

Chapter 9

THE LEGACY OF THE WAR: VISIONS OF THE FUTURE

Another god might fear their wall - their idle whim -
one far weaker than you in strength of hand and fury...
Come now, just wait till these long-haired Achaeans
sail back in their ships to the fatherland they love,
then batter their wall, sweep it into the salt breakers
and pile over the endless beach your drifts of sand again,
level it to your heart's content - the Argives' mighty wall.

— Zeus to Poseidon, Homer's *Iliad* (VII, 529-536)

The final military school of thought on Vietnam ignores not just goals but strategy as well, and argues more crudely that the war could have been won with different tactics: just lay on the fire-power and stick to it, and the enemy will wilt. Taking this as the only lesson from defeat erased the memory of foreign disaster and made the future look simple. Presidents got away with talking about "how" and not "why" as they returned America to the role of international enforcer. Ronald Reagan's arm-chair warriors unleashed a cyclone of devastation by proxy across Central America and large swatches of Africa and Asia. George Bush eagerly settled up with friendly dictators in Panama and Iraq who had trespassed the bounds of comity. Even Bill Clinton, who tried to avoid foreign policy, found himself dispatching reinforcements to Somalia after the relief effort there evolved into combat, in order to ensure US "credibility" in the face of challenge, that same nebulous concept that took the lives of so many US soldiers in Vietnam. A compliant congress overrode its Vietnam-style doubters and endorsed it all.

A classic expression of the school that prefers to meet violence with more violence, rather than assess its purpose and effect, is found in the book *About Face* by forcibly-retired Army Col. David Hackworth. In believing that more muscle would have won the war, he represents thousands of veterans who saw the enemy bend before US power and so can not shake the participant's

certainty that just a bit more would have made him break. Hackworth was a heavily-decorated commander at the battalion level who ran afoul of the Army in 1972 for telling the press why he thought Vietnamization was a failure. The brass went after him for corruption, but he beat the rap with the help of a sharp young lawyer named Brendan Sullivan, who fifteen years later became famous for saving another loquacious colonel, Oliver North, from being the scapegoat for another failed policy. A tactical genius whose personal pursuit of killing allegedly inspired the film "Apocalypse Now," Hackworth was the perfect unit commander, characterized by energy and myopia. At the next level of command, he would have been dangerous to his own people, since he hasn't a strategic thought in his brain. When he gets above his raisings in his book and expounds on global strategy, the US national interest, or procurement reform, it would be hilarious if not for his frightening certainty.

Perhaps because Hackworth couldn't think at a strategic level, he never succumbed to Vann's wishful thinking about Vietnamization. He knew only what he could see right in front of him, and three years later the NVA proved him right and Vann wrong. He never believed in Vann's "pacification" efforts anyway, in which cosmetic reforms would lead the enemy to surrender: he just wanted to blast away at everyone he could find in the free-fire zone he carried with him until they decided it was just too damn dangerous to mess with Texas. Hackworth brags that by aggressively using his advantages in communications, materiel, air mobility and coordinated bombing and artillery, his command achieved astronomical "kill ratios" of enemy versus US dead. However, he acknowledges that each of his successes brought study and a change of tactics by the enemy, and lead to setbacks in the kill ratios before he could rout them again. He also knew that as soon as he left a region, the enemy would take over again. His tactics amounted to an endless Hamburger Hill, the hills in Korea and Vietnam that American soldiers would take from the enemy, abandon because they held no intrinsic value, and then have to take again. By the time Hackworth was at his peak in the early 1970s, America's revulsion at its losses made Hackworth's plans moot.

The air warriors also have their tactical thinkers who believe that a more ferocious and unrelenting air assault would have

done the trick. Retired Admiral James Stockdale made this case a decade before he became a household name in 1992 as Ross Perot's running mate. A Navy pilot who was imprisoned for years in the "Hanoi Hilton," he expressed his understandable bitterness by blaming the loss of the war on anti-war protesters who gave Hanoi hope and pusillanimous politicians who then gave up on winning. Seeing how upset his captors were by the Christmas bombing, Stockdale says that earlier air power would have convinced Hanoi to "surrender" well before it did then. But this "surrender" was the peace agreement that allowed North Vietnam to win the war after a decent interval of three years, and in fact, massive air power was used throughout the war. Even with the broadest definition of military-related targets, as Palmer points out, as a pre-industrial society, North Vietnam simply didn't have much worth hitting, and its few assets were protected by ground-based defenses that inflicted "almost prohibitive" losses. Why would its resolve have been weakened more by daily raids rather than weekly or monthly ones? Destroying every city with nuclear weapons or fire-bombs would have been a different matter, but that is not what Stockdale or any military official ever seriously advocated during the war or after it.

