A Reply to Arnold R. Isaacs' Review Essay, "Remembering Vietnam"

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IN ARNOLD R. ISAACS' CRITIQUE cum review essay "Remembering Vietnam," he is determined to disabuse those of us who served in Vietnam of the belief that our service was for an honorable cause. Isaacs insists that the Pentagon's website for the 50th anniversary commemoration of the Vietnam War is "treating [the veterans] as children…" by "turning the history of Vietnam into a false, feel-good fable." Isaacs is emphasizing the atrocities committed by American troops, thereby inferring that the war was intrinsically *immoral.* He insists the war was *unwinnable* and *should never have been fought.* I would like to document that he is wrong on all three counts. I was involved with Vietnam continuously from December 1965 to January 1976, including 20 months "in-country."

Isaacs' First Point

As evidence of the first point, Isaacs cites at length from Nick Turse's book *Kill Anything That Moves:* "[in] an unsparing account of American complicity in a huge amount of civilian death and suffering. . . . Turse . . . 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."[1]

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PHOTO: Twentieth Century "Angel of Mercy" D.R. Howe (Glencoe, Minn.) treats the wounds of Pfc. D.A. Crum (New Brighton, Pa.), "H" Company, 2nd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, during Operation Hue City. (U.S. Marine Corps)

There were, of course, atrocities committed by U.S. troops, the most notable being the My Lai massacre on 16 March 1968, when a company from the Americal Division shot hundreds of unarmed men, women, and children. The division suppressed the bloody episode for over a year. When the massacre was finally revealed, there was a feeding frenzy by the Western media, especially the Americans. Soon the whole world knew about it. 1st Lt. William Calley was held responsible, court-martialed, convicted, and sentenced to life in prison for the crime (due to political pressure, he was eventually pardoned).

The rules of engagement issued by the Military Assistance Command Vietnam strictly forbade the killing of unarmed civilians or prisoners of war. This was and is an official policy of the United States. Guenter Lewy, in his classic *America in Vietnam*, one of the best documented, most reliable, and most even-handed of the countless books on Vietnam, notes, "Yet despite the pressure for a high enemy casualty toll, most soldiers in Vietnam did not kill prisoners or intentionally shoot unarmed villagers. Violations of the law of war in this regard were committed by individuals in violation of existing policy."[2] Lewy notes that from January 1965 to March 1973, 201 Army personnel were convicted of serious offenses against Vietnamese, and for the same offense, 77 marines were convicted from March 1965 to August 1971.

Even iconic anti-war activist Daniel Ellsberg rejected the idea that incidents like My Lai happened all the time. He wrote, "My Lai was beyond the bounds of permissible behavior, and that is recognizable by virtually every soldier in Vietnam."[3]

Without doubt, there were cases of civilians being killed or wounded in contested areas or areas under enemy control for being suspected of causing American casualties by planting mines, using poisoned pungi sticks, or otherwise aiding the enemy. A number of civilians were also the unintended victims of "collateral damage" by artillery or air strikes, or simply by being caught in a firefight in populated areas. Some U.S. troops were also accidentally killed or wounded. Lewy notes that "the tendency on the part of all too many newspaper and television reporters and editors was to see the war in Vietnam as an atrocity writ large, and specific incidents reported therefore were widely accepted as true," when there was little evidence.[4] The media looked for stories that put our forces or our Vietnamese allies in a bad light. I certainly found this to be true when I served in Vietnam.

One should point out that Isaacs did not begin reporting on Vietnam until after U.S. ground combat forces had been removed from Vietnam, and Turse, who was born in 1975, relied entirely on declassified and other documents, which I know from experience are not always reliable.

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To his credit, Isaacs does fault Turse for one-sidedness in his attacks ". . . except for a single mention" of the 1968 Hue massacre, "he says nothing about Communist conduct at all."

