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Return to Vietnam: An Exchange

To the Editors:

In an otherwise well documented review "Reconsidering Vietnam," *NYR*, October 10, 1991, Jonathan Mirsky simply asserts that twice as many American Vietnam veterans have committed suicide since the war as were killed in it. Can he give us his documentation for this astounding statement?

David Slawson

Los Angeles, California

To the Editors:

I enjoyed Jonathan Mirsky's review of recent books on contemporary Vietnam, but would like to correct one point. In his review, Mirsky mentions the case of the pacifist monk Nguyen Thanh Nam, aka the "Coconut Monk," who during the war became well known for establishing a sanctuary from violence in South Vietnam and who preached to both sides to end the war. Mirsky says that John Balaban, a former

ment's religious policies. Two prominent scholar monks from Van Hanh University, Venerables Thich Tue Sy and Thich Tri Sieu, were arrested in 1984 with other monks and nuns and in 1988 were sentenced to death for alleged antigovernment activities, but their death sentences were commuted to twenty years imprisonment after international protest.

The persecution since 1975 of Vietnamese religious peace activists, and the unwillingness of most American peace activists to support them, is a matter that deserves more attention from your readers.

Stephen Denney

Berkeley, California

To the Editors:

Despite the kind words by Jonathan Mirsky about my book *Dynamics of Defeat*, he perpetuates one of the greatest distortions concerning the Vietnam War. He writes (p. 48) "that most of the killing in

American units rarely operated in either. More than half of South Vietnam's people lived in these two areas. The thousands that perished in either place usually did so as a result of the struggle of Vietnamese versus Vietnamese.

Assessing US firepower is also tricky. Figures of bombs and shells expended are deceiving. Bombing, with questionable success, was most intense over the Ho Chi Minh trail, a dense wilderness. Because Westmoreland believed our role was to destroy enemy combat units, most US operations in South Vietnam were aimed at enemy redoubts: large, rugged, and heavily fortified areas, understandably feared by our infantrymen. The DMZ, the Iron Triangle, War Zone C, War Zone D, and the Plain of Reeds were a few of the most notable, but every area had them. These were the infamous "free fire zones." (Very few ponder these words: if some areas are "free fire" then other areas, populated naturally, were restricted.) Because of the rugged geography of these areas the civilian population was sparse there in peacetime, and early fighting drove that small number out. Attack by aircraft and artillery always preceded the countless American ground/helicopter forays into the enemy's back yard. Indirect bombardment was ceaseless. As one pilot told me, with only slight exaggeration, "Vietnam was a genocidal conflict if you were a tree." Yet nature heals quickly in the tropics and far from being destroyed by the war, the South is now by far the most prosperous part of Vietnam.

Indiscriminate atrocities were aberrations. Although every side committed them, creating an atrocity tally would be impossible and pointless. It would also obscure a crucial point. During the Vietnam War, as in almost every other conflict, most civilians died in crossfire. Their deaths were incidental to combat not its aim.

The best proof of this concerning Americans came from the peasants themselves. Every American division's area of operation included populated zones. Yet, despite Front propaganda and mutual dislike, Vietnamese civilians showed little fear of American combat soldiers. Next to every permanent American base camp a commercial town sprouted up. Camp followers went deep into the bush, far from any protection, and set up shop at temporary perimeters selling everything from cassettes to drugs. During the day, they often followed Americans on patrol (indeed, their absence might be a good sign). The thousands of small American medical aid missions normally received overflow crowds.

