

Looking Back at the Vietnam War

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This Spring marks 40 years since the end of the Vietnam War. At least that's what it's called in the United States, the Vietnam War. In Vietnam, it's called the American War to distinguish the phase involving the United States from those involving other aggressors and colonizers — China, France and Japan most notably.

The occasion has been marked by widespread commentary, reminisces and what passes for history in the corporate media. The Pentagon has chimed in with a fanciful account posted on its website that evokes the propaganda it spun during the actual fighting of the war: US imperialism good, Vietnam bad. On a more positive note, peace and veterans groups around the country have held events and otherwise tried to put forward analysis about the horrific nature of US aggression that haunts Vietnam to this day.

A more mixed aspect is the degree to which the war still hovers over our own country like a cloud. Several decades back, mainstream commentators regularly referred to the Vietnam Syndrome, which until the 1991 Persian Gulf War served to keep US imperialism in check to some extent. Media elites referred to the reluctance of our political class to go to war for fear of getting bogged down in “another Vietnam.” What they were unwilling to say openly is that the Vietnam Syndrome is really the gulf in opinion between elites and the public on the matter of US aggression.

In short, the US has found it extremely difficult since Vietnam to count on significant public support for its wars. Throughout the decade of the 1980's, for example, the US desperately sought to impose its will on Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala, to name just three, utilizing proxy armies to defend landed elites against the people of those countries. If not for ongoing public opposition, US troops would likely have been fighting in Central America as early as 1980. Because the US was unable to send troops, the kind of bloodletting the US inflicted on Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia did not happen in Central America. One result is that the popular movements and revolutionary forces were able to carry on the struggle, to a point where a one-time revolutionary guerrilla is today president of El Salvador and longtime Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega is again president of Nicaragua.

This is not to say a horrible number of deaths and incalculable damage was not inflicted on those countries; the US was especially determined to destroy the revolutionary experiment in Nicaragua, an effort that was largely successful. More ominously, though the hell of the military terror of the 1980's is past, Guatemala remains in the grips of wealthy elites tied to the United States and is one of the most class-stratified, repressive societies in the Hemisphere.

But the damage inflicted on Central America does not compare to what was done in Indochina and that was due in no small part to the efforts of millions of everyday Americans.

Unlike in Indochina, solidarity efforts with the people of Central America began early and in earnest. In Nicaragua, they began soon after the US moved against the popular revolt that overthrew the hated Somoza dictatorship in 1979. In El Salvador, solidarity work began in the wake of the murder by paramilitary terrorists of Archbishop Oscar Romero in 1980 and grew ever larger over the next ten years. That work included demonstrations, sit-ins, teach-ins, medical aid, Sister City projects, accompaniment by doctors, electricians and others with skills to offer, as well as making available sanctuary, usually in churches, to people fleeing the violence to the US.

Sporadic opposition within the US to aggression in Indochina, by contrast, popped up in 1963 and 1964 but it was very small and isolated. What we know as the anti-war movement did not take shape until 1965, more than a decade after the US unleashed its murderous puppet Ngo Dinh Diem on the southern part of Vietnam, and a full four years after President Kennedy began major escalation.

More recently, the US has invaded Iraq and Afghanistan and, as this is written, is contemplating sending troops elsewhere in the Middle East. Just as in Indochina, the efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan have in important ways been failures. And because of the massive use of superior military force, the US has become something of a pariah internationally — feared but extremely isolated. Again, domestic organizing has contributed significantly to that isolation. No small feat that, and one that is important to recognize both because of the suffering that would have resulted from the use of greater force, as well as for what it teaches about the impact the public can have on imperial war. There's still much to do, however, and for both ourselves and those who suffer under bombardment done in our names, we need to get to it.

Combatting the official, distorted history of Vietnam can assist us in those efforts and this admittedly cursory background is offered in that spirit. One aspect of that distorted history spun in some recent commentaries is that the War began in February 1965 when North Vietnamese and US troops clashed for the first time, the result, it's claimed (naturally) of an unprovoked North Vietnamese attack. One doesn't know whether to laugh or cry at the arrogance required to claim that point as the start of the war when tens of thousands — probably hundreds of thousands — of Vietnamese were already dead at US hands by that time, but such is the level of dishonesty and subservience to power in US political culture.

Pinpointing where US aggression in Vietnam began depends on how one determines how a war begins but 1945 is a good place to start in order to best understand what transpired over the ensuing 30 years. It was in the summer of that year that Vietnamese revolutionary forces grouped around the Viet Minh defeated Japan, whose army had invaded their country four years before. Like so many around the world who suffered greatly under the forces of fascism and militarism during the Second World War, the Vietnamese considered their victory the dawn of a new day. In that spirit, Viet Minh leader Ho Chi Minh read a proclamation inspired significantly by the US Declaration of Independence (large sections of which were included word for word) to a massive assembly in Vietnam that was also directed at Washington and people around the world.

