

# A HISTORY OF OUR TIME

Readings on Postwar America  
FOURTH EDITION

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# Part 5

## VIETNAM

The war in Vietnam represents one of the most difficult military and foreign policy experiences in American history. Each step of American involvement seemed merely a modification of past practice, an increment to existing policy, and therefore nothing that required a declaration of war or a full scale reassessment of underlying policies. Through such a process American participation in Vietnam grew from 800 troops in 1960 to 15,000 in 1963 to more than 500,000 in 1968. A civil war between the Vietnamese became an American war; the United States was perceived by most people in the world as a colonialist aggressor; and the American people themselves divided into warring factions over support or opposition to the war.

Ironically, the United States became involved in Vietnam less because of any interest in Southeast Asia itself than in order to achieve other foreign policy goals. Franklin Roosevelt had decided during World War II that colonialism should end in Southeast Asia. But after the war American officials reversed that stance. To mollify France's unhappiness over the rebuilding of Germany, the United States countenanced French policy in Southeast Asia. By 1948, the United States was providing crucial economic and political sustenance for the French occupation of Indochina.

When the French lost their own Vietnam war in 1954 and the Geneva conference divided Vietnam into two regions, the United States stepped in to provide support for the pro-western government of President Diem. This seemed a moderate enough action at the time, particularly given the fact that President Eisenhower had earlier refused a French request to use atomic weapons against the Vietnamese. But that moderate involvement in support of Diem provided the basis for ever-increasing commitments of American money and manpower. When John F. Kennedy became president,

Vietnam became a testing point of the battle against communism—again, not so much because of its own intrinsic importance as because of events elsewhere. After the debacle at the Bay of Pigs in April 1961 and Kennedy's confrontation with Khrushchev at Vienna in June 1961, the young American president wanted to find some place where he could take a stand and convey to the Russians his determination to hold firm against communism. Vietnam became such a place, and during the Kennedy years the United States significantly expanded the flow of foreign aid and military equipment to South Vietnam, increased the number of American troops engaged in the conflict to over 15,000, and launched a major effort at counterinsurgency. At the same time, however, the United States remained publicly committed to political reform in Vietnam and to the proposition that it was impossible for the United States itself to fight a war that the Vietnamese did not wish to wage.

It was Lyndon Johnson's misfortune to preside over the most massive and disastrous expansion of the war. Deeply committed to maintaining a strong military presence, fearful of abandoning Kennedy's policy, and anxious to put forward an image of strength and power, Johnson never asked the hard questions as to why we were in Vietnam, where our policy would lead, or what would happen as a consequence. As one coup d'état after another brought successive military regimes to power in South Vietnam, Johnson kept pouring more American troops and money into the country, attempting to provide, through external military support, a degree of stability that clearly was not present among the South Vietnamese themselves. The long range results are now history. The Vietnamese countryside was destroyed, millions of lives were lost, search and destroy missions became the hallmark of a senseless effort to accumulate military victories measured by body counts of Vietnamese dead, and the nation entered a downward spiral of divisiveness and mistrust.

There are various ways of interpreting American involvement in Vietnam. Some see the war as simply a logical extension of a Cold War mentality, in which any civil war or nationalist struggle was perceived as part of a communist conspiracy that must be stopped. According to that interpretation, U.S. involvement grew directly from a distorted definition of world events in which all subtleties of internal and cultural politics were lost. A second interpretation views Vietnam as the one exception to a generally successful for-

eign policy in the postwar world. The Vietnam experience was not the product of erroneous Cold War attitudes, but rather an unrelated mistake in which the United States became too deeply involved before it could make a correct assessment of the situation. A third interpretation is that the war represented a wise policy that went awry. According to this view, U.S. commitment to political reform in South Vietnam was intelligent, and only when America attempted to use military power in place of political persuasion did a good policy turn bad. Finally, there is the view that the policy was wise all along and was prevented from being successful only because the military was hindered by political decisions at home. According to General William Westmoreland, the war was won militarily; it was lost politically.

Whichever interpretation one accepts, there can be little question that the war was a traumatic event for America and the world. The following selections explore some of the explanations for the war, as well as the consequences it brought. John Garry Clifford places the war within the long-term framework of American foreign policy. Lyndon Johnson cogently states the reasons why Americans must fight and win. Leslie Gelb, a State Department official, analyzes the major explanations of the causes of the war and offers his own view of how and why the United States became involved so deeply. Richard Hammer describes the consequences of American policy for the Vietnamese people as well as for United States soldiers and those at home. His description of My Lai speaks as powerfully as anything to the horror of what occurred as a result of Vietnam. John Kerry, a representative of Vietnam Veterans Against the War (and now the junior Democratic Senator from Massachusetts), poignantly testifies about what he had observed and learned in the war.

Some critical questions remain. Was there ever a way that United States involvement could have led to a democratic government in Vietnam? How much racism was involved in U.S. policy? Did an episode such as My Lai represent the natural consequence of a "search and destroy" mentality, or was it a complete aberration? Finally, there is the question of how much American policy in Vietnam represented a fatal flaw in the idea that America has a moral right to tell the rest of the world how to behave.

# Vietnam in Historical Perspective

*John Garry Clifford*

*American involvement in Vietnam resulted from a series of assumptions about America's place in the world. John Garry Clifford, a diplomatic historian from the University of Connecticut, has written extensively about postwar American foreign policy. Here, he shows how the war in Vietnam reflected American ideas about the Cold War. Clifford concludes that the Vietnam experience challenged the basic tenets of American policy-makers, forcing a reassessment of how we proceed to achieve our goals. Clifford's essay accurately describes the immediate consequences of the Vietnam war. During the 1970s, Congress limited presidential power to make war without congressional approval, and circumscribed the freedom of action of the CIA. Nevertheless, students may ask whether Clifford's conclusions still hold in the 1990s.*

Although it is too early to determine, the Vietnam war may well prove to have been both the logical culmination of American foreign policy since 1945 and a turning point comparable to that of World War II. Certainly on a perceptual level, in the way Americans viewed the world, the war set in motion changes that became obvious by 1970. On an institutional level, in the way government agencies connected with foreign policy defined their goals and procedures, the evidence of change by the early 1970s was less marked. One thing became certain: the options available to American diplomats were more varied than at any other time since the fall of France in 1940.

Excerpted from John Garry Clifford, "Change and Continuity in American Foreign Policy Since 1930," in James T. Patterson, ed. *Paths to the Present* (Minneapolis: Burgess Publishing Co., 1975). Reprinted by permission of the author.

Vietnam, which Senator John F. Kennedy described in 1956 as the “cornerstone of the Free World in Southeast Asia, the Keystone to the arch, the finger in the dike,” was the logical, if erroneous, culmination of Cold War perceptions. The “lessons” of the past were constantly invoked. “If we don’t stop the Reds in South Vietnam,” said Lyndon Johnson, “tomorrow they will be in Hawaii, and next week they will be in San Francisco.” Former Undersecretary of the Air Force, Townsend Hoopes, described the thinking of Dean Rusk: “In his always articulate, sometimes eloquent, formulations, Asia seemed to be Europe, China was either Stalinist Russia or Hitler Germany, and SEATO was either NATO or the Grand Alliance of World War II.” If these analogies seemed somewhat strained, intended more for public persuasion than for internal conviction, the leaders in Washington all subscribed to the belief—unquestioned since Pearl Harbor—that aggression must be deterred. Vietnam became a test of America’s will. “I don’t need to remind you of what happened in the Civil War,” Johnson told a press conference in 1967. “People were here in the White House begging Lincoln to concede and to work out a deal with the Confederacy when word came of his victories. . . . I think you know what Roosevelt went through and President Wilson in World War I. . . . We are going to have this criticism. We are going to have this difference. . . . No one likes war. All people love peace. But you can’t have freedom without defending it. . . . We are going to do whatever it is necessary to do to see that the aggressor does not succeed.”

But who was the aggressor in Vietnam? The Soviet Union? As the “quagmire” deepened, observers noted that Soviet supplies indeed helped the “enemy,” but that Moscow was not master-minding a world-wide Communist conspiracy. The Sino-Soviet split became so evident by the mid-1960s that even the most militant Cold Warriors had to take notice. Perhaps the “enemy” was China, and Dean Rusk conjured up the frightening image of a billion Chinese armed with hydrogen bombs. But even after President Nixon’s trips to Moscow and Peking in 1972, the war continued. The suggestion persisted that it was a *civil* war, an internal conflict between two versions of Vietnamese nationality, but this reality did not gibe with Cold War perceptions. Not enough was known in Washington about the fundamental differences in Asian societies, and belief in the Domino

Theory came easily, along with visions of armed Communist hordes. Bureaucrats did not want to change their perceptions. James C. Thomson, a White House consultant during the early 1960s, recalls a conversation in March of 1964 with an Assistant Secretary of State. “But in some ways, of course, it *is* a civil war,” Thomson said. “Don’t play word games with me!” the official snapped.

