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# Reconsidering Vietnam

Jonathan Mirsky

1.

"That war cleaves us still." On January 20, 1989, George Bush included these words in his inaugural address. He followed them with the plea, "But friends, that was begun in earnest a quarter of a century ago. Surely the statute of limitations has been reached." Then came advice: "The final lesson of Vietnam is that no great nation can long afford to be sundered by a memory."

If there were any Vietnamese listening in front of the Capitol they would have been puzzled by the phrase "a quarter of a century ago." For them the war began no later than 1945, when the French returned to reclaim Indochina, and Vietnamese Communists might date it yet earlier, to an insurrection of 1930.

Here we begin to see the scale of the problem. There were plainly many wars, with many millions of memories—well over eight million Americans, including civilians, went to Vietnam. There would be the memories of the 58,000 Americans who died, and, according to General Giap's staff, the one million Vietnamese soldiers who died. In the admirable anthologies put together by Walter Capps and Harry Maurer we encounter the memories of soldiers who say they loved the war, and of whom some were drunk during most of it. Some believed we won most of the battles but lost the war; some feared they had entirely lost their sense of morality. The last is a common feeling among Vietnam veterans, twice as many of whom have committed suicide since the war died during it. Many suffer, as Peter Marin notes in *A Vietnam Reader*, from what Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness*, called "bad faith," the underlying and general sense of having betrayed what you feel you ought to have been."

But what do the Vietnamese feel about the war? We hear a few of their voices in the two collections by Capps and Maurer, and in the books by Justin Wintle and John Balaban. The leaders in Saigon and Hanoi spent their citizens' lives freely, while few died themselves. When Dean Rusk was asked by his son why the Vietnamese kept coming, he replied, "I really don't have much of an answer on that, Rich," and General Giap, when told by Morley Safer that some of his still-crippled veterans weren't sure whether the war was worth the suffering, "made a

movement across the face...as one would discourage a pesky gnat."<sup>1</sup>

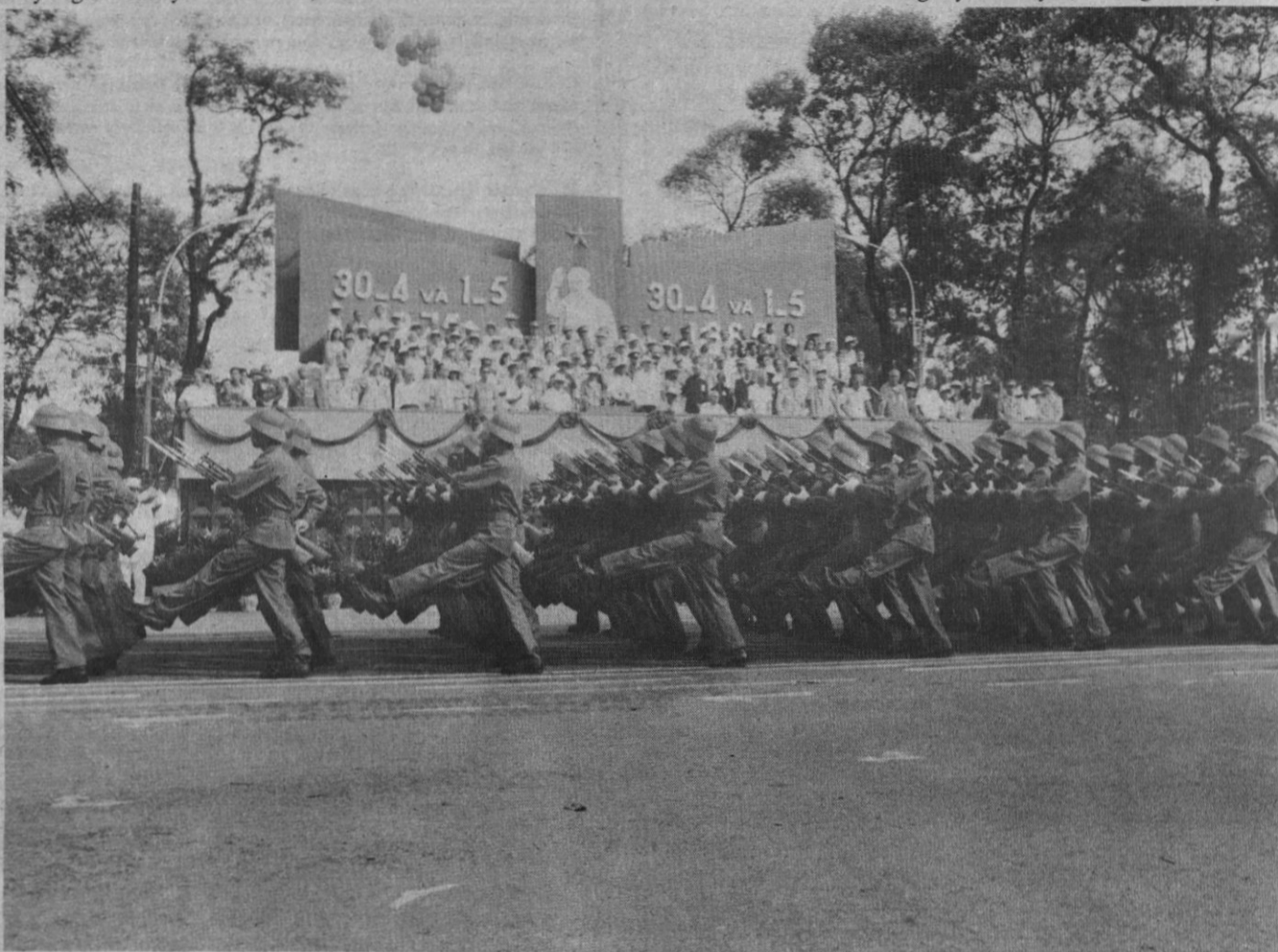
And what of the result? In Kyoto this April, Robert S. McNamara, secretary of defense between 1961 and 1968, when asked to explain his support of the war, admitted to several hundred

succeeded to some degree had we fought harder.

Apart from Truong Nhu Tang, the Vietcong's former minister of justice, until very recently few if any important Vietnamese in the struggle against the Americans said publicly that the war was a tragedy. And yet,

opened; victorious Vietnam is isolated, extremely poor, is begging for international help, and is condemned for its violations of human rights by both Amnesty and Asia Watch.

But prominent Vietnamese Communists are beginning to question the very legitimacy of the regime which fought so tenaciously and successfully for so long against France and the United States. This is more difficult for some of Hanoi's admirers in the West. In her long and well-researched polemical survey of Vietnamese history in this century, Marilyn Young, who devotes a page and a half to Nixon's nocturnal visit to the Lincoln Memorial in 1970, where he lectured bemused students about the war, manages only a sentence or two, in her postwar chapters, on how Vietnam now treats its citizens. She apparently has not talked to such Vietnamese as Colonel Bui Tin, the deputy editor of the Party's newspaper, *Nhan Dan*, and a veteran of Dien Bien Phu, who twenty-one years



Tenth anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War, Ho Chi Minh City, April 1985

## BOOKS DISCUSSED IN THIS ESSAY

**Vietnam: Citizens Detained for Peaceful Expression**  
Asia Watch/Human Rights Watch,  
11 pp., \$2.45

**A Vietnam Reader**  
by Walter Capps.  
Routledge,  
316 pp., \$45.00; \$14.95 (paper)

**The Dynamics of Defeat: The Vietnam War in Hau Nghia Province**  
by Eric M. Bergerud.  
Westview Press, 383 pp., \$32.00

