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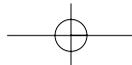
K. W. TAYLOR

Robert Buzzanco's "Fear and (Self) Loathing in Lubbock"

Robert Buzzanco wrote an article entitled "Fear and (Self) Loathing in Lubbock" that was published online in the April 16/17, 2005, issue of *Counterpunch* and reprinted in the December 2005 issue of *Passport*, the newsletter of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Policy. He was writing in reaction to a presentation I gave at the Fifth Triennial Vietnam Symposium of The Vietnam Center at Texas Tech University in March 2005 and also to an essay I wrote that was published in *Michigan Quarterly*.¹ In his article, he also registered his displeasure with a panel on which I had served as discussant at the annual conference of the Society of Historians of American Foreign Relations held in Austin, Texas, in the summer of 2004. The burden of his complaint is that I have voiced views on the Vietnam War that he thinks are wrong and even dangerous, namely that the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) was as legitimate and as potentially viable a state as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), that US support of the Republic of Vietnam was not necessarily a mistake, and that the outcome of the war was not the ineluctable result of, in his words, "the skills and appeal of the Vietnamese communists." Throughout his article, Buzzanco asserts that my views are based on emotion rather than evidence. Yet he presents his assertions (that the Republic of Vietnam was an illegitimate country, that the United States had no plausible reason to be involved there, and that the communists were sure to win) with more emotion than evidence.

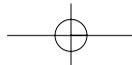
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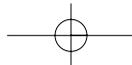
A premise of Buzzanco's interpretation of the war is that Ngô Đình Diệm was an incompetent American puppet and the architect of his own demise. He writes that Ngô Đình Diệm was "a Catholic ascetic who fled Vietnam and found sanctuary in a New York seminary, where the likes of Francis Cardinal Spellman, General John O'Daniel, Mike Mansfield, and John Kennedy designated him to be the leader of southern Vietnam after 1954."² As evidence for his description of Ngô Đình Diệm he cites his own book *Vietnam and the Transformation of American Life*,³ where he wrote: "In June 1954, Americans persuaded Bao Dai to appoint a Vietnamese elite named Ngo Dinh Diem to be Prime Minister. . . . He had spent the previous decade in a monastery in the United States."⁴ There is no indication of where he obtained his information, but it is certainly not based on reliable documentary evidence. Ngô Đình Diệm was in the United States for only two and a half years (from fall 1950 to spring 1953) and could not have spent a decade in an American monastery; far from withdrawing from worldly affairs, he spent his time in the United States fruitlessly lobbying politicians and government officials. There is no evidence that the US government or any freelance American was involved with Bảo Đại's appointment of Ngô Đình Diệm as prime minister in June 1954. David Anderson has made a careful study of English-language sources and concludes that "the initiative for Ngo Dinh Diem's appointment as prime minister came from within Vietnamese circles and not from the Americans. . . ."⁵ Edward Miller, using Vietnamese sources, reveals that Ngô Đình Diệm had a political base in Vietnam that was increasingly strengthened from late 1953 onward by growing Vietnamese impatience with French intransigence on issues related to national sovereignty.⁶ Both Anderson and Miller cite evidence that Ngô Đình Diệm's appointment was also made with the idea that his anti-French position and his prior residence in the United States would elicit future assistance from the United States, which was a critical consideration in the minds of anticommunist Vietnamese. However, this expectation in Bảo Đại's mind cannot be translated into any conscious US role in Ngô Đình Diệm's appointment.

Although Buzzanco takes pride in his reliance upon evidence, his portrayal of Ngô Đình Diệm, both in his "Lubbock" article and in his book that he cites in support of this article, is based on partial, inaccurate, or



