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*This research paper was for a class I took this past Fall (Fall '23). The class was HS456: America and Vietnam.*

*The question for the paper was the following: Was America's involvement with Vietnam a "noble cause" (Reagan) or a "moral and intellectual poverty?" (Carter)*

A "noble cause" or "moral and intellectual poverty," two differing statements from two presidents who held the highest office in government after the so-called end of the Vietnam War. Both presidents delivered their short evaluations of a conflict that lasted well over at least thirty years, and raged on while both were in office. (Although to the naive eye of the U.S, the war was done and wrapped up.) Reagan's "noble cause" speech assumed that the blood filled conflict in which the 46,370 American soldiers that were killed, 254,256 South Vietnamese that died, and over 800,000 more that were wounded on both sides<sup>1</sup>, gave their lives, limbs and sanity up for a cause that showed "fine personal qualities or high moral principles and ideals."<sup>2</sup> The same cause that during the height of the war dropped an average of 800 tons of bombs a day, totaling over 100 million tons between 1964-1972.<sup>3</sup> The conflict that displaced more than 690,000 Vietnamese citizens and turned them into refugees, not to mention the thousand more refugees created by the invasion of Cambodia.<sup>4</sup> The war would become known as the war in which the United States government lied to its citizens, caused protests to erupt across the country, and one in which its own soldiers, forced to participate in, could be seen rebelling against orders. Carter's assessment of a "moral and intellectual poverty" meant that there was an insufficient or poor quality of morality and intellect during the war. This statement more accurately portrayed the war compared to Reagan's, but still does not fully describe what a deplorable, and heinous war that was Vietnam. Both Reagan and Carter came from different sides of the political spectrum but had an eerily similar foreign policy. They were similar since both policies, like every president since Wilson, followed Wilsonianism. This was the idea that America must copy and paste its beliefs, government, and system of rule onto every other nation in the world. Anything against this idea was wrong and bad and must be stopped. Thus, this unwavering belief has put the United States on a one-track railway towards annihilating anything in its path that did not have the stamp of approval from the U.S., and Vietnam was no exception. From the beginning to the 'end' of the United States' involvement they failed to consider the different ideologies of

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<sup>1</sup> G. C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, (McGraw-Hill Education: New York, 2014,) p. 275.

<sup>2</sup> "Noble Definition," Merriam Webster, Date Accessed: Nov. 13, 2023. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/noble>

<sup>3</sup> B. Kiernan, *Viet Nam: A History From Earliest Times to the Present*, (Oxford University Press: New York City, 2017) p. 443

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 441.

communism at play and the culture of Vietnam. Their blatant disregard of the Vietnamese people was shown through their actions and decimation of the country. The U.S. routinely underestimated the Vietcong (VC) and the North Vietnamese and failed to consider the previous lessons learned by the British and the French. Those in power consistently promised to be the ones to win the war, but each time the war left a stain on their legacies, just like it did on America's.

To understand Carter and Reagan's assessments of the war, although different in theory, but the same in practice, one must understand the background of their speeches and foreign policies. Carter gave his speech in 1977, just two years before the start of the third Indochina War, and just four years after the U.S supposedly pulled its troops from Vietnam. His speech was given to students at the University of Notre Dame, a demographic that during the end of the war most notably opposed America's involvement. His famous line of Vietnam being a "moral and intellectual poverty," came after claiming that the U.S should be done fighting "...fire with fire..." He later said that the U.S had found its way back to its "...own principles and values and regained our lost confidence."<sup>5</sup> His statements given in the speech were attempts at covering up the crimes and decimation done in America's name to Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia during the Vietnam War. Ironically, Carter, who so valued that America had found its way back to its morals and principles would go on to secretly support the Khmer Rouge just a year later in 1978. This was done just after the Khmer Rouge had taken the lives of roughly 1.7 million people in Cambodia, which was about 21% of its population.<sup>6</sup> Carter and the U.S could not allow the Vietnamese, who came to the aid of the massacred, be seen as the good guys. Thus, Carter's view of a "moral and intellectual poverty" was a superficial coverup of Vietnam. It was his attempt at acknowledging and appealing to those who opposed the war, so they would become content, and Carter would be free to continue Wilsonianism in other parts of the world.

