

‘Propagandistic Notions’ vs. ‘Pretty Silly Stuff’

*A debate on the wisdom of a public education campaign
on the history and consequences of the Vietnam War*

THE FOLLOWING DISCUSSION took place during the early stages of the Levande Framtid/Living Future project¹, when Professor Stein Tønnesson of Oslo University was among those solicited for advice and suggestions. Reputed to be a leading authority on the Vietnam War, Prof. Tønnesson was at first highly critical of the initiative. But he modified his opposition in the course of a discussion which, among other things, yielded valuable insights into the nature and level of academic expertise on the subject. The main headings are:

“Stuck fast in propagandistic notions”	2
Prof. Tønnesson’s initial, negative assessment of the project.	
“It is difficult not to reach a harsh verdict”	4
Response to Prof. Tønnesson’s critique by Al Burke, project initiator and co-ordinator.	
“Pretty silly stuff”	10
Responses to Prof. Tønnesson’s critique by three members of the Advisory Board.	
“Strengthen the teaching of contemporary history, instead”	15
Final comments of Prof. Tønnesson.	
Endnotes	16

“Stuck fast in propagandistic notions”

*Stein Tønnesson, Professor of History
Centre for Development and the Environment (SUM)
University of Oslo, Norway*

The proposed public education campaign, *Levande Framtid*, appears to be stuck fast in the most propagandistic notions of the Vietnam anti-war movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. If you want to find a suitable author for the sort of book you propose, it will have to be someone who has not visited Vietnam during the past twenty years and has stopped reading about Vietnam since the beginning of the 1980s.

The Vietnam War started at the close of the 1950s as a revolt against the American-supported government of South Vietnam, which then developed into a civil war between two Vietnamese governments. Most of the Vietnamese who died during that war were killed by other Vietnamese.

The United States intervened massively in support of the losing side of the civil war, contributed greatly to prolonging the war, and failed. The bombing carried out by the U.S. in North Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia must clearly be regarded as “aggression”; but the objective of the U.S. was always limited to defending the South Vietnamese regime in order to prevent this part of Vietnam from also getting a communist regime. China and the Soviet Union gave extensive support to North Vietnam and the FLN which was controlled by the Communist Party in the north. Like Korea, Vietnam suffered the tragic fate of becoming a hot war in the middle of the Cold War.

Metre-long blinders

After the war, Vietnam became isolated and did not share in the major economic advances that other countries in the region experienced. This has been attributed largely to the lingering consequences of the war, and to the embargo imposed by the U.S. But the main reason was actually Hanoi’s own economic and foreign policies which, among other things, gave rise to a flood of refugees.

Another key factor was that, after liberating Cambodia from the genocidal Khmer Rouge, Vietnam established a puppet government in Phnom Penh and maintained a large military force in Cambodia until 1989, instead of seeking a peaceful international solution. The war in Cambodia made enormous demands on Vietnam’s resources and made the country dependent on extensive support from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

Regarding the Vietnam War exclusively as a “rape” of Indochina by the United States is only possible if one puts on metre-long blinders. And to write that there remains little uncertainty about the basic facts of the war and its origins is completely crazy. On the contrary: Those of us who conduct research into Vietnam’s history have great difficulty getting more than limited access to that country’s archives. For that reason, Vietnam’s modern history continues to be written primarily on the basis of archives in other countries. This is an obstacle to the development of an independent, disciplined history of Vietnam.

I regret to inform you that not only Palestine/Israel, Iraq/Kuwait and Serbia/Kosovo can be described as complicated conflicts: The conflict in Vietnam and the rest of Indochina was also complex. [Editor’s note: *Levande Framtid*’s materials refer only to the relative clarity surrounding the United States’ role in the Vietnam War, as disclosed for example by *The Pentagon Papers*. The complexity of Indochina’s history and current politics has not yet been addressed.]

Weakens serious criticism

Permit me also to express my scepticism toward a “public education campaign” that is only interested in illuminating black-and-white conflicts, and not those that are complex. The young people of Sweden should be helped to understand a world in which conflicts are complex, but where it is nevertheless necessary to take a stance on issues of right vs. wrong. I feel it would be very unfortunate if Swedish youth were to be subjected to so grossly oversimplified propaganda of the sort that you seem to propose.

