Vietnam and the Start of World War III: Some Psychological Parallels

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I wish to discuss with you the start of World War III.

No sane man or responsible government will seek its occurrence nor deliberately initiate it.

How, then, will this unwanted catastrophe happen?

Let me rephrase this question into a more general one, into a question with which psychologists as psychologists are scientifically concerned: Why is it that people, so often, end up doing things which they did not start out to do or did not intend? Parased differently, why do people unwittingly harm what they cherish, destroy what they seek to preserve?

Why is it that a mother who seeks to encourage the development of her child in a protective atmosphere freed from stress or danger may hamper the child's mental and emotional growth? Why does an investor in a stock sometimes keep buying a stock which keeps going down? Why do a married couple who love one another deeply wound each other in a quarrel, often to their later regret? Why do peaceful contests between high school hockey teams occasionally end up in a free-for-all? Why do unions and managements engage in prolonged strikes which are costly to both? What turns a lively controversy into a deadly quarrel?

It is evident that psychologists do not have complete answers to any of the questions I have asked. Yet we have something to say of relevance that may be useful. Let me sketch out some of the things we have to say.

For convenience of presentation, I shall organize this material under three headings: I Processes of Conflict Resolution; II Processes of Misperception, Misjudgment, Misunderstanding, and Miscommunication; III Processes of Unwitting Involvement and Commitment.

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I. Processes of Conflict Resolution

Most conflicts between two parties can have one of three outcomes (equating "no gain" and "loss"); one party may win and the other lose, both may lose, both may gain. I think it is reasonable to say that if a person sees only the possibility of a win-lose outcome or if he prefers an outcome of victory to one of mutual gain then he will have a competitive orientation to the conflict. Similarly, if a person prefers mutual gain to victory he will have a cooperative orientation to the resolution of conflict. These two distinctive orientations lead to quite different processes of conflict resolution, called simply "competitive" and "cooperative." In many research studies (Deutsch, 1965a) I have investigated the characteristics of these two processes. Let me highlight some of their differences:

1. Communication

   (a) A cooperative process is characterized by open and honest communication of relevant information between the participants. Each is interested in informing as well as being informed by the other.

   (b) A competitive process is characterized by either lack of communication or misleading communication. It also gives rise to espionage or other techniques which attempt to obtain information about the other which the other is unwilling to communicate. Each is interested in obtaining information about the other and in providing discouraging or misleading information to the other.

2. Perception

   (a) A cooperative process tends to increase sensitivity to similarities and common interests, while minimizing the salience of differences. It stimulates a convergence or conformity of beliefs and values.

   (b) A competitive process tends to increase sensitivity to differences and threats, while minimizing the awareness of similarities. It stimulates the sense
of complete oppositeness: "You are bad, I am good." It seems likely that competition produces a stronger bias toward misperceiving the other's neutral or conciliatory actions as malevolently motivated than the bias induced by cooperation to see the other's actions as benevolently intended.

3. **Attitudes toward one another**

   (a) A cooperative process leads to a trusting, friendly attitude and it increases the willingness to respond helpfully to the other's needs and requests.

   (b) A competitive process leads to a suspicious, hostile attitude and it increases the readiness to exploit the other's needs and to respond negatively to the other's requests.

4. **Task orientation**

   (a) A cooperative process leads to a definition of the conflicting interests as a mutual problem to be solved by collaborative effort. It facilitates the recognition of the legitimacy of each other's interests and of the necessity of searching for a solution which is responsive to the needs of each side. It tends to limit rather than expand the scope of conflicting interests. It enables the participants to approach the mutually acknowledged problem in a way which utilizes their special talents and enables them to substitute for one another in their joint work so that duplication of effort is reduced. Influence attempts tend to be limited to processes of persuasion. The enhancement of mutual power becomes an objective.

   (b) A competitive process stimulates the view that the solution of the conflict can only be of the type that is imposed by one side on the other. The enhancement of one's own power and minimization of the other's power becomes an objective. It leads to a minimization of the legitimacy of the other side's interests in the situation and tends to expand the scope of the issues in conflict so that the conflict becomes a matter of general principle rather than confined
to a particular issue at a given time and place. The expansion of the conflict increases its motivational significance to the participants and intensifies their emotional involvement in it; these, in turn, may make a limited defeat less acceptable or more humiliating than mutual disaster. Duplication of effort, so that the competitors become mirror-images of one another, is more likely than division of effort in the competitive process. Influence attempts tend to employ coercive processes.

