

# THE USES OF HISTORY, OR HOW DO WE ESCAPE STURGEON'S LAW?

by

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## INTRODUCTION

Renowned science fiction writer Theodore Sturgeon is credited with the aphorism recorded in the eponymous law:

"Ninety percent of everything is crap."<sup>1</sup>

Our panel's subject is the histories<sup>2</sup> of certain Central Intelligence Agency activities in Vietnam written by retired CIA staffer Thomas Ahern, who was present at the creation of the Vietnamese pacification program. These studies were written for a purpose. I am going to talk just a bit about the studies, but more about the purpose, and mostly about the very important implications of Mr. Ahern's studies for today and for tomorrow.

In general we expect that informed and educated officials highly compensated and well supported by staff will produce above average results. Mr. Ahern instead documents that many well informed, well educated, hardworking and patriotic people produced much less than optimal results in Vietnam. In fact they produced crap, as Sturgeon wisely warned comes naturally to people who don't see reality as it really is, which is most people about most things at most times. His studies in combination with some current events stimulate me to ask the question posed in the title of this paper. How might America stop producing excrement in its foreign interventions?

## BRIEF OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE STUDIES

The introduction to *The Way We Do Things: Black Entry Operations into North Vietnam* records that Director of Central Intelligence James Schlesinger brought about the founding of the Center for the Study of Intelligence so as to document lessons learned from intelligence operations. This founding showed great wisdom and foresight, because the benefits came only much later--in this case many decades later. Thomas Ahern's studies amply vindicate the hope of Director Schlesinger.

In the following I want to honor that wisdom and insight by using Ahern's studies for the purpose intended: to benefit future generations. I will largely omit pointing to specific pages in the studies, but instead just summarize some points in the histories for my purpose. Everyone concerned with America's foreign interventions past, present and future should read these studies.

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Expanded from the paper presented at the panel "Understanding the War in Southeast Asia through the Declassified Works of Thomas Ahern" at the the Vietnam Center Conference on Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and the Vietnam War, at Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas, March 13-14, 2009; live video filming of this session preserved at <[https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/434611](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/434611)>. The live presentation includes some materials not appearing in this text and vice versa.

In recounting events in his histories, Ahern shows numerous instances in which highly placed American officials were:

- \* making it up (what to do to solve some immediate problem) as they went along;
- \* hoping for a miracle in the absence of any sound plan;
- \* using magical thinking;
- \* allowing personal rivalries and animosities to obstruct the mission;
- \* allowing institutional rivalries to obstruct the mission;
- \* lacking doctrine or permitting unresolved doctrinal rivalries so impeding the mission;
- \* focussing on objectives other than the mission, such as re-election<sup>3</sup>;
- \* construing the immediate mission narrowly to the injury of long-run interests or the bigger picture (Graham Martin, Henry Kissinger);
- \* engaging in delusional thinking;
- \* void of scientifically validated insight into the objective situation.

Confronted with an adversary who thought and planned imperfectly but nevertheless more systematically, the conjunction of these shortcomings ultimately led to America's first military defeat. My purpose here is to comment on what happened then and some things that remain to be done to avert more of the same.

I participated in the Vietnam war as a very junior army officer and was so disturbed by my experience that after my military service I returned to Vietnam to conduct research on my own. I compiled the history of events in one province as seen by a low-level observer on the ground, in complete ignorance of top-level decision-making. (As a private citizen I had no official access.)

As a lieutenant between 1965 and 1967, and as a private researcher between 1968 and 1970, I had no idea of the quality of top-level decision-making. We now know from *Dereliction of Duty*<sup>4</sup> by H.R. McMaster and deeply probing interviews with Robert McNamara and McGeorge Bundy<sup>5</sup> that the military results in Vietnam were not some kind of unimaginable and inexplicable outcome but actually the predictable consequence of the decision-making pattern at the top of the military and civilian hierarchies.

And thanks to Ahern's studies of the CIA pacification program and of its dealings with Diem-era and post-Diem governments in South Vietnam, we can now understand the pathology of another large swath of American decision-making at the top.

I commit these words to paper intending no criticism of the officials involved. They were almost without exception hardworking and dedicated patriots, some of them sacrificing their lives. Results were still less than optimal.

All under the sun is ruled by the law of cause and effect. The reasons for sub-optimal results are comprehensible. We should comprehend them and do something about them. So doing will enhance world peace while improving the safety of the American nation in the years ahead.