The most famous exposition of the tactical argument for victory was made by the lachrymose Oliver North during the Iran-Contra hearings, who provided this obtuse, comforting account: "I would also point out that we didn't lose the war in Vietnam. We lost the war right here in this city." That is, we would have won had not politicians placed restrictions on the use of force. North's theme was reprised in George Bush's only reference to Vietnam in the announcement of war with Iraq in 1991: "Our troops...will not be asked to fight with one hand tied behind their back." This is as pernicious a myth as the "stab-in-the-back" theory used in Germany to explain its defeat in World War I. There are a lot of reasons why the United States lost the Vietnam War, but one of them is most certainly not that the troops' hands were tied. In fact, by the time the anti-war movement and its allies in congress began to impose even minimal restrictions on the war in the early 1970s, the United States had used massive force on all the countries of Indochina to no avail, because its political objectives were not only wrong and irrelevant to US national security, but

also unachievable in a civil war fueled by post-colonial nationalism.

Despite intermittent bombing halts ordered by the White House as part of its diplomacy, US forces smashed the physical and political infrastructure of Laos and Cambodia into the messes they still are today, leveled any sections of cities seized by the NLF (bombing Saigon itself during the Tet Offensive), stormed through free-fire zones in the South Vietnamese countryside, and eliminated North Vietnam's few trappings of modernity. All that was lacking was an invasion of the North, which would have been successful, although costly in US casualties. Even then, though, the Vietnamese would have regrouped in the jungle as they did when the French expelled them from Hanoi, and started over.

US forces actually would have done better, particularly in the early years, by relying less on firepower, and more on winning "hearts and minds" voluntarily, through political and economic opportunity rather than through terror and force. Of course, true local empowerment would have reduced the control and the corruption of the South Vietnamese Government, and we always blink when challenging our ally. Today, this contradiction still bedevils our halting attempts to promote development and democracy overseas: if they are serious, they inevitably bump up against powerful government-protected business interests or truculent military forces, and the over-riding requirements of "US national security," meaning friendly relations with the ruling powers, forces a retreat, just as it did back then.

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There was one officer who did ask "why" and not just "how" during the Vietnam War, and he had to leave the Army because of the answer at which he arrived. Edward King's book, published in 1972, is called The Death of the Army. Unfortunately, it was never read as widely within the national security ranks as the books by Summers and Palmer, or promoted throughout the country like the books by Hackworth and on Vann. If the average American thought of King and his troubling message when they heard the title "Lieutenant Colonel" rather than of Ollie North and his self-exalting one, we'd be halfway home and more. Like Hackworth a decorated veteran of Korea, King showed another kind of courage by resigning rather than punching his career ticket in a safe staff assignment in Vietnam. The Army tried, Soviet-

style, to classify him mentally ill because of the “complete reversal of attitude and motivation” that it saw in King’s insistence that in refusing to assist the war he was only following the Army’s own officer’s code.

Reading King’s book, I felt even closer to him than I had when we were congressional staff working on Central American policy in the 1980s, he with the Democratic Policy Committee (the think-tank for Senate Democratic Leader Robert Byrd) and I with the Arms Control and Foreign Policy Caucus (the collective office of 140 surviving liberals, directed by Edie Wilkie). Now I felt a poignant camaraderie of the past in which my angry, frightened younger self finally found someone to protect and represent him. King, as knowledgeable and experienced as I had been ignorant and naïve, had struggled with the same conflict of loyalty and responsibility that I had, and at the very same time. Palmer believed that as draftee and officer who opposed the war, we had “little choice but to serve,” but King and I felt there were real choices to be made. I was proud that both learned Ed and callow Caleb had made opposition to the war the center of their public and private lives, and had refused (although in my case only temporarily) to take the easy way out. The passionate yet factual letter to Nixon that King wrote upon resigning, a sort of “Letter from the Birmingham Jail” for the Movement that took to task an “outdated, bankrupt foreign policy,” captured precisely what I was trying to say in my leaflets at the draft board. He had been speaking for both of us, getting our message across better than I ever could have.

The officer’s code King quotes at the beginning of his book reads: “To have the mission fail because of false pride is inexcusable.” Unlike Palmer, whom he remembered in an interview with me as “one of the worst” of the company men, with an “extreme can-do” attitude with which he answered any pessimism about the war, King didn’t just assume that the stated ideals of the Army and the country justified their actions. He considered such an assumption an example of the false pride he had pledged to challenge in himself and his colleagues. By the time King resigned, Gen. William Westmoreland had admitted that pride in the Army’s reputation had kept him from telling Johnson that the war couldn’t be won. The Army was, in King’s mind, dead. When I first read King’s book in the mid-1980s, I took its title only as a

metaphor for such abstract failings in the officer corps, and dismissed his references to soldiers sabotaging their own combat missions as hyperbole. When I had finished the research for this book, though, I could see that King meant exactly what he said. When officers are scared to get out in front of their troops because they make a better target for them there, then you do indeed have the death of an army.