**Strange Ground: An Oral History of Americans in Vietnam, 1945-1975**  
by Harry Maurer.  
Avon, 634 pp., \$12.95 (paper)

**The Vietnam Wars: 1945-1990**  
by Marilyn B. Young.  
HarperCollins,  
386 pp., \$25.00; \$11.00 (paper)

**War by Other Means: National Liberation and Revolution in Viet-Nam 1954-60**  
by Carlyle A. Thayer.  
Allen and Unwin,  
256 pp., \$34.95; \$24.95 (paper)

**Vietnam at War: The History: 1946-1975**  
by Phillip B. Davidson.  
Oxford University Press,  
838 pp., \$16.95 (paper)

**Romancing Vietnam: Inside the Boat Country**  
by Justin Wintle.  
Pantheon, 466 pp., \$25.00  
(to be published in November)

**Remembering Heaven's Face: A Moral Witness in Vietnam**  
by John Balaban.  
Poseidon Press, 334 pp., \$21.95

journalists at the International Press Institute's annual meeting, "I was wrong." William Westmoreland still thinks we were right, and lost because we didn't go "all out." Clark Clifford, in his recent memoir, *Counsel to the President*, writes, contrary to his public statements at the time, that we should never have gone in, but might have

<sup>1</sup>See "The War That Will Not End," *The New York Review*, August 16, 1990.

what if the Vietnamese Communists had declined to fight the French in 1945? It is likely that many Vietnamese North and South who died would still be alive. Or what if the Americans had not attributed such cosmic powers to communism? According to Clark Clifford, McNamara assured President Johnson that a Communist victory in Vietnam would reverberate across to Greece and down to Africa. None of this hap-

later personally accepted the surrender of Saigon. In late 1990 while visiting Europe he stated that "our house is on fire" and called for a government of national reconciliation composed of exiles, refugees, and those at home. The colonel's remarks, hardly seditious except in a people's democracy, made him wary of returning to Vietnam. "Prison is possible, and my wife and children have already been interrogated by the police."<sup>2</sup>

Another bold critic from inside the regime is Nguyen Khac Vien, a leading Vietnamese historian and editor of a series of booklets on Vietnamese history much studied in the Sixties by the American antiwar movement. This March, in Hanoi, Vien described the state apparatus as

completely impotent, leaving the entire society chaotic and impossible to develop.... Surrounding each leader is a group of self-serving toadies.... The people, cadres and low-level party members have lost all faith in the upper echelons.

Vien suggested that "top leaders should voluntarily resign from the central bodies at present.... If these leaders persist in retaining their old positions, then their entire glorious pasts will fade away and they will bear responsibility for the collapse to come."

<sup>2</sup>*The New York Times*, December 29, 1990.

Photograph © Reuters/Bettmann Newsphotos



He called for "freedom of the press, association, petition, demonstration, strikes, voting..."<sup>3</sup>

It is precisely the loss of the "glorious past" that disturbs Hanoi's old men. Like their geriatric counterparts in Peking, they cannot bear scrutiny of the national myth, which, as in China, has two parts: all achievements of the past fifty or more years must be credited to the old Party heroes, and the Party disasters are someone else's fault; although sometimes the grandees do admit mistakes, which only they can correct. The new Party General Secretary, Do Muoi, emphasized in his first official speech, on June 27, that "our party and our people are unshakably determined to follow the path of socialism, the path chosen by President Ho Chi Minh, our party, and the people, the only correct path."<sup>4</sup>

New ideas are frightening to these men, unless such ideas are confined to improving the economy without seriously weakening central control. In their concise but penetrating study of reform in Vietnam, *Vietnam and Doi Moi: Domestic and International Dimensions of Reform*,<sup>5</sup> Professor Michael Leifer of the London School of Economics and John Phipps, a former research fellow at Chatham House, note the leaders' anxiety

that some of the [180,000] Vietnamese workers returning from Eastern Europe will bring back with them "dangerous" ideas... Developments in the communist world since 1989 seem likely to ensure that a confused and somewhat frightened party leadership will make no swift moves towards major political reform in Vietnam.

Far from backing away from this possibility, the Hanoi regime is tightening its grip on intellectuals. Michael Leifer told me recently that the Chinese model is once more dominant. In its report of a few months ago, Asia Watch sums up the most recent crackdown on Vietnamese intellectuals and includes a list of sixty-two people in detention. "Vietnam," the report begins,

continues to arrest and imprison its citizens for peacefully expressing views not sanctioned by official policy or for practicing religion outside official religious associations.

This should be read together with the equally revealing Amnesty International report on human rights in Vietnam, April 1, 1990, reviewed in these pages on August 16, 1990, and the section on Vietnam in the carefully compiled *Information and Censorship: World Report 1991*, published by a group called Article 19. The report notes that with one exception its list does not include the names of many Southerners associated with the previous government, who have been detained since 1975, and thus have spent more than fifteen years in prison.

<sup>3</sup>Text of letter to Nguyen Hu Tho, President, Fatherland Front, dated January 6, 1991.

<sup>4</sup>Library Association Publishing (London, 1991), pp. 236-239.

<sup>5</sup>RIIA Discussion Papers No. 35 (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1991).

One distinguished writer on the Asia Watch list is the poet Nguyen Chi Thien, who has already spent more than half his life in prison; he was first jailed during the Vietnamese version of the Hundred Flowers in 1958. In 1979 he handed a group of poems, called *Flowers from Hell*, to the British embassy in Hanoi, which refused to give him asylum. Another intellectual, Dr. Nguyen Dan Que, who had already served ten years in prison between 1978 and 1988 for speaking out on human rights, was rearrested on June 14, 1990, for signing a petition calling on the government to respect human rights and "to adopt a pluralistic political system." Asia Watch has requested comment about his case from Hanoi, but has received no answer.

Vietnam's long war in the second half of the twentieth century, the regime's ultimate explanation for virtually all subsequent failures, is now being questioned by writers in Vietnam and the retribution against them has been swift. According to the Paris-based International Federation of Human Rights, in an appeal dated June 17, 1991, the woman novelist Duong Thu Huong was arrested in April for "collecting and sending out of the country documents harmful to the State security." The real reason for her arrest, the statement says, is that she sent abroad the manuscript of her latest novel, *The Triumphal Arch*, which, according to the federation, describes the Vietnamese war and

the useless sacrifice of successive generations of young Vietnamese in the name of ideological and political goals which have led the country to the total economic, cultural, and moral devastation it suffers today.

Huong is not a class enemy. In 1967 she was sent by the Ministry of Culture to a particularly dangerous front-line post to "sing louder than the bombs," and in 1979 she went to the front again, as a film writer, in the war against China. Now she has been expelled from the Party.

As in China, writers with their "sugar-coated bullets" are a main target for the Party (although Chinese writers have been more brutally treated). In an unpublished paper written in 1990, Professor K. W. Taylor of Cornell, one of the most perceptive students of Vietnamese intellectual life, observes that

Authors are at the forefront of the current ferment in Vietnamese intellectual life, testing the limits of the forbidden and opening up mental space for the ongoing process of reform in the economic, political, and cultural life of the country. Newly published novels and short stories are quickly read by millions of Vietnamese in all parts of the country, especially those written by authors known to be "interesting."

