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History269 The American War in Vietnam

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America's Distortion of the Vietnam War

The Vietnam War was a brutal, murderous, and ultimately pointless conflict; however, if one were going off of official U.S. government claims from the time, none of this would be apparent. The Vietnam War was a disaster for both sides. For the United States, it was one of the first major estrangements of the public consciousness from the actions of the government. Many American citizens were appalled by the brutality their government had inflicted on the Vietnamese, and it put into question the values of democracy and world-wide peacekeeping that the American government's rhetoric had so passionately championed. For Vietnam, although independence was eventually won, the war was devastating to their land and population, the effects of which are still felt today. The U.S. government intentionally deceived the American public of the reality of Vietnam by propping up false theories of the spread of Communism, espousing false values of freedom and democracy, and simply lying about the targets and efficacy of U.S. ground and air offensives.

The Atlantic Charter of 1941, a joint resolution between the U.S. and Britain on goals after World War II, guaranteed, among other things, the U.S.'s belief in everyone's right to self-determination. This statement encouraged Ho Chi Minh, Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam at the time, to send a telegram to Harry Truman, citing the values of the Atlantic Charter to convince the U.S. to intervene in the impending French military operation in

Vietnam¹. This was one of several telegrams from Minh to Truman, all of which went unanswered.

The values outlined in the Atlantic Charter and also in documents like the Declaration of Independence gave way to the concept of American exceptionalism, the idea that America is a unique force for freedom and democracy in the international community. This idea was widely held among the American citizenry following World War II, the first major challenge of the concept being the Vietnam War. The U.S. had entered the Vietnam War in part to support and establish a capitalist, democratic South Vietnamese government as an alternative to the popularly-supported communist North Vietnam. But as grim details of the U.S.-backed South Vietnamese government came to light, many Americans became alienated from the American objective in Vietnam, begging the question: how could our country, who claims it is supporting democracy, support such an authoritarian regime?

The brutality of the South Vietnamese government under president Ngo Dinh Diem became widespread knowledge in June of 1963 after the heavily-publicized self-immolation of Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc, who set himself on fire in protest of the Diem regime's persecution of Buddhists. Diem, a Roman Catholic, enacted anti-Buddhist laws, including the banning of Buddhist religious flags in May of 1963.² With the South Vietnamese population being 70-80% Buddhist, these policies were extremely unpopular, and led to widespread protests, including the self-immolation of Quang Duc.³ Following this, Americans began to question the motivations of their government in supporting what was clearly an unpopular and brutal government.

¹ "Telegram from Ho Chi Minh to President Harry S. Truman | DocsTeach."

² "South Vietnamese Buddhists Initiate Fall of Dictator Diem, 1963 | Global Nonviolent Action Database."

³ "SNIE 53-2-63, "The Situation in South Vietnam, 10 July 1963."

The authoritarian actions of the Diem government were occurring long before 1963, and were not limited to religious persecution. Starting in 1959, the Diem regime began constructing agrovilles, later called strategic hamlets, which were newly-constructed villages in South Vietnam where many Vietnamese peasants were relocated. Often, their old villages and crops were destroyed to prevent North Vietnamese forces from using them. These strategic hamlets led to the destruction of many lives, with starvation being a major issue in many villages.⁴

The South Vietnamese government also held many political prisoners and staged many public executions of political dissenters. Despite a lot of people in the West denying the executions took place⁵, the South Vietnamese government openly advertised the executions. According to former South Vietnamese military cartographer Ngo Vinh Long, “the whole thing was meant to intimidate the population not to join the revolution against Diem.”⁶ Long goes on to describe some of the horrors of the Diem regime, there being “many military posts where they summarily chopped off the heads of people they thought were communists. They put their heads on stakes right in front of their outposts... they even invited people to take pictures with it.”⁷

While the U.S. was backing Diem, giving him standing ovations in Congress during his state visit and the press describing him as “‘brave’... ‘incorruptible,’ [and] ‘freedom-loving,’” the actions of his government could not have been further from this.⁸ While the U.S. eventually abandoned Diem in 1963 by greenlighting a coup that led to his assassination, the damage was done.⁹ The American government had openly supported an unpopular authoritarian regime while distorting it as a pillar of Catholic democracy fighting evil, godless communism, or, in other

⁴ Appy, *Patriots*, 57

⁵ Appy, *Patriots*, 58

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 22

⁹ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 24

words, the popularly-supported revolutionary movement in Vietnam, and this resonated with many Americans.

