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The Tragedy of Southeast Asia: A Vietnam veteran looks back at the war we should have won

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Fifteen years have gone by since officials of the United States and Communist North Vietnam signed an accord in Paris to end U.S. involvement in Vietnam. "Now that we have achieved an honorable settlement," said President Richard Nixon on January 23, 1973, "let us be proud that America did not settle for a peace that would have betrayed our allies, that would have abandoned our prisoners of war, that would have ended the war for us but would have continued the war for the 50 million people of Indochina."

As on so many other occasions during his political career, Richard Nixon was not being truthful with the American people. For the accord that Henry Kissinger had negotiated was designed to do exactly what Mr. Nixon said it would not do — betray our allies, abandon some of our prisoners of war, and continue the war for the suffering people of Indochina. What else could be expected of an agreement that allowed the Communists to keep 145,000 North Vietnamese troops in South Vietnam?

On January 24th, Hanoi's negotiator, Le Duc Tho, called the accord a "great victory." And so it was. The Reds began violating it immediately and, 27 months later, completed their subjugation of South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Millions died in the bloodbath that followed and millions more fled their tortured lands. America had suffered a disastrous defeat in the Vietnam War and more than 58,000 Americans and nearly 200,000 South Vietnamese had sacrificed their lives in vain.

The First Television War

It has been said that Vietnam was the first war to be lost not on the battlefield or at the negotiating table, but on the printed page and the television screen. The media's distortion of what was actually happening in Vietnam would be almost beyond belief if it had not been so thoroughly documented. The American Left was not satisfied that it had been able to undermine the support of the American people for the war effort during the late 1960s and early 1970s; it has continued to spread lies and misinformation about the war in recent years, primarily through such widely acclaimed films as *Platoon*, which was voted the best movie of 1986, *Hamburger Hill*, and *Full Metal Jacket*, and through a 13-part Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) series



entitled *Vietnam: A Television History*.

The major fault of the three films mentioned above is that they take isolated instances of evil and make them seem to be the way in which the entire war was conducted. If U.S. soldiers are not portrayed as drug-addicted, immoral, and inhuman killers, they are shown as mindless robots with no idea of the reasons why they were fighting and dying. There are no heroes in these movies, but I served with hundreds of heroic men, men who had laid down their lives not only for their fellow Americans but also for the brave people of Vietnam and Laos. I saw tough U.S. soldiers providing food and medicine to civilians, entertaining children with games and gifts on Christmas Eve at a Special Forces camp, and transporting to more secure areas families whose homes and villages had been destroyed by the Communists.

If Americans were such drug-addicted and evil animals, why have so many Vietnamese refugees come to America to build new lives? Is it too much to hope for one movie that will tell the truth about the Vietnam War? Lionel Chetwynd tried in *The Hanoi Hilton* to show the courage and constancy of American POWs during a nine-year captivity, but critics panned the film because it put "anti-war" types like Jane Fonda in a bad light. The movie lasted only a few weeks in the theaters.

Many Vietnam veterans have expressed outrage at the portrayal of American soldiers in Vietnam. Objecting to the characterizations in *Platoon*, former Army Captain John Walker said:

After having served two tours in Vietnam (both in combat units), I can truthfully say the following: (1) I do not remember ever seeing any of my fellow soldiers smoking dope; (2) Having been involved in numerous searches and sweeps of hamlets, I never once saw a harmless old Vietnamese man or woman needlessly executed or any female raped by U.S. or ARVN [South Vietnamese] troops. We only fired upon known enemy and usually only after being fired upon; (3) The discipline in our unit never deteriorated to the point where we fought among ourselves; (4) I don't remember hearing as much profanity during the two years I was there as there was in the two-hour movie

Propaganda by PBS

In the fall of 1983, the Public Broadcasting Service ran a 13-hour series on the Vietnam War that was so slanted it could have been produced in Hanoi. Even though PBS had the benefit of ten years of hindsight, it repeated the journalistic errors of the 1960s. It was propaganda, not history, when PBS painted North Vietnamese Communist butcher Ho Chi Minh as a patriot and a nationalist. It was propaganda, not history, when PBS tarred Americans who fought in Vietnam as drug addicts, racial bigots, and brutal killers. It was propaganda, not history, when PBS showed insignificant anti-war protests but ignored major pro-Vietnam demonstrations such as the parade of a quarter of a million people through New York City in May 1967.

