

# After the Cataclysm



# After the Cataclysm:

## Postwar Indochina and the Reconstruction of Imperial Ideology

The Political Economy of Human Rights  
Volume II

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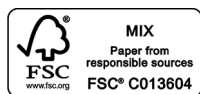
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# The Setting

## 1.1 The U.S. Impact on Indochina

The U.S. war in Indochina began as one of innumerable examples of counterrevolutionary intervention throughout the world. As a result of the wholly unanticipated level of resistance of the Vietnamese revolutionaries, and later their allies when the United States spread the war to the rest of Indochina, it was gradually transformed into one of the most destructive and murderous attacks on a civilian population in history, as the world's most powerful military machine was unleashed against peasant societies with extremely limited means of self-defense and lacking the capacity to strike back at the source of aggression.

The main outlines of the U.S. war are well documented. After World War II, the United States determined to back French imperialism in its effort to destroy what planners clearly recognized to be an indigenous nationalist movement in Vietnam, which declared independence in 1945 and vainly sought recognition and aid from the United States. The French-U.S. repacification effort failed. In 1954, France accepted a political settlement at Geneva, which, if adhered to by the United States, would have led to independence for the three countries of Indochina. Unwilling to accept the terms of this settlement, the United States undertook at once to subvert them. A client



regime was established in South Vietnam which immediately rejected the basic framework of the agreements, launched a fierce repression in the South, and refused to permit the elections to unify the two administrative zones of the country as laid down in the Geneva Accords (see Volume I, chapter 5). In the 1950s, the United States still hoped to be able to reconquer all of Vietnam; later, it limited its aims to maintaining control over South Vietnam and incorporating it into the Free World by any necessary means. Direct involvement of U.S. armed forces in military action against the South Vietnamese began in 1961-62.

Meanwhile in Laos the United States also successfully undermined the Geneva political settlement and prevented any sharing of power by the Pathet Lao, the left wing resistance forces that had fought the French and won the 1958 election despite a major U.S. effort to prevent this outcome. The United States then turned to subversion and fraud, setting off a civil war in which, as in South Vietnam, the right wing military backed by the United States was unable to hold its own. Meanwhile, Cambodia was able to maintain independence despite continual harassment by U.S. clients in Thailand and South Vietnam and an unsuccessful effort at subversion in the late 1950s.

By the early 1960s, virtually all parties concerned, apart from the United States and its various local clients, were making serious efforts to avoid an impending war by neutralizing South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia; that is, removing them from external (overwhelmingly U.S.) influence and control. Such an outcome was anathema to the U.S. leadership. President Johnson informed Ambassador Lodge in 1964 that his mission was "knocking down the idea of neutralization wherever it rears its ugly head." The United States was deeply concerned to prevent any negotiated political settlement because, as is easily documented, its planners and leaders assumed that the groups that they backed could not possibly survive peaceful competition.

Once again the United States succeeded in preventing a peaceful settlement. In South Vietnam, it stood in opposition to all significant political forces, however anti-Communist, imposing the rule of a military clique that was willing to serve U.S. interests. By January 1965, the United States was compelled to undermine its own puppet, General Khanh; he was attempting to form what Ambassador Taylor called a “dangerous” coalition with the Buddhists, who were not acting “in the interests of the Nation,” as General Westmoreland explained. What is more, Khanh was apparently trying to make peace with the NLF, quite possibly a factor that lay behind the elimination of his predecessors. At that point, the United States, which stood alone in understanding “the interests of the Nation” in South Vietnam, had no alternative but to extend its already substantial military campaign against the rural society of the South, where the overwhelming majority of the population lived. The United States therefore launched a full-scale invasion in a final effort to destroy the organized popular forces in the South. The invasion was accompanied by the bombing of North Vietnam, undertaken to lay some basis for the claim that the United States was “defending the South against external aggression,” and in the hope that the DRV would use its influence to bring the southern rebellion to a halt and permit the United States to attain its goals. This maneuver failed. The DRV responded by sending limited forces to the South, as most U.S. planners had anticipated. Meanwhile, the United States began the systematic bombing of South Vietnam, at three times the level of the more publicized—and more protested—bombing of the North.

