VIETNAM: LESSONS AND MISLESSONS

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June 1969

P-4084

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The periodic reassessment of history has been a favorite pastime of historians and political scientists alike. For historians, the task has the modest aim of gaining new insights and uncovering new facts about what happened. For political scientists attuned to George Santayana's wise counsel, the task is more ambitious: to learn history's lessons so that nations will not be condemned to repeat past errors. In most cases, this process of a sometimes agonizing reappraisal awaits the culmination of the event. The Vietnam conflict is evidently an exception. Already, there are millions of words in print, many more on the verge of publication, and still more awaiting transmission from thought to paper on Vietnam's significance for future American decision-making, policy, and strategy and tactics. This essay is less concerned with adding another set of lessons to those already and perhaps prematurely conceived by others than it is to pointing out some dilemmas inherent in the debate over them.

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There are two major difficulties associated with the learning of lessons that are bound to make the lessons as controversial as the war itself. First, we have the corruption of Santayana's prescription: those who profess awareness of history's lessons may be precisely those who will repeat the error or make new ones. As Albert Wohlstetter has remarked, "of all the disasters in Vietnam, the worst may be the 'lessons' we'll draw from it." Experience may be the worst rather than the best teacher, for the lessons supposedly derived from Vietnam may lead to new debacles, depending on who draws the lessons and how they are applied. This is the by now all too familiar problem of transferability: we may have learned a great deal from Munich, Korea, Malaya, and Cuba II, yet Vietnam may have been "the wrong war" to apply certain or any of their lessons.*

Secondly, there is always the possibility of finding lessons where none exist. Here, those who neglect history may actually have the advantage over those who submerge themselves in it. The strategic bombing of Germany during World War II may really have been irrelevant to any guesses on the probable effect of U.S. missions over North Vietnam. By the same token, Tito's break

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*One example is the strategic hamlets, adapted from the British success in Malaya. The hamlets' architects would, of course, counter that the Malaya experience bequeathed us the right lessons that were ineptly applied in Vietnam.

with Stalin may be a very unreliable guide to North Vietnam's behavior toward its westerly neighbors, China, and the non-Communist world. From this perspective, the more unique one considers the Vietnam experience to be, the fewer the lessons we can hope to draw from it. These two problems -- mislessons and nonlessons -- should forewarn against speaking too assertively about "lessons learned" in Vietnam. Especially with the war's outcome still in doubt, we cannot assume that a common standard of evaluation exists now about what is relevant, learnable, and instructive when it has not existed before.

It would be foolish as well as fruitless to argue that an effort to discern patterns, causes, and assumptions regarding the conduct of the war should not be undertaken. But in undertaking such an effort, one must be less than sanguine about the consequences. For every lesson that might be offered (as "learned"), another, perhaps totally opposite, lesson can be offered in its place. We might take some guidance from the experience of the Communist theoreticians who are constantly exploring the past in search of lessons. The explosive history of Sino-Soviet recriminations, for example, has clearly revealed the ambiguities, deceptive nature, and subjectivity inherent in the learning process. For every Marxist-Leninist proposition the Chinese have cited in support of their position, the Soviets have been able to counter in spades. It is hardly likely that the lessons of Vietnam put forward by any one "side" in this country will be any more convincing to the other side than those offered by Moscow to Peking. In fact, charges of revisionism and

dogmatism may become as common in the Western camp as they have been in the Communist camp.

What follows is an attempt to underscore the essential ambiguity of lessons learned by noting some principal areas of disagreement about Vietnam war policy and objectives. The discussion is rather crudely divided into political and military policies. The topics chosen by no means exhaust the list -- for instance, they do not include possible lessons the Communist parties to the conflict may think they have learned and about which the United States should presumably also be concerned -- but they may suggest the complexity of the task.

