

Choosing War :

The American War in Vietnam

"Now we have a problem in making our power credible, and Vietnam is the place."

- John F. Kennedy, 1961

Fredrik Logevall's book, entitled *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam*, presents the most skillfully, and scholarly investigation into the war that occurred in Vietnam during the latter of the twentieth century. The vast majority of authors that have written on this subject merely focus on different aspects of the war (as Logevall illustrates in the preface of his book), but Logevall accurately canvasses the war in its entirety. The following will address questions concerning why Logevall argues that the conflict could have been prevented, how cultural misunderstandings operated in this particular scenario, alternatives to the war itself, concepts that could be applied to this situation; as well as the answers to questions, such as why the United States avoided negotiations for a peaceful resolution in Vietnam in the early 1960s, the conflict management styles that were utilized by both the U.S. and Vietnam, and finally, why third parties failed to prevent the war from happening in the first place.

In *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam*, Fredrik Logevall makes several significant points regarding how the Vietnam War was

preventable. As a general answer to this question, it is suffice to say that the war could have easily been avoided if the more powerful nations, at that time did not place their international interests above any sort of desire to negotiate peacefully, for the betterment of the Vietnamese.

Also, the U.S. government (and more significantly, the executive branch) had its own political reasons to ignore the idea of peaceful resolution. Dissecting these international interests is vital for an explanation to the question. Logevall begins with France. He notes French imperialism of Indochina.

Due to France's influence in this area of the world, the Vietnamese internal conflict concerned those who had once dominated their educational system, political infrastructure, and economy. At that time, General Charles de Gaulle, as Logevall states, "believed that a major crisis threatened in Vietnam, one that again involved a western power, this time the United States(1)." The U.S. felt political pressure to prove their international domination. Following WWII, the so-called champion of not only the western world, but highly engrained in international relations globally, the U.S. felt a necessity to facilitate a sense of international credibility.

As Logevall explains, "for both American presidents in this period, and especially for Lyndon Johnson, the Vietnam conflict's importance derived in large measure from its potential to threaten their own political standing(xv)." Further research regarding public approval of war influencing presidential approval suggests a correlation. In Ryan Jacobs' undergraduate research paper at the University of North Carolina in Wilmington (UNCW), entitled *Does Public Opinion Regarding War Effect Presidential Approval Rating? Lyndon Johnson's Presidency and the Vietnam War*" Jacobs' suggests, "While analyzing the data, there were instances where in the presidential approval rating did not change; increase or decrease, although there were

fluctuations of conflict that should of suggested a variance in the presidential approval, if the hypothesis was correct. The two instances that provided some degree of certainty into this hypothesis were met with other factors that could also justify such variances, as well as the fluctuation of conflict in the war itself(15)." This analysis provides insight into how the perception of the war by U.S. citizens, and the actual details of the war at the time are significantly at odds.

"In foreign affairs, Johnson's emphasis on continuity with the policies of his predecessor had worked well. Though he and his advisers were laying plans for an escalated American commitment to Vietnam, they worked hard to prevent any major public debate on the matter. To a large extent, they succeeded-less because of their skill at deception, it should be noted , than because of public apathy(Logevall, 134)." It is still amazing how much of the war and the COST of the war LBJ was able to hide from the public.

It is striking how many, in both the Senate and the House were “duped” by LBJ with his Gulf of Tonkin Resolution—a carte blanche for war without Congressional approval! In a final analysis, this war probably would and could have been avoided if anyone except LBJ was in office. His insecurities about being blamed for “losing: Vietnam and Asia probably made the war a fait accompli.

Accordingly, other factors such as family members serving, a general assumption that the U.S. is just in their actions, and domestic policies also affected the presidential approval rating; although the desire to continue the war does play a part into the president's approval rating. Thus whether the U.S. was making headway in Vietnam or not, it did not influence the public approval rating, but rather the continuation of war, at any cost. "American public opinion embraced a

"Cold War Consensus" in this period (by 1964) and thus wholeheartedly supported a staunch commitment to defend South Vietnam, indeed saw the defense vital to U.S. security. The Americanization decision thus overwhelmingly represented conventional thinking(Logevall,xvII)." Logevall also points out how the Soviet Union, and Great Britain desired to keep a low profile during the early interactions between the U.S. and Vietnam.

