

The Lessons of Vietnam

The government spat on Vietnam vets, not the anti-war movement

anon.

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Although the phrase, “The first casualty in war is truth,” has been aptly realized in the media coverage of the Persian Gulf war, the truth is often the last casualty as well. In the case of America’s military adventure in Vietnam, numerous Big Lies about that conflict continue sixteen years after the U.S. defeat.

Even before the merciless U.S. bombing attack on Iraq began on January 16, President Bush continually propagated the Number One Big Lie about the U.S. loss in Vietnam: the war was lost because the armed forces had been “asked to fight with one arm tied behind their backs.” Bush assured the nation that the full weight of U.S. military resources would be deployed against the current enemy of the Empire. Certainly, the brutality of the air and ground war against Iraq have borne out his promise.

Like all Big Lies, once one has been pronounced endless times by lying politicians and their compliant mouthpiece, the media, it becomes enshrined in history as Truth. So it is with Vietnam. TV watchers repeat the same phrase uttered by the masters as though they themselves had come to the conclusion through some thoughtful process. They know! The Vietnam war was lost on the home-front, not on the battlefield. This refrain echoes almost exactly early Nazi Party propaganda following World War I, that, similarly, it was lack of resolve by the politicians in Berlin which led Germany to defeat, not the generals and German troops.

It would be easy to say that anyone with a passing knowledge of the history of the genocidal, ecocidal U.S. war against Vietnam would know the Home-front Loss theory is a Big Lie. However, the problem is that so few are acquainted with what actually occurred during that grisly chapter in American history. Americans grieve so for their 55,000 war dead, that most are unaware that upwards to 3,000,000 Indochinese, mostly civilians, were slaughtered by the U.S. war machine during 1962–1975. There is little, if anything, the U.S. could have done to inflict more military destruction on the people of that region, short of nuclear weapons and an invasion of North Vietnam, both of which were impractical for a variety of political reasons which had only partly to do with homefront opposition.

U.S. aerial bombing of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia saw more tonnage dropped on these defenseless peasant nations than the combined total of all that was used during both World War I, World War II (including Hiroshima and Nagasaki) and the Korean War. The use of nuclear weapons was considered by Nixon and the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff but rejected due to a fear that such usage could bring with it a confrontation with the Soviet Union and China as well as the adverse effect it would have on world opinion.

An invasion of North Vietnam also carried with it the substantial military risk of causing Chinese involvement, as did the war against North Korea in 1950 when U.S. forces came too close to the Chinese border. The U.S. already had a half-million men in the south of Vietnam by 1968 and had been unable to contain the popular-based guerrilla movement. The idea of sending hundreds of thousands more for an invasion of the North was militarily and politically unacceptable to everyone, politicians, generals and the U.S. people.

The Arm Tied Behind the Back theory, the Big Lie, is needed by the rulers to disguise the humiliating loss the war machine experienced at the hands of the Vietnamese, one compounded by mass-scale mutinies in the U.S. Armed Forces (See Winter 1991 FE, “The Collapse of the Armed Forces”), and the unprecedented political opposition at

home. Bush and his generals want to send all of this down the memory hole in order to force a lock-step march off to war in the Persian Gulf.

The Second Big Lie

Another Big Lie, one constantly heard repeated in the media in its propaganda campaign to isolate and marginalize the wide-spread, large-scale anti-war movement, is that its predecessor, the movement against the Vietnam war, had a contemptuous disregard for returning veterans illustrated most flagrantly by the act of spitting on many of them. So pervasive is this myth of the spat-upon GI that it is often repeated by anti-Persian Gulf war activists in a pledge to this time “support our troops” even while opposing the war. In truth, these spitting incidents were almost entirely, if not absolutely, fiction.

It was the government and the patriotic flag-wavers, if it was anyone, who ignored and abused the returning vets after sending them off to a cruel, unwinnable war. It wasn't the responsibility of anti-war protesters to provide parades and welcome-home demonstrations—that's what governments and local Chambers of Commerce are supposed to do. It wasn't the anti-war movement which denied benefits to veterans, sent them to hell-hole VA hospitals and refused to recognize they had been poisoned by Agent Orange—that was all courtesy of the government which sent them off to Vietnam in the first place.