The antidote to the PBS poison was provided in 1984 and 1985 by Accuracy in Media, which produced a two-hour video, narrated by Charlton Heston, that corrects the myths and



misinformation spread by PBS and other media outlets. Entitled *Television's Vietnam*, the AIM documentary shows how the media portrayed the 1968 Tet offensive of the Communists as a defeat for the American side when in fact it was a military disaster for the enemy. It also shows how the media ignored the systematic Communist massacre of more than 3,000 civilians in the South Vietnamese city of Hue in February 1968, but gave enormous coverage to the killing of several hundred civilians by American soldiers at My Lai, an aberration that was contrary to U.S. policy.

There are many other lies rebutted in the AIM documentary and it is must viewing for those who want the truth about the Vietnam War.

The betrayal of South Vietnam and the rest of Indochina to the Communists did not just happen in 1973. It began long before that, 30 years before, in fact, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Soviet dictator Josef Stalin agreed at a summit meeting in Teheran not to let France regain control of Indochina after World War II. Another huge boost for the Communists occurred at the Yalta Conference in February 1945 when Roosevelt sold out the Far East by giving Stalin the vast supply of Japanese arms in the Manchurian region of China. These arms helped the Chinese Communists to capture the mainland and prepared the way for war in Korea and Vietnam. One of the most accurate and prophetic statements about Yalta was made by Senator Joseph R. McCarthy: "Here were born the seeds for which men are dying today in the hills and valleys of Korea ... and will die tomorrow in the jungles of Indochina."

Even before the American people learned the details of the Yalta sellout, their political leaders were taking other steps to make the world safe for Communism. U.S. military men were ordered not to take the strategic European cities of Berlin and Prague, leaving them to the rapacious Soviet troops advancing from the East. "What the tin soldier politicians in Washington and Paris have managed to do today," General George S. Patton told reporters, "is another story you'll be writing for a long while if you live. They have allowed us to kick the hell out of one bastard and at the same time *forced* us to help establish a second one as evil or more evil than the first."

Five years after Patton's warning, American soldiers were at war again, this time against Communist forces in Korea. The North Koreans had invaded the South in June 1950 and had almost pushed the U.S. and South Korean armies off the peninsula when General Douglas MacArthur staged his brilliant landing at Inchon in September, cutting off the North Korean Army in the South. The allied forces quickly mopped up the Communists in the South and then moved north, capturing the Communist capital of Pyongyang in October and moving toward the Yalu River that separated North Korea from Manchuria. We had won the Korean War.

Enter Red China

On November 3rd, MacArthur notified his superiors in Washington that Red China had more than 800,000 men massed in Manchuria, ready to invade Korea. He ordered General George Stratemeyer to dispatch 90 bombers to destroy the Yalu bridges, but the order was countermanded by Secretary of Defense George C. Marshall, who directed MacArthur not only to



leave the bridges intact but also to give the Communists a five-mile-deep sanctuary on the Korean side of the Yalu. "For the first time in military history," said MacArthur, "a commander has been denied the use of his military power to safeguard the lives of his soldiers and safety of his army."

The Red Chinese hordes, their leaders having been informed by traitors in Washington that MacArthur's hands would be tied, swarmed over the Yalu bridges in November 1950 and fierce fighting resumed. Congressional hearings after the war concluded that most of the 5,000 captive Americans who died of atrocities in Korea were murdered by Chinese Communists. But even with the restrictions, U.S. forces had begun to regain the initiative against the Chinese Reds when President Harry Truman fired General MacArthur in April 1951. The bloody fighting continued for another two years before ending in an unsatisfactory stalemate that left South Korea free but North Korea and Red China still saddled with brutal Communist regimes that were now emboldened by their successes against a more militarily powerful United States of America.

