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An eminent historian looks at the decision-making of two presidents regarding instances of nation building and war-fighting. How can one learn from history without necessarily repeating it? - Ed.

Obama and Afghanistan: Learning from Nixon's Vietnam Ordeal

by Michael H. Hunt, Ph.D.

The Vietnam War has a bearing on President Obama's pending decision on troops levels. Though the president himself is doubtful about parallels, historians have pointed to the relevance of Lyndon Johnson's decisions in 1964-1965. That plunge into Vietnam, they warn, undid the Great Society program and ultimately the Johnson presidency. Obama could suffer the same fate.

Richard Nixon's Vietnam War may offer a more appropriate but no less cautionary point of comparison. Consider the parallels between the Nixon's position on coming into office in 1969 and the situation facing Obama exactly forty years later:

- The White House has shifted from one party to the other with the new occupant inheriting a foreign intervention that is going poorly.
• The Congress and the public are restive.
• The military is feeling the strain of a trying mission.
• The enemy has proven stubborn and elusive with the advantages of sanctuaries and outside funding.
• The U.S. client that U.S. troops are supposed to save has proven administratively ineffective, indeed could not stand alone despite a long-term U.S. assistance program.

Nixon brought to the White House grand plans that were ultimately undermined by efforts to make good on Vietnam commitments. His carefully matured vision of transforming the very nature of the Cold War struggle led him to détente with the Soviet Union and normalization of relations with China. These were key steps toward turning an intense, dangerous, global ideological struggle into the realist's dream of accommodation among the major powers that would make national interest, compromise, and constrained competition the rule of the day. Nixon pursued this vision with consistency and determination.

Yet he was at the same time saddled with the albatross of the Vietnam War. The pressure to wind that conflict down quickly was formidable. Public support was collapsing, and public protest burgeoning. Communist leaders in Hanoi were implacable in their drive to control the South, and they had the generous backing of Moscow and Beijing, Washington was isolated internationally, most worrisome of all, its Saigon client remained weak despite a decade and a half of U.S. "nation building."

At the very outset of his presidency Nixon devised a multi-pronged strategy intended to rid him of his albatross. He took important elements of the Johnson policy. He agreed that South Vietnam could not fall into Communist hands. There would be no cut and run. He also adopted the Johnson policy following the Tet offensive of strengthening Saigon's military in anticipation of shifting the burden of the fighting over to them. The new administration took on board the negotiations opened in Paris, another Johnson initiative. Nixon anticipated that as relations with Moscow and Beijing improved, these allies of Hanoi would apply pressure for a compromise settlement. Just in case the Communist side proved recalcitrant, Nixon had a trick up his sleeve: the use of U.S. military power and especially air power that would suggest Nixon was a madman with his finger playing nervously on the nuclear trigger. Thus intimidated, his foes would have to see reason. To win the time to secure a peace agreement, Nixon sought to shore up the home front, appealing for support from a patriotic public and looking for ways to put the protest movement on the defense.

However good the plan, Nixon encountered setbacks at every turn on every front. Vietnamization failed its major test in early 1971 when the cream of the Saigon government forces entered Laos and were routed by Hanoi's troops. Negotiations proved agonizingly slow and Hanoi's delegation maddeningly stubborn. A string of concessions by Nixon culminating in a commitment to withdraw U.S. troops from South Vietnam while acquiescing in the continued presence of Hanoi's forces failed to win counter concessions. In fact, Hanoi insisted Nixon still had to abandon his Saigon "puppets." On the battlefield U.S. forces threw their best punches — the bombing and then the invasion of enemy sanctuaries in Cambodia (1969 and 1970) and the bombing of North Vietnam (spring 1972) — all to no apparent avail. The home front was far from calm. Nixon suffered through a major round of demonstrations at the end of his first year in
office and then another even more turbulent outburst following his Cambodia decision the following spring. In 1971 demonstrators once again took to the streets, now led by veterans talking of a war of atrocities.

Finally in October 1972 peace seemed in grasp when Hanoi finally agreed to accept the Thieu regime as part of the postwar peace process. But Nixon found his client denying him closure. No matter how much pressure Washington applied, the South Vietnamese president refused to accept Hanoi's troops in the south. Putting on his madman mask, Nixon sent his bombers against Hanoi hoping either to get better terms or to demonstrate his toughness. The bombing was to no avail; Nixon quickly settled for peace terms essentially the same as those in October.

Over his first four years in office Vietnam kept Nixon in a steadily tightening vise. The government that he wanted to preserve could not stand on its own after two decades of U.S. support. Yet he was determined to end the war without a loss of face — without seeming to go out whimpering, without making the United States seem like a pitiful helpless giant. But how could he disguise failure not just to the world or to the voting public but to himself? The psychological wear and tear Nixon endured is evident in the White House tapes from 1971 and 1972 with their angry, urgent outbursts. With the vise seemingly released with the January 1973 peace agreement, Vietnam returned to torment him in the form of the Watergate scandal. Hardly was the ink dry on those accords when the dirty tricks that he had played in waging the Vietnam War at home became public. Soon the Watergate inquiry began to consume the president and his staff. Humiliated by resignation, Nixon was at least spared having to face the long foreseen collapse of the U.S. client.

