



Why did resistance against the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War take so long to succeed?

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1. Introduction

Ironically, the first act of resistance against the United States' involvement in Vietnam was from President Roosevelt. In January 1944, Roosevelt was adamant about his distaste towards colonialism in Southeast Asia and had no intention of supporting France's war to maintain their land in Vietnam, as a continuation of America's post-second world war reluctance to engage with international territorial gain, as stated in the Atlantic Charter in 1941¹. Why then did five consecutive presidents initiate and maintain involvement in the war against communism in North Vietnam, despite the United States' pledge against colonialism? This contradiction gave birth to a great deal of resistance against the growing contribution to seemingly colonialist activities by the United States Government. Resistance surrounding the Vietnam conflict took on many forms, which allows us to explore the complex definition of resistance itself. The two major aspects of resistance within this conflict were the internal struggle from American politicians and the American public, and the external military resistance from the communists in North Vietnam. Resistance against the US involvement would undoubtedly have succeeded sooner if the government administration and national security were fully aware of the difficulties of going to war with Vietnam prior to 1965 when the first American troops were deployed.

¹ M.Bradley and M.Young (eds) *Making Sense of the Vietnam Wars* (New York, 2008), p.25.

2. Discussion

A major contributing factor to resistance against the US involvement in Vietnam was that the United States did not want Vietnam falling under the control of the communist North Vietnam. The United States gave \$2.6 billion in financial aid to France between 1950 to 1954 to aid their colonial war against the communists in Vietnam, due to their fundamental opposition to the communist ideology and its spread, as it was perceived as an existential threat to Western development and economic progress following 1945.² After conceding victory to the communists in China, successive presidents from Truman to Nixon stressed their deep concern surrounding the possibility of South East Asia being pulled into a domino effect of nations falling under communist rule. Kennedy emphasised his concern that the fall of Vietnam to communism would lead to the loss of the entirety of Southeast Asia. Therefore, support for France was essential in the interests of the security of Western Europe- particularly due to the growing popularity of the communist party in France post World War Two. This reluctance towards the increasing control of communists in Vietnam continued into the early 1970s, when both Johnson and Nixon stated that they were unwilling to withdraw from Vietnam so long as the communists in the North remained engaged in the war. This clearly shows the American attitude towards the fight against communism: as long as there was a communist bid for power in Vietnam, resistance to the withdrawal of military aid from within the US government and from the American public had little effect. This military aid for the war against North Vietnam came originally in the form of financial aid for existing allied troops, and later developed into the deployment of the American military in 1965. The US Government spent an exceptionally long time considering their policy towards the Indochina war, in particular the extent of their own military involvement. These deliberations by American political leaders extended the duration of the war and subsequently delayed the success of the resistance against US involvement in Vietnam. It is therefore clear that the American position against communists in North Vietnam was primarily an ideological one, due to their perception of communism as a growing threat towards the West.

However, Bradley and Young claim that US national security officials 'repeatedly emphasised the favourable opportunities presented by the U.S power advantage, rather than the threat of the communist world, in their advocacy of the use of force in Vietnam.'³ This argument demonstrates that the idea of 'containment policy'- the US strategy which aimed to prevent the spread of communism from the East when nations showed signs of growing communist influence- does not satisfactorily explain the United States' military strategy, as they did indeed employ an offensive tactic in Vietnam as the war continued. This offensive tactic was further demonstrated by Kennedy, who stated that the US needed to 'move forward to meet communism rather than waiting for it to come to us and then reacting to it.'⁴ This proactivity is perhaps a result of the growing concern about communism in the post-war period, as the US had already taken part in one failed offensive against communism in the invasion of the Bay of Pigs in April 1961. Following the communist

² G. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-75* (New York, 1986), p.42.

³ Bradley and Young, *Making Sense*, p.74.

⁴ Herring, *America's Longest War*, p.74.

takeover in Cuba, it became increasingly imperative for the US to retain their strong position against communism, and thus to follow an aggressive military strategy in Vietnam. This focus on maintaining the upper hand against communism meant that the resistance against the US involvement in Vietnam had an even greater difficulty in succeeding and can therefore explain the delayed success of the internal resistance campaign. According to Young, the American policy of containment through an offensive strategy was nationally 'accepted without serious question for more than two decades.'⁵ This lack of questioning and confidence in the US military strength, alongside the American ideological opposition to communism, made it almost impossible for any resistance against the US involvement to succeed in the early 1960's.