This sketch of some aspects of competitive and cooperative processes suggests that each process tends to be self-confirming, so that the experience of cooperation will induce a benign spiral of increasing cooperation while competition will induce a vicious spiral of intensifying competition. Indeed, this is likely to some extent but there are restraints which usually operate to limit the spiralling of both types of processes. Not the least of these restraints arise from the fact that a person or group is usually involved in many situations and relationships simultaneously and his other involvements and relationships usually restrain what might be termed an obsessive intensification of any particular relationship.

However, there are circumstances which lead to an obsessive intensification of conflict: these I shall discuss in Section III under the heading of "processes of unwitting involvement and commitment."

Let me note, in passing, that it should be apparent that we are deeply involved in a competitive rather than a cooperative process of resolving our conflicts with Communist China, North Vietnam, and the Vietcong. There is little in the way of open and honest communication, there is massive and mutual misperception and misunderstanding, there is intense mutual suspicion and hostility, there is derogation of the possibilities of agreement other than those imposed by force, there is a widening of the scope of the issues in conflict and an escala-
tion of the force employed, and there is an increasing attempt to polarize
loyalties and allegiances about this one area of conflict.

What determines whether there will be a cooperative or competitive process
of conflict resolution?

There are several major, interrelated types of factors which determine
whether a cooperative or competitive process will dominate:

(a) The size (scope, importance, centrality, etc.) and rigidity of the
issue in conflict: the greater the size and rigidity the more difficult it will
be to resolve cooperatively. Many determinants of conflict size could be listed.
For example, an issue which bears upon self-esteem or change in power or status
is likely to be more important than an issue which does not. Illegitimate threat
or attempts to coerce are likely to increase the size of the conflict. Similarly,
some determinants of issue rigidity can be identified. Thus, an issue is more
rigid if it permits no substitute satisfactions and there is only enough for one
party. "Victory over the other" is a rigid issue. It is evident that we have
not chosen to cast the issues in conflict in Vietnam in such narrow, specific
terms as "the composition of the government in South Vietnam" rather we have
defined the issues in terms which are vague, and all-embracing - "freedom" versus
"communist aggression." The image of falling dominoes is an expression of a wide
rather than narrow conception of the conflict.

(b) The relative strength and salience of the existing cooperative and
competitive links between the conflicting parties: the stronger and more salient
the cooperative bonds are the less likely it is that they will engage in a com-
petitive process. The total strength of the cooperative bonds would be a function
of the number of bonds and the strength or importance of each bond. There are
obviously many different types of bonds that could be enumerated: superordinate
goals, mutually facilitating interests, common allegiances and values, linkage to
a common community, etc. It is evident that in relation to China and North Vietnam
we have not encouraged the development of cooperative bonds. We have opposed their
acceptance in the international community, we have supported their enemies, we have
discouraged trade and communication, and we have not attempted to let such nations
as France, Burma, and Pakistan (nations who are in contact with both sides) function
as mediators of conflict.

(c) The expectation that the outcome of one process or another will be more
unsatisfactory than the other. Many factors influencing such an expectation could
be listed: the prior experience of success and failure with the two processes, the
relative power of the parties involved, the skills the parties have in each of the
two processes, etc. The United States has had the misfortune of being too fortunate
in its prior experience with competitive international conflict: it has had too
many victories to accept compromises and to make concessions readily.

(d) The internal cohesiveness of each of the parties in conflict: coopera-
tive conflict resolution is less likely when either of the parties are characterized
by internal dissension or factionalism. Internal conflict may stimulate external
conflict as a tactic to increase cohesiveness, or it may lead to instability making
it difficult to work out a durable agreement, or it may tempt the other side to
take advantage of internal weakness. Certainly, the weakness of the government in
South Vietnam has been a barrier to any solution dependent upon direct negotiations
between the Vietcong and the government.

(e) The attitudes, strength, and resources of interested and relevant third
parties. For example, a conflict is more likely to be resolved cooperatively if
powerful-prestigious third parties encourage such a resolution and help to provide
resources (institutions, facilities, personnel, social norms and procedures) to
expedite discovery of a mutually satisfactory solution. We are in the unfortunate
position that relative to the prestige and power of the United States there is
neither a disinterested third-party nor an international community that is powerful and prestigious enough to motivate us to adopt a cooperative orientation to international conflict when we think our own parochial interests may be enhanced by the outcome of a competitive struggle.