Neither can I understand how *Levande Framtid* can accept Johan Galtung’s sweeping statement that the nature and extent of the crimes committed by the U.S. and its allies in the name of freedom and democracy are fully comparable with the worst excesses of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. Such a statement creates the impression that what the U.S. did in Vietnam is comparable to the Soviet Union’s and Nazi Germany’s worst excesses. In my opinion, that kind of exaggeration can only weaken the serious criticism that we must continue to undertake— also in connection with the ongoing war in the Balkans— of the United States’ morally reprehensible intervention in Vietnam.

The United States’ war effort in Vietnam must, in my opinion, be condemned on the basis of both *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bellum*. But that does not mean that the war can be described as a superpower’s rape of another people. The divisions within the Vietnamese population were very real; and when U.S. veterans are today well-received in Vietnam, it is not only due to their victims’ willingness to forgive, but also because many Vietnamese have missed the Americans and their dollars, and envy their countrymen who have become rich on the other side of the Pacific.

* * * * *

“It is difficult not to reach a harsh verdict”

Response to Prof. Tønnesson’s critique by Levande Framtid’s co-ordinator, Al Burke, and approved by the steering committee.

The Norwegian historian, Stein Tønnesson has found fault with the *Levande Framtid* project on a number of points that are encapsulated in the italicized sub-headings below. Most of the facts and events referred to in the responses are documented in the U.S. Defense Department’s own history of the Vietnam War, published under the title of *The Pentagon Papers*. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from that document.

The Vietnam War started at the close of the 1950s.

Direct U.S. involvement in Indochina began as early as World War II, when liaison officers attempted to co-ordinate the Allies’ military strategy with various resistance groups, including that of Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam. In return for that co-operation, various representatives of the U.S. government promised to support Vietnam’s independence following the defeat of the Japanese.

Instead, the U.S. chose to look the other way when the French re-occupied their former colony. Given France’s precarious situation in the post-war years, it is highly unlikely that it would have dared to re-enter Vietnam in defiance of U.S. wishes, had they been expressed. “Non-intervention by the U.S. on behalf of the Vietnamese was tantamount to acceptance of the French,” notes *The Pentagon Papers*.²

The war was a revolt against the American-supported government of South Vietnam, which then developed into a civil war between two Vietnamese governments.

The “American War” was, in fact, a continuation of the “French War”, which was largely financed by the U.S. from 1950 onward. By the end of the French War in 1954, the U.S. was paying roughly eighty percent of the costs.

The division of Vietnam into southern and northern halves was a legal fiction imposed by the U.S. on the peace agreement negotiated at Geneva, in order to prevent Ho Chi Minh’s liberation movement from taking power. As President Eisenhower and other U.S. officials noted, Ho Chi Minh’s popularity was so great that he would have received 75-80 percent of the vote in a fair election.

After the peace agreement was signed, the U.S. did everything possible to sabotage it: “The Eisenhower government had already sent a team of Americans to begin secret operations against the Vietminh [liberation movement] in June, while the Geneva Conference was still in session.” These agents carried out an extensive program of sabotage and psychological warfare, the latter successfully terrifying a large portion of the Catholic population— a product of French colonialism— into fleeing from the north to the south. “The attempt to scare the people worked.”

Ngo Dinh Diem was installed by the United States as “Premier of South Vietnam”, where he and his increasingly corrupt and brutal government enjoyed very little support

among the general population. But he was kept in his precarious office by U.S. money and military power. “Without the threat of U.S. intervention, South Vietnam could not have refused to even discuss the elections called for in 1956 under the Geneva settlement, without being immediately overrun by the Vietminh armies..... South Vietnam was essentially the creation of the United States.”

Oddly enough, the territorial integrity of Vietnam was underscored in a non-amendable article of the 1967 Constitution of the United States’ puppet government in Saigon, which held that “Vietnam is a territorially indivisible, unified and independent republic” extending from the Camau Peninsula to the Chinese border. The same principle was also emphasized in the Geneva Agreement.

In short, there was no South Vietnam and there was no civil war, in any meaningful sense of the terms. One could as well reason that the “legitimate Quisling government” during World War II was engaged in a civil war with the Norwegian resistance movement—except that there was far less resistance in Norway than in Vietnam.

There were, of course, internal divisions among the Vietnamese population, as in most other countries of the world— the United States not excepted. The sharpest division in Vietnam was that between the largely Catholic and urban elite which had emerged during a century of colonial subjugation, and the predominantly Buddhist peasants of the countryside. The latter comprised around eighty percent of the total population, the former some 10-15 percent. As always, there were many exceptions to this general pattern.

