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Reconsidering Vietnam

Jonathan Mirsky

1.

"That war cleaves us still." On January 20, 1989, George Bush included these words in his inaugural address. He followed them with the plea, "But friends, that was begun in earnest a quarter of a century ago. Surely the statute of limitations has been reached." Then came advice: "The final lesson of Vietnam is that no great nation can long afford to be sundered by a memory."

If there were any Vietnamese listening in front of the Capitol they would have been puzzled by the phrase "a quarter of a century ago." For them the war began no later than 1945, when the French returned to reclaim Indochina, and Vietnamese Communists might date it yet earlier, to an insurrection of 1930.

Here we begin to see the scale of the problem. There were plainly many wars, with many millions of memories—well over eight million Americans, including civilians, went to Vietnam. There would be the memories of the 58,000 Americans who died, and, according to General Giap's staff, the one million Vietnamese soldiers who died. In the admirable anthologies put together by Walter Capps and Harry Maurer we encounter the memories of soldiers who say they loved the war, and of whom some were drunk during most of it. Some believed we won most of the battles but lost the war; some feared they had entirely lost their sense of morality. The last is a common feeling among Vietnam veterans, twice as many of whom have committed suicide since the war died during it. Many suffer, as Peter Marin notes in A Vietnam Reader, from what Sartre, in Being and Nothingness, called "'bad faith,' the underlying and general sense of having betrayed what you feel you ought to have been."

But what do the Vietnamese feel about the war? We hear a few of their voices in the two collections by Capps and Maurer, and in the book by Justin Wintle and John Balaban. The leaders in Saigon and Hanoi spent their citizens' lives freely, while few died themselves. When Dean Rust was asked by his old and trusted Vietnamese kept coming, he replied, "I really don't have much of an answer on that, Rich," and General Giap, when told by Morley Safer that some of his still-crippled veterans weren't sure whether the war was worth the suffering, "made a movement across the face, as one would discourage a pesky gnat."

And what of the result? In Kyoto this April, Robert S. McNamara, secretary of defense between 1961 and 1968, when asked to explain his support of the war, admitted to several hundred succeeded to some degree had we fought harder.

Apart from Truong Nhu Tang, the Vietcong's former minister of justice, until very recently few if any important Vietnamese in the struggle against the Americans said publicly that the war was a tragedy. And yet, pened; victorious Vietnam is isolated, extremely poor, is begging for international help, and is condemned for its violations of human rights by both Amnesty and Asia Watch.

But prominent Vietnamese Communists are beginning to question the very legitimacy of the regime which fought so tenaciously and successfully for so long against France and the United States. This is more difficult for some of Hanoi's admirers in the West. In her long and well-researched polemical survey of Vietnamese history in this century, Marilyn Young, who devotes a page and half to Nixon's notorious visit to the Lincoln Memorial in 1971, lectured bemused students about the war, manages only a sentence or two, in her postwar chapters, on how Vietnam now treats its citizens. She apparently has not talked to such Vietnamese as colonel Bui Tin, the deputy editor of the Party's newspaper, Nhan Dan, and a veteran of Dien Bien Phu, who twenty-one years later personally accepted the surrender of Saigon. In late 1990 while visiting Europe he stated that four members are on fire and called for a government of national reconciliation composed of exiles, refugees, and those at home. The colonel's remarks, hardly secret except in a people's democracy, made him wary of returning to Vietnam. "Prison is possible, and my wife and children have already been interrogated by the police."

Another bold critic from inside the regime is Nguyen Khac Vien, a leading Vietnamese historian and editor of a series of booklets on Vietnamese history much studied by Stites about the American antiwar movement. This March, in Hanoi, Vien described the state apparatus as completely impotent, leaving the entire society chaotic and impossible to develop.... Surrounding each leader is a group of self-serving toadies.... The people, cadres and low-level party officials have lost all faith in the upper echelons. Vien suggested that "top leaders should voluntarily resign from the central bodies at present.... If these leaders persist in retaining their old positions, then their entire glorious past will fade away and they will bear responsibility for the collapse to come."2

Tenth anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War, Hô Chi Minh City, April 1985

