America's Paradoxical Trinity: WWII and Vietnam
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According to Carl von Clausewitz, the nineteenth century military philosopher, war is always comprised of what he called a paradoxical trinity. In his book *On War*, Clausewitz described this trinity as an interactive set of three basic dominant tendencies that drive the events of war. He said the trinity is composed of: "primordial violence, hatred, and hostility; its element of subordination as an instrument of policy; and the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam." Each of these tendencies generally, but not exclusively, corresponds to one of three groups in society. The first of these three tendencies correspond mainly to the people; the second to the government; the third to the commander and his army. Clausewitz writes that these tendencies are like three different codes of law, deep-rooted in their subject, and yet variable in their relationship to one another. He says the outcome of war is never determined by one tendency alone but by the interaction between them, which is forever and unavoidably shifting. Mark Handel, in his book *Masters of War*, writes that a more accurate depiction of the varying relationship among these three tendencies is a simple vector analysis, where the nature of war is the outcome or 'vector' of the three dominant tendencies. This 'vector' defines the nature of war and the spirit of the nation to fight and support the war. Clausewitz points out that the three dominant tendencies rarely carry equal weight and their relative intensity and relationships change according to the circumstances of each case. The difference in the relationship of these tendencies to one another that existed during World War II and that existed during the Vietnam War was dramatically different. The nature of war as determined by those relationships directly affected the national spirit during and following both wars. That national spirit contributed to winning World War II, the loss of the Vietnam War, and directly affected the relative social development of America and America's foreign policy after each war.

World War I was over and America's industrial might was coming of age as the United States was swiftly taking its place as the most powerful nation in the world. As the 1920s roared along, the Four Horseman of Notre Dame were giving Saturdays new meaning with their college football heroics. Jack Dempsey and Gene Tunney were raising the spectacle of heavyweight boxing matches to new heights of passion. Baseball was a daytime game and a true national pastime, from the magical Yankee Stadium to the sandlots in rural America. Optimism was widespread across the nation. Flappers were dancing the Charleston and F. Scott Fitzgerald published *The Great Gatsby*. However, President Calvin Coolidge was a benign presence in the White House, content to let bankers, industrialists, and speculators run the country as they saw fit. This soon led to the stock market crash on 1929. The stock market struggled to recover from the crash, but the damage was too great. Thirteen hundred banks closed. Businesses were failing everywhere, sending four and a half million people into the streets with no safety net. Optimism soon turned to despair for many. Congress passed the disastrous Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act, establishing barriers to world trade and exacerbating an already raging global recession. At the same time overseas, three men were plotting to change the world: Adolf Hitler in Germany, Joseph Stalin in Russia, and Mao Zedong in China. In America, the New York governor, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, was planning his campaign for the 1932 presidential election. A mass of homeless and unemployed men drifted across the American landscape, looking for work or a handout wherever they could find it.

Roosevelt took the oath of office as president promising a New Deal for the beleaguered American people. He pushed through an Emergency Banking Act, a Federal Emergency Relief Act, a National Industrial Recovery Act, and by 1935 set in motion the legislation that would become the Social Security System. Many began to look to the government with trust and President Roosevelt became popular. In his second term, Roosevelt tried to balance the continuing need for extraordinary efforts to revive the economy with what he knew was the great peril abroad. He created the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Works Progress Administration putting many unemployed men to work building roads and parks. The American people's confidence was building and their attitude toward government increasingly supportive. At the beginning of 1940, it was clear to most Americans that war would define their generation's coming of age. The role of the government was beginning to take on more importance in the Clausewitz trinity equation.

On December 7, 1941, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Across America on that Sunday afternoon, the stunning news from the radio electrified the nation and changed the lives of all who heard it. Marriages were postponed or accelerated. College was deferred. Plans of any kind for the future were

calibrated against the quickening pace of the march to war. American young men were enlisting in the military by the hundreds of thousands. Farm kids from the Great Plains who never expected to see the ocean in their lifetimes signed up for the Navy; brothers followed brothers into the Marines; young daredevils who were fascinated by the new frontiers of flight volunteered for pilot training. Single women poured into Washington to fill the exploding need for clerical help as the political capital mobilized for war. Other women, their husbands or boyfriends off to basic training, learned to drive trucks or handle welding torches. The old rules of gender and expectation changed radically with what was now expected of this generation. The scope of the national involvement was reflected in the numbers. By 1944, twelve million Americans were in uniform. War production represented 44 percent of the Gross National Product; there were almost nineteen million more workers than there had been five years earlier, and 35 percent of them were women. People's passions were aroused by the attack on Pearl Harbor and the trinity equation was beginning to change.

