

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: INVISIBLE ENEMIES: THE AMERICAN WAR
ON VIETNAM, 1975-2000

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This dissertation examines the construction of United States policy toward Vietnam from 1975-2000. Whereas the period since 1975 has traditionally been relegated to the epilogues of historical narratives about American-Vietnamese relations, this study moves that era to the center of the story, employing an interdisciplinary methodology to explore the intersections of diplomatic history, cultural representation, and international political economy. In the years following the withdrawal of its military forces from Southeast Asia, I argue, the United States continued to wage economic, political, and cultural warfare against the nation and people of Vietnam. In particular, I examine the ways in which cultural representations intersected and interacted with the formation of foreign policy. Both of these activities, I argue, were driven by the same cultural logic of “normalizing” the historical memory of the war, reinserting recuperative American narratives at the center of public discourses about the war while marginalizing

and silencing Vietnamese voices. What I call “The American War on Vietnam” was thus as much a battle for the cultural memory of the war in American society as it was a lengthy and bitter economic, political, and diplomatic war against the nation and people of Vietnam. I use a range of primary sources to reconstruct the policy history of this period, including many previously overlooked Congressional hearings. I also bring together a large body of secondary literature from a wide array of fields, including cultural and diplomatic history, cultural studies, political science, and economics. Pieced together from these disparate sources, I trace the changes and continuities in the American War on Vietnam over its twenty-five year course, from the initial imposition of an unprecedented and ill-conceived program of economic sanctions in 1975 to the final ratification of a bilateral trade agreement between the two nations in 2000.

INVISIBLE ENEMIES:
THE AMERICAN WAR ON VIETNAM, 1975-2000

by

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For Genanne

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Here's to Phase Two.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ADB	Asian Development Bank
ASEAN	The Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CGDK	Coalition Government of Kampuchea
CMEA	Council for Mutual Economic Assistance
DK	Democratic Kampuchea (Khmer Rouge Regime)
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam (“North Vietnam”)
FEER	<i>Far Eastern Economic Review</i>
IMF	International Monetary Fund
NLF	National Liberation Front
NYT	<i>New York Times</i>
RSV	Republic of South Vietnam
UN	United Nations
VCP	Vietnamese Communist Party
WB	World Bank
WP	<i>Washington Post</i>
WSJ	<i>Wall Street Journal</i>

*The President has gone to Vietnam,
A smallish country that we used to bomb
But now would like to send our products to.
And so our corporations take the view
That if the country's ruling class has picked
A form of rule that can be somewhat strict
That's up to them. And Clinton went to say
That there is nothing standing in the way
Of being friends with them forevermore.
Remind me, please: Why **did** we fight that war?*

- Calvin Trillin, “The Vietnam Peace” (2000)

INTRODUCTION

As the revolutionary forces of Vietnam draped and raised their flags throughout Saigon on April 30, 1975, the sound of gunfire continued. Although the sound was nothing new to the city, the intent of these shots was different. Fired in celebration by troops outside the former Presidential Palace, these were the sounds of victory; the second Indochina war was finally over. Several of the men surrounding Republic of Vietnam General Duong Van Minh were nevertheless understandably startled by the noise. As Bui Tin, a journalist and soldier for the Northern Vietnamese forces, accepted the formal surrender by the General, he told his former adversaries,

Our men are merely celebrating. You have nothing to fear. Between Vietnamese, there are no victors and no vanquished. Only the Americans have been beaten. If you are patriots, consider this a moment of joy. The war for our country is over.¹

Minh and his South Vietnamese colleagues were not likely put at ease by Tin's remarks, but it was certainly true that the Americans, who had hastily evacuated their remaining personnel the previous day, had been defeated. What Bui Tin could not possibly have realized at that moment, however, was that despite, and in fact because of, the successful campaign against the United States, the war for his country was in fact far from over.

As the revolutionary forces established control across Southern Vietnam, cracks in the fragile peace began to grow. To the North, an always contentious and precarious relationship between Hanoi and Beijing was being further strained as each country began

¹ Quoted in Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York, 1983), 683-684.

to position itself as the regional hegemon in Indochina. To the West, despite the mutual exchange of congratulatory messages on their recent triumphs, border tensions with the Khmer Rouge forces in Cambodia began to flare up as each side claimed control over long disputed areas that had been further destabilized by the American military assaults in the region. Although free from foreign occupation for the first time in over a century, Vietnam remained surrounded by hostile regimes and faced with the difficult task of rebuilding a nation devastated and deeply divided after thirty years of sustained warfare.

The difficult task of national reconstruction would have proven difficult enough under any circumstances; it would have been long and arduous even *with* the billions in American aid that had been promised as part of the 1973 peace accords; it would have been a financially imposing project even with the full and unfettered access to sources of international economic and humanitarian aid to which the Vietnamese were not only entitled, but in dire need of as well. Such issues should have been part of the spoils of war enjoyed by the impoverished and ravaged nation that had just defeated the primary superpower in the world. But as the Vietnamese were quickly learning in the years immediately following the American withdrawal, one of the few things worse than fighting a war against the United States is *winning* a war against the United States. In contrast to Germany and Japan, which after World War II received billions in American support, Vietnam found itself quickly cut off from American-controlled sources of economic assistance, humanitarian aid, and development loans. Had the United States

simply abandoned the nation altogether, rejecting calls for reparations and aid, the rebuilding of Vietnam may still have failed. The U.S., however, instead maintained an aggressive, hostile stance toward Vietnam, under which the nation and people of Vietnam would continue to suffer. Before the guns had even gone silent in Saigon, policymakers in the United States had initiated a series of punitive, vindictive policies against Vietnam that would define the course of relations between the two nations for the next two decades. As the Vietnamese war for national independence trudged on in the spring of 1975, a new phase of the American War against Vietnam began.

In this dissertation, I examine the post-1975 phase of United States policy toward Vietnam, which I call the American War on Vietnam, 1975-2000. Far from ending its war after the defeat of its Southern Vietnamese client regime, I argue, the United States continued to wage economic, political and cultural war on Vietnam after 1975. In particular, I examine the ways in which cultural representations intersected and interacted with the formation of foreign policy. Both of these activities, I argue, were driven by the same cultural logic of “normalizing” the historical memory of the war, reinserting recuperative American narratives at the center of public discourses about the war while marginalizing and silencing Vietnamese and other alternative and oppositional voices. By rendering Vietnamese subjects silent or invisible in American films, television shows, and comic books about the war while ignoring the real impact of United States policies

on Vietnam, the different “fronts” of the American War on Vietnam combined to reconstruct the cultural, political, and economic work of American empire in the wake of a devastating and divisive war. What I call “The American War on Vietnam” was thus as much a battle for the cultural memory of the war in American society as it was a lengthy and bitter economic, political, and diplomatic war against the nation and people of Vietnam.

I use a range of primary sources to reconstruct the policy history of this period, focusing in particular on many previously overlooked Congressional hearings, where the policies governing United States policy toward all of Southeast Asia after 1975 were discussed, debated, and developed. I focus on Congressional hearings for several reasons. First, they are often less sanitized sources of information than briefings or policy statements from the executive branch; in the back and forth of often-heated testimony, small windows can be found into the ironies and inconsistencies of the production of foreign policy. Secondly, the prints of committee proceedings often contain hard to find reports from other government agencies, such as the Government Accounting Office, Office of Management and Budget, and the Congressional Research Service; they also often include contemporary accounts from the news media that have been inserted for the record by participants. Not only do these reports often save a step in the research process, they also demonstrate which sources informed and influenced policy makers and witnesses at these hearings. Most importantly, however, congressional

hearings are extremely useful in demonstrating not only how policy debates were conducted, but also how they were *constructed*. What interests me is not only the discussions of American policy toward Vietnam after 1975, but the ways in which those discussions, whether they took place in Congress, in the pages of the news media, or on movie screens, constructed the terms and acceptable limits of debate. Indeed, as I argue here, one of the central characteristics of the American war on Vietnam after 1975 is the way in which it renders certain things completely outside the boundaries of public discourse.²

Along with these primary sources, I also bring together a large body of secondary literature from a wide array of fields, including cultural and diplomatic history, cultural studies, political science, and economics. Snippets of the story I wish to tell have been produced in all of these various places, but the entire narrative of American-Vietnamese relations has never been linked together in the manner proposed here. Pieced together

² A brief note on news sources: I have used a variety of news sources to reconstruct this history, but I rely heavily on accounts from five sources in particular: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, *Newsweek*, and *Time*. There are several reasons for this reliance. To begin with, for much of the period under consideration here, there were few American news sources with bureaus in Southeast Asia. The *Times* and the *Post* were among the exceptions to this rule. Although I consulted other newspapers in the course of my research, it became clear most other papers were either relying on accounts from these two sources or on wire service reports. Either way, reducing the focus of news articles to the *Times* and the *Post* and, similarly, to *Time* and *Newsweek* for weekly U.S. news magazines, while reducing a huge range of possible sources, has not compromised the overall integrity of my findings or argument. More importantly, with the exception of *FEER*, these are all among the most popular and widely-read news sources in the United States; they are particularly popular among policymakers in Washington, D.C. As noted above and demonstrated throughout this project, articles from these sources are widely cited in Congressional Hearings and often included in appendices in congressional reports and hearings prints. As such, they are particularly useful in exploring how public discussions of American policy toward Vietnam were constructed, and how cultural memory of the American War in/on Vietnam was actively contested in this era.

from these disparate sources, the changes and continuities in the American War on Vietnam over its twenty-five year course are traced here, from the initial imposition of an unprecedented and ill-conceived program of economic sanctions in 1975 through the U.S. backing of anti-Vietnamese forces during the Third Indochina War, to the final ratification of bilateral trade agreement between the two nations in 2000. The history constructed in this dissertation is designed to speak to a number of (inter)disciplinary conversations: on one level, it serves as an exploration of the construction of American foreign policy in the final chapter of the Cold War; on another, it is a contribution to recent work on the cultures of U.S. imperialism; it challenges scholars working in a number of fields to reconsider traditional definitions of what constitutes an act of war; and it proposes an interdisciplinary approach to the study of American foreign policy that places cultural representations and diplomatic history alongside one another as part of the same historical processes.

In the remainder of this introductory chapter, I discuss the methodological and theoretical approaches that I will employ in this study, and offer an outline of the chapters that make up my narrative. First, however, I will explore the relevant scholarly literature, arguing that the multifaceted nature of this topic necessitates an interdisciplinary approach. By combining approaches from History, the social sciences, and Cultural Studies, we can begin to grasp the full contours and implications of American policy toward Vietnam after 1975. Doing so, this study seeks to transcend the limits of previous

approaches to the problem, disrupting and transgressing the intellectual, disciplinary, and chronological boundaries that have contributed to the persistent invisibility of this phase of the American War on Vietnam and, indeed, of the Vietnamese in American representations of the war. Although I have tried to address scholarship in a number of areas, I begin with a discussion of the two most directly responsible for the development of this project, American Studies and Diplomatic History. The increasingly productive tension between these fields over the past several years has been central to the formation of the ideas and narrative presented here.

When Disciplines Collide: Historical Narratives of the American War in Vietnam

For several decades, the disciplinary wheels of American Studies and Diplomatic History have run on parallel tracks. At times, they seem even to be operating in parallel universes, never destined to meet. Over the past years, however, the trajectories of the fields have been altered, and the two now seem to be intersecting on a more regular basis—heading, perhaps, toward an interdisciplinary collision. I propose that this dissertation is the site of one of these collisions.

Once a fledgling field attempting to define the true nature of “American Civilization” or demonstrate the uniqueness of “the American mind,” American Studies has become increasingly interested of late with America’s place in the world. Especially

since Janice Radway, in her 1998 Presidential Address to the American Studies Association (ASA), asked us to reconsider the name of the Association, the field has been abuzz with calls for the “Internationalization” of American Studies and for the further development of research and teaching agendas that would focus equally on the global and the local.³ In a 1993 essay, Amy Kaplan identified what she described as three issues that contributed to the problem of empire across several disciplines: “the absence of culture from the history of U.S. imperialism; the absence of empire from the study of American culture; and the absence of the United States from the postcolonial history of imperialism.⁴ As ASA President in 2003, Kaplan echoed these themes in her presidential address.⁵

Diplomatic History, during the last decade, has heard similar appeals. In his 1990 Address, Michael Hunt called upon the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR) to develop a “practical” agenda for internationalizing the field, thinking about the institutional and professional ramifications of such changes.⁶ However, even more common in the pages of *Diplomatic History* have been pleas for greater attention to “culture” as a source of theoretical and methodological innovation for

³ Janice Radway, “What’s in a Name,” Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November, 1998. Reprinted in *American Quarterly* 51 (Spring, 1999), 1-32.

⁴ Amy Kaplan, “Left Alone With America: The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture,” in Kaplan and Donald Pease, eds., *Cultures of U.S. Imperialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 11.

⁵ Amy Kaplan, “Violent Belongings and the Question of American Empire Today.” *American Quarterly* 56 (March 2004): 1-18.

⁶ Michael Hunt, “Internationalizing U.S. Diplomatic History: A Practical Agenda,” Presidential Address to the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations. *Diplomatic History* 14 (1991): 1-11.

historians of foreign relations and a significant factor in the production of American foreign policy. Perhaps the most prominent of these recent calls came from Emily Rosenberg, in her 1998 Presidential Address, “Revisiting Dollar Diplomacy.”⁷ Finally, and most recently, Robert McMahon’s 2001 Address, “Contested Memory: The Vietnam War and American Society, 1975-2001,” to which I will return later, noted with great urgency that the issue of national memory of the American war in Vietnam was “far too important a subject for foreign relations specialists to abandon to the cultural historians, the cultural studies specialists, and the political polemicists.”⁸

Thus as American Studies looks increasingly outward and Diplomatic History looks increasingly inward, paths, if not research agendas, are beginning to cross; eyes, if not hearts, beginning to meet across crowded conference halls. Certainly, collisions have already begun to occur. One could argue that the path toward normalized relations between the two fields has already been blazed. At the annual conferences of both the ASA and SHAJR, one is increasingly likely to find commonalities in panel and paper titles. Several sessions at the last several American Studies meetings, and even one conference theme, have been devoted to explorations of American empire. But few, if any, of these sessions have featured diplomatic historians. American Studies scholars have been even scarcer at SHAJR conventions. Few colleagues of mine, or of the other American Studies scholar on my panel at a recent SHAJR convention, even knew what SHAJR was.

⁷ Revisiting Dollar Diplomacy: Narratives of Money and Manliness,” *Diplomatic History* 22 (Spring, 1998).

⁸ “Contested Memory: The Vietnam War and American Society, 1975-2001,” *Diplomatic History* 26 (2002): 159-184; 184.

In published scholarship, too, one could find a number of recent works that would seem to belie any great chasm between the fields. The aforementioned Amy Kaplan and Emily Rosenberg, as well as Mark Bradley, Kristin Hoganson, Melanie McAllister and Mary Renda have all produced landmark scholarship that explores the complex intersections of race, gender, and foreign relations.⁹ Renda's book, *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism*, was honored with top awards from both the American Studies Association and the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations.¹⁰ Yet these exemplary works stand out to a large degree because they are still bumps in the night, harbingers of things yet to come rather than markers of well established theoretical or methodological shifts. They serve as indications that American Studies and Diplomatic History may still have the occasional run-in, moments which are to be praised and awarded, but after which we are to return to our respective corners.

At first glance, it seems odd; one wonders why the two fields have not inched closer in the past. Aside from the obvious topical connections (both disciplines focus on the politics, histories, and cultures of the United States), the various addresses and articles invoked above betray some common history and similar concerns: both fields gained prominence as a result of the Cold War; both have worked in the service of American

⁹ Kaplan, *Cultures of United States Imperialism; The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); Mark Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919-1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Kristin Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Melanie McAllister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Mary Renda, *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation & the Culture of U.S. Imperialism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

¹⁰ My thanks to Mark Bradley for pointing this out to me.

empire; both have at times practiced, embraced, critiqued, and abandoned an unabashed American exceptionalism; both share a desire for greater language skills among graduate students; and both are in need of greater comparative and collaborative work.

Still, Diplomatic History and American Studies remain separate and somewhat disparate fields, with distinct practices and politics, each, it would seem, somewhat suspicious of the other. I could not agree more with Professor McMahon when he argues that the study of popular memory, and of popular culture, is too important to be left to cultural studies scholars, and I am certain that there are others in American Studies who feel a similar sentiment about foreign policy and diplomatic historians. My sense is that these suspicions are as much political as they are intellectual. I am still somewhat in both shock and awe of an academic conference that features, as SHAFR does, an official State Department reception. Not only would one be more likely to find something along the lines of a group protest of State Department policy at an American Studies conference, but I would speculate, only partially in jest, that there are many of us in the ASA who would have trouble gaining security clearance for such a high level government affair. The question of politics, however, is best left to another time and place. Here, I wish to focus on the intellectual distance between the fields: matters of theory, chronology, and methodology. On these matters, there is still much to be concerned about for scholars in both fields leering warily at the other.

In this section, I offer a brief overview of scholarship about the American War in

Vietnam, an admittedly daunting task. The lines between historical scholarship, polemics, biography, memoir, journalism, and fiction written about the war have always been blurred. Even within the category of what might be considered “legitimate” historical scholarship, hundreds of works on military, political, cultural, and intellectual history present themselves as potential candidates for review. Furthermore, given the interdisciplinary approach central to this dissertation, it is necessary to examine scholarship on the American War in Vietnam coming out of interdisciplinary fields such as Cultural Studies as well as work on the war and on Vietnam emanating from Social Sciences. While it is clearly impossible to provide a comprehensive overview of all the variations and trends in this body of literature, it is possible, by examining some of the major works in the field, to discern certain several narrative patterns, explanatory schemes, and gaps left to be addressed by future studies.

All of these (inter)disciplines have something to contribute to the understanding of American-Vietnamese relations since 1975, yet many of the works discussed here remain limited by their disciplinary boundaries. By working at the intersections of American Studies and Diplomatic History, I argue, we can develop a very different view of this period and begin to see some of the potential pitfalls and promises offered by the collision of these and other disciplines. Thus I posit that this dissertation, based in the interdisciplinary space of American Studies, can bring together useful and relevant strands from these vast bodies of work. Adding to this my own original contributions to

scholarship on America and Vietnam after 1975, the end result will be stronger than the sum of its parts. As such, I argue, this dissertation fits into a tradition of American Studies work as a “third space.” I will have more to say about this “space” at the end of this chapter.

To begin with, there are four dominant narratives of the American War in Vietnam that circulate among historical scholarship and in public discourses about the war. The first of these is the “Hand Behind the Back Theory.” The assertion of this theory tends to come largely from military histories of the war, especially those written by members of the armed forces, and from conservative pundits and politicians. Held back by policy makers, who were themselves held back by a liberal media and a disloyal anti-war movement, the story goes, the United States could have triumphed in Vietnam if it had simply committed more firepower and expanded the conflict into a more “conventional” war. Although this tract is less popular among academics, it remains a familiar explanatory scheme in public discussions of American foreign policy.¹¹ This narrative rests on a number of troubling omissions, the most important of which are that it fails to address the origins of American involvement in the region, neglects to consider what “victory” might have meant for the United States in Vietnam, and completely marginalizes the historical victory of the revolutionary forces of Vietnam.

The problems of the second narrative category, however, are more subtle and

¹¹ Two prototypes of this narrative are: Col. Harry Summers, *On Strategy* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1982); and Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). Other clear examples of this theory have come in U.S. Grant Sharp's *Strategy for Defeat* (1978), W. Scott Thompson and Donaldson Frizzell, eds. *Lessons of Vietnam* (1977), and several studies done by Michael Westbrook in the periodicals *Army* and *Combat Effectiveness* (1979).

pervasive. This is a narrative that has been widely termed the "quagmire" theory. This view holds that the United States, led by the "best and brightest" minds in America, entered Vietnam with the noblest of intentions but ultimately failed as a result of a series of policy mistakes, trapped in the "quagmire" of Vietnam. The grandfather of this narrative line comes from Arthur Schlesinger's *The Bitter Heritage: Vietnam and American Diplomacy*, in which he writes that the United States was "lured" into the "morass" of Vietnam, ultimately concluding, "the Vietnam story is a tragedy without villains."¹² Although James Gibson's *The Perfect War* (1986) offers an insightful critique of the quagmire model and Vietnam as "nightmare", by far the best rebuking of the quagmire narrative comes from Daniel Ellsberg in his *Papers on the War*.¹³ As Ellsberg points out, this quagmire serves as a particularly appealing image for the collective American consciousness and sense of national identity:

It is not, after all, Presidents and Cabinet Members who have a powerful reason to deny their responsibility for this war. And who succeed at it. It is true that the fact of executive deception gives the quagmire model a reality with respect to the *public*... Nevertheless, just as Presidents and their partisans find comfort and political safety in the quicksand image of *President-as-Victim*, so Americans at large are reassured in sudden moments of doubt by the same image drawn large, *America-as Victim*.¹⁴

These larger psychological needs served by the quagmire theory ultimately allow the narratives of American history to swallow the events of the war in Southeast Asia. In

¹² Schlesinger, *The Bitter Heritage: Vietnam and American Diplomacy 1941-1968* (Houghton-Mifflin, 1969), 48. Other examples of this model can be found in the works of David Hallberstam (*The Making of a Quagmire*, 1965) and Stanly Karnow (*Vietnam: A History*, 1983).

¹³ Daniel Ellsberg, "The Quagmire Myth and the Stalemate Machine," *Papers on the War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972) pp.47-135.

¹⁴ Ibid., 129-30, all emphases in original.

order to gain a historical understanding of the American war in Vietnam, according to Ellsberg, "one must begin by seeing that it is Americans, our leaders and ourselves, that build the bog, a trap much more for other victims: *our* policies, our politics the quagmire in which Indochina drowns."¹⁵

The third major narrative of American involvement in Vietnam is the "cultural misunderstanding" model. This view holds that the United States could never have succeeded in Vietnam because policy makers and military commanders alike failed to see the cultural, historical, and political realities of Indochina. The best example of this view comes from Frances Fitzgerald's *Fire in the Lake*, which has been criticized widely from both the left and the right.¹⁶ As Marvin Gettleman explains in his account of Vietnam War scholarship, the success of the book is due to its ability to explain the failure of The United States in Vietnam, "but not too harshly." Gettleman, along with Vietnamese historians Ngo Vinh Long, notes that Fitzgerald's account proved too simplistic in its view of Vietnamese culture and too dismissive of the possibility of an imperialist critique of American involvement:

In [Fitzgerald's] view, Marxism's appeal to the Vietnamese was merely the reaction of an unsophisticated peasantry still sunk in traditional Confucian values. Fitzgerald's view of the American side of the conflict was almost as shallow, as she could not bring herself to use the "i" word-imperialism-and hence missed the geopolitical imperatives to consolidate and extend capitalism.¹⁷

Slightly different versions of the cultural misunderstanding model come from Loren

¹⁵ Ibid., 131.

¹⁶ Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1972).

¹⁷ Marvin E. Gettleman, "Against Cartesianism: Three Generations of Vietnam Scholarship," in *Coming to Terms: Indochina, The United States, and the War*, Douglas Allen, and Ngo Vinh Long, eds. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), 297.

Baritz and James Gibson. Baritz, in his *Backfire: How American Culture Led Us Into Vietnam and Made Us Fight the Way We Did*, locates the cultural misunderstanding not between the cultures of America and Vietnam, but as an aspect of the myopia and solipsism deeply rooted in American culture.¹⁸ Looking at the Vietnamese as a mirror of themselves, Americans were unable to see the realities of the situation in Vietnam. Part of the reason the United States was able to justify the war, according to Baritz, was an ability to see themselves, as Stanley Karnow does, as "different" from other imperialists. Baritz argues that "we went into Vietnam in the name of ideas, of principles, of abstraction," an argument which he is able to sustain only through a troubling model of culture on the one hand, and a refusal to engage a massive body of work which suggests otherwise, on the other:

[T]he North's decision to continue fighting, and our decision to stop, were each consistent with the cultural imperatives of each nation. Because South Vietnam was trained by us to fight in the American style, it was forever dependent on a supply of hardware and fuel. That army was incongruent with the culture it was trying to defend.¹⁹

Despite the intriguing and sometimes insightful arguments of both Gibson and Baritz, however, both ultimately fall prey to the same trap as Fitzgerald, failing to assess the larger political, strategic, diplomatic, and economic aspects of American policy.

In his essay "Vietnam," Ngo Vinh Long notes that the fundamental problem with Western historians is that they, like the American policy makers during the war, have

¹⁸ Baritz, *Backfire* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1985;1998), 30; James Gibson, *The Perfect War: The War We Couldn't Lose and How We Did* (New York: Random House, 1986), 11-17.

¹⁹ Baritz, *Backfire*, 180.

failed to comprehend the "realities" of Vietnam:

It has been convenient for U.S. policymakers and mainstream historians to refuse to acknowledge the real enemy in order to justify the U.S. war effort as well as the failure of that effort, but many serious students of Vietnamese history have realized over the years that the total disregard of the realities of Vietnam had doomed U.S. intervention from the start.²⁰

Long's sentiments have been echoed by Stephen Vlastos, who, in a critique of "revisionist" Vietnam war scholarship, notes that an increasing number of works on this subject obfuscate events crucial to the rise of Vietnamese nationalist resistance and generally marginalize the Vietnamese as a people, in terms that seek to legitimate American intervention.²¹ Further describing the failure of Western scholars to validate the victories of the Vietnamese, Marvin Gettleman, in describing three "generations" of Vietnam War scholarship, asserts that the two earlier generations, although increasingly critical of United States policies in Indochina, also fail to accurately describe the Vietnamese revolutionary forces. These generations are part of the historical project that Gettleman calls "Cartesian Imperialism; I invade you therefore you exist." In such a framework, the Vietnamese can only be described in terms of their relationship to the United States as the object of an invasion, rather than the subject of active opposition.²²

A work that provides the foundation for Gettleman's third generation, and as an important departure for Western scholarship on the war in Vietnam is Gabriel Kolko's *Anatomy of a War*. The narrative presented by Kolko may be termed the "Imperialism

²⁰ Ngo Vinh Long, "Vietnam," in *Coming to Terms*, 10.

²¹ Vlastos, "Revisionist History," in Rowe and Berg, eds., *The Vietnam War and American Culture*.

²² Marvin Gettleman, "Against Cartesianism: Three Generations of Vietnam Scholarship," in *Coming to Terms*, 210.

narrative." This narrative argues that American policy toward Indochina was guided by imperial economic policies, specifically the development of a global capitalist economy guided by the desire for an integrated, global capitalist economy guided by Western Europe, The United States, and Japan. The initial impetus for American involvement in Southeast Asia, according to this theory, was the development of strong Asian markets for Japan, which was to become the Eastern "wing" of the global capitalist network, anchored in the West by Western Europe and The United States. "The history of the post-war era is essentially one of the monumental attempts-and failures-to weave together such a global order and of the essentially vast autonomous social forces and destabilizing dynamics emerging throughout the world to confound its ambitions," writes Kolko. "At stake were the large and growing strategic and economic interests in those unstable nations experiencing the greatest changes."²³

Although far from the most common, or dominant, narrative of American involvement in Vietnam circulating in American society, the basic evidence on which the Imperialism narrative rests is undisputed, cited in some textbook histories of the war that transcend any particular narrative tradition. Perhaps the best example of this comes from George Herring's *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*.²⁴ While not without its flaws, such as an overly American-centered point of view, Herring's book is rightly acclaimed by many as the most balanced and even-handed

²³ Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War* (New York: The New Press, 1985;1994), 73.

²⁴ *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1979;1996).

approach to the war. Herring actually takes a wider chronological view of the war than his title indicates, noting that American policy makers during the immediate post-World War Two era were particularly concerned with the stability of a wide region of Asia, in terms of both stable markets and access to raw materials:

The United States thus set out to defend a region perceived to be the “vital segment” of the “great crescent” of containment, stretching from Japan to India, ironically seeking to preserve for Japan in 1950 the sphere of economic influence it had attempted to thwart in 1941.²⁵

National Security Memos from the late 1940s through the early 1950s repeatedly note the strategic value of Southeast Asia, both in terms of raw materials, including rubber, oil, and tin, and as a trading partner for Japan. The entire region was to be defended at any cost, according to these documents--a policy stance which eventually led to American intervention in the Korean War, and in Indochina, which, as a 1952 NSC Memo states, “is of far greater strategic importance than Korea.”²⁶ By 1952, of course, the United States’ interest in Japan’s integration into the global capitalist economy was even greater, given the recent revolution in China. Another NSC memo from the same year notes that in addition to Indochina, the “loss” of “Malaysia and Indonesia in particular could result in such economic and political pressure on Japan as to make it extremely difficult to prevent Japan’s eventual accommodation to Communism.”²⁷ In short, then, the United States envisioned a Southeast Asia that would serve as a source of raw materials, particularly for Japan, and as a market for the finished consumer goods of Japan and its

²⁵Herring, 16. Herring here is citing NSC-48.

²⁶ NSC 124/1, 1952, *Pentagon Papers, Volume One, Senator Gravel Edition [PP]* (Boston, 1971), 375-381.

²⁷ NSC 124/2, *PP*, 385-86.

trading partners.

The most important aspect of the Imperialism narrative, however, is chronological. Alone among the dominant narrative strands surveyed here, it has expanded the narrative boundaries of the American War in Vietnam to include events prior to 1954 and, importantly, events and actions dating back to 1945. As Bruce Franklin notes in his discussion of the Imperialism narrative, the origins of the American War in Vietnam should correctly be traced to the fall of 1945, when the U.S. began military support for the French recolonization of Indochina. At that time, U.S. ships carrying American soldiers home from Europe were diverted to Southeast Asia to provide material support to the French effort to reconquer Vietnam.²⁸ This important development, discovered by Michael Gillen in his 1991 dissertation, is noticeably absent in histories of the American War in Vietnam, included only tangentially in a few works, including that of Marilyn Young, who directed the dissertation.²⁹

For all of their differences, every one of these dominant narratives of the war ends its story of American involvement in Vietnam with the “fall” of Saigon in April, 1975. Although no one would dispute that this date marks the formal end of the Second Indochina War, America’s role in Vietnam’s future was far from ended at the time. Events after 1975, the focus of this dissertation, indeed have a great deal to tell us about American imperial designs on Southeast Asia, Vietnam’s place in the region and the

²⁸ Franklin, “When Did the Vietnam War Begin?”

²⁹ Ibid.

world after its victory, about American foreign policy in the late stages of the Cold War, and indeed, about the conduct, legacies, and, perhaps, even the outcome of the American War in Vietnam. Taking the argument of the Imperialism narrative and the abundant evidence on which it rests as a starting point, we can begin to see contours of an American War in/on Vietnam that plays out over a much broader chronological spectrum when we consider the period after 1975 to be a crucial part of the narrative.

For example, Karnow's *Vietnam: A History*, an exemplar of the Quagmire model, uses particular chronological foci during the early Cold War period along with other narrative structures to tell a particular story of the war. On the other end of the chronological spectrum, even the 1991 edition of Karnow's book fails to adequately deal with the period after 1975. With a small section added, ironically, to the Preface, Karnow brings the reader up to date on events in both the United States and Vietnam through early 1990. He describes the troubles of the Vietnamese economy and spends a great deal of time focusing on what the war has done "to America," but does so in separate sections, implicitly arguing that these various developments are "legacies" of a war in the past rather than part of an ongoing set of relations between the United States and Vietnam. The American-led Embargo of Vietnam, for instance, is mentioned only in passing, rather than taken as a major factor in the troubles of the Vietnamese economy.³⁰

This trend of focusing on the years of direct military involvement, marginalizing the periods prior to 1950 and after 1975 is also replicated in several anthologies on the

³⁰ Ibid., 42-3. The mention of the embargo comes on 53.

war. *Light at the End of the Tunnel: A Vietnam War Anthology*, edited by Andrew J. Rotter, is woefully lacking in discussions of Cold War policy and post 1975 developments.³¹ The 1990 edition of *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War*, cited in the previous section and edited by Robert McMahon, while including several pieces on Cold War policy and their economic origins, fails to address the period after 1975 in any meaningful way, including documents related to the embargo and American actions against Vietnam, but focusing almost exclusively on the “legacies of the war” for the United States.³² In *Vietnam and America: A Documented History*, Marvin Gettleman, Marilyn Young, Jane Franklin and H. Bruce Franklin offer a series of documents and essays to contextualize the American War in Vietnam. Yet the period after 1975 receives only two essays, one from H. Bruce Franklin on the POW/MIA issue, and one from Marilyn Young on “The Vietnam War in American Memory,” both of which mention the embargo and the ongoing struggles between the United States and Vietnam only in passing.

George Herring, Gary Hess, and Marilyn Young offer perhaps the best examples of the limits imposed by the traditional chronological arrangement of the war in Vietnam. Both of their texts, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam 1950-1975* and *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990*, respectively, offer very comprehensive histories of the war, both address issues of the global economic roots of American policy toward Southeast Asia, both pay at least some attention to post-1975 developments. For the

³¹ Andrew J. Rotter, ed. *Light at the End of the Tunnel* (Wilmington, DE: St Martin’s Press, 1991;1999).

³² McMahon, *op cit*, especially pp. 72-117 and 608-647.

period after 1975, Herring does briefly discuss what he calls a “postwar-war,” which includes economic sanctions against Vietnam, and the ongoing negotiations over reparation payments and normalization of diplomatic relations.³³ These inclusions, however, read more as an aside than as an important development in Herring’s story. Young, as the title of her book indicates, considers the American war(s) against Vietnam not only to be plural rather than singular, but to have consumed a very wide time frame, from the immediate post-World War Two period through the Gulf War.³⁴ She discusses in some detail the American policy goals of creating a Japanese-centered, Southeast-Asian sphere of an integrated, global capitalist economy in the 1940s. Furthermore, in her conclusion she examines punitive actions taken by the United States against Vietnam after 1975.³⁵ So while expanding somewhat our chronological understanding of the war, none of these books, takes either period as a central focus, leaving that project, presumably to the next wave of scholarship. Even the most cursory glance at the most recent work on the war to emerge in recent years indicates that the gauntlet has not yet been picked up.³⁶

³³ Herring, *America’s Longest War*.

³⁴ Published in 1991, however, one must ask if bounding the study 1945-1990 indicates that the wars were finally over at the point of publication even though Young does not say as much.

³⁵ Young, *The Vietnam Wars*, esp. pp. 24-30 and 303-305.

³⁶ Peter Lowe’s edited volume, *The Vietnam War* (New York: St. Martin’s 1998), while an excellent example of international history, remains bound by chronological limitations, without a single essay that examines post-1975 events. Larry Addington’s *America’s War in Vietnam: A Short Narrative History* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 2000) spends a great deal of time on the period prior to direct American military involvement in Vietnam, but spends only a brief paragraph describing the relationship between Vietnam, the United States, and the world after 1975. Likewise, in his otherwise

Recently, Diplomatic History seems to be moving into the area of post-1975 American-Vietnamese relations, but its initial forays should sound alarms for cultural studies scholars. T. Christopher Jespersen's article, "The Bitter End and the Lost Chance in Vietnam: Congress, the Ford Administration and the Battle Over Vietnam, 1975-76," provides a necessary corrective to historical narratives of the war and points to the shortcomings of other work, noting that "most historical investigations into the nature of Vietnamese relations stop in 1975, if not 1973."³⁷ Perhaps the most important statement on the state of Diplomatic History scholarship with regard to American-Vietnamese relations since 1975, however, comes from Robert McMahon's Presidential Address, quoted earlier. In that essay, McMahon argues that both the Ford and Carter administrations began the "vindicationist" revision of war, reinscribing the war in public discourse as a courageous and heroic venture. This was accomplished, he notes, largely by focusing on the recuperation of American veterans of the war and, secondarily, by rendering outside these discursive structures any sense of what the war did (and was

excellent *Vietnam and the United States: Origins and Legacy of War* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998), Hess has a great deal to say about the origins of the war, focusing on the rise of Vietnamese nationalism and early American involvement in the region. His attention to the "legacies" of the war, however, consists of a scant fifteen pages describing post-1975 developments. In Gerard DeGroot's *A Noble Cause? America and the Vietnam War* (Pearson Education, 2000), especially pp. 26-35, 325-360), the author's historiographic essay, "Historians at War," asserts that his text will move beyond the 1945-1975 boundary. Unfortunately, his discussion of the pre-1945 developments in Vietnam and particularly of American Cold War policies leaves much to be desired, moving us nowhere past where Marilyn Young left off. His discussion of post-1975 developments is actually divided, one chapter for Vietnam, where American policy toward Vietnam barely consumes a paragraph, and an all-too-familiar chapter on the United States, entitled "Remembering and Forgetting," which describes the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, post-traumatic stress disorder, and the "Vietnam syndrome."

³⁷ T. Christopher Jespersen, "The Bitter End and the Lost Chance in Vietnam: Congress, the Ford Administration and the Battle Over Vietnam, 1975-76," *Diplomatic History* 24 (Spring, 2000), 267.

continuing to do) to the nation and people of Vietnam.³⁸ It was in precisely this atmosphere that Carter was able to proclaim, with a straight face, that the destruction wrought on Vietnam at the hands of American power was “mutual.”³⁹ Against this triumphalism, McMahon argues that representations of the war in popular culture worked within an “antiwar” paradigm, offering an alternative form of cultural memory. Popular forms, he argues, “represented the war as a lost, pointless, morally ambiguous conflict.”⁴⁰

In this piece, we get only a very surface level reading of several texts, including the first wave of American films about the war, released during 1977-1979. *Coming Home* (1978), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), and *Apocalypse Now* (1979), McMahon argues, are the exemplars of popular representations of the war: “together, they powerfully reinforced notions of the war as a hopeless, pointless, morally tainted endeavor.” These are strong claims to make about three historic films, the first major Hollywood movies explicitly related to the war in Vietnam, yet McMahon spends only three sentences explaining them. The only evidence he offers for this explanation is a statement from Francis Ford Coppola, creator of *Apocalypse Now*.⁴¹

Admittedly, a Presidential Address, even in published form, may not be the place

³⁸ McMahon, “Contested Memory,” 164-171.

³⁹ “Remarks at Press Briefing, March 24, 1977,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Jimmy Carter, 1977* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1979), 499-500. This issue will be discussed at length here in chapter two.

⁴⁰ McMahon, “Contested Memory,” 177-179.

⁴¹ Ibid., 178-79, n.62. The quotation from Coppola reads: “The most important thing I wanted to do in the making of *Apocalypse Now* was to create a film experience that would give the audience a sense of the horror, the madness, the sensuousness, and the moral dilemma of the Vietnam War.” The passage is taken from James Olson and Randy Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell* (St. James, NY, 1999), 270.

for a detailed critique of these representations. Yet the general theoretical and methodological assumptions underlying this approach indicate a larger intellectual problem. McMahon's essay rests on several assumptions that point out some of the perils of simply "adding" popular culture to the study of diplomatic history. Popular culture, in this formulation, is always secondary, a response to the "official," top-down discourse emanating from Congress and the White House. Also, the texts are taken at face value. No attempt is made to situate the texts in the political and social contexts within which they were constructed, disseminated, and received by audiences. Such an approach, as we will see, only reinforces the shortcomings of cultural studies approaches to representations of the war in American culture.

In order to advance our understanding of the war in Vietnam and its continued importance, we need scholarship which takes the periods prior to 1950 and after 1975 not as "prologues" or "epilogues" to the main story, but rather takes events of those periods to be the main stories themselves. Given the disciplinary confines of History, however, it is unlikely that historians will, in the short term, address this problem in any meaningful way. Rather, we should begin by looking to other fields and disciplines to see what contributions might be made to disrupting the traditional chronology.

Other Invisibilities: Social Science and Cultural Studies

Compared with historians' work on the American War in Vietnam, scholars in the Social Sciences and Cultural Studies have paid a great deal of attention to developments in America and Vietnam after 1975. Students of political science have examined changes in the Vietnamese brand of Socialism over time and studied the development of Hanoi's foreign policy after the defeat of the United States. Economists have explored Vietnam's significant economic transformation and Vietnam's role in the global and regional economies.⁴² In the realm of Cultural Studies, a variety of strands of work related to the war in Vietnam have been developed, all of which have some contribution to make to our understanding of events after 1975. Indeed, all of these areas have a great deal to contribute to a discussion of Vietnam and the United States after 1975, yet they all suffer from various shortcomings as well.

Political scientists, for example, have explained a great deal about Vietnam's political development after 1975, including relations with the United States and China and the war in Cambodia. Stephen Hurst, for example, constructs a useful study of American-Vietnamese relations from 1976-1979 in *The Carter Administration and Vietnam*.⁴³ Indeed, I rely heavily on Hurst's study in parts of chapter two and three here. However, like many works in Political Science, Hurst places too much emphasis on

⁴² There is also an extensive body of work from geographers and other environmental science scholars who have discussed and critiqued the nation's environmental policies, including reforestation efforts and the tension between industrial development and the desire to protect Vietnam's already fragile environment. They will not be discussed here for reasons of space and because this dissertation does not actively engage with that work. For an example of such scholarship, see Jonathan Rigg, *Southeast Asia: The Human Landscape of Modernization of Development* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

⁴³ Hurst, *The Carter Administration and Vietnam* (New York: St. Martin's, 1996).

fitting his case study into an particular theoretical approach, in this case, determining whether the forces of “globalist” or “regionalist” approaches to foreign policy determined the administration’s course of action with regard to Vietnam. Lost in his quest to determine the answer to this “belief-systems” problem are the ironies, intersections, and contradictions of each perspective and, with them, the intricacies of much of the story.⁴⁴ Even with this problem, however, Hurst has paved the way for future research into American-Vietnamese relations in the “postwar” era.

A more problematic (and symptomatic) example of the failures of some political science approaches comes from Stephen Morris. Morris, in his book *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia*, discusses the rise of the Third Indochina War, offering useful insights into the decision making process that led to Hanoi’s ultimate decision to invade and occupy its neighbor. However, like Hurst, Morris reveals himself to be too tied to particular aspects of international relations theory.⁴⁵ Although other more useful

⁴⁴ For instance, Hurst discusses the Globalist Cold Warrior view represented by Zbigniew Brzezinski and the Defense Department against the regionalist approach favored by the State Department. The Globalist view, he argues, favored focusing on the perceived military threat posed by the Soviet Union, while the regionalist approach concentrated on the regional political and economic development and, thus normalizing relations with Vietnam. Although the Globalist vision can help to explain the administration’s focus on improving relations with China in order to triangulate relations with the Soviets, Hurst never explores the irony, discussed here in chapters three and four, that the United States’ actions with China helped push Vietnam into the Soviet orbit and, eventually, led to a significant Soviet military presence in Vietnam, precisely the type of Soviet military proliferation the view was designed to keep in check.

⁴⁵ Stephen Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press). Morris’ conclusions, which boil down to his assertion that the Vietnamese Communist Party was lead by an “irrational” world-view, become all the more problematic when Morris’ political leanings are revealed. As discussed here in chapter six, Morris’ central role in a POW/MIA hoax during the early 1990s helped bring to light

contributions to the study of Vietnam's foreign relations after 1975 can be found elsewhere, Hurst and Morris' accounts are unfortunately symptomatic of the shortcomings of the discipline's contributions to this topic.⁴⁶

The work of Joseph Zasloff and MacAllister Brown is a noteworthy exception to this tendency. The two political science scholars collaborated on two significant works on Southeast Asia after 1975. The first, *Communist Indochina and U.S. Foreign Policy*, written shortly after the end of the American War in Vietnam, is one of the strongest contributions of that era to the understanding of the region after the U.S. withdrawal. Their later work, *Cambodia Confounds the Peacemakers*, provides the most detailed examination of the protracted diplomacy related to the political settlement of the Third Indochina War.⁴⁷ The latter is an especially useful contribution because of the wider dearth of scholarship devoted to the tragedy of Cambodia after the rise of the Khmer Rouge. Aside from the widely hailed work of Ben Kiernan and the less noted studies of Michael Haas, surprisingly little scholarly attention has been paid to this problem. Fortunately, a number of invaluable works on Cambodia have been produced by

his rigidly anti-Communist, anti-Hanoi, pro-Kissinger feelings, all of which further call into question his conclusions about the rise of the Third Indochina War.

⁴⁶ For other useful contributions, see Carlyle Thayer and Ramses Amer, eds., *Vietnamese Foreign Policy in Transition* (New York: St. Martin's, 1999); and David Wurfel and Bruce Borton, eds., *The Political Economy of Foreign Policy in Southeast Asia* (New York: St. Martin's, 1990). While these edited volumes still are more reliant on foreign policy and international relations theory than historians are often comfortable with, their more detailed and limited scope makes them more constructive sources than the texts discussed here.

⁴⁷ Zasloff and Brown., eds., *Communist Indochina and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1978); *Cambodia Confounds the Peacemakers* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

journalists Nayan Chanda, William Shawcross and Elizabeth Becker.⁴⁸ A final edited work by Zasloff, containing essays by he and Brown as well as a number of other significant scholars of the region, including Frederick Z. Brown and Chanda, is another excellent source of information on later developments in the region.⁴⁹ Unfortunately, Zasloff and Brown are the exception rather than the rule. In the final analysis, few works of political science advance our understanding of Vietnam's state policies after 1975 further than the work of historian William Duiker, whose *Vietnam Since the Fall of Saigon* provides a balanced and constructive summary of the changes the country experienced while rebuilding after the American war.⁵⁰

Economists, like political scientists have contributed important work about the transformation of Vietnam's political economy after 1975, and particularly after the *doi moi* reforms that began in the mid 1980s. Although this literature is nearly as diverse and, as it continues to grow, as large a body of work as historical scholarship on the American War in Vietnam, it is still possible to discern a few commonalities, contributions, and shortcomings. The most common aspect of the economic literature on Vietnam, and the Southeast Asian economy as a whole, after 1975, is that it is caged in

⁴⁸ Among Kiernan's many works on Cambodia, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power and Genocide Under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-1979* (New Haven: Yale University Pres, 1996) is particularly useful; Michael Haas, *Genocide By Proxy* (New York: Praeger, 1991) and *Cambodia, Pol Pot and the United States* (New York: Praeger, 1991); Nayan Chanda, *Brother Enemy* (New York: Harcourt-Brace, 1986); William Shawcross, *Sideshow* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979) and *The Quality of Mercy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984); Elizabeth Becker, *When the War Was Over* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986).

⁴⁹ Joseph Zasloff, ed., *Postwar Indochina: Old Enemies and New Allies* (Washington, D.C: Foreign Service Institute, Department of State, 1988).

⁵⁰ William Duiker, *Vietnam Since the Fall of Saigon* (Ohio University, 1985).

the neoliberal language of the global economy, situating Vietnam within a largely predetermined narrative of “development.” Part of this is no doubt simply a problem of language: it is difficult to describe the changes countries undergo during industrialization and integration into the global economy without reinscribing the power dynamics and division of labor implicit in that economic structure: thus nations such as Vietnam are “third world” as opposed to “first,” “periphery” as opposed to “core,” or “developing” as opposed to developed. Beyond the problem of language, however, there is often an unstated assumption built into studies of such “developing” nations that ignores the historical realities and specificities of the country or region in question, placing them instead on the continuum of development. As with historical works that render inconvenient developments outside the realm of their narrative structure, these studies often ignore the history of particular nations that is often crucial to understanding their location as “developing.” One need not look far beyond the titles of many of these works related to Vietnam to see this process at work: *Vietnam Today*, *Vietnam: The Incomplete Transformation*, *Vietnam: Dawn of a New Market*.⁵¹

To be fair, some of these titles over a more historical view of Vietnam’s economic transformation. For the most part though, economists have ignored the historical conditions that acted as structural constraints on Vietnam’s economy, most notably the long and devastating American War. Economist Adam Fforde is one of the more notorious culprits of this practice. In his two notable works, *From Plan to Market* and

⁵¹ Thai Quang Trung, ed., *Vietnam Today* (New York: Crane & Russack, 1990); Peter Wolff, *Vietnam: The Incomplete Transformation* (Portland, OR: Frank Cass Publishing, 1999); Geoffrey Murray, *Vietnam: The Dawn of a New Market* (St. Martin’s, 1997), 9

The Limits of National Liberation, Fforde rails against the failures of Vietnam's economic planning while ignoring the devastating legacies of the war with the United States. In one passage he notes, in a sweeping understatement, that although other regional nations experienced major economic growth during the period, "in the 1960s, Indochina was certainly not an ideal place for economic development."⁵² Geoffrey Murray's *Vietnam: Dawn of a New Market* also ignores the dusk before the dawn, as it were, failing to offer any discussion of the ravages of the American War. Murray's narrative begins in 1995, flashing back only to the mid-1980s period of nascent economic changes in Vietnam and devoting a few sentences to "the American-led embargo," which he incorrectly dates to the invasion of Cambodia.⁵³

Other economists are far more attentive to the historical conditions of Vietnam's economic transformation. Henrich Dahm, in his useful book, *French and Japanese Economic Relations With Vietnam Since 1975*, notes the United States was "very effective" in isolating Vietnam from international capital markets after 1975, helping shape the foreign investment policies of Hanoi in the 1980s and 1990s.⁵⁴ Australian economist Melanie Beresford is perhaps most attentive to the ways in which the United States, both prior to and after 1975 continued to affect Vietnam's economy. In a series of

⁵² Adam Fforde, *From Plan to Market* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 308. For other examples of this problem, see Fforde and Suzanne Paine, *The Limits of National Liberation* (New York: Methuen Books, 1987).

⁵³ Murray, *Dawn of a New Market*, 5. This is common misconception among economists and some political scientists. The American-led embargo was in fact begun in 1975, immediately after the fall of Saigon. The imposition of the embargo is discussed in detail here in chapter one; in chapter three, I discuss how the Third Indochina War helped to obscure the origins of the embargo.

⁵⁴ Henrich Dahm, *French and Japanese Economic Relations With Vietnam Since 1975*, (Surry, Great Britain: Curzon, 1999).

studies of Vietnam's economic transformation, Beresford makes a number of important observations about how the legacies of the American war shaped Vietnam's political economy. For instance, in her introduction to *National Unification and Economic Development in Vietnam*, she argues that the lack of a knowledge base about Southern Vietnam's economy was partially the result of the American Phoenix Program during the 1960s, a CIA-led assassination program that targeted village level leaders allegedly sympathetic to the National Liberation Front.⁵⁵ Although an important insight, Beresford's argument leaves out or glosses over other important factors, including the abandonment of Southern NLF leaders and cadres after the triumph of the Northern Vietnamese forces. In a more recent edited volume, Beresford teams with Vietnamese scholar Dang Phong to demonstrate further the ways in which U.S. policies helped shape Vietnam's economy. Both before and after 1975, the editors argue, the U.S. attempted to "squeeze the lifeblood out of Vietnam," by continuing to isolate and punish Vietnam, consistently pushing Hanoi into the Soviet sphere of influence. More than any other piece, this text demonstrates clearly that the neoliberal development model employed by the vast majority of economists neglects historical factors leading to future economic developments. Most notably for Vietnam, they show, the development model ignores the legacies of European colonialism, the enormous dependency of foreign aid and imports for both Northern and Southern Vietnam during the American war, and the American sanctions program after 1975.⁵⁶ Published by smaller and more obscure presses than her

⁵⁵ Melanie Beresford, *National Unification and Economic Development in Vietnam* (New York: St. Martin's, 1989), 4. See also her broad overview of Vietnam, *Vietnam: Politics, Economics and Society* (New York: Pinter Publishers, 1988).

development-model colleagues and cited far less often, Beresford's voice is a lonely one among economists focusing on Vietnam after 1975. Her close attention to historical factors shaping Vietnam's economy is clearly the exception rather than the rule in this field.

None of these works coming from social science perspectives offer a more complete picture of Vietnam's economy after 1975 than that offered by historian Gabriel Kolko in his 1997 follow-up to *Anatomy of a War*. In *Anatomy of a Peace*, Kolko provides a detailed discussion of the transformation of Vietnam's economy. As an historian, Kolko is particularly attentive to the structural limitations placed on Vietnam after the American War, starting from the assumption that the primary legacy of the war "was obviously economic."⁵⁷ Taking a strong stance against the tendency of economists to ignore these historical factors, Kolko argues:

To divorce Vietnam's economic development from war-induced causes, as International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and Establishment economists have persistently done, reflects capitalist economists' endemic ideological inability to view politics and economics as intrinsically related dimensions of one unified social reality.⁵⁸

Yet Kolko's own ideological commitments often obscure his view of the post-1975 period in Vietnam. A committed socialist and one-time advisor to the Communist Party in Vietnam, Kolko reserves much of the space in his text to lambaste the market-based ideology and reforms of some of Vietnam's leaders during the 1980s. Although he rightly criticizes some of Vietnam's acquiescing to the neo-liberal line of the IMF and World

⁵⁶ Melanie Beresford and Dang Phong, *Economic Transition in Vietnam* (Northampton, MA: Edward Ulger Publishing, 2000), especially pp. viii, 22, 27.

⁵⁷ Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a Peace* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 8.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 20.

Bank, he also glosses over the seriousness of the nation's economic troubles in the late 1970s and refuses to acknowledge the success of any policies based on market mechanisms. Even with these shortcomings, however, Kolko's attention to the historical factors at work in shaping the structural limitations on Vietnam's economy after 1975 demonstrates the gross shortcomings of the work of economists who ignore or marginalize these factors.

While historians of the American War in Vietnam have remained lodged in an outdated chronological paradigm and social sciences have more often than not ignored altogether the historical factors in American-Vietnamese relations after 1975, the work produced by Cultural Studies scholars generally falls into three categories. The first, and most troubling group can be located within the myth/symbol tradition of the discipline. Works such as John Hellmann's *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam*, Jonathan Capps' *The Unfinished War*, and Loren Baritz' *Backfire* are the exemplars of this mode.⁵⁹ A brief examination of Hellmann's argument will suffice as a critique of this approach.

Hellmann begins his description of the relationship between "American Myth" and "Vietnam" by claiming:

Vietnam is an experience that has severely called into question American myth. Americans entered Vietnam with certain expectations that a story, a distinctly American story, would unfold. When the story of America in Vietnam turned into something unexpected, the true nature of the larger story of America itself became the subject of intense cultural dispute. On the deepest level, the legacy of Vietnam is the disruption of our story, our explanation of the past and vision of the future."⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Capps, *The Unfinished War: Vietnam and the American Conscience* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1982).

⁶⁰ John Hellmann, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York, 1986), x.

Concluding his study, Hellmann reiterates that the “enduring trauma of Vietnam has been the disruption of the American story.” As with the myth and symbolists, Hellmann offers a critical assessment of these “myths” and of American Culture as a whole, but, also like his predecessors, his connections between “myth,” history, and experience are tenuous at best, resting on very troubling notions of cultural homogeneity and collective memory.

What exactly are these mythic narratives evidence of? For Hellmann, the popularity of *The Green Berets*, *The Deer Hunter*, and *Star Wars* are evidence that “American myth” is deeply held at some level by the majority of the population. There is no sense of the larger context of production and circulation for these texts, nor how or why real people consume them. Perhaps more troubling, though, is Hellmann’s insistence on a unified American society. Who is this “we” who had “our” story disrupted in Southeast Asia? Who is this “we” who “went into Vietnam” and had “our” expectations shattered? Who has the authority to define what the enduring legacy of this thing called “Vietnam” is?

Placed in the context of the late 1940s and early 1950s, at a time when the links between American Studies and a Cold War Americanism were very clear, the standard assumptions of the myth and symbol school are perhaps not surprising. In Smith’s America, as American Studies scholar Gene Wise pointed out in his history of the field, not only was it logical that a literary scholar could discern, or, more accurately, represent an “American mind,” but also that that mind would be unified and collectively held, rather than diverse and heterogeneous.⁶¹ Maintaining these assumptions after the cultural

⁶¹ Gene Wise, “Paradigm Dramas,” Reprinted in Lucy Maddox, ed., *Locating American Studies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1999).

and political upheavals of the 1960s, and particularly after the fractious and divisive war in Vietnam itself, however, is neither logical nor appropriate. Equally important, and keeping in line with their myth and symbol predecessors, the work on the American War in Vietnam coming out of this school ignores the real historical context in which events take place: namely, in this case, the larger geopolitical and economic motives for American intervention of Southeast Asia.

The second school of work on the American war in Vietnam coming out of an American Studies mold is the popular culture studies which abound in American Studies journals and conferences, often focused on such topics as “Vietnam-era” poetry and music, the films of Oliver Stone, or the writings of Tim O’Brien.⁶² Unlike the previous category, these studies often contribute greatly to our understanding of cultural representations of the war and how different groups have made sense of their experiences. A number of anthologies, for example, offer close readings of American films about the war.⁶³ A smaller subset of works has focused on the relationship between films about the war and the military.⁶⁴ Others have incorporated a wider variety of media

⁶² See, for instance, the special issues of *Genre*, Winter 1998, and *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Spring 1992.

⁶³ Julian Smith, *Looking Away* (New York: Scribner’s, 1975); Gene Dittmar and Linda Michaud, eds., *From Hanoi to Hollywood* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990); Eben J. Muse, *The Land of Nam* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1995); Michael Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991);

⁶⁴ Lawrence Suid’s, *Guts and Glory: Great American War Movies* has several interesting discussions of Vietnam War films and the cooperation (or lack thereof) from the U.S. Military ((Reading, MA: Addison_Wesley, 2000); Claude Smith’s article, “Clean Boys in Bright Uniforms: The Rehabilitation of the United States Military in Films Since 1978,” offers an intriguing, if limited view of the role of Vietnam War films in representations of the military after 1978 (*Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 11:4, Winter, 1984); Douglas Kellner, working within a more explicitly Cultural Studies context, has

in their explorations of the “cultural” legacies of the war.⁶⁵ For the vast majority of pieces in these and other collections, however, the close textual readings fall prey to the trap of ignoring the larger geopolitical and economic contexts in which the texts under consideration are produced and consumed. Thus, like the myth and symbolists, the bulk of these studies fail to consider the texts themselves as historical products and, as such, as part of the ongoing war against Vietnam.

Not all “textual” studies produce such narrowly applied readings, however. A few important works in cultural studies offer close readings of popular American representations of the war in Vietnam while placing them in the context of the larger battle against the memory and legacies of the war, if not the ongoing American War on Vietnam. Andrew Martin’s *Receptions of War*, despite its theory-laden focus on “the body,” offers an intriguing discussion of how many representations of the war in popular culture were “received” by American culture.⁶⁶ Keith Beattie’s *The Scar That Binds* uses the trope of “healing” to show how American representations of the war have distorted, inverted, and reconstructed the history of the war to situate the United States as the victim of the Vietnamese. Beattie offers a thorough examination of the central paradox of “Vietnam” in American culture: the war that represented so much cultural and political

contributed to this discussion as well. In particular see the relevant sections of his *Media Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995) and, with Michael Ryan, *Camera Politica* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988).

⁶⁵ Michael Klein, ed. *The Vietnam Era: Media and Popular Culture in the U.S. and Vietnam* (London: Pluto Press, 1990); Michael Schaefer, ed. *The Legacy: The Vietnam War in the American Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990); Richard Morris and Peter Ehrenhaus, eds., *Cultural Legacies of Vietnam* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Company, 1990).

⁶⁶ Andrew Martin, *Receptions of War: Vietnam in American Culture* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993).

division has more often than not been represented by the imposition of an artificial sense of unity and consensus.⁶⁷ Without question, however, the most important contribution in this realm comes from Susan Jeffords. In *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*, Jeffords surveys a diverse group of memoirs, fictional works and films about the war, arguing that these texts have used a number of “narrative mechanisms” to reassert the dominance of gendered language and images in the wake of the war. These texts, she shows, have aided not only in the remasculinization of American society after the war in Vietnam, but in the remilitarization of American society as well.⁶⁸

Even with the brilliance of Jeffords’ and Beattie’s formulations, however, the texts under consideration in these types of cultural studies are discussed only in terms of their relationship to cultural developments within the United States. What would happen if we began to view these cultural texts not as representations of historical events, but as part of an ongoing war, in which “Vietnam” as a signifier has been appropriated to signify something that happened *to* the United States, while at the same time these texts are being constructed, Vietnam the country, and its people, continue to suffer at the hands of American power?

Why is it, we must ask, that so many Cultural Studies scholars of the war seem to be repeating the mistakes made by previous generations, reifying “myths” and texts at the expense of contexts? Why is that cultural studies scholars seem to have abandoned

⁶⁷ Keith Beattie, *The Scar That Binds* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

⁶⁸ Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990).

altogether the archives in favor of various types of screens? To be sure, these studies contribute to our understanding of how the texts operate as visual and discursive representations of the American War in Vietnam and, as such, the various screens on and through which they operate can serve as useful sources of evidence for material that might not otherwise be “archived” at all.⁶⁹ The texts that serve as the basis for the studies of Jeffords, Martin, and Beattie, however, are for the most part well known popular novels and films, not the sort of otherwise marginalized or oppositional texts that would be usefully served by the conception of screen-as-archive. The majority of cultural studies work on the American war in Vietnam, by focusing on texts at the expense of context, stops short of offering the truly interdisciplinary work that combine the use of the screen and the archive.

We know that American Studies and Cultural Studies can do better, because there is a third and final body of work from scholars in the field, albeit it smaller than the other two, which has shown that we need not abandon contexts or archives. I like to think to think of this body of work as producing “counter-memories,” narratives running against the grain of popular memory and forcing citizens as well as students of the war to rethink their assumptions. By far the best example of this type of work comes from H. Bruce Franklin, whose works on representations of the war in American culture and especially the POW/MIA myth, have altered the terms of debate in this country.⁷⁰ Works such as

⁶⁹ My thanks to Lisa Lowe for bringing this point to my attention during a session at the Annual Meeting of the American Studies Association in Washington, D.C., November, 2001.

⁷⁰ Franklin, *MIA, or Mythmaking in America* (Brooklyn: Lawrence Hill Books, 1992); *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000).

these transcend the limitations of the other modes of inquiry addressed here, transgressing chronological, disciplinary, and political/ideological paradigms.⁷¹ As will become apparent throughout this dissertation, my work is extremely indebted to Franklin's. He has laid the intellectual, methodological, and chronological framework on which this project seeks to build. At the same time, I hope to add to that solid base in significant ways, extending the legacy of historical inversion and American victimization identified by Franklin by focusing on the larger context of American policy toward Vietnam after 1975.

Franklin's work can also be situated within a larger school of Counter-Memory scholarship from American Studies and Cultural Studies that does not necessarily explicitly address the American War in Vietnam. It is with this body of work that I hope to situate this dissertation. As we will see, these works share two primary characteristics: they embrace various aspects of a Foucauldian framework, focusing on the intersection of competing discourses and questions of power; and they are fundamentally inter- and transdisciplinary in their approaches.

Three works exemplify this school. The first, George Lipsitz' *Time Passages*, builds on the idea of Countermemory developed by Michel Foucault to show how various marginalized groups in American society have negotiated the polyvalent meanings of popular cultural forms while developing potentially oppositional forms of consciousness. Against Foucault and others who have adopted the more radical postmodern and post-

⁷¹ Another example of this work is Jerry Lembcke's *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

structural positions on history and totality, Lipsitz suggests that although successful totalizing narratives remain an impossibility, “the pursuit of such totality remains essential.” The “refusal of totality,” he argues, “could just as easily obscure real connections, causes, and relationships.”⁷² Lipsitz defines counter-memory within oppositional traditions of myth and folklore advanced by historically marginalized populations, but the tactics of counter-memory can also be the tools of the historian:

Counter-memory looks to the past for the hidden histories excluded from dominant narratives. But unlike myths that seek to detach events and actions from the fabric of any larger history, counter-memory forces revision of existing histories by supplying new perspectives about the past. Counter-memory embodies aspects of myth and aspects of history, but it retains an enduring suspicion of both categories. Counter-memory focuses on localized experiences with oppression, using them to reframe and refocus dominant narratives purporting to represent universal experiences.⁷³

While this study is not focused on the localized or personal in the manner Lipsitz prescribes, it does seek both to influence existing dominant narratives of the American war in Vietnam and the more totalizing narratives related to those dominant narratives.

Another more useful model of the Counter-memory school comes from Marita Sturken. In her book *Tangled Memories*, Sturken develops the concept of Cultural Memory, which she defines as “a field of cultural negotiation through which different stories vie for a place in history.”⁷⁴ The field of cultural memory, according to Sturken, is located between individual memory and historical discourse, although she contends that the boundaries between all three forms are fluid and “entangled.” Thus the focus is on

⁷² George Lipsitz, *Time Passages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1990), 214.

⁷³ Ibid., 213.

⁷⁴ Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories* (Berkeley: University of California, 1997), 1.

the manner in which battles between competing narratives are played out, “specifically, how histories are told through popular culture, the media, public images, and memorials—how cultural memory engages with historical narrative in the public sphere.”⁷⁵ Sturken takes for granted that memory is subjectively constructed and shaped in the present. The point in this model is not to determine if a given memory is “accurate” or “realistic,” but rather how it struggles against other versions of the past. Sturken also pays close attention to the “technologies of memory,” through which cultural memory is constructed. These “objects, images, and representations,” are “not vessels of memory in which memory passively resides so much as objects through which memories are shared, produced, and given meaning.”⁷⁶ This model, by foregrounding “the contest of stories in the public sphere,”⁷⁷ and the struggle over both public and individual meanings of historical events, allows for great flexibility in thinking about “memories” of the American War in Vietnam. It is also a much-needed corrective to the work of many cultural studies scholars, discussed earlier, who continue to embrace an uncritical collective memory approach.

The final work coming out of an interdisciplinary, cultural studies framework that serves as a model for this project is Melanie McAllister’s *Epic Encounters*, which explores representations of the Middle East in American culture since 1945.⁷⁸ Among

⁷⁵ Ibid., 5.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 9.

⁷⁷ I am borrowing this term from Jay Mechling’s article, “An American Culture Text With Grids,” *American Studies International*, 27:1 (April 1989): 2-12

⁷⁸ Melanie McAllister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000* (University of California Press, 2001).

the many valuable contributions of this work, the strongest is McAllister's effort to consider foreign policy along the same terms as cultural forms. She explores the intersections of these and other types of "meaning-making activity," as part of the same "politics of representation, the negotiation of political and moral values, as well as the public understanding of history and its significance."⁷⁹ Like Lipsitz and Sturken, McAllister starts from a position that denies the fixity of meaning to texts, focusing instead on the ways in which different groups, individuals, and institutions create meaning in, through, and around those texts. As such, McAllister encourages readers "ask less about "what texts mean"—with the implication that there is a hidden or allegorical code to their secret meaning—and more about how the texts participate in a field, and then in a set of fields, and thus in a social and political world."⁸⁰

The most provocative and challenging aspect of McAllister's work, however, has to do with the issues of power and agency. Again, like Sturken and Lipsitz, she is interested in the often messy intersections and collisions between history, memory, and representation. In particular, her work forces us to consider the question: if there is a confluence of representations in the realms of cultural and policy production, where do we situate the convergence on the continuum of coincidence and conspiracy? McAllister offers a starting point for such discussions, arguing against any approach that favors conspiracy, functionalism, or even a unifying cultural logic:

This production of knowledge occurs not through the conspiracy or conscious collaboration of individuals but through the internal logics of cultural practices,

⁷⁹ Ibid., 3.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 8.

intersecting with the entirely interested activity of social agents... We can begin to see how certain meanings became naturalized by repetition, as well as the ways that different sets of texts, with their own interests and affiliations, come to overlap, to reinforce and revise one another toward an end that is neither entirely planned nor entirely coincidental. If the end product is the successful construction of a discourse of expansionist nationalism [for example], what we examine here is not conspiracy, nor a functionalist set of representations in the service of power, but a process of convergence, in which historical events, overlapping representations, and diverse vested interests come together in a powerful and productive, if historically contingent accord.⁸¹

While there is much to recommend in this approach, it remains the task of a new generation of scholars, working at these interdisciplinary crossroads, to further probe the convergence of culture and foreign policy.

Although McAllister is certainly correct to assert that we need to be concerned less about “what texts mean” than with how they circulate with other texts and larger systems of “meaning making,” we cannot be too reticent to offer interpretations of a text’s content or “messages.” To begin with, a reading of a text is always implicit even in the most benign, objectivist reading (even in McAllister’s descriptions in *Epic Encounters*). Secondly, given the problematic representations offered by not only the texts under consideration in this dissertation, but by the discourses that arose (and continue to arise) around them, interventions are both necessary and just. All stories are not equal; some are better or worse, more racist or more malignant, than others. Although the task of the cultural historian may be simply to relate the history of a historical moment, the task of a counter-memory is to widen the terms of debate, to construct a

⁸¹ Ibid., 8.

greater space from which previously marginalized histories and agents may intervene.

To do so, it is sometimes necessary to debunk particular myths, stories, and ideas.

To offer a reading, implicitly or explicitly, within this larger framework, is not to betray Foucault's model. Quite the contrary, the issue of power so central to Foucault's method, is embedded precisely in this contest between narratives and representations. The point is that power, whether discursive or agential, operates not by conspiracy but by defining the terms of debate and delimiting the boundaries of acceptable, or possible, action or discourse. As Jay Mechling reminds us, in the contest of stories in the public sphere, power matters.⁸² Those who have access to the means of cultural production or the halls of government in which policy is constructed and implemented, are invested with the ways and means to speak their truths, however partial and incomplete, to power. Does this mean that those in power will construct narratives and images that reinforce existing power relations? Not necessarily; but it does mean that the stories they tell will have a far greater influence in structuring the terms of debate and action; their stories, in and of themselves, are both an exercise and a form of power.

Toward a(nother) Third Space

From its earliest origins, American Studies has been a “third space,” an interdisciplinary construct in and through which scholars working at the intersections of various fields can construct work that is stronger than the sum of its constituent parts.

⁸² Mechling, “An American Culture Grid With Texts,” 8.

Early generations of American Studies explored the possibilities of combining the study of sociology, cultural and intellectual history, and literature. Later generations of scholars would use the spaces made possible in part by American Studies and Cultural Studies to bring about the development of new fields, such as Queer Theory, Border Studies, Critical Race Theory, and some strands of Postcolonial Studies. Most recently, the scholars with whom I began this chapter—Amy Kaplan, Mark Bradley, Mary Renda, McAllister, and Kristin Hoganson—have been exploring the intersections of cultural studies and diplomatic history, helping to forge new directions in what Kaplan calls the Cultures of United States imperialism.⁸³

As I have shown here, this work offers an example of the ways in which a collision of disciplines can engender new theories, methods, and new narratives. Adding to this new field of work the concept of Cultural Memory, we can begin to see the possibilities for creating new counter memories to challenge hegemonic interpretations of American involvement in Southeast Asia and disrupt the dominant chronology of the American War in Vietnam. The study I offer here, therefore, is both an exploration of the battle over cultural memory of the American War in Vietnam and, at the same time, a narrative of counter-memory, an explicit intervention in that very battle.

The central task of this dissertation, then, is to disrupt and transgress the existing narrative frameworks and chronological boundaries of the American War against Vietnam. As I have argued in this chapter, the structural limitations placed on a given

⁸³ See note 9, above.

narrative by its acceptance of traditional chronologies of the war play a central role in determining what that the war was “about.” The issue of what I call the “narrative boundaries” of a given “text,” be it a policy debate, film, book, or public memorial, is thus central to many of the discussions I present here. This attention to the discursive structures of texts is another way in which the work of Michel Foucault has influenced my work.

As discussed above, Foucault’s conception of power is central to my study. I argue that the United States continued to exercise its considerable power over Vietnam after 1975. This power, although it often operated under the threat of direct force or military violence, more often than not it was exercised by “guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome” of a given situation.⁸⁴ The United States found itself in the unique position of emerging in 1975 from the longest—and one of the costliest—wars in its history defeated and divided, yet still armed with the ability to dictate the terms of peace to the enemy at whose hands it had been defeated. The United States was still able, in the late 1970s, to control many of the international institutions to which the Vietnamese sought access and aid; it was still able to govern, more than any other nation, the global flows of capital, technology, and commodities which the Vietnamese were often in desperate need of.

In short, the United States was both indirectly and directly responsible for defining the broad terms under which the Vietnamese would reconstruct and rebuild their

⁸⁴ Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” from *Michel Foucault: Beyond Poststructuralism and Hermeneutics*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983) 220-221.

nation. Foucault's phrase for such manifestations of power is "structuring the possible field of action."⁸⁵ Thus, for example, I will show that although the brutal American embargo did not *determine* the fate of a Socialist Vietnam,⁸⁶ it did limit the range of possibilities available to the state and its people, by restricting the amount of aid flowing into the country, the amount and type of exports flowing out of it, and by blocking Vietnamese applications for membership in the United Nations.

In focusing on the issue of narrative structure, I am also drawing on the work of Jill Lepore. As Lepore shows in her 1999 book, *The Name of War*, acts of war inevitably generate acts of narration.⁸⁷ "Waging, writing, and remembering a war" are all parts of the same process of defining the war and the nations and people who fought it:

Both acts [of war and narration] are often joined in a common purpose—defining the geographical, political, cultural, and sometimes national and racial boundaries between people. If you kill me and call my resistance 'treachery,' you have succeeded not only in killing me (and, in doing so, ensuring that I will not be able to call your attack a "massacre"), but you have also succeeded in calling me and my kind a treacherous people.⁸⁸

Although traditionally such narration was the province of victors in war, again the United States found itself in the unique position of losing a devastating war but still with the ability to define the ensuing contest for the war's meaning on its own terms. "If war is, at least in part, a contest for meaning," as Lepore argues, "can it ever be a fair fight when only one side has access to those perfect instruments of empire, pens, paper, and printing

⁸⁵ Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 221.

⁸⁶ On this topic, see Gabriel Kolko's *Anatomy of a Peace* (1999).

⁸⁷ Lepore, *The Name of War* (New York: Vintage, 1999), x.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

presses?"⁸⁹

If these statements about the politics of war stories are true for King Phillip's War, on which Lepore focuses, they most certainly hold true as well for the American War in Vietnam, a war that was fought on television much as it has been remembered on various "screens." If the pen and the printing press were once the perfect instruments of empire, certainly the American culture industries of the late 20th century must be considered as a key component in the ongoing war on Vietnam after 1975. Indeed, the central role played by the popular media in constructing cultural memory of the war in Vietnam in American society is precisely why it is necessary to consider the intersections of cultural production and policy formation.

The argument I develop here is that the narratives of the American War against Vietnam after 1975, whether constructed in the halls of Congress or on movie screens across the country, operate through the same cultural logic of historical inversion, recasting the history of the war with the United States as the victim of the cruel, Asian, Communist Vietnamese. Doing so requires that the haunting images and stories of that war—children burned with napalm, rapings, murders, and mass executions by American soldiers and their allies—be erased, or at the very least marginalized in American cultural memory. Lost in this war for American memory, however, is the consideration of the effects of the war on the nation and people of Vietnam. Any discussion of the massive devastation of Vietnamese life at the hands of the United States is a considerable threat to

⁸⁹ Ibid., xxi

the historical inversions enacted on the cultural front of the American War on Vietnam. As a result, Vietnam and the Vietnamese are rendered increasingly invisible in narratives of the war after 1975, either rendered outside the discursive construction altogether or dehumanized and marginalized to the point of invisibility and irrelevance. Thus in debates over the POW/MIA issue, not only are the historical roles of victim and aggressor inverted, but the entire discussion is focused on a small group of American soldiers. Hardly any mention of the estimated 300,000 unaccounted for Vietnamese soldiers can be found in the historical record. Similarly, in public discussions of the effects of Agent Orange on American soldiers, no consideration is given to the Vietnamese who were obviously subject to greater exposure to the effects of American chemical warfare. Even in public memorials, as I show in my final chapter here, the Vietnamese and the legacies of the war are carefully and consistently rendered invisible so as not to disrupt the cultural and political work of reconstructing the culture of American imperialism after the war in Vietnam.

With all of these and other considerations in mind, I have constructed a narrative here that tells the story of the American War on Vietnam, 1975-2000, examining the intersections and interactions of cultural representations and foreign policy. In the first chapter, I examine the early stages of the American War on Vietnam after 1975, paying particular attention to the imposition of U.S. economic sanctions on Vietnam during the final hours of the military phase of the war. We will see that far from abandoning

Vietnam altogether, the Ford administration pursued an aggressive and hostile policy toward Vietnam after the fall of the defeat of the South Vietnamese regime. This policy of denying humanitarian aid and access to multilateral institutions on top of American unilateral sanctions, while never intended to be permanent, would continue to serve as the basis for American policy toward Hanoi for the next two decades. As I will show, U.S. policy constituted a continuation of war by other means, sharing many characteristics with the military phase of the war: the American War on Vietnam consisted of poorly conceived, indiscriminate warfare that targeted civilians more than the state and was more harmful than helpful to U.S. political and economic interests.

In chapter two, I explore the process of “normalizing” the American War in Vietnam through the concept of “mutual destruction” made famous by President Carter in 1977. Far from the traditional understanding of diplomatic, political, and economic negotiations between former adversaries, I employ the term normalization to signify the larger cultural process of reintegrating the war into American cultural memory. In both the policy and cultural “fronts” of the ongoing war against Vietnam, the same cultural logic of inverting the history and public memory of the war was used to situate the United States as the victim of a savage and cruel and enemy. Films such as *The Deer Hunter*, *Apocalypse Now*, and *Coming Home* were central to this process, as was the powerful and pervasive POW/MIA myth. In both political discourse and cultural production during the late 1970s, the ongoing American War against Vietnam was legitimated by

representations of the war that marginalized and dehumanized the Vietnamese while focusing on what the war in Vietnam had done to the United States.

Examining American policy toward Vietnam and Southeast Asia as a whole during the Third Indochina War, I argue in chapter three that the United States entered a new phase of its war on Vietnam during the 1980s, providing various forms of support to the anti-Vietnamese forces in China and Cambodia during this long and bloody conflict. The avowed policy of “bleeding Vietnam,” followed by the U.S. and its allies in the war, was thus an extension but not a departure from previous American actions toward Vietnam. The “bleeding” of Vietnam was constituted not simply by prolonging the war between Vietnam and Cambodia, but by the ongoing political and diplomatic isolation of Vietnam led by the U.S. and China, and the ongoing economic embargo, joined during this period by several other key nations. This period also highlights the inconsistencies in U.S. policies toward the region as a whole, supporting various incarnations of the murderous Khmer Rouge while punishing Hanoi, the only government that had stood up to the genocidal Cambodian regime.

In chapter four, I turn once again to the cultural front of the war against Vietnam. Against the backdrop of the proxy U.S. wars in Cambodia and Central America and the resurgence of American militarism, I argue that a new matrix of representations of the war in Vietnam was established during this period. Discussing first the “second wave” of American films about the war, most notably *Rambo*, I show how narratives of the war

legitimized and made possible by this text and the ensuing cultural phenomenon of “Rambomania” established the cultural space into which a third wave of films would stride. This third wave of films, defined by Oliver Stone’s *Platoon*, was constructed around a discourse of realism that offered Stone’s version of the war as “the way it really was,” that trickled down into other media, including television and comic books. By tracing this process of cultural diffusion, I show how the narrow reality offered by *Platoon* and its progeny only served to further the cultural work of the American War on Vietnam, reconstituting the United States as the primary victim of the war by systematically erasing the Vietnamese from these representations.

The final stages of the American War on Vietnam are the focus of Chapter five. Tracing the gradual end of hostilities through the first half of the 1990s, I show how U.S. policy continued to erode, both at home and in the international community. The embargo, however, would remain in place as part of the first Bush administration’s “roadmap” policy, and would not be lifted until 1994 because of a number of ongoing investigations into the mythical allegations that Vietnam was holding American prisoners hostage. The staying power of the policy is even more significant given the increasingly vocal and visible lobbying of U.S. corporations during this time, as American business interests began to lose out on access to the Vietnamese market. Indeed, I argue, it is only when the discourse of “access” to Vietnam begins to fit the needs of both the corporate and POW/MIA lobbies that it becomes politically possible to end the sanctions. The new

era of relations between the United States and Vietnam launched during 1994-1995, however, reflected the strikingly asymmetrical power relations between the nations, with Vietnam, rather than the United States paying what amounted to war reparations as terms of a final settlement.

In the last chapter, I explore the larger battle over American cultural memory of the war by examining the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. Tracing the evolution of “the Wall,” as it is commonly called in the United States, I use the changes made to the memorial over time to sum up the cultural logic of the American War on Vietnam after 1975. From Maya Lin’s original design, the Wall has gone through several changes, additions, and replications, including the jump into cyberspace with a variety of Virtual Walls. With few exceptions, these changes have been driven by the need to impose narrative constraints on the cultural memory of the war in Vietnam, placing formal limits on Lin’s open-ended vision. The final result of the Walls, both physical and virtual, is a form of memorial that focuses cultural memory expressly on what the war did to America and Americans, rendering outside their narrative boundaries what the war did to Vietnam and the Vietnamese. As such, the walls offer a striking summation of the American War on Vietnam after 1975, reinscribing the war in Vietnam into American historical metanarratives while silencing important questions about the direction, scope, and consequences of American foreign policy.

The story I tell here is fraught with ironies, contradictions, and unintended

consequences. We will see, for example, that U.S. policy toward Vietnam after 1975 actively worked against American interests in many ways. While the focus on “live prisoners” allegedly being held by Hanoi was central to the historical inversion of the war that situated the U.S. as victim, it actually delayed the very “fullest possible accounting” sought by members of the POW/MIA lobby by drawing attention away from the very real and cathartic work of recovering the remains of actual American soldiers. On another matter, we will see that the economic arm of the United States’ war against Vietnam after 1975 was indicative of an American hold over the global capitalist infrastructure that was not in any way decreased by the military debacle in Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, while the United States used its control of institutions such as the IMF, World Bank, and ADB to implement its draconian economic sanctions against Vietnam, American business interests were undeniably harmed by the embargo. Thus the maintenance and preservation of U.S. economic hegemony in the late twentieth century came at the expense of many of its own economic interests.

While the narrative presented in these chapters does seek to include a wide range of events and stories, it is, like all narratives, necessarily incomplete. This story, like all stories, renders certain things outside its narrative boundaries, resulting in a variety of shortcomings. Some of these I have anticipated; there are likely others I have not. For instance, there are several chapters here that could easily be expanded into books in their own right. I have admittedly glossed over at times the type of historical details that one

might expect from a more traditional study of diplomatic history: the myriad memos and conversations that contribute to the formulation of a given policy and other intricacies of policymaking. While scholars in a variety of fields could undoubtedly benefit from a tightly drawn history of American and Vietnamese diplomacy from 1975 to 1979, that is not the goal of this project.

In another limitation, I am aware that in many places, this project could benefit from a reexamination of various “texts,” be they policy debates, news articles, or films, through the lenses of race, gender, class, or sexuality. The choice not to feature these issues in any developed way in this project is not meant to indicate that they are not part of the story of American-Vietnamese relations after 1975; issues of race, class, gender, ability, and sexuality are without question implicit in many of the texts under consideration here. Instead, the decision to leave aside such issues is, for the most part, a reflection of the already long and intricate narrative presented here.

Without question, the largest absence here is also the most ironic: this study is almost entirely focused on the production of American policy and American culture. In trying to draw attention to the ongoing effects of American policy on the nation and people of Vietnam, I have nevertheless contributed to the ongoing silencing of Vietnamese voices in American narratives of the war and its legacies. While part of this is a structural consideration on my part, refusing to expand and further extend an already protracted project, the primary reason for this glaring omission is a language barrier. Not

having learned Vietnamese, I have been unable to do any meaningful research with Vietnamese-language sources. Although a regrettable shortcoming on my part, I fully believe that it does not impugn the larger project of showing the malignant effects of U.S. policy on Vietnam. I remain committed to developing a more comparative, international approach to the issues I discuss here. Toward that end, I am currently working on an edited volume that will include international and interdisciplinary perspectives on American-Vietnamese relations since 1975.

In all of these cases, I have tried to point to the relevant secondary literature, when available, in footnotes. In others, I can only hope that I have the chance to expand this study, pursue additional related projects, and inspire and provoke other works in this area. It is important to note that this study, while presented as a fairly straightforward and largely chronological narrative, is not intended as *the* story to replace others, a new narrative to trump all others. It is, I believe, an original and potentially significant contribution to related scholarship, but it is also an intervention in the contestation of cultural memory. My focus remains set on disrupting the chronological and disciplinary boundaries of the history of the American War in Vietnam. Thus, my story begins where most historical narratives of the war end: with the toppling of the South Vietnamese regime on April 30, 1975.

CHAPTER ONE

A Continuation of War by Other Means: The Origins of the American War on Vietnam 1975-1977

As the last helicopters were leaving the roof of the American embassy in Saigon on April 30, 1975, Henry Kissinger sat helplessly in his corner West Wing office. “Neither Ford nor I could any longer influence the outcome,” he wrote in his memoirs, “So we each sat in our offices, freed of other duties, yet unable to affect the ongoing tragedy, with a serenity rarely experienced in high office.”⁹⁰ For neither the first nor last time, Kissinger greatly underestimated his influence on the world. Kissinger has been many things at many times, but rarely has he been benign. As the primary architect of American foreign policy in the 1970s, Kissinger already had helped supervise from afar the catastrophic events in Bangladesh, Chile, and Cyprus. Before the end of the year, he would help give the green light to a bloody coup in Indonesia. And, of course, he had personally overseen the deadly American bombing campaigns in Cambodia and Northern Vietnam. Indeed, much of the world has yet to recover from the impact made by Kissinger. Yet on this day, as he describes it, he was mostly contemplative, his reflections interrupted only by the occasional update from a staff member and, later, a press conference in which he argued that “what we need now in this country, for some weeks at least, and hopefully for some months is to heal the wounds and to put Vietnam

⁹⁰ Henry Kissinger, *Years of Renewal* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 541.

behind us and concentrate on the problems of the future.”⁹¹

Kissinger was certainly not alone among Americans in wanting to put Vietnam behind him. The steady erasure of Vietnam from American attention actually had begun after the Paris accords two years earlier. As the United States became engulfed in the Watergate scandal during 1974 and as most American personnel were evacuated from Southeast Asia, interest in the ongoing wars in both Vietnam and Cambodia declined steadily. A *Time* essay described this solipsism, noting that many Americans had for some time “enjoyed a comforting illusion: that Viet Nam and all its horrors had gone away for good” now that the Vietnamese were simply fighting each other.⁹² *Newsweek* echoed these sentiments, claiming that after the 1973 Accords, “the agony of Vietnam seemed to recede.”⁹³

As Saigon fell in the spring of 1975, however, “the war burst upon the U.S. all over again,” making clear to all those in the United States seeking to forget the war that it was their agony, not “the agony of *Vietnam*,” that had seemed to recede over the past two years.⁹⁴ The Khmer Rouge victory in Cambodia and the fall of Saigon once again brought the wars in Southeast Asia to the forefront of American consciousness. Images of suffering children, abandoned allies and clients, and fleeing Americans reclaimed the nightly news, the newspaper headlines, and the covers of magazines for one final flurry. Since 1950, the cover of *Time* had been devoted to some aspect of American involvement

⁹¹ Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, 545.

⁹² “How Should Americans Feel?” *Time*, April 14, 1975.

⁹³ *Newsweek*, March 31, 1975.

⁹⁴ “How Should Americans Feel?”

in Southeast Asia sixty-four times. For *Newsweek*, the count was sixty two times since 1961. From early April until early May, Vietnam was once again *the* story, as the mainstream media pondered the United States' role in the world, the plight of those we left behind, and, most of all, "where do we go from here?" Just as quickly, though, Vietnam was once again disappeared. In the second week in May, the covers of both major newsweeklies featured Mikhail Baryshnikov, rendering Vietnam increasingly to the back pages, where it would remain indefinitely.

The war thus ended for Americans, but not for America. By the time the Vietnamese were erased once again from American eyes in mid May of 1975, the new war against Vietnam already had begun. As Saigon was falling, the Ford White House swiftly imposed harsh economic sanctions on South Vietnam to match those long in place against the North. Amid his pensive meditations on April 30, the Secretary of State found time to recommend to the Commerce Department that it freeze an estimated \$70 million in South Vietnamese assets held by American-owned banks and their foreign subsidiaries. Such a decision was not new; the Truman administration had frozen close to \$200 million in Chinese assets in 1949, and Kissinger himself had authorized a similar arrangement for holding \$9 million in Cambodian assets less than two weeks earlier, as Phnom Penh was being overrun by the Khmer Rouge.⁹⁵

Two weeks later the White House was again in crisis mode, after a Khmer Rouge gunboat detained the *SS Mayaguez* in the Gulf of Thailand. Kissinger, returning to

⁹⁵ "Adjudication of Claims Against Vietnam," Hearing and Markup before the Subcommittees on Asian and Pacific Affairs and International Economic Policy and Trade, 96th Congress, 1st session, July 27, 1979, 3.