One of the most "interesting" writers is Nguyen Huy Thip. When the editor Nguyen Ngoc, who published three of Thip's stories in 1988, was removed from his post for doing so, his colleagues defiantly elected him head of the Writers' Association. What makes Thip interesting, according to

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"Military history as it should be written..."\*

## The Dynamics of Defeat

The Vietnam War in Hau Nghia Province

Eric M. Bergerud

*"Bergerud is knowledgeable, experienced, properly skeptical — the necessary traits of a good military historian. The Dynamics of Defeat is an original work, rather than the all too common rehash which serves largely to pass on the existing myths and historical fictions of the Vietnam War."*

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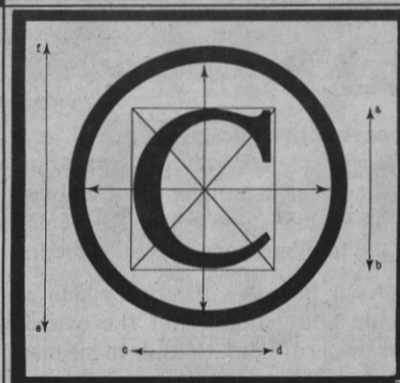
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Taylor, and perhaps keeps him out of jail, is that unlike the exponents of socialist realism, for whom "real" denotes whatever the Party defines as "real," he escapes the Party's dictates by writing about history indirectly and ambiguously (as Chinese writers do all the time). When he writes about heroism, a virtue that Party propaganda claims links anti-Mongol fighters of the thirteenth century, anti-Chinese leaders of the fifteenth century, and Ho Chi Minh, Thip's leading character is an antihero whose aggressive behavior is unmistakably identified, Taylor tells us,

with that of the current Vietnamese government, while a specially honoured traditional hero is shown as "a man with normal human appetites who could speak crudely and act cruelly,"

Thip's message "is that true virtue and intelligence are not to be found in the real Vietnamese world, but only among supernatural beings." Thip has challenged the Party's version of history—"the last intellectual refuge," Taylor concludes, "for legitimizing the authority of a regime no longer able to respond to criticisms of its failures in the present."

## 2.

One question worth asking about criticism of either side in Vietnam is whether it recognizes the cruelties of the other side as well. A revelation of the pain and confusion such recognition can arouse in a single person comes in the account, in Walter Capps's valuable anthology, by Davidson Loehr, an army lieutenant in Vietnam from July 1966 to August 1967. The Vietcong had assembled some villagers during a recruiting drive and when the village chief failed to cooperate they raped his six- and eight-year-old daughters, cut their throats, and threw the bodies into a well to pollute the water. Loehr's interpreter, Captain Trang, vomits and says repeatedly, "They are the same ages as my two girls." Six months later the Vietcong ambushes a 250-man American company, killing thirteen soldiers and wounding fifty-nine. It emerges that Captain Trang, whom Loehr thought he knew well, had revealed the company's movements to the enemy. "I wanted him dead," Loehr says. "But that had been taken care of." Trang was tortured and executed by his own army. Soon, however, Loehr learned that Trang had betrayed the Americans because the Vietcong had kidnapped his own daughters and would have killed them had he not cooperated. "It's a story with no exit," he writes.

You can't know it without being in it and once you're in it you can't get out of it. Nothing that anyone did made any sense, unless you were there, and then it was the only thing there was to do. It was hard to know who to blame. It was even harder to accept finally that the fact that there was no one to blame, no adequate or effective scapegoat to take away the sins of the world...

The Americans tried to make tangible a sense of their progress by issuing daily body counts and usually admitting their own losses; their enemies

had little to say publicly about their own dead. In 1990 one of General Giap's aides confided to Stanley Karnow, whose account is included in Capps's collection, that at least a million soldiers were killed, mostly fighting the Americans. He said nothing about wounded; "As for the civilian toll," he said, "We haven't the faintest idea."

The psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton has written often and movingly about deaths and killing in wartime, and the effects of what he calls "psychic numbing." Historians of the future, he suggests in an article that Capps includes in his anthology,

will select the phenomenon of the body count as the perfect symbol



French paratroopers in Vietnam, June 1952

of America's descent into evil... I know of no greater corruption than this phenomenon: the amount of killing—any killing—becomes the total measure of achievement.

As it happens, the other side also made body counts, but the evidence for this is difficult to find. In his meticulous and comprehensive study of one province during the war, *The Dynamics of Defeat: The Vietnam War in Hau Nghia Province*, Eric M. Bergerud, a military historian at Lincoln College, describes a Vietcong document captured after Tet in late 1968. It makes what he calls "preposterous" claims of victory which included almost six thousand dead Americans in one small district; the actual number, according to official American records, was 883. Bergerud says the report is accurate about the enormous Communist losses.

What of a regime that sends millions of men into battle, and keeps silent about those who died? How much did the high command of the North Vietnamese army care about the lives of its own soldiers, much less those of the French and Americans? In one region of Hau Nghia province alone, according to Bergerud, who used the Front's own confidential statistics, the Communists suffered "a 74 percent casualty rate that in military terms, is considered ruinous." At Dien Bien Phu, Giap has written, within the first

month of the battle, March–April, 1954, he lost at least sixteen thousand soldiers, including six thousand dead or at least two full combat divisions. There were one surgeon and six "assistant doctors" for fifty thousand troops. No wonder that at the end of the month, according to Giap, "a rightist and negative tendency appeared among our officers and men, under various forms: fear of casualties, losses, fatigue, difficulties and hardships, underestimation of the enemy, subjectivism, and self-conceit."

Giap dealt with this by "a campaign of ideological education and struggle... This campaign was a great success... and one of the greatest achievements ever scored by this work in the history of struggle of our

army." General Phillip Davidson, Westmoreland's intelligence chief, does not condemn Giap for his free-spending way with his soldiers' lives:

As a military strategist and tactician, he started as an amateur and finished as a professional... It was in the field of organization, administration, and motivation that he excelled. In this area he was a genius.

Lifton describes all the Vietnam veterans he knows of as "alienated." He refers to a study of two hundred veterans which stated that "not one of them—hawk, dove, or haunted—was entirely free of doubt about the nature of the war and the American role in it... they retain the gnawing suspicion that it was all for nothing." Some might say this is because they lost. But some of Giap's old soldiers, as described by Morley Safer in *Flashbacks*,<sup>6</sup> were equally, although more mutely, agonized by what it had all meant. One of them said that no one had won the war. Their commander brushed this aside. So far as we know, he saw the body counts on his side as a problem to be overcome in the interest of victory on the field. How troubled would he have been that the Vietcong, according to Loehr, raped and killed little girls in a similar interest?

As for American body counts, they were not, in spite of what Lifton says,

<sup>6</sup>Random House, 1990.

"the total measure of achievement," revolting though they were. Carrying them out was part of a six-part directive, written in 1966 by John McNaughton of Defense and William Bundy of State, and approved by Rusk, McNamara, and General Davidson surmises, by Westmoreland. Westmoreland was directed to "attrit" Vietcong and North Vietnamese forces so heavily that their losses would equal their capacity to supply new troops. The five other sections dealt with pacification, secure communications, and defending vital regions. Davidson admits that body count "has a ghoulish sound, and it was a gruesome business." The McNaughton-Bundy directive, "however, permitted no other method," which sounds as if Davidson is saying "We were just following orders," and may fit into Lifton's concept of evil, although destroying the enemy is the intention of most generals. Davidson admits that innocents were often killed but claims that conscientious commanders tried to be accurate and not make their units "look good" by inflating the numbers. He says, too, that an accurate body count was never certain. He puts the number of enemy dead in early 1969 at 435,000, and quotes Giap as telling Oriana Fallaci that he had lost 500,000, with the losses of six more years of war still to come.

General William E. DePuy, who was in Vietnam for almost three years, and was interviewed by Harry Maurer for his fascinating book, said

I figured out recently that if the North Vietnamese put up a memorial like the one we have on the [Washington] Mall, and it was adjusted for the relative populations of our country and theirs, the one in Hanoi would have 7 million names on it. Just soldiers. Interesting, isn't it?... Of course, the ARVN [South Vietnamese army] lost a lot, too. But the North Vietnamese main forces lost up to 40 percent of their troops every year. That's enormous. It's unbelievable...

