AN EERIE JUNGLE FILLED WITH DRAGONFLIES, SNIPER BULLETS AND GHOSTS: CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF VIETNAM AND THE VIETNAMESE THROUGH THE EYES OF AMERICAN TROOPS

Matthew M. Herrera
University of Massachusetts Amherst

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/masters_theses_2

Part of the Cultural History Commons, Diplomatic History Commons, Nature and Society Relations Commons, Place and Environment Commons, Political History Commons, Race and Ethnicity Commons, Social History Commons, and the United States History Commons

Recommended Citation

This Campus-Only Access for Five (5) Years is brought to you for free and open access by the Dissertations and Theses at ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.
AN EERIE JUNGLE FILLED WITH DRAGONFLIES, SNIPER BULLETS AND GHOSTS: CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF VIETNAM AND THE VIETNAMESE THROUGH THE EYES OF AMERICAN TROOPS

A Thesis Presented

by

MATTHEW MARTIN HERRERA

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2015

Department of History
AN EERIE JUNGLE FILLED WITH DRAGONFLIES, SNIPER BULLETS, AND GHOSTS: CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF VIETNAM AND THE VIETNAMESE THROUGH THE EYES OF AMERICAN TROOPS

A Thesis Presented

By

MATTHEW MARTIN HERRERA

Approved as to style and content by:

____________________________________
Christian Appy, Chair

____________________________________
David Glassberg, Member

____________________________________
Joye Bowman, Department Chair
History Department
DEDICATION

To my loving parents, Martin and Cynthia Herrera, and sister Candace, for their never ending support and encouragement. Also to my dog Dexter, whose picture was on my desk as I wrote this thesis.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis was crafted through much research, writing, revision, and diligent scholarship. However, the amount of work required to complete this thesis pales in comparison to the amount of support I received from my family, friends, colleagues, and advisors. Had it not been for this large support network, I do not know how this thesis would have been possible. The number of people I need to thank is substantial, and this writing is only a small token of the gratitude I have for them.

I first must thank the people where I pursued my undergraduate studies at Humboldt State University. Not only did they provide me with the foundation and tools needed to be a historian, but they also pushed me to pursue graduate school. In particular I want to thank Robert Cliver and Suzanne Pasztor. Not only did they give me invaluable advice about graduate school, but also helped push me to constantly challenge myself intellectually and improve my writing. Special thanks must go to my undergrad advisor Anne Paulet, who originally planted the seed of pursuing graduate studies. Had it not been for Dr. Paulet’s support, training, and belief in me, even when I did not believe in myself, I would have never gone this far. To this day she continues to be supportive of my academic career, and I could not thank her enough for everything she has done.

There are also numerous people here at UMass Amherst’s History Department who I must thank. Not only have they helped me grow intellectually, but have also been extremely supportive of me over the past two years and made this place feel like a home. I would like to thank everyone who I have had the privilege of taking courses with, and those who I was a teaching assistant for. Whether it was in their seminars or being a teaching assistant for their courses, it has been a rich learning experience that I will carry
with me as I continue my academic career. In particular I would like to thank: Joye
Bowman, John Higginson, Barbara Krauthamer, Mary Lashway, Stephen Platt, Sam
Redman, Sigrid Schmazler, and Joel Wolfe. I would also like to give a very special
thanks to my thesis committee, Christian Appy and David Glassberg. Not only do I want
to thank them for the time and effort they put into helping me craft this project, but also
for the countless resources they referred me to, and the invaluable feedback they gave.
Had it not been for them, I do not know how this thesis could have been possible.

I would also like to thank the people I have been fortunate to share an office with,
and those who were my fellow teaching assistants. Not only were you all a joy to work
with, but also provided some great conversations as well. In particular, Thomas Army,
Emily Hunter, John Roberts, Miriam Wells, Julie Peterson, Erica Fagen, Amy Breimaier,
and Sarah Lavallee. I would also like to thank my Fall 2013 cohort with whom I began
this journey: Thamyris Almeida, Mohammed Ataie, Janelle Bourgeois, Justin Burch,
Matthew Coletti, Thomas Emerson, Emily Hunter, Felicia Jamison, Mike Jirik, Deborah
Kallman, Destiney Linker, Jared Muskowitz, Emily Pipes, Kayla Pittman, Anthony
Repucci, Rebecca Schmitt, Sean Smeland, and Charles Weisenberger. Not only did I
form friendships with them that I hold dear, but they are also the ones that kept me sane
these past two years, and for that I cannot thank them enough. Also would like to thank
Marwa Amer, Adeline Brousson, Joie Campbell, Chelsea Miller, Neroli Price, and
Natalie Sherif.
ABSTRACT

AN EERIE JUNLGE FILLED WITH DRAGONFLIES, SNIPER BULLETS AND GHOSTS: CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF VIETNAM AND THE VIETNAMESE THROUGH THE EYES OF AMERICAN TROOPS

MAY 2015

MATTHEW MARTIN HERRERA,
B.A., HUMBOLDT STATE UNIVERSITY
M.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST
DIRECTED BY: PROFESSOR CHRISTIAN APPY

This thesis examines the changing perceptions of Vietnam’s landscape and the Vietnamese in the eyes of American troops throughout the Vietnam War. Throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Vietnamese were depicted as a people misguided by the French and in need of political mobilization by the American media and government. Following heavy investment and a rigged election in 1956, South Vietnam was painted as a beacon of democracy in Southeast Asia and an example of what American aid is capable of. As an increasing American military presence was being established in South Vietnam in the early 1960s, American troops were reminded by pocket books and other forms of American propaganda that South Vietnam was a land of dignity and respect. At first, troops were shocked by the beauty of the landscape and recalled that Vietnam did not look like a war-torn country at all. Yet as the land became increasingly devastated due to defoliant and numerous bombings, the perceptions of the Vietnamese took a turn for the worst; eventually being subhuman and deceptive. Vietnam’s landscape became perceived as a land of death where youth was expendable. However, less than a decade after the United States had pulled out of Vietnam, veterans and those affected by the war
begin to return in mass numbers constituting the largest population of Americans in Vietnam. This resulted in Vietnam’s landscape, which was seen as a land trap-laden wasteland, being seen a place of healing with a beautiful people that Americans helped save.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ................................................................. iv

ABSTRACT .................................................................................. vi

LIST OF FIGURES .................................................................. ix

INTRODUCTION ........................................................................ 1

CHAPTER

1: A LAND SURPASSING FERTILITY ............................................. 5
   Contradictions and Second Guessing ........................................ 11
   Tensions Rising .................................................................. 18

2: SWALLOWED BY PARADISE…SPIT OUT BY WAR .................. 22
   A Contaminating Experience ................................................. 34
   Napalm Sticks to Kids ....................................................... 37

EPILOGUE: AN EERIE HEALING JUNGLE? ................................. 41

APPENDIX ............................................................................. 52

FIGURES .............................................................................. 52

BIBLIOGRAPHY ..................................................................... 56
LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 1: Soldiers Carry A Wounded Comrade Through A Swampy Area........................................52

Fig. 2: Larry Burrows, Untitled. ....................................................................................................53

Fig. 3: Larry Burrows, US soldiers on the ground in Vietnam in 1968. ....................................54

Fig 4: John Olson, Untitled. ........................................................................................................55
INTRODUCTION

When American troops in large numbers first went to Vietnam in 1965, the land was verdant and lush. The American government and the press depicted the Vietnamese as a “rural” people who were in need of political “mobilization” and saving from a communist enemy. Envisioned as child-like and innocent, they were clearly worthy of American friendship. However, by the time Americans left in 1973, not only had the once green landscape been reduced to a crater-ridden moonscape, but the people had become untrustworthy and deceptive in the eyes of U.S. troops. Yet almost a decade later, American veterans began to revisit what was once considered Shangri-La on earth, constituting the largest population of U.S. citizens in Vietnam throughout eighties.

The changing perceptions of the Vietnamese landscape and people undermined government attempts to continue the American presence in Vietnam. The changing landscape also left lasting impressions on the memories of those who served. While most served only one yearlong tour of duty, their experience with the landscape, as mediated by race and ethnicity, affected their memories of the Vietnamese. As Vietnam increasingly became a wasteland due to constant fighting, bombing, and defoliation, the value of the Vietnamese in the eyes of American troops took a turn for the worse; eventually leading to the Vietnamese being seen as subhuman. Americans, by the end, saw the physical environment as of little value with neither people nor the land worth saving. These perceptions also convinced those in the military and media that the State of Vietnam was an unworthy ally and the Vietnamese army was not capable of winning the war.

---

To say there are a plethora of works on the Vietnam War is an understatement. Many historians such as Marilyn Young, Lloyd Gardner, and Fredrik Logevall have examined the various aspects of U.S. involvement and the years of active American warfare.\(^2\) There is also much scholarship that examine the various phases of American involvement in Vietnam, and the effects of it on American troops and those in the United States.\(^3\) In addition to scholarly works on various aspects of American involvement, there are large numbers of memoirs by those who participated in the war, some of the most popular being *A Rumor of War*, *We Were Soldiers Once…and Young*, *Chickenhawk*, and *Fire in the Lake*.\(^4\) Scholars such as Patrick Hagopian and Michael Allen have


published studies that combine the study of memory and Vietnam together.\textsuperscript{5} There are even those that examine the role of gender and its effect on the decision making during the war such as Robert Dean’s *Imperial Brotherhood* and is even mentioned in Heather Marie Stur’s *Beyond Combat*.\textsuperscript{6} Even consumerism and soldiering in South Vietnam during the war has been studied by Meredith Lair’s *Armed with Abundance*, and tourism after the war such as Scott Laderman’s *Tours of Vietnam*.\textsuperscript{7}

While these works all try to make sense of American participation in Vietnam, none have combined the examinations of human senses and emotions with perceptions of the Vietnamese landscape to examine how it affected perceptions of the Vietnamese.\textsuperscript{8}


According to Andrew Rotter in his article “Empire of the Senses,” “all human relationships … are shaped by all five senses; how we understand others, even more how we feel about them, emotionally, and thus how we act toward them, have a good deal to do with how we apprehend them through every sense.” Additionally, none have examined the relationship between the landscape and the memory of combat veterans; particularly those who returned to Vietnam after the war had ended. By utilizing further analysis and study, one can see how American perceptions of Vietnam and the Vietnamese worsened as the countryside withered and dried up.

