

Chapter 8

THE LEGACY OF THE WAR: IMAGES OF THE PAST

And I hope that you die, and your death will come soon.
I will follow your casket on a pale afternoon.

— Bob Dylan, “Masters of War”

....So we moved beside our guide
along the bank of the scalding purple river
in which the shrieking wraiths were boiled and dyed.

Some stood up to their lashes in that torrent,
and as we passed them the huge Centaur said:
“These were the kings of bloodshed and despoilment.
Here they pay for their ferocity.”

— Dante Alighieri, *Inferno* (XII, 100-106)

In his inaugural address in 1989 George Bush asked us to stop arguing about the war. Surely, he said, “the statute of limitations on Vietnam has run out.” But the only people who should want an end to debate are those for whom his use of language relating to crime has resonance: the civilian and military officials who ran the war and the legislators who funded it. Had these masters of war faced their own Nuremberg trials for violations of international law, they would have been punished for the bombing and shelling of non-military targets, the designation of “free-fire” zones and the removal of civilians from them, the assassination (during “attempts to arrest”) of thousands of civilians denounced under Operation Phoenix, and the routine transfer of prisoners from US to ARVN forces when it was common knowledge that torture, almost always, and murder, frequently, would result. Top US officials should have faced charges not just for the conduct of the war, but for its very existence. Our invasion preserved a regime that had violated the 1954 Geneva Accords by refusing to hold

the elections that would have brought Ho Chi Minh to power, and so violated both the accords and the UN Charter.

Yet neither their criminality nor the failure of their policy in its own terms seems to have discredited the Colbys, McNamaras, Bundys, and Kissingers who planned the war, the admirals, generals, colonels, and paramilitary potentates at our spy and development agencies who conducted it, and the legislators who funded it. Their continued acceptance in the foreign policy debate reflects our failure as a society to confront the wrong we did in Vietnam. In her book on the war, *New York Times* war reporter Gloria Emerson angrily notes that John Kerry's plea to congress that Vietnam provoke a national self-examination, and so come to mean "the place where America finally turned," was overridden by a widespread desire to put the war behind us even before it ended. She cites as shocking proof a book review in 1974 by her own paper's Christopher Lehman-Haupt that started with: "Quick — before your mind fogs up at the prospect of yet another book on Vietnam..."

One reason there has been little stomach in America for accountability is that it would be difficult to limit. Scapegoats could with much justification turn on the public and say: "But you told me to do that!" True, it was hard to find a way to vote against the war. The peace candidate in 1964 was Lyndon Johnson and in 1968, in many ways, Richard Nixon. However, the clearest peace candidate, George McGovern, was trounced by Nixon in 1972, and few members of congress actually lost their seat over the war, although a lot changed their position so as not to. America failed to make opposition to the war a political litmus test, and that makes it pretty embarrassing to start pointing fingers. So there were no Nuremberg trials for our leaders, and no national repentance for ourselves like the one we demanded from Germany. Instead of repairing Indochina and figuring out how to avoid similar damage in the future, America slapped a trade embargo on impoverished Vietnam and lectured it about human rights and imperialism for expelling the boat people and occupying Cambodia. These were real enough sins — although the madness of the Khmer Rouge made the war with Cambodia almost unavoidable — but like those often committed by some of our favorite friends. Vietnam's real sin, obviously, was to defeat the United States.

Bush's call to put debate on the war behind us was not just dangerous, but ludicrous. Far from there having been a divisive glut of recrimination over the war, there had been mostly silence and nonsense. (Of course, Bush forgot his own charity the instant his handlers smelled blood during the 1992 campaign, and attacked Clinton for dodging and protesting the war, adding noise to the silence but no wisdom to the nonsense.) Like the settlers who gobbled up America, we first pretended that history started afresh after our bout of amorality, and then seized on an absurd cultural mythology that exonerated and even celebrated it. The books and songs of the American frontier — moving west from James Fennimore Cooper and Daniel Boone to Davey Crockett, Jim Bowie, George Custer, and Buffalo Bill — made it easier for America to contrast itself in rectitude with the debauched Europeans, even as we seized an empire from Indians and Mexicans. The invention of moving pictures provided an even more effective way of portraying manifest destiny as an inevitable affair rather than a continual violation of reasonable compromises. Just so, with a few high-brow exceptions, did the American film industry do for the Vietnam War what a ministry of propaganda would have done only a little less crudely in a totalitarian state.

