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Prologue

My Rendezvous with Vietnam

Except as a distant historic footnote or an idle comparison to a possible quagmire in Iraq or Afghanistan, what does the Vietnam War evoke in the minds of Americans? A fight against global communism? An effort to support democracy in a distant land? Napalmed villages? Free-fire zones? Search-and-destroy military tactics? Mass antiwar protests? Student riots? American defeat?

These vivid images have become subliminal, but I surmise that the national memory is of a bloody, misguided war that could never have been won on any politically acceptable basis, into which we stumbled without realizing, either then or now, the strength of nationalist or popular determination of a people who had struggled for a thousand years to achieve independence.

In South Vietnam, Washington was attempting to help establish a free-market democracy, which our leaders hoped would best protect American interests, keep the Vietnamese from the depredations of a communist system, and prevent the spread of communism to the rest of Southeast Asia. As noble as this cause may have seemed to many Americans, the spectacular Vietcong offensive during the Lunar New Year, "Tet Mau Tan," on January 31, 1968, shocked policymakers and onlookers alike, exploding skepticism about the chances of American success. Tet intensified the struggle of those opposed to the war, channeling the growing anguish being felt by the nation.

The Tet Offensive of February 1968 spanned the breadth of South Vietnam and demonstrated a pervasive Vietcong capability throughout the cities and countryside to a degree almost no one had thought possible. On the Vietnam Working Group in the State

Department in Washington D.C., where I worked, the shock was intense as the news rolled over the wires revealing the intensity and scope of the Tet attacks. I recall the entire edifice that General William Westmoreland and the U.S. government had constructed collapsing in a single night. As if to signal the changing mood in the country, the most trusted man in America, CBS commentator Walter Cronkite, sounded the cost of Tet, solemnly declaring on February 27 that he was "more certain than ever that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate."¹

After a few confused, bloody weeks, the Tet Offensive was crushed militarily at great cost to the Vietcong cadres. However, from a political perspective, it was a stunning victory by the Vietcong and Hanoi against the U.S. and South Vietnamese governments. Tet dismayed Washington. Doubt about the success of the war against the Vietcong reflected the high political cost.

It took five more years for Nixon to extricate the nation from that quagmire. It took almost twenty more years for us to erase Vietnam from our national psyche and for Americans to claim that the Vietnam War was finally over. Was it over? Did we really learn the lessons of the Vietnam War, or the "American War," as Vietnamese refer to it? How had American leaders so misjudged the nature of the struggle in Vietnam, the strength of nationalist sentiment, the determination of North Vietnam's leaders, and Hanoi's attitude toward China and the Soviet Union? Were none of the American leaders aware of Vietnam's history? How did we come to expect that a corrupt regime in Saigon could earn the respect and support of the population? Was it understood that the widespread sympathy in South Vietnam toward the Vietminh (Vietcong)² did not reflect support for communism as an economic or political system, but rather for the unfinished struggle for national independence?³ How did American military leaders believe that search-and-destroy operations, bombing villages, punitive bombing in Northern Vietnam, and the massive presence of U.S. military personnel throughout the country was a productive strategy for handling this "people's war?"

Like most tragedies, there was nothing inevitable about the American fiasco in Vietnam. President John F. Kennedy asked Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Secretary of Defense Robert

McNamara five questions for which he wanted answers. McNamara described in his book, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, with considerable chagrin, Dean Rusk's analysis, which was, in his words, "inadequate": "We failed to address the five most basic questions that were never asked: Was it true that the fall of South Vietnam would trigger the fall of all Southeast Asia? Would that constitute a grave threat to the West's security? What kind of war—conventional or guerrilla—might develop? Could we win it with U.S. troops fighting alongside the South Vietnamese? Should we not know the answer to all these questions before deciding whether to commit troops?"⁴

President Kennedy never received answers to these questions, but, after having been poorly advised by the Pentagon during the ill-fated Bay of Pigs Operation and the handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, Kennedy bucked the generals' recommendations. On the eve of his assassination in November 1963, he again rejected the Pentagon's request to send 200,000 combat troops to Vietnam, as the Pentagon had regularly recommended since November 1961.⁵

In contrast, President Lyndon B. Johnson, facing political pressure from conservatives, neglected to ask the questions Kennedy had asked his secretaries of State and Defense and instead accepted his civilian advisors' and military leaders' advice to steadily escalate the war. By the end of Johnson's presidency, South Vietnam was swarming with more than 500,000 U.S. soldiers.

