Looking back on the Vietnam War

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"Without the exposure of these Vietnam policies as criminal, there is every likelihood of their repetition in subsequent conflicts."

—Richard Falk, speaking at the Congressional Conference on War and National Responsibility, convened in Washington, D.C. in early 1970

"Historical memory was never the forte of Americans in Vietnam."

—Frances Fitzgerald, *The Fire in The Lake*, 1972

I. AN ORWELLIAN WAR

"'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less.'

"'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean so many different things.'

"'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'who is to be master, that's all.'"

— *Alice in Wonderland*

It is spring, and as in the folk song, the grave yards are in flower. Old wars are being commemorated, new wars coordinated. In Germany, the American president makes his pilgrimage to lay a wreath at the nazi military cemetery at Bitburg, while in Central America (and elsewhere), storm-troopers in his pay add still more atrocities to a seemingly never-ending list.

Spring, 1985: ten years after the fall of Saigon to the Vietnamese. The media barrage has been deafening—a retrospective which, like the war-making itself, mostly ignores the realities of Vietnam. Self-absorbed, solipsistic, blind to the world, America is reassessing its experience in Vietnam.

One could only anticipate this anniversary with dread, not so much because America still does not understand Vietnam or the role it played there; after all, America has never come to terms with its history on this continent stolen from its original inhabitants. The dread comes deepest from what is concretely being manufactured out of the anniversary. That defeat of imperial power is now being employed to mobilize for new imperial adventures, for a new wave of war and destruction. The lessons are being turned diametrically on their head so that the bloody crusade may continue.

So, the war remains what it always was: an Orwellian charade. Now, as then, reality is being manufactured by an apparatus in the service of unbridled Power. The victims are dressed in the clothing of the perpetrators; the murderers, free and unrepentant, live well, now comfortably writing their memoirs and explicating the war which they managed for so many years. Now more sure of themselves that history has receded and the blood stains have faded, they speak more loudly, in self-righteous tones, claiming that their carnage was just, that it didn't go far enough, claiming that the aftermath of the war vindicates them.

There was no Nuremburg trial after the U.S. defeat in Indochina; no court ever punished the administrators of the American war—Nixon, Kissinger, Johnson, McNamara, Rusk, and the rest—for their crimes. They either died peacefully in their beds or went on to more lucrative jobs in the same line of work. Now they extol their "noble cause" and hint of treachery and betrayal. Now they say they could have, indeed should have, won. Perhaps they didn't unleash enough bombs, declare enough "free fire zones," defoliate enough lands. Perhaps not enough people were rounded up into concentration camps, their thatch villages burned and bulldozed. Perhaps not enough were incinerated by napalm and phosphorous (mobile Dachaus), not enough machine- gunned and bulldozed into open ditches, not enough of their defeated converted into prostitutes, lackeys, mercenaries. If America had spent more money, sent more troops, embraced a more ferocious national spirit, and ignored its own wounds, if it had been ready to risk everything in a deadly gamble to destroy all of Asia "in order to save it," then perhaps America could have "won" its war. A few million more would have been sacrificed. And, in fact, countless more did die in the aftermath: See how evil, how savage they are, America says through its propagandists; after our bloodbath ended, they undertook their own. Surely, ours was inadequate—we could have pacified more, neutralized more, killed more.

But we learned our lesson, say the loudspeakers, and here a citizen, there a veteran, there an adolescent look up, mouthing in unison, next time we must not lack the will to kill them all. And the blueprints are out on the tables.

II. AMERICA LICKS ITS WOUNDS

America has never confronted Vietnam or its role there. It has licked its wounds, engaged in recriminations without taking either its own history or the Indochinese people into account. They were simply "natives," a hostile landscape before which the American crusaders fought their war against the Wilderness. This war has gone on since the origins of America, and so it has never envisioned that inscrutable "other" on any terms but those of its own distorted projections.

For America, the war was a tragedy, we are told. But to be a tragedy, it would have had to be an extraordinary transgression of a normal balance in the world. It would also have had to bring proportionally extraordinary suffering on the transgressors. Yet in these terms it isn't Vietnam which was the tragedy, but America itself, and Vietnam only one more episode in its bloodletting. Of course, it was a moral tragedy for the Americans involved. But that is not how many see it.

One veteran officer, William Broyles, Jr., in *The Atlantic Monthly*, writes, "For us the war never really ended, not for the men who fought it, not for America." A symposium in Harpers magazine makes one of its central inquiries, "Vietnam stands for America's loss of innocence. How have Americans endured this loss?" Newsweek asks "What did Vietnam do to us?" before asking "What did America's involvement in the war do to Vietnam?" And a wounded vet tells a *New York Times Magazine* writer that "whatever happened to us there is inexplicable, but what it did for us as men is worth the price."

