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Some Lessons and Myths of the American War in Vietnam

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The War Was an Example of Imperialism

The Vietnam War was an example of imperial aggression. According to historian Michael Parenti, “Imperialism is what empires are all about. Imperialism is what empires do,” as “one country brings to bear...economic and military power upon another country in order to expropriate [its] land, labor, natural resources, capital and markets.” Imperialism ultimately enriches the home country’s dominant class. The process involves “unspeakable repression and state terror,” and must rely repeatedly “upon armed coercion and repression.” The ultimate aim of modern U.S. imperialism is “to make the world safe” for multinational corporations. When discussing imperialism, “the prime unit of analysis should be the *economic class* rather than the nation-state.”¹

U.S. actions in Vietnam and elsewhere are often described as reflecting “national interests,” “national security,” or “national defense.” Endless U.S. wars and regime changes, however, actually represent the class interests of those who own and govern the country. Noam Chomsky argues that if one wishes to understand imperial wars, therefore, “it is a good idea to begin by investigating the domestic social structure. Who sets foreign policy? What interest do these people represent? What is the domestic source of their power?”²

The United States Committed War Crimes, Including Torture

The war was waged “against the entire Vietnamese population,” designed to terrorize them into submission. The United States “made South Vietnam a sea of fire as a matter of policy, turning an entire nation into a target. This is not accidental but intentional and intrinsic to the U.S.’s strategic and political premises.” In such an attack “against an entire people...barbarism can be the only consequence of [U.S.] tactics,” conceived and organized by “the true architects of terror,” the “respected men of manners and conventional views who calculate and act behind desks and computers rather than in villages in the field.”³ The U.S. abuse of Vietnamese civilians and prisoners of war was strictly prohibited by the Geneva Convention that the United States signed. U.S. officials and media pundits, however, continue to assert that torture is a violation of “our values.” This is not true. Torture is as American as apple pie, widely practiced in wars and prisons.

Washington Lied

The war depended on government lies. Daniel Ellsberg exposed one such lie that had a profound impact on the eventual course of the conflict: the official story of the Tonkin Gulf crisis of August 1964. President Johnson and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara told the public that the North Vietnamese, for the second time in two days, had attacked U.S. warships on “routine

¹ Michael Parenti’s argument is a synthesis of “[What Do Empires Do?](http://michaelparenti.org)” 2010, <http://michaelparenti.org>, and *Against Empire* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1995), 23. Parenti documents this history in great detail in a number of other books, including *The Face of Imperialism*, *Profit Pathology and Other Indecencies*, and *The Sword and the Dollar*.

² Noam Chomsky, *Towards a New Cold War* (New York: New Press, 2003), 6, 93, 98.

³ Gabriel Kolko, “War Crimes and The Nature of the Vietnam War,” in Richard Falk, Gabriel Kolko, and Robert Jay Lifton, eds., *Crimes of War* (New York: Vintage, 1971), 412–13; Kolko, “On the Avoidance of Reality,” *Crimes of War*, 15.

patrol in international waters”; that this was clearly a “deliberate” pattern of “naked aggression”; that the evidence for the second attack, like the first, was “unequivocal”; that the attack had been “unprovoked”; and that the United States, by responding in order to deter any repetition, intended no wider war. All of these assurances were untrue.⁴

The War Was a Crime, Not a Mistake

Since the end of the war in 1975, there has been a concerted effort by U.S. officials, the corporate media, and influential intellectuals to portray U.S. actions as a “noble cause” that went astray. Historian Christian Appy profoundly disagrees, arguing that the findings of the *Pentagon Papers* and other documents provide “ample evidence to contradict this interpretation.... The United States did not inadvertently slip into the morass of war; it produced the war quite deliberately.”⁵

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Condemned the War—and Was Vilified for It

