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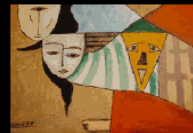
HOPE NEVER DIES IN
THE
INDOMITABLE
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SAIGON ARTS, CULTURE & EDUCATION INSTITUTE



To Research, Document & Promote Vietnamese-American Culture

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Vietnam Wasn't Just an American War

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/22/opinion/Vietnam-wasnt-just-an-American-War.html>

More than 40 years after its end, the Vietnam War remains, for Americans, essentially an American experience, or more accurately, an American metaphor. The continuing American inability and unwillingness to include the Vietnamese perspective also speaks volumes about how the United States relates to the rest of the world.. Americans want to be understood but rarely want to understand others.

Hollywood movies have been particularly powerful in shaping America's Vietnam War narrative. The story line may change, but the backdrop is the same. Chaos, not just wartime chaos, not just the proverbial "war is hell" chaos, but its Asiatic variant - with the inscrutable and unknowable always lurking and pouncing upon the naïve American protagonist. Predictably, as in "Apocalypse Now," there were fetid rivers, torrid jungles and impassive brown faces as backdrops to an American soldier's odyssey through the heart of darkness that is Vietnam.

The overarching theme was Vietnam's meaninglessness and what it did to Americans and America. There was always the tortured, psychologically unglued Vietnam veteran like the one in "The Deer Hunter." Metaphor takes over as American prisoners of war were forced to endure Russian roulette, a supposedly popular game played in back alleys by natives who seemingly have little value for life. Whether this game existed was irrelevant. It served to symbolize the brutality of war and the lunacies of this particular war.

In "Full Metal Jacket," the main character, Private Joker, wore both a peace symbol and the slogan "Born to Kill." The contradictions and ironies of Vietnam became more obvious when an officer declared that henceforth "search and destroy" missions would be described more palatably as "sweep and clear."

"Platoon" changed the dominant narrative of the crazed Vietnam vet, rehabilitating him by recreating the whole picture to depict, as Oliver Stone put it, "what it was like to be there." In the quest for authenticity, a former Marine Corps captain put the actors through a 14-day boot camp. They ate military rations, were forbidden to shower, and had to sleep in the jungle, with real-night watch rotations. Special packs of Marlboro cigarettes were made with the shade of cherry-red that match the Marlboros of the 1960s.

No attempt was made to portray the Vietnamese authentically. In scenes where Vietnamese villagers huddled in the background, the language they spoke was not Vietnamese. It was not even any real language but rather deep-throated grunts meant to simulate native talk. To be fair, all this changed when Mr. Stone made his next Vietnam movie, "Heaven and Earth," which broke new ground because the central character was a Vietnamese woman and because the movie paid attention to the details of Vietnam village custom - from lacquering teeth as protection against cavities to chewing betel nut.

But the meticulousness of "Heaven and Earth" remains a rarity in Hollywood. Other Vietnam movies were vehicles for American soul searching about involvement in the war. "Born on the Fourth of July" depicts a soldier's transformation from gung-ho veteran to war protester. The pendulum swings the other way with "Rambo," about a one-man army who overcame resistance from pusillanimous politicians at home to return to Vietnam to rescue American P.O.W.s. There is no ambiguity or skep-

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ticism about America here. Part heroic fantasy, part bloodthirsty revenge, "Rambo" gets to replay the war as it could have been, asking, "do we get to win this time?"

The Vietnamese remain irrelevant and invisible even in the universe of the novel. A novel can accommodate complexity of plot and character. But American writers for the most part are uninterested in and indifferent to the Vietnamese. In "The Things They Carried," Tim O'Brien tells the interrelated stories of men from a single platoon and the things they took to war, down to the smallest details: can openers, pocketknives, wristwatches, mosquito repellent, chewing gum, cigarettes, salt tablets, Kool-Aid, matches, sewing kits, C rations, along with weapons - and of course grief. Encounters with the Vietnamese were barely worth a nod, and as far as allied Vietnamese soldiers were concerned, they were pithily dismissed by the narrator as "useless."

