



Fall | Winter 2017

OKLAHOMA

# HUMANITIES

Culture | Issues | Ideas



**VIETNAM**





ANN THOMPSON  
Executive Director

## Making a Difference

We're pleased to be addressing in this issue the important topic of the Vietnam War, the impact of which continues to resonate in today's society. We're hopeful that the content will help us remember, learn, and reflect, all fundamental goals of Oklahoma Humanities' mission.

This magazine is just one of the ways we bring humanities content to the general public. We administer several statewide programs with varying formats, but they all have one thing in common: they rely on the scholarship found in history, literature, philosophy, art history, jurisprudence, and ethics. Our grants program to other nonprofits may help fund programs like museum exhibits, lecture series, film festivals, oral history projects, websites, historical first-person portrayals, or teacher institutes. Each year our reading and discussion program, *Let's Talk About It, Oklahoma*, reaches twenty-five communities and up to six prisons. Our Smithsonian Institution traveling exhibit program, *Museum on Main Street*, will finish its 2017 five-city tour of Oklahoma later this fall. The common objective of these programs is that Oklahomans have the

opportunity to be lifelong learners and informed citizens.

Our Board of Trustees and staff embarked on a strategic planning process recently that includes an online survey to our stakeholders asking them to weigh in on the programs we currently provide. I invite you to go to the home page of our website to participate ([okhumanities.org](http://okhumanities.org)). In addition to evaluating our programs, we ask that you use your imagination on how we might expand our programming. Consider the needs of our state, those problems that sharing humanities content might help alleviate.

The concerns we have in areas of equality, education, poverty, health care, and justice can seem overwhelming. Our organization is just one of many trying to make a difference and the needs can sometimes seem insurmountable, but we have seen how our work has changed lives. Help us continue to make a difference by participating in our program survey, checking our online calendar and attending programs in your community, and donating. We appreciate your input and enthusiasm in helping to share the history of our human experience.

ON THE COVER: Soldier of the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, c. 1969, by Charles O. Haughey, who was drafted in 1967. After serving a few months as a U.S. Army combat patrol rifleman, a commander learned that Haughey had photography experience. Haughey was reassigned to photograph morale-boosting images for the Army and American newspapers, 1968-1969, and shot close to 2,000 images. Courtesy PBS



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## CONTENTS

### VIETNAM

FALL | WINTER 2017 | VOL. 10, NO. 2

7 DOCUMENTING THE VIETNAM WAR  
A conversation with Lynn Novick.  
Interview by Carla Walker

12 ORIGINS OF THE VIETNAM WAR  
A history of foreign intervention.  
By Mark Atwood Lawrence

15 PRIVATE DOUBTS, PUBLIC RESOLVE,  
AND PERSONAL AMBITIONS  
How Vietnam became America's war.  
By Fredrik Logevall

22 A DISCONNECTED DIALOGUE  
American military strategy, 1964-1968.  
By Gregory Daddis

28 TRIANGLE OF ALLIES  
Vietnam, China, and the Soviet Union.  
By Xiao-Bing Li

31 INFOGRAPHIC & TIMELINE  
Dates and facts.  
Assembled by Jason A. Higgins

36 DONUT DOLLIES, WACs, AND WAFCs  
Women's service in the war.  
By Heather Marie Stur

41 PROTESTING VIETNAM  
Student voices in a time of war.  
By Sarah Eppler Janda

46 ON TRUE WAR STORIES  
There's no such thing as a *good* war story.  
By Viet Thanh Nguyen

50 VIETNAM REDUX—  
RETRIEVING TRUTHS, REVISING WAR  
The pitfalls of American exceptionalism.  
By Christian G. Appy

56 TELLING STORIES, REMEMBERING WAR  
Making sense of war.  
By Mia Martini

60 THE VIETNAM VETERANS  
MEMORIAL AT 35  
By Gordon O. Taylor

### IN EVERY ISSUE

2 From the Executive Director  
4 Post: Mail | Social Media | Messages  
6 The Editor's Desk  
62 Noteworthy: 2016 Annual Report

President Lyndon B. Johnson listens to a tape sent by his son-in-law, Captain Charles Robb, who was serving in Vietnam, July 31, 1968. Photo by Jack Kightlinger, courtesy LBJ Library

Reader Feedback



Your Spring/Summer 2017 Poetry issue has gotten me thinking about some of the poems that are important to me. This one was in a New Year’s card that my grandfather sent to friends in 1935. The poem is by a good friend of my grandfather’s, a Western artist named Joe De Yong, who grew up in Dewey and spent ten years as Charlie Russell’s only student.

Memories ride out of the night /  
And dismount from the back of the  
wind— / Gather in groups in front of  
my house / When, silently opening  
the door, they troop in / Backward  
at first—then crowding up close  
/ With a touch of the hand and a  
smile / Some that I’ve missed for a  
day, week or month / —Some from  
the big After While, / Stirring my  
heart, as a stick does the fire, / Their  
faces picked out in light, / And I’m  
glad that this group numbers you  
old friend, / Among those I see here  
tonight. © Joe De Yong, 1935

Thank you for your wonderful magazines.  
—Bill Woodard, Bartlesville

SEND YOUR IDEAS, opinions, and suggestions.  
Email the editor, carla@okhumanities.org, or  
comment via Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram.

I cannot put down the Spring/Summer 2017 issue of *Oklahoma Humanities*. Thanks to all for the beauty this brings to my day. I will keep the Oklahoma poets section to read each spring.

—Judy Cawthon, Oklahoma City

The Spring/Summer 2017 *Oklahoma Humanities* magazine was fantastic. Poetry allows ideas to be expressed in extraordinary ways that I find appealing.

—Kyle Dahlem, via Facebook

2016 Readers' Survey Results

Readers tell us that *Oklahoma Humanities* magazine is making a big impact. An overwhelming number of those surveyed (97%) say they value the magazine as a forum for differing viewpoints. Readers share the content with others (88%) and feel better informed to engage in civic life (96%). Their written comments positively inspire us. Following are just a few. Read what others say about *Oklahoma Humanities*, then give us your feedback.

—Carla Walker, Editor

- ♦ “This is the smartest magazine I get. It’s beautiful visually and intellectually satisfying.”
- ♦ “I like the way each issue revolves around a specific theme.”
- ♦ “I know the writing is well reasoned. I believe the only agenda within the pages of *Oklahoma Humanities* is one of open thought on topics that require attention. It’s called credibility, and your journal has just that.”
- ♦ “I always learn something.”
- ♦ “I look forward to each issue because I use the articles as springboards for discussions. I am never disappointed in what I find within the pages of *Oklahoma Humanities*.”
- ♦ “The magazine features creative, well-written articles that focus on topics not covered by other Oklahoma publications. The photography and illustrations are works of art.” (cont.)

LET US HEAR FROM YOU. Participate in our 2017 survey, open for your responses October 1-31 at okhumanities.org.

- ♦ “I don’t always agree with what is in the magazine, but at least it makes me think about the things I disagree with. Sometimes I change my perspective or position.”

2017 Magazine Awards



2017 Great Plains Journalism Awards  
Finalist | Great Plains Magazine of  
the Year

2017 Society of Professional  
Journalists Awards  
Oklahoma Pro Chapter

1<sup>st</sup> Place | Best PR Publication  
It’s a Mystery | Winter 2016

1<sup>st</sup> Place | General Writing  
“Democracy, the Free Press,  
and the Meaning of TRIBE”  
Interview with Sebastian Junger  
By Carla Walker

1<sup>st</sup> Place | PR Publication Cover  
Democracy | Fall/Winter 2016

2<sup>nd</sup> Place | General Writing  
“The News Today: Seven  
Trends in Old and New Media”  
By Elaine Kamarck & Ashley Gabriele

2<sup>nd</sup> Place | PR Publication Cover  
It’s a Mystery | Winter 2016

CORRECTION: The caption for the image on page 17 of the Spring/Summer 2017 issue should read: *In From the Night Herd*, Frederic Remington, 1907, oil on canvas; gift of Albert K. Mitchell, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum. We deeply regret the error.



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*Oklahoma Humanities* magazine is an award-winning collection of culture, issues, and ideas—a rich mix of humanities scholarship, insightful narratives, informed opinions, and beautiful images, for a read that is smart, balanced, educational, and entertaining. Subscribe online: [okhumanities.org](http://okhumanities.org) or call (405) 235-0280.

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*Oklahoma Humanities* awards include twenty-six Oklahoma Society of Professional Journalists awards, including multiple first place honors for Best Writing, Best Cover, and Best PR Publication; five Great Plains Journalism awards, including firsts for best Magazine Feature Writing and best Magazine Page Design, and as a finalist for the 2017 Great Plains Magazine of the Year; three Central Oklahoma IABC Bronze Quill Awards; the State Historic Preservation Officer's Citation of Merit; and an Oklahoma Heritage Distinguished Editorial Award.

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## ONE BOOK AT A TIME

*Let's Talk About It, Oklahoma* (LTAIO), the beloved reading and discussion program from Oklahoma Humanities (OH), has been enriching communities and changing lives for 32 years. More than a book club, LTAIO programs are facilitated by humanities scholars who relate layers of meaning, enhancing the understanding and appreciation of the text.

Local host communities receive a grant from OH to bring in scholars, and books are borrowed from the OH library. The program is free to participants, who come together to discuss books chosen from 45 available themes, including history, civil rights, Native American culture, family relationships, and other topics that reflect the human experience.



LTAIO was created for libraries, but has been adapted for other venues, including veterans groups and substance abuse programs, and is now in five state prisons. According to the RAND Corporation, "Inmates who participate in any kind of educational program behind bars—from remedial math to vocational auto shop to college-level courses—are up to 43 percent less likely to reoffend and return to prison."

LTAIO is quickly becoming a coveted program among Oklahoma's prison population. Educational opportunities

that prepare inmates for the transition from incarceration to release and give them tools to reduce the likelihood of reoffending are limited. LTAIO offers usable skills, possibility, and hope. How? Reading and discussing literature can help us analyze complex circumstances, understand and empathize with other points of view, and communicate effectively—benefits that foster personal growth and employability.

"LTAIO outreach to incarcerated populations is especially innovative," says Aaron Mason of Northwestern Oklahoma State University, one of several scholars facilitating book discussions in Oklahoma prisons. "Inmates demonstrate a genuine interest in discussing

human existence and the complex connections between ethics and morals. By participating, they prove—especially to themselves—that they can think critically and possess the ability for self-improvement. I have been privileged to participate in this program and sincerely hope it will assist in their rehabilitation."

Generous support for LTAIO is provided by the Inasmuch Foundation, Kirkpatrick Family Fund, McCasland Foundation, Oklahoma City University—and donors like you. [okhumanities.org/donate](http://okhumanities.org/donate)

ABOVE: Inmates and staff at the North Fork Correctional Center in Sayre, Oklahoma, are participating in recently launched LTAIO reading and discussion programs in prisons. The group meets weekly to maintain reading comprehension. Scholar-facilitated discussions of each book in the series encourage inmates to think critically, form new perspectives, and effectively communicate their views—skills that promote employability upon release. Courtesy Oklahoma Department of Corrections

## The Editor's Desk

CARLA WALKER  
carla@okhumanities.org



Peace, color silkscreen poster  
by unknown artist, ca. 1970-  
1980. Library of Congress

*It's going to make you uncomfortable.* The opening remark in my interview with filmmaker Lynn Novick, at right, is an apt observation for this issue on the Vietnam War. The images and events described in these pages are raw and unsettling.

National memory of the Vietnam era is fraught with discord and distrust—about the price of war and whether our government was telling the truth about the necessity of military action in Southeast Asia. Anxieties were further fueled by the Cold War proliferation of nuclear weapons and the specter of communism—a social system that (Americans feared) united the Soviet Union and China, threatened democracy, and could detonate world destruction.

At the time the U.S. entered the conflict, Vietnam was at war with itself—a civil struggle for unification (led by North Vietnam) versus independence (sought by South Vietnam), complicated by insurgents (the Viet Cong) striving to overthrow the South Vietnamese government. For all these parties, the resentment of foreign occupation was deep and centuries long. Outside forces seeking to rule the Vietnamese people and profit from her resources included ancient China, imperial France, World War II-era Japan, post-WWII France (a second attempt at colonial rule, backed by the United States as military advisor), then full U.S. military intervention to protect South Vietnam from communist takeover. Bankrolling military actions were three superpowers—China and the Soviet Union backing North Vietnam, and the United States propping up a weak South Vietnamese government. The superpowers provided a super-supply of weapons, money, and aid that sustained hostilities and ensured a deadly stalemate.

Complicating the reading of this multi-layered story are the acronyms and alternate names of battling forces. To help you keep track, we include a timeline of events; a glossary of military terms, people, places, and forces; and an infographic illustrating the military investment of superpowers, troop levels, firepower, and resulting casualties and refugees.

It's easy to avoid talking about the Vietnam War. But if we look carefully, the mistakes we made then are eerily similar to ones we're debating today. There is insight to be gained—and historical interpretation continues to evolve. Facts kept secret by the Vietnamese, Chinese, and Russian governments have only recently become available to scholars. This issue includes some of that evolving scholarship, and the expertise represented is the most glittering in our publication history: respected authorities in their fields of study, two Pulitzer Prize-winning authors, and an Emmy-winning documentary filmmaker. A retired U.S. Army colonel who also served as Chief of the American History Division at the Military Academy at West Point lends insight on U.S. military strategy. Interspersed among articles are the first-person accounts of decorated veterans and a conscientious objector. Together these voices present a broad view of international history, multinational war, domestic politics, home front tensions, and cultural memory.

Planning for this issue began more than a year ago, when the premiere of *The Vietnam War*, the newest documentary from co-directors Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, was set for September 2017. We seized the opportunity to expand conversations among viewers, to be an enduring companion to the epic film production while also creating a stand-alone resource that we hope will inspire inquiry in classrooms, libraries, discussion groups, and among families and friends across the country. To facilitate the task, we extended our page count—our heftiest issue ever—to present a history told in moving words and images.

Lynn Novick recently noted that film is a way to “curate a conversation that can't happen in real life.” The observation resonates with us, because it's what we try to do with each issue of *Oklahoma Humanities* magazine. Join us in a national conversation, one about men and women, war and protest, history and memory, fact and fiction, courage and sacrifice.





# DOCUMENTING THE VIETNAM WAR

A Conversation with Lynn Novick

INTERVIEW BY CARLA WALKER



Detail, program poster, *The Vietnam War*, a film by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick. Interview images courtesy PBS

“It’s going to make you uncomfortable.”

Lynn Novick is co-director, co-producer, and long-time creative collaborator with filmmaker Ken Burns. *The Vietnam War* is the newest of their award-winning documentaries, a 10-part, 18-hour odyssey into the multilayered conflict Americans know as “Vietnam.”

“It’s going to make you uncomfortable,” says Novick, “but hopefully, after watching the series, you’ll have a deeper understanding of a difficult, traumatic time in history.”

In early 1960s Vietnam, hostilities had deep roots, pitting citizens against outside aggressors and internal power struggles. Third-party insurgents complicated the clash between a North Vietnamese mandate for communist reunification and the South Vietnamese desire to remain an independent state. Add to that rivalry, military intervention from the United States, China, and the Soviet Union and the scope of a documentary on the Vietnam War becomes vast, taking a decade to complete. Novick made three trips to Vietnam during filming, staying an average of three weeks per visit to interview veterans and Vietnamese civilians whose lives were forever changed by what they call “the American War.”

In the United States, anti-communism protectionists faced opposition from antiwar protesters and conscientious objectors, each sector acting on heartfelt patriotism. An anti-establishment counterculture coincided with movements for civil rights and women’s equality—tensions that were reflected in an explosion of music, film, poetry, visual art, and changing views on sexuality, public policy, and environmentalism. The Novick-Burns documentary endeavors to capture all these narratives, showing that, for Americans, “Vietnam” was more than a war in far off Southeast Asia—it was an era of change.

*The Vietnam War* premieres September 17 on PBS and includes interviews with approximately 100 witnesses—for and against the war—as well as scholar commentary on the people and events that shaped world history and American culture. In the following conversation, Novick discusses the diverse perspectives captured in the film and the crew’s discoveries along the way, insight that is sure to enhance your appreciation of this unforgettable documentary.





North Vietnamese Army soldiers during Operation Lam Son 719, Laos 1971. Nguyen Dinh Uu, Doug Niven



A soldier burning down a hut in My Lai village. Photo by Ron Haberle. National Archives



Mass funeral for S. Vietnamese killed by Viet Cong during Tet Offensive, Oct. 1969. Bettmann, Getty Images



Young N. Vietnamese join the Youth Shock Brigades Against the Americans for National Salvation. Vietnam News Agency



Vietnamese Rangers rush children to a waiting helicopter northwest of Saigon, April 1974. Associated Press, The Horst Faas Estate, Michael Ebert, Magdeburg, Germany



Girl killed in the May Offensive (Mini-Tet), Saigon, 1968. Philip Jones Griffith, Magnum Photos



South Vietnamese soldier comforts wounded comrade near Saigon, Aug. 5, 1963. Horst Faas, Associated Press



Suspected Viet Cong soldier carrying a Russian-made rifle, awaiting interrogation, Aug. 25, 1965. Associated Press



Vietnamese farmer detained for questioning, 1967. Philip Jones Griffiths, Magnum Photos



Marines carrying their wounded during firefight near the DMZ, 1966. Larry Burrows, Getty Images



# DOCUMENTING THE VIETNAM WAR

**CARLA WALKER:** Lynn, thank you for this opportunity to talk about this extraordinary documentary. The press preview was only a fraction of the film, but very impressive. There is so much to the story, it is no wonder that it took ten years to put together. Do you have a personal connection to the war? Do you recall it in your childhood?

**LYNN NOVICK:** Yes. I am in my 50s, Ken Burns is in his mid-60s, Sara Botstein our producer is in her mid-40s, and Jeff Ward our writer is in his mid-70s. So we each represent a different decade in age and therefore a different perspective about the war.

As I was growing up it was something that my parents talked about a lot and were very upset about. I don't remember a time when the Vietnam War wasn't happening in my childhood. I certainly did not understand why it was happening, why we were there. And then it ended and we stopped talking about it. It was like it never happened, it just went away. That seemed very strange to me.

I came to understand that it's the most important event in American history since the Second World War, but also one of the least well understood. It's been an obsession for me for most of my adult life, trying to make sense of it, understand what happened, why it was so divisive, and why it remains divisive to this day.

**What are some of the particulars of that divisiveness that you look at in the film?**

We try to tell the story of the war in chronological order, from the origins of the French conquest of Indochina in 1858 up until today. We didn't set out to investigate the divisive aspects of the war, but rather to find out what happened, to see it from as many different perspectives as we possibly could, both American perspectives and

Vietnamese perspectives. We tried to look at this from every possible angle to understand why people disagree about it so vehemently. We were surprised to discover that the war remains as unsettled and divisive among Vietnamese as it is for Americans.

**Do the Vietnamese talk about it?**

No, in much the same way that we don't talk about it. In the beginning of the film, a North Vietnamese veteran says, "We don't talk about the war. We veterans don't like to talk about it." And then he goes on to say that he thinks it's a waste of time to argue about who won and who lost because the bigger question is that war is terrible. That, to us, elevates a different kind of conversation about the effects of war on people. It's a very sensitive subject among Vietnamese, for a variety of reasons that we learned about in making the film.

**Do they think about it as a civil war, within their country, and then Americans came along and interfered?**

That's a great question. Some people in Vietnam would say it's a civil war that tore families and the country apart. Some people would say it was a war to liberate their country from foreign domination. And some people would say it was a war of communists taking over an independent democratic country. There's no one Vietnamese perspective.

**How much time did you spend in Vietnam in the course of research and filming?**

I went to Vietnam three times, each time for about three weeks, over several years. It was an incredible privilege to go there and meet so many people. For every one you see on camera, we met many more. Sara Botstein and I led the effort to go to Vietnam and find people to interview to understand the war from

as many Vietnamese perspectives as possible. And the more we talked to people, the more we understood how complicated it is there.

For many people, there is tremendous pride that a small country managed to defeat this large and powerful country. And yet there's also an enormous amount of soul-searching about the true cost of the war: "It was important to unify the country, but did we get what we were promised? Was there any other way that it could have been accomplished? India achieved independence from Great Britain without a war. Was a war necessary? And was it just?" These are big questions that many people in Vietnam are asking.

**They have a different name for the war, don't they?**

Some people call it the American War, but there's a propagandistic name—the Resistance War Against America. There are many people in Vietnam who think about it as one war that lasted thirty years, from 1945 to 1975, fighting the French and then fighting the Americans *and* fighting each other.

**As an American, I can't imagine living through generations of conflict and occupation. Liberation must have been so important to the Vietnamese.**

In our film we have a number of American veterans who make parallels between American independence from Great Britain, which was unconventional warfare at that time, not playing by the rules, being the weaker power trying to outlast the stronger power. That's essentially how the communist-led North Vietnamese and Viet Cong approached the war against us. It's interesting the number of American veterans that bring that up, hypothetically wondering:



Military police block antiwar demonstrators at the Pentagon, Oct. 26, 1967. *The Washington Post*, Getty Images



Civilians huddle together after an attack by South Vietnamese forces, Dong Xoai, June 1965. Horst Faas, Associated Press



Marines marching in Da Nang, March 15, 1965. Associated Press



173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Brigade paratrooper after an early morning firefight, July 14, 1966. John Nance, Associated Press

How much was it like our quest for independence?

One of the things that Ken and I come to, again and again, is that the Vietnam War raises many, many questions—and a lot of them are unanswerable. We ask the questions with more information and more perspective, and hope to engage the country in a civil discourse about the questions that the war raises.

**In one of the interviews I read, you remarked that working on the film was a constant exercise in compassion. Would you talk about that?**

Yes, one of the great privileges of this film for me was conducting most of the interviews—and I know Ken feels the same way, and Sara Botstein, who also did a number of interviews. We're asking people to share some of the most difficult

memories and revealing moments of their lives. Sometimes it's easier to talk about these things with someone you don't know, because it's difficult to churn up these feelings and describe things that are so distressing. For us, to sit down with people who have painful stories to tell and just create a space where they feel it's okay—you're not going to judge, you're just going to give them your full attention and listen with an open mind and an open heart, to have compassion for them no matter who they are or what happened to them—was essential to getting this story. That was our central motivation, that we would tell this enormously painful tragedy through the eyes of the people who lived through it. And, yeah, you have to have compassion to do that.

**In your interviews with Vietnamese and American veterans, did you get a sense of whether there is a path to reconciliation?**

This is a great question. One of the many things that Ken and I learned in the course of putting this film together is that it's impossible to have true reconciliation unless you have moved toward understanding the truth first. There are many truths in something as complicated and messy as the Vietnam War, but one of the truths is there is an enormous amount of suffering on all sides.

If we as Americans can appreciate and accept that there's humanity and inhumanity in us, that there's humanity and inhumanity on all sides, *that*, I think, is a truth of this war that is important. A number of American veterans we've talked to have gone back to Vietnam and



# DOCUMENTING THE VIETNAM WAR

tried to meet with North Vietnamese soldiers or Viet Cong guerrillas and connect with them on a human level. They have found some peace in that and have been able to let go of some of the weight, the psychic weight they've been carrying. There is a possibility of reconciliation on a basic human level, one to one.

The American government and the Vietnam government have normalized relations. The real reconciliation, the real work that needs to happen is among Americans and among Vietnamese. That has not happened, either there or here. The rancor and bitterness and resentment over the war and whose fault it was, and the toll it took on our civil society, we're still fighting that war in some ways. I don't think we're very close to reconciliation at all.

**I found sections of the film difficult to watch. I'll admit to crying.**

If you don't cry when you're thinking about this story, you don't have a heart. It's a very painful story. If we want to find reconciliation and peace, we have to give vent, allow those feelings, whatever they might be—sadness, regret, remorse. It's impossible to think about it without crying.

It's also impossible to think about it without respect for the heroism and bravery and self-sacrifice of our soldiers who went so far above and beyond in a cause that was in dispute. I cannot even imagine how difficult that was, especially later, as the war became more unpopular and the wreckage of the war was called into question. Those soldiers still went to Vietnam and fought and died and sacrificed for each other and we have to remember that.

**Did the historical research of the era give you a sense of why Americans felt the need to protect the world against communism? Was it just our fear of "the other"?**

No, there was a legitimate and very real fear. Communism seemed to be gaining strength in the world after World War II. The Soviet Union had taken over a large swath of Europe, a lot of territory the Germans had previously conquered, and they weren't giving it up. They were basically reshaping those countries to be satellites. And in Asia, China became a communist country and was trying to foment revolution in other places. There was a real concern that democracies were under threat.

