

Meeting Yesterday Head-on: The Vietnam War in Vietnamese, American, and World History*

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“The trouble is that something’s gone wrong. It should be turnin’ out great. We’ve just gone off the road someplace. That’s what we’ve got to find out—where we’ve gone off the road. Then—”

“Hell, it’s not that. You’re just wrong. It’s a new ball game, and you just don’t get it. Yesterday’s dead, and every day-before-yesterday’s dead. Forget it. Bury it. If you’ll do that, then . . .”

“You’re both wrong. Nothing’s gone wrong—at least not in that sense. Yesterday’s not dead or gone. We’re just meeting it head-on for the first time.”

Exchange between two students and William Appleman Williams, 1967¹

IN the wake of the momentous changes that have transformed the world politically over the past few years, many observers in the United States have been moved to declare the absolute triumph of Western corporate capitalism and representative democracy as models. Some have even trumpeted the “end of history” as the major challengers to these systems, the communist regimes of the Soviet bloc and some of their Third World allies, seemingly col-

* This essay is a revised version of a paper delivered during the annual meetings of the American Historical Association, New York, 27–30 December 1990.

¹ Quoted in William Appleman Williams, *The Roots of the Modern American Empire: A Study of the Growth and Shaping of Social Consciousness in a Marketplace Society* (New York: Random House, 1969), p. ix.

lapsed under the weight of their own inadequacies and failures. While America's one-time adversary Vietnam struggled with its own pressing problems, problems so severe that many thousands of people fled the country, the United States won a series of small wars in the Caribbean and Persian Gulf that were proclaimed as ending the so-called Vietnam syndrome and reestablishing U.S. supremacy as a superpower in a unipolar "new world order."²

A few flies have appeared in the ointment, including a persistently aggressive and ruthless Iraqi dictator; destabilizing ethnic strife and economic collapse in the former communist states; disastrous civil war or unrest in some Third World nations; a severe recession, constraining U.S. foreign and domestic policies; and chronic low voter turnouts and widespread public apathy that have made U.S. democracy into a spectator sport. The triumph of the United States in the Cold War, if that is what it was, came at a huge cost and may yet prove a Pyrrhic victory. Indeed, although the Soviet Union clearly lost the Cold War, the United States may not have won it; despite their current problems, Japan and Germany arguably emerged with better long-term economic prospects.

But do these events—the end of the Cold War, the fragmentation of the USSR, the fluctuating return to repression in China, the obvious difficulties afflicting social revolutionary societies like Cuba and Vietnam, and the rapid decline of communism as an attractive ideology and social system—really mean that radical revolutions, especially those of an anti-Western character, are a thing of the past, an artifact of superpower rivalry that has now abated? Were the socialist revolutions and insurgencies of the twentieth century, including those which led to the Vietnam wars, primarily products of Cold War superpower machinations that dragged in a reluctant United States, as many Americans seem to believe? Or did they reflect other, more deeply rooted patterns of global history and antisystemic sentiments? Do these developments justify in retrospect the persistent U.S. opposition to radical revolutions, particularly those with a Marxist thrust, that has resulted in numerous, often counterproductive interventions over

² See, for example, Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Movement," *Foreign Affairs* 70 (1991): 23–33; Joshua Muravchik, "At Last, Pax Americana," *New York Times*, 24 January 1991. The most comprehensive exposition of the "end of history" argument can be found in Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Maxwell Macmillan, 1992).

the past century? Most of the major foreign crises the United States faced between 1945 and 1990 involved confrontation with Third World revolutions: in China, Korea, Cuba, Vietnam, Iran, Central America, Afghanistan, and Grenada. Was the U.S. intervention in Vietnam a reasoned response to Cold War concerns or rather part of a chronic pattern of activity aimed at reversing, repressing, or preventing revolutions that long predated the conflict with the USSR and its allies?

To understand the future of revolution and the U.S. reaction to revolution we need to comprehend the past. It is time for a reappraisal both of revolutions and revolutionary unrest in modern world history and of a U.S. response to that phenomenon that can only be called counterrevolutionary. This reappraisal can begin with what Americans term the Vietnam War, perhaps the most significant confrontation between counterrevolutionary intervention and revolution. Indeed, the Vietnam conflict involved many of the major themes of modern world history, including the conflictive relationship between a powerful industrialized society and a struggling underdeveloped society.

A battleground for two generations, Vietnam has been fought over for so long that the country and its people have become for many outsiders a symbol rather than flesh-and-blood reality. The reason for this notoriety was a war, which Americans called the Vietnam War and many Vietnamese termed the American War. The Americocentric term *Vietnam War* assumes that Vietnam was a problem for the United States rather than the reverse, a situation that Marvin Gettleman refers to as "Cartesian imperialism."³ Perhaps it would be more accurate to refer to the Vietnam Wars (involving both the French and the Americans), the American-Vietnamese War, or even, given the role of revolution and counterrevolution, the Vietnamese Revolutionary War. The latter term would cover the period from the early 1940s to 1975 that involved the majority of the Vietnamese population fighting against a succession of adversaries committed to repressing or reversing the revolution. But none of these terms recognizes the extension of the conflict into Cambodia and Laos at a high cost for those now maimed societies, a development that space precludes addressing here. For the United States, whose involvement directly or indi-

³ Marvin E. Gettleman, "Against Cartesianism: Three Generations of Vietnam Scholarship," in *Coming to Terms: Indochina, the United States and the War*, ed. Douglas Alien and Ngo Vinh Long (Boulder: Westview, 1991), p. 290.

rectly spanned four decades from the 1940s to the mid-1970s, it was the nation's longest war; for the Vietnamese it was perhaps only the latest episode of a struggle that goes back many centuries. Alan Goodman contends that the war constituted a fundamental clash between cultures and ways of thinking about history and power. He maintains that it needs to be placed in a larger political and social context.⁴

In some ways, the war did not conclude in 1975, either for the Vietnamese (and other "Indochinese") or for the Americans. Vietnam experienced a turbulent relationship with China (including a border war in 1979). For several decades, refugees streamed from all the countries, and a chronic (albeit low-level) Hmong resistance festered in Laos. The U.S. persistently supported antigovernment movements in Cambodia until the end of the 1980s and maintained a strict trade embargo against Vietnam until 1994. However, in the 1990s the United States groped toward a better relationship with Vietnam (including cooperation on the MIA issue) and shifted to supporting a negotiated settlement in Cambodia. Meanwhile, the exodus of Vietnamese "boat people" diminished to a small trickle, and refugee camps were closing down in Southeast Asia. With various Cambodian factions struggling to construct a multiparty coalition government, Laotian relations with China and Thailand slowly warming, and the U.S. moving toward improved relations with Vietnam (symbolized by an end to the trade embargo), the "war" finally seems to be nearing an end. But the years of conflict left a deep impression on both the United States and the Indochinese societies, an impression that will take decades more to diminish.

This study outlines some of the ways historians can understand the Vietnam War and the broader patterns out of which it arose. My analysis is frankly synthetic, relying chiefly on the voluminous relevant literature produced by scholars of U.S., Vietnamese, and global history; I aim to sketch a broader, more integrated view. I have not attempted to provide comprehensive coverage.⁵ Rather my purpose in this interpretative essay is to emphasize the

⁴ Alan Goodman, "Scholars Must Give More Serious Thought to How They Teach and Write about the War in Vietnam," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 25 July 1990, p. A36.

⁵ Many excellent surveys of the war exist, most of them emphasizing U.S. activities and decisions. See, for example, George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-75*, 2nd ed. (New York: Knopf, 1986); James D. Olson and Randy Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell: America and Vietnam, 1945-90* (New York: St. Martin's, 1991); Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, 2nd ed.

historical continuities between the past and present, to place the war in a broader context of Vietnamese history, American history, and the evolution of the modern world, especially the “Third World.” Over many years of teaching courses on the Vietnam War, I have come to believe that a narrow focus on either Southeast Asian or (more commonly) U.S. activities and contexts is insufficient to understand the origins, course, and consequences of the American-Vietnamese War and related conflicts. The war resulted from and was decided by a confluence of historical factors that were deeply rooted in Vietnamese, American, and modern global history; the neglect of any one factor presents a misleading picture. Inevitably perhaps, I emphasize a substantial pattern of continuity. But historical analysis must necessarily also embrace elements of change; the war was not a predetermined event. This brief study inevitably simplifies complex issues and can only sample a vast literature, so that some perspectives have to be downplayed in favor of others.⁶ Furthermore, this essay argues for a particular perspective. I make no claim for value-free objectivity (which may or may not be possible), in contrast to an openminded, undogmatic attitude. Indeed, I believe that women and men of goodwill and perception can disagree on major interpretations, a point richly illustrated in the literature. But ultimately scholars must place the conflicting data in some coherent framework.

THE WAR IN VIETNAMESE HISTORY

Americans are understandably preoccupied with the U.S. role and the effects of the war on Americans; few consider what the whole process meant for the Vietnamese and the impact it had on them. For Americans, Vietnam was an exotic backdrop for U.S. activities. Then as now, most people knew or cared little about the peoples of Indochina, their histories, cultures, and aspirations; many

(New York: Viking, 1991); Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945–90* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991); James D. Harrison, *The Endless War: Fifty Years of Struggle in Vietnam* (New York: Free Press, 1982); Gary Hess, *Vietnam and the United States: Origins and Legacy of War* (Boston: Twayne, 1990); Patrick J. Hearden, *The Tragedy of Vietnam* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991); William S. Turley, *The Second Indochina War: A Short Political and Military History, 1954–75* (Boulder: Westview, 1986); George D. Moss, *Vietnam: An American Ordeal* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1990); Hugh Higgins, *Vietnam*, 2nd ed. (London: Heineman, 1982); T. Louise Brown, *War and Aftermath in Vietnam* (London: Routledge, 1991).

⁶ A much more nuanced and detailed account can be found in my book-length manuscript, “The Vietnam Revolutionary War in Vietnamese, American, and World History.” This essay provides a very truncated summary of that study.

Americans even today cannot locate Vietnam on a world map.⁷ But the military context of the conflict was Southeast Asia, and the war remained an integral development in the overall historical evolution of that region.

One legitimate way to look at the Vietnam War is as an episode in Vietnam's long history, particularly its well-documented struggle for independence and the long search for social justice. Hodgkin, reflecting Vietnamese Marxist scholarship, has argued that the August Revolution of 1945, which first brought the communists to power in the north, can only be understood in the context of 4,000 years of Vietnamese history.⁸ From the perspective of Vietnam, the war was the logical outgrowth of many centuries of history, a history filled with nationalist or protonationalist resistance to invading and colonizing foreign powers, as well as recurrent peasant rebellion to rectify socioeconomic grievances. The Vietnam Wars then must be interpreted as only a phase, although an exceptionally violent one, in the much longer time of troubles for the inhabitants of Vietnam and adjacent countries. Keenly aware of their history, the Vietnamese are no strangers to struggle.⁹ A thousand years of Chinese colonization did not succeed in repressing the national identity, culture, or spirit of resistance, even if it did implant many Chinese cultural and political influences. The "unexplained miracle" of Vietnamese survival against all assimilationist programs is of the greatest importance for later history.¹⁰

The repeated Vietnamese rebellions against Chinese rule constructed a heritage of fierce, unyielding opposition to foreign conquest that served the Vietnamese well after independence, during the periodic attempts to reimpose Chinese domination. As one historian noted, "Vietnamese history has been compared to a vast

⁷ See, for example, *International Herald-Tribune*, 24 January 1985; *National Geographic Magazine*, December 1989: 816–18.

⁸ Thomas Hodgkin, *Vietnam: The Revolutionary Path* (New York: St. Martin's, 1981), p. vii.

⁹ See Truong Buu Lam, *Resistance, Rebellion, Revolution: Popular Movements in Vietnamese History* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1984).