1. POLITICS AND POLICY

The massive military and civilian presence of the United States in South Vietnam has led partisans and critics of Administration policy to draw some interesting implications for American influence in that country. The partisans are by no means in agreement on how much influence the United States has exercised over the internal affairs of its ally. Nevertheless, most of them, particularly Vietnam-based officials who remember American difficulties with Diem, would agree that, by any standard, the United States has not exercised influence, leverage, or control anywhere near in proportion to the burgeoning American presence. Above all, they would probably assert that, the overthrow of Diem notwithstanding, the United States has the (military) power but not the (political) ability to change Saigon administrations at will. Nor

does the United States have the capacity (though theoretically the power) to effect the kinds of massive structural reforms of South Vietnamese society that Saigon has rejected or unenthusiastically and only slowly implemented. Critics of the war reject these views but differ widely on what the United States, independent of Saigon's will, can and should do. Some have argued that the U.S. presence has not been decisive enough, that our presence is equivalent to our influence when we choose to push our weight around. Others have gone so far as to draw the lesson that only a massive American presence in a country such as Vietnam -- that is, almost an occupation -- can bring about the kinds of reforms we desire and should employ. Still others talk at once about the moral urgency of an American withdrawal from Vietnam and about a U.S.-engineered coup d'etat to make withdrawal easier.

All these views reveal just how great is the uncertainty about what has happened in the course of the U.S.-GVN relationship. Has the pattern of that relationship indicated how much, or how little, influence the United States can exert over an "underdeveloped" ally? Has the history of interaction between American and Vietnamese officials indicated the virtues, or the irrelevancy, of cultivating personal relationships to achieve leverage? How much influence, after all, has the United States had over structural changes in the GVN and the ARVN -- changes, we must recall, that have been recommended since 1954? Beyond these questions, there are others that go to the heart of American purposes and expectations for South

Vietnam. We need to know, for instance, what assumptions led Americans to conclude that it was desirable and feasible to engage in "nationbuilding" -- a mammoth, somehow coordinated program of social engineering to reverse in a matter of years the historic currents of sectional, tribal, ethnic, and religious separatism, transborder trade and migration patterns, and decentralized administration. Finally, though without exhausting the list, we might also inquire whether the presumed purpose of governmental reform -- to produce in South Vietnam democracy "from the top down" -- is a worthwhile, much less feasible, end, and to what extent the anti-Communist posture of any friendly nation presumes its interest in democratization.

Quite apart from bilateral relations, what can the war tell us about alliance politics? In 1965, a component of major direct American intervention in South Vietnam was to generate significant material contributions from our Asian allies. This effort at building a united front succeeded in producing troop support from Thailand, South Korea, and Australia, and noncombat personnel from Taiwan and the Philippines. It also may have prompted more serious thinking within these countries about their own defense. On the other hand, among them, Thailand, the Philippines, and Australia have paid a certain domestic political price for their support. For Japan, America's most important Asian ally, political support of our Vietnam policy has been a major irritant with probable upsetting consequences for the timetable of the retrocession of Okinawa. Moreover, the long-term effects of

the united-front approach can only begin to be gauged, and it is debatable whether they provide a definitive set of lessons to be learned. Increased concern about self-defense may promote greater self-reliance, thus decreasing the need for direct U.S. contributions. But such concern may also lead some Asian friends to exaggerate the military side of counterinsurgency and to neglect the historic roots of dissidence. And if self-defense thinking evolves into a new security organization of anti-Communist Asian nations, we are faced with the question of whether we have sowed the seeds of understanding or of new commitments. Lastly, as we look to some kind of Vietnam settlement, the united front may suddenly be of dubious value if those allies who sacrificed for America's sake during the war are denied a voice in its outcome or are dissatisfied with the final terms.

A different set of issues stemming from Vietnam concerns what we have learned about understanding other political systems and peoples. From the methodological standpoint, it might be argued that Vietnam, if nothing else, has opened up new avenues of intellectual pursuit: cost analysis, factor analysis, systems analysis, computer applications, etc. Few who are familiar with the extensiveness of the research undertaking on Vietnamese would quarrel with the view that this war has produced the vastest accumulation of information about any enemy in history. And the means of data accumulation make traditional field research and reliance on historical insight seem quite obsolete. But the question remains whether these new techniques have helped or hindered the Vietnam

effort. That they have introduced some order into a chaotic, multifaceted subject is undeniable, but at what price and with what benefits? One argument is that systems analysis has substituted numerical gamesmanship for political understanding; the war was made more "comprehensible" by considering enemy morale and cohesiveness in terms of body and weapons counts, government support in terms of population control, and the balance of forces in terms of shifting territorial holdings. Whether these transpositions made analysts and decision-makers more or less aware of the war's human and ideological dimensions is worthy of intensive investigation.