## SOME THINGS THAT WERE LEARNED

I point out two parts to the problem of sub-optimal results in U.S. efforts to affect or even to intercede in foreign societies undergoing civil conflict such as occurred in Vietnam.

One is the actual intervention itself. For better or worse the interventions have in some respects much improved although the lag has been very long; three decades or more. I can specifically date the lag from the response to my book *War Comes to Long An*.<sup>6</sup> It troubled many when it appeared in 1972, because it gently implied while the war was still on that serious errors in military strategy and serious misjudgments in policy had doomed our effort in Vietnam. But shortly after the end of America's Vietnam adventure, some thoughtful military officers began to use the book's lessons to teach a new generation of military leaders. In a *Military Review* article Special Forces Colonel John D. Waghelstein described his attempt to do so in the Low Intensity Conflict curriculum at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth.

In 1977 LIC instruction at CGSC consisted of forty hours out of the 1,000 hour curriculum, reflecting the Army's interest level. We were an entertaining bunch, not a serious threat to the Don Starry's Air-Land Battle crowd and we were pretty much left alone. We used Jeffrey Race's little book *War Comes to Long An*, and looked at the "Third World" as the play-ground of the future. We analyzed insurgent models, spoke "Mao" and *foco* and kept the flame alive. The LIC team had the area experts, so we had some credibility in assessing the arenas of the future. General Bob Arter was the Commandant and he enjoyed our lectures and let us dabble with our little piece of the curriculum.

When General William Richardson arrived in 1979, the LIC portion was cut to nine hours, the Air-Land battle mafia took complete control and our Vietnam experience and CI became non-subjects.<sup>7</sup>

Waghelstein thus documents the start of the period, longer than a ten years, when many high-ranking officials felt that "nothing important ever happened in Vietnam." There was no point to study it because such a horrid situation would obviously never recur.

Had Vietnam been the last such American intervention, that might have been the right decision. But this is not the world in which we live. America keeps having these "near-death" foreign intervention experiences.

By the turn of the millenium, *War Comes to Long An* was back in the curriculum of all the senior service schools and had become the quasi-official canonical explanation of how American leaders lost the war in Vietnam. The Naval War College reading list annotates it with the comment "If one wishes to understand the Vietnam conflict and why the United States lost, start here."<sup>8</sup>

Subsequently its insights were used together with other resources to design the Army's Human Terrain Analysis system and to write the joint Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual 3-24. The Agency for International Development has adopted a related methodology titled TCAFP: Tactical Conflict Assessment and Planning Framework.

So: since the Vietnam War the American military has learned a great deal about how to interact with foreign societies in the field of stability operations, and it is applying that

learning now for better or for worse. The lag was three decades, but it happened.

The second part is that experience of recent decades (and particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan) reveals that despite this learning and the application of this learning, America has suffered grave losses and keeps experiencing near-death foreign interventions. These losses are self-inflicted: they result from failure to apply basic understanding about human behavior to American interventions abroad.

The world would be a much better place, for America and for everyone else, should Americans begin to apply "human terrain analysis" to the American institutional context which guides its interventions. Or even better: in gaining the insight to judge soundly whether an intervention is worth doing, or even doable.

## **RECENT EXPERIENCE**

A colleague assigned to Iraq recently sent me a series of reports he had written for his supervisors about the situation in his province and the activities of his Afghan government counterparts; in them he describes a situation of military ineffectiveness, corruption, lack of strategy, and despair of improvement.<sup>9</sup> Reading them made me wonder what had happened in the last four decades; his situation was just like mine as an assistant subsector advisor in Vietnam's Phuoc Tuy province in 1968.

If we look at the situation in Iraq, we note the horrific consequences of the decisions (warned against beforehand) to enter without sufficient forces, with no plan for the day after victory, and to disband the Iraqi army. The wise George Ball gave Lyndon Johnson comparable warning in 1965.

And this phenomenon applies not just to American military or strategic decision-making. It characterizes many areas of decision-making, both official and private. Consider America's current economic difficulties, universally acknowledged to have resulted from excessive indebtedness. What is the public policy response? Preposterously, it is to create more debt, curing an emphysema victim by putting him back on Lucky Strikes. Or the widespread private choice of pill-and-diet regimes to mitigate obesity, when this is known to be a waste of money. Or the public's popular use of "investment advisors" to select stocks, when this is well known to enrich only the advisors while injuring the finances of the customers.<sup>10</sup>

In all of these cases injurious or disastrous consequences are foreseeable, foreseen and receive prominent warning. But those warning of the consequences if not ignored<sup>11</sup> are often viewed, or even reviled, as unduly alarmist, or perhaps just irresponsible, or most forgivingly "not team players." Some, like Nuriel Roubini now, are later occasionally acclaimed as clairvoyant even though earlier considered nutcases.

