

## Commemorating the American war in Viet Nam

On May 25, 2012, in announcing a 13-year long commemoration of the war in Viet Nam funded by Congress at \$65 million, President Obama proclaimed: “As we observe the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam War, we reflect with solemn reverence upon the valor of a generation that served with honor. We pay tribute to the more than 3 million servicemen and women who left their families to serve bravely, a world away... They pushed through jungles and rice paddies, heat and monsoon, fighting heroically to protect the ideals we hold dear as Americans. Through more than a decade of combat, over air, land, and sea, these proud Americans upheld the highest traditions of our Armed Forces.”<sup>1</sup>

Commemorations are acts of choosing what to remember about something presumably of significance. So 2 parts:

- A. creating a memory which is inevitably a direction to remember some things rather than others; a memory with a purpose; ostensibly to honor and thereby define honor for some future purpose
- B. defining some event as significant: making a major contribution to our world, a turning point

So I will try to make an argument for the significance of the war and point at what I think ought to be remembered which will diverge from hyperbolic salutations of soldierly valor – though valor there was -- to something more substantive; it will end up at cross purposes to Obama’s, I fear.

So let me develop an argument at 3 levels:

- 1. the war’s impact on the US
- 2. its impact on Vietnamese
- 3. and its impact on the world

(1) At the beginning of US involvement in Southeast Asia in support of the French war from 1945-54, the US was riding high, sensing an opportunity both to gain a foothold on the mainland of Asia (a long cherished goal of American power brokers) and to roll back the advance of Communism. It seemed an opportune moment for the US to assert global hegemony; as well as to demonstrate its military prowess. The US was high on power. It took for granted that it could out-do the outmoded European powers like the French who were driven out by the Vietnamese in 1954. The US then

directly intervened by creating a Republic of Viet Nam in the south opposed to Ho Chi Minh and the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam in the north.

So when I first encountered representatives of the Vietnamese “enemy” as an antiwar activist in a meeting at the Montreal Expo/World’s Fair in 1967, I was blown away by their confidence in ultimate victory. It hadn’t occurred to me that the US could lose this war. Ever since the war ended, the US military has droned on about how it won every battle – but lost the war due to civilian interference. This is problematic for many reasons:

Wars are generally fought for specific political purposes; they are not all-out street fights until no one is left standing. Of course, they are politically driven. What was the alternative strategy that would have allowed the US to triumph?

- a. Invade the North: US power was proving itself incapable of controlling South Viet Nam even with an allied South Vietnamese government and army; how could the US succeed against an independent Democratic Republic of Viet Nam in the north unified against foreign aggression?
- b. Use nuclear weapons (which Nixon seriously considered<sup>2</sup>): Such an escalation would be universally understood as an international war crime and possibly provoke a world war with the Soviet and/or Chinese.
- c. Putting all these conjectures aside, let me remind you how unrestrained the war actually was –
  - i. At its peak, the US had 540,000 troops at one time (plus another 100-200,000 supporting from outside Viet Nam) in a country slightly larger than Florida
  - ii. The bombing: “the United States Air Force dropped in Indochina, from 1964 to August 15, 1973, a total of 6,162,000 tons of bombs and other ordnance... This tonnage far exceeded that expended in World War II and in the Korean War.”<sup>3</sup>
  - iii. The chemical war: From 1961 until 1971, the US military dropped more than nineteen million gallons of toxic chemicals — defoliants or herbicides, including the notorious Agent Orange, produced by Monsanto and Dow Chemical — on approximately 4.8 million Vietnamese in southern Viet Nam in Operation Ranch Hand.

In the end in 1973, the US withdrew. Military defeat was a huge blow to imperial pride. It caused a prolonged crisis of confidence in the US military. A big part of the crisis was manifested in the demoralization and alienation of US soldiers. Along with alienation came resistance. Col. Robert D. Heinl wrote in 1971 in the **Armed Forces Journal** that

“by every conceivable indicator our army that now remains in Vietnam is in a state approaching collapse, with individual units having refused combat, murdering their officers and non-commissioned officers, drug-ridden, and dispirited when not near-mutinous.”<sup>4</sup> There were over 300 antiwar underground newspapers circulated among GIs. And there were over half a million reported incidents of desertion (503,926 to be exact).<sup>5</sup>

While it is crucial to memorialize this resistance, we must also note the impact on soldier’s mental health; including what veteran John Grant has termed the “moral damage” of fighting unjust war. To date, estimates of veteran suicides range from a low of 9,000-150,000<sup>6</sup>; the latter almost triple the number of US deaths during the actual conflict.