Unlike Carter, Reagan did not try to hide his foreign policy behind his speech. Instead, Reagan's speech proved how much he either did not see the consequences of the Vietnam War, or flat out ignored the results. Like Carter's speech, his was full of irony as well. Reagan gave his speech in Chicago in front of a crowd of veterans from the Vietnam War. He can be quoted as having said America's involvement in the war was a "noble cause." He goes on to say how the South Vietnamese were a "newly freed" country who sought America's help in self-defense from a "totalitarian neighbor bent on conquest..."<sup>7</sup> However, as history has shown, the South

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<sup>5</sup> "Carter's Foreign Policy," Office of the Historian, United States Department of State, Date accessed: Nov. 13, 2023. <https://history.state.gov/departments/history/short-history/carter>

<sup>6</sup> "Cambodian Genocide Program," Genocide Studies Program, Yale University, 2023. <https://gsp.yale.edu/case-studies/cambodian-genocide-program>

<sup>7</sup> "Peace: Restoring the Margin of Safety," Ronald Reagan Presidential Library Museum, National Archives, Date Accessed: Nov. 13, 2023. <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/peace-restoring-margin-safety#:~:text=It%20was%20to%20win%20in,in%20truth%2C%20a%20noble%20cause>

Vietnamese had no choice in the U.S being involved in its “freeing.” America instead chose a side that they labeled as ‘non-communist.’ This side was then assigned to be shaped in the eyes of America. South Vietnam was just the next country in line America forced its ideals upon, while they disregarded those who lived there. Reagan also stated in his speech that it would be a “...dishonor to the 50,000 young Americans who died in that cause...” to be guilty about the actions taken during the war.<sup>8</sup> On the contrary, it was a greater dishonor to those who served to fail to acknowledge how the actions taken by those who gave the orders during the war led them to their deaths. Those that survived were left with severe mental and physical disabilities. The same government who vowed to ‘honor’ the soldiers failed repeatedly the ones who returned. The soldier who entered Vietnam did not want to be there, nor did they think the cause was worth dying for. In fact, most soldiers sat around, and feared they would get called off base. Going off base meant the possibility of encountering the VC and dying. “Why doesn’t t.v. show how boring this war is,” said one American soldier.<sup>9</sup> Frank McAdam, a Marine Veteran of Vietnam wrote a response to Reagan’s speech in an op-ed, “‘A noble cause, Mr. Reagan? I would call it a horrible experience.’ McAdam wondered if Reagan would have seen Vietnam differently if instead of being ‘a captain who stayed home’ during World War II, ‘he had heard the sound of shots fired in anger and wondered whether he would live to see another sunrise.’”<sup>10</sup>

Since the very start of America’s involvement in Vietnam they failed to understand the complexity of the situation. It was not just a Communism versus Capitalism problem, but a mix of different nationalist groups, each with their own version of communism. These versions of communism were not simply Stalinist, Marxist, or Titoist, but a mix containing different parts of both, and adding on their own ideas.<sup>11</sup> Chapman Walker identified that Ho was a follower of Lenin, but his youth brigades were similar to what Hitler did with his Hitler Youth.<sup>12</sup> However, later in the war one saw that Ho greatly wanted to secure the countryside, which was a main principle of Maoism. Ho did not necessarily care to adhere to one side of communism, or choose one ally in the British, U.S, Soviets, or Chinese. Instead, he preferred to play off each side to achieve what his goal was, which was an independent ruling state of Vietnam in Indochina. The United States’ greatest folly in their involvement was that they did not see what Ho and the VietMinh saw in playing different forms of communism off each other, nor did they realize that the boundaries of the war did not stop with the borders of Vietnam.