At another level, we may ask whether the United States, for all the information it has acquired about the enemy, has fully understood it. There is considerable room left for doubt when one considers for how long the North Vietnamese have been regarded as mere instruments of Soviet and Chinese policy; as constantly in danger of cracking under the stress of the bombing; as embroiled in a leadership dispute among pro-Peking, pro-Moscow, and middle-of-the-road advocates. Similarly, doubts about American understanding must linger when we consider the surprise in certain quarters about Hanoi's stubborn determination to continue the war despite all our figures about the enemy's manpower and equipment losses and recruitment difficulties; or when we observed U.S. insistence that Hanoi give a quid pro quo for cessation of the bombing, and then blanched at new Viet Cong attacks on the cities; or when we demand the complete withdrawal of "North Vietnamese" troops as a condition for the departure of American forces. In all these cases,

important questions are raised about our understanding of the enemy -- of his capacity for resistance, of his zealous independence from foreign pressures and undesirable foreign counsel, of his confidence in time and tenacity, and of his refusal to concede on his (but not our) right to be fighting in South Vietnam.

Questions relating to our capacity to understand the other side also crop up when we consider how the United States sought to manipulate the Moscow-Peking-Hanoi triangle. One of the persuasive arguments for bombing North Vietnam evidently was that it could take advantage of the hostility in Sino-Soviet relations. The outcome was quite different: Sino-Soviet relations did not improve, but both powers effectively divided their labor for the sake of their beleaguered socialist ally. Again, when the bombing began on a daily basis in March 1965, the United States apparently expected, perhaps based on the "lesson" of Cuba II, that the Soviet Union, once faced with a decisive display of American force and will, would seek to pressure Hanoi to negotiate with the United States. Instead, as we know, the Soviets were forced to consider the overriding interests of bloc politics and thus to step up assistance to the North Vietnamese rather than play middleman between Hanoi and Washington (perhaps against their inclination, but perhaps not). Yet if the lesson of that period was that the Soviets will not and cannot for Washington's sake disregard Hanoi's objectives, not to mention China's accusations of "capitulationism," it does not seem to have been learned. How else explain the persistence of hopes that Moscow will help us out in

Paris -- except, of course, by falling back on the argument that "circumstances are different today" from what they were in 1965.

Turning to an entirely different kind of political problem with ambiguous lessons, we may ask what implications might be drawn about public opinion and executive leadership. To some, the war has manifested the failure of successive Administrations to provide strong leadership that could have channeled public opinion in favor of the conflict. To others the failure will not be one of leadership but of propaganda: had official Washington talked less of "aggression from the North" and Chinese war by proxy and been more matter-of-fact about the origins and meaning of the war, the public might have been more forthcoming with support. As the public became more informed about the nature of the war, as it became more exposed to criticism of Government responses and policies, important segments began to feel the Government had sold the nation a bill of goods. Still a third line of argument might pick up Professor Robert E. Osgood's conclusion, with reference to Korea, that the reaction of the American public then demonstrated anew "the confluence of pacifism and pugnacity." In this sense, neither strong leadership nor better propaganda could probably have affected the drift in public opinion toward disenchantment with war policies, since the decisive factors were the very ambiguity of the conflict and the failure of the United States to make short shrift of it.

In looking at ourselves for lessons, it would indeed be unfortunate if the many psychological dimensions of American conduct of the war were neglected. Why we are

the way we are is as worthy a topic of research as why the Communists indulge in wars of national liberation. One particular aspect of this vast problem concerns the implications of a commitment. There seem to be fundamental lessons -- whether they can be learned or not is another matter -- in the reactions of some Americans to the thought of stopping short of victory and withdrawing from Vietnam under, shall we say, less than satisfactory circumstances. The greater the commitment (in money, prestige, and manpower), it seems, the greater the reluctance to think about the unthinkable. Surely there is a close relationship between this phenomenon and our distaste for "losing," especially when we have the physical means of "winning." In fact, one might go further by hypothesizing that the size of the American investment in Vietnam has also tended to magnify the extent of any loss and the prize of the opponent -- e.g., new people's wars, widespread accommodation to Communism, upsetting of the balance of power. Any price becomes more acceptable than defeat, so that even those who agree that of course we must get out, end by advocating changes in tactics in order to stay in. To what extent we have here a parallel to the anxiety crisis in individuals faced with disruption of a dependency relationship is for others to answer; but investigation of this problem -- American political images and concerns -- might produce the most important lessons of all.