The civilian antiwar movement is better known. This movement has been portrayed as exclusively white and middle class, but antiwar activists of color -- from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to Muhammad Ali and Martin Luther King, from the Brown Berets, and the Chicano Moratorium to Corky Gonzalez and Ruben Salazar -- took courageous and effective stands against the war. And according to most surveys<sup>7</sup> working class respondents were more antiwar than the middle class.

Taking inspiration from the civil rights movement, an unprecedented opposition of remarkable proportions developed not just on the campuses, but in the streets and around family dinner tables. It may be hard to imagine given the success of our government in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in marginalizing not just antiwar opposition, but even removing the actual wars themselves from public view. Part of this, of course, is due to the absence of the draft, the privatization and robot-ization of the military, but also the self-conscious policy of our political leaders. War has been normalized, as one winds down another gets rolling.

On May 16 of this year, when asked at a Senate hearing how long the war on terrorism will last, Michael Sheehan, the assistant secretary of defense for special operations and low-intensity conflict, answered, “At least 10 to 20 years.”<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, this past week Obama seemed to offer a limited reappraisal: “Beyond Afghanistan, we must define our effort not as a boundless ‘global war on terror’” and adding that “perpetual war – through drones or Special Forces or troop deployments – will prove self-defeating, and alter our country in troubling ways.” Whether his words mark a real turn away from the direction of US global policy since World War II is certainly in doubt, but they represent an opening. The time is ripe for increased pressure from the peace movement

In any case, the movement against the war is well worth commemoration. Let me focus on its considerable achievements:

- a. An active, committed extra-parliamentary opposition in the streets was created in the face of serious attempts to marginalize it as unpatriotic, disloyal, unmanly, and naïve about, if not, pro-Communist.
- b. The movement made the morality of the war an issue for Americans; moving beyond the cost-benefit analysis favored by the punditocracy; the war was wrong not just too costly. As Martin Luther King put it, the “US was on the wrong side of the world revolution.”
- c. To some extent, the movement succeeded in humanizing the Vietnamese enemy not merely as victims, but as capable opponents who demonstrated bravery, resilience, and intelligence.
- d. The movement also affected ‘ordinary’ politics by posing the incompatibility of empire abroad and democracy at home. To fight the war and thereby protect and expand the empire, the US government found it necessary to lie to and manipulate its own people – as most dramatically evidenced by the *Pentagon Papers*.
- e. In tandem with the civil rights, Black liberation, and women’s movements, the anti-war movement fostered an intellectual revolution which undermined Euro-centrism and traditional hierarchies while honoring the previously marginalized. History could be made by ordinary people; by people of color, by women; by the ignored and excluded. Our grasp of history, culture, and human capacity was qualitatively expanded.

(2) Even as it is important to talk about the effect on Americans, it’s worth remembering that the **Viet Nam war took place in Viet Nam**, not in the US – though it would be hard to tell that from the American postwar reaction – academic, political, or cultural. The narrative is of American rather than Vietnamese trauma.

So let’s re-focus on Viet Nam. Accurate estimates are hard to come by, but as many as 3 million Vietnamese were likely killed, including 2 million civilians, hundreds of thousands seriously injured and disabled, millions of internally displaced, cropland and forests destroyed: incredible destruction – physical, environmental institutional, and psychological. The term ecocide was coined to try to capture the devastation of the Vietnamese landscape. Nick Turse in his 2013 book, *Kill Anything That Moves* is the latest to document the war on the civilian population, which he calls “the real American war in Vietnam”, a direct product of American strategy. US troops were unable to distinguish civilian Vietnamese from fighters. All Vietnamese, as a matter of course, were referred to as “gooks”. So the distinction between combatants and non-combatants, which had been eroding throughout 20th century warfare, virtually disappeared.

Yet the Vietnamese somehow endured – validating their view that their political superiority (especially historically honed and tempered Vietnamese nationalism) could overcome US firepower and technical superiority. The core of contradiction of US strategy was exposed: To win, the US had to establish a legitimate South Vietnamese government; after all, the US military did not want to stay in Viet Nam forever. But as the war effort floundered, the more the US took over the reins of war, the more the South Vietnamese government revealed itself as illegitimate and puppet-like. The American claim that it was bringing democracy was thus exposed as self-contradictory and doomed to failure.