II. Processes of Misperception

In the previous section I have pointed out that the social psychological dynamics of conflict are such as to foster perceptions which tend to perpetuate conflict even after the initial basis of conflict has become irrelevant. It is also true that many conflicts have their origins in misperceptions and misunderstandings. Elsewhere (Deutsch, 1965), I have described some of the common causes of misperceptions.

Here let me turn to the implications of a simple psychological principle: the perception of any act is determined both by our perception of the act itself and by our perception of the context in which the act occurs. The contexts of social acts are often not immediately given in perception and often they are not obvious. When the context is not obvious, we tend to assume a familiar context—a context which is most likely in terms of our own past experience. Since both the present situations and past experience of the actor and the perceiver may be rather different, it is not surprising that they will interpret the same act quite differently.

Let us consider this example from the war in Vietnam:

The scene was a small square in the city of Huế, South Vietnam, on a summer day in 1965. The place was known as a rendezvous for American GI's and Vietnamese girls. A couple of military police were on duty to keep order. On this day one of them had supplied himself with some candy for the children who played in the square and crowded around the Americans. As he started his
distribution in a friendly mood, a swarm of youngsters, jumping and reaching, pressed about him. With a laugh he tossed the candy out on the cobblestones. Immediately the children descended like locusts, each intent on grabbing a piece. A young Vietnamese school teacher happened by at this moment, and seeing the scrambling children, he spoke to them in stern and emphatic tones. He told them to pick up the candy and give it back to the American. After some hesitation they sheepishly complied. Then, facing the soldier and speaking in measured English with a tone of suppressed anger and scorn, he said: "You Americans don't understand. You are making beggars of our children, prostitutes of our women, and Communists of our men!"


I suspect that the American soldier was puzzled. His intent had been friendly, his mood was generous, and his action was unselfish; yet he was bitterly attacked. What was the American soldier's reaction to this incident: did he feel ashamed and wonder whether Americans were harming rather than helping Vietnam, or did he think his attacker was a disguised Vietcong, or did he think he was just a stupid "gook" who didn't know what was really good for him? I don't know but I am afraid that the American perspective on the war in Vietnam would have made it difficult for him to understand why the Vietnamese teacher did not appreciate his generosity.
The Americans look at the war in Vietnam in terms of its own preoccupation with the postwar expansion of Communism, which they think can only be stopped by American military power. We view ourselves as a nation which has generously committed American resources and American lives to the cause of holding back "the tides of darkness" represented by an aggressive international Communism: China, acting through its agents in North Vietnam, controls the Vietcong who are threatening freedom in South Vietnam and in all of South East Asia indirectly. We see ourselves as not only defending the freedom and welfare of the Vietnamese people but the freedom of all peoples because we are teaching international communism the lesson that aggression and subversion ("wars of liberation") do not pay. We have taken on this burden, without the support and encouragement of other nations, because of our unique world-wide responsibilities and power. In Vietnam, we are being generous and self-sacrificing in the service of liberal, humanistic values.

The American view of the Vietnam war finds little acceptance anywhere in the world and especially not in Vietnam. The perspective of the Vietnamese has been shaped by the effects of the American action and not by its intent and it has also been determined by historical factors that we find it convenient to forget. Let me list some of these factors:

1. The people in the underdeveloped countries are caught up in a social upheaval which reflects an "age of social change" rather than a Communist conspiracy. The extraordinary developments in science and technology, "the revolution of rising expectations" with the consequent pressure for economic development, the developing nationalisms and the demand for self-determination in many former colonial areas, the increasingly urgent quest for social justice and political reform, the population explosion, the changing power relations among nations: these are some of the factors contributing to the social upheaval of our time. Communism is an exacerbating symptom of the social ferment rather than its cause. The people of Vietnam are
unlikely to accept the American cold-war perspective for viewing the conflict in Vietnam: they are interested in a better life and freedom from foreign domination. They are also unlikely to view the Ho Chi Minh government in North Vietnam as a tool of Communist China. They know that Ho Chi Minh was fighting against foreign domination of Vietnam before China had a Communist government.

2. The United States gave substantial military aid to the French in their 18 year colonial war against the Vietminh.

3. The United States installed and supported Premier Diem. Diem wiped out the land reforms instituted by the Vietminh and instituted brutal repressive measures against the protesting peasants. As early as 1957, considerably before North Vietnam aided it, an armed revolt against Diem was initiated by the dissatisfied peasants. Diem compounded his unpopularity by discriminating against the Buddhist majority and excluding them from political power.