Yet no one denies it was a harsh war and that we have blood on our hands, certainly more than enough to shock good and sensitive people. All US soldiers live with horrible memories. However, responsibility for death lies heavily with the other side. As government presence spread, some Front controlled "combat hamlets" were heavily fortified and bravely fought for even though Allied victory was certain. Frequently small Front units ambushed US vehicles in a pro-government hamlet, hoping for return fire. Front psychological/economic warfare was also bloody. Local guerrillas frequently mined the roads, attempting to isolate pro-government hamlets. Therefore frequent victims were old vehicles jammed with Vietnamese civilians on the way to market. Results were horrible. Markets were mortared and rocketed in government areas. Also, because we were visible, when Americans began fighting near a hamlet the opening small-arms fire allowed civilians time to go to the shelters which existed in every house. However, Front violence came without warning and people were defenseless. Lastly, consider that heavy fighting in densely populated areas was initiated in every case by the Front and Hanoi (Tet 1968, Tet 1969, Easter Offensive 1972, 1975 Offensive).

The only thing we know for sure is that our casualties (45,000 combat dead) were



colleague of the monk visiting Vietnam in 1990, was told by communist guides that Venerable Nam was arrested as a "CIA collaborator." Actually Venerable Nam died on May 17, 1990, at the age of eighty-one, while trying to escape from his place of house arrest in Ben Tre province. He was first arrested shortly after the communist victory in 1975, detained in Can Tho prison, and in subsequent years was placed under house arrest.

Other religious leaders who opposed the war within South Vietnam have received similar treatment. The progressive Catholic priest Father Chan Tin, a leading opponent of political imprisonment in South Vietnam during the war, was placed under house arrest in May 1990. According to a Hanoi radio broadcast, he was accused by the authorities of delivering three sermons on the subject of repentance, namely repentance for individuals, repentance for the church community, and repentance for the national community—with the aim of attacking the communist party and the socialist regime, distorting our party and state's renovative line, and inciting Catholics to demand human and civil rights.

The unified Buddhist church, from its headquarters at the An Quang pagoda in Saigon, was a major representative of a neutralist, "third force" approach to ending the conflict. It had developed close ties with international peace organizations such as the Fellowship of Reconciliation during the war. It was, however, dissolved by the Vietnamese government in 1982, and replaced by the government-sponsored "Vietnam Buddhist Church."

Most of the prominent leaders of the Unified Buddhist Church have either died or been arrested since 1975, including Ven. Thich Thien Minh, a leader of the youth movement against Thieu, who died in Ham Tan prison in 1978. The Venerables Thich Quang Do and Thich Huyen Quang, leaders of the Unified Buddhist Church were banished from Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City) in 1982 and put under house arrest in subsequent years for protesting the govern-

Hue and during Tet generally—and during the war as a whole—was inflicted by the Americans."

On one level Mirsky is correct. Had the US avoided involvement the war would have ended far earlier. Yet I do not think Mr. Mirsky is referring to anything so indirect. Using the terms "killing" and "inflicted by the Americans" make his meaning clear enough. In addition, he immediately cites Colonel Hackworth and myself to illustrate the point that US forces unleashed a bloodbath. Sadly Mr. Mirsky's view is widely held in the United States. It is also almost certainly wrong.

Due to the wonders of modern accounting, we know our casualties and are pretty sure about the South Vietnamese military's. Additional credible figures do not exist. Thus we must look at the war itself to understand the nature of its violence. If we do so several factors appear that tell us much.

The first factor concerns simple time. The war was ugly by 1963, and very violent by 1965. Fighting in this period was primarily a Vietnamese affair. Obviously this was also true during the brutal 1973-1975 period. American ground forces played no role in the 1972 Easter Offensive, the worst battle of the war. We do not know enough about 1975, but routs are typically bloodbaths. Thus, US forces were absent, or limited to air attack, during much of the war's worst fighting.

During active US participation mitigating factors also existed. Although some American forces were in combat from beginning to end (1965-1972), ground combat units did not reach full strength until late 1967 (approximately 10 percent of Americans serving). By the end of 1969, Nixon began a rapid withdrawal with combat assets leaving first. The Army was at full strength for barely two years. So if we did most of the killing, it was done during the four years (1966-1970) out of a twelve-year conflict (1963-1975).