Still the Vietnamese victors faced daunting postwar problems:

1. A devastated landscape and population
2. Unexploded ordinance; injury, illness and birth defects almost certainly resulting from chemical warfare.
3. A divided nation, including supporters of the losing Republic of South Viet Nam
4. The dual problems of reunification and economic development
5. The hostility of China and Cambodia (Kampuchea), egged on by the US, which led to 2 wars
6. The continuing hostility, including an economic and diplomatic embargo, of the US.

(3) And finally, the Vietnamese resistance inspired people all over the world. It was a powerful blow against Euro/American supremacy and imperial arrogance. The war in Viet Nam demonstrated the limits of military power when opposed by a determined, organized opponent. The success of the Vietnamese resistance inspired others throughout the world to struggle for self-determination. It was the epitome of the revolt of those MLK called “the barefoot and shirtless people”.

So that is my sense of what might be worth commemorating. The US government’s purpose seems to be different: to finally put the Viet Nam ‘syndrome’ to rest by reinvigorating the military and endorsing US global ambitions – now battered after two frustrating land wars in Asia. The fantasy of techno-war -- nurtured in “the electronic battlefield’s’ 20,000 sensors along the Ho Chi Minh trail, even the first primitive drones, then deflated by defeat in Viet Nam; this fantasy is being revived in new generations of smart drones, a developing triple canopy of surveillance devices to be orbiting the earth, along with cyber-warfare. There are US military bases in well over a hundred countries

throughout the world. The dreams of empire are alive and deadly, but under threat. The National Intelligence Council predicts that the economies of Asia will surpass the economies of Europe and North America by 2030.

President Obama avows that the US “doesn’t play for second place”. Our task is not so easily reducible to sound bites. How to convince people that the Empire has no clothes; that we need a human not a techno fix. The war ought to remind us of what Martin Luther King called “an inescapable network of mutuality” in which the fates of Vietnamese and Americans, among others, are inextricably linked. The disregard of the environment embodied in the technological onslaught on Viet Nam (and led to the concept of “ecocide”) is echoed and amplified by human-induced climate change. The soldiers we honor on Memorial Day will not have died in vain if we are honest enough to face the truth of the Viet Nam war. The choice is clear: We recognize our common humanity or indulge rituals of power that end in mutual destruction.

Unending war is not only a tremendous strain on our economy; it promotes a dangerous delusion of power, as if techno-bullying is a way forward. We need a counter-commemoration of the American war in Viet Nam in which human cost and human capacity to resist oppression are honored and elaborated. Imperial America is stuck in a past that never existed; our mandate is to find a way forward, beginning with an honest accounting of the US’s wrongful war in Viet Nam. Our commemoration needs to be a warning: No More Viet Nams; No More Imperial War!