The war also intensified in Laos, with U.S. bombing from 1964 and military operations by a “clandestine army” of Hmong tribesmen, organized and directed by the CIA to supplement the inept “official” army trained and armed by the U.S. military. U.S. outposts in northern Laos were guiding the bombing of North

Vietnam from Thai bases. By this time Thai and North Vietnamese forces were also engaged, though on a considerably smaller scale. By 1968, the United States was conducting a bombing campaign of extraordinary severity in northern Laos, far removed from the war in South Vietnam. By 1969 the sporadic U.S.-Saigon attacks on Cambodia had escalated to intensive bombardment, and after the coup of March, 1970, which overthrew the Sihanouk government, Cambodia too was plunged into the inferno. U.S.-Saigon military actions began two days after the coup and a full-scale invasion (called a "limited incursion") took place at the end of April—"limited," as it turned out, largely because of the unprecedented demonstration of protest in the United States. This invasion and the subsequent bombing, particularly in 1973, led to vast suffering and destruction throughout the country.

All of these efforts failed. In January 1973 the United States signed a peace treaty in Paris which virtually recapitulated the NLF program of the early 1960s. This was interpreted as a stunning diplomatic victory in the United States. The United States government announced at once that it would disregard every essential provision of this treaty, and proceeded to do so, attempting again to conquer South Vietnam, now through the medium of the vastly expanded military forces it organized, trained, advised, and supplied. In a most remarkable display of servility, the Free Press misrepresented the new agreement in accordance with the Kissinger-Nixon version, which was diametrically opposed to the text on every crucial point, thus failing to bring out the significance of the U.S.-Thieu subversion of the major elements of the agreement. This misrepresentation of the actual terms of the agreement set the stage for indignation at the North Vietnamese response and the sudden collapse of the puppet regime.<sup>1</sup>

All of these U.S. efforts dating back to the 1940s eventually failed. By April 1975, U.S. clients had been defeated in all parts

of Indochina, leaving incredible carnage, bitterness, and near insoluble problems of reconstruction. The United States thereafter refused reparations or aid, and exerted its considerable influence to block assistance from elsewhere. Even trade is blocked by the United States, in a striking display of malice.<sup>2</sup>

Historical comparisons are of only limited value—too many factors vary from case to case—but it nevertheless may be suggestive to compare the situation in Indochina after 1975 with that of Western Europe as World War II came to an end. Western Europe was, of course, a group of advanced industrial countries which had, furthermore, suffered much less damage than the peasant societies brutalized by the United States in Indochina. Nevertheless, substantial U.S. assistance was provided to reconstruct industrial capitalism and to tame the labor movement and the popular resistance forces.<sup>3</sup> The harsh winters of the early postwar years brought Great Britain almost to its knees, and years went by before the effects of the war in Western Europe were overcome. The early years were marked by brutal massacres, forced labor and “reeducation” for prisoners of war, and other measures of retribution. (See chapter 2, section 2.)

In Indochina, the problems of reconstruction after 1975 were incomparably more severe. The destruction of the land and the social structure far surpassed anything in the industrial democracies subjected to Nazi attack and occupation. There are still no reparations or aid from the United States, and only very limited assistance from elsewhere. The most severe natural catastrophes in many decades have caused further havoc, as have conflicts of an extremely serious nature between Vietnam and Cambodia, and Vietnam and China. These conflicts the United States regards with satisfaction. As Secretary of Defense Harold Brown explained in an address to the Trilateral Commission (composed of elite groups in the United States, Japan, and Western Europe), the Cambodia-Vietnam conflict “does take the

pressure off ASEAN [the U.S. Southeast Asian allies]" while in the long run the "Vietnamese attempts at minor league hegemonism is [sic] likely to preoccupy the Communist powers in Southeast Asia for some time to come."<sup>4</sup> These conflicts are also helpful to U.S. policy by further impeding the difficult tasks of reconstruction and creating still more destruction in the lands ravaged by the U.S. military machine.