Likewise deployments were important. South Vietnamese were responsible for both Saigon and the Mekong Delta. Thus

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20 percent those of South Vietnamese forces. Enemy casualties were higher yet. It is true that in the infrequent large battles we inflicted great losses. Most exchanges, however, lasted minutes or less, and were over before US firepower could be used effectively. Unless killing and dying are unrelated, none of this fits with Mr. Mirsky's notion. At best, from Mirsky's point of view, his allegation remains unproven.

Eric M. Bergerud

Albany, California

Jonathan Mirsky replies:

In response to David Slawson: I got the number of suicides from Walter Capps, *The Vietnam Reader*, p. 2 (galley): "More than twice the number of those who lost their lives there [Vietnam] have taken their lives since the war." I've had one or two other letters questioning this statement, and no longer stand by it.

Stephen Denney reminds us of what has happened to religious figures in Vietnam after the war. I discussed this, including some other examples, in a previous *NYR* article, "The War That Will Not End," August 16, 1990, p. 36.

Eric Bergerud, whose excellent book I praised in my piece, questions my use of the words "most of the killing... during the war as a whole was inflicted by the Americans." Perhaps "the Americans were responsible for most of the killing during the war as a whole" would have been more accurate. He himself says "Had the US avoided involvement the war would have ended far earlier."

The rest of Mr. Bergerud's letter somehow gets away from this. "The war was ugly by 1963," he says, "and very violent by 1965. Fighting in this period was primarily a Vietnamese affair."

But the Vietnamese war didn't start for the US in the early Sixties but well over a decade earlier. We paid most of the bills for the French, in exchange for their military support in Europe, and after Dien Bien Phu in 1954 it was we who determined the course of Saigon politics—sometimes imperfectly, as with Ngo Dinh Diem—to the last days of the struggle. The US paid for and equipped the South's forces and kept them in the war—although very few, it must be said, went over to the enemy. All this is apart from the direct involvement of our own services.

Mr. Bergerud showed eloquently in his study of Hau Nghia that although the VC killed plenty of innocent people they were regarded by many Vietnamese as "our boys." If that is true, then the Americans must bear most of the responsibility for trying to destroy them and their supporters, even though after the war Hanoi would betray their hopes.

As George Kahin says at the very end of his definitive *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam*: "It was continuously necessary to inject American power into the areas of South Vietnam under Saigon's administration so that local levers of power remained in the hands of Vietnamese prepared to act in conformity with US interests" (p. 432).

LETTERS

WHITE NOISE

To the Editors:

It is a little difficult to tell from Mr. Ian Baruma's interesting review of my book, *Betrayal at Pearl Harbor* [*NYR*, December 19, 1991], how much he understands about cryptography. However, if he had studied the extensive paper trail of evidence in the book, I believe he would have had no difficulty in accepting that British codebreakers (in London and Singapore) had broken the new Japanese naval code (JN-25) by the fall of 1939.

This is, incidentally, confirmed on page 53 of Professor F.H. Hinsley's *British Intelligence in the Second World War* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), which

states that the new code "began to yield" in September 1939, and thereafter British cryptographers were able to keep track of the main Japanese naval movements.

We also know that the messages from Admiral Yamamoto to his Carrier Task Force were decrypted by the British and received in London, because I quote (on page 137) from an Admiralty signal confirming this. The message of 25 November, 1941, ordering the Task Force to sail and refuel eight days later out in the Pacific, was of such crucial importance that it is impossible to believe it was not shown at once to Churchill who saw all such messages in the raw (original) state even before his military commanders.

Even though there was no mention of the Task Force's ultimate destination, it hardly required a navigational genius to conclude that Pearl Harbor was one of the most likely targets and, therefore, one would have expected Churchill to have flashed this message immediately to Roosevelt so that the two leaders could then debate its implications.

Had Churchill done this, I believe Roosevelt would have immediately alerted his Hawaiian commanders to set a trap for the Japanese, and thus gone to war as a victor decimating the Task Force and possibly blunting Japan's strategic plans entirely. The fact he made no attempt to do this either means Roosevelt deliberately betrayed the United States, or he was not passed the information, in which case Churchill betrayed Roosevelt.