During the Second World War, the various outlets of popular culture behaved almost entirely as if they were the creatures of the government, it is hardly surprising to find that they spoke with one voice. Together with skepticism, irony, and doubt, an early casualty was a wide variety of views about current events. Radio, popular music, films, and magazines conveyed the same optimistic messages about the war. During the war, the average listener spent four and a half hours a day attending to what came out of the speaker, and when something especially significant was expected, one sat in front of the radio and looked at it intently. What came from it was thoroughly censored, and it was puritan, uncorrupted, and decisively optimistic.

World War II saw newspapers and radio reign supreme in war coverage, and not coincidentally, it was one of the most popular wars in American history. Even when the home front was battle weary, there was a consensus in the country that people were fighting for a common goal. That goal was to aid American allies in Europe and defend their interests in the Pacific arena. The government, acknowledging strong isolationist feelings in the country, tried to emphasize the importance of the war's aims. "In 1941, the United States went to war under the banner of 'the people's war.' The Roosevelt government's rhetoric and imagery invoked a democratic inclusiveness in contrast to the Axis' exclusivity and domination. The byword for the war effort became 'unity'." World War II was a war of consensus building. One factor aiding this effort was certainly the end of the Great Depression, which the county was suffering under when it entered the war. Another was a constant stream of war propaganda designed to keep public opinion high and morale good.

In the midst of administrative efforts to create unity, the press was no exception. The main pipelines of information for the American public were newspapers and radio. Radio in particular came into its own during the war. World War II was to be radio's hour of greatness in the light of history. Edward R. Morrow, broadcasting from London, told an American public the story of the war and tried to paint the picture with words.

Newspaper reports, which had to pass censors, were typically dispatched from the front like this one, "This is it! D-Day and What Followed" by *New York Herald Tribune* correspondent Joseph Driscoll. He emphasized the bravery of the troops. He marveled at the courage of his fellow Americans. I saw boys wounded and lying around for hours without even a moan out of them'. Even when newspaper reports tried to tell of the carnage and human loss in the war, thanks to censorship by the Office of War Information, they lacked the pictures to do so.

Both radio and newspapers were mediums, which did not have the same power television images, did in creating dissention among the public. Radio did have some similarities to television. It was a medium that made a more personal connection with its audience because it literally spoke to them and it was a means of relatively instant communication. Yet, the disembodied radio voice speaking to the audience had to emphasize the story aspect of the news and did not have television's power to hit the public with the visual reality of war's human tolls.

Television was not a player in the second world war. In the middle of the war, 1942, there were only 8,000 television receivers in the nation. But people recognized the power of images to turn public opinion. Part of the reason for the war's continuing strength on the home front was the Office of War Information's ability to suppress pictures of the American dead for the first two years of the war. In these popular collections of photographs, no matter how severely wounded, Allied troops are never shown suffering what was termed, in the Vietnam War, traumatic amputation. Everyone has all his

limbs, his hands and feet and digits, not to mention expressions of courage and cheer. When they finally released more explicit pictures, it was a calculated effort to bolster support for the war because the public was war weary. They needed to maintain a desire to fight. Print and radio reports in World War II, while of course not all positive, were denied the impact that images would have given them. Without uncensored, visceral images, they centered around a more detached narrative. The relationship of Clausewitz's dominant tendencies was roughly equal. The government acted with reason and purpose, its political aims clear. General Eisenhower in Europe and General Douglas MacArthur in the Pacific became the icons of their time and became the symbols of the military leadership of the war along with the political leadership of Franklin Roosevelt. The exploits of General Patton and Admiral Nimitz captured on newsreels, which prefaced every movie, and were followed passionately by a curious population. President Roosevelt's "fire-side chats" offered reassurance to the news-hungry nation and re-assured people that their sacrifices were worth it. The nation was immersed in the war effort at every level.

Accentuating the positive was the tone through out the war. It was especially true in the early spring of 1945, when everyone's morale needed a special boost. The war had been going on for months, even years longer than expected. By that time, almost everyone had a relative killed, wounded, or knew someone who had. Raising and sustaining morale became all-important, and morale itself developed into one of the unique obsessions of the Allies in the Second World War. On the Allied front manufacturers of beer, chewing gum, and tobacco moved their products by arguing their indispensability to high morale. Letters home from soldiers and sailors were largely written to sustain the morale of the folks at home, to hint as little as possible at the real, worrisome circumstance of the writer. Many letters written to soldiers were cheerful and provided memories of home. The war required the enemy to be totally evil and the allies to be totally good, all of them. The opposition between this black and white was clear and uncomplicated, untroubled by subtlety or nuance, let alone irony or skepticism. The war served a generation of Americans as a myth, which enshrined their essential purity. In the absence of doubt, and with the positive enjoying constant emphasis, the view easily developed that Americans were by nature, by instinct really, morally wonderful.

