

# Vietnam in America

Our longest war comes home

James Finn

On September 2, 1945, the Vietnamese Communists raised their red flag in Hanoi to proclaim the independent Republic of Vietnam. The group that saluted the flag included the Communist leader Ho Chi Minh and American officers in uniform.

On April 30, 1975, the last helicopter of an evacuation airlift rose from the U.S. embassy in Saigon. As the Americans fled Saigon, forces of the North Vietnam Army entered the city and renamed it Ho Chi Minh. South Vietnam ceased to exist as a separate state; the last official vestiges of American participation in a disastrous, losing war disappeared; and the Communists of North Vietnam consolidated their control over the entire country.

Between these two dates the United States became increasingly involved, politically and militarily, in Indochina, and each successive president—Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford—was forced to make significant policy decisions concerning that area. Those decisions led to and became part of the longest war in American history, the most expensive, save World War II, in terms of blood and money, and the first in which the United States suffered a clear defeat, the consequences of which are not yet fully realized.

Even before the end of 1975, as early as the Paris accords initialed in January, 1973, the American people had seemed to withdraw their interest from a war that

had for so long demanded our attention, that had soured and sundered our domestic politics. In a foreword to *Chance and Circumstance*, a study on the war and the Vietnam generation, Theodore M. Hesburgh states that it may remain the only such study, "since the American people tend to put unpleasant and unsuccessful events behind them as quickly as possible" and that "Now one rarely speaks about the war or hears about it..." That book was published late last year.

Fortunately, Father Hesburgh was wrong. America's role in the Vietnam war is historically too important for us to bury it; it remains too vast to be swept easily into any dustbin of history. It was always only a question of time before scholars, journalists, political analysts, participants, novelists, and movie makers attempted in different ways to impose upon that experience a shape and form that would make it comprehensible, that would allow us so to grasp it intellectually and emotionally that we could assess properly what took place, why things happened as they did, who was responsible. And, most important, what—if anything—that experience tells us about ourselves and our future. For whether we can and will learn from the war in Vietnam is at present an unanswered question.

The years since the end of the war allow perspective, and official records are increasingly accessible. Since the spate of books on that war promises to become a flood, it is well that we have early on Guenther Lewy's *America in Vietnam*, a study that joins scholarly integrity with a definite viewpoint. Not that Lewy resolves the dissensions that wracked our society during the war. Recollected and reordered in a period of relative tranquillity, the emotions of that period are simply returned to us in a

---

JAMES FINN, *Worldview's* Editor-in-Chief, is author of *Protest: Pacifism and Politics* (1968) and editor of two subsequent volumes: *A Conflict of Loyalties: The Case for Selective Conscientious Objection* and *Conscience and Command: Justice and Discipline in the Military*.

different form. In addition to the sources generally available, Lewy drew upon records previously untapped by researchers—classified records of the U.S. Army, Air Force, and Marine Corps. He contends that what emerges is not only novel and occasionally startling but that he has been able to clarify some of the major, debated issues of the war.

It is a major strength of Lewy's book that it provides enough evidence that one can draw inferences and conclusions other than his own. It is a weakness that one can do so readily. In fairness to Lewy one should note that this is a function of the situation rather than his work and one that he has recognized: "Like pieces in a kaleidoscope, the 'facts' of the Vietnam war could, and still can, be put together in a multitude of configurations which in turn lead to different political and moral judgments and conclusions."

In Lewy's own configuration the picture looks something like this. The initial commitment of the United States was part of an attempt to halt Soviet power, at a time "when the communist bloc was indeed a monolith" and a Communist victory anywhere was viewed as a threat to the U.S. The geopolitical importance of Vietnam and Southeast Asia was exaggerated by American leaders, making success or failure there more significant than the facts warranted. In addition, the character of world communism gradually changed—the monolith broke up, China reached an accommodation with the U.S., etc.—so that the initial premises for U.S. action were undermined. Nevertheless, Lewy maintains that "it could with much justice be said that the American commitment had in fact created a vital interest, for the prestige and credibility of a major world power cannot be dismissed as unimportant."

Against that general understanding Lewy provides, first, a record of American actions in Vietnam and, second, a defense in legal and moral terms of those actions. It is his contention and reasoned argument that the sense of guilt experienced by many Americans because of their country's role in that war is unnecessary and unwarranted. He argues further that neither war-weariness nor antiwar sentiments in America account for the defeat of South Vietnam. A deeper reason is the failure of our political and military leaders to understand that they were fighting a revolutionary war and to act accordingly.

