



A War Remembered: The Vietnam War Summit at the LBJ Presidential Library ed. Mark K. Updegrave.

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A War Remembered has been touted by its publisher as a “companion volume to a 2016 summit hosted by the LBJ Presidential Library [that] explores the lessons and legacy of America’s most divisive war, including the perspectives of luminaries such as US Secretaries of State Henry Kissinger and John Kerry.”¹ Let the buyer beware. The designations “summit” and “luminaries” and mention of former high government officials suggest the conference (26–28 Apr. 2016) was a peculiar kind of public-relations event. It seems to have been convened to maintain historical legacies and reputations (for example, of Lyndon Baines Johnson) while preserving the concept of ineradicable American exceptionalism to explain why the Vietnam War (called the “American War” by the Vietnamese who lived through it or died in their millions) played out as it did, with the United States winning the body count competition by a staggeringly wide margin.

Although at the conference there were full sessions with expert panelists and moderators on the bloody battle of Ia Drang, the physical and psychological trauma that Vietnam veterans still suffer long after their “bitter, often hostile reception” back home, the rifts torn among the American people, the impact of coverage of the war by print and photo journalists, the daily realities of fighting the war, and the music soldiers listened to while in country, these subjects are largely omitted from the published volume apart from brief remarks in photo captions. *A War Remembered* highlights the conflict’s afterlife in the memories or reconstructions promulgated by big-wigs.

Some 161 of the book’s 260+ pages contain photos and captions only or text with inserted photos. Many of these society-page-style images are of the summit’s participants and LBJ foundation trustees. Only four of the sixty participants were Vietnamese, of whom three now live in the United States: Texas state legislator Hubert Vo, Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer Nick Ut, and Tommy Hodihn, CEO of a Texas-based global software company, who at age fourteen witnessed US Marines landing at Da Nang. Oddly, only Vo is identified as an “emigrant.” Pham Quang Vinh, ambassador of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam to the United States, gave the closing speech of the summit—“America and Vietnam in the Twenty-First Century: A New Beginning”—focusing on normalized diplomatic relations between the two countries beginning in 1995.

This glaring imbalance in the ranks of the summiteers drew strong criticism at the start of the event from the longtime University of Texas classical philosopher, humanist, and Vietnam veteran Paul Woodruff:

The Vietnam Summit at the LBJ Presidential Library claims to be an unvarnished look at the Vietnam War. But in fact its design reflects the same racist myopia as the war itself; there is virtually

1. See Univ. of Texas Press website.

nothing on the program about Vietnamese points of view or on the effect of the war on the people of Vietnam. We memorialize the 5[8],000 American soldiers who died in Vietnam, but what about the Vietnamese civilians who were killed in the war—well over a million? What about the hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese troops, allied with us, who were killed? Or the millions of refugees who had to flee when the U.S. cut off military support, breaking a solemn promise to the government of South Vietnam? Now, over 60 years later, with over a million refugees from Vietnam living among us, we still think of the Vietnam War as all about us—and the program of this summit reflects that.²

The myopia of the organizers and the participants goes beyond what Woodruff terms the “racist” neglect of the complicated cultural, political, historical, economic, and strategic aspects of the Vietnamese side of the story to a disregard for the critical errors made by the civil and military leaders who directed the American conduct of the war. The same is true of the ten-part documentary, *The Vietnam War*, whose producers, filmmakers Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, and volume editor Mark Updegrave spend seventeen pages of *A War Remembered* in a rambling discussion of the series fully *sixteen months* before its release.³

During the history of the Vietnam War, presidents/commanders in chief, secretaries of defense, secretaries of state, and other State Department officials, ambassadors, national security advisers, intelligence agency operatives, generals, Congress-members, and sundry other “luminaries” within and outside the US government consistently made decisions based on their own political and career interests, while yet (in their own minds) addressing perceived Cold War geopolitical threats to US national well-being and showing little regard for whatever ethical standards are expected of the nation’s leaders.

What exactly are the lessons of the war in Vietnam for high-level decision-makers in the US civilian government and the military? What lessons has it taught the American people, who, in theory, can use them to elect the right people into office? Judging from the pronouncements of the political and cultural celebrities put forward in *A War Remembered*, the answer is precious few. Stunningly, the participants speak of lessons to be learned and applied *now*, forty-three years since the fall of Saigon. Bob Kerrey in his blunt, principled, and constructive epilogue is explicit:

I’m not certain we learned any lessons from the Vietnam War.... Very few of our elected leaders today will understand [its] history. And truth be told, American executive or legislative branch officials rarely provide historical context of any kind when answering foreign policy or national security questions. And that’s because voters equate weakness with explanation of subtle historical nuance. Voters in particular do not like to be told that their ideological conclusions are based upon the sands of ignorance. (207)

Kerrey then identifies two miserably tragic American actions during the Vietnam War: our “betrayal of an ally we promised we would never abandon [and] the bloody tactic chosen by the United States to attempt to defeat North Vietnam and its insurgent forces” (208). Only fleeting references to elements of this “bloody tactic” appear in *A War Remembered*. In a sincere, personally grounded foreword to the book (xi–xv), Jan Scruggs, the driving force behind the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington DC, notes that American aircraft dropped seven million tons of bombs and twenty million gallons of the Agent Orange defoliant on Vietnam (less than half the

2. “Views on Vietnam: Racism and the Vietnam Summit,” *Austin American Statesman* (26 Apr. 2016).

