

Who Owns the Vietnam War?

by Arthur Herman Commentary Magazine December 2007

In late August, an American President spoke forthrightly for the first time about what happened when the United States abandoned its commitments to two sovereign nations in Indochina, South Vietnam and Cambodia, and allowed them to be overrun by Communist forces. The President's remarks, which were intended to heighten public awareness of what might happen if we repeated the same mistake in Iraq, occupied barely three paragraphs in a 45-minute speech. Acknowledging that there is "a legitimate debate about how we got into the Vietnam war and how we left," Bush added that "Whatever your position is on that debate,"

one unmistakable legacy of Vietnam is that the price of America's withdrawal was paid by millions of innocent citizens whose agonies would add to our own vocabulary new terms like "boat people," "reeducation camps," and "killing fields."

*His words set off a firestorm among America's liberal elite. Outraged, Senator Joseph Biden accused the President of "playing the American people for fools." Everyone knows, Biden said, that "in Iraq, just as we did in Vietnam, we are clinging to a central government that does not and will not enjoy the support of the people" and is therefore doomed. The historian Robert Dallek declared that Bush's comparison "boggles the mind," and that the true comparison worked the other way around: even though "we dropped more bombs on Vietnam than we did in all of World War II in every theater, we couldn't work our will" to prevent North Vietnam's triumph over its southern neighbor—any more, presumably, than we can "work our will" in Iraq. Stanley Karnow, the author of *Vietnam: A History* (1983), one of the most widely read accounts of the war, asked sarcastically: "Does [Bush] think we should have stayed in Vietnam?" To Steven Simon of the Council on Foreign Relations, the postwar horrors that befell Vietnam and Cambodia occurred "because the United States left too late, not too early."*

And so it went. Senator John Kerry, a Vietnam veteran, was particularly scathing. Already on record as denying there was any "bloodbath" in Vietnam after the war, he denounced the President's comparison as "irresponsible." America, he declared, "lost the war in Vietnam because our soldiers were trapped in a distant country we did not understand, supporting a government that lacked sufficient legitimacy with its people" and fighting a war for "politicians [who] knew our strategy would not work."

In short, Kerry and the others were scandalized not by Bush's drawing of an analogy between Iraq and Vietnam but by its divergence from their analogy. For if there is one foreign-policy issue that the American Left has prided itself on "owning" over the past three decades, it is the issue that goes under the heading, "the lessons of Vietnam."

Even before the last Marine helicopter left the roof of the U.S. embassy in Saigon in April 1975, a narrative had developed to explain the course and the ultimate meaning of the war, and ever since then it has served as a template for understanding and evaluating America's behavior in the world.

That template rests on four basic theses:

1. America's cold-war obsession with Communist totalitarianism led it to intervene in an internal struggle in which no conceivable vital interest was at stake. "We deluded ourselves into thinking that we were defending freedom," wrote the military analyst Andrew Bacevich (himself no leftist) after Bush's speech, when in fact "we had blundered into a civil war," a war in which our side, the Republic of South Vietnam, "proved to be a fiction."

*2. On account of that initial mistake, we found ourselves confronting a powerful native insurgency in the form of the Vietcong (VC), an indigenous guerrilla force. In this unconventional conflict, for which the U.S. military was woefully unprepared, we soon resorted to drastic, even barbaric methods and then lied to the American public about them. Jonathan Schell wrote in a famous 1967 essay in the *New Yorker*: "we are destroying, seemingly by inadvertence, the very country we are supposedly protecting." Or as Martin Luther King, Jr., put it: "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today [is] my own government."*

3. *The frustrations of fighting this losing battle wrecked the morale of American troops, leading to excessive drug use, assaults on unpopular officers with fragmentation grenades, atrocities against Vietnamese civilians as in the village of My Lai in 1968, and, in the aftermath, a generation of veterans physically and emotionally scarred for life. For the American soldier in Vietnam, Marilyn B. Young wrote in The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990 (1991), “the announced goals of the war—to repel an outside invader, to give the people of South Vietnam a chance to choose their own government—were daily contradicted by the soldier’s sense that he was himself the invader.” According to the writer Peter Marin, what made Vietnam different from other wars was the American soldiers’ “direct confrontation . . . with their own culpability, their sense of their own capacity for error and excess” in an unjust and immoral conflict.*

4. *Despite intensive bombing, and despite Richard Nixon’s 1970 invasion of Cambodia in an effort to wipe out enemy sanctuaries there, the American intervention was destined to fail. The final collapse, which put an end to the government of South Vietnam in 1975, led at last to the unification of the country and other beneficial effects. Rather than triggering a bloodbath or the fall of other Asian regimes to Communism, as Presidents Johnson and Nixon and other war supporters had predicted, “the strategic effect,” in Bacevich’s words, “proved to be limited.” Once the Americans left, “the Vietnamese began getting their act together” and today enjoy peace and relative prosperity. In the judgment of Robert Dallek and others, whatever violence occurred in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge after we abandoned Vietnam was triggered by our earlier meddling in that country with Nixon’s “secret” bombing and incursion.*

Starting with some of the very first dispatches from Saigon in 1962 by the news reporters David Halberstam and Neil Sheehan, through the formation of the antiwar movement in the late 1960’s and the publication of the Pentagon Papers in 1971, down to the final cutoff of funding for South Vietnam by Congress in 1975, and all the way until today, this construction has been a mainstay of the liberal Left, of the Democratic party, and of the mainstream media. It has been sustained and elaborated in films like Apocalypse Now, Platoon, and Born on the Fourth of July and in television series like China Beach. In the minds of generations of Americans, it has taken on the aspect of unquestioned and unquestionable wisdom.