Dr. King’s historic Riverside Church (NYC) speech against the war on April 4, 1967 courageously confronted bitter and uncomfortable truths about the conflict and this society. He passionately and eloquently proclaimed that he “could not be silent in the face of such cruel manipulation of the poor.... I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today—my own government.” The war was “a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit, and if we ignore this sobering reality we will find ourselves organizing” committees to oppose other wars “for the next generation [and] attending rallies without end unless there is a significant and profound change in American life and policy.”⁶

King’s magnificent speech, relatively unknown in this country, elicited strong attacks by the political and corporate media establishment, and civil rights leaders. These included Vice President Hubert Humphrey; the *New York Times*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, the *Washington Post* and *Life Magazine*; Ralph Bunche, Nobel laureate and United Nations diplomat; and Roy Wilkins, NAACP director. The corporate media condemnation of King reflected public sentiment, as a Harris poll taken in May 1967 revealed that 73 percent of Americans opposed his antiwar position, including 50 percent of African Americans.⁷ *Life* denounced it as “demagogic slander that sounded like a script for Radio Hanoi.” The *Times* strongly condemned King, calling his effort to link civil rights and opposition to the war a “disservice to both. The moral issues in Vietnam are less clear-cut than he suggests.” It closed its harsh editorial by stating that there were “no simple or easy answers to the war in Vietnam or to racial injustice in this country. Linking these hard, complex problems will lead not to solutions but to deeper confusion.” The

⁴ Daniel Ellsberg, *Secrets* (New York: Penguin, 2002), 12.

⁵ Christian Appy, *Working Class War* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 253.

⁶ Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., “[Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence](http://commondreams.org),” April 4, 1967, Riverside Church, New York City, available at <http://commondreams.org>.

⁷ Edward Morgan, *What Really Happened to the 1960s* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2010), 76; Daniel S. Lucks, *Selma to Saigon: The Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky Press, 2014), 203.

Post claimed that some of his assertions were “sheer inventions of unsupported fantasy;” that King had “diminished his usefulness to his cause, to his country and to his people.”⁸

Some prominent African Americans condemned King’s position. An especially vicious attack came from black journalist Carl Rowan, a close ally of President Johnson and head of the U.S. Information Agency—who told the White House press secretary that “everyone in the Civil Rights movement has known that King is getting advice from a communist.” In an article in the *Reader’s Digest*, that had a circulation in the millions, Rowan accused King “of being an egomaniac who was under the sway of communists.”⁹ This is ironic given that the alleged communist in question, Stanley Levinson, consistently urged King not to publicly oppose the war and stick to his civil rights efforts.

On November 9, 1967, I was Dr. King’s co-host and driver when he delivered the annual Graduate Student Association Convocation address of the State University of New York at Buffalo. In our brief time together, we discussed the war, that April speech, and the harsh attacks he received for condemning it. He calmly explained that despite the vicious attacks upon his integrity and patriotism, he had to oppose the war because conscience demanded it. He courageously stayed the course until his tragic assassination five months later.

The Corporate Media Did Not Oppose the War, Only How It Was Fought

The assertion that the corporate media opposed and undermined the war effort is one of the great myths of the Vietnam conflict. They endorsed U.S. support of French colonialism and essentially emerged as tactical critics of the war only after the Tet Offensive in early 1968. The corporate media never challenged the fundamental premises upon which this war was based.

The First Antiwar Protests Came from the Merchant Marine Services

Opposition to U.S. intervention in Vietnam did not begin with student protests in the mid-1960s, but with U.S. merchant mariners in the fall of 1945. They had been diverted from bringing U.S. troops home from Europe to transport French troops to Vietnam to reclaim that colony. Some of these merchant mariners vigorously condemned the transport “to further the imperialist policies of foreign governments,” and a group from among the crews of four ships condemned the U.S. government for helping to “subjugate the native population of Vietnam.”¹⁰

Some two decades later, the most important opposition to the war would come within the military itself—including criticism by Generals Matthew Ridgeway, David Shoup, James Gavin, and Hugh Hester. Hester called the war “immoral and unjust,” an act of U.S. aggression; and Shoup stated that if the United States “had and would keep our dirty, bloody, dollar-crooked fingers out of the business of these nations so full of depressed exploited people, they will arrive

⁸ *New York Times*, April 7, 1967; *Washington Post*, April 6, 1967.