Bureaucratic style contributed significantly to the tragedy. Part of it derived from technological superiority, which in turn gave rise to a “can do” philosophy. At one extreme, in Walter LaFeber’s phrase, was “General Curtis LeMay’s notion that Communism could best be handled from a height of 50,000 feet.” At a more sophisticated level was the conviction that no matter how resilient the enemy proved, the United States could work its will through “smart” bombs, search and destroy tactics, electronic barriers, superior air power, or sheer economic momentum. A crazy sense of bloodlessness began to emerge. “Every quantitative measurement we have shows we’re winning this war,” McNamara stated in 1962. Statistics proliferated—infiltration rates, weapons-loss ratios, aircraft sorties rates, expended ammunition tonnages, allied troop contributions, enemy “body counts,” friendly casualties. Bureaucratic jargon (“free fire zones,” “surgical” air strikes, “threshold of pain,” “slow squeeze”) obscured the reality of flesh being mangled, villages devastated, ecology ruined. Describing the gradual pressure imposed by the “Rolling Thunder” bombing campaign, one State Department official said: “Our orchestration should be mainly violins, but with periodic touches of brass.”

This armchair atmosphere could not be dispelled by battle reports or occasional trips to Saigon. A process of self-hypnosis seemed at work. David Halberstam has told the story of Daniel Ellsberg’s return from a tour of duty in Vietnam and his attempts to tell presidential adviser Walt Rostow how badly the war was going. “No, you don’t understand,” said Rostow. “Victory is very near. I’ll show you the charts. The charts are very good.” “I don’t want to see any charts,” Ellsberg replied. “But, Dan, the charts are very good,” Rostow insisted. Similarly, James Thomson has described his shock on returning to Harvard after several years in the State Department. He suddenly realized that “the young men, the flesh and blood I taught and saw on these university streets, were potentially some of the numbers on the charts of those faraway planners.

In a curious sense, Cambridge is closer to this war than Washington."

The imperviousness of official Washington from external dissent contributed to the debacle. The smugness that came with access to classified information was partly responsible. The experts knew the facts, the critics did not. Internal dissenters were rarer and somehow safer to government leaders. President Johnson used to greet Bill Moyers rather affectionately: "Well, here comes Mr. Stop-the-Bombing." And when the war protest became especially shrill in 1966 and 1967, Johnson, who had followed the experts into the morass, displayed his furious temper. Dissenters, he said, were "nervous Nellies," "chickenshit." "I'm the only President you have," he would say. "Why don't you get on the team?" When hawks like Bundy and McNamara began to waver, Johnson sarcastically called the former "George McBundy" and unceremoniously nominated the latter to head the World Bank. This presidential temperament reinforced the natural bureaucratic tendency to remain silent so as not to lose one's effectiveness. Townsend Hoopes has described Vice-President Hubert Humphrey's abortive dissent in 1965: "His views were received at the White House with particular coldness, and he was banished from the inner councils for some months thereafter, until he decided to 'get back on the team.'" Not until the Tet offensive of early 1968 did effective criticism penetrate the Oval Office, and then it took someone of the stature of Dean Acheson to shake Lyndon Johnson. "With all due respect, Mr. President," said the mustachioed Dean of Middletown, "the Joint Chiefs of Staff don't know what they are talking about." When the Senior Advisory Group on Vietnam corroborated Acheson's estimates a few weeks later, the President's plaintive reaction underlined the extent to which policy had been made in a vacuum. "What did you tell them that you didn't tell me?" he asked his staff. "You must have given them a different briefing."

Momentum was another reason for escalation. The men in Washington may have thought they controlled events, but in actuality the geni of war were beyond control. For all their sophisticated technology, for all their favorable statistics, for all their "can do" spirit, American leaders never understood the extent to which decisions closed options previously available, making other decisions almost inevitable. Moreover, policy decisions often resulted from compromise, as in the case of the Kennedy administration sending military

advisers to South Vietnam in 1961, notwithstanding the Taylor-Rostow report which recommended 8,000 troops. These compromises represented the usual adjustment of differences between the various agencies involved: the Saigon embassy, CIA, the State Department, the White House Staff, and the Joint Chiefs. Once advisers were committed, however, pressure rose for increasing their numbers.

Similarly, in the winter of 1964-65, certain "dovish" planners in the State Department who were strongly opposed to bombing the North urged instead that ground forces be sent to the South. They thought such a move would increase bargaining leverage against the North and be a prod for negotiations. At the same time, military men determined not to fight another "land war" in Asia were calling for the air-strike option. Still other civilians seeking peace wanted to bomb Hanoi into early peace talks. Within eight months all factions were disappointed: there was a costly and ineffective air campaign against the North, a mushrooming ground commitment in the South, and negotiations farther away than before. Each step also added greater weight to the military's demands. As soon as the Army's mission had changed from advising to saving Saigon, it was inevitable that the Joint Chiefs should press for escalation. Each service had its special panaceas, and under a tacit agreement the Joint Chiefs usually spoke in unison. McNamara then scaled down their demands. The result: escalation. Even after Nixon began withdrawing ground forces in 1969, military pressure to "protect" these troops resulted in decisions to invade Cambodian sanctuaries, to mine the harbors of Haiphong and Hanoi, and to resume aerial bombardment of the North at ever-increasing rates.

Vietnam brought about an "agonizing reappraisal" in American foreign policy far more searching than anything John Foster Dulles had envisaged in the 1950s. Dissent in American wars was not a new phenomenon. New England Federalists had opposed the War of 1812, abolitionists had protested the Mexican War, and Mugwumps and anti-imperialists had been vocal in 1898. Generally these dissenters were relatively small in number, well educated, respectable (usually upper class WASP), and quite orthodox in the way they protested—pamphlets petitions, rallies, letter writing campaigns, efforts in behalf of anti-war candidates. The Vietnam war protest was different. The movement had enough diversity to include such heterogeneous spokesmen as Norman Mailer,

Muhammed Ali, Abby Hoffman, John Kenneth Galbraith, George Kennan, Jane Fonda, Joan Baez, Jeannette Rankin, Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy, Timothy Leary, Dick Gregory, and Noam Chomsky. Protest went from genteel teach-ins, to Senator Eugene McCarthy's brash campaign for the Democratic nomination in 1968, to marches On Washington, moratoria, and violent attempts by revolutionary groups to bring the war "home" to America. Protest literature ranged from the witty to the obscene.

People opposed the war for different reasons. Some still clung to the Cold War arguments for containment, but denied that the doctrine applied to Asia, or particularly to Vietnam. Others saw the war as killing reform at home, diverting attention from desperate conditions in the cities and in race relations. A less articulate group protested the deaths of American soldiers in Asian jungles, but seemed willing to permit American aircraft to drop billions of tons of bombs on yellow peoples. Others blamed President Johnson. "We've got a wild man in the White House," said Senator McCarthy. "A desperate man who was likely to get us into war with China," warned Senator Albert Gore of Tennessee.

More and more, protest occurred because of a moral revulsion to the war. Reaction to napalm bombing and "defoliation," horror at the destruction of the city of Hue in order to "save" it, incredulity at the My Lai massacre and the shootings of students at Kent State and Jackson State in 1970—all these events called into question the ethical standards of American policy. Confused about the identity of the aggressor in Vietnam—the Viet Cong? Hanoi? China?—more and more Americans came to agree with Walt Kelly's possum, Pogo: "We have met the enemy and they are us."

By the late 1960s this moral revulsion, fueled by the obvious *practical* failure of the American effort, had prompted a reassessment of long-held assumptions. One State Department official complained in 1966: "There is a considerable sort of feeling of unhappiness here that elements in the population that used to be thought of as our 'natural constituency' are not doing yeoman service for the Department now. We do have a constituency of sorts—the Foreign Policy Association, the Council on Foreign Relations, and all the other groups like that. These people have helped us all along for years, with the United Nations, the Marshall Plan, NATO, Korea, and all the others. But they are not helping us with the American public on the Vietnam issue. When they come to town to be

briefed on Vietnam, they do not leave with marching orders, as they used to." When Dean Acheson told President Johnson that the generals did not know what they were talking about, he was also serving notice that the foreign policy consensus in existence since World War II had shattered. Another symbolic confrontation occurred in the spring of 1970 following the Cambodia invasion, when a group of prominent academicians, headed by Richard Neustadt, visited Henry Kissinger and recanted their support for executive predominance in foreign policy. These defections did not mean that Nixon could not count on continued support from the "silent majority," that Congress suddenly cut off military appropriations, or that the Navy decided to convert its aircraft carriers into hospital ships. What did emerge was an eventual repudiation of the Vietnam war by a majority of the so-called "foreign policy public." "What the hell is an Establishment for, if it's not to support the President," Kissinger complained. The reaction was especially strong among academicians. The political scientist Bruce Russett wrote: "Vietnam has been to social scientists what Alamogordo was to the physicists. Few of those who have observed it can easily return to their comfortable presumptions about America's duty, or right, to fight in distant lands." . . .

