

War, Women, Vietnam:
The Mobilization of Female Images, 1954-1978

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Abstract

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This dissertation proceeds with two profoundly interwoven goals in mind: mapping the experience of women in the Vietnam War and evaluating the ways that ideas about women and gender influenced the course of American involvement in Vietnam. I argue that between 1954 and 1978, ideas about women and femininity did crucial work in impelling, sustaining, and later restraining the American mission in Vietnam. This project evaluates literal images such as photographs, film and television footage as well as images evoked by texts in the form of news reports, magazine articles, and fiction, focusing specifically on images that reveal deeply gendered ways of seeing and representing the conflict for Americans. Some of the images I consider include a French nurse known as the Angel of Dien Bien Phu, refugees fleeing for southern Vietnam in 1954, the first lady of the Republic of Vietnam Madame Nhu, and female members of the National Liberation Front. Juxtaposing images of American women, I also focus

on the figure of the housewife protesting American atrocities in Vietnam and the use of napalm, and images wrought by American women intellectuals that shifted focus away from the military and toward the larger social and psychological impact of the war.

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Introduction

In its 1966 Christmas issue, *Look* magazine published a feature story called “Women of Vietnam,” that profiled three Vietnamese women who embodied the largely unknown nation that was embroiled in a war in which the United States played an increasingly important role. *Look* offered three archetypes: the First Lady, the young, glamorous, and modern wife of Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky; the widow, a haggard, impoverished woman whose husband was killed by the National Liberation Front; and the bar girl, a twenty-year old worker in Saigon’s “semiprostitution” scene who earned more money in a month than nearly any member of the Saigon government. “Women of Vietnam” pointed out that though they may look as “fragile as butterflies...in all of Asia, there are no tougher, more resilient females.”¹ The article, with its creation of neat, comprehensible categories of Vietnamese women, demonstrates the American urge to understand the conflict in Vietnam and the utility of female symbols in making sense of a lingering, remote war.

“Women of Vietnam” is sympathetic to the women’s suffering, endured over decades of war: the first lady was lonely, a result of her husband’s political commitments; the overburdened widow led a grueling, dreary life spent toiling in a “manless village;” and the bar girl betrayed her fear of being unable to find a husband after the war, knowing that Vietnamese men would not look fondly on a young woman paid to traffic with foreigners. Though proclaiming an interest in Vietnamese women, the article unsurprisingly was most concerned with the ways the American presence had changed life in Vietnam, usually finding

¹ Laura Bergquist, “Women of Vietnam,” *Look*, 27 December 1966, 17-21.

it to be generally beneficial for the women. The first lady was shown to lead a glamorous life because American officials approved of her husband's political skill, the widow made a living by laundering the clothes of American military members, and of course the bar girl's livelihood was the direct result of United States military escalation. At the same time that it suggested that the women lived largely off American largesse, the article praised the shrewdness of the women, seeing virtue in their ability to survive and provide for their families in the face of fear and death and deprivation. Invoking images of refugees scavenging in piles of trash, "mama-sans" hawking American goods in the black market, and scantily-clad young women who supported extended families by having sex with members of the American military, *Look* offered a somewhat ambivalent picture of Vietnam, one that was a complex mélange of voyeurism, admiration and pity.

For a casual reader in 1966, the article, flanked by a dozen large, glossy photographs, was likely unremarkable, as the magazine's massive readership was familiar with the human interest approach it took in covering American foreign affairs. Adding "color" to political stories through visual images and short articles was a founding principle of *Look*, whose circulation numbers outpaced even *Life* magazine throughout the 1960s.² To a reader familiar with the war, however, the article is rich with detail about women's experiences, speaking to the economic impact of American military escalation, demographic shifts in the rural countryside, and social changes in urban Saigon. The article is also significant in that it hints at the tension between images and reality in Vietnam, as it suggests that photographs of exotic, beautiful women distracted from the reality of lives under the constant and shifting

² See Wendy Kozol, *Life's America: Family and Nation in Postwar Photojournalism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

threats of war, even as it attempts to tell the story of the war through photographs. The text of the article contains very little information about the war itself, no indication of who in Vietnam was the ally and who was the enemy, or what was the American stake in the war in political terms. Relying heavily on images and captions, the *Look* article raises far more questions than it answers about the women of Vietnam, but betrays a great deal of information about the ways that the American media conceived of them.

In 1971 Hannah Arendt wrote of the crucial importance of image making in the context of the Vietnam War, suggesting that images of the conflict, including those like the women portrayed in *Look*, were not just physical evidence of what happened but were fundamental to the public's interpretation of the war and even more importantly became the basis of America's foreign policy. Arendt wrote that the generation of intellectuals and government officials who orchestrated American intervention in Vietnam understood that "half of politics is 'image making' and the other half is making people believe in the imagery."³ While Arendt was speaking broadly of the myriad deceptions and self-deceptions revealed in the Pentagon Papers, her observation is valuable in assessing the ways that popular publications presented the war as it was unfolding. Journalist Tom Engelhardt also wrote of the unique power of various Vietnam War images, many of which "seemed to jump from the battlefield onto the home screen or into newspapers and magazines and were seared into public memory."⁴ Many of the images Engelhardt writes about portrayed episodes of violence that were transmitted through still photography and television footage, pictures of war that punctuate American

³ Hannah Arendt, "Lying in Politics: Reflections on the Pentagon Papers," *New York Review of Books*, 18 November 1971, 30-39.

⁴ Tom Engelhardt. *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 192. See also Michael A. Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991).

memory of the war.

This dissertation evaluates several such images from America's war in Vietnam, focusing specifically on the mobilization of images that reveal deeply gendered ways of seeing and representing the conflict for Americans. I consider literal images such as photographs, film and television footage as well as images evoked by texts in the form of news reports, magazine articles, and fiction. I focus on the central importance of images in the popular media because they represent the ways average Americans learned about the war, often in shallow, misleading, heavily edited, two-dimensional ways, but also because so many of the resonant images of the war featured women. Though concerned generally with the ways masculinity and femininity were being redefined in the period, this project is less concerned with notions of masculinity than with the definition and redefinition of femininity. Some of the images I evaluate include a heroic French nurse who was the only woman trapped at the besieged fortress of Dien Bien Phu, the figures of refugees fleeing for South Vietnam in 1954, images of the first lady of the southern government Madame Nhu as an exotic beauty and a potent political leader, and female members of the southern insurgency the National Liberation Front. Images of American women are also considered, as I focus on the figure of the housewife protesting American atrocities in Vietnam and the use of napalm, and images wrought by American women intellectuals that shifted focus away from superficial moments, away from the near-obsessive reverence for American military superiority and refocused questions on the moral aspects of the war.

I argue that some of the gendered images resonated with Americans but often misled and obscured the nature of the conflict, and often served specific agendas, which shifted over time. In his important study of the way the American media represented the conflict, Daniel

C. Hallin forwards a similar argument, emphasizing the ambiguity of television images, despite the fact that many viewers assumed the television images to be the most reflective of the realities of the war and the most unfiltered.⁵ Hallin notes the importance of context and editing, arguing that when the context for television images is excised, the editorial choices become the most important aspect, shaping viewers' opinions in ways we can never fully measure or know. Like Hallin, I argue that the images I evaluate in this study are important in part because they are frozen in time, were ripped from their context, and were often used as symbols for various political motivations and movements.

By evaluating gendered images, I focus on both the literal and metaphorical visibility of women in the history of the Vietnam War. In 1982 historian Elaine Tyler May wrote that the first task of the newly burgeoning field of women's and gender history was to make women visible, to "uncover women's buried past and place the female experience on the map of history."⁶ After this initial delineation, May asserted, historians would be able to redraw the map and think through some of the errors, omissions, and assumptions that characterized earlier studies. In terms of the broad scholarship on American women over the past thirty years, especially studies focused on the years after World War II, this map has been finely drawn and diverse, as studies have illuminated some of the darkest and most neglected

⁵ Daniel C. Hallin, *The "Uncensored War": The Media and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). Hallin's primary argument is that the media and the government were not, in fact, antagonistic and that the notion of an "adversary press" has been overstated and mythologized. For a more biographical view of correspondents in Vietnam in the early years of the war see William Prochnau, *Once Upon a Distant War: David Halberstam, Neil Sheehan, Peter Arnett, Young War Correspondents and Their Early Vietnam Battles* (New York: Vintage, 1996).

⁶ Elaine Tyler May, "Expanding the Past: Recent Scholarship on Women in Politics and Work," *Reviews in American History*, vol. 10, no. 4 (December 1982): 216-232.

corners of women's experience in United States history. But with regard to the scholarship on women and the Vietnam War, the map remains decidedly incomplete, particularly in terms of the ways Vietnamese women experienced the conflict. If the historiography of American women has reached the point where, as May contends, "the major challenge is not simply to point out what women have done in the past, but [to examine] what ultimate difference it makes in our total understanding of the historical experience," historians of gender and the Vietnam War still have much work to do in simply establishing women as primary actors in the story and documenting the ways they influenced the course of the conflict.

This dissertation proceeds with two deeply interwoven goals in mind: mapping the experience of women in the war and evaluating the ways that ideas about women and gender influenced the course of American involvement in Vietnam. I argue that between 1954 and complete American withdrawal from the conflict in 1975, ideas about masculinity and femininity did crucial work in impelling, sustaining, and later restraining the American mission in Vietnam. As gendered ideas helped to bolster the initial American involvement in Indochina, by 1967 similar notions of suffering women and children were deployed, often by American women, to persuade a skeptical public that the Americans were on the wrong course in the war.

I focus on a period that begins well before major American military involvement and extends slightly beyond its end because one of the study's key contentions is that the work of characterizing both Vietnamese and American women in this period, vis a vis the war, has a long history and relies on shifting notions of gender. Beginning in 1954, at the moment when the Viet Minh scored a decisive military victory against the French empire at Dien Bien Phu, I demonstrate the significant ways that women's involvement in the war changed over the

course of two turbulent decades. In terms of the culture of the war, images of Vietnamese women were initially employed by the American government and a compliant popular media as symbols of a nation in need of rescue, and the images of Vietnamese women transform in unexpected ways - allies in the Saigon government were framed as reflecting the modernity and gumption of its de facto first lady, Madame Nhu, whose acerbic public statements reshaped her role from ally to enemy; by the mid-1960s the women of the southern resistance movement, the National Liberation Front, were portrayed as hypersexual seductresses and spies, making them emblems of a shadowy and mysterious guerrilla movement. At the same time, images of American women associated with the war also evolved, as a rising tide of feminist activism converged, and sometimes clashed, with anti-Vietnam War protests in the early 1970s. Over the course of the long conflict, attitudes towards women in America also transformed, owing much to the national soul-searching over the nature of the Vietnam War and the impact of the war on Vietnamese civilians, particularly women and children.⁷

While second wave feminism in America is not an explicit focus in my study, an awareness of the ways feminist thought altered American women's perspectives on the war is an undercurrent and is fundamental in understanding the forces that shaped ideas about gender

⁷ The varied experience of American women and the Vietnam antiwar movement is too diverse to be discussed fully here, I focus on two discrete topics regarding American women: the women of Women Strike for Peace who explore the limits and benefits of their gender to intervene in war discussion and three American women writers who sought to contribute a new, gendered perspective to post-conflict histories and intellectual assessments of the war. The rise of second wave feminism is not discussed in much depth in this study, as my analysis is more restricted to women who had a very close relationship to the war rather than focusing on the formal women's movement. See Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), Sara M. Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Knopf, 1979), Estelle B. Freedman, *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002).

in the context of the Vietnam War. The Vietnam conflict has often been understood through the lens of masculinist constructions that emphasize the bellicosity of male rhetoric in heightening the cold war, and gender studies have focused on the damage the war did to that masculinity in America's loss. This project focuses not on simply inserting women into that familiar narrative but on reframing the question, asking how images and ideas about women figured in the war, and evaluating how women themselves engaged with the war, prosecuted it, and eventually opposed it between 1954-1975.

I follow historian Heather Stur in her move to examine elements of the Vietnam War that lie "beyond combat," shifting the inquiry into realms of race, gender, and culture.⁸ Though my engagement with America's war in Vietnam is generally outside of combat and focused exclusively on civilians, when discussing the experience of Vietnamese women, making a complete shift away from the military aspects is impossible. For the Vietnamese, the reality of combat was inescapable, and the problematic task of defining and identifying "civilians" in the war makes it fruitless for historians of the war to neatly separate female combatants from noncombatants. As the *Look* magazine article attests, the presence of American troops in Vietnam affected every aspect of life for the Vietnamese. Consequently, this study focuses on Vietnamese women who played varied, shifting roles, often as fighters. The American women I examine are more clearly assigned the role of non-combatants, civilians who were deeply engaged in the war as activists or intellectuals.

In the sense that this dissertation evaluates both Vietnamese and American women's experiences in the war, it is apt to be classified as "comparative" history, but because the term

⁸ Heather Stur, *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

implies certain equivalence, I think it oversimplifies the approach. To argue that Vietnamese and American women experienced the conflict in comparable ways is to understate drastically the degree to which these perspectives cannot be reconciled. Some attempts to integrate the two nations' women have led to works that inevitably focus on universal themes - suffering civilians, grieving mothers and children, abstractions about the horrors of war that do not lead to specific historical conclusions but rely on sweeping sentiment that often reinforces gender stereotypes.⁹ I prefer to think of my approach as integrative rather than comparative, viewing the war itself as the prism through which women's experiences are refracted.

I have chosen to integrate stories about American and Vietnamese women for a number of reasons. First, the government and the media's construction of gendered images about the war relied both on notions of Vietnamese and American women, though as I will argue in the first chapter the lack of knowledge in the United States about the Vietnamese in the mid-1950s allowed Americans to create a wholesale invention of the nation and its women to suit America's political purposes. I assert that the nature and degree of cultural differences between American and Vietnamese women served crucial functions, and they were highlighted when necessary, as in the 1954 refugee crisis and in the American news media's attempts to characterize the women of the National Liberation Front in negative terms. These differences were also downplayed when circumstances required, as when women of the antiwar left sought to demonstrate solidarity with Vietnamese civilians by focusing their protests on the war's impact on women and children.

⁹ For works that emphasize the universality of women's experience in the Vietnam War, see Barbara Sonneborn's documentary film, *Regret to Inform* (New York: Docurama, 2000), Karen Gottschang Turner and Thanh Hao Phan, *Even the Women Must Fight: Memories of War from North Vietnam* (New York: Wiley, 1998), and Arlene Eisen, *Women and Revolution in Viet Nam* (London: Zed Books, 1984).

A second reason for integrating these vastly different perspectives is to demonstrate that both Vietnamese and American women faced multiple conflicts both external and internal, often struggling against prescribed social roles and sometimes fighting against the popular representations devised by the United States government and the media.¹⁰ Vietnamese women refuted the early characterization that they were passive victims by actively participating in the war on all sides; American women showed that they were not detached from political protest or an intellectual inquiry into the war.

Ultimately I argue that examining the experiences of Vietnamese and American women in the same project is illuminating, even necessary, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the conflict itself. It has become axiomatic in historical scholarship that the two sides of a war are not neatly separable, but intertwined in not just military ways but in a web of social, political, economic, and cultural interaction and representation. An examination of the evolution in the ways Americans perceived the Vietnamese, particularly its women, raises new questions about the ways these same women and their female American counterparts figured in the war itself.

A principal argument in this dissertation, following French historian Joan Scott, is that ideas about gender were used throughout the conflict to mobilize particular constituencies and to define and redefine enemies and allies, and to establish a familiar rubric for understanding the war and America's position within it. This dissertation pays a great deal of attention to language and the discursive construction of gender, recalling Scott's assertion that

¹⁰ For more on the relationship between the media and the government, see David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire* (New York: Random House, 1965), William W. Prochnau, *Once Upon a Distant War*, Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988).

“differences of sex were not set by nature but were established through language,” and that the role of the historian is to “analyze language as a volatile, mutable system whose meanings could never finally be secured.”¹¹

One of the early criticisms that Scott faced in asserting the primary importance of gender in shaping social relations was that her reliance on poststructuralism somehow removed actual women from gender history, that the approach resulted in a fracturing of the representational with the material or empirical.¹² Scott was clearly aware of the possibility that her work would be read in this way, as she noted the necessity of historians to question when the language of gender structured experience and had material influences on behavior and decision-making, and when it operated as, in the words of historian Joanne Meyerowitz, a “convenient rhetorical flourish,” reflecting much about the culture, of course, but having little appreciable social impact.¹³

Scott’s work draws heavily from the theory of French historian Michel Foucault, work that has been so foundational for many twentieth century historians precisely because it seeks to integrate analyses of the material and the discursive and to reveal its deep interconnectedness. In *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault wrote that discourse analysis should not be viewed as a linguistic practice, urging historians to treat discourses not as

¹¹ AHR Forum, “Unanswered Questions,” *American Historical Review*, vol. 113, issue 5 (December 2008), 1423.

¹² For a useful overview of the reception of Scott’s paper and a valuable genealogy of gender history, see Joanne Meyerowitz, “A History of ‘Gender,’” *American Historical Review*, vol. 113, issue 5 (December 2008): 1346-1356.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1351.

groups of signs but “as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak.”¹⁴

Some applications of Foucault’s theories have, as Scott’s critics have charged, resulted in works that leave themselves open to criticism as having too exclusive a focus on language that is separable from what “really happened.” An interest in this division - or the perception of a simplistic division - between the discursive and material reality has animated this dissertation. For Foucault, of course, discourse never resided only in the realm of the intellectual or the ideological, but manifested itself through the exercise of power. Foucault himself sought to move beyond formal linguistic analysis, and into realms of knowledge and disciplines. Despite Foucault’s specific interpretation of discourse and discursive studies, the work of some scholars of gender who have engaged in discourse analysis have faced criticism for separating artificially the realms of the material and the intellectual/discursive.

In her influential study of race and gender in America, historian Gail Bederman asserts important points about Foucault’s ideas of discourse and the ways they have changed approaches to history. Bederman wrote in *Manliness and Civilization* that Foucault’s conception of discourse does not assert firm divisions between intellectual constructs and material practices, arguing that historians who use Foucault’s method “presume that intellectual knowledge and concrete power relations are mutually constitutive.”¹⁵ Second, Bederman argues that discursive analysis “assumes that the ideas and practices comprising any discourse will be multiple, inconsistent, and contradictory.” “Finally, because it interrogates these inconsistencies, this methodology implies a particular emphasis on human

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, trans. Alan Sheridan, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 49.

¹⁵ Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 24.

agency and the possibility of intentional change.” Bederman’s key contention is that inconsistencies of discourse do not necessarily destabilize the discourse itself, but reveal how people’s agency allows them to “ bend them [discourses] to their own purposes.”

While Bederman emphasizes the point that Foucault’s methodology collapses notions of discourse and material reality or personal agency, it is worth keeping in mind the potential for gaps in the ways government and media sources framed gender issues regarding the Vietnam War and the sometimes very different experiences of women who were involved. Though informed by Scott’s employment of poststructuralism and the Foucauldian conception of discourse that Bederman invokes, my study is not limited to analysis of representations, but is rooted in the notion that many of the familiar ways of representing gender in the context of the Vietnam War during the war itself were often wrong, an assertion I seek to demonstrate by evaluating the lived experience of women in the war. Representations did often clash with reality, and it is useful to explore this tension as a way of learning more about both gender relations in the mid-twentieth century and the ways the United States prosecuted the war in Vietnam. While a fundamental part of my argument relies on the ways the American media and government used a shifting language of gender during the American involvement in Vietnam, I interpose rhetorical analysis with the histories of women themselves, as a way of testing the validity and power of the representations, measuring the impact of these discursive strategies, and evaluating the ways that women themselves contributed to shaping and reshaping the gendered images of the war.

Often it seems that the space between the material and the representational is where mythology of wars is created, a point that can perhaps be extended to all American conflicts.¹⁶

¹⁶ Much has been written about the development of mythologies related to the Vietnam War.

Myth plays an important role in this dissertation, and the notion that gender provided a framework for a number of functional myths that serviced various agendas - the military's use of the image of surreptitious NLF women that served to justify an emphasis on security and an increase in military personnel, the antiwar movement's deployment of images of suffering women and children to illustrate their points about the war's fundamental immorality are just two examples. Though these images were certainly based in reality, the important point for my purposes is to examine the circumstances under which these images were developed and deployed, the ways they took on meanings that exceeded the images themselves, and the special ways that gender and sexuality helped to make these messages more relatable, more understandable, and more effective.

Literature Review

Most fundamentally, this dissertation draws from a rich and varied body of literature that evaluates the ways that women and gender have figured in wars, both as subjects and objects, as symbols and as participants. Jean Bethke Elshtain's *Women and War* explores the mythologies of war that rely on gender binaries and exploit notions of male aggression and feminine passivity. Elshtain offers two prototypical constructions of "Just Warriors," referring to the natural connections of manliness and war-making and its opposite, the "Beautiful Soul," which describes the female noncombatant, associated with virtues of gentleness and

See Jerry Lembcke, *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), and Lembcke, *Hanoi Jane: War, Sex, & Fantasies of Betrayal* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), H. Bruce Franklin, *M.I.A., or, Mythmaking in America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1993), and Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992), chapters 16-17.

domesticity at odds with the destructiveness of war.¹⁷ Elshtain's formulation may seem to rely on simple sex-determined stereotypes, but her analysis points to how narratives of war have relied on this simplistic imagery to "lull our critical faculties to sleep," and reestablish gender norms that support and sustain the waging of wars. The women in Elshtain's war stories are "represented as beings laced through and through with sexual and maternal imagery," an imagery that serves important functions like giving sanction to acts of violence and shaping the ways that men and women view themselves and their roles in war. Elshtain's intention in interrogating the Just Warrior/Beautiful Soul dichotomy is to explore "the complexity hiding behind many of our simple, rigid ideas and formulations," and to unmoor the simple association of women with life giving and men with life taking. One of the central arguments of this dissertation proceeds from Elshtain's premise. By looking specifically at the ways women and gender ideology intersected in the Vietnam War, I argue that the specificities of war and a close analysis of the way wars are culturally elaborated often render these simple, seemingly timeless gendered notions of warfare unstable and bring into sharp relief the ways evolving gender ideologies were used to prosecute the war in Vietnam.

While Elshtain's work is useful in raising questions about the ways gender is mythologized to further the cause of war, Cynthia Enloe's work is complementary as she has written extensively on the ways women and gender are crucial in maintaining militaries. In *Does Khaki Become You?* Enloe argues that women, though "kept ideologically marginal to the essential function of militaries," are in fact essential to its proper functioning, in acting as the symbol of the feminine, domestic "Beautiful Soul" Elshtain elaborates. Enloe writes, "In each country military strategists *need* women. They need women who will act and think as

¹⁷ Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Women and War* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

patriarchy expects women to act and think. And they need women whose use can be disguised, so that the military can remain the quintessentially ‘masculine’ institution, the bastion of ‘manliness.’”¹⁸ Enloe’s work has investigated how militaries have produced and reinforced dominant notions of masculinity and femininity, calling into question the naturalness with which military policies and values have been gendered.

In addition to the broad debate over the nature of women and gender in the context of American wars, military occupations, and interventions, this project also participates in debates raised in a body of literature that fuses social and cultural history with foreign relations more broadly, many of which have considered the gendered aspects of American empire. These works in part are responding to Amy Kaplan’s influential article “Left Alone With America,” that laments the “absence of culture from the history of US imperialism, the absence of empire from the study of American culture; and the absence of the United States from the postcolonial study of imperialism.”¹⁹ Since Kaplan’s essay almost two decades ago, a number of works have interrogated the reciprocal relations between America’s involvement in war and cultural production, a field that is particularly rich in the post-World War II period.²⁰

¹⁸ Cynthia Enloe, *Does Khaki Become You?: The Militarisation of Women's Lives* (Boston, Mass: South End Press, 1983), 220.

¹⁹ Amy Kaplan, and Donald E. Pease, *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 11.

²⁰ See Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), Karen Leong, *The China Mystique: Pearl S. Buck, Anna May Wong, Mayling Soong, and the Transformation of American Orientalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), and Mari Yoshihara, *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), Vicente

Laura Briggs's *Reproducing Empire* is an example of a work that exemplifies the fusion of gender studies with scholarship on American imperialism, seeing in American intervention in Puerto Rico the ways that women's bodies represented a site where the policies of American empire could be tested.²¹ Briggs contends that women's participation in empire was shaped by specific political contexts and an uncritical acceptance of scientific paradigms that organized knowledge about foreign peoples. Because the image of Puerto Rican women was characterized by victimization, Puerto Rico was made suitable for rescue and the island served as a place where American empire was "honed" over the course of the twentieth century. Briggs's work is important in establishing how gender was important not only in political rhetoric but also in actually structuring policy, as the United States developed programs specifically targeting women, such as sterilization experiments.

Two other important case studies that examine gender as a fundamental shaper of American efforts abroad are Kristin Hoganson's work on the Spanish-American War, *Fighting for American Manhood*, which argues that masculinity was at the cultural root of that conflict, and Mary Renda's *Taking Haiti*, which argues that paternalist discourse was a key animating feature of American intervention in Haiti between 1915 and 1940. Hoganson expands her analysis of a culture of masculinity beyond familiar arguments about Theodore Roosevelt, arguing that manliness was a central component of the military, psychological, and

Rafael, *White Love and Other Events in Filipino History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

²¹ Laura Briggs, *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

cultural explanations offered for war.²² Hoganson argues that American officials as well as journalists looked to places like Cuba and the Philippines as sites to restore the “degeneracy” of American manhood, which Hoganson defines in a dual sense – both physical degeneration usually attributed to tropical climates and a degeneracy of character that could only be redeemed through organized, structured violence. This work is particularly useful in the ways it demonstrates how the language of masculinity became naturalized as the language of politics and of empire and in its analysis of an increasingly vocal opposition to the war that developed in 1898 and 1899, which Hoganson notes was immediately cast as soft, regressive, and feminine. Hoganson places war at the center of the debate over gender, arguing that interventionists and non-interventionists were both forced to reckon with the ideals of manliness that had come to be associated with military engagement.

Mary Renda’s work examines the United States’ twenty-five year engagement in Haiti as an exercise of paternalism, which she argues was “not merely a justification laid on after the fact in order to pretty up American wrongdoing,” but was “a whole constellation of meanings, images, ideas, and values that helped to shape and direct US relations with former European colonial possessions.”²³ Renda maintains that paternalism in American rhetoric and policy served as a form of domination masked by its benevolence and structured by gender and sexuality. By figuring Haiti as an “exotic object of desire” as well as a subject easily controlled by parental guidance and discipline, the United States rationalized its military

²² Kristin L. Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

²³ Mary A. Renda, *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 15.

intervention and naturalized a familial language as it was applied to foreign involvement.

As the scholarship on American empire attests, scholars have productively examined war and militarism through a gendered lens, and in the past twenty years there has been an outpouring of work on various aspects of women and gender in the context of American wars. It is worth examining the broad trends of the scholarship by looking at America's wars chronologically to get a better sense of how the field is developing and the ways that gender theories have been applied across time and space.

Some of the richest scholarship on the topic of women, gender and war is in the history of the American Civil War, where scholars have been innovative in employing, expanding and refining the ways that gender opens up new ways of conceiving war.²⁴ The flourishing of gender studies and the civil war addresses the question of whether and how studies of martial subjects can be investigated through the lens of gender, as the two - military history and the social and cultural approach of gender - have only recently come to be seen as reconcilable.²⁵ Civil War historian Nina Silber wrote that because of the clash between Victorian notions of gender propriety and the ways that the war changed conceptions of masculinity, that "In many ways, the history of women's involvement in the Civil War is a history of tension and constant struggle to reconcile images with reality."²⁶ In her study of gender and the culture of

²⁴ For a work that established many trends in gender scholarship and the Civil War see Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber, *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

²⁵ An important article on this general question is Drew Gilpin Faust, "Altars of Sacrifice: Confederate Women and the Narratives of War," *The Journal of American History*, vol. 76, no. 4 (March 1990): 1200-1228.

²⁶ Nina Silber, "'A Woman's War': Gender and Civil War Studies," *OAH Magazine of History*, vol. 8, no. 1, The Civil War (Fall 1993): 11-13.

Reconstruction, Silber argues that the romanticized ideas of reunion operated in a gendered rubric that imagined reconciliation in a sentimental way. Gender, Silber asserted, offered a familiar framework for redefining the relationship between North and South after the war, and a flexible one, allowing for changes over time and in different contexts, from antagonistic to softer and more sentimental as reconciliation evolved.²⁷

Lee Ann Whites argues that the Civil War constituted a crisis in gender, suggesting that “Gender roles as well as gender relations played a critical role in the initial outbreak of the war, as well as in its course, its conduct, and its eventual outcome in the ‘reconstruction’ of the South.”²⁸ Whites notes that much of the Civil War scholarship that focuses on women and gender has fixated on establishing the intensity of women’s support for their sons and husbands, emphasizing the undying loyalty of women, particularly Confederate women, who many scholars have identified as the “very soul of the war.” Beyond studying women, Whites examines competing visions of what constituted manhood in the North and South, writing that specific patterns of white male domination and black dependency in the South fundamentally reshaped ideas about gender. Limiting her study to Augusta, Georgia, Whites’s study is valuable in attempting to untangle on a local level the ways that racial upheaval and changes in gender ideology were tightly intertwined and mutually constitutive.

Other studies have evaluated the Civil War’s impact on families and domestic relations, using gender as a way of understanding shifts in power dynamics on a household level.

Stephanie McCurry’s study of power within yeoman households in the South Carolina low

²⁷ Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

²⁸ LeeAnn Whites, *The Civil War As a Crisis in Gender: Augusta, Georgia, 1860-1890* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 3.

country, *Masters of Small Worlds* undertakes what the author calls “gendered political history,” the task of which is to “redraw the complex web of gender, class, and race relations within which low country farmers were enmeshed and to locate in it the meaning of their political sensibilities.”²⁹ Similarly, Laura Edwards’s study of Reconstruction, *Gendered Strife and Confusion*, argues that the Civil War and emancipation destabilized the boundaries between public and private spheres, contending that the household and its domestic relations became important political spaces where shifting ideas about race, class, and gender were negotiated and contested through cultural and legal means.³⁰

While scholars of the American Civil War have produced a number of groundbreaking and important studies of gender and war, World War II has also received a great deal of attention from gender scholars and reshaped the ways that gender has been used to understand war. Scholarship on the second World War has been particularly interested in two questions: how changes in women’s labor participation affected women’s roles in society after the war, and the related, larger question of how the war affected women on the home front in terms of alterations in ideologies of domesticity and proper gender roles.

Though labor concerns are not centrally important in my examination of the Vietnam War, the general idea of integrating labor, gender, and war is important in demonstrating the ways historians of gender have demonstrated how women have been fundamental in war-making despite formal exclusion from the battlefield. In the context of World War II, many

²⁹ Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 8.

³⁰ Laura F. Edwards, *Gendered Strife & Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

historians have investigated gender and the changing labor force. Historian William Chafe has argued that the Second World War was a watershed moment for women because of the broad social and cultural impact wrought by changes in employment patterns of women, particularly married women of the middle class.³¹ Other scholars have complicated this view that the war expanded women's opportunity and social stature, challenging the dominant, simplistic conventional wisdom that women's status was elevated because of their labor participation. These scholars have tempered the idea that the war led to massive changes for women, emphasizing continuity in women's social position. Leila Rupp's *Mobilizing Women for War* argues that changes in the labor force did not change expectations or the public's beliefs about women's "nature" or their proper social roles, arguing that beneath her overalls Rosie was still wearing her apron.³²

Maureen Honey's *Creating Rosie the Riveter* similarly argues that despite women's increased participation in the labor force during World War II that propaganda emphasized their femininity.³³ Though war encouraged nontraditional participation, Honey writes that over the course of the war that women's new roles were frequently framed in propaganda as fulfillment of feminine and maternal duty and virtue rather than offering a fundamentally new view of gender. Similarly, D'Ann Campbell's *Women at War with America* argues that rather

³¹ William Henry Chafe, *The Paradox of Change: American Women in the 20th Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 171-172. Chafe also acknowledges that the war ultimately did not lead to any substantive progress toward broader feminist goals of equality, but emphasizes that World War II was an important event in legitimizing female employment.

³² Leila J. Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War: German and American Propaganda, 1939-1945* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978).

³³ Maureen Honey, *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda During World War II* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984).

than raising women's status, World War II helped to entrench postwar ideas of domesticity.³⁴ From interest in the figure of Rosie the Riveter to Betty Friedan's landmark 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique*, scholars have demonstrated the ways that domesticity and labor were intimately linked to World War II, leading to questions about whether the conflict forced or even allowed women to reimagine their roles within the family and society, or if the notion of liberation through labor has been overstated.

Patterns in cold war scholarship on women and gender have also shown an interest in the issue of women and domesticity. Elaine Tyler May's influential work *Homeward Bound* offers the concept of "domestic containment," linking the cold war imperative of containment to 1950s ideas about the family. May links broader issues of geopolitics to the ideologies that governed private life, arguing that the 1950s cemented women's roles as mothers and homemakers, with lives ruled by an oppressive culture of domesticity.³⁵ May and other scholars have noted that this image of the suburban wife was often a mythical figure for many American women, because as scholars of World War II clearly established, the numbers of women working outside the home grew exponentially, despite a contraction after the war ended.³⁶

In many ways the dominant trend in gender scholarship on the cold war has been the

³⁴ D'Ann Campbell, *Women at War with America: Private Lives in a Patriotic Era* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1984).

³⁵ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), Joanne Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

³⁶ Dorothy Sue Cobble, *Dishing it Out: Waitresses and Their Unions in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), Ruth Milkman, *Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex During World War II* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

interest in the ways masculinity shaped American culture, exacerbated global tensions, and impacted geopolitical decision-making. Robert Dean has argued that American domination over the rest of the world required the cultivation of what he terms “imperial masculinity.”³⁷ The containment of communism, Dean contends, demanded a “manly patrician stoicism,” that was evident in the administration of John F. Kennedy, a brotherhood marked by notions of “privilege, power, service and sacrifice,” and punctuated by an “elite narrative of vigor, physical and moral courage.” Dean’s suggestion of the importance of traits of - or at least the outward appearance of - toughness further entrenched the conformity of the cold war and the willingness of government leaders to embark on wars on foreign territory, a point which is fundamental to this dissertation.³⁸ K.A. Cuordileone’s *Manhood and American Political Culture* likewise examines “anxieties about sexuality, manhood, and the self [that] surfaced in cold war political rhetoric and intersected with anxieties about communism and national security,” arguing that fears of declining masculinity and sexual promiscuity represented cultural fears that needed to be contained along with communism³⁹ This theme was satirized brilliantly in the 1964 film *Dr. Strangelove*. Cuordileone calls attention to gendered and sexualized imagery in cold war politics, noting the impact of the apparent “epidemic” of male

³⁷ Robert D. Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Making of Cold War Foreign Policy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 12.

³⁸ See Frank Costigliola, “‘Unceasing Pressure for Penetration’: Gender, Pathology, and Emotion in George Kennan’s Formation of the Cold War,” *The Journal of American History*, 83, no. 4 (March 1997): 1309-1339, and Robert D. Dean, “Masculinity As Ideology: John F. Kennedy and the Domestic Politics of Foreign Policy,” *Diplomatic History*, vol. 22, no. 1 (Winter 1998): 29-62.

³⁹ K. A. Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* (New York: Routledge, 2005), xx.

homosexuality in heightening America's aggressive foreign posture.⁴⁰

In contrast to prior wars and despite the vast amount of scholarship the Vietnam War has generated, remarkably little research has been devoted to women and gender in the context of Vietnam. One work that has brought gender analysis to the Vietnam conflict is Jeffords's seminal, pathbreaking work on the cultural need for a "remasculinization" of America in the wake of the Vietnam War.⁴¹ Jeffords's work prefigured Dean's analysis of the cold war in its suggestion that the Vietnam War wounded the ideals of American masculinity forwarded by the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Jeffords examines the ways American cultural productions, particularly Hollywood films such as *Rambo* and *Missing in Action*, sought to recuperate or rehabilitate American notions of manhood in the wake of the loss in Vietnam.

Jeffords's work has remained the lodestone for gender study in the context of Vietnam, but historian Heather Stur's *Beyond Combat* has raised important new questions about long-neglected roles of women in the war and the impact of gender ideology on the American course of war in Vietnam.⁴² Stur offers a valuable exegesis of American women who served in Vietnam as WACs and in the Red Cross Supplemental Recreation Activities Overseas (SRAO) program and investigates the degree to which antiwar soldiers were conscious of the gender politics of the war and the era. Stur is very conscious of the ways women served as useful symbols in the conflict, American women as wholesome "girls next door," who justified cold war interventionism and their foils, Vietnamese women who were frequently

⁴⁰ See also David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

⁴¹ Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

⁴² Heather Stur, *Beyond Combat*.

portrayed in America as dragon ladies and cunning prostitutes. Stur's work shares the propensity of *Look* magazine in assigning women to neat categories that are not mapped onto a chronology or understanding of the events of the war, and by emphasizing women's utility as symbols, the primary interest remains the way women were affected by war rather than interrogating the ways women affected it. In this sense it is apparent that the field of women and gender studies in the Vietnam War is still in its infancy.

Stur's work builds upon a substantial body of literature that has been concerned with evaluating the experience of American women who served in Vietnam in various occupations. Oral histories have told the stories of members of the WAC, humanitarian volunteers, government employees, and nurses attached to the American military, providing valuable testimony about the unique experiences of women in Vietnam during wartime.⁴³ Because most of these oral histories have had a specific vocational focus, though, there is usually very little variation in the types of stories the women tell and even less attempt to argue that women fundamentally changed the war in any way. In addition to studies of nurses and government workers in Vietnam, women journalists have also received a fair amount of recent attention from historians and writers, as biographical treatments and oral histories have paid tribute to the dozens of American women who reported from the war zone and

⁴³ See Ron Steinman, *Women in Vietnam* (New York: TV Books, 2000), Kara Dixon Vuic, *Officer, Nurse, Woman: The Army Nurse Corps in the Vietnam War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), Lynda VanDevanter, *Home Before Morning: The Story of an Army Nurse in Vietnam* (New York: Beaufort Books, 1983), Kathryn Marshall, *In the Combat Zone: An Oral History of American Women in Vietnam, 1966-1975* (New York: Little, Brown, 1987), Keith Walker, *A Piece of My Heart: The Stories of 26 American Women Who Served in Vietnam* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1985), Olga Gruhzt-Hoyt, *A Time Remembered: American Women in the Vietnam War* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1999).

contributed an impressive body of work to the war's journalistic history.⁴⁴ Perhaps the aspect of American women's experience in the war that has received the most attention thus far from scholars has been their role in the antiwar movement, scholarship that has brought attention to the diversity of the women who participated, including nascent radical feminists, religious opponents to war, and maternal activists drawing on a long tradition of pacifism and internationalism, to name a few.⁴⁵

Works on American women's experience in the war have been rich but relatively limited in scope, and within the orbit of Vietnam studies, the topic of women and the war has also been slow to develop. As scholars have begun to explore the consequences of the war - the economic realities of post-1975 Vietnam, the "boat people" phenomenon and diasporic issues, to name the most fully interrogated, questions about Vietnamese women's experience during the war have surfaced more frequently. Historian Francois Guillemot has written about female members of the "youth shock brigades" of North Vietnam that existed from 1950 to 1975, young women known as "shock girls" who played crucial roles in preparing battlefields and later cleaning up, earning the nickname "those who left first and returned last."⁴⁶ Other

⁴⁴ For specific treatments of women journalists in Vietnam, see Virginia Elwood-Akers, *Women War Correspondents in the Vietnam War, 1961-1975* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1988), Tad Bartimus, *War Torn: Stories of War from the Women Reporters Who Covered Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2002), and Joyce Hoffman, *On Their Own: Women Journalists and the American Experience in Vietnam* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2008).

⁴⁵ Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1987), Melvin Small, *Antiwarriors: The Vietnam War and the Battle for America's Hearts and Minds* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), N. L. Zaroulis and Gerald Sullivan, *Who Spoke Up?: American Protest against the War in Vietnam, 1963-1975* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1984), Terry H. Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁴⁶ Francois Guillemot, "Death and Suffering at First Hand: Youth Shock Brigades During the Vietnam War (1950-1975)," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*. 4, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 17-60.

works have evaluated the military contributions of Vietnamese women, including Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen's oral history of women of the RVN who fled to Australia after the war, which marks an important effort in recording voices of Vietnamese women refugees and migrants, whose new national status allowed them to reinterpret their role and experience in the war.⁴⁷

Two other genres have formed important bodies of literature from which we can draw ethnographic, personal information about the lives of Vietnamese women during the war: autobiography and fiction. Duong Van Mai Elliott's *The Sacred Willow* explores how war affected four generations of an upper class Vietnamese family and its experiences with the dislocations of French colonialism and the coming of the American war. Le Ly Hayslip's *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* became familiar to American movie audiences thanks to Oliver Stone's adaptation, but the text remains a potent artifact of the way a young woman's roles were constantly shifting as a result of the expansion of the American war and the threats of the NLF.⁴⁸ Nguyen Thi Dinh's memoir *No Other Road to Take* tells the story of a woman commander in the NLF who became a relatively famous figure in the United States

⁴⁷ Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen, *Memory Is Another Country: Women of the Vietnamese Diaspora* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2009). See also Karen Turner, *Even the Women Must Fight*, Sandra Taylor, *Vietnamese Women at War: Fighting for Ho Chi Minh and the Revolution* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999), and David Hunt, *Vietnam's Southern Revolution: From Peasant Insurrection to Total War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), chapter 6.

⁴⁸ Duong Van Mai Elliott, *The Sacred Willow: Four Generations in the Life of a Vietnamese Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), Le Ly Hayslip and Jay Wurts, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places: A Vietnamese Woman's Journey from War to Peace* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), Nguyen Thi Dinh, *No Other Road to Take: Memoir of Mrs. Nguyen Thi Dinh* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Southeast Asia Program, Dept. of Asian Studies, Cornell University, 1976). See also Nguyen Thi Tuyet Mai and Monique Senderowicz, *The Rubber Tree: Memoir of a Vietnamese Woman Who Was an Anti-French Guerrilla, a Publisher, and a Peace Activist* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1994).

because of her high rank and storied military career. Her memoir, while laden with party rhetoric, is a rare glimpse into the motivations of a woman who played a key role in Vietnam's nationalist struggles in the twentieth century. Vietnamese fiction has also been an unusually rich wellspring of knowledge on the role of Vietnamese women during and after the war. Female Novelist Duong Thu Huong's work has garnered literary acclaim, Party ignominy, and international attention for conveying the intimate, familial side of the war.⁴⁹

In addition to engaging works specifically dealing with gender and the Vietnam War, this dissertation attempts to intervene in a dialogue with another subfield of Vietnam War studies that has received increasing attention in recent years, the American relationship with the southern government, the Republic of Vietnam. This study focuses primarily on the geographical south in Vietnam, and pays attention to the ways gender was deployed in forming political relationships and popular perceptions of the southern ally in Saigon. While this dissertation does not engage in political or diplomatic history, an apprehension of the nature of the relationship and the American role in the RVN's creation is critical in assessing American cultural understandings of the Vietnamese. I see the recent studies of the RVN as laying the groundwork for examining the social and cultural interactions between the two in greater depth, and for understanding the ways that gender was useful in defining friends and enemies, sharpening those distinctions, and creating women who acted as shorthand figures for each.

One of the primary areas of analysis for recent scholarship has been the reevaluation of

⁴⁹ Duong Thu Huong, *Paradise of the Blind* (New York: Morrow, 1993) and *Novel Without a Name* (New York: W. Morrow, 1995). See also Wayne Karlin, Le Minh Khue and Vu Truong, *The Other Side of Heaven: Postwar Fiction by Vietnamese and American Writers* (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 1995).

the presidency of Ngo Dinh Diem. While many orthodox historians have dismissed the Diem regime as an abject failure and contended that South Vietnam was not a real nation but an invention of American officials, revisionist scholars have portrayed Diem as an effective leader who was constrained by weak and inconsistent American policy and ultimately discarded before a viable successor was in place.⁵⁰ Historian Mark Moyar, whose history of the Vietnam conflict, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War 1954-1965*, lies squarely in the revisionist camp, characterizes the war as a noble, justifiable effort that was winnable but improperly executed by the American government and military. For Moyar and other revisionists like Michael Lind, Ngo Dinh Diem was a wise and effective leader who was not given the opportunity to prove his ability to lead.⁵¹ Sympathetic works like Denis Warner's *The Last Confucian* have posited that Diem was to some extent a scapegoat of a failed

⁵⁰ In many ways this debate has been limited to historians who focus on the American side of the war. See Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Two key recent articles which represent the orthodox/revisionist split are K.W. Taylor, "How I Began to Teach about the Vietnam War," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 43, no. 4 (Fall 2004): 637-647 and Robert Buzzanco, "Fear and (Self) Loathing in Lubbock: How I Learned to Quit Worrying and Love Vietnam and Iraq," *Counterpunch*, April 16-17, 2005, <http://www.counterpunch.org/buzzanco04162005.html> For examples of other scholarship that has been classified as orthodox, see Philip E. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence, Kan: University Press of Kansas, 2002), Edward Garvey Miller, *Grand Designs: Vision, Power, and Nation Building in America's Alliance with Ngo Dinh Diem, 1954-1960* (Thesis (Ph. D.) Harvard University, 2004). For works often considered as revisionist, see James M. Carter, *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1954-1968* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia, 1950-1957* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). For an overview of the debate, see Andrew A. Wiest and Michael Doidge. *Triumph Revisited: Historians Battle for the Vietnam War* (New York: Routledge, 2010) and Edward Miller, "War Stories: The Taylor-Buzzanco Debate and How We Think about the Vietnam War," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 1, no. 1-2 (February/August 2006): 453-484.

⁵¹ Michael Lind, *Vietnam, the Necessary War: A Reinterpretation of America's Most Disastrous Military Conflict* (New York: Free Press, 1999).

American policy and the 1963 coup an admission of American defeat.⁵²

Seth Jacobs's recent reevaluation of the American relationship with the RVN looks for cultural explanations for the failed regime, arguing that American ideas about Vietnam's racial inferiority and Christian zealotry led the United States to support Diem despite his lack of popularity in Saigon or his ability to form a functioning and representative government.⁵³ The one point of agreement that has emerged among RVN scholars mirrors historian Edward Miller's contention that scholarship must not dismiss Diem as an American puppet, suggesting Diem should be studied not as a passive figure but as an agent of his own rise to power.⁵⁴ The question of Diem's leadership reinforces the orthodox/revisionist split that has hardened among scholars of the war, and this issue is important for my purposes, as it seems to signify the need for new methodologies and reveal the limitations of recent analytical frameworks.

This study draws from a broad selection of secondary literatures on the Vietnam War and takes as a central premise the notion that women and ideas about gender are not simply tertiary questions separable from the conflict itself, but that women and gender were constituent elements that both shaped the course of the war just as they were shaped by it. I look at a variety of cultural texts – literature, newspapers, and popular magazines most extensively, as their content reflects the ways ordinary Americans read the war and came to understand America's role in it. The first three chapters pay a great deal of attention to the war's portrayal in the American media as a way of assessing the ways the American public

⁵² Denis Warner, *The Last Confucian* (New York: Macmillan, 1963).

⁵³ Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam*.

⁵⁴ Edward Garvey Miller, *Grand Designs*.

received, understood, and either supported, were indifferent to, or opposed American involvement in Vietnam. I also draw from government documents, particularly the research and writings of the RAND Corporation and official government speeches that betrayed the gendered rhetoric of the era. Because most of the women in this study are relatively unknown to academic audiences, this dissertation contains a substantial amount of biography, often incomplete, and drawn from news accounts, memoirs, and government documents. Biographical information serves the dual purpose of exposing the experiences of women rarely contained in the historical record and also demonstrating the gulf that often existed between American characterizations of Vietnamese women and the women themselves. The chapters on Vietnamese women use a limited number of Vietnamese sources, and while I attempt to convey an understanding of the Vietnamese view of the war, this study does not purport to be within the bounds of Vietnamese studies, as my primary lines of inquiry are centered on American perceptions of the Vietnamese, understood through the prism of gender.

In the following chapters I seek to demonstrate the ways that gendered discourse helped to shape the narrative of the war from the first years of American involvement in Vietnam until the end of the war and to simultaneously evaluate the ways that Vietnamese and American women themselves participated in the conflict and in the creation of the war's discourse. Chapter one analyzes the production of cultural images of Vietnam in the news media and in popular literature and film in the mid-1950s that introduced the virtually unknown nation as a site of humanitarian rescue through human interest stories that relied on a language of gendered suffering that could be assuaged by American altruism. I argue that in the immediate aftermath of the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu, the American government and media

deployed a variety of feminized figures to portray Vietnam as a nation in need of protection and benevolent intervention.

The next two chapters focus on Vietnamese women on opposite sides of the conflict in southern Vietnam. Chapter two focuses on perceptions of Madame Nhu and the RVN in the American media, arguing that her significance goes beyond the symbolic and is an important way of assessing the relationship between the American and Saigon-based governments. I chart how this idea of using women and gender as framing devices for the war evolved between 1954 and 1963, from contradictory images of Madame Nhu as a modern feminist to a regressive reliance on imagery of a “dragon lady,” bound by a culture that was still unknowable to Americans. Chapter three evaluates American portrayals of the women of the National Liberation Front in American literature and the journalistic media, arguing that sensationalized, hyper-sexualized images of these women have obscured the nature of the movement and the role of women within it. I analyze how American cultural productions about the war, as well as the press and government documents relied on gendered imagery to intensify and illustrate the threat posed by NLF as emblems of a deceptive and often invisible enemy.

In the final two chapters I evaluate the ways American women attempted to reshape the war’s dominant narratives, as female members of the antiwar left drew attention away from the Vietnamese enemy and shifted it to the civilian victims, who were often figured as women and children victimized by overwhelming American weaponry. Chapter four focuses on the intersection of the antiwar group Women Strike for Peace and the issue of civilian casualties, particularly from napalm, which became a gendered issue framed by moral outrage and maternal pacifism. Chapter five looks at how three American women writers - Gloria

Emerson, Frances Fitzgerald, and Mary McCarthy – made early suggestions of the collective national trauma wrought by the Vietnam War and sought to evaluate the war in social and psychological ways rather than through military analysis. I evaluate how these three American women writers sought to intervene in the framing of the conflict in its final years and beyond, arguing that perceptions about the ability to narrate a war often pivot on naturalized assumptions about the intertwining of masculinity and warfare.

This study proposes that while women and ideas about gender were useful in the creation of effective symbols – in rationalizing American goals in the Vietnam War, characterizing threats, and defining values – that the lives of women affected by the war often conflicted with these representations in ways that often rendered the symbols sometimes false, and often fundamentally dishonest. Ideas about women and the war often crystallized in the form of female archetypes, as they did in *Look* magazine in 1966, but by evaluating the women's lived experiences, the familiar and often iconic gendered images of the war, so rich with meaning but so often void of context, take on a fuller meaning that reveals much about the war, the era, and evolving gender relations in the United States

Chapter One

Romance and Rescue: Gender, Myth and American Impressions of Vietnam in the 1950s

In his wildly popular 1947 novel, *Tales of the South Pacific*, James Michener gave American audiences their first major Vietnamese character, a middle-aged woman who worked as a black marketeer, with the sinister name Bloody Mary.¹ Millions of readers regarded Michener as the most trusted American authority on Asia, a prolific writer who presented the exotic cultures of the Asia-Pacific by fictionalizing the people he met on his own extensive travels, like the labor activist in the South Pacific who inspired the character of Bloody Mary. Michener described Bloody Mary as “old and repulsive,” as an aggressive but enterprising market seller who was brought to the Pacific island of the New Hebrides as an indentured servant of French plantation owners. Her face was lined with deep creases from years of hard labor in the sun, her few teeth stained with the red-black juice of betel nut; Michener stated that Mary’s mouth looked as if it had been “gashed by a rusty razor.”²

Despite her repellent appearance, Bloody Mary had some redeeming qualities, as she was a clever entrepreneur who endeared herself to the American military men on the island. In the chapter titled “Fo’ Dolla,” a pivotal part of the musical and movie adaptations of the book, *South Pacific*, Mary had begun to make substantial profits by selling grass skirts and shrunken human heads to American service men recovering from battle at Guadalcanal. When the French administrators realized women like Mary were earning as much annual profit from the grass

¹ James Michener, *Tales of the South Pacific* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1947).

² Ibid., 168.

skirts as some plantation owners, they passed a law prohibiting the indentured workers from selling goods directly to the public. The women were allowed to sell the skirts to the plantation owners cheaply, and the owners in turn collected the sizable profits by selling them to the Americans. When the American Marines heard of the restrictions placed on Bloody Mary, they offered her protection from the French police and helped her sell her goods to other Americans. The Marines, Michener wrote, “saw in Bloody Mary a symbol of age old defiance of unjust laws.”³ In *South Pacific*, Bloody Mary’s plot line is reduced to a bawdy, comedic rendering, as her importance is limited to her role as the mother of a lovely young woman, Liat, a pure, clean, attractive girl who became the object of an American Marine’s affection. In Michener’s novel, Bloody Mary is a caricature, haggling over prices in broken, vulgar English learned by conversing exclusively with soldiers using phrases such as “Goddam sonovabeech, no!” and ribbing the Marines with their own epithets, “*soandso* bastard!” Despite her function as comic relief, in *Tales of the South Pacific*, Bloody Mary at least hints at the complexities of the lives of the Vietnamese, who had become implicated in France’s global empire and would in the following decades be at the center of the American foreign policy conversation.

If America relied on Michener for information about Vietnam, as it did for the Pacific islands, the character of Bloody Mary surely confused more than it clarified. In *Tales of the South Pacific*, the name “Vietnam” never appears, as Bloody Mary and her fellow workers are called “Tonks,” short for Tonkinese, which was described simply as a French possession. Bloody Mary was represented as a *mélange* of ethnicities, a pan-Asian, pan-Pacific character that lacked a national identity. Writing that the “Tonks” came from “Tonkin China,” Michener maintained that the “Tonkinese were in reality Chinese, sort of the way Canadians were Americans, only a

³ Ibid., 171.

little different.”⁴ And so Bloody Mary was in no way a specific or even comprehensible reference to Vietnam, a nation virtually unknown to Americans in 1947, but Michener’s characterization of her established a cultural reference point, however inaccurate or imprecise, an image of the Vietnamese that could be invoked by average Americans as the United States drew closer to war. Michener later revealed that Mary’s nickname referred not to her betel-blackened mouth but to her outspoken advocacy of “Tonkinese rights,” and her opposition to French colonialism. Michener acknowledged that he did not discuss the political activism of the real Mary, which was evident in her strong resistance to the exploitative labor practices of the French and its policies of indentured servitude, blaming his own ignorance of the Vietnamese people and their perspective on the French war there.⁵

In the character of Bloody Mary, Michener posited a vision of the Vietnamese that emphasized a primitive exoticism, but more importantly as a people without a nation. While *Tales of the South Pacific* and the 1958 movie/musical it inspired, *South Pacific*, were not explicitly about Southeast Asia, the character of Bloody Mary offered readers a convoluted, dramatized vision of Vietnam that was embodied by a complex female character. Bloody Mary was important as the first popular image of a Vietnamese woman in postwar American culture, and variations of the characteristics Michener attributed to her would reappear in press coverage of Vietnam as the war unfolded in the 1960s. Michener’s character demonstrates the utility of female figures as devices through which Vietnam could be introduced to American audiences, often in vague and stereotypical ways that reinforced the prevailing American foreign policy narrative and presented the Vietnamese as a people vulnerable to communist influence and

⁴ Ibid., 191.

