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Why the War Was Immoral

Hendrik Hertzberg

Was the war in Vietnam wrong? Not just inadvisable, not just a costly mistake, but morally wrong? How one answers that depends partly, I guess, on how one experienced the war and the opposition to it. A few days ago, at the university where I'm spending a semester, I found myself deep in conversation with a tutor in the philosophy department, an intense, articulate man five or six years younger than I am. (I'm 41.) We were talking about our experiences in the antiwar movement—ten and 15 and nearly 20 years ago—and he said that when he looks back on that time he feels mostly a kind of angry regret. He had been a member of Students for a Democratic Society when SDS dropped its homegrown ideology of participatory democracy in favor of mindless Maoism; he had chanted, "Ho! Ho! Ho Chi Minh! NLF is gonna win!"; he had longed for the triumph of the forces of "liberation" not only in Vietnam but everywhere in the Third World and ultimately at home; he had spelled it Amerika and dismissed its political system—"bourgeois democracy"—as a hoax, a cover for racism and imperialism. When the war ended and Indochina vanished into blood-soaked totalitarianism (instead of the gentle egalitarianism he had expected), he was wrenchingly disillusioned. Gradually he discovered that the "revolutionary socialism" of the Third World is brutal, that the Soviet Union is armed and dangerous, that for all its flaws American democracy is the moral superior of any form of communism. "I was wrong, just totally wrong," he told me. Last year he voted for Reagan.

I was luckier. I happened to have been brought up in a political and moral atmosphere of left-wing anti-communism. Reared on Or-

well, Gandhi, and Silone, it was no great trick for me to avoid the more blatant naïvetés of New Leftism, and thus also to avoid the subsequent disillusionments. I took my antiwar arguments from Theodore Draper, not Noam Chomsky; from *Commentary* (yes, *Commentary*) and *The New Republic*, not the *National Guardian* and *Monthly Review*. I was similarly lucky in my encounter with military service. Opposed to what was then still called the "Vietnam policy," yet not so fiercely opposed as to be willing to risk prison, and too straight to dodge the draft, I signed up at the end of 1966 for a three-year hitch in the Navy. I asked to be sent to Vietnam, figuring a desk job in Saigon would be interesting without being unduly risky, but was sent—catch-22—to a sleepy shore billet in New York instead. Two years later I was ordered to Vietnam (desk job in Da Nang); but by then my antiwar convictions had grown so strong I preferred jail to further military service, and I announced my intention to refuse the orders. I hoped for antiwar martyrdom; instead, quite by chance, a medical difficulty developed, and I was hastily mustered out. I'd managed to have it both ways: veteran (sort of), and resister (in a way). In the Navy and after, I campaigned for Bobby Kennedy and Allard Lowenstein and other antiwar politicians; went on all the marches; hung around the office of a lively little pacifist weekly, *Win*, whose editor had two stickers on the bumper of his Volkswagen: US OUT OF VIETNAM and RUSSIA OUT OF LATVIA. But I didn't join any of what the inimitable Norman Podhoretz calls (in *Why We Were in Vietnam*) "the three main currents of the 'antiwar' movement": pro-Communist, anti-anti-Communist, and anti-American. I guess that I (along with more prominent opponents of the war, such as Podhoretz himself) must have joined one of the

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non-main currents. Perhaps it was the current that cheered when Norman Thomas, whom I had been taught to revere and who never disappointed, advised the movement to wash the flag, not burn it.

It's no surprise that the differences over Vietnam, rooted as they are in such different experiences, persist in the form of different histories remembered, different lessons learned. The war turned my tutor friend into a "communist" and me into a pacifist. A decade later, neither of us is what we were. We are merely a Republican and a Democrat, passing the time in earnest conversation. And I still think the war was immoral. So when my tutor friend told me the story of his days in the movement, I readily agreed with him that he had been wrong. "It could have been worse, though," I added. "You could have *supported* the war."

There were always two main arguments in favor of the war, the geopolitical and the "moral." The war's aftermath has undermined the first argument, but has seemingly strengthened the second. For the aftermath proved to be at once worse than the war's opponents had predicted and better than its supporters had feared—worse for the Indochinese, better for everyone else.