However, the image of a long-haired, LSD-sodden, foul-mouthed, anti-war hippie spitting on a Vietnam veteran disembarking from a plane after risking his life in the fight against communism persists in the public consciousness as how returning vets were treated and how the anti-war movement regarded them. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Readers of the Fifth Estate who have seen our histories of military resistance to the Vietnam war know that GIs were a key component of the anti-war movement, not its enemy. Active duty GIs led every major anti-war march during that period along with large contingents of vets. There were numerous Vietnam veteran anti-war hearings and marches at the nation's capital during the 1960s and 70s, including perhaps one of the most moving actions of the entire period in 1971: disillusioned vets flinging their battle medals at the Capitol in a show of contempt for the war they had been forced to fight.

The peace movement helped GIs and vets establish hundreds of active-duty, anti-war newsletters at bases, on ships and even in the field. It established legal defense networks and even unions for those GIs victimized by the brass and set up a string of GI coffeehouses at every major base in the United States. An important part of the anti-war movement's strategy was to promote the widespread mutinies which actually occurred. It was the courage of those soldiers who refused the orders to fight in a senseless war which was in good part what forced the American withdrawal from Vietnam.

The Big Lie ignores all of this and history is re-written so that in the popular memory returning vets arrived home awash in a sea of spittle. The carefully fabricated image of a combat marine with spit dripping off his nose while a tear runs from his eye appears repeatedly in an attempt to discredit both the contemporary and past peace movements.

Quite A Brawl

Just given some thought, even while ignoring the overwhelming solidarity between the soldiers and the protesters, does anyone really think there could have been any appreciable number of incidents where anti-war activists, or anyone for that matter, would go up and spit in another man's face, particularly one who had just returned from combat, without facing quite a brawl? And, if this was such a common occurrence, why weren't there any reports of it at the time? Why? Because it's total bullshit taken from novels like *Fields of Fire*, by James Webb, and the movie, “Coming Home.” Americans have a difficult time distinguishing between fact and media fiction and this particular social myth is both persistent and pernicious.

The importance of this Big Lie is obvious. The Vietnam-era mutinies and GI/protester solidarity scared the pants off the army brass and they are determined not to allow it to happen again. The Persian Gulf conflict, like all the others in U.S. history, is a rich man's war and a poor person's fight. This is a truth which must always be hidden from the troops behind the facade of patriotism, nationalism and militarism, for the armed forces are not only the worst feature of the state, they are also its core.

Without absolute control of organized violence, the state is nothing but hateful men in suits giving orders to the wind. It is the cultivated obedience of the troops to unquestionably carry out the dictates of the Empire's goals which we must attack and erode. GI resistance to the war in Vietnam serves as a model both to us and to those who are fighting the present one.

The rulers keep talking about the "lessons of Vietnam," and, to be sure, there are rich ones to be learned from that experience. None of them seem to be lost on the war makers, only on the people. The real lesson of Vietnam is that the generals and politicians lied to the American people every step of the way. From President Lyndon Johnson's 1964 election pledge that he would "not send American boys 10,000 miles to do the job that Asian boys should be doing," through the fabricated Tonkin Bay incident which allowed the mass introduction of U.S. troops, to Vice-President Hubert H. Humphrey's worst prediction of his generation, that he saw "the light at the end of the tunnel," the American people were suckered every step of the way just as they are being today.

Only the U.S. anti-war movement told the truth about the war, but unfortunately, this too is on its way down the memory hole. So it is our task to speak truth to Power once again. If we don't our children and grandchildren will be talking about the "Iraqi Syndrome" as they march off to die in the Empire's newest military adventures.

An excellent history of the Vietnam war is available from us as a reprint from the Spring 1985 Fifth Estate. Send a self-addressed stamped envelope with postage or ask for it with book orders.

The Destruction of Indochina (sidebar)

Tons of bombs dropped on Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia by the U.S.: 6,600,000

Gallons of Agent Orange and other herbicides sprayed: 19,200,000

Tons of Napalm dropped: 400,000

Bomb craters: 25,000,000

South Vietnamese hamlets destroyed by the war (out of 15,000): 9,000

Acres of farmland destroyed: 25,000,000

Acres of forest destroyed: 12,000,000

Indochinese killed by the U.S.: 3,000,000

Indochinese wounded by the U.S.: 3,200,000

Total refugees (by 1975): 14,305,000

Related

* "The Collapse of the Armed Forces," FE #335, Winter, 1990-91.

* *Fifth Estate's* Vietnam Resource Page.

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