---


CHAPTER 1

A LAND SURPASSING FERTILITY

When French explorers and merchants landed on the shores of Vietnam, it appeared they had come across a gold mine. During the Mekong Exploration Commission, French surveyors realized the potential treasure they came across. The Mekong Exploration Commission saw Southeast Asia “As a highway of commerce with the markets of inland China, and as a slipway for extracting the minerals and forest produce of the intervening lands.” Furthermore, this furnished an entry point “into continental Asia” and redeemed “the fortunes of the struggling colony in Saigon and endowing France with the potential for an eastern empire of its own.”

In an 1886 article for *Century*, Augustine Heard described the land of Vietnam as rich and of “surpassing fertility” due to being “abundantly watered by the great river Meikong, which with its subsidiary streams traverses in every direction.”

According to the British magazine *Spectator*, Indochina was too good to be true:

Statesmen cannot be indifferent to the magnificence of the prize…It is more than two-thirds the size of France, is accessible by three splendid rivers… and is splendidly fertile almost throughout. The forests are full of teak, the mountains overflow with minerals, and the plains, under the rudest culture, produce everything cultivated in the tropics. The reservoirs of earth-oil rival those of Pennsylvania, and there are large fields of coal.

To the French, Vietnam resembled paradise, and was the perfect place for the French to colonize. Not only was Vietnam in a prime location for opening up trade in the

---

11 Augustin Heard, “France and Indo-China,” *Century* 32, no. 3 (July 1886): 418, [http://digital.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=cent;cc=cent;rgn=full%20text;idno=cent0032-3;didno=cent0032-3;view=image;seq=428;node=cent0032-3%3A14;page=root;size=100](http://digital.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=cent;cc=cent;rgn=full%20text;idno=cent0032-3;didno=cent0032-3;view=image;seq=428;node=cent0032-3%3A14;page=root;size=100).
12 Ibid, 420.
Pacific, but the rich resources and fertile lands could only help increase the French Empire’s income. Because the Vietnamese landscape was lush, green, and abundant with natural resources, French politicians and officials jumped at the opportunity to colonize the country and civilize its people. According to Alice Conklin, French “publicists, and subsequently politicians, declared that their government alone among the Western states had a special mission to civilize the indigenous peoples now coming under its control – what the French called their mission civilsatrice.” As a result the French made large investments in Indochina, opening up schools teaching the French curriculum and establishing Vietnam as one of its main colonies.

The United States Department of Defense began to feel the same way as the French did back in 1886 regarding the prosperity of the land and people. In 1962, the Department of Defense published A Pocket Guide to Vietnam: 1962, which like the French colonizers before them, saw Vietnam’s tropical plants and resources as having great importance and economic potential:

Its [Vietnam’s] abundant rice crop, locally-grown vegetables, and fish from the richly stoked seas at its door make the country largely self-sustaining in food. A major export is rubber. Although the war ravaged the large rubber plantations and some of this acreage has not been reclaimed, rubber is still a very important product. Lacquer from Vietnam has always been highly prized on the foreign market… Tea, coffee, and quinine are grown in the high plateaus, which also produce cinnamon, timber, raw silk, vegetables, and vegetable dyes. Other Vietnamese products are corn, sugar cane, copra, tobacco, and mint oil. When engaging with the local inhabitants, U.S. servicemen and women were constantly reminded by pocketbooks and their superiors that respect and manners were a large part

---

of Vietnamese society: “Wherever you go, remember that Vietnam is a land of dignity and reserve. Your good manners, thoughtfulness, and restrained behavior will be appreciated by the Vietnamese.” By examining the actions taken by the United States, one could conclude the Americans were looking to expand their imperial power. However, this was not the case, and the ultimate goal of the United States was different than the French. France looked to exploit the resources of Vietnam for economic gain and establish a colonial relationship; the United States aimed to establish a new modern capitalist state free from communist influence.

As the French - Indochina War raged on and American financial support for the war surged, Americans took a critical view of the French. In 1951, *Time* magazine reported that the French military was “dizzily off balance,” and the soldiers were “hiding their heads in the sand.” French soldiers claimed the war was a lost cause, and South Vietnamese citizens began to change “Viet Nam piasters into Ho Chi Minh’s currency.” Both the French and Southern Vietnamese “agreed that Hanoi would be in Ho’s hands by year’s end.” On the other hand, Americans depicted the Vietnamese as a people with strong potential that were being misguided by the French. When the French first began to train Vietnamese soldiers for conflict against the “Indo-China” rebels, the American media praised their resiliency for keeping “their organization intact.” The media also commended their courage and tenacity for being able to “kill several-hundred of the enemy in close fighting” despite their defeat in an encounter with northern rebels. As the United States invested more into Vietnam, more Americans began to take an interest

---

15 Ibid, 1
in Vietnamese culture and American propaganda painted the Vietnamese as a people needing American guidance. A 1954 event held at the Carnegie Endowment International Center, displayed Vietnamese culture and allowed patrons to witness crafts never before seen in the United States. There was even a chance for visitors to sample Vietnamese Cuisine.18

According to historian Robert Dean, American political leaders perceived South Vietnam as “an idealized republican small producer democracy” throughout the early 1950s.19 The belief in the domino theory, prompted the United States to fund over seventy-five percent of the France’s war expenditures as aid increased from 650 million in 1953 to 1.28 billion dollars in 1954 alone.20 After the 1954 Geneva Conference, the United States perceived Vietnam as a land of potential prosperity and modernity. President Dwight Eisenhower made it clear to future South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem, that the Vietnamese people would have full support of the American government, going as far as to describe it as a humanitarian effort:

> Your recent requests for aid to assist in the formidable project of the movement of several hundred thousand loyal Vietnamese citizens away from areas which are passing under a de facto rule and political ideology which they abhor, are being fulfilled. I am glad that the United States is able to assist in this humanitarian effort. We have been exploring ways and means to permit our aid to Viet-Nam to be more effective and to make a greater contribution to the welfare and stability of the Government of Viet-Nam … I am, accordingly, instructing the American Ambassador to Viet-Nam to examine with you in your capacity as Chief of Government, bow an intelligent program of American aid given directly to your Government can serve to assist Viet-Nam in its present hour of trial.”21

---

Following the “election” of Premier Ngo Dinh Diem in 1955 and millions of dollars of “humanitarian aid” in the late 1950s and early 1960s, South Vietnam seemed to be flourishing in the eyes of American politicians and the media. South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem was hailed in 1959 as a “tough little miracle man.” Newsweek’s Ernest Lindley proclaimed that Diem was “one of the ablest free Asian leaders” and Americans should “take pride in our support.” Two years later, one American visitor noted that the stores and markets of Saigon were “filled with consumer goods.” The visitor also claimed that “the streets are filled with new motor scooters and expensive automobiles; and in the upper-income residential areas new and pretentious housing is being built.” Health services became more accessible to the population with the “expansion of health facilities” including hospitals being built and over 3,000 village health stations being established. According to Secretary Dean Rusk in 1963, North Vietnam was falling behind South Vietnam in industry, education, and overall standard of living despite its advantages of being more developed:

Although North Viet-Nam inherited most of the industry of Viet-Nam, and although its population is larger, it fell rapidly behind South Viet-Nam in food production, the number of children in school, and in standards of living. While per capita food production rose 20 percent in the South, it fell 10 percent in the North.

---

Upon arriving at Saigon in 1964, U.S. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. issued a public statement that described Saigon as “a city full of color and fascination.” Lodge further described the Vietnamese with respect, even comparing them to Americans:

> We think of the Vietnamese people as embodying a very old civilization and thus respecting all that pertains to learning and culture while, at the same time, taking part with modern energy in the struggle of life. We recall in particular the words of Doctor Dooley: “Americans never fail to like the Viet-Namese…It is impossible not to respect their driving compulsion for freedom… You have organized yourselves for war; you have reclaimed hamlet after hamlet from the aggressor; you are coming to the day when your country will be at peace and will stand as a beacon of hope to other nations, thus showing what a well thought out plan, animated by courage and sacrifice can accomplish. In America there is respect for culture and learning. There is also admiration for courage. Finally we, like you, believe in the dignity of the individual and his desire to be free. We believe also that to the aspirations of free men everywhere for a better life there is no upper limit. Vietnamese and Americans, therefore, have much in common.”

In 1961 President John F. Kennedy sent a letter to South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem assuring him that the United States was “prepared to help the Republic of Vietnam to protect its people and to preserve its independence” from communist insurgency. According to historian Fredrick Logevall, “vast quantities of the best American weapons, jet fighters, helicopters, and armored personnel carriers arrived, along with thousands of additional military advisers.” An article in the *New York Times* by Homer Bigart thought the various counter-insurgency operations by the United States made it seem as if war was inevitable in this land of peace and serenity. Bigart reported that by February 1962, “Nearly 5,000 United States military personnel are in South

---

26 Ibid.  
28 Logevall, Embers of War, 704.
Vietnam and more are pouring in." A decade ago, Vietnam was in turmoil after being mishandled by the French and their puppet emperor Bao Dai.

