

There Is No Rehabilitating the Vietnam War

There is enormous pressure and a lot of money working to rehabilitate Vietnam, to put the guilt and the shame of it behind us. But it was precisely the guilt of the people, their shame at what was being done in their name, and their courage to denounce it that made it impossible for their government to carry out the savagery any longer.

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Featured image: The Vietnam War, writes Freeman, "must be remembered and condemned for the debacle it actually was." (Image: vietnamfulldisclosure.org)

Since the day it ended, in 1975, there have been efforts to rehabilitate the Vietnam War, to make it acceptable, even honorable. After all, there were so many sides to the story, weren't there? It was so complex, so nuancical. There was real heroism among the troops.

Of course, all of this is true, but it's true of every war so it doesn't redeem any war. The Vietnam War is beyond redemption and must be remembered and condemned for the calamity that it was. The Vietnam War was "one of the greatest American foreign policy disasters of the twentieth century."

Those are not the words of a leftist pundit or a scribbling anti-American. They are the words of H.R. McMaster, the sitting National Security Advisor to the President of the United States.

Why must Vietnam be remembered and condemned for the debacle it actually was?

First, the U.S. betrayed its own ideals in the War. In 1946, Vietnamese president Ho Chi Minh approached U.S. president Harry Truman asking for the U.S.'s help in evicting the French who had occupied Vietnam as a colony since the 1860s. Hadn't the U.S. itself once fought a war of independence to rid itself of European colonial domination?

Indeed, the opening words to the Vietnamese Declaration of Independence were borrowed in sacramental reverence from the American Declaration. They echo to every patriotic American:

"All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, and among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."



French soldiers fight off a Viet Minh ambush in 1952. (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

But Ho was a communist. So, Truman turned him down and helped the French instead. That was the “original sin” that made it impossible for the U.S. to ever “win the hearts and minds” of the Vietnamese people. It is what ultimately doomed the War to failure. But that wasn’t the only cardinal sin the U.S. committed against its own putative ideals.

Eisenhower violated the 1954 Geneva accords that had settled the war with the French and set up a puppet regime in the south. Hence “South” Vietnam, which, not surprisingly, quickly disappeared once the Americans left. He crammed a wealthy Catholic mandarin from New Jersey—Ngo Diem—on the people who were overwhelmingly poor, Buddhist, and peasants.

Diem, with Eisenhower’s blessing, then boycotted the elections for national unification that had been agreed to in the accords. Eisenhower wrote later that the reason for the boycott was that “Our guys would have lost.” When Diem could no longer suppress the swelling rebellion against his divisive, hyper-oppressive rule, Kennedy had him assassinated.

Second, the U.S. carried out apocalyptic violence on Vietnam, vastly beyond any conceivable moral standard of proportionality. It dropped three times more tons of bombs on Vietnam than were used by all sides in all theaters in all of World War II *combined*. Vietnam is about the size of New Mexico and at the time had a population greater than New York and California put together.

The U.S. lost 58,000 lives in the War. But more than four *million* southeast Asians—Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians—were killed, most of them civilians. That’s 69 southeast Asians killed for every 1 American. That is not a war. That is a massacre, and on a scale approaching the Holocaust.

The U.S. sprayed 21 million gallons of carcinogenic defoliants on Vietnam, including the notorious Agent Orange. More than half of the nation’s forests were destroyed. Vietnam was the greatest intentionally man-made environmental catastrophe in the history of the world. Children are still being born with birth defects from the residual poisoning.

On neighboring Laos, which, in 1965 had a population of 2.4 million, the U.S. dropped 270 million cluster bombs. That’s 113 cluster bombs for every man, woman, and child in the

country. More than 80 million of the bombs are still unexploded today.

It's important to remember that neither Vietnam, nor Laos, nor Cambodia for that matter, ever attacked the United States. They never wanted to attack. They never tried to attack. They never had the capacity to attack. They had simply wanted their own way of life.

Finally, the War was founded on and prosecuted with relentless lying. Your mother once taught you, as all good mothers do, that if you have to lie about something it's wrong.

The "intelligence" agencies lied to us, unremittingly, about the threat from a nation of pre-Industrial Age farmers on the other side of the world who, after nearly a century of colonial domination, simply wanted to be left alone by western imperial powers.

Five successive presidents lied to the American people about the need for the War and its likely winnability. None of them wanted to appear to be "soft on communism." None wanted to be "the first American president to lose a war."

The Pentagon Papers revealed that the military was saturated with lies, from field level body counts to strategic reviews of progress. Truth tellers were drummed out of the service, ensuring that only lies got passed up the chain. The lies wouldn't be discovered until it was too late.

In fact, it is precisely our lying about the Vietnam War, both then and now, and our knowledge of those lies, without ever having openly, unambiguously repudiated them, that continues to make the War seem dishonorable.

The dishonor, of course, belongs not to the millions of soldiers who served there but rather to the War itself. It belongs to the institutions—both public and private—that profited from the War and lied to justify it, and to the people whose silence and knowing acquiescence made them complicit in the lies.

It belongs to those who put our soldiers, our children, in the perverse situation not of doing honorable things honorably, but of having to try to do dishonorable things honorably. For, despite the loftiest motives we might invent for its beginnings, that is unquestionably what the War ultimately became.

In March 1965, before the insertion of American ground troops that would make the War irreversible, before the vast majority of the bombings and killings would be perpetrated, a Pentagon briefing for Johnson stated that the true goals in the War were, "...70% to avoid a humiliating U.S. defeat; 20% to keep South Vietnam (and adjacent territories) from Chinese hands; and 10% to permit the people of Vietnam a better, freer way of life."

That is what the psychotic savagery of Vietnam was all about. It was not bumbling goodwill gone awry as the rehabilitationists would have us believe. It was not to bring democracy; not to defend against communism; not to help the Vietnamese people. It was "to avoid a humiliating U.S. defeat." Those are the official, though at the time secret, words of the U.S. government.



[Kennedy](#) and [McNamara](#) (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

We can summon an even greater authority than H.R. McMaster to confirm that the War was wrong. Robert McNamara was the U.S. Secretary of Defense in both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. He is the unquestioned architect and chief strategist of the War.

In his memoirs McNamara wrote,

“We of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations who participated in the decisions on Vietnam acted according to what we thought were the principles and traditions of this nation. We made our decisions in light of those values. Yet we were wrong, terribly wrong. We owe it to future generations to explain why.”

There are no two more disparate authorities on the War than these two men. They represent the old and the new, Democrat and Republican, civilian and soldier, actor and critic, introspective and retrospective. Yet they reach the same, damning conclusion.

There is enormous pressure and a lot of money working to rehabilitate Vietnam, to put the guilt and the shame of it behind us. But it was precisely the guilt of the people, their shame at what was being done in their name, and their courage to denounce it that made it impossible for their government to carry out the savagery any longer. Would that we had that kind of guilt, shame, and courage among us today.

Remember: if we had to lie about it, it was wrong. That is as true today as it was then, is it not? And wrong does not get made right by the louder or repeated repetition of original lies. Or, by the artful contrivance of newer, slicker, more personable ones.

Forgetting that lesson, or, worse, laundering it out of our memory so that we might go forward with cleansed consciences and fortified zeal for still more predation, would be a betrayal of itself that only the American people can resist.

[Robert Freeman](#) writes about economics and education. He is the author of The Best One-Hour History series which includes World War I, The Vietnam War, The Cold War, and other titles.

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