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Introduction to the Forum on The Vietnam War: Then and Now

The publication of this Forum has come a month shy of 50 years since April 30, 1975, marking the end of American intervention in the affairs of Indochina. What Americans called the Vietnam War or conflict involved many of the major themes of modern world history, including the conflictive relationship between a powerful industrial society and a struggling underdeveloped one, Vietnam, whose history and civilization stretches back two millennia. It arose out of the conflict of European colonialism, agrarian revolutions, and world wars. In those troubled times the United States emerged as, and believed itself to be, the most powerful nation in the world and was closely allied with France, the colonial power in Indochina and challenged by a revolution led by the communist Ho Chi Minh.

At the very beginning of U.S. intervention at the end of World War II in the md-1940s, a small contingent of American military advisors who worked with Ho Chi Minh saw in him a chance to build a strong relationship with the communist-led anti-colonial movement against the French occupiers of the country. In the mid-1950s, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff judged the strength of that movement to be so strong that they advised against any thought of direct American military intervention in the region. Two decades later in 1965, largely on the same grounds, George Ball, an advisor and friend to President Lyndon Baines Johnson, told him that expanding the U.S. military presence there would likely lead to a conflict lasting five years, cost 50,000 American lives and see the U.S. "leaving with our tail between our legs." Their predictions would prove accurate as the accelerating intervention joined the Vietnamese and Americans at the intersection of nationalism, revolution, and war. The resulting conflict would drag on into the mid-1970s with huge casualties for both sides, the growth of a strong anti-war movement in the U.S., and for the Vietnamese and their neighboring countries massive environmental damage and a flood of refugees seeking asylum or a better life in the West.

At the onset, many Americans were confident of victory. A top presidential advisor, MacGeorge Bundy, agreed that George (Ball) may be right, but American power was the greatest in the world, it had never lost a war, and, if things went awry, the U.S. could always pull out. In 1968, all the "Wise Men" that had previously urged escalation upon Johnson advised him to abandon the war that had claimed by then more than 20,000 American lives, yet the political risks of withdrawal were so great that the number of Americans lost under President Richard Nixon rose to a number that validated Ball's predictions.[1]

Since those predictions did came pass, most American scholarship on what has commonly come to be called the Vietnam War (see Bram Hubbell's article in this Forum) has passed through many phases but can be divided into two arguments.[2] One argument is that the American War in Vietnam originated earlier than the Cold War and failed due to the conjoined force of several developments: modern anti-colonialism, nationalism, international communism, and the fragility of corrupt and unpopular post-colonial patron-client systems in Indochina, and U.S. socio-political views of the pro- and anti-communist Vietnamese and other Indochinese people were so Americentric as to largely exclude them from policy considerations other than as a burden and obstacle to the success of American war aims. In 1966, the U.S. Pacific Command was sent a proposed change in policy in counter-insurgency that would put it so completely in the hands of U. S. operatives, as to raise a concern of even its designers that their Vietnamese ally's leaders would likely regard it as seriously impinging on the sovereignty of their state. The head of that command's response was to write on the margin of the proposal, "Who cares!"[3]

The strengths of this argument rests on its emphasis on world historical processes, that there is no avoiding that the events of 1975 marked a total defeat of American war aims. Another strength was that it honors the agency of its Vietnamese opponents. Among its weaknesses are that it exhibits an extremely negative view of the Republic of Vietnam that diminishes the local agency of non-communist Vietnamese, and that its attention to the wartime misconduct of American wartime operations was of little solace to some of its veterans who felt betrayed by their leaders and left behind by some of the leaders of the anti-war movement, who initially believed that, after having helped kill the demons driving America's will to Empire, it was time to turn to address the nation's endemic racism, gender inequality, and a failing environment.

The second argument is that the U.S. intervention was "a winnable war" that was lost due to timorous officials in Washington (particularly President Lyndon Baines Johnson), who handcuffed the military who were not allowed to win ("though they won every battle"). Proponents also blamed public dissent at home, which together with their view of a hostile media's coverage of the war and Congress' late war cut off of aid to Vietnam, amounted to a "stab in the back." As for America's ally, the Republic of Vietnam and its leaders, were condemned, until quite recently, as hopelessly corrupt,

part of an effort to see that government as validating American involvement in the region's affairs. It contends that the United States did, in fact, win the war because, for, while the post-war reunified Vietnam is a repressive Communist state, it now has good relations and considerable trade with the United States. This casts the war as betrayal from within of a noble cause, whose defenders seek to restore American pride and respect for its armed forces and thereby justify the war's enormous cost in human and economic terms.

