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Final Paper
12 December 2018

Lessons From War: Viet Nam, Self-Determinism, and the Reorganization of Global Power in an
Era of Neocolonialism

Reflection

On November 9th, 2018, I conducted an interview with Viet Nam veteran Mario Alejandro. The interview lasted an hour and a half, and covered Mario's experiences from November of 1966 when he was drafted into the U.S. army, to the fall of Sai Gon in 1975. This project taught me invaluable lessons on how to conduct an oral history—from the right way to formulate and design questions, to the techniques used to control the interview and guide the narrator through the conversation. Critically, I learned how to create my own primary source, a skill that will be essential to my studies as I continue to pursue history. This process was long and at times difficult, but also incredibly rewarding. Mario's impressions of the conflict and the people were captivating, and contributed immensely to my knowledge of the war. To me, the most fascinating part of the interview was Mario's recollection of what it was like to step off the plane in Viet Nam for the first time. His descriptions of those first moments—the looks he saw on the faces of the Vietnamese people and the overpowering sense that something was wrong and he did not belong there—were spellbinding. I felt like I was hearing about the war for the first time; everything he said gave me new insights into what the "Viet Nam War" was and what it meant. It was initially quite difficult to direct the interview so that it went in a direction that was useful for my research purposes. However, as the interview proceeded, I was able to get a better sense for how to guide Mario towards the right questions and keep him on topic. It was definitely hard to tell when I should push for answers or just let the conversation flow more

naturally and let Mario determine what he was comfortable sharing. Ultimately, I think that I found the right balance. However, there are points throughout the interview where I wish I had been more assertive about asking for answers, or that he had revealed a little more about specific experiences.

Analysis

Mario was drafted into the army at age nineteen, and assigned to a helicopter company which was stationed in a village called Dau Tieng, about forty-five miles Northwest of Sai Gon. His main role while in Viet Nam was that of a courier, meaning that Mario spent most of his time in helicopters delivering messages that he did not have the clearance to read. After nine months in Dau Tieng, he was transferred to Tan Son Nhut, an air base outside of Sai Gon where he finished the remainder of his service. Throughout the interview Mario told many incredible stories worthy of analysis and contextualization. However, what captivated me most were his first impressions of the country and people, and his commentary on why the U.S. became involved in Viet Nam in the first place. He was adamant that the U.S. had no right to intervene in Viet Nam, and despite the common claim that they were defending the region from Communism, he didn't feel as though that is what he and the military were doing at all. The texture and intensity that Mario lends to this conviction is an invaluable addition to the existing literature about the United State's motivation for entering the conflict in Viet Nam. By analyzing Mario's interview and other texts about the Viet Nam War together, we can see how Viet Nam served as an imperial arena in which the U.S. could assert their colonial power in a rapidly decolonizing world. By parading as democratic supporters of freedom while framing true anti-colonialism as Communism, the U.S. attempted to appear sympathetic to global independence movements while retaining influence in decolonizing regions. While this claim could be supported by published works, Mario's gut reaction upon his arrival in Dau Tieng, is among the best evidence of all.

Before deploying, Mario, “didn’t know what to expect,” and pictured the enemy as, “little guys in pajamas who ... hid out in the jungle.”¹ He flew to Dau Tieng with only this image in mind, and little knowledge of what to expect when he arrived. Recounting his first moments in Viet Nam, Mario says:

...when we got off the plane ... there were a group of I’d say maybe 50 to 100 local Vietnamese people wearing pajamas and conical hats and ... all of [them] stopped working and it was like dead silence. They stopped working, put down their bags, and were just looking at us as we sort of went by them with no expressions really. They weren’t waving flags and welcoming us, or any of that stuff. And I had the distinct sense and feeling that they would have rather we had not shown up. That’s the way it felt. So my first impression, at least as far as the people there, was that they didn’t want us to be there, and they were not at all supportive of what our mission was supposed to be ...²

Mario remembers this moment as informing the rest of his service, saying, “I think the way it set it up for me was that right from the outset I had the sense that this was the wrong place to be.”