Historians cannot predict the future. To suggest, however, that changes in American assumptions about the world began in the 1960s and that Watergate and Vietnam accelerated these changes, is not presumptuous. The "lower profile" of American involvement abroad, as proclaimed by the Nixon Doctrine, will result in "lower" perceptions about American power and responsibilities. The intellectual capital that financed the Marshall Plan, NATO, and Korea was expended in Southeast Asia in the 1960s. The Nixon-Kissinger policies of détente toward the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China have in themselves altered Cold War patterns. Do these changes signal a return to the isolationism of the 1930s, as defenders of the Vietnam war sometimes suggested? In the sense that domestic needs will not automatically take second place to foreign policy, or that Congress will not rubber-stamp executive initiatives, these changes do reflect some of the concerns of the Stimson-Hoover era. Nevertheless, the huge foreign policy bureaucracy spawned by World War II and the Cold War will remain, and it will take time for new perceptions to become embedded. Public opinion, decidedly noninterventionist in Asia because of the failure of

the ground war in Vietnam, may well permit intervention by means of naval and aerial bombardment in future crises. The renewal of war between Israel and the Arab states in the fall of 1973, combined with the Arab embargo of oil, raised the prospect of American intervention in the Middle East, and with it the possibility of a Soviet-American confrontation. Like all previous empires in decline, the United States will retreat reluctantly.

Nevertheless, Vietnam and Watergate have left an ambivalence which allows room for cautious optimism. As the political scientist Robert W. Tucker has observed, Pearl Harbor and the Berlin Blockade will not be automatic reference points for the coming generation of "foreign policy elites." Rather, memories of My Lai and the Cuban Missile Crisis will be much sharper. "Never again," a slogan which the Army brought out of the Korean War, ought to remain a convenient watchword. The waning of anti-Communism as a political issue, as well as the need to combat industrial pollution, to conserve energy, to revitalize public transportation, and to obtain public health insurance, should tend to "lower" profiles and "cool" American foreign policy. Gradually, one may predict, the traditional American mission of erecting a "city on the hill" and solving domestic problems will take precedence over building "democratic" governments in remote areas of the world.

John Quincy Adams said it well more than 150 years earlier:

Wherever the standard of freedom and Independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will her [America's] heart, her benediction and her prayers be. But she goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy. . . . She well knows that by once enlisting under other banners than her own, were they even the banners of foreign independence, she would involve herself beyond the power of extrication. . . . The fundamental maxims of her policy would change from *liberty to force*.

## Why We Are in Vietnam

Lyndon B. Johnson

*On April 7, 1965, President Johnson delivered a major address at Johns Hopkins University that he hoped might satisfy both the hawk and dove critics of his Vietnam policies. He asserted his determination to use whatever force was necessary to deter aggression as well as his readiness to begin "unconditional discussions" toward a peaceful settlement of the conflict. He even held out the promise of an American-financed billion dollar project to develop the Mekong river valley as an incentive to bring North Vietnam to the bargaining table. For the next three years, however, Johnson would talk about negotiations while continuing to escalate the war. Note the reasons he gave for the U.S. involvement, and the American objectives, in Vietnam. How realistic was his view of the stakes involved? Did he have other alternatives to the increasing use of American combat forces? If so, why were they rejected? Did Johnson think that escalation of the war was the price to be paid for preserving the Great Society programs?*

Tonight Americans and Asians are dying for a world where each people may choose its own path to change.

This is the principle for which our ancestors fought in the valleys of Pennsylvania. It is the principle for which our sons fight tonight in the jungles of Vietnam.

Vietnam is far away from this quiet campus. We have no territory there, nor do we seek any. The war is dirty and brutal and difficult. And some 400 young men, born into an America that is bursting with opportunity and promise, have ended their lives on Vietnam's steaming soil.

Why must we take this painful road?

From *Public Papers of Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1965* (Washington, D.C., 1966), pp. 394-97.



Why must this Nation hazard its ease, and its interest, and its power for the sake of a people so far away?

We fight because we must fight if we are to live in a world where every country can shape its own destiny. And only in such a world will our own freedom be finally secure.

This kind of world will never be built by bombs or bullets. Yet the infirmities of man are such that force must often precede reason, and the waste of war, the works of peace.

We wish that this were not so. But we must deal with the world as it is, if it is ever to be as we wish.

The world as it is in Asia is not a serene or peaceful place.

The first reality is that North Vietnam has attacked the independent nation of South Vietnam. Its object is total conquest.

Of course, some of the people of South Vietnam are participating in attack on their own government. But trained men and supplies, orders and arms, flow in a constant stream from north to south.

This support is the heartbeat of the war.

And it is a war of unparalleled brutality. Simple farmers are the targets of assassination and kidnapping. Women and children are strangled in the night because their men are loyal to their government. And helpless villages are ravaged by sneak attacks. Large-scale raids are conducted on towns, and terror strikes in the heart of cities.

The confused nature of this conflict cannot mask the fact that it is the new face of an old enemy.

Over this war—and all Asia—is another reality: the deepening shadow of Communist China. The rulers in Hanoi are urged on by Peking. This is a regime which has destroyed freedom in Tibet, which has attacked India, and has been condemned by the United Nations for aggression in Korea. It is a nation which is helping the forces of violence in almost every continent. The contest in Vietnam is part of a wider pattern of aggressive purposes.

Why are these realities our concern? Why are we in South Vietnam?

*We are there because we have a promise to keep.* Since 1954 every American President has offered support to the people of South Vietnam. We have helped to build, and we have helped to defend. Thus, over many years, we have made a national pledge to help South Vietnam defend its independence.

And I intend to keep that promise.

To dishonor that pledge, to abandon this small and brave nation to its enemies, and to the terror that must follow, would be an unforgivable wrong.

*We are also there to strengthen world order.* Around the globe, from Berlin to Thailand, are people whose well-being rests, in part, on the belief that they can count on us if they are attacked. To leave Vietnam to its fate would shake the confidence of all these people in the value of an American commitment and in the value of America's word. The result would be increased unrest and instability, and even wider war.

*We are also there because there are great stakes in the balance.* Let no one think for a moment that retreat from Vietnam would bring an end to conflict. The battle would be renewed in one country and then another. The central lesson of our time is that the appetite for aggression is never satisfied. To withdraw from one battlefield means only to prepare for the next. We must say in southeast Asia—as we did in Europe—in the words of the Bible: "Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further."

There are those who say that all our effort there will be futile—that China's power is such that it is bound to dominate all southeast Asia. But there is no end to that argument until all of the nations of Asia are swallowed up.

There are those who wonder why we have a responsibility there. Well, we have it there for the same reason that we have a responsibility for the defense of Europe. World War II was fought in both Europe and Asia, and when it ended we found ourselves with continued responsibility for the defense of freedom.

Our objective is the independence of South Vietnam, and its freedom from attack. We want nothing for ourselves—only that the people of South Vietnam be allowed to guide their own country in their own way.

We will do everything necessary to reach that objective. And we will do only what is absolutely necessary.

In recent months attacks on South Vietnam were stepped up. Thus, it became necessary for us to increase our response and to make attacks by air. This is not a change of purpose. It is a change in what we believe that purpose requires.

We do this in order to slow down aggression.

We do this to increase the confidence of the brave people of South Vietnam who have bravely borne this brutal battle for so many years with so many casualties.

And we do this to convince the leaders of North Vietnam—and all who seek to share their conquest—a very simple fact:

We will not be defeated.

We will not grow tired.

We will not withdraw, either openly or under the cloak of a meaningless agreement.

We know that air attacks alone will not accomplish all of these purposes. But it is our best and prayerful judgment that they are a necessary part of the surest road to peace.

We hope that peace will come swiftly. But that is in the hands of others besides ourselves. And we must be prepared for a long continued conflict. It will require patience as well as bravery, the will to endure as well as the will to resist.

I wish it were possible to convince others with words of what we now find it necessary to say with guns and planes: Armed hostility is futile. Our resources are equal to any challenge. Because we fight for values and we fight for principles, rather than territory or colonies, our patience and our determination are unending.

Once this is clear, then it should also be clear that the only path for reasonable men is the path of peaceful settlement.

Such peace demands an independent South Vietnam—securely guaranteed and able to shape its own relationships to all others—free from outside interference—tied to no alliance—a military base for no other country.

These are the essentials of any final settlement.

We will never be second in the search for such a peaceful settlement in Vietnam.

There may be many ways to this kind of peace: in discussion or negotiation with the governments concerned; in large groups or in small ones; in the reaffirmation of old agreements or their strengthening with new ones.

We have stated this position over and over again, fifty times and more, to friend and foe alike. And we remain ready, with this purpose, for unconditional discussions.

And until that bright and necessary day of peace we will try to keep conflict from spreading. We have no desire to see thousands die in battle—Asians or Americans. We have no desire to devastate

that which the people of North Vietnam have built with toil and sacrifice. We will use our power with restraint and with all the wisdom that we can command.

But we will use it.

