Aftermath of Defeat:
The Enduring Costs of the Vietnam War

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In the fall of 1945 the United States emerged for the second time in less than three decades from a global conflict that had immensely increased its economic productivity, prosperity, and military and political power. With the partial exception of Japan, which also increased both its economic and political standing in the First World War, America alone of the "great powers" was a major beneficiary of both of the most calamitous wars in human history — ironically partly because of its belated entry into combat in both conflicts. While the other major adversaries in both wars, particularly the second, suffered previously unimaginable military and civilian casualties and endured devastating assaults on their cities, infrastructure, manufacturing capacity and civilian populations, the United States managed to contain the devastation of both wars well beyond its national borders. It also gained immensely from the prodigious amounts of food, manufactured goods and war materials it provided for its soon to be allies, extended the effective reach of its bureaucracy, and greatly enhanced the size and sophistication of its own military establishment. Although America's nearly 30,000 combat deaths in the Second World War vastly exceeded those of all of the nation's previous *external* wars,[1] they paled in comparison to the military and civilian casualties suffered by the other major combatants in the war. It has been estimated, for example, that United States losses were only 2.5% of those of its Soviet ally. Comparable differences in levels of magnitude have been documented for both the other great powers engaged, including Germany, Japan, China and Great Britain, and proportionate to the population for smaller countries, such as Poland and Yugoslavia, drawn into the conflict.[2]

As had been the case in World War I, American industrial production soared in the second global conflagration even before the United States' entry due to lend-lease programs negotiated with the British and Chinese — and after Germany's ill-advised declaration of war on the U.S. — the Soviet Union. Already an impressive 42% of the world's total in 1939, America's manufacturing advantages were greatly increased by the nation's impunity from massed aerial bombardment and clashing armies. By 1941, the United States produced more steel, aluminum, oil and motorized vehicles than all of the other combatant nations combined. By war's end the U.S. merchant marine made up two-thirds of the global total, and the size and firepower of the American navy exceeded those of all of the other war fleets.[3] Though the

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1) U.S. Department of Justice estimates, www.pbs.org/greatwar/resources/casdeath_pop.html.

2) These comparisons are based on the totals and percentages cited by Gerhard Weinberg in *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 894.

3) Michael Adas, *Dominance by Design: Technological Imperatives and America's Civilizing Mission* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 221-23.

Soviet Union's land forces were significantly larger than and as mechanized as those of the United States, the latter possessed a monopoly — albeit short-lived — of nuclear weapons and superior naval and transcontinental air forces capable of deploying them. In contrast to the aftermath of the First World War, after the second the United States retained and subsequently greatly enhanced the outsized military forces it had marshaled to defeat the Axis powers. Driven in large part by its growing rivalry with the Soviet Union, America's accelerated military mobilization was made possible by its prodigious economic growth in the war years. It has been estimated that by 1945, Americans, who then made up only 7% of the world's population, controlled more wealth than all the rest of humanity.[4]

The unprecedented extent of America's global dominance in the late 1940s was, of course, challenged from the outset of the cold war by its erstwhile ally, the Soviet Union. The Soviet challenge was primarily military and strategic and centered on its disconcertingly rapid development of nuclear weaponry and satellite technologies. But America's hegemonic stature has been more fundamentally eroded in the longer term by the equally swift recovery of the former Axis powers, Japan and Germany, abetted by U.S. supported post-war reconstruction programs.[5] Competition from its former enemies and America's wartime allies has steadily diminished its economic advantages and reduced on occasion its political and military sway. Until the early 1960s America's decline was relative and predictable. But, despite its growing economic and military advantages vis-á-vis the Soviet Union, over the course of the next decade the United States entered a period of absolute decline. In my view the most pivotal constellation of forces responsible for this somewhat erratic downward trajectory in the half-century since America's economic and political supremacy peaked in the aftermath of World War II can be linked in varying ways to its misbegotten and deeply flawed interventions in Vietnam.

In order to understand the critical ways in which the U.S. debacle in Vietnam have contributed to the decline of America as a global hegemon, we need to focus on even more fundamental and enduring causal factors than the personal and political motivations that shaped the decisions of presidents and their advisors – both military and civilian. Though policy formulation and military strategy have been the main focus of the seemingly endless and often heated debates relating the massive and prolonged conflict that resulted, we need to look beyond the rationales policymakers assessed in private and offered in public to win the support of the American citizenry. A full reckoning of the price America has paid —

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[4] Richard Polenberg, *War and Society: The United* States*, 1941-1945* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972), 241-42.

