

Chapter Four

THE REMAKING OF HISTORY (1975)

groups. Therefore the public must be aroused by jingoist appeals, or at least kept disciplined and submissive, if American force is to be readily available for global management.

Here lies the task for the intelligentsia. If it is determined that we must, say, invade the Persian Gulf for the benefit of mankind, then there must be no emotional or moral objections from the unsophisticated masses, and surely no vulgar display of protest. The ideologists must guarantee that no "wrong lessons" are learned from the experience of the Indochina war and the resistance to it.

During the Vietnam war a vast gap opened between the nation's ideologists and a substantial body of public opinion. This gap must be closed if the world system is to be managed properly in coming years. Thus we are enjoined to "avoid recriminations," and serious efforts will be made to restrict attention to questions that have no significance or long-term implications. It will be necessary to pursue the propaganda battle with vigor and enterprise to reestablish the basic principle that the use of force by the United States is legitimate, if only it can succeed.

If America's Vietnam "intervention" is understood, as it properly must be, as a major crime against peace, then an ideological barrier will be erected against the future use of U.S. force for global management. Hence those who are committed to the founding principles of American imperialism must ensure that such questions are never raised. They may concede the stupidity of American policy, and even its savagery, but not the illegitimacy inherent in the entire enterprise, the fact that this was a war of aggression waged by the United States, first against South Vietnam, and then the rest of Indochina. These issues must be excluded from current and future debate over the "lessons of the debacle," because they go directly to the crucial matter of the resort to force and violence to guarantee a certain vision of global order.

Pursuit of the forbidden questions leads to examination of the origins and causes of the American war. Elaborate documentation is now available, and the conclusions indicated seem to me fairly clear. It was feared—under the plausible assumptions of the more rational versions of the "domino theory"—that Communist social and economic success in Indochina might cause "the rot to spread" to the rest of mainland Southeast Asia and perhaps beyond, to Indonesia and South Asia as well. In internal policy documents, the war planners wasted little time on the lurid variants of the domino the-

AMERICAN IMPERIALISM has suffered a stunning defeat in Indochina. But the same forces are engaged in another war against a much less resilient enemy, the American people. Here, the prospects for success are much greater. The battleground is ideological, not military. At stake are the lessons to be drawn from the American war in Indochina; the outcome will determine the course and character of new imperial ventures.

As the American-imposed regime in Saigon finally collapsed, Japan's leading newspaper, *Asahi Shimbun*, made the following editorial comment:

The war in Vietnam has been in every way a war of national emancipation. The age in which any great power can suppress indefinitely the rise of nationalism has come to an end.

The comment on the war in Vietnam is fairly accurate. The projection for the future, far too optimistic.

The question is a critical one. The great powers surely do not take the American failure in Vietnam as an indication that they can no longer use force to "suppress the rise of nationalism." In fact, during the period of its Vietnam debacle, the United States achieved some notable successes elsewhere, for example in Indonesia, Brazil, Chile, and the Dominican Republic. And the lessons of Vietnam surely do not teach our partners in détente that they must relax their brutal grip on their imperial domains.

Apologists for state violence understand very well that the general public has no real stake in imperial conquest and domination. The public costs of empire may run high, whatever the gains to dominant social and economic

ory served up to terrorize the public. What concerned them primarily was the demonstration effect, what was sometimes characterized as "ideological successes."

An egalitarian, modernizing revolutionary movement in one area might serve as a model elsewhere. The long-term effects, it was feared, might go so far as an accommodation between Japan, the major industrial power of the East, and Asian countries that had exorcised themselves from the U.S.-dominated global system. The end effect would be as if the United States had lost the Pacific war, which had been fought, in part, to prevent Japan from creating a "new order" from which the United States would be effectively excluded. Certainly the issues are more complex; I have examined them elsewhere in more detail.¹ But this, I think, is the heart of the matter.

It is possible to condemn American imperialism and yet remain within the framework of official ideology. This can be achieved by explaining imperialism in terms of some abstract "will to power and dominion," again, a neutral category that does not relate to the actual structure of our social and economic system. Thus, an opponent of the Vietnam war can write that "American involvement in Vietnam represented, more than anything else, the triumph of an expansionist and imperial interest"; "America's interventionist and counterrevolutionary policy is the expected response of an imperial power with a vital interest in maintaining an order that, apart from the material benefits this order confers, has become synonymous with the nation's vision of its role in history." But his criticism is not labeled "irresponsible" by mainstream scholarship and commentary, for he adds that "in the manner of all imperial visions, the vision of a preponderant America was solidly rooted in the will to exercise dominion over others, however benign the intent of those who entertained the vision." The criticism is responsible because it presupposes benign intent and does not explore the nature of this "dominion," which may therefore be understood as some socially neutral trait.² A threat to dominant ideology arises only when this "will to exercise dominion" is analyzed in terms of its specific social and economic components and is related to the actual structure of power and control over institutions in American society.³ One who raises these further questions must be excluded from polite discourse, as a "radical" or "Maximist" or "economic determinist" or "conspiracy theorist," not a sober commentator on serious issues.