4. The United States economic aid has largely gone to a small corrupt elite in Saigon, has increased inflation with resultant harm to the less privileged groups, and has magnified the discrepancies between the rich and the poor. For the urban poor and the rural peasants in South Vietnam, the American-supported governments in South Vietnam have not been the "good guys", they have been the "bad guys".

5. The massive presence of the American military has disrupted the economy of South Vietnam, preempted many of the services and facilities formerly available to the Vietnamese, corrupted many of its youth, and convinced many of its people that it is an American war. The subservience of the South Vietnamese governments to American influence further supports this view.

6. The military tactics employed by the Americans - massive bombings, poisonous spraying of food crops, destruction of villages thought to be harboring the Vietcong - has produced a massive uprooting of families (over 1,000,000 refugees are reported in the South), many civilian casualties (estimated as from
two to six times the number of combatant casualties), and great physical devastation of the countryside. The war-weariness of the Vietnamese has made them increasingly bitter toward the napalm bombing which has multiplied the war's destructiveness and horror.

These factors which have shaped the Vietnamese perspective help to explain why the American crusade against communism in Vietnam has not been persuasive to the Vietnamese, why there is such a high desertion rate in the South Vietnam army, and why there is so much anti-Americanism among the people we are defending at such a high cost. They also help to explain the fervor of our adversary: our adversaries view the war as a continuation of their struggle against foreign domination and exploitation.

III. Processes of Unwitting Involvement and Commitment

How did we get involved in this ridiculous and tragic situation: a situation in which American lives and resources are being expended in defense of a people who are being more grievously injured and who are becoming more bitterly antagonistic to us the more deeply we become involved in their internal conflict? How is it that we have become so obsessed with the war in South Vietnam that we are willing to jettison our plans for achieving a Great Society at home, neglect the more important problems in South America and India, and risk destroying our leadership abroad? Not so long ago, we had a different view of the importance of Vietnam. In 1954, despite urgent French pleas, President Eisenhower refused to let the American military intervene even if all of Vietnam should fall. Senator Lyndon B. Johnson, at that time, vehemently opposed the use of American soldiers in this far-off land.

As Richard N. Goodwin pointed out in The New Yorker recently (April 16, 1966):

Had the Communists succeeded in taking over the entire country, as they almost did, no sensible American would now be demanding that we go to war to recapture South Vietnam. It would be another name on the list of half-forgotten lost lands.
Today, however, events have overtaken that possibility. American power and wealth are committed to Vietnam on an immense scale. We will soon, in all probability, have half a million men in South Vietnam. Helicopters, air support, and modern firearms give our troops there four or five times the striking power of their Second World War counterparts. We have already dropped the rough equivalent of a ton of bombs for every Vietcong soldier. Our financial assistance since 1954 amounts to over three billion dollars, or more than two hundred dollars for every person in South Vietnam.

Now that we are massively involved in South Vietnam, we hear many different rationalizations of our involvement: Dean Rusk has cited the SEATO treaty commitment but as Goodwin has pointed out: "No adviser in the highest councils ever urged action on the basis of the SEATO treaty; none, as far as I know, ever mentioned the existence of such a pledge. And, in fact, there was no such commitment."

Efforts to justify our involvement in terms of showing the communists that internal subversion does not pay are also not convincing: would they not have already learned from Greece, Malaya, the Phillipines, the Congo, and Burma, if this was the lesson that had to be taught? Similarly, how persuasive is the "domino theory" when such big dominoes as China, itself, and also such small ones as Cuba have fallen without creating any noticeable domino effect? Nor can we claim "defense of freedom" as our justification when we consider how undemocratic the governments of South Vietnam have been - from Diem's to Ky's.

Why then are we involved in the war in South Vietnam?

The most direct statement of the reason for our continued involvement is the fact that we are involved: our continued involvement justifies our past involvement. Once involved it is exceedingly difficult to disengage and to admit, thereby,
how purposeless and unwitting our past involvement has been. I am stating, in other words, that we are not involved because of any large strategic or moral purpose and that any such purposes we now impute to our involvement are *ex post facto* rationalizations.

As a nation, we stumbled into the conflict in South Vietnam under the mistaken assumption that "victory might come easily and with little pain". At every step of increasing involvement, we were led to believe that with some small additional help (economic aid, then military advisers, then the use of American helicopters, then the combat use of American soldiers, then massive air intervention by American planes, then bombing of the North, then massive intervention of American troops, and so on) we would not risk a major conflict but yet would help to build an independent, stable country that could stand on its own feet. We have over and over again acted on the tempting assumption that with just a little more investment we would prevent the whole thing from going down the drain.