3. For cogent evaluations of the shortcomings of the series, see the ten critical essays in *Diplomatic History* 42 (2018) 377–483.

size of Texas) and, covertly and deceitfully, parts of Laos and Cambodia. By contrast, Allied bombers unleashed 3.4 million tons of bombs altogether in the European and Pacific theaters of the Second World War. The Vietnam statistics, Scruggs manages to say flatly, “illustrate that this was an all-out effort.... More than a million Vietnamese lost their lives, far more” (xii-xiii).

In his speech, Ambassador Vinh gives us an accurate reckoning of the terrible costs of the American War in his country:

we were forced to defend our national independence and freedom with untold suffering, and the painful legacies of war persisted until today. During the war, three million dead, four million injured and handicapped, 4.8 million exposed to dioxin and Agent Orange, hundreds of thousands still missing. (166)

John Kerry once called the war a “most profound failure of diplomatic spirit, insight, and political vision.” Here, he says vaguely, “there were mistakes in leadership, mistakes in communication, mistakes in strategy” (120); the wording smacks of Kissinger’s (and many another politician’s) self-serving use of the exculpatory passive voice: “And I think ... there were ... mistakes were made” (62). The leaders who planned and directed the Vietnam War made those mistakes, sometimes for less than honorable reasons, contrary to the trope that mistakes “just happen.” Our ally’s key political and military leaders were assassinated in 1963. Between 1964 and 1973, our bombers flew 580,000 secret sorties, dropping 2.5 million tons of explosives on a country the United States was not even “at war” with. When American leaders were publicly questioned about it, they denied it. Are we speaking here of one mistake or 580,000?⁴ Walt Rostow, whom John F. Kennedy marginalized as a purveyor of ideas “not merely unsound, but dangerously so,” was made a key adviser on the war by Lyndon Johnson. He advocated bombing, bombing, bombing, despite evidence that both in Europe during World War II and in Vietnam as the war continued, bombing did little to break the enemy’s morale.⁵

Kerry also speaks of the American commitment to “searching for the remains of our fallen troops,” and the noble cooperation of the people and government of Vietnam in these efforts, “even as the vast majority of their [soldiers]—a million strong probably—would never be found” (123).

None of the summit’s participants even hints at the magnitude of devastation in Vietnam and its lasting effects on the lives of survivors. Seven million dead or injured and handicapped. Nearly five million exposed to toxic chemical agents. One million bodies unrecovered. All from a population in 1970 of ca. 43 million. Equivalent figures for the US population at the time would be 33.4 million dead, injured, or handicapped and 4.75 million bodies unrecovered. The United States lost 440,000 soldiers during all of World War II. Kissinger is right: since the 1870s, the United States has suffered no long-term effects of wars waged on American soil (63). So Americans fail to grasp the consequences when their government’s actions make it what Martin Luther King Jr. called “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world.”

The staggering losses in Vietnam should have prompted urgent public investigations of the decisions by American leaders and elected representatives that caused such an atrocity. In the documentary *The Fog of War*,⁶ former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara recalls that Gen. Curtis LeMay once said of the US fire-bombing of Japanese cities (213,000 killed, not counting

4. See, further, Palaima, “Are the Lessons from Vietnam Lost?” *Austin American Statesman* (28 May 2016).

5. See Palaima, “Never Look Back,” *Texas Observer* (30 May 2008).

6. Subtitle: *Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (2003), dir. Errol Morris.

120,000 slain in Hiroshima and Nagasaki), “If we’d lost the war, we’d all have been prosecuted as war criminals.” McNamara admits, “And I think he’s right. He, and I’d say I, were behaving as war criminals. LeMay recognized that what he was doing would be thought immoral if his side had lost. But what makes it immoral if you lose and not immoral if you win?” LeMay was, of course, never called to account and McNamara did not live to attend the Vietnam summit. As for the Americans’ ultimate abandonment of their Vietnamese allies, Jan Scruggs makes it all seem so agentless, natural, and free of lethal consequences: “In 1975, the conclusion was at hand. Tanks rolled into Saigon with the South Vietnamese army laying down its arms” (xiii).

