Was it Worth It?

Although the argument continues as to whether the Vietnam War was an anti-Communist crusade, a military intervention to support the arguably pro-democratic side in a civil war, or an imperialist counterrevolution, there's no disputing that it totally failed to achieve the United States' express objective of preventing North Vietnam from conquering South Vietnam.

Some have taken the position, however, that the war had positive effects which were obscured by its ending in a military defeat. For example, the Prime Minister of Singapore Lee Kuan Yew argued that the U.S. intervention in Indochina, by giving the nations of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) - - Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand - - time to consolidate and engage in economic growth, prevented the domino effect from spreading Communism beyond Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia to the rest of Southeast Asia.

But, even if one were to concede that America's war effort actually served to neutralize the domino effect, or even if one were to assume for the moment that the U.S. had succeeded completely in thwarting North Vietnam, the question would remain - - was the war worth fighting? The answer depends to a large extent on a consideration of the costs of the war, especially the human costs.

The United States sustained a total of 58,220 dead of whom 40,934 were killed in action. There were also 304,000 wounded in action and 1,604 were still missing in action as of 2017.

The Army of South Vietnam suffered an estimated 219,000 to 313,000 deaths during the war. The number of wounded in action is not available, but presumably it would be four to five times the number of KIA, i.e., 985,500 to 1,408,500

Of the U.S. allies, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand, the total number of killed in action was 5,807, with 14,149 wounded.

The Vietnamese government's 1995 estimate of war deaths for the period of 1955–75 was 1.1 million Communist battle deaths and 2 Vietnamese civilian deaths.

Disputes have arisen over some of Hanoi's figures and Western experts have proposed varying estimates of total casualties, but there can be no doubt that millions were killed and many more millions were wounded.

Further, the Vietnamese government estimates that around 15.5 tons of ordnance, nearly three times that used by the Allies in World War II, were dropped on Vietnam between 1959 and 1975. Of that huge total, between 10% and 30% failed to detonate. According to the most recent official figures, explosions caused by buried bombs and mines claimed around 105,000 civilian victims between 1975 and 2007, of whom over 40,000 were killed. The Vietnamese government estimates that around 15%

of the total surface area of the country remains contaminated by land mines and unexploded ordnance (UXO).

In addition to the massive bombing of North and South Vietnam, the use of Agent Orange and other herbicides have left a deadly legacy. According to <history.com>, 400,000 people in Vietnam were killed or maimed as a result of exposure to herbicides like Agent Orange and Vietnam claims half a million children have been born with serious birth defects, while as many 2 million people are suffering from cancer or other illness attributed to Agent Orange.

Another casualty of the war, although in a totally different sphere, was the Johnson's Administration's Great Society program, the push for equal opportunity for racial and ethnic minorities and greater opportunity for all the economically disadvantaged.

Given, the horrendous suffering and loss of life the war occasioned and still occasions, it is difficult to identify a good that would have made such bloodletting worthwhile.

Did We Learn Anything?

On the other hand, if it were found that the war and its outcome served to teach the U.S. government to be more reflective in the conduct of its foreign relations and more prudent and deliberative in deciding whether or not to use military force, some small benefit may have been achieved.

So the further question arises: Did the war teach us anything of value?

After the war was lost in 1975, there was profound disillusionment and a great deal of talk about a "Vietnam Syndrome" that would cause the U.S. government to shy away from the use of military force. However, the syndrome's effects, if they ever existed, had apparently disappeared by the 1980s, as can be seen in the following list of American military engagements.

1982 Lebanon

1983 Grenada

1989 Panama

1991 Kuwait and Iraq (Gulf War)

1993 Somalia

1994 Haiti

1994-95 Bosnia

1999 Kosovo

2001-? Afghanistan

2003-2010 Iraq

2011- Libya

2014-? Iraq and Syria (ISIS)

The list has gone on and is likely to grow longer.

So the question lingers - - Did the Vietnam War teach us anything?