

The Perpetration of A Lie:  
The Misrepresentation of The Memory of The Vietnam War

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In 1954 the Geneva Accords divided Vietnam along the 17th parallel creating a North and South. For almost a decade leading to the signing of the Geneva Accords, the country had been plagued with conflict as the French tried to re-assert themselves into the country after losing control during World War II. The North was taken over by communist leader Ho Chi Min, who had declared Vietnam an independent state in 1945 with himself as chairman. What ensued was a conflict between North and South that spanned for decades until the fall of Saigon in 1975.

Although the Vietnam war was also a civil conflict, it is widely perceived as a conflict between the North Vietnamese and the Americans. The US saw fit to involve themselves out of fear of the domino effect, i.e., South Vietnam and surrounding Indonesia would fall to communism. It is evident that the conflict was a Cold War proxy war, and with the US not being the only ones holding communist anxieties, it is understandable that other countries would also see fit to aid the US and Saigon. Despite the involvement of other countries, such as Australia and South Korea, the memory of the Vietnam war is widely perceived as a conflict between Vietnam and the US. I aim to investigate how this memory has developed and maintained and why the involvement of other states has been erased from collective memories.

Writing on the history of Vietnam war typically neglect to mention the involvement of other states one example is Weaver's *Ideologies of Forgetting*.<sup>1</sup> Weaver <sup>wrote</sup> about the crimes of American soldiers who raped Vietnamese women, using oral history, testimonies and other methods and how this memory and culture of rape had been erased. However, I take issue in that Weaver only focuses on the crimes of US soldiers; from her writings of other instances of rape during wartime, we see that this is a widespread phenomenon not isolated to a particular nationality of men. By only focusing on rapes committed by US soldiers, not even discussing

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<sup>1</sup> Gina Marie Weaver and Project Muse University Press eBooks, *Ideologies of Forgetting: Rape in the Vietnam War*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010;2012).

their south Vietnamese comrades, this perpetuates the narrative that North Vietnam was only fighting the US. It is narratives like Weaver's that encourage me to investigate multiple stories of the war, to ensure that an accurate narrative is told. I initially hoped to utilise oral histories from all sides of the conflict, as I believed this would offer very accurate insight into personal experiences. However, when conducting my research, it seems that there is a dominant of US oral history but little to none from elsewhere. To overcome this issue, I have had to use various primary and secondary sources, utilising oral interviews conducted by others, declassified government documents, and newspaper articles documenting the events at the time. Using various primary sources will allow for a more well-rounded investigation and insight into things that are perhaps not typically discussed in oral history and thus would be missed through only oral testimony. I noticed during my research that many of my sources were from a western perspective and that much of the writing on the Vietnam war is western-centric; I tried to combat this as much as possible by featuring writings and sources from Vietnamese writers; however, I would have liked to have feature more from South Korean sources but found little on the subject that was translated.

Firstly, one must discuss the involvement of other countries outside of Vietnam and the US. Under the Many Flags campaign, the US enlisted the help of various other countries. Many refused to engage or limited their contribution to economic and humanitarian aid. However, some, South Korea and Australia, to name a few, did choose to contribute soldiers.<sup>2</sup> Like the US, Australia was also suffering through the red scare and had fears of communism spreading across Indonesia and Southeast Asia; thus, when the US called on their support, they saw fit to aid a state

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew Wiest, *Vietnam War 1956-1975* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2003), 14.

