

# MR Review Essay



## REMEMBERING VIETNAM

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**A**LTHOUGH AMERICA'S PRESENT conflicts are a different war fought by a very different U.S. military force in an even more different world, Americans still keep bumping into memories of Vietnam. Four decades after the last U.S. combat forces left that war, its ghosts continue to hover over today's. But there is no agreement on what those memories are, or what those ghosts have to tell us.

On one side is a wish to fit Vietnam into a comforting narrative of our history as a righteous, successful nation, whose wars are honorably fought to protect cherished freedoms. A striking case in point is the website the Defense Department has created for its 50th anniversary Commemoration of the Vietnam War, which began last year. Though one of the commemoration's stated goals is to "provide factual information about the Vietnam War" (the others are to "honor our Vietnam Veterans" and "increase public appreciation of their service") a visitor to the site would not learn that there was any controversy about national policy or any troubling questions about how the war was conducted. Nor would he learn the small detail that ultimately, our side lost.

This rose-tinted (or perhaps red-white-and-blue-tinted) memory of Vietnam may be understandable as an expression of respect for the soldiers who served there, and as a reaffirmation of patriotic feeling. It has little to do, however, with historical knowledge and understanding. Glossing over a great national failure may make veterans and their countrymen feel better, but it also keeps us from knowing things that might help leaders, soldiers, and citizens make wiser decisions in the conflicts of the present era.

That knowledge can be unwelcome and painful. Those are certainly the feelings evoked by Nick Turse's *Kill Anything That Moves* (Metropolitan

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PHOTO: U.S. soldiers form a search-and-destroy patrol in Phuoc Tuy Province, South Vietnam, 1966 (U.S. Army)

Books, New York, 2013), an unsparing account of American complicity in a huge amount of civilian death and suffering in Vietnam. Turse writes from an ideological position at the opposite pole from that of the 50th anniversary website. He sees the U.S. war in Vietnam as an immoral and unjust conflict in which atrocities were not accidents or isolated crimes but reflected the true nature of the war as it was conducted by American forces. Hence his subtitle: *The Real American War in Vietnam* (emphasis added).

That overbroad condemnation will anger many veterans and other readers. But it would be a mistake to dismiss the facts set out in this book just because one dislikes the author's political slant. His conclusions may be overstated, but Turse makes a strong case that the dark side of America's war in Vietnam was a good deal darker than is commonly remembered. If *the American war* was not a crime against humanity, Turse confronts us with convincing evidence that there was *an American war* that it is hard to call anything else—and that we should not scrub out of our history.

Turse covers two separate issues. One concerns murders and other abuses that clearly violated the laws of war and official U.S. rules of engagement. The other concerns the massive use of firepower that was standard practice in U.S. military operations—and killed far more civilians than died in outright war crimes. One notorious example was a six-month campaign by the U.S. 9th Infantry Division code named Operation Speedy Express, in which at least 5,000 civilians died, mainly from artillery fire and air strikes. That is ten times the death toll in My Lai, the site of the best known and most deadly U.S. atrocity.

In the first category, Turse details a fairly long list of incidents that, he states, indicate criminal acts on a scale “far beyond anything that can be explained as merely the work of some ‘bad apples,’ however numerous.” A handful of these events made news at the time. Most remained unknown until Turse uncovered the details, initially drawn from long-ignored military reports and expanded through numerous interviews with veterans in America and survivors in Vietnam. From that fuller record, he concludes that such crimes were not an aberration but “the inevitable outcome of deliberate policies, dictated at the highest levels of the military.”

That judgment is debatable. The archived files that Turse discovered contain reports on more than 300 incidents involving verified or alleged war crimes by U.S. troops—a horrifying number, and surely not the full tally, since there must have been many more that were never brought to the authorities' attention. But can several hundred or several thousand crimes really be considered representative of American soldiers' actions over the course of an eight-year war in which a couple of million U.S. troops were involved?