Vast social changes are imperative in Indochina to overcome centuries of injustice and oppression exacerbated by French colonialism, with its brutal and destructive impact on the peasant society, little recognized or appreciated in the West. Still more urgent, even a matter of sheer survival, is the need to return to the countryside the millions of people driven into urban concentrations by U.S. violence. The artificial Western implantations which survived on a foreign dole must be dismantled, and quickly, if the population is to survive. On this matter, all competent authorities agree. It is difficult to imagine how the task might be accomplished without considerable further suffering and disruption under the best of circumstances. Certainly, the far wealthier Western societies, which had suffered much less from World War II, would have had great difficulty in dealing with their far more limited problems without enormous foreign assistance, and would no doubt have been compelled to resort to Draconian measures.

It is worth noting that despite their enormous wealth and advantage, the Western powers have never conceived of undertaking serious programs directed to the welfare of the impoverished majority in the underdeveloped countries under their domination and influence, and would have no idea how to proceed even if, in some stunning reversal of history, they were to devote themselves to these ends. While Western elites are always keen to denounce injustice beyond their reach—from their position of privilege that derives from centuries of brutal exploitation—the task of overcoming

degradation and poverty within their own realms merits nothing more than occasional rhetorical flights, and they have demonstrated their talents and concern primarily in devising new forms of brutality and oppression when their own interests are threatened.

Under existing conditions, it is not clear that the tasks facing the postwar regimes in Indochina can be accomplished at all. By the standards of Western European or U.S. history, one should expect brutality, oppression, and recurrent warfare as these problems are confronted.

While the countries of Indochina face their perhaps insuperable tasks, the United States and its allies have tasks as well. One is to reconstruct recent history so as to present their past role in a better light. A second is to ensure that the countries that have freed themselves from Western dominion face harsh and severe conditions. The reasons are primarily two: to teach the lesson that exit from the Free World in the interest of national autonomy is the worst fate that a subject people can endure, and to provide a *post hoc* justification for U.S. intervention by showing the awful consequences of its defeat. It is obvious that the most severe consequences have followed directly from the original U.S. intervention. It is beyond question that Indochina would be a far happier place if the United States had refrained from backing the French imperial conquest, or had been willing to accept the political settlement of 1954, the neutralization proposals advanced by everyone from de Gaulle to the NLF in 1962-64, or the Paris Accords of 1973. It is both irrational and deeply immoral for the propaganda systems of the West to pretend that Western sensibilities are shocked by postwar atrocities and suffering, a transparent effort to efface its own record of barbarism—primarily, though not solely, that of the leader of the Free World. But total irrationality has never offered much of an impediment to propagandists in the past, and as we shall see, it is no more of a problem in the present case. As usual, a fair degree of fabrication and deceit also comes

in handy. Given the monolithic character of the media and scholarship, which tolerate little dissent, these efforts have achieved extraordinary success.

We will now turn to a more detailed discussion of some particular aspects of this amazing story and will see how these various themes run their predictable course in connection with each of the countries of Indochina, observing how the West is proceeding to come to terms with its crimes. In the course of this discussion, we will also consider some relevant background.

