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The Lesson of Afghanistan is the Lesson of Vietnam We Forgot

Philosopher Georg Hegel declared the only lesson of history is that we do not learn from history. As the US prepares for the final pullout from Afghanistan and what will soon follow as the fall of the country to the Taliban an entire generation of us wonder if this is not Deja vu all over again and that what we thought we had learned from the Vietnam War proved to be a fleeting lesson.

For those of my generation who grew up during or served in the Vietnam War a thousand images cross our mind. A naked girl scurrying away from Napalm, the execution of Nguyen Văn Lém, American flags draped on caskets in rows, a woman next to a dead body at Kent State University. But for many it is helicopters evacuating the US embassy in Saigon in 1975 as the city and South Vietnam fell to the Vietcong. The domino we fought so hard to prevent from falling, costing America 58,200 lost military lives hundreds of thousands wounded, and tens of billions of dollars, fell, nonetheless.

In college we read Francis FitzGerald's Fire in the Lake and supposedly learned that we never were going to win the Vietnam War with guns alone. Napalming a nation to death was not going to win over the hearts and minds of a people from a different culture we never understood. David Halberstram's The Best and the Brightest pointed to the arrogance of the Kennedy Administration in failing to understand that Vietnam was more about colonial independence than it was about communism and Cold War rivalry. And the Pentagon Papers documented the mistakes, misinformation, and lies surrounding the US involvement there, with the realization we could not win, no matter what the North Vietnamese body count was that week as announced by Secretary of Defense Robert

McNamara. We stayed up late at night after watching *Apocalypse Now*, haunted by Richard Wagner's *Ride Of The Valkyries* accompanying helicopters at dawn attacking a village, or the appearance of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in a scene after Captain Willard travels up the Nung River enroute to assignment to kill Captain Kurtz. The message some of us took from the movie and War was that it was a seduction into evil—we as a country turned into what we most despised.

Supposedly we learned something from the Vietnam War about the futility of starting a battle with no clear objectives or end game. We supposedly learned that brute force did not prevail, the need to align military power with soft power and our national interests, and that we needed to understand other cultures and history if we wished to be more successful in our foreign policy goals. Yet by 1980 Ronald Reagan declared Vietnam a “noble cause,” suggesting memories were short, hubris tall.

While General Colin Powell's doctrine sought to reteach the lessons of Vietnam as we prepared for the first Gulf War in 1990-1991. Merely seven days after 9/11, Congress issues the Authorization to Use Military Force, giving President Bush as much carte blanche authority to use military force against the Taliban and Afghanistan as did the Gulf of Tonkin did for Lyndon Johnson. We sent in the Marines and bombers and took Kabul quickly. Soon after that lies about weapons of mass destruction took us into Iraq, and soon we were in Bagdad with another resolution and capitulation to presidential lies. In both cases America reacted reflexively with military solutions, with no game plans for goals and objectives, what constituted victory, and no idea about the culture and people of these countries. We repeated the arrogance of Vietnam, thinking somehow we could turn them into western democracies, and make those people like us. All while bombing their villages and killing their people.

Now as America is ready to leave Afghanistan after 20 years and the media pundits screech that we are abandoning our allies and simply giving up as cowards, these reflections miss the deeper meaning of this war. We should have never been there to start with. We made the wrong choices in 2001, and like Vietnam even after we knew it was a lost cost we stayed on, hoping that one more military surge would be the “light at the end of the tunnel” that would finally win the war. I have no idea what we should do, but I do know that we should have learned from Vietnam that what we did in 2001 and are doing now is wrong and that it was never going to work.

To appease critics Biden has said that we will evacuate those in Afghanistan who assisted us. Already I can see the helicopters at the US embassy in Kabul.

Karl Marx once declared: “Hegel remarks somewhere that all great, world-historical facts and personages occur, as it were, twice. He has forgotten to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.”

Vietnam was the tragedy, Afghanistan the farce.

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