

HOW COULD SOMETHING LIKE THAT EVER HAPPEN ?

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by C. Francis Barrett (copyright 2021)

There are times in life when things occur which appear to be without rational explanation, which no one seemingly understands, or which remain a mystery. There are times when there are a series of such occurrences. Rarely, however, is there a series of connected events that continue seemingly endlessly without understanding, purpose, explanation, or justification. Once a century or so there may be a prolonged series of events that confound an entire nation. Such was the War in Vietnam.

At the outset of this War, few Americans really understood where Vietnam was located. A lesser number comprehended the geopolitical implications of this War. Hardly any knew the long, tortured history of Vietnam.

Many American servicemen did not even know the official name of South Vietnam, a place where they were about to go and possibly die. The same would be true of North Vietnam, their new enemy. Generally, it was known that this part of the world was Indochina. During World War II, the Japanese army occupied all of this territory as part of the Japanese Empire of more than 600 million subjects. After the Japanese surrendered, the nation of Vietnam became officially the Democratic Republic of Vietnam with its capital in Hanoi. However, the French, who had colonized this area years before but lost this territory to the Japanese during World War II, decided to re-enter and reclaim this part of their former colonial empire. After bitter fighting between the French and the Vietnamese communist military, the Geneva Accords of 1954 ended the hostilities – at least temporarily. Vietnam was partitioned at the 17th Parallel. To the north was the

Democratic Republic of Vietnam which became conventionally known as North Vietnam. Land south of the 17th Parallel became officially the Republic of Vietnam, but more commonly known as South Vietnam.

Vietnam was so remote that many Americans did not know if it was north or south of the Equator, but came to learn that Vietnam is north of the Equator and just south of the Tropic of Cancer, making it globally part of the North Tropical Zone of the world. Americans also learned that Vietnam was bordered in part by China, which led to the incessant fear that the War in Vietnam could produce a repeat of the war in Korea where tens of thousands of Chinese communist forces might attack, similar to what occurred during the invasion of North Korea in the Yalu River Valley.

The geography of Vietnam is complex and problematic. It is a narrow elongated country bordered for the most part on the east south by the South China Sea. The Gulf of Tonkin is the northerly extension of the South China Sea in the vicinity of Haiphong, the commercial port serving the capital of Hanoi. Abutting on the north is the Peoples Republic of China. Vietnam is bordered extensively on the west by the nation of Laos. Laos is a country that became well known to Americans in the late 1950s and early 1960s due to the missionary work of St. Louis physician Dr. Thomas Dooley. Dr. Dooley's fundraising appearances throughout the United States at that time educated the American public about the atrocities committed by the communists on a daily basis in that part of the world

The southern part of Vietnam is bordered by Cambodia, and Cambodia separates Vietnam from Thailand. The Gulf of Thailand forms the western boundary of Vietnam, south of Cambodia. Americans learned all too well about the infamous Ho Chi Minh Trail which extended through Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The major river in Indochina is the Mekong River, with the mouth

of the Mekong River at the extreme southern part of Vietnam adjacent to the South China Sea. Going upriver from the South China Sea, the Mekong River extends past the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh, then through all of Cambodia and into Laos, forming one of the boundaries between Laos and Thailand.

On a broader geographic scale, the Philippine Islands are due east, across the South China Sea. To the south on the opposite side of the South China Sea is the nation of Malaysia. Korea and Japan are far distant to the northeast.

To the west across the entire expanse of the Gulf of Thailand, there is the thin stretch of land of Thailand which connects to the south with Malaysia and borders Burma on its western boundary. To the west of Burma is the Andaman Sea.

How could a place like Vietnam, far distant, a small dot on the globe, and near nothing of familiarity to America, be of such geo-political importance and grave international concern?

Vietnam had a long and tortured history.

The earliest known inhabitants of this area were Negroid Pygmies who are believed to have migrated to what is now known as Vietnam some 25,000 to 50,000 years ago. There are no traces of these original inhabitants in modern times. Indonesians, known as Austronesians, ventured into this area from southern China a couple of thousand years B.C.