But is it accurate? By the late 1970’s and early 1980’s, in the wake of revelations about the Khmer Rouge massacres in Cambodia and the testimony of escapees from postwar Vietnam itself, critics like Guenter Lewy (America in Vietnam, 1978) and Norman Podhoretz (Why We Were in Vietnam, 1982) were undoing crucial elements of the standard account, especially its characterization of American motives in Indochina and its rosy portrayal of our adversaries. Lately, however, thanks to a growing body of evidence and careful work by scholars aided by first-hand accounts from former North Vietnamese and Vietcong participants, a much more comprehensive picture has begun to emerge, one that challenges the conventional wisdom from start to finish.

Among the new generation of historians of the Vietnam war, important debates and differences still remain—for example, over the efficacy of American tactics of counterinsurgency and pacification. But they overwhelmingly agree on one point: the old account is a myth, and no longer stands up to scrutiny. It is worthwhile reviewing some of the main findings of the new scholarship before returning to the question of their relevance, if any, to our present struggle in Iraq and to the President’s warning on August 23.

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Vietnam may have been a “civil war” in the sense that it involved Vietnamese killing other Vietnamese. But it is far from the case that, as many have claimed, Ho Chi Minh, the founder of Vietnam’s Indochinese Communist party, was primarily a nationalist who had successively fought Japanese occupiers (1941-45), French colonial rulers (1946-54), and finally the Americans (1965-75) in a

determined effort to unify the two halves of his country and thus make it possible, in the words of one favorably disposed historian, for “the people of Indochina [to] govern themselves.” Some have even asserted that, after World War II, the United States missed a great opportunity to support Ho in his fight against the French and for Vietnamese “self-determination.”

The truth is otherwise. Even before he founded the party in 1930, Ho was a committed Stalinist and Comintern agent. During World War II, his party did little actual fighting against the Japanese, concentrating instead on eliminating its Vietnamese opponents. Once hostilities with France began in 1946, Ho’s regime in North Vietnam survived with help from his ideological allies, especially the Soviet Union, until Mao Zedong’s victory in his own war for control of China in 1949 finally opened the way for a full-scale Communist counterattack. Like Kim Il Sung’s invasion of South Korea in June 1950, Ho’s war against the French in Vietnam came with Stalin’s backing and Mao’s support, and was part of the same effort to create (in the testimony of the former Red Army journalists Oleg Sarin and Lev Dvortsky) “new opportunities for spreading Soviet Communism further into Asia.”

Presidents Truman and Eisenhower understood the stakes in Vietnam only too well. Their goal in supporting the French against Ho and the Vietminh was to prevent a repetition of what was happening in Korea. By the time the conflict was winding down, the U.S. was supplying nearly 70 percent of the French effort—not enough to crush the Vietminh but enough to stop Ho from overrunning the southern half of the country. Without that help, the new republic in the south created by the 1954 Geneva Accords would have become subject to the same horrors that were about to engulf the north.

There, in 1954-55 alone, according to the French historian Jean-Louis Margolin (no admirer of American involvement in Vietnam), “the scale of violence was extraordinary.”¹

At least 50,000 people were executed, a figure proportional with the number of Chinese butchered during Mao’s agrarian “reforms” in China in 1949-50. Most victims were chosen virtually at random in order to terrorize the rest of North Vietnam’s rural population. As in Maoist China, entire families were made to suffer. “The motto was similar to [that] in China,” writes Margolin: ““Better ten innocent deaths than one enemy survivor.”” As many as 100,000 people were thrown into prison, and 95 percent of the cadres in the Vietminh were purged.

This reign of terror goes largely unmentioned in standard histories of the Vietnam war or by admiring biographers of Ho like David Halberstam. The same silence engulfs Hanoi’s version of Mao’s Great Leap Forward: a crash attempt, launched in October 1958, at collectivizing North Vietnam’s fragile agricultural base that triggered a famine similar to the one devastating China during those same years. The number of Vietnamese who died is still unknown, but left behind was an impoverished police state not very different from today’s North Korea, kept alive only by massive Soviet and Communist Chinese aid.

This was of no concern to Ho. Beginning in 1959, and for the remaining ten years of his life, his attention was focused on taking control of South Vietnam, a country that had so far eluded his grasp.