Even at the height of the counter-culture during the war, the industry had been steadily cranking out tear-jerking, chest-thumping whoppers about big-hearted Green Berets saving village kids from communists. After the war, films began to demonize the victors as a way of justifying the actions of the vanquished, who after all were the ones who purchased movie tickets. The primary method was the gripping myth of prisoners of war, which plays to the devotion to captured tribemembers and their remains that has been used to spur war fever since the Iliad and the Crusades. The myth can be traced back to a cynical attempt by the Nixon administration in 1969 to deflect criticism of the war by focusing attention on American prisoners. The ploy was brazen, since treatment of prisoners was in fact far more brutal on the part of US forces and the South Vietnamese allies to whom they transferred them. What started as a short-term scam then spiraled out of control: 15 years after the war ended, 70 percent of Americans believed, with absolutely no evidence, that Vietnam still held Americans prisoner.

As H. Bruce Franklin pointed out in an exposé of this maudlin hoax and the groups who thrive on it, movies about prisoners allowed Americans finally to win the war. Rambo (and a plethora of similar superheroes) not only rescues Americans, but gets to kill lots of incompetent and wicked Vietnamese and Soviets while doing so. His plea to a superior who offers him the mission — “Do we get to win this one? — makes clear the convenient belief that we could have won last time too if only, as Franklin summarizes, “the politicians, the media, the liberal establishment, bureaucrats, draft-dodging college students and their pinko professors, hippies, wimps, bleeding-heart housewives, and Jane Fonda hadn’t tied our boys’ hands and stabbed them in the back.”

Another myth also distracted America from recognizing and aiding the true victims of the war. The Vietnam veteran has developed into a cult, with a shrine at the gripping granite wall, a holy grail in the search for prisoners, and a passion play of suffering and public abuse. That makes it almost sacrilegious to say this, but the image of the haunted veteran abandoned by his country is a myth. The belated celebration for Vietnam vets at the end of the Gulf War in 1991 was intended as a remedy, but there was no illness, and it obscured our duty toward the silent marchers in these grand parades, the Vietnamese. Yes, the needs of Vietnam vets were slighted in the “rush to forget,” as Representative David Bonior subtitled his book on them, but the evidence is clear that these veterans did not suffer more than those of earlier wars because of the unpopularity of the war or their reception when they returned home, and are not markedly different psychologically from non-veterans.

Statements in the popular press and even some supposedly academic tomes that more Vietnam veterans have died violently, or even by suicide alone, since returning than died in the entire war, or that a high percentage of those who served have since been in jail, imply that something terrible is eating away at the vets. These claims are either outrageously false or misleading because they do not compare the vets to other Americans of their age and social status or to veterans of more popular wars to see if whatever problems are brought on by combat are easier to handle if the war is popular. The facts are these:

* According to the most comprehensive survey by the Centers for Disease Control, 2.6 percent of Vietnam veterans and 2.2

percent of veterans their age who did not go to Vietnam died during the 20 years after their tours, and both percentages are lower than the mortality rates for the civilian population of the same age. The differences between these three groups are similar to those for World War II and Korea.

* Of the 18,300 Vietnam combat veterans studied, 446 had died by the mid-1980s, 133 in car crashes and 57 by suicide. Extrapolating to all one million combat veterans, roughly 26,000 had died since returning, 8,000 in car crashes and 3,000 by suicide; for the three million who served in Indochina in or out of combat, the figures were 73,000 dead, 24,000 in car crashes, and 10,000 by suicide; for the nine million who served in the armed forces during the Vietnam War, 220,000 dead, with 65,000 in car crashes and 28,000 by suicide. These rates are similar to those for the population that didn't enter military service. The staggering aggregates for veterans result from demographics, not traumatic or unapplauded military service.

* The findings for mental health are much the same: veterans and non-veterans have the same rates of drug abuse, violent behavior, and mental illness requiring treatment. While another CDC study found Vietnam veterans twice as likely to have problems with alcohol, clinical depression, and anxiety than veterans who didn't serve in Vietnam, "only a minority are affected, not of a magnitude causing, as a group, lower social and economic attainment." For example, 4.5 percent of the Vietnam veterans had suffered clinical depression, compared to 2.3 percent of the other veterans — twice as high a rate, but still a small percentage of the whole group. In both groups, 90 percent were employed and 90 percent were happy with their relationship with their wife or partner.