It was at this point that the US made the crucial decision to reject Ho's overtures and throw in with Vietnam's long-time colonizers, France. Most of the French colonial administration and army had run away when Japan invaded Vietnam, ceding the country to the invaders; those French who remained collaborated with the Japanese. Yet in its imperial wisdom, France decided it was entirely within its rights to re-colonize Vietnam, which it did, with

crucial arms, money and diplomatic support from the US. The Vietnamese, not surprisingly, were not so enthusiastic about being invaded yet again and resisted just as they had resisted colonization and occupation for centuries.

As the French inflicted horrific violence in a failed attempt at re-conquest that lasted nine years, the US bore more and more of the war's burden. When the Vietnamese achieved final victory by annihilating the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, there was again the possibility that they had achieved independence. It was not to be, though. With Vietnam looking on skeptically, the US, other Western powers and the Soviet Union brokered the Geneva Accords that stipulated, among other things, that national elections unifying all of Vietnam be held within two years. The division of the country into North, where revolutionary forces had won complete victory, and South, which except for Saigon and the surrounding area was under Viet Minh control, was rightly seen by the Vietnamese as a ploy by US imperialism to buy time and a sell-out by the Soviet Union.

Though they had no faith that the US would live up to the agreement, the Vietnamese had little choice but to go along. Their fears were justified in no time, as the US made clear that the Geneva Accords were nothing but paper that could be shredded into a million worthless pieces. Since Washington knew Ho would win an election in a landslide, no such election ever took place. As in dozens of other cases over the past 100+ years, the US opposed democracy in favor of aggression. Elections are all well and good but only if the right people win; if the wrong people win, then out come the machine guns.

So in 1954, the US threw its considerable weight behind Ngo Dinh Diem, an expatriate living at the time in a New Jersey seminary run by the arch-reactionary Francis Cardinal Spellman, and installed him as dictator of what was now known as South Vietnam. During Diem's nine years in power, the US looked on approvingly as he waged a war of terror against the people of the South. Resistance continued and eventually grew, though for a time Washington shifted its regional attention to neighboring Laos, where there was also a strong insurgency fighting against a US-backed dictatorship.

That changed under the Kennedy Administration, however, as the US expanded its aggression in Vietnam and the resistance rapidly grew. The resistance was led largely by the National Front for Liberation, successor group to the Viet Minh and known by its French acronym NLF, but it was made up of a broad cross section of Vietnamese society including, significantly, a large number of Buddhist monks.

Though Kennedy is often portrayed as desiring peace in Vietnam, something the Camelot mythmakers claim he supposedly would have accomplished had he not been assassinated, the sordid facts reveal the opposite. At every point where peace or even de-escalation could have been achieved, Kennedy opted instead for escalation: through saturation bombing, through the widespread use of napalm and other chemical weapons, through the organization of strategic hamlets (such a great phrase, strategic hamlets; kind of like calling Auschwitz a country getaway), and, finally, through the introduction of ground troops.

Though a despot, Diem revealed himself to be a despot with something of a conscience in 1963 when, weary of the fighting tearing apart his country, he independently made peace overtures to the NLF and unification overtures to the North. It was a fateful decision, as Washington soon ordered that he be taken out, as he was, assassinated just three weeks before Kennedy himself was murdered. (It was this sequence of events that the great

Malcolm X referred to as “chickens coming home to roost,” precipitating his break with the Nation of Islam).

Kennedy’s successor Lyndon Johnson was only in office nine months before he fabricated the Gulf of Tonkin incident in August 1964, another Vietnam turning point.

Simultaneously, Johnson, dubbed the Peace Candidate by some (probably including himself), was warning the nation that Barry Goldwater, his opponent in that year’s presidential election, was a dangerously unhinged war monger. That theme produced the most memorable moment of the campaign, a TV ad featuring a little girl counting the petals she picks off a flower that morphs into a countdown to Armageddon.

Once he secured re-election and with the Gulf of Tonkin incident as justification, Johnson in early 1965 expanded aggression to all of Vietnam via a massive bombing campaign against the North (though the bulk of US destruction was always directed at the South). Parenthetically, Johnson would later that year order an invasion of the Dominican Republic to keep from power moderate reformer Juan Bosch and provide the usual substantial arms, money and diplomatic support to a murderous coup in Indonesia that brought the butcher Suharto to power. At least 500,000 people were killed during the coup and its aftermath; Amnesty International, generally blind to crimes committed by the US and its proxies, puts the figure at 1.5 million. The Peace Candidate, indeed.

So it remained in Vietnam for three years, a yin and yang of escalation and heightened resistance, until the Tet Offensive in January 1968. Before Tet, the US had largely gotten away with lying about the progress of the war, the burgeoning anti-war movement notwithstanding. After Tet, it was clear that the promised victory at hand was delusional and a fabrication. Still, Tet remains a bone of contention for the most extreme supporters of the war who claim the US capably defeated the uprising, only to be sabotaged by antiwar media and Democratic politicians.