To many Americans, the Vietnam War is a painful memory of military defeat and wasteful sacrifice. To North Vietnamese, the American War was just one episode in a centuries-long nationalist struggle against foreign domination. Hanoi committed Vietnam to this struggle despite the horrors of the war—a death toll in the millions, hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese soldiers unaccounted for, and a devastated country—in order to deliver a proud victory over the Americans, as had been their victory over the French after 100 years. This was all the more true in Vietnam's 1,000-plus years' struggle against the Chinese, which temporarily ended when the Chinese first accepted the independence of Vietnam in 1428. However, China would return repeatedly to reassert control over Vietnam from the 14th to 18th centuries. At every opportunity the Vietnamese repelled Chinese occupation.⁶

Hanoi's ultimate victory was one of history's few wars in which the winner received no reparations or compensation but struggled alone with the poverty and devastation of war. To make matters worse, the reunification of Vietnam was followed not by the representative government envisioned by early Vietminh figures but by the strict Marxist-Leninist authoritarianism imposed by leaders such as the Communist Party of Vietnam's General Secretary, Le Duan, who replaced Ho Chi Minh after his death in 1969.

The rigid ideological system began to lift and give way to a period of *Doi Moi* (renovation), and Vietnam began to define itself in the contemporary world, only in 1986—eleven years after the war concluded and national reunification was achieved.

Not until 1995, nine years later, and more than two decades after America's complete withdrawal of troops, did the United States begin reconciliation with Vietnam. Then, as *chargé d'affaires*, I opened the U.S. Embassy in Hanoi a month after President Bill Clinton established diplomatic relations with Vietnam in July 1995.

The arc of my life and career in the U.S. Foreign Service followed closely the trajectory of the Kennedy brothers—John, Robert, and Edward. A fervent supporter of John Kennedy's bid for president, and as part of the throng at his inauguration in Washington in January 1961, I heard him declare, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." Like many of my generation, I heeded his call: I joined the U.S. Foreign Service, where I worked for forty years, virtually always in or dealing with Asia. Robert Kennedy structured his 1968 campaign in significant part on opposition to the Vietnam War. Edward Kennedy, in his memoir, *True Compass*, focused on the dilemma regarding Vietnam with which President Kennedy struggled. He recounted how, "Jack's antenna was set to find a way out. He just never got the chance." Senator Kennedy later based his opposition to the Iraq War, at least in part, upon his perceptions of Vietnam.⁷

After my initial assignment to Kathmandu, Nepal—at the time, the enchanting Shangri-La in the Himalayas—State Department personnel came to Kathmandu in June 1964 and asked about my aspirations for future assignments. Mesmerized by the stunning beauty of the Himalayas emblazoned across the northern sky, the feudal kingdom nestled in the Kathmandu Valley, and certainly by

the Nepali people themselves, I first asked for an extension of my time in Kathmandu. At their insistence, I reluctantly responded, "If I must move, I wish to go anywhere in Asia, except Vietnam, because I do not like war!" Within a couple of weeks, the State Department ordered me to return to Washington to study Vietnamese and assigned me in 1965 to the rural U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) program working to support the provincial governments' efforts to strengthen the South Vietnamese government. In early 1967, I was assigned as an evaluator for Deputy Ambassador William Porter, traveling to contested areas to explore the effectiveness of the newly established revolutionary development program of the South Vietnamese government.

From Vietnam, I was assigned from mid-1967 to mid-1968 to the Vietnam Working Group, the State Department's Vietnam Desk, during which the 1968 Tet Offensive occurred. In 1968–70, I studied Chinese in Washington and then in Taichung, Taiwan, and acted as a political officer to the U.S. Embassy in Taipei, recognized at the time by the United States as the Government of China. I was selected in early 1973 as one of forty Foreign Service officers (FSOs) to return to Vietnam to evaluate security, political, military, and other developments in the wake of the departure of American forces after the signing of the Paris Accords. I was assigned to the pretty Mekong Delta town of My Tho. I will describe these experiences as the story progresses.

After my second assignment to Vietnam, I was assigned to Japan from 1973 to 1976 in the political section as the "China Watcher." After Japan, I was assigned from mid-1977 to 1980 to Thailand, where I interviewed Khmer refugees on the Thai-Cambodian border and Vietnamese in refugee camps for "boat people." I reported on the conditions and developments under the heinous Pol Pot regime in Phnom Penh and the results of the Vietnamese invasions and occupation of Cambodia in December 1978 and 1979. At the same time, I reported on developments in Vietnam itself that I learned from refugees: the preparations for attack on Cambodia, the movement towards an alliance with the Soviet Union, the deterioration in Hanoi's relations with Beijing, and China's "teaching Vietnam a lesson" by its punitive invasion of Vietnam in February 1979. Through refugees I learned of Vietnam's movement toward

reunification in 1976 and “socialist transformation,” including the anti-Chinese policies in North and South Vietnam from 1977 to 1979.

In reward for my work on Indochina, the assistant secretary of state for East Asia and the Pacific, Richard Holbrooke, chose me to be country director for Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia from 1980 to 1983. In 1981 I was shocked and elated when the Reagan administration selected me to approach Vietnam about the possibility of normalization—predicated upon Vietnam’s withdrawal from Cambodia. I also was an active participant in the Conference on Kampuchea (Cambodia), which devised a formula for resolution of the Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia, the template for their ultimate withdrawal in 1988–89 and the resolution to the Cambodian issue in 1991.