The geopolitical argument took many forms, some of which lay in ruins long before the war ended. The notion that the war was needed to stop Sino-Soviet expansionism, for example, had become an embarrassment well before Nixon arrived in Peking. So had the notion that the war was needed to convince the Chinese to abandon revolution and follow the Soviet example of peaceful coexistence.

The most persistent form of the geopolitical argument was the domino theory. Some of the war's retrospective defenders maintain that the fall of Cambodia and Laos proves that the theory was correct. Not so. Cambodia and Laos were Vietnam battlefields long before the Americans arrived, and by the end the three

countries became one domino. Anyway, the domino theory always encompassed more than Indochina. Even in its most modest version it envisaged the loss of all Southeast Asia, which is to say Thailand, Burma, and Malaysia. And in its more grandiose form it predicted that Indonesia, India, Australia, and Hawaii would topple too. None of this has happened; on the contrary, the American position in Asia and the Pacific is stronger now than it was before 1975. Such troubles as do exist there, such as instability in the Philippines, cannot remotely be traced to the defeat in Vietnam.

A milder corollary to the domino theory was the argument from will: we needed to go on fighting in Vietnam in order to demonstrate our resolve and reliability. This argument implicitly recognized that the fate of Vietnam was, by itself, peripheral to the national security of the United States; it shifted the ground of discussion from the geopolitics of the map to the geopolitics of the soul. Yes, their will to rid their country of foreigners was stronger than our will to demonstrate our will; but by any reasonable standard, our resolve was strong. We did far, far more than enough to meet our treaty obligations, demonstrate our will, and prove our reliability. We financed a quarter of a century of war in Vietnam. We fought there in strength for ten years—longer than we fought in World War I, in World War II, or in Korea, longer than in all of them put together. Fifty-eight thousand American soldiers were killed. We said we would fight, therefore we must fight: at many a juncture along the way that logic seemed compelling. But it was not a compelling reason to fight forever. Our guarantees were not worthless. It was the war that was worthless.

The importance of the collapse of the domino theory to the debate over the war's morality is that the theory, if correct, could arguably have justified an enormous degree of suffering and death. What if it had really been true that the loss of Vietnam would doom Australia, India,

Hawaii, and the rest to war followed by Communist totalitarianism? A firm moral case can be made that preventing the certain devastation and enslavement of many countries can justify the destruction, even the total destruction, of one. "We had to destroy this village in order to save a hundred villages" is a defensible proposition. But "we had to destroy this village in order to save it" is a moral absurdity. When the domino theory fell, so, domino-like, did one of the moral props of the war.

We are left, then, with the "moral case," as Podhoretz calls it—the view that the war was moral because it was an attempt to save South Vietnam from Communism. My tutor friend, back in his SDS days, did not think this a moral aim, would not have thought it a moral aim even if it could have been achieved without cost. In thinking these things he made a moral error, and he is right to rue it. Even those of us who took the view that it did not make much difference to the South Vietnamese whether they lived under Communism or under the Saigon regime made a moral error. Take away the war and the Saigon regime, with all its noisy corruption and repressiveness, was morally preferable to the totalitarian silence that now rules, with scarcely less corruption, in Ho Chi Minh City. Except that you can't take away the war.

The overwhelming majority of those who opposed the war did not in any case reject the aim of saving South Vietnam from Communism. And to the extent that the war was fought for this aim it was fought for a moral aim. But this says no more than that the war was fought with good intentions rather than evil ones, which is saying very little. If good intentions were enough, there would be no neoconservatives.

In war the moral question is always the same: does the end justify the means? The calculations are necessarily ugly, but they are unavoidable. Ten years ago the choice was not between a Communist South Vietnam and a non-Communist one. It was between a Commu-

nist South Vietnam on the one hand, and the terrible cost of keeping South Vietnam non-Communist on the other. The aftermath of the war—the boat people, the "reeducation" camps, above all the unimaginable horror that engulfed Cambodia—has made the "moral case," the argument that the war was worth fighting solely for the sake of the people of Indochina, seem much more plausible than it did at the time. But for the "moral case" to be clinched, the war must be judged to have been winnable—winnable, moreover, at a lower cost in suffering and death than the cost of the Communist victory.

