

THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY AND THE VIETNAM WAR 1962-1972

THE VIETNAM SYNDROME: A BRIEF HISTORY

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This essay addresses the origins, evolution and consequences of the so-called Vietnam Syndrome, especially as it has influenced American military operations since the end of the war. The attacks on New York and Washington slightly more than a year ago, and indeed, events since then, have made this subject rather less abstract than it might have been otherwise.

The United States was in shock for some time after the attacks of September 11, and what would be known as 'the war on terrorism' was still in its first light. Our enemies had not yet shown themselves. No war had been declared in the constitutional way. No strategies had been revealed. But the scent of vengefulness hung in the air. The public seemed to assume that the United States would reply to these attacks, but no one was inclined to look very much beyond the immediate moment. When, later on, the war was announced—not declared—and given a name, it became clear that Washington planned more than a limited retaliation. Without specifying the strategic aims of the war—no Fourteen Points or Four Freedoms this time—leading American officials were quick to warn their fellow citizens that the war would last a good long time. That seemed to be a pretty good guess when we were taking so long to find an enemy. Clearly, a cruise missile strike would not assuage public anger.

As the initial shock dissipated, and as the mass media broadcast guesses about the next military step, a certain question was never very far from the surface. Are the American people up to it? Can the Americans meet the demands of a new, protracted and very unconventional struggle? Later on, will the Americans support the war as enthusiastically as they seem to support it now, or will that support slowly lose its edge?

The common point of reference for all these questions was the war in Vietnam, a war fought so long ago that it seems almost ancient now. But the influence of this war on the present opinion is assumed to be such that one might be forgiven for thinking the United States had hidden behind its oceanic walls ever since. Grenada, Panama, Beirut, Central America, the Balkans, Somalia, and even the Gulf War—none of these campaigns seem to have excited the significance of the war in Vietnam. Only the memory of Vietnam is assumed to have had this kind of staying power, this capacity to influence our contemporary national policies. Are the American people up to it? This is a question that would not have been asked—indeed, was not asked—before the war in Vietnam.¹ This question, the body of assumptions upon which it is founded, and the effect the answer is supposed to exercise over American statecraft and American public sentiment are often referred to simply as the Vietnam Syndrome. I want to suggest that the Vietnam Syndrome has long outlived any real influence or usefulness it might have had once.

As with other such phrases, the Vietnam Syndrome has persisted because it has a certain elasticity. In its broadest sense, the Vietnam Syndrome signifies the supposed reluctance of the people of the United States to support the employment of their armed forces in the service of their nation's foreign policy. An important, more recently fixed codicil of this loose collection of attitudes has to do with the time and cost of a given military action if it cannot be avoided: military action must be prompt, decisive and as nearly cost-free as possible. The syndrome requires that few or preferably no casualties be taken. If those conditions are not met, the American public will insist on a prompt cessation of operations and an immediate withdrawal, without reference to its effect on American foreign policy. These notions constitute what might be regarded as the irreducible minimum of the Vietnam Syndrome. Of course, the phrase can be injected with a very wide range of additional meanings, depending on the argument it is meant to serve at the moment. Any attempt at a precise definition rather defeats the purpose; the Vietnam Syndrome is not meant to serve as a thought, but as a substitute for thought.

Among the claims to memory the twentieth century might make on the future, one seems to me to have been an extraordinary facility for cant, for the cheap, essentially meaningless political slogan. And it is their emptiness, their lack of meaning, that paradoxically make them especially pernicious. I am not alone in thinking so. Almost half a century ago, George Orwell warned that modern 'prose consists less and less of *words* chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more of *phrases* tacked together like the sections of a pre-fabricated hen-house'.²

The United States got a jump on the new century with 'Remember the Maine', an exhortation to war against Spain inspired by what seems to have been a battleship's defective boiler rather than the act of sabotage it was believed to be at the time. No matter. In the Great War, we hear the French call out at Verdun, 'they shall not pass', *ils ne passeront pas*. Both of these entries fall under the general category of war cries. They call frankly for retribution and little else. Once the urge is satisfied, they imply, everyone ought to go home. They make no contribution to political science.

The first great and particularly awful slogan of the century was *der Dolchstoss*, or the 'stab in the back'. Often cast as an explanation of how Germany would have won the Great War if spineless politicians and weak-kneed civilians had only stuck it out, as German armies were supposedly doing in the trenches. *Der Dolchstoss* was infinitely expansible. The phrase was suffused with just the right mixture of failure, regret, guilt, betrayal, vengefulness, spite, envy, self-righteousness and, yes, even hatred—all these emotions and more. Furthermore, the phrase 'had legs', it persisted in the political and public language. Hitler and his fellow criminals found the 'stab in the back' myth very useful indeed when their turn to make their own contribution to national mythology came around during the 1930s.

