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Sleeping With the Enemy

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It is difficult to explain to my children that in my teens and early twenties the most frequently heard voices of my peers were trying to destroy the foundations of American society, so that it might be rebuilt according to their own narcissistic notions. In retrospect it's hard even for some of us who went through those times to understand how highly educated people—most of them spawned from the comforts of the upper-middle class—could have seriously advanced the destructive ideas that were in the air during the late '60s and early '70s. Even Congress was influenced by the virus.

After President Nixon resigned in August of 1974, that fall's congressional elections brought 76 new Democrats to the House, and eight to the Senate. A preponderance of these freshmen had run on McGovernesque platforms. Many had been viewed as weak candidates before Nixon's resignation, and some were glaringly unqualified, such as then-26-year-old Tom Downey of New York, who had never really held a job in his life and was still living at home with his mother.

This so-called Watergate Congress rode into town with an overriding mission that had become the rallying point of the American Left: to end all American assistance in any form to the besieged government of South Vietnam. Make no mistake—this was not the cry of a few years earlier to stop young Americans from dying. It had been two years since the last American soldiers left Vietnam, and fully four years since the last serious American casualty calls there.

For reasons that escape historical justification, even after America's military withdrawal the Left continued to try to bring down the incipient South Vietnamese democracy. Future White House aide Harold Ickes and others at "Project Pursestrings"—assisted at one point by an ambitious young Bill Clinton—worked to cut off all congressional funding intended to help the South Vietnamese defend themselves. The Indochina Peace Coalition, run by David Dellinger and headlined by Jane Fonda and Tom Hayden, coordinated closely with Hanoi throughout 1973 and 1974, and barnstormed across America's campuses, rallying students to the supposed evils of the South Vietnamese government. Congressional allies repeatedly added amendments to spending bills to end U.S. support of Vietnamese anti-Communists, precluding even air strikes to help South Vietnamese soldiers under attack by North Vietnamese units that were assisted by Soviet-bloc forces.

Then in early 1975 the Watergate Congress dealt non-Communist Indochina the final blow. The new Congress icily resisted President Gerald Ford's January request for additional military aid to South Vietnam and Cambodia. This appropriation would have provided the beleaguered Cambodian and South Vietnamese militaries with ammunition, spare parts, and tactical weapons needed to continue their own defense. Despite the fact that the 1973 Paris Peace Accords called specifically for "unlimited military replacement aid" for South Vietnam, by March the House Democratic Caucus voted overwhelmingly, 189-49, against any additional military assistance to Vietnam or Cambodia.

The rhetoric of the antiwar Left during these debates was filled with condemnation of America's war-torn allies, and promises of a better life for them under the Communism that was sure to follow. Then-Congressman Christopher Dodd typified the hopeless naiveté of his peers when he intoned that "calling the Lon Nol regime an ally is to debase the word.... The greatest gift our country can give to the Cambodian people is peace, not guns. And the best way to accomplish that goal is by ending military aid now." Tom Downey, having become a foreign policy expert in the two months since being freed from his mother's apron strings, pooh-poohed the coming Cambodian holocaust that would kill more than one-third of the country's population, saying, "The administration has warned that if we leave there will be a bloodbath. But to warn of a new bloodbath is no justification for extending the current bloodbath."

On the battlefields of Vietnam the elimination of all U.S. logistical support was stunning and unanticipated news. South Vietnamese commanders had been assured of material support as the American military withdrew—the same sort of aid the U.S. routinely provided allies from South Korea to West Germany—and of renewed U.S. air strikes if the North attacked the South in violation of the 1973 Paris Peace Accords. Now they were staring at a terrifyingly uncertain future, even as the Soviets continued to assist the Communist North.

As the shocked and demoralized South Vietnamese military sought to readjust its forces to cope with serious shortages, the newly refurbished North Vietnamese immediately launched a major offensive. Catching many units out of position, the North rolled down the countryside over a 55-day period. In the ensuing years I have interviewed South Vietnamese survivors of these battles, many of whom spent ten years and more in Communist concentration camps after the war. The litany is continuous: "I had no ammunition." "I was down to three artillery rounds per tube per day." "I had nothing to give my soldiers." "I had to turn off my radio because I could no longer bear to hear their calls for help."