### War Anniversaries Worth Remembering:

- 5-8/1963: Buddhist demonstrations violently suppressed by Saigon government
- 9/01/1963: US-backed coup against President Ngo Dinh Diem of South Viet Nam
- 8/04-8/1964: The largely fabricated Gulf of Tonkin incident
- 8/07/1964: US Congress passes Gulf of Tonkin resolution giving the President a free hand without declaring war
- 3-6/1965: Antiwar teach-ins on US campuses
- 3/02/1965: US begins bombing of North Viet Nam in Operation Rolling Thunder
- 3/08/1965: US marines land in Da Nang marking a major escalation of US military involvement
- 3/17/1965: 25,000 march against the war in Washington DC
- 10-11/1965: Large antiwar demonstrations throughout US; including the first public burning of a draft card by David Miller
- 12/1965: US troops number 184,000
- 8/23/1966: Muhammad Ali applies for conscientious objector status, declaring that "I ain't got no quarrel with the Viet Cong"
- 6/1966: Fort Hood Three refuse deployment to Viet Nam
- 12/28/1966: Capt. Howard Levy charged with promoting "disloyalty and disaffection" among soldiers at Ft. Jackson and of refusing to teach dermatology to Special Forces airmen
- 4/02/1967: Meeting of the Bertrand Russell War Crimes Tribunal in Stockholm
- 4/04/1967: Martin Luther King speaks out publicly against the war
- 4/15/1967: 400,000 in NYC and 100,000 in San Francisco march against the war; 150 burn draft cards
- 10/1967: Stop the Draft Week in Oakland
- 10/3/1967: The Resistance organizes mass turn-in of draft cards by 1500
- 10/21/1967: March and attempt to "exorcise and levitate" the Pentagon; emergence of "flower power"
- Fall 1967: First GI coffeehouse, the UFO, set up at Ft. Jackson in Columbia, South Carolina
- 1/30/1968: Beginning of Peace Talks between US and Vietnamese opponents in Paris
- 3/16/1968: My Lai massacre
- 8/23-27/1968: Antiwar demonstration at Democratic National Convention
- 10/14/1968: Presidio munity where 27 prisoners at the Presidio stockade in San Francisco sat down in protest singing "We Shall Overcome"
- 9/02/1969: Death of Ho Chi Minh
- 10/15/1969: October Moratorium Against the War
- 11/15/1969: 500,000 march against war in Washington DC, hundreds of thousands in San Francisco; GI units in Viet Nam join in
- 4/29/1970: US and ARVN troops invade Cambodia
- 8/29/1970: 25,000 march in Chicano Moratorium in LA (Journalist Ruben Salazar is killed) by police
- 5/1970: Students are killed at antiwar demonstrations at Kent State (Ohio) and Jackson State (Mississippi) as nationwide demonstrations expand
- 1/31-2/02/1971: Vietnam Veterans Against the War organize the Winter Soldier Investigation of war crimes and atrocities in Vietnam (in Detroit with 116 veterans)
- 4/23/1971: Operation Dewey Canyon III where veterans throw 700 medals away at the Capitol building
- Starting 5/01/1971: Tens of thousands engage in nonviolent disobedience in Washington DC as 12,000+ are arrested
- 6/1971: The *NY Times* begins publication of *The Pentagon Papers* exposing US policy toward Viet Nam
- 10/1972: Paris Peace talks reach tentative agreement
- 12/18-29/1972: Christmas bombing of North Viet Nam; what Vietnamese call "Dien Bien Phu in the sky"
- 1/27/1973: Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring the Peace signed in Paris
- 4/30/1975: End of the war
- 2/03/1994: End of US embargo against Viet Nam
- 7/1995: Normalization of relations between Viet Nam and US

For more GI resistance see [http://www.sirnosir.com/timeline/chronology\\_harassment.html](http://www.sirnosir.com/timeline/chronology_harassment.html)

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.federalregister.gov/articles/2012/06/01/2012-13514/commemoration-of-the-50th-anniversary-of-the-vietnam-war>. See also the official web site at <http://www.vietnamwar50th.com/>.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB195/>.

<sup>3</sup> See Clodfelter, Michael. (1995). *Vietnam in Military Statistics: A History of the Indochina Wars, 1772-1991*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.

<sup>4</sup> Col. Robert D. Heinl, "The Collapse of the Armed Services" in *Armed Forces Journal* (June 7, 1971), 30-37.

<sup>5</sup> An estimate of the US Department of Defense; see

[http://books.google.com/books?id=Rzy\\_yNMKbcC&pg=PA212&lpg=PA212&dq=desertion+503,926&source=bl&ots=hOFO9rsb1B&sig=KX4JXAvwn2xw4eGFR\\_nfsKtB36k&hl=en&sa=X&ei=V15sUfv5KaXYyQG9gYGABg&ved=0CDEQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=desertion%20503%2C926&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=Rzy_yNMKbcC&pg=PA212&lpg=PA212&dq=desertion+503,926&source=bl&ots=hOFO9rsb1B&sig=KX4JXAvwn2xw4eGFR_nfsKtB36k&hl=en&sa=X&ei=V15sUfv5KaXYyQG9gYGABg&ved=0CDEQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=desertion%20503%2C926&f=false)

<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/2343923> or <http://rense.com/general77/hdtage.htm> or <http://winoverptsd.com/wp/category/disturbing-facts-about-vietnam-veterans/or> for estimates from low to high.

<sup>7</sup> See for instance, Philip E. Converse and Howard Schuman, "Silent Majorities and the Vietnam War," *Scientific American* (222, 6 June 1970), 23; John P. Robinson and Solomon G. Jacobson, "American Public Opinion About Vietnam," *Peace Research Society (International) Papers* (10, 1968), 63-79; and Harlan Hahn, "Correlates of Public Sentiments About War; Local Referenda on the Vietnam Issue," *American Political Science Review* (64, 4, December 1970), 1186-98.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2013/05/decades-of-war/>