

## The Specter of Vietnam

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It had been four years since US President George W. Bush led the nation into war against Iraq, contending that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction ready to launch at an hour's notice. Those weapons were never found, and boasts of "mission accomplished" rapidly gave way to fears of a new Vietnam War. As public disenchantment reached heights not seen since those years of agonizing futility, the president addressed the 2007 Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) convention to rally support with a warning and a promise: "This enemy is dangerous; this enemy is determined; and this enemy will be defeated."<sup>1</sup> US President Lyndon Johnson had said the same thing in almost the same words. Finally, his audience had stopped listening. Now, the immediate danger to the Bush White House was a new congressional attempt to limit presidential freedom of action, just as had happened at the end of the Vietnam War. Even before the Democrats gained narrow majorities in both the Senate and House in the 2006 midterm elections, Congress had created a ten-person "Iraq Study Group" (ISG) of notables to look at the war with "fresh eyes" – code words for a mandate to find a way out of a new stalemated war.

Prior to the Vietnam years such an initiative would have been unthinkable. In 1968, after three years of war, President Johnson felt compelled to call into session a "Council of Cold War Wise Men." Previously, they had told him to stay the course. Now, they warned it was time to think about how to get the nation out of a war gone so terribly wrong.<sup>2</sup> In 2006,

This chapter is dedicated to the memory of Marilyn B. Young, my longtime friend and coeditor who had planned to be the coauthor of the chapter. I would also like to acknowledge the contributions to my understanding of the issues from another friend, retired colonel and longtime Princeton University teacher, Paul L. Miles.

- 1 "Transcript of President Bush's Speech at the Veterans of Foreign Wars Convention," August 22, 2007, *New York Times*, August 22, 2007.
- 2 Lloyd C. Gardner, *Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam* (Chicago, 1995), 433–58.

this new council of foreign policy elders, the ISG, cochaired by former US Secretary of State James Baker and Democrat Lee Hamilton, a long-time member of the House of Representatives and vice chair of the 9/11 Commission, even more forcefully challenged White House prerogatives to conduct a war just as it saw fit. “Many Americans are dissatisfied, not just with the situation in Iraq but with the state of our political debate regarding Iraq,” read the covering letter accompanying its report. “Our political leaders must build a bipartisan approach to bring a responsible conclusion to what is now a lengthy and costly war. ... Our leaders must be candid and forthright with the American people in order to win their support.”<sup>3</sup> Those words fairly screamed “Vietnam” and the devastating “credibility gap” that had undercut LBJ’s war messages and now threatened George W. Bush. Making matters worse, ISG cochair James Baker had been President George H. W. Bush’s secretary of state and close confidant when the elder Bush celebrated victory in Gulf War I (1991) as sounding the death knell of the “Vietnam syndrome” – the end of fears about military actions leading to quagmires in far-off countries.<sup>4</sup>

“It’s a proud day for America,” Bush Sr. had declared, announcing victory in the brief war. “And, by God, we’ve kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all.” Vietnam had been fought the wrong way, he said, repeating the political rewriting of the war’s history since Saigon fell in 1975. But this time was different. “We promised you’d be given the means to fight,” he congratulated American soldiers – and himself. “We promised not to look over your shoulder. We promised this would not be another Vietnam. And we kept that promise.” Then came a bold assurance: “The specter of Vietnam has been buried forever in the desert sands of the Arabian Peninsula.”<sup>5</sup> Those were heady days. The Cold War had been won, and the United States could stop having bad dreams about what had happened in Vietnam. In this “new world order” the old questions about overreach no longer mattered. But then came Iraq. By 2007, the exorcism rite had been discredited, and policy elites

3 The report sold 35,000 copies in the first ten weeks. See *The Iraq Study Group Report: The Way Forward: A New Approach*, authorized ed. (New York, 2006).

4 In the early postwar years, the Vietnam syndrome was the first name given to a veterans’ disorder, later called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) after the Vietnam syndrome was appropriated by political figures as “reluctance to use military force.” See Robert D. Schulzinger, *A Time for Peace: The Legacy of the Vietnam War* (New York, 2006), chapter 4.

5 Bush, “Remarks to the American Legislative Exchange Council,” March 1, 1991: [www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=19351](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=19351); “Radio Address to United States Armed Forces Stationed in the Persian Gulf Region,” March 2, 1991: [www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=19355](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=19355).

were as divided as at the end of the Vietnam War.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, only a few weeks into the second Iraq War in 2003, the specter reappeared, with visions of joyous Baghdad citizens pulling down statues of Saddam Hussein replaced by dark clouds rising out of the desert, the very place Bush's father had said the syndrome had been buried.

Bush Jr. did not deny the resurgence of the Vietnam specter in his speech. The danger was not military defeat, however, but how it had once eroded the American will to stay the course in Vietnam. Despite his own father's previous assertion, the specter of Vietnam had haunted the president from the outset. Now, he would blame its reappearance on a British novel, *The Quiet American*.<sup>7</sup> He began his VFW speech by praising the veterans for saving Asia. "Today's dynamic and hopeful Asia – a region that brings us countless benefits – would not have been possible without America's presence and perseverance. It would not have been possible without the veterans in this hall today. And I thank you for your service. [Applause.]"

It might not have happened if the United States had faltered. At key moments after World War II, critics and doubters had dismissed American policy in Asia as "hopeless and naïve." But they had not deterred Washington policymakers, except in Vietnam, where Americans essentially gave in to unwarranted fears. The critics produced a tragedy for the Vietnamese people when Saigon fell to the communists. How did that happen? Who created the Vietnam specter? A British novelist created the Vietnam specter even before any American soldier or marine landed on the beaches at Đà Nẵng! "In 1955, long before the United States entered the war," he continued, "Graham Greene wrote a novel called *The Quiet American*. It was set in Saigon, and the main character was a young government agent, Alden Pyle. He was a symbol of American purpose and patriotism – and dangerous naïveté. Another character describes Alden this way: 'I never knew a man who had better motives for all the trouble he caused.'"

As American involvement deepened, with no resolution in sight, Bush went on, "the Graham Greene argument gathered some steam." Misguided

6 Fears of a new Vietnam in Iraq and contesting American visions are the subject of Michael MacDonald's *Overreach: Delusions of Regime Change in Iraq* (Cambridge, MA, 2014).

7 Two interesting comments lamenting the virulent nature of the Vietnam syndrome spreading into a general aversion to using military power from conservative commentators are William Schneider, "The Vietnam Syndrome Mutates," *The Atlantic Monthly*, April 2006: [www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2006/04/the-vietnam-syndrome-mutates/304891/](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2006/04/the-vietnam-syndrome-mutates/304891/), and Max Boot, "The Incurable Vietnam Syndrome," *CBS News*, October 14, 2009: [www.cbsnews.com/news/the-incurable-vietnam-syndrome/](http://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-incurable-vietnam-syndrome/).

critics insisted there would be no tragic consequences for the Vietnamese if we pulled out. They were wrong. “Three decades later, there is a legitimate debate about how we got into the Vietnam War and how we left.” But the price of America’s withdrawal could not be ignored, and it “was paid by millions of innocent citizens whose agonies would add to our vocabulary new terms like ‘boat people,’ ‘reeducation camps,’ and ‘killing fields.’”<sup>8</sup> If enough people believed Graham Greene’s version of history and stopped believing in the American mission, then it could indeed unnerve the nation at this critical moment in “Operation Iraqi Freedom,” and lead to disaster in the Middle East. Hence Greene’s portrait of Alden Pyle must be replaced with a narrative of American policy in Asia that would support the Iraq effort, demonstrate that the nation’s policy was neither naïve nor destructive, as the novelist had falsely portrayed it, and rally the country against pulling out of Iraq before the enemy was defeated and the “mission” there was “accomplished.”<sup>9</sup>

The burden of Bush Jr.’s comments about Graham Greene echoed the line put forward by “lost victory” advocates of an alternative history of the war, notably President Ronald Reagan: “We continue to talk about losing that war,” he told a press conference on April 18, 1985, about a week before the tenth anniversary of Saigon’s fall. “We didn’t lose that war. We won virtually every engagement.” Instead, “When the war was over and when we’d come home, that’s when we’d lost the war.” The blame fell on the North Vietnamese for violating the peace agreement, but more so on domestic opponents of the war in the media and elsewhere. Never again, he said, must young men be sent out to fight for “a cause that we’re unwilling to win. And that was the great tragedy – that was the great disgrace, to me, of Vietnam – that they were fed into this meatgrinder, and yet, no one had any intention of allowing victory.”<sup>10</sup>

It was true that Greene’s novel in film adaptations illustrated how doubts had replaced confidence in the American mission. The original Hollywood

8 Debates over Vietnam strategies can be followed in Gregory A. Daddis, *Withdrawal: Reassessing America’s Final Years in Vietnam* (New York, 2017).