This state of affairs can hardly be described as a “civil war”. There was an occupying power— first French, then U.S. American— and subjects among the native population who were dependent on and ruled by that power. This exceedingly unequal alliance of foreign and native interests, a standard feature of colonial regimes everywhere, attempted to impose its will on the vast majority of the population with a concentrated fury that is still reaping victims today, more than a quarter-century after the U.S. withdrawal.

It is within this framework that the following assertion should be interpreted....

Most of the Vietnamese who died during that war were killed by other Vietnamese.

There do not appear to be any reliable data on which such an assertion can be based. It is true, as noted above, that a minority of Vietnamese were allied with the Americans in a war against the vast majority of Vietnamese. But it is equally obvious that most of the killing would not have occurred if the U.S. had not devoted such enormous resources to that purpose.

This is confirmed by a wide variety of sources, including the testimony of Ralph McGeehee, a former CIA agent who defected from the agency in disgust over its methods in Vietnam. “The Phoenix Project was based on the concept that the communist movement in Vietnam consisted of guerrillas who were terrorizing people and forcing them to cooperate— when, in essence, the majority of the villagers were loyal communists who had dedicated their lives to fighting the Americans”.³

The Phoenix Program was an orgy of torture and assassination that accounted for the extinction of up to 40,000 human lives, often on mere suspicion of communist sympathies. Much of the torture and killing was carried out by native Vietnamese, but it requires a powerful distorting lens to see their actions as independent of the United States in this and related matters.

More to the point, there is much to indicate that the majority of deaths were the direct result of U.S. bombs, napalm and other firepower. Gen. Telford Taylor has stated flatly that, “The bombing in South Vietnam has, of course, been the principal cause of civilian casualties and the generation of refugees”.⁵ U.S. bombing was, of course, responsible for virtually all of the death and destruction visited upon the northern part of the country. But over twice as much aerial bombardment was inflicted on the south, i.e. the “nation” that the U.S. was supposed to be defending from attack.

China and the Soviet Union gave extensive support to North Vietnam and the FLN which was controlled by the Communist Party in the north.

Ho Chi Minh was a great admirer of the U.S. theory of government, and for many years kept a copy of the Declaration of Independence on his desk. He wrote to President Truman on at least eight occasions to remind the United States about its promise of support in regaining Vietnam’s independence, but his entreaties were never answered. Inevitably, his liberation movement was forced to rely on the Soviet Union for the means to resist continued subjugation. For a country being attacked by the U.S. during the Cold War, where else could one turn for support?

In any event, there is nothing to indicate that Ho Chi Minh was a mere puppet of the Soviets. “A survey by the State Department’s Office of Intelligence and Research in the fall of 1948 concluded that it could not find any hard evidence that Ho Chi Minh actually took his orders from Moscow.” Of course, as the aggression of France and the U.S. intensified, his movement became increasingly dependent on the Soviet Union’s support. China, given its own problems and a long history of conflict with its southern neighbour, was less eager to assist (and would eventually join the U.S. in an unholy alliance against Vietnam).

As for the FLN being “controlled by the Communist Party in the north”, that is a description of reality which is only possible if one accepts the legitimacy of the country’s forced division into separate entities. But as noted above, that was a legal fiction which was not even accepted by the United States’ puppet government in the south.

Naturally, most participants in the FLN were recruited locally. But a great many were returning southerners who had temporarily moved to the north after the partition in 1956 or to escape persecution by the Diem regime. That the legitimate leadership for the country as a whole happened to be located in the north was the logical consequence of Vietnam’s history and the artificial partition imposed by the U.S.

To write that there remains little uncertainty about the basic facts of the war and its origins is completely crazy.

We have chosen to base this response largely on *The Pentagon Papers*— not because it is necessarily the most comprehensive or accurate account, but because it confirms “the basic facts of the war” in a way that dispels any doubts about them. As far as we are aware, no U.S. official has ever challenged the validity of that account. It has been confirmed and further elaborated by Robert MacNamara, the former Secretary of Defense who bears a large share of responsibility for the war. Accordingly, it is reasonable to request that Prof. Tønnesson explain what there remains to be uncertain about, and why it is “crazy” of us to cite facts that have been acknowledged even by the aggressor.

Those of us who conduct research into Vietnam’s history have great difficulty getting more than limited access to that country’s archives.... This is an obstacle to the development of an independent, disciplined history of Vietnam.

Given the treatment that Vietnam has suffered at the hands of the West for the past 150 years, including the massive disinformation campaign to which it was subjected during and after the American War, why should it be eager to open its archives to representatives of those countries?