In short, there are ideologically permissible forms of opposition to imperial aggression. One may criticize the intellectual failures of planners, their

moral failures, and even the generalized and abstract "will to exercise dominion" to which they have regrettably, but so understandably succumbed. But the principle that the United States may exercise force to guarantee a certain global order that will be "open" to the penetration and control of transnational corporations—that is beyond the bounds of polite discourse.

Accordingly, the American intelligentsia now face several major tasks. They must rewrite the history of the war to disguise the fact that it was, in essence, an American war against South Vietnam, a war of annihilation that spilled over to the rest of Indochina. And they must obscure the fact that this aggression was constrained and hampered by a mass movement of protest and resistance, which engaged in effective direct action outside the bounds of "propriety," long before established political spokesman proclaimed themselves to be its leaders. In sum, they must ensure that all issues of principle are excluded from debate, so that no significant lessons will be drawn from the war.

What conclusions then, are to be drawn from the horrendous experience of Vietnam as the war draws to an end? There are those who regard the question as premature. The editors of the *New York Times* tell us that:

Clie, the goddess of history, is cool and slow and elusive in her ways. . . .

Only later, much later, can history begin to make an assessment of the mixture of good and evil, of wisdom and folly, of ideals and illusions in the long Vietnam story.

We must not "try to pre-empt history's role." Rather, "this is a time for humility and for silence and for prayer" (April 5, 1975).

There is at least one lesson that the Vietnam war should have taught even the most obtuse: It is a good idea to watch the performance of the free press with a cautious and skeptical eye. The editorial just cited is a case in point. The editors call for reason and restraint. Who can object? But let us look a little further. They go on:

There are those Americans who believe that the war to preserve a non-Communist, independent South Vietnam could have been waged differently. There are other Americans who believe that a viable, non-Communist South Vietnam was always a myth and that its present military defeats confirm the validity of their political analysis. A decade of fierce polemics has failed to resolve this ongoing quarrel.

We must be silent and pray as we await the verdict of history on this "complex disagreement."

The *New York Times* editors, in their humility, do not presume to deliver Clio's verdict. But they are careful to define the issues properly. The hawks allege that we could have won, while the doves reply that victory was always beyond our grasp. As for the merits of these opposing views, which mark the limits of responsible thinking, we must await the judgment of history.

There is, to be sure, a third logically possible position: Regardless of Clio's final judgment on the controversy between hawks and the doves, the United States simply had no legal or moral right to intervene in the internal affairs of Vietnam in the first place. It had no right to support the French effort to reconquer Indochina, or to attempt—successfully or not—to establish "a viable, non-Communist South Vietnam" in violation of the 1954 Geneva Accords, or to use force and violence to "preserve" the regime it had imposed.

The only judgment that Clio is permitted to hand down is a judgment of tactics: Could we have won? Other questions might be imagined. Should we have won? Did we have the right to try? Were we engaged in criminal aggression? But these questions are excluded from the debate, as the *New York Times* sets the ground rules.

There is method in the call for humility, silence, and prayer. Its manifest purpose is to restrict such controversy as may persist to questions of tactics, so that the basic principle of official ideology will stand: Alone among the states of the world, the United States has the authority to impose its rule by force. Correspondingly, the authentic peace movement, which challenged this basic doctrine, must be excluded from all future debate. Its position does not even enter into the "complex disagreement" that so troubles the editors of the *New York Times*.

It is interesting that not a single letter was published challenging the remarkable editorial stand of the *Times* in these terms. I say "published." At least one was sent; probably many more. The *Times* saw fit to publish quite a range of opinion in response to the editorial, including advocacy of nuclear bombardment (May 4, 1975). But there must, after all, be some limits in a civilized journal.

The *Times* is not alone in trying to restrict discussion to the narrow and trivial issues formulated in its editorial. The *Christian Science Monitor* gives this assessment:

Many voices, including this newspaper, regard the communist victory as a tragedy, believing the U.S. involvement in Vietnam to have been honorable, although the conduct of the war in both its political and military phases was fraught with mistakes and misjudgments. Others will argue, with equal cogency, that America should long ago have realized its mistakes and moved rapidly to extricate itself and permit the South Vietnamese to work things out for themselves. But surely there can be a unifying consensus. . . . (April 22)

Note that the opposing view is assumed to share the *Monitor's* basic premises, while differing on a question of timing. In fact, this is the standard position put forth in the national media, with a few honorable exceptions. Criticism of state policy is always welcome, but it must remain within civilized bounds. An Arthur Schlesinger may express his skepticism with regard to Joseph Alsop's prediction that the American war will succeed, for he goes on to stress that "we all pray that Mr. Alsop will be right." It is obvious, without discussion, than any right-thinking person must pray for the victory of American arms. As Schlesinger explained in 1967, American policy may yet succeed, in which event "we may all be saluting the wisdom and statesmanship of the American government" in conducting a war that was turning Vietnam into "a land of ruin and wreck."⁴ But he thought success to be unlikely. Had he gone on to urge that the United States abandon its failed enterprise, the *Monitor* would concede, in retrospect, that this extreme proposal had cogency equal to its own.