¹⁰ See, for example, Joseph Buttinger, *The Smaller Dragon: A Political History of Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1958), pp. 10–11; Hodgkin, *Vietnam: The Revolutionary Path*, p. 29; Keith Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), pp. 13, 34–39, 130, 175–78; John K. Whitmore, "Social Organization and Confucian Thought in Vietnam," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 15 (1984): 296–306. The theme of Vietnamese national survival is explored in more detail in Craig A. Lockard, "The Unexplained Miracle: Reflections on the History of Vietnamese National Identity and Survival" (forthcoming).

pantheon in which there are many thousands of niches occupied by all the heroes and heroines who have contributed to the building of the Vietnamese nation, the liberation of the Vietnamese people."¹¹ Many rebels demonstrated a willingness to fight to the death against hopeless odds. The Vietnamese became one of the few peoples to successfully resist Mongol invasion, with the entire population rallying to the cause.¹² The village system was characterized by a somewhat collectivist ideology, with much mutual assistance and intimate personal relationships.¹³

Unlike most premodern peoples, the Vietnamese had a well-developed sense of nation, of the difference between "us" and "them." Although nationalism in the modern sense may be said to have originated in Europe in the nineteenth century, the Vietnamese had something similar to nationalism or national consciousness going back many centuries. The traditional Vietnamese state always had more of a national character than was common in Asian societies, and despite an inequitable, despotic system, it could usually rally patriotic sentiments among the peasantry.¹⁴ Some historians view the Vietnamese sense of nation as peoplehood, an ethnic-cultural definition; others refer to protonationalism. Still others consider Vietnam a true nation, even nation-state, going back into the nineteenth century and probably earlier.¹⁵ Over time the Vietnamese developed a "myth of national indomitability."¹⁶ Truong Buu Lam contends that the course and consequences of foreign interventions and resistance movements rather closely paralleled those of domestic popular movements or

¹¹ Hodgkin, *Vietnam: The Revolutionary Path*, p. 9.

¹² Lam, *Resistance, Rebellion, Revolution*, p. 17.

¹³ See Alexander Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), p. 1; Ngo Vinh Long, "Communal Property and Peasant Revolutionary Struggles in Vietnam," *Peasant Studies* 17 (1990): 121–27; Gerald Hickey, "The Village through Time and War," in *Vietnam: Essays on History, Culture, and Society*, ed. David Elliott et al. (New York: Asia Society, 1985), p. 41; John Adams and Nancy Hancock, "Land and Economy in Traditional Vietnam," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 1 (1970): 98.

¹⁴ See Joseph Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Political History* (New York: Praeger, 1968), pp. 11, 53; Helen Lamb, *Vietnam's Will to Live: Resistance to Foreign Aggression from Early Times through the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), p. 35.

¹⁵ David Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885–1925* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p. 6; William Duiker, *The Rise of Nationalism in Vietnam, 1900–1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 30; Huynh Kim Khanh, *Vietnamese Communism, 1925–45* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp. 26–28, 32; Truong Buu Lam, *Patterns of Vietnamese Response to Foreign Intervention: 1858–1900* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), p. 31.

¹⁶ Turley, *Second Indochina War*, pp. 1–2.

uprisings, with foreign attackers soon enmeshed in the intricacies of local struggles that divided the Vietnamese population. Soon the invaders became another faction embroiled in civil strife—as the United States later learned.¹⁷

Peasant rebellion and civil war between powerful families were endemic Vietnamese patterns as well, an expression in part of increasing regionalism as Vietnamese civilization expanded to the south. Civil wars and chronic unrest also resulted in part from inequalities within the traditional Vietnamese socioeconomic structure. Throughout history peasant revolts were apparently far more common in Vietnam than in other mainland Southeast Asian societies, generated by wars, famines, and perhaps outrage at inequalities.¹⁸ The major rebellion involved the Taysons in the late eighteenth century, who held out for thirty years against the traditional leadership and its French allies. Their longevity was due in part to an appeal for radical socioeconomic change and a reputation as Asian Robin Hoods (their slogan was “seize the property of the rich and redistribute it to the poor”) and also in part to their adroit manipulation of antforeign sentiment against emperors who sought foreign assistance.¹⁹

The Tayson rebellion, which had a firm base among both peasants and merchants, was the only one to actually bring down a legitimate dynasty; the rebels reestablished national unity and promoted national culture and socioeconomic reform.²⁰ The counterrevolutionary reestablishment of traditional imperial rule in 1802, with French assistance, produced a dynasty with diminished legitimacy that was unable to address socioeconomic inequities.²¹ Although the Tayson rebellion has received scant attention in most accounts of the Vietnam Wars, Alexander Woodside argued that it “inaugurates modern Vietnamese history.”²² The Taysons also established precedents for the ideas of Ho Chi Minh, and they

¹⁷ Lam, *Resistance, Rebellion, Revolution*, pp. vii–viii.

¹⁸ Charles Keyes, *The Golden Peninsula: Culture and Adaptation in Mainland Southeast Asia* (New York: Macmillan, 1977), p. 184.

¹⁹ Lam, *Resistance, Rebellion, Revolution*, pp. 11–14; William Duiker, *Vietnam: Nation in Revolution* (Boulder: Westview, 1983), p. 22.

²⁰ Lam, *Resistance, Rebellion, Revolution*, pp. 10–14; Hodgkin, *Vietnam: The Revolutionary Path*, pp. 78–99; Jean Chesneaux, *The Vietnamese Nation: Contributions to a History* (Sydney: Current Books, 1966), p. 44.

²¹ Hodgkin, *Vietnam: The Revolutionary Path*, pp. 100–130; Alexander Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model: A Comparative Study of Vietnamese and Chinese Government in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 111, 135, 231; Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism*, pp. 20–25.

²² Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model*, p. 3.

are seen by communist historians as predecessors of the Viet Minh. It must be remembered that the Vietnamese, unlike the Americans, have an intense consciousness of their own history, not to mention an ancient tradition of historiography, and tend to adopt the longer view.²³

The French annexed Vietnam in the second half of the nineteenth century, but it took them an additional fifteen years of bloody repression to “pacify” the country against the heroic efforts of various resistance groups, who provided a model for guerrilla warfare strategies and popular mobilization later adopted by the communists.²⁴ The French artificially divided the country, compromised the legitimacy of the traditional elite, uprooted rural society, introduced divisive capitalistic influences into once communalistic communities, linked the Vietnamese to the vicissitudes of the world economy, undermined the traditional sociopolitical structure, and otherwise cynically exploited the Vietnamese for their own gain under the guise of the “civilizing mission.” In so doing they set into motion forces that ultimately doomed their imposed and unpopular rule. As Woodside has argued, the French colonial regime magnified the misfortunes of Vietnamese peasants, making a social revolution seem more desirable.²⁵ The French raised taxes, weakened village autonomy, and annexed communal lands for a new landlord class. In the process they generated what Donald Lancaster termed “progressive pauperization of the peasantry,” including a growing problem of tenancy and landlessness.²⁶ The French created a cultural crisis in Vietnam, resulting in what Paul Mus called a “nation off balance.”²⁷

The result was nationalism. The rise of Ho Chi Minh and the communists, many of whose leaders (including Ho) came from

²³ Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam*, p. 1.

²⁴ See, for example, Lam, *Patterns of Vietnamese Response*; Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism*; Hy V. Luong, *Revolution in the Village: Tradition and Transformation in North Vietnam, 1925–88* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992), pp. 39–42, 50.

²⁵ Alexander Woodside, “Vietnamese History: Confucianism, Colonialism, and the Struggle for Independence,” in *Vietnam: Essays on History, Culture, and Society*, ed. Elliott et al., p. 13.

²⁶ Donald Lancaster, *The Emancipation of French Indochina* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 65. See also James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), pp. 59, 131; Adams and Hancock, “Land and Economy,” p. 90; Ngo Vinh Long, *Before the Revolution: The Vietnamese Peasants under the French* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983), pp. 3–141.

²⁷ John T. McAlister and Paul Mus, *The Vietnamese and Their Revolution* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 38.

mandarin backgrounds, constituted a chapter in the centuries-long struggle for independence and national identity. This motive was augmented by a strong desire to reconstruct, even revolutionize, a society that had been irredeemably shattered by dynastic decline, exploitive French colonialism, and the ravages of war. French socioeconomic policies greatly disrupted peasant society, leaving an ideological vacuum and widespread desire for a new order. Marxism provided a model of such a community, one with many parallels to the traditional Confucianism that was strongly rooted in northern and central Vietnam.²⁸

The nationalism that emerged in the early part of the twentieth century was either backward-looking, collaborationist, or impatient. The French succeeded in eliminating or coopting most of these groups, unwittingly leaving the field open to the more organized, disciplined, and cohesive communists, who offered a program of both anticolonialism and societal transformation. Given the country's history, it was perhaps inevitable that Vietnamese-style communism would take on strong nationalist coloration, a pattern most Americans did not understand until the end of the war. Huynh Kim Khanh has expertly analyzed the graft between the indigenous and imported that integrated nationalism and internationalist Marxism.²⁹ Without question, the communists were able, for a variety of reasons, to inherit the mantle of nationalism, a more powerful symbol in Vietnam than in most societies. At the same time they were able to recruit peasant support with a program of socioeconomic reform, which addressed the issues of increasing peasant impoverishment, immiseration, and landlessness. Their effort involved creating resilient mass organizations in the villages.³⁰ Vietnamese communism became essentially adaptationist, incorporating aspects of Vietnam's cultural tradition and nationalism into Marxism-Leninism, so that it seemed more a fulfillment of than a break with the past.³¹

Beginning in the 1930s the alternatives to the communists and their charismatic, though ruthless, leader Ho failed to achieve

²⁸ See Nguyen Khac Vien, *Tradition and Revolution in Vietnam* (Berkeley: Indochina Resource Center, 1974), pp. 46-47.

²⁹ Khanh, *Vietnamese Communism*, pp. 20-21.

³⁰ See Luong, *Revolution in the Village*, pp. 132-40.

³¹ See McAlister and Mus, *Vietnamese and Their Revolution*, p. 116; Lamb, *Vietnam's Will to Live*, p. 2; Khanh, *Vietnamese Communism*, pp. 20-21; Ken Post, *Revolution, Socialism, and Nationalism in Viet Nam* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1989), pp. 9-13; John Dunn, *Modern Revolutions: An Introduction to the Analysis of a Political Phenomenon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), p. 145; Keyes, *Golden Peninsula*, p. 223.

either credibility or legitimacy. The alternatives included the Vietnamese anticommunist elements that rallied around the French, the discredited emperor Bao Dai, the successive Saigon governments beginning with Ngo Dinh Diem, and the Americans. The French reliance on a “Bao Dai solution” and their inability to negate revolutionary nationalism doomed them to failure in the First Indochina (Franco-Vietnamese) War against an outgunned but determined Viet Minh. Ho was regarded as the leader of Vietnamese nationalism by probable majorities of the Vietnamese population (and overwhelmingly in the north); even President Eisenhower conceded that Ho would win 80% of the vote in a free election.³² Not all Vietnamese shared these sentiments, however, including some groups in the north. There were indeed competing versions of what Vietnam was and should become. Vietnamese society was complex and included sizable groups that actively or passively opposed Ho’s forces, such as cultural traditionalists, various southern religious sects, many Catholics, prosperous peasants, landlords, and the business class. There was also a small middle group comprising urban-based intellectuals and a much larger group of politically neutral southern peasants who opposed both major blocs but had little influence and no support from the Americans.³³

Nonetheless, neither the murdered Diem nor any of the successor Saigon governments—all of them dominated by military officers who were mostly corrupt and associated with the French colonial system—ever succeeded in establishing much credibility with the general population. Held in contempt by the Americans they served, they remained primarily vehicles for ratifying, if not always carrying out, American directives. They rarely initiated major policies; indeed, they were not even consulted on the U.S. decision to commit massive ground forces in 1965.³⁴ These men were not the foundation on which to build a democratic and authentically nationalist program that might attract broader support. In this context there could be no substantial change of the

³² Weldon A. Brown, *Prelude to Disaster: The American Role in Vietnam, 1940–63* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat, 1975), p. 107.

³³ See Ralph Smith, *Viet-Nam and the West* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), p. 151; Turley, *Second Indochina War*, pp. 7–8; George McT. Kahin, “Political Polarization in South Vietnam: U.S. Policy in the Post Diem Period,” *Pacific Affairs* 52 (1979–80): 673; Neil L. Jameson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. ix–xiv, 176–376.

³⁴ Michael Maclear, *The Ten Thousand Day War: Vietnam, 1945–75* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1981), pp. 130–33.

highly inequitable rural socioeconomic system that might attract the large body of prorevolutionary peasants or the considerable number of neutral peasants.