⁵ For a description of Michener’s interactions with the real Bloody Mary, see Jim Lovensheimer, *South Pacific: Paradise Rewritten* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 165.

worthy of American protection.

While Bloody Mary is a single fictional character introduced a full decade before Vietnam entered the American cultural consciousness, she is important as an example of the ways Americans conceived of Asian women in the postwar world. By focusing on the characteristics that Michener alludes to in the figure of Bloody Mary, this chapter suggests approaching the origins of American intervention in Vietnam through the lens of gender, not as an alternative explanation for American actions but as a constituent element of the wider public's rationalization of Vietnam as a nation in need of American rescue. In the 1950s, this rationalization cast Vietnamese women in a role very different from the one it would play by the war's end in 1975.

Along with establishing Vietnam as a site of rescue, feminized figures also helped Americans to frame the Vietnamese conflict as a place where notions of American benevolence and military and economic dominance could converge in order to further the interests of the free world. Historian Emily Rosenberg has written about the ways that gender can be integrated into the study of United States foreign relations, writing that mythologized notions of femininity and masculinity have played a role in the way that America has conceived of its foreign allies and enemies. Rosenberg observes:

"At particular times in United States relations with weaker nations, gendered imagery helped convert stories about foreign affairs into mythic tales, often with the form and structure of popular romance novels. Romantic formulas helped articulate and justify policies of dependence, portraying the disorganized but alluring (feminine) tropics courted by and ultimately succumbing to the imprint of manly organizers of civilization."⁶

⁶ Emily Rosenberg, "Gender," *Journal of American History*, vol. 77, no. 1 (June 1990, 116-124), 119.

In this chapter I analyze the production of images of Vietnam in the mid-1950s whereby the American government and media sought to introduce a new policy of foreign aid to a little known country by producing historical examples of Rosenberg's "mythic tales" that evoke different iterations of feminine suffering as well as sacrifice and heroism. The "Angel of Dien Bien Phu," a French nurse who represented dedication and devotion to soldiers and to her nation in the final battle of the French war in Indochina in 1954, embodied one version of the heroic narrative. That same year, a feminized narrative of suffering in Vietnam was rendered in the composite figure of the Northern Vietnamese refugee, who in 1954 sacrificed her home to flee to the better life ostensibly offered by the burgeoning democracy being formed in the South. Media coverage of the "Angel," Genevieve de Galard, and stories about the unprecedented exodus of refugees from north to south were two of the only ways that ordinary Americans learned about this part of the world in the 1950s, as Vietnam in this moment was viewed more as an economic burden than a potential military entanglement.

The chapter also evaluates two other examples of the ways average Americans got to know the Vietnamese in this decade, through analysis of a controversy prompted by a letter to the editor of the *Washington Post* from a young Vietnamese woman who asked difficult questions about American intentions in her country. Finally, I will analyze two enormously popular novels about Vietnam – Graham Greene's 1956 *The Quiet American* and the 1958 novel *The Ugly American* – works that are frequently called upon by historians to help explain the origins of war in Vietnam, but are also works that can be read to reveal important gendered symbolism about the national character of the Vietnamese and the Americans. In *The Quiet American* I argue that the novel and later film's lone female figure, Phuong, read by contemporary audiences as a transparent metaphor for Vietnam, represented the American expectation of the passive

compliance of the South Vietnamese government but acknowledged her propensity for shifting loyalties. I will offer a brief reconsideration of *The Ugly American* which challenges one popular interpretation of the novel as a prescription for the restoration of masculine integrity to American politics, arguing instead that the book reaffirmed the importance of feminized American virtues to the wider world of foreign relations and more specifically to cold war conflicts like Vietnam.

In the mid-1950s, just after the Korean War had ended in an unsatisfying stalemate and geographic partition and the cold war threat of a nuclear conflict generated a mass cultural anxiety, many Americans skeptical of foreign military intervention - particularly in Asia - simply did not know or care about contemporary events in Vietnam. It was in this climate of reluctance and indifference that the American media faced the task of portraying both a South Vietnamese ally and a North Vietnamese enemy. This undertaking, which was implicitly supported by the American government, cultivated positive and optimistic coverage of the region, and was unfettered by preexisting cultural perceptions, as there were almost no popular references to Vietnam (with the single exception of Michener's *Bloody Mary*) that would have been familiar to most Americans in the mid-1950s. I argue that because of this perceptual vacuum the American media framed early stories about Vietnam in terms of "human interest" narratives that deployed a feminine language of altruism and humanity that marked a striking contrast to the more familiar notions of cold war bombast and masculine bellicosity that would define the American-Vietnamese relationship in the 1960s. Through the evocation of gendered imagery, the media helped to defend and explain the American government's foreign policy of intervention in Vietnam, using the humanity and righteousness of the cause to encourage support of the newly formed government in Saigon, the Republic of Vietnam (RVN). While the level of interest among ordinary Americans in Vietnam in the 1950s was undeniably limited, by focusing on the

first moments of cultural encounter between America and the Vietnamese, the period of 1954 through the early 1960s emerges as a time where we can locate the origins of America's cultural consciousness of Vietnam and then evaluate the terms whereby this consciousness was created. By crafting gendered mythic tales of real events in Vietnam, women were used to galvanize support for American intervention and to create a context and urgency for humanitarian action.

Though the utter lack of common knowledge about Vietnam freed the American press to create new perceptions of the nation, introducing Vietnam was a complicated matter in the 1950s. The first problem was the murkiness of America's position on the French war that began in 1946, a war that many in the United States viewed as an anachronism and a futile attempt to reinstate a colonial system that appeared to many as a relic of the past.⁷ Another difficulty in framing the conflict was the fact that in the 1950s Vietnam needed to be portrayed to the American public as two separate polities, one that was sufficiently threatening to justify major intervention, a trait that was ascribed to the northern Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), and human enough to merit assistance, a characterization attributed to the southern RVN. American newspapers, popular magazines and fiction in the mid-1950s represented the American ally in south Vietnam as both feminized, but also as capable and pragmatic, a country that was at once vulnerable to an internal communist takeover and thus in need of American protection, and simultaneously a promising democracy able to assimilate American guidance in establishing a representative government that would act as a bulwark against international communism and its spread throughout Asia.

One example of the press's effort to make this regional distinction clear and to simultaneously introduce the nation of Vietnam using gendered symbolism was in a 1955 article

⁷ See Mark Atwood Lawrence and Fredrik Logevall, *The First Vietnam War: Colonial Conflict and Cold War Crisis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

in *Mademoiselle* magazine titled “Young Women of Indochina.”⁸ The article profiled two Vietnamese women, a northern girl nicknamed “Pigtails,” and a southerner named Thap. On the page, the story is horizontally divided, with Pigtails’s story appearing above the title and Thap’s below, literally dividing the women’s stories into north and south. Like much of the early coverage of Vietnam, the photographs are more revealing than the text, representing the north as a dour, militarized culture and the south as a happy, optimistic one. The Northern women are featured in a photograph of a group of young women in military uniforms, armed with rifles and standing at attention, and the southern women are smiling, wearing a white ao dai, described as both aristocratic and traditional, and a tight close-up of a laughing young girl. In the text of the article, northerner Pigtails is presented as a cryptic figure, and the author expresses concern that she was monitoring the Americans’ movements to report to her superiors. After Pigtails assists the author Betty Jean Lifton in expediting her visa application, the article grants that in fact “Pigtails was human –and even more important than we had realized.” The southern Thap’s humanity was implicit, and her story reveals a young woman who found the Viet Minh’s Marxist political theory too rigid, her initial nationalist enthusiasm gave way to skepticism and mistrust of Ho Chi Minh’s leadership. Lifton’s article is a simplistic rendering of Vietnam that relies on women to introduce the nation, offering little information about the people or their political struggles but it did form effective shorthand references to describe the two polities of Vietnam to an unknowing readership.

Despite the efforts of *Mademoiselle* to make Vietnam understandable, the complexities of this geopolitical situation in Vietnam resisted this effort to create generic and easily legible representations of enemies and allies that were so familiar and useful in framing the Japanese

⁸ Betty Jean Lifton, “Young Women of Indochina,” *Mademoiselle*, 1 July 1955, 50-54.

enemy in World War II. In fact, the evolution of the relationship between the United States and Japan provides important context for understanding relations with Vietnam in the 1950s. In her history of the ways America reimagined postwar Japan from a brutal enemy depicted in racialized terms into a progressive, competent ally, historian Naoko Shibusawa has argued that the United States deployed a language of liberal paternalism that portrayed Japan as a geisha-like figure, as a diminutive, malleable nation that had confronted and moved beyond the violence of the war to form with Americans a mutually beneficial friendship and economic partnership.⁹ The historical circumstances in the relationship between Japan and the United States that Shibusawa evaluates were of course quite different than those of the American-Vietnamese relationship and were important in shaping the terms of the new Japanese-American alliance. America's relationship with Japan carried the heavy freight of the American use of atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and was influenced by years of wartime propaganda that cast Japan as a brutal and vicious enemy.

In the case of Vietnam in the 1950s, so little was known that popular representations in so-called "middlebrow" publications like the incredibly popular *Reader's Digest*, *Look*, *Time* and *Life*, in addition to women's magazines and major newspapers, were essentially creating Vietnam with no historical preconceptions, no baggage to work through, and no carefully crafted stereotypes to undo. Writing about the utter lack of any structures of government in Saigon in the mid-1950s, *Washington Post* columnist Marquis Childs wrote in December 1954, "It is difficult to realize the extent to which almost everything in South Vietnam must be started from

⁹ Naoko Shibusawa, *America's Geisha Ally: Reimagining the Japanese Enemy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 2006.

scratch.”¹⁰ Childs’s assertion of the Saigon government as a blank slate could have been equally applied to the collective American knowledge of Vietnam. Arguing for the importance of establishing a coherent narrative for the general public, Childs wrote, “If the story cannot be told for Americans, then it is difficult to get understanding for a vital effort in the struggle with communism.”

The humanitarianism that ostensibly animated the story of American involvement in postcolonial Vietnam relied heavily on shifting and racialized ideas about gender and images of women both as victims, often embodied by non-communist Vietnamese women, and as modern, progressive models, depicted in the figures of heroic and capable western women. This dichotomous view of women helped to galvanize support for American assistance in the country and reinforce the idea that communism was not just an abstract political philosophy but was a real, if manageable threat to American values and families. Relying on tropes of female sacrifice, the suffering of mothers, both small and “sublime” heroic acts of resistance, and children in need of guidance, this chapter analyzes the ways representations of women in the 1950s contributed to the formation of early perceptions of Vietnam. Through these female figures, the American media rendered the complex situation in Indochina as legible, understandable, and relatable, as fitting with American values and impelling a sense of responsibility for the nation of Vietnam.

Historical Background

In terms of the history of America’s war in Vietnam, the 1950s may have been the decade when the ideas that led to massive war gestated, but the decade has been little considered as important to the understanding of the conflict of the 1960s and 1970s. Identifying the point of

¹⁰ “Refugee Problem in South Vietnam,” *Washington Post*, 1 December 1954, 12.

origin of America's war in Vietnam has long been a debated issue. Some scholars have argued that America's first involvement began in September 1945 when the head of Saigon's OSS, Lieutenant Colonel Peter Dewey, became the first American killed by Vietnamese forces resisting the French. Alternatively, some have argued that United States involvement commenced in 1950 when President Harry Truman first offered monetary aid to the French, who were four years into a war to renew their colonial control of Indochina. Two dates during the Eisenhower administration have also been posited as start dates, one in 1954 when President Eisenhower sent a letter to Ngo Dinh Diem affirming America's support for his government, or in 1955 when American aid was first granted to the RVN directly, and not filtered through the French government. Historians have suggested other start dates for the war, some positing that the American war began in 1961 when President John F. Kennedy sent the first military advisers to Vietnam, in 1964 with the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution's tacit approval of President Lyndon Johnson's authority to wage war without Congressional authorization, or in 1965 with the large-scale influx of combat troops and the institution of heavy bombing campaigns.¹¹

This chapter, with its interest in public perceptions, finds its starting point in the middle of these events, as the French suffered a stinging defeat at the mountainous fortress at Dien Bien Phu on May 7, 1954. While the United States resisted offering France the ground troops, air power, or atomic weapons, May 1954 marked an important point as the origin of an American consciousness regarding Vietnam. In addition to its implications for France and the United States, Dien Bien Phu was also recognized almost immediately as an important battle in the history of global empire, marking the first time a colonized people effectively defeated its

¹¹ For an overview of this debate, see William Conrad Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986) and Fredrik Logevall, *The Origins of the Vietnam War* (Harlow, England: Longman, 2001).

colonial masters in a long and bloody military engagement. More specifically, the battle played an important symbolic role in affirming to the world the capability of Asians in defeating a major western power, a notion that first arose in the wake of the Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia during World War II, which saw Japan appeal to a racialized regionalism of “Asia for the Asians” in places like Vietnam.

Writer Graham Greene, who contributed important reportage on the region in the 1950s, argued that Dien Bien Phu was important not just in upsetting the tenuous balance of power in the world in terms of the global struggle between the alleged expansionism of Soviet communism and the influence of American democracy, but that it more fundamentally marked the end of western hope of dominating the east.¹² Some in the American press downplayed the magnitude of the battle, offering the opinion that the French loss at Dien Bien Phu was not really a surprise, and that militarily speaking the fortress was probably not worth defending. Some major publications like *Life* magazine went further, criticizing the French loss as reflecting a moment of its own “heroic insanity,” that French stubbornness prevented a more equitable settlement than the one they received at Geneva, an agreement that reflected the Viet Minh’s powerful negotiating position that resulted from its victory at Dien Bien Phu.¹³

Despite disagreements over the degree of its importance, the American press largely accepted the proposition that the French defeat was significant and in many ways symbolized the end of European colonialism as the world had known it. Criticism of the French venture in Indochina was familiar in intellectual journals like *The New Republic*, which asserted in 1950

¹² Graham Greene and John Clark Pratt, *The Quiet American, Viking Critical Edition* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 206.

¹³ “Heroism: Futile Without Unity, *Life*, 17 May 1954, 32.

that the French were waging a war solely based on “old-fashioned imperialistic greed and nothing else,” and that throughout the war, which the journal argued France had provoked and prolonged, the French “conducted themselves badly from every conceivable point of view - morally, politically, and humanly.”¹⁴

Criticism was not limited to intellectual publications, as demonstrated by a 1953 article in *Life* magazine that reportedly angered conservative publisher Henry Luce. The article, a sharply critical photographic essay on the French presence in Indochina, showed images of young Vietnamese wounded by the war juxtaposed with empty French offices in Hanoi. Photographs focused on the literal emptiness of French rule in Hanoi, showing images of deserted streets, vacant offices, captioned by the phrase, “It is a languid war at headquarters.”¹⁵ The article’s author, David Douglas Duncan, spent eight weeks in Indochina, and his essay launched a subtle but stinging critique of French laziness and bureaucratic inefficiency, with sharp captions noting that it was the local Vietnamese population fighting the French war, which was plagued by “corruption and vice.” The article suggested that American aid, which totaled over fifty million dollars in 1953 alone, was an “ill-fated failure,” with funds wasted on an incompetent and outmoded French administration to use against a population who appeared to be widely sympathetic to the Viet Minh. The French, *Life* asserted, had failed to support their own war, but the main reason that they failed to win it was their inability to acknowledge that the Indochinese would not fight and die to preserve the French empire. The *Life* article seemed to be exceptional, though, as most popular magazines and newspapers championed the American role in defending

¹⁴ “What Sort of Help for Indo-China,” *The New Republic*, 22 May 1950, vol. 122, issue 21, 5-6 and Percy Winner, “Outside America,” *The New Republic*, 19 June 1950, vol. 122, issue 25, 9-10.

¹⁵ David Douglas Duncan, “The Year of the Snake,” *Life*, 3 August 1953, 73-85.

democracy and constraining the expansionist tendencies of the Soviet Union. The tension between Duncan's article and the pro-intervention coverage demonstrated the important need for a way to unify American opinion on involvement in Vietnam and to establish a powerful narrative to make clear the importance of Vietnam to Americans.

Genevieve de Galard, the “Angel of Dien Bien Phu”

One way that the American press managed to interest American readers in an obscure battle in a far-flung Asian nation was to use the conventions of Hollywood, finding in the battle a mythic tale that played off notions of female heroism triumphing in the face of a seemingly hopeless defeat. Major newspaper coverage of Dien Bien Phu emphasized the high stakes of the battle in terms of French prestige, but as the media more closely associated the defeat with the actions of one heroic nurse, the coverage revealed a romanticized view of the conflict that at once reestablished the nobility of the French, excised the Vietnamese enemy and emphasized the unlikely courage of a woman. For many Americans in spring of 1954, Dien Bien Phu was a vaguely familiar name in the news, as many journalists and television newsmen regarded the battle as a potentially decisive moment for France - either it would hold the fort and reestablish control of its colony or the revolutionary Viet Minh, led by Ho Chi Minh and a gifted military strategist, General Vo Nguyen Giap, would deal a final blow not just to its former French masters but to the very concept of European colonialism in Asia. During the battle, President Eisenhower said in a speech at Transylvania College in April 1954, “The words Dien Bien Phu are no longer just a funny-sounding name, to be dismissed from the breakfast conversation

because we don't know where it is, or what it means."¹⁶ Eisenhower argued that the battle made clear the "agony" of the French war in Indochina and established Vietnam as a testing ground where freedom would battle communist dictatorship. Fearing the spread of communism from "this bottleneck in Indochina," throughout Southeast Asia and beyond, Eisenhower appealed to Americans to appreciate the importance of Vietnam to the security of the United States.

In January 1955, the Associated Press announced the winner of its thirteenth annual "International Woman of the Year" poll for 1954, as a French nurse, Genevieve de Galard, who was the lone woman caring for wounded soldiers at the besieged fortress at Dien Bien Phu.¹⁷ The twenty-nine year old air transport nurse had endured nearly six weeks stranded in the makeshift field hospital located in dank catacombs carved into a mountain at the remote French outpost in western Vietnam. De Galard worked alongside nearly 14,000 French union soldiers after her C-47 transport plane was damaged upon landing and unable to take off. During the last week of French resistance, Brigadier General Christian de Castries presented de Galard with the Military Cross for her "courage under fire," and after the French defeat de Galard was made a knight of the Legion of Honor, returning to France a national heroine despite the catastrophic loss that Dien Bien Phu represented for the French empire. Genevieve de Galard was a media sensation in 1954, not just in Europe but also in the United States, where she came to represent heroism, sacrifice, devotion to duty, and generosity of spirit. It is important to note the frequency with which de Galard was mentioned in press coverage of the battle. Her efforts became synonymous with Dien Bien Phu, and her story was relayed not as a marginal, feel-good footnote but was conveyed as *the* story of the battle.

¹⁶ Edward T. Folliard, "Dien Bien Phu Tests Freedom, Says Ike," *Washington Post*, 24 April 1954, 1.

¹⁷ "Nurse Wins AP Woman of the Year Poll," *Los Angeles Times*, 2 January 1955, D2.

Genevieve de Galard, who the American press quickly anointed the “Angel of Dien Bien Phu,” offered an early opportunity for the American media and the government to present the French effort in Indochina in terms of a humanitarian effort, one that relied heavily on gendered notions of sacrifice. De Galard’s story not only presented to a mainstream American audience the circumstances of the French battle at Dien Bien Phu in an engaging, person-to-person manner, but it also offered a way to soften or condition the American people for its own expanding presence in the region, if only at this stage as technical advisers and political tutors. The narrative of de Galard was steeped in visions of selfless humanitarianism and altruism, values that were primarily coded as feminine, and the story was largely stripped of any specific mention of the geopolitical implications of the French loss at Dien Bien Phu and the consequent unraveling of its empire in Southeast Asia. The story of the “Angel” pivoted on universal notions of feminine compassion and solace. That de Galard performed her duties in the midst of a brutal battle that brought to a close a deeply unpopular and lingering military engagement known by the French public as the “dirty war” rarely figured in the story.

The American press was perhaps the first to recognize the potential of the nurse’s story, as de Galard revealed in her memoir that while she was stranded in the battered fortress she received a “terse telegram” from an American press agency in Hanoi represented by journalist Marguerite Higgins offering to pay de Galard “thousands of dollars for an exclusive on my memoirs.”¹⁸ De Galard, confounded by the timing of the offer, shook it off with a laugh. “Preoccupied with my work,” de Galard recalled, “I simply never responded to that astonishing

¹⁸ Genevieve de Galard, *The Angel of Dien Bien Phu: The Lone French Woman at the Decisive Battle for Vietnam* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2010), 78.

offer made during the worst of the battle.”¹⁹ As the American press recognized so early, the angel’s story was laden with the stuff of a Hollywood blockbuster, and also represented an opportunity to frame the French war, the American relationship with France, and the current unstable circumstances of Indochina with a compelling human interest story bound to resonate with wide swaths of American society.

Genevieve de Galard first appeared in American coverage of the French war in Indochina two weeks after the battle ended on May 7, 1954, while she was still a prisoner of the victorious Viet Minh. The Viet Minh, aware that de Galard had received international press attention during the battle, were so concerned about the potential for public relations damage that leaders demanded de Galard be evacuated, fearing that the world would believe she was being held against her will.²⁰ Ever the devoted nurse, de Galard was unhappy to leave her comrades behind, many of whom were subjected to long and torturous marches from remote areas of the country to Hanoi. By the end of May, de Galard was released from captivity and greeted by a “heroine’s welcome” in Hanoi, where throngs of cheering supporters and two generals met her at Bach Mai airfield. Reporters from all over the world were eager to hear her story of surviving forty-one days of battle and eighteen days of “Red captivity.” After her release, Galard appeared relieved but battered, displaying a manner of self-effacing gentleness, repeatedly asserting that she had only done her duty.

In a first-person narrative of her ordeal at Dien Bien Phu that appeared in the November 1954 issue of *Woman’s Home Companion*, de Galard wrote that her days in the fortress “were a

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ “Angel Tells Own Story of Dien Bien Phu,” *Washington Post*, 29 July 1954, 19.

revelation for a woman,” that laid bare to her the true heroism of the French soldier.²¹ While she avoided a discussion of the larger implications of the French defeat or the political realities of contemporary Vietnam, de Galard acknowledged that she had, “in a minor sort of way,” become a symbol for those soldiers who had fought and died at Dien Bien Phu. In the article the nurse suggested that until after the defeat she had not realized the extent to which the battle had become an international phenomenon, but that after her trip to America, she came to understand that the battle was followed, was “really lived, almost hour by hour, by the American people.” De Galard stood as a witness to the “sublime heroism” of the soldiers, suggesting that as the only woman to experience the battle, that she possessed a “woman’s trust to keep alive the memory of the deeds men do and a woman’s truth to soothe the suffering that all of us will have to endure in life’s battles yet to come.”²²

The American press displayed something of an infatuation with the idolized figure of de Galard, seeing her as a symbol of the “ideal of service at a time when it is widely suffering from cynical disrepute.” Columnist Malvina Lindsey suggested that de Galard may lead the “hero-hungry” American people to consider more seriously the importance of nurses, a profession that in 1954 was experiencing serious shortages in the United States. According to Lindsey, the exploits of de Galard may be the thing to spur Americans to altruism and renew a national commitment to heroism “in the Nightingale pattern.”²³ While noting that her choice to serve as a combat nurse was “shockingly unconventional,” Lindsey acknowledged that de Galard’s unit was an elite one, comprised of several young women from aristocratic families, as was Galard

²¹ Genevieve de Galard-Terraube, “My Ordeal,” *Woman’s Home Companion*, 1 November 1954, vol. 81, 38-45.

²² *Ibid.*, 38.

²³ Malvina Lindsey, “French Nurse, New Spur to Altruism,” *Washington Post*, 26 July 1954, 6.

whose own lineage could be traced back to the fifteenth century when her ancestor Hector de Galard rode to Orleans with Joan of Arc. Journalists speculated about de Galard's motivation for becoming a flight nurse, citing her family's military tradition along with her devout Catholicism and her irrepressible call to service. De Galard herself referred to the notion that "every woman has a maternal instinct to care for someone in trouble," attributing her career choice to a biological imperative to give comfort to the suffering.²⁴

In addition to her courage, the American press also praised de Galard for her ability to retain her femininity in a dire situation. The *Washington Post* noted that even during the height of battle at Dien Bien Phu, Galard's "lips were rouged," and that General de Castries had ordered an aide to appoint de Galard's dugout with silk sheets made from parachutes. Despite the general's efforts to make de Galard comfortable, she was reported to have asked for no special treatment, only once requesting personal supplies of "new underwear, cosmetics, and some clean blouses," which were delivered to Dien Bien Phu, but like many supply drops in the mountainous terrain, fell just behind enemy lines.²⁵ To the American press she immediately became "sweet Genevieve," or "just Jenny," a woman whose shyness made her seem less like an international heroine or the sexpots of French cinema like Brigitte Bardot, with whom Americans had recently been introduced, and more familiar to Americans, like "somebody's cousin from France."²⁶ On her appearance, the American press presented de Galard as modestly attractive, as "cherubic-faced" and "shy, freckle-faced."

In *The Reporter*, journalist Edmond Taylor argued that while de Galard had come to be

²⁴ "Angel Tells Own Story of Dien Bien Phu," *Washington Post*, 29 July 1954, 19.

²⁵ "Foreign News: Angel's Return," *Time*, 31 May 1954, 23.

²⁶ "City Cheers the 'Angel of Dien Bien Phu' in Parade," *New York Times*, 27 July 1954, 1.

known as “the most glamorous Dienbienphu name,” that her image lacked the sex appeal it had become invested with. Taylor wrote, “Genevieve is rather an exception to the family tradition of feminine homeliness with her large clear blue eyes, her sturdy but graceful figure, and the natural elegance which enables her to look chic in camouflaged parachutists’ overalls. Otherwise she seems - deceptively - a typical, conventional, gloriously dull de Galard woman.”²⁷ Taylor’s article betrayed *The Reporter’s* left-leaning politics, arguing that in the end Dien Bien Phu demonstrated nothing more than the fact that the French were “willing to die for nothing,” and that Genevieve had become a symbol of national unity as a way of appealing to the “humanitarian and pacifist Left.”²⁸ Taylor astutely argued that in de Galard the martial tradition, and indeed the larger French efforts in Indochina, were relayed in a symbol that was less threatening than in a combatant, that her femininity and purity of purpose allowed the international public to admire the French effort and its associated virtues of honor and courage without calling into question the morality or political purpose of the French war in Vietnam.

“The heroine of the whole free world”

The willingness to blur the complex political realities of the postcolonial situation in Vietnam and convey the battle of Dien Bien Phu as a simple story of dedication and heroism condensed into the figure of a young female nurse was made apparent in the summer of 1954 when Genevieve de Galard embarked on a nineteen day tour of the United States. Ohio Congresswoman Frances Bolton initiated de Galard’s invitation to the United States, making de

²⁷ Edmond Taylor, “The Heroic Nurse of Dienbienphu,” *The Reporter*, 20 July 1954, 28.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

Galard the first foreign woman in history to visit the country as an honored guest of Congress.²⁹

While de Galard visited Walter Reed Hospital and attended receptions given by the Red Cross and other nursing associations, she was also feted with huge parades and meetings with New York's Catholic Archbishop Francis Cardinal Spellman and President Eisenhower. De Galard appeared on the morning shows of the national television networks where the "reluctant heroine" retold her experience in the siege and thanked the American public for both its material aid to France and for its "understanding" and friendship. In the course of her tour, de Galard visited five major cities on both coasts of the United States and was welcomed to New York City by a ticker-tape parade where 250,000 people lined Broadway to get a glimpse of the nurse. De Galard gave a short speech, her remarks memorized and delivered in competent but halting English, and told the crowd that the warmth Americans had shown her was evidence of "how strong are the ties which bind our two countries."³⁰ In his remarks, New York City Mayor Robert F. Wagner amplified the rhetoric, telling de Galard, "Mademoiselle, you are not only the heroine of France. You are the heroine of the entire free world."³¹

While most American journalists seemed content to focus on the heroic angle of de Galard's trip, some did ask the nurse for her opinions on the political situation in Indochina after the recent signing of the Geneva agreement. Others asked whether she considered the battle at Dien Bien Phu to have been futile. When these questions were posed after the New York City parade, Congresswoman Bolton quickly stepped in, telling the reporter "No politics." When the reporter repeated his question to de Galard, Bolton again declined, telling the journalist, "No

²⁹ "Ticker Tape Parade Greets 'Angel of Dien Bien Phu,'" *Washington Post*, 27 July 1954, 35.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

politics. We're not allowed."³² When she visited President Eisenhower, the Washington press corps plied her with similar questions, and without Bolton there to deflect, de Galard conceded that she knew nothing of the larger French strategy in Indochina, and asserted simply that her role was limited to caring for the wounded. But, de Galard continued, the value of Dien Bien Phu was that "it showed we could struggle for honor and make a great sacrifice for liberty," and that the battle "showed to other nations that France has a soul."³³

That both Genevieve de Galard and a United States Congresswoman both declined to discuss the larger political implications of the battle of Dien Bien Phu, French goals in the war, and the American stakes in their alliance reflected the reality that while women in the 1950s could be positively associated with war and figured as capable professionals, they were explicitly excluded from decision-making or even public debate on the larger terms of the conflict. Despite her unwillingness or inability to discuss the political ramifications of Dien Bien Phu and the purpose of the French effort there, it is significant that de Galard's trip coincided with a Congressional debate on cutting foreign aid to Indochina. In fact, de Galard appeared at the Capitol just as the debate commenced, a fact that was clearly not a case of fortuitous timing but of careful planning by her hosts, who like Bolton, outspokenly favored intervention in Vietnam. Bolton's stated purpose in inviting de Galard was to encourage young American women to join the nursing profession, a shortage that Bolton attributed in part to a "decline in altruism," that mirrored Malvina Lindsey's column on the topic. But in his thorough study of the American government's policies in the Vietnam War, political scientist William Conrad Gibbons notes that in her conversations with John Foster Dulles and Allen Dulles, Congresswoman Bolton

³² "City Cheers the 'Angel of Dien Bien Phu' in Parade," *New York Times*, 27 July 1954, 1.

³³ "Angel Due at White House," *Washington Post*, 29 July 1954, 45.

suggested that de Galard be brought to the Capitol at the time of the debate over Indochina funding in order to influence undecided members to vote for continuing aid.³⁴

The story of Genevieve de Galard was effective in introducing the notion that the United States was the inheritor of the French burden in Indochina, but was silent on the more complex aspects of the story, framing the war not as a struggle for the French to regain its empire but to ward off the communist advance of Ho Chi Minh and the North Vietnamese. The story of Genevieve de Galard, and not the story of the battle of Dien Bien Phu, was one of the biggest stories of 1954, most logically because it was a compelling narrative of adventure and personal triumph that conveyed European perseverance and a feminized notion of national devotion. The story, largely forgotten to history, is significant as the first American attempt to frame involvement in Vietnam as one imbued with overtones of rescue and heroism and cultivating a mythology of intervention that focused on a female hero.

Gender and the Politics of Foreign Aid

A constituent element of the debate over the scale and kind of American involvement in Indochina revolved around the scope and impact of foreign aid, a question that was first raised in 1950 as the United States first offered monetary aid to France, assistance that grew exponentially over the next four years until the United States was paying more than three-quarters of the French war tab by 1954.³⁵ After the French loss at Dien Bien Phu and their eventual exit from

³⁴ William Conrad Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships, Part I: 1945-1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 258.

³⁵ In 1954, the United States contributed \$800 million to Indochina while France contributed \$400 million, and *The New Republic* argued that “the disparity was not matched by personnel.”

Vietnam, complete by 1956, the United States struggled to define its own relationship to Vietnam, a relationship that was not yet militarized and was thus largely characterized by its aid program. By the mid-1950s, the idea of America providing aid to foreign countries was still a relatively new one, with the defense of Greece and Turkey in 1947 representing America's first major effort in providing unilateral humanitarian assistance to threatened governments abroad.

President Eisenhower's policy of "mutual security" relied heavily on aid, as well as the creation of new treaties and the establishment of alliances through economic cooperation and diplomacy. In a 1957 address to the nation, President Eisenhower argued that the American aid policy recognized that the United States "cannot exist as an island of freedom in a surrounding sea of communism," and that aid programs are necessary for the "saving" of imperiled nations and peoples. Eisenhower often invoked the language of rescue in explaining the American aid program. In his televised speech on mutual security, President Eisenhower suggested that American assistance to the RVN and the establishment of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) meant that "Viet-Nam has been saved for freedom," and that both Vietnam and the United States were more secure because of it.³⁶ Although President Eisenhower was clear on the point that American goodwill in the form of aid and advice was a smart and effective way to maintain peace and avoid a more costly war, the dynamics of the relationship between the United States and the recipients of its aid were still being debated.

In describing the relationship between the United States and Vietnam, the *Saturday Evening Post*, paraphrasing *New York Times* reporter James Reston, evoked a parental image,

The New Republic, "The Role of the United States in Indochina," 5 April 1954, vol. 130, issue 14, 3-5.

³⁶ "Text of President's TV Address on Mutual Security," *Washington Post*, 22 May 1957, A10.

citing the propensity of the United States of assuming the role of “babysitter for fledgling governments,” that had mounted successful revolutions but were not yet ready to govern themselves. The Americans, in this formulation, were responsible for “protecting, subsidizing and nursing” noncommunist elements in Vietnam, despite the lack of a sharply defined role.³⁷ The metaphor of babysitting reflects the parental regard that was evident in American characterization of Vietnam in the 1950s, but it is revealing that such a benign metaphor would be employed, particularly one that invested the American role with such explicitly feminine, nurturing connotations.

The *Saturday Evening Post* characterized Vietnam as a nation that had never been self-sufficient or independent, citing a thousand years of Chinese rule and the subsequent “attachment” to the French empire as evidence for the country’s inevitable and likely irreversible dependence on more powerful nations. The thrust of the article emphasized the dangers America faced in involving itself in an ill-defined relationship with the Vietnamese and assuming the role of protector in a situation that as the decade wore on seemed poised to become a violent struggle reminiscent of the recent war in Korea. By infantilizing the Vietnamese and casting the United States as the responsible caregiver, the article employed a very simple maternalist metaphor that would characterize the early relationship between the two nations.

Another familial metaphor for the American-Vietnamese relationship in the mid-1950s came from Senator John F. Kennedy, in an often-cited speech delivered to the American Friends of Vietnam (AFV) Committee conference in 1956. Kennedy, who visited Vietnam in 1950 and knew Diem personally, argued for the importance of America’s support of the RVN, contending

³⁷ Demaree Bess, “Bright Spot in Asia,” *Saturday Evening Post*, 15 September 1956, 36, 127-130.

that Vietnam was “the cornerstone of the free world” and that Americans had a moral responsibility to protect the fragile new democracy. Kennedy said, “If we are not the parents of little Vietnam, then surely we are the godparents. We presided at its birth, we gave assistance to its life, we have helped to shape its future.” “This is our offspring - we cannot abandon it, we cannot ignore its needs.”³⁸ Kennedy’s notion of a parental relationship to Vietnam laid bare the important need for the United States to protect its investment in Vietnam by figuring it as a dependent child. Kennedy called for a sense of responsibility for the RVN that highlighted the degree to which the United States assisted in its formation. That this literally paternalistic rhetoric was forwarded by one of Congress’s most outspoken supporters of American intervention in Vietnam was significant. The RVN’s dependence at this point was figured as natural and not pejorative, but as the “god child” would fail to establish its authority in the late 1950s, the metaphor would take on a far different resonance in the United States.

“Pilgrims of the East”

Debates over the American role in Southeast Asia reached a higher pitch as the French negotiated the formal exit from Indochina at the 1954 Geneva conference. The Geneva agreement that ended the war in July 1954 was widely criticized in the American media as a clear loss not just for the French, but also for the United States, who considered it a blow to the “free world.” The agreement established a temporary partition of Vietnam at the seventeenth parallel, assigning control of the north to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the south to

³⁸ John F. Kennedy, “America’s Stake in Vietnam: The Cornerstone of the Free World in Southeast Asia,” delivered at conference sponsored by the American Friends of Vietnam, Washington, D.C., 1 June 1956, Texas Tech University Vietnam Archive, Douglas Pike Collection (Other Manuscripts: American Friends of Vietnam), item # 1781114013.

the newly established RVN. Contrary to popular memory, the Geneva agreement did not divide Vietnam into two separate nations, but established two “regroupment” or “assembly” zones.³⁹ The division was intended to be temporary, as the country was to be reunified following national elections scheduled for July 1956. Observers in the United States noted without exception that based on the post-Dien Bien Phu political climate in Vietnam and because of the lack of a stable government in the south that the elections would be easily won by Ho Chi Minh. While some journalists noted that the agreement gave the French more than they could have legitimately expected given their decisive military defeat, others admitted that the agreement appeared to do little more than postpone Ho Chi Minh’s election and the ascendancy of the Viet Minh.

One of the only potential bright spots in the agreement for the RVN and the United States was the stipulation that permitted the free movement of Vietnamese citizens between regroupment zones in the 300-day period following the signing of the Geneva agreement. This provision led to a significant population shift from north to south, a campaign in which the United States played a key role. The operation, while demonstrating to the world America’s willingness to assist non-communist nations in literally fleeing communist threats, also functioned to shore up the paternalist relationship between the United States and Vietnam, and relied heavily on images of women and children in establishing Vietnam as a suitable and necessary site for rescue.

Between the summers of 1954 and 1955, almost a million people left their homes in North Vietnam to resettle in the south, assisted by substantial financial aid of the United States and with the help of the navies of the United States, France, and Great Britain. First dubbed

³⁹ For a cogent analysis of the Geneva Accords, see Katherine Statler, *Replacing France: The Origins of American Intervention in Vietnam* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007).

“Operation Exodus,” by the American government, the name of the monumental migration was almost immediately changed to the more resonant and uplifting “Operation Passage to Freedom.” The air and sealift of refugees would prove to be the largest in world history, demonstrating the logistical efficiency of the American military and the possibilities for international cooperation. Despite the massive outlay of the American Navy, the French government and to a lesser extent the British military also played major roles in the operation. President Eisenhower’s special envoy to Vietnam, retired general J. Lawton Collins reminded readers of *US News and World Report* in March 1955 that French planes and vessels had transported twice as many as the Americans, a fact that he admitted was not publicized in the American press.⁴⁰ Historian Katherine Statler has argued that the handling of the refugee crisis was one rare example of successful Franco-American cooperation in regards to Vietnam, but just as Americans at the time seemed to be unaware of the French contributions, the historical narrative of the exodus has largely been remembered as an American one. Most accounts emphasize the humanitarian motivation of the operation, and argue that the cold war imperatives of containment made the mission a rational and appropriate response to a potentially expanding crisis in Southeast Asia.

Operation Passage to Freedom offered the American government its first major opportunity to provide direct assistance to the Vietnamese, and demonstrate its commitment to aiding vulnerable people facing a communist threat. The press framed the migration as primarily a philanthropic mission, one that was rendered in the familiar binary logic of the early cold war as good versus evil. *Washington Post* columnist Malvina Lindsey reflected the charitable impetus behind the efforts of the American government and many volunteer agencies, writing that the

⁴⁰ J. Lawton Collins, “What We’re Doing in Indochina,” *US News and World Report*, 4 March 1955, vol. 38, 32-38.

motivation of humanitarianism “may seem visionary and idealistic to those who think the line against communism in Southeast Asia can be held only by bomb threats, military aid, or counterpropaganda.”⁴¹ While the human factor may have played a significant role in motivating the United States to offer enormous resources of the Navy and contribute more than forty million dollars in aid allocated specifically to the refugee crisis, there were clearly more politically pragmatic reasons for the American assistance. While the influx of large numbers of refugees would undoubtedly be a strain on the new southern government, still in its infancy in terms of bureaucratic establishment, the refugees would also provide an important political base for the nascent Diem administration. Additionally, the operation held enormous potential in the propaganda realm, as an example of a million people facing a communist threat “voting with their feet” by moving south and taking the side of American-style democracy.

The assumption that the refugees would be loyal to Diem and the RVN was based entirely on the fact that a large majority of the refugees were Catholic, the religion shared by President Ngo Dinh Diem. Rarely are the demographics of a group of people so central to the larger narrative of the event. Historian Ronald Frankum’s work on the migration, which made thorough use of Navy documents and interviews with participants in the operation, stated that Catholics made up 93% of the refugee population, but only represented between ten and twenty percent of the total population of Vietnam.⁴² Some estimates suggest that more than half of the northern Catholic population migrated south in 1954, with the majority of refugees coming from only two northern provinces - Bui Chu and Phat Diem.

Religion, and the heightened religiosity of the postwar years played a key role in spurring

⁴¹ “Asian Aid Without Propaganda Price,” Malvina Lindsey, *Washington Post*, 27 June 1955, 18.

⁴² Ronald Frankum, *Operation Passage to Freedom: The United States Navy in Vietnam, 1954-1955* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2007), 36.

American involvement in the mission in Vietnam, one that many Americans saw as a moral responsibility.⁴³ That Catholics constituted an overwhelming majority of the refugees and the involvement of so many Catholic relief agencies in the operation provide powerful evidence for the notion that Operation Passage to Freedom was invested with an overtly messianic motive. Even Francis Cardinal Spellman visited Saigon in the midst of the refugee movement, and the Archbishop insisted on visiting a refugee vessel as it arrived in Saigon. Spellman addressed the crowd, which *Newsweek* characterized as the “aged, the newly born, the seasick, the dirty, the pathetically ragged refugees from communist North Vietnam,” calling them heroes and inspirations. *Newsweek* christened the refugees as “pilgrims of the East,” and emphasized the destitute state of the passengers, who upon arrival were greeted by members of the American Wives Club of Saigon and then “dumped into stinking squalor in Saigon.”⁴⁴

Aside from the overwhelming majority of Catholics among the refugees, it is an important and rarely acknowledged fact that approximately 89% of the refugees were women and children.⁴⁵ Partially due to heavy casualties from the French war, very few men migrated south and based on Navy and press photographs and American accounts of the operation, many of those who did were elderly or disabled. Because of their overwhelming numbers, most of the images that the American public received were those of suffering women and often malnourished and diseased children. In many ways, the American effort in the migration, and its resulting press coverage, marked the beginning of the effort to capture the hearts and minds of

⁴³ See Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia, 1950-1957* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

⁴⁴ “Pilgrims of the East,” *Newsweek*, 24 January 1955, vol. 45, 42.

⁴⁵ Frankum, *Operation Passage to Freedom*, 36. Frankum arrived at this percentage by extrapolating the demographics of refugee arrivals in Danang. Though the figure is not derived from a statistical analysis of the entire operation, it is the most credible figure available.

both the Vietnamese refugees, and of the American public who watched the crisis unfold in the pages of popular magazines.

American coverage of the operation uniformly presented Vietnam as a “battered land,” a “land of confusion,” populated by poor and pitiable people. The press emphasized the abjection of the North Vietnamese people, repeatedly referring to the wretchedness and misery of the lives of Vietnamese people north of the seventeenth parallel and characterizing the journey south as a “flight from terror.”⁴⁶ Media stories on the migration were clearly intended to elicit the sympathy of the American public and engender increased American support for the RVN. The American Navy was acutely aware of the importance of press coverage of the operation, and Ronald Frankum noted that the Navy’s operation order explicitly called for personnel to encourage maximum publicity from the world press, particularly American magazines and television.

Major American publications like *Reader’s Digest*, *Look*, and *National Geographic* published stories on the mission in photograph-heavy features. Broadly speaking, newspaper coverage seemed to focus on the mission in terms of its financial cost and the potential impact of the migration on the geopolitical situation in the region, but glossy magazines that specialized in photo essays offered more depth in their coverage, appealing to the emotional aspects of the migration. In *Look*, the head of the International Rescue Committee Leo Cherne wrote an editorial on the refugees titled, “To Win Indochina We Must Win These People.”⁴⁷ Cherne warned, “If elections were held today, the overwhelming majority of Vietnamese would vote Communist,” and made clear that the Vietnamese refugees represented the battleground “for the

⁴⁶ Gertrude Samuels, “Passage to Freedom in Viet Nam,” *National Geographic*, 1 June 1955, 858.

⁴⁷ Leo Cherne, “To Win in Indochina We Must Win These People,” *Look*, 25 January 1955, 61-64.

hearts and minds of the whole Asian world.” Cherne argued that the odds were against the West in the battle for Vietnam, asserting that the Viet Minh’s victories at Dien Bien Phu and in negotiating the Geneva agreement meant they were optimistic about their chances of taking control of the whole country. Featuring photographs of a mourning widow, shirtless underfed elderly men and naked children, Cherne implored Americans to make a moral commitment to Vietnam and support what he called the “democratic” government in the south.

National Geographic covered the migration in an eighteen-page story published in June 1955, that portrayed the operation as an “upheaval in human geography” and described the destitute refugees as not simply ragged peasants but also “among the staunchest friends the Free World has in Asia.”⁴⁸ The *National Geographic* also featured photographs of unclothed children, mothers with small babies, and children with even smaller children strapped to their backs. The article’s author, Gertrude Samuels, lamented the helplessness of the refugees, who boarded American vessels in a “state of shock,” shaken by a visible sense of trauma that seemed especially apparent in the eyes of the masses of young children and babies. Samuels alluded to the importance of the competing propaganda campaigns that faced the refugees, noting that they had been subjected to “propaganda from both sides.” Samuels argued that the communist propaganda was violent and base, filled with warnings that the Americans and their French counterparts would cut off the hands of refugees, throw them overboard, or expose them to epidemic diseases. The Americans, Samuels noted, merely “warned the villagers about their fate as Catholics if they stayed north under communism,” offering no details on the manner in which the message was conveyed. It is well known that the American CIA engaged in a number of

⁴⁸ Gertrude Samuels, “Passage to Freedom in Viet Nam,” *National Geographic*, 1 June 1955, 858-874.

efforts to encourage northerners to migrate, including CIA agent and counterinsurgency legend Edward Lansdale's infamous plot to spread rumors in the North that the Virgin Mary had gone south and that those who chose to stay were certain to face a religiously motivated massacre.⁴⁹

Perhaps the most widely-read account of the operation appeared in *Reader's Digest*, written by one of the future authors of the immensely popular novel *The Ugly American*, Navy captain W.J. Lederer.⁵⁰ Lederer's rendering of the mission, published in March 1955, recounted his experience accompanying two thousand refugees on a ship from Hai Phong to Saigon in August 1954. Lederer wrote of his first impressions that the refugees immediately "melted into a pathetic mass of perspiration, scabies and sores." He told of the "stench and misery" of the refugees and lauded the genuine compassion of the American and French sailors. While the refugees boarded the boat caked with mud each was immediately deloused in a cloud of DDT mixed with talcum powder, and offered bars of soap and a shower. After a sailor assisted two small children with their bath, the children told their mother that the sailor was a priest, and that "first he blessed me and then baptized me American." "Children all over," Lederer wrote, "began clamoring for an 'American baptism.'" ⁵¹

The paternalism of Lederer's coverage of the crisis is glaring, even literal as many of the

⁴⁹ It is difficult to ascertain the degree to which American propaganda influenced the refugees. Historian of Vietnam Peter Hansen has downplayed the impact of CIA rumors or propaganda campaigns, arguing that the migrants, known in Vietnamese as "bac di cu," translated as northern migrants, were neither passive recipients of American influence nor the political instruments of the Diem regime in the south. In his interviews of those who fled south, Hansen found that "almost none" had encountered any American propaganda, but almost all fled to avoid religious persecution by the Viet Minh and that the decisions to leave were most influenced by the clergy. See Peter Hansen, "Bac Di Cu: Catholic Refugees from the North of Vietnam, and Their Role in the Southern Republic, 1954-1959," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, vol. 4, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 173-211.

⁵⁰ W.J. Lederer, "They'll Remember the Bayfield," *Reader's Digest*, 1 March 1955, 1-8.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

passengers insisted on referring to the Navy men as “Patri,” after they came to believe the sailors were priests. Demonstrating the complexity of the Navy’s use of French and Latin to mediate their conversations with the refugees, as no American personnel had even a basic knowledge of Vietnamese, Lederer somewhat inexplicably interpreted “Patri” as Vietnamese for father. The *Reader’s Digest* article also highlighted the fact that many babies were born aboard the two-week long transports, approximately one per voyage according to Dr. Tom Dooley’s account. Lederer observed that a tradition emerged where the new mothers would name their babies after the sailors or the ships, and the passengers took so much pride in being able to do so that during Lederer’s voyage the refugees were seen “tickling our most pregnant passenger with a feather,” in an attempt to induce her labor before arriving in Saigon. Ultimately the woman did in fact give birth on the ship, naming her son Dinh Quirk after the ship’s captain Philip D. Quirk. The repeated references to childbirth and reproduction in the coverage of the mission invested the stories of downtrodden and abandoned women with a sense of optimism and hope for renewal in a uniquely gendered way. Media coverage never explicitly mentioned the fact that most refugees were women, and consequently journalists were never forced to explain the absence of men and the related history of the violence of the French war. Focusing on babies and small children did reinforce the paternalism of American assistance, but also shifted the audience’s attention to stories of birth, renewal and potential for growth, gendered metaphors that would all be employed as the United States contributed to the establishment of the new southern government.

The story of what happened to the refugees after they arrived in Saigon drew little media attention, as the coverage of the operation ended on the high note of America’s success in orchestrating the complex migration. Graham Greene, who visited Vietnam several times in 1954 and 1955, wrote a scathing article on the fate of refugees in the spring of 1955, arguing that the

conditions in the south were unbearable and that American aid was insufficient.⁵² Greene wrote that many refugees were forced to camp on the sidewalks of the ritzy Rue Catinat or live in tents on blistering hot roadsides far from drinking water. The refugees lucky enough to have received a plot of land often found the barren soil to be impossible to cultivate and lacked necessary tools. Greene's criticism was directed towards American aid, which he saw not as a "spontaneous act of charity" but as a gift that demanded repayment, which he deduced was "cooperation in the cold war."⁵³ The refugees, Greene argued, found the material goods of American aid irritating, citing the uselessness of "razors for hairless chins," cheese that refugees tried to use as soap, and powdered milk that they could not identify seemed to represent for Greene the tone-deaf nature of American efforts and the cynical motivations of the entire project.

Despite Greene's criticism, the mission was clearly framed as a humanitarian one, and in light of the cold war climate of competing propaganda, the operation seemed to offer a perfect opportunity to influence world opinion on the benevolence of America's foreign aid. Katherine Statler has argued that the operation was both an unprecedented humanitarian mission and an effective propaganda effort that "captured the free world's imagination and had major repercussions for domestic politics in South Vietnam and in the United States."⁵⁴ Historian of American foreign relations David Anderson has written that the air and sealoft of refugees "did much to establish in the minds of Americans that the United States goal in Vietnam was to assist a freedom-loving people in their struggle to break from the yoke of communist tyranny."⁵⁵

⁵² Graham Greene, "Last Act in Indochina," *The New Republic*, 9 May 1955, vol. 132, 9-11.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵⁴ Statler, *Replacing France*, 145.

⁵⁵ David L. Anderson, *Trapped by Success: The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953-1961* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 77.

While the impact of the migration had a significant and lasting impact on Vietnam in terms of its massive demographic shifts as well as the burden the refugees placed on the RVN in resettlement, the extent to which the operation succeeded in convincing Americans of the value of Vietnam is more ambiguous than historians have allowed. Despite some positive coverage of the mission in the most popular of American publications, historian Ronald Frankum argued that the mission's commander, Admiral Lorenzo S. Sabin, lamented the fact that the operation received so little press coverage in the United States. Although the Navy's public relations office made great efforts to supply the press with stories and employed Navy officers like Lederer to frame the mission as a universally understandable human interest story, Admiral Sabin declared the lack of interest in America to be the only failure of the operation. The magazine coverage of the operation was effective in communicating the misery of the North Vietnamese and portraying the American ally in Saigon as the progressive and optimistic alternative, but like the attention given to Genevieve de Galard, the articles did little to convey the actual nature of the civil conflict in Vietnam. The reliance on images of suffering that were coded as feminized and infantilized probably succeeded in provoking the public sympathy it sought, but it also obscured the terms of the conflict and America's relationship to south Vietnam.

“Diplomacy of the Heart”

While Admiral Sabin lamented the mission's public relations efforts a failure, the magazine and newspaper accounts undoubtedly made millions of Americans aware of Operation Passage to Freedom and moved Vietnam from the distant periphery of the cold war struggle closer to the center. By far the most well known testament to the refugee crisis in Indochina was

the account by Tom Dooley, a naval doctor and Catholic who gained fame by opening medical clinics in Laos and later in treating the Vietnamese refugees in the northern port city of Hai Phong during the migration. Dooley's account of Operation Passage to Freedom was relayed in his 1956 book *Deliver Us From Evil*, which sold over a half million copies, a staggering number considering that a condensed version of the book had been serialized by *Reader's Digest* prior to the book's release.⁵⁶ One of the reasons for the popularity of *Deliver Us From Evil* in the mid-1950s was that it offered a simple and compelling rendering of the Viet Minh as representing the epitome of godless evil. In the book, Dooley proffered some particularly brutal stories of atrocities and torture perpetrated by the Viet Minh in an attempt to stem the tide of refugees heading south. Many of Dooley's stories played into the dominant fears in America about the violence of communist states, and Dooley and his audience seemed to evince a particular interest in episodes that involved brutality directed towards women. In *Deliver Us from Evil*, Dooley tells of a 1946 campaign of violence whereby Ho Chi Minh's forces disemboweled more than a thousand women in the north because they had collaborated with the French. Historians of Vietnam have agreed that the story is apocryphal, but the details of the fictional massacre were significant in light of the migration, which emphasized these women as victims or potential victims of the Viet Minh.⁵⁷

Like the popular magazine coverage, Dooley's book featured a number of evocative photographs that portrayed the Vietnamese as compellingly exotic and desperately impoverished.

⁵⁶ Dr. Tom Dooley, *Deliver Us from Evil* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, Inc., 1956). A good biography of Dooley is James Fisher, *Dr. America: The Lives of Thomas A. Dooley, 1927-1961* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997).

⁵⁷ The most credible refutation of these stories comes from French historian Paul Mus, cited in Robert Scheer, "Hang Down Your Head Tom Dooley," *Ramparts*, 25 January 1969, vol. 7, 15-19.

Deliver Us From Evil features one photograph of two young women each with a baby on her hip, described in the caption as “The faces of the women of Tonkin, whose men have been slaughtered in the eight years of war.”⁵⁸ The rest of the photographs repeat the themes in the American news coverage, showing an elderly man with deep wrinkles with an expression of resolute determination, shots of the crowded vessels, and pictures of sick children. The *Washington Post* described Dooley and his outreach as the “ultimate example of effective person to person contact with a foreign people,” seeing his work and the Navy’s efforts as a demonstration of American goodwill in a practical manner, or “diplomacy of the heart.”⁵⁹

In his book, Dooley lingers on stories of the way the American Navy sought to modernize Vietnam by introducing American technologies and sanitation practices and he also told of an episode when the Navy men brought to the ships “another American institution,” the beauty contest. Photographs in the papers of Senator Mike Mansfield, who visited Vietnam during the operation, show the winner of the first on-board beauty pageant, a scrubbed young woman sitting in a makeshift throne dressed in a white ao dai, her smile revealing gleaming white teeth.⁶⁰ The image of “Miss Passage to Freedom,” is stark in contrast to the ubiquitous photographs of dirty, naked children and weary, underfed mothers. Other photographs in Mansfield’s collection represent more closely the reality of the situation: a child afflicted with smallpox, a Navy doctor operating on the kidneys of a small baby, a young child being deloused by four Navy men in flour and DDT. Though the image of the beauty queen did not appear in Dooley’s book or in the

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ “Diplomacy of the Heart, *Washington Post*, 16 July 1956, 18.

