

Vietnam Revisited

Reader Letters From issue: **March 2008**

To the Editor:

Arthur Herman's views about Vietnam suffer from the same defect as those of his opponents: his primary interest is contemporary politics and not the truth about the past ["Who Owns the Vietnam War?," December 2007]. He does not care so much about what went on in Vietnam as he does about scoring points against liberals who oppose President Bush today over Iraq. Calling on history to orchestrate political commitments in the present is hardly new, but it is not the only use of the past, and surely not the most honorable.

The title of Mr. Herman's essay, "Who Owns the Vietnam War?," calls attention to his supposition that history is a piece of intellectual property that politicians can acquire for their campaigns. It bothers him that liberals have taken over this piece of the past, and he wants to reclaim it for his own purposes. But as Herman is only too willing to point out in the case of the liberals' history, bad things happen when the past is suborned to the present. Only Mr. Herman's determinedly selective reading of recent scholarship on the war could suggest that there is compelling agreement on anything.

Anyone who thinks that the 1954 Geneva Accords established a new republic in the south of Vietnam has not read them. If Mr. Herman believes that Richard Nixon withdrew American troops because of success on the battlefield, or persuaded China and Russia to turn off the spigot of support for Hanoi, he has not looked at the evidence. He is certainly not entirely wrong on these and other issues, but he pushes, indeed shoves, the evidence in the direction he wants it to go. He does not see the ambiguities, and slips easily into simple moralistic judgments about what could have or would have happened. His vision of the war in Vietnam is as mythic as that of his adversaries.

For one interested in historical truth, the last people to listen to about Vietnam are political men like President Bush, Senator John Kerry, and Daniel Ellsberg, whom Mr. Herman cites in setting the stage for his discussion. One does not, however, expect statesmen to be primarily engaged in truth-telling, and so their distortions can be dismissed. But because the moral obligations of would-be scholars are different, the intrusion of politics into their writing is more upsetting. Unless we maintain some respect for the aim of establishing the complexity of what really went on in the past, we contribute to the debasement of public understanding.

Bruce Kuklick

University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

To the Editor:

By one measure, the last four years have been a bonanza for historians like myself who teach and write about the Vietnam war. The Iraq conflict, so reminiscent of the American struggle in Vietnam, has sparked enormous interest in the subject among publishers and students. By another measure, however, it has been a thoroughly depressing time. Politicians and pundits have frequently played fast and loose with history—and misrepresented the findings of recent historical scholarship—in order to score points in the ongoing debate over the Iraq war. The gap between academic and popular discussion of the war has rarely yawned so wide.

Polemics like Arthur Herman's "Who Owns the Vietnam War?" are part of the problem. Mr. Herman claims to show how recent scholarship has demolished the old shibboleths about the war held sacred by the "liberals and leftists" who have led the charge against George W. Bush's policies in Iraq. While the Left-leaning establishment views Ho Chi Minh as a dedicated nationalist, Mr. Herman contends, new research reveals him to have been a craven Communist. While the Left sees South Vietnam as an illegitimate Potemkin village, new scholarship indicates it was a viable nation that commanded impressive support among its people. While the Left views American veterans as drug-addled misfits abused by their government, new writing reveals them to be successful citizens. And so on.

Unquestionably, Mr. Herman has a point. Critics of American policy in Vietnam have too often advanced a hopelessly one-dimensional view of the war that has not stood up to scholarly investigation. But he merely replaces the Left's caricature of the war with a new, equally far-fetched caricature that gratifies conservatives by making the U.S. intervention in Vietnam seem eminently sensible. He accomplishes this feat by drawing heavily on a handful of highly tendentious works by conservative authors.

Some of these studies, notably Lewis Sorley's *A Better War*, have been well received across the political spectrum. Others, especially Mark Moyer's *Triumph Forsaken*, have been subjected to withering criticism outside conservative circles. The important issue, however, is not the quality of these works as much as the fact that they represent just one current in a vast outpouring of writing on the Vietnam war in recent years. To claim, as Mr. Herman does, that the "new generation" of historians "overwhelmingly agrees" with his point of view—or, for that matter, with any single point of view—is simply wrong. On the contrary, recent studies point in various interpretive directions, making it more difficult than ever to defend blanket generalizations about the war. The multiplicity of viewpoints undoubtedly owes something to the diversity of ideological agendas informing them, but it owes far more to the fact that newly accessible documentary evidence from Vietnam, China, and Russia, as well as the United States, leads to no easy conclusions.