Other notable Vietnam novels, such as "13th Valley," "Matterhorn," "A Rumor of War," "Fields of Fire" and "Tree of Smoke," have been celebrated as telling the war as it truly was - drudgery, demoralization, disinformation, dehumanization. They also all center on an American central character transformed in one way or another by a place that was not a country but a vehicle for American metamorphosis.

But in the realm of movies and literature, one might say creators have poetic license. Historical endeavors, such as the Ken Burns-Lynn Novick 2017 PBS documentary, or the Vietnam War exhibitions presented by the New-York Historical Society and the National Archives, would surely be different. They were not. All presented the Vietnam War along the same conventional trajectory that treats the Vietnamese perspective and experience as an aside.

Out of the myriad photos, videos and oral histories compiled and presented by the historical society and the National Archives, the Vietnamese were granted minimal space. Certainly, there was no outright exclusion, which would have been ludicrous and damning. But one got the sense that the Vietnamese elements were perfunctory, added only to allow the exhibitions to claim inclusion. By contrast, painstaking care was devoted to showing the full range of the American experience, from the mundane and ordinary to the more pressing immediacy of war.

With respect to the PBS documentary, almost universally lauded as definitive, one might object to my characterization by pointing to the many South Vietnamese who were in fact interviewed for the series. The truth is, despite professed desires to include multiple perspectives, this series privileges the American perspective, whether it is supportive or critical of the American war effort.

It could have embarked on the worthwhile project of soothing American souls and healing divisions without sidelining the Vietnamese. The South Vietnamese were portrayed as incompetent and corrupt, their government bordering on illegitimate. This was done in a subtle and sophisticated way, not in the imperial manner of the past in which the West pontificates about the shortcomings of the native. South Vietnamese interviewees were allowed to express themselves in their own words.

But hovering above the cacophony is the seemingly more objective and reliable narrator, Peter Coyote, whose disembodied voice signaled omniscience. His narrative was peppered with adjectives like corrupt or weak or beleaguered when describing the South Vietnamese.

As a writer, I know that I write about a minor character differently from how I do my main character. The protagonist is carefully developed and infused with an active voice. By contrast, I might use my author's prerogative of description and prescription for minor characters. From tone to space to treatment, I know that the South Vietnamese is the minor character in the American historical exposition of the Vietnam War.

In the section of the PBS series about the Tet offensive of 1968, for example, there were hardly any South Vietnamese soldiers whose voices were included. Instead, their experiences were described and summarized. Even the postwar "re-education camps" and the suffering of the hundreds of thousands of "boat people" merited little time. They hardly mattered once American troops were pulled out and American P.O.W.s returned.

But North Vietnamese and Vietcong voices were amply heard, one might object. How does one explain this? Including enemy voices serves American interests and elevates the American national character as one capable of healing and reconciliation. In addition, showing the enemy as dedicated and fierce also explains why the United States didn't win the war.. Simultaneously marginalizing or presenting the South Vietnamese as incompetent serves a different but related objective - it explains why despite American blood, sweat and tears, the war could not be won. In fact, the series was much more concerned with demonstrating that the war could never have been won. On this issue, the Vietnamese point of view was excluded entirely.

The way the Vietnam War series portrayed Vietnam is emblematic of the way the United States relates to the world. Ameri-

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can suffering is deemed exceptional and presented with empathy and compassion; it is never a statistic or a number. American soldiers who died in the Vietnam War have a monument that names each of them. The dead from Sept. 11 are also known as individuals, and their names are appropriately read out on the anniversary. All the American M.I.A.s from the Vietnam War must be accounted for, because they are American.

American exceptionalism also means American experiences are projected as universal. Thus, the rules must change when calamity strikes America. Many countries have suffered terrorist attacks for years, and their citizens killed and maimed. But after Sept. 11, the United States argues that the global landscape has changed and new rules must be created. Waterboarding is not torture. Detention of enemies in Guantánamo away from American soil is legitimate.