Many Americans remember Douglas MacArthur's stirring speech to Congress when he returned to Washington in the spring of 1951, particularly his declaration that in war "there can be no substitute for victory." But how many recall the remarks of General George Stratemeyer when he appeared before the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee in 1954? "I don't know anything about politics," Stratemeyer told the Senators. "All my life has been spent in the military. But there is something going on, has been going on, ever since World War II ended. Right up to this minute, there is some hidden force or some hidden power or something that is influencing our people. They don't act like Americans. Americans are supposed to have guts, and our policy, as I read it, is wishy-washy and appeasing."

In the summer of 1956, the CBS Radio Network asked George Stratemeyer for a two-minute statement in answer to the question: "What major lesson should we have learned in the Korean War?" The retired Air Force officer replied:

The lessons learned from our defeat in the Korean War are these: (1) Don't ever again fight under the United Nations. You will not be permitted to win; (2) Always support those leaders who hate godless Communism as exemplified in General MacArthur, President Syngman Rhee, General Partridge, and President Chiang Kai-shek; (3) The United States Air Force can always supply the air needs of the ground forces; (4) Keep the U.S. State Department out of military business; (5) Air supply and air transportation are absolute necessities to the air forces, the ground forces, and the Navy in any future war.

CBS broadcast only lessons three and five. A few years later, General Stratemeyer joined The John Birch Society and worked unceasingly until his death in 1969 to expose the "hidden power" behind U.S. policies that always seem to help the Communists and hurt the cause of freedom.

When World War II had ended, France sent 70,000 soldiers to reestablish its authority in Indochina and quadrupled that commitment over the next nine years. Fighting between the French and Communist guerrillas headed by longtime Red revolutionary Ho Chi Minh, who had been put in



power in 1945 by U.S. agents working through the Office of Strategic Services (TV), was sporadic at first but blossomed into total war after the Korean armistice gave a terrific boost to the morale, prestige, and military strength of Communists in Asia. On May 7, 1954, the Communists routed the French at Dien Bien Phu after the Eisenhower Administration, on five separate occasions, had ruled out a one-hour air strike that would have broken the back of the Communists.

While the Red triumph at Dien Bien Phu was in reality a Pyrrhic victory because Ho's forces had been badly decimated, it gave the Communists a psychological advantage at the international conference in Geneva that summer. The accords reached in Geneva, which were not signed by the United States, divided French Indochina into four countries — Cambodia, Laos, South Vietnam, and Communist-controlled North Vietnam. When Ho began consolidating his Red tyranny in the North, more than a million people fled to the South, many of them sea-lifted by U.S. ships.

The logical ruler in South Vietnam was former Emperor Bao Dai, who had become chief of state in 1949. But leftists in America pressured Bao Dai to appoint as his prime minister a man named Ngo Dinh Diem, who subsequently ousted Bao Dai, became president of South Vietnam in 1955, and imposed a brutal dictatorship on the country until he was assassinated in 1963. While some conservatives continue to believe Diem was an anti-Communist hero, the facts suggest otherwise. And no one has done a better job of laying out those facts than Hilaire du Berrier, an American journalist who spent many years in Indochina and France and knew some of the personalities involved in the tragedy of Southeast Asia. His book, *Background to Betrayal*, is an indispensable source of information about events in that part of the world from 1945 to 1963.

Du Berrier, more than any other individual, has provided chapter and verse about the brainwashing machine in America that glorified Diem and covered up his ruthless policies in the late 1950s. Diem's principal backers during that period included Senator Mike Mansfield of Montana; Angier Biddle Duke, who headed American Friends of Vietnam; public relations promoters Harold Oram and Joseph Buttinger; Wesley Fishel at Michigan State University; and of course such media giants as *Harper's* magazine and the *New York Times*. Columnist Joseph Alsop, at one time a staunch supporter of Diem and of American involvement in South Vietnam, went so far as to say in 1971: "It is quite possible that there would have been no war at all if it had not been for the *Times* and the present Senate Majority Leader, Mike Mansfield of Montana."

One of the most important cogs in the Diem propaganda machine was Army Colonel Edward G. Lansdale, who went to Saigon in June 1954 as the personal representative of CIA chief Allen Dulles and helped solidify Diem's control of the country by destroying his opponents. Virtually nothing happened in Saigon at that time in which Lansdale was not involved in one way or another. He reported back to the CIA that only Diem could prevent a Communist takeover of South Vietnam. And that myth was spread by the liberals until they turned on Diem in 1961. The myth was then adopted by some conservatives who felt that Diem must be good because of the enemies he had acquired on the Left.