Layered on top of that, you have the nuclear age: China has nuclear weapons, Russia has nuclear weapons, and we have nuclear weapons. Three superpowers have the fate of the world in their hands. These are simultaneous, parallel, interconnected threats our leaders were consciously and thoughtfully trying to balance—how to have stability in the world, how to have safety in the nuclear age. The stakes in Vietnam seemed very high.

We were trying to avoid nuclear war by going to war in Vietnam. It was a way, in the 50s and early 60s, of showing the communists that we meant business and were not to be trifled with. I'm grossly oversimplifying a very complex geopolitical strategy, but we do try in the film to explain the context of the war and how it started. You see, over the course of ten episodes and eighteen hours, the rationale and the perceived necessity. The justification for the war evolves over time and that's partly why it gets so unpopular, because the reasons why we're there evolve.

**I want to ask you about the organization that supports our common work, the National Endowment for the Humanities. NEH supports much of the programming that we do in Oklahoma, and I know it has awarded grants to many of your films. Tell us about the role of those federal dollars in a project like your film on the Vietnam War.**

It is a great privilege to work with the Endowment. The process of creating the grant proposal holds our feet to the fire, elevates our own discourse as we try to explain to ourselves, before we can explain to the Endowment: Why are we making this film? What is its purpose? How can it advance our shared understanding of the humanities?

And every project is different. Baseball, jazz, the Second World War, prohibition, each film has its own connections to the humanities. We would employ scholars to help us on our films whether we had an NEH grant or not; but it's been incredibly collaborative to work with the Endowment over the years. They've introduced us to many, many scholars who've been incredibly helpful and thoughtful. It has been really instructive to understand the care and thought that goes into choosing grant recipients and then working with them to develop projects so they will fulfill the mandate of the Endowment. To me, the National Endowment for the Humanities represents the best of scholarship. Having their support holds us to a high standard and we're very grateful for that.

**Thank you for your insight, Lynn, and for taking on this project to help us understand the Vietnam War. We're going to learn so much from it.**

LYNN NOVICK is an Emmy and Peabody Award-winning documentary filmmaker with 30 years' experience in producing and directing documentary films about American history and culture—some of the most acclaimed to air on PBS, including: *Prohibition*, *Baseball*, *Jazz*, and *The War*, a 15-hour exploration of World War II. *The Vietnam War* is directed by Lynn Novick and Ken Burns, co-produced by Novick, Burns, and Sarah Botstein, and written by Geoffrey C. Ward.



# ORIGINS OF THE VIETNAM WAR

Foreign intervention has a long history in Vietnam.

MARK ATWOOD LAWRENCE

**W**hen did the Vietnam War begin? For many Americans, the obvious answer is 1965. That was the year when U.S. warplanes started bombing North Vietnam and the first contingents of American combat troops began fighting and dying in the South. Before long, thousands of Americans were patrolling the Vietnamese countryside, drawing fire, and calling in airstrikes—the distinctive patterns of the U.S. war in Vietnam.

Other reasonable answers might reach a little further back. We might say 1950, when the Truman administration made the first commitments of American arms and money to defeat the communist-led insurgency in Vietnam. Or perhaps 1954, when President Dwight D. Eisenhower threw American support behind South Vietnam, the anti-communist half of Vietnam that the United States would struggle to defend for more than two decades. Still another answer might be 1961, when John F. Kennedy sent thousands of U.S. military personnel to help train beleaguered South Vietnamese forces, a key crossover point when Americans took on major roles in an expanding conflict.

To pinpoint the war's origins in any of these ways, though, is to view history through a distinctly American lens. True, we may learn something of value about the U.S. experience by locating the start

of war in the 1950s or 60s. But we risk missing the deeper sources of instability and conflict in Vietnam. In fact, the origins of the Vietnam War extend backward to eras long before the United States exerted power internationally or even existed as a nation.

This distant history has come into sharper focus in recent years as historians have sought to broaden our understanding of a war that may have been America's greatest foreign-policy disaster but was also other things to other peoples. Geographically, they have delved into the experiences of Vietnam itself—both North and South—as well as China, the Soviet Union, France, and other nations that helped shape events in Southeast Asia. Chronologically, they have dug into the Vietnamese past to expose, more fully than ever before, the roots of conflict that became a focal point of global politics in the middle of the twentieth century.

Some historians locate the seeds of war as far back as 111 B.C., when China conquered the “Viet” ethnic group concentrated in the northern part of modern-day Vietnam. During the ensuing millennium of Chinese domination, the Vietnamese developed a complex relationship with their overlords. On one hand, Chinese religion, social organization, art, and music left deep imprints on Vietnamese culture. On the

*Jina Buddha Amitabha*  
sculpture, Vietnam, ca.  
late 18<sup>th</sup> century. LACMA





other hand, the Vietnamese repeatedly launched armed rebellions against Chinese control, the opening rounds of a centuries-long struggle to rid Vietnam of foreign interference. In 39 A.D., two sisters, Trung Trac and Trung Nhi, led the most famous insurrection of all, defeating a superior Chinese force and securing Vietnamese independence. When China quickly restored its suzerainty, the sisters drowned themselves in despair, securing their places in the pantheon of Vietnam's heroes.

Just how significant a role such distant events played in the trajectory of Vietnamese history is, unsurprisingly, a matter of dispute. Communist propagandists eager to portray modern Vietnam as the culmination of a timeless urge for national unity and independence draw a relatively straight line from the Trung Sisters to Ho Chi Minh and other

revolutionary leaders in the twentieth century. Most historians, though, see a more circuitous path across the centuries. They acknowledge early expressions of Vietnamese nationalism but also highlight long periods of factionalism, regionalism, and even civil war—divisiveness that did at least as much as foreign interference to obstruct the creation of a robust Vietnam. Only in 1802, when the House of Nguyen vanquished its rivals and installed the Emperor Gia Long, did something resembling the modern nation of Vietnam come into existence.

Scholars agree much more readily about the landmark importance of the next major development in Vietnamese history: French colonialism. Sometimes by force of arms, sometimes through negotiation, France gradually extended its control over Vietnam, along with neighboring Cambodia and Laos, during the

last decades of the nineteenth century and the first years of the twentieth. For the French, colonial rule promised vast riches, enhanced prestige on the world stage, and the chance to save souls and spread “civilization.” For most Vietnamese, however, the effects were crushing. More than any other factor, the imposition of Western rule fueled social and economic tensions that lay at the heart of Vietnam's twentieth-century upheavals.

To one small but influential group of Vietnamese—the professionals, intellectuals, teachers, and bureaucrats who comprised the nation's elite—colonial conquest did most of its damage in the political realm. The subjugation of Vietnam by confident, technologically advanced Europeans stirred painful questions about traditional Vietnamese society. “Why are we so cowardly and



Night Revels by anonymous Song Dynasty artist, 12<sup>th</sup> century; handscroll, ink and colors on silk. Palace Museum, China / [PD] Wikimedia Commons

weak-hearted?” asked nationalist leader Phan Boi Chau in a 1907 manifesto decrying his nation’s passivity in the face of French power. The fecklessness of Vietnamese governing institutions, religion, and cultural practices led many elites, often educated in French schools, to begin searching for ways to revitalize Vietnamese society and to regain their independence.

For the vast majority of Vietnamese, though, the most devastating effects of colonialism were economic. The old system of subsistence rice-farming, though hardly egalitarian, had provided most peasants a tolerable existence by assuring access to small plots of land. The new economic system imposed by France emphasized efficiency, profitability, and production of rice and rubber for the global market—goals achieved through concentrating land ownership in the hands of a few technologically advanced producers. Economic conversion forced huge numbers of Vietnamese peasants to become tenant farmers and wage laborers. A vicious cycle of indebtedness, vulnerability, and desperation took hold in much of the Indochinese countryside.

Cascading discontent, combined with delegitimation of traditional Vietnamese society, created fertile ground for an explosion of anticolonial nationalism in the twentieth century. At first, the most influential agitators were urban intellectuals, men of considerable talent but mostly lacking appeal among the peasantry that comprised more than ninety percent of Vietnamese society. Only with the emergence of Ho Chi Minh in the 1910s and 1920s did the anticolonial movement gain a leader who blended political sophistication with broad appeal in the countryside.

In contrast to other would-be nationalist leaders, Ho Chi Minh also drew eclectically on divergent political philosophies, tacking deftly as internal and global conditions changed. Hoping to harness democratic ideals espoused by the victorious democratic powers after the First World War, Ho emphasized his liberal convictions, demanding only that Westerners honor their own principles by granting freedom to colonized societies. Rebuffed by the West, Ho soon embraced Leninism and espoused communist revolution. But Ho’s tactical adjustments were hardly finished. During the 1930s and 1940s, he shifted in both directions, espousing Western ideals at moments when Washington seemed sympathetic to the anticolonial cause and communist themes when Moscow and Beijing seemed the most likely sources of political and material support to overthrow French rule.

Ho’s movement found a golden opportunity at the end of World War II, which had drastically weakened France and seemed to open the door to Vietnamese self-determination. On September 2, 1945, Ho Chi Minh climbed a makeshift dais in the center of Hanoi and proclaimed a new independent nation, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Within weeks, though, French leaders made clear their intention to restore colonial rule throughout *Indochine française*. Halting attempts at negotiation failed, and fighting between Ho’s troops and French forces broke out at the end of 1946, the start of a grueling eight-year conflict later dubbed the First Indochina War. At first, Americans stayed out of the ugly hostilities that smacked of old-fashioned colonial aggression. But the intensification of the Cold War in the late 1940s led U.S. leaders to hold their noses and back

France, a crucial ally in opposing communist expansion in both Europe and the Far East. Still, Truman and Eisenhower never seriously considered sending U.S. combat forces, even after Ho Chi Minh forged close relationships with the Soviet Union and communist China.

The nationalists’ military victory at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954 spelled the end of French colonialism and marked a triumph of sorts for Ho’s communist-led movement. But the peace settlement failed to resolve Vietnam’s fundamental tensions, fueled by decades of economic and social upheaval. Instead of creating a unified, autonomous nation, the treaty divided the country at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel and left its people to clash over divergent ideals, vulnerable to a new era of foreign interference. Fear of communist expansion led the United States to aid the Saigon government of the South, while the Soviet Union and China backed Ho’s communist North. The result was another two decades of strife—what Americans know as the Vietnam War.

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# Private Doubts, Public Resolve, and Personal Ambitions

*How Vietnam became America's war*

FREDRIK LOGEVALL

**HOW**  
do we explain  
American  
intervention  
in the  
Vietnam War?

And what can we take away from the long and bloody conflict today? In our rush to understand this piece of history, we have tended to give short shrift to what came before large-scale U.S. involvement. For too long, we have debated the Vietnam conflict as though it began one spring day in the early 1960s. But the earlier period is pivotal to all that would happen later.

We sometimes forget just how large the United States loomed in 1945, as World War II drew to a close. The war had seen the U.S. rise to a position of predominance in world (and especially East Asian) affairs. At the occasion of Japan's surrender late that summer, the "open moment" when the future of Indochina was anyone's guess, the U.S. had extraordinary political power in Asia of a kind never seen before (or since). Small wonder that as the guns fell silent and the Japanese gave up their occupation of Indochina, the major players—the French, the Vietnamese, the British, the Chinese, the Russians—all obsessed about a particular question regarding the territory: *What will the Americans do?*

Following World War II, Vietnamese nationalists under Ho Chi Minh fought to prevent a return of oppressive French colonial rule. The resulting French Indochina War (also known as the First Vietnam War, the Franco-Viet Minh War, or the First War of National Resistance) began in earnest in late 1946 and ended in a crushing French defeat in 1954. The United States, having backed the French war effort to the hilt, now stepped up its involvement in the anti-Ho cause. Which begs the question: What interest did the United States have in a small Asian country thousands of miles away, and why did American presidents and legislators risk countless lives and treasure to repeat many of the mistakes of their French ally?

## ★ COMBATING HO

The French arrived in Vietnam in the mid-nineteenth century and by 1890 had claimed colonial control of Indochina (present-day Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos). A Vietnamese nationalist movement dedicated to independence emerged and the French managed, for a time, to keep a lid on the ferment. But their defeat at the hands of Nazi Germany in 1940 allowed Japan to wrest control over Indochina.

Following Japan's surrender at the end of World War II, Ho Chi Minh proclaimed Vietnamese independence and asked for American support. The U.S. rejected Ho's appeals in favor of giving tacit backing to France's determined efforts to regain control, mostly to ensure French support in the emerging Soviet-American confrontation. The Truman administration was wary of Ho Chi Minh's communist sympathies. Ho, the State Department declared, was an "agent of international communism" who, it was assumed, would help the Soviet Union expand its global reach.

Looking past the Vietnamese nationalist rebellion and the age-old, tenacious resistance to foreign intruders, U.S. officials viewed events in Indochina through a Cold War lens. At the same time, they did not wish to be associated with a colonial war and, moreover, were unconvinced that France could achieve a military solution to the conflict; consequently, Washington initially took a hands-off approach to the French Indochina War. But when, in 1949, Mao Zedong's communists achieved victory in the Chinese civil war, the Truman administration quickly made two crucial decisions that would tie American interests to Vietnam for the next quarter century.

First, Washington recognized the French-appointed puppet government of Bao Dai, an intelligent but lazy former

emperor who had collaborated with both the French and the Japanese. Second, the administration agreed to send weapons and assistance to sustain the French military in Indochina. As the years passed, U.S. aid grew and grew. From 1945 to 1954, the United States gave \$2 billion of the \$5 billion that France spent to keep Vietnam within its empire—to no avail. In the eyes of many Vietnamese, the United States was an ally of the hated French and, in essence, a colonial power.

By mid-1954, the French were a spent force. A great-powers conference at Geneva produced an end to the fighting and a division of the country at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel—leaving Ho's communist Viet Minh in control north of that line and a noncommunist U.S.-backed government in charge south of it—with elections for reunification intended to occur within two years. American officials now made the fateful decision to try to succeed where the French had failed—by building up the South Vietnamese government of Ngo Dinh Diem as an anticommunist bastion. The election called for at Geneva never occurred.

As early as mid-1957, a communist insurgency was gaining steam in the south. Supported and directed by Ho's government in the north, the insurgents (derisively referred to as the "Viet Cong"—Vietnamese Communists—by South Vietnamese and U.S. officials) sought to destabilize and overthrow Diem's Saigon government. By the early 1960s, a new Vietnamese war had begun, a multilayered conflict pitting the Viet Cong and North Vietnam against South Vietnam and its American backers.

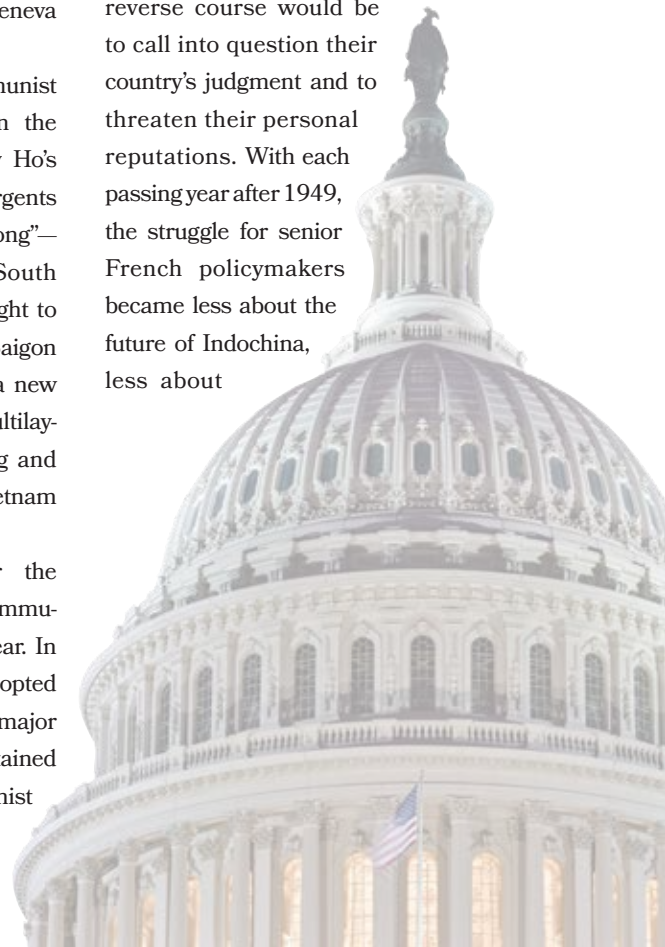
U.S. involvement to bolster the Saigon government and prevent communist expansionism grew year by year. In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson opted to make it a large-scale war, with major American ground forces and sustained aerial bombardment of communist

positions. By the end of that year, more than 180,000 U.S. combat forces were on the ground in Vietnam.

## ★ ENTER: THE CHAMPION OF FREEDOM

To study the French and American wars in succession is to experience feelings of *déjà vu*. The soldiers' difficulty in distinguishing friend from foe; the poor spirit among troops; commanders' gripes about meddling politicians; warnings against disengagement, which would dishonor soldiers who had already fallen; stubborn insistence that premature negotiations should be avoided—all these refrains, ubiquitous in Washington in 1966-67, were also heard in Paris in 1948-49.

Always, always there were promises of imminent success, of corners about to be turned. Civilian leaders (in Paris as much as in Washington) boxed themselves in with constant public affirmations of the conflict's importance and of the certainty of ultimate success. To order a halt and reverse course would be to call into question their country's judgment and to threaten their personal reputations. With each passing year after 1949, the struggle for senior French policymakers became less about the future of Indochina, less about





## Kennedy's doubts about involvement in Vietnam never went away.

grand geopolitical concerns, and more about domestic political strategizing and careerism.

For a long time, U.S. officials didn't pay much attention to the possible links between the French experience in Indochina and America's. They perceived the French as a decadent people trying vainly to prop up a colonial empire. Americans, on the other hand, were the good guys, militarily invincible, selflessly coming to the aid of the Vietnamese, after which they would go home. Untainted by colonialism, possessor of the mightiest arsenal the world had ever seen, the U.S. was the champion of freedom, the engine in the global drive to stamp out rapacious communist expansion.

It was, for the most part, self-delusion. France's war was *also* America's war—Washington footed much of the bill, supplied most of the weaponry, and pressed Paris leaders to hang tough when their will faltered. What U.S. officials didn't fathom, and refused to acknowledge, was that colonialism is in the eye of the beholder. To many Vietnamese after 1954, the United States was just another Western power, as responsible as the French for the suffering of the First War of National Resistance, with guns at the ready to impose its will over Vietnamese affairs.

### ★ THE KENNEDY PARADOX

John F. Kennedy understood this dynamic—about colonialism being in the eye of the beholder, about the challenges of subduing revolutionary nationalists by military means—more fully than perhaps anyone else in U.S. leadership



Sen. John F. Kennedy, Feb. 24, 1959, by Fred Westcott, U.S. Dept. of Energy Oak Ridge. [PD] Wikimedia Commons

throughout the period (other than FDR, who was convinced during World War II that colonialism was a dying system). When he visited Indochina as a young congressman in 1951, JFK witnessed the Franco-Viet Minh War up close, saw through the French bravado and optimism and asked penetrating questions about whether France, or any Western power, could ever overcome Ho Chi Minh's revolutionary cause.

"We are more and more becoming colonialists in the minds of the people," Kennedy wrote in his trip diary. "Because everyone believes that we control the U.N. [and] because our wealth is supposedly inexhaustible, we will be damned if we don't do what they [the emerging nations] want." The United States should avoid the path trod by the declining British and French empires and instead show that the enemy is not merely communism but "poverty and want," "sickness and disease," and "injustice and inequality."

Kennedy's doubts never went away, even after he became president a decade later. It's a remarkable thing about him that he often showed a capacity for nuanced and independent thought on world affairs, not least on the Indochina conflict. He showed an appreciation

for the vicissitudes of history and for the limits of U.S. power. Yet here's the paradox: This same JFK deepened American involvement dramatically during his thousand days as president.

In 1962, vast quantities of the best American weapons, fighter aircraft, helicopters, and armed personnel carriers arrived in Vietnam, along with thousands of additional military advisers, some taking part in combat. By the time of Kennedy's assassination in Dallas in November 1963, American military advisers numbered almost 16,000. In 1964, under President Lyndon Johnson, the number grew to 23,000. Early in 1965, Johnson sent large-scale ground forces and began the air war.

The U.S. troop count would max out at approximately 550,000 early in the Nixon administration. The figure would then begin to decline as Nixon adopted his Vietnamization policy to gradually withdraw American troops and turn over increasing control of the conflict to South Vietnam. Even as he embarked on troop withdrawal, he intensified the bombing of North Vietnam and enemy supply depots in neighboring Cambodia, hoping to pound Hanoi into concessions. He also expanded the

Johnson began to question the long-term prospects in the struggle, even with major American escalation.

ground war into Cambodia and Laos. For four years the war continued under Nixon until, in late January 1973, U.S. and North Vietnam negotiators reached agreement to cease hostilities with the Paris Peace Accords. The U.S. war now effectively came to an end.

#### ★ PRIVATE DOUBT, PUBLIC RESOLVE

But here's the troubling thing: None of these three presidents really believed in the war during their administrations. They doubted the prospects of success in Vietnam, even with major U.S. ground troops, and doubted the outcome really mattered to U.S. security.

These misgivings only deepened as American involvement grew. In the summer and fall of 1963, in his final months of life, Kennedy grew increasingly wary. In 1964, Johnson began to question the long-term prospects in the struggle, even with major American escalation, and to wonder about the war's ultimate importance to U.S. national security. "I don't think it's worth fighting for, and I don't think we can get out," he said in a phone call with McGeorge Bundy, his national security advisor. He further questioned: "What in the hell is Vietnam worth to me? ... What is it worth to this country?"

But like his predecessor, Johnson was careful to articulate those sentiments only privately and even then only to a select few. In public, he and his top advisers stuck to the received wisdom, insisting that the outcome in Southeast Asia was critically important to American interests, that they were committed



President Lyndon Johnson awards the Distinguished Service Cross to First Lieutenant Marty A. Hammer, Oct. 26, 1966, Cam Ranh Bay, South Vietnam. Photo by Yoichi Okamoto. LBJ Library

to defending their Saigon ally against aggression "imposed from the outside." Whatever problems might be hampering the war effort would be overcome in due course. And whatever the price of victory, the cost of defeat would be far greater. The sentiments, sometimes the very rhetoric, echoed that of their Paris counterparts a decade before.

And by making such assurances in public, American presidents found—like the French before them—that backing away could be exceptionally difficult. If they evinced even a slight interest in reducing America's involvement in the struggle, hawks in Congress and elsewhere stood ready to remind them of their past determination and to wonder aloud if they had gone soft. Presidential advisers, having asserted time and again that the struggle should and could be pursued to a successful conclusion, grasped full well that their reputations were now on the line and, with that, their careers.

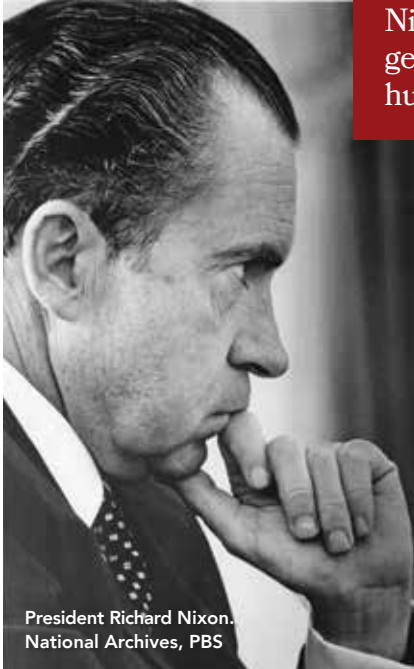
To be sure, Kennedy's and Johnson's freedom to maneuver was already constrained by the choices of their predecessors—by Truman's active support of the French war effort, and by the Eisenhower move in 1954 to intervene directly in Vietnam, displacing France

as the major external power. LBJ had the added burden of Kennedy's expansion of U.S. involvement in 1961-63. For more than a dozen years, the United States had committed itself to preserving a noncommunist toehold in Vietnam, and both men feared that to alter course, even under the fig-leaf cover of negotiated settlement, could be harmful to "credibility"—their country's, their party's, their own. They weren't willing to risk it.

Ultimately, Kennedy and Johnson found what a long line of French leaders had found: that in Vietnam, the path of least resistance, especially in domestic political terms, was to stand firm and hope that somehow things would turn out fine—at least long enough to be handed off to a successor. As Democrats, JFK and LBJ contended with the legacy of McCarthyism and the charge that they were "soft on communism."