South Vietnam was never the artificial American creation that critics claim. The political division of the country into northern and southern halves dates back at least to the 17th century, and was marked by sharp cultural and even linguistic differences. Indeed, the boundary between the two Vietnams set in the Geneva Accords roughly followed the south’s line of fortifications constructed centuries earlier to fend off the north.

The south was also Vietnam’s pluralist face, with a population in 1954 that included Christians, Buddhists (nearly one-quarter of the population), and ethnic Chinese, as well as 800,000 refugees from Ho’s terror.

These conflicting interests made governance difficult: during its short and sad history, South Vietnam went through a series of unstable governments, especially after the fall of President Ngo Diem in November 1963.

Nonetheless, over time this supposedly artificial and corrupt regime managed to turn South Vietnam into a country no less viable than South Korea, with an army similarly trained by U.S. advisers and then, starting in 1965, supported by American combat troops. By 1972, South Vietnam would have an army and local militia strong enough, with the aid only of American air power, to defend itself from full-scale attack by the North.

Ngo Diem was certainly no George Washington (as some admirers claimed), but neither was he the incompetent figure portrayed by the American press at the time and in current textbooks. The best and most recent account of the Diem years, by Mark Moyar,² documents his skill at balancing the demands of nationalists, traditionalists, and liberals and at convincing a peasant society to accept the unwelcome burden of fighting an insurgency funded, supplied, and even manned by the Communist North.

Diem's real failure was his inability to placate an American press determined to find fault with his leadership and American advisers like Colonel John Paul Vann who pressured Washington to drop its support for him. But Diem's removal by an American-supported coup in November 1963 only made things worse. As Moyar documents, before the coup the tide of war had been turning against the guerrillas. Yet by the time the American Foreign Service officer H.J. Kaplan arrived in Vietnam in January 1965, he was "shocked to discover that the Communists controlled most of the countryside."¹

With year's end, however, the course of the war had again shifted with the arrival of American combat troops. By 1966, even after tens of thousands of North Vietnamese regulars had entered the South, the mood in Saigon was one of "cautious optimism." In the spring of 1967, General Earl Wheeler was able to predict a victory "if we apply pressure upon the enemy relentlessly in the North" as well as the South.

What made this optimism possible was the U.S. military's overwhelming defeat of both Vietcong and North Vietnamese units in South Vietnam. This flies in the face of the second tenet of the Vietnam myth, namely, that after 1965 the United States found itself fighting an indigenous guerrilla army benefiting from superior tactics, enjoying popular support, and driven by a fervor that the weak and corrupt regime in Saigon could never hope to match.

Thus, according to the historians G.M. Kahn and John W. Lewis, "The insurrection [was] southern-rooted; it arose at southern initiative in response to southern demands." Powerfully supporting this same view was Frances Fitzgerald in her Pulitzer-Prize winning *Fire in the Lake* (1972). Offering a benign portrait of the Vietcong and its political wing, the National Liberation Front (NLF), Fitzgerald predicted hopefully that this grassroots movement would one day "cleanse the lake of Vietnamese society" with "the narrow flame of revolution."

Scholarly research has debunked this picture, too. As early as 1975, North Vietnam's own Communist-party historian admitted that the Vietcong were "always simply a group emanating from" Hanoi. In 1964 the North stepped up its backing of this proxy force by sending entire combat units from its regular army across the border. It was this growing invasion that had finally forced President Johnson, against his own instincts, to commit American ground troops in 1965—a decision that the standard account presents as a final plunge into the Vietnamese "quagmire" but that in fact had the result of transforming the war from a counterinsurgency operation into a struggle among three conventional armies: the United States and the

Army of the Republic of South Vietnam (ARVN) on one side, the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) on the other.

From movies like *Platoon* (1986) and *Casualties of War* (1989), the cliché image of the war itself is of American GI's slogging through rice paddies in order to do battle with men and women wearing black pajamas and armed with World War II-vintage weapons. This may bear some resemblance to Vietnamese reality during the Kennedy years, but for later years Mel Gibson's *We Were Soldiers* (2002), based on the dramatic November 1965 fight in the Ia Drang Valley between a battalion of the U.S. 7th Cavalry and one of the NVA's best equipped and most powerful units, comes much closer.

The battle raged for four days, involving mortars, heavy machine guns, rocket launchers, artillery, and air strikes. At the end the North Vietnamese retreated in disarray, leaving nearly 2,000 dead, while American casualties were 79 killed and 121 wounded. Ia Drang was a major setback for North Vietnamese arms and a foretaste of what was to come. High-intensity conventional firefights in the mountainous terrain along South Vietnam's northern border, not the low-intensity insurgency in the Mekong Delta that dominated American headlines but caused less than 5 percent of the total American combat deaths, made up the real Vietnam war.

Tragically, the Johnson administration never accepted that it could win a war it was in fact winning. As H.R. McMaster shows in *Dereliction of Duty* (1997), the overarching theme of the Johnson years was not reckless war-mongering but its opposite: indecision followed by halfway measures, and a growing pessimism leading to more halfway measures. It was this that encouraged the North to extend its efforts in 1964, enabling its Vietcong auxiliary to regain lost ground. The same indecisiveness plagued the American approach to bombing, employed by Johnson and his Defense Secretary Robert McNamara largely for political rather than military objectives, i.e., in the vain hope of convincing the North to come to the bargaining table. Until 1968, in fact, Washington's carefully planned bombing campaigns barely had an impact on the course of the fighting.