It is partly my purpose to assess the "price" of the war but not so much to the American soldiers, who were both victims and perpetrators, but to the real victims and heroes of that war—the Indochinese people who resisted American aggression. But to do so, it is imperative to demolish the Big Lie which begins from the lie of American "innocence" and proceeds to such dishonest formulations as "America's involvement in" a war which was America's creation. The difficulty in writing about Vietnam must be obvious, since every word is charged; even the most seemingly innocuous statement about the war is permeated with this lie of American innocence and misguided nobility.

The truth is harder to face for America, but it is there. "Just about every Vietnam vet hated the Vietnamese," one told Joseph Lelyveld of the *New York Times Magazine*. And a young U.S. embassy officer in Saigon, during the war, exploded at Frances Fitzgerald, "Don't you realize that everything the Americans do in Vietnam is founded on hatred of the Vietnamese?"

The suffering of the American soldiers should not, and cannot be ignored. They, too, were victims, pawns of the policy-makers who blithely sent them to their brutalization and death while themselves living comfortably in suburban luxury, spending their time analyzing "body counts" and writing policy statements. But decency requires

that a sense of proportion to the suffering be maintained. The soldiers were an occupation army engaged in a vicious, genocidal war against a whole population. The enemy was, quite simply, the Vietnamese people; indeed, it was the land itself, a "godforsaken mudhole," as I heard many people, both for and against the war, describe it. So what did it mean to burn villages, run down peasants in tanks and trucks, shoot anything that moved?

III. "A SHOOTING GALLERY"

The U.S. war against Vietnam was no loss of innocence, no aberration, any more than the massacre at My Lai was exceptional. My Lai will be remembered as the subhamlet in the Quang Ngai province in which a company from the 11th Brigade of the Americal Division murdered 347 old men, women, children and infants, then systematically burned the homes and huts. This happened in early 1968, but was covered up until late 1969. As the My Lai events were the logical outcome (and in fact only the most notorious of such massacres) of U.S. policy, the war itself was the inevitable outcome of America's history. Could this outcome have been anything but a series of brutal pogroms such as My Lai?

Even the official Pentagon report revealed that My Lai was not extraordinary. In his penetrating study of the continuity of massacre and conquest in American history, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire-Building*, Richard Drinnon writes, "On the very same day of the butchery there, another company from the same task force entered the sister subhamlet My Khe 4 with one of its machine-gunners 'firing his weapon from the hip, cowboy-movie style.' In this 'other massacre,' members of this separate company piled up a body count of perhaps a hundred peasants—My Khe was smaller than My Lai— 'just flattened that village' by dynamite and fire, and then threw a few handfuls of straw on the corpses. The next morning this company moved on down the Batangan peninsula by the South China Sea, burning every hamlet they came to, killing water buffalo, pigs, chickens, and ducks, and destroying crops. As one of the My Khe veterans said later 'what we were doing was being done all over.' Said another: 'We were out there having a good time. It was sort of like being in a shooting gallery.'" None of this came out until writer Seymour Hersch obtained the forty or so volumes of the Pentagon report and summarized them in *Cover-Up* (1972), the source of Drinnon's quotations. No one was tried for murder at My Khe.

Yet even these massacres do not convey the reality of the war. In hearings held by anti-war Congressmen in Washington, D.C. in 1970, journalist Jonathan Schell testified that in 1967 he had spent a month in that same province of Quang Ngai, surveying the damage of the war from the air and on the ground. "When I first looked down from the plane over Quang Ngai province," he reported, "I saw that the land below me had been completely devastated … What I discovered was that by the end of 1967, the destruction of society in Quang Ngai province was not something we were in danger of doing; it was a process we had almost completed. About 70 per cent of the villages in the province had been destroyed."

Schell decided to see an operation from its beginning to end in a forward air control plane. The operation was near Chu Lai, and was one of thirty or so such operations proceeding against the Viet Cong at the time. The area he studied had a population of about 17,000, and had not yet been destroyed. Flying for two weeks with the forward air control planes, he saw the daily bombing of villages and their burning by U.S. ground troops.

He had been told by the psychological warfare office that villages were never bombed unless already given warnings. Checking at the base at Chu Lai after the operation, he asked for a full catalogue of warning leaflets. "I hardly needed to do this," he said, "because I had seen the people running from their burning homes, and I had seen no leaflets dropped prior to the bombings. Indeed, five or six leaflets had been dropped, and not one of them had been a warning." They were simply anti-Viet Cong tracts. When he asked if civilians had been evacuated, he learned that "initially the colonel in charge of the operation had given an order that no refugees, as they call them, would be taken out of the area. Late in the operation that decision was reversed, and 100 of the 17,000 were taken out. But even those 100 were taken out after most of the area had been destroyed. In other words, an area inhabited by 17,000 people was about 70 per cent destroyed with no warning to the residents … and with only 100 people evacuated from the area."