What Happened Under Diem?

Instead of creating a democratic society, Ngo Dinh Diem established a family dictatorship that brought wealth and power to him, his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, a former labor leader who controlled the police, public and secret; his brother's wife, Madame Nhu, the beautiful "first lady" of Vietnam, who managed business deals and secret funds 'through a women's paramilitary organization of her own; his brother Monsignor Ngo Dinh Thuc, the Archbishop of Hue, who controlled the Catholic churches of South Vietnam; and his brother Ngo Dinh Can, who regulated the rice traffic and treated the northern part of the country as his own personal fief.

Not only did Diem not take effective steps to oppose the Communists, he systematically destroyed the country's three most implacable anti-Communist forces — the Cao Dai religious sect whose three and a half million followers kept the Communists out of an area that ran from 15 miles northwest of Saigon to the Cambodian border; the Hoa Hao sect whose two million members kept the Communists away from the great rice markets of the Mekong delta; and the Binh Xuyen of former pirate Bai Vien, whom du Berrier has called "Vietnam's Rambo" and of whom French journalist Raymond Cartier wrote: "He cleared Saigon of Communist hit teams and spies like a rat-terrier killing rats."

President Diem an anti-Communist? The chief of the Ngo Dinh brothers' secret police was Albert Pham Ngoc Thao, who had been Ho Chi Minh's intelligence chief in the southern region of Vietnam during the war against the French. Seventeen years after du Berrier reported Thao's ties with Ho, columnist Stanley Karnow confirmed what du Berrier had said. In an article that appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* on February 10, 1982, Karnow admitted that, in the early 1960s, he and Joe Alsop and others had praised Colonel Thao and turned him into a celebrity as one of the Diem regime's toughest foes of the Communists.

Writing from Ho Chi Minh City in 1982, however, Karnow said he had learned that "Col. Thao was a key Communist operative all along." He said that Thao had "urged President Diem to construct 'agrovilles,' enclosures into which peasants were forcibly corralled to cut them off from the Viet Cong. He later designed the 'Strategic Hamlet' program, which had a similar aim. But both schemes were actually devious devices. Or as one of Col. Thao's old comrades told me: 'His purpose was to antagonize peasants and alienate them from the Diem regime, and it worked.'"

Mr. Karnow also offered one explanation for the publication of false information in journals like *Time* magazine:

There are other cases, like that of my friend Pham Xuan An, who worked as a full-fledged correspondent for *Time* magazine in Saigon, an unusual position for a Vietnamese journalist. He also furnished the U.S. embassy with inside information — or perhaps it was "disinformation." For he really was a Communist agent, and he is now a senior official in the administration here.

American aid pouring into Vietnam through the National Bank of South Vietnam was administered



by another Communist, Vu Van Thai, who worked along with the Diem government's credit chief, Albert Pham Ngoc Thao. The American people were told that this aid was building a buffer against Communism, but in fact it was being used to turn South Vietnam into a police state where opponents of the regime were being jailed or executed. While Diem was antagonizing the peasants and driving some of them into the arms of the Viet Cong, he was also destroying the wonderful alliance between Catholics and Buddhists. One Catholic priest who had spent 37 years in the Orient pointed out that Diem, a nominal Catholic, had ruined all that had been done over 150 years to create understanding between Catholics and Buddhists.

As Diem's oppressive policies became harder and harder to cover up in 1962 and 1963, his one-time admirers on the Left deserted him. His favorable image in America began to change in the summer of 1963 as Buddhist monks immolated themselves to protest the massacre of Buddhist women and children in Hue by Diem's soldiers in May 1963. Madame Nhu helped restore some of the image with a whirlwind coast-to-coast tour of the United States in October, but the effort went for naught when her husband and President Diem were overthrown by the military and executed on November 1st. The Ngo Dinhs, and their liberal sponsors in the United States, had brought South Vietnam to the brink of anarchy. The Communists were growing daily in strength and reach, stepping up their attacks on villages and military units. The next phase of the Vietnam tragedy — the introduction of American fighting men in the jungles of Asia — was about to begin.