As many historians of the modern era have argued, the United States failed to change their attitude of arrogance following the Second World War.⁶ There is a vast amount of evidence to suggest that resistance against the United States' involvement in Vietnam would have succeeded sooner if it was not for their arrogance when approaching the Vietnam predicament, which entailed both an overestimation of their own military strength and an underestimation of the Viet Cong and their unique guerrilla tactics. Firstly, Johnson did not anticipate the longevity of the war. He wanted it to be a short conflict in order to ensure the implementation of a new government in Saigon, to keep the war geographically limited to exclude the agitation of China and the Soviet Union, and to limit the unease amongst the public on American soil. Despite this, by 1967 the States had deployed almost 500,000 combat troops in Vietnam, had released more bombs than in World War II, and was spending over \$2 billion per month.⁷ Furthermore, the US were confident in 1964 that Hanoi would pull out of their territories in South Vietnam out of fear if the US had started an air war, which was a gross overestimation of their own ability to intimidate an established military force. The US did not prepare for the possibility that the war could end in a drawn out failure, and had they considered this possibility perhaps they would not have repeated France's mistake by deploying troops in Vietnam. This confidence, and in particular the lack of preparation for failure, prevented any form of internal resistance against the invasion of Vietnam within the US from succeeding.

This confidence translated to the battleground, as the US decided to continue their campaign in Vietnam after two years of military engagement on the basis that they were winning. Their belief was due to the fact that the Vietnamese death toll had reached 220,000 by 1967, yet this does not take into account the 200,000 Vietnamese citizens who were drafted into the Viet Cong each year.⁸ These figures highlight the false sense of security given to the US by high numbers of casualties, which were taken to indicate American success. The US also failed to anticipate the Viet Cong's unconventional guerilla tactics, which during the Tet Offensive in 1967 proved truly detrimental to the chances of US victory. This lack of preparation for guerrilla warfare highlights the American

⁵ Bradley and Young, *Making Sense*, p.6.

⁶ Herring, *America's Longest War*, p.280.

⁷ Herring, *America's Longest War*, p.145.

⁸ *Ibid*, p.154.

military confidence, as the Vietminh had used similar tactics previously when fighting against the French in the early 1950s, yet the US failed to adapt their own tactics to overcome this. Indeed, when Johnson sent American troops to aid South Vietnam he underestimated the determination of the Viet Cong to fight against the American and South Vietnamese soldiers. American diplomat George Ball warned that 'once on the tigers back we cannot be sure of piking the place to dismount.'⁹ This statement encapsulates the idea that this was a war without frontal lines or any direction against an enemy which continued to replenish their military force, a war in which victory was the only result Johnson and Nixon would allow. The American Government did not prepare for the possibility of a lack of victory on the military front. This arrogance and lack of anticipation of a stalemate facilitated the delayed success of resistance against the US involvement in Vietnam, as the Oval Office refused to admit defeat. The continuation of the US campaign on the basis of their debatable successes encapsulates why the American confidence in their campaign could not be challenged by the internal resistance within the US bureaucracy, let alone the brutal, and often successful, resistance from the Viet Cong.

Herring places a great deal of responsibility upon presidents Johnson and Nixon, and their respective governments, for the decisions to both enter the war and delay withdrawal. The historian claims that Johnson remained in the war because 'he saw no alternative that did not require him to admit failure or defeat.'¹⁰ However, Young criticises this, as he argues that the Oval Office has been used as a scapegoat by historians and that not enough responsibility has been apportioned to the national security for the decision to engage in war in Vietnam, a problem which is often inherent within the President role. This criticism is useful, as between 1961 and 1965 the officials of the national security placed increasing pressure on presidents Kennedy and Johnson to send US troops into Vietnam, which they initially resisted. Therefore, Roosevelt cannot be defined as the sole president who resisted against US involvement in Vietnam, as Young states that Eisenhower declared himself 'bitterly opposed' to any military action in 1954, that Kennedy rejected five proposals from the national security bureaucracy to send military enforcements to Vietnam, and that Johnson rejected all thirteen attempts made by the national security bureaucracy to engage in the Vietnam War over fourteen months.¹¹ This debate within the literature further suggests that it was not only the Oval Office who were motivated to contain communism, but also a significant proportion of the government bureaucracy, which indicates an underlying pro-war monolith of opinion within the government at the start of the period. This provides a more understandable conclusion as to why resistance against the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War took so long to succeed, as in the years leading up to 1965 there was a consistent call from the national security to engage in warfare, and therefore any resistance was unwelcome and ignored.