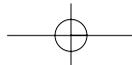
manipulative use of evidence. For example, he writes: “[T]he Ngo family put 78 percent of the American aid it received between 1956 and 1960 into the budget of the military while using but 2 percent on health, housing, or welfare programs, the ‘stuff’ of modernization.” For this, he quotes page 133 of David Anderson’s *Trapped by Success*, where it reads: “From 1956 to 1960, 78 percent of US aid to South Vietnam went into the RVN’s [Republic of Viet Nam] military budget. . . . Conversely, about 2 percent of US funds went into such programs as health, housing, and community development.” Anderson, in turn, cites Robert Scigliano. It is correct that Scigliano wrote: “78 percent of all American aid given to Vietnam between [1956 and 1960] went into the military budget.” However, he also wrote that “aid projects for economic and social development” made up “about 22 percent of the total aid given to Vietnam.”⁷ This is not simply a mistake of “two” for “twenty-two,” but rather a disingenuous use of Scigliano’s data. When Anderson mentions “health, housing, and community development,” he is referring to two of the seven categories listed by Scigliano (“health and sanitation” and “community development, social welfare, and housing”) that together add up to about 2 percent of total US funding (4.5 percent of nonmilitary aid). Anderson and Buzzanco conveniently ignore the other five categories cited by Scigliano (transportation, agriculture, public administration, education, industrial development and mining, and labor) that go to make up the rest of the 22 percent of US funding that was for nonmilitary purposes. The two categories selected by Anderson from Scigliano are translated by Buzzanco into “health, housing, or welfare programs, the ‘stuff’ of modernization,” as if none of the other five categories have anything to do with modernizing “stuff.” This is not a reassuring demonstration of research skill or use of evidence.

Another example of Buzzanco’s misuse of evidence is his quotation of Wesley Fishel in support of the idea that “Diem’s position and future were dependent on the U.S.” Writing in August/September 1954, shortly after Ngô Đình Diệm’s arrival in Sài Gòn and before Ngô Đình Diệm had begun to gain control of the chaotic military and political situation there, Fishel wrote in a letter quoted by Buzzanco as follows: “The government is shaky as all hell. It is being propped up for the moment only with great difficulty. Nothing can help it so much as administrative, economic, and social reforms. . . . The needs are enormous, the time short.” This quotation



reflects the daunting situation confronting Ngô Đình Diệm in the immediate wake of the Geneva settlement and resonates with what we know about the multiplicity of armed Vietnamese groups hostile to Ngô Đình Diệm, French efforts to oust Ngô Đình Diệm, and American doubts about the survival of his government. Fishel wrote this quotation seven months before the United States finally made a firm commitment to support Ngô Đình Diệm. In late April 1955, Lawton Collins, the US ambassador to Sài Gòn, persuaded John Foster Dulles and Dwight Eisenhower to withdraw from Ngô Đình Diệm the tentative American support he had received until then. This decision was reversed shortly after, when Ngô Đình Diệm surprised American policymakers with his ability to overcome his enemies. Fishel's exclamation in late summer 1954 that the government was "being propped up for the moment only with great difficulty" is hardly evidence that "Diem's position and future were dependent on the U.S." Fishel is surely not the most authoritative witness of what was happening in Sài Gòn at that time. The evidence examined in Edward Miller's dissertation displays the complex world of Sài Gòn politics that Ngô Đình Diệm mastered in a relatively short period of time. Miller shows that the roles of Americans in these events have been exaggerated, and that it was the energy, intelligence, and determination of Ngô Đình Diệm and his Vietnamese allies that were critical elements of his success.⁸

Beyond impressionistic observations by American observers, the issue of dependency for the two Vietnamese governments of that time is not as simple as Buzzanco implies. The government in Hà Nội was also dependent upon the assistance of its big-power patrons, the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the USSR, to train and equip the military, to stabilize and develop the economy, and to extend political control over the rural population.⁹ Both Vietnams were dependent upon their respective Cold War patrons for getting up to speed. The situation changed in the early 1960s, when the Kennedy administration embarked upon a policy of "regime change" in Sài Gòn that resulted in compromising the independence of the RVN to a much greater degree than occurred in the DRV, where the PRC and USSR competed for influence.¹⁰ Buzzanco's identification of Fishel as "an advisor from the infamous Michigan State Group and supporter of Diem" should alert us to the fact that Fishel was not an objective observer.

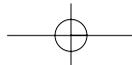


Fishel's exclamation about Ngô Đình Diệm's need for help in the summer of 1954 cannot be taken as evidence of a long-term relationship of dependency, considering that a long-term US commitment was still more than half a year away and that Fishel's role was exactly to provide help to Ngô Đình Diệm. Buzzanco imagines that Fishel is dismayed by the weakness of Ngô Đình Diệm's government, when in fact his words could be read as expressing excitement about the possibilities for making a difference.