**Contradictions and Second Guessing**

It became increasingly evident that the United States was prepping for war, since by the end of 1963, there were over 16,000 military advisers in Vietnam. Now under the leadership of Diem, with U.S. financial and military support, Vietnam was headed in the right direction and seemed as if a solution had been found. Additionally, the public statements regarding respect for the Vietnamese and declarations of confidence in the South Vietnamese government was propaganda as the actions taken by the United States said otherwise. It was very apparent that the United States wanted to project an image of South Vietnam as one with a modern democracy with a dignified people, that was worthy of respect. Yet at this time, the Diem Regime was becoming increasingly dictatorial and holding public executions for those that spoke out against the South Vietnamese government. Rufus Phillips who worked for Edward Geary Lansdale’s team in Vietnam during the late 1950s and returned again in 1962 as part of the Agency for International Development, stated the United States “supported the creation and development of a secret, elite political party called the Can Lao” and claimed “It was almost a carbon copy of the Communist party as an organizational weapon.”

Ngo Dinh Diem’s presidency was also becoming more and more like a dictatorship. Ngo Vinh Long, who was raised in Vietnam recalled “Every time we went

---

to the movies there was Diem’s picture and we had to stand up and sing.”

Public executions were common and people in the West denied it. Executions by guillotines were advertised in many newspapers, which Diem controlled, published pictures of this. Military outposts in the Vietnamese country displayed the heads of accused Communists proudly and encouraged photos:

In 1959, when I went around with the map teams there were many military outposts where they summarily chopped off the heads of people they thought were Communists. They put the heads on stakes right in front of their outposts, sometimes with two cigarettes up the nostrils. They even invited people to take pictures of it. They were very proud of themselves. It was a really savage time. It was like back to the Middle Ages.

Not only does this brutal display of force shatter the image of a peaceful and serene people, but also makes the South Vietnamese government look barbaric and totalitarian; not the modernized democracy that the United States was backing and pouring resources into.

In addition to contradicting what the United States was hoping to accomplish in South Vietnam by supporting the Diem regime, their actions towards the farmers spoke even louder. Beginning in 1959 the rural populations of Vietnam were herded together and put in “newly constructed villages” called “argovilles,” which eventually became known as “strategic hamlets.”

Ngo Vinh Long, who grew up in Vietnam before leaving in 1964, recalled that these hamlets “created tremendous destruction to peasant life” and were surrounded with “barbed-wire fences, moats, and spikes.” The U.S. would also destroy their rice fields and farmlands with defoliants to prevent the NLF from making

---

33 Ngo Vinh Long, in Patriots, 58.
34 Ibid, 57.
use of them and forcing peasants to begin anew. According to Long this “caused tremendous dislocation, even starvation.”

Many Vietnamese were resistant to being removed from their land as it was all they had. In fact, some returned back to them despite being in dangerous area since being declared a free-fire zone. Phan Xuan Sinh, who was part of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) recalled that one old couple kept returning their farmlands despite being relocated to a strategic hamlet. When questioned why he kept returning the elderly man replied, “All my ancestors are buried here and this is our land. We’re not going to leave.” Sinh was shocked to hear this at first but then realized “the land was unimaginably important to Vietnamese peasants. They were extremely poor and the land was all they had, all they loved.” Despite the United States claiming they were looking out for the Vietnamese’s best interest and treating them with respect, they were removing them away from the lands they were tied to and destroying it.

In addition to forced relocation from their homelands, the conditions in strategic hamlets were appalling. When visiting the Ka Rom hamlet, Ngo Vinh Long recalled that “two hundred people had starved to death” in a month’s time. The health of the inhabitants were also in atrocious condition as “Their hair was crinkled and brown, their skin was dark and flaky, and they smelled horrible.” When inquired about this, the U.S embassy and Saigon government refused to do anything, responding “this is how we are going to defeat the Communists,” and South Vietnamese propaganda brushed it aside, claiming it was a “sickness from heaven.”

36 Phan Xuan Sinh, in Patriots, 26.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid
Back in the United States, they was a growing number of officials were skeptical about getting too involved in Vietnam, and worried that the United States was stepping into quicksand. For example, ambassador to India John Kenneth Galbraith. Galbraith was uncomfortable with the idea of getting too involved in the “New Frontier,” and urged President Kennedy to not send combat units or deepen involvement in Vietnam for fear of the United States “being sunk under the rice fields.”39 In 1962, Galbraith sent a memorandum to President Kennedy about his concerns in Vietnam and mentioned the following considerations:

1. We have a growing military commitment. This could expand step by step into a major, long-drawn out indecisive military involvement.
2. We are backing a weak and, on the record, ineffectual government and a leader who as a politician may be beyond the point of no return.
3. There is consequent danger we shall replace the French as the colonial force in the area and bleed as the French did.
4. The political effects of some of the measures which pacification requires or is believed to require, including the concentration of population, relocation of villages, and the burning of old villages, may be damaging to those and especially to Westerners associated with it.
5. We fear that at some point in the involvement there will be a major political outburst about the new Korea and the new war into which the Democrats as so often before have precipitated us.
6. It seems at least possible that the Soviets are not particularly desirous of trouble in this part of the world and that our military reaction with the need to fall back on Chinese protection may be causing concern in Hanoi.40

According to analyst Daniel Ellsberg, the sentiments Galbraith felt were similar to what most Americans came to believe regarding the actions taken in Indochina: “For a great many, perhaps most Americans, visions of ‘quagmire…morass…quicksand…bog,’ along with the notion of ‘stumbling in’ have come to dominate their perceptions of America’s

position in the ‘Second Indochina War.”

Even Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev believed “[i]n South Vietnam, the U.S. had stumbled into a bog” and warned that Americans “would be mired down there a long time.”

In the early 1960s, there were a number of memorandum and research reports on the situation in Vietnam. While these reports highlighted positive feedback from the American military aid, almost all of them confirmed the fear of a long, drawn-out conflict being inevitable. In December of 1962, Roger Hilsman’s Research Memorandum argued that despite American military support and tactics being successful, the Viet Cong were not losing momentum:

[T]he Viet Cong has had to modify its tactics and perhaps set back its timetable. But the ‘national liberation war’ has not abated nor has the Viet Cong been weakened. On the contrary, the Viet Cong has expanded the size and enhanced the capability and organization of its guerrilla force--now estimated at about 23,000 in elite fighting personnel, plus some 100,000 irregulars and sympathizers. It still controls about 20 percent of the villages and about 9 percent of the rural population, and has varying degrees of influence among an additional 47 percent of the villages. Viet Cong control and communication lines to the peasant have not been seriously weakened and the guerrillas have thus been able to maintain good intelligence and a high degree of initiative, mobility, and striking power. Viet Cong influence has almost certainly improved in urban areas not only through subversion and terrorism but also because of its propaganda appeal to the increasingly frustrated non-Communist anti-Diem elements.

Fears of being trapped in a Vietnamese “bog” were confirmed in Hilsman’s report when it confirmed that the Viet Cong were preparing “for a long struggle” and taking measures “to maintain the present pace and diversity of its insurgent-subversive effort” against

---

41 Ibid, 48-9.
American intervention.\textsuperscript{43} He also claimed that the Viet Cong have only grown stronger in their military might and become even more organized:

Viet Cong capabilities have increased considerably during the past three years. In 1959 a relatively small but effective military-political apparatus operating largely in the Mekong River delta provinces, the Viet Cong has since grown into a formidable force operating throughout the countryside and even in many urban centers, including Saigon, the capital. In addition to increasing its numerical strength, the Viet Cong has significantly improved its military and political organization and its tactical, weapons, and subversive capabilities.\textsuperscript{44}

Not only did this report show that the Viet Cong was growing stronger and preparing for a long conflict, but they were doing so despite and because of the increase of American support and growing aggressiveness of the South Vietnamese forces.

A few months later in February 1963, additional reports confirmed the belief that the United States had stepped into quicksand despite some positive observations. In his memorandum to President Kennedy, Michael Forrestal claimed “The war in South Vietnam is clearly going better than it was a year ago.” Forrestal also reported, that the Viet Cong were more restricted in their movements and had trouble sustaining themselves:

The Viet Cong, in sum, are being hurt – they have somewhat less freedom of movement than they had a year ago, they apparently suffer acutely from lack of medicines, and in some very isolated areas they seem to be having trouble getting food.\textsuperscript{45}

American aid programs and the influx of military support had given “the Vietnamese military new confidence” and an increase in their assertiveness when engaging opposing forces. Infiltration and acquiring supplies from South Vietnam through sea and had also

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
been successfully blocked. However, the Viet Cong continued to flourish and recruit large numbers. Forrestal’s memorandum reported that the Viet Cong continued “to be aggressive and … extremely effective.” Since the start of 1963, Viet Cong forces “fought stubbornly and with telling results at Ap Bac, near My Tho” and showed their cunning by being able to escape “an elaborate trap in Tay Ninh province.” His memorandum continued to describe various examples of the Viet Cong’s resilience citing that there were able to fight “their way inside the perimeter of a U.S. Special Forces training camp at Plei Mrong, killing 39 of the trainee defenders and capturing 114 weapons” and “completely overran a strategic hamlet in Phu Yen province that was defended by a civil guard company in addition to the village militia.” All of this information led Forrestal to conclude that he was unsure that the United States was even winning, and that the United States had stepped into quicksand:

Our overall judgment, in sum, is that we are probably winning, but certainly more slowly than we had hoped. At the rate it is now going the war will last longer than we would like, cost more in terms of both lives and money than we anticipated, and prolong the period in which a sudden and dramatic event could upset the gains already made.\textsuperscript{48}

Nonetheless, President Kennedy stood his ground and defended the American policy in Indochina. At various speeches around the country, Kennedy justified the aid and expenditures being poured into Vietnam by citing national interest and preventing the spread of Communism:

I don’t see how we are going to be able, unless we are going to pull out of Southeast Asia and turn it over to the Communists, how we are going to be able to reduce very much our economic programs and military programs in South Viet-Nam, in Cambodia, in Thailand.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.
I think that unless you want to withdraw from the field and decide that it is in the national interest to permit that area to collapse, I would think that it would be impossible to substantially change it particularly, as we are in a very intensive struggle in those areas.