The reaction in the United States to this debacle defines two distinct camps that continue to be identifiable in many of the issues we face today. For most of those who fought in Vietnam, and for their families, friends, and political compatriots, this was a dark and deeply depressing month. The faces we saw running in terror from the North Vietnamese assault were real and familiar, not simply video images. The bodies that fell like spinning snowflakes toward cruel deaths after having clung hopelessly to the outer parts of departing helicopters and aircraft may have been people we knew or tried to help. Even for those who had lost their faith in America's ability to defeat the Communists, this was not the way it was supposed to end.

For those who had evaded the war and come of age believing our country was somehow evil, even as they romanticized the intentions of the Communists, these few weeks brought denials of their own responsibility in the debacle, armchair criticisms of the South Vietnamese military, or open celebrations. At the Georgetown University Law Center where I was a student, the North's blatant discarding of the promises of peace and elections contained in the 1973 Paris Accords, followed by the rumbling of North Vietnamese tanks through the streets of Saigon, was treated by many as a cause for actual rejoicing.

Denial is rampant in 1997, but the truth is this end result was the very goal of the antiwar movement's continuing efforts in the years after American withdrawal. George McGovern, more forthcoming than most, bluntly stated as much to this writer during a break in taping a 1995 edition of CNN's "Crossfire." After I had argued that the war was clearly winnable even toward the end if we had changed our strategy, the 1972 presidential candidate who had offered to go to Hanoi on his knees commented, "What you don't understand is that I didn't want us to win that war." Mr. McGovern was not

alone. He was part of a small but extremely influential minority who eventually had their way.

There is perhaps no greater testimony to the celebratory atmosphere that surrounded the Communist victory in Vietnam than the 1975 Academy Awards, which took place on April 8, just three weeks before the South's final surrender. The award for Best Feature Documentary went to the film *Hearts and Minds*, a vicious piece of propaganda that assailed American cultural values as well as our effort to assist South Vietnam's struggle for democracy. The producers, Peter Davis and Bert Schneider [who plays a role in David Horowitz's story—see page 31], jointly accepted the Oscar. Schneider was frank in his support of the Communists. As he stepped to the mike he commented that "It is ironic that we are here at a time just before Vietnam is about to be liberated." Then came one of the most stunning—if intentionally forgotten—moments in Hollywood history. As a struggling country many Americans had paid blood and tears to try to preserve was disappearing beneath a tank onslaught, Schneider pulled out a telegram from our enemy, the Vietnamese Communist delegation in Paris, and read aloud its congratulations to his film. Without hesitating, Hollywood's most powerful people rewarded Schneider's reading of the telegram with a standing ovation.

Those of us who either fought in Vietnam or supported our efforts there look at this 1975 "movie moment" with unforgetting and unmitigated amazement. Who were these people who so energetically poisoned the rest of the world's view of us? How had they turned so virulently against their own countrymen? How could they stand and applaud the victory of a Communist enemy who had taken 58,000 American lives and crushed a struggling, pro-democratic ally? Could they and the rest of us be said to be living in the same country anymore?

Not a peep was heard then, or since, from Hollywood regarding the people who disappeared behind Vietnam's bamboo curtain. No one has ever mentioned the concentration camps into which a million South Vietnamese soldiers were sent; 56,000 to die, 250,000 to stay for more than six years, and some for as long as 18. No one criticized the forced relocations, the corruption, or the continuing police state. More to the point, with the exception of the well-intentioned but artistically weak *Hamburger Hill*, one searches in vain for a single major film since that time that has portrayed American soldiers in Vietnam with dignity and in a true context.

Why? Because the film community, as with other elites, never liked, respected, or even understood those who answered the call and served. And at a time when a quiet but relentless battle is taking place over how history will remember our country's involvement in Vietnam, those who ridiculed government policy, avoided military service, and actively supported an enemy who turned out to be vicious and corrupt do not want to be remembered as having been so naive and so wrong.