Washington on May 13 after a trip to the Midwest, arrived just in time for a meeting of the National Security Council. Kissinger later described the next twenty-four hours as “one of the most bizarre and tense evenings of my experience in government.”⁹⁶ After another long day of NSC meetings, diplomatic negotiations with the Chinese, and the authorization of military force to rescue the crew of the *Mayaguez*, The White House went on with a dinner for Dutch Prime Minister Johannes den Uyl. By the end of the dinner, from which Kissinger and Ford repeatedly took leave, the ship and its crew of forty had been recovered, although forty-three American military personnel had been killed in the efforts. The next morning a 15,000 ton bomb was detonated on the island from which the crew had been released several hours earlier. The White House declared victory, believing it had demonstrated America’s resolve to use military force despite the humbling defeat at the hands of the revolutionary forces of Vietnam. “With this,” Kissinger wrote, “Indochina disappeared from the American agenda.”⁹⁷

Yet again, the Secretary of State had underestimated himself. Somehow, amid all the distractions of the *Mayaguez* incident, Kissinger authorized another decision that would keep Vietnam from disappearing from view for at least a little while longer. On May 14, the State Department recommended to the Secretary of Commerce that South Vietnam and Cambodia be placed in the most restricted category of export controls, under which American citizens were forbidden to send people in those countries any humanitarian aid. Within the year, the U.S. would be enlarging its sanctions program,

⁹⁶ Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, 566.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 575. In addition to Kissinger’s memoirs, this reconstruction of events comes from Seymour Hersh, *The Price of Power* (New York: Summit Books, 1983), 639; and Ralph Wetterhahn, *The Last Battle: The Mayaguez Incident and the End of the Vietnam War* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2001).

denying the Vietnamese international aid, access to international capital, and membership in the United Nations. Far from “unable to affect the ongoing tragedy,” as Kissinger put it, the United States began a new campaign against Vietnam before the old guns had even gone silent.

In this chapter, I explore the initial stages of the American War on Vietnam after 1975, tracing the evolution of U.S. policy toward Vietnam from the fall of Saigon through the failure of the two nations to normalize relations by the end of 1977. Although I will touch on the political and diplomatic aspects of this phase of the war, I pay particular attention to the economic sanctions imposed by the United States. In considering the legal authority and the justifications offered for the embargo, I will show that the sanctions program was yet another step in a long history of destructive and ill-advised American policies against Vietnam. What we will see is that although the sanctions were initially imposed without serious consideration, debate, or any sense of the larger policy goals they were being used to achieve, this lack of definition proved malleable enough to allow for future justifications of the program. Initially put in place by what can only be described as a petty and symbolic policy—to “monitor the attitudes” of the new nation toward the United States—the sanctions were later justified by a number of shifting policy goals. Initially, however, they embodied no larger objective. By far the most troubling aspect of the economic warfare waged on Vietnam after 1975, however, is the way in which the United States used its power (and the threat of power)

over international organizations including the United Nations, International Monetary Fund, and World Bank to extend what should have been unilateral sanctions to a de facto multilateral aid embargo, effectively cutting the Vietnamese off from much needed sources of aid and other assistance. Far from receding into isolation, the United States after 1975 remained in a position to shape the direction and contour of events in Vietnam and in Southeast Asia as a whole. In more than one way, only the weaponry had changed.

In fact, the sanctions merely replaced bombing campaigns as the tools by which the United States tried to force the Vietnamese to acquiesce to American demands. Like the bombings, the sanctions were an act of war, implicitly designed to destroy Vietnam's industry and economy and were damaging and indiscriminate in their effects on the Vietnamese people. Like the bombings, the legal justifications for the sanctions were put in place under dubious circumstances; they rested almost entirely on authority previously and shortsightedly delegated from Congress to the executive branch, and were later revised or dismantled because of the experience in Vietnam. Like the larger military campaign against Vietnam, the sanctions were ineffective in achieving any of the United States' short-term goals, making their effects on the population seem all the more senseless. And just as with the gradual escalation of American military involvement in the region, it became more difficult over time for policymakers to alter the American course of action.

Despite these similarities, however, one major difference distinguished the two phases of the war: the new phase would be met with silence in the United States, rendering it largely invisible. There would be no television cameras, no daily dispatches from the frontlines of this conflict, no antiwar rallies, and no major policy addresses. American families would not see, on a nightly basis, the suffering imposed by policies carried out in their name. But that did not, of course, alter the events taking place in Southeast Asia. If anything, the silence made it worse. The invisibility of the embargo is also indicative of the nature of sanctions policies. Embargoes are themselves invisible forms of economic warfare; they do not make for exciting on-location news reports, nor do the battles over them shake the earth. Rather, sanctions are a slow and silent form of weaponry, but no less deadly. They can choke off the lifeblood of a nation and contribute to famine, starvation, and other forms of misery.

It is a central tenet of this project that culture “matters” as it intersects with foreign policy, and vice-versa. Just as the images and information of the American War in Vietnam helped bring a sense of the devastation of that war home to the American public and to the rest of the world and contributed to efforts to end that phase of the war, the initial *absence* of images and information from the American War on Vietnam after 1975 allowed those policies to go largely unchecked. While later chapters in this study will examine the intersections of culture and policy, the real story of the years immediately following the end of the military phase of the war is silence. There are no

images, no films, no books of record to examine alongside policy formation from 1975 to early 1977. What little debate about American policy toward Southeast Asia that took place during this period was conducted within the halls of government, and even those discussions were often marked by silence on the question of Vietnam itself. Wanting to avoid “controversy” or “divisive issues,” Congress regularly shelved discussion the actual policies affecting the lives of people living in Southeast Asia for the sake of convenience and political expediency. I am not suggesting that Americans did not discuss and debate the meaning of the war in the immediate postwar period, rather that “Vietnam” during this time began to signify the war more than the nation of Vietnam.⁹⁸ This transformation, enacted in and through the cultural vacuum of the period from 1975-1977, helped create the cultural space into which the next phase of the battle, discussed in the following chapter, would take place.

Many American citizens and members of Congress initially favored reconciliation with Vietnam and sought an end to the embargo in the months immediately following the fall of Saigon. But whatever goodwill existed in the spring of 1975 was quickly squandered by vetoes and intransigence on the part of the Ford administration as well as a lack of perseverance by those in Congress who supported reconciliation. In that election year, few politicians could run on a policy of increased foreign aid, particularly to Vietnam. Meanwhile, the POW/MIA issue, conspicuously absent immediately after the war, became the centerpiece of American policy toward Vietnam. Once that issue took

⁹⁸ For a discussion of various American responses to the fall of Saigon and end of the military phase of the American War on Vietnam, see Alex Bloom, “‘The Mainspring in this Country Has Been Broken’: America’s Battered Sense of Self at the End of the Vietnam War,” Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association, January 2004, in possession of the author.

hold in late 1975, it would dominate future discussions of American-Vietnamese relations for decades to come.

The course of action set in motion on by Kissinger's authorization of the embargo on May 14, 1975—not considered at the time for its long-term policy implications and never intended to be permanent—would nevertheless define and limit the range and scope of future interactions between Vietnam and the United States. Decades earlier, the United States had supported a French war in Indochina and later gone to war there itself, continuing politics “by other means,” as the saying goes. In 1975, the U.S. began a new phase of the battle for Vietnam and Southeast Asia, continuing war by other means.

History of United States Sanctions Programs

In the annals of diplomatic history and international relations, economic sanctions have a long and sordid past, even though they have only recently become a common tool of foreign policy. Sanctions scholars normally point to Pericles' 432 B.C. embargo of imports during the Peloponnesian War as the first recorded economic sanction. The United States' early formation often revolved around a variety of economic measures, ranging from the Stamp Act to the trade embargoes leading up to the War of 1812.⁹⁹ The modern history of sanctions programs, however, dates from the outbreak of the first World War, when sanctions by the League of Nations were used either as a substitute or deterrent, rather than a precursor or supplement, to military force. Those measures

⁹⁹ Barry Carter, *International Economic Sanctions; Improving the Haphazard U.S. Legal Regime* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 8; Michael Malloy, *United States Economic Sanctions: Theory and Practice* (The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 2001), 3.

helped to initiate cyclical phases of sanctions and armed conflict, during which questions over the efficacy of such policies would be regularly revisited.

In 1919 Woodrow Wilson, lobbying for the League of Nations, argued for the use of sanctions as a tool to prevent military warfare:

A nation that is boycotted is a nation that is in sight of surrender. Apply this economic, peaceful, silent, deadly remedy and there will be no need for force. It is a terrible remedy. It does not cost a life outside the nation boycotted, but it brings a pressure on the nation which, in my judgment, no modern nation could resist.¹⁰⁰

Wilson's beliefs were given an initial boost when the League's trade sanctions against Yugoslavia and Greece helped produce peaceful resolutions to territorial disputes in the 1920s.¹⁰¹ The League's failure to act swiftly against Italian aggression in Abyssinia several years later was a setback for sanction supporters. More comprehensive programs against the Axis powers leading up to World War II, however, reinforced the belief that sanctions could be an effective measure to diminish, if not destroy, the ability of nations to make war.¹⁰² Since the end of the Second World War, no nation has made such prolific use of economic sanctions as the United States. Out of the 116 cases examined in a massive study by economists Gary Hufbauer, Kimberly Elliot, and Jeffrey Schott, the United States was involved, either unilaterally or multilaterally, 77 times, compared with 22 instances by England and 10 by the Soviet Union, the next most common users.

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in Carter, *International Economic Sanctions*, 9.

¹⁰¹ For the study of these cases, see Gary Hufbauer et. al., eds., *Economic Sanctions Reconsidered: History and Current Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for International Economics, 1985), 124-31.

¹⁰² Carter, *International Economic Sanctions*, 9-10.

The modern history of American sanction programs rests on a series of legislative acts, most of which are related in some fashion to the war against Vietnam. In fact, one of the great ironies of the embargo on Vietnam is that much of the authority under which the program was put in place was revisited shortly thereafter because many lawmakers took issue with the manner in which the program was imposed. In yet another similarity between the military campaign against Vietnam and the sanctions program, Congress attempted in the years following the imposition of the embargo to reclaim some of the powers previously delegated to the executive branch. As we will see, although lawmakers took issue with procedures and policies, they proved unwilling to ease the sanctions themselves, and quietly grandfathered Vietnam in to new legislation.

One of the most important and problematic pieces of legislation providing for economic sanctions, including those visited on Vietnam, is the Trading With the Enemy Act. Originally made law in 1917 to prevent trade with Germany in advance of the U.S. involvement in World War I and, more generally, to grant the President expanded economic powers in times of war, the act was designed to punish “declared enemies of the United States” or states posing an active threat to “U.S. interests.”¹⁰³ In 1933, however, Franklin Roosevelt declared a national emergency for a banking holiday to prevent a run on gold, a decision retroactively amended into the law by Congress a few days later.¹⁰⁴ This amendment resulted in section 5(b) of the act, which formalized executive authority to invoke the law “during any other period of national emergency

¹⁰³ Malloy, *United States Economic Sanctions*, 152.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. See also “Revision of Trading With the Enemy Act,” Markup before the Committee on International Relations, U.S. House of Representatives, 95th Congress, 1st Session, June 16, 17, 20, 1977 (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1977), 8.

declared by the President,” and was later used by Roosevelt to preemptively thwart Nazi property seizures in Western Europe prior to American involvement in World War One. On December 16, 1950, on the heels of China’s entry into the Korean War, President Truman declared a national emergency that would remain in place until 1978, when the National Emergencies Act of 1976 terminated all existing national emergencies. In those years, however, this declaration provided the justification for Foreign Asset controls and other sanctions against China, North Korea, North Vietnam, Cuba, Cambodia, South Vietnam, and several other states.

The other significant piece of legislation to the American sanctions program against Vietnam is the Export Administration Act (EAA). Originally passed as the Export Control Act of 1949 (ECA), this law was yet another delegation of authority from Congress to the Executive Branch. The ECA was intended to be “commodity-specific” rather than “nation-specific,” initially to prevent the export of materials that might be used in military efforts that might effect U.S. security and later to prevent “abnormal foreign demand” for American goods.¹⁰⁵ Originally set to expire in 1951 the ECA was revised and extended six times before being replaced by the Export Administration Act of 1969. The EAA was different from the ECA in several aspects, including seeking to promote, rather than restrict, trade, and making a greater distinction between military and non-military aid.¹⁰⁶ The trade embargoes imposed on the countries listed above as targets of the TWEA were justified by the EAA, which also underwent significant revisions in

¹⁰⁵ Malloy, *United States Economic Sanctions*, 40-41.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 52-64.

the late 1970s. After the severe alterations to the TWEA and EAA—together the foundation for nearly all American sanction programs from World War I through the war in Vietnam—the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA), passed in 1977, became the primary tool for imposing sanctions. Although this act, like the TWEA, was only supposed to be used during period of “rare and brief emergencies,” it was similarly vague in the powers it delegated to the President, which allowed for its regular invocation by the Reagan White House. First used during the Iranian hostage crisis, the IEEPA was invoked more in the next twenty years than the TWEA had been since 1917.¹⁰⁷

Within this legislative framework, scholars have long sought to consider the relative effectiveness of economic sanctions as a tool of foreign policy. Hufbauer, Schott, and Elliot argue that five major policy goals have been pursued through economic sanctions: getting a target state to mildly alter its policies; destabilization of the target country’s government; disrupting “a minor military adventure”; impairing “the military potential of the target country”; and producing a major policy alteration by the target country.¹⁰⁸ Drawing upon these ideas, legal scholar Michael Malloy’s framework allows for three broad categories of policy objectives in sanctions programs: Directive (“to create economic pressure calculated to alter behavior of a target state”); Defensive (“to reduce or slow development of an adversary’s military or strategic capabilities by raising the cost of acquiring imports or import substitutes”); and Communicative (“to send a

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 171.

¹⁰⁸ Hufbauer et. al., *Economic Sanctions Reconsidered*, 38.

symbolic message of displeasure with another country's behaviour (which may also be for internal political purposes or directed at allies)."¹⁰⁹ Whereas the first two can be measured objectively, Malloy argues, the latter is more problematic. Communicative policy goals are "less susceptible to measurement, redundant in that all sanctions are by nature communicative, motivated more by domestic policy than foreign or economic policy, likely to be "trivial or disproportionate" in its effects, and "of questionable appropriateness as a policy justification for economic sanctions."¹¹⁰ All this is certainly true, but that does not diminish the symbolic role of sanctions that Malloy wishes to downplay. In fact, as I will argue here, the American sanctions on Vietnam, although they at different times were justified by all five of Hufbauer et. al's goals, were also in large measure, symbolic, clearly driven more by domestic political concerns than any foreign policy objectives.

Evaluating the effectiveness of a sanctions program is a complicated project, and scholars approaching the problem from different angles, unsurprisingly, have come to different conclusions. Barry Carter's economic and legal analysis demonstrates that some sanctions, particularly those on import controls rather than export controls, have been successful, but that the American legal system "is decidedly not structured to facilitate" the use of those types of sanctions.¹¹¹ Political scientist Ernest Preeg, using five case studies of American unilateral sanctions, concludes that sanctions "have been

¹⁰⁹ Malloy, *United States Economic Sanctions.*, 19-20. Malloy's definition of the Communicative comes from Bayard, Pelzman, & Perez-Lopez, "Stakes and Risks in Economic Sanctions," *The World Economy* (73-74: 1983), 6.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 20-21.

¹¹¹ Carter, *op cit.*, 31.

almost entirely ineffective in achieving their intended policy goal,” due not only to their reliance on exports controls but because they inflict more damage on the population than the government and have an adverse impact on United States’ commercial interests.¹¹² Hufbauer’s study acknowledges that, “in most cases sanctions do not contribute very much to the achievement of policy goals.”¹¹³ Malloy’s legal analysis argues persuasively that most previous studies, many of which he explores at length, have oversimplified the effectiveness question. He posits a more “multiplex and multidimensional” analysis, including factors others have ignored, such as the role of other states, the passage of time, and extraneous events.¹¹⁴ Perhaps Malloy’s most important point, however, is his simplest: the effectiveness of a sanctions program can only be judged in relation to a clearly defined overarching policy of which the program is a part. As we will see, the lack of clearly articulated policy goals with regard to Vietnam makes the question of effectiveness even more complicated.

By the mid 1970s, the United States faced a foreign policy dilemma. No longer the sole hegemonic power, it was home to a reluctant population and government that shied away from foreign military commitments and increased foreign aid. After, and largely as a result of the war in Vietnam, the United States preferred instead to ride the wave of economic sanctions that were once again in vogue. The Soviet Union and China, as well as a number of developing nations, had become more independent of American trade and aid,¹¹⁵ and both of those major powers also had become increasingly willing to

¹¹² Ernest Preeg, *Feeling Good or Doing Good With Economic Sanctions* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1999), 2-3.

¹¹³ Hufbauer et. al., (1985), 79.

¹¹⁴ Malloy, *United States Economic Sanctions*, 379-380.

commit massive amounts of aid to nations targeted by western sanctions, including Vietnam and Cambodia—a situation that would lead to a long and bloody war in Cambodia in the 1980s.¹¹⁶ It was in this context that the United States placed sanctions on Vietnam in the mid-1970s.

Although the socio-economic analyses necessary to examine in full the relative impact of the American sanctions on Vietnam falls outside the scope of this study, we will see over the course of the next several chapters that it is nearly impossible to say with any certainty that the program was either a success or failure, because at no time was there a clearly and consistently articulated policy goal toward which the sanctions were intended to contribute. Initially set up to “monitor” the Vietnamese, the program was later justified by claiming it would force the Vietnamese to stop their border war with Cambodia (“disrupt a minor military adventure”), provide a full accounting of unaccounted for American personnel and alter Hanoi’s policies on religious practice (“mild policy alterations”), end their occupation of Cambodia (“major policy alteration”), and “limit their military potential.” Many also hoped that the embargo would destabilize the government. Together, these goals satisfied at various times all five of the Hufbauer studies potential policy goals.

By examining the conditions under which the embargo was initially imposed and maintained, however, we can see that the sanctions were little more than symbolic, punitive actions by a discomfited administration. As I will show, the embargo was not

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 107.

¹¹⁶ For more discussion on the U.S. role in pushing the Vietnamese further into the Soviet orbit, see chapter three, below.

initially implemented in order to further any specific policy goal, served no clear economic interests, and was considered a mistake by many in (and out of) Congress. The sanctions on Vietnam quickly became another point of contention in the post-Watergate efforts by Congress to reclaim authority previously given to the President. Discussions of the embargo at Congressional hearings would lead to the realization by members of Congress that several Presidents had in fact been using the Trading With the Enemy Act to authorize a number of policies over the years, and would eventually culminate in a revision of that legislation in line similar action taken in the War Powers Resolution. And although the laws under which the program was imposed would be revised and discarded, the sanctions on Vietnam would remain for two decades.

The 1975 Embargo Hearings

From the beginning, the economic sanctions placed on Vietnam were problematic. As stated previously, the asset controls, invoked under the authority of the Trading With the Enemy Act, were put in place as Saigon was being overrun by the Revolutionary Forces of Vietnam. The Export Administration Act of 1969 provided the additional legal cover for the trade embargo, which appeared to be even more hastily conceived than the asset seizures, given that its development took place during the *Mayaguez* crisis during the second week of May 1975. In neither of these decisions was Congress consulted by the Administration. As hearings commenced in the early summer of 1975 the White

House remained unable to articulate any coherent reason for the sanctions.

As Robert Miller, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs told Congress on June 4, the export controls, which had been placed on “the Communist controlled areas of Vietnam” in 1958, were extended to South Vietnam because they “further[ed] significantly the foreign policy of the United States,” and that such controls can be authorized by the President “for national security reasons.”¹¹⁷ “Communist controlled Vietnam,” originally had been placed in Category “Z” in 1958, a category normally reserved for nations with which the United States was at war. North Korea and Cuba were the only other nations included in the “Z” category at the time. Under this distinction, even private shipments of humanitarian aid to those countries must be subject to licenses granted by the federal government. Rarely, if ever, were such licenses granted. Category “Y,” a slightly less hostile category used to identify nations to whom the United States sought to deny “strategically important goods,” was at the time applicable to the Soviet Union and China, among others. Under that category, military aid and other supplies deemed “strategic” were subject to the same licensing procedures, but humanitarian aid was not. Ironically, this policy placed greater restrictions on aid than had been in place during the war.

Led by subcommittee chair Jonathan Bingham of New York, many committee members took the opportunity to express their concerns over the imposition of the embargo. In his opening remarks, Bingham noted:

¹¹⁷ “United States Embargo of Trade With South Vietnam and Cambodia,” Hearing before the Subcommittee on International Trade and Commerce, House of Representatives, 94th Congress, 1st Session, June 4, 1975, 3.

It has been my hope, and that of many Members of the Congress, that our peacetime policies toward Indochina would not be mere extensions of our wartime sanctions—that the end of the fighting in Vietnam and the end of U.S. military involvement there would make possible a gradual normalization of relations with the people and governments of Indochina... Symbolic gestures with little practical impact when they are invoked, embargoes often become serious hurdles indeed when the time comes for them to be revoked.¹¹⁸

After listening to Miller's testimony, Bingham offered that he found the administration's reasoning for the trade embargo "totally unconvincing," and a "purely bureaucratic procedure."¹¹⁹ While Miller continued to focus attention on the asset controls, which most members of the committee found less controversial, it became clear that Bingham's concerns about both the "practical impact" of the embargo and the permanence of them would become major issues.

The freezing of assets in such situations had indeed become standard operating procedure for the United States government. At the time of these 1975 hearings, the U.S. still controlled over \$100 million in Chinese assets. The blocking of assets was normally justified with the argument that the monies would be used to protect the government against claims from corporations and private individuals who lose foreign investments and property when governments seize or nationalize that property. Under the Foreign Claims Settlement Act (passed after the Communist victory in China), American citizens could file claims with the government that eventually could be settled using the foreign assets blocked by the U.S. as collateral. In March of 1977, as the Carter Administration was moving closer to normalizing relations with Beijing, the Chinese agreed to pay \$80.5

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 1.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 4,5.

million in cash to help offset the estimated \$197 million of American assets frozen since 1949.¹²⁰ As the revolutionary forces of Vietnam rolled into Saigon in 1975, the Ford Administration acted to ensure that these measures would be in place to protect the millions of dollars abandoned during the American evacuations that year.

Few congressional representatives took issue with the freezing of assets. The embargo was another matter. Asked to explain how imposing a trade embargo on Vietnam was a matter of national security, Miller answered that the controls would permit the U.S. government “to monitor the evolving attitudes of these new regimes toward the United States and toward its citizens.” It would have been “inappropriate,” he went on to claim, “to relax the controls on North Vietnam or Vietnam in light of the circumstances that pertained at the time.”¹²¹ The policy of the administration, he argued, was to extend the embargo to all of Vietnam and then to evaluate at some later date “the attitude” of the new government. Yet Miller, after further prodding from the committee, also conceded that Vietnam was not at all a threat to the security of the United States, as the legislation demands, but was rather *potentially* hostile to “American interests” in Southeast Asia. Having claimed that the North Vietnamese came to power in South Vietnam “in gross violation of the Paris Agreements,” Miller was put on the defensive in explaining how an embargo was in the interests of the United States. In a notable exchange with Representative Don Fraser of Minnesota, Miller revealed the confused and punitive nature of the policy:

¹²⁰ “Adjudication of Claims Against Vietnam,” Hearing and Markup before the Subcommittees on Asian and Pacific Affairs and International Economic Policy and Trade, 96th Congress, 1st session, July 27, 1979, 3.

¹²¹ “United States Embargo of Trade with South Vietnam and Cambodia,” 6.

Fraser: You agree Vietnam is not threatening the United States?

Miller: I agree Vietnam is not threatening the United States directly, but that it has taken power in South Vietnam by force of arms against the interests of the United States.

Fraser: This is a form of punishment then. It is for past behavior. It is not a present problem. It is past behavior.

Miller: Our judgment is that the application of these controls is a prudent and orderly way to establish a basis for judging how the attitudes of these new regimes evolve.

Fraser: Why do we have to put a restraint on trade in order to evaluate the regimes? Does that help our intelligence gatherers?

Miller: It puts us in a position to monitor the activities of these countries, of these regimes.

Fraser: How does putting an embargo on trade help to monitor their activities?

Miller: First, as I said, we want to be sure we deny any strategic goods to them. Second, as I have said, the controls already applied to all of Vietnam in effect.¹²²

This line of questioning resumed, with Chairman Bingham chastising Miller:

Bingham: Isn't it also true that clearly the purpose of the earlier embargo against North Vietnam was to try to impede North Vietnam's effectiveness in a military struggle to which we were opposed?

Miller: That is undoubtedly the case; that is correct.

Bingham: Then to impose an embargo after the contest is over is to close the barn door after the mare is stolen.

Miller responded that the extension of the embargo was "automatic," but the rest of his testimony made clear that it was hardly that easy. The committee later returned to this

¹²² Ibid.,11.

question when the underlying policy justifications given by Miller and others remained unclear. Asked if the decisions were made in “routine fashion,” as if “they were not very important decisions,” Miller replied that, no, “they were given careful consideration,” to which Chairman Bingham retorted, again, that the actions “were taken without consultation with Congress and without consultation with any of our friends in Southeast Asia.”¹²³

Administration officials also testified that President Ford actually had not been involved in the decision, further demonstrating the haphazard and surreptitious manner in which the embargo was put in place. When asked why there hadn’t been more debate on the matter, Phillip Trimble, a legal adviser at the State Department, stated that “the President has statutory authority, but that has been delegated.” The questioning continued:

Fraser: With respect to all of the controls that have now been applied, the Secretaries of the Departments can sign off without involving the President; is that correct?

Trimble: That is correct.

Fraser: No decision is required by the President?

Trimble: The authority is delegated; that is correct. Treasury and Commerce act on the recommendation of the Secretary of State.¹²⁴

In the end, the embargo was pushed through the administration without any trace of a serious debate. The ostensible reason given for the embargo was so that the United States

¹²³ Ibid., 19.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 9.

could “monitor” the new Vietnamese government, and neither Congress nor even the President were involved in the decision making process. Authority to impose the trade sanctions rested with the Treasury and Commerce departments, which acted on the instructions of none other than Henry Kissinger.

Several other things about these hearings are worth noting. First, although it would quickly become the defining policy goal of the embargo, there is not a single mention in the pages of the Subcommittee print of the POW/MIA issue. No hearing on any issue related to Vietnam for the next twenty years would take place without a significant portion of discussion committed to the topic of missing American personnel, yet in the initial discussion and imposition of the embargo, it is completely absent. Secondly, it is clear that the administration never intended the embargo to be permanent. When asked if the committee was correct in assuming that the sanctions were a “temporary measure,” Miller replied, “I don’t think anything is permanent, and I think this seriously is our intention, to watch and observe and evaluate the evolving attitudes of these regimes toward us.”¹²⁵ Yet the administration and Congress failed to lay out any specific criteria under which the sanctions would be revisited or lifted. As Miller told the committee, “I am not aware of any regular or periodic mechanism for reviewing [the policies].”¹²⁶ This absence of policy allowed for the future malleability of justifications for the program.

Finally, many in Congress were aware that beyond lacking any definitive policy

¹²⁵ Ibid., 7.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 9.

objectives, the sanctions might actually work against U.S. interests in the region in two ways. First, members of the committee assumed the sanctions would push Vietnam further toward its Communist sponsors. Michael Harrington of Massachusetts was particularly stringent in his criticism on this point, arguing the case of Cuba and numerous “other examples where we have driven the wedge of isolation only then to witness as the isolated nations move closer to the orbit of those with whom they are forced to deal for economic sustenance.”¹²⁷ In fact, Harrington’s sentiments would be borne out by future events, as the continued isolation of Vietnam by the United States resulted in the formal alliance of Hanoi with the Soviet Union, which in turn led to a triangular proxy standoff in Cambodia between the Soviets, The United States, and China.¹²⁸ Secondly, there was absolutely no economic justification for the embargo given by the White House, which indicates that they clearly had not given the issue much thought. Aside from direct American military and development aid to Southern Vietnam, which had already been discontinued and was further restricted by Congress, there was no trade relationship with Vietnam that would be missed. In Miller’s testimony, he noted that “the trade effect of the export controls was not a major consideration... and it is reasonable to assume that even without controls U.S. trade with South Vietnam would be practically nil for the foreseeable future.”¹²⁹

As in so many earlier instances, however, policymakers in Washington ignored or were unwilling to realize the Vietnamese desire for better relations between the two

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ See Chapter Three, below.

¹²⁹ “United States Embargo of Trade with South Vietnam and Cambodia,” 3.

nations. Only a few weeks after the fall of Saigon, Prime Minister Pham Van Dong had reached out for American aid, albeit not in the most conciliatory manner. The Prime Minister cited “obligations” of the United States stemming from its “criminal war of aggression” against Vietnam.¹³⁰ Rather than seizing the moment as an opportunity for negotiations, or simply ignoring the gesture, the State Department “issued a stiff denunciation” of the Prime Minister’s comments, reasserting the Administration’s views that the United States “has no intention of giving aid to any Indochinese communist nation.”¹³¹ Senator George McGovern, at a hearing on American MIAs in the spring of 1977, recounted a conversation he had had with Dong not long after the war had ended that further demonstrated the lack of understanding about possibilities for improved American-Vietnamese relations. The Senator asked the Prime Minister what he “thought was a facetious question [about] American oil companies going over there to develop their oil.” When Dong responded that Vietnam would indeed support American involvement in their offshore oil operations, McGovern was taken aback, having foolishly assumed that the last thing the Vietnamese would want would be a return of American industry.¹³² In fact, according to Nayan Chanda, American oil executives, who had invested hundreds of millions of dollars exploring oil in the South China Sea during the war, had quietly held several meetings with Vietnamese officials in Paris and later, in

¹³⁰ *NYT*, June 4, 1975, cited in Stephen Hurst, *The Carter Administration and Vietnam* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1996), 18.

¹³¹ Quoted in James Laurie, “Indochina: A Decision Based on Ideology,” *FEER* July 4, 1975, 13. See also Stephen Hurst, *The Carter Administration and Vietnam* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1996), 10.

¹³² “U.S. MIA’s in Southeast Asia,” Hearing before Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 95th Congress, 1st Session, April 1, 1977, 14.

February of 1976, were invited to Hanoi for further discussions. Because the embargo remained in place, however, the contracts never took shape.¹³³

In November of 1975, the embargo issue was given one last public hearing. That fall had seen the issue of normalizing relations with Vietnam back in the news, as business groups stepped up pressure on the Ford administration to repeal the embargo and as Hanoi's tone softened on the issue of American financial aid rather than "obligations."¹³⁴ On November 17, The Bingham Subcommittee on International Trade and Finance was again the forum for discussion of the embargo as members of various Church communities were invited to testify about export restrictions to Vietnam. The stated reason for the "Church Views" hearings was consideration of a House resolution, HR 9503 that would amend the Trading With the Enemy Act in order to repeal the embargo on Vietnam. Like the previous hearings, the testimony at this inquiry exposed the absurdity of American policy. Unlike the initial investigation, however, the POW/MIA issue began to surface in the Church hearings, marking the first of many shifts in policy justifications for the Embargo.

The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), a Quaker organization that had been very active in supplying aid to the people of Vietnam during the American war, had been quietly subverting the embargo while repeatedly being denied export licenses by the Ford administration. On November 10, "several hundred" members of the AFSC

¹³³ Nayan Chanda, *Brother Enemy* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 145.

¹³⁴ See, for instance, "U.S. Ready to Talk with Indochinese," *NYT*, November 15, 1975; "Trading With Indochina: Many U.S. Executives in Asia Urge Ban on Dealing with Vietnam and Cambodia," *WSJ*, November 1, 1975.

protested outside the White House, demanding that the State and Commerce Departments approve licenses to the group for humanitarian aid and other supplies.¹³⁵ In response to the increasingly visible protest, and to the release of nine American prisoners being held in Hanoi, the administration made modest revisions to its policy, which seemed to only further complicate matters.

After meeting with Kissinger on November 14, Sonny Montgomery, a Democratic Congressman from Mississippi and Chair of the House Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia, announced that over the weekend the White House had approved the AFSC license and that new requests would be considered on a case-by-case basis. The changes to the policy, however, turned out to be little more than cosmetic, attempting to draw a distinction between “humanitarian aid,” which would be allowed, and “economic assistance,” which would not. As several witnesses at the Church Hearings would testify, the distinction was both tenuous and arbitrary. The *Los Angeles Times* jumped on the story, calling American policy toward Vietnam “conspicuous silliness” being carried out “as if the war were still being waged.”¹³⁶ Taking the AFSC licenses as a case in point, the editorial noted that sweaters from the group were approved, but “16 tons of yarn” were not. “Medical supplies, powdered milk, canned pork, school supplies and pediatric drugs are licensed. But not fishing nets, not rotary tiller diesel plows, not the machinery to make prosthetic devices.”¹³⁷ By the time that the Subcommittee opened its hearings on the bill, the State department did reconsider

¹³⁵ Marjorie Hyer, “Quakers Get Approval for Vietnam Aid,” *WP*, November 15, 1975.

¹³⁶ “A Silly War,” *Los Angeles Times*, 11/13/75.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

and approve licenses for the fishing nets and rototillers, making clear that they had been granted in response to the release of the American citizens, and did not constitute a new direction in the overall trade policy.

Inside the Committee room, Bingham opened the hearings by stating that the announced change “constitutes no change in policy at all,” a point he continued to press with witnesses throughout the proceedings.¹³⁸ Edward Doherty of the United States Catholic Conference argued that many American citizens were ready to begin the process of reconciliation with Vietnam but that the Ford administration was standing in the way of peace. Doherty called upon the United States “to begin a national examination of conscience,” asserting that the American government and the American people has [sic] a responsibility to help rebuild Indochina.¹³⁹ In questioning from the Committee, however, the question of responsibility was quickly and deftly turned on the Vietnamese, as members asked about Vietnamese assistance regarding “those who are missing in action,” as a precondition for bilateral aid, which was completely outside the purview of the committee at the time. Several members also put the question of aid to Vietnam within the context of the larger battle of the period over the distribution of American foreign aid. Congressmen Edward Beister of Pennsylvania, for instance, asked why the American people should focus on Vietnam, which would not even be at the “top of the list” of poorest countries.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ “U.S. Embargo of Vietnam: Church Views,” Hearing before the Subcommittee on International Trade and Commerce, House of Representatives, 94th Congress, 1st Session, November 17 1975, 1.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 3-4.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 10.

The next witness, Herman Will, of the United Methodist Church, offered similar testimony, noting how active his Church had been in providing aid during the American war in Vietnam, and how despite raising hundreds of thousands of dollars in relief aid since the end of the war they were now unable to continue those efforts under current policy. Again, however, the talk quickly turned to Vietnamese responsibilities, particularly on the matter of Americans still listed as missing in action. Congressman Beister again took the lead, this time arguing that the MIA issue was not a “governmental relationship,” but a “human” relationship. In response, Will countered that given how the United States has “laid waste” to Vietnam, the Vietnamese may have difficulty seeing the recovery of American personnel as a priority, given the vast human tragedies that affected so many Vietnamese lives.¹⁴¹ Most notably, however, Mr. Will made the crucial point that the recent decision of the State department to consider further openings of the relationship between Washington and Hanoi on a quid pro quo basis actually encouraged the Vietnamese to withhold any information they might obtain about missing American personnel. This claim is important, because later debates over normalization of relations and aid to Vietnam would focus on the apparent willingness of Hanoi to trade information, or bodies, for aid. Similar testimony was offered by members of the United Presbyterian Church and by Clergy and Laity Concerned, and similar reactions were given by members of the committee. The Legislative Director of the American Legion included a written statement arguing that the United States “should not reward Hanoi’s

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 17.

intransigence” on the MIA issue. “Thousands of American families remain in limbo,” according to the statement, “because of Hanoi’s refusal to assist us in determining the fate of American servicemen who fought for us all in Indochina.”¹⁴²

In the period of just a few short months, the focus of the Congressional debate over the American embargo in Vietnam had gone from the statutory authority under which such measures can be imposed to Vietnamese responsibility for assisting the recovery of missing American military personnel.¹⁴³ Lost in this shift were questions over American responsibility for the devastation of Indochina, the fact that the United States seemed to be continuing the war by other means, and whether the trade embargo was actually a practical, effective, or humane means to a muddily or ill-defined end.

The United Nations

The embargo was but one piece of the initial phase of the American War on Vietnam. While the sanctions remained in place, the United States further demonstrated its ongoing obstinacy with regard to Vietnam at the United Nations. On August 6, 1975, the United Nations Security Council denied a hearing to South Korea’s application for membership. Although the South Koreans had been repeatedly denied admission since their first application 1949, the decision not to hold even a hearing on the matter was somewhat unusual. The standard U.N. position had been that divided nations, such as Korea, Germany, and Vietnam between 1954 and 1975 would not be admitted unless

¹⁴² Ibid., 40.

¹⁴³ I will return to the POW/MIA issue at the beginning of the next chapter, which traces the significance of the issue in the context of the opening of the “Cultural Front” of the American War on Vietnam after 1975.

both parties agree on entrance. Thus East and West Germany were not admitted until 1973, when they signed a mutual recognition treaty.¹⁴⁴ North Korea's continued intransigence on joining the United Nations effectively rendered void their Southern counterparts' request. As it turned out, however, the refusal of the Security Council to consider the Korean question provided the Ford administration the fodder it desired to take the unprecedented step of vetoing the two Vietnams' applications.

The Vietnamese applications, to be sure, provided an unusual case in their own right. At the time of the applications, North Vietnam remained clearly in control of South Vietnam, and there was little doubt in Southeast Asia, the United States, or the rest of the world, that the two would soon be reunified. As *The Economist* opined at the time, "there are now about one and a half Vietnams," united politically and militarily and separate primarily only in economic planning. Given that the DRV had taken over the RSV by force, regardless of the politics involved, the dual applications from "two governments, one of which has just helped overthrow the other's predecessor in a war fought to decide, among other things, whether their countries should be two or one," certainly constituted a unique situation.¹⁴⁵ The United States, though, was not interested in a debate on the subtleties of U.N. procedure, as the White House quickly made up its mind to reassert its power over the process.

The members of the American delegation were unanimous, according to Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then the American ambassador to the U.N. Although the admission of

¹⁴⁴ "Count Your Vietnams," *The Economist*, August 9, 1975, 14; Louis Halasz, "Stalemate in the Halls of Diplomacy," *FEER*, August 22, 1975, 20.

¹⁴⁵ "Count Your Vietnams."

“the Vietnams” would “symbolize and confirm” the humiliation of the United States and serve as yet another marker that “the end of the period in which the United States was *the* principal actor in world affairs, the mission agreed that an American veto would provoke the General Assembly, perhaps even to the point of expelling Israel.¹⁴⁶ In a lengthy cable to the White House, Moynihan informed Kissinger that a veto “would be a calamity:

.....

We would be seen to act out of bitterness, blindness, weakness, and fear. We would be seen not only to have lost the habit of victory, but in the process to have acquired the most pitiable stigma of defeat. But there would be little pity. The overwhelming response would be contempt.¹⁴⁷

Kissinger would have none of it, nor would President Ford. They instructed Moynihan to cast a veto against the Vietnamese application. The votes, cast on August 11, were only the eighth and ninth vetoes ever cast by the United States in the Security Council, and the first against the admission of another nation.¹⁴⁸

When the General Assembly convened in September, they responded to the American action with a vote of 123-0, instructing the Security Council to “reconsider” the applications “immediately and favorably.” The United States and a few select allies abstained from this vote. Although few likely took him at his word, those listening to Kissinger’s September 22 address to the U.N., could be forgiven for thinking that he had indeed reconsidered:

So we say to all peoples and governments: Let us fashion together a new world order. Let its arrangements be just. Let the new nations help shape it and feel it is

¹⁴⁶ Patrick J. Moynihan, *A Dangerous Place* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1978), 143.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 145.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 110, 146-48.

theirs. Let the old nations use their strengths and skill for the benefit of all mankind. Let us all work together to enrich the spirit and to enoble mankind.¹⁴⁹

One week later, however, the United States once again cast the lone veto against the admission of Vietnam into the United Nations. In December of 1975, when members of the Select Committee were meeting with Vietnamese leaders in Hanoi, Foreign Minister Phan Hien was told by members of the American delegation that the U.S. veto “was nothing directed at the Vietnamese,” at which Hien and his colleagues could only laugh.¹⁵⁰

Even taking into consideration the unusual nature of the Vietnamese applications, the clear international consensus was to allow the admission of both states under the assumption that reunification was little more than a formality. Although it has become increasingly common since the end of the war in Vietnam for the United States to be on the short end of near unanimous U.N. votes, at the time it was a major departure.¹⁵¹ While Moynihan’s comments in the Security Council justified on the vetoes on the grounds that the simultaneous denial of the South Korean application constituted “selective universality,” it seems clear that the administration’s motivations were far less idealistic. Kissinger and Ford could easily have instructed Moynihan to abstain from the votes, voicing displeasure at the process without making such a radical shift in policy. In

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 142.

¹⁵⁰ Jespersen, “The Bitter End and the Lost Chance in Vietnam: Congress, the Ford Administration and the Battle Over Vietnam, 1975-76,” *Diplomatic History* 24 (Spring 2000), 265-293; 279.

¹⁵¹ For a catalogue of such votes since 1978, see William Blum, *Rogue State: A Guide to the World’s Only Superpower* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 2000), chapter twenty: “The United States Versus the World at the United Nations,” 184-199.

another scenario, the delegation could have voiced its dissent while indicating that Vietnam should wait for admission until it was formally unified, a much more tenable position than seeking to barter one unorthodox set of applications for another. By noisily, publicly, and solitarily denying Vietnamese membership in the U.N., the White House echoed its actions after the fall of Saigon, enacting punitive measures that only made the nation appear more like a “petty and frustrated tyrant.”¹⁵²

This view was borne out a year later, when the recently reunified and renamed Socialist Republic of Vietnam applied for United Nations membership and was promptly greeted with an announcement by the Ford administration that it would once again veto the application in the Security Council. Although understandably frustrated, the Vietnamese were persuaded by the French to wait to apply until after the upcoming American elections. Working behind the scenes, Kissinger had secured this arrangement the previous week in Paris.¹⁵³ Public statements by the Hanoi regime, echoed by many in the international press, suggested that the continued obstinacy of the United States was based more on the personal pettiness of Kissinger than anything else. These feelings were seemingly confirmed yet again when, after the 1976 Presidential elections, the United States cast the lone veto against Vietnam’s application. Yet again the General Assembly responded with an adamant message to the Security Council to reconsider, and yet again the United States cast its veto.

Despite the strong appearance of Kissinger’s personal animosity driving United

¹⁵² Louis Halsalz, ”Washington Put on the Spot,” *FEER*, September 24, 1976, 20.

¹⁵³ Joseph Zasloff and MacAlister Brown, *Communist Indochina and U.S. Foreign Policy: Postwar Realities* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1978), 9.

States policy, the real story in the decision in the latest round of vetoes was the shift in justifications for the votes. From the muddled and unclear “selective universality” position of 1975, the United States was in the fall of 1976 asserting its rejection of the application solely on the basis of the POW/MIA issue. Ambassador William Scranton, who replaced Moynihan as head of the U.S. delegation, claimed that Vietnam was not fit for membership in the United Nations because it did not fulfill the criteria set forth in the U.N. charter. The unwillingness of Hanoi, he claimed, to provide a “full accounting” of missing American servicemen, violated the precepts of “humanitarianism” and “peaceful intent” set forth in the charter. As *Far Eastern Economic Review* columnist Louis Halasz pointed out at the time, however, the relevant section of the document says nothing about humanitarianism.¹⁵⁴ In fact, at the time, Hanoi had made a number of gestures, both to its neighbors and toward the United States, indicating its desire for improved bilateral and international relations, and was continually met only with increasingly unreasonable and unjustified American demands.

By the time the final veto was cast against Vietnam in December of 1976, Jimmy Carter had defeated Ford for the Presidency. Although the Carter administration would reverse the veto policy by 1977, the POW/MIA issue had been firmly established as the central facet of American policy toward Vietnam during the course of the campaign. As T. Christopher Jespersen has accurately described it, “Vietnam” had little effect on Ford’s defeat, but the domestic electoral process had a “substantial impact on decisions relating

¹⁵⁴ Hasalz, “Washington Put on the Spot.”

to Vietnam.”¹⁵⁵ Ford had been forced to move further to his political right on the POW/MIA issue to ward off a conservative challenge from Ronald Reagan, and to deflect Carter’s criticisms of his policies during the campaign. Ironically, the POW/MIA issue would play a far greater role in the normalization process of the 1990s than it did in the 1970s. But even without the POW/MIA issue on center stage, the Vietnamese faced a stalwart opponent in the United States Congress. During the early years of the Carter Administration, the House and Senate would seemingly pave the way for the White House to pursue full normalization, only to later throw up new roadblocks.

The Congressional Paradox: Revising TWEA, Hamstringing Holbrooke

While some Legislative Committees consulted members of Church communities and the White House continued to exercise its veto power at the U.N., other members of Congress had already initiated proceedings to significantly revise the Trading with the Enemy Act, under which the initial embargo had been imposed. The corrective legislation called for in 1975, however, would not be passed for two years. The changes to the law made in 1977, however, further demonstrate the extent to which many policymakers at the time considered the sanctions program against Vietnam to be a mistaken course of action put in place under questionable authority.

As described above, the Trading With the Enemy Act (TWEA) was later amended

¹⁵⁵ Jespersen, “The Bitter End,” 289.

several times to allow for various measures to be taken by the Executive branch of the government when it declared a “national emergency.” The first attack on this statutory authority came in 1976 when Congress passed the National Emergencies Act, which scheduled all existing emergencies to be terminated on September 14, 1978, with the exception of eight laws, including the TWEA.¹⁵⁶ The 1977 law further consolidated the moratorium on National Emergencies by further termination of existing emergencies and by requiring the President to declare a new state of emergency for any application of the powers granted in Section 5(b) of the TWEA. The new act also limited the application of the law “to the case of a declared war,” although the bill’s authors were careful to allow for sufficient gray area in the language of the legislation so that it might be applied in instances of undeclared wars such as the war on Vietnam.¹⁵⁷

The discussion and testimony in the hearing makes clear that representatives in both the Legislative and Executive branches found the previous policy regime haphazard, yet no one involved in the hearings was willing to extend the discussion to consider terminating the various sanctions programs in place at the time under the auspices of the TWEA. Instead, the existing sanctions against Vietnam, Cuba, North Korea, and a few other Eastern Bloc countries, were grandfathered into the new law. Congressman Bingham, who chaired the initial embargo hearings described above, and who was one of the authors of the TWEA revisions, explained the decision to continue those decisions by the need for an “uncontroversial” bill:

¹⁵⁶ “Revision of Trading With the Enemy Act,” 1.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

What we are focusing on is a procedural arrangement, and we are avoiding substantive issues of controversy. I think for us to attempt to deal with those controversial issues would be a mistake even though I personally favor lifting the embargo against Cuba and Vietnam... I think in time those embargoes will be lifted, but I think that will probably not occur until the President has made up his mind that that should be done and then persuades the Congress to concur in that judgment.¹⁵⁸

The new law did alter the terms of the embargoes such that if the President did decide to continue the sanctions, he would need to make an annual declaration to Congress, stating why it was in the national interest to do so. Certainly Bingham is right in noting that a Congressional cancellation of the existing embargoes, particularly against Cuba and Vietnam, would have greatly complicated the passage of the bill, but the multiple ironies are difficult to ignore. First, the entire Congressional backlash against Executive misuses of power during the war in Vietnam and Watergate, ranging from the election of the Watergate class of 1974, the War Powers Act, and the National Emergencies Act, was ostensibly intended to curb those abuses by reasserting the role of the legislative branch in constructing foreign policy. Yet the only ongoing material policies stemming from those abuses, the sanctions programs, were basically delegated back to the White House. Furthermore, in the 1975 embargo hearings previously mentioned, several members of the committee chastised representatives from the State and Commerce Departments for putting the sanctions in place as a matter of “bureaucratic procedure,” but by the time of these 1977 hearings, they had assumed the same procedural methods, eschewing any debate about the merits, purpose, or impact of the policy. Congress would not remain

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

passive for long, however.

On May 3, 1977 Foreign Minister Phan Hien met Assistant Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke in Paris to begin the process of normalization negotiations. Both of the men had been aides during the 1968 peace negotiations.¹⁵⁹ Holbrooke's intention was to inform the Vietnamese delegation that the United States would end its practice of vetoing the U.N. membership for Vietnam and, more importantly, that the U.S. was prepared to accept unconditional normalized relations between the two nations.¹⁶⁰ According to Elizabeth Becker, who later interviewed both men, Holbrooke began the meeting by offering this request: "May we go out this afternoon and announce normalization? The United States has no preconditions. After our embassies are established, we'll lift the trade embargo." To which Hien replied "just as simply: 'No, without aid it is impossible.'"¹⁶¹

The talks broke off immediately, but events continued to spiral when Hien addressed the press (which had been expecting the announcement of normalization as well), quoting directly from the Nixon letter (which had not yet been made public), and declaring, "Vietnam would not agree to normalization without an American promise of aid." The United States, of course, continued to insist that the letter was void. Furthermore, aid to Vietnam was still prohibited by law. The fallout was swift and immediate, as Congress immediately leapt into action. The House voted the same day, 266-131, to further prohibit American aid to Vietnam. Such aid, of course, was already

¹⁵⁹ Elizabeth Becker, *When the War Was Over: The Voices of Cambodia's Revolution and Its People* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), 390.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., Hurst, *The Carter Administration and Vietnam*, 35.

¹⁶¹ Becker, *When the War Was Over*, 391.

prohibited, but the new measure barred the administration from even discussing the matter with Hanoi. The resolution, part of a State Department appropriations measure in the Foreign Aid Bill, specifically prohibited “negotiating reparations, aid or any other form of payment to Vietnam.” On May 5, the State Department issued a statement affirming that the United States indeed would not provide aid to Vietnam.¹⁶²

Why would Hien make such a declaration? American journalist Elizabeth Becker maintains that the Vietnamese believed their public proclamations could sway the American public to their cause, just as the anti-war movement had seemingly come to their defense years earlier.¹⁶³ Hurst offers several additional explanations for Hien’s public declaration, ranging from their own misinterpretation of the “compromise” reached during the Woodcock mission¹⁶⁴ to their ambitious long-range economic planning to the Sino-Soviet dispute.¹⁶⁵ The one certainty is that the Vietnamese were in dire need of aid as the summer of 1977 approached.¹⁶⁶ New talks were scheduled for June, but the damage from the failures in Paris had already been done.

Although they clearly misread both the intentions of the United States government and the loyalties of the American public, one can certainly make an

¹⁶² Hurst, *The Carter Administration and Vietnam*, 41; Becker, *When the War Was Over*, 391; World News Digest, May 7, 1977, A1.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 391-93.

¹⁶⁴ The Woodcock Commission is discussed at the beginning of the following chapter.

¹⁶⁵ Hurst, *The Carter Administration and Vietnam*, 36-38.

¹⁶⁶ See, for instance, Kolko, *Anatomy of a Peace*. While Kolko maintains that the Vietnamese were “naïve” in their desire for American aid (15), he demonstrates how troubled the Vietnamese economy was at the time. The state of Vietnam’s economy is discussed more here in chapter three, below.

argument that the Vietnamese were rightly insistent that the U.S. provide a promise of aid upfront. Had Hien agreed to announce normalized relations that afternoon in Paris, there was absolutely no guarantee that the United States would be willing or able to provide aid. As the numerous congressional hearings and legislative maneuvers in the spring and summer of 1977 would demonstrate, despite the intentions of the White House, many policymakers were not interested in the symbolic healing that normalization would represent, much less the actual healing to which the United States could contribute by providing trade and aid to Vietnam. Even assuming that the embargo would in fact be lifted after diplomatic recognition (which was far from certain), allowing American business interests to deal with the Vietnamese, there was little chance that any aid would be headed to Hanoi.

Even the possibility of *trade* with the United States was beginning to recede. While business interests were nowhere near as visible in their lobbying efforts, they were beginning to take their place alongside the POW/MIA lobby as the most active force in constructing U.S. policy toward Vietnam. American firms had lost over \$100 million in Vietnam, and began pushing proposals that tied the resumption of normal trade relations to the settlement of these claims. While many companies, especially those in the oil and telecommunications industries were anxious to reenter the Indochinese market so as not to lose out to European companies, many were more firm in their commitment to recoup the cost of their abandoned assets. Frank Zingaro, CEO of oil giant Caltex, was a

particularly vocal opponent of normalization, let alone aid. “We are not ready to forgive and forget,” he told Far Eastern Economic Review before the Administration’s resumption of negotiations with the Vietnamese. “We are deeply interested in getting paid.”¹⁶⁷ With several major American corporations lined up against Vietnam as well, the possibility of normalization was fast eroding.

Clearly, given the tone of American-Vietnamese negotiations taking place in Paris and the domestic sentiment in the United States, direct bilateral aid was out of the question at this point, buried under layer upon layer of prohibitive legislation, but that did little to ease the most vehement opposition to economic assistance. Many in Congress, identifying what they considered to be a “loophole,” moved to prohibit American funds from reaching Vietnam even through International Aid Agencies or International Financial Institutions (IFIs). As numerous Congressional investigations had made plain, even without direct assistance from the United States Vietnam could still become the indirect recipient of American dollars. Although Congress had refused to seize many opportunities to reclaim the economic tools of foreign policy, many in the Capitol were determined to exercise control over the direction of foreign aid, particularly to IFIs.

The Battle over IFIs

In September 1976, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam assumed the place of the former South Vietnamese regime in the Asian Development Bank, World Bank, and

¹⁶⁷ “Claiming Assets in Vietnam,” *FEER* April 29, 1977, 43.

International Monetary Fund. This was a very significant development for a number of reasons. Symbolically, it further legitimized the newly reunified nation and further demonstrated Vietnam's desire for independence and sovereignty. At the time, neither the Soviet Union nor China had agreed to participate in the institutions because they were unwilling to divulge all the required economic data required by members. Vietnam's willingness to participate in the process confirmed both its distance from those nations and its need for international aid. The Vietnamese would soon come to realize that the Bretton Woods institutions were not democratic, nor did they offer a particularly healthy path for developing nations. The crucial point here is that despite their charters, these institutions were subject to the will of the United States, the largest contributor to the IFIs. The 1976 Final Report of the Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia noted that through these agencies and the United Nations, the Vietnamese would be receiving around \$34 million in United States aid in 1977, \$24 million in low interest loans and \$10 million in grants. The Select Committee recommended that the administration not "lose sight of these indirect contributions to Vietnamese humanitarian projects."¹⁶⁸

In June of 1977 it became clear that Congress would not allow the Carter White House or the Vietnamese to lose sight of the contributions. On June 2, Hien and Holbrooke met in Paris for another round of negotiations. The Vietnamese delegation delivered a list of information on twenty Americans listed as Missing in Action, and were

¹⁶⁸ *Final Report of the Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia*, 235.

again hopeful that some agreement on aid could be reached.¹⁶⁹ Holbrooke's response remained the same, however, as he informed them that any question of aid would have to be deferred until after normalization. He did inform Hien that the United States could "help you through different international organizations," but he could not pledge a given amount nor guarantee that Congress would agree to the general increase in funding to IFIs the administration was already promoting. Hien remained particularly frustrated by Holbrooke's insistence that congressional measure could continue to determine the fate of Vietnamese aid. "What would you do if I said the Vietnamese National Assembly had passed a law prohibiting searches for the MIAs?" he asked Holbrooke. "How can I go back to Hanoi empty handed?"¹⁷⁰ Again, no progress was made, and Hien indeed left empty handed.

Back in Washington, however, the resumption of negotiations had again raised the specter of aid to Vietnam, and the fact that Holbrooke had even raised the *possibility* of channeling aid through IFIs set off yet another firestorm of legislation. Just as after the May meetings, Congress took only a day to respond to the actions of the administration. On June 4, the House voted 359-33 to approve another amendment to the Foreign Aid Bill. The measure, Sponsored by Lester Wolff of New York, Chairperson of the Subcommittee, was supposedly designed for Congress to put to rest the idea of reparations as promised in the Nixon letter, adding "reparations" to the categories of aid which the United States could not provide to Vietnam, as if somehow the government

¹⁶⁹ Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 154.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

would approve reparations but not humanitarian aid. Although basically redundant, the amendment served to further demonstrate the degree of Congressional hostility toward Vietnam.¹⁷¹

Congress, however, was just getting warmed up. In the Senate on June 14, Robert Dole introduced an amendment that would force the United States to oppose funding to Vietnam provided through the World Bank and other IFIs and, if outvoted, to hold back the amount of funds used toward the projects from the next American contribution. Describing the amendment, political scientists Joseph Zasloff and McAllister Brown took note of the “emotion aroused by the Vietnam aid issue.” After John Glenn of Ohio spoke against the measure, citing the stance of the Select Committee and the State Department, “that to get tough may be counterproductive,” his office received a barrage of angry calls from the POW/MIA lobby arguing that getting tough was exactly what was required. The next day, claiming that his remarks had been misinterpreted, he introduced his own amendment, “barring any commitment by U.S. negotiators ‘to assist or pay reparations’ to the Indochina states. It passed 90-2.”¹⁷² On June 22, the House passed a similar measure, prohibiting American aid to six nations, including Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, although this amendment was later withdrawn as part of a larger compromise with the Senate.¹⁷³

¹⁷¹ “U.S. Aid to Vietnam,” Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs,” 95th Congress, 1st Session, July 19, 1977 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1979).

¹⁷² Zasloff and Brown, *Communist Indochina and U.S. Foreign Policy*, 25.

¹⁷³ Hurst, *The Carter Administration and Vietnam*, 43-44; Susumu Awano, “Aid: Change of Mood in Washington,” *FEER* November 4, 1977, 45.

Ironically, it was in part the rhetoric coming from the Carter White House that provided the fodder for consolidating the anti-Vietnam sentiment in Congress. Throughout his administration, Carter had pursued a foreign policy defined by human rights issues, and it was precisely that issue which many congressional opponents used to derail many of the administration’s foreign aid requests in 1977. To Carter’s opponents, Vietnam and other “Communist-controlled states” were guilty of numerous violations of basic human rights. Congress clearly missed the irony of constructing the POW/MIA issue and other actions of the Vietnamese government as “humanitarian” or human rights issues while they upheld the unprecedented economic sanctions—to say nothing of the American war waged on Vietnam for the previous two decades. Regardless, it was an effective foil to Carter’s policy. As Susumu Awanoohara wrote in the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, “the human rights issue boomeranged on Carter,” when “pro-human rights liberals” and “anti-aid conservatives” aligned in support of the various amendments restricting aid to a number of countries.¹⁷⁴ Although the battle over human rights never coalesced into a coherent policy, it did further hamstring Carter’s efforts at increasing foreign aid and provided yet another angle from which the Vietnamese became dehumanized in cultural and political discourses. The general hypocrisy of a foreign policy based on a muddily-defined concept of “human rights” would become even more pronounced as Carter began to move toward normalized relations with China while further alienating Vietnam.

¹⁷⁴ Awanoohara, “Aid: Change of Mood in Washington,” 46.

To be sure, the many amendments to foreign aid legislation were part of the larger battle over foreign policy taking place in the late 1970s. Throughout the Carter administration The White House and Congress locked horns on the substance, direction, and means of American foreign policy, particularly on the question of foreign aid. But it took a persistent hostility toward Vietnam to help solidify the general distaste for aid among many in Congress into a coherent, if troubling, expression of policy. Previous targets of state-specific aid restrictions, such as South Korea, Chile, and Angola, proved unable to muster the considerable ire of Congress; Vietnam and its neighbors experienced no such shortcomings. The most vociferous advocates of the anti-Vietnam policy, though, claimed that they were simply voicing the concerns of their constituents. Dole responded to questions about his amendment by claiming, “Vietnam is still such a controversial *issue*, from an emotional standpoint. My folks tell me that they want no part of this so-called normalization of relations with Vietnam.”¹⁷⁵ Although it is difficult to assess public support for aid to Vietnam in the late 1970s, A *New York Times/CBS* News Poll in July of 1977 indicated that “66 percent of Americans favored food or medical assistance to Vietnam and 49 percent favored assistance in industrial and farm equipment.” As Hurst points out, however, that same poll dropped to around twenty percent on the question of providing “actual money and grants.”¹⁷⁶ Even if Dole and the *Times* poll were correct in assessing Americans’ feeling towards normalization and aid, there is no evidence whatsoever that the public favored the draconian and unprecedented

¹⁷⁵ “Bid to Cut Out Indochina,” *FEER* June 17, 1977, 106.

¹⁷⁶ “Carter Gets the Amber Light,” *FEER* September 9, 1977, 18. *NYT*, July 29, 1977, 1; Hurst, *The Carter Administration and Vietnam*, 40.

measures taken by Congress to deny the nations of Indochina access to humanitarian and international aid. That, in the end, is one of the most unfortunate aspects of the debates over aid to Vietnam. Lost in the concern over providing aid or allowing trade with Vietnam was the radical nature of the sanctions themselves.

Also very troubling was the battle over funding for the World Bank and IMF, or what Hurst refers to as “the politicization of the IFIs.” Given Carter’s pledge to increase foreign aid and help increase the capital reserves of the World Bank and IMF, many legislators were prepared for a battle over the role of the United States in the Bretton Woods Institutions. Just as we saw in the previous chapter, when Vietnam became the convenient test case for a new, preemptive sanctions policy, in the battle over foreign aid in the summer of 1977 Vietnam became the testing ground for a reassertion of American hegemony over the international financial order.

Throughout the summer, Congress and the Administration battled over American contributions and veto powers at the IFIs. An appropriations bill containing \$5.2 billion in funds for the World Bank and Asian Development Bank, which, as noted above, had already been subject to amendments restricting loans to Vietnam and other countries, also became a battleground for protectionists in Congress, including Tom Harkin of Iowa and W. Henson Moore of Louisiana. The protectionist-bloc, along with the “anti-Vietnam” bloc again used the ill-defined human-rights platform of the White House in proposing their restrictions. The Harkin Amendment, for instance, prohibited American aid from

reaching “any government guilty of a consistent pattern of gross violations of internationally recognized human rights.”¹⁷⁷ Such measures, of course, were in direct violation of the World Bank Charter, which specifically prohibits basing lending decisions on political matters.¹⁷⁸

The amendments also prompted a sharp response from the World Bank itself. In one of the supreme ironies of the ongoing American War against Vietnam, Robert MacNamara, who had taken over as President of the World Bank in 1967 after leaving the Johnson Administration, came, in effect, to Vietnam’s defense a decade later, admonishing Congress not to place any restrictions on American contributions to the World Bank.¹⁷⁹ The letter was crucial in eventually getting the restrictions dropped, but the resolution of the foreign aid battle still ended badly for the people of Southeast Asia. Facing heat from many corners of the legislature, and having already committed an enormous amount of political capital on other international issues, Carter was ultimately forced to give in to the politicization of the IFIs. In September, Congress and the White House reached an agreement on the foreign aid bill, which placed no restrictions on American contributions to the IFIs, but only after the White House agreed that it would instruct its representatives at those institutions to vote against any aid to Vietnam and the other countries. As Hurst notes, “the administration thus closed off the last avenue by

¹⁷⁷ “Aid: Change of Mood in Washington,” *FEER* November 4, 1977; see also “Protectionism: Hamstringing the Aid Effort,” *FEER*, August 5, 1977, 32.

¹⁷⁸ For an excellent overview of the workings of the IMF and World Bank, see Joseph Stiglitz, *Globalization and its Discontents* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002).

¹⁷⁹ Zasloff and Brown, *Communist Indochina and U.S. Foreign Policy*, 24-5.

which it could reach an accommodation with Hanoi involving the provision of aid. All it could do now was wait and hope that the Vietnamese would drop their demand.”¹⁸⁰

The Vietnamese, however, desperate for aid and still suffocating under the embargo, were in no position to drop their demand. On December 19, the two delegations again met in Paris, but Holbrooke informed Hien that he had no instructions to offer any aid, even as a private, off-record statement. Holbrooke later told Nayan Chanda that during a break in the sessions, Hien said, “You just whisper in my ear the amount you’ll offer, and that is enough.” “I said, ‘I am sorry. I have no authority to do that.’” Holbrooke also informed Hien that the United States was not willing to drop the embargo, and the talks once again ended with no substantive progress.¹⁸¹

The prospects for normalization, so strong only a few months earlier, had been greatly diminished. As Hurst describes it, the failures of normalization in 1977 should be chalked up to both Hanoi and Washington. Without question, the Vietnamese underestimated the strength of aversion toward Hanoi felt by many in Congress, and, given their need for American aid, could have occasionally played their hand better in the face of such Congressional animosity. Nevertheless, the ultimate responsibility for failure must be placed with the United States. The Vietnamese, despite their initial obstinacy on the matter of reparations, continually demonstrated their flexibility in achieving some form of aid that would be acceptable to the United States. Earlier, in spring of 1977, the same type of amendments restricting aid through IFIs, had been

¹⁸⁰ Hurst, *The Carter Administration and Vietnam*, 43.

¹⁸¹ Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 156.

defeated in Congress, and the Vietnamese had indicated their willingness to receive aid through those institutions. But, as Hurst argues, an “opportunity was missed,” because of the Carter administration’s “overconfidence and unwillingness to provide Vietnam with aid.”¹⁸²

Hurst goes on to propose a scenario under which he believes that an agreement could, and should have been reached in the spring of 1977: Given that the politicization of the IFIs had been defeated at that time, he argues, “the administration could have agreed to a pledge of aid in escrow in return for a satisfactory MIA accounting. Hanoi would have accepted such a deal, and so would have the National League of American Families. With the latter’s backing, the administration would have been in a strong position to challenge Congress by arguing that measures to restrict the United States’ ability to channel aid to Vietnam would hinder an accounting for the MIAs. Free to increase its contributions to the IFIs and to vote in favor of loans by them to Vietnam, Washington would have opened the way to normalization.¹⁸³

The failure to normalize relations in 1977, however, should rest primarily with the United States, which ultimately failed to recognize the amount of destruction and devastation it wrought on Vietnam over the previous two decades. By way of contrast, consider the actions of France and Japan in their relations with Vietnam. In 1973, France began to provide aid to Vietnam through both loans and grants, with an initial \$20 million (in U.S. dollars) as a “contribution to the reconstruction and development of the country.”

¹⁸² Hurst, *The Carter Administration and Vietnam*, 44-45.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

Over the next five years, France would make another \$350 million available.¹⁸⁴ After Japan and Vietnam normalized relations in 1975, Japan made an immediate contribution of \$40 million in direct foreign aid to Vietnam, acknowledged by both sides as reparations for the brutal Japanese occupation during World War II.¹⁸⁵ The damage inflicted by the French and Japan, while unconscionable and severe, pales in comparison with that wrought on Vietnam by the United States; and France and Japan, although central to Vietnam's economy as investors and trading partners, did not hold the keys to the global economy; they could not single-handedly proscribe international aid or IFI funds from reaching Vietnam. The Vietnamese, and the rest of the world, was well aware that in their search for international aid no nation was more important than the United States.

Despite winning their decades-long war for independence, the Vietnamese were learning that the world had changed a great deal since their declaration of independence from the French thirty years earlier. Although a sovereign nation, with a new constitution and a seat in the United Nations, the leaders in Hanoi were learning that “independence” in the late 1970s had more to do with their position in the regional and global economy than with their political hegemony in Indochina. Vietnam had cast off the yoke of several colonizing powers, at an unimaginable cost. They were much less prepared, and would be much less successful, in their battle against the neo-colonial global economic order.

They would also, however, face another powerful, and even more elusive

¹⁸⁴ “More Francs for Vietnam,” *FEER* May 20, 1977.

¹⁸⁵ Zasloff and Brown, *Communist Indochina and U.S. Foreign Policy*, 20. Also see Henrich Dahm, *French and Japanese Economic Relations With Vietnam Since 1975*.

opponent as the 1970s drew to a close: the American culture industry. Armed with the cultural tools of empire, American society would build on the resurgence of the POW/MIA issue to pursue a remarkable and wide-scale historical and cultural inversion. Despite the fact that the United States *continued* to wage economic and political war on Vietnam after 1975, representations of Vietnam in American culture at the end of the 1970s would situate the United States as the victim of the Vietnamese.

CHAPTER TWO

Constructing Mutual Destruction: The Cultural Logic of “Normalization,” 1977-1979

15.35 million tons of bombs.
 2.5 million occupying troops.
 2 million hectares of forests defoliated or destroyed.
 80 million liters of chemical agents deployed.
 300,000 missing in action.
 14 million wounded.
 More than 3,000,000 dead.¹⁸⁶

For many of the statistics of the American War in Vietnam listed above, a comparison or equivalency with the United States is not even possible. The Vietnamese did not, of course, occupy, bomb, defoliate, or wage chemical warfare on the United States at any time. Yet even for those for which a comparison is possible, the numbers clearly suggest who the victims in the war were, and who the aggressors were. For example, the United States at the end of the war had only a few thousand servicemen unaccounted for compared with 300,000 Vietnamese. The United States lost close to 60,000 personnel in the war, which, while tragic, stands in stark contrast to the *3 million* Vietnamese. Before 1975, with numbers like these no one in their right mind in the United States—regardless of their feelings about the war or the Vietnamese—would ever have suggested that the destruction was “mutual.”

Indeed, it is difficult to fathom what “mutual destruction” would have looked like.

¹⁸⁶ Environmental Conference on Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos, *Long Term Consequences of the Vietnam War*, 43-44. Available online at <http://www.nnn.se/vietnam/ethics.pdf>.

The Environmental Conference on Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, in a 2003 report entitled “Long Term Consequences of the Vietnam War,” attempted such a comparison, and the numbers are nearly impossible to comprehend. If the United States had experienced similar consequences to those of Vietnam, the reports shows, the figures would be as follows:

Bombs Dropped:	430 million tons
Occupying Troops:	12.5 million
Hectares Defoliated or Destroyed:	56 million
Chemical Agents Deployed	2.24 <i>trillion</i> liters
Wounded:	70 million
Dead:	17,500,000 ¹⁸⁷

Even these numbers, however, do not do justice to the scale of destruction to which they refer. They do not, for instance, acknowledge the effects of the war on Cambodia or Laos, which are difficult to separate from those felt by Vietnam.

More importantly, however, the numbers do not indicate some of the most devastating aspects of the United States’ war on Vietnam: the terrible legacies of the war that continued to harm the Vietnamese after the departure of the United States. For instance, 3.5 million land mines remained in the ground in Vietnam after 1975.²³ 23 million bomb craters littered the country’s landscape. Since 1975, at least 38,000 people have been killed by landmines and unexploded ordnance throughout the Vietnamese countryside. Another 70,000 have been injured.¹⁸⁸ Most significantly, however, and most horribly, the deadly chemicals dumped on the region remained in the ground,

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.; “Vietnam War’s New Victims,” *BBC News Online*, November 15, 2000, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/1024627.stm>, February 18, 2004.

poisoning the water and the food supply and contaminating future generations of Vietnamese children. Decades later, extraordinarily high levels of Dioxin, the cancer-causing chemical found in Agent Orange, are still present in “hotspots” throughout Vietnam. The chemical can still be found in animals and groundwater, has been detected in the milk of nursing women, and has actually been found in the genetic code of some Vietnamese. Recent studies have also shown that the levels of Dioxin present in the chemical agents were at least twice as high as previously thought.¹⁸⁹ While these and other horrible environmental legacies of the American War in Vietnam could not have been known to Americans in the immediate “postwar” era, the figures from the military war itself certainly were.

Less than a year after the fall of Saigon, a United Nations mission visited Vietnam and detailed first-hand the ruins in which much of Vietnam found itself, the results of what the report called “a savage war of *destruction*.¹⁹⁰ It detailed the utter devastation of Vietnam’s industrial infrastructure, agricultural base, and transportation system; and it spoke of the large loss of life experienced by the Vietnamese and how that loss would

¹⁸⁹ “Long Term Consequences of the Vietnam War,” 43.; Arnold Schecter et. al., “Food as a Source of Dioxin Exposure in the Residents of Bien Hoa City, Vietnam,” *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Research* 45:8 (August, 2003); “Decades Later, Vietnam War Toxin Still Torments,” *WP*, February 16, 2004; “New Study Into Agent Orange,” *BBC News Online*, March 10, 2002, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/world/asia-pacific/1865730.stm>, February 18, 2004. For more on Agent Orange, see Robert Dreyfuss, “Agent Orange: The Next Generation,” *Mother Jones* (January/February, 2000); and Phillip Jones Griffiths, *Agent Orange: Collateral Damage in Vietnam* (London: Trolley Press, 2003).

¹⁹⁰ “Report of the United Nations Mission to North and South Viet-Nam,” Reprinted in “Aftermath of War: Humanitarian Problems of Southeast Asia,” Staff Report Prepared for the Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee to Investigate Problems Connected with Refugees and Escapees,” 94th Congress, 2nd Session, May 17, 1976.

affect the nation’s ability to rebuild. When this report was included in a Staff Report for Senator Ted Kennedy’s Senate Judiciary Committee in 1976, the Senator noted in the introduction how stark the situation was in Southeast Asia and how the United States was finally positioned to help, rather than harm, the people of that region. “Having contributed so heavily to the years of war, our country must not fail now to pursue policies and programs that will contribute to the peace.”¹⁹¹

We saw in the last chapter, however, far from pursuing peace and reconciliation in the years immediately following the end of the American War in Vietnam, the American government began to pursue “war by other means,” reclassifying the newly reunited nation of Vietnam as an “enemy,” and pursuing openly hostile and unprecedented economic and diplomatic policies against the Vietnamese. Although the election of Jimmy Carter initially held out the promise of peace and progress between the two nations, the period was ultimately shaped by a different type of “normalization.” Usually understood as a political, economic, and diplomatic term used to denote a state of open, peaceful, and, theoretically, mutually beneficial relations between nations, “normalization,” I will argue here, can better be understood as the way in which the United States in the late 1970s began the process of reconstructing its imperial project in Southeast Asia—a cultural and political process which inverted the history of the recent war by dehumanizing the Vietnamese and casting Americans as the principal victims of the conflict. We already have seen how this happened in the halls of Congress, where the

¹⁹¹ “Preface,” in “Aftermath of War,” v.

Vietnamese were routinely described as irrational and dehumanized figures, refusing to sufficiently cooperate with what the United States deemed “humanitarian” efforts, namely aiding in the search for missing American servicemen. Beginning in late 1977, however, these constructions were supplemented by major contributions from the American culture industries. On the big screen, Vietnam “Came Home” in the first wave of Hollywood films to deal directly with the war; the familiar images of the war, already fading in the absence of cultural representations of the war between 1975-76, began to be contested by another series of images: wounded and deranged American servicemen, fractured American communities, and savage and torturous Vietnamese figures.

Ignored by the culture industries in the years immediately following the war, by 1979 films about Vietnam had become huge box office draws and received the highest awards from the industry. Although the Carter administration had come painfully close to officially normalizing relations with Vietnam between 1977 and 1978, by the end of Carter’s term the United States had reinforced and strengthened the economic embargo, turned a blind eye to the Chinese invasion of Vietnam in 1979, and set in place the policies and alliances under which the next administration would resume direct support of anti-Vietnamese forces in the Third Indochina War. This process of normalization, whether in foreign policy or the arenas of cultural production, is based on the same cultural logic of inverting the historical legacies of the war to cast the United States as the victim of Vietnam. Even before the formal normalization process had begun, Carter was

able to proclaim that the destruction of the war in Vietnam was “mutual.” Just as Ford and Kissinger’s policies toward Vietnam were shaped by what Christopher Jespersen called the “national mood” of “denial and punishment,” the same sense of mutual destruction that helped the Carter administration navigate its foreign policy priorities in the late 1970s shaped cultural representations of the war in American society as well.¹⁹² While it gained expression in the later 1970s, the process of normalizing the American War in Vietnam—of culturally constructing mutual destruction—can be traced back at least a decade to one of the most strange and remarkable political and cultural movements in American history: the POW/MIA myth.

The POW/MIA Myth

In his landmark work, *M.I.A., or Mythmaking in America*, H. Bruce Franklin offers a definitive history of the rise of the POW/MIA myth as both a “national religion” of sorts and as “a basis—or at least an ostensible basis—for foreign policy.”¹⁹³ From 1954 to 1968, he demonstrates, there was no “POW/MIA” issue, largely because no such classification existed. In other wars, missing service personnel and prisoners were categorized separately.¹⁹⁴ But in the Spring of 1969, conservative forces in American society conspired with the incoming Nixon administration to conjure the issue that would provide justifications for Nixon’s escalations of the war, serve as an obstacle to negotiations, and remain the primary impediment to normalizing relations between the

¹⁹² Jespersen, “The Bitter End,” 267

¹⁹³ H Bruce Franklin, *M.I.A., or Mythmaking in America* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1992), 4.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 39.

United States and Vietnam for the next quarter of a century. By the 1980s, the POW/MIA myth took on a life of its own, which will be explored in chapter five. From 1969 to 1979, however, the issue drew the boundaries within which Vietnamese-American relations would be established. By dehumanizing the Vietnamese, portraying them as ruthless and cold-blooded figures, and helping to recast the United States as the primary victim of the American War in Vietnam, this issue came to define the matrix of the American War on Vietnam in the production of both foreign policy and cultural representations.

Immediately after their inauguration, members of the Nixon administration raised the issue of American prisoners of war in terms of a “prisoner exchange” at the Paris Peace Talks. The Vietnamese refusal to agree to such a plan unless the United States would end the war led to unfounded assertions by the American delegation of inhumane treatment in detention camps. The Vietnamese, they claimed, were cruelly using the prisoners as political bargaining chips.¹⁹⁵ As Ambassador William Sullivan later described this view to Congress, the Vietnamese

are attempting coldly, ruthlessly to use prisoners that they hold, our prisoners, as leverage for the achievement of political objectives which they have not been able to accomplish by military or psychological means... We think, however, that in making and in formulating proposals we have to treat that sort of mentality as one would treat any other blackmailer attempting to extract ransom and extortion from a law abiding citizen.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁵ *Final Report of the House Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia*, 94th Congress, 2nd Session, December 13, 1976, 107.

¹⁹⁶ Testimony before House Committee on International Relations, 92nd Congress, 2nd Session, February 3, 1972, 14; excerpted in *House Select Committee Final Report.*, 107-108.

The equation of the United States with a “law-abiding” citizen while the Nixon administration widened a devastating, unjust, and undeclared war in Southeast Asia, here alongside a portrayal of a “cold” and “ruthless” enemy is indicative of the cultural logic of inversion that would define the period of “normalization” in the late 1970s.

As became clear over the next several years, it was the United States, not Vietnam, which would use the POW/MIA issue for political gain, at home and abroad. On March 1, 1969, the White House launched its “Go Public” Campaign, which garnered immediate support in the mainstream media and gained resonance with the public throughout the summer as it became closely aligned with organizations of POW families and billionaire H. Ross Perot. Particularly effective was the campaign’s use of language describing the Vietnamese as “inhuman.” *The New York Times*, Franklin notes, was among the major newspapers to take hold of the issue, denouncing North Vietnam in an editorial entitled “Inhumane Stance on Prisoners.” In December, using similar language, the House of Representatives unanimously passed a resolution condemning the “the ruthlessness and cruelty of the North Vietnam.”¹⁹⁷ As the coverage of the POW issue intensified, Franklin notes that not only the history of the war, but the cultural representations of the war had begun to be inverted:

America’s vision of the war was being transformed. The actual photographs and TV footage of massacred villagers, napalmed children, Vietnamese prisoners being tortured and murdered, wounded GIs screaming in agony, and body bags being loaded by the dozen for shipment back home were being replaced by the simulated images of American POWs in the savage hands of Asian Communists.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁷ Franklin, *MIA*, 49-50; 196n. The *NYT* editorial appeared on May 29, 1969.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 54.

In the late 1960s, however, these images were still being contested in daily newspapers and televised news reports from Vietnam. Yet in a war so often defined by mediated images, the very fact that the inverted logic of the POW/MIA myth had become part of the battle over the cultural memory of the war is itself significant. The more crucial point in the context of post-1975 American relations with Vietnam is that the inverted constructions begun by the POW issue would continue to resonate in the production of both cultural representations and foreign policy. No longer constrained by competing images of American violence and atrocities in Vietnam, by the mid 1970s the dehumanization of the Vietnamese and the victimization of the United States could continue relatively unfettered.

One of the many sad ironies of the POW/MIA myth is that the American War in Vietnam produced the lowest percentage of unaccounted for American service personnel in major wars waged by the United States. As the government's own study of the topic indicates, of over 360,000 American soldiers killed in action during World War Two, twenty-two percent were never recovered, even with unfettered access to all sites of battle.¹⁹⁹ In the Korean War, according to Franklin, over fifteen percent of the 33,000 American casualties were not accounted for. The number for Vietnam was significantly lower; of close to 60,000 Americans killed in Vietnam, around 2,500, or four percent, were initially unaccounted for.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁹ *Final Report of the Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia*, 73-74.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 21; Franklin, *MIA*, 12.

Yet the POW/MIA issue has always had as much to do with letters as with numbers. As both Franklin's *MIA* and the Final Report of the Select Committee on Missing Persons make clear, very few of the missing American servicemen being discussed at Paris in 1972 or represented by the still ubiquitous POW/MIA flags should have been classified as such in the first place. Unaccounted-for soldiers had previously been classified in one of three categories: Killed in Action/Body Not Recovered (KNR/BNR), POW, or MIA. As part of the Go Public campaign, the administration merged the latter two categories, creating the category of "POW/MIA." In various hearings before the House Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia, several members of the United States defense establishment and the Intelligence Community testified about the confusion over the reclassification. Roger Shields, former Deputy Secretary of Defense, noted in the fall of 1975 that, "at the present time, the distinction between 'prisoner of war' and 'missing in action' is probably an academic one."²⁰¹

This public reclassification (the defense department still maintains a distinction in its own records) had a number of unfortunate effects, not least of which was the cruelty to which families of missing service personnel were subjected—many understandably bought into the myth that their missing loved ones might still be alive. Furthermore, the reclassification complicated the efforts to resolve all the cases of those unaccounted for. Out of the 2505 American soldiers listed as missing in the Final Report of the Select

²⁰¹ Testimony excerpted in *Final Report of the Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia*, 28.

Committee, 1113 were categorized as KIA/BNR, 728 as MIA, and 33 as POW.

According to the Committee, the vast majority of those placed in the MIA category should have been listed as KIA/BNR. Of the thirty-three POWs, the House Select Committee notes that there is no evidence that sixteen of them were ever taken prisoner, and that six were wrongly classified to begin with. The remaining eleven were “unaccounted for by their captors.”²⁰² As Franklin further explains in his close reading of the Final Report, “six of these [eleven] were known to have died and there was no evidence that four of the others had survived later than 1969. The remaining one turned out to be Robert Garwood, a former prisoner who had chosen to remain with the Viet Cong after his 1967 release. Garwood would eventually return to the United States in 1979 and would, several years later, contribute his fabricated stories to the then-established myth that Hanoi continued to hold Americans prisoner.²⁰³

Despite a complete absence of evidence and testimony denying the existence of live prisoners from all relevant government agencies, the POW/MIA issue became a significant factor in determining the fate of peace in Vietnam. From the Paris negotiations of 1969 on, the Vietnamese delegation was consistently met with unparalleled and unreasonable demands by the United States. In late 1969, the U.S. delegation presented a list of personnel it considered “missing or captured” to the Vietnamese. Attached to the list, notes Franklin, was a “bizarre” and “unprecedented”

²⁰² *Final Report of the Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia*, 238.

²⁰³ Franklin, *MIA* 113-116. Despite Garwood’s admissions of fabrications, the POW/MIA lobby continued to use his story as an example of the “truth” to which Hanoi would not hold up. In the 1993 Select Committee hearings, discussed here in chapter five, members of the National League of Families attacked the credibility of Vietnamese officials who claimed that they had not had knowledge of Garwood’s “imprisonment.”

statement: “We are holding the Communist authorities in Southeast Asia, responsible for every individual on this list whether or not he is internally classified by the services as captured or missing.” Franklin describes the impact of this attachment, worth quoting at length:

This demand is probably unprecedented in the annals of warfare. It has no basis in international law, which hardly requires belligerent powers to furnish each other with information on the identities of those they have killed. It could never even conceivably be met, for it holds all the opposing forces individually and collectively “responsible for every individual” missing, including those in planes lost at sea or exploding above mountains and jungle. It thoroughly and effectively confuses the question of the missing with that of prisoners. It has been the official policy of the United States since it was issued in 1969. It is the foundation upon which the entire POW/MIA myth has been built.²⁰⁴

This absurd demand further demonstrates that the reconstruction of Vietnam as an “enemy” state in the later stages of the war and, especially, after the fall of Saigon, was hardly the result of “business as usual” in Washington. Whether on political, economic, and cultural terrain, the United States continued to develop new and unprecedented means to castigate and punish the Vietnamese.

What is perhaps even more remarkable than this request, however, is how the Vietnamese repeatedly went above and beyond the call of what could have been reasonably expected from a former adversary that was still fighting off a war of aggression and, later, rebuilding a devastated and deeply divided country. Constantly being bombarded with different, conflicting numbers from the Pentagon, the Vietnamese and Laotian governments initially produced an accounting “for fifteen *more* prisoners

²⁰⁴ Ibid.,68.

than the Defense and State departments had listed as likely prisoners,” even though those numbers were themselves inflated.²⁰⁵ In fact, as Franklin goes on to argue, “what was truly remarkable about the accounting of American POWs was how closely each side’s list correlated with that of the other.”²⁰⁶ The Vietnamese, it turned out, were keeping better track of missing Americans than the United States.

Had it been left to the military, the issue may well have disappeared, despite the initial embarrassments of having the “Communist authorities in Southeast Asia” demonstrate superior record keeping of American forces. But in creating the POW/MIA issue, the White House had truly created what Franklin accurately terms a “Frankenstein’s monster;” the invention succeeded in shoring up support for Nixon’s war, but became an uncontrollable creature that would create policy dilemmas for all future administrations, turning bereaved and misled citizens against their own government.²⁰⁷ The Vietnamese, of course, remained the primary object of this ire, caught in the twisted logic of the POW/MIA matrix. Instructed by the American government and public that they would not receive any aid until they released these phantom captives and later accused, as Franklin points out, “of withholding prisoners because the United States had not carried out its promise to help rebuild Vietnam,” the Vietnamese people became the true prisoners of this myth.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 90.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 91.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 122.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 83. Also see Hurst, *The Carter Administration and Vietnam*, 41-44.

Beginning with the signing of the Paris Agreements, the Victory in Vietnam Association (VIVA) and the National League of American Families (NLOF) led the charge against the Vietnamese, selling millions of bumper stickers, POW bracelets, and other memorabilia to publicize the cause, all the while mounting a campaign to prevent the United States from fulfilling its obligation of reconstruction aid promised in the Paris Accords. Even though the Accords had been systematically violated and rendered all but void by the United States and its South Vietnamese clients and, later, by North Vietnam, the VIVA/NLOF coalition maintained its insistence that the United States not offer any aid whatsoever to the Vietnamese. Before the end of the war, it attempted to get a majority of members of Congress to sign a pledge

that any economic assistance, trade, or technological aid to North Vietnam, Cambodia, South Vietnam, and Laos be withheld until we get the return of all POWs and the fullest possible accounting of the missing in action and the return of the remains of those who died in the Vietnam conflict.²⁰⁹

One of those to sign was Sonny Montgomery, the Congressman from Mississippi who was selected to lead the House Select Committee on Missing Persons when that group was formed in the fall of 1975.²¹⁰

Although led by Montgomery, an ardent believer in the POW myth, the Select Committee succeeded, as the discussion of their findings above demonstrates, in all but disproving the existence of live POWs. After its exhaustive investigation during 1975-1976, the Committee's Final Report also encouraged Americans to have "reasonable

²⁰⁹ Janet Koenigsamen, *Mobilization of a Conscience Constituency: VIVA and the POW/MIA Movement* (Dissertation, Kent State University, 1987), 60-62; Quoted in Franklin, *MIA*, 87.

²¹⁰ Franklin, *MIA*, 87.

expectations” about the “fullest possible accounting” that had been demanded of the Vietnamese. In a large section devoted to “Difficulties,” the report listed the numerous factors that would make a “full” accounting impossible. “It must be recognized at the outset,” the section begins, “that many of the missing men cannot be accounted for, either by enemies or by our own forces.” The report continues:

Some losses occurred in remote areas or at sea or wreckage of an aircraft. Other men simply disappeared while on an aerial combat mission... Where aircraft losses are involved, the traumatic nature of the crashes suggests there will be few identifiable remains, particularly in cases where local indigenous persons are the only witnesses to an event which may have occurred many years ago... The ravages of time and climate and actions of predatory animals combine to destroy traces of crash and grave sites, particularly in remote areas where other humans are unlikely to have witnessed combat incidents or to have chanced on the scene afterwards. In some crashes, disintegration is so complete that no recognizable debris or remains can be located.²¹¹

The report goes on to detail numerous examples of situations where there the remains would be “obviously unaccountable,” especially given that at the time of the report the average time the person had been missing was over eight years.

Even if it were common practice for former adversaries to perform such tasks for one another, and even if the Vietnamese were inclined to assist in such Herculean efforts, the variables detailed above demonstrate how unlikely it would be that they could offer much. The Select Committee, however, took pains to point out that the American demands were even more unreasonable in light of the course and eventual outcome of the war than they had been when first made in Paris in 1969. “It is important to note that the

²¹¹ *Final Report of the Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia*, 197.

people of the United States know what constitutes an accounting,” the report explains.