⁹ Lucks, 196-97.

¹⁰ Michael Gillen, “Roots of Opposition: The Critical Response to U.S. Indochina Policy, 1945–1954,” Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1991, 122.

at a solution of their own.” The generals all signed a *New York Times* antiwar advertisement in 1967, and Shoup and Hester supported and spoke at rallies sponsored by the Vietnam Veterans against the War (VVAW). Because of their efforts, the FBI investigated them under Presidents Johnson and Nixon. [10]

According to political scientist Robert Buzzanco, these “respected and influential military figures ... initially spoke out against the war while the domestic consensus in support of American involvement was still strong.” Shoup and Gavin argued that many of those fighting with the National Liberation Front (NLF) “were not ideological communists but victims of a government and upper-class oppression who had revolted as nationalists”; that Ho Chi Minh “was a nationalist, albeit a communist too, who would not be a puppet of other communist powers.” Shoup described the war as a conflict between “those crooks in Saigon” and Vietnamese nationalists who sought a better life.¹¹

Christian Appy points out that in 1969-70, “substantial numbers of soldiers opposed the war they were sent to fight. They voiced objections, avoided combat, and sometimes engaged in collective defiance of direct orders.” There was a great deal of protest by black soldiers, many of whom “realized ... that a number of prominent black people they respected were protesting the war,” e.g., Muhammad Ali, Julian Bond, Malcolm X, and Dr. King. By 1969, “combat avoidance increasingly developed into direct ‘combat refusals,’ the military’s euphemism for mutiny. The most common instances involved small units refusing to move into areas where the men believed they might get pinned down by enemy fire.”¹²

Marine combat veteran, poet, historian, and activist W. D. Ehrhart spoke for thousands of vets who fought in the war and came home to challenge it:

I’d learned that the eighty-eight years of French colonial rule had been harsh and cruel; that the Americans had supported Ho Chi Minh and his Vietminh guerillas with arms and equipment and training during World War Two, and in return, Ho’s forces had provided the Americans with intelligence and had helped to rescue downed American pilots; that Ho had spent years trying to gain American support for Vietnamese independence; that at the end of World War Two, the United States had supported the French claim to Indochina; that North and South Vietnam were nothing more than an artificial construction of the Western powers, created at Geneva in 1954. I’d had to learn it all on my own, most of it years after I’d left Vietnam.¹³

The War Provoked Strong Working-Class Opposition

Labor studies scholar Penny Lewis counters a number of misconceptions about the antiwar movement in her *Hardhats, Hippies, and Hawks*, particularly the false view that working-class Americans were “largely supportive of the war and largely hostile to the numerous movements for social change taking place at the time.” In fact, “Working-class opposition to the

¹¹ Robert Buzzanco, “The American Military’s Rationale against the Vietnam War,” *Political Science Quarterly* 101, no. 4 (1986): 571.

¹² Appy, *Working Class War*, 222, 225, 244-45.

¹³ W. D. Ehrhart, *Passing Time* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1989), 161-62.

war was significantly more widespread than is remembered and parts of the movement found roots in working-class communities and politics. By and large, the greatest support for the war came from the privileged elite, despite the visible dissention of a minority of its leaders and youth.”¹⁴

As the war deepened, so did an antiwar movement within the working class. It included the rank-and-file union members, working-class veterans who joined and helped “to lead the movement when they returned stateside; [and] working-class GIs who refused to fight; and the deserters who walked away.” Especially after the Tet Offensive in early 1968, the antiwar movement “formed deeper roots among people of color, religious communities,” and students who attended non-elite campuses.¹⁵

The domestic antiwar movement was the largest in U.S. history, and the October 1969 Moratorium Against the War alone was the greatest single antiwar protest ever recorded in this country. The movement was deepened and strengthened by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), that in January 1966 issued a public statement against the war—a courageous dissent that nearly bankrupted it financially. SNCC called U.S. involvement “racist and imperialist.” The murder of SNCC activist and Navy veteran Sammy Younge showed that the organization’s role was not to fight in Vietnam, but to struggle within the United States for freedoms denied to African Americans. SNCC accordingly affirmed its support for draft resisters. Reflecting the national view at the time, most African Americans strongly disagreed with SNCC’s stand on the war and draft resistance.¹⁶

Though miniscule when compared to the astronomical level of violence in Vietnam, antiwar violence by college youth received much attention from the corporate media and the public. In fact, however, it was an extremely small part of an activist antiwar movement that “numbered more than 9,400 protest incidents recorded during the Vietnam era, as well as thousands of demonstrations, vigils, letter writing [campaigns], teach-ins, mass media presentations, articles and books [and petitioning] congressional representatives.” Added to these activities was an explosion of antiwar news sources across the country, beyond college campuses. There were countless antiwar papers published by active-duty soldiers and veterans who opposed the war, such as *Vietnam GI*, the VVAW paper.¹⁷

Appeals to Support the Troops Should Be Critically Examined

President Obama and the U.S. government Vietnam Commemoration have urged citizens to support and honor those who served in Vietnam—an appeal that certainly does not extend to the antiwar activists of the VVAW. The charge to honor the military in Vietnam—and all wars since—implicitly asks citizens to support uncritically any U.S. conflict. As the war continued, the VVAW rejected such a view, in the face of condemnation from prominent public officials, the American Legion, and Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW).

¹⁴ Penny Lewis, *Hardhats, Hippies, and Hawks* (Ithaca, NY: ILR, 2013), 4, 7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 92; Lucks, *Selma to Saigon*, 3.

¹⁷ Kirkpatrick Sale, *SDS* (New York: Random House, 1973), 514, 48.

The My Lai massacre offers a concrete case to test the official charge that citizens should support the military in times of war. Kenneth Hodge, one of the U.S. soldiers who participated in the massacre, insisted years later that “there was no crime committed.”

As a professional soldier, I had been taught and instructed to carry out the orders that were issued by the superiors. At no time did it ever cross my mind to disobey or to refuse to carry out an order that was issued by my superiors. I felt that they (Charlie Company) were able to carry out the assigned task, the orders, that meant killing small kids, killing women.... I feel we carried out the orders in a moral fashion, the orders of destroying the village, ...killing people in the village, and I feel we did not violate any moral standards.¹⁸

There is no bridge that can span the chasm between Hodge and those soldiers who refused orders to kill people at My Lai; and between Hodge and pilot Hugh Thompson Jr., who landed his helicopter in the midst of the massacre and saved Vietnamese who certainly would have been killed. Hodge’s defense should also be compared with journalist Jonathan Schell’s comment about My Lai: “With the report of the...massacre, we face a new situation. It is no longer possible for us to say that we did not know.... For if we learn to accept this, there is nothing we will not accept.”¹⁹

Real support for the troops should not consist of cheap flyovers at sporting events; corporate campaigns to raise funds for veterans that are pennies on the dollar alongside vast profits from military contracts; performing empty flag-waving gestures while supporting political efforts in Washington to cut funds for wounded and disabled veterans and other needed programs; or assuring veterans that the war was a noble cause when it was not.

My Lai Was a Massacre, Not an “Incident”

The most publicized U.S. atrocity of the war, the slaughter of unarmed residents of the hamlet of My Lai in the village of Son My on March 16, 1968, was a massacre—not an “incident,” as it was first called in the Vietnam War Commemoration. It lists the death toll “at ‘more than 200,’” and singles out only Lieutenant William Calley, “as if the deaths of all those Vietnamese civilians, carried out by dozens of men at the behest of higher command, could be the fault of just one junior officer.”²⁰ That same morning another massacre took place in the nearby hamlet of My Khe—to this day virtually unknown to the U.S. public. The My Lai and My Khe massacres resulted in the murders of 504 unarmed Vietnamese civilians; most of the victims were women, children, and infants.