The distinctive Vietnamese people were formed several hundred years B.C. with a combination of natives of China, Indonesia, Mongolia, and Thai.

The first king of Vietnam was De Minh, who was the descendant of a divine Chinese ruler. A succession of kings followed throughout B.C.

Eventually, Vietnam became subjected to Chinese rule as a result of military conquest. History confirms Chinese domination of the Vietnamese for more than a thousand years from the

1st Century B.C. to the 10th Century A.D. The advanced civilization imposed by China upgraded the standard of living in Vietnam. Significantly, however, the Vietnamese people resisted complete assimilation with the Chinese culture and Chinese civilization.

Over the ten centuries of Chinese domination and military rule, the Vietnamese periodically rebelled. After years of fierce fighting, the Vietnamese rebels were successful in achieving independence in the year 939 AD. There were subsequent efforts by the Chinese to reconquer Vietnam, as well as tremendous strife among the Vietnamese people themselves. War became a part of their culture for the better part of five centuries.

Between 1400 and 1800 A.D., Vietnamese nationalism continued to rise and solidify. Conflict and strife also increased, and the role of the soldier/peasant was ever present.

The European colonialization of Indochina commenced in the 16th Century. Portuguese explorers, adventurers, and missionaries were the first to arrive. Early in the 17th Century, more missionaries came, from Portugal, Spain, Italy, and France. The Portuguese, Dutch, and English trading companies established commercial trading centers as a part of their international economies. All the while, the nationalism of the Vietnamese people furthered resistance to the influence by these Europeans. Religious persecution of the European missionaries ensued. France, realizing the economic benefits of trade and a need to protect its Christian missionaries, found military intervention necessary. The French invasion of Vietnam commenced in 1857 under Napoleon III. French warships and ground troops proceeded to attack. However, due to heavy resistance and tropical diseases, the French army was forced to withdraw.

With time to regroup and realizing the economic benefits of colonial conquest, France renewed its military efforts in the 19th Century for the conquest of Vietnam. The French also

expanded their colonial efforts in Laos and Cambodia. By the end of the 19th Century, France had established colonial rule throughout Indochina to include Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

French colonial rule of Vietnam continued into the 20th Century, until 1939 when the Japanese Imperial Army made Indochina a part of its vast Japanese Empire extending from China to India.

The Japanese military machine dominated Southeast Asia and suppressed the peoples of Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Burma, Siam, Singapore, Borneo, New Guinea, and the Philippines. The Japanese occupation of Indochina was particularly complex. The Japanese territorial expansion was based upon the need for raw materials to support their ever-increasing industrialized society. Purportedly, in 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt was negotiating with Japanese envoys to reach an agreement that would require Japan to withdraw its forces from Indochina upon assurances that Japan would have access to needed raw materials. Talks were ongoing when, on December 7, 1941, Japanese planes bombed the US Naval Fleet anchored at Pearl Harbor on the island of Oahu, Hawaii. Needless to say, those negotiations were terminated and the fate of Indochina was sealed, setting up a series of events that would play out over the next four decades.

Japanese control over Indochina ceased with the unconditional surrender of Japan in August of 1945, shortly after the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima and then three days later on Nagasaki.

With the surrender of Japan, two conflicting forces were developing in Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh, recognized as the leader of Vietnam, sought Vietnamese nationalization and independence, but under the control of the Communist party. But France sought to reoccupy Indochina as a part of its colonial empire. The Potsdam conference, involving the leaders of the victorious allied

nations, recognized the right of France to re-establish French rule in Vietnam. Conflict immediately followed.

Under the Potsdam agreement, British forces were to disarm the Japanese forces in the south of Vietnam. In the north, Chinese forces under General Chiang Kai-shek were to disarm the Japanese; but the Chinese general was opposed to allowing France to rule Indochina.