There are no convenient historical examples to serve our interest. What is now being demanded of the Indochinese governments is unusual. After the 1946-54 war, the French did not receive information on their missing. The United States has never asked for such a volume of information on its missing, especially from a former enemy that was not defeated, and in a war as complex as the Vietnam war proved to be. There are no examples in world history to compare with the accounting now being requested.²¹²

Yet the Vietnamese had set up a “research program” to further assist in the recovery of remains, again demonstrating their willingness to help in the project. They informed the Select Committee delegation of this at a meeting in Paris in early December 1975, and then again on the Committee’s visit to Hanoi later in the month. Understandably, the Vietnamese pursued discussion of American trade and aid at both meetings, but were met with the insistence of the delegation that aid was “out of the question.”²¹³ Nevertheless, the Committee recommended that The United States normalize relations with Vietnam and the other nations of Indochina as soon as possible, “based not on unequal and humiliating war reparations, but on agreed principles of equality and mutual benefit.”²¹⁴ Although the formal process of normalization would begin shortly after the release of the final report, the questions of “equality” and “mutual benefit,” would complicate the negotiations, ultimately allowing the war to continue. We saw in the last chapter how normalization between the two nations had become an increasingly distant possibility by late 1977. As the “normalization” of the war in American culture continued to take hold, the possibility of actual normalization began to disappear completely.

²¹² Ibid., 208-09.

²¹³ Ibid., 10-11.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 228.

The Woodcock Mission

A year earlier, however, as Carter took office, optimism reigned supreme in the White House. According to the February 28, 1977 edition of *Time*, the Carter Administration began making “top-secret” overtures to the Vietnamese shortly after the inauguration.²¹⁵ In late January, Carter met with several members of Congress, including members of the Select Committee, reiterating his intention to move toward normalized relations. The article went on to note that the Vietnamese had softened their stance on American reparations over the past two years, indicating that they were equally interested in opening ties to American business interests. So certain of developing these ties were the Vietnamese that a group of oil executives visiting from Japan had been told in late 1976 that future development of Vietnam’s substantial petroleum interests “was reserved ‘for the American sector.’” “Washington, in turn,” concludes the piece, “seems almost ready to accept the fact that the fate of most of the MIAs will never be known.”²¹⁶

Although the Select Committee had all but declared that the MIA issue was a red herring, Carter clearly thought that he needed one final show of his attention to the matter before beginning to negotiate with the Vietnamese. On February 25, the White House announced that a delegation, led by Leonard Woodcock, President of the United Auto Workers (which had helped deliver the White House to Carter), would visit Hanoi to pave the way for negotiations. Woodcock would be accompanied by four others,

²¹⁵ “Extending a Hand at Hanoi,” *Time*, February 28, 1977, 30.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

including former Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield and Sonny Montgomery. In the announcement, the administration indicated a new phase in Vietnamese-American relations by noting that it would be “more flexible” in its policies, including an easing of the current embargo.²¹⁷ Presumably, this also meant an end to the official stance of requiring the impossible “full accounting” of missing Americans by the Vietnamese.

The mission, from the beginning was marked by a tension between the dictates of domestic politics and foreign relations. In his close study of the Carter administration’s policy toward Vietnam, Stephen Hurst shows that although the public presentation of the commission was to “discuss matters affecting mutual relations as part of a long-term goal of establishing normal relations,”²¹⁸ the real reason for the mission was more complex. According to Frederick Brown, a State Department spokesperson at the time of the commission, the administration needed to “neutralize” the MIA question as a domestic political issue. According to an internal White House memo unearthed by Hurst, however, National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski further wanted to “defuse the MIA issue” for the Vietnamese, taking away what most policymakers viewed as the only card held by Hanoi in negotiations.²¹⁹ Defusing either side of this coin, though, would prove more difficult than anyone in the White House had expected.

In Hurst’s account, when the delegation landed in Hanoi, it was met with immediate demands by the Vietnamese foreign minister, Nguyen Duy Trinh, that the

²¹⁷ *NYT*, February 26, 1977, 1.

²¹⁸ *NYT*, February 26, 1977, 1. Quoted in Hurst, *The Carter Administration and Vietnam*, 31.

²¹⁹ Hurst, *The Carter Administration and Vietnam*, 32. Hurst is citing from Frederick Brown, *Second Chance: The United States and Indochina in the 1990s* (Washington, D.C: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1989) 23-4.

United States was still under a legal obligation, from both the Paris Accords and the Nixon letter, to provide aid. Without aid, he allegedly told Woodcock, “there would be no accounting for the MIAs.”²²⁰ Hurst’s only references for this claim are later statements made by Woodcock, both in Congressional Testimony and in interviews by Nayan Chanda and Elizabeth Becker. If this was indeed the note on which the negotiations began, both parties kept the tension hidden from the press accompanying the mission.

All major accounts of the meetings reported in the American press took special note of the friendly manner in which the delegation was greeted. “From the moment the Americans arrived in Hanoi,” noted *Time*, “they were made to feel welcome by the Vietnamese, who avoided any macabre linkage between the remains of U.S. servicemen and money for reconstruction.”²²¹ The article went on to quote Deputy Foreign Minister Phan Hien’s remark that:

[t]his is not a question of what amount of money. It is a question of responsibility, honor, and conscience, and it does not relate to Nixon—it relates to the U.S.... If the U.S. does not make any contribution toward the healing of the wounds of war, then we will do it all ourselves. We’ve already begun doing that.²²²

The Economist also took note of the conspicuous, outgoing nature of the Vietnamese leaders, noting in particular that Prime Minister Pham Van Dong “had given the mission

²²⁰ Hurst, *The Carter Administration and Vietnam*, 32.

²²¹ “A Bridgehead is Won in Hanoi,” *Time*, March 28, 1977, 17.

²²² Ibid.

a friendly welcome” and was the prime mover in proposing formal negotiations later in the spring.²²³

There is no question that the Vietnamese, justifiably, felt entitled to war reparations from the United States. The issue here has to do with how the Vietnamese are portrayed in terms of the MIA issue – as a friendly, peace-loving people interested in putting the wounds of the American war behind them, or as a cruel and heartless Asian menace, holding knowledge of missing Americans, if not the missing Americans themselves, ransom for several billion dollars. Although the encounters were all described in glowing terms at the time, the Vietnamese had initially suggested that the biggest obstacle to normalization lay not with them, as the Americans had long suggested, but with the continuation of “erroneous policies of the past,” including the trade embargo and the veto of Vietnam’s United Nations application.²²⁴ Given the recent history of war and the hostile attitude toward Vietnam that continued after 1975, had the Vietnamese leadership been less than receptive to American demands, it certainly would have been understandable. But there is little evidence in the record that this was the case.

In Hurst’s account, based almost exclusively on the later interviews with Woodcock, the talks had stalled to the point of stalemate. At a crucial juncture, Woodcock took Hien aside privately and gave him what Hurst describes as an “ultimatum:” that “No American President or Congress could approve” an exchange of

²²³ “Vietnam: Mission Accomplished,” *The Economist* April 4, 1977, 47.

²²⁴ “Report of the Presidential Commission on U.S. Missing and Unaccounted For in Southeast Asia, included in “U.S. MIA’s in Southeast Asia,” Hearing Before the Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate, 95th Congress, 1st Session, April 4, 1977 (Washington, DC: USGPO, 1977).

aid for information. “Certainly Woodcock’s forceful presentation had an immediate effect on Phan Hien,” concludes Hurst. After the conversation, the Vietnamese position was “altered,” declaring “that the three main issues (MIAs, aid, and normalization) were ‘separate… but clearly interrelated,’” and that the basis for proceeding would be “moral and humanitarian, rather than legal.”²²⁵

Hurst’s account leaves out some important issues however, constructing a narrative of a stubborn and somewhat irrational Vietnamese leader being persuaded forcefully by the skilled and experienced American negotiator. As such, it oddly reinforces the process of cultural revisionism that portrayed the Vietnamese holding the United States hostage. One week after reporting the results of their trip to the President, Woodcock and Montgomery appeared before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to do the same. The bulk of the hearings focused on the still muddled relationship between MIA information and aid. Woodcock answered a number of questions about the Vietnamese position, but related nothing approaching the “stalemate” characterization. He notes only that “in the course of our discussions they abandoned the linkage” between the MIA and reparation sections of the Paris accords, while noting that the issues are “interrelated.” Woodcock later added, “[t]hey did make it very clear that they had humanitarian needs which could be separated from so-called obligations. I think that was a significant indication [of future cooperation].”²²⁶ There is absolutely no mention in the documents of Woodcock’s private conversation with Phan Hien, nor any indication that

²²⁵ Hurst, *The Carter Administration and Vietnam*, 33.

²²⁶ “U.S. MIA’s in Southeast Asia,” 9-10.

the Vietnamese were as obdurate in their demands as Woodcock later recalled.

At the end of the day, the Vietnamese were looking for an indication that the United States would stop its hostile economic and diplomatic policies and make some commitment, however nebulous, that they would provide some form of economic assistance to Vietnam. They dropped the terminology of reparations and obligations as well as their demand for the \$3.25 billion promised by Nixon in 1973. As Woodcock put it, “They put the emphasis on bilateral, multilateral, on the many ways it could be done.”²²⁷ Unfortunately for the Vietnamese, the United States was still unwilling to live up to its own humanitarian obligations. The refusal of the U.S. to in any way follow through with a pledge of some form of aid would remain the primary obstacle to normalization.

Upon its return, the Woodcock Mission was widely portrayed as a major success in paving the way for normalization. On March 24, Carter gave a public press conference to highlight the work of the Woodcock Mission. Addressing the question of normalization, Carter noted that he would favor normalizing relations with Vietnam when “convinced that the Vietnamese had done their best to account for the service personnel who are missing in action.” The President then reiterated some of the successes of the trip: “They not only gave us the bodies of 11 American servicemen, but they also set up a Vietnamese bureaucracy” to assist in further efforts. In short, Carter was already convinced:

²²⁷ Ibid., 13.

I think this is about all they can do. I don't have any way to prove that they have accounted for all those about whom they have information. But I think, so far as I can discern, they have acted in good faith... In the past, the Vietnamese have said that they would not negotiate with us nor give us additional information about the MIA's until we had agreed to pay reparations. They did not bring this up, which I thought was an act of reticence on their part.²²⁸

Yet again, there is no mention of the demands Woodcock later claimed were made by Hien. Just as in the press reports of the mission, the Vietnamese are presented as cooperative and open to negotiations.

Later, Ed Bradley of CBS began a line of questioning that would give an accurate indication of the administration's stance on Vietnam. Although much would be made of President Reagan's rewriting of history in a 1982 press conference, Carter's own interpretation of the war on March 24 are in some ways equally disturbing.²²⁹

Bradley: Mr. President, on the subject of Vietnam, if you feel the United States is not obligated to uphold the terms of the Paris Peace Accords because of the North Vietnamese offensive that overthrew the South Vietnamese Government, do you feel, on the other hand, any moral obligation to help rebuild the country?

Carter: I can't say what my position would be on some future economic relationship with Vietnam. I think that could only be concluded after we continue with negotiations to see what their attitude might be toward us.

After further elaboration, the questioning continued:

Bradley: Beyond that, do you still feel that if information on those American servicemen who are missing in action is forthcoming from the Vietnamese, that then this country has a moral obligation to help rebuild that country, if that information is forthcoming?

Carter: *Well, the destruction was mutual.* You know we went to Vietnam without any desire to capture territory or to impose American will on other people. We went there to defend the freedom of the South Vietnamese. And I do

²²⁸ "Remarks at Press Briefing, March 24, 1977," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Jimmy Carter, 1977* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1979), 499-500.

²²⁹ The Reagan statement is discussed below in chapter four.

not feel that we ought to apologize or to castigate ourselves *or to assume the status of culpability. Now, I am willing to face the future without reference to the past.* And that is what the Vietnamese leaders have proposed. And if, in normalization of relationships, there evolves trade, normal aid processes, then I would respond well. But I don't feel that we owe a debt, nor that we should be forced to pay reparations at all.²³⁰

This final statement by Carter has to be considered one of the most remarkable utterances ever made by an American official about the war in Vietnam. Leaving aside his statements about why the United States “went” to Vietnam, and even his belief that the United States did not “owe” Vietnam anything, sentiments which were likely shared by many Americans in 1977, an assertion of “mutual destruction” on the part of the Vietnamese can only be understood in terms of the ongoing cultural and political reconstruction of the war taking place in the mid-1970s. Surely no reasonable person would accept that Americans endured hardships on par with those suffered by the Vietnamese during the war. But in the “normalizing” process that inverted the role of victim, such statements became not only possible, but became accepted logic. Carter’s willingness “to face the future without reference to the past,” should thus be read not simply as an attempt to “put the war behind us,” but as part of a larger will-to-forget, a critical statement in the contest for cultural memory that defined this period in American life.

A Presidential declaration of “mutual destruction” notwithstanding, The Woodcock Mission appeared at the time to be a success for Vietnam as well. Aside from

²³⁰ “Remarks at Press Briefing,” 501; Emphasis added.

demonstrating to the United States that it was willing to continue to assist in the recovery of MIAs, the spring of 1977 saw a number of developments that boded well for Vietnam's own economic recovery. "It was not a coincidence that the Woodcock delegation's trip was preceded by an unpublicized three-week trip by the World Bank and two separate missions by United Nations Development Program [UNDP]," Nayan Chanda wrote in *Far Eastern Economic Review*.²³¹ Although neither program committed to specific aid projections at the time, the understanding among those agencies and the Vietnamese was that a normalization of relations with the United States would result in greater development aid for Vietnam. As Chanda described it, the UNDP informed the Vietnamese that the current allocations for two projects was insufficient and "that they would have to look for additional donors. As one diplomat noted: 'The Vietnamese know who the donors could be.'"²³²

We saw in the last chapter, however, how the Paris negotiations fell apart under the mutual pressures of the Vietnamese need for economic assistance and the desire of many in the United States congress to do away altogether with foreign aid. In the end, the failure has to be ascribed primarily to the unwillingness of the United States to acknowledge that the destruction of Vietnam by American hands over the past twenty years, far from being "mutual," was indeed something that Americans should seek to rectify.

Thus, as 1977 ended, there was little to be optimistic about in Hanoi. Failure to

²³¹ Nayan Chanda, "Vietnam: Breakthrough in Aid," *FEER*, April 1, 1977, 42.

²³² Ibid.

normalize relations with the United States and to secure other significant international aid, both of which were central to the Politburo's economic plans for postwar reconstruction, and increasing border tensions with Cambodia all loomed large as 1978 began. In less than a year, Vietnam would once again be at war, and normalization with the United States would be shelved indefinitely. And while all this was going on, another "front" in the American War on Vietnam opened in the United States: the cultural front.

"Vietnam Comes Home:" Normalizing the War on the Big Screen

The policies established in the period immediately following the fall of Saigon had been established in a relative cultural void. Compared to the flood of discourse and images to which Americans had grown accustomed during the period of direct American military involvement in Vietnam, Vietnam was disappeared from the nightly news, from the pages of daily and weekly news magazines, and was all but banned as a subject for films in the summer of 1975; the same cannot be said after 1977. "Vietnam" had never been completely erased from the cultural sphere, of course. As Julian Smith pointed out in *Looking Away: Hollywood and Vietnam*, the first major work to deal with the relative absence of the war in American film, for a number of years the war was simply marginal to the action of films.²³³ Films ranging from *Shampoo* (1975), where the war is literally background noise on the television, to the early veteran exploitation movies, such as *Welcome Home Soldier Boys* (1971), *The Visitors* (1972), *Heroes* (1977), and *Rolling*

²³³ Julian Smith, *Looking Away: Hollywood and Vietnam* (New York: Scribners, 1975).

Thunder (1977), presented the war in Vietnam as literally on the margins of American consciousness, something not yet completely forgotten, but certainly of minor importance. As scholar Rick Berg describes, this marginalization was in fact deeply rooted in the history of American films even connected even secondarily to Vietnam: “For Hollywood, Vietnam—both the country and the war—seemed to be just off screen, at the edge and on the frontier, always about to be found.”²³⁴ Indeed, from the middle through the end of the twentieth century, Vietnam, in American film and American foreign policy, would always be viewed through the colonial “gaze.”²³⁵

But in 1978, “Vietnam Came Home,” as the floodgates of cultural production opened, producing a series of landmark movies, novels, memoirs, and television shows about the war. Commentators of all stripes, recognizing the significance of the moment, wrote extensively about the reappearance of “Vietnam” in American culture. The focus of the commentary, as well as the focus of public debate, has been the motion pictures; it is for this reason, as well as limiting the size and scope of the present project, that I have chosen to focus on film here, leaving the issues raised by other media aside for now. Few critics at the time, however, and fewer scholars of the subject since, have connected the cultural representations of the war in film produced and disseminated in the late 1970s to the formation and consolidation of American policy toward Vietnam in the same period; that is my goal in the remainder of this chapter.

Drawing on the important work of Melanie McAllister in *Epic Encounters*:

²³⁴ Rick Berg, “Losing Vietnam: Covering the War in an Age of Technology,” in Rick Berg and John Carlos Rowe, eds., *The Vietnam War and American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 127.

²³⁵ Ibid.

Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000, I want to examine these films less as texts in their own right than as part of the larger project of “normalization” taking place in American politics and American culture in the wake of the war Vietnam. In her book, McAllister argues for the fundamental interconnectedness of cultural and “political fields,” and demonstrates convincingly that “cultural productions help make meanings by their historical association with other types of meaning-making activity.”²³⁶

This suggests that we might ask less about “what texts mean”—with the implication that there is a hidden or allegorical code to their secret meaning—and more about how the texts participate in a field, and then in a set of fields, and thus in a social and political world.²³⁶

While what these films have to say about both the war in Vietnam and its effects on the United States is significant and important, I am less concerned here with how cultural texts function as representations of the war itself than how they intersect and interact with public discourses about Vietnam and the production of foreign policy with regard to Vietnam that was explored in the previous chapter and in the first section of this chapter.

As McAllister argues, highlighting such parallels does not necessarily mean that there is some underlying conspiracy, nor even a unifying cultural logic. In *Epic Encounters*, McAllister uses this model to demonstrate how a variety of cultural representations related to the Middle East in the post-World War Two era coincided with the dictates of American foreign policy during the same period. A similar phenomenon, I

²³⁶ McAllister, *Epic Encounters*, 8.

argue here, is at work in the “normalization” of the American War in Vietnam in the late 1970s. Just as American policy toward Southeast Asia actively denied American responsibility for the war, refused to contribute to the healing of the wounds of war in Vietnam by prioritizing American suffering, dehumanized the Vietnamese as violators of humanitarian accords, and moved (as we will see in the next section) toward rendering Vietnam effectively invisible in its foreign policy, the films of this period work within the same cultural logic and the same matrices of representation. These texts, then, and the discourses surrounding them, must be considered part of the same normalization process. Along with the economic and political assaults being waged on Vietnam, this cultural front of the war helped to pave the way for the reconstruction of the American imperial project in the wake of Vietnam. The first step in this process was the construction of mutual destruction, focusing on the effects of the war on the United States rather than on the devastation of Vietnam. The most significant examples of this first wave of films accomplished this in different ways.

Most of the smaller movies of 1977 and 1978, such as *Who'll Stop the Rain*, *Go Tell the Spartans*, and *The Boys in Company C*, were overshadowed by three films that quickly came to constitute the early canon of American films about the war: *Coming Home*, *The Deer Hunter*, and *Apocalypse Now*. As Peter Marin wrote in *Harper's* in 1980, the “big three” of the late 1970s

were not necessarily the best or most intelligent films; they were *events*. Despite the fact that they failed to confront the moral issues of the war, they were treated

with the same seriousness and granted the same attentiveness that we ordinarily reserve for important books; many regarded them as summary statements about the war, which tells us something about ourselves, if not about Vietnam.²³⁷

It is undoubtedly true, as Marin and others have argued, that these films tell us more about Hollywood than they do about the American war in Vietnam; my argument is that by, for example, rendering the Vietnamese completely invisible (as in *Coming Home*) or as savage, inhumane villains, (as in *The Deer Hunter*), or by taking an ambivalent stance about American responsibility for the war (as in *Apocalypse Now*), these films worked within the same grid of representations that defined and shaped American policy towards Southeast Asia in the period.

Just as important as the films themselves, however, is the way in which these texts were criticized and discussed during the period. Thus after summaries of the films I will examine the ways in which critics, journalists, and other cultural commentators spoke and wrote about the films. I do this not only to contextualize the films, but also to show the ways which the discourses about the texts also contribute to the same intersection of cultural and policy production. These movies, we will see, provoked strong, often visceral reactions, and were discussed primarily for their “politics,” but the politics at stake were always domestic in nature. What I will do here is move beyond the scope of domestic political opinion, placing the films of this first wave of American films about the American war in Vietnam alongside the foreign policy debates of the Carter years. As the first shots fired in the battle for the American cultural memory of the war, these

²³⁷ Peter Marin, “Coming to Terms with Vietnam,” *Harpers*, December, 1980, 44.

films ask their audiences to remember and forget in particular ways, which are always already “political.” What I hope to show is that the consequences of this battle are important not only for America—the subject of all three films—but also for Vietnam—the often invisible, but always present *object* of the texts.

Coming Home

The genesis of *Coming Home* lies as much in the vision of Jane Fonda as director Hal Ashby, although the final product owes less to the political convictions of the artists involved than to the genre conventions and financial realities of Hollywood. In *The Land of Nam: The Vietnam War in American Film*, Eben Muse describes how Fonda, who worked with wounded American veterans during the war, originally wanted to make “an anti-war polemic,” focusing on the return of American soldiers, but was persuaded by Ashby to tone down the politics of the film to reach a wider audience. “The film thus became a love story with a Vietnam era backdrop,” he writes. “It makes the war palatable to a general audience by sentimentalizing the issues surrounding the conflict while evading the war itself.”²³⁸

As the film begins, however, the viewer could be forgiven for thinking that they were watching a documentary, rather than the melodrama that ensues. The opening scene shows a group of American veterans around a pool table, discussing the various rationalization mechanisms they and their peers have used to justify their roles in the war

²³⁸ Eben J. Muse, *The Land of Nam: The Vietnam War in American Film* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1995), 99.

and the injuries that resulted from their participation “They don’t want to see what they did as a waste,” says one. One of the vets, Luke (Jon Voight), lays flat, face down, and motionless on a gurney. The scene then shifts from Luke to a pair of legs running during the opening credit sequence. The legs are revealed to belong to Bob (Bruce Dern), in the first of what becomes an endless series of juxtapositions of the two men.

Coming Home revolves around the transformation of the two men, and of Bob’s wife, Sally (Fonda). As Bob heads headstrong off to war, determined to bring home a Russian made rifle as a keepsake, Sally begins her transformation by moving out of officer’s housing and volunteering at the local VA Hospital. There she meets Luke, a former high school classmate, who became a paraplegic in Vietnam. As Luke sheds his anger and hostility for sensitivity and intimacy, Sally’s transformation is highlighted, although hers is more physical and material than emotional; she remains passive and submissive in relationships while letting her hair down and buying a new sports car. “In short,” as Gilbert Adair has written of Sally’s metamorphosis, “*she turns into Jane Fonda.*”²³⁹ Sally and Luke eventually strike up a romance, which culminates in a long love scene.

Bob has undergone his own change, although *Coming Home* is much less concerned with exploring his experience. Upon returning from the war, he walks with a limp, which we later learn is a result of a self-inflicted mishap, and the mood of the scenes suggests something is different, but other than his reluctance to talk about the war,

²³⁹ Gilbert Adair, *Hollywood’s Vietnam: From the Green Berets to Full Metal Jacket* (London: Heinemann, 1989), 72.

we learn little of Bob's story. The implication of the film is that the transformations of all the characters are a result of the war, but as the film moves on, the love triangle becomes the plot's catalyst. As one reviewer suggested at the time, "as the romance develops, Vietnam recedes and Hollywood takes over."²⁴⁰ Indeed, Bob is pushed "over the edge" only when he learns of Sally's infidelities during his tour of duty.

During Sally and Luke's romance, Luke became the object of FBI surveillance, as a result of protesting the war by locking himself to the gate of the local army base. The surveillance tapes include sexual encounters between he and Sally. The FBI makes Bob aware of the affair while questioning him about Luke, leading Bob to confront Luke. Instead of focusing on the affair, however, Bob simply warns Luke about the surveillance. Upon his return home, Bob takes his rifle from the garage. Although the original version of the film had Bob take on the role of a deranged sniper, in the final version he enters the house silently, never revealing his intentions.²⁴¹ After Sally confronts him and they argue, Luke shows up, and Bob threatens them both with the bayonet end of the rifle. As Sally passively watches, Luke tells Bob, "I am not the enemy. The enemy is the fucking war. And you don't want to kill anyone here." Bob drops the rifle, and both men exit, leaving Sally alone in the house.

In the final scene, we see a montage of the characters, unsure of what really becomes of any of them. Luke gives a moving speech to a group of high school students, instructing them about the realities of war: "I have killed for my country. And I don't feel

²⁴⁰ Morris Dickstein, "Bringing it All Back Home," *Partisan Review* 45 (Winter 1978), 630.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

good about it... I don't see any reason for it. And there's a lot of shit I did over there that I find fucking hard to live with." Interspersed with the speech are shots of Bob walking along the beach, stripping from his uniform, removing his wedding ring, and swimming out into the ocean. Many reviewers read Bob's actions as suicide, but the film leaves Bob's fate open and unresolved. Sally, in the final shot of the movie, enters a market to buy steaks for a barbecue. The door of the market swings open to display the word "out."

For all its drama and its place in the pantheon of Vietnam War films, then, *Coming Home* has almost nothing to say about the war. Muse argues that "[a]ll we know of the war we learn from Bob—we never see any of it apart from a flash of news coverage—and his description is tantalizingly obscure: "I don't know what it's like; I only know what it is. TV shows what it's like."²⁴² We do learn that war is hell, from the shots of wounded men at the hospital, from Luke's final speech, and from Bob's brief recounting of troops under his command cutting the heads off of dead Vietnamese soldiers, the only moment in which he speaks about the war. One could argue that one of the messages of the film is indeed the need for veterans, and indeed for all Americans to talk about the war. Luke, the figure of redemption, does his duty by passing on his knowledge to the students, while Bob, who again and again refuses to talk about the war, ends the film in silence and, perhaps, suicide. The implication of this dichotomy, for many is that the film is thus "anti-war" because redemption came to the supposed anti-war figures.²⁴³ Yet the film itself does not provide any space for commentary about the

²⁴² Muse, *The Land of Nam*, 99.

²⁴³ For instance, see Jack Kroll's review of *The Deer Hunter* in *Newsweek*, which contrasts the politics of the two films. Kroll, "Life-or-Death Gambles," *Newsweek*, December 11, 1978, 113-4.

war in Vietnam; the war itself is completely and conspicuously absent, and the enemy, invisible. Instead, through the images of the mentally, emotionally, and physically traumatized American veterans, the film explores only what Vietnam did to “us.”

The reactions to *Coming Home* ranged widely. Conservative groups predictably reacted to “Hanoi” Jane Fonda with the same venom they had a decade earlier when she visited Northern Vietnam. In his more balanced account, Peter Marin noted “the smugness and self-satisfaction at work” in the film, sidestepping an honest attempt to deal with the problems of veterans for “a ritualized love story and a vehicle for Ms. Fonda’s perpetual moral posturing.” Frank Rich of *Time* found many faults with the film, but they were artistic, not political or moral in nature.²⁴⁴ In certainly one of the most even-handed reviews of *Coming Home*, Morris Dickstein, in *Partisan Review*, praised the film, despite its many faults, simply for being made:

Modest, flawed, even a little compromised by box office conventions, the film is nevertheless a serious act of witness, made by obsessed people with long memories and a determined conscience, a refusal to forget. This is what *Coming Home* finally means: bringing the war home. For once the Hollywood left has done itself proud.²⁴⁵

For Dickstein, the film’s attempt to break “the silence itself, the graveyard calm, the mood of national forgetfulness that is one of the hallmarks of the seventies,” is reason enough to celebrate. But to what, exactly, does *Coming Home* bear witness? What is it that Ashby and Fonda are seeking not to forget? The film has been credited with raising awareness of the treatment of veterans, which Dickstein sees as part of a larger struggle

²⁴⁴ Marin, “Coming to Terms with Vietnam,” 46; Frank Rich, “The Dark at the End of the Tunnel,” *Time*, February 20, 1978, 84.

²⁴⁵ Dickstein, “Bringing it All Back Home,” 632.

for public memory: “Our callous treatment of the unwelcome veteran is part of the avoidance of the memory of the war itself, and we may be condemned to repeat it unless we’re willing finally to face it.”²⁴⁶ Perhaps Dickstein was simply being overly optimistic that as the opening act in the veritable Vietnam War film festival that was 1978, *Coming Home* would be followed by films that would help Americans to “face” Vietnam. As I argued above, the need for dialogue, for a discussion, is proposed, but not fulfilled by the film; to the extent that *Coming Home* presents dialogue of the war at all, it is only inward looking and myopic. Even if successful in drawing attention to the plight of American veterans, *Coming Home*, and the other 1978 representations of the American War in Vietnam follow the logic of “mutual destruction” proposed by President Carter. They deliberately silence the past and situate Americans as the primary victims of the war. In short, Ashby’s films, and several others, face the war by not facing it at all. By keeping “Vietnam” and the Vietnamese, especially, silent, off-screen, and invisible, *Coming Home*, at best, asks viewers to remember certain things at the expense of others. It focuses attention on what “Vietnam” did to “us” at the expense of what “we” did, and what we were continuing to do, to the people of Vietnam.

The Deer Hunter

The Deer Hunter has never been accused of rendering the Vietnamese invisible. Michael Cimino’s film, which initially garnered none of the pre-release attention lavished

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

on *Coming Home* or *Apocalypse Now*, quickly gained infamy for its portrayal of Viet Cong soldiers as dehumanized savages who torture their American captors. In many ways, *The Deer Hunter* changed the way in which commentators wrote about the Vietnam War film; *Coming Home* only began to be widely discussed as overtly political when juxtaposed with *The Deer Hunter*. With the exception of the cartoonish *Rambo* (1985), no American film dealing with the war in Vietnam has aroused such vehement responses. As we will see in a later chapter, however, the connections between *Rambo* and the Reagan administration's foreign policy were all too apparent. Although *The Deer Hunter* has been criticized on a number of levels, as we will see, it has yet to be connected to the formation and consolidation of American foreign policy toward Vietnam.

The film takes place in three acts. In the first, the audience is introduced to the community of Clairton, Pennsylvania, a steel town populated largely with Russian Orthodox Christians. In the opening scene, we see the steel mill where Michael (Robert DeNiro), Nick (Christopher Walken), and Steve (John Savage) are ending their final shift before leaving for a tour of duty in Vietnam. On their way through the locker room, their co-workers wish them well. One encourages Michael to "kill a few for me." As the friends make their way to their local bar, we meet the rest of the gang, who are all preparing for Steve's wedding. The wedding and reception, long and elaborate scenes set in the VFW hall, portray a tightly knit community, grounded in tradition and nationalism.

The head table and reception floor, where the guests perform traditional Russian folk dances, are adorned with red, white and blue banners proclaiming “Serving God and Country Proudly.” At the reception, after Michael has made an awkward, half-hearted, and unsuccessful pass at Nick’s girlfriend, Linda (Meryl Streep), the three soldiers-to-be notice a Green Beret at the other end of the bar and buy the man a drink. “We’re going over there. We’re going airborne,” Michael tells him. “I hope they send us where the bullets are flying,” Nick adds. The soldier, with a blank stare, simply responds: “Fuck it,” as he drinks the shot. “What’s it like over there?” they ask. Again, the same response: “Fuck it.”

After the wedding, the men go hunting. The scenes, set ostensibly in the Appalachians of Pennsylvania, but shot in the more majestic Rockies, further establish Michael’s connections both to nature and to the idealized western hero. On the way to the cabin, Michael has a blowout with Stanley and the others over his “fanatical” ways about hunting (Michael will not allow Stanley to use an extra pair of boots because Stanley is never properly prepared). Michael, who Cimino constructs as an outsider, not entirely comfortable in the community, tracks a deer by himself, shunning the group dynamic of the others. He shoots the deer with “one shot,” the only acceptable form of hunting for Michael, as he explains at length to Nick in an earlier scene. Immediately, the film cuts to the boys driving back through town. They pull up to the bar with the ubiquitous steel mill in the background. Upstairs in the bar, a raucous celebration turns

somber as (the bartender) sits at the piano and plays a quiet ballad. The men exchange glances as the song gradually ends.

The next shot is a jarring cut to a village being bombed, and bamboo huts engulfed by flames while the sound of a helicopter rages in the background. Over an hour into the film, we reach act two, set in Vietnam. We see Michael lying injured as a Viet Cong soldier comes into the village, throws a hand grenade into a bunker filled with villagers. A lone Vietnamese soldier shoots down a defenseless woman carrying a baby, and Michael attacks him with a flamethrower, later killing him with his rifle after the other reinforcements, including Nick and Steve, appear. Soon, Vietnamese forces arrive, though, and the men are taken captive, setting up the scene for which the film is infamous. In just a few short minutes, Cimino establishes that the Viet Cong are cold and ruthless killers, executioners of women and children. The Americans are there to protect the Vietnamese people from such figures, but are themselves captured and taken prisoner.

In the POW camp, the prisoners are forced by their savage, caricatured Vietnamese captors to play Russian Roulette. The Viet Cong figures speak in sharp tones (and in Chinese, not Vietnamese), and they cackle and exchange money when one of the prisoners “loses” the game. The use of Chinese actors to play the role of the Vietnamese is nearly as offensive and racist as the total representation of the Vietnamese in the scene. In the context of 1978, when the United States was effectively choosing whether to normalize relations with China or Vietnam and, thus, choosing which side to back in the

Third Indochina War, the scene also acts as a harbinger of things to come: the United States siding with the Chinese. Just as the U.S. would, in 1978 and 1979, negotiate with China while abandoning Vietnam, in this scene, Vietnam is silenced by the Chinese who literally speak for them.

When Michael and Steven are forced to play the game, a bullet glances off Steven's head, leaving him wounded, but alive. He is then relegated to "the pit," an underwater holding cage littered with rats and corpses. In another cage, Michael hatches a plan to play the game with more bullets in the chamber, which allows them to kill their captors and escape. The "enemy" is on screen for less than fifteen minutes, but the scene, described by one reviewer as "one of the most frighteningly, unbearably tense sequences ever filmed, and the most violent excoriation of violence in screen history,"²⁴⁷ leaves a horrific and lasting impression. While *Coming Home* argues for an acceptance of all Americans as victims of "the war" as the enemy, *The Deer Hunter* puts an all-too-real face on both the enemy (cruel and inhuman Vietnamese) and the victim (well intentioned Americans). As Bruce Franklin argues in *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies*, this scene was central to the revisionism of the war that seized American culture well beyond the 1970s: "*The Deer Hunter* succeeded not only reversing key images of the war but also in helping to canonize U.S. prisoners of war as the most significant symbols of American manhood for the 1980s, 1990s, and beyond."²⁴⁸

After their escape, Nick is rescued by a helicopter, but Michael stays behind with

²⁴⁷ Kroll, "Life-or-Death Gambles."

²⁴⁸ Franklin, *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies*, 15.

Steven, who is too weak to hang on to the chopper. Michael and Steve are then shown walking back to Saigon amidst a flood of Vietnamese refugees, further reinforcing the view of the film that the Americans and, secondarily, the Vietnamese people, are the victims of the war waged by the “enemy” Vietnamese forces. In Saigon, Nick recovers at a hospital, but upon his release wanders back into the Saigon underworld, where he discovers a Russian roulette “club” where people play the game for money. Michael finds him there on chance, but Nick flees after the encounter in the club, and Michael returns home without him.

A shot of the familiar steel mill indicates that the final act, back in Clairton, has begun. Michael avoids his welcome home party upon return, and only later sneaks into his own house where Linda has been staying. With the status of Nick unknown, the romantic tension between Michael and Linda gives way to an affair; Michael, the western hero, has broken his own “code” of chastity and honor, notably with his best friend’s fiancée. Another hunting trip ensues, where Michael has yet another blowout with Stanley, this time over the gun that Stanley carries. On this trip, Michael is unable, or unwilling, to shoot the deer when face-to-face with it. Instead, he fires a shot into the air and repeatedly yells “O.K!” which the forest echoes back to him.

Unable to fully enter the community, even after he brings Steven home from the VA hospital, Michael returns to Vietnam to fulfill his promise to bring Nick home. It is now 1975, and the war is all but over, which further confuses the admittedly skewed

chronology employed by Cimino in dehistoricizing the war. Refugees clamor at the gate of the American Embassy while Michael wades back into Saigon to find the Russian Roulette club. Michael arranges to play Nick, who still does not recognize him. Michael puts the gun to his head, looks at Nick, says “I love you,” closes his eyes, and fires a blank. Nick takes the gun, while Michael pleads with him, “Come on Nicky, come home. Just come home.” Nick smiles as Michael reminds him of the trees in the mountains back home. “One shot?” he asks Michael, finally making a connection. “One shot,” Michael tells him. Nick smiles, places the gun to his head, and fires, falling dead. The scene cuts to footage of the end of the war on an unknown television screen. “This seems to be the last chapter in the history of American involvement in Vietnam,” tells a CBS news reporter.

In the final scene, second only to the Russian Roulette sequence to those who indicted the film as jingoistic, the group reassembles after Nick’s burial for breakfast at the bar. John, cooking eggs in the kitchen, begins to hum “God Bless America.” As he walks to the main room, the others, including Michael, join in, as Cimino demonstrates through close shots of the individual figures. On the second verse, we see the whole table, and Linda leads the singing. The singing gets louder on the bridge and the chorus, although it never reaches a triumphant pitch. As the song ends, Linda smiles at Michael, who toasts, “here’s to Nick.” The frame freezes and cuts to credits.

The controversial ending, along with the rest of the film, became an immediate

lightning rod for debate among critics about representing the war on screen. In *American Myth and The Legacy of Vietnam*, John Hellmann argues that “smaller films,” including *Coming Home*, “more consistently pleased film critics,” because the politics of such films were clearer. *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*, he claims, “were widely attacked in reviews and articles for being implausible and incoherent.”²⁴⁹ While that account may hold up for *Apocalypse Now*, as I will demonstrate below, *The Deer Hunter* brought forth a more diverse set of responses than Hellmann acknowledges.

When the film was released in late 1978, early enough to be considered for Academy Awards, several critics seized on it as a fascist, racist, and gross oversimplification of the war. Peter Marin lambasted Cimino for “intentional misrepresentations of the war, his implicit absolution of Americans for any illegitimate violence or brutality, and a xenophobia and racism as extravagant as anything to be found on the screen.”²⁵⁰ Peter Arnett, who covered the war as a reporter, labeled the film “fascist trash.”²⁵¹ Jane Fonda joined Arnett in calling the film “fascist,” adding that it was “a racist, pentagon version of the war.”²⁵² In international circles, the rifts over the film were even greater. At the 1979 Berlin International Film Festival, where the Deer Hunter represented the United States, the delegations from the U.S.S.R. and several

²⁴⁹ Hellmann, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: Columbia, 1986), 172.

²⁵⁰ Marin, “Coming to Terms,” 45.

²⁵¹ Arnett, “Vietnam’s Last Atrocity,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 4, 1979, quoted in Berg, “Losing Vietnam,” 139, n42.

²⁵² “Vietnam Comes Home,” *Time*, April 23, 1979, 22-28.

Soviet-aligned countries withdrew over what they termed “an affront to the struggles of the Vietnamese people.”²⁵³

Although certainly a racist, dehistoricized representation of the war, the film is not without its contradictions. For all the violence the film does to the Vietnamese people, and to the memory of the war itself, it is, as literary scholar Rick Berg points out, the only film of its time, and perhaps since, that “bothered to look at the community that fought the war.” While he acknowledges that Cimino’s representation of working class life in Clairton is as essentialized as that of the Vietnamese in the film, Berg praises the director for focusing on how the war in Vietnam destroyed many working-class communities. Even in the controversial final scene, one “that many read as just another attempt to recuperate the patriotic myths that led us into the war,” Berg finds an intimate portrayal of the impact of the war on those Americans who fought it: “What we see,” he concludes, “is a community shattered by Vietnam, trying to express a deeply rooted nationalism, with all its ironies and contradictions.”²⁵⁴

Leonard Quart, however, offers the counter view of this final scene, which he describes as “politically disturbing.” “There is no directorial irony in the sequence,” he notes. “The *mise-en-scene* and camera setups move us toward total empathy with their feelings.”

As a result, *The Deer Hunter* leaves us with the indelible image of Vietnam as an abattoir but then implicitly absolves the U.S. of the responsibility for helping bring it about by creating a working class who are viewed as both the war’s heroes and its victims. The portrait is so sympathetic that it allows the late 1970s

²⁵³ Adair, *Hollywood’s Vietnam*, 88.

²⁵⁴ Berg, “Losing Vietnam,” 139-140.

audience to feel somewhat relieved of its uneasiness and distress about America's role in Vietnam, and with some hope that the American Dream can be renewed by men like Michael Vronsky.²⁵⁵

Implicit in both of these accounts, though, regardless of whether the sequence seeks to exonerate the United States, is the focus on what the war "did" to Americans. My intent is not to criticize the films for their myopic and often narcissistic focus on American Culture; indeed, as with *Coming Home*'s focus on the plight of veterans, *The Deer Hunter* should be credited for bringing attention to previously marginalized or ignored effects of the war on Americans. However, to ignore the parallels of the logic of mutual destruction at work in the texts is to miss a great deal of their significance. These films effectively operate as the cultural front of the ongoing war on Vietnam in the late 1970s: reinforcing the structure and content of American policy toward Southeast Asia, the texts either render the Vietnamese invisible or represent them as cruel and inhuman subjects, reinforcing and solidifying the distorted cultural memory that the United States was the primary victim of the war. And, just as with the films themselves, the discourses surrounding the films constructed by critics and commentators do the cultural work of "normalization" during 1978, framing the public discussion of events in such a way to render the United States as the victim of the Vietnamese.

Certainly the earlier quotes demonstrate that many critics on the left took issue with the film, but many critics also praised *The Deer Hunter* for its "courage," and for its politics, or, rather the perceived lack thereof. In *Time*, Frank Rich held up Cimino's film

²⁵⁵ Leonard Quart, "The Deer Hunter: Superman in Vietnam" in Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud, eds. *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 167.

as “the first movie about Vietnam to free itself from all political cant,” pointing out that *The Deer Hunter* has no anti-war characters at all and that “its pro-war characters are apolitical foot soldiers, not fire-breathing gook-killers,” (failing, apparently to remember the only combat scene in the film, in which Michael sprays “a gook” with his flamethrower). “Cimino,” Rich concludes, “has attempted to embrace all the tragic contradictions of the U.S. intervention in Southeast Asia.”²⁵⁶ In *Newsweek*, Jack Kroll likewise extolled what he viewed as the apolitical nature of the film, calling it “the first film to look at Vietnam not politically, but as the manifestation of an endemic murderousness.” “Many people will react angrily to the film as politically reactionary.” he predicted, “But *The Deer Hunter* is a film of great courage and overwhelming emotional power.” Kroll took special pains to defend the Russian roulette scenes, calling them “dramatic and moral,” not “political,” a symbol of a society committing moral suicide.²⁵⁷ Leonard Quart later describes the view of the war in *The Deer Hunter* as “a politically indifferent one,” but then finds himself “politically troubled” by the final scene.²⁵⁸ So how can such an apolitical film be charged with causing people to view it as “politically reactionary?”

Indeed, what is most troubling about *The Deer Hunter* is that it is described even among many of its strongest critics as apolitical. It is hard to imagine *any* representation of the American War in Vietnam as being apolitical, particularly one appearing only a few years after the end of the war, and particularly one with seemingly overt racist

²⁵⁶ Rich “Vietnam Without a Map,” *Time*, December 18, 1978.

²⁵⁷ Kroll, “Life or Death Gambles,” *Newsweek*, December 11, 1978.

²⁵⁸ Quart, “The Superman in Vietnam,” 166-167.

representations of the Vietnamese. The reason for this dichotomous thinking, whereby something apolitical can still intersect with “the political” as a larger field, is a very narrow and myopic view of the meaning of “politics.”

In the debates over the meanings of these films, “politics” is used to refer almost exclusively to “pro-war” or “anti-war,” as though the films were released in 1968, not 1978. Thus *Coming Home*, because it has a recognizable “anti-war” figure such as Jane Fonda, and because it seems to tilt toward a traditional anti-war bias in its redemption of Luke and condemnation of Bob, can be described as anti-war. Because *The Deer Hunter*, as Kroll and Rich argued, is conspicuously *not* anti-war, especially when read alongside *Coming Home*, it can be described as apolitical. Such simplistic characterizations, aside from doing a gross injustice by reducing complex texts with multiple contradictions to a binary construction, also fail to consider the many ways in which texts are always already political. Just as there were many reasons for one to be anti-war or pro-war during the American War in Vietnam, there are multiple ways in which a film could “be” pro-war or anti-war. Certainly to dehistoricize the war, as Cimino does, is a political act, as is the rendering of the war itself invisible in *Coming Home*. The decision not to address the historical and political implications of the war in Vietnam, while understandable within the genre conventions and Hollywood mode of production, is nevertheless a political act. But the larger problem inherent in such constructions of the political is that by focusing the debate over the films in terms of domestic political attitudes, it ignores the

implications of the films for foreign policy.

As McAllister's work has demonstrated, the point is not whether or not a particular representation is accurate, realistic or racist –and more about how the texts participate with, intersect, and interact with other constructions, including the construction of foreign policy. Certainly, the dehumanized portrait of the Vietnamese offered by *The Deer Hunter* has a wider significance when considered alongside the similar portraits offered in Congressional debates about the POW/MIA myth. The POW/MIA films of the early 1980s, which will be discussed in a later chapter, make explicit such connections to ongoing political battles, but *The Deer Hunter* has never been implicated in the failures of normalization in the late 1970s. At the very least, the film argues for an acceptance of Carter's "mutual destruction," whereby the working class communities of Appalachia were as devastated by the war, if not more so, as the villages of the Mekong Delta. It is also important to situate the representations offered by *The Deer Hunter* in the dearth of any other images of the Vietnamese in American Culture at this moment. If Bruce Franklin's earlier assertion about the cultural inversion of the war beginning with the POW myth of the late 1960s is correct, then certainly the Russian Roulette scenes and the dehumanized portrayal of the Vietnamese in Cimino's film would seem to offer a fatal blow to any hopes of reversing the process. Against the backdrop of violence and inhumanity portrayed in the film, what American would actively support aid to Vietnam to heal the wounds of war?

Apocalypse Now

Apocalypse Now had become a legend even before it hit the big screen. Rumors had been circulating in Hollywood that Coppola was making a Vietnam film, that he had mortgaged his house to do so, that it was based on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and that he and his crew had been stranded in the Philippines for almost a year. In the summer of 1978, about halfway between the releases of *Coming Home* and *The Deer Hunter*, *Newsweek* ran a special piece by Maureen Orth entitled "Waiting for the Apocalypse." In it, she chronicled the various disasters that had put the film years behind schedule and tens of millions of dollars over budget: Harvey Keitel, originally slated to play the lead of Willard, had been fired. Martin Sheen, his replacement, had a heart attack. Marlon Brando, cast in the role of Colonel Kurtz, wouldn't work unless he was given one million dollars per week, and later arrived 75 pounds overweight, forcing Coppola to rewrite and reconceptualize many of Kurtz's scenes. The Philippine army helicopters, which were lent to Coppola by the Marcos Administration, were diverted for several days to put down a political insurrection.²⁵⁹

For all of these difficulties, however, "the longest running battle on the set was over what the film was really about." In the article, everyone from Coppola down weighed in with his or her view on the message of the film, and not one of them sounds remotely like the other. As later reviews and essays would further demonstrate, the film

²⁵⁹ Maureen Orth, "Watching the Apocalypse," *Newsweek* June 13, 1978, 57-64.

was pieced together on the fly, not simply in the face of production challenges, but in the face of an uncertain narrative and an uncertain message. Although it was originally based on *The Odyssey* and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the film draws on such a variety of influences, from The Doors to T.S. Elliot, as to make it all but incoherent at times.

Peter Marin accurately described it as

a sampler, a variety show of Coppola's talents: bits and pieces of successive scripts, fragments of John Milius's originally hawkish screenplay, Michael Herr's antiwar narrative added late in the day, set pieces of surreal exaggeration derivative of *Catch-22* or *MASH*, mawkish images of the Vietnamese, and, finally, the entire last convulsive third of the film, a pastiche of borrowed meanings and second-hand myths, in which Coppola, striving to locate the significance of his work, loses his way completely.²⁶⁰

Screenwriter John Milius would later tell *Film Comment* that the character of Willard was a combination of "Adam, Faust, Dante, Aeneas, Huckleberry Finn, Jesus Christ, the Ancient Mariner, Capt. Ahab, Odysseus, and Oedipus."²⁶¹ Nevertheless, if any of these three films was a spectacle, *Apocalypse Now* was it. "My movie isn't about Vietnam," Coppola arrogantly told an audience at the 1979 Cannes Film Festival, where the film shared the Grand Prize. "It is Vietnam." Although he was referring in part to the disastrous quagmire of production experience of the film, Coppola's statement becomes all the more loaded when considered within the matrix of normalization I am proposing here. In the context of the rewriting of the war in late 1970s American culture, his claim constitutes the ultimate act of cultural appropriation: allowing a fictional representation to displace and silence the historical reality of the war.

²⁶⁰ Marin, "Coming to Terms With Vietnam," 47.

²⁶¹ Richard Thompson, "Stoke: An Interview with John Milius," *Film Comment* 12 (July-August, 1976), quoted in Frank Tomasulo, "The Politics of Ambivalence: *Apocalypse Now* as Prowar and Antiwar Film," in Dittmar and Michaud, *From Hanoi to Hollywood*, 156.

Coppola's mythic journey up river follows Willard on his mission to "terminate the command" of Colonel Walter Kurtz. Willard has been informed that Kurtz, once a rising star in the military bureaucracy, has gone insane, and is now using "unsound methods" to wage his own war, without borders or boundaries of any kind. As he is escorted up the river by an army boat crew, Willard pours through Kurtz's file. Struggling to balance his concern for Kurtz's descent into madness with his own personal identification with Kurtz, Willard recognizes at least the insanity of his own mission, if not the war: "Charging a man with murder in this place," Willard tells the viewer through a voiceover, "is like handing out speeding tickets at the Indy 500." This statement also defined what critics would come to call the film's moral ambiguity. In Coppola's Vietnam, there is no useful distinction to be made between the killing of enemy combatants and the slaughter of innocent civilians.

The journey becomes more surreal as the crew moves farther up the river. In one of most legendary sequences of scenes in any Vietnam war film, they meet up with Colonel Kilgore (Robert Duvall), originally designed to play the Cyclops figure to Willard's Odysseus.²⁶² After mopping up the wreckage from his unit's last assault on the Vietnamese, Kilgore agrees to drop Willard and his crew in a "hairy," Viet Cong controlled area. The primary motivation for the mission comes when Kilgore learns that Lance, one of the men escorting Willard, is a legendary California surfer. Kilgore decides that the point can be taken and held long enough to enjoy some surfing. When

²⁶² Richard Thompson, "Stoked", quoted in Muse, *The Land of Nam*, 114.

one of his troops shows reluctance, claiming that, “it’s Charlie’s point, sir,” Kilgore shouts back, “Charlie Don’t Surf!”

The next morning, Kilgore’s unit attacks the village, while blaring “Ride of the Valkyries” from its speakers. ““I use Wagner,” Kilgore tells Lance. “It scares the shit out of the Slopes.” The village, marked at first by a seemingly innocuous schoolyard, turns out to be a Viet Cong stronghold, replete with anti-aircraft weaponry. Kilgore rewards one crew with “a case of beer for that one,” as they take out one of the gunners. “Don’t these people ever give up,” Kilgore asks as he takes out a vehicle on the bridge and then sips his coffee. The men land on the beach, and begin to take the village. An American soldier is shown close up, suffering from a severe leg wound (in far greater detail than we ever see for Vietnamese subjects). As one helicopter sets down in the schoolyard to evacuate the wounded, a young girl throws a grenade into the helicopter, blowing it up. “Fucking savages,” Kilgore responds. “I’m going to get that dink bitch,” adds another pilot. The girl and her mother run, and are gunned down from above by the helicopter. On the beach, the Colonel further secures the beach by ordering in a napalm strike along the treeline. The odor of the strike forces Kilgore to recall his fondness for the smell: “I love the smell of napalm in the morning... the smell, that gasoline smell... smells like... Victory. ... Someday this war’s gonna end.”

The scene sums up the ultimate ambivalence of *Apocalypse Now*. On the one hand, it seems determined to demonstrate the absurdity of the entire American

involvement in Vietnam: wiping out an entire village in order to surf. Coppola also makes a point in the sequence of alluding to the racism and hypocrisy of Kilgore and his men, who refer to the Vietnamese as “slopes,” and “savages.” That the Americans are clearly the initiators of the violence is itself somewhat remarkable. It is very rare, in fact, for the American forces in a Vietnam War film to initiate the action that results in a large battle or in the deaths of Vietnamese subjects. Normally, American troops are ambushed or caught off guard. Even in atrocity scenes, such as the one in *Platoon*, the American violence is set up by the gruesome killing of an American soldier. Yet the film at another level justifies the attack by showing it to be a Viet Cong controlled village. This is not the slaughter of innocents; they are the enemies of the Americans, who shoot back at the aircraft and throw grenades in helicopters. The ends of the particular mission are unquestionably absurd, but the battle itself and the killing of Vietnamese women and children are not.²⁶³

Later, up river, the film offers another instance of American-initiated violence, also ambiguous in its moral implications. On a “routine” stop of a Vietnamese family’s boat, the young and frazzled crew members accompanying Willard are ordered to inspect the cargo. Willard pleads with the chief to ignore the boat so that they can continue toward his destination. “Chef” reluctantly boards the boat. Frustrated and scared, he pushes a young girl down. “Shut up slope,” yells “Mr. Clean” (Larry Fishburne), who keeps the boat’s gun fixed on the family. The girl gets up to run after Chef, who is

²⁶³ In the *Redux* version of the film, released in 2001, many additional scenes were reinserted, including, interestingly, extra footage in the surfing scene where Kilgore goes out of his way to order the evacuation of a Vietnamese woman and her wounded baby. The footage further complicates the representation of American violence in the scene.

ordered to inspect another basket. As she rushes toward Chef, Mr. Clean opens fire, killing the girl. Lance joins in, and in a frantic scene, they slaughter the entire boat. Chef reveals that the girl was only attempting to protect her new puppy, which was hidden in the basket. The girl, the Chief points out, is moving, still alive. Willard instructs the chief that they will not take her to ARVN hospital, and executes the girl on the spot. “I told you not to stop, so let’s go.” In the voice over that follows, Willard elaborates: “It was a way we had over here. We’d cut em in half with machine guns and give them a band-aid. It was a lie; and the more I saw of them, the more I hated lies.” Through the use of the voice over, Willard justifies his murder, chalking it up to the “lie” of American policy in Vietnam.

Perhaps the most remarkable scene in *Apocalypse Now*, however, is one that was not included in the original 1979 release. After the apex of surrealistic adventure at the Du Long Bridge, where haunting and hallucinatory music is accompanied by the taunting voices of the Vietnamese in the wilderness (“Hey G.I., fuck you G.I.! I kill you G.I.!”), the crew comes upon an old French rubber plantation. The family, which has been on the land since the early years of the French colonization, treats the crew to dinner and offers Willard a historical lesson on the First and Second Indochina Wars. The patriarch of the family explains to Willard how the Americans never understood the primacy of Vietnamese nationalism. “If the Vietnamese are Communist tomorrow,” he says, “they will be *Vietnamese Communists*.” A younger man, recounting the domino theory,

appears more supportive what he perceives as the American position: “They are fighting for freedom,” he tells the patriarch. The conversation turns, at considerable length, to the Vietnamese victory at Dien Bien Phu. “Why don’t you Americans learn from us, learn from our mistakes. You are stronger, you could win,” the younger man pleads with Willard. In a twisted defense of Colonialism, the patriarch concludes that they stay because they

worked very hard bringing the rubber from Brazil. We worked very hard with Vietnamese to build something out of nothing. That is why we stay. Because it belongs to us. It keeps our family together. But you Americans are fighting for the biggest nothing!”²⁶⁴

The scene offers no definitive historical account of either the French or American historical involvement; it actually reads as more of a strange hybrid of several explanations for Franco-American failures than anything else. In the *Redux* version of the film, released in 2001, the scene was reinserted, standing out like a sore thumb as a half-hearted attempt to historicize the otherwise largely surreal, mythic narrative. Nevertheless, it is worth questioning why the scene was not included in the original version. Like *The Deer Hunter*, *Apocalypse Now* is unconcerned with the historical realities of the American War in Vietnam, attempting, according to Coppola, to get at larger questions of human nature.²⁶⁴ In the end, it is simply one more contradiction of the film, unsure of whether the history of American involvement matters, or whether, like the President claimed in his press conference on Vietnamese aid, the United States should

²⁶⁴ Orth, “Watching the Apocalypse.”

move forward “without reference to the past.”

The final scenes at Kurtz’s compound are similarly notable as much for what they are as for what they are not. As Coppola explains in the 1991 documentary *Hearts of Darkness*, shot during the filming by his wife, Eleanor, the improvisational nature of the story began to catch up with the filmmaker in the final scenes. On top of the various crises and adaptations detailed above in the 1978 *Newsweek* piece, Coppola was unable to come up with a suitable ending for the film. As Muse explains in *The Land of Nam*, three separate endings were shot: one in which Willard joins Kurtz, one in which Willard dies alongside Kurtz after calling in an American air strike on the compound, and one in which Willard kills Kurtz. The latter of the three was eventually used, but only after several audience focus groups found it the most appealing of the three.²⁶⁵

For many reviews and scholars, the inability of Coppola to articulate or symbolize any coherent message in the film’s climax was indicative of the larger moral and political failures of the film. Even among sympathetic reviewers, Coppola was often criticized for falling prey to his own delusions of grandeur. “A failed masterpiece,” was indicative of the descriptions offered by such reviews. Others were not as generous. Peter Marin derided the film as “morally stupid:” “an essentially unintelligent investigation of themes too complex for Coppola to handle... crippled by a morally incoherent attitude toward the war and its attendant issues.”²⁶⁶ Frank Tomasulo later took the film to task for its moral and political ambivalence. Coppola, in Tomasulo’s account, wanted to have it both

²⁶⁵ Muse, *The Land of Nam*, 114; 118.

²⁶⁶ Marin, “Coming to Terms With Vietnam,” 47.

ways—to have both an “anti-war” and “pro-war” film, as well as a film that aestheticizes the violence of war while attempting to comment on the events critically as well.²⁶⁷

One of Tomasulo’s concerns has to do with what the terms “the politics of film reception.” Working against the grain of theories that promote an “open,” multivalent text, Tomasulo argues that, “what is really needed—at least in terms of Vietnam War movies—is a *closed* text, a film that takes an *unambiguous* stance on the imperialist involvement and illegal conduct of the Vietnam Conflict.”²⁶⁸ Yet Tomasulo misses the very point of reception theories that focus on the polyvalence of textual meaning: it is not that artists actively *create* “open” texts and could simplify the articulation of a particular message by creating a less ambiguous text; ambiguity, after all, is not necessarily synonymous with polyvalency. Reception theories hold that texts, by the manner in which they are produced, received, and consumed, are open to a variety of readings based on the subject positions of their audience. Nevertheless, Tomasulo’s larger point is well-taken: films such as *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*, which seek to displace and abstract “political realities onto the universal and ambiguous realm of myth,” contribute to the “social amnesia” of American culture.

“Lifting the Moral Burden”

In one of the many articles to declare that Vietnam had “come home” in 1978, a piece in *Time* noted the rather remarkable spectacle of the Oscar Ceremony in April of

²⁶⁷ Frank Tomasulo, “The Politics of Ambivalence.”

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 157. Emphasis in original.

1979. Already that night, Jane Fonda and Jon Voight had won their respective awards for best performances in *Coming Home*, but the highlight of the ceremony came when John Wayne, of all people, awarded the final award of the night, Best Picture, to Cimino for *The Deer Hunter*. The piece also noted that headlines around the country cleverly appropriated the awards to comment on the irony of the situation, such as the *Los Angeles Examiner*, which proclaimed: “The War Finally Wins.”²⁶⁹

“Vietnam” had indeed been brought home in 1978. The films explored in this chapter, as well as the critical discourses they engendered, challenged existing American cultural memory of the war by “normalizing” it, translating it into terms acceptable to American cultural production and foreign policy. Through the act of cultural appropriation constituted by making the war “about us,” as all these films do, the texts reinforce the myopic and narcissistic tendencies of American policy toward Vietnam in the 1970s. All three of the texts examined here are part of the larger “normalization” of the United States’ war on Vietnam, doing for the cultural sphere what the legislative and policy discussions had accomplished in the political field. These films helped to lift the moral burden of the war off Americans, countering any collective sense of guilt with indulgent appeals to self-victimization.

By the time of the 1979 Oscars, the familiar images of the American War in Vietnam—of children being burned by napalm, of American allies executing their enemies on the streets of Saigon, of a mass of bodies, executed by young American

²⁶⁹ “Vietnam Comes Home,” *Time* April 23, 1978.

soldiers, lying in a ditch at My Lai—were being contested, if not entirely displaced, by images of traumatized American veterans, fractured communities, and, importantly sinister and cruel Vietnamese figures torturing Americans. “Vietnam” had successfully been brought into American cultural memory: it was no longer a war, and had long since ceased being a country. It was now an “experience,” something that happened *to* America and Americans.

Peter Marin, whose work has been cited often in this chapter, still wondered in 1980 if any American representations of the war would ever consider the war “from the Vietnamese point of view—in terms of their suffering rather than ours.”²⁷⁰ As I have shown, however, the political and cultural work of normalization sought not simply to ignore the Vietnamese, but to silence them. By rendering what the war did to the nation and people of Southeast Asia outside the realm of discussion, the cultural logic of mutual destruction constructed and disseminated in the late 1970s laid the groundwork for the resumption of the American imperial project in the region during the 1980s. The inverted historical representations of the war implicit in the constructions we have seen here would provide the lens through which most Americans would view the Third Indochina War. The government and mainstream media, both agents of normalization in the late 1970s, had already chosen sides in that conflict by early 1979, letting China and their Khmer Rouge clients off rather easily while condemning the Vietnamese as the aggressors and transgressors. But equally important is the way in which that conflict

²⁷⁰ Marin, Coming to Terms With Vietnam,” 43.

allowed the process of rewriting the American War in Vietnam to continue. That is the task to which we now turn.

CHAPTER THREE

Bleeding Vietnam: The United States and the Third Indochina War

In his 1976 National Address marking Tet, Le Duan, the long-time Secretary General of the Vietnamese Communist Party, promised that every family in Vietnam would have a radio, a television, and a refrigerator in their home within ten years.²⁷¹ While these specific goals may not have been exactly what one might have expected from one of the central figures of the Vietnamese Socialist revolution, Le Duan's comments reflected the sanguinity of Hanoi after the end of the Second Indochina War. Having defeated the Americans and their Southern Vietnamese clients, the Vietnamese leadership was now seemingly free to confront the task of socialist economic transformation.

In 1976, optimism reigned supreme in Hanoi. In July, Vietnam would be officially reunited as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. In the fall, representatives from the United States would visit and recommend the normalization of relations between the two nations. Later that year, the Party announced its incredibly ambitious Second Five Year Plan (FYP), its first such plan since the DRV's First FYP from 1961-1965. In that plan, the VCP announced that as part of its three ongoing revolutionary tracks (science and technology, relations of production, and cultural-ideological), the Vietnamese economy would exceed all expectations.²⁷² The projected increases in agricultural

²⁷¹ *Nhan Dan* (Hanoi), February 2, 1976, quote in David Marr and Christine White, "Introduction," in Marr and White, eds., *Postwar Vietnam: Dilemmas in Socialist Development* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 1.

production (8-10 percent), industrial output (16-18 percent), and national income (13-14 percent), would have been ambitious for any economy, let alone one still on the heels of three decades of sustained warfare.²⁷³ Moreover, the Fourth Party Congress at which the FYP was announced also provided a statement of economic independence. Anticipating a massive influx of foreign aid, especially from the United States, the Party angered the Soviets by declaring their agenda for genuine economic independence. Although committed to international socialism, the Vietnamese leadership prized nothing more than national sovereignty, which they knew would come only from a position of economic strength and international multilateralism. It certainly appeared to many at the time that the Vietnamese would soon, as Ho Chi Minh had predicted years earlier, rebuild their land “ten times more beautiful.”²⁷⁴

Ten years later, in early 1986, the dreams of Ho, Le Duan, and the Vietnamese people, lay in tatters. Le Duan had died the previous summer at the age of 79; many of his former comrades, including Vo Nguyen Giap, had been forced out of power and others, including Le Duc Tho and Pham Van Dong, would soon share a similar fate. The vanguard figures of the revolution were being replaced, and another transformation was underway. Beginning in the mid-1980s, the Vietnamese economy would move increasingly toward a capitalist, market-oriented approach. The economy had continued

²⁷² For further discussion of these “three revolutions,” see William Duiker, *Vietnam Since the Fall of Saigon* (Athens, Ohio: Center for International Studies, 1985), esp. Chapter One, pp. 3-29.

²⁷³ Charles Harvie and Tran Van Hoa, *Vietnam’s Reforms and Economic Growth* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1997), 46.

²⁷⁴ Ho Chi Minh, *Testament*, quoted in Duiker, *Vietnam Since the Fall of Saigon*, p.3: “Once the American invaders have been defeated, we will rebuild our land ten times more beautiful.”

to struggle throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s. As early as 1978 it became clear that the goals for the Second FYP would not be met: the agricultural production amounted to only two percent growth, industrial growth only six-tenths of a percent, and national income, far from the double digit gains projected, remained at less than one half of one percent.²⁷⁵ Although the economy would perform better in the Third FYP of 1981-1985, the goals for that period also fell considerably short of both the expectations of the government and the needs of the people. Far from economic independence, Vietnam had been forced into a position of accepting membership in Council of Mutual Economic Assistance, the Soviet-bloc common economy. Most importantly, the Vietnamese in 1986 found themselves mired in another long, bloody, and costly war. Although the immediate conflict in this war was the result of long-standing border disputes between the Vietnamese and their Cambodian neighbors, the Third Indochina War, like the two wars before it, became a proxy battle being waged by the world's foremost military powers.

Far from becoming “a land ten times more beautiful,” Vietnam by the mid 1980s was surrounded by unfriendly regimes, beset with serious economic woes, and remained the target of an alternatively hostile and indifferent United States. Without question, the Vietnamese leadership must shoulder a good portion of the blame for this situation. The VCP poorly managed its economy and at times remained needlessly obstinate in the face of world opinion during its occupation of Cambodia. What has often been obscured in

²⁷⁵ Harvie and Hoa, *op cit.*.

the rush to judgment against the failures of the Vietnamese, however, has been the role played by the United States in the multiple tragedies of Southeast Asia during the 1980s. In this chapter, I will argue that the United States, in concert with China and the ASEAN nations²⁷⁶, followed a policy of “bleeding Vietnam white” during this period, needlessly prolonging the devastating war in Cambodia while using the war as a justification for its continued hostility toward Vietnam. Far from a response to the Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia, United States’ strategy toward Southeast Asia during the late 1970s and 1980s was a continuation and, in effect, an extension, of its previous policies of continuing war by other means.

The Bleeding of Vietnam during the 1980s rested on three primary components: political/diplomatic, military, and economic. The political and diplomatic aspect was played out largely at the United Nations in the early 1980s, when the United States and China led the fight to retain the diplomatic credentials of the murderous Khmer Rouge regime and isolate the Vietnamese. The military phase of the policy grew largely out of the failure of the diplomatic efforts to achieve the desired results. Beginning in the early Reagan administration, a variety of actors in Washington began to press for the development of an “alternative” force in Cambodia, separate from the occupying Vietnamese and the Khmer Rouge. Beginning in 1982, the United States began to funnel aid to what it termed the “Non-Communist Resistance” in Cambodia. In actuality, the coalition was dominated by the Khmer Rouge, who thus found themselves the recipients

²⁷⁶ ASEAN is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, founded in 1967 in part to replace the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO), a collective security arrangement that included the United States and Australia as well as several Southeast Asian nations. ASEAN was initially made up of “the five.” Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. Brunei was added after gaining independence in 1982.

of large amounts of American aid. The economic aspect of the U.S. strategy toward Vietnam during the 1980s was to continue the economic sanctions program that had been enacted years earlier and persuade its allies to follow suit. By the end of the decade, however, it was clear that the United States was again going it alone with unilateral sanctions against Vietnam. Japan, France, and the ASEAN nations all resumed trade and even aid programs with Vietnam, leaving the U.S. with a confused policy.

To refer to the bleeding of Vietnam as a “policy,” however, is a misnomer. Although the various components that constituted the strategy can be discerned with the hindsight of history, they did not constitute a coherent policy stance at the time. As we will see in this chapter, the attitude of the United States government towards Vietnam more often than not continued to be defined by a *lack* of policy, just as it had since 1975. The de facto policy continued to be reactive, using whatever events developed in the region, or whatever political sentiments arose in the United States, as a justification for the ongoing hostile stance toward the Vietnamese. During the Third Indochina War, U.S. policies toward Vietnam also became more deferential to China and ASEAN, as the U.S. remained reluctant to become overtly reengaged with the politics of Southeast Asia.

At the same time, the program of Bleeding Vietnam was loosely held together by a cultural logic that continued to serve as the under girding for the larger American War on Vietnam after 1975. All of the components discussed in this chapter were wrought by the theme of invisibility. The military phase of the war—the covert supporting of the

Khmer Rouge—cannot be considered apart from the other military actions undertaken by the United States in the 1980s, particularly the wars in Central America. These actions were often described by using the signifier of “Vietnam.” Thus the discussion of “new Vietnams” in Central America helped to mask the ongoing war against the “real” Vietnam in Southeast Asia. The international extension of the economic sanctions program that resulted from the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia also helped to render invisible the origins of the American embargo on Vietnam. Various government officials and commentators at the time, and numerous scholars since, have mistakenly described Vietnamese actions against Cambodia as the origins of the sanctions, obscuring the actual imposition of the sanctions in 1975, discussed here in chapter three. Moreover, the failure of the United States to lift its sanctions upon the Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia in the late 1980s further points to the deep roots of the American policy. Both of these components were also part of a larger trend in revisionism that took place in American culture in the 1980s. Building upon the groundwork laid by the processes of “normalization,” as discussed in the previous chapters, the 1980s witnessed the triumph of revisionism of the American War in Vietnam, with the United States fully established as the primary victim of the war and the Vietnamese increasingly relegated to the margins of historical narratives about the war. Although this topic will be explored more fully in the next chapter, the revisionist tendencies of the Reagan administration during this time are also part and parcel of the larger project of bleeding Vietnam.

Thus, we will see, the American War on Vietnam after 1975 was both continued and extended during the 1980s, transitioning seamlessly from the Carter White House through both Reagan administrations and into the presidency of George Bush. By the end of the 1980s, the Vietnamese would be out of Cambodia and the Third Indochina War would finally be over, but the United States would continue to attempt to bleed Vietnam, maintaining its sanctions program and continuing to isolate the Vietnamese politically and diplomatically. Before discussing the bleeding of Vietnam, some background on the rise of the Third Indochina War is in order.

The Rise of the Third Indochina War

The suppression of long standing national disputes and coalescing of Asian communist and nationalist factions that had been engendered by the American War in Vietnam was quickly erased when the Americans left. The seemingly close relationship between the revolutionary forces of Vietnam and the Khmer Rouge of Cambodia, both of which had been supported by the Chinese during their wars to liberate their countries from American-backed regimes, had exchanged messages of congratulations on their victories in April of 1975. Less than a month later, the two nations were battling over disputed territories in the Gulf of Thailand.

The Khmer Rouge had come to power in a troubled nation wrought by decades of war in the surrounding region and its own status as a “sideshow” in the American War on

Vietnam. After the anti-communist and fiercely anti-Vietnamese Lon Nol regime seized power in a 1970 coup d'etat against longtime head of state Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the Northern Vietnamese troops led the assaults against the regime, building up the Khmer Rouge forces in the process. After 1972, the ethnic and national tensions between the Vietnamese and Khmer forces began to grow, and the Khmer Rouge forces battled increasingly alone against the forces of Lon Nol and the seemingly endless barrage of bombs from American B-52s.²⁷⁷ After the ending of the American bombing campaign the Khmer Rouge preceded toward Phnom Penh, securing the capitol two weeks prior to the North Vietnamese victory in Saigon.

Combining a radical vision of a socialist utopia, a fanatical racial nationalism, and a paranoia fueled by decades of foreign domination of Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge embarked on a sinister revolution the likes of which the world had never seen: the immediate abolition of private property, the forced evacuation of millions from the cities and towns around Phnom Penh to rural agricultural collectives, and, in short, the complete domination of everyday life by the regime. Elizabeth Becker, one of the first journalists allowed in Khmer Rouge-led Cambodia, describes the secrecy and silence with which the Khmer Rouge enacted their revolution:

Their silence was mysterious, even sinister. The first stories about life under their rule, told by Cambodians who managed to escape Thailand, were fantastic and made the regime sound like a monstrous abomination. Refugees said Cambodians wearing eyeglasses were killed because the Khmer Rouge thought only intellectuals wore eyeglasses. They said beautiful young women were forced to marry deformed Khmer Rouge veterans. They said all toys were banned, that

²⁷⁷ Becker, *When the War Was Over*, 149;169. Shawcross, *Sideshow*.

there were no more kites flying in the sky. They said there were no more dogs in the country because starving people had killed them all for food.²⁷⁸

Stories such as these, which as Becker explains were based on exaggerated version of actual events, such as the forced labor of children and the banning of sex and marriage, made it all the more difficult for some to believe the stories that began to surface months later: widespread famine, mass executions, and a massive program of genocide against its own people. Within years, millions of Cambodians would lay dead from the policies and actions of the Khmer Rouge.²⁷⁹

By the end of 1976, the Khmer Rouge had also become *the* major threat to the stability of Southeast Asia. The silence emanating from Cambodia was briefly shattered by a series of military clashes with both Thailand and Vietnam. Although almost no one in the world had a firm grasp on the horrors that had been taking place *within* Cambodia borders, the threat of conflict along its borders threatened to further destabilize the region. In January of 1977, Khmer Rouge forces led an incursion across the Thai border, leaving behind dozens of dead civilians, including women and children. Pictures of the atrocities were widely carried in the Western press.²⁸⁰ As Shawcross relates the story, however, what is most remarkable about the event is how little of a disturbance in Thai-Khmer relations the executions caused. Furthermore, according to Shawcross, the Khmer Rouge not only took credit for the murders, but also claimed that they had taken place within Cambodian borders. Thus, the indignancy of the Khmer Rouge was not at the

²⁷⁸ Becker, *When the War Was Over*, 176.

²⁷⁹ Ibid.; Shawcross, *Sideshow*.

²⁸⁰ Shawcross, *The Quality of Mercy*; *NYT*, February 1, 1977

charges of murder, but with Thailand’s “interference in Cambodian affairs.”²⁸¹ Thailand had been among the first nations in the region to recognize the Khmer Rouge regime, a decision that has normally attributed to Thai fears about the potential threat posed by the military power of Vietnam. Thailand and the Khmer Rouge quickly restored normalized relations after the January attacks, but Khmer atrocities against Thai civilians continued throughout the remainder of 1977, culminating in a December 15 attack on several Thai villages along the border. Even then, the Thai government revealed only a muted frustration with the Khmer Rouge, not wishing to complicate the relations between the two nations.²⁸² While the Thais refused to be provoked, Khmer Rouge attacks continued throughout the 1978 as well, resulting in the killing and kidnapping of numerous Thai citizens.²⁸³ As the Third Indochina War began, the Thai government stood firmly alongside the Khmer Rouge, serving as both the conduit for Chinese and American Aid to the “coalition” forces dominated by members of the genocidal regime and the base for American covert action in Cambodia.

On its Eastern border with Vietnam, the Khmer Rouge also engaged in a series of raids and attacks against Vietnamese villages. While the Vietnamese, like the Thai government, had largely ignored reports of the internal holocaust going on inside Cambodia and had maintained a front of cordial relations with their former allies, the long history of Vietnamese-Cambodian animosity made the Eastern front of the Khmer Rouge attacks much more dangerous. In April and May of 1977, Khmer Rouge forces

²⁸¹ Shawcross, *The Quality of Mercy*, 61.

²⁸² Stephen Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999, 78-79.

²⁸³ Ibid., 80-82.

attacked dozens of villages in the Parrot's Beak region of Vietnam, killing hundreds of Vietnamese citizens. Unlike the Thais, the Vietnamese responded to the attacks with force, clashing in several border skirmishes with the Cambodians throughout the summer. Although Hanoi clearly wished to avoid a wider war, the increasing frequency of attacks by the Khmer forces made it increasingly difficult to exercise patience. In September of 1977, several hundred Vietnamese civilians, again including large numbers of women and children, were killed in Tay Ninh Province at the hands of the Khmer Rouge. Yet several days later, the Vietnamese Communist Party sent a message of congratulations to Pol Pot for his formal announcement of the Kampuchean Communist Party.

The tide turned again in the fall, when the Vietnamese began actively supporting the formation of an insurgency to overthrow the Khmer Rouge leadership. In December of that year, the Vietnamese, after failing to make any progress in the border dispute, launched their own major incursion into Cambodian territory. Believing that a display of their superiority of manpower and firepower would instill some fear into the Khmer Rouge, the Vietnamese overpowered DK forces with tens of thousands of troops supported by numerous air sorties and withdrew their forces several weeks later, after stopping twenty miles short of taking Phnom Penh.²⁸⁴ Nayan Chanda later wrote that the brief Vietnamese invasion marked the beginning of the Third Indochina War so many had feared and tried to avoid. It would be another full year however, until sustained, full-scale war erupted in Southeast Asia.²⁸⁵

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 206.

In 1977, as Elizabeth Becker put it, Pol Pot and his regime “needed an active enemy.”²⁸⁶ Thailand, clearly, was both unsuited and unwilling to play that role; Vietnam, however, albeit somewhat reluctantly, obliged. After the brief invasion of late 1977, the Vietnamese began to publicize the Khmer Rouge atrocities committed in Cambodia and along the Vietnamese border. Yet the resulting publicity, combined with the Khmer Rouge’s own program of propaganda against Vietnam, led to concerns more about the outbreak of war in Indochina than about the Khmer Rouge’s crimes against humanity. The rest of the world had been dreadfully slow in reacting to the reports slowly emerging from Cambodia, although the secrecy of the Khmer Rouge was undoubtedly more to blame for the speed of reaction than the apparent indifference of the world community, particularly the United States. Nevertheless, when the United States began to take the Cambodian situation into account in its foreign policy toward Southeast Asia, beginning, for all intents and purposes in 1977, it seemed inconceivable that the U.S. would come down on the side of the Khmer Rouge, one of the most murderous regimes in history. Within several years, however, the U.S. would be funneling aid into Cambodia, a good portion of which would end up in the hands of the Khmer Rouge; it would vote on numerous occasions to continue to seat Pol Pot’s regime at the United Nations; and violate its own economic sanctions on Cambodia, all the while continuing to “bleed Vietnam” by prolonging its occupation of Cambodia and refusing to support actively the disarming of the Khmer Rouge.

²⁸⁶ Becker, *When the War Was Over*, 300.

Coming to Terms with Cambodia

As the world began to take notice of the numerous crises consuming Southeast Asia in 1978, the United States was forced to revisit its policies toward the region. Normalization with Vietnam was no longer the only issue under consideration; the security of close allies such as Thailand, relations with China (which the Carter administration had been quietly working to normalize), and the question of military and/or humanitarian intervention in Cambodia were all on the table in Washington, D.C.

When the stories of Khmer Rouge atrocities began to make their way into the Western world, however, the initial response in American policymaking circles revolved around the role of the United States in helping create the conditions that allowed the regime to seize power in 1975. In the summer of 1977, the House Subcommittee on International Organizations held the first major government hearings on the situation in Cambodia. As William Shawcross would later write, the most remarkable thing about these hearings was that they were the first hearings to be held on the matter, a full two years after the Khmer Rouge assumed power and had begun their program of auto-genocide.²⁸⁷

In the first of two sessions devoted to the situation, the committee heard testimony from several academics who sparred with various representatives about the tension between the moral responsibility of the United States for the existing situation in

²⁸⁷ Shawcross, *The Quality of Mercy*, 63.

Cambodia and the moral obligation to help in righting that situation. Two of the witnesses in particular, David Chandler of Harvard and Gareth Porter, an Australian academic working in Washington D.C., took their opportunity before the committee to castigate the United States' policy toward the region during the previous war. Chandler, while admitting that it was difficult to tell exactly what was happening in Cambodia at the current moment, the roots of the crisis lie in the American attacks on Cambodia during the Nixon administration. "To a large extent, I think the American actions are to blame" for the rise of the Khmer Rouge, Chandler told the committee. "It is ironic, to use a colorless word," he continued, "for us to accuse the Cambodians of being indifferent to life when, for so many years, Cambodian lives made so little difference to us."²⁸⁸ Chandler had no concrete recommendations for what course the United States should follow with regard to Cambodia, but he was adamant in his insistence that the United States face the complicated reality of the situation in that nation: "We should accept the fact, even if it might be a sad one, that Democratic Kampuchea is a sovereign independent state, and we should formulate our policies toward it, in part, by remembering rather than forgetting, what we have done."²⁸⁹

Porter's testimony was far more contentious. Along with some other intellectuals on the left, most notably Noam Chomsky (whose name arose in the course of Porter's testimony), Porter erred on the unfortunate side of caution in downplaying the possibility of a Cambodian holocaust. Pointing to previous exaggerations by Western powers of

²⁸⁸ "Human Rights in Cambodia," Hearing Before the House Subcommittee on International Organizations," 95th Congress, 1st Session, May 3, 1977 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1977), 14.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

Communist atrocities, such as the land reform program in Northern Vietnam in the mid 1950s, Porter argued that the postwar policies of the Khmer Rouge, such as mass evacuations and a return to collectivized agriculture were “rational” given the devastated state of the country’s infrastructure. In a lengthy and meticulously documented written statement, he argued that reports of genocide were completely overblown. Whatever “mistakes” the Khmer Rouge committed, Porter claimed, were “dwarfed” by the destruction previously caused by the United States. “It is the worst kind of historical myopia and hypocrisy,” he concluded, “to express more moral outrage at the revolutionary government for its weaknesses than at the cause of overwhelmingly greater suffering: the U.S. policy in Cambodia from 1970 to 1975.”²⁹⁰

The rest of the afternoon featured a series of vitriolic exchanges between Porter, Chandler, and several members of the committee. Before Porter arrived, several members of the committee grilled Chandler about his stance on the moral quandary facing the United States. Donald Fraser of Minnesota, the Chair of the Subcommittee, asked if Chandler thought the U.S. should refrain “for perpetuity,” because of “our own conduct in Cambodia.” Chandler rejected this simplification, drawing attention once again to the “complicated” position facing the United States. He reiterated his hope that, at the very least, attitudes and policy toward Cambodia would be formulated “in a context of memory,” rather than “in a vacuum, as if we had nothing to do with the situation there.”²⁹¹ The representative from Illinois, Edward Derwinski claimed one of the

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 32.

²⁹¹ Ibid., 17.

statements should not be entitled “Human Rights in Cambodia,” but rather “Justification for Slaughter.”²⁹² William Goodling, from Pennsylvania, also refused to see Chandler’s point about the complexity of the situation, calling his testimony “very annoying.” Yet in his muddled response, Dooling revealed the brutal nature of the American war on Cambodia. Comparing the United States’ bombing of Cambodia to the murderous Khmer Rouge seemed specious to Dooling: “Our bombs didn’t single out certain segments or certain peoples in Cambodia. Our bombs hit them all. And whether you thought it was right or I thought it was right, the military at that time thought it was right.”²⁹³ That such a statement could be couched as a defense of American policy reveals the tangled and twisted nature of American relations with Southeast Asia.

A much more nuanced position on the Cambodian situation came from Stephen Solarz, the Democratic Congressman from Long Island who came to Washington as part of the Watergate class of 1974. Jewish by his upbringing, Solarz took an early and passionate interest in both the Cambodian holocaust and the refugee crisis facing Southeast Asia. At the May 3 hearing, Solarz battled with Porter about the conditions in Cambodia, demonstrating the concern and the knowledge of the subject that went completely unrivaled in the United States government during his tenure. He ridiculed the witnesses who seemed to defend the Khmer Rouge, compared Porter to those who continued to deny the Jewish holocaust, and pressed them about their assumptions, their evidence, and their politics. Most impressively, he alone among the congressional

²⁹² Ibid., 40.

²⁹³ Ibid.

representatives acknowledged both the complexity of the situation in Southeast Asia and the moral ambiguity inherent in the formulation of American foreign policy toward the region. “I hold no brief for what we did in Cambodia,” he told the witnesses and the committee:

I fully agree that we bear a measure of the responsibility for setting in motion a course of events which ultimately led to this most monstrous evil. But how anybody can suggest, by virtue of that fact, that we are morally absolved of any obligation to attempt to deal with this crime seems to me an act of moral insensitivity.²⁹⁴

Over the course of the hearing, and numerous subsequent hearings over which he would preside as chair, Solarz demonstrated his unique grasp of the issues surrounding the region.

For the most part, Solarz went back and forth with Porter and Chandler about the conflicting evidence, mostly from Cambodian refugees in Thailand, about the extent of Khmer Rouge atrocities. Solarz played the role of prosecuting attorney, calling all of Porter’s evidence into question. At one point, Porter attempted to introduce into the record an article by Ben Kiernan, the Australian academic who went on to become one of the world’s foremost experts on Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge:

Solarz: Who is he? Do you know who this fellow is?

Chandler: He is a student of mine.

Solarz: Do you know him?

Porter: I do not know him personally, no sir.

²⁹⁴ “Human Rights in Cambodia,” 33.

Solarz: Do you know anything about him?

Porter: I know that he is a specialist on Cambodia.

[Porter then proceeds to recount Kiernan's article, which point out only that there are discrepancies in the accounts provided by refugees.]

Solarz: Let me tell you something, Mr. Porter. I don't know anything about this student of Dr. Chandler's, whom the professor disbelieves...²⁹⁵

Such was the tone for most of the hearing, with Porter pressing Solarz for misreading what was certainly a wealth of confusing and contradictory evidence, and Solarz arguing that the logical, if not entirely supported, reading of the evidence would suggest that a holocaust was taking place inside Cambodia. At one point in the questioning, Solarz responded to a defense of the Khmer Rouge evacuations of hospitals in Phnom Penh by simply asking Porter, "Do you really believe what you are saying?" Asked for clarification by Porter, Solarz responded, "This isn't some kind of put-on where you are playing a role? I mean you actually believe that what you have said is true?"²⁹⁶

The one item on which everyone in the hearing room appeared to agree is that humanitarian aid should be sent to Cambodia.²⁹⁷ Ironically, of course, such aid was prohibited under the sanctions placed on Cambodia under the auspices of the Trading With the Enemy Act and the Export Administration Act in 1975. The hearings did reveal that U.S. made DDT, used to combat malaria, had been bought by Cambodia. Any such transaction was prohibited under the sanctions program. Yet no one in the hearings was disturbed by this development. In his statement to the subcommittee, Deputy Secretary

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 37-38.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 43.

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 53.

of State Holbrooke noted, almost as an aside, “the United States has made exceptions to the Export Administration controls on Cambodia to permit sales of DDT as a means of easing the outbreak of malaria there.”²⁹⁸ It was clear to all those involved that malaria infections had been at epidemic levels in Cambodia since at least the height of the American bombing campaign. Even the government experts who testified at related hearings later in the summer of 1977 conceded that the number of deaths from malaria under the Khmer Rouge was “even greater than those executed.”²⁹⁹

That the need for assistance in some form, even from the United States, was a point of agreement in these hearings reveals as much about the state of lingering animosity and indifference towards Vietnam as it does about the state of concern about Cambodia. Vietnam was mentioned overtly only once in the hearing, when Solarz pointed out that the United States bombed Vietnam more heavily than Cambodia “and, whatever the situation may be [in Vietnam], I don’t know that they are systematically destroying their own people.”³⁰⁰

As I have shown in the previous chapters, during this same period—the spring and summer of 1977—Congress was developing new and unprecedented regulations to prevent direct aid to Vietnam, the Vietnamese receipt of aid through international organizations, and the possibility of even *discussing* aid to Vietnam during normalization negotiations. While the famines plaguing Vietnam in 1977 and 1978 do not constitute

²⁹⁸ “Human Rights in Cambodia [Second of Two Hearings],” Hearing Before the House Subcommittee on International Organizations,” 95th Congress, 1st Session, July 26, 1977 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1977), 3.

²⁹⁹ “Human Rights in Cambodia [Second of Two Hearings],” 8.

³⁰⁰ “Human Rights in Cambodia [First Hearing],” 33.

horrors parallel to the suffering of the Cambodian people, it is nevertheless remarkable that such proposals for aid were dropped so casually during the hearings. Aid to Cambodia, which would certainly have had to been provided via the Khmer Rouge, clearly a murderous and possibly a genocidal regime in the eyes of most government officials, was discussed as though the needs of the Cambodian people trumped the possibility of further propping up the Khmer Rouge regime. In and of itself, this is not a radical sentiment; on the contrary, it is precisely the point, albeit an often-contested one, of humanitarian aid. The question is: what is the reason for the double standard on aid to Vietnam and Cambodia?

