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ON EVE OF 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF VIETNAM WAR AUTHORIZATION, VETERANS GROUP CHALLENGES ANTI-VIETNAM LEADERS TO DEBATE

An organization of Vietnam veterans has challenged more than two-dozen prominent opponents of the Vietnam War from the 1960s and early 1970s to select one or more champions for a public debate, which is scheduled for 1 PM on Tuesday, August 5, in the Zenger room of the National Press Club in Washington, DC.

The debate is designed to reexamine the central tenets of the antiwar narrative, which the veterans believe will be shown to have been almost completely false. If America is to “learn the lessons of Vietnam” and “avoid another Vietnam” in the future, it is important first to establish what really *happened* in Vietnam, and what the real lessons to be extracted are.

On August 7, 1964, by an overwhelming margin of 504-2 (99.6%) the United States Congress passed a joint resolution authorizing the President to use U.S. armed forces to protect South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos in response to requests for assistance in defense of their freedom. The bill, often referred to as the “Gulf of Tonkin Resolution,” was signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson on August 10.

In the years that followed, the resulting war produced one of the most heated and divisive confrontations in America’s history, with hundreds of thousands of angry protesters marching in Washington, DC, and elsewhere. Ultimately, in May 1973, Congress enacted a prohibition against the use of any appropriated funds for combat operations anywhere in Indochina by U.S. armed forces effective August 15 of that year, and dramatically cut financial assistance to South Vietnam and Cambodia. Reassured that the United States would no longer fulfill the solemn commitments it had made by treaty and statute—and in President John F. Kennedy’s inspiring inaugural pledge that America would “pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty”—the North Vietnamese regular Army, behind columns of Soviet made tanks,

invaded the Republic of [South] Vietnam and overthrew its elected government in flagrant violation of international law. At the same time, Communist forces seized control of Laos and Cambodia, establishing totalitarian control as the United States and the rest of the world community watched passively from the sidelines.

By some estimates, more people died in Indochina in the following three years than had been killed in combat throughout Indochina in the previous fourteen. In tiny Cambodia alone, the Yale University Cambodia Genocide Program estimated that more than 20 percent of the population died under Pol Pot and his *Khmer Rouge* (“Red Cambodians”)—a total of nearly two million human beings. For decades thereafter, the respected human rights organization Freedom House ranked the unified Socialist Republic of Vietnam among the “worst of the worst,” rating it below Communist China and giving it the same score on political and civil liberties as North Korea.

On the eve of the 50th anniversary of the decision by an almost unanimous Congress—supported overwhelmingly by the American people (LBJ’s approval shot up 30 percent in the Gallup poll in August 1964)—to help defend the non-Communist peoples of Indochina, a group of Vietnam veterans has called for a major public debate on the wisdom of that decision. Believing—as do an overwhelming majority of Vietnam veterans—that their cause was noble, necessary, lawful, and just, the **Vietnam Veterans for Factual History** has issued invitations to more than two-dozen of the most prominent leaders of the anti-Vietnam protest movement during the war to revisit the arguments that ultimately persuaded the Congress to throw in the towel and abandon millions of people America had repeatedly pledged to protect and consign them to Communist tyranny and oppression.

In the modern era, whenever there is talk of using force we are bombarded with “Remember the lessons of Vietnam,” and “No more Vietnams!” The implication is that in Vietnam we fought an unnecessary, unlawful, and unwinnable war without the support of Congress or the American people and without serious consideration of the likely consequences. By this narrative, the government “lied” when it claimed the war was a result of “Aggression from the North” (the title of a 1965 State Department white paper), and it really was just a “civil war” involving a struggle for peace and civil liberties by the independent “National Liberation Front” (Viet Cong) in South Vietnam.

The protesters confidently assured us that Ho Chi Minh was a nationalist (“Vietnam’s George Washington”) rather than a Marxist-Leninist, that the United States first became involved following World War II by seeking to restore French colonial rule in Indochina, and that we violated the 1954 Geneva Accords by blocking free elections in 1956—elections in which even President Eisenhower acknowledge Ho Chi Minh would have won by at least 80% of the votes. Had we not become involved, they asserted, Ho would at worst have become like Tito—a buffer to Chinese expansionism. Instead, we imported a corrupt American puppet named Ngo Dinh Diem and propped him up to deny the Vietnamese people self-determination. To some, America was on the wrong side of the war.

