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Vietnam Syndrome

Governor Reagan's speech before the Veterans of Foreign Wars makes him the first presidential nominee since the Vietnam war to declare unequivocally that America's expedition in Southeast Asia was, in truth, a noble cause. A lot of people are going to say this confirms their worst suspicions about the Governor, that he's a wild man. But our reaction is that it's about time. In reaching back to Vietnam to find the underpinnings for his foreign policy, Governor Reagan is, we believe, making an important point.

It's been a decade, after all, since America began looking for the "lesson of Vietnam." The lesson President Carter has been preaching is that Vietnam taught America the limitations of its power and that the task of America's President must be to accommodate policy to these limitations. What Governor Reagan seems to be saying is that just because you lost doesn't mean you were wrong. But that if you go into a fight you're not apt to win it, even if you're right, unless you're committed and prepared.

It's about time this point was made because every day millions of refugees from Indochina, and the deafening silence from those who remain in Vietnam and Cambodia, testify to the rightness in principle of America's campaign there. Elsewhere on the globe, the rights and freedoms of other millions are threatened by reactionary, militaristic forces similar to

those who now control most of Indochina—all flying the banner of glorious revolution, of course. We find it noteworthy that in replying to Governor Reagan's thrusts, the Carter camp hasn't addressed this fundamental point, but has steered the debate to all the subsidiary issues: the draft, the level of spending on veterans, budgets, Olympic boycotts, grain embargoes and the like.

Both sides are playing conventional politics on these narrow issues, of course. But in going back to America's biggest defeat and drawing what for too long has been the minority conclusion, Governor Reagan has reintroduced the great overriding issue—were we right or wrong? In rejecting the argument that America is "guilty" in Indochina, he is laying the groundwork for a debate that could prove to be more edifying now that wartime passions have cooled. It is by now quite clear that the philosophical foundations laid in the 1950s and early 1960s for what some then saw as the historic world role of the United States were too weak to withstand the kind of ideological counterattack the Vietnam war unleashed against us. We have learned a lot since about the true moral level of that counterattack. Whether Governor Reagan succeeds or not, he has had the nerve to open old wounds in an effort to develop a new philosophical basis and summon the sort of commitment he thinks America will need for the confrontations ahead.