Taking the prize for concision, deployment of meaning, and a very long public life, 'Munich' will always come to mind, recalling Prime Minister Chamberlain's 'appeasement' of Hitler over Czechoslovakia in 1938. History has flogged Chamberlain ever since, and never again will Munich be known only as the principal city of Bavaria. Like the 'stab in the back' slogan, 'Munich' has staying power, and indeed the so-called lessons of Munich have been brandished several times lately—most recently over the direction US policy should take toward Iraq.

Comparing the Munich Syndrome with the Vietnam Syndrome is instructive. Munich is used against those who do not act. The Vietnam Syndrome describes those who act too much, are disappointed by what their action produces, and then refuse to act more.³ Munich is a metaphor for an event with known, and largely agreed upon, consequences. The Vietnam Syndrome has greater scope; it spans an entire decade. Munich works as a cautionary lesson—don't be intimidated or fooled by bullies—but the Vietnam Syndrome offers a kind of sad description for which few solutions seem to be available. Indeed, the use of the word syndrome imparts a medical tone, as if to suggest a disease. And that is not quite an accident.

The Vietnam Syndrome began its life in the 1960s as a diagnosis. In medical terminology, a syndrome is a collection of symptoms whose patterns suggest a particular illness. These symptoms may be transient, or temporary, and respond to proper medical treatment. A syndrome that persists or takes on a chronic state is defined as a disorder, and as such might be managed over the long term rather than cured.

The exact origins of the diagnosis are not entirely clear. One guess has the term originating as a kind of medical shorthand during the late 1960s among psychiatrists and psychologists of the United States' Veterans' Administration hospitals.⁴ The public debut of the Vietnam Syndrome was in *The New York Times* for 6 May 1972, in an 'op-ed' piece by one Dr Chaim Shatan. Shatan was a director of psychoanalytic training at New York University. As a practising psychoanalyst, Shatan had become interested in the nature, causes and treatment of severe psychological shock, especially as these cases presented themselves among victims of Nazi atrocities during the Holocaust.

By the late 1960s, Shatan was also an opponent of the war in Vietnam. At a university anti-war rally, several Vietnam veterans approached Shatan, asking for his help. They complained of difficulty readjusting to civilian life after their combat tours. They did not expect a sympathetic hearing at the Veterans' Administration Hospitals. They did not ask for therapy; they said they were 'hurting' and just wanted to talk. So was born what came to be known as the 'rap group', really only a collective therapy session by a new name.⁵

Before long, Dr Shatan was joined by another psychiatrist who was also interested in the nature and long-term effects of psychic trauma. Robert Jay Lifton taught at Yale and had served as a psychiatrist with the US Air Force during the Korean War. Like Shatan, he also had come to oppose the Vietnam War. His research interests at the time focused on the psychological trauma experienced by the survivors of the atomic attack on Hiroshima. To Shatan and Lifton, the victims of the Holocaust and of Hiroshima were special. The psychic traumas these patients had suffered so transcended the 'normal range of human experiences' that their shock was capable of producing profound reactions. To Lifton, such patients made up a 'special contemporary group' whose experiences had created 'special regenerative insight'. Before long, Shatan and Lifton were beginning to think of the veterans in their rap groups in the same light as victims of Hiroshima and the Holocaust.⁶

To these analysts, it seemed possible to think of the veterans as new and different sorts of patients, those whose psychological illness was the result of the stresses they experienced in war. Furthermore, these analysts found it possible to argue that a war whose origins, conduct, and expected outcome were so controversial that it would engender more psychological casualties than wars of a more straightforward kind.⁷ None of this was correct, but during the 1970s some facts appear to have been inconvenient in American public discourse.⁸

One symptom of the post-Vietnam syndrome was advertised as new and dangerous: these traumatic reactions were delayed, not showing themselves for months or even years after the traumatic event. Further, these reactions could supposedly occur without warning, at any time. *The New York Times* published a story in 1975 of a case in which a Vietnam veteran was convicted of murdering his wife. The veteran's defence was that he had been startled awake by a combat flashback and had instinctively pulled the gun from under his pillow and defended himself. An unsympathetic jury gave him life in prison. Citing statistics gathered during what he called a 'comprehensive series of stories' in *Penthouse* magazine, the journalist Tom Wicker informed the readers of his column in *The New York Times* that as many as 500,000 of the 2.5 million Vietnam veterans had attempted suicide, conveying the impression that every vet was deranged.⁹ News like this routinely appeared during the 1970s, and Hollywood discovered Rambo as well.