Notwithstanding the Potsdam conference, Ho Chi Minh never accepted French control and was insistent upon Vietnam independence. Ho Chi Minh had long had the backing of the Communist Party, including the Communist leaders in the Soviet Union and in the Peoples Republic of China. He had left Vietnam as a young seaman before World War I, and settled in Paris. He joined the Communist Party of France after the War, and then became a true revolutionary. He spent a number of years in the Soviet Union and in China in service to the International Communist Movement. Returning to Indochina, he established the Indochinese Communist Party in 1930. His goal was to take over and remove all French control from Vietnam. In 1941 he formed the Viet Minh which became a powerful force of communism. Since Nationalist China opposed communism in Indochina, General Chiang Kai-shek ordered the imprisonment of Ho Chi Minh in 1942.

Ironically, during World War II, it was the Viet Minh who assisted the allies in Vietnam because of their hatred toward their Japanese occupants. Efforts included rescuing downed allied pilots, cooperation in providing military intelligence, and many other anti-Japanese actions. This support of the allies led to Ho Chi Minh being released from prison in 1943 and to the allies providing him financial assistance and military aid to advance the anti-Japanese efforts and forces under the control of the Viet Minh.

When the Japanese surrendered in August of 1945, Ho Chi Minh ordered a general uprising under the direction of the Viet Minh. In the early part of 1946, peace negotiations between the French Colonialists and Ho Chi Minh led to a temporary peace agreement. The Viet Minh government would be recognized by France, and Vietnam would be given the status of a free state within the French Union. The French troops in Vietnam could remain initially, but would be gradually withdrawn over the next five years. Efforts between the French and the Viet Minh to function cooperatively broke down because of their inherent irreconcilable differences. Thus, in the latter part of 1946, the First Indochina War began. The United States and Great Britain provided financial and military support to the French because of the Communist philosophy of Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh.

What really caused the French to be ineffective in holding control of Vietnam was the desire of the Vietnamese people to achieve independence and have a unified country. Such independence was sought by the pro-Communist interests led by the Viet Minh, as well as by the anti-Communist sectors led primarily by the Roman Catholics in Vietnam who had been converted by European Christian missionaries. Among such anti-Communist leaders was Ngo Dinh Diem, whose later assassination played a major role in the destabilization of Vietnam.

The guerrilla war tactics of the Viet Minh, under the command of famed General Vo Nguyen Giap, continually inflicted severe losses on the French forces. The climax came with the infamous battle at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 when thousands of Viet Minh forces under General Giap outflanked the French garrison and besieged the French Army with constant bombardments and even suicide charges. Dien Bien Phu fell on May 7, 1954, and the French were forced to negotiate a peace agreement known as the Geneva Peace Accords of 1954.

Two Vietnams were created, divided by the 17th Parallel. All Viet Minh soldiers were moved north of the 17th Parallel, and all French and South Vietnamese forces were confined south of the 17th Parallel. This situation produced grave international concerns, as emissaries from the United States, the Soviet Union, the Peoples Republic of China, Great Britain, and France, were all involved in the negotiations. The 17th Parallel dividing line was intended to be provisional only, with the ultimate goal a unified nation under one government after free elections throughout Vietnam. When the Viet Minh leaders became confident of winning these elections and taking total control, neither the United States nor the provisional government in South Vietnam would concur. The Viet Minh felt certain, with the support of the Soviet Union and Communist China, that they could build their industrial base and increase their military strength, such that one Vietnam under Communist control would become inevitable.

Also, the anti-Communists in the south were fighting among themselves. Roman Catholic leader Ngo Dinh Diem effectively established himself as the President of South Vietnam, that is, the Republic of Vietnam. In addition to facing opposition from pro-Communists in the south and from the substantial Buddhist population, there was tremendous infighting in Diem's government. A military coup occurred, resulting in the assassination of Diem. Military control under Vice Air Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky, later President Ky, became the law in South Vietnam. It was only a matter of time before the pro-Communist forces would move to gain control of all of Vietnam. To facilitate this movement in the South, there was the creation and rise of the National Front for the Liberation of the South which became known as the National Liberation Front or NLF. Their professed goal was the removal of all foreign troops from Vietnam and the reunification of South Vietnam with the North under one government. With the support of arms, ammunition, and an officer cadre from the North, the NLF fighters grew substantially in strength and numbers. They

became known as the Viet Cong. Their recruitment of foot soldiers in the South was achieved through terroristic tactics. Viet Cong officers would approach the leader of a hamlet or a village and request a number of young men for training as fighters in the Viet Cong. These chieftains cooperated out of fear of threats of violent death to the members of their immediate families. The guerrilla war in Vietnam was now fully underway.