BOOKS DISCUSSED IN THIS ESSAY

Vietnam: Citizens Detained for Peaceful Expression
Asia Watch/Human Rights Watch, 11 pp., $2.45
A Vietnam Reader
by Walter Capps, Routledge, 316 pp., $45.00; $14.95 (paper)
The Dynamics of Defeat: The Vietnam War in Hanoi and The Vietnam War in
Hoa Nghia Province by Eric M. Bergerud, Westview Press, 383 pp., $32.00
by Harry Maurer, Avon, 634 pp., $12.95 (paper)
The Vietnam Wars 1945-1990
by Marilyn B. Young, HarperCollins, 386 pp., $25.00; $11.00 (paper)
War by Other Means: National Liberation and Revolution in Vietnam 1954-60
by Carlyle A. Thayer, Allen and Unwin, 256 pp., $34.95; $24.95 (paper)
Vietnam at War: The History: 1946-1975
by Phillip B. Davidson, Oxford University Press, 838 pp., $16.95 (paper)
Romancing Vietnam: Inside the Boat Country
by Justin Wintle, Pantheon, 466 pp., $25.00 (to be published in November)
Remembering Heaven's Face: A Moral Witness in Vietnam
by John Balaban, Poseidon Press, 334 pp., $21.95

2See "The War That Will Not End."

What if the Vietnamese Communists had declined to fight the French in 1945? It is likely that many Vietnamese North and South who died would still be alive. Or what if the Americans had not attributed such cosmic powers to communism? According to Clark Clifford, McNamara assured President Johnson that a Communist victory in Vietnam would reverberate across to Greece and down to Africa. None of this hap-

One distinguished writer on the Asia Watch list is the poet Nguyen Chi Thien, who has already spent more than half his life in prison; he was first jailed during the Vietnamese version of the Hundred Flowers. In 1979 he handed a group of poems, called Flowers from Hell, to the British embassy in Hanoi, which refused to give him asylum. Another intellectual, Dr. Nguyen Dan Quy, who had already served ten years in prison between 1978 and 1988 for speaking out on human rights, was rearrested on June 14, 1990, for signing a petition calling on the government to respect human rights and "to adopt a pluralistic political system." Asia Watch has requested comment about his case from Hanoi, but has received no answer.

Vietnam's long war in the second half of the twentieth century, the regime's ultimate explanation for virtually all subsequent failures, is now being questioned by writers in Vietnam and the retribution against them has been swift. According to the Paris-based International Federation of Human Rights, in an appeal dated June 17, 1991, the writer and activist Duong Thu Huong was arrested in April for "collecting and sending out of the country documents harmful to the State security." The real reason for her arrest, the statement says, is that she sent abroad the manuscript of her latest novel, The Triumphant Arch, which, according to the federation, describes the Vietnamese war and the useless sacrifice of successive generations of young Vietnamese in the names of ideological and political goals which have led the country to the total economic, cultural, and moral devastation it suffers today.

Huong is not a class enemy. In 1967 she was sent by the Ministry of Culture to a particularly dangerous front-line post to "sing louder than the bombs," and in 1979 she went to the front again, as a film writer, in the war against China. Now she has been expelled from the Party.

As in China, writers with their "sugar-coated bullets" are a main target for the Party (although Chinese writers have been more brutally treated). In an unpublished paper written in 1990, Professor K.W. Taylor of Cornell, one of the most perceptive students of Vietnamese intellectual life, observes that:

Authors are at the forefront of the current ferment in Vietnamese intellectual life, testing the limits of the forbidden and opening up mental space for the ongoing process of reform in the economic, political, and cultural life of the country. Recent published novels and short stories are quickly read by millions of Vietnamese in all parts of the country, especially those written by authors known to be "interesting."

One of the most "interesting" writers is Nguyen Huy Thip. When the editor Nguyen Ngoc, who published three of Thip's stories in 1988, was removed from his post for doing so, his colleagues defiantly named him head of the Writers' Association. What makes Thip interesting, according to

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October 19, 1991
Taylor, and perhaps keeps him out of jail, is that unlike the expectations of... 

with that of the current Vietnamese government, while a specially... 

that is true virtue and intelligence are not to be found in the... 

The psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton has written often and movingly about deaths and killing in wartime, and the effects of what he calls "psychic numbing." Historians of the future, he suggests in an article that Capps includes in his anthology,... 

American air force. "General Philip Davidson, Westmoreland's intelligence chief, does not condemn Giap for his free-spending way with his soldiers' lives": As a military strategist and tactician, he started as an amateur and finished as a professional. It was in the field of organization, administration, and motivation that he excelled. In this area he was a genius.