The United States dominated global affairs in the years immediately after World War II. Victorious in that great struggle, its homeland undamaged from the ravages of war, the nation was confident of its mission at home and abroad. U.S. leaders wanted to maintain the democratic structure they had defended at tremendous cost and to share the benefits of prosperity as widely as possible. For them, as for publisher Henry Luce of Time magazine, this was the "American Century." For 20 years, most Americans remained sure of this confident approach. They accepted the need for a strong stance against the Soviet Union in the Cold War that unfolded after 1945. The ex-GIs had seen enough war and wanted peace. They had learned in their youth that the way to prevent war was to deter through military strength, and to reject isolationism for full involvement in the world. Therefore, they supported NATO, the United Nations, and the Department of Defense. They endorsed the growth of government authority and accepted the outlines of the welfare state, first formulated during the New Deal. They enjoyed the postwar prosperity that created new levels of affluence in the United States. As the Cold War unfolded in the decade and a half after World War II, the United States experienced phenomenal economic growth. The war brought the return of prosperity, and in the postwar period, the United States consolidated its position as the world's richest country. Increasingly Americans now considered themselves part of the middle class. The national spirit created by the very nature of World War II influenced the conduct of the war and the post-war period. America's confidence continued until Clausewitz's dominant tendencies shifted and changed the nature of war in Indochina.

Indochina was still another Cold War battlefield. France had controlled Vietnam since the middle of the 19th century, only to be supplanted by Japan during the Second World War. Meanwhile, Ho Chi Minh, a Vietnamese communist, sought to liberate his nation from colonial rule and took the American War for Independence as his model. After the Allies defeated the Japanese in 1945, they still had to deal with Ho Chi Minh. France, hoping to regain great-power status, insisted on returning to Vietnam. Ho refused to back down, and the war for liberation continued. The United States, eager to maintain French support for the policy of containment in Europe, provided France with economic aid that freed resources for the struggle in Vietnam. Even that assistance could not prevent French defeat in 1954. At an international conference in Geneva, Vietnam was divided, with Ho in power in the North and Ngo Dinh Diem, a Roman Catholic anti-communist in a largely Buddhist population, heading the government in the South. Elections were to be held two years later to unify the country.

Persuaded that the fall of Vietnam could lead to the fall of Burma, Thailand, and Indonesia, President Eisenhower backed Diem's refusal to hold elections in 1956 and began to increase economic and military aid. President Kennedy increased assistance, and sent small numbers of military advisors, but still the struggle between North and South continued. Diem's unpopularity culminated in his overthrow and death in 1963. The situation was more unstable than ever before. Guerrillas in the South, known as Viet Cong, challenged the South Vietnamese government, sometimes covertly, sometimes through the National Liberation Front, their political arm. Aided by North Vietnam, they gained ground, especially among the peasants in the countryside. Determined to halt communist advances in South Vietnam, President Johnson made the Vietnam War his own. After a North Vietnamese naval attack on two American destroyers, Johnson won from Congress on August 7, 1964, passage of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which allowed the president to "take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression." After his re-election in November 1964, he embarked on a policy of escalation. From 25,000 troops at the start of 1965, the number of soldiers, both volunteers and draftees, rose to 500,000 by 1968. A massive bombing campaign wrought havoc in both North and South Vietnam.

Americans did not see the victorious images of the World War II successes or grand battleships and great armies; instead, they saw burning victims, screaming children, violent explosions, and the overall great losses of American forces and carnage of the Vietnamese civilians. They did not just read about them, they saw them every night on their television screens in their living rooms. Americans began to realize this was a war that was being lost at the expense of great casualties. Images from the fronts dominated the public perception of the war. With grisly battles shown on television, Americans began to protest their country's involvement in the war. A shift in the trinity equation was occurring. The passion of the people was taking precedence over the professional military and over the government’s policies. The trinity equation was beginning to change. The nature of war was changing and along with it the spirit of the nation. Such foreign policy specialists as George Kennan found fault with U.S. policies. Others argued that the U.S. had no strategy for ending the war. Americans watched, as the massive military campaign seemed to have no effect on the course of the war. Public dissatisfaction with U.S. policy, especially among the young, pressured Johnson to begin negotiating for peace.

Anti-war sentiment in 1968 led Johnson to renounce any intention of seeking another term. At the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, Illinois, protesters fought street battles with police. The chaos in the Democratic Party, especially after the murder of Robert Kennedy in June; white opposition to the civil rights measures of the 1960s; and the third-party candidacy of Alabama Governor George Wallace helped elect Republican Richard Nixon, who ran on a plan to extricate the United States from the war and to increase "law and order" at home.