Mr. Herman is right that Ho Chi Minh was a convinced Communist for much of his life, but evidence from

around the world also confirms that (contrary to what he writes) Hanoi was no simple puppet of Beijing or Moscow. Mr. Herman is on safe ground in suggesting that the South Vietnamese government enjoyed greater independence and legitimacy than historians have usually allowed, but evidence from Vietnam suggests that (again, contrary to what he writes) the Saigon regime never truly rivaled the Communists for the support of the bulk of the population. One could go on.

Left and Right will no doubt continue to clamor for “ownership” of the Vietnam war, which is too bad for those interested in fair and detached treatments of the subject. One hopes that sensible readers, tired of brazen grabs to control history, will recognize that the best case for ownership of the Vietnam war and its lessons lies with those who are able to see beyond the myths, and appreciate the immense complexity of the past.

Mark Atwood Lawrence

University of Texas

Austin, Texas

To the Editor:

Arthur Herman’s otherwise excellent essay appears to downplay the devastating effects of Nixon’s bombing campaigns in Cambodia. He describes the precision of smart bombs and claims that “the collateral damage caused by American bombing [in Vietnam] . . . was actually very limited.”

Philip Short, Michael Lind, Elizabeth Becker, and others have offered clear evidence that the bombing created enormous hardship for Cambodia’s rural populations, causing large peasant migrations to both Phnom Penh and the forests. Regardless of how “smart” the bombs were, there were a lot of them—according to some accounts, more than were dropped in all of World War II—and many Cambodian villages were destroyed. The bombing was also an effective recruiting tool for the Khmer Rouge, although the banditry of the South Vietnamese troops in Cambodia was also important in creating support for the Communists.

Although the bombing might have been justified by Cambodia’s violation of its claimed neutrality, the collateral damage made it easy for the antiwar Left to condemn everything we did in Indochina by pointing to an apparent lack of sympathy for the civilian population.

On the other hand, Mr. Herman is right to dismiss attempts to hold the American bombing accountable for the Cambodian genocide that followed. Some have proposed that the “savage” American bombing drove the Khmer Rouge to respond with savagery of their own—but no other population in history subjected to bombing has reacted by murdering millions of compatriots. Pol Pot was a follower of Marxism-Leninism who adopted the terror strategies of Stalin and Mao. They were called Red Khmers for a reason.

Peter Wilson

*Educational Television Cambodia
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To the Editor:

Arthur Herman's excellent reassessment of the Vietnam war is long overdue, and much welcomed by those of us who have admired America's long sacrifice in that country. I would like to buttress Mr. Herman's point about the "domino theory," which, as he points out "had always been ridiculed as fantasy" by antiwar critics. It is certainly true, as he says, that the fall of South Vietnam also led to the fall of Laos and Cambodia to Communist terror. But what is equally true is that many dominos did not fall specifically because America's stand in South Vietnam gave other Asian countries the decade-long breathing room they needed to develop stable governments and fend off Communist insurgencies.

In the 1960's, many thought that it was only a matter of time before the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and even Singapore would become Communist. While there were close calls, none did, because their leadership saw and believed in the American commitment to democracy in Asia, and stood firm. Americans should be proud of our role in the success of Southeast Asia and understand the lesson it holds for the war in Iraq and the future of the Middle East.

Leslie David Simon

Washington, D.C.

To the Editor:

Arthur Herman's brilliant essay puts the lie to certain tendentious readings of the Vietnam war and its aftermath.

"Today, America can regain the sense of pride that existed before Vietnam. But it cannot be achieved by refighting a war that is finished as far as America is concerned. . . . [T]hese events, tragic as they are, portend neither the end of the world nor of America's leadership in the world." President Gerald R. Ford uttered these words in a speech at Tulane University on April 23, 1975, in the final days of America's involvement in Vietnam. The crowd roared and gave him a standing ovation. The military draft had ended, and American troops and POW's had returned home two years earlier. America had washed its hands of Vietnam—but millions of lives were still at stake.

Halfway around the world, my family experienced the unfolding of the tragic events in South Vietnam. The day after South Vietnam's president Nguyen Van Thieu resigned, my family and I were put aboard an American evacuation aircraft. But my father and three uncles lingered, and spent the next decade undergoing a prison-camp "reeducation" by the victorious North Vietnamese Communists. They managed to survive, but many others did not, and hundreds of thousands of our fellow Vietnamese perished on the high seas while attempting to flee our native land.