⁶⁰ Photograph #98-882, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula, Mike Mansfield Papers, Series XXXVI, House/Senate/Ambassador Photos, 1942-1988.

magazine coverage of Operation Passage to Freedom, the choice of a clean, attractive young woman as the mission's representative seems to reflect the Navy's conception of the transformative power of American aid in Vietnam. The juxtaposition of the destitute refugees, malnourished and with teeth blackened by betel nut and the thoroughly westernized image of a well-groomed beauty queen encapsulated the nature of the American mission in Vietnam in the mid-1950s and its perceived ability to scrub clean the filth of communism and poverty and build a new nation in its own image.

Letter from "a little Vietnamese girl"

Despite the media blitz engendered by the Angel of Dien Bien Phu and the attempt at creating interest in the northern exodus, by the late 1950s the nation of Vietnam was still little-known in America, but the perceived threat of the Soviet Union - amplified by the launch of Sputnik and its increasing influence in the third world - was intensifying in American culture. This chapter has argued that the mythology created around the Angel of Dien Bien Phu and the image of the destitute female refugee in Vietnam were attempts to introduce the conflict in Southeast Asia to a mass American audience in a way that minimized the potential for a militarized engagement and emphasized aspects of humanitarianism and virtue deployed through feminized images. Another episode in 1958 provided evidence of the evolving importance of Vietnam in America, one that once again engaged a language of gender to convey the terms of the two nations' relationship. In February 1958, the *Washington Post* published on its front page a letter from a young Vietnamese girl who had serious questions about America and its intentions in Vietnam.⁶¹ The letter from the "little girl" stirred a minor controversy in

⁶¹ "She Asks for an Answer," *Washington Post*, 25 February 1958, A1.

Washington and marked another example of the ways the media sought to explain the terms of the American project in Vietnam by using gender dynamics to explain the relationship between the two nations. The letter and American responses to it reflected the way that Americans conceived of the Vietnamese – as feminized, malleable, naïve, and easily swayed, but also revealed the tensions in that prescribed relationship and foreshadowed Vietnamese resistance to their role as passive recipients of American aid.

The letter's author, given the pseudonym Le-My, presented a numbered list of questions that raised a remarkable number of sensitive issues for Americans, revealing for many readers Le-My's startling political astuteness and impressive knowledge of recent history in the United States. Printed next to the letter was a photograph of Le-My, revealing a smiling, dimpled young woman wearing an ao dai in what appears to be a school portrait. The article also featured an inset that contained a sample of Le-My's handwriting, as if to prove to readers that the letter was authentic and that the loopy, careful handwriting truly belonged to a young woman. Le-My began her letter to editor Fred Friendly demurely, saying, "I am a little Vietnamese girl. I saw your name in a newspaper and decided to write to you because your name sounded the nicest." Le-My asked whether Ngo Dinh Diem was an American puppet, whether the American people considered the Vietnamese as the equivalent of "Negros in America," and if President Eisenhower was too influenced by major American corporations. The girl questioned whether the United States was concerned about Soviet space technology and if Americans knew that "95% of Vietnamese did not like them." Le-My's tone clearly suggested a distinct skepticism of American involvement in her country, but her pointed and perceptive questions, particularly regarding race relations, where she even referenced the legacy of American slavery, seemed to emphasize some particularly contentious issues for Americans. Le-My asked specifically about

the recent controversy in Little Rock, where the Arkansas governor and National Guard troops barred a group of nine black students from entering a segregated Arkansas high school, asking “The trouble at Little Rock, do you think that was a big shame hung over America?”

The following day the *Washington Post* published another article about Le-My’s letter, this one tracking the reaction in Washington.⁶² Comments varied from those who lauded the young woman’s courage and encouraged the paper to bring her to the United States for a visit, and others who said that the nature of Le-My’s questions served as clear evidence that Soviet propaganda had penetrated young Vietnamese. For the skeptical readers, Le-My’s letter proved that the American mission in Vietnam and indeed the nation’s values were not clearly understood by the people. Some argued that the letter was a “communist plant,” while others saw the letter as a useful reminder about the nature of communist propaganda and its mischaracterization of American intentions. Virginia Representative Porter Hardy called Le-My a “courageous young lady” and called on a House subcommittee to discuss her questions and enlist her help in clarifying the American position. Senator Mike Monroney of Oklahoma used Le-My’s letter to prove that unilateral American monetary aid has placed Uncle Sam “in the role of Uncle Sap or Uncle Shylock,” and that the process of aiding underdeveloped countries needed to be reformed.⁶³

One of the more strident denunciations of Le-My’s letter came in a letter to the *Washington Post* from the wife of the Vietnamese Ambassador, Madame Tran Van Chuong. Madame Chuong, who was the mother of President Diem’s sister-in-law Madame Nhu, denounced the letter as “nonsense,” and remarked, “Your little Vietnamese girl sounds very much like a very

⁶² “Girl’s Letter Stirs Capitol,” *Washington Post*, 26 February 1958, A8.

⁶³ Ibid.

shrewd, grown up Communist.”⁶⁴ Madame Chuong reminded readers of the importance of American aid in resettling the Catholic refugees and suggested that the letter was inspired by people who sought to encourage the American public to lose interest in foreign aid programs and in the situation in Vietnam. Madame Chuong’s responses emphasizes the assumption that the young woman could not possibly understand the terms of the conflict, and had no business asking such fundamental political questions about American interests. The suspicion that immediately befell the “little girl” demonstrated not just skepticism of the Vietnamese, but illustrated the perceived distance between women and politics. Madame Chuong’s aggressive dismissal of the letter sought to placate Americans weary of allying themselves with people who do not trust them and assure readers that young Le-My was fictional and most assuredly a pawn of northern communism.

A week after publication of the girl’s letter, editor Friendly published his own response, where he addressed point by point Le-My’s questions, crafting answers that presented American foreign policy as a benevolent and benign force for global good. Friendly conceded that the letter was “charming,” and that the clear and earnest questions begged a response. Friendly’s argument about American intentions in Vietnam emphasized Secretary John Foster Dulles’s contention that the real colonial power of the age was in fact Soviet communism, which had enslaved Eastern Europe. Friendly cited America’s record in the Philippines as evidence that the United States fostered democracy and then granted independence to foreign governments, noting that “America had many chances to win colonies, but it has no colonies.”⁶⁵

Americans did have one major failing, according to Friendly, and that was “to want

⁶⁴ “Envoy’s Wife Denies Viet-Nam Dislikes U.S.,” *Washington Post*, 27 February 1958, A1.

⁶⁵ “An Answer to the Letter of a Vietnamese Girl,” *Washington Post*, 2 March 1958, E1.

everyone to like them.”⁶⁶ While Americans may be “rough in their manners,” rude, or dismissive of foreign customs Friendly asserted that Americans lack “meanness, or slyness, or deceit, or brutality.” America, Friendly implored Le-My, was inclined to sentimentality, sympathy, and generosity towards the rest of the world. Friendly's language was laden with feminine overtones, and his suggestion that the American interest in Vietnam was motivated solely by a warm sense of friendship and goodwill is striking in its contrast to the militarization that would unfold in the following years. Friendly's article was clearly responding not just to Le-My or the Vietnamese in general, but to skeptical Americans and to the Soviet Union. The *Washington Post* stated that they published the letter in order to “dramatize the problem” surrounding intervention in Vietnam - a problem that they framed as a global misunderstanding about the United States' role in the world. Friendly referred to the conflict mostly in terms of global politics and the Soviet threat, never mentioning any aspects of the local situation or the larger American apprehension of the conflict. Like the previous examples of images of Vietnam in the 1950s, the Vietnamese girl's letter revealed little American curiosity about Vietnam, but was more concerned with the way American aid was perceived “among those awakening peoples, who are courted by Moscow at least as ardently as they are by the United States.”⁶⁷ The fact that Friendly was explaining the American position to a young woman reproduced the gist of the power relations between the United States and Vietnam. Recreating the tutor/student dynamic writ small, the exchange between Friendly and Le-My cast Le-My as a metonym for the nation of Vietnam, a feminine symbol of a nation that needed America's guidance and protection.

Within a month, the *Washington Post* received nearly three hundred letters in response to

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

the Vietnamese girl, and the paper published a sample of thirty-five letters that gave a unique glimpse into the attitudes of everyday Americans about the situation in Vietnam.⁶⁸ Speaking to the general attitude of the responses, Friendly stated that almost without exception, all of the letters defended and sought to explain the rationale of the American foreign aid program. Friendly noted that only two letters were “hostile or abusive” and that the vast majority was “universally gentle, tolerant, infinitely patient and overwhelming in expressions of good will.” While Friendly’s description of the American response could hardly be considered neutral or even-handed in its appraisal of the American project in Vietnam, since his own response hewed so closely to the government’s conception of the inherent goodness of Americans and their democracy, the way he describes the letters betrayed a remarkably feminized notion of America, emphasizing gentleness over force and patience over the imposition of will.

While the respondents seemed universally supportive of American efforts, the dynamics of the conversation - the Americans operating from a position of power and financial control and the Vietnamese figured as young, feminine, and credulous - helped to shape this support and by extension the larger understanding of America’s role in the conflict as the nation to rescue Vietnam from communist advances. The episode with the “little Vietnamese girl” was not particularly significant in terms of influencing American policy or revealing anything new about the terms of the developing conflict, but the exchange that the letter inspired was a rare example of frank discussion about the situation in Vietnam among ordinary Americans in this period of fluidity and widespread indifference. The responses to the letter seemed to suggest a general support for the idea of American intervention in Vietnam but offered little evidence that most

⁶⁸ Alfred Friendly, “Readers Answer the Letter of a Vietnamese Girl,” *Washington Post*, 9 March 1958, E3.

knew anything about the nation they were assisting. The confusion about the specific points of American aid revealed the beginning of the difficulty in establishing who in Vietnam were America's allies and who were its enemies, a general problem that would reveal itself in the context of combat in the following decades.

At the annual conference of the American Friends of Vietnam held in February 1958, the group's Executive Director and prominent AFV spokesman Leo Cherne delivered a speech dedicated to the "little Vietnamese girl" and her letter, calling the whole episode a "masterpiece of calculated confusion."⁶⁹ Cherne argued that the letter needed to be addressed, "not because it cries for a reply to the source, but because it cries for a reply in America." Cherne worried that the questions posed in the letter "may quite foolishly reside in American minds," and that even if they hadn't previously, the letter may have planted them. Cherne began his analysis of the controversy by noting that the photograph of young Le-My showed a perfectly beautiful girl, and that "when the Vietnamese girl is beautiful, there is none more beautiful anywhere in the world." Cherne, like the editor Friendly, responded to each point of the girl's letter, again reiterating that his primary intention was not to inform her about American intentions, but to influence other Vietnamese susceptible to her suggestions and reassure newly skeptical Americans. Pointing out the by now familiar characteristics of sentimentality, generosity, and deeply religious purpose unique to America, Cherne argued that Americans did not seek to assimilate the world, but citing the example of Puerto Rico, often sought to "unload" dependent peoples. Cherne pointed out that "for a little Vietnamese girl," Le-My seems to know the names of several of the "right"

⁶⁹ "A Masterpiece of Confusion: The Letter from 'The Little Vietnamese Girl,'" Leo Cherne, Delivered to AFV Conference on Investment Conditions in Vietnam, New York City, 28 February 1958, Texas Tech University Vietnam Archive, Douglas Pike Collection (Other Manuscripts – American Friends of Vietnam), item # 1781244001.

American corporations and very cleverly phrased her question on America's position on civil rights. Cherne concluded his speech by noting that he had purposely not addressed the little girl directly, stating that "I don't know who she is, but I suspect that whoever wrote that letter is as clever as *he* is efficient."⁷⁰

In the Catholic publication *America*, another editorial discussed the letter and its response. While suggesting that the letter "has all the earmarks of a plant," which it argued was apparent in the letter's "studied lapses in grammar," and its "too fluent a command of the English language for a Vietnamese schoolgirl," the editorial suggested that the letter and the enthusiastic response it inspired was ultimately good for America. Although the article made clear its skepticism of the little girl's sincerity, it argued that asking questions about how America's foreign aid programs can be so misunderstood are crucial and timely. "Is there too much stress on the military aspects of our aid," the editorial asks, or is Soviet propaganda leading the "uncommitted third of mankind" to doubt American motives? Miss Le-My, *America* argued, did the nation a great favor by calling for Americans to question its public relations efforts in Asia.⁷¹

The Fictional Americans

The historical episodes of the "Angel" of Dien Bien Phu, the feminized images of the north Vietnamese refugee, and the letter from young Le-My focus on the ways the American news media conveyed the terms of American involvement and shaped popular perceptions of the situation in Vietnam using female figures, paternal relationships, and gendered notions of rescue. While these stories are small incidents in the history of America's role in Vietnam, they reflect a

⁷⁰ Ibid., emphasis is mine.

⁷¹ *America*, 15 March 1958, vol. 98, 687-688.

consciousness - and perhaps a new cautiousness - of the way Americans conceived of its foreign aid program in Vietnam. Two prominent novels, Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* and Eugene Burdick and William J. Lederer's *The Ugly American*, both adapted into major Hollywood films, represented major cultural works that engaged this debate about America's role abroad and also help to demonstrate the ways that Americans relied on gender, particularly the idea of women as representing respective nations, as a way of understanding Vietnam and the developing conflict.

Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*, often regarded as a prescient work that contained warning signs about the Vietnam conflict that the United States failed to heed, was published in 1956, and tells the story of a British journalist in Saigon, Thomas Fowler, who becomes embroiled in a love triangle with his young Vietnamese lover, Phuong, and an equally young, idealistic American, Alden Pyle. Greene writes evocatively of the political fluidity of Saigon in the early 1950s, of the battles being waged between the weakening French bureaucracy, the Vietnamese communists who were gaining strength, and the Americans who had begun to encourage the development of a "Third Force" between the two poles. Fowler, writing for a British newspaper, characterizes himself as a rather disengaged observer in the political intrigue, having come to enjoy the opium-glazed lifestyle of Vietnam and the comfort of his young mistress, Phuong. In Pyle, Greene paints an American protagonist made of equal parts ambition, good intention, and bumbling naïveté, while insinuating a darker involvement with the CIA and Pyle's importation of plastic explosives to arm this potential third force. In the novel, Fowler is aware of Pyle's shadowy dealings and after Pyle declares his intention to marry Phuong, Fowler is responsible for setting Pyle up to be killed by the communist faction. While the characters of Fowler and Pyle are developed and nuanced, Phuong remains a hollow, but important figure for

whose loyalty the two men and their nations are competing.

The national symbolism of *The Quiet American*'s three main characters was apparent, and the novel's hostile tone toward Americans and their foreign relationships were clearly apprehended by both readers and reviewers in the United States. "The allegory," *Los Angeles Times* book reviewer Robert R. Kirsch wrote, "requires no subtlety. Fowler is Britain, Pyle the United States, and Phuong the oppressed colonial peoples."⁷² The *New York Times* agreed, commenting that the novel employed characters "less as individuals than as representatives of their nations or political factions."⁷³ Another reviewer objected to Greene's blatant contempt for American involvement in foreign conflicts, condemning the "caricatures" of American society the novel suggested, which it portrayed as "a civilization composed exclusively of chewing gum, napalm bombs, deodorants, Congressional witch-hunts, celery wrapped in cellophane, and a naïve belief in one's own superior virtue."⁷⁴ While some pointed out the book's success as a terse melodrama, many American book reviewers agreed with *The New Republic*'s Francis Hackett that the book was "a missile, a pointed one," and "icily anti-American."⁷⁵ Some speculated that Greene's motivations for portraying America in an unflattering light stemmed from an incident in 1952 when the State Department briefly denied Greene a visa to enter the United States because of a past affiliation with the communist party. Others suggested Greene's book drew heavily from his reportage on the Indochinese conflict, both for British publications and American magazines, and that his skepticism about American intentions was bound up with

⁷² Robert R. Kirsch, "The Book Report," *Los Angeles Times*, 9 March 1956, A5.

⁷³ Robert Gorham Davis, "In Our Time No Man is a Neutral," *New York Times*, 11 March 1956, 256.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Francis Hackett, "The Quiet Englishman," *The New Republic*, 30 April 1956, 27-28.

his general disillusionment with the end of the bloody French conflict in Vietnam.

If Greene's Pyle represented an overly aggressive American interventionism, a youthful Boy Scout with boundless energy and big ideas, Fowler seemed to embody the notion of an aging, decaying European empire. In the book Fowler makes a revealing admission that to lose Phuong would be "the beginning of death." After Phuong leaves Fowler and agrees to marry Pyle, Fowler becomes an accomplice in Pyle's murder. After Pyle is killed, Phuong returns to the Brit and they resume their relationship as though Pyle had never existed. While Greene's portrayal of Pyle as an inept meddler seemed beyond debate for most Americans, the matter of the Vietnamese symbol, rendered in the feminine figure of Phuong, seemed equally transparent to contemporary audiences. The novel described Phuong as an eighteen-year-old "wonderfully ignorant" girl who sought the paternal protection of whoever could offer her the best circumstances. As the only Vietnamese character in the novel, Phuong clearly stood as a metaphor for the nation of Vietnam: a blank slate, a cipher, representing a people with no political beliefs anchoring them and no firm international alliances influencing their policies. The fact that Phuong was a young woman allowed Greene to insert her, and Vietnam, in the middle of disputes between the British and the Americans, old empire and new, but also influenced the way American audiences would think of the young Vietnamese polity in Saigon, as a fickle woman with shifting loyalties. Described by reviewers as an "amoral phantasm of desire," a "figurine," and a child, Phuong came to symbolize the newly formed RVN and serve as a prescient warning about American attempts to control her.⁷⁶

Greene's novel has been given a prominent place among literature on the early intervention

⁷⁶ John Lehmann, "The Blundering, Ineffectual American," *The New Republic*, 12 March 1956, 26-27.

of America in Vietnam, and while American reactions to the book were telling, the text itself reflects the perceptions of a British journalist and ultimately reveals very little about American ideas about Vietnam in the 1950s. A 1958 film version of Greene's novel, written and directed by legendary Hollywood mogul Joseph L. Mankiewicz, may have played an even more significant role in shaping American perceptions of Vietnam and revealing anxieties over Greene's portrayal of American efforts there.⁷⁷ The Mankiewicz film hews closely to Greene's novel in terms of the narrative structure, largely following the book scene by scene, but ultimately inverts the most important parts of the plot, restoring Pyle's honor after his death. The film's Pyle, who is unnamed and referred to simply as "the American" is changed in myriad ways both small and significant: he is from Texas, not Boston, his importation of plastics is, somewhat comically explained as an effort to provide materials to the Vietnamese toy industry rather than the book's suggestion that the materials were for making bombs.

Because Mankiewicz retains so much of the book's structure, these small changes would have been even more conspicuous to viewers familiar with Greene's slender book, and seem clearly crafted to enhance the folksy identification of viewers with the American's culture and his mission in Vietnam. Mankiewicz's most important alterations to Greene's work have to do with the characterization of the American, as his naïveté is retained but his motives are recast as honest and noble.⁷⁸ Mankiewicz appends important scenes onto Greene's story that clear the

⁷⁷ Joseph L. Mankiewicz, *The Quiet American* (Santa Monica, CA: MGM, 1958). For background on the making of the film and its reception see Kevin Lewis, "The Third Force: Graham Green and Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *The Quiet American*," *Film History*, vol. 10, no. 4 (1998): 477-491 and Stephen J. Whitfield, "The Quiet American as History," *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 30, no. 1 (April 1996): 65-86.

⁷⁸ A 2002 remake of the film starring Michael Caine restored the integrity of Greene's characterization of the three main characters. Philip Noyce, *The Quiet American* (Miramax Home Entertainment, 2002).

American of suspicions that he provided bombs to a dissident Vietnamese general that killed scores of civilians, which was the reason that both the film and the novel's Fowler set the American up to be assassinated by communists. By asserting the purity of the American's intentions, the Mankiewicz film instead demonizes Fowler for indirectly murdering the American and letting his petty jealousies over Phuong cloud his judgment.

While Mankiewicz's reworking of Greene's text is focused on recovering the virtue of the American, even in the film version the story still pivots on Phuong, though her film character, played by a previously undiscovered German-Italian model, is still as flat and undeveloped - but richly symbolic - as the novel. Phuong's loyalty, though, is the key in the film's restoration of Pyle's virtue, as an important final scene in the film shows her publicly rejecting Fowler, rather than returning to him after Pyle's death in the novel. Mankiewicz's outline of the film discusses the scene in detail, noting that Phuong "tells him [Fowler] that she will mourn the American. He loved her. She had believed his love and she now believes as he did in the faith and hope of the future. The future of her life and her country."⁷⁹ Phuong's fidelity to the American after his murder is the last impression Mankiewicz gives viewers of *The Quiet American* on the screen, and the gendered symbolism was clear. If readers of Greene's novel regarded Pyle's death as justified, or at least understandable, the film transformed him into a martyr. The final scene, demonstrating that Phuong's loyalty to the American would endure beyond his death was a less than subtle attempt to redirect the "missile" that was Greene's story and emphasize that American support of the RVN would be repaid with the intensity of a widow's eternal loyalty. Mankiewicz's involvement with the American Friends of Vietnam in producing the film, shot on

⁷⁹ "Synopsis of Outline by Joseph L. Mankiewicz," Texas Tech University Vietnam Archive, Douglas Pike Collection (Other Manuscripts – American Friends of Vietnam), item # 1781221004.

location in Saigon, and the donation of the proceeds of the film's opening to the organization's efforts in assisting the RVN provided the final evidence that the film was an overtly propagandistic work to encourage American support of south Vietnam and to reframe the two nations' relationship as devoted, if potentially deadly.

The Quiet American hinted at the complexity of the American relationship with Vietnam, but the novel *The Ugly American*, written by foreign aid workers Eugene Burdick and William J. Lederer, brought to popular consciousness a profound skepticism about American foreign aid. The novel was a sensation in 1958, selling nearly five million copies, appearing on bestseller lists for 78 weeks and leading journalists, academics, and the general American public to reflect on the nature of American aid programs. The novel was set in the fictional nation of Sarkhan, which was a thinly veiled pseudonym for Vietnam, and was a blistering critique of America's foreign service, arguing that diplomats and overseas employees were inefficient, insensitive, and spoiled, with no sense of the local culture nor what development projects were practical or appropriate.

In his important book on the role of masculinity in cold war aggression, *Imperial Brotherhood*, historian Robert Dean argued that *The Ugly American* reinforced the critical importance and recent decline of masculine republican virtue in the United States during the cold war. The perception of weakness that characterized the 1950s, according to Dean, was caused by the increasing influence exerted by women on American culture, or an internalization of popular 1940s ideas of placing blame for the feminization of young men on contemporary mothering.⁸⁰ Dean reads *The Ugly American* as a screed against the feminine weakness of bureaucracy and

⁸⁰ For well-known examples of this idea, see Philip Wylie, *Generation of Vipers* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1955) and Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia Farnham, *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1947).

found its heroes in tough, manly characters who were “not bound by tradition or enfeebled by luxury⁸¹.” In *Imperial Brotherhood*, Dean attributes this quote to the male heroes of the book, but in *The Ugly American* it was in fact used to describe a female character, Emma Atkins. Dean argued that the sentiment of the novel found such traction in American politics, particularly with John F. Kennedy, because it represented the Foreign Service as a “masculine imperial adventure” dominated by men.⁸² While Dean’s reading of *The Ugly American* finds support in both the text and in the ways politicians received the novel, I argue that the work is more ambiguous in terms of advocating a reassertion of masculine will. Although the novel has not been considered as a particularly valuable commentary on American notions of women, it does offer a unique perspective on the ways women were indeed viewed as a compulsory part of the American mission abroad, an assertion embodied by the characters of Homer and Emma Atkins.

The “ugly American” has become a frequently misused epithet applied to Americans who behave badly abroad, but in the novel the titular ugly American, Homer Atkins, is in fact one of the few admirable characters, imbued with a sense of practicality and local sensitivity, a frank and sincere man who has no patience for “goddamn silly questions about politics and native psychology.”⁸³ His wife and de facto project partner, Emma, is portrayed as the epitome of housewifely ingenuity and pragmatism, always there to offer her husband helpful suggestions and defer credit for success. Based on Emma’s idea, Homer crafts a water pump powered by bicycle (a pedal-operated pump, the novel neglects to mention, that was common in Asia for

⁸¹ Robert Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Making of Cold War Foreign Policy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 175.

⁸² Robert Dean notes that by 1959, Lederer boasted to his Naval commander that twenty-one pieces of Congressional legislation bore the words “ugly American,” Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood*, 173.

⁸³ William J. Lederer and Eugene Burdick, *The Ugly American* (New York: Norton, 1958).

several centuries prior). Emma urges Homer to be patient in introducing the device, telling him “You have to let them use the machine themselves and in their own way. If you try to jam it down their throats they’ll never use it.” To this Homer responds playfully, “All right, Mrs. Foster Dulles, you tell me what to do.”⁸⁴

The character of Emma Atkins is “simple and straightforward,” not a “busybody” but a sturdy woman who asks direct questions and offers efficient solutions to problems. When Emma observes that all of the older women of Sarkhan are hunched forward with deeply curved spines, Emma deduces that the cause of the problem was decades of using short handled brooms to sweep floors. Emma, who in her search for solutions, “wasn’t bound by centuries of tradition,” set out to find a long-handled substitute to ease the drudgery of Sarkhanese women’s housework. After finding a patch of long bamboo reeds by a stream, Emma crafted a new broom, and began sweeping her porch with the new invention. Like the water pump, Emma was careful not to force the invention upon the women, but to demonstrate its effectiveness through her own use. Later, Emma received a letter from local women who built a shrine to her, “in memory of the woman who unbent the backs of our people.”⁸⁵

Emma seems in many ways to be a model for the novel’s larger suggestion that Americans needed to contribute more practically to the solution of the “tiny conflicts” which the authors viewed as “the substance of competitive coexistence” in a cold war world. Emma and Homer seemed to represent the real “idea of America,” by not confining themselves to comfortable foreign cities and expatriate social circles but by getting out into the countryside and finding projects that would improve people’s lives. The authors of *The Ugly American* set forth in a

⁸⁴ Ibid., 218.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 238.

“factual epilogue” the argument that America had been offering the wrong kinds of aid to Asian nations and fostering dependence on foreign aid rather than self-sufficiency. Though Emma Atkins, as the housewife heroine, appears prepossessed by a concern for Sarkhanese tradition and culture, she is complicit in the overtly paternalist relationship between the two nations. The fictional character of Emma occupies a unique place, one that reflects the position of American women vis a vis the conflict in Vietnam. Emma is herself a model for the Vietnamese - industrious, modern, capable - but also aware of the limits of her involvement. The character of Emma Atkins could be interpreted as a symbol of American cultural imperialism and dismissed as evidence of American racism in the way it regarded the Vietnamese in the late 1950s, but to do so extinguishes the possibility that she stood as a model of American efficiency that was relayed in distinctly gendered terms. *The Ugly American*, although never directly naming Vietnam, is one of the few cultural artifacts of the 1950s that engages the United States-Vietnamese relationship, albeit in a manner that was intended to expose larger failures of America’s foreign bureaucracy.

The fictional Emma’s legibility as a capable American stands as a stark foil to the inscrutable, irrational Asian woman embodied by Greene’s Phuong and Michener’s Bloody Mary. While both characters are essentially parodies of American and Vietnamese women, they were important in both reflecting and shaping perceptions of women in this period whether consciously or not, and contributed to the collective imagery relating to the crisis in Vietnam. Decades later in his autobiography, James Michener expressed regret over his simplistic portrayal of Bloody Mary, acknowledging that he had glossed over the political activism of the real Tonkinese laborer who inspired his character and dismissed the possibility that she or her Vietnamese compatriots were capable of becoming revolutionary nationalists. Michener

reflected, “In later years, when American troops were fighting their fruitless battles in Vietnam, I wondered if our leaders realized that the enemy they were fighting consisted of millions of determined people like Bloody Mary.”⁸⁶ The fact that there was so little substance in characters like Bloody Mary, and indeed in those real women the American media used to introduce Vietnam to Americans was not questioned until following decades, as the war expanded and eventually the American public demanded answers to difficult questions about American intentions in Vietnam, many that were similar to those raised by the little Vietnamese girl in 1958.

For the first half of the decade, Vietnam was clearly not a central issue in American foreign policy. But by the end of the 1950s, the increasingly tense relationship with the Soviet Union, and specifically the impact of the launch of Sputnik had ratcheted up the tenor of the cold war in America and moved the events in Vietnam from a marginal revolutionary conflict to one that was central to a larger global struggle. This chapter unearths a few instances whereby women – Bloody Mary, the “Angel,” the refugee, Le-My, and the fictional Phuong and Emma Atkins, helped to frame the early debate over intervention in Vietnam in feminized terms. The American press and popular culture frequently used images of women as explanatory devices in framing the conflict in Vietnam in the 1950s, representing American aid and intervention using a romanticized language of rescue, rendering it as sympathetic, humanitarian, and critically important in the protection of the nation and the world.

⁸⁶ Cited in Jacobs, *America’s Miracle Man in Vietnam*, 126.

Chapter Two

A Flaming Feminist or a China Doll? Depictions of Madame Nhu and the Republic of Vietnam

In the recently released transcripts of conversations between former First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy and historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. that were recorded shortly after President Kennedy's assassination, Mrs. Kennedy revealed a sharp and candid assessment of the outspoken first lady of the American ally in Saigon, Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu. While Mrs. Kennedy asserted that in retrospect the infamous Madame Nhu was probably little more than an irritant to the Kennedy administration, she revealed a clear anxiety about powerful women that included criticism of prominent conservative and staunch supporter of Madame Nhu, Clare Boothe Luce. Mrs. Kennedy recalled asking her husband, "Why are these women like her and Clare Luce, who both obviously are attractive to men...why do they have this queer thing for power?" Mrs. Kennedy admitted to Schlesinger that Madame Nhu represented "everything that Jack found unattractive - that I found unattractive in a woman," and that President Kennedy attributed the shrillness of Madame Nhu and Luce to their shared resentment of "getting their power through men." Jacqueline Kennedy said that as a result of Madame Nhu's controversial behavior in the early 1960s, both she and President Kennedy interpreted Nhu and Luce as women who hated men, whispering to Schlesinger, "I wouldn't be surprised if they were lesbians."¹

¹ Michael Beschloss and Caroline Kennedy, *Jacqueline Kennedy: Historic Conversations on Life with John F. Kennedy* (New York: Hyperion, 2011), 305. For biographical treatments of Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu, see "First Lady of Vietnam," *New York Times Magazine*, 18 November 1962, 67; Heather Marie Stur, "Dragon Ladies, Gentle Warriors, and Girls Next Door: Gender and Ideas That Shaped the Vietnam War" (Ph.D. Thesis - University of Wisconsin--Madison, 2008), 44-100; David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire* (New York: Random House, 1965), 27-32; Arthur J. Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans:*

Jacqueline Kennedy's judgment of Madame Nhu could be dismissed as petty sniping or empty gossip, but her comments reflect in many ways the broad American perception of Madame Nhu, based exclusively on her presentation in the media. The press evoked a vision of Madame Nhu that changed over the course of her eight years as first lady of the southern Republic of Vietnam (RVN), beginning with an image of a woman who was fragile but fierce, a tiny "dragon lady" who ventured far outside the bounds of feminine propriety. Later, her image shifted to that of a provocative, publicity-starved troublemaker who inserted herself into the highest levels of global politics. This evolving presentation of Madame Nhu, and certainly Jacqueline Kennedy's observations, point to the vast distance between popular perceptions of Madame Nhu and the expectations Americans had of women, particularly of their own first ladies. Mrs. Kennedy, known for her genteel refinement, revealed in the course of her interviews that in the early 1960s she felt that women had no place in politics, arguing that they were too emotional to be effective and were better suited to the role of wife and quiet supporter.²

While Madame Nhu seemed to be the antithesis of the Kennedys' idea of a proper wife, her own self-image seemed to reveal a picture that closely resembled a traditional American first lady, albeit one who took a more progressive stance on the position of women in the government. In an 1963 interview with CBS, journalist Mike Wallace asked Madame Nhu which American first lady she felt she most resembled, she answered that she thought she was most like Bess Truman, as she was happiest at home. A somewhat stunned Wallace opined, "If there is any

Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 523-530.

² Jacqueline Kennedy told Schlesinger that the reason her husband was politically successful was because he did not hold grudges against his opponent, anticipating a need for cooperation later. Mrs. Kennedy said that maintaining alliances despite disagreements was the only way to be effective, and was "one reason I think women should never be in politics. We're just not suited for it." Cited in Beschloss, *Jacqueline Kennedy*, 89.

conclusive statement one can make about the paradoxical Madame Nhu, it is that her resemblance to Bess Truman is obscure.”³ Wallace echoed what seemed to be a unanimous position in America at the time, that Madame Nhu in no way played the role of a proper first lady, but was instead a cunning politician intent on eradicating the communist threat, transforming society in southern Vietnam, and amassing significant personal power along the way.

Madame Nhu, whose given name is Tran Le Xuan, was born in Hanoi in 1924. She attended and eventually dropped out of French schools in Hanoi and Saigon, and at eighteen she married the intellectual younger brother of the future RVN president, Ngo Dinh Nhu. Before her marriage she was a practicing Buddhist, but converted to Catholicism after meeting Nhu in the 1940s, and quickly became a devout follower. Madame Nhu first encountered the dangers of ideological conflict in Vietnam when, in 1946, she, her infant daughter, and her mother-in-law were captured by Viet Minh soldiers in Hanoi and held captive for four months. Eventually taken to Dalat, Madame Nhu and her family were released after French troops regained the area and she was reunited with her husband. Assessments of Madame Nhu’s actual power within the Diem regime have varied, but most journalists and American officials confirm that she wielded a significant influence on both her husband and President Diem, who never married. As the wife of the president’s brother, she acted as the *de facto* first lady of the Saigon government and assumed the role of “official hostess.” According to documents from the American Central Intelligence Agency, officials came to regard Ngo Dinh Nhu as the president’s “thinker” and Madame Nhu as Diem’s “platonic wife,” who comforted the president, relieved his tension, and

³ “Mike Wallace Interviews Madame Nhu,” *McCall’s*, November 1963, 236.

“needled him” like a typically dominant Vietnamese wife.⁴ While Madame Nhu took on a visible public role from the beginning of the Diem regime, her power grew as she was elected to the new nation’s legislative body, the National Assembly, in 1956 and later took on more explicit social projects aimed at elevating the status of Vietnamese women.

Madame Nhu first visited the United States with her husband and President Diem in 1957, when the American press first reported on the ways Madame Nhu reflected the state of Asian womanhood in the late 1950s. Described by the press during that trip as a “dynamo whose tiny waist can be spanned by a pair of hands,” she was also referred to as a “determined scrap of femininity,” who seemed to represent a new political awareness on the part of Asian women.⁵ In the early years of the RVN, Madame Nhu was most closely associated with social reform, and the issue that seemed to resonate most with Americans was Madame Nhu’s plans to reform marriage laws, finding particular interest in the issues of polygamy and arranged marriages. It seemed as though Madame Nhu, whose enormous charm seemed to barely conceal her fierce ambition, was spearheading a movement to modernize a culture about which, as chapter one argued, the American public knew little.

Interpreting Madame Nhu

Because of her prominence in the media and her audacious image, some histories of the

⁴ “Indications of Government of Vietnam Plan to Request Reduction of American Personnel in Vietnam,” 22 April 1963, CIA Report 22. The CIA’s assessment of Diem was that there was no sexual relationship with Madame Nhu, and the agency believed Diem had never had sex and that the president “likes good looking men around him.” CIA documents oddly likened the relationship to that between Hitler and Eva Braun.

⁵ Mary V.R. Thayer, “Viet Nam’s First Lady Visits Here on ‘Vacation,’” *Washington Post*, 3 April 1957, D6.

early years of the RVN have rendered Madame Nhu as a symbolic figure, as an embodiment of the new government in South Vietnam and its conflicting impulses of modernizing an ancient culture and demonstrating the new - and very public - political roles now available to women in the 1960s. In her dissertation, *Dragon Ladies, Gentle Warriors, and Girls Next Door*, historian Heather Stur views Madame Nhu as a metaphor for the nation of Vietnam, as the person whose image came to represent the American mission in Saigon.⁶ Seductive and dangerous, Madame Nhu seemed to be a fitting metaphor for the growing conflict in Southeast Asia. This chapter challenges this assertion, seeking to explore the myriad problems inherent in viewing Madame Nhu in exclusively symbolic terms. While the formulation is compelling, given her massive publicity and larger than life persona, reducing Madame Nhu to a symbol of the RVN reproduces a major problem in women's and gender history, which is the limited focus on representation rather than analysis of the historical context or systemic forces that created the representation.

It also points out more basic deficiencies in the relatively thin historiography of the RVN. First, focusing exclusively on the popular image of Madame Nhu, rather than evaluating the circumstances of that image's production, generalizes and obscures the broader condition of Vietnamese women in this period, as the American press's near-obsessive coverage of Madame Nhu subsumed any mention of other notable or powerful women in Vietnam. Second, robbing Madame Nhu of her historical specificity and significance has contributed to the perception that the RVN, a polity whose legitimacy has been justifiably questioned, was simply an extension of the United States government. Reading the experience of this new nation through a single, arguably anomalous figure has perpetuated histories of the Vietnam conflict that diminish or

⁶ Heather Marie Stur, "Dragon Ladies, Gentle Warriors, and Girls Next Door: Gender and Ideas that Shaped the Vietnam War" (Ph.D. dissertation University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2008), 26.

disregard the Saigon government and rely instead on tabloid-style readings of Madame Nhu's history that have been seared into the historical memory of this period.

The problem with viewing Madame Nhu in symbolic terms is that in reality, no one familiar with Vietnam in the late 1950s or early 1960s would have conceived of Madame Nhu as representative of women in Saigon. Press coverage around the globe and within Vietnam often accepted her as the face of her country but simultaneously figured Madame Nhu as an outsider, an anachronism, a curiosity in her own culture, which was usually presented as socially backward, populated by passive, geisha-like women. Madame Nhu's outspokenness led the press to regard her as a "dragon lady," a racialized epithet Americans applied to nearly every visible Asian woman of the mid-twentieth century.⁷ While the term has a long and complex history of its own, for the purposes of this chapter I will analyze the ways that reversions to the image of Madame Nhu as a cartoon-like dragon lady has done violence to the history of the RVN, and reveals the tendency to examine only the superficial, hyperbolic elements of the regime rather than to excavate the history of the government in terms of its policies or evaluating the nature of its support and opposition.⁸

⁷ The "dragon lady" moniker originated as a character in the comic strip "Terry and the Pirates," by Milton Caniff, published between 1936 and 1945. It was applied by various press outlets to numerous Asian women throughout the twentieth century, among the most famous were Madame Chiang-kai Shek of China, Imelda Marcos of the Philippines, Madame Syngman Rhee of South Korea, and Anna Chennault, the Chinese-born wife of American aviator Clare Chennault, who was a well-known socialite and friend of Richard Nixon. For general treatments of the "dragon lady" as racial stereotyping in American culture see Sheridan Prasso, *The Asian Mystique: Dragon Ladies, Geisha Girls, & Our Fantasies of the Exotic Orient* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005) and the documentary by Herb Wong and Deborah Gee, *Slaying the Dragon* (San Francisco: Cross Current Media, 1987).

⁸ Many scholars have assumed that Diem's base of supporters were composed largely of wealthy Saigon residents, and the nearly one million Catholic refugees from the North who settled in the South after 1954, see chapter one. Much has been written about Diem's opponents, but more research on his supporters is needed.

A symbolic rendering of Madame Nhu also reinforces a dangerous tendency to read the history of the war backwards, seeing retrospectively in the widespread public hatred that developed for Madame Nhu an indication of the government's destiny to fail. Further, seeing Madame Nhu as the historical personification of the RVN simplistically replicates precisely what the DRV charged in the early 1960s - that the administration was merely an American puppet. This puppet thesis, while once accepted unproblematically in histories of the southern government, particularly by historians writing in the 1980s, has been called into question by scholars who have investigated more closely the workings of the RVN.⁹ While some historians have reevaluated the figure of President Diem, few scholars have taken Madame Nhu seriously, with the exception of her prominent role in the 1963 Buddhist crisis in which she is widely believed to have been a major catalyst for the coup that killed the president and her husband.¹⁰ By evaluating Madame Nhu's own political career in addition to analyzing her popular and polarizing persona, it is clear that while her public statements genuinely offended Americans and much of the world, there was an underlying anxiety about the propriety of politically active women, particularly Asian women who were expected to conform to the cultural ethic of the "Orient."

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze Madame Nhu's role as a constituent part of the RVN and its history, as a figure who was more than simply a media-driven novelty but was

⁹ See Edward Garvey Miller, *Grand Designs: Vision, Power, and Nation Building in America's Alliance with Ngo Dinh Diem, 1954-1960* (Ph. D. Thesis Harvard University, 2004); Philip Catton, "Counterinsurgency and Nation-Building: The Strategic Hamlet Programme in South Vietnam, 1961-1963," *The International History Review*, vol. 21, no. 4 (Dec 1999): 918-940; James Carter, *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1954-1968* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

¹⁰ Howard Jones, *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 306-314; Robert McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Times Books, 1995), 76.

squarely in the middle of formulating fundamental governmental policies. This chapter does not seek to rescue Madame Nhu from historical ignominy, nor suggest she was a misunderstood postcolonial, protofeminist reformer. I will argue that her role was consequential, that she was more than symbolic, and that the staying power of her hyperbolic image in some ways reflects the refusal of historians to recognize the Diem regime as a real, if incredibly weak, ineffective, and only marginally representative polity. This chapter will evaluate three major aspects of Madame Nhu's image: her legislative activities and role in South Vietnamese politics between 1959-1962, her creation of women's organizations, and her 1963 tour of the United States that marked the height of her dubious notoriety in the United States. I will conclude with a consideration of some other RVN women who followed Madame Nhu, but never attained the same level of media attention. Contextualizing American impressions of the first lady with Madame Nhu's self-conception and her actual role within the government allows for a more balanced consideration of Madame Nhu as a historical figure and a more nuanced consideration of the ways American attitudes toward its allies in Saigon evolved over the first decade of the RVN's existence.

Electoral Politics in the South

One way of evaluating Madame Nhu's early political impact is by examining her role in elections in southern Vietnam. It has been well established by historians of this period that elections in the RVN were perennially corrupt, with episodes of stuffed ballot boxes, unfair campaign practices, and copious bribes appearing in local and national elections alike.¹¹ Ngo

¹¹ David L. Anderson, *Trapped by Success: The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953-1961* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 182, Katherine Statler, *Replacing France:*

Dinh Diem revealed to journalist Marguerite Higgins that the elections were essentially a facade, that the people of Vietnam were unequipped to participate in American-style democracy. Diem argued that most villagers, illiterate and wedded to village-level governance could not read the names on the ballot and certainly did not understand the concepts of a national, constitutional government. “We go through the form of the elections,” President Diem told Higgins, “and gradually, with practice, this will help our people understand the substance.”¹² Not surprisingly, the Ngos took advantage of the fluidity of the situation by installing supportive local politicians, often calling on their base of Catholic refugees to run for legislative positions. Madame Nhu, along with her own successful run for National Assembly in 1956 where she won 99.4% of the vote in Long An province, developed a cadre of female protégés who ran for local office and seats in the national legislature. One woman, Nguyen Thi Tuyet Mai, wrote about her experience in the 1959 elections and her own failed campaign for an Assembly seat from Bien Hoa province, revealing Madame Nhu’s political maneuverings.¹³ Mai stated that her run was intended to test the limits of the new democratic practices in South Vietnam to see if the criticisms of the Diem regime as autocratic and corrupt were fair. Mai’s husband, a former publisher and editor of Saigon’s English daily the *Times of Vietnam* and later the director of the news agency *Vietnam Press*, was a public supporter of Diem, leading Mai to expect little resistance from the national government in her run.

Mai’s most significant of four challengers in the election was one of Madame Nhu’s

The Origins of American Intervention in Vietnam (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 178.

¹² Marguerite Higgins, *Our Vietnam Nightmare* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965).

¹³ Nguyen Thi Tuyet Mai, “Electioneering Vietnamese Style,” *Asian Survey*, vol. 2, no. 9 (November 1962): 11-18.

protégés, Huynh Ngoc Nu, a former brick-carrier in her mid-thirties who had an elementary school education and no prior political experience. Mrs. Nu had established ties to the Viet Minh, which had occupied Bien Hoi in 1945, and her husband was reportedly still in North Vietnam working with the DRV. Despite what seemed an unlikely candidacy to Mai, Mrs. Nu won the election, receiving 8,000 votes more than the total number of votes cast. Mai noted the anger of the northern Catholic refugees who were the majority of Bien Hoa's voters, and suggested that the residents were prepared to march to Independence Palace in Saigon to protest the obviously corrupt elections. Despite the offers, Mai and her husband declined to stage a protest, arguing that public dissent would require unnecessary sacrifice and would ultimately be futile. Mai learned later that President Diem was furious with her husband for not advising Mai to withdraw from the election and charging that Mai had used the resources of the *Vietnam Press* to run her campaign. Mai believed that Diem's opinion of her was formed largely by the counsel of Madame Nhu, who had charged that Mai's behavior during the campaign was "inadmissible," alleging that Mai had worn "cowboy pants," which was "considered the ultimate in vulgarity by President Diem."¹⁴

For Mai, the elections were evidence that the democratic processes touted by the United States and the Diem administration were essentially fictive, largely symbolic exercises that inaugurated leaders who had already been chosen by the Ngo family. In addition, Mai's observations suggest that as early as 1959 support among Diem's most loyal constituency, northern Catholic refugees, had already begun to deteriorate, and that the people had come to expect corruption, bribery, and a generally unfair electoral climate in the south. Madame Nhu's involvement in the elections showed her increasing intervention in structures of power in Saigon,

¹⁴ Ibid.

and was an early sign of her involvement in the inner workings of the Saigon government.

Legislating Morality

While it was clear that Madame Nhu intended to use her influence to get her own supporters elected, she soon revealed a broad legislative agenda that targeted the status of Vietnamese women. On January 1, 1959, Madame Nhu secured passage of Law No. 1/59, known as the Family Code, a bill she had introduced two years earlier. The *Times of Viet Nam* published the full text of the law in March, accompanied by remarks from Madame Nhu on the “revolutionary” impact the law would have on the status of Vietnamese women. In her introductory statement Madame Nhu notes that the prior laws governing the family, the *Précis de Legislation* of 1883, were enacted by the French colonial regime and “wholly alien to the true traditions of Vietnam.” The French regime had written three separate laws for its protectorate regions of Vietnam, applying slightly different versions to the regions of Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina. Madame Nhu objected to the French law because it codified the inferior role of the wife by denying women property rights, and, signaling a strategy she would use later, she invoked the language of nationalism, arguing that “the coexistence of three different sets of laws on one soil and in one and the same nation is an unacceptable survival from the colonial era when foreign masters applied themselves to use against us the dictum: Divide and Rule.”¹⁵ More importantly, Madame Nhu railed against the way the French law, particularly its permissiveness of polygamy and adultery, impeded the evolution of the Vietnamese woman and reduced her status to that of “an incompetent and a minor.” In an interview on the French

¹⁵ “First Lady Talks to French T-Viewers About Family Law,” *The Times of Viet Nam*, 20 February 1960.

television program *Radiodiffusion et Television Francaise*, Madame Nhu asserted that before 1959 Vietnamese women were “classed in the category of infants and the insane.”¹⁶

The 1959 Family Code focused on reforming marriage law in particular, seeking to create equitable laws that assured there was “no longer a battlefield within the family.”¹⁷ It prohibited polygamy, outlawed arranged marriages, and severely curtailed the grounds for divorce in the controversial Article 55. It was rumored that Madame Nhu specifically established the divorce provisions to prevent her sister, Le Chi, from divorcing her wealthy husband in order to marry a French lover.¹⁸ In the French television interview, Madame Nhu’s rationale for the provision, however, invokes her Catholic morality, asserting that the arguments for easy divorce are equivalent to the arguments advocating “free love” and that for the government to allow one, it must allow the other. The moral provisions in the 1959 Family law betray a clear preoccupation with legislating morality and punishing transgressors, specifically noting that men convicted of bigamy or polygamy would not be eligible to hold government office.

Madame Nhu also suggested that the Family Bill was incomplete without a broader law governing inheritance, which was said to be part of a larger new Civil Code that was being written in the National Assembly but never passed. The 1959 law and Madame Nhu’s statements about it show a clear interest in asserting women’s rights to financial participation within the family. The law not only gave women the right to open a bank account without her husband’s permission, but also prohibited the husband from “selling, buying, or engaging anything of value

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ “Stimulated Apostles of Peace,” Opening address to Convention of VWSM, 28 March 1963, Robert Turner Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.

¹⁸ The most credible source for this is Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1983).

in the community property, such as real property, titles, or shares, without the consent of his wife.” While the law may have seemed unusually progressive to Americans, Vietnamese women historically exerted nearly complete control over family finances as well as commerce, since in the Confucian worldview the business of buying and selling was considered to be disreputable. As women long dominated the markets of southern Vietnam, the bill probably changed little in terms of day to day life in Vietnam, and in many ways the most significant outgrowth of the publicity for the measure may have been in demonstrating to an international audience of the relative power of Vietnamese women.

In terms of American coverage, the 1959 Family Law seemed to initiate the public’s interest in Madame Nhu and her surprisingly prominent role in the government. *Time* magazine first covered the law before it was even passed, writing in 1958 of the exotic women of Vietnam:

“Of all the silken women of the East, few have been more diligently trained in eye-fluttering subservience than the reed-slim Tonkinese and Annamese maidens of South Viet Nam. But when President Ngo Dinh Diem proclaimed his nation’s independence two years ago, his newly enfranchised countrywomen began to remold their personalities under the leadership of the President’s keenly intelligent sister-in-law, beauteous, sloe-eyed Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu. With the help of her enormous charm and an occasional whisk of a sandalwood fan, Madame Ngo got herself elected to South Viet Nam’s National Assembly, helped elect five other woman Deputies, and launched a drive for legislation banning 1) polygamy, 2) divorce, and 3) arranged marriages.”¹⁹

Time attributed the bill to Madame Nhu’s “flaming feminism,” and pointed out the contradictions between Madame Nhu’s modernizing laws and her outspoken and rigidly conservative public persona, suggesting that her references to the Vietnamese woman before

¹⁹ “When the Sky Fell,” *Time*, 17 Feb 1958, 32. I use *Time* magazine extensively in this chapter. For background on *Time*’s coverage and its reporters in Vietnam, notably Stanley Karnow, John Mecklin, Charles Mohr and stringer Jerry Rose, see William Prochnau, *Once Upon a Distant War: David Halberstam, Neil Sheehan, Peter Arnett -- Young War Correspondents and Their Early Vietnam Battles* (New York: Times Books, 1995).

1959 as “an eternal minor, an unpaid servant, a doll without a soul” inflamed traditionalists and offended the sensibility of most Asian (and presumably western) men.²⁰ A January 1959 *Time* article titled “Dainty Emancipator” again casts Madame Nhu as a heroine who rescued young women from lives of drudgery and unhappiness.²¹ Most of the coverage in *Time* in the late 1950s was sympathetic, presenting Madame Nhu as a shrewd political operative, able to push through ambitious legislation in an all-male assembly. In an interview with a *Time* reporter in Saigon, Madame Nhu played with gender stereotypes, stating that it was the male members of the National Assembly who prolonged debates over the Family Law. “Really,” Madame Nhu quipped, “men change their minds much more easily than women.” *Time* was one of the few American publications to cover the legislation, doubtless because of a longstanding interest of founder Henry Luce and his wife Clare Boothe Luce in China and in the culture of the “Orient.” In its coverage of the 1959 legislation the magazine is clearly fascinated by the idea that a non-western woman could secure the passage of such a bill, stating that “For an Asian nation, it was a surprising law.” *Time* was clear, however, that the law was inspired by Roman Catholic teachings, emphasizing its position that the bill did not grow out of a local Vietnamese origin. The American press interpreted the law as “feminist” but also read it as Madame Nhu’s attempt to impose a western, Catholic morality on what was construed as Saigon’s more natural tendency towards transgression and licentiousness.

Dancing with Death

After the passage of the Family Bill in 1959, Madame Nhu began to pursue new social

²⁰ “The Queen Bee,” *Time*, 9 Aug 1963, 21-25.

²¹ “Dainty Emancipator,” *Time*, 26 January 1959, 34.

legislation aimed at reforming what she saw as the degradation of morality in Saigon, which she attributed largely to the increasing American presence there. Although the original Family Bill was ostensibly geared toward modernizing familial relationships, the subsequent bill reasserted traditional - and clearly Catholic - values by banning a wide variety of activities including taxi dancing, boxing matches, organized animal fights, beauty contests, underage consumption of cigarettes and alcohol, mediums and sorcerers, gossiping, as well as contraceptives and the advocacy of contraception. Madame Nhu seemed especially offended by Saigon's nightlife, crafting a bill that would target the ever-growing number of prostitutes and bar girls. Initially, Madame Nhu told CBS's Mike Wallace, the purpose of the law was simply to prohibit the job of bar girl, but the Assembly, inspired by the spirit of her resolution, took the prohibitions further. As "twist-easies" sprung up around the city in defiance of the law, Madame Nhu reminded Saigon residents that in a time of war, "dancing with death is enough."²² *New York Times* correspondent Homer Bigart, a veteran war reporter and prominent member of the Saigon press scene, reflected a measure of American amusement at the broad range of activities the proposed new bill restricted, noting that the decision made even "fights between fishes crimes punishable by fines and jail sentences."²³

Both the American media and residents of Saigon were less eager to oblige Madame Nhu's legislative will in 1962. Whereas the 1959 bill passed with little objection, as few wanted to be associated with defending concubinage and polygamy, the new bill, officially called the "Law For the Protection of Morality," passed with a relatively narrow margin, receiving 79 of

²² "The Queen Bee," *Time*, 9 August 1963, 21-25.

²³ Homer Bigart, "Vietnam Weighs Curb on Dancing," *New York Times*, 28 January 1962, 21.

123 votes in the National Assembly and sparking some dissent among Senators.²⁴ Wesley Fishel, head of the Michigan State Advisory Group that provided guidance on the RVN's police force and public administration efforts, called the social purification law "asinine," and regarded it as proof that the Diem was falling victim to the "evil influences" of Ngo Dinh Nhu and his wife. Describing Madame Nhu as "brilliant, vivacious, bitchy, and brutal in her Borgia-like fashion," Fishel saw the bill as a silly law that would alienate large parts of the population and create friction among religious groups.²⁵ Fishel, once considered Ngo Dinh Diem's closest American advisor and one of his earliest supporters, saw the emergence of this bill as early evidence of Diem's inability to control his brother and sister-in-law, and a precursor of his regime's downfall.

Undeterred by criticisms that the law was an imposition of Catholic morality on a nation largely composed of Buddhists, Madame Nhu again used a nationalist argument to defend her bill, referencing the ways French colonialism had marked the Vietnamese people and its government and drawing clear parallels between the French system and the American presence. Madame Nhu remarked, "You must remember that we have been a colonial people too long and there used to be one law for the French and another for the native people. No, our people would not like one law for the Americans and another for themselves. It 'would bring bitter memories.'"²⁶ Madame Nhu cast her law as not only compatible with the larger fight against

²⁴ Madame Nhu was among nine women in the National Assembly, "First Lady of Vietnam," *New York Times Magazine*, 18 November 1962, 67.