But the truth is that American suffering is not unique and American tragedies are not more tragic than tragedies in other countries. There are many mighty countries that are not beloved. America, however, is a beacon for many in the world because it promises inclusion. It is exceptional when it embraces others and includes within its heart the perspectives of others different from it.

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2018 US Election Results

Vietnamese-Americans have won their 2018 state election with MA, and WA each having elected Vietnamese-Americans as State Senator and Representative.

1. **Tram Nguyen**, State Representative, Massachusetts, district 18.

She came to the US at the age of five with her parents and her sister. She is a lawyer in MA



Dean Tran, MA State Senator, won his reelection seat in MA.

2. **Joe Nguyen**, Washington State Senator, district 34.
- Thai My Linh**, a pharmacist, WA State Representative, district 41.
3. **Tyler Diep**, CA State Representative, district 72.
4. **Hubert Vo**, Texas Representative, district 149.
5. **Stephanie Murphy** (born Dang Thi Ngoc Dung), re-elected FL State Representative, district 7.

The Silence That Sears the Soul

https://www.aim.org/publications/aim_report/1977/07a.html

On June 16 and 21, [1977] a subcommittee of the House of Representatives heard testimony on the question of human rights violations in Vietnam since the Communist conquest of South Vietnam in April 1975.

At the June 16 hearing, Father Andre Gelinas, a French-Canadian Jesuit priest whose 19 years of residence in Vietnam included 15 months under Communist rule in Saigon, told the committee that the people of Vietnam are "in a temple state because of the oppressive role of the government." He said that something very tragic was happening there and that what was needed was a full-scale investigation and exposure.

Fr. Gelinas had previously published a detailed account of conditions in South Vietnam under Communist rule, originally in L'Express of Paris, and subsequently in the March 17, 1977 issue of The New York Review of Books. The latter article had considerable impact in intellectual circles in this country, since it sharply contradicted rosier views, such as one published in The New York Times Magazine by U.N. official, Alessandro Casella (under the pseudonym of Max Austerlitz).

Fr. Gelinas told the committee how the state of human rights had fared when the Communists took control of Saigon. He said that the first thing they did was to completely suppress freedom of speech, press and information. He said that before the Communist takeover there were 27 daily newspapers in Saigon, about 200 scholarly, literary and technical journals, numerous other magazines, three television channels, and about 24 radio stations.

The Communists immediately closed all of these media of communication. Not only that, but back issues of papers, magazines, records and cassettes were confiscated and burned in huge bonfires in the streets.

He said that the only source of information was one television channel owned and operated by the government, devoted exclusively to government propaganda, two radio stations and three daily newspapers. He said that all were filled with the same propaganda dictated by the party-controlled news agency.

Listening to foreign short-wave radio broadcasts was strictly forbidden. If you knew of anyone who listened to short-wave broadcasts it was your duty to report them to the police, and if you failed to do so you could be subject to deportation to the work camps along with your entire family. Indeed, he said, you were expected to report to the authorities all private conversations deemed contrary to the spirit of the revolution.

Fr. Gelinas said that people were imprisoned without trial, without a hearing, and, indeed, without even being accused of a crime. He said that 300,000 men had been imprisoned for over two years with no charges having even been filed against them. These are mainly those in the euphemistically labeled "re-education camps," which are really concentration camps, or "gulags."

How Many Victims?

Fr. Gelinas said that no one knew precisely how many prisoners there were, since the Communists were not very communicative on this score. He based his estimate of 300,000 on these observations:

1. All of the regular prisons were crowded and two new ones had been built in Saigon since the Communists took over.
2. Virtually all of the former BOQs (bachelor officers quarters) and BEQs (enlisted quarters) of the American military forces were now being used as prisons, with as many as 26 Vietnamese prisoners occupying a bedroom formerly used for one American soldier.

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3. He had received word of some 60 to 90 newly established work camps from his sources around the country, although the location of most of these camps is secret. These camps reportedly had a minimum population of 3,500 prisoners each, giving a range of from 210,000 to 315,000 prisoners in the camps.
4. In Saigon, 60 to 85 percent of the educated men were sent off to the camps. Since Vietnam had a relatively high proportion of educated people, Gelinas thought that the number imprisoned by the Communists could hardly be less than 300,000.
5. Finally, Fr. Gelinas pointed out that General Tran Van Tra, who had command of Saigon for the first nine months of Communist rule, said when he was replaced in January 1976 that hundreds of thousands of men were under reeducation. Fr. Gelinas said that the general may have leaked this figure because he was a southerner. He noted that the South Vietnamese Communists harbored considerable resentment against their northern comrades, who had pretty well squeezed them out of positions of authority in the South.

Fr. Gelinas said that the northerners, who were in control, had been most reticent about talking about their political prisoners. Francois Mitterand, the head of the French Socialist Party, had made a very strong public demand that they answer the questions being raised about the prisoners, but he had never gotten an answer. A group of prominent American anti-war activists had made a similar effort and had been similarly ignored.

Recently, Fr. Gelinas said, the authorities in Vietnam had been putting out a figure of 30,000 to 40,000 for the number of prisoners in the camps. He felt that this was far off the mark, for the reasons stated above.

Fr. Gelinas said that someone disappears in Saigon nearly every day. If the parents go to the authorities to find out what has happened to a daughter who has failed to come home for supper, they are told to mind their own business if they want to stay out of trouble. He said they would be told that if the girl were not a criminal she would be home. He said that the most frequent mode of arrest was to kidnap the victim in the streets. However, the famous knock on the door in the middle of the night, or at dawn, was also popular with the police. They would order the occupants into the street while they searched the house unobserved. They would then produce some damning evidence to justify an arrest, such as guns, foreign money, or printed material.

Zero Coverage

Media coverage of the hearing at which Fr. Gelinas testified was zero. No TV, no radio, no wire service, no New York Times, no Washington Post, and no news magazine stories.

It was not that the hearing was secret or unpublicized. It was open to all, and Accuracy in Media had a representative present. Both the Associated Press and UPI had listed it on their wires as one of the events scheduled for the day. It was part of a series of hearings on human rights by the Subcommittee on International Organizations, chaired by Congressman Donald Fraser. The hearings on South Korea in this series received wide press coverage.

However, it is true that there are a lot of things for the media to cover in Washington every day. Rather than chide the media for not having covered this particular hearing, AIM decided to make sure that they knew about the next hearing on human rights in Vietnam, which was scheduled for June 21. We telephoned the major news organizations to remind them of the hearing and ask them if they planned to have a reporter present.

As a result, nearly 20 reporters showed up for the June 21 hearing. No television camera crews were among them, but interest did appear to be high. The scheduled witnesses included a recent refugee from Vietnam who had es-

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caped from one of the "gulags," a former anti-war activist who is now critical of what the Communists are doing in Vietnam, and one of the leading anti-war activists who defends what the Communists are doing. The stage was set for a news- worthy hearing.

And newsworthy it was. Both the Associated Press and the UPI sent stories about it to their subscribers. We will report what was said so that you yourself can judge whether or not it was interesting and important, because to our amazement the newspapers, even those that had reporters at the hearing, carried nothing about it. We examined several newspapers from cities other than Washington and New York, and we found none that used the wire service stories.

Why? That is what we would very much like to know."

Suicide by Fire

"More than a dozen Vietnamese Buddhist monks and nuns have committed suicide by fire in protest of Vietnamese government persecution since 1975, a former AID official told Congress Tuesday."

That was the lead sentence of the story the UPI sent its subscribing newspapers on the June 21 hearing. Many people still remember the shockwave that resulted from the self- immolation of a Buddhist monk in Saigon as a protest against the government of President Diem back in 1963. They may find it strange that our newspapers would not be interested in reporting that suicide by fire is now being used to protest Communist oppression in Vietnam.