The dispassionate answer to that question is probably, “No.” But if you ask different questions, the answers are more disturbing. Did prevailing *authorized* military practices fail to show reasonable concern for Vietnamese lives? Did those practices and senior officers' attitudes—particularly the relentless pressure for high body counts—create a climate in which war crimes were more likely? Did unit leaders up and down the chain of command largely turn a blind eye to atrocities and unnecessary civilian deaths? On these, Turse leaves no reasonable doubt that the answers are “Yes,” “Yes,” and “Yes.” And those yeses show, also beyond reasonable doubt, that even if many Americans served honorably in Vietnam, what our nation and our military leadership did there gives no cause for sentimental celebration.

There's a troubling footnote to Turse's work. The archive that led to his quest contained reports collected by a Pentagon task force called the Vietnam War Crimes Working Group. Routinely declassified after the required 20-year wait, the file was sent to the National Archives, where Turse discovered it in 2001. But soon after his research became known, the documents were pulled from the public shelves and remain unavailable. Even decades later, it seems, the official response to American war crimes is to try to hide them, rather than acknowledge the truth.

As grim as it is, Turse's account actually does not portray the full measure of civilian suffering in South Vietnam. That is because he does not show that those civilians were victims of both sides, not just one. The Vietnamese Communists had only a small fraction of the firepower employed by U.S. forces, but their war, waged with mines, rocket and mortar attacks, assassinations, executions, and forced conscription—not to mention the imprisonment of tens of thousands in “reeducation” camps after the war—also brought plenty of fear, loss, and death to the Vietnamese countryside over many years.

It's likely that some of those incidents too are remembered in the villages where Turse did his interviews. (For a vivid account of brutality on both sides, one need only read *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*, further discussed below, whose author comes from the same coastal province where Turse collected much of his material.) But telling those stories would have been dangerous, because the Vietnamese authorities cling to their myths, too, and cases of Communist oppression conflict with the official heroic legend of the war. In Vietnam, it is safer by far—indeed, encouraged—to talk about American atrocities. Whether Turse appreciated that or not is not clear, but except for a single mention of the mass executions by North Vietnamese troops in Hue in 1968, he says nothing about Communist conduct at all. Their acts in no way excuse the American record of careless slaughter and destruction, but without them, the full story of what happened to the Vietnamese people in that war remains incomplete.

Also missing from *Kill Anything That Moves* is any acknowledgement of Americans who served in Vietnam and were not murderers. Turse doesn't say, quite, that all American soldiers were war criminals, but he doesn't say that they weren't, either. Those who didn't commit or cover up atrocities remain invisible in this book. The truth is more ambiguous—as shown in a remarkable letter from a veteran named Richard Brummett, written 30 years after Brummett came home from Vietnam and worth quoting at some length:

The first six months I served in C Troop 1-4 Cav in the First Infantry Division. The second six months in Viet Nam was with A Troop 1-1 Cav of the First Armored Division. That squadron, at large in Viet Nam without its division, later became a part of the new 23rd Infantry Division. These two cavalry troops were identical in TO&E and each were commanded by West Point educated captains. What was not identical was the philosophy of war as practiced by these two captains and that made all the difference.

While in the 1-4 Cav I could not understand what all the protest back home was about as we were genuinely trying to win

the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people. Our war was being fought fiercely but honorably. One example will tell much: One day my M48A3 tank hit a tree and said tree then fell into a rice paddy. Our captain had us seek out the farmer, apologize to him and then help him get the tree out of his paddy.

Transferred to the 1-1 Cav in January 1968 I felt I had landed in hell. The tanks were reassuringly the same homey hulks, the Vietnamese were the same ornery little land mine laying critters, my fellow troopers were the same unwilling draftees.

The captain was insane.

This officer gave license to, indeed, required savagery. One land mine and a damaged tank equaled one village destroyed. One dead trooper and everyone who could be found in the village was killed. Two US KIA, two villages. A stop for lunch on a hill top was followed by shelling a distant village just for the hell of it. A newly issued bridge tank was "tested" by using it to flatten a mud and thatch village with the bridge. Likewise, a new flame throwing track was tested on a village which had not offered any overt sign of hostility. And etc. and etc.

The worst was the one on one barbarism encouraged by the captain and one of his platoon sergeants. The platoon leaders . . . well, let us say the second lieutenants had little influence on the course of events.