In the same hearings, historian Richard Falk discussed the My Lai massacre, observing that "long before these disclosures there was abundant evidence that the United States was committing war crimes in Vietnam on a widespread and continuing basis."

But far more serious than these atrocities alone, he added, was "the official reliance by the United States Government on a set of battlefield policies that openly deny the significance of any distinction between civilians and combatants, between military and nonmilitary targets. The most spectacular of these practices are the B-52 pattern raids against undefended villages and populated areas, 'free-fire zones,' 'harassment and interdiction fire,' 'Operation Phoenix,' 'search and destroy' missions, massive crop destruction and defoliation, and forcible transfer of the civilian population in Vietnam from one place to another against their will... In fact, the wrongdoers at My Lai, whether or not they were carrying out specific command decisions, were indeed fulfilling the basic and persistent United States war policies in South Vietnam."

American policy was one of wanton, utter annihilation of the defiant land it faced. As U.S. Secretary of the Navy (now an arms control negotiator for Reagan) Paul Nitze said in 1965, "Where neither United States nor [South] Vietnamese forces can maintain continuous occupancy, it is necessary to destroy those facilities." And, surveying the destruction of Ben Tre during the Tet Offensive in 1968, an army officer told an AP reporter, "We had to destroy it to save it."

IV. INDIAN FIGHTERS

Such a statement reflects what salvation has always meant for these grim crusaders: a desolation. William Appleman Williams has written that for U.S. policy-makers, "America was the locomotive puffing away to pull the rest of the world into civilization. Truman talked about the hordes of Asians—the wilderness—threatening to overwhelm civilization ... Those images and metaphors ... tell us most of what we need to know about why we went to kill people in Vietnam. We were transforming the Wilderness in order to save the City on a Hill."

"I felt superior there," said Lieutenant William Calley. "I thought, I'm the big American from across the sea. I'll sock it to these people here ... We weren't in My Lai to kill human beings, really. We were there to kill ideology that is carried by—I don't know. Pawns. Blobs. Pieces of flesh, and I wasn't in My Lai to destroy intelligent men. I was there to destroy an intangible idea." Richard Drinnon quotes another My Lai veteran who "equated 'wiping the whole place out' with what he called 'the Indian idea ... the only good gook is a dead gook.' The Indian idea was in the air in Vietnam."

This was only the latest unfolding in that westward movement, the empire's relentless drive to destroy and subdue Wilderness, the "savages" who inhabited it, and all of nature. The situation was essentially the same when the U.S. began to intervene in Vietnam as it was for Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893 when he wrote his famous declaration that the dominant fact in American life had been expansion of its frontier. Though expansion had reached the Pacific coast, the rising imperial star of the U.S. indicated clearly to him that the movement would continue. This national mystique of Manifest Destiny plunged the Anglo-Americans into wars in Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean, the Philippines, and beyond.

In the mid-nineteenth century, William Gilpin had written of the American destiny "to subdue the continent—to rush over this vast field to the Pacific Ocean ... to stir up the sleep of a hundred centuries—to teach old nations a new civilization—to confirm the destiny of the human race ... to cause a stagnant people to be reborn—to perfect science ... to shed a new and resplendent glory upon mankind ..." This "perfected science" was the locomotive of modernity crystallized in the American Empire and its dream of conquest. The destruction of Vietnamese society by the bureaucrats and the Calleys was only the most modern incarnation of that "glory." By the time these conquerors and Indian fighters reached Indochina the frontier had become Kennedy's "New Frontier," his "relentless struggle in every corner of the globe." As Drinnon writes, the troops were now being sent "into action against disorder on a frontier that had become planetary."

In 1966, General Maxwell Taylor, leaving the ambassadorship in Saigon, revealed how deeply imbedded was the "Indian idea," describing the "pacification" program: "We have always been able to move in the areas where the

security was good enough. But I have often said, it is very hard to plant the corn outside the stockade when the Indians are around. We have to get the Indians farther away in many of the provinces to make good progress."

Fitzgerald comments that "American officers liked to call the area outside GVN [Government of Vietnam] control 'Indian country.' It was a joke, of course, no more than a figure of speech, but it put the Vietnam War into a definite historical and mythological perspective: the Americans were once again embarked upon a heroic and (for themselves) almost painless conquest of an inferior race. To the American settlers the defeat of the Indians had seemed not just a nationalist victory, but an achievement made in the name of humanity—the triumph of light over darkness, of good over evil, and of civilization over brutish nature. Quite unconsciously, the American officers and officials used a similar language to describe their war against the NLF. According to the official rhetoric, the Viet Cong did not live in places, they 'infested areas;' to 'clean them out' the American forces went on 'sweep and clear' operations or moved all the villagers into refugee camps in order to 'sanitize the area.'"