So I think we ought to judge the economic burden it places upon us as opposed to having the Communists control all of Southeast Asia with the inevitable effect that this would have on the security of India and, therefore, really begin to run perhaps all the way toward the Middle East. So I think that while we would all like to lighten the burden, I don't see any real prospect of the burden being lightened for the U.S. in Southeast Asia in the next year if we are going to do the job and meet what I think are very clear national needs.49

Not only were these reports foretelling of what awaited the United States military, but also similar to what French journalists described during the Indochina War, calling it a “bog.” Lucien Bodard even later published a book on the Indochina War calling it The Quicksand War: Prelude to Vietnam.50

**Tensions Rising**

As the pro-Catholic Diem Regime became more oppressive towards practitioners of Buddhism in South Vietnam, Buddhist monks rebelled. Known for their modest and pacifist nature, the Buddhist monks mounted a protest movement that not only shocked the South Vietnamese government, but also American intelligence services in 1963. Under former Chief of State Bao Dai, Buddhists were able to practice their religion openly without fear of persecution. When Ngo Dinh Diem, a Catholic, came into power, the United States circulated propaganda throughout North Vietnam that the Virgin Mary had returned to the South. Tensions between the Buddhists and the Diem regime reached a boiling point on the Buddha’s birthday of that year when Buddhists mounted a

massive protest in Hue against Diem’s ban on flying the Buddhist flag.\textsuperscript{51} The Diem regime responded by sending government troops who inadvertently fired into the crowds gathered. A number of Buddhists were killed in Hue, which led to additional protests that drew larger numbers. The Buddhists accused the South Vietnamese government of religious persecution –the South Vietnamese President denied the accusation and claimed the Viet Cong were behind the protests.\textsuperscript{52} As various demonstrations, protests, and hunger strikes attracted larger gatherings, the media coverage of the Buddhists in South Vietnam surged. This led to the American government growing increasingly apprehensive by the possible fall-out due to Diem’s actions.

Tensions between the Buddhists and South Vietnamese government fulminated on June 11, 1963. “Buddhist leadership tipped foreign correspondents” to gain publicity for their next demonstration.\textsuperscript{53} According to journalist Malcolm Browne, the forthcoming demonstration had more Buddhist monks and nuns than he had ever seen before. The women preparing and serving tea to onlookers wore white mourning dresses--some shedding tears. Joss sticks were lit, and a chant, described as “hypnotic,” began quietly, slowing becoming louder at an increased tempo.\textsuperscript{54} When the chanting stopped, a procession of monks and nuns moved to the intersection of Phan Dinh Phung and Le Van Duyet, where a car was waiting with three monks inside.

The first monks out of the car were young, bringing out a cushion and placing it in the middle of the intersection. As the monks made their way to the middle of the


\textsuperscript{53} Ibid, 114.

\textsuperscript{54} Browne, \textit{Patriots}, 68.
intersection, they aided an old monk, Thich Quang Duc, to the cushion. Positioning himself on the cushion, Duc sat in the lotus position, and one of the young monks poured gasoline all over him. After the young monks stepped back, Duc pulled out a box of matches, ignited one, and dropped it into his lap setting himself ablaze. Never flinching or crying out in pain, Duc remained in his position. Fire crews attempted to reach Duc, but his fellow monks held them back. When a fire truck made an effort to break through, a group of monks laid down in front of the wheels to impede its progress. As larger crowds gathered to see what was going on, the smell of burning human flesh filled the air. Photographers scrambled to take photos of what was going on, and others stood in shock of what they were witnessing. After sustaining his position for a number of minutes, Duc fell over in state of rigor mortis. With his body fully intact and unable to fit in a coffin, the monks placed him on top of a coffin and paraded him to the Xa-Loi pagoda. There the monks placed his body was on display for a number of hours before being cremated. Duc’s heart however, was removed and kept as a symbol of their insurrection. Images of Duc’s self-immolation “became front-page news around the world and, in many cases for the first time, readers began to wonder what was happening in Vietnam.”

According to a government document entitled, *History of the Vietnam War, 1962-1964: U.S. Policy 1962-1964 (Planned Phased Withdrawal of U.S. Forces)*, the United States felt that this protest was only the beginning, as opposition to the Diem government began to turn violent:

---

56 Ibid.
A series of incidents beginning early in May revealed the deep Divisions between militant Buddhist factions who purported to speak for the bulk of the South Vietnamese population, and the Government. Lack of popular support for the Diem regime had now turned to open opposition. As passions flared and Buddhist activism was met with increasingly severe countermeasures, violence grew and grew more serious. The U.S. began to be apprehensive about the possible consequences of the Diem government falling as the result of a coup. By early July, the crisis was recognized as serious at the highest levels of the U.S. government.58

This was only the beginning of problems for the United States and Diem regime. After the immolation took place, other resistance occurred. Frances Fitzgerald called the Buddhist resistance a “call to rebellion.”59 In his book, America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975, George Herring writes the “disaffected urban population of South Vietnam responded.” According to Herring, “Students in the universities and high schools, including some Catholics, joined in the mass protests, and discontent quickly spread to the army.”60 The fire of anger and resentment towards the government of South Vietnam only grew bigger as Madame Nhu, Diem’s sister-in-law, called the immolations “barbeques,” and offered additional gasoline and matches.61 As news and coverage of these incidents hit the Unites States, many Americans for the first time began to wonder what was going on in Vietnam. In 1965, after the Presidential election, Lyndon Johnson committed to a major escalation of U.S. troops in South Vietnam.

60 Herring, America’s Longest War, 115.
CHAPTER 2

SWALLOWED BY PARADISE...SPIT OUT BY WAR

As American combat troops in large numbers began to first set foot in Vietnam during 1965, the land did not look war torn at all despite the years of constant fighting.\(^\text{62}\) In fact, former infantry officer Philip Caputo recalled being shocked by what he saw when he first arrived at a camp outside of Da Nang. The difference between what Caputo was told by his skipper back in Okinawa, Japan and what the countryside looked like left him flabbergasted: “Vietnam, from what I could see of it, did not look like a war-torn country. The ‘Communist stronghold’ in front of us reminded me of a tropical park. Groves of bamboo and coconut palms rose out of rice paddies like islands from a colored sea.”\(^\text{63}\) Similarly, Lieutenant General Harold G. Moore remembered the Central Highlands of Vietnam was “a beautiful region; from the heavily populated coastal areas with their white sandy beaches and flat rice paddies.”\(^\text{64}\) With the beautiful landscape and leafy bright vegetation, Vietnam was what the 1962 U.S. Department of Defense pocket guide made it seem: “a land of dignity and reserve.”\(^\text{65}\) In an interview years after the war, Private Mark Smith recalled that the Binh Dinh Province looked as if it was “a Chinese silk-screen print come to life” with mountain ranges rising out of nowhere.\(^\text{66}\)

When soldiers saw the land for the first time, it often shattered the image imprinted in their minds from their training. Many troops came in with the mentality that

\(^{62}\) The author acknowledges that in hindsight most memoirs written must be read as critically as all sources. For the dissertation, I would also use diaries or journals written during the war to add strength to my arguments.


\(^{64}\) Harold G. Moore and Joseph L. Galloway, We Were Soldiers Once…and Young (New York: Random House, 1992) 42.

\(^{65}\) U.S. Dept. of Defense, Pocket Guide to Vietnam, 4

“red hordes” of Communist troops would be scattered all over the countryside. When Caputo further reflected on the “tropical park,” he noticed that the only physical manifestation of war in Vietnam was what the Americans had brought themselves. In his personal account, he states “I scanned the countryside with my binoculars, looking for red hordes, but the only signs of war were our own Phantoms, roaring northward with their bomb racks full.”

Due to technological advancements made during the Cold War, the United States brought modern warfare to the countryside, utilizing helicopters, bombers, and new machines of war to their advantage. In an interview, Private Mark Smith recalled “one of the things that struck me first upon arriving in Vietnam, was that it was the most beautiful country I have ever seen, and the one aspect of it that stuck with me the most, is the intensity of the colors, is the greens… they almost vibrated they were that intense.”

In the eyes of the American soldiers, they were at war in a beautiful country, not one that was covered in chaos, destruction, or Communist hordes.

The notion that Vietnam was a beautiful country with a respectable, innocent people was overwhelmingly popular among the troops when they first landed. However, this would not last forever. In summer of 1965, Lieutenant General Moore took a tour of the “beautiful region,” and visited what had been a major battle ground between the French and Vietnamese. At this site he learned that despite being in a country which resembled tranquility and peace, American troops should never underestimate the foe they were in combat against:

We walked the battleground, where a bullet-pocked six foot-high stone obelisk declares in French and Vietnamese: ‘here on June 24, 1954, soldiers of France and Vietnam died for their countries…’ Plumely and I walked the battleground

---

67 Phantom F-4s were supersonic fighter-bombers used by the U.S. Navy and Air Force; Caputo, A Rumor of War, 54
68 “Interview with Private Mark Smith,” Vietnam: A Television History, WGBH.
for two hours. Bone fragments, parts of weapons and vehicles, webgear and shell fragments and casings still littered the ground. From that visit I took away one lesson: Death is the price you pay for underestimating this tenacious enemy. 69

This was a sobering observation made by Moore. But, the first soldiers who came to Vietnam in 1965 felt that the Vietnamese who lived in the countryside were not the enemy. Rather than Communist pawns, they were seen as a peaceful people who kept to themselves. The Department of Defense’s *A Pocket Guide to Vietnam: 1962*, described these Vietnamese as a people who pledged no allegiance to the Viet Cong or South Vietnamese government. Instead their main concern was tending to their farm, families, and religion,

These people –the villagers, the rice farmers, the rubber plantation workers –have had little feelings of identification with either the Viet Cong or the central Government. The Vietnamese farmer lives in a small world limited by the bamboo hedge around his village. His loyalties are to his family, his land, and his spiritual world. 70

The Department of Defense’s description of the Vietnamese farmers also stated that they have been harassed by the Viet Cong and their future was in jeopardy: “The Viet Cong have neutralized the people’s support for the Government in some rural areas by a combination of terror and political action. One of the continuing programs of the central Government has been to provide better security and living conditions…the Communists seek to destroy…their Government.” 71 Should the communists have taken over the southern half of Vietnam, farmers would be forced to give up their land and participate in collectivization, establishing a face for whom the American troops were defending.