²⁵ Letter from Wesley Fishel to MSU President John A. Hannah, 17 February 1962, History Vault, Folder: US-South Vietnam Foreign Relations," in JFK National Security Files, Accession # 002783-003-0689.

²⁶ "Viet-Nam's Intrepid First Lady Brings Austerity to the Orient," *Washington Post*, 7 April 1963, F5.

Communism but as a crucial component, arguing that all of the American and ARVN efforts in fighting the North Vietnamese and the NLF would be “wasted if society were to wallow in the infamous ways of license.”²⁷ For Madame Nhu, the morality bill represented the notion that it was better to prevent social problems than to attempt to cure them, suggesting that she anticipated the further degradation of South Vietnam as the war drew on.

The American press commented little on the two morality bills, but the coverage did suggest that Madame Nhu’s latest efforts simultaneously reflected her “ardent feminism” and her “puritanical” instincts. Before the bill was passed, *Time* tamped down the legislation’s significance, opining that the law was “not considered exactly crucial by U.S. advisers,” where the *Washington Post* lamented that Madame Nhu had single-handedly turned the city once known as the Paris of the Orient “into a city almost Calvinist in its austerity.”²⁸ Another article in *Time* averred that Madame Nhu, a strong-willed feminist, pushed through the “chastity law” that sought to rein in cheating husbands in much the same way she would rein in the foreign correspondents who often reported unflatteringly on her activities.²⁹

This article so provoked Madame Nhu that she wrote a response, which was published in a subsequent issue of the magazine. Madame Nhu opened her letter asserting “I am not a feminist, if this means advocating a new social imbalance favoring women this time. If ever Viet Nam adopts a ‘chastity law,’ I shall urge that it be applied equally to all citizens.”³⁰ Madame Nhu’s letter also responded to the charge that she sought to establish a committee of foreign

²⁷ “UPI Interview with Madame Nhu,” 14 August 1962, transcribed in Robert F. Turner Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.

²⁸ “Sheltered Brains,” *Washington Post*, 8 February 1959, E4.

²⁹ “A Job for Joe,” *Time*, 1 December 1961, 78.

³⁰ “Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu Protests,” *Time*, 26 January 1962.

journalists in Saigon who would collectively adopt a common line that they would follow, much in the way that the North Vietnamese press functioned. Madame Nhu picked up on the article's sarcasm in deriding regarding this proposal, suggesting that the American media equated press freedom with overt criticism of the RVN, its ostensible ally. Madame Nhu warned that despite American criticisms of the rigidity of the North Vietnamese news agencies, the homogeneity of the communist press resulted in formidable propaganda, and that the diffuse reporting of the world press from Saigon served to "confuse the battle, maneuvering so blindly that it shoots at allies before hitting the enemy."³¹ This antipathy between the press and Madame Nhu was mounting in 1962, but only a year later the mutual skepticism between journalists and Madame Nhu would reach an inflammatory peak.

Historians have paid little attention to the 1959 Family Bill or the subsequent morality legislation in Vietnam, in part because both proved to be short-lived and openly flaunted laws, particularly the provisions regarding polygamy and the ban on dancing. Some have argued that the legislation was simply Diem's way of occupying Madame Nhu with a suitable diversion to prevent her from interfering in other political arenas, particularly those dealing with foreign relations. The "revolutionary" nature of these laws can easily be overstated, however, as can Madame Nhu's political skill in securing their passage. The National Assembly was notoriously pliant, bending to the Diem administration's will, and thus unlikely to oppose the proposals of its de facto first lady. It is unclear whether Diem was simply indulging Madame Nhu's penchant for spectacle by permitting the implementation of the bills, whether Madame Nhu truly was a committed activist interested in elevating the social position of women, or whether it was solely a campaign motivated by personal gain and religious zealotry. What is clear is that Madame

³¹ Ibid.

Nhu's legislation marked an important moment in relations between the RVN and the foreign press and in shaping perceptions of South Vietnam. Partly reflecting domestic American anxieties over the role of women in the late 1950s, the press coverage of Madame Nhu was situated at the intersection of gendered, Orientalist, and cold war discourses that prefigured Vietnam's later importance to American foreign policy and signaled a new formation of American cultural perceptions of the Vietnamese.

A Feminine Force

Shortly after her legislative victories, Madame Nhu turned her attention to the development of networks of women who would serve as the public face of the RVN, would facilitate communication and intelligence gathering, and would spread propaganda countering the growing threat from the southern revolutionaries of the National Liberation Front (NLF). In 1962, Madame Nhu officially founded the Vietnamese Women's Solidarity Movement (VWSM). Earlier, Madame Nhu revealed plans to create a new union of women that would subsume all smaller women's organizations in the RVN whose task would be to "inform women on what you call their 'prerogatives'" and "to make of the Feminine Force a force on which the nation can count, and which the nation must take into account."³² Before the RVN group was organized, however, the NLF established its own Union of Vietnamese Women, an organization later known as the Women's Liberation Association that will be discussed in the following chapter. Madame Nhu, in her address during the opening on the VWSM's first national congress denounced the "act of plagiarism," suggesting that the "Viet Cong" women's union was hastily

³² "First Lady Talks to French T-Viewers About Family Law," *The Times of Viet Nam*, 20 February 1960.

created only to pre-empt her own organization's founding, an act, she said, "that was not a new strategy for them." Madame Nhu went further, asserting that the Viet Cong had also passed a "Family Code," in response to her own bill, but this was a law, she asserted, that "promotes the disintegration of the Family. For in fact all totalitarian institutions attempt systematically to do away with intermediary community institutions in order to render the individual isolated and bare before the totalitarian machine."³³

By July 1962, *The Times of Viet Nam*, a paper which was by then under Madame Nhu's complete control, reported that the VWSM had a membership of over a million women, a figure that is difficult to substantiate and ultimately says little about the group's significance. Madame Nhu declared in March 1963 that in addition to the million plus official members, there were an "infinite number of associate members" whose only contribution was payment of the mandatory monthly dues of three piasters.³⁴ The VWSM seemed to present many of the same contradictions inherent in the Family Law, urging women to contribute to community development in defending the Republic against the NLF but also requiring women to maintain the warmth and security of their homes. Despite the importance of femininity, Madame Nhu rejected some elements of traditional gender roles in society, such as domestic confinement, contending, "In this atomic age, to continue to regard woman's place as solely in the home is to commit a gross and inadmissible anachronism."³⁵

Like her advocacy of the family laws, many of Madame Nhu's statements to the VWSM reflect her preoccupation with raising the status of Vietnamese women. Acknowledging the

³³ "The What and Why of the VWSM," *The Times of Viet Nam*, 18 March 1962, 18.

³⁴ "Stimulated Apostles of Peace," Opening address to Convention of VWSM, 28 March 1963, Robert Turner Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.

³⁵ Ibid.

potential for backlash in women's involvement in the new nation during a time of war, Madame Nhu urged members to "face not only the struggle for the Nation but also that for our own destiny as women, resolved as we are to reject forever the subservient lot which was formerly ours."³⁶ While she invoked the need for gender equality, she also reflected the same moral righteousness she exhibited in the earlier fight for the morality bill, warning that women who engaged in "illicit actions" or provoked public disorder would justly exasperate men "who are already too inclined to believe we have been emancipated too early."³⁷

While the VWSM's primary goals were focused on public welfare, running literacy campaigns and building facilities to support women and the poor, in November 1961 President Diem authorized the development of women's paramilitary training, including weapons training, to be led by Madame Nhu. While the women were never to be incorporated into the combat forces of the RVN or used in armed defense, the women were trained in judo, jiu-jitsu, artillery, and psychological warfare, and taught to identify and defuse mines and explosives. In the first paramilitary training course there were 1,200 graduates, and more than 150,000 registered for the second and third courses. Each class was assigned a name that evoked the virtues Madame Nhu sought to instill; the first class was called "Quyet Thang" ("Determined to Win"), the second "Dong Tien" ("Forward Together"), and the 1963 class was named "Dong Tam" ("With One Heart"). Madame Nhu made few public comments on the policy not to use the women in combat, suggesting this was President Diem's decision and not hers. In an interview with *The National Observer* Madame Nhu stated that the purpose of the paramilitary women was to form a force

³⁶ "Holiness Without Culture is Blind. Culture Without Holiness is Bookish," address to opening of Paramilitary Youth Training, 3 August 1963, Robert F. Turner Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.

³⁷ Ibid.

that “was capable of replacing, or at least effectively helping men in all domains,” and suggested that the women’s force was a way of mitigating the growing reliance on the United States for military force.³⁸

In a video produced by the Embassy of South Vietnam promoting the women’s training, it appears that a key goal of the paramilitary training was to empower women to contribute to the security of strategic hamlets, a program that was largely controlled by Ngo Dinh Nhu and was identified by Madame Nhu as the “foundation” of VWSM principles and indeed the basis of the RVN. In the video, Madame Nhu’s daughter Le Thuy is seen acting in a play depicting armed paramilitary women protecting strategic hamlets, which Madame Nhu framed as an appropriate and effective way of “filtering” the population and restricting movement of NLF agents.³⁹ The United States government encouraged the implementation of the strategic hamlet program, which had its roots in a similar strategy the British had used effectively in Malaya and also had grown out of the agroville program initiated by Diem in the late 1950s that took a similar approach.

Along with defending the hamlets, Madame Nhu argued that south Vietnamese women had a duty to contribute to the security of the nation itself, warning the young women not to “see only novelty in this honor” but to realize that membership bestows a responsibility to teach other women about moral strength and perseverance. Madame Nhu dubbed her movement a “kind of feminine order of knighthood,” that even without being integrated into an organized military

³⁸ “Interview of Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu by Mr. Alan E. Lidow,” 22 July 1963, Folder “Madam Ngo Dinh Nhu,” Marguerite Higgins Papers, Syracuse University Special Collections.

³⁹ “Trung Tam Quoc Gia Dien Anh Trinh Bay, Gai Dat Viet,” South Vietnam Embassy Collection, Motion Picture Reading Room, Library of Congress.

would contribute to the nation.⁴⁰ Madame Nhu's statements to the movement seem overblown given the actual duties of the group, which were largely limited to marching in parades in front of the Presidential palace to commemorate the annual women's day and sharpshooting contests where the women were matched against men known to be less skilled in marksmanship. She claimed that the significance of the movement was that it was the first attempt to mobilize women on a national scale, and it seems that organizing the group had the added benefit of focusing Saigon's young women on pursuits deemed morally acceptable in an urban environment offering ever-increasing opportunities for vice. In a 1962 interview with United Press International, Madame Nhu argued that the movement was an effort to stave off the advancing NLF, stating that Vietnamese women were obligated to "organize themselves and defend their families much further than just from the porch. Indeed when the enemy reaches the porch, it is always too late."⁴¹

Because the significance of the paramilitary women was largely limited to its symbolic value, the visual impact of the women is significant. The uniformed women were striking, bedecked in blue jumpsuits and dark lipstick, cinched with red belts, portraying a martial yet feminized image of the women Madame Nhu referred to as her "little darlings." While the VWSM was fashioned to exert an image of strength and independence, it projected a hyper-feminized appearance that seemed to be formed as a deliberate contrast to the image of the black pajama-clad jungle warriors of the NLF. It was clearly important to Madame Nhu that the paramilitary women look a certain way, and in the American media Madame Nhu had garnered

⁴⁰ "Stimulated Apostles of Peace," opening session of Convention of VWSM 28 March 1963, Robert F. Turner Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.

⁴¹ "UPI Interview with Madame Nhu," 14 August 1962, transcribed in Robert F. Turner Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.

attention for her experimental fashion. Even today an exhibition at the Women's History Museum in Saigon commemorates her modifications to the traditional Vietnamese ao dai, changing the high-necked tunic to a deep v-neck. In a statement to the VWSM, Madame Nhu asserts that it was never her intention to "launch a cosmopolitan fashion" and encourage extravagance, but she only wanted to offer some practical open-necked versions of the ao dai, which she claimed were "neither fanciful nor alien."⁴² In fact, Madame Nhu stated, her modifications to the ao dai were informed by the clothing of ancient Vietnam and were still common among women in the central highlands.

While the press in the United States suggested that Madame Nhu was attempting to make the ao dai more western and more revealing and sexually suggestive, she again invoked nationalism, asserting that it was an homage to minority hill tribes. "Thus," Madame Nhu averred, "nobody can accuse us of abandoning tradition or aping foreigners," for the new necklines are "genuinely native and traditional."⁴³ While Madame Nhu's interventions in fashion may be dismissed as superficial or insignificant, the way she used sartorial innovations to leave her mark on Vietnamese culture while linking her changes to the nation was important.⁴⁴ The American press regarded her modifications to the ao dai as little more than a woman who was finally showing an appropriate interest in women's things, but her own remarks reveal a larger attempt in making a lasting visual impact on the culture and asserting herself as an agent of

⁴² "Law and Harmony," opening session of Convention of VWSM, 27 March 1963, Robert F. Turner Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ For a work that evaluates the ways that Marie Antoinette's sartorial modifications to royal clothing represented both empowerment for the young queen and a source of resentment that helped spur the French Revolution, see Caroline Weber, *Queen of Fashion: What Marie Antoinette Wore to the Revolution* (New York: H. Holt, 2006).

cultural change. Although it would not become clear for a few years, Madame Nhu's early attempts to reshape the traditional ao dai was a signal of her desire to broaden her impact on the women of southern Vietnam.

Despite a fixation with the feminine ao dai, the American media, particularly photographers, seemed to frequently feature the image of armed Vietnamese women, noting that for her daughter Le Thuy's eighteenth birthday Madame Nhu gave her a pistol, declaring, "The better to shoot Viet Cong with."⁴⁵ Despite the preoccupation with weapons, *Time* magazine, like Madame Nhu, also drew a clear distinction between the women of the RVN and women in the NLF, marking the latter as more directly involved in combat and yet still governed by feminine impulses. The women's organization of the NLF, according to *Time*, was "a kind of Viet Cong ladies' aid: besides nagging government officials, the ladies write letters to boys drafted into the South Vietnamese army urging them to defect, recounting wild tales of the government troops ravaging the folks back home."⁴⁶ In the RVN, while the women were trained to use weapons, their roles were limited to clerical positions, nurses, welfare workers, and interpreters, but in the NLF, women like Nguyen Thi Dinh were acquiring reputations as generals, as combatants who were crucial to the aggressive tactics of the NLF in South Vietnam. The *Times of Viet Nam* highlighted the contrasts between the VWSM and the NLF guerrilla women, stating that "The Viet Cong do not respect womanhood," and that Saigon women happily joined the VWSM to protect themselves against the NLF, who "did everything to terrorize the girls."⁴⁷

Photo captions in publications like *Newsweek* and *Time* dubbed the RVN's paramilitary

⁴⁵ "Girls Under Fire," *Time*, 23 July 1965, 23.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ "Angry Young Women," *The Times of Viet Nam*, 22 July 1962.

women “amazons,” and referred to them as Madame Nhu’s private army of 25,000, covering the RVN women’s groups with a measure of entertainment and fascination. Seeing the group’s establishment as proof of Madame Nhu’s confidence in her own infallibility, *Time* noted that the paramilitary women were paid twice as much as army regulars. Madame Nhu justified the policy, saying, “The women are officers, not simple soldiers.”⁴⁸ *Time* also referred to the paramilitary women as at once a benign women’s group and a potential network of spies, describing it as “a sort of Oriental Junior League whose 1,200,000 members supervise workers’ nurseries and welfare centers – and serve as a political intelligence network throughout the country.” *Time* also noted that the NLF ran “a sweeping intelligence network” that consisted of women market sellers, beauticians, fishwives, and fruit sellers and also by means of Saigon’s myriad bar girls. The *Time* treatment of the women’s organizations in the RVN and the NLF reveals the beginnings of an anxiety over a deceptively feminine Vietnamese woman that would become increasingly apparent as the war unfolded. Madame Nhu, in many ways, was the first public proponent with a global media reach, of the image of Vietnamese femininity that was wedded to notions of war and violence.

While the women of the RVN and the NLF both emphasized their proficiency in handling weapons, and photographs of armed women circulated in major American publications, it is important to note that the United States had a policy forbidding photographs of American female soldiers and sailors under arms.⁴⁹ The American military was very careful to emphasize that women in its own armed forces were expected to present a feminine image, and like the women of the RVN American women were limited to noncombatant jobs such as nurses and

⁴⁸ “The Queen Bee,” *Time*, 9 August 1963, 21-25.

⁴⁹ David Detweiler, “Women Soldiers,” *Boston Globe*, 30 May 1971, D6.

administrative aides. By the early 1970s, America's women soldiers were offered optional rifle training, but the policy banning photographic depictions of armed women lasted beyond the Vietnam conflict. Part of the media's fascination with Madame Nhu's paramilitary women may have been simply the novelty of seeing real, non-Hollywood women handling guns, combined with the stark contrasts between the urbane RVN women and the rural guerrillas of the NLF.

The United States government and the CIA actively cultivated organizations like the VWSM and the paramilitary women as a tool for social movement or organizational propaganda, as networks to distribute information in areas where access to mass media was not possible. In a 1963 instructional pamphlet on propaganda in South Vietnam, the American government contended that social movement propaganda was particularly potent in the rural countryside, where illiteracy and lack of technology isolated many residents, making them susceptible to NLF penetration. Through organizations like Ngo Dinh Nhu's Republican Youth and the VWSM, the RVN sought to create tightly knit personal connections that encouraged loyalty to the RVN and attempted to mark a clear difference between the NLF and the Diem regime. There was a significant degree of spectacle involved, as the paramilitary women paraded often but were prohibited from engaging in combat or joining the ARVN, but the imperative to influence villagers away from NLF control was real, and one accepted method of doing so was through social movements like Madame Nhu's groups. The organizations could once again be interpreted as a project President Diem allowed Madame Nhu that could cause little public relations harm to the regime, but the fact that Madame Nhu became increasingly interested in drawing distinctions between women in the RVN and the southern insurgency of the NLF marked a new stage in the conflict, and added a new element to the American understanding of the social realities in south Vietnam.

Madame Nhu's involvement with family legislation and her establishment of large but essentially powerless women's groups established her as a powerful political force, and although she may have challenged some American notions of a woman's place in politics, her public persona up to this point was regarded more as an amusement than any kind of legitimate threat to the United States mission in Saigon. The American press feasted upon the juxtaposition of her power and her physical smallness, casting her as an enigmatic and exotic figure, but one still largely limited to women's issues. By 1963, however, Madame Nhu's public pronouncements were evolving from statements about the RVN's imperative to remake Vietnamese society for women to a more overt criticism of the American handling of the war. In a speech at the annual WSM convention in March 1963, Madame Nhu openly questioned the intentions of the Americans, calling into question the need to align the laws of the RVN, or indeed all underdeveloped nations with those of the west, "as if the latter contained all absolute truth in time and in space." Citing the VWSM as an example of an indigenous movement that took its governance from Vietnamese historical realities, Madame Nhu argues that the RVN must oppose the imposition of "foreign systems without any vital connection with the previous local economic, social, and human structure of our society."⁵⁰ Madame Nhu became a fairly constant critic of the notion that western powers like the United States sought to remake new nations in its own image, making her one of the only people close to the RVN president, and certainly the most recognizable person who publicly called into doubt American motives in Vietnam.

Based on prior inflammatory comments, in an August 1962 interview with UPI, Madame Nhu was asked whether she was "anti-American," to which she responded that she was not so

⁵⁰ "Law and Harmony," opening session of Convention of VWSM, 27 March 1963, Robert F. Turner Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.

foolish to be against her country's closest ally. However, Madame Nhu noted that she was indeed against people who abused the hospitality of the Vietnamese people, or attempted to plot against the government and sow division within its ranks. Undoubtedly referring to American military advisers and government officials in Saigon, Madame Nhu sharply criticized those "who like to submerge us in sanctimonious and pretentiously paternalistic sermons."⁵¹ The following year Madame Nhu renewed her criticisms of the overbearing Americans, telling Mike Wallace that her hostility toward the United States grew out of interactions with some Americans who clearly viewed themselves as morally superior. She opposed, she told Wallace, "sanctimonious freedom teachers," who are intolerant and eager to claim credit for anything successful. "You, who believe in freedom, in tolerance," she pronounced, "let us live as we like."⁵²

1963: Crisis Erupts

By 1963 the Diem administration had been in power for eight years, and given the depth of NLF penetration in the countryside and Diem's inability to attract mass support, American doubts about the regime's viability had steadily mounted. While no replacement government was officially sought, State Department documents reflect a growing mistrust not of Ngo Dinh Diem, but specifically of the Nhuses' influence. Official memos questioned whether Diem would be able to function without his brother, who had become his closest advisor, and Madame Nhu, whose value to the president the Americans did not understand but still acknowledged. Although the official American position towards Madame Nhu was outwardly supportive but increasingly

⁵¹ "UPI Interview with Madame Nhu," 14 August 1962, Robert F. Turner Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.

⁵² "Mike Wallace Interviews Madame Nhu," *McCall's*, November 1963, 236.

apprehensive, American officials in Saigon had finally lost patience with Madame Nhu after her acerbic response to Buddhist revolts in the city spurred by the public self-immolation of a sixty-seven year old monk named Thich Quang Duc in June 1963. Madame Nhu told interviewers that the Buddhists were communists or communist “dupes,” remarking to a correspondent “all the Buddhists have done for this country is to barbecue a monk.”⁵³ This line reverberated around the world, searing Madame Nhu’s place in history as a cruel and inhuman woman who mocked the suicide of a monk. For several years Madame Nhu’s criticisms had grown increasingly sharp, but referring to the scene as a barbecue raised the stakes on the American press’s palpable hatred for her.

As a way of contextualizing these well known comments, it is important to remember that for Madame Nhu, her husband, and President Diem, the Buddhists were waging a deeply politicized movement rather than protesting what they saw as repressive religious laws enacted by the regime.⁵⁴ The Ngos indicated to the American officials and the press that the fact that the monks had publicized the immolation and the series of suicides that followed it proved that it was an attempt to bring down the Diem regime by inciting revolt and by promoting a negative view of Diem in the world. This position found few sympathizers in the American press corps, with the notable exception of veteran war reporter Marguerite Higgins. Higgins, who had developed something of a personal relationship with Madame Nhu and was known to be

⁵³ Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), 170.

⁵⁴ For more on the circumstances surrounding the Buddhist crisis, see Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake* (New York: Little, Brown, 1972), chapter eight; Robert Topmiller, *The Lotus Unleashed: The Buddhist Peace Movement in South Vietnam* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2002); David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire* (New York: Random House, 1965), chapter eight; John Newman, *JFK and Vietnam: Deception, Intrigue, and the Struggle for Power* (New York: Warner Books, 1992), 69-75.

supportive of Diem's efforts, wrote a series of articles in the *New York Herald Tribune* arguing that the "Buddhist crisis" as it had come to be known, was a cynical attempt by sophisticated Buddhist leaders to "rivet world attention on the dark and dismal side of a picture that is by no means all black."⁵⁵

Higgins's articles sought to show the American audience the contrast between the situation in urban Saigon and the rural countryside, where, she argued, ARVN forces and American advisers were in fact waging the war successfully. Higgins interviewed peasants who spoke of the irrelevancy of the Buddhist crisis in rural areas outside of Saigon and Hue, reflecting the Diem administration's perspective by suggesting that the crisis was manufactured and artificial. Higgins wrote that American officials in Saigon agreed with Diem that the Buddhist leaders had political ambitions but that the Americans were forced to take a publicly disapproving tone after Diem's response was to mount violent raids of pagodas and mass arrests of Buddhist supporters. Higgins argued that the charge of repression contrasted starkly with her impressions of the overall optimism that pervaded the American mission in Vietnam, suggesting that some soldiers in the Mekong Delta felt they were making real progress against the NLF and that the American strategy was fundamentally sound.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Marguerite Higgins, "Vietnam Fact and Fiction: First of a Series on the Asian Trouble Spot," *New York Herald Tribune*, 26 August 1963.

⁵⁶ State Department memos from early 1963 suggest some optimism in that the strategic hamlet program was being pursued with vigor by Diem and Nhu, that morale in Saigon was higher because American aid was becoming more visible to Vietnamese citizens, and because the ARVN was becoming more active (see "Memorandum for the Record by the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Hilsman)," 2 January 1963, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1961-1963, Volume III: Vietnam January-August 1963* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1991), document 3. By May Ambassador Nolting reported that "neither undue optimism nor undue pessimism are called for," in "Memorandum for the Ambassador in Vietnam (Nolting) and the Commander, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (Harkins)" 3 May 1963, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1961-1963, Volume III: Vietnam January-August 1963*

Madame Nhu herself was aware of Higgins' supportive reporting and seemed to cultivate it, copying Higgins and the *New York Herald Tribune* on much of her correspondence to American officials. After the barbecue comments had captured the attention of the world, Marguerite Higgins wrote to Madame Nhu, offering some prepared talking points she suggested might help to smooth over public opinion and allow Madame Nhu to express her thoughts more diplomatically.⁵⁷ Higgins encouraged Madame Nhu to end the entire affair, to claim that she was misquoted and tell the press that she had no interest in prolonging a semantic argument. Words that Madame Nhu should avoid included "conspiracy," and "systematic," which Higgins suggested made an unfavorable impression on American audiences. Warning that criticisms of President Kennedy, regardless of their basis in fact, hurt the RVN and cast doubt on her own character, Higgins instead urged Madame Nhu to shift the focus to the state of the war in the countryside, and insist that the RVN was winning there. Much as her own reportage focused on successes in the Mekong Delta, Higgins emphasized that if Madame Nhu focused her comments on the NLF threat that Americans would once again come to regard the RVN as its ally and unite the two nations against the real common enemy. While Madame Nhu did consistently frame the war in these terms, her critical comments about the Buddhists and about the United States persisted despite Higgins's counsel.

Marguerite Higgins made clear that her correspondence with Madame Nhu was from a

(Washington: Government Printing Office, 1991), document 106. Some in the State Department continued to assert favorable military gains throughout the year, despite the dismal Hilsman-Forrestal report on Diem and the American mission in January 1963, but political pessimism dominated diplomatic cables after August 1963. Higgins seemed to fixate on reports of military progress despite political unrest in Saigon.

⁵⁷ Undated correspondence, Folder "Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu," Marguerite Higgins Papers, Syracuse University Special Collections.

private citizen rather than a journalist, but her professional support of the Diem regime even after the images of burning Buddhists had circulated around the globe was rare, as most journalists viewed Madame Nhu's remarks as confirmation that she and her family were despots who were morally unfit to rule. Higgins's clear support for the regime illuminated the rifts that had developed in the press corps in Saigon. Well-known journalists like David Halberstam ridiculed Higgins, who believed her reporting hewed too closely to the official American line. Higgins based much of her reportage on interviews with a number of high-ranking officials in the State Department, including the United States Ambassador to Vietnam Frederick G. Nolting, Jr. Nolting contended, and Higgins faithfully reported, that there was no religious persecution in Vietnam, that the Buddhists had long been involved in anti-government agitation.⁵⁸ In her visits to Saigon's pagodas, Higgins noted, the monks were "exhilarated by playbacks of US press stories" on their demonstrations.⁵⁹ Emphasizing the Buddhists' media savvy, Higgins also said that the pagodas were equipped with mimeograph machines, loudspeakers, and English-speaking press representatives who disseminated reportage and presented Buddhist demands for reforms.

The Buddhist crisis that began in the summer of 1963 marked a low point in America's

⁵⁸ Nolting maintained this view and condemned the American encouragement of the 1963 coup as "shameful and disastrous" in a bitter 1971 interview, "The Plot Against Diem," *US News and World Report*, 26 July 1971, 67-70. Nolting said that at the height of the Buddhist crisis in the summer of 1963, he was on vacation in Europe and no one at the Embassy or the State Department informed him of what was happening. He later found out that Diem sent two cables asking him to return to Saigon, but he never received them. Nolting told *US News* that he learned he had been replaced by Henry Cabot Lodge on a radio broadcast while on vacation. In an oral history with the LBJ Library, Nolting said that he was shocked by the coup in part because his last action in Saigon (Nolting left August 15, 1963) was to get Diem to agree to pursue a policy of reconciliation with the Buddhists. See Frederick Nolting Oral History Interview, conducted 11 November 1982, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, http://web2.millercenter.org/lbj/oralhistory/nolting_frederick_1982_1111.pdf.

⁵⁹ Undated correspondence, Folder "Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu," Marguerite Higgins Papers, Syracuse University Special Collections.

relationship with Ngo Dinh Diem and the Nhus, particularly in terms of public perceptions of Madame Nhu. Madame Nhu herself made few attempts at contrition. When asked to explain her “barbecue” comments about Thich Quang Duc’s immolation, Madame Nhu told an audience that she and her daughter had overheard an American soldier use the phrase at a hot dog stand in Saigon, and that “It sounded like a perfectly harmless Americanism.”⁶⁰ Although her response to the Buddhist crisis cannot be reduced to a shaky grasp of English, there is significant evidence supporting the notion that Madame Nhu had a very difficult time expressing herself clearly in English. Educated in a French lycee, Madame Nhu was most comfortable conversing and writing in French and was barely fluent in Vietnamese, a fact many of her detractors would cite as proof of her own foreignness. Her public addresses often reflected a dense, non-idiomatic grasp of English and her often confusing diction perpetuated the notion that she was haughty and out of touch with urban Saigon residents and certainly with rural peasants. Marguerite Higgins referred to her English as “atrocious,” and many of the difficulties in understanding her speeches resulted from the fact that Madame Nhu wrote her addresses in French, which were translated by staff or sometimes herself into Vietnamese and English.

Despite this, it was clear that Madame Nhu understood the impact of her barbecue comments, even telling Marguerite Higgins that if she had it to do over, she would use the same words. She chose those terms, she told Higgins, “because they have shock value. It is necessary to somehow shock the world out of this trance in which it looks at Vietnam with false vision about religious persecution that does not exist.”⁶¹ To another reporter Madame Nhu said that she was trying to use humor to defuse the situation, thinking that “ridicule was the best weapon” and

⁶⁰ “In the Lion’s Cage,” *Time*, 18 October 1963, 26-27.

⁶¹ Marguerite Higgins, *Our Vietnam Nightmare*, 62.

that the whole flap proved that she was a victim of American advice.⁶² It seems as though language was indeed a legitimate barrier for Madame Nhu, but it is also clear that she attempted to use the perception of her lack of fluency to provide a certain amount of cover for her more controversial remarks. *Time* acknowledged this propensity, stating that Madame Nhu sometimes used her imperfect English as a “handy escape hatch when her more acid quotes backfired.” Most of the American press, however, refused to accept this as a justification for her comments, which to the displeasure of the American staff in Saigon, did not stop with the Buddhist immolations.

In the fall of 1963, another of Madame Nhu’s inflammatory public remarks that she initially attributed to linguistic misunderstanding garnered attention from both the American press and officials in Vietnam. In an article that appeared in *Stars and Stripes*, Madame Nhu referred to junior American officers in Vietnam as “little soldiers of fortune,” a comment Ambassador to South Vietnam Henry Cabot Lodge publicly denounced as shocking and irresponsible.⁶³ Shortly after the American press expressed a similar outrage, the head of the VWSM wrote a letter to Ambassador Lodge attempting to explain the remarks, stating that Madame Nhu’s actual comments were that “*some junior officials in the American services are behaving like little improvised officers seeking fortune.*”⁶⁴ The VWSM emphasized its support for American servicemen but expressed concern that some soldiers behaved irresponsibly and had little understanding or respect for the people of southern Vietnam. Madame Nhu also told

⁶² Marjorie Hunter, “Mrs. Nhu Assails Americans Again,” *New York Times*, 17 October 1963.

⁶³ “A U.S. Rebuke for Vietnam’s Mme. Nhu,” *US News & World Report*, 7 Oct 1963, 28.

⁶⁴ “Copy of Letter (No. 1663) from Women’s Solidarity Movement of Viet-Nam to US Ambassador to Viet-Nam - re: Comments by Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu,” 27 Sept 1963, 3pp, Texas Tech University Vietnam Archive, John Fanning Collection, item # 20890106004, emphasis in original.

Time magazine that she had been misquoted, maintaining that she was merely stating that the American mission in Saigon had “among its lower officials some adventurers who did not hesitate to betray the official policy of their government.”⁶⁵ A week later, still not satisfied with her explanation, *Time* reported that Madame Nhu now claimed she had used the term as a compliment, suggesting that the American military was populated with “self-made heroes.”⁶⁶ At this point even Marguerite Higgins’s reporting began to convey some doubt about Madame Nhu’s suitability for a public role in the regime, suggesting that “moderation is clearly not Madame Nhu’s style,” and that the first lady still did not understand that her remarks were not just destroying her own image, but also hurting the Saigon government.⁶⁷

The Dragon Lady Visits America

It was under this cloud of doubt that Madame Nhu came even more squarely into the American journalistic spotlight when she embarked on a major American tour in fall of 1963. Although some appearances were cancelled during the course of her trip, at the outset Madame Nhu was scheduled to visit twelve American cities, deliver eleven university lectures, and by some estimates give up to eighty scheduled television appearances during her “three-week coast-to-coast campaign to woo the American public.”⁶⁸ Madame Nhu publicly stated that the tour was her idea, and represented a sincere effort to determine if freedom of expression truly existed in the United States, telling *Time* that the trip was designed not to rehabilitate her own image, but to

⁶⁵ “Hairy Caterpillars,” *Time*, 11 October 1963, 41. The title of the article refers to Madame Nhu’s statement that the only thing in the world she feared was a long hairy caterpillar.

⁶⁶ “In the Lion’s Cage,” *Time*, 18 October 1963, 26-27.

⁶⁷ Marguerite Higgins, “Mme. Nhu Woos Parents of GIs,” *Boston Globe*, 6 October 1963, 1.

⁶⁸ “Much Ado and Madame Nhu,” *Newsweek*, 21 Oct 1963, 35.

“clear up some of the ‘calumny’ aimed at her homeland.”⁶⁹ Many in the media also noted that Madame Nhu’s trip to America was timed to coincide with the opening of the United Nations debate on the Diem regime’s Buddhist policies, as the UN had opened an investigation into human rights abuses associated with the crisis. Despite the timing, Madame Nhu did not appear at the UN, as representatives for the RVN, which included Madame Nhu’s own mother made it clear that her presence would ensure harsh condemnation. Evidence suggests that while the United States government did not seek to prevent Madame Nhu’s tour, they also did not aid in its planning. Many press outlets surmised it was orchestrated by the State Department, intended to repair some of the immense public relations damage Madame Nhu had inflicted, but comments by American officials suggest a deep concern over the tour, and an apprehension of the potential political fallout from putting Madame Nhu in the spotlight.

While Madame Nhu never sought permission from the United States government for her trip, she did write to Vice President Lyndon Johnson, informing him of her plans but never requesting official meetings with the Kennedy White House. Johnson responded to Madame Nhu in a letter from September 1963, warning Madame Nhu that her visit came “at an intensely critical time,” and urged her to take into account, “in as coldly objective fashion as possible, the question whether your coming here will help or hinder the struggle to which both our countries are so deeply committed.”⁷⁰ Johnson acknowledged that doubts about the effectiveness of the Diem regime were reaching a fever pitch, based largely on the public reaction to the barbecue remarks. Clearly anticipating a media debacle surrounding the American tour, Johnson advised

⁶⁹ “Hairy Caterpillars,” *Time*, 11 October 1963, 41.

⁷⁰ “Letter to Madame Nhu from Lyndon B. Johnson,” 20 September 1963, Texas Tech University Vietnam Archive, Douglas Pike Collection (08 Biography), item # 236123070.

Madame Nhu that her attempts to remake her image would meet with resistance from journalists. Johnson averred, “my experience has taught me that debating with the press is a losing business.” The Vice President’s letter also responded to Madame Nhu’s contention that the American officials were discouraging her visit because they were afraid of her, and Johnson assured Madame Nhu that she was “quite wrong in supposing that I or any one of us here could feel ‘frightened’ by a lovely lady.”⁷¹ Johnson suggested that Madame Nhu’s efforts to defend herself would be rejected by the press and the public, and would likely only “intensify the doubt which exists in the public mind,” but maintained that if she chose to visit, she would be, “like all visitors, cordially received in all parts of the country.”

The press interpreted Madame Nhu’s visit largely along political lines, with the overtly conservative publications defending her and the more liberal outlets dismissing the tour as another publicity stunt. The *Washington Post* suggested that Madame Nhu, who caused so much harm to the South Vietnamese cause, came to America “to fortify by personal visit the unfavorable impressions she has created from afar,” lamenting the American tendency to make celebrities of its critics.⁷² Observing that there is “something pathetic” about Madame Nhu, the article essentially urged the United States to cut its ties with the Diem regime, reminding its readers that the American mission was not to save the Diem administration but to defend Southeast Asia.⁷³ Foreshadowing a change in leadership, the article suggested that the American presence in Saigon left the south Vietnamese people the option of choosing an alternative government, an option they would lose if the United States withdrew.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” *Washington Post*, 9 October 1963, A20.

⁷³ This reflected the policy of the Kennedy administration, reflecting the close relationship between the *Washington Post* and the White House.

On the other hand, the Catholic publication *America* suggested that the tour was the news media's way to "carry on the vendetta in full view of the American public," and the conservative *National Review* asserted that the trip simply allowed the press to "confirm their dislike for her."⁷⁴ Clearly Madame Nhu came to America in 1963 in a defensive mode and anticipated difficult questions about her recent notoriety.

The reception Madame Nhu received from the public and the press varied, as some audiences greeted her with respect and curiosity while others were perceptibly hostile, seeing her presence as an occasion for protesting the American association with what was increasingly believed to be a corrupt regime in Saigon. At Princeton, she was alternately booed and cheered, and at Columbia a barrage of rocks and eggs met her arriving car. Madame Nhu told the press that students and professors at Harvard had shown very bad manners, and a teenager outside a Berkeley lecture leaned beyond police lines to shout "fascist butcher" at the entering Madame Nhu.⁷⁵ In New Jersey, where President Diem had spent two years in seminary before becoming president of the RVN, six of the 250 picketers were Buddhist monks, who booed and hissed Madame Nhu. While the appearances during the first week of her three week tour seemed to draw the highest attendance, by the second week the sympathetic crowds seemed to have dwindled, leaving mostly newsmen and students in the crowds. Small demonstrations were common around the sites of Madame Nhu's speeches, and protestors carried signs that showed an almost compulsive devotion to using her name in puns, including slogans such as "No Nhus is

⁷⁴ "Mme. Nhu and the Press," *America*, 19 October 1963, 449; "Mme Nhu Comes to Town," *National Review*, 22 October 1963, 338.

⁷⁵ "Madame Nhu Returns, Finds Film Set Barred," *Los Angeles Times*, 30 October 1963, 2.

Good Nhus,” “Phu on Nhu,” and perhaps most labored, “Nhu Deal is Nhu Diem Good.”⁷⁶

The volume of press coverage of Madame Nhu’s tour was overwhelming, demonstrating a clear shift in tone from the late 1950s stories on her promotion of the Family Bill and her prominent and largely positive role in the establishment of the RVN. Whereas early coverage extolled Madame Nhu as a determined, if imperious, feminist, by 1963 much of the coverage betrayed the press’s fatigue with Madame Nhu’s notoriety, so much that *Newsweek* columnist Kenneth Crawford wrote dismissively that “her mission has been not so much a failure as an irritating irrelevancy.”⁷⁷ Although the press corps may have begun to see Madame Nhu’s political commentary as repetitive and tiresome, what endured was the media’s tendency to describe in minute detail her physical appearance and the way it contrasted with her overbearing personality. In an August 1963 cover story, *Time* magazine described her with a flurry of adjectives:

“A fragile, exciting beauty who stands only 5 ft. 2 in. in high heels – who has kept her girlish grace though she is the mother of four – Mme. Nhu does not look the part. To her critics she symbolizes everything that is wrong with the remote, authoritarian, family-dominated Diem regime. But if she is vain, arbitrary, puritanical, imperious and devious, she also exudes strength, dedication and courage. To some it seems that she belongs in an intrigue-encrusted 18th century court, or that she should wear the robes of a Chinese empress - or both.”⁷⁸

Much of the newspaper coverage of her visit highlighted the mélange of Madame Nhu’s exotic beauty, small stature, and threatening persona. *Newsweek* described her as “the talking doll from Saigon,” “St. Joan in a slit-skirt,” and as “a breath-taking vision of loveliness.” Journalists interpreted her behavior as deceptively timid, waving at newsmen “as they looked up

⁷⁶ “Nobody Home,” *Time*, 25 October 1963, 27.

⁷⁷ “Madame Nhu’s Mission,” Kenneth Crawford, *Newsweek*, 28 Oct 1963, 26.

⁷⁸ “The Queen Bee,” *Time*, 9 Aug 1963, 21-25.

into her soft brown almond eyes with their ‘please-protect-me-I’m-fragile’ look, the carefully planned, hard-hitting, searching questions seemed to vanish from their minds.”⁷⁹ Comparing Madame Nhu to the Queen of Hearts in Alice in Wonderland, one journalist gushed that “Mme. Nhu is such a dish that the poor victim, more often than not, is likely to gaze up at her adoringly as the execution order is pronounced.”⁸⁰

There was some media speculation that the tour was intended to present a contrite, penitent version of Madame Nhu that would soften her own image and attempt to humanize the Diem administration. Soon after her arrival, however, it became clear that Madame Nhu had no intention of presenting a sympathetic face, but was more interested in telling her side of the story, exactly what Vice President Johnson had warned against. Madame Nhu charged, “the American press tried to lynch me. Now they want to hear everything the corpse says.”⁸¹ Despite this charge, it did not appear that Madame Nhu sought the sympathy of the American public, or held any hope that her image could be revived. In fact, Madame Nhu seemed to revel in her disrepute, particularly poking fun at her belief that American men feared her. Journalist Mary McGrory called her “mockingly ferocious” in her assessment of Vietnamese women’s power, as Madame Nhu suggested that men, presumably both Vietnamese and American, “are a little afraid of the women’s force...I have told the men if they are good we will only take half the seats in the Parliament.” McGrory observed that the audience, “a little afraid, joined in her merry chuckles.”⁸²

⁷⁹ “Much Ado and Madame Nhu,” *Newsweek*, 21 Oct 1963, 35.

⁸⁰ Warren Unna, “Beautiful Spring Rippling into US,” *Washington Post*, 6 October 1963, E4.

⁸¹ “A Matter of Re-Education,” *Time*, 27 September 1963, 28.

⁸² Mary McGrory, “Irrepressible Madame Nhu: How Not to Make Friends but Make Secretary Rusk Cry,” *Boston Globe*, 13 October 1963, A3.

Little of the hostility directed toward Madame Nhu was tied to the larger political failures of the RVN or with America's unclear role in the government, with most attacking her public persona. It seemed few politicians or public figures wanted to go on the record defending or denouncing Madame Nhu and her press extravaganza. One exception was Congressman Wayne Hays (D-OH), who complained that "It's bad enough that every two-bit dictator around the world reviles and insults the U.S. at will, but it is too much to let this comic-strip Dragon Lady do it under our very noses."⁸³ Congressman Hays connected Madame Nhu's presence to increasing anti-American sentiment in the world, a frequent charge in the American media since the outbreak of the Buddhist crisis. Hays also resurrected the familiar comparison that evoked the legendary, lethal combination of beauty, corruption, and violence, referring to Madame Nhu as a "twentieth-century Lucrezia Borgia."⁸⁴ Madame Nhu acknowledged that she had become a controversial figure, and addressed the dragon lady image that the American press had seized upon by crafting her own nickname, the dragonfly. "Everyone calls me 'the Dragon Lady.' For the next few weeks I will be like the dragonfly of the Vietnamese song. When it's happy, it stays; when it's unhappy, it flies away."⁸⁵ While Madame Nhu expressed disappointment that the first lady of an allied nation was treated so poorly by the American media and virtually ignored by politicians, she did seem to believe that she could escape the harsh consequences of her condemnation of the Buddhists. She relied in some ways on the image created by the American press of her as sharp-tongued but ultimately ineffectual to deflect criticisms and continue to speak her mind.

⁸³ "In the Lion's Cage, *Time*, 18 October 1963, 26-27.

⁸⁴ The first comparison of Madame Nhu to Lucrezia Borgia appeared in "Joan or Lucrezia?" *Time*, 23 March 1962, 28-30.

⁸⁵ "Dragon Lady, Dragonfly," *US News and World Report*, 20 September 1963.

Humorist Art Buchwald also intervened in the Madame Nhu media frenzy, writing an article that appeared in syndication in several major newspapers. The conceit of Buchwald's piece is that he is interviewing Madame Nhu while he sleeps, presenting a "dream" interview with an alternative version Madame Nhu who responds in exactly the opposite way that the American public would expect. Asked what she thought the proper role for women should be, Buchwald's Madame Nhu replied, "'I can't speak for other women, but as for myself, I think a woman's place is in her home with her children.'" When asked about her role in the government, alter-Madame Nhu demurred, "I don't know or understand anything about politics so I believe those things should be left up to the men." Buchwald also poked fun at the relationship between Madame Nhu and the press, with his fictional subject remarking, "I think the American press has done a magnificent job reporting on events in my country. Occasionally they get a few facts wrong and our secret police have to correct them, but on the whole we have had a wonderful relationship." Buchwald also touched on Madame Nhu's tour, and alter-Madame Nhu laid out an itinerary that included more appropriate destinations for a tourist including a visit to Disneyland, fashion shows and Radio City Music Hall, with no political speeches, since "I'm traveling as a private citizen, you know."⁸⁶ Buchwald's satire of Madame Nhu said a lot about contemporary thoughts on the roles of women in public life, certainly more about American notions of women and politics than about Madame Nhu herself. Buchwald's article reiterated the well-known idea that Madame Nhu simply did not fit into an American conception of a woman politician, and more importantly suggested that no such thing existed in America at the time.

Madame Nhu Meets the Press

⁸⁶ Art Buchwald, "Overcome by the Nearness of Nhu," *Los Angeles Times*, 17 October 1963.

One important aspect of Madame Nhu's American tour that must be considered is the important and at that point still untested role of television in shaping perceptions of public figures. Many of Madame Nhu's stops were televised in local markets and she made several appearances on national television. *The Nation* magazine suggested that her tour spawned "some of the worst interviewing since TV was invented," programming that was "put on the air by experienced male journalists, who were apparently overcome by Mme. Nhu's scented silk gowns and inch-long fingernails."⁸⁷ Even women, the article notes, were not always able to resist her spell. The cameras in televised interviews with Madame Nhu often lingered on tight close-ups of her face and her clothing. ABC journalist Peggy Whedon stated that Madame Nhu spoke with such expressive gestures that she directed the cameraman to focus on Nhu's fingernails, a shot that was repeated in various television appearances.⁸⁸ While her ao dai gestured to a more traditional Vietnamese conception of femininity, her hair was elaborately coiffed, usually in a beehive style, and she wore thick makeup that resembled contemporary American styling.

Perhaps the most important and most-watched appearance on television was on NBC's *Meet the Press* on October 13, 1963. Host Ned Brooks introduced Madame Nhu as a woman many considered one of the most powerful individuals in Saigon, and most of the panel's questions were directed at her own volatile relationship with the American officials in Saigon and her opinions on the state of the war. Moderator Lawrence Spivak pointed out that while American aid was approximately a million and a half dollars a day at this point, Madame Nhu continued to criticize the actions of the United States government in Saigon and suggest that the Americans were overstepping their bounds by intervening in the daily workings of the RVN

⁸⁷ "Lady Known as Nhu," *The Nation*, 2 November 1963, 30.

⁸⁸ "She Has a Nose for News," *Christian Science Monitor*, 19 December 1969.

government. Didn't she believe, Spivak asked, that the United States had a right to intervene in its decision? Rather than reasserting her prior criticisms about American interference, Madame Nhu redirected the discussion toward the topic of regime change, which she noted that President Kennedy had publicly mentioned. Madame Nhu suggested it was well known that the Americans were actively seeking new leaders to replace the Diem administration, and told Spivak that she had received "unofficial advice" that she and her husband leave the country.⁸⁹ This was not a revelation for the press, as many publications had discussed the inevitability of Diem's removal for many months, but the Buddhist crisis seemed to increase the urgency of the debate. Later in the interview Madame Nhu backtracked slightly, suggesting that the idea that the Americans were committed to replacing Diem was simply a "supposition."

While Madame Nhu stated that she had no official role in the government, she did assert that the RVN was clearly winning the war and that she did not understand why no one in the press was reporting it. Spivak pressed Madame Nhu, questioning how all of the American officials who spoke skeptically of the progress in Saigon, including the majority of journalists, General Maxwell Taylor, Secretary McNamara, and President Kennedy were wrong and yet she was the only one to have an accurate grasp of the state of the war. Madame Nhu's response was muddled, as she admitted that not all of the Americans were wrong about the situation, but she attributed the problem to what was thought to be the characteristically Asian problem of "face." Madame Nhu stated that the problem was that for the officials, "the question of face is stronger

⁸⁹ The American position as of August 1963 that Diem could remain as president of the RVN providing the Nhus left was well known. For scholarship on the coup and the American role in it, see Howard Jones, *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), Ellen Hammer, *A Death in November: America in Vietnam, 1963* (New York: E.P. Dutton), 1987; Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co, 2003), 670-684. For a Vietnamese view, see Bui Diem and David Chanoff, *In the Jaws of History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 106-115.

than the question of justice.” She said that officials had made poor judgments in the past but were too rigid to admit errors, stating in her characteristically obtuse way, “to err is human, but to persevere is diabolical.”

In the years before 1963, American officials would often forgive Madame Nhu’s inflammatory public statements as they sometimes conceded that the press provoked or antagonized her in order to spur outrageous quotes. But by the time of her 1963 tour, it was clear that the State Department wanted Madame Nhu to stop talking.

In a September 1963 memorandum from Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs Roger Hilsman to the Secretary of State, Hilsman states that “since Nhu and Madame Nhu symbolize to the world and to important Vietnamese opinion GVN policies of repression, Nhus’ power must be terminated,” and that American credibility “requires their departure from Vietnam, at least for extended vacation.”⁹⁰ On *Meet the Press*, Madame Nhu stated flatly that while “officially nothing has been requested,” comments by the American ambassador and other officials had suggested the Nhus flee, framing it as “just an advice from a friend.”⁹¹ By this point, speculation about regime change was rampant, and Diem’s overthrow was increasingly seen as a foregone conclusion. The Buddhist crisis seemed to be the inevitable internal crisis that American officials had predicted, as most of the United States establishment doubted Diem’s ability to maintain a sense of national unity within the RVN.

In what seemed like a Hollywood ending, the rumored coup took place on November 1, while Madame Nhu was a guest at the Beverly Wilshire hotel in California. After learning of the

⁹⁰ “Document, US Department of State - Vietnam,” Draft Telegram from Roger Hilsman to Secretary of State,” 16 September 1963, Texas Tech University Vietnam Archive, David Lifton Collection, item #1320104007.

⁹¹ Transcript from *Meet the Press*, vol. 7, 1963 (Millwood, NY: Kraus Reprint Co., 1973), 523.

coup in Saigon that killed her husband and brother-in-law, Madame Nhu called Marguerite Higgins, whom she asked to intervene with the State Department in facilitating her children's safe exit from Vietnam. Higgins was able to arrange for the children's flight to Rome and reassured Madame Nhu that the White House had a stake in making sure they were not harmed. A barrage of journalists met Madame Nhu at the Beverly Wilshire, where, as *Newsweek* observed, "she was pallid and apparently had lost weight. But she still breathed fiery defiance." Asked if the coup signified her defeat, Madame Nhu responded, "Never! I will never be defeated!"⁹²

Clare Boothe Luce

Few came forward to defend Madame Nhu, either before the coup or after, but she found one prominent and faithful supporter in Clare Boothe Luce. Luce, a conservative writer, former Congresswoman, and wife of *Time* publisher Henry Luce, mounted a vigorous defense of Madame Nhu. In an article in the *National Review*, published just three days after President Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu were assassinated in Saigon, Luce railed against the American press for vilifying Madame Nhu on her American tour, suggesting that the coverage was "remarkably like what happened to Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek and Madame Chiang in China when the Department of State pulled the rug out from under them."⁹³ The American press, Luce wrote, had attempted to smash the "china doll-sized stateswoman into a tiny heap of porcelain scraps." Luce, however, asserted that fortunately, Madame Nhu was not a china doll, and that her

⁹² "Recognizing Madame Nhu," *Newsweek*, 18 November 1963, 35.

⁹³ "The Lady Is for Burning: The Seven Deadly Sins of Madame Nhu," *National Review*, 5 November 1963, 395. See also Wilfrid Sheed, *Clare Boothe Luce* (New York: Dutton, 1982).

endurance of the press's abuse reaffirmed her credibility as a politician, as a feminist, and as a "fighting lady," and that her endurance should have reaffirmed America's commitment to the Diem administration.

Luce's article, like much of the coverage she decried, makes repeated reference to Madame Nhu's physical frailty and her political toughness. Describing the First Lady as a "militant Catholic, mother of four, she is a devoted and fiercely loyal (if not subservient) wife" who held America's prestige "in the pale pink palm of her exquisite little hand." Luce rejected charges that Madame Nhu was a religious bigot, suggesting that Americans wanted progress for American women only. Luce, prefiguring later conservative attacks on the ways journalists contributed to failures in Saigon, blamed the mostly male American press corps in Saigon for fabricating the notion that Madame Nhu held too much power, defending her by mixing stereotypical metaphors about "Oriental" women as well as invoking the image of the women of the American frontier. Madame Nhu, Luce asserts,

"Offends both Western and Asiatic male sensibilities, not only because she herself is not the geisha type, the concubine type, or the clinging vine type, but because she seems to want the seven million women of her new-born, embattled nation to behave like the kind of women who went out of style a hundred or more years ago – the pioneer women of America."⁹⁴

Herself a prominent Catholic convert, Luce's defense of Madame Nhu is primarily framed in terms of her religious morality and her staunch anti-communist politics, asserting the familiar cold war narrative of American conservatives that the overthrow of the Diem administration would lead to a political vacuum that would quickly be filled by the "'Yu-No-Hu'

⁹⁴ Ibid.

family: the Chinese Communists.”⁹⁵ Luce’s article had little impact, given the fact that the assassination occurred as the article went to press. After the coup, in addition to Marguerite Higgins, Madame Nhu phoned Luce, asking for advice on what to do next. Luce betrayed a clear concern with public perception, trying to ensure that the public’s hostility towards Madame Nhu was mitigated by a sense of sympathy. In a subsequent conversation with Richard Nixon, Luce said that in her conversations with Madame Nhu she “used all the persuasive power I have to have her play the bereaved widow: homeless... penniless... deposed... and so on.”⁹⁶

While recovering Madame Nhu’s image was likely impossible at this point, Luce wanted to make clear that the failure of the Diem regime should be assigned to the Kennedy administration, who she viewed as inept in foreign policy and too timid in its Vietnam strategy. Luce also registered her disappointment in Diem’s lack of planning for a coup, chiding his asceticism and scolding him for not having a “Swiss flight insurance bank account.”⁹⁷ Despite her immediate concern with public perception, Luce seemed sympathetic to Madame Nhu’s situation, perhaps because the two women shared a similar history. Both women had converted to Catholicism upon marriage to powerful men, and both had attracted media attention in their rise to political prominence in the 1950s. Luce was long rumored to have had significant control over the editorial decisions of Henry Luce’s publications, including *Time* and *Life*, which repeatedly featured Madame Nhu in largely flattering terms, but she consistently denied having any influence on the magazines or its coverage of Vietnam.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ “Notes from Phone Conversation with Richard Nixon,” 4 November 1963, Clare Boothe Luce Papers, Box 716, Folder 10, Library of Congress Manuscript Collection.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

1964 Visa

After the coup, the United States government felt that Madame Nhu would finally sink into obscurity and the RVN could go on in waging the war. Despite her cool reception during the 1963 tour, the following year Madame Nhu requested a visa for another lecture tour in the United States, beginning with a scheduled talk at the Conservative Party of New York's meeting in Flushing. Madame Nhu asked for \$1,500 and expenses for each talk, and \$500 per half hour for television or radio interviews. Her steep fees supported the widespread press contention that Madame Nhu had fled to Europe with little money, casting doubt on prior rumors that she and her husband had been funneling RVN funds to their own foreign bank accounts. While Madame Nhu had no influence on current affairs in Saigon, she did seem to pose a continuing threat to American credibility, and many officials feared another tour would unnecessarily draw attention to the coup and raise questions about the role of the United States government in its planning. Since 1964 was an election year, President Johnson certainly did not want Madame Nhu reminding American voters of the problems in Vietnam.