In 1946 Ho Chi Minh gained popularity with the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) and declared Vietnam independent from the then ruling power, France. This new state was called the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). With it, Ho established a “national coalition

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid,

<sup>9</sup> C. Denton and J.Pilger, *Vietnam: The Quiet Mutiny*, 1970,00:08:57 <https://johnpilger.com/videos/vietnam-the-quiet-mutiny>

<sup>10</sup> C. Pach, “Ronald Reagan’s Noble Causes,” Ronald Reagan Institute, Date Accessed: Nov. 13, 2023. <https://www.reaganfoundation.org/media/360190/pach-essay-upload-1.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> T. O. Smith. *Britain and the Origins of the Vietnam War: UK Policy In Indo-China, 1943-1950*, (Palgrave Mcmillian: Basingstoke: England, 2007,)

<sup>12</sup> T. O. Smith. "Clandestine Meetings in Hanoi: British Liaisons With Ho Chi Minh, and Vo Nguyen Giap, in 1946". *Historical Yearbook XIX*:145-155 (Ovidius University Press) p. 150.

government.”<sup>13</sup> However, as one would later see and the U.S. would fail to recognize again and again, was that this government was not a monolithic entity. Other figures and groups vied for their chance to lead Vietnam into glory. Vo Nguyen Giap, Vietnam Quoc Dan Dong, and Dong Minh Hoi, all were different groups and people who thought that Ho was not the one who should be in charge. Ho knew he was not strong enough, and even tried multiple times to appeal to Britain, the United States, and France for support. “...Despite Ho Chi Minh’s ‘communist background’ he was still a moderating influence upon the more radical members of the Vietminh...Minh’s ‘patriotism’ rather than communism was the stronger element in play.”<sup>14</sup> The United States feared that communism would spread, but when given the opportunity back in 1946 of possibly working with Ho, they refused. America’s naivety of the different complexities involved in the VietMinh clouded their judgment, and in an attempt to counter the communists from spreading into Indochina, they chose their puppets in the form of Bao Dai and later Ngo Dinh Diem in the south, and not Ho Chi Minh in the north. The United States’ decision to go against the communist Ho, was America’s start to digging their own grave in Vietnam.

The U.S chose to side with Dai in the south, however they again failed to realize that much like the north, there was a fight for control. Different groups, including the communists were in the south. Among these groups included the existing French colonial population, various Vietnamese nationalist groups, and an indigenous Vietnamese population.<sup>15</sup>

The United States in the 1950s lived and died by the belief that Indochina, including Vietnam, was the “target of a coordinated offensive directed by the Kremlin.”<sup>16</sup> However, they failed to recognize that Ho’s main goal was independence for Vietnam. They also failed to recognize the thousands of years of animosity between the Chinese and Vietnamese. Ho was not going to bow down to either the Soviets, or especially not the Chinese. He once was quoted as saying, “It is better to sniff French shit for a while than eat China’s all our life.”<sup>17</sup> In reaching out to the U.S Ho valued the idea of the enemy of my enemy as my friend. However, the U.S just saw Ho as a communist, and unlike the British, they did not figure out that they could use Ho to their advantage.

By 1954, after the French and British signed the Geneva Accords, the United States assumed control for Vietnam. The French, who in ‘54 were destroyed at the battle of Dien Bien Phu, which resulted in 1,500 French soldiers killed, 4,000 wounded, and 10,000 missing or captured, agreed to enter into peace talks with the Soviets, Chinese and Vietnamese.<sup>18</sup> The Soviets and Chinese at this time wanted to focus on at-home matters. Everyone, but the United States, acknowledged that Vietnam was a lost cause, and all signs were pointing to it being a “moral and intellectual poverty.” President Eisenhower would ironically go on to say, “No more

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p.146.

<sup>14</sup> Meiklereid to Bevin in Ibid, p.152-153.

<sup>15</sup> Smith, *Clandestine Meetings*, p.146.

<sup>16</sup> Herring, *America’s Longest War*, p. 21.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p.24.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid,p.44.