Contradictory to this however, as mentioned earlier, was 1962, the United States was

---

69 Moore, *We Were Soldiers Once*, 42-3.
forcing Vietnamese farmers off their land into strategic hamlets, destroying their fields, and turning them into free-fire zones.

In addition to having to fight on multiple fronts against the enemy, one of the greatest challenges for the American combatant would be trekking through Vietnam’s terrain. While troops received training in tropical areas and were educated on interactions in Vietnam, they were not prepared for the complexity of the situation regarding the local inhabitants or the nature surrounding them. Photographs show that the vegetation of Vietnam in the early 1960s was very thick and unmanaged. It was common for troops to encounter grass that was waist high, which slowed movement greatly. Also, troops would have to venture into thickly forested areas, sometime so thick that the sun would be blocked out from hitting the floor.  

All of these factors took a heavy toll on advancing troops, and by as early as June in 1965, the nature of Vietnam began to be described as “a flat, eerie jungle, thick with scrub trees and tall grass, hot and wet in intermittent rain, strong tropical sun” with the air being filled with “dragonflies and sniper bullets.” The thick jungles and forested areas of Vietnam changed the way American soldiers fought. Bayonets, thought to have been useful for close quarters combat, were practically ineffective. The *New York Times* published an article in 1965 in which U.S. troops replaced their bayonets “after a savage encounter that resembled Indian fighting on the early American frontier.” The article further states that troops claimed that “In a jungle war…bayonets are unwieldy.” American troops found more

---

72 See Appendix Image 1
success wielding items such as hatchets or machetes to cut through the vegetation.\textsuperscript{74} This early observation by the \textit{New York Times} concludes that the fighting in the jungles of Vietnam was different than that of any other war encountered by American troops. The bayonet, one of the standard weapons that American troops had relied on since the Revolutionary War, was now made obsolete due to the harsh terrain of Vietnam.\textsuperscript{75}

In January 1965, the U.S. government painted the Vietnam’s landscape in a positive light, and soldiers’ memoirs seemed to agree. But by mid-year, troops were beginning to hate the land as the shock of beauty wore off. Philip Caputo recalled that while the land was still beautiful, it was deadly: “most impressive was the view, especially when you looked westward. Happy Valley was as beautiful as it was dangerous, a quilt of emerald rice paddies and dusty fields broken by the vagrant lines of paddy dikes and palm groves where the villages were.” In his personal account, he proclaimed he “had never seen such a country, so lush and enchanting in the daytime that it reminded me of Shangri-La, that fictional land of eternal youth. But night always brought the sound of artillery, a practical reminder that this was Vietnam, where youth was merely expendable.”\textsuperscript{76} The psychological impact of the deafening noise produced by America’s own arsenal may have had a large impact on the way servicemen and women saw the Vietnamese, and the enemy produced even more terrifying noises. At night, U.S. troops listened for yelling which signaled Vietnamese soldiers charging their positions. Vietnam appeared in memoirs as a treacherous place filled with dangerous landmines,

\textsuperscript{74} “G.I.’s Use Hatchets in a Jungle Fight against Vietcong,” \textit{New York Times} 13 December 1965, ISSN: 117055326. The author acknowledges that there is plenty to be said on landscapes merging with natives.


\textsuperscript{76} Caputo, \textit{A Rumor of War}, 68.
muddy swaps that slowed progress, and trap-laden jungles waiting for troops to walk through.\textsuperscript{77} In fact, Taylor E. Wise in, \textit{Eleven Bravo: A Skytrooper’s Memoir of War in Vietnam}, recalled that grunts “lived to escape the jungle, which was the grunts prison.”\textsuperscript{78} Photographs of the land reveal that sometimes troops would be forced down a narrow path covered with vegetation giving the impression that soldiers were imprisoned. Figure 1 of the Appendix, while taken in 1969, perfectly illustrates this. American troops are walking through an area thick with vegetation on each side, and the swamp water is up to their mid-thigh. The vegetation is also slanting over their heads, holding them in and restricting their movement greatly. The water is also muddy and unclear, preventing them from seeing if there are any traps at the bottom. On either side there is no escape; they have no choice but to remain partially submerged and continue forward as they carry their wounded comrade.\textsuperscript{79}

Not only did the jungles of Vietnam provide cover for the Viet Cong, but they also were rigged with barb, traps, and explosives which impeded troop progress. While in the jungles of Vietnam, trooper Jimmy Bass was amazed with how much he could hear, and how little he could see as he referred to the “stupid jungles.”\textsuperscript{80} In fact, the thick vegetation and tall grasses would greatly slow down troop progress. This was vital for exfiltration, especially when moving out wounded soldiers in combat situations. Also when it was required for helicopters to land, they would need a clear and open area which could be troublesome to find, especially when the troops were engaged in thick jungle

\textsuperscript{77} Raymond, “In Zone D,” \textit{New York Times}.  
\textsuperscript{80} “Interview with Jimmy Bass,” \textit{Vietnam: A Television History}, WGBH.
warfare. In Figure 2 in the Appendix, one can see how tall and thick the grass was. It is above their knees in some cases and requires high steps to maneuver through it properly. It should also be pointed out that the troops are headed to a helicopter for EVAC, and the rotors are causing the grass to be blown. Had there been no wind coming from the helicopter, the grass would be even higher, going up to perhaps the troops’ waistlines. Furthermore this image also shows that the trees and tree line looked very similar to what people could find in a park or heavily forested area back in the United States. This photograph shows how thick the surrounding vegetation was as well. In looking at the trees, it becomes very difficult to see past them showing how enemy troops could easily be hiding among the vegetation.81

F.D. Newman described trekking through the jungles as “tiresome and harsh.”82 According to one account, troops endured trekking through severe terrains using machetes to handle vegetation, and dealt with “leeches suck[ing] at you,” as “Branches whip into your face.” Often the vegetation was so dense and thick, it was difficult to pinpoint where fire was coming from: “The slick green foliage ahead offered no clue as to where the fire had come from.”83 As a result, artillery and bombing strikes on heavily forested areas would play a huge role in the war. According to Barry Weisberg in *Ecocide in Indochina: The Ecology of War*, the Associated Press reported that the United States dropped 2,825,824 tons of explosives on Vietnam by September of 1968. This was “twice the tonnage dropped on all of Europe during World War II. The amounts to

---

83 Ibid.
nearly 180 pounds of explosives for every person in North and South Vietnam as well as upward of 20 tons of explosives for each square mile.” According to George Black, the “U.S. Air Force dropped 100,000 tons of bombs on the surrounding mountains, stripped the forests bare with Agent Orange and incinerated them with napalm,” in operations to defend of Khe Sanh alone. In addition to the immense bombings, there was also a massive amount of herbicides dropped all over South Vietnam. Black writes that “Between 1961 and 1971, about 20 million gallons of herbicides were dropped on South Vietnam.” Not only was this disastrous to the landscape and farmlands that the Vietnamese were tied to, but also had lingering effects that exposed “as many as 4.8 million people to [the] toxic chemicals” in the decades after the war.

According to a 1967 special report from the Japanese newspaper Asahi, scorched earth tactics was a large part of the American strategy in the country side, particularly with farmlands and hamlets. This report states that it was standard operating procedure “to pound the place with bombs and shells with unreserved thoroughness before infantry men move in.” Journalist Katsuichi Honda described that “by the time ground troops” arrived, the “hamlets [were] almost wiped out.” Honda further describes that

Nearly 70% of the houses were burnt down, and some of them were still sending up smoke. Here and there along the road, there were pitfalls. Sharpened bamboo sticks were planted in the bottom of the holes. Most of these pitfalls were not covered. It may be that the suddenness of the attack did not allow them time to do so. All of the peasants seemed to have evacuated, and there was not a figure to be seen. Judging from the yards surrounded by trimmed hedges and amply planted with fruit trees, it seemed that the hamlet had been comparatively well-to-do.

86 Ibid, 19.
88 Ibid, 8-9.
The report also states that majority of the fields at this hamlet were ready for harvesting rice, but large portions of it were destroyed by the artillery fire in an effort to secure the area before confiscating the rice. This was to done ‘before the Viet Cong should get hold of the rice’ harvested by the villagers.”89

After continuous heavy amounts of bombing and artillery strikes, “all that jungle green became as monotonous as the beige of the desert or the white of the Arctic.”90 The goal of destroying Vietnam’s landscape was not only to take away cover for the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army, but also to demoralize the people into submission. According to Major Vernon Gillespie, “American strategists planned to use firepower to break the will of the enemy.”91 As mentioned earlier, the Vietnamese were very tied to land; especially the farmers. By destroying the land, American strategists hoped the will of the Communist forces would eventually subside and surrender. This led to the massive destruction of ground cover, eliminating any possible areas of hiding; especially the heavy jungle areas. With massive bombs and raging fires of napalm engulfing heavy jungle areas, often times there would be little to no vegetation left. This made it much easier for combatants to spot mines and other traps as their area of vision was substantially improved. Gillespie later reflected that because of “awesome firepower,” the thick forested jungles and lands of Vietnam “really looked like the moonscape when we were through.”92 Jimmy Bass recalled that when he flew over Vietnam, that the once rich, lush, and green landscape was being decimated: “Looking at the countryside, [there

---

89 Ibid, 8.
90 Caputo, A Rumor of War, 69.
91 “Interview with Major Vernon Gillespie,” Vietnam: A Television History, WGBH.
92 “Interview with Major Vernon Gillespie,” Vietnam: A Television History, WGBH.
were] bomb craters, land craters everywhere… the land was covered in bomb craters.”