Fortunately, I was the driver for the platoon sergeant of the Third Platoon who simply did not allow the worst to happen in his platoon, or at least within his sight. Our tank and its covering APC was an island of sanity in a war gone very, very mad. With thirty years to think this over it is clear to me leadership is everything in war.<sup>1</sup>

In a later letter, Brummett added this thought: "I can not say how many armored cavalry troops and squadrons went by the book and how many were uniformed savages. So, 'Win Their Hearts and Minds' or 'Kill Anything That Moves.' Both policies came from West Point."

Turse mentions Brummett, briefly, but not this letter. Nor does he mention anything comparable to Brummett's first unit—or for that matter, anyone like the platoon sergeant in his second. If he had, *Kill Anything That Moves* would be a fairer, stronger book.

The war in the pages of H.R. McMaster's *Dereliction of Duty* (HarperCollins, New York, 1997) is hard to connect with the one we read about in *Kill Anything That Moves*. Turse's war is a chaotic canvas of blood, explosions, terror, degradation, and moral disintegration. McMaster's is abstract, with a sound-track not of gunfire but the shuffling of paper and coffee cups clinking on conference-room tables. The two books differ in another way, too. One can't imagine any U.S. military professional reading *Kill Anything That Moves* without painful feelings. *Dereliction of Duty* is also critical of American military leadership, but many of those same professionals have taken comfort in its conclusions—possibly more comfort than is really warranted by the story it tells.

McMaster, now an Army major general, was a major when *Dereliction of Duty* was originally published in 1997. In it, he examines events not in Vietnam but in Washington: specifically, the decisions in 1964 and early 1965 that set the United States on the road to full-scale military intervention in the war. McMaster focuses on the relationship between the civilian leaders of the era (President Johnson, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, and other senior figures) on one side, and the uniformed military leadership, represented by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, on the other. His often-quoted final paragraph states this verdict: "The war in Vietnam was not lost in the field, nor was it lost on the front pages of the *New York Times* or on the college campuses. It was lost in Washington, D.C., even before Americans assumed sole responsibility for the fighting in 1965 and before they realized the country was at war; indeed, even before the first American units were deployed."

Perhaps because it absolves the military leaders who actually ran the war, as well as the soldiers who fought it, many officers and others sharing conventional military views embraced that analysis (though no doubt some wouldn't mind reserving a little blame for the *Times* or college students too). At least one JCS chairman made it required reading for the generals under his command.

Along with the book's conclusion, enthusiasts embraced a single strand of its narrative: the one showing that civilian leaders made their decisions without seriously seeking military advice. Typical of that reaction is one pundit's comment applauding the book for showing how Johnson and McNamara "systematically conspired to prevent the Joint Chiefs of Staff from performing their duty." Similarly, a reviewer for a military journal spotlighted the portrayal of "McNamara and his 'whiz kid' civilian assistants . . . rejecting military advice about which they knew or cared little," while their boss, LBJ, distrusted military men and "regarded their advice with contempt."

Those admirers of *Dereliction of Duty* generally agree with one of its criticisms of the Joint Chiefs—that they sinned by not publicly protesting or resigning rather than carry out policies they did not agree with. As far as it goes, that charge is clearly true. But it overlooks a far more significant failure, which is that even if LBJ had been willing to listen, his military advisers had no useful advice to give. If the U.S. government marched (or stumbled) into war without any clear idea how to fight the Vietnamese revolutionaries, that intellectual failure occurred on both banks of the Potomac, not just one. McMaster's research documents that the Chiefs' strategic thinking was as vague and incoherent as that of their civilian superiors. For example, when intelligence reports warned in late 1964 about deteriorating battlefield conditions in South Vietnam, the Chiefs dithered for six weeks before coming up with a list of proposed actions intended to "demonstrate resolve," "increase pressure" and "pose a plausible threat" that might cause North Vietnam's leaders to stop supporting Communist insurgents in the South—exactly the same kind of mushiness that critics have denounced for years in blaming LBJ for not giving the armed forces a clear objective in Vietnam.

Criticizing Johnson and McNamara for ignoring military advice is a valid argument. Saying that was why the war was lost is more questionable. For that to be true, one has to assume that success was possible in Vietnam, that America's military leadership knew how to win there, and would have won if their advice had been followed—in other words, that the war could have been won in Washington, instead of lost. Nothing in *Dereliction of Duty* supports any of those assumptions.

