

Women and Revolution in Viet Nam

Arlene Eisen

This book is dedicated to my sons, Biko and Tonga. I hope they will join generations of children who will be as fierce in their respect for women as they are in their hatred for oppression and in their determination for all people's liberation.



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19. Ngo Vinh Long, op. cit., p. 133.
20. For a detailed account of the Geneva Conference and period preceding from the perspective of a liberal US government official, see Archimede Patti, op. cit.
21. P. 34.
22. *The Pentagon Papers* (New York Times Edition; New York: Bantam, 1972 p. 72).
23. 'Cost of the Viet Nam War', *Indochina Newsletter* (Dorchester, Massachusetts), No. 18, November–December 1982, p. 12.

4. Megaviolence against Women

There is peace, but all around is still danger. You must walk in my footsteps.

Phan Tri Thien, a 19-year-old mine defuser as she escorted a foreign journalist, 1979

After years of fighting, in the spring of 1975, the US-sponsored army of South Viet Nam collapsed. On 30 April 1975, a sea of revolutionary flags welcomed a column of Liberation Army tanks into Saigon. A young, well-armed woman hailed and halted the first tank. Nguyen Trung Kien, 18 years old at the time, had been a commando fighter in Saigon. She climbed aboard the tank to guide it along the shortest route to the Presidential Palace. Minutes later, the PLAF raised the flag of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Viet Nam over the Palace. President Thieu had already fled. His replacement, President Duong Van 'Big' Minh, rose and greeted the first PLAF troops to enter the Palace: 'The revolution has come. You have come. We have been waiting for you this morning to hand over power.'

The PLAF officer replied in a gentle but firm voice: 'The revolution has seized complete power. The former administration has been overthrown. No one can hand over what they have already lost. You must surrender immediately.'¹

General Nguyen Thi Dinh, second in command of the PLAF and President of the Women's Union in the South, explained how local women's militia units and members of the Women's Union took over official posts of the Thieu regime in many southern cities even before the PLAF arrived. She told of a group of women taking over a villa that once housed two US army colonels and a navy commander. The women arrived at the villa on 29 April. The US officers fled in the middle of a meal. General Dinh smiled as she recalled, 'They were very frightened and left without taking a single needle.'²

Like a puppet with its strings cut, the entire Saigon state apparatus collapsed within hours. The next day, May Day, there was no official parade, but a spontaneous popular demonstration of joy and relief. Thousands took to the streets. Saigon was not conquered. It did not fall.

It was liberated. A formal national celebration began on 15 May. In Saigon, two million people packed into the central square waving flags of the PRG and DRV. The celebration included a parade in which women's army and militia divisions marched, proud of the enormous contribution they had made to the victory.

That victory did not come easily. This chapter documents the incalculable sacrifices the Vietnamese people made to defeat the military might of imperial America. Vietnamese women's wounds of war with the US run deep – some of them still fester – demanding prolonged attention and care. Healing is a precondition for women's liberation in Viet Nam.

'There Are Cemeteries of Our Freedom Fighters Everywhere'

Le Thu, Director of Education of the Viet Nam Women's Union, travelled throughout the southern provinces after the victory. She reported,

There are cemeteries of our freedom fighters everywhere . . . Wherever visited, mothers whose children had died showed me pictures of their children or their children's diaries . . . You see, the war took away their most beautiful dreams and their most precious loves. Among the survivors the women suffer the most. When you lose your dearest ones, you never find them again. It's a wound that can never be healed. At one local Women's Union executive committee meeting in the South, all except two out of 15 women were widows.³

In the ten years of warfare from 1965 to 1975, over two million Vietnamese people – soldiers and civilians on all sides of the conflict – were killed. A million women were widowed and 800,000 children orphaned. Over three million were wounded, many seriously. Some of the worst wounds were caused by anti-personnel weapons designed in the US to maximize the pain and suffering of human targets – but unable to pierce anything tougher than human flesh. An estimated 90% of the revolutionary cadres who stayed in the South were killed.⁴ After 1975, another 10,000 people were killed in fields by the ordinance the US left behind.

The Charlie Company, Third Airborne Brigade, 82nd Division of the US Armed Forces, massacred 504 in the village of Son My on 16 March 1968. It became known as the My Lai massacre. Most of the victims were women and children and before killing the women, GIs raped hundreds of them.⁵ Nearly ten years after the atrocity, one of the survivors, Nguyen Thi Doc, aged 73, broke a bitter silence and told a visitor: 'Eleven members of my family were killed: my sons, my daughter-in-law, my grandchildren. Who will take care of my grave? Now, in my old age, I am alone. With no immediate family.' Sobs choked off the rest of Mrs Doc's words. The young woman who tried to comfort her was a veteran guerrilla

who had joined the NLF after her family, too, was massacred at Son My. She was 14 at the time. She returned to Son My in 1975, to work as a political cadre, helping to administer the village and organize its reconstruction.⁶

Attack on Future Generations

Doctor Nguyen Thi Ngoc Phuong, Director of Obstetrics at the largest Ob/Gyn hospital in Ho Chi Minh City, asked,

What should I tell them? Imagine how we feel. Couples who have been separated for many years of war, finally reunite. Some of the women get pregnant. They have been waiting for so long for reunification. Then the newborn child dies because of severe genetic mutations resulting from one of the parents' exposure to defoliants. We have many, many such cases.⁷

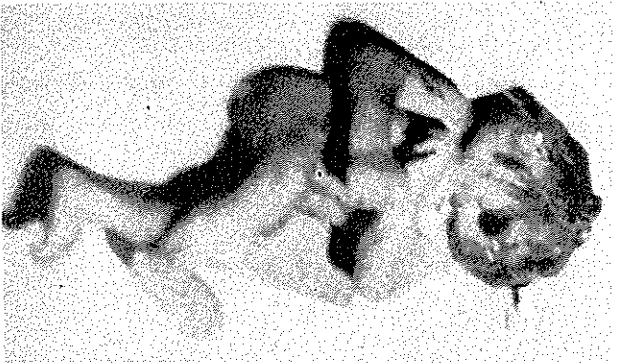
Systematic defoliation and saturation bombing of the Vietnamese countryside was a cornerstone of US strategy to deprive the liberation movement of its constituency and strongest base of support – the majority of Vietnamese people who were peasants. A US Senate Subcommittee on Refugees estimated that between 1965 and 1973, more than ten million people were forced to flee their villages.

The US sprayed more than half the territory of South Viet Nam with a chemical defoliant known as 'Agent Orange'. Agent Orange contains dioxin – a chemical unrivalled in its lethal power. Only one gram mixed in one million litres of water is enough to kill a guinea-pig after one swallow. By the end of the war, six pounds per person had been sprayed over South Viet Nam. To make matters worse, dioxin is not soluble in water alone. Vietnamese scientists expect the country's streams, rivers and wells to be contaminated for generations to come.

The total destructive capacity of dioxin is yet to be calculated. Vietnamese doctors have not been able to tabulate the overall damage to the population because they lack the necessary medical and computing equipment to do so. But they have proved that exposure to microscopic doses destroys liver tissue, causes still births, miscarriages, birth defects and cancer.

At Tu Du Hospital, the number of women who miscarried after their second month of pregnancy leaped from little more than 1% in the mid-1950s to 15% in 1967 and peaked at 20% in 1976. Molar pregnancy – a rare mutation of the placenta which kills the embryo and sometimes ruptures the uterus – rose from 0.8% in 1952 to 3% in 1976. The incidence of cervical cancer rose three times between 1952 and 1976 and five times by 1980. Some 65% of female cancer in the South is cervical – a much higher proportion than in the North – because only the South was sprayed with dioxin.

The Institute for Protection of Mothers and Children, a research Ob/Gyn hospital, found that expectant mothers exposed to dioxin have six



Parents of these genetically mutated newborns were exposed to dioxin
Arlene Eisen

times more chromosome breaks than survivors of Hiroshima. They give birth to babies with flippers instead of arms and legs, babies without testicles, babies with two heads, babies without kidneys, and other horrors. No national statistics are tabulated yet. However, at Tu Du Hospital, the number of newborns with fatal mutations rose from 0.01% in 1952 to 0.24% in 1978.⁸

The strategy of forced urbanization left another killer among the Vietnamese population: venereal disease. Most of the ten million peasants who were forced off the land crowded into Saigon, Danang and other South Vietnamese cities. The women had virtually no means of support. Some half a million became prostitutes. VD was not only a problem for the prostitutes. It also infected soldiers, officials and their loved ones. Although the precise figures are not available, the total number of cases of VD in 1975 was estimated at three million.⁹ By 1981, all but several thousands of these cases had been treated; but the total elimination of the disease is severely hampered by a scarcity of antibiotics.

Divorce under the Gun and Kidnapping

Even before these genocidal assaults on women's health were launched, Vietnamese women's rights to their families and motherhood were attacked. One provision of the 1954 Geneva Accords stipulated that those who fought with the Viet Minh in the southern provinces would regroup north of the 17th parallel until the country was reunified two years later. Thousands of families separated, expecting to see their loved ones within two years. Instead, Diem's troops arrested and tortured women whose husbands had gone North and forced them to sign forms divorcing their husbands. These women had to remarry within a stipulated time to prove their sincerity. Diem's armed agents would seek them out and rape those who had not remarried.¹⁰ In so doing, Diem was implementing part of a US strategy to keep North and South Viet Nam permanently divided.

In spite of Diem and his successors, family bonds remained strong. During the years that the US enforced the partition of Viet Nam, loyalty to distant family members became a militant defence of one's political principles, as well as an emotional need. A southern woman told police this, when she refused to denounce her husband who had regrouped in the North: 'I could not denounce my husband. He is in my heart. If you want me to denounce him, kill me and take out my heart.'¹¹

Years later, in April 1975, the US government airlifted some ten thousand children from South Viet Nam. They were carelessly loaded into cargo planes, unsafe for human transportation. The American press gave 'Operation Babylift' banner headlines, trying to convince the world of its humanitarian intentions. They claimed the communists would kill the orphans. The Vietnamese responded, 'We have struggled and sacrificed for 30 years so that our children's generation could live in peace. This kidnapping is another form of genocide against the Vietnamese

people.¹² On 4 April 1975, more than 150 children died when one of the planes crashed.

Operation Babylift was a last-ditch effort to rally support for a bankrupt policy in Viet Nam. Polls showed that 78% of the people in the US opposed any further intervention in Viet Nam. Congress balked at supporting a loser. President Ford and Ambassador Martin engineered Operation Babylift and persuaded Thieu's Welfare Minister to accept the plan. He explained:

The US Ambassador stressed that this evacuation along with the millions of refugees abandoning Communist controlled zones will help create a shift in American public opinion in favor of the Republic of Viet Nam. Especially when these children land in the US, they will be subject to television, radio and press agency coverage and the effect will be tremendous.¹³

This politician knew that many of the children were not orphans. Anxious mothers sometimes put children in orphanages to protect them from the ravages of war. Others left their children temporarily in the care of orphanages because they could not afford to feed them at inflated Saigon prices. Some children lived with their parents but had been arbitrarily picked up on the streets by US adoption agencies. Some were orphans who, if they had stayed in Viet Nam, would have been cared for by the community.

Ironically, given the racism rampant in US society, organizers of Operation Babylift claimed they were rescuing children fathered by GIs from the racist hatred of the Vietnamese people. Since the liberation of Viet Nam, the US press gives more space to the supposed discrimination faced by so-called Amer-Asian children than to any other issue regarding Viet Nam. These reports are often fed by a relatively small number of Vietnamese women in Ho Chi Minh City who are drawn to the wealth and comfort of the US. They pin their dreams on emigrating to the 'land of milk and honey' of their children's US fathers and hope their stories of mistreatment will win them safe passage.

An Amer-Asian boy at the Young Flower Orphanage in Ho Chi Minh City told a foreign journalist, 'My name is Tran. I am nine.' Then he sang,

'The war is gone
Planes come no more
Do not weep for those just born
The human being is ever green.'¹⁴

I found while travelling in Viet Nam that the mothers of children fathered by GIs are often assumed to have been raped or to have been prostitutes. They are not envied. But their children enjoy the same official rights and privileges as any Vietnamese. Socially, they may inherit some of their mother's lowered status, especially if she was a prostitute who chooses to remain outside the current revolutionary process. If these children are sometimes teased by other children who have not yet learned

the policies of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam, this social stigma can in no way be compared to the systematic racist oppression which all children of colour face in the United States.

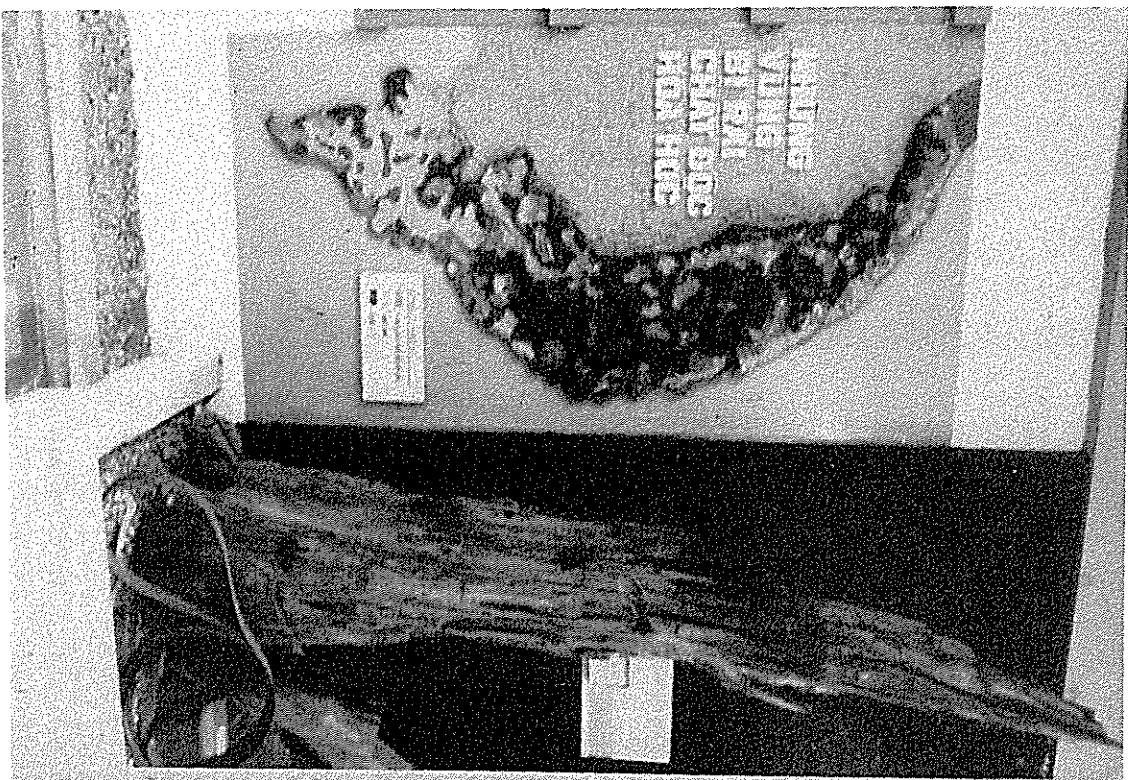
Ecocide and Economic Infanticide

After the massacre at Son My (My Lai), many of the villagers fled, some to join the liberation forces in the jungle, others to find refuge with relatives living in towns. A year later, those who remained were forced into US-controlled refugee camps. Then, the US Army returned to kill the coconut trees. When the trees were dead, bulldozers tore up the earth. Bombs destroyed the sea-wall that kept salt water out of the marshy lands where the people of Son My grew rice. A flourishing village became a wasteland. So did thousands of other South Vietnamese villages.

Over 43% of South Vietnamese plantations and orchards were destroyed. All irrigation networks were subject to repeated bombing. Half the water buffalo – essential for ploughing – were killed. In areas where defoliants were ineffective, the US bulldozed the vegetation, then planted 'elephant grass'. When the grass dried, the US Army doused it with napalm and gasoline, setting off raging prairie fires that consumed everything in the vicinity.

Without the benefit of machinery, people have reclaimed thousands of acres of land, often moving tons of earth by hand in wicker baskets. But as of March 1982, a half million hectares of formerly cultivated land lay fallow and millions of hectares of forest were perhaps permanently destroyed. In one area, there is a layer of coal two metres deep – the remains of U Minh Forest.¹⁵ In central Viet Nam, near the 17th parallel, massive destruction of the forests not only causes chronic flooding and soil erosion; it has also resulted in higher ground temperatures. Without the trees to cool the air as it blows down the mountain, a scorching wind comes roaring down, overheating the rice paddies and blowing sand on to them.¹⁶ With 55 million people and a total cultivated land surface of only 5.4 million hectares – or ten people to every 2.5 acres – it would be difficult to grow enough food to feed everyone, even under normal circumstances.¹⁷ And the circumstances in Viet Nam have been far from normal.

Ten million peasants who were forced to leave their homes also had to let their fields go fallow. So the US supplied 300,000 tons of rice a year to feed the people under its control.¹⁸ When US defeat appeared imminent, they slashed aid: by 30 April 1975, there was only enough rice in reserve in Saigon to feed the city's population for 15 days. Also, widespread flooding in central Viet Nam caused serious crop losses. The combination of these disasters created the threat of famine in the South immediately after liberation. Only huge donations of rice from the North prevented massive starvation in the southern cities.¹⁹



Display at Museum of US War Crimes. Light areas of map indicate areas of Viet Nam subjected to total ecoicide. Arlene Eise

The Price of Glitter

On the eve of liberation, Saigon's shop windows were crammed with Japanese radios, tape recorders and other gadgets. The streets glittered, while hundreds of air-conditioned bars played the latest American tunes. Journalist John Pilger called it the 'world's only consumer society that produced nothing'. In a 1974 report, the World Bank Study Mission concluded that the Thieu regime would need at least \$11 billion in aid until 1990 – just to keep from losing ground.²⁰ A noted Vietnamese commentator, Nguyen Khac Vien, pointed out the price of Saigon's glitter:

The more bombs fell upon liberated areas, the more goods Saigon received. I don't like to call it a false prosperity because the buildings, cars, goods are not artificial. These things impose themselves, obsess the mind, create an ambience, a new social order. I would rather say an expensive prosperity, even too dearly paid for. Because if some countries pay for the Mercedes and the Chevrolets, the refrigerators and other gadgets by the sale of oil, South Viet Nam paid for them with flesh and blood.²¹

South Viet Nam's economy was caught in ever rising spirals of dependency, corruption, unemployment and inflation. More than four million former peasants had no work. About six or seven million people lived on wages paid by US dollars – not counting Thieu's army or government administration. In total, 80% of the people depended on the US for their economic survival. United States aid amounted to more than half the gross national product of South Viet Nam. This dependency killed native industry. Any available capital was invested in luxury goods to sell to Americans, to prosperous pimps and prostitutes and to Saigon's generals. Scrap metal – the remains of US planes and other war *matériel* – made up 90% of the exports from the Republic of South Viet Nam.

In 1975, when the US cut off the flood of foreign aid and goods, prices soared. Traders, who numbered in the hundreds of thousands, began hoarding. Prices escalated further. Rumours spread a kind of collective psychosis. Those people who were accustomed to living off the US dole panicked. Sugar mills that imported raw sugar, bottling plants that imported powdered milk, paper mills that imported pulp and hundreds of other enterprises were crippled. With no raw materials or spare parts or foreign technicians, South Viet Nam's Honda-riding generation would have to learn to walk. Many chose not to. They became refugees – not from a communist bloodbath, but from poverty and hard work. In 1978, the per capita gross national product of Viet Nam was estimated at \$100 per year.²²

Crimes Against Women

1. Rape

No collection of veterans' war stories is complete without tales of rape. For example, Sgt Scot Camil, First Marine Division, testified:

When we went through the villages and searched people, the women would have all their clothes taken off and the men would use their penises to probe them to make sure they didn't have anything hidden anywhere; and this was raping, but it was done as searching.

Sp/4 Joe Galbally of the Americal Division reported:

We went through the village; it was an eight-man patrol. We entered a hooch (peasant home). These people are aware of what American soldiers do to them, so naturally they try to hide the young girls. We found one hiding in a bomb shelter in a sort of basement of her house. She was taken out, raped by six or seven people in front of her family, in front of us and the villagers. This isn't just one incident. This is just the first one I can remember. I know of ten or 15 such incidents at least.²³

Ten years later, Viet Nam veterans were still haunted by their crimes:

I had a sense of power. A sense of destruction. See, now, in the US a person is babied. He's told what to do But in the Nam you realized you had the power to take a life. You had the power to rape a woman and nobody could say nothing to you. That godlike feeling you had was in the field. It was like I was god. I could take a life. I could screw a woman

Another remembered:

You take a group of men and put them in a place where there are no rooming-eyed women There are women available. These women are of another culture, another color, another society. You don't want a prostitute. You get an M-16. What do you need to pay a lady for? You go down to the village and you take what you want. I saw guys who I believe had never had any kind of sex with a woman before in that kind of scene. They'd come back a double veteran. Raping a woman and then killing her made a man a double veteran?

It is safe to say that just as no South Vietnamese village escaped the bombs and the napalm made in the US, none escaped the rape. Racism bred in US society, combined with contempt for women, made rape a convenient tool in the hands of the Pentagon. It was unwritten Pentagon policy to condone, if not encourage, rape as a way of motivating the soldiers. If they couldn't fight for a just cause in Viet Nam, at least they could 'prove their manhood' in the patriarchal tradition of rape.

Rape also served another strategic purpose for US military planners. Terrorism is a classic counter-insurgency tactic against people's war. And rape is a classic act of terrorism which not only assaults and destroys a woman, it also humiliates and intimidates her family and community.²⁵ In many societies, women who have been raped are outcasts. Patriarchal codes in many Western, as well as Third World, countries assume that a woman provoked her rapist. 'She asked for it.' She is impure. The policy in liberated Viet Nam was to treat women who had been raped as victims of US aggression. Revolutionary cadres actively fought against the traditional shame and prejudice that stigmatized rape victims. Nevertheless, the scars remain. The horror of rape is not forgotten. The mutilation and disease are not easily cured. The child conceived in terror will be loved, in spite of her origin or the burden she brings to the woman who did not plan for her.

Crimes Against Women

2. Prostitution

Officially the Thieu regime maintained that prostitution was illegal. But a Saigon official candidly explained, 'The Americans need girls; we need dollars. Why should we refrain from the exchange? It's an inexhaustible source of US dollars for the state.'²⁶ At the height of US troop occupation, there were nearly half a million prostitutes in South Viet Nam, almost one for every GI. This amounted to 20 times more prostitutes than the combined total of women doctors and professionals. The prostitute scene fascinated US journalists who often gave the impression that women profited from US occupation. But some described the grim reality:

There is a woman who directs a group of deaf and dumb prostitutes – most of them 14 and 15 years old, some even younger. They cluster nightly at the corner of Tu Do Street nearest the Continental Hotel, usually just before curfew hour At this time of night, there are prostitutes – among them some who I have watched grow old and tightfaced in the last ten years – standing at street corners all over town, hoping to be picked up by late-cruising customers. At this hour too, pimps haul their girls around on the backs of motorcycles and offer them at bargain prices.²⁷

Some prostitutes may have become rich by Vietnamese standards, but all were subject to brutal exploitation. One veteran who had been stationed in Pleiku said that in 'Sin City', which appeared within three months after the base was built, a room in the whorehouse – actually a tent – would have 15 or 20 beds. He remembered, 'They got 300 piastres a day.' Three hundred piastres were officially equal to three US dollars, but with black market dealers, it came to about one dollar. If the prostitutes tried to get more money, US Military Police would declare their establishments 'off limits'. Similar strips appeared wherever there were US

bases. Another strip at Phu Loi, however, operated only during daylight hours because the NLF controlled that area at night.²⁸

Among the 500,000 prostitutes, there were many varieties, each suited to the different demands of the clients. In provincial outposts, some provided multiple services as indicated by the following advertisement: 'Car wash and get screwed.' Since many white GIs would not go with women they had seen with Black GIs, some prostitutes learned American habits of discrimination. A GI could 'rent a wife' by the day, week or month. These marriages, resembling indentured servitude, forced the woman to be both sex provider and servant. Many GIs preferred to rent wives because the faithful wife was less likely to catch and pass on VD. In Viet Nam, GIs could live in luxury previously reserved for high colonial administrators: 'Like I had, ah, it sounds kinda strange, but I had a houseboy and at first I had a girl to come in and she'd shine my shoes and make my bed, do my laundry, just anything entailed in taking care of my house for a grand total of \$7 per month.'²⁹

As GIs left Viet Nam, the prostitutes remained trapped in a cycle of heroin addiction, poverty and self-hatred. Probably a majority were infected with venereal disease. Their Amer-Asian children, although loved, became reminders of their degraded past. As soon as Saigon was liberated, a ban was placed on prostitution and the Women's Union launched an enormous campaign to find housing, food and new skills for thousands of unemployed women. The majority of them returned to the countryside. But thousands remained in the cities, requiring an enormous outlay of social resources to restore their dignity – an effort discussed in detail in Chapter 14.

Crimes Against Women

3. Drug Addiction

Today, the School for New Youth, in a suburb of Ho Chi Minh City, is centre where a sensitive combination of acupuncture, physical therapy and political and vocational education helps victims of drug addiction regain control over their lives. A room in the school is devoted to an exhibit showing US responsibility for making heroin addiction epidemic in South Viet Nam. One photo in the exhibit shows a huge GI handing marijuana cigarette to a small girl of perhaps eight years old.