The Vietnamese, whether they were the enemy or the vassals of the U.S., were considered stupid savages, "Orientals," in General William Westmoreland's words, who placed a lower value on life than westerners. The NLF were nothing but "termites" in the General's eyes, who showed his humanitarian concern for the country by advising that "We have to get the right balance of termite killers to get rid of the termites without wrecking the house." And an adviser in Pleiku told the head of the International Voluntary Service that the Montagnards (tribal highlanders) "have to realize that they are expendable," adding that the "Montagnard problem" could be solved "like we solved the Indian problem."

"Is it an exaggeration to suggest," wrote Noam Chomsky in 1970, "that our history of extermination and racism is reaching its climax in Vietnam today? It is not a question that Americans can easily put aside." Indeed, this is the theme of Drinnon's powerful book: since there was no end to this frontier being vanquished by the Empire, "Winning the West amounted to no less than winning the world. It could be finally and decisively 'won' only by rationalizing (Americanizing, westernizing, modernizing) the world, and that meant conquering the land beyond, banishing mystery, and negating or extirpating other peoples, so the whole would be subject to the regimented reason of one settlement culture with its professedly self-evident middle-class values."

But the "stagnant peoples" had their own vision of destiny. A veteran told the *Times*' Lelyveld, "I don't think the people wanted to be saved ..." When the conquerors saw the people wouldn't, and couldn't, be "saved," they set out, within the terms of their mad equation, to destroy them, using all the perfected science at their disposal to accomplish the destruction.

V. THE "LUNARIZATION PROGRAM"

The monstrous absurdity of pioneer arrogance saw its culmination in that unspeakable war—a war Vice-President Hubert Humphrey dubbed "America's finest hour." The entire might of the technological megamachine was pitted against a small, poor, archaic peasant region. The proportions—in comparative wealth, in technology, in firepower—were obscene. At any given time, the difference in firepower ranged anywhere from 50 to 1, to 500 to 1. The war represented "the triumph of the principles and values of the industrial bureaucracy," a "General Motors of Death," as Gordon Livingston, a regimental surgeon who served there, put it later. At the 1970 war crimes hearings, he testified, "The magnitude of the effort, the paperwork, and the middle-management attitude of many of the participants, as well as the predilection for charts and statistics—including that most dehumanizing and absurd figure of all, the body count—all these represent the triumph of technocracy over reason."

This quintessentially techno-bureaucratic campaign against Vietnam flowed from the same hatred and poverty of spirit that fueled the wars against the indigenous peoples of this continent. It was a deep-seated hatred, founded upon guilt and a sense of separation, so it had to be manifested in a war against the earth itself. But this time, all the demonic instruments of technology were available to the crusade.

The aerial bombardment was unrivaled in the history of warfare. Already, by 1969, South Vietnam, North Vietnam and Laos were the three most heavily bombed countries in history. "The unparalleled, lavish use of firepower," a U.S. military analyst wrote laconically, "is an outstanding characteristic of U.S. military tactics in the Vietnam war."

"Translated into human terms," commented Gabriel Kolko, "the United States has made South Vietnam a sea of fire as a matter of policy, turning an entire nation into a target." "On some days in 1969," reported ecologist John Lewallen in his book *Ecology of Devastation* (1971), "800 sorties were flown [in northern Laos], dropping napalm, phosphorous, and anti-personnel bombs. One old man described the effects: 'First the houses and fruit trees were burned, then the fields and the hillside and even the stream was on fire.'" Bombing became so intense by that year that at times it went on for twenty-four hours a day, and farming, if it could be done at all, could only take place at night.

The use of herbicides was even more devastating. "To a counterinsurgent," wrote Lewallen, "plants are the allies of the insurgent." E.W. Pfeiffer, a zoologist sent to Indochina by the American Association for the Advancement of Science to study ecological consequences of the war, compared the U.S. policy of bombing, defoliation, and mass plowing with giant bulldozers with the extermination of the buffalo herds in the American West. "This modern program," he reported in 1971, "has as destructive an influence on the social fabric of Indochinese life as did the ecocide (destruction of ecology) of the American West upon the American Indian."

NLF sources reported that some 300,000 people were poisoned each year between 1966 and 1969 by exposure to Agent Orange, Agent White, and other chemicals. An epidemic of birth defects was already occurring at that time. Over five million acres had been sprayed with some seventeen million gallons of herbicides, and an area the size of Massachusetts cleared by defoliants. The very soil of Indochina was being destroyed by bombing and defoliation, increasing salination, flooding, erosion and drought.