As a draftee with little enthusiasm for the military, it is unsurprising that Mario was unsettled by the sudden uprooting of his life so that he could travel thousands of miles to fight for a cause that he had no commitment to or understanding of. And yet, the way that he describes the impact of his arrival on the local Vietnamese people, points towards a particularly troubling dynamic. For even in the South where the locals were supposedly supportive of the United States’ fight against Communism, a young American soldier with little knowledge of the conflict can vividly remember after more than fifty years, the hostility directed at him as he entered Viet Nam. As he explains again later in the interview, “when I got off the plane ... I can’t figure out quite why ... but something’s off. I just don’t know what it is ...”³

¹ Alejandro, 11:24.

² Ibid., 16:20.

³ Alejandro, 54:30.

An examination of the geopolitical context in the first half of the twentieth century helps explain why Mario felt so uneasy arriving in Dau Tieng in 1967. Since the 1919 Russian Revolution and creation of the Comintern, the U.S. and other western powers had begun “containment” efforts designed to prevent the spread of Communism. Yet, despite the United States’ clear denunciation of Communism, Ho Chi Minh still believed that the U.S. would support his efforts in Viet Nam because of its own history fighting for independence from a colonial power. In fact, when Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnamese independence in 1945, he used the American Declaration of Independence in his speech as support for the Vietnamese quest for independence. The use of the Declaration of Independence indicates that Ho Chi Minh’s assertion of Vietnamese sovereignty was only a call for self-determinism, and not a declaration of the supremacy of Communism over Democracy. And yet, the United States saw Viet Nam’s burgeoning sovereignty as a sign that it was time for the great global battle between “good” and “evil” to be waged in Southeast Asia. The U.S. used anti-Communism to excuse their distress at seeing Vietnamese nationalism take form.

In fact, the United States’ action in Viet Nam was likely precipitated by their discomfort with global decolonization, which was moving quite rapidly by the early 1950s. Not only had China joined the Communist block in 1949, but Burma, Philippines, and India had all gained their independence in the three years prior. The United States initially began supporting the French in Viet Nam because they were afraid that Southeast Asian natural resources would be obtained by the Soviet Union and the Communist Party. Therefore, these first movements in Viet Nam were not just in response to ideology, but indicative of an attempt to win possession of the decolonizing world and to continue to exert influence over the region even though it was becoming independent. When asked if he felt like he was fighting Communism, Mario reinforced this view of U.S. motive, saying, “No, I felt like I was fighting a people. I didn’t have

a sense I was fighting an ideology... Its... I couldn't tell if they were communist or not. There was nothing about them, about the people there, that made me think they were. They didn't... they weren't doing anything different.”⁴

A closer look at American global presence in the 1950s reveals an intentional effort to manage decolonization and minimize economic and political losses. In 1953, the U.S. orchestrated a coup in Iran, specifically intended to remove Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh from power and prevent him from nationalizing Iranian oil.⁵ As a result of the coup, the U.S. was able to retain a large percentage of oil, thus ensuring their lasting economic stronghold over the region. In fact, more significant than the particulars of the coup, is its symbolic importance as an example of American political repositioning in a post-colonial world. Particularly of consequence is that the coup was carried out by the newly formed Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The covert nature of this action indicates that the U.S. was trying to figure out how they could approach imperialism without triggering a response from new international organizations like the United Nations that were supposed to protect the right to self-determinism. While Iran is in an entirely different region than Viet Nam, the 1953 coup reflects the same political strategy which led the U.S. to use Communism as an excuse to intervene in Viet Nam. The shifting global perspective on colonialism required the U.S. to come up with a more “appropriate” reason to continue to influence Southeast Asia.

