

What We Choose To Remember: The Human Costs of the Vietnam War

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In the Vietnam War, the United States, a mechanized industrial superpower, brought its full arsenal to bear against the combined guerilla forces (National Liberation Front) and standing army of North Vietnam (NVA). Two decades of escalating warfare resulted in the defeat of the U.S. war machine on foreign soil, a souring of public opinion at home, and the dramatic evacuation of American troops and personnel in spring 1975, preceding the fall of Saigon. The defeat of the modern world's most powerful empire by a small, former French colony has enthralled historians and military strategists alike (e.g. Summers 1982; Nagl 2002). Missing from many of these analyses, however, is the human cost of the war in Vietnam. This paper examines tactics used in the Vietnam War and their effect on both American and Vietnamese combatants, as well as Vietnamese civilians. Oral histories and hindsight reveal the ways in which ethnocentrism and constructions of the "self" and "other" influenced military strategy and devalued human lives. This toxic mind-set is exemplified in the tactical use of defoliants like Agent Orange, the "overkill" mentality of bombardment (Turse 2011), and damaging programmes of insurgency and counterinsurgency. We will see that, regardless of the way Vietnam "should" have been fought, the legacy from the way the war *was* fought needs to be remembered.

For several generations, war had been a constant in Vietnam. From the mid-nineteenth century, the Vietnamese had met French colonial armies with periods of fierce resistance. Foreign armies occupied and waged war within Vietnam during the early twentieth century as well, leading to increased political action for Vietnam's autonomy prior to World War II. For a time, the shared goal of independence united various Vietnamese nationalist groups with the Ho Chi Minh-led communists. Divisiveness over the path to independence was exposed following World War II, however, and led to the First Indo-Chinese War, as France tried to re-assert control over its former colony. By 1954, Geneva Accords had split the country at the 17th parallel, with the communist Viet Minh in control of the north and the pro-Western State of Vietnam established in the south (Santoli 1985: 337-338).

The United States, which had supported France's colonial claim, feared the potential "domino-effect" of a communist controlled north and continued their support of President Diem and the South Vietnamese army (Army of the Republic of Vietnam or AVRN; Verrone and Calkins 2005: 15). It was in this context that the war between South Vietnam and North Vietnam escalated in the 1960s. Though North Vietnam became a target for airstrikes in the 1965-68's Operation Rolling Thunder and again in 1972 (Turse 2013: 105-106), the greatest devastation was in the open rice paddies and jungles of South Vietnam, directed at guerilla forces dubbed by American intelligence as the "Viet Cong."

The National Liberation Front (NLF), also known as the People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF) or Viet Cong, consisted of uniformed soldiers and part-time combatants. Drawn largely from rural villages, with support from NVA personnel, it became difficult for U.S. soldiers to distinguish between South Vietnamese civilians and enemy combatants who were often farmers by day and fighters by night (Verrone and Calkins 2005: 96). American soldiers began to conflate the enemy with the people they were supposedly there to protect. Once that distinction was blurred, lines of conduct could be crossed, leading to innumerable atrocities against the Vietnamese. Turse (2013) uses the example of Sgt. Roy Bumgarner, credited with over 1,500 enemy KIAs. Many of Bumgarner's confirmed kills were unarmed women, children, and elderly whom he falsely reported as enemy combatants (192). Bumgarner was eventually court-martialed, but allowed to reenlist at a lower rank shortly thereafter.

Though an extreme example, Bumgarner's case provides insight into the re-socialization of soldiers, where the murder of innocents becomes an acceptable and valued act (Turse 2013:199). Even after his court-martial, Bumgarner was held in high esteem by his peers, in large part for the very acts he was court-martialed over. This acceptance was facilitated by the low importance placed on the lives of the Vietnamese, and the dehumanization of the "Other" in a context of war. It was an outlook that disturbed Sgt. Lee Childress, who observed that soldiers got in more trouble for killing water buffalos than they did Vietnamese peasants (Santoli 1981:63).

Vietnamese peasants also faced reprisal from the NLF if they were perceived to be colluding with the American or AVRN forces. In order to keep unsupportive villages in line, several strategies of terror were employed by NLF fighters and the NVA, including the complete destruction of villages and targeted assassination of local leaders and village chiefs (Santoli 1981:114 &196). Major Michael Andrews of the Combined Reconnaissance and Intelligent Platoon described the average Vietnamese villager as a "...servant of two masters, not being able to speak out against either without reprisal" (Santoli 1981: 189). Between 1957 and 1965, over 52,000 civilians were either kidnapped or killed by the NLF (Nagl 2002: 136). This is why, by CIA Case Officer Bruce Lawlor's estimation, most Vietnamese would have preferred to have no side in the war (Santoli 1981:195). The difficulty in disentangling civilian from enemy, and the eventual coalescing of these categories, was costly to Vietnamese villagers and influenced damaging American strategies throughout the war, including flawed counterinsurgency plans like relocation and mass deforestation.