I should have known better. In World War II I fought in a unit with casualties like that. The 90th Division had 25,000 casualties in just eleven months, so I should have known.

As usual, Bergerud's analysis, largely based on American and captured documents, is a shrewd one. During the war, Americans used to wonder whether the South Vietnamese preferred the Saigon government or its adversaries. What they should have been asking, according to Bergerud, is which they were willing to die for. "Had they asked the second question, they would not have liked the answer."

Such an acceptance of their own losses helps to explain the Communists' treatment of captured or dead enemies. DePuy recalls looking down from the air onto a battlefield where the Vietcong had massacred a South Vietnamese Ranger battalion and killed the prisoners. "They had arrayed all the bodies. They put the battalion commander and the American advisor at the very top, and laid the rest of the bodies out on each terrace all the way around like the spokes of a wheel. It was a vicious kind of



thing." DePuy fails to mention the similarly vicious killings by his own side; but he seems more thoughtful than most US commanders.

When you step back—and I didn't have these thoughts while I was there—you see the difference between a country that's fighting on its own terrain for its survival, and a country that's sending its forces halfway around the world to "contain" Communism.... I don't think Americans can be expected to support long, inconclusive wars.... If you have GIs going into villages or barrios and trying to sort out friend from foe, that's a disaster. It gives the other side a precious asset—call it patriotism, xenophobia, or nationalism. And once that happens, God help you.

The general is a professional soldier who, like Davidson, admires his enemy's ability to slug it out, absorb blows, and push toward victory. Perhaps Robert Lifton attributes evil too broadly to only one side.

Or perhaps evil is the wrong word. Some writers quote veterans as saying "It don't mean nothing" when they refer to the war, indicating with this phrase that they really feel the reverse. Bill Crownover worked in Saigon as a civilian doing electrical maintenance for an American contractor for a modest hourly wage. He told Maurer that he spent much of the time drunk in bars, hanging around with bar girls, and getting into fights.

You very rarely referred to the Vietnamese as Vietnamese. The zips, always the zips. Zips could mean zipper-heads, because someone unzipped his head and dumped all his brains out. Or it could mean zero, which means nothing, which is what they were. The zip mentality. Zip, zip, zip, zip, zip. It was a beautiful word.

That would make a good quote for an anti-war speech in the Sixties. But what of the views of William Broyles, Jr., who was a marine in Vietnam and later became editor in chief of *Newsweek*? Remembering the war, he wrote, "I had to admit that for all these years I also had loved it, and more than I knew. I hated war, too." He has spent time with veterans and most of them, he claims,

would have to admit that somewhere inside themselves they loved it, too, loved it as much as anything that has happened to them before or since. And how do you explain that to your wife, your children, your parents, or your friends?

Or, perhaps, to Robert Lifton? It might be hard to admit such thoughts to a psychiatrist. Capps quotes Broyles as saying:

War is a brutal, deadly game, but a game, the best there is.... But if you come back whole you bring with you the knowledge that you have explored regions of your soul that in most men will always remain uncharted.... The love of war stems from the union, deep in the core of our being, between sex and destruction, beauty and horror, love and death.... One of the most troubling reasons men love war is the love of destruction, the

thrill of killing.... Whenever another platoon got a higher body count, I was disappointed; it was like suiting up for the football game and then not getting to play.... I always thought napalm was greatly overrated, unless you enjoy watching tires burn. I preferred white phosphorus, which exploded with a fulsome elegance.... I loved it more—not less—because of its function: to destroy, to kill.... War is, in short, a turn-on.

The ambivalent thoughts of soldiers on both sides have no place in *The Vietnam Wars: 1945-1990* by Professor Marilyn Young of New York University. She condemns the United States for its cruelty in Vietnam, and provides much information, which we must not forget, about atrocities. Near the end she says that veterans "felt spat upon, stigmatized, contaminated." She speaks sympathetically of their postwar stress disorders, and quotes Lifton's remark that the key fact of the Vietnam war "is that no one really believes in it." But Young's condemnation of the conduct of the war is so vehement that many veterans reading it would be bound to feel guilty. Unless they had deserted they must share in the responsibility which Young insists on her last page we must all feel. And what if a part of the veterans' stress is the inability to admit, as Broyles does, that some or many of them, to some or a large degree, enjoyed themselves in Vietnam?

Young's book is an able "synthesis" (as she puts it) of the English-language literature on the war, starting in 1945, with a brief look back to the earlier French period, and extending to the late Eighties. It is well-organized and documented, and written in the polemical, slightly sentimental style of the Sixties left.

Young wants Americans to feel bad about the war, "to accept responsibility for it," and in her final chapters she brings in Lebanon, Libya, Grenada, Panama, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Angola—all part of what she describes as "a whole Orwellian world" projected by Washington since World War II. US policy has been heavy-handed and destructive in all these places but all the "projecting" has not been done by Americans. When Young deals with Vietnamese and Chinese aggression against their neighbors she places most of the blame on the US.

She rightly says that many Americans no longer believe that the United States is a champion of freedom and justice, and indeed many Americans, as a result of the war, believe virtually nothing their government says. But Young ignores the general loss of faith, too, in communism, not only in the West—including the Soviet Union—but in its Asian forms as well; hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese have fled to the United States, which destroyed much of their country. Young includes only a subclause on her own view of the boat people: she absurdly suggests they fled only because of the Cambodian-Vietnamese war. Perhaps she has not read any of the books based on interviews with refugees from the Vietnam People's Republic about why they really left. Le Ly Hayslip, whose poignant essay

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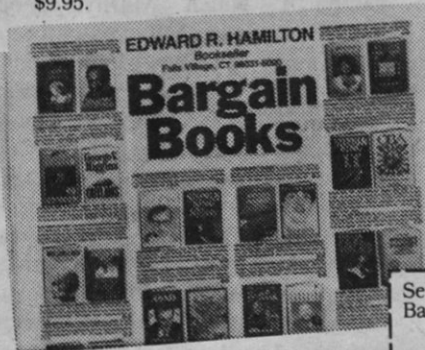
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appears in Capps's collection, remembers how as a teenager, "I loved, labored and fought steadily for the Viet Cong against American and South Vietnamese soldiers." Everything, she says, called her to war: her ancestors, myths and legends, parents' teachings, Ho's cadres: "Should an obedient child be less than an ox and refuse to do her duty?" But despite her cultural loyalties, for Hayslip the picture is less clear than for Marilyn Young:

Because we had to appease the allied forces by day and were terrorized by Viet Cong at night, we slept as little [as American GIs]. We obeyed both sides and wound up pleasing neither. We were people in the middle. We were what the war was all about."

Eric Bergerud provides a similar but more complex picture: "It is very possible that Vann [John Paul Vann, the central figure in Neil Sheehan's *A Bright and Shining Lie*] and others were right when they claimed that most peasants did not care who ruled in Saigon and just wanted to be left alone. The Party had what it needed, the support of the most politically aware and the most determined segment of the peasantry."