Readers of *A War Remembered* should also turn (or turn again) to Barbara Tuchman’s *The March of Folly*.⁷ Specifically, its fifth chapter forthrightly assigns blame for wrong decisions and suppression or neglect of good information in favor of bad. It also calls out the political cowardice and careerism that kept his advisers from challenging LBJ’s selfish political fear of being “the first President of the United States to lose a war.” They should also read Kimly Ngoun’s review of Bao Ninh’s *The Sorrow of War* (1996),⁸ a now classic account of what North Vietnamese soldiers went through during the American War. Ninh himself was one of only ten survivors of his five-hundred-“man” North Vietnamese Youth Brigade. According to Ngoun,

The Sorrow of War does not criticize or bias [sic] against any political ideology whether the communist Vietnam or the United States. ... The novel portrays the tremendous destructive effect of war on human beings, nature, and each individual person. The war destroys a person’s hope, dream, and future. It causes separation, sorrow and great despair.⁹

Each of the seven million Vietnamese killed or injured in the war was someone’s son or daughter, father or mother, brother or sister, husband or wife.

Among the abundant photographs in *A War Remembered*, none shows the physical destruction inflicted on Vietnam by US forces’ bombs, chemical agents, artillery, grenades, and rifle fire. One might imagine that only Vietnamese harmed Vietnamese (in one case by accident!). Nick Ut’s Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph of a young girl burned by American napalm appears only in small-scale on an overhead screen in a photo of a discussion of it by conference participants (109). Eddie Adams’s (also Pulitzer Prize-winning) photo, “Saigon Execution,” shows the chief of South Vietnam’s National Police blowing the brains out of a captured Viet Cong officer (112–13). A small photo is captioned “Vietnamese troops look helplessly on as a Vietnamese mother and young daughter weep over a dead baby, shot accidentally” (91). The baby is small and in the shadows and hard to pick out.

Two photos show each a single American soldier with a harrowed and taut face (8, 21). Otherwise, American troops appear only in good health, fit and trim physically and psychologically, even when in hospitals and standing on crutches. Whether in formation or during photo-op visits by LBJ (154–155, 188–99), they appear in groups, clean, neatly attired, happy, smiling, upbeat. In a rare exception, we see a black paratrooper assisting a white comrade with a head wound (152–53). Other soldiers are shown at rest and even looking rather bored, while manning a machine gun at Khe Sanh (110–11), relaxing in a tank hatch with a puppy (93), lounging together on the long exterior of a tank (83), and standing bare-chested and defiantly in full physical prime giving the black power salute (92). American tanks and artillery are never shown in action. One image shows chil-

7. Subtitle: *From Troy to Vietnam* (NY: Knopf, 1984) 234–377.

8. Subtitle: *A Novel of North Vietnam* [1991], trans. Phan Thanh Hao (NY: Pantheon, 1995).

9. *Mekong Journal* 3.2 (2009) 174.

dren in 1985 clambering on an abandoned tank as if it were a set of monkey bars in a playground (167). Oh, what a happy war!

Mark Updegrave's interview with Henry Kissinger (45–68) is notable for missed opportunities. He asks Kissinger (59–60) about a handwritten memo President Nixon wrote him declaring that, after ten years of bombing in Laos and Vietnam, “the result = Zilch. There is something wrong with the strategy or the air force,” contradicting his statement the night before in a televised CBS interview that the bombings “have been very, very effective. I think their effectiveness will be demonstrated.” Kissinger passes off the memo as written “in frustration, under constant pressure,” to be disregarded because Nixon “slightly exaggerated what he said publicly, and he usually exaggerated his frustration in a handwritten note.” Later, however, he says that Nixon “hated personal confrontation” and often spoke ambiguously person-to-person. “But ... in any written extract, you could rely on what he was saying.” Clearly, Nixon lied on national television and Kissinger is speaking out of both sides of his mouth. But Updegrave lets it pass.

In answering the question “What is the biggest lesson we should draw from the war in Vietnam ...?” Kissinger stresses that Americans are out of touch owing to their geographical separation from the sanguinary consequences of wars fought elsewhere in the world. He then declares: “So to answer your question: We’ve been involved in five wars since World War II, which we in effect have lost.... So if you enter a war, you should do it for objectives you can state, and if you cannot describe objectives you can sustain, you shouldn’t enter it” (63). The five (effectively) lost wars must be those waged in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq (Desert Storm, the Gulf War victory that never was),¹⁰ Afghanistan, and Iraq again, which President Barack Obama once called “dumb,” but later pronounced a “historic” and “extraordinary achievement” by American troops. Thus we have the spectacle of a brilliant statesman, for fifty years America’s premiere practitioner of realpolitik, baldly asserting that the United States has lost five wars its citizens were told they had won. And *no one* asks a follow-up question!

A War Remembered is by design and in final form more a keepsake, a souvenir purveying a positive illusion, than a cold, hard, salutary assessment, forty-some years on, of the grim details of all that US political and military leaders and the American people got wrong in Vietnam and what lessons may be drawn now and in the future from those mistakes.

10. See, further, James A. Warren, “The Gulf War Victory That Never Was,” *Daily Beast* (n.d.).