

❖ REMEMBER VIETNAM ❖

PREVENTIVE REMEMBRANCE

"Before, in the United States, people said, 'Remember Pearl Harbor'.
Now, I say, 'Remember Vietnam'. For always."

— *Ly Van Sau, 1973*

SINCE 1975 and the formal conclusion of the U.S war against the countries of Indochina, numerous other disasters and crimes against humanity have occurred which all have a rightful claim on the attention and solidarity of the world community. Some of them are currently in progress, and it may be assumed that there will be no shortage of tragic events in the future.

Nevertheless, there are good reasons to refresh humanity's collective memory of the Vietnam War, convey its lessons to future generations, and begin to deal effectively with its terrible consequences. Among those reasons are the following:

The war continues

As pointed out by an international conference in Stockholm a few years ago, "Wars do not end when the bombs stop falling and the fighting stops. The devastation continues long after, in the land and in the minds and bodies of the people. Years have passed since the conclusion of the wars that for decades tormented Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam; but throughout the region, innocent victims are still suffering."

The main purpose of the Stockholm Conference was to make a start at documenting the nature and extent of the environmental damage and human suffering resulting from the war. The findings are contained in three reports that are available on the conference web site.¹

Those findings are far from complete, but they make clear that the assault on Vietnam and the other two countries of Indochina was exceptional in its duration and ferocity. For all their horrors, the more recent wars of aggression by the United States and its allies have (thus far) been less prolonged and devastating. This is a crucial aspect of the Vietnam War which has been receding from awareness due to a variety of factors noted in the conference report on ethical, legal and policy issues (abbreviation: ELP report).² This, in itself, is a phenomenon that needs to be more widely known and understood.



Photo: Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University

*What napalm can do: Grieving woman and what is left of some children—
a common sight in Vietnam during the American War.*

It is not only in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam that the war lives on. Veterans of U.S. and allied military forces have inevitably suffered various kinds of long-term consequences, as well. The medical effects of contamination by Agent Orange and other toxic chemicals continue to be a subject of debate and adjudication, for example.

More generally, the Vietnam War continues to exert a strong influence on U.S. political life. This was clearly demonstrated during the 2004 presidential campaign when George W. Bush — who had exploited his family connections to avoid active duty and (apparently) to shirk his duties in the reserves — was pitted against John F. Kerry who had served in Vietnam with military distinction and, upon returning home, with even greater distinction as an eloquent critic of the war.

Such is the political climate in the United States that Kerry and his campaign advisors chose to emphasize his military rather than his anti-war heroics, but to no avail. According to most political analysts, Kerry's anti-war past was one of the key factors that cost him the election. This was because Bush's henchmen launched a massive smear campaign that portrayed Kerry as a liar who did not deserve his military honours and, much worse, had falsely accused his comrades-in-arms of war crimes.³

Everything about the Bush smear campaign was a lie. But it was effective — because the history of the Vietnam War, including massive crimes committed by the United States against the peoples of Indochina, has been obscured and falsified to such an extent that a large segment of the voting public was easily misled.

Thus, a malignant complex of lies, myths and delusions about the Vietnam War has played a significant, perhaps decisive, role in determining the outcome of the presidential election. Given the current standing of the United States as the sole global superpower, that outcome is something that concerns the entire planet and all its people.

All of this serves to confirm that, “Wars do not end when the bombs stop falling and the fighting stops.” To understand what that means — in terms of human, environmental, economic and political consequences — there is no more telling example than the Vietnam War.

Uniquely well-documented

One of the main reasons that the Vietnam War provides a useful example is that it is exceptionally well-documented. Apart from being “the first TV war”, with a degree of public scrutiny that has not been permitted since, it was the subject of a unique historical review that was conducted by the U.S. government while the shooting war was still in progress. Both the government minister who commissioned the review, known as *The Pentagon Papers*, and the well-informed official who leaked it to the press have since published memoirs with supplementary and confirmatory details.⁴ Intended to be kept secret, *The Pentagon Papers* were made available for public scrutiny by Daniel Ellsberg, who participated in the study and became disillusioned upon reading it. How and why that came about is related in his memoir, *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers*.

A great deal of other valuable information has also come to light in the years since the United States withdrew its troops from Vietnam. Among other things, a number of revelations emerged from the Senate-House hearings on the Central Intelligence Agency, which were made possible by the political climate that the war engendered.