The *Washington Post* has perhaps been the most consistent critic of the war among the national media. Consider, then, its editorial response to the termination of the war. In an April 30 editorial entitled "Deliverance," the *Post* insists that we can "afford the luxury of a debate" over the meaning of this "particular agony." Americans should develop "a larger judgment of the war as a whole," but it must be a balanced judgment, including both the positive and negative elements:

For if much of the actual conduct of Vietnam policy over the years was wrong and misguided—even tragic—it cannot be denied that some part of the purpose of that policy was right and defensible. Specifically, it was right to hope that the people of South Vietnam would be able to decide on their own form of government and social order. The American public is entitled, indeed obligated, to explore how good impulses came to be trans-

mitted into bad policy, but we cannot afford to cast out all remembrance of that earlier impulse. For the fundamental "lesson" of Vietnam surely is not that we as a people are intrinsically bad, but rather that we are capable of error—and on a gigantic scale. That is the spirit in which the post-mortems on Vietnam ought now to go forward. Not just the absence of re-tribution, but also the presence of insight and honesty is required to bind up the nation's wounds.

Note again the crucial words "wrong," "misguided," "tragic," "error." This is as far as "insight and honesty" can carry us in reaching our judgment. The *Post* encourages us to recall that "some part of the purpose" of our policy in Vietnam was "right and defensible," namely, our early effort to help the people of South Vietnam "to decide on their own form of government and social order." Surely we must agree that it is right and defensible to help people to achieve this end. But exactly when was this "early impulse" revealed in action? Let us try to date it more precisely, recalling on the way some of the crucial facts about the war.

Was it in the pre-1954 period that we were trying to help the people of South Vietnam in this way? That can hardly be what the *Post* editors have in mind. At that time, the United States was backing the French in their effort to reconquer Indochina.⁵ As Truman's Secretary of State, Dean Acheson noted, success in this effort "depends, in the end, on overcoming opposition of indigenous population." The Vietnamese resistance forces were led by Ho Chi Minh, whose appeals for American assistance had been rebuffed. No one had the slightest doubt that he had immense popular support as the leader of Vietnamese national forces. But, Acheson explained, "Question whether Ho is as much nationalist as Commie is irrelevant." He is an "out-right Commie." We must therefore help the French who are determined, in Acheson's phrase, "to protect IC [Indochina] from further COMMIE encroachments." Nothing here about helping the people of South Vietnam to determine their own fate.

Perhaps it was after the Geneva Accords that our "early impulse" flourished. Hardly a plausible contention. The ink was barely dry on the agreements when the National Security Council adopted a general program of subversion to undermine the political settlement, explicitly reserving the right (subject to congressional approval) to use military force "to defeat local Communist subversion or rebellion not constituting armed attack"—that is, in direct violation of the "supreme law of the land." Such force

might be used "either locally or against the external source of such subversion or rebellion (including Communist China if determined to be the source)." The U.S.-backed Diem regime launched a violent and bloody repression, in defiance of the accords that we had pledged to uphold, in an effort to destroy the southern forces that had participated in defeating French colonialism. This slaughter appeared to be fairly successful, but by 1959 the former Viet Minh forces, abandoning their hope that the Geneva Accords would be implemented, returned to armed struggle, evoking the predictable wall of protest in Washington. Surely, then, this was not the period when the United States showed its deep concern for the right of the South Vietnamese people to self-determination.

Perhaps the *Post* is referring to the early 1960s, when U.S. officials estimated that about half the population of South Vietnam supported the National Liberation Front (NLF) and, in the words of the Pentagon Papers historian, "Only the Viet Cong had any real support and influence on a broad base in the countryside," where 80 percent of the population lived. President Kennedy dispatched U.S. forces to suppress the "subversion or rebellion" that was bringing about the collapse of the Diem regime, which was described in the Pentagon Papers as "essentially the creation of the United States." By 1962, U.S. pilots were flying 30 percent of the combat missions, attacking "Viet Cong" guerrillas and the population that supported them. The local forces organized, trained, advised, and supplied by the United States undertook to remove more than one-third of the population by force to "strategic hamlets," where, in the phrase of the Administration's leading dove, Roger Hilsman, they would have a "free choice" between the Government and the Viet Cong. This magnanimous effort failed, Hilsman explains, because of inefficient police work. It was never possible to eradicate the Viet Cong political agents from the hamlets where the population was concentrated. How could a person exercise a "free choice" between the Government and the Viet Cong when the Viet Cong agents—his brothers or cousins—had not been eliminated?⁶

Plainly, we may dismiss the possibility that this was the period in question. After the coup that overthrew Diem in November 1963, South Vietnam was finally on its way to democracy, according to official propaganda. But this period, unfortunately is not a likely candidate for the *Post's* award for good behavior? Through 1964 the NLF was offering a settlement on the Laotian model, with a coalition government and a neutralist program.

Meanwhile the United States was maneuvering desperately to avoid what internal documents refer to as "premature negotiations." The reason, as explained by U.S. government scholar Douglas Pike, was that the non-Communists in South Vietnam, with the possible exception of the Buddhists, could not risk entering a coalition, "fearing that if they did the whale would swallow the minnow." As for the "Buddhists" (i.e., the politically organized Buddhist groups), General Westmoreland explained in September of that year they were not acting "in the interests of the Nation." As Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge later saw it, according to the Pentagon historian, the Buddhists were "equivalent to card-carrying Communists." The United States' position was that the two substantial political forces in the south, the southern whale and the Buddhists, must be prevented from deciding on their own form of government and social order. Only the United States understood "the interests of the Nation." Thus the United States tried to nourish its minnow, which at that point was General Khanh and the Armed Forces Council. As Ambassador Lodge explained, the generals are "all we have got." "The armed forces," Ambassador Maxwell Taylor elaborated, "were the only component of Vietnamese society which could serve as a stabilizing force."