In fact wise "clairvoyants" see more clearly (what clairvoyants literally do) than others only because they instinctively or systematically follow one or more simple procedures that everyone should adopt in both public and personal decision-making.

## **WHAT'S GOING ON HERE AND WHAT TO DO?**

In analogy to Human Terrain Analysis in civil war, we must become as insightful about our own motivations, incentives and distortions as we are about those of the enemy.

**Most** human behavior results not from reasoned goal-seeking but from emotions and hidden psychological processes. This applies to us as individuals and to our institutions as well. In fact the processes which I characterize here as 'distorting' in the context of policy formation are actually adaptive; that's why they exist in our minds but not in our consciousness. They resemble the tendency of our Paleolithic bodies to store a momentary energy surplus as fat: adaptive in the ancient environment of chronic food scarcity but no longer. These distorting psychological processes allow us to continue with more or less pacific mental functioning in the face of stress, conflict, ambiguity and the reality of unsustainable or even mortally threatening goals or circumstances, and to choose a course of action quickly and efficiently **most of the time** in situations of insufficient information.

A non-exhaustive list of such processes:

- \* inertia/influence of default option (variant of force-framing)
- \* cognitive dissonance
- \* nonperception
- \* misperception
- \* selective perception/biased assimilation/confirmation bias
- \* focusing illusion
- \* extraneous attachment
- \* authority influence
- \* anchoring
- \* overconfidence bias
- \* false analogy
- \* inability to cognize the objective impossibility to reach a goal anchored by attachment
- \* organizational and social learning lags
- \* decision-making under conditions of organizational conflict
- \* herd mentality/small-group behavior
- \* influence of culture, trust, local norms of behavior
- \* ownership/creator bias
- \* career incentives

The dissatisfied sometimes smugly dismiss unwanted institutional outcomes averring "fools were in charge." It's easy to say but analytically wrong, since the solution of the smug diagnosticians could be only to replace the dismissed with better fools. In fact we need to study why they *appear* to be fools, since in general they are well credentialled and successfully manage their personal affairs (leaving aside diets and finances as noted above).

Once having dispelled or compensated for distortions, we are ready for the "secret"--but it's not a secret--to improving organizational decision outcomes: building into the workflow two requirements and provision for one special condition:

(1) Add to the goal-oriented rational analysis at each level the analysis of distorting factors in the collection and processing of information on which the goal-oriented analysis is presumptively based. This additional step would, like Freudian psychiatry or Buddhist insight meditation, raise hidden distorting processes (individual and institutional) to the conscious level where they can be evaluated and compensated as appropriate. It's somewhat analogous to adding an environmental impact review to a physical construction program except on the input rather than the output side.

(2) Mandate evidence-basing of all decisions. This follows prudentially from a positivistic understanding of the world. Some basic principles:

- \* Everything in the universe is part of a cause-effect-cause-effect chain.
- \* Each particular part of reality (e.g. growth of an insurgent movement) can be modelled as a 'black box' with input-output relationships. If one wants to influence that part of reality, one must know at least the I/O relationships and ideally the box's internal structure.
- \* To specify an I/O relationship one must define metrics, units of measurement, and measurement procedures. One creates the social science analog of artillery firing tables.
- \* Study will reveal that these metrics have an expected range of values which will often revert toward the mean.
- \* To influence the outputs one must use an evidence-based procedure. A strategy must consist of a collection of such evidence-based interventions.
- \* One must evaluate the metrics and their changes against one's goals.
- \* Plans must be made to deal with inherently self-limiting processes. ("If it can't go on forever it won't.")

Failure to follow these rules has produced America's near-death experiences, so well documented by Thomas Ahern in the case of Vietnam.

Were this set of steps to become part of the workflow, no one would ever propose a measure without first having documented the evidence for its effectiveness and over-viewing the opposing evidence well refuted. And in review meetings he would always--politely but insistently-- demand the same of others. Does an action contribute to the goal or not? This question is scientifically answerable once one specifies the I/O relationships of the box under study. Ahern's studies show that decisions to commit lives and increase resources were often made in absence of supporting evidence, or in the face of contrary evidence.

