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การศึกษาเปรียบเทียบทัศนะของสหรัฐอเมริกาและเวียดนาม

นางสาวเหียงน แอน์ เวียด

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VIETNAM WAR OR AMERICAN WAR IN VIETNAM?  
A COMPARISON OF U.S. AND VIETNAMESE PERSPECTIVES

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
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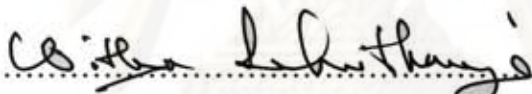
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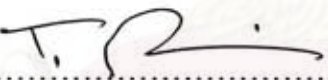
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เวียดนามเป็นที่รู้จักกันกว้างขวางว่า เป็นชาติที่มีวีรกรรมในการต่อสู้ โดยที่ตลอดระยะเวลา  
ยาวนานในประวัติศาสตร์ เวียดนามประสบความสำเร็จในการกวาดล้างผู้รุกรานเพื่อปกป้องเอกราช  
ของประเทศ การได้มีโอกาสเขียนถึงช่วงสมัยหนึ่งของวีรกรรมในประวัติศาสตร์ของเวียดนามเป็น  
เกียรติและความภาคภูมิใจของชาวเวียดนามผู้รักชาติทุกคน ชัยชนะในสงครามต่อสหรัฐอเมริกาเพื่อ  
ปกป้องประเทศชาติให้อยู่รอดปลอดภัยนับเป็นหลักชัยอันยิ่งใหญ่ที่นำไปสู่ศักราชใหม่ของเวียดนาม  
นั่นคือศักราชแห่งการมีเอกราชและเสรีภาพโดยสมบูรณ์ ความภูมิใจในชาติดังกล่าวนี้เองที่ทำให้  
ผู้เขียนศึกษาสงครามนี้

การถกเถียงว่า สงครามอเมริกา หรือสงครามเวียดนาม เป็นชื่อที่เหมาะสมกว่ากันในการ  
สะท้อนลักษณะที่แท้จริงของสงครามนี้ ดูจะไม่เป็นที่ยุติ เพราะทั้ง 2 ชื่อบ่งบอกมุมมองที่ต่างกันของ 2  
ประเทศ คือเวียดนามและสหรัฐอเมริกา ตามลำดับ อย่างไรก็ตาม อย่างไรก็ดี นั้นไม่ใช่วัตถุประสงค์ของงานศึกษา  
เรื่องนี้ วิทยานิพนธ์ฉบับนี้เพียงแต่หยิบยกปัญหานี้ขึ้นมาเพื่อจะค้นหาว่ามีนัยสำคัญโดยอยู่เบื้องหลังชื่อ  
เรียกแต่ละชื่อ โดยอาศัยการวิจัยเอกสารและการสัมภาษณ์ แทนที่จะถกเถียงว่า ชื่อใดถูกหรือผิด

สาขาวิชา เอเชียตะวันออกเฉียงใต้ศึกษา ลายมือชื่อนิสิต.....

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ลายมือชื่อ อ.ที่ปรึกษาวิทยานิพนธ์หลัก.....



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NGUYEN, ANH NGUYET: VIETNAM WAR OR AMERICAN WAR IN VIETNAM? A COMPARISON OF U.S. AND VIETNAMESE PERSPECTIVES. THESIS ADVISOR: ASSIST. PROF. THEERA NUCH PIAM, Ph.D., 61 pp.

Vietnam has been known widely as a heroic nation that has, throughout history, succeeded in sweeping away foreign invaders to protect the independence of the country. Having a chance to write about a heroic phase in its history is the honor and pride of any patriotic Vietnamese. Winning the war against America to save the nation is a glorious milestone marking a new era for Vietnam, an era of full independence and freedom. That national pride has led me to write about this War.

The debate whether or not the name American War or Vietnam War is more suitable to reflect the nature of this War seems to be endless, since the two names represent different perspectives from the two countries, Vietnam and the U.S., respectively. However, that is not the objective of this study. The thesis only raises a question to find out the implications behind each name by means of documentary research and interviews instead of arguing which name is right or wrong.

Field of Studies: Southeast Asian Studies    Student's signature: .....

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Rationale

Vietnam has been known widely as a heroic nation that has, throughout history, succeeded in sweeping away foreign invaders to protect the freedom of the country. Having a chance to write about a heroic phase in its history is the honor and pride of any patriotic Vietnamese, and I am not an exception.

Winning the war against America to save the nation is a glorious milestone marking a new era for Vietnam, an era of full independence and freedom. That national pride has led me to write about this War.

Admittedly, there is another stimulating reason as well; it is elsewhere even in the United States that many citizens did not know anything about the War while it was actually occurring in Vietnam:

*“...and there was a war going on all during my childhood, but I did not know then [...]. A president was shot and then his brother, but they were just words to me, just names, like Vietnam [...]. I knew nothing of war... it was still quite unreal to me, so far away, like bump in a crater on the moon. Vietnam was like a John Wayne movie, or a story in a book [...]. I could see it, yet I could not feel it...”<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> A young American woman, Cathy Gigante, remembers what it was to grow up during the Vietnam War, as quoted in Pratt J. C. (1984), p.1

This kind of total unawareness surprises me and makes me think I have to write something about my country and see how ‘outsiders’ view the War in Vietnam or - in a popular name - the Vietnam War.

The term “Vietnam War” has been used and understood for a long time by the international community in the sense that it was a war occurring in Vietnam as a civil war rather than any other meanings, especially the one pointing to the invasion by the United States. As a result, if one refers to “Vietnam War” then others can easily grasp it, but if one uses the term “American War” others may think of some previous U.S. civil war. People use the name “Vietnam War” simply because the Americans call it that way. However, the Vietnamese call it “American War”. So, why are there two names referring to only one war? What are the perspectives of both the U.S. and Vietnam on the War?

For all above reasons, I have decided to choose **“Vietnam War or American War in Vietnam? A Comparison of U.S. and Vietnamese Perspectives”** (สงครามเวียดนามหรือสงครามอเมริกันในเวียดนาม? การศึกษาเปรียบเทียบทัศนะของสหรัฐอเมริกาและเวียดนาม) as the topic for my paper with a view to making a thorough analysis of different viewpoints upon the Second Indochina War and giving some suggestions for better healing post-war sorrows.

## **1.2. Objectives**

This study aims at finding out and analyzing the implications behind different names of the (normally called) Vietnam War. It explores in detail the historical background, major perspectives on the War during wartime. At the same time, some suggestions will be made to relieve war sorrows.

In brief, the main objectives of this paper are as follows:

(1) To examine how differences between the names “Vietnam War” and “American War” represent different perspectives of the U.S. and Vietnam;

(2) To explore the impact of these differences upon the awareness and understanding of American and Vietnamese citizens about the War.

Hopefully, the study will make a small contribution to providing readers with useful reference material on the War in Vietnam.

### **1.3. Hypotheses**

The names “Vietnam War” and “American War” represent real different perspectives on the conflict. Although the U.S. perceive the world on a global scale and Vietnam on a regional one, at least, given the differences in the respective perspectives of the United States and Vietnam on the war, the conflict should be looked at from both vantage points to give it a more balanced view.

It should be noted in this connection that public attitudes in the U.S. are actually changing and tend to accept the term “American War” more openly. Moreover, it must be admitted that both “Vietnamese” and “American” perspectives do not represent unified viewpoints in Vietnam and the United States, respectively. Not only were there two different perspectives of North Vietnam and South Vietnam during the War but in the United States during that time there was widespread conflict among Americans on U.S. involvement in the War. This lack of uniformity in the “perspectives” that are the main focus of this study will certainly complicate any attempt to analyze them. However, it is hoped that insofar as we cannot, on the other hand, deny the existence of differences in “American” and “Vietnamese” viewpoints, a comparison of them will be meaningful in at least some academically useful respects.

#### **1.4. Scope and structure**

It would be beyond my capacity to study all aspects of the topic since one aspect alone could be a subject of an extensive study. What I am going to do is to go through it and focus only on main aspects with a comprehensive analysis from what I gain from both documentary and field-research findings.

Accordingly, this paper presents a background of the Vietnam/American War and discusses some different perspectives on it.

My paper consists of six main chapters in accordance with the following logical sequence:

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: Literature review

Chapter 3: Role of the U.S. in Indochina

Chapter 4: U.S. and Vietnamese perspectives during wartime

Chapter 5: Tentative suggested solutions to healing post-war sorrows

Chapter 6: Conclusions

#### **1.5. Methodology**

*(1) Documentary research:*

The study will explore theoretical arguments about the Vietnam/American War as well as review relevant literature and documents, both in English and Vietnamese.



- Sources on Vietnam's perspectives: (i) A number of selected academic journals and other publications (e.g. reminiscences, news, etc.); (ii) School textbooks taught in Vietnam

- Sources on the U.S. perspectives: (i) Selected highly popular research publications; (ii) Films, reminiscences, etc.

*(2) Interviews:*

The study also adopts as a qualitative research method. War veterans, war witnesses, and history researchers are regarded as key informants.

## **1.6. Limitations**

There are a number of limitations to this thesis.

First, the War in Vietnam has ended for a long time, 35 years, so most of the research for this paper is more document-based than on-site-field-trip-based.

Second, it is hard to draw a demarcation line between political and historical analysis in the paper. Instead, what serves the thesis' objectives and methodology would be taken in to account regardless it is political or historical or both.

Third, there is hardly any official source of reference released by the former South Vietnam regime available in English or Vietnamese. Instead, what is known about the regime is mostly from U.S. documents which, to serve some political intention, may deviate readers from the truth.

