RELEGITIMIZING INTERVENTION

THE ASSAULT ON THE 'VIET NAM SYNDROME'

by Michael Klare*

America's military leaders are guiding for the final assault on what they view as the biggest obstacle to US military supremacy: the Viet Nam Syndrome. Stated simply, the Viet Nam Syndrome is the American public's disinclination to engage in future Viet Nam-type interventions in the Third World. While most Americans cheered the US withdrawal from Indochina and the simultaneous reduction in our "police" presence abroad, some US leaders have campaigned ever since to relegitimize intervention as a standard instrument of US policy. As discontent over long gas lines and higher oil prices has intensified, these apostles attempted to convince the public that military action may be necessary to prevent erosion of our privileged way of life. If the public can be persuaded to accept this argument, they believe, US policymakers no longer need fear domestic resistance to future interventions abroad.

At the same time that many leaders have campaigned for public acquiescence to renewed interventionism, official Washington has moved ever closer to a new consensus on the use of military force abroad. This outlook holds that while America cannot, and should not, intervene in every Third World crisis, we must act when "vital" economic interests — particularly energy supplies — are threatened. This new consensus is reflected in White House statements to the effect that America is prepared to use military force to overcome any threat to US oil supplies, and in the creation of a "quick-strike force" for intervention in the Middle East. But the implementation of this consensus will be

hindered, many leaders believe, so long as the public adheres to its “never again” stance on intervention abroad. Hence the stepped-up assault on the Viet Nam Syndrome.

The Viet Nam Syndrome can be seen both as an institutional matrix and as a subjective condition. Institutionally, this outlook took a number of specific forms: (1) passage of the War Powers Act and other legislative restraints on presidential war-making abroad; (2) abolition of conscription and establishment of an all-volunteer service; (3) curtailment of covert operations by the CIA and other intelligence agencies; and (4) adoption of the “Nixon Doctrine” and the creation of surrogate “police” powers such as Iran.

These developments had immediate and profound consequences for the entire national security apparatus. The Armed Forces lost half of their uniformed personnel, thus eliminating future openings for thousands of generals, admirals and other top career officers. The Pentagon budget was reduced (in non-inflated, “real” dollars), causing a significant drop in defense contracts. The CIA was forced to undergo an unprecedented public probe of its secret operations, and lost many veteran “spooks” through a massive layoff of senior personnel.

All told, it was the greatest institutional setback for the warfare state since the demobilization ordered by President Eisenhower after the Korean War.

More serious than these institutional reverses, however, was the subjective response. Once all US troops had been withdrawn from Indochina, the nation breathed a collective sigh of relief and adopted a “never again” stance on the use of US troops to control political changes in the Third World. Summarizing this perspective in 1975, Senator Edward Kennedy declared that “the lesson (of Viet Nam) is that we must throw off the cumbersome mantle of world policeman”. In the same spirit, Senator Alan Cranston observed, “The United States should be a peaceful world neighbor instead of a militant world meddler”. This view prevailed in 1976, when Congress voted to prohibit US military involvement in Angola, and again a year later when Washington elected to remain on the sidelines during the Ethiopian-Somalia conflict.

President Carter, who was elected when the Viet Nam Syndrome was at its peak, has generally adhered to the non-interventionist outlook expressed by Senators Kennedy and Cranston in 1975. Although some of his advisers — particularly Zbigniew Brzezinski — called for a military response to particular crises, Carter vetoed direct US involvement in such conflicts as the Zaire upheaval, the Iranian Revolution, the Viet Nam-China border war, and the Nicaraguan civil war. And despite evidence of a turnaround in Administration thinking, this hands-off approach still governs official policy: in a May 1979 speech to the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance stated that “the use of military force is not, and should not be, a desirable American policy response to the internal politics of other nations”.

But for some US policymakers, this outlook is an intolerable constraint on US power at the time of growing challenges to American interests abroad. These leaders — representing powerful segments of the military, intelligence and business communities — argue that America’s unwillingness to use force in responding to minor threats abroad will only invite more serious and intractable challenges later. The Viet Nam Syndrome, in their view, actually fosters instability because it encourages hostile powers to exploit the emerging gaps in the West’s global security system. “Worldwide stability is being eroded through the retreatment of American policy and power”, James R. Schlesinger wrote in *Fortune* after his dismissal as Secretary of Defense in 1976. “This growing instability reflects visible factors such as the deterioration in the military balance, but also, perhaps more immediately, such invisible factors as the altered psychological stance of the United States, a nation apparently withdrawing from the burdens of leadership and power.”