that held the same ideologies as them.<sup>3</sup> The Australian government's department of veteran affairs conducted interviews with Vietnam veterans and families of veterans. Through these interviews, we see that the experience of the Australian soldiers in Vietnam was not especially unique; much like the US, they took part in bombings and killings. However, what is interesting is their experience after they returned to Australia. John Thurgar speaks for many Australian veterans when discussing how the Australian public and other veterans ostracised him.<sup>4</sup> At the Returned and Services League of Australia club, he was "accused by a world war II veteran of being a baby killer" as the veteran was against the Vietnam war,<sup>5</sup> much like many in Australia who thought it was unjust and had issues with the draft.<sup>6</sup> Thurgar discusses how the hostility he and other veterans experienced made them feel alienated from society. Thus, they organised Australia's Welcome Home Parade in 1987, which was such a significant success that it led to building the Vietnam war memorial in Canberra to commemorate.<sup>7</sup> An interview with Stuart Smith, son of Bernard Lyle Smith, who was killed in Vietnam, discusses his experience of coping with his father's death. He relays that when returned to school after his father's death, he was advised not to discuss it with the other children, out of worry that it would incite trouble, this carried on for decades, "in the seventies and eighties, it was not popular to talk about the Vietnam War and

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<sup>3</sup> John Murphy, *Harvest of Fear: A History of Australia's Vietnam War* (1st ed. Milton: Routledge, 1993;2019).

<sup>4</sup>John Thurgar, "Operation Aussies Home." Interview by The Australian Government Departments of Veterans' Affairs, ANZAC Portal, Video, 04:00. <https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/resources/john-thurgar-australian-army-operation-aussies-home>.

<sup>5</sup> Thurgar, Interview.

<sup>6</sup> Weist, *Vietnam War*, 31.

<sup>7</sup> Thurgar, Interview.

associate yourself with it so you kept that internal" he stated.<sup>8</sup> It is evident from accounts like Thurgar and Smith's that most of the Australian population did not agree with the war, and many were ashamed of Australia's actions. Thus, discussing the war and its atrocities became taboo during and in the decades following the war; this is what Connerton suggests is "Forgetting through Humiliated Silence", where the embarrassment of an event urges people to collectively accept not to discuss it.<sup>9</sup> It is only in the late 80s that it has become more acceptable to discuss Australia's participation, perhaps due to the efforts of men such as Thurgar taking action to commemorate. I believe this anathema to the war has aided in keeping Australian actions out of the spotlight as an internalised memory rather than a collective and public one has kept their contributions hidden for decades and has had less exposure compared to that of the US.

In Kwon's book, *After The Massacre*, he discusses Brian Willson's comment that "Veterans are in a unique position to initiate courageous leadership in a national healing process" for the sake of their souls and the nation's.<sup>10</sup> Much like how Australian veterans encouraged memorialisation Republic of Korea (ROK) veterans also did similar, dedicating the massacre memorial in Ha My, after the massacre carried out in the village by ROK soldiers in 1968. Here shame and guilt have manifested in another way; instead of encouraging silence, the veterans decided to recognise their crimes and attempted to build bridges. The ROK, a capitalist state, still had the war against socialist North Korea fresh in their minds, so when the US asked for help in

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<sup>8</sup> Stuart and Janice Smith, "Loss." Interview by The Australian Government Departments of Veterans' Affairs, ANZAC Portal, Video, 03:45. <https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/resources/janice-stuart-smith-loss>

<sup>9</sup> Paul Connerton, "Seven Types of Forgetting," *Memory Studies* 1, no. 1 (2008): 68.

<sup>10</sup> Heonik Kwon, *After the Massacre: Commemoration and Consolation in Ha My and My Lai*, (1st ed. Vol. 14. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 143.

the fight against communism South Korea responded by sending a little over 300,000 troops.<sup>11</sup> Deploying troops is what Lee argues "jump-started the South Korean economy" as the ROK earned an "average of \$200 million a year from the Vietnam war" receiving "vast financial compensation and profit in the form of soldiers salaries, grants, loans and contracts for supplying and building for the US forces".<sup>12</sup> The Korean war legacy and the relationship with the US is what has forced many not to address their wrongdoing in Vietnam immediately. The Korean war was the beginning of an anti-communist revolution, and "the Vietnam war passed on the legacy of the thorough anti-communism of South Korea";<sup>13</sup> it essentially aided president Park in maintaining anti-communism in South Korea and was thus a positive thing. In the government's eyes, addressing war crimes would weaken anti-Communist sentiments in South Korea. Furthermore, if the South Korean government were to address their crimes formally, it would expose them and paint the instigators, the US, in a bad light. Doing so would damage the beneficial relationship with the US and would essentially be 'looking a gift horse in the mouth'.