9 The president responded to the ISG report and the midterm elections in two ways: first, by firing the public face of the Iraq War, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, whose Pentagon press briefings had unwisely brushed aside reports of serious troubles as “stuff happens”; and then Bush eagerly seized on the “surge” promoted by another group of experts who were attuned to “lost victory” legends about Vietnam. For a skeptical view of the legend of the surge, see Peter Beinart, “The Surge Fallacy,” *The Atlantic*, September 2015: [www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/the-surge-fallacy/399344/](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/the-surge-fallacy/399344/).

10 Schulzinger, *A Time for Peace*, 187; Reagan, “Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session with Regional Editors and Broadcasters,” April 18, 1985: [www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=38498](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=38498).

version in 1958 starred World War II hero Audie Murphy – the war’s most decorated soldier – as Alden Pyle. In this version Pyle was not a secret US government agent, as in Greene’s novel, but a private citizen hoping to provide aid to anticommunist, anticolonial forces, the “Third Way.” Murphy was a perfect choice for the role of a dedicated American, like those in Kennedy’s Peace Corps at the height of the Cold War. The role of the jaded British journalist, Fowler, was played by Michael Redgrave in this version, and then by Michael Caine in the 2002 remake, which was truer to Greene’s narrative. Alden Pyle’s character is the only one that changes. Now played by Brendan Fraser as a man fully engaged in the “domino theory” version of the stakes in Vietnam, Pyle was willing to sacrifice Vietnamese lives to see that the communist-led Việt Minh forces did not win.<sup>11</sup>

In some ways, a better fit for Bush’s hero, however, would have been John Rambo. Surely more of those in the VFW audience knew about him. In a series of three films beginning in the 1980s promoting the legends about mistreated and misunderstood Vietnam veterans, John Rambo stood tall, holding off local police forces who bullied him into resistance by using his guerrilla warfare training. *Rambo* quickly spawned a popular following as an indomitable fighter. In the 1985 sequel, *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, the hero, now in prison, is offered a pardon by his old commanding officer if he will return to Vietnam to rescue US POWs supposedly still held captive by the “enemy.” Played by Sylvester Stallone, Rambo replies in an instantly famous plea that echoes and amplifies the “lost victory” legend, coated with bitter sarcasm, “Sir, do we get to win this time?”<sup>12</sup>

### The First Post-Vietnam Presidents: Ford and Carter

The aftermath of the war did not begin this way. US Presidents Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter attempted to appeal to a different side of what

11 A good summary of the different film versions is Martin F. Nolan, “Graham Greene’s Quiet Novel: On Film and in Print, ‘The Quiet American’ Still Fascinates,” *New York Times*, January 30, 2003. In both film versions, Fowler betrays Pyle, so that he is assassinated by Việt Minh operatives. The second film version also distorts Greene’s novel, however, by adding an ending that has Fowler present at a series of later American Cold War “interventions,” with repeated disastrous results.

12 The film was panned by critics, but the line “Do we get to win?” had a long shelf life in popular culture. Rambo’s mission to find POWs and get them home fit in well with a particular constituency that had taken advantage of the ragged end of the war to perpetuate the myth that the MIAs were being held prisoner by Hanoi. A good survey is Sean Hutchinson, “16 Things You Might Not Know about ‘Rambo,’” *mental floss*, n.d.: <http://mentalfloss.com/article/64286/16-things-you-might-not-know-about-rambo>.

it meant to come to terms with defeat. But the “lost victory” legend fit too well with a mythic American past, as Ronald Reagan understood very well, as he began his quest for the presidency in those immediate post-Vietnam years by promoting John Rambo’s version of history. Still, Gerald Ford tried. Ford never had to face a presidential election campaign and explain his positions to a nationwide electorate. His predecessor, Richard M. Nixon, had suggested in the 1968 campaign that he had a “plan” to end the war. That was a neat way to avoid specifics, and he squeaked through to the White House. Whatever self-created fantasies he occasionally projected about a military victory, Nixon knew it was not on the cards. He told his advisors, as he entered the presidential campaign, “I’ve come to the conclusion that there’s no way to win the war. But we can’t say that, of course. In fact, we have to seem to say the opposite, just to keep some degree of bargaining leverage.” He did not fear that people would hold up copies of *The Quiet American*, but that such deceptions would be revealed.<sup>13</sup>

Nixon’s plan turned out to be an irreversible drawdown of troops – agonizingly slow as it was – accompanied by the sound and fury of bombing raids that exceeded all that had gone before. Critics likened what he did to a Western desperado backing out the saloon door with six-guns blazing. Nixon resigned on August 9, 1974, because the floodwaters from Watergate could no longer be contained, making Vice-President Gerald Ford heir to a lost cause. But Nixon also left behind the “opening” to China that undercut the original rationale for the war, and Ford was able to walk through it even as the Saigon regime crumbled into broken pieces all around him.

Upon becoming president, Ford declared, “My fellow Americans, our long national nightmare is over.” “Our Constitution works,” he said. “Our great Republic is a government of laws and not of men. Here the people rule.” Like Nixon, he knew – and had known for a long time – that Vietnam was a lost cause. Despite his doubts, all through his years in Congress, Representative Gerry Ford had been a staunch supporter of the war. There was none stronger: “I am unequivocally opposed to retreat and withdrawal from Southeast Asia,” he wrote to a constituent in 1965, “which would mean withdrawal to Pearl Harbor.” As the years went by and the war deepened into a stalemate,

13 William Burr and Jeffrey P. Kimball, *Nixon’s Nuclear Specter: The Secret Alert of 1969, Madman Diplomacy, and the Vietnam War* (Lawrence, KS, 2015), 72–3. The frontispiece of this book also has an apt quotation for this chapter: “The main thing is ... [we] must hold up the specter of pressures for hitting the North.”

like other Republicans he blamed Lyndon Johnson's "mismanagement" for the nation's predicament.<sup>14</sup>

Those claims would have a malign impact on American politics. Ford admitted as much in interviews, long after his presidency, in 2004 and 2005, just as pressure built on President Bush over the Iraq War. He complained to Bob Woodward that he had inherited the problem and was obligated "on behalf of the country to try and solve the damn thing." As early as 1953, he came away from a fact-finding visit to Saigon filled with doubts. "All these French generals and colonels were dressed up here out in Saigon and telling me how they were gonna win the war against the Vietnamese." He continued:

Well, it sounded good on paper, and they ought to know more than I did. Well, in about six months the French got the hell kicked out of them in *Điện Biên Phủ*. ... The point is, we were on the wrong side of the locals. We made the same mistake that the French did, except we got deeper and deeper in the war. We could have avoided the whole darn Vietnam War if somebody in the Department of Defense or State had said, "Look here. Do we want to inherit the French mess?"<sup>15</sup>

None of his predecessors or their top advisors, he charged, ever told the truth about the situation. "I hope we never live through another era like that in American history. ... The results were very disillusioning."<sup>16</sup>

Few American troops were still in Vietnam when Ford took the oath of office. The 1973 War Powers Resolution, enacted over Nixon's veto, prohibited any new US combat activity anywhere in Southeast Asia unless authorized by a formal declaration of war. Ford had little choice now but to begin thinking about a postwar healing process.

Years later the War Powers Resolution became a big concern during the invasion of Iraq in 2003, when Bush defenders bristled at the congressional initiative in creating the ISG. But for now, it gave Ford a freer hand to begin leading the nation away from recriminations and finger-pointing. He made a

14 Quoted by David L. Anderson, "Gerald R. Ford and the Presidents' War in Vietnam," in David L. Anderson (ed.), *Shadow on the White House: Presidents and the Vietnam War, 1945-1975* (Lawrence, KS, 1993), 186.