The first part of Lewy's book is excellent. Although he writes as one sympathetic to the purposes of the war and as a harsh critic of the American Left, his historical account of America's gradual military involvement provides ground for an indictment of our political and military leadership. As other studies have shown, it is possible to draw from presidential statements, policy recommendations, and background studies repeated acknowledgments that the war could only be won by the South Vietnamese themselves and that they could only develop the ability to do so if the government created and maintained a strong national community. Nevertheless, the strategy the United States developed went almost directly counter to this wisdom. We sent to Vietnam a conventional army supplied with masses of modern, high-technology weaponry and attempted to transform

the conflict into a conventional war. The portrait of General Westmoreland that emerges from Lewy's account is of an intellectually narrow and militarily and politically unimaginative leader. But it was he who asked for, received, and deployed increasing forces and munitions as the war reached its peak. Lewy states coolly that "Unfortunately, one is driven to the conclusion that the special knowledge that Westmoreland and most of his subordinates had equipped them poorly to understand the political and social dynamics of the war in Vietnam. It was one of the tragedies of Vietnam...that the services refused to recognize the realities of a people's war and clung to the illusion that this was a war which troops could win."

*America in Vietnam*, by Guenther Lewy. (Oxford University Press; xiii + 540 pp.; \$19.95)

*Chance and Circumstance: The Draft, the War and the Vietnam Generation*, by Lawrence M. Baskir and William A. Strauss. (Vintage Books; 312 pp.; \$4.95 [paper])

*Many Reasons Why: The American Involvement in Vietnam (Interviews on BBC)*, by Michael Charlton and Anthony Moncrieff. (Hill and Wang; 250 pp.; \$10.00)

*A Short History of the Vietnam War*, edited by Alan R. Millett. (Indiana University Press; 165 pp.; \$3.95 [paper])

*The Fall of South Vietnam: Statements by Vietnamese Military and Civilian Leaders*, a report prepared by Stephen T. Hosmer, Konrad Kellen, Brian M. Jenkins. (Rand Corporation; 131 pp.; \$7.00)

*Sideshow: Nixon, Kissinger and the Destruction of Cambodia*, by William Shawcross. (Simon & Schuster; 467 pp.; \$13.95)

*Decent Interval*, by Frank Snepp. (Vintage Books; 590 pp.; \$4.95 [paper])

Putting that illusion into practice, American military leaders expressed nominal adherence to programs of pacification and actually followed a policy of search and destroy. Lewy notes that in the last five months of 1966, 95 per cent of all combat battalions were engaged in search-and-destroy missions. Even after Westmoreland was replaced by General Creighton Abrams in July, 1968, and after "Vietnamization" became proclaimed U.S. policy, the war of attrition continued, generating extensive firepower; American, V.C., and civilian casualties; prisoners; many refugees; and little allegiance to the Government of Vietnam. For example, after a month of heavy assault in Quang Ngai province it was estimated that allied fire, air strikes, and artillery accounted for 40 per cent of civilian casualties. Few Americans at home knew by name of such operations as MALHEUR, CEDAR FALLS, PIPESTONE CANYON, APACHE SNOW. Only occasionally did some battles, such as that for "Hamburger Hill," attain notoriety. To attain that hill more than a million pounds of bombs were dropped and artillery fired tens of thousands of rounds. Then bunker-to-bunker fighting took place with heavy American casualties. Once secured, the hill was abandoned. In spite of heavy criticism from the States, General Zais responded: "That hill was in my area of operations, that

was where the enemy was, that's where I attacked him....If I find him on another hill in the A Shau, I assure you I'll attack him."

All of this information and more Lewy provides. Most of what a hostile critic of the war would want for evidence is here: the unproductive search-and-destroy missions, the millions of refugees, the destruction of villages and hamlets, the domination of South Vietnamese military, the incompetence, corruption, and venality. Although he makes a number of serious criticisms along the way, Lewy is able to begin his second section with a remarkably tempered judgment: "This is not to say that allied military tactics in Vietnam were beyond reproach." With this statement he opens his analysis of the legality of the way in which the war was fought. Two of his overall judgments will, I believe, withstand the attacks to which they will inevitably be subjected. First, the intricacies of the war created many legal ambiguities and tangled issues about which serious and honest people can disagree. Carefully phrased, the second judgment deserves to be quoted:

The American record with regard to observance of the law of war is not a succession of war crimes and does not support charges of systematic and willful violation of existing agreements for standards of human decency in time of war, as many critics of the American involvement have alleged. Such charges were based on a distorted picture of the actual battlefield situation, on ignorance of existing rules of engagement, and on a tendency to construe every mistake of judgment as a wanton breach of the law of war....If the American record is not one of gross illegality, neither has it been a model of observance of the law of war.