Buzzanco also neglects to cite any evidence for his argument that, in his words, "by the early 1960s Diem's repression had set into motion two major lines of opposition." One of these was the National Front for the Liberation of South Viet-Nam (NLF), which, according to him, "the politburo in the north, due to southern pressure as much as their [*sic*] own designs, helped establish." The other was those who eventually overthrew Ngô Đình Diệm, namely, "army officers and government officials" in Sài Gòn who were Ngô Đình Diệm's "own people."

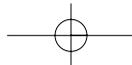
The first point has to do with the perennial controversy over whether the southern insurgency was primarily provoked by Sài Gòn repression or primarily a result of decisions made in Hà Nội. We know that decisions to escalate warfare in the south were made by Hà Nội in 1959 and 1960,¹¹ after Hà Nội had successfully repressed the rural population in the north. This repression, or "land reform," was done under the direction of Chinese advisors who, according to William Duiker, "intimidated" Hồ Chí Minh into following their model of rural revolution despite his dismay at injustices committed in its implementation.¹² Edwin Moise estimates the number of people killed during the northern land reform as "probably on the rough order of 5,000 and almost certainly between 3,000 and 15,000."¹³ Bùi Tín, in his memoir, wrote that the land reform "caused the deaths of more than ten thousand people."¹⁴ Arthur Dommen cites testimony from "a former cadre of the land reform campaign" for the information that "12,000 members and cadres of the party and 20,000 ordinary civilians were executed during the campaign."¹⁵

Ngô Đình Diệm's policy to gain control of the rural population in the south, made at the same time as the "land reform" in the north, also used violence. Citing a southern communist document captured in 1969 and an article published in Hà Nội in 1974, William Duiker wrote that the



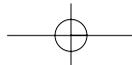
number killed in the south was “more than 1,000.”¹⁶ If we were to make a determination about comparative repression, the available evidence is fairly clear. There was rural repression in both Vietnams in the 1950s, and it was significantly more violent in the north than in the south. However, while northern peasants had no external network of support, the communist organization in the rural south was revived by Hà Nội after being defeated by the Sài Gòn government. Jeffrey Race, in his book, *War Comes to Long An*, refutes the view popularized by Philippe Devillers, Jean Lacouture, George McT. Kahin, and John W. Lewis that the southern insurgency developed independently of the Hà Nội government.¹⁷ Liên-Hằng T. Nguyễn, using Vietnamese documentation, has argued that the decisions in Hà Nội to initiate a new war in the south and to establish the NLF, made in 1959 and 1960, were related to internal party politics rather than to pressure from the situation in the south.¹⁸ David Elliott’s study of Định Tường Province demonstrates that by 1959 the communist network there had been suppressed and was restored only with new directives and support from Hà Nội and the initiation of a terror campaign that used assassination and intimidation.¹⁹ It is surely too simplistic to assume, as Buzzanco does, that repressive policies of the Sài Gòn government are sufficient to explain the insurgency.

Buzzanco’s idea that Ngô Đình Diệm’s “own people” overthrew him is presumably based upon the fact that it was a group of generals in his “own” army that led the uprising against him. However, evidence tells a rather different story of reluctant generals being urged to action by Americans. When the initial coup plot fell apart in August 1963, US Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, who went to Vietnam understanding his task as being to engineer the overthrow of Ngô Đình Diệm, reported: “My single greatest difficulty in carrying out the instructions of last Sunday [to effect ‘the overthrow of the Diem government’] is inertia. The days come and go and nothing happens.” He likened his position to “pushing a piece of spaghetti.” Lucien Conein, the CIA go-between with the plotters, reported that the generals backed off when they learned that General Paul Harkins, commander of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, had learned of the coup plan and disapproved of it. It took Lodge two more months to persuade the Vietnamese generals that the United States wanted them to overthrow Ngô Đình Diệm despite



General Harkins' disapproval.²⁰ There can be little doubt that if the United States had continued to support Ngô Đình Diệm and to discourage his enemies he would not have been overthrown in 1963, and, consequently, that if one were to look for those who overthrew Ngô Đình Diệm, one would find that the line of responsibility does not stop with "his own" generals but goes directly to the US ambassador, who most definitely was not one of Ngô Đình Diệm's "own people."