For historian Gabriel Kolko, My Lai “is simply the foot soldier’s direct expression of the...fire and terror that his superiors in Washington devise and command from behind desks.... The real war criminals in history never fire guns [and] never suffer discomfort. What is illegitimate and immoral, is the entire war and its intrinsic character.” Regarding the home front reception to the My Lai massacre, he reminds us that the “rather triumphant welcome various

¹⁸ Hodge quoted in Michael Bolton and Kevin Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai* (New York: Viking, 1992), 371.

¹⁹ Jonathan Schell, “Comment,” *New Yorker*, December 20, 1969, 27.

²⁰ Nick Turse, “Misremembering America’s Wars, 2003–2054,” *TomDispatch*, February 18, 2014,

political and veterans organizations gave Lieutenant Calley reveals that terror and barbarism have their followers and admirers at home as well as in Vietnam.”²¹

Regarding My Lai, the war, and the United States, historian Kendrick Oliver concludes: “This is not a society which really wanted to know about the violence of the war that its armed forces were waging in Vietnam.” Many citizens “perceived they had more in common with...Calley than with any of his victims.... It was the lieutenant...who became the object of public sympathy, not the inhabitants of My Lai whom he had hastened to death, and the orphans and widows he made of many of the rest.”²²

Ecocide Is an Essential Legacy of the War

The horrific and illegal chemical warfare against the Vietnamese was defined powerfully and precisely by prominent biologist Arthur Galston, who wrote that at the end of the Second World War “as a result of the Nuremberg trials, we justly condemned the willful destruction of an entire people and its culture, calling this crime against humanity *genocide*. It seems to me that the willful and permanent destruction of environment ... ought similarly to be considered as a crime against humanity, to be designated by the term *ecocide*.”²³

The devastating environmental health effects of the war continue for Vietnamese and U.S. veterans. Arthur Westing, the leading U.S. authority on ecological damage during the war, addressed these effects at an Agent Orange symposium in 2002. “Damage to the human environment in time of war is ... as old as warfare itself.... Nonetheless, the Second Indochina of 1961-1975 (the ‘Vietnam Conflict’; the ‘American War’) stands out today as the [classic] example of war-related environmental abuse.” This occurred because of a number of factors, including, “Long-term systematic fury inflicted by [the United States] upon the environment [of Vietnam] dependent for its survival upon a rural natural-resource economy.” Westing also stated that the “massive and sustained expenditure of herbicidal chemical warfare agents against the fields and forests of South Vietnam ... resulted a large-scale devastation of crops, to widespread and immediate damage to the island and coastal forest ecosystems, and in a variety of health problems among exposed humans.”²⁴

The U.S. Government Does Not “Hate War”—It Loves It

President Obama’s claim in his 2013 Vietnam Commemoration speech—that Americans “hate war” and “only fight to protect ourselves because it’s necessary”—is the latest in a long line of fantastical pronouncements by U.S. officials. Even an elementary knowledge of U.S. wars since the founding of the nation would dispel this delusion. These include the genocidal Indian Wars that lasted more than a century until 1890; wars of aggression against Cuban, Philippine,

²¹ Kolko, “War Crimes,” 414; “Avoidance,” 12.

²² Kendrick Oliver, *The My Lai Massacre in American History and Memory* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2006), 8–9.

²³ Quoted in Erwin Knoll and Judith Nies McFadden, *War Crimes and the American Conscience* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), 71.