Writing to Ngo Dinh Diem in 1954, President Dwight Eisenhower promised U.S. support to "assist the government of Vietnam in developing and maintaining a strong, viable state, capable of resisting attempted subversion or aggression through military means." He began sending American soldiers to South Vietnam as advisors. The numbers increased into the thousands under President John Kennedy and the advisors became fighters. JFK initiated the no-win policy in Vietnam when he implemented General Maxwell Taylor's strategy of "flexible response," which involved hitting the enemy just hard enough to let him know you were there but not hard enough to put him out of commission. All that this defensive strategy accomplished was to give the North Vietnamese more time to infiltrate their troops into the South, which forced the United States to send larger numbers of soldiers to meet the challenge.

The major infiltration route for men and supplies was the Ho Chi Minh trail, which wound its way from North Vietnam through Laos and Cambodia and into South Vietnam. Regular troops of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) used this route, as well as sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia, to launch their attacks on the South. The task faced by U.S. forces bordered on the impossible. They were not allowed to pursue the NVA into their sanctuaries and they had to deal at the same time with the terror tactics of the Viet Cong, who were executing village chiefs by the thousands and kidnapping wives and children to force husbands and fathers to fight with the VC — or at least to supply and protect them — if they ever hoped to see their loved ones again.

In the meantime, U.S. advisory groups were trying to undo some of the damage done to the people by the repressive Diem regime. These groups worked with various classes and religious denominations — all of whom wanted the same thing: freedom from Communism. Their efforts were rewarded as the Buddhists rallied to the cause, the Montagnards in the Central Highlands



began fighting the VC and the NVA, and the Chinese Nungs became the most trusted allies of the Army Special Forces. But still the Communist attacks and terror continued. One typical example was given by a close friend, a Green Beret medic named John Dryden, who went back to a friendly Vietnamese village after the Reds had been there:

When I arrived at the outpost, it was impossible not to see my friends. Their bodies were on one side of the highway, laid out as if for inspection, their heads on the other side. It was all militarily neat and orderly. Their wives and children, as befitting mere civilians, were not in ranks. They lay where they had been shot or bayoneted — haphazardly. Every single living thing in that community was dead — water buffalo, pigs, and dogs.

This was not an isolated instance. This kind of barbarism was occurring all over South Vietnam. The Communists were getting bolder as more NVA regulars and more war matériel poured into the South, and by 1965 there were over half a million Americans in the country. The logical question at this point is why didn't we go after the enemy's staging areas and supply dumps? Why didn't we hit the Ho Chi Minh trail and the sanctuaries and stop the Communists before they got into South Vietnam? The answer, of course, is that the politicians in Washington did not want to inflict any lasting damage on the Communists. Just as in Korea, the lives and safety of American soldiers and Marines came in second to political considerations.

The problem, said General Ira C. Eaker at the time, was that "in all our past wars we had professional military leaders and amateur soldiers. Vietnam is our first war where we have professional soldiers and amateur leaders." General Curtis LeMay, the first head of the Strategic Air Command, put it this way: "It is a war in which we are attempting to win without winning, trying to destroy without destroying. It is an Alice-in-Wonderland war."

Military Experts Ignored

In February 1965, President Lyndon Johnson announced his version of "flexible response" by ordering limited bombing of selected targets in North Vietnam. What was hailed as a bold step, however, was nothing of the kind, since the President had ruled out strikes on important military installations, major industrial plants, and the port of Haiphong through which flowed 70 percent of North Vietnam's war supplies. LBJ showed his true colors two months later by offering North Vietnam \$1 billion to rehabilitate the country if it would end the fighting. Ho Chi Minh rejected the bribe.

Over the next three years, the President played carrot-and-stick with the Communists by unilaterally halting the limited U.S. bombing raids on the North for varying periods of time in an effort to get the Reds to the negotiating table. But all that accomplished was to help the Communists resupply and reinforce their troops in South Vietnam during the bombing pauses so they could launch new attacks.