Another fundamental reason for the lack of US military success was that the neither side were defeated entirely, as the Viet Cong were never overthrown and did not concede, and the US also

⁹ Ibid, p.145.

¹⁰ Ibid, p.185.

¹¹ Bradley and Young, *Making Sense*, p.76.

refused to concede due to their sunk cost fallacy. A turning point in the war was the Viet Cong's Tet Offensive which 'broke like a clap of thunder on an astonished world' according to Duiker.¹² In October 1967, local communist party organisations formed guerrilla groups and suicide squads with the aim of establishing control over territories in South Vietnam. Their assaults were successful in infiltrating Saigon and Hue, and showed the US that the war would not be easy. This resulted in a decline in both the morale amongst American troops and in the national support within America for the war. This tremendous stance of resistance against the US by the Viet Cong demonstrated that the war could only end with the withdrawal of the United States' troops. The US needed to win outright, whereas Hanoi simply needed to show that they would not lose. Yet the US was unable to force Hanoi to submission, prolonging the success of Hanoi's resistance. The lack of admittance of defeat from the US was partly due to their immense depth of national resources. It seemed they were in a sunk cost fallacy, which meant that they could continuously reinvest into the war using seemingly indispensable financial resources. This financial strength fuelled their ideological refusal to concede to the communists, which meant that the US could neither win nor lose the war and were left with a prolonged stalemate.

Following the Tet Offensive, internal resistance against involvement in Vietnam within the United States was not only existent in the bureaucracy but also amongst the American public. Allan claims that 'virtually all historians agree that concern for American prisoners of war and soldiers missing in action (POW/MIA's) was key to prolonging the war'. These POW/MIAs intensified the American war effort and introduced a form of ultimatum for the US as they wanted neither to prolong the war nor to abandon their captured troops.¹³ Nixon spread propaganda which showed the war as a fight to free American POWs, heavily suggesting to the nation that there were vast amount of US soldiers being held captive and being violently treated in Vietnamese prisons, and thus providing this as the primary reason for the continuation of US involvement. Nixon also used the convincing quote 'the silent majority', which created the idea that there continued to be a large vocally silent support for the Vietnam War within the United States. Despite Nixon's initially effective political campaign to prolong the war, there was a shift in the general opinion of the American public as the war continued under the Nixon administration, despite his early intentions of withdrawing soldiers through his 'Vietnamization' strategy, which aimed to train South Vietnamese forces to take over the role of American troops. Young argues that ultimately, 'POW/MIA politics convinced the no longer silent majority that the Vietnam war was not worth the price.'¹⁴ Indeed, on January 27th 1973, the Paris agreement was signed which ensured the withdrawal of American troops despite the potential for further fighting from the North Vietnamese. Nixon had failed to win the war, and the American national resistance to free the prisoners of war ironically had a major contribution towards the decision to withdraw from the war entirely.

3. Conclusions

¹² W. Dukier, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam* (Oxford, 1996), p.295.

¹³ Bradley and Young, *Making Sense*, p.15.

¹⁴ Bradley and Young, *Making Sense*, p.270.

Resistance against the United States' involvement in Vietnam came in many different forms, with subsequently varying objectives and levels of success. The Viet Cong's resistance against the US troops specifically was largely successful as, despite a high death toll, they were able to force US withdrawal from the conflict in 1973. Despite this, their fight for communism in Vietnam as a whole was significantly less successful as the war continued between Hanoi and the South Vietnamese following the departure of the US. The internal resistance within America achieved mixed success, as although troops were eventually withdrawn and 591 POWs were recovered, this figure was much lower than the public were expecting and emphasised the high death toll, reported to be over 58,000.¹⁵ Unlike the American citizens campaigning for peace in Vietnam and all of their POWs returned, the Viet Cong had achieved success with the Paris agreement of 1973. Fundamentally, as important as containing communism was for the United States, it was their lack of consideration of the potential length of the war and of the strength of the Viet Cong tactics which meant that they were neither able to defeat the communist entirely nor prepared to concede when they were under attack, which ultimately prolonged the success of both internal and external resistance.

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¹⁵ US National Archives, 'Vietnam War U.S. Military Fatal Casualty Statistics' (27 Jan. 2020), <https://www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics>