JASON EPSTEIN: HOW NEW YORK FELL

The Charms of David Duke
Ian Buruma: With the Skinheads
Wonders of Angkor Wat
Stanley Hoffmann: The Delusion of World Order
To the Editors:

In an otherwise well documented review ("Reconsidering Vietnam," NYT, October 18, 1988), Jonathan Minkis simply states that twice as many American Vietnam veterans have committed suicide since the war as were killed in it. Can he give us his documentation for this astounding statement?

David Slawson

La Angeles, California

To the Editors:

I enjoyed Jonathan Mink's review of recent books on contemporary Vietnam, but would like to correct one point. In his review, he notes the case of the pacifist monk Nguyen Thanh Nam, aka the "Coconut Monk," who during the war became a sanctuary from violence in South Vietnam and who preached to both sides to end the war. Mink says that John Balaban, a former monk's religious policies. Two prominent scholar monks from Van Hanh University, Venerable Thich Tue Sy and Thich Tri Sueu, were arrested in 1984 with other monks and nuns and in 1988 were sentenced to death for alleged antigovernment activities, but their death sentences were commuted to twenty years imprisonment after international protest.

The persecution since 1975 of Vietnam-ese religious peace activists, and the unwillingness of most American peace activists to support them, is a matter that deserves more attention from your readers.

Stephen Denney

Berkeley, California

To the Editors:

Despite the kind words by Jonathan Minkis about my book Dynamics of Defeat, he perpetuates one of the greatest distortions concerning the Vietnam War. He writes (p. 48) "that most of the killing in American units rarely operated in either. More than half of South Vietnam's people lived in these two areas. The numbers of those that perished in either place usually did so as a result of the struggle of Vietnamese versus Vietnamese."

Assessing US firepower is also tricky. Figures of bombs and shells expended are deceiving. Bombing, with questionable success, was most intense over the Hanoi-Minh trail, a dense wilderness. Because Westmoreland believed our role was to destroy enemy combat units, most US operations in South Vietnam were aimed at enemy redoubts: large, rugged, and heavily fortified areas, understandably feared by our infantrymen. The DMZ, the Iron Triangle, War Zone C, and the Plain of Reeds were a few of the most notable, but every area had them. These were the infamous "free fire zones." Imagine ponder these word if some areas are "free fire" then other areas, populated naturally, were restricted.) Because of the rugged geography of these areas, the civil population was sparse there in peacetime, and early fighting drove that small number out. Air attack by aircraft and artillery always pre- ceded the countless American ground heli copter forays into the enemy's back yard. Indirect bombardment was ceaseless. As one US general wrote, with only slight exaggeration, "Vietnam was a genocidal conflict if you were a tree." Yet nature heals quickly in the tropics and far from being destroyed by the war, the South is now by far the most prosperous part of Vietnam.

Indiscriminate atrocities were aberra- tions. Although every side committed them, creating an atrocity tally would be impossible and pointless. It would also obscure a crucial point. During the Vietnam War, as in almost every other conflict, most civilians died in crossfire. Their deaths were incidental to combat not its aim.

The worst proof of this is that most Americans came from the peasants themselves. Every American division's area of opera- tion included populated zones. Yet, despite Front propoganda and mutual dislike, Vietnamese civilians showed little fear of American combat soldiers. Next to every permanent American base camp a commer- cial town sprouted up. Camp followers went deep into the bush, far from any pro- tection, and set up shop at temporary post. Selling everything from hos- settes to drugs. During the day, they often followed Americans on patrol (indeed, their absence might be a good sign). The thousands of small American medical missions normally received overflow crowds.

Yet no one denies it was a harsh war and that we have blood on our hands, certainly more than enough to shock and sensitive people. All US soldiers live with horri- ble memories. However, responsibility for death lies heavily with the Vietnames. As government presence spread, some Front controlled "combat hamlets" were heavily fortified and bravely fought for even though Allied victory was certain in fre- quently small Front units ambushed US ve- hicles in a pro-government hamlet, hoping for return fire. From a psychologica- economic warfare was also bloody. Local guer- rillas frequently mined the roads, attempt- ing to isolate pro-government hamlets. Therefore frequent visitation by old vehi- cles jammed with Vietnamese civilians on the way to market. Results were horrible. Markets were mortared and rocketed in government areas. Also, because we were visible, when Americans began fighting near a hamlet the opening small-arms fire allowed civilians time to go to the shelters which existed in every hamlet. However, Front violence came without warning and people were defenseless. Lastly, consider that heavy fighting, in occupied areas was initiated in every case by the Front and Hanoi (Tet 1968, Tet 1969, Easter Offensive 1972, 1975 Offensive). The truth is that our casualties (45,000 combat dead) were
20 percent of those South Vietnamese forces. Enemy casualties were higher yet. It is true that in the intense large battles we inflicted great losses. Most exchanges, however, were on a scale over which US firepower could be used effec-
tively. Unless killing and dying are un-
related in war, I would say, the notion of killing, at least, from Minsky’s point of view, his allegation remains unproven.

Eric M. Bergerud

Albany, California

Jonathan Minsky replies:
In response to David Sloan: I got the number of suicides from Walter Capps, The Vietnam Reader, p. 2 (gadley). “More than 500,000” is an estimate by an author who lost his lives there [Vietnam] have taken their lives since the war.” I had one or two other letters questioning this statement, and no longer stand by it.

Stephen Denney reminds us of what has happened to religious figures in Vietnam after the war. I discussed this, including some other examples, in a previous N.Y.R. article, “The War That Will Not End,” August 6, 1982.

Eric Bergerud, whose excellent book I praised in my piece, questions my use of the term “gas chamber,” doubts whether the war was a whole was inflicted by the Americans.” Perhaps “the Americans were responsible for this killing,” it being a war as a whole would have been more accu-
rate. He himself says “Had the US avoided involvement the war would have ended.

The rest of Mr. Bergerud’s letter some-
how gets away from this. “The war was only a ‘new kind of war’”–no, this was very violent by 1965. Fighting in this period was primarily a Vietnamese affair.

But the second war didn’t start for the US in the early Sixties but well over a decade earlier. We paid most of the bills for this war, in exchange for their mili-
tary support in Europe, and after Dien Bien Phu in 1954 it was we who determined the course of Saigon politics—sometimes improvised—and we were directly involved in the last days of the struggle. The US paid for and equipped the South’s forces and kept them in the war—although very few it must be said, went over to the enemy. All this is apart from the direct involvement of our own forces.

Mr. Bergerud showed eloquently in his study of Hau Nghia that although the VC killed proportionately more people they were regarded by many Vietnamese as “our boys.” If that is true, then the Americans must bear most of the responsibility for trying to destroy them and their supports, even though after the war Hanoi would betray their hopes. All of Professor Sloan’s at the very end of his definitive intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam: “It was con-
scionously necessary to inject American power into the areas of South Vietnam under Saigon’s administration so that local leaders of power remained in the hands of Vietnamese leaders.” To use the term US interests in conformity with US interests” (p. 432).

LETTERS

WHITE NOISE

To the Editors:
It is a little difficult to tell from Mr. Ian Buruma’s most convincing review of my book, Betrayal at Pearl Harbor [NYR, December 19, 1991], how much he understands about cryptography. However, if he had studied the extensive published primary evidence in my book, I believe he would have had no diffi-
culty in accepting that British codebreak-
ners (British, American, and Canadian) had intercepted the new Japanese naval code (JN-25) by the fall of 1939. This is, incidentally, confirmed on page 53 of Professor H. Hinsey’s British Intelligence in the Second World War (Cambridge University Press, 1979), which states that the new code “began to yield” in September 1939, and thereafter British cryptographers were able to keep track of the main Japanese naval movements.

We also know that in the autumn of 1939, Admiral Yamamoto to his Carrier Task Force were decrypted by the British and received by their First Sea Lord, because I quote (on page 137) from an Admiralty signal con-
firming this. The message of 25 November, 1941, ordering the Task Force to sail and refuel eight days later out in the Pacific, was of such crucial importance that it is im-
possible to believe it was not shown at once to the First Sea Lord by his cipher clerk. It is beyond all reasonable possibility that we should have expected Churchill to have flashed this message immediately to Roosevelt so that the two leaders could then debate its implications.

Had Churchill done this, I believe Roose-
velt would have immediately alerted his Hawaiian commanders to set a trap for the Japanese, and thus gone to war as a victor decimating the Task Force and possibly blinding the Japanese strategic initiative. The fact he made no attempt to do this either means Roosevelt deliberately be-
trated the United States. Simply he did not pass the information, in which case Churchill betrayed Roosevelt.

Since my book was published, I have re-
ceived a statement from an old family friend of the late Commander Malcolm Nave (Nave’s codebreaking career). He explained, for instance, who, in 1980, admitted that he had de-
crypted all Yamamoto’s signals to the Task Force, had guessed their destination was Pearl Harbor and personally sent this back from Singapore to Churchill. Burnett was pressed to write this down for posterity, but refused to do so because he had been sworn to secrecy about the affair.