By January 1965, even the minnow was shipping from the American grasp. According to Ambassador Taylor's memoirs, "The U.S. government had lost confidence in Khanh" by late January 1965. Khanh, he writes, "was a great disappointment." He might have been "the George Washington of his country," but he lacked "character and integrity," and was therefore told to get lost a few weeks later. Khanh's lack of character and integrity was clearly revealed that fateful January. He was moving then towards "a dangerous Khanh-Buddhist alliance which might eventually lead to an unfriendly government with which we could not work," Taylor explained.

Actually there was more to it than that. Khanh apparently was also close to a political settlement with the NLF. Speaking in Paris on "South Vietnam Day" (January 26, 1975), General Khanh stated, as he had before, that "foreign interference" had aborted his "hopes for national reconciliation and concord between the belligerent parties in South Vietnam" ten years earlier. In support of this contention, he released the text of a letter sent to him on January 28, 1965, by Huynh Tan Phat, then vice-president of the Central Committee of the NLF, in reply to an earlier letter of Khanh's. Phat affirmed his support for Khanh's express demand that "the U.S. must let South Vietnam settle the problems of South Vietnam" and his stand

"against foreign intervention in South Vietnam's domestic affairs." He expressed the willingness of the NLF to join Khanh in "combat for national sovereignty and independence, and against foreign intervention." These negotiations would have led to unity against the United States and an end to the war, Khanh stated. But within a month of this interchange, "I was forced to leave my country, as a result of foreign pressure."

In late January, according to the Pentagon Papers, General Westmoreland "obtained his first authority to use U.S. forces for combat within South Vietnam," including "authority to use U.S. jet aircraft in a strike role in emergencies" (three years after U.S. pilots began to participate in the bombing of South Vietnam). The timing was not accidental. To avert a political settlement among South Vietnamese, the United States undertook the regular systematic bombing of South Vietnam in February (at more than triple the level of the more publicized bombing of the North), and not long after, an American expeditionary force invaded South Vietnam.

In short, the period from the Diem coup to the outright U.S. invasion of early 1965 can hardly be described as a time when the United States acted on its early impulse to help the people of South Vietnam to decide their own future.

What about the period after February 1965? Here, the question is merely obscure.

In January 1973, Nixon and Kissinger were compelled to accept the peace proposals that they had sought to modify the preceding November, after the presidential elections. Perhaps this marks the beginning of the period to which the *Post* editors are referring. Again, the facts demonstrate clearly that this cannot be the period in question. See Chapter 3.

It must be, then, that the last days of the war mark the period when the United States sought to contribute to self-determination in South Vietnam. In fact, the editors of the *Post* tell us that "the last stage of an era-long American involvement in Vietnam was distinctive . . . because during that brief stage the United States acted with notable responsibility and care," removing Americans and thousands of Vietnamese. "The United States also, in the last days, made what seems to us an entirely genuine and selfless attempt to facilitate a political solution that would spare the Vietnamese further suffering."

Very touching. Granting, for the sake of discussion, the sincerity of this genuine and selfless attempt, this certainly proves that our involvement in Vietnam was a mixture of good and evil, and that "some part of the purpose

of [U.S.] policy was right and defensible," specifically, our "early impulse" to help the people of South Vietnam "to decide on their own form of government and social order". Let the debate go forward, then, without recriminations and with insight and honesty, as we proceed to bind up the nation's wounds, recognizing that we are capable of tragic error, but insisting on our "good impulses" which "came to be transmuted into bad policy" by some incomprehensible irony of history.

The U.S. government was (partially) defeated in Vietnam, but only bruised at home. Its intellectual elite is therefore free to interpret recent history without any need for self-examination.

In the current flood of essays on "the lessons of Vietnam," one finds very little honest self-appraisal. James Reston explains "the truth" about the recent disaster in the following terms:

The truth is that the United States Government, in addition to its own mistakes, was deceived by both the North Vietnamese, who broke the Paris agreements, and by the South Vietnamese, who broke the Paris agreements, and then gave up most of their country without advance notice. (*New York Times*, April 4, 1975)

The United States commits mistakes, but the Vietnamese—North and South—are guilty of crimes, breaking agreements that they had undertaken to uphold. The facts are a little different. As the Paris Agreements were signed, the White House announced that it would reject every major principle expressed in the scrap of paper the United States was forced to sign in Paris.⁹

The United States proceeded to support the Thieu regime in its announced efforts to violate the agreements by massive repression within its domains and military action to conquer the remainder of South Vietnam. In the summer of 1974, U.S. officials expressed their great pleasure at the success of these efforts, noting that the Thieu regime had succeeded in conquering some 15 percent of the territory administered by the PRG, making effective use of the enormous advantage in firepower it enjoyed thanks to the bounty of the United States. They looked forward with enthusiasm to still further successes.¹⁰

But none of this counts as an American violation of the Paris Agreements. It is only the evil Vietnamese, North and South, who are guilty of such crimes. This is a matter of doctrine. Facts are irrelevant.