[5] On Japanese and German postwar political and socio-economic recovery, see respectively John Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999); Mikiso Hane, *Eastern Phoenix: Japan Since 1945* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996); and Hanna Schissler, *The Miracle Years: A Cultural History of West Germany, 1949-1968* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Volker Berghahn, *Modern Germany: Society, Economy, and Politics in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

and continues to pay — for a misguided war of its own choosing must take into account the underlying and enduring assumptions about U.S. power and the nation's self-appointed world mission that informed escalating commitments to a government and state in southern Vietnam that was engineered in significant ways and sustained for two decades by a successive presidential administrations, in country advisors, and American military forces. In reckoning the wages of America's intervention, the far more catastrophic consequences of that failed enterprise for the peoples and environment of Vietnam should also be foregrounded despite their neglect in most of the works devoted to the American phase of the Vietnamese wars for independence.

Remarkably little attention has been given to the manner in which nation-building projects in Vietnam were informed by post-World War II analogies. But the widely-accepted success of American occupation policies in Japan and Germany both fed the can-do confidence with which American policymakers approached the post-Geneva challenge of fashioning an anti-communist nation south of the thirtieth parallel and shaped the specific projects implemented in large part to thwart the advance of the Democratic Republic of (North) Vietnam.[6)] Extending the propensity of many cold war analysts, perhaps most notably W. W. Rostow[7)] who saw developing societies as more or less interchangeable, Vietnam planners (including Rostow) assumed that the nation-building precedents set during the American occupations of Germany and Japan could be applied to Vietnam. But because the analogies were flawed and profoundly misleading, the policy formulations influenced by them usually abetted the coming debacle in Vietnam. Perhaps the most salient parallel between occupation policies in Japan and Germany and nation-building in South Vietnam was the fact all three societies had been ravaged by warfare. By contrast with Germany and Japan, whose defeat had meant both infrastructural devastation, social breakdown and political subjugation, however, the Vietnamese had emerged victorious in their conflict with the French and in the Viet Minh they had found both determined and astute political leadership and a military force capable of defending their emerging nation. More fundamentally, there was little basis in the history of Vietnam for comparisons that would suggest that approaches to postwar reconstruction similar to those implemented in Germany or Japan would prove viable successful.

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6) Though he does not link them to the successes of the post-1945 occupations, James C. Carter's *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1954-1968* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008) provides the fullest treatment of the impact of American initiatives to shore up the Diem and subsequent military regimes. For an overview of the more general and longer term impact of post-World War II occupation analogies, see Michael Adas, "Fatal Ambiguities: Cold War Rivalries, American Pro-Democracy Rhetoric, and Nation-Building in the Developing World," in Takashi Kato ed., *Democracy and Nationalism: Asia and the West*（デモクラシーとナショナリズム：アジアと欧米）(Tokyo: Mirai sha, 2011), 67-90.

7) Rostow, *Politics and the Stages of Growth* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 26, 29-30; and *The Stages of Economic Growth: Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 4, 6-7 & chapter 3.

Although a very persuasive case can be made for the existence of a strong sense of something approaching national identity in pre-modern China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam, the latter had been politically divided until the 18th century and in the century before the American intervention had been colonized by both France and (briefly) the Japanese. Although Vietnamese nationalism had surged from the early decades of resistance to French colonial rule in the beginning of the twentieth century, its revival gave rise to a proliferation of political parties, sectarian movements and regional divisions.[8) The struggle against the French established the communist-dominated Viet Minh as the standard bearer of the Vietnamese national cause, which was affirmed by the humiliating defeat of French forces at Dien Binh Phu in 1954. But the division of Vietnam at the 17th parallel that was negotiated in that same year at the Geneva Peace Conference, though intended to be temporary, stymied the Viet Minh's efforts to create a united nation and left the southern half of the country politically fragmented and vulnerable to outside intervention.[9) Thus, what U.S. planners perceived as a vacuum in South Vietnam provided — at least in their view — the potential to establish the sort of democratic, market-friendly and West-oriented polity that would not only prove to be a bulwark against the spread of communism but a pliable ally in the contest for global hegemony with the Soviet Union. They were confident that they had the same sort of tabula rasa that McArthur had as proconsul in occupied Japan, which had made it possible to write a constitution and determine the balance between branches of government. American advisors would also oversee the formation of police and military forces, plan and finance development projects, and insure essential socioeconomic reforms were implemented.[10)

The relative ease with which the choice of prominent American advocates, from Mike Mansfield and Hubert Humphrey to Cardinal Spellman, were able to install Ngo Dinh Diem as president of the newly-minted state of South Vietnam appeared to confirm for planners in both the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations that their presumption that they could determine the nature and historical trajectory of the fabricated nation was correct. But from the outset, Diem, who was a good deal more willful and impervious to American advice than any of his U.S. supporters could imagine, sought to build an autocratic regime in the South that favored his own relatives and the newly arrived Catholic minority. Diem's unrelenting pursuit

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8) The more informative accounts of these processes include, David Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism 1885-1925* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971); William J. Duiker, *The Rise of Nationalism in Vietnam, 1900-1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976); and Jean Chesneaux, *et. al.*, *Tradition et Révolution au Vietnam* (Paris: Editions Anthropos, 1971).