During their rise to power, the Khmer Rouge had played upon the role of the “U.S. imperialists,” in destroying their country and propping up the Lon Nol regime. Long after the war, they continued to blame the United States for committing genocide against the Cambodian people while denying their own genocidal practices. Even well into 1978, Pol Pot and Ieng Sary continued to accuse “the U.S. imperialists and their lackeys” of killing well over a million Cambodians. The number itself is not a matter of dispute. American officials at the July, 1977 hearings testified that the number of Cambodians killed during the American campaign involvement in that country “is probably close” to one million.³⁰¹ Yet the number of Vietnamese who were killed during the American War there is likely closer to three million. Even a conservative estimate would place it somewhere around two million, double the number of Cambodia. In

³⁰¹ “Human Rights in Cambodia [Second Hearing], 22.

neither case do government officials in the United States speak of an American genocide against the people of Southeast Asia, although the numbers are certainly comparable.

The Vietnamese, however, unlike the Khmer Rouge, entered the postwar era of American-Vietnamese relations with an attitude of openness, speaking of healing the wounds of war and developing a mutually beneficial relationship with the United States. They went to unprecedented ends in the face of unprecedented demands by the U.S. on the POW/MIA question, only to be met with greater skepticism and more demands. The Khmer Rouge, on the other hand, refused all American attempts at contact. The House Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia took particular note of the complete lack of assistance from the Khmer Rouge, and when the Woodcock Commission attempted to schedule a visit to Phnom Penh during their tour of the region in early 1977, they received no response from the Cambodian regime.³⁰²

Furthermore, the question of aid to Cambodia at the time was moot; the regime was still completely closed to the outside world, had rejected previous offers of aid from various countries, and certainly was not interested in any assistance from the United States. On the other hand, the Vietnamese had made clear that they both desired and needed aid from the United States and the world community. Although they initially demanded such aid, which turned out to be a gross political and diplomatic miscalculation with the United States, the Vietnamese grew increasingly flexible regarding the scope, form, and substance of aid. Yet Congress refused even to consider

³⁰² For more on the place of Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge in the POW/MIA situation, see Franklin, *M.I.A.*, 105-108.

such a possibility.

As Bruce Franklin wrote of the double standard for the Vietnamese and Cambodians with regard to the POW/MIA question: “Nowhere else does the hypocrisy and cynicism of U.S. government policy on the MIA question stand so nakedly exposed.” The same could be said of the more general policy of the United States, or, perhaps more appropriately, the lack of policy, on aid to the nations of Southeast Asia. The question of aid to Cambodia would continue to be raised during the next several years, without ever reaching an appropriate answer. The double standard to which the United States government was holding the Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese would also remain, and would grow increasingly hypocritical as the years, and the war for Cambodia, dragged on.³⁰³

Constructing a “Post-Vietnam” Policy: Choosing China

In June of 1978, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke addressed the Western Governors’ Association in Honolulu, describing to the group what he labeled the “Changing Perspectives” of American foreign policy in Southeast Asia. Holbrooke at the time was still leading the charge within the White House for normalizing relations with Vietnam, but on this day he revealed the extent to which that goal had fallen in priority. He spoke to the Governors of maintaining a strong military presence in the region, keeping up good relations with Japan, increasing trade and investment with the ASEAN

³⁰³ For the complexities of the aid situation in Cambodia, particularly during the Vietnamese occupation, see Shawcross, *The Quality of Mercy*, particularly pp. 95-111.

nations, and of “our commitment to normalizing relations with China.” Holbrooke labeled the overall shift in perspective “our post-Vietnam Asia policy.” Certainly this nomenclature reflects chronology, referring to a shift in American policy since the end of the Second Indochina War, but in the context of the summer of 1978, it also foreshadows the erasure of Vietnam from the visible American policy agenda. Holbrooke told the governors that “time will not permit” a discussion of Vietnamese-American relations, but did not in closing that the United States had “made a reasonable offer to establish diplomatic relations and to lift the trade embargo,” implying that the ball was in Hanoi’s court.³⁰⁴

Hanoi, however, had already made new overtures toward the United States in the summer of 1978. As Hurst has shown, throughout May, June, and July, Vietnamese officials made several public pronouncements revealing their willingness to drop outright the demand for American economic aid as a precondition for normalization. In July, Deputy Foreign Minister told journalists, “even if the U.S. Congress rejects the reconstruction aid, we look forward to establishing full diplomatic ties.”³⁰⁵ Hurst points out that another statement from the press conference seemed to contradict this revelation, but it was nevertheless made clear that the Vietnamese were open to the idea of normalizing without prior aid commitments of any kind.³⁰⁶ Another Vietnamese official

³⁰⁴ Holbrooke, “U.S. Policy in Asia: Changing Perspectives,” *Department of State Bulletin: Current Policy*, Number 24; June, 1978, 7.

³⁰⁵ Quoted in Hurst, *The Carter Administration and Vietnam*, 70; NYT, July 11, 1978, A6.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

noted later that summer, “it is clear that in matters of normalization, the ball is on the American side.”³⁰⁷

The United States, however, insisted that it had not received any “official” proposal from the Vietnamese, thus had no official basis of its own upon which to respond. At a Senate hearing in August, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Robert Oakley told the Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs, “we are waiting for a clarification of precisely what the Vietnamese have in mind. We have not yet had a direct, official explanation of their present position on establishing normal diplomatic relations with the United States.”³⁰⁸ It is curious, given the amount of attention the administration had devoted to the issue of normalization, why it was now “waiting” for further Vietnamese clarification. As Hurst puts it, “[t]he significant question is not ‘why did the Vietnamese not officially drop the aid precondition,’” he asks, “but ‘why did the United States not immediately kick the ball back?’”³⁰⁹ The answer, Hurst argues, has primarily to do with the external developments of the period, including several Soviet-related issues that had nothing to do with Southeast Asia but helped to reinforce the Brzezenski worldview within the administration.³¹⁰ When Vietnam became a full member of CMEA in June, the view of Hanoi as a Soviet proxy power was only further solidified in Washington. Even when a CIA study demonstrated that the Soviets were not actively involved in Vietnam at the time, the views continued to dominate White House

³⁰⁷ *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, August 20, 1978; quoted in Hurst, 71;

³⁰⁸ “Indochina,” Hearing Before the Senate Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 95th Congress, Second Session, (Washington, DC: GPO, 1978), 30.

³⁰⁹ Hurst, *The Carter Administration and Vietnam*, 71-72.

³¹⁰ Ibid., 73-90.

policy making.³¹¹ Throughout the summer, the United States maintained its hostile stance toward Vietnam in international organizations, casting the lone veto at the 1978 meeting of the Asian Development Bank, thus blocking new loans and grants to Vietnam.³¹²

In August, Sonny Montgomery led a Congressional delegation to Hanoi and met with several members of the VCP, including Pham Van Dong. The MIA/POW issue, which had momentarily ceased to be a central issue in the normalization process, was still the ostensible reason for the visit, but the Vietnamese used the occasion to claim, “officially,” that they were willing to move forward without concrete aid commitments.³¹³ “We are friends with you now, and we want to be even better friends,” Dong told Montgomery. “We had the wind against us in the past. Now let it be at our backs.”³¹⁴ Montgomery told reporters not only was he still “completely convinced that there are no more Americans alive in Southeast Asia,” but also that he had become much more sympathetic to the difficult position in which Vietnam found itself. Although Montgomery referred to his hosts as “the North Vietnamese,” he pointed out that if the United States wished to combat the Soviet Presence in Southeast Asia, “it would be

³¹¹ The study is discussed in Gareth Porter, “The Decline of US Diplomacy in Southeast Asia,” *SAIS Review*, Winter, 1980; Cited in Hurst, *The Carter Administration and Vietnam*, 94.

³¹² Derek Davies, “Carter’s Neglect, Moscow’s Victory,” *FEER* February 2, 1979, 16.

³¹³ Hurst, *The Carter Administration and Vietnam*, 96.

³¹⁴ “Hanoi: We Want to Be Your Good Friends,” *Newsweek*, September 4, 1978, 35.

useful if we had some presence in this part of the world to see what the Russians are trying to do.”³¹⁵

The Vietnamese had for many years made clear their desire for bilateral trade and aid agreements with many nations, as well as participation in multilateral agreements. As I argued in chapter one, the openness of the Vietnamese Communist Party to international financial institutions in the years immediately following the end of the Second Indochina War demonstrated their desire for genuine economic independence. The decision to join the World Bank, IMF, and Asian Development Bank had distanced Hanoi from both Moscow and China, which at the time had refused to open their books to the organizations. The VCP continued to make efforts at economic autonomy under the American embargo, gradually increasing trade with regional partners, and had rebuffed Soviet pressure to join the CMEA on several occasions. In December of 1976, for instance, the VCP rejected a Russian proposal for further economic integration, “confining themselves,” as Derek Davies later noted in the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, “to conventional expression of thanks for Soviet aid—but asking the French to build an integrated steel mill which Moscow had turned down.”³¹⁶ In August, 1978, shortly before Montgomery’s visit, Pham Van Dong restated the VCP’s position: “Whenever in our four-thousand-year history Vietnam has been dependent on one large friend, it has been a disaster for us.”³¹⁷ Only as final resorts, facing severe economic

³¹⁵ Ibid.

³¹⁶ Davies, “Carter’s Neglect, Moscow’s Victory.”

³¹⁷ Gareth Porter, “Vietnam’s Soviet Alliance: A Challenge to U.S. Policy,” *Indochina Issues* 6, May 1980; Quoted in Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 322.

crises, a potential famine, and the threat of a war with China, did the Vietnamese move toward full membership in the CMEA.

In fact, even the American State Department acknowledged that Vietnam's primary motive was moving towards political and economic independence. Responding to additional questions to a Senate committee in August, the State Department's official position on Soviet-Viet relations read as follows:

We doubt that Vietnam will seek too close ties to the Soviet Union if relations with China continue to deteriorate unless actual military conflict appears certain. Hanoi has traditionally cherished its independence and sovereignty and has sought to avoid too close identification with any one nation. Vietnam continues to receive international support and advisers from the U.S.S.R. However, we do not anticipate that the Vietnamese will be willing to give the Soviets bases in Vietnam, and allegations to date that this has occurred have been found to be inaccurate. Vietnam compensated for joining the Soviet Union's economic zone –COMECON—by active wooing of western nations, Japan, Australia, and ASEAN.³¹⁸

There was still clearly a split between the State Department position and that of Brzezinski throughout the fall and summer of 1978. Nevertheless, the major point is that while it is clear that it may not have been the intent of the Carter administration to push the Vietnamese into the Russian camp and structure their own complicity in the ensuing war in Southeast Asia, that is precisely the result of their foreign policy decisions of late 1978. In “choosing” China, the United States entered what historian Michael Haas has termed a “Faustian pact,” in which China and the U.S. would support the Khmer Rouge, one of the most murderous regimes in history.³¹⁹

³¹⁸ “State Department Answers to Additional Questions Submitted by Senator Glenn,” in “Indochina,” 42.

³¹⁹ Michael Haas, *Cambodia, Pol Pot, and The United States: The Faustian Pact* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1991).

As Hurst makes clear, Brzezinski's concern for thwarting Soviet influence in the region was a crucial factor in the Carter administration's decision to accelerate normalization of relations with China while shelving the process with Vietnam. Brzezinski's echoing of the Chinese line about Soviet and Vietnamese "hegemonists" during his May visit to Beijing may have helped clarify the administration's preference for improving Chinese relations at the expense of diplomacy with the Russians and Vietnamese, but it obscures a larger question about American policy at the time: if the United States wanted to combat Soviet influence in the region, why not move swiftly toward better relations with Vietnam, the only nation in the region where the Soviets were making inroads? Clearly, the point was not to battle "regional hegemonists," as the Chinese were obviously as interested in dominating Southeast Asia as any other nation, but rather to choose among those seeking greater regional influence: China, Vietnam, and The Soviet Union. Hurst may be right in arguing that The United States did not "choose" China at the expense of Vietnam, but that choice nevertheless pushed Vietnam further into the Soviet orbit, where it would stay for many years.³²⁰

The lines were thus drawn early in what would, within months, become the Third Indochina War. Throughout the fall, the Chinese had been moving tanks, artillery, and aircraft toward the Northern border of Vietnam, poised for an attack or an invasion. Vietnamese forces had also been active, securing the area north of Hanoi against a possible Chinese attack and concentrating their troops along the Cambodian border for an

³²⁰ Davies, "Carter's Neglect, Moscow's Victory."

invasion designed to oust the Pol Pot regime.³²¹ United States intelligence had been aware of all of these troop movements for some time, and was apparently less concerned with the Chinese buildup than with that of the Vietnamese. Even so, all available evidence indicates that although Washington was concerned about the ongoing border conflict and the possibility of a Vietnamese invasion, few in the United States thought that events would result in a prolonged occupation of Cambodia.

In August of 1978, the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations held its “first review of Indochina developments” since April of 1975.³²² At that hearing, Robert Oakley from the State Dept and Douglas Pike, a scholar in residence at the Congressional Research Service testified that a full-scale Vietnamese invasion and occupation was unlikely. When several members of the committee, particularly former Presidential candidate George McGovern inquired about the possibility of overthrowing the Khmer Rouge and stopping the genocide, Oakley replied that there had been reports from the region about “resistance movements” supported by Vietnam, but he was skeptical about their chances for success.³²³ Pike concurred:

For the Vietnamese, or anybody, to change the governmental structure would involve putting teams or military units into virtually every village in the country in a kind of military occupation that would be an extraordinarily dangerous, bleeding kind of operation which I cannot really believe the Vietnamese would entertain. So the Vietnamese, I think, would like to do the Socialist world a favor by getting rid of Pol Pot and his associates, but there are intractable problems, technical problems, involved in doing it, which are unique. You would not find them in any other country in the world.³²⁴

³²¹ On the Vietnamese decision to invade Cambodia, see Duiker, *Vietnam Since the Fall of Saigon*, 115-120; and Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 333-341.

³²² “Indochina,” 1.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 23.

McGovern pressed the witnesses, wondering if the Vietnamese were not up to the task, perhaps the United States could do the job of ridding the world of Pol Pot. Oakley responded, “I don’t believe that this is an option that is being studied anywhere.”³²⁵ Toward the close of the hearing, a seemingly exasperated Senator John Glenn, then chairman of the subcommittee, wondered if anyone in the government was “really coordinating this whole picture... I don’t want to form another committee or another study group. But who is in charge of our policy here that is laying out the short term and the long term?”³²⁶ Pike later offered an apparently unsatisfactory but nevertheless honest reply: “You know, to plan ahead requires that you anticipate and that you predict. Those of us who have worked in Asia were burned early, and have long learned, that it is extremely dangerous to try to predict anything.”³²⁷

As the in-house expert on Southeast Asia, however, Pike was asked several times over the next several months to do precisely what he had advised against: predict. In early October of 1978, he delivered a report to the House Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, entitled “The Vietnam-Cambodia Conflict.”³²⁸ Pike indicated that although a protracted occupation was a possibility given the limited options available to Vietnam, it was unlikely. Echoing what he had told the Senate committee two months

³²⁴ Ibid.

³²⁵ Ibid., 24.

³²⁶ Ibid., 32.

³²⁷ Ibid., 33-34.

³²⁸ Douglas Pike, “Vietnam-Cambodia Conflict,” Prepared by the Congressional Research Service for the House Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, 95th Congress, Second Session, (Washington, DC: GPO, 1978).

earlier, Pike concluded, “the most likely future of the war appears, as of this moment, to be indeterminate.” While a Vietnamese “client-state would be “an attractive prospect” for Vietnam,” it was only slightly more likely than a negotiated settlement.³²⁹

Despite the ongoing American hostility and intransigence toward the Vietnamese, and despite the concerns of the United States about recent developments in Southeast Asia, when Holbrooke arranged for secretive meetings in New York with Nguyen Co Thach in late September of 1978 normalization was still a possibility. At those meetings, Thach made a last-ditch effort to secure a promise of American aid, but none was forthcoming. According to Nayan Chanda, after another stalled session, Thach told Holbrooke, “Okay, I’ll tell you what you want to hear. We will defer other problems until later. Let’s normalize our relations without preconditions.” He then pressed Holbrooke to sign a memorandum of understanding immediately. Although Holbrooke refused to sign immediately, he felt assured leaving the meetings that normalization could be accomplished in the near future.³³⁰ He passed along word of the breakthrough through Vance to Carter. Thach told Holbrooke he would be in New York for another month and would await word of Carter’s approval.

Once thought to be a dead end, the long road to normalization seemed finally to have lead to an agreement. The United States would have a relationship with Vietnam, a symbolic and a strategic victory. Vietnam would not have the aid it had long needed, but it would have a new relationship with Washington, the possibility of future aid, and,

³²⁹ Ibid., 17-18.

³³⁰ Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 266.

presumably sooner rather than later, an end to the American embargo. Unfortunately, 1978 was an election year in the United States. When Carter agreed in principle to normalize with Vietnam, he did so with the caveat that it would have to wait until after the midterm elections.³³¹ Once again, the future of Vietnam would be subject to the domestic considerations of American politics.

In late October, Pike delivered yet another report, this time to the Senate, entitled “Vietnam’s Future Foreign Policy.” This report was noticeably different in tone, if not substance; if anything, much of the material was outdated given the developments in normalization talks earlier that fall. Pike described the Vietnamese as being paranoid and anti-American in their policy views. Hanoi perceived the United States “as a relentlessly aggressive and eternally hostile force stalking the world,” he argued.³³² Furthermore, Vietnamese leaders continued to act “as if the war were still being fought.” Those who claimed that Vietnam has adopted a conciliatory approach to the United States were wrong, Pike claimed. The internal message being circulated by the Party was “the U.S. is our enemy, the world’s enemy; and we will bury the U.S., or at least hope to do so.”³³³ Although the evidence offered for these sentiments as scant, referring to a few scattered editorials in *Nhan Dan*, the official Party newspaper, more disturbing were Pike’s claims that Hanoi was still solely focused on economic aid (“privately labeled war reparations”). That Vietnam had dropped its precondition of aid since the previous spring is completely

³³¹ Hurst, *op. cit.*, 96-97.

³³² Pike, “Vietnam’s Future Foreign Policy,” Congressional Research Service Report, October 24, 1978; reprinted in “Indochina,” Hearings Before the Senate Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 221.

³³³ *Ibid.*, 222-223.

ignored in the report. At the same time, Pike grossly minimized the ongoing American hostility toward Vietnam; the only mention of the U.S. sanctions program was when he noted, “certain legal prohibitions exist on U.S. money or goods going to Vietnam.”³³⁴ Despite the anti-Vietnamese tone of the report, however, Pike’s assessment of the Cambodia situation remained unchanged: the most likely outcome of the border conflict was “indeterminate,” a stalemate.³³⁵

In late 1978, this was the accepted wisdom and sentiment about Vietnam in Congress: the Vietnamese, for a number of reasons, were still undeserving of American aid and, although the border conflict with Cambodia was a source of concern, it was unlikely that Vietnam would invade and begin a protracted occupation. Furthermore, Pike and the various Congressional committees recognized that the development most likely to change the situation in Cambodia was a change of Cambodian leadership. As we have seen, few if any in Washington considered that a likely possibility. The world would find out soon enough how wrong these assumptions were.

When the United States made its choice, moving toward normalization with China, Hanoi made its own, final decision. On October 30, Holbrooke’s assistant, Robert Oakley, informed the Vietnamese delegation in New York that the United States could not proceed on normalization because of the situation in Cambodia, the refugee crisis, and Vietnamese-Soviet ties.³³⁶ On November 1, Thach met Le Duan, Pham Van Dong, and other Vietnamese leaders in Moscow. The next day, the two nations signed a twenty-

³³⁴ Ibid., 226-27.

³³⁵ Ibid., 160.

³³⁶ Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 290.

five year “Treaty of Friendship of Co-Operation,” which included provisions for military assistance to Vietnam in the event of an attack or “the threat of an attack.”³³⁷ That same day, Carter’s proposal for normalization with China, still unbeknownst to the American public, reached Deng Xiaoping, who had recently solidified control of the Chinese Communist Party. The terms of the agreement, as Nayan Chanda has observed, were almost identical to those rejected a year earlier, including the delicate question of American military support for Taiwan. Faced with the prospect of a potential Soviet military threat in the region, however, and poised for a confrontation with Vietnam, Deng realized that normalization with the United States should happen quickly, making final approval a mere formality. China and the United States would normalize relations before the end of the year.³³⁸

From December, 1978 to February of 1979, the entire landscape of Southeast Asia was rapidly transformed. On December 2, Hanoi announced the formation of the “Kampuchea National United Front for National Salvation,” working to remove the Pol Pot regime from power. On December 15, the United States and China announced their normalization of relations. By then, two Vietnamese divisions were already encamped well into Cambodian territory. On December 25, 1978, another eleven divisions poured across the border and began to cut swiftly through the countryside as the Khmer Rouge forces hastily retreated.³³⁹ As the Vietnamese forces closed in on the capital, they discovered a wealth of unused Chinese-supplied military equipment, including a fleet of

³³⁷ Ibid., 321-22.

³³⁸ For further discussion of Chinese-American normalization, see Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 325-335.

³³⁹ Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia*, 111.

MiG aircraft; two more Chinese ships loaded with weapons and ammunition, it was later revealed, were en route to Cambodia at the time of the invasion. The Khmer Rouge's peasant army, Nayan Chanda later wrote, "knew how to kill with machetes but had not had time to learn to fly fighter planes or man anti-aircraft guns."³⁴⁰ On January 7, Vietnamese forces consolidated control of an again-abandoned Phnom Penh; the Khmer Rouge leaders and their Chinese advisers fled to the Thai border. On January 14, Thai, Chinese, and Khmer Rouge leaders agreed upon a plan to wage a guerilla war against the Vietnamese.³⁴¹ The invasion that no one had predicted and many had feared had come, and another invasion was on the horizon as war once again threatened to engulf Southeast Asia.

As Chinese President Deng Xiaoping flew to Washington in January of 1979 to celebrate the normalization of relations with the United States, American intelligence was monitoring massive movements of Chinese troops to their Southern border. By the end of the month, well over 200,000 troops were poised along the border with Vietnam.³⁴² Various members of the Carter administration reiterated several times in late 1978 that the United States would "not take sides" in the burgeoning war between Cambodia and Vietnam, anticipating the moral dilemma that would confront the administration if forced to choose between accepting an aggressive Vietnamese incursion and backing the return to power of the genocidal Khmer Rouge. That already difficult position was only worsened with what appeared to be a likely Chinese invasion of Vietnam. Rather than

³⁴⁰ Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 342.

³⁴¹ Ibid., 349.

³⁴² Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 350.

risk the fate of normalization, the Carter administration chose to “wink” at China’s invasion plans. The Chinese had been rather public in their statements denouncing the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, informing the world that they planned on “teaching Vietnam a lesson.” Deng repeated these statements during his visit, both in the Oval office with Carter and at a press conference later that day. Officially, Carter urged Deng to exercise restraint with regard to Vietnam, but the recommendation was hollow at best.

Historians have differed on the extent to which the United States was complicit in China’s “punitive” invasion of Vietnam. Nayan Chanda and Elizabeth Becker have been stern in their criticisms of the Carter administration, whereas Hurst has defended Carter’s stance, arguing that Chanda in particular misread many of the administration’s statements.³⁴³ Hurst argues that far from appeasing the Chinese, the U.S. sternly denounced China’s actions, much to the surprise of Beijing. In Becker’s account, however, which Hurst largely ignores to focus on Chanda, even Brzezinski himself, in an interview with the author, described American policy as a “semipublic wink” at the Chinese plans. This wink, Becker explains, helped to set the stage for future U.S. proxy support of the Chinese and their Khmer Rouge clients. “We could never support [Pol Pot], Brzezinski told Becker, “but China could.”³⁴⁴

On February 17, 1979, the Chinese army swept across the Vietnamese border and began its brief punitive action, a two-week invasion of Vietnam that was later described by Chanda as a “pedagogical war,” designed to teach a stern “lesson” to an insolent

³⁴³ Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 352-362; Becker, *When the War Was Over*, 439-441; Hurst, *The Carter Administration and Vietnam*, 118-124. Also see, “Carter, The Unwilling Ally,” *FEER*, March 9, 1979, 16.

³⁴⁴ Becker, *When the War Was Over*, 440.

nation. The U.S. called for an emergency meeting of the U.N. Security Council and publicly called for the removal of both Vietnamese troops from Cambodia and Chinese troops from Vietnam.³⁴⁵ It is clear from statements that situated the Chinese response as a logical outcome of Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia, however, that the administration continued to view Vietnam as the primary aggressor. Carter stated that "in the last few weeks, we have seen a Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia and, as a result, a Chinese border penetration in Vietnam." Chanda situates this statement as part of the rationalization of U.S. support for China's actions, while Hurst argues that a "more logical conclusion" is that "it is simply a statement of fact."³⁴⁶ But Hurst's own account misquotes Chanda's quotation from Carter. In Hurst's citation, Carter uses the term, "Chinese border invasion," rather than the correct language from Chanda: "Chinese border penetration." Hurst's claim of neutrality and balance on behalf of the administration is thus suspect. Clearly, an all out Vietnamese "invasion" is constructed as more dire, and as a precursor to, the more benign "penetration" of the Chinese. Hurst also takes Chanda to task for misreading other statements by the White House, a result, he claims, of Chanda "misunderstanding the dynamics" of the administration.³⁴⁷ While Hurst focuses on the public statements of the administration, a function of his methodology, he fails to pay sufficient attention to the actions, or lack thereof, of the U.S. during the escalating war in Southeast Asia. In the long run, Chanda's version of events is upheld, particularly when one moves beyond the limited scope of Hurst's focus. Like

³⁴⁵ Hurst, *The Carter Administration and Vietnam*, 118-119; Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 359.

³⁴⁶ Hurst, *The Carter Administration and Vietnam*, 118.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 119.

China and the Soviets, the United States expressed little interest in the actual situation in Cambodia, continuing to use the nation, in Michael Haas' analogy, as a superpower "chessboard," with the Vietnamese and Cambodian people as their pawns.

The Vietnamese Occupation

The Chinese forces withdrew from Northern Vietnam in March of 1979, leaving in their wake a wide path of destruction, including tens of thousand dead on both sides. The destruction in Vietnam went beyond casualties, however. Government officials and sources on the ground in the North estimated that close to a million people had been "displaced" as a result of the attack, and 85,000 hectares of badly-needed rice fields had been destroyed, along with several hundred thousand cattle and water-buffalo. Bridges, factories, farms, and mineral mines were also destroyed and crippled by the invasion. Although the destruction wrought by the Chinese dealt a severe blow to an already weak Vietnamese infrastructure, it stopped short of dealing a fatal blow. Attempting to maintain the threat of another invasion, Beijing announced upon its withdrawal that it "reserved the right" to "teach Vietnam another lesson."³⁴⁸

If there was, indeed, a "lesson" taught to the Vietnamese by the Chinese invasion, it remains unclear to this day what that lesson was. Although it caused further injury to an already unstable Vietnamese economy and destroyed a large portion of the Northern infrastructure, the invasion had absolutely no effect on the situation in Cambodia. If

³⁴⁸ "Southeast Asia Refugee Crisis," Hearing Before the Senate Subcommittee on East Asia and Pacific Affairs," 96th Congress, 1st Session, September 27, 1979 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1980), 29; Murray Heibert, "Waiting in Ruins For the Next Installment," *FEER*, June 15, 1979, 12.

anything, it confirmed for the Vietnamese leadership what many already believed to be true: that Vietnam was surrounded by hostile regimes and that China was bent on destroying Vietnamese independence. Nayan Chanda later wondered whether China had not itself been the recipient of the lesson. “Far from diverting troops from Cambodia,” he wrote, “a cocky Vietnamese leadership did not even send regular troops to the border, leaving the job instead to the militia and regional forces.” Still, the Chinese were unable to secure a victory, suffering similar losses and coming to the realization that its armed forces were “not able to conduct a modern war.”³⁴⁹ Even so, the Vietnamese remained convinced throughout the next several years that another round of military engagement with China was inevitable. The question in Hanoi was no longer if, but “how and when” China would attack again.³⁵⁰

In Cambodia, the occupation continued unfettered by the events on Vietnam’s northern border. A United Nations report in 1979 acknowledged that although the Cambodian people continued to suffer, given the horrors that preceded the occupation “the Vietnamese army was and is still welcomed as the liberator of a nightmare.”³⁵¹ While it was clearly not their primary goal invading Cambodia, the Vietnamese were successful in halting the Cambodian genocide. Unfortunately, this positive outcome would be tempered by international concerns over Vietnamese designs on other neighboring countries, particularly Thailand, and the ongoing suffering of the Cambodian people. There is little question that the majority of Cambodian citizens were better off

³⁴⁹ Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 361.

³⁵⁰ Heibert, “Waiting in Ruins for the Next Installment.”

³⁵¹ Quoted in Shawcross, *The Quality of Mercy*, 116.

under Vietnamese rule than they had been under the previous regime, a host of new problems quickly emerged. When the Vietnamese removed Pol Pot from power, the Cambodian people, who had suffered under the Khmer Rouge for nearly four years, were suddenly freed from the forced agricultural collectives, allowed to return to their homes and search for their families. This newfound freedom, however, masked the harsh reality that the occupation would bring. With the almost instant abandonment of agricultural production, the famine would only get worse. Most of the entire 1979 crop was lost.³⁵² Mass starvation, accompanied by death on an unfathomable scale was sadly nothing new to Cambodians, but the Vietnamese invasion had ironically brought the suffering of the Cambodian people to the attention of the western world, including the United States government.

In the fall of 1979, a delegation from the U.S. Senate visited the vast refugee camps along the Thai-Cambodian border to witness the devastation first-hand. They informed the governing authorities that their interests were purely humanitarian, stressing that they “were not interested in political considerations.”³⁵³ The politics of food were inextricably tied to the politics of regime recognition during the occupation, which meant that the Cambodian people would once again be held hostage by geopolitical considerations. To provide food through Phnom Penh was seen by some as a boon to the Vietnamese-backed regime; to run the food through Thailand into the refugee camps

³⁵² Ibid., 95-96.

³⁵³ “Cambodian Famine and U.S. Contingency Relief Plans,” Hearing Before the Senate Subcommittee on Arms Control, Oceans, International Operations and Environment,” 96th Congress, 1st Session, November 8, 1979 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1980), 3.

would also provide aid to the Khmer Rouge forces that had made the camps their base.³⁵⁴

The leadership in Hanoi and Phnom Penh were deeply suspicious of aid, and were unwilling to have it funneled through the Thai border area. They suspected—rightly, as it turned out—that food-based aid would easily turn into financial and military aid to the Khmer Rouge resistance. In Cambodia in the late 1970s and 1980s, food was power, and it was, as one U.S. Senator put it, “being used as a weapon by all factions.”³⁵⁵

Although rightly suspicious of some Western aid overtures, the Vietnamese leadership did play a shameful role in obstructing humanitarian aid during the occupation. Aside from other abominable practices, such as the development of Vietnamese settlements, much like the Israeli settlements on the West Bank, inside Cambodian territory, the Vietnamese and Soviets alike regularly denied the possibility of widespread starvation and famine in the initial years of occupation.³⁵⁶ Refugees, reporters, and aid workers regularly accused the Vietnamese-led forces of using starvation as a political and military tactic to consolidate their hold on the countryside.³⁵⁷ Moreover, while the Cambodian people starved, they were nevertheless forced to send both rice and fish to feed Vietnamese citizens.³⁵⁸

³⁵⁴ For a thorough discussion of the interrelation of food and diplomacy, see Shawcross, *The Quality of Mercy*, especially pp. 95-111.

³⁵⁵ “Cambodian Famine and U.S. Contingency Relief Plans,” 5.

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 14-15; Becker, *When the War Was Over*, 444.

³⁵⁷ Along with Becker and Shawcross, *op. cit.*, see Anthony Lewis, “Cambodia: Time to Act,” *NYT*, September 27, 1979.

³⁵⁸ Becker, *ibid.*, 444.

Policies such as these certainly did little to assuage criticism of Vietnam's occupation. While one could certainly make the case that the invasion was partially justified by the incessant provocations of the Khmer Rouge, the Vietnamese had once again failed to accurately gauge the tide of opinion in the international arena. As Elizabeth Becker wrote, "While it is clear Cambodia started the border war with Vietnam, it is less obvious why Vietnam interpreted that challenge as an invitation to invade and occupy Cambodia." As her account, and others, make clear, a complex mixture of socio-historical and political reasons can, in part, explain the invasion and occupation, but the longer the Vietnamese occupation went on, the more obscured those reasons became. By the beginning of the 1980s, the cultural and historical memory about Southeast Asia had been as radically altered as its real political situation.

Once the victims of a cruel and unjustified war of unprovoked aggression, Vietnam was now derided as the aggressor, confirming to many long-time critics that Hanoi was bent on dominating all of Southeast Asia. Whereas a year earlier, Douglas Pike testified to Congress that the Vietnamese were in a particularly difficult position with few good options available, he was now ascribing blame to the Vietnamese for the entire Third Indochina War. "Vietnam's war with Cambodia and takeover of Laos," he wrote in a June, 1979, report to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, "triggered hostile Chinese behavior, which caused Vietnam and the U.S.S.R to move closer together, which caused concern in Japan, Southeast Asia, and the United States."³⁵⁹ A

³⁵⁹ Douglas Pike, "Vietnam's Foreign Relations, 1975-78," Report Prepared for the Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs (Washington: GPO, 1979), 1.

year earlier, several members of Congress had largely agreed with Pike that ridding the world of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge would, at least, be a beneficial outcome of a Vietnamese-sponsored revolution in Cambodia. A year into the Vietnamese occupation, though, Congress debated largely as if the Khmer Rouge was no longer an issue and the sole goal of policy should be to remove the Vietnamese from Cambodia.

The invasion and occupation also succeeded in obscuring the horrors of the Khmer Rouge rule of Cambodia. In Southeast Asia, Vietnam was now viewed by its neighbors “with revulsion,” “a country which has installed its own puppet regime, an action which completely overshadows the fact that the Pol Pot regime was one of the most despicable ever to reign in Asia.”³⁶⁰ Shortly after the Vietnamese invasion, the same Thai government against which the Khmer Rouge had spent several years launching unprovoked attacks offered the KR Foreign Minister Ieng Sary an armed escort to secure his passage to a United Nations meeting. William Shawcross offered a particularly vivid description of the event:

In a first-class cabin, being plied with champagne, went the man who, until a few days earlier had been reviled as a leader of one of the most vicious regimes in the world—a regime, moreover, that prided itself on abjuring most of the world. Until now the Khmer Rouge leadership had been mass murderers. Now they were also a government that had been overthrown by a regime seen as a surrogate of the Soviet Union.³⁶¹

This erasure of the Khmer Rouge’s program of auto-genocide spread across the globe as the Vietnamese occupation lengthened. “Much of the world—not just the Western World

³⁶⁰ Davies, “Carter’s Neglect, Moscow’s Victory.”

³⁶¹ Shawcross, *The Quality of Mercy*, 74.

and ASEAN,” Shawcross wrote, “has chosen to see the Khmer Rouge first as the defenders of national sovereignty rather than as the perpetrators of massive crimes against man.”³⁶²

The Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia and the Chinese invasion of Vietnam had the effect of internationalizing what many nations, including the United States, had wished to relegate to a regional conflict. The United Nations became, in the 1980s, a battleground for the future of Cambodia and, by extension, for Vietnam as well. For most of the world’s nations, nearly all of which had established relations with Vietnam and many of whom had recognized the Khmer Rouge as well, the situation required a new approach that recognized the complexity of the situation. For the United States, the Cambodian question was still framed through the lens established by the last several years of relations and negotiations with Vietnam: whether or not, in order to get what it wanted from Vietnam, it would be better for the United States to recognize Vietnam and have a political and economic presence in Hanoi to exert leverage on Vietnamese policy, or whether it was best to isolate Vietnam on all fronts, using normalization as a delayed reward for Vietnamese actions and policies that pleased Washington. Although the situation in Southeast Asia had radically changed since the American withdrawal from Vietnam, U.S. policy would remain the same: an aggressive, hostile program that sought to isolate Vietnam politically, economically, and diplomatically. The difference was that throughout most of the 1970s, the United States was only prolonging its own private war

³⁶² Shawcross, *The Quality of Mercy*, 330.

against Vietnam. In the 1980s, it would be contributing to the prolongation of a major regional, and potentially global, conflict. The bleeding of Vietnam in the 1980s did not just drain Hanoi; it also contributed to the long, sad, and violent history of Cambodia, adding more blood to what came to be known as “The Killing Fields.”

Bleeding Vietnam

The primary diplomatic battle over the Third Indochina War revolved around an issue that was, at one level, largely symbolic, and, at another level, of the utmost political significance: which regime would be seated as the Cambodian delegation to the United Nations. The United Nations had already spent time debating the situation in Cambodia after the Vietnamese and Chinese invasions. In the Security Council and the General Assembly, the Vietnamese and their allies in the Soviet-led bloc initially argued for the U.N. to leave the situation alone while the Chinese drafted a Security Council resolution calling for United Nations intervention. After the Chinese invasion of Vietnam, however, the Soviets drafted a new resolution calling for the withdrawal of Chinese troops and the payment of reparations to Vietnam. Deadlocked by mutual vetoes and a divided Security Council, no progress was made in either direction.³⁶³

The issue of seating the Cambodian delegation was a far more complicated issue, for it forced nations either to take sides in the war or remain staunchly neutral. The Vietnamese had been attempting to guide the international acceptance of the PRK since

³⁶³ “Vietnam and the UN,” *The Economist*, March 3, 1979, 54.

the fall of Phnom Penh, but only the Soviet Bloc and a few members of the non-aligned movement had formally recognized the Heng Samrin regime. In September of 1979, the United Nations for the first time took up the issue of the seating the PRK regime in place of the Khmer Rouge delegation. The efforts were no more successful than previous attempts at recognition in other arenas, such as ASEAN. The United Nation Credentials Committee, on which a United States representative sat, would be the first to weigh in the matter, by voting on a recommendation to the General Assembly for a vote later in the month.

Thus the United States, still smarting a bit from the embarrassment of the Chinese invasion that followed so closely upon the heels of normalization between the two nations, was placed in yet another awkward situation, forced to choose, effectively, between Vietnam, the nation it had spurned, ignored, and punished over the past several years, and the Khmer Rouge, the group that over a year earlier President Carter labeled “the worst violator of human rights in the world today.”³⁶⁴ The United States had four voting options available: it could vote in favor of the Vietnamese-led PRK, which would certainly anger the Chinese and the ASEAN nations, all of which had been vocal in their opposition to the Vietnamese occupation; it could vote to seat the Khmer Rouge, which would demonstrate support for the China/ASEAN position, but also signify support for the murderous regime; it could vote to leave the seat empty until such time as the situation in Cambodia was resolved, a stance seen by many as lending legitimacy to the

³⁶⁴ “Remarks by the President,” April 21, 1978, *Public Papers of the President* (Washington, GPO, 1980).

Vietnamese occupation and leaving the Cambodian people without representation; finally, the United States could abstain from the vote, which would have likely displeased both ASEAN and China, but which would have lent credence to the Carter administration's supposed stance of neutrality on the issue.

Secretary of State Vance, as Nayan Chanda would later report, was “agonized” by the decision, but ultimately joined Brzezinski in recommending that the U.S. vote to seat the Pol Pot regime as the representative of the Cambodian people in the United Nations.³⁶⁵ The Credentials Committee agreed, voting 6-3 to recommend to the General Assembly that it accept the DK regime as the legitimate government of Cambodia, which the assembly did on September 21 by a vote of 71-35 with 34 abstentions. The United States again cast its vote in favor of the Khmer Rouge, a vote, as Chanda wrote, that “linked U.S. support to a murderous group with whom U.S. officials were forbidden to shake hands.”³⁶⁶

A week after the U.N. vote, Assistant Secretary of State Holbrooke appeared at a Senate hearing about the situation in Southeast Asia. Although the hearings were ostensibly about the refugee crisis, the subcommittee members inquired about other matters, including the administration’s vote to support the Khmer Rouge delegation. Chairman John Glenn asked why the U.S. did not abstain from the vote, inferring that “we indicated by our vote that we supported Pol Pot at the United Nations, and that sort

³⁶⁵ Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 377.

³⁶⁶ As Chanda recounts the story, the United States representative to the Credentials Committee arose after casting the vote in favor of the DK to find someone grabbing his hand in congratulations. “I looked up and saw it was [Pol Pot’s lieutenant] Jeng Sary,” he told a reporter. “I wanted to wash my hand.” Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 454, note 23. Chanda is quoting from Gareth Porter, “Kampuchea’s UN Seat: Cutting the Pol Pot Connection,” *Indochina Issues*, No. 8, July 1980, 1.

of flies in the face of our human rights emphasis around the rest of the world.”³⁶⁷

Holbrooke responded that an abstention would have meant

a public break with the policies of that we, the ASEAN countries, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and the People’s Republic, have all followed in regard to the representation question. The costs of that would have been very great for our foreign policy. At the same time, we felt that any vote should not be misunderstood as implying any sort of support for Pol Pot. Therefore, our delegates in New York were instructed to deliver what some people described as a clothespin vote—you hold your nose and vote. We were voting only for the claim of this delegation to sit for Kampuchea at this time. We made it clear again and again that this regime is not acceptable to us or to the (Khmer) people, and that we will not recognize it or have anything to do with it.³⁶⁸

A vote for abstention, Holbrooke concluded, “would have put us on the side of Moscow and Vietnam.”³⁶⁹

The position of the Carter administration regarding the issue of U.N. representation for Cambodia was thus not a departure of policy at all. Having, for the past four years, refused to “recognize” Vietnam in its own rights, the administration was certainly not about to recognize what was clearly viewed as a Vietnamese puppet regime in Cambodia. Moreover, as it had for the past several years, the White House and Congress refused to move toward policies that would, even at a secondary level, indicate even the most minute acceptance of the Vietnamese. Holbrooke’s statement that the Khmer Rouge regime “is not acceptable to us,” and that “we will not recognize it or have anything to do with it,” could easily be confused with the government’s stance toward Vietnam.

³⁶⁷ “Southeast Asian Refugee Crisis,” 28.

³⁶⁸ Ibid.

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

The following year, Holbrooke once again appeared before a congressional committee to update them on the status of the Cambodian situation. The focus of the discussion remained on the refugee issue, but the hearings also dealt with military and political developments. The opening statement of the hearings, by Senator John Glenn, indicated the U.S. government's overriding perception of the situation: that Vietnam's invasion and occupation was one of three "separate but interrelated dangers" threatening the region. The second was "the turmoil and upheavals" the invasion had caused to the agricultural system, which were leading to widespread famine. The third danger was "Vietnam's harsh policies and conflict with China" that had led to the refugee crisis.³⁷⁰ Conspicuous in its absence from this list of dangers was the danger posed by the return to power of the Khmer Rouge, who continued to use the refugee camps along the Thai border as a base camp for much of their activity.

This view was essentially echoed by Holbrooke, who informed the committee that the administration "would not oppose" a coalition government that included the Khmer Rouge. The problem, he pointed out, was that neither the Khmer Rouge regime nor the Heng Samrin government were interested in a coalition government at the time.³⁷¹ The administration's belief, Holbrooke went on to explain, was that the DPK regime would not survive without the maintenance of large numbers of occupying Vietnamese troops. The Vietnamese-supported regime was only able to muster the support it had, he argued, because of the lingering fear of the return of the Khmer Rouge; the "unifying symbol" of

³⁷⁰ "Southeast Asia," Hearing Before the Senate Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs," 96th Congress, 2nd Session, March 24 and 25, 1980 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1980), 1.

³⁷¹ Ibid., 26.

Pol Pot had been exploited by the Heng Samrin regime “to coalesce opposition to a commonly hated foe.”³⁷²

The administration was arguing that the Vietnamese *needed* the Khmer Rouge as an enemy to help consolidate their hold on Cambodia, the same way that the Khmer Rouge had needed Vietnam as an external threat to help secure their revolutionary program years earlier. Ironically, the Vietnamese, although they had also issued contradictory statements, had also stated on several occasions that their primary goal in invading and occupying Cambodia was to remove their former allies, Pol Pot and his regime, from power. If any nation could be said to have “needed” the Khmer Rouge at the time, it was China. Certainly the United States was partially hamstrung by the moral dilemma of de facto and overt support for the Khmer Rouge rather than what it would later refer to as the “Non-Communist Resistance.” Yet the United States, along with China, ASEAN, and a large coalition of other nations, continued to view the Vietnamese, not the Khmer Rouge as the primary threat to the stability of the region. While the presence of 200,000 Vietnamese troops was certainly a continuation of the denial of Cambodian self-determination that had been perpetuated by various superpowers and client regimes, for several years, it was also at the beginning of the 1980s the only thing standing between the Cambodian people and the return of the Khmer Rouge.

The rest of the hearings focused on the logistical difficulties of relief efforts in the region, which was fairly appropriate given that such efforts would remain the only United

³⁷² Ibid., 26.

States engagement with the Third Indochina War for the duration of the Carter administration. In fact, not much movement of any kind would take place in Cambodia, as China and the Soviet Union continued to funnel millions of dollars into the region to prolong the proxy war. For the first several months of the Reagan administration, there was little or no mention of the war at all.

In the summer of 1981, however, the administration was given its first opportunity to confront the Cambodian question. On the campaign trail the previous year, Reagan had offered sharp criticisms of the Carter administration's hypocrisy with regard to the Khmer Rouge—decrying the regime as the “worst violator of human rights” in the contemporary world while voting to seat its delegation at the United Nations. In July, at the first International Conference on Kampuchea (ICK), the administration would be forced to offer its own solution. Instead, the conference demonstrated that Reagan would simply continue the failed policies of the previous administration, attempting to have it both ways, publicly offering empty denunciations of the same murderous regime that it continued to support through its diplomacy.

The Khmer Rouge leadership had made for strange bedfellows with nearly any government's representatives, aside, perhaps, from the Chinese. Certainly the spectacle of even the strained alliance between DK representatives and Carter administration officials, whose foreign policy rhetoric had been so consumed with issues of human rights, was strange enough. Perhaps the only thing stranger was the support of Reagan's

first Secretary of State, Alexander Haig who, a decade earlier had helped orchestrate the American war on Cambodia from inside the Nixon White House.³⁷³ Nevertheless, when the ICK came to New York that summer, Haig quietly helped to organize the administration's policy for Cambodia.

The conference had originally been proposed by the ASEAN nations, which had begun to depart from the hard-line stance of China and the United States regarding Vietnam's withdrawal from Cambodia. China would not accede to the conference unless the Khmer Rouge participated, however, and the Vietnamese remained unwilling to negotiate that point, so the ICK began without three crucial nations and actors: The Vietnamese, the Soviets, and Prince Nordoom Sihanouk, who viewed the event as a "tribunal" aimed at condemning the Vietnamese rather than finding a political solution to the war.³⁷⁴ Not to be deterred, the ASEAN delegates led the conference toward finding a solution that would provide for the independence of Cambodia and the security of Vietnam. According to Nayan Chanda, the ASEAN declaration from the conference noted that Vietnam had "legitimate concerns" about the stability of Cambodia and, in Chanda's words, "implicitly laid part of the blame for Vietnamese intervention on the Khmer Rouge's adventurism and China's military presence in Cambodia."³⁷⁵

The Chinese were unwilling to accept such language, and the conference produced several sharp exchanges between the Chinese and various ASEAN contingents. An ASEAN diplomat later told Chanda about one such encounter, between the United

³⁷³ Shawcross, *The Quality of Mercy*, 356.

³⁷⁴ Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 389-90.

³⁷⁵ Ibid., 387.

Nations ambassadors from Singapore and China. The Cambodian ambassador, upset at China's defense of the Khmer Rouge, informed his Chinese counterpart that he knew "at least as much of international law as you do, Mr. Ambassador, but law does not apply to this barbarous bunch." "He then proceeded to detail the Khmer Rouge's' horrendous record of four years," Chanda recounted. "Some of the Cambodians began to sob."³⁷⁶ The ICK also helped clarify the significance of the decision to allow the Khmer Rouge to retain the Cambodian seat at the United Nations. At another session of the conference, a Chinese representative asked an ASEAN representative, "How can you ask a legitimate member of the United Nations to lay down its arms? How can you impose an interim government in the territory of a UN member that has been the victim of aggression?"³⁷⁷

Using the language of international law and cloaking their support of the Khmer Rouge under the banner of the United Nations charter, the United States and China succeeding in getting the ASEAN representatives to withdraw language that sought to provide for the ultimate dismantling of the Khmer Rouge. Gone, as a result of the pressure from the U.S. and China, were provisions both for the disarming of the Khmer Rouge and the establishment of an interim government following the Vietnamese withdrawal. The resulting declaration from the conference was a muddled, unclear call for "appropriate measures for the maintenance of law and order."³⁷⁸

While it let China take the lead in supporting the Khmer Rouge, the United States' role in the conference was clear: in both word and deed, it had broken from its

³⁷⁶ Ibid., 388.

³⁷⁷ Ibid.

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 389.

stated position of supporting the ASEAN policy toward Cambodia and Vietnam in order to placate the Chinese and vilify the Vietnamese. The public gestures of the U.S., however, continued to express contempt for the Khmer Rouge, such as when Haig led a walkout of the delegation when Ieng Sary addressed the conference. “That bit of theatrics made the front page of *The New York Times*,” an ASEAN delegate to the conference later told Chanda, “but behind the scenes, they pressured us to accept the Chinese position.”³⁷⁹ After the formal negotiations of the ICK wrapped up, the United States delegation, including Haig, spent a good portion of that evening’s reception dodging the advances of the Khmer Rouge delegates, who wished to thank the Americans for supporting their cause.³⁸⁰

The United States’ support for the Khmer Rouge, first in the decision to support their claim to the Cambodian seat at the United Nations and then in helping persuade ASEAN representatives to the ICK that the regime should not be disarmed, was placed at the center of several Congressional inquiries over the next several years. Stephen Solarz, a member of the U.S. delegation to the ICK, used his recent rise to Chairman of the House Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs as an opportunity to probe and alter American policy toward Cambodia. His first hearing on the matter came only days after the ICK had concluded.

In his opening statement, Solarz expressed his “disappointment” with the American delegation’s “performance” at the conference, particularly its “acquiescence”

³⁷⁹ Ibid, 388-89.

³⁸⁰ Shawcross, *The Quality of Mercy*, 356.

to the final, muddled declaration. “What is at stake,” he argued at the hearing,

is much more than simply getting Vietnam out of Cambodia. What is at stake is making it possible for the people of Cambodia to determine their own future without fear that Pol Pot and his people will reimpose their authority over them by force of arms... There can be little doubt that if the Khmer Rouge were not disarmed, they would promptly march into Phnom Penh and undoubtedly proceed to reimplement their policies of auto genocide. That is something which I think the United States cannot acquiesce in or permit.³⁸¹

Over the course of this hearing and those that followed, Solarz continued his passionate attempts to provide for the possibility of a Cambodia free from Vietnam and the Khmer Rouge, a goal toward which the Reagan Administration, and most other members of Congress, had little interest in actively working. Yet, beginning with this hearing, the positions of Solarz and the White House would begin to coalesce in their search for an elusive, “Non-Communist resistance” force to battle the Vietnamese and prevent the return of the Khmer Rouge.

This July, 1981 hearing featured Son Sann, the leader of the Khmer People’s National Liberation Front (KPNLF). After assailing the Vietnamese for their invasion and occupation, Sann pleaded with the committee to provide “sufficient and efficient support for his movement.”³⁸² He acknowledged that there would be nothing to stop the return of a well-armed Khmer Rouge after the withdrawal of the Vietnamese, but the “real solution,” was not to disarm the various factions vying for control of Cambodia, but rather “to give the nationalists the things necessary to stop the Khmer Rouge.” “If, when the Vietnamese troops withdraw, if the Khmer Rouge agree to disarm, we will disarm

³⁸¹ “Kampuchea and American Foreign Policy Interests,” Hearing before the House Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, 97th Congress, First Session, July 23, 1981 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1982), 2-3.

³⁸² Ibid., 8.

also,” Sann told the committee. “If they do not want to disarm we will have the means to stop them from coming back to power.”³⁸³

Several members of the committee took the opportunity to express their discomfort at the recent U.S. actions in favor of the Khmer Rouge at the United Nations, and asked Sann for his counsel on related future decisions. Sann had little useful advice for the committee, informing them that leaving the seat vacant would be “dangerous,” even more so than continuing to support the Khmer Rouge delegation. He left the committee with the assurance that he was soon to meet with Prince Sihanouk in the hopes of constructing at a unified nationalist front to serve as an alternative to both the Pol Pot and Heng Samrin regimes. Hopefully, he informed them, such an alternative would be in place by that fall, when the next vote would take place on the Cambodian seat at the United Nations.³⁸⁴ In September, however, the question was once again before the U.N., and no coalition was in place. Once again, the majority of nations in the General Assembly, including the United States, voted to seat the Khmer Rouge.

In the meantime, Solarz continued to troll for the possibility of a viable Non-Communist Cambodian resistance force (NCR). In October of 1981, he held an extensive, three-day set of hearings on “U.S. Policy Toward Indochina Since Vietnam’s Occupation of Kampuchea.”³⁸⁵ The first round of hearings focused on the existence or potential for the emergence of NCR forces in Vietnam or Cambodia. Testifying were

³⁸³ Ibid., 9.

³⁸⁴ Ibid., 12.

³⁸⁵ “U.S. Policy Toward Indochina Since Vietnam’s Occupation of Kampuchea.” Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, 97th Congress, First Session, October 15, 21, 22, 1981 (Washington, D.C: GPO, 1981).

two Vietnamese expatriates—Truong Nhu Tang, a former member of the National Liberation Front for South Vietnam, and Doan Van Thai, author of a book on “the Vietnamese Gulag”—David Elliot, a Southeast Asian specialist formerly of the RAND corporation, and Douglas Pike. Tang and Thai attempted to convince the committee, without a shred of evidence, that the vast majority of the Vietnamese people were ready and willing to take up arms against their own government and “its master—the Soviet Union.” Tang, who went on to write a successful book, *A Viet Cong Memoir*, informed representatives that as a former leader of “the present regime of Vietnam,” he was certain “that over 90 percent of the Vietnamese people desire to fight against the present regime and Soviet intervention.”³⁸⁶ Thai echoed both the sentiment and the statistic—ninety percent of the Vietnamese people allied against their government—in his remarks.

There was, of course, no such level of support for another revolution in Vietnam, which became clear as the hearing went on. When Solarz queried Elliot and Pike on the “prospects for a viable, non-Communist, indigenous resistance movement,” in either Vietnam or Cambodia, both responded that the prospects were “bleak.”³⁸⁷ Returning to Tang, Solarz once again asked for his assessment of the possibility for such forces to develop. Backing off from his earlier statements, Tang acknowledged that although there was actually no current movement, he was “convinced that in time the people will rise to overthrow the regime.” “This passive resistance,” he argued, “is now turning into armed political violence,” but offered no evidence of such a transformation.³⁸⁸ If Solarz was

³⁸⁶ Ibid., 5.

³⁸⁷ Ibid., 50-51.

³⁸⁸ Ibid., 53.

hoping to uncover a viable Third Force in Southeast Asia, clearly he was going to be disappointed.

As these hearings went on the following week, similar testimony emerged from other witnesses who reinforce much of what the committee already knew: that Vietnam would not invade Thailand, that the Soviet presence in Vietnam and Laos was growing, and that there was no viable NCR in the region. Aside from the occasional callous remark, such as Representative Henry Hyde's statement on October 21 that the United States should be "pleased that the Soviets and the Chinese are glaring at each other" in a proxy war in Southeast Asia rather than funneling those resources into "Western Europe," the hearings went off without much excitement or revelation until the final day, when Solarz sparred with Assistant Secretary of State John Holdridge.

Solarz began by pressing Holdridge on why the U.S. should not offer the possibility of normalizing relations with Vietnam should Hanoi remove its troops from Cambodia. "[I]f the policy is ultimately going to work," Solarz offered, "it has to include carrots as well as sticks."³⁸⁹ As Holdridge went on to explain, the position of the White House was that "the Vietnamese have taken whatever carrots have been offered them and then proceeded right along the same lines without any basic adjustments." This problem, he argued, dated at least back to the failure of Hanoi to abide by the terms of the 1973 Paris Accords.³⁹⁰ Ignoring the number of gestures toward normalization by the Vietnamese over the years and the far more notable intransigence of the United States,

³⁸⁹ Ibid., 255.

³⁹⁰ Ibid., 264.

Holdridge noted that the removal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia was not the only obstacle to normalization. Along with the always at-the-ready MIA/POW issue, the Reagan administration adopted the updated policy of withholding normalization as long as Vietnam “generally remains a menace to other countries of the region.”³⁹¹ Although he insisted that this was not a new policy at all, it was clearly new language, and it serves as useful evidence against later statements that normalization was far from a given regardless of the situation in Cambodia.

The more immediate question was about United States assistance to indigenous Cambodian resistance movements. Although the White House had denied any knowledge of funding of the NCR forces in the region, the increasing discussion of what would come to be called the Reagan Doctrine—funding anti-communist “freedom fighters” throughout the developing world—lent credence to the possibility of arming various factions in the Third Indochina War. Solarz, who was clearly interested in such a proposal, was nevertheless concerned that the Reagan administration had already begun planning covert operations to anti-Vietnamese forces in Southeast Asia.

Solarz: Mr. Secretary, are we considering providing military assistance, directly or indirectly, to any of the resistance movements in Indochina?

Holdridge: No.

Solarz: Not in Cambodia?

Holdridge: Not in Cambodia.

Solarz: In Laos?

³⁹¹ Ibid., 166.

Holdridge: No.

Solarz: Vietnam?

Holdridge: No.

Solarz: Then what did you mean in your statement on the trip with Secretary Haig, that we had to put diplomatic, economic, and I think yes, even military pressure on the Vietnamese?

Holdridge: That was a collective “we,” Mr. Chairman. I wasn’t talking about the United States... If there is military pressure being exerted, that is for others to do.³⁹²

The issue of military aid to any nation of Southeast Asia had remained a loaded one since the American withdrawal from Vietnam, as had the balance between the roles of the Executive and Legislative branches of government in formulating and implementing foreign policy. Although many in Congress, Solarz included, were pressing for some type of aid program for some type of Cambodian resistance, they were also apprehensive about the White House acting on such issues without congressional approval.

A year later, in the fall of 1982, the situation in Cambodia had changed, if not substantially. The Vietnamese remained in occupation, and the war was still a stalemate, but a coalition, which China and ASEAN had been increasingly pushing for, had finally been established. The Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK), announced in the spring of 1982, included Son Sann’s KPNLF and featured Sihanouk as a cabinet leader and public face, but there was little question about which group was in charge of the group. The Khmer Rouge faction, by far the largest and best equipped of

³⁹² Ibid., 257; Brady, *United States Policy Toward Cambodia, 1977-92*, 74-75.

the three primary member movements, was the force behind the CGDK.³⁹³

Even with this understanding, the CGDK made an initial impact on Hanoi, who ceased challenging the Cambodian delegation at the United Nations after 1982. By the time Solarz held his last hearing on the question of the U.N. seat, the focus of American policymaking had clearly shifted to the question of supporting, and possibly arming, the NCR. In the October, 1982 hearings, Solarz and Holdridge again sparred over the question of Cambodian representation at the United Nations, but saved most of their discussion for the relative viability of the NCR in Cambodia and to what extent the United States was supporting that coalition. Holdridge testified that the United States was not providing any military assistance to the KPNLF at that point, but was less clear in response to Solarz' question about more general economic assistance:

We are providing humanitarian assistance to the refugee camps along the border. We are helping feed the Kampucheaans who are in the camps whether astride the border or on the Thai side. We are also providing medical assistance, food, clothing, and so on. As I say, we are carefully watching ASEAN, we are considering how we will be of further help. This will not in any event be military assistance. We will not provide assistance of any kind to the Khmer Rouge.³⁹⁴

As Solarz well knew, however, the Khmer Rouge controlled many of the refugee camps, so a significant amount of international aid flowing through the camps was, in effect, helping to replenish those forces. Solarz pushed Holdridge on this question, accusing him of being unresponsive and avoiding difficult questions.

³⁹³ Haas, *Genocide by Proxy*, 48.

³⁹⁴ "The Democratic Kampuchea Seat at the United Nations and American Interests," Hearing Before the Subcommittees on Asian and Pacific Affairs and on Human Rights and International Organizations, 97th Congress, First Session, September 15, 1982 (Washington, D.C: GPO, 1983), 28.

Holdridge: I am trying to answer the question as best I can. We do not have a program of assisting the Khmer Rouge. We make refugee supplies available to the international organizations. They in turn distribute them to women and children, some of whom are in camps which are controlled by the Khmer Rouge. Would you prefer the international organizations not to give any aid to women and children?

Solarz: If they are in camps controlled by the Khmer Rouge, my answer would be yes.³⁹⁵

Solarz went on to suggest that the United States encourage and, where possible, direct the International relief organizations working in the camps to focus on providing aid to camps controlled by the KPNLF, a recommendation that Holdridge rejected as “playing life and death” with the refugees.³⁹⁶ The hearings went on to solicit opinions on these matters from others, including a representative of the KPNLF and a member of an American-based Christian relief organization working in Cambodia, but few offered any evidence that would change Solarz’ mind about the current situation in Cambodia.

Solarz’ comments throughout the series of hearings he chaired in the early years of the Reagan administration revealed not only his concern for the people of Southeast Asia, but his growing concerns the direction of the Reagan administration’s foreign policy. As it turns out, Solarz was right to be suspicious of the activities of the White House. Although he was clearly not aware of it at the time, the Reagan administration had already begun covert funding of the KPNLF to wage a war of resistance against the Vietnamese occupation. Quietly, invisible to the American public, the American War on

³⁹⁵ Ibid., 29.

³⁹⁶ Ibid., 32-33.

Vietnam had entered a more active phase. Moving beyond the political and economic warfare of the late 1970s, the United States thus began to actively wage a proxy war against Vietnam during the 1980s.

The Reagan Doctrine and the Khmer Rouge

Unlike the Carter administration, which maintained a stance—in word if not in deed—of neutrality toward the situation in Southeast Asia, the Reagan administration had fewer qualms about providing aid to the Khmer Rouge-led “coalition” in Cambodia. As Christopher Brady argues in his study, *United States Foreign Policy Toward Cambodia, 1977-1992*, the administration’s vision of the Third Indochina War fit perfectly the world-view promoted by the Reagan White House: an expansionist Soviet empire was actively promoting revolution around the globe and had to be turned back.³⁹⁷

In spite of this world-view, for the first several years of his administration, Reagan failed to articulate a clear vision of foreign policy, particularly with regard to Southeast Asia. While the White House continued to support the seating of the Khmer Rouge delegation at the United Nations, it publicly refused to offer any aid commitment aid—military or otherwise—to the KPNLF. Behind the scenes, however, the United States had already begun covert funding to the Khmer Rouge-dominated group. In 1985, as Congress was debating a substantial increase in foreign aid to anti-communist

³⁹⁷ Brady, *United States Foreign Policy Toward Cambodia, 1977-1992*.

insurgencies around the world, *The Washington Post* revealed that the KPLNF had been receiving American funds since at least 1982. The story, by Charles Babcock and Bob Woodward, revealed that “millions of dollars” over several years had been funneled to the group through Thailand.³⁹⁸ On the day that the story ran, Stephen Solarz’ office released a statement to the press saying that he would not comment on intelligence matters, but that he remained “fully committed to [his] initiative to provide assistance for the non-Communist Cambodian resistance groups… As is the case in Afghanistan, I am convinced that such assistance… is in the American interests.”³⁹⁹ Later investigations, including one conducted by Australian filmmaker and journalist John Pilger revealed that U.S. aid to the Cambodian “resistance,” including the Khmer Rouge, actually predated the Reagan administration, stretching back to 1980.⁴⁰⁰

CIA sources for the article insisted that the aid had not been reaching the Khmer Rouge, but other anonymous sources acknowledged the hollowness of this claim, and the larger dilemmas posed by the policy. To begin with, they noted, any additional aid from the United States freed up other sources for military aid, rendering the distinction between “lethal” and “non-lethal” aid irrelevant. Furthermore, several of those involved in the program recognized that their attempt to strengthen the “non-Communist” elements of the coalition was unlikely to succeed. One “informed source” told the authors, “if the

³⁹⁸ “CIA Covertly Aiding Pro-West Cambodians,” *Washington Post*, July 8, 1985.

³⁹⁹ Statement to Press, July 8, 1985. Private Papers of Stephen Solarz, Brandeis University Library, Folder “Camb: 1985 NCR Aid.”

⁴⁰⁰ “The Long Secret Alliance: Uncle Sam and Pol Pot,” *Covert Action Quarterly* (62), posted at www.users.bigpond.com/nlevine/khmer_alliance.htm, October 22, 2002.

coalition wins, the Khmer Rouge will eat the others alive.”⁴⁰¹ The goal of the United States, however, was never a “victory” for the KPNLF. Rather, as became clear during the mid-1980s, the goal of the United States was to “bleed Vietnam white” on the fields of Cambodia, much as it had bleeding Vietnam economically and diplomatically for the decade since it withdrew its forces.

Supporters of this policy, from congressmen like Solarz to various administration officials, reiterated this goal often. Paul Wolfowitz, then a Deputy Secretary of State for Asian and Pacific Affairs, told the House Appropriations Committee in 1985 that the goal for the KPNLF was “definitely not a military victory and no one is deluded enough to think the Vietnamese are going to be beaten militarily.”⁴⁰² Solarz echoed these statements months later in a response to a *New York Times* op-ed criticizing his support of the Cambodian resistance. The purpose in providing overt aid to the KPNLF, Solarz wrote, was not “to win a war,” as the previous piece argued. “Not even the non-Communist resistance groups believe it is possible to achieve military victory.... But there is unlikely to be progress at the negotiating table unless Vietnam faces greater difficulty on the battlefield.”⁴⁰³ With a decent majority in Congress supporting the goal of aiding the KPNLF, the bleeding of Vietnam thus became policy. With the full backing of the White House, it would become part of a doctrine.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid.

⁴⁰² “Foreign Assistance and Related Programs Appropriations for 1986,” Hearings Before the House Subcommittee on Appropriations. March 27, 1985 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1986), 242. Cited in Bradley, *op. cit.*, 112, n74.

⁴⁰³ Stephen Solzarz, “Why the U.S. is Helping Cambodia,” *NYT*, July 30, 1985, 22A.

While implicitly a part of U.S. policy since 1975, the overt, military bleeding of Vietnam found a voice and larger purpose in the formulation of the “Reagan Doctrine” in 1985. First declared in the 1985 State of the Union address and further articulated in several addresses by various administration officials that year, the Reagan Doctrine was basically a policy of supporting proxy wars around the world. As Mark Lagon asserts in his study of the doctrine, “the Reagan administration declared that it reserved the right to aid insurgent ‘freedom fighters’ against pro-Soviet regimes recently established in the Third World.”⁴⁰⁴ Lagon’s study focuses on the implementation of the Doctrine in four scenarios: Afghanistan, Nicaragua, Angola, and Cambodia. Unfortunately, like many books concerned with international relations theory, Lagon’s study privileges theory over the historical realities of those various conflicts. Thus, the specificities of Southeast Asia, for instance, are of far less concern for Lagon than the relationship between the Reagan Doctrine and realism or idealism in foreign policy. In discussing the situation in Cambodia, Lagon argues that the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia were “similar,” because they both involved “the overt invasion and occupation of the country by a highly militarized neighbor,” ignoring the complex differences between the situations, particularly the unprovoked attacks on Vietnam by the Khmer Rouge between 1975 and 1978.⁴⁰⁵ Other scholarly accounts replicate this problem. John Dumbrell’s study of U.S. foreign policy from the Carter to the Clinton administrations argues that the policy “represented a commitment to a rather uncertain

⁴⁰⁴ John Lagon, *The Reagan Doctrine: Sources of American Conduct in the Cold War’s Last Chapter* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994), 1.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., 67.

form of coercive diplomacy.” The doctrine was rigidly applied in the form of “pure militarism” in some areas, but was more “pragmatic” in others.⁴⁰⁶ When discussing specific examples of the implementation of the Reagan Doctrine, however, Dumbrell completely ignores Cambodia. Only as an aside in his discussion of Afghanistan does Dumbrell mention the “invidious position” taken by the United States, “helping to arm the mass-murderous Khmer Rouge.”⁴⁰⁷

In these studies, as in U.S. Foreign Policy during the 1980s, Cambodia remained a “sideshow,” just as it had during the American Wars in Southeast Asia a decade earlier.⁴⁰⁸ Indeed, this was precisely the point of the Reagan Doctrine: to aid and abet proxy insurgencies around the globe without the direct involvement of United States forces; to bleed the target regimes slowly and painfully rather than a swift military victory. As a *Newsweek* article on the put it in late 1985, “the Reagan doctrine is a policy of harassing the Soviets on peripheral battlefields—and of doing it on the cheap, without any commitment of U.S. forces.”⁴⁰⁹ Because of the lack of direct U.S. involvement, the policy was acceptable to a wide audience and solicited little reaction, positive or negative, from the American public. The wars waged under the mantra of the Reagan doctrine were not meant to be covert; they were publicly defended and justified by the White House and its Congressional allies. But neither were they meant to be

⁴⁰⁶ John Dumbrell, *American Foreign Policy: From Carter to Clinton* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 80.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid., 101.

⁴⁰⁸ Shawcross, *Sideshow*.

⁴⁰⁹ “Waging War by Proxy,” *Newsweek*, December 23, 1985, 32-34.

public war. Painless, cost effective, and invisible to the American public: They were designed to be everything the American War in Vietnam was not.

The biggest problem with the government's policy, however, was that it was still embedded within the binary logic of the Cold War, imposing a Manichean "good and evil" framework on a variety of nations, regions, and regimes, that often did not fit the worldview of the Reagan Administration. Under such a framework, it was possible for many policymakers to turn a blind eye to the seedy coalitions within which the Reagan Doctrine placed the United States. Whether the formative elements of what would become the Taliban in Afghanistan, or the murderous Khmer Rouge, the "allies" of the United States during the 1980s were always of secondary interest to the struggle against opposing, Soviet proxy forces. Cambodia, in particular, was a place where simplistic distinctions were exploded and where the lines were always blurred. Whether between humanitarian aid and development aid⁴¹⁰, between the "non-Communist resistance" and the Khmer Rouge, or between lethal and non-lethal aid, binary constructions of the issues and actors involved could not explain away the exceedingly complex and muddled alliances formed on the killing fields of Cambodia. Also clearly on the periphery of American foreign policy and public discourse, the situation in Cambodia would continue to bear the footprint of the United States.

In the summer of 1985, however, the revelation of American covert aid having long been funneled to the Khmer Rouge cause little more than a brief distraction to

⁴¹⁰ On this dubious distinction, see Shawcross, *The Quality of Mercy*, 380.

foreign aid negotiations in Washington. Whereas the revelations of covert funding being directed to the Contra forces in Nicaragua would create a major scandal for the administration the following year, the Cambodian aid situation was barely a blip on the radar in 1985. Although there are several reasons for the difference in reaction to the two situations, the most significant was that Congressional leaders and the White House had forged a relative consensus on the issue of aid to Cambodia by 1985, whereas most Democrats in Congress, including Solarz, continued to oppose funding to anti-Sandinista forces in Central America. Solarz' efforts were also bolstered by the 1984 release of *The Killing Fields*, a film about the rise to power of the Khmer Rouge based on the real life story of Dith Pran, a survivor of the Cambodian holocaust who had worked for the *New York Times* during the American Wars in Vietnam and Cambodia in the 1970s.⁴¹¹ Pran and Dr. Haing Ngor, the virulently anti-Communist actor who played Pran in the films, became increasingly public figures in the United States, writing books, giving lectures, and even testifying at Congressional hearings on the war in Cambodia.

Having long pushed for more funding to Cambodian resistance movements, Solarz in the summer of 1985 won enough allies to secure funding to the KPNLF groups during the appropriations for foreign aid for FY1986. In the spring of 1985, Solarz began a major lobbying effort for his amendment to the foreign aid bill that would provide significant overt aid to the KPNLF. In a letter to Dante Fascell, chair of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Assistant Secretary of State for Legislative Affairs

⁴¹¹ Haas, *Genocide by Proxy*, 127. Hass notes in his introduction that earlier versions of the film contained allusions to the role of the United States in creating the conditions under which the Khmer Rouge came to power, but those references were cut from the final cut (*Ibid.*, ix).

William Ball informed the committee that the administration would support the amendment, “as an important signal to Hanoi regarding Congressional and public attitudes towards Vietnam’s illegal occupation of Cambodia and the threat it poses to its neighbors.”⁴¹² Congress eventually passed the measure, including Solarz’ proposal. Although the White House threatened to veto the final version of the bill because it did not include enough military aid to other regions and countries, the funding was eventually approved and the United States began overt funding of the Khmer Rouge-led KPNLF. The Cambodian forces received \$5 million, a third of the sum appropriated for the anti-Soviet factions in Afghanistan.⁴¹³ With triangulated support from all three major powers, the war in Cambodia would remain mired in stalemate for several more years.

Stalemate by Proxy

Even by the remarkable standards of Cambodian-American relations, the extent to which the Third Indochina War remained a sideshow in American society during the 1980s is remarkable. Rendered invisible by the administration’s other wars, and by the Iran-Contra scandal in particular, as well as the more general lack of concern about the situation in Southeast Asia, the Third Indochina War dragged on and on in a proxy stalemate. By the end of the Reagan administration, the United States had been funding the anti-Vietnamese forces, including the Khmer Rouge for the better part of a decade.

⁴¹² Letter from Ball to Fascell, April 24, 1985. Papers of Stephen Solarz, Brandeis University Library. Folder “Camb: 1985 NCR Aid.”

⁴¹³ “House Approves Foreign Aid Bill Opposing Marxists Around the World,” *NYT*, July 12, 1985, A1.

The overt support for these forces, including the possibility that American aid was being funneled to the Khmer Rouge, had been public knowledge since 1985, as was the revelation that covert aid had been sent since 1982. Neither the publicity surrounding *The Killing Fields* nor the enormity of the Iran-Contra scandal succeeded in arousing the American public's ire over their government's support of the Khmer Rouge.

Oddly, however, in the latter part of the decade, as the Vietnamese were finally withdrawing their military forces from Cambodia, another round of hearings in Congress and a series of news pieces focused on the problems encountered by the United States' aid programs in Cambodia. In fact, the attention given to the issue of U.S. aid in the region received more attention from 1988-1990 than it had at any point since 1975.

In June and July of 1988, Solarz convened yet another round of hearings devoted to the situation in Cambodia. These hearings, more than any others discussed in this chapter, demonstrate the deep contradictions of U.S. Policy toward Southeast Asia during the 1980s. The hearings were designed ostensibly to debate a joint resolution pending in the House, authored by Chester Atkins of Massachusetts, calling for the United States, "in cooperation with the international community," to

use all means available to prevent a return to power of Pol Pot, the top echelon of the Khmer Rouge, and their armed forces so that the Cambodian people might genuinely be free to pursue self-determination without the specter of the coercion, intimidation, and torture that are known elements of the Khmer Rouge ideology.⁴¹⁴

As the hearings made clear, however, the United States had no intention of backing up

⁴¹⁴ H.J. Resolution 602, included in "Hope for Cambodia: Preventing the Return of the Khmer Rouge and Aiding the Refugees," Hearing and Markup Before the House Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, 100th Congress, 2nd Session, June 30 and July 28, 1988, (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1989), 81.

this sentiment.

Despite numerous statements to the contrary by representatives of the White House as well as several congressional allies, it became clear during these sessions that a lingering hostility toward the Vietnamese, rather than any concern for the nation or people of Cambodia, was driving United States foreign relations. After hearing testimony from Dith Pran and Haing Ngor of *Killing Fields* fame, as well as Kitty Dukakis, human rights activist and, at the time, wife of the Democratic Nominee for President, Michael Dukakis, various administration officials appeared to discuss the administration's aims for Cambodia. Deputy Secretary of State David Lambertson expressed the administration's "uncertainty" about the extent of the Vietnamese withdrawal, arguing that the White House was simply following the ASEAN-led policy of "isolating Vietnam economically and diplomatically." This was hardly ASEAN's policy, however. Most ASEAN nations had resumed trade with Vietnam by the late 1980s, as had France and Japan, and all members of ASEAN had some scale of diplomatic presence in Hanoi at the time. Lambertson pressed his case, however, claiming that the administration was determined to follow a policy of "'no trade, no aid, and no normal relations' except in the context of a political settlement and an end of Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia."⁴¹⁵ This policy, he continued, did not reflect any lingering animus toward Vietnam resulting from the war. They are not a function of *what Vietnam did* in 1975, but of what it is doing right now—occupying militarily a once sovereign neighbor. The United States indeed looks forward to the time when we will be able to *resume* normal relations with

⁴¹⁵ "Hope for Cambodia," 38.

Vietnam. We have made it clear that we in fact will be prepared to do so in the context of an acceptable Cambodian settlement which provides for the withdrawal of all Vietnamese forces.⁴¹⁶

There is enough history rendered invisible by this statement that it is difficult to know where to begin dissecting it. Given the relations between the U.S. and Vietnam since 1975, it is difficult to accept the premise that the policy of “bleeding Vietnam white” is not based on “lingering animus.” As we have seen in previous chapters, the economic and diplomatic war against Vietnam had begun long before the invasion and occupation of Cambodia. Rather, the invasion was simply the latest in a long series of justifications used by various administrations to continue a hostile policy. Furthermore, The United States had never had, “normal relations” with Vietnam, so “resume” was at the very least a poor choice of verb in that context.

What is most remarkable about Lambertson’s testimony, however, is that it all but ignores the issue on which the hearings were supposed to focus: preventing the return to power by the Khmer Rouge. When Lambertson and other administration officials spoke of an “acceptable settlement” in Cambodia, they focused their attention almost solely on the issue of the Vietnamese withdrawal. In his testimony, Karl Jackson, Deputy Defense Secretary, argued even more strongly in favor of keeping the status quo policy toward Vietnam. Jackson claimed, without any evidence, that “the concerted Western diplomatic and trade embargo” had been successful, and that the U.S. “should resist all moves to normalize relations or to ease the trade embargo unless and until a satisfactory solution

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., 39. All emphasis has been added.

has been found to the Cambodian problem.”⁴¹⁷ Like Lambertson, Jackson’s definition of a “satisfactory” solution was unconcerned with the status of the Khmer Rouge forces.

Given the administration’s equivocations on the issue of the Khmer Rouge, Solzarz pressed the witnesses under questioning. It quickly became clear that the administration was neither interested nor willing in pressing ASEAN nations or China to take a stronger position on keeping the Khmer Rouge “controlled.”⁴¹⁸ That the United States was not particularly interested in the future of Cambodia was certainly not new, but the degree of obstinacy on the administration’s part is worth noting, given the actual situation in Cambodia. Throughout the Third Indochina War, the administration had made the argument that to take a hard line against the Khmer Rouge would be equivalent to supporting the Vietnamese. By the summer of 1988, however, the Vietnamese were clearly in the process of ending their occupation. Even if some in Washington remained “uncertain” about the scope and speed of the withdrawal, they admitted that the process was well underway. Thus, to push the international community, especially China and U.S. allies in Southeastern Asia, for a more concrete stance on barring the Khmer Rouge from returning to power or disrupting national elections, would not be seen in any way as mollifying the Vietnamese.

The line from Hanoi had remained the same for several years: Vietnam would end its occupation of Cambodia when the remnants of the Khmer Rouge had been eradicated and there was no possibility of their return to power. Although well along on their

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., 57.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., 60.

withdrawal plans, the goal of eradicating the Khmer Rouge was not yet accomplished. Largely because of aid from China and the United States, Pol Pot's regime remained a major force inside Cambodia. Throughout the withdrawal, the Vietnamese continued to demand that the Khmer Rouge be excluded from any political settlement, while China continued to press strongly for the inclusion of the Khmer Rouge. With the Vietnamese clearly on their way out, all that remained was for the other players, particularly the international superpowers that had been prolonging the bloody conflict for a decade, to make a concerted effort to keep the Khmer Rouge from returning.

According to the testimony given at this hearing, both Congress and the White House were in agreement that the Khmer Rouge should not be included in the political settlement. The representatives from the Reagan administration, however, told the subcommittee that it was "very hard" to "describe certain scenarios" leading to the exclusion of the Khmer Rouge from any negotiated settlement, even though a variety of proposals had been made at the United Nations and by the Vietnamese. This statement was too much for Representative Atkins, the principal author of the resolution under consideration, to take. When it came time for his questions, he lambasted the administration in an extended diatribe condemning the White House for failing to address the moral dilemmas posed by U.S. involvement in Cambodia. Christopher Brady condensed and excerpted Atkins' comments as follows:

I frankly want to express my anger at the policy which both of you [Lambertson and Jackson] represent.... We have a policy that is obsessed with the Vietnamese

withdrawal... But withdrawal is happening. We all know it... the real issue, the fundamental issue is the Khmer Rouge and you both politely dance around what I believe is one of the great fundamental moral questions of our time... And I think we ought to look at our history in this region, because frankly, it is a history of not wanting to know what was happening so that we could cover our moral backsides after it happened. It is a history of the strongest rhetoric accompanied by the most timid actions... the U.S. is just not willing to go the distance on this issue.⁴¹⁹

Atkins posed specific challenges and alternatives to the administration, arguing that there were, in fact, concrete steps the U.S. could take to help prevent the return of the Khmer Rouge. To begin with, he argued, the administration should encourage the Thai government to crack down on Khmer Rouge military operations originating within Thailand's borders. (Atkins stopped short of calling for an end to the U.S.'s own covert operations in Thailand). Furthermore, he claimed, the U.S. should step up pressure on China and on Thailand to stop those nations' aid programs to the Khmer Rouge.⁴²⁰ The only response of the administration was that such pressures were "unrealistic," and unlikely to produce any real results.⁴²¹

Despite the administration's reluctance to take a strong stance against the return of the Khmer Rouge, a law based on Atkins' resolution was eventually passed by Congress and signed into law by President Reagan in October of 1988.⁴²² The law, unsurprisingly, represented more of a symbolic gesture than a significant policy shift by the United States with regard to Cambodia. The administration continued to refuse calls to pressure the Chinese and Thais to end their aid programs, and continued to ignore and

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., 67-68; Brady, *US Foreign Policy Toward Cambodia*, 120.

⁴²⁰ "Hope for Cambodia," 68-69.

⁴²¹ Ibid., 70-71; Brady, *US Foreign Policy Toward Cambodia*, 120.

⁴²² Brady, *op. cit.*, 121.

isolate Vietnam. From its decision to back the Chinese invasion of Vietnam, through the International Conference on Kampuchea in 1981, and through a decade of warfare that remained largely invisible to the American public and most of the Western world, the United States substituted an absence of policy for a coherent approach to Southeast Asia. In the fall of 1988, as yet another administration stood poised to take the reigns in Washington, Vietnam and Cambodia continued to bleed.

The 1988 hearings about the situation in Cambodia did help to raise the public profile of U.S. involvement in the region. In October, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* each ran a series of articles devoted to the role of the United States in the Cambodian coalition. At the center of much of this storm was the enigmatic Prince Norodom Sihanouk, whose complicated relationship with the United States stretched back to the 1950s. In Washington to visit the Reagan administration, Sihanouk told a group at the Carnegie Endowment that reports of China's recent decreases in aid to the Prince's forces and allies had not hurt the coalition, because they were still "getting some weapons and ammunitions and equipment" from "some countries," although he initially stopped short of claiming the United States was offering military assistance. Later asked to clarify his comments, however, Sihanouk said that administration officials had promised political, diplomatic, and "material" aid to the non-Communist forces in Cambodia, all of which, he insinuated, had already been long provided "via Thailand."⁴²³

Two weeks later, the *Post* highlighted a serious scandal in the Cambodian aid

⁴²³ "Sihanouk Hints at Military Aid," *NYT*, October 14, 1988 A3.

program, revealing that over \$3.5 million in covert funding to the anti-Vietnamese forces has been embezzled by Thai military officers. According to the reports, the 1988 budget for the covert aid program—which it called “the least controversial and least known of the Reagan administration’s secret operations—was around \$12 million. The Thai scandal resulted in decrease in Congressional funding to the Cambodian program the following year, from \$12 to \$8 million.⁴²⁴ The *Times* ran a similar story a few days later, echoing the claims made in the *Post* and reiterating similar claims about the popularity of the program. “Because the program is the least contentious of the Reagan administration’s covert aid programs and compliments overt assistance of \$3.5 million a year approved by Congress in 1985, it has received little publicity over the years.”⁴²⁵

These articles are instructive for at least two reasons. First, both stories maintain the arbitrary distinction between “lethal” and “non-lethal” aid, relying on administration assurances that it was only providing “non-lethal” aid to the coalition. This distinction has been a hallmark of policy debates about the Cambodian situation dating back to the earliest Congressional hearings on the Khmer Rouge, and remained as hollow in 1988 as it had in 1978. Certainly when the coalition members were receiving non-lethal aid from the United States, that freed up resources or allowed other allies and donors to provide the weapons, or “lethal aid” that the forces required. Secondly, the articles both mention in passing that the covert aid program run by CIA operatives working on the Thailand-Cambodia border was an uncontroversial program. The *Post*’s claim that the Cambodian

⁴²⁴ “How Scandal Almost Sunk Our Secret Cambodia War,” *The Washington Post*, October 30, 1988, C1.

⁴²⁵ “Tainted Cambodian Aid: New Details,” *NYT*, November 1, 1988, A3.

aid program was both the least controversial and the least known of the Reagan Doctrine's proxy wars begs the question of whether there is not some relationship between the media's complicity in silence about the situation in Cambodia and the government's role in prolonging that war as "uncontroversial." The *Times'* coverage goes one step further in rendering that question irrelevant, claiming the program has received such scant attention over the years *because* it was "the least contentious" of the many proxy fights waged by the Reagan White House. These statements defy logic as well as the historical record; we know that even among the relative consensus that emerged around U.S. policy toward Cambodia in the 1980s, there were significant differences in the scope, scale, and target of aid to the anti-Vietnamese forces. The circular logic employed by these pieces seeks not only to justify the American role in prolonging the Third Indochina War; it also implicitly exonerates the American press for their own role in helping maintain the invisibility of that war and the American role in it.

Sideshow, Again

The contentiousness of U.S. policy towards Cambodia continued to be evident in future hearings on the scope and style of American aid, particularly as the Bush administration wavered on supporting a coalition that included the Khmer Rouge. In a series of Congressional hearings debating appropriations of overt and covert aid to the

NCR, the same battles over indirect aid to the Khmer Rouge and their involvement in a coalition government continued to be waged.⁴²⁶ In early 1990, these tensions came to a head when ABC news aired a special news program, “From the Killing Fields.” Hosted by Peter Jennings, the report argued that the United States was aiding the return to power of the Khmer Rouge by funneling aid to Sihanouk and his allies. The special was followed by a two hour “town meeting” on Cambodia, entitled “Beyond Vietnam.” This portion of the program included a live studio audience and a wide array of guests, including important policymakers such as Richard Holbrooke and Stephen Solarz to figures such as John McCain, William Westmoreland and Dith Pran.

The first segment of the program, the special report on U.S. aid to Cambodia, featured interviews with Sihanouk, Deputy Secretary of State for the Bush administration Richard Solomon, former CIA director William Colby, and Representative Chester Atkins. Sihanouk, as he had for several years, claimed that the United States was supplying both lethal and non-lethal aid to his forces, an argument backed up by interviews with aid workers on the ground in Cambodia. When he confronted Solomon with Sihanouk’s claims, Jennings asked the Secretary what the Bush administration would do if they “found out” that the Non-Communist Resistance and the Khmer Rouge were, as Sihanouk claimed, fighting “side by side” using American military aid. In a telling slip, Solomon responded that if the administration discovered “a violation of the law, we would cut off arms,” although he had previously denied that the U.S. was

⁴²⁶ “Amid Congressional Unease, U.S. Weighs Cambodia Arms Aid,” *Washington Post*, June 16, 1989, A12; “House Panel Assails U.S. Policy on Khmer Rouge,” *NYT*, September 15, 1989, A9.

supplying lethal aid to any forces in Cambodia. Solomon quickly “corrected” himself, saying, “I’m sorry. I made a mistake there. We do not supply any lethal assistance to the non-Communists.” Jennings was clearly not convinced of the administration’s line, inferring throughout the program that the U.S. was simply turning a blind eye to what was at the very least de facto acceptance aid being received by the Khmer Rouge.⁴²⁷

In the Town Hall segment of the program, the various figures assembled, including several diplomats and politicians who were implicated by the ABC report, responded. Charles Pickering, the American representative to the U.N. said he was “appalled” by the earlier program. Solarz, equally offended, dismissed the charges, noting that he “wrote the law” forbidding aid to the Khmer Rouge.⁴²⁸ Solarz, Pickering, and others claimed that Sihanouk was simply “mistaken” or that he “misspoke” in his statement about American military support. The program gradually descended into chaos from that point on, with various figures from the government brushing aside the charges of complicity in Khmer Rouge designs on power and an array of other figures accusing the U.S. of everything from direct military aid to Pol Pot to lending the Khmer Rouge “moral legitimacy.” Tellingly, despite Jennings’ best efforts to focus the debate on the issues he framed in his report, the discussion shifted to questions of the United States’ relationship with Vietnam—whether or not to normalize relations and end the trade embargo, and the status of American soldiers still listed as Missing in Action. In the final segment of the program, Jennings presented an aside about the legacies of U.S.

⁴²⁷ “From the Killing Fields,” *ABC News Special Report*, April 26, 1990.