Last, due to the author's limitations of knowledge, the thesis may have many loop-holes that need more review and betterment.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1. Overview of the Vietnam War

“The war in Southeast Asia, which claimed millions of Asian and American casualties and left the United States deeply divided, was inextricably linked to the Cold War. Indeed, the Vietnam War, engulfing all of Indochina (comprising Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia), was the most violent and sustained conflict of the Cold War era” (Hixson, 2000: vii).

Nearly always referred to in America as “the Vietnam War”, and in Vietnam as “the American War” or the “War Against the Americans to Save the Nation” - the conflict was the longest fought by the United States and was never declared by Congress. Although the date of its outset was never clearly established, many historians aver that the Vietnam War began when U.S. Marines arrived on March 8, 1965<sup>1</sup> (Cawthorne, 2007: 13), to join 21,000 U.S. military advisors already in Vietnam. Until that time, advisors had not assumed an offensive role in the fight against the North Vietnamese and Vietcong forces. America’s participation in the war officially ended on January 27, 1973, when the Paris Peace Accords were signed, although the U.S. continued to support South Vietnam’s war effort until 1974 when Congress cut off all military funding.

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<sup>1</sup> There are different sources telling different starting point of time of the War. Actually, apart from the non-military phase of U.S. involvement, the fight in which American troops were involved started as early as 1962-1963. Though American soldiers did take active part in the fighting, they were involved in various ways: the introduction of helicopter gunships in 1962, the Battle of Ap Bac in January 1963 (three U.S. advisors in the fighting, eight wounded...) In 1963, there were up to 15,000 U.S. military advisors in South Vietnam (Cawthorne, 2007: 56). Many scholars suppose that the Vietnam War officially started after the overthrow of Saigon’s regime of President Ngo Dinh Diem (1963).

Two coalitions fought the Second Indochina War. On one side, along with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam or the DRV), there was the National Liberation Front (NLF), a guerilla militia from South Vietnam that also was known as the Vietcong (VC), the Soviet Union and China, which provided military and financial support. On the other side was South Vietnam with its huge armed forces, the Army of the Republic of Viet Nam (ARVN), along with allied members from the United States – South Korea, Thailand, Australia, New Zealand and the Philippines. Other Cold War allies of the United States were opposed to the war and refused to join the fight.

When U.S. Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution on August 7, 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson was given broad powers to increase involvement in the war. National Security Council members, including Robert S. McNamara, Dean Rusk, and Maxwell Taylor, recommended to Johnson, on November 28, 1964 that he implemented a two-stage bombing of North Vietnam. Johnson and Defense Secretary McNamara micromanaged the bombing raids from Washington, D.C., out of fears of a runaway conflagration. J. William Fulbright, the longest-serving chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and a strong critic of the war, later wrote, “Many Senators, who accepted the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution without question, might well not have done so had they foreseen that it would subsequently be interpreted as a sweeping Congressional endorsement for conduct of a large-scale war in Asia.”

Johnson saw the war in much the same vein as his predecessor President John F. Kennedy: a way to retaliate against the Soviet Union for the Berlin Wall and the Cuban Missile Crisis. In 1964, Johnson and McNamara considered stepping up their involvement in the war because of the South Vietnamese forces' low morale. After an attack on two U.S. camps at Pleiku (in Central Highland of

Vietnam) in February 1965, Johnson decided to carry out bombings of infiltration routes and military installations in North Vietnam, using South Vietnamese pilots.

In March 1965, President Johnson ordered a dispatch of 3,500 marines, the first U.S. combat troops, into South Vietnam to protect U.S. military bases in response to the Gulf of Tonkin Incident<sup>2</sup>. Escalation of the troops began in July, and Johnson assigned General William Westmoreland as commander of all U.S. forces in South Vietnam. Fighting reached full-scale combat in 1966 and 1967 when both sides increased their forces, which was followed by a sharp rise in casualties.

The U.S. commenced the air war codenamed Operation Rolling Thunder, relentless but often interrupted bombing raids in North Vietnam, in February 1965. Rolling Thunder's purpose was to destroy the fighting will of the North Vietnamese, stop the flow of soldiers and supplies to the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese Army into South Vietnam on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and to demolish industrial bases and surface-to-air missile (SAM) defenses. (Also, the trail was used for sending Vietcong officers, who had been trained in North Vietnam, back to South Vietnam.) While only intended to last eight weeks, Operation Rolling Thunder bombing raids continued for three years. The construction of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, a 9,940-mile web of roads and rail lines that ran through Cambodia

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<sup>2</sup> The *Gulf of Tonkin Incident* was two separate occurrences involving naval forces of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) and the U.S. in the waters of the Gulf of Tonkin that prompted the first large-scale involvement of U.S. armed forces in Southeast Asia. On August 2, 1964, the destroyer *USS Maddox* (DD-731) engaged three North Vietnamese P-4 torpedo boats, resulting in damage to the three boats. Two days later the *Maddox* (having been joined by the destroyer *USS Turner Joy* (DD-951) reported a second engagement with North Vietnamese vessels (N. Cawthorne, *Vietnam: A War Lost and Won*, 2007, pp. 59-60). This second report was later claimed to be in error (Nguyen, 2008: 49). "It is not simply that there is a different story as to what happened; it is that **no attack** happened that night. [...] In truth, Hanoi's navy was engaged in nothing that night but the salvage of two of the boats damaged on August 2" (U.S. National Security Agency (NSA) report, quoted in *Chapter 5 – (U) Skunks, Bogies, Silent Hounds, and the Flying Fish: The Gulf of Tonkin Mystery, 2-4 August 1964* by Robert J. Hanyok, a historian for the U.S. NSA, available at <http://www.fas.org/irp/nsa/spartans/chapter5.pdf>)



and Laos, had begun on Ho Chi Minh's birthday on May 19, 1959; it carried more than one million North Vietnamese soldiers and vast quantities of supplies from China and the Soviet Union to battlefields in South Vietnam over 16 years.

The war was part of a larger regional conflict involving the neighboring countries of Cambodia and Laos, also known as the Second Indochina War. In many ways the Vietnam War was a direct successor to the French Indochina War, which is sometimes referred to as the First Indochina War, when the French fought to maintain control of their colony in Indochina against an independence movement led by Communist Party leader Ho Chi Minh. Citing progress in peace negotiations, on January 15, 1973 U.S. President Nixon ordered a suspension of offensive action in North Vietnam. This was later followed by the cease-fire agreement signed in Paris on January 27, 1973. The Vietnamization of the war thus took effect and the United States started the unilateral withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam.

Although it has been over 30 years since the reunification of Vietnam, interest in the Vietnam War remains high among scholars, college students, and the general public. In recent years, historians have devoted more attention to the international, internal, and Vietnamese facets of the conflict, broadening and deepening our understanding. Mitchell K. Hall (2000) focuses on the Vietnam War itself, taking the story through to 1975 and the North Vietnamese victory. He examined the military strategies employed, the rising domestic opposition and the impact of the war in the U.S. and Vietnam. Hall discusses military actions undertaken by the United States from 1965 to 1967 and then returns to 1965 and the growth of the antiwar movement (pp. 25-37, 42).

David E. Kaiser (2000) tells the full story of how America became involved in the Vietnam War - and the story challenges widely held assumptions about the

roles of Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson. Meanwhile, Robert S. McNamara, James G. Blight, Robert K. Brigham, Thomas J. Biersteker, Herbert Y. Schandler (2000) discuss the two main questions: (1) Did the Vietnam War have to happen? (2) And why couldn't it have ended earlier? They look at the many instances in which one side, or both, made crucial mistakes that led to the war and its duration. McNamara reveals both American and Vietnamese blunders, and points out ways in which such mistakes can be avoided in the future. He also shows conclusively that war could not be won militarily by the United States and withdraw lessons that can be learnt from the tragedy.

It seems that quite a few authors have mentioned the involvement of the U.S. in Vietnam. Other ones are James S. Olson and Randy Roberts (2006) who recount the history of American involvement in Vietnam from the end of World War II, clarifying the political aims, military strategy, and social and economic factors that contributed to the participants' actions. The main idea of the book is the argument that the entanglement of the United States in Vietnam was due to one major foreign policy attitude and one major domestic policy attitude. With respect to foreign policy, the involvement of the United States in Vietnam after World War II was rooted in the Cold War thinking of the American leaders. To the leaders of both the United States and the Soviet Union, Vietnam and other Third World nations were a battlefield on which the superpowers would wage various sorts of war to win the minds and the hearts of the people.

The War in Vietnam continues to attract enormous attention as one of the most divisive and traumatic events of the post-1945 period. For too long the issues have tended to revolve almost exclusively around American culpability, and Peter Lowe (1998)<sup>3</sup> explains the wider meaning and effects of the Vietnam War and

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<sup>3</sup> *The Vietnam War*, St. Martin's Press, 1998

provides comparative assessments of North and South Vietnam, China, the Soviet Union, Australia and the U.S., as well as looking at the anti-war movement and the origins and international response to the war.

Looking from another angle of the War, “Vietnam Voices - Perspectives on the War Years, 1941-1982”, compiled by John Clark Pratt, illuminates the United States’ involvement in its longest and most divisive war. From foot soldiers to generals, politicians to protesters, hawks and doves, their attitudes and experiences are graphically revealed. As the subtitle explains, this is from 1941-1982, so the book writes about the French view as well as American, North and South Vietnamese mixed in. What is also important is that Pratt also included the casualties for each year.