After a two-year stint in 1983–85 as country director for Japan, Ambassador Mike Mansfield selected me as his deputy at the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo from 1985 to 1989. Although Senator Mansfield in 1954 admired Ngo Dinh Diem, his assessment gradually evolved.⁸ When President Kennedy sent Majority Leader Mansfield to Vietnam in 1962, he was brutally frank in his conclusion that the United States had spent two billion dollars in seven years, yet “the same difficulties remain, if, indeed, they have not been compounded.” The fault lay, he said, with U.S. policy and with Diem for his failure to share power with non-Catholic factions of South Vietnamese society, e.g., Buddhists. Mansfield expressed fears that the United States was falling inexorably into a position in Vietnam formerly occupied by the French.⁹ Subsequently, I learned of Senate Majority Leader Mansfield’s nineteen memos to President Johnson arguing against escalation in Vietnam and of President Kennedy’s private comments to the Majority Leader about his intention to withdraw from Vietnam after the 1964 elections.

Serving as principal deputy assistant secretary for East Asia in the first Bush administration from 1989 to 1992 and on President Bill Clinton’s State Department policy-planning staff in 1994–95, I followed negotiations with Vietnam closely.

Thus, with six assignments in or on Vietnam (probably the most of any FSO), in 1995 I opened the U.S. Embassy in Hanoi as *chargé d’affaires* and embarked on one of the most rewarding assignments

an individual can have in diplomacy—reconciliation with a former enemy. Just prior to my departure in August for Hanoi, Deputy Secretary Warren Christopher emphasized that the resolution of the Prisoner of War/Missing in Action (POW/MIA) issue and human rights were at the top of my agenda, but he also stressed that I was to build a new relationship with Vietnam through reconciliation, a wonderfully open-ended instruction.

The day before I departed Hanoi at the conclusion of my assignment in May 1997, I called on Vietnam's wartime premier, Phan Van Dong, one of Ho Chi Minh's closest comrades. We discussed Vietnam's history from the 1940s through the American War and the junctures at which different policies might have produced vastly different outcomes. That conversation, buttressed by many more, is carried in full in this book, as it was the most exquisite moment of my career as a public servant.

Several years later, Princeton University's president, Shirley Tilghman, made clear that she found Princeton students too isolated from the contemporary world and urged the faculty to identify ways to overcome this situation. As a member of the Advisory Council of the Princeton Institute for International and Regional Studies, I suggested that I conduct a summer seminar in Hanoi entitled "The Vietnam War: Origins, Implications, and Consequences."

Princeton agreed.¹⁰ But why undertake a retrospective on events that occurred fifty years ago and which scholars have dissected hundreds of times? Why is this history relevant today?

My desire to equip the next generation of leaders with the tools and knowledge to navigate our country's increasingly complex security challenges motivated me to recommend the in-depth study of Vietnam and the exploration of the lessons of the Vietnam War.

These are my perceptions from my fifty-year engagement with Vietnam.

Vietnam 1945 Independence



Figure 2: Hanoi Ba Dinh Square, where Ho Chi Minh declared independence in 1945. Inspired by the U.S. Declaration of Independence, the Vietnam Declaration of Independence begins with “All men are created equal.” *Author’s Photo, 2007*



Figure 3: Uniformed students carry a portrait of President Ho Chi Minh during a parade in Hanoi in 1965. The U.S. began its serious military build-up in South Vietnam in March of that year. *PhotoQuest/Archive Photos via Getty Images*

War: Indochina War 1946-1954 and American War 1965-1975

The following four photos represent themes and facts that thread throughout the civil and foreign wars that Vietnam endured from 1946 until 1975.



Figure 4: Weapons and supplies were transported by bike and on foot by a peasant army endlessly slogging through rough terrain. *Marc Riboud/ Magnum Photos, 1969*



Figure 5: The Vietminh planted poison-tipped punji traps extensively along the trails. These and similar efforts were ultimately effective in achieving Vietnam's independence. On the darker side, the French at Hoa Lo Prison tortured, guillotined, and starved their Vietnamese opponents. After 1954, the Vietnamese maintained the prison but also used it as a training facility. During the American War, Hoa Lo again became a full-time prison where American pilots were tortured, starved, and deprived of decent medical treatment. *Author's Photo, 2007*



Figure 6: Numerous American planes were shot down, including B-52s, during the punitive Christmas bombing of Hanoi to force the Vietnamese to accept a peace treaty in 1972. Most of the prison was demolished in the Nineties, replaced with a modern Singaporean Hotel, but the gatehouse and entry became the Hoa Lo Museum. *Author's Photo, 2007*



Figure 7: Skeletal plaster figures reflect the miserable torture, starvation, and medically deprived conditions under French colonial rule. *Author's Photo, 2007*