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Lessons for Afghanistan from Vietnam: We had the experience but missed the meaning

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By Aurelie Basha.

Withdrawal is in the air. As the phase-out begins in Afghanistan, op-eds and journal articles abound about the potential lessons learnt. Not so long ago, in the 1970s, as the Nixon administration moved on its own promise of delivering “peace with honor”, a similar debate ensued. Just like today, commentators then did not know yet whether “victory” in Vietnam, if or when it was achieved, would be sustainable but they did know that the U.S. was leaving. They also knew that the great American military machine had failed to achieve a purely military victory and from this, stemmed some critical questions. I believe it’s timely to revisit some of their insight.

One man’s commentary, in particular, resonates deeper than most. That man was [Adam Yarmolinsky](#). Yarmolinsky had been an advisor to Kennedy until his election to the Presidency, at which point he joined McNamara’s team at the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD). After Kennedy’s assassination he tellingly moved on to deal with Johnson’s other war, the “War on Poverty”, until finally retiring to academia a short while later.

During his academic career, Yarmolinsky wrote prolifically about the Vietnam War experience and [civil-military relations](#). He notably drew the following lessons (in very simplified form):

First, U.S. power was limited and military power could only ever be one, as well as a rather limited, component of power. Informed by Vietnam, [with his Harvard colleagues Ernest May and Graham Allison](#), Yarmolinsky argued that U.S. military power was especially ill-suited to handle internal, guerrilla wars. But more importantly, he argued that the U.S. national security system was skewed to military solutions, because of the increasing proportion of the federal budget allocated to defense and because the Services had been equipped to deal with the full-range of contingencies. In other words, a massive military budget and set-up had created an institutional propensity to favour military solutions, to prove a return-on-investment.

Second, congressional leaders were largely to blame for the disproportionately high proportion of the federal budget allocated to defense. What is striking as a historian of this period is how readily and openly leading newspapers would speak of a military-industrial complex. (Writing a book on this topic today would land you in the “conspiracy theory” book section on Amazon.) Yarmolinsky addressed what he called the “military-industrial-labor-congressional complex” in arguing that a logical alliance had emerged between the Services and congressional leaders where Services could vie for a greater piece of the federal budget pie while Senators could secure contracts, profits and jobs for their constituents. The channel of communication between the two had also allowed the Services to eschew meaningful accountability and allowed them to operate in ways that were sometimes incompatible with the administration’s objectives.

Finally, Yarmolinsky had some lessons about leadership and presidential vision. Given these structural pulls, the U.S. needed a strong President and Secretary of Defense. The latter could maintain the relative hierarchy of military options to other policy tools but also the hierarchy of military advisors in national security decisions. Here, an informative anecdote is in order: Yarmolinsky, in office, had required that military officials run their public statements by the OSD to clear them of “colour words”, i.e. fear-mongering words. In response, McNamara and Kennedy had to defend the administration in front of Congress on [charges that Communists had infiltrated the OSD](#).

As for the President, Yarmolinsky concluded that the decision to withdraw was a presidential and civilian prerogative, requiring the vision to cut your losses and weigh the costs of the war against other interests. This, military advisors would never do: their perspective was “parochial” and their ethos required that a solution was always possible.

Then, and now, it is almost inevitable that military authorities will create their own [counter-narrative](#) of what went wrong, most likely blaming civilian weakness. But then, and now, there is a unique opportunity to confront some of the deeper, structural



issues that are raised by military failure. In particular, why the so-called “war on terrorism”, and intervention in Afghanistan, was defined almost exclusively in military terms in the first place.

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