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The Meaning of Vietnam

Noam Chomsky

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The US government was defeated in Indochina, but only bruised at home. No outside power will compel us to face the record honestly or to offer reparations. On the contrary, efforts will be devoted to obscuring the history of the war and the domestic resistance to it. There are some simple facts that we should try to save as the custodians of history set to work.

In its essence, the Indochina war was a war waged by the US and such local forces as it could organize against the rural population of South Vietnam. Regarding the Geneva Accords of 1954 as a “disaster,” Washington at once undertook a program of subversion throughout the region to undermine the political arrangements. A murderous repression in South Vietnam led to the renewal of resistance. Kennedy involved US forces in counterinsurgency, bombing, and “population control.” By 1964 it was obvious that there was no political base for US intervention. In January 1965, General Khanh was moving toward an alliance with anti-American Buddhists and had entered into negotiations with the NLF. He was removed as the systematic bombardment of South Vietnam began, at triple the level of the more publicized bombing of the North. The full-scale US invasion followed, with consequences that are well known. The

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civilian societies of Laos and then Cambodia were savagely attacked in a war that was at first “secret” thanks to the self-censorship of the press.

In January 1973 Nixon and Kissinger were compelled to accept the peace proposals they had sought to modify after the November 1972 elections. As in 1954, the acceptance was purely formal. The Paris Agreements recognized two equivalent parties in South Vietnam, the PRG and the GVN, and established a basis for political reconciliation. The US was enjoined not to impose any political tendency or personality on South Vietnam. But Nixon and Kissinger announced at once that in defiance of the scrap of paper signed in Paris, they would recognize the GVN as the sole legitimate government, its constitutional structure—which outlawed the other party—intact and unchanged.

In violation of the agreements, Thieu intensified political repression and launched a series of military actions. By mid-1974, US officials were optimistically reporting the success achieved by the Thieu regime, with its vast advantage in firepower, in conquering PRG territory where, they alleged, a North Vietnamese buildup was underway. As before, the whole rotten structure collapsed from within as soon as the “enemy” was so ungracious as to respond, and this time Washington itself had collapsed to the point where it could no longer send in bombers.

The American war was criminal in two major respects. Like the Dominican intervention and the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia, it was a case of aggression, conscious and premeditated. In 1954, the National Security Council stated that the US reserved the right to use force “to defeat local Communist subversion or rebellion not constituting armed attack,” i.e., in violation of “the supreme law of the land.” The US acted on this doctrine. Furthermore, the conduct of the war was an indescribable atrocity. The US goal was to eradicate the revolutionary nationalist forces which, US officials estimated,

enjoyed the support of half the population. The method, inevitably, was to destroy the rural society. While the war of annihilation partially succeeded in this aim, the US was never able to create a workable system out of the wreckage.

Opposition to the war at home made full-scale mobilization impossible and placed some constraints on the brutality of the war planners. By 1971, two-thirds of the US population opposed the war as immoral and called for the withdrawal of American troops. But the articulate intelligentsia generally opposed the war, if at all, on “pragmatic”—i.e., entirely unprincipled—grounds. Some objected to its horror; more objected to the failure of American arms and the incredible cost. Few were willing to question the fundamental principle that the US has the right to resort to force to manage international affairs. Throughout this period, there was a negative correlation between educational level and opposition to the war, specifically, principled opposition. (The correlation was obscured by the fact that the more articulate and visible elements in the peace movement were drawn disproportionately from privileged social groups.)

The gulf that opened between much of the population and the nation’s ideologists must be closed if US might is to be readily available for global management. Therefore, a propaganda battle is already being waged to ensure that all questions of principle are excluded from debate (“avoid recriminations”). Furthermore, the historical record must be revised, and it will be necessary to pretend that “responsible” political groups acting “within the system” sought to end the war, but were blocked in their efforts by the peace movement. People cannot be permitted to remember that the effective direct action of spontaneous movements—both in the United States and among the conscripted army in the field—that were out of the control of their “natural leaders” in fact played the primary role in constraining the war makers.

The US government was unable to subdue the forces of revolutionary nationalism in Indochina, but the American people are a less resilient enemy. If the apologists for state violence succeed in reversing their ideological defeats of the past years, the stage will be set for a renewal of armed intervention in the case of "local subversion or rebellion" that threatens to extricate some region from the US-dominated global system. A prestigious study group twenty years ago identified the primary threat of "communism" as the economic transformation of the communist powers "in ways which reduce their willingness and ability to complement the industrial economies of the West." The American effort to contain this threat in Indochina was blunted, but the struggle will doubtless continue elsewhere. Its issue will be affected, if not determined, by the outcome of the ideological conflict over "the lessons of Vietnam."