King believes that the seeds of the death of the Army can be traced to the creation of a large officer corps after World War II whose primary goal was promotion, and that Vietnam was just the hothouse in which the seeds were rapidly brought to full flower. He describes "the army where you can't fail" of the promotion-mad 1950s and 1960s, in which officers gave each other such high ratings that ratings became useless. West Point alumni constituted an informal "West Point Protective Association" that held onto the top slots by helping each other out on ratings and on promotion boards. King saw blind loyalty to one's superiors become the primary attribute of officers; questioners and reformers like him were anathema to the crowd of officers going along and getting along with a vengeance. The officer corps began to suffer from narrow minds, operationally and politically, a lack of initiative, and a surfeit of uncontested right-wing politics. When "the army where you can't fail" came to the battlefield in Vietnam, he says, it "led to failure." Officers had forgotten how to tell superiors they were wrong, and that led to strategic disaster in Washington and numerous tactical disasters in Vietnam.

The war's lack of a coherent purpose intensified the conflict between officers who needed to "make the bodies fly" to advance and draftees (or draft-threatened enlistees) who wanted as little combat as possible. It became a macabre and immoral "mercenary war," and because it couldn't be won, all that could be achieved from an operation causing the death of hundreds was an improvement in the officers' careers. King could not in good conscience order young men to die for that cause. He never suffered any "reversal" of loyalty to the Army; at times in the book, it's not clear whether he is more upset that the Army is ruining Vietnam or that Vietnam is ruining the Army. For example, King denounces the use of the "body count" to measure of units' effectiveness because it led soldiers to murder prisoners, which hurts the Army's moral fiber. It's only by knowing him that I can be

sure he was more outraged by the damage done to the prisoners' physical fiber.

King's analysis of the war is as compelling as his analysis of the Army. He saw the war as always unwinnable if the goal was its stated intent to protect and strengthen a democratic government: in our interview he said, "How could we preserve what didn't exist?" If the true goal of the war was, as King believes, to maintain non-communist rule over South Vietnam, he agrees with Summers that it could only have been accomplished with an invasion of the North, but he also agrees with Hackworth that even in the South the war could have been run a hell of a lot more effectively. According to King, only 15 percent of the Army's 400,000 troops was actually "in the field with a gun" at any one time, compared to 80 percent of the enemy's 350,000. To break the stalemate, he knew the Army would have to change its "tooth-to-tail" ratio and leave its safe havens. King also saw helicopters as a hindrance to ground combat. In Vietnam the order to advance came tentatively from 3,000 feet, while in Korea he remembered it coming insistently from a colonel, standing erect despite the bullets pinging around, who loomed over him atop a ditch. But King offered not suggestions on strategy like Summers or tactics like Hackworth, but rather his resignation, because he didn't think we ought to win.

King would probably be insulted by even the limited comparison to Hackworth's tactical perceptiveness that I have made, since he considers Hackworth the type of officer who doesn't belong in the Army, the enthusiastic killer. According to King, when Hackworth would (as described in his own book) requisition a helicopter as dusk was falling on a long day of combat and scour the area for final potshots, he wasn't killing for military necessity, but because he liked to kill. To King, that should have disqualified him from military service. This apparent paradox that people who like to kill don't belong in the killing business illustrates King's continuing affection for the Army. He sees people like Hackworth not only as criminal but also a bad influence on the soldiers who must retain a grasp on their humanity even as they kill for their country.

One of the strongest themes in King's book is that the Army was to blame for Vietnam. This may seem solipsistic and unfair, since the Army does what it is told by its civilian commander-in-

chief, who in turn obtains funding for the task from congress. It couldn't have sent advisers against the wishes of Kennedy or troops against the wishes of Johnson. King shows, though, how in constantly important and at times crucial ways, the Army played a major role in constructing the Vietnam foreign policy in general and in getting us into the Vietnam War in particular. In the 1950s, the Army started casting about for a mission and came up with the doctrine of limited war, which posited a major US interest in blocking communist movements and governments in the post-colonial world. (This part of King's scenario is certainly credible: I heard former chairman of the Joint Chiefs William Crowe sound a nearly identical warning in 1991 against officers scouting out new military roles in the post-Cold War era.) This doctrine transferred the popularized East-West mentality to the South, and required aid and advisers for counter-insurgency.

