

# CARELESSNESS AND ITS LESSONS:

THE GREAT MISUNDERSTANDING THAT WAS THE VIETNAM WAR AND ITS LESSONS

FOR THE WAR ON TERROR

Spring 2003

“We can draw lessons from the past, but we cannot live in it.”

**--Lyndon B. Johnson, December 13, 1963**

It is often said that the greatest lessons in one's life are learned from mistakes, setbacks, and defeats. In the history of nations, wartime defeats have often provided the greatest opportunities to learn valuable lessons. Many times these lessons have been overlooked, or the defeat meant the very end of the nation concerned. Victory, on the other hand, can make a victor assume nothing is wrong and to not recognize glaring weaknesses.

The defeat for the United States in Vietnam—and it most certainly was that, a defeat—gave our nation an unprecedented opportunity to reassess attitudes and tactics, goals, strategies, even our whole society. The lessons to learn that present themselves are just as valuable today as they were during the Vietnam conflict. I believe it is possible to create a world where, though individuals may commit violence, wars will become a thing of the past, and many of the lessons I see coming from the Vietnam conflict are to this end of establishing a world without war. In addition to learning how to fight the next war, then, Vietnam should first and foremost be a way for us to learn how to avoid it. Applied to our current “War on Terror,” these lessons shed a striking light on the paths we have before us and, should they be ignored, this “War on Terror” could prove to be our next Vietnam. Yet if we learn the lessons we need to and apply them, a new era of peace and prosperity could become the order of the day.

The most important lessons gleaned from the Vietnam conflict are the dual yet symbiotic lessons of knowing as much as possible about the people, culture, and situation with which we would get ourselves involved, giving our maximum effort when we do, and to always be actively engaged in talking to your enemy, even if it is in secret. The more you know about your enemy, the better prepared you will be to deal with him, understand him, and to predict his moves. Unless the exercise is a total farce, talking will always help by providing more information about the enemy, his intentions, or finding ways to avoid war altogether.

What was perhaps the biggest mistake made in going into Vietnam was that we assumed too much and researched too little. Vietnam, it was surmised, was a pawn of the monolithic world Communist movement, and the drive by Communists into Vietnam was only the beginning of a planned takeover of all of Southeast Asia. One high ranking Vietnamese official who took part in the conflict accurately said our problem was our focus, that “because the big powers were trying to establish blocs, U.S. actions toward Vietnam did not really relate specifically to Vietnam, but to the mindset for establishing blocks.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> MacNamara, Robert, James Blight and Robert Brigham, *Argument Without End*. New York: PublicAffairs, 1999. 56

To be sure, the United States was justified in being concerned about the advance of Communism throughout the world. But when considering entering the conflict in Vietnam, at least as much attention should have been given to Vietnam itself, its people, and its plight. Unfortunately, that was not the case. As one Vietnamese official stressed in a 1997-1998 conference which featured McNamara and other Americans and Vietnamese involved in running the war, “the U.S. opposition was based on the belief that if Vietnam gained its independence this would lead to the spread of Communism throughout Southeast Asia. That U.S. perception was wrong...”<sup>2</sup>

The idea that the Vietnamese Communists were mere pawns of the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) or even the Russians and that as such the struggle in Vietnam was a struggle against Chinese and Soviet Communist aggression could have been easily dispelled by anyone who had even a basic understanding of Vietnamese history and culture. The Vietnamese had been fiercely independent for centuries, and their struggles against the French and Americans were seen as smaller versions of their past conflicts against the Mongols and, above all, the Chinese. As the author of the most comprehensive biography of Ho Chi Minh to date notes, “A paramount fact in the history of [Vietnam] is its long and frequently bitter struggle against the expansionist tendencies of its northern neighbor, China.” In fact, “the heroic figures of traditional Vietnam...were all closely identified with resistance to Chinese domination.” Even when the Vietnamese finally did become part of the “Chinese world system” of tribute they did so only reluctantly, not willingly.<sup>3</sup>

That being said, the Chinese and Vietnamese people had a long bitter hatred of each other historically, so, as one Vietnamese official told U.S. officials at the late 1990’s conference, for the U.S. to think the Vietnamese struggle against France was “part of the Chinese expansionist game in Asia... you were wrong.”

He went on:

If I may say so, you were not only wrong, but you had, so to speak, lost your minds. Vietnam a part of the Chinese expansionist game in Asia? For anyone who knows the history of Indochina, this is incomprehensible.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the US basis for going to war was based on a falsehood, a falsehood that, again, anyone decently versed in the history of the area would have recognized. But even this glaring weakness would not have doomed the U.S.

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 53

<sup>3</sup> Duiker, William J. *Ho Chi Minh: A Life*. New York: Hyperion, 2000. 9-10

<sup>4</sup> McNamara, 81.

had we established some sort of a dialogue with Ho Chi Minh and his movement. If we had actually been talking to the Vietnamese Communists instead of acting with a haughty “We don’t deal with Communists” attitude, we would have been able to learn that, in spite of our beliefs, the Vietnamese were quite independent of the Chinese; had we met with them and agreed not to intervene it is likely we could have gotten the Vietnamese to pledge, in return, not to export their system to anyone else. Had we made that the condition to our non-intervention, in fact, it is inconceivable that Ho Chi Minh and the upper leadership of his revolutionary movement would have declined such an offer, since national independence was their main goal and this is publicly what was always stressed.