Correspondence within the State Department and with President Johnson indicate that President Johnson was agreeable to granting Madame Nhu a visa if her application was in order, but Ambassador Lodge urged that the visa be refused. The State Department, in an attempt to preempt any public criticism, laid out two potential explanations for the refusal, the first suggesting that Madame Nhu was a non-immigrant "whose activities might be prejudicial to the public interest."⁹⁸ The second justification was that the new leadership of the RVN had asked the United States not to permit it, but betraying the fact that this was conceived by the State

⁹⁸ "Memo from Michael V. Forrestal to Mr. Bundy," Executive Office of the President, National Security Council, 18 June 1964, Texas Tech University Vietnam Archive, Larry Berman Collection (Presidential Archives Research,) item # 0240103012.

Department, Assistant Secretary of State Forrestal noted that “before doing this, we should tell Lodge.”

The press took note of Madame Nhu’s planned trip, and a few publications objected to the State Department’s ultimate refusal of her visa. The Republican-leaning *Los Angeles Times* accused the State Department of stalling to discourage Madame Nhu, and the *Christian Science Monitor* argued that while Madame Nhu may do some short-term damage to the image of the RVN, it would doubtless be more harmful for the State Department to publicly attempt to muzzle her. Despite the element of personal tragedy involved in the coup, the scale of which increased after another Ngo brother, Ngo Dinh Can, was executed by the new government shortly after the coup, the American public had little sympathy for Madame Nhu. The *Christian Science Monitor* suggested that Madame Nhu be allowed to voice her opinions, certain that she would find few supporters and that stifling her would suggest to the American people that the government had something to hide.⁹⁹

As demonstrated in Art Buchwald’s earlier piece on Madame Nhu, her persona provided great fodder for comedy writers, and the 1964 visa issue led comic Paul Coates to publish an article urging the government to grant Madame Nhu a visa because “while her politics may be deplorable, her figure is delightful.”¹⁰⁰ Coates refers to Madame Nhu no longer as a fire-breathing dragon but now as a “luscious kitten,” and a “delectable madame.” Where once the press stoked the fear Madame Nhu elicited, now Coates argued that no one took her seriously and that her hysterical outbursts only appealed to right-wing fringe groups. Since her venomous

⁹⁹ “A Visa for Madame Nhu,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 1 July 1964.

¹⁰⁰ Paul Coates, “Here’s a Word of Love for You-Come and See Us, Madame Nhu!” *Los Angeles Times*, 30 June 1964, A6.

tongue had seemingly been clipped after her husband and brother-in-law's death, Coates hoped that the State Department would reconsider and "let the poor lady in," as he would likely go to see her speak himself, but "not to listen - I just want to look at her." Coates's persistent attention to her physical appearance was clearly nothing new, but his article seemed to reflect the deflation of Madame Nhu's influence, suggesting that the threat she had posed was extinguished with the deaths of her husband and brother-in-law. Over the course of the nine years Diem held power, it became clear that the press and Madame Nhu held a mutual fascination for one another, each seeing in the other the means for attracting attention.

After the coup, Madame Nhu faded from the public stage, retiring to Rome and later Paris, writing memoirs that were not published before her death in April 2011. Although she disappeared from the headlines, Madame Nhu apparently continued to follow American press coverage of her and any new information that came to light on the murders of Diem and her husband. She wrote a number of letters in response to critical articles that corrected in minute detail quotes she felt were misstated or assailed journalists for not affording her the proper respect. As evidence of her seeming obsession with corresponding with the press after her exile, Madame Nhu wrote to Clare Boothe Luce in early 1964, saying that she was considering filing a libel lawsuit against a journalist from the *Phoenix Arizona Journal* who had published a harsh piece about her.¹⁰¹ Luce advised her not to do so, arguing that the paper's circulation was so small that litigation was not worth pursuing and would likely have the effect of causing the piece to be reprinted throughout the United States. Presumably Luce prevailed, as Madame Nhu did not file any lawsuits and her relevance in the press finally receded once and for all.

¹⁰¹ "Letter to Madame Nhu," 24 February 1964, Clare Boothe Luce Papers, Box 223, Folder 1, Library of Congress Manuscript Collection.

Legacies of Madame Nhu in South Vietnam

After the coup that killed Diem and Nhu, control of the Saigon government passed through the hands of several generals, ultimately settling on President Nguyen Van Thieu in 1965. Thieu's prime minister and later vice president, was the flashy former commander of the Vietnamese Air Force, Nguyen Cao Ky. Ky was married to a beautiful, much younger woman who attracted attention of a similar sort as Madame Nhu. Dang Thuy Tuyet Mai Ky was called "an Oriental Jackie Kennedy," although she preferred to be known as the Grace Kelly of Vietnam.¹⁰² A former flight attendant, Mai was a beautiful, stylish reincarnation of Madame Nhu to some in the American press, and the media resurrected the familiar fragile, china-doll references to describe her. Journalist Beverly Deepe suggested that while Madame Ky lacked the "waspy" qualities of Madame Nhu, she exhibited a similar inclination for publicity. Although Mai Ky received sparse attention in the United States, one well-known fact of her life was that she had plastic surgery in Japan in 1966. Ky flew to Tokyo to straighten her nose and had a new procedure to reshape the Asian eyelid, slitting the skin to add a western-style fold and give the eye a rounder appearance. News of the procedure seemed to lead to an explosion of plastic surgeries in Saigon, by 1973 a single clinic in the city performed up to 1,000 operations a month, with many procedures aimed at giving Vietnamese women a more western appearance¹⁰³. Ky's plastic surgery seemed to signal the demise of the austerity inaugurated by Madame Nhu, and prefigured the growth of bars and brothels in Saigon that exploded after the repeal of the

¹⁰² Beverly Deepe, "Madame Ky, the Charmer," *Boston Globe*, 20 November 1966, C10.

¹⁰³ Popular procedures in addition to eye surgeries included breast enlargement, dimpled cheeks, larger hips and thighs, and also a procedure to make fingers appear fatter. "In Vietnam With Plastic Surgeons in Demand, Cosmetic Surgery Thrives," *New York Times*, 21 May 1973.

morality laws, which was one of the first acts of the post-Diem government.

Like the Nhus, Madame Ky also received some attention for allegations of corruption when it was revealed that she had acted as her husband's agent in claiming over 3,500 acres of land near Dalat to develop later. An angry group of tribesmen, who had been dislocated due to the war, successfully lobbied for the return of their ancestral land and prevented the transaction, but the affair drew attention to the specter of corruption among top Saigon officials that had begun with Diem. In contrast, the new first lady, Madame Thieu, presented an image that was more in keeping with the conservative expectations of Americans. Madame Thieu's rare press coverage involved organizing deliveries of cookies to orphanages and appearing at hospitals with the Vietnamese Association of Women of Goodwill. The *Los Angeles Times* heralded Madame Thieu as the "ideal" wife, who only wore traditional ao dais, almost never spoke publicly except in connection with charity, and "never does anything out of the ordinary that would get talked about."¹⁰⁴

The coverage of Mai Ky and Madame Thieu seemed to suggest that there were no women in Saigon who held the kind of political power or earned the media fascination that Madame Nhu once had. There was a marked decrease in the number of women in the National Assembly after the Diem coup, by October 1966 there were nineteen female candidates for National Assembly and only one woman, Tran Thi Xa, was elected. A Catholic mother of eight, Madame Xa crafted an image that seemed to be deliberately formed in opposition to Madame Nhu, Xa used a picture of mother with a child in her arms as her campaign symbol, and she explained that "a woman must always be more careful than a man because she is being judged

¹⁰⁴ Raymond R. Coffey, "Vietnam Women More Vocal," *Los Angeles Time*, 8 October 1970, F3.

more closely than he is.”¹⁰⁵ Madame Xa argued that while Vietnamese people expected women to be modest, “that doesn’t mean you can’t be Machiavellian.” One of the first measures Tran Thi Xa introduced in the National Assembly was a bill that required all imprisoned pregnant women be released, which passed easily. Xa’s pragmatism and maternal appeal led her to believe that she could be elected chairman of the assembly if she chose to run. “But,” she averred, that would be “‘immodest,’ a repetition of the mistake of Mme. Nhu, who ‘forgot she was a woman and tried to play like a man.’”¹⁰⁶

In 1967 another woman entered the South Vietnamese National Assembly, Mrs. Nguyen Van Tho, known as Pauline Tho. She was first elected in 1959 as one of Madame Nhu’s protégés, but she left the body after the Diem coup. In 1967 she re-entered politics and was the RVN’s only female senator by 1973. Known by a few members of the American press as the “iron butterfly,” Pauline Tho was known as an outspoken politician and was invited to the United States in 1973 to testify before Congress as an opponent of the Thieu regime.¹⁰⁷ When faced with the press’s obligatory comparisons to Madame Nhu, Tho also suggested that Madame Nhu’s fatal flaw was lacking tact and the fact that she “forgot she was a woman deep inside.” Tho, like many in the American press, blamed pride for Madame Nhu’s fall, but professed a lingering admiration for her strong will, determination, and intelligence.

In a 1967 story for *Vogue* magazine, journalist Frances Fitzgerald argued that both before and after Madame Nhu, Vietnamese women have exerted significant power in their society, but that they have traditionally done so quietly, “in the recesses of the family.” Madame Nhu,

¹⁰⁵ “The Distaff Delegate,” *Time*, 14 October 1966, 42.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ “Saigon’s Woman Senator Stands Up to Men,” *Los Angeles Times*, 23 May 1973, A7.

dismissed in her time by American experts and officials as an aberration from the passive Asian woman, was in Fitzgerald's formulation the cultural norm, the inheritor of centuries-old legends of female warriors and regarded as the "noi tuong" or general of the interior. Fitzgerald wrote that Vietnamese women who criticized Madame Nhu for being "too arrogant, too intransigent...un esprit francais, not really Vietnamese at all," were not suggesting that she was aberrant for acquiring so much power, but that she made too blatant a display of it. Madame Nhu, Fitzgerald argued, "revealed the mechanism and, in consequence, came to a bad end."¹⁰⁸ The fact that Madame Nhu had no real successor in terms of visibility, Fitzgerald contended, proved that Vietnamese women learned from her not to diminish the extent of their influence or play a more submissive role, but to be subtler.

What began as an early fascination with a beautiful, exotic, disarming woman who seemed to so starkly contrast the American expectations for Vietnamese women ended with the image of a widow who most people in the world seemed to despise and hold as a symbol of the failure of the Diem experiment in southern Vietnam. By evaluating Madame Nhu's political activities in addition to her well-known and inflammatory public remarks it is apparent that her brand of "feminism" that Americans once found compelling proved too threatening as her interests broadened from a focus on women's affairs to questioning fundamental aspects of American involvement in Vietnam. Media coverage of Madame Nhu confirmed the persistence of the view that women in the early 1960s should be seen and not heard, or at least limited in the scope of their public statements.

Jacqueline Kennedy's comments about Madame Nhu as shrill and unattractive reflected the expectations of political wives in this period, but Mrs. Kennedy failed to acknowledge that

¹⁰⁸ Frances Fitzgerald, "The Power Set," *Vogue*, 1 February 1967, 154.

Madame Nhu was herself a politician, a figure whose influence on daily life in Saigon was as significant as anyone aside from her husband and President Diem. After the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963, only three weeks after the deaths of Ngo Dinh Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu, Madame Nhu wrote to Jacqueline Kennedy, expressing condolences for the president's death, which resulted, Madame Nhu noted, from wounds nearly identical to those inflicted on the Ngo brothers. Although her own grief and fervid anger is apparent, Madame Nhu's sympathy letter drew a clear distinction between herself and Mrs. Kennedy, remarking that the President Kennedy's death was probably particularly unbearable 'because of your habitually well-sheltered life.'¹⁰⁹ Madame Nhu made other public comments insinuating that President Kennedy's murder was karmic, renewing her reputation in the press as heartless, incapable of empathy and possessing a limitless narcissism.

Madame Nhu's self-image remained that of a woman who had single-handedly liberated Vietnamese women and contributed to shaping a government that was near victory before the Buddhist crisis led the United States to desert Diem. Few in America would have recognized this version of history, nor would most of the Vietnamese women she claimed to have emancipated. Madame Nhu's version of herself and the image presented by the press are two equally shallow, one-dimensional views that not only could never be reconciled, but thrived on their opposition. By the end of the Diem regime the United States had contributed more than three billion dollars to the establishment of a southern government in Vietnam, but only ninety-eight Americans had thus far been killed, figures that would surge by the end of the decade. As the threat from the National Liberation Front grew and the magnitude of American military involvement expanded,

¹⁰⁹ "Mrs. Nhu Sends Condolences; Recalls Deaths in Saigon Coup," 25 November 1963, Folder "Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu," Marguerite Higgins Papers, Syracuse University Special Collections.

focus shifted from the inner turmoil of the Saigon government to what was perceived to be the most imminent threat to American prestige, the growing challenge from the NLF

Chapter Three

Seduce and Destroy: Images of “Viet Cong” Women

In the book, *Marine Sniper: 93 Confirmed Kills*, author Charles Henderson tells a semi-fictionalized story of legendary American gunnery sergeant Carlos Hathcock, who had become known for killing a record number Viet Cong agents. In the story, a female agent for the National Liberation Front nicknamed the Apache, stalks and tortures American servicemen, becoming a prized target for the American snipers. The Apache was said to have captured dozens of American and ARVN soldiers, submitting them to ever-increasing physical agony, including hanging them from trees and skinning them alive. In one scene, Hathcock and his fellow soldiers have spotted the Apache torturing an American captive. She approached the soldier with a long, curved knife and, “taking his genitals in her left hand, she jammed the blade’s point beneath the base of his penis, grazing his pubic bone. She pulled the knife with a sweeping, circular cut that released both testicles and his penis in one large handful of flesh that gushed with blood.”¹ Waiting for a clear shot, one of the snipers says to Hathcock, ‘Look at him, Gunny. That bitch has emasculated him.’”²

This scene is a graphically literal rendering of the fear that Viet Cong women stoked in American soldiers and has established an indelible image of NLF women in American culture, one that emphasizes sexuality, sadism, and deception.³ The Apache represents an archetypal

¹ Charles Henderson, *Marine Sniper: 93 Confirmed Kills* (New York: Berkley Books, 1986), 101.

² Ibid.

³ The trope of dangerous Vietnamese women extended beyond female soldiers. Fears of prostitutes spreading incurable diseases or implanting razor blades or broken glass in their

guerrilla woman that has become a remarkably common device in Vietnam War film and fiction.⁴ These fictional women have usually been presented as dangerous, but often excessively feminine villains who appear in brief, violent, and clichéd scenes that reflect the emphasize the cleavages between Western expectations of traditional Vietnamese femininity and the brutality of war. The image of the dangerous female guerrilla has provided fertile material for novels and countless American films in the years after the Vietnam War, but has also led many literary scholars to use these hyperbolic and stereotypical female figures as proof of the elision of real women's participation in war, and to suggest that these female characters have served to reify the central importance of America's crisis of masculinity in narratives of the conflict.⁵

This chapter argues that mythologized, fictional figures like the Apache – often created well after the war ended - have become dominant cultural symbols of the female members of the National Liberation Front for two reasons. First, the mythologized imagery fills a historical void, as scholars have largely ignored the women of the NLF, allowing for familiar cultural representations to be accepted more readily as historical reality. Secondly, a deeper analysis of American media coverage of NLF women during the war reveals a narrative that bears a striking

vaginas were common in GI folklore and rumor. See Monte Gulzow and Carol Mitchell, "'Vagina Dentata' and 'Incurable Venereal Disease' Legends in the Viet Nam War," *Western Folklore*, vol. 39, no. 4 (October 1980): 306-316.

⁴ Other fictional works that feature similar female characters include Larry Heinemann, *Paco's Story* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1986), Gustav Hasford, *The Short-Timers* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979). Female NLF fighters appear in numerous Hollywood films, including *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Go Tell the Spartans* (1978), *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), and *Casualties of War* (1989).

⁵ See for example John Hellmann, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), Thomas Myers, *Walking Point: American Narratives of the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), Kali Tal, "The Mind at War: Images of Women in Vietnam Novels by Combat Veterans," *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 31, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 76-96.

resemblance to the sensationalized fictional images, suggesting that popular journalism set an early and important precedent for the savage fictional women that would emerge later.

Characters like the Apache and the murderous teenage girl sniper in Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* conjure images of the war drawn from myriad sources, but when one examines the press coverage of women in the NLF in the 1960s, it becomes apparent that the idea of a sexualized, sadistic female enemy in Vietnam was first introduced by major American news outlets who depicted women's roles in the war using evocative but hardly common examples of violence to characterize the movement and illustrate its tactics.⁶ By focusing on American perceptions of NLF women as well as examining their actual roles and functions and the ways the movement itself used female figures in propaganda efforts, I argue that the tendency to portray NLF women as spies and seductresses has misrepresented the women's roles during the war and has also played a complex role in the ways Americans have remembered the war.

Sociologist Jerry Lembcke has written extensively about the ways mythology has shaped popular memory of the war, and in his book *Hanoi Jane*, Lembcke explores the gender dynamics of the war by examining the vilification of Jane Fonda and the feminization of the Vietnamese enemy. Lembcke argues that the anguish over America's loss in Vietnam intensified because of the "growing perception that Vietnamese women had played central roles in the defeat of the Americans. This sense – that America's only lost war had been lost to an army of women –

⁶ The cultural trope of a dangerous Asian woman predates the Vietnam War, of course, drawing in part from the work of Rudyard Kipling, whose stories about Indian women invested them with charm but also a power that was dangerous for white men. See Indrani Sen, "Imagining (Anglo) India: Rudyard Kipling and the Construction of Women," in *Woman and Empire: Representations in the Writings of British India, 1858-1900* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2002).

helped gender the war's remembrance for which Hanoi Jane became symbolic.”⁷ Lembcke suggests that beyond the Fonda mythology, that gendering Vietnamese warriors as Apache-like women was a way of amplifying feelings of American impotence and deepening the national sense of failure. Film scholar David Desser similarly argued that the ubiquity of cinematic images of the NLF agent as a woman represented the “near-hysterical reaction to the shock to the (masculine) American psyche that this physically smaller, technologically inferior race could defeat the hypermasculinized, hypertechnologized American soldier.”⁸

Literary scholar Katherine Kinney has also written about the ways that women have simultaneously been erased from the dominant narratives of the war and become important symbols of violence and terror. Kinney has written that the undeveloped female characters are evidence that much of the American literature of the war has focused nearly exclusively on attempts to redefine American identity, suggesting that the idea that “we fought ourselves” has been virtually the only story Americans have told about the Vietnam War.⁹ Kinney has focused on the exclusion of women from the primary war narratives that have generally abstracted the Vietnamese and reads the few women who do become subjects of American stories as devices through which Americans are working through a complex web of ideas about gender and war that arose alongside the Vietnam War. The reliance by authors on melodramatic stock villains in the form of brutal, torturous guerrilla women like the Apache and the resulting emphasis on

⁷ Jerry Lembcke, *Hanoi Jane: War, Sex, and Fantasies of Betrayal* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), 109.

⁸ David Desser, “‘Charlie Don’t Surf’: Race and Culture in the Vietnam War Films,” in Michael Anderegg, ed. *Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 96.

⁹ Katherine Kinney, *Friendly Fire: American Images of the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 4. This notion of “we fought ourselves,” is also the central theme of Oliver Stone’s film *Platoon* (Santa Monica, CA: MGM, 1986).

exclusion and absence by literary scholars have collectively misrepresented the importance of women in the Vietnamese conflict and pointed to the need for a deeper understanding of both the nature of women's participation in the NLF and the ways the American media portrayed them.

Despite their spotty and overly sensational appearance in fictional postwar narratives of the Vietnam conflict and the fact that historians have virtually ignored them altogether, Vietnamese women were quite clearly present in the culture of the 1960s, figuring prominently in American newspaper coverage of the war and in popular magazine accounts and playing a visible role within the movement to audiences in Vietnam. Further, the real life contributions of these women as seen through captured NLF documents and propaganda materials was clearly documented well before the American military escalation of the conflict in 1965, demonstrating that women were long known to be a vital part of waging the war itself and maintaining the movement's morale throughout the decades of conflict.

Remarkably little of the vast historical scholarship on the war in Vietnam evaluates the roles that women played in the NLF. Most of the individual women who figure in this chapter have been reduced to historical footnotes, if they are mentioned at all. The reluctance of historians to write about the women of the NLF can be attributed to a number of factors, one of the most important being the dearth of reliable archival sources, particularly the lack of records that allow NLF women to speak for themselves. The fact that loyalty to the NLF was constantly shifting, with villagers' allegiance changing at times from hour to hour, has made identifying members of the movement who did not take on public roles difficult. In an interview done by the RAND Corporation shortly after the 1968 Tet Offensive, the wife of a cyclo driver succinctly conveyed the fundamentally changeable loyalties of the southern Vietnamese civilians, saying, "this is a war between the two sides, and it is their business. We will obey both sides when

asked.”¹⁰ Aside from the very real difficulty in isolating a membership in the NLF, I argue that few historians have investigated the role of women in the movement - beyond admitting that they played a minor role as propagandists or rear area producers – because, as Jerry Lembcke suggests, these women have been relegated to the realm of mythology and dismissed as mere propaganda tools too readily, a dismissal that may have been informed by the ubiquity of these hyper-masculine fictional remembrances of the war.

This chapter will evaluate three aspects. First, I will assess the ways the popular American press presented the women of the NLF, usually as mysterious figures who often embodied the furtive, hypersexual, threatening nature of an enemy that was not easily identifiable or separable from the civilian population. I argue that the American press translated the women of the NLF into familiar, if fantastical and sexualized idioms that were understandable to an American audience and that served to heighten the threatening nature of the Vietnamese enemy. Second, I will evaluate the ways Vietnamese women actually functioned within the NLF from the movement’s founding in 1960 until the mid-1970s, discussing the jobs they did and the ways they influenced the broader popular perception of the movement in the United States as well as within southern Vietnam. By examining more closely how NLF women operated within the Front, it becomes clear that while the archetypal villainesses portrayed in the American press probably did have some basis in reality, that the more significant threat was the routine labor and creative combat of women. Finally, I will also consider the ways that NLF focused its own propaganda efforts on women, presenting female cadres who embodied a complex amalgam of identities including mothers, nationalists, intelligence agents, and

¹⁰ Victoria Pohle, *The Viet Cong in Saigon: Tactics and Objectives During the Tet Offensive* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1969), 33.

guerrillas. By examining the ways that American perceptions, NLF women's realities, and southern Vietnamese propaganda overlapped and deviated, I argue that women were important not just in the day-to-day execution of the war, but that women became crucial components of the conflict's iconography. Both the American and Vietnamese sources I examine present similar shallow, one-dimensional views of these women, embellishing and exploiting the women's actual roles in order to use their images and experiences to galvanize their respective causes.

Before evaluating the women of the NLF it is important to establish an understanding of the political circumstances in southern Vietnam from the late 1950s until the 1970s. The National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (Mặt Trận Dân Tộc Giải Phóng Miền Nam Việt Nam) was established on December 20, 1960 by a group of southerners who had served in the ranks of the northern Viet Minh during the French war.¹¹ The degree to which the NLF was shaped by a communist worldview has been debated by a number of scholars of Vietnam and of the American conflict there. Some have argued that the NLF was an indigenous southern revolutionary movement who took guidance from the principles of the northern Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) but was not a mere "puppet" of it.¹² The American government and its allies in Saigon, however, viewed the NLF as an extension of the ideology of Hanoi and saw

¹¹ On founding of NLF, see Carlyle A. Thayer, *War by Other Means: National Liberation and Revolution in Viet Nam, 1954-1960* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989), David W.P. Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930-1975* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2003). Organizationally the ARVN and the NLF are broken down in the same way: local self-defense units, provincial forces and regular troops - but in the ARVN, the Ngo Dinh Diem government had special forces, a marine corps, artillery units, paratroops, a navy, an air force. The overall strategy of the NLF and the ARVN was also parallel: both were set for long war and both intent on securing the same geographic objectives. See Jerry A. Rose, "The Elusive Viet Cong," *The New Republic*, 4 May 1963, 19-26.

¹² French journalist and long-time Vietnam correspondent Bernard Fall is an articulate exponent of this view. See *Viet-Nam Witness, 1953-1966* (New York: Praeger, 1966).

its military forces as a southern branch of the regular military forces of the DRV, the People's Army of Viet Nam (PAVN).¹³

One of very few Vietnamese-speaking American foreign service officers, Douglas Pike, who spent nearly a decade studying the movement, has argued persuasively that the political identity of the NLF lay somewhere between these two poles, that the movement maintained a general cooperation with the northern government but retained a flexible conception of revolution for the south that was more concerned with the impact of the war on the everyday lives of people in the countryside.¹⁴ Historian of Vietnam Jean Lacouture wrote in 1965 of the complexity of the relationship between the southern Front and the DRV, pointing out that while the southerners wished to retain their autonomy and sought international recognition of its sovereignty, that they were beholden to the North for aid and advice was implicit.¹⁵ For the purposes of this chapter I will retain Pike's flexible understanding, and focus on the NLF as it functioned in the geographical south, and on the primarily southern and central Vietnamese women who gained notoriety within the movement both in Vietnam and in America.

Another important but often disregarded problem in discussing the NLF is one of terminology. In American coverage of the war, particularly in the decades after the conflict ended, there has been a powerful tendency to use the term "Viet Cong" as a general referent to

¹³ Jeffrey Race's *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972) argues that the NLF had to conceal northern military involvement in one southern province, but that the movement appeared only after Party leaders assessed the southern situation and judged the Diem regime as too deeply flawed to survive.

¹⁴ Douglas Pike, *Vietcong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1966).

¹⁵ Jean Lacouture, "Viet Cong: Who Are They, What Do They Want?" *The New Republic*, 6 March 1965, 21-24.

the Vietnamese “enemy,” whether northern or southern, urban or rural, guerrilla or regular army. French journalist Bernard Fall conveyed the difficulty of identifying the NLF, saying that to the United States and its Saigon allies the Viet Cong represented an “Orwellian unperson.”¹⁶ Historian Nicholas Cull has argued in his history of the United States Information Agency (USIA), that the USIA created the term “Viet Cong” in order to play on global Cold War fears by associating the NLF with the larger communist organization in the north and with communist China and the Soviet Union. Cull suggests that the American government quickly came to regret merging the first words of the nation, “Viet Nam” with the Vietnamese word for communism “cong san,” because it “inadvertently affirmed the nationalist credentials of its enemy.”¹⁷ Despite its association of the nation with communism, the NLF rejected the term “Viet Cong” not just because it was seen as derogatory, but also because the movement claimed to represent various political ideologies, rather than exclusively adhering to communism.¹⁸

In the early 1960s the United States government and some subsequent histories of the war have made further attempts to specify who the Viet Cong were, purporting that the NLF was the

¹⁶ Bernard B. Fall, *Viet-Nam Witness, 1953-1966* (New York: Praeger, 1966), 234.

¹⁷ Nicolas J. Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945-1989* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 495.

¹⁸ This notion of deemphasizing class warfare rhetoric and focusing on a more moderate, flexible approach to Party doctrine was the basis for the concept of the “popular front” common in various communist parties around the world. Theodore Draper wrote that the “turn” to the popular front was initiated by the Communist International in 1935 and lasted in the American Communist Party until 1939. See *The Roots of American Communism* (New York: Viking, 1957). A good historiographical review of works on the Popular Front is Theodore Draper, “The Popular Front Revisited,” *New York Review of Books*, 30 May 1985. While Draper is critical of the Popular Front, Michael Denning has argued that it transformed the ways people imagined the world and helped mobilize various movements for civil liberties such as anti-lynching campaigns. See Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1998), 12-17.

movement's political organization whereas the Viet Cong was its "fighting arm," or military component. The RVN government, particularly during the Diem administration, resisted this kind of specificity, however, using the term "Viet Cong" as a general, disparaging term for all opponents of the regime.¹⁹ While the American military did distinguish NLF guerrillas from PAVN regulars in its official reports, ultimately for most Americans the official distinction between the two groups seems to be that the NLF represented a rural guerrilla movement likely initiated by the north, and the PAVN was the more conventional, organized fighting force of the DRV.²⁰

In the early 1960s, as violence in Vietnam increased along with the involvement of the United States, major American newspapers and magazines slowly began to publish stories on the nature of the NLF and occasionally on the role of women within the movement. Although the coverage was sparse, various publications often offered similar assessments of the NLF's women and came to focus on two aspects: the notion of women as urban spies, saboteurs, and seductresses and the women as fighters regularly engaged in combat against the ARVN and the American military. A 1968 article in the *Washington Post* summed up the notion of women as combatants who used their femininity to perpetrate violence, writing of the ways young women were being used as decoys or "lures" near American Marine bases, and referring to the potential of a young woman to be an "angel of death" as a member of what the Marines had begun to call

¹⁹ The Republic of Vietnam (RVN), discussed in chapter two, was alternatively known in American sources as the Government of Vietnam (GVN), I will use both names depending on the reference in the original sources.

²⁰ In this chapter I refer to the organization primarily as the NLF, but I use "Viet Cong" or "VC" as indicated by contemporary usage.

“‘seduce and destroy’ squads.”²¹ These women, familiar in their Hollywood-like sexuality and threats of violence, provided a useful face for the “faceless foe” that was the NLF, no matter how isolated or infrequent these incidents were in the course of the war.

From the beginning of coverage of the conflict, the American media betrayed a clear concern about the potential for women who had close access to American officials to be trained by the movement in espionage and intelligence gathering, using sexuality and physical proximity to damage the American mission. The media’s focus on this point reflects the fears of the United States military that one of the difficulties in fighting in Vietnam was that the enemy was inseparable from the civilian populations, resulting in the tendency to treat all civilians as potential insurgents. The earliest coverage of female involvement in the NLF appeared in 1962, in a story on the recruitment of Vietnamese women to work as domestic employees for American officials in Saigon and use their positions to provide intelligence to the Front. The July 1962 article in the *Boston Globe* quotes captured NLF documents that warned “one hundred beautiful girl spies of the Red Viet Cong are likely to seek employment as maids of United States officials in Saigon soon,” sowing early seeds of suspicion and distrust between Americans and urban Vietnamese women.²² The fear that female agents were being trained to undermine the American war effort through “seduction and explosives” recurred particularly in coverage of the situation in Saigon, betraying American concerns with NLF infiltration into realms of everyday life that

²¹ “VC Use Girls to Bait Marines,” *Washington Post*, 2 May 1968, A14.

²² “100 Young Lovelies Set to Spy on U.S. In Viet Nam,” *Boston Globe*, 3 July 1962, 9.

destabilized the urban environment and represented a constant if latent threat to Americans in southern Vietnam.²³

Although early coverage of the war rarely mentioned the role of sex between Americans and Vietnamese, one captured NLF document revealed detailed instructions to members of the VC to “train prostitutes and waitresses to propagandize Americans to stop fighting the Viet Cong,” while the agents were also ordered to “place explosive devices in bars throughout the city to assassinate Americans.”²⁴ In 1965 there was little actual violence taking place within the city of Saigon, but this fear of women who were prepared to sabotage American installations was stoked by the American media, as in August 1965 when a 17-year old woman named Nguyen Thi Nga attempted to blow up the officers’ quarters at the Soc Trang air base by smuggling explosives packed in talcum powder cans.²⁵ Nga, described as a “wide-eyed nymph whose slender, well-shaped figure was clothed in a filmy white gown,” was accused of seducing high-ranking American officers while plotting to plant plastic explosives in the base’s mess hall.²⁶ Nga first entered the Soc Trang base as an “office girl,” who was using her many relationships with officers to smuggle plans of the airbase to leaders of a VC intelligence unit.

Another instance of NLF attacks led by women occurred in the summer of 1965, when “two pretty women decoys” flirted with guards at the national police headquarters in Saigon, distracting them while two cars loaded with explosives drove through the open gate. The impact

²³ Jack Foisie, “Viet Cong Uses Girls in Effort to Subvert GIs,” *Los Angeles Times*, 2 December 1964, 2.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ “War Role of Vietcong’s Women Widens With Shortage of Men,” *New York Times*, 2 August 1965, 3.

²⁶ “Lovely ‘Moon Fairy’ a Deadly Red Agent,” *Los Angeles Times*, 17 April 1965, 1.

of the explosives destroyed a building and three police cars, killed four Vietnamese policemen and injured twenty-one, six of whom were American.²⁷ The concern over women as spies only grew with more incidents of violence as a 1966 story about a police raid of a spy ring run by a teenage girl spoke to the fear of women trained in intelligence work.²⁸ American news coverage of isolated incidents like those of Nguyen Thi Nga and the female decoys laid bare the fear of women's potential to threaten the American mission not just because of their intimate access allowed by their status as administrative or domestic workers, but because of the perceived ability of women, particularly older women, to move throughout Saigon attracting little attention. Women's presence in marketplaces was seen as an opportunity for female Viet Cong agents to move weapons or deliver secret messages that were cleverly concealed in everyday items or on their person. *Time* magazine touted the "immemorial value of women in espionage," noting that nearly every market in southern Vietnam has a "sharp-eyed little-old-lady vendor who is not quite what she seems."²⁹

Female agents were captured in Saigon in 1965 for offenses such as transporting messages affixed to the bottom of fish sauce jars, concealing grenades inside the buns of their hair and transporting plastic explosives in false bottoms of wooden fruit buckets. One Vietnamese typist working for the Americans was arrested after it was discovered that she hid poison inside of cigarette packets, while another woman entered an American compound with an explosive in her girdle.³⁰ The American media acknowledged not just the effectiveness of these

²⁷ "Two Pretty Women Serve as Decoys in Viet Raid," *Los Angeles Times*, 17 August 1965, 7.

²⁸ "Three Girls Held in Vietnam as Red Spies," *Los Angeles Times*, 16 April 1966, 8.

²⁹ "South Viet Nam: Victoria Charlenes," *Time*, 23 June 1967, 28.

³⁰ "Women Used in Deadly, Vital Role by Viet Cong," *Los Angeles Times*, 1 December 1965, C2.

women messengers but their ingenuity, noting that women were constantly coming up with new ways to subvert the search procedures of the Saigon government's check points, representing a nearly limitless and utterly insidious threat to Americans. It is certainly possible that the media focused on such episodes because they helped lend an air of mystery or an Ian Fleming-like intrigue to the conflict, but the concern of American officials about the potential threat posed by women led to far more vigilance and preoccupation with internal security within Saigon and the southern countryside.

In their coverage, American journalists often attempted to evaluate what motivated women to join the NLF, and their explanations invariably focused on relationships and sex. In a *Los Angeles Times* article titled "Ideology Not All: Men, Love Motivate Viet Cong's Women," the women of the NLF are presented as abandoned lovers and disgruntled widows with "sad eyes" who were left with few options other than to join the movement.³¹ Despite the increasingly common involvement of women in NLF battles, articles such as this one present women as timid and afraid of being alone, seeing in the NLF a chance to exorcise their anger at the Saigon government and American troops. Although the weary war widow narrative was fairly common in the American press, far more frequently the women of the NLF were figured as urban bar girls, either as "Communist-leaning" or fully trained NLF agents. Journalist Beverly Deepe points out the seeming paradox that the "increased importance of woman power" within the NLF was viewed by some as proof of NLF challenges in recruitment but seen by NLF radio

³¹ "Ideology Not All: Men, Love Motivate Viet Cong's Women," *Los Angeles Times*, 7 March 1968, A3.

broadcasts as evidence that “all elements of the Vietnamese population are being used in the ‘people’s war.’”³²

Deepe’s reportage shows an unusual interest in women’s involvement, detailing the responsibilities of the women’s organization within the NLF, the South Vietnam’s Women’s Liberation Association (SVWLA), which was founded in 1961 and as of 1968 claimed an almost certainly inflated membership of more than two million women. While the primary goals of the association were to continue mobilizing women to join the front lines, perform rear-service duties and motivate village and hamlet guerrilla forces, a second broad requirement spoke to the role of women in cities, provinces, and Saigon government-controlled areas. More “female underground cadres,” according to Deepe, were to be introduced into the urban environment.³³ Women were charged with increasing propaganda efforts and encouraged to form propaganda assault teams, consisting of three to five-woman cells who carried out propaganda missions in large market places. The thrust of Deepe’s article was that the NLF was redoubling efforts to encourage women to spearhead the revolution, arguing that the movement was critically aware of the importance of urban women in challenging American force. Despite Deepe’s attempts to lay out the goals and accomplishments of the women’s association, most of the mainstream American press maintained its dismissive, patronizing attitude towards the organization. In *Time*, the women’s organization was compared to an American ladies’ aid groups, who “besides

³² Beverly Deepe, “Political Spearhead Role? Women Build Viet Cong Ranks,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 4 May 1968, 4.

³³ Ibid.

nagging government officials,” was used primarily to write letters to ARVN soldiers encouraging them to join the NLF.³⁴

Aside from the repeated applications of western notions of femininity to the Vietnamese women, the American media also demonstrated a preoccupation of the role of sex within the movement, not just as a weapon that could be deployed against Americans, but as a way of maintaining discipline.³⁵ A 1968 article in the *New York Times* cites an American source that stated, “there seems to be a very strict sexual code among the Vietcong.” The source noted curiously that while they did find contraceptives at an abandoned camp near Saigon, “there’s no evidence at all of any promiscuity. They’re very strict, it seems.”³⁶ In addition to the *New York Times*, *The New Republic* also mentioned the discovery of “Chinese-made birth control pills” found by American soldiers in 1968, among the battle gear left by fleeing women. American intelligence officers registered surprise not at the large numbers of women involved, but by the existence of the pills as a sign of sexual activity.³⁷

³⁴ “Girls Under Fire,” *Time*, 23 July 1965, 17.

³⁵ The attitude of revolutionary groups toward sex and female members has received more scholarly attention recently, as historian Vina Lanzona observed very different sex practices among the Philippines’ Hukbalahap movement in the 1950s. Lanzona argues that the Huk movement fostered a sexually permissive culture, one that allowed women to legitimize their role or advance to leadership within the movement through sex and marriage. See Vina A. Lanzona, *Amazons of the Huk Rebellion: Gender, Sex, and Revolution in the Philippines*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009). In Vietnam, however, historian David Hunt argues that the NLF made explicit efforts in establishing a dichotomy of virtuous women and bad girls that was used to keep its female members in line. Hunt argues that the aggressive policing of sexuality prevented a meaningful feminist coalition within the Front, which he identifies as a key failure of the movement. See *Vietnam's Southern Revolution: From Peasant Insurrection to Total War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009).

³⁶ Bernard Weinraub, “Vietcong Recruit Girls for Combat,” *New York Times*, 10 June 1968, 3.

³⁷ Zalin Grant, “Mobilization of Women in Vietnam,” *The New Republic*, 1 June 1968, 11-13.

One of the reasons there was little evidence of sex, although it is unclear what would constitute evidence, was that the Front did in fact establish rigid rules regarding sex, reflecting standard practice among communist parties.³⁸ Both the American press and internal documents of the NLF demonstrate that the movement prohibited sex and marriage among cadres, and adopted a punitive attitude toward adultery and “moral lapses” among members. The *New York Times* observed that if a Vietcong couple does “yield to temptation, and is caught the penalty is harsh for both of them - anything from 3 to 10 years of confinement in the bamboo cages that serve as jail cells in remote base areas.”³⁹ While the punishment for sex among cadres seemed to apply equally to males and females, the article does suggest that the prohibition was intended to restrain the impulses of the movement’s women, whom they regarded as more likely to initiate physical relationships. The article emphasizes this notion that the movement itself saw women as particularly susceptible to breaking the rule, citing a captured NLF document’s assertion that “the weak points of women are that they are credulous and cannot resist love.”⁴⁰

American analysts argued that the motivation for harsh punishments regarding sex were less a product of cultural puritanism among the Vietnamese than proof of the movement’s discipline, citing one of the Front’s emulation campaigns, the “Three postponements” as evidence that the NLF put its political goals over personal relationships. The NLF’s female deputy commander, Nguyen Thi Dinh, was the spokesperson for the movement, as she called on women to not only play a role in recruitment, but to encourage adherence to a “new morality” for

³⁸ Lenin’s puritanical attitudes towards sex were well known, as he saw sex and love as bourgeois concerns that had no place in the party. See for instance Clara Zetkin and Vladimir Ilich Lenin, *Lenin on the Woman Question* (New York: International Publishers, 1934).

³⁹ “Vietcong Cadre Girls Told to Make War, Not Love,” *New York Times*, 16 March 1969, 3.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

NLF women. This new attitude was popularized by the “Three Postponements” campaign that sought to reform social customs to serve the war effort, and urged the postponement of love, marriage, and childbirth. The article notes that the movement was “not a notable success,” and that NLF men organized a countermovement mandating that men “find a mistress, fall in love, and prevent Mme. Dinh’s precepts from becoming the law of Viet Cong lands.”⁴¹ The tone of the *Time* piece maintains a glib, dismissive attitude of the capacity for women to threaten the American effort in Vietnam, seeming to present the “sullen, sloe-eyed” women as evidence of the enemy’s incapacity, desperation, and impending collapse in 1967.

Still, stories on NLF women were relatively rare in the American press, limited to a handful of articles in major newspapers and even fewer magazine features. Precisely because of this dearth of coverage, the coherence of the narrative that NLF women were particularly threatening because of their disarming sexuality or their perceived separation from the fighting was important in forming enduring impressions of Vietnamese women as threats to the American military. American knowledge of NLF women was based on a handful of evocative stories, isolated and sometimes anecdotal or apocryphal, but the cumulative impact of the repeated suggestion that NLF women would “seduce and destroy” their American and Saigon enemies did have an effect on the way Americans perceived the NLF and the evolving nature of the war in Vietnam.

By 1967, American coverage of Vietnamese women in the NLF shifted from a focus on urban saboteurs to the NLF’s use of women in regular military engagements throughout the south, focusing on the threat women posed as potential guerrilla fighters. A June 1967 feature in *Time* bestowed the nickname “Victoria Charlenes” on the women agents of the NLF, feminizing

⁴¹ “South Viet Nam: Victoria Charlenes,” *Time*, 23 June 1967, 28.

the ubiquitous “Victor Charlie” appellation given to the movement’s male soldiers, derived from the phonetic alphabet used by the military. News coverage in 1967 began to shift the American conversation from the fear of women’s particular talents in espionage and their creativity in small-scale attacks to the possibility that the women were being used as well-trained and effective combatants. The statistics, as many in the conflict, are known to be unreliable, but one Lieutenant General in the United States Marine Corps reported that as much as 29% of the guerrilla fighting force of the NLF was female.⁴² *Time* describes the day-to-day tasks women perform within the NLF, including sewing uniforms, toting rice and ammunition, clearing battlefields, operating radios and managing the “meticulous” NLF bureaucracy.

Touching on what was a particularly consequential role of women within the NLF, *Time* observed that women were critical to recruitment and retention, telling of entertainment troops tasked with keeping the villagers left behind in line with the NLF and recruiting new members. The civilian women’s association within the NLF took as one of its primary goals the need for women to convince their male relatives to participate in the armed struggle and to encourage village women to do all they could to aid the movement as noncombatants. RAND studies and several American journalists suggested that a primary role of women in the movement was to “shame” reluctant young men into service, using their own involvement in the Front as a way of pressuring family members to contribute.⁴³ While the media tended to focus on more sensational acts of sabotage, often the simple influence of older village women on younger people proved to

⁴²“South Viet Nam: Victoria Charlenes,” *Time*, 23 June 1967, 28.

⁴³ In 1971, *Der Spiegel* reported that the Pentagon suppressed a RAND study which concluded that NLF success on the battlefield was a result of “high ideological motivation” achieved in part by women’s encouragement of men to remain in the movement. “U.S. Suppressed Rand Study on Viet Cong, Der Spiegel Says,” *Chicago Tribune*, 15 November 1971, A8.

be a more significant threat to the American mission, particularly given the ever-increasing manpower shortages within the NLF. Captured documents reveal the mundane but strategic ways women were encouraged to contribute to war efforts, as young women were advised to promise marriage to multiple men if they agreed to serve or to claim to be the wives of young men who were being arrested by Saigon police and beg for their release. CIA reports suggested that the NLF had established a system of rewards for women who persuaded their husbands, sons, or brothers who had deserted to return to the Front. Women who were able to convince one man to return with his weapon were given a six-month exemption from required civilian labor and taxes, women who convinced five men to return with weapons received a six-year exemption. Additionally, the women's names would be inscribed on a "golden scroll" and they were given a photograph of Ho Chi Minh.⁴⁴

As the war progressed and American and ARVN casualties mounted, major American newspaper coverage presented the NLF's women combatants as a more legitimate threat than the earlier coverage, as multiple articles told of women acting as individuals or in small groups attacking American soldiers in provinces from the Long An to Tay Ninh and acting as front-line fighters. In June 1967, the overall force of women NLF fighters was said to have increased from 30,000 in 1962 to 295,000 in 1967.⁴⁵ Other estimates put the number of women in NLF guerrilla forces at as much as 50%.⁴⁶ American or ARVN forces captured or killed several young NLF women in 1967, most of the women were detained for firing on allied troops or throwing

⁴⁴ Central Intelligence Information Cable, "Viet Cong Use of Women in Guerrilla Units Intelligence Collection," 6 April 1967, CIA Collection, Texas Tech University Vietnam Archive, item # 04109123005.

⁴⁵ "Vietcong Stressing Roles for Women: Often Carry Weapons," *New York Times*, 25 June 1967, 3.

⁴⁶ "Wives are Cong Weaponry to Take Enemy by Surprise," *Washington Post*, 22 July 1967, B6.

grenades at American military installations.⁴⁷ Later in 1967, the first all-female squadron of eight attacked an American infantry company on ambush patrol in the jungles north of Saigon. The commanding officer reported that four of the women were killed and the other four escaped still shooting.⁴⁸ While none of the Americans were hit, this marked the first time that women soldiers directly engaged in battle against US or ARVN forces. While the American coverage suggested that most of the women were used in support roles, cleaning up battlefields, capturing weapons, or tending to wounded soldiers, there was a recognition that many of the women participated in assassinations or armed patrols. In *The New Republic*, Zalin Grant reported that the women of the NLF had “swapped jewelry for submachine guns, to take on US soldiers in battle.”⁴⁹

While stories of women’s battlefield exploits received coverage in American media outlets, the focus on women fighters obscured the everyday acts of resistance, sabotage, and propaganda that far more NLF women engaged in. Journalist David Halberstam, the reporter for the *New York Times* who spent many of America’s early years in Vietnam stationed in Saigon, noted in his 1965 book *The Making of a Quagmire* that ARVN troops recognized the power of village women who felt abused by the Saigon government to encourage others to join the NLF. Halberstam, while on patrol in a village in the Mekong Delta with a particularly effective ARVN captain, told of a village woman who resisted the captain’s interrogation and gave information about the presence of NLF cadres that was soon proven false. The ARVN captain acknowledged to Halberstam that he knew the woman worked for the NLF, but arresting her would only serve to make the other villagers angrier. The captain said, “it is too late to work on her, and if we

⁴⁷ “Viet Cong Recruiting Women Warriors,” *Boston Globe*, 25 June 1967, 12.

⁴⁸ “8 Vietcong Women Attack U.S. Force,” *New York Times*, 28 October 1967, 3.

⁴⁹ Zalin Grant, “Mobilization of Women in Vietnam,” *The New Republic*, 1 June 1968, 11-13.

take her away, her children will definitely go over to the enemy. Do they teach about this at Fort Bragg?” the soldier asked bitterly.⁵⁰

The influence that village women exerted on NLF cadres was certainly a far more significant contribution to the war effort than the few battalions of women soldiers that attacked American or ARVN forces, but as the ARVN captain admitted, the militaries had little success in countering the influence that women exerted on the general population in South Vietnam. American media coverage offers one limited view of the ways that Vietnamese women participated in the southern revolution, one that sought to introduce the American public to a conflict and a group of women that seemed desperately foreign and increasingly threatening. In addition to journalism, an important source base for scholars interested in the role of women in the war has been various collections of interviews administered by the RAND Corporation throughout the 1960s and 1970s. RAND, the nonprofit think tank that was initially attached to the United States Air Force, became the group that the American government tasked with dozens of research projects on topics including the effects of American and Saigon military operations on NLF behavior, statistical evaluations of the impact of chemical crop destruction, profiles of North Vietnamese soldiers in the south, and studies of logistics within the NLF administration among others.⁵¹

In its “Motivation and Morale” project, a study undertaken between August 1964 and December 1968, RAND sought to understand why NLF cadres joined the movement and what

⁵⁰ David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire: America and Vietnam During the Kennedy Era* (New York: Knopf, 1965), 55.

⁵¹ For the most thorough and updated review of the activities of RAND in Vietnam see Duong Van Mai Elliott, *RAND in Southeast Asia A History of the Vietnam War Era*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corp, 2010).

sustained their participation.⁵² While initially the project was limited to intelligence-gathering, by the mid-1960s as the Front came to pose a greater military and political threat, American officials began to press RAND analysts for more actionable information, instructing analysts to focus on information that would contribute most directly to the achievement of military objectives and to help the United States ultimately to win the war.⁵³

As well as providing analysis, RAND played a role in the administration of one of the most extensive and relatively efficient programs undertaken in South Vietnam, the Chieu Hoi program, known by the Americans in a very loose translation as “open arms.” Chieu Hoi was an effort to encourage NLF members to defect to the Saigon government side using primarily propaganda, often in the form of leaflets dropped by aircraft. The program was instituted in 1963 under the auspices of the government of Saigon and ran until 1973, with advisement, administration and funding provided by the American military. Defectors, known as “hoi chanh” or “ralliers,” were given political indoctrination, were promised job training and a monthly stipend, and offered the opportunity to re-integrate into southern society. In the first three years of the program nearly 28,000 guerrillas defected under the program, and over the course of the decade the number was close to 200,000.⁵⁴ Although military personnel and RAND analysts alike disagreed on the number of defections that were genuine, it was undeniable that the program was widely known and was, to some degree, an effective way of reaching out to disaffected or abused members of the NLF who were susceptible to GVN influence.

⁵² RAND conducted approximately 2,400 interviews that produced more than 62,000 transcribed pages, all of which were released to the American public in 1972.

⁵⁴ J. M. Carrier and C. A. H. Thomson, *Viet Cong Motivation and Morale: The Special Case of Chieu Hoi* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corp, 1966).

When approached critically, the Chieu Hoi and other RAND interview data can be used to reliably glean some information about the day-to-day lives of women in the NLF. This is a contention that has been widely accepted among historians for some time, as the data has been used in multiple scholarly analyses since the war's conclusion.⁵⁵ Given the importance attributed to these interviews and other RAND studies, not just by historians but also by the American government during the conflict, the possibilities and limitations of the data deserve further consideration. One important point of contention over the data is that analysts frequently used material culled from interviews as evidence in secondary analyses, or memoranda on topics that were not the original focus of the initial interview questions. The veracity or validity of RAND conclusions have been suspect on this basis and because of the nature of their samples, which were often relatively small and rarely representative across racial and class boundaries. The impact of these studies on the course of the war, however, was immense. The circumstances of the interviews are unclear in the transcriptions, but we know that many of the interviewers were RAND analysts and nearly all of the interpreters were middle class Saigon residents. The reliability of the translations is another consideration, particularly since historian and former RAND staffer Duong Van Mai Elliott states in her history of the organization that in one case an interviewer's only second language was French, resulting in the translation of original interviews from Vietnamese to French to English.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Works that have used the RAND interview data include David W.P. Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930-1975*, 2 vols. (New York: M E Sharpe Inc, 2002), David Hunt, *Vietnam's Southern Revolution: From Peasant Insurrection to Total War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), Sandra Taylor, *Vietnamese Women at War: Fighting for Ho Chi Minh and the Revolution* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1999).

⁵⁶ Elliott, *RAND in Southeast Asia*, 58.

Remarkably, even given these potential problems, the conclusions of RAND analysts often provided the sole basis for directing US military policy. In 1966, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara presented RAND results to the Senate Armed Services Committee and an appropriations sub-committee hearing to determine whether to authorize increased American bombings in Vietnam. The Senate committee was hesitant to approve increased bombing, expressing concern that the damage to villages and civilian casualties provided the NLF too much propaganda material. Using conclusions drawn exclusively from RAND interviews, McNamara argued that the NLF had already exploited maximum propaganda value of the devastation so that increased bombings were not likely to lead to any additional hostility of villagers toward the Saigon government or the United States. According to journalist Gareth Porter, the episode demonstrated that “RAND seems to have flashed the green light for a virtual scorched-earth policy in enemy zones,” and the American government accepted its logic. The fact that McNamara chose to feature the 1965 RAND report in his testimony supported Porter’s contention that the document represented “the clearest rationale for bombing villages ever made public.”⁵⁷

While it is clear that the United States government invested heavily in the analysis of the RAND Corporation, the Chieu Hoi program did not receive much attention in the United States press. There was, however, a small effort to feature the program as an example of successful cooperation with the Saigon government and evidence of progress in the war. Rarely in its coverage of NLF women did American publications actually publish specific identifying information or even the names of NLF women, with the exception of high-ranking cadres like Nguyen Thi Dinh, referring to them instead in terms of the archetypes discussed earlier. An

⁵⁷ Gareth Porter, “People as the Enemy,” *The New Republic*, 10 Feb 1968, 17-19.

exception to this is the case of an eighteen-year-old Viet Cong fighter named Tran Thi Ho Le who defected to the GVN side under the Chieu Hoi program. The American press picked up on Le as something of a poster girl of Chieu Hoi, presenting her as an ambassador for the program and the face of a reformed Viet Cong guerrilla woman in the media. Le told the press that she joined the Viet Cong in 1965 at the age of 13. Her reasons for joining were slightly different in major newspapers, as the *Los Angeles Times* attributed her joining to the VC's ideological plea that American imperialists were taking over South Vietnam.⁵⁸ The *New York Times* claimed that the Viet Cong's failure to pay Le her 18-cent per month personal hygiene allowance triggered her defection, while a feature in the French and English-language publication *The Vietnam Observer* imparted a feminist motivation, noting that "Miss Le joined the Viet Cong guerrillas three years ago, partly out of a sense of adventure and partly because she was told she would help emancipate the Vietnamese woman."⁵⁹

Despite these variations, the coverage of Tran Thi Ho Le's defection uniformly depicted her as a giggling, long-haired, pretty young girl who belonged to a 12-woman mortar group once referred to as a "pinup squad."⁶⁰ First trained as a nurse by the Front, Le studied mathematics to improve her skill in firing weapons and learned to handle artillery and operate an 82mm mortar. Despite the emphasis on her training, Le nonetheless appeared to journalists as "anything but a soldier."⁶¹ Le described to Americans the egalitarian nature of the NLF, telling that women were expected to perform all of the same tasks as men in terms of labor and combat. She told of the

⁵⁸ "Girl Defects After 3 Years as Viet Cong," *Los Angeles Times*, 18 July 1968, 8.

