

Myths and Realities in the Vietnam Debate

By Robert F. Turner

Introduction

After nearly a decade of daily involvement with Vietnam, I left that country during the April 1975 evacuation with a deep sense of anger and dishonor. Perhaps it was because I was by then "burned out," or perhaps because I was moved by President Ford's request that there be "no recriminations"—but for whatever reason, like many others I tried to put Vietnam behind me.

Now, nearly a dozen years later, two things about Vietnam have become clear to me. First, President Reagan was right in saying that what we sought to do in Vietnam was "a noble cause." Tens of thousands of our friends and neighbors paid the ultimate sacrifice for that cause, and we dishonor their memory by simply turning our backs on their struggle as if it never occurred. Secondly, and more importantly, we don't have the option of forgetting about Vietnam. Many of the same people who persuaded us that we were on the wrong side in the early 1970s are now using the same basic arguments to persuade us to abandon our friends in Central America—and they are using the argument that we must "avoid another Vietnam" to sell their views to the public. It is therefore most appropriate that the ABA has gathered together this distinguished group to revisit the reality of Vietnam—and perhaps to suggest some genuine "lessons" that may help to prevent us from repeating that great tragedy.

As a veteran of the campus debates of the 1960s, I want to talk briefly about what I believe were the six most common themes that I encountered in debating leaders of the so-called "anti-war" movement. There were other themes, to be sure, but these were the ones that seemed to be the most important to the critics at the time. The basic arguments ran something like this: first, Ho Chi Minh was Vietnam's "George Washington," and if he was a "communist" at all it was of the "Titoist" strain and a pragmatic consequence of U.S. refusal to assist him against the French. Second, had the U.S.

not undermined the 1954 Geneva Elections, which called for free elections to reunite Vietnam in July 1956, it would have been unnecessary for the people of Vietnam to take up arms because Ho Chi Minh would have easily won. Third, the struggle in Vietnam was not a matter of North Vietnamese "aggression," but rather a struggle against oppression by the indigenous National Liberation Front for South Vietnam. Fourth, the U.S. was "supporting the wrong side" in Vietnam, and our puppet governments were flagrantly violating even the most fundamental human rights of their people. Thus, it was important to end U.S. aid as a means of improving human rights for the Vietnamese people. Fifth, whatever happened in Vietnam really wasn't very important, and thus the United States should not have become involved. And finally, whatever the theoretical merits of the two sides in Vietnam, the horror of the war which we saw on our television every night outweighed any possible benefits to be gained from continuing to support South Vietnam. I would like to briefly address each one of these six arguments in turn.

Ho Chi Minh as "George Washington" or "Tito"

There is a great irony in the suggestion that Ho Chi Minh was "driven into the hands" of Moscow following World War II because the United States refused his appeals to help keep the French from returning to Indochina. It was, after all, Ho Chi Minh who signed a *modus vivendi* with the French on March 6, 1946, point two of which declared his government's willingness "to welcome amicably the French Army" when it returned to Vietnam.¹ The following day Ho Chi Minh and French Commanding General Jean Leclerc issued a joint communiqué calling on the people of Vietnam to "welcome" the French back. When the true nationalists cried "betrayal" and took to the hills to prepare for guerrilla war against the returning French, Ho and his colleagues fought hand-in-hand alongside the colonialist troops to "liquidate" the "reactionaries," and thus virtually guarantee a Marxist-Leninist leadership of the subsequent and anti-French resistance movement.² Indeed, contrary to the popular mythology that the United States supported the return of French colonialism to Indochina after the war,³ the late Bernard Fall noted in his classic

study, *The Two Viet-Nams*, that French General Sainteny radioed his superiors in Calcutta that he was "face to face with a deliberate Allied maneuver to evict the French from Indochina," and that "at the present time the Allied attitude is more harmful than that of the Viet Minh."⁴ The so-called "Pentagon Papers" provide excellent background on this period, documenting that the U.S. prohibited the French from using American arms in their campaign to return to power in Indochina,⁵ and noting that, in June 1948, the American ambassador in Paris was instructed "to 'apply such persuasion and/or pressure as is best calculated [to] produce desired result' of France's 'unequivocally and promptly approving the principle of Viet independence.'"⁶ It was only after the communist victory in China in 1949, and the subsequent delivery of large scale Chinese assistance to Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh, that the United States concluded it was in its national interest to provide some assistance to the French in Indochina. Even then, the U.S. continued to pressure France to commit itself to end its colonialism and provide for eventual self-government in Indochina.⁷

The idea that Ho Chi Minh was a "Titoist" is a myth, albeit a popular one.⁸ Time precludes a thorough discussion of Ho's background,⁹ but a few brief observations should suffice to put this legend to rest.

Ho Chi Minh was a co-founder of the French Communist Party in 1920, and for years thereafter was the official representative of the Communist International in Southeast Asia.¹⁰ Although as the Comintern representative he was present at the founding of the Indochinese Communist Party in February 1930 in Kowloon (Hong Kong), he did not set foot inside Vietnam itself between 1911 and 1941.