This war, like most wars, is filled with terrible irony. For what do the people of North Vietnam want? They want what their neighbors also desire: food for their hunger; health for their bodies; a chance to learn; progress for their country; and an end to the bondage of material misery. And they would find all these things far more readily in peaceful association with others than in the endless course of battle. . . .

We often say how impressive power is. But I do not find it impressive at all. The guns and the bombs, the rockets and the warships, are all symbols of human failure. They are necessary symbols. They protect what we cherish. But they are witness to human folly.

A dam built across a great river is impressive.

In the countryside where I was born, and where I live, I have seen the night illuminated, and the kitchens warmed, and the homes heated, where once the cheerless night and the ceaseless cold held sway. And all this happened because electricity came to our area along the humming wires of the REA [Rural Electrification Administrative]. Electrification of the countryside—yes, that, too, is impressive.

A rich harvest in a hungry land is impressive.

The sight of healthy children in a classroom is impressive.

These—not mighty arms—are the achievements which the American Nation believes to be impressive.

And, if we are steadfast, the time may come when all other nations will also find it so.

Every night before I turn out the lights to sleep I ask myself this question: Have I done everything that I can do to unite this country? Have I done everything I can to help unite the world, to try to bring peace and hope to all the peoples of the world? Have I done enough?

Ask yourselves that question in your homes—and in this hall tonight. Have we, each of us, all done all we could? Have we done enough?

We may well be living in the time foretold many years ago when it was said: "I call heaven and earth to record this day against you,

that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live.”

This generation of the world must choose: destroy or build, kill or aid, hate or understand.

We can do all these things on a scale never dreamed of before.

*Well, we will choose life.* In so doing we will prevail over the enemies within man, and over the natural enemies of all mankind. . . .

## Causes of the War

*Leslie Gelb*

*Those who know most about the decision-making process in American foreign policy frequently can say least about it. Officials at the State Department and the Pentagon see a myriad of classified information everyday. While lacking the independence and detachment of external observers, they have a unique vantage point on how and why particular policies are pursued. Leslie Gelb, a State Department official during the Vietnam war years, reflects this “insider’s” familiarity with all the currents and crosscurrents of advice shaping American foreign policy decisions on Vietnam. In this selection from testimony given before Congress, Gelb assesses the relative influence of the various forces acting upon the presidential decision-making process. Although Gelb does not cite chapter and verse of secret memoranda supporting various positions on the war, his is one of the most informed studies of how and why the United States became so deeply involved in Vietnam. His conclusion that pervasive anticommunist attitudes provide the key to our involvement in Southeast Asia supports the argument that the Vietnam war, far from being a deviation from postwar foreign policy, was in fact a logical extension of the Cold War.*

Wars are supposed to tell us about ourselves. Are we a wise and just nation? Or are we foolish and aggressive? Merciless or humane? Well led or misled? Vital or decadent? Hopeful or hopeless? Nations in war and after war, win or lose, try to scratch away at the paste or glue or traditions or values that held their societies together and see of what they are made. It is arguable whether a society should

From Leslie H. Gelb statement to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, May 1972.

indulge in such self-scrutiny. Societies are, as Edmund Burke wrote, "delicate, intricate wholes" that are more easily damaged than improved when subjected to the glare of Grand Inquisitors.

But in the case of our society and the war in Vietnam, too many people are seeking answers and are entitled to them, and many are only too eager to fill in the blanks. The families and friends of those who were killed and wounded will want to know whether it was worth it after all? Intellectuals will want to know "why Vietnam"? Men seeking and holding political office will demand to know who was responsible? The answers to these questions will themselves become political facts and forces, shaping the United States' role in the world and our lives at home for years to come.

#### CAUSES OF THE WAR: THE RANGE OF EXPLANATIONS

Central to this inquiry is the issue of causes of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. I have found eight discernible explanations advanced in the Vietnam literature. Different authors combine these explanations in various ways, but I will keep them separate for the purpose of analysis. I will, then, sketch my own position.

##### *The Arrogance of Power*

This view holds that a driving force in American involvement in Vietnam was the fact that we were a nation of enormous power and like comparable nations in history, we would seek to use this power at every opportunity. To have power is to want to employ it, is to be corrupted by it. The arrogance derives from the belief that to have power, is to be able to do anything. Power invokes right and justifies itself. Vietnam was there, a challenge to this power and an opportunity for its exercise, and no task was beyond accomplishment.

There can be no doubt about this strain in the behavior of other great powers and in the American character. But this is not a universal law. Great powers, and especially the United States have demonstrated self-restraint. The arrogance of power, I think, had more to do with our persisting in the war than with our initial involvement. It always was difficult for our leaders back in Washington and for operatives in the field to believe that American resources and ingenuity could not devise some way to overcome the adversary.

##### *Bureaucratic Politics*

There are two, not mutually exclusive, approaches within this view. One has it that national security bureaucrats (the professionals who make up the military services, civilian Defense, AID, State and the CIA) are afflicted with the curse of machismo, the need to assert and prove manhood and toughness. Career advancement and acceptability within the bureaucracy depended on showing that you were not afraid to propose the use of force. The other approach has it that bureaucrats purposefully misled their superiors about the situation in Vietnam and carefully constructed policy alternatives so as to circumscribe their superiors, thus forcing further involvement in Vietnam.

The machismo phenomenon is not unknown in the bureaucracy. It was difficult, if not damaging, to careers to appear conciliatory or "soft." Similarly, the constriction of options is a well-known bureaucratic device. But, I think, these approaches unduly emphasize the degree to which the President and his immediate advisers were trapped by the bureaucrats. The President was always in a position to ask for new options or to exclude certain others. The role of the bureaucracy was much more central to shaping the programs or the means used to fight the war than the key decisions to make the commitments in the first place.

##### *Domestic Politics*

This view is quite complicated, and authors argue their case on several different levels. The variants are if you were responsible for losing Vietnam to communism, you would: (a) lose the next election and lose the White House in particular; (b) jeopardize your domestic legislative program, your influence in general, by having to defend yourself constantly against political attack; (c) invite the return of a McCarthyite right-wing reaction; and (d) risk undermining domestic support for a continuing U.S. role abroad, in turn, risking dangerous probes by Russia and China.

There can be no doubt, despite the lack of supporting evidence in the Pentagon Papers, about the importance of domestic political considerations in both the initial commitment to and the subsequent increase in our Vietnam involvement. Officials are reluctant, for obvious reasons, to put these considerations down in writing, and scholars therefore learn too little about them. It should also be

noted that domestic political factors played a key part in shaping the manner in which the war was fought—no reserve call-ups, certain limitations on bombing targeting, paying for the war, and the like.

### *Imperialism*

This explanation is a variant of the domestic politics explanation. Proponents of this view argue that special interest groups maneuvered the United States into the war. Their goal was to capture export markets and natural resources at public expense for private economic gain.

The evidence put forward to support this “devil theory” has not been persuasive. Certain groups do gain economically from wars, but their power to drive our political system into war tends to be exaggerated and over-dramatized.

### *Men Making Hard Choices Pragmatically*

This is the view that our leaders over the years were not men who were inspired by any particular ideology, but were pragmatists weighing the evidence and looking at each problem on its merits. According to this perspective, our leaders knew they were facing tough choices, and their decisions always were close ones. But having decided 51 to 49 to go ahead, they tried to sell and implement their policies one hundred percent.

This view cannot be dismissed out-of-hand. Most of our leaders, and especially our Presidents, occupied centrist political positions. But Vietnam is a case, I believe, where practical politicians allowed an anti-communist world view to get the best of them.

### *Balance of Power Politics*

Intimately related to the pragmatic explanations is the conception which often accompanies pragmatism—the desire to maintain some perceived balance-of-power among nations. The principal considerations in pursuing this goal were: seeing that “the illegal use of force” is not allowed to succeed, honoring commitments, and keeping credibility with allies and potential adversaries. The underlying judgment was that failure to stop aggression in one place would tempt others to aggress in ever more dangerous places.

These represent the words and arguments most commonly and

persuasively used in the executive branch, the Congress, and elsewhere. They seemed commonsensical and prudential. Most Americans were prepared to stretch their meaning to Vietnam. No doubt many believed these arguments on their own merits, but in most cases, I think, the broader tenet of anti-communism made them convincing.

### *The Slippery Slope*

Tied to the pragmatic approach, the conception of balance of power, and the arrogance of power, is the explanation which holds that United States involvement in Vietnam is the story of the slippery slope. According to this view, Vietnam was not always critical to U.S. national security; it became so over the years as each succeeding administration piled commitment on commitment. Each administration sort of slid farther into the Vietnam quagmire, not really understanding the depth of the problems in Vietnam and convinced that it could win. The catchwords of this view are optimism and inadvertence.

While this explanation undoubtedly fits certain individuals and certain periods of time, it is, by itself, a fundamental distortion of the Vietnam experience. From the Korean War, stated American objectives for Vietnam were continuously high and absolute. U.S. involvement, not U.S. objectives, increased over time. Moreover, to scrutinize the range of official public statements and the private memos as revealed in the Pentagon Papers makes it difficult to argue that our leaders were deceived by the enormity of the Vietnam task before them. It was not necessary for our leaders to believe they were going to win. It was sufficient for them to believe that they could not afford to lose Vietnam to communism.

