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The Geopolitics of the Vietnam War

By Francis P. Sempa

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On April 30, 1975, as North Vietnamese troops captured Saigon, helicopters rescued the last remaining Americans from the roof of their embassy in South Vietnam – an unforgettable manifestation of the ignominious U.S. defeat in the war in Southeast Asia that cost more than 58,000 American lives. Between 1962 and 1975, James Burnham frequently devoted his fortnightly column in *National Review* to a geopolitical analysis of the war in the context of the larger struggle between the West and the Soviet Union. Looking back at those columns forty years after the end of the war makes for interesting reading because Burnham, more so than any other contemporary observer of the war, mostly got things right.

Born in Chicago in 1905, Burnham, the son of a railroad executive, studied at Princeton and Oxford in the 1920s, taught at New York University from the 1930s (when he temporarily embraced Marxism) to the early 1950s, worked as an analyst for the OSS during World War II and as a consultant to the CIA in the early Cold War years, authored 12 books, and served as a columnist and editor at *National Review* until sidelined by a stroke in 1978. He died at the age of 82 in 1987.

In his best-known books – *The Managerial Revolution*, *The Struggle for the World*, *The Coming Defeat of Communism*, *Containment or Liberation?*, and *Suicide of the West* – Burnham portrayed the U.S.-Soviet struggle as a zero-sum contest for world supremacy, similar to the first two world wars of the 20th century. In fact, in the first sentence of *The Struggle for the World*

Burnham called the U.S.-Soviet conflict "The Third World War," which later became the original title of the *National Review* column that he began writing in September 1955. In 1970, he changed the title of his column to "The Protracted Conflict."

Burnham understood that because of the unprecedented destructive power of atomic weapons, the Third World War probably would not be waged by direct mass armed clashes between U.S. and Soviet military forces in the principal geographic theaters of Europe and the Far East, but instead would likely be fought in peripheral regions and involve proxy forces of one or the other contestant. Indeed, one of his main criticisms of the U.S. policy of containment was that it failed to address indirect political and military aggression committed by Soviet proxies in the less-developed world – the precise challenge faced by the U.S. in the Vietnam War.

What Was At Stake In Southeast Asia?

Burnham viewed the war in Vietnam as part of a larger struggle for control of Southeast Asia and predominance in the Asia-Pacific region. In his March 13, 1962 column, Burnham identified communist armies in Laos and South Vietnam as proxy forces for the North Vietnamese, Chinese, and Soviet communist regimes. The communist goal was "control of the Southeast Asian peninsula" and an extension of communist power "to the Strait of Malacca [and] the Indonesian archipelago, . . . thus gain[ing] strategic domination of the South Sea passage, and simultaneously threaten[ing] India, Australia and the West's forward defense line."

Burnham accepted the logic of the "domino theory," first propounded, as he noted in his June 2, 1964 column, by OSS Director General William Donovan during the 1947-54 Indochina War. Indochina's loss to the communists risked the Western position in all of Southeast Asia and beyond. "[T]he first line of defense of our own country – our western strategic frontier – is the great arc, easily traceable on a map," Burnham explained, "that runs from Alaska down through South Korea, Japan, Okinawa, Formosa, Southeast Asia and the Philippines, and finally, after the dangerous gap now marked by Indonesia, on to a southern anchor in Australia." If the U.S. loses the war in Vietnam and the dominoes begin to fall, he continued, "our defensive frontier—not at once . . . but soon enough on the historic scale – must and will be drawn back to Hawaii: in fact . . . to our own West Coast . . ." The great danger, he wrote, was that defeat in Vietnam would be followed by a "strategic retreat" in Asia and the Pacific.

In a subsequent column (October 20, 1964), Burnham dismissed the notion that the struggle in Vietnam was a "local" or "brushfire" affair. "It is a critical battle in the war for Asia, the Western Pacific and the South Seas," he wrote. If the U.S. withdraws from the struggle, "we will have demonstrated our inability as defender. It will become next to certain that the whole vast region, sea and land, will shift into the camp of the enemy." U.S. forces are in South Vietnam, he wrote in his March 23, 1965 column, because "our own security" was at stake. U.S. interests "would be critically threatened," he noted, "by the advance of the Communist enterprise into Southeast Asia and the South Seas."

What was also at stake in the war, Burnham noted in several columns, was U.S. credibility – an essential weapon in the arsenal of a great power with global commitments and responsibilities. "Our national interest is at stake in Southeast Asia," he wrote in June 1965, "because we . . .

have staked it." "The present conflict in Vietnam," he continued, "has become, by our acts, a major test of our will." To fail in Vietnam "would be to suffer a staggering defeat with immense, inescapable and cumulative global repercussions, precisely because it would prove to everyone that our will was the weaker." In a subsequent column, Burnham further explained the concept of great power credibility by noting that even if America's national interest was not originally at stake in Vietnam, "the situation has been fundamentally changed by the *fact* of our large-scale involvement."

Did the U.S. Employ the Right Strategy in the War?

