

“Untold History of the United States”: Oliver Stone, Obama, and the War in Vietnam

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Oliver Stone’s Showtime series, [Untold History of the United States](#), is the most radical mainstream television I have ever watched. Eye-opening scenes, shocking speech by our presidents, splendid narration by Stone, all make for a compelling series. A 700-page book by Stone and historian Peter Kuznick accompanies the eight-part program; it provides greater detail and covers more ground than the Showtime installments, allowing viewers to gain an even better understanding of our “untold history.”

Episode 7, which is mainly about the War in Vietnam (or the Second Indochina War as it is also called), riveted me to the screen. Stone atones for whatever guilt he has felt about being a soldier in Vietnam by laying out the horrors of the war, the sheer murderous violence of it, in vivid detail. I came of political age in those years, and I got angry all over again watching the bombs and defoliants falling, the victims screaming, and the politicians and generals lying. It will be a joyous day when that master liar and war criminal Henry Kissinger dies and joins his cohorts in mass slaughter, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon. His name should become a synonym for murderer.

The carnage brought to Southeast Asia by the United States is mind-boggling, as Stone and Kuznick document:

*nearly four million Vietnamese killed.

*more bombs dropped on Vietnam than by all sides in all previous wars throughout history, and three times more dropped than by all sides in the Second World War.

*19,000,000 gallons of herbicide poisoned the land.

*9,000 of 15,000 hamlets destroyed in the South of Vietnam.

*In the North, all six industrial cities devastated; 28 of 30 provincial towns and 96 of 116 district towns leveled by bombing.

*The United States threatened to use nuclear weapons thirteen times. Nixon chided Kissinger for being too squeamish about this. Nixon said he, himself, just didn’t give a damn.

*After the war, unexploded bombs and mines permeated the landscape and took an additional 42,000 lives. Millions of acres of land have still not been cleared of live ordnance.

*Agent Orange and other defoliants have caused severe health problems for millions of

Vietnamese.

*Nearly all of Vietnam's triple canopy forests were destroyed.

*3,000,000 tons of ordnance struck 100,000 sites during the "secret" war in Cambodia, causing widespread social dislocation, destruction of crops, and starvation. The U.S. bombing campaign in Cambodia was directly responsible for the rise of the Khmer Rouge under Pol Pot and the genocide that took place afterward (The United States actually sided with Pol Pot when Vietnamese troops finally ended his reign of terror). Stone and Kuznick quote a Khmer Rouge officer:

Every time after there had been bombing, they would take the people to see the craters, to see how big and deep the craters were, to see how the earth had been gouged out and scorched ... The ordinary people sometimes literally shit in their pants when the big bombs and shells came. Their minds just froze up and they would wander around mute for three or four days. Terrified and half crazy, the people were ready to believe what they were told. It was because of their dissatisfaction with the bombing that they kept on cooperating with the Khmer Rouge, joining up with the Khmer Rouge, sending their children off to go with them ... Sometimes the bombs fell and hit little children, and their fathers would be all for the Khmer Rouge.

*2,756,941 tons of ordnance dropped in Laos on 113,716 sites. Much of the Laotian landscape was blown to bits.

At a news conference in 1977, in response to a reporter's question asking if the United States had a moral obligation to help rebuild Vietnam, President Jimmy Carter infamously replied:

The destruction was mutual. We went to Vietnam without any desire to capture territory or impose American will on other people. I don't feel that we ought to apologize or castigate ourselves or to assume the status of culpability.

Mutual? Carter's statement reflects both the arrogance of power and a vulgar sense of imperial righteousness. There were 58,000 U.S. soldiers killed during the war, and 300,000-plus wounded, and plenty of mental and physical illness, suicides, broken families, and other kinds of distress. Stone nicely captures all of this with a statement made to a journalist by a mother whose son was at My Lai, "I gave them a good boy, and they sent me back a murderer." But whatever happened here, it pales in comparison to what took place there. There was no mutuality whatsoever, and it is obscene to say there was. What the United States did in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos ranks with the worst atrocities of the twentieth century. If the peoples of Southeast Asia had done to us what we did to them, and the same share of our population was killed as in Vietnam, the Vietnam Memorial wall would have about 20,000,000 names on it.