One photograph taken by Larry Burrows of Life magazine shows that after an artillery strike and bombing run, the land resembled something similar to a desert. There was hardly any greenery, save for a few strands of elephant grass. The landscape has turned yellow, brown, and black in some places. Some of it is on fire and a significant part of the land is smoldering. Behind the troops, the once green and lush environment full of tall grasses and thick vegetation has been replaced by ash, dirt, and a smoking landscape. When comparing this to the image from 1966, one can see that the land looks nothing like it did a few short years ago. In addition to the land becoming a moonscape, it was also tainted by the defoliants and herbicides, rendering the land unusable. Also, “Ten percent of the munitions that rained down” did not detonate and remained in the land as unexploded ordnance. Not only did this cause problems for the farmers, but also turned their own fields into death traps. It has been estimated that “about 40,000 have been killed by unexploded ordnance since the war’s end, with another 65,000 maimed.”

Because the jungles and surrounding areas were heavily laden with traps, explosives, and landmines, how the United States combatants viewed the local Vietnamese people took a turn for the worse. As troops began to be killed as a result of the ambushes and traps, they needed someone to point the finger at: and that would be the local inhabitants. According to Private Bill Ehrhart, troops started to become suspicious of the farmers whom they were supposed to protect. In an interview, he claimed that as

---

93 “Interview with Jimmy Bass,” in Ibid.
96 Ibid, 17.
people started to perish as a result of landmines, suspicions led to those tending the land as they would never flinch after an explosion; almost as if they knew what was going to happen: “After people are dying and getting hit by mines, and you see the locals never get hit by mines or stepping on them, you start to think maybe they are the enemy, maybe they are avoiding where all the landmines are.”97 Ehrhart later confessed that troops began to fire upon suspicious people before asking questions (often times including groups of innocent women and children): “These are the same people…the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) and VC (Viet Cong) are the same people, the same race…I started to wonder why is this? You begin to start to think they are all the enemy…you begin to shoot first ask questions later.”98 This was very similar to racialization and dehumanization of the Japanese during World War II. The Japanese were perceived as “demons, savages, subhumans, and beasts.” During the Pacific Campaign, troops were ordered to “Kill Japs, kill Japs, kill more Japs.” In a letter to his wife, General Joseph Stilwell described the Japanese as “cockroaches” and was graphic about his feelings towards them: “When I think of how these bowlegged cockroaches have ruined our calm lives it makes me want to wrap Jap guts around every lamppost in Asia.”99

As Vietnam’s landscape was being decimated and combatant opinions of the Vietnamese took a dive, so did the American public towards the war effort. Various stories, news reels and images of the war revealed that the American mission to save Vietnam was hypocritical and destructive. Special reports by Life, Time, and the New

97 “Interview with Private Bill Ehrhart,” Vietnam: A Television History, WGBH.
98 “Interview with Private Bill Erhart,” Vietnam: A Television History, WGBH
York Times that inform the public of the operations going on in Vietnam, caused many to see that the United States was not saving the Vietnamese or preserving a democracy at all. One article in particular from New York Times in 1967 was very critical of the policy makers and their decisions regarding the Vietnam War and accused them of backing up a dictatorial regime: “Our policy makers have distorted history to justify our intervention in a civil conflict to supposedly defend a free nation against external aggression; actually we are backing a dictatorial group in Saigon against a competing group backed by a dictatorial group in the north.” As a result of other news reports and images that expose the reality of the war, Americans begin to realize that this “humanitarian mission,” as coined by President Eisenhower, was the exact opposite. Instead, the same people who the United States promised to protect were being punished and treated as guilty until proven innocent.

In 1968, anti-war sentiment grew during the Tet Offensive. Occurring between January and February, the Tet Offensive hit every major city and command center in South Vietnam, and had been the largest strategic operation taken by any side during the war. While this may not have been a strategic victory for the communist forces, this was a moral victory for them. After witnessing the horrors of Tet Offensive first hand, Chuck Searcy recalled that he began to question the mission the United States had taken in Vietnam: “It didn’t take long to see that what I’d been told about America’s role in the war was distortions, exaggerations and lies…Although ‘lies’ implies malice.

---

Like so many things Americans do, we had good intentions, but I saw very quickly that they had gone awry.”

The images that arose out of this attack were powerful making it into magazines such as *Life* and *Time*. One particular image captured by John Olson captures the devastation of Vietnam. Behind the troops, there are remnants of what may have been a village. The American soldier leading the unit has his clothes torn and by the looks on his fellow troops, they have seen much combat. Surrounding them is nothing but rubble. The trees and landscape have been completely destroyed and it is hard to tell if what is left is one building or several as nothing is left untouched by the attack. Furthermore, the expression on the faces of the troops is that of fear and concern; they have no idea what is lying in front of them or what they will encounter next. The only one who looks to be holding on to his composure strongly is the one yelling out orders. This powerful image captures the intensity that was the Tet Offensive, and showed Americans the cost and deadliness of the war. Furthermore, this another distinctive aspect of the Tet Offensive is the destruction of towns and urban landscapes that occur in the attack.

**A Contaminating Experience**

As the public became increasingly divided on the war, the American troop’s resentment towards the Vietnamese increased. Soon many US troops began to see the Vietnamese as subhuman, and as it becomes more apparent that their job is centered on the killing of Vietnamese rather than claiming territory or protecting citizens, wartime atrocities occur more frequently. In his personal account of combat experience, Bill

---

103 See Appendix Image 3.
Ehrhart viewed Vietnamese people as subhuman and foreign from anything he ever encountered when he first arrived in Vietnam. In particular, it was the smell that overpowered him:

The first thing that struck me about Vietnam was the smell: a sharp, pungent odor compounded of cooking fires, fish sauce, rice fields fertilized with human and animal excrement, water buffalo, chickens, unwashed bodies, and I don’t know what all else, but it clawed violently at my nose and caught fire in my lungs. It was awful. It permeated everything.  

According to historian Christian Appy, American troops described the air in Vietnam as rushing in “like poison, hot and choking.” One soldier recalled the smell and heat being the most intense: “I caught a whiff of the jungles, something dead there. I was not prepared for the heat and smell.” In *Working-Class War*, some of the American soldiers’ first impressions of Vietnam, “describe an intense and shocking heat: ‘like stepping into a sauna’ or ‘walking into a blast furnace’ –‘The sweat just popped.’” Jim Barret recalled that the country smelled like feces: “The first thing I noticed when we got off the plane at Cam Ranh Bay was the smell. It smelled like—the whole country smelled like—well, it smelled like shit. Like you just walked into a bathroom that hadn’t been cleaned properly.” As a result U.S. troops began to feel “defiled and unclean,” and possibly contributing to them seeing the whole war as “a contaminating experience.” These smells also contributed to how troops perceived the Vietnamese living in the countryside as well. Due to the smell of the area, Ehrhart began to develop resentful feelings for them and reflected “Jesus Christ, these people don’t even smell like human

---

107 Ibid, 128.
beings. And they were so little. So foreign.”


Appy, Working-Class War, 168.

Ibid, 28 and 163.

Nang to find shelter and food.” As more and more villages and homes were being destroyed by U.S. troops, increasing amounts of Vietnamese were forced to turn to Saigon run-refugee camps for survival. An American aid worker recalled these camps were “more like concentration camps than the attractive-sounding ‘return to village programs’, as they are called by the Government. Conditions in these camps are appalling.”\textsuperscript{112} The images of American troops burning down Vietnamese villagers’ homes were extremely popular and many believed that it was standard operating procedure. In fact, Japanese journalist Katsuichi Honda was in shock when he did not see troops setting fire to one of the houses when he accompanied a contingent of U.S. soldiers: “One thing struck me as unusual. In spite of the 30% of the houses still left unburnt, these American soldiers did not set fire to them. In all cases I had witnessed, hamlets considered as belonging to liberated districts had been burnt down 100%, without an exception.”\textsuperscript{113}

**Napalm Sticks to Kids**

According to Nick Turse in his book *Kill Anything that Moves*, some units would compete against each other for the higher body count, and it became common for American troops to kill groups of civilians with their reasoning being that small groups of civilians could be logged in with enemy deaths. Therefore, it became increasingly typical for patrols to plant weapons on dead civilians in order to avoid questioning and adhere to standard operating procedure.\textsuperscript{114} For United States troops, it appeared that Vietnam was no longer a land of beauty and peace, but now a place where there were no rules or morals; it was complete chaos and enemies were everywhere. In fact, the First Cavalry

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid, 65
\textsuperscript{113} Honda, *A Voice from the Villages*, 9.
\textsuperscript{114} Turse, *Kill Anything that Moves*, 48.
Division wrote a song which described this mentality showing the utter brutality American troops were showing the Vietnamese:

We shoot the sick, the young, the lame,
We do our best to kill and maim,
Because the kills count all the same,
Napalm sticks to kids.

Ox cart rolling down the road,
Peasants with a heavy load,
They’re all VC when the bombs explode,
Napalm sticks to kids 115

War atrocities in Vietnam were a common occurrence; the boundaries of civilian and enemy had been blurred, and as stated by the above song, all dead Vietnamese are Viet Cong. The most notorious of these acts would be the My Lai Massacre, in which over four hundred Vietnamese civilians were brutally slaughtered. Despite false reports being filed in a major top down cover-up that lasted twenty months, the piles “of civilian bodies with children clearly among them,” stood as a monument to the dehumanization and brutal treatment of the Vietnamese.116 One U.S. officer felt that if civilians were killed, it would send the communist forces a strong message, “So a few women and children get killed…Teach ‘em a damned good lesson. They’re all V. C. or at least helping them … you can’t convert them, only kill them.”117 This is a radical shift from the message United States propaganda was saying about the Vietnamese and how American troops were told to engage them. The United States told American soldiers the Vietnamese were a people that needed saving from the North, and demanded dignity and respect. As the land became decimated, the image and idea of a beautiful land and grateful people

116 There are numerous images of the piles, but they are too graphic to include. Turse, Kill Anything That Moves, 227-8.
was shattered. Now the American combatant saw the Vietnamese civilian as treacherous, untrustworthy, and beyond saving. There was no way to convert the Vietnamese in to a modern people free of communism; death was the only answer for them.