A great power protects its interests and preserves its credibility by diplomacy and military power linked by policy and strategy. Burnham was a fierce intellectual critic of the policy of containment as theorized by George F. Kennan in 1947 and practiced by the Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations. Containment, he repeatedly argued, was too strategically defensive to win a global struggle against an expansionist Soviet empire in control of the geopolitical "Heartland" of the Eurasian landmass. He proposed instead an alternative policy of "liberation," under which the United States and its allies would wage offensive political-psychological warfare against the Soviets and their communist allies, seeking to liberate countries from the communist orbit.

As early as March 1962, Burnham sensed that U.S. policymakers were unprepared to implement a political and military strategy to win the war in Southeast Asia due to the inherent restrictions of containment. "If we were serious in South Vietnam," he wrote, "we would not confine our military (and military support) activities to South Vietnam itself. We would extend our operations to Laos, Cambodia, northeast Thailand and – very decidedly – to the enemy bases in North Vietnam, and in China too." To do otherwise, in a war in which Americans were beginning to die, he opined, "is senseless butchery."

On January 29, 1963, Burnham began his column as follows:

We are losing another war, this time in Vietnam. More than 10,000 Americans have already been sucked into that steaming land of reed-covered marshes, rice paddies, mapless jungles and bewildering mountains. Nearly every day now there are American names on the casualty lists.

The North Vietnamese leaders, he noted, know that the United States has the military capacity to wipe Hanoi off the map and sever their communications with Communist China and the Soviet Union. "They know," he wrote, "that the Americans possess means which could transform the strategic character of the war, but they believe that political, ideological and moral inhibitions prevent use of these means." [I]t looks more and more likely," Burnham concluded, "that the present [U.S.] policy and strategy will fail. The war in South Vietnam is becoming a *sale guerre* – a vile, a dirty war – for Americans, too. It is likely to get much dirtier before it is over."

In his October 8, 1963 column, Burnham focused on the self-imposed military restrictions that he believed made success in the war impossible. Those restrictions, he noted, derived from understandable fears of escalation as well as the dictates of containment, and were both qualitative and quantitative. He heaped scorn upon the prohibitions against military action in

Laos, North Vietnam, and South China. He ridiculed publicly excluding the use of advanced weapons (including nuclear, biological and chemical). He lamented the fact that "we fight the enemy . . . on his terrain and terms." "In the end," he concluded, "we will pull out" of Vietnam and abandon Southeast Asia.

Similarly, in a February 1964 column, Burnham predicted that "the war in Vietnam, fought under the present strategic restrictions, is going to be lost." More than a year later (May 18, 1965), Burnham described President Johnson's limited military measures as a rearguard action designed to cover a strategic withdrawal. In a July 13, 1965 column, he ridiculed "the token bombings of trucks, highway bridges and empty barracks," and described the war as a "vortex [that] . . . [d]ay by day sucks in American men, ships, planes, weapons, supplies, money" to no strategic end.

Burnham's June 28, 1966 column manifested his continuing frustration with the "multitude of restrictions on weapons, tactics and strategy" imposed on U.S. military forces. Echoing General Douglas MacArthur's criticism of the restrictions imposed on U.S. forces in Korea, Burnham memorably wrote, "By what moral right does the President order hundreds of thousands of young citizens into a distant and most alien land, under conditions that mean death or grievous injury for many thousands of them and hardship for nearly all, and at the same time forbid them to use the most effective available weapons and methods against the enemy."

As the United States kept pouring more and more troops into South Vietnam without significantly changing its overall strategy of gradual escalation, Burnham in the spring of 1968 concluded that "stalemate" rather than victory was the true goal of the Johnson administration, but defeat was the more likely outcome.

In his April 28, 1972 column, Burnham came full circle with his early Cold War books, linking the military and strategic restrictions that led to the U.S. defeat in Vietnam to the overall "self-imposed strategic prison" of containment.

Without Victory, Was a Lasting Negotiated Peace Possible?

Burnham grasped before most outside observers that U.S. policy in Vietnam was not to seek victory in the traditional sense, but to use military force coupled with diplomacy to negotiate an honorable peace that would protect the independence of South Vietnam and preserve American credibility as a great power, similar to the outcome of the Korean War. As a former Marxist, however, Burnham understood the mind of the enemy better than the U.S. politicians and generals running the war did. He knew that the North Vietnamese communists sought not an honorable peace but victory, and that they were willing to wait out the Americans who were growing increasingly frustrated by growing casualty lists and a seemingly endless war. He also knew and wrote in his column that the communists understood that the principal front in the war was not the battlefields of Indochina, but the domestic political situation in the United States.

In August 1968, Burnham sensed that the communists were winning. They were planning how to achieve victory, while the U.S. was debating "only how to get out." In a subsequent column (April 1969), Burnham noted that unlike in Korea where the U.S. won a limited military victory

that allowed for an honorable and lasting peace, in Vietnam there was no military foundation for a political solution that would prevent a communist takeover.

