

Forty Years Ago: Victory In Vietnam! History and Reflections

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Forty years ago on April 30, 1975, the Vietnamese people, led by their Communist Party, were finally victorious in the long just struggle for national independence and unification against the United States and its puppet regime in Saigon.

America experienced an earthshaking lesson in Vietnam — “Stop your unjust wars of aggression!” —but Washington learned nothing from its humiliating defeat except to shift its battlefields of choice from Southeast Asia to Southwest Asia (i.e., the Middle East).

The U.S. went on to fight in Iraq three times and impose long sanctions in 25 continuous years; in Afghanistan the Pentagon has been fighting for 14 years and has achieved nothing; in Libya the U.S. bombed for less than a year but managed to spark a civil war and open the door to the Islamic State in the process. Many smaller incursions have taken place since losing the Vietnam war. For instance, the Obama Administration for years took actions to overthrow Syrian President Assad, and all the White House has to show for it is a jihadi war led by the Islamic State and the al-Nusra Front (the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda).

Most Americans, except for families of the dead, veterans and war opponents, never think about the Vietnam War — one of history’s most unequal and vicious. Young Americans in general have received only a bowdlerized trace of information at school. At the same time, the lives of many Americans who protested this shameful war — civilians plus antiwar GIs and draft resisters — were largely radicalized and changed forever. Now in their sixties through eighties and older, they continue to this day to protest war and injustice. For some, myself included, details of this war remain indelibly etched in memory.

The day after the U.S. debacle the name of Saigon, the South Vietnamese capital where the American command was situated until being unceremoniously, was changed to Ho Chi Minh City in honor of the great leader of the Indochinese people who died in 1969. Hanoi, to the north, remained the capital of reunified Vietnam.

Droves of Americans, including a substantial number of former soldiers, now visit both cities and other parts of the Vietnam every year. Many tour the war museums, the old battlefields and tunnels used by peasants and fighters to escape from or to attack American forces. The Vietnamese treat such visitors courteously, without a sign of enmity, which is quite remarkable considering the horrors perpetrated upon a country that survived more explosive tonnage than the U.S. deployed during World War II in Europe and Asia-Pacific — 15,500,000 tons of air and ground munitions during the Vietnam War; 6,000,000 tons in WW II.

Vietnam at the time had a population of about 52 million situated on both sides of the 17th

parallel, temporarily dividing North and South Vietnam. Over four million were killed in Washington's aggressive war upon a very poor largely peasant society beginning in the mid-1950s when the U.S. took over from the defeated French colonialist armies. France had occupied and oppressed Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia (Indochina) for over 100 years, then it became America's turn. U.S. bombings killed at least a million more people in Laos and Cambodia.

For an American society fearfully fixated on a few domestic terrorist incidents such as the Boston Marathon killings or the so-called "underwear" bomber, the immensity of the deaths caused by their own government in Iraq, Vietnam and so many other countries, is evidently incomprehensible and thus unimportant.

U.S. combat deaths from 1955-1975 were 47,424, nearly all in the latter part of the war. Officially, Afghanistan is Washington's longest war at 14 years, but unofficially Vietnam is six years longer. In time, Afghanistan may live up to its dubious designation since the U.S. government continues to delay full withdrawal of combat forces.

It may be of interest to learn that the total number of American combat deaths in 76 wars from 1775 to 2015 (including all the dead on both sides during the Civil War) amounts to 846,163. That's less than the UN-verified total of a million Iraqis, half of whom were young children, who died from 1991 to 2003 due to killer sanctions. This was followed by another million dead Iraqis from the 2003-2011 war.

Compare the U.S. total of combat deaths in World War II (291,557) to the number of Russian combat and civilian deaths (27 million). There were no civilian deaths in the U.S, which has not suffered war damage from foreign invasions since the British War of 1812-15. Most of Russia was flattened east of the Ural Mountains in WWII. In Washington's 1950-1953 war against North Korea, every city and most towns were destroyed by U.S. carpet bombings. Several millions were killed. The U.S. suffered 33,686 combat deaths.

Militarism, a principal element in U.S. society, thrives on unequal wars where the weapons, technology and communications of the "enemy" are far inferior and where it is impossible for an inch of U.S. territory to experience the footprint of a foreign soldier. Since the Civil War the American people, landscape and infrastructure has been untouched by war.

This is not as good as some think. America is the world's principal mass killer since the end of WWII but its people are so accustomed to wars that cause them no pain and suffering that they easily support, or are indifferent to, unjust aggression in the name of protecting America. Ironically, there's hardly any need to protect America, enclosed between two oceans in an impenetrable fortress. But government fear mongering about the nation's vulnerability is a most useful lie intended to perpetuate Washington's insistence upon functioning as global overlord and military superpower.