⁴²⁸ “Beyond Vietnam,” *ABC News Special Report*, April 26, 1990.

involvement in Southeast Asia. As the credits began to roll, a cacophony of shouting voices continued to roar on the soundstage. Lost in the chaos, the suffering of the Cambodian people was once again quickly relegated to the background of the ongoing American War on Vietnam.

CHAPTER FOUR

“I Am Reality”: Redrawing the Terms of Battle, 1985-1989

Amid the ongoing tragedy in Cambodia and the decision of the United States to maintain its policy of “bleeding” Vietnam, the spring of 1985 brought with it the ten-year anniversary of the end of the Second Indochina War. The occasion was marked in the United States by official state department addresses, several academic symposia, editorials and special sections in most major American papers, cover story retrospectives in leading weekly news magazines, and numerous television reports. In Vietnam, the anniversary received less sustained attention. Aside from a few official pronouncements from the Party and the occasional flag-waving ceremony, the liberation of the South was quietly commemorated in the North. In the South itself, however, where the “ideological and cultural” component of the Vietnamese revolution continued to lag, a major festival was planned.

Although more than 1,000 Western journalists had applied for visas to cover the events, the Vietnamese government was wary of allowing too much media coverage.⁴²⁹ The official reason for reticence was that the press corps might constitute a “security risk.” Hanoi, after all, was not on particularly good terms with the United States and most of its allies at the time. The Vietnamese government was also taken aback,

⁴²⁹ Jonathan Alter, “Live From Ho Chi Minh City,” *Newsweek*, April 22, 1985, 72.

however, at the interest in covering the events, particularly among the Americans whose defeat they were celebrating. “I’m not quite sure,” a media relations representative for the government told Jonathan Alter of *Newsweek*, “why there is this great desire by you Americans to relive this terrible defeat.” Alter explained in his article that the reason, “of course,” was “to learn from it.”⁴³⁰ As we will see, however, the occasion offered more of an opportunity to contribute to rewriting the history of the war than to study it. Even the American media itself, Alter included, seemed surprised at the scope of the coverage. All three television networks devoted substantial airtime to the anniversary, with ABC and NBC sending, at considerable cost, extensive crews to provide live satellite feeds from Ho Chi Minh City.⁴³¹

The coverage proved both difficult and disappointing. ABC’s *Nightline* featured a “debate” between Le Duc Tho and Henry Kissinger, the two men who once shared the Nobel Peace Prize for negotiating the shaky agreement to end the American involvement in Vietnam. Like that agreement, the 1985 broadcast that was a disaster, beset with logistical and technical difficulties. Mixed audio signals caused a cacophony of overlapping voices, with host Ted Koppel, Tho, and his translator constantly speaking over one another. A frustrated Kissinger, who felt unable to break through the noise, complained to the network, with which he had a consulting contract at the time, and succeeded in extending the show ten minutes to allow him a proper “response.”⁴³² NBC’s *Today* show had other problems. Throughout the week, the morning show aired

⁴³⁰ Ibid.

⁴³¹ Ibid. Also see Tom Shales, “TV’s Return to Vietnam,” *WP*, May 2, 1985.

⁴³² Maureen Dowd, “Kissinger and Le Duc Tho Meet Again, and Bitterness Shows,” *NYT*, May 1, 1985.

live segments from Ho Chi Minh City, where it was late in the evening. During several pieces, Vietnam's legendary insects took aim at host Bryant Gumbel and his guests. As one review put it, "the huge TV lights attracted great hordes of winged creatures that encircled and bombarded the anchorman."⁴³³

Media critic Tom Shales reported in *The Washington Post* that most network executives considered the coverage a complete technical and financial failure. Many had hoped for "a big story," particularly "a break in the MIA story," but decided midweek that "no news" was being made.⁴³⁴ The fact that the anniversary itself turned out not to be "newsworthy," however, paled in comparison with the narrative constructed by Shales in his review of the coverage. After taking the networks to task for their shoddy reports, he points out that the real problem with the entire effort was that the media missed "the real" story:

One crucial thing that none of the network newsbobs seems willing to consider is that by going to Vietnam, and with such a flurry, they missed the real Vietnam story, which can be covered without leaving the United States. This is where the American soldiers who fought and survived are, this is where the government officials who engineered the war are, and this is where the real scars are, as far as American involvement is concerned.⁴³⁵

"The real Vietnam story," as we will see shortly, was more than adequately covered by the American press, which had no difficulty focusing its attention on the United States.

⁴³³ Shales, "TV's Return to Vietnam."

⁴³⁴ Ibid.

⁴³⁵ Ibid.

Shales' remarks, however, demonstrate the extent to which the boundaries of narratives about the war and its legacies in American culture had already by 1985 been drawn so as to exclude any consideration of Vietnam and the Vietnamese. The "scars" of "American involvement," of course, are everywhere in Southeast Asia. For every American veteran of the war afflicted with cancer or other conditions related to the use of chemical weapons by the United States during the war, there are thousands of Vietnamese. For every tragically amputated American veteran, there are thousands of Vietnamese children left with deformities from the war itself, not to mention the ongoing problem of unexploded ordinance throughout the Vietnamese countryside. And certainly in the spring of 1985, one needed look no further than Cambodia to see the most horrific legacies of American involvement in the region.

The American War on Vietnam after 1975, however, rendered the Vietnamese largely invisible, focusing attention instead on what Vietnam "did" to the United States rather than on what the United States had done, and was continuing to do, to Southeast Asia. As we have seen in the previous chapters, the decade following the end of the war was a period of considerable political and cultural work, with forces from diverse segments of American culture battling the cultural memory of the war. In this chapter, I will continue to trace the cultural front of the American War on Vietnam, examining the considerable success of the revisionist work done in American culture by the mid-1980s. Whereas the first wave of Vietnam films, including *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse*

Now, examined here in chapter two, laid the groundwork for this revisionism of the early 1980s both by recasting the United States as the victim of a cruel and savage Asian nation intent on holding America hostage and by erasing Vietnamese voices from the narrative of the war, the second and third waves of films in the 1980s took a different tack.

Beginning with the POW/MIA films of the early 1980s, the terms of debate over “Vietnam” in American culture, were completely redrawn. The revenge fantasies of such films as *Uncommon Valor*, *MIA*, and, most famously, *Rambo*, while lambasted by critics, were embraced by American audiences. Although the revisionism of films in this second wave was far from harmless in its contributions to the solidification of the POW/MIA myth and its further vilification of the Vietnamese, the real danger of these movies lay in the way in which they altered the way in which many Americans thought, wrote, and represented the war in Vietnam. By creating their historically inverted view of the war, the Rambo-style films of this period opened up the cultural space for the third wave of American films about the war. Critics and audiences alike praised this third wave, defined by Oliver Stone’s *Platoon* (1986), for its “realism.” While undoubtedly more “realistic” than *Rambo*, *The Deer Hunter*, or *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon* in particular was surrounded by a discourse of reality that moved beyond the conventions of American films about the war. The cultural transition in the United States from *Rambo* to *Platoon*, which took place largely during the years 1985-1988, sparked a larger debate in American culture about the history of the American war in Vietnam. Against Rambo’s

revisionism, *Platoon*'s "reality," redrew the discursive boundaries about the cultural memory of the war by focusing attention entirely on what "Vietnam did" to the United States.

My goal in examining the construction of the "reality" of the American war in Vietnam during the mid-1980s is not to argue that *Platoon*'s version of events, nor even *Rambo*'s, is patently false or historically inaccurate. Nor is it to argue that there is a single historical reality to which these films, or their audiences, should subscribe. Rather, it is to reinforce the argument I am making throughout this project: that there is and has been an ongoing battle in the United States over the cultural memory, and in that contest, power matters. The contest of stories in the public sphere⁴³⁶ is not played out on a level field, but rather is structured by those with access to create and disseminate their stories.

Thus the 1980s witnessed a set of competing realities about the American War in Vietnam, but in the debate structured by Oliver Stone's *Platoon* and Sylvester Stallone's *Rambo*, any number of stories were left silent and invisible. Most importantly for my purposes here, any discussion of what the United States did, and was continuing to do, to Vietnam and to all of Southeast Asia, was rendered outside debates about the reality of the war. In the last segment of this chapter, after discussing *Rambo* and *Platoon*, I show how the fallout of the "reality" debate structured discussion of the war in another realm of cultural production: comic books. In *The 'Nam*, a popular comic about the war, the visions of *Rambo* and *Platoon* were combined to construct an even more problematic

⁴³⁶ Mechling, "An American Culture Text, With Grids," (cf. introduction).

view of history. By the end of the 1980s, I argue, discussions of the effects of the American war on Vietnam had become focused exclusively on the United States. The texts of this period helped move American society from a sense of “mutual destruction”—which at least implicitly acknowledged the existence of the Vietnamese—to a “reality” in which the Vietnamese ceased to matter or, in some cases, even exist. After the restructuring of the debate by the texts examined here, it was not uncommon to read or hear of the war in Vietnam that “in the end,” as the lead character in *Platoon* put it, Americans “did not fight the enemy. We fought ourselves.” Thus from the ten-year anniversary of the end of the war, though *Rambo*, *Platoon*, and *The ‘Nam*, the cultural front of the American war on Vietnam after achieved extraordinary success after 1985, effectively erasing the Vietnamese from popular narratives of the war and masking the ongoing effects of the war on the nations and people of Southeast Asia.

The Ten-Year Anniversary

In the United States, the anniversary of the “fall” of Saigon was an opportunity to reflect on “the legacy of Vietnam,” as *Newsweek* put it, or, in the words of *Time*, “The War That Went Wrong, The Lessons it Taught.”⁴³⁷ Like the other events marking the period, these special issues, which appeared two weeks prior to the actual anniversary, demonstrated the ongoing battle over the cultural memory of the war that had begun over a decade earlier. From the perspective of these news magazines, ten years removed from

⁴³⁷ *Newsweek*, April 15, 1985; *Time*, April 15, 1985.

the end of the war, the focus of any retrospection would be on what the war did, and was continuing to do to Americans. When the Vietnamese were mentioned at all, they were portrayed as corrupt ideologues and villains in the case of Party leaders, or as the helpless victims of the “repressive” and “Stalinist” regime.

Newsweek’s take on the war from the vantage point of 1985 obsessed with what Vietnam “did” to the United States, but began with an attack on the legacy of the Vietnamese victory. “The events of the past decade—the occupation of the boat people, the dreary neo-Stalinist isolation of Vietnam today—have deflated the hopeful expectations of those who saw Ho Chi Minh as the liberator of his country.”⁴³⁸ This strategy of using the failures and shortcomings of the Vietnamese regime in support of a revisionist history of the war, an increasingly common tactic in American culture by 1985, was normally coupled with the statement that unlike the Vietnamese, who were clearly imperialists in disguise, the United States fought “a noble cause,” with “the best intentions.” *Newsweek* was no exception:

A war fought with the best of intentions and the worst of results—a war in which, unless one counts the hollow triumph of national liberation celebrated 10 years ago this month in Saigon, there were no winners at all.⁴³⁹

While it is undoubtedly fair, as I argued in the previous chapter, to criticize the leadership of Vietnam on a number of levels, only the most narrow-minded American view would use such shortcomings in support of such a spurious argument. Aside from the rubble of history buried below any proclamation of American “good intentions” with regard to the

⁴³⁸ “The War That Won’t Go Away,” *Newsweek*, April 15, 1985; 32.

⁴³⁹ “We’re Still Prisoners of War,” *Newsweek*, April 15, 1985, 34-35.

war, the belief that the expulsion of the United States from Southeast Asia in 1975 constituted “the worst of results,” can only be sustained by the invisibility and silence of the Vietnamese themselves.

Indeed, when, in a later piece, *Newsweek*’s reporters in Vietnam bothered to speak with Vietnamese citizens, the editorial view was quickly destroyed. Tony Clifton and Ron Moreau, who traveled throughout the country during their visit, took note of the roads paved by American intentions. Praising the “benefits” of previous imperialists in Vietnam, they wrote that, “The French left their language, their graceful colonial architecture, even their excellent crusty bread. The Chinese left their philosophy, their tombs, their arts and their dragon temples. But the Americans have left only rust.”⁴⁴⁰ When they spoke to the Vietnamese, however, they realized the legacies of the United States occupation of the country consisted of more than the “rusty metal” once used by the military and appropriated by the people of Vietnam as roofs for their homes. A professor at Can Tho University told them: “You gave us some very good roads, of course, and you trained some of our best scientists and technicians. But you also gave us Agent Orange, social diseases, and more bombs than have been dropped on any other country.”⁴⁴¹

That piece, entitled, “A Wounded Land,” was a rare exception in the flood of coverage that dominated the reporting of the anniversary in the American media. Although it mistakenly noted that the “economic blockade” of Vietnam began only in

⁴⁴⁰ “A Wounded Land,” *Newsweek*, April 15, 1985, 59.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid., 58.

1979 with the full-scale invasion of Cambodia, the essay stands out among the numerous articles that focused on what the war did to American society. By making the effort to speak with a variety of Vietnamese citizens from around the country, the authors drew praise from even as harsh a critic as Noam Chomsky. Yet as Chomsky noted, the account constituted only four of the magazine's thirty-three devoted to the topic.⁴⁴² For the most part, he argued, the coverage of the anniversary ignored any discussion of the waging of the war by the United States or the effects of the war on Southeast Asia. "It is a classic example of Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark," he wrote.

Time's coverage was particularly myopic and reactionary. "The war destroyed many lives, American and Vietnamese. But it did other damage: to American faith in government and authority, for one thing." This lead article in the special issue did not stop with equating the deaths of three million Vietnamese and 58,000 Americans, or the actual, physical destruction of an entire nation with the symbolic trauma done to many Americans' "faith in government." The piece went on to place the blame for such destruction to the United States squarely on Vietnam:

Charles de Gaulle called Vietnam "a rotten country," and he was right in a psychic as well as a physical sense. Rotten, certainly for Americans. Vietnam took America's energy and comparative innocence—a dangerous innocence, perhaps—and bent it around so that the muzzle fired back in the nation's face. The war became America vs. America.⁴⁴³

In this confused construction, the prime mover of the war was not that the "muzzle" of American "energy" and "innocence" was pointed at Vietnam in the first place, but rather

⁴⁴² Noam Chomsky, "The United States and Indochina: Far From an Aberration," in Allen and Long, eds., *Coming to Terms: Indochina, The United States, and the War*, 172; 186 n20.

⁴⁴³ "A Bloody Rite of Passage," *Time*, April 15, 1985, 22-23.

that the Vietnamese caused the gun to backfire. This view is reinforced by the title of the special issue, “The War That *Went Wrong*;” no attention in this or other retrospectives would focus on the origins of American involvement in Southeast Asia, leaving outside the realm of acceptable debate whether or not the war was “wrong” in the first place. Amazingly, in blaming the Vietnamese, *Time* denies the historical actors who expelled the Americans from their country are denied the agency of their victory, as “the war became America vs. America.” In the end, *Time* argued, “Vietnam was a crisis of the American identity,” and, even more offensive, “Vietnam may have been a hallucination.”⁴⁴⁴ The erasure of the Vietnamese from the narrative of the war was thus fully accomplished by the end of the essay, constructing the war as a completely American event. Whether dismissed as a “rotten country,” or a figment of the collective American psyche, however, these constructions of Vietnam and the American War there would pale in comparison to that offered by a film timed to coincide with the anniversary. While *Apocalypse Now* had offered a vision of the war in Vietnam as a dark, hallucinatory nightmare for the United States, the new vision of the war offered by 1985’s *Rambo* would provide a revenge fantasy that combined the view of Vietnam as a rotten country with the desire to see the United States as the ongoing hostage of that war.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid., 31. After obsessing on what “Vietnam did” to American politics, gender and race relations, and nationalism, The *Time* piece went on to include a brief essay on life in Vietnam, the primary fascination of which was that many Southerners had failed to embrace socialism and continued to have access to Cognac and Coca-Cola. After this one page essay, six pages explored the implications of Vietnam for the use of American military power, entitled, “Lessons from a Lost War.”

Rewriting Reality: Rambo's Revisionism

The early 1980s had witnessed the arrival of the second wave of American films about the war. These films, most notably *First Blood* (1982), *Uncommon Valor* (1983), and *Missing in Action* (1984) looked and sounded completely different from the first wave of films, discussed in chapter four. These new films, which focused on the plight of American veterans in the United States and those supposedly still being held in Hanoi, were unapologetic in their revisionism. They took the POW/MIA myth as fact, actually returning to Southeast Asia in the case of *Uncommon Valor* and *Missing in Action* (which produced several sequels), brandishing a hatred of the evil Asians who were holding their buddies hostage alongside an equally virulent abhorrence of their own government, which they felt continued to deny and cover-up the existence of the POWs. The films were also part of what several authors have referred to as a “neo-fascist aesthetic” in American film, as evidenced in such other films as *Red Dawn* (1982), *Conan the Barbarian* (1984), and *Invasion U.S.A.* (1985).⁴⁴⁵

The irony of the POW films is that they made, in part, the same argument that I am making in this project: that the war with Vietnam continued after 1975, through the 1980s and 1990s. Unfortunately, they, along with the entire POW/MIA industry, inverted the roles of victim and aggressor, representing Americans as being held hostage by the Vietnamese, rather than acknowledging that the Vietnamese people continued to suffer as a result of the United States’ economic sanctions, diplomatic hostility, and

⁴⁴⁵ For a discussion of the “fascist aesthetic” debate, see Harry Haines, “The Pride is Back: *Rambo*, *Magnum P.I.* and the Return Trip to Vietnam,” in *Cultural Legacies of Vietnam: The Uses of the Past in the Present*, Richard Morris and Peter Ehrenhaus, editors (Norwood New Jersey: Ablex Publishing, 1990), 99-123; 108. Also see Franklin, *MIA*, 140-141; and Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of American Culture*.

military aid to the anti-Vietnamese forces in Southeast Asia. In fact, the films coincided with several paramilitary operations in Southeast Asia undertaken in conjunction with the Reagan administration. As Bruce Franklin revealed in *Mythmaking in America*, the strange alliance of Colonel Bo Gritz, a fervent believer in the POW cause, William Shatner (of *Star Trek* fame), and Clint Eastwood, financed a 1982 covert mission into Laos with the full knowledge of the President, who repeatedly told Eastwood that if the team found one POW, he would “start World War Three” to get the rest out.⁴⁴⁶

The mission, as well as others supposedly directed by Gritz, turned up no evidence of live American POW’s. That task was left to Hollywood. In both *Uncommon Valor* and *Missing in Action*, the teams, led by Gene Hackman and Chuck Norris, respectively, turn up dozens of POWs still being held in Southeast Asia. Although *Uncommon Valor* was more commercially successful, *Missing in Action* was more influential in the genre, helping to pave the way for its own sequels and other POW fantasies. Central to the plot of *Missing in Action* and the films that would follow it was the complete inversion of victimization, exonerating American soldiers while constructing the Vietnamese as cruel and savage criminals. Franklin sums up this strategy of historical inversion in *M.I.A.*:

Just as the POW issue was consciously created in 1969 amid shocking revelations about U.S. conduct... *Missing In Action* uses the POW issue to indoctrinate audiences of the 1980s with the notions that American were not the victimizers but the victims. Those who have forgotten, or are too young to remember, learn that all accusations of U.S. war crimes are merely insidious Asian Communist propaganda designed to hide the crimes the Vietnamese are

⁴⁴⁶ Franklin, *MIA*, 137-38.

still perpetrating against innocent Americans.⁴⁴⁷

It may seem at first to be granting these action films too much power to suggest their power as a force for historical revisionism. As we will see, however, the inverted discourse of victimization constructed in and through these films had implications far beyond the movie screen. Films such as *Uncommon Valor* and *Missing in Action* would help to set the terms of debate for what types of stories about the American War in Vietnam would be told to “post-Vietnam” generations of Americans.

None of these earlier films, though, would have the impact of 1985’s *Rambo*. Timed to coincide with the ten-year anniversary of the end of the war, the pre-release press for the film contained a video detailing the POW/MIA issue, hyping *Rambo*’s connection to the myth of live prisoners being held in Hanoi. A sequel to 1982’s *First Blood*, a surprising box office success, *Rambo* revolves around the character of John Rambo, a misunderstood and tortured American veteran of the war in Vietnam. *First Blood* had circulated for years in Hollywood, undergoing numerous plot changes and casting characters. In the body of rising superstar Sylvester Stallone, however, the character became a veritable superhero in the 1980s, a cultural phenomenon that would reshape the ways in which Americans told and discussed stories about the war in Vietnam.⁴⁴⁸

The opening shot of *Rambo* reveals the prison labor camp in which Rambo (Stallone) has spent the last several years since single-handedly destroying the town of

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., 149.

⁴⁴⁸ On the relationship of Stallone and his hypermasculine body to the politics of the 1980s, see Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America*, and Jeffords, *Hard Bodies*.

Hope, Oregon, in *First Blood*. Rambo's former commander, Colonel Trautman arrives at the prison, requesting that Rambo accompany him on a new mission: "Recon for POW's in 'Nam." After hearing the details of the mission and agreeing to join Trautman, Rambo asks the question for which the film became infamous: "Sir, do we get to win this time?" "This time it's up to you," Trautman replies.

Unfortunately for Rambo, Trautman is not in charge of this mission. Marshall Murdoch, a Washington Bureaucrat working for a Congressional Committee, is leading the team along with a group of mercenaries. The Committee, Murdoch explains to Rambo, is simply attempting to find evidence that will disprove any beliefs in live POWs being held by the Vietnamese. Rambo is only supposed to take photographs of the empty camp, the very one in which he was held during the war. "Under no circumstances," he is informed by Murdoch, "are you to engage the enemy."

After being dropped in Vietnam from the base in Thailand, Rambo meets up with Co Bao (played by Hawaiian actress Julia Nickson), his Vietnamese guide who speaks in short choppy English. As they move down the river toward the camp, escorted by pirates, Rambo tells Co Bao his story about how when returned from Vietnam, he found another war going on in the U.S., a "quiet war" against veterans. Bao relates that she is working against her own government because her father, an "intelligence officer" had been killed. When the mission is over, she tells Rambo, she would very much like to go to America.

When they arrive at the camp, Rambo defies his orders and, with Bao's help, infiltrates the camp, which is of course populated with a dozen American POWs. He easily kills and outmaneuvers several Vietnamese guards, all of whom appear even less Vietnamese than Bao does. He rescues one POW and brings him along to the extraction point where he is to be picked up by Murdoch's men. Along the way, as they elude the inept Vietnamese soldiers, the POW tells Rambo how timely his rescue was: "They move us around a lot—to harvest crops." Thus the film's first explanation for why the Vietnamese would still be holding American soldiers: during a devastating famine and an ongoing war with Cambodia, the Vietnamese need some help with their agricultural production. To help facilitate this, apparently, they repeatedly torture the men so that they appear unwilling to do anything, much less harvest rice.

The plot thickens, however, when they reach the extraction point. Rambo informs Murdoch that he has an American POW with him, which leads Murdoch to abort the mission, leaving Rambo and the man to be captured by the Vietnamese and returned to the camp. At the camp, the Vietnamese soldiers and their Russian "advisors" torture Rambo. The representation of the relationship between the Soviets and the Vietnamese offers an accurate portrayal of the Reaganite, Cold Warrior worldview, in which the incompetent and minute Asian subjects are merely the lackeys of the powerful and forceful Russians. The Soviets in *Rambo* seem to respect the Americans more than their Vietnamese allies, whom they dismiss as "vulgar" and "lacking compassion." The film

also refuses to move beyond Stallone's, and Rambo's own American-centric view, refusing even to bother with such inconveniences as subtitles when languages other than English are being spoken. The leader of the Russian troops even gives his orders to the Vietnamese in English.⁴⁴⁹ Clearly whatever the Vietnamese are saying is irrelevant, as they are merely the Asian puppets of the Kremlin.

Rambo, however, is much less concerned with the Vietnamese as an enemy than it is with the United States. As the film argues, Rambo's mission was never intended to prove the existence of POWs. The government, which the film ultimately shows to be even more evil and corrupt than either the Russians or the Vietnamese, had no intention of rescuing any POWs found by Rambo. This is consistent both with the tone and content of the POW/MIA myth, which strongly believed in a government-led cover up of evidence confirming the existence of live POWs. It is also consistent with domestic Reaganism in general, which blamed government for the troubles of the country. Trautman, angry at Murdoch for abandoning his man, tells him that he knows what the cover up was really about: "Money. In '72, we were supposed to pay the Cong four and a half billion dollars in war reparations. We reneged. They kept the POWs." Murdoch doesn't dispute this story; he admits that the POWs were being held as ransom, but that the alternatives to a cover-up were either "paying blackmail money," that would end up "financing the war effort against our [Cambodian] allies," or, worse, "starting the war up all over again" to save "a few forgotten ghosts." This is one version of the narrative of

⁴⁴⁹ Like *The Deer Hunter* and several other films, *Rambo* uses mostly Chinese actors to fill the roles of the Vietnamese. This interchangeability of third world subjects has been a hallmark of the Rambo films. In the final installment of the trilogy, *Rambo III*, in which Rambo fights alongside the Mujahideen in Afghanistan, this logic is taken a step further. The film, shot in Israel, uses Israeli actors to play the roles of the Islamic fundamentalists leading the resistance against the Russian occupation.

the war in Vietnam that seeks to erase the Vietnamese from the story. The “Hand Behind the Back Theory,” popularized during the war and canonized by authors such as Colonel Harry Summers in his *On Strategy*, chalks up the United States’ loss at the hands of what Henry Kissinger once called a “fourth rate power,” to a combination of failure of nerve by bureaucrats or politicians, an unpatriotic antiwar movement, and a liberal media establishment. As we will see, the narrative of the war offered by *Platoon*, while distinct from *Rambo* in many ways, offers its own version of a war in which the Vietnamese are, at best, irrelevant and in which the United States actually fought, and defeated, itself.

Back at the POW camp, Rambo escapes with the help of Co Bao, who returned disguised as a prostitute servicing the Vietnamese guards. After their escape, Bao and Rambo share a romantic encounter, during which he agrees to take her with him back to the United States. After the kiss, however, Bao is gunned down by a Vietnamese soldier, which sets off Rambo on a killing rampage, leading him back to the camp to rescue the remaining POWs rather than escape alone. During this montage, Rambo becomes a one-man death squad, a human B-52, destroying helicopters, entire villages, and sending hordes of Vietnamese into a frenzied panic and, eventually, to their deaths. After a final face off with the Russians, Rambo returns to the base in Thailand, ready to confront his betrayers.

Removing the large gun from the helicopter, Rambo completely destroys the huge supercomputers lauded by Murdoch at the beginning of the film. He then goes after

Murdoch, stabbing his knife into a desk right next to Murdoch's head, but allowing him to live. "You know there's more men out there," he tells Murdoch. "Find them. Or I'll find you." On his way out of the camp, Trautman implores Rambo to stay with him rather than wandering off. "The war, everything that happened here may be wrong. But, dammit, don't hate your country for it," he tells him. "Hate?" Rambo responds. "I'd die for it." Rambo also goes on to offer a final statement on behalf of his men: "I want what they want, what every guy who came over here and spilled his guts and gave everything they had wants: for our country to love us as much as we love it." Here Rambo adds another crucial element to the hand behind the back theory: that the soldiers were betrayed not simply by sheepish politicians but by the American public. Rambo is thus the supreme patriot, whose escapades in and after the war are explained as his duty to the nation he loves.

The initial critical response to *Rambo* suggested that critics did not love the film as much as Stallone loved it, although many acknowledged, as one put it, "*Rambo* works."⁴⁵⁰ Jack Kroll of *Newsweek* was completely unconcerned with the *Rambo*'s acceptance of the POW/MIA myth, the representation of the Vietnamese, or the anti-government message of the film. For Kroll, it was all about Stallone's masochism and narcissism.⁴⁵¹ Richard Shickel of *Time* admitted feeling "shame" at being somewhat amused by the action sequences and Rambo's "superhero ploys," because the film was preying upon the "live moral issues" of the POW/MIA myth. "Whether such victims are

⁴⁵⁰ "Danger: Live Moral Issues," *Time*, May 26, 1985, 91.

⁴⁵¹ Kroll, "A One-Man Army," *Newsweek*, May 27, 1985.

real or fiction,” he noted, “the films exploit and travesty emotions that a decent movie would try to help us share more deeply.”⁴⁵² *The Washington Post* and *New York Times* were unique not for their criticisms of *Rambo*, but rather for their brief attention to the dehumanized portrayal of the Vietnamese. The *Post* assailed Stallone for its revisionist approach to the war, comparing it to the Nazi led revisionism of the war during interwar Germany, and noting that the Vietnamese in the film “are caricatures out of 1960s anticommunist propaganda. They are flunkies of the Russians, and their cause is neither anti-colonialism, nationalism nor even imperialism, but raw evil.”⁴⁵³ The *Times* sounded a similar note, focusing on the film’s “plausibility” problem:

Among other things, *Rambo* seems to believe the Vietnamese, apparently out of sheer Asiatic crudeness, would waste the manpower represented by 50 to 60 of their soldiers to guard a heavily armed jungle prison, which contains no more than a dozen or so P.O.W.’s used as farm laborers. If the Vietnamese are so hard up for labor, why not just use the soldiers and get rid of the prisoners? Are these captors not only mean but also stupid? Well, you might ask, but answers are not forthcoming.⁴⁵⁴

Unlike *First Blood*, the *Times* reviewer noted, the action in *Rambo* “is supported only what appears to be the star’s ego and a large budget for special effects.”⁴⁵⁵

Were it simply another action film, or even another of the *Missing in Action* series, *Rambo* may very well have faded quickly from screens. But a variety of circumstances converged to help create what would quickly become known as

⁴⁵² Schickel, “Live Moral Issues.”

⁴⁵³ Richard Cohen, “Next: Rambo Goes to Nicaragua?” *WP*, June 4, 1985.

⁴⁵⁴ Vincent Canby, “*Rambo Delivers a Revenge Fantasy*,” *NYT*, May 26, 1985.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid.

“Rambomania” in the summer of 1985.⁴⁵⁶ To begin with, in 1985 Sylvester Stallone was one of the biggest box office draws in the United States. Drawing on the success of *First Blood* and the *Rocky* franchise, the makers of *Rambo* led a major publicity blitz to hype the film. Upon its release, *Rambo* opened in 2,165 theaters—at the time a record number.⁴⁵⁷ Within three weeks, the film had grossed over \$75 million; the original *First Blood* had been considered successful when it grossed \$15 over the same period.⁴⁵⁸

According to some scholars, *Rambo* also shaped and was shaped by other cultural forces in society. As Susan Jeffords demonstrates in her book, *The Remasculinization of America*, the American War in Vietnam “provided the context in which American males could most clearly be identified as victims of a wide range of factors.”⁴⁵⁹ *Rambo* and other later representations of the war in American culture helped white American men to recover and reassert the masculine identity that had been called into question after the war. Clearly, the spectacle of shirtless young men adorned with plastic rifles and bullets entering Stallone look-alike contests, the winner of which would receive a job delivering “Rambograms,” testifies to Jeffords’ assertions.⁴⁶⁰ Critical theorist and cultural critic Douglas Kellner has also linked the success of *Rambo* to the film’s role as propaganda for Ronald Reagan’s domestic and foreign policy. For Kellner, Rambo is an articulation

⁴⁵⁶ For an excellent summary and discussion of Rambomania, see Douglas Keller, *Media Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995), chapter two: “Media Culture, Politics, and Ideology: From Reagan to Rambo.”

⁴⁵⁷ “Blood, Sweat, and Cheers,” *Newsweek*, June 3, 1985, 62.

⁴⁵⁸ Fred Bruning, “A Nation Succumbs to Rambomania,” *Macleans*, July 29, 1985, 7.

⁴⁵⁹ Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America*, 121.

⁴⁶⁰ “Rocky and Rambo: Return of the American Hero,” *Newsweek*, December 23, 1985, 61.

of much of Reaganism: unilateral military intervention, and a radical individualist as anti-government activist.⁴⁶¹

Reagan himself testified to the parallels between his worldview and that of Stallone in the early summer of 1985. Preparing to address the nation to announce the release of hostages being held in Beirut, Reagan announced, “Boy, I saw Rambo last night. Now I know what to do next time this happens.”⁴⁶² Although The White House claimed that the President was simply joking in a microphone test, the remark was picked up and carried in every major newspaper the next day.⁴⁶³ Stephen Randall, the executive vice president for marketing at Tri-Star pictures, the film’s distributor, told *Business Week* that Reagan’s comments may have added as much as \$50 million to the domestic revenues of the film.⁴⁶⁴ In Congress, lawmakers also appropriated the image of *Rambo* “over a dozen times” while debating a foreign aid bill that included aid to “insurgents in Afghanistan and Cambodia,” the very forces with which Rambo was aligned in *Rambo III*, and, implicitly, in *Rambo*.⁴⁶⁵

The virulent jingoism of Rambo, however, was immensely popular overseas as well. All three films in the series were financed by sales of the international distribution rights. *First Blood*, made for only \$14 million, grossed over \$50 million domestically

⁴⁶¹ Keller, *Media Culture*, 66.

⁴⁶² Franklin, *MIA*, 151.

⁴⁶³ For instance, see “Reagan Gets Idea from ‘Rambo’ for Next Time,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 1, 1985, cited in Franklin, *MIA*, 212; n43.

⁴⁶⁴ “The U.S. Has Surrendered—Now Rambo is Taking the World By Storm,” *Business Week*, August 26, 1985, 109.

⁴⁶⁵ Steven Roberts, “‘Machismo’ on Capitol Hill,” *WP*, July 15, 1985. Also cited in Franklin, *MIA*, 151.

and over \$70 million abroad. *Rambo*, which cost \$44 million, made more than \$180 million around the world, \$30 million more than it grossed in the United States.⁴⁶⁶ Although very popular in areas ranging from Bolivia to Japan, the film did especially well in the Middle East, breaking several marks in Israel and shattering every box office record in Lebanon.⁴⁶⁷ One of the foreign distributors of *Rambo* speculated that because of his lone-wolf style of violence, “maybe he’s a hero in the U.S. and a terrorist in other parts of the world.”⁴⁶⁸ Even some aboriginal tribes in Australia were documented appropriating Rambo’s insurgent identity to further their reclamation projects in that nation.⁴⁶⁹

Not everyone outside the United States appreciated the film, however. *Rambo* was banned in places as diverse as India and Norway, and drew particular ire from the Soviet Union. The Soviet government decried what it termed the American “cult of violence,” represented by attacks on Soviets in films such as *Rambo* and *Red Dawn*. A Russian film reviewer for Tass, the official government film agency wrote in December of 1985:

To brainwash the public, primarily American youth, U.S. propaganda experts urgently need a new ‘hero’ – a guy with muscles of iron who can deal with his enemies alone. Those who trampled on Grenada’s freedom, those who direct the actions of hitmen and killers in Lebanon, Nicaragua, and Afghanistan... eagerly await such a hero.⁴⁷⁰

⁴⁶⁶ “Rambonomics,” documentary by Laura Nix. Tri-Star Productions, 2001. Included in the *Rambo* DVD trilogy from Tri-Star, 2002.

⁴⁶⁷ “The U.S. Has Surrendered.”

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁹ John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 166-67.

It is worth noting that the Russians, who come off far better than the Vietnamese in the film, did not come to the defense of their allies here, nor did they note the American support of anti-Vietnamese forces in Southeast Asia. Clearly the United States was not the only nation to whom the ongoing, stalemated Third Indochina War was merely a sideshow.

The varied responses and appropriations of the Rambo image and identity in the United States and around the world testifies to the need to explore texts less in search of their “meaning” or their “code” than in how the texts circulate in particular contexts, how they relate to other texts, and how different groups respond to and use texts in specific historical moments. Like the rest of the world, the film sent shockwaves through American culture. Along with the “Rambograms” mentioned earlier, the United States and was also exposed to Rambo action figures, a Rambo cartoon series, Rambo toy guns and video games, and even Rambo-themed adult films.⁴⁷¹ The character also became synonymous with individual acts of mass violence, particularly those connected to or committed by veterans of the war. On December 5, 1986, Campo Delgado, a Columbian veteran of the American War in Vietnam went on a killing spree in Bogota, murdering 29 people, including his mother, before turning the gun on himself. The press quickly dubbed the killings a “Rambo-style bloodbath.”⁴⁷²

⁴⁷⁰ Quoted in “Reds Launch Major Assault on *Rambo*,” *The Toronto Star*, December 20, 1985, D26.

⁴⁷¹ “Rocky and Rambo: Return of the American Hero;” See also Franklin, *MIA*, 151. Franklin even mentions a few of the adult titles, including *Ramb-ohh!* (1986) and *Bimbo: Hot Blood Part I* (1985).

⁴⁷² “Vietnam Veteran Kills 29 in Bogota,” *The Times* (London), December 6, 1986.

A large number of Americans, including many veterans of the war, found the film both offensive and ridiculous. One veteran at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington told a reporter he thought the film was “fake. It didn’t represent me a bit.”⁴⁷³ Some took issue with the film’s revisionism, while others blamed Stallone for glamorizing combat. Scholar Harry Haines, in his essay, “The Pride is Back,” described a protest in Salt Lake City, in which American veterans of the war handed out information describing the movie as a “lie,” and containing “An Open Letter to Sylvester Stallone.” The letter read:

First, we want to know where you were in 1968 when we needed you. [Stallone, who was twenty-one in 1968, was teaching at a female secondary school in Switzerland at the time.] What right do you have to make this kind of movie and allow people of this country who have never been to war to believe that this is how wars are fought?

Many of our brothers went to their graves because they believed that you fought wars the way John Wayne did in his movies. Are you prepared to accept responsibility for the deaths that may happen in future wars as a result of youths who believe?⁴⁷⁴

Haines describes the protest not simply as a response to the film but to the rise of a “teenage ‘Rambo’ cult” in the city.⁴⁷⁵ In early 1986, a similar scene developed in Cambridge, where Harvard’s Hasty Pudding Society named Stallone its “Man of the Year” for 1985. Outside the club, a group of Veterans protested with signs that read “Reality vs. Rambo,” and featured a silhouetted Rambo figure in a circle with a line through it. According to film scholar Kevin Bowen, a small group of teenagers outside

⁴⁷³ “How Real is *Rambo*?” *WP*, July 8, 1985, C1.

⁴⁷⁴ Harry Haines, “The Pride is Back: *Rambo*, *Magnum P.I.* and the Return Trip to Vietnam,” in *Cultural Legacies of Vietnam: The Uses of the Past in the Present*, 99-123; 112.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 113.

the club waiting to get the actor's autograph taunted the veterans, calling Stallone "a real veteran."⁴⁷⁶ Several members of the group were accosted by the teens, some of whom even picked fights with the veterans.⁴⁷⁷

Some of the greatest damage done by *Rambo*, however, centered on its shameless propagandizing of the POW/MIA myth. Although it was neither the first nor last film to do so, its popularity allowed the myth to further seep into American culture, bringing it once again to the forefront of national affairs. We saw earlier how the Reagan administration approved and oversaw covert operations, not unlike the one portrayed in *Rambo*. With the release of the film however, the radical posturing of the POW/MIA lobby gained prominence. "We still have men over there who could be in prison camps working in fields," one veteran told *The Washington Post* in July of 1985. "I still think there's people in there and in the government trying to hide it," added another.⁴⁷⁸

In October of 1985, National Security Advisor Robert MacFarlane told a private audience that "there have to be live Americans over there," setting off a flurry of articles and remarks by relevant constituencies. Jeremiah Denton, a Republican Senator from Alabama and former POW, affirmed MacFarlane's beliefs, adding "the greatest motivation for me to believe that there are Americans there is the Communists' insistence that they are not."⁴⁷⁹ Throughout the year, articles appeared in numerous media outlets

⁴⁷⁶ Kevin Bowen, "'Strange Hells': Hollywood in Search of America's Lost War," in Dittmar and Michaud, eds., *From Hanoi to Hollywood*; 226-235; 229.

⁴⁷⁷ Haines quotes members of the group whom he interviewed and cites "Stallone Comes Through at Harvard," (*The Boston Globe*, February 19, 1986, 21) in "The Pride is Back," 113.

⁴⁷⁸ "How Real is Rambo?"

updating the MIA missions underway in Southeast Asia, noting that pressure had increased for results since *Rambo's* release.⁴⁸⁰ The Vietnamese, as they had done all along, went above and beyond expectations, continuing to locate, excavate, and repatriate the remains of unaccounted for American soldiers as if it were a standard practice in international relations. Yet every new discovery seemed to reinforce the paranoid fantasies that the Vietnamese were still holding live American prisoners. This view was only reinforced by the Regan Administration, who continued to blame Hanoi for the missing soldiers, "insisting," as one article put it, "that Hanoi must clear up the MIA controversy."⁴⁸¹

In the final analysis, however, the real danger of Rambo consists not in the text itself, nor even in the text's role in the larger social, political, and cultural issues described by Jeffords, Franklin, or Kellner. To be sure the damage done by Rambo was hardly insignificant in any of these cases: the remasculinization and remilitarization of American society or the further ensconcing of the POW/MIA mythology; yet in 1986, when Rambomania was finally dying down, the damage was only partially done. One of the most important and largely unnoticed long-term consequences of the Rambo phenomenon is that it redrew the terms of debate over the cultural memory of the war. As the standard bearer of the second wave, "revisionist" school of American films about the war in Vietnam, Rambo constructed and established a new matrix of representations

⁴⁷⁹ "POW's in Vietnam: Fact or Fiction," *U.S. News and World Report*, October 28, 1985, 12. MacFarlane's quote also appears in Franklin, *MIA*, 157.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid. Also see, for example, "MIA's: A Surprise from Hanoi," *Newsweek*, July 22, 1985, 34; and "The Lost Americans," *Newsweek*, January 20, 1986, 26.

⁴⁸¹ "The Lost Americans."

within and against which the next wave of films would be framed. However ridiculous the comic-book fantasy of *Rambo* may have appeared to some, it became the model against which new versions of the war's "reality" would be judged.

From Realism to Reality: Platoon as the Anti-Rambo

All but lost amid the rabid Rambomania was an antidote to the Reaganite fantasies filling the screens of the mid 1980s. *Salvador*, a dark view of American interventions in Central America, centered on the real-life experiences of Richard Boyle, a photojournalist who went to El Salvador "to reclaim his glory days from Vietnam."⁴⁸² Starring James Woods and Jim Belushi, both of whom took cuts in their normal salaries to make the picture, *Salvador* was the first directorial success for an up-and-coming filmmaker named Oliver Stone. Describing the impetus for the film, Stone said that he was "sick of happy endings. The 1980s is the era of phony endings. It's time to cycle a change." When asked if American filmgoers were ready "for such a heavy dose of political reality," Stone replied: "This will be a test case won't it?"⁴⁸³

If *Salvador* was indeed the test case, the answer must have been "no." Although it received some critical acclaim, the film performed poorly at the box office. Not to be deterred, Stone emerged from *Salvador* ready to deliver another dark film that would give new meaning to the word "reality." Stone, who dropped out of Yale in 1965 to join the

⁴⁸² "Oh What an Ugly War," *Newsweek*, September 9, 1985, 89.

⁴⁸³ Ibid.

American War in Vietnam, had been shopping around a screenplay based on his experiences in the war since the mid-1970s. Finding no interest and without the capital to make the film himself, he continued to write screenplays, breaking through with 1978's *Midnight Express*, for which he received an Academy Award.

Despite the increased attention that the Oscar brought him, Stone still found no suitors for his Vietnam film. In 1984, Stone struck a deal with Michael Cimino, of *The Deer Hunter* fame, and Dino De Laurentiis of the De Laurentiis Entertainment Group in Hollywood: if Stone would write the screenplay for *Year of the Dragon*, a Cimino project for De Laurentiis, Cimino would produce Stone's film. *Year of the Dragon*, in which a Vietnam War veteran fights drug traffic in New York's Chinatown, flopped, and the deal to make Stone's picture fell through because of a problem with the distribution rights.⁴⁸⁴ Finally, while Stone was making *Salvador*, a producer named Arnold Kopelson read Stone's screenplay and decided to make the film, the projected budget for which was only \$6 million. A few months later, Stone brought his production to the Philippines and began shooting *Platoon*.

Stone's screenplay was based on his own experiences in combat, a point that he and the studio never tired of promoting during the film's run. He also believed that his film was a crucial historical intervention, a revision of revisionist texts such as *Rambo* and *Top Gun*, two of the biggest films of the period, which Stone saw as "sinister" attempts to romanticize and rewrite the realities of warfare. "It's like a video game," he

⁴⁸⁴ Oliver Stone, "My Brilliant Career," *Time*, January 26, 1986, 60.

noted on an episode of *20/20*, “There is no reality to it.”⁴⁸⁵ Stone’s concern was not just with Rambomania, however. Even earlier films admired by Stone, such as *Apocalypse Now* and *The Deer Hunter*, “didn’t really fundamentally deal with the reality that I saw over there as an infantryman.” These films, Stone felt, had left a gaping hole in historical and popular narratives of the war: “I mean if we didn’t make that story, I felt we wouldn’t be telling the truth, we would be denying history. America would be a trasher of history, blind to the past.”⁴⁸⁶

In an attempt to accurately recreate his experiences, he put his actors through a month-long military training run by former Marine Captain Dale Dye. Dye, who served during the early years of direct American military involvement in Vietnam, set up a consulting firm to provide technical advice to filmmakers about the military. The firm, Warriors, Inc., was created by Dye in 1985 for reasons that echoed Stone’s reasons for making the film: “out of distaste for what he considered the metaphorical rambling of such films as *Apocalypse Now* and *The Deer Hunter* and for the revenge fantasies of the *Rambo* genre.” Even though the politics of Stone and Dye differed (they reportedly referred to each other as “John Wayne” and “the Bolshevik” on set), the two were both determined to “set the record straight.”⁴⁸⁷

Certainly the experiences of Stone and the advice and training provided by Dye lent themselves to the discourse of reality surrounding the film, but long before filming

⁴⁸⁵ *20/20*, March 26, 1987; cited in Lawrence Suid, *Guts and Glory: The Making of the American Military Image in Film* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2002), 504.

⁴⁸⁶ *Nightline*, December 19, 1986; cited in Suid, *Guts and Glory*, 505.

⁴⁸⁷ “How the War Was Won,” *Time*, January 26, 1986, 58.

started, it was clear that not everyone shared *Platoon*'s view of reality. Considering a request for assistance from one of Stone's earlier production companies, the military responded, "the script presents an unfair and inaccurate view of the Army... The entire script is rife with unrealistic and highly unfavorable depictions of the American soldier." Such a response was not entirely uncommon; as Lawrence Suid points out in his detailed study of the subject, even the unapologetically pro-war vehicle, *The Green Berets*, was initially denied military assistance.⁴⁸⁸ Yet at the time of the letter, both *Top Gun* and *Rambo* were set to have military aid provided. Dye, who appeared on the *20/20* episode with Stone, acknowledged that some of the specific complaints of the Army, including images of American soldiers raping and murdering children were far from universal, but remained adamant that the film was far more realistic than other films receiving aid:

It is not fair to say that every infantryman experienced those things and that every infantry platoon carried those things out. And we hastened to point that out. But is certainly fair to say those things happened. They're on the record, and if you want to deny the record, then go do *Rambo*.⁴⁸⁹

As we will see, the "record" was hotly contested after audiences flocked to see *Platoon* during the winter and spring of 1987.

The plot of Stone's film centers on the autobiographical character of Chris (Charlie Sheen), a college student who dropped out to join the war. The audience arrives in Vietnam with Chris in the opening scene, and remains with him until the film ends. In the first sequences of the film, we follow Chris on his first ambush mission.

⁴⁸⁸ Suid, *Guts and Glory*, 503-504.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid., 507.

The heat, the bugs, and the jungle are all palpable to the viewer, as Chris passes out on the hike from carrying too much. Drawing, as he does throughout the film on his own similar experiences, Stone's Chris is paralyzed by fear on the ambush, allowing the Viet Cong patrol to sneak up on the platoon. In the ensuing firefight, one member of the unit is killed, and Chris receives a minor injury.

After returning from his stint in the hospital, Chris returns to base camp, where Stone introduces the divided platoon, composed primarily of the "regulars" and "lifers," who drink, play poker, and generally follow Sergeant Barnes (Tom Berenger), and "the heads," who smoke pot, dance together to Motown tunes, and follow Elias (Willem Defoe). The bulk of the film focuses on the internal conflict of the Platoon between Barnes and Elias. Although Chris immediately identifies with Elias, a Christ-like figure who looks out for him, his ongoing conflict with the monstrous Barnes comes equally to define the character. As the film goes on, Chris rejects the most evil of Barnes' actions, but nevertheless becomes masculinized through combat, turning into a fighting and killing machine as reminiscent of Barnes as he is Elias.

In the defining moment of *Platoon*, the unit discovers Manny, one of their own, grotesquely killed by Vietnamese forces. The camera follows the troops in a tracking shot, showing close-ups of all the faces staring blankly ahead, ending with Barnes who snarls, "the motherfuckers." As the troops march toward the nearby village, reportedly in the hands of the National Liberation Front, Chris' voiceover reveals:

The village, which has stood for maybe a thousand years, didn't know we were coming that day. If they would, they would have ran. Barnes was the focus of our rage. Through him, our Captain Ahab, we would get things right again. That day, we loved him.

In following the lead of Barnes, his "Ahab," Chris at the same time attempts to justify the events which are about to take place and points out the futility of the platoon's efforts.

Like Ahab's quest for the elusive white whale, the platoon's search for "the enemy" will ultimately be a journey of senseless self-destruction. In the context of a narrative about the American war in Vietnam, however, the voiceover betrays the inability of Stone to represent the war from the point of view of a Vietnamese villager. Although the ensuing scene attempts to give a sense of the destruction wrought on similar villages during the war, it ultimately serves as a backdrop for the larger plot device of the internal battle between good and evil in the platoon.

As the platoon enters the village, pushing the residents with their guns, knocking over rice and killing a pig, Barnes locates several villagers hiding in a bunker. When one refuses to come out, he detonates a grenade inside the bunker. In one of the homes, Chris and Bunny (Kevin Dillon), a self-described "killer," threaten an old woman and her son, who appears to have developmental disabilities. Chris screams at the young man, remaining unrepentant, as another member of his squad (Corey Glover) attempts to calm him: "Oh, they're scared? *They're* scared? What about me? I'm sick of this shit!" Chris fires his weapon at the feet of the man, but stops short of executing him, at which point

Bunny calls him a “pussy” for not “doing the gook,” whom he charges with killing Manny as well as Sal, an earlier casualty. As they turn to leave the hut, Bunny turns around and repeatedly rams the butt of his rifle into the boy’s face, beating him to death.

Outside, the villagers have been rounded up and Barnes interrogates them through a translator. The elder man of the village denies that they are “VC,” but tells him that the NVA forces them to keep rice and weapons there. Throughout the scene, the man’s wife angrily yells and runs toward Barnes, held back by members of the squad. Her voice get louder and her rage more intense until Barnes walks up to her, draws his rifle and fires a single shot through her head. As the man holds his dead wife, Barnes instructs the translator: “You tell them he starts talking, or I’ll waste more of them.” Others in the platoon cry out in agreement, “let’s do the whole fucking village,” as Barnes takes the man’s young daughter and holds a gun to her head, still demanding information. Elias, who had remained behind at a bunker complex, shows up to stop Barnes, resulting in a brawl between the two. The village is burned, “suspected VC” rounded up and bound, and the atrocities continue, as Chris breaks up a group of soldiers raping two young girls. The scene is undoubtedly the most horrific sequence of any American film about the war in Vietnam, and was the focal point, as we will see, of the public debate over the “reality” of the film.

As the film continues, Chris continues to negotiate the rift in the Platoon, noting through a voiceover that he doesn’t “know what is right or wrong anymore... I can’t

believe we're fighting each other when we should be fighting them." Caught in a heated firefight, Elias goes off on his own to outflank the enemy troops, but is left behind as the platoon retreats. When Barnes finds Elias in the jungle, he "frags" him, shooting him and leaving him for dead. When Chris returns to try and find Elias, Barnes orders him to retreat from the area, telling him that Elias is dead. As the platoon is choppered out of the area, they see Elias being chased by what appears to be a full regiment of Vietnamese troops. He is shot several more times, and eventually succumbs to his pursuers.

Chris immediately suspects that Barnes murdered Elias, and back at the base plots his own fragging of Barnes with some of the other heads. Barnes can't be killed, Rhab tells Chris, "The only thing that can kill Barnes is Barnes." Their plot is interrupted by a half-drunken Barnes, who suddenly appears at the base of the bunker stairs, his face half-shadowed to reinforce the Platoon's struggle over the good and evil in their leader. "Y'all talking 'bout killin?" he asks. "Whatdy'all know bout killin?" As he stumbles around the bunker, he chastises the heads for their idealism, their belief in Elias, and for their cowardice. "You smoke this shit to escape from reality?" he asks them. "Me, I don't need this shit. *I am reality.*"

In that one short phrase, Barnes encapsulates the larger message of *Platoon*: that this is the way the war in Vietnam "really was." Barnes might as well be speaking directly to the audience, or, perhaps, to Rambo himself. War is about killing, he tells the troops. It's about death, and guts, and survival. At first glance, this is perhaps a more

suitable message than the glory-seeking fantasies offered by *Rambo* and the like. It is crucial, however, to see what is unspoken and invisible in Barnes', and *Platoon*'s version of reality. The scene in the bunker revolves around the murder of Elias, whose final demise is shown in excruciatingly slow motion as his troops watch helplessly from above. Although the atrocities in the village caused further divisions within the platoon, Chris and the others only begin to contemplate action when Barnes murders one of their own. *Platoon*'s reality is clearly that of a dark, divisive, and devastating war, but devastating for whom? The village is quickly forgotten (although not as quickly, as we will see, for American movie-goers, particularly veterans), rendered to the backdrop of the internal conflict of the film: brother versus brother, American against American. The war, *Platoon* betrays, was about the United States and what "the war" did "to us." In this sense, it is the culmination of the cinematic cultural productions that began with *Coming Home* nearly a decade earlier.

In the final scene of the movie, a long battle sequence in which the North Vietnamese troops overrun the American encampment, Chris demonstrates his full transformation into a one-man fighting force. In a Ramboesque moment, he kills over a dozen Vietnamese soldiers single-handedly. The Vietnamese troops overrun the American perimeter and the local commander, played by Dale Dye, calls in an air strike on his own troops. Shortly after that order, a Vietnamese suicide-bomber detonates a grenade in the command bunker. Chris and Barnes find themselves face to face amidst

the chaos of the battle, but just as Barnes is ready to deliver a final blow to Chris, the air strike bleeds the entire screen white. In the aftermath of the battle, the next morning, Chris awakes to find Barnes slithering around on the ground. Chris stares blankly at him at Barnes orders him to call for help. Realizing what is about to take place, Barnes tells Chris to “do it.” Without hesitation, Chris raises his weapon and fires two rounds into Barnes chest, killing him.

As relief arrives, Chris is taken away on a stretcher, while hundreds of dead Vietnamese bodies are tossed and bulldozed into a mass grave. As the helicopter carries Chris toward the heavens, a final voiceover brings closure to the narrative:

I think now, looking back, we did not fight the enemy. We fought ourselves. And the enemy was in us. The war is over for me now, but it always will be there for the rest of my days—as I’m sure Elias will be—fighting with Barnes for what Rah called the possession of my soul. There are times since when I feel like a child born of those two fathers. But be that as it may, those of us who did make it home have an obligation to build again; to teach others what we know; and to try with what’s left of our lives to find a goodness and meaning to this life.

If the United States did not fight the enemy, one wonders, who were the nameless, faceless bodies being destroyed in the village or in the final battle scene? Why were they being killed? Like nearly every other American film about the war, *Platoon* refuses to deal with the larger historical and political questions explaining American involvement in Vietnam. Yet *Platoon* takes this dehistoricizing of the war a step further, seeking to erase the Vietnamese from the narrative altogether. To argue, as *Platoon* does, that the enemy was “us,” is not simply to ignore why the United States became involved in Southeast

Asia; it is also to render invisible the incredible devastation wrought on Vietnam at the hands of the United States over several decades.

From the original screenplay, through the struggle to get it made, the production, release, and ensuing cultural dialogues about the film, *Platoon* has been discursively constructed almost exclusively around a single word: reality. As I argue here, though, the constructions of reality that accompany *Platoon* are, first, based as much on previous representations of the war, particularly *Rambo*, as on the “reality” of the war itself and, secondly, drawn upon a very narrow view of the war that reinforces the myopia of earlier Hollywood representations of the war and continues to render the Vietnamese invisible. Although it is not surprising, perhaps, that any American representations of the war silence the voices or points of view of the Vietnamese, the absence of those voices is nevertheless crucial to the constructions of the war offered by those representations, particularly the victimization of American subjects at the hands of the Vietnamese. Only by marginalizing and silencing the voices of the Vietnamese are such representations able to focus their attention entirely on the effects of the war on the United States. As I will argue below, however, the discourse surrounding the film is even more important than the text itself. It is by examining *Platoon*’s relationship to other texts and to other forms of expression that we can see how its version of reality achieved hegemony over the cultural memory of the war in the United States.

Released in December of 1986 in order to qualify for the Academy Awards,

where it received the awards for Best Picture and Best Director, *Platoon*'s preview trailers declared it "the first real movie about the war in Vietnam." Stone, in interviews for both print and television news, spoke about his own experiences testified to the reality of the film. And immediately upon its New York release it was hailed by most critics in language indistinguishable from the studio's marketing or Stone's own media campaign. David Ansen of *Newsweek* wrote that Stone's "elegy" is different from other films about the war. For starters, he was there." Ansen was particularly impressed with the way Stone situated the audience "down in the muck with the grunts."⁴⁹⁰ These sentiments were echoed by *The New York Times*, in which Vincent Camby lauded *Platoon* for taking as its subject, "the life of the infantryman, endured at ground level, in heat and muck, with fatigue and ants and with fear as a constant, even during the druggy hours back in the comparative safety of the base."⁴⁹¹ Fred Burning, writing in MacLean's, claimed that *Platoon* left audiences feeling that "they had served a tour of duty too." "Now," he concluded, "we know exactly how bad it was" for the American troops.⁴⁹²

The ultimate compliment for *Platoon*, however, came on January 26, 1987, when the film appeared on the cover of *Time*, a rare honor for a contemporary Hollywood film. Not even at the height of Rambomania, when the shirtless Stallone was a ubiquitous presence in American, and even global culture, did his presence grace the weekly's cover. With a background of camouflaged fatigues, the *Time* cover featured a grim snapshot of Elias, Barnes, and Chris, staring blankly ahead under the banner, "PLATOON: Viet Nam

⁴⁹⁰ David Ansen, "A Ferocious Vietnam Elegy," *Newsweek*, January 5, 1987, 57.

⁴⁹¹ Vincent Camby, "The Vietnam War in Stone's 'Platoon,'" *NYT*, December 19, 1986.

⁴⁹² Fred Burning, "A Celluloid War of Credibility," *Maclean's*, March 16, 1987.

As It Really Was.” Inside, a major feature by Richard Corliss, including sidebars on Stone and Dye, highlights Stone’s experiences in the war and how he has “created a time-capsule movie that explodes like a frag bomb in the consciousness of America, showing how it was back then, over there.” Stone, Corliss concludes, “has devised a drama of palpable realism.”⁴⁹³

In these and other reviews, critics hail the film’s “realism,” and praise Stone, clearly situated as an authority on the war, for telling it how it was. But we can also see from these reviews that the aesthetic realism of the film, the “palpable” landscape representing Vietnam, is as central to the construction of reality offered by *Platoon* as any attention to historical accuracy. The basic formula for these reviews can roughly be summarized as saying: take Stone’s experience, add a dose of “muck,” and you have the reality of the American war in Vietnam. Gilbert Adair points to both these components in his discussion of *Platoon*, arguing that “we are bullied into craven submission” by the construction of “realness” in the film and the “certificate of authenticity,” offered by Stone’s experiential justifications.⁴⁹⁴

But there is a more subtle factor at work in constructing *Platoon* as “the way it was” as well, one which has been overlooked in other studies of films about the American War in Vietnam. *Platoon*, as film scholar Eben Muse later claimed, “established the conventions of reality for Vietnam.”⁴⁹⁵ This is certainly true, although it is significant that Muse chose to use “Vietnam” to stand in for “Hollywood

⁴⁹³ “Vietnam, The Way It Really Was,” *Time*, January 26, 1987, 57.

⁴⁹⁴ Adair, *Hollywood’s Vietnam*, 150

⁴⁹⁵ Muse, “The Way it Really Was,” in *The Land of Nam*, 169.

representations of the American War in Vietnam.” But *Platoon* did not simply conjure up its reality from the muck of historical experience. Rather, Stone’s film altered the matrix of “reality” for American films about the war by working against the conventions established by earlier representations. In nearly every review of *Platoon*, the reviewer begins by setting the film up against earlier Hollywood representations of the American War in Vietnam, most commonly *The Deer Hunter*, *Apocalypse Now*, and, especially, *Rambo*. This is not surprising, of course; it is common for films, particularly those dealing with a specific historical topic, to be compared to one another. But the prevalence with which these three films are invoked in reviews and debates about *Platoon* suggests something more than comparison at work here. *Platoon* may look, sound, and feel more like the actual combat experience of American infantrymen in Vietnam, but it does so as much because Stone’s Chris is not Cimino’s Michael, Coppala’s Willard, or Stallone’s Rambo. Similarly, with the success of *Platoon*, those films became increasingly *less* about Vietnam the nation or even Vietnam the war, and more about “Vietnam,” the American “experience.”

We have already seen that both Stone and Dye brought to the project a desire to produce an explicit reversal of “the metaphorical rambling of such films as *Apocalypse Now* and *The Deer Hunter* and for the revenge fantasies of the *Rambo*.” “There’s no reality” to those pictures, Stone noted. The entire project of *Platoon* thus began with a particular view of reality framed as much by earlier filmic representations as historical

experience. In Ansen's *Newsweek* review, he begins by noting that while watching *Platoon*, "it dawns on you that most previous Hollywood movies about Vietnam weren't really about Vietnam." In the first film wave (discussed here in chapter four),

Vietnam was not so much an issue as an opportunity to create epic cinema; for the makers of 'Rambo' and its comic-book ilk it was an opportunity to make money, while winning the war in a cinematic rematch.⁴⁹⁶

Canby's review in the *Times* concurred, arguing that *Platoon* "is not like any other Vietnam film that's yet been made, certainly not like those revisionist comic strips 'Rambo' and 'Missing in Action.'" The film was also unlike Coppala's or Cimino's, he continued, which were "more about the mind of the America that fought the war than the Vietnam War itself."⁴⁹⁷ Canby continued to press the point in a later piece, concluding that, unlike *Platoon*, *Apocalypse Now*, and *The Deer Hunter* "floated above the concerns of the American foot soldiers and saw the war in terms of mythology."⁴⁹⁸

In March of 1987, when *Platoon* once again grabbed headlines as the Oscars approached, no less a figure than David Halberstam, a legendary reporter during the war, weighed in on the film, further cementing the film's version of reality. In contrast to the films of the first wave, all of which Halberstam praises in some way, "*Platoon* is about Vietnam... It is painfully realistic." "What Mr. Stone has done," he continues, in both a medium given to fantasy and in a political age given to longing (if not fantasy) is to strike an enormous blow for reality." But, he adds, "[o]ne cannot truly appreciate his achievement without comparing it to the work of Sylvester Stallone... Because of

⁴⁹⁶ Ansen, "A Ferocious Vietnam Elegy."

⁴⁹⁷ Vincent Camby, "The Vietnam War in Stone's *Platoon*."

⁴⁹⁸ Camby, "*Platoon* Finds New Life in Old War Movie," *NYT*, January 11, 1987.

Rambo, I am that much more in Oliver Stone's debt." Halberstam could hardly fit enough superlatives in his piece: "genuinely authentic," "stunningly real" "the ultimate work of witness."⁴⁹⁹

What is most significant about Halberstam's piece, however, is his testament of the reality of the film from the "enemy" point of view. Not only does Stone accurately represent the American soldiers' experience, but in his film "the other side gets to shoot back;" they are shown as "professional and tough."

From the very early scene when the Americans set a night ambush, we see the N.V.A. regulars move into that ambush and we see how skillful and careful they are. In a World War II movie, all the N.V.A. soldiers would be blown away; in this one, although surprised, they fight with considerable skill.⁵⁰⁰

Halberstam again points to Rambo, however, as crucial to the construction of the Vietnamese offered by *Platoon*. "Mr. Stallone," he writes does an injustice to the American veterans of the war "because he diminishes their opponents:

In *Rambo* we are told that where an American battalion would have failed, one soldier-as-cowboy can do it all, wipe out hundreds of dinky little Vietnamese. With the barely covert racism of the movie, Mr. Stallone would undo what few lessons we have learned from Vietnam.⁵⁰¹

Halberstam admits that the Vietnamese soldiers in the film are "more a shadow hovering constantly in the background than a fleshed out reality," but then how are they different from the voices in the wilderness offered in *Apocalypse Now*? Against the caricatured Communist stooges in *Rambo*, would not any invisible enemy appear more realistic?

⁴⁹⁹ David Halberstam, "Two Who Were There View *Platoon*; The Correspondent." *NYT* March 8, 1987.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁰¹ Ibid.

Without *Rambo*, how realistic would Stone's Vietnamese be? How "tough" and "professional" would the Vietnamese appear?

Halberstam, for instance, points to the early ambush scene, drawn from Stone's own experience. In that scene, briefly recounted above, the platoon sets up their position for the night. Chris is awakened to take his shift, which he does nervously but without incident, as a voiceover explains why he joined the war. Chris then awakens Junior, himself a fairly racist portrayal of a disgruntled, lazy black soldier, to take his shift.⁵⁰² Later, Chris awakens to find that Junior has fallen asleep and notices shadowy figures in the distance approaching the unit's perimeter. As they move closer, Chris remains paralyzed by fear, watching the enemy forces move closer and closer. They are almost on top of him when one trips the wire protecting the perimeter, sending up flares and awakening the platoon. Chris then fumbles the activation of the claymore mines, further hampering the American unit. During and after the brief but intense fight, we see close ups of the American wounded, one of whom dies, and Chris, who receives a minor wound, but a great deal of attention from the unit and the camera. The Vietnamese forces scamper off into the night, retreating shadows back into the jungle. Needless to say, the audience never receives that unit's casualty report.

Certainly a film need not give as much attention to the Vietnamese forces as it does to the American troops to be considered fair, but what in this scene justifies Halberstam's claim of the Vietnamese being shown to fight with "considerable skill"?

⁵⁰² Stone drew a fair amount of criticism for his portrayal of Black soldiers in *Platoon*. In their initial denial of military assistance, the Army took Stone to task for "stereotyping black soldiers." (Suid, *Guts and Glory* 503). *Time* noted that black soldiers are occasionally patronized and sentimentalized. ("Vietnam: The Way it Really Was," 58.) For a fuller treatment of the issue, see Clyde Taylor, "The Colonialist Subtext in *Platoon*," in Dittmar and Michaud, *From Hanoi to Hollywood*.

The Vietnamese walk right up on the American platoon, only to set off a tripwire and announce their presence, they get in a shot or two, and then retreat just as quickly as they came. One could certainly argue that this is an improvement over *Rambo*, but there seems little basis for Halberstam's claim of the heroic and skillful representation of Vietnamese soldiers.

The ambush scene is the only one specifically mentioned by Halberstam, but there seems scant evidence in the film to support his argument. In every encounter portrayed by the film, the Vietnamese are merely a postscript. During the atrocity sequence in the village, Chris notes that if the villagers had known he and his platoon were coming, "they would have run." Where, one is tempted to ask, would they have run? Could the villagers really have been surprised when the Americans showed up? In the final battle scene, Chris has matured into a killing machine and makes up for the supposed cowardice of other members of the unit by staying to fight, taking out dozens of Vietnamese. Although different in scale from John Rambo's exploits, is Chris' rampage all that different, in terms of its representation of the enemy, from what Halberstam refers to as "the soldier as cowboy" who "wipes out hundreds of dinky Vietnamese"? After the battle, the audience again sees agonizing close-ups of the wounded Americans, while the faceless and nameless Vietnamese corpses are simply bulldozed into a mass grave. Even in *Time*, the only major piece on *Platoon* even to point out the potentially problematic representation quickly explained it away:

[T]he Vietnamese are either pathetic victims or the invisible, inhuman enemy. In the scheme of *Platoon* (and not just *Platoon*) they do not matter. The nearly one million Vietnamese casualties are deemed trivial compared with America's loss of innocence, of allies, of geopolitical face. And the tragedy of Viet Nam is seen as this: not that they died, but that we debased ourselves in killing them. Of course, *Platoon* need not be every possible Viet Nam film to be the best one so far. It is enough that Stone has devised a drama of palpable realism...⁵⁰³

Once again, any potential problems with the film, any contradictions in its construction of reality, are justified by placing *Platoon* alongside *more* problematic, earlier representations of the war. What this review fails to acknowledge is that the invisible enemy is not a casual by-product of the film's focus on the United States. Rather, it is a crucial factor in allowing the American-centered narrative to continue.

In the end, the Vietnamese are clearly an afterthought to *Platoon*, which, as *Time* pointed out, does not distinguish it from most other American films about the war. There may be good reasons for such representations, which have little to do with the commercial viability of a film more attentive or sympathetic to the Vietnamese people; when discussing *Salvador*, Stone argued he could not "get inside the Salvadoran peasant's head. That would be presumptuous of me."⁵⁰⁴ It could very well be that a representation that allows the Vietnamese subjects to remain invisible, rather than attempting to speak for them, is an improvement over the racism of *Rambo*. In the final sequence, however, Stone's allegorical screenplay proposes a further, revisionist erasure of the Vietnamese. As he rides away in the helicopter, Chris tells the audience, "we did not fight the enemy. We fought ourselves and the enemy was in us." Those shadowy

⁵⁰³ "Vietnam: The Way it Really Was," 58.

⁵⁰⁴ "Oh What a Dirty War."

figures in the jungle, the girls being raped in the village, and the mass grave full of Vietnamese bodies— do not matter in the final analysis of *Platoon*. What matters, as with *Coming Home*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Apocalypse Now*, and even *Rambo*, is what the war did to “us.”

My point here is not to discuss the film that Stone or others could have made; rather, I have attempted to show that *Platoon*’s “reality,” to which the studio, filmmaker, actors, critics, and reviewers testified, is necessarily incomplete. For a film to be constructed through self-promotion and critical discourse as “Vietnam: The Way it Really Was,” with only the slightest regard for what the war did to the nation and people of Vietnam is as problematic as the absurdities offered by *Rambo* and its progeny. The makers of *Rambo* or the *Missing in Action* films, while never apologetic about their film, also never tried to pawn their movies off as portraying the reality of the American War in Vietnam. “I tried to make video games out of them,” said Joe Zito, director of *Missing in Action* and *Missing in Action II*, “and audiences had to know that we weren’t playing realistically... It’s not as if we set out to make a realistic war movie and failed.”⁵⁰⁵

The intentions of the films may have been different, but *Platoon* and *Rambo* will always be intimately linked to one another in the battle over the cultural memory of the American War in Vietnam. We have already seen how critics and reviewers constructed a discourse of *Platoon*’s reality against *Rambo*’s cartoonish fare, but other constituencies weighed in during the “*Platoon-Mania*” of early 1987 as well. On January 25, *The Los*

⁵⁰⁵ Quoted in “*Platoon*—Hollywood Steps on a Gold Mine,” *LA Times*, January 25, 1987, Calendar Section, 39.

Angeles Times devoted its “Calendar” section to *Platoon*, receiving an overwhelming response to its proposed forum, “A Reason to Reflect on War.”⁵⁰⁶ Critics, veterans, and members of the movie industry weighed in, discussing the film’s relation to the Rambo films and belying *Platoon*’s claims of a monopoly on the reality of the war. Chuck Norris, star of the *Missing in Action* franchise, called *Platoon* a “slap in the face,” to American veterans, adding, “my God, it’s making us look like the bad guys, and the VC like the good guys.”⁵⁰⁷ Jane Fonda served as the counterweight to Norris on the same page, calling the Ramboesque fantasies “revisionist cinema” that “obscures the truth.” Taking particular issue with Stallone, Fonda noted that he was teaching school in Switzerland during the war.⁵⁰⁸

More important than the Hollywood stars, however, were the more anonymous figures quoted in the piece. Radio talk show hosts remarked that they were being forced to limit the amount of air time devoted to listeners’ comments on *Platoon*, because the film was “all they wanted to talk about.” “A woman called to say her husband, who was a former Marine, didn’t find it (“*Platoon*”) realistic,” noted a Chicago host. “The phones rang off the hook after that from people defending it.”⁵⁰⁹ Several veterans are cited in the article as finding the film too difficult to sit through; they ended up in the lobby weeping. Yet for every veteran who found the film all too realistic, there seems to be one who finds

⁵⁰⁶ “A Reason to Reflect on War,” *LA Times*, January 25, 1987. Calendar Section, 1.

⁵⁰⁷ “Drawing Flak from Norris,” *LA Times*, January 25, 1987. Calendar Section, 3.

⁵⁰⁸ “After Seeing *Platoon*, Fonda Wept,” *LA Times*, January 25, 1987. Calendar Section, 3.

⁵⁰⁹ “*Platoon*—Hollywood Steps on a Goldmine,” 5.

Platoon an affront to their experience. “I was insulted by it,” claimed Al Santoli, a combat veteran and author. “In my division, we didn’t burn down any villages, we didn’t slaughter villagers. It says no more about the war than *The Deer Hunter* or any of the others. It’s just one person’s view of it.”⁵¹⁰

The most intriguing part of the *LA Times* forum is a brief side story devoted to responses to the film from Vietnamese refugees. The piece is entitled, “Viet Refugees Give *Platoon* Good Reviews,” but once again the reaction to the film is altered by the lens of *Rambo* and other films. To many Vietnamese refugees, the story begins, “the best that can be said for *Platoon*” is that it “isn’t just another Rambo.” “We have never taken the earlier films seriously,” noted an Orange County resident, because they “are so unreal, the situations so preposterous.” A student at UC Irvine called *Platoon* “very real. It is not make believe. It is not a lot of Stallone or Chuck Norris.” As with American veterans, however, the reality of the film remains sharply contested for many Vietnamese-Americans. Yen Do, editor of a Vietnamese paper in California, accepted that an American film that did justice to a Vietnamese view of the war was unlikely, but wanted to make clear that *Platoon* “was no more about Vietnam and its people than was *Deer Hunter* or any of the others. This is to be expected. They were made by Americans for Americans.” Yet in the end, Do conceded, “Yes, it is better than *Rambo*. We can be glad for that can’t we?”⁵¹¹

Do was not the only one grateful for *Platoon*, however. Early in January of 1987,

⁵¹⁰ Ibid., 6.

⁵¹¹ “Viet Refugees Give *Platoon* Good Reviews,” *LA Times*, January 25, 1987. Calendar Section, 5.

a father wrote to the *New York Times* praised *Platoon* as antidote to *Rambo*. His son, the man wrote, had become “enthralled” with Rambo’s escapades as a lone warrior Movies such as *Rambo* and Clint Eastwood’s *Heartbreak Ridge*, which portrays the invasion of Grenada as an antidote to the Vietnam “syndrome,” “reinforced my son’s plans to join [the Marines].” *Platoon*, by contrast, “worked a dramatic cure;” its images of “filth and blood,” and of war in which “death wasn’t clean,” led his son to rethink his enlistment plans and his Rambo fantasies. “*Platoon* is rated R for good reasons,” the man concluded.” “For the sake of the Rambo generation, it ought to be PG-13.”⁵¹²

Was *Platoon* an improvement over *Rambo*? Would the “Rambo generation” be better off with the stark realism of Stone than with the cartoonish fare of Stallone? As I have argued here, the question itself obscures the significant similarities of the two films. As I have also argued, however, the answer to that question lies not in a reading of the texts themselves, but to examine how they interact with other fields and other form of cultural production.

The ‘NAM – *Comic Book Battleground*

As *Platoon*’s version of reality was ensconced in American culture, its trickle-down effects were seen not simply in other films, but in other media and contexts as well. Inevitably, however, as *Platoon* was emulated in a medium such as television, an already questionable and problematic representation of the war was further sanitized in

⁵¹² “*Platoon Meets Rambo*,” *NYT*, January 22, 1987, A26.

accordance with the commercial and political precepts of cultural production. All the major networks were contemplating Vietnam War-related projects in the summer of 1987; NBC reportedly had in the works a Vietnam version of *M*A*S*H*, and ABC was developing a similar project that would eventually become the very successful *China Beach* series.⁵¹³ When CBS launched *Tour of Duty* in the fall of 1987, alongside HBO's *Vietnam War Story*, it quickly became clear that network television would not be able to reproduce *Platoon* without significant concessions. Although HBO's series was allowed at least some latitude in its use of salty language and violence, CBS's show was roundly criticized by critics for its oversimplifications and overly sanitized portrayal of war. As one critic wrote:

Nary a single GI is shown puffing a joint. Breakdowns in military discipline—the atrocities committed against Vietnamese civilians and the “fragging” of U.S. officers—are as absent as references to the war’s political divisiveness or depictions of its gory cost.

These problems, however, were explained away largely by the limitations of network programming:

Still, it’s hard to imagine any filmmaker obliged to answer to affiliates, sponsors, and government overseers doing this subject much differently. And just the fact that CBS decided to take on Vietnam merits a commendation.⁵¹⁴

This, in the final analysis, is the most dangerous aspect of *Platoon*: not that in and of itself it was “unrealistic,” but that by recasting the lines of what was considered the reality of the war, its progeny, working within the confines, histories, and modes of production in other media, could come up far short of *Platoon*’s realism and still be

⁵¹³ “Prime Time for Vietnam,” *Newsweek*, August 31, 1987, 68.

⁵¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.

accepted as working within the new matrix of reality.

Some of the concern with having these representations reach a wider audience revolved around how to teach a new generation of “post-Vietnam” Americans about the war. One article in *U.S News and World Report* even credited Stone’s film with helping to instill in young people a new curiosity about the American War in Vietnam: “Until now, the views of the young have been shaped more often by Hollywood in films such as *The Deer Hunter* and *Rambo* than by history books,” but new curricula and movies such as *Platoon* “are casting Vietnam in a more realistic light.”⁵¹⁵ As that article pointed out, however, because of the way history classes are taught, the war often comes late in the year and thus receives scant attention. Thus, even with the most innovative curriculum, students might not even discuss the war in their history classes. Left with such a void, many would continue to learn about the war through films and other representations.⁵¹⁶

If students and others were to learn about the war outside of the classroom, many no doubt continued to take refuge in their belief that *Platoon* had replaced the “comic book ilk” of *Rambo* as the primary popular historical referent for the war in American culture. As we have seen, of course, the two films actually share a great deal in common. And at least in one medium, the seemingly opposed modes of *Platoon*’s realism and *Rambo*’s comic-book fantasies came together to constitute a new front in the cultural inversion of the history of the war.

In December of 1986, Marvel Comics released the first issue of its new Vietnam

⁵¹⁵ “Vietnam Comes of Age,” *U.S. News and World Report*, February 2, 1987, 58.

⁵¹⁶ For a fuller discussion of the topic, see “Quagmire in the Classroom: Teaching the Vietnam War to Post-Vietnam Generations,” undergraduate thesis by the author, in possession of author.

War comic, *The 'NAM*. Within a year, the book and its creators would be featured on the CBS Evening News with Dan Rather, receive an award from the Vietnam Veterans of America, and become one of the hottest selling comics in the Marvel family. *The 'NAM*, however, was not meant to be just another war comic; it was designed to play *Platoon* to G.I. Joe's *Rambo*. In the first issue, “‘Nam: First Patrol,” after following PFC Ed Marks on a journey that replicates Chris Taylor’s initial story in *Platoon*, the series editors described their goals for the book:

The ‘NAM is the real thing—or at least as close to the real thing as we can get—in a newsstand comic bearing the Comics Code seal. Every action, every firefight is based on fact... Furthermore, the events in the ‘Nam happen in real time. When thirty days pass for the reader, thirty days also pass for the characters in the story... Now, I can’t promise that we will show everything, every action that everyone’s father or brother ever took part in during the Viet Nam war. But I will promise that we will show, in basic terms, what the War was really like for those who fought in it.⁵¹⁷

That disclaimer is followed by a section called “‘Nam Notes,” a glossary of “grunt jargon” that appeared in every issue. “To give a true feel of the real Viet Nam, we will use this jargon whenever we can,” explained the editors. For example, in the first issue, the glossary included “LZ” (landing zone), M-16, R&R, and “Victor Charlie;” “(or sometimes just CHARLIE): the Viet Cong, in short, the enemy.⁵¹⁸ The next issue offered a diagram of military hierarchies, a few additional phrases, and an updated definition for “Charlie”: “The Viet Cong, Charlie Cong, the VC, the enemy, the bad guys.”⁵¹⁹ Like *Platoon*, although “enemy” will be relegated almost entirely to the background of the

⁵¹⁷ “Incoming,” *The Nam* 1 (New York: Marvel Comics, December, 1987).

⁵¹⁸ “‘Nam Notes,” *The Nam* 1, December, 1986.

⁵¹⁹ “‘Nam Notes,” *The Nam* 2, January, 1987.

story, *The 'Nam* makes no secret of its allegiances. Not only are the “Viet Cong,” who are never referred to by the more proper and sympathetic “National Liberation Front,” described as “the enemy,” without any justification of why they are contesting the American presence in Vietnam, they are also clearly labeled “the bad guys.” No guesses are thus needed to determine who “the good guys” were in the American War in Vietnam.

In its limited, structured realism, working within the confines of the Comics Code, which regulates violence, sexuality and language for comic books much in the same way as film ratings, *The 'NAM* quickly became hailed by readers, many of them first-time comic readers according to their letters, as a “realistic” comic, one committed, like *Platoon*, to showing the war “how it really was.” More importantly, however, the comic became a site of struggle over the cultural memory of the war, a space for debates over the form and substance of memories of war and a means of transmitting knowledge to future generations. As readers responded to *The 'Nam*, they also claimed the text as a pedagogical site, and, as such, a crucial point of inquiry for cultural studies scholars and historians of the relationship between Vietnam and American Culture after 1975.

Despite claims of realism from its creators, the comic offers many troubling representations of the war, the Vietnamese, and the antiwar movement. It also offers a very limited and sanitized portrayal of the American “grunt’s” combat experience. Although much of this is to be expected given the history and mode of production of the

medium and genre within which the comic operated, the images and ideas laying claim to the “reality” of the war need to be understood as part of the larger, troubling construction of the “reality” of the war taking place in American culture in the mid to late 1980s. As with the previous discussion of *Rambo* and *Platoon*, the point here is not to dismiss one set of texts as “false,” but rather to demonstrate that far from a singular historical reality, texts, especially popular texts, necessarily offer competing versions of the same events. Texts such as *Platoon* and *The 'Nam*, however, which use the tropes of experience and “historical accuracy” to claim their version of reality as *the* reality, further demonstrate the need to identify and dissect the contradictions and silences embedded in those stories.

For the most part, *The 'Nam* worked within the established matrix of representations defined by films about the American War in Vietnam, rendering Vietnamese subjects almost entirely invisible and focusing attention on what the war did to Americans. It was particularly similar to *Platoon* in its focus on portraying the war from the “grunt’s point of view.” As with the other, more sanitized progeny of *Platoon* in other media, however, *The Nam* reinforced a view of the war in which American soldiers play the role of the good guys to the marginalized Vietnamese enemy. Unlike *Platoon*, there is little mention of drugs in *The 'Nam*; there are no atrocity scenes or rapings of young girls. When it comes to representations of the enemy, however, the comic follows *Platoon* closely. With a few exceptions, the Vietnamese in *The 'Nam* do not speak. We do not see their faces and they do not shoot back, although they always

instigate the fighting. The bombing and napalming of villages is always justified by showing that village was controlled by the National Liberation Front. Vietnamese deaths occur in bunches, with nameless and faceless piles of bodies, while American deaths, few and far between, are drawn out, anguishing scenes. As we will see, the creators of the comics did this not only based on the codes, formal and informal, of comic production, but because of their own views of the war and other popular representations of the war.

In the fifth issue, “Humpin the Boonies,” readers are shown the first close view of the Vietnamese. After the unit stumbles upon a massive pile of bodies, murdered by the NLF, one of the troops hears a squad of soldiers, who turn out to be the executioners of the villagers, drunkenly stumbling down the road. “They get careless when they think they’re safe,” one of the Americans says. “Must be a pretty big camp nearby. Let’s find it!”⁵²⁰ In the next pane, the American unit shows up, completely undetected, a few yards away from the base. “See the livestock. They must have ‘liberated’ it from the village. These are the boys that like to play with machetes.” After calling for reinforcements, the V.C. base is shelled, and we see fearful Vietnamese soldiers being exploded by artillery; the entire base is wiped out without a fight. As in other representations discussed in this and previous chapters, when the Vietnamese forces are shown at all, they are often shown as incompetent or corrupt.

Similar images appear with incredible regularity in the comic. In the next issue, “Monsoon,” the racist caricatures of Vietnamese villagers go well beyond comic book

⁵²⁰ “Humpin’ the Boonies,” *The ‘Nam* Number Five (April, 1987).

simplifications. Aside from the crude artwork, the villagers in this issue grin menacingly throughout the following “realistic” dialogue:

Vietnamese Villager: Hello Joe! Welcome to our old poor village.

American Soldier: Thank you. We are just passing through, looking for numbah ten guerillas. Have you seen any?

Villager: (now surrounded by four other grinning locals): Guerillas! Here? This is just a peaceful village.

Soldier: I am glad it is so peaceful. We will not disturb you, but surely you won’t mind if we walk through and avoid the mud of the fields?

Villager: We would be proud to have our American friends visit. Just follow this dike for another two or three clicks. We will go ahead to prepare a welcome.

Unsurprisingly, the Americans see through the villagers’ charade, and ambush the villagers “welcome,” which consists of a few dozen members of the NLF, heavily armed and idly waiting for the approaching Americans. All of the Vietnamese are killed in the American counter-attack.

In two issues, however, the creators of *The ‘Nam*, stretch the limits of representations by attempting to present a view of the war from the “enemy’s point of view.” In Number Seven, for instance, entitled “Good Old Days,” the cover shows an old, run down Vietnamese soldier against a backdrop of two rifles, a silhouetted map of Vietnam, and a pastiche of flags related to the occupation and liberation of the country. Ed Marks, the “star” of the first year’s series, asks Duong, a former NLF soldier, “why he switched.” The entire strip offers a condensed history of Vietnamese from 1940 to 1967,

reinscribed within a narrative that “explains” the American war. In case readers questioned the accuracy of the story, Doug Murray, the strip’s author, attached a note to the second page:

The elements of this story *are completely true*. Duong’s story is actually a composite of the stories of three different VC... By using these stories, I think we’ve given a clear picture of the roots of the war—the reason Charlie fought as long and hard as he did.⁵²¹

Duong narrates the story, which begins with French Vichy officials executing his wife, who resisted the Japanese-French occupation. After attending college in France and being exposed to Vietnamese nationalist thought, Doung returned to join the Viet Minh in their fight against the occupying powers. As the Viet Minh unit liberated his village, Duong began to be suspicious of the revolutionaries, and returned to his life as “a simple farmer.” In 1954, “it all came apart again... war had come again,” and Duong again joined the Viet Minh to fight the French. “Finally, at Dienbienphu, the war was over,” he continued, “but that wasn’t the end of it. The diplomats talked and my country still wasn’t free. It was split in two. And the South was still under the hand of the colonialists.”⁵²² Describing the repression of Diem’s regime in the South and land reform in the North, Duong noted that “there seemed no justice anywhere.”

Then, with the arrival of large numbers of troops, the story notes, “the Americans came.”

They began to build great bases, where they could feel secure. Then they went in to our cities, and tried to buy everything [including, the image instructs, Vietnamese women]. But they were never really secure. Not in their bases. Not

⁵²¹ “Good Old Days,” *The ‘Nam* Number Seven (June, 1987); emphasis added.

⁵²² Ibid., 13.

in our cities. They were never safe. [images of Americans having their throats slit and being gunned down by Vietnamese]. But the Americans got better, and more confident. Meanwhile I kept fighting. But it was not the same. You Americans wanted to help [American soldiers assisting Vietnamese children], while my people—I do not know what my people were trying to do! [a young Vietnamese boy attacks American soldiers with a grenade, killing them both.] As time passed, I became more and more unsure that I was on the right side [Viet Minh gunning down unarmed students, women, and children]. Finally, I made my decision. I came to your people, where I have been accepted.⁵²³

This attempt at the “enemy’s” point of view, far from showing “why Charlie fought as long and hard as he did,” works entirely within the pattern of historical inversion whereby the Americans are entirely different from the imperial powers that previously sought to colonize Vietnam. The story completely masks the long history of American involvement that began long before 1965, and completely ignores the role of American atrocities and war crimes in Vietnam. In contrast, although the strip does attempt to show the nationalist roots of the Vietnamese revolutionary forces, it makes them out to be little more than murderers and tyrants, while the American servicemen are cast as the innocent victims of young urban terrorists on motorbikes. Thus, whether the revolutionary forces of Vietnam were primarily Communist or Nationalist is irrelevant to the story; they were simply terrorists who attacked the friendly Americans—in acts that this seasoned nationalist fighter is unable to comprehend.