For many Vietnamese the American-Vietnamese War was essentially a continuation of the First Indochina War to expel the French and reconstruct a maimed society. This view was strengthened by the massive U.S. military aid to the French forces in the early 1950s and U.S. sponsorship (in many accounts, actual creation) of the separate South Vietnamese state.³⁵ Some scholars argue that U.S. involvement constituted a twenty-year extension of the "civilizing mission" pioneered by the French decades earlier, thus ratifying the revolutionary struggle as an effort at decolonization.³⁶ Many believe that despite their resolve, technological power, courage, and military advantages, the Americans and their Vietnamese allies never had much chance to win the war since the fate of Vietnam had already been decided in the 1940s and early 1950s, when the communists won the "mandate of heaven" and humbled the hated French colonizers.

The view of one continuous conflict pitting revolutionary nationalists against counterrevolutionary antinationalists makes it easier to explain why the revolutionary forces fought with such determination and attracted such widespread (though by no means universal) support. Many scholars, holding varied views, agree that first the Viet Minh and then the National Liberation Front succeeded in relating their goals to peasants' needs, creating a renewed sense of community, social solidarity, and political participation.³⁷ Land reform was perhaps the key issue of the war, indeed of the Vietnamese Revolution as a whole. However

³⁵ The most exhaustive study remains George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1987), pp. 3-92. See also Andrew Rotter, *The Path to Vietnam: Origins of the American Commitment to Southeast Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 213-21; Lloyd C. Gardner, *Approaching Vietnam: From World War II through Dienbienphu, 1941-1954* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988), pp. 11-356; Anthony Short, *The Origins of the Vietnam War* (London: Longman, 1989).

³⁶ Huynh Kim Khanh, "The Making and Unmaking of 'Free Vietnam,'" *Pacific Affairs* 60 (1987): 474-75.

³⁷ Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam*, pp. 303-304; James W. Trullinger, Jr., *Village at War: An Account of the Revolution in Vietnam* (New York: Longman, 1980), p. 109; Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), p. 276; Eric M. Bergerud, *Dynamics of Defeat: The Vietnam War in Hau Nghia Province* (Boulder: Westview, 1991), pp. 45-84; Douglas Pike, *Viet Cong: The Organization and Technique of the National Liberation Front* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1966), pp. 124-35, 374; Gerald C. Hickey, *Village in Vietnam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), p. 9.

opportunistically, the communists advocated and implemented changes, while Diem and his successors overturned Viet Minh land reforms, promulgated coercive and disastrous strategies (the Strategic Hamlets), or pursued halfhearted changes.³⁸

Khanh has placed the fall of Saigon in 1975 in a broader historical perspective:

There was a *déjà vu* quality to the Communist victory. . . . There was not much opposition. The Americans had been first to take flight. . . . The war-profiteering Saigon generals followed . . . deprived of the active support of their foreign masters. Left behind was a bewildered, battered population. . . . As in 1945, Vietnamese national unity was reasserted . . . spiritual unity remained [only] an aspiration. . . . The events . . . were also a turning point in the history of Vietnam. . . . The defeat of the United States effected the complete decolonization of the country, the culmination of 117 years of resistance against continuous Western attempts to mold Vietnamese national destiny.³⁹

The war greatly affected the Vietnamese, of whom around 4 million were killed or wounded, 10% of the population.⁴⁰ The survivors continue to face severe socioeconomic and environmental problems generated by the conflict, including the highest rate of birth defects in the world.⁴¹ The environmental destruction directed by the United States was so extensive that it gave rise to a new word in the English language, *ecocide*. Half the country's forests were destroyed, and one-third of the country is now considered a wasteland.⁴² Vietnam became the most heavily bombed nation in world history. The United States dropped on Vietnam nearly triple the total bomb tonnage of World War II, in what crit-

³⁸ See Olson and Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell*, p. 63; Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), p. 126; Mark Selden, "The National Liberation Front and the Transformation of Vietnamese Society," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 2 (1969): 37–38; David Hunt, "U.S. Scholarship and the National Liberation Front," in *The American War in Vietnam*, ed. Jayne Werner and David Hunt (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 93–108.

³⁹ Khanh, *Vietnamese Communism*, pp. 339–40.

⁴⁰ Jonathan Mirsky, "Reconsidering Vietnam," *New York Review of Books* 38 (10 October 1991): 46; *International Herald-Tribune*, 23 April 1985.

⁴¹ Nick Malloni, "Agent of Destruction," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 7 December 1989, pp. 38–39; Peter Korn, "The Persisting Poison," *The Nation*, 8 April 1991, pp. 440–45.

⁴² Olson and Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell*, p. 159; Brown, *War and Aftermath*, p. 197; Barry Weisberg, *Ecocide in Indochina: The Ecology of War* (San Francisco: Canfield, 1970), pp. 1–15.

ics called a policy of "lunarization."⁴³ The destruction and casualty rates in Cambodia and Laos were also massive. Society was fractured; as with the U.S. Civil War, reconciliation between factions and divided families may take decades.

One of the cruel ironies is that the Vietnamese communists are paying a high price for their success, perhaps in part because communist cadres often behave much like the elitist, rigid Confucian mandarins of traditional Vietnam from which many leaders descend.⁴⁴ Political and economic mistakes by the government, ideological rigidity, natural disasters, the U.S. embargo, and the devastation of the war all contributed to the country's postwar problems. As Premier Pham Van Dong conceded, "Waging war is simple, but running a country is very difficult."⁴⁵ Many Americans have assumed that the obvious failures of the communist government since "liberation" confirm the correctness of the U.S. mission to protect South Vietnam from communist "tyranny." Few Americans doubt that the communist leaders have created a "mess," generating thousands of "boat people" and failing to revitalize the stagnant economy. Yet at the same time Vietnam now possesses the long-sought cultural independence, unity, and renewed sense of community. Some sources assert that many peasants now enjoy access to land and face less official coercion than before 1975; agrarian policies increased crop yields and land use while also providing village schools and clinics.⁴⁶ On the other hand, there has been widespread resistance to collectivist policies. By the mid-1980s this necessitated the introduction of liberalized, market-oriented reforms that have increased productivity.⁴⁷

⁴³ John Lewallen, *Ecology of Devastation: Indochina* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1971), pp. 103–109; Robert Mueller, "Vietnam and America," in *Vietnam Reconsidered: Lessons from a War*, ed. Harrison Salisbury (New York: Harper, 1983), pp. 267–68; Susan Rhodes, ed., *Vietnam: A Teacher's Guide* (New York: Asia Society, 1983), p. 112.

⁴⁴ Stephen B. Young, "Vietnamese Marxism: Transition in Elite Ideology," *Asian Survey* 19 (1979): 770–79.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, p. 9.

⁴⁶ Christine Pelzer White, "Everyday Resistance, Socialist Revolution and Rural Development: The Vietnamese Case," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 13 (1986): 49–63; Luong, *Revolution in the Village*, pp. 169–200.

⁴⁷ See, for example, Ngo Vinh Hai, "Postwar Vietnam: Political Economy," in *Coming to Terms*, ed. Alien and Long, pp. 65–88; Vo Nhan Tri, *Vietnam's Economic Policy since 1975* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1990); Melanie Beresford, *Vietnam: Politics, Economics and Society* (London: Pinter, 1988), pp. 127–76. For assessments of reform, see William Turley and Mark Selden, eds., *Reinventing Vietnamese Socialism: Doi Moi in Comparative Perspective* (Boulder: Westview, 1993); Gareth Porter, *Vietnam: The Politics of Bureaucratic Socialism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

But despite some fluctuating cultural *glasnost*, political life has remained authoritarian.⁴⁸

Still, we must ask whether a basically illegitimate government dominated and maintained by the United States, protected by many thousands of U.S. troops (at great cost to U.S. taxpayers) and ruling over a disgruntled population, could have done any better or would have been able to renew the nation's self-confidence. The fact that the victorious communists have not yet been able to satisfy the expectations of many Vietnamese in their devastated country does not diminish their achievement or their identification with Vietnamese national goals, since there were no acceptable and realistic alternatives to their revolution. But it does mean that the "mandate of heaven" rests uneasily on their shoulders and can—indeed, probably will—be challenged at some future date by noncommunist forces. For future success the Vietnamese must find a solution rooted in their own best traditions but embracing new ideas that may be relevant. They will also need to emphasize the qualities of patience, talent, and endurance for which they are noted.⁴⁹

THE WAR IN AMERICAN HISTORY

Writing on the Vietnam War, or on U.S. foreign policies in the contemporary world, is fraught with inherent controversy. The war carries much cultural and intellectual baggage for Americans; merely the word *Vietnam* arouses an emotional reaction. Furthermore, the many accounts of the war differ on what actually happened and why, not to mention its implications. Some observers describe the war as a "noble effort" ruined by political and media meddling, while others identify a well-meaning but misperceiving United States bogged down in a quagmire. Another perspective views the war as an imperialistic adventure. One study concludes that "if we could all look at that terrible experience through the same pair of eyes, it could teach us much. But we cannot, so it cannot."⁵⁰ The perceptions of the various Vietnamese factions often differ substantially from American versions. Gary Hess has

⁴⁸ On cultural liberalization, see many articles in *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 1991–92.

⁴⁹ See William Duiker, *Vietnam since the Fall of Saigon* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1980), p. 88.

⁵⁰ David Fromkin and James Chase, "What Are the Lessons of Vietnam?" *Foreign Affairs* 63 (1985): 724.

divided the analysis of the U.S. defeat into two schools of thought, the “winnable” and the “unwinnable.” The former holds that more effective use of U.S. military power could have changed the outcome.⁵¹ Recent examples of this approach, mostly identified with conservative scholars, have achieved wide exposure by reinforcing the popular notion that the war was moral, well intentioned, and could have been won with more purposive and forceful strategies.⁵²

The “unwinnable” argument holds that the war was a lost cause for the United States from the start. This approach was well summarized in the lyrics once penned by American folksinger Phil Ochs: “We are fighting in a war we lost before the war began / we are the white boots marching in a yellow land.”⁵³ In this view, U.S. soldiers and advisers, no matter how brave and well intentioned, had no possibility—barring the employment of even more morally reprehensible and deadly strategies than were already used—of diverting or annihilating the historic force of anticolonial nationalism whose mantle, like it or not, had been assumed by Ho Chi Minh and his communist-led forces in the 1930s and 1940s. Nor did they have much chance of repressing a thrust for radical socioeconomic change whose roots can be traced well back into Vietnamese history and whose realization many Vietnamese identified with communist revolution. U.S. soldiers in the field, then, did not “lose” the war; rather, they were placed in an impossible position, amid the convoluted politics of Vietnam, by the misguided policies of officials in both the executive branch of government and the Pentagon.

From the perspective of U.S. history, many scholars argue that the conflict can best be seen as a particularly bitter and bloody episode in a decades-old, outward-thrusting pattern of interventions. The pattern was reinforced by the exigencies of the Cold War and America’s self-appointed post-World War II role as the antagonist of Marxist-inspired revolutions that might threaten the basic structure of the global system. Historians disagree about the weightings of influences that contribute to U.S. foreign

⁵¹ Hess, *Vietnam and the United States*, pp. 173–75.

⁵² Examples of the “revisionist” literature include Anthony James Joes, *The War for South Viet Nam, 1954–75* (Westport: Praeger, 1990); Guenther Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Col. Harry Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (New York: Dell, 1982).