Two weeks after the fall of Saigon, Senator Robert Byrd commented that "barmaids, prostitutes, and criminals" should be screened out as "excludable categories" for emigration. Senator Joseph Biden charged that the Ford administration "had not informed Congress adequately about the number of refugees"—as if anyone actually knew during the chaotic evacuation. "I think the Vietnamese are better off in Vietnam," sniffed George McGovern in *Newsweek*. Despite these rejections, my family was resettled in America, and we are forever grateful.

A few years after my father was released—thanks to President Ronald Reagan's leadership and the efforts of his special envoy, retired Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman John Vessey, Jr.—James Webb wrote in the *New York Times* that "Vietnam is the great unfinished morality play of our time. We have never before abandoned an ally on the battlefield—an ally, incidentally, whose casualty rate was 40 times ours." Let us hope our country does not turn its back on our Iraqi allies.

Quang X. Pham
Mission Viejo, California

Arthur Herman writes:

It is frustrating when the academic mind chooses to use critical detachment as an excuse for intellectual and moral evasion. Bruce Kuklick and Mark Atwood Lawrence object to my argument, but instead of addressing it head on, they affect a pose of scholarly disinterestedness and accuse me of bad taste for sorting through the evidence and drawing the conclusion that the United States won the war in Vietnam on the battlefield but gave it away on the political front.

The only substantive criticism Mr. Kuklick offers is that I am partially wrong on two points. "Anyone," he writes, "who thinks that the 1954 Geneva Accords established a new republic in the south of Vietnam has not read them." The word "established" is his, not mine, but no one can deny the obvious fact that the accords created the conditions under which an independent South Vietnam could emerge. As to whether or not it was Nixon's diplomatic success with Russia and China and General Abrams's success on the battlefield that enabled the U.S. to disengage from Vietnam, perhaps Mr. Lawrence should send Mr. Kuklick his copy of Lewis Sorley's *A Better War*, which gives chapter and verse on this matter and for whose detached legitimacy he vouches.

Mr. Lawrence, for his own part, asserts vaguely that "evidence from Vietnam" and "from around the world"

contradicts or complicates some of my claims. Thus, Ho Chi Minh was not merely a “simple” puppet of Moscow and Beijing. But I never suggested otherwise—what puppet ever is a mere proxy? In the end, Mr. Lawrence seems to want me to split the ideological difference. Conceding that I am often “on solid ground,” he still wants me to leave running room for the standard liberal narrative of American hubris in Vietnam.

I thank Peter Wilson for his generous words. As for his criticism, my remarks about the “very limited” damage from so-called smart bombs were made in the context of the air war over Vietnam, not Cambodia. What he asserts about the latter may well be true, but it has always struck me that the real culprit in the Cambodian tragedy was the feckless Prince Sihanouk. It was he who first allowed his country to become a North Vietnamese safe haven, in violation of agreements that he himself had signed; who then encouraged the American bombing of his country while insisting that it be kept secret so as not to offend Hanoi; and who ended up forging an alliance with the genocidal Khmer Rouge in the vain hope they would restore him to power.

I thank Leslie David Simon and Quang X. Pham for their letters. Mr. Pham’s moving tale incidentally answers my title question, “Who Owns the Vietnam War?,” to which Messrs. Kuklick and Lawrence take exception. It was our allies the Vietnamese who were really left with it. We need constantly to remind ourselves of what happened to those who were left behind when a great power ran from its responsibilities. Here, *pace* Mr. Simon, is where America’s role in Southeast Asia is not a source of unmitigated pride.

This lesson first came home to me while studying in Paris in the 1980’s. There I met a Vietnamese woman who had fled with her family from the Communist takeover. Her brother, a pilot in the South Vietnamese air force, was shot down and killed during the final Communist offensive when her country was overrun. The bitterness she expressed toward America for its abandonment was profound.

Our professors and our textbooks, with their supposed appreciation for “the immense complexity of the past,” taught us that people like her did not really exist: that South Vietnam had been populated either by self-interested American puppets or hapless peasants who secretly yearned to be united with the North through a Communist victory. What I learned was that many South Vietnamese fought and risked everything for a country that they believed in. This encounter first woke me from my own “dogmatic slumbers” (a phrase whose origin Mr. Kuklick will recognize) over Vietnam. It would be nice to think that Quang Pham’s letter, if not my essay, might encourage others to do the same.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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FOOTNOTES

Commentary

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