⁵⁹ "Vietcong Cadre Girls Told to Make War, Not Love," *New York Times*, 16 March 1969, and Nguyen Thuoc, "Confessions of a V.C. Girl Fighter," *The Vietnam Observer*, December 1968.

⁶⁰ "Girl Defects After 3 Years as Viet Cong," *Los Angeles Times*, 18 July 1968, 8.

⁶¹ "Beauty, 18, Ends 3 Years as VC," *Pacific Stars and Stripes*, 19 July 1968.

routines of life in the jungle, rising at five for calisthenics followed by two hours of political study. Military training in the afternoon was followed by self-criticism sessions or Party cultural events in the evening. The American coverage did not explicitly cite the hardships of daily life as the sole motivation for her decision to defect, instead one article blamed the harsh inhumanity of the movement, contending that “she could no longer stand the cold and ruthless repression of human emotions and compassion” and the “heavy personal restrictions placed on them by the Party.”⁶²

The Vietnam Observer used the case of Miss Le to elucidate the policies of sexual restraint of the NLF that the American press had emphasized earlier, casting celibacy among cadres as a rigid, if somewhat novel requirement. The publication states that all NLF recruits were subjected to medical examination upon joining the Viet Cong, and that unmarried girls found to have lost their virginity were not permitted to advance within the ranks. Unmarried girls who had sex “were considered emotionally unreliable and unable to stand the rigid ascetics of communist life.”⁶³ An unnamed American analyst of the Viet Cong was quoted saying that “when you join the party you in effect marry it, and she is a very jealous mistress.”⁶⁴

Not only was sex prohibited, but also physical intimacy of any kind was not permitted unless granted permission. Le said, “We accepted Party members stifling our love life,” but found it “difficult to endure their constant criticism and the negation of natural sentiments we all have as normal human beings.” Le attributed her growing “hatred toward men” that was instilled

⁶² Nguyen Thuoc, “Confessions of a V.C. Girl Fighter,” *The Vietnam Observer*, December 1968.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ “Vietcong Cadre Girls Told to Make War, Not Love,” *New York Times*, 16 March 1969, 3.

by repeated Party lectures as the primary reason she defected.⁶⁵ After returning to her family, she was “back ‘on the other side of Vietnamese life’ where warmth, affection and love are not shunned.” Le was scheduled to undertake a world tour under the auspices of the Saigon government to publicize and to relay her message to her former female comrades to “have courage and come on over!”

In reading the original transcripts of the interviews the Joint United States Public Affairs Office (JUSPAO) did with Tran Thi Ho Le, a slightly different image emerges. Le’s age at the time of her defection was in fact 15, not 13 as she previously told the American press. Le said in the interview that the minimum age for enrolling in NLF training courses in 1965 was 17, so she lied about her age and entered at 15, accounting for the two-year discrepancy. When asked about her political motivations for joining the movement, Le admits that even after rallying she still found the rhetoric of the Front admirable, but found that the movement’s stated ideology differed widely from the reality of life as a cadre. Le stated that she was a dedicated soldier who was admitted to the party under promises of unity but became disillusioned with the long years of war. Le says that after years of dedication, “the truth became apparent to me. They promised unity that has never come. We waited and waited, there was only blood and death. None of our hopes have been realized.”⁶⁶

While the American sources suggested that Le was a hardened combatant, in the official interviews, Le presents herself as a somewhat reluctant soldier with minimal combat experience, and she specifically denies that she was a guerrilla. Le states that she was a nurse who served in

⁶⁵ Nguyen Thuoc, “Confessions of a V.C. Girl Fighter,” *The Vietnam Observer*, December 1968.

⁶⁶ Interview with Tran Thi Ho Le, September 1968, Robert F. Turner Papers, File “Tran Thi Ho Le,” Hoover Institution, Stanford University.

regional forces, therefore a VC soldier, “but not a guerrilla.” While emphasizing her training as a nurse, it is clear in the interview that she was also trained in artillery and had participated in eighteen shellings. She did not appear, however, to have risen very far in the VC leadership, and admits that she felt ashamed that at eighteen years old, people thought of her as an assassin. The image that emerges from her official interviews is less of a battle-hardened guerrilla than of a young woman disillusioned with a movement and a war that had consumed much of her youth and blunted her idealism.

Tran Thi Ho Le was the only young woman the American press named in conjunction with Chieu Hoi, despite the fact that there were at least fourteen women who rallied in the early years of the program. There were other women with more experience than Le, some of whom had longer careers and commanded more troops, but these women were not chosen as the face of the program. Another female rallier, Huynh Thi Tan, seemed to contradict much of Tran Thi Ho Le’s view of life in the NLF. Tan, known as Mrs. Thanh, rallied to the government side in 1967 at the age of 28 and became known by the US military as the “Tigress of Chau Doc.”⁶⁷ Thanh joined the movement for many of the same idealistic reasons as Le, believing that the NLF represented more clearly the will of the Vietnamese people. Of her motivations, Thanh said she joined “because I thought I could fight for a noble cause, not for myself, but for my people and family. I fought for 14 million people who were suffering.” Thanh contends that urban Vietnamese women had become too caught up in material life and were naive to the privations and suffering of women in the countryside.

⁶⁷ “Ideology Not All: Men, Love Motivate Viet Cong’s Women,” *Los Angeles Times*, 7 March 1968, A3.

Thanh married a fellow cadre who she met after joining the NLF, and her husband was killed in 1966, two years after their marriage. Mrs. Thanh was dismayed by the way the NLF treated her after her husband was killed, saying that she “encountered only obstacles and difficulties” from the VC, who hadn’t even informed her directly of her husband’s death. Based on her interview, Mrs. Thanh amassed considerable military power during her five-year career with the NLF, commanding 147 soldiers, and losing only 19 in battle.⁶⁸ Thanh, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, received the NLF’s medal for meritorious service 43 times. While Mrs. Thanh categorized most of her battle engagements as “trifling,” consisting of troop interceptions and sabotage of communications routes, she did participate in two major battles and received a rare commendation from the North Vietnamese army. Thanh said that she was the only woman to command an entire company that operated across three regions, and that she was trained in the use of mines as well as techniques to destroy bridges, vehicles, and government installation in her home province of An Giang.

No photographs of Mrs. Thanh are attached to her interviews, so it is impossible to say if her appearance, compared to the beautiful, young 18-year old Le, precluded her from being chosen as the symbol of the Chieu Hoi program.⁶⁹ More likely, Thanh’s outspoken criticism of the Chieu Hoi center in An Giang province disqualified her from any consideration for media attention. In her JUSPAO interview, Thanh makes clear that she was “truly displeased” with her treatment at the Chieu Hoi center, telling the service chief at one point that “I’d rather live with

⁶⁸ JUSPAO interview with Huynh Thi Thanh, p. 11, Robert F. Turner Papers, File “Nguyen Thi Ngoc Bong (Mrs.),” Hoover Institution, Stanford University.

⁶⁹ Interestingly, when JUSPAO asked Tran Thi Ho Le if she had ever met Thanh, she responded that she had never heard of her.

the VC and never rally if I knew that you are treating us like this.”⁷⁰ Thanh was not simply a disgruntled resident of the center, but became an instructor of Chieu Hoi policies at An Giang, despite saying that the chief there treated ralliers worse than prisoners of war. Thanh tells of the unnamed chief’s penchant for using the ralliers to perform labor for him, requiring ralliers to wash his cows daily and closely inspect them each evening for cleanliness. Ralliers, contrary to the program’s policies, were not permitted to leave the facility, were not allowed to receive family visitors, and were often not given the \$200VN per month allowance that each returnee was promised.

Thanh was angered at the chief’s inept administration, and planned two separate demonstrations of rallier discontent. After Thanh tore down a poster that advertised the \$200VN allowance and attempted to stage a coup, the chief admonished the male ralliers who followed Thanh’s lead, some of whom were military officers, saying, “You are grown up men, and you have fallen into a scheme put up by a woman. Why is it you are so stirred up and did anything that woman told you to do?” The chief managed to defuse the situation and allowances were eventually paid, but it is clear in Thanh’s interview that her dissatisfaction with the way the Chieu Hoi center in An Giang operated extended to doubt about the likelihood that the Saigon government would win the loyalty of the masses.

The two stories of the Chieu Hoi women come closer to representing the actual roles of women in the NLF than earlier press coverage, but further analysis of Vietnamese sources demonstrate that the American media offered a very narrow and one-dimensional view of the women of the NLF. In examining Vietnamese sources, it becomes clear that one area of the war where women played a crucial and visible role was in the realm of propaganda. The famed North

⁷⁰ Ibid.

Vietnamese general Vo Nguyen Giap who became known as a brilliant strategist in part because of his success in defeating the French at the battle of Dien Bien Phu, argued in his book *People's War, People's Army* that propaganda and organization of the masses throughout the country was of decisive importance.⁷¹ Political activities, said General Giap, trumped military strategy, lending great significance to activities that would increasingly include large numbers of women. Southern leaders of the NLF certainly agreed, as the highest ranking military leaders recognized that the key to winning the war was winning the people, the “hearts and minds” that the American military evoked so frequently but had little success in reaching. NLF training documents suggest that in order to properly motivate women to join the movement that cadres must acknowledge the “virtues” that have made Vietnamese women suited to revolution, particularly “endurance, patience, hard-working and a spirit ready to sacrifice for other persons.”⁷²

One of the ways that the NLF sought to motivate women and include them in its program was by invoking the ideas of women's liberation. A 1961 NLF training document on the role of women in the revolution placed women's liberation as a constituent part of the movement's policy. The general policy is to “free women in every aspect,” to give them “a new revolutionary morality,” and to link the liberation of women to the liberation of the Vietnamese people.⁷³ The document argues that women must struggle to liberate themselves in economic, political, social,

⁷¹ Vo Nguyen Giap, *People's War, People's Army: The Viet Cong Insurrection Manual For Underdeveloped Countries* (New York: Praeger, 1967).

⁷² “Planning of Motivation, Organization and Training of Woman Cadres,” (“Ke hoach van dong to chuc va dao tao can bo phu nu”), undated, Robert F. Turner Papers, File “Vietnam Women,” Hoover Institution, Stanford University.

⁷³ “Women and the Revolution: NLF Training Document, 1961,” Douglas Pike Collection (Unit 05), Texas Tech University Vietnam Archive, item # 2311007002.

and cultural domains. Noting that “in North Vietnam, no woman is illiterate,” the document calls for schools and colleges to be open to all women, “even married or busy women,” and that despite their physical disadvantages and destiny to be mothers, women must be considered equals in every way, even within the family.

The Party’s notion of a “new revolutionary morality” notes that in the past, the freedom of Vietnamese women has been “falsely shaped against the revolution,” and that Confucian virtues limited women’s roles to the family, and even within the family women played a minor role. The Party announced its intention to abolish that “corruptive morality” and forge a new social order to preserve the dignity of women. In assessing the appeal of the NLF to young women, interviews suggest that they were often drawn to the sense of adventure that Tran Thi Ho Le cited, as one respondent said she welcomed a position as an NLF liaison agent because she had never been outside her home province and was eager to see the rest of the country.⁷⁴ Another RAND study contends that the NLF appealed on a number of grounds in addition to adventure: “nationalistic, promises of glory, social equality, land, and escape from personal problems.”⁷⁵

One of the most common ways for women to participate in the revolution was by joining one of the NLF’s women’s associations, but to a certain extent assessing the numbers of women who joined tells us little about their roles within the organization. In his study of the central village of My Thu Phuong, social scientist James Trullinger argues that although nearly all of the village’s women were technically members, participation in that particular village was coerced

⁷⁴ Burchett, 85.

⁷⁵ W. Phillips Davison, *Some Observations on Viet Cong Operations in the Villages* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corp, 1968).

and unenthusiastic.⁷⁶ Like the leaders of the RVN women's associations, NLF organizers often forced women to join and transported them to rallies en masse. While it is certainly true that simply joining a group or attending the twice-weekly meetings of the women's association does not suggest that these women were vitally important to the movement, historian David Hunt describes membership in NLF women's association as the fast track to leadership within the movement, especially during periods of heavy propaganda when women were used most. RAND analyses also noted that within a general women's organization there were a number of specialized groups such as the Foster Sisters' Association and Foster Mothers' Association, who were less involved with agitation work and concentrated on caring for military personnel.

One of the primary functions of the women's groups seems to have been publicizing and advocating various social campaigns, such as the Three Postponements discussed earlier. In addition, women played a wide range of important roles at all levels of the NLF organizational structure, and the Front recognized the importance of aiming its propaganda efforts at the "well-to-do and average women."⁷⁷ According to the RAND interviews, women in high political positions, even as Party Secretaries in the village, were not rare. According to captured NLF documents, many officials believed women "did better work than the men," and they made up a significant percentage of both students and instructors in political training courses.⁷⁸ Despite the encouragement for women to be involved, the RAND data suggests that the VC organization may have viewed women with some ambivalence, as many interviewees said that the female

⁷⁶ James W. Trullinger, *Village at War: An Account of Conflict in Vietnam* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980), 77.

⁷⁷ "Planning of Motivation, Organization and Training of Woman Cadres," ("Ke hoach van dong to chuc va dao tao can bo phu nu"), undated, Robert F. Turner Papers, File "Vietnam Women," Hoover Institution, Stanford University.

⁷⁸ Davison, 83.

platoons were poorly trained in terms of weapons or military tactics and that the movement was “very afraid” of the effect women could have on young fighters susceptible to distraction. Additionally, in many instances NLF officials expressed concerns that women often served as spies or double agents for the Saigon government, suggesting that the perceived affinity of women and espionage was an idea that was not limited to the American press.

It became increasingly clear throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s the greatest strength of the NLF lay in its superior organization in the countryside, owing in part to its successful mobilization of women. While the larger population’s support for the movement ebbed and flowed throughout the 1960s, declining substantially between 1964 to 1966 as large numbers of American military forces were introduced and violence within the NLF increased, cadres recognized that few South Vietnamese would join the movement spontaneously, that they would have to be persuaded. One of the ways women were both effectively mobilized on a small scale and used to encourage other villagers to join was by gathering a group to demonstrate in front of district capital government offices to protest bombings and shelling of villages and demand compensation for damage. Village leaders particularly encouraged women to initiate these acts, known within the movement as “face-to-face struggles,” seeing older women as ideal for the task.

One RAND study argues, however, that the NLF women rarely organized demonstrations unless they believed the event to merit protest. Villagers told interviewers that when the women classified government or American attacks as “legitimate,” or provoked by NLF guerrillas, the public showed little enthusiasm for participating in demonstrations. When, however, the villagers saw the offense as “illegitimate,” and could see no rational military reason for the attack, larger

groups of women were likely to participate.⁷⁹ RAND respondents also reported a marked shift in the conflict in 1965. One respondent observed that it was easy to get women to organize demonstrations and offer to help the NLF in 1964, but one year later it was “almost impossible” to get women to participate.⁸⁰ While Hunt argues that women’s priorities shifted more toward basic survival in 1965, the RAND reports suggest that the new disinterest could be attributed to a period of disenchantment with life under VC control following an initial burst of enthusiasm. Disenchantment, RAND argues, that was caused by increased violence and higher taxes demanded by the movement.

Australian journalist Wilfred Burchett, who was well known as a sympathizer of the NLF cause, details a number of specific demonstrations organized by NLF women, finding particular significance in a 1960 incident in My Tho referred to as “Bird’s Cross Roads.”⁸¹ After the GVN burned six villages to the ground, thousands of women organized in the capital of My Tho province to demonstrate. A young pregnant woman carried the first banner, and was immediately shot and killed by the RVN military. Two more young women took up the banner after she fell, both of whom were also shot and killed. The marching women carried the four women’s bodies to the governor’s office and demanded compensation for the families of the dead women and for the burned villages, which was eventually granted.

Burchett believed the incident, which was also the subject of an NLF flyer, inspired “innumerable other acts of heroism” by Vietnamese women. In fact, the story of demonstrations such as this recurred frequently in NLF publications and speeches, and occasionally received

⁷⁹ Ibid., 80.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 166.

⁸¹ Wilfred G. Burchett, *Vietnam: Inside Story of the Guerilla War* (New York: International Publishers, 1965), 65.

mention in the American media. One of the reasons that NLF women were able to mount spontaneous demonstrations reflected the American military's fear: their ability to travel freely in various social settings, mingling with different types of people. A CIA document from 1967 reveals the agency's fear that the NLF planned to send women "under the guise of funeral processions" into different villages in order to gather intelligence.⁸² Demonstrations in the city of Saigon became so frequent that the NLF would bring women in from the countryside to protest. Burchett's study of the NLF noted that village women who often came en masse to Saigon became such an irritant to the Diem administration that the police would spray participants with colored water or forcibly clip the women's hair short with shears to mark the women as agitators and allow village police to arrest the women after they had returned home, saving the resources and the reputations of the GVN who did not want to be seen making mass arrests of old women.⁸³

In addition to organizing demonstrations, one of the core activities of women in the NLF was "agitation work," which included aspects of propaganda or "proselyting," which was the campaign known in Vietnamese as "binh van." In an article commemorating International Women's Day in 1967, the South Vietnamese Liberation Women's Union's president Le Thi Rieng hailed the achievements of the movement's women in throwing confusion among the enemy's ranks and impairing their morale.⁸⁴ One of the ways that the women created this confusion was by spreading rumors or mounting what was known as "whispering campaigns."

⁸² "Viet Cong Use of Women in Guerrilla Units," CIA Collection, Texas Tech University Vietnam Archive, item # 04109123005.

⁸³ Ibid, 67.

⁸⁴ "South Vietnam Women in the Anti-US Resistance War," 2 March 1967, Douglas Pike Collection (Unit 05), Texas Tech University Vietnam Archive, item #2311008018.

RAND analyst W.P. Davison noted the early importance of propaganda in the form of gossip or rumors spread by cadres among small, trusted groups of people in villages. Davison identified 1957 as the year that the NLF first instructed cadres to spread rumors or plant relevant news items into conversations with influential people, suggesting that this was a time-tested political tactic. Davison's analysis suggests that one of the reasons VC propaganda was so effective was because of its specificity - cadres were trained to say how many pigs or oxen were killed by US/GVN bombs, or give a specific number of houses burned, and that information must be tailored for its audience, be persistent, and to stress personal relationships.

According to RAND interviews, local NLF cells compiled large amounts of political intelligence on government workers and citizens in their areas. Cadres knew that to make their propaganda most effective they had to have a clear picture of the population, and so they tracked the occupations and religious beliefs of targets and adjusted their messages accordingly. A cadre who resisted NLF propaganda for six months before joining said that other NLF members taunted him repeatedly, telling him he should follow the example of the girls who had already joined the movement.⁸⁵ One propaganda cadre noted that the most important lesson he learned was to recognize the importance of the family in his message, encouraging young men and their wives and parents to join at the same time.⁸⁶ This point was not lost on the United States government, as one of the reasons that the defection program Chieu Hoi was believed to be so

⁸⁵ Davison, 18.

⁸⁶ Joining as a family was standard Communist Party practice. For memoirs on family membership see Judy Kaplan and Linn Shapiro, Eds. *Red Diapers: Growing Up In the Communist Left* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), Bettina Aptheker, *Intimate Politics: How I Grew Up Red, Fought for Free Speech, and Became a Feminist Rebel* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2006). For a view of the ways the party influenced families and vice versa see Kate Weigand, *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women's Liberation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

effective was because it was designed to appeal to separated families, offering to reunite cadres who had left family members behind. Further, many RAND studies noted that not surprisingly, families tended to favor the side with which their sons were serving, a central reason that the movement propagandized women and also trained women as liaison agents.

Though it is clear that rumor spreading was an important tactic for the NLF, it is difficult to assess the impact of rumor in archival sources and in interview transcripts. One study done by RAND in January 1969 on the tactics and objectives of the NLF in Saigon during the 1968 Tet Offensive is a rare example of a document that interrogates both the sources, the content, and the consequences of rumors allegedly planted by the NLF.⁸⁷ The study found a “surprisingly widespread discussion” of a rumor that the United States had collaborated with the NLF, allowing the offensive against Saigon to take place in order to provide the political rationale necessary for opening negotiations with the Front. While the RAND interviewers were unable to prove conclusively that the rumor originated with the NLF, they concluded that since it was a tactic consistent with NLF policies, they likely initiated it. Of their sample of 280 people, 24% of which were women, half of the respondents had heard the rumor. The RAND interviewers attempted to quantify the number of people who believed the rumor and questioned the reasons for believing it. For many, the idea that the NLF and the United States were collaborating seemed plausible because it seemed so unlikely that the NLF could cause such damage within Saigon, a city with such a heavy American presence. Some cited the lack of a quick response by ARVN troops as reason for believing, and others questioned whether the United States allowed the Tet attacks so that they would weaken the GVN authority so much that the Americans would be forced into negotiations with the NLF. Many respondents who did not believe the rumor

⁸⁷ Victoria Pohle, *The Viet Cong in Saigon*.

stated that they believed it to be a typical propaganda trick by the NLF that sought to encourage anti-American sentiment.

While it is unwise to draw large conclusions from such a small and specific study, this particular RAND report is a unique document that attempted to assess the contemporary psychological response of civilians to engagements in the war and to point out the widespread impact of rumors, a propaganda technique that was often left to the movement's women. One of the earliest motivations in rumor spreading was to denounce the strategic hamlets as prisons and encourage physical resistance among villagers. Women were often assigned this task for obvious reasons, since they were left behind in villages after most of the young men were conscripted. The strategic hamlet program, which was introduced in southern Vietnam in various iterations from the late 1950s until the program finally collapsed in 1964, was based on the idea that peasants needed to be separated from NLF guerrillas and moved to fortified, armed villages in order to provide security and make the villagers less susceptible to NLF propaganda.

The program, based on American military studies of a similar theory applied in Malaya by the British military, was an unmitigated failure that left the population angry and aggrieved.⁸⁸ Histories of the program and the larger counterinsurgency strategy in the countryside have

⁸⁸ A work by the architect of the British program in Malaya is Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: The Lessons of Malaya and Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1966). See also John S. Nagl, *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam: Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002). A May 1961 article in the *Saturday Evening Post* written by "An American Officer" effusively praises the bravery of the "self defense troops" of Binh Hung village and argued for the utility of the strategic hamlet program. Historian Jonathan Nashel noted that the article was nearly identical in tone and content to a memorandum written by CIA officer Edward Lansdale in *Edward Lansdale's Cold War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 54-56. For background on the Kennedy administration's strong support for the program see Howard Jones, *Death of a Generation: How the Assassination of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 167-177, Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 2003), 527-528, and Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars: 1945-1990* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 82-88.

argued that the program was ill conceived in its failure to consider the attachment Vietnamese people had to their ancestral land and to their livestock. The program angered many peasants who resented having their movements monitored and restricted, and seemed to have become a locus for corruption as village leaders sought GVN funds to build ever more cheaply constructed and hastily built hamlets.⁸⁹ Journalist Halberstam suggested that though the strategic hamlet program had little practical effect on the NLF's ability to control the population, the Front's use of the program as a rallying cry for propaganda efforts demonstrated its clever understanding of the nature of the war. In much of its propaganda, the NLF encouraged women to act as the "primary nucleus force" in destroying each of the hamlets, denouncing the program as "cruel and insidious psychological warfare."⁹⁰ One of the statistics mentioned in annual reports of the women's organizations of the NLF included "acts of destruction" of strategic hamlets, reflecting the primary importance of the program to the women's efforts.

While they performed particularly well in the political tasks assigned by NLF leadership, women were also well-trained and creative armed combatants. When the NLF began its formal push to recruit women to the movement in 1965, the Front offered membership to women of all ages, those with children and without, but the clear focus was on attracting young women between 17 and 30 years of age who could replace or reinforce guerrilla units.⁹¹ In Burchett's interviews with young NLF women, one girl explained that the women of the village were

⁸⁹ In a 1962 pamphlet by the USIA, "South Vietnam: The Formative Years," the agency suggests that the GVN plans called for approximately 10,000 strategic hamlets across the nation, Texas Tech University Vietnam Archive.

⁹⁰ "Marking 10th Year of South Vietnam Liberation Women's Federation," *Nhan Dan*, 8 March 1971, 1, Douglas Pike Collection, Texas Tech University Vietnam Archive.

⁹¹ "VC Recruitment of Women," undated, Robert F. Turner Papers, File "Vietnam Women," Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.

particularly effective as guerrillas, or as defenders of their home villages because they understood the mistakes of the GVN enemy in trying to secure hamlets. One young woman said that while the GVN soldiers built conspicuous outposts with huge watchtowers to try and control the rural population, that the women of the village built their own fire positions close to the ground or underground. Because of this, the enemy could not move along roads without being in the sights of their weapons. This, said the young woman, “is what we mean by people’s war.”⁹²

In addition to the armed defense of their villages, one activity village women frequently undertook to aid the NLF was acting as what Burchett referred to as “cannon spikers.” In this scenario, women would approach entering government soldiers, ply them with tea and food, and try to convince them that by burning or shelling villages that they would only be killing women and children. The idea, according to Burchett’s NLF sources, was to force ARVN and American soldiers to “associate a vulnerable face with a village.” Clearly, as the war drew on RVN and American troops came to assume the complicity of women with the NLF, and many of these tactics were of limited utility after the mid-1960s.

Burchett’s work also tells of two unusual techniques employed by the women of Ben Tre, the home province of Nguyen Thi Dinh and a province long associated as a birthplace of activists and revolutionaries. The women of Ben Tre would capture and cage monkeys, affix signs with propaganda slogans to the monkeys, and release them into markets in the early mornings. People in the markets not only saw the messages the monkeys carried, but the activity often distracted police, allowing people to assemble into propaganda teams during a time when public assembly was increasingly monitored and restricted.

⁹² Burchett, 45.

Burchett cites another example of the women's creative employment of animals in Ben Tre, this time in combat. A woman named Chi Nguyet, who had been previously arrested after protesting the Diem regime, told Burchett of a particularly large and aggressive type of bee, more than twice as big as ordinary bees with a painful sting that was sometimes fatal if a person was stung several times. Chi Nguyet said that the women studied the habits of the bees and set up some hives in the trees alongside the road between the nearest RVN post and her village. The local women covered the hives with sticky paper and fastened strings to a bamboo trap set on the road. When enemy patrols passed by, they tore the paper from the hive, releasing the bees that immediately attacked. The troops, said Chi Nguyet, "ran like mad buffalo" and fell into the spiked traps. Spurred by their effectiveness, village women set up more hives and began to cultivate the bees specifically for village defense, eventually raising more than 200 hives that deterred enemy forces.⁹³

While this story may seem apocryphal, Nguyen Thi Dinh confirmed the use of bees in a speech in 1971 in an interview with Tran Thi Ho Le administered by JUSPAO in September 1968.⁹⁴ Le told the interviewer that the VC used a type of bee called "vo ve" to attack American infantry troops in Thuan My village on two separate occasions, and the stings left the soldiers weeping openly. Le reported that she was aware of six separate reports on American troops stung by the bees. The RAND interviewer, rather than asking about the NLF's procedures for raising

⁹³ Burchett, *Vietnam*, 204.

⁹⁴ Interview with Tran Thi Ho Le, September 1968, Robert F. Turner Papers, File "Tran Thi Ho Le," Hoover Institution, Stanford University and Nguyen Thi Dinh, "Ten Years of Victorious Struggle of South Vietnamese Women" *Nhan Dan*, 8 March 1971 3, Douglas Pike Collection (Unit 05), Texas Tech University Vietnam Archive, item #2311104039. See also Jeffrey A. Lockwood, *Six-Legged Soldiers: Using Insects as Weapons of War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 207.

or deploying bees as weapons, asked Le repeatedly if the bees were ever given an official commendation by the North Vietnamese.

These unorthodox methods of fighting that were often initiated by the women of the NLF were more than just novelties in terms of their real effects on American troops, but seem to have received little attention or respect by the American press. Based on a number of Chieu Hoi interviews and according to Burchett, there were many in the Saigon army, who were said to be “more terrified of the ‘chignon battalions’ and their unconventional activities than the ‘Viet Cong’ proper.”⁹⁵

By the end of 1968 it appeared that even the United States military began to realize the value of Vietnamese women in propaganda work, as the US 9th Infantry Division attempted to organize and mobilize the female relatives of NLF guerrillas into an “informal, antiwar protest group” that came to be known as the “Tigress Scouts.”⁹⁶ The idea, according to journalist David Hoffman, was based on the notion seemingly shared by both the NLF and the Americans that “only a woman can truly communicate with another woman - especially on the subject of love.” The division chief of staff Ira Hunt said that the idea for the group was borrowed from the Chieu Hoi program, and that the program was initially resisted by the military but grew quickly in popularity after the “terrain-wise scouts led Americans to Communist arms caches and protected them from hidden booby traps.”⁹⁷ While the 9th Infantry Division did not employ the women in combat, they served on daily “nightcap” missions where medical teams, intelligence officers and psychological warfare specialists spent an evening in a hamlet where they offered dental services

⁹⁵ Burchett, 204.

⁹⁶ David Hoffman, “Women Help Win Viet Cong to Allied Side,” *Los Angeles Times*, 18 December 1968, H9.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

to villagers, and following a fifteen minute propaganda lecture, screened Walt Disney movies dubbed in Vietnamese. The groups of women were trained to give inoculations and treat infections, acts that offered intimate access to large numbers of villagers. The 9th found that “much valuable intelligence can be gleaned from an evening’s conversation with the villagers.”⁹⁸ As of December 1968 the Tigress Scouts claimed a membership of 360 women, who received the same pay and benefits as their male counterparts.

While it is clear that the NLF came to depend on women to support the movement in myriad ways, the organization also used the women of the movement in various types of propaganda in order to motivate the masses and sustain popular support for the cause. The instinct to use women in revolutionary propaganda was familiar to the Vietnamese, who drew inspiration from various female figures in their revolutionary history, none more familiar than the cult-like cultural devotion to the first-century Trung sisters who raised an army to back Chinese aggressors and have served as national examples of heroic resistance and self-sacrifice.⁹⁹ The ubiquity of references to the Trung sisters in encouraging women’s participation in the NLF was not surprising given the power that the legend was invested with, but American media sources also made repeated references to the Trung sisters, finding in the story an explanation for the prominent role women played in the war and tracing the lineage of heroic women far back into Vietnam’s ancient past. The Trung sisters mythology was of course invoked very differently in American and Vietnamese sources: to the Vietnamese it offered a romantic

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ For background on the Trung sisters, see Keith Weller Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 334-339.

and unifying vision of the national past and tradition of resistance, and to the American press it was a taut parable that illustrated the potential for fanaticism and suicidal aggression.

In many captured NLF documents it becomes clear that women of the movement, often the same individuals mentioned in American coverage, proved to be useful symbols of the revolution and effective tools for not just recruitment but in highlighting the ability of women to be skilled and determined fighters. Two women who figured prominently in NLF propaganda were Ta Thi Kieu, who used the alias Muoi Ly, and Nguyen Thi Ut, also known as Ut Tich. Muoi Ly was the “much advertised heroine” mentioned by *Time* magazine in 1967 and was one of a few of women the NLF used as symbols of its revolution.¹⁰⁰ Born to a family of farmers in Mo Cay district, Ben Tre province in 1938, Muoi Ly’s military achievements were relayed in various NLF publications and numerous speeches by the movement’s female leaders as well as public addresses by General Vo Nguyen Giap and DRV President Ho Chi Minh.¹⁰¹ Muoi Ly told of an early interest in joining the resistance movement after being dismissed by the older cadres in her village. Describing her motivation to join the NLF, Muoi Ly told the story of an incident she witnessed where enemy soldiers used children returning home from school as live shooting targets. Enraged, Muoi Ly organized her first demonstration of village women, which quickly grew violent. The booklet refers to a woman who was shot in the abdomen by government

¹⁰⁰ The northern DRV also used the stories and images of NLF women in its propaganda materials, but analysis here is limited to documents targeted to the southern population and created under the auspices of the NLF.

¹⁰¹ “Giap’s May 19 Speech to Youth Congress,” 10 August 1966, Douglas Pike Collection, Texas Tech University Vietnam Archive, item # 4080421012 and “Speech by Ho Chi Minh, 26 March 1966, Douglas Pike Collection, item # 2360610008.

soldiers, and after being fatally wounded, “clenched her teeth and from her protruding bowels she snatched off a section and threw it at the face of the blood-thirsty enemy.”¹⁰²

While the incident is uncorroborated and the intestine strewing likely fabricated, it is nonetheless significant that the NLF focused its intensely well planned propaganda efforts on a young woman of relative low rank within the organization. Certainly the ability of Muoi Ly to draw attention to the potential for young women to contribute to the revolution motivated the creation of this pamphlet and led to her inclusion in various well-publicized speeches. Muoi Ly became known in the movement not just as an effective liaison agent, but for her talent in organizing deadly ambushes, planned after days of observing the movements of enemy troops. In one ambush she shot the head of the patrol, and after identifying the other “mercenaries” she lobbied the families of the soldiers to demand they return to the village and join the NLF. Muoi Ly led two ambushes on a post at An Binh, capturing weapons and hundreds of grenades.

Muoi Ly even appeared in a short illustrated propaganda booklet that presents her battle exploits as comic book-style adventures.¹⁰³ In the booklet, Muoi Ly is portrayed as a poor farmer, born to a family crowded with siblings, which forced her to work long hours to provide food. While working in the fields, Muoi Ly realized that she could do more to help the families and children in her village by joining the fight for independence. The story is a straightforward, if hyperbolic chronicle of her exploits, telling of her assassination of a powerful military leader named Hon, and emphasizing her total sacrifice to the movement. While it is impossible to

¹⁰² “An Indomitable People,” *Vietnamese Studies*, October 1965, Douglas Pike Collection (Unit 05), Texas Tech University Vietnam Archive, item # 2311702020.

¹⁰³ “Nu Anh Hung Quan Doi Giai Phong Mien Nam Ta Thi Kieu Tuc Muoi Ly” Van Nghe Giai Phong, (Liberation Army Heroine Ta Thi Kieu, alias Muoi Ly), undated, Douglas Pike Collection (Unit 05), Texas Tech University Vietnam Archive, Item # 23128075001.

assess the readership of the booklet, it was produced by the NLF's publishing house, Van Nghe Giai Phong, and features elaborate illustrations with short, easily read captions.

In total, Muoi Ly was said to have participated in 33 battles, 471 acts of demolition of strategic hamlets, 78 political struggles organized by the district and 29 struggles led by the province.¹⁰⁴ Scholars of the Vietnam conflict have long realized the difficulty, and perhaps the futility, in confirming statistics such as these, and it is virtually impossible to verify particular acts of battlefield heroism, particularly those by a young and relatively little-known Vietnamese woman. Some might argue that the attention paid to Muoi Ly in NLF documents is insignificant, that the movement merely needed a female face to galvanize support among the female population. Based on the primary importance that military leaders placed on propaganda, however, and the demonstrably important roles women played within the movement, the decision to focus on women heroines was an important, conscious effort on the part of the movement to invoke the mythology of female heroism to unify women behind the movement's military and political goals.

Another poor peasant girl, Ut Tich, was the focus of NLF publications and mentioned alongside Muoi Ly in Party and NLF addresses. While Muoi Ly was portrayed as youthful and aggressive, Ut Tich was rendered as a maternal figure, eight years older than Muoi Ly and the mother of six. Photographs of Ut Tich show a rail-thin woman with a look of desperation that contrasts the half-smile of the more cherubic, vigorous Muoi Ly. Most accounts of Ut Tich's exploits describe her as either pregnant while attacking enemy positions or nursing her newborn

¹⁰⁴*Heroes and Heroines of the Liberation Armed Forces of South Vietnam* (Saigon: Liberation Editions, 1965), 38.

before an ambush. The *Vietnam Courier* described Ut Tich as “nothing but skin and bone,” a woman who had been savagely beaten throughout her childhood.¹⁰⁵

Ut Tich was from Tra Vinh province, one of three daughters who labored for their parents’ powerful landlord who subjected the family to physical abuse and severe deprivation. Ut Tich’s narrative of resistance dated back to the August Revolution in 1945 when she was inspired to fight back against a beating by the landlord’s wife. Ut Tich saw the necessity of joining the revolution as the need to rid Vietnam of its “two mortal enemies: imperialism and the feudal class of landlords.”¹⁰⁶ After carrying out propaganda work and acting as a liaison agent throughout the French war, the “policy of terror” of the Diem regime led Ut Tich to take up arms again. Ut Tich planned ambushes, resumed agitation work and planned raids alongside her Khmer husband. In early 1961, the NLF sent her to a strategic hamlet where she was to organize a resistance movement that would ultimately overrun and capture all 64 of its defenders, a plan she would carry out in a different hamlet in 1964. Later that year, having just given birth to her sixth child six weeks earlier and with her other five young children nearby, Ut Tich was said to have aided in a battle by carrying munitions to the frontline and dragging the wounded to the rear, only stopping to nurse her newborn baby after she had finished the job. Ho Chi Minh used her example to appeal to “many Ut Tichs, many rifle-carrying mothers” who had been emerging throughout Vietnam.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ “Nguyen Thi Ut: Heroine of South Vietnam Liberation Army,” *Vietnam Courier*, 10 March 1966, Douglas Pike Collection (Unit 08), Texas Tech University Vietnam Archive, item # 2361209106.

¹⁰⁶ *Heroes and Heroines of the Liberation Armed Forces of South Vietnam*, 20.

¹⁰⁷ “Millions of People Respond to President Ho Chi Minh’s Appeal,” *Vietnam Courier*, 29 August 1966, Douglas Pike Collection (Unit 02), Texas Tech University Vietnam Archive, item # 2130708004.

The propaganda featuring Ut Tich associated a well-known heroine not just with motherhood and militancy, but specifically with the destruction of strategic hamlets, which had been since the earliest years of American involvement a primary focus of movement efforts. A cornerstone of the American-developed counterinsurgency effort, this program was a flashpoint for the Front's women organizers, who argued that the program displaced millions and angered even more.¹⁰⁸ Families were forced to abandon ancestral land and abandon crops before harvest, thus the program created a group of people ripe for NLF persuasion.

Ut Tich was also featured in a comic book style rendering published by Van Nghe Giai Phong that is stylistically and narratively similar to Muoi Ly's treatment.¹⁰⁹ Ut Tich's story begins with her childhood beatings at the hands of her employer, with an illustration showing a large and angry woman attacking a tiny, thin child with a broom handle. Telling of her successes in infiltrating strategic hamlets, the booklet shows Ut Tich seizing the guards' weapons and escaping by swimming away. In one scene Ut Tich is shown surrounded by a group of women and children, urging the women to arm themselves and to set good examples for their children by ending their silence and supporting the NLF. By the end of the booklet Ut Tich is rendered as a healthy woman surrounded by a gaggle of small children, with a small baby slung over one shoulder and a rifle over the other.

¹⁰⁸ A useful article on the early reception of the strategic hamlet program in Vietnam is Bernard Fall, "How Much Time Do We Have in Vietnam," *The New Republic*, 22 February 1964, 10-11. The Pentagon Papers asserted that according to a GVN report in September 1962, while only 28% of proposed hamlets were actually constructed that more than 4.3 million people, or 33% of the total population of southern Vietnam lived in a completed strategic hamlet. See *The Pentagon Papers*, Gravel Edition, Vol. 2 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), chapter 2, "The Strategic Hamlet Program, 1961-1963," 128-159.

¹⁰⁹ Le Hong Hai, "Nu Anh Hung Nguyen Thi Ut," Van Nghe Giai Phong, captured by JUSPAO 14 January 1967, Douglas Pike Collection (Unit 05), item # 23125048001.

Both Muoi Ly and Ut Tich came to personify the narrative of female self-sacrifice that NLF cultivated, a notion that had permeated the Front's conception of war. The images portrayed in NLF propaganda in fact differed very little from the women presented by the US press, focusing on otherworldly strength and dedication that papered over the real struggles of southern women for the sake of galvanizing a revolution. Although it is impossible to assess with any accuracy the effect of these propaganda campaigns on the population, they are nonetheless important in shedding light on the ways gender was deployed in military propaganda.

Although it may have rendered too mythical the potential threat that female NLF agents posed, the American concerns over women in the NLF proved warranted, although the women's real contributions took a more conventional and mundane form than that anticipated by the media. Rather than deadly seductresses, Vietnamese women were major contributors to the war effort in very simple ways, usually in ways that were not gender-specific. The women of the NLF proved to be more than simply novel and effective intelligence gatherers as they performed the daily tasks that sustained the revolution and cultivated an atmosphere of fear and suspicion among GVN and American officials that had tangible impacts on American policy. The NLF women participated in battles and served as high-level diplomats, and were viewed by some as the reason the movement survived. In his study of the NLF, Douglas Pike concludes that:

“Vietnamese women were far harder workers than Vietnamese men. Knowing this, the NLF passed the burden of sheer drudgery to the most likely candidates in the name of idealism. The Vietnamese woman grew the vegetables, raised the chickens, and poled the sampans to deliver food to guerrilla bands; she ran the market struggle movement, unmasked the spies, and led the village indoctrination sessions; she made the spiked foot traps, carried the ammunition, and dug the crosshatch roadblocks. The woman was in truth the water buffalo of the Revolution.”¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Douglas Pike, *Vietcong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1966), 178.

While the American press acknowledged the importance of these women very early in the conflict, the portrayals gradually shifted from prototypical Apaches and images of “seduction and explosives” to the more functional concerns about the threat of women fighters. The Front itself also maintained a mythologized view of its women, choosing icons that represented youthful energy and maternal sacrifice in the name of the nation. While in reality the most significant contributions of the women of the NLF were in the realms of propaganda and simple manual labor, they also provided an internationally compelling public face that proved to be politically useful for both sides of the conflict

Chapter Four

Incendiary Images: Gender and Civilian Casualties in the Vietnam Antiwar Movement

In March 1965, an eighty-two-year-old widow named Alice Herz doused her clothing with two cans of Energine cleaning fluid and set herself on fire on a Detroit street corner to protest the escalating war in Vietnam. Passersby managed to put out the flames, and Herz was rushed to the hospital, where she remained in critical condition until she died ten days later. On the way to the hospital, Herz told a fire department lieutenant, “I did it to protest the arms race all over the world. I wanted to burn myself like the monks in Vietnam did.”¹ Herz had come to the United States in 1943, after fleeing the Nazis in her native Germany and spending months in refugee camps in France and Cuba. She had been involved with the peace movement in Germany, and she continued her pacifist activism in America, as she became an ardent supporter of Martin Luther King, Jr. She wrote freelance articles for a Swiss newspaper and was known as a devoted pacifist. At the time of her immolation, Herz had with her copies of leaflets denouncing President Lyndon Johnson’s escalation of war in Vietnam, in which she declared, “I have chosen the flaming death of the Buddhists. May America’s youth take the lead toward LIFE.”² Herz’s daughter Helga told the *New York Times* that her mother’s act was not the result of a “mental derangement or a psychological compulsion,” but that the immolation represented “the need to

¹ “Woman, 82, Sets Herself Afire in Street as Protest on Vietnam,” *New York Times*, 18 March 1965, 3. See also *Phoenix: Letters and Documents of Alice Herz* (Amsterdam: Gruner, 1976).

² Taylor Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-1968* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 120.

do something that would call attention to the gravity of the situation.”³ Herz’s pastor at the First Unitarian Universalist Church further emphasized Herz’s mental stability, telling journalists that the burning “is not the work of a crackpot.”⁴ News of Herz’s death traveled quickly to Vietnam, and the North Vietnamese newspaper, the *Vietnam Courier*, published a supplement on March 18 dedicated to Herz’s protest. The paper also published an open letter from the Vietnam Women’s Union, which stated that Vietnamese women had been deeply moved by Herz’s act and appreciated the support of American peace activists. Nationwide memorials for Herz were held in Vietnam, a shrine to Herz, which still stands, was erected in the Saigon Women’s Museum, and a street in Hanoi was named in her honor.

Two years later, on a Sunday afternoon in October 1967, a 56-year old housewife from La Puente, California, Florence Beaumont, drenched herself in gasoline on the front steps of the Federal Building in Los Angeles and ignited a book of matches. The woman was the wife of an artist and the mother of two daughters aged eighteen and twenty. Two eyewitnesses reported that Beaumont ran “about forty feet, flaming and screaming, before she collapsed,” and died on the scene. Nearby, Beaumont left her purse on the sidewalk, taped to it was a card reading simply, “Hello, I’m Florence Beaumont.”⁵ Her pickup truck was parked nearby, filled with flyers protesting the Vietnam War and urging voters to defeat Lyndon Johnson in 1968, and a bumper sticker supporting the Peace and Freedom Party. Beaumont had told a friend two days before the immolation of her plans to burn herself, but her friend later told the *Los Angeles Times* that she did not believe Beaumont would follow through.

³ “Woman, 82, Sets Herself Afire in Street as Protest on Vietnam,” *New York Times*, 18 March 1965, 3.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ “War Protester Burns Herself to Death Here,” *Los Angeles Times*, 16 Oct 1967, B.

Beaumont's husband George told reporters that while she never explicitly told him that she intended to immolate, she had once commented that "the Buddhist monks who burned themselves were not close enough to home."⁶ Days after her death, George Beaumont read a prepared statement to members of the press, declaring that Florence's death "was no suicide," but an "immolation, a supreme sacrifice to humanity, to peace and freedom for all mankind." George continued, "The match that Florence used to touch off her gasoline-soaked clothing has lighted a fire that will not go out - ever - a fire under us complacent fat cats so damned secure in our ivory towers 9,000 miles from exploding napalm, and THAT, we are sure, is the purpose of her act."⁷

Despite George Beaumont's conviction, his wife's immolation in 1967 garnered even less attention from the media than that of Alice Herz, which itself received very little coverage in 1965.⁸ Herz became the first American citizen to burn herself during the Vietnam War, but the immolation of Norman Morrison, the 31-year old Quaker who set fire to himself beneath Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's office at the Pentagon in November 1965 is perhaps the only immolation that most Americans remember. All of the acts could be traced to the person's participation in various antiwar groups, and all were said to be inspired by the 1963 immolation of Vietnamese monk Thich Quang Duc in the streets of Saigon that provoked the acid response from Madame Nhu discussed in chapter two.

⁶ Eric Malic, "But Victim Wasn't Believed," *Los Angeles Times*, 18 October 1967, 3.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ In total, eight Americans burned themselves to death during the Vietnam War: Quaker, Norman Morrison, a Trappist seminarian Roger LaPorte, a Japanese-American Buddhist Hiroko Hayasaki, a student of Zen Buddhism, Erik Thoen, college student George Winne, high school student, Ronald Brazee. Cited in Nancy Zaroulis and Gerald Sullivan, *Who Spoke Up? American Protest Against the War in Vietnam 1963-1975* (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 4-5.

The immolations, while rare and isolated events, are important in their attempts to demonstrate the involvement of women in the antiwar movement and their efforts to establish a sense of solidarity between Vietnamese and American women in opposition to a war that had increasingly drawn civilian women into its orbit. The immolations of Herz and Beaumont were small and relatively unnoticed acts of protest by unlikely activists, both older women, both mothers who had a demonstrated objection to the war in Vietnam but very little personal connection to it. Herz was a member of two antiwar organizations with primarily female memberships – the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) established in 1915 and dedicated to preventing international wars, and Women Strike for Peace (WSP), which was established in 1961 initially to advocate for the ban of atmospheric nuclear testing, but she was not a leader in either movement.⁹ Since WSP never officially acknowledged Beaumont’s act, it is unlikely that she participated in the organization, but she perfectly represented the type of woman it attracted, which is to say a mother who fiercely opposed the Vietnam War on moral grounds.

This chapter explores one organization, Women Strike for Peace, which used gender to legitimize their form of war protest and one particular issue, napalm and its impact on Vietnamese civilians, which animated their activism. Fire, both literal and metaphorical, is a recurring trope in this chapter, and images of fire were associated with the war in Vietnam from the earliest years of American involvement. The Buddhist immolations that inspired Herz and Beaumont’s acts were widely broadcast throughout the world and became visual reminders of

⁹ For background on the ways women’s organizations like WILPF and WSP leveraged maternalism in the service of pacifism see Helen Laville, *Cold War Women: The International Activities of American Women’s Organizations* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2002) and Harriet Hyman Alonso, *Peace as a Woman’s Issue: A History of the U.S. Movement for World Peace and Women’s Rights* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993).

the unraveling of order in Saigon by 1963. CBS correspondent Morley Safer's report from Cam Ne in August 1965 showed American television viewers how Marines burned a small Vietnamese village to the ground, using Zippo lighters to ignite the thatch roofed structures as old men and women looked on helplessly.¹⁰

By the early 1970s images of napalmed villages and burned children were familiar to American audiences, none more iconic than the 1972 photograph of nine-year-old Phan Thi Kim Phuc running down a Saigon highway with her clothes burned off her body. This chapter is bookended by these two images: Alice Herz's immolations and the burned girl, and will evaluate how American women like those in WSP engaged the issue of civilian casualties by emphasizing both the vulnerability of women in a war zone and the responsibility of American women to intervene. This chapter argues that WSP and many major American magazines framed the issue of civilian casualties in explicitly gendered terms as it emphasized the numbers of Vietnamese women and children who were victimized by American weapons like napalm. By looking at the nature of coverage of civilian casualties in publications geared toward a female audience like *Redbook* and *Ladies' Home Journal*, as well as widely read publications of the left and mainstream magazines and newspapers, I will argue that some segments of the American media and one group of antiwar women encouraged opposition to the war infused by a moral outrage that simultaneously sought to capitalize on a long tradition of maternal pacifism and suggest to American women that they had the power to affect diplomatic efforts in Southeast Asia.

One of the difficulties in offering a coherent picture of the American antiwar movement in the Vietnam era is that the movement was comprised of so many different factions, all with

¹⁰ Peter Arnett, *Live from the Battlefield: From Vietnam to Baghdad, 35 Years in the World's War Zones* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 184-185.

different goals and tactics, appealing to different memberships. I have chosen to focus on WSP in this chapter as a case study not because they were broadly representative of Vietnam War protest groups, but because of their clear articulation of gendered concerns in opposing the war and because of their entirely female membership. While Vietnam protest organizations cut across a number of age, gender, racial, and geographic barriers, it is safe to say that WSP was not a typical antiwar group. Their concerns did not always mirror the issues raised by radical feminists or by larger groups such as Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and were not so visible as demonstrations that were led by soldiers who had recently returned from the war, who were playing an increasing role in the protest culture after 1967 with the growth of Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW).¹¹ WSP, while attracting little academic interest beyond former participants, is important in offering an alternative vision of Vietnam War protesters, one that clearly incorporated their own subjective, conservative experiences as wives and mothers in framing their approach and their political agenda. WSP was important in helping to shift the narrative of war opposition using gendered appeals and a pacifist approach that was rooted in a maternal understanding of war, and an example of a group that managed to employ the issue of civilian casualties most successfully.

I will explore how WSP gained publicity and international notoriety not just in highlighting the issue of napalm or civilian victims of the Vietnam War but also for providing eyewitness testimony on the war by traveling to Vietnam and by acting as unofficial diplomats. WSP used their activism to establish relationships with Vietnamese women and form transnational networks that drew global attention to the antiwar movement. While these networks may not have had a measurable, substantive policy impact nor shortened the duration of the war,

¹¹ See Andrew Hunt, *The Turning: A History of Vietnam Veterans Against the War* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

they added an important gendered understanding of the moral criticisms of the Johnson and Nixon administrations' Vietnam policies. With its popular slogan, "Not my son, not your son, not their son," and larger than life-sized posters bearing images of children disfigured by napalm burns, WSP effectively leveraged familiar and timeless stereotypes of housewives and mothers to lend credibility and moral authority to their activism, using gendered appeals and their own maternal personas to suggest that their opposition was protective but benign and above petty politics. Of course, the issue of civilian casualties and concern over the impact of war on women and children was not the exclusive province of WSP or of women in other antiwar factions, but their self-styled "maternal emotionalism" led to more visibility for women in the antiwar movement and broadened the group's membership.¹² WSP's feminine approach and their focus on the effects of war on Vietnamese civilians was important in helping to bring these images of wounded civilians to the wider public's attention. While the message of WSP was shaped in large part by their own interactions with Vietnamese women, their political platform was also influenced by the ways the American media presented the issue of civilian casualties and napalm. For this reason, the current chapter examines the intersection of these historical narratives.

Inverting the Rescue Narrative

As I argued in chapter one, the United States presented its involvement in Vietnam in the 1950s using a gendered narrative of rescue, depicting victimized Vietnamese refugees in 1954 as

¹² A standard source on the broader issues of civilian casualties in Vietnam is Gunter Lewy, *America in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). For a recent work that uses interviews of Vietnamese civilians and American soldiers to investigate war crimes allegations, arguing that My Lai was not an aberrant occurrence, see Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* (New York: Macmillan, 2013).

feminine, vulnerable to communist abuses, and befitting of American protection and guidance. While the narrative of the 1950s placed the United States in the role of saving Vietnam from international communism, by the early 1970s, the antiwar movement had reexamined this narrative, with many factions arguing that as the war dragged on that Vietnamese civilians did not need the protection of the American government, but required protection *from* it. For opponents of the war, the cold war concerns of the domino theory and the critical importance of political alignment that the American government presented as so crucial in the 1950s were supplanted by a flood of images of burned and maimed civilians as the bodies of injured Vietnamese became regular features of newspaper coverage and nightly television broadcasts on the war.

By publicizing the effects of napalm on civilians, members of the antiwar movement in the Vietnam War era reworked the official rescue narrative that was established to rationalize American involvement in Vietnam in the 1950s, a narrative that still relied on gendered notions of vulnerability and underdevelopment but shifted the blame away from international communism and raised doubts about the militarized, interventionist nature of American foreign policy. As the war expanded and millions of citizens began to question the motivation and the impact of the war in Vietnam, the familiar relationship of vulnerable nation and American savior was interrogated and ultimately rejected by the antiwar left. Whereas historically the United States had deployed images of the injured, malnourished refugees of chapter one to legitimate and rationalize its own role abroad, the opponents of the war in Vietnam used these same types of images to argue for American disengagement and recognition of the immorality of America's prosecution of the war. For perhaps the first time on a broad national scale, photographs and descriptions of wounded civilians, images that instinctively inspired shock, revulsion, sympathy,

and outrage, were not deployed in service of the political and military missions of the United States government abroad, but were used against it. The refrain, “Hey, hey LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?” which likely originated at an SDS demonstration in 1965, became a common line among protesters and a powerful statement about the recognition of the war’s victims as not just civilians but women and children.¹³

Historian Emily Rosenberg has contributed a great deal to the broader discourse of gender and rescue in America’s foreign policy history, identifying the liberation and uplift of threatened women both in the United States and abroad as a persistent trope of American exceptionalism. Rosenberg argues “the rescue theme often works to display and reinforce notions of the superior manliness of the rescuer nation, indeed, to cast the nation itself in a manly role.”¹⁴ As the rescue of victimized women has constituted a familiar theme in America’s foreign entanglements, Rosenberg reveals the ways that portraying a nation’s women as imperiled and vulnerable has lent considerable weight to America’s efforts to rationalize its paternalistic nationalism and cast the United States as rescuer, to galvanize public support for its efforts, and to dramatize the morality of its missions abroad. This gendered notion of rescue, Rosenberg contends, has historically operated to “shore up visions of superior US social arrangements - visions essential to rallying wartime nationalism and to presenting citizens with a sense of their nation’s special benevolence.”¹⁵ Rosenberg and other historians of gender and American foreign policy have effectively demonstrated the durability of this thesis in twentieth-century American history,

¹³ Melvin Small, *Antiwarriors: The Vietnam War and the Battle for America’s Hearts and Minds* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 55.