Young also writes cursorily of one of the large population movements in modern times, the emigration of well over one million Catholics who in the summer of 1954 left North Vietnam for the South. Apparently drawing on George McTurnan Kahin's *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam*,<sup>7</sup> she devotes ten lines to the entire episode and provides no sources. But she gives the impression that the Catholics left largely because they were "encouraged by the Catholic hierarchy and organized by [the CIA's] Lansdale and his team." This is true as far as it goes, and Kahin makes the same point at much greater length and with substantial citations to the Pentagon Papers and other early accounts of the movement, including Bernard Fall's *The Two Vietnams*.<sup>8</sup>

Nonetheless, whatever the uses of American Special Forces' propaganda and the power of the Catholic hierarchy, more than one million Vietnamese citizens did not want to live under the Communists; this was 65 percent of the northern Catholic population. Fall also says that the Tonkin Catholics would have fled in any event because of their "long experience at the hands of their non-Catholic fellow citizens," and observes as well that although the US-inspired psychological warfare was very effective, "there is no doubt that hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese would have fled Communist domination in any case."<sup>9</sup> Young says the refugees "were carried south in American ships," while Fall says the French carried more than half of them. Most sources agree that the movement of the Catholics into the South, where they were protected by the Catholic Diem family, caused considerable resentment among Buddhist and Taoist Vietnamese, who associated the Catholics with the French occupiers. I remember Catholic villages in the South in 1965 that were heavily

<sup>7</sup>Knopf, 1986.

<sup>8</sup>Praeger, 1967.

<sup>9</sup>Fall, *The Two Vietnams*, p. 153.

armed and fearful of Vietcong attacks.

Much of Young's narrative follows the general line set out masterfully by Kahin, supplemented by other familiar and well-used sources. She fails to acknowledge the difficulties encountered by the "good" side in her account of the battle of Dien Bien Phu, omitting Giap's own accounts of the failure of nerve among his own forces or his quarrel with his Chinese advisers about tactics. The interesting photographs she has included show the French and the Americans at their worst, while the Vietcong and North Vietnamese pictures—some of them clearly posed—show their subjects smiling and determined.

In her account of the brutal North Vietnamese land reform of the 1950s, Young writes that the Party committed, and later admitted, "abuses" but she makes the killings—she puts them at between three and fifteen



Hue after US bombing, May 1968

thousand—sound like "a series of spiteful local acts of vengeance. One of the leading authorities on the period, Carlyle Thayer of the Australian Defence Force Academy, has shown in *War by Other Means* the role of the Party in the terror, during which "many long-serving cadres with bourgeois backgrounds were denounced; landlords and rich peasants were condemned in public trials for committing crimes..." Thayer puts the number of executions at five thousand.

Thayer supplies much detail on the period in 1955 and 1956 when there was a purge of dissident North Vietnamese intellectuals who "began to express concern about a lack of freedom of expression in their respective fields of interest." This repressive campaign, which Marilyn Young wholly ignores, began even before the well-known crushing of hundreds of thousands of similar intellectuals in China after the abrupt termination of the Hundred Flowers. Thayer does not provide hard figures on the extent of the Vietnamese crackdown, but writes, "Quite simply, Vietnam's party leaders were unwilling to sanction criticism which raised politically sensitive issues at a time of mounting domestic unrest."

The same situation obtains in Hanoi thirty-six years later, and for all these years it has remained part of the largely unexamined and mostly unknown history of life in North Vietnam. Except for the reference to the land reform of the mid-Fifties, Young,

who rightly devotes several pages to the brutality of Diem's repression in the South, has nothing to say about the northern regime's crushing of political dissent. She writes,

In short, in 1956–57 the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was an exceedingly poor country, determined to achieve both social equity and prosperity for as much of its population as international politics and the limits of its own vision allowed.

What the limits were, she does not say.

In fact there were not many limits on the Party's use of violence against its enemies, and Young, who is unrelenting in her judgments on American atrocities, slurs over the facts when confronted with Communist ones—for example, when dealing with the Hue massacre during the Tet offensive of early 1968 she puts the number of

out by the Vietcong with his five-year-old son, three-year-old daughter, and two of his nephews. "There was a burst of gunfire. When the rest of the family came out, they found all five of them dead."<sup>11</sup> Young may feel she has dealt with such killings when she writes, "In the early days of the occupation, there were indeed summary executions."

When something bad happens on the non-American side, Young uses words like "indeed," and "certainly," as if to show that she is not concealing anything. In the case of the Hue murders, she produces one of her characteristic obfuscating statements: "...it is unseemly, even obscene, to argue about the numbers." Why it is unseemly to establish how many people were killed in cold blood by the Vietcong she never says. The killings were not indiscriminate slaughter, Young writes, but the summary execution of those on lists drawn up by the NLF of employees of the Saigon regime. Did these include foreign doctors and priests? Although she quotes from an interesting speculation by Richard Falk of Princeton that the Hue executions caused many Southerners to fear the front and eventually to become boat people, Young ends with another exonerating sentence: "What the history of Tet in the city of Hue reveals is the extraordinary harshness and brutality of a struggle that had been going on for over twenty years." Note how brutality now becomes the villain, and not the people who committed it.

Young is right to say, however, that most of the killing in Hue and during Tet generally—and during the war as a whole—was inflicted by the Americans. In his *About Face: The Odyssey of an American Warrior*,<sup>12</sup> Colonel David Hackworth writes that during Tet "as the Americans geared up their war machine in counterattack, close to all the civilian casualties were from US activity."

Eric Bergerud quotes an American major in Hau Nghia province who had vainly tried to prevent American soldiers from treating all Vietnamese as if they were Vietcong: "They used to destroy in a few minutes time all that I could possibly conjure up with all the civic action programs and begging and pleading and whatever else you could think of: they would counteract what I could do in a month in three or four minutes."

The lack of even-handedness in Young's account is apparent as well when it comes to torture. She refers to the American-sponsored interrogation centers where torture was "routinely administered." She supplies a poignant Magnum photograph of a captured Vietcong woman, wounded in the spine, with her hands tied behind her back, waiting for what an American officer says is rape and execution by South Vietnamese interrogators. Earlier, she includes another picture of a captured American pilot being escorted by a woman "militia fighter." Young does not mention in her book that many American prisoners were also tortured, although evidence of this is abundant. In *Strange Ground*, Maurer interviews an AID employee who was captured by the Vietcong and marched North with a

people murdered by the NLF at three to four hundred, saying this, "the most careful estimate," was provided by Len Ackland. But she does not identify Ackland or his work or explain why this number is correct and others, such as Don Oberdorfer's in *Tet!*, reaching the thousands, are not. Oberdorfer was a well-known journalist for *Time* and *The Washington Post* in Vietnam and was there during Tet. His account of what happened in Hue supplies information omitted by Young, in addition to his estimate of the number of those murdered by the Vietcong: 2,800 victims of the occupation, "shot to death, bludgeoned or buried alive in the most extensive political slaughter of the war."<sup>10</sup> Young writes that "all the accounts agree that NLF rather than North Vietnamese units were responsible for the executions," but Oberdorfer points out that Hue lay in a region "under direct command and control from North Vietnam." Nor in her account of those murdered does Young include the three German doctors working in public health in Hue, or the two French priests who were buried alive.

Nor, moreover, does Young mention the 428 Catholics marched away for "political orientation," whose skeletons were not discovered for nineteen months. Oberdorfer writes that Pham Van Tuong, a part-time janitor in a government office, was called

<sup>10</sup>Don Oberdorfer, *Tet!: The Turning Point in the Vietnam War* (Doubleday, 1971; Da Capo, 1984), p. 201.

<sup>11</sup>Oberdorfer, *Tet!*, p. 229.

<sup>12</sup>Touchstone Press, 1990, p. 612.



civilian nurse of missionary background. Both were horribly treated and neglected.

The girl began to get very weak. They'd kick her and drag her and raise hell with her.... She lay in her own goddamn shit, and they wouldn't help me wash her... they deliberately tried to poison us so it would look like natural causes. I buried her, and I became very depressed after that for a while.