* "Post-traumatic stress syndrome" was common in combat veterans of Vietnam, with responsible estimates ranging from 33 to 60 percent. However, these aftereffects of what was called shell-shock in previous wars dissipated with time. CDC found that 15 percent of Vietnam veterans suffered at some point from PTSS, but that by the mid-1980s, only two percent did.

In sum, according to one of the leading students of the issue, "It is not being in Vietnam, but how much death and dying you see" that makes a difference in one's psychological reaction. It was not feeling guilty for losing or for fighting an immoral war

or feeling angry that your country wasn't properly recognizing your or your friends' sacrifices that gave Vietnam veterans problems, but the experience of combat, common to all wars. On reflection, it is logical that the accolades of the populace would not have much impact on the private shock and trauma of combat: soldiers are driven part or all the way mad in all wars by what they see and do. It would not surprise me if someone who has suffered shell-shock and seen humankind's dirtiest secrets was disturbed as much by public support — as the protagonist in the World War I classic *All Quiet of the Western Front* is when he returns to his school while on leave and is fêted — as by public disdain. Soldiers suffering pain and confusion deserve the government's help and society's compassion, but a brass band wouldn't have made it any better then and won't make it any better now.

There is no equally scientific way of debunking the perception among Vietnam veterans that they were vilified upon returning. Many veterans in their memoirs claim to have been spat upon by protesters when they came back to "the world." I think this is a mass hallucination based on some isolated incidents. The vast majority of the protesters I knew were sincerely concerned for the welfare of the soldiers and did not hold them responsible for the war. Some of the most important protests tried to shut down draft boards, induction centers, and troop trains, all to try to keep the soldiers from harm's way. On the other hand, I'm sure there were a lot of people calling soldiers baby-killers and giving them the finger instead of a ride when they tried to hitchhike in their uniforms, and I can recall myself talking trash during chance meetings with soldiers. These nasty expressions of anti-war sentiment were misplaced — whatever baby-killing some soldiers perpetrated was just a fraction of that caused by the decision by civilian politicians to go to war and attack populated areas with heavy ground and air forces — but anyone who goes into the business of killing ought to be ready to endure and debate those who disagree, especially in America.

Alienated veterans who continue to be angry at the protesters are pointing their rage in the wrong direction. They were abandoned by the embarrassed mainstream who wished that the war could just be forgotten, not by the anti-war minority who wished it had never started. Vets ought to lay off Jane Fonda and

get after the politicians who voted for an immoral and unwinnable war and the officials who directed it. Fonda erred in letting herself be photographed with an anti-aircraft gun in Hanoi, but she apologized for that error, and in any event was there because she was courageously trying to stop a war she opposed and save American as well as Vietnamese lives. Who among the politicians and officials took similar risks for peace?

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After the war, America was exhausted with having been defeated and liberals didn't want to be responsible for rehashing the reasons why. We more radical opponents of the war who were angered by its goals and not just its brutal and costly methods had no political forum within which to debate our erstwhile liberal allies, let alone our implacable conservative opponents. In groups as in individuals, anger that remains silent turns into depression and lethargy, and so we collectively turned inward, alienated from ourselves and the country. The absence of a reckoning for Vietnam was not due to any conspiracy between a cowed media and the government and business leaders who felt threatened by a rejection of the Vietnam foreign policy. The important books have certainly been written — like Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, his jangling mosaic of the madness of the war as seen from the mud, blood, and fear of his time as a war correspondent; like Neil Sheehan's massive explication of the life of John Paul Vann, a leader of America's counter-insurgency campaign; like Stanley Karnow's solid history of the war that was also presented as a documentary on public television. The problem is that as a people we don't want to talk about them, about it, to identify lessons and take them to heart.

Into this vacuum of discussion, first tentatively and then more boldly as they saw that the going was unobstructed, strode those who had prosecuted or promoted the war, the military and civilian officials and conservative writers who comprise the US national security establishment. Violating the historical truism, this time the losers wrote the history, and pointedly used it as a map for the future. Their themes are diverse and contradictory — that we won by losing; that we had the war won but didn't realize it; that we lost, but could have won with a better strategy; and that we lost, but could have won with better tactics. What they have in common is an acceptance of the war's goal of main-

taining a cooperative regime in power in South Vietnam. The authors are searching for why we lost, and not for why we should have fought at all.