Rather than seeking to cooperate with non-communist nationalist groups in Vietnam, Ho and his associates betrayed many of Vietnam's most respected nationalist leaders to the French police as a means of raising funds and in the process eliminating possible future opposition. If anyone was Vietnam's "George Washington" (Bernard Fall called him "Vietnam's Sun Yat-zen"),¹¹

it was Phan Boi Chau. At least he probably would have been Vietnam's George Washington if Ho Chi Minh and his comrades had not "sold" him to the French in 1925.¹²

When Ho Chi Minh in January 1950 expressed a desire to establish diplomatic relations with "all nations," Tito's Yugoslavia promptly responded that it would be pleased to do so. After some delay, Ho responded by simply "taking note" of the Yugoslav offer.¹³ Not only did he refuse to formally establish diplomatic relations with Tito's government, he immediately commenced an extensive propaganda attack, describing Tito, among other things, as "a spy for American imperialism."¹⁴

One could argue that in 1950 Ho Chi Minh was so dependent upon Soviet military support that he could not afford to offend Stalin by recognizing Tito. This theory, however, fails to explain Ho's refusal to embrace Tito even after Stalin's death and Khrushchev's friendship visit to Belgrade. Even after a Vietnamese delegation finally did visit Yugoslavia in September 1957, upon its return one of its senior members publicly denounced "Titoism," proclaiming that:

[A]ll frenzied attacks of imperialism in every form, particularly under the signboards "national communism" or "revisionism," aimed at sowing discord among and destroying the forces of socialism will certainly be smashed by the monolithic solidarity of brotherly parties and countries in the socialist camp headed by the Soviet Union.¹⁵

At the Third Party Congress in 1960, First Secretary Le Duan asserted that "modern revisionism remains the main danger for the international communist movement." He denounced "[t]he modern revisionists represented by the Tito clique in Yugoslavia," and concluded that "if we want to lay bare the aggressive and bellicose nature of imperialism . . . the communist and workers' parties must necessarily direct their main blow against revisionism."¹⁶

This is not to suggest that there was no "evidence" that the Vietnamese Communists were "nationalists." On the contrary, "nationalism" was a central theme of their propaganda, along with "peace" and "democracy." Such themes were carefully designed to appeal to the aspirations of the people. The real party viewpoint was reflected in a 1960 speech by Le Duan, who found no difficulty in calling for the Party to "hold aloft the banner of nationalism," while a few minutes later warning "[T]he communist and workers' parties have the obligation . . . to resolutely struggle against all manifestations of nationalism and chauvinism."¹⁷

Another cause of confusion resulted from the Party's practice of "redefining" popular terms to give them a Marxist-Leninist context. Thus, Ho Chi Minh said that "[G]enuine patriotism" was "part and parcel of internationalism,"¹⁸ and could "never be separated from proletarian internationalism."¹⁹ In 1960, Premier Pham Van Dong argued that "[I]n our country, to be a patriot means to love socialism, patriotism is closely linked with socialism, and the communist is the most genuine patriot."²⁰

Of course, "nationalism" and "patriotism" were not the only popular terms they chose to redefine. Another very popular theme in their propaganda was "peace," which the Party explained in a document restricted to circulation among Party members as not "pacifism," but "a real peace based upon . . . victory over the aggressors. . . ."²¹

Ironically, if there was a potential "Tito" among the Indochinese communists it was more likely to have been the ultranationalist Pol Pot, head of the Cambodian Communist Party, rather than Ho Chi Minh. Elizabeth Becker, the author of *When the War Was Over: The Voices of Cambodia's Revolution and Its People*, wrote in the October 20, 1987 issue of *The New Republic* that, after becoming a Communist as a student in Paris, Pol Pot "took off one summer for Yugoslavia, where he worked on a road crew and, by his own account, absorbed and admired Yugoslavia's independence from the Soviet Union—at a time when the communist world was condemning Tito for his independent stance."²²

The 1956 "Elections"

Few myths were more popular or more effective in making Americans doubt the moral authority of U.S. policy in Vietnam than the suggestion that the United States government encouraged Ngo Dinh Diem to refuse to hold the reunification elections allegedly agreed to during the 1954 Geneva Conference and scheduled for July 1956. This was often reinforced with a quotation from President Eisenhower's Mandate for Change to the effect that eighty percent of the Vietnamese people would have voted for Ho Chi Minh.

Ironically, perhaps the best antidote to this mythology were *The Pentagon Papers* published in 1971. They make clear, first of all, that neither the United States government nor Ngo Dinh Diem's State of Vietnam signed anything at the 1954 Geneva Conference. With respect to the question of reunification, the non-communist Vietnamese delegation objected strenuously to any division of Vietnam, but lost out when the French accepted the proposal of Viet Minh delegate Pham Van Dong.²³ Dong, who subsequently became Prime Minister of Ho Chi Minh's government, then proposed that Vietnam eventually be united by elections under the supervision of "local commissions."²⁴ The United States countered with what became known as the "American Plan," with the support of South Vietnam and the United Kingdom. It provided for unification elections under the supervision of the United Nations.²⁵ This was rejected by Soviet delegation head Molotov, with the support of the other communist delegations.²⁶ In the end, over the protest of South Vietnam and the United States, the cease fire agreement (signed only by France and the Viet Minh) provided for division of Vietnam at the 17th parallel and supervision of the agreement by an International Control Commission (ICC) chaired by India with Hungary and Canada as members. At the insistence of the communist delegations, "important questions" could only be settled by unanimous vote of the commissioners.²⁷

The nationalist Vietnamese position was very clear. The Diem government continued to call for free elections supervised by the United Nations and, as *The Pentagon Papers* later observed, it

protested against the Viet Minh proposed elections because it was "convinced that Hanoi would not permit 'free general elections by secret ballot,' and that the ICC would be important in supervising the elections in any case."²⁸

The United States position at Geneva was equally clear. *The Pentagon Papers* wrote that the low level U.S. delegation took a "rigid" position:

[T]he United States would not associate itself with any arrangement that failed to provide adequately for an internationally supervised cease-fire and national elections, that resulted in the partitioning of any of the Associated States, or that compromised the independence and territorial integrity of those States in any way. It would not interfere with French efforts to reach an agreement, but neither would it guarantee or otherwise be placed in the position of seeming to support it if contrary to policy.²⁹

Because the United States refused to sign the proposed "Final Declaration" relating to Vietnam at the Geneva Conference—the only document to make reference to holding unification elections in July 1956³⁰—the Declaration was simply approved by a voice vote without signature. Before the vote, Dr. Tran Van Do of South Vietnam protested strongly against the idea of partition and against the absence of effective international supervision, and reaffirmed his government's demand for United Nations supervision of a cease-fire and of free elections when the United Nations believes that order and security will have been everywhere truly restored."³¹ The U.S. position on elections was equally clear and was set forth by delegation head Ambassador Walter Bedell Smith on the final day of the conference:

As I stated on July 18, my Government is not prepared to join in a declaration by the Conference such as is submitted. However, the United States makes this unilateral declaration of its position in these matters. . . . In connection with the statement in the declaration concerning free elections in Viet-Nam my Government wishes to make clear its position which it has

expressed in a declaration made in Washington on June 29, 1954, as follows:

In the case of nations now divided against their will, we shall continue to seek to achieve unity through free elections supervised by the United Nations to insure that they are conducted fairly.