Chairman Mao said of his guerillas that they were "small fish swimming in a greater sea" of civilians (Santoli 1981:50). The aim of counterinsurgency was to dry up that sea. During the Vietnam War, the United States military called this pacification. David Ross, a medic in the 1st Infantry Division, describes pacification as processes that first tried to win the minds of the people, and failing that, would relocate them (Santoli 1981:50). In Vietnam, relocation was an attempt to establish areas of explicit American control. Clearing areas of civilians would both remove them from guerilla influence and allow for the establishment of "free-strike zones," areas cleared for open bombardment. It would create front-lines in a war without them. However, the methods employed showed, at best, a culture-bond

misunderstanding of Vietnamese peasantry, and, at worst, a complete lack of empathy concerning the consequences.

A failure to recognize villages as political units, rooted in ethnocentrism, was costly to the U.S. war effort. Rural villages in South Vietnam consisted of fisherfolk, rice farmers, and horticulturalists who made fields of forests through the practice of cutting and burning wooded areas. Pacification by relocation undermined and destroyed these Vietnamese communities. Gerald Hickey, who worked with Central Highland populations throughout the Vietnam War, described the effects of relocation on the highland communities. Events he witnessed demonstrate the failure of U.S. efforts to comprehend highlander culture. Basic inconsistencies, like using Vietnamese to address highland populations that did not speak the standard language, are emblematic of this failure (Hickey 2002: 213). Relocation not only disrupted social life and subsistence, but exposed the highlanders to devastating attacks by North Vietnamese troops who easily penetrated weak camp defenses (Hickey 2002:213).

In many cases, relocation was a euphemism for destruction, in which Vietnamese peasantry were relocated because they had no other place to go. Operation Sunrise, conducted by U.S. advisors and allied Vietnamese troops in 1962, involved razing hundreds of villages and sending former inhabitants to dismal barracks to live (Turse 2013: 65). This scene would repeat throughout the war, with U.S. troops doing the work. One account details how the Americans bulldozed a whole village, graveyard and all (Santoli 1981: 46). Often, relocated or destroyed villages could be the same ones that American soldiers had recently worked closely with. Lee Childress, a sergeant in Phu Loi, shared Christmas with a group of Vietnamese children only to see them killed on December 27th by American artillery (Santoli 1981:63). Such actions could be justified because, to American strategists, the South Vietnamese peasantry were less than civilians: they were potential Viet Cong.

The rationale behind relocation was that it would isolate the guerilla forces from the local population. However, an undermining of traditional village life, as a strong nucleus and political unit that could potentially resist outside intrusion, was not the way to do this. This alienation worked against efforts to win the hearts of the population and resulted in what Oscar Salemink generously described as “structural inconsistency” (2003:240).

Relocation and pacification of large areas were also achieved through large-scale deforestation using pesticides like Agent Orange. The spraying of Agent Orange for the purpose of killing vegetation and opening visibility for bombardment had immediate and lasting effects for those who lived or fought in regions sprayed by it. Agent Orange and other herbicides destroyed important economic crops, killed livestock, and caused illness and stillbirth amongst Vietnamese villagers (Hickey 2002: 343-345). The effect of over 70 million liters of herbicidal agent withered away emerald green forests that had awed arriving soldiers with their beauty, turning them into a pile of weeds (Turse 2013: 95). Hickey saw little attempt to deliberately spray settlements, though in most cases the poison drifted into villages anyway (2002:343). However, reports turned up by Nick Turse indicate that the destruction of important cash

crops was seen by American war planners as a boon to pacification, as well as cutting off rice supply to the guerilla army (Turse 2013:95). It was also devastating to the Vietnamese farmer. Today, some 70,000 Vietnamese are estimated to have illnesses caused by high levels of dioxins in the environment (Hickey 2002: 355). When historians discuss the toxic legacy of the Vietnam War, they are not speaking strictly in metaphor.

Clearing the rural areas of both civilians and vegetation fulfilled the objective of creating “free-strike zones” for the U.S. military. The creation of “free-strike zones” was supported by the notion that “...everything that was ‘out there’, was the enemy” (Santoli 1981:50). This, in turn, justified large-scale bombing, the exact kind of war the U.S. military had prepared for. General Maxwell Taylor, a key advisor in the war from 1961-68, and General Westmoreland, the top U.S. commander in Vietnam from 1964-68, saw Vietnam as a convenient weapons lab (Turse 2013: 78). The American weapons of war were the most sophisticated and technologically advanced on the planet. They had superior aircraft, small-arms, grenades, mines, and artillery, all to direct at a guerilla force in Southern Vietnam that had no air force to speak of (Turse 2013:80). The policy of both the U.S. military and the AVRN was to send “... a bullet (or a shell, or a bomb) rather than a man whenever possible” (Nagl 2002:138). The American strategy was to unleash hell in Vietnam, and they did so to the equivalent of 640 Hiroshima-sized bombs and 400,000 tons of horrific napalm (Turse 2013: 80-83).