### *Anti-Communism*

The analysts who offer this explanation hold that anti-communism was the central and all-pervasive fact of U.S. foreign policy from at least 1947 until the end of the sixties. After World War II, an ideology whose very existence seemed to threaten basic American values had combined with the national force of first Russia and then China. This combination of ideology and power brought our leaders to see the world in “we-they” terms and to insist that peace was indivisible. Going well beyond balance of power considerations,

every piece of territory became critical, and every besieged nation, a potential domino. Communism came to be seen as an infection to be quarantined rather than a force to be judiciously and appropriately balanced. Vietnam, in particular, became the cockpit of confrontation between the "Free World" and Totalitarianism; it was where the action was for 20 years.

In my opinion, simple anti-communism was the principal reason for United States involvement in Vietnam. It is not the whole story, but it is the biggest part.

As of this point in my own research, I advance three propositions to explain why, how, and with what expectations the United States became involved in the Vietnam war.

First, U.S. involvement in Vietnam is not mainly or mostly a story of step by step, inadvertent descent into unforeseen quicksand. It is primarily a story of why U.S. leaders considered that it was vital not to lose Vietnam by force to Communism. Our leaders believed Vietnam to be vital not for itself, but for what they thought its "loss" would mean internationally and domestically. Previous involvement made further involvement more unavoidable, and, to this extent, commitments were inherited. But judgments of Vietnam's "vitalness"—beginning with the Korean War—were sufficient in themselves to set the course for escalation.

Second, our Presidents were never actually seeking a military victory in Vietnam. They were doing only what they thought was minimally necessary at each stage to keep Indochina, and later South Vietnam, out of Communist hands. This forced our Presidents to be brakemen, to do less than those who were urging military victory and to reject proposals for disengagement. It also meant that our Presidents wanted a negotiated settlement without fully realizing (though realizing more than their critics) that a civil war cannot be ended by political compromise.

Third, our Presidents and most of their lieutenants were not deluded by optimistic reports of progress and did not proceed on the basis of wishful thinking about winning a military victory in South Vietnam. They recognized that the steps they were taking were not adequate to win the war and that unless Hanoi relented, they would have to do more and more. Their strategy was to persevere in hope that their will to continue—if not the practical effects of their actions—would cause the Communists to relent.

## One Morning in the War

Richard Hammer

*More than any other single group in the population, journalists were responsible for bringing to public attention the shortcomings and contradictions of American policy in Vietnam. As early as 1963, David Halberstam, the New York Times correspondent in Vietnam, pointed out that conventional military tactics had no place in a guerrilla war, and that a civil struggle between competing Vietnamese political factions could not be resolved by external military intervention. The contradiction between journalistic accounts of the war and official reports sent to the Pentagon and the White House continued throughout the years of American involvement in Southeast Asia.*

*During the last half of the 1960s, television and newspaper reporters played a major role in turning American public opinion against the war as people saw American soldiers igniting Vietnamese thatched huts and heard an Army major say that "we had to destroy the village in order to save it." It was a journalist who first made public the atrocities committed at My Lai. In the following selection, Richard Hammer describes in searing detail one "search and destroy" mission of the war. To some, the My Lai episode represented a total aberration, with a single company going insane for one day. To others, the episode typified—in extreme form—a practice that was all too frequent. Almost everyone agrees that the My Lai tragedy dramatized the impossibility of attempting to use external military force to fight a civil war where one could not tell who was a friend and who was an enemy.*

In these early days of combat, the men began to solidify their previously formed and now lasting impressions of their officers and

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sergeants. Medina, for one, seemed totally impervious to danger. In fact, he seemed almost to be searching for it, to test the courage of his men and of himself. At the same time, he seemed totally dedicated to the welfare of his own men, concerned about them, grieving when one of them was wounded, concerned that they be fed well, have shelter and ammunition. It was, one of the men remembers, "like he was some kind of hen taking care of her brood, if you know what I mean. If we was out in the field, one platoon going one way and another going a different way and there was some shots, then Medina'd be on the field phone right away, wanting to know what the shooting was about, if anybody was hurt, if reinforcements were needed, that kind of thing. He had to know everything that was happening everywhere in the company."

But if Medina was concerned about his own men, those who served under him noticed that he seemed utterly oblivious to the Vietnamese. On occasions when the company entered a hamlet and all was peaceful, Medina seemed bored, anxious to get moving after he had posed a few questions to the village chiefs through his interpreter, and there would be a look of weary impatience when his soldiers passed out cigarettes and canned fruit to the villagers. "I mean," one of his soldiers says, "he didn't ever talk about the gooks. He didn't call them any names, just didn't seem to care one way or another about them. . . . Except, of course, when some guy got hit, then Medina'd get real angry and talk about how we'd get our back at them. . . ."

Calley was something different. About the best that anyone had to say for him was the summation by one corporal in his platoon: "He wasn't the best officer in the world, but then he wasn't the worst one, either."

There were others, however, who weren't quite so sure of that. . . . "It was like he was all wound up tight, just waiting to bust loose. And when he busted, everyone around him was going to be hit by the pieces. . . . Like he was a little guy, see, all puffed up, trying to make himself bigger and taller than anybody else. I guess maybe you can only do that for so long and then look out, man."

There were a number of men who pointed to an episode early in February when they were looking for some concrete evidence to back their then-vague feelings about Calley. According to James Bergthold, for one, one afternoon Calley deliberately murdered a Vietnamese civilian without any provocation. The platoon was on a

routine patrol when Bergthold brought in a Vietnamese civilian, about sixty years old, whom he had just discovered in a paddy. "I brought the guy in," he said. "He was standing in a field all by himself. I brought him in, and the lieutenant asked him questions and then threw him in a well and shot him in the head. He never said why he did it." . . .

More and more as these daily patrols went on without end, the men in Task Force Barker grew to hate the dirty war they were part of, a war where everything and nothing was the enemy and fair game, where trouble could come from anyone or anything. And they began to take casualties now and again, here and there. Moving down a trail one afternoon somewhere in their district (no one is sure exactly where, as most of the men were never really sure where they were except that they were somewhere in Vietnam), a mine suddenly exploded. Three men went down, one of them dead. Just off the trail, hidden in the brush, was a fifteen year old girl, her hand still on the detonator of the mine. Simultaneously, four or five soldiers fired. The girl fell over the detonator, riddled with bullets, dead.

Another hamlet. Some of the men see a young Vietnamese girl. They grab her and pull her inside the nearest hootch. There are screams and cries from inside and then silence. Soon the men come walking out, satisfied.

The people have gathered in the center of another hamlet, smiling and greeting the Americans, milling around them while cigarettes, gum, canned fruits are passed out. A couple of the men wander casually about the settlement. They go into one hootch and emerge carrying a number of trinkets, relics and family heirlooms and start to rejoin the rest of the platoon. An old man breaks away from the group and trots after them. He bows his head, folds his hands and with a humble, obsequious smile murmurs words in Vietnamese to them and points with anguish at the souvenirs they are carrying away. It was his hootch and he would like his possessions returned. He grows tiresome and one of the soldiers turns and without a thought shoots him.

Day after day the dirty incidents of this kind, in this kind of war, mount. . . .

There was no way to tell when a fire fight might break out. The morning would start as usual, with a routine search-and-destroy mission scheduled. But sometime during the day, the VC would be

waiting, the blood would be spilled on the land. Day after day it was the same thing. There was no relief. It was days out on patrol, many nights bivouacked in some field or in some hamlet, the men sleeping only from fatigue, the sentries constantly on the alert. Then it would be back to the fire base, back to LZ Dottie, back to the bunkers with no amusements, no nights off for a drink or a girl. Just the grinding fear and hate and frustration of war.

Then word came that the opportunity to strike back at the enemy in what might well be a major engagement had arrived.

At dusk that evening, Medina gathered his company together at the fire base to brief them on the operation for the next day. "I told them," he says, "that the intelligence reports indicated that the 48th VC Battalion was in the village and the intelligence reports indicated that there would be no women and children in the village, that they would have gone to market." . . .

Others, however, remember the briefing in a different way. Richard Pendleton says, "He told us there were Viet Cong in the village and we should kill them before they kill us."

It was just about seven in the morning when the first shells began to rain on Xom Lang that March 16th. Those who were still at home—most of the people in the sub-hamlet, for it was still early and many of them were just beginning breakfast—quickly sought shelter in their family bunkers. Almost every house had its bunker dug into the ground nearby. The VC when they had arrived had forced the people to build them, and from friends in other hamlets they had heard enough tales to know that in case of a bombardment, a bunker was one of the few hopes of survival. So each family dug its own.