9) Jules Roy, *The Battle of Dienbienphu* (New York: Carroll and Graft, 1984); Alain Rusico, *La Guerre Française D'Indochine* (Brussels: Editions Complexe, 1992); Fredrik Logeval, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2012); and Jean Lacouture, *Vietnam Between Two Truces* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1966).

10) See especially, Carter, *Inventing Vietnam*, chapters 2-4; and Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and "Nation Building" in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), chapter 5.

of his own agenda not only gives credence to recent scholarship that seeks to foreground Vietnamese agency despite American efforts to dominate the process of nation-building in South Vietnam,[11] it underscores the contrasts between the situations that confronted American proconsuls in Japan and Germany and American ambassadors and advisors in Vietnam. Neither defeat nor unconditional surrender hamstrung Vietnamese leaders, North or South. In contrast to Japan and Germany, Vietnam had never been a nation in the Western sense of the term. Nor had its peoples known a functioning parliamentary democracy, a highly developed, indigenous commercial sector or a significant merchant marine. French repression had effectively curtailed the emergence of a civil society that could serve to counterbalance either the communist regime in the North or Diem's dictatorship in the South. Over a decade of war to put an end to colonial rule had destroyed much of the modern infrastructure introduced by the French, which in any case was oriented overwhelmingly to extraction of primary products for export and expatriate and metropole merchants' profit.[12] In contrast to prewar Germany and Japan, a broadly educated citizenry with skills appropriate for industrial development did not emerged in Vietnam under French rule, and with the exception of French enterprises, including mining and plantation production, neither an industrial sector with advanced research facilities nor Vietnam-based corporate institutions were established.

These and other legacies of the colonial era meant that Vietnam — South and North — had few of the human and material assets that facilitated the postwar recovery of Japan and Germany. They also made it highly likely that Rostow's capitalist stage sequence, which was patterned on the Anglo-American path to industrialization and modernity, would have at best marginal relevance for the political and socioeconomic development of South Vietnam. Nonetheless, Rostow's version of modernization theory was touted (explicitly set forth in the title of his *Stages of Growth*) by perhaps a majority of American academics, development specialists and government policy makers as the most potent ideological foil against Marxist dialectic materialism.[13] Armed with Rostow's universalized imperatives, social scientists in the bourgeoning array of think tanks (most critically the Center for International Studies at MIT), which in important ways defined the 1950s and 1960s intellectually, tirelessly debated and sought to distill the practical applications of Rostow's formulations. American military and civilian planners and development specialists then sought to apply their findings in their efforts to "win" the allegiance and acquiescence of Diem and his cronies and political allies and the "hearts and minds' of the largely peasant population of South Vietnam. Rostow and other "mandarins" of modernization theory contrasted the successes, as measured by economic

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11) See especially, Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

12) The most complete accounting remains Charles Robequain, *L'évolution économique de l'Indochine Française* (Paris: Centre d'êtudes de politique étrangère, 1939), and for the French empire more generally, see Jacques Marseille, *Empire colonial et capitalisme français* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1984)

13) Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2003).

growth and standards of living, of the United States and other democracies (Rostow's favorite in the developing world was India) with the massive poverty and material backwardness of the Soviet Union and The Peoples' Republic of China. Bolstered by a consensus assumption of America's indisputable supremacy in technological innovation and scientific breakthroughs, and a closely related faith in techno-scientific solutions to all manner of human challenges, they set out to build a nation that could serve as an exemplar of the superiority of consumerist-capitalist democracy for all of the emerging nations of the contested postcolonial world.[14)]