In addition, French General de Gaulle, and critics of the Vietnam War "were much better at pointing out the flaws in current American policy and the likely futility of escalation than at identifying alternative solutions and the means to achieve them(Logevall,xxIII)." It may be plausible that the U.S. was conceited, and other powerful nation-states saw the U.S. involvement in Vietnam purposeful in weakening U.S. international supremacy. According to Logevall, the U.S. relied on militaristic tactics which had worked in prior conflicts, but lacked strategies that they would have needed in order to settle the dispute in Vietnam by use of force, as opposed to negotiation.

Furthermore, The United States continued reluctance to heed warnings from western allies played a vital role in the failure in Vietnam. During a private discussion, which the U.S. declared to be more efficient in instances where, "the ally is carrying the major responsibility(Logevall,61)", de Gaulle reiterated, "that France had learned that political questions could not be solved by force, even when that force was superior; and he refused to give assurances as to what he might say or do in the future(Logevall,61)." Also, Western power could not win a land war in Asia.

As with similar discussions with the United Nations, negotiations with Vietnam resonated amongst officials of other countries, but the United States felt invested in the war. These warnings, and the silence of very influential nation-states emitted throughout the world, but

seemed to fall on deaf ears in Washington. As the U.S. continued to deploy troops, there quickly became no issue of peaceful resolution. The Vietnam War became an American past-time within U.S. borders, and the citizenship of U.S. states was very much unaware of what was truly happening overseas.

Alternatives to the war included a wide array of conflict management styles, but cultural misunderstandings, a sense of international duty, and lack of information put the U.S. in an awkward position. At several points in time during the Vietnam War, the U.S. could of applied conflict management styles that might have benefited all parties, as opposed to continuing war. Also a “Tito-Type” communist state could have been a solution (meaning a communist state not depending on nor being run by Moscow or Beijing) which is exactly what is established in Vietnam right now.

Also, as one of the most powerful nation-states in the world, it was their duty to do so early on, and more peacefully. An example that could of greatly assisted the U.S. in order to attempt to resolve issues in Vietnam is called, "Mirror Imaging". According to Ruhi Bakhare's scholarly journal *The Manager and Conflict Management*, "Mirror Imaging" is:

- strategy which parties can use to assess the reasonableness of their behaviour. It asks the parties to look at themselves the way others see them and make appropriate changes if they do not like what they see. Often if disputants will look at themselves honestly, they will sometimes notice that they are doing the same kinds of things—name calling, deception, and rumor spreading, for example—that they fault their opponents for doing. Once this is understood, parties can change their behaviour to appear more reasonable, without altering or undermining their true interests at all(45).

In regards to "Mirror Imaging" and the Vietnam War, at what point did the U.S. notice that the Vietnamese called it the "American War"? Reading Logevall's book, this was one of the U.S.'s biggest failures. "It will not do to merely state that a face-saving American disengagement could

have been arranged in, say, late 1964, after LBJ had been safely returned to the White House. Precisely how could it have been arranged? What would likely have happened if it had been?(Logevall,xxIII)." During communications between Canada and North Vietnam, Logevall also noted that Prime Minister Pham Van Dong, "(appeared) to have been trying, as Wallace J. Thies has put it, to "sketch out a solution allowing the U.S. a face-saving exit from the war"(162)."

As Logevall states, no one could of known how much bloodshed would result of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, but as he also quoted Walter Lippman, "early in the spring: "It used to be a war of the South Vietnamese assisted by the Americans. It is now becoming an American War very inefficiently assisted by the South Vietnamese"(375)."