One of the great myths to come out of the Vietnam War is that U.S. air power was not able to



defeat a guerrilla army. The fact is that U.S. air power was never effectively used for any extended period of time during the war. From 1965 to 1968, it was the virtually unanimous opinion of U.S. military leaders that the war could be won in a matter of weeks by destroying North Vietnam's capability for waging war. In 1965, Air Force Chief of Staff General John P. McConnell said the United States had the military capacity to win the war "virtually overnight," but that "President Johnson has emphasized that it is our national policy to keep this conflict at the lowest possible level of intensity, for humanitarian as well as for political reasons."

In March 1968, *Science & Mechanics* magazine interviewed top military personnel who concluded that the war could be won in six weeks if the United States officially declared war on North Vietnam, closed the port of Haiphong, invaded the North above the 17th Parallel, destroyed all targets of consequence in the North after warning the people to get out of the target areas, and warned the Soviet Union and Red China to halt all shipments of war supplies to the Hanoi regime or face a military response from us.

General LeMay, in his 1968 book *America Is In Danger*, repeated the same prescription for victory in Vietnam, saying that "we must see to it that Communist aggression results in Communist disaster. This we cannot obtain at the negotiating table." He said: "I believe that the course I suggest will end the war much sooner than will the policies we now pursue, with less loss of life on both sides. I am sure it will cost fewer American lives." Nearly 15,000 Americans were killed in combat in 1968, almost equalling the total number of combat dead in the previous seven years. That 30,000-man toll would almost double again before the last U.S. troops were withdrawn from Vietnam four and a half years later.

The dubious nature of the Johnson Administration's policies in Vietnam became even more obvious with the knowledge that the President was at the same time ordering strikes on Soviet-made SAM missile sites in North Vietnam *and* stepping up strategic trade with the Soviet Union. In October 1967, he had announced that hundreds of industrial items, formerly classified as "strategic," were now freed for export to the USSR and Communist Europe; that credits would be extended to the Red regimes in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia — all of which were supplying the sinews of war to their comrades in Hanoi; and that the Export-Import Bank would under-write the Soviet purchase of \$50 million worth of American machine tools to equip an automobile factory being built in the Soviet Union by the Fiat company of Italy.

It was, said General LeMay, like "attempting to dress and undress at the same time."

The Rules of Engagement

That American pilots in Vietnam were trapped in a no-win situation was bad enough; that they had to risk their lives every day to adhere to the most asinine rules and regulations was inexcusable. While Lyndon Johnson was President, he had to approve every target proposed for bombing. There were no targets approved at one point because LBJ was in the hospital and his aides did not want to bother him. "It's a daffy war in lots of ways," said one pilot who had been bombing the North. "Many times as we come in over Haiphong we'll see a Russian tanker steaming in or tied up at a



pier. Its crew will wave to us and we'll wave back. But then for the next six weeks we chase individual oil trucks down camouflaged roads with maybe \$30 million worth of airplanes. We lose some of those planes. And we lose men, too."

There were indications during the Vietnam War that American pilots were operating under crazy and ever-changing restrictions, but it was not until March 1985 that the American people finally learned the details of the unbelievably complex and lengthy series of rules that told the military what it could and could not do in South Vietnam, North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Senator Barry Goldwater, after persuading Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger to declassify the Rules of Engagement, took up 26 pages of the *Congressional Record* (March 6, 14, and 18, 1985) to summarize some of the most outrageous curbs on our military. Said Goldwater:

These layers of restrictions, which were constantly changing and were almost impossible to memorize or understand, although it was required of our pilots, granted huge sanctuary areas to the enemy. When certain limits would at last be removed after repeated appeals by the Joint Chiefs, the reductions were made only in gradual steps and seldom were strong enough to serve our strategic ends. Numerous partial and total bombing halts interrupted the effectiveness of earlier bombing campaigns. Often, when limited extensions of target areas were granted, they were unexpectedly canceled and withdrawn shortly afterward.

What were some of the rules?

- SAM missile sites could not be bombed while they were under construction, but only after they became operational.
- Pilots were not permitted to attack a Communist MiG sitting on the runway. The only time it could be attacked was after it was in the air, had been identified, and had showed hostile intentions. Even then, its base could not be bombed.
- Military truck depots located just over 200 yards from a road could not be destroyed. Enemy trucks on a road could be attacked, but if they drove off the road they were safe from bombing.
- If a South Vietnamese forward air controller was not on an aircraft, it was forbidden to bomb enemy troops during a fire fight even though the Reds were clearly visible and were being pointed at by an officer on the ground. The aircraft's bombs were dumped in the ocean.

