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Watch on the West

A Newsletter of FPRI's Center for the Study of America and the West Who Were We in Vietnam?

Volume 1, Number 7

May 2000

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First published in *The New York Times*, April 26, 2000.

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"Twas in another lifetime, full of toil and blood," began Bob Dylan's "Shelter from the Storm" in 1974, when "blackness was a virtue, and the road was full of mud." The fall of South Vietnam 25 years ago seems to me a scene from another lifetime. I had returned from Vietnam in 1970, earned a Ph.D. in history at the University of Chicago, and just received a job offer from Berkeley (the letter was dated April Fool's Day). I was as sick of the war as anyone and eager to "open up that Golden Gate." But news that the North Vietnamese had launched an invasion more akin to the blitzkrieg of Poland than to a Maoist "people's war," and had overrun my old base camp 30 miles up Thunder Road from Saigon, turned my heart to lead.

I could not deal with it any more than I had the death of my mother a few years earlier, so I repressed it until, in 1994, a former student invited me to lecture on Vietnam to his prep school students. Thanks to him, I dredged up and purged all my anger, disillusionment, fear and pity— for myself and the Vietnamese — and promptly worked up a seminar on the war that I have taught ever since.

No one disputes Vietnam's manifold effects on America. Richard Nixon presided over replacement of the draft with an all-volunteer (and increasingly mixed-gender) force and reduction of the voting age to 18. The Vietnam syndrome and the public's aversion to casualties inspired the strict Weinberger-Powell guidelines for the commitment of forces abroad. Congress attacked the so-called imperial presidency through the War Powers Act, C.I.A. hearings and the movement to impeach Richard Nixon for abuses committed in the name of national security. A loss of trust in the presidency ensued, and the media became adversarial. Yet the turmoil at home also allowed Nixon to pursue the Silent Majority and Southern strategies that paved the way for Ronald Reagan and Newt Gingrich, and our policies are still perturbed by what candidates did, or did not do, back in the 60's.

Vietnam also completed the integration of the armed forces and launched the careers of thousands of African-American officers and noncommissioned officers, as well as others who returned home to work in law enforcement, government and the professions. The Pentagon itself addressed racial tensions so well after 1975 that the military became a model for civilian institutions.

The war's primary economic effect was "guns and butter" budgets that helped to spark the inflation of the 1970's and hooked the federal government on deficit spending until the 1990's.

But the deepest long-term effect on America may stem from the rich and undeserved contributions made to American life by the Vietnamese refugees who quietly went to work restoring blighted neighborhoods, building businesses and sending their children to college.

The lessons of the war, by contrast, are still up for grabs, as demonstrated by the flow of new books. Was the military derelict in its duty when it promised, then pretended, to win the war, or did arrogant civilians order the military into battle with one hand tied and no clear goals? Was the American effort in Vietnam a sin, a blunder or a "necessary war"? Should it stand as a warning against state-building projects in strange and violent settings, like the Balkans? Or did Vietnam's school of hard knocks teach Americans to do peacemaking and state building right?

Drawing lessons from Vietnam remains a political enterprise. It is also a deeply psychological one for those who designed the war and for the baby boomers who were obliged to wage, resist or just run from it. No one wants to admit being wrong back then, and all want to believe that what happened back then proves they are right today.

Still, post-cold war historians have revealed certain facts that Americans need to digest. One is that there was nothing inevitable about Ho Chi Minh's rise to the status of icon. He spent his mysterious years in Moscow and China doing virtually nothing useful, and was little regarded in the Indochinese Communist Party. What made possible his "triumphant return" in 1941 was Vietnam's premature uprising against the French in 1940 and the decimation of its Communist leadership.

We know, too, that Ho promoted the broad-based Viet Minh movement not only to rally the masses against the Japanese and the French, but also to co-opt or eliminate rivals. To be sure, he was a puppet of no one, least of all Vietnam's old nemesis, China. But when Hanoi decided in 1959 to approve armed struggle against Ngo Dinh Diem's regime in Saigon, Ho personified the third world "national liberation movements" that Khrushchev and Mao vowed to support and Kennedy was determined to thwart.

It is easy to chastise Americans for backing the French and then replacing them as patrons of South Vietnam. But we did, and great nations are responsible for their acts. That is why the most shameful aspect of all is how the United States, having adopted the non-Communist Vietnamese, betrayed them repeatedly. The first time was in 1963 when President Kennedy's men sanctioned the overthrow of Diem because he was an authoritarian patriot who refused to play puppet. If they were intent on judging the Saigon regime by different standards than they did South Korea and Taiwan, then they should have pulled out.

Instead, the Johnson administration not only took over the war, but chose means — search and destroy missions in the South and calibrated bombing in the North, without any effort to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail — that were as ineffective as they were destructive. Then Lyndon Johnson just washed his hands of the mess after Tet 1968, when he halted the bombing, begged for peace talks, gave Hanoi time to recoup from the devastating losses suffered by Viet Cong cadres and bequeathed to his successor 540,000 demoralized American troops who knew we “weren't in it to win.” That was America's second betrayal of the South Vietnamese.

When Paul O'Dwyer, a New York Democratic Senate candidate, told the 1968 Democratic convention that Democratic voters had registered “an indictment” against the war, it was over so far as doves were concerned. But the people who voted for Nixon and George Wallace were not tired of fighting; they were tired of losing. What is more, Nixon and Henry Kissinger hoped to salvage America's global posture through the China Opening, and soon suspected that the Chinese wanted Americans in Southeast Asia. Beset on their northern frontier by Soviet armies and rocket divisions, the Chinese were loath to see Vietnam unite under the tough pro-Soviet regime in Hanoi. So instead of blaming the Democrats and “bugging out” in his personal interest, Nixon determined to withdraw gradually. That did him in. He was a war president held to peacetime standards of governance, and when Congress cut off aid to Saigon after the 1973 Paris Accords, it was voting for defeat, not for peace. That was America's third betrayal.

A bright student from New York taught me that. Throughout the semester he had criticized United States involvement in Vietnam until, in the penultimate class, he suddenly changed his mind. Later I asked him wryly, “Who are you?” He asked what I meant, and I referred to his flip-flop. He blushed, then said, “Nixon was right!” About geopolitics? No, he said, about honor: maybe we shouldn't have been there, but having created South Vietnam, urged its people to fight for 10 years at the risk of exile, prison and death if they lost, and done so much damage to their country, how could Americans just desert them? He even likened it to turning our backs on the Holocaust. Who are you? It seems Americans will be answering that question for some time to come, with that other lifetime on their minds.

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