James Rusbridge
Cornwall, England

Ian Buruma replies:
Mr. Rusbridge is right to doubt my expre-
tsive in cryptography: it is virtually nil. I take his word for it that the message from Admiral Yamamoto in which the Japanese asked to be read by British codebreakers and that “it is impossible to believe it was not shown at once to the First Sea Lord by his cipher clerk. It is beyond all reasonable possibility that we should have expected Churchill to have flashed this message immediately to Roosevelt so that the two leaders could then debate its implications.” Stalin had prior warn-
ing of Hitler’s plan to attack the Soviet Union and did nothing. MacArthur knew that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Har-
bore and would almost certainly attack the Philippines, but failed to act. As a histo-
rian, Mr. Rusbridge should have reminded us that Pearl Harbor, important signals can be “partly obscured before the event by the surging ‘morning noise.’” Or they can be disbelieved. So even if Churchill had been warned that Pearl Harbor was a possible target for a Japanese attack, his failure to tell Roosevelt might be a blunder, but then again it might not.

And one other thing, for an eagle-eyed de

coder of complicated code, Mr. Rus-
budge might have spelled my name right.

SHAKESPEARE & CO.

To the Editors:
The conclusion that “all biography is ultimately fiction” is one with which most contemporary theorists of liter-

dature would concur. It is a post-

colonial and postmodernist position that language constructs the reality it seems merely to refer to; therefore all texts are texts. And this is true of Shakespeare’s texts as well, and it is even more true of his academic, however, a distinction between empirical and fictional narrative

stubbornly persists. Granted that my interpretation is partial, subjective, and open to revision—that therefore the "real" Shakespeare, in Shakespeare’s own sense, would argue against the whole body of critical and literary works that have been written about him—"the real" Shakespeare cannot be known. It is not clear where Lodge stands on this.

The phrases “stubbornly persists” as “many would argue” suggest that Lodge may be a bit familiar with some literary studies those who have difficulties believing that “language constructs reality” who defer to, and obstinately cling to the conviction that there is a real difference between, for example, my declmation, “I was born of imperial parents at Blackheath, Kent, near the sea.” (A sub-

mission supported by some yellowing docu-
ments), and my asserting, “I was born in Devon.” The creation of Shakespeare, as the case is known, by the Port of Wales, by his mistress, an indigent Rus-
sian princess,” which, I insist, once and for all, is an imaginative re-creation of Lodge’s, merely showing that he is up on the literal frivalities from academe (which they do not commim with his hilarious novels and evou doubts, either as a matter of "mean sensibieness" to "put in question" the distinction between fact and fiction (accepted by all sane peo-
ple): Lodge’s four Gullivers of literature the astrin, and in some of these capades, as known from letters, journal, newspaper reports, and the like, in a way typical of such discussions over the past in the past century or so. The fact is, he has not been able to demonstrate, even if he is the immense gulf between writers who intellectualize to believe the otherwise, the actuality of the construction of the way they read and tell about fiction and non-fiction, and write books reviews for rational audiences.

Norman Fraser

Department of English, University of Minnesota

Minneapolis, Minnesota

David Lodge replies:
I am sorry that I did not make clear to Pro-

fessor Frumin where I stand in this ma-

ter—which is, of course, firmly on the fence. I have written, I agree with him that there is a meaningful discri-
tion to be made between facts and fiction, and any irony in my “stubbornly” was not meant to be ironical. On the other hand, it seems to me equally obvious that as soon as “facts” are articulated in a discourse, the text begins, and an interpre-
tation is a kind of fiction (not be confused with a falsehood). Professor Frumin’s book is an empirically verifiable fact, but his verbal description of it is nes-
sessarily selective, privileging some of its as-
pects, excluding others. It seems to me that Lodge’s being in that he has been a sense “language constructs the reality it seems merely to refer to” is a metaphoric image. Biographers and historians are not in any condition of pure truth, nor are they thought they try to work exclu-
sively with empirically verifiable facts. Nor do I believe that it precludes one from joyn-

ing of, and engagement with, the products of that work.

THE BUCHANAN CANON

To the Editors:

1. “I met Jeffrey Hart, the Dartmouth English teacher who, along with his wife, launched The Dartmouth Review….”

2. “Hung on the wall was a cover of the magazine…”

In fact, neither Bill Buckley nor I had anything to do with launching The Dar-

mouth Review.

The principal launcher was Gregory Fos-
sedal, a Dartmouth senior, who had been

Professor David Lodge

Harvard University

To the Editors: Garry Wills’ piece is an admi-

rable contribution to the debate as to what the Canon should include, but means that it has failed to take into account the fact that the Canon should not be an inventory of every learned work or every learned text. It is not only a collection of facts, but also a collection of critical judgment. Logic is a kind of fiction (not to be confused with a falsehood). Biographers and historians are not in any condition of pure truth, nor are they thought they try to work exclu-
sively with empirically verifiable facts. Nor do I believe that it precludes one from joyn-

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