Maurer also interviewed an air force colonel who realized within twenty minutes of his first interrogation, which included being beaten with fists and rifle butts; that "I was looking at death right there." Later the torture became more severe. "If they want something badly enough, they're gonna do whatever they have to do to get it."

This determination to get results even if it meant imposing great suffering was not confined to torturing captured American pilots. In Hau Nghia province, says Bergerud, "The Party was careful to direct its violence at the very worst or very best GVN [Government of Vietnam] officials. 'Punishing' (the Party's euphemism for murder) a despicable official gained the Party popularity; killing good officials sowed fear. By making efficiency and anti-Communist zeal very dangerous, the Party encouraged bad and dishonest administration in GVN areas... there can be no doubt that virtually all assassinations were premeditated and came by order of high Party officials."

Young ignores both such suffering and the mentality that ordered it to take place. And when she sums up the terrible costs of the entire war, for which not only the Americans were responsible, her conclusion is bland: the millions of refugees, the hundreds of thousands who died (an underestimate), the many more who were wounded, the rural devastation, corruption (but only in the South), etc.,

were a heavy price to pay for the right of the NLF to political participation in the life of South Vietnam. Still, the American effort to create an anti-Communist state south of the 17th parallel had been deferred; perhaps defeated.

But Young should know that the NLF never gained the right to participate in the life of Vietnam as a result of the war; nor was the NLF ever intended by the northern Communists to have this right, as Carlyle Thayer and Gabriel Kolko (in *Anatomy of a War*) have shown. Young's own analysis of the degree of control of Hanoi over the Front is muddled. She is probably still influenced by what anti-war activists were told by both Hanoi and the Front during the war, when we were assured how independent the NLF was. She twice quotes Truong Nhu Tang, the ex-minister of justice of the Front, but never tells her readers that he fled from Vietnam after he realized that those who had joined what they imagined was an independent southern movement had been manipulated and betrayed. He wrote:

Instead of national reconciliation and independence, Ho Chi Minh's successors have given us a country devouring its own and beholden

once again to foreigners, though now it is the Soviets rather than the Americans. In the process, the lives that so many gave to create a new nation are now no more than ashes cast aside.<sup>13</sup>

Young can do no more than to refer, near the end of her book, to Hanoi's impatience and distrust of "enemies real and anticipated" and its indifference "to local sensibilities." Hanoi, she remarks, has acted

without paying *undue attention* to the mobilization of popular support... the necessities of peace, more difficult to determine, could prove harder to accept [my italics].

"Undue attention" is one of Young's more unfortunate phrases. Why weren't the people of South Vietnam



Saigon, April 27, 1975, after bombardment by Communist forces

thousand—sound like a series of spiteful local acts of vengeance. One of the leading authorities on the period, Carlyle Thayer of the Australian Defence Force Academy, has shown in *War by Other Means* the role of the Party in the terror, during which "many long-serving cadres with bourgeois backgrounds were denounced; landlords and rich peasants were condemned in public trials for committing crimes..." Thayer puts the number of executions at five thousand.

and once an antiwar activist, refers in *A Vietnam Reader* to those on the left who

explain away revolutionary abominations... conjuring rationalizations for crimes committed by left-wing guerrillas. A curious partial freedom is parceled out to state-sponsored socialism, as if revolutions are responsible for their accomplishments, while their brutality, if acknowledged at all, is credited to American imperialism.

There is more than a little of this tendency in Marilyn Young's often useful and interesting book.

General Phillip Davidson, an author of passions and biases as strong as Marilyn Young's, is occasionally capa-

<sup>13</sup>Truong Nhu Tang, *Journal of A Vietcong* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1986), p. 310; published in the US under the title *A Vietcong Memoir* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986).

ble of more even-handed appraisals, a surprising quality in a man who was for two years the army's chief intelligence officer in Vietnam. *Vietnam at War: The History: 1946-1975* is a detailed analysis of the long struggle in which he says "the United States won every battle in and over Vietnam and yet lost the war." Davidson has decided to concentrate on General Vo Nguyen Giap as the "connecting symbol" between the French and the American struggles. At the North's triumphant celebrations in Saigon, Premier Pham Van Dong described Giap as "the architect of our victory."

Davidson starts, however, by coarsely drawing a contrast between Giap and Westmoreland. Giap has "thick lips, a flattened nose, no neck, a bulging forehead and a receding hairline... this runtiness probably

once large numbers of American dead were being sent home. "The exploitation of this critical American vulnerability elevated Vo Nguyen Giap into the first rank of grand strategists."

The battlefield, in Davidson's judgment, is not where the war was lost. He insists, as all American military commanders have ever since, that while Tet was a crushing loss for the enemy, it was turned into a victory because of the reactions of the press and civilian leaders at home. Ultimately, he says, the Communists had "a superior grand strategy," namely "the independence and unification of Vietnam and eventually of all of French Indochina." This is the kind of war General DePuy warned that Americans must not fight. The Americans lost, Davidson asserts, because they violated a North Vietnamese axiom: you may win battles but you will lose the war if your tactics are right but your strategy is wrong. For Giap's forces it was just the opposite, which is why they almost invariably lost on the field but won in the end. Predictably, Davidson's analysis, like the German generals' "stab in the back theory" after the Great War, lets the military off the hook.

We had many strengths, but our principal advantage over the enemy lay in our tremendous military superiority... [the correct strategy was] to avoid a protracted war and to strike the Viet Cong and North Vietnam as soon as possible with enough military force to bring the war to a quick and satisfactory solution.

If Congress had refused to declare war, Davidson says, with all that such a declaration entailed, presumably including mobilization of reserves and even more intensive bombing, the US should have gone home.

Why the United States should have declared war and gone on to win, Davidson never considers. He has little else but contempt for our Saigon allies, although during Tet, he says, some of their units fought valiantly, and civilians failed to go over to the other side as Giap had hoped they would. In a single sentence, Davidson appears to torpedo any justification for the loss of a single American life in Vietnam, much less the taking of Vietnamese lives. We went there to defend, he says, a South Vietnam which

had never been a nation, and it had no precepts of national patriotism or sacrifice for the national good. The extended family (including long-dead ancestors) was the only recognized symbol of unity and loyalty to the country.

Davidson is right to say that the will to defend South Vietnam was weak and confused. But his implication that Vietnamese have no concept of patriotism shows startling ignorance of Vietnamese history, particularly of nationalism in this century, a subject well explored by many scholars, most recently in Australia by Carlyle Thayer and by Greg Lockhart, the author of *Nation in Arms: The Origins of the People's Army of Vietnam*.<sup>14</sup> Giap's men were laying down their lives for more than dead ancestors.

Giap's genius, in Davidson's view, lay in avoiding direct attacks on

<sup>14</sup>Simon and Schuster, 1989.



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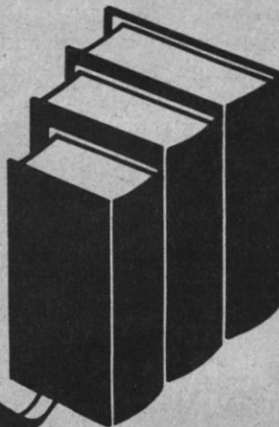
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American forces and concentrating on the American home front, where a nearly treasonous press, "liberal" civilians, a vacillating LBJ, a Nixon who wanted to get out, and a nervous population which believed what they read in the newspapers combined to defeat themselves. The US army itself, he concedes, began to fray and collapse, fragging its officers and sinking into drugs. The rising numbers of these demoralized soldiers coming home in coffins was the final blow to the war effort. Davidson agrees with George Will's suggestion that had Antietam been shown on TV, the reluctant McClellan would have been elected president. Censorship and a short war, plus World War Two journalistic ethics, could have kept the home spirit alive. "Even now," Davidson concludes, "our defeat in Vietnam has taught us nothing."