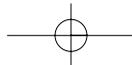
Buzzanco is particularly unhappy with the idea that the Republic of Vietnam was a "real state." He endorses the idea proposed by James Carter, a student of his, that it was "invented" by the United States. Carter's dissertation, "Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State-Making in Southeast Asia" (University of Houston, 2004), proposes that the RVN was not a state because it could not have existed without "massive infusions of American military and economic aid." However, if at that time one were to measure legitimacy as Buzzanco does, in terms of the degree to which a state relied upon external assistance, there would be a long list of illegitimate states that nevertheless were recognized by many other countries as sovereign and independent despite their dependence upon more powerful patrons. Apparently trying to avoid the absurdity of this approach, Buzzanco moves on to assert that the RVN lacked, in his words, the "essential 'stuff'" of "consensus, sovereignty, development, international legitimacy, and other defining criteria." This begs many questions. Is the consensus achieved by repression and fear in the DRV what Buzzanco considers to be a mark of legitimacy? On what basis does the recognition of Hà Nội's sovereignty by Beijing, Moscow, and their ilk count for more than the recognition of Sài Gòn's sovereignty by London, Washington, and their ilk? By what criteria does Buzzanco measure "development" in the two Vietnams or compare the international legitimacy of Hà Nội and Sài Gòn? And what is to be made of "other defining criteria"? One such "other defining criteria," according to Buzzanco, is military success, for he claims "the NLF and Viet Cong" defeated "the U.S. armed forces," which, according to him, "would seem, by almost any 'expert' analysis, would [*sic*] constitute some kind of legitimacy and viability." First, "the NLF and Viet Cong" did not defeat the US armed forces, and neither, for that matter, did the army of the DRV, which ultimately gained control of the RVN after the redeployment of US forces out of



that country. Second, if Buzzanco would pause to consider what kind of “expert” analysis he is implying here, I expect that he would be dismayed by it, for he suggests that force makes right, and I doubt very much if he would want to make this analysis for places where US military force has been a factor in establishing new governments.

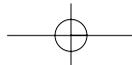
Buzzanco’s “experts” on the issue of whether or not the RVN was a “real state” are all American politicians, generals, or government officials (Mike Mansfield, Henry Cabot Lodge, William Westmoreland, Victor Krulak, Donald Rumsfeld, Robert Komer, Richard Holbrooke, and Paul Warnke). Buzzanco’s one and only quotation from a Vietnamese, Bùi Diễm, that “Americans came in like bulldozers,” is not only irrelevant but also incorrect. On the page cited in Bùi Diễm’s book there is no mention of bulldozers.²¹ Mining the comments of Americans blinded by their own power for quotations about a Vietnamese reality beyond their comprehension is not the way I would choose to analyze the legitimacy of the RVN as a sovereign state. Bùi Diễm’s book documents his years of service to this state. Although often disenchanted with the governments in Sài Gòn and with American arrogance, many thousands of Vietnamese worked for, fought for, and died for this state; their hopes and aspirations were expressed in writings that, with rare exceptions, are unavailable in English.²² Diplomatic recognition is not necessarily a measure of sovereignty, but if Buzzanco wants to work with evidence he will have to present an argument to dismiss the fact that in addition to being accorded diplomatic recognition by approximately sixty nations, the RVN was a member of over thirty international organizations, including twelve United Nations agencies.²³

Buzzanco is unhappy with any questioning of the fashionable view that the United States had no “legitimate basis” for intervention in Vietnam. First he tries to appeal to international law. He writes: “Even if one accepts the legitimacy and viability of the southern state, Vietnam is, at best, or worst, a civil war, and, having no sanction from the UN or other controlling body, America’s military invasion does not meet the test for accepted intervention.” As evidence for this statement he cites without any page references Telford Taylor’s *Nuremberg and Vietnam*²⁴ and the two-volume *The Vietnam War and International Law*, edited by Richard A. Falk,²⁵ but these works do not sustain his argument. Telford Taylor reviews the legal arguments made



both in support of and against US policy in Vietnam²⁶ and writes: “Eminently respectable and learned voices are raised on both sides of the debate.”²⁷ He concludes that the issue is “not susceptible to solution by judicial decree” and that the war was “the work of the President and the Congress—the people’s elected agents—and the war can be ended only by action of the national will, exerted through political, not judicial, channels.”²⁸ The volumes edited by Richard Falk contain articles and documents on both sides of the debate. Presumably, Buzzanco is not intending to reference the essays by John Norton Moore and others who argue for the legality of US action in Vietnam, or by Wolfgang Friedmann and others who argue that international law was not sufficiently developed to be applied to the case of Vietnam. We can imagine that he likes the articles by Richard Falk, which favor his own interpretation, but in citing the entire two-volume work he references a debate that explores all sides of the issue at length but leaves readers free to select or reject in accordance with their own interpretive predilections.