Richard Nixon, too, saw the war through the lens of domestic politics and his own prospects for reelection in 1972. Like his Democratic predecessors, he privately questioned Vietnam's importance to American security and feared that any kind of lasting military victory would be impossible to achieve. Moreover, Nixon understood that the





President Richard Nixon.  
National Archives, PBS

Nixon understood that the conflict was generating deep divisions at home and hurting the nation's image abroad.

conflict was generating deep divisions at home and hurting the nation's image abroad. Yet—again like his predecessors—he feared that a precipitous withdrawal would harm American credibility on the world stage as well as his own domestic standing. Anxious to get American troops out of Vietnam, Nixon was at the same time no less committed than LBJ to preserving an independent, noncommunist South Vietnam.

In short, the three presidents most closely associated with the conflict in Vietnam—Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon—escalated and perpetuated a war that they privately doubted was winnable or necessary. They sent 58,220 Americans to die for a cause they did not fully believe in. The evidence leaves little doubt on this score. In addition to those 58,200 deaths, more than 304,000 Americans were wounded in Vietnam, with 153,000 cases serious enough to require hospitalization; 75,000 veterans were left severely disabled.

And we must always bear in mind the estimated 3 million Vietnamese

deaths—2 million of them civilians—during the years of American intervention.

None of which is to suggest that geopolitical considerations were entirely absent from American policymaking. Especially in the early years, fears of falling dominoes should Indochina be lost shaped U.S. policy in important ways—global communism must not be allowed to expand. In addition, there can be no doubt that a sense of idealism spurred American leaders to defend noncommunist South Vietnam against outside aggression, to believe that ultimately U.S. intervention would benefit the mass of Vietnamese.

But these concerns did not *drive* U.S. policy. For all the presidents who had to deal with Vietnam in a serious way—six in total, from Harry Truman to Gerald Ford—the domino that mattered most was the one at home concerning their domestic political position. This was true of French leaders from more or less the start of their war, and it was true of American officials from an early stage in theirs.

And so it can be said of America's Vietnam decision-makers—as it can be said also of later administrations elsewhere—that their actions in Southeast Asia erased any distinction between policy and politics, so that governing became principally not about the common good, but about achieving partisan objectives and personal ambitions.

#### ★ PERMISSIVE CONTEXT

But it won't do to stop there. To place all of the responsibility for America's Vietnam debacle on the presidents and

their top aides is to miss the contribution of other elements in American society. The key decisions occurred within a permissive context, which suggests that the circle of responsibility was wide.

Thus the near-unanimous passage in August 1964 of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution—which gave Johnson wide latitude to wage war in Southeast Asia as he saw fit—should not obscure the fact that the most respected, most senior Democratic legislators on Capitol Hill (J. William Fulbright, Mike Mansfield, Richard Russell) privately opposed large-scale increase in the American commitment (or Americanization, as it was called, meaning the conflict was now fully a U.S. affair), as did Senator and then Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey. Nor were they alone. Exact numbers are hard to come by, but certainly in the Senate a clear majority of Democrats and moderate Republicans were either downright opposed to Americanization or ambivalent; meanwhile, vocal proponents of taking the war to North Vietnam were strikingly few in number.

Publicly, though, the vast majority of lawmakers voiced staunch support for standing firm in the war, not merely in August 1964 but in the critical months that followed. They were in a tough spot, or so they said. It was an election year, for one thing, and American advisers in Vietnam were being shot at. Johnson, moreover, had made clear he expected party members to fall into line. Then, after March 1965 and the arrival of the first ground troops, a different dynamic

Lawmakers now had to support the policy or face the political consequence of “abandoning the troops” in the field.



Troops listening to President Lyndon Johnson during his visit to Cam Ranh Bay, South Vietnam, Dec. 23, 1967. LBJ Library

took hold: lawmakers now had to support the policy or face the political consequences of “abandoning the troops” in the field. From then on, Rhode Island Senator Claiborne Pell ruefully remarked, going against Johnson on Vietnam would be like “voting against motherhood.”

In the press, too, leading newspapers were disinclined to ask tough questions in the crucial months of decision, to probe deeply into administration claims regarding the situation on the ground in South Vietnam and the need to take new military measures. Among the broader public, meanwhile, apathy was the order of day. Most Americans, like most Frenchmen before them, were too preoccupied with their daily lives to give much thought to a small Asian country thousands of miles away. To the extent that they paid attention, they trusted their leaders’ assurances that the outcome in Vietnam was of critical national security importance and that victory would be achieved. Only later, after the war became stalemated and U.S. casualties grew dramatically, would

public opinion and press attention shift in a more probing and questioning direction.

In this way, the Vietnam War was not “Johnson’s War” or “Nixon’s War,” or any leader’s war; it was “America’s War.”

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**EXTRA!** READ | THINK | TALK | LINK

- “JFK in History,” John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. Short essays on moments in history, including the Vietnam War, that shaped and were influenced by Kennedy. [jfklibrary.org](http://jfklibrary.org)
- “The Vietnam Conflict,” Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library. Virtual exhibit, LBJ’s Daily Diary, video of “Peace Without Conquest” speech, and a presidential timeline. [lbjlibrary.org](http://lbjlibrary.org)
- “Memoirs v. Tapes: President Nixon & the December Bombings,” Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum. Essay and photos detailing Nixon’s motivations and actions during the Vietnam War. Includes audio from the Nixon White House Tapes collection. [nixonlibrary.org](http://nixonlibrary.org)



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# VET VOICES

Dan Glenn, Commander  
United States Navy  
Naval Aviator, A-4 Skyhawk  
Shot down: 21 December 1966  
Released: 4 March 1973  
Retired: 1 December 1983



## Getting shot down over North Vietnam—

the impact of three 57mm anti-aircraft explosions, the engine plummeting from 8000 rpm to zero, flames rushing from the intakes as the aircraft plunged toward fiery destruction in a rice paddy—marked my confounding entry into life as a prisoner of war. Losing close friends and seeing war's devastation was an up-close, personal experience. It didn't fundamentally change who I was or what I believed, but strengthened many of my values.

We had already been moved when U.S. Special Forces attempted a rescue of American POWs from Son Tay prison—great for our morale, but alarming for the Vietnamese who began exercises to thwart potential future raids. Our group of prisoners began to worry, *What if?* What if U.S. commandos came and the Vietnamese decided we should be executed? We needed a plan.

As a naval officer, I was ready to do whatever I was called to do, but I was dumbfounded when I was selected for hand grenade suppression. If a guard lobbed a live grenade into the room, I was to suffocate it by throwing my 110 pounds on top of it. If that sounds drastic to you, think what was going through my mind.

Our instructor was Marine Warrant Officer John Frederick, an expert on hand grenades. John was the strong silent type, constantly exercising his 250-pound "Hulk" body. He could take me out with one hand while doing one hand push-ups with the other. But John had a gentle nature and a reassuring voice. "A hand grenade is a simple thing," he said, "a small explosive surrounded by frangible shrapnel. That shrapnel must accelerate to do damage. The theory is that we can make the shrapnel harmless if we don't give it a chance to accelerate."

*Theory? Who tested that theory?* We sat nervously glancing at each other.

"So, when we go on alert, grab your bedroll and stand ready." John picked up his bedroll and held it firmly against his chest. "I need something to represent a hand grenade." He looked around and settled on my well-worn, porcelain-enameled steel cup. I positioned it on the concrete slab where he pointed.

Suddenly my cup became a live hand grenade. "Hu-wah!" John leapt into the air and landed bedroll first

on the grenade. "Just hold your position until the blast is muffled." Rocking back on his knees, he lifted the bedroll to reveal a smashed snarl of enamel chips. His satisfied expression turned to dismay. "Gee, I'm really sorry." He shook his head while the group disbanded amid snorts and snickers.

I told him it was no big deal, though I had an attachment to that old cup. I was surprised that I was able to bend it back and even more surprised when it didn't leak. I look at that cup today, sitting on my bookshelf with its scars and chips, and see the resilience, strength, and character exemplified by John Frederick.

After my first return trip to Vietnam in 1995, a few simple thoughts helped put the past in perspective: Vietnam is a country, not a war. Vietnamese are people, not prison guards. Son Tay is a city, not a prisoner of war camp. It's better to seek lessons to be learned than to vilify participants, supporters, or protesters on either side.

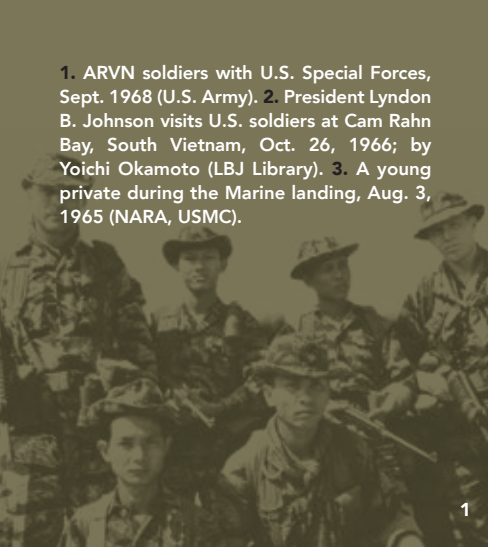
Four return trips have shown me that Vietnam is a country of contrasts, from North to South, from city to remote regions, and from young to old. I'm fascinated by the new way I see things. On the road to Son Tay in '95, I could sense exactly where I was from the smells, sounds, and feelings I had while blindfolded in the back of a truck twenty-seven years before. In '97, I traded stories over a beer with two Son Tay policemen who were twelve years old the night of the Son Tay prison raid.

The former Viet Cong veteran I met in '95 was the only male survivor in a family that lost seven brothers and a brother-in-law. Thirty years earlier, I had dropped bombs where he was living and fighting. By some quirk of fate, we both survived and moved on with our lives.

I no longer seek to sweep my eight years in the Vietnam War behind me. I have a deep interest in the broader aspects of the war and all who took part in it. I'm drawn to things Vietnamese—the people, the country, the history and culture—and look forward to my next visit. Getting to know people of other countries broadens our worldview. It narrows the separation of *us and them* toward that of *we*. ❖



1. ARVN soldiers with U.S. Special Forces, Sept. 1968 (U.S. Army). 2. President Lyndon B. Johnson visits U.S. soldiers at Cam Ranh Bay, South Vietnam, Oct. 26, 1966; by Yoichi Okamoto (LBJ Library). 3. A young private during the Marine landing, Aug. 3, 1965 (NARA, USMC).



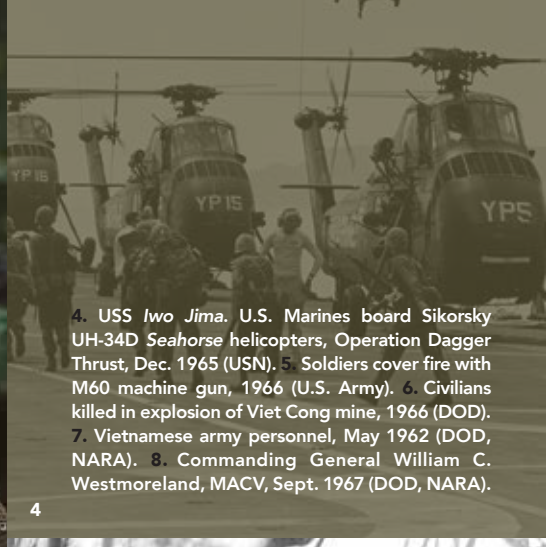
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4. USS *Iwo Jima*. U.S. Marines board Sikorsky UH-34D Seahorse helicopters, Operation Dagger Thrust, Dec. 1965 (USN). 5. Soldiers cover fire with M60 machine gun, 1966 (U.S. Army). 6. Civilians killed in explosion of Viet Cong mine, 1966 (DOD). 7. Vietnamese army personnel, May 1962 (DOD, NARA). 8. Commanding General William C. Westmoreland, MACV, Sept. 1967 (DOD, NARA).

4



5

# A DISCONNECTED DIALOGUE

AMERICAN MILITARY STRATEGY, 1964-1968

GREGORY DADDIS



6



7



8

IMAGE SOURCES: LBJ Presidential Library; Library of Congress (LOC); National Archives and Records Adm. (NARA); U.S. Army; U.S. Dept. of Defense (DOD); U.S. Marine Corps (USMC); U. S. Navy (USN). All images, except #18 and #21, are in the public domain, obtained via Wikimedia Commons.





9. PFC Michael J. Mendoza fires M-16 into suspected Viet Cong occupied area during Operation Cook, Sept. 8, 1967, by Robert C. Lafoon (U.S. Army).  
10. U.S. Navy Catapult Officer signals launch to a Douglas A-4C Skyhawk aboard USS Coral Sea, South China Sea, March 24, 1965, by James F. Falk (USN).

**I**N 1995, Robert S. McNamara's *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (Times Books) hit bookstores. A mea culpa of sorts—hardly enough, his critics charged—the former U.S. Secretary of Defense detailed the many blunders and miscalculations leading to America's fateful loss in the Vietnam War. McNamara notably conceded he had “erred by not forcing . . . a knock-down, drag-out debate over the loose assumptions, unasked questions, and thin analyses underlying our military strategy in Vietnam.”

The admission, supported by a careful reading of the historical record, begs larger questions: How do we remember American strategy in Vietnam? What language do we use to describe a war that proved so tragic, not only for the United States but, perhaps more importantly, for the millions of Vietnamese who lost their lives in a decades-long civil war? In coming to grips with a complex war, Americans, then and now, have relied on a series of tropes to streamline their conversations about a distasteful war. Terms like “attrition,” “search-and-destroy,” and “body count” have become convenient shorthand, replacing deeper explorations of a multifaceted conflict.

In fact, this bankruptcy in language proved momentous. As McNamara intimated, the failure of civilian policymakers and senior military leaders to force an honest dialogue over deeper strategic questions ensured that policy objectives for the war in Vietnam far outmatched the capabilities of the U.S. mission there. The disconnects between policy crafted in Washington and military strategy designed in Saigon go far in explaining the American outcome.

During the crucial years between 1964 and 1968, U.S. leaders failed to achieve any real consensus over what was possible in Vietnam, who was winning, and whether or not the war's political objectives were worth the sacrifices necessary to achieve them.

### *On Virtue and Victory*

American political objectives in Southeast Asia had deep roots. By mid-1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson had assumed a strategic legacy from earlier administrations that seemingly left little room for maneuver. Fears of communism's global reach remained strong, as did assumptions underwriting the “domino theory” which presumed that if a U.S. ally fell to communism, other regional powers would follow suit. To many Americans, it seemed far less important that the Vietnamese were grappling with issues related to national identity in the post-colonial era than the possibility the whole of Vietnam might fall under the evil influence of communism.

Without question, LBJ chose to commit the United States to backing an independent, stable, non-communist South Vietnam; in mid-1964, the Saigon government (GVN) seemed edging toward outright collapse. Reports from the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) and the American embassy relayed growing concerns of GVN instability, infiltration into South Vietnam by the communist North Vietnamese Army, and militarization of the insurgent National Liberation Front. If LBJ did not act, he feared, South Vietnam surely would fall.

Such a decision partially rested on contemporary notions about the utility of U.S. military force abroad.





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11. Young men from South Vietnam's 44 provinces train for 13 weeks at the National Training Center, 1970. Their job: Help villagers help themselves (NARA).  
12. Flame thrower during Operation New Castle, March 26, 1967 (DOD, NARA).  
13. Soldiers carry a wounded comrade through a swampy area, 1969 (DOD, NARA).  
14. General William Westmoreland and President Lyndon B. Johnson at the White House, April 6, 1968, by Yoichi Okamoto (LBJ Library, NARA).  
15. Vietnamese Army troops in combat operations against Viet Cong guerrillas in marshy delta country, 1961 (DOD).



12



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14



## EXCEPTIONALISM

Policymakers simply assumed American power would prevail.



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16. Second Lieutenant Kathleen M. Sullivan treats a Vietnamese child during Operation MED CAP. Teams of U.S. Air Force doctors, nurses, and aides travel to villages to treat the sick, 1967 (DOD, NARA).  
17. Marine Company 1 soldier on patrol south of Da Nang, Oct. 30, 1969 (DOD, NARA).  
18. Marines blow up bunkers and tunnels used by the Viet Cong during Operation Georgia, May 5, 1966 (DOD, NARA).  
19. John Kerry, spokesman for Vietnam Veterans Against the War, April 21, 1971, by Warren K. Leffler, U.S. News & World Report Magazine (LOC).

19





Most Americans, still viewing victory in World War II as proof of their nation's power and virtue, saw few, if any, limits to what they could accomplish. In short, almost any foreign policy problem could be solved with the right mix of military power, economic support, and developmental aid.

When Operation Rolling Thunder, an extended bombing campaign against North Vietnam in early 1965, failed to deliver any appreciable gains, consensus grew inside the White House for further escalation. Johnson inched closer and closer to deploying U.S. ground combat troops in Vietnam. There was little discussion, however, about how best to use these troops and how likely their deployment would achieve U.S. political objectives in Southeast Asia. As McNamara admitted, senior policymakers simply assumed American power would prevail and thus maintain a noncommunist nation in South Vietnam.

### *Power, Purpose, and Pacification*

The conception and implementation of U.S. military strategy in Vietnam fell to MACV's commander, General William C. Westmoreland. A veteran of World War II and the Korean War, and a former West Point superintendent, Westmoreland was widely respected. His presence in crafting strategy loomed large. Throughout that crucial first year of American combat troop deployment to Vietnam, few policymakers sought to link the president's larger political objectives to the military strategy being developed in Westmoreland's headquarters. Both the White House and MACV realized difficulties were ahead, yet only a handful of senior leaders questioned the feasibility of attaining lofty political aims with a strategy ultimately resting on a weak

Saigon government. Critical strategic discussions—those matching military means to political ends—were missing in the year of American escalation.

Standard critiques of Westmoreland's strategy contend the U.S. Army concentrated solely on "attrition," the wearing down of enemy combat units. In actuality, MACV undertook a comprehensive approach. Still, strategic planning rested upon universally-held assumptions about U.S. military power and what it could deliver. Even with presidential restrictions limiting the war's geographical boundaries and prohibiting the call-up of U.S. strategic reserve forces, uniformed leaders remained optimistic that, over time, they could fulfill Johnson's political aims.

Westmoreland consequently developed a wide-ranging concept of operations in mid-1965. He not only had to keep North Vietnamese army units, or "bully boys" as he termed them, away from the population, but also defeat the local insurgency, the "termites," operating throughout South Vietnam's hamlets and villages. This dual-threat meant Westmoreland could not ignore the military aspects of a political conflict. After first "halting the losing trend" by defending South Vietnam's population centers, the U.S. and South Vietnamese allies would resume the offensive by attacking both enemy main force units and the insurgency's infrastructure.

During this critical phase, Westmoreland intended security increases to facilitate pacification, a process MACV defined as "establishing or re-establishing local government responsive to and involving participation of the people," thus linking the rural population to the GVN. Battle, in short,

had political purpose. In the final phase, MACV sought the insurgency's complete destruction while assisting Saigon in maintaining internal order and protecting the nation's borders. Throughout all phases, Westmoreland anticipated improvements within the South Vietnamese army (ARVN), so, ultimately, the Americans could hand over the war.

### *Casualties of War and Words*

Many of those Americans, however, found their mission in Vietnam as frustrating as it was deadly. Long, grueling patrols across difficult terrain—through dark jungles and muddy rice paddies—frequently came up emptyhanded against an elusive enemy. Insurgent attacks, in the form of deadly ambushes, sapped U.S. manpower in combat units, while young American soldiers and marines contended with mines, booby traps, and the seemingly ever-present jungle boot rot. For combat soldiers, it proved an exhausting war. Worse (it seemed to them), Americans were doing all the hard fighting while their South Vietnamese allies took a safer back seat. Such attitudes were hardly fair (or accurate), as demonstrated by the losses ARVN troops and local territorial militia suffered through years of continual conflict. Still, the necessity to defeat the enemy in the field while simultaneously protecting the population from attack presented U.S. troops with challenges as taxing as they were complicated.

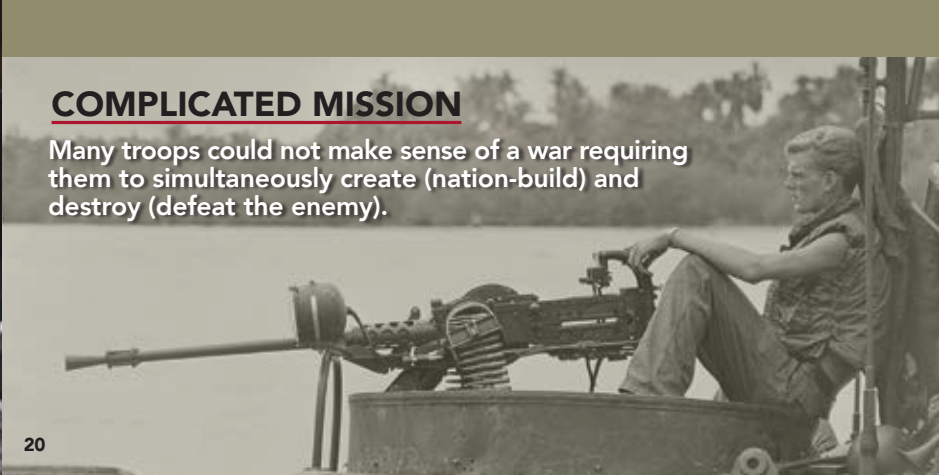
But such fighting held stark consequences for the South Vietnamese population as well. Military operations forced families from their ancestral homes, leaving a refugee population uprooted and adrift for months at a time. The use of herbicides, intended to deprive the enemy of natural cover, destroyed



19. General William Westmoreland, flanked by Secretary of State Dean Rusk, left, and President Lyndon Johnson, right, at a press conference outside the White House, April 7, 1968, by Frank Wolfe (LBJ Library, NARA).

## COMPLICATED MISSION

Many troops could not make sense of a war requiring them to simultaneously create (nation-build) and destroy (defeat the enemy).



20. A U.S. Navy river patrol boat crewman during a day-long patrol on the Go Cong River, Jan. 1967 (DOD, NARA).

crops and exposed rural farmers and their families to dangerous chemicals. And young American soldiers, unable to tell friend from foe in a war without front lines, often took a heavy-handed approach when dealing with the population. While atrocities like My Lai were far from common, the South Vietnamese lived on a landscape permeated by death, destruction, and fear.

Battle also became a main component of the war's popular narrative. Terms like "body counts," "attrition," and "search-and-destroy" quickly evolved into mainstays of public discussions on the war, overshadowing the allies' more nuanced strategic approach. To critics, Westmoreland ignored the war's political components in a misguided search for heroic battlefield victories.

Yet, a deeper examination finds a far more holistic strategy. Westmoreland's command focused on a wide array of tasks—expanding the population living in "secure" areas, ensuring the defense of food-producing regions, and increasing the usage of critical roads and railroads. The 1966 Honolulu Conference decree charged Westmoreland to "attrite" Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) "forces at a rate at least as high as their capacity to put men in the field." But aiming for such a "crossover point" did not preclude MACV from accomplishing other important nonmilitary objectives.

Certainly, a multidimensional strategy risked uncertainty at the soldier level. In the field, many troops could not make sense of a war requiring them to simultaneously create (nation-build) and destroy (defeat the enemy). Here, Westmoreland struggled to articulate his strategy to numerous audiences—the White House, the Saigon leadership, the press, his own troops, and the American public back home. By the end of 1966, while the enemy tide had been stemmed, forward momentum seemed lacking. Some observers began to wonder if the war had sunk into an uneasy stalemate.

### *Limits of Military Force*

The increasing focus on pacification—what LBJ called "the other war"—illustrated the ways in which the White House aimed to export the Great Society domestic agenda abroad. While the president made clear his desire to accentuate the war's non-military aspects, little debate accompanied decisions on how (or even if) U.S. military forces could spur "revolutionary development" inside South Vietnam, balancing security with economic, political, and social development. American-centric definitions of terms like "revolutionary development," "civic action," and "pacification" habitually seemed out-of-step with rural realities in Vietnam.

MACV's definition of civic action, for example, intended to employ "indigenous military forces on projects useful to the local population at all levels." But such initiatives failed to inspire nationwide loyalty to the Saigon government, a necessity in a political civil war. In truth, the allies frequently talked past each other when relating military strategy to concepts of social revolution among South Vietnam's population.

Still, MACV put its shoulder into pacification and, in 1967, created the Office of Civil Operations and Rural Development Support (CORDS), centralizing U.S. efforts within military headquarters. As in so many aspects of strategy, though, too few of the war's managers asked whether the American definition of pacification was even feasible. How, for instance, could foreigners establish lasting bonds between local peoples and their own government?

