

The Biggest Mistakes of the Vietnam War (and others)

Demonstrating Lack of Resolve, Misguided Negotiation Expectations, and Limited Strategic Outlook, Part 8 (Mistakes 9, 10, and 11 of 13)

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From early 1965 through early 1968, there were six major confrontations between Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and the Pacific Area Commander (CINCPAC) and the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS). These involved a number of Johnson-McNamara policies and strategies that CINCPAC Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp and the JCS believed severely hindered the defeat of Communist aggression in Southeast Asia. After the war and his retirement, Admiral Sharp even wrote a book titled *Strategies for Defeat: Vietnam in Perspective*, first published in 1978. It was Sharp who characterized Johnson's Operation Rolling Thunder as "powder-puff air warfare." A major issue with Sharp and the JCS was the Johnson-McNamara policy of highly restricted bombing of strategic targets in North Vietnam, leaving huge enemy sanctuaries around the most strategic North Vietnamese military and logistical targets critical to their invasion of South Vietnam. President Nixon eventually reversed this costly and absurd policy.

Most of these confrontations revolved around mistakes we have already covered in our series—allowing enemy sanctuaries, the strategy of "gradualism" (graded escalation), failure to utilize our most powerful military assets forcefully, micromanagement of military operations by Johnson and McNamara, and failure to acknowledge the true nature of the enemy. To this could be added 16 bombing halts initiated by Johnson to encourage the North Vietnamese leaders to come to a negotiated settlement. All these bombing halts allowed North Vietnam to reinforce and resupply its troops, after which U.S. and South Vietnamese casualties rose. The most controversial began on October 31, 1968, just before the three-way 1968 Presidential election contest being fought by Humphrey, Nixon, and Wallace.

All of these strategic and tactical errors can be summed up in one disastrous political error: Demonstrating a LACK OF RESOLVE to the enemy. No military leader outside of a madhouse would expect an enemy to surrender, compromise, or retreat in the face of irresolute or timid action. Sharp and the JCS kept telling McNamara and Johnson that their policies demonstrated a lack of resolve that would not result in peace but disrespect, enemy exploitation, and intensified and prolonged North Vietnamese aggression. Demonstrating lack of resolve to the enemy is mistake number 9 for the Vietnam War. Demonstrating Lack of Resolve is the mega-seed of military defeat or costly retreat, but it is a common error for those who are overly influenced by short-term popularity with the media, low-information voters, and special interest financial support.

In my opinion, President Obama showed this lack of resolve in regards to defeating ISIS and the threat of Global Islamic Supremacism and Jihadism. This was so obvious that it caused people to speculate whether the President had some sort of divided loyalties regarding Islam. Whatever President Obama's reasoning, President Trump and Secretary of Defense Mattis completely overturned any appearance of lack of resolve on the first Monday of the Trump Administration.

Mistake number 10, especially for the Johnson Administration, was a negotiation policy that primarily aimed at facilitating U.S. withdrawal from South Vietnam rather than North Vietnamese

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cessation of aggression and withdrawal from South Vietnam. Our political leaders had not learned one of the most obvious lessons from the Korean War. Negotiating with Communists without applying the threat of force is largely futile. They do not negotiate with honest sincerity. Their only objective is the advance of Communism. Their only truth is whatever advances Communism. Their principal negotiation method reveals their basic nature; they are ruthless bullies with no appreciation for truth or promise. They will break a treaty as soon as they are stronger or we become weaker. Communists, Marxist Leftists, Alinsky Radicals, Nazis, and the Muslim Brotherhood all seem to read from the same operational playbook. They only understand force and continuous pressure. Sun Tzu's famous quote about "knowing your enemy and yourself" is also relevant to negotiation. Preparation, information, intelligence, and realism are major advantages in successful negotiation. Knowledge of an adversary must include not only material and economic factors, but also their psychological, ideological, emotional, cultural, and religious motivations.

The eleventh mistake made in Vietnam was failure to recognize the overall objectives and strategies of the enemy. The North Vietnamese objective was not simply control of South Vietnam but all of Southeast Asia. Their primary strategy of undermining the will of the American people to resist Communist aggression received little attention, but it was ultimately what brought Communist control of all Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, while the U.S. Congress stood aside in 1975 and allowed the Communists to slaughter, starve, or cause the drowning of millions of Vietnamese, Lao, and Cambodians in a reign of terror that extended at least four years.

"Be audacious and cunning in your plans, firm and persevering in their execution, determined to find a glorious end."

~ Carl von Clausewitz

"Hit 'em as hard as you can, when they ain't lookin.'"

~ a U.S. Marine Gunnery Sergeant

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.

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