The retrospective defenders of the war must argue that the war could have been won, and their arguments mostly take the form of "if only." If only the bombers had hit "worthwhile targets" on their 1,000 sorties a day, says the military analyst Edward Luttwak in a current *Harper's* symposium, it "would have ended the war in a day." If only Lyndon Johnson had rallied the country behind the war as a moral imperative, writes Podhoretz in his Vietnam book, then the American people would have remained steadfast. If only the United States had followed a purposeful military strategy, argues Harry G. Summers in *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*, then the conditions for a successful South Vietnamese war against the Vietcong might have been created. If only Congress hadn't voted down supplementary military aid to the Saigon government in 1975, contends Richard Nixon in his new book, *No More Vietnams*, then everything might have turned out fine.

All of these arguments rest on the assumption that there was a point at which North Vietnam, having calculated that the actual costs of war were exceeding the prospective benefits of victory, would have stopped fighting. It seems clearer than ever today that there was no such point. Some people understood this at the time. Ten years ago, this magazine published a special issue devoted to

the end of the war. Richard Holbrooke, who had resigned in protest from the foreign service, and who later became an assistant secretary of state, began his essay with these words:

For at least eight years it seemed reasonable to me to assume that sooner or later, no matter what we did in Vietnam, things would end badly for us. This feeling was not based on any desire to see us humiliated, or any feeling that the other side represented the forces of goodness and light; it just seemed that the only way to stave off an eventual Communist victory was with an open-ended, and therefore endless, application of American firepower in support of the South Vietnamese regime. No matter how much force we were willing to use, this would not end the war, only prevent Saigon's defeat. And the human suffering would be bottomless. The war would go on until the North Vietnamese achieved their objectives.

Holbrooke's judgment has stood up well. "The essential reality of the struggle," wrote Stanley Karnow in *Vietnam: A History*, published in 1983, "was that the Communists, imbued with an almost fanatical sense of dedication to a reunified Vietnam under their control, saw the war against the United States and its South Vietnamese ally as the continuation of two thousand years of resistance to Chinese and later French rule. They were prepared to accept limitless casualties to attain their sacred objective. Ho Chi Minh, their leader, had made that calculation plain to the French as they braced for war in the late 1940s. 'You can kill ten of my men for every one I kill of yours,' he warned them, 'but even at those odds, you will lose and I will win.'" William Broyles Jr., who fought in Vietnam 15 years ago as a Marine officer, and who recently went back for a visit during which he talked to hundreds of his former enemies, has a similar assessment. Writing in the April *Atlantic*, he concludes, "Whatever the price of winning the war—twenty more

years of fighting, another million dead, the destruction of Hanoi—the North Vietnamese were willing to pay it."

If the North Vietnamese were willing to accept limitless casualties, if they were willing to pay any price, then the war could not have been won except by the physical destruction of North Vietnam and the killing of a large proportion of its people. A million? Three million? Six million? The shrill accusation of some in the antiwar movement that the war was "genocidal" was not entirely without justice. Of course no American wanted to kill everybody in North Vietnam. Americans are not monsters. But Americans are not losers, either. Americans are winners. But the logic of winning in Vietnam was inescapably the logic of genocide. We did not lose in Vietnam. We chose not to win. If our entry into the war had something to do with preserving our values, so did our exit from it.

Even Podhoretz, in his book on Vietnam, admits repeatedly that the war could not have been won. In the end, he writes, "The United States demonstrated that saving South Vietnam from Communism was not only beyond its reasonable military, political, and intellectual capabilities but that it was ultimately beyond its moral capabilities as well." Yes, it was beyond our moral capabilities—except that what he understands as a moral failure I understand as a moral success. It wasn't cowardice that finally impelled us to quit. It was conscience.

The old arguments for the war still walk among us, zombielike, in the form of the theory of the Vietnam syndrome, a term calculated to make the American people's desire to avoid another Vietnam sound pathological rather than prudent. Of course, if the war did result in a syndrome, if it did result in a paralysis of American will and so forth, that is hardly an argument that the war was a good idea. Nor do the follies of parts of the antiwar movement somehow vindicate the war. On the contrary,

the antiwar movement was created by the war. Is it really so surprising that this unending, unwinnable war became a machine for producing irrationality, hysteria, and rage? The conservatives' anger at the antiwar movement is misplaced.