Lifton describes all the Vietnam veterans he knows as "alienated." He refers to a study of two hundred veterans which stated that "not one of them—hawk, dove, or haunted—was entirely free of doubt about the nature of the American role in it... they retain the gnawing suspicion that it was all for nothing." Some might say this is because they lost. But some of Giap's old soldiers, as described by Morley Safer in "Flashbacks," were equally, although more mutely, agonized by what it had all meant. One of them said that no one had won the war. Their commander brushed this aside. So far as we know, he saw the body counts on his side as a problem to be overcome in the interest of victory on the field. How troubled would they have been that the Vietcong, according to Loehr, raped and killed little girls in a similar interest? As for American body counts, they were not, in spite of what Lifton says,
thing" DePay fails to mention the similarly vicious killings by his own side, but he seems more thoughtful than most US commanders.

When you step back—and I didn't have these thoughts while I was there—you see the difference between a country that's fighting on its own terrain for its survival, and a country that's sending its forces halfway around the world to "contain" Communism. I don't think Americans can be expected to support long, inconclusive wars. If you have GIS going into villages or barrios and trying to sort out friend from foe, that's a disaster. It gives the other side a precious asset—call it patriotism, xenophobia, or nationalism. And once that happens, God help you.

The general is a professional soldier who, like Davidson, admires his enemy's ability to slug it out, absorb blows, and push toward victory. Perhaps Robert Liiton attributes evil too broadly to only one side.

Or evil is the wrong word. Some writers quote veterans as saying "It don't mean nothing" when they refer to the war, indicating with this phrase that they really feel the reverses. But this, according to Liiton, was in Saigon as a civilian doing electrical maintenance for an American contractor for a modest hourly wage. He told Mauer that he spent much of the time drunk in bars, hanging around with bar girls and getting into fights.

You very rarely referred to the Vietnamese as Vietnamese. The zips, always the zips. Zips could mean zipper-headers, because someone unzipped his head and dumped all his brains out. Or it could mean a zippo, which means nothing, which is what they were. The zip mentality. Zip, zip, zip, zip. It was a beautiful word.

That would make a good quote for an anti-war speech in the Sixties. But what of the views of William Broyles, Jr., who was a marine in Vietnam and later became editor in chief of Newsweek? Remembering the war, he wrote, "I had to admit that for all these years I also had loved it, and more than that I understood it, too." He has spent time with veterans and most of them, he claims, would have admitted that somewhere inside themselves they loved it, too, loved it as much as anything that has happened to them since. And how do you explain that to your wife, your children, your parents, or your friends?

Or, perhaps, to Robert Liiton? It might be hard to admit such thoughts to a psychiatrist. Capps quotes Broyles as saying:

"War is a brutal, deadly game, but a game worth playing..." He might say... But if you come back whole you bring with you the knowledge that you have explored regions of your soul that in most men will always remain undiscovered. And how can you explain that to your wife, your children, your parents, or your friends?

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appears in Capps's collection, remembers how as a teenager, "I loved, labored and fought steadily for the Viet Cong against American and South Vietnamese."

"I'm not talking about anything, she says, called her to war: her ancestors, myths and legends, parents' teachings. He's cadre: "Should an obedient child be less than an ox and refuse to do her duty?" But despite her cultural loyalties, for Hayslip the picture is less clear than for Marilyn Young: "Because we had to appease the allied forces by day and were terrorized by Viet Cong at night, we slept as little [as American GIs]." We were not up to pleasing neither. We were people in the middle. We were what the war was all about."

Eric Bergerud provides a similar but more complex picture: "It is possible that Vann [John Paul Vann, the central figure in Noel Stohichan's A Bright and Shining Lie] and others were right when they claimed that most peasants did not care who ruled in Saigon and just wanted to be left alone. But the Party had what it needed, the support of the most politically aware and the most determined segment of the peasantry."

Young also writes cursorily of one of the large population movements in modern times, the emigration of well over one million Catholics who in the summer of 1954 left North Vietnam for the South. Apparently drawing on George McTearman Kahin's Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam,1 she devotes ten lines to the entire episode and provides no sources. But she gives the impression that the Catholics left largely because they were "encouraged by the Catholic hierarchy and organized by the CIA's Landale and his team," This is true as far as it goes, and Kahin makes the same point at much greater length and with substantial citations to the Pentagon Papers and other early accounts of the movement, including Bernard Fall's The Two Vietnams.2 Nonetheless, whatever the uses of American Special Forces' propaganda and the power of the Catholic hierarchy, more than one million Vietnamese citizens did not want to live under the Communists; this was 65 percent of the northern Catholic population. Fall also says that the Tonkin Catholics would have fled in any event because of their "long experience at the skillful management of Vietnamese culture and peaceful methods of civilian persuasion," and observes as well that although the U.S.-inspired psychological warfare was very effective, "there is no doubt that hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese would have fled under Communist domination in any case."3 Young says the refugees "were carried south in American ships," while Fall says the French carried more than half of them on a program that supported the movement of the Catholics into the South, where they were protected by the Catholic Diem family, considered considerable resentment among Buddhist and their political opponents to the Catholics with the French occupiers. I remember Catholic villages in the South in 1965 that were heavily armed and fearful of Vietcong attacks.

