

10. The Cold War, 'French' Indochina, & the Vietnam Wars

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A. The Vietnam Wars' Cold War Origins - Supporting France

(a) Supporting France's Colonialism

We may be used to thinking of 'the Vietnam War' as a conflict of the 1960s when Australia too became involved, but in fact 'Vietnam wars' go back far, far earlier. Indeed, they go back to the 1850s when France began its colonisation of Indochina.(ME, 54) Always resisted by the Indochinese, that brutal French occupation continued for near a hundred years until, following the fall of France in 1940, Japan's forces took over as the colonisers. At that stage, with the support of pro-Hitler Vichy French troops, these forces remained in control until 1945 when Japan surrendered to the United States. A major issue then was: would the Vietnamese who under Ho Chi Minh had throughout the war fought against the Japanese invaders, finally, in fulfilment of the Atlantic and United

Nations' Charters, gain *their* nation's long-denied independence? (BT3, 296) The following outline of subsequent events is based largely on Barbara Tuchman's highly illuminating account, "*America Betrays Herself in Vietnam*" in "*The March of Folly*", an account well worth the reading! (BT3, 289-474)

In Franklin Roosevelt it seemed that the colonised people of S.E.Asia would have a champion. Disgusted with European versions of colonialism, he was adamant that Indochina "... *should not go back to France*,". As early as January 1943 he had told his Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, "...*the case is perfectly clear. France has had the country – thirty million inhabitants – for nearly a hundred years and the people are worse off than they were at the beginning.*"(BT3, 291) With Britain's colonial interests in mind, Churchill had very different ideas, as had many Americans in high places. So there was consideration of a 'trusteeship' under one or other country, with a view to possible independence later. But in the event, following Roosevelt's untimely death on April 15, 1945, the discussion more and more focused on supporting the claims of France in the hope that that war-torn European country would remain safe from the temptations of communism, a movement already strong there, especially among its former partisans, its war-time resistance fighters.

So, ten days after FDR's death Secretary of State Stettinius was telling France's leader, De Gaulle that the US did not question French sovereignty over Indochina.(BT3, 294) Of course Ho Chi Minh, whose war-time struggle against the Japanese had been supported by American OSS groups operating in Indochina was, to say the least, disappointed. As a long-standing fighter for independence he had tried to make his country's case at the Versailles Peace Conference of 1919. Then, notwithstanding that the League of Nations' Covenant endorsed national independence, Ho's request to be heard was turned down, at which point he joined the Indochinese Communist Party.(BT3, 296) And, having continued the struggle ever since, he was not about to give up. In attitude, the French too were still determined, their Brazzaville Declaration of January 1944 declaring, "...*the aims of the mission civilisatrice.....exclude any idea of autonomy....The attainment of 'self government' in the colonies, even in the distant future, must be excluded.*" But even more determined, a week after Japan's surrender in August 1945, the Vietnamese, quoting from the opening phrases of America's 1776 *Declaration of Independence*, proclaimed the independence of their '*Democratic Republic of Vietnam*'.(BT3, 298)

(b) Betraying the Atlantic and United Nations Charters

The prospect of a return of the French seemed a very bad omen for the future prospects of world peace since it was in complete contradiction not only to the Allies' earlier commitments in the *Atlantic Charter*, but to the recently-agreed *Charter of the United Nations*. The United States and Britain, the principal architects of both, were turning their backs on the very principles they had designed, at *that time* proclaiming that they were *essential* to assure a fairer, more equitable and secure world. The third commitment of the *Atlantic Charter* declares that the United States and the United Kingdom undertake to "...*respect the right of all peoples to chose the form of*

government under which they will live; and they wish to see sovereign rights and self-government restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them.”(WC4iii, 393) That commitment, fully endorsed in the UN Charter, (see Articles 1, 2 & 4) was being blatantly rejected by those very countries. Thus, in July 1945, even before Japan’s defeat, that part of Indochina below the 16th parallel was assigned to a British military command which thereupon accepted a French offer of assistance by an army corps of 62,000 under General Leclerc.(BT3, 297) By August, President Truman was reassuring General DeGaulle of the US acceptance of France’s claim, and in mid-September British and French forces entered Saigon, two further French divisions soon arriving on American troopships.

Pending the arrival of these reinforcements, the British used Japanese units, - their disarmament deferred – to resist the Vietnamese forces. And following their earlier track record, the French set about re-possessing Indochina, ‘their’ colony, with brutal ‘efficiency’. That was upsetting to those in the US State Department who had long wanted to see a very different future for post-war Indochina, but they met overwhelming opposition from within the US Administration. Eight appeals for recognition and economic aid by Vietnam’s war-time resistance leader, Ho Chi Minh, to President Truman and George Marshall his Secretary of State, went unanswered.(BT3, 301) In part this attitude was based on the desire to support France’s anti-communist status in West Europe, but also because the Vietnamese nationalist movement, the Viet-Minh, was not only Asian, but communist.

So the French regained control of Saigon. At that, the Viet-Minh melted into the countryside, Ho setting up a provisional government in the northern city of Hanoi.(BT3, 300-1) This might sound just like Kemal Attaturk’s successful move towards Turkey’s national independence in 1922, but here the stated US Administration view was that if you were a communist, your nationalism was suspect, and especially so because your thoughts, your policies, your every move would be ‘controlled by the Kremlin’.(BT3, 302) Ho of course disagreed, proclaiming his core aim as independence, - something acknowledged only decades later by President Kennedy’s Defence Secretary, Robert McNamara.(c.f. McNamara’s film,“*Fog of War*”) (BT3, 302)

By the end of 1946, although the Indochina war was fully under way, the French commander, General Leclerc, had concluded that the Vietnamese opposition was so determined that a French victory would be impossible since “...*it would take 500,000 men to do it and even then it could not be done*”.(BT3,303) Tuchman then asks why if a French general could see that in 1945, American administrations not only continued their support of the French, but two decades later ended up putting 500,000 young *Americans* there and only *then* finally seeing the folly of it all? (BT3, 303; McNamara,“*Fog of War*”) But at the time, Truman and Secretary of State Dean Acheson assured the American public that the French would in future substantiate their claim to have the support of the people of Indochina.(BT3, 304) The Americans had further claimed that if Vietnam fell to communism, other states would ‘like dominoes’ fall in sequence, a fear greatly amplified once China, under Mao, had in 1949 turned communist and the 1950 Korean War began. (BT3, 307-8) (and see below, 11(a-e))

(c) US Military Support for France

Thus although at that stage, the US Administration persuaded itself that Bao Dai, then a French puppet ruler (formerly a puppet of the Japanese during their WWII occupation) was a valid nationalist alternative to Ho Chi Minh, that was to no avail since the French had no interest whatever in Vietnamese independence.(BT3, 308-9) At all events, the US dispatched a small Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) to advise on the use of US military know-how and equipment soon to arrive. US policy statements referred to the Southeast Asian area as “*vital to the free world*” and President Truman, broadcasting to the American people, warned of “*the clear and present danger*” and of a “*monstrous conspiracy to stamp out freedom all over the world*”.(BT3, 310) At this time China was portrayed as a communist ‘satellite’ which, together with Russia, would cause the downfall of Korea, Indochina, Burma and the rest of Southeast Asia, such that all would be “*absorbed by force into a new colonialism of a Soviet Communist empire*”.(BT3, 311-2)

So, instead of being looked at on its merits, the Vietnamese struggle for independence from the French colonising power got caught up in the aims and rhetoric of the Cold War. It thus was used to back the hysterical claims of a communist ‘threat’ to the ‘free world’. And these claims reached new heights in 1952 when John Foster Dulles became President Eisenhower’s Secretary of State. Then, for America, the threat was said to be so serious that it must reject mere ‘containment’ as ‘negative’, ‘futile’ and ‘immoral’. “*Liberating influencesin the captive world,*” must be encouraged. America must demonstrate that “*it wants and it expects liberation to occur*”.(BT3, 315) As Tuchman indicated, Dulles, the son of a Presbyterian minister and a devout churchman, was overflowing with self-righteous zeal in the anti-communist cause. Throughout his seven years of office he upheld the rightness of American intervention in Vietnam. Various options for more direct intervention were discussed, even for a possible attack on China, the alleged controller of the Viet-Minh, but in the absence of Vietnamese support for the French presence, Eisenhower held back.(BT3, 318)