Among everyday Americans, attitudes during this troubled time were much healthier. Behind the media filtering and distortion on Vietnam, the fact is that our citizenry agreed far more consistently with those of us who fought than with those who undermined our fight. This was especially true, interestingly, among the young Americans now portrayed as having rebelled against the war.

As reported in *Public Opinion*, Gallup surveys from 1966 to the end of U.S. involvement show that younger Americans actually supported the Vietnam war longer than any other age group. Even by January of 1973, when 68 percent of Americans over the age of 50 believed it had been a mistake to send troops to Vietnam, only 49 percent of those between 25 and 29 agreed. These findings that the youth cohort as a whole was distinctly unradical were buttressed by 1972 election results—where 18- to 29-year-olds preferred Richard Nixon to George McGovern by 59 to 40 percent.

29-year-olds preferred Richard Nixon to George McGovern by 52 to 46 percent.

Similarly, despite persistent allegations to the contrary by former protesters who now dominate media and academia, the 1970 invasion of Cambodia—which caused widespread campus demonstrations, including a riot that led to four deaths at Kent State University—was strongly supported by the public. According to Harris surveys, nearly 6 in 10 Americans believed the Cambodian invasion was justified. A majority in that same May 1970 survey supported an immediate resumption of bombings in North Vietnam, a complete repudiation of the antiwar movement.

Vietnam veterans, though persistently maligned in film, news reports, and classrooms as unwilling, unsuccessful soldiers, have been well thought of by average Americans. In the most comprehensive study ever done on Vietnam vets (Harris Survey, 1980, commissioned by the Veterans Administration), 73 percent of the general public and 89 percent of Vietnam veterans agreed with the statement that "The trouble in Vietnam was that our troops were asked to fight in a war which our political leaders in Washington would not let them win." Seventy percent of those who fought in Vietnam disagreed with the statement "It is shameful what my country did to the Vietnamese people." Fully 91 percent of those who served in Vietnam combat stated that they were glad they had served their country, and 74 percent said they had enjoyed their time in the military. Moreover, 71 percent of those who expressed an opinion indicated that they would go to Vietnam again, even knowing the end result and the ridicule that would be heaped on them when they returned.

This same survey contained what was called a "feelings thermometer," measuring the public's attitudes toward various groups on a scale of 1 to 10. Veterans who served in Vietnam rated a 9.8 on this scale. Doctors scored a 7.9, TV reporters a 6.1, politicians a 5.2, antiwar demonstrators a 5.0, and draft evaders who went to Canada came in at 3.3.

Contrary to persistent mythology, two-thirds of those who served during Vietnam were volunteers rather than draftees, and 77 percent of those who died were volunteers. Of those who died, 86 percent were Caucasian, 12.5 percent were African-American, and 1.2 percent were from other races. The common claim that it was minorities and the poor who were left to do the dirty work of military service in Vietnam is false. The main imbalance in the war was simply that the privileged avoided their obligations, and have persisted since that time in demeaning the experience in order to protect themselves from the judgment of history.

And what of these elites who misread not only a war but also their own countrymen? Where are they now, other than in the White House? On this vital historical issue that defined our generation, they now keep a low profile, and well they should.

What an eerie feeling it must have been for those who staked the journey of their youth on the idea that their own country was an evil force, to have watched their naiveté unravel in the years following 1975. How sobering it must have been for those who allowed themselves to move beyond their natural denial, to observe the spectacle of hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese fleeing the "pure flame of the revolution" on rickety boats that gave them a 50 percent chance of death at sea, or to see television pictures of thousands of Cambodian skulls lying in open fields, part of the millions killed by Communist "liberators." How hollow the memories of drug-drenched and sex-enshrined antiwar rallies must be; how false the music that beatified their supposedly noble dissent.

Indeed, let's be frank. How secretly humiliating to stare into the face of a disabled veteran, or to watch the valedictory speech of the latest Vietnamese-American kid whose late father fought alongside the Americans in a cause they openly mocked,

derided, and despised. And what a shame that the system of government that allowed that student to be so quickly successful here is not in place in the country of her origin.

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