

Notes for National Press Club
(Turner remarks—5 Aug 2014)

Good afternoon, and welcome.

We are gathered today on the eve of the **50th anniversary** of the **August 7, 1964**, vote by Congress to authorize the use of military force to protect any of the Protocol States to the 1955 SEATO Treaty.

Vietnam Veterans for Factual History—diverse group of mostly Vietnam veterans, including retired 4-star generals, Medal of Honor recipients, POWs, special operations personnel, and others. Our common bond is a belief that Americans have been misled about the realities of Vietnam, and too many of the “facts” they have been led to believe are in reality not true.

After the war, **polls** showed that Vietnam veterans supported the war by overwhelming margins—**more than twice the level** of Americans who did not serve in Vietnam.

Proud of our service, most combat veterans said they would go back even if they knew the outcome

We saw what was going on **first-hand** and didn’t have to learn about the war through the filter of **Dan Rather** or other journalists—who we later learned were often getting their insights from Communist agents masquerading as “journalists.”

Indeed, the **most respected** South Vietnamese “journalist” by the **American media** was a very clever man named **Pham Xuan An**. He worked for *Time* and *Reuters*, but was **relied upon** by **David Halberstam**, **Neil Sheehan**, and many other American journalists in Saigon.

It was not until after the war that it was revealed that he was in fact a **North Vietnamese Army Colonel** the entire time. He retired as a highly-decorated General, and passed away in 2006. If you are interested in reading his story, get the book ***Perfect Spy: The Incredible Double Life of Pham Xuan An***

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You have been **invited to hear a debate**, and I **regret** to report that **not one** of the more than **two-dozen prominent leaders** of the anti-Vietnam war movement was willing to join us and **try to defend the core arguments** that turned so many Americans against the war.

But **that may be a *bigger news story***. For, as we will discuss, given the information that has emerged since the end of the war it would be *very* difficult to **defend the narrative** that we heard from coast to coast, at “**teach-ins**,” **protest rallies**, and other events, for nearly a decade beginning in 1965.

My name is **Bob Turner**, and for the past **27 years** I have been a **professor** at the **University of Virginia**, where among other things I have taught both undergraduate and graduate seminars on the Vietnam War.

This week marks **50 years** since I **published my first commentary** on Vietnam as a **Letter to the Editor** of the **Paris edition** of the *New York Times*. When I returned to America to continue my undergraduate education later that month, I quickly became engaged in **defending** the war—traveling around the country **debating SDS leaders** and even some **professors**. I wrote a **450-page honors thesis** on the war in 1966-67.

When I graduated from college I was **commissioned** as an Army officer through **ROTC**, and on my **first day** of active duty I **volunteered** for duty in **Vietnam**. Although I had served as a **recon platoon leader** and qualified as an **Expert Infantryman**, when **Ho Chi Minh died** I wrote an op-ed correctly predicting that **Le Duan** would emerge “**first among equals**” in the Politburo. (I was told that **CIA** and **DIA** had predicted **Truong Chinh** would come out on top, and my article explained why that would not happen.)

At that point the government decided that my knowledge of the enemy was more valuable than my skills as a warrior, and I was detailed to the “**North Vietnam/Viet Cong Affairs Division**” of a branch of the American Embassy—with the newly-created title “**Assistant Special Projects Officer**.”

Between **1968** and **1975**, I was in Vietnam **five times** and traveled through **42 of 44 provinces**.

After my **second Vietnam tour** ended at the end of 1971, I accepted a position at **Stanford's Hoover Institution**—where I was their in-house expert on the war and I wrote the **first major English-language history of *Vietnamese Communism***. [\[\[SHOW BOOK\]\]](#)

I then came to Washington, DC, as a Hoover **Public Affairs Fellow**, which led to five years as **national security adviser** to a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. I **returned to Vietnam** at every opportunity, finally leaving at the end of **April 1975** during the **Final Evacuation**—when I was back in Vietnam seeking to assist with the **rescue of orphans** and trying to rescue **orphans** in **Phnom Penh**, Cambodia. I continued to debate anti-Vietnam leaders at every opportunity—but, **even then, there were not many who seemed interested in debating anyone who had much knowledge about the facts.**

My role this afternoon is to provide some **background** on **how** and **why** we went to war in Vietnam, and why doing so was both a very **rational** decision and **fully consistent** with **International Law**. (I hold both **professional** and **academic doctorates** from the **University of Virginia School of Law**, where in **1981** I co-founded the **Center for National Security Law**. I am also a former **Charles H. Stockton Professor of International Law** at the **Naval War College**, and **chaired** the **ABA Standing Committee on Law and National Security** for **three terms**—so I have some knowledge about these legal issues.)