15 Bob Woodward and Christine Parthemore, "'No Point in Being Bitter,'" *Washington Post*, December 31, 2006.

16 The claim that no one provided him, or other presidents, with information that contradicted upbeat assumptions about the way the war was going is refuted in National Intelligence Council, *Estimative Products on Vietnam, 1948-1975*, a 650-page collection of National Intelligence Estimates (NICs) and other documents, published in 2005 by the Government Printing Office, Washington, DC. It was prepared under the auspices of David F. Gordon, vice chairman of the National Intelligence Council, and with an introduction by Lloyd C. Gardner.

good start, but many things combined to undo succeeding presidential initiatives. Nine days into his presidency, he addressed the VFW, asking those in attendance to understand that his position was not one of facing “the terrible decisions of a foreign war.” Instead, “like President Truman and President Lincoln [I] ... found on my desk, where the buck stops, the urgent problem of how to bind up the Nation’s wounds. And I intend to do that.” While he opposed unconditional amnesty for draft evaders, he went on, there was a more important imperative guiding his decisions right from his first moments as president: “I acknowledged a Power, higher than the people, Who commands not only righteousness but love, not only justice but mercy.”

The requirements for “earned reentry without penalty for draft evasion” were never entirely clear in terms of what had to be done by a recipient, and brought criticism both from those who pursued the chimera of the missing in action (MIA) and from the antiwar spokespersons for the men who had followed the road to Canada rather than be drafted into the jungle trails of Vietnam. It was indeed a remarkable statement to make at *that* moment to *that* audience. The response to this offer was low, however, with only a few thousand applicants, and the program was discarded after only twelve months.<sup>17</sup>

Ford’s pardon of Richard Nixon for Watergate crimes a month after he took office drew a similar response. Other Vietnam-related issues swarmed all around the White House like angry bees. There was the problem of what to do about the military aid Nixon had promised Saigon, and the promises of huge reconstruction aid for Hanoi if it agreed to sign the 1973 Paris Peace Accords. The fall of Saigon rendered that offer moot – or did it? Ford did not talk about these “debts” to the VFW as he finished his address, pledging (as was usual in such talks) to maintain military readiness “and the strength of our will.” “America is not the policeman of the world, but we continue to be the backbone of a free world collective security setup.”<sup>18</sup>

That the United States had lost its nerve sometime in the last phases of the Vietnam War quickly emerged as a constant preoccupation for a rising group of neoconservatives down to the end of the Cold War – and after. Even in the last weeks before the final defeat, Ford was asked at a press conference the sort of question that pursued presidents who did not endorse the “lost victory” narrative: “Mr. President, are you ready to accept a communist takeover of South Vietnam and Cambodia?” This was a variation on the famous sardonic

<sup>17</sup> Anderson, “Gerald R. Ford,” 189.

<sup>18</sup> Gerald Ford, “Remarks to the Veterans of Foreign Wars Annual Convention, Chicago, Illinois,” August 19, 1974: [www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=4476](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=4476).

quip: "Have you stopped beating your wife yet?" But there was nothing funny about it for Ford. He answered as best he could: "I would hope that that would not take place in either case. My whole Congressional life in recent years was aimed at avoiding it. My complete efforts as President of the United States were aimed at avoiding that."<sup>19</sup>

The only way out of the trap was to bring in a third factor – Congress' failure to aid the Saigon regime with military supplies. Or Congress and the anti-war "hysteria." Watergate survivor Henry Kissinger, still secretary of state and national security advisor all-in-one, had hoped a decent interval would at least save the political situation at home. If the United States supplied the aid it had promised, he preached, and then the war was lost in a year or two – then that outcome would be on the South Vietnamese themselves. But there would be no decent interval.

On April 23, 1975, Ford went to New Orleans to deliver an address at Tulane University. It was very much in the spirit of his VFW talk the previous August. After a few introductory remarks, he noted that the battle of New Orleans in January 1815 had been a great victory over the British. This victory should be remembered and celebrated – even though it came two weeks after the signing of the armistice ending the War of 1812. The nation had suffered "a measure of defeat" in that war, including the capture and burning of Washington, but the battle of New Orleans "was a powerful restorative to our national pride." Today, he went on, the United States could also regain the pride that existed before Vietnam. But it could not be achieved "by refighting a war that is finished as far as America is concerned." He added:

I ask that we stop refighting the battles and the recriminations of the past. I ask that we look now at what is right with America, at our possibilities and our potentialities for change and growth and achievement and sharing. I ask that we accept the responsibilities of leadership as a good neighbor to all peoples and the enemy of none.<sup>20</sup>

Together, the VFW and Tulane speeches were examples of strong presidential leadership at a difficult moment. Yet they both failed to prevent the bitter feelings that followed the fall of Saigon one week later, on April 30, 1975. Even before that date, Ford faced a powerful challenge for the Republican nomination the following year from former California Governor Ronald Reagan.

19 "The President's News Conference," April 3, 1975: [www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=4812](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=4812).

20 Ford, "Address at a Tulane University Convocation," April 23, 1975: [www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-tulane-university-convocation](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-tulane-university-convocation).

Reagan attacked Kissinger and Ford for promoting détente with the Soviet Union, which presumably only weakened the United States' global standing.

Then Reagan's handlers seized on an even more visceral issue that would handicap presidential efforts to "stop refighting the battles" of the past. Kissinger, Nixon, and Ford, in their haste to end the war, it was charged, had left thousands of Americans behind in prison camps. The POW/MIA question had the longest staying power in modern American politics for those who wanted to refight the Vietnam War – and use war casualties to aid in the quest for political power. And it quickly got out of control. In the 1970s, a POW wife had developed a black-and-white flag with silhouettes of a man next to a watchtower and a barbed-wire fence, with the words "You are not forgotten." Congress then mandated that it be flown over public buildings six days a year. It remains the only flag that may be flown with the Stars and Stripes over the White House. More important, perhaps, it is still flown every day on thousands of businesses and public buildings across the United States.<sup>21</sup>

The POW/MIA legend soon spread with those who promoted false reports of sightings of American POWs in Laos, and the cruel hoaxes perpetrated on families of MIAs, corrupt politicians, the wildest schemes of adventurers. It fostered a "Rambo Faction" in Congress that pushed these cruel deceptions past the last boundaries of decency. It took twenty years and the bipartisan leadership of Senators John Kerry and John McCain to finally exorcize that evil nightmare foisted on American families.<sup>22</sup>

Yet its symbol is still there when one drives into a gas station or seeks a book at a library. Not everywhere, but still there, like the Cheshire cat's grin in *Alice in Wonderland*. Ford had been the first to be trapped by the issue. He made some efforts in the direction of beginning negotiations with Hanoi, but the question was always: Who would go first? The new Vietnamese government wanted to cash Nixon's promises of reconstruction aid, while Washington countered that supposed violations of the 1973 Paris Peace Accords and Hanoi's failure to account for MIAs rendered the aid promises inoperable. Diplomatic recognition would only "dignify and reward their posture of linking an accounting of our men to our providing them money," said Ford, and he would not do it.<sup>23</sup>

21 Elizabeth Flock, "The POW/MIA Flag Still Flies High Despite Questions," *US News & World Report*, February 28, 2013: [www.usnews.com/news/articles/2013/02/28/the-powmia-flag-still-flies-high-despite-questions](http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2013/02/28/the-powmia-flag-still-flies-high-despite-questions).

22 This subject is covered in detail in Robert D. Schulzinger, *A Time for Peace: The Legacy of the Vietnam War* (New York, 2006), 7, 23–41.

