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Visions of Righteousness

Noam Chomsky

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In one of his sermons on human rights, President Carter explained that we owe Vietnam no debt and have no responsibility to render it any assistance because “the destruction was mutual.”¹ If words have meaning, this must stand among the most astonishing statements in diplomatic history. What is most interesting about this statement is the reaction to it among educated Americans: null. Furthermore, the occasional reference to it, and what it means, evokes no comment and no interest. It is considered neither appalling, nor even noteworthy, and is felt to have no bearing on Carter’s standing as patron saint of human rights, any more than do his actions: dedicated support for Indonesian atrocities in Timor and the successful terrorist campaign undertaken in El Salvador to destroy the popular organizations that were defended by the assassinated Archbishop; a huge increase in arms flow to Israel in parallel with its 1978 invasion of Lebanon, its subsequent large-scale bombing of civilians, and its rapid expansion into the occupied territories; etc. All of this is a tribute to the successes of a system of indoctrination that has few if any peers.

¹ News conference, 24 March 1977; New York Times, 25 March 1977.

These successes permit the commissars to issue pronouncements of quite impressive audacity. Thus, Zbigniew Brzezinski thunders that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan is

a classical foreign invasion, waged with Nazi-like brutality. Scorched villages, executed hostages, massive bombings, even chemical warfare ... [with] several hundred thousand killed and maimed by Soviet military operations that qualify as genocidal in their intent and effect... It needs to be said directly, and over and over again, that Soviet policy in Afghanistan is the fourth greatest exercise in social holocaust of our contemporary age: it ranks only after Stalin's multimillion massacres; after Hitler's genocide of the European Jews and partially of the Slavs; and after Pol Pot's decimation of his own people; it is, moreover, happening right now.²

While the descriptive words are fair enough, when issuing from this source they merit all the admiration accorded similar pronouncements by Brzezinski's Soviet models with regard to American crimes, which he somehow seems to have overlooked in his ranking of atrocities of the modern age. To mention a few: the U.S. wars in Indochina, to which his condemnation applies in full except that there were many *millions* "killed and maimed" and the level of destruction was far greater; the Indonesian massacres of 1965 backed enthusiastically by the U.S. with half a million murdered; the Timor massacres conducted under Brzezinski's aegis with hundreds of thousands "killed and maimed" and the remnants left in the state of Biafra and the Thai-Cambodian border, an operation that is "happening right now" thanks to U.S. silence and support; the murder,

² Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Afghanistan and Nicaragua," *The National Interest* 1 (Fall 1985): 48–51.

power should hardly come as a surprise to people familiar with modern history and capable of reasoned and critical thought.

ential are those that appeal to the tastes and interest of those who own and manage the society. Similarly, to qualify as an “expert,” as Henry Kissinger explained on the basis of his not inconsiderable experience in these matters, one must know how to serve power. The “expert has his constituency,” Kissinger explained: “those who have a vested interest in commonly held opinions: elaborating and defining its consensus at a high level has, after all, made him an expert.”⁵² We need only proceed a step further, identifying those whose vested interest is operative within the social nexus.

The result is a system of principles that gives comfort to the powerful though in private, they speak to one another in a different and more realistic voice, offering “unanswerable” arguments that it would be “impolitic” to make public and is rarely subjected to challenge. There are departures, when segments of the normally quiescent population become organized in efforts to enter the political arena or influence public policy, giving rise to what elite groups call a “crisis of democracy” which must be combated so that order can be restored. We have recently passed through such a crisis, which led to an awakening on the part of much of the population to the realities of the world in which they live, and it predictably evoked great fear and concern, and a dedicated and committed effort to restore obedience. This is the source of the reactionary jingoism that has misappropriated the term “conservatism” in recent years, and of the general support for its major goals on the part of the mainstream of contemporary liberalism, now with a “neo” affixed. The purpose is to extirpate heresy and to restore domestic and international order for the benefit of the privileged and powerful. That the mainstream intelligentsia associate themselves with these tendencies while proclaiming their independence and integrity and adversarial stance vis a vis established

⁵² Henry Kissinger, *American Foreign Policy* (New York: Norton, 1969), 28.

often with hideous torture and mutilation, of over 100,000 people in El Salvador and Guatemala since 1978, operations carried out thanks to the support of the U.S. and its proxies, and most definitely “happening right now.” But the readers of the *National Interest* will find nothing amiss in Brzezinski’s presentation, since in Vietnam “the destruction was mutual” and the other cases, if known at all, have been easily assimilated into the preferred model of American benevolence. An auspicious opening for a new “conservative” journal of international affairs.

“It is scandalous,” Brzezinski writes, “that so much of the conventionally liberal community, always so ready to embrace victims of American or Israeli or any other unfashionable ‘imperialism,’ is so reticent on the subject” of Afghanistan. Surely one might expect liberals in Congress or the press to desist from their ceaseless efforts on behalf of the PLO and the guerillas in El Salvador long enough to notice Soviet crimes; perhaps they might even follow Brzezinski to the Khyber Pass so that they can strike heroic poses there before a camera crew. One should not, incidentally, dismiss this characterization of the “liberal community” on the grounds of its transparent absurdity. Rather, it should be understood as a typical example of a campaign carefully designed to eliminate even the limited critique of crimes by the U.S. and its clients that sometimes is voiced, a campaign that reflects the natural commitments of the totalitarian right, which regards anything less than full subservience as an intolerable deviation from political correctness.

Some feel that there was a debt but that it has been amply repaid. Under the headline “The Debt to the Indochinese Is Becoming a Fiscal Drain,” Bernard Gwertzman of the New York Times quotes a State Department official who “said he believed the United States has now paid its moral debt for its involvement on the losing side in Indochina.” The remark, which passed without comment, is illuminating: we owe no debt for mass slaughter and for leaving three countries in

ruins, no debt to the millions of maimed and orphaned, to the peasants who still die today from unexploded ordnance. Rather, our moral debt results only from the fact that we did not win or as the Party Line has it, that South Vietnam (namely, the client regime that we established as a cover for our attack against South Vietnam, which had as much legitimacy as the Afghan regime established by the USSR) lost the war to North Vietnam the official enemy, since the U.S. attack against the south cannot be conceded. By this logic, if the Russians win in Afghanistan, they will have no moral debt at all. Proceeding further, how have we paid our moral debt for failing to win? By resettling Vietnamese refugees fleeing the lands we ravaged, "one of the largest, most dramatic humanitarian efforts in history" according to Roger Winter, director of the U.S. Committee for Refugees. But "despite the pride," Gwertzman reports, "some voices in the Reagan Administration and in Congress are once again asking whether the war debt has now been paid..."³

Invariably, the reader of the press who believes that the lowest depths have already been reached is proven wrong. In March 1968, as U.S. atrocities in South Vietnam were reaching their peak, the *Times* ran an item headed "Army Exhibit Bars Simulating Shooting at Vietnamese Hut," reporting an attempt by demonstrators to disrupt an exhibit in the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry: "Beginning today, visitors can no longer enter a helicopter for simulated firing of a machine gun at targets in a diorama of the Vietnam Central Highlands. The targets were a hut, two bridges and an ammunition dump, and a light flashed when a hit was scored." *The Times* is bitterly scornful of the peaceniks who demonstrated in protest at this amusing exhibit, which was such great fun for the kiddies, even objecting "to children being permitted to 'fire' at the hut,

³ Bernard Gwertzman, "The Debt to the Indochinese Is Becoming a Fiscal Drain," *NYT*, 3 March 1985.

nam no debt because "the destruction was mutual," without this evoking even a raised eyebrow.