As Duiker’s masterful biography concludes the question of whether he was more of a Marxist or more of a freedom fighter, “There seems little doubt that for Ho Chi Minh the survival of his country was first and always his primary concern.”<sup>5</sup> In addition, while some questioned his loyalty to the Communist Party and to Communism/Marxism-Leninism, few would question his loyalty to his native land.<sup>6</sup> Had the U.S. actively sought out communication with Ho after WWII, there would have been some type of established contact with Ho in the decades before direct U.S. involvement in Vietnam, and it is entirely conceivable then that the U.S. could have brokered some deal between the French and the Vietnamese; it is even more likely that we would have had a far better understanding of Ho’s movement and would then most likely have avoided making “domino theory” predictions about a monolithic Communist movement. Such knowledge could have prevented the Vietnam War as America knows it and spared the American and Vietnamese people a tragedy that even today is horrible to think of. Yet, from the end of World War II through much of the Vietnam War, until near its end, our contact with our perceived enemy was either minimal or nonexistent. What should be noted is that the Vietnamese made a number of serious attempts at contacting us before the Vietnam War from our perspective began, all of which were ignored.

Unfortunately, even at the 1997 meeting between U.S. and Vietnamese officials from the period concerned, the U.S. delegation “wish[ed] to begin the serious search for missed opportunities in 1961” noted one of the Vietnamese, Nguyen Khac Huynh.<sup>7</sup> The fact that even thirty years after the end of U.S. involvement

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<sup>5</sup> Duiker, 570

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> McNamara, 76

in Vietnam we were still failing to place the struggle in Vietnam its proper context of colonialism, nationalism, and the failed aspects of post-WWII U.S. policy is very troubling indeed. The fact of the matter is we have done similar things in the past and are still doing the same today. Cuba is only examined in the context of the Castro era, not the privations and brutality of the Batista era and never looking at our own direct responsibility when we administered Cuba as a colony. In Iran, what is seen as Iranian hatred for America is almost never shown in context with the brutal CIA-backed and imposed dictatorship of the Shah's monarchy who created the conditions for Khomeini's Iranian Revolution. Americans and far too often American policymakers look only at the context of recent events and fail to see the larger historical trends; we tend to see the regimes creating problems and not also the conditions—which we often created—which allowed those regimes to come into power in the first place. A Washington Times article uses quotes from historian David McCullough to make a case against teaching multiculturalism and “cultural equivalence” in its typically partisan fashion, but the main point of the article and of McCullough, that “a nation or a community or a society can suffer as much from the adverse effects of amnesia as can an individual,” still rings true.<sup>8</sup> Refreshingly, after September 11<sup>th</sup>, the wisdom of our policy of aiding the Mujahadeen and Bin Laden against the Soviet Union, but not as much our abandonment of them after the conflict ended, was questioned.

Yet during and after the war, “Vietnam was virtually invisible in course catalogs,” and “only a tiny handful of universities taught Vietnamese history or culture or language, or anything at all about the war's origins.”<sup>9</sup> It was “only when the war burst into the popular culture in the 1980s... that it also emerged as a fashionable subject on many college and university campuses.”<sup>10</sup> Yet many of these classes dealt with the war only on a superficial level or avoided getting at the heart of the matter entirely. In addition, the war still had a shroud of mythology and stereotypes that distorted the truth and to this day, popular culture continues to misrepresent some critical issues, such as POW's and the brutality of common U.S. soldiers. As Isaacs notes, the issues surrounding the war “seem to have become even more partisan and emotional and polarized, not less, over the years.”<sup>11</sup> One of the few clear-sighted term papers Isaacs graded stressed that “there was more to it than a bunch of old men sending off young men to die,” that “it wasn't all Americans going in and blasting villages

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<sup>8</sup> Archibald, George. “McCullough Calls National Amnesia Threat to Liberty.” *Washington Times*, May 16<sup>th</sup>, 2003.

<sup>9</sup> Isaacs, Arnold R. *Vietnam Shadows*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997. 138

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 138-139

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 141

filled with women and children,” nor was it all “government cover-ups and conspiracy.”<sup>12</sup> Yet even today these are lasting impressions. Though the number of courses offered grew, “more courses didn’t necessarily mean more true understanding or knowledge of the war;”<sup>13</sup> unfortunately, “teachers were hardly immune to the ideological passions still surrounding the subject.” Another major problem was that most of these courses were suffering from “an American centered perspective.” What academia and Hollywood ended up doing, then, was “recreat[ing] the cultural blindness of the wartime era, when, generally speaking, neither the American public, its scholars, its government, nor its military leaders knew even the most basic facts about Vietnam, or thought it necessary to know any.”<sup>14</sup> Said one journalist,

When we talk about Vietnam, we are seldom talking about the country of that name or the situation of the people who live there. Usually we are talking about ourselves... Probably we always were, which is one conspicuous reason our leaders found it so hard to shape a strategy that fit us and our chosen terrain.<sup>15</sup>

Isaacs quotes Duiker, biographer of Ho, as saying that his students “still cannot grasp that the war had something to do with other people.”<sup>16</sup> In addition, rather than on focusing on our errors, much of the academic debate centered on “what-if” scenarios. At the heart of the matter were an “American tradition of self-centeredness” and an inability “to accept the reality of [our] own country’s failure in Vietnam.”

Looking back deep into the past, several major opportunities—perhaps the most important concerning Vietnam—occurred during an era in which our “experts” on Vietnam had failed to even recognize as significant. Ho met with U.S. diplomat Archimedes Patti in late August, 1945, to express concern about the intentions of both French and *Chinese* troops (more proof that should have been noted as to why Ho was not a slave of the Chinese) that had liberated Indochina from the Japanese.<sup>17</sup> In their last meeting, roughly a month later, “Ho remarked that he could not reconcile the official U.S. position on self-determination that had been laid out at the Tehran, Quebec, and Potsdam conferences with the current policy of standing aside and permitting the British and the Chinese to assist in the return of the French to Indochina.” Patti, though admitting “personal sympathy,” “reiterated official U.S. policy that neither questioned French sovereignty nor supported Paris’s imperialist