Vietnam, once a major exporter of rice, now had to import it from the U.S. due to crop destruction and the disruption of agriculture. Huge tracts of mangrove, evergreen rain forest, and fruit trees were wiped out, leading to the breakdown of associated ecosystems, especially in the Mekong Delta. By December 1970, at least 35 percent of South Vietnam's fourteen million acres of dense forests had been sprayed.

A "food denial" program was also implemented by the Americans to starve the insurgents into submission. This meant massive spraying of croplands and destruction of food stores. Of course, the insurgents, being more mobile, were able to evade some of the circumstances brought about by defoliation, but the villagers left behind starved. Many animal species, particularly birds and aquatic food chains, were destroyed by the chemical warfare.

The hatred for the land and the people knew no limits. A joke circulating at the time was that a proper "final solution" to the "Vietnamese problem" would be to pave the country and make it a parking lot, a joke that was repeated by then California governor Ronald Reagan. Such was the attitude of these American missionaries of a "new civilization." But to the Vietnamese, who blended their Buddhism with strong animist and nature-worship beliefs along with ancestor worship, the land itself was sacred, a constant which centered their universe.

The purpose of American "pacification" of this wilderness was to pave the spiritual and political soil of village identity to make it accessible to American tanks. To "dry up the sea" in which the rebels swam, they had to remove the people from the land itself, forcibly relocating entire villages to so-called "strategic hamlets" (concentration camps), and to the desperation of the cities, turning their old lands into "free-fire zones" where anything that moved was a target. As a result of this campaign and NLF resistance to it, by 1970 a third of the people of South Vietnam had become refugees. In the first six months of that year, another half a million refugees were "generated" by forced removal and wanton destruction. This figure would even be too conservative, since many refugees were never accounted for by official U.S./South Vietnamese government head counts. "The large majority of the refugees, as every objective account agrees, were seeking to escape the free-fire zones and the rain of fire the Americans were showering on them," Gabriel Kolko reported. "You have to be able to separate the sheep from the goats," said one Pentagon-sponsored analyst. "The way to do it is harsh. You would have to put all military-age males in the army or in a camp as you pacify the country. Anyone not in the army or in a camp is a target. He's either a Viet Cong or is helping them."

Vietnamese culture, as Frances Fitzgerald pointed out, was wrecked by forced relocation and flight to the cities: "As they took life from the earth and from the ancestors, so they would find immortality in their children, who in their turn would take their place upon the earth. To leave the land and the family forever was therefore to lose their place in the universe and to suffer a permanent, collective death."

Of course, many analysts and experts in the pay of the empire found a rosier side to this havoc. For example, Samuel P. Huntington, Chairman of the Department of Government at Harvard University, contributed to Foreign

Affairs in 1968 a rather cheerful view of history and the American cultural devastation. "In an absent-minded way," wrote the professor from the comfort of his study, "the United States may have stumbled upon the answer to 'wars of national liberation.'"

War, he argued, wasn't in and of itself the answer, but more importantly the "forced-draft urbanization and modernization which rapidly brings the country in question out of the phase in which a rural revolutionary movement can hope to generate sufficient strength to come to power." The solution was to produce "a massive migration from countryside to city." In this way, with bombs and slaughter, did the empire "stir the sleep of a hundred centuries." By 1967 Senator William J. Fulbright remarked that Saigon, representative of all the towns of South Vietnam by being swollen to some four times its previous population, had become "an American brothel."

VI. A COUNTRY SHATTERED

In the end, the U.S. had converted the South, in Fitzgerald's words, into "a country shattered so that no two pieces fit together." Shattering the country—by depopulating the countryside, by defoliation and carpet bombing, by terror and imposed dependence upon the U.S. military—was the method which the crackpot bureaucratic ideologues sanguinely recommended as the solution to the "Vietnamese problem." Destroying that latest incarnation of the "howling wilderness infested by bloodthirsty savages"—the lush Vietnamese rainforests and grasslands where a "VC" was hidden behind every tree—and physically liquidating whoever resisted the salvation America so nobly offered, became the only solution to an unresolvable problem. Only in such a way could the "credibility" of the empire be restored and the rising tide of nationalist revolution be halted.

And they went to every length to do so. It became official U.S. policy, in the words of Robert Opton, Jr., a psychologist who was in Vietnam during 1967 and 1968 as a reporter, "to obliterate not just whole villages, but whole districts and virtually whole provinces." At first, residents were moved out, but the vast numbers of refugees created by these operations led military officers to order that no new refugees be "generated." As Jonathan Schell had witnessed, no warnings were issued when air strikes were called in on their villages, and every civilian on the ground was assumed to be the enemy and fired on accordingly. Free fire zones now came to include many inhabited villages.