Use of the term “representative” in this context is not unintentional: The analyses of many “western experts” betray the same kind of inability and/or unwillingness to see the world from a Vietnamese perspective that is reflected in the policies of the United States and France.

Although it can hardly be regarded as an urgent priority for Vietnam at the moment, “the development of an independent, disciplined history” may well be regarded as useful and worthwhile. But there is reason to doubt that many, if not most, western scholars are capable of contributing to such a development. The available evidence suggests that many would follow an ethnocentric inclination to distort the facts in such a way as to benefit the reputation of the United States and do additional harm to Vietnam. That being the case, it seems quite prudent of Vietnam to exercise caution in opening its archives.

In any event, access to those archives is hardly necessary in order to understand the role of the United States in Vietnam which, at least to begin with, is the main focus of the *Levande Framtid* project. The archives of other countries, particularly those of the U.S., are quite adequate to that purpose.

When U.S. veterans are today well-received in Vietnam, it is not only due to their victims’ willingness to forgive, but also because many Vietnamese have missed the Americans and their dollars, and envy their countrymen who have become rich on the other side of the Pacific.

It is no doubt true that Vietnamese, in general, are as interested in money and wealth as are people everywhere else. But Prof. Tønnesson is obviously deluding himself if he imagines that they would prefer a resumption of the war in order to once again enjoy the presence of “the Americans and their dollars”? Further, is there any well-grounded reason to believe that the willingness to forgive—to which so many returning GIs have attested—is anything other than a sincere expression of the majority’s deeply-ingrained Buddhist values and beliefs?

In other words, it is difficult to interpret this particular statement as anything other than an attempt, perhaps unconscious, to exaggerate the pecuniary motives of the Vietnamese and to belittle their genuinely reconciliatory behavior. But if there is any credible evidence to the contrary, we would naturally be quite willing to acknowledge it.

Neither can I understand how Levande Framtid can accept Johan Galtung’s sweeping statement that the nature and extent of the crimes committed by the U.S. and its allies in the name of freedom and democracy are fully comparable with the worst excesses of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany.

As we note in our material, it is impossible to make direct comparisons of various crimes against humanity: “Every such crime has its own historical and ideological context,” we point out. It may also be the case that, if some useful index of nations’ criminality is ever

devised, the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany would be ranked as more destructive than the U.S. But there is little doubt that all three would end up in roughly the same category. (See Richard Du Boff’s observations on this subject in “Pretty silly stuff”, p. 12.)

To some extent, that may be simply due to the fact that the U.S. has had greater resources with which to spread misery all over the planet. For a concise catalogue of that destruction, we recommend William Blum’s *Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CIA Interventions since World War II* (see also his brief commentary on Prof. Tønnesson’s analysis of the Vietnam War in “Pretty silly stuff”). The dismal record of U.S. involvement in Latin America during the past century, for example, far exceeds the scope of anything that the Soviet Union managed to inflict on its client-states in Central Europe.

As regards Vietnam, there are certain parallels to be drawn with the fate of Europe during World War II. General Telford Taylor, who was the U.S. Chief General Counsel at the Nuremberg Tribunal wrote in *Nuremberg and Vietnam* that if one looks at what “the U.S. government has actually done in Vietnam, it is difficult not to reach a harsh verdict”.⁵

Further, as Noam Chomsky points out: “Tens if not hundreds of thousands more were killed in Laos, mainly by U.S. attacks that were in large part unrelated to the war in Vietnam, as Washington has conceded. . . . The toll of Indochinese dead during the U.S. wars is impressive even by twentieth century standards. For these dead, the U.S. bears responsibility— just as Japan is responsible for deaths in China, and Russia for deaths in Afghanistan, whoever may have pulled the trigger, a truism understood very well by Western intellectuals when the responsibility can be laid at someone else’s door.”⁶

Accordingly, we see no reason to alter either Galtung’s or Taylor’s harsh verdict. But Prof. Tønnesson or anyone else is very welcome to re-open the case with additional evidence and arguments.

