

Why We Lost the Vietnam War

And yet after more than a decade of desperate boat people, after the killing fields of Cambodia, after all that has happened in that unhappy part of the world, who can doubt that the cause for which our men fought was just? It was, after all, however imperfectly pursued, the cause of freedom; and they showed uncommon courage in its service. Perhaps at this late date we can all agree that we've learned one lesson: that young Americans must never again be sent to fight and die unless we are prepared to let them win.
--Ronald Reagan, Veteran's Day Address, Nov. 11, 1988 at Vietnam Veterans' Memorial, Washington, D.C.



“Our big advantage over the Americans is that they want to win the war more than we do.”
an un-named government official from South Vietnam

Many statements commonly made about the war in Vietnam are in fact true.

- 1) Corruption, coups and unstable governments impeded loyalty to the South Vietnamese government
 - US desperately tried to get rid of Diem, but even after his demise, further coups followed.
 - Suppression of anti-government newspapers
 - Weapons ended up in the hands of communists
 - Aid intended to build up the country ended up in private hands
- 2) “We should have bombed the hell out of them the minute we took office.”—Henry Kissinger
 - Although we did bomb North Vietnam, we often avoided civilian areas, didn't mine their harbors, and didn't send foot-soldiers to occupy North Vietnamese territory. We tried to keep the conflict localized (to South Vietnam), in order to not provoke the Chinese (as we did in Korea).
- 3) War was waged between the most advanced military in the world, against an army from an agrarian society
 - Very often, bombing missions destroyed only bridges and roads, without being able to find valuable military targets; or our losses would be three to ten times theirs.
 - Tons of defoliants were dumped into jungle areas, to chase away peasants from communist-held farm regions, to the cities where the US had more power.
- 4) Underestimation of the will to win of the NVA.
 - “You can kill ten of my men for every one I kill of yours, but even at those odds, you will lose and I will win.” North Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh, to the French in the 1940s.

Did the media and the anti-war demonstrators sell us out?

Yes, the media exaggerated communist power and US atrocities during the war (such as Walter Cronkite on the Tet Offensive; giving air time to the Mai Lai massacre but ignoring grosser violations of the VC at Hué), but the above problems existed long before the media, anti-war demonstrators, and the American public in general got tired of the war. Had the media never covered the war, and the anti-war protests, as graphically as it did, very little would have been different. Many of the anti-war statements uttered by demonstrators were grounded in fact, and were stated by senior American personnel in Vietnam.