

Obama's Afghanistan Woes Recall LBJ's in Vietnam

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President Obama faces some of the same issues today over how to proceed in Afghanistan that President Johnson faced in 1965 when he escalated the war in Viet Nam.

"The parallels between Viet Nam and Afghanistan are truly striking," says Gordon Goldstein, author of "Lessons in Disaster: McGeorge Bundy and the Path to War in Vietnam(Times Books)."

"They are both large countries. They both had corrupt governments. They both had insurgencies," said Goldstein. In Viet Nam the U.S. mistakenly believed, "If we imposed enough pain on the insurgents, we would demonstrate to them they could not win and coerce them to the conference table," Goldstein said.

Bundy, who served as National Security Advisor from 1961 through 1966, had an opportunity to set up an executive committee to consider U.S. options under President Lyndon Johnson but did not do so, Goldstein said. Moreover, when U.S. Ambassador to South Viet Nam General William Westmoreland told Bundy not to send in more troops, he did not heed his advice.

The critical decision was made in 1965, Goldstein said on the Comcast TV interview program "Books of Our Time," sponsored by the Massachusetts School of Law at Andover. "The proposal to bomb the North (to the conference table) did not anticipate the impact of increasing troop protection around the U.S. air bases," he said.

The requirement to provide the added troops soon resulted in liberalizing the rules of engagement, Goldstein said, intensifying the shooting war.

"I tried to understand what Bundy was thinking in 1965," Goldstein told interviewer Dean Lawrence Velvel of the law school. "Embedded in every proposal was how to apply military power" to gain the upper hand before any attempt was made at negotiations, Goldstein said.

When trusted Bundy aide James Thomson Jr. voiced his objections to a Bundy proposal to escalate the air war, Bundy thanked him for his views but rejected his position. Thomson pointed out that at the end of the day the Vietnamese knew we were going to leave the country but it was their country "and they had nowhere else to go," Goldstein said.

Goldstein said the LBJ White House internal debate over Viet Nam pitted Undersecretary of State George Ball, who favored a pullout, against Bundy, Defense Secy. Robert McNamara and Secretary of State Dean Rusk.

Goldstein said Bundy asserted at the time the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces were losing 100 men for each American killed but despite this attrition rate it was the U.S., not the Vietnamese, that quit the field.

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