It should also be noted that there are important differences between the United States’ treatment of Nazi Germany and of Vietnam, as Chomsky has pointed out: “Like Haiti in 1825 and others since, Vietnam must pay indemnities for its liberation. . . . It was compelled to take on the debts incurred by the Saigon regime to support the U.S. war effort, and to accept ‘free market reforms’, with the usual results. The industrial base has severely eroded or been taken over by foreign capital. The World Bank reports that famines have erupted affecting over a quarter of the population while malaria deaths tripled during the first four years of the ‘reforms’ as the health system collapsed along with other social programs. . . .”⁷

The proposed public education campaign appears to be stuck fast in the most propagandistic notions of the Vietnam anti-war movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. If you want to find a suitable author for the sort of book you propose, it will have to be someone who has not visited Vietnam during the past twenty years and has stopped reading about Vietnam since the beginning of the 1980s.

We are aware that there are theoretical speculations among physicists and others concerning the nature of time, which raise the possibility that it is not unidirectional and sequential. But until such speculations become accepted fact, we will consider ourselves bound by the rules of logic that conventional notions of time impose.

For that reason, it is difficult to see how any aspect of the American War, which ended in 1972, can be explained by events that occurred after 1980, or that the war can be better understood by those who have “visited Vietnam during the past twenty years”. On the

evidence, the reverse may be true: The understanding of at least some western scholars does not seem to have been improved by the study of more recent events, to indulge in understatement.

It also appears that Prof. Tønnesson would like to use Vietnam’s difficulties following the war to somehow mitigate the enormity of the United States’ crimes during it. That strikes us as somewhat like citing the behavior of Israeli Jews toward the Palestinians in order to “better understand” the Holocaust. It seems far more plausible to seek an explanation of the Jews’ post-Holocaust behavior in their terrible history of persecution, rather than *vice versa*.

The same sequential logic applies to Vietnam, of course. Has there been any human community in all of history which has experienced the kind of protracted trauma that Vietnam has endured, and immediately afterward managed to establish a perfectly harmonious, just and well-functioning society? Our own educations failed to include mention of any such instant transformation. On the other hand, despite its mistakes and despite the aggressive behavior of China and the U.S. following the American War, Vietnam has provided an encouraging example of reconciliation. One thing that did not occur was the famous “blood-bath” which U.S. propaganda assured us would inevitably follow a victory by “North” Vietnam.

The young people of Sweden should be helped to understand a world in which conflicts are complex, but where it is nevertheless necessary to take a stance on issues of right vs. wrong. I feel it would be very unfortunate if Swedish youth were to be subjected to so grossly oversimplified propaganda of the sort that you seem to propose.

See all of the above.

* * * * *

“Pretty silly stuff”

Three members of Levande Framtid’s Advisory Board⁸ respond to Prof. Tønnesson, whose comments are indicated in italics

Edward S. Herman

The proposed public education campaign, Levande Framtid, appears to be stuck fast in the most propagandistic notions of the Vietnam anti-war movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. If you want to find a suitable author for the sort of book you propose, it will have to be someone who has not visited Vietnam during the past twenty years and has stopped reading about Vietnam since the beginning of the 1980s.

This is just name-calling. Al Burke’s response to this nonsense is good.

The Vietnam War started at the close of the 1950s as a revolt against the American-supported government of South Vietnam, which then developed into a civil war between two Vietnamese governments. Most of the Vietnamese who died during that war were killed by other Vietnamese.

Al Burke’s response to this is also sound. Only an apologist for the U.S. would consider the South Vietnamese government independent and legitimate, just as an apologist for Imperial Japan might have considered a Chinese government installed in Nanking by Japan as legitimate. (This guy is really dumb!!!)

The bombing carried out by the U.S. in North Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia must clearly be regarded as “aggression”; but the objective of the U.S. was always limited to defending the government of South Vietnam in order to prevent it from also getting a communist government.

This is again pretty crude apologetics: Aggression is good, as long as it is for the purpose of keeping a client government in power, even if it means opposing self-determination, violating international law, and killing vast numbers of people.

China and the Soviet Union gave extensive support to North Vietnam and the FLN which was controlled by the Communist Party in the north. Like Korea, Vietnam suffered the tragic fate of becoming a hot war in the middle of the Cold War.

Again, crude apologetics. Does Prof. Tønnesson ever admit that the South Vietnamese government was “controlled by” the U.S. and a *de facto* puppet? Al Burke provides a good answer to this, but note how the apologist transforms what he admits to be aggression into “Cold War conflict”— when, in fact, it was the aggression that brought the Soviets and Chinese in to protect the victim.

After the war, Vietnam became isolated and did not share in the major economic advances that other countries in the region experienced. This has been attributed largely to the lingering consequences of the war, and to the embargo imposed by the U.S. But the main reason was actually Hanoi's own economic and foreign policies which, among other things, gave rise to a flood of refugees.