Another book called “*Vietnam: A History*” is a masterfully written history of America’s involvement in Vietnam, but it does not deal with all the battles of the war. Karnow analyzes the conflict from both the political and military standpoint, and is unsparing in his criticism of errors made by political and military leaders on all sides of the conflict. This book focuses on three main areas: first, the author’s account of the conflict between the French and Viet Minh, and how the French were defeated at Dien Bien Phu in 1954; second, how the U.S. government formulated its Vietnam policy under the Kennedy administration, and how that policy ultimately failed; and third, how Richard Nixon, upon becoming President in 1969, changed America’s Vietnam policy and began the process of “Vietnamizing” the war. Karnow describes in detail how the Kennedy administration initially supported South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem, then tacitly approved of the 1963 coup d’etat which resulted in Diem’s murder. The book offers a good understanding of the war and its causes.

There seem to be different scholars discussing different aspects of the War. David Chanoff and Doan Van Toai (1996)<sup>4</sup> have another way to analyze the Vietnam War, in which the American experience during the Vietnam conflict is universally known: the brutalisation of the U.S. fighting men, the drug abuse, and the trauma. According to these authors, *even today the very word 'Vietnam' is too often interpreted as referring to this conflict (and specifically the American perception of it) rather than to the country and its people*. Normally, the view from the other side - the Vietcong and North Vietnamese - has been virtually ignored. Yet, Chanoff and Doan tell the story that emerges of the ordinary people of both North and South Vietnam, of the Vietcong guerrilla fighters and terrorists, North Vietnamese soldiers and cadres, monks, opposition leaders, propaganda chiefs and village secretaries. These writers have provided a rare insight into the thinking of the 'other side' (implying Vietnam's perspective).

In sum, each author has his own angle to look at the War in Vietnam. Yet, no one seems to wonder about the names Vietnam War and American War that represent real different perspectives on the conflict, which is the main content of this paper.

## 2.2. Etymology

Various names have been applied to what is known as the "Vietnam War". These have shifted over time, although Vietnam War is the most commonly used title in English. It has been variously called the "Second Indochina War" or the "Vietnam War", and, in Vietnamese, "Kháng chiến chống Mỹ cứu nước" (Resistance War against America to save the nation).

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<sup>4</sup> *Vietnam: A Portrait of Its People at War*, I.B. Tauris, 1996



*Second Indochina War* places the conflict into context with other distinct, but related, and contiguous conflicts in Southeast Asia. Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia are seen as the battlegrounds of a larger Indochinese conflict that began at the end of World War II and lasted until communist victory in 1975. This conflict can be viewed in terms of the demise of colonialism and its after-effects during the Cold War.

*Vietnam War* is a popular name.

*Resistance War against America and to save the nation* is the term favored by North Vietnam; and its meaning is self-evident.



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## CHAPTER III

### ROLE OF THE U.S. IN INDOCHINA

#### 3.1. U.S intervention in Indochina

This part explains why the U.S. became involved in Indochina and why it stayed so long in the War in Vietnam.

Indochina, or the Indochinese Peninsular, is a region in Southeast Asia. It lies roughly east of India, and south of China. The word has French origins, *Indochine*, and was adopted when French colonizers in Vietnam began expanding their territory to bordering countries. So, Indochina here refers to French Indochina, which was part of the French empire, consisting of a federation of four protectorates (Tonkin, Annam, Cambodia and Laos) and one directly-ruled colony (Cochinchina). The capital of French Indochina was Hanoi.



U.S. involvement in Indochina in general, and Vietnam, in particular, occurred step by step. When the Korean War broke out in 1950, the U.S. began to support the French as part of a global strategy of resisting communism. U.S. leaders believed that the fall of Vietnam would lead to the fall of other countries in the region, like dominoes. Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnam's independence on September 2, 1945, but the French came back to reoccupy Indochina. The failure to reach an agreement over the future of Vietnam led eventually to the Franco-Vietminh War, or the First Indochina War, at the end of 1946. The French had a firm control only over the South and the war, dragging on gradually, wore them down. In May 1954, French forces were trapped at Dien Bien Phu and were forced to surrender. The Franco-Vietminh War thus came to an end.

Meanwhile, the Americans, fearing that Vietminh's victory would result in the spread of communism in Southeast Asia, decided to intervene. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles responded by creating, in September 1954, the South-East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) and by installing, a year later, a pro-U.S. South Vietnamese government led by Ngo Dinh Diem. After that the Americans quickly replaced the French, who eventually left Indochina in 1956. Diem did not hold elections in 1956, in accordance with the Geneva Accords, for fear of a communist victory.

Diem's regime was based on military repression from the beginning, and was supported by a minority of Roman Catholics. It failed to win popular support by not implementing land reforms. Opposition to his regime had been growing since the late 1950s. Meanwhile the Viet Cong armed resistance to Diem rapidly gained in strength in the early 1960s, with the formation of the National Liberation Front (NLF) in 1960. During this time, Viet Cong's strategy consisted mainly of infiltration and terrorist activities. Though the insurgents in the South were mainly directed by the Communist Party of Vietnam, armed activities at this stage did not

involve North Vietnamese regular forces. Their main purpose was to overthrow the Diem government through both terrorist activities and popular uprising. In 1960 the pro-US government in Laos was overthrown and Diem continued to rule oppressively in Vietnam.

Up to now, there are still various opinions on why the U.S. wanted to be involved in Indochina. According to Daum et al. (2003: 29), the United States, driven by the imperatives of a rapidly engulfing Cold War, quickly dropped all pretense of championing decolonization, particularly in Southeast Asia. American policy-makers not only encouraged, but also actively intervened to facilitate France's re-colonization of Indochina. On 1 May 1950, U.S. President Harry S. Truman provided the French-sponsored governments of Indochina with \$10 million, and committed a program of economic assistance to them (Rotter, cited in Hixson, Vol. 1, 2000: 144). Later, in the 1960s, three American presidents presided over an escalating political and military involvement in Indochina that had almost all of the main attributes of colonial interventions in the preceding centuries of European global domination (Daum et al., 2003: 29).

The United States recognition in February 1950 of the government of Emperor Bao Dai was a milestone marking the initial American political involvement in Indochina. The U.S. supposed that only the success of the Bao Dai government could ensure the "preservation of a noncommunist, Western-oriented Southeast Asia" (Hess, cited in Hixson, Vol. 1, 2000: 197).

*"...we do not lose sights of the fact that Ho Chi Minh has direct Communist connections and it should be obvious that we are not interested in seeing colonial*



*empire administrations supplanted by philosophy and political organization directed from and controlled by [the] Kremlin... ”<sup>1</sup>*

So, the first and foremost reason for U.S. involvement in Indochina can be traced to the so-called American theme (Melby, cited in Hixon, Vol., 1 2000: 190). It was regarded as “an influence that would embrace the globe. It was called **anticommunism**” (Hixson, Vol. 1, 2000: 190-191). There are some arguments that the U.S. was too worried about containing perceived Communist expansionism in Southeast Asia after China came under Communist rule in 1949, which was feared by the then U.S. administration to be “a threat to a decolonizing Southeast Asia, independent of and even more menacing than the Soviet Union” (Daum et al. 2003: 29).

This American theme is also shown clearly in the following policy, serving as the first significant statement on Indochina with an attempt at resisting what is seen as Communist expansion:

*“A. OBJECTIVES*

*(1) to eliminate so far as possible Communist influence in Indochina and to see installed a self-governing nationalist state which will be friendly to the U.S. and which [...] will be patterned upon our conception of a democratic state as opposed... Communist domination; [...] and (4) to prevent undue Chinese penetration and subsequent influence in Indochina... ”<sup>2</sup>*

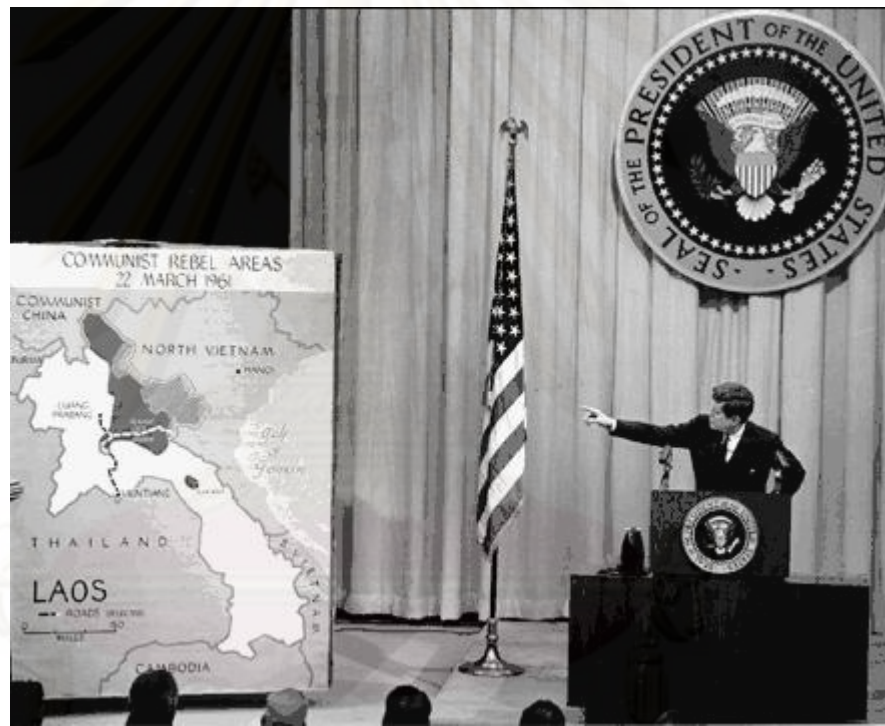
The United States assumed that the Viet Minh were puppets of China, or maybe the Soviets, or maybe a little bit of both. The feeling at the time was that if the U.S. were to let the Viet Minh take control of Vietnam, then this would initiate

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<sup>1</sup> Statement by Secretary of State George C. Marshall, February 1947, shortly after the French-Vietminh war (Vietminh: League for Vietnamese Independence)

<sup>2</sup> Executive Secretariat Files, Department of State Policy Statement on Indochina, September 27, 1948, as cited in Pratt J. C. (1984), p. 4-5

a kind of chain reaction, in which nearby areas like Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Indonesia, etc., would all fall, like a row of dominos and succumb to communist influence. They called this the ‘domino theory’, and basically the U.S. government believed that the obvious solution to such a situation was to make sure that the first domino (Vietnam) did not fall. This is the main reason why the Eisenhower administration was willing to commit so much money and resources to create a “South Vietnam”.