With respect to the statement made by the representative of the State of Vietnam, the United States reiterates its traditional position that peoples are entitled to determine their own future and that it will not join in any arrangement which would hinder this.³²

The wisdom of the U.S. and South Vietnamese positions with respect to elections has been reaffirmed time and again during the past three decades. Because of the Polish veto on important questions, the ICC proved as powerless as both delegations feared. Since Hanoi had a significant majority of the population following partition, and since Ho Chi Minh and other key Party leaders always received at least ninety-nine percent of the vote in the subsequent so-called "elections"³³ in North Vietnam, it would have been suicide for Diem's government to accept the communist proposal. The consistent position of Diem and the American delegation that unification elections must have effective international supervision was admirable, and any criticism of either government for failing to submit to essentially unsupervised proposed elections envisioned by the Final Declaration at Geneva—which both governments denounced at the time—is unwarranted. Nevertheless, this argument was instrumental in turning many Americans against their government's policies in Vietnam.

The question of the "Eisenhower quote" is equally easy to dispose of: all one has to do is read the entire sentence. Not infrequently, for maximum effectiveness, critics of U.S. involvement in Vietnam would omit two separate passages from the sentence in *Mandate for Change*.

For example, Felix Greene, in his 1966 book, *Vietnam! Vietnam*, wrote that:

The reason the U.S. refused to allow elections was abundantly clear. No one who knew the conditions in Vietnam was in any doubt that, if elections were held, Ho Chi Minh would be elected by an overwhelming majority of the people.

He then quotes President Eisenhower as writing:

I have never talked or corresponded with a person knowledgeable in Indochinese affairs who did not agree that had elections been held . . . possibly eighty percent of the population would have voted for the Communist Ho Chi Minh.

It is instructive to compare what President Eisenhower actually wrote with this partial excerpt:

I have never talked or corresponded with a person knowledgeable in Indochinese affairs who did not agree that had elections been held as of the time of the fighting, possibly eighty percent of the population would have voted for the Communist Ho Chi Minh as their leader rather than Chief of State Bao Dai. Indeed, the lack of leadership and drive on the part of Bao Dai was a factor in the feeling prevalent among Vietnamese that they had nothing to fight for.³⁴

Thus, in context, Eisenhower was talking about an election in 1954 between Ho and Bao Dai, and his purpose was at least in part to emphasize the shortcomings of Bao Dai, a corrupt French puppet who had very little support in Vietnam. He was eventually defeated by well in excess of eighty percent of the vote by Ngo Dinh Diem, a man *The Pentagon Papers* note had a "reputation for incorruptible nationalism."³⁵ After working for the French for a year in 1933, Diem resigned in protest that promised reforms were being blocked. He subsequently refused invitations to head a puppet government for the Japanese, to serve as Premier under Bao Dai at the end of World War II, and to accept a senior position in Ho Chi Minh's government in 1946.³⁶ When the French returned

later that year—at Ho's invitation³⁷—they, too, sought to persuade Diem to head a puppet government.³⁸ Indeed, it is quite possible that Diem's refusal to be an American "puppet" in the end led to the frustration that caused the Kennedy Administration to engineer his overthrow and eventual death.

Not only was the famous "Eisenhower quote" not a comparison between Ho Chi Minh and Ngo Dinh Diem, but it was discussing an entirely different period in both North and South Vietnam. Between 1954 and 1956 (when the elections envisioned in the Final Declaration would have been held) "Ngo Dinh Diem really did accomplish miracles"³⁹ in South Vietnam, while North Vietnam experienced a blood land reform purge that resulted in the deaths of tens if not hundreds of thousands of people.⁴⁰ As *The Pentagon Papers* observed in discussing the Eisenhower quote:

It is almost certain that by 1956 the proportion which might have voted for Ho—in a free election against Diem—would have been much smaller than eighty percent. Diem's success in the South had been far greater than anyone could have foreseen, while the North Vietnamese regime had been suffering from food scarcity, and low public morale stemming from inept imitation of Chinese communism.⁴¹

In summary, the reality is that "the United States did not—as is often alleged—connive with Diem to ignore the elections."⁴² Both governments strongly supported the concept of unification through free elections, but both insisted wisely that any such election must have effective international supervision, preferably under the auspices of the United Nations, to be meaningful. History has shown that this was a wise decision. With the support of China and the Soviet Union, the Vietnamese Communists essentially blocked free elections by objecting to effective supervision. Nevertheless, the myth that the United States reneged on its commitment at the Geneva Conference to permit free elections in July 1956 was instrumental in persuading large numbers of Americans that their government was morally wrong in Vietnam.