In King's analysis, Eisenhower, who knew the Pentagon well, was able to "keep them on a short leash," but he could sense the inexorable power of the amorphous but unified "military-industrial-complex" that would benefit from the Army's global orientation. The Army, through Gen. Maxwell Taylor, then "sold" Kennedy on the theory of counter-insurgency in Latin America and Indochina, while failing to tell him that it hadn't really been tested. King says that the French General Staff were stunned when they met with Army strategists in 1961 and were told that a counter-insurgency campaign and "nation-building" would easily contain the recently-launched NLF. The French considered the NLF a continuation of the same rebellion that had driven them from Indochina, and predicted disaster, but were unable to shake the "can-do" Americans. King believes that the Army placed enormous pressure on Kennedy to send advisers and on Johnson to send combat troops. Like Summers, he thinks that the Joint Chiefs failed badly by not telling Johnson and then Nixon that the strategy was failing, although to him, as to me, Summers' recommendation that the Chiefs resign in protest smacks of a coup. Don't worry, says King: had either President disagreed with the Chiefs on a matter as important as this, he'd have soon, and properly, asked for their resignations.

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King was a little off-base in his focus on the American military's political power. Without the support of an American

corporate network that filled the vacuum left by the demise of colonialism, the Army wouldn't even have had a hearing on its global strategy. However, because of the parallel interests of our corporate and military elites, King's focus certainly made him prescient about the future of US policy toward the developing world. When the war in Vietnam was still raging, he was already looking ahead to the dangers posed by the survival of the foreign policy that had taken us there. He thought that "limited war" would still appeal to the Army as long as US troops were not directly involved, just as it had to Palmer's war college class. He noted the unquenchable hubris of a colonel who said in 1971, despite the continuing debacle of Vietnam, that counter-insurgency in Peru would be an easy task, as long as you "get in there early and form it, shape it." And he specifically cited Palmer and Hackworth as preparing for Latin America. Palmer, then the Army's vice chief of staff, was plotting the strategy, and Hackworth, on his way out of the Army, was as usual gearing up to kill enemies: "I'm going to study Latin American affairs....(T)he bastards think they can win it all now....I guess I just like war."

What King predicted came to pass. In the decade after Vietnam, the Pentagon developed a theory and a practice of limited war called "Low-Intensity Conflict" (LIC), which meant low intensity only for the US advisers and not for the citizens of the country in question. Like Vietnamization, LIC was a way to achieve the goals of the Vietnam foreign policy without US casualties: we would provide allied armies with equipment, training, and information on the enemy gleaned from American technology and other forms of espionage so that they could pursue the enemy in small-unit combat; we would provide allied governments with economic aid so they could pay the army, revive the economy, and extend bureaucracy and services into rebel-influenced areas. Also like Vietnamization, LIC would treat the symptoms of conflict, and ignore its underlying roots, like political repression and a lack of economic opportunity.

LIC doesn't challenge an allied government: human rights under LIC means proper procedures for arrests, not trials for powerful abusers; a settlement of a conflict means a surrender by rebels, not a commensurate ceding of power by undemocratic armed forces; meeting human needs means giving away food in military "civic action" campaigns, not a new power structure that

provides economic opportunity. The thinking behind LIC, as outlined in a Pentagon study called *Discriminate Deterrence* in 1988, is thinking that is rooted in an image of Vietnam as a blunder, not a crime, as an error in implementation, not formulation. LIC can't bring itself to acknowledge the primary foreign lesson of the Vietnam War, which is that if a government doesn't deserve the loyalty of its people, outside help will fail. Nor can LIC even begin to enunciate the primary domestic lesson, which is that our national security establishment, enmeshed in ideology, partisan politics, corporate power, and personal self-interest, doesn't really want to stare down such governments, and so therefore loses its leverage once it is intertwined with them.

King's proposed solutions — to eliminate US programs that prepare its own soldiers to guide or even fight in LICs, and to cut off foreign aid and weapons to unrepresentative governments — were never seriously contemplated in official Washington. After a post-Vietnam respite during the early years of the Carter administration, LIC burst forth on the developing world in the 1980s with a new twist: not only would we aid friendly governments under the Nixon doctrine if they faced insurgencies or, under the Carter doctrine, if they would provide military support to the Rapid Deployment Force we established for the Middle East, but we would also, under a Reagan doctrine, aid rebels who were fighting governments that were perceived as pro-Soviet or at least anti-American. The Reaganauts also jettisoned the few constraints that had resulted from Vietnam, ignoring the requirement of the War Powers act that congress approve military actions, mocking Carter's emphasis on human rights, and revoking his "pariah" instructions that told US embassies not to cooperate with American arms dealers. Vietnam had become a bad dream, an inconvenient memory, not the place where, as a young John Kerry pleaded, America finally turned.