Much of Young's narrative follows the general line set out masterfully by Kahin, supplemented by other familiar and well-used sources. She fails to acknowledge the difficulties encountered by the "good" side in her account of the battle of Dien Bien Phu, omitting Giap's failure of nerve among his own forces or his quarrel with his Chinese advisors about tactics. The interesting photographs she has included show the French and the Americans at their worst, while the Vietcong and North Vietnamese pictures—some of them clearly posed—show their subjects smiling and determined.

In her account of the brutal North Vietnamese land reform of the 1950s, Young writes that the Party commissar, and later admitted, "abuses" but she makes the killings—she puts them at between three and fifteen thousand—sound like "a series of spiteful local acts of vengeance. One of the leading authorities on the period, Carlyle Thayer of the Australian Defence Force Academy, has shown in The Reformation of the Party in the war, during which "many long-serving cadres with bourgeois backgrounds were denounced; landlords and rich peasants were condemned in public trials for committing crimes...." Thayer puts the number of executions at five thousand.

Thayer supplies much detail on the period in 1954 and 1956 when there was a purge of dissident North Vietnamese intellectuals who "began to express concern about a lack of freedom and democracy. They had been more lenient toward the Saigon citizens," and observes as well that although the US-inspired psychological warfare was very effective, "there is no doubt that hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese would have fled under Communist domination in any case."4 Young says the refugees "were carried south in American ships," while Fall says the French carried more than half of them on a program that supported the movement of the Catholics into the South, where they were protected by the Catholic Diem family, considered considerable resentment among Buddhist and their political opponents to the Catholics with the French occupiers. I remember Catholic villages in the South in 1965 that were heavily armed and fearful of Vietcong attacks.

In short, in 1954-57 the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was an exceedingly poor country, determined to achieve both social and prosperity for as much as its population as international politics and the limits of its own vision allowed.

What the limits were, she does not say.

In fact there were not many limits on the Party's use of violence against its enemies, and Young, who is unrelenting in her portrayal of American atrocities, slurs over the facts when confronted with Communist ones—for example, when dealing with the Hue massacre during the Tet offensive of early 1968 she puts the number of people murdered by the NLF at three to four hundred, saying this, "the most careful estimate," was provided by Leo Ackland. But she does not identify Ackland or his work or explain why this number is correct and others, such as Don Oberdorfer's in Tet!, reaching the thousands, are not. Oberdorfer was a well-known journalist for Time and The Washington Post in Vietnam and was there during Tet. His account of what happened in Hue supplies information omitted by Young, in addition to his estimate of the number of those murdered by the Vietcong 2,800 victims of the occupation, "shocked to death, beheaded or burned alive in the most extensive political terror in world history." Young writes that "all the accounts agree that NLF rather than North Vietnamese units were responsible for the executions," but Oberdorfer points out that Hue was a region "under direct command and control from North Vietnam," Nor in her account of those murdered does Young include the three German doctors working in public health in Hue, or the two French priests who were buried alive.

Nor, moreover, does Young mention the 428 Catholics marched away for "political orientation," whose whereabouts were not discovered for nineteen months. Oberdorfer writes that Pham Van Tuong, a part-time janitor in a government office, was called "Don Oberdorfer, Tet, The Burning Point in the Vietnam War (Doublay, 1971; Du Capo, 1984), p. 201.

Young is right to say, however, that most of the killing in Hue and during the Tet attacks—both the carnage on the streets and the horrors on the farms—was inflicted by the Americans. In his About Face: The Odyssey of an American Warrior,5 Colonel David Hackworth writes that during the Tet Offensive the Americans destroyed their war machine in counterattack, close to all the civilian casualties were from US activity.

Eric Bergerud quotes an American major serving in the South who said he had "tried to prevent American soldiers from treating all Vietnamese as if they were Vietcong: "They used to destroy in a few minutes time all that I thought was going on. They were the center of the civic actions programs and begging and pleading and whatever else you could think of: they would counteract what I could do in a month in three or four minutes."