Opton witnessed U.S. Cobra helicopters firing 20 mm. cannons into houses, and soldiers shooting the people as they ran out of the houses. "This was termed 'prepping the area' by the American lieutenant colonel who directed the operation. 'We sort of shoot it up to see if anything moves,' he explained, and he added by way of reassurance that this treatment was perfectly routine."

Everyday occurrences of atrocities and brutality against the Vietnamese became so commonplace that they ceased to be reported as news. Pfc. Allen Akers, who served in the 3rd Marine Division, testified at the Winter Soldier Investigation on war crimes in Vietnam (convened by the Vietnam Veterans Against the War in Detroit in early 1971), "We were given orders whenever we moved into a village to reconnoiter by fire. This means to—whenever we step into a village to fire upon houses, bushes, anything to our discretion that looked like there might be somebody hiding behind or under…we'd carry our rifles about hip high and we'd line up on a line parallel to the village and start walking, firing from the hip."

Pfc. Charles Stephens, of the 101st Airborne Division, testified that his battalion had attacked Tui Hoa, reconnoitering by fire, and wounding women and children, who later died due to lack of medical attention. The next day they fired on the village as the people buried their dead, killing another person. "We went down that same day to get some water and there were two little boys playing on a dike and one sergeant just took his M-16 and shot one boy at the dike. The other boy tried to run. He was almost out of sight when the other guy, a Spec 4, shot this other little boy off the dike. The little guy was like lying on the ground kicking, so he shot him again to make sure he was dead." Stephens testified that to prove their body count "we had to cut off the right ear of everybody we killed … Guys would cut off heads, put them on a stake and stick a guy's penis in his mouth." Kenneth Ruth, a medic in the 1st Air Cavalry Division, reported the torture of prisoners, and test-firing of weapons by firing them indiscriminately at villagers. "Nobody else cared. This is the general attitude. You know, Vietnamese aren't humans, they're targets." He concluded, "I could go on all day. All of us could. And every GI in this room could say the same thing."

Sgt. Scott Camil of the 1st Marine Division reported "burning of villages with civilians in them, the cutting off of ears, cutting off of heads, torturing of prisoners, calling in of artillery on villages for games, corpsmen killing wounded prisoners, napalm dropped on villages, women being raped, women and children being massacred, CS gas used on the people, animals slaughtered, passes rejected and the people holding them shot, bodies shoved out of helicopters, teargassing people for fun and running civilians off the road." When asked by the moderator if prisoners being tortured were civilians or North Vietnamese army men, he replied, "The way we distinguished between civilians and VC, VC had weapons and civilians didn't and anybody that was dead was considered a VC. If you killed someone they said, 'How do you know he's a VC?' and the general reply would be, 'He's dead,' and that was sufficient." He reported that when villagers were searched, "the women would have all their clothes taken off and the men would use their penises to probe them to make sure they didn't have anything hidden anywhere; and this was raping but it was done as searching." All this had taken place in the presence of officers.

The list of brutality is endless, which explains psychologist Robert J. Lifton's observation that of the two hundred or so soldiers he and his colleagues interviewed, none was surprised by the news of My Lai. "They had not been surprised because they have either been party to, or witness to, or have heard fairly close-hand about hundreds or thousands of similar, if smaller incidents." Said Camil, "It wasn't like they were humans. We were conditioned to believe that this was for the good of the nation … And when you shot someone you didn't think you were shooting at a human. They were a gook or a Commie and it was okay. And anything you did to them was okay because like they would tell you they'd do it to you if they had the chance."

Others reported destroying rice and livestock, killing of unarmed persons, running people down on the road with trucks and tanks, desecrating graves, throwing people out of helicopters, throwing cans of C-rations at children by the sides of roads, firing 50-caliber machine guns at villages for sport, nazi-style revenge massacres of whole villages after a GI was killed by a sniper, burning of huts with the people inside, firing at peasants in ox-carts from planes simply to finish off unused ammunition, torturing "VC suspects" by attaching electrical wires to their genitalia (called the "Bell Telephone Hour" by soldiers), rape and murder of women, burning of villages. As Opton wrote in 1970, "'Winning the hearts and minds' of the Vietnamese is now maintained only as a public relations product for consumption on the home market."

And yet among many soldiers there was the grotesque complaint that they were fighting "with one arm tied behind our back," a complaint bellowed today by those who have no shame. What more could they have been allowed in order to carry on their grisly business? Opton noted that among soldiers he interviewed in Vietnam, "many felt that a final solution was the best and perhaps only solution, and many of their officers agreed. Extermination of the Vietnamese people, some officers felt, would be the best way to protect the men under them." So the only way to "save" the Vietnamese would be to annihilate them all, which was probably true in terms of winning the war, since the Vietnamese were willing to fight to the bitter end to throw out the invaders. It was this heroic resistance which impeded the extermination from taking place.