Britain is believed to have remained largely uninvolved in the conflict, only offering funds and humanitarian aid to South Vietnam.<sup>14</sup> However, what was portrayed in the papers at the time was somewhat deceiving, as declassified files "show that Britain backed the US at virtually every

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<sup>11</sup> Justine Guichard, "The Vietnam Pieta: Shaping the Memory of South Korea's Participation in the Vietnam War," *Les Ateliers De l'éthique* 14, no. 2 (2019): 22.

<sup>12</sup> Jin-kyung Lee and Project Muse University Press eBooks, *Service Economies: Militarism, Sex Work, and Migrant Labor in South Korea* (New ed. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 41.

<sup>13</sup> Lee, *Service Economies*, 41.

<sup>14</sup> "BRITAIN CONFIRMS VIETNAM FLIGHTS," *New York Times*, Oct 28, 1967, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/britain-confirms-vietnam-flights/docview/117423587/se-2?accountid=14656>.

stage of military escalation, and also played its own important secret role in the war"<sup>15</sup>. Britain had recently emerged from the Malayan emergency, a war against Malayan communists fighting against British imperialists. Like the US, communism was a source of severe anxiety, and the British recognised that if Vietnam were to fall to communism, it could have a domino effect on Southeast Asia and potentially impact British imperialist holdings in the area. Others may have been encouraged to adopt communism in the revolt against imperial rule, which would have dire effects on Britain's capitalist economy. Britain was left with a heavily weakened economy after World War II, and with the threat of nuclear war, they relied on their 'special relationship' with the US to help fund their economy and nuclear endeavours. At the same time, the vast majority of the British public was openly against the US actions in Vietnam and saw the war as unjust; this was expressed in many protests.<sup>16</sup> The British government was trapped in a catch-22 needing to appease their people whilst simultaneously maintaining their 'special relationship' with the US and fighting communism; the solution was covert aid. The Geneva Accords put limits on the number of US troops allowed in Vietnam, a number the US had superseded by 1961, and various government memos show that British ministers and officials were aware of this violation.<sup>17</sup> A co-chairman of the Geneva Accords, the British had a responsibility to address the US' actions; however, declassified files show the foreign office wrote to the US saying that "as co-chairman, Her Majesty's government are prepared to turn a blind eye to American activities".<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, perhaps the most significant contribution was the British Advisory Mission to South Vietnam

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<sup>15</sup> Mark Curtis, *Unpeople: Britain's Secret Human Rights Abuses*, (London: Vintage, 2004), 198.

<sup>16</sup> "Ban Urged on Anti-Vietnam War March," *South China Morning Post (1946-)*, Sep 07, 1968, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/ban-urged-on-anti-vietnam-war-march/docview/1509723019/se-2?accountid=14656>.

<sup>17</sup> Curtis, *Unpeople*, 205.

<sup>18</sup> Curtis, *Unpeople*, 205.

(BRIAM), led by Sir Robert Thompson, which trained soldiers in South Vietnam in counter-insurgency methods that had been utilised in the Malayan emergency and aided in the development of the Strategic Hamlets Program.<sup>19</sup> British advisors and technicians were also sent to aid the US and Saigon; however, documents show that they were undercover and given US ID. The declassified documents that Curtis utilises in his writing demonstrate that Britain did indeed contribute to the war; however, this is very rarely discussed and not a dominant narrative due to the secretive nature of their aid.