Nearly three years later, in February 1972, in the wake of President Nixon's election year proposal for a peace agreement, Burnham concluded that the U.S. "has lost the war in Indochina, has been defeated." He termed Nixon's proposal a "capitulation," and explained that "Henry Kissinger was negotiating not victory or peace but surrender" in Paris. Two months later, Burnham ridiculed "Vietnamization" as a strategy that "seeks to keep the enemy from reaching his goal without defeating him." "For Richard Nixon," Burnham wrote, "South Vietnam's survival as an independent non-Communist state has a lower priority than American withdrawal and his own re-election." In a subsequent column that summer, Burnham commented that once U.S. land, naval, and air forces withdraw from the war, North Vietnam "will have preponderant power over the South," which means that "the North will be able to – and will – carry through its undeviating goal of dominating the South."

In an especially memorable column on February 16, 1973, less than a month after the U.S. and North Vietnam to much national and international acclaim signed the Paris Accords purporting to end the war, Burnham, in Churchillian fashion, wrote that the agreement was neither a peace treaty nor an armistice, and did not end the war. A more accurate title for the document, he remarked, was "A Protocol of American Military Disengagement from Vietnam." Unlike the Korean armistice, he noted, under the Paris Accords there is no actual DMZ that marks the geographical division of power between North and South. Instead, "[t]he maps of Indochina showing areas controlled by the Communists, and confirmed to their control by the agreement, look like the X-ray of a chest with metastasized cancer." While the fighting in Vietnam will likely pause until the U.S. military disengagement is complete, he explained, "there is no prospect that Communist Hanoi will renounce its goal of taking power in South Vietnam."

A month later, Burnham wrote that "[t]o the North Vietnamese, the ceasefire agreement means, in essence, getting rid of the Americans, as before they got rid of the French." "When U.S. power is gone," he continued, "Communist power will be predominant in the Indochinese equilibrium." The communists will in due course violate the ceasefire agreement, and the United States will look on from afar, but do nothing militarily to enforce the accords.

Lessons from Southeast Asia

In his April 27, 1973 column, Burnham sought to "draw some meaningful lessons" from the U.S. defeat in Vietnam. First, the nation should not pursue an objective if it is unwilling to use sufficient means to accomplish the objective. Second, when fighting an enemy committed to a political objective, a strategy of incremental escalation does not work. Third, the U.S. military needs a suitable doctrine to fight in revolutionary wars of liberation. Fourth, such wars are better fought by professional soldiers rather than a conscript army. Fifth, when a great power fights a minor power or group it should use overwhelming force at the outset of the conflict to paralyze the enemy and accomplish the objective with less bloodshed and at lesser cost. Sixth, a nation should not enter a military conflict if it determines that the risk of escalation in the global political context is too great.

Burnham's final reflection on America's defeat in the war appeared in his May 23, 1975 column, a little less than a month after the tragic scene on the roof of the American embassy in Saigon played out. He expressed concern that the Vietnam War might be the first manifestation of U.S. "imperial overstretch," and worried that America's psychological reaction to its defeat would lead to a withdrawal from Asia and a retrenchment throughout the world. "Measured quantitatively," he explained, "our defeat in Indochina is a minor affair." Its strategic importance will depend on how America reacts in Asia, the Pacific, and other parts of the world. Taking the long view, Burnham noted that withdrawal from Indochina marks the first reversal of a continuous historical U.S. expansion westward. "[A]long a given strategic line," he wrote, "once you have withdrawn from one outpost the others come under greater pressure." U.S. withdrawal from Indochina was already "leading toward withdrawal from Southeast Asia generally." "It is hard to see," he continued, "how . . . further withdrawals can be indefinitely delayed, unless there is a drastic shift in strategic thrust and national attitude." Perhaps, he hoped, Vietnam defeat would not have such drastic consequences, but he sensed that it might ultimately mean U.S. withdrawal from Asia.

Forty years later, Burnham's running commentary and geopolitical analysis of the Vietnam War holds up better than those of most of his contemporaries. While he did not get everything right about the war, he was mostly right about the "big" items. He understood the global context of the war; accurately identified U.S. interests in the region; correctly judged the importance of credibility to a great power with global commitments; understood the motivations and goals of the enemy; grasped earlier than almost anyone the fundamentally flawed nature of U.S. strategy in Indochina; and correctly perceived the immediate impact of the war on America's approach to the world.

In the wake of the Vietnam War, the United States temporarily pulled-back from its global commitments; reduced its military power and imperial reach; engaged in frequent bouts of national self-flagellation; fell behind the Soviet Union in the strategic nuclear balance; refused to come to the aid of long-time strategic allies; and suffered geopolitical setbacks in parts of the undeveloped world. The great British historian Paul Johnson, echoing the title of one of Burnham's books, called this era "America's suicide attempt."

Fortunately, the United States did not completely withdraw from Asia and the western Pacific. Today, as it engages in geopolitical competition with China, America could use the strategic insight of James Burnham.