



DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Washington, D.C. 20520

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May 9, 1975

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MEMORANDUM FOR LIEUTENANT GENERAL BRENT SCOWCROFT  
THE WHITE HOUSE

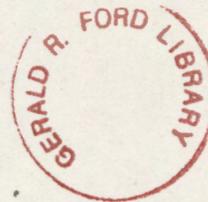
Subject: Lessons of Viet-Nam

Attached is a paper on "Lessons of Viet-Nam"  
which you requested.

*George S. Springsteen*  
George S. Springsteen  
Executive Secretary

Attachment:

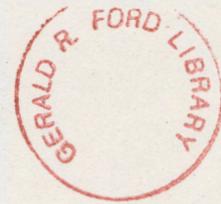
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The Lessons of Viet-Nam

To draw meaningful lessons from our Viet-Nam experience it is essential to bear in mind the climate of the times during which fateful decisions were taken. In 1954 it was widely accepted that we faced a monolithic communist bloc bent on expansion through military means. Indochina was seen, with considerable logic in that context, as a primary locus for that expansion and there was a remarkably broad consensus in this country that the United States should combat it. In the early 1960's, America was imbued with an activist, outward-looking spirit, one reflection of which was the notion that American resources and American expertise could solve any problem anywhere. It was only in the late 60's, when our participation in what was perceived to be an unjust and unwinnable war became objectionable to broad segments of the American people, that our policies outstripped the national consensus and support for them began to wane.

Having been badly burned in Viet-Nam, the American people now appear to have quite different, and more limited, visions of our proper role in the world and our ability to influence events. In a sense, a control mechanism has evolved within our society which is likely to prevent for the foreseeable future any repetition of a Viet-Nam style involvement. The danger may therefore be not that we will ignore the lessons of Viet-Nam, but that we will be tempted to apply them too broadly, in East Asia and around the world. Nonetheless, although not all of them are universally applicable, the lessons of Viet-Nam are clear, and numerous:

The Nature of Commitments

-- We must keep commitments to individual countries tailored to our degree of interest. This is not to say that the independence and well-being of small countries are of no consequence or concern for the United States-- only that such considerations are relatively more consequential in areas where our interests are more directly at issue. Related to this, resources devoted to carrying out our commitments should be proportionate to the intrinsic importance of the commitment itself, or of the interest it reflects.

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-- It follows, therefore, that we should commit ourselves only selectively to undertakings likely to involve the expenditure of lives or of massive resources. (Important note: having made commitments, we cannot be selectively reliable in fulfilling them.)

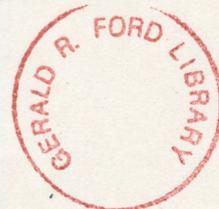
-- Recognizing that constancy in our commitments is important, we should nevertheless avoid confusing constancy with inertia. When circumstances change dramatically, or a commitment clearly becomes unsustainable, we should draw the right conclusions and change our policy accordingly. 1968 was probably a better time to try for a comprehensive political settlement in Viet-Nam than was 1972. 1973 was a better time to press the GVN for further realistic political negotiations--particularly since we were in that year deprived by the Congress of the ability to enforce the Paris Agreement--than was 1974 or 1975.

#### The Nature of Allies

-- Foremost among the criteria we might henceforth employ in making judgments about our commitments is the indigenous strength and will of our prospective ally--its ability to help itself. Although the Vietnamese government we supported was far more humane than its adversary, it was, in the final analysis, unable to mobilize effectively the support of its people in the face of an implacable, disciplined enemy. Without such support, ultimate defeat was probably inevitable. On our desire to stem North Vietnamese communist expansion, we underestimated this critical factor.

-- In effect, we allowed saving South Viet-Nam to become more important to us than it was for the South Vietnamese themselves. In the future, we should gauge our support to our allies' efforts, and their successes. If they cannot do the job, we will be unable to do it for them.

-- We should be fully aware of the fragility of governments which rest, to a significant degree, on the support of the military. This was not the chief cause of South Viet-Nam's downfall--indeed the GVN retained a considerable aura of legitimacy within Viet-Nam--but the inflexibility and narrowness of judgment of an increasingly isolated leadership in the face of unyielding North Vietnamese pressure played a role in the nation's ultimate collapse.

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-- We consistently allowed the GVN to utilize massive U.S. support as a substitute for solutions to its own internal political problems. We were never willing to force the GVN to face up to this fact.

### The Nature of Adversaries

-- There are probably few prospective opponents anywhere in the world who will prove to have the determination and single-mindedness of Hanoi. Nevertheless, we consistently underestimated the tenacity and sense of purpose of Hanoi, and overestimated our ability to break its will. We applied our strength without an adequate assessment of our opponent and thus neither achieved success nor deterred his pursuit of his objectives.

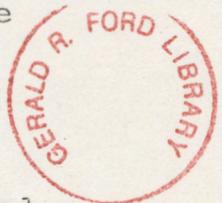
-- Nor should we underestimate the ability of revolutionary movements to develop broad and deep-seated popular support in loosely structured, unmodern societies. Most such societies have relatively recent memories of colonialism, or continue to experience various degrees of external exploitation, and are as such susceptible to revolutionary appeals to nationalistic instincts. In Viet-Nam, we were never able to escape being the inheritors of the French colonization.

-- Negotiated settlements of continuing conflicts have no intrinsic life of their own. With communist adversaries such agreements must be backed by strength and the will to use it. When an agreement no longer serves their interest, they will ignore it if it is not enforceable. Since Hanoi's goal remained unchanged after January 1973, it followed that the Paris Agreement could not be successful without our readiness to force compliance or to continue high levels of military support to the GVN. (This does not mean that all agreements with all communist states are inherently unworkable--obviously in areas where there is a confluence of sustained interests, agreements can be reached which communist states will maintain.)