The overweening confidence of American advisors that they could readily engineer South Vietnam's polity and society in ways that suited U.S. interests was made possible in large part by their appalling ignorance of Vietnamese history and culture. Their refusal to take seriously the nature and objectives of both their adversaries and putative allies obscured fundamental dimensions of Vietnamese society and past and current responses to foreign domination that rendered analogies to postwar Japan and Germany misleading at best. At the highest levels of decision-making, ignorance made it possible for social scientists — most crucially Rostow — to apply abstract social science paradigms based on Western examples, and numbers crunchers — most infamously McNamara — to deploy computer data to both gauge probabilities and predicted outcomes of American military responses and silence presidential confidants — most valiantly George Ball — who dared challenged their projections and assessments. Perhaps most disconcerting was the willfulness of the American refusal to take 2000 years of Vietnamese history seriously. The very choice of Vietnam as the place to make a definitive stand against the spread of communism in the postcolonial world apparently took little or no account of a the centuries-long history of determined Vietnamese resistance and ultimately successful efforts to put an end to Chinese rule. It was also clearly grounded in the false assumption that the arbitrary, post-Geneva, North-South division of the country was based on longstanding and intractable regional hostilities among the ethnic Vietnamese. This conviction reflected a costly misreading of the nature and course of the nationalist movement and the sources of the appeal of Ho Chi Minh and the communist-dominated Viet Minh Front. These misconceptions were in turn part of a larger misconstrued Manichean vision of communism as a monolithic and coordinated global threat. As Robert McNamara had the courage to admit — albeit decades after the ill-fated U.S. intervention had ended in defeat — in attempting to explain the rationales for a misguided war: "We clearly lacked the understanding of Vietnamese history and culture that would have prevented us from believing that they would reverse course as a function of being 'punished' by U.S. power."[15)]

[14)] Rostow, *Stages of Growth*, 8-9, 22; "Technology and the Economic Theorist: Past, Present and Future," in Rostow, *History, Policy and Economic Theory* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), 317-54; and "Development: Some Lessons," 427, 429-30; Joseph Kahl, *The Measurement of Modernity* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1968; and Adas, *Dominance by Design*, chapter 5.

[15)] McNamara quote from *Argument without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy* (New York: Public Affairs Press, 1999), 304; Adas, *Dominance by Design*, 296-300.

The post-intervention claims of McNamara and many of the other architects of the U.S. debacle that little was known about Vietnam's past were belied by the wealth of serious scholarship and professional reporting available in the decades when American involvement was steadily escalating. But then, many and often the best of these works were in French, which even the elite educated advisors of successive presidents apparently had not bothered to learn or at least continued to read. Particularly on the military side of Vietnamese resistance to foreign invasion and their recent history of local resistance and nationalist guerrilla war for independence, this neglect would prove lethal. The often impatient dismissal of French warnings against American intervention and efforts to provide military advice was perhaps predictable in view of France's recent defeats in the Second World War and Indochina. But distain for French pessimism was also triggered by the growing confidence of U.S. military advisers that deterring a communist takeover in Vietnam would yield tactics and an overall strategy for defeating agrarian-based guerrilla warfare in the predominantly peasant societies of the "developing world." Nikita Khrushchev's call in January 1961 for revolutionary movements based on guerrilla insurgencies as a way to break through the nuclear standoff that had stalemated the cold war gave added urgency to the Kennedy administration's exploration of counterinsurgent responses. Kennedy's personal commitment, and at times direct involvement, in developing special counterinsurgent forces was significantly intensified by the very real prospect of a nuclear exchange between the Soviet and American superpowers during the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962. Prompted by McNamara, he had already decided to shift American defense policy away from the reliance on massive nuclear retaliation that was the centerpiece of the New Look of the Eisenhower era. Despite the enthusiasm of JFK and his inner circle of advisors, from the outset the U.S. military fought a high tech, conventional war of attrition in Vietnam, best exemplified by the fact that the first officer put in change of counter-insurgency operations in country, knew nothing about guerrilla warfare.[16)]

America's misguided intervention in Vietnam was the product of a treacherous mix of can-do hubris, ignorance, unquestioned confidence that America's vastly superior science and technology could overcome any obstacles, and absolute certainty that America's unparalleled military might quickly bring the leaders of North Vietnam, which Henry Kissinger once dismissed as "fourth-rate power," to the bargaining table. As Hans Morgenthau perceptively observed, Americans had come by the mid-twentieth century to equate technological achievements and material increase with "national virtue" and "moral superiority."[17)] As they had for centuries, America's leaders proclaimed, and the great majority of the citizenry assumed, that they belonged to a nation with a divinely-ordained mission that encompassed the rest of humanity. The cold war struggle against the tyranny of communism was part of a greater teleological continuum in which the United States had long been the chief repository,

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16) David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1972), 94-6, 121-24, 242, 268-70, 273-76.

17) In "The Pathology of Power" *American Perspective* 4 (Winter, 1950), 9.

defender and propagator of democracy, human freedoms and capitalism. Thus, the war in Vietnam was subsumed into a longer and more enduring global mission that would require the sacrifice of tens of thousands of American lives and millions of Vietnamese soldiers and civilians.