Less troubling is number twenty-two, “Thanks for Thanksgiving,” which offers a surprisingly dignified representation of Vietnamese forces, if only for a few pages. In an

⁵²³ Ibid., 16-22.

underground tunnel complex, Vietnamese subjects, far from the racist caricatures seen in other issues escape American fire, treat their wounded, and speak in full sentences (which were “translated from the Vietnamese”). For the rest of the book, action reverts back to the American unit, which cooks up a large Thanksgiving feast while in the field. As they leave their field location to return the base, the Americans leave several cases of food behind, which the Vietnamese forces take into the bunkers to feed their wounded. “You see, Doctor. You see?,” one of the wounded says. “It is as I said! The Americans have much! So much! And it just slips through their fingers. So it will be with our country! With all their might! It will slip though their fingers.” “I hope you are right, my friend,” the doctor replies. “I just hope you are right.”⁵²⁴

The issue is fairly remarkable for a comic-book representation of the American war in Vietnam, but needs to be placed in the context of the rest of the issues. This is the only issue among the first fifty that offers a representation of the Vietnamese as something other than invisible, silent enemies, racist dehumanized caricatures, or helpless, fearful villagers. Overall, the comic not only follows these previous patterns of representing the “Other,” but works within the larger pattern of cultural inversion we have seen in other media and texts so far.

The ‘Nam also regularly inverted the history of the war though the distortion of particular incidents and images. In number twenty-four, “The Beginning of the End,” set during the 1968 Tet Offensive, the strip follows the troops through their battle at the

⁵²⁴ “Thanks for Thanksgiving,” *The ‘Nam* Number Twenty-Two (September, 1988).

American Embassy in Saigon, after which they meet up with General Loan, the head of the brutal and repressive South Vietnamese police forces. The cover of the book offers a different take on the famous image of General Loan executing a Vietnamese prisoner, showing the image from behind the prisoner, with the cameraman who took the picture in the center of the frame. As a photographer and his Vietnamese guide survey the streets, the American unit discovers that Loan's family and one of his assistants have been killed by the NLF. In the next frames, the famous image of Loan executing a Vietnamese prisoner is inverted, showing it from a different view: the strip shows a close shot on the photographer's camera lens, which reflects the image of Loan firing a bullet into the head of the prisoner. The prisoner, however, is mostly obscured by the frame. The image thus focuses attention on the camera, making its focus the media's coverage of the event rather than the illegal execution itself. In the scene that follows, the American soldiers looking on are concerned not with the barbarous act, but by the fact that the images shot by the photographer will be on the "front page of every newspaper" in the United States.

Bruce Franklin, in his *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies*, placed *The 'Nam*'s inversion of this image within the larger process of cultural inversion begun by *The Deer Hunter* a decade earlier:

The prisoner appears merely as an arm, a shoulder, and a sliver of a body on the left. The only face shown belongs to the chief of the security police, who displays the righteous—even heroic—indignation that has led him to carry out this justifiable revenge against the treacherous "Viet Cong" pictured in the story. The climactic image is a full page in which the execution scene appears as a reflection in the gigantic lens of the camera above the leering mouth of the photographer,

from which comes a bubble with his greedy words, “Keep Shooting! Just keep shooting!” “Shooting” a picture here had become synonymous with murder and treason.⁵²⁵

Franklin goes on to critique the strip’s indictment of the media, preaching a dangerous but often quoted “lesson” of the American War in Vietnam. “The logic of this comic book militarism is inescapable,” he writes. “[P]hotographers should be allowed to show the public only what the military deems suitable.”⁵²⁶

The process of inversion does not end with the strip, however. Readers of the strip are free to examine the representations, weigh them against their own knowledge and experience them, and construct their own meanings. Unfortunately, however, a large segment of *The Nam*’s audience seems to have learned the inverted lesson offered by the strip. In future issues, several readers wrote in to praise the issue, for both its artistic and educational value. In the February edition, three issues later, one reader lauded the “magnificent” cover and the writer’s attention to the “context” of the photo: “it is always easy so easy to forget that the photo doesn’t exist by itself, in some sort of historical limbo.” “Thank you for taking the mystique away from the enemy,” he concluded.⁵²⁷ A more disturbing letter comes from a young reader of the comic:

Thanks for the truth about the Vietnam War. I’m 14, so this comic is the only way to see THE NAM without sneaking into movie theaters. My history classes ignore the war. Our education on Vietnam consists of being told there was a war and seeing a documentary about the invasion of the embassy. I learned more in issue #24 than I did in two weeks of edited documentaries that show the V.C. as heroes and the grunts as child killers.⁵²⁸

⁵²⁵ H. Bruce Franklin, *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies*, 18.

⁵²⁶ Ibid.

⁵²⁷ “Incoming,” *The ‘Nam*, No. 27 (February, 1989).

⁵²⁸ “Incoming,” *The ‘Nam*, No. 28 (March, 1989).

The readers of *The 'Nam*, however, were not all young, “post-Vietnam” schoolchildren learning their first lessons about the war. Many were veterans and amateur historians, who did write in from time to time to discuss the “reality” presented in the comic. Almost invariably, however, these discussions focused on the details of military symbols and command structures invoked in the text. One of these figures took issue with Number 24, not with the portrayal of the image, but with details about the timing of the attack on the embassy, a man in the embassy to whom an American soldier threw a pistol, and the NLF takeover of the local radio station tower. The author responded by invoking dramatic license. “The events are correct,” he claimed. “The people are fictitious.”⁵²⁹

In other instances, however, the strip completely rewrites events themselves, offering a revisionist approach to the war that goes far beyond the symbolic inversion offered in the Tet issue. In number nine, for instance, the story opens with Ed reading an issue of *Stars and Stripes*, the official military newspaper. Above Ed, the strip notes that, in keeping with the “real time” narrative, the story takes place in October of 1966. The image on the front of the paper is of a seated figure engulfed by flames. The ensuing dialogue confirms that this is indeed an allusion to the infamous self-immolation of Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc, who took his own life on a crowded Saigon street to protest the Diem regime’s repression of religious freedom in Southern Vietnam—in June of 1963.⁵³⁰

The anachronism of the representation is not the only misrepresentation here. Far

⁵²⁹ “Incoming,” *The 'Nam*, No. 29 (April, 1989).

⁵³⁰ “Pride Goeth...,” *The 'Nam*, No. 9 (August, 1987).

more disturbing was the explanation given for the photo in the Incoming Section of the book several issues later. In response to a letter from a young reader of the comic, Doug allows the following historical inversion to take place:

I am writing to you to ask about the picture on the cover of the STARS AND STRIPES in Ed Marks' hands on page 1 of issue # 9. Is this supposed to be a photo of the time when a Buddhist monk set himself on fire in the street *to protest communism?*... Maybe you should have let the readers understand more clearly exactly what it was in the photo. Maybe Ed could have read the headline out loud, or you could have made the headline visible to the reader.⁵³¹

Doug responded:

Yes, that was a photo of a Buddhist monk immolating himself *in a protest*. Such things happened many times in the course of the Vietnam war and became so near-common that people didn't even mention it most of the time. We don't really feel it necessary to call attention to such things because they are part of the background... It's there for readers like you, who care enough to pay attention to the whole story, not just the combat sequences.⁵³²

The historical reality of the act, a protest against the repressive, anti-Buddhist actions of the American-supported Diem regime in Southern Vietnam is clearly inverted here.

Doug allows the assertion in Joe's letter, that the monk sacrificed himself to protest *Communism*, to stand unchallenged. He does further injustice to the legacy of Duc by arguing that such acts were so commonplace as to become simply "part of the background." Overtly relegating such actions to the backdrop of the comic's "action" further demonstrates the extent to which the effects of the war on Vietnam and the Vietnamese are marginalized by the text. Bringing Duc's story into the fold in any truthful way would force the narrative to acknowledge the repressive nature of the

⁵³¹ "Incoming," *The 'Nam* Number Fourteen (January, 1988); emphasis added, ellipsis in original.

⁵³² Ibid; emphasis added.

American-backed regime in the South. Having clearly explained at the outset of the strip that “The V.C.” were “the bad guys” in the war, such complications are left outside the realm of normative discourse in the text.

As with the problematic representations of the Vietnamese and sanitized version of the war presented throughout the strip, there is little worth criticism in and of itself, given the medium and genre. However, given the strip’s claims of historical accuracy, realism, and attention to detail, such misrepresentations are both discouraging and dangerous. Were these images and versions of the past simply standing on their own, they might be dismissed as subtle, if precarious distortions of the past. But *The ‘Nam* also offers evidence, through its “Incoming” section, that its representations of the war were reaching and connecting with readers. Indeed, the Incoming page is a much more interesting and important site for the battle over the cultural memory of the war. Over the course of the first fifty issues, from December of 1986 through November of 1990, *The ‘Nam* printed close to two hundred letters from readers including American, Australian, and Canadian Veterans of the war, children of American soldiers who fought in the war, students attempting to learn more about the war, and comic book fans who seemed to have little interest in the war at all. The Incoming pages of *The ‘Nam* are the space in which an inverted reality of the war is accomplished for a specific audience, with readers staking a claim for both the accuracy and educational value of the strip, and the creators further ensconcing their own version of reality of the war, the updated version of “the

way it really was."

Out of the two hundred printed letters, roughly one third of the total praised the comic for its realism. For some, this distinction was drawn clearly in reference to other comics, primarily *G.I. Joe*, or films, such as *Rambo*. Many also commented on the similarities of the strip to *Platoon*. (About fourteen percent of the letters mentioned Stone's film by name; almost the identical number referenced *Rambo*, *Missing In Action*, or *G.I. Joe*.) The space was also used to debate issues related to the war, such as the treatment of veterans, the anti-war movement, and the POW/MIA issue. In most instances, backed by the authority of his creator's voice and his status as a veteran, Doug Murray framed and allowed the framing of the page to purport his views on these and other issues, all the while holding up his view as *the* reality of the war.

On the first Incoming page, in February of 1987, five of the seven letters used the word "real," or some derivative thereof to describe the first issues of *The 'Nam*. "I hope to see this magazine continue to tell the true story," wrote one veteran. "War is not a game, it is not 'RAMBO' or 'G.I. JOE.' A younger reader concurred: "THE NAM isn't super heroes, it's not 'GI JOE,' it's not RAMBO... It bears a closer relationship to some recent war films than it does to 'Sgt. Rock' [another war comic]. For this reader, the fact that the "enemy" was largely invisible was a bonus:

The enemy is never portrayed as evil or monstrous, in fact, they remain unseen throughout the whole story—a literary tactic, which when employed in propoganda is designed to dehumanize the enemy and make them easier to hate and kill, but here actually serve to make war more baffling.⁵³³

⁵³³ "Incoming," *The 'Nam*, No. 3 (February, 1987).

Others added praise for the “rugged realism,” or “honest and insightful” message of the book.

Throughout its run, letters such as these continued to pour in, continuing the redefinition of reality. “I envisioned four-color adaptations of such travesties as RAMBO or MISSING IN ACTION,” wrote a European reader. “I feel it is a pernicious tendency in the popular media today to trivialize what was a very traumatic experience, not only for the U.S. but also for the rest of the *Western* world.”⁵³⁴ “GI Joe and Rambo are okay for fantasy,” wrote a longtime comics fan, “but this real life depiction of war is great.” Another gushed, “THE NAM is probably the most realistic and fabulous comic I have ever read.”⁵³⁵ “I am glad to see a comic that deals with the reality of this war,” added a reader who was “too young to remember much about the Vietnam era.”

I hope that kids do read THE NAM. We have to be reminded that war is not GI JOE, that people die and lives are torn. We need to know just what happened in Vietnam. I intend to be with THE NAM throughout the entire war. I don’t want to place blame for what happened in Vietnam—I only want to understand.⁵³⁶

Clearly, for these and other readers, *The ‘Nam* fit the mold of the new reality for the American War in Vietnam. Just as *Platoon* was upheld as “the way it was,” largely because *Rambo* had shown the way it wasn’t, *The ‘Nam* must have been the way it was because it was working within a different mode of representation than both *Rambo* and *G.I. Joe*. As one reader described the book, “The people who were there can say, ‘Yeah, that’s the way it really was,’ the people who were never there can look at it and say,

⁵³⁴ “Incoming,” *The ‘Nam*, No. 6 (May, 1987); emphasis added.

⁵³⁵ “Incoming,” *The ‘Nam*, No. 8 (July, 1987).

⁵³⁶ *Ibid.*

‘Yeah, that’s the way it really must have been.’”⁵³⁷

By contrast, only a token few of the letters criticized the comic’s lack of realism, and most of these, as with the Tet issue described above, focused on items such as the correct order of battle, or the correct spelling of an Air Force Base.⁵³⁸ Most of these letters were more concerned with the dictates of the comic’s code than with the content of *The ‘Nam* per se, but even in these letters, the influence of *Platoon* was made clear. In issue eleven, for instance, one letter argued that

adhering to the code has done more than inhibit the language—it has totally ruled out a realistic portrayal of the war. I’m sure we won’t see any of the rape, drug use, or fragging of superior officers that was so prevalent among the troops in Vietnam... PLATOON catches the reality, THE NAM is nothing more than a watered-down kiddie version.⁵³⁹

Murray’s response to this letter is intriguing. He cited several other letters from readers who had also seen *Platoon*, but came to different conclusions:

Platoon is a very realistic looking movie; however, it is *not* a totally realistic portrayal of the Vietnam War! Fraggings, rape, destruction of villages, all of the stuff the TV and newspaper reporters of the late 60’s and 70’s made such a big thing out of were not, I repeat, not the everyday affairs of life in the Vietnam war. Atrocities did happen, officers and NCO’s were fragged, but this was the exception, not the rule. Reality may not be exciting and titillating as entertainment—but it does exist.⁵⁴⁰

In the space of a brief paragraph, the author accomplishes a number of things, all of which demonstrate a great deal about the tone of his comic. First, as he did with the

⁵³⁷ “Incoming,” *The ‘Nam*, No. 3.

⁵³⁸ See, for instance, “Incoming,” *The ‘Nam*, No. 9 (August, 1987) and No. 20 (July, 1988).

⁵³⁹ “Incoming,” *The ‘Nam*, No. 11 (October, 1987).

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid. Emphasis in original.

Tet issue, he blames the media for misrepresenting the “everyday affairs” of the American war, “making big things” out of the occasional rape or atrocity. Secondly, he demonstrates the extent to which the comic focuses on the American experience. Even if such events were not “everyday” occurrences, the destruction of villages and the deaths of civilians in particular must have seemed far from “the exception” to Vietnamese citizens. Most importantly for our purposes, however, he betrays how the matrix constructed by and around *Platoon* defined the terms of debate over the historical realities of the war. Any attention to American war crimes in Vietnam would begin to focus attention on the effects of the war on the Vietnamese people, and such attention would greatly complicate *The ‘Nam*’s sanitized version of the war.

More common than these debates, however, was the issue of whether or not young people should be the target of a war comic. Few were concerned with exposing children to graphic images, but many wanted more salty, violent, and gory stories for themselves. In number five, a reader praised the artwork but took Murray to task for oversanitizing and oversimplifying. “I was hoping we could have a *real* account of the Vietnam War,” he wrote. “Why do we have to gear the book toward the twelve-year-old market?” But Doug defended his decision to produce a “code” book, specifically focusing on the educational value he saw in the book: “THE NAM is not just aimed at people like you and the vets, it’s meant as a sort of primer on the Vietnam War to anyone that will read it.”⁵⁴¹

⁵⁴¹ “Incoming,” *The ‘Nam*, No. 5 (April, 1987).

It was precisely this use of the strip as a supplement, answer, or antidote to one's historical knowledge, or lack thereof, of the war that drew a number of readers to *The 'Nam*. One reader acknowledged that he would rather see *The 'Nam* as a non-code book, but did not want the creators to "forego a golden opportunity to do something genuinely worthwhile in the comic medium." "I think you should aim at not only entertaining your readers but also educating them about the true nature of war."⁵⁴² For many young readers, this was exactly what they believed they were getting. "Before this came out I never knew much about Vietnam," wrote a young fan. "I like this book because it tells me what adults won't. I hope that this lasts a long time and I hope all the other kids out there are learning as much as I am."⁵⁴³ Another issue features a young reader who wanted to express his "feelings of joy" that "the world of comics is being lifted from its station as an entertainment form to become a tool of education and enlightenment." He noted that he had his interest in the war piqued in school, but "saw the need to learn about [the war] and to spread that learning to other young people. Movies like *Platoon* and *Full Metal Jacket* are a start, but can only reach so many people."⁵⁴⁴ For some, the comic was even a substitute for school: "THE NAM gives us superior insight into the war as opposed to the films and books (particularly history texts) on the subject," commented one reader.⁵⁴⁵

⁵⁴² "Incoming," *The 'Nam*, No. 6 (May, 1987).

⁵⁴³ "Incoming," *The 'Nam*, No. 7 (June, 1987).

⁵⁴⁴ "Incoming," *The 'Nam*, No. 14 (January, 1988).

⁵⁴⁵ "Incoming," *The 'Nam*, No. 15 (February, 1988).

These testaments should not be surprising. Cultural studies scholars have long made the claim that popular culture can be both a site of contested hegemony and a space of pedagogical value. What is surprising and problematic about the Incoming section of *The 'Nam* are the testaments offered to the reality of the war presented by the strip: not that the books offer a history of the war, alternative, revisionist, or otherwise, but that, like *Platoon*, it offers *the* history – “the way it really was.” We have already seen how the creators of the comic perpetuate historical myths and other revisionist inversions of issues central to the cultural inversions of the war chronicled by Bruce Franklin⁵⁴⁶, the POW/MIA myth and the denigration of the anti-war movement, reared their ugly heads on the Incoming pages as well, imbued with the claims of authenticity and historical accuracy constructed by the comic and its readers.

The POW/MIA issue first appeared in number thirteen, when a twenty-eight year old reader wrote in to congratulate the creators on a “worthy project.” After the obligatory contrasts with *GI JOE* and *Rambo*, this fan asked several worthy questions about issues related to the war, including the frequency of American atrocities (“Yes, I am aware that the VC/NVA did things several times worse, but...”) and the existence of American MIAs being held in Vietnam. Like many of the other historical questions recounted above, this reader had good questions to ask about the issue, and clearly felt Doug Murray to be a qualified person to query. The man admitted that he was skeptical about the myth, largely because he was “suspicious of any cause that’s made so much

⁵⁴⁶ Franklin, *Mythmaking in America and Vietnam and Other American Fantasies*.

money for Sylvester Stallone and Chuck Norris.” But, he continued, “there is some very compelling, credible evidence. Just because photos can be faked, and witnesses can lie, doesn’t mean they are and they do... I would hate to reject facts just because they are unpleasant.”⁵⁴⁷ In response to these questions, Murray noted that the strip would show an American being taken captive in a future issue, but also offered his personal opinion, which had been solicited by the reader: “I personally believe that there are still American MIA’s in the ‘Nam, possibly being held against the U.S. paying the reparations agreed to provisionally in Paris in ’72. I doubt whether they’ll ever be released, however.”⁵⁴⁸

Murray continued to perpetuate this myth in future issues. In number twenty-four, a teenage reader wrote in, appealing for a special issue related the POW/MIA’s he believed to exist. “No Rambo rescue missions,” he requested, “just cold, hard facts.” “There are still (approximately) 2500 missing and unaccounted-for men in Vietnam,” he added. “I wear an MIA/POW bracelet in hopes that SSG Elbert Bush will return home alive. Those that are still living need the U.S.’s support.”⁵⁴⁹ Doug praised the young man in his response: “The M.I.A. issue is one of the most frustrating and shameful sides of the whole war. Anything that can be done to help is both vital and noteworthy.”⁵⁵⁰ In another issue, another reader asked Doug if he thought any of his friends from the war were still being held in Hanoi. Murray’s response began with an affirmation of his faith in the myth: “I personally believe that are still Americans in Vietnam—whether you want

⁵⁴⁷ “Incoming,” *The ‘Nam*, No. 13 (December, 1987).

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁹ “Incoming,” *The ‘Nam*, No. 24 (November, 1988).

⁵⁵⁰ Ibid.

to call them POW's or MIA's is unimportant. I also believe that they will never come back, simply because of the political outrage that would result. On the personal side... I really don't know if friends I left behind are still there."⁵⁵¹

The perpetuation of the POW/MIA myth is certainly disturbing, but it seems more benign when compared with the manner in which the anti-war movement was raked over the coals in *The 'Nam*. The furor over this issue began with number fifteen, when PFC Ed Marks returned to "the world," after his tour in the war. The cover of that issue featured Marks standing in line at the airport between two "hippies," one skinny and scowling, another obese an apparently yelling something at the returning soldier. In the story, Marks comes home to feel unappreciated, misunderstood, amazed at the antiwar movement, and angry about the media's coverage of the war. In a letter to his buddies still in Vietnam, he writes of seeing a major protest on television: "There were college students in Wisconsin... trying to do... I don't know what, something about a representative for Dow Chemicals and them trying to stop Dow from making napalm." In the next scene, a shocked Marks continues, "Napalm! How many times did a napalm drop save our butts?" Rather than trying to understand the protestors, whose side his father tries to explain to him, Marks reenlists and becomes a drill instructor for a short time, after which he returns to college because "someone who understood what it's really like in the Nam had to tell its story."⁵⁵²

Immediately, the letters poured in from readers upset with the representation of

⁵⁵¹ "Incoming," *The 'Nam*, No. 25 (December, 1988).

⁵⁵² "Notes from the World," *The 'Nam* No. 15 (February, 1988).

the antiwar movement offered by *The 'Nam*. Two especially angry letters appeared in number eighteen. The first defended the antiwar movement, calling number fifteen a “gross insult to those of us who gave so much to try to bring an end to this war,” and defending the right of dissent in wartime. The second, written by someone from the Comics Industry, was less tempered and more insensitive than the first, taking issue with the defense of Dow Chemical, but also chiding at the notion that “we’re supposed to feel sorry for Ed Marks because he didn’t get a ticker tape parade,” and arguing that the portrayal of the war through individual, sympathetic soldiers was “something like doing a book called AUSCHWITZ and presenting the Nazi guards as people too.”⁵⁵³ Doug Murray’s lengthy response began with a defense of those “who had fought a dirty and unpleasant war because their government had asked us to,” and then launched into a diatribe against “those who reviled returning troops simply because they felt those young men should not have fought,” even though neither the strip nor the letters dealt with any specific ill treatment of returning veterans. Murray then took on the writer of the second letter, which he labeled “unreasoning elitist tripe,” directly:

As for you, Mr. Karter, do you believe that each individual American must make his own choice on when and where to fight and what is and is not a “just” war? There is a word for that—the word is anarchy, and that way lies the death and obliteration of everything we (even you) hold dear.⁵⁵⁴

Your contention that napalm was bad because Dow Chemical made money on it is downright imbecilic. Do you try and make money with your “Dreamwell Comics?” If so, does that automatically make them bad? Making money is part of the American way. If, while making that money, you do some good (and I feel that saving American troops’ lives is good), then it is all the better.⁵⁵⁵

⁵⁵³ “Incoming,” *The 'Nam*, No. 18 (May, 1988).

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid.

Aside from the absurdity of some positions in both the letter and the response, what is particularly intriguing is how once again the Vietnamese have been positioned completely outside the terms of the debate here. Neither of the antiwar letters, aside from the implied reference of Auschwitz, mention the effects of the war on the Vietnamese, and the entire discussion of Dow Chemical, from both sides, fails to mention why so much anger was directed at that firms' profiteering from the production and employment of napalm: that, "in saving the butts" of American servicemen, Dow's chemical weaponry savagely burned, killed, and maimed innocent Vietnamese, and destroyed millions of acres of Vietnamese land.

Several fans wrote in to echo Murray's response to the letters, and others added their own responses as well, most of which continued to center on the treatment of veterans at the hands of an ungrateful antiwar movement. One letter went so far as to proclaim that "the only real tragedy of the 'Nam war [was that] no one, absolutely no one ever went up to a Nam vet and said: "You did a good job."⁵⁵⁶ In a later issue, a veteran wrote in to note that he and his fellow veterans" have made our peace with our treatment." But this peace was conditional; this reader was only willing to grant forgiveness for the past sins of the antiwar in exchange for deference to those "who were there:"

If THE 'NAM is not a realistic portrayal of the war, I wish someone would tell me what I was in. Yes, "Platoon" and "A Rumor of War" may be an example of one facet of the war, but they are not the be all and end all of Vietnam. If this is your memory of your time there, then please see a counselor to help you handle

⁵⁵⁶ "Incoming," *The 'Nam*, No. 27 (February, 1989).

the problems you will face in the not too distant future. If, on the other hand, you were not there, then keep your bleepin mouth SHUT!⁵⁵⁷

In one fail swoop, this veteran summarizes the cultural work done by the reconstruction of the reality of the American War in Vietnam during the mid to late 1980s: The recuperation of the American veterans of the war as the center of the historical narrative; the claim of reality for the narrow version of history presented and defended by Platoon and, then, *The 'Nam*; the silencing of voices and stories that cannot be contained by those narratives of reality, including the antiwar movement, the Vietnamese, and anyone “who wasn’t there.”

By 1988, the Third Indochina War was nearing an end as Vietnam continued to remove its troops from Cambodia. As we saw in chapter five, the events in Southeast Asia received little attention in the American press, certainly nothing that bordered on the consecutive cultural phenomena of Rambomania and Platoonmania from 1985 to 1987. For an indication of the depths of ignorance of the situation in Southeast Asia and the state of American-Vietnamese relations toward the end of the 1980s, consider the essay, “No Hard Feelings?” in the December 1988 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*. Penned by the accomplished James Fallows, who some years earlier had written one of the most eloquent pieces about the gross inequities in the American draft, “No Hard Feelings” was based in part on Fallow’s trip to Southeast Asia in 1987. The author mentions the war

⁵⁵⁷ “Incoming,” *The 'Nam*, No. 33 (August, 1989).

with Cambodia only once, in passing, yet at the same time, expresses surprise that the Vietnamese are seemingly not as interested in the American war on their country as the United States is. That sentiment, Fallows noted, was shared by several other Southeast nations he visited, which led him to make the following astonishing statement:

The Vietnamese obviously care more about their war than their neighbors do, but what I saw reinforced the conclusion I had reached in the neighboring countries: *The Vietnam War will be important only for what it did internally to the United States.* What it did internally is immense, but the effects may be easier to deal with if we recognize that we are talking *about something Americans did to one another*, not an event that changed world history.⁵⁵⁸

Again, we can see the pervasive effects of the *Platoon* syndrome in American society. In the space of little more than a decade, “Vietnam” had gone from something “we” did to the Vietnamese to something Vietnam did to “us,” to, finally, something “we” did to ourselves. By the end of the 1980s, the Vietnamese astonishingly had ceased even to be a required component of the matrix of representations for the American War in Vietnam.

Fallows ended his article by arguing that the Vietnamese wanted to normalize relations with the United States solely for financial reasons, as if there were another, more fitting reason for them to do so. In the end, he argues, the United States should treat Vietnam as “just another bad country,” much like Burma, and there is no real harm in having a relationship with bad countries.⁵⁵⁹ With the end of the war in Cambodia and the historical inversion of the American War in Vietnam essentially complete by the end of the 1980s, there was seemingly little standing in the way of normalizing relations with

⁵⁵⁸ James Fallows, “No Hard Feelings?” *The Atlantic Monthly* (December, 1988), 76.

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid., 78.

this “bad country.” As the United States and Vietnam entered the 1990s, the possibility of reconciliation between the two nations was, once again, at hand. As we will see in the following chapter, however, peace continued to be an elusive goal.

CHAPTER FIVE

Peace is at Hand: Roadmaps, Roadblocks and One Way Streets, 1990-1995

Throughout the Gulf War of 1990-1991, the Bush administration made clear that the United States was not simply at war with Iraq; it was at war with the memory of Vietnam. While much of this rhetoric was to be expected—all U.S. military adventures since 1975 had been viewed through the lens of the Vietnam War—the Bush White House seemed almost singularly obsessed with “curing” what had become known as America’s Vietnam “syndrome.”⁵⁶⁰ In his inaugural address three years earlier, Bush became only the second U.S. President ever to use the word “Vietnam” in that forum, declaring, “the final lesson of Vietnam is that no great nation can long afford to be sundered by a memory.”⁵⁶¹ On November 30, with over 300,000 American troops already assembled in the Persian Gulf region, Bush assured the nation that this war would “not be another Vietnam.” After the end of hostilities, the President infamously declared, “By God, we’ve kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all.”⁵⁶² In his testimony to a Senate panel the following month, Assistant Secretary of State Richard Solomon opened by telling the committee, “Let me begin by saying the war is over. As the President has said,

⁵⁶⁰ For an interesting discussion of the Vietnam Syndrome and its relationships to the American War in Vietnam and American foreign policy after 1975, see Geoff Simmons, *Vietnam Syndrome: Impact on US Foreign Policy* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1998).

⁵⁶¹ “Inaugural Address,” *Public Papers of the President, 1991*, Volume One (Washington, D.C: GPO, 1992).

⁵⁶² “Kicking the Vietnam Syndrome,” *WP*, March 4, 1991.

our Vietnam syndrome is behind us.”⁵⁶³ It was unclear to which war the Secretary was referring; for the White House, the war with Vietnam and the war with Iraq had become one and the same.

Mary McGrory pointed out in her *Washington Post* column shortly after the end of the Gulf War, if Bush wished to “formalize the defeat of the ‘Vietnam syndrome,’” he could begin by normalizing relations with the nation of Vietnam, and certainly by lifting the trade embargo that was nearing its fifteenth anniversary. As McGrory noted, the time was ripe for such a step forward. The President was enjoying a ninety-percent approval rating at the time, and polls showed that although Americans were less inclined to support full recognition of Vietnam, seventy percent favored lifting the embargo.⁵⁶⁴ With the syndrome apparently “kicked,” nearly all of the Vietnamese troops gone from Cambodia (an estimated 5,000 “advisors” remained at the time), continued progress being made on the POW/MIA issue as a result of the Vessey Mission⁵⁶⁵, and American business interests clamoring for access to the Vietnamese market, the time certainly appeared right to end the sanctions program.

In this chapter, I trace the final stages of the American War on Vietnam from the beginning of the “Roadmap” phase of the Bush administration in 1991 through the normalization of diplomatic relations under the Clinton Administration. Although, as I

⁵⁶³ “Vietnam: The Road Ahead,” Testimony before the Senate Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs, April 25, 1991. Reprinted in *U.S. Department of State Dispatch*, Volume 2, Number 18, May 6, 1991.

⁵⁶⁴ “The Real ‘Vietnam Syndrome,’” *WP*, March 7, 1991.

⁵⁶⁵ “The Vessey Mission to Hanoi,” Hearing Before the House Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs,” 100th Congress, 2nd Session, September 30, 1987.

have alluded to above, the time was ripe for an end to the sanctions program in 1991, hostile relations with Vietnam would drag on for several years. The primary reason for this delay, as I demonstrate here, is a continued tension between the two primary lobby groups affecting U.S. policy toward Vietnam, the POW/MIA lobby and American business interests. Throughout the Roadmap phase, the POW/MIA lobby continued to construct roadblocks to normalization—a series of bizarre and unfortunate hoaxes designed to persuade policymakers and the public that Americans had been, and continued to be, held prisoner in Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, U.S. corporations found themselves shut out of the rapidly expanding Vietnamese market. As Japanese, French companies, as well as firms from the ASEAN allies (whose policies the U.S. was ostensibly supporting by maintaining the embargo), streamed into Vietnam, American businesses grew increasingly frustrated by the legal barriers that remained in place under the U.S. sanctions program.

Throughout a length policy debate, another round of Select Committee Hearings on the POW/MIA issue, and the domestic political entanglements of the Clinton administration, the tension between these two lobby groups continued to manifest itself around two key phrases: leverage and, more importantly, access. POW/MIA groups argued that if the United States lifted the embargo, it would lose its only source of leverage over Hanoi and would thus be helpless to force Vietnam to return the remains of American service personnel. Business interests took the opposite approach, arguing not

only that they desired entrance to the Vietnamese market, but that increased access by the United States in the region would also facilitate the goals of the POW/MIA efforts. Indeed, as we will see, only when “access” becomes the dominant argument for both groups does the embargo get lifted and normalization proceed. The discursive construction of Vietnam around the term access during this final stage of the war is appropriate, given the larger shift in American society in this period. Although many policymakers are fond of describing the transition of “Vietnam” in American culture from a “war” to a “nation,” this only masks the construction most important to the shift in policy: Vietnam as “market.” Ironically, this final shift in the way in which Americans talk, wrote, and debated “Vietnam,” returned U.S. policy toward Southeast Asia to where it had been fifty years earlier at the dawn of the Cold War, when the American architects of the postwar world sought to develop the region as a market for the raw materials, labor needs, and finished consumer goods of Japan. By the end of the twentieth century Vietnam had come nearly full circle in the designs of the United States: from market to nation to war to movie and back, finally, to market.

The “Roadmap”

On the heels of its victory in the Gulf, the Bush Administration was moving forward with normalization plans in the spring of 1991. At the United Nations on April

9, Solomon met with Vietnamese diplomat Trinh Xuan Lang, presenting him with the Bush administration's "Roadmap" to normalized relations. The document laid out a four-step plan to phase in normalization gradually. The steps all revolved around a final settlement in Cambodia and Vietnamese "cooperation" on the POW/MIA issue. Once again, official U.S. government policy created a linkage, this time overtly, between Vietnamese efforts to produce the remains of U.S. personnel and an end to the sanctions programs. As had been the case for close to two decades, that same policy would regularly be turned against the Vietnamese in coming years, with various constituencies accusing Hanoi of holding remains, if not prisoners, "hostage" in exchange for American trade. What the POW/MIA lobby and its allies would never come to recognize is how much of a one-way street the roadmap really was. The gradual easing of the embargo would do little for Vietnam. It would, however, drastically increase the "progress" and results sought by the POW community. It would also create new opportunities for American business interests, even if at a slower pace than corporations sought. Throughout the process, however, and even after the completion of the roadmap framework, the Vietnamese remained at a gross disadvantage in their relationship with the United States.

Specifically, phase one of the roadmap called for a final peace agreement in Cambodia and increased progress on the POW/MIA issue in exchange for the easing of travel restrictions on American citizens by the U.S. Phase two called for a lasting

Cambodian ceasefire and more progress on POW/MIAs in exchange for a partial lifting of the American trade embargo. Phase three was to be completed after the United Nations peacekeeping force had been in Cambodia for at least six months, continued progress on the POW/MIA issue, a full end to the American embargo, the establishment of diplomatic offices in each country and an easing of restrictions on international lending. Finally, phase four was called for U.N.-supervised elections in Cambodia, continued progress on POW/MIAs, support for international loans, and full normalization of political and economic relations.⁵⁶⁶

Despite a luke-warm reception to the plan by Hanoi, which was understandably frustrated by this ongoing linkage between the embargo and the POW/MIA issue as well as the fact that the Cambodian peace plan being supported and brokered by the U.S. continued to include representatives of the Khmer Rouge, the Vietnamese had little choice but to accept the American framework. That year, aid from the Soviet Union had been cut in half, from \$2 billion to \$1 billion. Before the end of the summer, the Soviet Union would collapse, leaving Vietnam without its principal source of aid. Even with increased trade from the ASEAN nations, Japan, and Europe since its withdrawal from Cambodia, Vietnam was in need of access to large amounts capital to finance its most pressing need: renovating the infrastructure, much of it neglected and still in tatters from the end of the American war.

There were several possible solutions to this problem, but all of them were limited

⁵⁶⁶ Don Oberdorfer, “U.S Details Plan for Normalizing Vietnam Relations,” *WP*, April 10, 1991; “US Lays Conditions for an Opening to Vietnam: Deal on My Terms,” *FEER*, April 18, 1991, 13.

to some degree by the American sanctions program. Most corporations were unwilling or unable to invest in or engage in such programs themselves, and many of the firms best suited to the size and scale required were American companies, still banned even from the bidding process. The projects could also be funded by bilateral aid, but likely candidates such as France and Japan were still nominally supporting the U.S. embargo. Although they both had begun to resume trade with Vietnam, both nations remained unwilling to provide the levels of direct aid necessary for large infrastructure projects. Finally, the most plausible, if not the most ideal scenario for funding the projects was to secure loans from an IFI. Because of the American-led ban on loans to Vietnam, however, the IMF, World Bank, and ADB were all prohibited from making such arrangements with Hanoi. While France and other nations had pushed for an end to the policy since the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops in Cambodia in 1989, the United States and Japan had lobbied to keep the ban in place. By the end of 1991, Japan would join France in leading the charge for a resumption of lending and a restructuring of Vietnam's existing debt, but would still face stiff opposition from the U.S.⁵⁶⁷

The intransigence of the Bush administration on the issue of IFI lending is, at first glance, the most glaring oddity of the Roadmap: Why would the administration set the resumption of international lending to Vietnam, a relatively minor step compared with full normalization, for the final step of the roadmap, after an end to the American trade embargo? Why would it actively prevent Vietnam from financing its own projects or

⁵⁶⁷ "US to Hurdle Vietnam's IMF/World Bank Ties," *FEER*, October 17, 1991; SEE ALSO "The Next Great Leap," *FEER*, April 22, 1993, 68; Aid: Ghosts at the Feast," *FEER* April 22, 1993, 72.

other nations from helping to finance those projects through IFIs? The petty resentment of U.S. policymakers toward Vietnam is likely part of an explanation, as is the ongoing desire by Washington to use the IMF and World Bank as tools to enforce American foreign policy. A fuller answer would become obvious in later hearings: Under the terms of the U.S. sanctions regime, American firms would be barred from bidding on or participating in any IFI-sponsored programs should lending to Vietnam resume. The Bush administration thus designed the Roadmap to prolong unnecessarily the already blatant politicization of the IFIs so that American firms would not lose further business opportunities to their international counterparts. As a result of such policies, as well as the regularly scheduled speed bumps provided by the POW/MIA community, Vietnam would have to wait several more years to reach the end of the road to normalization.

In the spring of 1991, though, many in the administration claimed normalization could happen sooner rather than later. On April 11, Solomon told Congress that if the Vietnamese cooperated fully with the plan, full normalization would occur “in short order.”⁵⁶⁸ On April 20, after two days of negotiations between General Vessey and Vietnamese Foreign Minister Thach, the State administration announced that a U.S. office designed to facilitate progress on the POW/MIA would be established in Hanoi. Testifying before the Senate Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs again on April 25, Solomon announced that as a positive gesture toward recent progress on the POW/MIA issue, the U.S. would make its first aid donation to Vietnam since 1975: one

⁵⁶⁸ “Effects of the Continued Diplomatic Stalemate in Cambodia,” Hearings Before the Senate Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 102nd Congress, 1st Session, April 11, 1991 (Washington, D.C: GPO, 1991), 22.

million dollars, distributed by private agencies and NGOs for the production of prosthetic devices to help amputees from the American war.⁵⁶⁹ From the view of the White House, the Roadmap initiative was already ahead of schedule and yielding results.

Claims of progress were met with skepticism on Capitol Hill, however. Members of Congress with wildly differing views on the situation in Cambodia and relations with Vietnam were quick to criticize the administration's policy from all sides. Senators and Vietnam veterans John Kerry and John McCain, for instance, argued that as long as the Chinese continued to back the Khmer Rouge forces, a lasting peace in Cambodia would remain a distant hope. Thus, they reasoned, it seemed unfair to hold the Vietnamese accountable for Khmer Rouge actions when they had for the past decade been the only nation to actively fight against the former genocidal regime. "If we were applying as much pressure to the Chinese as we are on the Vietnamese," McCain told *The Washington Post*, "I'd be more optimistic."⁵⁷⁰ Kerry was more pointed in his criticisms. Sparring with Secretary Solomon at the April 11 hearings, the Senator from Massachusetts pointed to the inconsistencies with American policy. The U.S., he pointed out, had been at the very least complicit in the rebuilding of the Khmer Rouge, and had a long record of open and often friendly relationships with other repressive and murderous regimes.

You know what Vietnam did? They did what nobody else was willing to do. They went into Cambodia and kicked the Khmer Rouge out and nobody in the world said thank you. We responded with an embargo... Why is it that we are driven to treat Vietnam differently from Iraq, from China, from Chile and

⁵⁶⁹ "Vietnam: The Road Ahead;" "U.S. to Give Vietnam \$1 Million," *NYT* April 26, 1991.

⁵⁷⁰ "U.S. Details Plan for Normalizing Relations."

Pinochet, from other countless other governments?⁵⁷¹

In fact, the Vietnamese continued to be the only force actively resisting the return to power of the Khmer Rouge. Earlier in that week, some of the remaining Vietnamese military personnel remaining in Cambodia helped put down an uprising by members of the former genocidal regime.⁵⁷² The United States, meanwhile, continued to support the inclusion of Khmer Rouge members in the transitional Cambodian government.⁵⁷³

Another group of Senators was attacking administration policy from a different angle point, arguing that far from accelerating progress on the POW/MIA issue, as Kerry and McCain argued, “accommodating” Vietnam by gradually easing the embargo would mean abandoning the only leverage the U.S. continued to hold over Vietnam. Leading this charge were Senators Jesse Helms of North Carolina and Bob Smith of New Hampshire. Ironically, although these rigidly anti-Communist Senators held no brief for Vietnam, they continued to see the U.S. Government as the primary obstacle to a full accounting of American personnel from the war in Vietnam. Smith in particular was an open supporter of various conspiracy theories purporting that the American government was actively suppressing knowledge of American servicemen being held in Southeast Asia. Helms agreed with Smith, taking a page out of the *Rambo* script in his dissent from the Roadmap policy, “I’m not criticizing Vietnam as much as I am our own government.”⁵⁷⁴ In May, less than a month after the formal proclamation of the

⁵⁷¹ “Effects of the Continued Diplomatic Stalemate in Cambodia,” 28.

⁵⁷² “U.S. Details Plan for Normalizing Vietnam Relations.”

⁵⁷³ “Effects of the Continued Diplomatic Stalemate in Cambodia,” 29.

⁵⁷⁴ “U.S. to Give Vietnam \$1 Million.”

Roadmap, they took up the most controversial aspect of the policy—“satisfactory progress” toward a “full accounting” by Vietnam of all unaccounted for American servicemen—by producing a wildly inaccurate report on the history of the POW/MIA issue.⁵⁷⁵

Led by Smith and Helms, both members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee as well as committed devotees to the POW mythology, the POW/MIA activists built on this latest “report” and began to lobby for the creation of yet another Senate Select Committee to resolve the fate of the unaccounted-for soldiers. Many years had passed since the height of Rambomania, however. Those in Congress and the White House who still assumed the worst about Vietnam were by 1991 more likely to believe that rapprochement with Vietnam, rather than isolation, was the best course of action. The roadmap and the growing power of the pro-Vietnam business lobby were steering American-Vietnamese relations toward a path where “access” trumped “leverage.”

1991 Embargo Hearings

With the Vietnamese troops gone from Cambodia and ongoing cooperation with body recovery placating all but the most radical elements of the POW/MIA true believers, there was little basis for arguing in favor of keeping the embargo in place. The first Congressional hearing in fifteen years dedicated solely to the embargo on Vietnam,

⁵⁷⁵ *An Examination of U.S. Policy Toward POW/MIA*s, Report Prepared by the Republican Staff of U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, May 1991, cited in Franklin, *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies*, 196.

the June sessions marked a significant turning point in public discourse about American-Vietnamese relations.

Indicative of the new direction of policy, the hearings were a joint meeting of Solarz' Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs and the Subcommittee on International Economic Policy and Trade, chaired by Sam Gejdenson of Connecticut. Gejdenson and others in favor of lifting the embargo were not concerned with the effects of the embargo on Vietnam, but rather focused the embargo's ineffectiveness as a policy tool and its negative effects on American business interests. The diplomatic, internationalist approach long-favored by Solarz was, particularly after the fall of the Berlin wall, increasingly open to challenges from a more corporatized free-trade approach which argued that "market forces" would ultimately work to minimize differences between nations and thus be more conducive to cooperation on matters such as human rights. The opening statements of the two chairmen revealed this increasing divergence in approaches to Vietnam in the 1990s. Whereas Solarz pressed to keep the embargo in place to ensure "Vietnamese cooperation" with the political settlement in Cambodia, Gejdenson argued, "[t]he U.S. embargo no longer makes sense:"

We have only to look for examples of Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union to know that exposures to Americans and American ideas of freedom and democracy and free enterprise is what will be most successful in pressuring the Vietnamese to change. Sixteen years of a U.S. economic embargo on Vietnam has only succeeded in denying Americans their rights and in sheltering the Vietnamese from Americans and American ideals that would threaten their totalitarian government.⁵⁷⁶

⁵⁷⁶ "U.S. Economic Embargo on Vietnam," Joint Hearing Before the House Subcommittees on Asian and Pacific Affairs and International Economic Policy and Trade," 102nd Congress, First Session, June 25 1991 (Washington, D.C: GPO, 1993), 1-2.

A number of corporate lobbyists and witnesses would testify in support of Gejdenson's position, arguing that the way to end the war and foster a lasting peace between the countries was to bring capitalism to Vietnam as it had been brought to the rest of Southeast Asia. With trade barriers removed, ideological barriers would easily break down, they argued; with unfettered access to Vietnam's markets, resources, and its cheap, abundant labor force, would come the answers sought by the families of unaccounted for American personnel.

The question of access was brought into striking relief at the hearings by Frank Murkowski, then a Senator from Alaska, who was called to testify on a piece of legislation he had recently introduced to the Senate: "The Vietnam Access of 1991." The bill called for lifting only the most stringent aspects of the embargo, effectively lifting Vietnam out of category "Z" into a less-restricted classification for export controls. This easing of the embargo, Murkowski argued, would "lead to greater access within Vietnam."⁵⁷⁷ The Senator noted that there was substantial support in his chamber for an easing of the sanctions. The Foreign Relations Committee on which he sat had recently passed, by a twelve-to-one margin, a resolution declaring, "the goals of U.S. foreign policy would be advanced by increased access to Vietnam and by a lifting of the trade embargo against Vietnam."⁵⁷⁸

When Solarz questioned Murkowski about the bill, he took pains to point out that a number of groups, including the National League of Families, opposed any easing of

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid., 4.

⁵⁷⁸ Ibid., 5.

the embargo. Murkowski countered by noting that the isolationist approach supported by the NLOF had failed to produce satisfactory results, adding that the Vietnam Veterans of America, the largest group representing American veterans of the war, supported his position.⁵⁷⁹ The POW/MIA issue continued to be a palpable political threat to anyone in the hearing room who appeared to put business interests ahead of “concern for the families.” In a brief exchange with Murkowski about the U.S. missing out on “a piece of the action” in places like Vietnam and Cuba, committee member Eni Faleomavaega of American Samoa quickly made his priority clear. When Murkowski noted that trade opportunities should “obviously” wait to be initiated until after the POA/MIA issue is resolved, the representative hastily added, “Please do not misunderstand me. I have the highest regard for the various organizations and government agencies that are trying very hard to account for the 2,300 POW/MIA’s from the Vietnam conflict.”⁵⁸⁰

The hearing, however, ultimately had less to do with Murkowski’s legislation than with providing the increasingly organized business community a chance to weigh in on the embargo. Led by Virginia Foote, Director of the U.S.-Vietnam Trade Council, a parade of corporate executives testified and submitted written statements for the record arguing that the embargo was outdated, ineffective, and harmful to American interests. Dwight Jasman, Managing Director of AT&T’s Pacific operations, explained to the committee how the ban on providing direct phone service to Vietnam—one of only three countries, along with Cambodia and North Korea, on which such a ban existed—was not

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid., 10-12.

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid., 17.

only ineffective in isolating Vietnam, but ironically worked directly *against* American policy goals. Because the ban was easily subverted by connecting through a conference call based in, say, Canada, Jasman told the committee, the Vietnamese government not only could easily provide means of communication to the United States but also received payment from the Canadian carrier, the type of “hard-currency” programs the ban was designed to prevent. Giving American communication companies control over the phone lines, he argued, was the only plausible way to enforce the ban.⁵⁸¹ Other witnesses, primarily from the petroleum and communications industries, testified that they were missing out on precious market shares to their European counterparts. If the American-embargo was designed to isolate Vietnam from international capital, they pointed out, the policy was failing miserably. Despite the administration’s claims that the embargo was part of an international reaction to Vietnam’s lingering presence in Cambodia, the hearings helped magnify the fact that other nations, including the closest U.S. allies in the region, had long since abandoned their own bilateral sanctions. While Japan had not yet restored its regular aid program to Vietnam, by the summer of 1991 it was trading with Vietnam to the tune of close to \$1 billion, including \$400 million worth of crude oil.⁵⁸²

Throughout the 1980s the Reagan and Bush administrations, along with a cohort of supporters in congress that included Solarz, justified the embargo by claiming that it was simply adding muscle to the ASEAN policy of isolating Vietnam. As we saw in chapter three, however, the ASEAN nations all had substantial trade programs with

⁵⁸¹ Ibid., 18-19.

⁵⁸² Ibid., 76-77; Dahm, *French and Japanese Relations with Vietnam since 1975*, 113.

Vietnam; by 1991 the United States was the only nation still pursuing a policy of total isolation with Vietnam. Even China and Vietnam had normalized relations the previous year, and had begun substantial trade. Nevertheless, Solarz pressed all the witnesses to explain how the United States could continue to exert leverage on Vietnam, particularly with regard to Cambodia, without the embargo in place. In particular, he trumpeted the need to show support for the Cambodian settlement plan proposed by the P-5, or permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (China, Great Britain, France, the United States and the Soviet Union). As Virginia Foote made clear in her testimony, however, all four other members of the P-5 maintained bilateral trade with Vietnam.⁵⁸³ Thus although the Vietnamese had long expressed their desire for American trade, it was far from the necessity implied by Solarz and others. By the summer of 1991, any harm that the lack of trade with the U.S. was having on Vietnam was more than offset by the increases in foreign investment by America's allies.

The 1993 Final Senate Select Committee

Whatever progress was being made on the roadmap framework by the early summer of 1991 was shattered in July, when three separate series of photos, supposedly depicting American "POW's" took the U.S. media by storm. Newspapers, magazines and nightly newscasts focused intensely on the pictures, furthering the claims made by Smith, Helms, and the POW/MIA lobby that the men in the pictures were American

⁵⁸³ "U.S. Economic Embargo on Vietnam, 75-79.

servicemen still being held against their will in Southeast Asia.⁵⁸⁴ In the furor over the images, including the call from the *Wall Street Journal* to “Bring on Rambo,” the worst fears of policymakers and the most extreme claims of conspiracy theorists were seemingly realized.⁵⁸⁵ As Bruce Franklin noted in his 2000 update of the POW/MIA myth, on the same day as the *Journal*’s piece appeared, a “stampeded” Senate voted unanimously to create the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs. The pictures, unsurprisingly, were eventually discredited, but the Select Committee would spend much of the next year, and millions of dollars, working once again, to follow these and other charges.

Not to be outdone by the more high-profile Senate committee, Stephen Solarz and the House Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs also seized the opportunity to hold hearings on this “new evidence,” and the implications on the path to normalized relations. In late July, Solzarz’ committee held the first hearings on the photographs. At the time of the hearings, a team from the Defense Department was already on the ground in Vietnam and Laos, working with the Vietnamese to investigate the photos, and the Sandia Laboratories in New Mexico had already completed their analysis of the first photo, which depicted three men holding a sign. The team on the ground found nothing to corroborate the identity of the men in the picture, and the lab, along with the Defense Intelligence Agency, ruled that the photo was almost certainly a hoax. The image in question had actually been doctored, the report claimed, from a 1923 picture in a Soviet

⁵⁸⁴ “Hoping Against Hope,” *Newsweek*, July 29, 1991. “Are They or Aren’t They,” *Time*, July 29, 1991, 41.

⁵⁸⁵ *WSJ*, August 2, 1991; Cited in Franklin, *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies*, 197.

magazine.⁵⁸⁶ Although the other pictures would also be exposed as fabrications, Congressional committees would still be debating the images two years later.

As the Select Committee was convening its first of many hearings in November of 1991, members of the Solarz House Subcommittee met once again, pursuing many of the same questions and concerns of their senate counterparts. Although each committee contained a representative sample from the ideological spectrum, it became clear over the course of the hearings that even previously more detached figures such as Solarz had moved closer in position on the POW/MIA issue to their conspiracy-minded Republican colleagues, such as Representatives Robert Dornan and Robert Lagomarsino of California, and Bob Smith, who was appointed John Kerry's co-chair on the Senate Select committee. Solarz, who had passionately advocated for a negotiated settlement in Cambodia, became increasingly convinced throughout the 1980s and early 1990s that Vietnam was deliberately withholding evidence about American military personnel, some of whom may have been held alive at some point.⁵⁸⁷ Kerry, while he remained more moderate in his stance on the issue than his co-chair Smith or Solarz, was instrumental in

⁵⁸⁶ “Resolving the POW/MIA Issue: A Status Report,” Hearing Before the House Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, 102nd Congress, 1st Session, July 17, 1991 (Washington, D.C: GPO, 1992); “Appendix Two: Analysis of the Purported Robertson, Lundy, and Steven POW/MIA Image,” reprinted in “American POW’s in Southeast Asia: The Questions Remain,” Hearings before the House Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, July 31 and August 2, 1991 (Washington, D.C: GPO, 1993), 175. Also see Franklin, *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies*, 197. Franklin notes that the following summer, the Defense Department confirmed that the picture was “a 1923 photograph reproduced in a 1989 Soviet magazine.”

⁵⁸⁷ For the full evolution of Solarz’ position on Vietnam and the POW question, see Solarz and Richard Childress, “Vietnam: Detours on the Path to Normalization,” in C. Richard Nelson and Kenneth Weisbrode, eds., *Reversing Relations with Former Adversaries: U.S. Foreign Policy After the Cold War* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1998), 88-125.

constructing the hearings to represent only the two narrowly defined “sides” of debate that achieved hegemony during the 1980s: One, that the government was actively looking for POW/MIA’s it believed might be alive, and, two, that the government was actively covering up the existence of the prisoners.⁵⁸⁸ Bruce Franklin, the most well known advocate of the “third” side of the debate—that the entire idea of “POW/MIA’s” being held in Southeast Asia was a pernicious and pervasive myth—was denied the opportunity to testify.⁵⁸⁹

Despite these problems, John Kerry was more often than not a force of relative reason in the hearings. While he failed to construct the Select Committee hearings in such a way that a more diverse range of opinion and testimony would be presented, he did at times relate personal stories from his representations being presented by other factions. At one point, Kerry made what would appear to be a fairly basic, yet important point: that during the 1980s, it was extremely rare to see “a Caucasian” in Vietnam, particularly outside of the major cities. He spoke of the “significant curiosity” aroused by his own visits, when he would walk into a village and immediately cause a major stir. “It is very hard to understand” Kerry argued, “how Americans could be moved or moving without a community noticing it in a way that would create ripples of information at some point.”⁵⁹⁰ Furthermore, he pointed out, although Americans working on body

⁵⁸⁸ Franklin, *MIA*, 157-58.

⁵⁸⁹ Franklin recounts the story as a footnote in his *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies*, 233 n78: “My own efforts to testify, in which I persisted from February to December 1992, were officially rebuffed not only by the committee and in letters from Senator Kerry but also by Senator Kerry and Senator [Chuck] Grassley [of Iowa, another member of the Select Committee], when I appeared with them on national television.”

⁵⁹⁰ “U.S. Government’s Post-War POW/MIA Efforts,” 282.

recovery continued to be somewhat restricted in their movement, diplomats and aid workers from other nations and NGOs enjoyed the unfettered access to Vietnam sought by the U.S. On the one hand, this points to the failure of an aggressive and hostile foreign policy, a major point of debate during the hearings. Equally important, Kerry noted that if these various groups, including representatives of many close U.S. allies, had not seen or heard any evidence of American prisoners during their travels, it would bolster the case against live prisoners.⁵⁹¹

On another occasion, more indicative of his overall, equivocating position on the issue, Kerry related the story of when he became the first U.S. citizen to meet with the General Secretary of Vietnam's Politburo. The Vietnamese delegation could not understand why, in 1991, the issue of unaccounted for U.S. personnel was being discussed, when it was hardly mentioned during the normalization talks of 1978. In response, Kerry offered a fairly concise and interesting summary of how the issue gained such currency:

So I, frankly, went through this long explanation to him of what happened with the problems of Jimmy Carter's presidency and what happened in the desert in Iran and the sense of lack of power in the country and along came Ronald Reagan and he made this a big issue, to his credit, and raised the consciousness, and then movies appeared and books appeared, and Sly Stallone made a cult, and off we went, and it entered the American consciousness and body politic.⁵⁹²

The Congressional delegation left a large collection of articles and information about the issue from the American media to demonstrate the prominence of the issue in the U.S.

⁵⁹¹ Ibid., 282-83.

⁵⁹² "Oversight Hearings," 1295.

The Vietnamese, according to Kerry, were somewhat taken aback that the issue was indeed “real” and “serious.” “He had no idea that this was anything but an American trick in the 1980s and nineties to sort of find a different way to prosecute the war against Vietnam.”⁵⁹³ Despite his skepticism about the issue, Kerry’s insistence that Reagan should receive “credit” for exacerbating the issue reveals that within the confines constructed by the Select Committee, even the more reasonable positions were trapped by the powerful POW/MIA mythology.

As a result, the committee spent endless hours discussing the limitless gamut of POW/MIA hoaxes, from the already discredited photos to the “warehouse” myth. One of the most enduring tales of this phase of the POW/MIA drama, this particular myth held that there existed a “warehouse” deep in the jungles of Southeast Asia, where the Vietnamese were secretly keeping the remains of hundreds of American service personnel. The basis for this myth came from a lone intelligence source, mysteriously nicknamed “The Mortician,” who claimed that Vietnam, in the early 1980s, had at least 400 sets of remains locked away in storage. This shadowy figure was an ethnic Chinese who fled Vietnam shortly after the Chinese invasion of Vietnam in 1979 and was debriefed by American intelligence after his defection. Supporters of the Mortician’s statements were never able to produce any evidence to support his claims, nor could they even claim that the alleged remains were American, but those who believed his story, including high-level figures in the Bush administration’s defense department, used it to

⁵⁹³ Ibid.

add fuel to the live prisoner fire.⁵⁹⁴ Bob Smith would help keep this myth alive with a new twist when, on several occasions during hearings of the Select Committee, he claimed that a holding cell of *live* prisoners was located under Ho Chi Minh's mausoleum in Hanoi.⁵⁹⁵ A new hybrid of the warehouse story and the more popular stories of secret Laotian prison camps, similar to the one depicted in *Rambo*, Smith's theory was quickly dismissed.

Driven by such outlandish stories, the POW/MIA hearings of 1991 and 1992 illuminate the standard operating assumptions of the United States Government with regard to Vietnam during the "Roadmap" period. To begin with, the hearings reveal that despite the claims of conspiracy theorists in the POW/MIA community, the classification of the issue as a "matter of the highest national priority," was not simply lip service. The Department of Defense was spending over \$20 million a year just for the POW/MIA work being done by U.S. Pacific Command in 1990, and close to \$100 million over all.⁵⁹⁶ Before the Solarz committee on November 6, 1991, Deputy Defense Secretary Carl Ford

⁵⁹⁴ For testimony on the "Mortician" and the warehouse, see "American POW/MIA's in Southeast Asia: An Update on U.S. Policy and Current Investigations," Hearings before the House Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, 102nd Congress, 1st Session, November 6, 1991 (Washington, D.C: GPO, 1992, 74-76; and "Oversight Hearings: Department of Defense, POW/MIA Family Issues, and Private Sector Issues," Hearings before the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs, 102nd Congress, 2nd Session, December 1-4, 1992 (Washington, D.C: GPO, 1994), 1190.

⁵⁹⁵ "U.S. Government's Post-War POW/MIA Efforts," Hearings before the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs, 102nd Congress, 2nd Session, August 11-12, 1992 (Washington, D.C: GPO, 1993); "Oversight Hearings," 14-16.

⁵⁹⁶ "POWs/MIAs: Missing Pieces in the Puzzle," Hearings Before the House Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs," July 14, 1993 (Washington, D.C: GPO, 1994), 66; The \$100 million figure comes from the "Final Report of the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs," (Washington, D.C: GPO, 1993), 8.

told the committee that the Bush administration, under the direction of Defense Secretary Dick Cheney, had created the special position of Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for POW/MIA Affairs and had increased the Pentagon Staff directly responsible solely for POW/MIA related issues from three to fourteen. At that same hearing, and as the Senate Select Committee helped to make clear over the next year, however, it was not simply the POW/MIA issue in general, but the resolution of the “live prisoner” issue that was the primary focus of U.S. Government policy with respect to Vietnam. Ford told the Solarz committee,

Our most urgent priority is investigating whether or not live Americans are held again their will in Southeast Asia. The *live prisoner* issue has been at the forefront of our investigations. While the governments of Indochina have consistently denied that they are still holding American prisoners, their denials have not deterred us from pursuing the *live prisoner* issue directly on each and every occasion, and at all levels, with them for several years. We intend to keep the pressure on. Although we have thus far been unable to prove that Americans are still detained against their will, information available precludes ruling out that possibility. Our assumption is that at least some Americans are still held captive.⁵⁹⁷

This emphasis is important for several reasons. First, it makes plain that the fundamental assumption of the United States government even in 1991—the starting point for all official inquiries into the issue—was that the Vietnamese and/or the Laotian governments were, in fact, keeping American prisoners alive, and had been for at least sixteen years. Starting from this assumption would make it nearly impossible to prove that there were no Americans being held. Rather than starting from the more logical position that there

⁵⁹⁷ “American POW/MIA’s in Southeast Asia: An Update on U.S. Policy and Current Investigations,” 29. Emphasis in original.

were no American prisoners alive in Southeast Asia, a position supported by the complete absence of evidence to the contrary, the government's official position continued to place the onus on Hanoi to "prove" the *nonexistence* of these figures.

Most importantly, however, the focus placed on the live prisoner issue obscured and delayed the more important work of locating, repatriating, and identifying remains. Particularly useful in illuminating this problem was the testimony of Ted Schweitzer. Appearing before the Select Committee on December 4, 1992, Schweitzer, who had been working closely with Vietnamese authorities in archives throughout the country, noted that the POW/MIA community's focus on live prisoners had been among the biggest obstacles to obtaining the "full accounting" that the U.S. continued to demand of Vietnam. Alongside the larger hostile policies of the United States, the "unsound methods" being employed by American body recovery teams, and "the almost religious resistance among the official and unofficial POW/MIA community and the United States against any serious scholarly research on dead MIAs," Schweitzer told the committee, the live prisoner issue has cost us years in the search for answers.⁵⁹⁸

I personally spent tens of thousands of dollars, and nearly 3 years of my life, trying to get someone, anyone, to believe me that there was a mountain of information on dead Americans in Hanoi. I even showed pictures of dead MIAs to dozens of influential people, and still no one was interested, not even Ross Perot.⁵⁹⁹

Schweitzer's mention of Perot is especially significant, given the Texas billionaire's central role in financing and publicizing many of the more roguish elements in the

⁵⁹⁸ "Oversight Hearings: Department of Defense, POW/MIA Family Issues, and Private Sector Issues," 1188-1189.

⁵⁹⁹ Ibid., 1189.

POW/MIA campaigns, not to mention his significant role in the previous month's Presidential election, where President Bush's policies toward Vietnam were called into question. Schweitzer noted that he had personally implored Perot and others to focus on the "treasure-trove of American war artifacts in Hanoi." Yet, "Ross Perot and the others all replied that those men are dead, and I'm not interested in dead men."⁶⁰⁰ Rather than commit to the work that would most likely result in the resolution of discrepancy cases, the government continued to press the live prisoner issues, offending and confounding the Vietnamese, lending credence to the conspiracy theorists, and prolonging the agony of American families.

The live prisoner issue was also complicating matters on the ground in the region, wasting the time and energy of everyone involved. One particular concern of the United States was the desire for "unfettered access" to the Vietnamese countryside so that teams could react immediately to any live sighting reports. Because of the ongoing hostile relations between the U.S. and Vietnam, delegations from one nation to the other were closely monitored and placed under stringent travel restrictions. Compared to the twenty-five mile restriction placed on Vietnamese representatives to the United Nations, which remained in place until late 1991, the American body recovery teams had wide access to the Vietnamese countryside. And although bilateral cooperation on the issue had increased dramatically since the Vessey mission and since the announcement of the Roadmap, the Vietnamese understandably maintained some restrictions on the movement

⁶⁰⁰ Ibid., 1188.

of American military personnel in their country. Those restrictions, however, continued to be a source of great acrimony for the military, members of congress, and the POW/MIA lobby. The specific concern of the U.S. teams, predicated on the belief that live prisoners were still being held, was that in order to investigate a live sighting report, American personnel had to apply for and receive official clearance to examine the site, which often took several days. If the Vietnamese, Cambodian, or Laotian government was holding American prisoners in secret camps, the argument went, they could easily relocate those camps with a few days notice. For instance, when a U.S. team was investigating the case of Donald Carr—believed to be the figure in the third set of photos to surface in the summer of 1991—they received word that Carr was being held in a prison camp near the Laotian Plain of Jars region. When the camp could not be located after several attempts, rather than conclude that they had received bad information, the team kept insisting that the camp had been repeatedly moved. At the Select Committee Hearings, this case was used as evidence in support of the argument for increased access.⁶⁰¹

Based on examples of this sort, the military personnel in charge of POW/MIA recovery in Southeast Asia reported to Congress that they required “full and unfettered access” to any location in the region, so that they could, on a moment’s notice, investigate any live sighting reports. Testifying in November of 1991, Major General George Christmas, Director of Operations for the U.S. Pacific Command, argued that the

⁶⁰¹ Ibid.

best solution to the live sighting investigation problem was for the Vietnamese to allow the U.S. recovery teams to use American military helicopters to patrol the countryside.⁶⁰² Currently, the teams were being shuttled in Russian-made helicopters operated by Vietnamese pilots. Eventually, the governments agreed on a plan that would allow the U.S. to use rented helicopters, but the suggestion that the Vietnamese should allow the use of American military helicopters is remarkable, given the state of relations between the two countries in the fall of 1991. Only the day before the General's testimony, President Bush and Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney had pledged "decisive action" should any confirmation of live prisoners be made, continuing at the highest and most public level the implication that Hanoi had been holding American prisoners for two decades while at the same time threatening immediate military action against Vietnam.⁶⁰³

Regardless of the fact that the Vietnamese were, of course, not keeping prisoners, the belligerence of Washington was hardly the type of demonstration that would cause Hanoi to rethink their stance on the increased presence of American military. Furthermore, despite the slight easing of restrictions under the embargo, the United States continued officially to categorize Vietnam as an "enemy" nation under the Trading With the Enemy Act. In the fall of 1991, the only other countries classified as such were Cuba, Libya, and North Korea. It is difficult to imagine these nations allowing the presence of American military personnel permitted by Vietnam at the time, let alone the request for unfettered access to search the countryside and classified military records. For the

⁶⁰² "American POW/MIA's in Southeast Asia: An Update on U.S. Policy and Current Investigations," 81-82.

⁶⁰³ Cited in Ibid., 82.

previous decade, the United States had funded the forces fighting Vietnam in Cambodia; only two years earlier it denied a license to a private group seeking to donate wheelchairs to Vietnamese amputees from the American War, and the United States; at the time of the request, the U.S. continued to exercise its veto power to prohibit international loans to Vietnam.⁶⁰⁴ In nearly every manner, the United States continued to treat Vietnam as an enemy nation, yet there was no sense of irony present when seeking to dictate to Hanoi terms that would be difficult for many American allies to accept.

Most importantly, however, the helicopter request is indicative of the fundamental inability for anyone involved in these hearings even to begin to view the issue from a Vietnamese perspective. At no point in any of the testimony did anyone raise the issue of how the remote villages throughout the country would react to the reappearance of American helicopters that for years had terrorized Vietnamese civilians from the sky. Similarly, only Ted Schweitzer, in his testimony to the Select Committee, pointed out that if it wished greater enthusiasm and cooperation from Hanoi in accounting for the small number of “discrepancy cases,” the U.S. might express a greater concern for the estimated 300,000 Vietnamese soldiers, not to mention countless civilians, still unaccounted for. As Schweitzer pointed out to the committee, this would not only be an appropriate gesture, but would actually assist in the recovery of American remains:

Many cases of American missing are closely intertwined in the archives with cases of Vietnamese missing. Had we shown real interest in helping Vietnam with its missing, we would certainly have come upon this correlation sooner, and been able to resolve many of our own MIA cases earlier.⁶⁰⁵

⁶⁰⁴ “The Vessey Mission to Hanoi,” 50; “Issues Affecting the Question of U.S. Relations with Vietnam,” 55.

⁶⁰⁵ “Oversight Hearings,” 1189.

The U.S. disregard for Vietnamese MIAs was also present in the way in which it dealt with recovered remains. When American teams shipped a large set of remains to its labs in Hawaii, more often than not a large percentage of the remains were not American.⁶⁰⁶ Instead of using the opportunity to use their findings to assist in the search for unaccounted-for Vietnamese soldiers and civilians, the lack of correlation to American servicemen's records was regularly turned back on the Vietnamese, with groups like the National League accusing Vietnam of stalling or deceiving the American public by using phony remains. This tactic would continue through 1993, with the NLoF and others blaming the Vietnamese when their "archives," which naturally focused on Vietnamese military records, failed to produce documents that matched the needs of the POW/MIA lobby. As is the case with so many aspects of the ongoing war on Vietnam after 1975, the United States failed to take into account the Vietnamese perspective, revealing the callousness of the policy while at the same time working directly against the interests of American citizens.

The inability of U.S. policymakers to put themselves in Vietnamese shoes, however, went far beyond insensitivity. More commonly, the failure to grasp Hanoi's approach to the American POW/MIA issue led to fundamental misconceptions about the Vietnamese government's level of cooperation. Whereas the United States, since early in the Reagan Administration, had designated the issue under the "highest national priority,"

⁶⁰⁶ "American POW/MIA's in Southeast Asia," 9.

the Vietnamese understandably had very different priorities, from recovering their own missing, to wars with Cambodia and China, to a radical transformation of their economic system, itself still recovering from the effects of the American War and the ongoing economic sanctions program. Yet when the Vietnamese failed to mobilize resources in the manner demanded by the POW/MIA lobby and policymakers in the U.S., they were portrayed as intransigent or, worse, actively engaged in deceiving the American government and the families of the service personnel in question. In this sense, the hearings once again revealed the heavy burden being placed on the Vietnamese to dig themselves out of the hole dug for them by the POW/MIA lobby.

Ann Mills Griffiths, Executive Director of the National League of American Families and a seemingly ubiquitous presence at any hearing connected to Vietnam or the POW/MIA issue, offered an example of this in her testimony during one of the Select Committee hearings. In order to satisfy the conditions laid out in U.S. policy, the Vietnamese government had to provide either the “live prisoner,” the remains of the person in question, or “convincing evidence” of why it cannot provide the remains. Only by one of those three scenarios could U.S. personnel be considered “accounted for,” and thus taken off of the official POW/MIA list. As Mills testified in December of 1992, even in a case where the family of the person in question had publicly acknowledged that he was dead, and had obtained a photograph apparently showing his corpse, the person remained on the POW/MIA list, and, as such, unaccounted for. This paradox has its root

in the decision of the Nixon administration to blur the distinction between different military categories of POW, MIA, and KIA/BNR, but remained a powerful force in U.S. policy in the 1990s.⁶⁰⁷ Responding to questions about why the man was still listed as POW/MIA, Griffiths responded, “Because he isn’t accounted for:”

Kerry: What do you mean, he is not accounted for?

Griffiths: Because there’s no convincing—

Kerry: What do you mean he is not accounted for? He is dead.

Griffiths: No. His death has been confirmed. He’s not accounted for unless—

Kerry: But he is not—

Griffiths: Excuse me, let me finish.

Kerry: He is not a POW.

Griffiths: No, no.

Kerry: He is not a live person.

Griffiths: He’s dead.

Kerry: He is not an MIA.

Griffiths: He is killed in action, body not recovered.

Kerry: Correct.

Griffiths: But they have not provided convincing evidence as to why they cannot repatriate his remains.⁶⁰⁸

Griffiths later added, “what we’re talking about here is the unilateral repatriation of

⁶⁰⁷ On the classification decision, see chapter four, above; and Franklin, *MIA*, 16-17.

⁶⁰⁸ “Oversight Hearings,” 1293.

remains that are already recovered or easily recoverable,” although she admitted under further questioning that she had no evidence to support the allegation that the Vietnamese had the remains in question nor that they were “easily recoverable.”⁶⁰⁹

Perhaps no issue in the entire history of the POW/MIA myth is so misunderstood as the belief, perpetuated at every opportunity by Griffiths and the POW/MIA lobby, that the Vietnamese had “easy” access to remains of U.S. personnel scattered throughout the country. In this sense, the testimony of Ted Schweitzer, noted above, was perhaps the most significant in the voluminous proceedings of the Select Committee. Along with his important contribution to dispelling the “warehouse” myth and his damning indictment of the focus on live prisoners, Schweitzer was alone in the myriad witnesses before the committee in describing the situation on the ground in Vietnam. In his descriptions, Schweitzer dispelled several pernicious myths about the Vietnamese. To begin with, he pointed out, the Vietnamese did indeed have a stockpile of information relevant to U.S. concerns. Contrary to the claims of the POW/MIA lobby, however, the “archive” in question was neither secretive nor centralized. Rather, it was a massive “collection” of memorabilia, documents, “souvenirs,” and other residue from airplane and helicopter crashes, battles and missions over the past half-century of warfare in Vietnam, involving not simply the United States, but the French, British, Japanese, Chinese, and various incarnations of Vietnamese resistance forces. Moreover, this “collection,” described by Schweitzer as a “mountain of information,” was literally scattered throughout Vietnam,

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid., 1294.

and most of it was in possession of Vietnamese citizens at the village and province level: “In the first place, really, the Vietnamese don’t know exactly what they’ve got. It is not a system, a computerized system with an index to everything that’s held in the central government’s archive files.”⁶¹⁰

The people of Vietnam, Schweitzer noted, were thus the most important resource in the elusive quest for a full accounting. Given the circumstances, it would be up to the United States, not the Vietnamese government, to seek out the information. “The leadership of Vietnam cannot simply order 70 million Vietnamese citizens to bring this mountain of material to Hanoi.” In perhaps the most significant testimony of the entire proceedings, Schweitzer continued:

[assisting the U.S. search program] has to be something that the Vietnamese, the common Vietnamese citizen, feels in his heart he wants to do for America. If he has a souvenir, war memorabilia, something that he has picked up from a crash or a war site in the highlands in 1967 or from a crash up in the mountains someplace, say a piece of an airplane that he’s been using as a side of his house or a little package of things he picked up somehow, maybe the man who picked it up is dead and his children have it and have no idea what it is even. But they’re not going to make—the common person of Vietnam just isn’t going to come forward with all that mountain of information unless they really have the feeling in their heart that they want to do this for America. It can’t be dictated on high that you will bring forward everything that you possess on America. It just won’t happen that way.⁶¹¹

Later Schweitzer reinforced the point: “Even with the fullest cooperation from the Vietnamese government, it will take an enormous amount of goodwill, time, and work to locate the materials, collect them, and catalog them.”⁶¹²

⁶¹⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹¹ “Oversight Hearings,” 1185.

⁶¹² Ibid., 1187.

The need to engage with the scattered villagers throughout Vietnam was driven home by several examples offered by Schweitzer and others working in the country. In one case, from an area outside of Da Nang, in central Vietnam, a U.S. recovery team was presented with five sets of remains that local Vietnamese citizens had personally discovered several years earlier. When asked, ““why did you wait five years to turn these remains into us,”” they replied, ““because you never came to our village.””⁶¹³ In another case, Schweitzer related the story of a Navy pilot who had been shot down over the Vietnamese coast. Local villagers took their boat out, dragged the plane to shore, and buried the remains of the pilot near the beach. The next day, an American bombing raid carpeted the area, destroying the grave. “Even though they had the remains and pictures,” Schweitzer told the committee, “the remains are now completely unrecoverable.”⁶¹⁴ This was not the only confirmed report of recoverable remains being destroyed by U.S. bombings. In another case uncovered through conversations with locals, a North Vietnamese army team returning to Hanoi with reports of soldiers from both sides who had been captured or killed was struck by American bombs, killing all members of the team and destroying the report.⁶¹⁵

More than any other witness, Schweitzer outlined the ironies and inconsistencies of the POW/MIA issue. That is what makes it strange that his testimony was not included in the Final Report Issued by the Select Committee on January 13, 1993. Schweitzer’s work in Hanoi had been publicly hailed by President Bush as a

⁶¹³ Ibid., 1195.

⁶¹⁴ Ibid., 1186.

⁶¹⁵ Ibid.

“breakthrough” in October of 1992. While Bush’s comments had as much to do with his final push for the November election, the press took note of the importance of Schweitzer’s efforts in their reports, leading to Schweitzer’s testimony before the Committee in December.⁶¹⁶ Because of the tone of the reports, however, it appeared as though Hanoi had been withholding the information. As discussed above, this was far from the case; the Vietnamese were only too happy to allow access the documents and photographs, much of which they were previously unaware they possessed. When the Final Report was being assembled in late December and early January, however, all references to Schweitzer’s testimony were left out. His name does not even appear on the list of witnesses.

Sixteen years and one month to the day after the 1976 Select Committee on POW/MIAAs released its report, the 1993 incarnation renounced the earlier findings. While “previous committees” determined that no American personnel remained alive in Southeast Asia, the report noted,

This committee has uncovered evidence that precludes it from taking the same view. We acknowledge that there is no proof that U.S. POWs survived, but neither is there proof that all of those who did not return had died. There is evidence, moreover, that indicates the possibility of survival, at least for a small number, after Operation Homecoming.⁶¹⁷

The “evidence” “uncovered” by the committee amounted to little more than specious claims gathered by questionable intelligence sources and practices:

First, there are the Americans known or thought possibly to have been alive in

⁶¹⁶ “U.S. Ex-Operative in Hanoi Obtained MIA Photos,” *WP*, October 22, 1992; “Bush Hails ‘Breakthrough’ in Vietnam War MIA Cases,” *WP*, October 24, 1992.

⁶¹⁷ Final Report of the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs,” Senate Report 103-1, January 13, 1993 (Washington, D.C: GPO, 1993), 7

captivity who did not come back; we cannot dismiss the chance that some of these known prisoners remained captive past Operation Homecoming.

Second, leaders of the Pathet Lao claimed throughout the war that they were holding American prisoners in Laos. Those claims were believed--and, up to a point, validated--at the time; they cannot be dismissed summarily today.

Third, U.S. defense and intelligence officials hoped that forty or forty-one prisoners captured in Laos would be released at Operation Homecoming, instead of the twelve who were actually repatriated. These reports were taken seriously enough at the time to prompt recommendations by some officials for military action aimed at gaining the release of the additional prisoners thought to be held.

Fourth, information collected by U.S. intelligence agencies during the last years, in the form of live-sighting, hearsay, and other intelligence reports, raises questions about the possibility that a small number of unidentified U.S. POWs who did not return may have survived in captivity.

Finally, even after Operation Homecoming and returnee debriefs, more than 70 Americans were officially listed as POWs based on information gathered prior to the signing of the peace agreement; while the remains of many of these Americans have been repatriated, the fates of some continue unknown to this day.⁶¹⁸

Reading these findings raises the question of what, if anything the hearings accomplished other than the transmogrification of the faint hopes of families and the spurious assumptions of the POW/MIA lobby into “fact.” All of this supposed evidence rests on the fundamental assumption that Americans *must have been* held after 1973. Ironically, much of the confusion over the unresolved cases is traceable to the most significant finding of the 1976 Report so disparaged by the 1993 Committee: that the United States military was deficient in its record-keeping of soldiers classified as MIA, KIA/BNR, or POW. Unlike the 1976 report, which attempted to clear the way for normalization, the 1993 report overtly declared that the issue was far from resolved. “We want to make clear,” the introduction noted, “that this report is not intended to close the door on this

⁶¹⁸ “Final Report of the Senate Select Committee,” 7.

issue. It is meant to open it.”⁶¹⁹

The one issue on which the Committee did attempt to provide a sense of finality was the belief that the U.S. Government was actively covering up the existence of live POWs. While implying that Americans were still being held by the Vietnamese or Laotians, the committee took pains to argue that as to the question of whether “American POWs were knowingly abandoned in Southeast Asia,” the answer “is clearly no.”⁶²⁰ Thus, if it suggests anything, the Final Report indicates that the primary goal of the document was not to resolve the POW/MIA, nor to exonerate the Vietnamese, but rather to refocus attention on Vietnam by disproving the conspiracy theories directed at the United States. This is reflected not only by the unsubstantiated “evidence” of live prisoners but by the failure to include in the Final Report the testimony by Schweitzer and others who demonstrated the cooperation of the Vietnamese and the general lack of care put into the sections of the report dedicated to discussions of relations with Vietnam. The Final Report contains several references to “North Vietnam” in the present tense, such as: “The U.S. has long suspected that the North Vietnamese *have been* holding a considerable amount of information bearing on the fate of missing Americans.”⁶²¹ As we have seen throughout the post-1975 period, the occasional slip of referring to “North” or “South” Vietnam during a congressional hearing or a statement to the press was not

⁶¹⁹ Ibid., 4.

⁶²⁰ The report went on to add that, “But there remains the troubling question of whether the Americans who were expected to return but did not were, as a group, shunted aside and discounted by government and population alike. The answer to that question is essentially yes,” (“Final Report,” 7).

⁶²¹ Ibid., 28. A later section detailing the cooperation of the ASEAN nations after 1984 also refers to “North Vietnam” (285).

entirely uncommon. For such phrasing to be included in an official Senate report of such magnitude twenty years after the American military withdrawal from Vietnam, however, only testifies to the decidedly anti-Vietnamese tone of the Senate Select Committee.

The Clinton Years

In the face of ongoing accusations by the more radical elements of the hearings, Vietnamese officials were quick to point out that they were providing the U.S. with highly classified military records, even when American officials would refuse to provide them with relevant classified materials from the U.S.⁶²² In addition to very public cooperation with U.S. demands, another step in the roadmap had been met when over the summer, when the Cambodian Ceasefire Agreement had entered its second phase, preparing for U.N.-supervised elections, albeit without the support of the Khmer Rouge. At the same time he had praised the “breakthrough” made by Schweitzer, Bush told reporters on the campaign trail that he thought he was ready “to begin writing the last chapter of the Vietnam War.”⁶²³

As the Select Committee was wrapping up its hearings and readying its report, American businesses were gearing up for what they assumed would be a relatively swift end to the sanctions in early 1993. Pharmaceutical representatives, investors, and

⁶²² “Vietnam Underlines Cooperation on MIAs,” *WP* October 31, 1992.

⁶²³ “Bush Sees Gain in U.S.-Vietnam Ties,” *Los Angeles Times*. October 24, 1992. Cited in Franklin, *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies*, 199.

members of the airline industry began to flock to Vietnam, following the lead of their colleagues in the oil and telecommunications industry who had been actively working to develop bases of operations in the country since late 1991. The Australian-based *Vietnam Investment Review* playfully noted that there had been a dramatic upsurge in “live sightings” of Americans toward the end of the 1992, including representatives of Proctor and Gamble, Coca-Cola, Boeing, and Eastman-Kodak.⁶²⁴ It is likely that the Bush administration was waiting for the Final Report of the Select Committee to be released in 1993 to announce further easing of the sanctions, if not an outright end to the embargo.

By the time the Select Committee had wrapped up its hearings in December, however, the political landscape of Washington had been altered. After twelve years of Ronald Reagan and George Bush, Bill Clinton and Al Gore swept into the White House in the fall of 1992. The specter of the war in Vietnam was once again raised in the campaign, with conservative Bush supporters charging Clinton, who had been active in the antiwar movement, particularly during his days as a Rhodes scholar at Oxford, with being a “draft-dodger.” If Clinton were to follow the Roadmap to normalization with Vietnam, he would have to navigate rough political waters by fending off charges of “selling out” the families of unaccounted for servicemen from some veteran groups and the National League of American Families. It certainly helped that the Bush administration continued along its slow path to normalization by further easing the

⁶²⁴ “Vietnam: The Big Buildup Begins,” *WP*, December 6, 1992.

embargo in December, allowing American companies to sign tentative contracts to do business in Vietnam. The contracts would not be allowed to be finalized until the sanctions were lifted, but American companies could at least enter the Vietnamese market and compete with European and Asian firms.⁶²⁵ The most restrictive measures of the sanctions program, however remained in place, including the ban on access to IFI funds. Despite the snail's pace of progress, it did finally appear that the pieces were in place for normalization to occur. As Frederick Brown put it in a paper for the Overseas Development Council, the United States was finally in a position to "win" in Vietnam. It would be up to the new administration to finish the job of allowing Vietnam to fully integrate with the regional and global economies.⁶²⁶ Even the *Wall Street Journal*, which only a year earlier had continued to oppose any normalization of relations as long as Vietnam retained any remnants of a "centrally-planned" economy, was ready to lift the embargo by the spring of 1993.⁶²⁷ "President Clinton," the *Journal* pleaded in its lead editorial of March 8, "Normalize Ties With Vietnam."⁶²⁸

Although it remains unclear if Clinton was ready for full normalization by the spring, an April 28 IMF meeting in Washington lurked on the near horizon. The White House was prepared to offer a slight detour from the roadmap at the meeting by ending its opposition to loans to Vietnam and the Franco-Japanese plan to restructure Vietnam's

⁶²⁵ "Statement by Press Secretary Fitzwater on Relations With Vietnam, December 4, 1992," *Public Papers of the President, 1992-1993*, Volume One (Washington: GPO, 1993, 2187; "Embargo is Eased After Hanoi's Help on MIAs," *WP*, December 15, 1993.

⁶²⁶ Brown's paper cited in "Vietnam: The Big Buildup Begins."

⁶²⁷ The October 1991 *WSJ* editorial and responses from member of the U.S.-Vietnam Trade Council are reprinted in "U.S. Economic Embargo on Vietnam," 93.

⁶²⁸ "President Clinton: Normalize Ties With Vietnam," *WSJ*, March 8, 1993.

existing debt. At the very least, the plan suggested that the full embargo would be lifted by September, when the Trading With Enemy Act provisions would have to be renewed for the sanctions to continue. On April 12, *The Wall Street Journal* again weighed in favor of the move, but warned of what it called “an orchestrated campaign” to prevent progress on normalization. “As if on cue,” Bruce Franklin wrote at the time, another cruel and fraudulent campaign from anti-Vietnamese forces appeared on the same day as the *Journal’s* warning.⁶²⁹

Working in the Moscow archives of the former Soviet Communist Party, Australian scholar Stephen Morris, then a fellow at Harvard University, unearthed a document purporting to show that the Vietnamese held hundreds of American prisoners back after the Paris accords. *The New York Times*, which first reported Morris’ claim, was quickest to jump to conclusions, adding fuel to the fire by seeking out Carter Administration National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski to assess the claim. Brzezinski told the *Times*, in a statement picked up by newspapers and television stations across the country, “the great likelihood” was not that the Vietnamese continued to hold those prisoners, but rather “that the Vietnamese took hundreds of American officers out and shot them in cold blood.”⁶³⁰

The news media went into an immediate frenzy, drawing the same narrow discursive boundaries of the issue that had become commonplace in American culture. The initial news cycle, following Brzezinski’s comments, was not about the accuracy of

⁶²⁹ Franklin, “M.I.A.SMA,” *The Nation*, May 10, 1993, 616; also see Franklin, “Missing in Action in the 21st Century,” in *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies*.

⁶³⁰ “U.S. to Press Hanoi to Explain ’72 POW Report,” *NYT*, April 13, 1993; “POW Document Renews Bitter Arguments,” *WP*, April 14, 1993.

the document or its claims, but whether or not the prisoners were more likely executed in the late 1970s or continued to be held captive in Southeast Asia. As Bruce Franklin recounts the fallout:

In a replay of the phony photo gambits of 1991, the “smoking gun” now exploded as the lead story on every TV network, including PBS, whose balanced coverage showcased a *MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour* panel on April 13, consisting of three disinterested “experts”—Brzezinski, Kissinger, and Morris himself. Brzezinski’s massacre scenario was repeated in editorials across the country. Headlines blared “North Vietnam Kept 700 POWs After War: ‘Smoking Gun File Exposes 20 Years of Duplicity’”; “POWs” The Awful Truth?”; and “We Can’t Set Up Ties with Killers of Our POWs.”⁶³¹

Although neither the document, Morris’ claims, nor Brzezinski’s wild allegation held up under investigation, the damage had been done in the first round of coverage, as the press did not nearly go to the same ends to disprove the claims as it had to spread them.

Franklin, Nayan Chanda, the U.S. Defense Department, and others familiar with the issues quickly found the document to be inaccurate on a number of points. Writing in *The Nation*, and *Far Eastern Economic Review*, respectively, Franklin and Chanda pointed out several flaws with the document, ranging from terminology never used by the Vietnamese to the wrong names of significant Vietnamese leaders to the segregation of POWs by rank (which was not the normal practice) and other wildly inaccurate numbers given for known prisoners being held at the time.⁶³² Chanda’s article quoted military officials investigating the claim who further confirmed the report was likely a “fabrication.” “The more textual analysis you make,” one of the investigators told

⁶³¹ Franklin, *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies*, 200. Franklin’s headlines and editorials are taken from *The Washington Times*, April 12, 1993; *USA Today*, April 12, 1993; *WP*, April 15, 1993; and *Jersey Journal*, April 18, 1993 (233, n87).

⁶³² Franklin, “M.I.A.SMA;” Chanda, “Research and Destroy,” *FEER*, May 6, 1993, 20.