The lack of even-handedness in Young's account is as apparent as well when it comes to torture. She refers to the American-sponsored interrogation techniques routinely administered." She supplies a poignant Magnum photograph of a captured Vietcong woman, wounded in the spine, with her hands tied behind her back, waiting for what an American officer says is rape and execution by South Vietnamese interrogators. Earlier, she includes another picture of a captured American pilot who has been hit in the face by a bullet in the head. Young does not mention in her book that many American prisoners were also tortured, although evidence of this is found in Walter D. Moore, Ground, Mauer interviews an AD employee who was captured by the Vietcong and marched North with a oner for the Vietcong with his five-year-old son, three-year-old daughter, and two of his nephews. "There was a burst of gunfire, after the rest of the family came out, they followed and killed them dead." Young may feel she has dealt with such killings when she writes, "In the early days of the occupation, the killings were indeed summary executions."

When something bad happens on the non-American side, Young uses words like "indeed," and "certainly," as if to show that she is not concealing anything. In her account of the Butcher, she produces one of her characteristic obfuscating statements: "...it is unseemly, even obscene, to argue about the numbers." Why it is unethical for Americans to be killed in cold blood by the Vietcong she never says. The killings were not indiscriminate slaughter, Young writes, but the summary execution of people who were seen as casting doubt on the legitimacy of the Saigon regime. Did these include foreign doctors and priests? Although she quotes from an interesting speculation by Richard Fall,6 she is therefore confused about the extent of the secret marriages caused many Southerners to fear the front and eventually to become boat people, Young ends with another exonerating sentence: "What the history of Tet in the United States is the extraordinary harshness and brutality of a struggle that had been going on for over twenty years." Note how brutality now becomes the villain, and not the people who committed it.


Preager, 1986.

Fall, The Two Vietnams, p. 153.

1Oberdorfer, Tet, p. 229.


The New York Review
once again to foreigners, though now it is the Soviets rather than the Americans. In the process, the lives that so many gave to create a new nation are now no more than ashes cast aside.\(^\text{1}\)

Young can do no more than to refer, near the end of her book, to Hanoi's impatience and distrust of "enemies real and anticipated" and its indifference to "local sensibilities." Hanoi, she remarks, has acted without paying undue attention to the mobilization of popular support...the necessities of peace, more difficult to determine, could prove harder to accept [my italics].

"Undue attention" is one of Young's more unfortunate phrases. Why weren't the people of South Vietnam-thousands-sound like a series of spitful local acts of vengeance. One of the leading authorities on the period, Carlyle Thayer of the Australian Defence Force Academy, has shown in War by Other Means the role of the Party in the terror, during which "many long-serving cadres with bourgeois backgrounds were denounced; landlords and rich peasants were condemned in public trials for committing crimes...." Thayer puts the number of executions at five thousand, and once an activist, refers in A Vietnam Reader to those on the left who explain away revolutionary abominations...conjoining rationalizations for crimes committed by left-wing guerrillas. A curious partial freedom is parceled out to state-sponsored socialism, as if revolutions are responsible for their accomplishments, while their brutality, if acknowledged at all, is credited to American imperialism.

There is more than a little of this tendency in Marilyn Young's often useful and interesting book.

General Phillip Davidson, an author of passions and biases as strong as Marilyn's, is occasionally capable...\(^\text{14}\)

Photograph: Northern NAACP

Saigon, April 27, 1975, after bombardment by Communist forces

accounts for some of his unpleasant personality—for Vo Nguyen Giap is definitely not your "Mr. Nice Guy." To make this point Davidson compares Giap to Hitler and Mussolini, and notes his reputation as a "peasant, a surly boor," and as "savages and deceitful," because he tried to manipulate an interview with Oriana Fallaci. Is General Davidson implying that American commanders customarily tell the truth to journalists, especially those from enemy countries? By contrast, Davidson's own boss and hero, William Westmoreland, "is a handsome man, one of the most handsome of his generation. He is erect, well-built, about six feet tall, with a masculine face...." On hot days he never sweats. He fulfills Napoleon's criterion for a great commander: "an equilibrium of character and intellect." Westmoreland rarely sweats or drinks, does not smoke, and banishes from his entourage those guilty of "sexual pecadillo or excessive drinking."

One would expect after all this that Giap could hardly emerge as a brilliant commander or Westmoreland as a flawed one. But Davidson is not sure that Westmoreland's day-by-day attention of often elusive enemy forces was the right way to win the war. He reminds us that although such a strategy "destroyed the Indians as a guerrilla force," it took "a century and a half." Giap, wholly self-taught, concentrated on the American weakness of will once large numbers of Americans were being sent home. "The exploitation of this critical American vulnerability elevated Vo Nguyen Giap into the first rank of grand strategists."