The reasons for the rather general and probably quite unconscious subordination of large segments of the educated classes to the system of power and domination do not seem very difficult to discern. At any given stage, one is exposed to little that questions the basic doctrines of the faith: that the United States is unique in the contemporary world and in history in its devotion to such ideals as freedom and selfdetermination, that it is not an actor in world affairs but rather an "emancipator," responding to the hostile or brutal acts of other powers, but apart from that, seeking nothing but justice, human rights and democracy. Intellectual laziness alone tends to induce acceptance of the doctrines that "everyone believes." There are no courses in "intellectual self-defense," where students are helped to find ways to protect themselves from the deluge of received opinion. Furthermore, it is convenient to conform: that way lies privilege and power, while the rational skeptic faces obloquy and marginalization not death squads or psychiatric prison, as elsewhere all too often, but still a degree of unpleasantness, and very likely, exclusion from the guilds. The natural tendencies to conform are thus refined by institutional pressures that tend to exclude those who do not toe the line. In the sciences, critical thought and reasoned skepticism are values highly to be prized. Elsewhere, they are often considered heresies to be stamped out; obedience is what yields rewards. The structural basis for conformity is obvious enough, given the distribution of domestic power. Political power resides essentially in those groups that can mobilize the resources to shape affairs of state in our society, primarily an elite of corporations, law firms that cater to their interests, financial institutions and the like and the same is true of power in the cultural domains. Those segments of the media that can reach a large audience are simply part of the system of concentrated economic-political power, and naturally enough, journals that are well-funded and influ-

tive detriment to our national security. To do so, we will have to dispense with all sentimentality and day-dreaming; and our attention will have to be concentrated everywhere on our immediate national objectives. We need not deceive ourselves that we can afford today the luxury of altruism and world-benefaction ... We should cease to talk about vague and for the Far East unreal objectives such as human rights, the raising of the living standards, and democratization. The day is not far off when we are going to have to deal in straight power concepts. The less we are then hampered by idealistic slogans, the better.⁵¹

The subsequent historical record shows that Kennan's prescriptions proved close to the mark, though a closer analysis indicates that he understated the case, and that the U.S. did not simply disregard "human rights, the raising of the living standards, and democratization," but evinced a positive hostility towards them in much of the world, particularly democratization in any meaningful sense, any sense that would permit genuine participation of substantial parts of the population in the formation of public policy, since such tendencies would interfere with the one form of freedom that really counts: the freedom to rob and to exploit. But again, these are only considerations of empirical fact, as little relevant to political theology as is the fact that the United States attacked South Vietnam.

Given these lasting and deep-seated features of the intellectual culture, it is less surprising perhaps though still, it would seem, rather shocking that the man who is criticized for his extreme devotion to human rights should say that we owe Viet-

⁵¹ Policy Planning Study (PPS), 23, 24 Feb. 1948, *FRUS 1948*, I (part 2); reprinted in part in Thomas Etzold and John Lewis Gaddis, *Containment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 226f.

even though no people appear... "Citing this item at the time, I asked whether "what is needed in the United States is dissent or denazification," a question that elicited much outrage; the question stands, however.⁴

To see how the moral level has improved since, we may turn to the *Times* sixteen years later, where we find a report on a new board game designed by a Princeton student called "Vietnam: 1965–1975." One player "takes the role of the United States and South Vietnam, and the other represents North Vietnam and the Vietcong." The inventor hopes the game will lead people to "experiment with new ideas, new approaches" to the war. We may ask another question: how would we react to a report in *Pravda* of a board game sold in Moscow, in which one player "takes the role of the USSR and Afghanistan, and the other represents Pakistan, the CIA, China, and the rebels," designed to lead people to "experiment with new ideas, new approaches" to the war perhaps supplied with some accessory information concerning the "bandits terrorizing Afghanistan," who, according to Western sources, initiated their attacks from Pakistan with support from this U.S.Chinese ally in 1973, six years before the USSR sent forces to "defend the legitimate government?"⁵

The American system of indoctrination is not satisfied with "mutual destruction" that effaces all responsibility for some of the major war crimes of the modern era. Rather, the perpetrator of the crimes must be seen as the injured party. We find headlines in the nation's press reading: "Vietnam, Trying to be Nicer, Still has a Long Way to Go."⁶ "It's about time the Vietnamese demonstrated some good will," said Charles Printz

⁴ NYT, 18 March 1968; Chomsky, *American Power and the New Mandarins* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969), 14.

⁵ "A Vietnam War Board Game Created by Princeton Senior," NYT, 1 April 1984; Lawrence Lifschultz, "The Not;So-New Rebellion," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 30 Jan. 1981, 32–33.

⁶ Barbara Crossette, NYT, 10 Nov. 1985.

of Human Rights Advocates International, referring to negotiations about Amerasian children who constitute a tiny fraction of the victims of the savage U.S. aggression in Indochina. Crossette adds that the Vietnamese have also not been sufficiently forthcoming on the matter of remains of American soldiers, though their behavior is improving somewhat: "There has been progress, albeit slow, on the missing Americans." The unresolved problem of the war is what they did to us. This point of view may be understood by invoking the terminology contrived by Adlai Stevenson the hero of Brzezinski's "liberal community" at the United Nations in May 1964, when he explained that we were in South Vietnam to combat "internal aggression," that is, the aggression of South Vietnamese peasants against U.S. military forces and their clients in South Vietnam. Since we were simply defending ourselves from aggression, it makes sense to consider ourselves the victims of the Vietnamese.⁷

This picture of aggrieved innocence, carefully crafted by the propaganda system and lovingly nurtured by the educated classes, must surely count as one of the most remarkable phenomena of the modern age. Its roots lie deep in the national culture. "The conquerors of America glorified the devastation they wrought in visions of righteousness," Francis Jennings observes, "and their descendants have been reluctant to peer through the aura."⁸ No one who surveys the story of the conquest of the national territory, or the reaction to it over three and a half centuries, can doubt the accuracy of this indictment. In Memphis in 1831, Alexis de Tocqueville watched in "the middle of the winter" when the "cold was unusually severe" as "three or four thousand soldiers drive before them the wandering races of the aborigines," who "brought in their

⁷ For documentation and further discussion of the interesting concept "internal aggression" as developed by U.S. officials, see my *For Reasons of State* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973), 114f.

⁸ Francis Jennings, *The Invasion of America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 6.

particularly what is intended for a general audience. These assumptions have the status of truths of doctrine, and it would be as pointless to face them with evidence as it is with doctrines of other religious faiths.

The evidence, in fact, shows with considerable clarity that the proclaimed ideals were not the goals of Woodrow Wilson, or his predecessors, or any of his successors.⁴⁹ A more accurate account of Wilson's actual goals is given by the interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine presented to him by his Secretary of State, Robert Lansing, an argument that Wilson found "unanswerable" though he thought it would be "impolitic" to make it public:

In its advocacy of the Monroe Doctrine the United States considers its own interests. The integrity of other American nations is an incident, not an end. While this may seem based on selfishness alone, the author of the Doctrine had no higher or more generous motive in its declaration.⁵⁰

The category of those who function as "an incident, not an end" expanded along with U.S. power in subsequent years. How planners perceived the world, when they were not addressing the general public, is illustrated in a perceptive and typically acute analysis by George Kennan, one of the most thoughtful and humane of those who established the structure of the postwar world:

... we have about 50% of the world's wealth, but only 6.3% of its population ... In this situation, we cannot fail to be the object of envy and resentment. Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity without posi-

⁴⁹ For a review of the facts of the matter, see *Turning the Tide* and sources cited.

⁵⁰ Gabriel Kolko, *Main Currents in American History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 47.

Similar thoughts are familiar among the culturally colonized elites elsewhere. Thus, according to Michael Howard, Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford, “For 200 years the United States has preserved almost unsullied the original ideals of the Enlightenment: the belief in the God-given rights of the individual, the inherent rights of free assembly and free speech, the blessings of free enterprise, the perfectibility of man, and, above all, the universality of these values.” In this nearly ideal society, the influence of elites is “quite limited.” The world, however, does not appreciate this magnificence: “the United States does not enjoy the place in the world that it should have earned through its achievements, its generosity, and its goodwill since World War II” as illustrated in such contemporary paradises as Indochina, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador and Guatemala, to mention a few of the many candidates, just as belief in the “God-given rights of the individual” and the universality of this doctrine for 200 years is illustrated by a century of literal human slavery and effective disenfranchisement of blacks for another century, genocidal assaults on the native population, the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Filipinos at the turn of the century and millions of Indochinese, and a host of other examples.⁴⁸

Such commentary, again, need not be burdened by evidence; it suffices to assert what people of power and privilege would like to believe, including those criticized, e.g., the “left isolationists” of Krauthammer’s fancies, who are delighted to hear of their commitment to Wilsonian goals. Presupposed throughout, without argument or evidence, is that the United States has been committed to such goals as self-determination, human rights, democracy, economic development, and so on. It is considered unnecessary to demonstrate or even argue for these assumptions, in political commentary and much of scholarship,

train the wounded and the sick, with children newly born and old men on the verge of death,” a “solemn spectacle” that would never fade from his memory: “the triumphal march of civilization across the desert.” They were the lucky ones, the ones who had escaped the ravages of Andrew Jackson who, years earlier, had urged his men to exterminate the “blood thirsty barbarians” and “cannibals” and to “destroy [sic] those deluded victims doomed to destruction [sic] by their own restless and savage conduct” as they did, killing women and children, stripping the skin from the bodies of the dead for bridle reins and cutting the tip of each dead Indian’s nose to count the number of “savage dogs” who had been removed from the path of civilization. De Tocqueville was particularly impressed by the way the pioneers could deprive Indians of their rights and exterminate them “with singular felicity, tranquilly, legally, philanthropically, without shedding blood, and without violating a single great principle of morality in the eyes of the world.” It was impossible to destroy people with “more respect for the laws of humanity.” Still earlier, the Founding Fathers, in their bill of indictment in the Declaration of Independence, had accused the King of England of inciting against the suffering colonies “the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions”; they were referring to the response of the native population to the genocidal assaults launched against them by the saintly Puritans and other merciless European savages who had taught the Indians that warfare, European-style, is a program of mass extermination of women and children, a lesson that George Washington was soon to teach the Iroquois as he sent his forces to destroy their society and civilization, quite advanced by the standards of