The pacification effort proved more than just rhetoric. In the field, units like the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division instituted a "Good Neighbor" program as groundwork for social and economic development. Others, like the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division in Hau Nghia province, undertook civic action projects: constructing schools, hospitals, and churches; assisting in agricultural planting, harvesting, and processing; and furnishing food, clothing, and medical supplies to the local population.





21

21. Marines patrol along the Quang Tri River, June 1967 (Russell Jewett [CC] Wikimedia Commons).

Once again, however, a broken dialogue between U.S. forces and the South Vietnamese seemed to undermine any sense of lasting progress. Local communities too often blamed Americans, rather than insurgents, for the devastation brought upon their hamlets and villages. ARVN officers and soldiers chafed under the tutelage of overbearing U.S. advisors who too often demeaned them. And, across South Vietnam, local province and district chiefs too often felt helpless inside a deadly war being waged across their landscapes.

Pacification surely gave testament to a comprehensive allied strategy, but that same strategy foundered, in part, because of largely unexamined assumptions about military force achieving social and political aims in a civil war over national identity.

### *The War for Public Opinion*

By early 1967, many Americans found it difficult to be optimistic about Vietnam. Westmoreland's headquarters and the CIA engaged in a bitter battle over assessing progress. Military operations made only temporary gains in the countryside and Westmoreland struggled to articulate his strategy in an understandable way. All the while, the lack of demonstrable progress led to increasing dissent at home.

Worse, the war seemed to be unraveling the very fabric of South Vietnamese

society. The social dislocation caused by large-scale combat operations—families being forced from devastated villages caught in the crossfire of war—undermined pacification plans and larger U.S. policy objectives. The rural population increasingly saw the ARVN as an occupying force, while the army itself was racked by low pay, morale problems, and a lack of political training. Nor did the Saigon government appear to be making inroads into improving its legitimacy with the people.

On the American home front, a growing antiwar movement voiced concerns over the devastation being wrought by U.S. policies abroad. More and more Americans began questioning whether so much destruction was justified to achieve only a military stalemate. White House officials believed they were now fighting two wars—one in Vietnam, the other at home.

Such domestic tensions led President Johnson to initiate a wide-ranging “salesmanship” campaign in 1967 to demonstrate progress in Vietnam. Three times that year, Westmoreland came home to report on the war. But the stalemate seemed only to harden. Consequently, an increasing number of politically-conscious draftees began entering the army's ranks, willing to question their government's official narrative of the war. So contentious had the war become, that

by the late 1960s and early 1970s, the U.S. Army in Vietnam appeared to be at war with itself.

Strategists despised the word “stalemate.” This was as true in Hanoi as it was in Washington. By late 1967, North Vietnamese leaders formulated a grand offensive into South Vietnam aimed at achieving a “decisive” military victory. Westmoreland's command sensed something was afoot, but doubted the enemy's capacity to launch a major operation across the breadth of South Vietnam. It would soon become clear MACV had greatly underestimated their adversaries.

During the 1968 Tet holiday, communist forces launched a countrywide offensive throughout South Vietnam in late January and into February. For months, senior U.S. officials had publicly declared the war was being won. The Tet offensive now undermined all their claims. Few areas in South Vietnam seemed safe. And while the allies successfully fought back enemy forces, the damage had been done. A disconnected dialogue had turned into a yawning credibility gap. To many Americans at home, only two prospects seemed likely—either U.S. military leaders had been inept in managing the war or, perhaps worse, their government had been lying to them. Either way, the war in Vietnam no longer seemed worth supporting.

DADDIS | cont. p. 61



# Triangle of Allies

*Vietnam, China, and  
the Soviet Union*

North Vietnamese Army soldiers on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, 1969. Le Minh Truong, Doug Niven, courtesy PBS

*On friendship, aid,  
and shifting  
alliances*

XIAO-BING LI

A

Are new insights on the Vietnam War possible five decades after it became a multinational conflict? International archival documents released in more recent years reveal a communist vantage that sheds new light on Western study of the conflict. Communist military troops, technology,

and logistics proved to be the decisive edge that enabled North Vietnam to survive the U.S. Rolling Thunder bombing campaign and helped the Viet Cong defeat South Vietnam. Russian and Chinese support prolonged the war, making it impossible for the United States to win.





### *Russian Comrades*

The USSR (Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics) shifted its Vietnam policy from one of “staying away” until the end of Nikita Khrushchev’s rule in 1964 toward “lending a hand” after Leonid Brezhnev’s rise to General Secretary of the Communist Party. In 1965, Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin visited Hanoi and signed an agreement with Ho Chi Minh providing a combat brigade of 4,000 Russian troops by spring and war supplies totaling 148,500 tons by year’s end. Moscow continuously increased military aid to Hanoi, reaching a total of \$3 billion between 1968 and 1971.

The Soviet high command also established a special missile force detachment under the command of General Alexander Stuchilov. The Soviet surface-to-air missile (SAM) defense system became operational in April 1965, shooting down three U.S. warplanes on the first day of engagement. From 1965 to 1972, Moscow shipped 95 sets of missile launchers and 7,658 SAM missiles to Vietnam.

The advantages of Soviet forces were technology, firepower, and mobility. The Soviets began training and arming Vietnamese missile troops and, by 1968, North Vietnam had established the most effective air defense system in the world. The U.S. lost nearly 1,000 airplanes and B-52 bombers during Rolling Thunder from 1965 to 1968. Russian assistance secured Ho’s regime in the North.

### *Chinese Allies*

As a communist state bordering North Vietnam, the People’s Republic of China did not want a collapse of North Vietnam or increased American influence in South Vietnam. China became directly involved in June 1965. Between 1965 and 1970, China sent 320,000 troops. In the words of Mao Zedong, Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, the Chinese Army’s mission was to “resist America and assist Vietnam.” Operating with the NVA (North Vietnamese Army, also called Viet Minh) and NLF (National Liberation Front, also known as Viet Cong), Chinese forces successfully adapted guerrilla warfare, active defense,

and “people’s war” strategy—what Viet Minh Commander Vo Nguyen Giap called “war for the people by the people.”

Beijing also provided Hanoi with large-scale military aid: weapons, ammunition, and vehicles totaling \$14 billion. China’s financial aid totaled \$20 billion, including substantial construction, transportation, and natural resources. Chinese engineering and air defense troops participated in construction and operation of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, a complex system of jungle and mountain trails used to transport troops, laborers, and supplies from North Vietnam, through Laos and Cambodia, to South Vietnam. Soon a 400-mile Laotian border became a major supply corridor for the NLF in the South.

### *Aid by Land and Sea*

China sent troops and aid along the Ho Chi Minh Trail using Chinese officers to supervise at key depots, such as Thanh Hoa, Vinh, Tchepone (Laos), and Lomphat (Cambodia). Trucks traveled from the Chinese border to Thanh Hoa, where Vietnamese drivers took over and drove them to Vinh. At Vinh, a Laotian driver paired with each NVA driver to cross the Laos border into Tchepone. Travel time from the Chinese border to Tchepone was about 20-25 days. After Tchepone, most troops had to travel by foot, crossing the Truong Son Mountain Range. By the time the last officer left Vietnam in August 1973, Chinese casualties totaled 1,715 killed and 6,400 wounded. Those killed in Laos and Vietnam were buried there, which continues to trouble the families of the deceased.

The Johnson administration ordered air attacks against the Ho Chi Minh Trail and, from 1964 to 1967, U.S. planes dropped an estimated 450,000 tons of bombs in Laos. Chinese reports show that about 55-65 percent of Chinese supplies were destroyed or interdicted along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the fall of 1967 when U.S. warplanes flew 3,000 combat missions per month against Laos targets.

The first Chinese military division entered Laos in 1968, and by 1970 China had 110,000 troops there to provide air defense against U.S. bombing, construct and repair

roads, and maintain transportation and communication along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The annual ground delivery of Chinese aid along the Trail increased to 45,000 tons by 1970. China also provided hard currency (\$49 million in 1968 and \$68 million in 1969) for medicine, supplies, and transportation costs. China's military aid to Laos—including 115,000 automatic rifles, 2,780 artillery pieces, 34 tanks, 170 million rounds of ammunition, and 2.7 million artillery shells—helped Laotian communist forces to win their war against the pro-American government. Chinese casualties in Laos totaled 269 killed and 1,200 wounded.

To support NLF battalions deep in the South, Chinese naval vessels first shipped weapons, ammunition, and food to the high seas off the southern coast, where supplies were unloaded to Vietnamese fishing boats. Mao approved the construction of a sea-route, a southern counterpart of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, through Cambodia to the southwestern border of South Vietnam. From 1968, China began to ship military aid through the South China Sea to the Sihanoukville Harbor in Cambodia, where Beijing had spent huge amounts to build a new port. Chinese supplies then crossed northward by road to Cambodian border towns close to NLF bases in southwest Vietnam.

Chinese sea-route shipments increased from 12,000 tons in 1969 to 20,000 tons in 1970. At the time, a U.S. general estimated that, while the majority of supplies entering the north end of the Ho Chi Minh Trail were destroyed, virtually all supplies entering through Sihanoukville reached destination in Cambodia. From April 29 to June 29, 1970, about 15,000 U.S. and ARVN troops attacked communist bases and depots in Cambodia to destroy enemy supplies. The war now encompassed Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.

### *Playing Both Sides*

With Russian military technology and massive Chinese intervention, the NVA and NLF could function on both conventional and unconventional levels, which the American military was not fully prepared to face. Nevertheless, the Vietnam War seriously tested the limits of the communist alliance. Rather than improving Sino-Soviet relations, aid to North Vietnam created a new competition as each superpower attempted to control Southeast Asian communist movements.

China shifted its defense and national security concerns from the United States to the Soviet Union. Beijing saw the U.S. as a declining power because of its failures in Vietnam and problems in other parts of the world. As the U.S. tried to withdraw from Southeast Asia, the Soviet Union filled the power vacuum, replacing the U.S. as the “imperialist” aggressor in the region. To maintain maximum support, North Vietnam remained neutral in the Sino-Soviet rivalry. When Beijing and Moscow each tried to pull Hanoi to their side, Ho Chi Minh excused himself: *What is a child to do when his parents are fighting?*

The Chinese-Russian rivalry in Vietnam worsened and eventually led to a Sino-Soviet border clash in 1969-1971. China turned to the United States in 1972, the year that President Richard Nixon visited China. The border conflicts, which had pinned down one million Russian troops, continued after Nixon's trip to Beijing.

The triangular relationship changed after Ho died in 1969. Hanoi began moving closer to Moscow in 1970-1972, and the traditional alliance between China and North Vietnam established in 1950 fell apart. After the Paris Peace Treaty was signed in January 1973 and American troops withdrew, the Chinese Navy attacked the South Vietnamese Navy around the Paracels and Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. When the

Vietnam War ended in 1975, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam claimed the islands, but Chinese troops stayed and China remained in control in the South China Sea. Unresolved issues led to hostility and crises between China and Vietnam, and Beijing invaded Vietnam in 1979. The best communist friends had become the worst enemies in less than ten years.

Chinese withdrawal from Vietnam did not end the border conflict. Eventually, in 1992, Chinese troops withdrew. In 1993, to develop trade between the two countries, Chinese troops began operations along the Chinese-Vietnamese border to clear areas where they had laid four million land mines.

In retrospect, the Vietnam War, seemingly a “double-edged sword,” undermined the international communist alliance and transformed the Cold War from a bi-polar standoff to multi-front confrontations, forcing both the U.S. and the Soviet Union to use “the China card”—to play a different game in a new triangular relationship during the 1980s. In terms of impact on the global Cold War, Sino-American diplomatic normalization dramatically shifted the balance of power. While policymakers in Washington found it possible to concentrate more of America's resources and strategic attention on dealing with the Soviet Union, Moscow's leaders, having to confront the West (America) and East (China) simultaneously, saw their strength and power become seriously overextended, signaling the beginning of the end of the Cold War.

XIAO-BING LI is professor of history and director of the Western Pacific Institute at the University of Central Oklahoma. He has authored numerous scholarly articles and several books, including: *China's Battle for Korea: The 1951 Spring Offensive* (Indiana Univ. Press, 2014), *Voices from the Vietnam War: Stories from American, Asian, and Russian Veterans* (Univ. of Kentucky Press, 2010), and *A History of the Modern Chinese Army* (Univ. of Kentucky Press, 2007). He holds a Ph.D. from Carnegie Mellon University.



# THE AMERICAN-VIETNAM WAR BY THE NUMBERS

Illustration by Anne Richardson



## VIETNAMESE REFUGEES



South Vietnamese displaced by late 1960s **10,000,000+/-**

Refugees evacuated from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos during the fall of Saigon, April-May 1975 **140,000+/-**

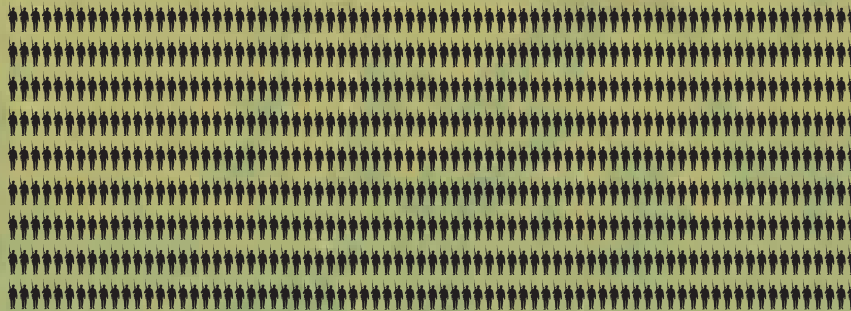
Refugees who fled Vietnam, Cambodia, & Laos after 1975 **3,000,000+/-**

## TOTAL TROOPS/ADVISORS

4,000 – Soviet Union (♣ = 4,000)

320,000 – China

2,700,000 – United States (7,484 – U.S. women)



8,000,000 Vietnam War 2,200,000 World War II 500,000 Korean War



## CASUALTIES

(ESTIMATED)

Chinese military deaths

1,000

U.S. military deaths

58,220

U.S. military wounded

153,300

Vietnamese military & civilian deaths

3,400,000

## U.S. CHEMICAL WEAPONS

Gallons of defoliants (Agent Orange and others) sprayed in South Vietnam to deprive enemy of protective jungle cover and crops. Destroyed one seventh of total land area, leaving contaminated soil and residual ecological damage.

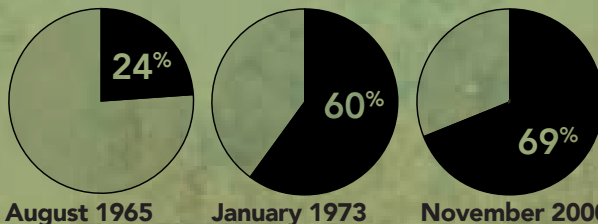


Vietnamese citizens with birth defects, cancer, and other diseases due to Agent Orange exposure

Dollars appropriated by Congress in 1983, for CDC research on health risks of Vietnam vets exposed to Agent Orange

**SOURCES:** Congressional Research Service (crs.gov); *Encyclopedia Britannica* (britannica.com); "Americans Look Back at Vietnam War," Mark Gillespie, Nov. 17, 2000, Gallup (gallup.com); "The State of the World's Refugees, 2000," United Nations Refugee Agency; World History Project (history-world.org); *Voices from the Vietnam War: Stories from American, Asian, and Russian Veterans*, Xiao-Bing Li (Univ. Press of Kentucky, 2010).

## AMERICANS AGAINST THE VIETNAM WAR (GALLUP POLL)



## MILITARY AID

(U.S. DOLLARS)



# VIETNAM WAR TIMELINE

Aug. 14, 1941 — Atlantic Charter: President Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill meet secretly aboard the U.S.S. *Augusta* to outline post-WWII international policies, and agree all nations should have the right to self-determination. (Photo: Church services aboard HMS *Prince of Wales* during talks, Aug. 1941. U.S. Navy Historical Center [PD] WC)



Sept. 2, 1945 — Ho Chi Minh declares Vietnam an independent nation. Hoping to gain U.S. support, his Declaration document intentionally mirrors America's Declaration of Independence. (Rene Burri, Magnum Photos, PBS)



France attempts to regain pre-WWII imperial rule of Vietnam in French Indochina War. (French Foreign Legionnaires and a U.S.-gifted tank make a sweep through communist-held areas between Haiphong and Hanoi, ca. 1954. U.S. DOD [PD] WC)

Jan.-Feb. 1950 — China and the Soviet Union recognize Ho's government, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The U.S. recognizes French-supported Bao Dai government, the State of Vietnam (later, South Vietnam) and sends \$15 million in military aid.

July 21, 1954 — Geneva Accords end French occupation, calling for temporary division of North and South Vietnam at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel and democratic elections to be held within two years to reunify the country under one government. (Plenary session on Indochina in the Palais des Nations, July 21, 1954. U.S. Govt. [PD] WC)



Ho's Viet Minh capture the French military outpost at Dien Bien Phu. With heavy casualties on both sides, France agrees to peace talks in Geneva. (Victorious Viet Minh troops parade through Hanoi, Oct. 9, 1954. U.S. Army [PD] WC)

Eisenhower sends CIA and military advisers to protect South Vietnam from Communist takeover, citing the Domino Theory: "You have a row of dominoes set up. You knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly."

1955 — The self-appointed (and U.S.-supported) anti-communist leader Ngo Dinh Diem refuses to hold reunification elections, in violation of the Geneva Accords, and creates the Government of the Republic of Vietnam (GVN or South Vietnam).

1962 — Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) is formed to control all U.S. military efforts. Operation Ranchhand begins, using the defoliant Agent Orange to clear vegetation used by Viet Cong insurgents to conceal themselves for ambushes. By summer 1971, 11 million gallons have been sprayed on South Vietnam, laying waste to over one seventh of total land area.



President John F. Kennedy sends Vice Pres. Lyndon Johnson on a tour of Asian countries. While in Saigon, LBJ assures Diem he is crucial to U.S. objectives in Vietnam. (JFK speech to joint session of Congress, May 25, 1961. NASA [PD] WC)

June 11, 1963

Nov. 1963 — Diem is overthrown and murdered in U.S.-backed military coup.

Nov. 22, 1963 — JFK assassinated, LBJ sworn in as president.

Aug. 2-4, 1964 — Gulf of Tonkin incidents: U.S. alleges that North Vietnamese boats fired on U.S. destroyers. Congress passes Gulf of Tonkin Resolution on Aug. 7, giving LBJ power to "take all necessary measures" to repel attacks against U.S. forces. (Capt. John J. Herrick and Comm. Herbert L. Ogier aboard USS *Maddox*, Aug. 13, 1964. They were in charge of the ship during engagement with three N. Vietnamese motor torpedo boats on Aug. 2, 1964. USN [PD] WC)



Self-immolation of Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc in Saigon in protest of brutal Diem regime (Pulitzer-winning photo by Malcolm Browne, AP). Veteran Tom Kinnick recalls witnessing another monk self-immolate: "I just couldn't believe that someone

would believe in something so much that they would give their life like that." (OOHRP, Higgins, June 5, 2014)

China, neighbor and ally to North Vietnam, successfully tests an atomic bomb.

Oct. 1964





Operation Rolling Thunder begins bombardment of North Vietnam. The first American combat troops, U.S. Marines, land at Da Nang on March 8. (Landing signal officer Lt. Vernon Jumper advises pilot of a McDonnell F-4B Phantom II plane on approach to the aircraft carrier USS Midway, 1965. USN [PD] WC)

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Mar. 1965

March 24-25, 1965

First antiwar teach-in is held at University of Michigan, featuring seminars, rallies, and speeches to encourage debate. About 3,000 people attend. By May, teach-ins reach 100 campuses. (College students march against the war, Boston, Oct. 16, 1965. Frank C. Curtin, AP, PBS)



Students for a Democratic Society organize antiwar March on Washington, which draws a crowd of 25,000.

Apr. 17, 1965

June 27, 1965

Gen. William Westmoreland launches first major U.S. ground offensive. (Westmoreland in Cabinet Room, 1968, by White House photographer Yoichi R. Okamoto. LBJ Library, NARA, [PD] WC)



Battle of Ia Drang, the first major battle between U.S. and Vietnamese forces.

Nov. 14-16, 1965

End of 1965

U.S. troops number more than 200,000.

Feb. 1966



LBJ meets South Vietnamese leaders in Honolulu and promises to continue military aid against North Vietnam, with expectations that South Vietnam will expand democracy and improve economic conditions. (Sec. Orville Freeman, Pres. Lyndon Johnson, Sec. John Gardner at Honolulu Conference on Vietnam War, Feb. 2, 1966, by Yoichi R. Okamoto. LBJ Library)

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Aug. 1966

Defense Secretary Robert McNamara announces Project 100,000 (part of LBJ's Great Society), which lowers military entrance exam requirements. As a result, black men are disproportionately assigned to combat units and twice as likely as whites to die in Vietnam. Martin Luther King Jr. and the NAACP speak out against the racist practices. U.S. military takes steps to lower percentage after 1967. (Funeral of soldier killed in Vietnam, S. Carolina, 1966, by Larry Burrows. Getty Images, PBS)



U.S. troop levels reach 385,000. In this year, more than 6,000 Americans are killed; 30,000 wounded; 61,000 Viet Cong killed.

End of 1966

Apr. 4, 1967

Martin Luther King Jr., Riverside Church Speech: "We have been repeatedly faced with the cruel irony of watching Negro and white boys on TV screens as they kill and die together for a nation that has been unable to seat them together in the same schools." (MLK, Jr., speaking in New York City, 1967, by Don Rice, World Journal Tribune. LOC)



Jan. 30-31, 1968

Start of Tet Offensive, a massive coordinated attack by the Viet Cong using open warfare in the streets of approximately 100 cities and towns across the length and breadth



Feb. 27, 1968

CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite denounces the war: "To say that we are closer to victory today is to believe, in the face of the evidence, the optimists who have been wrong in the past. To suggest we are on the edge of defeat is to yield to unreasonable pessimism. To say that we are mired in stalemate seems the



only realistic, yet unsatisfactory, conclusion." (Cronkite as photographed by Thomas J. O'Halloran, Sept. 23, 1976, U.S. News & World Report Magazine. LOC)

of South Vietnam, creates some 500,000 civilian refugees. Months earlier, Gen. Westmoreland had declared the war was coming to an end. Dire results of Tet shatter troop morale and public support. Westmoreland is replaced by General Creighton Abrams in June 1968. (Mass funeral for S. Vietnamese killed by Viet Cong in Hue during Tet Offensive, Oct. 1969. Bettmann, Getty Images, PBS)

IMAGE SOURCES: p. 35

# VIETNAM WAR TIMELINE



Richard Nixon takes office as president. (Richard M. Nixon, Official Presidential Portrait, July 8, 1971. NARA [PD] WC)

Operation Menu: Nixon authorizes the bombing of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong bases in Cambodia. More than 500,000 tons of bombs are dropped over the next four years.



Operation Giant Lance: Nixon orders 18 B-52s loaded with hydrogen bombs to fly near the Soviet border to intimidate the USSR and force North Vietnam to negotiate surrender. (Boeing B-52D-35-BW *Stratofortress* dropping bombs over Vietnam, ca. 1965-1972. USAF [PD] WC)

Nixon announces invasion of Cambodia, sparking nationwide protests.



Kent State Massacre. Ohio National Guard opens fire on students, killing four and wounding nine. Tom Grace: "I thought, 'Oh my God!' I turned and started running. . . . The bullet . . . knocked me off my feet. . . . It lasted thirteen seconds, but it seemed like it kept going, and going, and going" (*Patriots, Appy*). Student protests erupt on Oklahoma campuses and others across the country. (Mary Ann Vecchio kneels over the body of fellow student Jeffrey Miller, Kent State Univ., May 4, 1970, by John Filo. Getty Images, PBS)

*The New York Times* begins publishing the Pentagon Papers, a classified report on the war leaked by Daniel Ellsberg, who later noted: "I think [policymakers] prolonged an unwinnable stalemate not just because they cared about getting reelected. . . . They were willing to send men and women to their deaths to avoid being called losers." (*Patriots, Appy*)

Mar. 16, 1968 — My Lai Massacre. U.S. Charlie Company soldiers murder 504 civilians, mostly women, children, and elderly men. The military covers up the atrocity for 20 months. Only one member of the division is tried and found guilty of war crimes. Repercussions are felt throughout the Army, and the American public begins to question U.S. presence in Vietnam. Larry Colburn: "I've seen the list of dead and there were 120 some humans *under the age of five*. . . . They were butchering people. . . . How do you get that far over the edge?" (*Patriots, Appy*) (Unidentified Vietnamese women and children before being killed in the My Lai Massacre, March 16, 1968, by Ronald L. Haeberle. U.S. DOD [PD] WC)



Apr. 4, 1968

Jan. 1969

Feb. 1969

June 1969

Nixon announces plan for "Vietnamization" of the war, the gradual withdrawal of American troops while increasing financial support to South Vietnam's military. (Pres. Richard Nixon shaking hands with armed forces in Vietnam, July 30, 1969, by Oliver F. Atkins. Richard Nixon Library & Museum, NARA [PD] WC)



Sept. 2, 1969

Oct. 27, 1969

Nov. 3, 1969

Nixon delivers "Silent Majority" Speech: "Let us be united for peace. Let us also be united against defeat. Because let us understand: North Vietnam cannot defeat or humiliate the United States. Only Americans can do that."