The overwhelming majority of Americans knew absolutely nothing about their own country's involvement in Vietnam until around 1965 when President Lyndon Johnson began to vastly increase the U.S. troop component, which reached 549,500 mostly conscript personnel in 1968. By then, a vibrant antiwar movement was shaking the White House to the extent that Johnson announced he would not run for re-election. He retired in disgrace for what became a very unpopular war, despite authoring several important domestic achievements.

Richard Nixon, Johnson's elected replacement, caused many more Vietnamese (and

Cambodian) deaths in the name of seeking peace. But by 1973 the antiwar movement, the American people and rebellious U.S. soldiers in the field forced the White House to withdraw all American combat troops from Vietnam. Thousands of U.S. military advisers, CIA agents, and those Washington delegated to basically control the Saigon government and military, remained in the country for two more years. They were obliged to flee in extreme haste as liberation forces closed in and quickly declared victory.

The 1960s and early '70s were great years of domestic uprisings in the United States against various ills and injustices, from the segregation of African Americans, to the subjugation of women, repressive cultural backwardness, the Vietnam War, the hatred and shunning of LGBT people and other causes.

As the war continued, the majority of the American people began demanding peace. The antiwar movement became extremely large and militant, ultimately contributing strongly to the withdrawal of U.S. troops. By the early 1970s the Hanoi government recognized there were three fronts in the war — the battlefield, the Paris peace talks, and the American people's antiwar movement. I always bring this up when I'm told that peace demonstrations do no good. When antiwar movements become large, rambunctious, militant and long-lived they can stop a war or at least educate millions of people to oppose the next war.

A number of activists I knew or worked with during this exciting period of the uprising against a devastating imperialist war are still in opposition today. I'm 80 now and never served in the war (except for 1962-63 in prison for opposing the war machine) but the passionate hatred for colonialism and imperialism emanating from that ruthless conflict remains even stronger with me 40 years later, as I'm sure it does for many other opponents of that war who are still active.

As a quite young journalist for a major wire service in New York I was aware of many details of the Vietnam conflict beginning in the 1950s, mainly after the historic French defeat in the battle of Diên Biên Phu in 1954. My years as writer and then the editor of the (U.S.) Guardian radical newsweekly (1963 to 1984) made me feel very much a part of the antiwar struggle because few if any other U.S. independent publications labored as long and hard against the war and for the victory of the Vietnamese people.

Our long-time foreign correspondent Wilfred Burchett wrote weekly articles from the battlefields and liberated areas of Vietnam with coverage that far excelled that of the reporters for major American newspapers, stationed in Saigon or with fighting U.S. units, often pegging their stories on official lies and fictitious body counts and on press conference propaganda from the government. It still happens today, of course, but Vietnam opened millions of eyes to Washington's imperial perfidy, and the Internet has become a major source of antiwar news and radical analysis if you know where to look.

To the leftist Guardian, along with many on the U.S. left from progressives to communists, the Vietnam War was imperialist in nature. The Guardian wanted the war to end with the defeat of the American aggressor. Other sections of the broad and diverse peace movement objected strenuously to the term "imperialist" and were fearful of publicly supporting the defeat of their own country despite its having launched one of history's most hideous wars of aggression.

Having been involved in opposing every U.S. war since Korea I have seen the "imperialist"

question crop up repeatedly as though it is too radical or leftist instead of what it really is — the truth.

The issue of the Guardian reporting on the April 30 defeat of U.S.-South Vietnamese forces proclaimed in huge type on the front page: "VICTORY IN VIETNAM!" The lead article began: "Vietnam is completely liberated. After 35 years of continuous heroic struggle against Japanese, French and American imperialism, the Vietnamese people from north to south are free and independent."

I was in Vietnam a few months before victory and was told by a government official of Hanoi's "deep appreciation for the Guardian's steadfast opposition to French colonialism and American imperialism, and for its years of efforts on behalf of peace, national liberation and the unification of Vietnam." This was essentially repeated to me in different words by another official on the 30th anniversary celebration in Ho Chi Minh City.

What remained of the mass U.S. antiwar movement went home when the war ended in 1975. Likewise, most of what was left of the extraordinary period of radical and revolutionary upsurges known as the Sixties ended around

that time as well. This was unfortunate because what largely replaced this people-driven epoch of advances in freedom and progressive militancy has been decades of conservatism and reactionary backlash against the people's victories of the Sixties.