Compared to the losses of other great powers in major modern conflicts, with the exception of the internecine slaughter of the U.S. Civil War and its multi-front commitments in World War II America's wartime casualties have been remarkably low. This discrepancy owes much to what one historian has aptly called the "American way of war,"[18] which is reliant on massive firepower delivered by a daunting array of advanced weaponry. That advantage went far to bolster the certitude of American leaders that deploying even a limited range of the superpower's unprecedented military arsenal would make for a quick and decisive victory against what Henry Kissinger dismissed as a "third-class Communist peasant state."[19] Over half a decade of escalating American military operations, ending in the hasty withdrawal of U.S. personnel and soon afterward the collapse of the Saigon regime, made a mockery of these expectations. North Vietnam's refusal to yield despite the massive U.S. onslaught as well as widespread domestic opposition to a conflict that was increasingly seen as an unnecessary, if not immoral, war of choice magnified the sense of the futility of the loss of over 58,000 American dead and 153,000 wounded and missing in action.[20] Polls taken in the late 1960's, as American engagement in Vietnam peaked, indicated that a majority of the U.S. citizenry thought the war a "tragic mistake" if not "wrong and immoral." By 1982, those who expressed a similar assessment had reached 72 percent.[21]

Although rarely taken into account in the contentious exchanges between critics of the war and the "revisionists" who defend it as a noble cause in the national interest, the toll of Vietnamese dead and wounded — both North and South — was several levels of magnitude greater. Estimates of the casualties inflicted on the people of Vietnam by the high tech, massive firepower offensives launched in both theatres during the American phase of the wars of liberation range from early Department of Defense estimates of 1.2 million to the official 1995 Vietnamese Government total of more than 3 million. All estimates concur that a substantial majority of the dead and wounded on both sides of the 17th parallel were civilians, and four out of ten of those killed or maimed were children under the age of

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[18] Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973).

[19] William Shawcross, *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 87.

[20] Although American casualty statistics vary somewhat, those provided by the United States Department of Justice and the U.S. Veteran's compilations are in close agreement.

[21] Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, *American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Relations, 1983* (Chicago: C.C.F.R., 1983), 29.

fourteen.[22] The obliteration of the military-civilian divide was paralleled by a sustained assault on the infrastructure, cities and towns, and the very environment of both North and South Vietnam. Defoliants and herbicides, most infamously agent orange, made wastelands of over a quarter of South Vietnam's mangrove wetlands, rain forests, plantations and rice paddies. Napalm incinerated villages, peasants and wildlife, and reduced great swaths of timberland and Vietnam's bourgeoning logging industry to smoking ruins. Tens of thousands of hectares of fertile farmland, pockmarked with craters from carpet bombing, became breeding grounds for malarial mosquitos, and rats thrived and rabies spread from the mountains of garbage spawned by the military bases of the American occupiers and the Army of the Republic of South Vietnam.[23] Though most Americans are (and were) oblivious to this devastation, its legacy persists in toxic wastelands, unexploded bombs and mines, maimed bodies, severe defects in newborn children, and cancer-ridden adults.[24] It embodies the prodigious human suffering that has been in many ways the supreme price that the Vietnamese people have paid for the American invasion and occupation of their homeland.

The cruel irony of the pervasive destruction wrought in South Vietnam, which was an inevitable by-product of the American crusade to save it from communist tyranny, has seldom been noted by even the most vocal critics of the U.S. intervention. Nor has a full accounting of the material losses inflicted by America's high tech assault on both South and North Vietnam, insofar as I am aware, been attempted. At the very least it has never been made available to the U.S. citizenry. By contrast, estimates of the monetary costs to America have proliferated and varied considerably. The most recent estimate, which accounts for inflation, totaled 738 billion dollars (Constant FY2011$). But none of the estimates have or have even sought to factor in the very substantial domestic costs of the war in terms of policing and the destruction that accompanied urban riots and chronic demonstrations that were directly linked to the war.[25]

If the economic fallout from the war is more broadly construed, the surge in military spending that the war precipitated contributed in major ways to the decline of the United States as an industrial superpower. Although post-World War II competition with the Soviet Union was the major source of growth in military spending, and its impact increased rather dramatically as the cold war arms race heated up, the massive military commitment to the Vietnam conflict and the ever-more ambitious (but largely failed) nation-building initiatives

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22) William F. Pepper, "The Children of Vietnam," in Barry Weisberg, ed., *Ecocide in Indochina: The Ecology of War* (San Francisco: Canfield Press, 1970), 100-101. The fullest account of the American war against the Vietnamese civilian population can be found in Nick Turse's *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* (New York: Henry Holt, 2013).

23) The classic exposés of these criminal assaults on the land and people of Vietnam are John Lewallen, *Ecology of Devastation: Vietnam* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1971) and the essays in J. B. Nielands *et.al.*, *Not Since the Romans Salted the Land* (Ithaca: Glad Day, 1970).