Nixon's struggle suggests three propositions pertinent to the current deliberations over Afghanistan.

First, state building goes hand in glove with military operations. Nixon's stress on Vietnamization reflected an insight that had been central to U.S. policy in Vietnam from the 1950s. Eisenhower and Kennedy had launched a nation-building effort. Westmoreland in devising his basic strategy for U.S. forces in 1965 relied on Saigon to have the capacity to hold areas that U.S. forces had cleared. Johnson had played a variant on the nation-building tune when he gave priority to training and supplies in early 1968 following the shock of the Tet Offensive.

Second, the failure of state building undercuts any military success. Nixon knew just as well as his predecessors that the failure of the Saigon government to perform was critical to success. One president after another pressed for better performance. Kennedy had schemed in the overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963 precisely because the latter had failed to prosecute an effective war in the countryside. Johnson had spent a frustrating year and half thereafter trying to make the Saigon generals turn from their game of political musical chairs to the pressing business of pacification. Even when a pair of those generals (Nguyen Van Thieu and Nguyen Cao Ky) finally brought a modicum of stability, Saigon could still not compete militarily or administratively in the countryside. Americans had to carry the war for a regime marked by profiteering, corruption, and demoralization. With Saigon still failing in the essential role it was supposed to play, Nixon bombed and invaded and blustered, and American forces could win every battle---but it made no difference. With the peace agreement near conclusion Nixon finally, candidly confronted the
prospect that the Thieu regime could not compete. It had "no choice except to commit suicide."\textsuperscript{4} Finally and most to the point, a failure to accept failure can not only debilitate a presidential administration but also sew appalling havoc. Nixon's long and tortured path out of Vietnam accentuated already deep social divisions and political bitterness in the United States. The human costs were stunningly high. Americans paid for four more years of fighting with the deaths of nearly 21,000 troops. In that time almost half a million North Vietnamese soldiers died, as did roughly 109,000 soldiers on the Saigon side. On top of all this, Cambodia collapsed into a conflict that proved the prologue to genocide. Nixon himself was ruined by the war, the second president to suffer that fate. His disgrace as well as the abandonment of South Vietnam to its fate produced a critical reaction with long-term deleterious effects on his grand Cold War strategy. A group later dubbed neo-conservative seized on the U.S. failure in Vietnam to attack what was for them a bigger target, Nixon's watering down of a once militant Cold War policy. For neo-conservatives and other critics, Vietnam demonstrated the need for a tougher foreign policy, moral rearmament at home, a stronger president, a subservient media, and a military insulated from public protest and political interference.

If it was hard for Nixon to accept failure, it seems retreat remains equally difficult today. The counterinsurgency specialists who call for more troops understand that their strategy is dependent on a strong Afghan partner. Yet virtually all the evidence suggests that partner does not exist. The Karzai government is a creature of U.S. policy with a weak and limited writ. Nothing suggests the situation will change. And any further attempt to transform Kabul into the tool Washington needs will only confirm the taint of empire that for some already attaches to the U.S. presence. In an ideal world Obama would follow the third proposition and admit failure.\textsuperscript{5} However compelling this conclusion, the lessons of the past must accommodate to the politics of the possible. Given all the pressures on Obama — bureaucratic, political, international, perhaps even personal — to stay the course, an alternative to immediately liquidating the Afghan position is worth considering. It would involve making emphatically the connection between a continued U.S. military role and Kabul's political and military effectiveness. The Obama administration could then make one final good faith effort perhaps with even more U.S. troops than are there now. With the link between Kabul's performance and U.S. military and economic support explicit, concrete, and time limited, everyone should understand the consequences if the Kabul government remains a non-performing asset.

At the same time the administration needs to plan for that likely eventuality. The most promising approach, attractive even now, would be to turn the prime responsibility for the management of Afghanistan to regional powers. China, Russia, Iran, Pakistan, and India have the greatest enduring stake in the country; they know the most about it and thus can see their way more clearly; and they are more likely than the United States to make sacrifices over the long haul to maintain their influence. Much the same process of regionalization occurred following Nixon's extrication of U.S. forces. China contained Vietnam; Vietnam toppled the sanguinary Khmer Rouge; and the ASEAN states pulled Vietnam into their collaborative order. The only Americans with grounds for complaint were those fantasists still entranced by the dream of a region cut to the American measure. If only Nixon had demoted Vietnam to a regional question at the start of his presidency.
But he did not. His failure to promptly accept failure and the ensuing consequences provide a stark warning of the risks Obama now runs. Another regional intervention gone wrong could distract the president and country from the pressing problems of our day. It could drain Obama's political capital and slowly eat his presidency alive. Finally, a prolongation of the Afghan conflict could add death and suffering to a country far too familiar with both and in the bargain make Pakistan into a latter-day Cambodia. History suggests a prudent acceptance of failure; there is much good reason to listen.

Endnotes:
1. This commentary arises from a pair of talks for the UNC Program in Humanities and Human Values, 8 October and 6 November 2009.