¹⁴ Emily Rosenberg, “Rescuing Women and Children,” *Journal of American History*, vol. 89, No. 2 (September 2002): 456-465.

¹⁵ Rosenberg, 461.

particularly in the United States government's involvement in smaller nations facing wars of national liberation, but the Vietnam era was unique in that groups of citizens critical of government action rejected the notion of American rescue, and those opposition groups used the symbolic rendering of Vietnam as a vulnerable woman or child in order to urge the American government to account for civilian casualties and acknowledge the human consequences of the fighting in Vietnam.¹⁶

The various uses of the metaphor of a vulnerable, feminized nation demonstrates the power and flexibility of images and rhetoric surrounding injured women and children, and the Vietnamese enemy of the American government also used them as grist for the propaganda mill in both the United States and in Vietnam. In fact the antiwar left's use of these images were usually dismissed by war supporters as reinforcing the propaganda of the DRV and NLF, as the end goal of each seemed to be exposing atrocities to the world and questioning the wisdom of American involvement. Judging the success of the propagandistic value of these images is impossible, as debates over the larger success of the antiwar movement continue unabated, with some arguing that war opposition actually extended the duration and the intensity of the war, and others, usually participants, arguing that the movement spurred nothing short of a tectonic shift in American culture and demonstrated the ability of citizens to influence foreign policy in an unprecedented way.¹⁷ What is clear is that the images of wounded Vietnamese civilians served a

¹⁶ See for example Mary Renda, *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), Kristin Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), and Laura Briggs, *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

¹⁷ See Adam M. Garfinkle, *Telltale Hearts: The Origins and Impact of the Vietnam Antiwar Movement* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995) for a critical view of the movement and Todd

very real purpose in the American antiwar movement, one that played on fundamental beliefs about women and children as vulnerable and dependent and gave rise to questions about the role of the United States as global protector.

WSP was certainly the largest and most powerful women's organization to engage this issue of civilian casualties in Vietnam, finding that the pacifist message followed naturally from earlier efforts to protest nuclear arms, as many founding members of WSP were members of the anti-nuclear peace organization SANE.¹⁸ WSP was formed in November 1961, when Alice Herz joined an estimated 50,000 mostly middle-aged, middle-class white women from sixty cities in a one-day peace strike protesting the planned resumption of atmospheric nuclear weapons testing by the governments of the United States and the Soviet Union.¹⁹ Throughout America, tens of thousands of housewives and mothers joined the strike, advocating disarmament through a domestic discourse that upheld the right of mothers and children to live in a world free of nuclear fallout. Historian and WSP co-founder Amy Swerdlow contends that in the early 1960s, WSP discovered in American housewives "a reservoir of dormant political outrage, organizational talent, political inventiveness, and a hunger for sisterly collaboration."²⁰ The group directed its early efforts at general protests of nuclear proliferation and militarism, but as early as June 1963 at the organization's second national conference the group came to focus their efforts on

Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987) for a laudatory perspective.

¹⁸ William J. Rorabaugh, *Kennedy and the Promise of the Sixties* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 54.

¹⁹ For more background on WSP's history see Midge Decter, "The Peace Ladies," *Harper's*, March 1963, 48-53 and Ethel Taylor, *We Made a Difference: My Personal Journey with Women Strike for Peace* (Philadelphia: Camino Books, 1998).

²⁰ Amy Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace: Traditional Motherhood and Radical Politics in the 1960s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 4.

opposing the Vietnam War, resolving that they must alert the American public “to the dangers and horrors of [the war in Vietnam] and to the specific ways in which human morality is being violated by attacks on civilian populations - women and children.”²¹

While many government officials and journalists dismissed the movement as a group of meddling housewives, a characterization that WSP members found more tolerable than being ignored, the members of the Washington, D.C. chapter did succeed in getting meetings with a number of important political figures. WSP gained notoriety in 1967 when, after being denied access to the Pentagon, they responded by removing their high-heeled shoes and banging them on the doors until they were granted a meeting with a group of generals.²² WSP also took meetings at the White House, and in a memorandum to President Johnson’s press secretary Bill Moyers, member of the National Security Council staff Donald W. Ropa expressed his frustration with the intractable women, recommending that the White House “avoid future meetings with this particular group, unless you deem it advisable simply in order to monitor their views as one of the militant elements in the Vietnam opposition.”²³

Despite the White House characterization of WSP as “militant,” one of the group’s defining characteristics was its collective image as harmless - conservative and motherly, an image that seemed natural, but was also carefully and strategically constructed. WSP has garnered frequent mention but relatively little analysis from historians, perhaps because the organization does not fit neatly within either a liberal, radical, or conservative narrative of the

²¹ Barbara Bick, “Women Set the Pace for Anti-War Movement,” undated, Texas Tech University Vietnam Archive, William Colby Collection, item # 0440422006.

²² Swerdlow, 135.

²³ Memorandum from Donald Ropa to Bill Moyers, 7 April 1966, *History Vault*, July 1965-May 1967, accession # 002291-006-0882.

1960s or the antiwar movement of the Vietnam era. By the early 1970s, the group's conservative gender ideology would be viewed as anachronistic and regressive to members of the counterculture while their committed pacifism distanced them from the political right.²⁴ The only comprehensive scholarly treatment of WSP is co-founder and historian Amy Swerdlow's *Women Strike for Peace: Traditional Motherhood and Radical Politics in the 1960s*.²⁵ Swerdlow highlights how WSP embraced the seeming contradictions of motherhood and political activism, arguing that the adherence to conservative gender ideology enabled WSP to take more radical political stances on issues like the Vietnam War. Maternalist rhetoric, Swerdlow contends, helped WSP appeal to the political inclinations of the average American woman, using the image of the outraged mother, full of what member Barbara Bick called "womanly fury," to make bold political statements in furthering the pacifist cause.

In arguing that WSP's feminine tactics were a natural consequence of having a membership comprised entirely of angry mothers, Swerdlow implies that the maternal framing of the movement was somewhat inevitable, understating the notion that the distinctly feminine, but not feminist nature of WSP was in fact a calculated, sophisticated, and pragmatic use of gendered notions of politics. Consciously cultivating an image of domesticity and maternal virtue, WSP leveraged their non-threatening personas to engage in a form of unofficial diplomacy, forming relationships with Vietnamese combatants during wartime under the

²⁴ Linking pacifism with femininity alienated not just radical feminists in the United States. French feminist Simone de Beauvoir argued that women's interest in peace followed the same constrictive gender roles that have justified patriarchal subordination of women. See Alice Schwartz, "Simone de Beauvoir Talks About Sartre," *Ms.* August 1983, 87-90. However, de Beauvoir sent a letter to WSP assuring the group of her solidarity with their organization of a NATO Women's Peace Force in 1964 (Swerdlow, 207).

²⁵ *Ibid.*

protective rubric of universal motherhood, without violating gender norms of the antifeminist 1950s or renouncing traditional female gender roles. The focus on women and children as victims of war was a natural extension of the type of activism WSP engaged in and a logical continuation of its protective maternalism.

Since its founding WSP saw itself above all as a practical group of problem solvers, intent on responding to the world's most pressing problems with a mix of pragmatism and instinct. In a statement encouraging WSP to participate in international conferences, member Madelyn Duckles employed a rationale that reflected the larger conception of the organization's responsibility to their children and to the world. Duckles compared the world's tense political situation, from nuclear war to involvement in Vietnam, to a burning house and emphasized the obligation of WSP to take quick and effective steps to put out the fire.²⁶ Duckles pleaded,

The analogy is a crude one, but make no mistake about it: the house of the family of man is on fire. And while peace groups such as the disarmament agency considers whether to use chemical spray or water against it, and from what angle once they determine the direction of the wind, and while other peace groups are arguing about who started the blaze, and yet another is busy examining the qualifications of the fire department, we Women for Peace have got to keep up the bucket brigade from all sides. Our children are in that burning house!²⁷

The analogy perfectly expressed WSP's conception of the world, the intimate and immediate threat war posed, and WSP women's own potential to mitigate violence and ensure a safe place to raise their children. Duckles's statement reflected the organization's dissatisfaction

²⁶ Madelyn Duckles, "Statement Made by Madeline Duckles on Participation in International Conferences (in reply to Eleanor Garst, Folly Fodor, et al.)" Swarthmore College Peace Collection (SCPC), DG 115, Box A-7, Folder 1, undated.

²⁷ "Women for Peace" was an alternative name used by many WSP chapters, and as international involvement increased, some chapters began using the name Women's International Strike for Peace (WISP). Women Strike for Peace remained the most commonly used name.

with other peace groups, whose concern with bureaucratic structure impeded real progress and distracted members from the cause for which they worked. By framing nuclear proliferation in terms of a house fire, Duckles appealed to pragmatic mothers who did not want to engage in a lengthy rhetorical analysis of a problem, but were only interested in applying the quickest, most efficient solutions. Further, Duckles's choice of the fire metaphor not only spoke to the women's pragmatic, motherly responses to crisis but also invoked images of napalm that animated WSP's activism.

One of the most direct ways that WSP intervened in the Vietnam War and focused attention on the issue of civilian casualties was by participating in major international peace conferences in Moscow, Jakarta, Paris, and Vancouver, establishing contacts with Vietnamese women who attended those same conferences. These links with Vietnamese women would become more important as the war in Vietnam escalated, less because of their progress at the conferences than because of the symbolic value of partnering with Vietnamese women to discuss issues related to civilians. The formation of these international networks proved crucial when, in May 1965, WSP became the first women's peace group to establish personal contact with the North Vietnamese government and visit Hanoi as an independent peace delegation after the United States began sustained bombing campaigns of the region.

By participating in international conferences, sending delegations to Vietnam during the war, and later creating a committee to facilitate communication between prisoners of war and their families, WSP demonstrated a keen awareness of the gendered uses of power and a shrewd apprehension of both the limitations and benefits of casting themselves as an apolitical group of housewives and mothers. Through its creation of transnational networks of women, based on the common identifiers of mothers and nurturers, WSP implicitly challenged the confinement of

women to the domestic sphere and carved out a new space in which previously politically disengaged women could assert their views about America's foreign policy in Vietnam – albeit from a relatively conservative and privileged position. Although it remains difficult to gauge the ultimate success of WSP in altering the course of the war, WSP did open a new form of dialogue with North Vietnamese women and demonstrated how American women appropriated and redefined a restrictive feminine role while publicly challenging militarism and the male domination of foreign policy.

The 1965 Moscow conference proved to be a significant event as WSP members Mary Clarke and Lorraine Gordon met for the first time with members of the Vietnam Women's Union and organized a three-day trip to Hanoi immediately following the Moscow conference.²⁸ Because the women flew to Hanoi directly from Moscow and did not consult other WSP members before their trip, the Hanoi visit in June 1965 was not officially sanctioned by WSP. Despite the fact that the meeting was not planned or approved by WSP, Clarke and Gordon did use the opportunity to organize future official meetings between Vietnamese women and WSP. Given the impact Alice Herz's immolation had had on the Vietnamese and given her known affiliation with WSP, members of the Vietnam Women's Union welcomed Clarke and Gordon and accompanied them on tours of Hanoi neighborhoods.

Because Americans were legally prohibited from entering Vietnam in 1965, Clarke and Gordon, along with their Vietnamese hosts, remained reluctant to make details of the visit public. After meeting with Premier Pham Van Dong, Clarke and Gordon made initial preparations to hold a meeting between WSP representatives and a Vietnamese delegation in an Asian city accessible to Vietnamese women from the DRV. Jakarta was offered as a possible site since it

²⁸ Swerdlow, 214.

imposed fewer travel restrictions on the delegates from either country. After Clarke and Gordon returned to the United States, WSP members hesitated to expand their international reach, and many objected to meetings with Vietnamese women in Vietnam. Historian Mary Hersberger expressed the tenor of some members' reservations, noting, "The image of American citizens traveling to Vietnam, a country against whom American troops were actively deployed, called up a mixture of cultural and political taboos that included treason."²⁹ Organizing meetings between citizens of warring nations was a bold proposition, much bolder than mere involvement in global protests or participation in international peace conferences. Such actions would inevitably call into question the political orientation of WSP and require the organization to articulate its political agenda more clearly.

Along with concerns about the credibility of WSP, members also worried about the physical safety of delegates and the possible legal consequences of involving themselves so overtly in foreign policy issues. HUAC staff director Francis McNamara raised the possibility that WSP meetings with Vietnamese women violated the Logan Act, a vague and rarely invoked law passed in 1799 that prohibits American citizens from engaging in private diplomacy by interacting or corresponding with foreign governments during conflicts with the United States.³⁰ Pennsylvania Senator Hugh Scott had raised the threat of prosecution under the Logan Act previously in 1961, after WSP sent a letter to Nina Khrushchev urging her to condemn Soviet

²⁹ Mary Hersberger, *Traveling to Vietnam: American Peace Activists and the War* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998), 4.

³⁰ Michael V. Seitzinger, *The Logan Act* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, 1978). Members of WSP were subpoenaed to appear before a HUAC committee in 1962, and the images of mothers with small children in tow responding to questions about communist infiltration damaged HUAC's credibility and lent support to WSP. See Amy Swerdlow, "Ladies Day at the Capitol: Women Strike for Peace Versus HUAC," *Feminist Studies* vol. 8, No. 3 (Autumn, 1982): 493-520.

nuclear testing and to stand with American peace activists. In many ways the threat of prosecution under Logan was less of a concern to WSP members than the fear that they would be discredited as communist proxies if they were to engage in meetings with the Vietnamese without the American government's authorization. Despite this fear, WSP eventually accepted the risks involved and began to publicize plans for a July 1965 conference in Jakarta.

The Jakarta conference proved to be a signal event in the history of WSP, and its primary objective was to project an image of empathy and understanding among American and Vietnamese women, emphasizing the suffering the war caused for Vietnam's women and children. In a report entitled "One View of the Purposes of the Jakarta Meeting," WSP delegate Frances Herring suggested that the primary goal of the meeting should be more than just woman-to-woman communication that it should aim to "stir the imagination of Americans, now numbed by the repeated shocks of one equivocal military fait accompli after another."³¹ Herring went on to argue that WSP, in the four years since its founding, has "helped melt the iceberg of public apathy and has nourished some national initiatives toward a changed foreign policy."³² Although WSP framed the meetings as opportunities for personal interaction among women, clearly some of the members felt that the conferences could influence the American government's military policy in Vietnam.

WSP sent ten delegates to Indonesia to meet with nine Vietnamese women representing both North Vietnam and the NLF for five days in July 1965. In an internal memorandum written before the conference, WSP addressed the possibility of widening the conference to allow women from Canada and Australia to join, but the Vietnamese women wanted only to meet with

³¹ "One View of the Purposes of the Jakarta Meeting," SCPC, DG 115, Box A-2, Folder 2.

³² Ibid.

the women of WSP. The memorandum also addressed now-familiar questions about what could be accomplished at Jakarta, stating “the purpose of the meeting is not to negotiate or offer terms of any kind, but to exchange ideas, explore communication and discuss a return by our governments to the Geneva Agreements of 1954.”³³ The delegation was composed of women from the Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C. chapters, along with three non-WSP members affiliated with SDS and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

The atmosphere at the Jakarta conference was informal, and the agenda was general, consisting of discussions about the utility of the United Nations in finding peaceful solutions in Vietnam, conversations about how the war affected the lives of Vietnamese women and children, and talks about ways to establish regular channels of communication between the WSP and Vietnamese women. The Vietnamese women shared photographs and personal stories of their children and families, and they spoke in detail about deaths of family members and the devastation of the environment. Throughout the conference, the Vietnamese women emphasized the physical destruction and psychological terror wrought by American airpower. One of the Vietnamese delegates, a doctor named Truc, told WSP of her work in bombed hospitals and her experience with children who suffered napalm and phosphorous burns.

The long and graphic discussions of the impact of American weaponry reinforced the WSP delegation’s commitment to end the war. In her report, Mary Clarke stated, “We believed the women when they said: ‘The Vietnamese people will fight to the last. Only genocide can bring military victory.’”³⁴ Upon their return to America, the WSP delegates relayed to the public the stories the Vietnamese women had shared, detailing the effects of anti-personnel bombs, napalm

³³ “Concerning the Jakarta Meeting, July 14-19,” SCPC, DG 115, Box A-2, Folder 2.

³⁴ Ibid.

and white phosphorous, and gas. There are some indications that the United States government used the information gathered by WSP to gauge informally the effectiveness of its bombing campaigns. An FBI report on a July 1965 WSP meeting held at American University concluded that “apparently the raids are pretty successful” since the WSP delegates’ speeches conveyed the heavy toll of civilian casualties in North and South Vietnam.³⁵

The WSP delegates and their Vietnamese counterparts formed strong bonds as a result of the Jakarta conference, but discussions of the Vietnamese women’s war experiences revealed how war exposed profound ruptures in the women’s actual lives and their respective conceptions of motherhood and domesticity. Hearing the Vietnamese women describe their active participation in the conflict challenged WSP’s commitment to pacifism and called into question the extent to which the feminine, housewifely image they cultivated could be profitably applied to bring an end to the war. In addition to the different experiences with violence, the WSP women and the Vietnamese delegates had different professional backgrounds as well. While the WSP delegation consisted mainly of housewives, the Vietnamese group included a professor, a lawyer, a doctor, a news editor, and two cadres from the North Vietnam Women’s Union.³⁶ Historian and WSP member Swerdlow asserts that the WSP delegation never expressed any concern or discomfort that its representatives were described as nonprofessional housewives, while the Vietnamese women presented themselves as workers, students, professionals, and artists. Among the Vietnamese delegates at the Jakarta meeting was Columbia Law School graduate and South Vietnamese attorney Ngo Ba Thanh, and NLF representative Nguyen Thi

³⁵ FBI Memorandum, SCPC, DG 115, Box A-8, Folder 1.

³⁶ Swerdlow, 216.

Binh, who eventually became foreign minister of the NLF.³⁷ Along with Binh, two other women represented South Vietnam in Jakarta and five women represented the Hanoi regime.

Despite the stark differences in the women's professional backgrounds and experiences in the war, the Vietnamese women also invoked the language of maternalism to justify their struggle and to argue for peace. After Jakarta, the Vietnamese women repeatedly expressed their "militant solidarity" with American women peace activists, but Nguyen Thi Binh argued that because of American aggression, South Vietnamese women had no choice but to continue participating in armed fighting. Speaking to an April 1968 women's conference in Paris, a meeting modeled on the Jakarta proceedings, Binh declared of the NLF's women: "They are feared by the enemy, but are loved by the people who affectionately call them "the long-haired army."³⁸ Although the women were feared warriors, Binh went on to say, "South Vietnamese women do not attack the enemy with only weapons but also with arguments sprung from the hearts of wives and mothers." Nguyen Thi Binh and the other Vietnamese delegates emphasized the common struggle for peace by highlighting the universal bonds of women, reflecting the core principles of WSP. In a letter from the Vietnam Women's Union to WSP in March 1966, Vo Thi The emphasized these shared ties, using a domestic, if overtly propagandistic language. As she noted, "Indeed, in this common struggle, the hearts of the American and Vietnamese women beat in unison, for all of them love their husbands, their children, the independence of their

³⁷ Nguyen Thi Binh is an important political figure who has received next to no biographical attention from scholars. A useful general background on her role in NLF delegations and her success as a diplomat can be found in Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 182-191.

³⁸ Speech by Nguyen Thi Binh at Paris Conference, April 1968, SCPC DG 115 Box A-4 Folder 3.

country.”³⁹

The meetings in Jakarta and Paris had ended with an affirmation of this shared struggle, as the Vietnamese women and WSP issued a joint denunciation of United States policy in Vietnam, essentially restating the NLF and North Vietnamese assertions that the United States was interfering in a civil conflict and needlessly inflicting massive devastation on the civilian population. In addition to a call for honoring the Geneva Accords, WSP demanded an end to bombing in North Vietnam and a withdrawal of all American troops from the region. Although these demands were obviously not met, the Jakarta conference was a significant step for WSP. The conference established ties between citizens of enemy countries that led to dozens of future meetings during the course of the war, and the Jakarta denunciation was one of the earliest condemnations of American policy in Vietnam, one that prefigured the later erosion of domestic support for United States involvement in the war. Because this denunciation came in 1965, when the United States had only one-fifth the number of troops it would have in Vietnam by 1968, and because it issued from a group of American housewives who had come to identify with the suffering of Vietnamese civilians, it pointed to the prescience of WSP in apprehending the scope and nature of the conflict unfolding.

WSP and the Vietnamese women seemed to make little substantive progress in the meetings in terms of altering American public opinion, but the symbolic importance of the conference was immediately apparent. The *New York Times* emphasized how the joint denunciation of United States policy issued by WSP and the Vietnamese women “echoed Hanoi’s propaganda line” and resulted in little tangible change in America’s policy in Vietnam.⁴⁰

³⁹ Letter from VNWU to American Women, 14 March 1966, SCPC DG115, Box A-3 Folder 2.

⁴⁰ “Women Score U.S. at Jakarta Talks,” *New York Times*, 19 July 1965, 2.

The *Los Angeles Times* stated that the WSP delegation “denied that the North and South Vietnamese women they met were Communists,” intimating that the WSP women were naive about their Vietnamese counterparts or were communists themselves.⁴¹ In a report written after the Jakarta meeting, WSP delegates did attempt to establish the NLF’s political neutrality, explaining that, according to the Jakarta delegation, the NLF was not controlled by Hanoi, a proposition largely rejected by most Americans as well as the Johnson administration. While the focus on the NLF allowed WSP and the Vietnamese women to avoid ideological discussions about communism, this avoidance seemed to some members of the American media to be evidence of WSP’s ignorance and naiveté, as proof that they were out of their depth.

Because of the contacts formed in meetings abroad and because of WSP’s continuing relationship with the Vietnamese women, three WSP members were invited to visit North Vietnam in 1967, marking the first official WSP delegation to the war-torn country, following the unofficial visit in 1965, and the first trip of many made by American peace activists. Historian Mary Hershberger has established that two hundred civilians accepted invitations to visit North Vietnam during the war, by 1969 at the rate of approximately one group per month.⁴² WSP made numerous visits to Hanoi through 1975, and WSP and the Vietnamese delegations met again in conferences in Paris, Stockholm, Budapest, Berlin, Cuba, Toronto, and Vancouver.

While meeting with Vietnamese women at international peace conferences subjected WSP to a potential backlash from the United States government, traveling to Vietnam as members of a private delegation presented even greater risks. In addition to the high costs, a particularly important issue given WSP’s perennial inability to raise funds, traveling to Vietnam raised issues

⁴¹ “U.S. Women’s Peace Mission Tells of Talks,” *Los Angeles Times*, 20 July 1965, 10.

⁴² Hershberger, *Traveling to Vietnam*, 4.

about physical safety and about possible criminal charges. Despite the risks, Dagmar Wilson urged the WSP membership to seize the opportunity to build solidarity among Vietnamese and American women and to use the visits to shed additional light on American aggression and further the cause of peace. In a letter to WSP members calling for support of the first WSP delegation to Hanoi, Wilson reiterated the WSP commitment to seeing the war for themselves, arguing, “The act of going to Vietnam is a manifestation of our refusal to recognize the authority of our government to choose for us who our enemies are and who shall be our friends.”⁴³ Wilson’s statement echoed the 1965 debate over WSP’s participation at Jakarta, but in contrast to Madelyn Duckles’s house fire analogy, Wilson’s call to reject the authority of the United States government indicated a more aggressive approach. Establishing friendships among the women and exposing civilian suffering was still the paramount goal, but Wilson’s argument relied less on maternal rhetoric and foreshadowed the language of more radical antiwar activists who would supplant the conservative maternalism of WSP.

During these private visits, WSP delegates were escorted by representatives of the Vietnam Women’s Union, and they took tours of bomb shelters, visited hospitals and rural villages, and met with teachers and political leaders. The initial delegations to Vietnam involved few formal meetings, but rather investigated the physical impact of the war on civilians. Feminist and activist Barbara Deming, while not a member of WSP and frequent critic of the movement’s conservatism, which she argued resulted from its counterproductive fear of alienating the average woman, provided powerful testimony about her own trips to Vietnam that visited the same bombed-out neighborhoods and hospitals that the other American activists toured.

⁴³ Letter, July 1967, American University Archives and Special Collections, Box 3 – Visits Abroad.

Deming's comments on her 1966 trip to Hanoi were far more radical than the public statements of WSP members, as Deming stated bluntly her conviction that the United States was "waging a war of terror against the civilian population."⁴⁴ In a talk discussing her eleven-day trip to Hanoi, Deming told of a newborn baby she encountered in a Hanoi hospital that illustrated the vulnerability of Vietnamese children. The baby's mother was in her last month of pregnancy when her village was hit by fragmentation bombs. A bomb fragment pierced the woman's abdomen and an hour later she gave birth to a boy who had a bloodstained forehead, a wound said to be sustained from the bomb impact. The baby was alive, but frail, and doctors feared he would not develop normally. Deming made a number of public appearances discussing her trip to Hanoi and several major newspapers relayed her observations. Her charges that the United States military was aggressively targeting civilians indicated a shift from the conservative style of WSP, despite their mutual use of imagery related to wounded women and children.

By 1968, as peace activists' trips to Hanoi became relatively common and women's groups seemed to become increasingly more aligned with Deming's radicalism, some of the WSP members realized that they needed a new, more compelling reason for continuing the delegations. As Dagmar Wilson stated earlier, the general purpose of the delegations was to develop a mutual understanding with the Vietnamese and to restore individual human faces to the victims of the conflict, those presented so abstractly by the American media. After receiving an invitation to Hanoi in 1969, Philadelphia WSP member Ethel Taylor wrote to Cora Weiss asking if the organization should develop a more specific reason for visiting Vietnam. Taylor, writing in October 1969, pointed to the growth of the antiwar movement in the United States, saying "the climate is different now than when Dagmar, et al went. It's IN to be against the

⁴⁴ Barbara Deming, *Revolution and Equilibrium* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1971), 169.

war.”⁴⁵ Taylor’s comment reflected the shifts in the nature of war opposition during America’s involvement in Vietnam, and demonstrated that the effectiveness of WSP tactics were eroding with the growth of other antiwar groups and the rise of radical feminists, who were outspoken in their criticism of WSP’s reliance on old stereotypes of women and their suggestion pacifism was innately feminine or biologically determined.⁴⁶

While their influence waned by the early 1970s, by using motherhood as an idiom, WSP opened up a sizable constituency of women who opposed the Vietnam War from the earliest days of American involvement. Exposing the issue of wounded Vietnamese women and children gave focus to WSP’s antiwar efforts, allowed them to speak from personal experience on the war, a topic that historically had seemed to lie far beyond the purview of mothers and housewives. WSP actions further reinforced the strategic political pairing of women and children as signifiers of civilians, and justified their own participation in foreign policy debates by reminding Americans that the victims of the war’s aggression were just like them. In many ways, WSP’s maternal activism helped to carve out the cultural space that provided the context for antiwar activism that helped to make the increasingly familiar photographs of napalmed civilians more intimate, resonant, and affecting, allowing the issue of civilian casualties to penetrate more widely and deeply among ordinary Americans.

While WSP meetings with Vietnamese women and their messages focused on general themes about the casualties of the Vietnam conflict, the issue of napalm became an increasingly specific focus, as demonstrated by a 1966 protest in California. A group of four WSP members

⁴⁵ Letter, SCPC, DG 115, Box A-8, Folder 1.

⁴⁶ See for instance Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 57.

organized a demonstration at the port of Santa Clara, intended to block a shipment of napalm scheduled to depart for Vietnam in May 1966. The women physically impeded trucks and forklifts at the port, earning the names “housewife terrorists,” and “napalm ladies” from the press.⁴⁷ The women told the WSP newsletter “Memo” that while their action was small that they “did stop murder for 63 minutes before our arrest.”⁴⁸ In fact their success was slightly greater, as the event caused the barge to miss the tide, delaying the shipment by twelve hours. The women received a suspended sentence and an informal probation, but the specter of housewives intervening in the war in such a direct form of protest resonated with *New York Times* reporter Tom Wicker, who said that the very fact that the women were so ordinary had a profound impact on his view of the antiwar movement and the napalm issue.⁴⁹ Famed radical protest singer Pete Seeger in a song titled “Housewife Terrorists” immortalized the Santa Clara action, writing of the confrontation between the dockworkers and the women:

The owner said, Ladies, why don't you think of your children?"
"We are," says we, "and yours as well
And we're thinking of those children in far off Vietnam
For whom these bombs will make a burning hell."⁵⁰

“Canned Hell”

In order to understand the ways that the gendered issue of civilian casualties came to be an effective focus for groups like WSP, it is helpful to explore briefly the dimensions of the

⁴⁷ Melvin Small, *Antiwarriors*, 44. See also Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, *Peace Now! American Society and the Ending of the Vietnam War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 156.

⁴⁸ Swerdlow, 134.

⁴⁹ Tom Wells, *The War Within: America's Battle Over Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 85.

⁵⁰ Pete Seeger, “Housewife Terrorists,” http://peteseeger.net/wp/?page_id=1370, accessed 25 June 2012.

American military's use of napalm, the weapon that became most closely linked to civilian injuries and deaths. Despite the popular association of napalm use with America's war in Vietnam, it was in fact deployed in large volumes in Japan in the waning months of World War II and in even greater amounts during the Korean War. Developed in 1942 by American chemist L.F. Fieser, napalm was from its beginnings regarded as a fearsome but relatively simple weapon, a "blob of fire" made by combining 100-octane gasoline with a powder that formed a thick syrup that created a "vicious, clinging, furious blaze."⁵¹ Known for its unique ability to evoke "dead panic" in the most seasoned combatants, American military officials noted the profound psychological effect caused by napalm, a weapon one Korean prisoner of war described simply as "pure hell." In a feature on the weapon in 1951 titled "Napalm: Canned Hell," *Colliers* magazine told of the weapon's potent effect in Korea, describing how "screaming men rolled on the ground to smother the flame; it wouldn't smother. Others brushed frantically at flickering spots on their arms and legs; it did no good. Farther away, men untouched by fire gasped, choked - and died." The magazine noted that in the first six months of 1951, almost five million gallons of this "devil's mixture" were dropped in Korea, estimating that Allied planes dropped approximately 77,000 gallons per day.

In Vietnam, the United States also widely used napalm, but in far smaller volumes. The *New York Times* estimated in 1967 that 1,500 tons of napalm was used in an average month in South Vietnam, deployed via incendiary bombs, land mines, and in flamethrowers. American officials, clearly wary of charges of chemical warfare, were careful to emphasize that napalm was classified as conventional ordnance and that military planners exerted care in selecting targets that were not near civilian population centers. It is unclear precisely when the United

⁵¹ Bill Stapleton, "Napalm: Canned Hell," *Colliers*, 4 August 1951, 32-33.

States first began using napalm in southern Vietnam; in a 1963 issue of *Life* magazine a Larry Burrows photograph shows a napalm raid, but neither the caption nor the story indicate where the strike occurred.⁵² The first aerial strikes using the weapon by American planes in North Vietnam were reported by the American news media in 1965, as a measure to suppress persistent antiaircraft fire.⁵³ Despite confirmations of the use of napalm in the north, the vast majority was dropped in South Vietnam, much of it in provinces surrounding Saigon.

The *New York Times* described napalm as a “useful but not pretty” technology, noting that American soldiers referred to it as a “terror weapon.” In an article in the *New England Journal of Medicine* two doctors with experience treating napalm burns argued that incendiary bombing with napalm was potentially as deadly and destructive as atomic warfare. Doctors observed that faced with napalm attacks, seasoned troops were known to break from cover, arguing that frequent “maladaptive reactions like irrational flight or immobilization” increased vulnerability to serious injury.⁵⁴ Doctors estimated that a napalm burn to only ten percent of the body may result in renal failure and require amputation, complications that were made worse by two factors: the inadequacy of medical facilities in Vietnam and the high proportion of victims who were children, whose small bodies presented unique challenges in treatment and healing.

Because of the ways American and RVN forces deployed napalm, in massive quantities to burn heavily forested jungles and as antipersonnel weapons to clear tunnels and bunkers, and

⁵² Larry Burrows, “We Wade Deeper into Jungle War,” *Life*, 25 January 1963, 24. Interestingly, the caption for the napalm photo states that American soldiers trained the Vietnamese to operate T-28 bombers which retained American markings and led the Vietnamese to targets, but “as advisers they may not drop bombs.”

⁵³ Jack Raymond, “US Fliers Using Napalm in Raids,” *New York Times*, 20 March 1965, 2.

⁵⁴ Dr. Peter Reich and Victor Sidel, “Napalm,” *Commonweal*, 12 January 1968, 440-441, reprinted from *New England Journal of Medicine*, 13 July 1967.

because of the tendency of the weapon to shift directions with the wind, women and children were frequently and unavoidably victims. The American media often indicated when napalm raids were carried out by Americans or by the RVN military, but there is evidence that as early as 1962 the issue of which polity bore responsibility for napalm attacks was a subject of debate. In a State Department memorandum from December 1962, American officials acknowledged that the United States did not have “direct control” of the RVN Air Force’s use of napalm in South Vietnam “any more than it controls use of any other weapon” in their arsenal. “At the same time,” the memo conceded, “RVNAF does not have air capability for large quantities of napalm,” and often called on the Americans for additional delivery assistance. “Thus,” the State Department concluded,” in terms of large amounts of napalm, the US in fact has control and is exercising it.”⁵⁵ The memo demonstrates the complexity of the relationship between the United States military and the nascent RVN forces, a complexity that only deepened over the subsequent decade, and foreshadows later difficulties in assessing whose forces would bear the blame for civilian war casualties.

Visual Impact of Napalm

It is important to be aware of both the ways the United States military used napalm in Vietnam and also the ways that ordinary Americans learned of its use, and so I will examine a few key articles in American magazines with wide circulations that presented stories about napalm that emphasized visceral photographs and harrowing descriptions of wounded civilians, particularly children. Tens of thousands of American women were motivated by reports on the

⁵⁵ Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, 15 December 1962, *Foreign Relations of the United States, Volume II: Vietnam, 1962* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1990), 329.

war to join WSP, but millions more saw the photographs of napalm injuries in the pages of mass-market magazines and news publications, photographs that had a far broader social impact than one antiwar group. Like WSP, much of the new coverage of napalm played on similar gendered notions of Vietnamese vulnerability and appealed to American women's maternal notions of protection and rescue. While napalm was only one particular weapon that opponents of the war opposed with respect to civilian casualties, I focus on it in this chapter in part because of the literal visibility of napalm wounds, the impact photographs of napalmed women and children had on American citizens, the profusion of such images in the mainstream American press, and the way those images inspired a protest motivated by gendered concerns.

There are a number of reasons that napalm photos were so ubiquitous during the Vietnam War: record numbers of journalists who reported from the war zone, huge circulation numbers for American magazines, the ways television contributed to the desire for Americans to visualize the conflict, new camera and video technologies, and of course the simple shock value of the photos in drawing large audiences. It is important to remember that in prior wars, and indeed in those wars since Vietnam, the American government made efforts to carefully manage the information that emerged from war zones and through propaganda or simple censorship each branch of the military and the Pentagon developed extensive guidelines for war reporting that limited press access to the field and determined what stories would reach publication. During the Vietnam War, neither the military nor the president imposed any rules that could have been construed as censorship, for reasons that have not been fully explored by scholars. President Johnson biographer Randall Woods has stated that Johnson and his advisers never considered censorship and Johnson staff member Bill Moyers commented that the government's official guidelines for journalists were minimal and geared toward preserving the safety of American

forces in Vietnam.⁵⁶ The level of press freedom in Vietnam is striking in its contrast to the strict censorship imposed by Ngo Dinh Diem and succeeding military regimes in the RVN.⁵⁷

Because of the relatively open access of journalists to the field in Vietnam, photographs of the war were ubiquitous in American culture, and napalm photographs were increasingly common. Opposition to the use of napalm among the American antiwar movement was likely motivated not just by the numbers of civilians killed by the weapon, but by the visual renderings of its survivors in cultural publications, portraying victims who were likely to be profoundly burned and disfigured. Napalm became a singular issue in the debate over the war's morality, a fiery issue made more intense by the vision of survivors whose bodies bore the instantly recognizable scars of the conflict, providing powerful, searing images of violence that invigorated a moral opposition to the war by purporting to show the true nature of the conflict and American technology.

For those who opposed the war, the images of burned Vietnamese civilians seemed to provide undeniable evidence of the indiscriminate violence of American weapons, and the use of these images in protest marches and antiwar literature suggested that photographs, rather than political speech or even other forms of journalism, represented most faithfully the reality of the

⁵⁶ Randall B. Woods, *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 674. See also Daniel C. Hallin, *The Uncensored War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), William M. Hammond, *Public Affairs: The Military and the Press, 1968-1973* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1988). For General William C. Westmoreland's opinion on the futility of censorship in Vietnam see George S. McGovern, Patrick J. Hearden, et al, *Vietnam: Four American Perspectives*, (W. Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1990), 47. For a general treatment of the military and the press see Michael Sweeney, *The Military and the Press: An Uneasy Truce* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2006).

⁵⁷ A good overview of the Diem regime's censorship policies can be found in Susan Moeller, *Shooting War: Photography and the American Experience of Combat* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 361-365, Howard Jones, *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 145, 156, 209, David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire* (New York: Random House, 1965), 145-147.

war in a reliably mimetic way. Media scholar Susan Moeller has suggested that photographs have provided rich material for humanitarian responses to war, writing that through photography war becomes “personal and comprehensible,” translating a massive and remote event like a foreign war into a story about individual human beings.⁵⁸ Despite the effectiveness of visual images in evoking the nature of war, Moeller acknowledges that images cannot be regarded as transparent truth, and that viewers bring varied and complex perspectives and agendas into their interpretations of war images.⁵⁹

Susan Sontag examined this assumption about the transparency or legibility of photographs during the Vietnam War, writing in 1973 that while the photographs demonstrating the horrors of the conflict were important in mobilizing antiwar sentiment, they became so frequent and familiar after 1967 that they “transfixed,” and “anesthetized” the American public.⁶⁰ Sontag mused that that if Americans had been confronted with similar photographs of the devastation the United States military inflicted on the people and the land in Korea, that a similar opposition movement likely would have developed. Sontag argued that the counterfactual was irrelevant, however, noting that the public did not see graphic photographs in Korea “because there was, ideologically, no space for them.” Americans were able to see the remainders of the war in Vietnam, according to Sontag, because there were journalists who framed the war as ill conceived and savage. In positing that the interpretation of photographs required ideological “space” or narrative context, Sontag argued that photographs, fragmented and discrete, could only be influential when viewed by someone with a pre-existing notion of the war in which to fit

⁵⁸ Susan Moeller, *Shooting War*, 19.

⁵⁹ For a more general treatment of war photography that takes up this question see Caroline Brothers, *War and Photography* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

⁶⁰ Susan Sontag, “On Photography,” *New York Review of Books*, 18 October 1973, 59-63.

the images, and that even then war photography often overwhelmed its audience, relaying affect and raw emotion with little lasting effect.⁶¹

Sontag's analysis of photography is useful here not simply because it is so fully informed by the ongoing experience of war in Vietnam and her own prominent opposition to it, but because it questions the "limit of photographic knowledge of the world," and raises doubts about the stability of the relationship between image and reality, a stability that was assumed to be so natural that the images of napalmed civilians seemed to convey more about the war than any manner of verbal description could. Sontag's analysis of the dissonance between image and reality is more than simply theoretical or semantic in the context of the Vietnam War, a war that was shaped so profoundly by a handful of deeply resonant photographs and television images, images that were so influential in forming public opinion about the conflict. Sontag wrote that the response to still photographs "will always be some kind of sentimentalism - whether cynical or humanist," suggesting that the emotional response to images is always more important and more lasting than any reality the image purports to convey. While photographs have emotional impact, Sontag worried that the most lasting effect is in "making us feel that the world is more available than it really is. By furnishing this already crowded world with a duplicate world of images, photography subtly devalues the world and undermines the possibility of having fresh responses to it."⁶² Sontag's criticism suggests that photography, by conveying its own reality, created a new kind of knowledge about the Vietnam War, one that invested a certain power in the viewer by revealing the powerlessness of the subject, who was so frequently figured as a

⁶¹ For a view of the way Sontag's thoughts on the power of photography to convey meaning changed between the 1970s and the 1990s, see Judith Butler, "Photography, War, Outrage," *PMLA*, vol. 120, No. 3 (May 2005): 822-827.

⁶² *Ibid.*

woman or a child.

Sontag's criticism represented an intellectual reflection on a war that was nearing its end in 1973, but at the height of the conflict in the mid-1960s, the images she discussed were frequently displayed by activist groups like WSP. Also, new printing technology made the widespread dissemination of images possible at unprecedented low cost. Much of the journalistic coverage of American use of napalm and larger stories on the war sought to expose the impact of the fighting on the "innocents," with an outpouring of stories on maimed and disfigured children. Because much of this coverage, as Sontag's analysis suggests, was explicitly visual in nature, it came to be a common feature in popular publications ranging from *Popular Mechanics* to *Look* and glossy women's magazines that typically avoided overtly political topics. The American press conveyed, often in gruesome photographs and evocative descriptions the damage the war inflicted on Vietnamese women and children and these stories had a significant cultural impact on Americans who were growing more skeptical of the Vietnam War as the years of involvement dragged on.

Magazines with primarily female readerships seemed to be particularly interested in offering stories about civilian suffering in Vietnam portrayed through graphic photographs. I will evaluate three of the most widely read magazine articles published in January 1967 that take up the issue of civilian casualties to demonstrate how the media, like WSP, encouraged a maternalist understanding of the conflict and urged citizen involvement, particularly by women, in antiwar efforts by focusing on child victims of napalm attacks. January 1967 seemed to represent a climax of American interest in the civilian napalm issue, with three major magazines publishing stories that described in harrowing detail the condition of injured women and children and highlighted the gender dimensions of civilian casualties. Three of the most important of

these articles, featured in *Redbook*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, and *Ramparts*, attracted a wide audience, all three staking their credibility, like WSP, on the power of civilian eyewitness testimony and personal visits with the Vietnamese wounded. These stories and the reactions they caused reflected the increasing doubts about the intentions and actions of the United States government in Vietnam, and demonstrated a new concern among American women through coverage that seemed to be explicitly designed to present an empathetic identification with and a desire to aid and protect the Vietnamese wounded in the war.

January's issue of *Redbook* featured an article by American surgeon Richard E. Perry that was titled "Where the Innocent Die."⁶³ Dr. Perry wrote of his experiences while spending nearly two years living and treating patients in Saigon. Dr. Perry had arrived in Vietnam in 1962, working in urban areas and in remote mountain regions, visiting villages and assisting in the establishment of a foundation in partnership with the State Department that recruited American doctors to work in Vietnam in two-month tours of duty. Perry cited his own moral obligation in coming to Vietnam and implored his readers to involve themselves in medical aid to the country. Dr. Perry wrote that the number of civilian casualties was difficult to substantiate but that by 1963 the figure was "enormous," and noted that while military personnel received prompt treatment, that civilians "cannot escape from the war that rages around them and who are wounded by bombs, bullets, land mines, poisoned bamboo spikes, artillery shells and exploding napalm." Perry gave a number of examples of the horrors of war that he saw in Vietnam, including a day when a bus carrying twenty-three women struck a land mine, a group that represented nearly the entire population of a local village. Perry vividly described how the mine

⁶³ Richard E. Perry, M.D. with Robert J. Levin, "Where the Innocent Die," *Redbook*, 1 January 1967, 46-47, 99-104.

tore the bus apart, “driving splinters like nails deep into the women’s bodies, shattering their heels, their lower shin bones and their buttocks.”⁶⁴ The women were unloaded from the trucks, Perry stated, “as if they were hindquarters of beef.” Sixteen of the women were saved, but Dr. Perry lamented that tragedies such as these were daily occurrences in Vietnam.

While the injuries inflicted by landmines, artillery, and bombs moved Dr. Perry, he wrote that despite his wide medical experience that “nothing could have prepared me for my encounters with Vietnamese women and children burned by napalm.” Perry described the sight as “shocking and sickening, even for a physician, to see and smell the blackened flesh.” The sight of children burned by the weapon provided the most gruesome sights, as Perry writes, “one never forgets the bewildered eyes of the silent, suffering, napalm-burned child.” *Redbook* readers could not have missed the message of Dr. Perry’s piece, written not only to expose the degree of suffering among Vietnamese civilians, but to urge Americans to get involved in aid efforts. While Perry notes the tendency of the American government to blame the NLF for the majority of injuries, he ultimately argues that placing blame is less important than taking responsibility for the wounded. “Someone must be there to bind the wounds,” Perry argued, “if not we Americans, then who?”

Perry’s article is effective in its descriptions of what he characterizes as the unimaginable suffering of Vietnamese civilians, and while it avoids overt political commentary in favor of encouraging humanitarian intervention, it is steeped in a pacifist logic that decried the unnecessary violence of war, a message that would resonate with a number of antiwar groups including those dominated by women like WSP. Perry’s piece described the real physical consequences of the American war on the Vietnamese and criticizes the “comfortable barrier”

⁶⁴ Ibid..

that existed between the soldiers who fire the weapons and the “suffering human beings on the ground.” American killing, according to Perry, was “tidy,” is “impersonal and sophisticated,” in stark contrast to the “personal and primitive” savagery of the Viet Cong, an organization that Perry contends was universally, and simplistically, regarded by the American press as terrorists.⁶⁵ While the thrust of Perry’s article is to provide a purportedly neutral testimony about the nature of civilian casualties, it also raised questions about the larger motives of the American government in Vietnam and cast doubt on the morality of the war’s weapons.

The January 1967 issue of *Ladies Home Journal* featured another prominent article that examined the war’s impact on Vietnamese civilians, this one written by legendary journalist and war observer Martha Gellhorn. Gellhorn’s article, titled “Suffer the Little Children,” was a collection of poignant, emotional impressions from her trip to Vietnam and visits to civilian hospitals and orphanages.⁶⁶ Gellhorn wrote that while she had witnessed war and observed its devastation in nine countries, she “had never seen a war like the one in South Vietnam.”⁶⁷ Focusing only on the child victims in the province of My Tho in the Mekong Delta, Gellhorn wrote about the “tiny war wounded,” that according to her sources roughly numbered two thousand per month. Gellhorn described the injured young people she observed: a six-month old baby with a mutilated arm whose mother was killed during a night bombing raid, a thirteen year old girl missing a foot who shared a small bed with an old woman with a shattered knee, a fourteen year old girl who suffered a head wound from a mortar, a fifteen year old girl

⁶⁵ For an influential view on the way Vietnam emphasized the ways technology has made warfare remote and impersonal see Anthony Lewis, “The Dehumanization of War,” *New York Times*, 24 November 1969, 46.

⁶⁶ For background on Gellhorn’s experience in Vietnam see Caroline Moorehead, *Gellhorn: A Twentieth-Century Life* (New York: H. Holt, 2003), 349-358.

⁶⁷ Martha Gellhorn, “Suffer the Little Children,” *Ladies’ Home Journal*, January 1967, 107-111.

recovering from a chest wound from a machine gun bullet.

The thrust of Gellhorn's article was to argue that responsibility for the Vietnamese children's suffering was not exclusive to the American military or government policymakers, but that the American people were also complicit and should feel compelled to intervene. "The children," Gellhorn wrote, "suffer in silence...but their eyes talk for them." Describing their "tragic resignation," Gellhorn wrote, "I take the anguish, grief, bewilderment in their eyes, rightly, as accusation." The article, in its close observations and unfettered indictment of the war's violence, is suffused with pathos and empathy, and encourages its readers to take personal responsibility for the injuries inflicted and to suture the broader issue of civilian casualties in Vietnam to the desperate suffering of its children.

Because of the nature of the publications, Gellhorn, like Dr. Perry, did not devote extensive time to the political aspects of the conflict, nor did she assess whether the injuries she observed were inflicted by the United States, the RVN military, or the Viet Cong. Ultimately, in Gellhorn's rendering, the responsibility for the injuries belongs to the nation that provided the weapons, citing a doctor who conceded that "Most of the bits and pieces I take out of people...are identified as American." Gellhorn wrote of the inadequacy of the grimy, overcrowded medical wards she visited, where the wounded shared bare beds and cots or lay in the corridors. Those who managed to get treatment were in Gellhorn's estimation the lucky ones, as she noted that the lack of any organized form of transportation to provincial hospitals left many to die from treatable wounds. Because of inadequate sanitation, including a lack of clean water or electricity, and the frequent amputation of limbs as a surgical shortcut, many of those who survived the initial injuries faced long recoveries and even longer waits for artificial limbs. The enormous demand for prostheses in Vietnam left many to wait for years, although as

Gellhorn observed there were more pressing concerns to distract the wounded, as most hospitals had no food to offer patients, leaving the wounded dependent on relatives to keep from starving.

Like Dr. Perry's *Redbook* article, Gellhorn reserved a special shock for the child victims of napalm. Placing blame squarely with the American military, Gellhorn wrote, "We alone possess and freely use this weapon in South Vietnam." Gellhorn told of a seven year old boy who suffered napalm burns to his face, back, and hands, who had reached the hospital after his emaciated grandfather had carried him to the nearest town where he was flown to the hospital. The boy's wounds were healing, and his crying had given away to twisting silently in his bed, "as if trying to dodge his incomprehensible torture." Another seven-year-old boy from the same village was in the Quy Nhon hospital when Gellhorn visited. The boy "moaned like a mourning dove," as his mother stood over her child's cot, "fanning the little body, in a helpless effort to cool that wet, red skin." Gellhorn's scathing but spare prose heightened the impact of her descriptions, relying on brief but poignant interactions with injured children and their devastated families.

Gellhorn was known as a serious and battle-hardened journalist, but the *Ladies' Home Journal* article spoke directly to its female audience, in terms that allowed for a maternal, personal understanding and intimate identification. Gellhorn told of a New Jersey housewife and mother of six who adopted three Vietnamese children and visited the country to see the conditions that other Vietnamese children were facing. The woman recounted to Gellhorn how her own initial skepticism about the agony of napalm wounds gave way to a stark realization when she witnessed the impact. The woman said that while she had read in the press that napalm melts the flesh,

“I thought that’s nonsense, because I can put a roast in the oven and the fat will melt but the meat stays there. Well, I went and saw these children burned by napalm, and it is absolutely true. The chemical reaction of this napalm does melt the flesh, and the flesh runs right down their faces and onto their chests and it sits there and it grows there... These children can’t turn their heads, they were so thick with flesh... And when gangrene sets in, they cut off their hands or fingers or their feet; the only thing they cannot cut off is their head...”⁶⁸

The housewife’s description of a napalm-wounded child relies not on gruesome photographs or even particularly morbid language, but by fitting the wounds into a domestic idiom shaped by her own experience, she framed the story in terms that would resonate with the female audience of *Ladies’ Home Journal* and encourage them to identify with the suffering of the children and their mothers. Gellhorn’s article proceeded from the notion that American women were not receiving the truth about the war in Vietnam, but she also argues more subtly that the observations of women revealed something new about the war that was being purposely hidden by the government. In her article, Gellhorn acknowledged the “problem of ‘facts’” in the Vietnam War in 1967 and wrote of the difficulty one faced in sifting through information in an effort to locate the “truth” of the war.

While Gellhorn’s motivation is explicitly about recording her own observations and interactions with Vietnamese children, she insinuates a larger point about the nature of information in Vietnam, writing “it is almost impossible to keep up with the facts in this escalating war.”⁶⁹ In part, she continued, “the facts about this war are buried under propaganda,” and she also suggests that the issue of civilian casualties is weighed down with too much emotional freight to be dealt with by the military or other government bureaucracy whose

⁶⁸ Gellhorn, “Suffer the Little Children,” 109.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

endless pursuit of statistics were in Gellhorn's mind only "indications of truth rather than absolute accuracy." In writing about the suffering of Vietnamese children, Gellhorn suggests that she is able in some small measure to cut through the war's propaganda to get to the real "truth," a truth she claimed -- and American women were increasingly willing to believe -- was only accessible by the testimony of civilian eyewitnesses and by what they could see with their own eyes.

While Dr. Perry and Gellhorn's articles offered similarly sympathetic and heart-rending images of the civilian casualty issue, another influential article in January 1967 appeared in *Ramparts* magazine.⁷⁰ The article contained a preface written by famed baby doctor and prominent war opponent Benjamin Spock criticizing the American government's lack of assistance to wounded Vietnamese children. The author of the twenty-three-page feature article, William J. Pepper, was a political science professor who spent six weeks in Vietnam in the spring of 1966. Pepper's article contained six full pages of powerful photographs of wounded Vietnamese children, demonstrating the range of devastation visited upon the young victims. The first photograph showed a 28-year old mother lying on her side, nursing a baby on the floor of a hospital with a heavily bandaged hand, directing a penetrating gaze toward the camera. The caption noted that shrapnel wounds severed the woman's spine and left her paralyzed from the chest down, injuries that led to her death a few days after the photograph was taken. A subsequent shot showed two emaciated children sharing a single Saigon hospital bed, another featured a close-up of a young boy's face deeply lacerated by shrapnel accompanied by a caption saying that the Da Nang hospital's lack of basic equipment led to the boy's death during a minor surgery.

⁷⁰ William F. Pepper, "The Children of Vietnam," *Ramparts*, January 1967, 44-67.

Other photos included a crying baby missing an arm below the elbow, a young girl with deep facial burns wearing an eye patch, children reluctantly smiling for the camera behind the barbed wire of a refugee camp, and making visible the description in Gellhorn's *Ladies' Home Journal* article, a photo of a boy burned by napalm whose chin and neck had melted onto his chest. The photographs rendered visible and inarguable what Pepper described as the "horror of what we are doing to the children of Vietnam," which he described as "staggering." Pepper wrote that the "tiny faces and bodies scorched and sealed by fire," rendered the young victims "scarcely human." Writing of his own instinct to reach out to the injured children, Pepper said that he restrained the urge to touch the wounded "for fear that the ash-like skin would crumble in my fingers."

The visual impact of the photographs in Pepper's article is stunning, not simply because of the graphic nature of the shots and the smallness of the victims, but because of the sheer number of them, which suggested that napalm injuries were not just devastating but also widespread. In most of the shots the children look directly at the camera, reinforcing Gellhorn's observation that the children's gazes seemed to represent an accusation aimed at both the photographer and also at the American people. The fact that all of the photographs appear before the text of Pepper's article further suggests that the images speak for themselves, and that the *Ramparts* piece chose to allow the photographs to tell the story in a way that the *Redbook* and *Ladies' Home Journal* pieces did not. While Pepper's assertions in the text would draw controversy, the images were presented as the irrevocable truth of the war for Vietnamese civilians, and the impact of the article would be widely felt.

Perhaps the most important consequence of Pepper's article was the role it has been attributed in convincing Martin Luther King, Jr. to speak publicly for the first time in opposition

to the Vietnam War. King biographer David Garrow wrote of aide Bernard Lee's remembrance of the day Dr. King first flipped through the issue of *Ramparts* in an airport newsstand and saw the images of the wounded children. "He froze," Lee recalled, when he "saw a picture of a Vietnamese mother holding her dead baby, a baby killed by our military."⁷¹ King pushed away a plate of food, telling Lee that "nothing will ever taste any good for me until I do everything I can to end that war." In a speech at New York City's Riverside Church that April, King spoke powerfully of his own struggle to "break the betrayal of my own silences" and speak out against the Vietnam War. King's speech included a brief history of conflict in Vietnam since the end of World War II, describing the "voiceless" Vietnamese civilians as the key to ending the current war and affirming the American duty to "know them and hear their broken cries." King then turned his focus to the children, referencing Pepper's article when he stated:

So far we may have killed a million of them, mostly children. They wander into the towns and see thousands of the children, homeless, without clothes, running in packs on the streets like animals. They see the children degraded by our soldiers as they beg for food. They see the children selling their sisters to our soldiers, soliciting for their mothers.⁷²

While it is difficult to know the extent to which the *Ramparts* article contributed to King's decision, the Riverside speech did betray a clear emphasis on child victims and a sense of parental responsibility among Americans. King's evolving position on Vietnam along with the raw emotional power of the images in the popular press moved the issue of civilian casualties, an issue that spoke so clearly to gendered notions of vulnerability, to the center of antiwar rhetoric.