United States military intelligence recognized the imminent threat posed by the Viet Cong to the government of South Vietnam. During the Eisenhower administration, the United States provided only limited support to the Saigon government. Under the Kennedy administration, thousands of advisors, typically Special Forces Members of the United States Army, were sent to South Vietnam, plus an increasing number of US helicopter pilots for the numerous reconnaissance missions needed to aid the South Vietnamese Army. The gradual escalation of the war in Vietnam was in process.

After his very successful election in November of 1964, President Lyndon Johnson made winning the war in Vietnam a priority. In February of 1965, President Johnson ordered the bombing of North Vietnam to limit or prevent the continued supply of arms and troops from North Vietnam into South Vietnam along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

When the limited and strategic bombing of targets in North Vietnam did not produce the desired results, President Johnson, as Commander-in-Chief, sent, for the first time, combat ground troops to Vietnam. The first of the US Marines landed at Da Nang, a coastal city on the South China Sea, in March of 1965. Not long after, the First Infantry Division of the Army, Big Red One, arrived. As Commander of all forces in Vietnam, General William Westmoreland asked for more troops, and President Johnson complied. By the end of 1965, there were more than 75,000 combat troops in South Vietnam. By early 1968, there were more than 510,000 combat troops.

The peak was reached in early January of 1969, as President Johnson was leaving the White House, at more than 600,000 men in arms.

With the assumption of the Office of the President of the United States in January of 1969, President Richard Nixon began his efforts to implement what he called “peace with honor”. Such involved the staged withdrawal of large numbers of troops in 1969, 1970 and 1971.

With 1972 being an election year, the situation in Vietnam was critical. President Nixon continued to withdraw troops, and his program of Vietnamization of the war continued to seek what he called “peace with honor”. Yet, the North Vietnamese Communists, with strong support of the Soviet Union and the Peoples Republic of China, refused to agree to peace on terms acceptable to the South Vietnamese people. The Communists were content to prolong the war and the corresponding domestic strife that continued to divide America. In late 1972, safely after the election, with reduced concerns about political fallout, and with timing that made it unlikely for the antiwar movement to mount major protests, President Nixon authorized the so-called Christmas bombing. For the first time, the United States Air Force engaged in high altitude heavy aerial bombardment of North Vietnam using B52 bombers that could do far more damage than the prior years of pinpoint target bombing by Air Force and Navy fighter pilots. Shortly after this heavy pounding, a peace agreement was signed in January of 1973, by the United States, North Vietnam, South Vietnam, and the National Liberation Front. After President Nixon resigned in August of 1974, it just a matter of time before the North Vietnamese would invade the South and seek a complete conquest of Vietnam. In April of 1975, North Vietnamese armor and mechanized infantry units entered the capital city of Saigon, deposing the Saigon government through force and causing the panic-driven evacuation of the remaining US troops and support staff, and those

South Vietnamese loyalists who were so fortunate to escape death, imprisonment, or re-education camps.

Although the foregoing chronology of the war summarizes in general terms the role of the United States, it fails to explain the significance and impact of the war itself.

The political significance of Vietnam on America was astounding.

Although the Eisenhower Administration supported the anti-communist efforts of the Vietnamese against Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh in the 1950s, President Eisenhower always warned the American electorate against engaging in a major land war in Asia. His advice was not heeded.