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 143

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 146

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 147

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Duiker, 331

ambitions.” Moreover, Ho realized that many Americans viewed him as a “Moscow puppet” and took the opportunity to assure Patti that he was his own man with his own cause, that he had recently received more support from the U.S. than from the U.S.S.R. He also told Patti that the American Revolution against the British had served as inspiration.<sup>18</sup>

Roughly a year later, on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 1946, Ho, in Paris for talks with the French who, despite previous agreements, seemed bent on retaking Indochina as a colony, met with the American George Abbott, first secretary of the U.S. Embassy in Paris. In this conversation, Ho reminded Abbott of the cooperation his group and the U.S. enjoyed during the war, reminded Abbott of his admiration for the recently departed Roosevelt, and talked of how badly his country needed economic assistance, suggesting that, should some sort of aid package be put together, the two countries could cooperate militarily, even offering the U.S. a naval base, it seems, at Cam Rahn Bay. Yet, as with all of Ho’s earlier attempts to reach an understanding with the Truman administration, his words and offers were ignored.<sup>19</sup>

When Dean Acheson replaced George C. Marshall as U.S. Secretary of State early in 1949, the distinction that Marshall tried to make between those who were more nationalist and those who were more Communist in Indochina, and to aid the former, were policies that Acheson abandoned. In his folly, Acheson completely dismissed Ho’s claims that he was like the independent minded Tito who was not part of the Soviet Bloc, but that all Communists were nationalists and “once they had come to power, their Stalinist proclivities would clearly become evident.”<sup>20</sup> As another Vietnamese participant noted in the aforementioned conference of the late 1990’s,

...the U.S. mindset toward Vietnam was influenced by some sort of irrational apprehension or nightmare...Everything, it seems, was perceived through the lens of Cold War politics. It was because of this that you gentlemen [McNamara, Cooper, others] could not understand the rise of nationalist movements throughout the Third World...I believe the Americans, if they would simply have “read the fine print,” they would be able to distinguish nationalist movements from Cold War politics.<sup>21</sup>

During December of 1946, as the situation with the French deteriorated, Ho met in Hanoi with a senior U.S. State Department official, Abbot Low Moffat, and assured him that, despite whatever circumstantial

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid* r, 341-342

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 377-378

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 424

<sup>21</sup> McNamara, 51-52

evidence he was a pawn of Moscow, he was *primarily* a nationalist fighting for independence, not a Communist, and again offered the U.S. a naval base at Cam Rahn Bay. Moffat, not given any instructions on what to do on this point, “really couldn’t say anything.”<sup>22</sup>

Yet this was not the most disturbing aspect of Ho’s reaching out to the U.S. Between October of 1945 and February of 1946, Ho sent to President Harry S. Truman no fewer than eight cables and/or letters filled with passionate pleas to support the Vietnamese people in their struggle for independence and self-determination; Ho even drew from the preamble of Thomas Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence when proclaiming his own “Declaration of Independence” for Vietnam. Yet despite these direct appeals to President Truman and the best of America, despite an obvious grasp for the ideals America was supposed to live up to, ideals which Ho admired and incorporated into his aims for his own people, every single letter and cable was simply ignored.<sup>23</sup>

Many of the French who returned to Indochina at the end of WWII were using American equipment, and Truman began helping the French in small ways that still allowed the Vietnamese to think of us as neutral. Yet after May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1950, we openly supported the French against the Vietnamese fighting for independence. This occurred despite the fact that the Asian specialists in the State Department thought very highly of Ho and were more than sympathetic to his cause; French actions and intentions alarmed them.<sup>24</sup> Yet these very experts were ignored, and many of them would later be purged from the State Department during the anti-Communist purges of the 1950’s for being sympathetic to “Red” Ho. Truman did not want to risk irritating the French, whose support against the Soviet Union and its Eastern Bloc was so critical in Europe. So to this end, the United States, bastion of freedom, liberty, and the basic rights of man supported a French effort in Indochina which aimed at restoring an exploitative apartheid colonial rule over the people of Indochina, often using brutal tactics which at times targeted Vietnamese civilians. U.S. aid would account for 80% of the resources going into the French military effort in Indochina.<sup>25</sup>

WWII was *supposed* to be a war of liberation. The war in Asia that was against the brutal imperialist policies of Japan ended so that most of the people of Southeast Asia—people who had at first been liberated by the Japanese from their European colonists only to be treated even more brutally by the Japanese themselves—

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<sup>22</sup> Duiker, 390-391

<sup>23</sup> McNamara, 69

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 70

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 86

could now return back to being the colonial servants of their old European masters. The very aims which had made the Japanese so evil, so necessary to defeat, so “deserving” of two atomic bombs, we ourselves were now supporting.

Bluntly stated, our support to restore French colonial power in Indochina, as well as support for the restoration of colonialism in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East after the war, was the height of hypocrisy and, to a degree, racism. It may not have been overt, but anyone who has read John W. Dower’s *War Without Mercy* cannot help but notice that the Pacific War was seen by many outside the West, and even by minorities in the West, as a war of the “yellow peril” Asian Japanese imperialists fighting white Western imperialists, and that the real aims of the Pacific War were to defeat a threat posed by non-whites to the system of white European and American supremacy in Asia.<sup>26</sup> Our support of the French, British, Flemish and Dutch colonial reassertions throughout the world certainly did not help to change this impression. Where was the Marshall plan for Asia? Africa? The white European nations received massive amounts of economic aid to help create healthy, robust, democratic societies, what Marshall felt was the best guard against war and the spread of Communism, while Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, with a few exceptions, most notably Japan (Israel was seen by the peoples of the Middle East as a new white European colony), were told instead of receiving a Marshall plan, the countries which benefited from that plan would rule over you. Not only was it a betrayal, it was immoral, and given our clout having just saved Europe from Nazism and giving its nations massive aid, it is not unrealistic to say that we could have succeeded in dissuading some of the European powers from reestablishing colonial empires or to make life better for those whom they did rule, tying our aid for the Europeans to real progress in helping their colonized peoples establish their own self-government. The Vietnam War, as well as many of the wars taking place in the Third World, grew directly out of the failures of the Great Powers after WWII to do the right thing and to put the ideology with which they had fought the Germans and the Japanese into practice.