Throughout the decade, the American public was engaged in highly complex negotiations with the memory of the war in Vietnam. The process by which the Vietnam veteran became a metaphor for the nation as a whole began very soon after President Nixon ordered the withdrawal of American forces. In January, 1970, Lifton and several other prominent psychiatrists were called to testify before the Senate on the care and treatment of wounded Vietnam veterans. Lifton devoted his testimony to the 'psychological predicament of the Vietnam Veteran'. Although Lifton did not employ the term, 'post-Vietnam syndrome', his testimony leaves little doubt that he considered his patients' complaints quite real, uniquely created by combat experiences.¹⁰

The finer technical points of Lifton's testimony are of less significance here than his broader argument; it was, simply put, that the United States itself was suffering from a collective kind of post-Vietnam syndrome, composed of symptoms that mimicked those of his individual patients—guilt, resentment and alienation. 'The Vietnam Veteran serves as a psychological crucible of the entire country's doubts and misgivings about the war', Lifton told the Senators.¹¹

This was not the first occasion a medical diagnosis had slipped past the boundaries of its scientific origins to enter common language. In Great Britain after the First World War, 'shell shock', although repudiated by the physician who coined the term, became a very public

diagnosis, freighted with any number of extra-scientific connotations. After that war, leading British psychologists observed, just as did Robert Lifton, that although the term with which each became associated was medically useless, the terms had nevertheless captured the public's imagination.¹² However, not even shell shock rose quite to the level of national cliché, as the post-Vietnam syndrome would.

To finish this skein of the story, debates were to continue in medical circles for the rest of the decade over the legitimacy of the post-Vietnam syndrome. The debates were more or less resolved in 1980 with a new third edition of the psychiatric profession's diagnostic guide, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, or DSM-III. After an intense public lobbying campaign by Shatan, Lifton, and others, DSM-III included a category of illness now designated 'Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder', or PTSD.¹³ A new chapter in the history of modern psychiatric disease classifications had been written. Well before then, however, the Vietnam Syndrome had made good its escape from the medical world and had been enlisted for non-scientific duty.

By 1970, public opinion polls showed a majority of Americans favouring withdrawal from Vietnam. Indeed, popular support for Richard Nixon's presidential administration was partly contingent upon US withdrawal from Vietnam. Richard J. Barnet found it possible to write in 1970, without reservation: 'it is safe to say that there is no one in the United States who is for the Vietnam war ... Although the war is far from over, the "lessons" of Vietnam are filling volumes. The whole direction of American foreign policy for the next generation will depend upon which lessons are accepted as the new orthodoxy.'¹⁴

When this was written, the United States had already started its slow retreat. President Nixon would not be able to make good on his campaign promise to abolish conscription for another year. The war was still running, and it would continue to run, past the last American troops who left in April, 1973, and on to that day in late April, 1975, when NVA tanks crashed through the gates at the Presidential Palace in Saigon. On that day, the last Americans were killed in Vietnam: two Marine corporals, Charles McMahon, 22, and Darwin Judge, 19. The war had sunk from view in America. Contrary to Professor Barnet's view, not many people seemed very interested in the lessons of the war.

'To the surprise of many observers', historian George Herring wrote several years later, 'the traumatic climax of the Vietnam War in 1975 did not provoke a great national debate on what had gone wrong. Quite the contrary, the first postwar years were marked by a conspicuous silence on the subject, as though the war had not happened.'¹⁵ Indeed, the American people had already delivered their verdict on this war. In 1971, public opinion polls showed slightly more than 60 per cent of Americans favouring the withdrawal of all US troops from Vietnam. Four years later, during the week Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese, 53 per cent of those polled still thought the United States should 'help governments that might be overthrown by communist-backed forces'.¹⁶ Opinion had settled into what seemed to be a permanent divide: slightly more than half of all Americans supported their government's foreign policies, even if those policies meant using military force.¹⁷ So it was not the use of military force in general that had fallen from favour; it was the unsuccessful use of military force.