On November 1, 1968, President Johnson announced the end of all bombing in North Vietnam. President Nixon continued that policy until 1972, when he ordered 12 days of strikes in the Hanoi-Haiphong area beginning on December 18th. In March of that year, Air Force General John Lavelle, trying to protect American forces, had ordered, on his own authority, air strikes against North Vietnamese airfields and missile sites. He was relieved of his command for violating the Rules of Engagement. During the same week he was recalled, however, the North Vietnamese launched a major offensive against South Vietnam, prompting President Nixon to suspend the rules Lavelle had been accused of violating. Nixon then ordered tactical air strikes against some of the same



targets Lavelle had singled out.

The Battle for Laos

The fall of Laos to the Reds actually began in 1962 when the Kennedy Administration forced the anti-Communist government in that country to surrender control to a Communist-dominated coalition. I became involved in Laos in 1968 and left that beleaguered nation in 1970 with a broken heart. Some 400 Green Berets, members of the Army Special Forces, had come to Laos to assist in counter-insurgency operations against Communist guerrillas. These White Star Mobile Training Teams were joined later by Air Commandos, under the direction of General Harry "Heinie" Aderholt. Both groups fought with and on behalf of the Hmong tribesmen (sometimes mistakenly called Meos), who were commanded by Major General Vang Pao, the most selfless combatant of Communists I have ever known.

It was Vang Pao, by the way, who stayed behind the lines and rescued victims of the bloody battle at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. It was also Vang Pao, supported by a group of forward air controllers known as the Ravens, whose leadership made the difference in so many battles and kept so many Americans from being killed, wounded, or captured. That the Hmong were fierce fighters for freedom was evident from a sign over the entrance to Vang Pao's headquarters: "To be born a free man is an accident; to live one a responsibility; to die one an obligation."

With the support of an Air Force that was guided by the Ravens, Vang Pao's troops fought the Communists to a standstill. The entire story is told in Christopher Robbins' book *The Ravens*. It is a book that will make you laugh as well as cry as it describes the sellout of Vang Pao and the bravery of Americans like Fred Platt, Frank Krickler, Tom Harris, and "Weird" Harold Mesaris.

Prince Mangkra Souvanna Phouma wanted Vang Pao to come to the Laotian capital of Vientiane when the sellout was about to take place, but the general stayed away because he knew the Communists were waiting to kill him. In a book published in France (*L'Agonie Du Laos*), the Prince recalled his last meeting with Vang Pao and said as he flew over Vang Pao's headquarters for the last time, he thought: "Before what was the theater of so much heroism I can understand the heartbreak of this great warrior faced with such a terrible alternative: to fight to the death, or to flee. But fight with what? There was nothing."

An incident mentioned in the Robbins book indicates that Vang Pao had no illusions about what was going to happen to his country:

One night at dinner at Vang Pao's house, where John Mansur had gone as usual to be briefed for the following day's missions, the general shocked the young Raven. The talk had been about the poor way the war was going, and Vang Pao was arguing for a big push, a quick victory before it was too late. Mansur had made earnest, naive assurances that the Americans could always be relied upon, whatever might happen. They would stick by the Meo through thick and thin. Vang Pao sighed and shook his head. "John, you don't understand."



“What don’t I understand?”

“One of these days your people — the American people will make the American military quit helping us. And as soon as that happens the Communists are going to take my country.”

Mansur could not believe his ears. “General,” he said emotionally, “we will *never* do that.”

Vang Pao smiled. “You do not understand, John.”

Just as Vang Pao had predicted, the will of the American people to resist Communism in Southeast Asia was undermined by Communist-organized street demonstrations, media distortions and lies, weak-kneed politicians in both of the major political parties, and celebrities like Jane Fonda who went to North Vietnam in 1972 and posed next to Communist artillery pieces, broadcast propaganda into South Vietnam, and caused Americans to be tortured in the Hanoi Hilton. But this was to be expected from a woman who two years earlier had been quoted as saying: “I am a socialist. Therefore, I think we should strive toward a socialist society — all the way to Communism. I believe if everyone knew what the word meant, we’d all be on our knees praying for a Communist society.”