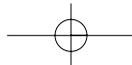
Consequently, Buzzanco rightly shifts his argument away from legal considerations: “But the right to intervene ultimately becomes a political question.” The “political question” arises as two separate questions that are nevertheless related. First, were US policies in Vietnam between 1950 and 1975 reasonable? And second, if so, or to the extent that some were reasonable, were they implemented competently or not? By “reasonable” I mean to imply policies that can be justified by what they hope to achieve, by a rational context of thought, and by a plausible expectation of success. The success of a policy determines in some measure whether or not one can say it has been competently implemented. Since US policy in Vietnam was unsuccessful in preserving a noncommunist Vietnamese state, even if the policy is thought to have been correct, it may be assumed that it was incompetently implemented, and on this assumption Robert Buzzanco and I are apparently in agreement. We disagree, however, on the question of whether or not US policy goals in Vietnam were reasonable to begin with. I think that the goals were reasonable, but that they were progressively corrupted by the incompetence with which they were pursued. In the 1950s and early 1960s, Americans generally agreed that there were compelling strategic reasons for US intervention in Vietnam related to what was understood as the



Cold War. Furthermore, political change in Asia during the past half century has shown that efforts to defend dictatorships with a potential for democratic development have not always been without positive effect. Nevertheless, the colossal blunders and waste of US intervention in Vietnam appeared increasingly unreasonable to more and more Americans as the years went by. And that is what finally forced the United States to let go of this Vietnam policy.

Buzzanco misses the mark when he criticizes me for believing “that Americans are too self-critical about the Cold War.” I do not know whether Americans are too self-critical about the Cold War or not, or even what it would mean to be “too” self-critical, and I do not think the question is even important in the context of this discussion. The remarks to which Buzzanco is responding are about teaching, the point being that students today have no experience of what is called the Cold War and tend not to understand how large it loomed in the consciousness of those of us who lived through the 1950s and early 1960s. Furthermore, without such an understanding it is difficult to contextualize the widespread conviction among American policymakers of that time that it was a good idea to resist the expansion of a Vietnamese communist regime. We can document debates in the US government, both in the Pentagon and the State Department, dating back to the late 1940s, in which the pros and cons of getting involved in the Vietnamese situation are thoughtfully addressed. There is wisdom on both sides of this debate, which continues, as we see, even today; but after the end of the Chinese civil war and then the outbreak of the Korean War, Cold War logic, if it can be so called, trumped all other considerations. Speaking in terms of the classroom, I wanted to point out that, without an understanding of the Cold War dimension of that era, students have difficulty understanding US involvement in Vietnam.

It does not matter whether or not we agree with the idea of Michael Lind and others that US intervention in Vietnam “was essential to the containment of communism in the Cold War.”²⁹ Regardless of how it looks to us in retrospect, as historians we must consider how it looked to people living at that time. In the 1950s and early 1960s, communist movements supported by the PRC, not to mention the DRV,³⁰ did threaten governments in the Southeast Asian region. Noncommunist governments in the region at that

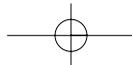


time understood the domino theory and knew that it had to do with them. However ineptly, US intervention in Vietnam in the mid to late 1960s stabilized the region for these governments and enabled the emergence of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations as an association of “dominoes” that did not fall. When we consider that Taiwan, South Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines endured much of the Cold War under dictatorial regimes but eventually developed forms of democratic politics and relatively prosperous economies under American strategic protection, the role of the United States in facilitating democratic change in Asia is not as ludicrous as Buzzanco would have it.

Buzzanco says that neither the noncommunist Vietnamese nor the Americans could match “the skills and appeal of the Vietnamese communists,” which presumably mobilized people under the banner of nationalism and anticolonialism. In the context of a totalitarian state, however, these skills teach people to follow orders by indoctrination, discipline, and fear. It is easily forgotten that many Vietnamese were nationalist and anticolonial but also anticommunist.