The "Indigenous" National Liberation Front

Another key argument used time and again by critics of U.S. involvement in Vietnam was that the Department of State was lying about the extent of North Vietnamese involvement, and the real struggle was just a "civil war" between the puppet government of Ngo Dinh Diem (or later, Nguyen Van Thieu) on the one side, and a group of freedom fighters seeking only human rights and national independence under the banner of the National Liberation Front for South Vietnam on the other. In one of the more popular "scholarly" books about Vietnam during the late 1960s, *The United States in Vietnam* Cornell University professors George Kahin and John Lewis wrote:

[The NLF] is not "Hanoi's creation"; it has manifested independence and it is Southern. Insurrectionary activity against the Saigon government began in the South under Southern leadership not as a consequence of any dictate from Hanoi, but contrary to Hanoi's injunctions. Abundant data have been available to Washington to invalidate any argument that revival of the war in the South was precipitated by "aggression from the North."⁴³

I can remember scores of debates in which I confronted this allegation. Even when I pointed out that the September 1967 *Programme* of the NLF was in many respects a verbatim copy of the 1955 *Programme* of Hanoi's Fatherland Front, many in the audience seemed convince the Department of State was lying to the American people. Indeed this theme remained central to the anti-Vietnam argument throughout the war even after the much acclaimed Pentagon Papers dismissed outright.⁴⁴ Although many wrote at length about the May 1959 decision of the Fifteenth Plenum of the Central Committee of the Vietnam Worker's Party,⁴⁵ the faithful would not be swayed.

I shall not dwell upon this point here other than to emphasize the great importance it played in turning Americans against their government. The prompt demise of the NLF speaks for itself, but if anyone continues to have even the slightest doubt about the origin of the so-called "Viet Cong," I would urge them to

read the February 26, 1983 issue of *The Economist*. In an article based upon a French television interview (February 16, 1983) with two senior North Vietnamese Army generals entitled "We Lied to You," we find this account:

Vietnam has at last come clean. In half a dozen sentences in a French television documentary, the North Vietnamese military commander, General Vo Nguyen Giap, and his colleague, General Vo Bam, have demolished some of the myths which helped to swell the anti-Vietnam war movement from San Francisco to Stockholm.

According to General Bam, the decision to unleash an armed revolt against the Saigon government was taken by a North Vietnamese communist party plenum in 1959. This was a year before the National Liberation Front was set up in South Vietnam. The aim, General Bam added, was "to reunite the country." So much for that myth that the Vietcong was an autonomous southern force which spontaneously decided to rise against the oppression of the Diem regime. And General Bam should know. As a result of the decision, he was given the job of opening up an infiltration trail in the south.⁴⁶

While in the early days the Viet Cong was composed largely of southern-born guerrillas, the 1968 Tet Offensive largely broke the back of the indigenous Viet Cong infrastructure. In the final years of the war, something on the order of ninety percent of the fighting was being done by North Vietnamese Army regulars.

Cutting Aid to Promote Human Rights

One of the most effective themes, particularly in dealing with church people and the Congress, was that the United States was "on the wrong side" in Vietnam, that we were supporting "tyrants" and "dictators" who oppressed the people, deprived them of fundamental human rights, and left them with no option but to take up arms in self-defense—themes that were instrumental in turning the American people against their government at a critical time.

Anyone who attempts to defend the human rights practices of the Diem or Thieu regimes runs the risk of appearing insensitive to the genuine abuses which did exist. Vietnam was never a model democracy, and the fact that it was almost continually engaged in a war for its survival led to additional constraints. To say that in many respects it compared favorably with the American government under President Lincoln is only persuasive to those who are aware of the dramatic infringements upon civil liberties during our own civil war.

The Pentagon Papers were probably accurate in noting that Diem's regime "compared favorably with other Asian governments of the same period in its respect for the person and property of citizens."⁴⁷ It was, nevertheless, authoritarian. But in every category, across the board, it was far superior to what Ho Chi Minh and his comrades were offering in the North—and that was the alternative offered by a U.S. decision to terminate assistance to South Vietnam.

Similarly, South Vietnam under Nguyen Van Thieu was far from perfect by Western standards, but it was far better than the critics pretended. *Christian Science Monitor* Saigon correspondent Dan Sutherland accurately observed in 1970, for example, that:

[U]nder its new press law, South Vietnam now has one of the freest presses in Southeast Asia, and the daily paper with the biggest circulation here happens to be sharply critical of President Thieu. . . . [S]ince the new press law was promulgated nine months ago, the government has not been able to close down *Tin Sang* or any other newspaper among the more than 30 now being published in Saigon.⁴⁸

During the war we heard a great deal about so-called "tiger cages" being used to incarcerate political opponents of the Saigon regime. Many of us assumed from this description and the photographs in *Life* magazine⁴⁹ that people were being crowded into subterranean pits unable to stand erect and exposed to the elements from above. In 1974 I visited the infamous "Tiger Cages" of Con Son Island and, to say the least, they didn't live up to their

horrible reputations. Don't misunderstand me—I am not saying they weren't bad. They were typical of many prisons the French left behind in their former colonies Nor am I saying prisoners weren't mistreated or abused by guards—enough of that happens in this country to be wary of making judgment on that subject. But in terms of physical characteristics, the so-called "tiger cages" compared favorably with some isolation facilities in this country. Designed for one prisoner, but, because of overcrowded conditions, often used to imprison three, they measured roughly five by ten feet at the ground and were just under ten feet high. What Life Magazine neglected to point out is that the "pits" were above ground and were protected from the elements by a normal roof ten feet above the ceiling bars. They weren't good—few prison cells are—but they were far less horrible than we were led to believe by the critics.

We were also told there were "hundreds of thousands" of "political prisoners" under the Thieu regime. That was a lie. Undoubtedly there were people in detention because of their political views, but at the worst they numbered a few hundred or so. When I visited South Vietnam in 1974 I had no trouble meeting with some of the most prominent internal critics of the Thieu regime, which in itself told me something. I asked the famous Father Chan Tin how he came up with his estimate of 200,000 political prisoners, and he explained rather vaguely that it was based upon estimates made by former prisoners and the family members of prisoners. I couldn't help but wonder how many "political prisoners" we could find in the Washington D.C. jail system if we relied upon the estimates of former prisoners and their families.