The obvious problem with this level of bombardment is that bombs and napalm do not discriminate. Napalm burned a Vietnamese farmer the same way it burned a Viet Cong guerilla. To complicate matters further, the farmer and the guerilla could be one and the same. Karl Phaler, a U.S. Advisor to the Vietnamese Navy, was stationed in the Mekong Delta when the bombing campaign ramped up in 1967 (Santoli 1981:54-55). He witnessed the cities swell with refugees from the country, as well as children dismembered as a result of U.S. ordnance. It made Phaler aware of the consequences of this detached bombardment. The pilot flying the B-52 might not know what happened with his bombs, but Phaler “...knew where his ordnance went,” who it was affecting, and the devastation it left (Santoli 1981: 54).

Phaler’s experience with the suffering victims of this strategy allowed him to see the humanity of the Vietnamese, dispelling the distancing effect of ethnocentrism. Seeing the devastation the war wrought on a human level led to soldiers like Phaler questioning the purpose of it all. In the examples of individuals like Phaler and Childress (above), we see the blowback of ethnocentric strategies when the separation between “us” and “them” is proven to be false: it ends up making victims of those who carry out the orders as well. Ethnocentrism was also a bad strategy, as indiscriminate bombing is credited with alienating the Vietnamese population and pushed them towards support of the NLF (Nagl 2002: 138). General Lu Mong La of the AVRN understood this, if the Americans did not. He had instructed his troops to avoid harming innocents because it would cost the hearts of the people (Santoli 1985:152).

Dan Pitzer, a POW from 1963-1967 in U Minh forest, recalled the fear and respect the NLF had for aircraft, hiding everything at the suggestion of engines overhead (Santoli 1985:95). Their tactics

reflected this respect. Guerilla fighters knew that it took two to three minutes for an air assault to be scrambled. They would ambush and escape from U.S. Army units on search and destroy missions before any air support could show (Santoli 1981:67). In some locales, air support was simply impractical due to environmental conditions and guerilla tactics that brought the fight to the jungle: for example, in one of the first battles between U.S. forces and the NVA in 1965, in the rugged terrain of the Ia Drang Valley. "Air assault didn't mean shit in Ia Drang" according to Thomas Bird, member of the 1st Calvary (Santoli 1981:42). The NLF quickly adapted tactics to American firepower by "hugging" enemy units so as to endanger American and AVRN troops with their own air and artillery support (Nagl 2002: 155). The Air Force, as told by one officer, explained that bombing was still an option in overrun zones to "save the situation" (Turse 2013:86). This occurred during the Tet Offensive in 1968 when Viet Cong forces brought the war to the cities.

Surprised and panicking, the Americans resorted to their conventional strategy of overwhelming bombardment, and thus the debate around the Tet Offensive is often about which side lost more strategically: the Viet Cong were mostly destroyed in the south, requiring a restructuring of the organization, but the American war effort lost face at home (Santoli 1985: 144). Rarely mentioned is that U.S. military deliberately dropped ordnance directly on the cities. The city of Hue saw almost three quarters of its homes destroyed, leaving 3,800 residents killed, and 16,000 homeless (Turse 2013:103). That this is considered a victory by American military standards is informative about what success meant to the military and how little Vietnamese lives meant to those directing the war. It was an exhibition of Nick Turse's characterization of U.S. commanders who "... wasted ammunition like millionaires, hoarded American lives like misers- and often treated Vietnamese lives as if they were worth nothing at all" (2013:107).

But it was not solely the lives of the Vietnamese that were treated as worthless. Al Santoli was at Fort Gordon in Georgia when then Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird came to inspect the military hospital. The building was cockroach infested, with poor heating in the winter. Santoli was wheeling a wounded American soldier down the hospital's narrow hallway towards Laird and an entourage of colonels and generals. Laird walked by without a glance towards Santoli and the young sergeant who had lost both legs in the war. Laird, like many policy makers and historians, chose to ignore the costs of war on those who experience it first-hand. The tendency in accounting the cost of war is to undervalue the effect it has on your soldiers and the civilians whose homes are turned into a warzone. It certainly does not account for the loss of humanity the individual faces. This was the case in the Vietnam.

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