As King pointed out, nothing fundamental changed as a result of Vietnam. Under the Vietnam foreign policy, before and after Vietnam, those who refuse to cooperate with our global military strategy are treated as threats to our security whom we have the right and the ability to punish, directly or indirectly. Our foreign policy right on into the Clinton administration automatically focused on keeping the lid on for "friendly" governments. Unless there are particularly shocking and well-publicized violations

of human rights (and often even if there are), the Pentagon and CIA keep strengthening the repressive military forces that maintain our friends: in President Clinton's first year in office, our arms transfers to developing countries soared to a record \$15 billion, and 90 percent of those sales went to undemocratic but "friendly" governments. The definition of a "friend" remains the same: someone who provides access to US forces, cooperation to US diplomats and spies, support to Western investors and banks, or simply just cash to our arms-makers.

True democracy, human rights, economic opportunity, and all those other things that presidents talk about and Americans and (cultural surprise!!) people in the developing world value, are decidedly secondary in the equation, concepts to pay lip service to in the attempt to defuse rebellion, not values to be pursued if they weaken the friendly keepers. Short-term successes — close relations with dictatorships like Cuba and the Philippines in the '50s, Vietnam and Zaire in the '60s, Iran and Nicaragua in the '70s, and El Salvador and Somalia in the '80s — keep turning into long-term disasters. (Watch for Indonesia and Saudi Arabia to devolve from US-armed founts of stability to chaos in the '90s...) Yet the foreign policy lives on, running on its own momentum, guided by the dwindling number of Americans who benefit from a developing world that is militarized and undemocratic, and as a result records economic growth and purchases of US commercial exports that are far below their potential.

Vietnam did have an effect on US policy, of course, but mostly on methods rather than goals. This is best illustrated by the tragedies of El Salvador and Nicaragua. To dampen public outcry, there was no direct intervention in El Salvador to rebuff a leftist rebellion against an Army that resembled a Mafia, but the US share of the Salvadoran budget grew to exceed that government's own contribution for the first time in the history of foreign aid, Vietnam included. It took only a few hundred Pentagon and CIA personnel on the ground to run a war that was fought to nearly the last Salvadoran. Some 70,000 died, mostly civilians, before the Army's assassination of six Jesuit priests convinced congress to cut off aid to the murderers in 1990 rather than continue the futile attempt to reform them. Within a year, the Army agreed to a peace settlement that it had been able to reject during the decade of US largesse, and another casualty of the Vietnam

foreign policy began the daunting task of recovery from civil war. Similarly in Nicaragua, it just took US funds (and, it turned out, a bit from autocrats in Saudi Arabia and Brunei) to send the unruly child of so many paternalistic interventions back to the days of a barter economy.

While working in congress to try to stop those wars, it felt as I had been transported back to the 1960s. The Reagan and Bush administrations reprised the public relations efforts of the Johnson and Nixon teams, manipulating the media into covering its cheerleading claims as fact, muscling aside reporters who refused to play along, and questioning the patriotism of its critics. And less than ten years after the fall of Saigon, Republicans and southern Democrats again gave them the votes to get away with it. Reagan's congenital mendacity and Bush's feigned ignorance seemed to infect the entire executive branch during their tenures. Right after I came to the Caucus in 1984, we caught Secretary of State George Shultz assuring House Speaker Tip O'Neill (not to mention the public) that without emergency aid, Salvadoran soldiers would be forced back to the barracks for lack of ammunition. We dug up the facts to confront this bald-faced lie, showing that there was no emergency, and the new aid was really for continuing the quadrupling of the Army. When enough southern Democrats shrugged off this outrage to permit the aid to go through congress, my chest tightened up with the same old rage of helplessness I had felt about Vietnam, and I knew the people of Central America were in for a long, rough ride.

My next seven years were nothing but repetitions of this first encounter with what erstwhile New York Times reporter Ray Bonner titled his book: "weakness (by the congress) and deceit (by the administration)." We would nail them in our reports, chapter, verse, and author: assistant secretary of state Tony Motley lying about "surgical" bombing strikes; David D'Louhy, US embassy chargé in San Salvador, slandering American human rights activists; State Department lawyer Jim Michel funneling illegal aid to Salvadoran police through so many different channels it took a year to tabulate them all; Luigi Einaudi, son of one of my father's dearest colleagues at Cornell and a top assistant to Motley's replacement, Elliott Abrams, cooking the books to claim that few of the contras' leaders had come up through Somoza's National Guard; State and Defense Department "anti-terrorist" units stu-

diously ignoring a bomber of a civilian airliner who was working for the Iran-Contra network, and refusing to follow the trail of accountability for the transfer to the contras of US military aid to El Salvador; the Agency for International Development illegally passing money to programs run by the Salvadoran Army...and this is just a sampling from a list that was literally endless.