In the Presidential campaign of 1960, the candidates of both political parties argued strongly for the prevention of Communist aggression in Southeast Asia. The Democratic nominee, young Senator John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts, knew that he needed to establish himself as strongly anti-Communist in order to be elected. It was, after all, the height of the Cold War. Vice President Richard M. Nixon, the Republican nominee, had long been known as being anti-Communist, but was vulnerable because Americans were questioning the nation's military preparedness and especially the status of its military technology in light of the stunning advances of the Soviet Union under Premier Nikita Khrushchev. In 1957, the Soviets had launched Sputnik, the small satellite that orbited the earth, plunging American politicians and military leaders into periods of self-doubt. Khrushchev had also conducted tests of hydrogen bombs of many megatons, far exceeding the destructive capabilities of the nuclear tests conducted by the United States.

Thus, after John Kennedy won a close election in November of 1960, President Kennedy was committed to demonstrating his military prowess as Commander-in-Chief. He took great

pride in sending, as he stated in his Boston accent, troops to “Asiar” involving many thousands of military advisors who were typically Green Berets and Airborne Rangers.

The Presidential election of November, 1964, turned in many ways on the issue of Vietnam. President Lyndon Johnson was enjoying unparalleled success. A number of Presidential historians were calling him one of the greatest Presidents in the history of the United States. In addition to his Great Society programs of political and economic justice for all, he re-assured the country that he had a reasoned approach, not to worry about bombing North Vietnam or the sending of American ground troops to southeast Asia. His opponent, Republican nominee Barry Goldwater, was portrayed by his opponents as a warmonger, referencing his apparent willingness to bomb North Vietnam. It appeared that most Americans felt safe with Lyndon Johnson and not as safe with Barry Goldwater as President. President Johnson won in a landslide, carrying 46 of the 50 states, garnering the most votes ever, and more significantly having long coattails to elect Democrats in great numbers across the United States.

The Presidential election of 1968 brought into full focus the policies concerning the War in Vietnam. Lyndon Johnson had seemed unbeatable for so long but now appeared weakened by the deterioration of conditions in Vietnam. The Tet Offensive in February of 1968 was the beginning of the end for Lyndon Johnson. With simultaneous and coordinated attacks on cities and military bases throughout South Vietnam, war correspondents informed the American public that the War could not be won. Confidence in President Johnson was lost. Now, for sure, he would be facing contested primary elections. Senator Eugene McCarthy of Wisconsin emerged as the peace candidate. New York Senator Robert F. Kennedy announced his candidacy, with the support of many establishment Democrats, academia, young voters, and multitudes of admirers of his late brother.

The Republican Party experienced the rebirth of Richard Nixon as a Presidential candidate. He pledged to restore law and order to the streets of the United States after race riots and anti-war demonstrations had disrupted cities across the country. He tried to take a limited position on the war in Vietnam, pledging to seek an expedited military victory without involving more troops or the expansion of the war.

The 1968 Presidential race also saw the rise of George Wallace, the Governor of Alabama, who along with his running mate, General Curtis LeMay, the former Commander of the Strategic Air Command, took aggressive stances on suppressing civil rights demonstrations, political protests, and what were deemed anti-American activities. General Curtis LeMay stated infamously that the United States should bomb North Vietnam back into the Stone Age.

The Presidential campaign of 1968 reached a boiling point in August at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Because of the anticipated anti-war demonstrations, Chicago Mayor Richard Daley pledged that his Police Department would maintain law and order. If Senator Kennedy had not been assassinated, he most assuredly would have received the nomination. Thus, the opposition to the Democratic establishment came from Senator Eugene McCarthy. Mayor Daley and his establishment Democrats were determined that their candidate, Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey of Minnesota, would be victorious. Pitched battles ensued in the streets of Chicago including beautiful Michigan Avenue, where anti-war protestors and the Chicago Police Department literally fought for possession of the streets. The Convention itself was held in historic Chicago Stadium. Inside the Stadium fist fights broke out on the floor as the anti-war supporters of Senator Eugene McCarthy sought recognition, only to be beaten down by Mayor Daley and his heavy-handed supporters. Inevitably, the nomination for the Democratic Presidential candidate went to Vice President Humphrey.