The French imposed the opium trade on Viet Nam in 1865, but there was little heroin there until 1964. By 1970, there had been a 400% increase in the heroin available. Indochina, with the support of the CIA and its Air America, became the hub of international heroin traffic. The CIA bought the loyalty of many Vietnamese officials with the proceeds from this booming trade.³⁰ According to documents from the Thieu regime, there were 150,000 heroin addicts in Saigon alone in 1973. Almost 85% of them were under 35 years old. Phan Nguyen Binh

Director of Education at the School for New Youth, gave a portrait of the scars the drug users bear:

Besides their addictions, they were infected with VD, tuberculosis and malaria. But their most dangerous diseases were spiritual. Their social personalities were destroyed. They had no confidence in themselves, their families or society. Some were Buddhist, some were Catholic – but whatever their religion, they all believed that drugs were gods. If they dropped their addiction, they were sure the god of drugs would kill them. They suffered severe depression. As late as 1978, some 50% of our students were in thieves' gangs.

Every addict wants to stop but can't do it alone. We work very hard in this centre to restore their confidence. We tell them, 'You are not culpable, you are only the victims of colonialist culture. If you begin today, it's not too late for you to contribute to the country. If you contribute to the struggle against addiction, you're making a big contribution.'³¹

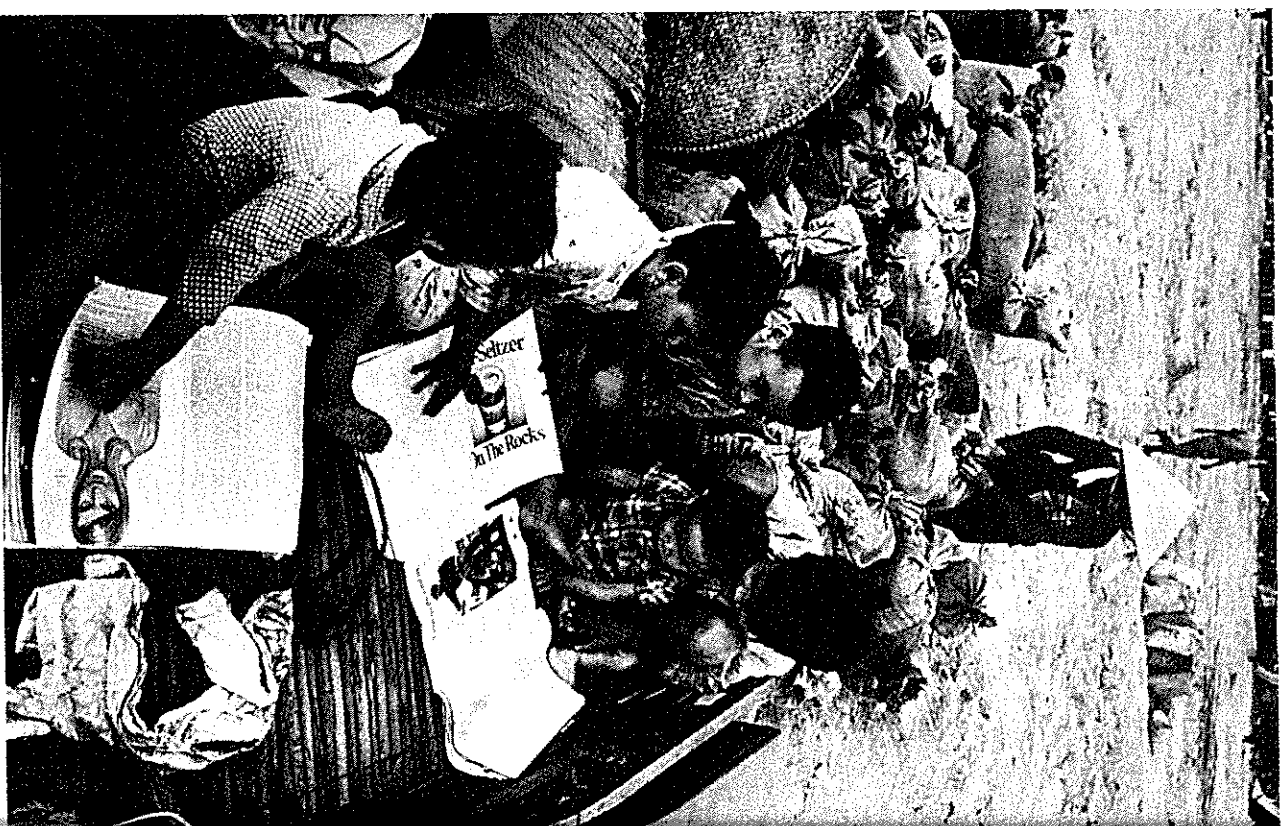
Schools like these require an enormous outlay of resources to feed, clothe, house, care for and re-educate their students. Generally people stay at the school a year before they fully recover their health. Some 20% need more time and 15% of the students are returnees. Thousands have joined productive life permanently. In 1981, Binh estimated that only 5,000 hard-core addicts remain in Ho Chi Minh City. He thought that by 1983, the school would no longer be needed, and would be converted into a factory. Yet when I visited Viet Nam in the autumn of 1981, syringes seemed to be one of the most common items sold openly by petty traders on the streets near the former Continental Hotel in Ho Chi Minh City.

Crimes Against Women

4. Cultural Intoxication and Pornography

The US attempt to 'win the hearts and minds' of the majority of Vietnamese people failed. Yet 20 years of US domination over all legal sources of information and education in Saigon-controlled areas seriously damaged the culture and consciousness of the South Vietnamese people. For 20 years, the CIA, the United States Information Agency, and all the machinery of the US government was mobilized to justify US aggression with stories of communist atrocities, North Vietnamese invasion, blood-baths and revenge.

The *Pentagon Papers* documented memos by generals, top Pentagon and State Department officials boasting about their psychological warfare campaigns, systematically using lies and other 'dirty tricks'.³² US control over the education of Saigon's youth meant, for example, that despite her participation in the Viet Minh, Vo Thi The lamented, 'My 4th grade nephew in Saigon learned that Ho Chi Minh sold out South Viet



Vietnamese children on their way to US-sponsored "strategic hamlet" Viet Nam INC.