The sellout of Southeast Asia was completed in 1975 as the Communists overran Indochina and added three once independent nations to its Evil Empire. In just 25 years, two no-win wars in Asia had claimed more than 112,000 American lives, had inflicted wounds on another 256,000 Americans, and had left more than 3,000 of our fighting men missing in action or in Communist prisoner of war camps. The political leaders of this nation have never been held accountable for their terrible betrayal of their fellow countrymen and of millions of brave people who looked to the United States for help.

Our prayer must be that of Captain Jim Mulligan, former POW and author of *The Hanoi Commitment*: “Lord, save me from the politicians who have the nerve to engage me in war but who don’t have the guts to let me win it.”

Some Personal Reflections

People have asked me why I went to Southeast Asia from 1966 to 1970 knowing that we would not be able to win that war. The best answer I can give is to quote one of my heroes, General George Patton, when he was asked about following Army regulations:

Army regulations are written by those who have never been in battle Our only mission in combat is to win After the battles are over, those in the Pentagon can write about what we did wrong Battles are won by determined soldiers who do not spend a split second trying to remember what Army regulations had to say about what you should do when you are being shot at.



I went to Southeast Asia with the idea of breaking those regulations that would keep us from getting the job done — in combat and otherwise. I could not stay “Stateside” while many of my best friends were over there. At a recent reunion with Raven friends in San Antonio, we reminisced about our service in Southeast Asia. We talked about friends who were not there, those who had died or were missing in action. We reflected about men like Will Green, code name “Black Lion,” who was killed by a mine in Laos, and Burr “Mr. Clean” Smith, who died of cancer a short time ago. Fred Platt was at the reunion even though he is in constant pain from having been shot down 11 times. And I had to say something about Frank Kricker, who once asked me if I could get him into the Ravens. Frank hadn’t been in Laos very long when he needed 40 stitches in his posterior and had his big toe shot off by enemy fire. I was back in the States by then and received the ugliest letter in the world from Frank for getting him into that predicament. He won the Silver Star for his work as a Raven.

Chris Robbins did a terrific job in his book about the Ravens, although he was wrong in crediting me with winning three Bronze Stars in World War II. (I’m not that old, Chris.) It was indeed fitting that he dedicated his book not only to the memory of his father but also to “the Ravens who never flew home, and the Hmong who can never return.”

No article about Vietnam would be complete without mentioning the courageous and selfless men of the Special Forces. We were sitting around Camp Jack L. Goodman in the Cholon Section of Saigon one night when a friend who had just come back from America told me bluntly: “Patrick, we’re not losing the war over here; we’re losing it back in the U.S.” He went on to explain that, while walking through a shopping area in Oakland, California, he saw people manning a booth with a sign that said: “STOP Aid and Trade to our Marxist Enemies.”

When those at the booth saw my friend’s Green Beret, they apologized for not being able to do more for Americans fighting in Vietnam. They showed my pal a list of the critical materials that our government had approved for shipment to the Soviet Union, which in turn were being used to kill Americans in Vietnam. He then thanked them for all *they* were doing.

I asked my friend who these people were, and he said they were members of The John Birch Society, an organization he once thought was “kooky” but not anymore. I then told my buddy that I had been a member of the Society since 1962, when the Defense Department put a stop to educating the military about the dangers of Communism. My friend had some blank petitions opposing aid and trade with the Communists and said that he was going to get them signed and then when his tour was up in another six months, he was going back home to fight those who were helping the Communists take over the world.

Three months later, my friend was killed while on a classified reconnaissance mission with a Green Beret team. Thinking of him, and of all those mentioned in this article, as well as many unnamed friends whom I shall never see again, still brings tears to my eyes. Please don’t ever forget those who sacrificed their lives in the never-ending quest for freedom. And renew your determination to preserve freedom in this great land and to spread that freedom to Southeast Asia and to all those once-free countries now held captive by Communist slavemasters.