In the strictly legal terms that he employs, Lewy successfully refutes or establishes acceptable alternatives to the charges of extensive war crimes levied against the American military performance by, e.g., Noam Chomsky, the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars, the International War Crimes Tribunal (which included Jean-Paul Sartre, Stokeley Carmichael, Dave Dellinger, Carl Oglesby, and others), the National Committee for a Citizens' Commission of Inquiry on U.S. War Crimes in Vietnam (CCI), the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW), and those who, like Daniel Berrigan, charged that the U.S. waged "a monstrous and intentionally genocidal air war" against North Vietnam.

The basis for Lewy's argument and my own general agreement with him on this issue is one that many people will find repugnant. The various laws of war, developed historically from diverse sources, are intended to mitigate the inevitable ravages of war and place moral and humanitarian restraints upon the participants. In the most general terms the laws are intended to protect noncombatants and to ensure that damages inflicted are not disproportionate to the advantages that are sought. The application of the law to actual practice has been and remains extremely sticky. The discretion allowed to actual participants, while not unlimited, is

expansive; the laws are vague and in some aspects anachronistic; and adequate evidence is frequently difficult to obtain. It is unlikely that these conditions will be radically altered. But unless one is a pacifist, these are the legal terms that one accepts in modern war and which one is constrained to apply. Nor are these terms completely without bite or substance. It is on these terms that the atrocity of Mylai was investigated and it is these terms that allow Lewy to say there may be "at least dereliction of duty or perhaps even criminal negligence" on the part of General Westmoreland.

At this point many readers will feel dissatisfaction and irritation with this argument—as I do myself. The moral judgments that led me to protest the war are not so neatly constrained by Lewy's legalistic defense, which I accept. For Lewy's legal apologia rests on the assumption that, *given the way the war was fought*, the Americans adhered to the rules of war. The damage to noncombatants was a regrettable but almost inevitable concomitant of the American strategy of expending immense amounts of military equipment rather than American lives. Given these terms, the American military performed well and sometimes heroically. Fair enough. But the strongest antiwar protests flowed from either of two positions: that the United States should not be fighting in Vietnam or that it should not be fighting the kind of war it was. The public disenchantment with the war developed, not because of Communist propaganda, media misrepresentation, or an undefined war-weariness, but with a gradual perception that the goal was not commensurate with the destruction. A commonsensical, moral judgment.

Lewy reminds us of C.V. Wedgwood's dictum that "History is lived forward but it is written in retrospect." This provides a cautionary note that we should not pretend to wisdom that neither we nor the principal actors had at the beginning of a train of events, the beginning of our involvement with Indochina, for example. Again, fair enough. But we do judge our political and military leaders by the consequences of their actions, and we are right to do so. In light of the consequences of the Vietnam war the American people were not well served by those who made the most determinative decisions.

Although the rationale for fighting in Vietnam was always shifting and never less than confused, the American people at one time were told that the war was intended to restrain the spread of communism, particularly as that threat issued from the Chinese colossus to the north. Today Communist Vietnam and China engage in armed conflict and recrimination, Vietnam having sought succor from the Soviets. Pol Pot, who replaced Sihanouk as ruler of Cambodia, is himself replaced by a puppet of Vietnam, which now threatens Cambodian sovereignty. According to William Shawcross in *Sideshow*, Sihanouk says "There are only two men responsible for the tragedy in Cambodia today, Mr. Nixon and Dr. Kissinger....By expanding the war into Cambodia, Nixon and Kissinger killed a lot of Americans and many other people, they spent enormous sums of money—\$4 billion—and the results were the opposite

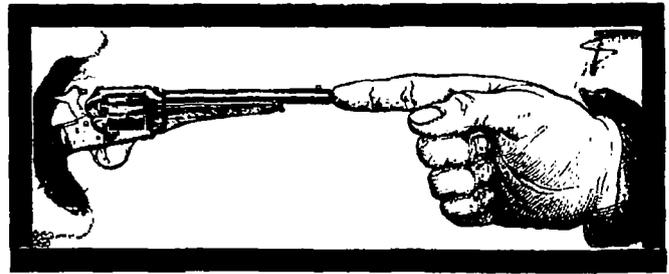
of what they wanted. They demoralized America, they lost all of Indochina to the Communists, and they created the Khmer Rouge." And China and the United States continue on the path of reconciliation opened up by Nixon and Kissinger. According to the initial rationale, the war in Vietnam did not accomplish what we intended, and much of what it did accomplish we did not intend.

