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## Why I Love the “Vietnam Syndrome” of the People



Photo by [Egor Myznik](#)

The Vietnam Syndrome was a term deployed after the U.S. defeat in the Vietnam War to explain and complain about the reluctance of the U.S. Government to use international force robustly in shaping its foreign policy. This reluctance was from its first enunciations resented by the foreign policy establishment in Washington including the conservative think tanks.

The use of ‘syndrome’ suggests that a medical disorder was afflicting this policy establishment and needed to be overcome as soon as possible. Yet to many others, including myself, the Vietnam Syndrome was welcomed as a long overdue prudent and principled post-Vietnam advocacy of a law-oriented U.S. foreign policy respectful of the

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self-determination rights of the Global South and of the restraints on the use of international force enshrined UN Charter.

Over the years, the Vietnam Syndrome lived this double life. One proposed cure was by way of the Weinberger Doctrine, which in its essence sought to correct the alleged government mismanagement of its intervention in Vietnam over the course of a full decade. What Caspar Weinberger, a right wing political figure and at the time Reagan's Secretary of Defense proposed in 1983, was that the U.S, should not enter future non-defensive questionable foreign wars, with the Vietnam War in mind, without satisfying the following conditions:

- 1) The commitment must be deemed vital to our national interest or that of our allies.
- 2) It should be made "wholeheartedly, and with the clear intention of winning."
- 3) Political and military objectives and the ways to meet them must be clearly defined.
- 4) As conditions change, whether the commitment remains in the national interest must be reassessed.
- 5) Before a commitment is made, there must be "some reasonable assurance" of popular and congressional support.
- 6) A commitment to arms must be a last resort.

Weinberger, in particular, criticized the Vietnam engagement as it involved a gradual, incremental increase in the American commitment, which he contended, almost always ends in failure. Although Weinberger, and those on the Beltway who quickly subscribed to his prescription for the future, embraced the doctrine as a formula for victory in future wars of intervention (what Tom Friedman later christened as law-free 'wars of choice').

Read carefully, there are ambiguities in Weinberger's formulation. It was never made clear whether the Vietnam War was deemed vital to 'our national interest' or lacked 'the clear intention of winning.' Yet it was hoped in Washington that the Weinberger Doctrine could put to rest the idea that under no circumstance should the U.S. expend blood of its citizen or treasure on non-defensive wars in the Global South.

And yet, sophisticated political leaders in the U.S. understood there was more weight to the Vietnam Syndrome than setting forth a formula to ensure that policy-makers could win future such wars. It was thus not surprising that the first words uttered by President George H.W. Bush in 1991 after a U.S. led victory over Iraq in the First Gulf War were "By God, we've kicked the Vietnam Syndrome once and for all." The implicit claim was that the desert victory in conventional warfare would demonstrate that the U.S. could turn its military superiority into a political victory, which it had been unable to do in Vietnam.

Again, the claim was ill-conceived and proved disastrously premature. First of all, the Vietnam War was a war of national resistance fought against Western colonialist forces, not a defensive conventional war designed to reverse Iraq's aggression and annexation of Kuwait. Beyond this the military phase was mandated by the UN Security Council and a regional consensus, with implementation delegated to an American-led coalition of countries. Only hawkish ideologues and unperceptive commentators could confuse the First Gulf War with the Vietnam War.

Neo-conservatives eager to exploit the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s understood that the Vietnam Syndrome continued to stand in the way of their strategic hopes of democracy promoting military interventions, especially in the Middle East, by seizing the unipolar moment. Its advocacy format, Project for a New American Century (PNAC), actually recognized the political dependence of their program on 'a new Pearl Harbor' to reawaken the dormant fighting instincts of the American public. Although PNAC didn't itself connect the dots, the Vietnam Syndrome withstood earlier erasure efforts.

It was only finally overcome in the public sphere by the 9/11 Attacks, which President George W. Bush seized upon in a moment of national hysteria to declare the Great Terror War in 2001. These attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon were, in effect, the new Pearl Harbor the PNAC was waiting for. Yet once again the analogy proved disastrously misleading, inducing failures reminiscent of Vietnam in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as indirectly in Libya, Syria, and Yemen.

