

Reconciling Perspectives: A Study of the Vietnam War

The Vietnam War calls so much into question. A foundational question is “Whose War was it?” Americans think of it as our War. Two million killed Vietnamese would disagree. Could we have won it? Would opponents of the War have opposed it if they knew that the enemy regularly committed savage atrocities in trying to unite Vietnam on Stalinist principles? Would supporters have supported it if they knew that our South Vietnam ally forced peasants into hamlets encased in barbed wire so that we could later shoot on sight anyone found within the evacuated areas? How would draftees’ families have felt if they knew that many draftees were issued M16 rifles that routinely jammed in combat and were used as “bait” to attract enemy fire in a war that U.S. analysts feared could not be won? How would voters have voted if they knew that Presidents Johnson and Nixon were lying? Can we reconcile a General’s view that “we went into Vietnam with a great army, and finished with a terrible one,” with a soldier’s view that “The U.S. Army was like a mother who sold out her kids to be raped by father to protect her own interests”?

The War had many vivid contradictions. Marines, ordered to hold Khe Sanh at all cost, did so, at great cost. Then we levelled our base and left. Our Army fought fiercely for 10 days to take Hill 937. Then we left, giving it back. U.S. Command hoped to kill so many enemy that they would stop fighting; most soldiers simply hoped to make it to DEROS (Date Estimated Return from Overseas). As company-level officers acquired 6 months of key combat experience, we replaced them. Helicopters sometimes shot at peasants as enemy guerrillas waved. Our bombing damaged our international prestige more than the enemy’s fighting ability. While favoring democracy we supported 4 military coups in South Vietnam. We won the Tet offensive; then many Americans turned against the War.

Opposition to the War was part of a cultural transformation in which activist Americans challenged many conventional views. One view was that fighting in Vietnam was critical for America to uphold our identity as the world’s steadfast leader against Communist aggression. While many thought this a worthy cause, and while some felt it justified our doing anything necessary to win, others felt that it did not justify the extreme destruction and killing caused by our massive use of agent orange, napalm, and high explosives.

The essence of any war, even a war motivated by a dire geopolitical purpose, is killing. And a bitter reality is that killing profoundly affects those doing the killing. In Vietnam this included some Americans who found themselves killing civilians whose freedom they were there to protect. Another bitter reality is that living in terror--of enemy ambushes, of mines and trip-wired booby traps, of children throwing grenades--profoundly affects the terrorized. Many profoundly affected Americans returned home from such bitter realities, some traumatized by what they saw or what they did, to find themselves regarded not as protectors of America, but as weaponized instruments of a deceitful government.

Gen. David Petraeus calls the Vietnam War “the most divisive and disastrous conflict in American history.” We shall attempt to reconcile its divisiveness by examining what did occur in

Vietnam and in America, and by determining why things occurred as they did. We shall consider compelling issues, find fine people, and uncover uplifting stories.

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Fridays: 10:00 a.m. to noon, 8 weeks: September 25 through November 13

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