The psychological aspects of the war are among those that are thrust into the background when debate centers around the war's costs to the United States. If we want to know what lessons the war has given us about

tolerable levels of costs to achieve victory, we are quickly in an impossible deadlock. It can always be contended that by changing the mix of resources ("we could win by adding X millions here and reducing Y millions there") or maintaining the mix but improving tactics ("we can stay on indefinitely at present levels of expenditure in lives and money, provided we are more prudent militarily") or simply reducing overall expenditures ("we can stay on indefinitely provided we reduce the costs in lives and money"), costs can be made tolerable. So long as the terms of the debate are confined to tangible costs, and given the virtually inexhaustible resources of the United States, no convincing arguments can be made at what point the war costs too much. And, of course, the same dilemma applies if we consider the psychological and political costs of varying degrees and lengths of commitment to Vietnam (or any other war). When can we say that the war produces unacceptable rifts in the American party system, exacerbates racial tensions, absorbs money that could better be used at home, or dangerously polarizes public opinion? To speak of "no more Vietnams" because of the war's impact on American society thus assumes a number of rather controversial lessons concerning the nature and magnitude of costs.

One great problem in avoiding mislessons in this area will consequently arise whenever we must weigh tangible against intangible matters. When a nation's life is clearly at stake it is traditional and not disrupting to sacrifice any amount of men and material goods

to save it. But when certain war outcomes are merely in the national interest -- and few would have argued that because of Ho's actions America's life was at stake, except perhaps very indirectly -- tangible costs in men and material have to be weighed against intangible national interests, not to mention domestic disruption and possible damage to relations with allies. There is hardly agreement just how to conduct such calculations; nor will there be, presumably, on what Vietnam can teach us about this.

2. MILITARY STRATEGY AND TACTICS

The military strategy and tactics that have been employed in the war in Vietnam are themselves, or at one point were claimed to be, lessons learned from the obsolescence of prior doctrines, such as Massive Retaliation, which itself was never applied except as a psycho-military posture. When it was recognized very early in the game -- for example in Greece and Turkey -- that the "enemy" was trying to develop a new way of circumventing our basic policy of containment backed by the threat of massive retaliation, the lessons learned from that were a host of counterinsurgency doctrines, designed to prevent the big Communist powers from extending their domains by aiding local insurgencies.

In addition to counterinsurgency techniques, new overall doctrines on how to deal with the big Communist powers were developed, with the "flexible response" strategy high on the list. This doctrine was based on the thought that there was a sort of continuum from a

rifle bullet to a megaton device that could be travelled on, depending on what steps had been reach on Herman Kahn's escalation ladder. It also carried the unspoken assumption that the other side was always clearly the agressor and somehow aware of it, as a result of which it would at any point be able and willing to "climb down" once it recognized our resolve to counter any of its next steps on the ladder with higher steps of our own, up to and including the big exchange of nuclear weapons. We thus visualized our flexible response as a strategy similar to the card player who takes on any challenger secure in the knowledge that the other fellow will soon desist when he perceives superior will and reserves.

But even though this type of thinking appears to have been somewhat valid in Korea, it broke down altogether in Vietnam. And Vietnam turned not only into the graveyard of the flexible response, but of practically all strategic doctrines currently held as well. Most striking of all, perhaps, were the failures of the strategies of coercion and interdiction by air power. It is not quite clear, or more precisely, a matter of controversy, just what the air strikes against North Vietnam intended to do according to the various decisionmakers who advocated and implemented them; but it is clear that they failed.

In the very early days of the war, at the time of the Tonkin Resolution, selected strikes were made against a few targets, in retaliation for certain hostile acts that had been committed by the "enemy" (was it the Viet Cong or the North?) against us. And right from the start the semantics surrounding the activity were disconcerting:

some spoke of retaliatory strikes, others of punitive strikes, and so on. The idea was, no doubt, to deter, and many of the leading personalities made the point that the subsequent regular bombing was meant to discourage the North from aiding the VC in the South. Others insisted, after regular bombing had shown no effect on Hanoi's resolve to aid its allies, that the air activity was less psychological and more directly military. They claimed that interdiction of Hanoi's aid effort, partly by intercepting the trucks going down the Ho Chi Minh trail, partly by destroying northern industry, communications and so on, were the aims.

It is obvious by now that the attempt at coercion -- either by actually forcing Hanoi's leaders to desist or by forcing their people to force the leaders to desist -- failed to work altogether. But it is not clear what it was that caused the failure. Most advocates of the program believe it was intrinsically sound but failed because it was too restricted. Others disagree, on two counts: they feel that heavier bombing of more targets would not have "done it" either, and that, besides, the United States, trying to avoid a spread of the war or a confrontation with others, did not even have the usable option of "more" bombing.

