

Our Vietnam, And the Soviets': Monuments to superpower thinking.

By David K. Shipler WASHINGTON

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Recently, I took a Soviet friend to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. We walked slowly past the long wall, mostly in silence, seeing ourselves reflected darkly in the polished black granite, among the engraved names of 58,156 dead. A woman knelt, holding a piece of paper against the stone, rubbing a pencil across a name.

I wondered aloud what kind of monument the Soviet Union would build to its veterans from Afghanistan. My friend replied that it would not be done for at least 20 or 30 years, because so many of the young men who were sent had not wanted to go, and yet committed "crimes" when they were there.

The Soviet Union does not build monuments to ambiguity, as we have done so gracefully with our wall of names. And this difference poses a question about how each great power absorbs defeat, how it learns and how its experience affects its policy.

The United States is a democracy

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with a free press, and the Soviet Union is not. This alone should produce a contrast in behavior. It should offer us the advantage of wisdom, the ability to digest intelligently the unrestricted flow of information about other regions of the world. The weight our system gives to the people's voice should impose a restraint, especially in dispatching troops, that does not burden Soviet leaders.

But how differently did the two countries actually handle their ill-fated adventures?

Both entered their respective quagmires because they misperceived the stakes, the threats, the cultural dynamics of the conflicts and the prospects for victory.

Both overestimated the effectiveness of superior firepower in a guerrilla war. And both took about the same time to get out — roughly nine years, if we date the United States buildup from the 1964 Tonkin Gulf Resolution.

In the 1960's, the United States

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Monuments to superpower thinking.

imagined Vietnam as susceptible to Chinese Communist expansion, although a reading of any basic history book would have revealed how stubbornly the Vietnamese themselves had resisted the Chinese for centuries.

In light of the Vietnamese-Chinese antagonisms that have flared up since the 1975 North Vietnam takeover of South Vietnam, those American fears now seem laughable. Even the Soviet presence in Vietnam has hardly damaged American interests in East Asia.

Similarly, the Soviet Union imagined Afghanistan as susceptible to inroads by the United States and China. More than a year before the Soviet invasion of December 1979, Moscow apparently failed to appreciate the social and religious roots of an Afghan insurgency that arose to resist the ruling Afghan Communists' program of modernization.

Instead, the Kremlin saw the rebels as part of an American- and Chinese-led effort to turn Afghanistan into a hostile outpost on the Soviet border. The last straw came when Hafizullah Amin, viewed from the Kremlin as secretly pro-American because he had studied in the United States, became the Afghan leader in September 1979.

Using the East-West rivalry to magnify local conflicts has been a favorite obsession of the two powers since the end of World War II. The surrounding fantasies and paranoia explain the long time it took both the United States and Soviet Union to accept defeat, for the stakes seemed much higher than they were.

Americans knew a great deal about their war; they watched the suffering on their television screens and saw the self-deluding optimism of their Government crumble. They confronted their own immorality in the Mylai massacre and the intensive bombing of civilians. Still, it took a long time.

By contrast, the Russians were told little in the early years of their war. They were spared TV pictures of gruesome combat, news of civilian casualties, accounts of massacres by their own young men. The official lie that they were there to fight alongside Afghans, rather than against them, collapsed only for the soldiers who saw first-hand, then came home to tell family and friends the truth.

The truth insinuated itself slowly

into consciousness, spreading by word of mouth, then gradually finding its way obliquely into the Soviet press. And it took a long time.

In the United States, where the Vietnam War provoked angry divisions of opinion, the push for withdrawal grew from the bottom up. In the Soviet Union, where the opportunity for public debate on foreign policy is still limited, the desire for withdrawal was first articulated at the top. The popular restiveness over the war found public expression only after Mikhail S. Gorbachev came into office and decided to get out.

For each of the great powers, it was the first defeat. Each faced humiliation by a weaker but more committed indigenous force using weapons supplied by the other power. Each found its vast nuclear arsenal too terrible to be of any use. Because of the risk of a direct clash with the opposing superpower, each found it impossible to invade the sanctuary of the enemy: Pakistan, which harbored and supplied the Afghan guerrillas, and North Vietnam.

Yet the Soviet withdrawal seems more remarkable than the American, precisely because of the authoritarian Soviet political system, the proximity of Afghanistan to the Soviet Union and the Russian tradition of contiguous expansionism. It is a fundamental reversal of historic trends.

America emerged from its debacle saying, "No more Vietnams." But that kind of slogan is more difficult for the Soviet Union, unless it abandons its compulsion to control Eastern Europe. The Afghanistan experience may reinforce Mr. Gorbachev's obvious inclination to defuse the East-West component of regional conflicts and should be met by a reciprocal mood in Washington.

It will be important to see what kind of monument the Russians build. □