That was public opinion. Elite political opinion was a good deal more wary of military commitments abroad. Congressional opposition to the war manifested itself most forcefully through votes on defence budgets. In 1970, defence expenditures consumed about 40 per cent of all government expenditures. By 1976 (the vote was for FY 1977), that outlay had dropped to about 24 percent, a smaller proportion than any budget since before the Second World War.¹⁸ Rather than fighting a futile delaying action against public and congressional sentiment, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird tried to manage the inevitable reductions. His ambition was to posture the defence establishment for a rebuilding program several years hence, when the disappointments of the war might be muted.¹⁹

What public commentators were fond of calling the 'process of national healing' had to compete with the Watergate Scandals at home and a world that continued to make demands on official American attention. The Nixon Administration had already promulgated what was

called the 'Nixon Doctrine', calling for a retreat from foreign obligations. This was just as well, for Congress passed the Church Amendment in 1973, forbidding any more Americans in combat in Southeast Asia. That was followed a year later by the War Powers Act, in which Congress asserted its constitutional powers by severely limiting presidential authority to employ military force abroad. The United States drew back from the global activism that President Kennedy had proclaimed so famously in his inaugural address.²⁰ Historians since have argued that, by contrast, the five years after the fall of Saigon constituted 'the greatest deviation of US policy from the basic ... containment strategy of the past 35 years'.²¹

Any war that takes as long to end as this one did defies those who like their history neat. How public figures interpreted the lessons of this war depended importantly on preconceptions. What we would recognise today as an objective view of the war—its origins, its conduct, and its outcome—was nowhere to be seen. This view would necessarily have included not only an appreciation for events as they transpired, but also a clear-eyed reading of American public sentiment. Neither of those seemed to be in good supply.

Richard Nixon did more than any other single public figure to redefine the Vietnam Syndrome from diagnosis to political slogan. Five years after resigning from office during the Watergate scandals, Nixon published *The Real War*, in which he used 'the Vietnam Syndrome' as a title for one of his chapters. Here, he wrote:

Unless the United States shakes the false lessons of Vietnam and puts 'the Vietnam Syndrome' behind it, we will forfeit the security of our allies and eventually our own. This is the real lesson of Vietnam—not that we should abandon power, but that unless we learn to use it effectively to defend our interests, the tables of history will be turned against us and all we believe in.²²

By one count, the United States employed its armed forces abroad in support of its foreign policy objectives more than 215 times between 1945 and 1976. This accounting does not include the Korean or Vietnam wars.²³ By this standard, American military operations declined between the end of Vietnam and the beginning of the 'eighties, when Nixon wrote this. The Soviets did indeed intervene in Angola's civil war during this period, but so did the United States until Congress learned of the covert operations we were conducting. It is also true that President Carter and his administration were hesitant to react to the seizure of hostages at the embassy in Tehran, and that the United States' covert attempt to rescue them misfired badly. Nor, at virtually the same time, was the United States capable of preventing the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan. Even at this remove, one wonders how the United States could have found a way to keep the Soviets at home. How, in this light, might one see the United States' reaction—or more exactly, lack of reaction—to the Soviet Union's invasion of Czechoslovakia? These foreign policy reverses said more about official hesitancy and poor planning than a strategic retreat induced by a national malaise.²⁴ The Carter administration may have conceived its policies, thinking that it was reflecting the wishes of the American people; if so, it was going to pay for such miscalculation after the fact, by losing the next election.

This was by no means the first time policymakers had projected their illusions onto American public opinion as rationale for policy, nor would it be the last. The new presidential administration of Ronald Reagan came to office in 1980 on a promise, among others, to 'restore the military strength of the United States as quickly as possible'. For this task the new president selected Caspar W Weinberger to serve as Secretary of Defense and George W Shultz to serve as the new Secretary of State.

These two worldly, experienced and strong-willed men had very different views of American military power. Shultz was very much the activist. To Shultz, every international problem was in some respect an American problem, and calculated international engagement was Shultz's answer to the Carter administration's timidity. Not that Weinberger was a pacifist; far from it, but he disliked using military power as an adjunct to diplomacy. The differences between the two cabinet officers turned not on whether military power should be employed, but how, when and to what purpose.

In retrospect, Shultz and Weinberger's views were not so far apart in practice. Shultz was increasingly frustrated by a resurgence of terrorism in the Middle East, terrorism that seemed to benefit by the acquiescence or fearful tolerance of leading powers. He favoured American participation in a multinational peacekeeping force that was deployed into Lebanon in 1982. Weinberger was most interested in rebuilding the armed forces. Contingency operations, peacekeeping or 'nation-building' operations, expeditionary operations could only dissipate American military power as far as he was concerned. Weinberger thought the Beirut expedition was poorly framed, its objectives too vague for practical use. For Weinberger, the attack on the Marine barracks the following year was the inevitable result of sending American troops on 'show-the-flag' missions.

Furthermore, in the Reagan White House a third party often worked at cross-purposes to both the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of State—the National Security Advisor, Robert McFarlane. Weinberger was especially critical of McFarlane and his staff, all of whom he thought were 'even more militant' than the staff at the State Department. To Weinberger, the NSC Staff spent 'most of their time thinking up ever more wild adventures for our troops'.²⁵ All of them seemed to regard their fellow citizens as unreliable, or at least as holding opinions so variable as to make any foreign policy initiative a risky proposition. To McFarlane and one of his most energetic staffers, Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North, that meant covert operations. Their own covert operations.