WHY DID WE GO TO WAR IN VIETNAM?

There was great **hope** at the **end of WW II** that the world community might come together through the **United Nations** and cooperate to **eliminate threats to the peace**. But the **Soviet Union** quickly began supporting **guerrilla movements** in southern Europe and elsewhere.

October 1949 **Mao** consolidates Communist control in Mainland China, and immediately starts providing **vast amounts of arms** and equipment to Ho Chi Minh's **Viet Minh**.

One of the many “**myths**” about Vietnam is that America first became involved to **reimpose French colonial rule**.

Pentagon Papers [[SHOW]] – prohibited **US flag ships** to carry troops or supplies to Indochina, **pressured Paris** to make concessions to genuine nationalists in Vietnam.

Top French general in Saigon said the Americans were a bigger problem than the Viet Minh.

Myth of “Uncle Ho” – *Pentagon Papers* (and **official biographies** published by Hanoi) note that **Ho did not set foot in Vietnam** from **1911** until **1941**. In **Dec. 1920** he co-founded the **French Communist Party**, and soon thereafter traveled to **Moscow** for training. He then traveled around the world on a Soviet passport as a paid agent of the **Communist International**.

After WW II, he signed an agreement in Paris on **March 6, 1946**, “**inviting**” the French back to Vietnam—and **French and Viet Minh** military units conducted **joint operations** to attack **genuine “nationalist” groups**, calling them “**enemies of the peace**” since they had **opposed** the return of the **French**. (If this surprises you, take a look at vol. 1 of the *Pentagon Papers*.)

And yet, war opponents (most totally **clueless** about this background) **praised Ho** as Vietnam’s “**George Washington**.”

June 1950, invasion of **South Korea**—major international aggression. UNSC Responded.

NSC-68 (Truman) “**Containment Doctrine**”

Ike’s “New Look” doctrine—U.S. would respond to future Communist aggression “**at a time and place of our choosing**” through “**massive retaliation**.”

It worked with **Nikita Khrushchev**, who became **Soviet Premier** following the **1953 death of Josef Stalin**. **Khrushchev feared** that Eisenhower might use **nuclear weapons** against Moscow or other Soviet targets, so he **instructed Communist parties** around the world to **refrain from “armed struggle.”**

This is not the time to analyze the Sino-Soviet Split in detail. But it involved a **struggle for leadership** of the **International Communist Movement**, and a **central issue** was whether **Khrushchev's "Peaceful Coexistence"** was the **best policy**.

Khrushchev warned of the **dangers of nuclear war**. **Mao** acknowledged that **in appearance** the "**imperialists**" looked very **fierce**, but in **reality** they were but "**paper tigers**."

Mao recognized that **large-scale, overt aggression** as occurred in **Korea** in 1950 might be **risky**, but the **solution** was **low-intensity aggression** through "**people's wars**" (or what others called "**wars of national liberation**.")

By infiltrating **advisers with money and weapons**, the Communists could **promote** the **overthrow** of **governments** throughout the **Third World**. And since **guerrillas live, eat, and fight among the people**, unless the "**imperialists**" were willing to **murder 100 innocent civilians to kill 10 guerrillas**, **nuclear weapons** would be **useless** against "**people's war**."

In this dispute, the conflict in **Vietnam** became the **global "test case"**.

Why do I say that? Because it was true – and it was identified as a "test case" by **Communists** around the world.

[[PUT UP LIN BIAO POSTERS (2) and READ.

Consider also this comment from **Cuba's Ché Guevara** [**PUT UP POSTER**]

With the **active support** of **China** and the **Soviet Union**, **North Vietnam** was actively engaged in **trying to overthrow** the government of **South Vietnam** **covertly**.