²⁴ Arthur Westing, “Return to Vietnam: The Legacy of Agent Orange,” lecture at Yale University, April 26, 2002; Westing, *Ecological Consequences of the Second Indochina War* (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 1974), 22.

and Puerto Rican independence struggles in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; and the overthrow of forty-one governments in Latin America between 1898 and 1994.²⁵ There is also Korea, Vietnam, Panama, Iraq (twice, in 1991 and 2003, in addition to genocidal economic sanctions in between), and Afghanistan, with the latter two both still underway, Libya, Syria, and many more documented in the Congressional Research Service's important study, released in September 2014, that tallied hundreds of U.S. military interventions. As Veterans for Peace note on their website: "America has been at war [224] out of [241] years since 1776. Let that sink in for a moment." Since the end of the shooting war in Vietnam in April 1975, virtually every calendar year has seen the presence of U.S. military forces throughout the world. A number of these nations have seen multiple U.S. military interventions under various presidents over the past forty years since the end of the war.²⁶ The historical record, therefore, reveals a government that is addicted to war.

Vietnamese Resistance to U.S. Aggression was Justified

Nguyen Thi Binh, head of the Vietnamese delegation to the 1968 Paris Peace Conference, declared that the war of resistance against America was "the fiercest struggle in the history of Vietnam," forced upon a people who did not provoke or threaten the United States. During the Second World War, Vietnam "was on the side of the Allies and embedded the spirit of democracy and freedom of the Declaration of Independence of America in the Vietnamese Declaration of Independence and constitution." Despite this fact, the United States "attempted to replace France and impose its rule over Vietnam." The Vietnamese understood their country "was one," and their "sacred aspiration was independence, freedom, and unification." They always believed that they "have the right to choose the political regime for their country without foreign intervention."²⁷

The History of the War Is a Struggle for Memory

A practical lesson of the war is offered by Vietnam veteran and sociologist Jerry Lembcke, author of the important book *Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam* that confronted the lies and myths regarding antiwar activists' abuse of returning veterans: The "vast majority of Vietnam War veterans would know more about the war today if they had spent their months of deployment stateside in a classroom with Howard Zinn." And what should be the lesson for young people who wish to understand the American war? "That the veteran...might today be a better source...had he stayed home from Vietnam and read some history books; [and] the student, whose education might be better served by reading a good history book about the war than interviewing the veteran."²⁸

²⁵ Greg Grandin, "The War to Start All Wars: The 25th Anniversary of the Forgotten Invasion of Panama," *TomDispatch*, December 23, 2014. See also Grandin's excellent *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism* (New York: Metropolitan), 2006.

²⁶ Barbara Salazar Torreon, *Instances of Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad, 1798–2014* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Office, 2014).

²⁷ Nguyen Thi Binh, "The Vietnam War and Its Lessons," in Christopher Goscha and Maurice Vaisse, eds., *The Vietnam War and Europe 1963–1973* (Brussels: Bruylant, 2003), 455–56.

²⁸ Jerry Lembcke, "Why Students Should Stop Interviewing Vietnam Veterans," *History News Network*, May 27, 2013, <http://historynewsnetwork.org>

Students and Teachers: Carefully Analyze Your U.S. History Textbooks

After every war that the United States has fought, a new chapter is added to public knowledge of the conflict, including secondary history textbooks that interpret the conflict for succeeding generations. The new stories stress the necessity of its involvement and America's role and conduct during the war. Some describe the excesses and even the criminal behavior of the U.S. military, but never define these as such or acknowledge their central place in the conduct of the war. U.S. history textbooks essentially portray U.S. aggression against Vietnam as a failed defense of democracy and freedom; it was a "mistake" and a "tragedy," with noble goals. The thesis that the conflict was an illegal act of criminal state aggression is considered unworthy of critical examination. The parameters established by these texts do not allow students to consider the possibility that the Vietnamese resistance was a justifiable liberation struggle against foreign invasion.