Koreas with the United States furnishing 90% of the manpower.”<sup>19</sup> However, that year, the U.S. gave France \$385 million in support of the war effort.<sup>20</sup>

Throughout the presidencies of Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon, each president played their role in expanding America’s involvement in the war. By the time Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon became presidents it was evident they were following a continued pattern of protecting their own legacies over the lives of the soldiers in Vietnam and the Vietnamese people. Each president and their advisors in their own ways lied and deceived the American public and its soldiers on the situation in Vietnam. They piled on lies just as American and Vietnamese lives piled up in Vietnam. The soldiers nor the American people by the 1960s had any idea what America was still doing in Southeast Asia. Each president cited the threat of the Domino Theory coming true as the reason why America was in Vietnam. American citizens fed into the lies due to McCarthyism spreading through America during this time. However, the claim of Americanizing, or saving the Vietnamese from communism was a thin veil that a few began to see through. Just like the lie that each president used to shift the blame onto the Vietnamese as the ones that must win the war themselves as an excuse as to why America had not achieved victory.<sup>21</sup>

The period of lies started with the Kennedy administration in 1963. Secretary of State Robert McNamara and Kennedy were both quoted in multiple press reports and speeches that the U.S. would “gradually withdraw” American troops and military personnel between 1963-1965.<sup>22</sup> However, in December of 1963 the U.S. had in total 16,300 military personnel in Vietnam. By December of 1965 that number rose to 184,300.<sup>23</sup>

During Johnson’s presidency, the lies were centered around protecting his domestic policies of his promised “Great Society.”<sup>24</sup> A failure in Vietnam meant his legacy and society would be tarnished forever. Spurred on by the fact he became president after Kennedy’s assassination, and an upcoming election was on the horizon, Johnson’s big chance came with the Gulf of Tonkin incident. On August 1st and 4th of 1964 U.S ships were supposedly attacked by North Vietnamese ships. However, Johnson and McNamara failed to mention that U.S ships were in enemy waters, and the reports that came to Washington were inconclusive about what happened due to a combination of bad weather and “overactive sonarmen.” It was later determined that a second attack never occurred.<sup>25</sup> As a result of the Tonkin Incident, the president ordered regular bombing of North Vietnam, as well as the passage of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. The resolution gave the president the authority to take “all necessary steps”

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<sup>19</sup> Eisenhower in Ibid, p.41.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 34.

<sup>21</sup> *The New York Times*, February 16, 1964 in R.N. Goodwin, *Triumph or Tragedy: Reflections on Vietnam*, (Random House: New York, 1966) p. 134-135.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 134-135.

<sup>23</sup> Herring, *America’s Longest War*, p. 188.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 154.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 146-148.

in the future of the war and got rid of congressional authority.<sup>26</sup> Johnson feared appearing weak at a vital time in his presidency, thus he manipulated the Tonkin incident into what would help work to further his legacy. His deceit and newly acquired power led to the U.S deploying ground troops in early 1965. In a “watershed moment” in American history, Johnson approved for two battalions to be deployed at Da Nang, with little to no support. “Regardless of what was said or believed at the time the Marines were landed, it was obvious to them from the start they had neither the capability or flexibility to adequately secure the air base at Da Nang.”<sup>27</sup> Johnson’s expansion of the war through bombing and ground troop deployment showed how he valued his legacy and presidency over the lives of American soldiers. It also demonstrated how he had little regard for the future implications of his actions, and the death and destruction that was already present and would later come.

After Johnson, it was President Nixon and his Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, who not only followed in the footsteps of their predecessors, but also expanded the war to new heights, all while vowing to de-escalate the war. Ironically, Nixon spent more time preoccupied with Cambodia, a neutral nation, that he did with the war in Vietnam. Nixon and Kissinger’s actions expanded outside the Vietnam borders, into neighboring Cambodia which resulted in catastrophic events. Nixon didn’t become president until 1969, but the United States and Cambodia’s relationship had been on the rocks in the years that led up to ‘69. Back in 1964 then leader of Cambodia, Prince Sihanouk, had been openly criticizing the U.S. That same year violent demonstrations took place in Phnom Penh at the U.S Embassy. A few days later South Vietnamese aircraft, carrying American and South Vietnamese troops, attacked the village of Chantrea, killing 17 Cambodians.<sup>28</sup> For the rest of ‘64 there were border raids on Cambodian soil and a continued presence of American bombs being dropped. In one incident chemicals dropped by South Vietnamese planes killed 100 people. Fast forward two years later in ‘66 the Cambodian villages of Thlok Trach and Anlong Trach were bombed. Simultaneously, the U.S pledged to “respect Cambodia’s sovereignty, neutrality and territorial integrity...avoid acts of aggression against Cambodia.”<sup>29</sup>