Since my book was published, I have received a statement from an old family friend of the late Commander Malcolm Burnett (Nave's codebreaking colleague) who, in 1980, admitted that he had decrypted all Yamamoto's signals to the Task Force, had guessed their destination was Pearl Harbor, and personally sent this back from Singapore to Churchill. Burnett was pressed to write this down for posterity, but refused to do so because he had been sworn to secrecy about the affair.

James Rusbridger

Cornwall, England

Ian Baruma replies:

Mr. Rusbridger is right to doubt my expertise in cryptography: it is virtually nil. I take his word for it that the message from Admiral Yamamoto in November 1941 was read by British code breakers and that "it is impossible to believe it was not shown at once to Churchill..." But this doesn't prove a conspiracy to trap Roosevelt into going to war.

Heaps of intelligence passed across Churchill's desk, some genuine, some false. Although it is easy after the event to see bad faith or plain lunacy in the failure to act on such data, this is not necessarily the right interpretation. Stalin had prior warning of Hitler's plan to attack the Soviet Union and did nothing. MacArthur knew that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor and would almost certainly attack the Philippines, but failed to act. As a historian, quoted by Mr. Rusbridger in his book, remarked about Pearl Harbor, important signals can be "partly obscured before the event by the surrounding noise." Or they can be disbelieved. So even if Churchill had been warned that Pearl Harbor was a possible target for a Japanese attack, his failure to tell Roosevelt might have been a betrayal, but then again it might not.

And one other thing, for an eagle-eyed decoder of complicated data, Mr. Rusbridger might have spelled my name right.

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To the Editors:

Professor E.A.J. Honigmann begins his astute article, "The Second-Best Bed" [*NYR*, November 7, 1991] with the quotation "In the name of God amen I William Shakespeare of Stratford upon Avon..." In fact, the testator wrote, "I William Shackspeare." And "Shackspeare" is how

the name is rendered at the head of the will, and "Shackspere" in the body of the document. John Combe did not leave five pounds "to Master William Shakespeare" as Professor Honigmann quotes him as having written but "to Master William Shackspere." While Professor Honigmann refers glibly throughout to "Shakespeare" the name nowhere appears in connection with the will. The man buried as "Will Shackspere, gent." signed the three pages of the will "William Shackspere," "Willm Shackspere" and "William Shackspeare." If his name was "Shakespeare" with a long "a" in the first syllable he nowhere to our knowledge gave any sign of knowing it.

Professor Honigmann might have told us that no fellow villager known to us attributed any distinction to Stratford's subsequently famous son for generations to come and that those who knew him deemed him not even worth having his name on his tomb. The outsiders who erected the monument to "Shakespeare" in Trinity Church, clearly as part of the scheme to deflect to the Stratfordian the interest certain to arise in the identity of the mysterious poet-dramatist "William Shakespeare," said nothing in the inscription of the subject's having been a dramatist or actor or a poet except in the obscure "arte Maronem." They were not going to, when those who knew "Will Shackspere, gent." must have known him as a near-illiterate who never claimed to have written anything, who mentioned no books in his will and left not a line of manuscript to turn up in the house that remained in the family for two more generations, while three collected editions of Shakespeare's plays were published hailing their author as his nation's triumph.

Charlton Ogburn

Beaufort, South Carolina

E. A. J. Honigmann replies:

Mr. Ogburn believes that the Earl of Oxford wrote the plays usually attributed to William Shakespeare (see my review of his book in *The New York Review*, January 17, 1985, page 23). In "The Second-Best Bed" I stated that "I have modernized the quotations from wills" (page 30, footnote 7)—not to bend the evidence against Oxford, as Mr. Ogburn seems to believe, but simply as a matter of convenience. Stratford, by the way, was not just a village in Shakespeare's time, though it suits the "Oxfordians" to present Shakespeare as an ignorant village yokel: "By the King's letters patent in the seventh year of Edward VI's reign, it became an independent township; a corporation possessed of a common seal and consisting of a bailiff and a council of fourteen burgesses and fourteen aldermen." (S. Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare: A Documentary Life*, Oxford University Press, 1975, page 5.)