McMaster himself, in an interview a couple of years after the book was published, observed that the decisions he wrote about “mired the United States in a costly war *that could not be won at a cost acceptable to the American public*”<sup>22</sup> (emphasis added). That is inconsistent with his stated conclusion that the war was decided in Washington, but it is a far more plausible judgment on the true nature of a great American mistake.

There’s a reason why the United States went to war in Vietnam without a clear discussion of how the war would be won. The reason is that how to win was not really seen as a question that had to be asked. Winning was taken for granted. The choice was whether to intervene or not. If we did, neither civilian nor military decisionmakers imagined that U.S. military power could fail to achieve U.S. objectives. With few exceptions, other Americans couldn’t imagine it either.

That unthinking confidence was a key thread in America’s failure, Neil Sheehan argues in his book *A Bright Shining Lie* (Random House, New York, 1988). The generals who led the U.S. military into the war “assumed they would prevail in Vietnam simply because of who they were,” Sheehan wrote. Neither they nor the American public could grasp how a lightly armed force in a poor country could hold out against overwhelming U.S. military power. Because the American concept of war considered *only* the equations of armed strength and destructive force, ignoring all other factors, Americans failed to see either their enemy’s other strengths or their ally’s crucial weaknesses, which combined in the end to doom the U.S. effort.

Sheehan’s account of the American war is told through the story of a single American, John Paul Vann. Vann’s highest military rank was lieutenant colonel, and his highest civilian post was as the chief U.S. official in one of South Vietnam’s four military regions—positions that would not ordinarily have historic significance. But Vann’s story, as Sheehan tells it, stunningly captures the essence of America’s experience in Vietnam. Indeed, if it were not a true story, *A Bright Shining Lie* would be one of the great novels of that or any American war.

Vann arrived in Vietnam in March 1962, just as the few thousand U.S. military advisers there were moving into a more active combat role. He died there in June 1972, in the final year of the U.S.

military effort, when his helicopter crashed near Kontum in South Vietnam’s central highlands. Known for exceptional physical bravery, Vann excelled for most of that time in vision and moral courage as well. He saw many things more clearly and honestly than his superiors, and had the integrity to tell them what he saw: that corruption and poor leadership in the South Vietnamese system were undermining American goals; that U.S. tactics were causing vast numbers of unnecessary civilian casualties; and that even with a staggering advantage in firepower, the American strategy of attrition could not succeed in a war where the enemy could almost always choose when and where to fight and could avoid battle when losses became too great.

However, there was another side to Vann’s character. The moral hero in his professional life also committed monstrous acts in his personal life, mainly due to a twisted, compulsive sexuality. When Vann retired from the Army after coming back from Vietnam in 1963, he let his admirers—Sheehan among them—believe that he had sacrificed his career by telling the truth about the war to his superiors. But that was a lie. Vann ruined his military career by personal misconduct, not by challenging official deceptions.

In 1965, as the main-force U.S. war got under way, Vann returned to Vietnam as a civilian. He served there for the next seven years while American troop strength rose to over half a million, then fell back under President Nixon’s “Vietnamization” policy. As those events played out without the victory Americans had been so sure of winning, Vann continued to display physical courage, but over time, his clear-sighted vision began to fade. As honest as he had been with himself and others about the failings of particular U.S. actions and policies, Vann was still a product of the era of American supremacy, a believer in the righteousness of America’s purposes and the limitless reach of its strength.

In the end, he was unable to accept that America’s armed forces could not achieve national goals. Meanwhile, the war’s violence and the repeated tests of his bravery became his escape from personal demons. By the time he died, Sheehan writes, “the John Vann his old friends had known had disappeared into the war. Each year South Vietnam

had become a more perfect place for him. The war satisfied him so completely that he could no longer look at it as something separate from himself. He had finally bent the truth about the war as he had bent other and lesser truths in the past.”

Among the thousands of books that have been written on Vietnam, *A Bright Shining Lie* stands out for its unbent truths on America’s war there and the reasons it failed—reasons that lay in many historical circumstances but also in the character of a generation that believed too strongly in a myth of American infallibility.

Long after the war ended, some still clung to the belief that Americans could not lose a war—and did not lose in Vietnam. One such believer is Lewis Sorley, who declared in his book, *A Better War* (Harcourt Brace and Company, New York, 1999): “There came a time when the war was won. The fighting wasn’t over, but the war was won.”