When Nixon became president in ‘69 the U.S and Cambodia attempted to fix relations, however much like in ‘66, Nixon went behind the back of the Cambodians and ordered B-52 bombers to begin hitting Cambodia. The raids continued for over a year and in total dropped 108,823 tons of bombs on a neutral country. Nixon and Kissinger did their best to hide the bombings, as they were not public information until 1973, when the damage had already been done.<sup>30</sup> Just a year later in a highly controversial ousting, Lon Nol overthrew Sihanouk, a change

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 307.

<sup>27</sup> *Pentagon Papers: Evolution of the War: Marine Combat Units Go to Da Nang*, Gravel ed., National Archives, Date Accessed: Nov. 14, 2023. p. ii. <https://nara-media-001.s3.amazonaws.com/arcmedia/research/pentagon-papers/Pentagon-Papers-Part-IV-C-4.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> K. Clymer, *The United States and Cambodia, 1960-1991*, in T.O. Smith, ed., *Cambodia and the West*, (Palgrave Mcmillian: London, 2018) p.151.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 152.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 154.

of government in which the “Nixon administration did not regret.”<sup>31</sup> Nixon took full advantage of the vulnerability of Cambodia and invaded the country under the pretense that there was a central command headquarters of the VietCong in Cambodia. This proved to be a failure, and the U.S was condemned by the rest of the world. The condemnation of Nixon’s action in ‘70 proved to be meaningless. Nixon would continue to bomb Cambodia, which effectively drove Cambodians into the hands of the Khmer Rouge.

The actions of the United States, specifically under the Nixon administration demonstrated why Vietnam was the tragedy it was. Between ‘69- ‘73 America dropped 2.7 million tons of bombs on Cambodia.<sup>32</sup> Many of these plots were on the border of Vietnam and Cambodia, however a great number of bombs were dropped into central Cambodia, and even as far north to the Thai border.<sup>33</sup> Over 10% of the bombing was “indiscriminate” with 3,580 of the sites having “unknown targets.” While 8,238 sites had no targets.<sup>34</sup> This happened all while Cambodia was a neutral country. The estimated bombings killed between 50,000-150,000 people. However, the greater travesty would occur because of the bombings, and after the U.S decided that Vietnam was completed. In bombing Cambodia, the U.S did precisely what it was in Vietnam to prevent. The bombings caused the Vietnamese Communists to drive deeper into Cambodia, connecting them with the Khmer Rouge. It also caused Cambodians to lean towards the Khmer Rouge as their forces grew from around 1,000 guerrillas in ‘69 to over 200,000 in ‘73.<sup>35</sup> In ‘73 when America ‘pulled out’ from Vietnam it left behind a decimated country in Cambodia. Its people were blown back to the stone age, which set them up for disaster in 1975. That year the Khmer Rouge took control and created a genocide in which 1.7 million people were killed. The Nixon administration and America set up Cambodia and its people for the Khmer Rouge to annihilate. During the genocide, people were subjected to indoctrination, starvation, and severe working conditions among the intolerable society created by the Khmer Rouge. Their personalities and inner selves were stripped of their being. While Pol Pot was the mastermind behind the genocide, in no way should Nixon and Kissinger “escape judgement for their role in the slaughter that was a prelude to the genocide.”<sup>36</sup>

The countries on the border of Cambodia were no exceptions for the destruction experienced at the hands of the U.S. Between 1961-1972 America dropped roughly 1 million tons of bombs on North Vietnam. In the rural south, approximately 4 million tons of bombs were dropped, along with 400,000 tons of napalm, and 19 million gallons of herbicides. This was done all in the name of America ‘helping’ to save the Vietnamese from the communists. The U.S effectively destroyed homes and farms, creating a flood of food shortages, and health issues

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 155.