I also had a lengthy talk with Madam Ngo Ba Thanh, an outspoken critic of the Thieu regime and a hero of the New Left in this country. In trying to understand what she meant by the term "political prisoner," I asked her how she would characterize Sirhan Sirhan, the man convicted of the murder of Senator Robert Kennedy. She responded by saying, "I would say he is 'political,' because, you see, his motive was political." By her definition, when a Viet Cong "tax collector" used armed force to extort

money from a farmer, or a sapper killed a dozen women and children on an intercity bus, these "political" offenders did not deserve imprisonment.

A fair summary of human rights under the Thieu regime was provided by Congressman Leo Ryan, who was a strong critic of U.S. policy in Vietnam. Returning from a congressional human rights investigation to South Vietnam in late 1974, he told his colleagues that:

In summary, although South Vietnam is no bastion of democratic principles, the worst charges of widespread repression of fundamental human rights are overblown. There is a vocal, operative political opposition and press. It is not doubted that there are some political prisoners, but neither the populace as a whole nor the opposition political leaders appear to be living in fear of government repression.⁵⁰

As a Jeffersonian, I am a strong believer in the importance of respect for human rights. I believe it should be an important theme of U.S. foreign policy, because I believe our tolerance of dissent is one of our great strengths. It is precisely because I believe human rights are important that I take such offense at the dishonesty that characterized much of the Vietnam debate on this subject. I am speaking not only of exaggerated claims about violations in South Vietnam, but also about the virtual "whitewash" of conditions in the North. Since it should have been clear to everyone that a withdrawal of U.S. support for South Vietnam would lead to a communist victory, those who led the fight against aid on human rights grounds should have felt a moral obligation to at least consider the likely alternative. The record of Stalinist repression in the North was clear to anyone who cared to look,⁵¹ but many who knew better intentionally chose to ignore it.

Consider, for example, the writing of French journalist Jean Lacouture, whose many books on Vietnam became a staple of the New Left during the war. Lacouture was one of several European journalists who had formerly been very supportive of the National Liberation Front and who was invited to visit "liberated" southern

Vietnam after the war. Upon his return, he expressed his "shame for having contributed . . . to the installation of one of the most oppressive regimes history has ever known."⁵² In an interview with an Italian journalist, he acknowledged that during the war "my behavior was sometime more that of a militant than of a journalist. . . . I believed it was not opportune to expose the Stalinist nature of the Vietnamese regime in 1972, right at the time when Nixon was bombing Hanoi. "⁵³

Or consider this account, which appeared in *Newsweek* in 1982 under the title "Vietnam's Postwar Hell," by former anti-Vietnam activist Ginetta Sagan:

Human rights in Vietnam is not a new concern to me. During the years before 1975 I met with representatives of the National Liberation Front who told me of their great concern for human rights in South Vietnam. Where are these leaders today, and where are my colleagues in the peace movement who had so strongly protested political repression by the Thieu regime? . . .

During the last three years friends and I have interviewed several hundred former prisoners, read newspaper articles on the camps as well as various reports of Amnesty International, and have studied official statements from the Vietnamese Government and its press on the re-education camps. The picture that emerges is one of severe hardship, where prisoners are kept on a starvation diet, overworked and harshly punished for minor infractions of camp rules. We know of cases where prisoners have been beaten to death, confined to dark cells or in ditches dug around the perimeters of the camps and executed for attempting escape. A common form of punishment is confinement to the CONEX boxes—air-freight containers that were left behind by the United States in 1975. The boxes vary in size; some are made of wood and others of metal. In a CONEX box 4 feet high and 4 feet wide, for example, several prisoners would be confined with their feet shackled, and allowed only one bowl of rice and water a day. "It reminded me of the pictures I saw of Nazi camp inmates after World War II," said a physician we interviewed who witnessed the release of four prisoners who had been confined to a CONEX box

for one month. None of them survived. . . . Today there is no talk in Vietnam about human rights—only about the "dictatorship of the proletariat" and the need to suppress dissidents.⁵⁴

There was substance to many of the human rights charges leveled against South Vietnam in the 1960s and early 1970s—for the most part it was an average developing country fighting for its survival. To the extent it was less repressive than others, it was probably as much ; result of U.S. pressure than the Jeffersonian character of its leadership. But for all of its genuine flaws, it was not one-tenth as bad as the Stalinist regime that succeeded it after public pressure in this country persuaded Congress to cut off aid to the Thieu regime. Thanks in large part to the critics, Vietnam has now become, in the words of the 1983 Department of State annual human rights survey, "the single most repressive government in the world."⁵⁵

Vietnam Really Wasn't "Important"

It was also alleged that Vietnam simply wasn't "important" enough to justify the loss of American lives. There were at least two strains to this argument. In one form, it was explained that, of course we would fight to protect freedom in Europe, but the Vietnamese were "different." Sometimes it was suggested that they really didn't "value life" like "we" did. This approach was, in essence, a manifestation of racism. In case there is any doubt, having witnessed a large number of Vietnamese mothers and fathers mourning the loss of their sons to the war I can assure you that the Vietnamese do care about human life as much as "we" do.

Another version of this myth was explained in "strategic" terms. After all, Vietnam was a relatively small country located thousands of miles from the United States. In the beginning, most Americans had trouble even finding it on a map. Who cared what happened to it?