The grand-historical argument that we won by losing has been promulgated *ex post facto* by Henry Kissinger, William Bundy, Gen. William Westmoreland, and various editorialists in the *Wall Street Journal*. The claim is that our losing effort provided breathing room for the dominoes of Southeast Asia outside of Indochina to strengthen themselves against communist insurgency. It conveniently forgets that the dominoes we invoked in Vietnam were the other countries of Indochina, which were decimated by the war and ended up under Vietnamese domination. Why would Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and (in one extreme version) Australia have gone communist had the Viet Minh won in 1945 or 1954, or the NLF in 1965, or the North Vietnamese in 1968 or 1970 or 1972 rather than 1975? The largest of them, Indonesia, slaughtered its communists and their potential allies in 1965, the year the first US combat units came to Vietnam. And in any event, the assumptions that Indonesia is better off for living under a brutal right-wing dictatorship since then and that we had a right to determine its future reveal that the authors are still playing with their globes and ignoring the people on them.

The argument that we had the war won might seem absurd at first glance. How could one recall the collapse of the South Vietnamese Army in 1975, bringing to an ignominious end thirty years and billions of dollars of US military involvement, and call our military policy a success? Surprisingly, this counter-intuitive argument has shown great appeal and served quite handily to blunt critical analysis of what went wrong. The clearest explication of it was proffered by retired Army Col. John Collins, an analyst at the Library of Congress who worked on the planning staff in Vietnam. Collins is best known for *The Military Balance*, his annual "bean-counts" in the 1970s and 1980s that showed Soviet advantages over US forces in numbers of weapons and troops. These provided the intellectual underpinning for the military buildup started by Carter and expanded further by Reagan, even though Collins himself warned that the "gaps" should not in themselves, without a "net assessment" of how they would be countered in a European war by superior US technology, position, and training, determine US spending or strategy. His carefully con-

structed argument about how we “lost the won war” from 1972 to 1975 fell victim to similar misinterpretation.

US ground and air forces decimated the lightly-armed and finally-exposed NLF as a mobile combat force during the Tet Offensive, Collins argues, and the “pacification” of rural areas through Phoenix, improved services, and South Vietnamese security patrols then further reduced it to the status of an inconsistent nuisance. We were unaware of this fact, and lost our resolve to fund the South Vietnamese and support them with our air power indefinitely, so we “lost the won war.” Even granting Collins his finding – and as many assessments from the villages counter his view of the collapse of the NLF’s infrastructure and popular support as confirm it – he only says that one aspect of the war was won, not the War as a whole. He notes that North Vietnam’s generals constantly shifted strategy, making a complete transition from guerrilla strikes to tank battalions as they grappled first with how to defeat the unexpectedly-introduced US troops and then the well-equipped South Vietnamese army they left behind. Even as US troops started to be withdrawn in 1969, the NVA increased its main units in the South. The South Vietnamese army was being left to its fate, and just because the war was lost in a new way doesn’t mean it wasn’t still lost.

John Paul Vann, the colonel who left the Army in frustration with its refusal to adopt guerrilla tactics and became a civilian warlord over pacification efforts, is shown by Sheehan’s book to have bought Collins’s theory without Collins’s disclaimer. Vann believed that the quiescence of the NLF and the lull in North Vietnamese operations as US forces disengaged in the early 1970s meant that the whole War had been won. Vann believed that Vietnamization had succeeded, and that the forces we would leave behind were capable of beating the NVA on their own as long as they were given funding and the US air power that was used to bludgeon the 1972 Easter Offensive to a halt. Vann too was congratulating US strategy on meeting a challenge that had already changed so dramatically that it was irrelevant. The enemy had succeeded in making it impossible for the United States to bankroll the war and bombard indefinitely, so Vann’s optimism was not related to the war at hand. In that war, NVA main units hammered away at ARVN main units until they prevailed by virtue of the permanent initiative their occupation of parts of South Viet-

nam gave them, the greater dedication of their fighters and commanders to their cause, their related longer lengths of service and greater experience, and the willingness and ability of their leaders to replace casualties.