When looking at the contribution of other countries, it is clear that it was comparably less to that of the US who sent roughly 2,700,000 troops to Vietnam,<sup>20</sup> while the ROK sent 320,000 and Australia 60,000,<sup>21</sup> and the UK only offered support in training and other methods, not the supplying actual combatants. Thus, it is understandable that the US actions would overshadow that of other countries. The memory of these countries contributions would also be further hidden by issues such as shame, political motives and the fact that their contribution was secret.

The 1960s were a time marked by increasing globalisation, and with it came the growth of media and television. The Vietnam war marked the first time a war was televised, and the coverage was widespread. The news heavily sensationalised the war - the more dramatic, the more viewers. Furthermore, there was an obvious bias in news coverage. When investigating archival footage of the war, one can identify the media's blatant propagandism of the war. Throughout many broadcasting services, there seems to be a clear theme; footage solely focuses

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<sup>19</sup> Curtis, *Unpeople*.

<sup>20</sup> US Department of Veterans Affairs, "Military Health History Pocket Card," Accessed Dec 8, 2021, <https://www.va.gov/oaa/pocketcard/m-vietnam.asp>.

<sup>21</sup> The Australian Government Departments of Veterans' Affairs, "The Vietnam War," ANZAC Portal, Last Updated February 23, 2021, <https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/wars-and-missions/vietnam-war-1962-1975/vietnam-war>.



on the American soldier, not even the South Vietnamese, it follows American soldiers in action as they dodge shellfire and shoot from their dugouts, the media clearly makes an effort to portray the American soldier as a patriotic hero in danger who is gladly risking their life for the sake of their country.<sup>22</sup> <sup>23</sup> Moreover, much of the media portrays Americans as saviours of Vietnam as it features emaciated and crying Vietnamese citizens begging American soldiers for help,<sup>24</sup> further bolstering the government's ideology that America is the protector of human rights. The government heavily utilised media to propel their propaganda. Page writes that war is the enemy of liberal democracies like the US, as war can make people lose confidence in their government.<sup>25</sup> there was great protest towards the Vietnam war, which many believed to be unjust; this was not only contained to some American citizens but also other states;<sup>26</sup> if the Johnson administration were to maintain their citizens' faith and maintain international relations, they would have to propagandise their actions heavily.<sup>27</sup> The government would make great efforts to underline "America's invisibility" and remind people of their actions during World War II and their fight against Hitler so "American involvement in Vietnam could be seen in the framework of past

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<sup>22</sup> CBS Evening News, "Vietnam War, 1970: CBS camera rolls as platoon comes under fire," CBS, April 30, 2015, Youtube Video, 05:08, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=89\\_3DgW\\_7mg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=89_3DgW_7mg).

<sup>23</sup> CBS Evening News, "How CBS News Cameras Captured The Vietnam War," CBS, February 27, 2019, Youtube Video, 03:13, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yyJEiN56E10>.

<sup>24</sup> CBS Evening News, "How CBS News Cameras Captured The Vietnam War".

<sup>25</sup> Caroline Page, *U.S. Official Propaganda during the Vietnam War, 1965-1973: The Limits of Persuasion*, (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 44.

<sup>26</sup> Dana Adams Schmidt, "PROTESTS ABROAD TO BACK U.S. RALLY: MARCHES OPPOSED TO WAR IN VIETNAM SET IN CAPITALS," *New York Times*, Oct 21, 1967, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/prottests-abroad-back-u-s-rally/docview/117853126/se-2?accountid=14656>.

<sup>27</sup> Page, *US Official Propaganda*, 49.

American actions, aimed, it was believed, at promoting 'justice' and ultimately 'peace'".<sup>28</sup> Johnson would continually make speeches covered by the media worldwide that highlighted US support for South Vietnam as a fight for democracy and freedom and as a peace negotiator.<sup>29</sup> The heavy American propaganda and media coverage of the war would permeate society, leaving a lasting belief that this was a US war.