On this point, later scholars like John Nagle, Andrew Krepinevich, and others have faulted the poor performance of the American military against the Vietcong. But they may overestimate the significance of the VC "insurgency," whose vacillating fortunes were almost entirely a function of the degree of North Vietnamese support. By June 1968, fully 70 percent of VC units in at least one province were actually North Vietnamese soldiers in disguise, and these northern invaders were as much foreigners as the Americans. "They wander around in the jungle," one Vietnamese interpreter told the Marines, "and can't do anything without our local people to act as guides." Far from being "fish swimming in the ocean of the people," as the propaganda cliché had it, the NVA forces were regular soldiers fighting conventional battles against a conventional foe who had them outclassed in nearly every category.

True, the North enjoyed two huge advantages. The first were its sanctuaries for regrouping and rearming in Cambodia and Laos. (These sanctuaries, ironically, had been set up with U.S. help according to agreements recognizing the two countries' "neutrality.") The second was the freedom to terrorize civilian populations into providing food and necessary cover for the North's operations. Yet even so, once Americans arrived in numbers, the Communists found themselves mauled in one battle after another. As time wore on, General Giap, the North's commander in chief, calculated that he needed a nine-to-one numerical advantage over the Americans in order to prevail in any battle. Eventually, the VC lost control even over the Mekong Delta, the original site of the alleged Vietnam "quagmire." The Tet offensive at the end of January 1968 would be the VC's last stand.

The decision to launch that offensive was made in Hanoi. It was born of desperation, a mad gamble to seize the northern provinces of South Vietnam with conventional troops while triggering an uprising that would distract the Americans—and, some still hoped, revive the fading hopes of the Communists. The offensive itself began on January 30 and ended a little more than a month later when Marines crushed the last pockets of resistance in the northern city of Hue. It was a spectacular defeat both for the Vietcong, who failed to trigger their popular uprising, and for the North, which lost 20 percent of its forces in the South and suffered 33,000 men killed in action, all for no gain.

Today even the *New York Times* has had to concede that Tet was an overwhelming American victory. But, like many others, it still refuses to acknowledge the implications. Tet not only destroyed the Vietcong as an effective political and military force; together with the siege of Khe Sanh, it also crippled the NVA. Like the Somme or Verdun in World War I, these big battles exacted a price in “a lost generation” of North Vietnamese youth. Small wonder that in mid-1968 General Giap made the fateful decision to scale back NVA operations to hit-and-run raids while relying more heavily than ever on the sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia.

In the meantime, in the South, as Lewis Sorley notes in *A Better War* (1999), the Tet offensive “radically changed the outlook of South Vietnam’s populace.” Instead of provoking an uprising in favor of the Communists, its effect was “just the opposite—general mobilization in support of the government.” By the end of 1969, over 70 percent of South Vietnam’s population was rated as under government control, compared to 42 percent at the beginning of 1968. The new government of President Nguyen Van Thieu followed with a sweeping land-reform law that cut Vietnam’s tenant-farmer population from 60 percent to 7 percent by 1973.

To be sure, all this made no impression on the American public. That was because the press had presented the Tet offensive as a stunning Communist success and a signal that there was no light at the end of the tunnel. The suddenness of the attack had caught not only the American military by surprise, but also the American media. After the war, one of their own, the *Washington Post*’s Saigon bureau chief Peter Braestrup, documented exactly how the major media proceeded to turn the reality of American victory into an image of American and South Vietnamese defeat.¹ Basing themselves on that image, Walter Cronkite and others clearly felt they now had definitive grounds for mistrusting their government’s word and for concluding that, just as the antiwar movement had declared, victory in Vietnam was not and never had been a possibility.

Others went beyond this conclusion. In March 1969, the executive producer of ABC News told his Saigon bureau: “I think the time has come to shift our focus from the battlefield . . . to themes and stories under the general heading, ‘We are on our way out of Vietnam.’” One of those “stories” would be the massacre at My Lai, which took place in the aftermath of Tet but became a news event only a year later. The steady coverage of isolated but sensational episodes like My Lai, deaths by “friendly fire,” and the like had the effect of convincing many Americans that such extraordinary occurrences reflected the ordinary situation on the ground and were destroying their country’s moral standing. Seizing the opportunity, a weakened Hanoi tried to turn it to its advantage. As Mark Woodruff writes in *Unheralded Victory: The Defeat of the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese Army* (1999), Hanoi “increasingly shifted its [own] efforts toward the American media and the antiwar movement and soon sought American casualties as [its] main objective.” Indirectly, then, the press’s willful misreading of the meaning of Tet and its harping on the idea that “we are on our way out” would increase the cost of the war in American blood.