Not long after I arrived in Vietnam, two young women, a nurse and a teacher in a village near Saigon, were executed by the Vietcong (VC) for being a government presence in the village. I sensed from this single incident that ours was a "noble cause" (as Ronald Reagan declared in 1980). From 1957 to 1972, 36,775 South Vietnamese were assassinated by the VC, and 58,499 were abducted.[5] This, unlike illegal U.S. atrocities, was done as a matter of policy intended primarily to intimidate and control villagers in rural areas. Our media rarely, if ever, reported these atrocities. On 30 January 1968, during the Tet Offensive, the North Vietnamese captured the imperial capital of Hue and executed an estimated 6,000 civilians. On 27 April 1968, *Radio Hanoi* announced that those executed were "hooligan lackeys who owed blood debts to the people." In other words, it was declared

official policy to eliminate "bourgeois" and other "class enemies," including priests and foreigners. On retaking Hue, American troops discovered a mass grave containing about 2,800 bodies; there was clear evidence that a number of them had been buried alive. When German correspondent Uwe Siemon-Netto (*Springer* papers), accompanied by *Washington Post* correspondent Peter Braestrup, visited the mass grave, they noted an American television camera crew standing by doing nothing. Peter asked them, "Why don't you film this?" he was told, "We are not here to film anti-Communist propaganda."[6] This view was typical. The *New York Times,* with the largest bureau in the country, carried only a brief wire service story on this, the *greatest atrocity of the war* by far. For other media it was strictly a one-day story.

After I returned to the states, I was assigned to speak about Vietnam to audiences all over the country. As I finished each talk, I would ask, "Who has heard of My Lai?" all hands would go up. When I next asked, "Who has heard of the Hue massacre?" not a single hand would go up. I use this as an example of how our media insufficiently covered or ignored the misdeeds of the enemy. I remember that in World War II, all Americans were convinced the German and Japanese regimes were intrinsically evil, oppressive, and aggressive. This also aptly described the Hanoi regime, but how many people knew it by depending on our news media? Imagine someone during World War II chanting, "let's hear it for Hitler" or, "hooray for Hirohito." During the Vietnam War, it was common to hear anti-war groups chanting, "Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh, NLF is gonna win."

Isaacs' Second Point

As to the second point, that the war was *unwinnable*, I point out that we no doubt made mistakes in our prosecution of the war. Our initial emphasis, for example, was on body count as a metric of success. However, as it turned out, we were killing a very large number of enemy troops. A *History Channel* documentary on 25 October 2004, included a knowledgeable North Vietnamese who said the North lost about 2 million people, mostly through hostilities and disease. Our side killed about a million of their troops, proportionally equivalent to the United States losing 17 million. This attrition ultimately brought North Vietnam to the brink of defeat. Hanoi had to scrape the bottom of the manpower barrel to mount the 1972 "Easter Offensive." The offensive cost the North 100,000 killed in action, twice that suffered by the United States in the entire war. The concept of using body count as a metric of success sounded morbid and generated a great deal of criticism from the media. The media claimed the after-battle body counts were exaggerated, and many might well have been. The only time I was able to check the accuracy of one of these counts was when we captured the enemy after action report of a major battle in III Corps area of operations in 1966. The report set their losses at a figure that was only about ten percent less than our count (although this could have been an aberration).

The turning point of the war was the enemy's largest offensive, launched at the end of March 1972, the so-called Easter Offensive. North Vietnam attacked with the equivalent of 23 divisions well equipped with, among other things, hundreds of Soviet T-54 tanks, long-range artillery, rockets, and the latest in surface-to-air missile defense weapons. This was clearly a test of the Vietnamization ordered by President Nixon, which resulted in the withdrawal of all U.S. ground combat forces. Not long after the Easter Offensive began, Nixon sent Henry Kissinger's deputy, Maj. Gen. Alexander Haig, to Vietnam to give him a firsthand assessment. Haig took a fellow National Security Council (NSC) staffer and me with him. I was sent to Western II Corps, placing me directly in the path of a major assault. I landed in Pleiku under artillery fire and then flew to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam 23rd Division Headquarters, which was also under artillery attack. I was extracted shortly before it fell to a tank attack. Back in Pleiku the enemy attacked us with Soviet 122mm rockets (my ears still ring from that attack). In Kontum, the principal advisor, a U.S. Army colonel, was convinced that Kontum, a key enemy objective, would fall. (He was wrong. The 23rd saved it.)