It can be argued that that statement defies not just history but elementary logic. It is hard to see how a war has been won if the enemy is still fighting, much less if the bloodiest battles are still to come, as Vietnam’s did in 1972—well after Sorley says victory was achieved. It seems even more illogical to declare that a war was won if, after it ends, the enemy rules the country where the war was fought. Yet the claim that the U.S. military effort actually succeeded in Vietnam has become a theme for a number of historians. That alternative narrative of the war is relevant to recent policy debates, not just to the historical argument about Vietnam. That’s because the case made by Sorley and others is, in essence, that the United States succeeded in Vietnam by adopting many of the methods and principles now labeled as “counterinsurgency warfare.” Thus, rather than being remembered as a mistake, the American effort in Vietnam becomes a positive model for present-day strategists looking for solutions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The “better war” of Sorley’s title is the one led by Gen. Creighton Abrams after he succeeded Gen. William Westmoreland in mid-1968 as the top U.S. commander in Vietnam. In place of his predecessor’s search-and-destroy strategy, Abrams declared protecting South Vietnam’s population as the main mission of U.S. forces. That policy, then usually called “pacification” rather than “counterinsurgency,” was undoubt-

edly wiser than Westmoreland’s. But Sorley’s claims for its success and his uniformly rosy spin on Abrams’s generalship rest on a deceptively selective version of the facts.

His argument that the Abrams strategy “won” the war is based on the low level of enemy action in the years after Abrams took command. But while the relative quiet on the battlefields in 1970 and 1971 may have been partly a result of pacification successes, it did not mean that U.S. actions had decisively destroyed the enemy’s ability to fight. The lull also occurred because the Communist forces deliberately avoided battle in order to rest, reequip, and replace losses. When they returned to the fight in 1972, in the attack that became known as the Easter Offensive, the fighting was more intense than in any previous stage of the war—far heavier, by any reasonable estimate, than would have been possible if they had really been defeated just a year or so before.

Some argue that to the extent that the 1972 attack was mounted by regular North Vietnamese units, it is valid to claim that pacification defeated the guerrilla threat in the South. Even if it were true, that is a meaningless argument, since U.S. efforts all along were directed at defeating Hanoi’s forces. And in fact, although the headlined battles in 1972 were with main-force units, local guerrillas reappeared strongly in many areas as well. In the revisionist narrative, the Easter offensive is invariably portrayed as a clear victory for the South, but that too is false. With U.S. air support, Saigon’s troops successfully defended the three province capitals that came under attack, but lost almost all of the chain of inland bases they had held as an outer defense line protecting the populated coastal lowlands, while unprecedented casualties and destruction permanently depressed civilian morale. The Communist side also suffered huge losses without achieving its goals. By any honest assessment, the 1972 fighting was not a victory for either side, but recreated the old stalemate at a higher level of violence, in which South Vietnam’s national will and fragile institutions continued to weaken over the next three years.

The “we really won” narrative leaves only one possible explanation for the final outcome of the war. It’s the same as H.R. McMaster’s, though transplanted to a decade later: that the war was not lost in Vietnam but in Washington—specifically,

because of reductions in military aid to South Vietnam in the final year of the war. That too is a hugely oversimplified answer to a complicated question. The aid cuts (not a cut-off, as is often alleged) were a factor in South Vietnam's defeat. But seeing it as the *sole* reason perceives the end of the war with the same illusion that permeated U.S. decision making at the beginning: that winning or losing was exclusively in American hands. For Sorley and others who have written in a similar vein, the war unfolded and ended entirely as the result of American decisions. In their lens, nothing is seen of the character, strategies, strengths, and shortcomings of either our enemy or our ally, or the idea that the leadership, skill, nerve, will, and endurance of the two Vietnamese sides had any bearing on the outcome.

The historian Ronald Spector, in his review of *Dereliction of Duty*, recalled a story about the Confederate general George Pickett's response when he was asked why the South lost the Civil War. "Well," Pickett is supposed to have replied, "I kinda think the Yankees had a little something to do with it."<sup>3</sup> The Vietnamese had something to do with America's failure in Vietnam, too, a truth that Americans would have done well to remember before plunging into war in other distant, unfamiliar places. Sadly, a mass of evidence suggests that we did not learn that lesson well enough.