## A SPECIAL CONDITION FOR A SPECIAL CASE

My near-centenarian step-father never asked me to restore him to youthful vigor so he could run the Marine Corps Marathon with me. His lungs largely destroyed by 50 years of smoking, he trusted me to organize the inevitable gently and humanely. I did this for him.

Those entrusted with the fate of nations owe no less to those in their care. But too often Americans are fed fantasies about non-existing possibilities. It happens because (leaving aside personal cowardice) official workflows do not force the specification of what is technically called an overdetermined situation.

Once one comprehends the I/O relationships of a problem under study, one can often answer scientifically the question of what actions and resources are necessary to achieve the goal. One can further ask "Are the objectives inside the box unrealizable given the constraints outside the box?" *Ahern shows that forcing a systematic study of this question and forcing this analysis into recorded form was not part of the process in the events which he describes.*

"We can do it" is an inspiring motto of motivation, determination and perseverance, but sound only if it is mated with the correlative question "Is the objective realizable? How do you **know** it is? **How would you know that it is not?**"

These questions, suitably operationalized once they are on the discussion agenda, have to be added to official decision-making protocols, perhaps by legislation.

Life often presents us with horrible prospects or horrible choices. But if that is likely to be or is the reality, it is more prudent to take losses early, to accept with equanimity the horrible reality, and to plan for it humanely and fairly, as best one can. But experience shows that that option is not even on an official agenda unless it is forced to be part of the decision-making process.

In the absence of the above, American leaders have regularly presented us with delusional or magical thinking. Should the measures proposed here become routine, Americans could expect fewer near-death experiences as well as better value for their tax money.

#### AHERN'S CIA AND RURAL PACIFICATION IN LIGHT OF THE ABOVE

Ahern's extensive Vietnam field experience and highly detailed historical accounts in fact entitle him to draw rather sweeping conclusions, or at least "hypotheses to be tested in future American interventions." As he was too modest to do so, I offer hints of various forms in this section. For example:

**Proposition:** Overdetermined situations exist in which no form of foreign intervention can avert a particular type of outcome; specifically "could America have 'won' the Vietnam War?" Was the Vietnam goal impossible from the start; or did it become impossible at some point and if so when, given the limited wisdom of American officials and the constraints imposed by the American political process? If not possible (technical term: overdetermined), what limits needed to be relaxed?

What criteria allow one to decide to intervene with a prospect of success? What criteria dictate withdrawal from a troubled intervention? Right answers to these questions (lacking then and still lacking) would save much blood and treasure.

**Proposition:** The United States heads a world empire; historical experience teaches us that both wisdom and ruthlessness in the application of violence are necessary to ensure the durability and profitability of empire. Does the United States possess the capability effectively to manage a world empire? (Niall Ferguson says no.) Ahern presents much valuable evidence bearing on this debate.

**Proposition:** Successful application of violence to perpetuate empire requires wisdom not ordinarily found among military organizations or leaders. What non-military institution or institutions did best in Vietnam (e.g. AID, State, CIA, contractors); which components of the American military conformed to the proposition and which not (e.g. Marines; Army; Special Forces)? A noted development since the Vietnam War has been the marked expansion of the extent and level of competence of the American military in dealing with issues formerly deemed "civilian" or "political" in terms of the proposition.

**Proposition from field of management studies:** Major efforts crossing agency and international boundaries require certain types of management on which there is extensive literature. How were sound management principles violated in the planning and

conduct of this war? (E.g. clarity and stability of objectives; unity of command; commonality of doctrine and programs; accountability in execution; matching of resources to objectives.)

**Proposition from field of institutional change studies:** Changing institutions requires determined leadership committed to stated objectives; re-norming of personnel with sanctions for failure to observe new norms; new incentive structures to enforce compliance with new objectives. The American effort to prevent South Vietnam from coming under communist control failed because the American effort built up an alternate structure to the allied government rather than inducing it to change for its own survival. A strong case is implied that this made America's failure inevitable: once external support was withdrawn in a political deal with the North, nothing survivable remained since nothing had been constructed. A reasonably implied interventionist guideline is that if the mendicant government will not enthuse about reforming itself, then the United States should not engage because the "alternate parallel structure" approach failed and is likely always to fail. Afghanistan comes immediately to mind.

