

The responsibility of the west



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Perhaps one of the most controversial and universally disputed wars in American history is the Vietnam War. Kept out of mind and excluded from textbooks, this portion of American past is kept under wraps; and it is very clear why that is after even a brief investigation into the matter. During this time period, America acted under the premise of a responsibility to fight for freedom, and a responsibility to liberate an oppressed people. On the contrary, even while keen to interfere, the true responsibility of Americans in Vietnam was to let the independent country manage its own affairs.

Sadly, Americans did indeed interfere, and a disastrous impact was made on both American and Vietnamese society. There is no doubt that America had no business or claim in Vietnam when they became involved in the 1960s.

While addressing John Hopkins University in April of 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson admitted, "Vietnam is far away from this quiet campus. We have no territory there, nor do we seek any." Why, one might wonder, would America then become so involved? President Johnson goes on to argue that America's involvement was due solely to the unspoken promise and responsibility America has to protect other nations in their fight for freedom.

And while assisting struggling countries in the struggle for independence from various oppressors and tragic circumstances is indeed both heroic and moral, these actions are entirely unjustified if the country aiming to give that assistance, in this case, America, is in need of help itself. In Senator J.

William Fulbright's 1966 speech, *The Arrogance of Power*, Fulbright confronts America's overenthusiastic zeal for international independence at the cost of the amenities of the American public: "In [America's] excessive involvement in the affairs of other countries, we are not only living

off of our assets and denying our own people the proper enjoyment on their resources; we are also denying the world the example of a free society enjoying its freedom to the fullest.??? It is true that the independence and liberation of Vietnam would likely improve the lives of Vietnamese and those countries that interact with the seemingly eternally oppressed country. This, however, cannot be achieved at the detriment of the American government and the American public as a whole. To help the world is to serve as an example of what a great nation should be, not to deplete the resources of what could be a great nation to attempt to compromise for the shortcomings of others, despite their situation. In order to resolve the problems of others, America must first resolve her own. Like every war to become before and after, the Vietnam War had massive casualties, many of which were directly caused by American involvement.

Many American soldiers died fighting for a cause unbeknownst to them in an unfamiliar land far away from the place they called home. President Johnson spoke of the American casualties in his aforementioned 1965 address, confessing, "Some four-hundred young men, born into an America that is bursting with opportunity and promise, have ended their lives on Vietnam's steaming soil." This early figure was sadly eclipsed, as by the end of the war, American casualties numbered 58, 000. Not only did these men die often at an obscenely young age, but they also died unjustly in a war for a cause unknown to them for a people they never truly knew. Furthermore, the American war took not only American lives in the ways of violence, but also Vietnamese lives in the ways of neglect. Ngo Vinh Long, a

Vietnamese-American professor, grew up in Vietnam during the time of the war.

His academic excellence earned him a spot on the American government's map-making team. Through this position, he traveled through South Vietnam, seeing the horrors of American contribution first hand. He recounts his experiences in a short segment of the narrative Patriots: The Vietnam War remembered from all sides: One day I entered a village by the name of Ka Rom where highlanders had been regrouped into a strategic hamlet. They said that two-hundred people had starved to death in the past month, I knew they were telling the truth just by looking at them. When one thinks of the casualties of war, one thinks of valiant heroes dying in the battlefield for their cause.

One does not think of the innocent civilians who die as a result of the violence and turmoil of a country at war. The American-made strategic hamlets grouped together at random to form small villages where every family was responsible for the actions of each individual within the society. Thus, if one individual was to act out, the whole village would be punished, often with imprisonment.

Americans neglected the lives of the very people they claimed they were trying to save, oppressing their right to freedom by creating these hamlets. Unfortunately, this was not the only way the Americans mistreated the Vietnamese. The American Vietnam War was one of many instances in which America entered international affairs with the belief that American policies are the right policies, without exception. America exhibited the perfect

example of the Arrogance of Power, as described by Senator J. William Fulbright:??? The attitude above all others which I feel sure is no longer valid is the arrogance of power, the tendency of great nations to equate power with virtue and major responsibilities with a universal mission.??? Contrary to popular American belief, the power that the young nation has accumulated during its short years as an independent country is best utilized by assisting their own, not using their power to force their principles on other nations.

In the case of Vietnam, America did exactly as Fulbright describes; they entered into foreign affairs with little understanding of the implications of their attempt at imposing a democratic government. The ignorance and bold nature of American involvement in foreign affairs is extremely well represented in Graham Greene??™s *The Quiet American*. In Greene??™s novel, he uses his characters to represent the nations they hail from. In one particular instance, Pyle, an American agent, is out to dinner with Fowler, a British journalist, and Phoung, Fowler??™s Vietnamese mistress. Shortly after the end of their meal, a group of women of ill repute take the stage of the venue. Pyle begins to express his concerns as Fowler reacts, later saying, ??? I was astonished by the sudden violence of Pyle??™s protest.

??? Fowler,??™ he said, ??? let??™s go. We??™ve had enough, haven??™t we This isn??™t a bit suitable for [Phoung].??™ ??? Pyle, much like the nation he represents, fights for what he thinks is right for Phoung. Phoung, however, much like the Vietnamese people, never gets a say in her own affairs. Instead, she responds only to the paths that others lay out for her, oblivious to her situation and her own beliefs as to what would be best.

Although written before America became involved in Vietnam, *The Quiet American* predicted exactly how America's interference would play out. America would enter Vietnam with no regards to the country's independence or age long traditions, and implicate a system doomed to fail. There will always be regrettable mistakes in history. No society will ever go without deadly fault either hiding in their past or looming in the future.

Nevertheless, there will always be mistakes that could have been easily avoided, much like America's interference in Vietnam. If one thing is to be learned about this tragic conflict, it is that power need not be used, especially in the case of foreign affairs. America must learn from their experience in Vietnam to respect and honour their responsibility to allow fellow nations to handle their own affairs.