For all his years in Vietnam, Vann was no closer to understanding the essence of the struggle than Kissinger, who had spent hardly any time there. They both still believed that the enemy had a breaking point where the sacrifice required to drive out a foreign power and its agent would no longer be worth the reward of a united country under the rule of the Vietnamese Communist Party. US strategy never envisioned that the enemy be defeated through combat in North Vietnam. Rather, it assumed that the enemy could be discouraged by the price it had to pay in casualties and economic devastation, but there never was such a price. Like Vann, William Colby, the architect of Operation Phoenix who later directed the CIA, calls the replacement of NLF insurgents with NVA main units proof that the war was won and that with a little more patience, a lasting settlement could have been reached on US terms. He claims vindication for Phoenix, as if its success would remove its criminality; it doesn't, and it doesn't speak well for Colby that he thought the enemy wasn't going to counter successes by US and ARVN forces in one sphere with new tactics in that sphere and increased pressure in others.

The leading proponent of the school that argues that we did in fact lose the war and did so because of a poor strategy is retired Army Col. Harry Summers, who also worked on the planning staff in Vietnam. His book, *On Strategy*, ridicules the opinion identified here with Collins, Vann, and Colby that the essential war was a guerrilla war and that it was won. He offers as a fitting epitaph to that sort of non-strategic thinking a story of his encounter with a North Vietnamese officer during negotiations at the end of the war. Summers takes some comfort in asserting to the officer that US forces were never defeated in battle, to which the officer replies that this "may be so, but is also irrelevant," revealing to Summers the superior strategic thinking of the enemy.

Of course, Summers' assertion and the NVA officer's acceptance of it will come as a surprise to those on both sides who fought in the literally thousands of engagements in which American forces did lose and in some cases were overrun and wiped out. It certainly came as a surprise to that officer when he was

approached years later by another author for confirmation, and he insisted that the essence of his exchange with Summers had been lost in translation. The point was not that American units had lost no battles, which he said they certainly had, but that it would have made no difference if they had in fact won them all, as long as the casualties they suffered eventually broke the will of the American people to continue the war. The fact that even a sophisticated critic like Summers misdefines what it means to win a battle — apparently relying on the fact that US forces would usually call in reinforcements and firepower after a mauling and regain the contested terrain to no effect as the enemy slipped away — shows the pervasiveness of the weakness of American strategic thinking about the war.

Summers argues that the essential rules of an effective strategy, from having an achievable goal to exploiting such time-honored principles as mass and surprise, were violated both in the conception of the war and its implementation. To the argument that the United States should have discarded its conventional forces and fought a lengthy, village-level guerrilla war, he counters that the underlying fulcrum of enemy power in the war was never the irregular forces disrupting South Vietnamese administration in the countryside, but rather was always the one type of power that could and in fact did win the war, the North Vietnamese units that eventually coursed south in 1975 and crashed through the gates of the South Vietnamese Presidential Palace. He shows how the United States guaranteed its own defeat by chasing the smokescreen of the guerrillas or waiting on the strategic defensive for the main units of the enemy to choose when and where to bloody US and allied forces, instead of taking the strategic offensive and using the principles of war to attack the enemy and, in the technical, Clausewitzian terms to which Summers is partial, destroy its will and ability to combat.

The unavoidable conclusion to which one is led by Summers, a conclusion that he acknowledges almost grudgingly, is that no amount of punitive pounding of North Vietnam from the air and enemy casualties in the South could have destroyed its will and ability to combat, and that an invasion and occupation of the North by US forces was the only path to victory. He believes that the Joint Chiefs of Staff should have concluded this by the mid-1960s and should have so informed President Johnson, and

then resigned if he failed either to approve that strategy or to disengage. Here Summers reveals that his strength, a dispassionate focus on purely military facts, is also his weakness. Like Gen. MacArthur in his dispute with President Truman over extending the war in Korea to Chinese soil, Summers is unwilling to admit to a broader picture than his arena of war. To invert French premier Clemenceau's dictum, he thinks crucial decisions about the war and where it fits in that picture are too important to be left to the elected civilians. For the Joint Chiefs to have confronted Johnson with a demand for invasion or withdrawal and then resigned had he chosen a middle path would have been dangerously close to attempting a coup d'état.

Notwithstanding all his public bluster about the abilities of US forces and all the rosy assessments he received about the war from the Pentagon, Johnson, a smart man and a brilliant student of power, appeared by 1965 already to acknowledge the likelihood of the view later espoused by Summers that the war was unwinnable with the current strategy of discouraging the enemy by bloodying him from the air in the North and chasing him around in the South. Certainly, he was presented with an assessment similar to Summers' in 1967 when secretary of defense McNamara told him that his only practical choices were massive escalation or a dramatic reduction in air and ground combat. As commander-in-chief and chief executive, he simply refused to bet that an invasion would solve the problem in Vietnam and also not disrupt the national and international initiatives that he deemed equally important to America's future.