One of the tactics that the U.S. considered during the Vietnam War, which proved as a horrible method in such a situation, was Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge's "carrot and stick" form of diplomacy. As Logevall explains, "The purpose of this mission was to frighten Ho Chi Minh and Pham Van Dong, to compel them "to call off the V.C." Under no circumstances should the interlocutor agree to a great-power conference on the war(156)." It was a action of pure intimidation. LBJ should have seen that neither the Japanese nor the French intimidated them and that they would have fought to the last man/woman, which the U.S. was not willing to do. In other words, the North Vietnamese were "all in" while the U.S. was only "partially in."

As Logevall continues, "Not a negotiation but an ultimatum: what Lodge was describing was a strategy of coercive diplomacy, or *compellance*, in which a state employs threats or limited force to persuade an opponent to cease its aggression(156)." This threat was not perceived in the way that Lodge had hoped when Canadian, Blair Seaborn delivered the message to Dong. In addition to this particular tactic, The U.S.'s inability to see eye-to-eye with the Canadian

government placed a barrier between communications, which in turn caused more friction. The U.S. was weary of disclosing vital information, and filtered their communications with Blair Seaborn. This was an effort to have Seaborn focus more so on the "stick" than that of the "carrot" while delivering the information to the Prime Minister of North Vietnam .

Shortly afterwards, Seaborn met with North Vietnamese Prime Minister, Pham Van Dong, who emphasized North Vietnam's commitment to the war. Dong also made it completely clear that he perceived war efforts by the U.S. as fruitless. In his assessment, Seaborn felt that the Khanh government was weakening, and furthering U.S. involvement would be erroneous, but again, such statements did not resonant in Washington. Dong's confidence in North Vietnam's success was overlooked by Johnson's belief that the U.S. military could end the war with the use of force.

Although as Logevall emphasizes in his book, Johnson's philosophy of peaceful resolutions outweighed his desire for bloody conflict, but Johnson was not aware of the perplexity within Vietnamese borders; which would result in a much more grueling struggle to resolve. As Dong expressed his relentless pursuit to Seaborn, it became more clear that the U.S. may have been best utilized to provide rations, and other accommodations to assist the South Vietnamese .. from afar. Still, this still would have resulted in a failure for the U.S.

Overall, Johnson's reasoning behind not taking a face-saving exit from the war was very much because of the fear of a communist takeover. Still, this paranoia assumed that the Soviet Union, Vietnam, and China would get along to the extent of a communistic Asian coalition, which would probably of not actually happened in such a way. The tension among these different countries could of possibly caused wars between them, as opposed to directing their aggression towards the U.S. Furthermore, the Soviet Union and China both did want to

influence Vietnam during the war, as the U.S. obviously did, but that did not mean that the U.S.'s intentions were just, and the others were unjust.

Similarly, the U.S. could not ploy the South Vietnamese with threats of decreasing foreign aid because of South Vietnam's assurance that, given the amount of time, money, and effort, the U.S. would not act on such threats. These actions quickly led to the South Vietnamese government, Khanh to abolish any desire for the continuance of U.S. aid. "Khanh accused Taylor of interfering in South Vietnam's internal affairs and publicly vowed independence from "foreign manipulation." American aid was no longer needed, he proclaimed, especially given that the United States had imposed a new colonialism on South Vietnam(Logevall, 293)."

Also, the Southern Vietnamese employed negotiations within the borders of Vietnam, but one of the biggest problems was U.S. involvement in Vietnam. As foreign troops were deployed to Vietnam, Southern Vietnamese desire to bring about peace was halted by the aggressive actions of U.S. troops. Logevall points out that, "Southerners worried that the bombs (from the U.S.) would drop on relatives in the North, while others feared what influx of more Americans would do to Southern society and culture(368)." Although U.S. officials were aware of peace talks, and Southern Vietnamese concerns of U.S. involvement, there was no desire to end the war until the U.S. felt that they had somehow won. Logevall also describes Lyndon Johnson's fixation with Vietnam. As he grew obsessed with the war, any attempt for Vietnam to resolve their own issues were crushed by U.S. takeover.