*Caption 1 : U.S. President John Kennedy talks about Indochina<sup>3</sup>*

Others, focusing on the larger issue of U.S. military intervention in Vietnam, suppose that **American ethnocentrism** (the belief that one’s own nation and its values are superior to all others) is a subordinate reason for U.S.

<sup>3</sup> Taken from <http://mcadams.posc.mu.edu/context1.htm>

intervention in Indochina. **Ethnocentrism**, first introduced by an American academic and professor at Yale University - William G. Sumner (1840-1910) - in his book *Folkways* (1906), is the tendency to believe that one's ethnic or cultural group is centrally important, and that all other groups are measured in relation to one's own. The ethnocentric individual will judge other groups relative to their own particular ethnic group or culture, especially with concern to language, behavior, customs, and religion. These ethnic distinctions and sub-divisions serve to define each ethnicity's unique cultural identity (Anderson 1999). Thus, the American ethnocentrism caused a generation of U.S. policymakers to misunderstand the nature of the Vietnamese conflict and to make judgments that were tragically inappropriate (Hixson, Vol. 1, 2000: 144)

Another opinion is that the U.S. wanted to maintain **access to Far East raw materials** (Hixson, Vol. 1, 2000: 144). However, what made the U.S. different from France and Japan - which went bankrupt after the World War II and tried to squeeze out Vietnam's resources to serve their countries, was that the former accessed raw materials in Indochina with a view to conquering all resources supporting communists, leading to a possible prevention of Communism spread in Indochina.

In a nutshell, there might be different viewpoints of U.S. long presence in Indochina: anti-communism, American ethnocentrism and access to raw materials; however, the first seems to be the main and most convincing reason.



### 3.2. North Vietnam's view at U.S. presence in Indochina

The United States came to Vietnam at a critical juncture of Vietnamese history - a period of change more profound than any that the Vietnamese had ever experienced. In 1954, the Vietnamese were gaining independence after seventy years of French colonial rule. Yet, U.S. presence in Indochina was such a new threat to Vietnam's freedom from foreign colonialists that took great concern of fighters for peace and independence in Vietnam, "... *the U.S. imperialists* not only are the enemy of the world's people but are becoming the *main and direct enemy of the Vietnamese, Cambodian and Lao peoples...* But now the French are having talks with us while the American imperialists are becoming our main and direct enemy; so our spearhead must be directed at the latter [...]. U.S. policy is to expand and internationalize the Indochina war."<sup>4</sup>



*Caption 2 : U.S. combat troops arrive (by Philip J. Griffiths)*

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<sup>4</sup> Report by Ho Chi Minh to the Sixth Plenum of the Party Central Committee, July 15, 1954, as cited in Pratt J. C. (1984), p. 28



To analyze this more clearly, in “Nước Mỹ với cuộc chiến Đông Dương”<sup>5</sup> (meaning “The U.S. and the Indochina War”), Nguyen Tien Dong - a Vietnamese history researcher – said that the U.S had, since early 1940s, intended to make Indochina a new-type colony, proven by its different attempts between 1940 and 1945 to oust French rulers from this peninsular. After World War II, with a view to having free hands to cope with the international revolutionary movements and the greater and greater influence of the Soviet Union over Europe, the U.S. made a volte-face to compromise with the French so that the latter would return to Indochina with huge support by the former. The essence of this act, according to Nguyen, was clear: U.S. leaders made the French a proxy suppressor on the rising revolutionary movements in Indochina. Under the mask of urging French colonialists to free their colonies, including Vietnam, the U.S. did receive support from many anti-war people not only in America but also from worldwide. Nguyen supposed this to be an equivocal and foxy policy of the practical U.S. imperialist in that the U.S., while protesting the French colonialism over Vietnam, prevented by many ways Vietnam’s fight for independence under the leadership of Viet Minh.

U.S. involvement in Indochina was more and more visible through its rocketing financial support in the Indochina War throughout the years of 1950 (US\$ 10 mil.), 1951 (US\$ 30 mil.), 1952 (US\$ 525 mil.), 1953 (US\$ 735 mil.), and 1954 (US\$ 1063 mil.)<sup>6</sup> After the bitter failure and great loss of French invaders at Dien Bien Phu (in Northern Vietnam) on 7 May 1954, which ended the rule of French colonialists in this country, the U.S. did want to put its hands into Vietnam but found that military interference was impossible at that moment due to the world’s anti-war public opinions. U.S. leaders therefore commenced a new

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<sup>5</sup> An article on Quân đội Nhân dân (People’s Army) Daily – Voice of the Armed Forces and People of Vietnam, 6 May 2009

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

plot to enslave Indochina instead. This plot aimed at destroying the Geneva Accords (1954)<sup>7</sup> and replacing the French in Indochina, which caused Vietnam's independence to be 21 years late in 1975 (that should have been in 1954 as aforementioned).<sup>8</sup>

Again, Prof. Dr. Phan Ngoc Lien, Chairman of the Vietnam History Education Association emphasized that “the U.S. stepped into the (Second) Indochina War for invasion. Therefore, our (Vietnamese) people had to carry out a revolutionary war, a comprehensive people's war to fight against the most brutal and fierce war by the American imperialist in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>9</sup> Phan considered it to be the most sacred mandate of each and every Vietnamese patriotic citizen to follow Ho Chi Minh's urge, “If there is still only a single invader on our fatherland, we have to continue to fight and sweep him away.”<sup>10</sup> Once more, Dr. Phan pointed out clearly that this war has two sides: the just (Vietnam, implying North Vietnam) and the unjust (the U.S.) so “in the end,” he said, “Vietnam won simply because justice would triumph over injustice.” As to this, General Nguyen Chi Thanh (as cited in Nguyen, 2008: 54) also said, “The U.S. is a wealthy country with many modern weapons but it's carrying out an unjust war protested by the world's people... We'll surely defeat it.”

Also, Lieutenant General Nguyen Dinh Uoc, the former Director of Vietnam Institute of Military History, affirmed that the U.S. interfered into Indochina to invade, and their first target to conquer was Vietnam. He raised a

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<sup>7</sup> *Geneva Accords* was signed on behalf of France by Pierre Mendes-France and of the Democratic republic of Vietnam by Pham Van Dong at the Geneva Conference (8 May – 21 July, 1954) attended by many countries that agreed to end hostilities and restore peace in French Indochina (including Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> *Revolutionary Ideology and Sentiment Education for the Youth through Studying the Resistance War against the Americans to Save the Nation*, Vietnam Communist Review, Issue 80, 2005

<sup>10</sup> As cited from *Collected Writings of Ho Chi Minh*, Hanoi: National Politics Publisher, Vol. 12, p. 407, 1996

very big question at a Vietnam War Symposium in 1999 in Lubbock, Texas (Nguyen, 2008: 143), “How can the *Joint Communiqué* by Eisenhower and Ngo Dinh Diem say that ‘The U.S. boundary is prolonged to the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel of Vietnam’?” President Roosevelt said that French colonialism was harsh so the U.S. had to help Indochina to get independence, but Truman and Eisenhower did the reverse thing by supporting French colonialists, then forced South Vietnam to be fully dependent upon the U.S. Nguyen adds that all presidents of South Vietnam (from Ngo Dinh Diem to Nguyen Van Thieu) were selected and controlled by the U.S.

In brief, to the eye of freedom fighters in North Vietnam, there is only one reason that the U.S. intervened into Indochina: invasion. This explains why all Vietnamese patriots considered the American troops in Vietnam invaders that must be swept away.



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# **CHAPTER IV**

## **U.S. AND VIETNAMESE PERSPECTIVES**

### **DURING WARTIME**

“...Although both popular imagination and academic research on the Vietnam War continue to flourish, there is no consensus in sight” (Daum et al, 2003). This is understandable since the U.S. and Vietnam perceived the world in different ways. The former did on a global scale, where imperialism was supposed to be the key to explaining U.S. acts upon other countries; meanwhile, the latter was more or less defensive after years of fighting against foreign invaders (China, France, Japan, and the U.S.) and more focused on a regional scale when looking out to the world. This leads to the difference in perceptions of the two countries on the Vietnam/American War during the wartime.

For many Vietnamese, the “Vietnam War” is not a single event, but a long chain of wars for independence against foreign enemies. In 1883, France took formal possession of Vietnam, abolished its name, and divided the nation into three parts. Resistance to French rule grew over the next century and culminated in a brutal eight-year war (1946-54). After a major Vietnamese victory at Dien Bien Phu, it ended with a peace settlement in Geneva. The anti-French war had been led by the Indochinese Communist party but included many non-Communist nationalists. In the final years of that war, the United States provided massive military aid to the French. From that point on, many Vietnamese viewed the United States as an enemy in the quest for independence and the American War as a direct outgrowth of the war with France.



In 1954 at Geneva, the great powers agreed to divide Vietnam temporarily at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel. The idea was not to separate Vietnam into North and South, but to establish the peaceful conditions that would allow for a nationwide reunification election in 1956. However, those elections were never held as the United States stepped in to build and bolster what it hoped to be permanent, non-Communist South Vietnam. The Communist retained significant support throughout Vietnam, however, and set their sights on an eventual overthrow of the American-backed regime in Saigon, the capital of the newly created “country” – in U.S. words.