Johnson was leery of his military advisers' assurances that China would not respond to a US ground presence in North Vietnam the same way it had in North Korea. He told associates how the Pentagon had informed Truman that China would stay out of the Korean War if US forces, having regained South Korea from North Korean troops, went north into North Korea, and that Truman had rued the day he accepted that assurance, which led to military disaster, thousands of wasted lives, and a Republican victory in the 1952 presidential election. A wider war, even if eventually successful, boded ill for Johnson's domestic agenda as well as for US relations with its other allies and for America's place in world opinion in general, so he rejected the option of an invasion.

Another military official who joins Summers in pinning the blame for losing the war in Vietnam on US strategy is one of the people who had primary responsibility for implementing it, retired Gen. Bruce Palmer, Westmoreland's deputy in Vietnam and then vice-chief of staff of the Army from 1968 to 1973. Palmer's book, *The 25-Year War*, inadvertently reveals the intellectual handicap that discipline imposes on armed forces and to a lesser extent any bureaucracy. It shows the schizophrenia that necessarily comes with being even the best of the bunch, an observant officer, a thinker who is not permitted to come to conclusions that call the institution into question. Palmer's experience on the ground provided him with more than enough proof that the separate components of American policy were misguided, but his background and loyalty as a professional American soldier rule out the conclusion that the sum of these misguided components was a misguided whole, that the war and the foreign policy that led to it were simply wrong. This tension runs throughout the book, its repetition becoming more humorous with each juxtaposition of analytic aplomb and naïve sentiment:

* He paints a bitter picture of a South Vietnamese officer corps that is thoroughly penetrated by NLF agents, arranges with enemy commanders to avoid contact, and treats the war primarily as a way to make money through kickbacks and payoffs; when all this forces US troops to operate alone, he politely expresses his regrets that this "gave the impression" to ARVN soldiers that American planners "lacked confidence" in them.

* He generously calls the arrangements to avoid combat a cultural issue that was "very difficult for (American advisers) to understand, much less accept"; but for any officer in any army to make such arrangements calls into question the entire purpose of a war, which is the one thing that Palmer can not question.

* He repeatedly rates the overall performance of US officers, advisers, and soldiers as "outstanding" and of "high quality" until the disintegration of 1970, yet he records the advisers' failure to build a cohesive ARVN despite 20 years' effort, and documents "monumentally misleading" advice from field commanders and "almost ludicrous" proposals from top brass.

* He absolves American troops of systematic "war crimes," yet he obliquely confirms the existence of such crimes by saying that some units "padded" reports of body counts with civilians

or were “careless” about “avoiding” civilian casualties, and that a “major deficiency” in the training of US personnel in the applicability of the Geneva Conventions to “unconventional guerrilla warfare” led in part to the “aberration” of My Lai.

* He notes the damage done to the American cause by the linking of the war in Vietnamese and world opinion to the attempt by France to retain its colonial rule, but can only conclude that it made our championing of decolonization elsewhere “seem” rather than be “hypocritical.” Similarly, he provides example after example of misleading information by the US Government, yet can only calmly report a “perception of deception” on the part of the public rather than agree on the reality of it.

* He identifies a “lack of whole-hearted public support” as the “fatal weakness” of the war and suggests a stronger campaign to win the public over, even as he acknowledges that our top political leaders failed “to grasp why it was necessary to go to war” and that the threat to US interests was “difficult to view credibly.” Similarly, he documents the North Vietnamese campaign to “mobilize world opinion against the United States” for its “immoral, illegitimate, and unlawful war against a weak, small country seeking to unify its people under one government” without acknowledging the validity of this portrayal.