⁵³ “White Boots Marching,” from Ochs’s album, *Tape from California* (A&M Records, Sp4148).

policies. Some (particularly the “revisionists”) point to economic self-interest and an imperialist thrust to project U.S. capitalist dominance as key factors. Others stress domestic politics, including the use of external threats to promote internal stability. Many historians emphasize as key factors a commitment to legalism, a missionary-type “evangelism” to reshape the world in America’s image, strategic thinking, or bureaucratic and political infighting.⁵⁴ Thus the debate continues between those who identify internal forces as primary and those who stress external geopolitical factors. At base the argument concerns motives, perceptions, and developments. Thomas McCormick, a “revisionist,” summarizes the major views: “Did an exceptional society fulfill its divine mission to defend civilization against the forces of barbarism and destruction? Or, smitten by the arrogance of power, tragically betray its unique ideals and its special opportunities and launch a global expansion that inhibited democracy, development, or peace? Or merely get trapped in the destructive consequences of its own innocence and ill-conceived good intentions . . . ?”⁵⁵

Ultimately U.S. policies have derived from a variety of external and internal influences. Especially in Asia, the policies have usually reflected a complex blend of naive idealism and naked self-interest.⁵⁶ Former senator J. William Fulbright maintains that two contrasting impulses compete for control of U.S. policy: one is generous, humane, self-critical, and judicious; the other is egotistical, self-righteous, and arrogant.⁵⁷ Americans have been an ideological people who filter their information about the world through assumptions that often remain unexamined. Michael Hunt believes American ideology has included three relevant core ideas: an active quest for national greatness incorporating the promotion of liberty; a racial hierarchy to evaluate other peoples and their aspirations; and a condemnation of radical change overseas, including revolutionary change. Vietnam offers a stark illus-

⁵⁴ For a useful overview of many of the approaches, see Michael J. Hogan and Thomas G. Paterson, eds., *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

⁵⁵ Thomas McCormick, “‘Every System Needs a Center Sometimes’: An Essay on Hegemony and Modern American Foreign Policy,” in *Redefining the Past: Essays in Diplomatic History in Honor of William Appleman Williams*, ed. Lloyd C. Gardner (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1986), p. 73.

⁵⁶ On this point see John K. Fairbank, *The United States and China*, 4th ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 307–35.

⁵⁷ See J. William Fulbright, *The Arrogance of Power* (New York: Random House, 1967).

tration of the unfortunate consequences that have sometimes resulted from these ideological considerations.⁵⁸ The degree to which U.S. leaders have understood or employed historical experiences has been hotly debated, but some scholars identify a sort of “historical amnesia” as characteristic.⁵⁹ Many scholars have demonstrated the importance of American sociocultural values in foreign policy. Deeply ingrained belief in the uniqueness of the United States as the “city upon a hill” or “God’s country” and notions of themselves as the bearers of the torch of political and economic freedom, combined with the messianic character of nineteenth-century Protestant theology, tempted Americans to mask their actions and arrogance in righteous rhetoric.⁶⁰

Many scholars believe that these patterns often led to imperialism, motivated either by naked power considerations or welfare notions. Perhaps America’s imperial drive, rooted in both economic and ideological considerations (including a missionary sense of destiny and historical myopia), can be traced back to the beginnings of the republic and the concept of Manifest Destiny. Some historians, especially William Appleman Williams and his “revisionist” followers, contend that “empire is as American as apple pie.”⁶¹ Many others would dispute this interpretation, arguing instead that humanitarian or strategic considerations were paramount and that the United States justifiably reacted to threats. The influential “realist” school, for example, stresses the role of the state, policy-making elites, power, and national interest. It essentially celebrates elite management and views U.S. policy as chiefly reactive to foreign events. More recently “postrevisionists”

⁵⁸ Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), pp. ix–xi, 1–8, 173.

⁵⁹ See, for example, Gabriel Kolko, *Main Currents in Modern American History* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), p. vii; William Appleman Williams, *America Confronts a Revolutionary World: 1775–1976* (New York: William Morrow, 1976), p. 11; Gettleman, “Against Cartesianism,” p. 139. For a more nuanced view see Ernest May, *“Lessons” of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973).

⁶⁰ See, for example, Fulbright, *Arrogance of Power*; Francis Jennings, *The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975); Loren Baritz, *Backfire: A History of How American Culture Led Us into Vietnam and Made Us Fight the Way We Did* (New York: Ballantine, 1985); Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (New York: Vintage, 1973).

⁶¹ William Appleman Williams, “Rise of an American World Power Complex,” in *Struggle Against History: United States Foreign Policy in an Age of Revolution*, ed. Neil Houghton (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), p. 1.

have combined elements of “revisionism” and “realism,” emphasizing the state and geopolitical strategic factors, but also conceding an imperialistic thrust. Indeed, there is a recent general trend to incorporate imperialism as an explanatory framework.⁶²

Still, even within the various schools there are many competing analytical models. For example, adherents of “corporatism” describe a U.S. system characterized by particular organizational forms, a related ideology, and consequent patterns of public policy.⁶³ Critics accuse the Williams-inspired “revisionists” of monocausal explanations (economic motives), although many do in fact postulate a mix of economic and ideological considerations, as well as the countervailing demands of domestic and global conditions.⁶⁴ My analysis generally follows that of the “revisionists” and some of the other historians of U.S. foreign relations whose perspective is more or less congruent with them.⁶⁵

In this view, Manifest Destiny to settle the continent at the expense of local peoples colonized the Native Americans, Mexicans, and others deemed less worthy than white Americans. This social Darwinism, even racism, afflicted many presidents and prompted Americans to see themselves as carriers of technological civilization, a crusade that justified forceful policies. It is no accident, then, that in Vietnam many soldiers referred to districts controlled by the National Liberation Front as “Indian Country,” that is, a dangerous place occupied by barbaric peoples.⁶⁶ Mani-

⁶² For an excellent discussion of this trend, as well as the limitations and strengths of the argument, see Edward P. Crapol, “Coming to Terms with Empire: The Historiography of Late Nineteenth-Century American Foreign Relations,” *Diplomatic History* 16 (1992): 573–97. See also Emily Rosenberg, “‘The Empire’ Strikes Back,” *Reviews in American History*, 16 December 1988, pp. 585–91; Robin Winks, “The American Struggle with ‘Imperialism’: How Words Frighten,” in *The American Identity: Fusion and Fragmentation*, ed. Rob Kroes (Amsterdam, 1980), pp. 143–77.

⁶³ See, for example, Michael J. Hogan, “Corporatism,” in *Explaining American Foreign Relations*, ed. Hogan and Paterson, pp. 226–36.

⁶⁴ See, for example, Thomas McCormick, *China Market: America’s Quest for Informal Empire, 1893–1901* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1967), pp. 9–10; and McCormick, *America’s Half-Century: United States Foreign Policy in the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

⁶⁵ In particular I was influenced by the writings of Lloyd Gardner, Walter LaFeber, Thomas McCormick, Stephen Ambrose, Richard Barnet, Bruce Cumings, Robert Daliek, Michael Hunt, Thomas Paterson, Emily Rosenberg, and Richard Van Alstyne.

⁶⁶ See, for example, Richard Drinnon, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire-Building* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980); Ronald Takaki, *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New

fest Destiny was soon translated into informal empire abroad, exemplified in the Monroe Doctrine (the "manifesto of the American Empire," according to Williams);⁶⁷ the colonization of the Philippines as a consequence of the Spanish-American War; and the persistent interventions in, and neocolonial influence over, many Latin American countries.

U.S. missionaries, traders, and gunboats had long been active in China, while American warships had even been involved in occasional small-scale conflicts in Southeast Asia, including Vietnam, during the nineteenth century.⁶⁸ These actions exemplified a persistent pattern of "gunboat diplomacy."⁶⁹ Theodore Roosevelt first propounded the view of America as a hemispheric "policeman," and the role of gunboat diplomacy soon extended worldwide.⁷⁰ With the Spanish-American War, the United States gained a colonial and neocolonial toehold in the Caribbean and also began to take an even more active role in Asian affairs. The counterrevolutionary strain in American ideology led to brief, ultimately unsuccessful military interventions against revolutionary forces in Russia and Mexico, not to mention a long history of military occupations in Central American countries, such as Nicaragua and Haiti.

The U.S. intervention in the Philippine insurrection against Spain in 1898 constituted the first of four ground wars the United States fought in Asia over the next seven decades. The decision by the United States to stay on after helping defeat the Spanish colonizers required the suppression at great loss of life of what many believe to have been an authentic social revolution against colonialism. It proved a brutal affair that reflected little credit on the Americans and their pretensions. President McKinley's rationale

York: Knopf, 1979); Michael Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, the Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Walter L. Williams, "United States Indian Policy and the Debate over Philippine Annexation: Implications for the Origins of American Imperialism," *Journal of American History* 66 (1980): 810-12.

⁶⁷ William Appleman Williams, *The Contours of American History* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1966), p. 215.

⁶⁸ On these episodes see James W. Gould, "American Imperialism in Southeast Asia before 1898," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 3 (1972): 306-14; Ronald Spector, "The American Image of Southeast Asia, 1790-1856: A Preliminary Assessment," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 3 (1972): 299-305.

⁶⁹ See Fairbank, *The United States and China*, p. 6.

⁷⁰ Gary Nash et. al., *The American People: Creating a Nation and a Society*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1990), p. 696.

for the conflict reflected the myths of Manifest Destiny and social Darwinism in a particularly virulent form: "It is our duty to uplift and civilize and Christianize and by God's Will do our very best by them [the Filipinos]." ⁷¹ Such sentiments completely ignored Filipino realities and achievements. The racism of many U.S. soldiers, who called the Filipinos "gooks," and the terrorist tactics often employed in "pacification" were both reflected decades later in Vietnam. ⁷²

Indeed, the American-Philippine War bears striking resemblance to the later American-Vietnamese War. Both involved U.S. efforts to repress revolution, and heavy casualties were incurred on both sides. David Steinberg believes that the valor of the rebel soldiers, the active participation of many peasants, and the commitment of many Filipinos to the cause of national independence "made this struggle one of the first wars of national liberation." ⁷³ The elusive nationalists lived off the land and practiced a harassing guerrilla warfare that confounded and demoralized the U.S. soldiers. In Pampanga province, notes John Larkin, the Americans controlled the towns and the guerrillas the countryside; the people gave public allegiance to the Americans but secretly aided the rebels. ⁷⁴

As with the Vietnamese revolutionaries, it is easy to overromanticize the Filipino guerrillas, who were deeply divided along sociocultural and ideological lines. Philippine nationalist historians have glorified a revolt of the lower-class masses against exploitation and imperialism, while some recent scholarship asserts that the elite rather than the peasantry provided the main support for the revolutionary forces. ⁷⁵ In any case, with the revolution crushed, the Philippines became the place where the United States came closest to enjoying free rein to do whatever it

⁷¹ Quoted in David J. Steinberg et. al., *In Search of Southeast Asia: A Modern History*, 2nd ed. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), p. 274.

⁷² See Walter LaFeber, *The American Age: United States Foreign Policy at Home and Abroad since 1750* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), p. 202; Hess, *Vietnam and the United States*, p. 25.

⁷³ David Steinberg, *The Philippines: A Singular and Plural Place* (Boulder: Westview, 1982), p. 44.

⁷⁴ John Larkin, *The Pampangans: Colonial Society in a Philippine Province* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), p. 122.

⁷⁵ The nationalist argument is made in Teodoro Agoncillo, *The Revolt of the Masses: The Story of Bonifacio and the Katipunan* (Quezon City: University of Philippines, 1956). For an alternative view, see Glenn May, *Battle for Batangas: A Philippine Province at War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

wished with the lives of other people. And it compiled a mixed record as a colonial power over the "little brown brothers," practicing (often progressive) policies of "social engineering." Ultimately, however, the U.S. performance was flawed because the Americans coddled the collaborating elite while disregarding the appalling plight of the peasants, thus perpetuating a feudal oligarchy in power.⁷⁶

World War II constituted a very bitter experience but also a rallying cry for Americans, and it certainly helped shape their vision of the nature of world politics. It also involved the United States in its second Asian ground war, in Japan, China, and Southeast Asia. The war changed world political arrangements, removing the twin cancers of Nazism and Japanese militarism. The United States emerged much stronger and less devastated than any other combatant and clearly became the dominant world power. The United States could now assert and assume hegemony within the larger world-system, becoming "the global workshop and banker, umpire and teacher."⁷⁷ It could take the lead in protecting a global system in which it held the strongest cards. In 1941 Henry Luce declared that the twentieth century would be the "American Century," with the United States as a global model.⁷⁸ For several decades Luce's view did not seem unrealistic, and most Americans came to believe that they were indeed destined to lead the world. The United States, like the USSR, viewed the world through the prism of World War II experience, determined to ensure there would be no more Munichs.

The Cold War was the major influence on U.S. foreign policy during the post-World War II years, adding urgency to the traditional counterrevolutionary and interventionist tendencies. American leaders, correctly or incorrectly, believed the USSR to be pursuing global aggression, although they apparently had little firm evidence to substantiate that fear. Many scholars blame the Cold War on the Soviet determination to fill the power vacuum in Europe; Soviet behavior in the immediate postwar

⁷⁶ Stanley Karnow, *In Our Image: America's Empire in the Philippines* (New York: Random House, 1989), p. 198.