Dec. 1, 1969

Apr. 30, 1970

May 4, 1970

Draft lottery introduced. (Curtis W. Tarr, director of the Selective Service System, turns the drum containing capsules of draft numbers at the annual draft lottery, Washington, D.C., Feb. 2, 1972, by Thomas J. O'Halloran, *U.S. News & World Report Magazine*. LOC)



May 15, 1970

Mississippi police fire on black students at Jackson State College, killing two, injuring twelve. Veteran Ronald Beer: "I think the nation, including the president, finally acknowledged that we cannot resolve our differences by killing our young people." (OOHRP, Higgins, July 18, 2014)

June 1971

Jan. 27, 1973

Paris Peace Accord is signed, establishing immediate cease-fire. (Paris peace talks, Vietnam peace agreement signing, Jan. 27, 1973, by White House photographer Robert L. Knudsen. Richard Nixon Library & Museum, NARA [PD] WC)





Mar. 1973 — The last U.S. combat troops depart South Vietnam, leaving only military advisors and Marines protecting U.S. installations.

Aug. 9, 1974 — Nixon resigns presidency under pressure from Watergate hearings.

Apr. 29, 1975 — In a massive 18-hour airlift, U.S. Marine and Air Force helicopters evacuate from Saigon over 1,000 American civilians and almost 7,000 South Vietnamese refugees. (U.S. Navy personnel push a helicopter into the sea to make room for more evacuation flights from Saigon, April 29, 1975. Jacques Tonnaire, AP, PBS)



Apr. 30, 1975 — Fall of Saigon. North Vietnamese forces capture city, effectively ending the war. In fifteen years, almost one million North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops, and 250,000 South Vietnamese troops have been killed. Casualties also include hundreds of thousands of civilians.

Today — Residual ecological impacts and exposure to Agent Orange still cause birth defects and other health issues. Vietnamese civilians continue to die from unexploded ordnance, approx. 40,000 deaths since 1975. (UH-1D helicopter sprays a defoliation agent on agricultural land in the Mekong Delta, July 26, 1969, by Brian K. Grigsby, SPC5. U.S. Army, NARA [PD] WC)



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SOURCES: *Battlefield: Vietnam*, pbs.org; *Pentagon Papers*, archives.gov; *Vietnam Online*, pbs.org; *Vietnam War*, britannica.com; Oklahoma Oral History Research Program (OOHRP), Oklahoma State Univ., interviews by Jason A. Higgins; *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity* (Viking, 2015), Christian G. Appy; *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides* (Viking, 2003), Christian G. Appy.

IMAGES: Courtesy Associated Press (AP); LBJ Library; Library of Congress (LOC); National Aeronautics and Space Adm. (NASA); PBS press photos for *The Vietnam War*; Richard Nixon Library & Museum; U.S. Air Force (USAF); U.S. Army; U.S. Dept. of Defense (DOD); U.S. Government (U.S. Govt.); U.S. National Archives and Records Adm. (NARA); U.S. Navy (USN). Many of the images are in the public domain, obtained via Wikimedia Commons ([PD] WC).

# GLOSSARY

## ACRONYMS, PEOPLE, AND MILITARY TERMS

- Agent Orange:** Defoliant used to clear jungle vegetation and crops  
**Chu Lai:** Seaport city, site of U.S. military installation  
**CO:** Conscientious objector, exempted from military combat service based on religious or ideological objections  
**Da Nang:** Central Vietnam port on South China Sea, site of U.S. military installation  
**DMZ:** Demilitarized Zone between North and South Vietnam established at 1954 Geneva Convention  
**Domino Theory:** Supposition that if one country fell to communist control, others nearby would follow  
**Grunt:** U.S. infantryman  
**In-country:** Service in the country of conflict  
**Litter:** Stretcher to carry dead or wounded  
**MACV:** Military Assistance Command-Vietnam, command unit over all U.S. military activities  
**MOS:** Military Occupational Specialty  
**Napalm:** Fierce-burning gel-like petroleum substance used in flamethrowers and bombs  
**Search & Destroy:** Operation to search an area and destroy anything (or anyone) that might be useful to the enemy. For the first time in modern U.S. military history, victory was measured not by territory captured but by body counts from search and destroy missions.  
**Tet:** Buddhist Lunar New Year  
**Triage:** Prioritization of casualties for medical treatment  
**Vietnamization:** Nixon policy for gradual withdrawal of American troops and handoff of military responsibility to South Vietnamese Army

## NORTH VIETNAM

- Vo Nguyen Giap:** Commander in Chief and military strategist responsible for victories in French Indochina War and Vietnam War  
**Ho Chi Minh (1890-1969):** Leader and first President of DRV  
**DRV:** Democratic Republic of Vietnam  
**NVA:** North Vietnamese Army  
**PAVN:** People's Army of Vietnam, early name for North Vietnamese Army  
**Viet Minh:** North Vietnamese resistance troops organized by Ho Chi Minh

## SOUTH VIETNAM

- Ngo Dinh Diem:** President of GVN, 1955-1963  
**Nguyen Van Thieu:** President of South Vietnam, 1967-1975  
**ARVN:** Army of the Republic of Vietnam  
**GVN:** Government of the Republic of Vietnam, formed in 1955 and backed by U.S.  
**State of Viet Nam:** South Vietnam  
**Vietnamese Popular Forces:** Military forces formed by local citizens

## VIET CONG

- NLF:** National Liberation Front; political wing of communist-led insurgents that infiltrated South Vietnam to take down the government. Military was known as the People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF). Both the NLF and the PLAF were directed by the southern branch of the Vietnamese Communist Party headed by Ho Chi Minh.  
**VC:** Viet Cong

## CHINA

- Mao Zedong:** Party secretary of the CCP  
**CCP:** Chinese Communist Party  
**PLA:** People's Liberation Army (Chinese Army)  
**PRC:** People's Republic of China

## SOVIET UNION

- Andrei Gromyko:** Minister of Foreign Affairs, USSR, 1957-1985  
**Nikita Krushchev:** Communist Party Secretary, 1953-1964  
**Leonid Brezhnev:** Communist Party Secretary, 1964-1982  
**USSR:** Soviet Union (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics)

SOURCES: *Vietnam Online*, PBS.org; *Sixties Project* Glossary: www2.iath.virginia.edu/sixties

# DONUT DOLLIES, NURSES, WACs, and WAFCs ★★



1. American Red Cross SRAO (Supplemental Recreation Activities Overseas) class, a.k.a. "Donut Dollies," 1966. (WV0407, J. Holley Watts Collection, UNCG) 2. Red Cross workers Dale "Paige" Dempsey (right) and Diane Johnson lead a quiz game for servicemen, Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam, 1970. (WV0456 Dale Dempsey Papers, UNCG) 3. Seaman apprentice Anneliese Knapp, one of fifty Navy women assigned to duty on USS *Sanctuary*, March 1973. (DOD, NARA) 4. Intensive care ward, USS *Repose* off the coast of Vietnam, Oct. 1967. (DOD, NARA) 5. Lieut. Comm. Joan Brouillette with patient PFC. Charles Smith, Da Nang, S. Vietnam, Jan. 6, 1968. (DOD, NARA) 6. U.S. Navy nurse and patients aboard USS *Sanctuary*, 1967 (USN) 7. Lieut. Frances Crumpton and Nangnoi Tongkim, a Thai nurse, with wounded American soldier, Saigon, Feb. 1966. (DOD, NARA)





## WOMEN WHO SERVED IN THE VIETNAM WAR



HEATHER MARIE STUR



On Christmas Eve, 1964, National Liberation Front (NLF) guerrillas drove a car loaded with explosives into a parking lot behind the Brink Hotel Bachelor Officers Quarters in central Saigon. The blast killed two U.S. servicemen and wounded more than sixty American military personnel and Vietnamese civilians. Among the wounded were four Navy nurses: Lieutenant Barbara Wooster, Lieutenant Ruth Mason, Lieutenant Ann Darby Reynolds, and Lieutenant Frances L. Crumpton. Though injured, the nurses assisted wounded U.S. servicemen until ambulances arrived. On January 9, 1965, in a ceremony at the U.S. Navy Headquarters Support Activity Hospital in Saigon, the nurses received Purple Heart Medals for their service.

Why are Americans invested in a Vietnam War narrative in which the characters are almost entirely American men? As the story of the Brink nurses illustrates, women saw combat in Vietnam, from the “air-conditioned jungle” in Saigon to remote MASH units and aboard Navy Hospital ships.

American women served in the Vietnam War in various ways, through the military and with civilian organizations, from the earliest days of U.S. intervention in the late 1940s through the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975. Inconsistent recordkeeping makes it difficult to say exactly how many American women served in the war. Veterans' Administration records indicate that approximately 11,000 did military tours in Vietnam, with the majority serving in the Army Nurse Corps. The next largest group served in the Women's

Army Corps, with smaller numbers serving with the Air Force, Navy, and Marines. Civilian women serving with the Red Cross, churches, government aid programs, and humanitarian organizations numbered from 25,000 to 50,000 according to estimates.

The Red Cross had been sending teams of women overseas to work with troops since World War II. They served coffee and donuts, earning the nickname “Donut Dollies.” In 1965, fearing the impact on troop morale from what was looking to be a long war, Defense Department officials asked the Red Cross to establish a program called Supplemental Recreation Activities Overseas (SRAO). From 1965 through 1972, nearly 630 women served in Vietnam through the program.

Some SRAO participants staffed recreation centers on large bases where servicemen could shoot pool, listen to music, read, play games, write letters, or sit and talk. Others traveled, usually by helicopter, to support bases in remote areas where troops waited to go into battle. They traveled in pairs and brought games, snacks, soda, and juice. Sometimes the most important thing a Donut Dolly could do was sit beside a GI as a sympathetic human presence.

Most SRAO women were in their early twenties, a few years older than the average U.S. enlisted man. In the pre-departure training session, Red Cross instructors told the women they were meant to be a “touch of home,” the girl next door—cute, friendly, and caring—not sexual. Their powder blue dresses, though impractical in Vietnam's heat, dust, and mud, projected a perky innocence. Smiling was a job requirement, so

they learned to compartmentalize their emotions about the war.

Donut Dolly Emily Strange was stationed in the Mekong Delta with the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division and Mobile Riverine Force in 1968. She had become close with GI Michael Stacy. They both played guitar and often strummed folk tunes together. After Stacy died in a helicopter crash in March 1969, Strange realized that she needed to put distance between herself and the guys she worked with. It was scary to think about her friends dying. So she stopped learning the names of the servicemen she met. Long after the war, she believed there were probably guys she knew on the Vietnam Wall, but never learning their names meant she wouldn't have to face the pain of knowing for sure. It was her job to make lonely, frightened soldiers feel better, and she had to show up and do her job despite her own feelings of fear and isolation. She called it putting on her “Eleanor Rigby” face that she kept in a jar by the door. Like so many veterans, Emily Strange struggled to settle back into “the World.” When her girlfriends invited her to go shopping, she wondered how anyone could care about something so frivolous. She knew it wasn't that her friends were shallow, it was her. She found solace in writing poetry, attended and spoke at vets' reunions, and built a website where veterans could publish their stories and find one another. Strange remained connected with fellow Donut Dollies and Vietnam veterans until she passed away in July 2016.

Like the Donut Dollies, nurses also had to compartmentalize emotions to do their jobs. The Army began deploying nurses to Saigon in 1956, at first to



## Nurses carried wounded servicemen across the threshold from combat to the aftermath.



train Vietnamese nurses. American nurses had the double duty of treating the physical wounds of servicemen (and sometimes Vietnamese civilians) and offering an emotional salve to injured and dying troops. They broke the news that a man would never walk or see again.

Some nurses held men as they cried out for parents and took their last breaths. Literally and figuratively, nurses carried wounded servicemen across the threshold from combat to the aftermath, which could be a drastically altered life—or death.

Linda Pugsley was a 22-year-old registered nurse working at Boston City Hospital when she joined the Air Force in 1967. She went through basic training and flight school and was commissioned a second lieutenant. At the time, she had no political feelings about the Vietnam War, but wanted to help take care of injured American servicemen. She figured she could handle it—a weekend shift at Boston City Hospital usually included gunshot and stabwounds, car wrecks, and other bloody traumas. But nothing could have prepared her for Vietnam.

Pugsley soon realized that she was not just tending physical wounds; she and other nurses were often viewed as angels by injured troops. There was something about a woman taking care of them that brought them comfort. Some nurses wore perfume because it reminded patients of home. In a war zone it was at once utterly incongruous and a desperately needed bit of normalcy. Like Donut Dolly Emily Strange, Pugsley eventually stopped learning the names of her patients as a coping mechanism. Lynda Van Devanter (whose autobiography, *Home Before Morning*, was the inspiration for the television drama *China Beach*) wore

ribbons in her hair to uphold the feminine image her patients expected and needed. At the same time, she suppressed her emotions and steeled herself to cope with the mental burden of trying to be soothing and pretty to broken and dying men.

After nurses, the next largest number of servicewomen were deployed with the Women's Army Corps. Like nurses, the first WACs went to Vietnam to train personnel in South Vietnam's Women's Armed Forces Corps. About 700 WACs served in the war, mostly in clerical jobs, but it did not shield them from combat. Linda McClenahan worked in the Army Communications Center from 1969 through 1970. One of her jobs was to process casualty reports, so she was often one of the first to read the names of men who were killed in action. Lieutenant Colonel Janie Miller, a career WAC who served in Korea and Vietnam, managed a U.S. Army mortuary in Saigon. She rotated her staff every three months because of the work's emotional toll. When Pinkie Houser, a WAC who volunteered for Vietnam in 1968, lost her commanding officer in battle, she processed his records and sent his personal effects to his family. It was one of the hardest things she had to do during the war.

To experience the Vietnam War directly, American women made choices that took them across an ocean to be there. For the women of South Vietnam where ground combat was taking place, the battlefield and the home front were the same. There was no protected domestic space. Some women took up arms on behalf of South Vietnam as civilians in the People's Self-Defense Forces.

When the civilian world is adjacent to the military world, they affect each other in immediate ways. The South Vietnamese government recognized the need to provide social services for ARVN families, and





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8. U.S. Army Medical Specialist Corps physical therapists, Vietnam, Oct. 1969. (WW0600 Marcia Jones Snow Papers, UNCG) 9. Second Lieut. Kathleen M. Sullivan treats a Vietnamese child, 1967. (DOD, NARA) 10. Sgt. Sans instructs WAC class on pack closing the T-10 parachute, 90th Aerial Equipment Depot, Saigon, July 12, 1970. (DOD, NARA) 11. First Lieut. Elaine H. Niggemann changes surgical dressing for civil employee James J. Torgelson, 24<sup>th</sup> Evacuation Hosp., July 9, 1971. (DOD, NARA)

the Ministry of Defense established the Women's Armed Forces Corps (WAFC) in 1965. It authorized women to serve in administrative, intelligence, medical, and social work positions to free men for combat. To enter the officers' corps, women had to be college graduates, while regular enlisted women needed a high school diploma. Female recruits had to be unmarried and remain unmarried for their first two years of service; after that, they had to get permission from South Vietnam's military high command. A lack of available records makes it difficult to know how many women served, but U.S. reports note the WAFC's strength was approximately 3,000 at that time.

WAFC's social welfare division placed service-women near ARVN family camps to provide child care, basic health care, pharmaceutical services, and social services to support troops' dependents. That they were in the army but doing traditional "women's work" illustrates how the Vietnam War expanded gender roles for middle-class South Vietnamese women without completely transforming them. In 1970, the Vietnam Council on Foreign Relations published a booklet entitled *South Vietnam's Women in Uniform* about the ways Vietnamese women were assisting South Vietnam's war effort. A section called "Quitting the Kitchens" stated that wartime opportunities for women in WAFC and other defense services indicated a transformation occurring in South Vietnamese society:

Traditionally, the role of the Asian woman is a passive one. Kept in the background, girls are raised to be feminine and dependent, to stay at home caring for husband and family. Twenty years ago, the idea of a female soldier was

even more far-fetched than that of a woman doctor or lawyer. But years of war have brought women into a man's world, partly by necessity, partly by choice.

In American popular memory, the Vietnam War was a man's experience, particularly an infantryman's experience. But American and Vietnamese women should also be main characters. American women earned Purple Hearts; Vietnamese women ministered to noncombatants living in combat zones. American and Vietnamese women's stories illustrate the essential power of women in difficult times—even in a war zone.

Heather Marie Stur is associate professor of history at the University of Southern Mississippi, co-director of the USM Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage, and Fellow of the Dale Center for the Study of War and Society. She holds several awards, including a Fulbright Fellowship to Vietnam. Her books include *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2011) and *Saigon at War: The Third Force and the Global Sixties in South Vietnam* (forthcoming, Cambridge Univ. Press, 2018).

IMAGE SOURCES: Betty H. Carter Women Veterans Historical Project, Martha Blakeney Hodges Special Collections and University Archives, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG); U.S. Dept. of Defense (DOD); U.S. National Archives and Records Adm. (NARA); U.S. Navy (USN)

**EXTRA!** READ | THINK | TALK | LINK

- "Not Just Pretty Faces—The Women of the Vietnam War," The Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University. Essays, interviews, photos, and video. [vietnam.ttu.edu](http://vietnam.ttu.edu) (click on *Digital Materials* tab; select *Online Exhibits*)
- The Women in Military Service for America Memorial. Exhibits and essays on women's military service, highlighting accomplishments of black, Native American, Puerto Rican, and Asian-Pacific American women veterans. [womensmemorial.org](http://womensmemorial.org)
- "The Vietnamese Women Who Fought for their Country," photographer Lee Karen Stow, *BBC News*, Dec. 6, 2016. Photo essay on Vietnamese women's service during war with the U.S. [bbc.com](http://bbc.com)



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# VET VOICES

Lou Graul Eisenbrandt, 1st Lieutenant  
United States Army Nurse Corps  
Author, *Vietnam Nurse:  
Mending & Remembering*



## Whenever I am asked why I joined the Army,

I always give the same reply . . . I wanted to see the world! On the plane [to Ben Hoa airfield], filled to capacity with soldiers, thirteen of us were women. It was instantly clear that I was going to have to be comfortable in a man's domain. The final leg of this arduous journey was a HUEY, which plopped me down at my home for the next year—the 91<sup>st</sup> Evacuation Hospital in Chu Lai, South Vietnam.

After I had spent three months on the medical wards, the chief nurse offered me the chance to move to R&E—receiving and emergency. I felt ready to tackle what I considered the most intensive of the nursing specialties, especially in a combat theater. The date was 20 February 1970, eight days before my twenty-third birthday.

Looking back, I realize that no one can truly be prepared for the type of trauma nursing that I would experience over the next eight months. On my second day in R&E, a young man was brought in missing both legs. Dried blood was caked to his fatigues, hands, face, and IV bottle lying next to him on the litter. The medic in the field had bandaged his stumps, started the fluids, and given him morphine; it was up to us to take it from there. Time was of the essence. After making all the necessary adjustments and notes, he was on his way to surgery. He was nineteen. When I got off duty, a bunch of us celebrated my birthday. That evening I was blowing out birthday candles; the next morning, my patient was waking up to a new life, without legs.

Though statistics indicate that the United States started pulling troops out of Vietnam in April 1969, our flood of casualties actually increased during my deployment. On April 30, 1970, the hospital compound was hit. It brought the war even closer, making us realize that nowhere was truly safe. Ho Chi Minh's North Vietnamese troops expressed allegiance by terrorizing South Vietnamese residents and the foreign troops supporting them with daybreak rocket attacks. We could hear the mortars screaming overhead, but fortunately, most of the rounds landed in the South China Sea. The high-pitched whistle followed by a watery splash is a sound that I have never forgotten.

On May 7, we were overwhelmed with a mass casualty situation. For the next twenty-four hours, the R&E was a study of organized chaos as we treated ninety-nine patients,

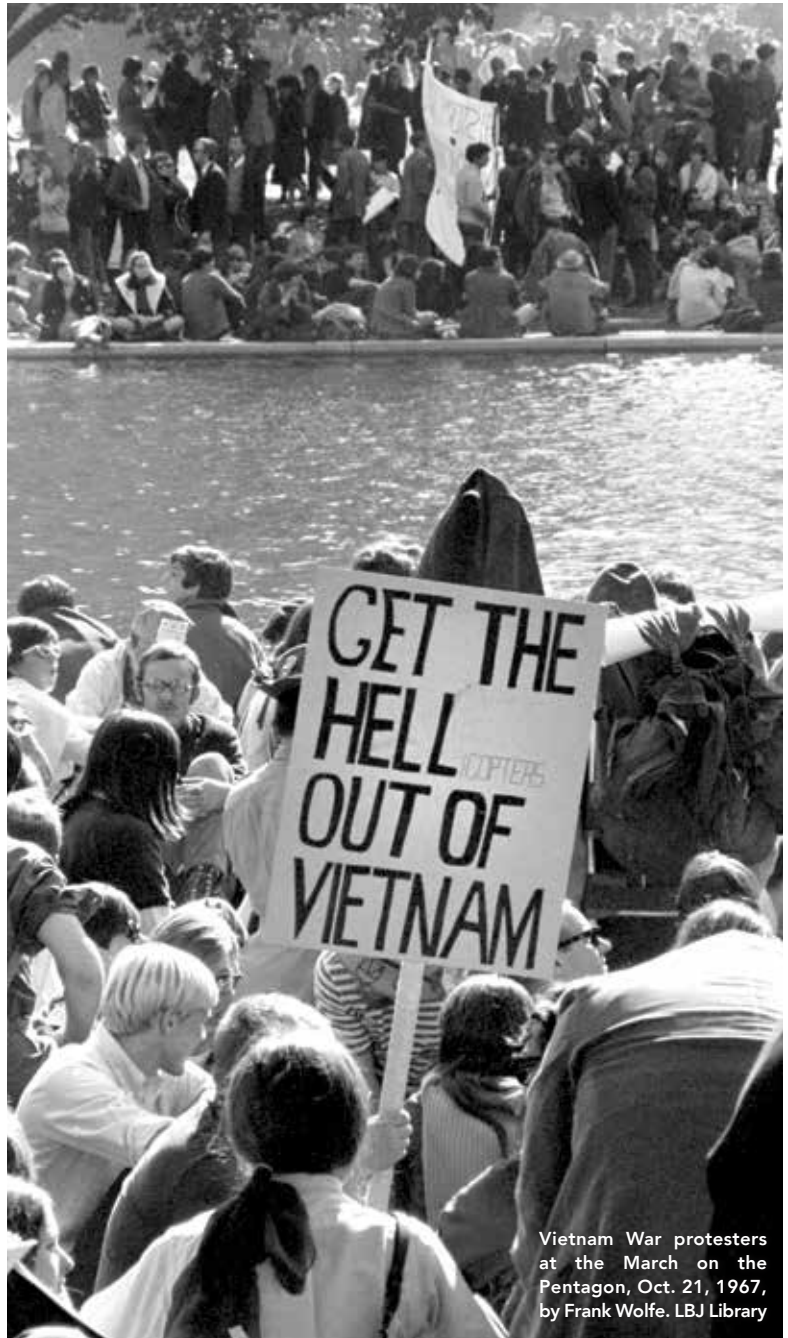
many of them civilians—tiny babies, elderly grandparents, and school children, all needing medical attention. We placed the more seriously injured on litters on the floor and outdoor sidewalks. Most of the wounds were the result of flying shrapnel from splintered buildings and destroyed equipment. Everyone who was assigned to the R&E, regardless of what their schedule was, hurried to the hospital. I worked for my usual twelve hours plus several more.