For most Americans, Vietnam was not even a familiar name until the mid-1960s when the nation dramatically escalated its military intervention. Few realized the United States had been involved in Vietnam where it had presided over the creation of South Vietnam. Instead, they believed their country had entered a war already in progress whose origins were mysterious. American leaders claimed that U.S. troops were needed to help a small, struggling democracy in South Vietnam to maintain its independence from external Communist aggression launched from North Vietnam and engineered by the Soviet Union and Communist China, and that if the United States failed to prevent a Communist takeover of South Vietnam, one country after another would fall under the control of America’s Cold War enemies. These arguments had great resonance in American political culture in the 1950s and early 1960s, and there was widespread public support for intervention in Vietnam that lasted through years of mounting escalation (Apply, 2004: xix).

Overtime, however, even more Americans came to believe their leaders had misled and even lied to them about the realities of the war. Many concluded that South Vietnam was neither a democratic nor an independent nation, but a corrupt and unpopular regime entirely dependent on U.S. support.

So, each name “Vietnam War” / “American War” represents a perspective behind it.

#### **4.1. U.S. perspectives behind the name of “Vietnam War”**

In the United States today, ‘Vietnam War’ is shorthand for America’s longest and most divisive foreign war, and it is often evoked as little more than a political or media cliché, a glib reference to a controversial war that ended badly, a time of domestic turmoil, a history to be avoided in the future. For many Americans, the war’s meaning has been winnowed down to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D. C., where they stand in silence, filled with emotion, but unsure how to move beyond their private reflections to a broader engagement with daunting subject.

##### ***4.1.1. U.S. Administration’s viewpoints***

Much of the scholarly work on this matter reflects different views among U.S. administrators and military leaders.

On one hand, Vietnam represented, in John F. Kennedy’s words, “the cornerstone of the Free World in Southeast Asia, the keystone in the arch, the finger in the dike.” The Republic of Vietnam – RVN (i.e. South Vietnam) sustained by the American intervention in Indochina in the years after the 1954 Geneva Conference, “is our offspring, we cannot abandon it, we cannot ignore its needs” (Herring, 1986: 43). Besides, speaking in 1956, a young senator from Massachusetts argued that the fundamental tenets of American foreign policy depended “in considerable measure upon a strong and Vietnamese nation (implying South Vietnam)” (Hixson, Vol. 4, 2000: 237).

During the Spring of 1965, shortly after U.S. President Lyndon Johnson initiated a policy of bombing North Vietnam and stepping up ground action in the South, Time magazine published an editorial defending the President's moves. Entitled "Viet Nam: The Right War at the Right Time,"<sup>1</sup> the essay affirmed the then U.S. administration's thoughts that America was morally right to intervene in the war because it was necessary to contain the expansion of the Sino-Soviet bloc; to fulfill American treaty obligations (including bilateral agreements with South Vietnam and the terms of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) pact); to protect a pro-western "country" (implying South Vietnam) from armed totalitarian attack (from North Vietnam); and to defend American national honor and credibility. Invoking the so-called "domino theory," which held that the loss of South Vietnam would lead inevitably to the loss of neighboring countries, Time described South Vietnam as a vital buffer state necessary to halt communist expansion.

This can be understood since the U.S. perceived the world on a global scale, which means Vietnam - in the eyes of U.S. imperialist leaders - was a link in a chain of the worldwide Communist force that had to be prevented. This explains why these powerful leaders considered Vietnam War to be a necessary move and act on the way to wipe out Communism, like any other deeds that the U.S. administration had done with any threat to its global hegemony.

On the other hand, it is interesting to notice that doubts and suspicion over the rightness of U.S. involvement in Vietnam were also spreading among U.S. leaders. Even U.S. military leaders, for instance, had to admit (in secret reports) the fabrication around North Vietnam's communism, "...the Vietminh would

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<sup>1</sup> Available at *Time magazine* online, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,898797-3,00.html>

drive the French out of Indochina on the basis of popular support, not Chinese assistance. Ho (i.e. Ho Chi Minh) enjoyed the support of 80 percent of the Vietnamese people, yet **80 percent of his followers were not communists**. Such indigenous appeal virtually assured Vietminh success.”<sup>2</sup> Besides, as the anti-war movement’s ideals spread beyond college campuses, greater-than-ever doubts about the wisdom of escalation also began to appear within the U.S. administration itself. President Johnson was counseled against further military involvement in Vietnam in 1965 by Undersecretary of State George Ball. In 1967 Johnson fired Defense Secretary McNamara after the secretary expressed concern about the moral justifications for war (Brune et al, 2003: 764). Many believed that the cost of winning was too high.



*Caption 3 : Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara (left) and President John Kennedy are discussing the Vietnam War at the White House<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> Report (in CIA factbook which was revealed after the end of the War) by the Ad Hoc Committee of Major General R. E. Duff, USA, Captain W. O. Floyd, USN, Major D. D. Duff, USAF, to the JSC, “Program of Assistance for the General Area of China,” JSC 1721/43, 16 January 1950, RG 218, CCS 452, China (4-3-45), section 7; Plans and Oppositions position paper, “U.S. Position with respect to Indochina, 25 February 1950,” RG 319, G-3 091 Indochina, TS.

<sup>3</sup> Taken from Lao Dong (Labor) Newspaper online, <http://www.laodong.com.vn/Home/McNamara-va-nhung-bai-hoc-muon-ve-Viet-Nam/20097/146067.laodong>



However, widespread opposition within the government did not appear until 1968. Exacerbating the situation was the presidential election of that year, in which Johnson faced a strong challenge from peace candidates Eugene McCarthy, Robert Kennedy, and George McGovern, all Democrats, as well as his eventual successor, Richard M. Nixon. On 25 March Johnson learned that his closest advisors now opposed the war; six days later, he withdrew from the race (Tucker, 1998: 35).

Hence, it can be seen that during the wartime, there was a shift in U.S. leaders' perceptions on the war: from a victory assurance to a doubt of losing the war, from aggressiveness to reconciliation, from public opinion ignorance to public reaction attention, and from war continuance to war ending decisions.

#### ***4.1.2. U.S. ordinary people' thoughts***

The Vietnam War divided America. Each night as families watched the war on the nightly news, Americans began to diverge into two separate schools of thinking, Pro-War and Anti-War.

*\* Voice from those supporting the then U.S. Administration to conduct and continue the War in Vietnam:*

Those who supported the war claimed that it was being fought to prevent communist aggression. Advocates of freedom believe that they should be in favor of the war since the U.S. government's purpose is to protect the citizenry from aggression, both foreign and domestic.



*Caption 4 : Pro-Vietnam War Marchers*

*(Demonstrators in favor of the Vietnam War march to counteract the anti-Vietnam protest taking place in Oakland, California. November 1965)<sup>4</sup>*

Public support for the war decreased as the war waged on throughout the sixties and beginning part of the 1970s. People soon raised a question, “Where is the line drawn then between legitimate self-defense and wrongful foreign interference?” William L. Lurch and Peter W. Sperlich collected public opinion data measuring support for the war from 1965-1971. Support for the war was measured by a negative response to the question: “In view of developments since we entered the fighting in Vietnam, do you think the U.S. made a mistake sending

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<sup>4</sup> Taken by photographer Ted Streshinky in November 1965

troops to fight in Vietnam?" (Lunch et al., 1979: 21-44). They found the following results.

<b>Month</b>	<b>Percentage who said NO</b>
August 1965	61%
March 1966	59%
May 1966	49%
September 1966	48%
November 1966	51%
February 1967	52%
May 1967	50%
July 1967	48%
October 1967	44%
December 1967	48%
February 1968	42%
March 1968	41%
April 1968	40%
August 1968	35%
October 1968	37%

February 1969	39%
October 1969	32%
January 1970	33%
April 1970	34%
May 1970	36%
January 1971	31%
May 1971	28%

*\* Voice from those opposing the U.S. Administration to conduct and continue the War in Vietnam:*

Political opposition to U.S. intervention in Vietnam eventually became the central issue of the conflict. That “hawks”<sup>5</sup> and “doves”<sup>6</sup> hotly debated the issue in Congress, policy forums, schools, churches, and often in the streets as well (Hixson, Volume 4, 2000: xiii) led to the widespread anti-war movement in the U.S. In any sense, opposition to U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War is significant because it was the first time a war was shown and accessed through the media to the public in the United States. Attracting members from college campuses, middle-class suburbs, labor unions, and government institutions, the anti-war movement gained national prominence in 1965, peaked in 1968, and remained powerful throughout the duration of the conflict.