However, even as the U.S. attempted to maintain control over the region, they were watching it slip through their fingers. In 1955, twenty-nine African and Asian countries gathered in Bandung, Indonesia for a conference on decolonization.⁶ It was here that the Third World Project formed as a protest of imperialism, a declaration of non-alignment, and a socio-political

⁴ Alejandro, 29:00.

⁵ Wilber.

⁶ Wood, 523.

structure to guide newly independent nations.⁷ A year later in Paris, the world saw the first International Congress of Black Writers and Artists, who gathered to discuss independence, decolonization, and Civil Rights. A year after that, Ghana gained its independence.⁸ The U.S. responded to these murmurings of unrest by amplifying their battle against the Soviet Union and Communism. The world was decolonizing, and it was essential that the United States, and not the Soviet Union, obtain control over the new sovereign nations. Non-alignment was not an option, because that would bring the decolonizing states dangerously close to real self-determinism, and the U.S. was desperate to preserve their imperial presence across the globe.

When asked about reading that he has done on the Viet Nam War, Mario pointed to William Lederer and Eugene Burdick's 1958 novel, *The Ugly American*, as an example of writing that "got it right." Indeed, considering that it was written before mass protests of the war, *The Ugly American* is a remarkable critique of President Kennedy's foreign policy in Southeast Asia which produced "ugly Americans" who made no attempt to understand other cultures, were reluctant to change, and were blinded by arrogance.⁹ Yet, even *The Ugly American*, through its portrayal of Sarkhan as a fictional representation of "Asia," draws our attention to a common western mindset which ignored the diversity of Asia, and depicted it as a blank slate. In this interpretation, Asia was one large region open for colonization rather than a collection of potentially sovereign nations. The U.S. saw no option but to intervene in Viet Nam because, in their mind, the end of French colonialism left the country a leaderless vacuum that would inevitably be filled by Communism. Through their arrogance and imperial politics, the U.S. made the Viet Nam War what it was. Their larger fight with the Soviet Union over the

⁷ Ibid., 536.

⁸ Prasad.

⁹ Lederer.

decolonizing world turned the Vietnamese quest for self-determinism into a brutally violent proxy war.

A discussion of U.S. military presence and action in Viet Nam necessitates an examination of how we can find the legacies of colonialism in the military labor produced by Asians in Viet Nam. In his 2018 book, *Soldiering Through Empire: Race and the Making of the Decolonizing Pacific*, historian Simeon Man does just that through an analysis of the role that Filipino people played in the Viet Nam War. He points to the mid-1950s American programs known as “Operation Brotherhood” and “Operation Liberty” in which Americans trained Filipino medics, doctors, and nurses to work with Vietnamese refugees. The CIA then made a concerted effort to circulate images of Filipino doctors helping their Vietnamese “brothers.” Their goal was to use the newly independent Philippines as an example of “successful” decolonization and to project an image of U.S. medicine and militarization helping Asians secure an “Asia for Asians”.¹⁰

Yet in reality, these programs were designed to help the U.S. pretend they were anti-colonial while still practicing imperialism. Man describes the Philippines as a “laboratory of counterinsurgency,” and a pawn in the American mission to win over hearts and minds so that they could retain control over a decolonizing Asia without appearing to do so.¹¹ In fact, these programs were not nearly as successful as the U.S. claimed them to be because they depended on an American vision of racial kinship between Vietnamese people and Filipinos. Again, the U.S. was missing the diversity of Asia, and using democracy to justify state violence. Just as Filipino doctors became agents of U.S. imperialism, so did the ARVN soldiers who were fighting for a Viet Nam that was “free,” but also one that would allow the U.S. to retain their political power in the region. By dismissing non-alignment and preventing Viet Nam from pursuing self-

¹⁰ Man, *Soldiering*, 51.