This argument's weaknesses can be found at its ahistorical heart, revealed by its preference for "could have, should have, would have won the war" rationales that embrace a concept of an American victory decades after the fact that paradoxically included the sacrifice of the now lionized Republic of Vietnam, while eliding the lives of 10 million Indochinese who died during its course and its American dead, as well as those among the living that might find the argument unsettling. Moreover, much of the evidence at the center of this approach, that the war was lost because of the anti-war movement in the streets and in Congress, is found in *Lost Victory,* authored by William Colby, the Central Intelligence Agency's Chief of Station in Saigon and later head of that agency. Colby was twice filmed at meetings at what is now the Center for Peace and Conflict Studies at Texas Tech University in response to a question asking if it was true that public dissent and the anti-war candidates elected to Congress lost the war. On both occasions, he replied that in a democracy, the people are right to abandon a costly war in which their government has failed to show progress, and "we failed to do that."[4]

Remarkably, whatever are the real strengths and weakness of each of these arguments, so briefly surveyed above, the professional, political, and personal concerns that drive each are often the same in at least one respect: to derive lessons from the war that may well-serve their country and the world. Unfortunately, their differences have often impeded this aim, as may be reflected in the endgames of America's most recent wars.

It is just possible that progress in the direction of both healing and the creation of a national consensus on the war can be achieved by embracing a familiar adage regarding historical inquiry, that historical events are rarely what they seem, and more complex that one can possibly imagine. The articles in this Forum, in tenor, as well as argument, represent movement in that direction.

Bram Hubbell's article addresses the teaching of Southeast Asia after the Second World War in U.S. schools, where students' views are often shaped by misleading films and Americentric approaches. Hubbell defines for teachers how to appropriately address the meaning of the many variations of the names of the term "Vietnam War" which arises in every serious study of this conflict. He resolves that issue effectively for classroom teachers and Hubbell's approach also satisfies the title and subject of this Forum by employing a global focus and by bringing the topic into the classroom through various means, such as introducing the First Indochina War with a French map in order

to drive that point home. Among its great strengths is that Hubbell provided the means of bringing women and Indochinese (Vietnamese and Cambodian) lives in to the classroom.

The women's liberation movement in the United States, in which Barbara Winslow participated, played a prominent, if unacknowledged, role in the inextricably interconnected global movements opposing the U.S. war in Vietnam and supporting anticolonial and anti-imperialist struggles. In Seattle in the 1960s left feminists looked to anti-imperialist women freedom fighters as models of revolutionary womanhood as they attempted to create peace and a sense of a global sisterhood. They challenged the white and male leadership of the U.S. antiwar and peace movements, questioned the prevailing maternalistic approaches to women's peace activism, decentered the west and began to develop a new gendered analysis of war, peace and anti-imperialism.

Huy Trieu Ha focuses on teaching about the anti-communist Republic of Vietnam in Vietnamese higher education and the ideological restraints placed by Vietnam's communist government on the classroom discussion of what it considers the renegade Republic of Vietnam and its imperialist U.S. master during the American War. He argues that these restraints deprive Vietnamese students of an excellent opportunity to teach multiple perspectives, engaging with continuity and change over time, and utilize other strategies that encourage critical thinking, as well as inhibiting a fuller appreciation of their own country's history. He has little hope that such things will change, as doing so would be regarded as undermining the ruling party's claim to be the savior and preserver of modern Vietnam's hard-won independence and national unity. However, he offers some means of exciting the interest of students and faculty to explore their country's history more fully in the event that current restraints be lessened in the future.

Justin Simundson's study of the *Times of Vietnam*, the voice of the Republic of Vietnam under the leadership of the post-Geneva Conference State of Vietnam and the first President of the Republic of Vietnam, Ngô Đình Diệm reenforces Huy Trieu Ha's argument of how the study of the Republic of Vietnam offers opportunities for a broader and also deeper understanding of the former U.S ally and thus the American War in Vietnam itself. In fact, these two essays are at the cutting edge of scholarship on that conflict.

Arnold Issacs' article examines the activities and perspectives of the American journalists in reporting the Vietnam War. A respected and well-published author as well as an experienced Vietnam War correspondent, he evaluates the content of the journalist's reporting, concluding that, contrary to critical conservative observers, their reporting did not glamorize the communist forces but neither was it left-wing. Generally the war correspondents' reported the fighting, not the politics, but can be criticized for failing to give readers or viewers an understanding of the war's real issues or the context of Vietnamese history and society, as is often the case in war reportage. Issac's

argument, his evidence, and respectful treatment of those who hold different views is a model of writing on "controversial subjects."