I have published three studies on the treatment of the American War in Vietnam in U.S. history textbooks; they cover the story of the war in 56 books published from the mid-1960s through 2011. These include *Lessons of the Vietnam War*, with the late William Griffen (1984), *Civic Illiteracy and Education* (1997), and *The American War* (2016). Essentially, history textbooks' support of the Noble Cause War in Vietnam denies millions of students the opportunity to critically examine: (1) the causes of the war as studied in the broadest geopolitical context; (2) the charge of U.S. war crimes that have been exhaustively documented; (3) the full extent of catastrophic human and ecological destruction; (4) U.S. war planners' secret and illegal policies, as revealed by the *Pentagon Papers* and other sources; (5) the powerful influence of the domestic and military antiwar movements, and repressive government responses; (6) the unconstitutional exercise of presidential powers in waging the war; and (7) the short-and long-range consequences of this conflict. The words "U.S. invasion of Vietnam" do not appear in any of the fifty-six texts examined.

A primary concern put forth to justify Washington's current wars—that a benevolent United States is defending itself against "terrorism"—is also a key concept in the textbooks. The language of terrorism, selectively applied to enemies but not allies, shaped U.S. public opinion during the War in Vietnam, as it does today. According to the textbook story, resistance to U.S. forces in Vietnam was built upon "terror": it is the most frequently used word to describe the tactics of the North Vietnamese and the National Liberation Front (NLF)—called the "Viet Cong." U.S. bombing, however, the major destructive tactic of the war and more than twice the tonnage it dropped in both the Second World War and the Korean War, is described as "systematic," "heavy," "massive," "raining," "intensified," "retaliatory," "constant," or "stepped up," *but never as "terror."* The texts do not suggest that U.S. tactics in Vietnam, e.g., chemical defoliation, search and destroy missions, civilian bombing raids, and the Phoenix program, were war crimes, and terrorist in nature.

Although recently published textbooks examined for this book (2001-2011) are more accurate and critical of the war, the discussion of U.S. war crimes, for example, resembles the analysis of earlier text studies. Terrible actions by the United States are covered, such as the My Lai massacre, but it is simply out of bounds to suggest that such actions and the conflict itself are war crimes such as those condemned at the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials at the end of the Second

World War; that those who planned, executed, and lied about the conflict are war criminals. Nowhere is it hinted, for example, as argued by the late scholar and antiwar activist Carl Oglesby, that the U.S. might have been “the enemy of those who are just, smart, honest, courageous, and *correct*.”²⁹

Noam Chomsky’s conclusion on the nature of the war and its relationship to the educational system captures the essence of the past and present textbook studies. Simply replace Southeast Asia with Afghanistan or Iraq, and his thoughts in 1966 on schools and society remain just as accurate and relevant.

At this moment of national disgrace, as American technology is running amuck in Southeast Asia, a discussion of American schools can hardly avoid noting the fact that these schools are the first training ground for the *troops* that will enforce the muted, unending terror of the status quo of a projected American century; for the *technicians* who will be developing the means for extension of American power; for the *intellectuals* who can be counted on, in significant measure, to provide the intellectual justification for this particular form of barbarism and to decry the irresponsibility and lack of sophistication of those who will find all of this intolerable and revolting.³⁰

Conclusion

Forty years after the War in Vietnam ended in 1975, an ideological war over the most accurate and truthful story of the conflict remains. Whose ideas about the war will prevail? This “struggle for memory” will help determine how we, the people, will respond to present and future U.S. international conflicts. Judging from the past few decades, and the lack of mass protests that we saw during the Vietnam era, the lessons are clear. If citizens are to understand the role of U.S. governmental and corporate elites in initiating the current endless wars, they must develop an accurate and comprehensive understanding of the history of the conflict in Vietnam. Such an analysis will provide the critical tools with which to counter the hyper-patriotism of the official Vietnam Commemoration.