I am relating my experiences only to convey why, when I returned to Washington, I believed South Vietnam was not going to win. When our side began to win, it was not reflected in CIA reports, even though the media reported on the heroic and successful defense of An Loc. On 15 September 1972, the most significant event of the offensive occurred

when the South Vietnamese marines recaptured Quang Tri, the only provincial capital captured during the offensive, and the enemy's strongest position by far. Quang Tri is located 20 miles from North Vietnam and was defended by some of the North's best troops with the best equipment. I was out of town when this happened. When I returned to Washington, no one mentioned this significant event, and I remained ignorant of it for some time. I still carried my negative, if now outdated, memories from April 1972, modified by a few reported South Vietnamese successes such as An Loc. The South Vietnamese forces were on a roll and close to victory. After Hanoi had won the war in 1975, former top commander in the South, Gen. Tran Van Tra, writing in the *Nhan Dan,* made it clear that by the fall of 1972, his forces were on the verge of defeat.[7] Former CIA director William Colby wrote in his book, *Lost Victory,* "[by the fall of 1972] on the ground in South Vietnam the war had been won." U.S. air power played a decisive role in the victory.[8] The United States also provided essential logistic and naval support, but without the determined and, in the end successful, efforts of South Vietnamese ground forces, U.S. air power alone could not have prevented a communist victory.

Faced with defeat, Hanoi offered negotiating concessions to Kissinger. Kissinger took the bait, and negotiations began near Paris on 8 October 1972. The North Vietnamese leaked that a negotiated peace was near. Once Congress learned this, interest in continuing the war rapidly waned. This was the first step in "snatching defeat from the jaws of victory." Kissinger also agreed to a "cease-fire in place," which left enemy troops in South Vietnam. Foreign Service officer John Negroponte, who then headed the NSC Indochina staff, courageously went *mano a mano* with Kissinger on this, but to no avail. After breaking a deadlock with the so-called "Christmas bombings," the Paris Peace Accords were signed on 27 January 1973, and were immediately subject to massive violations by communist troops and lesser violations by our side. North Vietnamese chief of staff Gen. Van Tien

John McCain after being released from a prisoner of war camp in Vietnam, March 1973. (U.S. Navy, National Archives)

Dung cogently stated in *Nhan Dan* in April-May 1976 that "the [Paris] agreement represented a big victory for our people and a big defeat for the U.S. imperialists and their [Vietnamese] lackeys."[9]

After we recovered our prisoners of war and returned our troops to the United States, America lost interest in Vietnam and the fate of the Vietnamese. It was then difficult to get any aid, especially military aid, for them. Congress reduced military aid to South Vietnam from $2.3 billion in fiscal year 1973 to $799 million in fiscal year 1975—a crippling reduction. Gen. Van Tien Dung said in *Great Spring Victory*, "[President] Nguyen Van Thieu was forced to fight a poor man's war. Enemy firepower had decreased by nearly 60% . . . [and] its mobility was also reduced by half."[10] While this reduction in aid contributed substantially to South Vietnam's defeat in the spring of 1975 (after the North had three years to recover from its 1972 defeat), the final blow was the 4 June 1973 Case-Church Amendment that cut off all funding for U.S. military operations in Indochina. This made it impossible for us to enforce compliance with the Paris Accords. It also ensured that South Vietnamese troops would not have the U.S. air support that was essential in 1972 and encouraged the final attack by the North in 1975, which conquered the South. We had abandoned our South Vietnamese allies to a grim and tragic fate, whereas, Hanoi would continue to count on its loyal allies, China and the Soviet Union.

Isaacs' Final Point

This brings us to the last point: *should we have ever fought this war*? I argue that by continuing to disparage the South Vietnamese government and its armed forces, our media convinced the American public that Vietnam was not worth fighting for. Certainly, the South Vietnamese government suffered from corruption and at times was incompetent. (Corruption was far more extensive in the tightly controlled North. In 1967, Ho Chi Minh inveighed on the radio against the widespread corruption in his country.) South Vietnamese troops performed poorly at times and lost four times as many troops as did the United States, but in the end, South Vietnam was winning the war. The test for the South came during the 1968 Tet Offensive when enemy troops (mostly Vietcong) overran the majority of the towns and cities in the country. The North's initial success was widely publicized by the U.S. media, making a lasting impression on the American public. What received little attention was the South's widespread and courageous resistance, which remained true to the government and successfully countered VC efforts to incite a popular uprising against it. It was scarcely reported that the VC was soundly crushed and never really recovered from this disastrous defeat. The resulting increased security in the countryside made possible one of the most successful land reforms in history. Even when under siege, those areas under government control enjoyed a remarkable degree of freedom. To me, South Vietnam was worth defending.