To make matters worse, it was alleged, American soldiers routinely behaved (in the 1971 words of John Kerry) “in [a] fashion reminiscent of Genghis Khan . . .” Rape, murder, and other war crimes were claimed to be commonplace, not to mention the intentional carpet-bombing of civilians in Cambodia and North Vietnamese cities. Rather than being welcomed

home as warriors who had served America honorably, returning Vietnam veterans were sometimes urged not to wear their uniforms off base and were blamed by many for the unpopular war.

The occasion of the 50th anniversary of the AUMF (aka Gulf of Tonkin Resolution) provides a useful occasion to revisit the debates of the 1960. Although unknown to most Americans, after the war ended, Hanoi repeatedly admitted that it had made a decision in May 1959 to open the Ho Chi Minh Trail and start sending troops, arms, and supplies covertly into South Vietnam to overthrow that country's government. This was more than five years before Congress authorized the use of American combat units to protect South Vietnam. Many other key arguments used by critics to engender opposition to the war were undermined by other Vietnamese Communist admissions, and others were refuted by once-classified documents made public by the Pentagon Papers and elsewhere. Indeed, few of the central arguments of prominent war opponents remain even slightly credible today.

Today, polls show the American people have acknowledged that Vietnam veterans were treated unfairly. Even John Kerry sheepishly acknowledged on Meet the Press in 2001 that his charges of "genocide" and the like "were the words of an angry young man," acknowledging: "I think our soldiers served as nobly, on the whole, as in any war, and people need to understand that." Former Stanford Law School Dean John Hart Ely, who had been a strong opponent of the war at the time, later researched the facts and concluded, "years of denial and doubletalk notwithstanding," Congress had in reality authorized each phase of the war. What about the charge that the war was "unwinnable"? Writing in *Foreign Affairs* in January 2005, Yale University History Professor John Lewis Gaddis—called the "dean of Cold War historians" by the *New York Times*—observed: "Historians now acknowledge that American counterinsurgency operations in Vietnam were succeeding during the final years of that conflict . . ." That was the perception of Vietnam veterans who were there at the time.

Finally, there is the important issue of whether the war was "necessary." One of the central issues in the Sino-Soviet split was whether Communists around the world should engage in "armed struggle" to advance their cause. President Eisenhower's "New Look" doctrine eschewed responding to Communist aggression with U.S. ground forces (as we had done in Korea) and relied instead on deterrence through our nuclear triad. The message was clear—America would respond to future Communist aggression at a time and place of our own choosing through "massive retaliation." This deterred Nikita Khrushchev, who urged caution to avoid the risk of a nuclear attack on the Soviet Union. In contrast, Mao Zedong rejected Khrushchev's caution and declared that armed struggle around the world should continue. Large-scale invasions as in Korea might be risky, but the "imperialists"—despite their powerful nuclear weapons—were in reality "paper tigers" because nuclear weapons could not be used against guerrillas who live and fight among the people. Thus, by training and supplying guerrillas throughout the Third World to launch "people's wars" (also known as "wars of national liberation"), the Communists could "liberate" one country after another and the American "imperialists" would be helpless to stop them. (Ike had also dramatically reduced American conventional forces.)

The war in Vietnam (more correctly, Indochina, as the (attached) August 1964 AUMF authorized the defense of Cambodia and Laos as well as South Vietnam if they sought help) became a "test case" of whether America could defeat "people's war." For example, Lin Biao—

the Vice Chairman of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party—wrote in *Long Live the Victory of People's War* (1964):

The United States has made South Vietnam a testing ground for the suppression of people's war. . . . And everybody can now see that the U.S. aggressors are unable to find a way of coping with people's war [a Communist victory in Vietnam] will lead to a chain reaction The people in other parts of the world will see . . . that U.S. imperialism can be defeated, and that what the Vietnamese people can do, they can do too.

