

WHY THE VIETNAM WAR STILL MATTERS

BY JACKSON LEARS

EDITOR'S NOTE: The Vietnam War, which the United States lost after a decade of intense escalation, ended 30 years ago, on April 30, 1975 (two centuries and 11 days after the American Revolution began). The emergence of the USA as the most powerful nation in history is commemorated during this year's 60th anniversary of warfare's most dramatic event, the nuclear holocaust of two Japanese cities that ended World War 2. But the U.S. was challenged by another rising superpower, Soviet Russia which had at enormous cost — 24+ million at latest count — defeated the principal Nazi German army (May 8 is VE Day) and absorbed eastern Europe as the fulcrum of its fatally inflated empire. The upper layer Cold War that resulted precipitated hot wars in relatively obscure 3rd world regions. The Vietnam War was a sideshow that took over prime time by its duration and futility. The American government was willing to sacrifice a generation to the war. The American public was not, and ultimately prevailed though many thousands died in the interim and many more millions of lives were shattered or at least irreversibly altered by the war.

George Bush's victory in 2004 signified the triumph of lies. Some of the least examined lies involved the history of the Vietnam War. In their attacks on Kerry's antiwar dissent, Bush and his Swift Boat allies advanced a rightwing narrative of the Vietnam War — a narrative that legitimated current administration policy in Iraq. Popular acceptance of this story required widespread ignorance of what actually happened in our recent past. The diffuse but undeniable influence of the Swift Boat slanders was a symptom of the collective amnesia that threatens democratic debate in the contemporary United States.

"The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting," the Czech novelist Milan Kundera wrote. During the 20th century, control over public perceptions of the past has become an essential strategy for the maintenance of state power. Kundera opened *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* by recalling the disappearance of a Communist leader from official photographs after he had been charged with treason and hanged. Anyone who questioned the regime's legitimacy could simply be airbrushed out of history. Our postmodern media managers are subtler, but in reshaping the public memory of the Vietnam War they have accomplished something even more impressive. They have erased the experience of an entire generation.

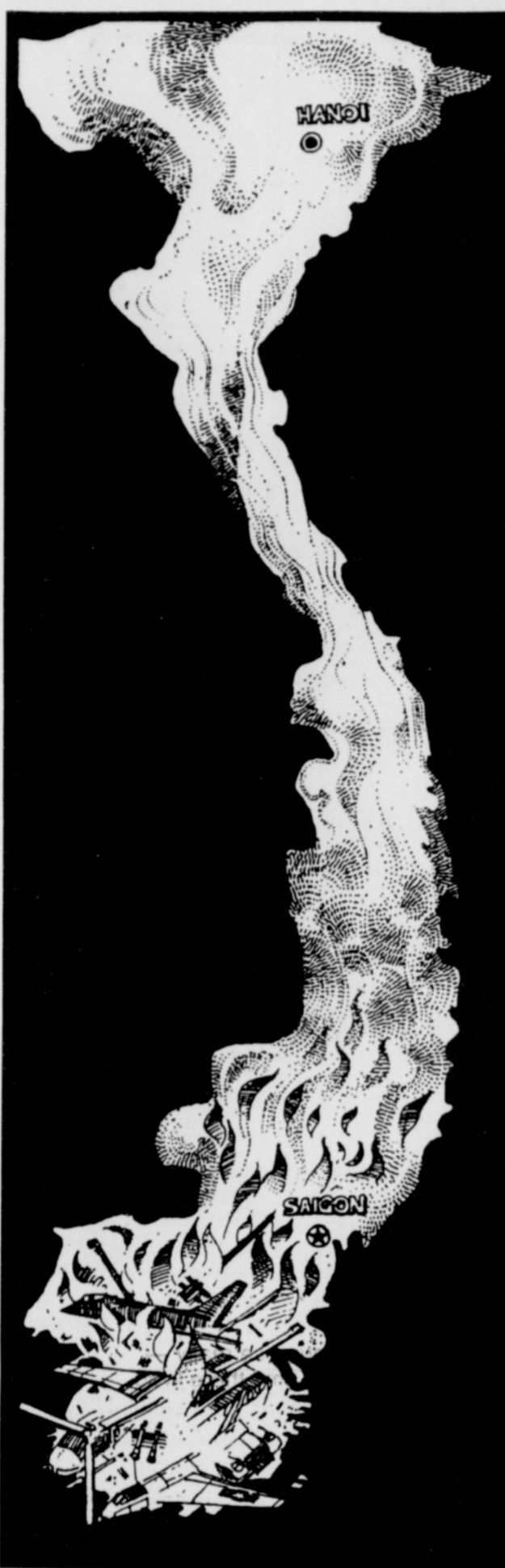
Since the rise of Ronald Reagan, rightwing journalists and intellectuals have been successfully selling a fictional explanation for American defeat in Vietnam. It is a variant of the "stab in the back" story concocted by German nationalists after their defeat in World War 1. The American mission in Vietnam, from the post-Reagan view, was a "noble cause" done in by cowardly campus radicals and their allies in the "liberal media," whose combined pressure on politicians forced the military to fight "with one hand tied behind its back." During the last 25 years, this rightist fairy tale has seeped into our popular culture — in the regularly scheduled rants of talk-radio and cable television hosts, in films from *Rambo* to *Forrest Gump*, and in the rhetoric of politicians in both parties. By the '90s, even liberals were too cowed by this bizarre account of the Vietnam War to recall the actual events of the era.