The actual consequences of this so-called syndrome are highly problematic. We "lost" Iran after Vietnam, but we "lost" Cuba before it. A more precise effect of the war upon the American political psyche was diagnosed in 1971 by Nathan Glazer, who wrote in a famous *Commentary* article titled "Vietnam: The Case for Immediate Withdrawal" that "the experience of Vietnam has turned the American people into haters of war." That seems exactly right. By August 1964, 300 Americans had been killed and 1,000 wounded in Vietnam. Yet there were only a half-dozen American correspondents reporting on the war. (Meanwhile President Johnson was running as the peace candi-

date, with the support of SDS.) Such relative public indifference to a war with American deaths running into the hundreds would be unthinkable today. It took years for any significant movement of protest to develop against the Vietnam War. The premises of U.S. involvement were scarcely questioned for the first 15 years. But if the Reagan administration launches an invasion of Nicaragua today, thousands of church people are ready to commit civil disobedience tomorrow. And before giving its support to the new war, the public would insist on a full and prompt discussion of its aims, purposes, and prospects—not out of cynicism or morbid suspicion, but out of a healthy, skeptical, democratic spirit of self-government. War can sometimes be a necessity, but is always to be abhorred. Yes, we were right to oppose the Vietnam War, all of us. Even my friend the Reagan-voting ex-SDSer. Even Norman Podhoretz.

My Vietnam Lessons David Horowitz

(No)

When I see today's protestors, in the flush of youthful idealism, with their signs proclaiming "No Vietnams in Central America" a feeling of ineffable sadness overtakes me. For twenty years ago I was one of them. In 1962, as a student at Berkeley, I wrote the first book of New Left protest and helped to organize perhaps the first anti-war demonstration opposing President Kennedy's policies in Vietnam. In the mid-Sixties I went to England to work for Bertrand Russell and helped organize the International War Crimes Tribunal which brought American military actions under damning scrutiny but ignored analagous excesses by the North Vietnamese.

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While in England I also wrote *The Free World Colossus*, which identified America as the aggressor in the cold war, and was used as a radical text in colleges and in the growing protest movement. At the end of the Sixties I returned to America and was an editor of *Ramparts*, the most widely read New Left magazine. Our most famous cover featured a photograph of the My Lai massacre with a sign superimposed and planted among the corpses saying "Re-Elect the President."

My political activities in these years were inspired in part by the belief that America was not living up to its democratic ideals at home or abroad. At the time, American blacks were still second class citizens, lacking basic political rights in many regions of the South, including the right to vote. (The civil rights struggle

remains for me a historic triumph for American democracy and one in which radicals like myself played a strategic and honorable part.) Abroad, the United States supported many dictatorships, and opposed nationalist movements led by Communists like the one in Vietnam. I supported their "National Liberation Front" first of all because I believed they were struggling for self-determination. If they were Marxists, well Marxism to me implied economic development and power over one's national destiny—a basic ingredient of self-determination.

Like today's young radicals, my priorities reflected a double standard. I judged other countries and political movements by the futures I imagined they could have if only the United States and its allies would get out of their way. I judged America, however, by its actual performance, which I held up to a standard of high and even impossible ideals. Of course, if I had looked at the facts (or been able to) I would have seen that America was more tolerant, more democratic and more open to change than the countries and movements to whom I gave my support. But I was unable to do just that. I was—in the then fashionable term—"alienated" from what was near to me and unable to judge it objectively. Some of my alienation could be attributed to youth itself, the feeling that I and my peers could understand the world better and accomplish more than the older generation could.

But there was another dimension to my disaffection, an ideology that committed me to "truths" behind the common sense surfaces of things. I was a Marxist and a socialist. I believed in the "dialectic" of history and therefore, even though I knew that the societies calling themselves Marxist were ruled by ruthless dictatorships I believed that they would soon evolve into socialist democracies. I attributed their negative features to underdevelopment and to the capitalist pasts from which they had emerged. I believed that Marxist economic planning was the most rational

solution to their underdevelopment and would soon bring them untold prosperity (an idea refuted as dramatically by the experience of the last twenty-five years as the parallel notion that private property is the source of all tyranny and that socialist states will soon become free). But at the time, I expected (as did most of my comrades in the New Left who gave any thought to the subject) that the de-Stalinization process begun by Khrushchev would continue until Russia and the Communist world generally became even more democratic than the United States.