A good deal of that evidence can be found in *Cultures of War* (W.W. Norton, New York, 2010), by the renowned historian John W. Dower. *Cultures of War* is not about Vietnam, but focuses on wars before and after. It examines the influence of cultural attitudes in two events of the U.S.-Japanese war in World War II, Japan's decision to attack Pearl Harbor, and the American decision to drop an atomic bomb on Hiroshima; and in two events of the war-on-terror era, the 9/11 attack, and the U.S. invasion of Iraq. The parallels Dower finds in those two eras are arresting in themselves. They also evoke unmistakable echoes of Vietnam, even where that war is not mentioned.

An example is this passage from a "supporting paper" submitted in early 2005 for a Defense Science Board report on the U.S. effort in Iraq:

To put it bluntly, [U.S. forces] never possessed an understanding of the political and religious nature of their opponent. . . . It is clear that Americans who waged

the war and who have attempted to mold the aftermath have had no clear idea of the framework that has molded the personalities and attitudes of Iraqis. Finally, it might help if Americans and their leaders were to show less arrogance and more understanding of themselves and their place in history. Perhaps more than any other people, Americans display a consistent amnesia concerning their own past, as well as the history of those around them.<sup>4</sup>

Change the name of the country (and perhaps delete the word "religious") and every other word in those sentences could have been written about the U.S. war in Vietnam. The same is true in many other places in Dower's book, as where he notes the American habit of disparaging enemies from other races and cultures. That tendency leads Americans to chronically underestimate the people they are fighting, like the former Navy commander at Pearl Harbor who admitted, "I never thought those little yellow sons-of-bitches could pull off such an attack, so far from Japan."

The word "little" is as significant as the word "yellow" in that sentence, Dower points out, connoting "not merely people of generally shorter physical stature, but more broadly a race and culture inherently small in capability and in the accomplishments esteemed in the white Euro-American world." Both the attitude and the word persist in American culture. Three decades after Pearl Harbor, Henry Kissinger contemptuously called North Vietnam "a miserable little country."<sup>5</sup> Three more decades after that, in a new century, a conservative columnist offered this policy advice: "Every ten years or so, the United States needs to pick up some small crappy little country and throw it against the wall, just to show the world we mean business."<sup>6</sup>

That arrogance has consequences. In seeing their opponents as inferior primitives, Dower writes, Americans fail to see anything of an enemy's "diversity, complexity, autonomy, history, and historical consciousness." That leads to costly mistakes in planning and carrying out wars. The same blindness about our friends can be even more damaging, though military theorists and historians often overlook that point. In Vietnam, miscalculating the qualities and

capabilities of our ally almost certainly had more to do with America's failure than any miscalculations about the enemy. One could probably say the same about American frustrations in Afghanistan as well.

Some wars can be understood through accounts of battles, weapons, and diplomatic exchanges. Vietnam's can only be understood in the context of a broader history and how that history was experienced by the Vietnamese themselves. Two books that can illuminate that experience for American readers are Duong Van Mai Elliott's *The Sacred Willow* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1999) and Le Ly Hayslip's *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (Doubleday, New York, 1989).

The authors have sharply different backgrounds. *Sacred Willow*, which tells the story of four generations in Elliott's family, is a saga of the mandarin class, the educated, privileged Vietnamese whose power and status were most threatened by the Communist revolutionaries. Often, they sided with the French colonial rulers and then with the Americans against the revolutionary side. But many made those choices out of loyalty only to their own interests, not to any principle or national goal. One of Elliott's brothers became an officer in the French army, but told his family, "Don't worry. I might be in their army, but I'm not going to do any fighting for them. Why should I die for them?"

To an extent many Americans were unable or unwilling to see during their war, a great many members of the Vietnamese elite who prospered from the U.S. presence had much the same attitude. This was the class that produced nearly all South Vietnam's political leaders, top military officers, and senior bureaucrats; a class that grew rich from corruption and purchased draft exemptions or paid bribes for safe noncombat assignments for their sons while peasant families lost their homes and fields and village boys did the dying. Elliott grew up with her family's fear and hatred of Communism, but came to see South Vietnam with more critical eyes: a fractured society, with no system, no ideology, and no leadership that could unite Vietnamese for a common goal. "Gradually," she writes, "it dawned on me that it was not communist cleverness or trickery that was making us lose. We were losing because of ourselves."