America's involvement in the war would not only feature through patriotic and propagandised frameworks. There would also be negative coverage of the US involvement, none as widely covered as the My Lai Massacre, where on 16th March 1965, us troops mass murdered hundreds of unarmed South Vietnamese civilians. Journalist Seymour Hersh exposed the horrifying event almost two years after the incident.<sup>30</sup> The news spread across the globe, as indicated by newspaper archives all over the globe-spanning from the UK to India.<sup>31 32</sup> The incident would not stop there. The trial of Lt. William Calley would bring about much controversy as he would repeatedly have his sentence shortened after he was found guilty for the murder of 22 people, again sparking global outrage, portraying the American military in an incredibly unfavourable light and ingraining their actions into the minds of many. The Hollywood film industry would also capitalise on the Vietnam war. The American usage of film correlates to what Nguyen discusses in his writing about Vietnamese and American memories of the war; the

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<sup>28</sup> Page, *US Official Propaganda*, 51-52.

<sup>29</sup> Page, *US Official Propaganda*, 57.

<sup>30</sup> George Cotkin and Project Muse University Press eBooks, *Morality's Muddy Waters: Ethical Quandaries in Modern America*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010;2011;2013), 82.

<sup>31</sup> Louis Heren, "New Death Charge Against My Lai Lieutenant," *Times London, England*, 1969.

<sup>32</sup> "Sergeant to be Court-Martialled: My Lai Affair," *The Times of India (1861-2010)*, 1970, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/sergeant-be-court-martialled-my-lai-affair/docview/347163217/se-2?accountid=14656>.

'heroicising' of American soldiers clearly relates to what is highlighted as 'remembering one's own', where we villainise our enemies and portray ourselves as heroes,<sup>33</sup> this is especially evident in media coverage too, Ha also argues this arguing that American cultural memory excludes the Vietnamese experience and "if the Vietnamese are present in US films and books, they tend to be presented as "shadowy cardboard figures, merely one-dimensional stage props for the inner workings of the American psyche".<sup>34</sup> In the decades following the war, the American film industry would be wrought with films based on the war, or what Nguyen called an 'Industry of Memory',<sup>35</sup> with many of them focusing on the trials and tribulations of veterans with common themes of the disillusioned soldier and veteran as seen in *Platoon*, *Heaven & Earth* and *The War*.<sup>36 37 38</sup> Though many of these films showed the darker, more macabre side of the war, they were often very successful, with films such as *Platoon* and *Born on The Fourth of July* being critically acclaimed.<sup>39 40</sup> The success of the films solidified the idea that only the American soldier fought the war into the minds of people across the globe. The heavy media portrayal of the Vietnam war, whether it be news broadcasts, films, newspapers, or other forms of media, helped and has

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<sup>33</sup> Viet Thanh Nguyen and De Gruyter Harvard University Press Complete eBook-Package 2016, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England;: Harvard University Press, 2016).

<sup>34</sup> Quan Manh Ha, "When Memory Speaks: Transnational Remembrances in Vietnam War Literature," *Southeast Asian Studies (Kyoto (Japan))* 5, no. 3 (2016): 464.

<sup>35</sup> Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*.

<sup>36</sup> *Platoon*, Directed by Oliver Stone, (Hemdale Film Corporation, 1986).

<sup>37</sup> *Heaven & Earth*, Directed by Oliver Stone, (Warner Bros, 1993).

<sup>38</sup> *The War*, Directed by Jon Arnet, (Island World, 1994).

<sup>39</sup> *Born on The Fourth of July*, Directed by Oliver Stone, (Universal Pictures, 1989)

<sup>40</sup> James Stuart Olson, Randy Roberts, and Inc ebrary, *Where the Domino Fell: America and Vietnam, 1945-2010*, (Sixth ed. Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014;2013).

continued to help cement the ideology that the Vietnam war was an "American war" as the media coverage was heavily US-centric.

