



## Episode 1,117: Was the Vietnam War “Winnable”?

Guest: Gareth Porter

**WOODS:** I thought I'd have you on because I wanted to address a claim that a friend of mine made on a recent episode, and we didn't plumb the depths of it really because we were covering so many topics, and I thought I would ask you because of your knowledge – you've written on Vietnam extensively. And it's this primary claim – and we hear it a lot. We hear it even to this day, and we heard it at the time – that there was no reason for South Vietnam to have fallen to communism, that if the U.S. had been permitted, the regime had been permitted to keep up the bombing, this collapse would not have happened, and so this is entirely avoidable, and that it's a myth that the war was unwinnable. It was unwinnable because we put shackles on ourselves and particularly at the end when, in a defeatist way, we just threw up our hands and abandoned our South Vietnamese allies.

Now, we've heard this many times over the years. I think it might be a good idea, though, to start a little bit earlier. Instead of going right to 1975, what about this claim that in general – not just in 1975, but in general, the war was unwinnable? How could the war truly be unwinnable when you have a power of the size and scope of the U.S. involved and just the sheer tonnage of bombs that could be dropped? Why would that not be winnable?

**PORTER:** Well, of course it depends on what you mean by winnable, Tom. The United States in theory could have remained in Vietnam forever. That's a theoretical possibility. And you're right that the United States could in theory have continued to drop so much tonnage of bombs as to make it impossible for any Vietnamese, whether Viet Cong or North Vietnamese resistance to make any headway. And that is a fact, it seems to me, that is a bit similar to that pigs could fly if they had wings, because there are so many ways in which that theoretical possibility was never a realistic possibility. There are so many reasons why that is the case. So I think that's really the starting point that we have to establish as a way of getting into this issue.

**WOODS:** All right, because I suppose it's true that if we defined victory as absolute devastation or something like that, obviously you could just drop nuclear missiles or whatever you want to do, but the question is: given what the U.S.'s goals were, was there something that was fundamentally impossible to reach about them? That is to say, what the U.S. says it wants to do is prevent communism from spreading to the South. Is there something about that that's just inherently not doable?

**PORTER:** Yeah, there's a lot about that that is inherently undoable. It starts with the fact that the war itself originates in an effort by the United States to put together a government in the South that had no legitimacy in 1954. It was a government that did not have its own

indigenous roots, but was the result of the defeat of the French colonial enterprise in Vietnam by the Viet Minh, the communist-led nationalist movement in Vietnam. And as a result of that defeat, the United States and the French get together and say, okay, we'll put in Ngo Dinh Diem as the leader of a rump regime in the South.

And of course the Geneva agreement – to get into a little bit of necessary history here, the Geneva agreement which ended the war between the French and the Viet Minh, called for a united Vietnam within two years through national elections. And the Eisenhower administration, what hardly anyone is really aware of, is that the Eisenhower administration was ready to support those national elections throughout Vietnam despite the fact that they knew the communists would win those elections. It was generally conceded that the communists would win those elections. Until the very last moment, practically, when basically John Foster Dulles was convinced to obstruct them, to get Eisenhower to refuse to go along with it.

In my book about the U.S. entrance into war in Vietnam, *Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam*, I document that fact that basically John Foster Dulles had deceived Eisenhower by suggesting that, well, it's not a good time now to promulgate this public policy of support for all Vietnam elections once and for all, because the British and French have not told us what their position is. Well, that was a lie. It simply wasn't true. And so he was trying to get Eisenhower – and he succeeded in doing this, to get Eisenhower to put off the decision. And that's what happened. The decision – then Eisenhower got distracted, apparently, and the decision was never again revisited.

And the United States did use its dominance, its dominant nuclear power and conventional power to intimidate Russia and China so that the United States could essentially bring about a situation where there were no all-Vietnam elections. And that's how the Diem regime was able to survive, because of the U.S. military ability to prevent any interference in its plan to set up a separate regime in the South.

But my point is simply that it had no indigenous roots. Yes, they brought in hundreds of thousands of North Vietnamese Catholics into the South, and that basically was the political base of the Diem regime. And then he went into the South Vietnamese villages and allied himself with the landowners who had lost their land during the Viet Minh War as part of the political-military conflict there, but who had of course no support from the people in the villages themselves. And so from that point of view, there was a very clear-cut situation of no real support for this regime. And that would be the basic point that I would begin with to address this question of whether that war was winnable.