The real shocker to most people, especially foreign policy conservatives, is that the War on Terror also stems from these failures. It is no coincidence that the places where we failed after WWII are more often than not close to or are the very same areas where terrorism is born, thrives, and finds recruits. For the War on

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<sup>26</sup> See Dower, John W. *War Without Mercy*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1986.

Terror is undeniably part of the War on Poverty, the War on Hunger, the War on Dictatorships, the War on Hopelessness, and the War of Image. All of these combine into one huge war: a War for a Better World.

Many of same conditions that spawned Communist movements spawn terrorist movements: brutal oppression by a corrupt regime, usually installed or supported by the U.S. and its allies or consisting of the U.S. and its allies; extreme poverty, loss of faith in government and in the ability of peaceful solutions to succeed because of decades of suffering and misery; growing hatred of those who have put them in this situation (their own selfish dictators and a West who supports and installs them). For these people, their children and their children's children keep being thrust into a cycle of hell, and, due to the media and globalization, they can see what by is comparison the disgusting wealth and prosperity of the few, the wealth exhibited by their old colonial masters, those who keep them down even today by supporting their dictators. It is a feeling that few in the West can understand, this hatred, because the conditions which breed it are so foreign and unimaginable to us, yet so real and palpable and obtrusive to them. Perhaps, growing up as an Irish-American and looking at the centuries-long-conflict in Ireland, I am a bit more sympathetic to this feeling.

The point of this is that yes, terrorism is evil, an abominable evil, but so is supporting governments which rule by terror, murder, and deprivation of everything from food to rights; so is not taking responsibility when we helped to create such conditions. Killing and capturing the "the bad guys" is important to the War on Terror, but so is winning the hearts and minds those on the fence and those we have lost but can win back. Anyone who has even modestly studied both Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism will concur that it is only self serving when our leaders daily give speeches that say we are going to beat the terrorists who "hate freedom." Nobody hates freedom, but people hate our world system which gives freedom to a select few while covertly denying it to most others. If you were an old tribesman who saw modernization, you might feel threatened, be afraid of these new institutions which threaten your way of life and the old social order, and so you turn to religion, and in the case of the War on Terror, this is usually Islam. Yet the form the terrorists turn to, usually Wahhabism, is a corrupted and twisted form of Islam, an Islam that blindly rejects the good of modernization along with the bad, a breakaway sect of Islam that violates Islam's own most basic tenets and advocates terrorism.

The problem is that this path actually looks like the best path. Globalization as it happens today benefits the outside investors much, much more than the countries in which they set up shop, and no one trusts us because of our foreign policy record of betraying the Third World repeatedly. No one just wakes up one day and all of a sudden says, "I hate the West, let's go kill Americans." That our system, which to us has innumerable obvious advantages, does not even appeal to these people is a failure of our conduct in foreign policy and a failure of us to sell our intentions and aims successfully. There was a time when people like Ho Chi Minh, the Palestinians, and the Iranians all looked favorably on America, looked to us for help. Not only did they look for help, they expected it, based on our rhetoric and our own history. But when we supported the French against Ho Chi Minh, when we installed the brutal Shah in Iran, when we allowed Israel to expel 400,000 Palestinians from their land and then to build colonial settlements all over the West Bank and Gaza for decades without any real attempt to stop this activity, these people lost their faith in us, saw us as total hypocrites, and many went over to the Communist side during the Cold War or removed themselves from normal society and created the fundamentalism which today spawns terrorism. As to the many who went over to the Communist side, it was not that the Communists did not have their own selfish aims, but that the U.S. ended up supporting the rich colonizing nations against the weak and oppressed peoples, and the Soviets supported the weak against our puppets. The aptly named documentary "Hearts and Minds" has a Daniel Ellsberg telling the audience "We weren't on the wrong side. We were the wrong side."<sup>27</sup>

While the U.S. was certainly, in the big picture, on the "right" side during the Cold War, we were on the wrong side of the Vietnam War, among other Cold War conflicts. The lesson here is that each case must be given its full attention as an individual situation, much like a doctor treats his patients individually; the labels of black and white, right and wrong, which were so convenient during the Cold War, are even less appropriate today. The best tool, whether fighting Communism or terrorism, is to do everything we can to help these troubled spots build real civil societies, real democracies, real opportunities, and to bring them into the circle of prosperity which has been enjoyed so long in the West and Japan, and now South Korea, so that war becomes virtually an impossibility. Today it is inconceivable that England and Germany would go to war with each other, or Japan and South Korea, or the U.S. and Japan. This is because in the postwar era, the U.S. put an enormous

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<sup>27</sup> *Hearts and Minds*. (Rainbow Pictures, Directed by Peter Davis, 1974).

amount of effort into rebuilding these societies (though efforts in Korea were admittedly belated) and made really helping these people for the sake establishing strong, stable, and healthy democracies (among other reasons) a huge priority. Marshall figured out that this was the best way to win hearts and minds, not with empty promises or “half-assed” efforts that kept only one or two short-sighted goals in mind. We rebuilt Europe for the “long-haul” and Japan too after WWII. Yet the Shah’s government concerned us only to the extent that it was not Communist, not under Soviet influence, and not nationalizing the oil industry in Iran; we could care less what he was doing and who was suffering as long as these scenarios never occurred. The difference in the degree of success of the immediate postwar reconstructive policies and of the policies directed towards Iran is as clear as night and day, one of the few black and white distinctions that history will allow us to make. In the same way, both Vietnam and Afghanistan are perfect examples of “half-assed” short sighted efforts that blew up in our face because we did not place the same value on establishing strong, stable and healthy democracies for the people of Vietnam and Afghanistan, democracies that focused on human rights and equal justice under the law for all, as we did the Europeans and Japanese after WWII.