⁴⁸ Michael Howard, “The Bewildered American Raj,” *Harper’s* 270, no. 1618. March 1985, 55–60.

the era, in 1779. Rarely have hypocrisy and moral cowardice been so explicit, and admired with such awe for centuries.⁹

The story continues with no essential change in later years. The American conquest of the Philippines, led by men who had learned their craft in the Indian wars, ranks among the most barbaric episodes of modern history. In the island of Luzon alone, some 600,000 natives perished from the war or diseases caused by it. General Jacob Smith, who gave orders to turn the island of Samar into a “howling wilderness,” to “kill and burn” “the more you kill and burn the better you will please me” was retired with no punishment by President Roosevelt, who made it clear that Smith’s only sin was his “loose and violent talk.” Roosevelt, who went on to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, explained that “I also heartily approve of the employment of the sternest measures necessary” against the cruel and treacherous savages who “disregard... the rules of civilized warfare,” and who had furthermore “assailed our sovereignty” (President McKinley) in an earlier act of internal aggression. The director of all Presbyterian missions hailed the conquest as “a great step toward the civilization and the evangelization of the world,” while another missionary explained that the notorious “water cure” was not really “torture” because “the victim has it in his own power to stop the process” by divulging what he knows “before the operation has gone far enough to seriously hurt him,” and a leading Episcopal Bishop lauded General Smith’s tactics as necessary “to purge the natives,” who were “treacherous and barbarous,” of the “evil effects” of “a degenerate form

⁹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Knopf, 1945), I; General Andrew Jackson, *General Orders*, 1813; cited by Ronald Takaki, *Iron Cages* (New York: Knopf, 1979), 80–81, 95–96. See Richard Drinnon, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire-Building* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), for a penetrating discussion of these matters. For an upbeat and enthusiastic account of the destruction of the Iroquois civilization, see Fairfax Downey, *Indian Wars of the U.S. Army* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1963), 32f.

be comprehensible in these circles, given that in each such case the United States is acting in defense against internal aggression, and with intent so noble that words can barely express it.

True, one is not often treated to such delicacies as Huntington’s ode to the Holy State cited earlier, but it is, nevertheless, not too far from the norm.

The official doctrine as propounded by government spokesmen, the U.S. media, and a broad range of scholarship is illustrated, for example, in the report of the National Bipartisan (Kissinger) Commission on Central America: “The international purposes of the United States in the late twentieth century are cooperation, not hegemony or domination; partnership, not confrontation; a decent life for all, not exploitation.” Similarly, Irving Kristol informs us that the United States

is not a “have” nation in the sense that it exercises or seeks to maintain any kind of “hegemony” over distant areas of the globe. Indeed, that very word, “hegemony,” with all its deliberate vagueness and ambiguity, was appropriated by latter-day Marxists in order to give American foreign policy an “imperialist” substance it is supposed to have but does not.

Among these “Marxists,” he fails to observe, are such figures as Samuel Huntington, who, accurately this time, describes the 1945–70 period as one in which the “the U.S. was the hegemonic power in a system of world order.”⁴⁷ And again, the idea that the U.S. does not exercise or seek any kind of “hegemony,” alone among the great powers of history, requires no evidence and stands as a Truth irrespective of the historical facts.

⁴⁷ Irving Kristol, “Foreign Policy in an Age of Ideology,” *The National Interest* 1 (Fall, 1985); Huntington, in M.J. Crozier, S.P. Huntington, and J. Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy* (New York: New York University Press, 1975).

Central America and the Caribbean and laying the basis for the establishment of a network of National Security States on the Nazi model throughout the hemisphere; and the aid program, as the facts of aid disbursement make clear, was designed largely to “improve the productivity of Central America’s agricultural exporters and at the same time to advance the sales of American companies that manufacture pesticides and fertilizer,” which is why nutritional levels declined in the course of “economic miracles” that quite predictably benefited U.S. agri-business and their local associates.⁴⁵ Locke deserves better treatment than that. But these again are mere facts, not relevant to the higher domains of political commentary.

Open the latest issue of any major journal on U.S. foreign policy and one is likely to find something similar. Thus, the lead article in the current issue of *Foreign Affairs*, as I write, is by James Schlesinger, now at Georgetown University after having served as Secretary of Defense, Director of Central Intelligence, and in other high positions.⁴⁶ He contrasts the U.S. and Russian stance over the years. “The American desire was to fulfill the promise of Wilsonian idealism, of the Four Freedoms ... The themes of realpolitik remain contrary to the spirit of American democracy,” while the Russians, so unlike us, are guided by “deep-seated impulses never to flag in the quest for marginal advantages.” The United States seeks all good things, but “almost inevitably, the Polands and the Afghanistans lead to confrontation, even if the Angolas and the Nicaraguas do not” and most assuredly, the Guatemalas, Chiles, Vietnams, Irans, Lebanons, Dominican Republics, etc., do not have the same effect; indeed, the idea would not

⁴⁵ Lester Langley, *Central America: The Real Stakes* (New York: Crown, 1985), 128; see *Turning the Tide* for discussion and further sources on these matters.

⁴⁶ James Schlesinger, “The Eagle and the Bear: Ruminations on Forty Years of Superpower Relations,” *Foreign Affairs* 63, no. 5 (Summer 1985): 938, 939, 940, 947.

of Christianity.” The press chimed in with similar sentiments. “Whether we like it or not,” the *New York Criterion* explained, “we must go on slaughtering the natives in English fashion, and taking what muddy glory lies in the wholesale killing until they have learned to respect our arms. The more difficult task of getting them to respect our intentions will follow.” Similar thoughts were expressed as we were slaughtering the natives of South Vietnam, and we hear them again today, often in almost these words, with regard to our current exploits in Central America. The reference of the “English fashion” will be understood by any student of American history.

For Theodore Roosevelt, the murderers in the Philippines were fighting “for the triumph of civilization over the black chaos of savagery and barbarism,” while President Taft observed that “there never was a war conducted, whether against inferior races or not, in which there were more compassion and more restraint and more generosity” than in this campaign of wholesale slaughter and mass torture and terror. Stuart Creighton Miller, who records these horrors and the reaction to them in some detail and observes that they have largely disappeared from history, assures the reader that “the American interventions both in Vietnam and in the Philippines were motivated in part by good intentions to elevate or to aid the victims”; Soviet scholars say the same about Afghanistan, with comparable justice.”¹⁰

General Smith’s subordinate Littleton Waller was acquitted in courtmartial proceedings, since he had only been following orders: namely, to kill every male Filipino over the age of ten. He went on to become a Major-General, and to take charge of Woodrow Wilson’s atrocities as he celebrated his doctrine of self-determination by invading Haiti and the Dominican Re-

¹⁰ Daniel Boone Schirmer, *Republic or Empire* (Cambridge, Ma.: Schenkman, 1972), 231; Stuart Creighton Miller, *Benevolent Assimilation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 220, 255, 248f., 78, 213, 269; David Bain, *Sitting in Darkness* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), 78.

public, where his warriors murdered, raped, burned villages, established concentration camps that provided labor for U.S. companies, reinstituted virtual slavery, demolished the political system and any vestige of intellectual freedom, and generally reduced the countries to misery while enriching U.S. sugar companies. According to the approved version, these exploits not only illustrate the Wilsonian doctrine of self-determination to which we are dedicated as a matter of definition, but also serve as a notable example of how “the overall effect of American power on other societies was to further liberty, pluralism, and democracy.” So we are informed by Harvard scholar Samuel Huntington, who adds that “No Dominican could doubt but that his country was a far, far better place to live in 1922 than it was in 1916,” including those tortured by the benefactors and those whose families they murdered or whose villages they burned for the benefit of U.S. sugar companies.¹¹

The record of U.S. intervention in Central America and the Caribbean, to the present day, adds further shameful chapters to the story of terror, torture, slavery, starvation and repression, all conducted with the most touching innocence, and with endless benevolence particularly with regard to the U.S. investors whose representatives design these admirable exercises. The worst period in this sordid history was initiated by the Kennedy Administration, which established the basic structure of state terrorism that has since massacred tens of thousands as an integral part of the Alliance for Progress; this cynical program, devised in fear of “another Castro,” fostered a form of “development” in which crop lands were converted to export for the benefit of U.S. corporations and their local associates while the population sank into misery and starva-

¹¹ Samuel Huntington, “American Ideals versus American Institutions,” *Political Science Quarterly* 97, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 25; Correspondence, 97, no. 4 (Winter 1982–3): 753. On Wilson’s achievements, see Lester Langley, *The Banana Wars* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1983); Bruce Calder, *The Impact of Intervention* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984).