A few observations at this point may be useful:

- * Vietnam today has a population of sixty million people, making it the third largest Communist State in the world.
- * Vietnam now has the third largest army in the world (behind China and the USSR, just ahead of India and the United States), and with a total of about three million people under arms has the largest per capita army of any country in the world.
- * The Soviet Pacific Fleet (which has doubled in size since the war began and is now the largest of Moscow's four fleets) has its largest naval base outside the Soviet Union for forward deployment of warships at am Ranh Bay, Vietnam. About two dozen Soviet naval vessels, including three to four attack and cruise missile submarines, regularly operate from this major facility. An accompanying airfield hosts a squadron of more than a dozen MiG-23 fighters, and about two dozen Soviet bombers capable of attacking the Philippines, Guam, and other targets of historic importance to the United States.⁵⁷
- * Vietnam's post-war aggression against its neighbors led the editors of *The New York Times Magazine* to note last year that "[A] nation once portrayed by some American intellectuals as the repository of moral rectitude now stands exposed as the Prussia of Southeast Asia."⁵⁸

There may still be honorable people who believe that Vietnam is strategically unimportant. If so, I'll bet they haven't discussed the issue with the Japanese.

Stop the Killing!

Vietnam was an unusual war, and as has often been noted, the first "television" war.⁵⁹ Although all wars are horrible, and in many respects Vietnam was less horrible than some others, for the first time the public was exposed in graphic detail to the reality of combat. There was an element of the anti-Vietnam movement that basically didn't quarrel with the fact that Ho Chi Minh and his Stalinist comrades were seeking to use force to conquer South Vietnam, and many of these didn't doubt that human rights for the people of Vietnam would go down the tubes in the process. But they were so horrified by the reality of the war—and they were right, it was horrible—that in essence they said, regardless of other considerations, we simply have to "stop the killing."

This was the saddest myth of all. Despite efforts by the American government to warn that a communist victory would likely lead to a "bloodbath," for the most part the critics dismissed this concern. After all, they reasoned, all the National Liberation Front wanted was peace, independence, and freedom. I will never forget hearing Senator Mike Mansfield dismiss this concern and assure some of his colleagues in March 1975 that he had spoken by telephone with Prince Sihanouk, and had been assured that if the United States withdrew its support not more than four or five Cambodians would be killed following a Khmer Rouge victory. Even worse, from my perspective, was the judgment of Congressman Pete McCloskey (California), who after a visit to Cambodia came back and warned his colleagues that a blood-bath was certain to follow, but nevertheless voted to terminate further assistance to the non-communist regime in Phnom Penh.

I don't think anyone knows, or will ever know, the total human cost of the communist victory in Indochina. In Cambodia alone, estimates of the deaths run between one and three million.⁶⁰ Far lesser numbers were reportedly executed in South Vietnam. One thing, however, seems clear. It is likely that more people were killed in tiny Cambodia alone in the first three years of "peacetime" following "liberation" than were killed on all sides—North Vietnamese, South Vietnamese, Laotians, Cambodians, and about 58,000 Americans—during thirteen years of war. That is a great tragedy.

Lessons for the Future

A major reason so many people were persuaded by these arguments to actively oppose the policies of their government was the effectiveness of the enemy's political warfare campaign. Indeed, I belong to the school of thought that believes the United States did not lose the war in Vietnam at all, but in the streets of Chicago, Paris, and Washington, and in the halls of Congress. Further, I would contend that effective political warfare was far more important than the battle of Dien Bien Phu in the Viet Minh defeat of the French in 1954. Communist forces were told from the earliest days of the Second Indochina War that if they just tied down the Americans and increased their casualties, the "progressive forces" of the world and in the United States would force the Congress to cut off aid.

Colonel Harry Summers has told the story of his meeting with a North Vietnamese Army colonel in April 1975, during which he remarked that the NVA did not beat us on the battlefield. The North Vietnamese colonel considered that for a moment, and then responded: "That may be true—but it is also irrelevant." ⁶¹ I would argue that both men were right.

I suspect that some of you are wondering why we are dredging up all of this painful history today. The Vietnam war is over, and even if many Americans were misled there is nothing we can do to correct the errors of the past. Many people were mistaken about one aspect or another of Vietnam, so why don't we just put that painful episode of our history behind us?

There are many answers to that question, but the most important one in my view is that while "Vietnam" may be "behind us," its emotional and strategic legacy continues to drive both our policies and those of our principal adversaries. Because most Americans don't understand what really happened in Vietnam, many of them continue to believe that we were on the side of evil. For whatever reason, many Americans have concluded from Vietnam that the United States should turn inward and not become involved in resisting aggression in other lands. Above all,

Congress has misunderstood Vietnam, and its numerous efforts to tie the constitutional hands of the President through the War Powers Resolution and numerous other legislative constraints have gone far toward neutralizing the deterrent ability of the United States. If we don't set the record straight and restore the proper constitutional balance, at some point in the future we are going to find ourselves forced to choose between acquiescing in major international aggression or repurchasing our national credibility with the lives of our young men. That is a choice that no one who has seen firsthand the genuine horrors of war can tolerate.

Vietnam's success in political warfare was not lost on the Marxist "Sandinista National Liberation Front" in Nicaragua. Indeed, time and again they have made it very clear that they hope to use the same sort of propaganda tactics to turn idealistic American students and citizens against their government. They know well that, in the long run, no American foreign policy can long succeed without popular understanding and support.

Until I learned from Sandinista documents that they had carefully studied the experience of the Vietnamese Communists, I could not explain the incredible sense of *deja vu* I experienced in first analyzing Sandinista propaganda themes. The examples that follow are illustrative.