While slowly withdrawing American troops, Nixon ordered some of the most fearful bombing in the war. He also invaded Cambodia in 1970 to cut off North Vietnamese supply lines, which passed through there to South Vietnam. This led to another round of protests and demonstrations, as students in many universities took to the streets. In one such demonstration, at Kent State University in Ohio, National Guard troops who had been called in to restore order panicked and killed four students. A cease-fire, negotiated for the United States by Nixon's national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, was finally signed in 1973. Although American troops departed, the war lingered on into the spring of 1975, when North Vietnam consolidated its control over the entire country. The war led many young Americans to question the actions of their own nation and the values it sought to uphold.

The postwar war began the instant that peace was proclaimed. The United States had difficulty arranging with the North Vietnamese and Vietcong the return of its 587 prisoners of war, at one point threatening to delay further troop withdrawals in the absence of cooperation. By the end of March 1973, the POWs had been released, returning home to receive the only heroes’ welcome of the war, and all U.S. troops had been withdrawn.

The effects of the war have been more in the realm of affecting the national spirit than in tangible effects. Among a people accustomed to celebrating peace with ticker-tape parades, the end of the war left a deep residue of frustration, anger, and disillusionment. Veterans of the war came home to indifference, at best, and to acquisitions of being ‘baby-killers’ and being spit on, at worst. Many

veterans had difficulty re-adapting to society and turned to alcohol or drugs. Americans generally agreed that the war had been a senseless tragedy and a dark moment in the nation's history. Resentment and disillusionment smoldered beneath the surface, provoking a sharp reaction against nearly three decades of crisis diplomacy and global intervention. Even before the war had ended, the traumatic experience of Vietnam, combined with the apparent improvement of relations with the Soviet Union and China and a growing preoccupation with domestic problems, provided a drastic reordering of national priorities. The trinity equation had shifted further from the government. From the late 1940s to the 1960s, foreign policy had consistently headed its list of national concerns, but by the mid-1970s, it ranked well down the list. The Vietnam experience also provided strong opposition to military intervention abroad, even in defense of America's oldest and staunchest allies. Polls taken shortly before the fall of Saigon indicated that only 36 percent of American people felt is was important for the United States to make and keep commitments to other nations, and only 34 percent expressed willingness to send troops should the Russians attempt to take over West Berlin. A majority of Americans endorsed military intervention only in the defense of Canada.

The relationship of Clausewitz's dominant tendencies changed dramatically from that of World War II. The passion of the people took a greater precedence over military leadership while the role of political leadership remained about the same as during World War II. The political leadership was unable to rally the people in support of the war and the national spirit was greatly affected. On the political level, American failure in Vietnam brought important changes in the conduct of the nation's diplomacy, weakening all of those Cold War assumptions that had crystallized in the late 1940s, and guided American leaders through the late 1960s. The controversy over the war contributed to a softening of the policy of containment and accelerated a reaction against two decades of crisis diplomacy and intervention. Weary of the costs and burdens of the Cold War, Americans became skeptical about the use of force as an instrument of foreign policy and acquired a new sense of American power abroad.

For many, the presumption that American foreign policy was premised on a moral foundation was undermined. Americans had felt they could go almost any place and do almost anything after Word War II. Vietnam tested America's will to reshape the world in its own image and the claim of its citizens to be a special people. The battle between the war's supporters and those who demanded immediate withdrawal divided the nation. Many analysts claim that this debate produced the greatest fissure since the Civil War. The Vietnam War had a profound impact on a once-proud U.S. military establishment, calling into question its conviction, born of its decisive role in two world wars, that it was invincible; challenging, as perhaps nothing before in its history, its faith that the massive application of force was the solution to military problems.

By the mid-1980s, Americans began to discus the war. If they were willing to talk about Vietnam, Americans remained confused and divided about its implications for U.S. foreign policy. The war had produced indifference and a tendency toward withdrawal. Bitter memories of the war remained on the consciousness of Americans. Ten years after the end of the war, a majority of Americans still believed that intervention in Vietnam had been a mistake.

Throughout the history of the United States, war has been the primary impetus behind growth and development. It has been a source of American nationalism and encouraged political and social change. The relationship of Clausewitz's three dominant tendencies of war created a vector roughly equal between the people, the military, and the government during World War II. The nature by which World War II was prosecuted had created a national spirit of confidence that enabled America to grow, prosper, and promote foreign policy engagement. The American men and women who grew up in the Great Depression and who came of age in World War II devoted their adult years to the building of modern America. The unpopularity of the Vietnam War and the inability of the government to rally the people to support the war lead to the war being fought differently than World War II. The relationship of Clausewitz's three dominant tendencies of war during Vietnam created a vector that was closer to the passion of the people and further away from the military and the government than during World War II. The national spirit created during the Vietnam War caused Americans to question government and retreat from a policy of engagement in foreign policy. The comparison of World War II and of the Vietnam War clearly shows that the relationships between the basic dominant tendencies in Clausewitz paradoxical trinity, creates the collective national spirit during wartime and for some time after.

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