Buzzanco reduces the question of whether the war was “winnable” to proposals that it be fought “without restraints,” or by “invading the north,” or with “more and better bombing.” On the other hand, it can be plausibly argued that less military force applied more intelligently by the United States held better prospects for success than did a simple escalation of what was actually done. But the political dimension also needs to be kept in mind, and the United States severely damaged its policy by not maintaining full support for Ngô Đình Diệm, the most plausible leader among the anticommunist Vietnamese.

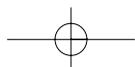
The American betrayal of Ngô Đình Diệm, more than any other single event, handicapped American policy in Vietnam. It revealed the confusion of ideals for realism that emerged in the foreign policy of the Kennedy administration. Kennedy’s ringing declarations of extending freedom into new frontiers was seemingly contradicted by a fear of commitment in Cuba and in Laos, while in Vietnam “idealistic” political reforms were confused with “realistic” security measures. Once the United States turned against Ngô Đình Diệm, everything that came later was increasingly difficult to reconcile with American ideals, although, comparatively, American ideals were still,



in my opinion, worthier than Hà Nội's and no more corrupted by recourse to violence than Hà Nội's.

The problem was that American ideals came from political experience on a peaceful continent surrounded by oceans rather than from the situation faced by an embattled ally in Asia. The so-called "hearts and minds" that were essential to winning the war were not so much in Vietnam as they were in the United States. Vietnamese did not have the same opportunities that Americans enjoyed to express what was in their hearts or on their minds. When Americans and their representatives lost confidence in national policy in Vietnam and decided that they preferred defeat to victory, they did this with the luxury of being an ocean away from the consequences.

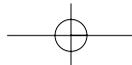
It would be tedious to itemize all the statements in Buzzanco's article that are contrary to evidence. However, as another example, I will mention his depiction of the effects of the 1968 Tết Offensive in Vietnam. He says that it "showed that the enemy could attack with impunity . . . [and] caused massive desertions among the army of southern Vietnam and caused massive setbacks to pacification programs." The massive casualties suffered by the communist attackers are well documented; they most certainly did not "attack with impunity." Furthermore, the southern army fought well, the Tết attacks galvanized support among southerners for the Sài Gòn government, and subsequently there were significant successes in pacification programs.³¹ The Tết attacks had a very different effect upon public opinion in the United States, but that is another story. Buzzanco remarks that William Westmoreland's "response" to the Tết attacks was to ask for 206,000 more troops, as if this were required by the battlefield situation. But, as is well known, and as Robert Buzzanco himself indicates in his book *Masters of War*,³² this troop request did not originate with Westmoreland; it came from Earle Wheeler's scheme to capitalize on events in Vietnam to get Lyndon Johnson to authorize a global increase in troop strength. In the words of George Herring, Wheeler presented "a gloomy assessment" of the Tết Offensive in Vietnam "to stampede the administration into providing the troops to rebuild a depleted strategic reserve. . . ."³³ One of the features of the US-centric view of the war expressed by Buzzanco is that the experience of southern Vietnamese is erased while the Hà Nội version of events is trumpeted.



The question I addressed in the Lubbock talk that upset Buzzanco was this: How did it happen that, only ten years after John Kennedy's idealistic exhortation to "pay any price" for "freedom," so many Americans arrived at a cynical, self-critical mood with no confidence in their government's capacity to play a positive role in world affairs? Failures in presidential leadership and loss of faith in that leadership are surely one part of the answer; public opinion, congressional elections, and the exercise of legislative power ultimately overcame executive power and represented a democratic force with its own momentum. Yet there remained a residue of cynicism toward American foreign policy that has become a relatively prominent feature of academic opinion since the 1960s.

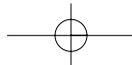
My tentative analysis is that there are at least five factors to take into account in explaining this: the effects of the post-1945 prosperity, with changing attitudes toward death and reduced tolerance for the human cost of war; the civil rights, environmental, and women's rights movements that focused attention on what was wrong and needed changing in American society; the shift of the Cold War from a bipolar confrontation to a triangular set of negotiated relationships among the PRC, the United States, and the USSR, which lessened the sense of urgency about the Cold War; poor leadership during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations that prolonged the war in Vietnam beyond what the American people were prepared to accept; and the disappointment of a generation that came of age in the early 1960s with unusually high expectations and idealisms only to learn that their government spent lives easily and could not be trusted to tell the truth. None of these observations is new, but I think the last one deserves a bit more attention than it has received, not only in the context of the Vietnam War but also in describing a general disappointment with what the United States has made of its power and influence in the world during the past half century. This disappointment is often justified, which is only to be expected given the flawed human nature we all share. On the other hand, it should be measured against alternatives and the accumulation of positive contributions that the United States has made and can yet make in the field of international relations.