⁷⁷ McCormick, *America's Half-Century*, pp. 5, 33.

⁷⁸ Stephen Ambrose, *The Rise to Globalism: American Foreign Policy since 1950*, 5th ed. (New York: Penguin, 1988), p. xv; Donald E. White, "The 'American Century' in World History," *Journal of World History* 3 (1992): 105-27.

years required a firm response.⁷⁹ Other historians perceive an obsessive, perhaps even deliberately exaggerated or manipulated, fear of communism at home and abroad that aroused suspicion of even the most nationalist movement that might threaten the U.S. position.⁸⁰

Thomas Paterson concludes, “Americans embraced soothing simplicity rather than sophisticated analysis. They saw blacks and whites where grays abounded. . . . Americans reacted, the Soviets acted. Americans defended; the Soviets aggressed. . . . People swallowed it. Debate—the testing of assumptions—became shallow. Critics were isolated as enemies of the state, appeasers. Communist sympathizers, or just muddleheaded idealists.”⁸¹ Indeed, the increasing friction between the superpowers intensified the anticommunism deeply embedded in American culture. These passions combined during the 1940s and 1950s to produce an interventionist—to many observers, counterrevolutionary—foreign policy in the Third World. They also led to construction of a national security state at home, furthered by a ruthless “ends justify the means” ethos and almost paranoid fears. These attitudes were expressed in the top-secret report of 1950 known as NSC-68, which became one of the most pivotal documents in U.S. history.⁸²

In this context, the domino theory of a communist sweep through Southeast Asia and the perceived need to maintain military credibility soon provided the rationale for action. The rhetoric of the domino theory ultimately became irrational, as Lyndon Johnson warned that defeat in South Vietnam would bring communist threats to the beaches of California, and Richard Nixon contended that a Viet Cong victory would herald “the destruction

⁷⁹ See, for example, John Spanier, “American Foreign Policy since World War II,” in *America and the Origins of the Cold War*, ed. James V. Compton (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), pp. 24–35; John Lewis Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press), pp. 20–47.

⁸⁰ See, for example, Thomas Paterson, *American Foreign Policy: A History since 1900*, 3rd ed. (Lexington: D. C. Heath, 1991), pp. 463–65; William Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America since World War II*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 78.

⁸¹ Paterson, *American Foreign Policy since 1900*, pp. 463–65.

⁸² On NSC-68 see, for example, Ernest R. May, ed., *American Cold War Strategy: Interpreting NSC 68* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1993); McCormick, *America's Half-Century*, pp. 47, 97–98; LaFeber, *American Age*, pp. 479–82; Young, *Vietnam Wars*, pp. 25–28.

of free speech for all men for all time."⁸³ Many of these beliefs reflected a pervasive ethnocentrism as well as a misunderstanding of the world. As Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes once noted, "What America does best is understand itself; what it does worst is understand others."⁸⁴ Perhaps, as one journalist wrote, "the U.S. government should be prohibited from invading or bombing any nation that a majority of adult Americans cannot locate on a map."⁸⁵

Cold War fears and general ignorance soon led to a disdain for diplomacy and a preference for unilateral interventions, propelled by the concept of "counterinsurgency." Americans soon identified all social revolutions with communism and the machinations of the Soviets and Chinese.⁸⁶ The fear of communism in Asia was accelerated by the Chinese communist victory in China in 1949. The major early confrontation occurred in Korea in 1950, the third Asian land war. Just as the U.S. colonial experience in the Philippines offers lessons in understanding the later commitments in Vietnam, so does the U.S. participation in the Korean War, which had a similar moral ambiguity, with the allied South Korean government a parody of democratic aspirations. Most traditional analyses stress the Cold War environment that forced the United States, despite the reluctance of many officials, to counter North Korean aggression. Furthermore, the U.S. anticommunist mood made "losing Korea" unthinkable for President Truman.⁸⁷

But a growing "revisionist" historical literature attributes the

⁸³ The quotations are from L. S. Stavrianos, *Global Rift: The Third World Comes of Age* (New York: William Morrow, 1981), pp. 479–82; Young, *Vietnam Wars*, pp. 25–28.

⁸⁴ Quoted in *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 10 July 1986, p. 135.

⁸⁵ Neal Richman, quoted in *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 1 January 1987, p. 41.

⁸⁶ Most of the general studies of post-World War II U.S. intervention are by critics of U.S. policy. See, for example, Richard Barnet, *Intervention and Revolution: The United States and the Third World* (New York: Mentor, 1972); William Blum, *The CIA: A Forgotten History—U.S. Global Interventions since World War II* (London: Zed, 1986); Melvin Gurtov, *The United States against the Third World: Anti-nationalism and Intervention* (New York: Praeger, 1974); Gabriel Kolko, *Confronting the Third World: United States Foreign Policy, 1945–80* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988); Saul Landau, *The Dangerous Doctrine: National Security and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Boulder: Westview, 1988); John Prados, *Presidents' Secret Wars: CIA and Pentagon Covert Operations since World War II* (New York: William Morrow, 1986); Stavrianos, *Global Rift*.

⁸⁷ See, for example, Robert Daliek, *The American Style of Foreign Policy: Cultural Politics and Foreign Affairs* (New York: Knopf, 1983), pp. 180–81; Robert Ferrell, *American Diplomacy: The Twentieth Century* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988), p. 280.

conflict between North and South Korea chiefly to internal factors, including the illegitimacy of the conservative South Korean political leaders, who were basically installed and maintained by the United States. The “revisionists” also point to the substantial nationalist and leftist groups in the south; in the late 1940s there was popular rebellion and massive repression in the south.⁸⁸ South Korean politics in this period bears striking similarity to South Vietnamese politics during the Diem years. The South Korean leader Syngman Rhee resembled America’s chosen instrument in Vietnam, Diem: both were long expatriated, rigidly conservative Christians with a weak local political base who had dictatorial tendencies and a penchant for imprisoning or eliminating their many opponents. The ruthless, impatient, and ultimately foolhardy North Korean leader Kim Il-Sung, whose relations with South Korean leftists were poor, does not seem to have been the simple Soviet puppet portrayed by the Americans.⁸⁹

The precise origins of the Korean War remain a matter of heated debate among specialists; there are at least a half-dozen major theories and interpretations.⁹⁰ Bruce Cumings makes a cogent case that even the question of who started the war cannot be answered conclusively; he offers plausible scenarios attributing responsibility variously to unprovoked North Korean aggression (the U.S. view), a surprise South Korean invasion of the North (the North Korean view), and South Korean provocations forcing a major response from the North.⁹¹ The question of who started the war may be meaningless, since as in the American Civil War the broader issues ensured eventual conflict whatever the spark.⁹² One inclusive analysis postulates that the North

⁸⁸ The most important revisionist studies on Korea are by Bruce Cumings. His works include: *The Origins of the Korean War: Liberation and the Emergence of Separate Regimes, 1945–47* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); *The Origins of the Korean War: The Roaring of the Cataract, 1947–50* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990). See also Jon Halliday and Bruce Cumings, *Korea: The Unknown War* (New York: Pantheon, 1988); Frank Baldwin, ed., *Without Parallel: The American-Korean Relationship since 1945* (New York: Pantheon, 1974).

⁸⁹ See, for example, Halliday and Cumings, *Korea: The Unknown War: Peter Lowe, The Origins of the Korean War* (New York: Longman, 1986); John Merrill, *Korea: The Peninsular Origins of the War* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1989).

⁹⁰ For a survey see Merrill, *Korea*, pp. 13–54.

⁹¹ Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*, pp. 568–621.

⁹² Halliday and Cumings, *Korea: The Unknown War*, p. 74. See also Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*, pp. 771–72.

Koreans were the aggressors, but that Truman seized the opportunity to extend containment to Asia on the basis of dubious interpretations of an international communist conspiracy. Ironically, the simultaneous dramatic increase of U.S. aid to the French in Indochina, which ultimately led to the Vietnam War, was barely noticed.⁹³

As with Vietnam, Americans knew little about the complex history of Korea, and what began as a civil war soon became an international war with foreign intervention and heavy casualties on all sides.⁹⁴ The Korean War constituted a watershed for U.S. involvement in Asia, sanctifying Cold War verities. It facilitated the U.S. assumption of a global policeman role. As a U.S. general admitted in 1952, "Korea has been a blessing. There had to be a Korea either here or someplace in the world."⁹⁵ Predictably, the Americans stayed on to protect the South Korean regime. Protection included the permanent stationing of troops and massive military and economic aid, an indication of what a "victory" in Vietnam might have entailed. The bitter and ultimately inconclusive conflict (successful only as a "limited war") reinforced U.S. anticommunism and paranoia.

U.S. intervention in Latin America, reminiscent of the dubious claims of the Monroe Doctrine, also continued under the guise of anticommunism. The list of Latin American governments, some of them democratic, that were actively destabilized, overthrown, or replaced directly or indirectly by the United States is long and sobering: Guatemala (1954), Brazil (1963), Dominican Republic (1965), Chile (1973), Jamaica (1980), Grenada (1983), Panama (1989), Nicaragua (1990). Vietnam was hardly unique. "Destroying the village to save it" in Vietnam was closely related to what Secretary of State Henry Kissinger called "not standing by while Chile goes communist due to the unconcern of its own people."⁹⁶ The over-

⁹³ Steven Ambrose, "From Korea to Vietnam: The Failure of a Policy Rooted in Fear," in *Understanding the American Experience: Recent Interpretations*, ed. James Banner et al., 2 vols. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 2: 407-409.

⁹⁴ For a balanced Korean perspective on the origins and consequences of the conflict for Koreans, see Young Whan Kihl, *Politics and Policies in Divided Korea: Regimes in Conflict* (Boulder: Westview, 1984), pp. 39-41.

⁹⁵ Gen. Mark Van Vleet, quoted in Andrew Patner, *I. F. Stone: A Portrait* (New York: Anchor, 1988), p. 61.

⁹⁶ Quoted in James D. Cockcroft, *Neighbors in Turmoil: Latin America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), p. 456.

throw of the reformist Arbenz government in Guatemala, an operation led by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), undoubtedly provided a model for the long-covert operations throughout Indochina beginning in the mid-1950s. To critics, these activities reflected imperialism and a pronounced U.S. desire to shape the world to its own ends, regardless of the aspirations of peoples in the countries affected. Supporters, of course, viewed these actions as a stabilizing response to political realities that supported an overall strategic thrust in the world.

Indeed, virtually all American leaders, regardless of party, shared a militant anticommunism and conception of their country as the world's policeman, a self-appointed role. Realpolitik—the unilateralist U.S. drive to maintain a strategic balance of power with moral considerations secondary—remained the mainstream of thought in foreign policy from the 1940s through the 1980s. The construction of a national security state provided the justification and the means for such activities. Hence, the United States intervened repeatedly in Third World countries, using a mix of covert, proxy, and military forces along with economic activities that promoted continuing neocolonialism. For example, U.S. intervention in Vietnam began as a covert operation, first with support from the Office of Strategic Services for Ho in 1934, then with secret aid to the French effort and CIA sabotage in North Vietnam. By the late 1950s it had evolved into a proxy war with a growing number of U.S. “advisers” and major CIA activity, and by the mid-1960s it had finally escalated into a full-scale military commitment when the other strategies failed. The military commitment topped off at 550,000 U.S. troops in 1968.