A popular memory of the Vietnam War was the burning of Vietnamese villages and mistreatment of the villagers. In Honda’s report, he noted that commanders of battalions often commented that “Cameramen always take pictures highlighting only the burning of the villages.” When interviewing an NBC-TV cameraman, he discovered that the images and videos being broadcast in the United States were often grim, and showed how “Villages were turned into hell wherever the American soldiers arrived” and often led to Americans seeing their troops as being cruel and heartless:

Heavy tanks and APC tanks enter a hamlet, marching in columns. American soldiers file out of the tanks and approach farmhouses. The inhabitants come out of their shelters. All are women, children and old people. They plead with the soldiers in a language which the latter did not understand. Brushing aside all their entreaties, the soldiers set fire to the houses with their lighters…the houses which have been completely dried up, are instantly tuned into pillars of fire. Wailing women and children. An old man about to run into a flaming house, trying to save what little he can. A housewife clinging to him in frantic efforts to keep him from the danger.\footnote{Honda, \textit{A Voice from the Villages}, 9.}

Videos and images similar to this were prevalent in the news and exposed the brutality of the war, with many thinking the treatment of the Vietnamese was “too merciless.”\footnote{Ibid.}

These also showed how the Vietnamese, who were originally seen as innocent and with respect, had now been treated as inhuman and without mercy.

When news and conditions of Vietnamese detainees reached the eyes and ears of the public, the International Committee of the Red Cross began an investigation touring sixty U.S. run detention facilities in 1968 and 1969. During these investigations, the Red
Cross learned that captives were interrogated and tortured by U.S. servicemen before being sent to South Vietnamese forces. The evidence found in the Red Cross investigation uncovered various forms of torture that prisoners endured such as burnings, beatings, and electrical shock. Mass paranoia and the “shoot first, ask questions later” attitude being adopted by troops, involved children and youngsters. For example, a twelve year old boy was killed by a member from the 82nd Airborne Division for going through a bases’ dump site in the Hau Nghia Province. Other instances included a shooting of a sixteen year old girl in the skull and the wounding of a ten year old boy after soldiers from the 1st Infantry Brigade, 5th Infantry Division fired their rifles and grenade launchers to scare off a group of local youngsters in 1970. In 1971, Major Gordon Livingston testified before Congress that “Above 90 percent of the Americans with whom I had contact in Vietnam’ treated the Vietnamese as subhuman and with ‘nearly universal contempt.” Instead of being seen as the “rural” people who were in need of political “mobilization,” the Vietnamese were now the man in the black pajamas, who was deceptive and untrustworthy in a land filled with eerie jungles and sniper bullets.

120 Turse, Kill Anything That Moves, 177.
122 Turse, Kill Anything that Moves, 160.
123 “Statement of Dr. Gordon Livingston,” in The Dellums Committee Hearings on War Crimes in Vietnam: An Inquiry into Command Responsibility in South East Asia, as quoted in Ibid.
EPILOGUE: AN EERIE HEALING JUNGLE?

When the United States “lost” their former protégé China to communist influence, American officials were going to stop at nothing to prevent their newest investment from going “red” as well. After all, no president or politician in their right mind would want to be remembered as the one who lost Vietnam. To lose Vietnam would forever have been labeled as a failure and ruin a president’s legacy, just as the loss of China did to Truman’s Presidency. Hence throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s, massive monetary and military advisory investments were put into South Vietnam. Because of this, the American government saw South Vietnam as a modern nation on the rise and a perfect example of what American aid could accomplish. When U.S. troops were required to go to Vietnam, they felt the land was full of harmony and loveliness. They were stationed to be at war in a tropical park reminiscent of Shangri-La. American soldiers were respectful of Vietnamese farmers and back on the domestic front, the public supported the government’s actions. United States troops felt the only signs of war present in Vietnam were the technology and supplies that they had brought themselves.

The situation for U.S. troops in Vietnam was wearisome. They were stressed, frustrated, and because of the draft, many were forced to be there. During the early 1960s, there was a period of mixed emotions towards the Vietnamese. Yet by the late 1960s and in to the 1970s, there feelings towards the Vietnamese were synonymous with violence and loathing. Yet almost a decade after the United States had pulled out of Vietnam in 1973, troops began to revisit what was once considered Shangri-La on earth and re-establish friendships with the Vietnamese. In fact Vietnam veterans “constituted
the largest population of U.S. citizens in Vietnam” during the 1980s.\textsuperscript{125} But why was this? What could veterans hope to gain by going back to visit a country full of untrustworthy and deceptive inhabitants? According to Bruce Prideaux’s article, “Echoes of War: Battlefield Tourism,” while there are a wide variety of motives for people wanting to visit sites of conflict, veterans’ are being brought on by a yearning “to remember comrades; the rekindle memoires of loved ones who fell in battle; to ponder on the feats of those who they will never know; and to gloat on victory or lament over defeat.”\textsuperscript{126} Ria Dunkley argues that while each person has their own reasons for visiting sites of conflict, an overwhelming majority of them have to do with educational purposes or honoring the memories and service of their ancestors or those who fought for their country. Dunkley further points out that tourism to these sites have has often been compared to a “religiously uplifting” experience, and marketed as a pilgrimage rather than an educational practice. However Dunkley argues that whether the purpose for people visiting is education or remembrance, both are emotionally cathartic:

Both experiences can be emotionally cathartic and offer psychological healing and a deepening and strengthening of faith. Motives for undertaking medieval pilgrimage were varied and included healing or undertaking a journey as part of penance, to achieve spiritual merit or to be associated with religious saints and figures by gaining insights into their lives and deaths - all of which might have resonance with contemporary battlefield tourists.\textsuperscript{127}

Scholars have come to number of conclusions as to why sites of conflict have attracted large numbers of visitors. Richard Sharpley argues that people may visit these

\begin{itemize}
\end{itemize}
landscapes in order to “to gain a sense of national identity or out of national pride” and learn more about their cultural heritage. Other scholars such as V. L. Smith contend that the majority of those visiting sites of conflict are actually researchers, or those looking to broaden their knowledge of the conflict itself, rather than fulfilling a patriotic call: “Battlefields are of particular interest to two diverse groups: history buffs and military strategists, both real and armchair...For many visitors an eerie sense of the supernatural lingers in the air – the mystery of the souls (or spirits) of those who died there.” Whatever the reasons are, there continues to be a fascination with sites of conflict “despite the passage of time.” More and more, these sites have grown in popularity and “today individuals can either visit independently using one of the many guidebooks, or join an [organized] tour as there are a range of large and small [organizations]” that offer fully planned trips to these places.

Americans and Europeans have continually held a very high regard for sites of conflict, treating them with a religious like reverence. According to scholar Douglas Hurt, battlefields are “Often... the most valued and revered spaces of a culture, because their widely shared significance outweighs competing values and potential uses of the site.” In the United States, up until the incidents of September 11th 2001, the battlefield at Gettysburg and the Oklahoma City Bombing Memorial may have been the most sacred. These sites are highly politicized in the United States and often the subject of much debate due to “Historic sites and battlefields [being] critical places for

130 Ibid, 862.
131 Ibid.
interpretation because they are symbols of federal authority on the American landscape that often reinforce the legitimacy of past government action.” Hurt further argues that “War memorials in particular are expressions of political memory that reflect what a society wants to remember or, conversely, what it wants to forget.”133

Since the re-establishment of diplomatic relations under the Clinton administration, Vietnam has become a hot tourist destination. According to the Christian Science Monitor, Vietnam Battlefield Tours “estimates it has taken more than 1,000 veterans to the country since the group’s founding in 2005.” The Vietnamese government estimates “that more than 400,000 Americans – many of them former military – have visited the country annually” with some even ex-patriating to Vietnam.134 There has been a rise in the number of organizations who plan entire trips around visiting sites of conflict in Vietnam, such as Back to the Nam and Vietnam Battlefield Tours. However one of the biggest reasons why Vietnam has attracted such a large number of veterans is because of how it is marketed. According to Christina Schwenkel’s The American War in Contemporary Vietnam, “Travel to Vietnam is frequently marketed to veterans as a healing journey, through which a transformed moral state is achieved.”135 Revisiting Vietnam provided veterans a chance to “reconcile with a painful and formative past” as pilgrimages to former battle sites served “as a cathartic experiences that involves apprehensive and yet performative engagements with memory.”136 The land of Vietnam, which was remembered as laden with traps, death, and as a prison, had been replaced

133 Ibid, 377.
136 Ibid, 81.
with new memories; memories of a healing environment, cathartic experiences, and putting to rest demons from the war.

A friendship between those American veterans who have chosen to go back to Vietnam and the Vietnamese that they meet has been established, and the land has once again been seen in a romanticized view. Returning to Vietnam after the war has also served as a means of therapy for battling Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Numerous organizations such as Back to the Nam and Tours of Peace organize trips for veterans interested in returning to Vietnam and often see it as a first step in battling PTSD. Combat veteran Bill Braniff, founder of Back to the Nam, has travelled to Vietnam numerous times, befriending former enemies “to soothe the emotional and physical wounds of war.” On the organization’s website Bill writes that the landscape also healed like the veterans: “Returning to Vietnam is more than a healing experience for Veterans, it is a trip taking you around the countryside, visiting with former adversaries, seeing the natural beauty of a land that was involved in war for probably over 2,000 years.” Tours of Peace advertises that while many cannot fathom why veterans would desire returning to a land where so was so much death and bitter memories occurred, it helps returning veterans find a sense of peace and closure: “[S]eeing Vietnam as it is now, meeting people who survived the war, and those who grew up in the post war years, gives veterans the opportunity to bring closure to their Vietnam war experience.”