Caring for so many victims is always a challenge, but doing so without command of their language made it even more difficult. The hospital did have two interpreters that provided much needed assistance. Also on duty from time to time were a Vietnamese nurse and an aide. Just having a kind soul who spoke the same language and could reassure the injured that their pleas were being heard was most beneficial. Our first monumental challenge was triage. Most days, one physician would be in charge of the order in which patients were readied for surgery, depending on the injury. On that day, each decision was a collective one. The dialog was fast and furious. "I have a bad head wound over here that needs to be at the front of the line." "Here is a possible amputation of the right leg." "I need a translator over here please!" "Ask her where it hurts." Watching the agony on a parent's face as her child whimpered with pain was heartbreaking.

Several of us were asked to give blood, which was in short supply. By dawn, the floor was finally hosed clean of the last remnants of human suffering. The cries and moans had softened with the aid of pain meds and the soothing voices of the staff and family who had come along with the victims.

I stumbled back to my room. Collapsing onto my creaky bed, sleep overcame my fatigue as I closed my eyes and ears to the war. Back home they were continuing the drawdown of troops; here in the war, the violence raged on. ❖ Adapted from *Vietnam Nurse: Mending and Remembering* (Deeds Publishing, 2015), winner of the 2016 Military Writer's Society of America Silver Medal Award. [deedspublishing.com/eisenbrandt](http://deedspublishing.com/eisenbrandt)





Vietnam War protesters at the March on the Pentagon, Oct. 21, 1967, by Frank Wolfe. LBJ Library

# PROTESTING VIETNAM

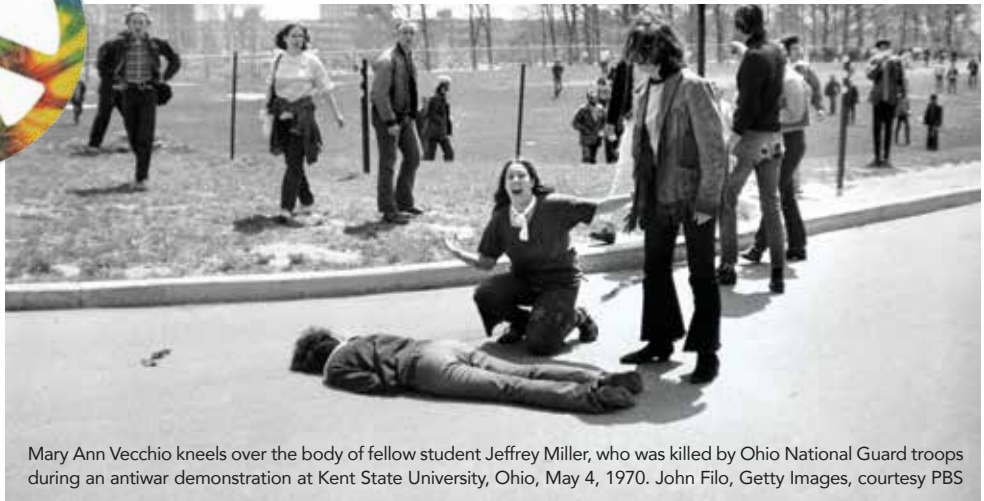
## STUDENT VOICES IN A TIME OF WAR

SARAH EPPLER JANDA

Antiwar protests began in Oklahoma much the same as they did elsewhere in the United States. Even before combat troops were sent to Vietnam in March 1965, students, both nationally and locally were voicing their opposition. Sporting signs that read “I won’t fight in Vietnam” and “War on poverty not on people,” students from across the country participated in the first large March on Washington demonstration sponsored by Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) on April 17, 1965. Organizers were stunned when an estimated 25,000 people showed up to join in the protest. “I was convinced as a result of that march that the war was going to end the next day,” remarked SDS leader Carl Davidson.



Shootings at Kent State fundamentally transformed the antiwar movement and led to the largest student protests in American history.



Mary Ann Vecchio kneels over the body of fellow student Jeffrey Miller, who was killed by Ohio National Guard troops during an antiwar demonstration at Kent State University, Ohio, May 4, 1970. John Filo, Getty Images, courtesy PBS

In Oklahoma, small groups of students, sometimes connected to organizations like SDS and sometimes not, began protesting even before passage of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in August 1964, which essentially gave President Lyndon Johnson the power to wage war in Vietnam. Jim Russell, a Tulsa native and student at the University of Oklahoma (OU), recalled participating in the first antiwar demonstration in the state, in front of the Oklahoma City post office in the spring of 1964. Sponsored by the OU chapter of SDS, the demonstration had only a handful of protesters and ended without incident. American actions in Vietnam, explained SDS President Paul Potter, provided “a bitter and saddening insight.” To the 1960s generation, the steadily increasing number of military advisors in Vietnam, the draft, the fact that young men were deemed old enough to fight but not vote (the voting age was still 21), and the incomprehensibility of the necessity of war all contributed to the rise of activism.

### THE PRICE OF DISSENT

Antiwar demonstrations grew as the decade wore on, especially after General Lewis B. Hershey, director of the Selective Service System, issued a

directive to local draft boards in October 1967 which suggested that students who demonstrated against the war could and should lose their draft deferment status. Students regularly sought draft counseling on or near college campuses, often from clergy affiliated with organizations like the Wesley Foundation. Students learned how to object, how to gain or maintain deferments, and when to secure legal representation.

Intense frustration gripped many who strongly opposed the war and feared they would be forced to fight. OU activist Mike Wright even dedicated his master's thesis to the North Vietnamese as a testament to his opposition to the war. After Oklahoma State University (OSU) student Melvin Wade failed to take the ceremonial step forward at his draft induction, the FBI paid him a visit and Melvin fled Stillwater in the middle of the night to relocate. Ron Stevens, another OSU student, had long planned to attend seminary after graduation, but his deferment was denied. He appealed and was interviewed with a series of questions about his faith, and again denied on the grounds that he “seemed insincere.” Stevens won a deferment on a final appeal with the help of U.S. Senator Fred Harris

and moved to Chicago to attend seminary in the summer of 1968.

While Stevens succeeded in his deferment efforts, thousands of others in the state did not as unrest increased across the country in 1968, among the most domestically volatile years in American history, especially after the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy. Fear gripped national and state governments, and Oklahoma Governor Dewey F. Bartlett, like many other governors, ordered improved riot containment strategies. Following a small antiwar protest sparked by the appearance of General Hershey in Oklahoma City in March, Governor Bartlett created a secret agency to surveil and collect information on suspected dissidents. The creation and operation of the Office of Inter-agency Coordination was kept secret even from members of the state legislature, despite the fact that it was financed by diverting money from the National Guard budget. Governor Bartlett's actions reveal a period fraught with turmoil.

### OKLAHOMA OUTRAGE

Oklahomans experienced a wide range of reactions to social unrest. Some college and university students demonstrated against the war, while others



marched in support of it. To be sure, antiwar protests in Oklahoma were on a much smaller scale than in larger, less conservative, and more cosmopolitan states, but protesters were nevertheless viewed with suspicion and hostility. “People in Oklahoma do not like student unrest,” recalled OU administrator Gordon Christenson. “They don’t like people who go against the values of the society.” The public consistently decried the use of tax dollars to support public institutions where students opposed the war. Public expressions of contempt for these students flooded the governor’s office as well as the offices of university presidents.

While protests against the Vietnam War (and surveillance of those who participated in them) became commonplace, Oklahoma protests were generally peaceful, with students arrested for obstructing streets and sidewalks but quickly released from jail. Even so, Oklahomans who opposed dissent projected that they were under attack by outside “communistic” forces that had taken hold of college campuses. Monitoring of antiwar activists revealed little cause for alarm; between 1968 and 1971 the FBI regularly noted small groups of protesters, especially at OU and in Oklahoma City, but nothing that warranted the fear, hostility, and outrage voiced by angry Oklahomans who opposed protests.

As their letters to Governor Bartlett revealed, many Oklahomans took umbrage at even minor manifestations of dissent. They feared that the highly publicized violence at schools like Columbia and Berkeley might erupt in Oklahoma. One citizen complained about “creeps that are going to our colleges and universities, causing riots and costing the tax payer many dollars.” One rather extreme letter called on the governor to ready the National Guard with “live ammo” and “fixed bayonets” to halt campus protests. A letter to OU President George Lynn

Cross warned that Oklahomans would not tolerate “any little ‘Berkeleys,’” and urged him to expel students who engaged in protests. When OSU President Robert Kamm took actions against student protests, he received accolades from parents and self-identified Oklahoma tax payers who supported his efforts to crack down on campus dissent.

### **PATRIOTISM ON PARADE**

On October 15, 1969, the Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam took place as students across the United States participated in demonstrations and teach-ins, campus forums that disseminated information and facilitated debates with pro- and antiwar perspectives. A group of 1,500 rallied in support of peace at the Oklahoma Capitol and small groups of students at OSU, OU, Phillips University, and Tulsa University participated, while schools like East Central, Cameron College (now Cameron University), and Central State (now the University of Central Oklahoma) did not.

Instead, students at Cameron participated in a “We Love America” parade and received praise from Governor Bartlett, who had urged students to resist the moratorium. One student wrote to assure him that Cameron would not participate in the moratorium, saying:

We hate war; we hate dying;  
we love America and will keep  
Old Glory flying.

Located just a few miles from Ft. Sill, with many military dependents attending the school during the Vietnam War, it is not surprising that Cameron students chose not to participate in the moratorium. However, nearly half of Cameron students who were surveyed thought the campus *should* participate. Patricia Loughlin noted in her history of Central State that some students were critical of the student government decision not to participate in the moratorium. They protested anyway

and were labeled unpatriotic for doing so. Support for the Vietnam War was far from universal, even on conservative campuses in a conservative state.

### **TRAGEDY AT KENT STATE**

Shootings at Kent State fundamentally transformed the antiwar movement and led to the largest student protests in American history. Events leading to the tragedy began with national campus unrest in response to President Richard M. Nixon’s announcement of the bombing of Cambodia on April 30, 1970. The announcement signified a widening of the war rather than the drawdown many had expected.

Tensions at Kent State escalated and the Ohio National Guard was ordered to campus to maintain peace. The country was shocked to learn that four unarmed students were shot and killed by the soldiers on May 4. In the wake of the shootings, at least 450 schools were temporarily shut down (some for the rest of the semester) because of protests, and National Guard units were called in to restore order on at least two dozen occasions that May. Many students who had previously not participated in demonstrations of any kind were galvanized by the killings to engage in protests.

In Oklahoma, students responded to the Kent State news with shock. Several schools, including OSU, Central State, and the University of Tulsa, held candlelight vigils to mourn the death of the Kent State students. Students at OU participated in a candlelight vigil on the evening of May 4 and continued to mourn and protest all through the week of May 5 to May 12, 1970, marking the most volatile period of student unrest in Oklahoma history.

### **PLANNING FOR PROTEST**

On May 5, the day after the Kent State shootings, a mild protest on the OU campus quickly turned violent when



While students protest, one does his best to drown out the university president's speech, May 6, 1970. Bob Albright, *Oklahoma Times*.

student Keith Green was arrested for waving a Viet Cong flag. Approximately 500 students surrounded the police car that held Green, refusing to allow the car to move forward. They let the air out of the tires, attempted to set fire to the gas tank, and even tried to wrest Green from the car. Bill Jones, the OU chief of police, called in 100 state troopers for backup. In the midst of this pandemonium, an OU officer's gun went missing for several minutes before a student (who seems to have found it on the ground) returned it to an officer. Several students received minor injuries during altercations with officers, and two students were arrested for interfering with law enforcement. The incident had a sobering effect across campus and only exacerbated Governor Bartlett's desire to stop demonstrations of any kind.

The unstable nature of what many described as a "melee" convinced Bill Jones that a different approach was needed to prevent further violence on campus, and he was not alone. As William McKeen argued in his dissertation about that week, the events of May 5 led to a remarkable campus-wide effort to allow students to peacefully protest. "The university administration maneuvered through the next week," McKeen noted, "determined to allow peaceful expressions of dissent." Campus police, student government officers, university administrators, faculty, staff, students, and activists all contributed

to the effort to prevent violence while still providing for students to convey their deep anger and sadness over the war and the Kent State shootings.

Volunteer faculty and student Peace Marshals wearing black arm bands patrolled the campus that week to help maintain calm. The ROTC cadre commander, Lieutenant Colonel Leroy Land, took warm drinks to shivering protesters outside the ROTC building on one particularly cold morning. Bill Jones, identifying himself as the university's "Chief Pig" to lighten tensions, met with students who planned a demonstration at the May 12 ceremony to be held by the ROTC. He worked with Land to identify where protesters could stand without obstructing the ceremony. Students who interfered with the ceremony would be arrested, and Governor Bartlett had threatened to send in both state troopers and the National Guard. No one at OU wanted to see this happen so antiwar protesters cooperated with Jones and Land. When a few protesters inadvertently blocked the parade route, Land redirected it slightly to avoid arrests.

Unlike hundreds of other schools across the country, OU stayed open that week in May and the campus community coalesced around a shared commitment to protect both free speech and student lives. Governor Bartlett, for a variety of reasons, seemed committed to sending in the National Guard and he repeatedly threatened to do so that week. OU President J. Herbert Hollomon, who was neither liked nor trusted by the governor, told Bartlett that the blood would be on his hands if he sent in troops against Hollomon's wishes. Ultimately, the governor backed down

and the demonstration of May 12 ended peacefully. Only four students, of their own choosing, were arrested as a symbol of their protest. Governor Bartlett later told Bill Jones that OU did the right thing that day, but he had far greater praise for OSU President Kamm, writing to say how pleased he was that there had been no such unrest at OSU that May.

What many outside of OU could not have fully appreciated was what a remarkable accomplishment it was that no one was hurt or killed. To be sure, what most clearly stands out about Oklahoma in the aftermath of Kent State was not the size of protests, but the commitment to saving lives.

SARAH EPLER JANDA is a professor of history at Cameron University and author of *Beloved Women: The Political Lives of LaDonna Harris and Wilma Mankiller* (Northern Illinois Univ. Press, 2007) and *Pride of the Wichitas: A History of Cameron University* (Oklahoma Heritage Assoc., 2010). Her forthcoming book is *Prairie Power: Student Activism, Counterculture, and Backlash in Oklahoma, 1962-1972* (Univ. of Oklahoma Press, spring 2018).

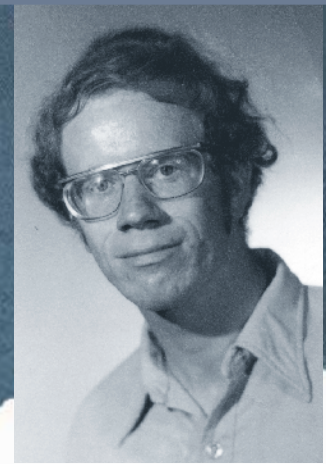
#### EXTRA! READ | THINK | TALK | LINK

- "Vietnam War Protests," John W. Miller, *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, Oklahoma Historical Society. History on Oklahoma campuses. [okhistory.org](http://okhistory.org)
- "Resistance and Revolution: The Anti-Vietnam War Movement at the University of Michigan, 1965-1972." Photos and essays on the first teach-in, a model replicated on campuses across the country. [lsa.umich.edu/history/public-history.html](http://lsa.umich.edu/history/public-history.html) (scroll to exhibit title)
- "'There Was All This Chaos': Vietnam Era Antiwar Activists Reflect," Daniel S. Levy, *TIME* magazine, Jan. 30, 2015. Memories of the era. [time.com](http://time.com)
- *The Pacific Northwest Antiwar and Radical History Project*, University of Washington. Photos and essays on draft resistance and GI dissent. [depts.washington.edu/antiwar](http://depts.washington.edu/antiwar)



# CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTOR

Thom Nickels  
Conscientious Objector  
Author, *Literary Philadelphia*



## **In 1969, I was a teenager in a quandary.**

Many young Americans were beginning to question the Vietnam War. I remember telling my family that I admired the men who fled to Canada or became conscientious objectors rather than participate in an immoral war. We argued at the dinner table, at the breakfast table, and finally agreed to disagree.

So you can imagine the tension once I announced my decision to register as a CO. My father's concern was protecting the family name. My mother, in tears, pleaded with me to think of my father's work as an architect. Would his business fail because of me? I was warned that becoming a CO would destroy my career options. Intuitively I knew this wasn't true; surely attitudes about the value of the war would change.

When I applied for CO status, my beliefs were influenced by secular thinkers like Camus, Thoreau, and Bertrand Russell. These writers helped me formulate the idea that, with the advent of nuclear weapons, every war risks destroying the planet. I also concluded that to become a soldier puts you in the hands of a commander who, in the panic and anarchy of the battlefield, might order you to kill women and children rather than enemy soldiers.

Fleeing to Canada rather than register for the draft or as a CO became a valid option for many. In my case, jail seemed preferable to leaving my country, especially when laws barred my return to the U.S. (That changed when President Jimmy Carter extended amnesty to young men who fled to Canada.) CO applicants were required to write an essay explaining one's beliefs. If that essay was accepted, the next step was a Q&A appearance before the local draft board, after which the registrant would be obligated to obey the board's decision. A rejected applicant must enlist in the Army or face a two-year prison term.

When I presented myself before the board, they asked me if I would have fought in World War II to prevent Hitler from invading the U.S. I replied that wars now risk obliterating the planet, and the issues with Vietnam are hardly as clear as they were when Nazis threatened civilization. Although I felt great relief when the draft board granted my request, my family life became more stressful than ever. My father, in a desperate moment, ordered me to stop reading books, and my mother had the unpleasant task of informing relatives and friends that Tommy was a conscientious objector.

Five months later, I boarded a Greyhound bus to Boston, not knowing where I would live or work. I'd chosen Boston as my alternative service city, which met the requirement of being at least 100 miles from my home. I found a room in Harvard Square with grad students, and was soon hired as an orderly at Tufts New England Medical Center. When my service was up I felt a vast inner numbness. After two and a half years, I didn't know what I wanted to do. I headed to Colorado, where I took a job in a hotel and wrote movie reviews for a local magazine. The year in Colorado helped me focus on the future. By this time my younger brother had enlisted in the Navy and was serving in Vietnam.

Day by day, public support of the war seemed to shrink. A sea change occurred in 1971 when Daniel Ellsberg leaked the Pentagon Papers. As Ellsberg later put it, "My government was involved in an unjust war that was going to continue and get larger." Now, at family gatherings, I noticed that relatives who had disapproved of my decision were losing their judgmental looks. Protests against the war were now mainstream as more leaders called for withdrawal of U.S. troops. My mother confided that she had jumped to my defense at a family cocktail party when an uncle called me a coward. My father's business was flourishing. Nothing had happened to the family name, outside of a few disparaging remarks from random neighbors or drunken uncles.

To their everlasting credit, my father and brother eventually congratulated me for my prescience in knowing that public opinion would change, and that the war in Vietnam served no purpose except to kill thousands of young men. Looking back on that experience nearly half a century later, I feel that I and thousands of other conscientious objectors did succeed. We demonstrated that misguided wars can be ended, if enough people are willing to say "no" and stick to their convictions. ❖ Thom Nickels is a Philadelphia author, poet, and journalist. He is theater critic at *ICON Magazine* and a weekly columnist for *Philadelphia Magazine* and *The Philadelphia Free Press*. He is author of eleven books. His next book is *Great Philadelphia Mansions*, forthcoming late 2017.



Longing, Denise Duong

# ON TRUE WAR STORIES

VIET THANH NGUYEN

There's no such thing  
as a good war story.



**War is hell.** Like many Americans and people the world over, I enjoy war stories that depend on what seems to be a disturbing idea. I have a personal stake in such stories, having been born in Vietnam but raised, or made, as it were, in America. A war brought me from over there to over here, an experience I share with millions of my fellow Americans. Sometimes I wonder whether my circumstances, or what my parents endured, can be called a war story, and how that story can be told. In “How to Tell a True War Story,” from *The Things They Carried*, Tim O’Brien says:

War is hell, but that’s not the half of it, because war is mystery and terror and adventure and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and love. War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead. The truths are contradictory.

I have only experienced the half of war that is not any fun. Perhaps that is why thrilling war stories captivate me, the ones with “gore galore,” in the words of art critic Lucy Lippard. But as good as those war stories are, perhaps they are not actually true.

One of my early encounters with a true war story was reading Larry Heinemann’s *Close Quarters*, which shocked me when I was perhaps eleven or twelve. Near the end of this Vietnam War novel, the young all-American soldier who is the narrator puts a gun to the head of a Vietnamese prostitute named Claymore Face. He gives her a choice: — him and his friends or get blown away. The novel renders no judgment on this rape, leaving me alone with my feelings, without the comfort provided by the author telling me that this was wrong. I could not forgive Heinemann for scarring me with such an ugly scene until I wrote a novel myself decades later. This is when I realized that

some things are so nasty the writer should simply show them as they are. The ugliness is, and must be, unforgettable.

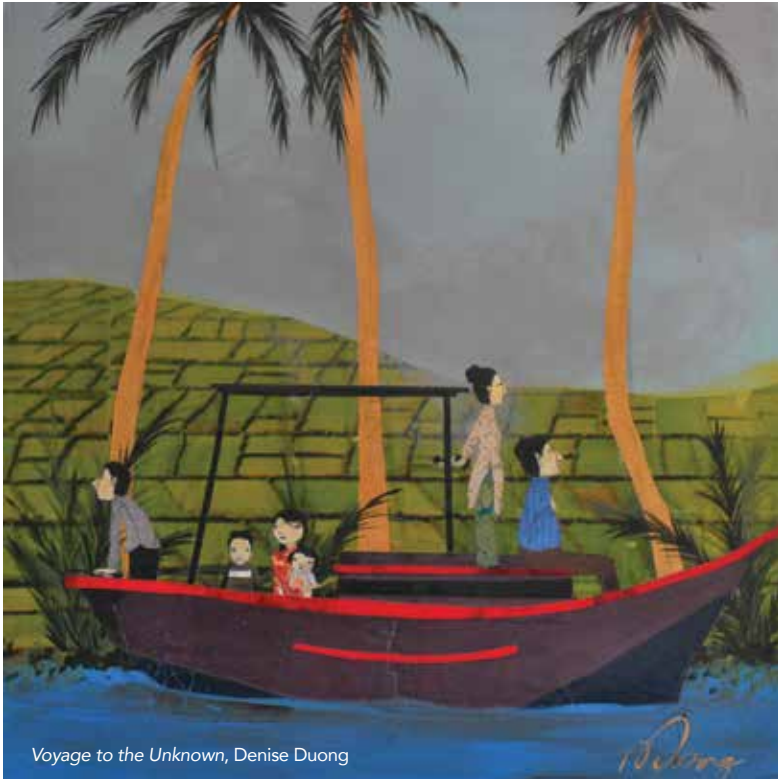
Still. It did not matter if Heinemann’s sympathies might lie with Claymore Face, because the story belonged to the American soldier. I dimly realized a few things that would take me years to articulate. First: better to be victimizer than victim. That’s why America’s Vietnam War stories, which often dwell on the bad things that Americans have done, depend on turning the Vietnamese into bit actors. As any movie star will attest, it is preferable to take center stage as antihero than take to the wings as virtuous extra. This is why bleak Vietnam War stories still do well in an America that sometimes does its hardest to deny its sometimes nasty behavior. Americans applaud these stories and successors like *Zero Dark Thirty*, for even if they depict Americans torturing others, their audiences know it is far more interesting to torture than be tortured. Or, as Milton’s Satan observed, better to rule in Hell than serve in Heaven.

The second thing I learned from Heinemann: rape was hard to account for in a certain kind of war story, the one that audiences call “good.” If, in a good war story, war makes you a man, does rape make you a woman? If women are unmade by rape (as are the male victims of rape), *Close Quarters* shows that the kind of man made by rape was not the kind anybody wants around. That’s why Americans welcome home their soldiers without wanting to think too much about what they might have done over there. Killing is not the problem. No one is concerned that Clint Eastwood can celebrate, in his film, an American sniper who killed one hundred and sixty people in a rather intimate way, seeing their faces through his scope. But rape? Look away. The other side does it, not us.

The last thing I learned from Claymore Face was that she did and did not

have my face. She was Vietnamese and a gook. So was I in the eyes of some Americans, a host of Hollywood screenwriters, and directors who had killed nearly as many Vietnamese on screen as had died in the war. And yet I was also an American. People like me, the Vietnamese who fled to the United States after the war’s end, were living proof of the success of one of America’s greatest desires, to win the hearts and minds of others. America’s ability to do so was the central message of John Wayne’s propaganda movie set in Vietnam, *The Green Berets*. The wrong-headedness of this desire is inadvertently shown in the infamous final shot. Wayne, the American soldier, walks into the sunset with a young Vietnamese orphan in need of his paternal benevolence. The sun is setting in the South China Sea, but that sea lies east of Vietnam. Americans cannot see straight sometimes, which is why many thought that Iraqis would treat their invaders as liberators, even though Americans themselves would never do any such thing.