The Weinberger Doctrine may have influenced the Pentagon to substitute air power and drones for boots on the ground to the extent possible and rely upon 'shock and awe' tactics to overwhelm a lesser adversary quickly, but as it turned out, these tactics were no more successful than what failed in Vietnam. In the end, costly, controversial, prolonged occupations the desired political outcomes were not attained in the targeted countries of the Global South. Despite the Soviet collapse, the U.S. continued to encounter frustration in its attempts to manage geopolitics, especially when the effort was to accompany a regime-changing intervention with state-building along Western neoliberal lines.

In my view, the dominant and sensible interpretation of the Vietnam Syndrome was as an inhibition on entry into non-defensive wars without at least the authorization of the UN and the conformity of the mission with international law. The Vietnam Syndrome was not articulated in the aftermath of the Vietnam War as a warning to war-mongering bureaucrats against fighting losing wars, but as opposition to all wars of intervention and

aggression. This primary meaning of the Vietnam Syndrome has been lost over the decades, a casualty of state propaganda and a complicit media, reinforced by those private sectors that benefit from war.

When the elder Bush was announcing to the world the burial of the Vietnam Syndrome 'beneath the sands of the Arabian desert,' he wasn't gloating over successful the application of the Weinberger Doctrine. He was celebrating the first clear post-Vietnam victory in war. The legacy of defeatism prevalent among the American people was what was bothering and inhibiting the Washington establishment, especially in Congress. Already a decade earlier Ronald Reagan had declared '[f]or too long we have lived with the Vietnam Syndrome.' As with Bush, Reagan had no trouble accepting the guidelines of the Weinberger Doctrine. What he opposed was the mood of political timidity in the country that weakened the willingness of public opinion to support going after adversaries in the Global South with America's military might.

Among my current fears is that Russia's attack on Ukraine has completely reversed the guidance of restraint implicit in the Vietnam Syndrome so far as the American public is concerned, with the odd partial exception of the extreme right of the political spectrum. Ukraine as a seemingly victimized white, European society in an attack that has sent tremors of fear throughout other Russian neighbors, especially those in East Europe that were coercively situated in the Soviet sphere of influence throughout 40-plus years of the Cold War and had strong political bases of ethnic and emotional support in the leading countries of Western Europe and North America.

Currently, the escalating Ukraine Crisis suggests that the loss of the inhibiting influence of the Vietnam Syndrome, is irresponsibly risking catastrophic consequences in blood and treasure, seemingly oblivious to the dangers of challenging the traditional spheres of influence of great powers such as Russia. It is not a matter of endorsing Putin's aggression, but rather concerns about exerting efforts to make the world somewhat more insulated against major warfare, especially wars likely to be fought with nuclear weapons. The pre-2022 efforts to interfere in the politics of Ukraine by promoting anti-Russian moves while overlooking abuses by Ukraine of the Russian-oriented majorities in the Dombas do not vindicate Putin but they do cast a dark shadow on NATO claims of virtuous politics guided by respect for the territorial sovereignty of states, human rights, and a mutual concern for maintaining conditions of peaceful coexistence between geopolitical rivals.

The apocalyptic dangers now confronting the world with greatest risk of nuclear war since at least the Cuban Missile Crisis are also telling us why the problem in Vietnam was primarily with promiscuous militarism rather than with avoiding defeat in the future, which was the preoccupation of the Weinberger Doctrine.

Against this background, I am a fervent advocate of the revitalization of the Vietnam Syndrome in its populist variant, as a doctrine of strong restraint when it comes to the use of military force, and not only in the Global South. Rather than a 'syndrome' it was from its outset 50 years ago primarily an angry reaction to a botched war effort that was intended to inhibit and even discredit belligerent impulses in Washington.

I love the Vietnam Syndrome because it was the proper redemptive path for American foreign policy to take after the Vietnam defeat. Yet the promise of the Vietnam Syndrome was first reformulated by the militarized bureaucracy in Washington not to prevent wars, but to make them supposedly winnable by the diversionary Weinberger Doctrine, which may work conceptually but failed miserably when operationalized. And more recently a sense of restraint has been almost removed from foreign policy deliberations when dealing with a major nuclear weapons states facing defeat on its own borders and led by a dangerous autocrat.

Privileging the righteous cause of resisting Russian aggression in Ukraine while neglecting the imperatives of geopolitical caution in the nuclear age is a stunning display of managerial incompetence in Washington that is jeopardizing the future of the entire human species. It should enlighten people everywhere about the severe dangers of a unipolar form of world order accentuated by the dispersed possession of nuclear weapons. One false step on either side and we are done as a species.

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