Chanda, “the more ridiculous it is... It is illiterate.”⁶³³ Chanda’s scathing piece drew an angry response from Morris, who was unable to refute any of the direct claims made by Chanda, Franklin, or other investigators, arguing at best that the obvious inaccuracies in the report were the result of a faulty translation from Vietnamese to Russian. More commonly, however, Morris’ response was to assume the de facto position of the POW/MIA lobby and the likes of Kissinger and Brzezinski: that any discrepancies related to American prisoners were the result of the lying and deceitful leaders in Hanoi; The Vietnamese were never to be trusted on their word, even when it conformed precisely to the historical records in question.⁶³⁴

When Morris remained adamant about the accuracy of the document, some in the press began to question his personal motives. Morris, *The Washington Post* pointed out, had long been a public critic of Vietnamese leaders and a staunch supporter of Henry Kissinger. Moreover, as Morris freely admitted in the *Post* piece, “If I find out the Soviets had poor intelligence, all my research has been in vain... I’m basing the whole credibility of what I’m doing on the validity of their intelligence.”⁶³⁵ Morris shrugged off those who disagreed with him, including General Vessey, who flew to Vietnam to investigate the document. Those sympathetic to Morris tried to deflect criticism of him by pointing out that while the document may have been “authentic,” and while the Soviets may have believed the document at the time, it did not follow that the information

⁶³³ Chanda, “Research and Destroy.” Ellipsis in original.

⁶³⁴ Morris, “Documenting the Truth,” *FEER*, July 15, 1993, 4.

⁶³⁵ “A Researcher’s Dream Find on U.S. POWs Turns Into a Nightmare,” *WP* April 25, 1993.

was accurate. Morris speciously rejected this distinction, once again asserting “it cannot be true” that the basis for his entire research project was so flawed.⁶³⁶

Although the document was clearly inaccurate, the damage to Vietnamese-American relations was already done, once again putting the POW/MIA myth at the center of national attention and forcing the Clinton administration to postpone the lifting of its IMF veto. By summer, however, after the initial furor over the Morris incident had been quelled, progress slowly resumed. The Cambodian-related aspects of Phase Three of the roadmap had been fulfilled when U.N.-supervised elections in Cambodia were held in May. After massive turnout, the newly elected national assembly named Sihanouk head of state and approved a coalition government, without the Khmer Rouge, who had announced earlier in the year that they would not participate in the elections. Despite sporadic violence from the Khmer Forces, a constitution and government, which included Hun Sen, would be in place by the fall.⁶³⁷ The official Interagency report on the Morris document was also released, concluding that it was totally unreliable; and on the night of July 2, after the daily news cycle had already ended, the administration quietly announced it was lifting the ban on IFI lending.⁶³⁸ The Administration’s decision was supported by a bipartisan letter from several members of Congress stating that further Vietnamese cooperation would be “in jeopardy if our nation does not make a gesture to

⁶³⁶ Ibid. The actual “1205 Report” is included as an appendix in “POW/MIA’s: Where Do We Go From Here,” 315-330.

⁶³⁷ For a detailed discussion of the Cambodian elections, see Brown and Zasloff, *Cambodia Confounds the Peacemakers, 1979-1998*, especially chapter three, “Implementing the Paris Agreements, 1991-1993,” and chapter four, “Conducting the Election, 1992-1993.”

⁶³⁸ “The Wages of Peace,” *FEER*, July 15, 1993, 10.

acknowledge the contributions of the Vietnamese.”⁶³⁹ The move was promptly criticized from the POW/MIA community for abandoning “leverage” on the Vietnamese, and, equally predictably, disparaged by corporate interests who, under the remaining aspects of the embargo, were not permitted to bid on projects that would presumably result from the resumption of lending to Vietnam. More clearly than ever, the tension between “leverage” and “access” was driving American policy.

The tension between the POW/MIA lobby and the forces of the American business community continued to define the course of U.S. policy toward Vietnam, as a series of Congressional hearings resulting from the decision to lift the restrictions demonstrated. The first of these, “POW’s/MIA’s: Missing Pieces of the Puzzle,” was convened on July 14, 1993, with another session on July 22. As with all previous Government hearings on the issue, these hearings drew the terms of debate around specious assumptions and featured a conspicuous dearth of informed scholarly opinion. The first session featured four “experts” to speak to the Morris document: Morris himself, Al Santoli, Jim Sanders, and George Carver, Jr. All four men were on the record as believing that Vietnam had kept American prisoners after the Paris agreements of 1973.⁶⁴⁰ None of the witnesses were able to refute the claims of inaccuracy made by others who had investigated the document; rather, they criticized the government for not adequately exploring the report and speculated about why neither the U.S. government nor the Vietnamese were to be believed. Morris’ statements to the Committee were full

⁶³⁹ “U.S. Drops Opposition to Loans for Vietnam,” *WP*, July 3, 1993.

⁶⁴⁰ “POW’s/MIA’s: Missing Pieces of the Puzzle,” Hearings Before the House Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific,” July 14 and 22, 1993 (Washington, D.C: GPO< 1994).

of the misrepresentation and hyperbole about Hanoi for which he gained a reputation over the years. Morris insinuated that the document must be accurate because

we have abundant evidence of other massive violations of the Paris Peace Agreement, and in fact of every other peace agreement the Vietnamese communist leaders have ever signed—most notably the Geneva agreement of 1954 ending hostilities in Indochina and the Geneva agreement of 1962 on Laos.⁶⁴¹

This outrageous statement, ascribing to Vietnam actions actually taken by the United States, offers a near-total inversion of history (particularly with regard to the Geneva accords), a stretch even for the likes of Morris, Brzezinski, or Kissinger. Against such scholarly objectivity, Morris argued that many within the State and Defense Departments, including General Vessey, “have pursued their assignment [of determining the accuracy of the information in the document] with inappropriate prejudice.”⁶⁴² The official government representatives at the hearings refused to give prominence to the Morris document, which had been termed the “1205 Report,” after the number of prisoners it alleged the Vietnamese had held. Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for POW/MIA Affairs Ed Ross noted briefly in his opening statement only that, “While portions of the document are plausible, evidence in support of its accuracy is far outweighed by errors, omissions, and propaganda that detract from its credibility.”⁶⁴³

The Senate hearing of that summer was a far more balanced and productive affair, exploring many the ironies and inconsistencies of American policy toward Vietnam. The hearing would be the last significant appraisal of the policy before the embargo was lifted

⁶⁴¹ Ibid., 113.

⁶⁴² Ibid.

⁶⁴³ Ibid., 191.

early in 1994. In a prepared statement to the committee, Senator John Kerry acknowledged the ongoing war against Vietnam, if not the ramifications:

Since 1975, the U.S.-Vietnamese relationship had remained essentially frozen, like a still photograph from that traumatic day when the last Americans left Saigon by helicopter from the U.S. embassy roof. Diplomatic relations have remained severed; Vietnamese assets have been frozen; trade has been embargoed. The war has gone on in another form, less bloody, but still damaging to our national psyche.⁶⁴⁴

Although Kerry's portrayal of this phase war remained focused on the damage done to Americans, the acknowledgement of an ongoing warlike state of relations between the two nations was a rarity in congressional debates on the topic. Other familiar faces from the Senate appeared to testify at the hearings, including Bob Kerrey of Nebraska, who spoke passionately about incorporating human rights considerations to discussions of relations with Vietnam, an issue that was absent from the Roadmap plan but had been vigorously debated in Congress with regard to the China trade agreement. Frank Murkowski of Alaska was also back, armed with a new version of his "Vietnam Access Bill," which had been derailed in previous years by the reemergence of various POW/MIA claims.⁶⁴⁵

The hearings also featured John Terzano, President of Vietnam Veterans of America, the leading Veterans organization for American veterans of the war and a strong supporter of normalizing relations with Vietnam. Terzano provided an eloquent argument about the many reasons to move forward on normalization with Vietnam, but

⁶⁴⁴ "United States Policy Toward Vietnam," Hearing Before the Senate Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs," 103rd Congress, 1st Session, July 21, 1993 (Washington, D.C: GPO, 1993), 13.

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid., 18, 45.

his testimony was significant for one reason in particular: for the first time since 1975, a congressional hearing featured a witness decrying the American embargo on Vietnam because of its effects on the people of Vietnam.⁶⁴⁶ If the U.S. government planned to incorporate the human rights issues of other nations into its foreign policy, he argued, it should begin with as reconsideration of its own impact on rights around the world:

I believe this policy [the embargo] was always wrong and immoral, but it now violates increasingly accepted principles of human rights. This June, the World Conference on Human Right upheld “the right to development” as a basic human right. And, for the first time, the U.S. recognized it by signing on to the declaration. How do we continue to justify our attempt to cause suffering to the Vietnamese people, former allies and enemies alike, over policies over which they have no control? Twenty years after the last American soldier left Vietnam, why are we still punishing these people?⁶⁴⁷

That last remark, about “the last American” leaving Vietnam, also offered a subtle jab at the POW/MIA lobby and Ann Mills Griffiths of the NLOF, who was to testify shortly after Terzano. Griffiths and the rest of the POW lobby must have begun to realize by this time that their efforts to prevent normalization were beginning to seem desperate. As new live sighting reports or secret declassified documents continued to appear, only to be dismissed and discredited, and as actual remains of American soldiers continued to be returned home from the jungles of Southeast Asia because of the help of the Vietnamese people, there was no legitimate argument left to make for upholding the embargo. Over the course of the past several years, most hearings related to Vietnam featured at least one new document or report about a particular unresolved case in Defense Department files.

⁶⁴⁶ The previous examples of testimony focusing on the plight of the Vietnamese under the embargo came in the November, 1975 hearings, “U.S. Trade Embargo of Vietnam: Church Views,” discussed in chapter one.

⁶⁴⁷ “United States Policy Toward Vietnam,” 63.

The best Griffiths could muster at these hearings was the submission of remarks by former Reagan National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane, who had criticized the Clinton administration's approach at the recently concluded 24th Annual Meeting of the NLoF.⁶⁴⁸ Aside from that, Griffiths took time to criticize members of the Clinton's administration for not giving her prior notice when it made the IMF arrears decision, something to which she had grown accustomed during prior administrations.

Finally, Griffiths insinuated that the White House press release accompanying the IMF announcement was misleading: "The summary also stated that 18,000 documents have been reviewed by U.S. specialists. It did not clarify that less than 100 of the documents, so I am told, even remotely correlate to missing Americans."⁶⁴⁹ The majority of the documents, of course, focused on Vietnamese military records. For years, Griffiths had pressured the Vietnamese to open up their "archives," so that American investigators could pour over the documents. The Vietnamese repeatedly denied that they had the types of records described by their American critics. With Hanoi now providing nearly unfettered access, even to highly classified military records, the National League of Families was reduced to criticizing the Vietnamese for not having what it never professed to have in the first place. Clearly, there was little ammunition in the NLoF arsenal left to battle the forces of normalization. And with the POW/MIA myth seemingly discredited once and for all, the corporate forces clamoring for a full end to the embargo were gaining widespread acceptance in the halls of the U.S. government.

⁶⁴⁸ McFarlane, "The Last Battle," Remarks at the National League of Families 24th Annual Meeting Dinner, July 16, 1993, reprinted in "United States Policy Toward Vietnam," 79-81.

⁶⁴⁹ "United States Policy Toward Vietnam," 78.

In addition to the U.S.-Vietnam Trade Council, other pro-business lobbying groups were beginning to coalesce around the effort to end the embargo. At the July Senate hearings, Al Baker, CEO of Halliburton testified on behalf of the National Foreign Trade Council, a coalition of over 500 large U.S. firms engaged in trade and investments around the world. The American Chamber of Commerce was also lined up in favor of lifting the embargo, submitting a detailed prepared statement describing the “lost opportunities” of American businesses in Vietnam. Baker pointed to the combination of Vietnam’s growing economy and the large market shares of various industries—particularly petroleum exploration and development, one of Halliburton’s specialties—arguing that the embargo was only harming United States interests. While Baker and the NFTC supported the administration’s decision to lift the IMF restrictions, they criticized the President for not going far enough. Under the embargo, U.S. firms were still banned from bidding on or participating in the many infrastructure projects likely to result from the new IMF loans. Thus, Baker pointed out, American businesses found themselves “in the unusual position of having its own government use U.S. tax dollars directly or indirectly to fund economic activity from which they are legally barred.”⁶⁵⁰

Perhaps no issue sums up the central tension of American policy—“access” versus “leverage”—better than the question of opposing loans from the IMF. As we saw in chapter one, during the normalization debates of the late 1970s, one of the major

⁶⁵⁰ “U.S. Policy Toward Vietnam,” 69.

concerns among policymakers was the “politicization” of IFIs. The Carter Administration and representatives from the IFIs, such as World Bank President Robert McNamara, opposed using the institutions to serve as a means of enforcing U.S. policy with developing countries. A decade later, such concerns were absent from the debate over lifting the embargo. The institutions were, by 1991, clearly under the thumb of the United States, which continued to exercise its veto power over lending policies to ensure that no loans to Vietnam were approved by the IMF, World Bank, or Asian Development Bank. Absent any discussion of whether or not it was legitimate for the United States to use the institutions to punish the Vietnamese, the only issue was how long to continue the ban. The standard assumption of various anti-Vietnamese constituencies, particularly the POW/MIA lobby, was that the Vietnamese not only wanted but needed the loans. The reality was far more complex.

Although it was barred from direct lending to Vietnam, the IMF was never entirely absent from Hanoi. Representatives of the fund were not barred by U.S. policy from advising Vietnam, which they continued to do throughout the 1980s, peddling to Hanoi the neoliberal “reform” measures of privatizing state-controlled resources and programs (including health care and education), liberalization of investment codes (particularly with foreign ownership regulations), and ending subsidies for agriculture and industry. By the end of 1987, as part of its *doi moi* program, Hanoi had agreed to, as historian Gabriel Kolko put it, “the entire IMF package, one that many countries are

reluctant to accept, much less implement.”⁶⁵¹ As Kolko persuasively demonstrates in his close study of the transformation of Vietnam’s political economy after 1975, the role of the IMF is not to be discounted in Vietnam’s “reforms” of the 1980s:

Whatever the Communist Party’s rhetoric of its pretensions, Vietnam’s economic and social direction since 1986 is comprehensible only in the context of the IMF’s central influence. The party’s ideologues still evoke Marx, Lenin, and Ho Chi Minh devoutly but the IMF’s inspiration has been far more decisive, and it has determined the nation’s crucial priorities.⁶⁵²

Had Vietnam not followed the IMF’s advice for its economic program in the 1980s, the question of the resumption of lending in the early 1990s would have been a moot point, as the fund would likely have denied both requests for new funding and any proposals to restructure the Vietnamese arrears. The Vietnamese did, as Kolko suggests, follow the IMF program, helping make the country ripe, and vulnerable, for foreign investment.

Although Vietnam maintained a liberal foreign investment code, many firms were reluctant to do business there based on bureaucratic and legal problems. In that sense, the resumption of IMF projects would have been an important sign of security for investors. As the fund’s representatives in Hanoi put it, “It would help reassure investors that the country was on the right economic path.”⁶⁵³ That the resumption of lending would be good for investors in the U.S. and elsewhere was only part of the question, however. The more pressing question is what the impact of further IMF dictates would have on the Vietnamese economy and the Vietnamese people, as the sanctions of the 1980s had all but disappeared and bilateral trade with nations in the region and around the globe was

⁶⁵¹ Kolko, *Anatomy of a Peace*, 33.

⁶⁵² Ibid.

⁶⁵³ “The Next Great Leap,” *FEER*, April 22, 1993, 68.

increasing.

The Vietnamese Politburo, as it was frequently throughout the 1980s, remained in 1993 divided on the question of whether the significant injection of capital that the resumption of multilateral aid would provide was necessary. Those who favored a major influx of foreign capital pointed to the still neglected infrastructure and the drastic drops in aid since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Others argued that finally gaining economic independence from the Soviets had forced Vietnam to become more self-sufficient. As a member of the Party told Nayan Chanda in 1995, “We started to develop only in 1991, when the Soviet aid stopped and the U.S. still had its embargo. We were like babies who stopped drinking milk and were starting to eat on their own.”⁶⁵⁴ While the record of progress of under IMF based-reforms is checkered at best, there is some evidence to recommend the position by Chanda’s source. Even with the massive amounts of Soviet aid in the late 1980s, the Vietnamese economy was largely stagnant. In 1992, when the well of foreign aid had completely dried up, the Vietnamese economy still grew by 8.3%, almost doubling in size from 1991. Inflation, historically one of Vietnam’s biggest problems, was held to 18%, extremely low by Vietnamese standards. Perhaps most significantly, Vietnam’s trade deficit was all but erased in 1992, despite the ongoing trade embargo by the United States and the dissolution of bilateral aid and trade with the Soviet Union.⁶⁵⁵

Citing this level of progress, many in Vietnam questioned whether a massive

⁶⁵⁴ “Vietnam: War and Peace,” *FEER*, May 4, 1995, 20.

⁶⁵⁵ “The Next Great Leap;” Vietnam: Transition to a Market Economy,” International Monetary Fund Report (Washington, D.C, 1996).

influx of aid would be beneficial to the Vietnamese people. While there were any number of projects that needed major financing—roads, bridges and electrical infrastructure—some wondered if the Party had the knowledge or the priorities to lead the rebuilding effort. “We’re desperately short of capital,” a Vietnamese representative of the Institute for Scientific and Technological Forecasting acknowledged, “but in my opinion our biggest difficulty is the lack of economic know-how.” The bulk of training over the past several decades, he pointed out, had been dedicated to the military, not to economic planning, let alone market-based economics.⁶⁵⁶ Even one American working for the World Bank was quoted as saying that perhaps the resumption of loans was not in Vietnam’s interest: “the World Bank is always looking for new clients and trying to push money on them. But Vietnam can push domestic reform further without multilateral aid. It might even be good for Vietnam not to have access to aid.”⁶⁵⁷

Economists and historians remain sharply divided over whether the IMF-based reform measures have benefited the Vietnamese people as a whole⁶⁵⁸; only after more time has passed and a generation as come of age under the Vietnamese “market socialism” will we really have enough information to form useful conclusions on that issue. The crucial point for the present study is how the debate between those advocating “leverage” or “access” as the focal point of American policy toward Vietnam continued to render the Vietnamese people invisible. While those advocating “access”

⁶⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁷ “The Wages of Peace.”

⁶⁵⁸ For a negative view of the IMF and World Bank role in Vietnam, see Kolko, *Anatomy of a Peace*. For more positive reviews, see the IMF Report, “Vietnam: Transition to a Market Economy,” cited above, and Peter Wolff, *Vietnam: The Incomplete Transformation* (London: Frank Cass Publishing, 1999), 118-121.

were unquestionably correct in their assumptions that increased contact with the Vietnamese people would lead to greater success for American businesses and increased progress in the search for remains of American servicemen, there was little consideration in the debates given to what the effects of either course would be on the people of Vietnam.

As discussions of “lost opportunities” for peace, so common in the histories of the war in Vietnam, were replaced with talk of lost opportunities for market shares and competitive bids for business projects in Vietnam, “Vietnam as Market” had begun to trump “Vietnam as war” or even “Vietnam as nation” as the most common representation of Vietnam in American culture. Unfortunately, this latest construction did nothing to make the Vietnamese people more visible in policy discussion or in American culture. As the September deadline for renewing the Trading With the Enemy Act approached the administration signaled it was not prepared to unilaterally lift the sanctions, although it did indicate that it did eventually submit to the disgruntled business community by allowing American businesses to bid on IMF projects “pending the lifting of the embargo.”⁶⁵⁹ While the larger economic war gradually wound down, the battle for access was over. On September 14, 1993, the American embargo of Vietnam entered its eighteenth year; it would not see a nineteenth.

⁶⁵⁹ This restriction was formally lifted in December.

Trading with the Enemy, 1994-1995

When the 103rd Congress of the United States returned to Washington for its second session, nearly all of the pieces were finally in place for the White House to lift the embargo. As *Time* magazine put it in early 1994, “the issue of normalizing relations with Vietnam no longer hinges on the unanswered—or unanswerable—questions of what happened to America’s missing soldiers; instead it has become a debate about whether the war is finally, conclusively over.”⁶⁶⁰ The only consideration left for Clinton was purely political: could the White House survive the inevitable onslaught of criticism from the POW/MIA lobby. The last-gasp “leverage” argument of the National League of Families and its allies in Congress—that the embargo was the last “bargaining chip” left on the table with Vietnam—was no longer sustainable in the face of ever-increasing progress in body recovery since the U.S. had steadily eased the embargo. While the basis for moving forward was obviously economic at this point, the decision to end the sanctions would still have to be couched in terms of ongoing commitments to the POW/MIA mission. A *New York Times/CBS* News poll conducted in mid-January revealed that although a small plurality of those questioned favored lifting the embargo (46 percent in favor versus 40 against), a far greater number, 56 percent, believed that some Americans were still being held prisoner in Southeast Asia. In the face of such numbers and public perceptions of his record on the war, to lift the embargo once and for all Clinton needed what the news media at the time termed “political cover.”⁶⁶¹

⁶⁶⁰ “Does Clinton Need This?” *Time*, February 7, 1994, 47.

⁶⁶¹ Ibid; “Senate Urges End to U.S. Embargo Against Vietnam,” *WP*, January 28, 1994; “The Wages of Peace,” *FEER* July 15, 1993, 10.

On January 27, 1993, the Senate held a lengthy and contentious debate over whether to give the President that cover. The floor fight for a resolution recommending the President end the embargo once and for all, led by John Kerry and John McCain, brought out the expected animosity from anti-Vietnamese forces inside and outside of the Senate chambers. Against the claims of Kerry and McCain that it was “time to put the war behind us,” Bob Smith voiced the reaction of groups like the VFW and National League of Families, calling an end to the sanctions “immoral and incomprehensible.”⁶⁶² Even in the face of such rhetoric, those opposed to any movement toward normalization were far outweighed by pro-business forces and those who saw the embargo as an impediment to progress on the POW/MIA issue. In the early hours of the 28th, the non-binding resolution calling on the President to lift the embargo passed by a vote of 62-38.

Although the administration tried to downplay its role in pushing for the resolution, it had, by all accounts, orchestrated the passage closely with Kerry and other supporters. Although Kerry toed the administration’s line by placing himself at the center of the story, McCain was more honest in his statements to the press, telling *The Washington Post*, “The White House staff felt it was very important to pass this [resolution], given the problems that the President’s lack of military background gives him on this sort of issue.” Three days later, the administration removed the final political roadblock when it received word that the Justice Department was prepared to clear Commerce Secretary Ron Brown of charges that he accepted a large payoff from

⁶⁶² “Senate Urges End to U.S. Embargo Against Vietnam.”

Vietnamese-American businessmen in exchange for helping lift the sanctions.⁶⁶³

On the morning of February 3, *The Washington Post* ran a story describing the “last bitter days of the personal Vietnam war” still being fought by “a handful of distressed and angry Americans.”⁶⁶⁴ Murmurs from the White House indicating the end of the embargo was imminent led members of the National League and the VFW to huddle in the Capitol for a last-minute “strategy session” with Bob Smith and Ross Perot. According to the story, Smith and Perot “pleaded” with the groups for any suggestions on how to “head off” the White House plans. Unable to come up with any serious proposals, the group declared defeat. One member told the *Post* that all in attendance had come to recognize “that the handwriting was on the wall.”⁶⁶⁵ The POW/MIA lobby, at long last, had no more tricks up its sleeve, yet even they likely did not realize how soon the announcement would come.

Later that day, armed with the presence of several veterans from Congress, Bill Clinton lifted the American embargo on Vietnam, telling the assembled guests and media he was “absolutely convinced that it offers the best way to resolve the fate of those who remain missing and about whom we are not sure.”⁶⁶⁶ Most clearly, the President indicated that although the embargo was lifted, full normalization of political and economic relations could still take some time. After detailing the progress that had been

⁶⁶³ “Justice Department Set to Clear Ron Brown.” *WP*, February 2, 1994.

⁶⁶⁴ “MIA Activists Fight on for Vietnam Embargo,” *WP*, February 3, 1994.

⁶⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶⁶ “Remarks on Lifting the Trade Embargo on Vietnam and an Exchange With Reporters,” February 3, 1994. *Public Papers of the President, 1994*, Volume One (Washington, D.C: GPO, 1995), 178.

made resolving outstanding cases, he made his case to the various groups opposing the move: “I want to be clear: These actions do not constitute a normalization of our relationships. Before that happens, we must have more progress, more cooperation, and more answers.”⁶⁶⁷

The end of the embargo, however, moved a new set of questions to the forefront. Clinton’s fervent rhetoric about the ongoing commitment to the POW/MIA issue only served to mask the new economic focus of American-Vietnamese relations. After his remarks, the first barrage of questions from the press was telling: “Mr. President, aren’t you giving up some leverage, though? Could we ask about that? And what do you anticipate in terms of American trade? What’s the size of the market? What do you think the opportunities are?”⁶⁶⁸ As he had for the past year, Clinton assured the public that economics played no role in his decision, insisting that he had not even received briefings on the benefits that lifting the embargo would provide for American business. “I thought it was very important,” he responded, “that that not be a part of this decision.”⁶⁶⁹ Even so, American corporations had no need for Clinton’s prognostications. They had long been aware of the opportunities available to them in the Vietnamese market, and were ready to seize their chance the moment the embargo was officially lifted.

The announcement from the White House set off a frenzy of contract signing, announcements of new services, and distribution of free samples from New York to

⁶⁶⁷ Ibid, 179; “Clinton Lifts Vietnam Trade Embargo,” *WP*, February 4, 1994.

⁶⁶⁸ “Remarks on Lifting the Trade Embargo on Vietnam,” 180.

⁶⁶⁹ Ibid.

Hanoi. Within an hour of Clinton's remarks, representatives of Pepsi set up an inflatable soda can and began handing out 40,000 free bottles of the soft drink in Ho Chi Minh City. A few hours later, about the time American Express signed a contract to be the first credit card accepted in Vietnam, United Airlines announced that it was ready to begin service from Los Angeles to Ho Chi Minh City, pending final approval from Hanoi. Not to be outdone by its rival, Coca-Cola later that day unveiled a billboard in Ho Chi Minh City with the phrase, "Nice to see you again." Coke, which spent \$250,000 on marketing in advertising the first ten days after the embargo was lifted, proclaimed that it would spend \$45 million on production in Vietnam over the next five years.⁶⁷⁰ Pepsi responded a few days later, unleashing a new advertising campaign featuring the current Miss Vietnam.⁶⁷¹

The headlines in the United States were unanimous in their predictions: The war was finally over; a long, bitter relationship would soon be thawed by the prospect of trade. The contents of *Time* magazine featured a cartoon of Ho Chi Minh holding up an order of French fries sporting the likeness of Colonel Sanders, the mascot of Kentucky Fried Chicken. "'Vietnam,'" William Branigin declared, "can finally become for America a country instead of a war, a place of real people with a history and a future instead of U.S. national nightmare."⁶⁷² Yet the American media seemed unable to describe the new nation without the trope of warfare. The marketplace of Saigon, papers

⁶⁷⁰ "Watch This Space: Advertisers Covet Vietnam's Growing Consumer Market," *FEER*, March 31, 1994, 66.

⁶⁷¹ "Vietnam Welcomes U.S. Decision on Embargo," *NYT*, February 5, 1994; "Peace Finally at Hand," *Time*, February 14, 1994; "New Vietnam Combat: Coke Versus Pepsi," *NYT*, February 7, 1994; "The War—To Cash In," *Newsweek*, February 14, 1994, 33.

⁶⁷² "As Trade Opens, War Closes," *WP*, February 6, 1994;

declared, was the site of “the new Vietnam war,” the latest “campaign between for the hearts and minds of Vietnam’s 71 million people.” “Vietnam Braces For a New Invasion,” declared *Newsweek*.⁶⁷³ In particular, the American “Cola Wars” were seen as opening a new front in Vietnam. *The New York Times* proclaimed Coke versus Pepsi “the new Vietnam Combat,” and elsewhere the “battle” between the two soft drink giants was being followed closely, with Pepsi winning “the opening skirmish,” but Coke “fighting back” strongly. The *Times* admitted to the irony of the situation, noting that fighting the cola wars on the streets of Hanoi was likely “the realization of the worst nightmare of a generation of dedicated Vietnamese Communists.”⁶⁷⁴

While an accurate representation of the seemingly unbridled enthusiasm of American business interests breaking into the new market, the clever headlines and playful anecdotes were not indicative of the more cautious tone in Vietnam. Were it not for the spectacle-laden antics of Pepsi and Coke, many Vietnamese may not have even been aware that the embargo had been lifted. The state television station ran the embargo story seventh on its morning broadcast. “The Vietnam issue has created many emotions in the United States,” Deputy Foreign Minister Le Mai offered. “We Vietnamese have less emotions.”⁶⁷⁵ Official statements from Hanoi expressed cautious optimism to the long-awaited end to the sanctions, hailing “a new page in U.S.-Vietnam relations.”⁶⁷⁶ Accompanying such reactions, however, were calls for full diplomatic normalization and

⁶⁷³ “The War—To Cash In;” “New Vietnam Combat.”

⁶⁷⁴ “New Vietnam Combat;” “As Trade Opens, War Closes.”

⁶⁷⁵ “A Lukewarm Welcome,” *FEER*, February 17, 1994.

⁶⁷⁶ “Vietnam Welcomes U.S. Decision on Embargo.”

the establishment of Most Favored Nation (MFN) status for Vietnam. Vietnamese leaders were acutely aware that they remained at a major disadvantage in the global economy without a full trade agreement with the United States. Ending the Trading With the Enemy Act “only allows American companies to sell in Vietnam,” Le Van Bang, Vietnamese ambassador to the United Nations, told the *Far Eastern Economic Review* the night before Clinton’s announcement. “It is not both ways because without MFN, we cannot compete and sell in the U.S.”⁶⁷⁷ Although the end of the sanctions was praised as a step in the right direction and, in the short term, a stimulus for American investments and capital, without MFN status Vietnam would be unable to develop a balanced trade program.

This disjunction was apparent in the case of Vietnam’s negotiations with Boeing. The American based aerospace giant had agreed in principle with the Vietnamese government to a sale of four 737 aircraft only a few months earlier. When the White House failed to lift the embargo, however, Boeing lost its chance at the \$160 million contract, passed over for the French firm, Airbus. Ironically, Airbus could only lease the aircraft to Vietnam, because they had sufficient American “content” to be prohibited by the embargo.⁶⁷⁸ Both Boeing and Hanoi were thus happy to be able to revive their deal in 1994. After the lifting of the embargo, Boeing announced that it expected Vietnam to buy at least 60 aircraft over the next decade, to the tune of around \$4 billion. The Vietnamese were not as optimistic. While they needed the planes, the Vietnamese

⁶⁷⁷ “A Lukewarm Welcome.”

⁶⁷⁸ “Making Up for Lost Time,” *FEER*, February 17, 1994, 17.

economist Le Dan Doanh argued, Hanoi would be unable to purchase such a fleet without a reduction in American tariffs on Vietnamese goods to the U.S. “Now Vietnam can buy Boeings,” Doanh noted, “but it can’t sell textiles in the U.S. A one-way street can’t be maintained for a long time. Vietnam needs to pay for its imports.”⁶⁷⁹

Despite the claims of the POW/MIA lobby, the Vietnamese were far from emboldened by the lifting of the sanctions. If anything, the reaction from Hanoi should have reinforced the view that the United States was clearly still in a position of power relative to Vietnam. In Washington, however, the various anti-Vietnamese constituencies were not prepared to go quietly. Exactly one week after Clinton announced the end of the embargo, the House Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific held a hearing appropriately entitled, “POW/MIA: Where Do We Go From Here.” The last hearing of its type before the United States and Vietnam normalized diplomatic relations, the discussions in front of the committee demonstrate the tatters in which the POW/MIA lobby found itself and the extent to which it continued to misread the power dynamics of American relations with Vietnam.

Gary Ackerman, the representative from New York who had taken over as chair of the subcommittee after the departure of Solarz, opened by stating that in light of the lifting the embargo, the U.S. “must immediately move to ensure that Hanoi does not interpret this action to mean that it is off the hook on providing a full accounting of our missing Vietnam war heroes.”⁶⁸⁰ Other members of the committee made similarly

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁰ “POW/MIA: Where Do We Go From Here?” Hearings Before the House Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific,” 103rd Congress, Second Session, February 10, 1994 (Washington, D.C: GPO, 1994), 4.

worded opening remarks, calling for diligence on the POW/MIA issue while assuring the many members of the POW/MIA lobby in attendance that the end of the embargo did not constitute normalized relations or a commitment of United States aid. The statements of the committee and witnesses only served to confirm how out of step they were with the direction of relations with Vietnam. Representative Dana Rohrabacher claimed that the administration had “just given up the tremendous leverage that we had on *South* Vietnam by lifting the embargo.”⁶⁸¹ Luis Gutierrez of Illinois argued that the final chapter of the war in fact had not yet been written, contrary to all accounts in the news media. That would be accomplished only when the U.S. could “find out all of the information of those who went to Vietnam, but did not return.”⁶⁸²

A member of the “POW/MIA Grassroots Organization” dug up the issue of the 1973 Nixon reparations letter, arguing that it continued to serve as Hanoi’s basis for withholding live American prisoners. “Can we not for once, just once,” she pleaded, “put aside all other considerations except for to secure the release of any Americans being held against their will?”⁶⁸³ Former POW Michael BENEGE provided perhaps the most outrageous comments of the hearings, stating matter-of-factly: “Hanoi knows where the bodies are buried. Why would Hanoi hold POWs? The Vietnamese Communists are not born again Christians. They are not Mr. Nice Guy.” BENEGE went on to accuse Hanoi of continuing to hold prisoners from the end of the First Indochina War as well. “This is documented, that they hold French POWs.” “By lifting the trade embargo,” BENEGE

⁶⁸¹ Ibid., 8 (emphasis added).

⁶⁸² Ibid., 9.

⁶⁸³ Ibid., 19.

concluded, “President Clinton lost a unique opportunity to heal the wounds of the Vietnam War.”⁶⁸⁴

If the purpose of the hearings was, in part, to determine the future direction of the POW/MIA lobby, prospects for the movement were not bright. The rigidly anti-Vietnamese sentiments expressed by Benege and others were clearly in the minority among the American public and among American policy makers after the lifting of the embargo. Images of an America held hostage by devilish Asian communists had long disappeared, replaced by a triumphant Cold War victory and the demise of the Soviet Union. Once the centerpiece and driving force behind American policy toward Vietnam, the POW/MIA lobby by 1994 was largely reduced to an afterthought. Policymakers continued to pledge their ongoing commitment to the mission of obtaining a “full accounting” from the Vietnamese, but the direction of American-Vietnamese relations was now being driven largely by the forces of the global economy and the Vietnamese market.

The issue of settling outstanding corporate claims against Vietnam was given only a brief moment in the spotlight at the hearings. Robert Torricelli, designated spokesman in Congress for the corporate claimants made a brief appearance at the outset of the session, asserting that the corporate victims of the war should not be abandoned in the push for normalization. Like the POW/MIA activists, Torricelli wanted “to continue pressure on the Vietnamese,” but it was the pressure provided by the economic dynamics

⁶⁸⁴ Ibid., 21-22; 24.

of American-Vietnamese relations that would drive normalization. In the year ahead, it would be Torricelli's corporate claims, not the claims of the POW/MIA lobby that would be the basis of the bilateral negotiations between Washington and Hanoi.

The Final Step: Reverse Reparations and Normalization

As 1995 began, the pieces of a new era of relations between Vietnam and the United States were seemingly in hand. With the embargo lifted and international lending fully restored, American trade and investment with Vietnam increased significantly, as did other forms of bilateral and multilateral aid to Vietnam. In 1993, the Vietnamese government reported \$500 million in foreign assistance, up from an average of less than \$100 million during the late 1980s and early 1990s. At the fall 1993 IMF and World Bank meetings, with U.S. opposition out of the way, Hanoi received aid pledges of nearly \$2 billion. Under the limited waiver opportunities permitted under the embargo during 1993, American companies exported about \$7 million worth of products to Vietnam. In 1994, the exports reached \$160 million.⁶⁸⁵ The prospects were for aid and trade only to increase in the final five years of the century, but there remained several obstacles to increased U.S. business activity in Vietnam and even more obstacles to full economic normalization for the Vietnamese.

Although the end of the embargo created a long-awaited groundswell of foreign investment, many of the legal safeguards to which American firms working overseas had

⁶⁸⁵ "U.S.-Vietnam Relations: Issues and Implications," Report to Congressional Committees by the General Accounting Office (Washington, D.C: GPO, 1995), 6; 9.

grown accustomed could not be put in place without further measures. The Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC), and the Export-Import Bank (Eximbank), both of which provided support for American businesses operating internationally, continued to be prohibited from working with Vietnam because of “a complex set of statutory constraints,” most of which stemmed from Vietnam’s status as a “non-market” economy.⁶⁸⁶ Many of these restraints were odd relics of the Cold War that seemed particularly ill-suited to dealing the most central aspects of American policy toward Asia in 1995: promoting trade among ASEAN, Japan, and the U.S., and recognizing Vietnam while relations with China were slowly deteriorating. Section 620(f) of the Foreign Assistance Act, for instance, required the President to issue a waiver in order for OPIC or the Trade and Development Agency to assist American firms doing business with any Communist countries. The Presidential determination was required to substantiate that “(a) the assistance is vital to U.S. security, (b) the country is not controlled by the international Communist conspiracy and (c) the assistance will promote independence from International communism.”⁶⁸⁷ Less severe was the Jackson-Vanik waiver, required by the Trade Act of 1974, which required an annual Presidential waiver asserting that the governments of nonmarket-economy countries either allow their citizens to emigrate freely or that the waiver will help promote reform and progress on emigration issues.⁶⁸⁸

⁶⁸⁶ Ibid., 13.

⁶⁸⁷ Ibid., 15.

⁶⁸⁸ For an example of the process involved in the Jackson-Vanik waiver determination, see “Waiver Under the Trade Act of 1974 with Respect to Vietnam,” Communication from the President of the United States to the House Committee on Ways and Means,” April 21, 1998 (Washington: GPO, 1998); and “Approving the Extension of Nondiscriminatory Treatment (Normal Trade Relations) to the Products of the Socialist

The Foreign Assistance Act also prohibited the U.S. government from trading or providing aid to countries that had illegally expropriated American property—private or government—or had defaulted on previous loans from the United States.⁶⁸⁹ Vietnam fit both these categories: the property seized in 1975 was taken in violation of international law, and the collapse of the Saigon regime in April of that year left the United States with around \$150 million unpaid loans from the defunct Republic of South Vietnam. Given the enormous economic—let alone human—costs that the United States inflicted on Vietnam both during and after the military phase of the war, it might have been reasonable for the United States to make exceptions in order to “heal the wounds of war,” as the normalization process was avowedly designed to do. Furthermore, given the questionable legality of the American war in Vietnam, the claims issue was a rather ironic and extremely selective invocation of international law by the United States. As we have seen throughout this chapter, however, Vietnam remained at a distinct disadvantage throughout the normalization process, with no real leverage to speak of. If the settlement of outstanding claims was the final obstacle to normalization—which it clearly was for the United States—the Vietnamese would again acquiesce to American demands.

For several years, the claims issue arose sporadically at government hearings on policies toward Vietnam or Cambodia, with the most significant point of contention being whether or not to include the claims of private American companies and

Republic of Vietnam,” Report of the Senate Finance Committee to Accompany S.J. Res. 16, 107th Congress, 1st Session, July 27, 2001 (Washington: GPO, 2001)

⁶⁸⁹ “U.S.-Vietnam Relations: Issues and Implications,” 15-16.

individuals simultaneously with those of the U.S. Government. The issue was first openly debated in 1979, when the claims on Vietnam were formally referred to the Foreign Claims Settlement Commission (FCSC) and the International Claims Settlement Act of 1949 was amended to include Vietnam.⁶⁹⁰ After a six-year investigation, the Commission ruled in 1986 that 192 of the 534 claims met the requirements for compensation. Over half (58%) of the 192 successful claims were to a handful of petroleum companies. The total amount of the claims awarded was just under \$100 million dollars.⁶⁹¹ Ironically, when the commission for Vietnam was created in 1980, the Vietnam assets frozen by the U.S. in 1975 were worth almost exactly this amount.⁶⁹²

The assets, of course, had appreciated considerably since 1975. By 1983, the Vietnamese assets were estimated to be worth \$150 million; by 1989, they were valued at \$245 million; and by 1994 they were worth approximately \$290 million and, by some estimates well over \$300 million.⁶⁹³ As Robert Torricelli told a House Committee at the time the embargo was lifted, this amount was “far more than necessary to pay the claims.”⁶⁹⁴ The claims, however, were also subject to appreciation. According to the terms provided by the settlement legislation, all approved claims were adjusted for simple interest calculations, at a rate of six percent per year, retroactive to 1975. Thus the awards were worth \$99 million in 1986, \$200 million in 1989, and nearly \$220 million

⁶⁹⁰ “Adjudication of Claims Against Vietnam.” Also see chapter one.

⁶⁹¹ “Issues Affecting the Question of United States Relations With Vietnam,” 14.

⁶⁹² “Adjudication of Claims Against Vietnam,” 3.

⁶⁹³ “POW/MIA: Where Do We Go From Here,” 2. The 1995 GAO Report claimed that the assets were worth “more than \$350 million.”

⁶⁹⁴ Ibid., 3; Issues Affecting the Question of United States Relations With Vietnam,” 100.

by 1995.⁶⁹⁵ This amount was only for private claims, though, and did not include the \$150 million in outstanding loans claimed by the U.S. Government. Combining the Government and private claims, the amount reached approximately \$370 million, well over the estimated \$300 million value of the frozen Vietnamese assets. In effect, the U.S. was negotiating political and economic normalization with the Vietnamese claiming that it was *owed* tens, if not hundreds of millions of dollars.

Further stretching the absurd, some in Congress had for years been trying to pay out claims from the frozen assets without reaching a full agreement with the Vietnamese government. Since the bulk of the assets held in the United States were formerly property of the Republic of Vietnam, which had ceased to exist in 1975, some in Congress responded positively to legislation authored by lawyers representing the corporate claimants asserting that the current government of Vietnam had no legal right to the frozen funds. The case was only bolstered by the fact that the United States had not yet legally recognized the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.⁶⁹⁶ The SRV had formally accepted the international responsibilities of both “North” and “South” Vietnam during 1975-1976, and it was a commonplace of international law that a new government was entitled and obligated to assume both the rights and liabilities of the previous regime. In the eyes of the United States, however, as one litigator argued in 1989: “Vietnam is not, however, the normal case, and the normal rule does not automatically apply.”⁶⁹⁷

⁶⁹⁵ “Issues Affecting the Question of United States Relations With Vietnam,” 3.

⁶⁹⁶ Ibid., 67.

⁶⁹⁷ Ibid., 68.

As it consistently had since 1975, the United States proved that it was willing to go above and beyond its own precedents and the norms of international relations to punish Vietnam. Thus it was that on January 28, 1995, the United States and Vietnam signed an historic “Agreement Concerning the Settlement of Certain Property Claims.” The agreement arranged for Vietnam to pay private claims of United States nationals (“both natural and juridical persons”), in the amount of \$208,510,481.⁶⁹⁸ The claims of the United States government for the RVN loans were not covered by this arrangement. Only in 1997 did the two governments reach an agreement on this issue, when U.S. Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin and Vietnamese Finance Minister Nguyen Sinh Hung agreed that the SRV would repay \$145 million in loans from the former Saigon regime. The agreement also called for a “down payment” of \$8.5 to cover the interest on the loans. The down payment was due within 30 days; the full loan was to be paid off through “regular payments” until 2019.⁶⁹⁹

“Binding our Wounds”

With the corporate claims issue settled, there was no longer anything standing of the way of normalization between the United States and Vietnam. Although the White House would still have to fend off criticisms from the insatiable demands of the POW/MIA lobby, even the American media was beginning to reject the increasingly desperate antics of the groups. In June, as speculation that normalization was imminent

⁶⁹⁸ “Claims: Agreement Between the United States of America and Vietnam,” U.S. State Department Document, January 28, 1995 (Washington, D.C: GPO, 1995).

⁶⁹⁹ “United States and Vietnam Sign Debt Agreement,” U.S. Department of State Press Release, April 7, 1997.

spread quickly through the U.S., former North Carolina Congressman Billy Hendon, a longtime advocate of various POW conspiracy theories, repeatedly chained himself to the headquarters of the U.S. POW/MIA office in Hanoi. Hendon, who appeared several times at various Congressional hearings and was responsible for some of the most outrageous claims about live prisoners, claimed that he knew the location in Vietnam where American prisoners were being held. Refusing to divulge the location, he informed authorities that he would lead them to the men. Eventually, the American team investigated Hendon's claim about a supposed underground prison fifty miles outside of Hanoi. The spot turned out to be a depot for military vehicles. Absolutely no evidence of anything related to American prisoners was found.⁷⁰⁰

Around the same time as Hendon's antics, an American team received permission to do a massive excavation at a series of Vietnamese military cemeteries, unearthing hundreds of Vietnamese corpses with the vague hopes of finding a few isolated remains from American servicemen. No American remains were found. "Imagine," Jonathan Alter wrote in *Newsweek* the following week, "if the Government of Vietnam believed that one of its estimated 300,000 MIAs had been mistakenly buried in Arlington national cemetery. Would the United States allow the Vietnamese to go into Arlington in the middle of the night and dig up old bones? Be serious." Yet the Vietnamese continued to cooperate and assist the American teams with their efforts. The younger Vietnamese in particular, Alter pointed out, were "sympathetic to all this but a bit perplexed by the

⁷⁰⁰ "MIA Hunter Chains Himself to Gate," *NYT*, June 5, 1995; "U.S. Finds No POWs at Vietnam Military Site," *NYT*, June 19, 1995.

American obsession with the war.⁷⁰¹ The obsessions of the POW/MIA believers were given one last moment in the spotlight, as Bob Smith, joined now by Bob Dole, attempted a last ditch effort to derail diplomatic recognition of Vietnam by preventing the approval of funds for an American embassy. With or without the measure, however, it was clear by late June that the White House was prepared to announce normalization.

On July 11, 1995, in a brief, solemn, and understated ceremony in the East Room of the White House, President Bill Clinton announced that the United States was establishing normalized diplomatic relations with Vietnam. Couching the announcement, as ever, in the language of continued progress on a full accounting of those listed as POW/MIA, Clinton noted that only 55 “discrepancy cases” remained. Normalization would help the United States “move forward on an issue that has separated Americans from one another for too long now,” Clinton remarked.

This moment offers us the opportunity to bind up our own wounds. They have resisted time for too long. We can now move on to common ground. Whatever divided us before, let us consign to the past. Let this moment, in the words of Scripture, “Be a time to heal, and a time to build.”⁷⁰²

The “wounds” to be healed were American, but try as he might Clinton could not consign them to the past. Angered by the administration’s decision, the Republican controlled Congress seized the opportunity, reviving the Smith-Dole legislation denying funding to the American embassy in Vietnam. “A slap in the face” to the “friends and families of American MIAs,” one member of the House International Affairs Committee

⁷⁰¹ “Binding Up Old Wounds,” *Newsweek*, June 26, 1995, 34.

⁷⁰² “Opening to Vietnam,” *NYT*, July 12, 1995.

labeled normalization. “A blot, a stain on our government,” cried another.⁷⁰³ There was little support among the public to sustain the punitive proposals. In a *New York Times* survey immediately after the normalization announcement, nearly all the respondents supported rapprochement with Vietnam. Even some who believed that Americans were still being held in prison camps in Hanoi recognized that the time had come. “The question should be, can Vietnam forgive us,” said one respondent. “If we had won,” argued another, “this wouldn’t be an issue.” Not every one was convinced, of course. “It’s the same Vietnam that took our sons and brothers,” said a woman who lost family in the war. “I could never forgive them for that.”⁷⁰⁴ As usual, the Vietnamese took the high road in the face of ongoing American hostility. Shortly after the normalization announcement, the government officially renamed the Museum of American War Atrocities in Ho Chi Minh City the “Museum of War Evidence.”

That August, in a large public ceremony, Secretary of State Warren Christopher and Foreign Minister Nguyen Canh Cam signed the official papers on normalization, opening the American embassy in Hanoi. The ceremony was upbeat, including a champagne toast. Cam told the assembled guests that a new era in American-Vietnamese relations had, at long last, arrived. “We want Americans to view Vietnam was a country, and not as a war,” he noted. As the American flag was raised over the embassy, it seemed that the U.S. was finally prepared to do just that. Yet for twenty years the American War in Vietnam had resisted attempts at closure, denying any solid “ending” to

⁷⁰³ “Republicans Attack Clinton on Vietnam,” *NYT*, July 13, 1995.

⁷⁰⁴ “Reflecting on Vietnam Ties, Many Agree That It’s Time,” *NYT*, July 15, 1995.

the multiple narratives it had produced. The period after 1995 would not be all that different, bringing unresolved issues and new battles to the ongoing American war with the nation, the market, and the memory of Vietnam.

CHAPTER SIX

Invisible Enemies: Searching for Vietnam at The Wall(s)

*I didn't want a monument,
not even one as sober as that
vast black wall of broken lives.
I didn't want a road beside the Delaware
River with a sign proclaiming:
"Vietnam Veterans Memorial Highway."*

*What I wanted was a simple recognition
of the limits of our power as a nation
to inflict our will on others.
What I wanted was an understanding
that the world is neither black-and-white
nor ours.
What I wanted was an end to monuments.*

*But no one
ever asked me what I wanted.*

-W.D. Erhardt, "The Invasion of Grenada,"

Nothing more aptly sums up the American War on Vietnam after 1975 than the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. From its proposal in 1979 and initial construction in the early 1980s through the passage of legislation in late 2003 to add an "Education Center" to the site, "The Wall," as the memorial is more commonly called in the United States, has spanned nearly the entire period of the post-military phase of the

war. Over that time, The Wall has been a central battleground in the contest over cultural memories of the war: a powerful symbol for various veterans' constituencies including the POW/MIA lobby; a trope of sorts in works of fiction and nonfiction about the war; and a symbol used by legislators to defend and publicize an array of policy positions. Like the larger cultural front in the ongoing war in Vietnam, The Wall has consistently rendered the nation and people of Vietnam invisible, demonstrating once and for all how central that absence is to the reconstruction of American nationalism and American imperialism after 1975. Yet The Wall consistently has resisted providing closure, kept alive by the very contest for public memory it helps to engender. What makes the absence of the Vietnamese all the more significant is that in the twenty-five years since its inception The Wall has consistently been challenged to become a more "inclusive" site of public history and memory.

Over the past two decades, various groups and individuals, feeling that the site could not contain or represent their stories and memories, have sought to mark the limitations of the memorial. The Wall has shaped and, in turn, been profoundly shaped by the additions of, first, Frederick Hart's "Three Fightingmen Statue," and the American flag which accompanies it, and, second, Glenda Goodacre's tribute to the American Women who served in Vietnam. All the while, families of those Americans who died as a result of the war but were not included in the criteria for listing on The Wall have lobbied to have more names added to the black granite face of the memorial. More

recently, Congress approved the addition of the “In Memory Plaque,” which now commemorates American Veterans who have died since their return from the war, and the development of the Education Center to “educate young Americans about the Vietnam War and The Wall.”⁷⁰⁵ Throughout the often bitter political and cultural battles over these changes, the absence of any mention of Vietnam or the Vietnamese has become more conspicuous.

In this final chapter, I want to explore The Wall as a site where competing narratives of the American War in Vietnam have been constructed and contested. In particular, I will focus on what I call the narrative structure of memorial. By narrative structure, I mean the ways in which the material, spatial, and contextual elements of the memorials structure visitors’ bodies and experiences in particular ways⁷⁰⁶. I do not have in mind here a determinist model, in which the structures predict the stories that will be told at the different sites, but rather a dynamic situation in which these structures shape and in turn are shaped by the experiences of visitors. The narrative structure does not determine, then, but rather serves as a boundary or limit of normative and accepted practices for users who bring a seemingly infinite number of stories with them when they visit these sites. As I have argued throughout this work, these normative boundaries are

⁷⁰⁵ “Background: An Education Center at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial,” www.thevirtualwall.org/index.cfm?SectionID=315, March 2, 2004.

⁷⁰⁶ The idea of narrative structure has been developed particularly in the field of literary criticism, drawing especially on the work of Michel Foucault. Historian Hayden White has also written about the concept in *The Content and the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987). Scholars of what has come to be called Narratology have further developed the concept. See in particular the work of Mieke Bal in her *Narratology: An Introduction to the Theory of the Narrative* (University of Toronto, 1985;1997). Bal has been at the forefront of interdisciplinary work that has seeks to apply the study of narrative structure to other fields, including material culture.

important not because they actively silence some narratives at the expense of others, but because of how the structural limitations of dominant discourses render some forms of stories outside the “possible field of action,” in Foucault’s words.⁷⁰⁷ As with the narratives of histories, films, journalism, and foreign policy debates that I have explored throughout these pages, the discursive boundaries set by the narrative structure of The Wall have worked to render invisible the nation and people of Vietnam most directly and direly effected by the war. In doing so, The Wall has been the site of some of the most extraordinary cultural work of the American War on Vietnam. More than any other component part of the American war on Vietnam since 1975, The Wall, demonstrates how the persistent invisibility of the Vietnamese in discussions of the war has been central to the recuperation of American nationalism and the reestablishment of American imperialism.

In exploring these themes, I will draw on a number of previous works about The Wall, although two in particular are central to my analysis. Marita Sturken’s *Tangled Memories*, which has provided the basis for much of this project’s framework, offers one of the best overall readings of The Wall, discussing the site as a “screen” for “innumerable projections of memory and history,” a major battleground in the struggle for cultural memories of the war. While Sturken focuses on the larger cultural and mental landscapes of the site, Kristin Ann Haas’ *Carried to the Wall* discusses how Americans have used the site over time, participating in the battles described by

⁷⁰⁷ Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” 221

Sturken.⁷⁰⁸ Unfortunately, since these works came out only a year apart, they did not benefit from each other's analysis. While I will make use of the valuable discussions of The Wall and American memory offered by both Sturken and Haas, I will also distinguish my contribution from theirs. Most importantly, I will attempt to complicate the binary constructions present in both works. For Sturken, The Wall

lies at the center of a struggle between narratives. It has spawned two very different kinds of remembrance: one a retrenched historical narrative that attempts to rewrite the Vietnam war in a way that reinscribes U.S. imperialism and the masculinity of the American soldier, the other a textured and complex remembrance that allows the Americans affected by this war—the veterans, their families, and the families and friends of the war dead—to speak of loss, pain, and futility. The memorial thus stands in a precarious space between these opposing interpretations of the war.⁷⁰⁹

While it is likely that more than two different kinds of remembrance are negotiated at The Wall, Sturken does make a strong case that the two *dominant* forms of narratives produced are the *personal* and the *national*. I will argue, drawing from Sturken, that the disjuncture between these two narratives has been the driving force in the efforts of different groups and individuals to further alter the space of the memorial itself and to pursue alternative forms of memorial online at the Virtual Walls. At the same time, however, the two narratives do not consistently oppose each other in the manner Sturken suggests. Rather than seeing the personal and the national as two narratives locked in struggle, I will suggest that the personal acts of memory performed at and around the wall are rather easily reconciled with the larger project of the national narrative: the

⁷⁰⁸ Sturken, *Tangled Memories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Kristin Ann Hass, *Carried to the Wall* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

⁷⁰⁹ Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 84.

reinscription of American imperialism into the grand narrative of American history. The more important point, I will argue is that as the personal/national tension is played out at the site, it further erases the ghostly, invisible presence of the Vietnamese. Most significantly, however, I will extend Sturken's argument, examining how her model applied to the movement of The Wall into cyberspace.

Haas constructs a different and more troubling binary in her study. Focusing on the acts of memory performed at the wall, she argues that The Wall has "opened up a public space for debate about what it meant to fight in and come home from, this war."⁷¹⁰ People who leave items at the Wall, she asserts, are attempting to participate in the negotiation of the public meaning of the war. While there is certainly a degree of negotiation going on at The Walls, Haas' reliance on the term "public" when describing the space of the site and the type of discourse taking place at The Wall conceals the actual complexity of that interaction. Haas is not clear on whether the term applies to the type of negotiation going on, the goals of that negotiation, or simply to the space in which that negotiation takes place? For my purposes, I propose that "public discourse" about the war must have at least a marginal connection to the larger meanings of the war in Vietnam for the United States. To complicate Haas idea of "the public," I will show that acts of memorialization at The Wall and its various progeny, have little to do with any sort of public discourse about the meaning of the war in Vietnam for the United States as a nation or, of course, for Southeast Asia, but everything to do with coming to terms with

⁷¹⁰ Hass, *Carried to The Wall*, 104.

private, localized, personal loss and in reconciling personal narratives with national narratives.

By exploring the battles for cultural memory waged at and around The Wall, I will trace the pliability and permeability of the narrative structure of The Wall, through the various additions to the site mentioned above and, most significantly, through the evolution of the memorial into cyberspace. In decade since the United States and Vietnam have normalized relations, The Wall has gone digital. Several “Virtual Walls” have sprung up on the web, allowing for visitors and users to remember the American War in Vietnam, their nation, and their loved ones, in new ways. Yet what at first glance seems to be a completely new direction in public remembrance of the war is just another step in an ongoing process of cultural negotiation. Although the narrative structures of the “Real” Wall and digital sites are very different, allowing in some ways for very different types of memorial to occur, the Virtual Walls are remarkably successful in their attempts to “reflect the environment” of the Real Wall. While the Virtual Walls offer a resolution of some of the limitations of the Real Wall, they simply reinforce others. Ultimately, while users of the sites have developed new and interesting forms of remembrance, a recuperative nationalist narrative is still the dominant cultural force at the cybermemorials. As with The Wall, this narrative is successful because of the pervasive invisibility of the Vietnamese. Thus, in closing, I will explore a transnational war memorial, The Widows of War Memorial, as an alternative to the Virtual Walls’

model. By moving beyond the discursive boundaries and of The Walls—real and virtual—the widows of war memorial offers a powerful antidote to nationalist discourses seeking to reinscribe, or erase, various forms of violence imperialism. As we will ultimately see, however, at the dawn of the Twenty-First century, The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is more susceptible than ever to forces wishing to impose a nationalist narrative on the site. As such, the contested cultural memory of the American War in Vietnam is more vulnerable than ever to an imposition of consensus.

The Wall⁷¹¹

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial began as an idea in the head of Jan Scruggs, an American veteran of the war in Vietnam. As recounted in *To Heal A Nation*, which he co-authored, Scruggs, after seeing *The Deer Hunter* in the spring of 1979, awoke from a difficult night of traumatic flashbacks to tell his wife, “I’m going to build a memorial to all the guys who served in Vietnam. It’ll have the name of everyone killed.”⁷¹² Unspoken by Scruggs in that passage, an invisible inference that would eventually be transferred to the memorial itself, was that by “everyone,” he meant Americans.

Scruggs and his fellow veterans embarked on a remarkable campaign, raising awareness of veterans issues as they raised millions of dollars from individuals, private organizations, and American corporations to fund the memorial. After battling members of Congress and enduring the first of many battles with the National Park Service,

⁷¹¹ After I begin discussing the Virtual Walls, I will also refer to the original wall as “The Real Wall.” This is not meant to diminish the significance of the Virtual Walls or other related sites, only to distinguish between the various incarnations of The Wall.

⁷¹² Jan Scruggs and Joel Swerdlow, *To Heal A Nation: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 7.

legislation designating a two acre spot on the National Mall for the memorial was signed into law by President Carter in June of 1980.

When the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF), the organization set up by Scruggs to finance the building of the memorial, announced the design competition for the memorial, it offered the first series of structures that would come to define the narrative boundaries of the site. Only two explicit rules were laid out for the contest: entries were to incorporate the names of American soldiers who died in Vietnam, and they were not to be “political” in nature. Specifically, the mission statement of the design competition released by the VVMF detailed a theme of reconciliation that the Fund saw as apolitical in nature: “The Memorial will make no political statement about the war or its conduct. It will transcend those issues. The hope is that the creation of the Memorial will begin a healing process.”⁷¹³ As Scruggs and his partners were soon to find out, both of the requirements would prove to be points of contention. The question of whose name would be allowed to be included on The Wall would provide the driving tension for several additions to the site in the ensuing years. More to the point, it was impossible for anything related to the American war in Vietnam to be apolitical.

At the end of the contest, the largest in American history at the time, the unlikely winner emerged: Maya Ying Lin, a 21 year-old undergraduate architecture student at Yale. Lin, born in Ohio, was a particular surprise to many because of her Asian-American heritage. She would later write that at the time of the contest she had been

⁷¹³ Ibid., 53.

“naïve” about her “racial identity.” When her design was announced as the winner, a reporter asked her, “Isn’t it ironic that the war in Vietnam was fought in Asia and you are of Asian descent?” Lin dismissed the question as “completely racist—and completely irrelevant.” When she saw the story in the *Washington Post* the following day, however, she realized that “we were going to have problems.” The article, which focused on elements of Taoism and Zen present in the design, labeled Lin “an Asian artist for an Asian war.”

Eventually, though, it occurred to me to ask the veterans if my race mattered. They seemed embarrassed—and it was then that I realized that people were having problems with the fact that a “gook” had designed the memorial. It left me chilled.⁷¹⁴

Although the public unease of some over Lin’s identity would subside somewhat over the course of the site’s development, her design would prove to be the real controversy. Although the design would endure the various alterations that would be imposed on the site, Lin herself would be overtly marginalized in the process. Over the course of the negotiations over the site, Lin who represented the Other to so many involved in the memorial, was nearly rendered as invisible as the ghostly Vietnamese presence at The Wall.

Lin’s design had been praised by the jury for its simplicity and minimalism: two long, black granite walls descending into the earth, with the names of the dead listed in chronological order of their death. As Lin described her memorial years later:

At the intersection of these walls, on the right side, at the wall’s top, is carved the

⁷¹⁴ Maya Lin, *Boundaries* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000); excerpted in *WP*: “‘As American As Anyone Else’—but Asian Too,” November 12, 2000.

date of the first death. It is followed by the names of those who have died in the war in chronological order. These names continue on this wall, appearing to recede into the earth at the wall's end. The names resume on the left wall as the wall emerges from the earth back to the origin where the date is carved at the bottom of this well. Thus, the war's beginning and end meet. The war is complete, coming full circle yet broken by the earth that bounds the angle's open side and contained within the earth itself. As we turn to leave, we see these walls stretching into the distances, directing us to the Washington Monument to the left, and the Lincoln Memorial to the right, thus bringing the Vietnam memorial into historical context. We the living are brought to a concrete realization of these deaths. Brought to a sharp awareness of such a loss, it is up to each individual to resolve or come to terms with this loss.⁷¹⁵

The unique, non-linear chronological listing of the names carved on the wall was a point of contention for some of the veterans groups associated with the construction of the memorial, but they eventually agreed that the "narrative framework," as Sturken puts it, "provides a spatial reference for their experience of the war, a kind of memory map." Significantly, she adds, "the refusal of linearity" in Lin's design, "is appropriate to a conflict that has no narrative closure."⁷¹⁶ Rejecting the traditional role of the war memorial, Lin's memorial refuses to allow the war in Vietnam to be contained "within the particular master narratives" of history. Rather, The Wall "refuses to sanction the closure of the conflict."⁷¹⁷

Indeed, the lack of "closure" provided by the design is the single most important factor in its narrative structure. The Wall is inherently open-ended and, thus participatory. The listing of the names in and of itself, as Haas suggests, requires "a

⁷¹⁵ Maya Lin, quoted in *Grounds for Remembering: Monuments, Memorials, Texts* (Berkeley, CA: Doreen Townsend Center for the Humanities, 1995), 12.

⁷¹⁶ Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 61.

⁷¹⁷ Ibid., 51.

certain amount of participation” by visitors.⁷¹⁸ Even more generally, however, the memorial’s narrative structure was designed to leave the task of interpretation to the individual visitors. One of the jury member said of the design, “People can bring to it whatever they want.”⁷¹⁹ Although the “historical context” described by Lin was a key component in the design and does situate the memorial, and thus the war in Vietnam, in relation to the larger narrative space of the Mall, that relationship is, at best, ambiguous. In the end the historical referents of the monument were less important to Lin than the cathartic potential of the site. “Death is in the end a personal and private matter,” she wrote of her design, “and the area contained within this memorial is a quiet place, meant for personal reflection and private reckoning.”⁷²⁰ The original discursive structure of The Wall, then, was centered around personal narratives and private acts of memory, leaving the larger questions “about the war or its conduct” appropriately unresolved.

Not everyone shared the jury’s reading of the design, however. For many, the ambiguity of the proposal and the open-ended narrative structure, although seemingly in line with the competition’s guidelines, was threatening. Many disparaged Lin’s design for not being sufficiently upbeat and patriotic. A group of Republicans in Congress sent a letter to President Reagan, labeling the design “a political statement of shame and dishonor.”⁷²¹ Author Tom Wolfe called it “a tribute to Jane Fonda.”⁷²² Tom Cahart, a

⁷¹⁸ Haas, *Carried to the Wall*, 15.

⁷¹⁹ “Epitaph for Vietnam,” *WP*, May 7, 1981.

⁷²⁰ Lin, in *Grounds for Remembering*; also quoted in “The Statue and The Wall,” *WP*, November 10, 1984.

⁷²¹ “Memorial Delayed; Vietnam Memorial to be Reviews,” *WP*, February 27, 1982.

veteran and member of the VVMF who had offered his own design in the competition, labeled The Wall “a black gash of shame.” Cahart, whose own proposal featured an officer offering a dead GI up to heaven while standing in a large purple heart, went on to lead the public relations battle against accepting Lin’s design.⁷²³ The conservative magazine *National Review* provided yet another scathing critique of the proposal, labeling it “an Orwellian Glop.” The *Review* even went after for Lin for following the most basic criteria of the competition, listing the names of all the Americans who died in the war: “The mode of listing the names make them individual deaths, not deaths in a cause: they might as well have been traffic accidents.”⁷²⁴ Lin later claimed, as did supporters at the time, that the names, “seemingly infinite in number, convey the overwhelming numbers while unifying the individuals as a whole. For this memorial is meant not as a monument to the individual, but rather as a memorial to the men and women who died in the war as a whole.”⁷²⁵ Such arguments were no use, however. In the face of the small but vocal outcry, the White House directed Secretary of Interior James Watt to delay the planned groundbreaking of the memorial, scheduled for that spring, until a “compromise” could be reached.

Despite a raft of defenders on the jury and among the veterans groups sponsoring the memorial, Lin was abandoned by many key players, including Scruggs, who favored a quick resolution to the flap and feared losing the site altogether. The VVMF chose to

⁷²² Tom Wolfe, “Art Disputes War,” *WP*, October 13, 1992.

⁷²³ Scruggs, *To Heal A Nation*, 80.

⁷²⁴ “Stop That Monument,” *National Review*, September 18, 1981, 1064. Quoted in Scruggs, *To Heal a Nation*, 81; and Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 52.

⁷²⁵ Lin, *Grounds for Remembering*, 11.

work out a deal with opposing forces so that the construction of the memorial could proceed on schedule. The original compromise called for a flagpole to be placed on top of the apex of the two walls and a statue, defined as “a strong commanding figure symbolizing all who served in Vietnam,” placed directly in front of The Wall.⁷²⁶ Reports also circulated that inscriptions would also be added, including one that read: “For those who fought for it, freedom has a flavor,” and another, quoting former POW Jeremiah Denton: “We are honored to have had the opportunity to serve our country under difficult circumstances. God Bless America!”⁷²⁷ Lin was understandably upset at the proposed changes to her design, although she attempted throughout the ordeal to accommodate the disparate demands of various groups. Although the flag and statue would later be moved away from the proposed location of The Wall’s apex and the proposed inscriptions would be dropped, for Lin the damage was already done. When the groundbreaking ceremony was held on March 27, 1982, she was noticeably absent, as she was in November, when The Wall was officially opened.

Although it was not in place for either the groundbreaking or the dedication in 1982, the disputed statue continued to be a source of controversy. By July, Lin broke her silence and offered public criticism of the addition. When the addition of the statue was finalized Lin accused the sculptor of “drawing mustaches on other people’s portraits.”⁷²⁸ The statue, sculpted by Frederick Hart, portrays three stoic American soldiers of diverse ethnic backgrounds staring across to The Wall. Haas describes the figures as “strong,

⁷²⁶ “Ground Broken in Capital for Memorial on Vietnam,” *NYT*, March 27, 1982.

⁷²⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷²⁸ “‘Art War’ Erupts Over Vietnam Veterans Memorial,” *WP*, July 8, 1982.

masculine, and heroic,” the prescribed antidote for many to Lin’s more ambiguous Wall.⁷²⁹ When finally unveiled, Lin said of the statue: “Three men standing there before the world—it’s trite. It’s a generalization a simplification. Hart gives you an image—he’s illustrating a book.”⁷³⁰ Other critics weighed in on the statue as well. The art critic for the *Boston Globe* called Hart’s piece a “Starsky and Hutch pose.”⁷³¹ Scruggs defended the statue, claiming that far from detracting from Lin’s vision, Hart’s piece “makes it 100 percent better, much more beautiful.”⁷³² Others from the selection committee, including Architect Harry Weise, sympathized with Lin: “It’s as if Michelangelo had the Secretary of the Interior climb onto the scaffold and muck around with his work.”⁷³³ Perhaps *The Economist* put it most aptly, however, when it opined, “This ‘improvement’ would make the V-shaped memorial more like other memorials, but it cannot make Vietnam more like other wars.”⁷³⁴

When the statue was officially added to the site on Veterans Day in 1984, two years after the “first” dedication of The Wall, Lin was again absent; her name was not even mentioned during the proceedings that day. Unlike the 1982 dedication, when President Reagan stayed away due to “security concerns,” in 1984 he lent credence to the addition of the statue by showing up to accept, on behalf of the federal government, the

⁷²⁹ Haas, *Carried to the Wall*, 18.

⁷³⁰ Scruggs, *To Heal A Nation*, 129.

⁷³¹ Ibid.

⁷³² “‘Art War’ Erupts Over Vietnam Veterans Memorial.”

⁷³³ Ibid.

⁷³⁴ Quoted in *To Heal a Nation*, 130.

memorial as a gift from the VVMF.⁷³⁵ With the statue in place, keeping watch over The Wall from across the knoll, many at the ceremony felt the memorial was finally prepared to begin its avowed mission of promoting healing and reconciliation among Americans. *The New York Times*, writing of the dedication ceremony, claimed that the statue finally “completed” the memorial.⁷³⁶

The battle to include the statue and its flagpole was the first of many battles over the narrative structure of the memorial. The imposition of the more overtly political, patriotic, and heroic statue was intended to situate visitors to the site in a less ambiguous discursive framework. Despite the manner in which the additions were handled and the way in which Lin was personally treated during the ordeal, Hart’s addition proved to be a fairly benign addition to the site. Lin’s more open-ended structure was designed to allow visitors to come to their own conclusions and interpretations, but Hart’s sculpture did not impose closure on the memorial. Rather, it provided a useful and appropriate tension to the site, representing a different vision of the war in Vietnam and its legacies for the American soldiers who fought and died there. Even Lin would later admit, “In a funny sense, the compromise brings the memorial closer to the truth. What is also memorialized is that people still cannot resolve that war, nor can they separate the issues, the politics, from it.”⁷³⁷

As would be the case with future battles, various groups and figures attempted to provide closure to such campaigns by declaring, as the *Times* did in 1984, that the

⁷³⁵ “President Accepts Vietnam Memorial,” *NYT*, November 12, 1984.

⁷³⁶ “Statue Completes Vietnam Memorial,” *NYT*, November 10, 1984.

⁷³⁷ Quoted in Scruggs, *To Heal a Nation*, 133.

memorial was “finished,” or “completed.” But The Wall, like the larger signifier of “Vietnam” in American culture, steadily and stubbornly resisted attempts to pronounce it finished. Although her design had been disrupted by political negotiations, Lin’s vision of The Wall persevered. Visitors began to flock to the memorial, immediately making it the most visited monument in Washington. Regardless of the changes made at the site, the powerful tension between the creation of “a quiet place, meant for personal reflection and private reckoning,” and the profoundly national space created by the insertion of The Wall in the National Mall, would continue to exert a powerful force on the established narrative boundaries of the site.

As Sturken points out, The Wall “functions in opposition to the codes of remembrance evidenced on the Washington Mall.”⁷³⁸ Rather than the traditional, elevated white structures, The Wall, with its lowered, reflective black face, is designed both to be partially hidden from the larger narrative of the mall, as guided by the Washington Monument and Lincoln Memorial, and to stand out and be different, to mark an interruption in the grand narrative sweep of American history. That tension extends to the personal interactions and remembrances that take place in this most national of spaces. Uncertain of how exactly the war in Vietnam fits into United States history, most visitors to The Wall are similarly dealing with how the war has effected them personally, be it in the image they have of their nation or what the war did to themselves and their families. Users of the site are thus, as a result of the narrative structure of the memorial,

⁷³⁸ Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 46.

placed in a situation where cultural memory and national history come together and in which visitors are forced to confront conflicting frameworks and interpretations of the past. As David Thelen describes it, “Maya Lin designed a memorial that brilliantly allowed those with large political agendas and those with intimate private memories to come together.”⁷³⁹

More than anything else, however, The Wall was designed to be interactive. Although no one imagined the scope or degree that the interaction would eventually take, the reflective face of the memorial in itself forced a degree of interaction not present at other structures on the mall. Visitors see themselves in the shiny granite face of The Wall, and, at many angles, they can also witness the reflections of the Washington and Lincoln memorials and the additional statues at the site. All of this reflection, of course, takes place over the façade of the engraved names of the dead. Furthermore, in order to truly interact with the memorial, visitors must allow their body to be taken in by the site, to walk down into the depths of The Wall, guided by the structure of the site, bounded by ropes on one side of the path and The Wall itself on the other. Visitors are at the same time structured in the narrative design of the memorial’s space and also invited, indeed encouraged, to act as their own narrator and guide, constantly remaking the always unfinished memorial. This is precisely the type of terrain that Sturken describes as cultural memory, an always fluctuating and contested battleground for the meaning of the past.

⁷³⁹ David Thelen, “Memory and American History” *The Journal of American History* 75 (Spring, 1989): 1117-1129; 1128.

The most telling form of interaction at The Wall, of course, results from the tradition of visitors leaving artifacts at the memorial. This practice, which began almost immediately in 1982, forms the focus of Haas' book. By leaving these items, visitors to the site have actively performed acts of memory, bringing their own personal narratives of the war to The Wall, and negotiating those memories within the narrative structure provided by the memorial. The structure of the site prohibits making permanent these additional markers of memory, which everyday are added to the National Park Service's archive. Yet the objects continue to appear, left at the base of the Wall as a form of participatory memorialization. But what exactly do these objects represent?

As Haas argues in *Carried to The Wall*, the artifacts do offer some insights, most notably a marking of the limitations of the monument not unlike those represented by the flag, the added statues, and the In Memory plaque. "The restive memory of the war changed American public commemoration," she writes,

because the memory "could not be expressed or contained by Lin' powerful and suggestive design alone. The deep need to remember the war and the challenges that it presented to the idea of the nation, the soldier, and the citizen met in Lin's design and inspired hundreds of thousands of Americans to bring their own memorials to the Wall. These intensely individuated public memorials forge a richly textured memory of the war and its legacies.⁷⁴⁰

That the objects mark a limitation in the narrative structure of the memorial is clear; the question has to do with whether these "intensely individuated" memorials are, at the same time, "public."

⁷⁴⁰ Ibid., 2.

Most of the estimated 4 million annual visitors to The Wall do not leave artifacts, letters, or flowers. Yet even those who do offer little more context for their acts than those who simply pass by. What is clear is that they understand the temporary nature of their memorial. Sturken claims that the artifacts represent “messages for the dead that are intended to be shared as cultural memory,”⁷⁴¹ but how are we to understand the intentions of those who leave the objects? How do we know that they are intended to be “shared” at all? The objects themselves, as both Sturken and Haas acknowledge, remain for the most part a mystery. According to Haas, “It is nearly impossible to know anything about the donors other than they felt strongly enough to leave their things. It is often impossible to know even for whom an object was left.” It is clear, however, that visitors understand the temporary nature of their memorial. People who visit the Real Wall are well aware by now that items left there are collected regularly, as evidenced by one letter cited by Haas: “I’m bringing ‘Teddy Bear’ and your loved race car. I realize they can’t stay here long, but they are yours and I want them to be with you.”⁷⁴²

Note that this letter, the style of which is indicative of the majority of those left at the Real Wall, is not only aware of the temporary nature of the artifact, but also addresses it *to* the person who is being remembered. This note is clearly designed neither to be read nor to elicit any sort of response. The act described here is, personal, idiosyncratic, likely cathartic and, ultimately, private. The fact that it takes place in a very public space does not alter this. Yet to label this note as “private” seems equally reductionist as calling it

⁷⁴¹ Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 78.

⁷⁴² Ibid., 22. The letter quoted by Haas is taken from Laura Palmer’s *Shrapnel in the Heart* (New York, 1987), 21.

“public.” Regardless of the original intentions of the author, which we will never know, the note has been made public, included in books and, perhaps like so many artifacts, included in the public display of items left at The Wall in the Smithsonian Exhibit. Rather than rely on the false binary of public and private, why not examine the letters and artifacts as occupying the middle ground *between* public and private?

While Haas offers a fascinating description of the collection of items left at The Wall over time, noting that there are multiple memories being made at the site, her assertion of this constituting a public debate over the meaning of the war is ultimately unconvincing. The memory being negotiated, or even contested at the Real Wall, may be the result of a divisive and devastating war, but the acts of memory performed at The Wall offer little, if any, public debate about the larger, public meaning of the war. They are acts concerned primarily with the memories of American individuals, families and friends. While these memories are often negotiated in the context of their conflict with the larger national narrative structured by the memorial, the proliferation of individual forms of remembrance does little to challenge the dominance of the national narrative at the site.

Occasionally, as we have seen, the battle over cultural memory becomes more inclusive and more “public,” resulting in actual physical changes to the memorial. Yet in most of these cases, the driving force in the battle has been the tension implicit in resolving a group of individual narratives with the national narrative of the site. This was

particularly evident in the 1993 addition of Glenda Goodacre's Vietnam Women's Memorial. As Sturken argues, the decision to allow the addition of this statue, which features three nurses caring for a fallen soldier, was about "inclusion and recognition." The service of American women in the war was not represented by The Wall, save for the few female names on memorial. This absence, as Haas points to, is part of a long tradition in American society of rendering "women's war work" invisible.⁷⁴³ The sculpture was widely criticized, including by Maya Lin, for setting a disturbing precedent of adding "special interest memorials." "One monument too many," claimed *The Washington Post*.⁷⁴⁴ But the addition clearly represented a rupture in the existing narrative structure of the site, a tension between personal and national narratives that could not be privately negotiated. It would not be the last battle to resolve such a tension.

The most noted intersections of the personal and the national at the memorial have focused on the issue of whose names are, can, and cannot be represented on The Wall. Most recently, the battle has been over the addition of the "In Memory Plaque," commemorating those who have died since their return from the war. The plaque reads, "In Memory of the men and women who served in the Vietnam War and later died as a result of their service. We honor and remember their sacrifice." The bill supporting the addition of the plaque was sponsored by over 104 representatives and eventually passed, unanimously, on May 9, 2000. President Clinton signed it into law on June 15. The plaque was finally put in place April 15, 2002.

⁷⁴³ Haas, *Carried to the Wall*, 19.

⁷⁴⁴ Ibid; Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 69.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund has received numerous suggestions for additions over the years. Why was this one accepted? Unlike other proposals, such as Branch-Specific military additions for the Army or Marines, the In Memory plaque clearly demonstrates a disjuncture in the narrative structure of the memorial. Unable to reconcile their narratives of personal loss with the fact that those they lost are not included in the arbitrary chronological narrative imposed by The Wall, those who have lost loved ones have, since the first days after The Wall's dedication, challenged Department of Defense rules for which names could be added to The Wall. "Each day we receive inquiries from family members asking how can they get the name of their father, brother, or sister included on The Wall," notes Jim Doyle of Vietnam Veterans of America in his testimony before the Subcommittee on National Parks, Historic Preservation, and Recreation. "We must tell them that there is no memorial to the sacrifice of their father, mother, husband, or mother."⁷⁴⁵

Robert Doubek, an advisor to Vietnam War in Memory Memorial Inc. and an advisor to the VVMF in the original design contest, gives in his testimony some indication of the sentiment involved in the decision to add the plaque. Although he opposed the addition of the Three Fightingmen and Women's Memorial, Doubek now offers:

With the hindsight of two decades, it is now clear that the casualties of Vietnam were not only those named on The Wall. The casualties include thousands who returned home to family and friends but who have died prematurely as an indirect result of their Vietnam service. These include those exposed to Agent Orange, and

⁷⁴⁵ http://energy.senate.gov/hearings/national_parks/4_27Cats&Dogs/Doyle.htm

those subject to severe post traumatic stress syndrome. The "In Memory" plaque will honor them. It will provide a special tribute to their unique sacrifice. It will comfort their loved ones by providing a societal acknowledgment of their loss.⁷⁴⁶

What is most striking about Doubek's testimony, however, is that he goes on to note that he further supports the In Memory plaque because rather than setting precedent for further additions, the addition "closes the book and completes the memorial."⁷⁴⁷ Just as with the addition of Hart's statue, when the memorial was declared "finished," this assertion of finishing the memorial is premature. We have seen that the narrative structure of the memorial refuses linearity and closure, allowing spaces for a variety of individual memories to interact with the national context of the memorial and its location on the mall. The inability of The Wall to contain so many stories and contradictions would continue to serve as a roadblock to those wishing to "end" the memorial.

There are still stories that cannot be contained by or represented at The Wall. Although the narrative structure has now seemingly been altered so that the stories of most Americans can be represented, there still remains the question of those who died in their efforts to *stop* the American War in Vietnam. Are they not part of the narrative of that war, and of the national space in which the memorial stands? And of course, most glaringly, there are still the names of those who many would consider to be the greatest victims of the war, the millions of Vietnamese and other Southeast Asians who died in the conflict, not to mention those Vietnamese who, even more so than American veterans, continue to suffer from the effects of Agent Orange and other forms of chemical and

⁷⁴⁶ http://energy.senate.gov/hearings/national_parks/4_27Cats&Dogs/Doubek.htm

⁷⁴⁷ Ibid.

economic warfare.

Although it seems likely that the book will never be closed on the memorial as firmly as Mr. Doubek would have liked, it does seem unlikely the above stories will ever be represented at The Wall. The reason, I believe, is that these stories pose a far greater threat to the national narrative represented by the site and the mall than the previous additions. The other additions to the memorial are all fairly easily subsumed under the larger nationalist project of the mall, particularly under the already somewhat conspicuous sign of The Wall. The memorial still does not, as the VVMF originally prescribed, endorse any particular view of the war. Yet, just as there can never be an apolitical statement about the American War in Vietnam, there can similarly be no apolitical structure on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

Again, Marita Sturken has been especially eloquent on this point. First, she notes, as with any memorial or representation of memory, certain things must be forgotten so that others might be remembered. In the case of a national monument, this is often a political decision. “Framed within the context of the Washington Mall,” she writes, “the Vietnam Veterans Memorial must necessarily ‘forget’ the Vietnamese and cast the Vietnam veterans as the primary victims of the war.”⁷⁴⁸ Later, in describing Chris Burden’s alternative memorial-sculpture, “The Other Vietnam Memorial,” which contains three million Vietnamese names, Sturken asks the fundamental question, “Why must a national memorial reenact conflict by showing only one side of the conflict?”⁷⁴⁹

⁷⁴⁸ Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 63.

⁷⁴⁹ Ibid., 83.

The Virtual Walls

Searching for “Vietnam” on the Internet immediately alerts one to the heavy use of the medium made by American veterans of the war. A Google search for “Vietnam” will provide anywhere between 10-15 million hits, with the top returns regularly going, first, to Vietnam’s official tourism site and, secondly, to the Vietnam Veterans of America, www.vietvet.org. The Real Wall has its own official website, maintained by the National Park Service, which offers its own description of The Wall, which intriguingly described the three component pieces of the site as “distinct sections”:

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial serves as a testament to the sacrifice of American military personnel during one of this nation's least popular wars. The memorial consists of three distinct sections. "The Wall," the three service men statue and flagpole and the women in service to the Vietnam war statue. The purpose of this memorial is to separate the issue of the sacrifices of the veterans from the U.S. policy in the war, thereby creating a venue for reconciliation.⁷⁵⁰

Hundreds of course syllabi devoted to the American War in Vietnam will also appear, as will chronologies of the war, and links to various American television shows and exhibits about the war. American veterans of the war were among the first organized groups to make use of the web, launching [vietvet.org](http://www.vietvet.org) on Veterans Day in 1994. Since then, sites devoted to veterans’ issues have expanded exponentially.

The most common form of sites devoted to American veterans of the war are what I call cybermemorials, online, interactive sites devoted to the memorialization of those

⁷⁵⁰ <http://www.nps.gov/vive/>

who died as a result of their service in the war. Started in 1996, Thewall-usa.com claims to be the “the first Internet site dedicated to honoring those who died in the Vietnam War.” The site, which also goes by the title, “The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Web Page,” started and maintained by members of the Fourth Battalion of the 9th Infantry Regiment, has collected over 20,000 “remembrances” since it went online. The title of “first” virtual wall, however, more accurately rests with vietvet.org, which contains sections devoted to remembrance that date back to the site’s 1994 inception. Vietvet has “The Wall on the Web,” a page dedicated to the Real Wall, which lists all the names from The Wall and links to noquarter.org, the searchable “Vietnam Casualty Search Engine” that provides standard background information about those listed on The Wall.⁷⁵¹ Vietvet.org also has its own “Remembrance” section, “Reflections, Memories, and Images of Vietnam Past,” that contains stories, poems and memoirs written by veterans as well as remembrances left in memory of Americans who died in the war.⁷⁵² Most notably, however, the site features the “Taps Gallery,” which developed the format used by later cybermemorials.⁷⁵³ The Taps Gallery features images, text, and links dedicated to those who served and died in Vietnam. For example:

*PFC Frank Fettuccia
US Army medic
D. Co., 2nd. BN, 35th. INF RGT, 4th. INF Div.
KIA 1 March, 1968*

He was there for less than 1 year.

I would like to get in contact with his former teammates from that div.;

⁷⁵¹ <http://www.vietvet.org/thewall/thewallm.html>

⁷⁵² <http://www.vietvet.org/thepast.htm>

⁷⁵³ <http://www.vietvet.org/tapsgal.htm>

anyone who knew him well. I'd like to hear the stories and fotos; I have 2 old ones to exchange.

Every year, on his date of death in March, I try to have a Mass said for his soul.

*I miss him so much. He was a good and true friend.
Please contact: Maureen Cawley Monteiro⁷⁵⁴*

The people who constructed these memorials to their loved ones performed acts of memory not possible within the confines of The Wall. Using the applications of the medium available to them, they expanded the narrative possibilities of the site to create memorials that were, at once, both public and private, individuated acts of memory yet lasting additions to the public space of the memorial.

For Vietvet.org and the visitors who constructed its remembrance sections, the Taps Gallery was not only a place to move beyond the *structural* narrative constraints of The Wall, it was also a space to tell and share stories whose *content* was limited by The Wall. While it remained—and remains—a source of tension at the Real Wall, the American veterans who died after their return as a result of their service were for many years not explicitly acknowledged at The Wall. The Taps Gallery and its format provided a forum for many of these stories to be told publicly:

My father did three tours to Vietnam earning the Bronze Star twice and he thought what he was doing was right; for his family, his parents and his country. He was a huey technician inspector.

He committed suicide last month and I believe in the way that he did it he truly never left Vietnam. My father did not have a high tolerance for pain and so I think

⁷⁵⁴ Ibid.; All quotes from memorial pages are placed in italics to clearly differentiate them from the text and from other block quotations.

that his guilt hurt him so deep inside because he loved his baby girl with every ounce of his being, but he couldn't tolerate the pain anymore. The only hell story I ever heard was when they went down to pick up people and everyone was shot and he had to fly the helicopter out himself. But he left behind his heart along with many wounded.

The only thing anyone ever got from Vietnam was pain and sorrow. Vietnam took my dad. His Grandchildren are beautiful gifts he will never treasure. And I hope to see him someday to smell his Old Spice aftershave and tell him that I love him.

His Baby Girl, Erin⁷⁵⁵

Others told of the deadly legacies of American chemical warfare:

*Johnny Ingram Streater
United States Army
Vietnam Veteran - 1969 –1970*

Johnny was my husband who passed away on November 16, 2003 of liver disease. He was 100% service connected for PTSD and lived with the haunting memories of Vietnam and several medical conditions related to his service for 33 years. Of course the VA would never admit he was even exposed to agent orange even though he told me that he would radio the planes where to drop and then wade through the chemical afterward.

There were times when I wondered if he might take his own life but thank God his family meant so much to him that he never did. Immediately after he passed three people whose lives he saved since Vietnam contacted me to tell me their stories. He was a true hero in every sense of the word. I'm sure the angels in heaven are singing "Welcome Home" to their brother.

*Until we meet again dear Husband.
Your wife,
Shirlean⁷⁵⁶*

⁷⁵⁵ Ibid.,

⁷⁵⁶ Ibid.