Both Shultz and Weinberger would eventually take their arguments to the public. In October, 1984, Shultz delivered an address in Manhattan in which he argued that the United States must 'prevent and deter future terrorist acts ... The public must understand before the fact that occasions will come when their government must act before each and every fact is known—and the decisions cannot be tied to the opinion polls'.²⁶ The cycle between national decision and national action was too fast to accommodate democratic participation, Shultz seemed to be arguing; you have to leave it up to me.

Weinberger answered Shultz the following month, in a speech before the National Press Club that he called 'The Uses of National Power'.²⁷ He proposed six 'tests' for the United States to pass before committing American troops to combat. The speech quickly and famously became known as the 'Weinberger Doctrine', and because it has been variously interpreted and somewhat distorted over the past decade and a half, Weinberger's 'tests' are worth repeating:

1. Our vital interests must be at stake.
2. The issues involved are so important for the future of the United States and our allies that we are prepared to commit enough forces to win.
3. We have clearly defined political and military objectives, which we must secure.
4. We have sized our forces to achieve our objectives.
5. We have some reasonable assurance of the support of the American people.
6. US forces are committed to combat only as a last resort.²⁸

To George Shultz, the Weinberger Doctrine was anathema. 'This was the Vietnam syndrome in spades, and a complete abdication of the duties of leadership', he wrote in his memoirs. Ignoring the salient fact that in the American system of government, cabinet officers do not unilaterally promulgate fighting doctrines or indeed doctrines of any sort, Shultz speculated that Weinberger had been co-opted by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The JCS, Shultz thought, held a 'deep philosophical opposition to using our military for counterterrorist operations'.²⁹

However, if one were to inventory American expeditionary operations in the last two decades of the twentieth century, one might conclude that the United States was recovering handily from any syndrome it might have suffered. In addition to the Carter Administration's attempt to rescue hostages in Iran in 1980, the Marines had been sent into Lebanon in 1983. Two days after a truck bomb destroyed the Marine barracks in Beirut, killing more than 240 people, the United States invaded the Caribbean island of Grenada, a dagger pointed at the heart of Trinidad and Tobago. In 1986, the United States launched strikes against Libya in reprisal for terrorist actions in Europe. In the following year, the United States agreed to flag all tankers in the Persian Gulf during the 'tanker war' between Iran and Iraq. And, as the decade drew to a

close, the United States invaded Panama, overthrew the government, and installed another. All the while, the United States was covertly supporting the Afghan revolt against Soviet occupation. Not one of these operations adhered strictly to the Weinberger Doctrine's six tests; indeed, several of them directly violated Weinberger's principle requiring an unambiguous objective. Such accountings are always somewhat subjective, of course, but it seems to me the United States was not exactly quiescent during this period.³⁰

The next, perhaps the last, variant of the Vietnam Syndrome appeared in the form of what has been called the Powell Doctrine. Colin Powell had served as one of Secretary Weinberger's military assistants before rising, eventually, to official fame as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the Gulf War. Indeed, Powell was with Weinberger when the secretary delivered his speech at the press club. Although Powell's doctrine and Weinberger's are often spoken of as though they are the same, Powell's views as chairman evolved away from Weinberger's dogma and toward Shultz's flexibility.³¹ Powell's first major operation as Chairman of the JCS was the invasion of Panama. How he depicts that operation in his memoirs is telling: 'The lessons I absorbed from Panama confirmed all my convictions over the preceding twenty years, since the days of doubt over Vietnam. Have a clear political objective and stick to it. Use all the force necessary, and do not apologize for going in big if that is what it takes.' All these lessons have to do with how to employ military force, not whether to use military force. This variant, like the original, also assumes that the object in war does not change while the war is being fought. So, to Powell, the objective did not much matter so long as it was clear and attainable. The Powell Doctrine did not seem to leave much room for Shultz-style operations, but that did not prove to be the case. Powell was not averse to using the armed forces; he simply wanted the forces to be so powerful, regardless of the mission, that there was no danger of failure.³²