Nam to the French at Geneva and Diem returned to save the country.³³ A woman who worked as a secretary for a US corporation in Saigon fled to the US as Saigon was liberated because she believed the CIA-sponsored rumours that single women would be forced to marry Vietcong amputees. Even after Saigon was liberated, the psychological war continued. A Women's Union cadre who worked on the campaign to inoculate children explained:

We began inoculating the children against cholera, tetanus, typhoid and all the other preventable diseases right after liberation. But we had a terrible time getting parents to bring their children to health centres. Rumours raged throughout the city that rather than inoculating the children, we were taking blood from them for transfusions for wounded 'Vietcong' soldiers. All our cadres had to make a big show of bringing their children to be inoculated first, before the rest of the population would trust us. After, we were able to arrest some of the people who initiated the rumours. They made a public apology for their crime.³⁴

The US attempt at controlling the political thinking of the Vietnamese people was not only designed to justify US aggression, it was also designed to demoralize and dampen the spirit of resistance. Truong Tuyet Anh now teaches literature at the University of Ho Chi Minh City. She explained how years of anti-communist propaganda had affected her:

I have known the humiliation of a person conscious of living under foreign domination; but because I did not understand the great history of our nation, I simply suffered, thinking that I belonged to a small, weak and backward people continuously subjected to oppression and foreign domination, and I felt ashamed of being powerless in the face of the enslavement of my country . . . I believed the brutal war in our native land was between the 'dictatorial communist side' and the 'free nationalist side' (although I was well aware at the same time of the dirty, contemptible things being done in the 'free side'), and so I found no way out of the impasse either for my country or for myself. As a consequence, I paid little attention to the political situation under the former regime, closeted myself in my ivory tower of poetry . . .³⁵

Shortly after liberation, a Museum of US War Crimes opened its doors to the public in Saigon. Exhibits carefully documented the genocide committed against the Vietnamese people, as well as the cultural assaults. A US journalist noted, 'The crowds that the exhibit has drawn reflect the fact that many Saigoneers know far less about the atrocities of the war . . . than the average American. The old government had censored all hostile or critical reporting in Saigon.'³⁶

The US also tried to dampen people's spirit of resistance by glorifying the American way of life'. Each GI flaunting his portable radio became a

walking advertisement for the benefits which the US economy could provide. They also imposed a white Western standard of beauty. Thousands of Vietnamese women underwent the ordeal of cosmetic surgery to become more appealing to their customers from the US. Rounder eyes, breasts expanded with silicone, hips padded with silicone – all brought higher prices from GI 'johns'. According to an article in *The New York Times*:

Dr Ban will convert what he refers to as 'natural Asian defects' within an hour. (He has a team of five doctors.) He also said, 'By removing a woman's complexes, we give her confidence and transform her psychology. It's a lot of fun.'

The fashion doesn't stop there (at eyes and breasts). In their eagerness to imitate Europeans, some Vietnamese want bigger noses, dimpled cheeks, cleft chins . . . even fatter fingers. A pioneer in the operation is Mr Nguyen Cao Ky, the glamorous wife of the former Vice President . . . Cosmetic surgery is still a risk, contends Doctor Thai Minh Bach who he performed the operation often, but says that he spends half his time padding up the mistakes of other surgeons.³⁷

Many of the Vietnamese women who worked as waitresses or walked the streets could not afford to Westernize their bodies. They had to settle for Westernizing their names. *Xuan*, which means spring in Vietnamese, became Ann. *Phuong* (flower) became Fran. Some GIs bragged about how they could entice a woman to bed with a can which the woman thought was hair spray. In fact it was spray starch. Few of the women could read labels. While they spoke quite a bit of English, they remained illiterate in their own language. Even many of the wives of Saigon army officers and administrators, able to dress in expensive Western style, were illiterate.

For those who did read, the CIA exported more books and magazines to South Viet Nam than were printed inside that country. They read editorials like, 'What is happiness? No such thing exists. Only acceptance is real. To accept, that's all.'³⁸ A room in the Museum of US War Crime features charts and some examples of the pornography exported to South Viet Nam. A guide carefully explains the humiliating function of pornography and challenges any potential voyeurs looking at the exhibit.

When Saigon was first liberated, students and other young people took the initiative in cleaning the streets and painting over signs and billboards that insulted women. They also collected demoralizing and pornographic literature. But six years later, degrading music, literature and other materials were reappearing:

At the beginning we underestimated the importance and strength of cultural imperialism. Now we've discovered there has been an organized effort promoting music calling for the overthrow of socialism. Their literature

pornographic and defeatist. It's a plot of cultural intoxicification. Our *Hom Thom* campaign aims to combat this new psychological warfare. The people who print and distribute it are punished. Users are considered victims. But it is not enough to forbid it. We must create and popularize a healthier culture.³⁹

The literature she is referring to was found in Ho Chi Minh City in 1981, written in Vietnamese, but often published in the US and distributed free. These books draw a gloomy picture of socialist Viet Nam. There were also hundreds of 1981 calendars featuring a naked woman and the striped flag of the former Saigon regime. The caption read, 'Proud as ever to be Vietnamese'.

The music seemed to be more popular than the books. One of the composers is Pham Duy, a defector from the Viet Minh in 1954, who worked for Saigon's propaganda apparatus during the war. His recent songs, taped in the US, are titled 'Farewell Saigon', and 'To Those Who Remain', and others urging people to leave Viet Nam. Voice of America, broadcasting from transmitters in southern China, the Philippines and offshore Viet Nam, features this music.

These unwelcome 'gifts' from the US continue to undermine efforts to reconstruct the country; they promote a psychology of sexual exploitation, cynicism, pessimism and selfishness.

Problems of National Reconciliation

A policy of national reconciliation is the political antidote to the cultural intoxicification still plaguing South Vietnamese society. National reconciliation flows from Ho Chi Minh's teaching: 'Viet Nam is one. The Vietnamese people are one.' The policy assumes that there are neither victims nor vanquished among the Vietnamese. The only defeated enemy is US imperialism. Virtually every family had some member on the other side during the war – which accounts for the depth and spirit of reconciliation.

The Provisional Government of the Republic of South Viet Nam began to implement the policy of national reconciliation even before the final victory in 1975. During my visit to liberated areas in 1974, Bui Thi Me, Vice-Minister of Health of the PRG, introduced me to former members of the Saigon Army living peacefully there. The PRG and the Women's Union were taking special steps to educate people in such a way as to encourage reconciliation rather than revenge. Bui Thi Me's explanation relied on a substantial dose of nationalism: 'If we took revenge, we would be falling into the trap of Vietnamization . . . allowing the US government to set one Vietnamese against another. No Vietnamese is our enemy, only the US government. Thieu is not Vietnamese. American blood flows in his veins.'⁴⁰

There were over a million soldiers and officials of the US-sponsored

Thieu regime. Most of them were drafted against their will. But some had committed serious crimes against the Vietnamese people. By early 1976, after varying periods of re-education, 95% of them were reintegrated into society with their full civil rights restored. They voted in April 1976, for the first reunified National Assembly.⁴¹ Reconciliation was only possible because re-education (*hoc lap*) became part of the curriculum of every school. In factories, workers also engaged in *hoc lap*, at meetings where they discussed problems of organization, management and distribution of profits. Street meetings in residential neighbourhoods included lectures on such themes as French colonialism, the struggle for independence, US aggression and war crimes, the Communist Party and the future of the country. The press, radio and TV discussed similar themes. Neighbourhood exhibitions clarified the issues.