Despite these scandals and numerous others uncovered by the press, congress kept right on voting funds for the wars. Had the Reagan and Bush administrations not hoisted themselves on their own petard of contempt for democracy — funding the contras through arms sales to Iran, and stonewalling the investigation of the murder of the Jesuit fathers — the wars would still be going on today. Seymour Hersh's admonition about Nixon's crowd, cited previously, that, "the abiding characteristic of this administration is that it lies," had become true, and expected, for the national security establishment as a whole. The Iran-Contra scandal showed this to the nation, but the nation's representatives failed to make the liars pay a stiff price for it, just as they had failed to after Vietnam.

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Too often, those of us who have any interest at all in the Vietnam War talk about its impact on America and Americans — and not about its impact on the real victims, Indochina and the Indochinese. That is why the first step toward confronting the legacy of Vietnam and winning the struggle for America's soul, must be a concrete one directed not at our country's intellect, but at our former enemy's physical well-being. In 1995 the Clinton administration finally ended the spiteful policy of isolation of Vietnam that had been maintained with only minor modifications for nearly 20 years, cutting it off from trade, aid, and loans from the World Bank. Now the time has come for a major effort of reconstruction, after which can we truly say that we have put the war behind us.

The effort to normalize relations with Vietnam received a boost in the late 1980s by an unlikely pair of former Navy officers serving in the Senate, Republicans John McCain and Mark Hatfield, one a conservative on foreign policy who was shot down and imprisoned in Vietnam, and the other a liberal on foreign policy who formed his opposition to war when he walked on the rubble at Hiroshima in the days after the dropping of the atomic

bomb. Their efforts were reinforced in 1991 by two similarly dissimilar staffers, Tim Rieser, an iconoclastic Vermonter (perhaps that is redundant) working for a Senate foreign aid subcommittee, and Fred Downes, a conservative Vietnam vet at the Veterans Administration and author of moving books about his experiences in and after the war. They fulfilled their dream of many years of including Vietnamese amputees in a special US program that provides prosthetic devices to war victims overseas, marking the first provision of US aid to Vietnam since the war.

I had done my small part in nursing along their effort by pairing them up and encouraging them to establish the program in less controversial countries first, so that its expansion to Vietnam could be seen as a simple step for an existing program. My interest was not just in the good that the program would do for Vietnamese victims of the war, but in the precedent of US aid, which might prove to be the pinprick that burst the balloon. My hopes were constantly delayed, however, by the hoopla about the bogus issue of American "prisoners of war" in Indochina, complete with forged photographs and phony documents that were repeatedly plastered across America's media, as if the previous hoax hadn't occurred. After three years, Bill Clinton finally recognized Vietnam, but the attack of the Republican Congress on humanitarian foreign aid made it unlikely that we would soon be able to fulfill our most fundamental responsibilities arising from the war.

In addition to fixing up Vietnam, though, America must take up its unfulfilled responsibility to fix itself. To stake our claim to being a civilized people, we have to understand how the war could have happened, so that the risk of other wars can be reduced. We have to understand how the war could have continued, so that the risk of other prolonged failures can be reduced. We have to understand how a foreign policy could have developed that like a 20th century version of Victorian England's assumes that a great power must reward the cooperative and defeat the uncooperative, so that the risk of grinding misery under US-backed regimes can also be reduced.

Vietnam should have taught America that it, like all countries, has a systematic tendency toward an arrogance of power that only power brings, and that it, unlike most countries, has so much power that the arrogance can be a danger to itself and oth-

ers. Proponents of the Vietnam foreign policy and the Cold War within which it thrived understood that the ancient drive for power had by the end of World War II been forced to shroud itself in a mist of modern morality. No longer could politicians say, as Thucydides recounts the Athenians saying to the Spartans at the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War, "It has always been a rule that the weak should be subject to the strong." Ruling groups' sentiments might remain the same, but their words had to be changed to reflect the confirmation by Germany's and Japan's crimes that a world based on rights rather than might was morally preferable both in theory and, because it would serve the interests of the vast majority of people, in practice.