I heard a different kind of war story as I grew up among Vietnamese refugees. There was the one about a man who held up a mom-and-pop shop in a small Vietnamese town with a hand grenade. Or the one about a mother who fled that small town when the communists arrived, taking her sons but leaving behind her adopted teenage daughter to take care of the shop, believing she would soon return. Mother and daughter would not see each other again for twenty years. Or what about the time that mother and her husband opened another shop in San Jose, California, and were shot on Christmas Eve in an armed robbery? Or how they cried when they received letters announcing the deaths of their parents in their now lost homeland? Or how they worked twelve-hour days every day of the year except for Christmas, Easter, and Tet?



Voyage to the Unknown, Denise Duong

## Being acclimated to hell is part of our disorder.

Those were my parents. Their stories are typical of refugees, although when I mention them to other Americans, an uncomfortable silence usually ensues, since these things did not happen to most Americans. But are not these stories also war stories? For many people, and according to O'Brien's definition, no. There is nothing fun about losing home, business, family, health, sanity, or country, some or all of which happened to so many of the Vietnamese people I know. You don't get a medal for these kinds of things, much less a belated parade or memorial, and hardly ever a movie. What you get are war stories told about the soldiers who came to your country to save you from communism, just as we are now getting war stories about the soldiers who went to Iraq and Afghanistan. Heinemann's novel was part of a whole wave of stories that refought the Vietnam War on page and screen. These stories are how most global audiences know this war, the first war in history where the loser gets to write the history for the world. While the Vietnamese have written history, too, their stories stand little chance against the shock and awe

of the American military-cinema-industrial complex. But as novelist Gina Apostol says of this complex: "Does it not suggest not only an economic order but also a psychiatric disorder?"

This disorder thrives on the excitement of good war stories, which, like O'Brien, overlook at least two things that war happens to be. First: war is profitable. Few storytellers want to discuss this because the fact that war makes an enormous amount of money is either disturbing to most Americans or not disturbing at all, due to the aforementioned disorder. Second: war is a bore. Photographer Tod Papageorge's book, *American Sports, 1970: Or How We Spent the War in Vietnam*, shows how trivial the war was for many Americans. The photographs simply capture Americans playing in sporting events or watching them. Only the last photograph of the War Memorial in Indianapolis acknowledges the war, with these words on the facing page: "In 1970, 4,221 American troops were killed in Vietnam." Even as American soldiers died abroad, life went on at home. So it is with America's wars in the Middle East, akin to a sporting event for those Americans not directly involved, which is to say the overwhelming majority. Papageorge's photos are true war stories of life inside the war machine for civilians, most of whom are not paying much attention, if at all, to the wars fought in their name. What is most disturbing about his photos is the implication that if war is hell, then this is what hell looks like, Americans enjoying seemingly innocent pastimes.

Being acclimated to hell is part of our disorder. But listen carefully. Can't you hear the dull hum of the war machine we live in, the white noise of a massive mechanism oiled by banalities, bolted together by triviality, and enabled by passive consent? In "The Brother Who Went to Vietnam," from her book *China Men*, Maxine Hong Kingston writes:

Whenever we ate a candy bar, when we drank grape juice, bought bread (ITT makes Wonder bread), wrapped food in plastic, made a phone call, put money in the bank, cleaned the oven, washed with soap, turned on the electricity, refrigerated food, cooked it, ran a computer, drove a car, rode an airplane, sprayed with insecticide, we were



supporting the corporations that made tanks and bombers, napalm, defoliants, and bombs.

For the carpet bombing.

From carpets to carpet bombing, war is so woven into society's fabric that it is almost impossible for a citizen not to find war underfoot even at home.

For many, this is not a good war story, but a bad one they would rather avoid. This story says that all war is, in a sense, total war. Opening a refrigerator is a true war story. So is paying one's taxes. Complicity is the truest war story of all, which is why a blood-drenched movie like *Apocalypse Now* tells only half the true war story. It is about the heart of darkness over there, in the jungle where the white man discovers that he, too, is a savage, the heart of darkness beating within him. But the other half of the true war story would show that the heart of darkness is also where we reside, over here, all around us. Americans do not wish to confront this domestic horror directly, which is why they substitute for it stories of zombies and serial killers and the like. Fictional violence and monstrous horror are easier to stomach than understanding how opening our refrigerator or watching a football game connects us to war, which is not thrilling at all. The true war story is not only that war is hell, a statement that never prevented us from going to war but has always gotten us to run to the movie theater or pick up a book. The true war story is also that war is normal, which is why we are always going to war. War is boring, a bad story most people do want to hear. War involves all of us, and that is more discomfiting than any horror story over here or blood-and-guts story over there.

The fact that my family of refugees has become living proof of the American Dream is also a true war story, my

parents wealthy, my brother a doctor on a White House committee, and myself a professor and novelist. To many Americans, we are evidence that the war was worth it, since it gave us the chance to be better Americans than many Americans. But if we are a testament to the immigrant story, we are only here because the United States fought a war that killed three million Vietnamese (not counting the three million others that died in neighboring Laos and Cambodia during the war and immediately after). Filipinos are here because of the U.S. war that killed a million people in the Philippines in 1898. Koreans are here because of the Korean War that killed three million. We can argue about the blame, but the list goes on, as Junot Díaz also understands. In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, he tells us:

Just as the U.S. was ramping up its involvement in Vietnam, LBJ launched an illegal invasion of the Dominican Republic (April 28, 1965). (Santo Domingo was Iraq before Iraq was Iraq). A smashing military success for the U.S., and many of the same units and intelligence teams that took part in the 'democratization' of Santo Domingo were immediately shipped off to Saigon.

Many Americans forgot or never knew this true war story. If Americans think of the arrival of Dominicans to America at all, they most likely think of it as an immigrant story.

But what if we understood immigrant stories to be war stories? And what if we understood that war stories disturb even more when they are not about soldiers, when they show us how normal war is, how war touches and transforms everything and everybody, including, most of all, civilians? War stories that thrill may be true, but they only make war more

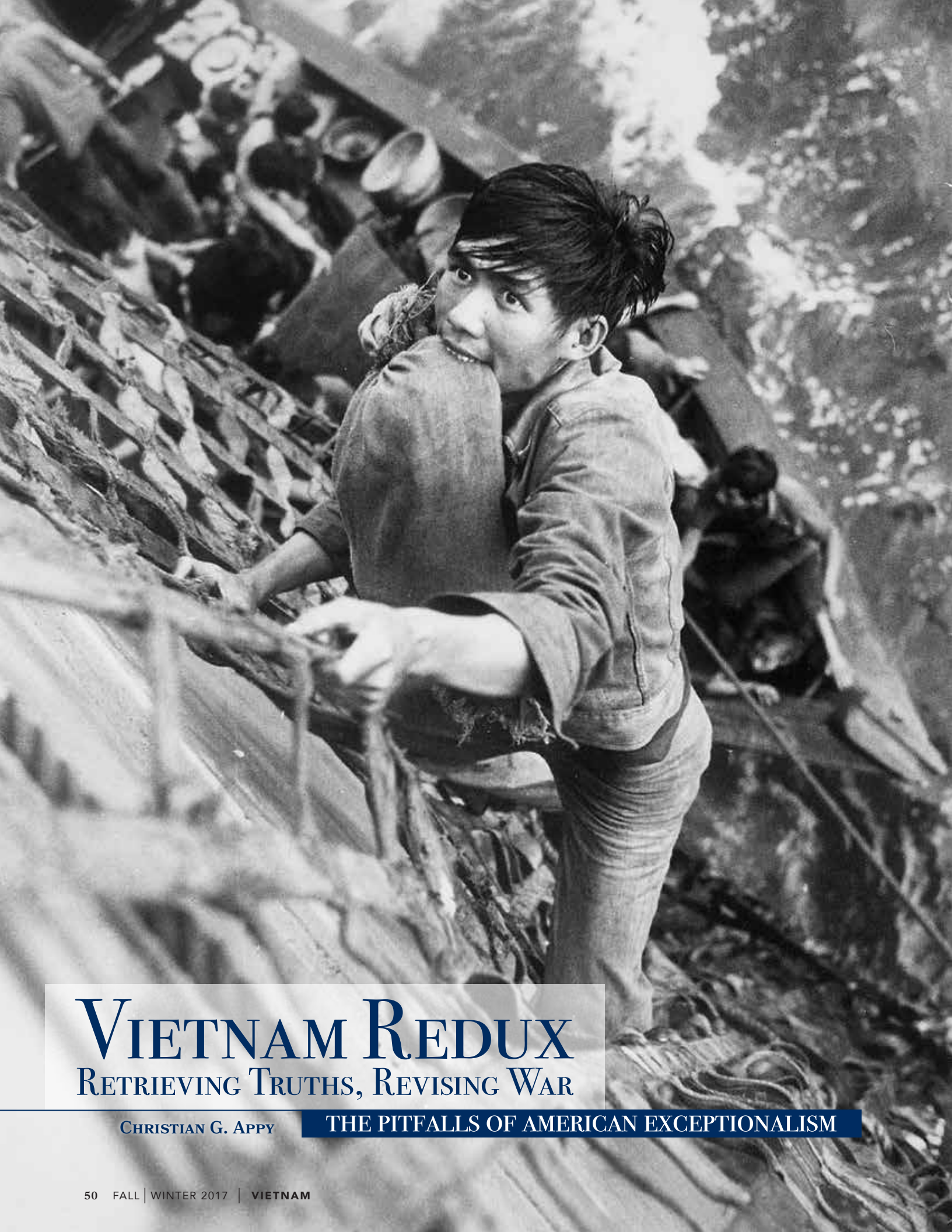
alluring, something that happens somewhere else, over there. Another kind of true war story reminds us of something much more uncomfortable: that war begins, and ends, over here, with the support of citizens for the war machine, with the arrival of frightened refugees fleeing wars that we have instigated. Telling these kinds of stories, or learning to read, see, and hear boring stories as war stories, is an important way to treat the disorder of our military-industrial complex. Rather than being disturbed by the idea that war is hell, this complex thrives on it.

VIET THANH NGUYEN's novel *The Sympathizer* (Grove Atlantic, 2015) won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, the Dayton Literary Peace Prize, and other awards. His other books include *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Harvard Univ. Press, 2016), a finalist for the National Book Award in nonfiction. His newest book is a short story collection, *The Refugees* (Grove Press, 2017). This essay first appeared in "(Re)Collecting the Vietnam War" (*The Asian American Literary Review*, Fall 2015).

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- Visit Nguyen's website to link to essays, interviews, and lectures. [vietnguyen.info/home](http://vietnguyen.info/home)
- *First Days Story Project: Voices of the Vietnam Refugee Experience*, a collaboration of *American Experience* (PBS) and StoryCorps. Audio narratives and photos documenting experiences of Vietnamese American refugees and Vietnam War veterans. [pbs.org](http://pbs.org) [search: American Experience, *Last Days in Vietnam*]
- "How Vietnamese Refugees Spent 40 Years Rejuvenating an Oklahoma City Neighborhood," Jacob McClelland, KGOU, Dec. 30, 2015. Vietnamese refugees who immigrated to OKC and created a vibrant Asian District of restaurants and businesses. [kgou.org](http://kgou.org)



# VIETNAM REDUX

RETRIEVING TRUTHS, REVISING WAR

CHRISTIAN G. APPY

THE PITFALLS OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM



I had not intended to write another book about the Vietnam War. However, as the apparently endless wars in Afghanistan and Iraq dragged on, year after year, it felt imperative to re-examine a history that bears so many troubling similarities with the present.

In the twenty-first century, as in Vietnam a half century ago, the United States once again waged undeclared war under false pretexts; once again, hundreds of thousands of American troops were deployed to distant lands where they were widely perceived as hostile invaders; once again, the mission was to prop up foreign governments that could not gain the broad support of their own people; once again, we fought brutal counter-insurgencies guaranteed to maim, kill, or displace countless civilians; once again, U.S. officials insisted that victory depended on winning the “hearts and minds” of ordinary people even as our warfare was endangering those very people and driving them into the arms of the enemy; once again, the fighting persisted long after a majority of Americans had deemed it mistaken or even immoral; and once again the government failed to achieve its stated objectives and sought face-saving exits to disguise the disasters it had created.

These commonalities are themselves sufficient reason to insist on the relevance of the Vietnam War to our own times. However, there is another, more pressing, need to seek a full reckoning of what we did in Vietnam so many decades ago. Now, more than ever, there is widespread disdain for fact-based evidence of all kinds—historical, scientific, environmental, social, medical, and more. Powerful individuals and institutions have always had the capacity and propensity to discredit or ignore knowledge that challenges their authority. But in recent years the contempt for verifiable evidence is more brazen. Public officials often act as if appearances are more important than reality; or, even more disturbing, that “reality”

itself can be invented.

About a year after the Iraq War began, a senior adviser to President George Bush mocked journalist Ron Suskind for belonging to the “reality-based community,” people who base their evaluations of the government on “the judicious study of discernible reality.” However, the aide continued, “that’s not the way the world really works anymore. We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we’ll act again, creating other new realities. . . . We’re history’s actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.”

If that is, in fact, now the “way the world really works,” those of us in the “reality-based community” must work harder than ever to recover and defend the historical memories that have been most successfully silenced, distorted, or replaced by stories that serve the interests of power. Thus, the impetus for my writing *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity*.

## THE REFUGEE COUNT

Vietnam War history has been particularly susceptible to campaigns that have sought to cleanse it of painful reminders of national failure and wrong-doing. A powerful strain in this effort has been the post-Vietnam insistence that supporting and thanking our troops is more important than critical thinking about the wars they are sent to fight. Saying “thank you for your service” is a gesture that requires nothing of us. In addition to dampening dissent, its main function may be to ease the conscience of a nation that relies on less than one percent of its fellow citizens to fight its wars. If we really want to honor veterans—or anyone for that matter—we need to care about their experiences. We need to engage them, and listen.

Let’s listen to a Vietnam veteran named Jim Soular. In 2000, I met him in Hanoi. He was returning to Vietnam for the first time

A Vietnamese refugee, with his belongings secured between his teeth, climbs a cargo net to the deck of the USS *White Plains*. The ship is picking up 29 refugees from a 35-foot wooden boat in the South China Sea. July 30, 1979. Dept. of Defense, National Archives

since 1967. Why had he made the long, arduous trip? “I wanted to come back and see the place at peace,” Jim explained. “I wanted to put a face on the Vietnamese because I damn sure didn’t the first time I was here. They were just ‘gooks,’ ‘slopes,’ or ‘dinks.’”

Jim Soular, like so many veterans, had working-class roots. He grew up in the Mesabi Iron range of northern Minnesota. He followed his father and many other relatives into the open pit mines. It was not long before a draft notice arrived. “I had no problem with that because I was a patriot. I believed in the flag. I believed in serving my country.” And he was good at it, acing every course and eventually

becoming flight engineer on the enormous, tandem rotor, Chinook helicopter—the CH-47.

In Vietnam, Jim served with the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division (Airmobile). “As a flight engineer I was in charge of a one-and-a-half-million

dollar helicopter. Wherever it went, I went. I took care of all the maintenance, all the records. It was my ship. There was something grand about that for a nineteen-year-old specialist E-4. And I just loved flying. Every time those turbines started winding up, I just thought, *yeah!*”

Specialist Soular flew on all kinds of missions, but the ones he dreaded most forced South Vietnamese peasants out of their rural villages against their will. “On one mission,” he recalls, “when we were depopulating a village we packed about sixty people into my Chinook. They’d never been near this kind of machine and were really scared, but there were people forcing them in with M-16s so they didn’t have a choice. We got ‘em in and had them squatting. I could see the terror in their faces. They were defecating and urinating and completely freaked out. It was horrible. We started lifting off and one of the Vietnamese in the back stood up and freaked out. He was in his thirties or forties, hard to tell. We were probably sixty feet off the ground, maybe more. The crew chief just thought, fuck it, you’re out of here, and pitched the man out the back end. I remember looking out the side of the chopper when he hit the ground. I’m sure he was killed but we never heard anything about it.”

It wasn’t the killing alone that troubled Jim. “I felt within myself that the forced dislocation of these people was a real tragedy. I never flew refugees back in. It was always out. Quite often they would find their own way back into those free-fire zones. We didn’t understand that their ancestors were buried there, that it was very important to their culture and religion to be with their ancestors.”

From the late 1950s into the early 1970s, the United States military forcibly relocated or displaced between 5 and 10 million South Vietnamese rural farmers (out of a total population of 19 million). They were driven into “strategic hamlets,”

**“I felt within myself that the forced dislocation of these people was a real tragedy. I never flew refugees back in. It was always out.”**



Dept. of Defense, 1965 caption: The wages of many years of war are reflected in the faces of this aged Vietnamese couple in a U.S. Marine Corps-sponsored refugee camp, Le My, Vietnam. Hundreds of such Vietnamese families were evacuated from Viet Cong terrorism by Leathernecks of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 3<sup>rd</sup> Marines Regiment, 3<sup>rd</sup> Marines Division. National Archives



refugee camps, shantytowns, and the ever-swelling cities (the Saigon population soared from 300,000 to 3 million). Once emptied of people, the villages were typically burned down or plowed under and then declared “free fire zones”—places which the U.S. claimed the right to bomb or shell indiscriminately despite the fact that many of the displaced villagers returned to their ancestral land to rebuild.

American officials were not ashamed of these policies. In fact, they regarded the “generation of refugees” a measure of success, almost as crucial as the “body count.” The goal was to deprive Communist forces of the food, shelter, intelligence, and recruits offered by many rural peasants. If you remove the villagers, you remove the enemy’s life support system. That was the theory. Predictably, however, forced relocations merely deepened civilian anger at the United States and the Saigon government it backed.

### REVIVING EXCEPTIONALISM

For Jim Soular, service in Vietnam profoundly undermined his youthful faith in American exceptionalism, the idea that the United States is a unique and invincible force for good in the world, always on the side of democracy and human rights, with higher moral standards than other countries or cultures. “Everything I’d been raised to believe in was contrary to what I saw in Vietnam,” he concluded.

Another indelible memory: His chopper was used to evacuate a platoon of U.S. troops in thick jungle near Kontum. “They had to blow a hole in the jungle for us to get in and there was just barely enough room. It was like dropping down a tunnel. As we dropped down in there these guys started materializing out of the jungle. They’d been out so long their fatigues were rotting off. I’ll never forget this one guy. He came on board and he

had about four or five scalps hanging from his belt. You know, every now and then you’d see a guy with a string of ears, but I’d never seen scalps before. These were bad-looking dudes. But I could tell they were just young guys like us.”

Jim was hardly alone in his growing opposition to the war. No event in our history demanded more soul-searching. Never before had such a wide range of Americans come to doubt their nation’s use of military force and the values and institutions that supported it. By 1971, 71 percent of Americans had concluded that the war was a mistake; 58 percent believed it was immoral. Even pro-war hawks began to lose faith in the claims of American exceptionalism. How, they wondered, had the greatest military power in world history been unable to prevail against a small, poor, agricultural country? What had happened to the America that had rallied so magnificently to defeat fascism in World War II? Had the divisions of the 1960s forever destroyed our patriotic faith?

For the political right, defeat in Vietnam was an intense motivator. In the decades after the war, conservatives were determined to rebuild everything they thought the war had destroyed—the faith in American exceptionalism and the power, pride, and patriotism that buttressed the creed. The success of that project depended in part on marginalizing the kind of damning testimony offered by Jim Soular. If Vietnamese refugees were to be remembered at all, they were not those created intentionally by U.S. policy, but those who fled Vietnam at war’s end out of fear of Communist reprisals. By ignoring the ways U.S. intervention in Vietnam endangered all Vietnamese, including our “allies,” a focus on the plight of postwar refugees, and the Americans who helped them, might even supplant a story of imperial ruthlessness with one of heroic humanitarianism.

### REAL TO REEL— RECASTING THE END-STORY

One of the most recent versions of the Vietnam end-story comes from filmmaker Rory Kennedy, daughter of Senator Robert Kennedy who was assassinated in the midst of his 1968 antiwar campaign for president. In her 2014 documentary, *Last Days in Vietnam*, Kennedy highlights a handful of heroic Americans, and a few Vietnamese, who carried out a series of ad hoc rescue missions to evacuate South Vietnamese in defiance of U.S. ambassador Graham Martin, who stubbornly delayed the official evacuation until the last possible moment out of a delusional faith that defeat could be averted.

The drama and danger of these unauthorized evacuations is amped up by the film’s undocumented assertion that all Vietnamese seeking to leave were in mortal peril. Several of the witnesses invoke the specter of a Communist “bloodbath,” a staple of pro-war propaganda since the 1960s. (President Nixon once warned that the Communists of Vietnam would massacre civilians “in the millions” if the U.S. pulled out.) The heroes of Kennedy’s documentary make the unchallenged claim that the people they were rescuing were “dead men walking” who would certainly be murdered if they remained in their homeland.

Of course, the Communist victors were hardly merciful to their vanquished enemies. They imprisoned hundreds of thousands of people in “re-education camps” and subjected them to brutal, even deadly, treatment. However, Nixon’s imagined bloodbath never occurred. More to the point, the film simply ignores the historical evidence that most Vietnamese never perceived the Americans as saviors or rescuers; they were far more commonly viewed



South Vietnamese civilians scramble to board a helicopter during the evacuation of Saigon, April 29, 1975. Courtesy Hubert Van Es, Bettman, Getty Images, PBS

as destroyers—throughout the South as well as the North.

To bury that reality *Last Days in Vietnam* recycles another prominent piece of wartime propaganda—the idea that South Vietnam was a “free” nation resisting “external” Communist aggression. The film repeatedly shows a map in which North Vietnamese red ink floods ever downward over an all-white South, as if the war were a Communist invasion instead of a country-wide struggle that began in the South in opposition to a repressive American-backed dictator. In truth, significant portions of the South had

been “red” since the anticolonial struggle against the French in the 1940s and 1950s. Had the South been uniformly and fervently anti-Communist, the war might well have had a different outcome. In fact, South Vietnam, with U.S. support, blocked reunification elections in 1956 (called for by the Geneva Accords) because it feared that southerners would help elect Communist leader Ho Chi Minh as president. Put another way, the U.S. betrayed the people of Vietnam and their right to self-determination, not by pulling out of the country in 1975, but by supporting the French war for colonial reconquest from 1946 to 1954 and then intervening directly in 1954.

### RECOVERING RESPONSIBILITY

Now, of course, we face another, even more extreme, refugee crisis, this time in the Greater Middle East. And much of it is the result of U.S. military intervention, especially in Iraq. In Vietnam, the U.S. should have done far more to organize a thorough and systematic evacuation of those who had tied their fortunes to the U.S. mission and sought to leave. Yet,

today, we have done far less to aid those fleeing the war zones we did so much to create. We have accepted only a paltry few of those seeking sanctuary on our shores.

A full reckoning of the Vietnam War and those that followed demands, in part, that we scrutinize our historical role in the “generation of refugees.” What might we learn from that history and how might we change? Perhaps the most difficult admission we might make is that our foreign policy has failed to demonstrate an equal regard for human life in all nations. That may be the ugliest underpinning of American exceptionalism, and disavowing that faith may be the only way to end the cycle of endless war. It is not true to the historic record, it insults all other nations, and it leaves us too deferential to leaders who deploy our troops by invoking its false assurances.

The final words belong to Jim Soular: “One of my big regrets is that we didn’t know anything about the Vietnamese when we went there and we didn’t know anything more when we left. If circumstances had been different, we might have learned so much from them instead of learning nothing and doing so much damage.”

CHRISTIAN APPY is a professor of history at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. His books on the Vietnam War include: *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity* (Viking, 2015), *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides* (Viking, 2003), and *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Univ. of N. Carolina Press, 1993).

### EXTRA! READ | THINK | TALK | LINK

- “Christian Appy: American Reckoning,” Seattle Town Hall lecture, Feb. 16, 2015. Appy discusses how defeat in the Vietnam War still affects America, from popular culture to foreign policy. [youtube.com](http://youtube.com)
- *Last Days in Vietnam*, produced and directed by Rory Kennedy, *American Experience*, PBS. Film clips, image and video galleries, and StoryCorps audio of refugee and veteran first-person narratives. [pbs.org](http://pbs.org)



## OKLAHOMA HUMANITIES

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# VET VOICES

Gary L. Smith, A2C  
Communications Specialist  
United States Air Force



## I was assigned to the 1965<sup>th</sup> Communications

Squadron, Ubon, Thailand, from June 1964 to June 1965. Flying from Travis AFB outside of San Francisco, headed for Saigon, I was seated next to a guy from Arkansas. Looking out my window at the Pacific Ocean, I said, "Man, that's a lot of water down there," to which my Arkansas friend remarked, "Yeah, and that's just the top of it."