This is an outrage— completely unscientific assertions, and note the gross apologetics of “lingering consequences of the war,” which is a bit understated for the effects of a murderous aggression that left the country prostrate. Hanoi's policies are separated out from the effects of the devastating war and the continued ostracism of the victim of aggression, on no basis whatsoever.

Another key factor was that, after liberating Cambodia from the genocidal Khmer Rouge, Vietnam established a puppet government in Phnom Penh and maintained a large military force in Cambodia until 1989, instead of seeking a peaceful international solution. The war in Cambodia made enormous demands on Vietnam's resources and made the country dependent on extensive support from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

Notice how Prof. Tønnesson uses the phrase “puppet government” to describe Vietnam's client in Cambodia, but not for the South Vietnamese government imposed by the U.S. On the principles of “humanitarian intervention” how does Prof. Tønnesson explain why Vietnam has been further boycotted, while Indonesia in East Timor kept getting loans and aid from the West? Prof. Tønnesson also misses the point that the West kept supporting the Khmer Rouge; if they had ceased doing so, maybe there would have been peace. And did not Vietnam have every reason to feel threatened by the Khmer Rouge, China and the U.S.?

I regret to inform you that not only Palestine/Israel, etc. can be described as complicated: The conflict in Vietnam and the rest of Indochina was also complex.

“Complex” is the favorite word of the apologist. He finds it very simple to explain the Cold War basis of the U.S. intervention and a lot of other stuff. Al Burke's response to this is also good.

Additional matters

Questions in italics posed by the editor

Who killed whom? Prof. Tønnesson states that it was largely a matter of Vietnamese killing other Vietnamese.

Prof. Tønnesson's stress on whether the U.S. or the Vietnamese did the direct killing is itself proof of an apologist at work, because even a secondary school student should recognize that a great power can mobilize a mercenary army within a state to do much of its dirty work. During the Nixon years there was an open effort to shift the burden of fighting to the mercenary army. This was called “Vietnamization”, but at the time I called it “mercenarization.” If the U.S. can hire an internal army to kill, what does that prove? Also, note the interesting fact that although the U.S. spent enormous sums to fund internal mercenaries, it was recognized by everybody that they would not fight, and could not compete with the communists. How does Prof. Tønnesson explain this?

Are there reliable figures on the distribution of deaths and casualties, and their causes? For instance, how many were killed directly by U.S. bombing, etc?

Prof. Tønnesson’s claim is outrageous nonsense. First, there are no authoritative figures, so where is his scientism in making a definite claim? Also, due to the desire to avoid U.S. casualties, the U.S. used increasingly capital-intensive warfare that took an increasingly heavy toll of the civilian population. As Richard Du Boff has noted (see below), all the casualties in the North were caused by the U.S., but the U.S. bombing of villages in the South was even more ferocious, and the huge operations like Speedy Express and My Lai were strictly U.S.-implemented. Apart from that, who was paying for and supplying the guns and napalm to the Saigon army?

Was the U.S. motivated primarily by anti-communist zeal, even in the cases of Laos and Cambodia?

This is speculation, and ignores the fact that the U.S. was an exceedingly arrogant superpower that thought it had the right to exercise its will anywhere. Laos and Cambodia were “side-shows” where the people stood in the way of U.S. aims and could therefore be destroyed.

Was the U.S. embargo after the war of only secondary significance for Vietnam’s economic difficulties, as stated?

Anybody that makes such an unverifiable statement immediately demonstrates that he or she is an apologist for Western power. Especially if they fail to acknowledge that the virtually genocidal war had left the country devastated, its finest manpower killed, the country traumatized, so that recovery would have been difficult in the best of circumstances.⁹

In short, this is all pretty silly stuff, although I agree that a strong factual reply is in order.

Richard B. Du Boff

1. Regarding the statement by Prof. Tønnesson that, “Most of the Vietnamese who died during the war were killed by other Vietnamese”: I do not think anyone can conclusively prove this to be true or false, because numbers of those killed and wounded in Vietnam from 1965 to 1975—the U.S.-dominated phase of the Vietnam War— will never be known. But the most likely estimate would be the opposite, namely, that U.S. armed forces were responsible for inflicting considerably more casualties of war on civilians and military personnel, for the following reasons:

First, massive U.S. air power— with bombs of various tonnages and types, napalm, automatic weapons, etc.— took a huge toll of human life, probably the largest of any single type of military action during the war. Second, it is well known that the U.S. trained and equipped ARVN (the South Vietnamese army) was reluctant to engage the enemy, preferring to allow the U.S. forces to do most of the fighting. During the war, it became difficult, soon impossible, for even the U.S. press to avoid reporting the greatest single complaint of U.S. military personnel, especially draftees— that the Vietnamese on “our side” were unwilling to fight despite being given overwhelming superiority in equipment and supplies, compared to the other side (“Vietcong”), which fought bravely under enormous disadvantages, even though both were Vietnamese!