Over the years, yes, it's true that the U.S. threw so much money into South Vietnam that it stabilized the regime in the sense that there was no immediate threat of overthrow from the communists, and the military was built up to some extent. But when the communists decided to make the move against the regime in retaliation for the killing of thousands of former Viet Minh by the Diem regime, that regime was very close to collapse. And that was why the United States had to intervene militarily in 1964-65, particularly in '65, but began of course with the threat to bomb North Vietnam as a way of trying to prevent an intervention by communist forces from the North to frustrate the U.S. plan to try to stabilize the regime. So that is sort of the next phase of this process by which the United States tried to – what I would say is that they tried to bring about a situation which really wasn't feasible, which was

to stabilize a regime that did not have a modicum of support necessary to stand without the United States constantly occupying the country.

**WOODS:** So in other words, it's not so much a question of the relative merits of the two regimes, North and South, that we might look at from a distance and with a clipboard, but rather what people who lived in these places thought. And if in the South they believed that an illegitimate regime had been imposed on them, then that's going to make it very, very difficult for any cause associated with that regime to prevail.

Yet, there's still this part of me that feels like after we saw what – it turned out not to be all sunshine and lollipops after the communist victory in South Vietnam, and Nixon in his book that he wrote about it years later, *No More Vietnams* – I think he wrote that in the mid '80s – he took almost a delight in writing that, yes, it's true that of course South Vietnam had had an authoritarian regime, but then after that regime was removed, you had whatever freedom of speech had existed, whatever freedom of the press – you had several different media channels, television channels and so on – all these things were taken away. You went from having at least a few outlets to having one official outlet in area after area of civil society.

So given that we kind of know how it turns out, we know that it's actually not really sunshine and lollipops after all – I guess I'm getting onto a different question, but that's how Norman Podhoretz defended the war in his book *Why We Were in Vietnam*. He says, look, this is how it actually wound up turning out, not according to the instruction manuals of how communism is supposed to be and it's just looking out for the common man, but in practice, it really turned out to be a nightmare when it comes to individual rights. So does that not color at least our view of the justice of the war as opposed to the winnability? I guess that was a very – that may have been the most convoluted little talk I've given in the whole history of this podcast. That's a real record for me.

But I guess that's where I was winding up. In terms of evaluating the justice of it, I know that the neoconservative point of view always is: our intentions are good. We want to bring about improvement in these people's lives. We want to bring about better regimes for them. So yeah, maybe where I'm going with this is: so what about democracy? Maybe people are stupid. Maybe they voluntarily enslave themselves. We're going to save them anyway.

**PORTER:** No, no, I don't think it's a question of people voluntarily enslaving themselves, but it is a question of the process of historical change which goes through – just to go back to my original point, it goes back to French colonialism. The United States originally intervened in the Vietnam conflict when the French were still trying to reestablish their full control over Vietnam. And that of course had no legitimacy with regard to Vietnamese, whether they were staunch supporters of socialism or whether they were the exact opposite, as many Vietnamese individuals were of course, during and after French colonialism.

So you have to take a realistic view of how things can change from a brutal colonial regime which gave very little by way of any rights to the Vietnamese, and then essentially only to a tiny minority of those who spoke French and were landowners and so forth, and going from that situation to a situation of liberal democracy. You can't just go from one to the other. And the communist movement in Vietnam presented itself as the only way to liberate Vietnam from the French, and so you had to go through a phase of history in which the communists were going to be the dominant political force in Vietnamese society.

So then obviously what you've just articulated, Tom, is the rationale for every U.S. war, isn't it?

**WOODS:** Right.

**PORTER:** I mean, in the end. They talk about weapons of mass destruction and so on and so forth, but in the end, it's always justified by the fact that we stand for liberal democracy and they don't. And that obviously is true, but it simply does not deal with the realities of the situation. It's a theory that doesn't deal with the costs, the social human costs of going to war. And those costs in the case of Vietnam were so enormous. The costs in terms of Vietnamese civilians killed was certainly in the millions, in counting both the period of the war when the French were still there and the period of the war when the Americans were fighting there. And that is a cost that you simply cannot justify what the United States was trying to do given that kind of human cost, in my view.

**WOODS:** All right, we'll continue this discussion on Vietnam after we thank our sponsor.

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All right, Gareth, you must be familiar of course with Max Boot?

**PORTER:** Yes, of course.

**WOODS:** It rings a bell? Yeah, it's a scourge of both of us, no doubt, but he's out with a new book and it's called *The Road Not Taken*, and it's about a CIA operative named Edward Lansdale. It's quite a lengthy book. And here again is an attempt to say, if only we had done thus and so, we could have won the war. If only we had listened to this guy – and there's something that kind of became legendary about this guy later on for – I don't know if we want to call them dead-enders or whatever, people who look back and say we could have won if we had done this sort of thing. And what he's claiming is that we just needed to, if you can believe this is seriously being proposed after the experience we've had since, winning hearts and minds. If we had tried harder to win hearts and minds, we could have won this thing. That's really what that boils down to. Are you familiar with this Edward Lansdale thesis, and what do you make of it?