Colonel Hackworth would agree, but for different reasons. In his usual blunt fashion he says of Tet, in *About Face*, that while it may have been a tactical American victory, "the strategic and psychological victory the Communists achieved during Tet—among the South Vietnamese people, the American public, and the American fighting men—was incalculable." More bluntly still, in a report written in 1968, Hackworth summed up: "The US Army has botched the war." What the army needed in Vietnam, he suggested, was a great fighter, like Stonewall Jackson, Rommel—or Giap.<sup>15</sup>

Without mentioning Davidson by name, Clark Clifford, in *Counsel to the President*, disagrees on almost every point with Davidson's analysis. On Tet, Clifford says,

the outcome of the Tet Offensive may remain in dispute, but there can be no question that it was a turning point in the war. Its size and scope made mockery of what the American military had told the public about the war, and devastated Administration credibility... the military assessment of the Tet Offensive since it ended was incomplete and self-serving. At the time of the initial attacks the reaction of our military leadership approached panic and their intelligence failure [Davidson's responsibility; he claims that the army knew what was likely to happen] was a critical factor.<sup>16</sup>

As for the seditious press, Clifford says that most "of the reporting from the war zone reflected the official position. Contrary to right-wing revisionism, reporters and the anti-war movement did not defeat America in Vietnam. Our policy failed because it was based on false premises and false promises." It is the hawks who produced defeat in Vietnam, according to McNamara's successor as secretary of defense, who for some years took a hawkish position himself. "They argued that America's worldwide strength and credibility were on the line in Vietnam, which was not true.... Then, after the failure of their policies they sought to blame those who had opposed the war."<sup>17</sup>

Bergerud sees this in a far broader

<sup>15</sup>Hackworth, *About Face*, pp. 612, 614.

<sup>16</sup>*Counsel to the President: A Memoir* (Random House, 1991), p. 474.

<sup>17</sup>*Counsel to the President*, p. 613.

perspective. Although many rural Vietnamese may now be unhappy about the way the war turned out, and most would probably have been glad to have been left alone during it, he suggests that

While the war was on, as confirmed by scores of reports and interrogations received by the Americans at Hau Nghia in every phase of the conflict [as Davidson, the chief of Army Intelligence, must have known] peasants perceived the followers of the Front as honest, efficient, and genuinely concerned about the people's welfare... the GVN, even with massive American support could never create the essential foundation for strong and resilient morale—the perception that it could win. The collapse of 1975 is very intelligible in this light.

That the Front itself was then forced to disband by the North Vietnamese remains one of the war's great ironies.

## 3.

The two books on postwar Vietnam, by Justin Wintle and John Balaban, are perhaps the most revealing to be published so far. Except for reports by human rights organizations and quick trips by reporters to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, the texture of life in Vietnam since the war has been largely neglected.

Wintle is a novelist who was in Vietnam for the first time between October 4, 1989, and January 3, 1990. He wanted to describe Vietnam, the actual country, as opposed to the "Vietnam" we all remember from the war, the

nexus of signs and sounds that describe, simultaneously, American guilt and American prowess. The "real" Vietnam, elusive and incapable of realization as it may be, is never even given a chance. It has become, culturally, off limits.

Of course, as Wintle discovered, it is impossible to escape the war in Vietnam. It is a land of heroes, whom the Party ceaselessly invokes to hide its failures or justify them, but even though he felt like a "sheep under a heavy escort of many sheepdogs," he tried with some success to decode what he was shown.

His Vietnamese hosts were wary of letting Wintle see things that could have discredited them, and kept insisting, although he had not claimed this, that he was composing a biography of Ho Chi Minh. Within a few days he noticed that Hanoi is so poor that even a general whom he interviewed was slipped a small tip by Wintle's guides. As he wandered about Hanoi, eating in noodle shops, talking to giggling young women, and trying to find something attractive to buy, he noticed that the Party, after defeating the French, the Americans, and the Chinese, "has simply been unable to deliver the goods as regards the promised benefits of socialism." It is, therefore, as in all people's democracies, a great advantage to be a cadre:

Viewed this way, Vietnam... looks like a large protection racket, in which the state plays the role of the Mob or the Mafia or the Triads or the Yakuza.... A disease which is commonly regarded as affecting parts of the



capitalist body politic in fact affects the whole of the communist body politic.

Although he has an irritating habit of turning nouns into verbs ("Regularly I was entouraged") Wintle can be appealing because he does not pretend to understand everything. Near the Chinese border, at Pac Bo, he visits the cave where for a few weeks in 1941, after being abroad for almost thirty years, Ho Chi Minh began to organize the resistance. A nearby pool is fed by what Ho called Lenin stream. Wintle fills his flask and in a burst of inspiration, remembering the Vietnamese word for water, cries out, "Nuoc Lenin, Nuoc Lenin." His companions, also inspired, repeat the words. "I have, quite unwittingly, done something the retelling of which can do my standing nothing but good." On his long drive south to Ho Chi Minh City the story follows him. "Among cadres, among former VC, among potatoes big and small alike, among real heroes even, it will always raise a smile, or at the least a nod of approval."

On his way south Wintle and his "sheepdogs" stop at a small hostel for veterans of the sacred Nghe Tinh uprising of 1930, which the eight-month-old Communist party ineptly organized against the French. He meets a woman who remembers being tortured with a stick called the crocodile because it was studded with crocodile bones. Wintle asks the director what will happen when the last revolutionaries have died; will the hostel's doors be closed? No, there will be more veterans, from 1945, from the war against Diem and the Americans, and the one against the Chinese. "You see," the director replies, "in Vietnam, we have all the veterans we want. We may not be very rich in anything else, but for veterans, our supplies will last well into the next century... if not forever."

But Wintle's best passages are set in Quang Ngai, just below the 17th parallel, not far from the scene of the My Lai massacre. There he discovers that at nearby Binh Hoa, in late 1966, there was an even larger massacre of villagers, by South Korean soldiers. Wintle insists on going there and the cadres have no time to tell the villagers what to say. One old man "speaks absolutely from the heart. His eyes quickly soak. He simply cannot grasp why, after so many years, a complete stranger has arrived to ask him questions." At least 502 people were killed by the South Korean Green Dragon Division at Binh Hoa.

No foreigner has visited this terrible place, Wintle learns, and no Vietnamese journalists. There is no monument there. He later checks war records and finds no mention of Binh Hoa. All Wintle can do is to record the names people tell him. He guesses no one has made an issue of Binh Hoa,

because the Americans were not directly involved, because it was not a matter of westerners slaughtering Asian innocents, but of Asians slaughtering Asian innocents. I detect a distinct whiff of dog eat dog about the matter.