24) Peter Korn, "The Persisting Poison," *The Nation* April 8, 1991, 440-45; and Chris Gilson, "The Deadly Legacy of the War in Vietnam," *America*, June 3-10 (2000), 9-10.

25) Stephen Dagett, *Costs of Major U.S. Wars* Congressional Research Service, June 29, 2010.

successive administrations launched in Indochina also contributed significantly to the accelerated rise of military spending from the 1960s onward. The spiraling costs of America's military during and after the Vietnam conflict fed major increases in an already bloated national debt, which from the 1980s was no longer simply money Americans owed themselves but dollars whose value depended on a major influx of foreign capital investment from Japan and the oil-producing states of the Middle East. The rapid expansion of the U.S. military-industrial complex diverted vast sums of investment, technological and scientific talent, and entrepreneurial engagement from key civilian industries, including automobile manufacturing and steel production. Government and private sector funding was also channeled away from education, infrastructural improvement and maintenance, and remedial social programs.[26)]

Although the Vietnam war was obviously only one of many sources of these downward trends and the broader processes of the deindustrialization of America, it initiated a pattern of intervention aimed at policing what were viewed as "rogue" states and funding, hence controlling, the processes of nation building in what were considered dysfunctional developing societies, from Central America and Somalia to Afghanistan and Iraq. Nonetheless, in the years just after the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam it appeared that at least some of the lessons of that misbegotten intervention had been learned. The American military establishment, and in particular the Joint Chiefs of Staff, which had consistently supported each uptick in the escalation of the war in both South and North Vietnam, was in disrepute; its standing in public opinion polls at an all-time low. Congress passed a number of measures to limit presidential war powers and head off a repetition of the Tonkin Gulf fiasco. Little noticed at the time, but of equal importance, there was a conscious attempt to redirect U.S. foreign aid away from mega-scale development projects, such as dams and industrial complexes, to local, environmentally sensitive projects that involved peasants, women and community engagement. Education, health and hygiene, clean water supplies and technological inputs that in scale and application targeted local needs were privileged in Congressional foreign aid allocations and World Bank development programs (revealingly very often championed by Robert McNamara).[27)] At the same time, American military interventionism was hamstrung by what became known as the Vietnam Syndrome.

The majority consensus of public opinion in the 1970s and 1980s was that the war in Vietnam had been both a costly and failed effort to intervene in the affairs of a little understood

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[26)] Ismael Hossein-Zadeh, *The Political Economy of US Militarism* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006); Barry Bluestone and Bennet Harrison, *The Deindustrialization of America: Plant Closings, Community Abandonment and the Dismantling of Basic Industry* (New York: Basic Books, 1982); and J. Heathcott Cowie and Barry. Bluestone. *Beyond the Ruins: The Meanings of Deindustrialization* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

[27)] Nick Eberstadt, "The Perversion of Foreign Aid," *Commentary* (June, 1985), 22-27; Elliot R. and Victoria A. Morss, *Foreign Aid: An Assessment of New and Traditional Strategies* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1982) 26-27; and Deborah Shapley, *Promise and Power: The Life and Times of Robert McNamara* (Boston: Little Brown, 1993), especially 502-24.

"Third World" country. This negative assessment deterred presidents from Gerald Ford to Bill Clinton against putting "boots on the ground" in troubled regions of the postcolonial world even in situations where American nationals were at risk (as in the Pueblo Incident) or genocide was clearly underway (as in Rwanda). When America did go to war in these decades, most notably in the major war fought in Kuwait and Iraq in 1990, the Vietnam debacle was very much in the minds of President George H. W. Bush and his advisors as well as Colin Powell and other American military commanders, many of whom had served in Vietnam. The refrain of "No more Vietnams" was ubiquitous in public debate and popular protest against the war, and the Bush administration's astute building of a coalition that included Arab allies insured there would not be a repeat of the international isolation and condemnation that was so pervasive in the Vietnam era. But Bush's subsequent claim that the rout of the overmatched Iraqi forces by the United States and its allies had "kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all" was a startling non-sequitur. Rather than resort to guerrilla insurgency that had fought the U.S. military to a standoff in Vietnam, the Iraqis countered Operation Desert Storm with a conventional plan of battle that quickly revealed the obsolescence of their weapons, the rigidity of their generals, and their lack of allies and places to hide. Even in victory, however, the specter of Vietnam haunted America's civilian and military planners, as witnessed by the (wise) decision not to occupy Iraq as well as the (inexplicable) refusal to use U.S. and allied forces still in place in the region to prevent Saddam Hussein's brutal reprisals against the Shi'as in the south and Kurds in the north. With exhortation on the part of American leaders, including President Bush himself, they had supported the allies and sought to resist the return of Saddam's oppressive dictatorship.[28)]