Le Ly Hayslip shows us the peasant's war, not the mandarin's. Even for those who believe they know something about the war, hers is a searing story. As a young girl in her village in Quang Nam province, Hayslip became a lookout and messenger for the local guerrillas, then was jailed and tortured by South Vietnamese police, then sentenced to death by the Viet Cong, who suspected her of becoming a government informant. The men who were sent to execute her raped her instead, then let her go, sparing her life but leaving her dishonored, with no chance to marry or have a family. Fleeing her village, Hayslip joined the new wartime world of millions of uprooted peasants trying to survive in South Vietnam's cities. In Danang and later in Saigon, she was a maid, a black market trader, a hospital attendant, a waitress, and on one occasion a prostitute, then met and married an American construction worker who brought her (but only after she paid huge bribes for a passport and visa) to the United States.

*When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* is about much more than Hayslip's own ordeal. It also tells about the destruction of her family and an entire way of life at the hands of "the Vietnamese on both sides who were making our country not just a graveyard, but a sewer of corruption and prison of fear."

In her family, no one escaped the war's ravages. Her mother, like Le Ly, also came under suspicion by the Viet Cong and had to leave her home. Later, her father was arrested as a suspected Communist and badly beaten by government soldiers; then, when the Viet Cong tried to use him to make Le Ly enlist as a saboteur, he killed himself to keep her out of danger. Her five siblings were all scattered by the war, as were the rest of her relatives and neighbors who lost their homes and land and everything else that once made sense of their lives. As one reviewer commented, if "telling how it really was" is supposed to be the ultimate praise for writing about war, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* tells how it *really* really was—a war of immense and needless suffering that if remembered truthfully, bears no resemblance to the patriotic myths of either side.

Two other titles are worth mentioning here. Both are novels showing the war from the Communist side, in a very different light from that



side's heroic legend. *The Sorrow of War*, by Bao Ninh, was published in Vietnam, but years after it appeared in the West. Duong Thu Huong's novel *Without a Name* remains banned; after it was published abroad, its author was expelled from the Communist party and briefly imprisoned.

Fortunately, America's myth-makers do not have the power to suppress books that challenge their myths. But the impulse to erase painful truths from our Vietnam memories has been a powerful one. It has several causes. One is that it helps today's Washington elite avoid difficult truths about the present wars as well. Another is that it is convenient for politicians and pundits who profit politically from current versions of American nationalism. Americans in general

prefer a memory that does not contradict the myth of a successful, benevolent nation. And no doubt many would like to put the experience of Vietnam veterans in a more positive, patriotic light.

Those veterans deserve recognition, to be sure. But treating them as children who can't face troubling facts is a poor way to honor them. Turning the history of Vietnam into a false feel-good fable, like that being promoted in the Pentagon's 50th anniversary observance, does not truly respect the service and sacrifice of the Americans who fought there or the better qualities of the country they served. To the extent that it keeps us from seeing what we should have learned from that war, it is also a serious disservice to the soldiers we ask to fight our wars today. **MR**

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#### NOTES

1. The letter, written in 1999, was made available to the author by Brummett and is quoted here with his permission. In recent years he has made regular visits to work with humanitarian assistance projects in Vietnamese villages, including one that he and his fellow soldiers burned to the ground in 1968.

2. McMaster was interviewed for a 1999 PBS Frontline documentary. Full text is at <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/military/etc/lessons.html>>.

3. Ronald Spector, "Cooking Up a Quagmire," *New York Times Book Review*, 20 July 1997.

4. Defense Science Board, *2004 Summer Study on Transition To and From Hostilities Supporting Papers*, January 2005, 67-68. The full text is available at <<http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA438417>>.

5. Henry Kissinger, *White House Years*, 1120.

6. Jonah Goldberg, "Baghdad Delenda Est, Part Two," *National Review*, 23 April 2002. That particular sentence, Goldberg wrote, paraphrased an earlier speech by the neoconservative pundit Michael Ledeen.