Furthermore, "our Vietnamese" not only broke the Paris Agreements, but also gave up most of their country without giving us advance notice. Reston complains that "the Thieu Government didn't even give Mr. Ford a chance to be fair at the end. It just ordered the retreat, called in the television cameras, and blamed America for the human wreckage of its own failures." How ungrateful and unworthy are these Vietnamese! Ford in his innocence, was again deceived; he "was almost unfair to his own country. For he left the impression that somehow the United States was responsible for the carnage in Southeast Asia." That we should be so falsely accused . . .

After many years, one expects nothing different from this worthy pundit. Let us turn, then, to the *Times's* most outspoken dove, Anthony Lewis, a serious and effective critic of the war in the 1970s. Summing up the history of the war, he concludes:

The early American decisions on Indochina can be regarded as blundering efforts to do good. But by 1969 it was clear to most of the world—and most Americans—that the intervention had been a disastrous mistake.

Congress and most of the American people "know now that intervention in Southeast Asia was a mistake from the beginning," "that the idea of building a nation on the American model in South Vietnam was a delusion," "that it did not work and that no amount of arms or dollars or blood could ever make it work." Only Ford and Kissinger have failed to learn "the lessons of folly." The lesson of Vietnam is that "deceit does not pay; it may have worked in some other century or some other country, but in the United States at the end of the twentieth century it cannot." Thus "a crucial element at the end was the same one that caused disaster all along: deception by American officials—deception of others and ourselves." This should "afford insight into what went wrong in general." He quotes with approval the judgment of the London *Sunday Times*: "The massive lies involved in the Asian policy have done as much to damage American society and America's reputation as the failure of the policy itself."¹¹

The lesson, then, is that we should avoid mistakes and lies, and keep to policies that succeed and are honestly portrayed. If only our early efforts to do good had not been so "blundering," they would have been legitimate. This includes, one must assume, such efforts to do good as our support for the Diemist repression after 1954, or the combat operations of the early 1960s by U.S. forces and the troops they trained and controlled, or the strate-

gie hamlet program, or the bombing of more than a hundred thousand montagnards into "safe areas" in 1962, and on. Recall Bernard Fall's estimate that by April 1965, before the first North Vietnamese battalion was detected in the South, more than 160,000 "Viet Cong" had fallen "under the crushing weight of American armor, napalm, jet bombers and, finally, vomiting gases."¹² But all of these were "blundering efforts to do good," though by 1969 we should have seen that the "intervention" was a "disastrous mistake."

Finally, consider the thoughts of TRB (Richard Strout), the regular commentator of the *New Republic* (April 25). He writes from Paris, where he has been visiting monuments that record Hitler's crimes. The emotional impact is overwhelming: "I hated the maniac Hitler crew; I could never forgive the Germans." But, he continues, "other nations have lost their senses too; was this not the land of the guillotine? And then, of course, I thought of Vietnam."

At last, someone is willing to contemplate the *criminal* nature of the American war. But not for long. The next sentence reads: "It was not wickedness; it was stupidity." It was "one of the greatest blunders of our history." There is a message: "Watching the long tragedy in living color has been a chastening experience but the act of bravery is to face up to it." If we can do so, perhaps there will be "the dawn of a new maturity—a coming of age."

Our "bravery," however, can go only so far. Our "new maturity" cannot tolerate the questioning of our fundamental decency.

Since TRB recalls "the maniac Hitler crew," perhaps we may go on to recall the self-judgment of the Nazi criminals whom he so passionately decries. We might recall the words of Heinrich Himmler, speaking of the massacre of the Jews:

To have gone through this and—except for instances of human weakness—to have remained decent, that has made us tough. This is an unwritten, never to be written, glorious page of our history.¹³

By Himmler's standards, the toughness of the American government must be exalted indeed. We have gone through this, and yet remained decent. Blundering perhaps, but fundamentally decent. And if anyone doubts our toughness, let them ask the Cambodians.

We did, of course, have our instances of human weakness. By our stan-

dards. My Lai was such an instance; the criminals were dealt with properly in a demonstration of our system of justice. It is true that we did not apply exactly the same standards that were brought to bear in the case of General Yamashita, hanged for crimes committed by troops over whom he had no control in the last months of the Philippine campaign. But at least Lieutenant Calley spent some time under house arrest. The long arm of justice, however, does not reach as far as those responsible, say, for Operation SPEEDY EXPRESS in the Delta province of Kien Hoa in early 1969, which succeeded in massacring eleven thousand of those South Vietnamese whose right to self-determination we were so vigorously defending, capturing 750 weapons and destroying the political and social structure established by the NLF. This operation was more than merely decent: "The performance of this division has been magnificent," General Abrams rhapsodized, in promoting its commander.¹⁴ We can be sure that the custodians of history will place these glorious pages in our history in the proper light.