According to one veteran, revisiting Vietnam helped him take control of life:

Like many of my fellow veterans, I have suffered the effects of PTSD since returning from Vietnam in 1970. In and out of therapy for 15 years, I finally

---

137 As of November 22, 2014, Back to the Nam appears to no longer active. “From Tours of Duty to Tours of Healing.” http://www.backtothenam.org/
138 “A Note From Bill,” http://www.backtothenam.org/
139 “Tours of Peace,” http://topvietnamveterans.org/p-vet.html
accepted the fact that PTSD was destroying my life. I needed help, I needed to go back to that place where it all began...Vietnam. The help I needed came in the form of TOP Vietnam Veterans. This Veterans organization made it possible for me to return to Vietnam, and in doing so, I was empowered to turn the page, and get on with my life. I have come full circle. I am once again a whole person.\footnote{Rick L., Tours of Peace,” http://topvietnamveterans.org/p-vet.html}

Another veteran who participated in Tours of Peace claimed, “the old images of the war are still with me, but have somewhat faded and are put into the past. Now when I think of Vietnam, I have new images: smiling children, happy faces, a beautiful country, the people are at peace. It makes my heart feel good.”\footnote{Steve S., Tour of Peace, http://topvietnamveterans.org/p-vet.html} Not only is this transformation remarkable, but also supports Frederick Olmsted’s argument about the healing power of nature. In Olmsted’s report, he claimed that it was

\begin{quote}
a scientific fact that the occasional contemplation of natural scenes of an impressive character, particularly if this contemplation occurs in connection with relief from ordinary care…is favorable to the health and vigor of men and especially to the health and vigor of their intellect beyond any other conditions which can be offered.\footnote{Olmsted, “Preliminary Report on the Yosemite,” 502.}
\end{quote}

This is a remarkable transformation in comparison to how combat troops had viewed the Vietnamese in the later 1960s and early 1970s. Even family members of war veterans have journeyed to Vietnam as a means of finding closure and healing for their personal attachments to the war. Patty Randall, a widow of an American soldier who died in Vietnam remarked after her visit, “It is a beautiful country, not the swampy, jungle over grown shown in the movies. The people were very nice – every time they found out why we were there – they would tell me ‘very sorry Madame.’\footnote{Patty Randall, “Patty Randall’s Vietnam Journey,” http://www.backtothenam.org/journeys.html} Even interactions with the Vietnamese veterans who fought on the opposing side have been cathartic. Wayne
Karlin, coeditor of *The Other Side of Heaven*, returned to Vietnam in 1994. After a night of heavy drinking on Christmas Eve, Karlin found himself finding support from the most unlikely of sources during a flashback, including one Vietnamese man who had been firing at him from the other side in Quang Tri:

> I was fairly drunk. There were firecrackers going off all over the place. We’re in this huge crowd. It’s very dark and I start feeling all these people pressing in on me. I’m the only Westerner there. Running through my mind are these old American POWs being marched through Hanoi during the war and crowds of people screaming at them. I really start to lose it. Suddenly the guy from Quang Tri and a vet on my other side just grab my arms and hold onto my hands. The others from a protective circle around me. They can see what’s going on, they’ve been in the war too…I was remembering a story one of them had told earlier about being on an antiaircraft crew that shot down an American plane. Maybe that’s why that POW image came to mind. He’d been in the party that went out in a boat to pull the pilot out of the water when people in the area just wanted to kill him. That’s what it felt like—like they were pulling me out of the water.  

While there are not any dates provided with these testimonials, it is astonishing to see American troops perceiving Vietnam and the Vietnamese in such a positive light. Under the Clinton Administration, diplomatic relations reopened between the United States and Vietnam in 1995. Vietnam became a top tourist destination as students, scholars, tourists, and Vietnamese refugees who looked to visit their old home.

The “re-opening” of Vietnam became an opportunity for tourists to fulfil their desire to “see, experience, and understand mass destruction and violence in the modern era.” While this looked like an excellent opportunity for veterans and their families, there are still those who are not ready to return due to “complex historical, economic, and psychological barriers.” There are those that still harbor hatred for the Vietnamese and others who are not yet ready to revisit and lay their ghosts of Vietnam to rest. Schwenkel

---

144 Wayne Karlin, in *Patriots*, 547-8.  
145 Schwenkel, *American War in Contemporary Vietnam*, 81
writes that one woman wished to visit Vietnam to aid a family member: “I have a cousin who served in Vietnam and refuses to think about going back. He can’t even fathom it. He has a deep dislike for the Vietnamese people.”

As American veterans and those affected by the war have been able to find peace in the lands of Vietnam, the Vietnamese countryside has been healing as well. While much of southern Vietnam still remains contaminated by the different herbicides and defoliants used, different organizations have lent their support to heal the landscape. Project RENEW, Restoring the Environmental and Neutralizing the Effects of War, was formed in 2001 and has dedicated themselves to humanitarian efforts for those affected by the Vietnam War and the removal of unexploded ordnance such as rocket-propelled grenades, mines, and artillery shells. As of 2012, the Obama administration has “committed serious money to cleaning up the worst of the dioxin hot spots.” Additionally, USAID, “is now set to disburse another $21 million in humanitarian aid for people with serious birth defects and disabilities.” While it be a very long time, if ever, before the Vietnamese landscape fully heals from the war, these are all steps in the right directions.

Contributing to the Vietnamese landscape becoming one of healing and closure, is troops having gone back to make sense of their involvement. There is a long tradition of American veterans going on excursions to old battlefields, but Vietnam veterans do so for a different reason. World War II veterans were hailed as heroes and honored with parades when they arrived home. Vietnam veterans received no pomp and circumstance; the popular memory is that they were spit upon, called baby killers, and looked down

---

146 Ibid, 30.
upon for serving in a war the public did not fully support. There was also no clear objective in Vietnam other than preventing communist takeover. World War II soldiers were deployed to put a stop to the Nazi war machine, and topple the Japanese Empire which had attacked Pearl Harbor. In Korea, American troops joined the United Nations in a police action to push back the aggressive North Korean forces and Chinese army. The United States had also been victorious or achieved their objective in previous conflicts; in this war the United States had been defeated. Additionally this was a long drawn out conflict that by the end did not have popular support. The American public had turned against the war and politicians were calling for an end to it. Most veterans’ pilgrimages to battle sites serve as a means of memorializing their sacrifices and honoring those who gave their lives. While Vietnam veterans did so as well, they returned to their battle-sites to combat PTSD, find closure, and make sense of a war that remains controversial in American memory. After returning from his service 1967, Greg Kleven recalled asking himself why the United States got involved in the first place: “I kept asking myself, why did we go? What was behind it? I never knew the history of it. So I was searching for all of those things.” Contributing to the lack of closure was the lack of American media coverage following the fall of Saigon in 1975. This led to veterans having a hard time “understanding how their role in the war contributed to the country's well-being.”

To this day, there are a significant number of American veterans who have expatriated to Vietnam. Not only has revisiting old battlefield and sites of conflict allowed people to pay homage to their ancestors and explore their

---


national identity, but also allowed people to lay ghosts to rest and honor their fallen comrades.

The Vietnam War was unlike any other war that the United States had participated in throughout its existence. While the land of Vietnam has been engulfed in a constant war for independence since the 1930s, the Americans brought a different type of warfare with a new strategy: modernized warfare and decimating the land in order to break the will of the enemy. The idea and assumption that superior technology and battlefield tactics would be enough to contain the communist threat to the north could not have been more wrong. The United States plunged themselves into a war that was seen more of an obligation, and according to President Dwight E. Eisenhower, the situation in Vietnam was “a dangerous mess.”\(^{151}\) Failure to commit to war would be seen cowardly and embarrass the United States on the international scene is they would be seen as inept and weak.

By destroying the land and jungles where communist forces were supposedly hiding, the United States instead chose to focus the efforts of its superior firepower and technology on breaking the will of the enemy. A land in which respect and honor was supposed to be held in high regard was bombed indiscriminately, and Vietnamese civilians were shot before being asked questions. In reexamining John Olson’s image of the Tet Offensive, Figure 4, one can see how it perfectly captures what the Vietnam War embodied. In the background, there is evidence of heavy vegetation that has been devastated by constant bombing and fighting. Behind the troops there are remnants of where one (or several) buildings once stood. All over the ground where they crouch,

there are pieces of buildings, shell fragments, pieces of wood and ruined foliage. The looks and dress of the troops themselves look to be worn and tired, just like the American war effort. Furthermore, the skies are grey and seem to be darkened by the warfare which is ravaging the land, almost as if foreshadowing future events and the eventual end result of the Vietnam War. The Vietnamese lost all their respect and the positive perception they were perceived as. Instead of being seen as the “rural” people who were in need of political “mobilization,” they were now the man in the black pajamas, who was deceptive and untrustworthy in a land filled with eerie jungles and sniper bullets.¹⁵³

APPENDIX

FIGURES

Fig 4: John Olson, *Untitled*, *Life* 64, No. 10 (March 8 1968):  
[Accessed April 3, 2014].
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972) 134


Heard, Augustin. “France and Indo-China,” *Century* 32, no. 3 (July 1886): 416-421. http://digital.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=cent;cc=cent;rgn=full%20text;idno=cent0032-3;didno=cent0032-3;view=image;seq=428;node=cent0032-3%3A14;page=root;size=100.


Hurt, Douglas A. “Reinterpreting the Washita Battlefield National Historic Site.” *Geographical Review* 100, no. 3 (June 2010): 376, ISSN 0016-7428.