In short, due to the passage of time and the accumulation of evidence, much of it supplied by the U.S. government and its officials, the Vietnam War provides a particularly useful framework for interpreting similar events in the past, present and future. Violations of international law, destabilization campaigns, the use of client regimes as instruments of imperial policy, the exploitation of fear to induce public support for war, distortion of the purpose and principles of the United Nations, falsification of history — these and related issues are as relevant today as they were a half-century ago.

Scare tactics and other propaganda techniques, for example, have hardly changed since U.S. officials warned of an inevitable “bloodbath” and a terrifying “domino effect” stretching from Vietnam to Australia and India. In fact, many of those who share responsibility for the Vietnam War are currently exercising their war-mongering skills as officials of the U.S. government.

Marshalling the past

“We learn from history that we do not learn from history,” observed Hegel, and there is no clearer illustration of that wisdom than the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq. The parallels with the Vietnam War are many and significant, as numerous analysts have pointed out. It is possible that the ongoing catastrophe in Iraq would have occurred even if the U.S. population and the world in general had been equipped to foresee those parallels and grasp their implications. But it would almost certainly have been more difficult, and the resistance would likely have been more unrelenting than it has been to date.

That is what George Orwell appears to have had in mind when he wrote: “Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past.” History has significant political uses and, conversely, politics have a powerful impact on historical knowledge and awareness — as the 2004 U.S. presidential election so dismayingly demonstrated.

For a nation bent on aggression, it is useful and perhaps even necessary to create widespread confusion or amnesia about its past crimes. Such a condition can never be imposed on all the people of the world, nor need it be. It is enough to prevent the formation of a critical mass of worldwide opposition that might jeopardize the project. Thus, burying the Vietnam War in some obscure and distorted past has been essential to the imperial ambitions of the world's only superpower. For, if people can be made to forget such a colossal crime against humanity and international law, they can be made to forget just about anything.

Perversely, the commission of new crimes contributes to the process of forgetting, as the current occupants of the White House seem to be aware. "We're an empire now," a senior presidential adviser recently declared, "and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality . . . we'll act again, creating other new realities."⁵

'It was a U.S. war of aggression'

Here are some of the things I understood, in a way that I had not just months before, when I finished reading the full Pentagon Papers toward the end of September 1969:

- There had been no continuous First and Second Indochina War, just one continuous conflict for almost a quarter of a century.
- In practical terms, on one side, it had been an American war almost from the beginning— at first French-American, eventually wholly American. In both cases, it was a struggle of Vietnamese— not all of them, but enough to persist— against American policy and American financing, proxies, technicians, firepower and, finally, troops and pilots.
- Since at least the late 1940s, there had probably never been a year when political violence in Vietnam would have reached a scale of "war" had not the U.S. president, Congress and citizens fueled it with money, weapons and ultimately manpower— first through the French, then funneled to wholly owned client regimes, and at last directly. Indeed, there would have been no war after 1954 if the United States and its Vietnamese collaborators, wholly financed by the United States, had not been determined to frustrate and overturn the process of political resolution negotiated at Geneva.
- It was no more a "civil war" after 1955 or 1960 than it had been during the U.S.-supported French attempt at colonial reconquest. A war in which one side was entirely equipped and paid by a foreign power, which dictated the local regime in its own interest, was not a civil war. To say that we had "interfered" in what was "really a civil war", as most American writers and even liberal critics of the war do to this day, merely screened a more painful reality and is as much a myth as the earlier official one of "aggression from the North". In terms of the UN Charter and of our own avowed ideals, it was a war of aggression, foreign aggression.

From Secrets by Daniel Ellsberg; reviewed at www.nnn.se/vietnam/ellsberg.pdf

In addition to the countries of Indochina, such realities have been imposed on Chile, Grenada, Ecuador, Uruguay, Nicaragua, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, etc. Thus, a great power can deflect attention from past crimes by perpetrating new ones, and any attempt to revive interest in the Vietnam War may be greeted with a response like: "Why spend time and other resources on that? After all, it happened long ago and there are more urgent problems to deal with today."

The problem is that there are always more urgent problems. Until a critical mass of the world community learns not to forget the great crimes of the past and their relevance for the present, it is fairly certain that they will continue *ad infinitum* into the future—and that, as a result, it will never be possible to deal properly with any of them. Just a few years ago, for example, Afghanistan was "liberated" amidst a rain of bombs and promises. Today, that devastated land is yesterday's news, rapidly disappearing from general awareness in the uranium-contaminated dust and budget deficits of the war against Iraq. Before long, it will likely be Iraq's turn to recede into obscurity, as some new designated threat is subjected to the blessings of U.S. *blitzkrieg* ("shock and awe" in Newspeak), occupation and "democracy".