Our own respectable doves share some fundamental assumptions with the hawks. The U.S. government is honorable. It may make mistakes, but it does not commit crimes. It is continually deceived and often foolish (we are so "naïve and idealistic" in our dealings with our allies and dependencies, Chester Cooper remarks), but it is never wicked. Crucially, it does not act on the basis of the perceived self-interest of dominant social groups, as other states do. "One of the difficulties of explaining [American] policy," Ambassador Charles Bohlen explained at Columbia University in 1969, is that "our policy is not rooted in any national material interest of the United States, as most foreign policies of other countries in the past have been."¹⁵ Only those who are "radical" or "irresponsible" or "emotional"—and thus quite beyond the pale—will insist on applying to the United States the intellectual and moral standards that are taken for granted when we analyze and evaluate the behavior of officially designated enemies or, for that matter, any other power.

It is a highly important fact that the majority of the American people strayed beyond the bounds of legitimate criticism, regarding the war as immoral, not merely a tactical error. The intellectuals, however, generally remained more submissive to official ideology, consistent with their social role. This is evident from commentary in the press and academic scholarship. The polls revealed a negative correlation between educational level and opposition to the war—specifically, principled opposition, that is, advocacy of withdrawal of American forces. The correlation has been obscured

by the fact that visible and articulate opposition to the war, not surprisingly, disproportionately involved more privileged social strata. The greater subservience of the intelligentsia to state ideology is also demonstrated in a recent study of the "American intellectual elite"¹⁶—if one is willing to tolerate this absurd concept for the sake of discussion. The study reveals, as should have been anticipated, that these more subtle thinkers generally opposed the war on "pragmatic" grounds. Translating to more honest terms, the intellectual elite generally felt that we couldn't get away with it (at least after the Tet offensive), or that the cost was too high (for some, the cost to the victims).

The essential features of U.S. policy in Indochina were clearly illustrated in the final incident of the American war, the *Mayaguez* incident. On May 12, 1975, the U.S. merchant ship *Mayaguez* was intercepted by Cambodian patrol boats within three miles of a Cambodian island, according to Cambodia—within seven miles, according to the ship's captain. Shortly after midnight (U.S. Eastern Daylight Time) on May 14, U.S. planes sank three Cambodian gunboats. That afternoon, the secretary-general of the United Nations requested the parties to refrain from acts of force. At 7:07 PM, Cambodian radio announced that the ship would be released. A few minutes later, Marines attacked Tang Island and boarded the deserted ship nearby. At 10:45 PM, a boat approached the U.S. destroyer *Wilson* with the crew of the *Mayaguez* aboard. Shortly after, U.S. planes attacked the mainland. A second strike against civilian targets took place forty-three minutes after the captain of the *Wilson* reported to the White House that the crew of the *Mayaguez* was safe. U.S. Marines were withdrawn after heavy fighting. The Pentagon announced that its largest bomb, fifteen thousand pounds, had been used. The operation cost the lives of forty-one Americans, according to the Pentagon (fifty wounded), along with an unknown number of Cambodians.

A few days later, in an incident barely noted in the press, the U.S. Coast Guard boarded the Polish trawler *Kalnar* and forced it to shore in San Francisco. The ship was allegedly fishing two miles within the twelve-mile limit established by the United States. The crew was confined to the ship under armed guard as a court pondered the penalty, which might include sale of the ship and its cargo. There have been many similar incidents. In one week of January 1975, Ecuador reportedly seized seven American tuna boats, some up to one hundred miles at sea, imposing heavy fines.

President Ford stated in a May 19 interview that the United States was

aware that Cambodian gunboats had intercepted a Panamanian and a South Korean ship a few days before the *Mayaguez* incident, then releasing the ships and crews unharmed. Kissinger alleged that the United States had informed insurance companies that Cambodia was defending its coastal waters, but the president of the American Institute of Marine Underwriters was unable to verify any such "forewarning."

Evidently, the *Kalnar* and *Mayaguez* incidents are not comparable. Cambodia had just emerged from a brutal war, for which the United States bears direct responsibility. For twenty years, Cambodia had been the victim of U.S. subversion, harassment, devastating air attacks, and direct invasion. Cambodia announced that hostile U.S. actions were still continuing, including espionage flights and "subversive, sabotage and destructive activities" and penetration of coastal waters by U.S. spy ships "engaged in espionage activities there almost daily." Thai and Cambodian nationals had been landed, Cambodia alleged, to contact espionage agents, and had confessed that they were in the employ of the CIA. Whether these charges were true or not, there can be no doubt that Cambodia had ample reason, based on history and perhaps current actions, to be wary of U.S. subversion and intervention. In contrast, Poland poses no threat to the security or territorial integrity of the United States.

According to Kissinger, the United States decided to use military force to avoid "a humiliating discussion," failing to add that the supreme law of the land obliges the United States to limit itself to "humiliating discussion" and other peaceful means if it perceives a threat to peace and security. Aware of its legal obligations, the United States informed the United Nations Security Council that it was exercising the inherent right of self-defense against armed attack, though evidently it is ludicrous to describe the Cambodian action as an "armed attack" against the United States in the sense of international law.