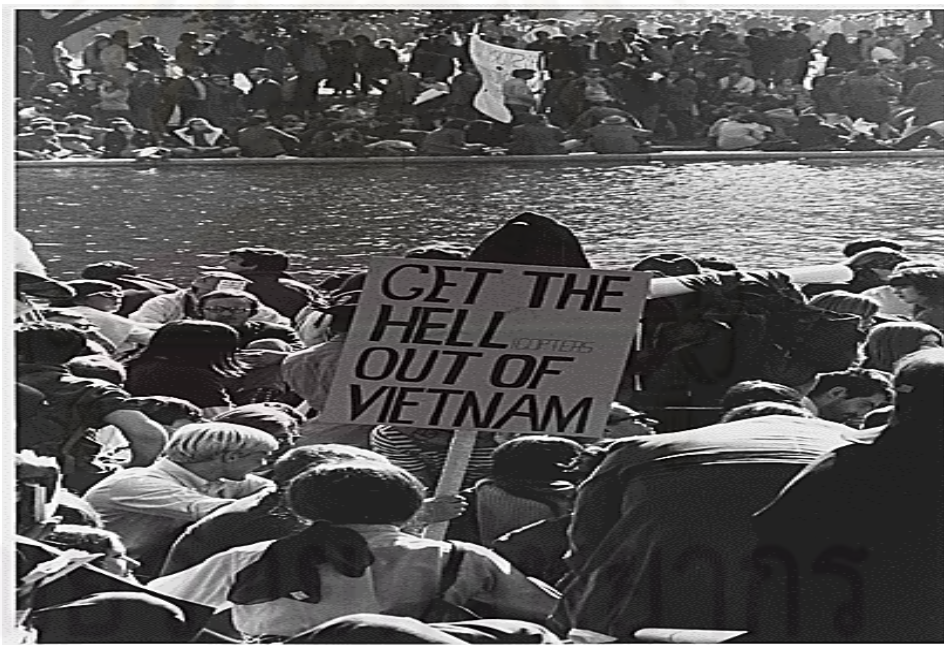
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<sup>5</sup> U.S. Republicans

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Democrats



American colleges were the starting point for the growing protest against the Vietnam War. More American students were enrolled in college than ever before, and the culture of freethinking and protest was already strong there as students played a major role in the civil rights movement. Students in Michigan formed the “Students for a Democratic Society”, also encouraged student activists to speak out against the war. Some universities held “teach-ins” where professors taught night sessions in which concerns about the war could be discussed. Students and other young people also began to resist the draft by burning their draft cards and fleeing to Canada. Over 100,000 young people fled the U.S. rather than be drafted to serve in Vietnam (Cayton et al., 2002).



*Caption 5: Protest against the Vietnam War was widespread in the U.S.*

*(from Wikimedia)*

In 1971 and after that, avoiding service in the Vietnam War became an issue in American politics. There were more and more American people believing the United States made a mistake in sending troops to Vietnam.

**TABLE 3**

*Percentage Believing the United States Made a Mistake in Sending Troops to Vietnam by Sex, Race, Education, and Age (Hixon, Vol. 4, 2000: 527)*

	Gallup National Results (May 1971) (N = 1,500 +)	Detroit Area Study Results (April-August 1971) (N = 1,881)
<b>Sex</b>		
Male.....	65	66
Female.....	72	72
<b>Race</b>		
White.....	67	68
Black*.....	83	82
<b>Education</b>		
College.....	66	70
High school.....	67	68
Grade school.....	75	73

**Age**

21-29.....	63	68
30-49.....	67	66
50 and over.....	73	74
<b>Total</b>	68	69

*NOTE.-Percentages calculated after removing missing data (11% reported by Gallup, 3.3% by Detroit Area Study).*

*\* Includes other nonwhites for Gallup only.*

More and more of U.S troops' anti-war efforts have been seen during the Vietnam War. American troops made anti-war efforts because they hated the war after seeing too many casualties and deaths, said historical experts at the two-day "Great Victory in Spring 1975" seminar, which started on April 14, 2005, was co-hosted by Vietnam's Ministry of Defense, the Central Committee for Ideology and Culture and Ho Chi Minh City. Also, American soldiers understood the unjustness of the war that the U.S. brought to Vietnam, experts added.

U.S. troops protested the war by deserting the army, opposing their superiors' orders, getting addicted to heroin or even committing suicide, said experts. After the Tet (Lunar New Year) Offensive in 1968, the morality of American troops became extremely low, and anti-war movements got stronger, said Dr. Ngo Van Quy from the Ho Chi Minh City Historical Science Association. He said the anti-war movement also spread to the U.S. Navy and Air Forces in 1972.

Petitions with thousands of signatures by U.S. Navy personnel were sent to the U.S Congress to demand an end of the war, Dr. Quy said. He added, according to the U.S. Pentagon, the number of mutiny cases among American military forces rose from 252 in 1968 to 370 in 1970, and then doubled in 1971.

U.S. statistics also showed that the number of U.S troops who deserted the army hit 7.35 per cent in 1971, four times higher than in 1966, Dr. Quy said. “On average, one American soldier deserted his post every six minutes,” he emphasized.

It is likely to categorize the reasons behind American opposition to the Vietnam War as: moral, legal, and pragmatic arguments against U.S. intervention; and reaction to the media portrayal of the devastation in Southeast Asia.

Anti-war protestors also made moral arguments against the United States’ involvement in Vietnam. This moral imperative argument against the war was especially popular among American college students. For example, in an article entitled, “Two Sources of Anti-war Sentiment in America,” Schuman found that students were more likely than the general public to accuse the United States of having imperialistic goals in Vietnam. Students in Schuman’s study were also more likely to criticize the war as “immoral” (Schuman, 2000: 127-150). Civilian deaths, which were either downplayed or omitted entirely by the Western media, became a subject of protest when photographic evidence of casualties emerged. In response to these photos William F. Petter wrote “A million children have been killed or wounded or burned in the war America is carrying on in Vietnam” (Allen, 56-63). A shocking photo of General Nguyen Ngoc Loan holding a pistol to the head of a ‘suspicious Viet Cong’ during the Tet Offensive (see photo below) also provoked a public outcry (Cawthorne, 2007: 275).





Another element of the American opposition to the war was claimed to be the perception that U.S intervention in Vietnam, which had been argued as acceptable due to the Domino Theory and the threat of Communism, was the concern that involvement there was not legally justifiable. Some Americans believed that the Communist threat was used as a scapegoat to hide imperialistic intentions, while others argued that the American intervention in South Vietnam interfered with the “self-determination” of the country, meaning that Vietnamese people ought to have determined the fate of the county and, therefore, America was not right to intervene.

จุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย



*Caption 6: Dr. Benjamin Spock and Dr. Martin Luther King are leading an anti-war demonstration in Chicago, March 25, 1967 (Cawthorne 2007:256)*

Additionally, media coverage of the war in Vietnam shook the faith of citizens at home. That is, new media technologies, like television, brought images of wartime conflict to the kitchen table. To illustrate this claim, Allen Guttman (1969) cites Mr. Fran McGee, NBC news figure who stated that the war was all but lost as a “conclusion to be drawn inescapably from the facts.” For the first time in American history the media was privileged to dispense battlefield footage to public. Graphic footage of casualties on the nightly news eliminated any myth of the glory of war. With no clear sign of victory in Vietnam, the media images of American military casualties helped to stimulate the opposition of the war in Americans.

But, after all, from both sides of argument, supporters and opponents, “the consensus in the United States was that the Vietnam War had been a colossal mistake. More than 58,000 Americans, most of them very young men, died in Indochina. Hundreds of thousands more returned home with physical or psychological wounds...” (Hixson, Volume 1, 2000: xi)

That is why 35 years after the end of the War, Wallace A. Joseph, an American Marine Corps veteran, withdrew war lessons from his very experience in Vietnam<sup>7</sup>, “Don’t get involved in a situation in a place where you don’t know anything about the people or the country. We had no specialists on Vietnam; we knew nothing about them; and we didn’t learn anything from the French. We also got involved without an exit strategy, and we were in there without any clear cut support from the American public. Most of us didn’t even know where Vietnam was on a map. We made the mistake of propping up a weak, unpopular government in South Vietnam, and later we were complicit in overthrowing the government because we finally realized they were incompetent. We stumbled in based on misinformation. We thought that the Vietnamese communists were part of an international communist conspiracy. We thought Ho Chi Minh was a pawn of China and Russia. One looks back, and it is a terrible tragedy.”

He added that nearly 60,000 Americans ended up dying. Even the war’s chief architect, Robert McNamara, who served under both Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, looked back 20 years after the war ended and said that it was all “terribly wrong”.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Interview in California, July 2009

<sup>8</sup> From the preface of *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (by Mc Namara, 1995): “We of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations who participated in the decisions on Vietnam acted according to what we thought were the principles and traditions of this nation. We made our decisions in light of those values. Yet we were wrong, terribly wrong. We owe it to future generations to explain why.”



In short, the term “Vietnam War” implies perceptions of both the U.S. administration and U.S. citizens that Vietnam War is a war happening in a country named Vietnam.

## 4.2. Vietnamese perspectives behind the name of “American War”

### 4.2.1. North Vietnam government’s viewpoints

By the terms of the Geneva Accord (1954), which ended the French Indochina War, the Viet Minh became the government of North Vietnam. The North Vietnamese leadership approved tentative measures to revive the southern insurgency in December 1956 to unify the country and considered the South Vietnamese regime a puppet controlled by the U.S.



*Caption 7: Foreign war-protestants in favor of Hanoi government (from Wikimedia)*



The North Vietnamese leaders argued that American involvement in Vietnam was not justified either on the grounds of vital national interest or strong moral imperative of the U.S. While U.S. leaders claimed that American intervention was justified because the war had been caused by “foreign aggression” (in the U.S. administration’s words) from North Vietnam, Hanoi government maintained that what was happening in Vietnam was essentially a Vietnamese internal affair in which the United States had no right to intervene.

Hanoi’s leaders also noted that Vietnam had been one country until it was temporarily divided by the Geneva Accords of 1954, which provided for general elections in 1956 to reunify the country and that it was the South Vietnamese “President”, Ngo Dinh Diem, who refused to honor that agreement. In addition, Hanoi rejected the notion that the United States had any treaty obligation to defend South Vietnam, noting that back in 1955, when the SEATO pact was approved, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles informed Congress that in the event of communist subversion “all we have is an undertaking to consult together as to what to do about it” (Young, 1991: 47).