The shells continued to thud into the ground and explode, destroying houses and gouging deep craters for about twenty minutes. The artillery barrage marched up and down the hamlet and the area around it, preparing the landing zone for the troop-carrying helicopters. Overhead, helicopter gunships hovered without any opposition, pounding the hamlet and the ground around it with rockets and machine gun fire. . . .

Captain Ernest Medina was in the lead chopper, watching the artillery and the gunships level Xom Lang. He "could see the smoke and flash of artillery" as the settlement was ripped apart. Then his helicopter settled into a paddy about a hundred and fifty meters west. Immediately the door gunners strafed the surrounding coun-

tryside with machine gun fire in case there happened to be VC waiting among the growing rice and brush.

As far as Medina could tell there was no return fire. "My instant impression," he says, "was that I didn't hear the familiar crackle of rifle bullets zinging over my head."

Accompanied by his radio operator and other company aides, Medina clambered down from the helicopter and rushed across the paddy to the edge of a small graveyard just at the edge of Xom Lang. Still there was no return fire, and all around him the other choppers were settling to the ground and the men of Company C were pouring through the doors, firing toward the houses as they emerged. It seemed to have occurred to no one at that moment that the lack of return fire might mean that this was not the hamlet where the VC was centered, that this was not "Pinkville." . . .

"When the attack started," Sergeant Charles West recalls, "it couldn't have been stopped by anyone. We were mad and we had been told that the enemy was there and we were going in there to give them a fight for what they had done to our dead buddies."

Approaching Xom Lang, "we went in shooting," West says. "We'd shoot into the hootches and there were people running around. There were big craters in the village from the bombing. When I got there I saw some of the people, some of the women and kids all torn up."

"I was just coming to the first row of houses, with five or six other guys," says another member of the platoon, "when we heard this noise behind us. Everybody was scared and on edge, and keyed up, too, to kill, and somebody turned quick and snapped off a shot. We all turned and shot. And there was this big old water buffalo, I guess that's what it was, standing in the middle of this field behind us. Everybody was shooting at it and you could see little puffs jumping out where the bullets hit. It was like something in slow motion, and finally that cow just slumped down and collapsed." His face contorted by the remembrance, he adds, "Now it seems kind of funny, but it didn't then. And once the shooting started, I guess it affected everyone. From then on it was like nobody could stop. Everyone was just shooting at everything and anything, like the ammo wouldn't ever give out."

The contagion of slaughter was spreading throughout the platoon.

Combat photographer Ronald Haeberle and Army Correspon-



dent Jay Roberts had requested permission to accompany a combat mission in order to get both pictures and a story of American soldiers in action. They had been assigned to Charley Company and to Calley's platoon. Leaving their helicopter with about ten or fifteen other soldiers, they came upon a cow being slaughtered, and then the picture turned sickly grisly. "Off to the right," Haeberle said, "a woman's form, a head appeared from some brush. All the other GI's started firing at her, aiming at her, firing at her over and over again."

The bullets riddled the woman's body. She slumped against a well pump in the middle of the rice paddy, her head caught between two of its poles. She was obviously already dead, but the infection, the hysteria was now ascendant. The men were oblivious to everything but slaughter. "They just kept shooting at her. You could see the bones flying in the air, chip by chip."

There were the sounds: the shots running into and over each other from inside the hamlet; it sounded as though everyone had his rifle on automatic, no one bothering to save ammunition by switching to single shot. And not drowned by the sharp bark of the rifles and duller thuds of grenades were screams; they sounded like women and children, but how can anyone tell in that kind of moment from a distance who is screaming?

Four or five Americans were outside the hamlet, moving along its perimeter. The job of their platoon was to seal it off and so prevent the VC inside from fleeing from Calley's men, to catch them in a pincer and slaughter them. Vernardo Simpson and these other soldiers were probing the bushes on the outskirts, delicately, searching for mines and booby traps. As they neared the first group of houses, a man dressed in black pajamas—the dress convinced Simpson that he must be a VC even though black pajamas were traditional peasant dress—suddenly appeared from nowhere, from some bushes and began running toward the hamlet. A woman and child popped up from the same underbrush and started "running away from us toward some huts."

"Dong lai! Dong lai!" The Americans shouted after the Vietnamese. But they kept on running. Lieutenant Brooks, the leader of this second platoon, gave the orders to shoot. If these people did not stop on command, then they must necessarily be VC. "This is what I did," Simpson says. "I shot them, the lady and the little boy. He was about two years old."

A woman and a child? Why?

"I was reluctant, but I was following a direct order. If I didn't do this I could stand court martial for not following a direct order."

Before the day was over, Simpson says, he would have killed at least ten Vietnamese in Xom Lang.

With the number killed there, his total was about the average for each soldier.

When the shelling stopped, Pham Phon crept from the bunker near his hootch. About fifty meters away, he saw a small group of American soldiers. Poking his head back into the bunker, he told his wife and three children—two sons aged nine and four, and a seven year old daughter—to come up and walk slowly toward the Americans.

Like almost all Vietnamese in the hamlets around the country, Phon and his family had learned from the three previous American visits and from the tales told by refugees who had come to Xom Lang to seek shelter after their hamlets had been turned into battlegrounds and from tales carried by others from far away, just how to act when American troops arrived.

It was imperative not to run, either toward the Americans or away from them. If you ran, the Americans would think that you were VC, running away from them or running toward them with a grenade, and they would shoot.

It was imperative not to stay inside the house or the bunker. If you did, then the Americans would think you were VC hiding in ambush, and they would shoot or throw grenades into the house or bunker.

It was imperative to walk slowly toward the Americans, with hands in plain view, or to gather in small groups in some central spot and wait for the Americans to arrive—but never to gather in large groups, for then the Americans would think the group was VC waiting to fire. It was absolutely imperative to show only servility so that the Americans would know that you were not VC and had only peaceful intent.

So Phon and his family walked slowly toward the soldiers. The three children smiled and shouted, "Hello! Hello! Okay! Okay!"

Only this time, unlike the three previous American visitations, there were no answering grins, no gifts of candy and rations. The Americans pointed their rifles at the family and sternly ordered them to walk to the canal about a hundred meters away.

Inside the hamlet, the men of the first platoon were racing from house to house. They planted dynamite and explosive to the brick ones and blew them into dust. They set fires with their lighters to the thatched roofs and to the hootches, watched them flare into a ritual bonfire and then raced on to the next hootch. Some soldiers were pulling people from bunkers and out of the houses and herding them into groups. Some of the Vietnamese tried to run and were immediately shot. Others didn't seem to know what was happening, didn't understand what the Americans were doing or why. But most of them behaved as they had learned they must behave. Meekly they followed any order given.

Some of the groups were marched away in the direction of the canal, and those who straggled behind, could not keep up, were promptly shot.

There were soldiers standing outside the hootches, watching them burn, and as Vietnamese suddenly emerged from the pyres, would shoot them.

And through everything, through the sound of gunfire and through the crackling of flames, through the smoke that had begun to cover everything like a pall, came high-pitched screams of pain and terror, bewildered cries, pleading cries. All were ignored.

Michael Bernhardt remembers coming into the hamlet and seeing his fellow soldiers "doing a whole lot of shooting up. But none of it was incoming. I'd been around enough to tell that. I figured we were advancing on the village with fire power."

Inside the hamlet, Bernhardt "saw these guys doing strange things. They were doing it in three ways. They were setting fire to the hootches and huts and waiting for the people to come out and then shooting them. They were going into the hootches and shooting them up. They were gathering people in groups and shooting them."

The raging fever in the other members of his platoon stunned and shocked Bernhardt. He watched one soldier shooting at everything he saw, blazing away indiscriminately and laughing hysterically as he kept pulling the trigger, kept his finger on the trigger until all the bullets in a clip were gone, then throwing away the clip and reloading and starting again. And laughing all the time. "He just couldn't stop. He thought it was funny, funny, funny." . . .

For Private Herbert Carter it was too much, a nightmare from which there seemed no awakening. "People began coming out of

their hootches and the guys shot them and burned the hootches—or burned the hootches and then shot the people when they came out. Sometimes they would round up a bunch and shoot them together. It went on like that for what seemed like all day. Some of the guys seemed to be having a lot of fun. They were wisecracking and yelling, 'Chalk that one up for me.'

When he could stand the sight no longer, Carter turned and stumbled out of the hamlet. He sat down under a tree and shot himself in the foot.

He was Charley Company's only casualty that morning.

When the first shells hurled their way into Xom Lang, Nguyen Thi Nien and her family took shelter in their bunker adjacent to their house. In the bunker with her were her eighty-year-old father-in-law, her sister and her sister's seven-year-old daughter, her own husband and their three children. They covered in the bunker for a considerable length of time. Finally they heard steady rifle fire around them and American voices yelling: "VC di ra! VC di ra!"—VC, get out! VC, get out!

The family crawled slowly and carefully out of the bunker, making every effort to display no hostility. But once they were out they noticed that the Americans were still some distance away. Taking her youngest child, still a baby, in one arm and holding her second youngest by the hand, Nguyen Thi Nien started away, toward the rice paddies. She did not run, but walked on steadily. Her husband and the oldest child started to follow her. But her sister and her sister's daughter hung back, then started in another direction. And her father-in-law turned and started back to the house.