**PORTER:** Of course, yes, I'm very familiar with it, having basically been a specialist on Vietnam for well over two decades and writing my dissertation on the period from the end of French colonialism to the Diem regime. And I've also read Boot's book, so I'm very familiar with what he argues in that book. And I would suggest to you that, in fact if you read the book through, what he argues is very much short of saying that if only Lansdale had been listened to the United States could have prevailed in Vietnam. I think he actually does not say anything even close to that. If you read that book all the way through, what you find is that he actually concedes that Lansdale really never had a chance to do anything.

He was of course originally in North Vietnam as a CIA operative, basically trying to sabotage the North Vietnamese regime just as it was getting started after the war and at the same time moving hundreds of thousands of mainly Catholics, almost entirely Catholics from the North to the South, and carrying out propaganda operations more than anything else. And then when he got to the South, he was in charge of the CIA's effort to try to basically

sabotage the newly ensconced Viet Minh regime there. And he did a few things in that regard, but that was really all he ever did until the United States intervened in the big war, and it's that period that is primarily covered by this book.

And what one gets from reading Max Boot, surprisingly, to me at least, is that he really doesn't try to maintain that history would have been different if only people had listened to Lansdale in the 1960s, because he concedes it was really too late. The big war that started in 1965 made it impossible for Lansdale to do what he wanted to do or what he thought he could do, which was to use — you know, it's not clear exactly what Lansdale was going to do. I mean, this is one of the things that Boot admits, that there's no clear idea that Lansdale ever really put forward. It was always very vague what he wanted to do. But he makes it clear that the war that the United States did fight in South Vietnam was not compatible with the idea that Lansdale was going to be the savior of Vietnam or of South Vietnam through some kind of alternative strategy, because the big war simply drowned out anything that Lansdale could have possibly done.

**WOODS:** To what extent is what Lansdale recommended similar to what was tried in Afghanistan, the COIN strategy, counterinsurgency, where we're going to try to not just bomb everybody but we're going to try to get to the root causes of terrorism and see if we can win over hearts and minds? Didn't they try that strategy? Because at the end of Boot's book, he talks about Lansdalism for the 21st century. He's not letting this thing go.

**PORTER:** I mean, the fact is that Lansdale had his opportunity in 1954-55 when he was very close to Ngo Dinh Diem and there was peace, and that's when a Lansdale strategy in theory could have and should have taken the stage and carried out a wide-ranging set of reforms or whatever that would have changed the history of Vietnam. The fact is, of course, that Diem was somebody who simply could not have carried out the kind of reforms that theoretically Lansdale may have had in mind. He was somebody who was from a very different era who did not believe in individual freedoms. He did not believe in any of the things that Lansdale believed in. His approach was heavy-handed. It was based on the belief that — I'm talking now about Diem. It was based on the belief that there was an elite that should govern in Vietnam and that the rest of the people were subject to his wisdom. So my key point here is that there was never any real chance to do what Lansdale had in mind. If there was, it was when he was very close to Diem, but it didn't happen because Diem was simply not capable of listening to him and didn't listen to him.

**WOODS:** All right, then let's place ourselves in 1975 as the spring offensive gets going. I guess it got started in the last month of '74, but anyway, this is really the beginning of the end for the South Vietnamese regime. And I remember again years and years — I was in high school, and over the summer I read Nixon's book on Vietnam because I felt like I should get both sides, and I thought: who better to give me the official side than the guy who spent all that time waging it? So I read that, and again, it was his view that if the Democrats hadn't basically shut off all possible angles for U.S. support to defend South Vietnam, we could have stopped this complete takeover. What is your view of that claim?

**PORTER:** Well, first of all, you have to realize that there was a change of government in the United States because of Richard Nixon's failure as a leader. He was replaced in August of 1974, right? August '74 by Gerald Ford. And Ford was not committed to a continued war in Vietnam for an indefinite period of time like Nixon had been. Nixon had a personal stake in this for obvious reasons that Ford did not have. And so the idea that Gerald Ford was going to

carry on a war such as Nixon was prepared to do is simply not realistic at all. I mean, that's the first point that I would make about this. Ford may have made some noises that this is a terrible shame and so forth, but he had no intention of continuing a war indefinitely for all kinds of reasons.