2. Regarding “Those of us who conduct research into Vietnam’s history have great difficulty getting more than limited access to that country’s archives”: This is largely irrelevant for evaluating the U.S. role in Vietnam, not only from 1965 to 1975, but starting in 1950 when the United States assumed an increasingly larger share of the expenses of France’s “Indochina War”, which ended with the Geneva Conference of July 1954.

This also undermines the credibility of any such statement as, “To write that there remains little uncertainty about the basic facts of the war and its origins is completely crazy.” There is in fact exceedingly little uncertainty, unless one assumes that the war really was part of a Soviet (or “Red” Chinese?) plot to extend the communist empire all over the globe, and that we still cannot prove it because of archive inaccessibility!

3. The major issue during the war— in fact, even before it and ever since— was whether there ever was a viable, independent political entity known as “South Vietnam.” That “nation” was established only by U.S. sabotage of the Geneva Accords of 1954. In his memoirs, Eisenhower stated (perhaps the best-known comment of the entire history of the war) that, in 1954, every informed observer he met agreed that “possibly 80 percent” of the Vietnamese people would have chosen Ho Chi Minh in a free election. Even Leo Cherne, one of earliest hawks and promoters of an “independent, non-Communist” South Vietnam, wrote in *Look* magazine (25 January 1955) that, “If elections [mandated by the Geneva Accords] were held today, the overwhelming majority of Vietnamese would vote Communist . . . No more than 18 months remain for us to complete the job of winning over the Vietnamese before they vote. What can we do?” Over the next 20 years, nothing in this equation ever changed. See, for example:

- “Premier Ky [whose role-model was Adolph Hitler]. . . said in an interview that his regime was not yet ready to face the threat of communist political agitation after a negotiated cease-fire because it had not yet had time to begin to overcome what he called the many social and economic injustices in Vietnam.” (Reported by Charles Mohr, in *New York Times*, 1 September 1965)

- “We are very weak politically and without the strong political support of the population which the FLN have. Thus, now even if we defeat them militarily, they can come to power because of their greater political strength. We now have— thanks to the support of our allies— a strong military instrument. But we are without a political instrument that can compete with the communists in the South.” (Statement from a top South Vietnamese general to Professor George Kahin of Cornell University; quoted by Kahin in *The New Republic*, 14 October 1967).

- In 1969 “a broad spectrum of South Vietnamese politicians” still believed the Thieu-Ky regime incapable of competing politically with the communists. “Interviews with the most important political parties, fronts and religious blocs did not turn up a single individual who believed that the present Thieu government could win in any reasonably fair and open political competition with the communists.” (Peter Kumpa, reporting in the *Baltimore Sun*, 2 June 1969).

4. Regarding *Levande Framtid*’s assessment that, “if some useful index of nations’ criminality is ever devised, the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany would possibly be ranked as more destructive than the U.S.”:

I am not at all sure about the former case. If we are talking about death, destruction, and devastation visited upon others outside of one's own borders, the U.S. easily beats the old USSR. Four times in the last 50 years (Korea, Vietnam, Persian Gulf, Kosovo) the U.S. has intervened in regional or local conflicts and transformed them into major international confrontations. This omits U.S. support of brutal and murderous regimes, and in several cases close co-operation in bringing them to power (Greece 1967, Chile 1973). Clinton apologized for U.S. support of terror and murder in Guatemala, but that's only a small start. . . . If we are dealing with suppression of one's own population or groups within it, Stalin's record is indeed impressive, but this era effectively ended with Khrushchev's destalinization speech in 1956. Meanwhile, back in the U.S.A., native Americans and African-Americans might have some different ideas about how the U.S. has treated its "minorities".

William Blum

"It would take me days to point out all the errors in the article you sent by that professor."