Which brings us to the third tenet of the Vietnam myth—that our failures in vanquishing our unconventional foe pushed American soldiers over the brink, leading to the “fragging” of officers, drug

use, and the kind of indiscriminate shooting of women and children later portrayed as common and widespread. Similarly, it became a truism that the ordeal of fighting an elusive enemy in the steaming jungles of Vietnam (unlike, presumably, the ordeal of fighting a similarly elusive enemy in the steaming jungles of Guadalcanal or Guam during World War II) left veterans uniquely traumatized, psychological time bombs set to go off under the pressure of later “flashbacks” to their Vietnam experience.

Woodruff points to the popular 70’s television series *Kojak*, in which, after any particularly gruesome homicide, the police lieutenant would routinely order “that all Vietnam vets be brought in for questioning.”

Guenter Lewy was one of the first to investigate the claim that atrocities like My Lai were routine. He found no grounds for it. On the contrary, what made My Lai so noteworthy—an estimated 180-200 civilians were killed by members of an Army “search and destroy” task force under the impression that the villagers were actively supporting the enemy—and caused the Army to put its perpetrators on trial, was precisely that it was both unusual and in violation of military directives. Even so harsh a critic of the war as the former Pentagon official Daniel Ellsberg was emphatic on this point: “My Lai was beyond the bounds of permissible behavior . . . virtually every soldier in Vietnam [knew] it was wrong.”

Other, later assertions about similar mass shootings, or indiscriminate killings on orders from higher-ups, also fall apart under scrutiny. At the meeting of Vietnam Veterans Against the War held in Detroit in early 1971, the so-called Winter Soldier conference, John Kerry and others claimed to have witnessed grisly tortures, villages burned to the ground, gang rapes of women, ears cut off, and other horrors. When an outraged Congress demanded an inquiry, however, the claims evaporated. Many so-called eyewitnesses refused to testify, even after being promised that they would never be questioned about atrocities they personally had witnessed or committed. Several turned out never to have been in Vietnam at all. In the end, no substantive charges ever emerged from the Winter Soldier conference.

Another notorious case was that of Lieutenant Colonel Anthony Herbert, who claimed he had been dismissed from the army for refusing to cover up war crimes. Herbert received lavish coverage in the *New York Times*, *Time*, and *Newsweek* and three appearances on the *Dick Cavett Show* before his story was finally exposed as fraudulent.

Yet an insatiable appetite for sensational charges continued to draw bizarre characters into the limelight. They included Kenneth B. Osborn, who testified in 1973 to “atrocities” committed by members of the CIA’s Phoenix pacification program but who had never served in the Phoenix program or met anyone connected with it, and never provided any specific information to support his charges; former Army Lieutenant Francis Reitemeyer, who claimed that he had been given a “kill quota of 50 VC per month” but had never even served in Vietnam; and the seven patients at a veterans’ hospital in Nevada, allegedly suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of service in Vietnam, one of whose stories was so harrowing that he had been hired as a counselor at the local Veterans’ Center but none of whom had actually been there.

Tom Harkin of Iowa, who may have served in Vietnam but not in the role of combat pilot as he claimed, even made it to the United States Senate. Genuine veterans of Vietnam, by contrast, were hardly broken men and women. The rate of murderous attacks or “fragging” of unpopular officers was lower in American ranks than among Australian troops in Vietnam, and the rate of drug use was no higher than among American military personnel serving in Germany. Psychiatric casualties in Vietnam (12 per 1,000) were lower than in the Korean war (37 per 1,000) or in World War II, even though the Vietnam veteran spent more time in combat than his predecessor in that latter conflict.

In 1980, according to a Veterans Administration survey, 90 percent of Vietnam vets with “heavy combat exposure” said they were proud to have served their country, and 69 percent said their service had been a positive experience. A 1986 *Washington Post*/ABC poll reported that Vietnam veterans were more likely than their peers in the general population to have a college education, own their own home, and hold a high-income job. Divorce and suicide rates were no higher among veterans than among non-veterans.

Certainly, atrocities took place in Vietnam, as they do in all wars and under all conditions. Yet out of 2.59 million American soldiers and Marines who served in Vietnam, a grand total of 201 Army personnel and 77 Marines were tried and convicted of serious crimes against Vietnamese civilians. Of these, 95 soldiers and 27 Marines were convicted of unjustifiable homicide, but in fully 25 percent of those cases the deaths occurred in the midst of combat operations.

By contrast with such American atrocities, which were random and rare, Vietcong atrocities, like the murder of entire families in order to terrorize villages into submission, were systematic and a matter of deliberate policy. Wholesale butchery of the kind perpetrated in Hue in 1968 was repeated on a smaller scale many times in the Vietnamese countryside. But American reporters were simply not interested in covering this, preferring instead to focus on American misdeeds, even when they were fabricated.

The reporter Peter Arnett, a strident critic of the war, had to admit afterward that he had never seen an American soldier kill or even abuse a Vietnamese civilian. “They didn’t even think of it. Every unit I was with, [the GI’s] went out of their way to be kind and decent with the people.” Yet, in 1998, a quarter-century later, the same Arnett was still capable of running a CNN program about American use of nerve gas in Vietnam, even though he and everyone else involved in the story must have guessed that the allegations were untrue.