Kwon argues that based on his interviews and investigation of rituals and commemoration, the end of the Cold War allowed for many to commemorate mass death. Before the fall of the Soviet Union (USSR) but after the fall of Saigon, the Vietnam government adopted very left-wing politics and economics, mirroring that of the USSR, focusing on the collective and not allowing for the proper commemoration of victims of mass death. It was not until politics shifted towards privatisation that commemoration started to occur outside of the public sphere. Kwon highlights that politics can affect memorialisation. When one cannot correctly memorialise, the actual narrative cannot be maintained, and alternate and inaccurate stories become dominant. Others also share Kwon's sentiments that politics impact memory and reconciliation after the war. Though the conflict in Vietnam was a Cold War proxy war, it was also a civil conflict. Kwon's book features a poem written by the famous Vietnamese poet Pham Day; this poem, called *A Tale of Two Soldiers*, focuses on two soldiers who grew up in the same village and lived similar lives only to end up fighting on opposite sides of the war.<sup>41</sup> The poem highlights the polarising views of the war and how both sides were fighting for what they believed was right. When trying to rebuild after a war, Long notes that it can be difficult due to the enduring "polarisation in social, economic and ideological terms",<sup>42</sup> there are still those who fought on the losing side and maintain their anti-communist values and some who do not know how to forgive them. In her memoir, Hayslip discusses how she was recruited by the Northern Viet Cong as a child. Hayslip was later arrested by the South Vietnamese and, after returning to her village, was sentenced to death by the Viet

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<sup>41</sup> Kwon, *After The Massacre*, 159.

<sup>42</sup> Ngô Vĩnh Long, "Military Victory and the Difficult Tasks of Reconciliation in Vietnam: A Cautionary Tale," *Peace and Change* 38, no. 4 (2013): 474.

Cong, who no longer trusted her. After enduring many hardships, Hayslip fled to America, and when she returned to Vietnam 16 years later, her family was hesitant about her visiting as many tensions from the war were still present.<sup>43</sup> In a similar vein, we see the impact of polarising views in CBC's newscasts which shows South Vietnamese in Da Nang clamouring in desperation to get on the last flight to the US as the city fell to North Vietnam; many of these people were deserters who left their wives and children out of fear of what would happen to them if they remained.<sup>44</sup>

The enduring tensions from the civil war explain why both Long and Quang suggest that the government chose to tread lightly and refrain from bringing up the war as to avoid causing disruption and threats to their power.<sup>45</sup> <sup>46</sup> The Vietnamese government's approach can explain why when other countries brought up war crimes decades later, "The Vietnamese government discouraged further communications about war-crime history and issued a series of requests for cooperation to the domestic media" the government believed that it was best for Vietnam to "transcend her tragic past", though not forget it.<sup>47</sup> It is evident that the memory of the war has been repressed to fit the Vietnamese political agenda, both for their own gain and to ease tensions. However, false narratives that fail to include all contributors can arise, such as the US being Saigon's only allies.

The US has been the object of public disapproval for decades due to most people believing the war to be unjust, and though the US were a significant actor in the war, they were not the only

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<sup>43</sup> Le Ly Hayslip and Jay Wurts, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places: A Vietnamese Woman's Journey from War to Peace*, (New York, N.Y., U.S.A: Plume, 1990).

<sup>44</sup> CBS Evening News, "How CBS News Cameras Captured The Vietnam War".

<sup>45</sup> Long, "Military Victory".

<sup>46</sup> Trần Hữu Quang, "The Question of Reconciliation in Vietnam: A Relevant Social Issue," *Peace and Change* 38, no. 4 (2013): 411-425.

<sup>47</sup> Kwon, *After The Massacre*, 144.

ones. The other actors have managed to evade condemnation avoiding the reputation that the US has gained. There is a multitude of reasons why the narrative had been moulded to an American-centric one, from the influence of media, politics and shame. However, regardless I think it is essential that the actions of others are formally addressed and further brought into the light, not revealing the true story of the Vietnam war is an injustice to the Vietnamese people and those who lost their lives to the conflict as they deserve to be accurately remembered and memorialised by the public.

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