Ngo Dinh Diem’s horribly brutal and ineffective government in “South Vietnam” mattered only to us in the sense that it was not Communist. As a Catholic who spoke English well and had lived for years in the U.S., he was an easy candidate for us to work with in quickly establishing a government in Vietnam. Yet he had been so far removed from his own country, a Catholic in a Buddhist nation who had not been through the same torments as his people had been.

Rather than take time or effort to really search out and find a suitable candidate, rather than really put the resources forward to help bring Vietnam out of the mud and help itself get up on its feet, we cared only that Diem was not Communist and easy to work with; that he was killing and torturing his people mattered little to us. In the long run, this served to turn many in “South Vietnam” away from us and towards Ho, and helped to fill the ranks of the Viet Cong, or VC, the guerrillas fighting with support from the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) against the South Vietnamese regime and who blended into the local civilian population. Luu Doan Huynh, at the conference cited throughout this paper, reminds the Americans that “[Diem] was your guy, and he was killing our people. You see, blood again—blood speaks loudly when you are the one who is bleeding.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> McNamara, 94

Our support for Diem made the situation so much more difficult for us, made the war so much harder for us, and we did not even realize this at the time. Even our own soldiers fighting in Vietnam questioned the morality of fighting to support the South Vietnamese regime:

If there was a national strategy, it never filtered down to the regular soldier. Everyone knew that the South Vietnamese governments, no matter who they had in there, were all corrupt. We all wondered: why do we want those guys in there? Are they any better than the guys we are fighting? There just seemed to be no goal. This was very distressing. I was surprised how much even the young soldiers were aware of this.<sup>29</sup>

Likewise, our financing and support of Bin Laden against the Soviets did us more harm than good because of the way we carried it out. As soon as the Soviets withdrew, Bin Laden and Afghanistan were nothing to us, and we withdrew all our aid and support, left nothing, left Afghanistan to wallow in abject misery, chaos, poverty, and warlordism so that a regime like the Taliban actually looked like an improvement when they came into power. It has been documented that our abandonment of Afghanistan was a key factor in the turning of Bin Laden so vehemently and obsessively against us. Then came September 11<sup>th</sup>, and during the war in Afghanistan, we ended up fighting people with the very weapons with which we equipped them in the 1980's. In addition, well before even the "Second Gulf War" seems to have ousted Saddam Hussein, Afghanistan had already begun to fall apart yet again due to neglect and a minimal amount of attention from U.S. policy makers. Afghanistan could very well become host to terrorists yet again if we do not reverse the egregious trends we have set in place in that part of the world. Israel does not need all of our military aid, especially if we help them peacefully end the Occupation. Could not some of that money, and some of the money going into these faulty tax cuts of President Bush, go towards not only shoring up friendly regimes in that part of the world, but also to help make them better, more just, democratic, and peaceful societies? Would not such actions help reduce in number those who feel they need to be terrorists? And guess what: many of the problems in this part of the world, from the situations in India and Pakistan to Saddam's newly-old regime in Iraq, stem from the failures of that critical post-WWII period where the chance to help the world start over was missed in many parts of the world. Had the British and French been less concerned with keeping colonial possessions and more concerned with helping them establish self-rule, places like Iraq, India, Pakistan, Burma, many African nations, and Vietnam would all have had better societies after WWII and not decades of conflict.

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<sup>29</sup> Bergerud, Eric M. *Red Thunder Tropic Lightning*. New York: Penguin Books, 1993. 258

Our story of propping up Diem, and other regimes around the world like his, to the defeat of our own ends and to the detriment of the lives of the people over whom they ruled is not at all uncommon, unfortunately, and the question remains: with the failure of our nation-building policies in Vietnam and the lack of serious effort made to really understand Vietnam so that a war could have been avoided, have we since learned from our mistakes in Vietnam? With Iran, the hostages and the truck bombing in Beirut hit us hard, and there is a lot of space between the end of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and 9/11. Yet with Vietnam, the connection is right there for everyone to see and affected far more Americans than the Iranian Revolution, thus the failure of our policies concerning Vietnam are the most glaring, most obvious, and the most hurtful to us. Our ignorance of Vietnam and our support of Diem provide the starkest, most obvious lessons of failure in our history since Reconstruction after the Civil War for us to learn from and apply those lessons to our current and future conduct.

*Have we learned our lesson?* The military has adapted remarkably well in the areas that concern it and its failures during Vietnam, but the most important issues of how we operate in the world, it seems, have eluded us. There is little in Afghanistan that shows we have learned that the effort at the level of the Marshall plan and of SCAP in Japan is the only way to go about nation building, that anything less ends in disaster (Afghanistan) and finding the easiest and first person possible to run a government, (Diem, or Ahmed Chalabi in Iraq!) does not work. Yet even today, Chalabi seems to be the favored man in Iraq even though experts say he is a poor choice. Bush and Rumsfeld seem only too eager to get out of Iraq and reduce our troop presence, and if their conduct in Afghanistan is any indication as to what is in store for Iraq, the situation will only go from worse to ugly. That in 1945 SCAP in Japan could operate with such a zeal, sense of purpose, and sense of idealism (albeit sometimes of a self-righteous nature) that the Japanese of that generation idolized MacArthur as nearly a god, while a similar sense of purpose and effort in our current military commands in Iraq and Afghanistan is lacking in 2003, is very, very troubling indeed.