In 1969, as Richard Nixon arrived in the White House, South Vietnam was settling into a period of relative peace and calm. General Creighton Abrams had taken over as Westmoreland’s successor, and, as documented by Phillip B. Davidson in *Vietnam at War* (1988), North Vietnam’s heavy casualties in Tet had compelled Hanoi to reduce the size of its operations in the South. With the decline in American and South Vietnamese casualties, Abrams shifted attention to pacification tactics while also providing more up-to-date material support for his South Vietnamese allies, including tanks and helicopters.

But the war was still going in Vietnam’s highlands and along its borders, and the American public was increasingly impatient to see it end. Support for our continued presence had dipped below 50 percent in February 1968, in the midst of Tet. A month later, disapproval of America’s handling of the war rose to 63 percent. The tide of public opinion forced President Johnson to drop out of the presidential race and call for peace talks with Hanoi, while unilaterally halting the bombing campaign north of the 20th parallel (the most effective air campaign of the war thus far). Abrams had no illusions about the amount of time he had to secure South Vietnam, but he believed that in Nixon he finally had a White House willing to bring the war to the enemy.

Nixon had been elected to end the war, not to win it, and his declared priority was to begin the withdrawal of American forces. Yet, paradoxically, it was success on the battlefield in 1969-70 that allowed him to draw down troop numbers and thus simultaneously respond to a public convinced that the war was not a success but a failure. Nevertheless, the cuts themselves inevitably endangered the stability that had permitted them to be made in the first place.

The next years were rife with such contradictions. At first, Nixon tried the same strategies that Johnson had hoped would entice North Vietnam to the bargaining table, with the same miserable results. Then, for

the first time in the war, he swung over to an offensive strategy, closing down the NVA's sanctuaries along Vietnam's 800-mile border with Laos and Cambodia, across which Communist soldiers had been allowed to attack at will, and thereby correcting America's most glaring military problem.

According to the Vietnam myth, Nixon's "incursion" into Cambodia in 1970, followed by Operation Lam Son 719 into Laos, was not only illegal and unconstitutional but had the effect of widening the war and destabilizing the region. In fact, it was the existence of the Communist sanctuaries that had destabilized the region, and deeply worried American allies in Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore. Nixon's incursion was also the U.S. Army's first major joint operation with the South Vietnamese. More than 50,000 ARVN troops proved their effectiveness at waging the kind of war they would need to fight to keep their country free: flying their own helicopters, operating their own heavy artillery and tanks, even conducting their own air strikes. Cambodia was proof that Vietnamization could work.

Meanwhile, Nixon also brought the war north. He ordered the mining of Haiphong harbor, the main unloading depot for Russian and Chinese supplies, and launched a steady bombing campaign that finally wrecked the North's capacity to wage battle. Robert Dallek's assertion that we failed to win a war in which we "dropped more bombs than in World War II" is thus both misleading and irrelevant. In fact, the majority of tonnage of bombs dropped during the war was in the South, not the North, was in support of tactical operations, and, thanks to the ability to bomb in far tighter clusters than during the Korean war, resulted in far less collateral damage. It was Vietnam, not the Gulf war of 1991, that marked, in 1968, the first use of so-called "smart," laser-guided weapons.

The American media completely missed these important developments, too. More than that: to quote Lewis Sorley, "in these later years the press simply missed the war." It missed the fact that the siege of Khe Sanh had been a major American victory, mistakenly representing it as a repetition of France's 1954 debacle at Dien Bien Phu. Although it lavishly covered the reports of gullible visitors to Hanoi like Mary McCarthy, Jane Fonda, and Harrison Salisbury, all of whom described a North heroically struggling against Washington's campaign to "bomb them back into the Stone Age," it missed the fact that the collateral damage caused by American bombing, including the so-called Christmas bombing in 1972, was actually very limited. When Stanley Karnow visited Hanoi in 1981, expecting to find large sections of the city leveled, he was astonished to report that "Hanoi and Hai-phong are almost completely unscathed, and the surrounding countryside appears to have been barely touched."

Nixon's real triumph came on the diplomatic front, when he persuaded both China and Russia to shut off the spigot of support for Hanoi. This loss, combined with the effectiveness of American bombing and the NVA's disastrous "Easter" offensive against the South in 1972, which cost the famous General Giap his job, finally forced Hanoi to sign the peace accords waiting for them in Paris and to recognize the Republic of South Vietnam. Nixon was now free to withdraw the last remaining U.S. troops—a withdrawal, according to the Vietnam myth, supposedly taking place under the looming shadow of defeat.

As we have seen, however, the withdrawal had actually been under way since 1969; by August 1972, there were no more U.S. combat forces left in Vietnam and a year later there were no U.S. military personnel at all. The reason, in Sorley's words, was that by then "the South Vietnamese countryside had been widely pacified, so much so that the term 'pacification' was no longer even used." Once again, this was not the picture presented by the media, to Congress, or to the American public.