Ahern offers plenty of subsidiary conclusions here e.g. effectiveness of U.S. decision-making process at many levels; effectiveness of management; recruitment e.g. if you are going to run an empire you need to have in stock a significant cadre of linguists in the language areas of concern. This is expensive--but necessary it can be argued. The stronger form of the argument is that lack of the requisite people bespeaks a lack of seriousness as a country and so one should not even contemplate an intervention. Some would argue that this is one of the several diagnostic criteria warning a priori that the United States should never have taken up this venture; others being the selfishness and incompetence of American political and military leaders and the stinginess of the American people in supporting the commitment of money and bodies necessary (according to the imperialist argument) to maintain their position atop the imperial pyramid.

Ahern's data offer powerful inferences regarding these propositions. He tends to come down on the side that Vietnam was an impossible mission given America's heritage of anti-imperialism, the ignorance of its military leaders, the focus on their personal futures of political leaders almost regardless of the consequences for the nation, and the faintheartedness of the American public vis-a-vis the financial, personal and moral commitments necessary to manage well this peripheral piece of the empire.

Ahern also offers another important conclusion, that "the U.S. left Vietnam with little more understanding than it had brought in 1954." Despite an extensive research program, the U.S. got facts but not wisdom! The road to Iraq, Afghanistan, and . . . ?

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Tom Ahern's Vietnam studies are one point on a straight line leading to the present: an almost flat line in view of today's near-death foreign intervention experiences. We need to escape Sturgeon's Law in official decision-making. It can be done. Tom Ahern's work, when juxtaposed with *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq*<sup>16</sup> by Thomas E. Ricks, proves the need. And his work proves the wisdom of establishing the Center for the Study of Intelligence.



- 1 <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sturgeon's\\_law](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sturgeon's_law)>
- 2 Thomas L. Ahern, Jr, *The Way We Do Things: Black Entry Operations into North Vietnam, CIA and the Generals: Covert Support to Military Government in South Vietnam, and CIA and Rural Pacification in Vietnam*, all downloadable at <<http://today.ttu.edu/2009/03/cia-releases-documents-of-vietnam-war-era-intelligence/>>. The latter was commercially released in slightly shortened form as *Vietnam Declassified: The CIA and Counter-insurgency* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009).
- 3 Ahern documents a piercing example at page 13 of *The Way We Do Things*: President Lyndon Johnson's single instruction in December of 1963 to his new CIA Chief of Station in a personal meeting at the White House was not to forget that they were entering an election year.
- 4 H. R. McMaster, *Derelection of Duty* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997).
- 5 Bob Woodward and Gordon M. Goldstein, "The Anguish of Decision" *The Washington Post*, October 19, 2009.
- 6 Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972); expanded second edition published in 2010.
- 7 John D. Waghelstein, "What's Wrong in Iraq? or Ruminations of a Pachyderm," *Military Review*, 86:1, January/February 2006, pp. 112-117, downloadable at <<http://usacac.army.mil/CAC/milreview/English/JanFeb06/Waghelstein.pdf>>
- 8 Jeffrey Race, "War Comes to Long An: Back Story to the Writing of a Military Classic," downloadable at <<http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/340-race.pdf>>.
- 9 Personal correspondence from "William Stryker" (pseud.) then working for an NGO out of Herat in Western Afghanistan.
- 10 Michael Lewis, "The Evolution of an Investor" *Portfolio*, November 19, 2007, downloadable from <<http://www.portfolio.com/executives/features/2007/11/19/Blaine-Lourd-Profile/>>. I invoke the parallel of errors and distortions in the realm of finance because, unlike the supposedly judgmental and ineffable 'soft' domain of foreign policy, finance is definitively about quantifiable and measurable behavioral relationships. But identical errors of perception and decision-making occur in both domains.
- 11 High government officials and private sector business leaders exculpated their grave misjudgments by claiming that events leading to the 2008 financial crisis were "unforeseeable"; of course they were foreseen, but ignored or rationalized away. See the unmistakable, and highly entertaining warning in 2005 of billionaire real estate investor Tom Barrack in, of all places, *Fortune* magazine: "I'm Tom Barrack\* and I'm Getting Out," downloadable at <[http://157.166.224.108/magazines/fortune/fortune\\_archive/2005/10/31/toc.html](http://157.166.224.108/magazines/fortune/fortune_archive/2005/10/31/toc.html)>

Readers in search of a chuckle in the face of such depressing facts may want to read

"Implications of the New Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac Risk-based Capital Standard" in which Nobel Memorial Prize winner Joseph Stiglitz in 2002 concludes that "on the

basis of historical experience, the risk to the government from a potential default on GSE debt is effectively zero." Downloadable from <<http://online.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/stiglitzrisk.pdf>>.

12 Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

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