One of the most prevalent American government claims was the “domino theory:” the idea that if Vietnam fell to communism as a pawn of Communist China or the Soviet Union, so too would the surrounding southeast Asian countries, like a line of dominoes. Thus, an increasingly-globalized communist movement would develop and threaten United States national security. After the Vietnam War, many U.S. foreign policy officials realized that this theory was misconceived: as White House counselman Clark Clifford put it, “I know now that the domino theory was a false theory, that we should not have gotten involved [in Vietnam]”.¹⁰ Even former defense secretary Geroge McNamara, who was instrumental in the expansion of military intervention in Vietnam, admitted that the domino theory was misguided, that “if only he understood the fervor of Vietnamese nationalism...if only he had realized that the domino theory was wrong, he might have persuaded his presidential bosses to withdraw from Vietnam”.¹¹

However, the signs that the domino theory was false were apparent long before the start of the Vietnam War. The United States majorly funded the French-Indochina War after World War II, where Vietnam was fighting for its independence. Prior to this conflict, on September 2, 1945, Ho Chi Minh read the Vietnamese Declaration of Independence, opening with a direct quote of the first line of the United States Declaration of Independence and further quoting the Declaration of the French Revolution. Minh called the statements of liberty and freedom for all humans in these declarations “undeniable truths”.¹² He then goes on to detail the brutal French occupation of Vietnam, where the exploitation of the Vietnamese people, their labor, and their resources had stripped them of said undeniable truths. This was no ideological war covertly

¹⁰ “Hearts and Minds (1974).”

¹¹ Appy, “What Was the Vietnam War About?”

¹² “Declaration of Independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.”

masterminded by the Chinese or the Soviets; it was a liberatory war from a violent colonial occupation. So, when the U.S. militarily intervened shortly after the French-Indochina War, the Vietnamese saw Americans just as they did the French: imperialists attempting to strip them of their freedom. As former Vietcong soldier Tran Thi Gung describes her motivations for joining the effort against the US: “I wanted to do something to liberate my country and help people get enough food and clothing”.¹³

Vietnam’s revolutionary history spans its entire existence. Occupied by China for 1000 years, the Vietnamese fought for their independence. Occupied by the French for nearly a century, they did the same. It was not any different when America invaded, and U.S. foreign policymakers should have understood this.

U.S. official claims on the bombing campaigns in Vietnam also differ from reality. Regarding the bombing of North Vietnam, or Operation Rolling Thunder, National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy called the “bombing of the North... the most accurate and restrained in modern warfare.”¹⁴ Other U.S. officials “repeatedly insisted that only military targets were hit”.¹⁵ This did not follow the reality of Vietnam; the campaigns were far from restrained, with U.S. bombs killing about 55,000 North Vietnamese civilians.¹⁶ While Operation Rolling Thunder was relentless, it pales in comparison to the bombing of South Vietnam, where 4 million tons of bombs were dropped on the U.S. supported state.¹⁷

U.S. ground offensives targeted civilians as well. Body count became the highest military priority for the United States.¹⁸ In order to maximize this number, some military officers inflated the number of targets they killed. It also led to “an incentive to kill civilians so long as they could

¹³ Appy, *Patriots*, 16

¹⁴ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 162

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 164

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 169

be included in the count of “enemy” dead.”¹⁹ Again, the U.S. operation was not about saving democracy in Vietnam from communism; it was to so thoroughly destroy the opposition that they would have no choice but to surrender.

The U.S. government’s claims of the domino theory, their commitment to democracy and freedom, and the targets of their military operations during the Vietnam War contrast deeply with the conflict’s realities. They invoked the fear of communism that the era of McCarthyism in the previous decade had cultivated in order to claim that North Vietnam was simply a pawn of China and the USSR, even though the Vietnamese, as they had for their entire history, simply wanted liberation and independence. The American government propped up a brutal, undemocratic, and authoritarian regime in the south despite their supposed support of freedom and democracy. They lied about who they were killing in Vietnam, which ended up totalling about 2 million civilians in both the North and the South.²⁰ Despite these tragic realities, the Vietnam War teaches us the valuable lesson of rigorously interrogating the reasons and motivations of war, so that such an event is not repeated in the future.

¹⁹ Appy, *American Reckoning*, 170

²⁰ Spector, “Vietnam War | Facts, Summary, Years, Timeline, Casualties, Combatants, & Facts.”

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