This is the published version

Burchill, Scott 2005, Refusing to learn from history, newmatilda.com.

Available from Deakin Research Online

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30015377

Reproduced with the kind permission of the copyright owner

Copyright: 2005, New Matilda
REFUSING TO LEARN FROM HISTORY

NewMatilda.com, 11 May, 2005

The US-led invasion of Vietnam which "unleashed the greatest flood of firepower against a nation known to history," was a catastrophic disaster for the civilian population, inflicting unimaginable human suffering and permanent physical and psychic damage upon a poor, peasant based society. Consequently it was also a war which presented difficult moral and polemical challenges for those who sought to justify and prolong it. According to the war's foremost historian,

the US carried the war against civilians to an extent that only Germany and Japan have surpassed in modern history. Astonishingly superficial putative ethical anti-Communist justifications were concocted to rationalise the United States' behaviour, but an additional animus of outright cruelty, especially amongst airpower advocates, as well as a racist undercurrent, reinforced it.

Statistics cannot capture the full magnitude of such a human tragedy because "numbers can never capture the tears, anxieties and repeated losses that the Vietnamese people suffered." Figures are only ever approximations, after all "the victims are unable to keep records and the perpetrators do not wish to do so." The following summary, therefore, conveys only the barest outline of a crime against humanity for which we share direct responsibility:

The United States and its allies exploded fifteen million tons of munitions during 1964-72, twice the amount used in all of Europe and Asia during World War Two. It sprayed defoliants, which cause cancer, birth defects, and other illnesses, on a fifth of South Vietnam's jungles, over a third of its mangrove forests, as well as on rice crops. About seven million South Vietnamese, comprising over half the peasants and one-third the entire population, became refugees and were forced into camps and cities, permanently for many, where degradation, vice, and penury brutally assaulted their traditional culture. Almost all of North Vietnam's industry, bridges, and transport systems were destroyed. Assessments of wounded and dead differ greatly, but in a nation of eighteen million in 1970, as many as 1,350,000 South Vietnamese civilians were wounded, with death for between a fifth and third of this number. Over two million North Vietnamese soldiers and civilians were killed - altogether, about three million people died.

Thirty years after the fall of Saigon it was almost inevitable that support of the war, especially those with residual ties to the South Vietnamese regime, would maintain their habit of inventing specious explanations for
Washington's comprehensive defeat. Their arguments, which attempt to retrospectively justify the war by criticising life in Vietnam after 1975 - if the ends will justify the means -, not only skirt over the destruction unleashed on the country in the 20th century's longest global conflict, they also give no credit to indigenous communist forces for the victory over the United States.

The particular revision that conservatives such as Gerard Henderson and Greg Sheridan settled on was that while US military support for the South Vietnamese Army "had been stopped" by 1975 (Henderson), the North "munificently backed by China and the Soviet Union," a decisive factor when it "ultimately invaded [the South] in 1975" (Sheridan).

Henderson and Sheridan's inference that the South Vietnamese regime and its US backers were only defeated by superior firepower supplied by either the Chinese, the Soviets or both, could not be further from the truth. As Gabriel Kolko, who has written the definitive history of the war, explains:

The Saigon army commanded by Nguyen van Thieu was far stronger than their adversaries. At the beginning of 1975 they had over three times as much artillery, twice as many tanks and armored cars, 1400 aircraft and a virtual monopoly of the air. They had a two-to-one superiority of combat troops -- roughly 700,000 to 320,000.

Henderson and Sheridan's attachment to the conflict is of little consequence, except as an example of how Cold War warriors prefer ideology to historical truth. They must know that the state of South Vietnam was a US fabrication and that puppet governments in Saigon established by Washington had no popular legitimacy. They must realise that the only "invasion" which took place came from outside Indochina - US, Australian, South Korean and other forces - and not by nationals within their own country. And they surely have difficulty explaining why the south of the country - those the US were allegedly protecting from communist subversion - was more heavily bombed than the north. A "morally just war" (Sheridan) indeed.

More disturbing than the views of right wing apologists are those of Governor-General, Major-General Michael Jeffreys, who saw active service in Vietnam as a senior officer in the Australian Army. It is unsurprising that a participant in the conflict, Jeffreys would seek to rationalise his own actions and those of the men he commanded. However, three decades on there are few excuses for the kind of historical fantasies which seem to have captured His Excellency. Speaking to a group of veterans on 31 August 2002, Jeffreys asked

Was [Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War] worthwhile? Was it right to be there in the first place, and did you and we fellow Australians in the taskforce do a good job? General Peter Cosgrove has been reported as saying that in hindsight, [although] we did a good job, we should not have been there. This will always be a subjective judgment but, on balance, I can't agree.

For a start, I think it can be somewhat counterproductive to look at such questions with the benefit of hindsight. Political leaders don't have that luxury; they have to make decisions based on assessment of the political, military and social imperatives of the time.
We should never forget that in 1965, [while] the Vietnam conflict was in full swing, the communist PKI attempted to take control of Indonesia, only to be thwarted by the quick reactions of generals Nasution and Suharto, [while] Thailand sat sitting on the fence looking to see which way to jump.

One can only speculate what the region would have looked like if North Vietnam had been allowed to take control of the south unimpeded in 1954 and used the substantial battle-trained forces and resources it had available for employment elsewhere in the region. Similarly on the potential impact on the Malayan emergency, Thailand and Indonesia if there had been no resistance in South Vietnam. ...

I believe passionately that Vietnam was a just cause in the circumstances of the time.

Jeffrey's comments are remarkable for the extent to which they have not been influenced by either subsequent historical analysis or wide public discussion. Refusing to consider events "with the benefit of hindsight" is a challenge our Governor-General has clearly met.

Along with Sheridan, Jeffrey must be one of the few people alive who still believes in the domino theory - although the editor of The Australian believes the theory "looks less naïve that it once did," without explaining why. The comfortable simplicities of monolithic, expansionary communism - a theory completely discredited decades ago by open divisions within the communist world between the USSR and China, China and Vietnam, Cambodia and Vietnam - seem to have found a permanent home in the strategic mindset of Australia's head of state. It wasn't a credible idea in the mid 1950s. To maintain the illusion today is truly bizarre.

It is hard to know where Jeffrey gets the idea, for example, that in 1954 the North Vietnamese army would have invaded countries "elsewhere in the region" had it not been confronted by anti-communist forces. No evidence for such a proposition has ever been produced, even by the pathological of Hanoi's opponents. The claim that prospects for communist takeovers in Thailand and Indonesia were contingent on the successful unification of Vietnam is equally false. How could he remain so poorly informed?

Jeffrey uncritically accepts General Suharto's version of complex events in Indonesia during 1965, a narrative widely disputed by historians who argue that there is little evidence that the PKI had anything to do with the so called September "coup." Given that the Indonesian Communist party and thousands of others unconnected with it were annihilated by the middle of 1966 in what the CIA described as "one of the worst mass murders of the 20 th century," it was in no position to assist or inspire anyone across the region to the communist cause. It is unlikely that the hundreds of thousands - perhaps over a million - soon to be slaughtered as well as their friends and families, are as grateful as Jeffrey seems to be for the "quick reactions of generals Nasution and Suharto."

Stupidity is one thing. Ideology and willful ignorance of history are quite another. Clutching desperately to old, discredited falsehoods and refusing to reconsider past events in light of contemporary scholarship does no credit to those who, thirty years later, still strive to defend the obscene that was the Vietnam war.


Gerard Henderson, 'Breakfast', *ABC Radio National* - Friday 29 April 2005