For these critics, US non-involvement in Angola, Ethiopia, and Iran represents a sign of American weakness rather than a calculated policy of restraint. “Viet Nam caused a loss of confidence in the ability of the US to defend non-communist regimes in Third World countries against subversion and military takeovers by Moscow’s allies”,
Business Week observed recently. “This perception of paralysis was confirmed when the US stood by helplessly as Russian-backed insurgents, aided by Cuban troops, took over Angola. And it was enhanced when the Soviet-aligned Ethiopian government crushed separatist movements in Eritrea and the Ogaden.”

For advocates of a renewed interventionist posture, the Viet Nam Syndrome is not merely a misguided policy approach, but evidence of a far more profound psychological disorder. “Our internal preoccupations and our political divisions of recent years”, according to Schlesinger, suggest “a growing infirmity of American policy”. Frequently, these critics choose words with psychosexual overtones: America’s allies have lost confidence in “the firmness of American policy”; Europeans deplore “the faltering of American purpose”; American restraint has “created an image of US impotence abroad”.(Quotes from Fortune and Business Week.)

Because Carter has generally upheld the non-interventionist approach, he has become the principal target for such complaints. Despite his apparent success at Camp David, he is often portrayed as “weak” and “indecisive” in responding to foreign crises. “The Administration’s response to the multiplying challenges and disorders abroad”, George F. Will charged in Newsweek recently, “has been a litany of things it will not do: interventions it will not contemplate, bases it will not seek, weapons it will not build. Its policy has been symbolized by two aircraft carriers, the one Carter vetoed and the one he changed his mind about sending toward the Persian Gulf”. The President’s so-called “turn the other cheek” policy has also been the topic of frequent attacks by leaders of both major parties. Senator Howard Baker, for instance, has charged that Carter’s failure to defend the Shah and other US clients “invite the interpretation that we do not have the will or the resolve to react under any circumstances”. And in an extraordinary 1979 address to the Coalition for a Democratic Majority, Senator Henry Jackson charged that the Administration’s placidity in the face of growing Soviet belligerence has “the mark of appeasement”.

These attacks culminated in March 1979 with a special issue of Business Week on “The Decline of US Power” which featured a dramatic picture of the Statue of Liberty in tears. Arguing that since Viet Nam, the United States “has been buffeted by an unnerving series of shocks that signal an accelerating erosion of power and influence”, Business Week’s editors called for a revitalized military capacity to protect US interests abroad. Without a more activist foreign policy, they argued, America’s favored economic standing may soon
vanish. "The policies set in motion during the Viet Nam war are now threatening the way of life built since World War II."

The Business Week issue was particularly significant because it constitutes a rare public airing of the intense policy debate which has gripped the US business community ever since Viet Nam. This debate actually originated in the elite struggle over the war itself: after Tet and the appearance of a broad-based antiwar movement at home, the corporate world split into factions favoring the continuation of the war and others calling for an American withdrawal. After the war, this debate was transformed into a deeper conflict over America's role in the "post-Viet Nam" world. This struggle pitted those businessmen who felt that America's overseas interests could be adequately protected without recourse to military action against those who maintained that intervention must always be considered the "final solution" to America's political-economic problems abroad. The former group, which I have chosen to call the "Traders", argued that by expanding US trade relations with Third World governments, America could play a sort of global managerial role in spite of continued ideological conflict with some regimes. The latter group, which I choose to call the "Prussians", insist that as the world becomes more turbulent and chaotic, America must use its military clout to prevent Third World upstarts from upsetting the global economic applecart.

For the most part, the participants in this struggle prefer to conduct their battles in seclusion — in corporate board rooms, private clubs, and exclusive Washington restaurants. Because the debates revolve around the basic underpinnings of American power, and because it is simply not possible to expose the inner workings of elite decision-making to public scrutiny (it is not proper, for instance, to tell a Congressional subcommittee that Cuban intervention in Angola is really good for America because it assures stability in Gulf Oil's Cabinda field), this struggle tends to be translated into other terms when conducted in public.

The most common expression of this struggle, of course, is the debate over the "Soviet threat". Because data on Soviet military strength is subject to a wide range of interpretations, disputes over the size and character of Soviet capabilities are often used as surrogates for the more profound contest over imperial policy. While the Traders argue that Moscow is far too preoccupied with domestic problems and growing restiveness in Eastern Europe to embark upon any major confrontations with the West, the Prussians insist that Moscow will use its awesome military muscle to dominate key Third World areas — particularly the Middle East — and thus to undermine the western economies. While both sides recognize that it is unlikely that Moscow would ever be foolhardy enough to threaten any really critical American interests, such as oil (despite all the talk of Soviet intervention in the Middle East, Moscow has been very, very careful to avoid any action that could be interpreted as a threat to western oil supplies) the Prussians argue that the mere existence of large Soviet forces might encourage maverick Third World governments to be more obstinate in their dealings with the West than they would be otherwise. Thus, when outgoing Secretary of Energy James
Schlesinger warned in August that the apparent “preponderance of Soviet power” in the Middle East increases Moscow’s capacity for “influence and subversion” of the West’s oil supplies, insiders understood that it wasn’t Moscow that he was worried about, but rather the growing independence of the Mideast oil powers. And when he called for a beefed-up American presence to discourage Soviet adventures in that area, what he really meant is that we must have the capacity to crush any indigenous challenges to US interests.