Yet for a moment in July 2004, on the last night of the Democratic Convention, it seemed as if one major party, at least, might finally be remembering the truth about the Vietnam War. In different ways, Max Cleland and John Kerry made the same larger point: Despite having volunteered for the war, many veterans came to see it as a catastrophic mistake sustained by systematic mendacity. Opposition to this war was a patriotic service. For a moment that night in July, as Cleland and Kerry recalled their commitment and disillusionment, it looked as if our politicians might finally be coming to grips with the real meanings of the American misadventure in Vietnam.

But that hopeful assumption underestimated the tenacity of the rightwing narrative as well as its centrality to contemporary Republican strategy. The Orwellian 'Swift Boat Veterans for Truth' burst onto the post-convention scene, telling big lies and sowing big doubts about Kerry's medals. In a predictable display of phony "even-handedness," the national media gave the Swift Boat charges equal time with Kerry's defense, as if lies and truth deserved an even break from a responsible press.

The Swift Boat veterans embraced the "stab in the back" story of defeat in Vietnam. They were enraged that Kerry told the truth about the Vietnam War, as he did in his testimony to Congress in 1971 when he reported the results of the Winter Soldier Investigation. At this investigation, he testified, "over 150 honorably discharged, many highly decorated veterans," acknowledged their common participation in acts that could be characterized as atrocities or even war crimes. These men courageously questioned their own conduct, and demanded to know how their government had placed them in conditions that encouraged or even required that conduct. They spoke for themselves and their comrades, those who had died as well as those who lay helpless in veterans' hospitals, forgotten by the prating politicians who publicly claimed to exalt them.

The young Kerry was clear about who was responsible for this disaster. He asked: "Where are the leaders of our country?"



MARTIN AVILLEZ

Where are they now that we, the men they sent off to war, have returned? These are the commanders who have deserted their troops.... These men have left all the casualties and retreated behind a pious shield of public rectitude."

This testimony is simply inadmissible to the sanitized story of the Vietnam War that dominates contemporary politics.

The Swift Boat Veterans professed outrage at the very notion that any Americans might have committed atrocities in Vietnam. By focusing on ordinary soldiers and leaving policymakers out of the picture, they avoided the larger meanings of that capacious word, "atrocities" — the carpet bombing, the free fire zones, the use of napalm and Agent Orange—all the government strategies sanctioned by the highest military and civilian authority. Faith in American virtue remained intact, and the erasure of collective memory was stunning. About the time of the first Presidential debate, a headline in the *Village Voice* read: "Kerry Was Right: New Evidence of Vietnam Atrocities." As if Kerry needed "new evidence" to confirm his own experience and the experience of his contemporaries! Well, apparently he did.

In contrast to the media legitimation of the Swift Boat Veterans' lies, consider the discrediting of the essentially accurate CBS report on Bush's National Guard service. The truth about Bush's service — or lack of it — disappeared beneath a fog of charges and countercharges regarding the authenticity of several letters written by Bush's commanding officer, Lt. Col. Jerry Killian. No matter that the colonel's secretary confirmed the substance of the documents (while asserting that she herself had not typed them). No matter that the former lieutenant governor of Texas, Ben Barnes, admitted publicly that he was "ashamed" of securing preferential treatment for Bush and other wealthy, well-connected young men. The letters could not be authenticated, and that became the story.