In short, forgetting or neglecting the lessons of past crimes increases the likelihood of new ones. This is especially true of criminal acts whose perpetration depends on the consent, inaction or indifference of the world community, which in turn is linked to the formation of public opinion.

Hence, the current and future significance of an informed historical perspective. Public opinion is a force that can be subdued and misdirected, or marshalled so that political leaders are emboldened to oppose aggression and are provided with essential support if and when they dare to do so.

Common humanity

The trials of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam did not end with the withdrawal of U.S. troops in 1975, nor was there any significant effort by the international community to help them recover from the enormous destruction that had been inflicted upon them. In fact, their suffering was prolonged and intensified by punishing embargoes imposed by the United States, isolating Indochina from most of the world and causing great hardship (see ELP

"It's very hard for the Vietnamese now. They're very poor, and the cruel thing is that we seem to rejoice in it. Before we went to Vietnam, the country had not done any harm to us at all—all of which is forgotten. I'm sorry that the United States, which rebuilt Germany and Japan with such swiftness, sees fit to prevent powdered milk from getting to malnourished Vietnamese children. But I guess we will have our revenge. We will rewrite the war, we will win it, and we will make sure that they starve."

— Gloria Emerson, U.S. war correspondent⁷

report for details). This may be contrasted with the lavishly financed post-World War II reconstruction of Europe and parts of Asia, including the two nations condemned as the principal aggressors, or with more recent economic assistance to victims of U.S. wars in the Balkans, Afghanistan and Iraq.

The reason for this disparity, of course, is that the Vietnamese defeated the superpower on the battlefield that was made of their country— although at inhuman

cost. For that reason, the victims of the American War have been uniquely abused and neglected. Simple justice and common humanity compel remembrance of their suffering and, however long delayed, a concentrated effort to assist the survivors and their descendants. To do less is to accord them less human value than victims of similar or lesser catastrophes who have received far more attention and support.

To redress that wrong is crucial not only for the victims but also for the perpetrators, for a variety of reasons. One of them is noted in the ELP report: "It is dangerous for any nation to live a lie, both for itself and for the surrounding world; and that danger is obviously compounded if the nation in question is the planet's only superpower."

A related theme was developed in 1967 by Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., in his famous speech against the Vietnam War in New York's Riverside Church: "If America's soul becomes totally poisoned, part of the autopsy must read Vietnam. It can never be saved so long as it destroys the deepest hopes of men the world over. . . . The war in Vietnam is but a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit. . . . History is cluttered with the wreckage of nations and individuals that pursued this self-defeating path of hate."⁶

Of course, the dominant forces in the United States did not heed Rev. King's wisdom then; and they appear no more inclined to do so today. This sorry state of affairs is noted in the ELP report: "Clearly, there are powerful psychological and political forces in the United States which have impeded the long-overdue reconstruction of Indochina, and are likely to do so for the foreseeable future. . . . Until such time as the United States can bring itself to accept its responsibility, it would be appropriate for other nations—less tormented by the humiliation of military defeat and the demons it arouses—to compensate for the lack of action. This applies especially to the developed countries of the West, most of which actively or passively supported the American War. . . . Others did little or nothing to shorten it and nearly the entire developed world supported the punishing embargoes instigated by the United States against Vietnam and Cambodia."

The report also noted that a number of developed countries have, at long last, begun to provide a modicum of assistance. But the response thus far has been nowhere in proportion to the level of suffering and destruction caused by the American War; and in many cases, the support provided appears to be motivated as much or more by commercial interests as by concern for the victims.



A retrospective analysis in the U.S. Newsweek 15 April 1985 illustrates Bruce Franklin's observation that, "Within the dominant American culture, 'Vietnam' is no longer a nation, a people, or even a war. 'Vietnam' is something terrible that happened to us, something that divided, wounded, and victimized America." For more on that cultural complex, see www.nnn.se/vietnam/franklin.pdf

Model of reconciliation

In our time, as in probably no other, there are two extraordinary examples of peaceful, conciliatory response to great injustice. One is taking place in South Africa, where Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu and others have led the way in healing the wounds of *apartheid*.

The other is taking place in Vietnam, as noted in the ELP report: "Throughout their 2000-year history, the people of Vietnam have had many occasions to deal with invaders, and they have developed a fairly unique habit of forgiveness that is expressed in the ancient proverb, 'Do not hack at the heels of the enemy when he flees. Let him slip away if he promises to cease warring against you. Strew roses in his path — without thorns.'