23 T. Christopher Jespersen, "The Bitter End and the Lost Chance in Vietnam: Congress, the Ford Administration and the Battle over Vietnam, 1975–1976," *Diplomatic History* 24

Georgia Governor Jimmy Carter came into the White House in 1977 on a wave of anti-Washington sentiment. He attempted to have it both ways in dealing with the Vietnam legacy. In their third presidential debate, Carter had followed Ford's lead in opposing Vietnam's admission to the United Nations (UN) – but he went further, to castigate the president for not creating an MIA task force. He promised that, if elected, he would send a fact-finding mission to Vietnam. On the other hand, he pursued Ford's quest to stop refighting the Vietnam War in a much-publicized speech at Notre Dame and with a new offer of pardons for draft evaders. At the university's commencement address on May 22, 1977, he said that the United States “can” have a foreign policy “that is democratic, that is based on fundamental values, and that uses power and influence.” “We can also have a foreign policy that the American people both support and, for a change, know about and understand.”<sup>24</sup>

The obvious reference to past White House duplicity could be read two ways: either that it was true what Reagan and his supporters said about running out on American soldiers left behind – or that from the beginning the war had been fraught with deception. As if on cue, Robert Aldrich's 1977 film, *Twilight's Last Gleaming*, portrayed an enraged air force colonel – played by iconic star Burt Lancaster – who “captures” a missile silo and threatens to launch an inter-continental ballistic missile attack on Russia unless President Stevens reads on national television a top-secret memo that demonstrated policymakers knew the war was unwinnable almost from the start. When Stevens finally agrees to do this, his advisors – the bluest of political bluebloods in the “Establishment” – decide the president must be sacrificed to maintain the fiction and save the country, as they know and love it. Betrayed by his closest advisors, Stevens is shot and killed by a sniper. There is no happy ending.<sup>25</sup>

It was in the Notre Dame speech that Carter also said, “Soviet expansion was almost inevitable” after World War II, a very bad thing to say in any

(2) (spring 2000), 272. And see also James Carroll, “The True Nature of John McCain's Heroism,” *New Yorker*, July 21, 2017: [www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-true-nature-of-john-mccains-heroism](http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-true-nature-of-john-mccains-heroism). I am indebted to Colonel Paul L. Miles for information about the testimony and conclusions of the special select committee chaired by Kerry and McCain that debunked the POW/MIA legend. See US Congress, Senate, *Report of the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs* (Washington, DC, 1992).

24 Jimmy Carter, “Address at Commencement Exercises at the University of Notre Dame,” May 22, 1977: [www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-commencement-exercises-the-university-notre-dame](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-commencement-exercises-the-university-notre-dame).

25 An excellent retrospective review is Nicolas Rapold, “Aiming a Query and Missiles at a President,” *New York Times*, October 19, 2012: [www.nytimes.com/2012/10/21/.../burt-lancaster-in-twilight-s-last-gleaming.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/21/.../burt-lancaster-in-twilight-s-last-gleaming.html). Aldrich attempted to have Carter view the film, but the president refused a private showing.

speech, made much worse by adding that as a result of the defeat in Vietnam “we are now free of that inordinate fear of communism” that governed the actions of policymakers. At least that is what most headlines about the speech highlighted. What he actually said at Notre Dame was: “*Being confident of our own future, we are now free of that inordinate fear of communism which once led us to embrace any dictator who joined us in that fear.*”<sup>26</sup>

Still, no real moves toward resolving matters with the new government of Vietnam succeeded in the four years Carter attempted to “crisis manage” challenges presented by something new under the economic sun, “stagflation,” along with the Soviet move into Afghanistan in 1979, and (worst of all) the Iranian hostage crisis. Along this rocky way, the MIA mission he ordered to Southeast Asia essentially got lost amidst all the turmoil, while National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski sought to play the China card against the Soviet Union, pushing Vietnam aside. China skillfully played its own “American Card,” writes historian Walter LaFeber, using a visit by paramount leader Deng Xiaoping to the United States in early 1979 as a prelude of sorts for Beijing’s invasion of Vietnam later that year to make it appear that Washington was a silent partner in the attack on Moscow’s “ally” in Southeast Asia. The episode ended badly for the Chinese, but little changed otherwise.<sup>27</sup>

The next year brought the roof down on the Carter administration. In response to the American willingness to take in the deposed shah of Iran so that he might receive expert medical treatment, angry Iranian students seized the US Embassy in Tehran on November 4, 1979, and held hostage some fifty-two diplomats. The media portrayed this as a major crisis, with newscasters on all networks constantly calling attention to Washington’s inability to do anything about the outrage, which went on for more than a year. The next month saw the Soviet military move into Afghanistan in an attempt to restore a government friendly to Moscow, an old-style colonial-like adventure that ended instead with the collapse of the Soviet empire and the downfall of the Communist Party.<sup>28</sup>

In response to Soviet military action, Carter had declared détente was over, ordered the creation of a Rapid Deployment Force to meet the danger, and announced a new “Carter Doctrine” purposely patterned after the 1947 Truman Doctrine about Greece and Turkey, warning that any attempt

26 *Ibid.*, my emphasis.

27 Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia and the Cold War, 1945–1990* (New York, 1991), 291.

28 Douglas Little, *US Versus THEM: The United States, Radical Islam, and the Rise of the Green Threat* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2016), 33–48.

now by the Soviets to gain control of the Persian Gulf would be regarded as an attack on vital American interests and would “be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.” But it was all just talk, jeered Carter’s critics. The hostages were still held prisoner, and America’s credibility had suffered another blow. With vivid memories of Americans fleeing Vietnam from Saigon rooftops and scrambling for the last flights out of Tân Sơn Nhất Air Base as shells fell on the runways, it seemed as though there was no end to national humiliation. Days after the hostage crisis began, ABC devoted a nightly broadcast on the situation: *The Iran Crisis: America Held Hostage*. Anchored by Ted Koppel, the show eventually became *Nightline*.<sup>29</sup> Carter did not help himself much by declaring that he would not leave the White House grounds for political campaigning until the hostages were freed. That vow only emphasized the nation’s supposed paralysis.

The intense pressure on Carter to “do something!” suggested another possible retreat along the lines of Vietnam. The president called on Vietnam hero Colonel Charlie Beckwith to lead a mission to rescue the hostages. Beckwith was an early volunteer for the Army Special Forces, perhaps better known as the Green Berets, an elite unit that first saw major action in Vietnam. In 1965, (then) Major Beckwith’s men rescued a small force of Green Berets trapped by thousands of enemy troops at Plei Me. The next year he was wounded and nearly killed while directing another rescue operation. Promoted to battalion commander, he was then assigned to teach at the Special Warfare School at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Beckwith’s exploits served as a kind of factual counterpoint to another legend-creating film starring John Wayne, *The Green Berets*, wherein Wayne, in an epilogue to his long career as a rawhide, tough Western hero, rappels down a mountainside with a Vietnamese woman on his back to save her from the communists, among other exploits, thus repudiating the Graham Greene version of American neo-imperialist intentions. *The Green Berets* was a great commercial success, probably in tribute to Wayne’s career; however, little of it resembled the real war in and over Vietnam. In time – the movie was released in 1968 – it added more stuffing to the “lost victory” myth.<sup>30</sup>

The president asked Beckwith to put into operation what had been learned in Vietnam to take charge of the rescue operation to free the hostages and fly them home. In late April 1980, a mission of eight helicopters attempted the feat. Everything went wrong. Three of the eight failed, and after eight Americans were killed in a collision of one of the helicopters with a C-130

29 John Feffer, “America Held Hostage,” *Antiwar.com*, December 13, 2014: <https://original.antiwar.com/feffer/2014/12/12/america-held-hostage-3/>.

30 Garry Wills, *John Wayne’s America: The Politics of Celebrity* (New York, 1997), 228–32.

transport airplane, the mission was called off. An investigation determined that the personnel, drawn from all three military services, had not trained together before being selected, and that the mission even lacked a clear chain of command. Participants in the doomed operation blamed a huge dust storm. Beckwith charged it was “doomed by too much internal bickering among bureaucrats who did not have enough experience with high-risk missions.”<sup>31</sup>

Designed to end the grip Vietnam had on the American psyche, what the mission really displayed was that technological solutions often failed to solve political crises. But Carter lost the 1980 election standing in the reopened grave of the Vietnam specter. The hostage crisis proved to be a perfect sixty-second excerpt from a full-length documentary about the Carter administration: high hopes for success plunging quickly into frustration and recrimination, and then the president’s approval ratings during the crisis falling from nearly 80 percent to less than 30 percent. It doomed his reelection bid, while paving the way for Ronald Reagan’s huge military budgets, the surefire tonic presidents have recommended for all sorts of political ailments since World War II.<sup>32</sup>

### Reagan the Redeemer

The hostages were released just as Reagan was inaugurated on January 20, 1981. His supporters have long argued this happened because a Carter official let slip that the president had taken military action off the table after the desert fiasco. With a war against Iraq going on, moreover, Tehran needed to court favor with the United States and a new president.<sup>33</sup> Public opinion in the United States now appeared ready to loosen Vietnam-era military restraints on the executive. Thus, Reagan’s “Evil Empire” bluster and “Star Wars” ambitions captured the national mood on the rebound from all the Vietnam disappointments.