But for most of our policymakers the initial rationale had a short life span. In 1973 Murray Marder of the *Washington Post* wrote that "The credibility of the U.S. government was progressively crippled as the rationale for the war shifted from checkmating world Communism to 'self-determination' for South Vietnam, to protecting American commitments, to saving American prestige, to averting 'humiliation,' to defending the presidency, to rescuing prisoners. Ultimately, ending the war became the objective of the war itself" (*A Short History of the Vietnam War*).

If one accepts this as historically accurate, the best one can do in terms of affixing responsibility is to attempt to understand and explain why successive policymakers made decisions that were successively repudiated, why they made inadequate, faulty, or bad judgments. It would be quixotic to defend those decisions as superior to those made by responsible critics who, early on, opposed American warfare in Vietnam.

As the decision to fight in Vietnam with American troops was gradually made, the decision of *how* to fight was also gradually made. The wrong decision was made. Political ends were subordinated to military means. Major General Edward Lansdale stated this precisely when he spoke of "the tragic fact that American leaders relied so heavily on military solutions in a war that begged for political solutions by us because the enemy waged it as a political contest backed by armed forces.... We mostly sought to destroy enemy forces. The enemy sought to gain control of the people." Henry Kissinger made the same point in *Foreign Affairs* magazine in 1968, adding that "we lost sight of one of the cardinal maxims of guerrilla war; the guerrilla wins if he does not lose; the conventional army loses if it does not win." Sir Robert Thompson, a British expert and advisor to our government, made the same point. And so did people in our government, including people in the armed forces. A frequently declared goal—a political goal—of U.S. policy, a *sine qua non* of South Vietnam's viability, was to help the government of South Vietnam become worthy of and win the allegiance of its people.

In practice these precepts and goals were ignored or overridden. General Earle Wheeler derided those who asserted the primacy of political or economic factors. "I do not agree. The essence of the problem in Vietnam is military." Westmoreland bristled at the idea that civilians should suggest how the war should be fought. Asserting correctly that the 1968 Tet offensive was a military victory for the Americans, he failed to recognize that it was, as Kissinger also correctly asserted, a political defeat. And according to Vietnamese leaders, military and civilian, the way the Americans fought the war ill prepared the Vietnamese armed forces to fight alone. During the war Vice-President Ky complained:



"The Americans have captured our war." When we turned it back to them without promise of continuing aid, we contributed to the rapid collapse of South Vietnamese resistance. As a South Vietnamese general summarized that collapse, "everything was unique in the closing days of the Vietnam war: There were three presidents in one week, a million-man army was annihilated in two months, five billion dollars worth of equipment was lost, a country with nineteen million people collapsed and joined the ranks of the Communist countries..." (*The Fall of South Vietnam*). A number of people attribute the finale debacle to the congressional cuts in aid and responsibility for that debacle to those who supported those cuts. Unless these critics acknowledge that what we simultaneously withdrew was a degree of psychological support that should never have been provided—or, rather, imposed on the government of South Vietnam—their criticism is largely misguided. Both the financial and psychological support were engendered and necessitated by how we fought the war.

The issue of how America fought the war is central to our response to the war. Given the way the war was fought, Lewy's legal apologia has great strength. But that given was not historically inevitable nor desirable. If we had subordinated our military means to our political goals, if we had truly fought a political war, we would not have attempted to transform the conflict into a conventional war. We would not have introduced into the conflict, therefore, the massive weaponry that appeared to cause much unnecessary suffering and destruction. It appeared to because it did. Referring to what he called his first serious speech on the war, Eugene McCarthy said: "I wasn't going to argue the legality of it or the morality of it; but it looked to me as though there were no proportion between what we were going to do, by way of military action, and the possible good that might come out of it." Many Americans soon came to say something very much like McCarthy. To press the point, one can say that the American military performed well, given the way they fought, but that in political and moral terms it was a bad way. The strongest condemnation of the war is directed, then, not to particular acts, however vile, nor even to the sum of many particular acts, but to the strategy that allowed military criteria to determine the nature of the conflict. If the U.S. had fought a different war, if it had fought a political war, it might still have lost. But the cost to the Vietnamese, to our own society, to our international prestige would have been considerably less.