The problem here was not that Bush evaded the draft or even that he did so by benefiting from economic privilege. No one should have to apologize for avoiding that vile war by any means necessary. The problem was that his behavior epitomized the hypocrisy of the draft-dodging hawk. Like most of his administration, Bush vigorously supported the war while even more vigorously trying to evade it, and ever since his entry into Presidential politics his handlers have concealed their candidate's spotty military record while outfitting him in military costumes and posing him as a courageous commander in chief, brimming with "resolve." He became the quintessential post-modern patriot, for whom the appearance of bravery is more important than the actuality.

The acquiescence of the national media allowed this pose to work. The draft-dodging hawks embodied heroic leadership, while Bush's opponent was "perceived" (we were told) as indecisive and weak — this man who courageously volunteered for combat, then came home and courageously criticized the insane policies he had seen on the ground in Vietnam. One does not have to be an uncritical fan of Kerry to feel the outrage at the injustice done to him. Under the barrage of Republican disinformation, his noblest moments became the seed of his undoing. No wonder so many of us, when we encountered the national media coverage of this campaign, felt that we had entered an "Alice in Wonderland" world, as the novelist and Vietnam veteran Tim O'Brien said of the Swift Boat controversy — a world where factual evidence was ignored, common-sense perceptions of reality were reversed and history was refashioned to meet the needs of those in power.

The consequences for contemporary politics cannot be overestimated. Refusal to come to grips with our defeat in Vietnam — to reflect on the hazards of a morally charged hubris — lies at the core of our current misadventures abroad. Bush's advisers came of age in the shadow of that defeat, determined to deny its significance by reasserting imperial power on a grand scale, just as German nationalists had longed to do in the wake of World War 1. That dream of national regeneration, combined with our collective amnesia, lets the Bush administration ignore the growing parallels between the failed policy in Iraq and the failed precedent in Vietnam: the millenarian fantasies used to justify the war; the ignorance of local culture and custom; the reiteration of empty platitudes as chaos looms; the fetish of "free elections;" the soldiers trapped in an impossible assignment — as vulnerable to local hostility as any Western army of occupation has ever been in any country with a history of colonial domination.

The most important parallel is the government's inability to tell the truth about the war. The lie at the center of the rightwing Vietnam narrative — the stab-in-the-back story — was central to Bush's campaign strategy, and continues to underwrite support for his war in Iraq. The belief (against all evidence) that the troops in Vietnam were somehow betrayed by the antiwar movement, rather than by the men who sent them there, remains a powerful rhetorical weapon. It allows Bush and his handlers to equate criticism of government policy with treason — or at best with a failure to "support our troops." The persistence of this twisted logic underscores the continuing relevance of the young John Kerry's charge: that the people who have truly abandoned our troops are the policymakers who sent them on a fool's errand under cover of false claims, and then "retreated behind a pious shield of public rectitude." They've done it again. That is why the Vietnam War still matters.

Jackson Lears is editor of *Raritan* and most recently author of *Something for Nothing: Luck in America*. This article is reprinted from *In These Times*.

GOOD QUESTION, VIETNAM

From questions submitted by Vietnamese people to the U.S.-Indochina Educational Foundation for its "FAQ About America" project. A number of the questions will be answered by U.S. educators, professionals, and others in a book that will be published later this year by Phuong Nam, in Ho Chi Minh City.

- When did your culture form?
- What does a typical American look like? Do actors and actresses in Hollywood movies possess characteristics of a typical American?
- What is Hollywood?
- There are many sexy scenes in American movies. Does that reflect the daily lives of Americans?
- How many people in the USA like to drink Coke?
- Why are American Presidents so bellicose?
- Does the U.S. really wish for peace and happiness for other countries, as they always announce in public?
- What do Americans think about Communists?
- People say that Americans look down on people of color and people from 3rd World countries. Is that true?
- Are Americans extravagant?
- Americans are very combative, aren't they?
- Why do many Americans like to be single nowadays?
- Americans seem to be superficial and not sincere. What do you think about this?
- Do you think using an excessive amount of slang will gradually destroy the beauty of the English language?
- What will happen if the American President doesn't carry out the promises he made in the campaign?
- What percentage of the U.S. population wants to be a good friend of Vietnam in all fields?
- How can the post-traumatic stress disorder be solved? What are the U.S. responsibilities in solving it?
- Why does America appear to be the major factor of almost every war?
- Which aspects of life are American people most interested in? I have learned America is a free country; what is the real freedom in this country?

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