"Such an attitude is consistent with the deeply-held Buddhist beliefs shared by the vast majority of the population. . . . U.S. veterans who return to the scenes of their war-making in Vietnam are often astonished and deeply moved by the open friendliness with which their former targets greet them. . . .

"I feel great respect for the deep mourning that the American people have shown for their 50,000 dead. It is a sign of great humanism,' says [author and veteran] Bao Ninh. 'But

"Denying the people their legitimate choice of government"

To me, it was obvious that we were bolstering a hopelessly corrupt government that had neither the support nor the respect of the Vietnamese people....

One of the first things I noticed was that CIA intelligence reports and news reports were frequently similar.... The Agency had hundreds of people working in various capacities in the world's news media, from executives to stringers. Through them, it disseminated propaganda designed to shape world opinion.... Here was a dangerous cycle. Agency disinformation, mistaken as fact, seeped into the files of U.S. government agencies and the CIA itself....

Although I had been in the CIA for 20 years, I really never had attempted to understand communism on its own terms. Instead, I relied on United States news organizations and CIA reporting for information about communist movements. This was true of everyone in the CIA. The limited two-year tours, the reliance on Agency 'inside' information, and the prevailing fiercely anti-communist atmosphere all tended to give a distorted, one-side view of any situation....

I began to read and comprehend communist newspapers, journals, and broadcast transcripts. Then I began to read historical works, and Chinese and Vietnamese revolutionary writings. Gradually, in an almost physically painful process, the accumulated facts and knowledge forced my mind to open, to look at reality from the communists' perspective. To my amazement, they had a case to make. Vietnam, of course, was the most dramatic example of this. For the first time now, I had a chance to read the history of their war, and for the first time I became aware the Agency, in conjunction with the U.S. military and other elements of the U.S. government, had for 21 years attempted to deny the communists their legitimate claim to govern the people who overwhelmingly supported them.

— *From Deadly Deceits by Ralph McGehee, C.I.A. officer in Vietnam*⁸

we lost a hundred times more in the war, possibly as many as five million. The mountains, beaches and rivers were filled with the dead. But when the war was over, the country was so poor and life was so hard that we who survived never had time to mourn.' Nevertheless: 'Anyone who thinks that we hate Americans knows nothing about the Vietnamese people.'"

Learning this about the Vietnamese people would surely be of great value to others; and the contrast with the behaviour of the United States, as reflected in the 2004 presidential election, would also be enlightening.

To sum up:

- The Vietnam War will continue to have profound human, environmental, economic and political consequences long into the future.
- Its origins and process are exceptionally well-documented, not least by the aggressor nation.
- By providing a frame of reference within which to understand present and future catastrophes of a similar nature, the Vietnam War continues to be highly relevant.
- In contrast to the aftermath of other wars, the victims have been woefully neglected—due mainly to the vengefulness of the superpower whose unprovoked aggression was repelled.
- The Vietnamese are providing an example of forgiveness and conciliation that is of obvious interest and potentially great value to the rest of the world.

For these and possibly other reasons, the time is more than ripe to properly remember Vietnam— even though the war "happened long ago" and there are so many urgent problems of more recent origin crying for attention.

— *Al Burke*
May 2008

NOTES

1. The Environmental Conference on Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam was held in Stockholm in July of 2002. The conference reports and related information are available at: www.nnn.se/environ.htm
 2. The conference report entitled *Ethics • Law • Policy* is available at: www.nnn.se/environ/ethics.htm
 3. The issue of war crimes is discussed at some length in the *Ethics • Law • Policy* report: www.nnn.se/environ/ethics.htm
 4. The internal study that came to be known as *The Pentagon Papers* was commissioned by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, and leaked to the press by Daniel Ellsberg. For details, see *Ethics • Law • Policy* report, *op.cit.*
 5. Bush administration official quoted by Ron Suskind in “Without a Doubt: Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W Bush”, *New York Times*, 17 October 2004
 6. The text of Rev. King’s speech is available at many sites on the Internet, including: <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkatimetobreaksilence.htm>
- loria Emerson quoted in *Newsweek*, 15 April 1985, i.e. during the depths of the U.S. embargo against Vietnam. She covered the war for the *New York Times* during 1970-1972, and later wrote of her experiences in the book, *Winners and Losers* (Random House, 1977).
8. McGeehee, Ralph: *Deadly Deceits*. New York: Sheridan Square Publications, 1983

Additional information on this subject at:

www.nnn.se/vietnam.htm