I have considered what I regard as the central issues in Lewy's book, but he touches on others less central to his purpose yet still important in our public debate. For example, the place of public debate and protest during the war. In *Many Reasons Why*, from which I have previously quoted, McCarthy says: "I think the war would have ended just about the way it did if we had not even made a protest in 1968. If there'd been no criticism I'm afraid the war would have run out, afraid that our protests didn't end it any earlier than it would have." In the same volume, John Kenneth Galbraith says that "the man who deserves more credit than anybody else for bringing our involvement to an end...[is] Eugene McCarthy," because without his run for the presidency, protest went nowhere. General Lansdale, in his foreword to *A Short History of the Vietnam War*, says that the antiwar campaign "left at least a generation of Americans emotionally maimed and has to be looked upon as probably the most compelling factor in our withdrawal from Vietnam." Lewy calls American public opinion a "crucial domino."

How effective the antiwar protest was is significant. It is essential to discern the elements that comprised it. But there is in much of the comment on that protest more than a suggestion that the protesters, however well intentioned, however intense their feelings, however persuaded in their judgments, should have shut up. In 1965 James Reston said of the protesters that "the truth is...they are not promoting peace but postponing it. They are not persuading the President and Congress to end the war, but deceiving Ho Chi Minh and General Giap into prolonging it." A particularly dumb and wrong-headed remark. Ho Chi Minh and Giap were not going to be "deceived" into continuing a war that, in their terms, was already decades old. And the protesters could only have been postponing peace if, in fact, it was to be achieved by means then employed. The protesters *may* have been ineffective in changing U.S. policy, but the main thrust of the protest was honorable and should not be demeaned. Except for political opportunists and Communist partisans, they fought for the best interests of America and the Vietnamese. Only those who still cling to the notion that continued American involvement would have led to a desirable military victory would seem to have a case against the protesters.

Another issue that is central to our political processes, our understanding of them, and our sense of ourselves as a people of integrity hinges on the degree of trust we should have in our leaders. How free should they be in times of stress to conduct operations behind a veil of secrecy or seven veils of deception? Whom are our chief executive leaders obliged to inform, whom are they entitled to deceive? Under what conditions and for how long? In terms of domestic affairs, Watergate has provided some answers, although even some of these are subject to revision. The war in Vietnam may, under analysis, provide answers in terms of international affairs. At least it poses the questions sharply.

The American people were lied to by a number of high officials during the war, and each case invites particular investigation. In *Sideshow* William Shaw-

cross examines the lies that were told about the bombing and invasion of Cambodia. The first request to bomb Cambodia came from General Abrams in early 1969. Through the rest of that year and into 1970 regular and heavy bombing raids were made, records of the raids were disguised so that even secret official records failed to note their existence, and those who planned the raids—Nixon, Kissinger, Abrams, etc.—said they had not taken place. It was not until 1973 that the Senate Foreign Relations Committee learned of the raids. When he was confirmed as Secretary of State in 1973, Henry Kissinger, in a moment of high casuistry, said that "It was not a bombing of Cambodia, but it was a bombing of North Vietnamese in Cambodia." There was and is no way of calculating how many Cambodians were killed. Kissinger also said that Prince Sihanouk, by his silence, acquiesced in the bombing. Shawcross writes:

The evidence indicates that "the Sihanouk excuse" was merely that; the secrecy, the wiretaps, the burning and falsification of reports, were principally intended to conceal the administration's widening of the war from the American people. Even after 1970 when Menu [code name for the bombing] had ended and Sihanouk, exiled, no longer needed protection, Nixon, Kissinger, Rogers, Laird, Elliot L. Richardson and other officials all continued to assure Congress, press and public, without equivocation, that the United States had scrupulously declined to attack Communist positions in Cambodia before spring 1970. Official, highly classified Pentagon computer printouts of the bombing of Indochina continued to show "Nil" for Cambodia in 1969. In 1973, when some of the truth was established, these same officials denied all responsibility for the falsification.

*Sideshow* is a challenge to those against whom it brings a moral indictment to explain their roles and an invitation to all of us to evaluate their performances. Nixon's memoirs, for example, show little comprehension of what his policies did to Cambodia. Kissinger can be expected to make a rhetorically more persuasive case.

Almost everyone who has written about Vietnam has written also about the "lessons" of Vietnam. I do not wish here to add to those lessons; at least I do not wish to make more explicit those that might be lurking in the previous paragraphs. I would only emphasize that the "facts" of war in Vietnam can indeed be put together in many different ways that lead to different moral and political judgments. It would be surprising indeed if those Americans primarily responsible for the guidance of the war did not provide accounts that allow their own decisions to be seen in a flattering light. Those responsible for the disastrous trench warfare of World War I did no less. It is the responsibility of the rest of us to see that a different and sometimes harsher light provided by a different perspective is focused upon those decisions. We can start with the facts that the American war in Vietnam was a failure, and that it would be a mark of intellectual, political, and moral bankruptcy to conclude that it was nobody's fault.