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Assignment #1:

I have to admit that before starting this course I knew fairly little about the Vietnam War and at times I have felt a bit guilty about my ignorance on this topic. Every time I drive past someone on the side of the road holding a sign that says, "homeless Vietnam vet", it reminds me of the sacrifices that have been made by so many, and I feel I almost owe it to them to educate myself on their experience. With that being said, I have learned a lot just in the last two weeks about this war and I have basically been glued to the Patriots book. I have found myself captivated by just about every entry, and anxious to read one after another, as I learn something new from each of them. There was one entry in particular however that seemed to stick in my mind after reading Part I, so that is the one that I have chosen to write about.

Phan Xuan Sinh was the platoon leader of a scout company in the largest branch of the South Vietnamese military, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). It was his heartbreaking accounts of the war that still replayed in mind days after reading them. The first was of a fishing boat that his company mistook for Viet Cong. It was only after his company fired upon the boat at full force without receiving any fire in return, that they realized they had just slaughtered a large boat of Vietnamese civilians; elders, women, and children included. He goes on to tell an account of an elderly couple living in a thatched house in the middle of a highly dangerous, "free-fire zone". Sinh took it upon himself to explain the dangers of living in this zone to the couple and help them relocate for the sake of their own safety. He even went as far as to burn their house to the ground to ensure that they wouldn't return. A few weeks later, while on another mission Sinh flew over that area again and saw a new thatch house in place of the one that he had burned to the ground. Once again he landed there to investigate, and once again he found the same elderly couple that had been living there before. When he asked the old man why on earth he'd return after being warned about the dangers, the man replied saying, "All my ancestors are buried here and this is our land. We're not going to leave". This encounter reminded Sinh that for many poor Vietnamese peasants, land was literally all they had and therefore of the greatest importance. When I think about war I tend to forget about all of the innocent civilians affected by it. They

never asked for, or wanted a war but it showed up on their doorstep anyways. I don't think Sinh was a monster or enjoyed taking lives, especially those of civilians, he was simply following orders. I also don't overlook the fact that these are secondhand accounts and could possibly be inaccurate. In fact, I suspected a few of the entries I read from others to be exaggerated. It is human nature to at times be boastful, and hold oneself in a light that is more favorable than it is accurate. In general I would consider myself slightly untrusting when it comes to listening to secondhand accounts of anything, much-less an event that happened decades ago in a foreign country. I'm skeptical to believe everything in this book is perfectly accurate, without bias, prejudice, or embellishment, whether it is subconscious on the speaker's behalf or not. However, I find Sinh's story to be credible. You can bet that the story of the fishing boat is one of his least favorite, and yet he shares it anyways. Instead of painting himself as some sort of glamorized war hero, he admits one of his biggest mistakes that had terrible consequences. He clearly was deeply affected by his experiences in war as recounting them still brought him to tears all this time later but in my opinion he isn't jaded from them. He also appears to remember at least these two accounts with substantial clarity. For these reasons I find him to be a credible source.

From the watching the very first episode of Vietnam: A Television History, until now I have had the same lingering question about Vietnam; what went wrong? How could we invest so many resources in this war and still come out defeated? Some of the accounts in Part II began to answer this question for me. Over-all I think the U.S. had an enormous ignorance about Vietnam as a country and culture. Coupled with this ignorance was an even bigger sense of arrogance. This turned out to be a fatal concoction for the United States. To me the most disappointing story in Part II of Patriots, was the one told by Chester Cooper. I was not displeased with him as an individual but his depiction of the U.S. political and military leadership (assuming of course that is it accurate). According to Cooper, Kennedy's team was comprised of highly intelligent men, but they had one key downfall; the inability to acknowledge what they didn't know, or merely the fact that there were indeed things they didn't know. It is my personal opinion that too many egos got in the way of attacking the war in the most efficient and educated ways possible. Cooper also states that at least until the late 50's, Americans had to rely on the French desk at the State Department to provide them with any information they sought on Vietnam. He also mentions that at the beginning of the war there wasn't a single American in the Embassy in Saigon who spoke Vietnamese, or knew much of anything about Buddhism.

Cooper goes on to tell of a conversation he had with an economic warfare specialist, Mike Deutch, from which he learned that about 2/3's of everything being sent to the aid ARVN was being stolen. Later Deutch took him to the Saigon docks so he could witness this robbery for himself, and sure enough he watched as an 8-foot pile of materials shrank down to about 3 feet in the middle of the night. Cooper also explains that there was very little public interest in negotiations between Vietnam and America because just about all of them were made in secret and nothing ever came of them. He also paints political leaders such as President Johnson and Walt Rostow as being stubborn, inflexible, and arrogant. His story of the U.S. purposely bombing the airport in Hanoi the same day that the Norwegian ambassador to Beijing flew in was a good example of this arrogance. It is also stories such as these that I find so utterly disappointing. The American defeat in Vietnam is no longer such a mystery to me. The U.S. entered the war overly confident in its abilities and poorly educated on its enemy. It is nearly impossible to put up your best fight when you are operating under ignorant and arrogant leadership.

It is said that history can be the best teacher. I agree with this statement, assuming our country isn't too proud to learn from the mistakes it has made in the past. I hope that our political and military leadership has learned the importance of studying your enemy. Had the American army known more about guerrilla forces, for example that they hid in small man-made tunnels while they were under fire; they probably would have developed better, or at the very least different tactics of attack. If Americans had tried to learn more about Vietnam's recent history before going there, maybe they would have been able to learn from some of France's mistakes, preventing some of our own. If they had tried to learn more about Vietnamese culture, maybe they would have better understood what the Vietnamese people wanted, and in taking steps towards providing it, would have gained their support. I think failure of any capacity has value in the lessons that can be learned from it. I realize that some of the things that I have mentioned as ignorance, arrogance, or miscalculation may be easier to recognize in hindsight. However, I also think that some of the people who were in Vietnam saw the light during the time of chaos and war. People like Chester Cooper and Paul Kattenburg saw this war for what it was, unwinnable. Unfortunately anyone who spoke unfavorably of the war was silenced by military and political leaders. It is also my hope that in the future, people who have unpopular opinions won't be silenced but considered. Most of those who were involved in the Vietnam War, regardless of which side they were fighting on, remember it unfavorably. Hopefully every nation, even those who weren't involved, realized how high the

costs of war really are, and that everything possible should be done to prevent another Vietnam from occurring.

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