Lieutenant General Nguyen Dinh Uoc in his memoir (Nguyen, 2008: 139-144) recalled his participation in the 3-day Vietnam War Symposium in 1999 in Lubbock, Texas at the invitation of Dr. James Reckner, Director of the Vietnam Center, Texas Tech University. Nguyen gave a speech named ‘Targets of the U.S. and Vietnam in the War’, in which he opened with these words, “Time has gone by, leaving us a chance to look back to the War in a more objective, honest, and comprehensive way. At many conferences, the Americans often suppose that the Vietnam War broke out due to the policy of both sides, that ‘North Vietnam wants to take over and impose communism in South Vietnam,’ and that the Americans

wish Vietnam to be independent, free of communism so the U.S need support its allies to prevent communists.”

Yet, “the truth is,” Nguyen added, “Vietnam is a unified nation. Never ever have there been two Vietnams. The Vietnamese people have the right to follow their wishing political regime [...]. U.S. leaders pleaded anti-communist to interfere into the internal affairs of Vietnam, or in other words, the Americans invaded Vietnam under the cover of anti-communist.” So, in one way or another, that was the onset of the “American War” - by and of the Americans.

In March 2005, Nguyen had attended a workshop on the Vietnam War in the U.S.<sup>9</sup>, emphasizing U.S. mistake of involving in Vietnam. He said, embarking on a political policy of gradual escalation of war, the U.S. burdened the ultimate result of total defeat, the meaningless loss of over 50,000 American men, and the maiming of thousands more. At that time, many American military officers have admitted that the 1975 victory showed Vietnam’s superior intelligence over the U.S. army.

“Also, the U.S was very proud of its air cavalry of 500 helicopters, which the U.S. army described as an invention of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But during the Vietnam War, the cavalry bit the dust, said Nguyen. This was more proof of Vietnam’s strength and intelligence, he said.

In a nutshell, to Northerners, it was the American War, by the invading Americans.

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<sup>9</sup> According to Thanh Nien (Youth) News Daily, 15 April 2005

#### *4.2.2. South Vietnam regime's viewpoints*

The South Vietnam regime can also be called Saigon government.

In 1954, France and the Việt Minh agreed at the Geneva Conference that the State of Vietnam (former name of Republic of Vietnam) would rule the territory south of the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel, pending unification on the basis of supervised elections in 1956. At the time of the conference, it was expected that the South would continue to be a French dependency. However, Ngo Dinh Diem, who preferred American sponsorship to French, rejected the agreement.

Then, Diem announced in a broadcast in 1956 that South Vietnam would not participate in the elections specified in the Geneva accords (Cheng, 1997: 11). As Saigon's delegation did not sign the Geneva accords, it was not bound by it, Diem said. He also claimed the communist government in the North created conditions that made a fair election impossible in that region.

Diem held a referendum in October 1955, asking voters to approve a republic and remove Emperor Bao Dai as head of state. Diem's "republic" was said to have been approved by 98 percent of voters. On 26 October, 1955, Diem declared himself as the president of the newly proclaimed Republic of Vietnam.

Diem attempted to consolidate his rule on Vietnam by eliminating rival groups. He launched an Anti-communist denunciation campaign (To Cong) against remnants of the communist Viet Minh. Throughout this period the level of U.S. aid and political support increased.

The South Vietnam regime's viewpoints about the War have its reasons tracing back Saigon's relationship with the United States. Hanoi would say the founding of South Vietnam was based on the United States's desire to create an "anti-communist" base in Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, Saigon argued that it was based on popular support of the South Vietnamese people. However, the U.S. and

the Diem government agreed that elections mandated by the Geneva Conference (1954) should not occur, claiming that the communists could not be trusted to conduct a fair election in the North. Moreover, most contemporary observers, including U.S. President Eisenhower, estimated that if an election were held in the 1954-55 period (when South Vietnam was under Bao Dai's rule), around 80% of the Vietnamese population would vote for Ho Chi Minh.



*Caption 8: U.S. President Eisenhower greeted South Vietnam President Ngo Dinh Diem in Washington, 1956*

The dominant political rationale for supporting the South Vietnam regime was America's containment policy, which was designed to hold back the spread of communism during the Cold War.

Although "the South Vietnam regime paid a price for fighting hard. They lost more than 230,000 men during this terrible war," (Nguyen Van Kiet, a former South Vietnamese Navy soldier, at the Vietnam Center in Lubbock, Texas on 17-



18 March 1999<sup>10</sup>), it was in the eyes of Saigon leaders that this War is Vietnam War supported by the U.S., a conflict in Vietnam that they needed foreign assistance to reach its plan: occupying the Southern half of the unified country of Vietnam to establish an autonomous territory which they called “Republic of Vietnam”.

#### *4.2.3. Northern and Southern Vietnamese ordinary people’s thoughts*

All patriotic Vietnamese people, during the war time, saw the United States as a foreign occupier. They were fighting in order to expel the invader from their country. In other words, from a (North or South) Vietnamese ordinary people’s perspective, it was a resistance struggle for independence.

All Northerners and Southerners were eventually colonially-occupied citizens of Vietnam. The objectives of Vietnamese insurgents were largely aligned and had been for decades: rid Vietnam of the authoritarian French, then the authoritarian Japanese, the French again (supported by America -- insufficiently, according to Bernard Fall), then America and the so-called puppet regime of Diem, then America.

A Vietnamese veteran<sup>11</sup> said the U.S. administration regarded communism as some kind of enemy, like other forms of socialism. But the thing was, whenever those U.S. people would talk about how bad communism is, often the reasons they would give would be framed in terms of how communism is authoritarian and oppressive, while the U.S. is all about freedom and democracy.

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<sup>10</sup> Available at Radio Free Asia, <http://www.rfa.org/english/features/opinion>

<sup>11</sup> Interview in Hanoi, December 2008 (It should be noted that the term “Vietnamese veteran” is different from “Vietnam veteran” in that the former refers to a war veteran who is Vietnamese, and the latter a U.S. veteran participating in the War in Vietnam.)

There are many arguments saying that North Vietnamese people supported North Vietnam government in the “Resistance War against the Americans to save the nation” while South Vietnamese people hated and went against North Vietnam because they regarded the War as a form of “invasion” by North Vietnam, not by the U.S. However, the facts show that these arguments are not true.

Hixson (Volume 4, 2000: viii) says that “Not all of the southern Vietnamese revolutionaries were communists, to be sure, but they opposed the Saigon government as a puppet regime of the United States – a continuation of foreign control that Vietnam had been struggling to overcome since the establishment of French colonialism.”

In brief, there is no difference in perspectives between ordinary Northerners and Southerners about the War. All they wanted is freedom, peace, and independence. Hence, to their eyes this war was the American War which forced them to do a Revolutionary War against the Americans to save the country.

**CHAPTER V**  
**SUGGESTIVE SOLUTIONS TO HEALING**  
**POST-WAR SORROWS**

*“How many American soldiers  
Died in this land?  
How many Vietnamese  
Lie buried under trees and grass? ...  
Now the wineglass join friends in peace.  
The old men lift their glasses  
Tears run down their cheeks.”*

(Karnow, 1991: 17)

**5.1. Remaining impacts of the War upon American people**

“There is the guilt all soldiers feel for having broken the taboo against killing, a guilt as old as war itself. Add to this the soldier’s sense of shame for having fought in actions that resulted, indirectly or directly, in the deaths of civilians. Then pile on top of that an attitude of social opprobrium, an attitude that made the fighting man feel personally morally responsible for the war, and you get your proverbial walking time bomb” (Caputo 1982).

The War in Vietnam impacted American veterans in a variety of ways. Most combat soldiers witnessed violence and lost friends to the horrors of war. The dedication of eight new names to the Vietnam War Memorial on 28 May 2001

brought the American death toll to 58,226,<sup>1</sup> a number that will continue to rise as the classified casualties of the covert war in Laos and Cambodia continue to surface. Some American veterans bore emotional and physical injuries that they would carry for the rest of their lives.

The U.S. not only lost a costly military war but also its sense of confidence, efficacy, and national unity. More than 58,000 U.S. soldiers lost their lives, approximately 153,000 were wounded, and some 2,500 are still listed as missing in action.<sup>2</sup> All these soldiers who fought in the war faithfully answered their country's call for service, many paid the ultimate price to defend their right to reflect on these events, but most likely, few completely understood what they were doing and why they were sent there. War obsessions remain until today.

O'Brien, a Vietnam War veteran, now a writer, returned to Vietnam 20 years after the end of the War and showed a journalist from Vietnam News Agency<sup>3</sup> his loss and trauma in his diary, "This little field, I thought, had swallowed so much. My best friend. My pride. My belief in myself as a man of some small dignity and courage..."

Another veteran said he would not go back to another Vietnam.<sup>4</sup> "We didn't prove anything, we didn't solve anything, we just made a whole lot of people unhappy. A lot of young men and women died. For country [U.S.], yes, but over there [Vietnam] - for nothing."

Many veterans are unable to leave behind the trauma of Vietnam and psychologically return home. They veterans struggle with a variety of extremely severe problems:

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.vietnam-war.info/casualties>

<sup>2</sup> Statistical information about casualties of the Vietnam Conflict, the National Archive:  
<http://www.archives.gov/research/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics.html>

<sup>3</sup> Vietnam News, January 2009

<sup>4</sup> Interview, California, July 2009



- Fears (such as of closed spaces, crowds, unfamiliar places, or sudden attack);
- Anxiety (such as restlessness, obsessive worries, compulsive rituals);
- Panic (such as a terror of losing control, suffocating, or going crazy);
- Depression (such as hopelessness, loss of all interests, suicidal impulses);
- Rage in the form of either intense violent emotions or violent actions;
- Irritability (such as feeling constantly annoyed, on edge, and critical);
- Shame (such as feeling embarrassed, exposed, violated, or like a misfit);
- Guilt (such as feeling others should have lived and he should have died, or feeling that he failed or made mistakes that had terrible consequences);
- Isolation (such as being physically present but emotionally absent, going off alone for long periods of time, or refusing to talk about family matters);
- Emotional emptiness (such as staring off into space blankly or refusing to show any feelings when everyone else is very emotional);
- Alienation (such as feeling that no one understands or that everyone makes too much fuss about unimportant things and too little about big problems);
- Being over-controlling (such as being extremely demanding or needing to make all decisions even if they are really someone else's responsibility);
- Inability to relax (such as always being on the go, never able to have fun, or turning everything into serious work or a crisis);
- Addiction (such as compulsive overuse of alcohol, drugs, or gambling).