Of course, there was also the fear on the part of war planners that the war could expand beyond their ability to "manage" it effectively. A widening of the war could also draw more massive protest against what was an increasingly unpopular war back home, and resistance in the army itself, which was starting to break down and turn against the war. David Halberstam reports in his book *The Best and the Brightest* that in late 1966, the military was urging Lyndon Johnson to bomb Hanoi and Haiphong and to block the harbor. Johnson replied, "I have one more problem for your computer—will you feed into it how long it will take five hundred thousand angry Americans to climb that White House fence out there and lynch their President if he does something like that?" Daniel Ellsberg pointed out much later that it was only the resistance to the war by Americans at home that prevented Richard Nixon from committing that ultimate atrocity of dropping nuclear weapons on North Vietnam. Such an escalation could be the only logic of the statement current among those who refuse to face the reality of the hideous crusade, that the U.S. military was "not allowed to win." It is the culmination of the "Indian idea."

VII. BLOODBATHS

The Americans may not have been able to impose a "final solution" on the Indochinese, but they did enough damage in the course of that war to wreck the societies and lay the basis for further carnage, as in Cambodia, making Nixon's cynical warning of a "bloodbath" a self-fulfilling prophecy. If some 58,000 American soldiers died in Vietnam and another 300,000 were wounded, and we add to that list the startling number of suicides among veterans since the war, some 50,000, how can these horrifying figures compare to those of three million Vietnamese killed and 4.5 million wounded? What would be the comparable length of a wall like the veterans' memorial in Washington, D.C. if it contained those three million names? And consider some other statistics: ten million refugees, a million orphans, nearly 10,000 hamlets destroyed in South Vietnam alone: 6,600,000 tons of bombs dropped on Indochina, including 400,000 tons of napalm, leaving some 25 million craters; 25 million acres of farmland and twelve million acres of forests destroyed, by among other causes, nineteen million gallons of defoliants sprayed on them. The horror visited upon thousands of American soldiers and their families due to exposure to Agent Orange and other defoliants is only an indication of the far greater numbers and levels of contamination of Indochinese who were and continue to be the victims of the chemical plagues deliberately unleashed by the American masters of war.

The United States went into Vietnam to "save" the south by impeding reunification of the country and stopping the communists from assuming power over the entire country. In so doing it wrecked the possibility of any diversity in Vietnamese society (or Laotian or Cambodian), of anyone but the communists coming to power, by uprooting and destroying the very groups that could have resisted or offset control by the Stalinists—the regional political groups and religious sects, the tribespeople of the highlands, the Buddhists, and other political tendencies. The U.S. claimed its desire to prevent domination of the south by northerners. Yet during the Tet Offensive in 1968 and the "Operation Phoenix" program of mass assassinations, jailings and relocations which followed in the early 1970's, it exterminated the mainly southern NLF cadres, making northern domination of the culturally distinct south another self-fulfilling prophecy (indeed, perhaps a necessity for the Vietnamese if they were going to win the war). "The U.S. has changed Vietnam," wrote Fitzgerald, "to the point where it is unrecognizable to Vietnamese… and flattened the local ethnic, religious, and cultural peculiarities beneath a uniform, national disaster."

Now, ten years later, we could only expect the grotesque spectacle in which history has been rewritten so that Americans can continue to evade individual and collective guilt for the slaughter of the Indochinese and the wrecking of their societies.

One particularly repellent example was President Carter's astonishing statement in March 1977 that "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 we ought to apologize or castigate ourselves or to assume the status of culpability." Vietnamese author Ngo Vinh Long reports that "A professor at Hue University likened [the statement] to a rapist saying that his victims hurt him as much as he hurt them." Yet, incredibly, the refusal by Americans to face the truth of American culpability has brought about exactly such a reversal in many people's minds.

The atrocities and injustices which followed in the wake of the U.S. war—which could only be seen as the tragic consequences of American devastation, as further proof that a holocaust does not create conditions for reconciliation and freedom but only for more holocaust and tyranny—these crimes are now employed by propagandists as a justification for the original violence that prepared the ground for them. The question never seems to be raised that even if the Indochinese were destined to mutual wars and dictatorship—a frequent occurrence in the troubled Third World—how could that justify the American intervention, the millions dead and wounded, the ruination of traditional forms of life which may have helped to prevent such brutality?