Just as in the 1960s we were told that Ho Chi Minh and his colleagues were nationalist heroes who had thrown out the hated French colonialists and wanted nothing more than "peace, independence, and freedom," today we are told that the Sandinista leaders and the insurgents in El Salvador are not Marxist-Leninists. Yet for those who will bother to take the time to do a little research, the record is clear that the Sandinista Front was from the early 1960s an avowedly Marxist-Leninist organization dedicated to the support of "wars of national liberation" throughout Central America. Cayetano Carpio, the real power behind the FMLN in El Salvador, was for years the Secretary General of the Salvador Communist Party until he resigned and set up a Castroite splinter group because Moscow's line on "armed struggle" was not militant enough.⁶²

We are told that the United States worked from the outset to undermine the Sandinista government after the overthrow of the despised Somoza, and yet even the World Court has recognized that during the first eighteen months the U.S. was the largest supplier of outside aid to the Sandinista government. The United States decision to support the contras was not made until December 1981, over a year after Nicaragua had begun a massive effort to overthrow the government of El Salvador by supplying hundreds of tons of arms and equipment—accompanied by tactical advice and training—to the guerrillas in El Salvador.

Well-meaning but misinformed critics assure us that the Salvadoran insurgents are armed with U.S. M16 rifles, like those given by the United States to the government of El Salvador, and not communist AK47s. This is cited as evidence that there is really no "external aggression" involved. The problems with this reasoning are considerable. For instance, the guerrillas were armed with M16s prior to the start of the January 10, 1981 "Final Offensive" before the United States had provided any M16s to the Salvadoran government. In addition, M16s have serial numbers, and the large majority of the hundreds of M16s that have been taken from Salvadoran guerrillas have been traced by their serial numbers back to supplies abandoned in Vietnam by the U.S. Army in 1975. Further, documents captured from the guerrillas establish in great detail how Shafik Handal, the Secretary General of the Salvador Communist Party, visited the communist world in mid-1980 seeking "western" weapons, and how Moscow picked up the tab for the shipment of sixty tons of abandoned U.S. M16s and other equipment from Vietnam, through Cuba and Nicaragua, and into El Salvador. But the well-meaning critics don't know this, and they continue to protest with the same moral indignation that led their predecessors to assure us that the people of Indochina would be better off if Congress would just cut off aid to Saigon.

The "human rights" campaign to cut off aid to El Salvador and the contras also brings to mind the experience of the Vietnam debate. Genuine shortcomings are being grossly and dishonestly overblown, and the reality of Sandinista repression is all too often ignored.

Indeed, the similarities between the old Vietnamese Communist tactics and those being followed today by Nicaragua's Marxist-Leninist leaders was driven especially home last year when I read an article by Larry Harrison, who in the early days of the Sandinista regime directed the U.S. AID mission in Managua. He noted that, despite the tremendous efforts of the Carter Administration to befriend Nicaragua following the revolution, their newspapers and internal propaganda continued to tell horrible lies about the United States. He raised this problem with a member of the Sandinista cabinet, who responded: You don't understand revolutionary truth. What is true is what serves the ends of the revolution."⁶³ That rang a big bell, and led me for the first time in years to pick up a copy of volume four of Ho Chi Minh's Selected Works, where I found this statement from a 1956 speech: "Truth is what is beneficial to the Fatherland and to the people. What is detrimental to the interests of the Fatherland and people is not truth. To strive to serve the Fatherland and the people is to obey the truth."⁶⁴

Our Marxist-Leninist adversaries have redefined "truth." Knowing this makes it a little easier to understand what Nicaragua's Foreign Minister had in mind when, in a sworn affidavit to the World Court, he asserted that "In truth, my government is not engaged, and has not been engaged, in the provision of arms or other supplies to either of the factions engaged in the civil war in El Salvador."

Conclusion

Put simply, it is imperative that we set the record straight about Vietnam not because it will help the people of Indochina, or bring back to life the millions who died, but because the same tactic of lies and deceit is now being used against us to deprive still others of their freedom.

The people who protested against Vietnam were, in the overwhelming majority, as good, as decent, and as patriotic as any of us here. If you think I am suggesting that they were in any way evil, you have misunderstood me. But for all of their innocence,

their actions had consequences. Because of their protest, tens of millions of people lost their freedom and millions of others lost their lives. Each protester will have to come to terms with that reality on their own.

Those who understand what really occurred in Vietnam, and what is continuing to occur every day in Central America, have a higher moral obligation. We cannot absolve ourselves by saying that we did not understand, that we were misled. If we fail to do all within our power to correct the mythological historical record of Vietnam, and to learn and share with our fellow citizens the reality of what is taking place in Central America, we will certainly bear a fair measure of the responsibility for the tragedy that is likely to follow if the record is not set straight. For, in the end, we will not be able to absolve ourselves by simply saying "We didn't know."

Notes

1. See, e.g., R. Turner, *Vietnamese Communism: Its Origins and Development* 52 (1975).
2. Lucien Bodard writes:
In Tonkin Ho Chi Minh had not stretched out his hand to the Nationalists: he had ordered them to be massacred.... Thousands, maybe tens of thousands of men had been liquidated in 1945, 1946 and later. . . . We know how it ended . . . how Ho Chi Minh allowed Leclerc's soldiers to come and how the Expeditionary Force let the Vietminh wipe out the Nationalists, with all their hatred of the French and their xenophobia. It had meant their extermination—or very nearly.
L. Bodard, *The Quicksand War: Prelude to Vietnam* 208-09 (1967). See also Bernard Fall's profile of Vo Nguyen Giap in *Vo Nguyen Giap, People's War, People's Army* (Praeger ed.); and Turner, supra note 1 at 58-59.
3. See, e.g., H. Zinn, *Vietnam: The Logic of Withdrawal* 38

(1967); and B. Spock and M. Zimmerman, *Dr. Spock on Vietnam* 19 (1968).