Instead, throughout 1953 America simply increased its arms flow to the French. As Dean Acheson put it, “*The French blackmailed us*”, - meaning that such military aid was France’s price for joining (with its 12 NATO divisions) the European Defence Community (EDC).(BT3, 319) That aside, American arms supplies to the French in Vietnam were alone of little use when the Vietnamese were so unified in their opposition. As Eisenhower revealed in his 1963 memoirs, “*...the mass of the population supported the enemy*”, so he, (like others in his Administration) recognised that the key to any possible success lay in France giving the Vietnamese an accelerated and genuine independence. But of course, that is precisely what the French government was determined *not* to do, notwithstanding that in France itself feeling against the war had been growing for quite some time.(BT3, 320) Despite American arms, much bloodshed and destruction, the Vietnamese remained determined. Clearly, the war was not ‘succeeding’.

(d) French Defeat at Dien Bien Phu & the Geneva Accord

May 7, 1954 was a turning point when, after intense fighting, the Viet-Minh took a French stronghold at Dien Bien Phu. At that stage a Geneva Conference of various powers (France, USA, Britain, China, Russia, Laos, Cambodia, Viet-Minh) was called to examine a possible settlement.(BT3, 331-2) Within weeks, a new French government announced its intention of withdrawing from Indochina. Despite many disagreements, there was an eventual final compromise, an *Accord* worked out in Geneva, which specified the independence of Laos and Cambodia - and for Vietnam a cease-fire with temporary partition along the 17th parallel pending elections to be held within two years and an International Control Commission to supervise implementation of the *Accord's* terms. Although the US did not sign, it declared it would refrain from "*the threat or use of force*" aimed at disturbing these arrangements.(BT3, 333)

Certainly Dulles was not happy. After all, he had not stopped the Viet-Minh-led government in the north; had failed to keep France fighting; failed to get France into the European Defence Community, the EDC (rejected by its Assembly that August); failed to coax Britain or any other ally into joint military action in Vietnam; and even failed to gain his own President's approval for direct US military intervention. And the French? Well they had lost 50,000 young soldiers killed, another 100,000 wounded, a complete tragedy - and all for nothing.(BT3, 334-5) - figures for Vietnamese unknown. So at this stage, what might have driven Americans to similarly tragic counter-productive efforts? Well, as Barbara Tuchman explained, "*The American government reacted not to the Chinese upheaval or to Vietnamese nationalism per se, but to intimidation by the rabid right at home and to the public dread of Communism that this played on and reflected.*" Dulles' plan was twofold, to create a *non-colonial* Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO,- i.e., like NATO) and to ensure that the south Vietnam zone be treated *as if* it were a sovereign state, and made strong enough to "*recapture the country*".(BT3, 335) In September 1954, SEATO was set up with the US, Britain, France, Australia, New Zealand and only *two* S.E.Asian nations -Thailand and the Philippines - plus Pakistan. If the purpose of the Treaty was to defend the nations of this S.E.Asian region, then having but two willing S.E.Asian 'recruits' clearly pointed to a lack of authenticity.(BT3, 337)

B. Replacing the French

(a) Side-lining the *Geneva Accord* – US Replaces France

Under the Geneva Accord, France was to supervise the armistice and subsequent elections, and it held hopes of maintaining its cultural and commercial interests, - as well as a possible voluntary inclusion of Indochina in the French Union later. All this the US wanted to avoid and in Ngo Dinh Diem, the South's new premier, they thought they had the right Vietnamese anti-communist nationalist to lead 'South Vietnam'.(BT3, 338-9) With its own Ambassador and many advisors installed in Saigon, the US began training a Vietnamese army that would be different from the 200,000 Vietnamese used in the 'French force' of 348,000 (which, along with 80,000 French, also included 48,000 North Africans and 20,000 Foreign Legionnaires). The US Joint Chiefs of Staff had very serious doubts about where this would lead, but it nevertheless went ahead.(BT3, 340-1)

President Eisenhower, who also had serious doubts about both the popularity and viability of the new Diem regime sent General Collins, his trusted WWII colleague, to investigate. Collins' report was 'negative', recommending that if a trial support of Diem for a while longer failed, there should be "*..the gradual withdrawal of support from Vietnam.....it may be the only solution.*"(BT3, 343) Yet the US government not only persisted in supporting Diem's flawed government, it also supported his denial of the 1956 nation-wide elections due under the *Geneva Accord*. Tuchman quotes Senator John F Kennedy in a 1956 speech acknowledging "*..the popularity and prevalence of Ho Chi Minh's party throughout Indochina*"; and she further reveals that when informed by his advisors that Ho would certainly win such an election, President Eisenhower refused to agree to its taking place.(BT3, 347-8)

Over the following five years, with the US providing 60-75% of its budget, South Vietnam appeared on the surface to flourish. The French completed a phased withdrawal. The Vietnamese middle class were satisfied by a flow of US imports but the majority, the peasants, more and more supported the Viet-Minh partisan movement (or 'Viet-Cong') which by 1959 controlled large areas of the south.(BT3, 349) American advice to Diem was to undertake 'radical reforms' but cessation of generous aid never followed his failure to do so.(BT3, 351) In the south a National Liberation Front, (which called for the overthrow of Diem and American involvement) was formed as President Kennedy took office in December 1960.(BT3, 352) Notwithstanding the relative youth and enthusiasm of his new Administration, it appears they did not re-examine the case justifying the US being in Vietnam for, as a Senator, Kennedy (influenced by Cardinal Spellman and others) had fully taken on the Cold War mind-set of the day. And with his paper-thin electoral mandate, Kennedy felt he had to placate those on his right, like John McCone, a disciple of 'massive nuclear retaliation'.(BT3, 357) So his chosen team were no 'bleeding hearts', but rather 'tough realists', as exemplified by Defence Secretary, Robert McNamara who, with his 'gift of certainty', once proclaimed at a Pentagon briefing "*...we have the power to knock any society out of the 20th century.*"(BT3, 355-6)

(b) Driven by Dogma, - Military Escalation

Thus slowly there began an inexorable escalation of America's direct military involvement and other support which required more Americans on the ground to guide the Vietnamese under Diem "*..towards United States policy objectives.*". Prime among the measures taken was the setting up of the '*Special Warfare Training Program*'.(BT3, 358) Just before Kennedy came to office, Soviet premier Nikita Krushchev had challenged the US by saying that the USSR planned to support 'wars of liberation' in places like Cuba, Algeria and Vietnam, a challenge which led McNamara and others in the team to develop their doctrinal theories of 'counter-insurgency' and methods for 'limited wars'. But, as Tuchman commented, "*Although the doctrine emphasized political measures, counter-insurgency in practice was military.*" Land reform should have been central to the admittedly much-needed 'radical reforms' essential if popular support was to be gained, yet that had absolutely no appeal for Diem or his American

sponsors.(BT3, 354,360-1)

When Kennedy's Vice President, Lyndon Johnson visited Saigon in 1961, he pronounced Diem to be the "*Winston Churchill of Asia*", going on to claim that leadership in individual countries "...rests on the knowledge and faith in the United States power, will and understanding." Everything hinged on success in South-East Asia "...or the United States must inevitably surrender the Pacific, and pull back our defenses to San Francisco."(!)(BT3, 364-5) No one could have believed such nonsense, but (as with Kennedy) for those on the political right, all hinged on American 'credibility'. As Kennedy confessed to journalist, James Reston, "*Now we have a problem in making our power credible, and Vietnam looks like that place*". (BT3,366)

But in the South, while Saigon was 'secure', Vietnamese guerrillas controlled most of the rest. In October 1961, General Maxwell Taylor along with Walt Rostow went to investigate.(BT3, 367-8) Their report which recommended deployment of 8,000 American troops foresaw that there might subsequently be no limit to possible future commitments, "...unless we attack the source in Hanoi." And in referring to Hanoi's aggression across "*an international boundary*", (i.e., at odds with history and the *Geneva Accord*) it began the myth that north and south regions were two *separate countries*. To justify what followed, that myth was to be used over and over again.(BT3, 369) McNamara and the Joint Chiefs believed 6 divisions, some 205,000 US soldiers might ultimately be needed.(BT3, 371) By the end of 1962 American troops numbered 11,000, - 17,000 by October 1963, - though all without Congressional authority or approval! Publicly Kennedy denied it, but with some media probing the truth came out.(BT3, 373)

(c) J.K.Galbraith (and others) Warn J.F.K.

In November 1961, and again in March 1962, John Kenneth Galbraith, then US Ambassador to India, having visited South Vietnam, reported to Kennedy his impressions of the Diem regime. Strongly counseling against US troop involvement, Galbraith advocated a neutralist political settlement. Help, he knew, could be expected from Jawaharlal Nehru towards a non-aligned government on the Laos model. Moreover, he warned that, in continuing to support the corrupt ineffectual Diem, "*We shall replace the French as the colonial force in the area and bleed as the French did.*" (BT3, 376) He also warned of the folly of such unpopular actions as defoliation and the 'strategic hamlet' program which separated peasants from their villages, locking them up in compounds. But wise as it was, Galbraith's advice was opposed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff who saw it as 'retreat' in the 'stand against communism'. And, sadly, Kennedy went along with them (BT3, 375-6)

Advice similar to that of Galbraith also came from Senator Mike Mansfield, Majority Leader, who warned the President that the introduction of American troops would dominate a civil war 'that was not our affair'.(BT3, 377) Kennedy was ambivalent but apparently afraid not only of seeming to encourage communism, but of appearing to damage American prestige, - and of the domestic political consequences of that! So

things remained the same. As he said to Mansfield regarding complete withdrawal, "*But I can't do it until 1965 – until after I'm re-elected.*"

Privately, however, there remained within the Kennedy Administration quite some ambivalence and indecision as to how best to proceed. An 'intermediate plan' drawn by McNamara was to strengthen the Vietnamese forces to allow withdrawal of 1,000 US troops by the end of 1963. But in mid year all came apart with a Buddhist revolt in Saigon against Diem's regime, Diem's brutal response, and indications that he and close relatives, the Nhus, were planning a 'deal' with Hanoi. A coup by Vietnamese army generals was in prospect and Washington instructed their Ambassador, Henry Cabot Lodge, that if Diem failed to get rid of his offending relatives, Lodge was to authorise the generals that they could proceed.(BT3, 381-4) Over succeeding months the war went on, the Vietnamese army showing its characteristic lack of commitment; and covert preparations for the military coup proceeded. An investigative mission by Robert McNamara and General Taylor announced the 1,000-troop withdrawal for October and forecast that the overall task "*...can be completed by the end of 1965.*" However, the coup took place on November 1,1963, with the deaths of Diem as well as his Nhu relatives. And, as events transpired, President Kennedy was to die less than a month later.(BT3, 384-7)

(d) Kennedy gone; Johnson also 'bows to the Right'

Then, feeling similarly obliged to resist any temptation to surrender, to back away from a 'just cause', Lyndon Johnson, Kennedy's successor soon made up his mind that he would not be the President 'to lose South Vietnam'. Cabot Lodge warned of the post-assassination political instability and need for a much stronger US military effort. At this stage UN Secretary-General U Thant was canvassing for a neutralist coalition government, but Johnson was not responsive, McNamara encouraging him to continue every effort to win.(BT3, 388-9) If communism won in South Vietnam, the stakes were said to be enormous. Laos, Cambodia, Burma, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia would all be endangered; India would be outflanked by Red China; the encouragement to revolutionary movements everywhere would be profound; neutralism would spread and with it a sense that communism might be the way of the future, etc., etc. But as Tuchman (at time of writing) commented, "*As of 1983, Vietnam has, unhappily, been under Communist control for eight years and except for Laos and Cambodia, none of these terrors has been realized.*" (BT3, 390)

Johnson, facing a re-election year in 1964 was planning for an air offensive augmented by intensified ground war, but as he said, "*We don't want our American boys to do the fighting for Asian boys.*" Then in August 1964, he put to the US Congress the '*Tonkin Gulf Resolution*' which, if passed, would provide a 'blank cheque' for a Presidential 'Executive war'. The Resolution to give such freedom of action, - to authorise "*all necessary measures to repel armed attack*", was based on the claim that, unprovoked, North Vietnamese torpedo boats had fired on US warships in the Tonkin Gulf outside the 3-mile off-shore limit recognised by the US as 'international waters'. (Hanoi claimed that limit to be 12 miles – but just imagine the reverse circumstance, - or even 50 miles

off the Californian coast!) Perceptively, Senator Wayne Morse denounced the Resolution as a “*pre-dated declaration of war*”, (i.e., on North Vietnam and Laos) at the same time questioning whether the US ships might not have fired first, but it was passed overwhelmingly by both Houses.(BT3, 394-6)

(e) UN Conciliation Rejected: Bombs Instead

At this time a second attempt by UN’s U Thant, supported by De Gaulle, for a reconvened Geneva Conference and Great Power-backed guarantee of neutrality for Laos, Cambodia and ‘*two Vietnams*’, again failed to gain US support.(BT3, 396) U Thant also proposed a cease-fire across both Vietnam and Laos, as well as talks between Hanoi and Washington, the US to write and announce their terms, - but the US rejected the very idea of “*feelers toward neutralism*”. Instead there began an American bombing campaign termed ‘ROLLING THUNDER’. And this bombing soon became a ‘fact-on-the-ground’ that precluded any chance of settlement by negotiation.(BT3, 396-7) Much terrible destruction and death followed. And that despite the fact of Johnson’s ever so strong Presidential win having been on a ‘peace ticket’ platform (to counter Goldwater’s clearly-stated war-like intentions) a win which would have authorised a sane and honorable settlement, also opportunity to get on with his much-cherished civil rights and social welfare programs at home. But tragically his exaggerated fears of the political right drove him to greater and greater folly.(BT3, 398) Protecting the United States’ ‘prestige’ from failure became his near-total preoccupation.(BT3, 402) (c.f. Lloyd George and Winston Churchill denying Turkish ‘Home Rule’ and calling for war in 1922 - see 7B(b), 10-12; MG1, 641-3; WC2, 422-8).

Fearing possible Russian or Chinese intervention, the details of ‘Rolling Thunder’ were planned, supervised, and evaluated directly from the White House. Yet a more realistically ‘dangerous’ response came from the home front, the nation’s campuses, thousands of students and faculty assembling to protest the pointless carnage which they saw not as for their country’s defence’ but as a war crime. To counter this view, the State Department issued a White Paper titled “*Aggression from the North*”, claiming it was ‘foreign aggression’, just like that which occurred in the 1930s preceding WWII.(c.f. above, 7C(d); 8B(a) (c) (f) (g)) At all events, since the bombing of the North failed to dampen the insurgency in the South, the decision was taken to raise US troop strength there to 82,000.(BT3, 403-5) The aim became to kill off the enemy in very large numbers, hence the much-vaunted ‘search and destroy’ missions, the pre-occupation with ‘body counts’ and the need for increasingly greater numbers of US troops – so many of whom would be ‘drafted’.