For all soldiers, officials and most politicians of the old regime, there was a minimum of three days' obligatory re-education. For the rest of the population, re-education was more casual. A former secretary at a US government agency described her relief:

I thought liberation would be the end for people like me. When, some days later the call came for everyone to register, I thought, 'This is it.' But it took me 15 minutes in all and so far no one has asked about my work again. In fact, when the soldiers came around to our house, it was only to check if we had enough rice.⁴²

There was not one authorized execution of any official of the Thieu regime, regardless of how heinous his crime. De Gaulle spoke in his memoirs of 2,070 French people being executed for having collaborated with the Nazis. French women who had taken German lovers had their heads shaved and were publicly humiliated in the streets. Vietnamese revolutionary authorities took deliberate steps to prevent people from seeking revenge.

Yet reconciliation has not been all smooth sailing. People, especially in Saigon, are often uncooperative at re-education meetings. A British journalist reported:

Food or lack of it is obsessively discussed; at one neighbourhood re-education session there were muffled complaints about the bureaucracy's poor record of distribution. 'You should not complain,' said a humourless cadre. 'It's better than before when the Americans ate the flesh of your babies!' At this an old woman leapt to her feet and shouted, 'Rubbish! We all know the Americans only eat out of cans!' The audience burst into laughter and cheering, relishing the moment of rebellion. Re-educating millions of like minded heretics will not be easy.⁴³

Others say, 'You forgive me, but I want to continue to doubt, hoping of expecting the US to return soon.' A few people live on gold they have

managed to hoard and thousands live on gifts they receive from relatives overseas. They pack their belongings and wait for the first chance to leave. A tiny minority actively plot to overthrow the government.

The ones remaining in re-education camps as of the autumn of 1981, were those who persisted in counter-revolutionary activities after 1975; those who set fire to Haiphong Harbour; those who planted bombs in the Hanoi railway station in 1979; those who attempted other forms of sabotage with the encouragement of the US or China; and those who, the government fears, would put their pro-imperialist ideals into dangerous practice if given a chance. Special re-education programmes must be designed for these people. Time is also needed for a thorough investigation into their past before authorities can distinguish between those who are ready to become trusted citizens again and diehard counter-revolutionaries who remain a danger to society.⁴⁴

However, thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, of people in Ho Chi Minh City and other southern cities who sneer at the revolutionary government pose the greatest challenge to reconciliation. Although some are quite poor, most of them are professionals and small business owners. Rather than actively sabotaging economic and political mobilization, they passively resist. They complain about their deteriorating economic situations, assume they are more civilized and sophisticated than revolutionary cadres and cynically wait for the revolution 'to make them an offer'. They disdain collective work and will not join organizations like the Women's Union. They spread rumours to undermine public confidence in revolutionary cadres and institutions, exaggerate the government's errors and weaknesses and ignore its achievements.

Members of the Association of Vietnamese Patriots in the US, an organization which actively supports the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam, believe that the problems created by these detractors are significant. Nguyen Long's account of his 'escape' from Viet Nam, called *After Saigon Fell*, is a case in point. He had earned a doctorate in political science in the US and returned to Saigon in 1972. He lost his teaching job in November 1975, because he was accused of educating his students in a reactionary manner. Finally, in 1979, he joined the ranks of the boat people, he explained, because his wife feared 'the children would live in poverty as the offspring of a bourgeois intellectual'.⁴⁵

Meanwhile, thousands of people who have little respect for revolutionary policy hustle freely in certain districts of Ho Chi Minh City. They openly attempt to cajole foreigners into illegal currency deals or into buying stolen goods or a prostitute's time. District One, for example, the former red light district of Saigon, seems far from re-educated. Those women who dress indiscreetly by Vietnamese standards may elicit a critical frown from a passing Women's Union cadre born and raised in the North. Yet the two co-exist. At times they struggle. It will probably take generations before they are reconciled.

Whether we look at the lists of war dead, the devastation of the

Vietnamese ecology and economy or the crimes committed directly against women, the wounds of war with the US remain as dangerous obstacles to women's emancipation.

Notes

1. Victory scenes from *The New York Times*, 3 May 1975, and *South Viet Nam Struggle*, No. 300, 12 May 1975, and Nos. 301-2, 19 May 1975.
2. Associated Press Release, 23 May 1975.
3. Interview with Le Thu by author (Hanoi, 29 August 1981).
4. Statistics from John Cavanaugh *et al.*, 'A Time to Heal' (Washington DC: Indochina Resource Center, 1976); Le Anh Tu, 'Viet Nam: Legacy of War' (Philadelphia: American Friends Service Committee, 1975); John Spragens Jr, 'Food and Wall', *The Texas Observer*, 27 February 1981, p. 8.
5. Committee to Denounce War Crimes of US Imperialism, *Crimes Perpetrated by US Imperialists and Henchmen Against Women and Children in South Viet Nam* (South Viet Nam: Gai Phong Publishing House, 1968), p. 13. For thorough analysis of rape in Viet Nam by US troops, see Arlene Eisen Bergman, chapter 4: 'The Politics of Rape in Viet Nam', *Women of Viet Nam* (San Francisco: Peoples Press, 1975).
6. Martha Winnacker, 'Recovering from Thirty Years of War', *South East Asia Chronicle*, Nos. 56-7, May-July 1977, pp. 5-6.
7. Interview with Nguyen Thi Ngoc Phuong by author (Ho Chi Minh City, 1 September 1981).
8. Information on dioxin from interview with Dr Phuong and from Ton Du Lang, 'US Chemical War in Viet Nam Has Not Ended', *Viet Nam* (pictorial), No. 267, March 1981, pp. 12-13. See also, *Report from International Symposium on Long Term Ecological and Human Consequences of Chemical Warfare in Viet Nam* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1983).
9. Cavanaugh *et al.*, op. cit., p. 11. For more information on prostitution, see Arlene Eisen Bergman, op. cit., Chapter 5: 'Mass Production of Prostitutes'.
10. Wilfred Burchett, *Viet Nam Will Win* (New York: Guardian, 1970), pp. 119-20.
11. 'History of the Vietnamese Women's Movement', *Viet Nam Report*, No. 8, April 1975, p. 9.
12. Unpublished letter from Internews reporter, Linda Garrett, who was in Hanoi, 28 April 1975.
13. Letter of former Saigon Minister of Welfare to ex-Premier Tran Thie Khien, *The New York Times*, 7 April 1975.
14. John Pilger, 'Back to Viet Nam', *Aftermath* (London: New Statesman, 1982), p. 18.
15. Kathleen Gough, 'An Interview in Hanoi', *US/Viet Nam Friendship Association Newsletter*, Vol. 4, No. 3, May-June 1982, p. 4.
16. Ngo Vinh Long, 'View from the Village', *Indochina Issues*, No. 12, December 1980, p. 7.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
18. John Spragens Jr, 'The Way It Was', *South East Asia Chronicle*, No. 7, December 1980, p. 5.