Four weeks after finally achieving his goal as Republican nominee for president the previous summer, Reagan went to the annual convention of the VFW. The veterans’ group was an eager audience for locker-room pep talks instead of dour sermons about saving energy by turning off the lights upstairs. The VFW had just broken an eighty-year precedent by endorsing Reagan. He

31 Associated Press, “Col. Charlie Beckwith, 65, Dies; Led Failed Rescue Effort in Iran,” *New York Times*, June 14, 1994: [www.nytimes.com/1994/06/14/obituaries/col-charlie-beckwith-65-dies-led-failed-rescue-effort-in-iran.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1994/06/14/obituaries/col-charlie-beckwith-65-dies-led-failed-rescue-effort-in-iran.html).

32 Steven R. Weisman, “For America, a Painful Reawakening,” *New York Times*, May 17, 1981: [www.nytimes.com/1981/05/17/magazine/for-america-a-painful-reawakening.html?searchResultPosition=1](http://www.nytimes.com/1981/05/17/magazine/for-america-a-painful-reawakening.html?searchResultPosition=1).

33 Michael Rubin, “Reagan Deserves Credit for 1981 Hostage Release,” January 27, 2016, *AEI*: [www.aei.org/publication/reagan-deserves-credit-for-1981-hostage-release/](http://www.aei.org/publication/reagan-deserves-credit-for-1981-hostage-release/).

hoped they would be just as enthusiastic after four years. "Because, my friends, nothing would mean more to me as president than to live up to your trust."

It was past time to end post-Vietnam sleepwalking. "America has been sleepwalking far too long. We have to snap out of it, and with your help, that's exactly what we're going to do." There were those who equated military preparedness with a desire for war. The great American humorist, Will Rogers, had an answer for that: "I've never seen anyone insult Jack Dempsey." Reagan continued:

For too long, we have lived with the "Vietnam Syndrome." Much of that syndrome has been created by the North Vietnamese aggressors who now threaten the peaceful people of Thailand. Over and over they told us for nearly 10 years that we were the aggressors bent on imperialistic conquests. They had a plan. It was to win in the field of propaganda here in America what they could not win on the field of battle in Vietnam. As the years dragged on, we were told that peace would come if we would simply stop interfering and go home.<sup>34</sup>

Then came his rallying cry. "It is time we recognized that ours was, in truth, a noble cause." The nation dishonored the memory of 50,000 young Americans who died for that cause when it gave way to feelings of guilt "as if we were doing something shameful." The soldiers in Vietnam fought as well and as bravely as any Americans had ever fought in any war. There were many lessons to take away from Vietnam. The soldiers next time must be given the means and the determination to prevail. "And while we are at it, let us tell those who fought in that war that we will never again ask young men to fight and possibly to die in a war our government is afraid to let them win."

Interestingly, however, amidst these vows about the need for military preparedness, Reagan listed the Soviet Union's "attempt to encircle and neutralize the People's Republic of China," and thereby continued to undercut the original motivation for the Vietnam War to block Chinese expansion into Southeast Asia.<sup>35</sup> After he became president, Reagan mused that what had been needed to drive the specter away and unite the nation behind the effort was a formal declaration of war. Vietnam had been fought under a vaguely worded Gulf of

34 Ronald Reagan, "Peace: Restoring the Margin of Safety," August 18, 1980, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library: [www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/peace-restoring-margin-safety](http://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/peace-restoring-margin-safety).

35 For a trenchant comment on Vietnam as an example of American refusal to engage with the past, see Andrew J. Bacevich, "Did Reagan Win the Vietnam War?" *The American Conservative*, May 5, 2015: [www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/did-reagan-win-the-vietnam-war/](http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/did-reagan-win-the-vietnam-war/)

Tonkin Resolution. That was the initial and fatal mistake. He was asked if that might not have widened the war and “gotten us stuck in an even greater quagmire.” His answer was a study in how to have it both ways. That was what was said about Korea, and it “prevented us from allowing General MacArthur to lead us to a victory in Korea.” “Everyone thought that you have to fight a war without winning it or you might find yourself in a bigger war,” he said. “Well, maybe General MacArthur was right, there is no substitute for victory.”<sup>36</sup>

Reagan fought to victory in a 1983 mini-war in Grenada, an island with a total population of 90,000, the size of Fargo, North Dakota, in order to prevent a new Cuba-style regime in the Caribbean. One result was to give director Clint Eastwood a starring role in a movie, *Heartbreak Ridge*, to show how the marines had overcome the Vietnam syndrome, led by a rejuvenated Korean War veteran. Reagan’s popularity ratings did go up as he narrowed previous gaps vis-à-vis likely Democratic candidates for 1984. Generally speaking, the polls showed that a military victory, any military victory after Vietnam, was welcome, even if some feared Reagan would use the invasion as a springboard for larger operations.<sup>37</sup>

Inside his administration, however, there was an ongoing tussle over how best to avoid another Vietnam that occasionally broke out in public debates between Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger and Secretary of State George W. Shultz, who reversed traditional roles, with Shultz insisting that the 1973 War Powers Resolution hampered presidents seeking freedom of action to use military force to protect American interests, and Weinberger fearing appetite growing momentum. “Employing our forces almost indiscriminately and as a regular and customary part of our diplomatic efforts,” said Weinberger, “would surely plunge us headlong into the sort of domestic turmoil we experienced during the Vietnam War, without accomplishing the goal for which we committed our forces.”<sup>38</sup>

The debate was never really resolved. Both men invoked Vietnam, and both took pieces of the “lost war” thesis to bolster their positions, especially the idea that the war had been mismanaged from the outset by the Democrats. As the Reaganites struggled to find a strategy to avoid another Vietnam while spending \$1

36 “Reagan Gives Views on the Vietnam War,” April 5, 1984, *New York Times*: [www.nytimes.com/1984/04/05/world/reagan-gives-views-on-the-vietnam-war.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1984/04/05/world/reagan-gives-views-on-the-vietnam-war.html)

37 Barry Sussman, “Grenada Move Earns Reagan Broad Political Gains, Poll Shows,” *Washington Post*, November 9, 1983: [www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1983/11/09/grenada-move-earns-reagan-broad-political-gains-poll-shows/6c7b2ecd-5c9c-4aea-946c-408eef6b61a6/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1983/11/09/grenada-move-earns-reagan-broad-political-gains-poll-shows/6c7b2ecd-5c9c-4aea-946c-408eef6b61a6/).