Similarly, Cuba's Ché Guevara declared: "The Vietnam battlefield is most important for the future of all America . . . Vietnam is the great laboratory of Yankee imperialism [T]he victorious end of this battle will also spell the end of North American imperialism." Had America failed to assist the people of South Vietnam defend themselves from armed aggression, we would likely have soon found ourselves facing a dozen or more "wars of national liberation" throughout the Third World. By coming to their aid, we bought time for Indonesia and Thailand to become stronger, and in the process China—which in 1964 was actively supporting guerrillas throughout Southeast Asia and as far away as Mozambique—turned inward during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. When Congress finally snatched defeat from the jaws of victory in Indochina, China was no longer exporting revolution. Our display of a lack of will to keep our commitments did lead Moscow to invade Afghanistan, transport tens of thousands of Cuban troops to Angola to try to foment revolution there, and to authorize pro-Moscow Marxist-Leninist groups in Latin America to engage in "armed struggle" (resulting in hundreds of thousands of additional deaths), but the outcome would have been far worse had America not resisted Communist aggression in the mid-1960s.

This debate is *important*, and not just because truth is important. Nearly three million Americans served with honor in Vietnam, and they deserve recognition for their sacrifice. But, far more importantly, if America is to avoid repeating the mistakes of Vietnam, the American people need to understand what really happened. This debate will contribute to that end.

For additional information on VVFH and this program, see: www.vvfh.org

Southeast Asia Resolution

[aka Gulf of Tonkin Resolution]

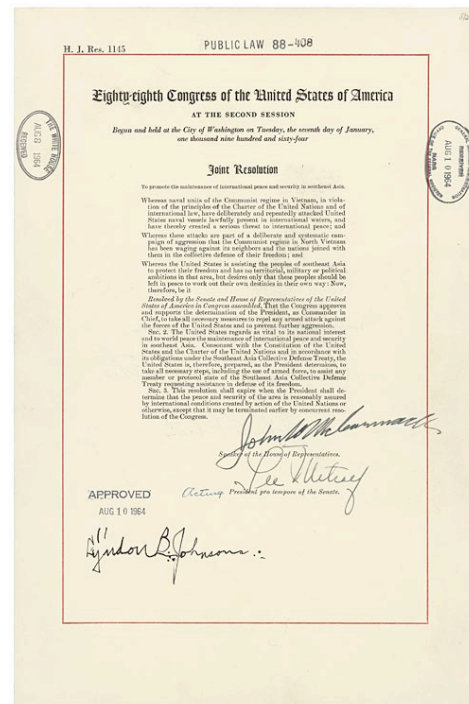
Joint Resolution of Congress H.J. RES 1145 August 7, 1964

Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

That the Congress approves and supports the determination of the President, as Commander in Chief, to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.

Section 2. The United States regards as vital to its national interest and to world peace the maintenance of international peace and security in southeast Asia. Consonant with the Constitution of the United States and the Charter of the United Nations and in accordance with its obligations under the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty, the United States is, therefore, prepared, as the President determines, to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force, to assist any member or protocol state of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty requesting assistance in defense of its freedom.

Section 3. This resolution shall expire when the President shall determine that the peace and security of the area is reasonably assured by international conditions created by action of the United Nations or otherwise, except that it may be terminated earlier by concurrent resolution of the Congress.



SOURCE: http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/tonkin-g.asp

SEATO Treaty (1955) (Excerpts)

Done at Manila, September 8, 1954. Ratification advised by the Senate Feb. 1, 1955;
ratified by the President Feb. 4, 1955; entered into force Feb. 19, 1955

ARTICLE IV

1. Each Party recognizes that aggression by means of armed attack in the treaty area against any of the Parties **or against any State or territory which the Parties by unanimous agreement may hereafter designate**, would endanger its own peace and safety, and agrees that it will in that event act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional processes. Measures taken under this paragraph shall be immediately reported to the Security Council of the United Nations.

Protocol to the SEATO Treaty

Designation of States and Territory as to Which Provisions of Article IV . . . are to be Applicable.

The Parties to the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty unanimously designate for the purposes of Article IV of the Treaty the States of **Cambodia** and **Laos** and the free territory under the jurisdiction of the State of **Vietnam**.

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This Protocol shall enter into force simultaneously with the coming into force of the Treaty.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, the undersigned Plenipotentiaries have signed this Protocol to the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty.

Done at Manila, this eighth day of September, 1954.

SOURCES: TIAS 3170; 6 UST 81-86. Full text available at:
http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/usmu003.asp; U.S. Department of State, *American Foreign Policy*, 1950-1955, pp. 912-913.