Just before retiring from military service, Powell approved a new joint doctrine that had a great deal more in common with Shultz's views.³³ After the Gulf War, the orthodox American-style operation was in danger of being subsumed under the weight of emphasis on what were being called 'operations other than war'. Indeed, the Gulf War was beginning to look a bit old-fashioned in the middle 1990s. By then, Powell was given to saying that decisive military victories were rare in the modern world, and that the most an armed force could do was to ensure a conflict ended on terms that diplomacy could make favourable. Although he claimed to be guided by the 'lessons' of Vietnam, he had no real reply when he and Madeline Albright, then US ambassador to the UN, were arguing over the intervention in Bosnia. 'What's the point of having this superb military that you are always talking about if we can't use it?' she asked. Powell answered by citing the 'more than two dozen times' American armed forces had been used in the past three years—'for war, peacekeeping, disaster relief, and humanitarian assistance'. After his retirement from military life, Powell would write, 'there are times when American lives must be risked and lost. Foreign policy cannot be paralyzed by the prospect of casualties ... To provide a "symbol" or a "presence" is not good enough.' The only American strategic doctrine in effect might just as well have been phrased this way: circumstances define action.³⁴

One former policymaker who has been keeping watch calculates that 'the pace of interventions has, if anything, picked up' in the 1990s.³⁵ After the Gulf War, the US intervened in Bosnia, Somalia, Haiti, Rwanda and Kosovo, not to mention actions associated with the aftermath of the Gulf War itself—enforcing 'no-fly' zones over Iraq for almost a decade, as well as relief operations in Northern Iraq. President Bush might have been too late with his cheer after the Gulf War that the Vietnam Syndrome had been 'licked, once and for all'. As a doctrinal basis for international action, the Vietnam Syndrome had been shredded already by the history of the 1980s.

The most persistent symptom of the Vietnam Syndrome has turned on the question of American casualties. This question alone has been made to serve on occasion as a crude measurement of success—sometimes employed as an argument against action, sometimes invoked after the fact in recrimination. As an instrument of statecraft, however, the casualty list is less than effective and sometimes self-defeating. The United States' withdrawal from Somalia after the killing of eighteen soldiers during the Mogadishu debacle of 1993 is often cited as an example of the fecklessness of American policymakers and public alike—the 'cut

and run' mentality that supposedly had its origins in 1973. In point of fact, we have seen accusations like this since the very beginning of the twentieth century. After the Boer War, a French general observed that the British Army was suffering what he called 'Acute Transvaalitis', which he defined as an abnormal dread of losses on the battlefield.³⁶ He thought of this dread as a 'ravaging microbe' that fed upon the 'floods of sniveling sentimentality then in vogue.'³⁷

At the other extreme, however, one can find a case that seems to offer proof of a rather stolid acceptance of the butcher's bill. That was in the summer of 1990, when classified estimates of casualties in an anticipated war with Iraq were leaked to the press. These numbers were revealed well before the US had committed itself to nothing more than defending Saudi Arabia against further Iraqi aggression. Simulations of an American offensive against prepared Iraqi positions had run out estimates of 30,000 American casualties.

What happened when these estimates were leaked is telling. Nothing happened. The American public reacted not at all. Strategic planning proceeded at the normal pace, scheduled deployments were executed without pause and lodgments in the operational areas were established at the necessary times and places. No one raised the casualty flag. Operations DESERTSHIELD and DESERTSTORM were conducted more or less as planned. The Vietnam Syndrome was nowhere to be seen, except in the White House, where President Bush was promising the American public, 'this will not be another Vietnam. This will not be a protracted, drawn-out war.'³⁸

If the Vietnam Syndrome has any life left at all, it is only in public discourse. Even then it is a defective medium for the expression of what are very complex public views. American policymakers no doubt had a catalogue of reasons for withdrawing our troops after the fight in Mogadishu, but if they believed they were accurately reflecting the opinions of most Americans, they were wrong. Opinion polls showed at the time and later a decided public tendency to escalate, not withdraw, when Americans suffered casualties. No 'Acute Transvaalitis' here.

This lack of correspondence between the views of the policymaker and the citizen extends to other, broader questions of American foreign policy. Recent studies have shown an American public that is a good deal more amenable to foreign aid than policymakers had long supposed. Most Americans also seem to support international engagement as much as ever. Contrary to official wisdom in the United States and indeed elsewhere around the world, most Americans are not interested in assuming the role of global hegemon. As for the 'humanitarian operations' that were supposed to have fallen into disrepute since Mogadishu, the contrary is true. Americans do support such missions, especially if they are under United Nations authority.³⁹ All of this suggests that if we are to understand why some operations work and others do not, why some win support and others do not, we shall have to go well beyond casual guesses about domestic support and the influence of an old war. And yet, even today one would have no trouble at all, finding responsible officials and public intellectuals, using the Vietnam Syndrome as a tool of argument.⁴⁰

We may now ask ourselves, at a generation's remove, whether the Vietnam Syndrome made any real difference in the conduct of American statecraft? If we could somehow factor out the Vietnam Syndrome for a moment, would the American domestic temper, which is the real engine of our foreign policies, have pointed us in the same directions at about the same time? I think a case might be made that there would have been differences in degree, minor variations, but not in kind. No cliché should ever exercise much influence over a nation's affairs.