What about avoiding wars in general? Our involvement in Vietnam was based wholly on false presumptions that should easily have been dispelled, and that we operated on such presumptions is inexcusable. As McNamara notes with Blight and Brigham,

There is no question that the United States missed opportunity after opportunity to probe Ho Chi Minh and the Vietminh in order to discover their nationalist roots. In addition, U.S. leaders erred in not doing their homework on Vietnam's historical relationship with China. They had been adversaries for a

thousand years before either one became communist. Dean Acheson's excuse was that the French "blackmailed" the United States into supporting them in Indochina strikes me as unconvincing, in retrospect. Leaders in Washington should have stuck with their basic moral values rather than allow themselves to be blackmailed. Acheson's and Truman's decision in mid-1950 to underwrite the French war effort in Indochina was a mistake, a very, very costly mistake.<sup>30</sup>

As Gen. Brower, a distinguished veteran of the Vietnam War, told us in his lecture, if he was in charge he would not have gotten involved militarily at all.<sup>31</sup> Yet being amazed at the misunderstandings seems to be a common thread in all of the readings and films on the Vietnam War that I have seen; a teacher taking his college students to a trip in Vietnam noted that "As our trip came to an end, we were all struck by how much Americans had misunderstood the Vietnamese during the war itself."<sup>32</sup> The documentary "Hearts and Minds" gives perhaps the most striking image of our own folly when the film has Gen. Westmoreland talking about how "The Oriental [Asian] doesn't put the same high price on life as does the Westerner. Life is cheap in the Orient," immediately followed by scenes of Vietnamese civilians, women and children, wailing with misery over the death of their loved ones.<sup>33</sup> The misunderstandings were so great that they continue to boggle the mind today. One of the Vietnamese participants in the 1997 conference noted at its end,

...As I have listened to the discussion in this conference, I ask myself: How could two countries have so many wrong ideas about each other? I am not just talking about mindsets. They were bad enough. But all the way through—all the way through this bloody affair, we had many wrong ideas about each other. I ask myself: How is this possible?<sup>34</sup>

The answer is simple: when you don't communicate, when you assume too much, when you go into a problem with arrogance and hubris instead of putting all your energies into understanding the situation so you can equip yourself with the best knowledge available, horrendous misunderstandings are easy to see coming a mile away, as is pointless bloodshed. To be fair, it seems that our State Department now more than ever has experts who refuse to be ignored and will even publicly resign if that draws attention to what they see as careless mistakes, as was the case for several career diplomats after the Iraqi National Museum was looted following the "Second Gulf War," despite the fact that countless experts called attention to the need to protect it. Our government today is much more open and willing to criticize itself than it was 30 or 50 years ago, and this is a good thing. It

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<sup>30</sup> McNamara, 95

<sup>31</sup> Brower, Brig. Gen. Charles. "The U.S. Army in Vietnam." Lecture, May 28<sup>th</sup>, 2003.

<sup>32</sup> Winkler, Allan M. "Americans in Vietnam, Disturbed and Heartened." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. (April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2003). B9

<sup>33</sup> *Hearts and Minds*

<sup>34</sup> McNamara, 99

seems too, today, that the State Department is more willing to stand up to the Pentagon on matters of policy, and academics are much more respected and carry more authority today than they did 50 years ago. This is in part because scholarship today is more balanced, less ethno-centric, and can draw on more information than ever before, so it is more accurate and useful than in the past. Thus it is that today, as far as knowledge about other people, places, and cultures, we have reached a pinnacle. Still, leadership can easily be blinded by arrogance and be dismissive if expert opinion is ignored, as happened with the State Department concerning Ho Chi Minh in the late 1940's and early 1950's, and, it seems, as happened recently concerning many situations in Iraq. Secretary Rumsfeld showed the amount of concern he placed on protecting the Iraqi National Museum when he incredulously exclaimed "I mean, are there *really* that many vases in Iraq?"

Gen. Brower touched on another important dimension of being culturally aware: that if you do have an army operating in a far away place, it is important that the army from the top on down be aware and educated about the culture they in which they find themselves. This was not at all the case in Vietnam. One soldier writing about his experience in Vietnam noted that

When you think about it, it was a total mismatch. We didn't have a clue about their language or their customs. I guess you're not supposed to pat their children on the head. I never knew that, but it was probably the first thing that we did. It was a sign of disrespect, we found out... We couldn't speak their language; they couldn't speak ours. We looked at them funny. There was a lot of wailing and screaming, which got on everybody's nerves. That's just the way they talked and acted, but it was something else. So we started losing our cool after a while. The Army could have prepared us a little bit better. A majority of us couldn't even say hello or good morning in Vietnamese. The only words we picked up were a mixture of French and Vietnamese, and you couldn't use any of them in polite company. The most frequently used phrase was *ditty mau*, which means, "Get the hell out of here."<sup>35</sup>

Another soldier opened his comments with a simple "Their culture was so different."<sup>36</sup> "For reasons not at all apparent in retrospect," notes Bergerud, "the Army did almost nothing to prepare soldiers for the "culture shock"—and the term is a good one here—that almost all of them encountered when coming to Vietnam."<sup>37</sup>

Many of the American soldiers had never even left their home states before the War, and they were thrust into a situation where the people looked completely different from what they were used to, dressed differently, spoke in a language to them that was unintelligible, and, to make matters worse, "anyone" could be in the Viet Cong or a VC sympathizer. The typical veteran "stressed how totally ignorant [he was] about the Vietnamese and their

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<sup>35</sup> Bergerud, 221-222