Later he is told what happened by one of the few survivors. He was a baby of seven months, was shot, and is now blind. Wintle wants to shake his hand. "Suddenly he drops his trousers to his

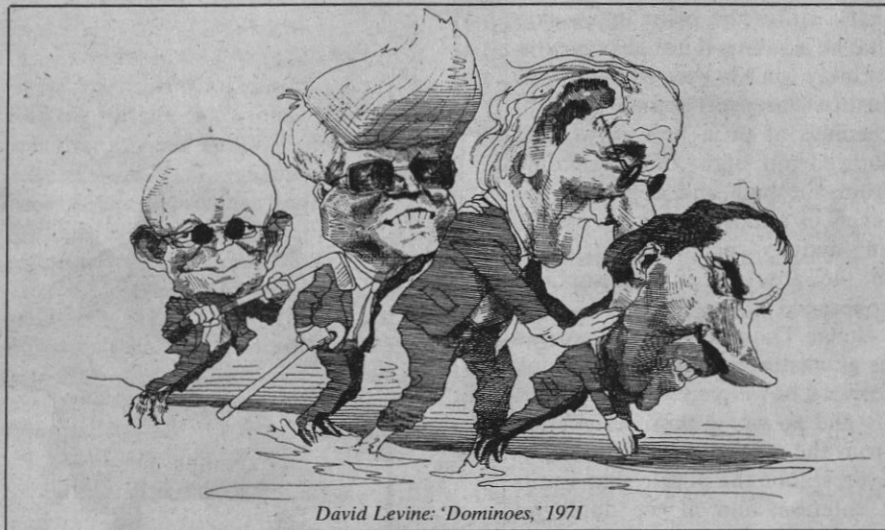
ankles and, feeling with his fingers, shows me the scar of the bullet wound in his buttock. The wound is almost as old as he is, yet he has never seen it." Wintle's books is full of short episodes like this; he has certainly succeeded in turning "Vietnam" into Vietnam, but he could never escape the war.

John Balaban's *Remembering Heaven's Face* is the best book I have read about both Vietnam and "Vietnam" in a long time. Balaban now teaches English at Penn State and has written poetry about the war. In 1967, after studying English at Harvard (where McNamara told demonstrating students to be more polite) he went to Vietnam as a conscientious objector, to work for International Voluntary Services. After two horrifying years there, he decided to close his notebooks for twenty years, and went home. He returned in 1971 to collect traditional

conduct pass from the Vietcong. He was gathering material on civilians killed by the Americans—half of all civilians admitted to hospitals in the delta were war casualties, Balaban says—and he had arranged to pass it on to Senator Kennedy who was visiting Vietnam. Before this could happen Gitelson was found shot and floating in a canal. Balaban, although he has no substantial evidence to support his claims, suspects that he was an early victim of the Phoenix Program, "which we now know was unleashed at that time to assassinate secretly anyone suspected of Viet Cong affiliation."

He describes the carnage inflicted by the Americans when they attacked the town Can Tho after the NLF had penetrated it during Tet.

The Air Force jets had been dropping cluster bombs that made the air on the outskirts... dance with



songs and, in 1989, on his forty-sixth birthday, traveled to the North.

The book's title comes from a scene rarely witnessed in Vietnam by foreigners. *Mat toi* means "the sun," or "face of heaven" in Vietnamese; it watches over human beings and "constantly reassesses our fates." Heaven's face is said to appear on the altar mirrors in Vietnamese homes, which bear the names of the family's ancestors; it is covered with a red cloth. Balaban once secretly watched some old men dancing in a courtyard. Their faces, tilted to the sky, are covered in red cloth.

That mysterious dance holds elements of all my memories of Vietnam... they contain a secret witnessing of a strange event, some bewilderment at what I saw, and some threat of violence—all tinged with the sense of the human spirit reaching toward heaven...

During his first year in Vietnam, based in Can Tho in the delta, Balaban made some odd friends. One was a CIA man, removed from his job as station chief because he refused to help carry out a private assassination scheme conducted by the province chief. "I'm not a murderer, John-boy... When I was in Greece, we killed some bad guys, but usually they had guns in their hands. This little bastard's just popping off his enemies. Old ladies. Anybody."

Another friend was the elusive Dave Gitelson, who worked alone in a remote International Voluntary Service station, where the farmers regarded him, Balaban says, as a kind of Johnny Appleseed with his knapsack full of seed samples and agricultural information. Balaban suspects Gitelson had what amounted to a safe-

knives, for each of those cluster bombs contained four hundred bomblets filled with razor-sharp slivers.... It was like a gang mower snipping off everything in its path. Whole families reunited at Tet the night before now lay about us shredded and bleeding to death in the dirt.

This account could have been matched by hundreds of others that provide irrefutable evidence of the cruelty and illegitimacy of the American war. It occurred after Balaban had been in Vietnam only a few months and he spent much of the rest of his time, despite the reluctance of many official Americans to cooperate, getting a few dozen horribly wounded children to US hospitals. As he says, "I recorded these events in my notebook as if it were a duty, as if having an account of the horrors could somehow mitigate them... But for twenty years now, I have kept these notebooks sealed shut, and it is clear why: their contents are unbearable..."

Horrible though it all was, Balaban, like William Broyles, Jr., felt he was with friends "more real to me than those around me in my middle age." One night, drunk and careering around Saigon with several other men, Balaban finds himself outside a strange house.

"I want to fuck!" Our friend yelled back in with a kind of frat mindlessness.

In seconds the door crashed open and I could see a huge naked black man, his skin a satin glow in the dim lamplight, pointing an M-16 at our friend and asking, "You want to fuck this?"

"It's a mistake, man. We got the

wrong house," someone said. Drunk and turned around, we had blundered into the lair of one of Saigon's AWOL blacks.

A pacifist, Balaban also carried a pistol in his elephant-hide briefcase to protect himself against a variety of prospective enemies. Eventually he threw it in the river. He says, "I grew up in Vietnam. In this particular sense of growing witness and wisdom, it wasn't all bad."

He could not get Vietnam out of his mind when he returned to what GIs called "the world," and in 1971 he came back to collect the songs, "*Co dao*," that were composed by peasants and reached back to "the distant origins of the Vietnamese when they called themselves the Lac and lived in diminutive agrarian kingdoms in the deltas of the Red and Black rivers of the North." When he had transcribed them he discovered "an amazing index to the continuum of Vietnamese humanism."

This humanism survived the war. When he cautiously tells people in the street in Hanoi that he is an American, it is "as if I had said 'Say cheese.' I am enveloped by smiles... Someone says, 'America, number one.'" He gives a lecture on American writers at the Institute of Literature. His interpreter, once a student at Yale, speaks perfect English. But when Balaban gets to Thoreau, "Mr. Binh hits his first and only snag. He can't say aloud: 'Civil Disobedience.' He just stops. He's embarrassed. He'd rather not say the words."

When he was working in the South in 1968 Balaban had met the extraordinary "Coconut Monk," Nguyen Tham Nam, who despite some harassment from Saigon "preached pacifism and compassionate regard" on Phoenix Island, a sanctuary from violence. In 1990, he was told by his Communist guides that the monk had been arrested as a "CIA collaborator." Balaban doubts the government believes this: "probably they just feel threatened by the obstreperous, bent man and his lethal humor."

In the countryside, to his astonishment, Balaban found that the wounds of war had all but disappeared. "The fields are green and the children are healthy. All have been readmitted into the sane continuum of Vietnamese life, which seemed broken forever." He condemns the US for its "small and sour-grapes... postwar punishment of Vietnam, our trade and diplomatic embargoes that keep the country in economic ruin. How self-punishing and miserly in American spirit are these policies." But most of Vietnam's sixty-two million people have forgotten the war, Balaban believes, as they get on with their harvests. This is not amnesia, he says, but sanity. He advises veterans to visit Vietnam, "... do something good there, and your pain won't seem so private, your need for resentment so great."

But unlike those who think only of the American responsibility for what Vietnam has become, Balaban, one of the few Westerners who knows the country intimately, says of the Communists that while they have given Vietnamese back their nation, it is "at such a price in fervid obedience and individual constraint that one senses that mere nationhood isn't enough." The sixty-two million "commonfolk," he writes, "have had enough of war and bravery and nobility of sacrifice." □