Buzzanco obviously considers himself someone with the credentials to speak about the Vietnam War, although he does not use Vietnamese and



relies entirely on English-language sources. He would like to discount my views on the war because I am supposed to be a historian with a specialty “in Vietnam’s early history, before the tenth century.” My work has never been so narrow as that. I have published articles on nearly every period of Vietnamese history, including modern times. I have lived in Vietnam, I read Vietnamese, and I speak Vietnamese. This does not make me correct, but it gives me a chance to know Vietnam as a country and not just as a war. One might find it a source of wonderment that American historians think they can write with authority about the Vietnam War without being able to use the Vietnamese language to read source materials, but Vietnam War studies in this country have prospered largely in this mode. Thus, events in Vietnam have been absorbed into narratives that serve the purposes of American historians. But this war is also part of the history of the Vietnamese peoples, and neither the Hà Nội nor the US versions of this war account for the experience of southern Vietnamese, whether it was those who resisted communism or those who were mobilized by the communist party to fight for Hà Nội’s interests.

My view of the war can be summarized in four points. First, the American policy to support and defend an anticommunist Vietnam was a plausible and defensible idea in the context of the 1950s and early 1960s. Second, the Kennedy and Johnson administrations made many mistakes that turned this policy into a monstrous ordeal. Third, despite this, Nixon managed to redeploy US forces out of Vietnam while stabilizing the government and army of the RVN. Fourth, domestic political pressures led first to a peace agreement that granted Hà Nội military access to the RVN and then to a repudiation of the alliance with the RVN. I do not entertain any animosity, irritation, anger, or madness (contrary to Buzzanco’s attribution of these emotions to me) toward anyone for the fact that a “good idea” went wrong or that the American people valued domestic peace over a discredited foreign commitment. I believe that if the United States had maintained its support of Ngô Đình Diệm and had followed his advice as much as it demanded that he follow American advice, many grave errors could have been avoided. Ngô Đình Diệm did not want US troops in the RVN.³⁴ In 1961, he told the US ambassador: “If we cannot win this struggle ourselves, with the invaluable help you are giving, then we deserve to lose, and will lose.”³⁵ Ultimately, after



Ngô Đình Diệm's murder and years of blunders and confusions, the "invaluable help" of the US to the RVN was withdrawn. ■

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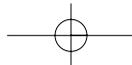
ABSTRACT

This is a response to Robert Buzzanco's article, "Fear and (Self) Loathing in Lubbock," which argued against views expressed by the author about the US-Vietnam War. This essay emphasizes the perspective of anticommunist Vietnamese, suggests a rationale for American policy decisions, and contextualizes the outcome of the war with human choices rather than with a scheme of historical inevitability.

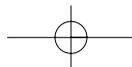
KEY WORDS: *Vietnamese history, the Vietnam War, Ngô Đình Diệm, US foreign policy*

Notes

1. K.W. Taylor, "How I Began to Teach about the Vietnam War," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 43, no. 4 (Fall 2004): 637–647.
2. Robert Buzzanco, "Fear and (Self) Loathing in Lubbock," *Counterpunch*, April 16/17, 2005, <http://www.counterpunch.org/buzzanco04162005.html>; and *Passport*, December 2005, <http://www.shafr.org/newsletter/w005/december/buzzanco.htm>. Throughout this essay, when I quote Robert Buzzanco, it is from this article unless otherwise noted.
3. Robert Buzzanco, *Vietnam and the Transformation of American Life* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 55–58.
4. *Ibid.*, 55.
5. David Anderson, *Trapped By Success: The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953–61* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 55.
6. Edward Miller, "Grand Designs: Vision, Power and Nation Building in America's Alliance with Ngo Dinh Diem, 1954–1960" (PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 2004), 68–92.
7. Robert Scigliano, *South Vietnam: Nation under Stress* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1963), 113–115.