38 A good short introduction to the debate is Richard Halloran, “Shultz and Weinberger: Disputing Use of Force,” *New York Times*, November 30, 1984: [www.nytimes.com/1984/11/30/us/shultz-and-weinberger-disputing-use-of-force.html?searchResultPosition=1](http://www.nytimes.com/1984/11/30/us/shultz-and-weinberger-disputing-use-of-force.html?searchResultPosition=1).

trillion on military hardware like the “Star Wars” dream of an antiballistic missile system, terrorist attacks in Somalia and Beirut resulting in American deaths drew no military response from Washington. Shultz and Weinberger played out their beliefs perfectly in these situations. On October 23, 1983, Arab terrorists drove a truck containing high explosives into the marine barracks in Beirut, killing 238 Americans and 58 French soldiers, members of a multinational force tasked with keeping peace between Israeli forces and jihadists operating from Syria. Weinberger had wanted to remove the marines, but Shultz had the president’s ear in terms of a fear that it would look like the United States had cut and run. That view held until the aftermath of the bombing, when the “rescue” operation in Grenada offered a less dangerous field of action to redeem Vietnam.<sup>39</sup>

The biggest Vietnam issue in the Reagan administration, however, turned out to be a heavily fraught cultural issue with political overtones: the erection of a memorial to honor the 58,000 Americans who died in Vietnam. The campaign for a memorial had begun in 1979 as the idea of a wounded veteran, Jan Scruggs, 29 years old and also a Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) sufferer. After his service in Vietnam, Scruggs graduated from American University and then received a master’s degree in psychology. In 1977 he wrote a bitter article for the *Washington Post*, entitled “Forgotten Veterans of that ‘Peculiar War.’” In it was the genesis of a formal proposal: “Perhaps a national monument is in order to remind an ungrateful nation of what it has done to its sons.”<sup>40</sup>

Over the next few years, Scruggs’ initial idea became the central issue under contention about memory of the war. He imagined a place on the National Mall for a garden and statuary representing the soldiers who died, as well as those who served. What was most striking about the movement for a memorial led by a group that took the name Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF) was that there was as yet neither a memorial for the fallen of World War II nor even of World War I in Washington. But in 1980, a bill setting a site for a Vietnam memorial passed both the Senate and the House. Once that happened, and Carter signed it into law on July 1, 1980, things began to move rapidly – into a full-blown controversy about the design of the memorial.

Fundraising dinners were headlined by a variety of people representing almost every point of view about the war “and indeed the inner conflict of the

39 See Caspar Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace: Seven Critical Years in the Pentagon* (New York, 1990), 160–1, and George Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York, 1993), 330–1.

40 James Reston, Jr., *A Rift in the Earth: Art, Memory, and the Fight for a Vietnam War Memorial* (New York, 2017), 20. Reston’s book is essential for understanding the politics and history of the national Vietnam memorial. The account that follows here is largely drawn from Reston’s book.

entire Vietnam generation.” For those who had hoped that a sculptor would be chosen to create traditional statuary, the decision to hold an open competition juried by distinguished architects and artists was a foreboding there might not be statuary at all like that common across the land from Gettysburg to small towns honoring both Union and Confederate soldiers. When the jury decided on a design by a Yale undergraduate in architecture, Maya Ying Lin, the jury issued a final praise: “This is very much a memorial of our own times, one that could not have been achieved in another time or place.”<sup>41</sup>

Lin’s design was by her own naming to represent a “rift in the earth,” a long, black slab of granite on which would be inscribed the names of the fallen. She had designed it as a class project. The announcement produced a storm of criticism about the competition, about the jury’s decision, and about Lin’s background as the daughter of Chinese immigrants. Critics described it as the war protestors’ final victory. It was an ugly battle. In the midst of the furor in 1982, President Reagan revived the POW/MIA issue, flying over 450 MIA family members on military transports to their annual convention. Here, and by inviting selected families to White House luncheons, the president repeated the mantra assuring them their cause had the “highest national priority.”<sup>42</sup>

The criticism mounted with one dissident veteran, Tom Carhart, declaring that he saw in the design “a black trench that scars the Mall with black walls, the universal color of shame and sorrow and degradation.” Secretary of the Interior James Watt, under whose authority the monument would be built, made clear his position against the design, calling it an “act of treason” even before he saw it. A conference inside the White House arrived at a compromise that would involve adding statuary and an American flag at its apex. The fight went on, with Lin responding that the additions would be the equivalent of desecrating the Mona Lisa with a moustache. “Past a certain point, it’s not worth compromising.”<sup>43</sup> For the two sides it felt like they were fighting a last battle of the Vietnam War, for there was yet more to come in succeeding years. In the moment, however, the compromise was accepted, and eventually the memorial would become almost hallowed ground as relatives of the veterans and well-wishers brought thousands of things that they left at the base of the 250-foot-long memorial.<sup>44</sup>

41 Ibid., 50.

42 James Rosenthal, “The Myth of the Lost POWs,” *The New Republic*, July 1, 1985: <https://newrepublic.com/article/90232/pow-mia-vietnam-ronald-reagan>.

43 Reston, *A Rift in the Earth*, 107.

44 A memorial of similar design for Vietnamese dead would have to be twenty to thirty times longer.

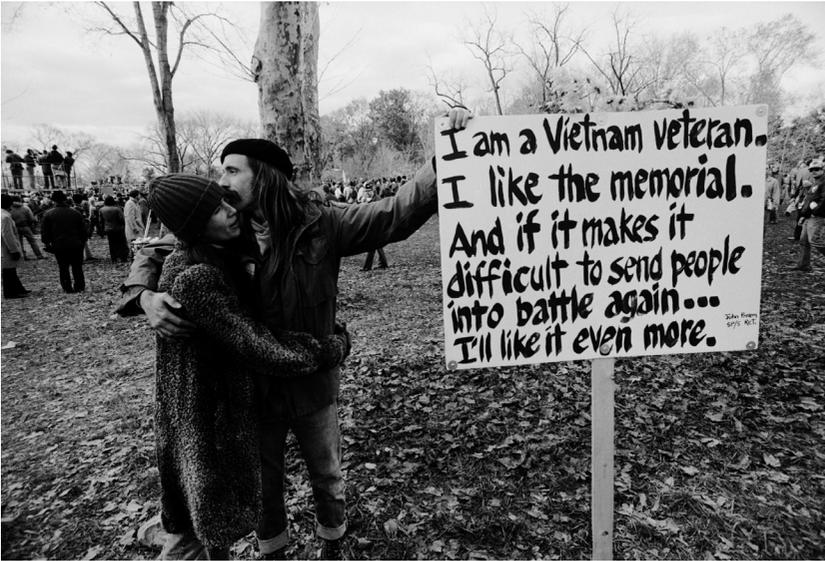


Figure 25.1 A Vietnam War veteran holds a sign praising the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The sign reads: "I am a Vietnam veteran. I like the memorial. And if it makes it difficult to send people into battle again ... I'll like it even more" (1983). Source: Leif Skoogfors / Contributor / Corbis Historical / Getty Images.

Maya Ying Lin's memorial was dedicated on November 13, 1982. President Reagan declined the opportunity to be the keynote speaker. Ranking members of his administration were also conspicuous by their absence. The marine band was there, and there were flyovers by military jets. Two years later, the add-on statue by Frederick Hart was dedicated. This time Reagan was there to give the main address. He had just been reelected, and the domestic politics of Vietnam had finally begun to die down. In a memorable passage from his address, he noted that the memorial acted as a mirror when you touched it searching for a name. "From certain angles, you're touching, too, the reflection of the Washington Monument or the chair in which great Abe Lincoln sits." The names on the wall reflected the best in us. "And it's good that we do it in the reflected glow of the enduring symbols of our Republic."<sup>45</sup>

45 "Remarks at Dedication Ceremonies for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Statue," November 11, 1984: [www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-dedication-ceremonies-for-the-vietnam-veterans-memorial-statue](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-dedication-ceremonies-for-the-vietnam-veterans-memorial-statue).

This time there was a brief nod toward the POW/MIA families. There had been much rethinking by both sides on the Vietnam War question, “and by those who did not know which view was right. ... And it’s time we moved on in unity and resolve – with the resolve to always stand for freedom, as those who fought did, and to always try to protect and preserve the peace.” Finally, he said, the memorial belonged to all of us. Ahead for Reagan and the world in the following year were the summits with a new Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, new arms pacts, and the effective end of the Cold War. The last ostensible reason for the Vietnam War had disappeared. US President George H. W. Bush then celebrated the burial of the Vietnam specter after the brief war against Saddam Hussein in 1991.

Americans were more than ready to move on, electing Bill Clinton, who had done everything he could to avoid going into the military and serving in Vietnam. Clinton spoke at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial a few months after entering office in 1993, easily warding off the few who came to protest his appearance. “To all of you who are shouting, I have heard you. I ask that you now hear me,” he prefaced his remarks. If there was any determination to use the Vietnam syndrome in any of its several known manifestations against Clinton, he deftly parried the thrusts. His successor, George W. Bush, had also avoided service. Thus, two presidents were elected without war records so essential in the post-Civil War and post-World War II eras. Not only that, Clinton and Bush had apparently gained politically from their efforts to stay far away from the ground battles or perilous bombing missions over North Vietnam.

