

The Biggest Mistakes of the Vietnam War (and others)

Failure to Mobilize the Support and Will of the People - Part 7

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Prussian General and military theorist Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831) insisted that any successful theory of warfare had to balance what he called “the trinity of war.” This concerned the motivation and morale affecting the people, the government, and the Army. The support and will of all three had to be mobilized to accomplish strategic objectives and victory. Moreover, successful military strategies should undermine the morale of the enemy’s people, government, and Army.

The French did not withdraw from Indo-China solely because of their defeat at the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954. They withdrew because the French people were war weary from World War II and Algeria, and the Communists had been relentless in exploiting this war weariness by undermining the morale of the French people and Parliament. It is a significant footnote in history that Marx, Engels, and Lenin had studied Clausewitz’s 1831 unfinished work: On War, and incorporated many of his principles, including “the trinity of war” in Communist political and military doctrine. Mao also studied Clausewitz.

New academic theories of “limited war” and “gradualism,” however, had begun to undermine the appreciation of Clausewitz, military experience, and common sense during Robert McNamara’s 1961-1968 tenure as U.S. Secretary of Defense. Military force was not primarily for fighting and victory but “signaling” possible threats of military escalation to the enemy.

The Vietnam War was, as Clausewitz would have predicted, a two front war for the United States—a war front in Southeast Asia and a home front in Congress and on university campuses and other vulnerable spheres of social, media, and political influence. As it turned out, despite the Johnson-McNamara strategies that severely handicapped the full and proper use of our military, air, and naval superiority, the Communists could not defeat U.S. forces in Southeast Asia. In fact, the Communists realized they were in danger of defeat in late 1967. Following their crushing defeat by South Vietnamese and U.S. troops during the desperate Communist Tet Offensive beginning on January 30, 1968, North Vietnam’s leaders were ready to postpone their conquest of South Vietnam for decades. The North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong lost 100,000 men killed-in-action during the first half of 1968. The Viet Cong were all but annihilated. Yet the feckless, left-biased U.S. Media ignorantly spun Tet into an embarrassing U.S. and South Vietnamese defeat that made victory seem impossible. Those who remember Walter Cronkite’s CBS newscasts remember the pessimism that was drummed into the public by irresponsible media and the panic that ensued in Congress for hasty U.S. withdrawal and desertion of South Vietnam. The U.S. News Media and a panicked Congress revived Communist morale and determination to conquer South Vietnam.

Franklin Roosevelt and a bipartisan Congress did mobilize American public will to defeat Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan in World War II. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, of course, made it much easier.

President Lyndon Johnson made no effort to mobilize the public will to win in Vietnam. It would be more accurate to say he tried to hide as much of the war as possible from the American public.

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This was not a Johnson oversight. According to his own words, he feared too much public focus on defeating Communist aggression in Vietnam would jeopardize his “Great Society” programs:
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“...History provided too many cases where the sound of the bugle put an immediate end to the hopes and dreams of the best reformers: The Spanish-American War drowned the “populist” [my quotation marks] spirit; World War I ended Woodrow Wilson’s New Freedom; World War II brought the New Deal to a close. Once the war began, then all those conservatives in Congress would use it as a weapon against the Great Society.”

Thus Johnson disregarded some of Clausewitz’s best advice: The Armed Forces should not be committed without the commitment of the people. Political leadership should be about more than governing according to the latest poll. Leadership requires the wisdom to determine what actions are necessary and right and then motivating and guiding Congress and the people to support informed national security measures. The people must be convinced that military actions are right and necessary. Leaving the people out of the equation is a disastrous mistake. It is also essential to be proactive in keeping the public informed with the truth. Our enemies will be working on the other side of the equation by spreading lies and disinformation to undermine public understanding of serious threats to national security. My study of history indicates that Nazi, Communist, and Islamist military and political operational strategies and tactics seem to come out of the same playbook. We had best do our homework.

“The first and most important rule to observe...is to use our entire force with the utmost energy....Given the same amount of intelligence, timidity will do a thousand times more damage than audacity.”—Carl von Clausewitz.

Mike Scruggs is the author of two books: *The Un-Civil War: Shattering the Historical Myths*; and *Lessons from the Vietnam War: Truths the Media Never Told You*, and over 600 articles on military history, national security, intelligent design, genealogical genetics, immigration, current political affairs, Islam, and the Middle East.

He holds a BS degree from the University of Georgia and an MBA from Stanford University. A former USAF intelligence officer and Air Commando, he is a decorated combat veteran of the Vietnam War, and holds the Distinguished Flying Cross, Purple Heart, and Air Medal. He is a retired First Vice President for a major national financial services firm and former Chairman of the Board of a classical Christian school.

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