Although international law was still in its infancy during the war, U.S. involvement questionably resulted in war crimes, crimes against humanity, and possibly even genocide. Considering the fact that nearly three million Vietnamese died during the Vietnam War, a death

toll that high is comparable to that of the Rwandan genocide, and the acts of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia (in respect to the population prior to each individual massacre). If the United Nations, and the International Court of Justice had more clout at the time, the U.S. could of quite possibly been better criticized internationally, which could of seen some success in disengaging U.S. militaristic operations in Vietnam Soviet Union Prime Minister, Andrei Gromyko "told Rusk that America had no important stake in the Vietnam conflict and that none of the U.S.-sponsored governments in Saigon had been worthy of the name. He told Rusk that all outstanding questions on the war could be solved at a great-power conference(Logevall,290)." If the suggestions to get the world powers together in order to communicate openly about their stance on the war in Vietnam were considered, it could of prevented the series of failure by the U.S.

Additionally, without the conception of the International Criminal Court, only tribunals were installed for international conflicts post WWII (i.e. The Nuremberg and Tokyo Tribunals). Thus international questions of U.S. involvement were essentially limited to secret meetings, and correspondence that could do little, but advise the U.S.

More importantly, U.S. involvement in Vietnam appears to have been more so weighed on egotistical and role, or behavioral beliefs. Also, the framework that the U.S. established to evaluate the situation in Vietnam was ambiguous, which severely and negativity impacted U.S. engagements with North Vietnam. The usage of guerilla warfare, and being staged on the Vietnamese's own turf led to unexpected results for U.S. soldiers; which was a primary aspect of U.S. failure during the war. This misinterpretations among the U.S. with both South and North Vietnamese also lead to unnecessary conflict which only perpetuated the war.

Coincidentally, the U.S. rested too heavily on feelings over thoughts, and facts behind the conflict. The passion, and commitment of the U.S. government, military, and public influenced

actions early in the war. The Vietnam War is an example of when patriotism is pushed to the limit, and blinds a nation-state from altruistic actions. As Cognitive Dissonance Theory states, in order to achieve consistency, the U.S. attempted to rationalize, avoid (criticism of other international players), reframe, and ignore obvious problems that the U.S. was responsible for during the war.

Similarly, the essential perpetual patterns that lead to conflict; such as assuming everyone else sees the world the same way, others are similar, favoring negative impressions over positive impressions, and attributing ones' behaviors to external circumstances and other's behaviors to internal circumstances, were involved in U.S. relations with the Vietnamese.

In regards to the U.S.'s ego and role driven decision to exacerbate conflict in Vietnam, self face, or the U.S.'s perceived personal image played an extremely detrimental role. The delusional behavior of the president's of the United States during the Vietnam, or American War in Vietnam, lack of knowledge of Vietnam itself, led to one of the biggest failures in the history of the United States.

During the Nixon administration, the conception of "a plan to bring "peace with honor," it mainly entailed reducing American casualties by having South Vietnamese soldiers bear more of the ground fighting--a process he called "Vietnamization"--and defusing anti-war protests by ending the military draft. Nixon provided the South Vietnamese army with new training and improved weapons and tried to frighten the North Vietnamese to the peace table by demonstrating his willingness to bomb urban areas and mine harbors. Note, if Nixon had not resigned, there are many who think he would have gone back to bombing North Vietnam when they made their final offensive in the Spring of 1975 which would have only prolonged the war.

Also, Nixon hoped to orchestrate Soviet and Chinese pressure on North Vietnam(Digital

History ID 3464, 1)". This attempt to disengage from the war was at best, the only viable solution left at that point in time. It was not the result of diligent work to resolve issues among the U.S. and Vietnam, but failure had already been the state of U.S. involvement, and as an outcome; president Nixon was left with no other option, but to leave Vietnam to deal with problems that had only arisen out of the deficiency of the U.S.

Fredrik Logevall's book *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* is a literature masterpiece that carefully, and systematically illustrates the important details, and consequences of the Vietnam War. This historical work of art delves deep into a conflict that never should of happened, and explains the reasoning behind such failure "to a T". In conclusion, as Logevall sums it up, "something very much like this could happen again. Not in the same place, assuredly, and not in the same way, but potentially with equally destructive results. This is the central lesson of the war(412)."

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