

## 11 Lessons from the Vietnam War

*Robert McNamara*

It is sometimes said that the post-Cold War world will be so different from the world of the past that the lessons of Vietnam will be inapplicable or of no relevance to the twenty-first century. I disagree... There were eleven major causes for our disaster in Vietnam:

1. We misjudged then--as we have since--the geopolitical intentions of our adversaries... and we exaggerated the dangers to the United States of their actions.
2. We viewed the people and leaders of South Vietnam in terms of our own experience. We saw in them a thirst for--and a determination to fight for--freedom and democracy. We totally misjudged the political forces within the country.
3. We underestimated the power of nationalism to motivate a people... to fight and die for their beliefs and values--and we continue to do so today in many parts of the world.
4. Our misjudgments of friend and foe alike reflected our profound ignorance of the history, culture, and politics of the people in the area, and the personalities and habits of their leaders...
5. We failed then--as we have since--to recognize the limitations of modern, high-technology equipment, forces and doctrine in confronting unconventional, highly motivated people's movements. We failed as well to adapt our military forces to the task of winning the hearts and minds of people from a totally different culture.
6. We failed to draw Congress and the American people into a full and frank discussion and debate of the pros and cons of a large-scale U.S. military involvement... before we initiated the action.
7. After the action got underway and unanticipated events forced us off our planned course, we failed to retain popular support in part because we did not explain fully what was happening and why we were doing what we did. We had not prepared the public to understand the complex events we faced and how to react constructively to the need for changes in course as the nation confronted uncharted seas and an alien environment. A nation's deepest strength lies not in military prowess but, rather, in the the unity of its people. We failed to maintain it.
8. We did not recognize that neither our people nor our leaders are omniscient. Where our own security is not directly at stake, our judgment of what is in another people's or country's best interest should be put to the test of open discussion in international forums. We do not have the God-given right to shape every nation in our own image or as we choose.
9. We did not hold to the principle that U.S. military action--other than in response to direct threats to our own security--should be carried out only in conjunction with multinational forces supported fully (and not merely cosmetically) by the international community.
10. We failed to recognize that in international affairs, as in other aspects of life, there may be problems for which there are no immediate solutions... at times, we may have to live an imperfect, untidy world.
11. Underlying many of these errors lay our failure to organize the top echelons of the executive branch to deal effectively with the extraordinarily complex range of political and military issues...

These were our major failures, in their essence. Though set forth separately, they are all in some way linked: failure in one area contributed to or compounded failure in another. Each became a turn in a terrible knot.

Pointing out these mistakes allows us to map the lessons of Vietnam, and places us in a position to apply them to the post-Cold War world.

**11 Lessons - McNamara**

*Discussion Questions*

**Name:**

1. Which of these 11 lessons do you think is most important? What makes it more important than the others?

2. Which of these lessons is most ignored? What makes you think so?

3. Do you disagree with any of these statements? Why or why not?