## 1.2 The United States in Vietnam: A Partial Victory

The war in Vietnam ended with a defeat for U.S. imperial violence, but only a partial defeat—a significant fact. The U.S. Expeditionary Force of over half a million men in South Vietnam became “a drugged, mutinous and demoralised rabble”<sup>5</sup> and was withdrawn. U.S. leaders had painfully learned a lesson familiar to their predecessors: a conscript army is ill-suited to fight a colonial war with its inevitable barbarism and incessant atrocities against helpless civilians. Such a war is better left to hired killers such as the French Foreign Legion or native mercenaries, or in the modern period to an advanced technology that leaves some psychic distance between the murderers and their victims—although even B-52 pilots reportedly began to object when Nixon and Kissinger dispatched them to devastate Hanoi in December, 1972 in a final effort to compel the North Vietnamese to accept a U.S.-dictated peace.<sup>6</sup>

The United States was never able to construct a viable Quisling government or organize local forces capable of maintaining the U.S. creation against its Vietnamese enemies. As Richard West remarks, “when the Communists launched their attack in March 1975 they were still outnumbered by more than three to one in manpower and still more in equipment, in spite of the claims to the contrary issued from Saigon,” but “the South”—

that is, the U.S. client regime and its supporters—had “simply lost the will to go on fighting.” Historian Joseph Buttinger comments that its “swift and dramatic collapse...was not the result of an overwhelming attack by superior military forces” and “came about because of the degree of moral disintegration the South Vietnamese army had reached in 1975” which “in turn reflected the degree of moral and political decay to which South Vietnamese society had sunk after years of increasing political terror, mass misery and corruption”<sup>7</sup>—that is, after years of U.S. “nation-building” efforts. As seen by T.D. Allman, one of the most outstanding of the war correspondents for many years, the U.S. policy of refugee generation created

what Senator Fulbright called “a society of prostitutes and mercenaries”—and the caricature of civilisation produced in South Vietnam by the American way of war is what now accounts for the collapse of a state that never had any economic, political or social basis except that provided by the Americans. The South Vietnamese soldiers fleeing an enemy which has not yet attacked and trying to push their motor bikes on to U.S. ships sum up the product of American “nation-building”—a militarist society with nothing worth fighting for; a consumer society that produces nothing; a nation of abandoned women conditioned to flee to the next handout of US surplus rice; of dispossessed gangs hitching rides on US planes to the next jerry-built urban slum.<sup>8</sup>

The speed and character of the collapse of the Saigon regime came as a surprise even to the usually well-informed leadership in Hanoi, and even more so to Washington, where it had been “optimistically” proclaimed not long before that the regime that the United States continued to support in violation of the scrap of paper signed in Paris in January, 1973 was successfully eliminating the parallel and equivalent authority in the South (the PRG) with which it was pledged to accommodate, and would be able to withstand any military response to its program of undermining the Paris Accords by force and violence.<sup>9</sup>



But the U.S. defeat was only partial. To understand events in postwar Vietnam it is important to recognize that the United States did in effect win the war in the South. It did not quite succeed in realizing the grim prediction of Bernard Fall that “Vietnam 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.”<sup>10</sup> But it came close. As the full power of the U.S. expeditionary force was let loose against the South in the following years, there was substantial success in “grinding the enemy down by sheer weight and mass” in the accurate words of pacification chief Robert (“Blowtorch”) Komer.<sup>11</sup>

The southern-based indigenous resistance, which had called for the independence and neutrality of South Vietnam at a time when the U.S. client regime (and its sponsor) firmly rejected any such outcome, was virtually destroyed, as was the peasant society in which it had taken hold. Hence both the military and political phases of the struggle fell under the control of North Vietnam, viciously attacked, with a large part of its above-ground physical structures destroyed, but never crushed as a viable society. Frank Snepp, one of the top CIA analysts of Vietnamese affairs in the latter years of the war, writes: “At the time of the Communist victory the party apparatus in the south was in shambles, thanks in part to the depredations of the Phoenix Program. The [North Vietnamese] army thus remained the primary instrument of control.”<sup>12</sup> This consequence of the U.S. war provided a propaganda victory for Western hypocrites, who could now maintain on the basis of the direct results of the U.S. assault that the United States was obviously now “defending South Vietnam from aggression from Hanoi.”

The propaganda institutions have, needless to say, lost no time in exploiting their advantage. To select one of numerous examples, the *New York Times*, in an editorial concerned with what is “to be learned now from Indochina,” writes: “In Vietnam,