In July 1964 Johnson announced a lift in draft quotas that would increase the US Vietnam force to 125,000, - rising to 200,000 by the end of 1965. As General Taylor explained, the purpose was to inflict “*...continued increasing loss on the Viet-Cong guerrillas so that they cannot replace their losses.*””*Theoretically they would virtually run out of trained troops by the end of 1966.*”(BT3, 406) Of course the other side of the equation was the parallel cost in young American lives. And all going on without any declaration of war because Johnson wanted to avoid drawing too much

attention either internationally or at home where he feared a right-wing push that would divert too many resources from his much-needed domestic programs.(BT3, 407) Just like Robert McNamara, he wanted an undeclared 'limited war' so that the public 'didn't notice' and 'didn't interfere' with what the Executive branch of government was doing. But declared or not, increasingly the so-called limited war did in fact come to public attention – though initially the objection to it was anything but general, (similar to what happened in Australia).

Clark Clifford, former White House Counsel to Truman and intimate of the President, privately advocated a political settlement, warning that according to CIA assessments, further build-up of US forces without any real prospect of victory could become an open-ended commitment. Although the military advised otherwise, General Wheeler admitted it could take 750,000 men and 7 years before victory was theirs. Johnson elected to fight and at the same time negotiate 'from a position of strength'.(BT3, 411-3) But as time wore on the war became progressively more and more ugly, with Napalm attacks on peasant villagers and their crops, plus aerial crop and jungle defoliation, the torturing of prisoners and the pursuit of ever-rising enemy body counts. The widespread use of Napalm targeted at the civil population represented terrorism of the worst kind, aeri-ally-attacked village huts and their occupants going up "*in a boil of orange flame*", with burning jellied-petrol sticking to the skin of men, women and children, causing the most agonising torture.(BT3, 415). And all of this was conveyed via American media to those at home who thus were made aware not only of the war's cost in deaths and wounding of increasing numbers of their own young committed to the war (245,000 by April 1966), but to those in the incinerated villages, - the burned bodies, - the dead and maimed Vietnamese.

Paradoxically, the US military and other efforts were supposed to be directed at '*Winning the Hearts and Minds*' of these villagers under its 'WHAM' program, but all anyone could see was widespread misery. When bombing was resumed after the Christmas break, 77 members of the House urged the President to extend the pause and submit the conflict to negotiation through the UN. And Senators Fulbright, Eugene McCarthy and Young joined Morse and Gruening in calling for repeal of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution – but their motion went down 92 to 5. Clearly most members of Congress, victims still of special pleading by those dependent on the arms industries within their own states, were not ready to alter course.(BT3, 415-7)

(f) Ambassador George Kennan (and others) cry shame...

Among the respected conservative voices questioning the wisdom and rightness of it all was that of Ambassador George Kennan who raised the issue of America's self-betrayal. His view was that success in the war, even if achievable, would, because of its "*...grievous damage on the lives of a poor and helpless people, particularly a people of different race and color...*", profoundly damage the image of the United States throughout the world.(BT3,419) He went on to quote John Quincy Adams' dictum that whenever the standard of liberty was unfurled in the world, "*...there will be America's heart...but she goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy.*" And for Kennan,

Adams' idea of 'pursuing monsters' meant endless wars in which American "...policy would insensibly change from liberty to force."(BT3, 419-20)

(g) ..but bombing further escalated

Notwithstanding such wisdom, American bombing continued to escalate and by the end of 1966 had reached an annual rate of 500,000 tons, - higher than the rate used on Japan in WWII. Despite the terrible consequences, Hanoi reacted only in anger and defiance, as had the British people under the German 'blitz' – and the Germans under the subsequent British bombardment during WWII.(BT3,422; also 9B(b) & 9F(e)) At this critical stage of the war, one lead player in Johnson's team was having serious doubts. That was his Defence Secretary Robert McNamara whose own Systems Analysis clearly indicated that the military benefits were not worth the economic costs. Privately, his was a dawning recognition of futility. Writing to the President he proposed, as a substitute for bombing, along with increased ground forces, an 'anti-infiltration barrier' – but his ideas were not accepted. And much to the President's concern, there were many other doubters besides; and although few of these resigned or spoke out publicly, Johnson had them quietly eased out.(BT3, 423)

Often Johnson may have questioned his own unwavering outward stand, but only inwardly - unless something just slipped out. For example, once asked how long the war might last, he replied "*Who knows how long, how much? The important thing is, are we right or wrong?*". Except for those in reserved occupations and tertiary students who could gain deferments, the draft stood like a shadow over young Americans. By late 1966, there were 375,000 American troops in Vietnam, 463,000 by mid-1967, with General Westmoreland requesting yet another 70,000 because, as he said, he required 525,000 as a minimum essential force. Johnson agreed, so public protests grew. The bombing of a small rural Asian country which, communist or not, could by no stretch of the imagination threaten the United States, was more and more seen as both cruel and immoral. Accounts of atrocities committed on Vietnamese prisoners affected Americans and many others across the world. Like America's earlier war on the Philippines (1898-) and Britain's on the Boers (1899-1902) it was a major cause of disunity 'at home'.(BT3, 424-5)

Another issue was the war's alarming economic cost - multi-billions of dollars, deficit-financed, a cost to be born by future generations, all driving inflation and unfavourable balance of payments. A former chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, Dillon, speaking for a group organised by J.K.Galbraith and Arthur Schlesinger Jr. warned of the dire consequences of such folly. James Thomson, a former State Department staffer, writing to the New York Times stressed that constructive alternatives had always been available, echoing Edmund Burke's point that the United States, long the greatest power on earth, had already "...the power to lose face, the power to admit error, and the power to act with magnanimity." Similarly, General David Shoup, recently retired Commandant of the Marine Corps and Pacific war hero, pointing to the government's claim that Vietnam was vital to the United States' interests, judged this sheer "*poppycock*", going on to say that the American sacrifices were wrong and "*Why can't we let people actually*

determine their own lives?” (BT3, 427) (Shades of an earlier US Marine General, Smedley Butler.(SB)

(h) National/Personal Pride prevail

So for the President the problem became: how to bring this highly destructive counter-productive conflict to a close without appearing to give in, without the US (or himself) ‘losing face’? To that end the US plan was to bring Hanoi to negotiate on US terms, from its position of greater strength. But, willing to put up with the punishment in the meantime, Hanoi always insisted the bombing must first cease. However, for the US, the continued use of B-52s remained the key element in its position of ‘greater strength’. And so, tragically, the war was to drag on and on and all at an ever-mounting terrible cost to both the people of Vietnam and to so many young Americans. As Bill Moyers understood it, President Johnson knew the war was destroying his reputation: *“He knew it. He sensed that the war would destroy him politically and wreck his presidency. He was a miserable man.”*(BT3, 427-31)

He, the President, was flanked on the right by those like his Air Force Commander, Admiral Ulysses Grant Sharp, who proclaimed a splendid record for the B-52s’ damage to power plants, railroads, factories, bridges, harvests – the entire *“widespread disruption of economic activity.”* Indeed, for Sharp, that was reason not for less but for more bombing. And on the other side, from a previously unexpected source, came a different view, for at that stage Defence Secretary McNamara, who had been looking into the bombing results, disputed its effectiveness in reducing the flow of men and supplies to the South, in breaking the will of the North Vietnamese people, or in providing *“...any confidence that they can be bombed to the negotiating table.”*(BT3, 431-2) But fearful of the influence of his right-wing colleagues, Johnson would not be convinced, and the bombing was extended to take in Haiphong. Moreover, he was concerned not only that McNamara had lost faith in the bombing approach, but that he had in Cabinet expressed the additional view that the war *“...was destroying the countryside in the South; its making lasting enemies,”*. So, shortly thereafter, without consultation, Johnson announced McNamara’s nomination as President of the World Bank, a transfer quietly accepted.(BT3, 431-3) How disappointing McNamara did not reveal *then* to his country and the world the judgements he later gave in his film of 2004, *“The Fog of War”*.