Despite official denials, the American military actions were clearly punitive in intent. The *Washington Post* reported (May 17) that U.S. sources privately conceded "that they were gratified to see the Khmer Rouge government hit hard." Cambodia had to be punished for its insolence in withholding the armed might of the United States. The domestic response indicated that the illegal resort to violence will continue to enjoy liberal support, if only it can succeed (assuming that we regard the loss of forty-one marines to save thirty-nine crewmen who were about to be released as "success"). Senator Kennedy stated that "the President's firm and successful ac-

tion gave an undeniable and needed lift to the nation's spirit, and he deserves our genuine support."¹⁷ That everyone's spirits were lifted by still another blow at Cambodia may be doubted. Still, this reaction, from the senator who had been most closely concerned with the human impact of the American war, is important and revealing. Senator Mansfield explained that Ford's political triumph weakens antimilitarist forces in Congress. Supporting his conclusion, on May 20 the House voted overwhelmingly against reducing American troop commitments overseas. House Majority leader Thomas P. O'Neill reversed his earlier support for troop reductions.

There were a few honorable voices of protest. Anthony Lewis observed that "for all the bluster and righteous talk of principle, it is impossible to imagine the United States behaving that way toward anyone other than a weak, ruined country of little yellow people who have frustrated us."

On the liberal wing of the mainstream, John Osborne chided Lewis in the *New Republic* (June 7) for his failure to see "some good and gain" in the *Myagüez* incident. Osborne himself felt that the President acted "properly, legally, courageously, and as necessity required." There were, to be sure, some "flaws." One of these flaws, "disturbing, avoidable, and to be deplored," was the tentative plan to use B-52s. But our honor was saved, according to Osborne, when the plan was rejected "partly because of predictable domestic and world reaction and partly because heavy bombing would almost certainly have worsened rather than bettered the lot of the *Myagüez* crewmen."

Another possible consideration comes to mind: Bombing of defenseless Cambodia with B-52s, once again, would have constituted another major massacre of the Cambodian people. But no such thoughts trouble the mind or conscience of this austere tribune of the people, who sternly rebuked those "journalistic thumb-suckers" who raised questions in the wrong "manner and tone" in "a disgrace to journalism."

Top Administration officials informed the press that it was Henry Kissinger who "advocated bombing the Cambodian mainland with B-52s during the recent crisis over the captured ship *Myagüez*."¹⁸ Thankfully, he was overruled by others more humane, who felt that carrier-based bombers would be punishment enough.

The incident reveals the basic elements in U.S. policy towards Indochina: lawlessness, savagery, and stupidity—but not complete stupidity, as one can see from the success in arousing jingoist sentiments at home. The crucial matter is lawlessness, in the specific sense of violating the principle that

force may not be used for any purpose except for genuine self-defense against armed attack. The significance of this matter is obvious if only from the fact that it is so generally excluded from discussion of the "Lessons of Vietnam" in the mass media, the journals of opinion, and—we may safely predict—academic scholarship.

Within the ideological institutions—the mass media, the schools, and the universities—there is every reason to expect that the task of excluding these issues will be carried out with a fair measure of success. Whether these efforts will succeed in restoring the conformism and submissiveness of earlier years remains to be seen.

The *Post* editorial was certainly correct in denying that "we as a people are intrinsically bad." In fact, "we as a people" recognized that the war was something more than a mistake. In 1965, teach-ins, demonstrations, town forums, extensive lobbying, and other forms of protest reached substantial proportions, and by 1967 there were enormous mass demonstrations, large-scale draft resistance, and other forms of nonviolent civil disobedience. Not long after, the American political leadership came to understand why imperial powers have generally relied on mercenaries to fight brutal colonial wars, as the conscript army, much to its credit, began to disintegrate in the field. By 1971, to judge by the polls, two-thirds of the population regarded the war as immoral and called for the withdrawal of American troops. Thus "we as a people" were, by then, neither doves nor hawks in the sense of responsible editorial opinion and the overwhelming majority of the political commentators.

It has become a matter of critical importance to reverse the ideological defeats of the past decade and to reestablish the doctrine that the United States is entitled to use force and violence to impose order as it sees fit. Some propagandists are willing to put the matter quite crudely. Thus Kissinger, in his academic days, wrote of the great risks if there is "no penalty for intransigence." But there are more subtle and effective means. The best, no doubt, is to reconstruct somehow the shattered image of the United States as a public benefactor. Hence the emphasis on our naiveté, our blunders, our early impulses to do good, our moralism and lack of concern for the material interests that dominate the policy of other powers.

Where this doctrine is not blandly asserted in foreign policy debate, it is insinuated. Consider, as a crucial case in point, the current debate over the use of military force to ensure American control over the world's major energy resources in the Middle East, and thus to maintain our capacity to con-

trol and organize the "free world." For the moment, the debate over such intervention is the pastime of intellectuals.

But the situation is unstable. No one can predict what the future may bring. Within the narrow spectrum of responsible opinion there is room for disagreement over the tactical question of how American hegemony is to be established, in the Middle East or elsewhere. Some feel that force is necessary to guarantee "American interests."¹⁹ Others conclude that economic power and normal business procedures will suffice. No serious question may be raised, however, concerning our right to intervene, or the benevolent purposes that will guide such moves, if we are forced to counteract "the aggression of the oil-producing countries against the economies of the developing and developed worlds."²⁰

It comes as no surprise, then, to discover that in the current debate over U.S. intervention in the Arabian peninsula it is generally accepted on all sides that after having successfully established its rule, the United States will guarantee a fair and equitable distribution of Middle East oil. The proposition that the United States will or might act in this way is rarely questioned. But consider now the basis for this tacit assumption. Is it an induction from the historical record? That is, can we found this belief on American conduct in the past with regard to its agricultural resources or raw materials or the products of its industrial plant? When the United States dominated world trade in oil, did it use its power to guarantee that its European allies, for example, would benefit from the low production cost of Middle Eastern petroleum? These questions are hardly worth discussing.

