

**OTHERS SAY** TOM PALAIMA  
Special Contributor

# VIEWPOINTS

## We held summit, but we've yet to learn lessons of Vietnam War

What starts at the University of Texas is supposed to change the world. Last month, a Vietnam War Summit was held at the LBJ Presidential Library on the UT campus. Since then, I



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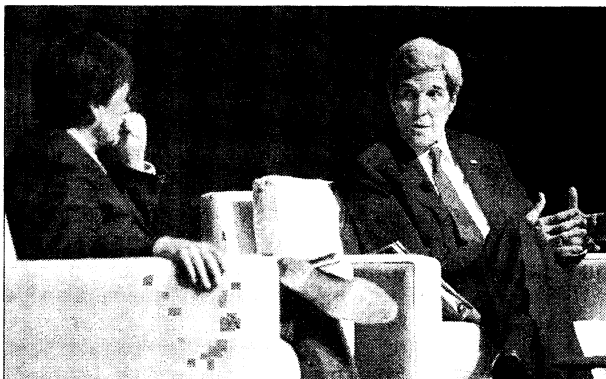
have been talking and corresponding with wise friends and colleagues, with veterans, with students,

thinking, rethinking, sometimes talking out loud to myself, other times staring into space, trying to make sense of the Vietnam War Summit in moral terms. I cannot.

What takes place at a summit will only change our world according to the terms set and the intentions of the participants involved. We have to ask who is at the table, what they hope to achieve, what they will even permit themselves to accomplish.

Let me begin with the truly mournful words of an Australian infantryman among the 23,000 who were killed in five months during the first Battle of the Somme in World War I: "For Christ's sake, write a book on the life of an infantryman. By doing so you will quickly prevent these shocking tragedies."

This poor, long dead Aussie soldier imagined that honest accounts like E.B. Sledge's "With the Old Breed at Peleliu and Okinawa," a book that literally haunted famed British military historian John Keegan, would, in the words of eminent American war scholar Paul Fussell, be "hard to forget." We would, thought Fussell, "not easily brush away its troubling revelations." We would never again send teenage boys — and now girls — off to fight and die in unnecessary



Filmmaker Ken Burns and Secretary of State John Kerry speak during the summit. JAY JANNER / AMERICAN-STATESMAN

wars. We would not escalate disproportionately the wars we fight.

If that Aussie soldier were alive today, he might pin his hopes on summits. What might he be saying about the Vietnam War Summit?

Former Secretary of State and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger said he was honored "to participate in a conference which is needed to heal wounds of the debate about Vietnam." Kissinger says, "heal wounds of the debate," as if those are the wounds that matter.

The real wounds are not to the intellectual egos, the public reputations, the historical legacies or even the moral and philosophical beliefs and political positions of those who were involved directly or indirectly in decision-making about the Vietnam War. The wounds that matter are the physical wounds that killed between 1.2 and 3.2 million Vietnamese soldiers and civilians between 1955 and 1975. Over 58,000 American soldiers lost their lives.

When Secretary of State John Kerry tweeted from the Vietnam War Summit, "If we forget, we cease to learn," what did he mean? He surely has never forgotten. Why then has he not learned and applied the

lesson that drone strikes will not defeat an enemy any more than bombers and phantom jets dropping 7 million tons of bombs on what President Lyndon B. Johnson called "a raggedy-ass, little fourth-rate country?"

Missing from the summit were the consciences of two courageous political leaders whose forthright views got them killed in 1968 on a hotel balcony in Memphis and a hotel kitchen in Los Angeles:

■ **Robert F. Kennedy, Feb. 8, 1968:** "Whatever the outcome of these battles, it is the people we seek to defend who are the greatest losers. Nor does it serve the interests of America to fight this war as if moral standards could be subordinated to immediate necessities."

■ **Martin Luther King Jr., April 4, 1967:** "All the while the people [of Vietnam] read our leaflets and received the regular promises of peace and democracy and land reform. Now they languish under our bombs and consider us, not their fellow Vietnamese, the real enemy."

We have forgotten their words of truth and have ceased to learn from them. Our world is not changing.

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