In some cases the U.S. interventions meant reinforcing the power of corrupt, dictatorial, occasionally even tyrannical and genocidal regimes allied to the United States, such as those of General Mobutu Sese Seko in Zaire, Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines, General Augusto Pinochet in Chile, or Manuel Noriega in Panama. Such figures are contemporary reincarnations of the Central American despots of the 1930s, of whom President Franklin Roosevelt said, “They may be SOB’s but they are our SOB’s.”⁹⁷ During the 1950s and 1960s the United States also

⁹⁷ Quoted in Lester Langley, *Central America: The Real Stakes* (New York: Dorsey, 1985), p. 23.

became more deeply involved in Southeast Asia, countering leftist insurgency in the Philippines, fomenting regional secession movements or anticommunist crackdowns in Indonesia, and sponsoring surrogate military forces in Burma.⁹⁸

Many scholars contend that the U.S. government rather than the Vietnamese communists caused the American-Vietnamese War.⁹⁹ They argue that the progressive U.S. intervention in Vietnam was but a logical extension of foreign policy patterns established decades before. Perhaps, as Williams contended, the experience of the American-Vietnamese War can basically be seen as each country meeting its own long history head-on. From this perspective, the American-Vietnamese War was not an aberration but rather the most obvious, and ultimately the most frustrating, of persistent patterns of intervention designed to shape the world to U.S. needs. The deliberate decision to progressively intervene in Indochinese affairs resulted from a combination of factors, including the broad political and economic thrust of post-World War II foreign policy that might be characterized as imperialistic, along with a profound ignorance and even disdain of Vietnamese realities and hence an underappreciation of the challenge.

The decision to intervene ignored or misread the history of the region. Several historians point to America's abysmal ignorance of Vietnam, including long-range cultural and historical factors.¹⁰⁰ One critic believes that no top U.S. officials could have

⁹⁸ On these activities see Blum, *CIA*, pp. 18–19, 37–43, 108–12, 217–22; Cecil B. Curry, *Edward Lansdale: The Unquiet American* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988), pp. 78–133; Kolko, *Confronting the Third World*, pp. 175–85; Alfred McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin: CIA Complicity in the Global Drug Trade* (New York: Lawrence Hill, 1991), pp. 162–79, 343, 374; Prados, *Presidents' Secret Wars*, pp. 73–77, 128–48; Peter Dale Scott, "The United States and the Overthrow of Sukarno, 1965–67," *Pacific Affairs* 58 (1985): 239–64; D. Michael Shafer, *Deadly Paradigms: The Failure of U.S. Counterinsurgency Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 205–39; "Rustle of Ghosts," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 2 August 1990, 18–19.

⁹⁹ See, for example, Larry Cable, *Conflict of Myths: The Development of Counterinsurgency Doctrine and the Vietnam War* (New York: New York University Press, 1988), p. 225; Francis Fitzgerald, "How Does America Avoid Future Vietnams?" in *Vietnam Reconsidered*, ed. Salisbury, p. 300; Short, *Origins of the Vietnam War*, p. 330.

¹⁰⁰ See Duiker, *Rise of Nationalism*, p. 13; George Herring, "The Vietnam Analogy and the 'Lessons' of History," in *The Vietnam War as History*, ed. Elizabeth Jane Errington and B. J. C. McKercher (New York: Praeger, 1990), p. 12; Ngo Vinh Long, "The War and the Vietnamese," in *Vietnam Reconsidered*, ed. Salisbury, pp. 228, 234; Joseph Buttinger, *Vietnam: The Unforgettable Tragedy* (New York: Horizon, 1977), p. 17; Jamison, *Understanding Vietnam*, pp. ix–x; Dennis E. Showalter and John G. Albert, "Introduction," in *An American Dilemma: Vietnam, 1964–1973*,

passed a simple exam on the history of Vietnam.¹⁰¹ Stanley Karnow contends that Americans can never really understand Southeast Asians. He concludes, "I am more convinced than before that the United States could never have won a conflict in this alien land, where the enemy was tenacious, dedicated, and everywhere. . . . In short, the Vietnam conflict was waged in an environment too complex and mysterious for Americans to comprehend."¹⁰² It does seem probable that, seeing communism rather than nationalism, the United States applied military solutions to a problem that was essentially cultural and political, and hence precipitated "the wrong war in the wrong place at the wrong time for the wrong reason."¹⁰³

Geopolitical and strategic factors predicated by the Cold War and defined by realpolitik were also at work. George Kahin has documented how U.S. policies toward Vietnam were framed significantly by strategic considerations conditioned by anticommunism; in his view, Vietnam was only a pawn in a deadly serious, larger global game that had as much to do with European as with Asian considerations. These concerns included providing reconstructed France and Japan with guaranteed markets to stabilize the world economy and block domestic communists, a move that would help resolve some U.S. economic problems as well.¹⁰⁴ The overall health of its allies required the United States to act as what McCormick terms a "surrogate for other core countries" by stabilizing a region critical to their economic well-being and integrating it more firmly into the global system.¹⁰⁵

Many historians believe that the United States committed itself to Vietnam to prove that wars of national liberation (Marxist-led revolutions) do not work. The historical myopia and ethnocentrism caused American leaders to construct mental models

ed. Dennis E. Showalter and John G. Albert (Chicago: Imprint Publications, 1993), pp. 1-11.

¹⁰¹ Daniel Ellsberg, *Papers on the War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), p. 28.

¹⁰² Quoted in David L. Bender, *The Vietnam War: Opposing Viewpoints* (St. Paul: Greenhaven, 1984), p. 73.

¹⁰³ Olson and Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell*, p. 283.

¹⁰⁴ Kahin, *Intervention*, pp. 3-65. See also Thomas McCormick, "Introduction," in *America in Vietnam: A Documentary History*, ed. William Appleman Williams et al. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985), pp. 52-54; Rotter, *Path to Vietnam*.

¹⁰⁵ McCormick, "Introduction," in *America in Vietnam*, ed. Williams et al., pp. 52, 54.

divorced from Southeast Asian realities and to invent myths to justify those models.¹⁰⁶ Consequently, America's missionary sense of destiny and desire to spread its model to the world came to grief in a country with valid historical reasons for mistrusting foreign powers on "civilizing" missions. President Johnson said in 1965 that "I want to leave the footprints of America there [Indochina]. . . . We can turn the Mekong into a Tennessee Valley."¹⁰⁷ In speaking thus, he was only reflecting a naive sense of mission and possibilities with deep historical roots.

The Vietnamese—as well as the Cambodians and Laotians, about whom Americans knew even less—were commonly seen as pawns to be manipulated for policy goals decided in Washington. Their country was viewed as a laboratory in which to test American political theories, military strategies, and technologies. These attitudes and the policies based on them often ignored the human consequences for the peoples of "Indochina." Americans had all the answers, and the Vietnamese needed only to listen to them to solve their problems. Americans would decide who governed in Saigon, although most of the men selected proved to be venal, incompetent, corrupt, and all too often involved with the drug trade.¹⁰⁸ It still seems astonishing in hindsight how most Americans involved never understood that the attempt to guide or control the development of the Saigon government and South Vietnamese society might be perceived by others as imperialism or neocolonialism, especially in a country drenched in nationalist and perhaps, for the unsophisticated, even xenophobic traditions.

The policies pursued in Vietnam entailed the subordination and hence compromising of allied Vietnamese leaders; overreliance on purely military measures, especially air power; manipulation of Vietnamese realities to U.S. ends; infliction of appalling devastation through ecocide and enormous casualties through a pattern of measuring success by the "body count"; fluctuating and half-hearted attempts at "pacification" through "hearts and minds" programs of civic action; and failure to determine what "victory" would really require. Such policies could not ulti-

¹⁰⁶ Ambrose, *Rise to Globalism*, p. xv; Bernard Fall, *Last Reflections on a War* (New York: Schocken, 1972), p. 225; Neil Sheehan et. al., *The Pentagon Papers* (New York: Bantam, 1971), p. 255; Stavrianos, *Global Rift*, p. 726.

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in Paterson, *American Foreign Policy*, p. 533.

¹⁰⁸ Harrison, *Endless War*, p. 245; Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, pp. 386, 400, 441; McCoy, *Politics of Heroin*, pp. 203–22; Turley, *Second Indochina War*, p. 52.

mately, perhaps even conceivably, defeat a nontechnological enemy rooted in the villages and exemplifying nationalist aspirations, however cynically those sentiments might have been manipulated by the communists. To borrow General Maxwell Taylor's apt retrospective words, the Americans, misreading or disregarding history, never understood the Vietnamese (on either side) or themselves, and hence misjudged the efficacy of U.S. solutions.¹⁰⁹

The debate over why the United States failed and the Vietnamese communists achieved victory remains heated. Did the war end as it did because the United States failed to apply sufficient power or employed its power improperly, as many conservatives believe? Because of domestic dissent? Or, as George Herring asks, "was the war decided more by conditions in Vietnam than by what the United States did or did not do? Were these conditions in fact so intractable as to make the war unwinnable as far as the United States was concerned?"¹¹⁰ History suggests an affirmative answer to Herring's questions. The result was tragic for both Americans and Indochinese. The costly war shattered the post-World War II consensus on foreign policy and deeply divided American society while undermining the U.S. reputation in the world and arguably prolonging the Cold War. A careful reading of modern Vietnamese history suggests the inevitability of U.S. defeat and ultimate communist triumph. The Americans misanalyzed the dynamics of the struggle and were unable to respond adequately to the political nature of the conflict, instead laboring unsuccessfully to turn the conflict into their own kind of war, which meant the physical rather than political attrition of the enemy.¹¹¹

Almost two decades after U.S. troops pulled out of Indochina, Americans are still haunted by a divisive conflict that fragmented the political consensus and generated unprecedented domestic sociopolitical turbulence in the 1960s. The war left 58,000 Americans dead and 519,000 physically disabled; 3 million veterans, many of them troubled; and nearly 2 million Indochinese refugees, half of whom now live in the United States. Politicians

¹⁰⁹ Quoted in Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, p. 19.

¹¹⁰ "America and Vietnam: The Debate Continues," *American Historical Review* 92 (1987): 351. For a general summary of the competing interpretations, see Paul Joseph, *Cracks in the Empire: State Politics in the Vietnam War* (Boston: South End, 1981), pp. 13–41.

¹¹¹ See Brown, *War and Aftermath*, p. 210.

remain wary of the war's "lessons," and many people seem obsessed with either perpetuating or overcoming the "Vietnam syndrome." Service in Vietnam or draft avoidance has become a sensitive issue for political candidates. Then there is the battered U.S. economy, suffering in part as a result of attempting to fund both "guns and butter" in the Vietnam years, maintaining social programs while fighting a war that cost \$250 billion directly and ultimately perhaps as much as \$1 trillion.¹¹²

Have the "lessons" of Vietnam been learned? Perhaps, and perhaps not. As Khanh argues, most American retrospectives and postmortems on the war tend to perpetuate an ethnocentric approach.¹¹³ Walter LaFeber contends that the U.S. defeat had much less to do with the use or lack of military power than with the failure to "understand their own history, their own two-century-old revolution, and their own long relationship with Asia."¹¹⁴ The world is rapidly changing, and interventions are costly; recent events suggest that Americans may have to accept limits to their power and learn to accommodate themselves to a multipolar world. Given the toxin-drenched rubble and the shattered societies left by the United States in Indochina, the essential lesson may be the need for Americans to accept responsibility for their actions, as war critic Gloria Emerson points out:

It's very hard for the Vietnamese now. They're very poor, and the cruel thing is that we seem to rejoice in it. Before we went to Vietnam, the country had not done us any harm at all. . . . I'm sorry that the U.S., which rebuilt Germany and Japan with such swiftness sees fit to prevent powdered milk from getting to malnourished children. But I guess we will have our revenge. We will rewrite the war, we will win it and we will make sure that they starve. Do you know what I'd do? I'd chain all of them [the politicians] to that haunting Vietnam memorial and have them read—slowly—every name aloud. Then the war would end for me. Take all of them, all of them who gave us the war—all of them who . . . began to doubt that the war could be won and still kept it going. Chain them to the memorial for several days, if need be, and have

¹¹² See *Indochina Newsletter*, November–December 1982, p. 12; *The World Almanac of the Vietnam War*, ed. John S. Bowman (New York: World Almanac, 1985), p. 358.

¹¹³ Khanh, "The Making and Unmaking of Free Vietnam," p. 474.