During the war, U.S. veterans exhibited courage and honor when they saved comrades from grievous injury and death; when they showed deep concern for veterans who suffered from Agent Orange-related health problems; when some journey to Vietnam to help heal the scars of war through their efforts at the Friendship House and Project Renew; and continue their antiwar activism through the VVAW and the Veterans for Peace (VFP). These admirable and moving actions, however, must not divert attention from the fact that powerful war makers in Washington sent these men to fight and die in an aggressive conflict where war crimes were committed on a massive scale. It is certain that the official Vietnam Commemoration will not honor, or even mention, the courageous soldiers who stood up and refused to obey unjust and immoral orders, and who organized a powerful antiwar movement among their comrades in the

²⁹ Carl Oglesby, “Vietnam Crucible: An Essay on the Meaning of the Cold War,” in Oglesby and Richard Schaul, *Containment and Change* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 141.

³⁰ Kolko, “Avoidance,” 14.

field and at home that became the greatest and most effective such effort in U.S. history—led by the VVAW.

The Commemoration lessons are based on the dominant and false story of American beneficence: a nation forever faithful in its quest for justice that always follows a righteous path in its wartime conduct. This book has exposed the lie, however, that the United States government was doing the right thing in Vietnam. It has argued that there is another story that must be told of a decades' long reign of terror against the people of Vietnam—a shameful war that no government-sanctioned lesson or eloquent rhetoric from the Vietnam Commemoration can hide. The U.S. government will never acknowledge this; therefore, it must be sanitized for the public.

During the war, those who controlled this nation's foreign policy were, in the words of the late historian Gabriel Kolko, "devious, incorrigible, and beyond the pale of human values..." They revealed themselves in Vietnam, and since in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia, for what they are: international terrorists. The U.S. wars against Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria, and the deadly drone attacks against other countries, however, have not yet led to an organized and mass antiwar movement here.

Those who want to end these ongoing military aggressions must study the antiwar protests of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the nature of mass movements in general, in order to draw valid conclusions that will assist in building another mass antiwar movement in this nation. Will it simply be another organized effort that will disband as soon as the U.S. appears to be "winning" a conflict, or ends its most recent aggression? Or will it be a different kind of movement with broader goals and new tactics?

Citizens might conclude that stopping U.S. wars requires building a movement that will be strong enough to prevent wars before they start. Their study of history may also lead them to see these wars as systemic, intimately bound up with the imperatives of capitalism and imperialism. This would require building a mass movement to end the rule of powerful war makers that has historically used the U.S. military machine and this country's foreign proxies to expand and strengthen their domination throughout the world.

An accurate study of the history of wars might lead citizens to conclude that every war emanates from a unique set of circumstances or context that will be used by those in control to justify its necessity by using a barrage of propaganda—as in the totally fraudulent claim in 2002 and 2003 that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. The state's propaganda will separate various wars by portraying them as disconnected fragments, thereby forcing citizens to organize themselves anew each time as simply an "antiwar" movement. A careful study of history might reveal that such single-issue struggles are, by their nature, ephemeral, and do not address the fundamental, underlying causes of U.S. aggressive wars.

The powerful class has manipulated far too many citizens here through its domination of the public education system, the corporate mass media, and national security state propaganda. Since the Vietnam conflict ended in 1975, this domination has lessened citizens' ability to make informed judgments about controversial issues, to understand the actual nature of U.S. international policies. It has decreased their capacity to resist ongoing U.S. violence abroad that has killed and maimed millions, and created millions more refugees. Gabriel Kolko argues that

citizens here cannot resist U.S. wars because most “are still incapable of ... a searing reappraisal of their cherished assumptions and vision of society.” [31]

This state of affairs can be changed—but only when citizens reject the official lessons of the War in Vietnam and form their own critical and moral lessons. They will then see the connections between that war, the U.S. national security state and its foreign policy, the socio-economic system, and the principles that drive U.S. aggressive conflicts. Citizens must engage with alternative historical narratives that present often-omitted facts and interpretations that are based on critical and documented methods of analysis. They must draw lessons that are grounded in the pursuit of justice, humanity, and legitimate government actions. Finally, citizens must grasp the lessons of previous social movements that were organized to stop aggressive wars. Only then will new tactics be developed and a mass movement organized that can confront the war makers and the war machine in Washington.

Author

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