In fact, it is one of the war's tragic ironies that the forced modernization so fondly touted as a solution by U.S. analysts like the Harvard Government professor will now be carried out by the Stalinists rather than the fascist puppets of the Americans, and only because the U.S. pulverized that society so thoroughly that the only force left which was capable of creating a new society of any kind was the communists. It is hard to say what would have happened if the Indian fighters had not marched into that valley, but once they did their dirty work, the consequences could only be a foregone conclusion. And the consistent pressure which America now puts on the Indochinese contributes to every act of oppression and brutality which occurs there to this day.

Now that the "lesson" that more American terror and death was necessary in Indochina is widely proclaimed, there are those who would wish to employ it for further holocaust in Central America. Edward N. Luttwak, one of the latest clones of American crackpot military realism, claimed in the *Harper's* symposium that if the "1,000 sorties flown each day in Vietnam" had hit "worthwhile targets," they "would have ended the war in a day," and now prescribes American "victory" for El Salvador, Using the same terms and justifications applied by counterinsurgency analysts in the 1960s in Vietnam: "I believe the United States should help the Salvadoran government, which is a democratizing regime, win the war… The United States can permit the Salvadorans to prevail by using their traditional methods—which simply entail killing as many people as they can until there are no guerrillas left."

And so the graveyards are in flower this spring ten years later, this spring which is witness and prelude to more butchery a la Edward Luttwak. The slaughter is going on at this very moment, in the highlands of Guatemala, in the ravines of El Salvador, along the Honduras-Nicaragua border. We are now told by Richard Nixon (in a book which can only bring to mind the image of Hitler, say in 1955, writing a retrospective on World War II) that the idea of "no more Vietnams" means not that America shouldn't intervene, but that it shouldn't fail. That is always the plan. Now the Mayan Indians are being rounded up into strategic hamlets, tortured and massacred, their cultures wrecked and whole language groups decimated. The poor farmers of that earth goddess' necklace of volcanic jewels which is Central America are being exterminated, the "sheep separated from the goats." Even napalm is being used against them in a stunning repetition of history which can only elicit a scream of anguish directly from the heart. Of course these unfortunate people are only "Commies," "subversives," "guerrillas"— targets. They are more jungle to be paved and turned into an American parking lot.

VIII. AMERICA'S NEXT VIETNAM

Like millions of others, I did what I could to stop that war. I demonstrated, leafleted, sat in, burned my draft card, walked out of school, spoke on street corners. In 1967 I was fifteen years old. I would have enlisted in the NLF to fight against the American invasion had I had the opportunity.

Because I was young and America was fighting a war so transparently evil, I tended to glorify the resistance, the NLF and the North Vietnamese. The heroism and the dignity of the Vietnamese people blinded me to the authoritarian character of the Stalinist politicians who were carried to power. Experience and a deepening understanding of the world made it clear that such illusions are dangerous. Nevertheless, I don't regret waving a "VC" flag, the flag of the empire's enemy, at the gates of a factory in Warren, Michigan, where tanks were produced.

Obviously, everyone always wishes they could have known then what they know now, and I don't confuse my opposition to U.S. intervention in Central America with any illusions about the politicians who run Nicaragua or the political parties involved in the resistance in Guatemala and El Salvador. But the lack of judgment some of us showed in glorifying the Vietnamese resistance cannot be blamed for the misery visited upon those tortured lands. The blame must be laid where it belongs if we are to break the cycle of destruction: on the technocratic fascist war conceived and conducted by the U.S. imperialist war machine, and the daily acts of complicity by Americans with that war machine.

Now the same events are unfolding in Central America (or actually have been unfolding for years, though we are only now becoming increasingly aware of them). The U.S. plays the same dirty tricks, foments its Big Lie, butchers poor farmers and ignites villages in the name of freedom, progress, salvation. Its infernal technology is now being brought to bear on still more victims.

When I look up at the map of Indochina on my wall, I cannot help but wonder: what more could we have done to stop the suffering, to obstruct that smoking, clanking juggernaut cutting its bloody swath through a faraway land? To all the apologists for genocide, paid and unpaid, who repeat the imperial lie that the antiwar movement, which eventually became the great majority of Americans, inside and outside the military, "betrayed" the war effort, I can only reply: We didn't do enough to undermine and betray your war. If there is any lesson to be learned from that war which can aid us in understanding the situation we find ourselves in today, it is that lesson—that now that the soil is being bloodstained by new, hellish wars, now that the engines of holocaust are again filling the air with their terrifying drone, we must find a way to rally our spirits once more, to blockade the beast, to stop its murderous

career. Yesterday is today and today is tomorrow. The Vietnam wars are an American creation. It is here—and it is we who must act—where they will be stopped once and for all.

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Related

A reprint of this article, with an introduction by Richard Drinnon, appeared in FE #346, Summer, 1995.
See also: Vietnam's Untold Victim: The Land, FE #321, Indian Summer, 1985

George Bradford (David Watson)
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