Palmer’s ingenuousness reminds me of retired Marine Col. Ray Madonna, who commanded a company in Vietnam that occupied a village, only to find out that the purpose was to allow the absentee landlord to fly in and collect the rents. When Madonna told this anecdote to college students I was teaching 15 years later, he still saw it as an example of a bad apple and not a rotten barrel. He felt no wicked motivations and so assumed as much for his side and its allies. Even though he called the war a mistake, he refused to concede the moral high ground to me and the war’s opponents, arguing that we had been “right for the wrong reason” while he had been “wrong for the right reason,” which was to save South Vietnam from communism. In the same vein, Palmer concludes that “(o)ur motives and objectives as a government were straight-forward and devoid of territorial ambitions or self-aggrandizement.” Every claim in that all-encompassing sentence is demonstrably false by his own examples, but Palmer the officer who respects his allies, colleagues, and country and Palmer the soldier who knows what he sees are the twain that can not meet.

This combination of factual perceptiveness and institutional limitation had existed in Palmer for a long time. He recounts how in 1951 his class at the War College studied Indochina and recommended that we not send US forces to defeat the communist nationalists who were fighting the French. The students noted the technical difficulties of such combat and its minimal strategic importance, and felt that the taint of colonialism would handicap any American effort. Then, they turned around and approved military aid to the French effort! They couldn't quite make the leap from disputing an ally's plans to refusing to help out a bit, from acknowledging the driving nationalism underneath Vietnamese communism to foregoing seeing if a little aid here and there could thwart it. This refusal to renounce an empire that could be run indirectly, on the cheap, is precisely what placed the United States in the quicksand of suzerainty over Indochina in the 1950s, and led to the direct, expensive effort to impose its will in the 1960s.

The paradox of nationalism in Vietnam was that if the colonial legacy meant that a foreign-backed government couldn't develop a bond of nationhood and fairness that impelled the average citizen to loyalty and the average soldier to battle, then it couldn't be saved by outside forces; if it did develop such a bond, then it wouldn't even need outside support. This reality discredited Palmer's final recourse to explain our defeat, "culture." He ascribes our opponents' superior "will to prevail" to "oriental values" about human life that permitted them, like our previous Asian opponents in Japan, China, and Korea, to treat as "acceptable losses" levels of casualties that would cause occidentals to rethink their commitment. But by that standard, ARVN troops were classic Europeans for surrendering a lost cause, and the Germans in World War II were decidedly Asian in resisting the allied onslaught that was obviously destroying the thousand-year Reich. This charge of Asian barbarism is bizarre. After all, it was Americans inflicting all these casualties, from the fire-bombing of Tokyo to the hill battles of Korea and the Christmas bombing of Hanoi.

Like Summers, Palmer doesn't blame civilian leaders for the defeat in Vietnam, although he resents their intrusion in operational decisions and their refusal to put the country on a war footing, and he remains agog at Nixon's orders that secretly bypassed his own secretary of defense. He faults the armed forces

for numerous problems in tactics and command structure, but he also acknowledges that absent an offensive strategy, fine-tuning couldn't win the war. He believes that his and other military leaders' biggest failing was in not proposing a winning strategy when the original one failed, and he suggests one similar to Summers' because he can see that as long as the enemy was permitted to maintain its strategic offensive, US forces would be required forever as an occupation force, which was not politically feasible.

Palmer argues that US forces should have been focused on the northern provinces of the South and in Laos, threatening amphibious landings in North Vietnam to keep its main units at home. The fighting and pacification in the South he would have left to the ARVN. This amounts to Vietnamization of the war five years earlier than it occurred, but as Palmer himself notes when recounting an inspection tour, in 1965 US forces were required to prevent the collapse of the government. Once it saw that the Americans would rescue it, it had no reason to change its predatory position toward its citizens and its army had no reason to fight. Both Summers and Palmer envision calling the bluff of the insouciant government and the ineffectual army, telling them to shape up or watch the United States ship out, but once we were in the field, this threat just wasn't credible.

Right to the end, Palmer remains an archetype of America's ideological blindness. He acknowledges that the die was cast once US troops began leaving, but he still blames the final outcome more on congress for cutting supplies to the ARVN than on the performance of the North Vietnamese, who were still outmanned and outsupplied. He castigates America for abandoning "a nation whose only sin was to look for us to survival" rather than for creating the fiction of that nation out of whole cloth. He muses about whether Gen. Creighton Abrams, had he not died, might have with his "father-savior-hero" image in Vietnam persuaded congress and the nation to return and "rescue" South Vietnam. These inconsistent conclusions simply reaffirm the political schizophrenia — the conflict between the language and the reality of America's world role, between America's soaring values and its earthbound actions — on which the Vietnam foreign policy is founded.

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