The witness who told of the suicides was Theodore Jaquency. Who resigned his position with AID in Vietnam in 1971 because of his disagreement with U.S. support of President Thieu. After his resignation he worked as a journalist to publicize violations of human rights by the Thieu government. He testified in 1971 before a Congressional committee investigating violations of human rights by Thieu.

Jaquency told the committee that at that time he had sought the help of members of Congress to secure the release of Deputy Tran Ngnc Chau from prison. He said that he now hears that Chau is back in the same prison, with on difference. The communists had cemented over the cell window bars to make the cells darker and hotter than ever before, he said.

Of course, there is another important difference. Back in 1971, Deputy Chau's imprisonment was a matter of great interest and concern to the American news media. Today, his plight, though discussed by Jaquency, goes unnoticed by the press.

Jaquency pointed out that many of the prisoners now are people who were prominent "third force" opponents of South Vietnamese governments during the war. They were advocates of a compromise peace and many of them were imprisoned. Now the victors imprison them.

Jaquency introduced for the record an article he published in the April 1977 issue of Worldview in which he described in horrifying detail the conditions in the crowded Communist prisons in Vietnam, based on reports of escapees. These accounts presented a very different picture from the one seen by Western visitors to the model "re-education" camps near Saigon. One man who had been at the Tan Mai camp in Bien Hoa Province told of being imprisoned in a dark, sunless room, holding 80 prisoners. They did nothing but sit or lie on the concrete floor, being

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permitted to go out into the daylight once a week for 15 minutes. Once every two weeks they went to the office for two hours to write confessions. The only food was two bowls of rice with a little salt each day.

This man said that no medical treatment was provided, and the prisoners were not even permitted to talk to each other. He said "If they saw three people whispering together in the cell, they would put them in special 'dark rooms.' These were very small, for one person; with no light at all, no air holes like in our cell. One time every day they would throw in some food for you. There was no toilet. You went right on the floor. Once a week they would throw two buckets of water on you to bathe. If you were caught talking, the first time they would put you in the dark room for one week, the second time for two weeks, and so on."

He said that the Communist strategy was simply to keep people in the prisons until they died or went crazy, noting that under these conditions people will die, be driven mad or become paralyzed. In his cell in four months three people died, and two or three developed paralysis. He said that fortunately no one in his cell went mad, but you could hear those who had gone crazy screaming in the other cells.

A Prisoner Testifies

But the Committee did not have to depend solely on second-hand accounts of inhumane treatment of prisoners in Communist Vietnam.

For the first time in history, a Vietnamese escapee was invited to tell his story to a Congressional Committee. Nguyen Van Coi had been a rice farmer in the Mekong Delta. He told the Committee that he decided to stay in Vietnam when the Communists took over, seeking peace and reconciliation. He was arrested three months later, and spent the next year in two different prisons and one forced labor camp. His story parallels those told by Jaqueny about intolerable crowding in airless cells, with food limited to two bowls of rice a day. Here is the account he gave the Committee of the "re-education" camp he was sent to in the U-Minh forest.

"Actually there was no camp when I arrived there. The ankle to the tree trunks chained prisoners. The U-Minh forest is famous for its mosquitoes, and anytime I clasped my hands I killed at least one. Many prisoners died of malaria, dysentery (from drinking dirty water) and other malnutrition diseases. We were given breakfast at 6 A.M. and went to work clearing the forest until 6 P.M., then escorted back to the camp for our second meal of the day ...I used eucalyptus bark for clothing, since my clothes were gone. Many fellow inmates were deported to the North. I knew I would not get out of the camp alive. I wanted to commit suicide."

Mr. Coi did succeed in making an escape, and with the help of co-religionist villagers, he managed to get to Thailand and ultimately to this country. He was full of gratitude for having been given the opportunity to tell a Committee of the United States Congress about the conditions in Vietnamese Gulag Archipelago, as he knew them from personal experience. He must have been surprised and disappointed to find his testimony so utterly ignored by the American media.