<sup>32</sup> T. Owen and B. Kiernan. “Making More Enemies than We Kill? Calculating U.S. Bomb Tonnages Dropped on Laos and Cambodia, and Weighing Their Implications,” The Asia-Pacific Journal, April 27, 2015. Date Accessed: Nov. 13, 2023. <https://apjif.org/Ben-Kiernan/4313.html>

<sup>33</sup> “U.S Involvement in the Cambodian War and Genocide,” Genocide Studies Program, Yale University, Date Accessed: Nov. 13, 2023. <https://gsp.yale.edu/case-studies/cambodian-genocide-program>

<sup>34</sup> Owen and Kiernan. “Making More Enemies than We Kill?”

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.



endured by the Vietnamese. These problems could be seen then in the 1960s-1970s, as well as today. In neighboring Laos, also a neutral country, America dropped 5.7 million tons of bombs between '64- '72.<sup>37</sup> In Vietnam after the war 'ended' the U.S supposedly left, but the bombs they left behind remained. As a result, South Vietnamese soldiers, and the remaining U.S military officials used children as mine detectors, leaving hospitals in full capacity with children who were mutilated.<sup>38</sup> The United States vowed that it was in Vietnam to stop communism, but their one-track focused mind allowed for decisions to be made that resulted in insurmountable damages to the people, land, and culture of Southeast Asia.

In conclusion, to call the U. S's actions during this time a "noble cause" is an abomination. Likewise, to simply chalk up the actions of America to a "moral and intellectual poverty" is equally as deplorable. Carter and Reagan's foreign policy actions in Cambodia, and El Salvador showed that the U.S did not see any consequences of the Vietnam War. The war may have ended for the U.S in '73, but the war continued in Vietnam for years. In 1972 the percentage of patients in the hospitals who experienced war-related injuries was 65%, two years later after the supposed end of the war the number only dropped to 61%.<sup>39</sup> During the so-called peaceful period, the number of deaths continued to fall, totaling over 70,000.<sup>40</sup> It wasn't just one president that ruined Vietnam, but a line of presidents whose foreign policy protected their legacies under the form of Wilsonianism. During their times in office each president fed the nation lie after lie about how America was helping Vietnam, even as the refugee number reached over 690,000 people.<sup>41</sup> The line of presidents that followed each other stayed fixated on the sole idea that North Vietnam was communist and must be stopped. While the rest of the world slowly realized that there were different sides to the leadership in North Vietnam, and these different sides could be used against greater enemies. American citizens must also not be let off the hook, because it took them until the end of the war to begin protesting. However, those who were drafted into the war at some points took matters into their own control. Most American citizens fed into the lies of the government, due to the spread of McCarthyism. Americans had numerous opportunities since the Vietnam War to keep their government's actions in check but continue to bury their heads in the sand at what America does in other countries. This is always done under the guise of Americanizing other countries, who do not wish to be Americanized. Neither side of the political divide had a right to voice their opinion about the conflict and pretend to care about the veterans and those who died, as well as the refugees who were left in the destruction. No cause in any way was worth bombing and decimating multiple countries, causing hundreds of thousands of deaths and refugees. The tragedy that was Vietnam is one in which Americans should be forever guilt-ridden with. We should have vowed to stop or prevent anything like what happened from

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> C.Denton and J. Pilger, *Vietnam: Still America's War*, 1974, 00:11:08

<https://johnpilger.com/videos/vietnam-still-americas-war>

<sup>39</sup> C. Denton and J. Pilger, *Vietnam: Still America's War*, 1974, 00:08:48.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Kiernan, *Viet Nam: A History*, p. 443.



happening again. However, time and time again since the war America has turned a blind eye to the travesty they injected and continue to inject into other nations which are deemed as ‘un-American.’ The U. S.’s involvement in the Vietnam War decimated three countries on the opposite side of the globe. Their actions led to a genocide in one country, and created poverty, famine, and mutilation of humanity in all areas America touched in Indochina.

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