The air support for troops in the South, seemingly a much simpler matter and quite successful in that it bailed out ambushed friendly troops perhaps eight times out of ten, has not been clearly a productive strategy either. For the application of air power and also of artillery in the South could not but alienate at least some of the very civilians we felt we had to win over to

our side as an integral part of the counterinsurgency war, and when we killed and maimed them, we could hardly expect them to become our friends. On the other hand, there are those who insist they have learned from talks with villagers that the devastation wrought by our air power in the South did not alienate most villagers, who saw it as a necessity imposed on us by the VC -- a "lesson" that would certainly bear further study.

The question has of course arisen many times what to do if indeed the use of air and artillery should be politically so counter-productive in a counterinsurgency war as to make the use of other military tactics imperative. Some already claim to have learned that guerrilla warfare can only be countered by guerrilla warfare, or at least a close facsimile thereof; and that therefore the American army must be trained in night fighting, small unit action, and so on. Others reject this "lesson," arguing that such guerrilla tactics cannot be used by us because our soldiers are not sufficiently motivated and because in a foreign country, we cannot melt into the countryside.

Those involved in Pacification have gone through the agonizing process of shedding one lesson for another several times during the Vietnam war. Climbing down from the most ambitious initial objective, nationbuilding, they arrived, via hearts-and-minds and various other quasi-political formulations, to the simpler concepts of "population control" and "village security," which are essentially military concepts, and which they declared to be absolute "musts" in every counterinsurgency war. This, however, is just as dubious a lesson learned as the

other military lessons. In the first place, the various advocates of security are not in agreement as to what security really means, except that "absolute" security cannot be attained -- i.e., some VC influx into villages cannot be prevented at all times, and when it cannot, those collaborating with us have a good chance of having their throats cut. The "relative" security obtained at enormous cost may then be worth very little in the battle with the enemy.

Equally troublesome are the various ratios that have been established by the more computer-minded warriors in Vietnam. They believed at one point, and quite a few of them still seem to believe, that there are certain kill ratios, attrition ratios, and particularly some magic force ratios that will defeat the enemy and must therefore be attained. Thus, students of the Malayan war reached the conclusion that a 10:1 ratio in forces opposing each other was sufficient. Yet, it seems improbable that such ratios guaranteeing success can be established with any validity. It is not just the general strategic situation that determines the strength of the enemy, but in particular his morale; and a thousand "well-indoctrinated" on the enemy side are harder to lick, in certain circumstances, than five thousand who are less eager to fight.

The many uncertainties on how to proceed militarily led to even more uncertainties as to what had or had not been accomplished in the war. The most persistent question soom became: Are we winning? In other days and ages that question rarely needed to be asked as it was quite obvious whether or not one side or the other was winning.

But in the Vietnam war the strategists had to fall back upon an intricate system of "indicators" that would tell them whether they were ahead or behind. With regard to the standards they came to apply, many lessons will yet have to be learned, the outstanding one of which may be -- but is not necessarily -- the simple one that if you cannot discern quite easily that you are winning, then you are not, and no further studies based on indicators are needed.

One premature lesson many profess to have learned is that the strategy of search-and-destroy was "wrong," and the clear-and-hold follow-up strategy no better. Perhaps the more defensive posture adopted later, coupled with greater efforts at using small action teams and combined action platoon, was somewhat less expensive in men and money, and prevented a recurrence of such disasters as the Tet offensive of 1968. On the other hand, just what is a superior defensive strategy good for? If the concept is that the war can only be terminated if the enemy is destroyed, a more defensive strategy, while temporarily perhaps less painful, would appear to be even more ill-suited to reaching the final objective. In this connection it should be remembered that it is always possible that a certain objective cannot be reached by <u>any</u> means, so that the lesson flowing from failure is not necessarily some alternate strategy, but rather the insight that the objective is not an attainable one.

In all, it would appear that the enemy, on purpose or not, has managed in the course of the Vietnam war to pulverize almost all of our military and strategic concepts. We no longer can say for sure what is victory or even

progress; what is useful or not useful intelligence; what are the enemy's main weaknesses we must exploit or his principal strengths we must break; what needs to be done to win or extricate or terminate. Into this gigantic conceptual vacuum, new doctrines are apt to pour like a flood, under the guise of lessons learned. Therefore, let our first lesson be: Caveat student!