When I received my orders for Saigon in mid-1964, the full buildup of American troops had not yet begun. When my plane arrived, the heat was so intense that the Kiwi shoe polish I had applied to my boots the night before melted and ran down into the cracks and laces. Saigon was a bustling city, with just about anything a young soldier might be looking for, from Buddhist temples to downtown bars where a GI could pick up a girl. And, of course, all GIs had the same first name—Joe. Seeing how people lived in underdeveloped countries in Southeast Asia was an eye-opener.

After five days, we were told that there was a need for three Airmen to transfer to a small base in Thailand. I was one of the "lucky" guys. After a couple of days in Bangkok, I boarded a C123 cargo plane bound for Ubon in northeastern Thailand. Ubon is surrounded by jungle and a major river runs through the city, the Mun River. (A local band played a song that was popular in the U.S.—"Moon River.")

After getting signed in, I learned that my Top Secret security clearance had not yet followed me to Thailand. That meant I would be walking guard duty from midnight to eight a.m., each night until my clearance arrived. I walked guard duty around a communications/radar compound, armed with two weapons: a carbine 30 M1 rifle and a Smith and Wesson 38 revolver. I wasn't allowed to carry live ammunition because, in 1964, all troops were classified as military "advisers," not combat personnel. That made guard duty just a little uncertain. I once asked my OIC (Officer in Charge) what I was to do if approached by a person at the fence surrounding the compound. He just shrugged and said, "Well, Airman Smith, I guess you should aim your rifle and yell really loud, "BANG!" That wasn't the answer I was looking for.

My Top Secret clearance arrived and I went to work at the communications center. We were equipped with the latest crypto equipment that allowed us to send and receive classified traffic from other Air Force bases in Southeast Asia. Most of the traffic I handled was classified either "Secret" or "Top Secret," depending on the sensitivity of the message.

The first half of my tour was pretty uneventful as the war was just beginning to heat up with more troops arriving in Vietnam and Thailand. After six months, we received two squadrons of F4C fighter bombers, just about the coolest, meanest aircraft our armed services had at that time, and I loved watching them take off and land. The F4s that flew out of Ubon were credited for shooting down the first Russian MIGS in the Vietnam War.

One Sunday afternoon, we received an S.O.S. that an F100 bomber was badly shot up and would need immediate attention upon landing—if, in fact, he could safely land. I watched as the F100 approached, black smoke billowing from the rear of the plane. I thought he would crash for sure. As he neared the edge of the runway, he straightened up and landed without any difficulty. One of the guys on the fire truck told me that when the pilot exited the cockpit, his first words were, "Where's the chow hall? I am starved!" Our fighter pilots have ice water running through their veins.

The men I served with at Ubon were some of the best people I have ever been associated with. Like me, their main objective was to go back to "the world," home in the United States. August 1965 found me headed for home. There was no one to greet us at Travis AFB. We really didn't think there would be since the war was such a touchy subject back home. Getting off the plane, I made it a point to kneel down and kiss the runway. I was back in "the world!"

I am proud of my service. I feel I made a significant contribution to the war effort. However, I don't think we should ever have been there. There was nothing to be gained. South Vietnam should have fought its own war. ❖

Detail, *Wealth, Resistance & Heroic Protest*, Jane Irish. janeirish.com



## TELLING STORIES, REMEMBERING WAR

Stories help us make sense of war and heal from it.

MIA MARTINI

In a true war story, if there's a moral at all, it's like the thread that makes the cloth. You can't tease it out. You can't extract the meaning without unraveling the deeper meaning. And in the end, really, there's nothing much to say about a true war story, except maybe "Oh."

—Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*

Vietnam remains the most controversial war of the twentieth century, a scar on the American psyche. U.S. involvement, the treatment of veterans, and the war's legacy continue to evoke strong emotions. Narrative and storytelling—in this case, the way we tell the story of Vietnam—play a role in the process of integrating memory and trauma. Films like *Apocalypse Now* and *Platoon* and books like *The Things They Carried* struggle to assimilate the conflict of war and, in doing so, show us a path to understanding and recovery. On an individual level, narrative allows a person to make sense of what they have experienced, to create order out of traumatic disorder. Narrative

also allows the nation to recuperate cultural memory, to make sense of war and heal from it.

Today, we have the misconception that the Vietnam War was well known and generally opposed. But before 1965, the conflict was mentioned only briefly in national news, and was usually called the French Colonial War or Second Indochina War. Media coverage began to increase with the TIME magazine cover story on Vietnam, October 22, 1965. TIME presented the war in an optimistic light, expressing pride in American military prowess. That year, TIME also reported on the first antiwar protests, but demonstrators were often outnumbered and outshouted



by war supporters. Reports of protests contained primarily pro-intervention attitudes. Until 1968, American journalists compared the mission in Vietnam to our mission in Europe twenty-five years earlier. TIME both measured American public sentiment and affected it through pro-war language, shaping the first story we told about the war.

Autumn 1969 marked a shift in public perception. In September, Alpha Company of 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion refused to attack a well-defended Viet Cong position, claiming that they had had enough. Both soldiers and civilians were war-weary. Two months later, news of the year-old My Lai massacre broke, further damaging American opinion. At My Lai, up to 504 unarmed civilians, including elderly men, women, and children, were killed (some also raped or mutilated) by Charlie Company soldiers. Of the 26 soldiers charged with criminal offenses, only Lieutenant William Calley, Jr., was convicted, and he served less than four years of his life sentence.

The first story on My Lai was incredulous, apologist, and defensive, all at the same time. The atrocity was blamed on the idea that not even Americans are immune to the cruelty of prolonged combat and that all soldiers can reach their breaking point. The story challenged our self-image as the protectors of democracy, rescuing the South Vietnamese from communism. The men of Charlie Company were a typical cross-section of U.S. troops and the very normality of the soldiers affected the American public; this company could have been any group of soldiers, including friends, family, or even themselves.

Media coverage of protests, poor field tactics, and massacres dominated popular imagination, drowning out the more common dispatches of events. The narrative of soldiers pushed past their limits continued as veterans returned home. In the 1970s, veterans were blamed for a much larger percentage of crime than they actually committed and it was commonplace to hear about “crazy vets.” They were portrayed by news corporations and the film industry as irredeemably damaged. Media sensationalism of veterans exacerbated domestic tensions, exposed ambiguity about support for the war, and allowed the narrative of continued presence in Vietnam to be shaded by concern for insane veterans and their impact on civilians.

Several Vietnam movies highlight this trend. *Taxi Driver*, released in 1976, is the story of Travis Bickle, an honorably discharged Marine who attempts to assassinate a senator. Bickle is disgusted by the crimes he witnesses while driving his taxi, and he unleashes his fury in a bloody and gratifying climax. Bickle is sympathetic, but not a truly heroic character. His actions serve mainly to highlight the instability of veterans.

*Apocalypse Now*, released in 1979, is one of the most popular Vietnam War movies and is the medium through which many people understand and interpret it. It is a standard

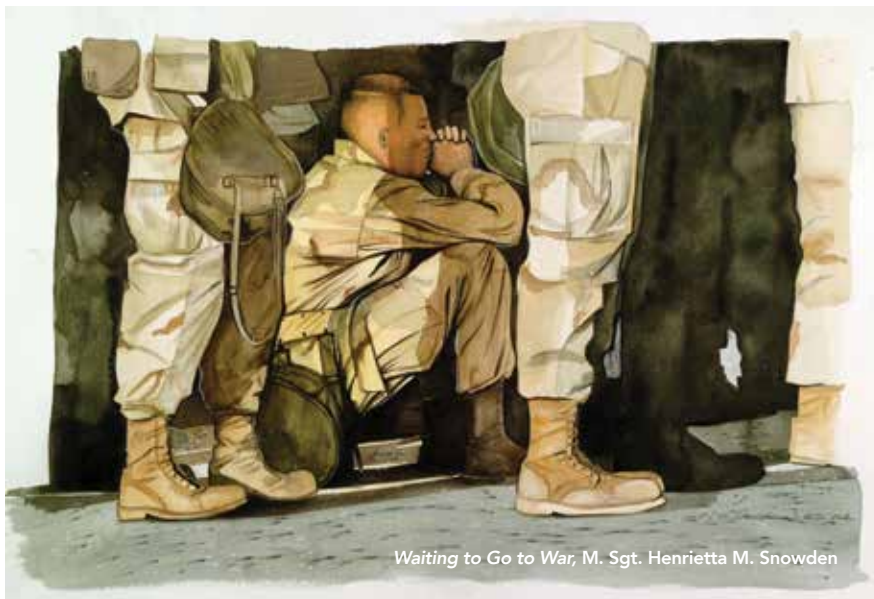


We are always retelling the story, and retelling it is necessary for us to move forward.

representation and, while many elements reflect American activity in Southeast Asia, the film emphasizes bleakness and inhumanity rather than the common experience of a soldier. The film follows Captain Willard on his secret mission to assassinate a rogue colonel, Kurtz, who has lost his sanity. Kurtz has formed his own company outside of the American military hierarchy, pretending to be a demi-god in Cambodia. There is no salvation in this film; to kill the monster, Willard must become a monster. There is no easy way to tell the difference between an officer in good standing and a lunatic. It suggests that anyone who fights in Vietnam must lose the greater part of his humanity and that the damage done to individual soldiers is insurmountable.

The healing of the American psyche began with the Vietnam War Memorial in 1982. This was the public recognition of honorable service, but it was not without controversy. Maya Lin's design was called a black ditch and some protested that its placement in the side of a hill indicated it was being hidden in shame. At the time, cultural critics compared the way the Memorial divided the country to the way the war itself prompted division. Today, it is the most popular destination on the Mall, but it took a decade to come into existence and acceptance occurred only grudgingly. Unlike the triumphant memorials from previous wars, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial has no glorious cavalry officers or conquering flag raisers. The list of casualties includes neither ranks nor units. It is a simple, understated wall and embodies the idea that we can honor the soldier without admiring war. The Wall allows the war to be critiqued, in the best sense of the word, to be discussed openly and reexamined. Although once politicized, the Wall is a neutral moment in time, marking the shift in how the war itself was portrayed.

After 1982, narratives surrounding Vietnam became more nuanced and reflected a greater diversity of opinion. Oliver Stone's *Platoon*, in 1986, emphasizes the moral ambiguity of guerrilla warfare rather than condemning soldiers caught in a war not of their own choosing. It was advertised as the first real Vietnam film, and was even considered history by some critics. Part of this was due to Stone's personal history; he was a decorated army veteran, which gave him more credibility than some other filmmakers. The film shows how difficult it is to find or create a single, clear narrative and makes all of the contradictions visible: Soldiers were highly skilled professionals and ill-trained pot-smokers. They were racially integrated and suffered racial tensions. American intervention was altruistic and selfishly motivated.



Waiting to Go to War, M. Sgt. Henrietta M. Snowden

*Platoon* follows infantry volunteer Chris Taylor through deployment, hazing, and integration in the unit, and his moral crisis following a My Lai-like incident. Much of the film is narrated with a voiceover of Taylor's letters to his grandmother; however, as Taylor abandons his romanticized view of war, he is no longer able to write. As combat affects him, he can no longer keep the story straight or understand what is happening. Taylor's narration intrudes on the story while also developing it, forcing the audience to reflect on the war's narrative as a whole: If this representation is a construction, then the overall cultural narrative may also be a construction. Rather than providing a unified story, the battle scenes focus on Taylor's perspective and the confusion of combat. This emphasizes the subjective nature of finding meaning in the narrative. Taylor is the future, the soldier who must go home having learned his lessons from Vietnam, obligated to teach those lessons to others. *Platoon*, unlike *Apocalypse Now*, allows for salvation in war, but also demands a collective response. Stone, while stressing the brutality of combat, additionally stresses the role good men play and indicates that the battle continues to be fought in the minds and hearts of the survivors—veterans and civilians alike.

Literature has also played a role in revising the way Vietnam is seen. *The Things They Carried*, written by Tim O'Brien and published in 1990, is a collection of short chapters, each containing commentary on the war, life, and truth, variously contradicting itself even within a single chapter. Like Stone, O'Brien served in Vietnam and his book is closely tied to his experiences there. "How to Tell a True War Story" includes four versions of the same event: the death of Curt Lemon. The first version is magical: "When he died it was beautiful, the way the sunlight lifted him up and sucked him high into a tree full of moss and vines and white blossoms." The second is brief: "He was playing catch with Rat, laughing, and then he was dead." The third focuses on the mess of death and how the narrator had to "shiny up [the tree] and peel him off." The fourth is again magical, retelling the part about the sun.

The story shows how the meaning of a war story can change based on how it is told and what is emphasized. It opens with the line: "This is true." But which version is true? The point is that they are all true, that it is "difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen." The story can be truer than the facts because it captures how everyone felt and what they experienced. To O'Brien, war stories are

always metaphorical, communicating an experience, not reciting facts. His book shows that we are always retelling the story, and retelling it is necessary for us to move forward.

O'Brien did not gloss the atrocities committed in Vietnam, but his novel works to humanize the participants and place the war in cultural context in a way that softens the overall memory of it. The novel asks an unspoken question: Can we be redeemed through storytelling? The answer is clearly yes; while the narratives, individually and collectively, implicate all Americans in the events of Vietnam, they also work to save us from the same events. O'Brien also wrote that stories are for joining the past to the future, implying that the story can save our cultural sanity, allow society to recover from Vietnam, and help prevent similar events in the future. The story will remain long after Vietnam becomes only a chapter or footnote in history.

Our collective conversation began with pride in saving Vietnam, shifted into shame over our involvement, hid the pain and guilt of our actions through sensationalizing veterans crimes, and finally moved to a place of redemption as soldiers were portrayed as complex, nuanced characters. The efforts of storytellers have transformed the wounds of Vietnam into scar tissue. The narratives force us to question not only the war, but the ways it is represented, and the way we remember it.

MIA MARTINI currently teaches composition at West Virginia University-Potomac State College and holds a Ph.D. in American literature from Purdue University. Her dissertation, *Imagining War: Shaping and Reshaping Cultural Memory in the Twentieth Century*, explores trauma and remembrance in American culture. She also studies film and narrative theory, and has presented on topics ranging from Norman Mailer to Nazi zombies. Snowden art, above, from: *In the Line of Duty: Army Art, 1965-2014*, Sarah G. Forgey, ed., U.S. Army Center of Military History (2015).



# VET VOICES

Terry P. Rizzuti, Sergeant (E-5)  
United States Marine Corps  
Author, *The Second Tour*



**My MOS was Rifleman**, so I mostly carried a rifle in Vietnam. For a short time I was a Radioman. Later on, I carried an M-79 grenade launcher, then went back to the rifle. I served with Golf Company, Second Battalion of the 26<sup>th</sup> Marines from late 1966 to late 1967. Our home base was in Phu Bai.

My identity was formed in Vietnam. I'm a Vietnam Vet—that's who I am. The war affected me in many ways, and I'm still sorting that all out. It made me more liberal, more tolerant, but also more cautious. In one sense I'm very proud to have been a combat Marine and a damn good one. But in another sense I'm very ashamed about certain incidents involving the breakdown of my moral character.

On December 8, 1966, our point man was shot in the face. The bullet tore his jaw off from the nose down. He just stood there in the trail staring back at all of us who were hugging the ground. The lieutenant kept yelling at me to take point, but I was frozen in place. By the time I worked up the nerve to rise and move past the point man, I couldn't look at him. I've always felt I contributed to his death by not being able to look him in the eye. He must have known how horrible he looked simply by using me as a mirror.

I'm not sure whether I'm a better person for having served in the war. How can you really know? I usually stand up well under pressure simply by telling myself, *Nobody's shooting at me, or What are they gonna do, send me to Vietnam?* I have a tremendous will to live and the self-confidence to survive. I am very introspective about good and evil and the capacity for both that exists within each individual. I have a good understanding of fear, terror, heroism, and cowardice.

I still have a lot of bitterness, however. The Agent Orange issue eats at me when I think about the effect it might have on my children and grandchildren, and when I fit it in with feelings that our government used us. I feel bitterness that Vietnam veterans were made the scapegoats for a society quagmired in an immoral war. I believe we should never have fought there, that we really had no reason to. But I also believe that since we did fight there, we should have fought to win. I don't think most people back home understood the Vietnam

War at all. I don't think they understand it now or even want to be reminded of it. I think someone called it "cultural denial."

Lots of things bother me about the Vietnam War. I lost an appreciation for rain, camping, woods, and physical fitness. I have a difficult time handling loud noises or crowded situations. I lost trust in organizations and institutions, and trust in myself in the sense that I lost the ability to communicate love and anger, for fear of breaking down in tears to the point of convulsions or becoming mad to the point of violence. I lost the ability to have fun. I lost faith, in the Christian sense. I lost a good portion of my hearing, which interferes with relationships and my ability to participate in discussions. I lost interest and drive and enjoyment. All of these aspects of my life require constant attention and control.

Most of my war memories center on the sad stuff, although I know we laughed a lot. Laughter was an excellent defense mechanism. When we were in "the rear" in Vietnam, we were rationed two beers per day, but two beers weren't enough to help us forget that we'd soon be returning to "the boonies." One day a friend and I discovered that the Air Wing had no restriction, so we headed to the Air Wing enlisted men's club. When the "airwingers" realized we were grunts, they started buying us beer in exchange for war stories.

The first few times we visited, we described firefights. My friend would tell the first half of a story, the beer would flow, and then I would finish the story and the beer would flow some more. One night my friend started a story that I didn't recognize. I had no clue what he was talking about. Halfway through he turned to me and said, "Your turn." The beer was flowing. "But it's your story," I said. "Come on man," he said, "it's your turn." So, I made up an ending, a real whopper to keep that beer flowing. We did this for several more weeks, making up war stories for beer. ❖

A U.S. Army Reserve soldier reads some of the 58,272 names etched into "The Wall" of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Washington, D.C., July 22, 2015. U.S. Army photo by Ken Scar



# THE VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL

AT 35

Controversy, commemoration, and  
the value of coming together

Gordon O. Taylor

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., dedicated in 1982, was mired in controversy from the start—from the architectural competition which selected Maya Lin's design; through the stages of opposition, approval, and years of construction; into wider, ongoing public response.

Lin's intent was for interaction: In the reflectivity of the black granite panels, inscribed with thousands of names of the fallen, is a solemn meeting place for all—for families and friends, surviving veterans, and Americans at large—to see themselves in a thoughtful encounter with those now far beyond. She conceived the project as transcending politics, a place to commemorate and help absorb unbearable loss.

The Memorial site now includes two statuary additions: a bronze sculpture depicting three infantrymen emerging from combat (dedicated in 1984) and a bronze of three female nurses, one of which holds a wounded soldier (dedicated in 1993). Lin contends that these separate statues wrongly suggest they are for the living and the names of the dead and missing carved into the Memorial Wall are solely for those lost. "The design I made was for the returning veterans," Lin wrote about her work, "and equally names all who served regardless of race, creed, or sex."

Thirty-five years may be too short a time in which to assess the significance of a war memorial. Nevertheless, in 2017 the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, in its

(presumably) final form, has settled into collective consciousness. The interactions with those who visit the site or ponder its meanings by looking at images have become less the source of still-simmering controversy and more of complicated yet calmer meditation on personal grief, national and international trauma, and how to learn from the past.

During the 1960s and 1970s, "the war at home" was as much a source of controversy as the conflict overseas. The domestic issues and debates persist to this day, alongside discussion of how wars since Vietnam have repeated—or departed from—American experience in Southeast Asia, or indeed the impact on countries and cultures, like Vietnam, seeking to cope with the aftermath of war.



### *Embracing War's Complexities*

In their postwar memoirs, many senior U.S. military officers would argue they had won the war militarily but that Washington politicians had lost it politically. After Tet, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had requested troop reinforcements, only to be denied by a president who would decide in March not to run for reelection. After 1969, they claimed, Congress and the Nixon White House had succumbed to domestic pressures, walking away from South Vietnamese allies in their time of greatest need. In this narrative, the military had done their duty only to be forsaken by feckless politicians.

Yet another storyline arose in the postwar years: that Westmoreland had mismanaged the war by committing to a senseless strategy of “attrition.” In this tale, narrow-minded officers sought glory through killing the enemy, dismissing the far more important aspects of population security and the political conflict so central to determining which side ultimately would prevail. No wonder, the narrative went, that massacres like My Lai had occurred. In the process, any nuances of American strategy were conveniently brushed aside.

Such competing narratives—neither one an accurate account of American experiences in Vietnam from 1964 to 1968—offer valuable perspective on how we talk about war. Our dialogue matters. The American war in Vietnam proved far more complex than reductive narratives would have us believe. And if we are to avoid similar fates, of simply assuming that American military power is a panacea for any overseas social or political problem, then we must embrace those complexities. Wars are complicated affairs—and so should be our discussions of them.

GREGORY A. DADDIS is an associate professor of history and director of Chapman University's MA Program in War and Society. He is a retired U.S. Army colonel who served in operations Desert Storm and Iraqi Freedom, and formerly as Chief of the American History Division in the Department of History at the U.S. Military Academy, West Point. He is the author of *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2014) and the forthcoming *Withdrawal: Reassessing America's Final Years in Vietnam*.

#### **EXTRA!** READ | THINK | TALK | LINK

- “U.S. Military Strategy in Vietnam,” Gregory Daddis, lecture at New York Military Affairs Symposium, Sept. 5, 2014. The definition of military strategy and its implementation in the Vietnam War. [c-span.org](http://c-span.org)
- *Vietnam War*, Digital History website, University of Houston. Textbook history of the war includes discussion of guerrilla warfare, military operations, major battles, and more. Links to primary documents, biographies, and audio. [digitalhistory.uh.edu](http://digitalhistory.uh.edu) (Era tab: Vietnam War)
- “The Military and Diplomatic Course of the Vietnam War,” David L. Anderson, *The Oxford Companion to American Military History* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1999). A readable, general-audience description of the many “sides” of the Vietnam conflict and how the U.S. escalated its involvement. [english.illinois.edu/maps/vietnam/anderson.htm](http://english.illinois.edu/maps/vietnam/anderson.htm)

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, with its separate yet increasingly integrated elements, now seems less to ignite or intensify these speculations than to subsume them—at least for the time of one's contemplation of the Memorial itself—into more fundamental questions confronted on a personal level: Is war worth the human costs? Can wars be classified as just or unjust? Why did my friends die and not me? Does seeing my reflection affect my relation to those named, or to the war itself?

It was probably inevitable, even necessary, that any memorial expression of a controversial war would itself be controversial. In the words of Maya Lin, “To fly we have to have resistance.” Thirty-five years on, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial seems to have reached a state of unifying equilibrium: between the statuary figures of soldiers and nurses and the names of their brothers and sisters carved in granite; between what the Wall seeks to say to us and what we are able to read for ourselves in its black stone pages.

Michael Herr, in *Dispatches*, speaks of hearing this story from a soldier in Vietnam:

Patrol went up the mountain. One man came back. He died before he could tell us what happened.

In the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is a text of that story. Though viewing the names cannot tell us what happened, visualizing the thousands of promising lives lost, the sea of names that reflect our own faces as we stand at that Wall, can urge us toward a more peaceful future.

GORDON O. TAYLOR is Chapman Professor of English emeritus at the University of Tulsa, where he served as English Department Chair and Dean of Arts and Sciences. He recently served on the Board of Trustees for Oklahoma Humanities. A native of Los Angeles, he attended Harvard College and took his Ph.D. at the University of California at Berkeley. In 1980 he received a Guggenheim Fellowship for work on American literary-cultural response to the war in Vietnam.

#### **EXTRA!** READ | THINK | TALK | LINK

- “Making the Memorial,” Maya Lin, *The New York Review of Books*, Nov. 2, 2000. Lin's personal essay on her aesthetics and inspiration for design of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. [nybooks.com](http://nybooks.com)
- “About the Vietnam Veterans Memorial,” Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund. History of the memorial and its design, construction controversy, and names of the fallen. [vwmf.org/memorial](http://vwmf.org/memorial)

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## 2016 ANNUAL REPORT

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National Endowment for the Humanities	\$695,829
Program Support	119,547
Annual Campaign	50,534
Other Income	86,567
Investment Income	45,135
Total Revenues and Other Support	\$997,612

### EXPENSES

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Council Grants (Re-grants)	261,944
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<b>Total Expenses</b>	<b>\$909,199</b>

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