

Missing Voices from the Vietnam War

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By Arnold R. Isaacs

The local Viet Cong guerrillas in their area preferred to get their recruits young, the villagers told me. Boys of 15 or even younger were easier to indoctrinate than those a few years older, more easily taught to believe in revolutionary ideology and to become willing fighters in the war for national liberation. So, the villagers said, when their sons were approaching that age, they sent them to live with relatives or friends in the district town or some other more secure area, to keep them away from the Viet Cong recruiters.

We were speaking in the dooryard of one of a few dozen houses strung along the side of a paved highway. By the standard of the time this was government-controlled land, at least in daytime. On a normal day, South Vietnamese military traffic and unarmed civilians moved freely on the road. But if you walked perhaps 100 meters away from the roadside out to the far edge of the field behind those houses, you were in enemy territory. Not that the VC were right there, which most of the time they weren't. But they could be there any time they wanted to, with no government presence to restrict their freedom of movement.

In effect, the Republic of Vietnam on that stretch of road was a slender ribbon through what was effectively Communist-controlled countryside -- a ribbon that was rolled up every evening at dark and not rolled back out until the sun rose again the next day. There were lots of places like that in South Vietnam, and lots of people living in those narrow strips of land where the two sides in the war kind of blurred into each other.

After they sent their sons to the district town to get them away from the Viet Cong, the villagers went on, they'd stay there for the next few years. But when they turned 18 they'd be drafted by the South Vietnamese government. So when the boys were reaching draft age their families would bring them back and send them out into the Communist zone to keep them out of the government army.

By then the Viet Cong didn't want them any more. After several years living and going to school on the government side, they'd be too brainwashed, politically too unreliable to be trustworthy soldiers for the revolution. So they wouldn't end up in the guerrilla army. It was still very dangerous out there, even if they were just living on the land, because those zones were frequently hit by shelling and air strikes. But the villagers believed their sons were still safer there than they would be in the government army.

Remembering that story, I think again, as I did at the time, that what I heard in that village was the true voice of the South Vietnamese peasants whom both sides claimed to be fighting for.

The people who spoke to me that day did not believe in either of those sides. They feared and hated them both, and with plenty of good reason. The war they were living in was not about saving democracy from communist dictatorship. Nor was it about liberating Vietnam from the American imperialists and their puppets. It was just a vast, violent force that kept them in constant fear and that they couldn't do anything about, going on year after year, destroying their fields, blowing up their homes, taking their sons away to be killed.

There were certainly Vietnamese who supported one side or the other. Some did so from genuine ideological conviction, others for completely non-political reasons rooted in personal or family history. Many were loyal to the Saigon government only because the Communists had killed their father or grandfather two or twenty years ago, or because their son or brother was fighting in the South Vietnamese army. There must have been many on the revolutionary side for exactly the same kind of reason.

But everything I saw and heard in my time in Vietnam, in that roadside village and elsewhere, leaves me certain that what those peasants told me echoed the experience of millions of people who were victims of both sides and were powerless to do anything except try to survive. Powerless and essentially voiceless, too. No institution or movement spoke for those villagers or others like them.

On very rare occasions, I or some other reporter might come and listen and perhaps write something about them, but those isolated, sporadic stories were lost in the flood of war coverage. In Vietnam, those in power on both sides ruthlessly repressed any views that did not support their cause. So those peasants' voices went almost entirely unheard.

They largely remained unheard in the decades after the war, too. Because their story was untold during the war, it is missing from the historical record. But it was also lost because it falls outside conventional notions of how war is remembered.

Americans, like most other people, are conditioned to think that the history of a war is the history of the two sides that fought it, and that understanding their actions and the reasons for conflict is the way to understand the war. Thus, to take a prominent recent example, when Ken Burns and Lynn Novick set out to show "both sides" of the Vietnamese experience (though subordinate to showing both sides of the American debate) in their much-publicized TV documentary, they turned to Vietnamese who were strongly engaged in one side's war or the other's.

All but a few of the Vietnamese who appear in the film were military veterans who served in the North or South Vietnamese army or the Liberation Front. Most of the others held official posts or were actively involved as civilians supporting their side's war effort. None lived through the war in a South Vietnamese village.

Yes, those were "voices from both sides." But there was no voice telling about the peasants' war, the one I heard about from those villagers who tried so

desperately to protect their sons and others like them in many other places. Those missing voices, not from one or the other side but from neither, might tell a more truthful story about the Vietnam war, if they were heard.

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