On the other hand, the same Marxist analysis told me that America, however amenable to reform in the past, was now set on a course that would make it increasingly rigid, repressive, and ultimately fascist. The United States was the leviathan of a global imperialist system under attack at home and abroad. Its ruling class could not afford to retreat from this challenge: it could only grow more reactionary and repressive. This expectation (wrong, as events proved, in every respect) was not an idiosyncratic theory of mine, but was the linchpin of the New Left's political view of the world and its strategy of opposition to America's war in Vietnam. The New Left believed that in Vietnam America's corporate-liberal empire had reached a point of no return. As a result, electoral politics and reform were futile and counter-productive. The only way to alter America's imperial course was to take to the streets—first to organize resistance to the war, and then to "liberate" ourselves from the corporate capitalist system.

What happened to change my views? First of all [is] the very experience of being part of a radical protest movement in this country. As our opposition to the war grew more violent and our prophecies of impending fascism more strident, I observed how we were actually being treated by the system we reviled and condemned. By the decade's end we

had deliberately crossed the line of legitimate dissent and abused every First Amendment privilege and right granted us as Americans. While American boys were dying overseas, we spat on the flag, broke the law, denigrated and disrupted the institutions of government and education, revealed classified secrets and gave comfort to the enemy. Some of us provided a protective propaganda shield for Hanoi's Communist regime while it tortured American fliers; others engaged in violent sabotage against the war effort. All the time I thought to myself: if we did this in any other country, the very least of our punishments would be long prison terms and the stigma of traitors. In any of the *socialist* countries we supported—from Cuba to North Vietnam—we would spend most of our lives in jail and more probably be shot.

And what actually happened to us in repressive capitalist America? Here and there our wrists were slapped (some of us went to trial, some spent months in jail) but the overwhelming national response to our assault was one of tolerance and eventually respect. We began as a peripheral minority, but gradually people joined us: first in thousands and then in tens of thousands, swelling our ranks until finally we reached what can only be called the conscience of the nation. America itself became troubled about its presence in Vietnam, about the justice and morality of the war it had gone there to fight. And because the nation became so troubled, it lost its will to continue the war, and withdrew.

Out the window went all our assumptions about the rigidity of American politics, about the controlled capitalist media (which in fact provided most of the information that fueled our attacks on the war) and about ruling class control of American foreign policy. That policy had shown itself in its most critical dimension responsive to the will of ordinary people, and to their sense of justice and morality. As a historian, I believe I am correct in saying that America's

withdrawal from the battlefield in Vietnam under such circumstances is unique in human history: there is no other case on record of a major power retreating from a war in response to the moral opposition of its own citizenry.

If America's political response to its test of fire gave me an entirely new regard for American institutions and for the culture of democracy which informs and supports them, the aftermath of America's military retreat gave me a new appreciation of the Communist side of the international power struggle.

In 1975, America not only withdrew its forces from Vietnam, as we on the left said it could never do, but from Laos and Cambodia, and ultimately from its role as guardian of the international status quo. Far from increasing the freedom and well-being of Third World nations, as we in the left had predicted, however, America's withdrawal resulted in an international power vacuum that was quickly filled by the armies of Russia, Cuba, and the mass murderers of the Khmer Rouge (not to mention the non-Communist but no less bloodthirsty fanatics of revolutionary Islam). In Afghanistan, the Soviet Union perpetrated the most naked aggression by a great power since World War II, killing a million people (three times the per capita death rate of Vietnamese in the Vietnam War) while making half the population refugees. In Africa, Cuban intervention propped up a bloody Ethiopian dictator whose officially designated "Red Terror" claimed 100,000 lives including, in one year, virtually the entire graduating class of the high schools of Addis Ababa, and whose Marxist economic programs produced a famine that still threatens the lives of millions. In Cambodia, America's withdrawal paved the way for a 20th Century nightmare—the genocidal destruction of two million Cambodians by the Khmer Rouge protégés of the North Vietnamese. All this bloodshed and misery was the direct result of America's post-Vietnam withdrawal, of the end of *Pax*

Americana, which we had ardently desired and helped to bring about.