American public opinion needed to be assuaged, if not fully convinced, by the self-serving claim that our foreign policy had moral legitimacy, that it was consistent not just with our economic interests but with our proclaimed values. This led to the pernicious myth of righteousness that sustained, and sustains, the Vietnam foreign policy. From John J. McCloy, the acknowledged chairman of the foreign policy establishment who during the Cold War's first decade ran the World Bank, the Chase Manhattan bank, and the Council on Foreign Relations while helping establish the CIA's network of spying and bribing, to Jeanne Kirkpatrick, the acid-tongued apologist for authoritarians who during the Cold War's last decade was US ambassador to the United Nations, spokespeople for the Vietnam foreign policy refused to cede the moral high ground. They argued consistently and vociferously that by aiding "our bastards," to borrow a phrase from Franklin Roosevelt and an earlier era of American power, we were improving the lives of their people.

Penetration by our businesses would "trickle down" to relieve the squalor of the post-colonial economy, and even if our soldiers and diplomats couldn't magically reform the ruling rightist thugs, we would block the decline in human rights that would occur if communists came to power. If the people wanted us out, it was only because they didn't understand their own interests as well as we did; our short-term support for repression was for their own long-term good. We had not sought this mantle of protecting the world from communism, but now that the power vacuum at the end of World War II had given it to us, we were morally bound to wear it. Without widespread acquiescence by the me-

dia, academia, and political parties in this fantasy of moral utility, the national security establishment could not have hijacked America into Vietnam. Even that classic demonstration of how our foreign policy was contrary to both our values and most of our interests could not by itself break the narrow frame within which America's political debate took place. An important part of the fantasy continues to be the claim that we support "democracy," and elections are the veneer for that claim.

In America, despite the corrupting power of campaign contributions, elections are generally open and fair contests that guarantee other essential elements of democracy, such as an apolitical military force, a rule of law, individual rights of expression and movement, and a responsive government, since if those are abrogated, elections permit us to throw the bums out. To the South Vietnamese, though, elections were part of the machinery of undemocratic rule, tightly-controlled plebiscites in which votes were counted fairly and results respected only if they were meaningless. When essential elements of democracy emerged in South Vietnam, such as citizen movements and protests about government policy, scripted elections provided the government with a mandate to quash them.

Vietnam had a history of phony elections well before the United States sent its troops there. The French reneged on Ho Chi Minh's electoral victory in 1946, and in the plebiscite in 1955, Diem garnered 200,000 more affirmative votes from Saigon than the 450,000 registered voters there could have provided. When US officials placed their own electoral superstructure on top of the corrupt coalition of civilian and military satrapies that comprised the South Vietnamese government in the 1960s and 1970s, the results were as predictable as they were in the communist North. Opposition candidates were kept off the ballot by the subservient court system, using laws prohibiting anti-government expression or even the discussion of a coalition government and a negotiated peace. Government control of the vote count meant that in rare cases of true competition, the incumbent would win.

There is little doubt that supporters of the NLF or of a coalition government would have won enough seats in any fair parliamentary elections in the 1960s that a negotiated peace would have resulted: that's why the United States didn't permit any such elections. In 1972 North Vietnam offered to end the war if South

Vietnam held internationally-supervised elections, but President Thieu rejected the offer. He knew that he would lose control of the government, which would eventually lead to unification under Hanoi's rule. Instead, Thieu prepared one more of his fraudulent coronations, this time finally with a formidable opponent, former Gen. "Big" Minh, who preferred a settlement to continued war. Minh learned that Thieu had constructed a scheme for counting the ballots that would give him as many votes as necessary to win. Minh went to see US Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker to ask for a fair count, but Bunker turned him down, delivering the most memorable howler of the war: "We do not interfere in another country's internal affairs." Despite being offered \$3 million by the CIA to stay in the race, Minh dropped out, leaving Vietnam's last election as meaningless as its first one in 1946.

The theme of elections as democracy has become even more prevalent in US foreign policy since Vietnam, as elections we sponsored were used to provide undemocratic leaders and the military forces that maintained them with the imprimatur of democracy and the US aid that went with it. The national security establishment's argument for elections was summed up perfectly in the title of a column in 1992 by *Washington Post* editorial writer Stephen Rosenfeld: "Democracy First, then Human Rights." By democracy, Rosenfeld meant the machinery of elections, and by human rights, he meant those things that I would call democracy: a functioning judicial system, freedom of expression, accountability of the military and police forces, and an eventual demilitarization of society in which armed forces are reduced and excluded from politics. Rosenfeld was criticizing a report by the group Human Rights Watch that argued, as I am, that an election doth not a democracy make, and that US foreign policy, by ignoring this reality, was perpetuating rather than challenging the de facto dictatorship and military rule that cover three-fourths of the developing world.