Thus, “the professor is obviously capable,” and “he is clearly disinterested.” “Moreover, like the American superpower, the professor does not control the lives or destinies of his students: they remain free to come or go,” just like the peasants of South Vietnam or the Guazapa mountains in El Salvador. “It will help us understand America’s performance and psychology as a superpower, and the whys and wherefores of its Indochina involvement, if we bear in mind this analogy of the American performance in the superpower role with that of the benevolent but clearly egocentric professor, dispensing emancipation through knowledge of both righteousness and the right way to the deprived students of the world.”

The reader must bear in mind that this is not intended as irony or caricature, but is rather presented seriously, is taken seriously, and is not untypical of what we find in the literature, not at the lunatic fringe, but at the respectable and moderately dissident extreme of the mainstream spectrum.

The standard drivel about Wilsonian principles of self-determination unaffected by Wilson’s behavior, for example in Hispaniola, or in succeeding to eliminate consideration of U.S. domination in the Americas from the Versailles deliberations by no means stands alone. Kennedy’s Camelot merits similar acclaim among the faithful. In a fairly critical study, Robert Packenham writes that Kennedy’s policies toward Latin America in 1962–3 “utilized principally diplomatic techniques to promote liberal democratic rule,” and cites with approval Arthur Schlesinger’s comment that the Kennedy approach to development, based on designing aid for “take off” into self-sustaining economic growth, was “a very American effort to persuade the developing countries to base their revolutions on Locke rather than on Marx.”⁴⁴ In the real world, the Kennedy administration succeeded in blocking capitalist democracy in

⁴⁴ Robert A. Packenham, *Liberal America and the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 156, 63.

experience which have made the United States perform its superpower role in what we might term a particularistic way.” He holds that “principles and ideals hold a cardinal place in the U.S. national ethos and crucially distinguish U.S. performance in the superpower role” a standard view, commonly set forth in the United States, Britain and elsewhere in scholarly work on modern history. These principles and ideals, he explains, were “laid down by the founding fathers, those pure geniuses of detached contemplation,” and “refined by subsequent leading figures of thought and action” from John Adams to Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt; such Kim Il Sung-ism with regard to the “pure geniuses,” etc., is also far from rare. These principles, he continues, were “tested and retested in the process of settling the continent [as Indians, Blacks, Mexicans, immigrant workers and others can testify], healing the North-South breach, developing the economy from the wilderness in the spirit of free enterprise, and fighting World Wars I and II, not so much for interests as for the survival of the very principles by which most Americans were guiding their lives.”

It is this unique legacy that explains the way Americans act “in the superpower role.” The Americans approached this role, “devoid of artifice or deception,” with “the mind set of an emancipator”:

In such a mind set, one need not feel or act superior, or believe one is imposing one’s ethos or values on others, since one senses naturally that others cannot doubt the emancipator’s righteous cause anymore than his capacities. In this respect, the American role as superpower, particularly in the early postwar years, is very analogous to the role that can be attributed to a professor, mentor, or other type of emancipator.

tion, necessitating an efficient system of state terror to ensure “stability” and “order.” We can witness its achievements today, for example, in El Salvador, where Presidents Carter and Reagan organized the slaughter of some 60,000 people, to mounting applause in the United States as the terror appeared to be showing signs of success. During the post-World War II period, as U.S. power greatly expanded, similar projects were undertaken over a much wider range, with massacres in Greece, Korea (prior to what we call “the Korean War,” some 100,000 had been killed in South Korea, primarily in U.S.-run counterinsurgency campaigns undertaken as part of our successful effort to destroy the indigenous political system and install our chosen clients), Southeast Asia, and elsewhere, all with inspiring professions of noble intent and the enthusiastic acclaim of the educated classes, as long as violence appears to be successful.¹²

In brief, a major theme of our history from the earliest days has been a combination of hideous atrocities and protestations of awesome benevolence. It should come as no great surprise to students of American history that we are the injured party in Indochina.

Contrary to much illusion, there was little principled opposition to the Indochina war among the articulate intelligentsia. One detailed study undertaken in 1970, at the peak of antiwar protest, revealed that the “American intellectual elite” came to oppose the war for the same “pragmatic reasons” that had convinced business circles that this investment should be liquidated. Very few opposed the war on the grounds that led all to condemn the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia: not that it failed, or that it was too bloody, but that aggression is wrong. In striking contrast, as late as 1982 after years of unremitting

¹² For extensive discussion of these matters and their sources in U.S. planning, see my *Turning the Tide* (Boston: South End Press, 1985), and sources cited there.

propaganda with virtually no dissenting voice permitted expression to a large audience over 70% of the general population (but far fewer “opinion leaders”) still regarded the war as “fundamentally wrong and immoral,” not merely “a mistake.”¹³

The technical term for this failure of the indoctrination system is the “Vietnam syndrome,” a dread disease that spread over the population with such symptoms as distaste for aggression and massacre, what Norman Podhoretz calls the “sickly inhibitions against the use of military force,” which he hopes were finally overcome with the grand triumph of American arms in Grenada.¹⁴ The malady, however, persists, and continues to inhibit the state executive in Central America and elsewhere. The major U.S. defeat in Indochina was at home: much of the population rejected the approved stance of passivity, apathy and obedience. Great efforts were made through the 1970s to overcome this “crisis of democracy,” as it was called, but with less success than reliance on articulate opinion would suggest.

There was, to be sure, debate over the wisdom of the war. The hawks, such as Joseph Alsop, argued that with sufficient violence the U.S. could succeed in its aims, while the doves doubted this conclusion, though emphasizing that “we all pray that Mr. Alsop will be right” and that “we may all be saluting the wisdom and statesmanship of the American government” if it succeeds in subjugating Vietnam (what we would call: “liberating Vietnam”) while leaving it “a land of ruin and wreck” (Arthur Schlesinger). Few would deny that the war began with “blundering efforts to do good” (Anthony Lewis) in “an excess of righteousness and disinterested benevolence” (John King Fairbank), that it was “a failed crusade” undertaken for motives that were “noble” though “illusory” and with the “loftiest intentions” (Stanley Karnow, in his best-selling his-

¹³ For references to material not specifically cited, here and below, and discussion in more general context, see my *Towards a New Cold War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), *Turning the Tide*, and sources cited there.

¹⁴ Norman Podhoretz, “Proper Uses of Power,” *NYT*, 30 Oct. 1983.

Commentators who keep to the Party Line have an easy task; they need not consider mere facts, always a great convenience for writers and political analysts. Thus, Charles Krauthammer asserts that “left isolationism” has become “the ideology of the Democratic Party”: “There is no retreat from the grand Wilsonian commitment to the spread of American values,” namely human rights and democracy, but these “isolationists” reject the use of force to achieve our noble objectives. In contrast, “right isolationism” (Irving Kristol, Caspar Weinberger and the Joint Chiefs, etc.) calls for “retreat from Wilsonian goals” in favor of defense of interests. He also speaks of “the selectivity of the fervor for reforming the world” among “left isolationists,” who have an “obsessive” focus on the Philippines, El Salvador, Korea and Taiwan, but, he would like us to believe, would never be heard voicing a criticism of the Soviet Union, Cuba, or Libya. The latter assertion might be considered too exotic to merit discussion among sane people, but, as noted earlier, that would miss the point, which is to eliminate even that margin of criticism that might constrain state violence, for example, the occasional peep of protest over U.S.-organized terror in El Salvador which, if truth be told, is comparable to that attributable to Pol Pot at the time when the chorus of condemnation was reaching an early peak of intensity in 1977. Crucially, it is unnecessary to establish that there is or ever was a “grand Wilsonian commitment,” apart from rhetoric; that is a given, a premise for respectable discussion.