The Paris Peace Accords left several hostages to fortune. The most important was the continued presence of more than 160,000 NVA troops in the South who resumed fighting almost as soon as the accords were signed. Although Henry Kissinger recommended renewed bombing along the Laos corridor, Nixon

hesitated and then did nothing. With the departure of the last American troops, he had lost his political leverage with Congress and his military leverage in Vietnam. He and Kissinger now had to sit on the sidelines and watch as the NVA, in flagrant violation of the agreement signed in Paris, steadily rebuilt its strength with the help of Russia and China, and the South felt the noose tighten once again.

After Nixon's highly successful Cambodia incursion in 1970, the Democratic Congress had passed the Cooper-Church amendment to ensure that something like this would never happen again. Now, to add to his troubles, Nixon's presidency had begun to collapse with the Watergate scandals. Democrats sought to complete the political rout by sabotaging what was left of his Vietnam policy. When a rebuilt and re-equipped NVA launched a massive invasion across the DMZ in 1975, there was no possibility that Congress would redeem the original pledges of support for South Vietnam, even if the country's survival was at stake. A weakened caretaker President, Gerald Ford, bowed to what seemed to him inevitable.

The British counterinsurgency expert Robert Thompson, who visited South Vietnam in 1974, wrote admiringly of "the resilience of the Vietnamese, their courage, stamina, and stoicism. . . . They surmounted national and personal crises that would have crushed most peoples." But to many Vietnamese, it must have seemed pointless to fight on if their patron and ally was going to leave them in the lurch. As Kissinger confessed to President Thieu, "It is a fact that in the United States all the press, the media, and the intellectuals have a vested interest in [your] defeat."

On April 23, 1975, even as the battered ARVN was fighting to the last round against a vastly superior NVA force at Xuan Loc, Ford proclaimed that "America can regain the sense of pride that existed before Vietnam. But it cannot be achieved by re-fighting a war that is finished as far as America is concerned." To most South Vietnamese, this signaled the doom of their country.

And not their country alone. The final conquest of South Vietnam by North Vietnam in April 1975 signaled the start of a domino-like process that antiwar critics had always ridiculed as fantasy. By the end of the decade, the much-derided "domino theory" had become fact.

The first to fall to Communist expansionism was of course South Vietnam itself. Its army had been the fourth largest in the world, and its navy the fifth largest; as a result of its collapse, masses of U.S.-made military equipment fell into Communist hands. The former Navy and Air Force base at Cam Ranh Bay became home to a Soviet submarine and surface-fleet presence—the largest such base outside the Soviet Union. A similar fate befell Vietnam's nearest neighbors. The cessation of U.S. aid to the pro-American government in Cambodia delivered that country into the hands of the NVA's ally, the Khmer Rouge, while Laos gave up any pretense at neutrality and became totally dominated by the Communist Pathet Lao.

Those who still cling to the Vietnam myth maintain that the falling dominos stopped there, since other Southeast Asian nations like Thailand and Malaysia did *not* succumb to Communist domination. True; but the domino effect was not limited to Asia alone. As the political scientist Michael Katz has pointed out, after Vietnam it was "politically impossible for the U.S. government to undertake large-scale military intervention anywhere in the third world," a fact of which Marxist-Leninist revolutionaries took ample advantage. Even during the war, new pro-Soviet regimes had emerged in the Congo (1968), Benin (1972), and Ethiopia and Guinea Bissau (1974). At war's end and thereafter, the list grew to include, in 1975, Madagascar, Cape Verde, Mozambique, and Angola, then Afghanistan (1978) and Grenada and Nicaragua (1979). The fall of the shah of Iran and the establishment of the Ayatollah Khomeini's radical Islamic republic can similarly be seen as a result of America's abandonment of Vietnam—and as itself the first domino in a second great revolutionary wave with which we are still trying to come to grips.

As for the people living in the affected countries, the result was a humanitarian disaster. The claim that there was no “bloodbath” in South Vietnam is true only by comparison with what happened to its neighbor Cambodia. On top of the more than 275,000 South Vietnamese who died fighting in the country’s armed forces, at least 65,000 were murdered or shot after “liberation”—the equivalent of three-quarters of a million people in today’s United States.

According to the scholar D.R. Sar Desai, the Communist regime forcibly relocated or sent to “reeducation camps” somewhere between one-third to one-half of South Vietnam’s population; perhaps as many as 250,000 died of disease, starvation, or overwork, and the last inmates were not released until 1986. Ironically, the victims included many former members of the National Liberation Front and Vietcong, who realized too late that they had been puppets of the North all along. Another million or so Vietnamese, most of them ethnic Chinese, fled by sea from the new regime; an unknown number died or were lost at sea.

It was of course in Cambodia that the most notorious of post-Vietnam mass murders took place. This is not the place to recite all the horrors associated with the reign of terror of the Khmer Rouge. >From the perspective of the Vietnam myth, what is significant is how the bloody role of the Khmer Rouge was at first denied and then twisted so that blame for their brutality could be placed firmly on the United States, in particular on those who had fought to avoid a bloodbath in the first place.