¹¹⁴ Walter LaFeber, "Introduction," in *America in Vietnam*, ed. Williams et al., p. 233.

them read each name aloud. Wouldn't that be something? Justice at last.¹¹⁵

THE WAR IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

From a global perspective, the Vietnamese revolutionary war was part of a broader twentieth-century thrust for radical change within societies, and in the structure of the global system. To understand modern revolutions, the global context needs to be considered, for it helped to elicit counterrevolutionary activity in general and most prominently the intervention of the United States in Vietnam that caused the American-Vietnamese War. In the case of anticolonial revolutions, clearly the need to end subjugation to, and exploitation by, a colonial power provided a powerful impetus for drastic action. As Gerard Chaliand contends, little can be understood about Third World revolutionary movements without recalling that in the early decades of this century Europeans dominated, directly or indirectly, all of Africa and most of Asia. The Europeans assumed that they stood atop a hierarchy of civilizations that needed Western guidance—the French concept of the “civilizing mission” in Indochina or the British notion of the “white man’s burden.”¹¹⁶

The response was nationalism, which arguably became the most potent political force in the world during the twentieth century and constituted a major feature of the social revolutions that erupted. In a broad sense, nationalism was a manifestation of group feeling resulting from a process by which people became gradually conscious of themselves as possessing a separate national identity and sought their own “nation” or “nation-state.” But it often became a combustible force, as one scholar argues: “Nationalism is like fire. When fire stays in the fireplace, it warms the room. When it gets in the living room, it burns down the house.”¹¹⁷ Nationalism thus offered both positive and negative features, an ideology for nation building and a buttress for vio-

¹¹⁵ Quoted in *Newsweek*, 15 April 1985, p. 39.

¹¹⁶ Gerard Chaliand, “Historical Precedents,” in *Revolution and Political Change in the Third World*, ed. Barry M. Schultz and Robert O. Slater (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1990), p. 20; *Revolution in the Third World: Currents and Conflicts in Asia, Africa, and Latin America*, rev. ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989), pp. 207–208.

¹¹⁷ Marshall Windmiller, “Justice, Law and a Few Other Strong Words for the Left,” in *These Times*, 10–23 July 1991, p. 16.

lent xenophobia. Counterrevolutionary interventionism inevitably brought the United States into conflict with this mighty force.

Colonialism also led to a situation of economic dependence, in which most of the colonies developed economic "monocultures" that locked them into the almost exclusive production and export of a few primary commodities, such as rubber, rice, and tungsten from Vietnam. This made later economic diversification difficult. To cover the costs of colonization the colonial powers also needed to use a variety of methods, some of them coercive, to appropriate economic surplus in a process of unequal exchange. This involved spreading capitalist processes and enhancing sources of state revenue, but both proved disruptive and laid the groundwork for revolutionary responses in countries like Vietnam.¹¹⁸ Decolonization did not remove the revolutionary thrust, because the economic structure of the Third World did not change dramatically. Continuing "neo-imperialism" or neocolonialism remained a reality for many countries. Hence, there has been a sporadic "revolt of the periphery" against the political and economic power of the "core" nations anxious to preserve their stake in the periphery—an uncoordinated "antisystemic" thrust against the entrenched power structure of the global system.¹¹⁹

By the late 1940s a larger strategic chess game was in progress with the emergence of the Cold War, and the superpowers showed little concern for the rights of people in the Third World. The U.S. policy of containment became globalized with the Korean War; a "zero sum" mentality required the United States to counter or block any perceived Soviet gain. The revolutionary thrust inevitably drew in the United States in its self-appointed role of world policeman. Some historians argue that during the past five centuries there have been only three true hegemonic powers with the combined economic, political, and military power to dominate even other powerful societies: the Dutch in the seventeenth century, the British in the nineteenth, and the United States in the mid-twentieth.¹²⁰

In this view, U.S. leaders were anxious to preserve the status

¹¹⁸ See Luong, *Revolution in the Village*, pp. 11–19, 220–32.

¹¹⁹ See Daniel Chirot, *Social Change in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harcourt. Brace, Jovanovich, 1977), pp. 166–81; Giovanni Arrighi et. al., *Antisystemic Movements* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 1.

¹²⁰ Immanuel Wallerstein, *Report on an Intellectual Project: The Fernand Braudel Center, 1976–91* (Binghamton: Fernand Braudel Center, 1991), p. 5.

quo in the world-system, committed to the expansion of U.S. economic activities, and concerned that the Soviet position not be improved in the Cold War. For these reasons they mounted an aggressive campaign of counterrevolution. Many observers believe that this campaign was costly for both Americans and other peoples and that it compromised the generous instincts historically associated with the United States. They also believe that it essentially put the United States on the side of those opposing economic development and substantial social reform that might mitigate the misery of the people. Once a liberalizing influence in the world, the United States became, in the eyes of critics, a force for conservatism and landlord protection.¹²¹

The Vietnamese revolution and consequent war with the United States challenged this pattern, for a small and underdeveloped but committed society eventually defeated the most powerful nation on earth. The war inevitably had spillover effects; the domestic and international politics, not to mention the mutual relationships, of both China and the USSR were influenced by their policies toward Vietnam. For example, disagreements about Vietnam among Chinese leaders may have helped precipitate the tumultuous Cultural Revolution of the late 1960s. Furthermore, U.S. activities may have unintentionally and ironically pushed Vietnam back into the Chinese political and cultural orbit, to the advantage of China, reversing several decades of movement by the Vietnamese revolutionaries away from China. Such a development made all the more realistic the fears of U.S. presidents that an invasion of North Vietnam might well precipitate a Korea-like Chinese invasion.¹²² For the Vietnamese, victory affirmed the legitimacy and efficacy of national liberation and the continuing

121 See, for example, Robert Heilbroner, "Must America Be Counterrevolutionary?" in *The Developing Nations: What Path to Modernisation*, ed. Frank Tachau (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), pp. 216–17; Jeffrey M. Paige, *Agrarian Revolution: Social Movements and Export Agriculture in the Underdeveloped World* (New York: Free Press, 1975), p. xii.

122 Jay Tao, "Mao's World Outlook: Vietnam and the Revolution in China," *Asian Survey* 8 (1986): 416–32; Jay Taylor, *China and Southeast Asia: Peking's Relationship with Revolutionary Movements* (New York: Praeger, 1976), pp. 1–72; Donald S. Zagoria, *Vietnam Triangle: Moscow, Peking, Hanoi* (New York: Pegasus, 1967), p. 63; Brown, *War and Aftermath*, p. 251; Keith W. Taylor, "China and Vietnam: Looking for a New Version of an Old Relationship," in *The Vietnam War: Vietnamese and American Perspectives*, ed. Jayne S. Werner and Luu Doan Huynh (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1993), pp. 271–85; John W. Garver, "China and the Revisionist Thesis," in *Looking Back on the Vietnam War: A 1990s Perspective on the Decisions, Combat and Legacies*, ed. William Head and Lawrence E. Grinter (Westport: Praeger, 1993), pp. 105–118.

relevance of anticolonial nationalism. The world could not help but notice the blow at superpower omnipotence. To many observers 1975 marked the beginning of the gradual decline of the United States as a superpower, the diminishing of the "American century," and the ratification of a multipolar world.

Should Americans have feared revolutions? Revolution is a controversial and elusive topic, woefully misunderstood, and a powerful cultural myth that may be abhorred or worshiped. Many historians have attempted to define the term. Among the definitions are W. F. Wertheim's concept of "cataclysmic change"; James DeFronzo's notion of an organized social movement to drastically alter or replace existing institutions; Theda Skocpol's thesis of rapid, basic transformation of state and class structures; and John Dunn's idea of a massive, rapid, and violent social change offering new values.¹²³ Although they vary in nuance and substance, most definitions suggest the transformational and purposeful role of revolution, as well as its identification with violence or the threat of violence. Revolution is also a process involving dynamic, long-term patterns of change.¹²⁴ Revolutions play a major role in world history, constituting what Jack Goldstone terms "significant turning points," destroying in their wake much that is good as well as much that is bad.¹²⁵ Revolutionary approaches to change, involving purposeful violence to overthrow existing political and/or socioeconomic systems, have been common for several centuries. But the twentieth century has been the bloodiest, most turbulent, and most revolutionary age, in which revolutions have greatly affected world power relationships. As Robert Blackey and Clifford Paynton argue, "The history of revolution is, in fact, the history of the world in change."¹²⁶

¹²³ W. F. Wertheim, *Evolution and Revolution: The Rising Waves of Emancipation* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p. 9; James DeFronzo, *Revolutions and Revolutionary Movements* (Boulder: Westview, 1991), p. 8; Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 4; Dunn, *Modern Revolutions*, p. 12.

¹²⁴ Thomas Greene, *Comparative Revolutionary Movements: Search for Theory and Justice*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1984), pp. 15–16; William Rosenberg and Marilyn Young, *Transforming Russia and China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. viii–ix, 333.

¹²⁵ Jack Goldstone, *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 443.

¹²⁶ Robert Blackey and Clifford Paynton, *Revolution and the Revolutionary Ideal* (Cambridge: Schenkman, 1976), p. 2.

The setting for revolutionary activity moved from the industrializing West to the Third World as the drive to end colonialism and neocolonialism intensified revolutionary turmoil. In most cases this involved the peasantry, increasingly immiserated and marginalized by commercialization and other byproducts of the evolution of the world economy. Many of the major revolutions of the twentieth century, including those in Vietnam, China, and Cuba, have been aptly characterized as peasant revolutions.¹²⁷ Revolutionary intellectuals, often inspired by a Marxist vision, helped to mobilize this unhappiness. Nationalism also provided a powerful framework for both Marxists and non-Marxists. The more radical sought a new social order free of Western political and economic domination, including long-term political mobilization of the population and the creation of a new mentality.

There is much romanticism about revolution, exemplified in the works of writers like Frantz Fanon.¹²⁸ Indeed, the question of whether revolutions ultimately constitute positive or negative developments, whether they meet or can even hope to meet their stated goals, has aroused much heated debate. Most of the successful revolutionaries have failed in many respects to create a more democratic society; rather, despotism, bureaucratization, and inefficiency have been characteristic. The human costs of revolution are high. But some revolutions manage to generate more participatory systems than the despotic regimes they replaced. Examples include Nicaragua under the Sandinistas or Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe. Many have been able to raise living standards somewhat for the mass of the once-exploited population; for example, from the 1950s through 1980s the Cuban people, whatever their other problems, generally enjoyed the highest standard of material life in Latin America, as measured by longevity, health care, and education.¹²⁹

An assessment of failure must be balanced with a consideration of the benefits. Despite the human toll, repression, and economic disarray, revolutions also redress many wrongs. Barrington Moore suggests that the costs of revolution must be

¹²⁷ The classic account remains Eric Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).

¹²⁸ See, for example, Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove, 1963).

¹²⁹ Thomas Skidmore and Peter Smith, *Modern Latin America*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 273–74; Stavrianos, *Global Rift*, pp. 744–55.

weighed against the costs of going without.¹³⁰ Would the South Vietnamese have been better off under the French or Bao Dai or Diem or the various Saigon generals, buttressed by a massive, semipermanent U.S. military occupation, than they were under the communists? Would most Nicaraguans have preferred the venal dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza to rule by the Sandinistas? Did the majority of Cubans enjoy a more satisfactory life under Fulgencio Batista than Fidel Castro? Did most people in Mozambique prosper under the Portuguese, or in Zimbabwe (Southern Rhodesia) under the racist white minority regime? Considering that some sort of liberal or social democratic system or mass movement was not available as a realistic alternative, many historians would view the social revolutionary states as an improvement in many, though not all respects.

Vietnam has been a typical member of the Third World in its history of colonialism, less industrialized and inadequately diversified economy, and position of relative political and economical weakness with respect to the major industrial powers. However, it also possesses many unique historical experiences and societal patterns. The Vietnamese revolution was deeply embedded in the country's development and dynamics even though it exhibited many features in common with other revolutions. Within the context of twentieth-century revolutions in the Third World, Vietnam appears to follow a typical trajectory: anticolonial nationalism; peasant immiseration and disequilibrium under colonialism; dysfunctional sociopolitical systems; radicalized revolutionary elites of mostly middle-class and intellectual backgrounds; an ideology mixing universalistic (Marxist) and indigenous features; a charismatic and pragmatic leader (Ho); revolutionary armies of mostly peasant origin; wartime disruption; mass social mobilization; guerrilla warfare as the chief military tactic; multifaceted strategies and appeals; promise of socioeconomic transformation (especially agrarian restructuring); intervention of counterrevolutionary forces (France and the United States); centralization, enhanced state authority, and socioeconomic reform after the acquisition of power, accompanied by economic hardship and exodus of (mostly middle-class) refugees.