To take an example from the field of scholarship, consider the study of the “Vietnam trauma” by Paul Kattenburg, one of the few early dissenters on Vietnam within the U.S. government and now Jacobson Professor of Public Affairs at the University of South Carolina.⁴³ Kattenburg is concerned to identify the “salient features central to the American traditions and

⁴³ Paul M. Kattenburg, *The Vietnam Trauma in American Foreign Policy, 1945–75* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1982), 69f.

todians of history, perhaps to be exposed by crusading intellectuals a century or two hence, if “Western civilization” endures that long.

As the earlier discussion indicated, the creation of convenient “visions of righteousness” is not an invention of the intellectuals of the Vietnam era; nor, of course, is the malady confined to the United States, though one might wonder how many others compare with us in its virulence. Each atrocity has been readily handled, either forgotten, or dismissed as an unfortunate error due to our naivete, or revised to serve as a proof of the magnificence of our intentions. Furthermore, the record of historical fact is not permitted to disturb the basic principles of interpretation of U.S. foreign policy over quite a broad spectrum of mainstream opinion, even by those who recognize that something may be amiss. Thus, Norman Graebner, a historian of the “realist” school influenced by George Kennan, formulates as unquestioned fact the conventional doctrine that U.S. foreign policy has been guided by the “Wilsonian principles of peace and self-determination.” But he notices and this is unusual that the United States “generally ignored the principles of self-determination in Asia and Africa [he excludes the most obvious case: Latin America] where it had some chance of success and promoted it behind the Iron and Bamboo curtains where it had no chance of success at all.” That is, in regions where our influence and power might have led to the realization of our principles, we ignored them, while we proclaimed them with enthusiasm with regard to enemy terrain. His conclusion is that this is “ironic,” but the facts do not shake the conviction that we are committed to the Wilsonian principle of selfdetermination.⁴² That doctrine holds, even if refuted by the historical facts. If only natural scientists were permitted such convenient methods, how easy their tasks would be.

⁴² Norman A. Graebner, *Cold War Diplomacy* (New York: Van Nostrand Books, 1962).

tory). These are the voices of the doves. As noted, much of the population rejected the hawkdove consensus of elite circles, a fact of lasting significance. It was that part of the population that concerned the planners in Washington, for example, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, who asked in a secret memo of May 19, 1967 whether expansion of the American war might “polarize opinion to the extent that ‘doves’ in the US will get out of hand massive refusals to serve, or to fight, or to cooperate, or worse?”¹⁵

It is worth recalling a few facts. The U.S. was deeply committed to the French effort to reconquer their former colony, recognizing throughout that the enemy was the nationalist movement of Vietnam. The death toll was about 1/2 million. When France withdrew, the U.S. dedicated itself at once to subverting the 1954 Geneva settlement, installing in the south a terrorist regime that had killed perhaps 70,000 “Viet Cong” by 1961, evoking resistance which, from 1959, was supported from the northern half of the country temporarily divided by the 1954 settlement that the U.S. had undermined. In 1961–2, President Kennedy launched a direct attack against rural South Vietnam with large-scale bombing and defoliation as part of a program designed to drive millions of people to camps where they would be “protected” by armed guards and barbed wire from the guerrillas whom, the U.S. conceded, they were willingly supporting. The U.S. maintained that it was invited in, but as the London *Economist* accurately observed, “an invader is an invader unless invited in by a government with a claim to legitimacy.” The U.S. never regarded the clients it installed as having any such claim, and in fact regularly replaced them when they failed to exhibit sufficient enthusiasm for the American attack or sought to implement the neutralist settlement that was advocated on all sides and was considered the prime danger by

¹⁵ Mark McCain, *Boston Globe*, 9 Dec. 1984; memo released during the Westmoreland-CBS libel trial.

the aggressors, since it would undermine the basis for their war against South Vietnam. In short, the U.S. invaded South Vietnam, where it proceeded to compound the crime of aggression with numerous and quite appalling crimes against humanity throughout Indochina.

The *Economist*, of course, was not referring to Vietnam but to a similar Soviet fraud concerning Afghanistan. With regard to official enemies, Western intellectuals are able to perceive that $2 + 2 = 4$. Their Soviet counterparts have the same clear vision with regard to the United States.

From 1961 to 1965, the U.S. expanded the war against South Vietnam while fending off the threat of neutralization and political settlement, which was severe at the time. This was regarded as an intolerable prospect, since our “minnow” could not compete politically with their “whale,” as explained by Douglas Pike, the leading government specialist on the National Liberation Front (in essence, the former Viet Minh, the anti-French resistance, “Viet Cong” in U.S. propaganda). Pike further explained that the NLF “maintained that its contest with the GVN [the U.S.-installed client regime] and the United States should be fought out at the political level and that the use of massed military might was in itself illegitimate” until forced by the United States “to use counter-force to survive.” The aggressors succeeded in shifting the conflict from the political to the military arena, a major victory since it is in that arena alone that they reign supreme, while the propaganda system then exploited the use of “counter-force to survive” by the South Vietnamese enemy as proof that they were “terrorists” from whom we must defend South Vietnam by attacking and destroying it. Still more interestingly, this version of history is now close to received doctrine.

In 1965, the U.S. began the direct land invasion of South Vietnam, along with the bombing of the north, and at three times the level, the systematic bombardment of the south, which bore the brunt of U.S. aggression throughout. By then,

I do not, incidentally, exempt myself from this critique with regard to Cambodia and Timor. I condemned the “barbarity” and “brutal practice” of the Khmer Rouge in 1977,³⁹ long before speaking or writing a word on the U.S.-backed atrocities in Timor, which on moral grounds posed a far more serious issue for Westerners. It is difficult even for those who try to be alert to such matters to extricate themselves from a propaganda system of overwhelming efficiency and power.

Now, Western moralists remain silent as their governments provide the means for the Indonesian generals to consummate their massacres, while the U.S. backs the Democratic Kampuchea coalition, largely based on the Khmer Rouge, because of its “continuity” with the Pol Pot regime, so the State Department explains, adding that this Khmer Rouge-based coalition is “unquestionably” more representative of the Cambodian people than the resistance is of the Timorese.⁴⁰ The reason for this stance was explained by our ally Deng Xiaoping: “It is wise for China to force the Vietnamese to stay in Kampuchea because that way they will suffer more and more...”⁴¹ This makes good sense, since the prime motive is to “bleed Vietnam,” to ensure that suffering and brutality reach the maximum possible level so that we can exult in our benevolence in undertaking our “noble crusade” in earlier years.

The elementary truths about these terrible years survive in the memories of those who opposed the U.S. war against South Vietnam, then all of Indochina, but there is no doubt that the approved version will sooner or later be established by the cus-

sandra: What Everyone Knows About Noam Chomsky,” *Grand Street* 5, no. 1 (Autumn 1985): 106131.

³⁹ *Nation*, 25 June 1977.

⁴⁰ John Holdridge of the State Department, Hearing before the Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, 97th Congress, second session, 14 Sept. 1982, 71.

⁴¹ Cited by Ben Kiernan, *Tribune* (Australia), 20 March 1985.

opinion, and becomes still more obvious when a broader range of cases is considered.³⁶

The latest phase of this tragicomedy is the current pretense, initiated by William Shawcross in an inspired Agitprop achievement,³⁷ that there was relative silence in the West over the Khmer Rouge. This is a variant of the Brzezinski ploy concerning the “liberal community” noted earlier; in the real world, condemnations virtually unprecedented in their severity extended from mass circulation journals such as the *Reader’s Digest* and *TV Guide* to the *New York Review of Books*, including the press quite generally (1976-early 1977). Furthermore, Shawcross argues, this “silence” was the result of “left-wing skepticism” so powerful that it silenced governments and journals throughout the West; even had such “skepticism” existed on the part of people systematically excluded from the media and mainstream discussion, the idea that this consequence could ensue is a construction of such audacity that one must admire its creators, Shawcross in particular.³⁸

³⁶ See Political Economy of Human Rights and Edward S. Herman, *The Real Terror Network*, for extensive evidence.