19. 'Agriculture in South Viet Nam Before and After Liberation', *Viet Nam Courier*, No. 57, February 1977, p. 11.
20. Spragens, op. cit., p. 5.
21. Nguyen Khac Vien, 'South Viet Nam: 1976', *Viet Nam Courier*, No. 47, April 1976, pp. 6-7.
22. This statistic is from Jayne Werner, private correspondence, autumn 1982. Nayan Chanda in 'South East Asia Isn't the Monolith the West Anticipated', *The New York Times*, 11 September 1977, says it is \$160.
23. Quoted by David Hunt, 'Organizing for Revolution in Viet Nam', *Radical America*, Vol. 8, No. 1-2, January-April 1974, pp. 39-40; and *Winter Soldier Investigation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), p. 26. For a detailed account of the total destruction of one Vietnamese village by the US army, see Jonathan Scell's *The Village of Ben Suc* (New York: Village, 1967). Also for more on rape, Chapter 4 of Arlene Eisen Bergman, op. cit.
24. Mark Baker, *Nam: The Viet Nam War in the Words of the Men and Women Who Fought There* (New York: Morrow and Company, 1982), pp. 152 and 166.
25. For a discussion of how rape was used as a counter-insurgency weapon against slaves in the US, see Angela Davis, 'Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves', *Black Scholar*, December 1971.
26. Thanh Nam, 'In the Shadow of the American Embassy', *South Viet Nam in Struggle*, No. 164, 11 September 1972, p. 2.
27. *New Yorker*, 15 April 1972, pp. 52-4.
28. Jonathan Schell, op. cit., pp. 108-9.
29. Norma Juliet Wikler, *Viet Nam and the Veterans' Consciousness* (Berkeley: University of California, Department of Sociology: PhD Dissertation, June 1973), pp. 136, 170. For a more respectful view of the prostitutes in South East Asia, see Stanley Goff, Robert Sanders with Clark Smith, *Brothers: Black Soldiers in the Nam* (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1982).
30. See Alfred McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin in South East Asia* (New York: Harper, 1973).
31. Interview with Phan Nguyen Binh by author (Ho Chi Minh City, 9 September 1981).
32. For examples of early psychological warfare techniques, see *Pentagon Papers* (New York: Bantam, 1971), pp. 55-60.
33. Interview with Vo Thi The by Donna Futterman, 22 July 1975 (unpublished notes).
34. Interview with Tran Thanh Tuyen by the author (Ho Chi Minh City, 9 September 1981).
35. Truong Tuyet Anh, 'One Year with the Revolution', *Viet Nam Courier*, No. 57, February 1977, p. 27.
36. Frances Starnes, 'The Streets of Ho Chi Minh City', *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, 17 October 1975, p. 12.
37. *The New York Times*, 21 May 1973.
38. Ann Froines, 'The Cultural War: Smack, Pimps and Coca Cola', *University Review*, April 1972, p. 19.
39. Interview with Bui Thi Me by author (Ho Chi Minh City, 8 September 1981).
40. Interview with Bui Thi Me by author (liberated Quang Tri, September 1974).
41. In 1980, Vietnamese authorities maintained that 20,000 remained in re-education camps: 'Written Reply of the Vietnamese Government to Amnesty

- International Memorandum, September 1980', in *Report of an Amnesty International Mission to the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam* (London: Amnesty International Publications, 1981), p. 26.
42. Rami Chabira, 'Adjusting to New Life in Viet Nam', *San Francisco Chronicle* 15 August 1975, p. 4.
43. Pilger, op. cit., pp. 15-16.
44. There has been enormous publicity and controversy on this issue. Amnesty International does not accept the Vietnamese government's view that it has the right to keep these people in re-education camps. See Amnesty International's criticism of Viet Nam's alleged denial of human rights in the above cited report.
45. Nguyen Long with Harry Kendall, *After Saigon Fell* (Berkeley: University of California, Institute of East Asian Studies, 1981). Robert Scalapino, a political science professor who advised the State Department during the Viet Nam war, wrote the foreword for this book.

5. Viet Nam Still Bleeds

Our children still cannot sleep soundly. We are in a state of semi-war, with a half million Chinese troops at our northern border.

Le Thu, Education Director, Viet Nam Women's Union

(This note is too important to leave in a footnote: unlike other chapters in this book, this one does not focus specifically on women. Chapter 5 is an attempt to unravel the confusion created by the US 'cold war' against Viet Nam, the exodus of the boat people, Viet Nam's war with Pol Pot's forces in Kampuchea and China's invasion of Viet Nam. I believe the chapter provides the essential context for understanding Vietnamese women in the post-1975 era. Continued hostilities against Viet Nam, the subject of this chapter, not only act as a brake on women's progress, they also define the boundaries and set the priorities for all women's struggles in Viet Nam.)

The last US official fled Viet Nam on 29 April 1975, only hours before the liberation forces took over the Presidential Palace in Saigon. The US had invested \$275 billion to maintain control over South Viet Nam. During the last ten years, nearly 58,000 of the three million US soldiers who did a tour of duty in Viet Nam had died. Another 157,000 had been wounded. And after some 14.3 million tons of bombs had been dropped on Viet Nam,¹ the United States still suffered a humiliating defeat. This defeat transformed international power relations. It exposed and seriously weakened the US system of domination.

Despite the fact that it is nearly a decade since the US Embassy closed in Saigon, the US government is still deeply involved in Viet Nam. The policy guiding that involvement is revenge. The strategic goal is to force Viet Nam to continue to pay in blood and tears for defeating the military might of the US; to continue to teach other Third World countries that might be inspired by the Vietnamese example that the victory may be too costly; to rewrite the history of the war so that Americans can be proud of that shameful adventure and the US government can justify the continuation of its imperialist adventures in other parts of the world.