Needless to say, remembrances continue to be stirred by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Its stark black granite reflecting panels, covered with the names of the

more than 58,000 American men and women who died in Vietnam, is a somber reminder of the loss of too many young Americans, and of what the War did to the United States and its messianic belief in its own overweening virtue.

## **5.2. Remaining impacts of the War upon Vietnamese people**

After the War, "... we [Vietnam] defeated the United States. But now we are plagued by problems. We do not have enough to eat. We are a poor, underdeveloped nation. Waging a war is simple, but running a country is very difficult" (Pham Van Dong, cited in Karnow 1991: 9).

In fact, the devastation of the War in Vietnam ran so deep, and was so widespread, that no one really knows the exact number of people killed or seriously injured during the war years. Most estimates range somewhere around 3 to 3.5 million Vietnamese people killed. To this day, about 300,000 Vietnamese are still considered 'missing in action'.

The War destroyed Vietnam in other ways as well. First, there were the bombs. Vietnam endured the most concentrated, intense bombing history has ever seen. The United States rained 8 million tons of bombs down on Vietnam - that's almost 3 times the total amount of all the bombs dropped worldwide during all of World War II, all on a country that's quite a bit smaller than the size of California. The U.S. flattened everything from schools, hospitals, Buddhist temples to crops, in a word, everything.

The U.S. also used a lot of biological warfare in Vietnam. The purpose was to destroy the environment in such a way to make it hard for the Viet Cong to hide in the forests, or to destroy crops and livestock so that the Vietnamese people might surrender due to starvation and other kinds of suffering. More than 6 million acres of South Vietnam were sprayed, including entire villages and farms - this

killed thousands of civilians and contaminated land so severely that in some parts of Vietnam, trees have only recently started to grow again. A wide range of crippling and disfiguring birth defects, caused by the teratogens that were put in the chemicals, are another lasting legacy of this especially vicious warring tactic.

Another thing is that millions of Vietnamese became refugees. Nobody even knows how many thousands of people perished during this time. Also an estimated 6 million unexploded mines and bombs remain in Vietnam and continue to kill farmers and children even today. The lingering effects of the war in Vietnam are too much to make into a list, it just goes on and on.

In short, the U.S. committed a great number of brutalities and atrocities against Vietnamese civilians (and indiscriminately bombing the countryside and mountains, planting untold number of landmines and sea mines, and using toxic chemicals such as Agent Orange to deforest the countryside, and which, even 30 years later, continues to contaminate Vietnamese food and people. All these actions ultimately devastated the lands and lives of countless innocent Vietnamese citizens.<sup>5</sup>

### **5.3. Efforts of and tentative suggested solutions to healing post-war sorrows**

War, of any kinds, is crime to human beings. Nonetheless, healing war wounds is more urgent and significant than looking back to the miserable past without doing anything. Efforts from both sides of the War in Vietnam, the U.S. and Vietnam, are necessary to open a new page for the harmony between these two nations and their respective people.

Vietnam War veteran Chuck Searcy, Vice-President of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF), on behalf of American veterans of the Vietnam

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with an editor of the Vietnam Communist Review, 29 December 2008

war, said - in an open letter to the people of Vietnam on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the end of the war on April 30, 1975 - that “there are many on all sides who still suffer the consequences of the war, including the hundreds of American families and the hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese families whose loved ones never have been found, the millions who attribute their medical problems and disabilities to America’s use of Agent Orange in Vietnam, and the children and adults in Vietnam who are still exposed every day to the dangers of death or injury from unexploded ordnance and landmines as well as residual effects of Agent Orange dioxin in remaining contaminated sites”<sup>6</sup>

Obviously, no one can change the past and erase the tragedy of the war, but people together can work for a better life towards future generations. The Vietnamese often say, ‘Close the past and open the future’, which makes U.S. former troops in Vietnam grateful for this gracious and generous attitude.

Searcy added, “While Vietnam has never demanded an apology from the U.S. for our massive armed intervention in Vietnam's internal affairs, we nonetheless wish to take this opportunity to express our recognition of America's role in causing tremendous devastation of natural resources, economic dislocation, loss of life and pain and suffering for millions of people. As American citizens, we offer our sincere regrets and deepest sympathies for the war's destruction and the continuing consequences for innocent people on all sides.”<sup>7</sup>

Two of the most remarkable efforts are helping Agent Dioxide (AO) victims and looking for ‘missing-in-action’ (MIA) soldiers.

***Helping Agent Dioxide (AO) victims:***

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<sup>6</sup> Available at <http://www.petitiononline.com/EOWVN/petition.html>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.



Many have been involving in these activities. For instance, Martna Halybortan, the spouse of a war veteran – Halyborton Porter Alex, on the occasion of returning to Vietnam with her husband in April 2005 said to Le Ma Luong – the Director of the Vietnam Military History Museum, “I hadn’t known much about the Resistance War against the Americans of the Vietnamese people until my husband came back from the war. It was he himself that made me close to the Vietnamese people.” She revealed in tears that Alex was an AO (Agent Orange) victim and this visit to Vietnam might be the last time he could return to Vietnam for his life could not last for so long.



*Caption 9: Halyborton and his wife Martna at Vietnam Military History Museum  
(Hanoi)*

Haunted by the sorrows of the war that her husband has suffered for years, Martna was determined to contribute to healing war wounds. She went to Vietnam in 2004 to teach English in Hoa Sua orphan school for 2 months. Meanwhile, she had a chance to go to mountainous Bac Ha (Lao Cai province, North Vietnam) to give pigs to poor families for them to raise. She also visited an orphanage in Hoi An (Quang Nam province, Central Vietnam), and Hope village in Da Nang city

(Central Vietnam). She even awarded poor students money in Hue (Central Vietnam). “My greatest impression upon the war by the American in Vietnam is Vietnamese children affected by AO I’ve met. How brutal the war was!” expressed Martna.<sup>8</sup>

Besides Martna and her husband, “more and more U.S. retired soldiers are contributing to the betterment of AO victims’ life in Vietnam.”<sup>9</sup>

***U.S. Missing in Action (MIA) remains hand-over:***

MIA soldiers are still being looked for with efforts from both the U.S. and Vietnam. So far, the remains of 909 Americans have been identified in and around Indochina since US troops officially left Vietnam in 1973: 645 in Vietnam, 230 in Laos, 31 in Cambodia and three in China, according to the US Embassy in Hanoi. There are 1,737 Americans still unaccounted for from the Vietnam War, including 1,322 in Vietnam.<sup>10</sup>

In brief, post-war cooperation between the U.S. and Vietnam is not necessarily politically significant, but above all, must be for humane purpose. All should be for humans, both the Americans and Vietnamese who are victims and victimized by the War in Vietnam.

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<sup>8</sup> According to a story by Le Ma Luong, the Director of the Vietnam Military History Museum, in Vietnamnet Daily issued on 2 April 2005

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Anna Monteleone (U.S. civilian), California, March 2010

<sup>10</sup> Thanh Nien (Youth) Daily, 13 September 2009

## **CHAPTER VI**

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The War in Vietnam generated controversy long after the guns went silent in Southeast Asia. The War occurred in present-day Vietnam, Southeast Asia, representing a successful attempt on the part of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam, DRV) and the National Front for the Liberation of Vietnam (Viet Cong) to unite the entire nation. Opposing the DRV was the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam, RVN), backed by the United States.

The debate whether or not the name American War or Vietnam War is more suitable to reflect the nature of the War seems to be endless, since the two names represent different perspectives from the two countries, Vietnam and the U.S., respectively. The U.S. and Vietnam perceived the world in different ways. The former did on a global scale, where imperialism was supposed to be the key to explaining U.S. acts upon other countries; meanwhile, the latter was more or less defensive after years of fighting against foreign invaders (former China, France, Japan, and the U.S.) and more focused on a regional scale when looking out to the world.

The thesis raises a question with a view to finding out the implications behind each name instead of arguing which name is right or wrong. Documentary research and interviews suggest that the name Vietnam War, used by the U.S. administration and people and the South Vietnam's regime, bears the meaning of a war happening in Vietnam - a supposedly civil conflict, in which the word America (or the U.S.) hides away. The name Vietnam War emphasizes the place of the battle. Meanwhile, the name American War, used by Vietnamese people,

implies a heroic war resisting against the American invader in Vietnam. It emphasizes the agent of the action (imperialist Americans).

Additionally, whilst the name Vietnam War seems to refuse to tell the nature of the war which is an invasion, the name American War points out exactly what is meant by that: a war by the American.

Although the story of the War might never end at the argument over the war's name. The story of the U.S. and Vietnam will continue to be told by the people of both countries providing that people still want to know the value of peace.

*“Vietnam is still with us. It has created doubts about American judgment, about American credibility, about American power – not only at home, but throughout the world.”* (Henry Kissinger, cited in Karnow 1991: 9)

War wounds are healing day after day with effort from both sides yet not easy to be treated overnight. That is why post-war impacts are not only in Vietnam (referred to the name Vietnam War) on Vietnamese people but also on the American (referred to the name American War).

Therefore, research on this War may be interests to many future scholars who want to rethink the War in their own views, and hopefully, young people from both countries will contribute to better understanding of the War so as for better war wounds healing.



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