"I am too old," she remembers him calling after her. "I cannot keep up. You get out and I will stay here to keep the house."

There was almost no argument. "We told him," Nguyen Thi Nien says, "all right, you are too old. So you stay here and if the GI's arrive you ask them not to shoot you and not to burn the house."

The old man called that that was exactly what he intended to do. He would stand guard over the family house. But then Nguyen Thi Nien's husband decided that he could not leave his father alone in the house. He turned, sending the oldest child after his wife and the other children, and went back to his father. They stood outside the house for a brief moment arguing. The son trying to convince the old man to get out of the house and go with them to the paddies before the Americans arrived. The Americans were approaching

and they could hear the clatter of shots, they could see the flames licking around other houses, and the smoke.

But the old man remained adamant. He was too old, he kept insisting. He could not make it to the paddy. He refused to leave, turning from his son and starting into the house.

The Americans were almost on them; the firing was all around them now. Nien realized that he could wait no longer. If he were to escape the approaching Americans—he realized by then that this was not a friendly visit, that the Americans were hostile this time and were shooting at everything—he would have to flee immediately.

About four hundred meters away, he saw his wife and three children just ducking into the rice paddies, safe. He started after them. Ahead of him, just a few feet, was an old woman, a nearby neighbor. “But suddenly,” he says, “five GI’s were in front of me, about a hundred meters or so from me. The GI’s saw us and started to shoot and the lady was killed. I was hit and so I lay down. Then I saw blood coming from my stomach and so I took a handkerchief and put it over my wound. I lay on the ground there for a little while and then I tried to get back to my house, to my old father and my sister-in-law and her child who must still be there. I could not walk very well and so I was crawling. On the way back to my house I saw five children and one father lying dead on the ground. When I reached my house, I saw it was on fire. Through the fire I could see the bodies of my old father, my sister-in-law and her child inside the house. Then I lost consciousness and I do not know anything more of what happened.” . . .

“I was just coming into the middle of that ville,” remembers one soldier, refusing to look around or to meet his questioner’s eyes as he talks, “and I saw this guy. He was one of my best friends in the company. But honest to Christ, at first I didn’t even recognize him. He was kneeling on the ground, this absolutely incredible . . . I don’t know what you’d call it, a smile or a snarl or something, but anyway, his whole face was distorted. He was covered with smoke, his face streaked with it, and it looked like there was blood on him, too. You couldn’t tell, but there was blood everywhere. Anyway, he was kneeling there holding this grenade launcher, and he was launching grenades at the hootches. A couple of times he launched grenades at groups of people. The grenades would explode, you know, KAPLOW, and then you’d see pieces of bodies flying

around. Some of the groups were just piles of bodies. But I remember there was this one group a little distance away. Maybe there was ten people, most of them women and little kids, huddled all together and you could see they were really scared, they just couldn’t seem to move. Anyway, he turns around toward them and lets fly with a grenade. It landed right in the middle of them. You could hear the screams and then the sound and then see the pieces of bodies scatter out, and the whole area just suddenly turned red like somebody had turned on a faucet.”

Did you do anything to try to stop him?

“You got rocks or something? All you had to do was take one look at him, at his face and you knew the best thing was to leave him alone. I think if I had even said a word to him at all, he would have turned and killed me and not thought a damn thing about it.” . . .

Jay Roberts and Ronald Haeberle moved about the havoc taking pictures. They came upon one group of Americans surrounding a small group of women, children and a teen-age girl. She was perhaps twelve or thirteen and was wearing the traditional peasant black pajamas. One of the Americans grabbed her by the shoulders while another began to try to strip the pajamas off her, pulling at the top of the blouse to undo it.

“Let’s see what she’s made of,” one of the soldiers laughed.

Another moved close to her, laughing and pointing at her. “VC, boom-boom,” he said. He was telling her in the GI patois that she was a whore for the VC, and indicating that if she did it for them why not for the Americans.

A third soldier examined her carefully and then turned to the others. “Jesus,” he said, “I’m horny.”

All around there were burning buildings and bodies and the sounds of firing and screams. But the Americans seemed totally oblivious to anything but the girl. They had almost stripped her when her mother rushed over and tried to help her escape. She clutched at the American soldiers, scratched them, clawed at their faces, screaming invectives at them. They pushed her off. One soldier slapped her across the face; another hit her in the stomach with his fist; a third kicked her in the behind, knocking her sprawling to the ground.

But the mother’s actions had given the girl a chance to escape a little. She took shelter behind some of the other women in the

group and tried to button the top of her blouse. Haeberle stepped in, knelt and took a picture of the scene.

Roberts remembers that at that moment, "when they noticed Ron, they left off and turned away as if everything was normal. Then a soldier asked, 'Well, what'll we do with 'em?'"

"'Kill 'em,' another answered.

"I heard an M-60 go off, a light machine gun, and when we turned all of them and the kids with them were dead." . . .

Another soldier says he saw a teen-age girl running across a rice paddy, trying to hide from an American who was chasing her. As he watched, he saw this American soldier aim with his rifle and shoot. The girl gave a cry and fell down. The soldier went after her and vanished into the paddy. A few minutes later there was another shot from the area and then the soldier walked back from the field into the hamlet. . . .

A small boy, three or four, suddenly appears from nowhere on the trail in front of a group of Americans. He is wounded in the arm. Michael Terry sees "the boy clutching his wounded arm with his other hand while the blood trickled between his fingers. He was staring around himself in shock and disbelief at what he saw. He just stood there with big eyes staring around like he didn't understand what was happening. Then the captain's radio operator put a burst of 16 into him."

When Paul Meadlo came into Xom Lang, Lieutenant Calley set him and some of the other men to work gathering the people together in groups in a central location. "There was about forty, forty-five people that we gathered in the center of the village," Meadlo told an interviewer. "And we placed them in there, and it was like a little island, right there in the center of the village."

The soldiers forced the people in the group to squat on the ground. "Lieutenant Calley came over and said, 'You know what to do with them, don't you?' And I said, 'Yes.' So I took it for granted he just wanted us to watch them. And he left and came back about ten or fifteen minutes later, and said, 'How come you ain't killed them yet?' And I told him that I didn't think he wanted us to kill them, that you just wanted us to guard them. He said, 'No, I want them dead.'"

At first Meadlo was surprised by the order—not shocked or horrified, but surprised. "But three, four guys heard it and then he

stepped back about ten, fifteen feet, and he started shooting them. And he told me to start shooting. I poured about four clips into the group."

A clip is seventeen rounds. Meadlo fired sixty-eight rounds into this group of people. "I fired them on automatic," he said, "so you can't . . . you just spray the area on them and so you can't know how many you killed 'cause they were going fast. So I might have killed ten or fifteen of them."

One slaughter was over, but there was more to come, and the thirst for blood had become so contagious that no one thought anything about what he was doing. "We started to gather them up, more people," Meadlo says, "and we had about seven or eight people that we was gonna put into a hootch and we dropped a hand grenade in there with them."

Then Meadlo and several other soldiers took a group of civilians—almost exclusively women and children, some of the children still too young to walk—toward one of the two canals on the outskirts of Xom Lang. "They had about seventy, seventy-five people all gathered up. So we threw ours in with them and Lieutenant Calley told me, he said, 'Meadlo, we got another job to do.' And so he walked over to the people and started pushing them off and started shooting."

Taking his cue from Calley, Meadlo and then the other members of this squad "started pushing them off and we started shooting them. So altogether we just pushed them all off and just started using automatics on them. And somebody told us to switch off to single shot so that we could save ammo. So we switched off to single shot and shot a few more rounds."

In the heat and the passion of that morning, it is almost impossible to know who is telling the real truth about any of the events or any of the people, or if there is even any real truth. And perhaps it is less than the major quest in the story of what happened and why it happened that morning in March to discover and decide just who killed whom, where and when. Many hundreds of people, most of them children, women and old men, were slaughtered at Xom Lang and Binh Dong. A mass hysteria swept over a large number of American soldiers who became executioners, indiscriminate butchers. And in the horror of it all, is there really sense and meaning in saying that one did such and such and this one did this and that? In a senseless slaughter, the attempt to fix blame for specific

killings on specific people is an attempt to find sense and logic where it does not and cannot exist. The responsibility for what happened at Xom Lang lies not just with the man or the men who pulled the triggers and threw the grenades. The responsibility goes further and higher.

As darkness fell that night over Xom Lang, over Son My, over all of Vietnam, it was morning half a world away, in Washington, D.C. If the repercussions of what had happened that morning in this one corner of Vietnam had not yet reached the American capital, repercussions of Vietnam itself, of all that had led up to that morning in the war, had reached the center of government of the United States.