¹¹ Man, (lecture).

determinism, U.S. imperial policies and motives produced a conflict in which Vietnamese people were expected to cooperate in their own colonization, and yet were also doomed to bare the largest burden of violence, regardless of political affiliation. As Man asserts, “the inclusion of Asians via the military, moreover, was always partial ... Enlisted to liberate Asia from colonialism and communism, Asians in the military simultaneously expanded the power of the U.S. government to demarcate and police the boundary between “good” and “bad” Asians”.¹²

Ultimately, the Viet Nam War is inextricable from the post-WWII race for decolonization and the United States’ desperate attempt to remain an imperial power despite the wave of self-determinism spreading through Africa and Asia. Accordingly, through pursuing what Man calls, “the integration of different regions in Asia into the global capitalist economy,” the U.S. was, “co-opting the decolonization project for imperialist ends”.¹³ This co-opting is linguistically evident in Americans’ determination to refer to the NLF as the Viet Cong. By using a misnomer to refer to the National *Liberation* Force, the U.S. effectively erased the nationalist movement in Viet Nam and produced an intentionally distorted understanding of the political forces involved in the war. As a result, the Viet Nam War became a strategic site of imperial reorganization in an increasingly post-colonial world.

And so, this analysis of American motives for intervening in Viet Nam brings us back to our discussion of Mario’s testimony. To him, it seemed obvious that the U.S. was more of an invading force than a protective one. Responding to whether there were ever any conversations between soldiers and Vietnamese civilians, Mario said, “there was almost never any kind of political discussion between ... anyone that I know, or knew, and any Vietnamese person ... [but] my assumption was that everybody who was there was sympathetic to the Vietnamese cause. You know, again, just the idea of having someone from another country come into your

¹² Man, *Soldiering*, 186.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 187.

country and just sort of like occupy it... to me it was almost like, how could you be okay with that?"¹⁴ However, it seems that the absence of political conversations was part of a greater pattern in which the U.S. government attempted to control the information that soldiers had access to, or ability to discuss. When asked if he had access to news, Mario responded, "No ... we weren't getting it ... uh, uh ... when I got back here I didn't have a clue what was going on."¹⁵ It is evident then, that the U.S. government was using, not only ARVN soldiers, but also American soldiers in their effort to maintain imperial power in Viet Nam. Draftees like Mario, plucked unwillingly from their homes at age nineteen, were deprived of the information they would need to make an informed decision about the action the U.S. was taking in Viet Nam. By keeping these men in the dark, the U.S. hoped to perpetuate the facade they had constructed to obscure their colonial motivations, and use the men as agents of state violence. By projecting the image of ARVN and American soldiers working together to protect the country from Communism, the U.S. was able to claim the role of "ally" instead of "invader".

Yet, Mario's account of his service in Viet Nam shows us just how thin this veil was.

When recounting his reaction to the war ending in 1975, Mario says:

...It never bother me to say or think that we lost because we did. We lost. And um it's not surprising that we did, we were supposed to lose ... and I always think that if it were reversed and someone, sort of, invaded where I lived, you know, I'd pick up a gun and go hide in the jungle and try and kill as many guys as I could. You know, this is my country ... we were wrong in so many ways.¹⁶

For a draftee on the ground in Viet Nam, it was clear from the beginning that the U.S. was an invading force. Separate from political theory about colonialism and self-determinism, Mario's interview is still a potent call for a deep examination of the United States' imperial legacy. His chilling description of those first moments of his service is a testament to the self-evident immorality of what the U.S. was doing in Viet Nam. But discussed in tandem with historical and

¹⁴ Alejandro, 30:50.

¹⁵ Ibid., 52:00.

¹⁶ Alejandro, 1:11:50.

geopolitical analysis, Mario's testimony is a powerful argument for redefining our conception of the entire conflict. The Viet Nam war was more than a just a phase of the Cold War. It was the consequence of the fast decay of a long-standing imperial structure and a dizzying shift in global power which left the United States reeling and frantic for a way to cling to its imperial status. For many in Viet Nam, the conflict was a quest for self-determinism. For the U.S., its served as an incubator for neocolonialism.

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