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 222

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 221

culture.”<sup>38</sup> Surrounded by the horrors of war and a population that, at times, worked against them, U.S. soldiers often retreated from the Vietnamese and began looking at the Vietnamese as subhuman, if they hadn’t already been conditioned to do so before they even arrived in Vietnam. “Hearts and Minds” present us with the heartwarming scene of a Vietnam veteran (to be fair to most veterans, this guy appeared not at all to be normal) giving a speech for a middle or elementary school assembly repeatedly referring to the Vietnamese as “gooks.”<sup>39</sup> For those over the ocean, “A lot of us didn’t try to understand the people or make friends,” said one veteran. “Some of us hated them: Everybody was a zip, gook, or animal. I think many of us wanted to be friends with the civilian population and get to know them, but you couldn’t. You couldn’t trust them.”<sup>40</sup> Another veteran concurs when he wrote that, though some Americans made a real effort

to learn their language and customs... most of us didn’t want anything to do with them. The only Vietnamese words we learned were the cusswords. The young kids did the same. They would curse at us in English, and we cursed at them in English. The army did its best to keep us from associating with them because “all” civilians were potential VC and could toss a grenade at us at any moment...Consequently, we saw the gooks as subhuman and were prejudiced against them and downright hated their guts! Seeing a dead gook was no big deal. It only hurt when Americans got killed.<sup>41</sup>

The film “Platoon”—directed by Oliver Stone, himself a Vietnam War veteran—provides several interesting dramatizations of such situations. There is one situation where Sgt. Barnes accosts one of his men who freezes upon seeing a dead Vietnamese and asks him “What's the matter boy? He ain't gonna bite you. That's a good gook; good and dead.”<sup>42</sup> While such attitudes were unfortunately not uncommon, characters like “Bunny”—who seems at times sadistic, especially when he bashes one young Vietnamese’s brains in (or out, more accurately) and talks about “wasting” the whole village—seem less common, though they surely did exist.

The only real documented example of U.S. troops consciously “wasting” an entire village occurred at My Lai in 1968. The Lt. Calley who received most of the blame for the situation quoted his superior, Capt. Medina, as ordering him to “waste the Vietnamese and get my people out in line, out in the position they were supposed to be.”<sup>43</sup> As far as this paper is concerned, the massacre was not nearly as big a deal as the cover-up, for while the massacre can not be said to represent any general trend—it was most certainly a freak incident—

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Hearts and Minds*

<sup>40</sup> Bergerud, 223-224

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 224-225

<sup>42</sup> *Platoon* (Directed by Oliver Stone, 1986).

<sup>43</sup> Olson, James S. and Randy Roberts. *My Lai*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1998. 22

the cover-up is highly indicative of our military's, our government's, and our nation's unwillingness to examine and judge objectively our own actions when we were wrong. No president wanted to admit defeat, no general wanted to admit that a limited war could not win against such a determined foe, and the American people did not want to admit that they had actually gone along with the whole prosecution of the war as easily as they did. Where our societies and institutions failed as a whole, instead of self-criticism and introspection, scapegoats—Lt. Calley, President Johnson, the desire to fight a limited war—were sought. As Peter Steinfels states in his “Calley and the Public Conscience,” “The comment of Mylai by one brave juror is also the best judgment on the national response: “I wanted to believe it didn't happen.””<sup>44</sup> Yet this was only part of the larger “historical amnesia” mentioned earlier in this paper.

Anyway, as has already been pointed out, little was done to prepare the troops for the “culture shock” they would endure. If American policy makers had really cared about the Vietnamese people, and not just defeating Communism, they could have made each GI go through lectures on Vietnamese culture and history—just the basics—and could have easily accomplished this by making each person who was being shipped off to Vietnam go through just a few hours of mandatory classes. This would have required little effort on our part, but it was not done. Even easier would have been providing each soldier with a card that would have had basic Vietnamese phrases on them, so that at even just a rudimentary level, communication could have been possible, not an obstacle and a source of complete and total frustration. For soldiers who spent much of their time interacting with and interrogating local Vietnamese, such a small and inexpensive card could have gone a long way, as could any training or preparation, but there was none. The issue, as the Vietnamese people themselves, was just not important enough to warrant such basic consideration. Aside from the occasional South Vietnamese interpreter, interactions between soldier and civilian in Vietnam were thus disasters waiting to happen, and well before the end of the war, each hated and mistrusted and misunderstood the other for reasons that amounted to carelessness. The little things, in the end, mattered a lot, and for entities of the size and with the budgets of the federal government, Pentagon, and military, there is no good excuse for not putting forth a serious effort to address them. As Michael J. Fox's character notes in *Casualties of War*, “Everybody's acting

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 191

like we can do anything and it don't matter what we do. Maybe we gotta' be extra careful because maybe it matters more than we even know.”<sup>45</sup>

Said one veteran, “We could give a shit what happened to the country [Vietnam/South Vietnam] after we left. We had 365 days to spend there, and then we didn't give a damn what happened. All we wanted to do was make it through our time alive and get the hell out of there.”<sup>46</sup> That this view existed among a significant number of troops is a testament to the failure of our government to properly prepare our fighting forces to understand what they were doing and to prepare them for how to deal with the local culture so that interacting with the local population would not prove to be such a horrible nightmare. Had such preparation occurred, relations between locals and Americans could have potentially been—and probably would have been—much healthier, and this would have changed the feelings of our troops over there significantly. Higher morale and greater empathy for the Vietnamese would have replaced indifference and hatred, but the hatred and indifference that occurred on both sides, military and civilian, served only to further the interest of the North Vietnamese Communists. Compassion was often even discouraged:

We did not see [the Vietnamese] as people per se, only as objects. We did not speak their language, so we could not ask them their names, their home villages, or even if they were the same age as us. We were ignorant of their history and culture, so we had no idea if they were Vietnamese, Cambodian, or possibly Chinese; to us, it didn't matter. One critical point has to be made here, and that is the presence of tremendous group pressure not to feel any compassion toward your enemy. If an individual GI had any pangs of compassion or showed that he wanted to treat the VC as an actual individual human being (after a capture), the fear that the less feeling (or emotional) men in the squad/platoon would ridicule him was too great. Many times, I saw small acts of compassion that were immediately counteracted by cruelty and deliberate steps taken to show the squad/platoon that to be human had no place in war. Of course, there was no official policy to this effect, but there was no shortage of GIs whose acts showed cruelty and wanton violence dispensed as haphazardly as possible.<sup>47</sup>

The situation was so bad that one veteran remarked “if I would have been Vietnamese, I would have been a VC, even though I am an anti-Communist. I would not have been able to sit there and watch whole people's lives go up in smoke at the whim of a nineteen-year-old punk who blew away 2 or 3 people just because he was angry.”<sup>48</sup> Many other Americans more or less felt the same way.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> *Casualties of War* (Directed by Brian De Palma, 1989).