Two short questions for Mr. Ogburn. (1) Is there any evidence that "outsiders erected the monument"? (2) Did the author of the epitaph for Susanna (Shakespeare) Hall not attribute distinction to her father?—"Witty above her sexe, but that's not all, / Wise to salvation was good Mistris Hall, / Something of Shakespeare was in that, but this / Wholy of him with whom she's now in blisse..."

THE FICTION OF FACT

To the Editors:

At the beginning of his absorbing review of a new biography of D.H. Lawrence ["Lawrence in Love," *NYR*, February 13], David Lodge writes:

the conclusion that "all biography is ultimately fiction" is one with which most contemporary theorists of literature would concur. It is a post-structuralist commonplace that language constructs the reality it seems merely to refer to; therefore all texts are fictions... Even in the groves of academe, however, a distinction between empirical and fictional narrative

stubbornly persists. Granted that any interpretation is partial, subjective, and open to revision—therefore a kind of "fiction"—nevertheless there is a difference, many would argue, between facts that are recovered by historical research, and "facts" that are invented by the creative imagination.

It is not clear where Lodge stands in all this. The phrases "stubbornly persists" and "many would argue" suggest that Lodge may regard as stragglers in the rear guard of literary studies those who have difficulty believing that "language constructs the reality it seems merely to refer to," and obstinately cling to the conviction that there is a real difference between, for example, my declaring, "I was born of immigrant parents at Lincoln Hospital in the Bronx" (a statement supported by some yellowing documents), and my asserting, "I was born in the Devonshire castle of my father, the Prince of Wales, by his mistress, an indigent Russian princess," which, I insist, once and for all, is a fabrication. Whether Lodge is merely showing that he is up on the latest frivolities from academe (which no one familiar with his hilarious novels has ever doubted), being ironic, or means seriously to "put in question" the distinction between fact and fiction (accepted by all sane people, with the exception of some literary theorists), he then goes on for several thousand words to discuss in minute detail Lawrence's life, lovers, wife, and sundry escapades, as known from letters, journals, newspaper reports, and the like, in a way typical of such discussions over the past two hundred years—but for the frank sexual detail—meanwhile ignoring altogether that a "theoretical" question about fact and fiction exists. What this demonstrates, once again, is the immense gulf between what some intellectuals profess to believe as theorists, and what they actually believe as demonstrated by the way they read and talk about fiction and non-fiction, and write book reviews for rational audiences.

Norman Fruman

Department of English
University of Minnesota
Minneapolis, Minnesota

David Lodge replies:

I am sorry that I did not make clear to Professor Fruman where I stand in this matter—which is, of course, firmly on the fence, like any good liberal. I entirely agree with him that there is a meaningful distinction to be made between facts and fictions, and any irony in my "stubbornly" was directed at those who deny this. On the other hand, it seems to me equally obvious that as soon as "facts" are articulated in a discourse, interpretation begins, and an interpretation is a kind of fiction (not to be confused with a falsehood). Professor Fruman's birth is an empirically verifiable fact, but his verbal description of it is necessarily selective, privileging some of its aspects, excluding others. It seems to me legitimate to say that in this sense "language constructs the reality it seems merely to refer to." Biographers and historians are not immune from this condition of human thought because they try to work exclusively with empirically verifiable facts. Nor does acknowledging it preclude one's enjoyment of, and engagement with, the products of that work.

THE BUCHANAN CANON

To the Editors:

Garry Wills' article "The Golden 'Blade'" [*NYR*, February 13] contains a number of errors.

1. "I met Jeffrey Hart, the Dartmouth English teacher who, along with his son, launched *The Dartmouth Review*..." Also: "Buckley helped launch the magazine..." In fact, neither Bill Buckley nor I had anything to do with launching *The Dartmouth Review*.

The principal launcher was Gregory Fossedal, a Dartmouth senior, who had been