The UPI devoted a good part of its story to Mr. Coi's testimony, concluding with his comment on the testimony of another witness, Don Luce, long a leading anti-war activist and now co-director of an organization called Clergy and Laity Concerned. Mr. Luce told the Committee that a former South Vietnamese general had told him that the "re-education centers" were "true labor and true political education, not torture or retaliation."

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To which Mr. Coi replied: "Mr. Luce's view of the Communists is the view we had of the Communists before they took over. Then I felt I could live with the Communists... Mr. Luce's view of the situation is only a view from the outside. I would like to show you the inside situation. I would like to talk about what I have seen, from my heart, of the blood and tears of the Vietnamese people."

Vietnamese in France During WWI

<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/video-on-demand/asia-in-the-great-war/vietnam-war-and-rebellion-10926524>

This is an interesting 47 min documentary about the 90,000 Vietnamese (North and South) who were drafted and served in the French Army in the major European battles of WWI. Many of them returned to Vietnam after 1918, while others resettled in France.

This is recounted by the French author/historian Pierre Brocheux and two of their Vietnamese grandchildren (now French citizens) who searched for their long lost roots in Vietnam and France in the early twentieth century.

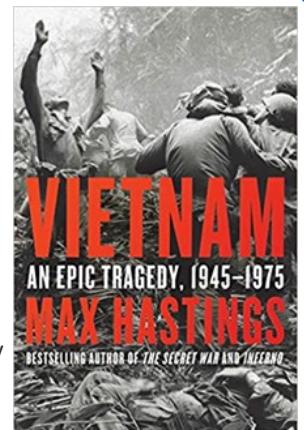
PS. Forwarded by Bill Laurie

Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy, 1945-1975 *Max Hastings*

Vietnam became the Western world's most divisive modern conflict, precipitating a battlefield humiliation for France in 1954, then a vastly greater one for the United States in 1975. Max Hastings has spent the past three years interviewing scores of participants on both sides, as well as researching a multitude of American and Vietnamese documents and memoirs, to create an epic narrative of an epic struggle. He portrays the set pieces of Dien Bien Phu, the 1968 Tet offensive, the air blitz of North Vietnam, and also much less familiar miniatures such as the bloodbath at Daido, where a US Marine battalion was almost wiped out, together with extraordinary recollections of Ho Chi Minh's warriors. Here are the vivid realities of strife amid jungle and paddies that killed two million people.

Many writers treat the war as a US tragedy, yet Hastings sees it as overwhelmingly that of the Vietnamese people, of whom forty died for every American. US blunders and atrocities were matched by those committed by their enemies. While all the world has seen the image of a screaming, naked girl seared by napalm, it forgets countless eviscerations, beheadings, and murders carried out by the communists. The people of both former Vietnams paid a bitter price for the Northerners' victory in privation and oppression. Here is testimony from Vietcong guerrillas, Southern paratroopers, Saigon bargirls, and Hanoi students alongside that of infantrymen from South Dakota, Marines from North Carolina, and Huey pilots from Arkansas.

No past volume has blended a political and military narrative of the entire conflict with heart-stopping personal experiences, in the fashion that Max Hastings' readers know so well. The author suggests that neither side deserved to win this struggle with so many lessons for the twenty-first century about the misuse of military might to confront intractable political and cultural challenges. He marshals testimony from warlords and peasants, statesmen and soldiers, to create an extraordinary record.



Available on Amazon:

<https://www.amazon.com/Vietnam-Tragedy-1945-1975-Max-Hastings/dp/0062405667/>

Indochina in the Year of the Dog - 1970

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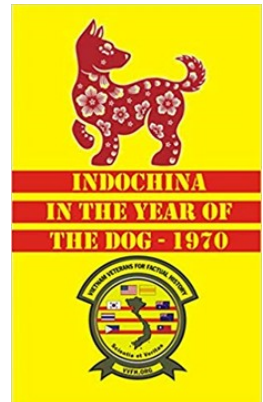
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