With all of the chaos in Chicago, it appeared that Richard Nixon need only have a steady run to win the Presidency. The Republican National Convention was basically uneventful.

However, in October, on the even of the election, President Johnson announced he was going to halt the bombing of North Vietnam, which would help his loyal Vice President, Hubert Humphrey, have a chance to win the Presidency. This sudden reversal of policy on Vietnam caused many Democrats to now support Vice President Humphrey. The race went down to the wire, and Richard Nixon barely won the popular vote but decidedly won the electoral vote. George Wallace did, however, win 5 States in the former “Solid South”.

The Vietnam War continued to be a major influence on US Presidential elections. In 1972, the Democrats nominated Senator George McGovern, who was strongly antiwar. George McGovern was a fine and decent man, and he had served bravely in the Army Air Corps in World War II, surviving a number of missions. He abhorred war. He believed that little good could come from war. Unfortunately, he had no real plan for Vietnam, other than immediate withdrawal, which failed to address a multitude of issues including the return of the prisoners held in North Vietnam, the protection of innocent people in South Vietnam, and the effect on US military commitments, among others.

The assassination attempt on the life of George Wallace by Arthur Bremer in May of 1972 in Maryland left him paralyzed. Thus, there was no third party candidate that could affect the outcome.

Although there was still mounting opposition to the war in Vietnam, the majority believed that President Nixon was doing the best that he could to extricate America from Vietnam. President Nixon prevailed in an extremely one-sided election, winning 49 of the 50 states.

Even the election of 1976 was affected by the war in Vietnam. President Gerald Ford suffered from being President during the fall of Saigon. It was quite depressing for Americans to watch the news in April and May of 1975 and see first-hand the chaotic evacuation of South Vietnam. To observe the US Embassy abandoned in retreat was more than many Americans could handle. It was not President Ford's fault that he did not have the power or the support of Congress to stop the North Vietnamese invasion in direct violation of their signed peace agreement. Yet, it truly hurt him at the ballot box.

Although most Americans thereafter thought that the war in Vietnam would no longer be a political issue, it surfaced again in 2004. The Democratic nominee, John Kerry, Senator from Massachusetts, campaigned on his military career, referencing three Purple Hearts awarded to him in Vietnam and his leadership in Vietnam Veterans Against the War. But a former Naval Officer, John O'Neill, a graduate of the United States Naval Academy, and successor commander of John Kerry's swift boat in Vietnam, wrote the New York Times No. 1 Bestseller entitled "Unfit for Command". John O'Neill's book sought to debunk John Kerry's claims about his service in Vietnam and the legitimacy of his position in Vietnam Veterans Against the War. Many believed that it was this book that doomed John Kerry's chances for election as President.

The purpose of political debate in a democratic society is to allow the electorate to hear all sides of an issue, to be able to separate the wheat from the chaff, and to have the resources to make intelligent decisions. Yet, with all of the political debate that took place throughout many Presidential elections, there was never a clear understanding of the war in Vietnam and how it happened.

It was hoped that when the analysis for this paper commenced, the reasons for the war in Vietnam would be forthcoming. Yet, such still remains essentially unsettled in American history.

Perhaps, this is because the pivotal events of the War in Vietnam were so controversial. The first of such occurred with the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. It authorized President Johnson to undertake combat operations in Southeast Asia, virtually solely at his discretion. A host of dubious occurrences led to the adoption of this Resolution on August 7, 1964, which only two Senators opposed and not a single Member of Congress. In the Gulf of Tonkin, the South Vietnamese Navy had shelled two North Vietnamese islands, putting the tiny and ineffective North Vietnamese Navy on high alert. When the North Vietnamese Commander of a torpedo boat moved to attack the navy destroyer U.S.S. Maddox, there were series of misfires by both sides. Although no further shots were fired by the North Vietnamese Navy, concerns were raised that such was about to occur.