What distinguished the Vietnam case was the excessive degree of nationalism so strongly rooted in historical experience and

¹³⁰ Barrington Moore, *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon, 1966), p. 505.

the determination and ruthlessness of the counterrevolutionary forces. Eventually most revolutionary regimes become more moderate and pragmatic in order to adjust to internal and international realities, as Vietnam is currently doing with programs of economic liberalization. Entropy inevitably sets in. Castro claimed that a revolution is like a bicycle: you have to keep pedaling or you fall off. But it is hard to sustain the energy for permanent pedaling. Thus, it is premature to conclude that revolutions cannot serve any positive purpose; the evidence suggests the contrary, which is why revolutionary appeals do find an audience among some sections of the population in many disequibrated, malfunctioning, inequitable societies, especially in the Third World.

The American-Vietnamese War constituted the major attempt in modern history by the United States to counter a revolutionary thrust militarily. In Herring's words, Vietnam marked the end of an era in world history and of U.S. foreign policy.¹³¹ Arnold Toynbee contended that the defeat of the U.S. military in Vietnam represents a historical milestone as important as the defeat of the Spanish Armada.¹³² This is surely an overstatement, for the rapid dissolution of the Soviet empire in the late 1980s temporarily at least left the United States as the dominant remaining power. Furthermore, not all Americans or all U.S. leaders recognized the growing limitations on U.S. power. Consequently, after 1975 the confrontation between the United States and revolutionary forces continued, though on a scale of force much reduced from that employed in Vietnam. Counterinsurgency was transformed into "low-intensity conflict," and the Nixon, Ford, and Reagan administrations labored hard, with only modest success, to overcome the "Vietnam syndrome" reluctance of the U.S. public and Congress to commit troops, while engaging in various covert and low-level military activities against leftist Third World governments or movements in Central America and Africa.

But the conditions that prompted this revolutionary thrust have not changed significantly for many Third World societies; deepening poverty, overpopulation, collapsing ecosystems, ineffective or discredited governments, and relative powerlessness in the global order remain common. Revolutionary uprisings will no

¹³¹ Herring, *America's Longest War*, p. 281.

¹³² Quoted in Stewart McBride, "Vietnam Revisited: America's Longest War Still Goes On," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 31 March 1982, p. B3.

doubt continue, although the ideological configuration of those movements may differ from those of the past. Most of the Marxist-Leninist regimes installed by revolution may face, or have already faced, challenges to their legitimacy, just as the communist regimes installed by Soviet military force in eastern Europe have tumbled in what some commentators see as revolutions, others as counterrevolutions, and still others as evolutionary changes accomplished without much violence.¹³³ The collapse of the USSR and the diminishing appeal of Marxism-Leninism may generate new revolutionary ideologies; revivalist or militant Islam has already demonstrated its potency in some societies, most especially in Iran. Still some of the existing revolutionary movements threatening conservative governments profess radical, Marxist-inspired visions. Indeed, the ruthless Shining Path guerrillas in Peru claim to have inherited the mantle of both Maoist revolution and indigenous resentment of the white elite. On the other hand, the New People's Army in the Philippines follows a more eclectic and nationalist path in seeking to turn increasing socioeconomic distress to its advantage.

If the United States continues to assert its right to reshape, even directly confront, those movements, as it has for decades, then perhaps there will be more Vietnams. President Bush proclaimed that, with the Gulf War victory, the United States had finally "licked the Vietnam Syndrome," and his administration developed preliminary plans to police the "New World Order" with the removal of the Soviet threat. To critics this meant becoming both a "global schoolmaster" and a militarized "911 service."¹³⁴ But Bush lost his 1992 reelection bid, chiefly because of burgeoning domestic problems. By the mid-1990s, the haphazard military commitment to stabilize Somalia and the reluctance to

¹³³ See, for example, DeFronzo, *Revolutions and Revolutionary Movements*, pp. 1-54; Daniel Chirot, ed., *The Crisis of Leninism and the Decline of the Left: The Revolutions of 1989* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991); Jaroslav Piekalkiewicz, "Poland: Nonviolent Revolution in a Socialist State," in *Revolutions of the Late Twentieth Century*, ed. Jack A. Goldstone et al. (Boulder: Westview, 1991), pp. 136-61; James Petras, "Eastern Europe: Restoration and Crisis," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 21 (1991): 301-26; Robert Darnton, "Did East Germany Have a Revolution?", *New York Times*, 3 December 1990.

¹³⁴ Bush is quoted in David Moberg, "Vietnam Syndrome Only in Remission," *In These Times*, 20-26 March 1991, p. 13. On the Pentagon's plans, see *New York Times*, 8 and 10 March 1992; Susumu Awanohara, "The Lone Ranger," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 26 March 1992, p. 11; James Chace, "The Pentagon's Superpower Fantasy," *New York Times*, 16 March 1992.

assert power in turbulent states like Haiti, Bosnia, and Liberia suggested that the United States no longer had the economic means and political will to intervene against society-threatening conflict, massive repression, or revolutions in strategically important nations, much less in more neglected ones, now that the USSR and international communism have receded as adversaries. An economic resurgence that restored American confidence or election of more bellicose leaders could, of course, renew aspirations to command global supremacy.

Some historians believe the Cold War brought a “long peace” of systemic stability, while others point to some 100 wars since 1945, mostly in the Third World, resulting in between 15 million and 30 million deaths and perhaps 30 million refugees—hardly evidence for general peace.¹³⁵ Waging the Cold War, including Vietnam, proved very costly to the United States: between \$4 trillion and \$5 trillion was spent, and some 113,000 Americans were killed.¹³⁶ The U.S. economy became dangerously dependent on defense spending as the United States poured its economic surplus into the Cold War, while the Japanese invested in their economic infrastructure, and the Western Europeans constructed welfare states; the result was neglect of human and economic resources. McCormick argues that, as a result, what the U.S. economy can best deliver today is precisely guns and butter.¹³⁷

Revolutions are seldom panaceas for the ills they seek to redress, but they are also seldom dead ends. Revolutions can permit a society to reorganize itself and select a developmental road suitable for its specific conditions. Revolution remains for many a symbol of rebirth and liberation. Dunn has summarized the persistent appeal of revolutionary solutions: “Revolution is in many ways a feeble remedy for their ills—and it is no remedy at all for many of them. Also it is a remedy the distribution of which is much affected by factors that are extremely arbitrary from the point of view of the suffering society. But weak though it may be as a remedy and capricious though the conditions of its supply are likely to remain, it is still today, for those states and societies

¹³⁵ See, for example, Gaddis, *Long Peace*; Patrick Brogan, *The Fighting Never Stopped: A Comprehensive Guide to World Conflict since 1945* (New York: Vintage, 1990), p. vii; Charles W. Kegley, “Cold War Myths and International Realities: The Long Peace Reconsidered,” unpublished paper, 1991.

¹³⁶ Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War: 1945–90*, 6th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991), p. 1.

¹³⁷ McCormick, “Every System Needs a Center,” p. 213.

which can no longer go on in the old way, the only remedy there is."¹³⁸

In the celebration over the end of the Cold War, little attention has been accorded to the inability of many Third World governments, whether following a capitalist or socialist model, to substantially raise living standards or rectify rapidly disintegrating socioeconomic conditions. Despite the rapid economic growth of a few newly industrializing nations, mostly located on the Pacific rim, the difference in average incomes between industrialized and Third World countries as a whole may grow from 15:1 in 1960 to 30:1 by 2000; the average gap in GNP may also double.¹³⁹ Economic problems, sociocultural conflict, and environmental decay should generate much future political turbulence, perhaps even new insurgencies.

The "New World Order" promise of a peaceful world moving toward American values will likely founder on proliferating regional, civil, and ethnic conflicts. It is hard to deny the contemporary salience of ethnic and cultural nationalism. Thomas Friedman argues that "there is no more violent cocktail than ethnic and tribal hatreds combined with uneven economic growth. In an era when there is far more economic advice than resources to implement it, and far more ethnic passions than traditions of pluralism to contain them, there are going to be far more world disorders than world orders."¹⁴⁰

Bruce Cumings believes that strong cases can be made for two contrasting arguments: that the world is on the brink of a new era of peace, prosperity, and cooperation; and that the world is on the brink of a horrendous crisis that could lead to global depression, exploding nationalism, and even war.¹⁴¹ British historian Christopher Thorne predicted that the post-Cold War world will bring enhanced complexities and frustrations, challenging an American predilection for simple (even simplistic) explanations and decisive

¹³⁸ Dunn, *Modern Revolutions*, p. 257.

¹³⁹ Lynn Miller, *Global Order: Values and Power in International Politics*, 2nd ed. (Boulder: Westview, 1990), pp. 141-43; David Morawetz, "The Gap between Rich and Poor Countries," in *The Gap between Rich and Poor: Contending Perspectives on the Political Economy of Development*, ed. Mitchell A. Seligson (Boulder: Westview, 1984), p. 9.

¹⁴⁰ "Today's Threat to Peace Is the Guy Down the Street," *New York Times*, 2 June 1991.

¹⁴¹ "Trilateralism in the New World Order," *World Policy Review* 8 (1991): 196-99, 213-20.

responses. He believes that this may test the traditional U.S. inability to understand or empathize with radical upheavals of the type that could become even more endemic in the future.¹⁴² A careful study of recent history suggests that there is a basis for Thorne's fears. However, as both official and public reluctance to intervene substantially in Bosnia suggests, Americans may also now be more wary of the potentially disastrous consequences.

CONCLUSIONS

The American-Vietnamese War constitutes one of the most important developments in the history of the twentieth century. This study has argued that the war can only be understood in the context, and as episodes in the history, of three distinct entities: Vietnam, the United States, and the larger world. The war was part of the general turbulence of the modern world that one Chinese leader characterized as "great disorder under heaven."¹⁴³ It is not hard to identify the ferment in political, social, economic, cultural, and ideological structures of various societies as well as in the world as a whole over the past five decades.

Americans, too many of them lacking historical memory, may be unable to accurately assess this world. Many observers bemoan the historical amnesia of Americans. As one radical critic argues:

Relatively few [Americans] ever hear of the multinational invasion of Russia in which the United States was a participant. . . . The centuries of imperialism imposed on Asia, Africa, and Latin America by the European and North American powers are, for the most part, nonevents in the collective American psyche. Not many Americans could put together two intelligent sentences about the histories of Mexico, Canada, Puerto Rico, or Cuba. . . . Most would not have the foggiest idea what was at stake in the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution . . . or the Chinese Revolution.¹⁴⁴

A historical approach is particularly critical in coming to terms with the American-Vietnamese War. But since the struggle in-

¹⁴² "American Political Culture and the End of the Cold War," *Journal of American Studies* 26 (1992): 327, 330.

¹⁴³ Zhou Enlai, quoted in Stavrianos, *Global Rift*, p. 791.

¹⁴⁴ Michael Parenti, *Make-Believe Media: The Politics of Entertainment* (New York: St. Martin's, 1992), p. 57.

volved two very different societies and reflected major themes of modern world history, the retrospective must acknowledge the ways in which the separate histories of Vietnamese and Americans, and the history of the world as a whole, became joined at the intersection of nationalism, revolution, counterrevolution, and war.

In intervening in Vietnam, U.S. leaders converted themselves into, and sent their young soldiers to die as, Westerners fighting against what large sections of the Vietnamese population saw as a struggle for change and against a new colonialism. The result was disastrous for all parties involved and perhaps even predictable if the patterns of Vietnamese history, U.S. history, and modern world history had been correctly identified by Americans. Not all wars can or should be avoided, but the American-Vietnamese War might never have occurred if U.S. leaders had overcome their Cold War paranoia and realpolitik strategizing to comprehend the function, and see the human dimension, of peasant-based anticolonial or antityranny revolutions in poor, often dysfunctional, societies.

There are alternatives. In *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice asked the Cheshire Cat: "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?" The cat replied, "That depends a great deal on where you want to get to."¹⁴⁵ Precisely. Americans need to establish policy priorities that will better contribute to popular-based government, human development, sustainable environmental integrity, and equitable socioeconomic systems both at home and abroad. The acquisition of a critical and comparative sense of history that emphasizes the common concerns of the world rather than narrow parochial interests would contribute to this effort. Otherwise Americans may continue to meet their yesterdays head-on.

¹⁴⁵ Lewis Carroll, "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland," in *The Complete Works of Lewis Carroll* (New York: Modern Library), pp. 71–72.