Far from an independent force, the Khmer Rouge had been founded in 1951 as an integral component of Ho Chi Minh’s Indochinese Communist party. After 1970, Communist North Vietnam steadily armed and trained the Khmer Rouge to do battle against the pro-American government in Phnom Penh. At the time, antiwar activists in the United States were perfectly aware of this, and wholly approved: here was the Vietcong’s Cambodian twin, another group of Asian revolutionaries struggling to liberate their country from the yoke of neo-colonialism.

Five years later, when the horrific revelations about the Cambodian killing fields began to leak out, the line changed. In the argument best articulated by the British journalist William Shawcross in *Sideshow* (1979), Nixon and Kissinger’s “secret” bombing campaigns in Cambodia had so destabilized the country and wrecked its cultural fabric as to push the Khmer Rouge in an increasingly radical and vicious direction. Noam Chomsky and his co-author Edward Herman would go so far as to claim that the atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge were “a direct and understandable response to the still more concentrated and extreme savagery of a U.S. assault that may in part have been designed to evoke this very response.”

As Shawcross, to his credit, would later admit, none of this bears scrutiny. Nixon’s bombing campaign was never “secret” at all. The Cambodian government had itself approved and encouraged the campaign, hoping it would drive the hated Vietnamese out of the country once and for all. As for provoking the otherwise pacifically inclined Khmer Rouge, Laos was more heavily bombed than Cambodia during the war, and South Vietnam more than both, yet neither country produced a revolutionary insurgency as violent as the killers who inherited Phnom Penh.

The ideology of the Khmer Rouge, writes Jean-Louis Margolin, was “part of the great tradition of Leninism found in the successive figures of Stalin, Mao Zedong, and Ho Chi Minh,” and the proportion of the Cambodian population they killed “at the very least one in seven, and more likely one in five or four, is enough to obliterate the oft-heard argument that the violence of the Khmer Rouge . . . was only the reaction of a people driven mad by the original sin of American bombing.” To the contrary, one would be justified in concluding (in the words of the American political journalist Michael Lind) that “if any Americans deserve a share of the blame for the Khmer Rouge massacres and famines, it is antiwar

members of Congress . . . who sought to hasten a Khmer Rouge victory by denying U.S. military aid and air support for America's Cambodian allies."

In identifying the Khmer Rouge massacres as "a direct and understandable response to the still more concentrated and extreme savagery of a U.S. assault that may in part have been designed to evoke this very response," Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman typified a more widespread moral deadening that had slowly spread like a poison across the American Left during and after the war, and that permeates casual discourse to this day. The poison resulted from the exercise of building and sustaining an entirely fictionalized version of reality in Vietnam, and from steadfastly refusing to weigh the actions of America's enemies in the same ethical balance as the actions of America itself.

Above all, antiwar activists and critics of American policy in the media denied their *own* moral responsibility for what happened in Vietnam and Indochina once the policy they themselves had vociferously advocated—namely, withdrawal and disengagement—was carried out. When, four years after the fall of Saigon, Joan Baez, Richard John Neuhaus, and other former antiwar activists tried to draw attention to the plight of Vietnam's boat people and the brutal tyranny that had been established in that country, their former comrades, led by celebrities like Tom Hayden and Jane Fonda, denounced them as "stooges" and CIA agents. "Even if the [North] Vietnamese had chosen the course of mass executions and plunder," one of these former comrades stated in a letter, "it would have been our own strategies of terror and brutality that drove them to it."

This collapse of ethical and intellectual integrity would have consequences far beyond Vietnam. In the decades to come, the Vietnam myth would justify the Left's instinctual opposition to America's efforts to contain Communist aggression in Latin America in the 1980's, its characterization of the 1991 Gulf war as a campaign of "blood for oil," and its denunciations of our interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq after 9/11. The need to prop up the same myth in the face of a contradictory reality would fuel the "paranoid style" of leftist conspiracy-mongering in films like Oliver Stone's *JFK*, Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 911*, and most recently and blatantly *Loose Change*, which argues that the Twin Towers were brought down by agents of the Bush administration. And, as President Bush discovered last August, it remains potent enough to trigger the most irrational and rhetorically violent responses when anyone dares challenge its proprietary construction of what the Vietnam war was in fact all about, and what are its lessons.

Historical analogies are never entirely accurate. They may not even be useful. But it remains true that our present and future actions are always based, to some extent, on our evaluation of past experience. Generals are often accused of fighting the last war. This is something that, when it comes to Vietnam, liberals and leftists have been doing for more than three decades, by refusing to confront (in words Peter Marin once flung in the face of American authorities) "their own culpability" and "their own capacity for error and excess." Whatever the differences or similarities between Vietnam and Iraq, or between Vietnam and our global war with Islamic radicalism, the real analogy between then and now may lie in this tenacious refusal of self-examination by the liberal Left—especially when the facts utterly contravene its reflexive indictment of the motives, purposes, and actions of the American government.