* * * * *

“Strengthen the teaching of contemporary history, instead”

Additional comments by Prof. Stein Tønneson

In the exchange thus far, I have limited myself to launching counter-arguments against your “educational project”, where you compared the U.S. war in Vietnam with the Nazi Holocaust. My counter-arguments led one of your correspondents to think that I’m an apologist for the American War, a misunderstanding which I think will seem absurd to most of those who know me.

My sympathy during the war was with the FLN and the DRV in their fight against the South Vietnamese regime and its U.S. backers; and as a political person, I remain of the opinion that it was both unwise and morally despicable of the United States to intervene in order to bolster the brutal, dictatorial and moribund Saigon regime.

I am also of the opinion that the U.S. committed serious war crimes in its bombing of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, and in using weapons such as napalm and defoliants. It must be of great importance today to strengthen public awareness of the terrible long-term effects in Vietnam of agent orange, and to demand of the U.S. that it take responsibility for those acts and contribute financially and technically to alleviating the damage it caused. While condemning the U.S. warfare, however, I also want to emphasize that the war in Vietnam was not initiated by the U.S.* It was essentially a civil war between two regimes, divided by the Cold War and social revolution. The two regimes were not equally legitimate. The DRV, which emerged from the revolution of 1945, was in my view far more nationally legitimate than the south-based republic, which grew out of collaboration with France and, from 1954-55, could only survive with U.S. support.

Despite this view, one cannot deny that the south-based regime also had a substantial following. Those who supported it, many of whom later fled the country, also deserve a place within the Vietnamese nation, and today it is seen as important both by the regime in Hanoi and by moderate Viet Kieu (exile Vietnamese), to work for national reconciliation.

I remain of the opinion that neither the Vietnamese nor the international community—nor Swedish young people for that matter—have much to gain or learn from a replay of the anti-war campaign in the form it took during the war. It is wrong, or at least grossly simplistic, to see the Vietnam War as just a war between the United States as aggressor and the “Vietnamese people” as victim.

Let me add that since I wrote my earlier comments, I have learned a little more about the haphazard manner in which prime minister Göran Persson initiated the campaign against the Holocaust, and about subsequent proposals to launch a similar campaign against the crimes of communism. As a historian, I am generally sceptical to highly normative campaigns concerning the tragedies of the past, and am professionally committed to establishing nuance in our interpretation of the past. Let me add, however, that as a political person I became somewhat more positive to the *Levande Framtid* project when I realized that it was a response to a suggested normative campaign against communism.

My conviction, however, is that neither the crimes of communism nor those of the U.S. in Vietnam are suitable as targets for a highly normative campaign of the kind that was organized concerning the Holocaust. What we should do is to strengthen the teaching of

contemporary history in our schools, and present young people with different interpretations of the great tragedies and struggles of the 20th century. Teach them to question, wonder, be concerned, rather than to condemn or castigate.

**Editor’s note:* Anyone who is inclined to share Prof. Tønnesson’s view that “the war in Vietnam was not initiated by the U.S.” is strongly urged to read the U.S. government’s own history of the war, published under the title of *The Pentagon Papers*.¹⁰ It should also be noted that *Levande Framtid* does not equate the Vietnam War with the Holocaust; in fact, it has been emphasized that, “Every such crime has its own historical and ideological context”.¹¹

— July 1999

* * * * *

NOTES

1. Complete information on the Levande Framtid/Living Future project is available at www.nnn.se/levande.htm
2. Gravel, Senator Mike, ed. *The Pentagon Papers*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1971-1972
Supplementary note, September 2007: Actually, the U.S. did more than “look the other way”. It actively assisted the French in their re-colonization effort, among other things by transporting occupation troops from Europe to Vietnam and by financing most of the French War; see www.nnn.se/vietnam/franklin.pdf
3. McGeehee, Ralph, interview on Swedish Public Television 1999. See also his memoir, *Deadly Deceits*, Sheridan Square Publications, New York; 1983
4. Taylor, Telford. *Nuremberg and Vietnam*. Quadrangle Books, Chicago; 1970
5. Ibid.
6. Chomsky, Noam. “Memories”; *Z Magazine*, July/August 1995
7. Ibid.
8. The project’s Advisory Board is presented in the document at www.nnn.se/levande/living.pdf
9. The devastating consequences are further analyzed by Prof. Herman in the document at www.nnn.se/vietnam/lessons.pdf
10. A concise summary of *The Pentagon Papers* is available at www.nnn.se/vietnam.htm
11. See “Questions & Answers” at www.nnn.se/levande/living.pdf

LEVANDE FRAMTID/LIVING FUTURE
www.nnn.se/levande.htm