

November 3, 1981

Some Lessons Learned from the Vietnam War  
(listed in no particular order)

1. A country of such divergent opinions as the US can only conduct a major war of extended duration if it first goes through its own democratic procedures, culminating in an official declaration of war. Only this can provide the legal basis for enforcing the unity of purpose and action necessary to win.
2. If your enemy is in Country A, it makes no sense to try to defeat him by fighting him only in contiguous Country B. B tends to be devastated, while A, from his sanctuary, remains free to export war and sabotage indefinitely.
3. In Vietnam, much earlier and stronger aid to the territorial forces (forerunners of Popular and Regional Forces) might have avoided the necessity of large-scale US military intervention in 1965.
4. No program can work unless there are trained and motivated people to carry it out. Failure to solve this problem in advance guaranteed the failure of many programs in Vietnam, and throwing more and more money at the problems merely made them worse.
5. In Vietnam, American policy-makers tended hubristically to ignore what the situation was, instead looking back up the chain of command for Washington to indicate what reality it wished to be created, ~~not~~ as if, by our wealth and power, we could create any reality in Vietnam we wanted to, without regard to Vietnamese pre-existing realities.
6. Worthy ends can be sullied and lost by inappropriate means.
7. A powerful country should not give its smaller ally a blank check - or the perception of being given one. To do so weakens ~~the~~ resolve, diminishes pride, ~~dampens the sense of urgency and encourages corruption.~~ dampens the sense of urgency and encourages corruption.
8. Attempt to build programs around genuine motivations which already exist. Nothing in foreign affairs is more difficult than to change deep-seated attitudes which are already there, or create new attitudes which are not there. Aid programs around the world either succeed or fail according to the motivations and traditional attitudes of the respective countries to whom the aid is given. This factor is more crucial than either the nature or quantity of the aid given.
9. Quality is more important than quantity, above all in personnel matters.

*John Williams*