Clinton rightly spoke of how Americans viewed the Vietnam era now as “those complicated times.” “Many volumes have been written about this war and those complicated times,” he said at the memorial, “but the message of this memorial is quite simple: these men and women fought for freedom, brought honor to their communities, loved their country, and died for it.”<sup>46</sup>

As usual there was the pledge to do all that was possible to find out about the mythical POW/MIAs, but Clinton added a smart political move in pledging to declassify all government materials about those still left behind. Then he lifted the economic embargo on Vietnam, restored diplomatic relations, and set out to negotiate a bilateral trade agreement. All along the way he had the support of Vietnam veterans. The crowning step was the appointment of

46 “Transcript of Clinton Speech at Vietnam War Memorial,” May 31, 1993, *New York Times*, June 1, 1993: [www.nytimes.com/1993/06/01/us/transcript-of-clinton-speech-at-vietnam-war-memorial.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1993/06/01/us/transcript-of-clinton-speech-at-vietnam-war-memorial.html).

a former POW, Peter Peterson, as America's first ambassador to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRVN). Peterson, in turn, gave him full credit for moving ahead so "aggressively" in developing ties with Vietnam. It may not have been any political advantage to do these things, Peterson said, but Clinton saw an opportunity "for America to heal wounds and to build bridges."<sup>47</sup>

After Peterson arrived in Hanoi, an early visitor was Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. During her visit he handed the secretary a brick from the "Hanoi Hilton," where he had spent more than six years as a POW. It was a symbol of more brutal times, he explained, but now a "stepping stone to a better future." Parts of the building were being torn down and turned into "a luxury block of apartments and stores by a Singapore Company."<sup>48</sup> There were deep ironies on both sides at this mini-ceremony presided over by a former POW: Hồ Chí Minh's revolution and LBJ's war turned upside down. Peterson noted during Albright's visit that on the streets of Hanoi Vietnamese treat him as an old friend. "We're not talking 1975 any more. We're talking 1997. I think it would be really helpful if Americans could see Vietnam as a country, and not a war."

After the 2000 election, Clinton traveled to Vietnam for the first official visit by an American president. Large crowds clustered along the highway from the Hanoi airport to the city. He spoke at Hanoi National University about missed connections over the history of the two countries, and the tragic results of the war for both sides, including the staggering numbers of Vietnamese who fought on both sides, "more than 3 million brave soldiers and citizens." Clinton noted that as a result of the war there were now in the United States more than 1 million citizens of Vietnamese heritage. He amplified Peterson's comment about the need to see, as more were, Vietnam not as a war, but a country, "a country with the highest literacy rate in Southeast Asia."<sup>49</sup>

Much of the remainder of the speech focused on the forces of globalism, making integration more certain daily. Both countries began, he noted, with a Declaration of Independence, a remark sure to be noted as a reference to Hồ Chí Minh's famous 1945 public initiative that war critics always cited later as evidence there was more of Jefferson than Marx in Vietnam's

47 "Clinton Makes Groundbreaking Vietnam Speech," *Time*, November 17, 2000.

48 Steven Erlanger, "In Vietnam, 'Hanoi Hilton' Brick Links Past and Future," *New York Times*, June 28, 1997: [www.nytimes.com/1997/06/28/world/in-vietnam-hanoi-hilton-brick-links-past-and-future.html?ref=topics](http://www.nytimes.com/1997/06/28/world/in-vietnam-hanoi-hilton-brick-links-past-and-future.html?ref=topics).

49 William J. Clinton, "Remarks at National University in Hanoi, Vietnam," November 17, 2000: [www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-vietnam-national-university-hanoi-vietnam](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-vietnam-national-university-hanoi-vietnam).

struggle in its war against the French from 1945 to 1954, and how it was misunderstood by American leaders focused on the European aspects of the Cold War. However that may be, or may have been, now both sides appeared to be tip-toeing around, looking for allies in growing apprehension about China's new assertiveness in the seas around Vietnam and on the world stage.<sup>50</sup>

A military alliance was still far off, but the momentum for closer Vietnamese–American relations gained speed after 9/11, even as anxiety about the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns emerged. The Vietnam syndrome or specter had always been about bad experiences in fighting wars of empire, whatever Americans wished to call the “New World Order,” the “Unipolar Moment,” “American Exceptionalism,” or, as Madeleine Albright put it, the “Indispensable Nation.”

### America's New Longest War

Fear of a new Vietnam War actually predated the aftermath of 9/11, when the United States launched attacks on the Taliban in Afghanistan and then moved on with “Shock and Awe” to remove Saddam Hussein's supposed weapons of mass destruction and the regime itself. There had long been an effort by policymakers to build a consensus for military action against the dictator. Secretary of State Albright found herself outflanked at one point by protestors as she began a speech at Ohio State University on February 18, 1998 who chanted, “One, two, three, four, we don't want your racist war.” Change one word in that chant (“fucking” for “racist”) and you have the most famous (or notorious) chant of the Vietnam era. The change of word here opposed a Second Gulf War – after the one, of course, where George H. W. Bush had buried the specter forever. But unlike the original chant, which expressed frustration, not moral judgment, this new one did not anticipate America's new longest war to come.<sup>51</sup>

Albright put a good face on the situation. She told an interviewer that despite the protestors in the audience of 6,000,

there are more Americans who really like us to go in and finish off Saddam Hussein. That was the message that I got from that meeting. ... [I]f we have

50 See, for example, Jane Perlez, “Why Might Vietnam Let US Military Return? China,” *New York Times*, May 29, 2016: [www.nytimes.com/2016/05/20/world/asia/access-to-bay-adds-enticement-as-us-weighs-lifting-vietnam-embargo.html?searchResultPosition=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/20/world/asia/access-to-bay-adds-enticement-as-us-weighs-lifting-vietnam-embargo.html?searchResultPosition=1).

51 CNN, “US Policy on Iraq Draws Fire in Ohio,” February 18, 1998: <http://edition.cnn.com/WORLD/9802/18/town.meeting.folo/>.

to use force, it is because we are America; we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future, and we see here the danger here to all of us.<sup>52</sup>

But not everyone agreed that American policymakers could see far enough into the future to avoid another Vietnam. Within weeks of the first attacks on Taliban strongholds after 9/11, a newspaper column by R. W. Apple stirred concern even in the Oval Office, where President George W. Bush already had Saddam Hussein marked down as next on the list of “must do’s” to make the twenty-first-century world “Safe for Democracy.”<sup>53</sup> Apple wrote, “Could Afghanistan become another Vietnam? Is the United States facing another stalemate on the other side of the world? Premature the questions may be. ... Unreasonable they are not, given the scars scoured into the national psyche by defeat in Southeast Asia.”<sup>54</sup>

Apple’s article was discussed in Bush’s war cabinet, with the president expressing pique about media complaints. “They don’t get it. How many times do you have to tell them it’s going to be a different type of war? And they don’t believe it.” Some CIA officers thought the bombing might have been enough and that a pause might be desirable for negotiations with “moderate Taliban.” Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld scotched that idea, but in doing so could not avoid bringing up Vietnam. There were not going to be any bombing pauses, especially for some kind of negotiations. “Period. Bombing pauses smacked of Vietnam. No way.”<sup>55</sup>

Seven years later, the war in Afghanistan continued. Saddam Hussein had been disposed of, but Iraq’s future was far from being assured as Barack Obama campaigned against John McCain, another former POW in Hanoi, promising an end to the mindset that had produced another quagmire. Months after his election, however, near the end of 2009, Obama settled an embarrassing near-public debate inside his administration fueled by newspaper leaks by announcing he was sending an additional 30,000 American troops to Afghanistan with a mission to bolster and train local forces. These troops

52 “Interview on NBC-TV ‘The Today Show’ with Matt Lauer,” February 19, 1998: <https://1997-2001.state.gov/www/statements/1998/980219a.html>.

53 For a discussion of how the Bush administration sought to update Woodrow Wilson’s rallying cry, see Lloyd C. Gardner, *The Long Road to Baghdad: A History of US Foreign Policy from the 1970s to the Present* (New York, 2008), 138–41.