President Johnson directed air raids on North Vietnam to deter further aggression. A squadron of eight A-4 Skyhawks was ordered to take off from the USS Constellation Aircraft Carrier and attack North Vietnamese torpedo boat installations and oil facilities on the coast. Lieutenant Everett Alvarez was shot down, captured, and taken to the Hanoi Hilton, as the first prisoner of war, where he was confined until 1973. As a consequence, President Johnson was given the authorization that he wanted to engage in combat operations in southeast Asia. For years, the misinformation surrounding the adoption of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was referred to by opponents of the war as the “big lie”. The United States never recovered domestically from this lack of credibility.

The Siege of Khe Sanh was a highly covered set of circumstances. In 1966, the Marines had established a base at this strategic location in the northern part of South Vietnam, just a few miles from the Laos border. In late 1967, a build-up of thousands of North Vietnamese regulars, supplied by ammunition and weapons transported along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, surrounded the Marines in anticipation of a major assault in early 1968. This base became symbolic of the war

itself. There were those who maintained that it would become another Dien Bien Phu where the French Army was overrun by General Giap in 1954, leading to the defeat of the French in Vietnam. Supplies had to be airdropped at Khe Sanh to insure that the Marines could survive. Periodically, North Vietnamese sappers tried to penetrate the perimeter. The Marines were under frequent attack, by mortar, rocket propelled grenades, and artillery. What turned the tide, however, was the relentless pounding of the United States Air Force of the surrounding terrain, obliterating thousands of the North Vietnamese regulars. No major attack ever materialized. Thereafter, the Marines abandoned the base, leaving many to question whether it was ever necessary in the first place.

Another such incident was the My Lai Massacre in 1968. In this village, battle weary infantry men, under the orders of Company Commander Captain Ernest Medina and Platoon Leader Lieutenant William Calley, hundreds of innocent villagers, old men, women, and children were lined up and basically murdered. Mixed reports gave varying accounts. There were those who argued that this Village harbored Viet Cong, which led to the deaths of American servicemen. Other, more credible accounts confirmed the wanton and needless slaughter of innocent civilians. Both Captain Medina and Lieutenant Calley and two dozen others were court-martialed. Lieutenant Calley was convicted, but Captain Medina was acquitted. The Captain's civilian lawyer, famed criminal defense attorney F. Lee Bailey, commented afterwards that military courts are a great place to be when you are innocent, but a terrible place to be when you are guilty.

As noted above, the Tet Offensive occurred in early 1968 and was perhaps the single most important episode. As a part of the Chinese Lunar New Year, thousands of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese regulars stormed over a hundred military installations and cities through all of South Vietnam, with Viet Cong attacking the perimeter of the United States Embassy in Saigon. The

fighting was vicious and bloody. It was so widespread and intense that the news correspondents informed the American public that South Vietnam was not secure and the war could not be won. Military intelligence, however, confirmed that heavy losses were inflicted on both the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese armies. The Viet Cong were so heavily hit that they were not a factor for the remainder of the war.

One of the most significant events occurred in the Spring of 1970 as a result of the incursion into Cambodia, Operation Fishhook. Due to a massive build-up of troops and arms in Cambodia near the South Vietnam border, President Nixon authorized an offensive attack against major forces of the North Vietnamese army. Militarily, the attacks were highly successful, but the domestic fallout was more damaging. Anti-war protests on college campuses across the nation resulted in disturbances of such a magnitude that Police and National Guard Units were called to prevent further damage. At Kent State University in Ohio, and at Jackson State University in Mississippi, students were shot and killed, to the horror of the nation. Most universities were closed for the remainder of the school year. To prevent further unrest and dissention at home, the military invasion of Cambodia was halted, much to the chagrin of the Commanders whose troops were less than 20 miles from destroying the Headquarters of the North Vietnamese Army. As with all of the War in Vietnam, nothing turned out well for anybody.

What can be learned from these major events that occurred during the War? Such provide little in the way of answers, but do reinforce the complexity, controversy, and uncertainty of the entire war effort.

