8 Vietnam and the Debate on Intervention in Bosnia

Previous chapters have stressed the diminishing importance of Yugoslavia as a security interest with the end of the Cold War and the tendency of Americans to look inward to domestic issues and avoid foreign obligations and burdens. But the legacy of the Vietnam War also contributed to both the American public’s lack of enthusiasm for a Bosnian involvement and the foreign-policy elite’s perception that intervention in the former Yugoslavia would have the ‘tar baby’ effect of the Vietnam involvement. This thinking was particularly apparent during the Bush administration’s decisions on Bosnia. This chapter will explore the nature of that impact and the problems connected with the attempt to use the Vietnam analogy for analysis of the Bosnian War.

Atrocities and war crimes in the former Yugoslavia evoked memories of World War II, and explicit parallels were frequently drawn between the two, as at the dedication of the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC. Other analogies were sometimes cited the German experience in Yugoslavia in World War II, Lebanon and – by those who favored intervention – the Gulf War with its relatively easy ‘victory’ using high-tech weaponry. But none of these memories or images were salient enough to overcome the dominant images, fears, and influence on decision-making that stemmed from the Vietnam War and other foreign-policy disasters such as Lebanon. The American experience in Vietnam permeated the debate on Bosnia. The fearful images of Vietnam seemed more potent in the Bush administration and the Congress than with the Clinton people, which may partially explain why Clinton was always more inclined toward an American military response in Bosnia.

Vietnam was a defining, traumatic experience for a generation of Americans. That war had split the foreign-policy establishment, divided the country along ideological lines,
adversely affected the economy, and raised persistent suspicions about any proposals for undertaking military actions abroad.¹ Twenty-five years later, that war still provided the reference points for the foreign policy debate on Bosnia, while the Gulf-War experience proved to be only a momentary respite from the grip of the Vietnam experience on the country's foreign-policy perspective. With national security interests not clearly at stake, and humanitarian intervention dependent on the mobilization of divided or indifferent public opinion, the residual impact of Vietnam was sufficient to ensure no obvious foreign policy risks would be taken in Bosnia for over three years after the war began in the spring of 1992.

COMPARISON OF BOSNIAN, VIETNAMESE AND GULF WARS

There was little comparison of the Bosnian War with the Gulf War either by policy-makers or commentators. The Gulf War had barely ended when the Serbs invaded first Slovenia, and then Croatia. The Gulf war was widely seen, both among foreign-policy experts and the general public, as a clear-cut victory for the United States, a morale builder, and an experience that helped to lift the cloud of self-doubt that the Vietnam defeat had inflicted on the American people. But analogies drawn to the Bosnian War have most frequently referred to Vietnam. This was more indicative of the continued grip of the 'Vietnam syndrome' on the American consciousness than it was of the similarities or differences in the wars. It is interesting, therefore, to note that the Bosnian and Gulf Wars have a surprising number of parallels.

Table 8.1 compares the three wars. A yes answer is given for a favorable condition for intervention, and each yes is given one point. Favorable factors for prosecuting a war include a consensus in the US on the question of who the aggressor was in Bosnia, motivated allied troops (Bosnian government troops), and international opinion favorable to intervention.² Bosnia is judged to be partially a civil conflict, and the allied Bosnian government is considered to be legitimate. This is a controversial position, because of the Serbian rejection of the referendum on independence, but the government at the