³⁷ Shawcross, *Revolution and Its Aftermath in Kampuchea and Quality of Mercy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984); see my “Decade of Genocide” for discussion. Perhaps I may take credit for suggesting this clever idea to him. In a 1978 essay (reprinted in *Towards a New Cold War*; see p. 95), I wrote that “It is not gratifying to the ego merely to march in a parade; therefore, those who join in ritual condemnation of an official enemy must show that they are engaged in a courageous struggle against powerful forces that defend it. Since these rarely exist, even on a meager scale [and in the case of the Khmer Rouge, were undetectable outside of marginal Maoist groups], they must be concocted; if nothing else is at hand, those who propose a minimal concern for fact will do. The system that has been constructed enables one to lie freely with regard to the crimes, real or alleged, of an official enemy, while suppressing the systematic involvement of one’s own state in atrocities, repression, or aggression ...” These comments accurately anticipate the subsequent antics.

³⁸ On Shawcross’s fabrication of evidence in support of his thesis, see my “Decade of Genocide” and Christopher Hitchens, “The Chorus and Cas-

probably some 170,000 South Vietnamese had been killed, many of them “under the crushing weight of American armor, napalm, jet bombers and, finally, vomiting gases,” in the words of the hawkish military historian Bernard Fall. The U.S. then escalated the war against the south, also extending it to Laos and Cambodia where perhaps another 1/2 million to a million were killed, while the Vietnamese death toll may well have reached or passed 3 million, while the land was destroyed and the societies demolished in one of the major catastrophes of the modern era¹⁶ a respectable achievement in the days before we fell victim to the “sickly inhibitions against the use of military force.”

The devastation that the United States left as its legacy has been quickly removed from consciousness here, and indeed, was little appreciated at the time. Its extent is worth recalling. In the south, 9,000 out of 15,000 hamlets were damaged or destroyed along with some 25 million acres of farmland and 12 million acres of forest; 1.5 million cattle were killed; and there are 1 million widows and some 800,000 orphans. In the north, all six industrial cities were damaged (three razed to the ground) along with 28 of 30 provincial towns (12 completely destroyed), 96 of 116 district towns, and 4,000 of some 5,800 communes; 400,000 cattle were killed and over a million acres of farmland were damaged. Much of the land is a moonscape, where people live on the edge of famine with rice rations lower than Bangladesh. In a recent study unreported here in the mainstream, the respected Swissbased environmental group IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources) concluded that the ecology is not only refusing to heal but is worsening, so that a “catastrophe” may result unless billions of dollars are spent to “reconstruct” the land that has

¹⁶ Bernard Fall, “Viet Cong: The Unseen Enemy in Vietnam,” *New Society*, 22 April 1965, 10–12; Paul Quinn-Judge, “The Confusion and Mystery Surrounding Vietnam’s War Dead,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 11 Oct. 1984, 49.

been destroyed, a “monumental” task that could be addressed only if the U.S. were to offer the reparations that it owes, a possibility that cannot be considered in a cultural climate as depraved and cowardly as ours. Forests have not recovered, fisheries remain reduced in variety and productivity, cropland productivity has not yet regained normal levels, and there is a great increase in toxin-related disease and cancer, with 4 million acres affected by the 19 million gallons of poisons dumped on cropland and forest in U.S. chemical warfare operations. Destruction of forests has increased the frequency of floods and droughts and aggravated the impact of typhoons, and war damage to dikes (some of which, in the south, were completely destroyed by U.S. bombardment) and other agricultural systems have yet to be repaired. The report notes that “humanitarian and conservationist groups, particularly in the United States, have encountered official resistance and red tape when requesting their governments’ authorization to send assistance to Vietnam” naturally enough, since the U.S. remains committed to ensure that its victory is not threatened by recovery of the countries it has destroyed.¹⁷

Throughout 1964, as the U.S. planned the extension of its aggression to North Vietnam, planners were aware that heightened U.S. military actions might lead to North Vietnamese “ground action in South Vietnam or Laos” in retaliation (William Bundy, November 1964). The U.S. later claimed that North Vietnamese troops began leaving for the south in October 1964, two months after the U.S. bombing of North Vietnam during the fabricated Tonkin Gulf incident. As

¹⁷ Ton That Thien, “Vietnam’s New Economic Policy,” *Pacific Affairs* 56, no. 4 (Winter 1983–4): 691–708; Chitra Subramaniam, *PNS*, 15 Nov. 1985; both writing from Geneva. For detailed discussion of the effects of U.S. chemical and environmental warfare in Vietnam, unprecedented in scale and character, see SIPRI, *Ecological Consequences of the Second Indochina War* (Stockholm: Almqvist Wiskell, 1976), concluding that “the ecological debilitation from such attack is likely to be of long duration.”

The nature of the profound Western agony over Cambodia as a sociocultural phenomenon can be assessed by comparing it to the reaction to comparable and simultaneous atrocities in Timor. There, the U.S. bore primary responsibility, and the atrocities could have been terminated at once, as distinct from Cambodia, where nothing could be done but the blame could be placed on the official enemy. The excuses now produced for this shameful behavior are instructive. Thus, William Shawcross rejects the obvious (and obviously correct) interpretation of the comparative response to Timor and Cambodia in favor of a “more structurally serious explanation”: “a comparative lack of sources” and lack of access to refugees.³⁵ Lisbon is a two-hour flight from London, and even Australia is not notably harder to reach than the Thai-Cambodia border, but the many Timorese refugees in Lisbon and Australia were ignored by the media, which preferred “facts” offered by State Department handouts and Indonesian generals. Similarly, the media ignored readily available refugee studies from sources at least as credible as those used as the basis for the impotent but ideologically serviceable outrage over the Khmer Rouge, and disregarded highly credible witnesses who reached New York and Washington along with additional evidence from Church sources and others. The coverage of Timor actually declined sharply as massacres increased. The real reason for this difference in scope and character of coverage is not difficult to discern, though not very comfortable for Western

31–34, for review of this and other material. Note that the Finnish study is entitled *Decade of the Genocide*, in recognition of the fact that killings during the U.S.-run war were roughly comparable to those under Pol Pot. The facts are of little interest in the U.S., where the Khmer Rouge have a specific role to play: namely, to provide a justification for U.S. atrocities.

³⁵ Shawcross, in David Chandler and Ben Kiernan, eds., *Revolution and Its Aftermath in Kampuchea* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); see my “Decade of Genocide” for further discussion.

in Indochina, which then evokes further joy and gloating here. Since “the destruction is mutual,” as is readily demonstrated by a stroll through New York, Boston, Vinh, Quang Ngai Province, and the Plain of Jars, we are entitled to deny reparations, aid and trade, and to block development funds. The extent of U.S. sadism is noteworthy, as is the (null) reaction to it. In 1977, when India tried to send 100 buffalos to Vietnam to replenish the herds destroyed by U.S. violence, the U.S. threatened to cancel “food for peace” aid while the press featured photographs of peasants in Cambodia pulling plows as proof of Communist barbarity; the photographs in this case turned out to be fabrications of Thai intelligence, but authentic ones could no doubt have been obtained, throughout Indochina. The Carter administration even denied rice to Laos (despite a cynical pretense to the contrary), where the agricultural system was destroyed by U.S. terror bombing. Oxfam America was not permitted to send 10 solar pumps to Cambodia for irrigation in 1983; in 1981, the U.S. government sought to block a shipment of school supplies and educational kits to Cambodia by the Mennonite Church. Meanwhile, from the first days of the Khmer Rouge takeover in 1975, the West was consumed with horror over their atrocities, described as “genocide” at a time when deaths had reached the thousands in mid-1975. The Khmer Rouge may be responsible for a half-million to a million dead, so current scholarship indicates (in conformity to the estimates of U.S. intelligence at the time), primarily in 1978, when the worst atrocities took place, largely unknown to the West, in the context of the escalating war with Vietnam.³⁴

³⁴ The major scholarly study of the Pol Pot period, Vickery’s *Cambodia*, has been widely and favorably reviewed in England, Australia and elsewhere, but never here. The one major governmental study, by a Finnish Inquiry Commission, was also ignored here: Kimmo Kiljunen, ed., *Kampuchea: Decade of the Genocide* (London: Zed Books, 1984). See Kiljunen, “Power Politics and the Tragedy of Kampuchea in the ‘70s,” *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 17, no. 2 (April-June 1985): 49–64, for a brief account of the Finnish study, and my “Decade of Genocide in Review,” *Inside Asia* 2 (Feb.-Mar. 1985),

late as July 1965, the Pentagon was still concerned over the “probability” that there might be North Vietnamese units in or near the south five months after the regular bombing of North Vietnam, three months after the direct U.S. land invasion of the south, over three years after the beginning of U.S. bombing of the south, ten years after the U.S. subversion of the political accords that were to unify the country, and with the death toll in the south probably approaching 200,000. Thankfully, North Vietnamese units finally arrived as anticipated, thus making it possible for the propaganda system to shift from defense of South Vietnam against internal aggression to defense against North Vietnamese aggression. As late as the Tet offensive in January 1968, North Vietnamese troops appear to have been at about the level of the mercenary forces (Korean, Thai) brought in by the U.S. from January 1965 as part of the effort to subjugate South Vietnam, and according to the Pentagon there still were only South Vietnamese fighting in the Mekong Delta, where the most savage fighting took place at the time. U.S. military forces of course vastly exceeded all others in numbers, firepower, and atrocities.