This same interplay between the “Soviet threat” debate and the deeper foreign policy struggle has arisen in the SALT debate. Although most of the discussion has focused on such questions as their relative size of the superpowers’ arsenals and the verifiability of the proposed treaty, the underlying debate concerns the perception of power insofar as it affects America’s capacity to dominate the western world. Thus, while no one really doubts that America can continue to deter any conceivable Soviet assault, critics argue that the appearance of Soviet might may act as a constraint on our capacity to discipline errant regimes abroad. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that pro- and anti-SALT senators are moving toward a compromise which will involve a massive expansion of America’s “general purpose” forces — i.e., forces intended for intervention and other non-nuclear contingencies.

The debate over renewed interventionism has also arisen in recent discussions of the Viet Nam war itself. While most Americans still believe that we were right to pull US troops out of Indochina, many “realist” intellectuals now argue that we’d be better off (i.e., no “boat people”, no Cambodia conflict, etc.) if we’d stuck it out in Viet Nam and demonstrated our “resolve” to protect US interests. Needless to say, it follows from this logic that if we were right to stay in Viet Nam in the first place, we’ll be even more right to intervene the next time a Viet Nam-type situation arises abroad.

As these debates proceeded, both sides have demonstrated assorted strengths and weaknesses. By choosing early to support Jimmy Carter in 1976, the Traders succeeded in placing some of their top leaders in high Administration posts. The Prussians, on the other hand, have proved adept at manipulating public opinion and at using the “Soviet threat” hysteria to undermine Administration policies. And while the Traders have worked wonders at Camp David and in other secluded diplomatic arenas, the inherent exclusivity of their approach (relying, as it does, on secret “understandings” between nominal antagonists) leaves them vulnerable to charges of “appeasement” — or at least of procrastination in the face of growing danger. As a result, the Traders have gradually lost ground over the past year and resistance to intervention (at least in elite circles) has significantly diminished.

This trend was already evident in January when the Traders suffered a particularly crushing blow: the collapse of the Pahlavi Dynasty in Iran. With the Shah no longer available to serve as a surrogate gendarme in the Persian Gulf, the Nixon Doctrine evaporated overnight, and, with it, a major prop of the non-interventionist position. Although most experts agreed that there was little Washington could do to save the Shah, the very absence of any meaningful options was cited as proof of American “impotence”.

After Iran, it became apparent that top US policymakers had moved towards a new consensus on the use of military force to protect “vital” US interests abroad. The new outlook was unveiled on February 26, when the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of Energy both announced that the United States would use force if necessary to protect its energy supplies in the Persian Gulf area. Appearing on “Face the Nation”, Defense Secretary Harold Brown asserted that Mideast oil supplies are “clearly part of our vital interests”, and that “in the protection of those vital interests we’ll take any action that’s appropriate, including the use of military force”. On the same day, then Energy Secretary James Schlesinger told reporters from The New York Times that “The United States has vital interests in the Persian Gulf. The United States must move in such a way that it protects those interests, even if that involves the use of military strength or of military presence.”

President Carter backed up these statements with a dramatic flexing of US military muscle during the Yemen crisis of last March. Although the origins of the crisis are steeped in tribal animosities and the fighting was confined to a narrow border area, Carter chose to elevate the Yemen conflict into a major East-West confrontation involving America’s “vital interests”. Arguing that the South Yemeni attack on North Yemen constituted an indirect threat to Saudi Arabia — and hence to American oil supplies — the White House announced emergency measures designed to prevent any further aggression by the Soviet-armed Southerners. Elements of the 82nd Airborne Division (America’s standby intervention force) were placed on alert, and the aircraft carrier Constellation was ordered into the Arabian Peninsula. Fortunately, the crisis subsided once Arab League negotiators worked out a cease-fire, but it could easily have escalated into something far more serious: according to Jim Hoagland of the Washington Post, the White House was prepared to authorize the carrier’s 85 warplanes to engage in combat if Soviet or Cuban pilots stationed in South Yemen joined the conflict.