At the end of 1967, the US Defense Department announced the total tonnage of bombs dropped on North and South Vietnam as *“over 1.5 million”*, thus surpassing by 75,000 tons the total the US Army Air Force had dropped on Europe during WWII. Slightly more than half of this had been dropped on North Vietnam, that exceeding the total dropped in WWII’s Pacific war. At this time Johnson had placed the ceiling on American ground forces at 525,000, just over the top figure France’s General Leclerc had suggested might ultimately be necessary, though he’d immediately added, *“..even then it could not be done”*. Indeed, all such military efforts seemed ineffective, especially when the Vietnamese Tet Offensive, a massive coordinated assault against 100 towns and cities in South Vietnam in January 1968, succeeded in penetrating even

the grounds of the American embassy in Saigon. This brought into question General Westmoreland's credibility and stunned both the American public and government. As the Wall Street Journal put it, "*We think the American people should be getting ready to accept, if they have not already, the prospect that the whole Vietnam effort may be doomed.*" Yet Westmoreland's request for an additional 206,000 troops was granted and there remained, it seemed, an unchanged view of the correct response among the joint Chiefs and others in the President's inner circle. They were, in George Kennan's words, "*...like men in a dream*", incapable of "*...any realistic assessment of the effects of their own acts.*"(BT3, 436-8)

(i) Lack of S.E.Asian Support (or even interest) continues

Ironically at that stage Clark Clifford, who had been chosen by Johnson to replace McNamara as a way of restoring support for government policies, became similarly disillusioned with the prospects for success. His confidence had already been undermined the previous summer when he toured SEATO nations (the supposed 'domino' victim states) hoping to gather greater support for the US in its role there. Instead he had found a lack of serious concern, Thailand for example, with a population of 30 million, having only 2,500 troops in Vietnam was happy to offer its gratitude but no more. And currently he found that the more 'we' Americanised the war, the less South Vietnam would do for itself. So, concluding that the "*...military course we were pursuing was not only endless but hopeless*", Clifford set about dislodging the President from his 'frozen stance'. It was a move aided by Walter Cronkite's February broadcast which, reflecting on his own knowledge of Vietnam, - the 470,000 new refugees added to the pre-existing 800,000, all in make-shift hovels, - advocated negotiations, "*...not the dictation of peace terms.*" The nation's 'uncle' had spoken and the message got through to the top. Admitted the President: "*If I've lost Walter, I've lost middle America.*"

A week later, Senator Fulbright announced that the Senate's reinvestigation of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution showed it to have been obtained by '*misrepresentation*'.(BT3, 439-41) And shortly thereafter the respected Dean Acheson was advising Johnson that the military targets sought were unachievable, that the President's speeches were so out of touch with reality, that he was no longer believed, that no longer did the country support the war.(BT3, 442) And to try to convince Johnson that Vietnam was indeed a counter-productive lost cause, Clark Clifford assembled a conference of former statesmen, the 'Wise Men' (as they were termed), - including Dean Acheson, Ambassador Lodge, Arthur Dean, George Ball, Cyrus Vance, plus generals Ridgway, Omar Bradley and Maxwell Taylor, together with Johnson's close friend on the High Court, Abe Fortas, - to render judgement.

The great majority held that the aim of military victory had trapped the US into a situation which, running counter to the national interest, could only get worse. But Johnson remained unmoved, for beyond his talk of willingness to negotiate, lay his determination to 'win', to avoid being the President who admitted defeat.(BT3,443-5) And so came his surprise announcement of March 1968, election year, that "*I shall not*

seek and I will not accept the nomination of my Party for another term as your President.” Rather than admit the truth, that the war was un-winnable and that continuation in office could only further undermine his country’s and his own reputation, he would simply move out of politics – admitting nothing! Again, what a tragic omission!

(j) Johnson leaves; ‘Peace Candidate’ Nixon Bombs and Invades Cambodia

As Barbara Tuchman commented, *“Although the legacy of Lyndon Johnson was plain, the legacy of folly gripped his successor.”* The new Administration under President Richard Nixon and his Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, went on attempting military coercion, increasing the level of destruction and greatly prolonging the war but never attaining the much-desired ‘victory’. Although Nixon had come to the White House promising *“I’m going to end the war – fast”*, he in fact had no plan beyond the failed formula that had confounded Johnson – i.e., one that compounded its evils, both by amplifying the war’s destructiveness and prolonging it.(BT3, 448-50) For like his predecessor, he had no intention of presiding over a defeat, especially by a third-rate, notoriously weak power like Vietnam. (It brings to mind today’s Iraq, - weak still but defiant, determined never to hand over to the invader).

So he and Kissinger developed a plan, firstly to undermine their domestic opposition by ending the draft and bringing home US ground forces. And secondly, to greatly intensify the air war in North Vietnam and extend it to adjacent territories in Laos and Cambodia. As always the Vietnamese forces were expected to ‘fill the gap’ on the ground, though with vastly increased US military equipment. Then the ‘punitive level’ of bombing would be adjusted to ensure that a ‘suitable’ negotiated settlement would result. With Nixon in office just two months, the first bombing of Cambodia took place in March 1969. Since neighbouring Cambodia, ruled by Prince Sihanouk, was a neutral country, that raid was kept secret, as were all that followed.(BT3, 448-452)

When it appeared not only that American feelings against the war were persisting, but that Hanoi was just going to stick it out, plans for a decisive blow from the air were made to blockade: to mine harbours, rivers and coastal waters, bomb dikes, carpet bomb Hanoi, etc. In the course of this planning and in clear recognition of the essential weakness of the country the US was attacking, Kissinger remarked, *“I refuse to believe that a little fourth rate power like North Vietnam doesn’t have a breaking point,”*. But the protests in the US had gone on growing, with 100,000 gathering in Boston Common and, a little later, 250,000 in Washington - so Nixon and Kissinger knew that excessive violence, *if revealed*, might blow back politically on their efforts. The Administration regarded these demonstrations along with media criticism, not as lawful citizen dissent, a democratic right, but as ‘disloyal subversion’. Indeed, for Kissinger such activity was seen simply as ‘unwarranted interference’ with his conduct of foreign affairs. (c.f., Churchill’s comments on Britain’s Foreign Secretary Grey’s ‘right’ to conduct a covert foreign policy that led his country into WWI. c.f.3B(b) (c))

And all the while the covert bombing of Cambodia went on, military records falsified

to keep it from the American public. But leaks on the secret bombing reached the media. And in attempting to locate the source, the FBI was called in, Kissinger directing wire taps on his own staff, this beginning the long sequence of events which was to end in the first resignation of an American President.(BT3, 456-7) However, that was far ahead and in the meantime Cambodia's bombing was compounded when American and Vietnamese ground forces were sent to invade that neutral state. In part this was to support a friendlier regime in Phnom Penh which had deposed Prince Sihanouk, but it was also supposed to destroy an alleged enemy headquarters - although that was never discovered! As Tuchman commented, "*The overall result was negative: a weakened government in Phnom Penh left in need of protection, land and villages wrecked, a third of the population made homeless refugees, and the pro-Communist Khmer Rouge greatly augmented by recruits.*" News of the invasion also considerably increased America's anti-war sentiment, the *New York Times* labelling Nixon's reasons for the invasion "*Military Hallucinations – Again*". Only a few months earlier accounts of the massacre in Vietnam of Mylai villagers had broken and the nation was further shocked when on May 4 the National Guard, called to a demonstration at Kent State University, opened fire killing 4 students. The public objections continued to grow and, like Johnson, Nixon responded by adopting a 'them and us' siege mentality, resorting to secret surveillance of 'enemies' through more wire tapping which extended even to the tapping of 17 members of his own National Security Council! (BT3, 458-60)

(k) Daniel Ellsberg; - and Rising public Disgust

In June 1971, a collected record of mostly classified papers (originally some 14 volumes authorised by Robert McNamara in an effort to reveal the roots of American involvement in Vietnam) was secretly copied, then released to members of Congress and the press by Daniel Ellsberg, a former Pentagon official. These papers revealed the lack of input on war policy from the US Congress. Consequently, much concern was expressed that Congress had been by-passed in the lead-up to Cambodia's invasion. Indeed, armed with that hitherto-denied information, Senators sought to curb funds and reduce military involvement in a number of ways, - though still with limited success. They did, however, finally repeal the infamous *Tonkin Gulf Resolution*.