One of the most frequently heard comments on why so much American power was committed in Vietnam with so little desired result has been that our power was too gradually applied, both on the ground in the South and in the air in the North. It gave the enemy a chance, some critics say, to mobilize his own forces and to increase his resilience in absorbing the blows that were dealt him eventually. From the purely military point of view, there is perhaps some sound logic in this type of thinking. It must be remembered, however, that due to the slow and gradual nature of the involvement-turned-war, no American government could easily have persuaded the American public, or even come to believe itself, that forces such as were eventually deployed would be needed, not to win the war, but merely to prevent the victory of the other side. Thus, no U.S. government would have felt or been free to go all out all at once. In fact, the argument could be made just the other way around: Had any U.S. government known at the beginning of the involvement that huge forces and efforts would be required, it probably would not have engaged in the venture at all. Thus, to conclude that an immediate "blitz" with all forces would have done the job may be just another mislesson forcing

itself upon the observer. Had it been credible that a blitz of such proportions was required, the country -- perhaps even including the military -- might for that very reason have refused to launch it.

One area in which we certainly committed some of our most grievous errors was the assessment of enemy morale and motivation. We grossly underestimated, at all times, what the state of morale of the enemy was, and were inclined to interpret the numerous defections on the one hand, and the reports and complaints of such defectors on the other, as rather solid straws in the wind of the VC's impending collapse.

It is easy, in retrospect, to see where we erred: we interpreted routine complaints, found in similar or greater measure in any army and any war, as signs of something they were not. We also projected much of our own thinking into the enemy: if our soldiers would have to fight an enemy technologically a hundred times superior to them, or if they would have to fight with only rifles and mortars against an army with tanks and air forces, their morale might not be very good. But the Vietnamese soldiers, both in the VC and the NVA reacted differently, and still do.

Only in the latter course of the war did we develop methods of interrogation and analysis that began to provide us with an apparently more realistic picture of the enemy soldier than we had in the beginning. But, here again, the possibility of drawing many different conclusions, and "learning" much that might not be there is great. Those involved in the war know that disagreement over just how good or bad the enemy's morale was or is

never ceased, and that methodological disputes over how best to measure it are equally sharp. Lessons cry out to be learned in that area, but there, too, the pitfalls are waiting for the analyst.

Related to our unsuccessful assessment of enemy morale was and is our study of the peasant, the inhabitant of what we consider to be the all-important countryside in Vietnam. From the beginning of the war it was recognized as crucial that this was largely a political war, and that neither side would have an easy time winning it if it could not command the loyalty of the rural population for whose allegiance both sides vied with different blandishments. But it never became clear just on whose side the villagers were. There always remained uncertainty and contradiction, such as on the question of whether our bombing and shellings would "work for us." The villagers might blame the other side for bringing our attacks upon them; but they might also blame us simply for attacking. In recent years, analysts have tended to conclude that the villagers really do not blame anybody, and, as far as the war at large is concerned, favor neither side but just try to survive. However, even this claim is not convincingly supported by evidence; it may testify more to the perplexity of the analysts than to anything else, and what evidence there is for it is not produced by methods of analysis that are undisputed.

What is so very important with regard to villager attitudes as well as the morale of enemy soldiers is, of course, that -- had we had an accurate picture from the beginning -- we might (a) not have become engaged in the venture at all, or (b) engaged in it very differently.

Pacification, for example, can only work, obviously, if the premises on which it rests as to what the villagers are or want or do not want are accurate. Yet, even the fact that pacification did not work cannot automatically be regarded as evidence that the premises were wrong. To the war in Vietnam there were so many interlocking premises that it is perfectly conceivable that in some area our reading of the situation was right, and yet we had to fail.

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If any one conclusion emerges from this glance at the possible lessons of Vietnam, it is that learning them may be a good thing in some cases, unlearning what already poses as lessons better still in others, and denying that there really are any perhaps the best -- because the safest -- thing of all. But whether lessons can be learned, and which ones should be, requires that we begin by evaluating whether, in Karl Deutsch's terms, we are organized to learn "creatively" or "pathologically." Only when we can understand and admit the biases in the making and carrying out of our own decisions can we profitably move on to extracting lessons, learning those we should, and knowing which of those learned should be used where, and how.