The final article in this Forum is a Digital Database for Teaching the Vietnam War prepared by master teacher and *World History Connected's* Editor for Digital Content, John Maunu. It is introduced and topically organized so as to provide easy access to a great deal of material. His introduction mentions fundamental references after providing a list of the categories he employed that make exceptional search terms across the database, such as "Domino Theory." He has provided descriptions of virtually every link, virtually all of which are open-sourced (free) and for which he has also provided directions to overcome any obstacles to their use. Please read the essay of his own teaching of the subject attached to the database and note his dedication of the database to his brother, a Vietnam veteran.

Marc Jason Gilbert received a Ph.D in History from UCLA and for many years thereafter was Professor of History and co-Director of programs in South and Southeast Asia in the University System of Georgia, which conferred upon him the title of Distinguished Professor in 1998. From 2006 to 2019, he was the holder of the National Endowment for the Humanities-supported Endowed Chair in World History at Hawai'i Pacific University He was Editor of the e-journal, *World History Connected*, (2008-2023), and elected President of the World History Association (2012-2014). In 2024, that association conferred upon him its highest honor, that of being a "Pioneer in World History." From the outset of his career, Gilbert has sought to bring a global dimension to South and Southeast Asian history in numerous papers, articles, chapters in books, books, and monographs, many of which are part of the cannon in several history sub-disciplines. Major works in world history include *South Asia in World History* (2017); *World Civilizations, the Global Experience,* with Peter N. Stearns, Michael Adas and Stuart Schwartz, now in its 8th edition (2021); and Cross-Cultural Encounters in Modern World History, with Jon Davidann (Second edition, 2019). He has many publications relevant to this Forum on the global and local dimensions of the American War in Indochina (*Why the North Won the Vietnam War*, *The Tet Offensive, The Vietnam War on Campus: Other Voices, More Distant Drums* and the "Global Dimensions of a Brushfire War"). His most recent publication traces Hawaii's own experience of that conflict, which stimulated the rise of the Hawaiian Sovereignty Movement ("The View from the Hill: Hawaii's Congressional Delegation and the Struggle for Peace in Vietnam and Equity at Home, 1964-1975," in Fredrik Logevall and Brian Cuddy (eds.), The Vietnam War in the Pacific World (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2022).

Craig A. Lockard is Ben and Joyce Rosenberg Professor of History Emeritus in the Social Change and Development Department at the University of Wisconsin–Green Bay, where from 1975 to 2010 he taught courses on Asian, African, comparative, and world history. Lockard earned an MA in Asian Studies at the University of Hawaii and a PhD in Comparative World and Southeast Asian History at the University of Wisconsin Madison. His published books, articles, essays, and reviews range over a wide spectrum of topics: world history; Southeast Asian history, politics, and society; Malaysian studies; Asian emigration and diasporas; the Vietnam War; and folk, popular, rock, and world music. Among his major books relevant to this Forum are *Societies, Networks, and Transitions: A Global History*, 4 ed. (latest 2021); and *Southeast Asia in World History* (2009); Dance of Life: Popular Music and Politics in Modern Southeast Asia (1998. He has served on various editorial advisory boards, including the Journal of World History, World History Connected, and The History Teacher, and as book review editor for the *Journal of Asian Studies* and the *World History Bulletin*. He was one of the founders of the World History Association, served as the organization's first secretary and several terms as a member of the Executive Council. Dr. Lockard was awarded the WHA's highest honor, the Pioneer of World History award, in 2017.

Notes

[1] See George Herring, *America's Longest War, America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975 with Poster* (New York: McGraw-Hill Humanities/ Social *Sciences*/Languages, 4th edition (2001); Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (Randon House, Reprint Edition 2014), and Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

[2] A number of schools of interpretation have arisen and what follows here is an all too brief amalgamation meant to be "fair and balanced," but, as always in such efforts, is open to question! For a study of the evolution of these "schools," which avoids confusion over nomenclature (orthodox view, revisionist view, and then followers of the old orthodox school calling themselves revisionists, and calling the old revisionists the orthodox view), see Marc Jason Gilbert, ed., *Why the North Won the Vietnam War* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 4-30.

[3] Quotation is on margin of CINPAC, US Army Study, on "PROVN, 27 May 1966 to JCS," p.3, in PROVN file, Item 102083, The U.S National Archives, College Park, Maryland, as cited in Marc Jason Gilbert, "PROVN's Integrated War Strategy for Vietnam, 1966," in Geoffrey Shaw, James D. McLeroy, Henry Gole, Frank Scotton, Marc Jason Gilbert, et al. *Indochina in the Year of the Horse, 1966* (Houston, TX: Radix Press, 2016), quotation appears on page 107, with treatment of this issue, 100-108.

[4] The questions, in each case, were asked by a co-author of this Introduction, Marc Jason Gilbert, who was on very good terms with him: shortly before he died, Colby offered him carte blanche for research and told him to look him up, giving him his card.