This type of assumption is one with which we are familiar in connection with the psychology of gambling. We all know of the losing gambler, getting deeper and deeper into a hole, who keeps on betting with the hope that by so doing he will recover his initial losses. Not all losing gamblers submit to the gambler's temptation of course. But those whose sense of omnipotence is at stake, those who are too proud to recognize that they cannot overcome the odds against them are vulnerable to this type of disastrous temptation. Are we, as a nation, so committed to a view of ourselves as omnipotent that we can not recognize that we are making the wrong gamble?

In addition to the gambler's temptation, I shall describe briefly three other processes of gradual and unwitting commitment. One is the much-discussed process of dissonance reduction. As Festinger (1961) has pointed out: "Rats and people come to love the things for which they have suffered." Presumably they do so in order to reduce the dissonance induced by the suffering and their method
of dissonance-reduction is to enhance the attractiveness of the choice which led to their suffering: only if what one chose was really worthwhile would all of the associated suffering be tolerable. Have we not increased what we perceive to be at stake in the Vietnam conflict as it has become more and more costly for us? We are now at the point where we are told that our national honor, our influence as a world leader, our national security are in the balance in the conflict over this tragic little land.

Silvan Tomkins (Tomkins and Izard, 1965) has described a process of circular, incremental magnification which also helps to explain the widening of involvement and the monopolization of thought. He suggests that it occurs if there is a sequence of events of this type: threat, successful defense, breakdown of defense and re-emergence of threat, second successful new defense, second breakdown of defense and re-emergence of threat, and so on until an expectation is generated that no matter how successful a defense against a dreaded contingency may seem, it will prove unavailing and require yet another defense. This process is circular and incremental since each new threat requires a more desperate defense and the successive breakdown of each newly improved defense generates a magnification of the nature of the threat and the concurrent affect which it evokes. The increasing and obsessive preoccupation with Vietnam may, in part, reflect just such a process: time and time again, we have assumed that a new and more powerful defense or assault against the Vietcong would do the trick only to find that a new and more powerful military commitment was required. By now, according to newspaper reports, Vietnam almost monopolizes the thinking of our national leaders and the attention given to more fundamental concerns is minimized.

Let me, finally, turn to an everyday process of unwitting involvement: situational entrapment. The characteristic of this process is that behavior is typically initiated under the assumption that the environment is compliant rather than reactive - that it responds as a tool for one's purposes rather than as a
self-maintaining system. Well-intentioned actions sometimes produce effects opposite to those intended because the actions do not take into account the characteristics of the setting in which they take place. By now, we are all aware that an unintended consequence of some public health measures in Latin America was the population explosion. Only now, are we beginning to recognize that some consequences of the types of aid we have given to some underdeveloped countries is to hinder their economic development and to foster a need for ever-increasing aid. Similarly, one may propose that the nature of the American intervention in Vietnam has served to weaken the opposition to the Vietcong, demoralize those in Vietnam who were able and willing to rely on the Vietnamese to solve their problems without foreign control, increase the strength and resolution of the Vietcong, and otherwise produce the responses which would require an increasing involvement and commitment of American resources and men just to prevent an immediate overturn of the situation.
Conclusion

In this brief paper, I have tried to provide some illustrations of the relevance of social psychology to the study of international conflict. Much of my discussion has been guided by the attempt to understand international strife without resort to either a "conspiracy theory of history" nor to a naive psychological theory that equates the effects of behavior with its intentions. I have tried to throw light on the American paradox in Vietnam, a paradox which can be expressed in the question: How is it that a generous, peaceable nation like the United States which has been led by liberal, well-intentioned men could have gotten itself so deeply and unwittingly involved in the Vietnam fratricide with the tragic consequence that it has worsened the plight of the Vietnamese, wasted American lives and resources, and endangered world peace?

I have been concerned with the Vietnam war, not only because of its tragic character, but also because it illustrates how World War III is most likely to start. "... it will come not in a burst of Strangelove madness or a Fail-safe accident but through a long series of acts and decisions, each seemingly reasonable, that will slowly place the great powers in a situation in which they will find it impossible to back down. It will be no one's fault." (Goodwin, The New Yorker, April 16, 1966)

Our task, as psychologists, is not to judge fault but to help men to avoid those faulty processes which lead to the mushrooming rather than the peaceful resolution of conflict. We have much to learn about such processes. Let us work together to acquire this knowledge which may still play a role in averting a world catastrophe.
References