In planning and executing the war against Iraq and its aftermath, Bush's advisers and the American military adhered to the principles of engagement first set forth by Caspar Weinberger, Ronald Reagan's Secretary of Defense and later further elaborated by Colin Powell, Bush's chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The concerns and strategic approaches enunciated by each of these exceedingly able presidential advisors, including well-defined objectives and a workable exit plan, were very clearly formulated in response to failed intervention in Vietnam. Soon after the deceptively brief first U.S.-Iraq war, the Vietnam syndrome returned in many of the post-mortems on the initially well-intended but ultimately abortive foray into what remained of the shattered state of Somalia and recurring deliberations in the Clinton administration over if, when and how to intervene in the civil war in Bosnia and the murderous ethnic strife in Rwanda.[29)] The debates surrounding Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003 and the long and costly occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan that followed revived fears

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[28)] John Carlos Rowe, "The 'Vietnam Effect' in the Persian Gulf War" C*ultural Critique* 19 (1991), 121-39; and Adas, *Dominance by Design*, 350-60.

[29)] The best appraisal of American policy in the 1990s, which returns again and again in the recurring analogies to Vietnam is David Halberstam's *War in a Time of Peace: Bush, Clinton, and the Generals* (New York: Scribner, 2001).

of another Vietnam and contested claims regarding the continuing relevance of the Vietnam syndrome.[30] Over a decade later Barak Obama's reluctance to allow the United States to become embroiled in the Syrian civil war and his determination to negotiate with Iran rather than bomb its nuclear facilities, despite intense Israeli pressure and opposition from legislators within his own party in thrall to the funding provided by the Israel lobby, owed much to his own and widespread public anxieties about America being drawn yet another quagmire. Thus, a legacy of the Vietnam syndrome that some policy analysts have seen hampering the capacity of American leaders to deploy force in support of U.S. interests overseas has from another point of view served as a deterrent to impulsive and unnecessary military aggression that rather than enhancing the nation's security has drained its human and material resources, multiplied its enemies and diminished its standing as a responsible global power.[31]

For Lyndon Johnson, General William Westmorland and other American leaders who sought to deflect blame for the failed intervention away from their deficiencies as decision makers and military commanders as well as the postwar revisionists who sought to recast the war as a noble cause, the extensive access allowed journalists and television commentators to the soldiers in combat was a major reason for the spreading demoralization of American forces in the field and the loss of support of the citizenry back home.[32] In the aftermath of the war, the military in particular was determined to curtail in future conflicts the intense media scrutiny that many commanders believed had done much to deny them victory in Vietnam. In the first of the major wars against Iraq that followed two decades later, reporters and broadcasters were ordinarily allowed only highly controlled contacts with combat units and kept far from the battlefields. News of actions at the front was conveyed mainly through carefully orchestrated sessions led by select military commanders for reporters admitted to press pools. The military planners had also found ways of channeling and censoring information fed via satellite to the U.S. and other overseas broadcast systems. Reporters, news agencies and networks vied for places in the pool sessions and opportunities to pose questions for the presiding officers. Machines rather than soldiers or support staff were featured in a sizeable portion of the war news conveyed, which suited the commercialized and highly competitive media corporations that dominated the American print media and televised news broadcasting.[33]

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[30] See, for examples, the exchange between Joseph Biden and John McCain in the June 24, 2004 issue of *The New Republic*: 14-18; Richard Lowry, "Bush's Vietnam Syndrome," *National Review* 20 (2006): 18-22.

[31] For a provocative but compelling analysis of the Syrian decision and its links to the attempt for rapprochement with Iran, see Graham E. Fuller, "Has Obama (Inadvertently) Broken the Mold in US Foreign Policy?" *New Perspectives Quarterly* 30 no. 3 (2013).

[32] For samples of these convictions in the Johnson administration, see Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961-1973* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 379, 444-45, Charges relating to the pernicious impact of the anti-war bias in the media were pervasive, especially after the 1968 Tet rising made a shambles of the "light at the end of the tunnel" cant of the war planners and supporters.

[33] These trends are explored in detail in the essays in Susan Jeffords and Lauren Rabinovitz, eds., *"Seeing*

In part due to push back from the media industry in the 1990s, in the second US-Iraq war, the military adopted a different approach to controlling war reporting. Rather than denying journalists and reporters access to the battlefield, they were embedded in combat units on patrol missions and caught up in firefights. At least in the early stages of the war and occupation, the inevitable bonding that occurred between soldiers and approved media personnel resulted in a focus on well-trained, committed warriors doing their duty in wartime coverage in the press, on television and increasingly on the worldwide web. The impact of the conflict on the Iraqi people, the widespread destruction of Operation Iraqi Freedom, and the growing resistance to British and American forces were covered, if at all, in short broadcast segments or relegated to the back pages of most newspapers. In combination with excessive commercialization, particularly on television and cable networks, an ever greater emphasis on news as entertainment and a means of conveying partisan viewpoints threatens to eviscerate the freedoms of press and speech that have long been mainsprings of the open and relatively independent civil society in which democracies thrive.