Such questions are of course no longer of theoretical interest only. So it is just as well that the power of the Vietnam Syndrome has faded to that of a rhetorical artifact.

As the metaphor is no longer capable of bearing too much intellectual or emotional weight, history has moved along in its unsentimental way. Perhaps this new century has a full supply of its own grand clichés, waiting to be requisitioned—but I hope not. War is too important to be left to history.

Endnotes

1. The United States' earlier wars had certainly provoked controversy and resistance, but on those occasions public resistance had a different shape. Only during our civil war and during our brief involvement in the Great War were there any significant resistance movements, and none of these was strong enough to affect American national strategy or military policy in any substantive way. Put another way, until the war in Vietnam, American anti-war movements were fringe movements.
2. George Orwell, 'Politics and the English Language', in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, vol. IV; *In Front of Your Nose, 1945-1950*, Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (eds) (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1968), 129. George Ball, Undersecretary of State in the Kennedy and Johnson presidencies and an important figure in early planning for the war, found it necessary to write an opinion piece in *The New York Times*, deploring the development of a new 'stab in the back' thesis for the defeat in Vietnam. See George Ball, 'Block that Vietnam Myth', *The New York Times*, 30 September 1990, 4. The date is significant: debates on the American intervention in the Gulf were then underway.
3. Arnold R Isaacs is among the many others who have made this comparison. Isaacs points out that North Vietnam's Prime Minister, Pham Van Dong, was 'haunted by a Munich analogy' as well, vowing never again to allow themselves to be misled because of unwise diplomatic concessions Arnold R. Isaacs, *Vietnam Shadows The War, Its Ghosts, and Its Legacy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 67. See also Jeffrey Record, 'Perils of Reasoning by Historical Analogy: Munich, Vietnam and American Use of Force', *Air War College Occasional Paper No 4* (Maxwell AFB, Alabama Air University Press, March 1998).
4. Ben Shepard, *A War of Nerves: Soldiers and Psychiatrists in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass Harvard University Press, 2001), 357, offers this impressive list of symptoms; apathy, cynicism, alienation, depression, mistrust and expectation of betrayal), inability to concentrate, insomnia, nightmares, restlessness, uprootedness and impatience.
5. Chaim Shatan, 'Post-Vietnam Syndrome', *The New York Times*, 6 May 1972, 35.
6. See Shephard's excellent discussion on the ideas of Shatan and Lifton in *A War of Nerves*, 356-67. Lifton's earlier work, *Death in Life*, is quoted here. A much less generous interpretation of Lifton's work appears in D.G. Burkett and Glenna Whitley's *Stolen Valor: How the Vietnam Generation Was Robbed of its Heroes and its History* (Dallas, Texas: Verity Press, 1998), 141-61.
7. US Congress, Senate, Committee on Labor and Human Resources, *Oversight of Medical Care of Veterans Wounded in Vietnam, Hearings* before the Subcommittee on Veterans' Affairs, 91st Cong., 2nd Sess; 27 January 1970: 498-9. (Hereinafter cited as 'Lifton Testimony'). Lifton drew precisely this corollary in testimony before the Senate.
8. Several contemporary studies are summarised in Burkett and Whitley, *Stolen Valor*, 141-51. Wars have long known psychological casualties. Modern military medicine had itself hardly come of age before taking notice of such casualties. From the Russo-Japanese War onward, the medical services of most advanced armies struggled to understand psychological distress due to combat. The psychological casualties produced by the Vietnam War were not inordinately high; by one count, those amounted to roughly half of those produced by World War II American troops—a fact reported once more in 1975 by David Lamb, 'Vietnam Veterans Melting into Society', *Los Angeles Times*, 3 November 1975. See also Captain R L Richards' precocious article. 'Mental and Nervous Diseases in the Russo-Japanese War', *The Military Surgeon XXVI* (1910), 177-93. For a brief introduction to this subject, see my 'Shell Shock', *American Heritage* 41: 4 (May/June, 1991), 75-87.
9. Tom Wicker, 'The Vietnam Disease', *The New York Times*, 27 May 1975, 29.
10. Robert Jay Lifton, *Home from the War: Vietnam Veterans; neither Victims nor Executioners* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973).
11. *Lifton Testimony*, 496, 507.
12. Great Britain, Parliament, *Report of the War Office Committee of Enquiry into "Shell Shock"* (London: HMSO, 1922), A-2. The most extensive examination of the concept of shell shock, conducted by the 'Southard Committee', concluded that 'shell shock' was a grievous misnomer' but 'is the popular or vulgar term in general use' and that therefore the term had to be employed in public discourse.
13. Spiller, 'Shell Shock', 75-87.
14. Richard J Barnett, 'The Security of Empire', in Robert W Gregg and Charles W Kegley, Jr (eds), *After Vietnam: The Future of American Foreign Policy* (Garden City, N Y : Doubleday & Company. Inc. 1971), 32.
15. George C. Herring, 'American Strategy in Vietnam: The Postwar Debate'. *Military Affairs* 46: 2 (April, 1982), 57.
16. The Gallup Organization, *The Gallup Poll Public Opinion 1937-1997* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources CD-ROM, 2000), 468, 2316-17.
17. Indeed, only 26 percent of those polled in May, 1970, would approve using US troops to defend Berlin. This *Time*-Lewis Harris Poll is quoted in Allison, May and Yarmolinsky, 'Limits to Intervention', in Gregg and Kegley (eds), *After Vietnam*, 49-68.
18. The force structure of all the services declined accordingly. From 1970 to 1974, the Air Force was reduced by 59 squadrons; the Army was reduced from 23 to 16 divisions; the Navy lost 481 ships. These figures, authorisations for FY 1977, are conveniently summarised in John Lewis Gaddis,

- Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 322-3.
19. So remembered Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), 32.
20. The phrase is Gaddis's, in *Strategies of Containment*, 205.
21. Douglas Pike and Benjamin Ward, 'Losing and Winning Abroad: Korea and Vietnam as Successes', *The Washington Quarterly* (Summer, 1987), 77-85.
22. Richard Nixon, *The Real War* (New York: Warner Books, 1980), 122-3.
23. Barry M Blechman, Stephen S. Kaplan, et al, *Force without War: US Armed Forces as a Political Instrument* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1978), 38, and *passim*.
24. One might even compare this emergency with the seizure of the intelligence-gathering vessel USS Pueblo by the North Koreans in January, 1968. That incident coincided with the Tet Offensive in South Vietnam. The United States was decisively engaged in fighting there, of course, but it might be difficult to argue that the United States was reluctant to exercise its power elsewhere in the world. The ultimate safety of the crew was a good and sufficient reason to talk a way out of the incident, as indeed occurred.
25. Caspar W Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace: Seven Critical Years in the Pentagon* (New York: Warner Books, 1990), 159.
26. George Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993), 648.
27. The text of this speech forms the Appendix of Weinberger's *Fighting for Peace*, 433.
28. *Ibid*, 402.
29. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 649-50.
30. Record, 'Perils of Reasoning by Historical Analogy', 13, 18.
31. Colin Powell with Joseph Persico, *My American Journey* (New York: Random House), 293. When Weinberger gave his speech, Powell remembered being concerned that these fixed tests might 'lead potential enemies to look for loopholes'.
32. *Ibid*. 420-1.
33. For a different view see Record's excellent analysis in his 'Perils of Reasoning by Historical Analogy', 25.
34. Powell, *My American Journey*, 256. See Charles A Stevenson, 'The Evolving Clinton Doctrine on the Use of Force', *Armed Forces & Society* 22: 4 (Summer, 1996), 515-17.
35. Richard Haas, *Interventions: The Use of American Military Force in the Post-Cold War World* (Washington: A Carnegie Endowment Book, 1994), 21.
36. See 'Major Jette', 'The Dread of Incurring Losses on the Battle-field and the Essential Elements of the Offensive', Colonel R H Wilson, trans., *Journal of the Military Services Institution of the United States* LI (1912), 330-40, and esp 340.
37. Joseph C Arnold, 'French Tactical Doctrine; 1870-1914', *Military Affairs* 42: 2 (April, 1978), 61-7, and esp 63-4.
38. See Bush's remark in John Mueller, *Public Opinion in the Gulf War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 45.
39. Steven Kull, I M Destler, Clay Ramsay, *The Foreign Policy Cap: How Policymakers misread the Public* (College Park, MD: Center for International & Security Studies at the University of Maryland, 1997), iii-iv, and *passim*.
40. See the persistence of this 'gap' admirably demonstrated in Ronald Brownstein, 'Vietnam is No Longer Part of Iraq Equation', *Los Angeles Times*, 22 September 2002, 1; Charles Moskos, 'Our Will to Fight Depends on Who is Willing to Die', in *Wall Street Journal Online*, 20 March 2002, and Henry Kissinger, 'The Long Shadow of Vietnam', in *Newsweek.com*, 1 May 2000.