It was appropriate that Rosenfeld would be the spokesperson for this point of view. He had been an adversary of the Caucus when I was there in the 1980s, contending through 10 years of mayhem by the Salvadoran armed forces that they were at least serving an elected democracy. When the election disease struck in El Salvador early in the Reagan administration, politicians there joked that no country since Vietnam had so many elections and

so little democracy. Advocates for US aid to the Salvadoran military effort such as Rosenfeld would refer to these numerous elections as if they provided freedom of choice. But as in Vietnam, representatives of the rebels or peace-oriented candidates were completely excluded from running at first and then, when they were allowed to participate, couldn't campaign, since the history of El Salvador taught its people that anyone who attended their rallies or came from a district that voted overwhelmingly for them was placing their life in jeopardy.

Official Washington blistered Nicaragua's ruling party for harassing opposition politicians, but the Sandinistas' tricks were kids' stuff compared to what happened to dissidents in El Salvador. Newspapers that criticized the government were bombed, and human rights leaders who criticized the government were assassinated. The best example of how elections and democracy collided in El Salvador came in 1984 when the CIA used covert funding and probably vote fraud to deny the presidency to death squad leader Roberto D'Aubuisson (who had by far the best organized political machine of the day) because it knew that the US Congress wouldn't provide aid to his government. This was far less cynical than it seemed: since US policy had already decided to focus on the trappings rather than the reality of democracy, tampering with the trappings wasn't really so bad.

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Perhaps the national security establishment avoided a detailed rehashing of Vietnam precisely because it might have led to systematic questions about what we were doing there in the first place. What disparate critics of the war who have been discussed previously, like historian Henry Steele Commager, policy analysts Leslie Gelb and Richard Betts, and SDS leader Paul Potter, all pointed out was that Vietnam was inevitable in the assumptions of American foreign policy and American politics. If the war was wrong, they implied, then the assumptions might be wrong as well. Recognizing this link, right-wing author Norman Podhoretz argued in his book on Vietnam that the war was right, a noble effort that fell short because of extenuating local conditions, poor execution, and a failure of will on the part of liberals once complications arose. The self-evident absurdity of this proposition, its contradiction of even the most faint-hearted of the systematic analyses of reports from the ground in Vietnam, reaffirms

all the more that the national security establishment is better off simply leaving Vietnam behind.

And why not? After all, to date they've won the war after the war. The Vietnam foreign policy of collaborating with undemocratic governments was so fully revived and then deeply embedded, its assumptions so institutionalized in the public and private spheres of American life, that it even survived the demise of the Cold War that was such an essential part of its original justification. Indeed, US relations with undemocratic "friends" have continued in the 1990s as if the Soviet Union had not disintegrated. As noted above, arms sales to dictators have reached record heights, as contractors scurry to compensate for reduced Pentagon orders; scores of repressive governments are provided with free weapons and military training from the Pentagon and cash aid from the State Department and Agency for International Development, much of it under the soft-sounding rubric of "foreign aid;" and bribes handed out by the CIA's spies serve notice that the national security establishment is still implementing the Vietnam foreign policy.

It is up to those of us who oppose this result in the struggle for America's soul to continue talking about Vietnam and the Vietnam foreign policy. If we don't force the nation to confront the truth about why and how we tried to keep thugs in power in Vietnam for thirty years and about the devastation it caused, there will be more Vietnams...and El Salvadors, Guatemalas, Angolas, Somalia, Iraqs, Irans, Indonesias....But is it too late? Didn't George Bush declare the "Vietnam syndrome" dead after US forces decimated enemies in Panama and Iraq? He did say that, but it was just wishful thinking after short wars on our terms against weak conventional armed forces. Aversion by the American public and hence their politicians to picking sides in civil wars in the former Yugoslavia and Somalia shows that the memory of the Vietnam War and the Movement that rose up to end it lives on. Its guardians and heirs founded the human rights, nuclear freeze, and anti-apartheid movements and a host of other successful citizen challenges to the Vietnam foreign policy, and they are turning their attention to new issues like the emerging "Code of Conduct" campaign that would bar arms sales to dictators.

To borrow from Homer's metaphor in the *Iliad*, a powerful god, the national security state, tried to wash away the mighty

sea-wall built by the Movement, that brief national opposition to the war and even to some of the foreign policy that led to it. The god has been diligent in his efforts, but you can still see the outlines of the sea-wall's ridges in the sand, showing us where to come and rebuild it. When Dylan's Chimes of Freedom flashed inside us in the 1960s, they insisted that we realize and then act on our fundamental refusal to be party to the Vietnam foreign policy and any society that accepted it. That alienation made us exiles in our own land, tasting Dante's bitter bread of salt and stone. At times we were miserable and deadened, looking with anger and hopelessness at the power arrayed against the people of Indochina and against ourselves; at times we were ecstatic and alive, celebrating our struggle for America's soul by building a nation within a nation, with our own music, legends, and heroes. All in all it was a hard way, but it was and will always be our only way.

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