United States Enters WW II Because of Vietnam

When I was teaching at Georgetown, students were surprised when I said that the United States got into World War II because of what is now Vietnam. When the Japanese were rampaging all over China, and even in response to the notorious 1937 Nanking Massacre, the United States took no serious punitive steps against Japan. However, when Japanese troops occupied what is now Vietnam, the United States and its allies placed embargoes on shipments of oil, scrap iron, and rubber to Japan. The embargo posed a major threat to Japan's economy, and Tokyo no doubt considered it a warlike move. We took this step because then-French Indochina was an ideal staging area for invading the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia). Japan then assumed that when they moved in this direction, we would attempt to interpose our fleet to thwart them. To prevent this, Japan sought to neutralize our fleet by attacking it at Pearl Harbor. It then moved to capture virtually all of Southeast Asia.

President Eisenhower no doubt had this in mind when, in April 1954, he opined that a communist victory in Indochina could topple countries of Southeast Asia like "dominos." While this "domino theory" was long pooh-poohed by many liberals and others in the United States, the leaders of Australia, New Zealand, Cambodia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and India essentially agreed with Eisenhower, as did leaders in Hanoi, (then) Peking, and Moscow. For example, China's famed Marshal Lin Piao stated in September 1965 that revolutionary

warfare could encircle developed capitalist countries and that the defeat of U.S. imperialism in Vietnam would show the people of the world that what the Vietnamese people can do, they can do too (as reported in my memoir).[11] In July 1964, North Vietnam's Defense Minister Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap declared, "South Vietnam [the Vietcong] is the vanguard fighter of the national liberation movement in the present era … and the failure of the special war unleashed by the U.S. imperialists in South Vietnam would mean that this war can be defeated anywhere in the world."[12] The war bought precious time for strengthening Southeast Asian regimes while wearing down North Vietnam (which lost a million troops in the war) and effectively eliminating its threat to Southeast Asia.

In the 1970s, Indonesian leaders Suharto and Malik confirmed in an interview with columnist Robert Novak that our introduction of combat troops in Vietnam in March 1965 encouraged their courageous resistance to a nearly successful October 1965 Chinese-backed communist coup. Success of that coup would no doubt have triggered our treaty obligation to come to the aid of the Philippines in the face of a massive communist threat that would have dwarfed what we faced in Vietnam.[13] Historian Norman Friedman argues that U.S. troop commitment to Vietnam also encouraged the successful British defense of Malaysia against a communist invasion force launched from Indonesia.[14]

As noted above, in 1941, the United States considered the area now called Vietnam important to our national security at a time when it was vastly more remote that it was in 1965. We should look at the Vietnam War as another facet of George Kennen's global "containment policy." With this perspective, our war effort, while ending in a tactical defeat, was ultimately a *strategic victory*. It most certainly was not a war fought in vain.

All of those who served in Vietnam, both in uniform and as civilians, should applaud the Pentagon for creating a website that reflects a positive side to our involvement in Vietnam. It is time the nation recognized our service in a positive light. ***MR***

NOTES

1. Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2013).
2. Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1978), 343.
3. Daniel Ellsberg, *Papers on the War* (New York, Pocket Books, 1972), 262.
4. Lewy, 321-22.
5. Lewy, 454.
6. Uwe Siemon-Netto, *Duc: A Reporter's Love for the Wounded People of Vietnam* (Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, 2013), 211.
7. Lewis Sorley, *A Better War* (Boston: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1999), 366.
8. William Colby, *Lost Victory* (Chicago: Contemporary Books Publishing Group, 1989).
9. Gen. Van Tien Dung, quoted in *Nhan Dan*, April-May 1976.
10. Gen. Van Tien Dung, quoted in *Great Spring Victory* (Monthly Review Press, 1977).
11. William Stearman, *An American Adventure: From Early Aviation through Three Years in the White House* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2013), 192.
12. Lewy, 424.
13. Stearman, 193.
14. Norman Friedman, *The Fifty Year War* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2000), 315-16 and 398.