In reality, the Tet Offensive followed the NLF strategy of never engaging the US in a battle as that word is traditionally understood. It was a hit and run operation with the purpose of inflicting great damage, yes, but designed primarily to display once and for all that its forces were formidable and the will of the people unconquerable. In short, the goal was not to win a battle of Tet; the goal was to show anyone who still doubted that the US could not win. I recall reading years ago something said around the time of Tet by a Vietnamese elder who had probably seen as much death and destruction as anyone who ever lived (I’m paraphrasing): *We can settle this now or we can settle it a thousand years from now. It’s up to the Americans.*

One group who became convinced after Tet that the Vietnamese were right in their assessment was the US business community. As always, their view, unlike generals, policy wonks and national politicians, was sober and geared to the long run. What they saw were war expenditures that were a huge economic drain, attention to Indochina that would have been better placed in outdoing global competitors in the expansion of markets, an army increasingly reluctant to fight, and the spread of domestic insurgencies from the isolation of college campuses to crucial points of production, most notably the Revolutionary Union Movement sweeping the auto industry.

One of the business elite’s first moves was to push Johnson aside in favor of Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy. Kennedy was a long-time Cold Warrior going back to his

days working with Joe McCarthy and Roy Cohn whose plans for Vietnam, much like his brother's, were predicated on victory first and then peace. McCarthy, meanwhile, had no connection to the anti-war movement before or after his thoroughly opportunistic six-month effort to cash in as the new Peace Candidate, and the 1968 election serves as well as any example of the disparity between rulers and ruled: a majority of the population in favor of immediate withdrawal having to choose between candidates who all favored continuing the war.

Richard Nixon's Vietnamization — shifting the burden of the war to the South Vietnamese army — was Washington's last failed act. The killing continued and the war was expanded to Laos and Cambodia but still the US could not win. Before the end, in 1973, the US perpetrated another fraud, the Paris Peace Accords, every tenet of which Nixon violated before the ink on the document was dry. By the time the revolutionary forces took Saigon on April 30 1975, the US had been involved in Vietnam for thirty years.

The list of outstanding books about Vietnam is a long one and mention will be made only of recent scholarship by Christian Appy who, among other contributions, has meticulously documented the working class nature of the war and the domestic opposition to it. That last flies in the face of the official history, as elites prefer to foster the notion that the movement consisted exclusively of privileged white college students. In reality, workers and the poor opposed US aggression in higher numbers from start to finish and not only because sons of the working class were far more likely to do the fighting. Ineluctably, it was overwhelmingly working class active duty resisters and recently returned veterans whose opposition to the war ultimately proved decisive on the home front.

Virtually every American who knows even a little about the war knows that 55,000 US soldiers died in Vietnam. Only a tiny percentage, however, come anywhere near the correct number of Indochinese killed when polled. Noam Chomsky has written of one poll where the average given by respondents was 200,000 and likens this to people believing that 300,000 Jews were murdered in the Holocaust, as in both cases the count is off by a factor of 20. Such a gross misunderstanding underscores the effectiveness of the intellectual class in propagating a self-serving, highly distorted nature of the war — who suffered, who died, who the wronged are.

Even the largely accepted figure of four million Indochinese dead is probably low, possibly dramatically so, though the truth will probably never be known. Those best equipped to make that determination are the very ones who either waged the war or have a vested interest in burying its truths. As a US general speaking of a more recent conflagration put it: "We don't do body counts." Not, anyway, when the dead bodies are victims of American violence.

Also completely ignored here is the Vietnamese experience of Agent Orange and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, for example. Take the terrible suffering of US soldiers and multiply their numbers ten thousand fold or more and we get a sense of the damage to the Vietnamese. Additionally, Vietnam and the rest of Indochina (the official histories generally and conveniently leave out the wars waged against Laos and Cambodia) are full of unexploded ordinances that regularly cause death and injuries, to this day. And though Vietnam and Laos were able to avoid catastrophic famine, Cambodia was not, not surprising given that it's a small country whose countryside was bombed back to the Stone Age. Destruction on such a scale combined with an ironclad US-imposed postwar embargo essentially doomed hundreds of thousands to death by starvation. That's an unpleasant

truth, though; so much easier to blame everything bad that happened in Cambodia after April 1975 on the despotic Khmer Rouge.

However, though neither Vietnam or Laos experienced the postwar cataclysm of Cambodia, the war was so destructive that it could be argued that the US won in the sense that an alternative mode of social organization was rendered impossible (much like 1980's Nicaragua). The US views all societies that put people before profits as a threat, particularly if they're in the global South. It is the only way to understand the 50 years plus war of terror against Cuba, today's bellicosity directed at Venezuela and the continuation of the war in Indochina in the 1970's long after the US knew it could not win. In large part because of the scale of destruction, Vietnam today is well integrated into the global economy with all the negatives that entails, full of sweatshops, venture capitalists and major disparities in wealth and power.

Discussions of Vietnam are hardly academic exercises; the US is currently on a global rampage and falsifying history is part and parcel of the effort to whip up support for the next war. Because of the domestic gulf between rulers and ruled on the question of US aggression, we have the US going ahead with a second invasion of Iraq in 2003, destroying Libya, supporting war-hungry neo-Nazis in Ukraine, threatening Venezuela and engaging in a proxy war designed to destroy Syria, all despite opposition from a majority of the public on every count. Put simply, that means we will have to more effectively do our work of building an anti-war, anti-imperialist movement toward a day when we may live with the people of the world in something approximating harmony.

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