In Vietnam itself, the war's aftermath showed beyond any doubt the struggle there was not ultimately to achieve or prevent self-determination but—as various Presidents said and we denied—a Communist conquest of the South. Today, the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, whose cause we supported, no longer exists. Its leaders are dead, in exile, in detention camps, under house arrest or powerless in their own land. American forces left Vietnam ten years ago; but today Hanoi's army is the fourth largest in the world and Vietnam has emerged as a Soviet satellite and imperialist aggressor in its own right, subverting the independence of Laos, invading and colonizing Cambodia.

These facts confronted me with a supreme irony: the nation I had believed to be governed by corporate interests, a fountainhead of world reaction, was halted in mid-course by its conscience-stricken and morally aroused populace; the forces I had identified with progress, once freed from the grip of U.S. "imperialism," revealed themselves to be oppressive, unspeakably ruthless and predatory. Nor were they able to bring their own or any of their captive peoples the economic benefits they had promised. I was left with this question: what true friend of the South Vietnamese, or the Cambodians, or the Afghans, or Ethiopians, would not wish that *Pax Americana* were still in force?

There was yet another Vietnam lesson for me when I pondered the question put by Jeane Kirkpatrick to the still active veterans of the new left: "How can it be that persons so deeply committed to the liberation of South Vietnam and Cambodia from Generals Thieu and Lon Nol were so little affected by the enslavement that followed their liberation? Why was there so little anguish among the American accomplices who helped Pol Pot to power?" Indeed, why have the passionate advocates of Third World liberation not raised their voices in protest over

the rape of Afghanistan or the Cuban abetted catastrophe to Ethiopia?

Not only has the left failed to make a cause of these Marxist atrocities, it has failed to consider the implications of what we now know about Hanoi's role in South Vietnam's "civil war." For North Vietnam's victors have boldly acknowledged that they had infiltrated even more troops into the South than was claimed by the Presidential White Paper which was used to justify America's original commitment of military forces—a White Paper which we leftists scorned at the time as a fiction based on anti-Communist paranoia and deception. But today's left is too busy denigrating Ronald Reagan's White Papers on Soviet and Cuban intervention in Central America to consider the implications of this past history to the present.

My experience has convinced me that historical ignorance and moral blindness are endemic to the American left, necessary conditions of its existence. It does not value the bounty it actually has in this country, and in the effort to achieve a historically bankrupt fantasy—call it socialism, call it "liberation"—undermines the very privileges and rights it is the first to claim. Its most visible and lasting effect is to strengthen and promote a rapacious Communist world empire.

The lesson I learned from the Vietnam War was not a lesson in theory but in practice. Observing America go through its worst historical hour, from a vantage point on the other side of the barricade, I came to understand that democratic values are easily lost and historically only rarely achieved, that—however flawed—America is a precious gift, a unique presence in the world of nations, an unparalleled plurality of ethnic, economic and political communities. Moreover, because it is the strongest of the handful of democratic societies that mankind has managed to create, it is also a fortress that stands between the free nations of the world and the dark, totalitarian forces which threaten to engulf them.

My values have not changed, but my sense of what supports and makes them possible has. I no longer can join "anti-war" movements that seek to disarm the western democracies in the face of the danger that confronts them. I support the current efforts of America's leadership to rebuild our dangerously weakened military defenses, and I endorse the conservative argument that America needs to be vigilant, strong and clear of purpose in its life and death struggle with its global totalitarian adversaries. As an ex-radical, I would only add that in this struggle Americans need to respect and encourage their own generosity—their tolerance for internal dissent and their willingness to come to the aid of people who are fighting for their freedom.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1 Was the U.S. intervention in Vietnam motivated primarily by antipathy toward the Soviet Union?
- 2 Were the Vietcong and North Vietnamese puppets of either the Soviet Union or China?
- * 3 Could the United States have won in Vietnam? If so, how?
- * 4 Was domestic opposition to the Vietnamese war the principal reason for the U.S. failure?
- 5 What have been the consequences for U.S. foreign policy makers of the failure in Vietnam?

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