If post-Vietnam measures taken by the military to limit and channel media coverage of America's wars have already constricted basic freedoms, changes in the recruitment and composition of the nation's armed forces pose an even more fundamental threat to its democratic system. Even before the retreat from Vietnam, numerous civilian officials and especially military commanders had concluded that conscription was a major reason for both the widespread demoralization and growing dissent within the units actually fighting in Vietnam, trainees waiting to be sent into the quagmire, and youthful protesters who had become the mainstay of anti-war demonstrations across America. Although the arguments for shifting from a heavily conscripted to a volunteer army were based on a complex mixture of rationales, the Vietnam debacle was a (perhaps the) decisive factor. As Colin Powell's conviction that the advantages of an all-volunteer army had been amply demonstrated in the success of Operation Desert Storm and had proved to be a major means by which the poor and undereducated could embark on fulfilling careers and gain in social status,[34] a credible case could be made for the abolition of the draft. But the potential threats to civilian control over the military stressed by those (in many cases within the military) opposed to the all-volunteer alternative remain compelling. One was the danger that a popular commander within the military could seize control of the government, particularly in a crisis situation, with the support of armed forces that had become in effect a Praetorian Guard. Another downside to the shift, which became increasingly apparent in the first decade of the twenty-first century, was the nation's growing dependence on a small minority to bear the burden of its wars. Despite a heartening rise in popular support for wounded veterans, the end of universal male conscription

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Through the Media," The Persian Gulf War (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994) and Douglas Kellner, *The Persian Gulf TV War* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992).

[34] Venise T. Berry and Kim E. Karloff, "Perspectives on the Persian Gulf War in Popular Black Magazines, in Jeffords", *Seeing the Media*, 257-59.

has not only rendered much of the citizenry oblivious to the impact and enduring repercussions of America's military interventions overseas but also largely indifferent to plight of soldiers in combat and the drain of resources expended on America's seemingly endless "war on terror." These trends exacerbate the growing income and social divide in the United States and pose a potential threat to civilian control over both the military and the republic as a whole. [35]

As I hope the foregoing makes clear, any assessment of the long-term impact of the war in Vietnam for the United States (or for that matter for Vietnam) is bound to be a contentious exercise. The substantial corpus of revisionist works — some of them based on serious scholarly endeavor or military expertise — has challenged in ways often worth consideration the predominant postwar conclusion that it was a misguided intervention that was destined to fail. If opinion polls are an accurate gauge, a substantial majority of Americans still hold that view, and subsequent military misadventures in Iraq and Afghanistan have certainly discredited similar wars of choice rather than necessity and nation-building projects imposed on unwilling peoples with divergent histories, social configurations, political systems, and cultural norms. The extent to which the interventions in Vietnam have contributed to the relative decline of America as an economic and political superpower, despite our outsize military prowess, is equally debatable, as are the gauges and causes of that process more generally and prognostications about the inevitability or possibility of reversing the downward spiral. Nonetheless, I believe there is ample evidence to conclude that the failed mission in Vietnam, and those that followed in Iraq and Afghanistan, have forced Americans who are engaged at various levels with other peoples and nations and world affairs more broadly to question the hubris that has so often accompanied our involvement in the outside world. In view of the prodigious suffering and destruction wrought by Americans' attempts to forcibly channel the historical trajectory of very different and all too often poorly understood societies in ways not of their own choosing, it is difficult to continue to insist that our woefully inefficient form of democracy, severely frayed social welfare system, often obsolescent modes of production, and skewed distribution of wealth ought to serve as models for the rest of humanity. An impressive array of published memoirs, letters and novels written by American soldiers in Vietnam, and more recently Iraq and Afghanistan, also serve as reminders of the suffering and dislocation inflicted on Americans themselves, especially the least privileged of the nation's citizens. This sorry record of aggressive interventionism ought to compel Americans and humanity more generally to question the widely-held assumptions that scientific discoveries and technological breakthroughs are overwhelmingly beneficial and progressive, and that superlative achievements in these endeavors and the advancement of some kinds of civil rights has earned the United States the mandate to police — and civilize — the rest of the world.

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[35] Andrew J. Bacevich, *Breach of Trust: How Americans Failed Their Soldiers and Their Country* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2013).