Regrettably, no plausible explanation, no rational basis, no reasonable understanding exists for the War in Vietnam. Surely, it is recognized that the justification for the war was the prevention of communist aggression and communist expansion. But that alone does not explain or account

for all of the lives that were lost, all of the shots that were fired, all of the bombs that were dropped, the defoliation of a fifth of the country, the slaughter of innocent civilians, and the endless suffering that occurred. Those who argued for a military victory were always constrained by the fear of a greater war, the intervention of Chinese Communists, the direct participation of the Soviet Union, and the possibility of nuclear war. Those who advocated for complete pullout and total withdrawal were never able to answer the question of how to prevent the murder of millions of people that would surely result as soon as American forces left Vietnam

Thus, it can only be hoped in America that everyone today has achieved some form of reconciliation or at least is at peace with himself or herself. One of the greatest impediments to healing the wounds of Vietnam came in the Memoirs of Robert S. McNamara, the Secretary of Defense under President Johnson and considered the major architect of the United States military involvement and massive buildup of armed forces. In his Memoirs, he wrote that Vietnam was of no strategic significance, not militarily, not geographically, not geopolitically. But he could never face the families of those who lost loved ones on the battlefields and tell them what a huge mistake was made and seek their apology. Like so many people at the time such calamitous events are happening, they are blinded as to the underlying realities. McNamara referred to it as the fog of war.

Such a response is wholly inadequate to the more than two and a half million young men who were sent by their government to the combat zone, to the families of the more than 58,000 who laid down their lives for their country, and for the millions more who were scarred physically, mentally, or psychologically by the horrors of this war and its ancillary events.

Fortunately, there has been some reconciliation and some healing. For the armed forces, this came in the Gulf War during Operation Desert Shield and then in Operation Desert Storm.

The Commanding Officers of that victorious campaign in the early 1990s had served as Junior Officers in South Vietnam. They knew the American military could win any war that was necessary and conducted in a proper manner. Unlike Vietnam with its gradual escalation, the United States military prepared over half a million combatants with months of training and practice, defining clearly the roles of infantry, armor, and artillery on the ground, and bombers, fighter jets, and attack helicopters in the air. The result was a quick, decisive victory, bringing the Iraqi army under Saddam Hussein to its knees. American casualties were few in number. The American armed forces were now healed from the missteps in Southeast Asia, especially since many had wrongly predicted that Kuwait would be another Vietnam.

Most difficult of all was the healing of the families, the loved ones, and the friends of those who had fallen to their deaths in Vietnam. But so much healing did occur through the establishment of the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington DC, which is perhaps the most moving of all war memorials anywhere in the World. The long connected tablets of black granite bearing the name of every serviceman who passed away etched in the stone leaves an indelible impression on every person who has occasion to visit this Wall. There is nothing more meaningful than looking for the name of such a loved one in the alphabetical register, finding the Panel Number and Line Number, and then seeing that individual's name permanently inscribed. This emotion-provoking design was the creation of a young architectural student at Yale University, the daughter of Chinese immigrants, Maya Lyn. Her design of polished black granite sunken into the ground with the chronological listing in order of death of more than 58,000 Americans was not without controversy. Yet, today it stands as the most impactful memorial on the Washington Mall. Anyone who visits this Memorial will be touched by emotions they never knew they had within them.

Most regrettably, the war in Vietnam will always be remembered as a painful experience in American history for all concerned. As we reach the end of this paper, we can only hope that everyone involved, whether military combatant, pro-war advocate, anti-war protestor, neutral citizen, victim or non-victim, can hope that lessons are learned such that the negative aspects of this history will not be repeated. It is hoped by giving this War perspective, there will at last be some understanding. To put this War in the proper perspective, consider the following.

Consider the lasting division created throughout the country.

Consider the pain and suffering of so many for so long.

Consider the political discord that lasted for years.

Consider the hurt and harm endured by too many families.

But to put this War in the proper perspective, remember that all of the foregoing pales in comparison to everything related to the American Civil War.