Also in 1971 Vietnamese ground forces with American air support invaded Laos, but suffered a 50% casualty rate. As Washington was forever heralding operations as designed "*...to save American lives*", anti-Americanism continued to spread with open demands for political compromise. Moreover, polls at home showed a majority of Americans favouring the removal of all US troops by the end of the year, most agreeing that "*...it was morally wrong for the US to be fighting in Vietnam.*"(BT3, 463) By 1972 the war had lasted longer than any in American history. In March that year the North launched an offensive, 120,000 troops moving south to Saigon. Overwhelmed on the ground, the US greatly heightened its B-52 attacks on the North, with round-the-clock raids and a naval blockade, including the mining of Haiphong harbour.(BT3, 464) It was at this time that Nixon's 'Committee to Re-elect the President' became involved in the illicit break-in of the Democratic National Committee's offices in the Watergate building to rifle the files of their opposition, - though public revelations on this and other 'dirty

tricks' to ensure Nixon's re-election were still a year away.(BT3, 465) Meanwhile Nixon in Moscow (there to sign the SALT agreement on nuclear arms limitation) found the Russians willing to encourage the heavily-bombed Vietnamese North to negotiate with the US-advised South. On October 31 a draft treaty, which recognised the NLF (Viet Cong) as a valid political force, and allowed 145,000 North Vietnamese troops to remain in the south, was announced by Kissinger who proclaimed 'peace was at hand', - despite the fact that it was rejected by General Thieu, the South's leader. But for Nixon the outcome was a triumph, he being re-elected with the largest popular and electoral majority ever recorded! (BT3, 466)

However in subsequent secret negotiations with the North, Kissinger, attempting to back away from the agreed settlement terms, was rebuffed by Hanoi. And the US response then was the notorious 'Christmas bombing', the heaviest American action of the war, in just 12 days the US Air Force dropping a greater bomb tonnage than the total of the past 3 years.(BT3, 467) That meant terrible destruction across Hanoi and Haiphong. It also caused the loss of American planes and their crews, including some 95 taken prisoner in the north. The American public were not pleased with any of this and in early January 1973, members of Congress in both Houses voted for an immediate cease-fire and cut-off of military funds for Indochina, contingent only on the release of US POWs and safe withdrawal of US forces.

Threatened by the looming Watergate scandal and its own political demise, the Administration agreed to cease bombing if Hanoi resumed peace talks. Hanoi agreed and in a final Treaty, signed in Paris on June 27, 1973, the Viet Cong (then called the Provisional Revolutionary Government, the PRG) were recognised, as was the unity of Vietnam in an article which provided for its later re-unification on the basis of peaceful discussion between the parties.(BT3, 469) In the event, the US, already unwilling to persist in Vietnam, became pre-occupied with the Watergate scandal, its own internal political corruption and its televised investigation by Senator Sam Ervin's Congressional Committee. Congress cut off funds for further military intervention and the Vietnamese launched a final offensive which easily overcame Thieu's ARVN army.

(I) Final Lose-lose Outcomes

Overall, it had been a profoundly tragic disaster for all concerned. Some 58,000 young Americans had died for nothing, 300,000 wounded physically and even greater numbers mentally. Many of these victims had been 'drafted', forcibly conscripted into it, themselves traumatised not only by the weapons, but by knowledge of the damage they had inflicted on the men, women and children of the other side. Indeed, what Americans had suffered was but a shadow of what befell the Vietnamese. On that, Robert McNamara in his testimonial film "*Fog of War*" gives the number of Vietnamese killed as some 2.5 million. To this we must add the necessarily far larger numbers wounded, the burned and crippled children, the disrupted bombed-out cities, the ravaged land, defoliated, pitted with bomb craters, littered with unexploded land mines. Indeed, all the most terrible legacy of a needless, pointless war for which the US recognises still no responsibility, e.g., no obligation even to partial compensation towards the recovery of

unexploded ordinance, to restoration of the land or to rebuilding the broken cities, towns and villages.

C. Australia's Self-imposed Involvement in the Vietnam War 1964-1971

As you will have noticed, so far I have said nothing of Australia's tragic involvement in this war. Tragic it was for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that our Robert Menzies government of the day 'invited itself' into the conflict. Initially that involved quiet negotiations to get the US Administration (which up till March 1965 did not have its own combat troops involved), to agree to an early contribution of Australian troops. As that took quite some time, there was a last-minute panic move to obtain, with American assistance, a formal South Vietnamese request (ultimately unsuccessful) for Australia's military assistance, - in time for Menzies' already-leaked and therefore imminent 'official announcement'. Although a small force, one battalion, it was to increase year by year until by October 1967 it had reached 8,000. In the event, our Australian force reached Vietnam in May, 1965, just 3 months after the first contingent of American combat troops.

Despite the US Administration's later attempts to gather wide international military support, such was studiously avoided not only by Britain and other Western countries, but by all Asian-Pacific countries other than South Korea, Thailand, Australia and New Zealand, - clearly an extremely limited 'Coalition of the Willing'. So we have to ask, why and how did it come about that Australian government politicians committed us? Was there any public or even parliamentary debate on the issues before such commitment? Just who made the decision? And in what way was Australia 'invited', - by whom, and under what circumstances?

As background, its worth noting that from from 1949 on, the earliest days of the Menzies' government, it championed France's 'right' to regain its pre-WWII colony of Indochina. Although the Menzies cabinet was pro-colonial 'in principle', always its key argument was that the Vietnamese independence movement led by Ho Chi Minh, was communist. Starting with that undoubted fact, and its ready acceptance of Cold War assumptions, our government of the day promoted the idea of there being a world-wide Moscow/China-backed movement of which the Vietnamese resistance to France was an integral part; and, further, that if Vietnam (clearly determined as it was to regain its long-denied independence) was to become a communist government, then all other countries in the region inevitably would fall, 'like dominoes'! Indeed, I remember some election posters of the period featuring a S.E.Asian regional map with superimposed downward-thrusting red arrows emanating from China, the threat clearly pointing our way!

However, judging by the number of S.E.Asian states *avoiding* military involvement in Vietnam and electing to remain outside Dulles' SEATO protective umbrella, few there were who truly believed this myth. Indeed, although under SEATO the 'Republic of Vietnam' was itself a 'designated state', it never requested military assistance under the Treaty.(MS, 42) However, believed or not, this 'threat' was promoted in Australia by the Menzies government over some two decades - that is until the very end of the Vietnam

war, the cessation of Vietnam's occupation by American forces. Politically it was a winner for Menzies since many Australians, feeling insecure, fearing a possible Asian invasion from our north, were swayed by that myth. And as Menzies and others were only too aware, for many years that gained his government significant public support, not only support for sending regular army troops, but even for forcing the very young - those conscripted 20-year old boys, to serve and die there!

So, based on the ultimately-revealed official documents of the time, let me give a brief outline of how our original military involvement came about, as set out in a small book, "*War for the Asking*", by Michael Sexton, an Australian lawyer with wide experience of both public and international law. At the outset there was in most quarters of Australian society not a great deal of public discussion on the issue, of the rightness or wrongness of the war in Vietnam up to the time of the 1954 *Geneva Accord* and France's withdrawal – nor even during the early phases of America's military involvement. And certainly, there was all too little parliamentary questioning and debate.(MS) As to our first military commitment there, that was in 1962 when a small military instructor training team was sent.(MS, 41) The subsequent decision to send Australian combat troops came according to the following sequence and rationale.