Senator Eugene McCarthy and his young idealists, the advocates of the "New Politics," were celebrating the victory earlier in the week over Lyndon Johnson in the New Hampshire Democratic primary. Eugene McCarthy, until then not a well-known national politician, had upset the incumbent President, the leader of his own party. The issue which he had raised to win that victory was that of the war in Vietnam.

In the caucus room of the United States Senate, Robert Francis Kennedy was about to declare that he was a candidate for his party's presidential nomination, that he, too, would take on the President, his brother's Vice President. And the quarrel which had led to this break was the war in Vietnam, what the United States under Lyndon Johnson had done to Vietnam and what it had done to itself.

In the White House, the President was in an anguished personal struggle. As a result of the war in Vietnam, the people had turned against him, had lost confidence in his ability to lead the nation. Less than four years after he had won the greatest political victory in American history as a candidate of peace, even the voters of his own party had rejected him, now identified as the candidate of war. Within two weeks, he would make his fateful decision. He would stop the bombing of North Vietnam. He would seek a beginning of peace negotiations. And he would not seek re-nomination or reelection as President of the United States. He, too, had been destroyed by the war in Vietnam.

But on that March 16, 1968, Xom Lang and Binh Dong and My Hoi, My Lai and Son My and Pinkville were names that these politi-

cal leaders had never heard. They were names that most of the military in Vietnam had never heard.

There had been a minor engagement there that day. On the next day and in the days to follow, it would be hailed as a victory.

But the target of the day, the Viet Cong soldiers, had been untouched. From their camp at My Khe sub-hamlet they had heard, early in the morning, the sound of planes and guns to the west; they had heard the sounds moving across the village as the day progressed. And before the Americans came near to My Khe—My Lai (1) or Pinkville—the VC had faded from the scene, moving silently out of the hamlet and north to the sanctuary of Batangan. They would be back.

# Vietnam Veterans Against the War

John Kerry

*By the early 1970s the American people's initial support of the government policy in Vietnam had become a yearning for an end to what seemed an interminable and unwinnable war. Americans from all walks of life, including Vietnam veterans, now openly questioned and protested against the military effort. In the spring of 1971 disillusioned veterans came forward to denounce the war and hurl their medals onto the steps of the capitol building; then John Kerry, a representative of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, bitterly attacked American policies in an appearance before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that received widespread coverage in the media. Kerry expressed revulsion at the war's brutal horrors, denied that the United States was advancing the cause of freedom, disputed the government's rationale for the conflict, decried the corrupt and dictatorial regime in Saigon, and condemned American officials for deceiving the public and for deserting those they sent off to war. In 1984, Kerry was elected U.S. senator from Massachusetts and reelected in 1990.*

I would like to talk on behalf of all those veterans and say that several months ago in Detroit we had an investigation at which over 150 honorably discharged, and many very highly decorated, veterans testified to war crimes committed in Southeast Asia. These were not isolated incidents but crimes committed on a day-to-day basis with the full awareness of officers at all levels of command.

From "Vietnam Veterans Against the War" statement by John Kerry to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, April 22, 1971.

It is impossible to describe to you exactly what did happen in Detroit—the emotions in the room and the feelings of the men who were reliving their experiences in Vietnam. They relived the absolute horror of what this country, in a sense, made them do.

They told stories that at times they had personally raped, cut off ears, cut off heads, taped wires from portable telephones to human genitals and turned up the power, cut off limbs, blown up bodies, randomly shot at civilians, razed villages in fashion reminiscent of Genghis Khan, shot cattle and dogs for fun, poisoned food stocks, and generally ravaged the countryside of South Vietnam in addition to the normal ravage of war and the normal and very particular ravaging which is done by the applied bombing power of this country.

We call this investigation the Winter Soldier Investigation. The term Winter Soldier is a play on words of Thomas Paine's in 1776 when he spoke of the Sunshine Patriots and summer time soldiers who deserted at Valley Forge because the going was rough.

We who have come here to Washington have come here because we feel we have to be winter soldiers now. We could come back to this country, we could be quiet, we could hold our silence, we could not tell what went on in Vietnam, but we feel because of what threatens this country, not the reds, but the crimes which we are committing that threaten it, that we have to speak out. . . .

In our opinion and from our experience, there is nothing in South Vietnam which could happen that realistically threatens the United States of America. And to attempt to justify the loss of one American life in Vietnam, Cambodia or Laos by linking such loss to the preservation of freedom, which those misfits supposedly abuse, is to us the height of criminal hypocrisy, and it is that kind of hypocrisy which we feel has torn this country apart.

We found that not only was it a civil war, an effort by a people who had for years been seeking their liberation from any colonial influence whatsoever, but also we found that the Vietnamese whom we had enthusiastically molded after our own image were hard put to take up the fight against the threat we were supposedly saving them from.

We found most people didn't even know the difference between communism and democracy. They only wanted to work in rice paddies without helicopters strafing them and bombs with napalm burning their villages and tearing their country apart. They wanted

everything to do with the war, particularly with this foreign presence of the United States of America, to leave them alone in peace, and they practiced the art of survival by siding with whichever military force was present at a particular time, be it Viet Cong, North Vietnamese or American.

We found also that all too often American men were dying in those rice paddies for want of support from their allies. We saw first hand how monies from American taxes were used for a corrupt dictatorial regime. We saw that many people in this country had a one-sided idea of who was kept free by our flag, and blacks provided the highest percentage of casualties. We saw Vietnam ravaged equally by American bombs and search and destroy missions, as well as by Viet Cong terrorism and yet we listened while this country tried to blame all of the havoc on the Viet Cong.

We rationalized destroying villages in order to save them. We saw America lose her sense of morality as she accepted very coolly a My Lai and refused to give up the image of American soldiers who hand out chocolate bars and chewing gum.

We learned the meaning of free fire zones, shooting anything that moves, and we watched while America placed a cheapness on the lives of Orientals.

We watched the United States falsification of body counts, in fact the glorification of body counts. We listened while month after month we were told the back of the enemy was about to break. We fought using weapons against "oriental human beings." We fought using weapons against those people which I do not believe this country would dream of using were we fighting in the European theater. We watched while men charged up hills because a general said that hill has to be taken, and after losing one platoon or two platoons they marched away to leave the hill for reoccupation by the North Vietnamese. We watched pride allow the most unimportant battles to be blown into extravaganzas, because we couldn't lose, and we couldn't retreat, and because it didn't matter how many American bodies were lost to prove that point, and so there were Hamburger Hills and Khe Sanhs and Hill 81s and Fire Base 6s, and so many others.

Now we are told that the men who fought there must watch quietly while American lives are lost so that we can exercise the incredible arrogance of Vietnamizing the Vietnamese.

Each day to facilitate the process by which the United States

washes her hands of Vietnam someone has to give up his life so that the United States doesn't have to admit something that the entire world already knows, so that we can't say that we have made a mistake. Someone has to die so that President Nixon won't be, and these are his words, "the first President to lose a war."

We are asking Americans to think about that because how do you ask a man to be the last man to die in Vietnam? How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake? . . . We are here in Washington also to say that the problem of this war is not just a question of war and diplomacy. It is part and parcel of everything that we are trying as human beings to communicate to people in this country—the question of racism which is rampant in the military, and so many other questions such as the use of weapons; the hypocrisy in our taking umbrage at the Geneva Conventions and using that as justification for a continuation of this war when we are more guilty than any other body of violations of those Geneva Conventions: in the use of free fire zones, harassment interdiction fire, search and destroy missions, the bombings, the torture of prisoners, the killing of prisoners, all accepted policy by many units in South Vietnam. That is what we are trying to say. It is part and parcel of everything.

An American Indian friend of mine who lives in the Indian Nation of Alcatraz put it to me very succinctly. He told me how as a boy on an Indian reservation he had watched television and he used to cheer the cowboys when they came in and shot the Indians, and then suddenly one day he stopped in Vietnam and he said "my God, I am doing to these people the very same thing that was done to my people," and he stopped. And that is what we are trying to say, that we think this thing has to end.

We are here to ask, and we are here to ask vehemently, where are the leaders of our country. Where is the leadership? We're here to ask where are McNamara, Rostow, Bundy, Gilpatrick, and so many others. Where are they now that we, the men they sent off to war, have returned. These are commanders who have deserted their troops. And there is no more serious crime in the laws of war. The Army says they never leave their wounded. The marines say they never leave even their dead. These men have left all the casualties and retreated behind a pious shield of public rectitude. They've left the real stuff of their reputations bleaching behind them in the sun in this country. . . .

We wish that a merciful God could wipe away our own memories of that service as easily as this administration has wiped away their memories of us. But all that they have done and all that they can do by this denial is to make more clear than ever our own determination to undertake one last mission—to search out and destroy the last vestige of this barbaric war, to pacify our own hearts, to conquer the hate and the fear that have driven this country these last ten years and more. And more. And so when thirty years from now our brothers go down the street without a leg, without an arm, or a face, and small boys ask why, we will be able to say “Vietnam” and not mean a desert, not a filthy obscene memory, but mean instead the place where America finally turned and where soldiers like us helped it in the turning.