It was a national nightmare and public opinion had turned against this war. It didn't have any public support anymore. It had no support in Congress anymore. I remember because I was then co-director of the Indochina Resource Center, which was an antiwar organization in Washington, D.C., and I was working with two members of the Senate on an end-the-war amendment, which would cut off all funds completely for anything that had to do with U.S. continued combat in Vietnam. And that idea was really catching hold. Every day, I was getting more members of the Senate to sign up as cosponsors of this end-the-war amendment, but before I was able to complete the job, the North Vietnamese had sent their troops into the South and the last phase of the war began.

But my point here is simply that politically, the situation had changed dramatically in the final year of the war. There was no stomach on the part of the American people or of Congress for continuing this war, and so those people who were still arguing that all it took was yet another infusion of bombs, of American bombs or of American money into the situation I think just really had it all wrong.

**WOODS:** All right, but most of that answer had to do with a lack of political will and how unrealistic it was to expect the U.S. to intervene in any significant —

**PORTER:** That's true.

**WOODS:** And of course that's right. So in other words, we're dealing entirely in hypotheticals here. But let's imagine we did have the political will to do it. I think that's the nature of the critique, that unfortunately Americans had allowed themselves to get ground down by the war and to miss the central point, which is that we're saving these folks from communism. It's totally avoidable. We just need to get in there for one last campaign. I want to know from a military point of view: is there anything implausible about that plan?

**PORTER:** Look, I mean, if you have the money and the political will and the goods to continue a war, as in this case, you can do it forever. Sure. So what does that prove? It doesn't prove anything, that that's theoretically feasible to continue a war forever as long as there's political support for it and the United States has the money and the bombs to do it. But what does that prove? I don't know what it proves?

**WOODS:** Well, I've heard it said that it wasn't the North Vietnamese forces were just absolutely overwhelming so it was completely inconceivable that they could have been held off. They could have been held off if we had taken that one last stand. Now, is the question that it would have been way more than one last stand and we would have just revived the whole war? I just want to know: is it the case that we were really just one final push back away from protecting South Vietnam?

**PORTER:** Well, why would you say one final pushback? You mean that had the United States remained there for a few more months then the North Vietnamese would have backed off and said, "Okay, you win. We will never contest the legitimacy of that government in the

South again?" No, that's not going to happen. Of course that was not in the cards. This is a much more fundamental conflict than that would suggest, so I don't regard that as a realistic scenario for even discussion, worth discussing.

**WOODS:** All right, as we close then, would you mind just telling us a bit about your book *Perils of Dominance*, where it fits in the overall Vietnam literature?

**PORTER:** Yes, of course, thank you. The book *Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam* is an effort to essentially analyze the history of the Vietnam War from basically looking at the beginning of it now, not the entire course of the war, but the origins of the war from the point of view of the fact that there was a real imbalance of power between the United States and the communist parties to this that really determined the outlines of U.S. policy, because the U.S. was so tempted by its power advantage over the Chinese, the Soviets, and of course the North Vietnamese to intervene in the belief that, *What could go wrong, because we have so much more power in relation to our foes in Vietnam that we have a lot of leverage here? We should be using it.*

And that is the thesis that I track really from the first Indochina war into the U.S. intervention in 1965 and basically show that it was indeed the U.S. reliance on its overpowering advantage through the existence of the nuclear weapons that the United States had and the fact that the United States could intervene through conventional forces. The combination of those two things it was believed would give the United States this overwhelming advantage, and as it turned out, that simply meant the United States was in for a very long ride in Vietnam.

**WOODS:** Well, I'll be sure to link to that at [TomWoods.com/1117](http://TomWoods.com/1117). And then do you have a website or an archive of writing I should direct people to?

**PORTER:** Well, unfortunately I don't have a single archive. That's a problem that I should have addressed long ago and I haven't gotten around to doing it. But I have most of my articles for about ten years or so are on the IPS. It's on the Inter Press Service website, a full archive of all my articles for IPS, which ended about two or three years ago now. And since then, I have been publishing for a variety of websites, so people just have to track down one of my articles and they can go from there to find out where my articles are.

**WOODS:** And are you active on Twitter?

**PORTER:** Yes, I am. I have a Twitter account, for sure.

**WOODS:** So also if people follow you on Twitter, then they'll also get directed to what you've been doing. So that's of course [Twitter.com/GarethPorter](https://twitter.com/GarethPorter), so we'll link to that. All this stuff we'll link to at [TomWoods.com/1117](http://TomWoods.com/1117). Well, thanks very much for doing this. I think it was very helpful and illuminating. Appreciate it.

**PORTER:** Thanks so much, Tom, for having me.