(a) Menzies Aiming at US Support, 'in case of need'...

The overall idea was to induce the US to accept a troop contribution towards its efforts in Vietnam in the expectation that if and when Australia *or 'its interests'*, were under challenge at any time (e.g., in New Guinea or Indonesia) and wanted military support, the United States would feel obliged to come to our assistance. In a cabled report to his government in May 1964 Alan Renouf, senior public servant and diplomat, put it like this: "*Our objective should be to achieve such an habitual closeness of relations with the United States and sense of mutual alliance that in our time of need,the United States would have little option but to respond as we would want.*" And as he soon went on, "*The problem of Vietnam is one, it seems, where we could without disproportionate expenditure pick up a lot of credit with the United States.....*" (MS,44-5) Good to know it was only our 'expenditure' that was at stake!

From this viewpoint, however, the problem was that (to that date and since) the United States had avoided giving any blanket assurances of support regarding possible future disputes. Not surprisingly, (and notwithstanding the ANZUS Treaty - which in any case bound the parties only to *confer* and *consider* the issues) the US, like any country, intended to keep all future options open. But (as now!) the Australian government of the day was blind to that reality. Accordingly, its aim was to obtain from the US a specific request for military assistance to support US efforts in Vietnam. And, to prepare for the success it expected, in November 1964 the government introduced national conscription for 20-year-olds.(MS, 79)

However, since the US was already somewhat wary, and since in late 1964 Johnson was approaching his Presidential re-election (he on a 'peace platform' against a 'macho' Barry Goldwater) that success was not immediately in prospect. However, when in

November that year the President was re-elected, encouragement of our on-going *political* support followed, yet (for the time being) that was all. This was frustrating, for as Keith Waller our Washington Ambassador saw it in late December, 1964, “...*it is unfortunate that current American strategy in South Vietnam was not decided on immediately after the President’s election. The present low key activity, the way in which every move seems closely tied to the political situation in Saigon and the somewhat irresolute American attitude gives cause for increasing uneasiness.*”(MS,68-9)

(b) ...Encourages stronger US bombing

Clearly the Australian government wanted from the Americans tougher military action, including the stronger ‘Phase 2’ bombing response, something it would encourage diplomatically over the following months in the hope of bringing on the much-sought-after request.(MS, 89-93, 97) In January, Paul Hasluck, Minister for External Affairs and Acting Prime Minister while Menzies was in the US, indicated to Ambassador Waller “*If the United States decided to put into effect a carefully-phased programme of air strikes against North Vietnam’s infiltration system we would extend full public and diplomatic support. If such operations led to international pressure for the immediate calling of another Geneva Conference, we would join in resisting such pressures until we both considered that some acceptable prospect of genuine negotiation existed.*”(MS, 98)

Thus while waiting to get the Johnson Administration to make the needed request, the Australian government wanted to display its encouragement of the bombing approach to ‘successful negotiation’. A press release of February 8 from Minister Hasluck regarding recent US bombing of North Vietnam fully supported that action, going on to say, “*It will hearten the free countries of Asia to see this evidence of the continued determination of the United States to assist the free peoples to defend their freedom and to maintain their independence.*”(MS, 116-7) As if that was not enough, following the beginnings of the ‘Rolling Thunder’ bombing programme, his ‘ministerial statement’ of March 23 included the sentiment that, “*What the United States has chosen to do in South Vietnam appears to the Australian Government as the recognition and acceptance by it of the great responsibilities which its own greatness has laid upon it.*”(MS, 117) And that was, doubtless, but further encouragement of feelings already well established within the US Administration; and certainly no encouragement to the much-needed negotiated settlement under the UN, as then being proposed by France’s DeGaulle, Yugoslavia’s President Tito, and the leaders of 17 non-aligned nations meeting in Belgrade.(MS, 138) .

At military staff talks in Honolulu between the US and Australia at the end of March, 1965, our government had indicated its willingness to send an infantry battalion to Vietnam. Following this the US State Department advised General Maxwell Taylor in Saigon to approach the South Vietnamese government for a formal request to the Australian government.(MS, 142) But Taylor hesitated because Prime Minister Quat and other South Vietnamese leaders were sensitive about having ground troops from *any* foreign power on their soil since it would make them look as if they were not in control of their own country. They wanted to be seen as authentic Vietnamese nationalists.(MS,

145) Moreover, at this stage Taylor had yet to get clearance for landing two more US marine battalions! As this had to be Taylor's first priority, he held off raising Australia's offer with Quat.(MS, 144-7)

In the meanwhile, in Washington, Australia's Ambassador Waller gained Dean Rusk's approval to inform his government of a formal US request. Rusk proposed that the next step be a joint approach by US and Australian ambassadors in Saigon to attain South Vietnam's approval, Taylor to sound out Quat in advance.(MS, 149) Ironically, at that critical stage of these (covert) negotiations, ten Anglican bishops wrote an open letter to Prime Minister Menzies pleading for Australia to support negotiations to end the conflict instead of advocating its indefinite continuation. In part they said: "*We cannot think that we, or others more distinguished, are hopelessly deluded in asking that negotiations become the objective of Australian diplomacy.....In urging this we are supported by his Holiness the Pope, by U Thant, and by the governments of France and India, and your fellow Prime Minister of a Dominion, and the United Kingdom Government.*"(MS ,151)

Menzies was clearly hurt. As he responded, "*My colleagues and I must decline to be cast in the roles of war-mongers and supporters of illicit action on the part of the United States or South Vietnam.*

We are constantly aware of our duties to our country and our people. One of those duties is.....to keep the peace.....Another is to be acutely aware of the need to preserve the security of Australia. It would be a sorry day if, by undermining the will and capacity to resist in South-East Asia, we found aggressive Communism moving nearer to our shores....." (MS, 150-1) So there you have it – see below re. Australian lottery to 'enlist' young conscripts.

Of course the Bishops had not known of Australia's advancing plans to send combat troops, but these went on quietly, with arrangements that they arrive via HMAS *Sydney* late in May.(MS, 156) Yet at that time Australia had no request from Vietnam since General Taylor had yet to gain formal approval from Vietnam's PM Quat for additional *American* troops. Indeed, even as late as April 22, Quat remained extremely reluctant to discuss the question. And although by April 25, 1965 Quat himself was convinced, he still needed to consult over the following week with his generals, Thieu and Minh.(MS, 160)

Notwithstanding all this uncertainty, however, back in Canberra Menzies decided that he would make the formal announcement regarding a 'Vietnamese request for Australian troops' on the evening of Thursday April 29. So to expedite such a request, Waller was enjoined to urge the State Department to put pressure on General Taylor. But Washington, was not about to jump or give assurances. Yet on April 26 Taylor did see Quat at which time he got in-principle approval for Australia's contribution. However, wanting to coordinate simultaneous announcements, Quat needed early advice from Australia on *its* proposed text, including references to *prior* consultations between the Vietnamese, United States and Australian governments.(MS, 163) (How embarrassing!) At all events, on Wednesday April 28, Washington informed Canberra it doubted the

feasibility of the Thursday 29th dead-line, and by that evening near panic developed in Canberra because our government's battalion decision, which finally had been 'leaked' to the press, was already on its way around the world, including to Washington and Vietnam!