The Party Line holds that “North Vietnam, not the Vietcong, was always the enemy,” as John Corry observes in reporting the basic message of an NBC “White Paper” on the war.¹⁸ This stand is conventional in the mainstream. Corry is particularly indignant that anyone should question this Higher Truth propounded by the state propaganda system. As proof of the absurdity of such “liberal mythology,” he cites the battle of Ia Drang valley in November 1965: “It was clear then that North Vietnam was in the war. Nonetheless, liberal mythology insisted that the war was being waged only by the Vietcong, mostly righteous peasants.” Corry presents no example of anyone who denied that there were North Vietnamese troops in the south in November 1965, since there were none, even among the few

¹⁸ John Corry, NYT, 27 April 1985.

opponents of the war, who at that time and for several years after included very few representatives of mainstream liberalism. As noted earlier, principled objection to the war was a highly marginal phenomenon among American intellectuals even at the height of opposition to it. Corry's argument for North Vietnamese aggression, however, is as impressive as any that has been presented.

The NBC "White Paper" was one of a rash of retrospectives on the tenth anniversary of the war's end, devoted to "The War that Went Wrong, The Lessons it Taught."¹⁹ They present a sad picture of U.S. intellectual culture, a picture of dishonesty and moral cowardice. Their most striking feature is what is missing: the American wars in Indochina. It is a classic example of Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark. Apart from a few scattered sentences, the rare allusions to the war in these lengthy presentations are devoted to the suffering of the American invaders. The *Wall Street Journal*, for example, refers to "the \$180 million in chemical companies' compensation to Agent Orange victims" U.S. soldiers, not the South Vietnamese victims, whose suffering was and is vastly greater.²⁰ It is difficult to exaggerate the significance of these startling facts.

There is an occasional glimpse of reality. *Time* opens its inquiry by recalling the trauma of the American soldiers, facing an enemy that "dissolved by day into the villages, into the other Vietnamese. They maddened the Americans with the mystery of who they were the unseen man who shot from the tree line, or laid a wire across the trail with a Claymore mine at the other end, the mama-san who did the wash, the child concealing a grenade." No doubt one could find similar complaints in the Nazi press about the Balkans.

¹⁹ *Time*, 15 April 1985, 16–61.

²⁰ *WSJ*, 4 April 1985. An exception was *Newsweek*, 15 April 1985, which devoted four pages of its 33-page account to a report by Tony Clifton and Ron Moreau on the effects of the war on the "wounded land."

Indonesia (the most important "domino," short of Japan) while American liberals lauded the "dramatic changes" that took place there the most dramatic being the massacre of hundreds of thousands of landless peasants as a proof that we were right to defend South Vietnam by demolishing it, thus encouraging the Indonesian generals to prevent any rot from spreading there. In 1972, the U.S. backed the overthrow of Philippine democracy behind the "shield" provided by its successes in Indochina, thus averting the threat of national capitalism there with a terror-and-torture state on the preferred Latin American model. A move towards democracy in Thailand in 1973 evoked some concern, and a reduction in economic aid and increase in military aid in preparation for the military coup that took place with U.S. support in 1976. Thailand had a particularly important role in the U.S. regional system since 1954, when the National Security Council laid out a plan for subversion and eventual aggression throughout Southeast Asia in response to the Geneva Accords, with Thailand "as the focal point of U.S. covert and psychological operations," including "covert operations on a large and effective scale" throughout Indochina, with the explicit intention of "making more difficult the control by the Viet Minh of North Vietnam." Subsequently Thailand served as a major base for the U.S. attacks on Vietnam and Laos.³³

In short, the U.S. won a regional victory, and even a substantial local victory in Indochina, left in ruins. That the U.S. suffered a "defeat" in Indochina is a natural perception on the part of those of limitless ambition, who understand "defeat" to mean the achievement only of major goals, while certain minor ones remain beyond our grasp.

Postwar U.S. policy has been designed to ensure that the victory is maintained by maximizing suffering and oppression

³³ Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *Political Economy of Human Rights*, I (Boston: South End Press, 1979), chapter 4.

in Indochina”: how we “resist” the natives in their land, the *Times* does not explain.

That the U.S. lost the war in Indochina is “an inescapable fact” (*Wall Street Journal*), repeated without question throughout the retrospectives and in American commentary generally. When some doctrine is universally proclaimed without qualification, a rational mind will at once inquire as to whether it is true. In this case, it is false, though to see why, it is necessary to escape the confines of the propaganda system and to investigate the rich documentary record that lays out the planning and motives for the American war against the Indochinese, which persisted for almost 30 years. Those who undertake this task will discover that a rather different conclusion is in order.

The U.S. did not achieve its maximal goals in Indochina, but it did gain a partial victory. Despite talk by Eisenhower and others about Vietnamese raw materials, the primary U.S. concern was not Indochina, but rather the “domino effect,” the demonstration effect of successful independent development that might cause “the rot to spread” to Thailand and beyond, possibly ultimately drawing Japan into a “New Order” from which the U.S. would be excluded. This threat was averted. The countries of Indochina will be lucky to survive: they will not endanger global order by social and economic success in a framework that denies the West the freedom to exploit, infecting regions beyond, as had been feared. It might parenthetically be noted that although this interpretation of the American aggression is supported by substantial evidence, there is no hint of its existence, and surely no reference to the extensive documentation substantiating it, in the standard histories, since such facts do not conform to the required image of aggrieved benevolence. Again, we see here the operation of the Orwellian principle that Ignorance is Strength.

Meanwhile, the U.S. moved forcefully to buttress the second line of defense. In 1965, the U.S. backed a military coup in

The meaning of these facts is almost never perceived. *Time* goes so far as to claim that the “subversion” was “orchestrated” by Moscow, so that the U.S. had to send troops to “defend” South Vietnam, echoing the fantasies concocted in scholarship, for example, by Walt Rostow, who maintains that in his effort “to gain the balance of power in Eurasia,” Stalin turned “to the East, to back Mao and to enflame the North Korean and Indochinese Communists.”²¹ Few can comprehend surely not the editors of *Time* the significance of the analysis by the military command and civilian officials of the aggressors:

The success of this unique system of war depends upon almost complete unity of action of the entire population. That such unity is a fact is too obvious to admit of discussion: how it is brought about and maintained is not so plain. Intimidation has undoubtedly accomplished much to this end, but fear as the only motive is hardly sufficient to account for the united and apparently spontaneous action of several millions of people ... [The only collaborators are] intriguers, disreputable or ignorant, who we had rigged out with sometimes high ranks, which became tools in their hands for plundering the country without scruple... Despised, they possessed neither the spiritual culture nor the moral fibre that would have allowed them to understand and carry out their task.

The words are those of General Arthur McArthur describing the Philippine war of national liberation in 1900 and the French residentminister in Vietnam in 1897,²² but they apply

²¹ Walt W. Rostow, *The View from the Seventh Floor* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 244. On the facts concerning Indochina, see the documentation reviewed in *For Reasons of State*. Rostow’s account of Mao and North Korea is also fanciful, as the record of serious scholarship shows.

²² Cited in *American Power and the New Mandarins*, 253, 238.

with considerable accuracy to the U.S. war against Vietnam, as the Time quote illustrates, in its own way.

Throughout, the familiar convenient innocence served admirably, as in the days when we were “slaughtering the natives” in the Philippines, Latin America and elsewhere, preparing the way to “getting them to respect our intentions.” In February 1965, the U.S. initiated the regular bombardment of North Vietnam, and more significantly, as Bernard Fall observed, began “to wage unlimited aerial warfare inside [South Vietnam] at the price of literally pounding the place to bits,” the decision that “changed the character of the Vietnam war” more than any other.²³ These moves inspired the distinguished liberal commentator of the New York Times, James Reston, “to clarify America’s present and future policy in Vietnam”:

The guiding principle of American foreign policy since 1945 has been that no state shall use military force or the threat of military force to achieve its political objectives. And the companion of this principle has been that the United States would use its influence and its power, when necessary and where it could be effective, against any state that defied this principle.