8. Miller, "Grand Designs," 125–204.
9. Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950–1975* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 69–75.
10. See W.R. Smyser, *The Independent Vietnamese: Vietnamese Communism between Russia and China, 1956–1969* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Southeast Asia Program, 1980).
11. On this, see Carlyle A. Thayer, *War by Other Means* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989), especially 195–196.
12. William J. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh: A Life* (New York: Hyperion, 2000), 478–479.
13. Edwin E. Moise, *Land Reform in China and North Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 222.
14. Bùi Tín, *Following Ho Chi Minh* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1995), 27.
15. Arthur J. Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 340.
16. William J. Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1981), 174. The more exuberant estimates of people killed in the repressions in the north and south are either not based on any discernible evidence or come from secondary writings written several years after the end of the war. See Bernard B. Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Praeger, 1967), 156, and David W.P. Elliott, *The Vietnamese War*, 2 vols. (M.W. Sharpe, 2003), 1:198.
17. Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972), 107–108n5. Race is referring to *La fin d'une guerre* by Jean Lacouture and Philippe Devillers and to *The United States in Vietnam* by George McT. Kahin and John W. Lewis.
18. Liên-Hằng T. Nguyễn, "The Making of Hanoi's Grand Strategy during the Second Indochina War" (lecture given at Cornell University, September 15, 2005).
19. Elliott, *The Vietnamese War*, 1:212ff.
20. Anne Blair, *Lodge in Vietnam* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 46, 58, 66; Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, 509–547.
21. Bui Diem, *In the Jaws of History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 127.
22. For example, on political thought, see Nguyễn Phương, *Ánh sáng dân chủ* [The Light of Democracy] (Sài Gòn: Xã-Hội Ấn-Quán, 1957). For what is basically a eulogy for Ngô Đình Diệm, see Đỗ Thọ, *Nhật ký* [Diary] (Sài Gòn: Đồng Nai, 1971; 3rd printing). In literature, see, for example, Nhã Ca, *Tình ca trong lửa đỏ* [Love Song in Red Flames] (Sài Gòn: Thương Yêu, 1970) and *Đêm nghe tiếng đạn bác* [At Night I Hear the Cannons] (Sài Gòn: Nam Cường, 1967); Dương Nghiễm Mậu, *Phấn đấu* [To Struggle] (Sài Gòn: Tập-san Văn, 1966); Duyên Anh, *Sa mạc tuổi trẻ* [The Desert of Youth] (first published in Sài Gòn 1966,



- reprinted in Los Alamitos, CA: Việt Nam, 1977); Viên Linh, *Hạ đỏ có chàng tới hỏi* [A Boyfriend Comes to Inquire in the Red Summer] (Sài Gòn: Khai Hóa, 1973); Y Uyên, *Ngựa tím* [Purple Horse] (Sài Gòn: Giao Điểm, 1967). For a soldier's memoir, see John C. Schafer, "Phan Nhat Nam and the Battle of An Loc," and his translation of Phan Nhật Nam, "An Lộc: The Unquiet East," *Crossroads* 13, no. 2 (1999): 53–102.
23. Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, 299; John Norton Moore, "The Lawfulness of Military Assistance to the Republic of Viet-Nam," in *The Vietnam War and International Law*, ed. Richard A. Falk, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968–1969), 1:239.
 24. Telford Taylor, *Nuremberg and Vietnam* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970).
 25. Richard A. Falk, ed., *The Vietnam War and International Law*.
 26. Taylor, *Nuremberg and Vietnam*, 95–102.
 27. *Ibid.*, 97.
 28. *Ibid.*, 120–121.
 29. Michael Lind, *Vietnam: The Necessary War* (New York: Touchstone, 2002).
 30. Christopher E. Goscha, *Thailand and the Southeast Asian Network of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Richmond, UK: Curzon Press, 1999); Stephen R. Heder, *Cambodian Communism and the Vietnamese Model* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2004).
 31. Elliott, *The Vietnam War*, 2:1116–1117, 2:1166–1179; Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience*, 668–669; Anthony James Joes, *The War for South Viet Nam, 1954–1975* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001), 98–101.
 32. Robert Buzzanco, *Masters of War* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 322–327.
 33. George C. Herring, *America's Longest War*, 4th ed. (McGraw Hill, 2002), 235.
 34. Frederick Nolting, *From Trust to Tragedy* (New York: Praeger, 1988), 39, 53.
 35. *Ibid.*, 33.