And many used the space to link to other “memorial pages” they had created on other websites:

Bobby Joe Williams

*VNVMC Alabama
Died May 2002*

BJ was the most wonderful brother. BJ suffered terribly from PTSD and he died of cancer caused by Agent Orange after a long and hard struggle.

God only knows how he is missed by all of us each and everyday. You can view his memorial site at this link.⁷⁵⁷

For these users, the Taps Gallery was a separate site, distinctly and intentionally separated from “The Wall on the Web” section of the site and lacking many explicit references to the Real Wall. However, Vietvet.org, along with Thewall-usa.com demonstrated the possibilities offered by the Internet to move beyond the structural and content-based limits placed on memorial practices at The Wall. Two future sites, both known as “The Virtual Wall” would build on these frameworks to reconstruct, powerfully and convincingly, both the national context of The Wall and the more flexible and permeable personal narrative structure provided by web-based technologies of memory.⁷⁵⁸

The first Virtual Wall (VW1) was put online in March of 1997⁷⁵⁹. Run by a small group of American veterans of the war in Vietnam, VW1 is a completely non-profit endeavor, which rejects even donations, aside from the free web space provided by a

⁷⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁵⁸ The phase “technologies of memory” is taken from Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 9.

⁷⁵⁹ <http://www.virtualwall.org>

local Internet Service Provider. The Virtual Wall describes itself as

an interactive World Wide Web site that attempts to take portions of the experience and emotions of a visit to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (The Wall) into homes and schools of internet visitors. The Virtual Wall endeavors to duplicate and convey the dignity and solemnity of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and to maintain the tradition of care and compassion of National Park Service volunteers at The Wall. The Virtual Wall reflects an environment like The Wall itself: a memorial created and maintained by volunteers, with no commercials, no noisy or flashy distractions, and no hands held out for donations.⁷⁶⁰

The Virtual Wall appears as a list of names of those who died or were listed as MIA in the war, the same group of names eligible to be placed on the Real Wall. The names are listed alphabetically, not chronologically as on the Real Wall, although visitors can choose to view the names chronologically, by state, or by the panel number on which the name appears on the Real Wall. Unlike the Real Wall, however, each name here is a link which, when clicked on, reveals information about that person. This information includes such things as name, date of birth, rank, and date of death, but the pages also include images and words left by those who have visited the page. Sometimes these messages are from members of the deceased's unit, sometimes from family and friends, and occasionally from anonymous visitors. When first put online, VW1 contained the names of 27 of the webmaster's friends: some from high school, some from flight school class, and some from his unit in Vietnam. Due to staff and time restraints, VW1 does not have a page for all of the names on the Real Wall, only those requested by visitors.

The Second Virtual Wall (VW2) went online in November of 1998 as a joint

⁷⁶⁰ <http://www.virtualwall.org/announce.html>

venture between Winstar Communications and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, the same group that funded the Real Wall. This site seems more intent on highlighting the importance of the personal, stating on its home page: “The Virtual Wall creates a unique experience for each visitor... Create your own personal journey.”⁷⁶¹ Although the gist of the site, names as links to pages about that person, is similar to VW1, the appearance is very different. Obviously maintained by a professional, full time staff, VW2 doesn’t just seek to reflect or duplicate the purpose or the experience of the Real Wall, it attempts a “virtual replica” of the Real Wall itself. VW2 has a name and a linked page for every name listed on the Real Wall, although most pages do not have messages or images left there. Since its launch, VW2 has expanded to become the home page for the entire VVMF, a center for educational programs related to the war and The Wall, and a media clearinghouse for information related to the various memorials.

“Thevirtualwall.org,” will thus now bring users to the home page of the VVMF. When users click on the Virtual Wall section of the site, they can read about the history of the site and search for an individual name on the virtual wall. By clicking on “Experience The Wall,” users are taken through an elaborate Flash software program that conjures the words “Sacrifice” and “Honor” against a backdrop image of The Wall, before the primary message scrolls across the screen: “58,220 gave their lives in Vietnam--Millions Remember.” The screen then dissolves into a digital graphic representation of The Wall: a v-shaped black wall surrounded by digital green grass. As

⁷⁶¹ <http://www.thevirtualwall.org>

was the case with Hart's "Three Fightingmen" statue, and as would become clear in the debate over the proposed Visitors Center at The Wall, the language of "sacrifice," "honor," and "patriotism," became increasingly central to the discursive construction of the memorials over time. These ideas and phrases, indeed, offer the primary means of reconciling the often-conflicting personal and national narratives while further placing questions of American imperialism outside the realm of normative conversation.

Offering a navigation tool to the visitor that remains onscreen, the panels appear similar to the way they do at The Wall. Users can navigate, panel by panel, simulating to some degree a walk past the Real Wall. We can "enter" the memorial, encountering at the base of The Wall, as we would at the Real Wall, the name of the first American killed in Vietnam. Unlike at the Real Wall, however, we click on the name to learn that

MAURICE FLOURNOY was born on July 7, 1929. He became a member of the Air Force while in El Camdo, Texas and attained the rank of SSGT (E5). On February 21, 1960 at the age of 30, MAURICE FLOURNOY gave his life in the service of our country in South Vietnam, Quang Tri Province. You can find MAURICE FLOURNOY honored on the Vietnam Memorial Wall on Panel 1E, Row 1.⁷⁶²

The second Virtual Wall once contained a discussion area, which allowed users to discuss the war and its legacies, recent events, and American foreign policy. Mostly, however, visitors used the space to try to connect with former buddies or family members, much as they still do, as we will see, on the pages of the Virtual Walls. The discussion area was

⁷⁶² http://www.thevirtualwall.org/member_information.asp?anWho=16508

taken down due to lack of interest, although the site still features occasional live “chats” with public figures, journalists, authors, and veterans.

Although the memorial pages of the two Virtual Walls differ slightly in appearance, the stories told on those pages are remarkably similar. It is in the stories on these pages that we can glimpse at the everyday negotiation of personal and national narratives. While most pages do not have images or messages left there, those that do generally fall into three categories. The first are messages left *to* the person being remembered, very much like letters left at the Real Wall, except for the difference that these are more public messages, left to be read by anyone. The brother of Edward Cannon offers the simple remembrance:

*My Brother, you'll always be in our hearts forever, God be with you and all our brothers who gave there "All" we miss you dearly. Your Twin Brother-Robert.*⁷⁶³

Far more common at the Virtual Walls, however, are messages written *about* those who died in Vietnam. The most prominent of these types of stories are those dealing with POW/MIA issues. One such page, dedicated to Richard Cole, not only tells the story of Cole, but also a story of frustration with a government that “has been lying to us for 27 years about our loved ones, and continues to lie.”⁷⁶⁴ As with the larger POW/MIA myth, these pages are often the most glaring example of the tension between personal memories seeking inclusion in the larger national narrative of loss, healing, and recuperative nationalism. Less dramatic, perhaps, but equally moving are the stories which simply

⁷⁶³<http://www.thevirtualwall.org/showClip.asp?anClip=16668&nVeteran=7732&listURL=%2Fmember%5Finformation%2Easp%3FnVeteran%3D7732;> (Note: Citations have been corrected for neither spelling nor grammar.)

⁷⁶⁴<http://members.xoom.com/voicesmemory/index.htm>

give the visitor a little more information about the name on The Wall. Patrick O' Shaughnessy's page offers the following story from a high school friend:

*Pat was a fine young man and a very good athlete. We attended high school together... I felt his loss and think our community was robbed of someone who would leave his mark in life. I never watch a ball game without thinking of Pat.*⁷⁶⁵

Finally, the most intriguing of the Virtual Wall pages, are those seeking connections with the families and friends of those they lost. On the page for Harold Cumings, we see the following message: "I would like to contact the widow or the other family of Harold Cumings, Jr.. I was with Harold when he was taken in Ambush and must fulfill his last request," followed by the contact information.⁷⁶⁶ Similarly, the widow of Edward Birmingham provides this request on his page:

*I am Edward's Widow
He left three children: 2 sons and 1 daughter
I am sure they would love to learn more about the father they never got to know.
Please send mail... Sallie Birmingham.*⁷⁶⁷

Interestingly, neither of the pages for Cumings and Birmingham at VW2 have any remembrances or messages posted.

While we do not see the outcomes of such attempts at communication, it is clear that people use these sites in ways for which the Real Wall was not designed. The stories told on these pages are more communal in nature, designed for public eyes with the goal of telling and sharing stories and information. The vast majority of messages are *about* the dead and those they left behind, not letters written *to* or objects left *for* those lost in

⁷⁶⁵ <http://www.virtualwall.org/do/OShaughnessy/PJ01a.htm>

⁷⁶⁶ <http://www.virtualwall.org/dc/CummingsHW01a.htm>

⁷⁶⁷ <http://www.virtualwall.org/db/BirminghamE01a.htm>

the war. Users of the Virtual Walls take advantage the sites, which are more conducive to communication, to create and pursue these different types of stories that they cannot share at the Real Wall. Although we may not understand the depth of intentions of the authors of these acts of memory, we can be sure, unlike those left at The Wall, that the bulk of these messages were meant to be shared, part of ongoing conversations about the war. Yet at the same time, the questions about the “public” nature of these acts must be questioned. What type of public spaces are the Virtual Walls?

The most important aspect of the Virtual Walls, of course, is their ability to act as both an archive and medium for the stories visitors wish to tell. The acts of memory manifested on the pages of the Virtual Walls, as we have seen, are different in style from those performed at the Real Wall. They are largely designed for public viewing and are often explicit attempts at communication with others. But it is important to note that the attempts at communication provided by the Virtual Walls are largely private also. Edward Birmingham’s widow does not post the responses she receives from her message, nor does Harold Cumings’ buddy offer the visitors any update on whether or not he has fulfilled Harold’s wish. In fact, we do not know if there have any connections made at all. Perhaps we are not supposed to. While the structure of the Virtual Walls provides the potential for a more public-oriented discourse, what we see are visitors using the space for personal communication. Although connections are sought out, these acts of memory remain focused on individual, localized stories. As such, they reflect the larger

political and cultural environment of the Real Wall, which does not offer a public space for public debate about the war and its legacies, but rather a liminal space for personal, private acts of memory.

The Virtual Walls have a decidedly different narrative structure and offer a space more conducive to the resolution of the personal and the national than the Real Wall. Most importantly, the Virtual Walls are ostensibly removed from the physical, public context of the National Mall. While clearly one must have access to and the knowledge to manipulate a computer and internet service in order to visit the Virtual Walls, once these prerequisites have been filled, users can visit as often as they like, not constrained by travel as with the Real Wall. The digital state of The Walls, existing only in the flow of information rather than in a finite space, provides opportunities for those who cannot otherwise make it to Washington D.C. As such, “The Wall That Heals” a scaled-down replica of the Real Wall that travels around the United States, offers many users a more accurate analogy. One veteran who served in Vietnam in 1968-69 wrote that

I spend time adding things on [the Virtual Wall] for members of our unit lost in VietNam. I have been to the moving wall three times in three states, but never got to Washington DC yet. Matter of money to go --not choice - or feelings about wall or war. The Virtual Wall gives each of us a chance to say special things about people, not names in rock.⁷⁶⁸

Even the construction of the first Virtual Wall was determined by the spatial constraints of the Real Wall. The webmaster, Jim, had worked for years as a NPS volunteer at the Real Wall, but the nine hour drive from upstate New York meant that he could only get

⁷⁶⁸ Personal email to author, 2/4/2000.

there a few times a year.⁷⁶⁹ Instead, Jim and his staff have constructed a space that can be more easily accessed. As such, the public/private dynamics of the sites are rather complex. On the one hand, they are removed from the imposing, hypervisible national context provided by the Mall, removing a key element of the Real Wall's narrative structure. At the same time, however, the Virtual Walls are much more accessible to a range of users than the Real Wall. The decentered nature of the virtual memorial has made the Virtual Walls more conducive to personalized acts of memory than the Real Wall, but this has had little effect on the influence of the national narrative at the sites, particularly at VW2, where the use of the red, white, and blue VVMF logo and other images featuring the American flag have helped to recontextualize the national narrative.

The national narrative is also reconstructed actively at the Virtual Walls by users who invoke the themes of "duty," "sacrifice," "heroism," and "patriotism" on the pages. Some of these are similar to the types of messages discussed above; one veteran posted a message about a fallen friend, invoking both the American flag and the POW/MIA flag to speak of the honor and duty his friend represented to him:

In front of my house is a flag pole on which fly two flags, the Stars and Stripes, of course, and a POW/MIA flag. The first honors this country and all who have or will defend it, the second flies for William Tamm Arnold and all who never returned. It flies 24/7 and will remain there as long as there is life in these tired old bones. God Bless You.⁷⁷⁰

A less personal but similar message came from another fellow veteran:

I want to thank you Earl Lee Wilson, for your courageous and valiant service, your

⁷⁶⁹ Personal email to author, 11/8/1999.

⁷⁷⁰ <http://www.vvmf.org/index.cfm?SectionID=110&anClip=27044>, March 10, 2003.

years of faithfully contributing, and your most holy sacrifice given to this great country of ours!

Your Spirit is alive--and strong, therefore Marine, you shall never be forgotten, nor has your death been in vain! It's Heroes like you, that made it possible for others like myself to return home and lead free and full lives! Again, although we never met personally, thank you SSGT Earl Lee Wilson, for a job well done! REST IN ETERNAL PEACE MY MARINE FRIEND⁷⁷¹

More telling of the latent impulse to reconstruct the national narrative at the Virtual Walls are the messages posted by users who have no connection at all to the person memorialized on the page. Several teachers, apparently, have assigned their students to post remembrances on VW2, which has contributed to the volume of these types of remembrances:

In my history class at my high school, we are currently carrying out the Gridley High School posting project to ensure that no soldier who died in Vietnam is forgotten. You have paid a price. That price was death, but by paying that terrible cost, you gave to those still living freedom, and an example. Your example of sacrifice and patriotism will live on, inspiring others to act courageously and bravely to serve and better their country. For that service, that sacrifice, I thank you. You will not be forgotten.⁷⁷²

My teacher served in the Vietnam War and was shocked at the few number of remembrances there were for all these people who gave their lives. I felt this assignment to be uplifting to the family members of those who lost their lives. The men/women are honorable and so selflessly fought for the country they believed in and saw potential in. These amazing people served their country in a time of need and I wanted to express my gratitude and admiration.⁷⁷³

One entire sixth grade class posted the following message to several pages, with the subject, “Remembering a serviceman from our country:”

⁷⁷¹ <http://www.vvmf.org/index.cfm?SectionID=110&anClip=121310>. March 17, 2003.

⁷⁷² <http://www.vvmf.org/index.cfm?SectionID=110&anClip=121285>. March 17, 2003.

⁷⁷³ <http://www.vvmf.org/index.cfm?SectionID=110&anClip=121201>. March 17, 2003.

*We would like to say thank you for serving your country and sacrificing your life.
We appreciate you very much!*⁷⁷⁴

Yet students are not the only ones participating in such projects. It is increasingly common to find these more spontaneous and anonymous postings on the pages of VW2:

*Although we never met personally, I want to thank you Bobby Lynn Weathers, for your courageous and valiant service, faithful contribution, and your most holy sacrifice given to this great country of ours!*⁷⁷⁵

*Dear Joe,
I want to tell you that I greatly appreciate all the time and effort you took to support our country. It takes a lot to do what you did. It takes a lot of courageousness to go fight for your country. We need more soldiers like you today. Thank you and God Bless.*⁷⁷⁶

As with the objects and letters left at the Real Wall, we do not know the intentions of such messages, although most users post their email addresses to allow for further contact to take place. Nevertheless, it is striking how similar these postings, taken from a wide array of dates and pages, are to one another. The language of duty, honor, patriotism and sacrifice, so central to the reinscription of the war in Vietnam into the national narrative has clearly been absorbed by a variety of users. Regardless of their intentions, by posting these messages on the pages of anonymous veterans, they have recreated and reimposed the national context from which the Virtual Walls were originally removed.

Thus, while users have taken advantage of the discursive possibilities provided by the Virtual Walls to expand the narrative structure of the memorials, the acts of memory performed on the pages of these sites only serve to reinforce the triumph of the

⁷⁷⁴ <http://www.vvmf.org/index.cfm?SectionID=110&anClip=121312>. March 10, 2003.

⁷⁷⁵ <http://www.vvmf.org/index.cfm?SectionID=110&anClip=121372>. March 17, 2003.

⁷⁷⁶ <http://www.vvmf.org/index.cfm?SectionID=110&anClip=120345>. March 17, 2003.

recuperative national narrative described by Sturken. The end results of both the Virtual and Real Walls are sites that focus attention on what the war did to individual Americans, their friends and their families. The unstated assumption behind this is that the memory of the American war in Vietnam should be about Americans, not about U.S. policy, and not about the millions of non-American lives destroyed in Southeast Asia.

Just as with the Real Wall, the focus on America and Americans at the Virtual Walls is largely due to the absence of any mention of what the war did to the nation and people of Vietnam. While this absence is certainly not surprising given the overt national presence at the Real Wall, its absence at the Virtual Wall reinforces the success with which the virtual sites “reflect” the environment of the Real Wall by reconstructing and reimposing the national narrative. The improbable scenario of adding a plaque to the space of the Real Wall commemorating the lives lost even among the supposed South Vietnamese allies of the United States could be accomplished rather easily on the pages of the Virtual Walls, but I have yet to run across such a page. Sturken writes of the ghostly presence of the Vietnamese dead at The Real Wall:

It is rarely mentioned that the discussion surrounding the memorial never mentions the Vietnamese people. This is not a memorial to their loss; they cannot even be mentioned in the context of the mall. Nor does the memorial itself allow for their mention; though it allows for an outpouring of grief, it does not speak to the intricate reasons why the lives represented by the inscribed names were lost in vain.⁷⁷⁷

Note how Sturken indicates that the Vietnamese are rendered outside the narrative

⁷⁷⁷ Sturken, *Tangled Memories*.

structure of the site: “*they cannot even be mentioned*” at the Real Wall. In contrast, any user could post a page that signifies the unfortunate loss of life on all sides of this war with only a few clicks of a mouse and a few strokes on the keyboard. Yet, as we have seen, the pages instead are filled with messages that speak of the honor, sacrifice, and duty of American soldiers.

The point of this discussion is not to diminish the importance of the loss of American lives in Vietnam or marginalize the very real sacrifices made by American veterans of the war. Rather, it is to show how these decentered technologies of memory have succeeded in maintaining the power dynamics of the narratives structure of the Real wall. Even freed from the overt nationalist context of the Real Wall, the Virtual Walls allow a nationalist narrative to redouble its hegemony. Just as with the Real Wall, this is accomplished at the Virtual Walls not because of what is said or represented, but because of what is *not* said or represented; not because of who or what is remembered, but because of who or what is forgotten. Nationalism is reinscribed while imperialism is erased and silenced, rendered outside the narrative structures of the cultural memory being constructed at the memorials. In the face of such a powerful cultural force, it becomes all the important to return to Sturken’s question: “Why must a national memorial reenact conflict by showing only one side of the conflict?”

The Widows of War Memorial as Transnational Cybermemorial

Since the inception of the Virtual Walls in the late 1990s, a veritable industry of cybermemorials has developed in the United States. The University of California-Berkeley now hosts a page where visitors can “view and create memorials online for faculty, staff, students, retirees, emeriti, and volunteers who have died.”⁷⁷⁸ Virtual-Memorials.com offers personalized service to those who desire their own cybermemorial, creating “memorials that celebrate the lives and personalities of those we have lost.”⁷⁷⁹ Other Vietnam-related memorials have also arisen; Vietworld.com offered a virtual memorial to those who died while in Vietnam’s “Re-education Camps” after the demise of the Republic of South Vietnam. Although the site has since been taken down, it once offered link to hundreds who died in what the site refers to as the “Vietnamese Holocaust.”⁷⁸⁰ The majority of cybermemorials, however, remain centered around the nation-state.

One of the great strengths of cyberspace as a medium is its ability to facilitate and expedite transnational cultural and political flows. An example of a project that takes advantage of this possibility to move beyond the limitations of the Virtual Walls is the Widows of War Living Memorial, a result of Barbara Sonneborn’s documentary film, *Regret to Inform*. Following the lead of the film, the site is “a place where widows of all wars can record and share their stories with people throughout the world.”⁷⁸¹

⁷⁷⁸ <http://death-response.chance.berkeley.edu/memorial>. January 20, 2004.

⁷⁷⁹ <http://www.virtual-memorials.com>. January 20, 2004.

⁷⁸⁰ <http://www.vietworld.com/Holocaust/index.html>. November 28, 2000.

This site in many ways reproduces the same types of stories seen on the pages of the Virtual Walls, those of individual families coping with personal losses, but by expanding the discussion to include widows of soldiers from places other than the United States and from wars other than Vietnam, the dynamics and implications of the site change considerably. Growing out of Sonneborn's film, which traces her journey back to Vietnam to learn more about the war which took her husband, the postings of the site were initially mostly by American women who lost their husbands in Vietnam, but quickly grew to include stories from women who lost loved ones in battles in Armenia, Guatemala, Tibet, and Rwanda, to name a few. The site also has numerous stories from Vietnamese widows.

After telling the stories of watching her village burn to the ground and the execution of her cousin, Juan Ngoc Nguyen's page recounts the story of her husband's death.

I was only 14 years old when my South Vietnamese village was burned to the ground. It was 1968, and my five year-old cousin was killed by a soldier in front of me. You can't comprehend the loss, you just try to go on.⁷⁸²

Nancy Le's page tells another story that takes her from the years of the American War and into the postwar era, when other Southern Vietnamese like she and her family fled from the Communists.

So in February 1981, I took my husband and my two oldest sons to the South China Sea. I watched them climb into a boat with 72 people and go into the water. I planned to join them later that year, but that day I cried all the way back to Saigon... After nine days, we landed on a beach in Malaysia. My sons and I

⁷⁸¹ <http://www.warwidows.org/>

⁷⁸² http://www.warwidows.org/xuan_ngoc_nguyen.html

*looked for my husband and my other sons. We didn't hear about them ever again. After two years, we got permission to go to the United States.*⁷⁸³

The site also includes the writings of widows from World War Two, The Third Indochina War, and the American War on Iraq.

Including the stories of widows from Cambodia and Vietnam displaces much of the American-centered focus of the Virtual Walls and puts a very human face on the object of the American War. The “victims” of this site are not just Americans, but Southeast Asian men, women, and children as well. Furthermore, by focusing on the stories of widows from numerous conflicts and wars, the Widows’ memorial creates the possibilities for larger stories to be told which transcend the often confining narrative grasp of the American war in Vietnam.

After the events of September 11, 2001, the ensuing United States war in Afghanistan, and the increased violence in Israel and Palestine, the Widows of War Memorial became a clearinghouse for stories of widows from those areas. One widow from Israel offered her contribution to the site, claiming the space as a memorial not to wars, but in the name of peace:

*And yet, without peace, I see no future in this region. The price of war is so high we must do everything to prevent it. The new weapons make war all the more devastating. All efforts must be made to create peace. Never mind the risks—we must take the risks of peace.*⁷⁸⁴

The site as a whole offered a “statement” after September 11 that accurately summed up the larger cultural work of the project:

⁷⁸³ http://www.warwidows.org/nancy_le.html

⁷⁸⁴ http://www.warwidows.org/Memorial/eva_alaluf.html

*Our thoughts and prayers are with all those who have suffered or lost loved ones in this tragedy. Terrorism has been called a new kind of war. Our goal at the WarWidows International Peace Alliance is to end violence and war in all its incarnations.*⁷⁸⁵

As a truly transnational memorial not to war but to peace, the Widows of War Living Memorial offers an opportunity for forms of remembrance that the Real and Virtual Walls cannot. Freed from nationalistic narratives and from narrow definitions of “victims,” the site moves beyond the narrative structure of the Walls, transcending the gendered space of those memorials to create a space in which war itself can be memorialized. As such, it offers a powerful example of the type of memorial the Virtual Walls might have been and still could be, and further demonstrates the power of the national narrative to hold sway over those sites.

An End to Monuments? The Future of Remembrance at The Wall

We have seen that users of the Virtual Walls have used the tools provided them by the medium to challenge and expand the narrative boundaries of the memorials by telling stories whose form and content is circumscribed by the boundaries of the real wall. We have also seen, however, how those sites have become another site of the dominance of the nationalist narrative that seeks to marginalize the significance of the American War in Vietnam by simply reinscribing that conflict into the sweep of United States history as an aberration rather than an important chapter in American imperialism.

⁷⁸⁵ <http://www.warwidows.org/Memorial/response901.html>. March 17, 2003.

Although the basic narrative structure of the Real Wall has been kept in place, having become more flexible and inclusive over time, it remains subject to forces seeking to further limit the structure of the site by imposing a more monolithic vision of the war. A quarter century removed from the end of the military phase of the American War in Vietnam, Lin's design maintained sufficient liminality and ambiguity to provoke a new proposal for a major addition to the memorial.

In September, 2000, Senator Chuck Hagel of Nebraska, a Veteran of the war in Vietnam introduced legislation calling for an “Education Center” to be placed at The Wall. The proposal originated earlier that year in discussions related to the addition of the “In Memory” plaque. The “primary reason” for the Education Center, according to the VVMF, who spearheaded the drive, “would be to educate young Americans about the Vietnam War and The Wall.”⁷⁸⁶ The proposed center would include historical information about the war, rotate different museum-style exhibits, and contain a photo gallery featuring pictures of all those listed on the wall. In this sense, the center would in part mirror the Virtual Walls, allowing for more individualized and personalized forms of remembrance. But the focal point of the proposal was to pass the “lessons of Vietnam” on to future generations of Vietnam. Throughout the next three years, as the battle over the center continued, several constituencies expressed their concern that these “young Americans” had little knowledge of the war and, as such, would not learn the lessons offered by the war. While few disagreed with this assessment, the question of what

⁷⁸⁶ “Background: An Education Center at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.”

exactly these lessons were would continue to be a sticking point.

The Education Center proposal hit its first snag almost immediately. The National Park Service had for several years resisted a number of proposed additions to the mall, including the Franklin Roosevelt Memorial, the Korean War Memorial, and the World War Two Memorial. The NPS worried that the Center would take away from the experience of The Wall, further clutter the mall as a whole, and set a precedent for similar centers at other monuments.⁷⁸⁷ The Park Service was supported by several environmental groups, including The National Coalition to Save Our Mall, which offered a counter-proposal suggesting instead that “pamphlets” be handed to visitors.⁷⁸⁸ For several legislative sessions, the proposed Center at The Wall was attached to legislation supported by these groups that would have placed strict limitations on any further additions to the Mall. A more surprising source of opposition came from Phil Gramm. The Republican Senator from Texas had by 2001 twice taken the Education Center off of the Senate’s unanimous consent calendar, dooming the measure to die in committee.⁷⁸⁹ Gramm’s reason for opposing the Center had nothing to do with environmental concerns or with the war and its legacies; he was opposed to building any more memorials, or banning any more memorials until a monument to Ronald Reagan was accepted. Though his stalwart opposition, Gramm almost single-handedly blocked not only the Center but also the ban on future additions to the Mall. Ironically, Reagan himself had signed the original legislation to which the ban was being amended: The 1986 Commemorative

⁷⁸⁷ “Underground Center Proposed Near Wall,” *WP*, November 1, 2001.

⁷⁸⁸ “Split on Lessons of Vietnam, United on Passing Them On,” *WP*, May 22, 2003; “Preservation Law Puts Leash on Mall Projects,” *WP*, November 20, 2003.

⁷⁸⁹ “Background: An Education Center at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.”

Works Act, which specified that no monument to an individual could be built on the Mall until twenty-five years after the person's death. The irony was not lost on the Bush administration, which supported the ban and reminded Gramm that Reagan, in his early nineties at the time of the proposal, had not only signed the legislation, but also that the famously anti-federal government President already had the Washington, D.C. airport and another Federal building named after him.⁷⁹⁰

When Gramm retired in 2002, the proposal was cleared to move forward, although not without continued opposition from the NPS. In May, 2003, the Congressional Subcommittee charged with marking up the legislation held hearings at The Wall to determine the impact of the Center on the site and the Mall. What is most intriguing about these hearings, for my purposes, is not the environmental opposition to the addition, but the concern over the tone, content, and pedagogical style of the Center. While apprehension over the environmental and aesthetic impact of the Center remained fairly consistent over the years, the concerns over the educational style of the Center took on new meaning with the American War on Iraq in 2003.

Against the lack of "historical context" provided by the Wall itself, a diverse groups of witnesses, including actor Robert Duvall and author Stanley Karnow, took an opportunity at the May hearings to weigh in on what "lessons of Vietnam" should be conveyed at the Center. Duvall invoked a line from his role in *Apocalypse Now*, "You know, someday this war's going to end," to introduce his testimony that the "societal

⁷⁹⁰ "Legislative Field Hearing to Authorize the Design and Construction of a Visitor Center for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial," Hearing Before the House Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation, and Public Lands, 108th Congress, First Session, May 21, 2003 (Washington, D.C: GPO, 2003), 26.

impact of the war is not over.” Calling on Congress to allow the Center to go forward, Duvall claimed that the educational mission of the center was a logical outgrowth of the Wall and the Wall That Heals: “America’s youth must have the opportunity to learn patriotism and sacrifice at the Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial.”⁷⁹¹ Alone among the witnesses, and certainly unique among those who have engaged in public discourse about the Wall, Stanley Karnow took a moment to remind those in attendance about the damage done to Vietnam and the Vietnamese during the war. Yet in making even this comment in passing, Karnow acknowledged that the issue was essentially irrelevant:

If I could just inject one more point, when we talk about the number of Americans who died in Vietnam—I know it is not within the purview of this—I want to remind people that something like 2 to 3 million Vietnamese also died in the war, and I am talking about Vietnamese on both sides.⁷⁹²

The Vietnamese, as Karnow well knew, were always outside “the purview” of American policy. His comments were especially telling when compared with his formal comments inserted for the record, which contain no mention of the Vietnamese. Yet Karnow, a member of the Center’s Advisory Council, had in mind a Center with a different educational mission than Duvall and others at the hearings. Rather than “patriotism” and “sacrifice,” Karnow envisioned a Center that would move beyond commemorating the dead to “become an instrument of goodwill and that elusive dream—peace on earth.”⁷⁹³

John Peterson, a Republican committee member from Pennsylvania, offered a strikingly different vision of the Center. Peterson claimed that the Center would be a

⁷⁹¹ “Legislative Field Hearing,” 10.

⁷⁹² Ibid., 17.

⁷⁹³ Ibid., 19.

valuable addition to the site because it would help “personalize” the war for Americans. He was less concerned about the lessons of the war; as he stated in the hearings, the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrated that those “lessons had been learned.” Nevertheless, he offered the Visitors Center as a way to make sure those lessons were passed on, asserting that it was “vital to this country to understand the intricacies of the Vietnam War, the mistakes that were made there so that we don’t repeat them.” As to what specific lessons the Center might provide, Peterson offered:

I think as we watch [the Bush] administration as it came into some involvements, they didn’t make some of the mistakes that were made in Vietnam. Because when we decide to have a conflict, we win, we get it over with. We don’t do it in stages. We don’t do it in degrees. We don’t decide whether we should turn it over. When we make a decision, we win. And if we don’t remember history, we have the likeliness to repeat it.⁷⁹⁴

Others went on to testify about the importance of the Center as a pedagogical site that could help instill the values of “service,” “sacrifice,” and “patriotism,” but perhaps the most telling testimony came from Duncan Hunter, Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee. Hunter described with disdain the negative image of the American War in Vietnam in American culture, especially American films about the war (except *We Were Soldiers* and *The Green Berets*, which he approved of). Hunter also railed against the *Enola Gay* exhibit at the Smithsonian that had caused such an uproar years earlier by discussing questions of the use of the nuclear weapons and offering what some viewed as too sympathetic a view of the Japanese victims of the bombs.⁷⁹⁵ Like

⁷⁹⁴ Ibid., 22.

⁷⁹⁵ Ibid., 24. On the Enola Gay controversy and some interesting connections to Vietnam, see Edward Lilleenthal and Tom Englehardt, eds., *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles Over the American Past* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1996).

Peterson, Hunter saw the recent Iraq war as a step in the right direction, claiming that the media coverage of the invasion sent the “message” to the American people that “GIs are pretty good people. They had never seen that before.” Along these lines, he continued, “visitors centers are darn good if they carry the right message.” As for the specific Center being proposed for The Wall, Hunter concluded that he was

all for this exhibit if it shows the honor and goodness of American GIs, and, I think, Mr. Chairman—and I speak for myself—the honor of the cause. The only time when Vietnam had any freedom, any modicum of freedom—and if anybody thinks that they have got a modicum of freedom over today, please go on over and take a look—was when the Americans were there.⁷⁹⁶

In the end, the Center, in the words of Hunter, would tell the stories of “honor and determination” that were at the heart of the American War in Vietnam—a useful corrective to the “distorted view” of the war, and the soldiers who fought it, in American culture.

The bill was eventually passed by the House as well as the Senate, and was signed into law by President Bush in November 2003. The final version of the bill focused almost exclusively on limits to future building on the Mall, devoting only a few pages to the addition of the “Vietnam Veterans Memorial Visitors Center.” The law did not lay out specific guidelines for the content of the center, stating only that it was to provide “appropriate educational and interpretive functions.”⁷⁹⁷ The design of the center is far from complete, let alone the content, but the response of the VVMF was telling.

⁷⁹⁶ Ibid., 24.

⁷⁹⁷ Text of H.R. 1442, available on the VVWF website, www.thevirtualwall.org, March 10, 2004.

Trumpeting the final approval of the authorizing legislation, the press release posted on the Virtual Wall's website claimed that the center would "not only honor the memory of Vietnam veterans, but most importantly will educate visitors of the sacrifices our veterans have made in the name of freedom." Jan Scruggs, who had begun his quest for a Vietnam Veterans Memorial nearly twenty-five years earlier, added his thanks to Bush for approving the Center, "guaranteeing," as Scruggs put it, "that future generations will better understand the principles of service, sacrifice, and patriotism."⁷⁹⁸ These ideas, then, are the true "lessons of Vietnam" that The Wall would now pass on. As with the Virtual Walls, the discourse of the duty, honor, sacrifice of American service personnel has become the trope for the reinscription of the national narrative, further rendering outside the realm of discussion any sense of what the war did to the nation and people of Vietnam. The Center thus stands as possibly the final strand in the reimposition of a grand national narrative at The Wall, reintegrating Vietnam, through the lenses of Iraq, Afghanistan, and a narrow brand of "patriotism," into the once endangered story of America's long march to Freedom at home and abroad.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial stood for over two decades as a complex, liminal space. Situated in the most national of contexts, The Wall also offered a remarkably personal space for those touched by the war to perform individual acts of memory, reconciling and challenging their personal narratives with the National narrative constructed at the memorial. I have argued here that, since its inception, the ambiguity so

⁷⁹⁸ "President Bush Signs Visitors Center Bill," www.thevirtualwall.org/index.cfm?SectionID=298, March 10, 2004.

centrally built into The Wall has been constantly under attack by those seeking a more cohesive, and more inclusive (to a point) narrative. The additions of two statues, a flagpole, a commemorative plaque, and, now, an Educational Visitors Center have been shaped by that ambiguity and have all shaped and will continue to shape the narrative structure of the site.

There will always be those who speak and write “back” at such displays of power, but it does seem safe to assume that if the Center’s narrative of the war is constructed around the ideas described by Scruggs, the question of American imperialism will be all but erased as a point of entry into the debate at The Wall. While critical narratives of the war—new and old—may continue to be constructed against such triumphant revisionism, one must ask where such stories will be told. It is very unlikely that they will be told at The Wall.

In his testimony about the center in May of 2003, Robert Duvall claimed that “education is never dangerous.”⁷⁹⁹ Certainly it is far too early in the process to see what the Visitors Center will have to say about the American War in Vietnam, and it would be troubling to imply, without knowing those details, that an exhibit that focuses almost exclusively on “service, sacrifice, and patriotism,” is in itself “dangerous.” The real danger of the Center is not that it will provide a particular narrative of the American War in Vietnam; it is that it will make the narrative structure of the overall site so rigid as to further exclude a greater range of stories, further imposing coherence, uniformity, and

⁷⁹⁹ “Legislative Field Hearing,” 9.

consensus on a fractured, divisive, heterogeneity of stories. The more stories that are rendered outside the narrative structure of the memorial, the more likely it is that we will never see, in W.D. Erhardt's memorable phrase, "an end to monuments."

EPILOGUE

The Uneasy Peace and the Flags That Still Fly

Although I have situated the 1995 normalization and diplomatic recognition of Vietnam as the “end” of the American War on Vietnam, the period since normalization has been marked by a series of ongoing battles between the two nations, on trade, human rights issues, and the ongoing contestation for the meaning of “Vietnam” in American Society. Nevertheless, 1995 did mark, as Secretary of State Christopher put it at the time, “an end to a decade of war and two decades of estrangement.”⁸⁰⁰ Normalization also offered the opportunity for some in the United States to rethink the long war against Vietnam, and to see what lessons might be drawn from it. In 1995, the message was clear. Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times* declared victory in Vietnam, “if winning is measured by a Vietnam that is economically, politically, and strategically pro-Western.” “It’s time that we declare victory,” he added, “and go back to Vietnam and reap it.”⁸⁰¹ The lesson of Vietnam, argued the *Washington Post*, “is that it makes a lot more sense to make markets than to make war.”⁸⁰² By 1995, Vietnam the market was attracting a lot of attention from American corporations; what effect the new relationship would have on Vietnam the nation remains to be seen.

After diplomatic normalization was completed in 1995, the economic windfall predicted by many was slow to develop. American corporations were finally free to set

⁸⁰⁰ Quoted in “U.S.-Vietnamese Ties,” *NYT*, August 6, 1995.

⁸⁰¹ “Good Morning, Vietnam,” *NYT*, January 18, 1995.

⁸⁰² “Make Money, Not War,” *WP*, February 15, 1995.

up operations in Vietnam, taking advantage of a skilled, hard-working, and cheap labor force. Within a year, however, stories of abusive labor practices and unsafe working conditions began to surface. Nike, Disney, and McDonalds were among the well-known companies implicated in various stories of sweatshops in Vietnam. In one example, labor monitoring groups found factories producing toys for McDonald's "Happy Meals" where many young Vietnamese women were being paid only six cents per hour. As one news report of the situation noted, however, "low wages are not the workers' worst problem." In February of 1996, more 200 workers in the plant were forced to stop working as a result of acetone poisoning.⁸⁰³ Later that year, in response to cases such as these as well as the more high-profile Nike situation, Vietnam Labor Watch was founded to monitor labor practices in the country.

As Vietnamese leaders made clear after the lifting of the embargo, the new era of relations would mean little economically without a trade agreement extending normal trade relations to Vietnam. Negotiations over the agreement proceeded at a snail's pace however, which meant that Vietnamese exports to the United States were still subject to high tariff rates. By the end of the twentieth century, the United States remained the only industrialized nation not to grant MFN to Vietnam, and Vietnam remained one of only six countries not to receive that status from the United States.⁸⁰⁴ From 1997 to 2000, the

⁸⁰³ "McDonald's 'Happy Meals' Sad For Workers," Interpress Service. May 9, 1996. Available at www.oneworld.org/ips2/may/Vietnam.html. February 25, 2004. For similar stories, see Irene Norlund, "Nike and Labour in Vietnam," *Nordic Newsletter of Asian Studies* 3 (October 1997); and Eyal Press, "Vietnam: A Nike Sneak," *The Nation*, April 5, 1999.

⁸⁰⁴ "The Vietnam-U.S. Bilateral Trade Agreement," Congressional Research Service Report to Congress, June 20, 2001 (Washington: GPO, 2001); "United States-Vietnam

Clinton administration granted Jackson-Vanik waivers to Vietnam, lessening the effects of the tariffs by granting temporary most favored nation (MFN) status to some Vietnamese goods.

On each occasion, Congress was required to approve the waiver, and many members took the opportunity to criticize Vietnam for what some considered human rights violations, for lack of transparency in economic matters, and, of course, for not producing the remains of American service personnel. Although these hearings tended to focus more on issues of international trade than those held prior to normalization, the same cast of characters could often be found at the witness table. In hearings on relations with Vietnam in the late 1990s, those who clung to the need for “leverage” on Vietnam, whether for political or economic reasons, maintained that the promise of NTR and, later, accession to the WTO, continued to provide the United States with the required leverage over Hanoi.⁸⁰⁵ And, without fail, every major hearing would feature a presentation by Ann Mills Griffiths and other members of the POW/MIA lobby, who continued to lambast the Vietnamese for not doing enough to assist in the recovery of American remains.⁸⁰⁶ Despite such criticisms, and despite the determined efforts of many representatives in the House, the Jackson-Vanik waivers were upheld every year.

“Bilateral Trade Agreement,” Hearing Before the Senate Committee On Finance, 107th Congress, 1st Session, June 26, 2001 (Washington: GPO, 2001).

⁸⁰⁵ See, for example, the statement of Ambassador Douglas “Pete” Peterson to the House Subcommittee on Trade, in “United States-Vietnam Trade Relations,” Hearing before the House Subcommittee on Trade, 106th Congress, 1st Session, June 17, 1999 (Washington: GPO, 2000), 33.

⁸⁰⁶ Ibid., 99; “U.S.-Vietnam Relations,” Hearing Before the House Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, 105th Congress, 1st Session, June 18, 1997 (Washington: GPO, 1998), 59.

Not until the summer of 2000, however, did the two nations agree to the terms of the bilateral trade agreement (BTA). That document, too, was subject to the approval of legislatures in both countries, and the United States Congress would not receive the measure for over a year, after George W. Bush had assumed the Presidency. In September of 2001, the United States Senate passed the measure by a vote of 88-12, while the House required only a voice vote. President Bush signed the BTA into law on October 16. In Vietnam, the National Assembly approved the agreement 278-85, and President Tran Duc Luong signed the BTA into law. After a mutual exchange of letters acknowledging the accord, the BTA between Vietnam and the United States went into effect on December 10. Under the agreement, Vietnam does receive MFN—or Normal Trade Relations—status, although that status is not permanent.⁸⁰⁷ Thus, Vietnam remains subject to annual “reviews” by the White House and Congress, both of which must still sign off on Vietnam’s adherence to American conditions on immigration, human rights, and a number of other issues as laid out in the BTA.

While the BTA has opened many doors into the American market for Vietnamese goods—imports to the U.S. reached \$1.05 billion in 2001—it has, like the IMF/World Bank structural adjustment programs and the influx of foreign investment into produced mixed results for Vietnam. Consider the case of catfish. After the terms of the BTA were agreed upon in 2000, Vietnamese exports of catfish to the U.S. jumped from five million pounds to thirty-four million pounds. Under the terms of the agreement,

⁸⁰⁷ “The U.S-Vietnam Bilateral Trade Agreement,” 1-2; In 1998, the official terminology of the U.S. government shifted from “Most Favored Nation” status to “Normal Trade Relations,” or NTR.

American catfish farmers filed suit with the Commerce department in 2002 charging the Vietnamese with a number of complaints: that Vietnamese catfish were not really catfish; that the Vietnamese were “dumping” their “catfish” in the U.S. market; and, most ironically, that the Vietnamese fish might be unsafe for American consumers because they might be contaminated with dioxin from Agent Orange.⁸⁰⁸ In July 2003, the U.S. International Trade Commission ruled unanimously in favor of the American catfish industry, clearing the way for the government to impose import duties of 37 to 64 percent on Vietnamese catfish fillets. While the catfish case was pending, the American shrimp industry filed a similar suit, which is still pending at the time of this writing.⁸⁰⁹ In an equally ironic protest, U.S. rice growers and numerous members of Congress from across the political spectrum expressed their displeasure when a contract for 70,000 metric tons of rice to be shipped to American-occupied Iraq was denied to American farmers. Instead the contract, along with a U.N.-based contract for 152,000 metric tons, was awarded to Vietnam.⁸¹⁰

Vietnam may join the WTO as early as 2005, in which case U.S. sanctions would be subject to WTO adjudication⁸¹¹; until then, the U.S. and Vietnam will remain locked in such trade wars. To be sure, such skirmishes are preferable to the types of wars endured in the thirty years prior; yet these conflicts indicate a remaining source of tension

⁸⁰⁸ “Free Trade’s Muddy Waters,” *WP*, July 13, 2003; “Vietnam Shuns U.S. Sanctions on Catfish,” *WP*, June 18, 2003.

⁸⁰⁹ “Trade Ruling Favors U.S. Catfish Farmers Over Vietnamese,” *WP*, July 24, 2003. “Vietnam Worried About Shrimp Sanctions,” *WP*, July 24, 2003.

⁸¹⁰ “U.S. Rice Growers Want to Sell to Iraq,” *WP*, March 14, 2004.

⁸¹¹ On Vietnam and the WTO, see Kym Anderson, *Vietnam’s Transforming Economy and WTO Accession* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1999).

and hostility toward Vietnam on the part of some Americans, as well as Vietnamese distrust of the United States. They also indicate the extent to which major political and economic developments in Vietnam remain subject to the domestic politics of the United States.

“Vietnam” in Twenty-First Century American Culture

At the time of this writing, it has been over a decade since the American embargo on Vietnam was lifted, and nearly a decade since the normalization of diplomatic relations between the two nations. As we approach the thirtieth anniversary of the end of the military phase of the American War in Vietnam, it is worth reflecting on how much has changed in relations between United States and Vietnam—and how much has stayed the same.

Since 1975, a generation has come of age in Vietnam and in the United States. In Vietnam, more than half of the current population was born after the end of the American War. While many of these Vietnamese have known the horrors of war experienced by previous generations, they have also experienced the greatest period of economic expansion in that nation’s history. This latest generation in Vietnam is marked more by the items they consume and the market ideology they expound than by their adherence to socialist policies or the imperialists they have expelled.

When President Clinton made his historic visit to Vietnam in November 2000, he received an extraordinarily warm welcome. Although his flight landed after 11 p.m. in Hanoi, well after most the country is normally asleep, thousands of Vietnamese lined the streets and congregated in front of the hotel where the Clintons were staying. Many Vietnamese, according to various press accounts, thought well of Clinton not only because he had lifted the sanctions and normalized relations, but because they knew he had opposed the war in the 1960s and 1970s.⁸¹² In an unprecedented move, Vietnamese officials allowed Clinton's address from Hanoi's National University to be carried live on national television. In the speech, Clinton made reference to the ongoing efforts of the Vietnamese to recover the remains of American servicemen.

Your cooperation in that mission over these last eight years has made it possible for America to support international lending to Vietnam, to resume trade between our countries, to establish formal diplomatic relations and, this year, to sign a pivotal trade agreement. Finally, America is coming to see Vietnam as your people have asked for years -- as a country, not a war.⁸¹³

It is not clear, however, that this has been the case.

In the United States, Vietnam has become an important trading partner, the leading supplier of coffee and a major source of textiles. "Vietnam," however, remains a free-floating signifier in American Society, more commonly used as an analogy for various American military misadventures. The recent invasion and occupation of Iraq, in particular, has led to a sharp resurgence of "Vietnam" as a means of debate, which makes it all the more ironic when seemingly significant stories about Vietnam the nation, or

⁸¹² "Clinton Gets Late-Night Welcome in Vietnam," *Reuters*, November 16, 2000.

⁸¹³ "President's Remarks at Vietnam's National University," November 17, 2000; taken from The White House website, www.whitehouse.gov, November 20, 2000.

even Vietnam the war, receive little if any attention in the American press.

For example, in October 2003, the *Toledo Blade* ran a major exclusive, revealing the previously undocumented story of Tiger Force, an elite American military unit that waged a violent and murderous reign of terror in the Vietnamese Central highlands in 1967. The story, which ran in multiple sections over several days, detailed how members of Tiger Force murdered, dismembered, decapitated, and mutilated hundreds of unarmed villagers, including women and children, over a period of several months. Most of the killings, reporters Michael Sallah and Mitch Weiss reported, took place within less than fifty miles of My Lai, the site of the massacre previously thought to be the worst of American War crimes in Vietnam. While investigating the My Lai murders, the Army learned of the Tiger Force crimes, and promptly covered them up. Although the Pentagon's investigation found that several members of the platoon were guilty of war crimes, none were prosecuted.⁸¹⁴ As the *Blade* editorialized at the end of the story's run, "Tiger Force's Assaults Should Horrify the Nation."⁸¹⁵ Instead, the story was largely ignored. In the spring of 2004, however, it was awarded a Pulitzer Prize.

A few weeks after the story appeared, Seymour Hersh, who first uncovered the My Lai massacre, noted, "the Blade's extraordinary investigation of Tiger Force, however, remains all but invisible." None of the major news networks had picked up the story, and hardly any other newspapers had even mentioned the account.⁸¹⁶ Hersh's

⁸¹⁴ Among the many stories ran by the *Blade* in October and November 2003, see in particular, "Untold Story of Savage Force," October 19, 2003; and "Vietnam Inquiry Yields No Justice," October 20, 2003.

⁸¹⁵ "Buried Secrets" *Toledo Blade*, October 24, 2004, A-26.

⁸¹⁶ "Uncovered," The Talk of the Town, *The New Yorker*, November 10, 2003, 41.

critique led ABC News to run a feature on the Tiger Force story, but no other major outlets followed suit. Writing about the media's coverage (or lack thereof) of the story in *The Nation* in March of 2004, Scott Sherman noted that at the time, the "list of major news organizations that has yet to acknowledge the *Blade* series includes NBC, CBS, CNN, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News and World Report*, and the *Wall Street Journal*."⁸¹⁷ *The New York Times*, while acknowledging the story with a summary on page A24 eight weeks later, admitted that if its own staff had discovered the story, "it would have been on the front page."⁸¹⁸ More than journalistic chauvinism, however, both Sherman and Hersh speculated that the reluctance to reprint, follow-up on, or further investigate the story came from an unwillingness among the media to bring up such issues while the United States was at war in Iraq. In an interview on National Public Radio, *Blade* reporter Sallah stated, "there is a sense that we should not be too openly critical and evoke these painful memories of Vietnam when we're already in a conflict."⁸¹⁹

Yet while the Tiger Force story was being ignored, "Vietnam," was seemingly everywhere. Countless stories compared the war in Iraq to the war in Vietnam, speeches in Congress labeled Iraq "Bush's Vietnam," and the press pored over the wartime records of the two candidates for President in 2004, Bush and Senator John Kerry. In one form or another, the cover of *Newsweek* featured several prominent stories related to the American War. The first featured wartime-era pictures of the two Presidential

⁸¹⁷ "The Other My Lai," *The Nation*, March 1, 2004, 9.

⁸¹⁸ The statement came from *Times* editor Bill Keller and was quoted by public editor Daniel Okrent; cited in "The Other My Lai."

⁸¹⁹ Quoted in "The Other My Lai." The modern-day Tiger Force, was at the time on active duty in Iraq.

candidates, Bush in Alabama while a member of the National Guard, and Kerry on a gunboat in the Mekong Delta.⁸²⁰ Only a few weeks later, the cover featured a picture of a young American soldier next to the headline, “Crisis in Iraq: The Vietnam Factor.” In that week’s issue, several stories and columns compared the wars in Iraq and Vietnam.⁸²¹ And, as the fighting in Iraq raged on, the magazine also featured a cover story on “The New Science of Strokes,” but also teased a story on “John Kerry & Agent Orange.” Inside, a five-page story expressed concerns over Kerry’s health, pointing out that he had been exposed to the cancer-causing chemical agent while serving in Vietnam. That concern was especially noteworthy, given how the story addressed the obvious point: that millions of Vietnamese had been exposed to the agent as well:

Agent Orange was one of the many tragedies of Vietnam. It may have killed or sickened, via long-incubating cancers and nerve disorders, thousands of American soldiers and sailors (not to mention many more Vietnamese).⁸²²

In the space of a few thousand words detailing the deadly effects of the chemical warfare waged on Vietnam at the hands of the United States, the primary victims of the attacks drew barely a parenthetical reminder. Even a brief paragraph could have mentioned that Vietnamese victims had recently initiated legal action against the manufacturers of Agent Orange, following a path similar to that which led to the 1984 case in which American veterans of the war won a \$180 million settlement from Monsanto and Dow Chemical; or that recent studies found both that dioxin from Agent Orange was still contaminating

⁸²⁰ *Newsweek*, February 23, 2004.

⁸²¹ *Newsweek*, April 18, 2004.

⁸²² “John Kerry and Agent Orange,” *Newsweek*, March 8, 2004.

Vietnam's food and water supplies at extremely high levels and that previous statistics on dioxin levels per liter of Agent Orange were underestimated.⁸²³ Instead, Vietnam is relegated to its traditional role in American public discourse: readily available to highlight the meaning of the war for the United States, and conspicuously invisible whenever a story raises the specter of American imperialism or dares address the legacies of the war for the Vietnamese. Vietnam continues to operate as a ghostly presence haunting American society, everywhere and nowhere at the same time. As ever, the Vietnamese remain invisible enemies, and invisible victims of the United States.

I have attempted to show in this dissertation how this came to be. We have seen that immediately after the victory of the revolutionary forces in Vietnam, the United States launched an unprecedented political, economic, and cultural attack, a new phase in its ongoing war on Vietnam. Beginning with the imposition of a draconian program of economic sanctions, the United States in the twenty years after the fall of Saigon continued to shape the contours of Vietnam's economy, drawing the boundaries within which the nation's economic transformation would take place. The United States during the late 1970s working within the cultural logic of "normalizing" the cultural memory of

⁸²³ "Legal Actions by Vietnamese Agent Orange Victims Was Inevitable," *AP*, February 9, 2004.. Also, see other sources on Agent Orange, taken from note 189, above: "Long Term Consequences of the Vietnam War," 43.; Arnold Schecter et. al., "Food as a Source of Dioxin Exposure in the Residents of Bien Hoa City, Vietnam," *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Research* 45:8 (August, 2003); "Decades Later, Vietnam War Toxin Still Torments," *WP*, February 16, 2004; "New Study Into Agent Orange," *BBC News Online*, March 10, 2002, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/world/asia-pacific/1865730.stm>, February 18, 2004. For more on Agent Orange, see Robert Dreyfuss, "Agent Orange: The Next Generation," *Mother Jones* (January/February, 2000); and Phillip Jones Griffiths, *Agent Orange: Collateral Damage in Vietnam* (London: Trolley Press, 2003).

the war in Vietnam constructing representations of the war in Congress and in American films about the war that portrayed a sense of mutual destruction. Within this framework, the United States began to be recast as the victims of the war, held hostage, under the trope of the POW/MIA myth, by cruel and inhuman Vietnamese.

In the 1980s, I have argued, this normalization project continued, as the United States worked to “Bleed Vietnam White” on the battlefields of Cambodia by arming the Vietnamese opposition, including the Khmer Rouge; isolating Vietnam politically and diplomatically; and extending its sanctions program to include key allies such as Japan, France, and the ASEAN nations. Meanwhile, representations of the war in American culture moved from the mutual destruction phase, which ended with the revenge fantasies of *Rambo*, and into a moment in which the Vietnamese were actually erased from narratives of the war altogether. Surrounded by a cultural discourse that testified to its “reality,” Oliver Stone’s *Platoon* led the way in constructing a narrative of the American War in Vietnam in which the United States fought, and lost, only to itself.

Finally, I have shown how the final stages of the American War in Vietnam developed, with the lifting of the sanctions and diplomatic normalization being accomplished through a discourse of “access,” which mollified both American business interests clamoring for a share of the Vietnamese market, and the POW/MIA lobby, which sought greater cooperation in their efforts to recover the remains of United States soldiers. As I have mentioned briefly here, however, the period since 1975 has belied

any true, lasting peaceful relations between the two countries. Rather, relations between Vietnam and the United States, while on better footing than at any time in recent history, continue to be marked by hostility and distrust in the political, cultural, and economic fields.

Much more work needs to be done in these and other areas before we can begin to develop a better sense of this period in the history of American-Vietnamese relations. To begin with, we need more comparative work that explores how the war has been remembered and contested in various aspects of Vietnamese society.⁸²⁴ We also need to consider the implications of this study for the larger history of the United States, Vietnam, and Southeast Asia as a whole. In particular we need studies that examine the effects of globalization on the nation and people of Vietnam, work that looks beyond the confines of traditional economic models to place the changes in sociological and historical perspectives. Toward that end, I am working with several colleagues to develop an international and interdisciplinary anthology that addresses these issues.

In another area, one of the central tasks of this project was to disrupt, transgress, and transcend traditional chronologies of the American War in Vietnam by moving the period after 1975 to the center of the narrative. Admittedly, this dissertation has only scratched the surface of a number of important issues of the post-1975 period; nevertheless, this period now needs to be integrated with larger narratives of the war,

⁸²⁴ For two excellent examples of work that addresses this issue from a Vietnamese perspective, see Hue-Tam Ho Tai, ed., *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); and Patricia Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam: New Histories of the National Past*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

particularly when we see how closely the current relationships between the United States, Japan, and Southeast Asia match the original designs of the American architects of the Cold War.

We know, for instance, that United States policy at the dawn of the Cold War envisioned a large segment of Asia, known at the time as the “great crescent,” serving the dual, complimentary functions of a bulwark against Communism and the hinge upon which Japan’s economic revival would rest. National Security Memos from the late 1940s through the early 1950s repeatedly note the strategic value of Southeast Asia, both in terms of raw materials, and as a trading partner for Japan. The entire region was to be defended at any cost according to these documents--a policy stance which eventually led to American intervention in Korea and later in Indochina, which, as a 1952 NSC Memo states, “is of far greater strategic importance than Korea.”⁸²⁵ By 1952, of course, the United States’ interest in Japan’s integration into the global capitalist economy was even greater, given the recent revolution in China. Another NSC memo from the same year notes that in addition to Indochina, the “loss” of “Malaysia and Indonesia in particular could result in such economic and political pressure on Japan as to make it extremely difficult to prevent Japan’s eventual accommodation to Communism.”⁸²⁶ In short, then, the United States envisioned a Southeast Asia that would serve as a source of raw materials, particularly for Japan, and as a market for the finished consumer goods of Japan and its trading partners.

⁸²⁵ NSC 124/1, 1952, *Pentagon Papers, Volume One, Senator Gravel Edition [PP]* (Boston, 1971), 375-381.

⁸²⁶ NSC 124/2, *PP*, 385-86.

While the path from 1945 to 2005 has been far from direct, we can now look at the region of Southeast Asia, its economic integration, and its relationships to Japan, the United States, and the global economy and see that things have turned out largely the way that these original U.S. policies had hoped for. How did this come to be? What role did the United States have in these developments? What effect did the American War in Vietnam have on the region? What effects, if any, did American policy toward Vietnam, Cambodia, and the ASEAN nations after 1975? Some of these questions have been addressed by scholars and former policymakers debating the revisionist “Buying Time” argument, in which the United States is declared the victor in the larger battle for an integrated, capitalist Southeast Asia despite the loss of the “battle” in Vietnam.⁸²⁷

I believe that this dissertation may shed new light onto this issue, however. Although the transformation in which I am interested appears at this point to be the result of the unintended consequences of American policy rather than coordinated, developed, and sustained actions by any nation or actors, there are still a number of questions that beg to be asked and answered. Toward that end, my next major project, tentatively entitled “Nations, Wars, and Markets: America, Vietnam, and the Making of the Global Economy, 1945-2005,” will place American-Vietnamese relations from 1945-2005 within the context of the larger political and economic transformations of Southeast Asia during that period.

⁸²⁷ The best summary, and rebuttal of this argument can be found in Robert McMahon, “What Difference Did it Make?: Assessing the Vietnam War’s Impact on Southeast Asia,” in Lloyd Gardner and Ted Gitterman, eds., *International Perspectives on Vietnam* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2000), 189-203.

The Flags That Still Fly

By way of concluding, I want to mention the stories of three flags that symbolize the ambiguous and contested place of Vietnam in American Society, in American cultural memory, and in the world. To begin with, there is the POW/MIA flag, a symbol can be found seemingly everywhere in American society. In 1997, Congress passed a law, redundant for many states with similar laws already on the books, requiring Post Offices and other Federal buildings to fly the flag several times a year.⁸²⁸ This “second national flag,” as Bruce Franklin has labeled it, serves as a powerful reminder of the hold the war has on American cultural memory, a reminder that the American war on Vietnam may never end, but also that it will be remembered—and forgotten—in particular ways.⁸²⁹

Another signal of the American desire to constantly contest, revise and erase particular memories of the war, arose in a more unlikely place in early 2003. In January, State delegate Robert Hull—who represents the Northern suburb Fairfax, home to one of the largest Vietnamese-American communities in the United States—introduced a bill to the state legislature requiring that the flag of the former Republic of South Vietnam, rather than the official flag of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam—be displayed at all public functions and all state institutions, including public schools.⁸³⁰ The flag has long been a popular symbol for many of Virginia’s 30,000 Vietnamese-American citizens, and was called “an eternal symbol of hope and love of freedom,” by Governor Mark Warner

⁸²⁸ Franklin, “Missing in Action in the 21st Century,” in *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies*, 173.

⁸²⁹ Ibid., 174.

⁸³⁰ “Bid to Honor South Vietnamese Elicits Anger,” *WP*, January 29, 2003.

when he declared June 19, 2002 “Vietnamese American Freedom Fighter Day.”⁸³¹ Clearly, Vietnam took great offense at the proposal, calling it “insolent,” and lodging formal complaints with the United States Department of State. The State Department successfully lobbied for the State Senate to kill the bill, but the Vietnamese-Americans in Virginia remained firm in their desire to raise the issue at a later date. One Arlington resident told the *Washington Post* that hanging the Vietnamese flag was “just like displaying the swastika in a community with a lot of people of Jewish background.”⁸³² While the feelings of some refugees from Southern Vietnam are understandable, the gesture of banning the flag of an existing nation in favor of one representing a former American client state—which was in existence for less than twenty years—surely stands as one of most remarkable displays of the desire to erase and rewrite the American War in Vietnam.

The final flag that symbolizes so much about the always transforming relationship between the United States and Vietnam can be found in the central region of Vietnam, in what was once the demilitarized zone separating Northern and Southern sections of the country. In that war-torn area, still recovering from the environmental devastation of the war, there now stands a large, American-owned automobile factory. Outside the factory stand three flagpoles, flying three different flags at the exact same height. The first is the flag of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam; the second is the flag of the United States of America; the third flag belongs to the Ford Motor Company.

⁸³¹ Ibid.

⁸³² “Va. Bill Promoting South Vietnamese Flag Dies,” *WP*, February 17, 2003.

From Richmond to Hanoi, each of these flags serve as symbols of the ongoing contest for cultural memory in American society. And each of the flags, in their own way, echo back to the final line of the admittedly tongue-in-cheek Calvin Trillin poem that served as an epigraph for this project:

“Remind me please, why did we fight that war?”

APPENDIX A

Selected Chronology of American-Vietnamese Relations
1973-2001**1973**

January 23 – Kissinger and Le Duc Tho initial Paris accords, ending the military phase of the American War in Vietnam. Although the agreement acknowledges the existence of two regimes in Southern Vietnam, the Republic of Vietnam and the revolutionary Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG), when Nixon announces the agreement that night on television, he notes that the United States continues to recognize the Republic of Vietnam as “the only legitimate government in Vietnam.”

January 27 – Peace agreement signed by representatives from the United States, North and South Vietnam, and the PRG.

February – Nixon sends a private letter to Pham Van Dong promising close to \$4 billion in postwar reconstruction aid to Vietnam. The letter would surface during normalization negotiations between Vietnam and the United States in 1977-1978. The letter is eventually deemed irrelevant by American lawmakers because the 1973 Peace Accords failed. Vietnam never receives any reconstruction aid from the United States.

February – April – American POWs are returned and US Combat Troops are Withdrawn from Vietnam.

- Violations of the agreement continue throughout the countryside, as ARVN and PLAF troops continue to extend their areas of control. The United States, also in clear violation of the accords, sends thousands of millions of tons of military equipment throughout the year.

June – At the national convention of the League of American families, the Victory in Vietnam Association attempts to get members of Congress to sign a pledge to deny “any economic assistance, trade, or technological aid” to the nations of Indochina.

July – Congress forbids further use of United States funds for military action in Southeast Asia.

November – Overriding Ford's veto, Congress passes the War Powers Act, limiting the President's power to wage war without legislative approval.

1975

January-April – A major offensive by North Vietnamese and NLF troops meets surprisingly little resistance, capturing the northernmost provinces and cities of Southern Vietnam.

March 30-31 – Da Nang is captured by North Vietnamese forces; The “Ho Chi Minh Campaign” begins to move toward Saigon.

April – Congress rejects the Ford Administration's request for emergency military aid to South Vietnam.

April 17 – The Khmer Rouge take Phnom Penh, renaming Cambodia “Democratic Kampuchea.” The regime, led by Pol Pot, begins a mass evacuation of the cities, forcing Cambodians into agricultural labor camps. Over the next several years, over two million Cambodians will die from disease, starvation, and execution at the hands of the Khmer Rouge.

April 30

- The final United States personnel are evacuated from the American embassy in Saigon.
- Representatives of The Revolutionary Forces of Vietnam accept the surrender of South Vietnam.
- The Treasury Department bans all financial and commercial interactions with South Vietnam, extending part of the wartime embargo on “Communist controlled areas of Vietnam” and freezing \$70 million in Vietnamese assets

May 12 – A United States ship, the *SS Mayaguez* is intercepted and seized by Khmer Rouge forces.

May 13 – The Ford Administration launches military action to recover the crew of the *Mayaguez*.

May 14 - The crew of forty is eventually released unharmed, but forty-three military personnel are killed in the process.

- Amid constant meetings and negotiations regarding the *Mayaguez*, Kissinger directs the Commerce Department to extend the trade embargo of North Vietnam to all of “communist controlled Vietnam”

May 15 – Seven hours after Ford announces the safe recovery of the crew, a 15,000 ton is detonated on the island where the crew had previously been held.

May 16 – Under directions from the Secretary of State given on May 14, the Commerce Department announces a total trade embargo, previously restricted to the DRV to Southern Vietnam. Vietnam is placed in the “Z” category of Export Controls, along with Cuba and North Korea, rather than the “Y” category applied to the Soviet Union and China. This distinction makes it illegal even for private humanitarian shipments to be sent to Vietnam without specific licenses from the United States.

June 3 – Pham Van Dong makes a speech calling for normalized relations with the United States if the U.S. would maintain its pledge of reconstruction aid to Vietnam.

Summer- Vietnamese hold several negotiations requesting increases in aid from China, which has gradually reduced its aid programs since 1973. No increases are granted.

August 6 – The United Nations Security Council denies a hearing to South Korea’s application for membership.

August 11 – Claiming a double standard of “selective universality” in its decision on the South Korean application, the Ford Administration instructs U.N. ambassador Daniel Patrick Moynihan to veto the North and South Vietnamese applications. The lone veto is sufficient to deny membership.

August – The DRV becomes a member of the non-aligned movement at the conference of non-aligned nations in Peru.

September 11 – The House Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia is established. “Sonny” Montgomery, long an advocate of the view that the Vietnamese were keeping live American soldiers as prisoners, is selected as Chair.

September 29 – After a unanimous U.N. General Assembly mandate to “reconsider” the Vietnamese applications, the United States again casts the lone veto denying membership.

December – The House Select Committee on Missing Persons meets with Vietnamese delegation in Paris, and, later, Hanoi. Although the Committee attempts to make contact with Khmer Rouge officials in Phnom Penh, they receive no response.

1976

February – ASEAN holds its first summit in Bali. The nations announce the ASEAN “Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia.”

April – Fending off a right-wing challenge by California governor Ronald Reagan, President Ford announces his intention not to consider normalizing relations with Vietnam until the United States receives a “full accounting” on the POW-MIA issue.

-Throughout the spring and for the next year, the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia undertakes a rapid series of execution programs and “purges” aimed in many instances at those suspected as having ties to the Vietnamese.

- Vietnam loses around two millions metric tons of grain to a combination of drought and floods, a pattern which will continue for two years.

July 2 – Northern and Southern Vietnam are reunified as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV). Hanoi is named the capital. September 2, 1945, when Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnam’s independence from France, remains the primary national independence holiday.

September 13 – The United States announces its intention once again to veto Vietnam’s application to the United Nations. Persuaded by the French delegation

to wait until after the American elections in November, the Vietnamese apply in November, at which point they are met with another veto by the U.S.

September – The International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and Asian Development Bank recognize the SRV.

November – Jimmy Carter is elected President of the United States, promising to help settle the POW-MIA issue by moving toward normalized relations with Vietnam.

December

-The House Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia publishes its final report, declaring that no American prisoners are being held alive in Southeast Asia and endorsing the normalization of relations with Hanoi.

- The International Monetary Fund sends a mission to Vietnam to assess the situation and determine the need for international aid.

December 14-20 – At the Fourth National Party Congress, the first since 1960, The Vietnam Workers' Party (*Lao Dong*) is renamed the Communist Party of Vietnam (VCP). Le Duan, who has served as Secretary General of the Party since the previous Congress, is elected Secretary-General of the VCP. The Party also announces its Second Five Year Plan (1976-1980), setting ambitious targets for production and growth rates in all sectors of the economy. By 1978 it becomes clear that results will fall well short of the goals.

1977

March 16 – A Presidential Commission headed by former UAW President Leonard Woodcock arrives in Hanoi with the goal of resolving the MIA issue and move forward on normalization.

March 24 – Remarking on the success of the Woodcock commission, Carter admits that the Vietnamese have done “about all they can do” in their efforts to recover the remains of American soldiers. Carter also declares, “the destruction of the American war in Vietnam was “mutual.”

- As China and the United States move closer towards normalized relations, the Chinese agree to pay over \$80 million to help offset close to \$200 million in American assets lost in the wake of the 1949 Revolution

April 18 – In an attempt to lure more foreign aid and investment, Vietnam announces a liberal investment code.

April 30 – Khmer Rouge forces attack Vietnamese villages in the Parrot’s Beak region of the Vietnam-Cambodia border in Southern Vietnam, killing hundreds of unarmed civilians.

Spring and Summer - The Vietnamese economy continues to suffer for a variety of reasons, not least of which are a series of natural disasters, including drought and flooding. Border clashes continue in the Parrot’s Beak region of the Vietnamese-Cambodian border.

May 3 – Richard Holbrooke arrives in Paris prepared to normalize relations with Vietnam. The Vietnamese refused the offer without a promise of American reconstruction aid and the talks stall. At his press conference, Vietnamese foreign minister Phan Hien reveals the contents of Nixon’s 1973 letter promising aid.

June 4 - The House of Representatives passes the Wolff Amendment to the Foreign Aid Bill, further prohibiting any form of “assistance” or “reparations” to Vietnam.

June 15- In another round of Paris talks, Holbrooke tells Hien that although the administration is legally barred from providing direct bilateral aid to Vietnam, it can channel aid through international lending institutions such as the IMF and World Bank if the Vietnamese will further their efforts on the POW-MIA issue. Hien again refuses to normalize without a strong aid commitment from the U.S.

June 20 – Congress revises the Trading With the Enemy Act to limit Presidential powers to declare trade embargoes and terminate several existing “national emergencies.” The new version of the act grandfathered in existing embargoes, including Vietnam, which now must be renewed every year by the President. The Vietnamese sanctions are renewed every year until 1994.

June 22 - The House passes Young amendment to the Foreign Aid Bill, prohibiting international lending agencies from using American funds to provide any aid to Vietnam. The amendment is withdrawn, but only after the White

House agrees to have its representatives at the institutions veto any requests that would result in Vietnamese receipt of indirect American funds.

September – Khmer Rouge forces launch another raid against a Vietnamese village, killing hundreds of civilians.

– The SRV is admitted as a member of the United Nations.

December – Vietnamese and American delegations meet for another round of talks in Paris. The United States continues to refuse a pledge of aid before normalization and the talks produce no new progress.

December 25 – Amid increasing border skirmishes in the Parrot's Beak region, Vietnam launches an attack on Cambodia, attempting to intimidate the Khmer Rouge. Vietnamese forces come within twenty-five miles of Phnom Penh, but stop short of a full invasion.

December 31 – Cambodia breaks diplomatic contact with Vietnam.

1978

February – While trying to sponsor a popular uprising against the Khmer Rouge, Vietnam openly calls for a truce with Cambodia.

March 23 – The VCP announces an acceleration of the economic transformation of the South, outlawing private enterprise. The enforcement has a disproportional effect on ethnic Chinese, particularly in the Cholon district near Saigon, many of whom have long been central to various industries and markets in the South. “Boat people” begin to flee Vietnam, beginning a refugee crisis throughout Southeast Asia and further straining Sino-Vietnamese relations.

May – National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski arrives in Beijing to begin negotiations for normalizing American-Chinese relations. Border fighting intensifies between Vietnam and Cambodia.

Summer – In the midst of an accelerated collectivization of agriculture in the Central and Southern provinces, Vietnam is struck with the most severe flooding in recorded history. Over three million tons of rice and one million homes are destroyed.

June 29– Suffering from natural disasters, a lack of international aid, and especially the recent end of China’s aid, Vietnam becomes a full member of the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA or COMECON), the Soviet-led network of Communist economies.

August – Representative Sonny Montgomery leads a Congressional delegation to Hanoi. Pham Van Dong informed the group that Vietnam was officially dropping its precondition of American aid and presented them with the remains of fifteen American soldiers.

September 22 – Holbrooke meets with Nguyen Co Thach in New York and recommends that the administration normalize relations with Vietnam. The administration, however, postpones further movement on Vietnam until after the Congressional elections and after relations with China are normalized.

November 3 – Vietnam signs a twenty-five year treaty with the Soviet Union.

December 12 – The United States and China normalize relations

December 22 – Vietnamese forces assemble along the Cambodian border in preparation for a major offensive.

December 25 – Vietnam invades Cambodia.

1979

January 7-11 – Vietnam captures Phnom Penh and announces the formation of the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). Prince Sihanouk appeals to the United Nations to continue to recognize the Khmer Rouge delegation.

January 28 – Deng Xiaoping meets with Carter in Washington and informs the administration of China’s plan to attack Vietnam in order to “teach them a lesson.”

February 17 – China invades Vietnam. The U.S. is publicly critical of the attack but links it to the Vietnamese presence in Cambodia, calling on both nations to withdraw their troops.

February – Vietnam signs a Twenty-Five Year“ Peace and Friendship Treaty” with The PRK.

March 5 – After destroying several villages, power stations, and factories, and losing twenty thousand troops, China withdraws from Northern Vietnam but maintains heavy troop levels along the border, occasionally threatening to teach Vietnam “another lesson.”

September 21 – The United Nations rejects formal recognition of the PRK, with the United States casting a vote in favor of the Khmer Rouge.

- The VCP’s Second Five Year Plan is acknowledged as a major failure, with all sectors of the economy falling well short of goals, leading to another round of liberalization measures enacted in Vietnam.

1980

January – A Major reorganization at the top of the VCP results in the replacement of several leaders of the war against the United States, including Vo Nguyen Giap.

Summer/Fall - Food riots and general unrest in several Northern provinces testify to the ongoing struggles of the reorganization of the Vietnamese economy.

November - Ronald Reagan is elected President of the United States.

1981

The Third Five Year Plan, in response to the crises of 1979-80, calls for further liberalization measures in the Vietnamese economy. Although the economy performs far better under this plan than the previous, targets are still not met and underlying structural problems continue to plague the long-term prospects of the economy.

July 13 – New York hosts an International Conference on Kampuchea (ICK), initiated and sponsored by ASEAN and attended by nearly 100 nations. Vietnam does not attend, and the PRK government is barred from participating, although the Khmer Rouge is welcomed. An ASEAN-sponsored resolution calling for the

disarmament of the Khmer Rouge as part of a negotiated settlement is rejected by China and the United States. No agreement is reached.

July 23 - On the heels of the failure of the ICK, Representative Stephen Solarz (D-NY) chairs the first of several hearings over the next several years on the role of the United States in Southeast Asia.

- Faced with mounting debts and a major balance of payments problem, Vietnam accepts a series of loans from the IMF. In 1982, the Vietnamese request a second installment of loans, but are rejected by the IMF because they refuse to implement price controls and end public food subsidies.

1982

February – *The New York Times* reveals that US and ASEAN members had met secretly in Hawaii, with the ASEAN representatives urging the United States to normalize relations with Vietnam to help end the occupation of Cambodia and limit China's power in the region.

March ___ - At a Presidential Press Conference, Ronald Reagan offers a stunningly inaccurate history of the American involvements in Vietnam....

June 22 – A coalition government of Cambodia (CGDK), consisting of factions led by Sihanouk, Son Sann, and the Khmer Rouge is announced.

Fall – The Coalition, labeled the “Non-Communist Resistance (NCR)” in Washington, begins receiving covert aid from the United States through Thailand.

November – The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. is dedicated.

1984

January – Brunei becomes the sixth member of ASEAN after gaining its independence from Great Britain.

- *The Killing Fields*, a film about the Cambodian holocaust is released in the United States. A scene implicating the United States in the rise of the Khmer Rouge is deleted from the original print.

-Seven chemical producers are ordered to pay \$180 million settlement in a suit brought by American Veterans exposed to Agent Orange in Vietnam.

1985

March - Vietnam publicly declares that it will withdraw if the Khmer Rouge faction is excluded from holding any power in future Cambodian government.

April 30 – Hundreds of American journalists, including all three major news networks, descend on Vietnam for the tenth anniversary of the end of the American War in Vietnam.

Spring and Summer – A series of price and monetary reforms, including a major devaluation of the Vietnamese Dong against the United States dollar, in line with IMF and World Bank recommendations, result in major inflation and price increases.

May - Congress approves \$5 million in “non-lethal aid” to the NCR in Cambodia. Congress remains unaware of covert aid already being supplied by the Reagan Administration. Aid to Cambodia is still technically illegal under the embargo imposed in April of 1975.

July 8 – *The Washington Post* reveals that the CIA has been providing aid to the NCR since 1982. Questions are raised in hearings and the press about the funding reaching Khmer Rouge forces. Although no direct link is established at the time, it is revealed in 1990 that the Khmer Rouge had in fact been receiving aid from the United States.

July 10 – Le Duan dies at age 79.

1986

December – At the Sixth National Congress, the VCP announces the institutionalization of several major economic policies, known as *Doi Moi* (“Renovation”). The program acknowledged the role of private enterprise, promoted a shift to lighter industrial production, and attempted to attract greater foreign investment. Several high-ranking members of the VCP, including Pham Van Dong and Le Duc Tho, step down from their positions in the Party.

1987

January - The cast of Oliver Stone's film *Platoon* is featured on the cover of *Time*, under the headline, "Vietnam As It Really Was"

February - President Reagan appoints General John Vessey, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Special Envoy to Vietnam in the hopes of restarting stalled talks on Vietnamese "assistance" with the POW/MIA mission.

May – Vietnam reports that it has begun selling crude oil to two Japanese firms, the first such sales to any major American ally since Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia. Although Japan is publicly rebuked by ASEAN and the United States, sales continue.

-U.S. Funding for the Cambodian coalition forces is raised \$12 million.

August 1-3 – General Vessey visits Hanoi, reopening a dialogue of mutual "Humanitarian Issues:" the POW/MIA issue and humanitarian aid to Vietnam.

September 2 – On the forty-second anniversary of the Declaration of Independence from France, the VCP declares a general amnesty for former members of the South Vietnamese regime, releasing several thousand prisoners.

December – Vietnam enacts new law on Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), allowing for greater percentage of foreign-owned private sector companies and a greater influx of foreign capital.

1988

October – Sihanouk publicly claims that the United States has been supplying his the Cambodian coalition forces with military aid

-Senate Intelligence Hearings reveal that the Thai government has been diverting funds marked for the NCR in Cambodia. The stolen funds are estimated at \$3.5 million.

November – Vice President George Bush elected President of the United States.

1989

January – Bush becomes only the second President to mention “Vietnam” in an inaugural address, claiming that “surely the statute of limitations” on that war has ended.

April 5 – Vietnam announces that the remaining troops stationed in Cambodia will return home in six months.

July 25 – The First of the Jakarta Informal Meetings (JIM) between Cambodian factions is held.

August – A month-long conference on Cambodia opens in Paris with all four Cambodian factions and twenty countries in attendance. No agreement is reached.

September – Vietnam announces the complete withdrawal of its troops from Cambodia.

1990

April – ABC news airs a primetime news special, hosted by Peter Jennings, which accuses the United States of supplying “lethal aid” and other military assistance to the NCR and the Khmer Rouge. Several high-level American officials, past and present, appear on the program in an attempt to refute the claim.

July 18 – The Bush administration eases restrictions on aid to Cambodia and announces that it will no longer support the Khmer Rouge as the Cambodian representative at the United Nations.

September – At another round of the JIM, the four Cambodian factions agree to form Supreme National Council.

September 5 – American embargo of Vietnam is continued for one year.

1991

January 3 – American and Vietnamese representatives meet in Hanoi to discuss the POW/MIA issue.

January - After a decisive war against Iraqi forces in Kuwait, Bush declares that the United States “has kicked the Vietnam syndrome”

April 9- “Roadmap” to Normalization of relations between the United States and Vietnam announced by Bush administration.

May 1 – The Cambodian cease-fire takes effect

June – A United States office devoted to MIA recovery projects is established in Hanoi.

June 17 – The Senate Foreign Relations Committee approves a resolution calling for an end to the embargo on Vietnam.

August – The Soviet Union collapses.

October 23– The agreement ending the Cambodian war is signed in Paris. At the meeting, Secretary of State Baker meets with Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Manh Cam. Baker continues to stress the need for Vietnamese “cooperation” on the MIA issue.

November – During hearings being held by the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA affairs, rumors are circulated by a former KGB official that the Vietnamese did not return all American prisoners of war in 1973. No evidence is ever brought to substantiate the charges.

November 21– Vietnamese and United States officials meet again in New York to discuss normalization. The United States’ desire for access to classified Vietnamese military and security records to further efforts for the MIA/POW searches remains the primary obstacle to an agreement.

November– Vietnam and China restore normalized diplomatic relations.

December – The Bush administration relaxes travel restrictions, allowing privately organized trips to Vietnam

1992

February – The United States provides a \$25,000 grant to typhoon victims in Central Vietnam, the first such aid since 1975.

March – Bush administration representatives meet with Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet in Hanoi. The Vietnamese agree to help in searching for MIAs in exchange for a lifting of the embargo. Secretary of State Richard Solomon rejects the offer, linking the embargo to a fuller accounting on the MIA issue, and Vietnam's non-interference in the upcoming Cambodian elections. The Bush administration does announce an expanded aid package to Vietnam, including health-related aid for prosthetics, scholarship aid for students wishing to travel to the United States, and the restoration of telephone communications.

April – The Senate Select Committee visits Vietnam. Although the Committee would again conclude that no American prisoners were being held in Southeast Asia, its hearings throughout the year demonstrated the persistence of the MIA/POW lobby and the anti-Vietnamese forces in Congress.

- The Bush administration further eases the embargo, allowing commercial sales of items qualifying as meeting "basic human needs," lifting restrictions on NGO and non-profit projects in Vietnam, and allows telecommunication development between the U.S. and Vietnam

May 5 – At the annual meeting of the Asian Development Bank, The United States casts a lone veto, blocking the resumption of loans to Vietnam.

July – Vietnam and Laos are granted "Observer" status within ASEAN.

August – During the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIAs, Senator Bob Smith of New Hampshire claims that live American POWs had been imprisoned under Ho Chi Minh's mausoleum in Hanoi.

October – Vietnam agrees to allow the United States access to military files related to the search for remains of American service personnel classified as MIA.

October 29 – Japan announces that it will restore its full aid program to Vietnam.

November - Bill Clinton is elected President of the United States. The Clinton White House will endorse and follow the “Roadmap” to normalization begun under Bush.

- Japan resumes full assistance program to Vietnam, pledging 1.5 billion over the next three years.

December 30 – The Bush Administration eases the American embargo on Vietnam. Under the new regulations, businesses can sign tentative contracts for work in Vietnam, set up offices in Vietnam, and employ Vietnamese workers.

1993

January – The Senate Select Committee on Missing Persons releases its final report, concluding that no Americans are being held in Southeast Asia.

March – China is granted Most Favored Nation status by the U.S.

April – The Khmer Rouge announces it will not participate in the Cambodian elections. Its forces begin erratic armed resistance.

July 2 – In response to Japanese and French proposals to resume IMF lending to Vietnam and allow Hanoi to restructure its arrears, Clinton announces that the United States will end its opposition to IFI loans to Vietnam. Under the embargo, however, American firms remain barred from bidding on IMF, World Bank, and ADB projects in Vietnam.

September – Clinton officially renews the embargo on Vietnam, but approves an aid package similar to that approved by the Bush administration in March of 1992.

September 24 – Sihanouk elected King of Cambodia by national assembly after UN supervised elections.

December – The White House announces that American firms can bid on Vietnamese projects sponsored by IFIs, “pending the lifting of the embargo.”

1994

January 27 – The United States Senate passes a nonbinding resolution endorsing the lifting of the American embargo on Vietnam.

February 3 – The Clinton administration officially lifts the embargo. The measure will be signed into law on April 30.

February and March - Khmer Rouge and Government forces battle throughout Cambodia.

July - The Cambodian National Assembly officially bans the Khmer Rouge.

October 17 - Vietnam officially applies for membership in ASEAN.

October 25 – Cambodia applies for observer status in ASEAN.

June – China’s MFN status with the United States is renewed.

July 27 – Vietnam becomes the seventh member of ASEAN. Myanmar (Burma) is admitted as an observer nation.

1995

January 28 – The United States and Vietnam reach an agreement releasing \$90 million in Vietnamese assets frozen since 1975 and using other frozen assets to pay American corporations’ claims on property lost during the war. Close to two hundred claimants, disproportionately from the petroleum and telecommunications industries, receive compensation in excess of \$200 million.

April – Former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara releases his memoir, *In Retrospect*, in which he admits that the war in Vietnam was “terribly, terribly, wrong.”

July 11 – President Clinton announces that the United States will normalize diplomatic relations with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

July 28 – Vietnam officially joins ASEAN

August 5 – Vietnam and the United States officially normalize relations, but normalized economic relations are not advanced until 2000, when the United States grant Vietnam “most favored nations” status.

November – McNamara visits Vietnam and meets with his former adversary, Vo Nguyen Giap. Giap tells McNamara “nothing happened” in the second Tonkin Gulf incident of 1994.

December 15 – The first ever ASEAN Summit between the seven members and the “CLM Countries:” Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar. The nations sign an accord declaring Southeast Asia a Nuclear-Weapon Free Area.

1996

March - Cambodia and Laos apply for ASEAN membership.

July – Myanmar applies for ASEAN membership

November – Bill Clinton is elected to a second term as United States President.

-Since the end of the embargo, over 400 U.S. firms have set up operations in Vietnam. U.S. exports to Vietnam for the year reach \$600 million, double the level from 1995. Total trade between the two nations in 1996 approaches \$1 billion.

Vietnam Labor Watch is founded in response to reports of Nike and other corporations operating sweatshops throughout Vietnam

1997

April 7 - Hanoi agrees to repay \$145 million in loans taken out by the South Vietnamese regime during the early 1970s.

April 10 – Senate confirms Douglas “Pete” Peterson, former POW, as the first American ambassador to Vietnam.

June – Secretary of State Albright lays the ceremonial cornerstone of the new U.S. Consulate in Ho Chi Minh City.

July 2-4 – Several Cambodian factions fight in and around Phnom Penh.

July 10 – Cambodia's admission to ASEAN is delayed because of ongoing hostilities.

July 23 – Laos and Myanmar are admitted as the eighth and ninth members of ASEAN.

1998

March 9 – Clinton issues the first Jackson-Vanik waiver to Vietnam, which essentially bestows temporary MFN status on Vietnam, allowing, among other things, the Export-Import Bank (Ex-Im) and the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) to underwrite U.S. business ventures in Vietnam.

March 19 – Following the approval of the waiver, Vietnam reaches an agreement with OPIC to provide risk insurance and other financial guarantees to American firms doing business in the country.

April 15- Pol Pot dies.

July – The House of Representatives votes against a resolution seeking to deny the Jackson-Vanik waiver to Vietnam. Similar resolutions would be defeated in 1999 and 2000.

1999

April 30 – At a ceremony held in Hanoi, Cambodia is admitted as the tenth member of ASEAN.

2000

July 13 – Five years after normalization, United States and Vietnamese negotiators sign the Bilateral Trade Agreement, which still must be approved by the nations' respective legislatures and signed into law.

November/December – In the closest electoral victory in American history, George W. Bush becomes President.

- After a decline during the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s, bilateral trade between the United States and Vietnam reaches the \$1 billion mark.

November 16-20– President Clinton visits Vietnam, the first American President to do so since 1969. At a speech at the National University in Hanoi televised on live television in Vietnam, Clinton remarks, “Finally, America is coming to see Vietnam as your people have asked for years -- as a country, not a war.”

2001

March – Vietnam announces plans to accede to the World Trade Organization by 2004.

June 8 – President Bush submits the BTA to Congress

July 26 - Secretary of State Colin Powell, a veteran of the American War, returns to Vietnam to meet with ASEAN leaders.

September – The BTA passes by a voice vote in the House and 88-12 in the Senate.

October 16 – President Bush signs the BTA into law.

November 28 – The Vietnamese National Assembly passes the BTA 278-85.

December 4 - Vietnamese President Tran Duc Luong signs the BTA into law.

- Bilateral trade between the countries reaches \$1.5 billion, with the United States alone importing over \$1 billion worth of Vietnamese goods.

December 10 – After a mutual exchange of letters acknowledging the accord, the BTA between Vietnam and the United States takes effect.

APPENDIX B

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APPENDIX C

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