Our political rulers have continued ever since 1975, when the North Vietnamese Army and the National Liberation Front militarily liberated their country, to not just erase the horrors of Vietnam from public memory but to paint the war as what President Reagan called "a noble cause." Since he took office, President Obama, an admirer of Reagan, has gone further than any president to do this, attempting to perpetrate another U.S. atrocity, albeit in another form than war, by proclaiming the "Vietnam War Commemoration." The 2008 National

Defense Authorization Act empowered the Secretary of Defense to organize events to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the War in Vietnam. A thirteen-year commemoration is envisioned, from Memorial Day 2012 until November 11, 2025.

In his Proclamation urging us all to participate in what amounts to an orgy of self-congratulations and forgetfulness, President Obama said:

As we observe the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam War, we reflect with solemn reverence upon the valor of a generation that served with honor. We pay tribute to the more than 3 million servicemen and women who left their families to serve bravely, a world away from everything they knew and everyone they loved. From Ia Drang to Khe Sanh, from Hue to Saigon and countless villages in between, they pushed through jungles and rice paddies, heat and monsoon, fighting heroically to protect the ideals we hold dear as Americans. Through more than a decade of combat, over air, land, and sea, these proud Americans upheld the highest traditions of our Armed Forces.

This made me want to cry. Tens of thousands of Vietnamese suspected of being insurgents or sympathizers assassinated in the CIA's Phoenix Program; the forcible removal of more than five million villagers from their homes into "Strategic Hamlets"; political prisoners jailed and tortured in "tiger cages"; the intentional bombing of North Vietnamese dikes and hospitals; the murder of some 500 women, babies, children, and old people (many were first raped and later butchered) by GIs at My Lai. What kind of valorous efforts were these? What kind of grand ideals did these embody?

The Secretary of Defense is to organize all of the Commemoration's programs to satisfy these objectives:

1. To thank and honor veterans of the Vietnam War, including personnel who were held as prisoners of war (POW), or listed as missing in action (MIA), for their service and sacrifice on behalf of the United States and to thank and honor the families of these veterans.
2. To highlight the service of the Armed Forces during the Vietnam War and the contributions of Federal agencies and governmental and non-governmental organizations that served with, or in support of, the Armed Forces.
3. To pay tribute to the contributions made on the home front by the people of the United States during the Vietnam War.
4. To highlight the advances in technology, science, and medicine related to military research conducted during the Vietnam War.
5. To recognize the contributions and sacrifices made by the allies of the United States during the Vietnam War.

These are all awful, but the fourth one would make the Nazis proud.

The current chairman of the Commemoration is former Nebraska Senator and Vietnam veteran Chuck Hagel. He is also under consideration to become the next Secretary of Defense. If he does, he'll become the chief organizer of everything connected with it. Some progressives claim that Hagel will be a rare voice of reason and decency at the top of the

U.S. killing machine. But how reasonable and decent can a man be who would agree to chair this trunkful of lies?

I hope that radicals will do what they can to counter this celebration of atrocities. Monthly Review magazine, with which I am affiliated, will be running a series of essays from our archives, as well as newly written contributions, on the war. The first of these was published in November, 2012, a wonderful review of Oliver Stone's film, Platoon, by former Marine Leo Cawley, who was poisoned by Agent Orange and died too young from its effects. It's a good antidote to the most recent attempt to rewrite the history of the war in Southeast Asia. The Vietnam War should never be forgotten. It was a stain on our country and on humanity itself. To glorify it is an ignominious crime. We should instead honor the Vietnamese people, who fought more valiantly and suffered more for their liberation from foreign rule than we ever did for our own.

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