One of the **key elements** of the anti-Vietnam narrative was that the **State Department** had "**lied**" when it released a "**white paper**" asserting the conflict in Vietnam was "**Aggression from the North**."

We were told instead that the, quote, “**civil war**” in South Vietnam was **independent of Hanoi** and the “**National Liberation Front**” (“**Viet Cong**”) began in **Ben Tre** (Kien Hoa) in the Mekong Delta, without any North Vietnamese involvement.

None of the activists who preached this line in the 1960s is willing to debate us on this point. I wonder why?

[[SHOW POSTER ON *VIETNAM COURIER* AND READ FROM *VICTORY IN VIETNAM* BOOK.]]

[SHOW and READ poster on 3d Party Congress and creating national united front]

[SHOW POSTER OF DRV AND NLF FLAGS (NOTE DRV ALL RED, NFL HALF RED WITH BLUE ON BOTTOM)]

Then there was the **argument** that Ho and his colleagues were very **moderate, like Tito**, and would be a useful **buffer** to **Chinese Communist expansion** into Southeast Asia.

[SHOW POSTERS on Mao and Stalin and REVISIONISM]

We can **discuss** this issue more **during Q&A** if you like.

Another issue I’d love to address **during Q&A** is the charge that the United States violated the **1954 Geneva Accords**, and **blocked the “free elections”** planned for **1956** because even **Pres. Eisenhower admitted Ho Chi Minh would have won by 80% of the vote.**

I took part in more than 100 debates, teach-ins, panels, and other programs on Vietnam between 1965 and entering the Army, and I heard this argument at almost every one of them. It is NOT true.

At **Geneva** we and the **South Vietnamese objected** to **partition** and called for **UN supervised elections**. So **neither the U.S. nor South Vietnam signed or agreed to anything** at Geneva, and both countries issued **statements** again calling for **UN supervised elections**.

Now let's briefly look at my second point:

HOW DID WE GO TO WAR IN INDOCHINA

Immediately **following** the **Geneva** Conference and with the **Korean War in mind**, the United States decided to try to **deter future aggression** by entering into mutual security treaties with countries it thought might be **victims** of future **Communist aggression**.

In **September** of **1954**, the United States, France, Great Britain, New Zealand, Australia, the Philippines, Thailand and Pakistan met in Manila and agreed to the SEATO Treaty.

[**SHOW** and **READ** SEATO Art 4]

The "**Protocol States**" that were designated at the time were "**Cambodia, Laos, and South Vietnam**."

The **Senate consented** to the ratification of the SEATO Treaty in February 1955 by a vote of **82-1**.

I have **already noted** that **Hanoi** has now **admitted** that it made a **decision** on **May 19, 1959**, (**Ho Chi Minh's 69th birthday**) to **open** the **Ho Chi Minh Trail** and start **sending troops, weapons, and supplies** into South Vietnam to **overthrow its government** by force.

That was **more than five years before** the U.S. **Congress** decided to **authorize the President** to go to **war** in defense of South Vietnam—pursuant to the **SEATO Treaty**.

There is a **misperception** that **U.S. concern** about protecting South Vietnam **began on August 2, 1964**, when North Vietnamese **torpedo boats** attacked an American naval ship (***U.S.S. Maddox***) in **international waters** off the coast of North Vietnam.

Some have even claimed that LBJ either sent the *Maddox* off the North Vietnamese coast to try **to provoke an attack**, or that he *made up* the entire incident and “lied” to Congress and the American people. Neither are true, and we can discuss that during **Q&A** if you like. (And, in case you missed it, **General Vo Nguyen Giap**—Hanoi’s Defense Minister during the war—**admitted** that the August 2 attack did occur.)

Indeed, the **Authorization for the Use of Military Force** in Indochina had **already** been **drafted** by the Department of State because the situation in Vietnam was getting worse. And **if there had been no attack** in early August of 1964, the terrorist bombing of the **Brinks BOQ on Christmas Eve** of that year would have provided sufficient cause for action.

