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The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked (A Brookings Classic)

Leslie H. Gelb

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"If a historian were allowed but one book on the American involvement in Vietnam, this would be it." *Foreign Affairs* When first published in 1979, four years after the end of one of the most divisive conflicts in the United States, *The Irony of Vietnam* raised eyebrows. Most students of the war argued that the United States had "stumbled into a quagmire in Vietnam through hubris and miscalculation," as the *New York Times*'s Fox Butterfield put it. But the perspective of time and the opening of documentary sources, including the Pentagon Papers, had allowed Gelb and Betts to probe deep into the decisionmaking leading to escalation of military action in Vietnam. The failure of Vietnam could be laid at the door of American foreign policy, they said, but the decisions that led to the failure were made by presidents aware of the risks, clear about their aims, knowledgeable about the weaknesses of their allies, and under no illusion about the outcome.

The book offers a picture of a steely resolve in government circles that, while useful in creating consensus, did not allow for alternative perspectives. In the years since its publication, *The Irony of Vietnam* has come to be considered the seminal work on the Vietnam War.

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