The Brown-Schlesinger statements of February 26, coupled with Carter’s muscle-flexing over Yemen, have been cited by observers both inside and outside the Administration as proof that official Washington has now recovered from the Viet Nam Syndrome. “This country went through a very deep philosophical-cultural crisis as a result of the war in Viet Nam”, national security adviser Zbiginiew Brzezinski acknowledged in April, but “it is now emerging from that crisis”. The Administration’s response to Yemen, he noted, “signalled to others that we will use force when necessary to protect our important interests”.

The events in Iran and Yemen also had a big impact in Congress. “The tide that swept back US intervention in Viet Nam, Cambodia, and Angola could now be turning the other way”, The Washington Post reported in June. “Strong pressures are beginning to build up that could pave the way for a return to a more interventionist policy, based on military presence, to guarantee US access to foreign energy supplies.” And in a comment that captures the mood of many in Congress, Senator Sam Nunn noted recently that, “I’d rather flex our muscles a little bit on a weekly basis than have to resort to a great display of force at some very high level of danger”.

In response to these pressures, the Administration has announced creation of a “Unilateral Corps” for intervention in the Middle East. The Unilateral Corps — so-called because it would be independent of NATO and thus available for unilateral action by the United States — will consist of about 100,000 troops drawn from existing army, air force, and marine units, including the elite 82nd Airborne Division. Once organized, the Unilateral Corps will be available, on very short notice, for rapid deployment to distant trouble spots such as the Persian Gulf. The formation of such a “quick-reaction strike force” was originally proposed over year ago, but the pace of planning was reportedly stepped up in February, following the upheaval in Iran.

At this point, it is impossible to predict when, and under what circumstances, the Unilateral Corps will be ordered into action. Several scenarios have, however, received wide attention in the military press: occupation of Saudi oilfields to prevent their
takeover by radical Arab forces; naval action in the Persian Gulf to protect oil tankers from attacks by Palestinian commandos; defense of North Yemen or Oman in the event of a South Yemeni invasion; and reprisals against Colonel Khadafi following Libyan-backed terrorist raids elsewhere. Whether or not any of these particular scenarios is played out is, of course, beside the point. What matters is that top US policymakers are apparently committed to the use of military force in the event that critical US interests are threatened abroad.

Such action — if and when it comes — will not, however, be a replay of Viet Nam. US war planners now have to contend with many constraints not present in the 1960s. First and foremost is the memory of the antiwar movement, which argues against a prolonged counter-insurgency war with daily footage of American corpses being flown back home. Economics also play a role: Viet Nam was an extravagant, fuel-intensive war which could not be repeated at today’s oil prices without bankrupting the Treasury. And the runaway arms trade has profoundly altered the international military environment: whereas Vietnamese guerrillas were armed with relatively primitive infantry weapons, potential adversaries in the Middle East and Africa are armed with the latest French, Russian and American combat systems. All this means that any future intervention will have to be fought with much more precision, speed, and ferocity than anything we’ve ever seen.

The future “Viet Nams” will diverge from the original in another critical respect: the character of the rationalizations used to justify the war. Whereas the Indochina conflict was essentially (if unconvincingly) justified on the basis of “containment”—i.e., that stopping the Viet Cong was necessary to block further Soviet “expansion” into the Third World — any future interventions will be justified on more pragmatic grounds. US leaders recognize that the American public is far more concerned with inflation and the energy crisis than it is with convoluted Cold War stratagems. They believe, therefore, that the next Viet Nams will have to be sellable in crass materialistic terms: intervention is necessary, they will argue, to insure a steady flow of oil to the local gas pumps. There is also a danger of what Professor Richard Falk of Princeton University calls “humanitarian interventions” — i.e. Entebbe-type raids to free civilian hostages or campaigns to topple such troublesome despots as say, Colonel Khadafi, or the Ayatollah Khomaini. (The victims of pro-US despots such as President Marcos of the Philippines and President Park of South Korea should not, however, expect such “humanitarian” relief.)

Whether or not the American public will swallow such justifications remains to be seen. There are still many prominent leaders who can be counted on to oppose military intervention no matter how it may be disguised, and the peace movement, though shrunken, is capable of fairly rapid mobilization. But the advocates of intervention clearly believe that most of the public’s residual antiwar sentiment has been melted away, and that with an intensified propaganda campaign the “Viet Nam Syndrome” can be extinguished completely. When, and if, they conclude that they’ve succeeded, the appearance — in battle — of the Unilateral Corps will probably not be long in coming. Thus all of us who worked together to stop the Viet Nam war, and all those who believe in seeking peaceful solutions to the world’s problems, have an immense responsibility to challenge the notion that intervention is in the public interest, and to advise Washington — as loudly as possible — that any repeat of Viet Nam will be met with instantaneous and unremitting opposition.