<sup>46</sup> Bergerud, 272

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 256

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 239

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 219-258

While Brower can safely say that we have greatly improved in this regard<sup>50</sup>—that much is undeniable—the specter of Vietnam reared its head when, during the “Second Gulf War,” a CNN crew captured a group of U.S. Marines going house to house in search of Fedayeen Saddam guerrillas. As the soldiers approached one house you could see a family in its doorway looking terrified as the soldiers shouted English that the family could not understand. They was herded out of the house and got on their knees with their hands over their heads, the children crying. It was heart wrenching, and at least had an interpreter been there, or had the Marine known a few basic phrases of Arabic, the situation might have been less terrifying for the family. Yet, on the other side of the coin, a group of soldiers approached the Imam Ali Mosque (one of the holiest in Shi’a Islam) with the intention of protecting the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who was supposed to be in his house, a few blocks from the mosque. Immediately a crowd of hundreds of locals went hysterical and blocked the 20 or so Marines from advancing. The crowd began chanting and grew increasingly hostile. And the commander, on camera, was recorded saying “Stop, keep your weapons down and smile.” With the crowd becoming increasingly hysterical, the commander ordered his troops to turn around and go back while he himself faced the crowd. Thankful that they did not resort to violence, he began bowing to the crowd, smiling and waving goodbye, and the crowd calmed down, many waving and smiling back. Even without an interpreter (the addition of which is something to consider for the future) a crisis was averted. The standoff could easily have ended in a massacre, but the commander realized he was dealing with *real* people, and treated them with respect and dignity, his own demeanor very humble. I was personally so proud of him and my country at this point, for it is simple actions like this that really go far in winning hearts and minds. And in the battle against terrorism, men like this commander should be in the highest demand. Clearly and reassuringly in some important ways, the lessons of Vietnam have been learned. No one was screaming “waste the towelheads!” Instead, basic human decency prevailed.

In contrast, Bergerud correctly stressed the uniqueness of how ill-prepared the men fighting in Vietnam were to deal with what they encountered there: “Ironically, in no previous war was the cultural divide between American soldier and the indigenous population as wide as it was in Vietnam. And in no previous war were the

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<sup>50</sup> Brower

consequences of this division so vital and so potentially tragic.”<sup>51</sup> He adds that “It was the only war in American history where our soldiers did not know and were not trained to know the very people that were or might have been their allies. The Army paid dearly for this policy of learned ignorance. So did many Vietnamese.” The point of this entire paper is to stress that this was the case from the very top to the very bottom of America, from the President in the oval office to the private in his foxhole. If anything sticks in the mind of someone who watched part four of the LBJ documentary that was part of the “American Experience Series,” LBJ was dumbfounded almost all the time by the behavior of the North Vietnamese, and his lack of understanding drove him to despair and to not seek reelection.<sup>52</sup> In the same series of documentaries, an episode showed Nixon thinking he could bomb the North Vietnamese into giving more concessions during negotiations, and his strategies worked just as well as Johnson’s and gave President the same befuddled look that clouded the face of Johnson.<sup>53</sup> What is evident from another documentary, “Vietnam Passage”—as well as from many other sources mentioned in this paper—is that many Vietnamese people were willing to go through extraordinary hardships to survive, to see us defeated, a level of commitment we never came close to matching. A woman from “Vietnam Passage” who was imprisoned and tortured in a South Vietnamese prison still had a smile on her face decades after the war when she talked about the day the NVA took Saigon.<sup>54</sup>

Charlie Sheen’s character in *Platoon* tells us “Somebody once wrote: “Hell is the impossibility of reason.” That’s what this place [Vietnam] feels like. Hell.”<sup>55</sup> The battlefield may be the impossibility of reason, but where the planning takes place, there should *never* be an impossibility of reason. Yet that is what happened; reason and facts at the Pentagon and White House were tossed aside for irrationality and ignorant assumptions. And when such a situation comes about, we must fight the urge to succumb to what happened to Col. Kurz in *Apocalypse Now* when he subscribed to the idea that “it’s judgment that defeats us.”<sup>56</sup> Charlie Sheen’s father Martin Sheen rejects Kurz’s assertion that judgment defeats us. Rather, it is our ability to judge ourselves in situations like the Vietnam War that give value to such experiences, that we may learn from our mistakes and not repeat them, or at the very least, do better the next time. As Charlie Sheen’s character notes at the end of

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<sup>51</sup> Bergerud, 219

<sup>52</sup> *LBJ* (Part Four: “The Last Believer,” Produced by David Grubin, American Experience Series, PBS, 1991).

<sup>53</sup> *Nixon* (Part Three: “Secrets Unraveled.” Produced by Elizabeth Deane, American Experience Series, PBS, 1993).

<sup>54</sup> *Vietnam Passage: Journeys from War to Peace* (Wind and Star Productions, Directed by Sandy Northrop, 2002).

<sup>55</sup> *Platoon*

<sup>56</sup> *Apocalypse Now* (Directed by Francis Ford Coppola, 1979).

*Platoon*, "...those of us who did make it have an obligation to build again. To teach to others what we know, and to try with what's left of our lives to find a goodness and a meaning to this life."<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> *Platoon*

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