54 Apple, “A Nation Challenged: News Analysis; A Military Quagmire Remembered: Afghanistan as Vietnam,” *New York Times*, October 31, 2001: [www.nytimes.com/2001/10/31/world/nation-challenged-analysis-military-quagmire-remembered-afghanistan-vietnam.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/31/world/nation-challenged-analysis-military-quagmire-remembered-afghanistan-vietnam.html).

55 Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York, 2002), 278–9, 187.

would be there for a strictly limited time, he announced in a speech at West Point to a new generation of army officers, and the drawdown would begin in 2011. This half-way commitment brought a chorus of opposition from those who thought the “lessons” of Vietnam were being ignored. Guerrilla warfare student David Kilcullen said Obama’s deadline was “a recipe for *Điện Biên Phủ* in the Hindu Kush.” General Stanley McChrystal, the commander in Afghanistan, warned even more ominously that the only alternative to sending more troops to that country was the dreaded “helicopter on the roof,” remembered as the last shameful retreat of the Vietnam War.<sup>56</sup>

Career diplomat Richard Holbrooke, whose service began in Vietnam, was called to duty again as President Obama made these decisions. His view also was that the deadline was self-defeating, as it removed any incentive for the Taliban to negotiate. But the real problem was that the military still clung to outdated beliefs in Counter-Insurgency (COIN). It was, he wrote in a memo for Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, “something out of the past which, where it succeeded, was primarily a colonial concept that involved a great deal of coercive force.” It also signaled that the military still had control of the decision-making process because they were, in effect, grading themselves.<sup>57</sup>

American troop levels came down, and US Special Forces killed the architect of the 9/11 attack, Osama bin Laden. Obama sat through the tense hours as the SEAL team broke into bin Laden’s unfortified sanctuary and safely exited with his body. It was then buried at sea, and perhaps with it at last the specter of Vietnam. But the war goes on, only now one reminder of the Vietnam War was discontinued: body counts of supposed enemy dead. It had been started up again after Donald Trump became president to rally White House support for America’s new longest war. The practice was abruptly stopped after newspaper inquiries. And for good reason: “The body counts served as a grisly contrast to other metrics that paint a grimmer reality of the war effort – including high attrition rates in the Afghan military and the loss of territory to Taliban militants.”<sup>58</sup> Defense Secretary James Mattis had wanted the practice ended months earlier. “You all know of the corrosive

56 Lloyd C. Gardner, *Killing Machine: The American Presidency in the Age of Drone Warfare* (New York, 2013), 64.

57 Ronan Farrow, *War on Peace: The End of Diplomacy and the Decline of American Influence* (New York, 2018), 117–20.

58 Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “US Retreats on Publicizing Body Count of Militants Killed in Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, September 20, 2018: [www.nytimes.com/2018/09/20/us/politics/military-body-count-afghanistan.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/20/us/politics/military-body-count-afghanistan.html).

effect of that sort of metric back in the Vietnam War,” he told journalists after declining to release the estimated numbers of Islamic State (ISIS) fighters in a bombing raid. “It’s something that has stayed with us all these years.”<sup>59</sup>

In August 2021, the end of the American presence in Afghanistan came about swiftly, and the Afghan government collapsed much more rapidly than many American military and political leaders expected. Donald Trump had instructed Secretary of Defense James Mattis to reduce US troop strength by half in December 2018; at the same time he also ordered the withdrawal of all troops from Syria. Trump, having an aversion to military commitments, still left it to his successor, Joe Biden, to pull the plug and execute the final withdrawal. Biden did just that in the spring and summer of 2021. The August withdrawal was widely covered by the media, and the images did not reflect well on the administration.

The Wilson Center offered an early assessment of the US departure in November 2021. James Jeffrey, chair of the Middle East Program at the Center and a former ambassador to Iraq, brought up the comparison with Vietnam: “This is a failure, first of all. It’s the biggest failure that Washington has seen since Vietnam.”<sup>60</sup> Not so surprisingly, Jeffrey went from 1975 to 2021, all the while completely bypassing the 9/11 attack and the botched invasion of Iraq in 2003 as other possible examples of American failures. Over at the Atlantic Council, Daniel Fried, the former National Security Council (NSC) senior director and former ambassador to Poland, also brought up Vietnam, but his was a more optimistic take on the situation. “History confounds expectations, especially those made in the immediate aftermath of major events. Who believed in 1975 when the US withdrew from Saigon that, years later, Vietnam would welcome the US vice president, seeking American support against a potentially aggressive China?”<sup>61</sup> Those years Fried referred to were actually two decades, and they happened after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, Vietnam’s chief international and economic lifeline of support. And of course, Fried never discussed how the Taliban leaders of 2021 might constitute a different set of governing and diplomatic challenges from those the Vietnamese Workers’ Party (VWP) did in 1975.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Hindsight Up Front: Wilson Center, “Implications of Afghanistan Withdrawal for the Middle East,” November 2, 2021: [www.wilsoncenter.org/event/hindsight-front-implications-afghanistan-withdrawal-middle-east](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/hindsight-front-implications-afghanistan-withdrawal-middle-east).

<sup>61</sup> Atlantic Council, “Experts React: The US Withdrawal from Afghanistan Is Complete. What’s Next?” August 30, 2021: [www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/experts-react-the-us-withdrawal-from-afghanistan-is-complete-whats-next/](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/experts-react-the-us-withdrawal-from-afghanistan-is-complete-whats-next/).

## Conclusion

Forty-six years after the United States fled South Vietnam and the South Vietnamese who had worked alongside Americans for so many years, the scenes from Kabul airport were, yet again, heartbreaking. Thousands sought to board the last remaining flights, pressing against fences and rushing planes trying to taxi for takeoff. Writing for the Associated Press, Zeke Miller, Jonathan Lemire, and Josh Boak invoked “setbacks of past presidents such as the withdrawal from Vietnam and the botched Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba.” How the latter pertained to the Afghan situation in 2021, the authors never explained; nor were there any obvious parallels – but Vietnam in 1975? That was readily and frequently invoked. As the trio wrote, the images from Kabul “rivalled anything witnessed in Saigon. Thousands of Afghan citizens, many of whom worked as translators and other aides to American troops.”<sup>62</sup>

John Rash (of the Rash Report) got directly to the point: “About 2,800 miles [4,500 kilometers] separate Kabul from Saigon (now Hồ Chí Minh City). And 46 years separate the fall of Saigon to North Vietnamese forces from the threat Kabul faces today from the Taliban. But the perilous parallels between the two long, lost wars are unmistakable.”<sup>63</sup> As if his words were not forceful enough, Rash’s commentary appeared juxtaposed with the iconic picture of South Vietnamese fleeing to an American Huey helicopter atop a Saigon building, which had become the symbol of the American fiasco in Southeast Asia. Everything old was new again.

It was perhaps most fitting that the *USA TODAY* editorial board member Thuan Le Elston, herself a self-described refugee from South Vietnam because of her father’s cooperation and work with Americans, asserted that South Vietnamese refugees in the United States were having a terrible time watching the images from Kabul, “not wanting to relive our fall of Saigon nearly five decades ago.” Kabul became the Saigon of the twenty-first century.<sup>64</sup>

Kabul was, of course, not Saigon, but the fact that Saigon immediately came to the mind of many commentators speaks to the power that the

62 Zeke Miller, Jonathan Lemire, and Josh Boak, “Unwavering Biden Is Face of Disorderly Afghan Evacuation,” Associated Press, *The Spokesman-Review* (Spokane, Washington), A9.

63 John Rash (Rash Report), “In Kabul, Shadows of Saigon,” *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis), A7.

64 Thuan Le Elston, *USA TODAY* editorial board, August 22, 2021, in *Florida Today* (Cocoa, FL), wrote under the headline: “Kabul, Saigon: Their Horror Was Our Horror.”

## The Specter of Vietnam

American involvement in Vietnam has had and how the impact it continues to have on the consciousness of many Americans infects much political and cultural commentary. Vietnam is not going away. Vietnam, itself, is much more than the American involvement and the war, but, from the American perspective, Vietnam remains as resonant as ever.