Could We Have Won the War?

-by Stanley Karnow

The same question arises in every discussion of the Vietnam experience: Could we have won the war? My answer is simple: The war was unwinnable.

The United States went into Southeast Asia with a huge arsenal – artillery, aircraft and the latest technological devices. At the height of the war, in late 1967, more than 500,000 American troops were involved. Our strategy was to break the will of the communists, and compel them to withdraw to North Vietnam – and we defeated them in every battle. But it was all futile.

What we did not understand was that we were up against an enemy willing to take unlimited losses. So, even though we killed them by the thousands, they would not surrender. It is estimated that at least one million communist soldiers died in the war. Compare Vietnam's population to ours, and it's as if we lost four million men. We believed that, with our overwhelming firepower, we could wear them down – but just the opposite occurred. By their tenacity and perseverance, they wore down the American public – so that, after years without progress, we felt that we had to withdraw.

General William C. Westmoreland, the U.S. commander, maintained that the communists accepted heavy casualties because Asians regard life as cheap. That comment showed a failure to understand the Vietnamese, their history and what makes them tick. They have been struggling against foreign invaders for 2,000 years – Chinese, Cambodians, French and Japanese. As a result, they became intensely nationalist – and would make extraordinary sacrifices to defend their homeland.

On a visit to Hanoi not long ago, I interviewed General Vo Ngyuen Giap, the commander of the communist forces. "How long were you prepared to go on fighting?" I asked him, to which he responded, "10, 20, 50, 100 years, as long as it took to win –

regardless of cost." This willingness to accept such losses, incidentally, is not unique to the Vietnamese. Some 30,000 Americans – Union and Confederates- died in a single day in the battle of Antietam during our Civil War. They too were fighting for a cause.

The Vietnam War could have been avoided, in my view, if we had known more about the country. We would have realized that the Vietnamese communists were not part of some global communist machine but were basically nationalists. In that sense they were no threat to America's security. Only within the past 25 years have we recognized that communist movements in each country were different – and had different priorities. We paid a high tuition fee to learn that lesson: Nearly 60,000 names on the Vietnam Memorial in Washington.

Stanley Karnow covered the war in Vietnam from 1959 to the end. He is the author of <u>Vietnam: a History</u>, and winner of the Pulitzer Prize in History in 1990.

After Reading Discussion Questions

1. What was the U.S. military strategy for attempting to defeat the Vietnamese?

2. Give examples of things we didn't know about the Vietnamese that contributed to our defeat there. How is it possible that our leaders and military experts were unaware of these facts?

3. To what extent do you agree with Karnow? Give your rationale for agreeing or disagreeing.

4. Explain in your own words what Karnow meant when he wrote: "We would have realized that the Vietnamese communitst were not part of some global communist machine but were basically nationalists."

5. In view of what happened in Vietnam, how should the United States change its foreign policy so that we do not become involved in another Vietnam?