4. B. Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams* 68-69 (rev. ed. 1964).
5. 1 *The Pentagon Papers* 3 (Gravel ed. 1971). The Pentagon Papers were, on balance, far more devastating to the fundamental arguments being used by the New Left and other Vietnam critics than they were to government policy. See, e.g., R. Turner, *Myths of the Vietnam War: The Pentagon Papers Reconsidered* (1972).
6. *The Pentagon Papers*, *supra* note 5 at 32.
7. *Id.* at 199.
8. See, e.g., J. Gavin, *Crisis Now* 62-63 (1968), who wrote that Ho was "a man who tends toward the combination of nationalism and communism associated with Marshal Tito."
9. For a more detailed account, see Turner, *supra* note 1, chapter 1.
10. This Comintern role is openly admitted in Vietnamese Communist literature. See, e.g., 2 *Ho Chi Minh, Selected Works* 145 (1961).
11. Fall, *supra* note 4 at 235.
12. See, e.g., 1 J. Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled* 155-56 (1967).
13. New York Times, March 19, 1950, Sec. 4, at 2.
14. *Id.*, March 16, 1950.
15. Vietnam News Agency, Hanoi, 8 September 1957 (statement by Hoang Van Hoan to 700 party cadres). See also 4 *Ho Chi Minh*, *supra* note 10 at 257.
16. Le Duan, *On Some Present International Problems* 51-52 (1964).
17. *Id.* at 49. See also *id.* at 70, 179.
18. 3 *Ho Chi Minh*, *supra* note 10 at 262.
19. 4 *Id.* 182.

20. Pham Van Dong, *XV Anniversary of the DRV 1945-1960* at 41 (1960).
21. Quoted in Turner, *supra* note 1 at 112.
22. Becker, "The Hanoi Pact," *The New Republic*, October 20, 1986, at 33.
23. 1 *Pentagon Papers*, *supra* note 5 at 134.
24. *Id.* at 119.
25. *Id.* at 140.
26. *Id.*
27. *Id.* at 140, 147.
28. *Id.* at 247.
29. *Id.* at 121.
30. *Final Declaration of the Geneva Conference* (21 July 1954), unsigned, art. 7. See also *Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Vietnam* (20 July 1954), signed by French and Viet Minh, art. 14(a).
31. *The Pentagon Papers*, *supra* note 5 at 560, 570.
32. *Id.* at 570-71.
33. See, e.g., Turner, *supra* note 1 at 193-94, 202-03, 215-17.
34. D. Eisenhower, *The White House Years: Mandate for Change* 372; (1963). Emphasis added.
35. *The Pentagon Papers*, *supra* note 5 at 296. Bernard Fall writes of Diem's "reputation for 'all-or-nothing integrity'" Fall, *supra* note 5 at 239.
36. *The Pentagon Papers*, *supra* note 5 at 298.
37. Turner, *supra* note 1 at 52.
38. *The Pentagon Papers*, *supra* note 5 at 298.
39. *Id.* at 252.
40. See Turner, *supra* note 1 at 142-43.
41. *The Pentagon Papers*, *supra* note 5 at 246.
42. *Id.* at 245.

43. G. Kahin and J. Lewis, *The United States in Vietnam* 120 (1967).
44. *Pentagon Papers*, *supra* note 5 at 260.
45. See, e.g., Turner, *supra* note 1 at 180-82.
46. "We Lied to You," *Economist*, February 26, 1983. During the February 16, 1983 French television interview, General Vo Bam said:

On 19 May, 1959, I had the privilege of being designated by the Vietnamese Communist Party to open the Ho Chi Minh Trail . . . so as to dispatch the cadres, the troops, the ammunition and the medical supplies to the south—and so to execute an order of the Vietnamese Communist Party's Fifteenth plenum by which it was decided to unleash a military attack in the south and reunify the fatherland.
47. *Pentagon Papers*, *supra* note 5 at 253.
48. Sutherland, "Free-swinging Press keeps Saigon Ducking," *Christian Science Monitor*, September 18, 1970.
49. *Life*, July 17, 1970, at 29.
50. United States House of Representatives, *Vietnam and Korea: Human Rights and U.S. Assistance, A Study Mission Report of the Committee on Foreign Affairs 5* (94th Cong., 1st Sess., February 9, 1975).
51. See, e.g., Turner, *supra* note 1 at 130-43; 155-63.
52. Quoted in Ledeen, "Europe—The Good News and the Bad," *Commentary*, April 1979, at 53.
53. *Id.*
54. Sagan, "Vietnam's Postwar Hell," *Newsweek*, May 3, 1982, at 13.
55. Quoted in *Time*, April 25, 1983, at 85.
56. See, e.g., U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1984*, Report Submitted to the Senate Comm. on Foreign Relations and House Comm. on Foreign Affairs, 99th Cong., 1st Sess., February 1985, at

891.

57. See, e.g., Branigan, "Soviet Military Operations Seen Increasing in the Pacific," *The Washington Post*, August 1, 1986, at A17, col. 1.
58. The Editors, "Vietnam in America: A Preface," *The New York Times Magazine*, March 31, 1985, at 27.
59. For an excellent criticism of the role of the press in Vietnam, see Elegant, "How to Lose a War," *Encounter*, August 1981, at 73.
60. Elizabeth Becker, *supra* note 22 at 28, estimates "nearly two million Cambodians"—which she describes as "nearly one-fourth" of Cambodia's population—died under the Pol Pot regime. Arnold R. Isaacs, author of *Without Honor: Defeat in Vietnam and Cambodia*, estimates that "up to 3 million people were murdered or died of exhaustion, starvation or disease." Isaacs, "Cambodia: No Hands are Clean," *The Chicago Tribune*, March 18, 1985, at 11. For other estimates in the two million plus range, see Gershman, "After the Dominoes Fell," *Commentary*, May 1978, at 53.
61. H. Summers, *On Strategy* 1 (1982).
62. See generally R. Turner, *Nicaragua v. United States: A Look at the Facts* (1987).
63. Harrison, "We Tried to Accept the Sandinista Revolution," *Encounter*, December 1983, at 75.
64. 4 Ho Chi Minh, *supra* note 10 at 176.

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