

Vietnam and the New Intellectual Universe

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No political happening of the post-World War II era has affected the American intellectual community as deeply as the Vietnam war and the protest against it. The antiwar movement established a new mode of thought that reassessed the nature of international relations, the role of the United States as a world power, and the forms of social organization once generally perceived as menacing and totalitarian. In the largest sense, this new way of thinking amounted to a rejection of cold warriorism in all its forms. Many intellectuals abandoned not just the simpleminded militaristic variety but also the sophisticated cold warriorism of a Kennan or a Niebuhr with its emphasis upon the ambiguities of human experience, its distinction between individual and collective morality, and its ideal of a foreign policy that sought to reconcile morality and self-interest.

Motivated primarily by a deep sense of moral revulsion against the destruction in Southeast Asia, the antiwar movement created a new intellectual universe in which moral distinctions were primary and absolute. The dominant fact of world politics became the global revolution of oppressed peoples against Western (predominantly U.S.) economic and political imperialism, and the United States replaced Nazi Germany as the most bloodthirsty nation in human history. Within this framework the conflict in Vietnam took on a Manichean character as a struggle of good (Hanoi and the Viet Cong) against evil (the United States and Saigon).

The tactical merits of organizing opposition to the war around this viewpoint were debatable: it probably alienated many people who had reservations about the conflict. Of more concern, now that the American role in Vietnam has come to an irrevocable end, is the continued existence of this philosophy within the intellectual community, embraced by individuals who should be aware of its inadequacy as a tool for understanding a complex world.

Few works could exemplify this intellectual hangover more vividly than Gareth Porter's *A Peace Denied: The United States, Vietnam, and the Paris Agreement* (Indiana University Press; 357 pp.; \$15.00), a history of the diplomatic conflict between the United States and the

Vietnam Communists. It argues that the United States denied peace to a ravaged Vietnam by engaging in a relentless imperialism that included the support of a repressive government and the use of diplomacy as a tool to mobilize support for the war rather than to achieve peace. Porter is willing to admit that the United States had "geopolitical interests" in Southeast Asia, although he never gets around to defining them; but America, he asserts, wrongly gave these interests "priority over any consideration of the interests and aspirations of the Vietnamese people themselves." Porter assumes the prime Vietnamese interest and aspiration to be the establishment of a Communist government; it follows that the only legitimate exercise of U.S. power in South Vietnam would have been to facilitate a Viet Cong triumph.

Porter's frame of reference excludes the argument that the Vietnamese Communists might be declared at least equally guilty of denying peace to Vietnam by carrying on the fighting and by employing diplomacy to achieve *their* objectives—representing the people, it is suggested, they had legitimacy and morality on their side. Of course, one may protest, the kaleidoscopic Vietnamese political situation was hardly that simple. There is considerable doubt that in South Vietnam the Viet Cong could have mustered the willing support of even a simple majority.

If one goes beyond the question of majority support to that of moral integrity, it is harder yet to understand the source of the legitimacy with which the author endows the Communists. Like too many contemporary intellectuals, he appears to prefer an honest, efficient totalitarianism of the North Vietnamese variety to a corrupt, inefficient police state of the Saigon style. It is perhaps indicative of his attitude toward such considerations that he uses the words "communism" and "socialism" synonymously and consistently refers to the USSR and China as the leading nations of the "socialist bloc."

Having wiped out any significant opposition, having established absolute control over the communications media, Hanoi could display to foreign observers a picture of a united population dedicated to the pursuit of a just goal at any price. Conversely, Saigon presented the much messier spectacle of a government that could not effectively organize or unite its people. It seems irrele-

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vant to the author that this failure rested to a large extent upon the inability of any dictator from Diem to Thieu to eradicate basic liberties with the same finality as in the North.

Nor can the author claim that the Communists were less wedded to violence than the Saigon military governments. He prefers to stress Hanoi's pursuit of peace, but he makes it clear that North Vietnam was determined to carry on at any price until it achieved total victory. The Viet Cong guerrillas may have been tribunes of the people, as Porter implies, but they also routinely employed murder and terror against their opponents. With apparently unintended irony, Porter reprovingly contrasts the Thieu government's policy of jailing many of its opponents with the "much smaller" number of detentions in Communist-controlled areas. There, it seems, government officials who were not re-educable "and who were considered to have committed serious crimes were more often assassinated than imprisoned if they ignored warnings to desist."

The author's treatment of the post-Paris Agreement period in 1973-74 typifies his skewed viewpoint. It might seem undeniable to anyone who read a newspaper during this period that both sides systematically violated the Paris agreements. Porter, however, dwells extensively upon Saigon's transgressions while consistently representing accusations of Communist violations as ill-founded. He characterizes the Canadian truce observers, who were most critical of the Communists, as hopelessly biased, although he admits that their "findings of fact in particular investigations had been fair enough." The Polish and Hungarian observers, on the

other hand, receive gentle treatment, although the author concedes they were wholly committed to Hanoi and the Viet Cong. Porter appears to accept Communist arguments of military security as justification for blocking investigations of alleged truce violations, and he has no trouble with the Communist denial of adequate air corridors to control commission helicopters. His account is, in brief, a mirror image of the Canadian attitude that he condemns so strongly.

An author is entitled to a frame of reference, however one-dimensional. But *A Peace Denied* is being marketed as a work of scholarship, elaborately footnoted, and brought out by an academic publisher. It must therefore be evaluated as scholarship, not as an antiwar tract, and on this point Porter's ideology betrays his professed purpose. *A Peace Denied* is, quite frankly, very bad history. Its account of events is, to say the least, selective. The author uncritically accepts sources with which he agrees and is hypercritical of those with which he disagrees. He paints a tidy ideological landscape that bears little resemblance to the terrible, complicated reality that was Vietnam. Rejecting the premise that all parties to the conflict shared in the moral guilt that modern war brings in such ample quantities, he has written an advocacy history that will satisfy only those who already agree with him.

Of course, their numbers are not inconsiderable. It is a measure of the continuing intellectual malaise of the academic community that this book was accepted as a Ph.D. dissertation at Cornell and rushed into print by a leading university press.

The Conquest of Will: Information Processing in Human Affairs by Abbe Mowshowitz

(Addison-Wesley: 366 pp.; \$8.95)

Martin Green

The computer industry today looks in some ways like the textile industry at the beginning of the nineteenth century, because of its tremendous growth rate, because of its fundamental difference from earlier modes of production, and because of its enormous potential for changing our lives. And since we all wish we'd been there to do something about the industrial revolution—don't half our books imply that wish?—we are committed to doing something about the information revolution. We can date the latter, according to Professor Mowshowitz, from 1951, and can look forward, some predictions say, to compu-

ters becoming the largest industry in the world by 2000. Because that industry is so largely in the hands of one country, the USA, and indeed of one company, IBM, we must feel immediate political anxieties of a familiar kind. But more important are the less predictable consequences of an information utility, with terminals in every home, a network of computers, a national or world databank, and information of every sort about everybody immediately available to the authorities.

Computers are the major device by means of which society masters its accelerating complexity—complexity

here meaning diversification and specialization. The information the computers process for them enables the managers of our society—in the hospitals, prisons, armies, governments—to coordinate diversity and control disorder. But, as Professor Mowshowitz points out, by so doing, computers make possible further "complexity" and deliver more power into managerial hands. They are not merely means, to be used for no matter what ends. They are a dynamism that drives society in one particular direction.

Unfortunately, though this book alerts our attention vividly, it cannot