Today, far right pro-war Republican forces have taken over Congress and the Supreme Court, and they are swiftly gaining control of state governments and using their powers to wreck the union movement, take back the gains of the women's movement and destroy programs that help the poor. Meanwhile, since there are only two "official" political parties, the only viable alternative within the ruling class-controlled electoral system is now the center-right pro-war Democratic Party, which has proven itself incapable of blocking the reactionary juggernaut, and all too often its conservative sector joins with the opposition, as many House and Senate Democrats are doing today in opposition to the U.S.-Iran talks. They'd rather follow screaming Warlord Bibi than their own president.

Once and all to briefly center left, today's Democratic Party may be better than the right wing know-nothings, but it is definitely part of the problem, not the solution, and simply cannot be counted upon to function as a buffer against the Tea Party far right, the buffoons in Congress and the war-mongering neoconservatives of both parties who are making a comeback.

Economic and social gains — or any gains for working families — are hardly likely under present circumstances. There has to be a major change away from our imperialist capitalist system that presides over oligarch control of elections, rampant built-in inequality, wage stagnation, police violence, climate change, historic concentrations of wealth in the vaults of fewer than 1% of the people, continuing racism in America and endless imperialist wars. There are better systems, such as socialism, but after 100 years of anti-socialist and anti-communist propaganda the American people have a way to go before that becomes viable.

At this stage, it seems to me, America needs a new Sixties on steroids — a 21st century uprising of mass movements in the streets, meeting halls and cultural events making specific demands on the power structure using whatever tactics are appropriate, including mass civil disobedience, strikes and calculated disruption. And it is about time we realize the

absolute need for collective, disciplined leadership. I know there is considerable anti-leadership sentiment in some oppositional movements, such as Occupy when it flourished too briefly, but this has to change before system change ever becomes a reality.

There are those who think significant social change in America is impossible or that the vehicle for change emanates from the ballot box alone. Is it impossible?

In the politically, socially and culturally repressive 1950s — when teachers were fired and writers, actors, unionists and others were blacklisted for harboring progressive ideas, when African Americans suffered under official and unofficial segregation, and when women were still kept “in their place,” who would believe that a “Sixties” was about to emerge?

Who would credit the idea that downtrodden blacks would stand up and risk their lives to confront racist Jim Crow in a couple of years? Who conceived of the possibility that women would stand up and demand their full rights? Who believed that millions of Americans would stand up for years to stop a criminal war? Was there anyone so naïve as to predict LGBT people would stand up, come out proudly, and demand respect? What parents or educators anticipated that many millions of students would stand up against repressive campus and outdated behavioral rules, and then bring the antiwar and radical struggle to the college green and even in some cases blockade their school president’s office. Judging by the 1950s crackdown on left to communist movements, it was not thought reasonable to proclaim that the left would soon stand up and experience a virtual renaissance, gaining members and playing an important role in the fight for peace and justice?”

If a Sixties can emerge from a backward Fifties, why can’t a Twenties emerge from a backward Tens? And if that doesn’t work, there’s always the Thirties and Forties. The key is to work hard now and persistently to bring it about, and to be patient if it takes a long time.

Obviously, social change does not drop from the sky, nor is it a gift from the bourgeoisie. It may not have been noticed by history but very many people and organizations were working hard for peace and social justice in the repressive 1950s. This helped bring about the social uprisings in the next decade. First, the oppressed blacks rebelled magnificently as the 1960s began, paving the way for other groups to rise up and express various pent-up demands for social change, compounded by an unjust criminal war that was draining the blood from America and its conscripted youth, not to mention the victim nation.

The U.S. government may not ever learn the lessons of the Vietnam War, compelled as it is by a socio-economic political system to create a better world first and foremost for the 1%, and empty rhetoric and wars for the rest of us. But I hope the lessons learned from the 1960-1975 era of uprisings for social change are not entirely forgotten but revived, improved and in time put into practice at a much higher and decisive level.

Thanks for listening, to speak. The anniversary of Vietnam’s victory brought all this out.

— The Guardian radical newsweekly attained a paid circulation of 26,000 readers and a pass along readership of at least 100,000 by the 1970s. The entire audience, aside from FBI readers seeking to know what’s happening on the left, opposed the Vietnam War. Several years after I left the paper it suddenly and inexplicably folded in 1992, but the Guardian was there when it was needed most — to tell the truth about the war, to identify it as imperialist, to unequivocally support Vietnam against the aggressor, and to report on and help build the peace movement.

— A 13-page article titled “The Guardian the Goes to War,” is collected in the 2011 book “Insiders Histories of the Vietnam Era Underground Press, part 1,” (Michigan State Univ. Press)

— If you haven’t done so, read “Vo Nguyen Giap: Death of a Giant” in the 10-26-13 Newsletter:

<http://activistnewsletter.blogspot.com/2013/10/0-0-1-1-11-hudson-valley-activist.html>

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