[[**READ TONKIN RES poster**]]

During the **floor debate** on this Resolution, Senator J. William Fulbright (SFRC Chairman) was asked whether in enacting the statute Congress would be **giving the President authority to take such steps as could lead into “war.”** He replied: **“That is the way I would interpret it.”**

The joint resolution passed the **House** of Representatives **unanimously**, and passed the **Senate** by a vote of **88-2**. The combined congressional vote was **504-2**, or a margin of **99.6%** in favor. (You can **round that number up** if you like.)

WAS THE WAR LEGAL?

I agreed to make the case that the war was **lawful**, but now that Hanoi has admitted that it was engaged in a covert armed attack to overthrow the government of South Vietnam **I can’t imagine that any serious person would still contend** that it was unlawful for us to go to the aid of South Vietnam. If you have doubts, take a look at **Article 51** of the UN Charter.

In **April 1990**, our Center tried to recreate the **great legal debate** of the 1960s but in light of the most recent information. We invited the **six most prominent international lawyers** who had opposed the war, and the **six top constitutional lawyers** as well. **NONE** of them was willing to debate.

We finally found two people who were willing to debate, and the **transcript** can be found in our book *The “Real” Lessons of the Vietnam War* in case you are interested. If you read it, I suspect you will understand why few of the more prominent “experts” who opposed the war are willing to try to make that case today.

[[SHOW *The Real Lessons of the Vietnam War* book.]]

But I’ll be delighted to discuss the issue during **Q&A** if you like.

CONGRESSIONAL SUPPORT AND PUBLIC OPINION

Let me close this part of my presentation with an important observation.

American went to war in Indochina with the **overwhelming support** of both **Congress** and the **American people**.

I’ve already **noted** that **Congress authorized** the war by a **99.6%** majority.

To be sure, they **did not give LBJ** the **money** he had requested to fight the war. They more than **tripled it!**

And while it can be argued that few anticipated the vote would lead to a major war, **support for the war stayed strong** for several years even after the war had escalated:

- **1966: \$13 billion** supplemental appropriation passed **389-3** in House and **87-2** in Senate
- **1967: \$12 billion** supplemental passed **385-11** in House and **77-3** in Senate
 - (House rejected amendment to prohibit funds for combat over North Vietnam 77-3)

Public Opinion was also very strong in support of the decision:

LBJ’s public approval rating in the **Gallup Polls** jumped **58%** between July and August 1964—a jump of **30 full points!** [42-72%]

But that changed over the years, as **so-called “peace activists”** insisted that there was no North Vietnamese “aggression” and we were really trying to prevent the **free election** of a very popular “nationalist” leader, who even Ike said was the people’s choice.

Relying on Vietnamese sources (because they didn’t want to leave the safety of their hotels), the **American media** presented the **1968 Tet Offensive** as a **great Communist victory**—and as **proof** that either our government was “**lying**” to us, or it was so far **out of touch with reality** as to be unworthy of our trust.

We now know, of course, that—like the **1970 Cambodian** incursion—the **Tet Offensive was a tremendous victory** for South Vietnam and its American allies. **For every American or South Vietnamese killed by the Communists, more than 10 of their own** forces were killed.

The **Viet Cong infrastructure** was also **compromised**, and by the end of 1968 the so-called “Viet Cong” had to be replaced by **North Vietnamese regulars** to continue the fight.

By **1972**, there was a **broad agreement** among many experts that the **war was being won** in South Vietnam.

William Colby, who had been **CIA Station Chief** in Saigon in the late 1950s and had been a top civilian official in country for years, wrote in his book *Lost Victory* that the turning point was the Easter Offensive of 1972, when South Vietnam held off a major attack by the best soldiers North Vietnam had—and pushed them back without the help of American ground forces:

“A free Vietnam had proven that it had the will and the capability to defend itself with the assistance, but not the participation, of its American ally against the enemy to the north assisted by Soviet and Chinese allies. **On the ground in South Vietnam, the war had been won.**”

Journalist Robert Elegant wrote in 1981:

“Looking back coolly, I believe it can be said (surprising as it may still sound) that **South Vietnamese and American forces actually won the limited military struggle.**”

I could read your quotes from other experts, like my old friend the late **Douglas Pike**, and **Prof. Lewis Sorley** (a member of our group), but let me just read this statement from a *Foreign Affairs* article by Yale University History Professor **John Lewis Gaddis**—who the *New York Times* has called “**the Dean of American Cold War historians**”:

“Historians now acknowledge that American counter-insurgency operations in Vietnam were succeeding during the final years of that conflict; the problem was that support for the war had long since crumbled at home.”