The battlefield, in Davidson's judgment, is not where the war was lost. He insists, as all American military commanders have ever since, that while Tet was a crushing loss for the enemy, it turned the tide into victory because of the reactions of the press and civilian leaders at home. Ultimately, he says, the Communists had a "superior grand strategy," namely "the independence and unification of Vietnam and the end of French Indochina." This is the kind of war General DePuy warned that Americans must not fight. The Americans lost; Davidson asserts, because they violated a "No Vietnams" axiom: you may win battles but you will lose the war if your tactics are right but your strategy is wrong. For Giap's forces it was just the opposite, which is why they almost invariably lost the war, but won in the end. Predictably, Davidson's analysis, like the German generals' "stab in the back theory" after the Great War, lets the military off the hook.

We had many strengths, but our principal advantage over the enemy was our tremendous superiority...[the correct strategy was] to avoid a protracted war and to strike the Viet Cong and North Vietnam as soon as possible with enough military force to bring the war to a quick and satisfactory solution.

If Congress had refused to declare war, Davidson says, with all that such a declaration entailed, presumably including mobilization of reserves and even more massive bombing, the US should have gone home.

Why the United States should have declared war and gone on to win, Davidson never considers. He has little else but contempt for our Saigon allies, although during Tet, he says, some of their units fought valiantly, and even more or less on the other side as Giap had hoped they would. In a single sentence, Davidson appears to torpedo any justification for the loss of a single American life in Vietnam, much less the taking of Vietnamese lives. Davidson says that to defend, he says, a South Vietnam which had never been a nation, and it had no precepts of national patriotism or sacrifice for the national good. The extended family (including long-dead ancestors) was the highest symbol of unity and loyalty to the country.

Davidson is right to say that the will to defend South Vietnam was weak and confused. But his implication that Vietnamese "have no concept of patriotism shows startling ignorance of Vietnamese patriotism. This nationalism in this century, a subject well explored by many scholars, most recently in Australia by Carlyle Thayer and in Greg Lockhart, the author of No Conquest, No Power—The People's Army of Vietnam.\(^\text{16}\) Giap's men were laying down their lives for more than dead ancestors.

Giap's genius, in Davidson's view, lay in avoiding direct attacks on...\(^\text{17}\)
American forces and concentrating on the American home front, where a nearly treasonous press, "liberal" civilians, a vacillating LBJ, a Nixon who wanted to get out, and a nervous population which believed what they read in newspapers that wanted to defeat themselves. The US army itself, he conceded, began to fray and collapse, fraying its officers and sinking into drugs. The rising numbers of these demobilized soldiers entombed in home coffins was the final blow to the war effort. Davidson agrees with George Will's suggestion that had Vietnem been shown on TV, the re- luctant McClellan would have been elected president. Conscription and a short war, plus World War Two journ- nalistics ethic, could have kept the home spirit alive. "Even now," Davidson concludes, "our defeat in Vietnam has taught us nothing."

Colonel Hockworth would agree, but for different reasons. In his usual blunt fashion he says of Tet, in About Face, that while it may have been a tactical American victory, "the strategic and psychological victory the Communists achieved during Tet—among the South Vietnamese people, the American public, and the American fighting men—was inescapable. 13 More bluntly still, in a report written in 1968, Hock- worth summed up: "The US Army has botched the war." What the army accomplished in Vietnam, he suggested, was a great fighter, like Stonewall Jackson, Rommel—or Giap. 15

Without mentioning Davidson by name, Clark Clifford, in Counsel to the President, disagrees on almost every point with Davidson's analysis. On Tet, Clifford says, the outcome of the Tet Offensive may remain in dispute, but there can be no question that it was a turning point in the war. Its size and scale were made mockery of what the American military had told the public about the war, and devastated Administration credibility ... the military assessment of the Tet Offensive since it ended was incomplete and self-serving. At the time of the initial attacks the reaction of our military leadership approached panic and their intelligence failure [Davidson’s responsibility: he claims that the army knew what was likely to happen] was a critical factor. 16

As for the seditious press, Clifford says that most of "the reporting from the war zone reflected the official position. Contrary to right-wing revisionism, the Tet Offensive and its outcome did not defeat America in Vietnam. Our policy failed because it was based on false premises and false promises." It is the hawks who produced defeat in Vietnam, he concludes, according to McNamara’s successor as secretary of defense, who for some years took a hawkish position himself. "They argued that America’s world leadership and strength could be credited instead of the line in Vietnam, which was not true ... Then, after the failure of their policies they sought to blame those who had opposed the war." 17