Of course, it might be argued that the leopard will, for some reason, change its spots. But then, we might speculate that the Arab oil producers are no less likely to use their control over petroleum to ensure a fair and equitable distribution. The Arab oil producers, for example, expend a far greater proportion of their GNP for foreign aid than the United States or other industrial powers have ever done, and a far larger proportion of their aid goes to poorer countries.²¹ Thus, if history is a guide, perhaps we should encourage Saudi Arabia and Kuwait to conquer Texas, rather than debating the merits of an American invasion of the Middle East. In fact, the whole discussion suggests a dangerous case of advanced cretinism. What is remarkable about the recent debate is that it proceeds at all, given the absurdity of the hidden premise.

Nothing could indicate more clearly how wedded the intelligentsia re-

main to the doctrine of American benevolence, and the corollary principle that the United States is entitled to resort to force and violence to maintain "global order"—if only we can succeed, and, as the more sensitive will add, if only we are not too brutal about it.

The entire American record in Indochina can be captured in the three words "lawlessness," "savagery," and "stupidity"—in that order. From the outset, it was understood, and explicitly affirmed, at the highest level of policymaking, that the U.S. "intervention" in South Vietnam and elsewhere was to be pursued in defiance of any legal barrier to the use of force in international affairs. Given the indigenous strength and courage of the South Vietnamese resistance, the United States was compelled to undertake a war of annihilation to destroy the society in which it gained its support—the society "controlled by the Viet Cong" in the terminology of the propagandists. The United States partially succeeded in this aim, but was never able to construct a viable client regime out of the wreckage. When Washington was no longer able to call out the B-52s, the whole rotten structure collapsed from within. In the end, the interests of American ruling groups were damaged, in Southeast Asia, in the United States itself, and throughout the world. Lawlessness led to savagery in the face of resistance to aggression. And in retrospect, the failure of the project may be attributed, in part, to stupidity.

Intellectual apologists for state violence, including those who describe themselves as doves, will naturally focus on the stupidity, alleging that the war was a tragic error, a case of worthy impulse transmuted into bad policy, perhaps because of the personal failings of a generation of political leaders and incompetent advisers. Stupidity is a politically neutral category. If American policy was stupid, as in retrospect all can see it was, then the remedy is to find smarter policymakers; presumably, the critics.

Some opponents of the war were appalled by the savagery of the American attack. Even such a prominent hawk as Bernard Fall turned against the war in the belief that Vietnam was unlikely to survive as a cultural and historic entity under the American model of counterrevolutionary violence. It is true that the Nazi-like barbarity of U.S. war policy was the most salient and unforgettable feature of the war, in South Vietnam and elsewhere in Indochina. But savagery too is a politically neutral category. If the American leadership was sadistic, as it surely was, the remedy—it will be argued—is to find people who will pursue the same policies in a more humane fashion.

The more critical matter is the lawlessness, specifically the resort to force to maintain a "stable world order" primarily in the interests of those who claim the right to manage the global economy.

Suppose that the system of thought control reestablishes the doctrine that the United States remains exempt from the principles we correctly but hypocritically invoke in condemning the resort to force and terror on the part of others. Then the basis is laid for the next stage of imperial violence and aggression. As long as these doctrines hold sway, there is every reason to expect a reenactment of the tragedy of Vietnam.

Chapter Five

ON THE AGGRESSION OF SOUTH VIETNAMESE PEASANTS AGAINST THE UNITED STATES (1979)

ALTHOUGH A LONGTIME DEFENDER of the U.S. intervention in Vietnam, Guenter Lewy pretends here to be above the battle, bringing "light, rather than heat" to an experience "more complex than ideologues on either side" would allow (v.vii). He also believes that his portrayal of the war is "novel and occasionally startling in both fact and significance" (v). This work resists, however, on a foundation of unexamined chauvinist premises capable of rationalizing virtually any form of aggression and violence, and its scholarly facade crumbles at almost random scrutiny. The novelty of Lewy's book is the combining in a single volume of a review of factual materials that others have presented in condemnation of the war with the standard conclusions of state propaganda. To achieve this marriage, Lewy is compelled to misuse and misrepresent documentary material, ignore critical evidence, and descend to a quite "startling" moral level.

Lewy had access to substantial new documentation from U.S. government sources. What he has culled from it is by and large insignificant, although occasionally he provides some new evidence of interest. To cite one case, Lewy reports a military analysis of "air operations in the populated Delta area" in January 1963 involving "indiscriminate killing" which "took a heavy toll of essentially innocent men, women and children" (96). Elsewhere he notes that "during the year 1962 American planes flew 2,048 attack sorties" (24) and that villages in "open zones" were "subjected to random bombardment by artillery and aircraft so as to *drive the inhabitants*