Near midnight on Wednesday, 28th, the text of Menzies' intended statement was cabled to Washington and Saigon for clearance. And Australia's Ambassador in Saigon was asked to make sure that Quat did not make his announcement *before* Menzies made his.(MS, 164-5) The Americans decided to 'live with' the fact of the Australian 'leak' and did their best to expedite the necessary message from South Vietnam's PM, Quat.(MS, 166-7) At 5.10 pm Thursday 29th, Canberra heard from its Saigon Ambassador that Quat again accepted Australia's offer and agreed that Australia's announcement refer to a Vietnamese government request, yet still it was all only verbal, there being no formal written request. And although this could not arrive in time, a promise was made to have one, dated April 29, sent promptly. So on that basis Menzies went ahead, presenting at 8 p.m. that evening his parliamentary statement.(MS, 169-70)

But when finally Prime Minister Quat's letter, addressed to our ambassador in Saigon and dated April 29 eventuated, it read as follows:

29 April, 1965

"Dear Mr Ambassador,

I have the honor to refer to your letter of today's date confirming the Australian Government's offer to send to Viet Nam an infantry battalion of 800 men, with some 100 personnel in logistic support to serve with United States forces in assisting in the defence of the Republic of Viet Nam.

I wish to confirm my government's acceptance of this offer and to request the dispatch of this force to Viet Nam on the basis which we discussed.

Sincerely,
PHAN-HUY-QUAT

That letter was of course embarrassingly disappointing to the Menzies' government. In failing to refer to any prior South Vietnamese request and mentioning only our government's offer, it reflected the arrangement's true background, which of course the government would not wish to reveal. So Quat's letter was not made available to the parliament for another 6 years - by which time our troops were about to return.

(c) Were We Dinkum? Was Australia Threatened?

At this stage one has to ask three related questions: First, as justification for its actions, was the Australian government ever truly concerned or fearful of a future invasion of Australia by Asians as it had repeatedly claimed? Secondly, was it ever justified in conscripting 20-year-old boys who then were liable to serve in Vietnam?

And thirdly, if indeed a wide section of the Australian public *sincerely* believed the validity of this threat of northern attack, should it have accepted such an unjust and yet patently ineffective ‘partial conscription’ approach to the prospect of invasion?!

I believe the answers lie in simple documented facts which speak for themselves. If during the period of the 1950s and ‘60s, when the government was ‘sounding the alarms’ about ‘threats from the north’, - it had perceived any *real* threat of invasion, it would have embarked on a steady build up of our armed forces. Not only did that not happen, but army numbers were allowed to *decline* to the point that even to fulfill its commitment of a *small* Vietnam force of just one battalion, it introduced (only 5 months before its planned announcement) *selective* compulsory military service by 20-year-olds! That move, while sufficient to supply its small Vietnam ‘token force’, would of course have been no bar to any invasion. Thus, instead of building the nation’s army by providing appropriate incentives to guarantee adequate recruitment (and other defence measures) we see a Prime Minister and Cabinet which, rather than employing their much-vaunted ‘market forces’ strategies to *pay* for the services required, opted for the arbitrary, unjust *coercion* of young men, numbers of whom would suffer not only physical and mental damage, but the final penalty, death.(see below)

And one of the saddest aspects of this is that for so many of the Vietnam War years, notwithstanding the opportunities offered by our democratic institutions, a majority of Australians went along with this totally unconscionable injustice. There was simply no groundswell of revulsion, no widespread rejection of the very idea! You see logically, if Australia had been *truly* at risk of attack, - under any *genuine* threat, - there would not only have been the earlier build-up of our permanent forces, but the introduction of a *universal* system of compulsory military service, batches of civilian men and women receiving several months of basic military and fitness training until *all* able-bodied persons of voting age, to (say) age 60, were thus prepared. Yes, that would have come at some economic cost and have required a deal of cooperation across the community, but it would have indicated that the Australian government and people were serious, ‘dinkum’, in their belief of real threat and in their determination to face it effectively and equitably.

But instead we had the scheme introduced in November 1964, - one limited to those reaching the age of 20 whose names having been placed in a barrel, were drawn to select the proportion whose ‘duty’, as they were informed, was to serve Australian society at home or abroad, wherever the government deemed appropriate. Although a minority in the community objected loudly and long, the scheme’s wider public acceptance demonstrated both the nation’s insincerity as to their belief in any real threat *and* their disregard of the supreme injustice to young lads caught up in that scheme. If this were not the case, politicians and the press would have been deluged with letters and people would have ‘filled the streets’ as (after further years of inaction) eventually they did.

Thus for many years the silent majority remained just that, while the cruel war ‘in our name’ went on. Indeed, that blindness to injustice continued well beyond April 18, 1966 when the first batches of Australian conscripts, having completed their training, were

sent off to Vietnam. If you were of a mind to be consoled, or simply to accept this situation, there were many possible reasons. Perhaps you had, yourself, passed the critical age; or your son's name missed being pulled from the barrel; or he had occupational or tertiary education protection; or your son was 'too young' or 'past the age'; or, thank God, you had only daughters! All of these factors may well have come into it but no matter how you present the situation, looking back (and forward, for we live in 'loony age') there could be no justification, no excuse for the cowardly acts done in our name.

After all, if on the one hand you, as a mature male - of any age up to 60 (just think of 'Dad's Army'!) - *truly* believed there was a *genuine* threat of invasion, you would see it as your duty to volunteer, for you simply could not adopt the cowardly approach of compelling younger boys to 'do your fighting for you', could you? They after all have most of their life ahead of them while you as, say, a 40- to 60-year old have had most of yours. But if on the other hand, you recognised the falsity of the threat, in all conscience you would be inundating the letter columns and occupying the streets with your strident objections - as all along were the vocal minority. To do otherwise would also represent cowardice. For inspiration, one has only to think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian who through the 1930s and WWII stood out against the madness of Adolf Hitler and his destructive (and ultimately self-destructive) regime, even to the point of imprisonment and death at their hands.(DB)

None of the above condemnation of Australia's evil selective conscription scheme of the 1960s is to suggest any justification for sending our permanent army troops to Vietnam. Although many of these (initially at least) may have welcomed the opportunity to go overseas, see military action, gain wider experience, etc., very many later came to see the war as an unjust and brutal imposition on the Vietnamese, as well as highly damaging to all those young Australians directly involved, - so many survivors suffering lasting physical and mental trauma.

And what of the final outcome for Australia and Australians? As indicated, many at home did finally 'wake up' to the utter injustice and counter-productiveness of the war, including the wrong done to the conscripts. By the late 1960s, many ordinary Australians were indeed talking seriously to one another, writing to politicians and the press and, ultimately, literally filling the streets, as on May 8, 1970, when 70-100,000 led by Jim Cairns marched together in Melbourne. Hard to know what finally overcame the apathy, though I know from my own experience of middle class friends and relatives, there was growing concern that 'one of theirs' might get caught up in the lottery and sent.

At all events, without the 'victory' sought by the US and Australia, the war was nevertheless tapering off and more and more forces being withdrawn. So, yes, by then it looked as though the devastated land and people of communist Vietnam would finally be left alone, would finally attain their long-sought independence - but at what terrible cost all round? For as in so many wars, there were no winners, only losers. Politically, Vietnam would remain a communist state. Likewise, Laos and Cambodia, both severely bombed by the US would, in desperation or madness, go the same way. And, contrary to

all the Cold War rhetoric of the time, not a single other state would, (like a domino) fall - so no retrospective justifying predictions there.

Finally, the real costs of these counter-productive decades: Of the French and associated troops, some 92,000 had been killed, unknown numbers wounded; the Americans had lost 58,000 killed, their names engraved on a black marble memorial wall in Washington, plus another 300,000 wounded; Australia had lost 500 killed, of whom 193, almost 40%, were conscripts, (their names lie hidden in their Anzac Parade, Canberra Memorial) to which we must add the wounded and the long-term mentally-anguished survivors. Needless to say, the Vietnamese losses were far far greater again, including 750,000 dead from France's attempts at re-conquest, and the further 1,100,000 military deaths, plus another 2.5 million civilian dead from the more extended and violent American period (1954-1972). And since no known statistics exist, God knows how many Vietnamese wounded and mentally unhinged were left to 'carry on' as best they could in their wrecked, pock-marked/bomb-cratered, defoliated, land of desolation.

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