Bergere sees this in a far broader perspective. Although many rural Viet- namese may now be unhappy with the way the war turned out, and most would probably have been glad to have been left alone during it, suggests that

While the war was on, as con- firmed by scores of reports and in- terrogations received by the Americans at Hanoi, the Vietnamese in every phase of the conflict [as Davidson, the chief of Army Intelligence, must have known] peasants perceived the followers of the Front as honest, efficient, and genuinely concerned about the peasants’ wel- fare ... the GVN, even with mass- ive American support could never create the essential foundation for strong and resilient morale. The people were sure that it could win. The collapse of 1975 is very intelligible in this light.

That the Front itself was then forced to disband by the North Vietnamese remains one of the war’s great ironies.

3.

The two books on postwar Vietnam, by Justin Wintle and John Balaban, are perhaps the most revealing to be published so far. Each is the result of interviews by human rights organizations and quick trips by reporters to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, the texture of life in Viet- nam since the war has been largely neglected.

Wintle is a novelist who was in Viet- nam for the first time between October 4, 1989, and January 3, 1990. He wanted to describe Vietnam, the actual country, as opposed to the "them" we all remember from the war, the

nexus of signs and sounds that de- scribe, simultaneously, American guilt and American prowess. The "real" Vietnam, elusive and inca- pable of realization as it may be, is never given a chance. It has become, culturally, off limits.

Of course, as Wintle discovered, it is impossible to escape the war in Viet- nam. It is a land of heroes, whom the Party ceaselessly invokes to hide its failures or justify them, but even though he felt like a "sheep under a heavy escort of many shepards," he tried with some success to decode what he was shown.

His Vietnamese hosts were wary of letting Wintle see things that would have discredited them, and kept insist- ing, although he had not claimed this, that he was composing a biography of Ho Chi Minh. Within a few days he no- ticed that Hanoi is so remote, even an interview was slipped a small tip by Wintle’s guides. As he wandered about Hanoi, eating in noodle shops, talking to giggling young women, and trying to find somewhere to dance, he no- ticed that the Party, after defeating the French, the Americans, and the Chinese, "has simply been unable to deliver the goods in regards to the benefits of socialism." It is, therefore, as in all people’s democra- cies, a great advantage to be a cadre:

Viewed this way, Vietnam... looks like a large protection racket, in which the state plays the role of the Mob or the Mafia or the Triads or the Yakuzas... A disease which is commonly regarded as affecting parts of the...
capitalist body politic in fact affects the whole of the communist body politic. Although he has an irritating habit of turning nouns into verbs ("Regularly I was encouraged") Wintle can be appealing because he is not pretentious and he is keen to understand everything. Near the Chinese border, at Pac Bo, he visits the cave where for a few weeks in 1941, after being abroad for almost thirty years, Ho Chi Minh began to form the resistance. A nearby pool is fed by what Ho called Lenin stream. Wintle fills his flask and in a burst of inspiration, remembering the Vietnamese word for cadres, he says, "I, from Nuo Lenin." His companions, also inspired, repeat the words. I have, quite unwittingly, done something the retooling of which can do my standing nothing but good." On his long drive south to Hô Chí Minh City the story follows him. "Among cadres, among former VC, among potatoes big and small alike, among real heroes even, it will always raise a smile, or at least a nod of approbation."

On his way south Wintle and his "sheepdogs" stop at a small hostel for veterans of the sacred North. It's the evening of 30th, which the eight-month-old Communist party ineptly organized against the French. He meets a woman who remembers being tortured with a stick through her leg, and she has studded with crocodile bones. Wintle asks the director what will happen when the last revolutionaries have died; will the hostel's doors be closed? No, there will be another; and the next thing he knows is that Wintle is not only fighting the war against Diem and the Americans, and the one against the Chinese.

"You see," the director replies, "in Vietnam we have all the veterans we want. And not only very rich in anything else, but for veterans, our supplies will last well into the next century... if not forever."

But Wintle's best passages are set in Quang Ngai, just below the 17th parallel, the time of the My Lai massacre. There he discovers that at nearby Binh Hoa, in late 1966, there was an even larger massacre of villagers, by South Korean soldiers. All he knows about this is that the cadres have no time to tell the villagers what to say. One old man "speaks absolutely from the heart. His voice was not my own, I could not grasp why, after so many years, a complete stranger has arrived to ask him questions." At least 502 people were killed by the South Korean Green Dragon Commandos at Binh Hoa.