There were **several factors** in the crumbling of that support. Secretary of Defense Robert **McNamara** violated fundamental tenets of the civil-military relationship by **cutting the Joint Chiefs of Staff out of the loop** and pursuing a “**no win**” strategy that actually encouraged Hanoi to continue fighting. **LBJ** selected **bombing targets** during weekly **Tuesday lunches** from which **senior military leaders** were usually **excluded**.

But the **most serious damage** came from the so-called “**anti-war**” **movement**. (I say “so-called” because all Americans are against war, save as a last resort to protect freedom.)

And thus, it is in my view of **tremendous interest**, that **not a single one of the more than two-dozen prominent anti-Vietnam leaders** from the 1960s **was willing to join us** and **attempt to defend** the arguments they used **to turn Congress** and the American people **against the war**.

Indeed, **let me share with you** a portion of an **e-mail** we received from a respected Vietnam scholar at **Clemson** University:

[[**SHOW** and Read **Ed Moise’s** email POSTER]]

The **American military** served with **honor** and **courage** in Vietnam, and we **did not lose the war**. Indeed, during the entire war we **did not lose a single major battle**.

Even **John Kerry**, who in **1971** defamed the men he had left behind by alleging that **60 to 80 percent** of us were “**stoned 24 hours a day**” and that American troops were **behaving in a fashion “reminiscent of Genghis Khan”** has **recanted** his **accusations**. **Three decades later**, Kerry sheepishly acknowledged on **Meet the Press** that his allegations of “**genocide**” and **frequent war crimes** were “**the words of an angry young man,**” and acknowledged that in Vietnam “**our soldiers served as nobly, in the whole, as in any war**”

If our soldiers, sailors, and Marines didn't lose the war, **what happened?**

Put simply, **Congress threw in the towel—snatching defeat from the jaws of victory**, when in **May 1973** it passed a law **prohibiting** the **expenditure** of treasury **funds** for any U.S. military involvement in hostilities to try to protect the people of Vietnam or Cambodia we had repeatedly pledged to defend.

[[SHOW AND READ FULBRIGHT AMENDMENT POSTER]]

Soon thereafter, North Vietnamese Premier **Pham Van Dong** is reported to have said: “**The Americans won't come back now even if we offer them candy.**”

In **1975**, with **increased military assistance** from **China** and the **Soviet Union**, Hanoi sent virtually its entire Army behind columns of **Soviet-made tanks** to overthrow its neighbors in **conventional aggression**. (Only the **325th Division** was retained to protect Hanoi.)

Prohibited by Congress from responding, America sat quietly on the sidelines as the conquest was completed.

Time permitting, at the **end of the program** I will talk a little about the **human and strategic consequences** of that decision.

But it is **important to understand** that—even though **tyranny ultimately prevailed**—by **delaying** the **Communist victory** for a decade we **bought time for good things to happen**.

In **1964 Thailand** and **Indonesia** were very vulnerable to Communist subversion. By **1975** both were **much stronger** and able to defend themselves.

More importantly, in **1964 Communist China** was actively **exporting “revolution”** throughout **Southeast Asia** and as far away as **Mozambique** in Africa. By **1975**, China had turned inward during the **Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution**. **Lin Biao** and **Ché Guevara** were **dead**, and **China** was **no longer exporting revolution**.

Had we walked away fifty years ago and **confirmed** that America had **no answer to “people’s wars,”** we would have **undermined** Khrushchev’s “**peaceful coexistence**” like and **confirmed** that **Mao was right**. That **might have united** the two Communist giants, and it **certainly** would have made the **aggressive strategy** advocated by **Mao more attractive** throughout the Third World.

Now I’m going to **turn the program over** to my distinguished colleagues on today’s program:

Prof. Nguyen Ngoc Bich—a distinguished Vietnamese scholar (and graduate of **Princeton** and **Columbia** University) who I had the honor of knowing in Saigon more than 40 years ago.

Col. Andrew Finlayson—a genuine **war hero** who spent nearly three years “in country” in some of the most dangerous assignments that existed.