This is the principle that was “at stake in Vietnam,” where “the United States is now challenging the Communist effort to seek power by the more cunning technique of military subversion” (the United States having blocked all efforts at political settlement because it knew the indigenous opposition would easily win a political contest, and after ten years of murderous repression and three years of U.S. Air Force bombing in the south).²⁴

²³ “Vietnam Blitz: A Report on the Impersonal War,” *New Republic*, 9 Oct. 1965, 19.

²⁴ James Reston, NYT, 26 Feb. 1965.

Vietnamese aggressors.”³⁰ As explained by the government’s leading specialist on Indochinese communism, now director of the Indochina archives at the University of California in Berkeley, Pol Pot was the “charismatic” leader of a “bloody but successful peasant revolution with a substantial residue of popular support,” under which “on a statistical basis, most [peasant] ... did not experience much in the way of butality.”³¹ Though the Times is outraged at the Prussian-style aggression that overthrew our current Khmer Rouge ally, and at the current Vietnamese insistence that a political settlement must exclude Pol Pot, the reader of its pages will find little factual material about any of these matters. There are, incidentally, countries that have “unleashed a series of pitiless attacks against their neighbors” in these years, for example, Israel, with its invasions of Lebanon in 1978 and 1982. But as an American client state, Israel inherits the right of aggression so that it does not merit the bitter criticism that Vietnam deserves for overthrowing Pol Pot; and in any event, its invasion of Lebanon was a “liberation,” as the *Times* explained at the time, always carefully excluding Lebanese opinion on the matter as obviously irrelevant.³²

The *Times* recognizes that the United States did suffer “shame” during its Indochina wars: “the shame of defeat.” Victory, we are to assume, would not have been shameful, and the record of aggression and atrocities supported by the Times obviously evokes no shame. Rather, the United States thought it was “resisting” Communists “when it intervened

³⁰ Nayan Chanda, “CIA No, US Aid Yes,” “Sihanouk Stonewalled,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 16 Aug. 1984, 16–18; 1 Nov. 1984, 30.

³¹ Douglas Pike, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 29 Nov. 1979; *Christian Science Monitor*, 4 Dec. 1979. Cited by Michael Vickery, *Cambodia* (Boston: South End Press, 1983), 65–6.

³² On Lebanese opinion and the scandalous refusal of the media to consider it, and the general context, see my *Fateful Triangle* (Boston: South End Press, 1983).

ways, scrupulously ignored. Critics of the anti-war movement are quoted on its “moral failure of terrifying proportions,” but those who opposed U.S. atrocities are given no opportunity to explain the basis for their opposition to U.S. aggression and massacre or to assign these critics and the *New York Times* their proper place in history, including those who regard themselves as “doves” because of their occasional twitters of protest when the cost to us became too great. We learn that the opponents of the war “brandished moral principles and brushed aside complexity,” but hear nothing of what they had to say exactly as was the case throughout the war. A current pretense is that the mainstream media were open to principled critics of the war during these years, indeed that they dominated the media. In fact, they were almost entirely excluded, as is easily demonstrated, and now we are permitted to hear accounts of their alleged crimes, but not, of course, their actual words, exactly as one would expect in a properly functioning system of indoctrination.

The *Times* informs us that Vietnam “now stands exposed as the Prussia of Southeast Asia” because since 1975 they have “unleashed a series of pitiless attacks against their neighbors,” referring to the Vietnamese invasion that overthrew the Pol Pot regime (after two years of border attacks from Cambodia), the regime that we now support despite pretenses to the contrary, emphasizing the “continuity” of the current Khmer Rouge-based coalition with the Pol Pot regime (see below). The Khmer Rouge receive “massive support” from our ally China, Nayan Chanda reports, while the U.S. has more than doubled its support to the coalition. Deng Xiaoping, expressing the Chinese stand (which we tacitly and materially support), states: “I do not understand why some want to remove Pol Pot. It is true that he made some mistakes in the past but now he is leading the fight against the

In November 1967, when Bernard Fall, long a committed advocate of U.S. support for the Saigon regime, pleaded for an end to the war because “Viet-Nam as a cultural and historic entity... is threatened with extinction .. [as] ... the countryside literally dies under the blows of the largest military machine ever unleashed on an area of this size,” Reston explained that America

is fighting a war now on the principle that military power shall not compel South Vietnam to do what it does not want to do, that man does not belong to the state. This is the deepest conviction of Western Civilization, and rests on the old doctrine that the individual belongs not to the state but to his Creator, and therefore, has “inalienable rights” as a person, which no magistrate or political force may violate.²⁵

The same touching faith in American innocence and benevolence in Indochina as elsewhere throughout our history persists until today in any commentary that can reach a substantial audience, untroubled by the plain facts. Much of the population understood and still remembers the truth, though this too will pass as the system of indoctrination erases historical memories and establishes the “truths” that are deemed more satisfactory.

By 1967, popular protest had reached a significant scale, although elite groups remained loyal to the cause, apart from the bombing of North Vietnam, which was regarded as a potential threat to us since it might lead to a broader war drawing in China and the USSR, from which we might not be immune the “toughest” question, according to the McNamara memo cited earlier, and the only serious question among

²⁵ Bernard Fall, *Last Reflections on a War* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967), 33, 47; James Reston, NYT, 24 Nov. 1967.

“respectable” critics of the war. The massacre of innocents is a problem only among emotional or irresponsible types, or among the “aging adolescents on college faculties who found it rejuvenating to play ‘revolution,’” in Stuart Chreighton Miller’s words. Decent and respectable people remain silent and obedient, devoting themselves to personal gain, concerned only that we too might ultimately face unacceptable threat a stance not without recent historical precedent elsewhere. In contrast to the war protestors, two commentators explain, “decent, patriotic Americans demanded and in the person of Ronald Reagan have apparently achieved a return to pride and patriotism, a reaffirmation of the values and virtues that had been trampled upon by the Vietnam-spawned counterculture,”²⁶ most crucially the virtues of marching in the parade chanting praises for their leaders as they conduct their necessary chores, as in Indochina and El Salvador.

The U.S. attack reached its peak of intensity and horror after the Tet offensive, with the post-Tet pacification campaigns actually mass murder operations launched against defenseless civilians, as in Operation Speedy Express in the Mekong Delta and mounting atrocities in Laos and Cambodia, called here “secret wars,” a technical term referring to executive wars that the press does not expose though it has ample evidence concerning them, and that are later denounced with much outrage, when the proper time has come, and attributed to evil men whom we have sternly excluded from the body politic, another sign of our profound decency and honor. By 1970, if not before, it was becoming clear that U.S. policy would “create a situation in which, indeed, North Vietnam will necessarily dominate Indochina, for no other viable society will remain.”²⁷ This predictable consequence of U.S. savagery would later be used as

²⁶ Allan E. Goodman and Seth P. Tillman, *NYT*, 24 March 1985.

²⁷ Chomsky, *At War with Asia* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), 286.

a post hoc justification for it, in another propaganda achievement that Goebbels would have admired.

It is a most revealing fact that there is no such event in history as the American attack against South Vietnam launched by Kennedy and escalated by his successors. Rather, history records only “a defense of freedom,”²⁸ a “failed crusade” (Stanley Karnow) that was perhaps unwise, the doves maintain. At a comparable level of integrity, Soviet party hacks extol the “defense of Afghanistan” against “bandits” and “terrorists” organized by the CIA. They, at least, can plead fear of totalitarian violence, while their Western counterparts can offer no such excuse for their servility.

The extent of this servility is revealed throughout the tenth anniversary retrospectives, not only by the omission of the war itself, but also by the interpretation provided. The *New York Times* writes sardonically of the “ignorance” of the American people, only 60 percent of whom are aware that the U.S. “sided with South Vietnam”²⁹ as Nazi Germany sided with France, as the USSR now sides with Afghanistan. Given that we were defending South Vietnam, it must be that the critics of this noble if flawed enterprise sided with Hanoi, and that is indeed what the Party Line maintains; that opposition to American aggression entails no such support, just as opposition to Soviet aggression entails no support for either the feudal forces of the Afghan resistance or Pakistan or the United States, is an elementary point that would not surpass the capacity of an intelligent ten-year old, though it inevitably escapes the mind of the commissar. The *Times* alleges that North Vietnam was “portrayed by some American intellectuals as the repository of moral rectitude.” No examples are given, nor is evidence presented to support these charges, and the actual record is, as al-

²⁸ Charles Krauthammer, “Isolationism, Left and Right,” *New Republic*, 4 March 1985, 18–25.

²⁹ *NYT*, 31 March 1985.