No foreigner has visited this terrible place, Wintle learns, and no Vietnamese journalists. There is no monument there. He later checks war records and finds that 502 people were massacred. All Wintle can do is to record the names people tell him. He guesses no one has made an issue of Binh Hoa, because the Americans were not directly involved, because it was not a matter of westerners slaughtering Asian innocents, but of Asian innocents slaughtering their fellow innocents. I detect a distinct whiff of dog cat dog about the matter.

Later he is told what happened by one of the few survivors. He was a baby of seven months, was shot, and is now blind. Wintle wants to shake his hand. "Suddenly he drops his trousers to his ankles and, feeling with his fingers, shows me the scar of the bullet wound in his buttck. The wound is almost as old as he is, yet he has never seen it." Wintle's book's is full of short episodes like this; he has certainly succeeded in turning "Vietnam" into Vietnam, but he could never escape the war.

John Balaban's Remembering Heaven's Face is the best book I have read about both Vietnam and "Vietnam" in a long time. Balaban now teaches English at Penn State and has written poetry about the war. In 1987, after studying English at Harvard (where McNamara told demonstrating students to be more polite) he went to Vietnam as a conscientious objector, to work for International Voluntary Services. After two horrifying years there, he decided to close his notebooks for twenty years, and went home. He returned in 1971 to collect traditional conduct pass from the Vietcong. He was gathering material on civilians killed by the Americans—half of all civilians admitted to hospitals in the delta were war casualties. Balaban says—and he had arranged to pass it on to Senator Kennedy who was visiting Vietnam. Before this could happen, though, he was caught and floating in a canal. Balaban, although he has no substantial evidence to support his claims, suspects that he was an early victim of the Phoenix Program, "which we now know was unleashed at that time to assassinate secretly anyone suspected of Viet Cong affiliation."

He describes the carnage inflicted by the Americans when they attacked the town Can Tho after the NLF had penetrated it during Tet.

The Air Force jets had been dropping cluster bombs that made the air on the outskirts... dance with wrong house," someone said. Drunk and turned around, we had blundered into the lair of one of Saigon's AWOL blacks.

A pacifist, Balaban also carried a pistol in his elephant-hide briefer to protect himself from "American" and "Vietnamese" enemies. Eventually he threw it in the river. He says, "I grew up in Vietnam. In this particular sense of growing wisdom and wisdom, it wasn't all bad." He says he got his first picture of the war when he returned to what GIs called "the world," and in 1971 he came back... to collect the songs, "Co dao," that were composed by peasants and soldiers. Two months later, he had written of the Vietnamese when they called themselves the Lac and lived in diminutive agrarian kingdoms in the deltas of the Red and Black rivers of the North. When he had transcribed these, he discovered "an amazing index to the continuum of Vietnamese humanism."

This humanism survived the war. When he carefully talks people in the street in Hanoi that he is an American, it is as if I had said "Yes, I am." I am enveloped by smiles... Someone says, "America, number one." He gives a lecture on American writers at the Institute of Culture, and his interpreter, a student at Yale, speaks perfect English. But when Balaban gets to Thoan, "Mr. Binh hits his first and only snare. He can't say aloud. 'Civil Disobedience.' He just says it, and everybody gets it."

When he was working in the South in 1968 Balaban had met the extraordinary "Coconut Monk," Nguyen Tri Van, who also despised the US and had been arrested as a "CIA collaborator." Balaban doubts the government believes this: "probably they just feel threatened by the obstreperous, bent man and his lethal humor."

In the countryside, to his astonishment, Balaban found that the wounds of war had all but disappeared. "The fields are green, the children are thriving. They all had been readmitted into the same continuum of Vietnamese life, which seemed broken forever." He condemns the US for its "small and sour grapes in South Vietnam and the US trade and diplomatic embargoes that keep the country in economic ruin. How self-punishing and miserly in American spirit are these policies." But mostly he finds the Vietnamese people have forgotten the war, Balaban believes, as they get on with their harvests. This is not amnesia, he says, but sanity. He advises veterans to visit Vietnam... "do not see much there, but don't see it as private, your need for resentment so great."

But unlike those who think only of the American responsibility for what Vietnam has become, Balaban, one of the Vietnamese who knows the country intimately, says of the Communists that while they have given Vietnamese back their nation, it is "at such a price they have no sense and an absolute constraint that one senses that mere nationhood isn't enough."

The sixty-two million "commonfolk," he writes, "have had enough of war and bravery and nobility of sacrifice."