### Limitations on Our Ability to Influence Events

-- Clearly, Viet-Nam demonstrated that the effectiveness of modern military technology is severely limited in

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unconventional conflicts. Neither massive firepower, nor ingenious gimmickry, can insure success. Their selective use, on a piece-meal basis, adds to their ineffectiveness.

-- In addition, if we ever again undertake a direct military involvement in such a conflict, we should guard against shifting from a supportive to a primary role, as we did in Viet-Nam beginning in 1965.

-- Moreover, we should avoid situations such as developed in Viet-Nam in which the indigenous defending forces became second-class citizens in their own country; as our own military role grew, ARVN's declined, a situation which was not reversed until we began Vietnamization and the withdrawal of our forces.

-- We should recognize that large expeditionary forces, by their very nature, will not adapt to the conditions of an unconventional conflict. Instead, the tendency will be to transform an unconventional war to a conventional one, while fundamental political aspects of the conflict are progressively ignored.

-- We should admit our own imperfect understanding of the political dynamics of foreign (particularly Asian) societies. In Viet-Nam we persistently looked at political conditions, and made our judgments, from what was basically a Western perspective.

-- Since our ability to understand the politics of countries such as Viet-Nam is limited, it follows that our attempts to manipulate political forces may well fail. We should not assume, as we did in 1963, that we know what is best for a country and proceed, as in the overthrow of Diem, to precipitate a situation with unknown and possibly disastrous consequences. Nor should we take the opposite tack--allying ourselves too rigidly with a leadership whose diminishing mandate we may not be able to perceive.

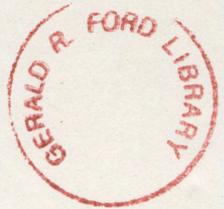
#### International Aspects of Bilateral Commitments

-- We should more realistically assess our ability to maintain international support for difficult undertakings, recognizing at the outset that we may be operating alone, that other governments--because of limited resources,

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differing political perceptions or divergent national interests--will not support our efforts in any meaningful way. Through strenuous efforts we elicited some tangible support from a few of our friends for our policies in Viet-Nam, but this was not sustained.

-- Moreover, we should bear in mind the possibility of undertakings such as Viet-Nam actively damaging our relations with other allies.

-- We should not expect, in the event of another situation like Viet-Nam, that the major communist powers will help pull our chestnuts out of the fire. At best, our bilateral relationships with the PRC and the Soviet Union may encourage a passive response from them--whether things are going well for us (as in 1972), or badly (as in 1975).

-- We should expect that the major communist powers will support local subversion and wars of liberation, particularly if they perceive no adverse effect on their relations with us or on their direct interests.

#### The Management of Commitments

-- If we were ever to become involved again in an effort of the magnitude of Viet-Nam, we could make things somewhat easier for ourselves by improving the ways we attempt to manage our involvement. It can be argued that, in addition to having very little control over what South Viet-Nam did, we were never in firm control of our own resources, whether military, economic or political. A diffusion of responsibility and control compounded our difficulties.

-- We should guard against biased intelligence and analysis to support policy goals, as happened in Viet-Nam particularly during the height of our involvement. Related to this, we should be wary of "advocacy reporting" from our missions and within the bureaucracy at home. A particularly virulent form of "localitis" affected many capable and dedicated individuals working in or on Viet-Nam. They were intensely committed, to a worthy goal, but personal commitment sometimes blurred judgment.

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-- We should devise more effective ways of bridging the gap between the expert level and the decision-making level of the government. Cogent judgment was often obscured as information and recommendations proceeded upward through the system, because of the pressures for success.

-- We should insure that the political and military aspects of our commitments, and the resources we devote to each, are kept in proper balance. Military considerations will become dominant in policy if that balance is skewed and, as in Viet-Nam, we may lose sight of the fundamental nature of the conflict and our goals in it.

-- We should try to insure that we do not become locked-in to "firefighting" management techniques. We must improve our ability to anticipate events in any situation of major American involvement, rather than finding ourselves--as we so often did in Viet-Nam--coping with crises after they had arisen.

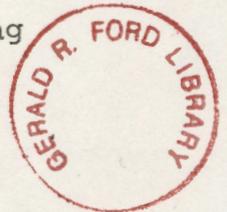
#### Domestic Considerations

-- We should recognize that no amount of cajolery can create public support for a foreign undertaking where none already exists. (Thus, our commitments must be related to perceived national interests.) An Administration, by active leadership, can only energize latent support.

-- Having become involved in a difficult foreign project, we should not attempt to mislead public opinion or the Congress as to its duration or the level of sacrifice it will require. We should not profess to see lights at the end of tunnels. We should not employ short-term rationales, out of short-term expediency, when in fact much remains to be done.

-- We should never assume that inconsistencies in our policies, or foul-ups in their implementation, will go unnoticed by the fourth estate. We will have to live with the fact that mistakes will be exposed (as well as, unfortunately, the fact that any course of action, right or wrong, will be second-guessed).

-- We should insure that Congress is on board not only at the outset of foreign commitments, but at every

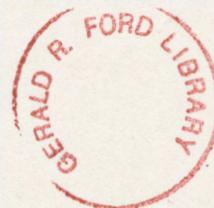
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stage at which any escalation of our commitment or involvement is contemplated. In the absence of Congressional support, clearly, commitment beyond a certain level is impossible.

-- Consistent with the requirements of military security, our basic policy decisions should be publicly stated and defended.



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