⁷¹ David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow, 1986), 543.

⁷² Clayborne Carson and Kris Shepherd, *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2001), 148.

The pictures and King's reaction showed that wounded Vietnamese civilians had become a powerful way of reaching a broader audience and by highlighting the graphic nature of the wounds, the 1967 coverage reframed the war as one where civilians were not simply collateral damage but were the human targets of American weapons.

While the photographs were no doubt the most affecting element of the *Ramparts* article, the piece was also controversial in its attempts to quantify the numbers of civilians killed and wounded, despite (or perhaps because of) the American government's failure to track such data. Using figures provided by a Canadian member of the International Control Commission, Pepper's *Ramparts* article estimated that 415,000 civilians had been killed since 1961, and since nearly 70% of the residents of war-impacted villages were children, Pepper concluded that at least a quarter of a million Vietnamese children had been killed in the war. Using the American military rule of thumb that the number of wounded generally represented three times the number of dead, Pepper calculated that at least a million children had suffered war injuries. The unreliability of statistics has become an axiom of Vietnam War history, and what matters for the purposes of this chapter is not arriving at a substantiated number but the nature and the existence of the debate itself, and the demand of American citizens to know how many civilians were affected. There is some evidence that Pepper's figures were generally accepted in the press, as the April issue of *Look* magazine, in an article titled "Vietnam's War-Ravaged Children," asserts some of the same estimates without attribution, and the figure of a million injured children became commonplace in protest speeches and antiwar materials.⁷³

The responses to Pepper's casualty estimates were intense on both sides, sparking outrage in those inclined to accept the figures and "bitter resentment" among military officials who

⁷³ Chandler Brossard, "Vietnam's War-Ravaged Children," *Look*, 18 April 1967, 22.

dismissed them as baseless. In an interview with the *New York Times*, an unnamed military official stated that the casualty figures in *Ramparts* “will not stand up under examination,” and Army Major General James William Humphreys, who was in charge of United States medical assistance to Vietnam, dismissed Pepper’s article as a “case of distortion.”⁷⁴ Military officials, while maintaining that Pepper’s statistics were not based in reality, stated that because of a lack of data, that the figures were questionable, but General Humphreys admitted, “I have no way of proving he is wrong.” Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara also told the press that the American officials “simply don’t have any idea” how many civilians were killed or wounded in Vietnam and that no agency collected comprehensive data on the matter.

The issue of quantifying civilian casualties is one that will never be resolved with certainty, but it is relevant here in that the appeals to establish exactly how many civilians were affected by American weapons had become an increasingly important thread in the rhetoric of the antiwar movement, and one of the primary ways that opposition groups asserted the importance of women and children to the larger cause of ending the war. The movement to force the government to track civilian casualties, which began shortly after the January 1967 magazine coverage of napalm, is one of few examples of a substantive impact the movement had on the government, however inexact or half-hearted the effort to do so ultimately was. In many ways, exposing the issue for the American people was the most important consequence of the campaign to pressure the United States government to count the civilian dead and injured, as it conjured powerful and lingering images of napalmed children in the minds of an increasingly war-weary public.

Five years after the magazine coverage of napalm-wounded children in Vietnam and more

⁷⁴ Jonathan Randal, “Toll of Civilians Rising,” *New York Times*, 21 April 1967, 1.

than seven years after WSP made napalm a central focus of its movement, on June 9, 1972, a photograph appeared on the front page of the *New York Times* and dozens of newspapers worldwide that showed five small Vietnamese children running in terror toward the camera, screaming with pain while fleeing a napalm attack in South Vietnam. The children were flanked by seven men in fatigues and helmets, some armed with weapons and one reloading his camera. In the center of the photograph was a naked nine-year old Phan Thi Kim Phuc, her clothes completely burned off by the napalm, running with arms outstretched down the wide Highway 1 in Hau Nghia province. *New York Times* reporter Fox Butterfield recounted the napalm raid as a tragic but not uncommon mistake, writing that in this instance South Vietnamese planes had accidentally dropped napalm on their own troops, injuring five women and children and six South Vietnamese soldiers in the village of Trang Bang.⁷⁵

After the photograph was taken, Kim Phuc kept running until she reached government positions as soldiers and reporters helped to cool the girl's burning back by pouring water from their canteens over her skin. A twenty-one year Vietnamese staff photographer for the Associated Press, Huynh Cong "Nick" Ut, took the photograph of Kim Phuc that won the Pulitzer Prize, but before that shot he captured an image of Kim Phuc's grandmother Tao carrying Kim's gravely burned three-year old brother Danh down the same highway, the boy's blackened flesh peeling off in large chunks. Danh died a few hours after the attack, but after fourteen months of recovery in the American-run Barsky hospital in Saigon, seventeen operations and skin grafts and countless agonizing "burn baths," Kim Phuc and her picture had a

⁷⁵ Fox Butterfield, "South Vietnamese Drop Napalm on Own Troops, *New York Times*, 9 June 1972, 1. Footage from the event was also broadcast on network television news, see for instance, John Chancellor, "Vietnam/Offensive – South Vietnamese Accident," *NBC Evening News*, 8 June 1972. The photograph was also featured in the "Year in Pictures" issue of *Life* magazine on 29 December 1972.

profound impact on American public opinion of the war and crystallized for many the brutality of the conflict and America's misguided use of devastating weaponry.⁷⁶

This chapter has argued that while the issue of civilian casualties was a concern of war opponents from its beginnings, by 1967 the narrative of the war shifted, as popular publications brought to light the degree of suffering of Vietnamese civilians and the extent to which women and children bore the brunt of American firepower. Women Strike for Peace played a role in conditioning Americans for the idea that women could and must intervene in political issues and bring a maternal, commonsense approach to foreign policy, but their influence was admittedly limited, appealing to mostly wealthy, conservative urban and suburban housewives. When the national press picked up the same rhetoric that characterized WSP's movement, however, a national audience became aware of what was happening to civilians in Vietnam. WSP set a precedent for interacting with Vietnamese women, establishing relationships that despite massive imbalances in wealth and status, reflected their efforts to humanize the Vietnamese and influence American public opinion against further militarization of the conflict. By 1972 when the photograph of Kim Phuc appeared in the media and the footage of the incident was aired on television news broadcasts, groups like WSP and the popular media had already provided a context for the public's reaction to it. Americans had seen the impact of errant napalm on Vietnamese civilians before in the pages of popular magazines and newspapers and on television, but the photograph's resonance was broad and deep in exposing in one still, enduring frame the war's impact on civilians. The picture was for many Americans a chilling confirmation of the

⁷⁶ For the most thorough account of Kim Phuc's life and the circumstances leading to and following the photograph, see Denise Chong, *The Girl in the Picture: The Story of Kim Phuc, the Photograph, and the Vietnam War* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000). For an analysis of the photograph from the perspective of racial violence see Sylvia Shin Huey Chong, *The Oriental Obscene: Violence and Racial Fantasies in the Vietnam Era* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 113-127.

public's deep disapproval of the war and represented in one unforgettable image the dubiousness of American claims to be rescuing the people of Vietnam.

Chapter Five

“The Blame and the Guilt, the Guilt and the Blame”: Three American Women Assess the War, 1968-1978

“All right, yes, it had been a groove being a war correspondent, hanging out with the grunts and getting close to the war, touching it, losing yourself in it and trying yourself against it. I had always wanted that, never mind why, it had just been a thing of mine, the way this movie is a thing of mine, and I’d done it; I was in many ways a brother to these poor, tired grunts, I knew what they knew now, I’d done it and it was really something. Everywhere I’d gone, there had always been Marines or soldiers who would tell me what the Avenger had told Krynski, *You’re all right, man, you guys are cool, you got balls.*”¹

This scene from Michael Herr’s *Dispatches* evoked the camaraderie felt among male war correspondents and the military in the Vietnam War, conveying the sense of brotherhood that emerged between the two groups of men that has become a pervasive feature of many accounts of the war. Herr’s interaction with the soldiers and his confession that he relished the insider status of being so close to battle demonstrates that just as combat is a gendered concept, so is the process of writing the war, framing it, and remembering it. *Dispatches* is regarded as one of the classic examples of the genre of war reportage in Vietnam, and is a clear foil to the types of writing I will be evaluating in this chapter. Literary scholar Maria S. Bonn has pointed out what many other critics, literary theorists, and Vietnam War scholars have argued, “for all that *Dispatches* reveals of the brutality and senselessness of Vietnam, its love for the war it protests is

¹ Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (New York: Avon Books, 1978), 206, italics in original.

all over Herr's book."² For Herr the war is beautiful and wonderful, the most profound experience a man can have in life.

Literary scholar Regula Fuchs has identified similar romanticized masculine notions of war in the semi-fictional Vietnam works of Tim O'Brien, Philip Caputo, and Gustav Hasford, who all wrote longingly about the intensity of war and their fascination with military technologies that allowed them the power to kill and the powerful "feelings of elation with regard to war."³ Scores of combat narratives on the war in Vietnam emphasize the bonds forged in battle, bonds that Susan Jeffords observes are "always and already masculine," naturalizing the exclusion of women and eliding differences in race and class to arrive at a singular male experience of war."⁴ In the 1980s this notion of a heroic masculine narrative of the combat experience in Vietnam replayed itself in a host of Hollywood films, many intent on explaining how defeat in Vietnam was not the fault of American soldiers but assigned blame to the American government, and as Jeffords has convincingly argued, most were concerned with recuperating American masculinity in the wake of defeat.⁵ Before this cultural reconstruction of masculinity began, however, there

² Maria S. Bonn, "The Lust of the Eye: Michael Herr, Gloria Emerson and the Art of Observation," *Papers on Language and Literature* 29, issue 1 (Winter 1993): 28-42.

³ Regula Fuchs, *Remembering Vietnam: Gustav Hasford, Ron Kovic, Tim O'Brien and the Fabrication of American Cultural Memory* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 135.

⁴ Susan Jeffords, "Things Worth Dying For: Gender and the Ideology of Collectivity in Vietnam Representation," *Cultural Critique*, no. 8 (Winter 1987-88): 79-103. On the more theoretical utility of the masculine bond in excluding women from Western political traditions see Nancy Hartsock, *Money, Sex and Power: Toward a Feminist Historical Materialism* (New York: Longman, 1983).

⁵ Susan Jeffords examines this process of "debriding" or cleansing soldiers of their cultural association with losing the war in "Debriding Vietnam: The Resurrection of the White American Male," *Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): 525-543. Tom Englehardt's *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 282-285 also makes the point that like the Rambo films, Hasbro's resuscitation of

was a period in the immediate wake of the war when ideas about it were in flux, and notions of responsibility and blame were first being articulated, in myriad ways. While few intellectual voices succeeded in making sense of America's stunning loss in Vietnam, stories of combat and the physical experience of war abounded.

The combat narrative is as old as war itself, but a number of resonant, hyper-masculine cultural works on Vietnam meant that the genre took on a special character in the years after the Vietnam War, one that emphasized the experience of soldiers.⁶ In the often-cited *Esquire* article titled "Why Men Love War," writer and Vietnam veteran William S. Broyles offered a definitive exploration of the intimate social and psychological experience of the war, writing of the "awesome beauty, the haunting romance, the timeless nightmare" of the combat experience for veterans.⁷ Broyles wrote of the soldiers' irrepressible and inexplicable love for the war's violence, stating "I believe that most men who have been to war would have to admit, if they are honest, that somewhere inside themselves they loved it too, loved it as much as anything that has happened to them before or since." Broyles suggested that the love of war stems from "its being an experience of great intensity," and that "like a stern father, it provides with its order and discipline both security and an irresistible urge to rebel against it, a constant yearning to fly over the cuckoo's nest." Citing comradeship as the enduring emotion of war, Broyles wrote that war was "the only utopian experience most of us ever have. Individual possessions and advantage

G.I. Joe toys provided an explanatory backstory for American children to help cast the American soldier as the "good guys" in the Vietnam War.

⁶ Signal literary works and memoirs of the period I am discussing in this chapter include Ronald Glasser, *365 Days* (New York: G. Braziller, 1971) Tim O'Brien, *If I Die in a Combat Zone...Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (New York: Broadway Books, 1973), Phillip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976), Ron Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977), and Herr's *Dispatches*.

⁷ William Broyles, Jr., "Why Men Love War," *Esquire*, November 1984, 55-65.

count for nothing; the group is everything.”

Making explicit the gendered elements of war as a combat fantasy and quintessentially male experience, Broyles examined the relationship between “sex and destruction, beauty and horror, love and death.” In Broyles’s mind, war was the only way that most men can “touch the mythic domains in our soul.” Further delving into the experience of war as a profound experience of power, Broyles wrote, “It is, for men, at some terrible level the closest thing to what childbirth is for women: the initiation into the power of life and death.” Broyles’s assessment of the psychological impact of killing for the soldier was made clear in his essay, the aspects of life-giving are less so, but this statement is indicative of the ways his essay focused on the war as an amplifier of male experience. In addition, the experience could only be shared by those who experienced it as participants or direct observers, as Broyles wrote that the purpose of war stories is “not to enlighten but to exclude; its message is not its content but putting the listener in his place. I suffered, I was there. You were not.” Ultimately, Broyles argued, war was like “lifting off the corner of the universe and looking at what’s underneath.” Broyles’s hyperbolic essay is revealing in helping to explain the complicated, hyper-masculine, and gender-exclusive tendencies of conveying the combat experience, and his insights capture the tenor of many narratives published in the decades following the Vietnam War.

This chapter evaluates writing about the war that considers the conflict in a different light, through the eyes of three female authors who went to Vietnam as journalists, intellectuals and historians and wrote about the war in reflective books written late in the conflict or just after it ended. Mary McCarthy’s three books on Vietnam – *Vietnam*, *Hanoi*, and *Medina*; Frances Fitzgerald’s *Fire in the Lake*; and Gloria Emerson’s *Winners and Losers*, while claiming to be free of explicit gender analysis, offer a chance to observe the different ways women experienced

the war both as witnesses and as social critics, a space that was occupied by very few women in the Vietnam era.⁸ I argue that through these works' then-uncommon attention to the notion that the Vietnam War inflicted a broad social trauma felt by all citizens of the United States and Vietnam, not just veterans, that the Vietnam works of Mary McCarthy, Frances Fitzgerald, and Gloria Emerson prefigured the American cultural transformation of the Vietnam War to the Vietnam *experience*.⁹ These writers put forward ideas about collective guilt and national trauma that suggested that the American people, regardless of gender or combat experience, shared in the confusion and blame for the loss in Vietnam.¹⁰

Cultural critic Keith Beattie has written about the ways that American culture came to

⁸ More than one hundred women were accredited journalists in Vietnam during the war and many worked for prestigious publications, contributing valuable reportage on the conflict. Cited in Susan Moeller, *Shooting War: Photography and the American Experience of Combat* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 358. Despite the large number of female journalists who covered Vietnam, women published far fewer books about the war than their male colleagues. For works specifically on women journalists and Vietnam see Joyce Hoffman, *On Their Own: Women Journalists and the American Experience in Vietnam* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2008) and Tad Bartimus, *War Torn: Stories of War from Women Reporters Who Covered Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2002).

⁹ In a speech given on April 29, 1975, President Gerald Ford said that the evacuation of Saigon "closes a chapter in the American experience," foreshadowing his administration's framing of the war as an experience. Cited in Patrick Hagopian, *The Vietnam War in American Memory: Veterans, Memorials, and the Politics of Healing* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 32.

¹⁰ On this general topic the literature is vast. Much of the transformation focuses on traumatic injury and veterans' postwar experiences, particularly with PTSD. A superb source on the experience of the returning veteran is Robert Jay Lifton, *Home from the War: Learning from Vietnam Veterans* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973). On the psychological impact of combat see Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Atheneum, 1994). On Vietnam veterans and social reintegration see Ellen Frey-Wouters and Robert S. Laufer, *Legacy of a War: The American Soldier in Vietnam* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1986). On veterans and PTSD from a theological perspective, see William P. Mahedy's *Out of the Night: The Spiritual Journey of Vietnam Vets* (New York: Ballantine, 1986). For a study of trauma in Vietnam War literature: Kali Tal, *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

associate the Vietnam War with the metaphor of a wound, arguing that the “divisive impact of the war in Vietnam upon American culture has commonly been defined as a ‘wound,’ while reconciliatory efforts have been termed ‘healing.’”¹¹ Beattie maintained that because of the flood of grisly battle images Americans consumed as well as the prominence of injured veterans returning home, that injury and wounding became the dominant framework for remembering the conflict and making sense of it.¹²

The wound metaphor in literature and scholarship and also in political speech after the war often focused exclusively on the bodies of soldiers, but this chapter contends that the texts of McCarthy, Fitzgerald, and Emerson sought to redefine this notion of trauma by identifying themes of collective blame that would eventually become commonplace in narratives of the war. At the time these women were writing, these ideas about blame and guilt were only beginning to surface in American culture, and reactions to assertions that the American people deserved some of the blame were often met with resistance. Rather than focusing on the combat aspects of the war, these works offered a broader cultural definition of trauma, exploring what Gloria Emerson described as “the blame and the guilt, the guilt and the blame, and always the surprise that it

¹¹ Keith Beattie, *The Scar that Binds: American Culture and the Vietnam War* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 7.

¹² Similar works that interrogate the idea of Vietnam as a wound include Alexander Kendrick, *The Wound Within: America in the Vietnam Years 1945-1974* (New York: Little, Brown, 1974), Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), Tom Wells, *The War Within: America's Battle Over Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), Fred Turner, *Echoes of Combat: The Vietnam War in American Memory* (New York: Anchor Books, 1996). For criticism of existing scholarship on the topic see Michael Rogin, “Healing the Vietnam Wound,” *American Quarterly*, 53, no 1 (September 1999): 702-708. Importantly, former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara wrote that the motivation to write his 1995 memoir was because the Vietnam wounds “remain unhealed.” See Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1995), xv.

turned out as miserably as this.”¹³ The blame and guilt, in Emerson’s formulation, “covers us all.”¹⁴ This notion of collective guilt is pervasive in the works of all three writers: Emerson’s work is defined by its attention to the psychological ramifications of the war and her own tortured experience in Vietnam, Frances Fitzgerald refers to the war’s end as a period when the United States had to deal with “guilt and illusions destroyed,” and Mary McCarthy argued more broadly that the American way of life was to blame for the loss of the war.

The first four chapters of the dissertation evaluated the ways women and ideas about gender helped to introduce the nation of Vietnam, the ways Vietnamese women fought the war on different sides, and how American women came to oppose it. The fifth chapter examines the ways women in the United States contributed to understanding and remembering the conflict in the final years of combat and in the war’s immediate aftermath. I have asserted that images of women were used to create alternatively romantic and threatening notions of the Vietnamese, and by the 1970s I argue that McCarthy, Fitzgerald, and Emerson worked to undo romantic notions of war in part by criticizing the conflict as a site of hyper-masculine militarist fantasy, sustained by a false faith in technological dominance and also open up a discussion about guilt and blame that went beyond the military. This chapter examines the work of these three journalists and intellectuals writing about the war between 1968 and 1978, a time when many Americans were experiencing a deep fatigue with the subject of Vietnam and just before a flowering of cultural texts that sought to work through the war’s trauma, after ideas about post traumatic stress were becoming naturalized in American culture. In part, this chapter shows how American women figured in the Vietnam War not just as victims or symbols nor as maternal

¹³ Gloria Emerson, “Hey, Lady, What Are You Doing Here?” *McCall’s*, August 1971, 61.

¹⁴ Ibid.

antiwar activists, but how they actively shaped the contemporary understanding of the conflict, and produced works that offered early intimations of the broad and deep cultural reverberations of the war that would reveal themselves more clearly in the subsequent decade. I suggest that through this small sample of writing on the Vietnam War that women challenged the notion that the war was best or exclusively conveyed through a military analysis, using their exclusion from combat as an opportunity to probe the nation's collective psychosocial wounds.

The works I analyze attempted to set the war in a historical and moral context, and in addition to their attention to the psychological fallout of the war, they can be used to shed light on the ways the Vietnam War exposed the ways that gender roles were shifting in America in terms of women's participation in shaping the war's discourse and their positions as prominent social commentators. Through observation and critique of American culture and by traveling to Vietnam to learn about the war from the Vietnamese perspective, these three women wrote valuable, if sometimes unpopular or obscure works on the war that betray a deeper sense of the gender politics of the era. The experience of male writers, by virtue of their gender, can be more easily and seamlessly integrated into master narratives of the war in ways that female perspectives cannot and have not been.

By looking at the ways that women writers who visited Vietnam and observed the military effort there analyzed the conflict in the waning years of the conflict, this chapter argues that while these women's critical voices do not offer a fundamentally new interpretation or a vastly different perspective on the war, their works and the contemporary reviews of their works reveal that despite the persistence of rigid gender binaries that figure men as masculine warriors and women as feminine pacifists, that gender roles were much more complicated and contextual. Writing from a position they conceive as gender-neutral, these women are not affirming the

traditional, pacific gender roles of women suggested by members of Women Strike for Peace, but rational political critiques, informed by first-hand experience in the war and as thinkers who sought to expose the larger failings of the United States in Vietnam, criticizing the masculine political and military culture that undergirded the intervention.

This chapter will offer brief evaluations of the women's works and analyze two common aspects of the women's work: exposing and calling into question the American reliance on technology to win the war by military dominance and criticism of the planners and "experts" who formulated the American mission in Vietnam in a hyper-masculine, artificial, newly created language. Finally, I will briefly evaluate contemporary reviews of the women's works as a way of understanding the ways that writing about Vietnam was a very gendered process, one that reflected changing notions of women as professional writers and persistent stereotypes about women's limited abilities to perceive war.

The Vietnam works of McCarthy, Fitzgerald and Emerson, while not reducible to a single political position or narrative approach, are unified by their engagement of the idea that the Vietnam War inflicted a social trauma that was felt more widely and deeply than Americans were willing to acknowledge at the time. The plumbing of the psychological impact of the war was an approach that did not have much cultural currency until the 1980s when posttraumatic stress disorder became a standard diagnosis for Vietnam War veterans and the depth of combat trauma on soldiers became an acceptable topic of public discourse.¹⁵ After the cracks in the American military's dominance were exposed by the Tet Offensive in 1968 and a broad national

¹⁵ For interesting background on how a group of doctors and advocates worked to establish PTSD as a legitimate diagnostic category in the DSM-III in 1980, see Bessel A. Van der Kolk, Alexander C. McFarlane, and Lars Weisaeth, *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society* (New York: Guilford Press, 1996), 60-62.

bitterness emerged after President Nixon's expansion of the war into Cambodia in 1970, McCarthy, Fitzgerald, and Emerson each waded into an emotionally and politically charged way of seeing the war, one that would defy the frequent pleadings of President Gerald Ford in the mid-1970s for Americans to forget the war and move past it.¹⁶

Along with their intentions to examine the nation's fresh emotional wounds in the late 1960s and early 1970s, these women faced the additional pressures of being women writing about war, a subjectivity that further eroded perceptions of their ability to meaningfully contribute to debates on the war. Although the women wrote from a humanist and activist perspective, their attention to trauma led them to evaluate the war's impact on individuals, military and civilian alike, by first looking to their own experience. These three women attempted to excavate the remains of the war in the collective American psyche and discover something about the conflict's origins by looking inward, an approach that when adopted by women writers was easy to dismiss as overly personal, irrelevant, and self-indulgent, words that were distinctly coded as feminine. Despite the fact that the women were not writing from an explicitly feminist or gender-conscious perspective, this chapter will show that many reviewers and critics interpreted their work as feminized, and thus a frivolous and unnecessary way of examining war, an important element in understanding the gendered intellectual terrain that women writers of the period traversed.

French historian Joan Scott has pointed out through her seminal work on gender theory that when writing a history of women and gender that it is not enough to establish simply that women were present at historical events and that they participated, but scholars must evaluate the

¹⁶ Peter Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened: America in the 1970s* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 163.

ways that women and the nature of their participation illuminated ways of thinking about gender. Historian of women and gender Jeanne Boydston refined Joan Scott's case for the relevance of gender as an analytical category, arguing that gender should be regarded not as a fixed and stable category, but as a question.¹⁷ Boydston contended that historians have been too quick to assume what constitutes the binaries of feminine/masculine without accepting the notion that these terms are constituted in particular times and places, by changes in the social order, by war, by political upheavals, and by discourse. Because of the convergence of combat in Vietnam, the antiwar movement, and the feminist movement in the late 1960s, it is difficult to assert that "masculine" and "feminine" mean the same things they did after World War II. Susan Jeffords has argued that in the wake of the Vietnam War that gender binaries were more fixed and polarized than ever, that the perception of returning Vietnam veterans as victims of the war was inherently bound to the idea that the gains of the feminist movement were achieved at the expense of men, particularly beleaguered Vietnam veterans.¹⁸

Because of the changes in women's social position combined with the war's fracturing of notions of masculinity, the period at the end of the Vietnam War is a moment when ideas about what constitutes femininity and masculinity were being renegotiated. Despite shifting conceptions of gender in the 1970s, when considering women's writing on Vietnam, the binaries that gender scholars resist often played a role in determining the author's credibility on the topic of war. As Jeanne Boydston argued, applying static and timeless notions of masculinity and femininity reveals nothing about these women or the period of the late 1960s and early 1970s, as

¹⁷ Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (December 1986): 1053-1075, Jeanne Boydston, "Gender as a Question of Historical Analysis," *Gender & History* 20, no. 3 (November 2008): 558-583.

¹⁸ Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America*, 119.

Americans were grappling with how to explain a war that was going badly, and eventually was lost. An examination of women's writing on the war offers one small but revealing way that the late years of the Vietnam War troubled simplistic gender binaries and called into question what constituted masculinity and femininity in the context of narrating and attempting to make sense of war.

It seems logical to assume that these three women - prominent, outspoken, and iconoclastic - were exemplars of second wave feminism in America, but their relationship to feminism was complicated and is worth evaluating briefly at the outset.¹⁹ It is clear that McCarthy, Fitzgerald, and Emerson all dissociated themselves from the feminist movement, not because the three women opposed fundamental notions of gender equality that the women's movement espoused but, as this chapter will show, because the women feared that the association would damage their professional and intellectual credibility. There are inherent challenges in writing a gender analysis of women who explicitly avoided the topic of gender politics and the women's liberation movement, but the women's fears that "feminist" would become their primary political designation were not unfounded. This attitude was common among female war correspondents of previous generations, as Nancy Caldwell Sorel wrote that none of the many women journalists of World War II she interviewed "claimed affiliation or even affinity" with feminism, as they saw the movement as valuable for women of the next generation, rather than themselves.²⁰

¹⁹ For a broad view of second wave feminism in America, see Estelle Freedman, *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002), Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Knopf, 1979), Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking, 2000).

²⁰ Nancy Caldwell Sorel, *The Women Who Wrote the War* (New York: Arcade, 1999), 390.

Rather than working to advance the principles of organized “feminism,” McCarthy, Fitzgerald and Emerson were more concerned with preserving their personal and professional autonomy and focusing attention on the war itself.

Although these three authors spoke infrequently about their relationship to feminism, both as a movement and as political principle, it does not follow that their works did not influence the course of the movement. Emerson, Fitzgerald and McCarthy expressly distanced themselves from if not criticized outright the mission of the feminist movement which Emerson saw as frivolous, disconnected from important realities, a nuisance, even an insult to the men fighting the war. Gloria Emerson clearly stated her desire to be seen as a reporter and not a woman reporter, saying that she was “weary of feminists who think that women have special qualities in their war reporting.”²¹ In the early pages of *Winners and Losers* Emerson identified the moment that her interest in the women’s movement ended, when she encountered feminist writer Germaine Greer in Vietnam in 1971. Greer, witnessing a group of Vietnamese women filling sandbags at an American Army base near Saigon, did not comment on the nature of the women’s labor nor the sprawling American military complex, but registered her resentment of the sign “Men at Work.”²² Perhaps as a reaction to her frustration over what she saw as Greer’s misguided priorities, Emerson evoked her antipathy towards feminists as she wrote of her experience inside a bunker at Khe Sanh, with nine or ten soldiers squeezed in, preparing for a North Vietnamese ground attack. When an officer offered Emerson a gun to protect herself, she wrote “in that lonely moment I became more equal with men than I have ever cared to be. I

²¹ Virginia Elwood-Akers, *Women War Correspondents in the Vietnam War, 1961-1975* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1988), 6.

²² Gloria Emerson, *Winners and Losers: Battles, Retreats, Gains, Losses, and Ruins from a Long War* (New York: Random House, 1976), 7, italics mine.

would have gladly shared the horror of it with the fiercely fashionable advocates of women's lib."²³

Frances Fitzgerald similarly alienated herself from an organized feminist movement, telling *Vogue* in 1973 that she was simply not a movement person, that "the only thing I've ever joined is the public library."²⁴ In several interviews with popular magazines Fitzgerald acknowledged her fear that her work would not be taken seriously because of her gender. An editor at the *New York Review of Books* confirmed that Fitzgerald was careful not to appear frivolous, and her academic approach to *Fire in the Lake* reflected her desire to be seen as a serious writer and a thinker. Fitzgerald said that she found the positive reviews of her work gratifying, but feared that people might say, "'Yes, we're against the war and here's this sweet girl graduate writing a book; how nice,' but that they won't really read it."²⁵ Although Frances Fitzgerald felt that being female was an obstacle to be overcome, her work reveals little to no interest in how ideas about gender influenced her own view of the Vietnam War or her perceptions of women's ability to write effectively about military conflicts.

For Mary McCarthy the issue of feminism may have been a generational one. Fifty-five years old when she first traveled to Vietnam, many younger women would not have expected McCarthy to be in the vanguard of the feminist movement. Though her 1963 novel *The Group* was interpreted by some as a feminist text, since it explored the world of a group of Vassar graduates as they navigated new relationships and the professional world, McCarthy never aligned herself with feminist thought, nor even suggested a consciousness of the movement's

²³ Gloria Emerson, "Hey, Lady, What Are You Doing Here?," *McCall's*, August 1971, 61.

²⁴ "Fire in the Mind: Frances Fitzgerald," *Vogue*, 1 January 1973, 108-

²⁵ Jane Howard, "Frankie's Fire," *Life*, 27 October 1972, 51.

rationale. In a conversation with one of her biographers, Carol Brightman, McCarthy said she had “no interest in feminism and hates self-pity.”²⁶ When Brightman pressed McCarthy to explain why her books linger on interpersonal conflict and frustrations between the sexes, McCarthy claimed that she did not understand that there was a natural connection between those topics and women’s liberation, and was completely unable to see her work as relevant to feminism. It is possible, of course, that McCarthy was being purposely obtuse in claiming ignorance of the movement, or simply uninterested in examining her own assumptions about gender. McCarthy also told Brightman that she did not understand how issues like abortion were related to feminism, seeing the notion of personal freedom as an abstract idea not defined or bounded by gender.

It is important to establish that these three writers were not feminist activists in part to demonstrate that their works were not explicitly gender conscious and not centrally concerned with their own subjectivity vis-à-vis war. Despite the fact that the women did not identify themselves as feminists and despite their general avoidance of gender questions, the works of McCarthy, Fitzgerald, and Emerson can still be profitably read to reveal how gender ideology was changing. It is important to distinguish these writers from the peace activists of the previous chapter, women who often used their femininity to bolster their credibility on issues related to the Vietnam War. Political scientist Joshua Goldstein has written about the dualism established by women peace activists and the stereotypes of masculinity inherent in soldiering.²⁷ Goldstein has argued that making peace feminine only bolsters the traditional gender binary and more

²⁶ Alan Ackerman, *Just Words: Lillian Hellman, Mary McCarthy, and the Failure of Public Conversation in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 156.

²⁷ Joshua S. Goldstein, *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 307.

sharply defines gender divisions in the context of war and combat. Much of the peace activism of the Vietnam War era, particularly of the kind deployed by WSP, reified these stereotypical binaries, feminizing peace and further masculinizing war. While the women of this chapter shared much in common with women antiwar activists, it is important to understand that McCarthy, Fitzgerald and Emerson complicated the formula as they wrote from a position that was not rooted in a tradition of pacifism or maternalism but one critical of what they saw as the American government's incompetence, immorality, and neo-colonialism, flaws they attributed in varying degrees to hyper-masculine male leadership.

Social critic Cynthia Enloe has written extensively on the relationship between women and the military, which is important to consider before evaluating the women's works. Enloe has argued that the American military bureaucracy depends on women to fulfill the role of camp follower, a role that kept women "ideologically marginal to the essential function of militaries - combat."²⁸ Enloe argued that despite being kept on the periphery of war, that the military system requires women to be kept in the "rear," or on the home front, because "Women *as women* must be denied access to 'the front,' to 'combat' so that men can claim a uniqueness and superiority that will justify their dominant position in the social order." Because of the fact that women often appeared at the front lines of wars, Enloe wrote that "the military has to constantly redefine 'the front' and 'combat' as wherever 'women' are not. Women may serve the military, but they can never be permitted to *be* the military. They must remain 'camp followers.'"²⁹

Enloe's conception of camp followers, evoking a tradition of American women's roles in

²⁸ Cynthia Enloe, *Does Khaki Become You? The Militarisation of Women's Lives* (Boston: South End Press, 1983), 2.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

wartime that dates back to the American Revolution, does not make allowances for women who are opponents of war, as her focus was on explaining the ways that the military needs women not just to sustain wars but also to maintain a general patriarchal social structure upon which war depends. Through the works of McCarthy, Fitzgerald, and Emerson, we see the ways that women began to occupy a new role not of camp follower but of contemporary critic, offering criticism that was not rooted in moral opposition but intellectual assessment aimed at the government and military. By engaging with the structural arguments that compelled American intervention in Vietnam, these women problematized traditional notions of women's roles in wartime and revealed important insights about the ways the public viewed them. As Susan Jeffords has argued, a male telling of war has been naturalized by cultural assumptions about gender and by the dearth of women's perspectives on war to reach publication. While women were filing stories in newspapers across the world, few women besides these three were writing book-length analyses of the war. Few alternatives existed to the "war as brotherhood" genre that so permeated the canonical literature on Vietnam.

I will now move to a consideration of the specific ways that McCarthy, Fitzgerald, and Emerson challenged these conventions and offered insight into an experience from which they were seen as naturally excluded. While there were other women reporting in Vietnam and writing quality books on the conflict, I focus on these three women because of commonalities in their lines of argument, the fact that they were writing in approximately the same period, and the prominence of the women in the literary and intellectual worlds.³⁰ These women forwarded ideas

³⁰ Some other valuable works by women on Vietnam include Ellen J. Hammer, *The Struggle for Indochina, 1940-1955* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1966) and *A Death in November: American in Vietnam, 1963* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1987) and Marguerite Higgins, *Our Vietnam Nightmare* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965). Myra MacPherson's *Long Time Passing: Vietnam and the Haunted Generation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) is

about Vietnam that while fairly far to the political left, were broadly accepted by the American public by the early 1970s. All of the writers favored disengagement from the war to varying degrees and asserted different opinions on the extent of America's obligation to the Vietnamese after the war. Despite a similar antiwar agenda, the three women approached the task of writing about the war in different ways: Fitzgerald took a more scholarly approach to Vietnamese history, Emerson preferred an older style of journalistic reportage, paying attention to the broad social impact of the war's violence, and McCarthy undertook a more detached, intellectual dissection of the war's rhetoric and latent capitalist motivations.

Mary McCarthy, born in 1912 in Seattle, was a successful novelist with a sterling reputation as one of America's great women of letters.³¹ McCarthy wrote several novels and gained notoriety for her biting wit and her satirical approach to political writing. She wrote three small books on Vietnam: *Vietnam* (1967), based on a visit to South Vietnam, *Hanoi* (1968), a report on her trip to North Vietnam by invitation of the DRV, and her impressionistic observations on the court martial of a captain involved in the atrocity at My Lai, *Medina* (1969).³² All three of McCarthy's Vietnam works offer sharp criticism of the war's handling by the American government and military. *Vietnam* criticizes American intentions in terms of underlying

an important book that takes up many of the themes I discuss in this chapter, but because it was published in the mid-1980s it was part of a second surge of Vietnam studies and memoirs that was fundamentally different than the works published in the immediate postwar years.

³¹ Biographies of Mary McCarthy include Frances Kiernan, *Seeing Mary Plain: A Life of Mary McCarthy* (New York: Norton, 2000), Carol Gelderman, *Conversations with Mary McCarthy* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1991), Carol Brightman, ed., *Between Friends: The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy 1949-1975* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995), Carol Brightman, *Writing Dangerously: Mary McCarthy and Her World* (New York: C. Potter, 1992).

³² Mary McCarthy, *Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1967), Mary McCarthy, *Hanoi* (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1968), Mary McCarthy, *Medina* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972).

economic ambitions, *Hanoi* evaluates the consequences of American bombings in North Vietnam, finding the North Vietnamese response to be indicative of a resourceful and resilient spirit, and *Medina* acts as a sort of postscript to a war that Americans longed to forget by focusing on the futility of war crimes trials. To the surprise of McCarthy and her publishers, all of her works on Vietnam were largely ignored, selling poorly and eliciting few major reviews.

On his television show *Firing Line*, Mary McCarthy told archconservative William F. Buckley, Jr. that after the publication of *Vietnam* in 1967 she was “thunderstruck” that a radical work on a controversial topic stirred so little public debate. Buckley replied wryly that perhaps people did not react to the book because they thought it was “preposterous.”³³ McCarthy continued to publicly lament the poor sales of her books on Vietnam, a fact that Gloria Emerson interpreted as the desperation of a bitter and aging woman who regretted lost attention. In a *Washington Post* review of the compilation of the three Vietnam books, called *The Seventeenth Degree*, Emerson called the book a “punishing chunk of lard to swallow,” and suggested that the book had nothing to add to the war’s fine journalistic coverage.³⁴ Despite its small readership and hostile reviews, McCarthy’s works on Vietnam are included here because they offered an incisive, penetrating, yet largely forgotten criticism of the American project in Vietnam that offered glimpses of the gendered dynamics of the war despite claiming to ignore them entirely.

In contrast to Mary McCarthy’s obscure works, Frances Fitzgerald’s *Fire in the Lake*, which won a bevy of prominent awards in 1973 including the National Book Award, a Pulitzer Prize, and the Bancroft Award for History, represents a successful and enduring account of the war that found an explanation for the roots of the conflict and the reasons for American failures

³³ Gelderman, *Mary McCarthy*, 283.

³⁴ Gloria Emerson, “Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary,” *Washington Post*, 2 June 1974, BW5.

in Vietnamese culture and history.³⁵ Fitzgerald, who was only twenty-five when she went to Vietnam as a freelance reporter in 1966, wrote articles for *Vogue* and *Esquire*, frequently focusing on neglected aspects of Vietnamese life such as religion, family structure, and village life.³⁶ *Life* magazine referred to Fitzgerald as the “proverbial girl who has everything,” calling her a “postdebutante with a private income and awesome family connections.”³⁷ As the daughter of a high-ranking CIA officer, Desmond Fitzgerald, and prominent socialite and special representative for the United Nations, Marietta Peabody Tree, Frances Fitzgerald came from a powerful and politically connected family, but her work on Vietnam blends both a detached academic interest in the war with her an eyewitness journalistic perspective of someone who spent considerable time in the war zone.³⁸

In *Fire in the Lake*, Fitzgerald argued that since the Vietnamese have always looked to history to understand their present, that an understanding of Vietnam’s past should have been a starting point for the American government. Fitzgerald traces the efforts of the Vietnamese and the Americans to understand each other, a process that required each to “recreate the whole

³⁵ Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972).

³⁶ For biographical background on Fitzgerald see Robert Friedman, “Frances Fitzgerald is Fascinated with Failure,” *Esquire*, July 1980, 48-54, “Frances FitzGerald,” *Publisher’s Weekly*, 16 October 1972, 16-17. Myra MacPherson, “Woman Behind ‘Fire in the Lake,’” *Los Angeles Times* 24 Sep 1972, D4.

³⁷ Jane Howard, “Frankie’s Fire,” *Life*, 27 October 1972, 51

³⁸ In the mid-1950s, Desmond Fitzgerald was central to the CIA’s activities in Asia; in 1954 he was named head of Far East Division stationed in China and participated in field operations in the Philippines and Indonesia. Marietta Tree was researcher at *Life*, modeled for *Vogue* and *Harpers Bazaar*; she divorced Desmond Fitzgerald in 1947. See Evan Thomas, *The Very Best Men: Four Who Dared, The Early Years of the CIA* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 49.

world of the other, the whole intellectual landscape.”³⁹ *Fire in the Lake* took up the subjects of politics in the RVN, the nature of the NLF movement and its political structure, the history of the Buddhist crises in 1963 and 1966, and problems of corruption in elections and the expanding war after 1968 and through Nixon’s expansion into Cambodia. Of the three works, Fitzgerald’s approached the topic from the most overtly academic orientation, relying particularly on the scholarship of historian of Vietnam Paul Mus to explore a national culture in which she had no linguistic background or academic training.⁴⁰ Fitzgerald’s combination of academic and popular writing earned praise from the general public, and the expected scorn from scholars who took issue with her generalizing about the Vietnamese character, assorted factual errors, and her ill-conceived attempt to generate what historian David Marr called a “grand Vietnamese *Gestalt*.”⁴¹ Fitzgerald clearly expected a vigorous response from intellectuals, telling *Life* magazine that she wanted the book to be viewed as both scholarly and popular, “but I didn’t want to go too far toward either of those poles.”⁴² Despite criticisms, her work, particularly the analysis of the Diem regime has remained an important contribution to scholarship on the war.

Like *Fire in the Lake*, Gloria Emerson’s *Winners and Losers* earned similar praise as it also won the National Book Award for Contemporary Thought in 1978.⁴³ While both books earned

³⁹ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁰ Paul Mus’s most important work on Vietnam is *Viet-Nam, Sociologie d'une Guerre* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1952), translated as John T. McAlister and Paul Mus, *The Vietnamese and their Revolution* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).

⁴¹ David Marr, Review of *Fire in the Lake*, *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 32, no. 3 (May 1973): 564-565.

⁴² Howard, “Frankie’s Fire.”

⁴³ Gloria Emerson, *Winners and Losers: Battles, Retreats, Gains, Losses, and Ruins from a Long War* (New York: Random House, 1976).

critical acclaim upon their publication, Gloria Emerson's book has fallen into relative obscurity, particularly when compared to *Dispatches*, which has emerged as a Vietnam War classic. Like Frances Fitzgerald, Gloria Emerson was also born in 1929 into a wealthy New York City family. Emerson was a *New York Times* journalist who covered Vietnam between 1970-1972.⁴⁴ Before going to Vietnam, Emerson was covering haute couture in Paris, but her subsequent work on the war was far from "woman's page" news. Emerson's reportage from Vietnam revealed her concern with the war's survivors, with those who were abused and forgotten, particularly the war's impact on Vietnamese women. Emerson's work was well regarded, and she won a George Polk Memorial Award for journalism in 1970. Emerson won in the foreign reporting category, for her articles that illuminated the "effects of the war on the South Vietnamese as individuals."⁴⁵

Winners and Losers is a long and challenging work that cuts abruptly from scene to scene, interjected by Emerson's own recollections and opinions. Much of the content of *Winners and Losers* draws heavily from Emerson's reportage for the *New York Times*, but the book version often lacks the context of the original articles, leaving the reader to identify key figures and orient themselves in terms of time and place. The chaotic structure of the work was often the foundation of its criticism, but Emerson stated that her intention was to juxtapose various civilian and military experiences of the war, both Vietnamese and American, a diffuse and difficult task that she admits was not fully realized in her book. Emerson told *Publisher's Weekly* that her goal was to "weave together a composite portrait of what the war had done to people on both sides of it, and the time as well as in retrospect," and to remind Americans, relentlessly, of the

⁴⁴ For biographical background see "Gloria Emerson," *Publishers Weekly*, issue 2, 1977, 8-9, Gloria Emerson, "Each Day is a Separate Ordeal," *Saturday Review*, 18 November 1972, 52-57.

⁴⁵ "A Times Reporter in Vietnam Wins a Polk Award," *New York Times*, 17 February 1971, 35.

pain the war caused and the conflict's brutal consequences.⁴⁶ Emerson spoke frequently of the agony of writing the book and the ways she became obsessed with sharing the stories of people she had met during the war.

Though McCarthy, Fitzgerald, and Emerson had distinctive writing styles and different goals for their works, there are two important commonalities within their works that merit exploration. All three women wrote extensively of the failure of technology in America's waging of war in Vietnam and the failure of sensible planning by politicians and military leaders. I will attempt to untangle these two threads within the works, which are deeply interwoven, by looking at specific ways that these writers made efforts to untether their war narratives from the spectacle of high technology and offer sharp, fundamental critiques of the American government officials who planned the war and the high-level military officers who carried out those plans.

The "Glamour Bit"

One of the most important shared aspects of the works of McCarthy, Fitzgerald, and Emerson that aligns with many later works on the legacy of Vietnam was their focus on the inability of technology to deliver an American victory and their probing of the moral consequences of new and massively destructive weapons.⁴⁷ The point that dominant American technology should have allowed the United States to dominate the Vietnamese into surrender is simplistic, but has been a

⁴⁶ "Gloria Emerson," *Publishers Weekly*, issue 2, 1977, 8-9.

⁴⁷ See for example Michael Bibby, *The Vietnam War and Postmodernity* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), Thomas G. Mahnken, *Technology and the American Way of War Since 1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 89-121.

fundamental point of a number of works on the war.⁴⁸ The fact that despite technological advantages the American military did not prevail is a paradox that has been taken up by scores of historians, writers, filmmakers, and cultural critics.

Susan Jeffords argues in her work on gender and the Vietnam War, *The Remasculinization of America*, that a common feature in Vietnam narratives is the intense fascination with technology, and the emphasis on the performance of technology rather than the ends or the goals of its deployment. Jeffords writes that in much Vietnam literature technology is detached from its violent function, that “machine guns, shells, and mini-guns are not described as killing ...they are described only as their own display, their own theater.”⁴⁹ This “aesthetic of technology,” in becoming pure spectacle, encompasses aspects of the erotic for writers, and focuses on its beauty, divorced from morality and consequences. Jeffords’s contention finds its evidence in myriad films and literary works of the 1980s, but the notion that technology was a primary focus of earlier works on Vietnam was an argument that McCarthy, Fitzgerald, and Emerson each made.

In *The Perfect War*, historian James Gibson wrote that America’s defeat in Vietnam revealed

⁴⁸ This idea has been particularly common in recent conservative reassessments of the war that place the blame for loss on restraints placed on the military and poor decision making in Washington, arguing that superior technology was not allowed to win the war. See Mark Moyer, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), and Michael Lind, *The Necessary War: A Reinterpretation of America’s Most Disastrous Military Conflict* (New York: Free Press, 1999). General William C. Westmoreland has made similar arguments, writing that military leaders were not given enough of a voice in policymaking, see “Vietnam in Perspective,” *Military Review*, vol. 50 (January 1979): 34-43.

⁴⁹ Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 9. Jeffords draws heavily from the work of Jean-Francois Lyotard, who has argued that since World War II that technology has shifted emphasis to the means rather than the ends. See *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

the limits of “technowar,” or a paradigm that uses techniques of scientific management, modern systems of production and high technology weapons to win a war by inflicting mass casualties. Gibson’s argument is personified in the figure of Henry Kissinger, who noted America’s increasing reliance on technology to win wars and wrote that since the end of World War II, the foundation of American foreign policy was “the assumption that technology plus managerial skills gave us the ability to reshape the international system and to bring domestic transformations in ‘emerging countries.’”⁵⁰ Kissinger argued that with technological advantage the potential for American’s global dominance was limitless. Gibson contended that the United States’ defeat in Vietnam revealed the limits of the “technowar” paradigm because of its failure to apprehend the nature of the revolutionary nationalism of the Vietnamese and its fetishism of weapons that often had little impact.

Cultural works have been particularly interested in this point on failed technology. Media scholar Marita Sturken has argued that Ron Kovic’s *Born on the Fourth of July* explores the failure of technology in Vietnam, writing that Kovic’s focus on his own wounded body remind readers of the United States’ defeat in Vietnam and the failures of the medical interventions that could not fix his injuries. Sturken argued that Kovic’s body and its loss of innocence and masculinity represented “high technology replaced by its refuse.”⁵¹ Sturken argued the ultimate contrast to Kovic’s image of injury can be found in major Hollywood films including *Apocalypse Now*, *Casualties of War*, *Full Metal Jacket*, the *Rambo* films, and *Platoon*, films which “have reiterated in their production values the technological spectacle of combat... glorifying combat

⁵⁰ Cited in James Gibson, *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986), 15.

⁵¹ Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 110.

and its weaponry.” Following Susan Jeffords, Sturken contended that the spectacle of high-tech violent films symbolized the recuperation of manhood whereby “weaponry serves as a stand-in for the American male.”⁵²

While this notion of the failure of technology has become familiar in scholarship and literature on Vietnam, in the waning years of the war and the immediate period after, it was only in the 1980s that this idea became fully accepted and naturalized in the cultural memory of the war. The works of McCarthy, Fitzgerald, and Emerson showed some early indications of this line of reasoning, as all three focused a great deal of attention on the failure of weapons and called attention to the fallacy inherent in the idea that the war could be won by technology alone. A clear, if unexpected foil to this aversion to the war’s technology can be found in the Vietnam reportage of John Steinbeck, who wrote a series of articles from the country for *Newsday* in 1966 and 1967.⁵³ Steinbeck wrote often of the awe American weaponry inspired in him, and he was particularly impressed by the agility and power of the helicopter. Riding along with American Marines in Pleiku in 1967, Steinbeck wrote evocatively of the skill with which pilots navigated through steep mountains and waterfalls, through thick foliage and blasts of purple smoke. Landing in a small clearing encircled by bamboo, Steinbeck watched the soldiers alight the helicopter and disappear into the brush:

“Can you understand the quick glow of pride one feels in just belonging to the same species as these men? I suppose it is the opposite of the shiver of shame I sometimes feel at home when I see the dirty clothes, dirty minds, sour smelling wastelings and their ill-favored and barren pad mates. Their shuffling, drag-ass protests that they are conscience-bound not to kill people are a little silly. They’re not in danger of that. Hell, they couldn’t hit anybody. I think their main concern is that a one-armed half

⁵² Ibid., 107.

⁵³ Robert B. Harmon and John Steinbeck, *John Steinbeck and Newsday, with a Focus on "Letters to Alicia": An Annotated and Documented Reference Guide* (San Jose, CA: R.B. Harmon, 1999).

blind 12-year-old V.C. could knock them off with a bunch of ripe bananas.”⁵⁴

This quotation offers a good example of what English scholar and editor of a volume of Steinbeck’s reportage Thomas Barden referred to as writing in the “jaunty adventure style” that initially characterized Steinbeck’s articles, which marked such a shift from the ethos of his earlier work. While it is true that over time his exuberance over American weapons and antipathy toward antiwar protesters was tempered by a skepticism over the war’s impact on the region and a growing doubt about the likelihood of success in Vietnam after he returned home, Steinbeck’s early writing from Vietnam is important in affirming the potency of the formulation of war as a space in which, as Broyles wrote, “offers a sanction to play boys’ games.”⁵⁵ The degree to which Steinbeck not only lionized the military but also denigrated the antiwar movement was a surprise, as many expected Steinbeck’s in-country reportage for *Newsday* to evince a moral perspective, to be as Barden says a “moral witness,” and to take an introspective look at the conflict. Instead he seemed to succumb to the war’s machismo, as Mary McCarthy referred to him as an “infatuated civilian,” entranced by its weapons and technology and the ability of the American military to pulverize the Vietnamese.⁵⁶

Journalist Ward Just wrote in the *New York Times* of Steinbeck’s hawkish, enthusiastic coverage of the war, noting that one unnamed critic referred to Steinbeck as a “literary Curtis LeMay,” a reference to the American Air Force General who advised maximum air power in the war, and argued that the United States should bomb the North Vietnamese “back into the Stone

⁵⁴ Thomas E. Barden, ed. *Steinbeck in Vietnam: Dispatches from the War* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 24.

⁵⁵ Broyles, “Why Men Love War.”

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Age.”⁵⁷ Steinbeck ironically came to typify the notion of a traditionally masculine journalistic response to war, attesting to the idea that seemingly reasonable and thoughtful men could be intoxicated by the weaponry of war and the specter of mechanical dominance of the American military over the Vietnamese. While this view was unexpected from Steinbeck, it confirms assumptions about the hypnotic power of weapons and the ability of technology to make irrelevant the moral underpinnings of the conflict or the human aspects and exemplified the seemingly natural conclusion that the pairing of men and war is a natural and inevitable one, a combination that seemed predetermined by gender.

In contrast to Steinbeck, the works of Emerson, McCarthy, and Fitzgerald are critical of American technology and the obsessive faith the military bureaucracy and highest levels of government officials invested in it. The women addressed doubts about their ability to understand the nature of combat simply by ignoring the narration of battles and deliberately avoiding the description of military operations. At the same time, the women’s works offered an incisive critique of the broader nature of the military in Vietnam, particularly criticizing the endemic corruption in both the RVN and United States militaries.⁵⁸ While none of the women’s works offer references to the direct experience of battle, they offer instead a broader, more measured evaluation of the political and human underpinnings of the military. Though it seems reasonable to argue that the women’s avoidance of military technology was a result of traditionally gendered responses to war, this logic affirms the binary notion of women as pacifist

⁵⁷ Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam* (New York: Viking, 1991), 50.

⁵⁸ The most authoritative sources on corruption within the southern government, in Saigon and throughout the countryside is David W.P. Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930-1975* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2003). Important journalistic sources on southern corruption in the 1960s are Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988) and David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire* (New York: Random House, 1965).

observers and men as aggressive participants that this chapter challenges. Rather than refocusing their analysis of the war on its human aspects because of their gender, I argue it was a more complicated, calculated decision that was designed more to preserve their intellectual credibility and to neutralize potential criticisms of their inabilities to understand and portray combat. Though it may seem that evaluating what is not in the women's works is akin to proving a negative, a closer evaluation of their treatment of the topic of weapons and the technologies of war reveals an important way that they pointed out the flaws in only seeing the conflict in terms of armed struggle.

One of the defining features of Mary McCarthy's work was her emphasis on the simple, obvious notion that she was an outsider when she visited the war, particularly when it came to interacting with military officers and enlisted men and discussing the weapons of war. McCarthy cultivated this distance in order to prove that her work told the stories the military not only would not tell, but also did not want to be told. The opening line of *Vietnam* confirmed her desire to be seen as opposing the American military's project in Vietnam. "I confess that when I went to Vietnam early last February I was looking for material damaging to the American interest and that I found it," McCarthy wrote, setting out from the beginning her project's intent to expose the military's misconduct.⁵⁹ McCarthy looked for this damaging material in Saigon, which she observed was a teeming den of iniquity, a city bulging with refugees created by the war and caught up in a bizarre economy of sex and service driven by the presence of the American military.

McCarthy also evaluated the nature of weapons being deployed in the conflict, prefiguring Gibson's "technowar" argument that the development of new technologies gave the United

⁵⁹ McCarthy, 3.

States a false sense of its ability to annihilate the Vietnamese enemy. McCarthy wrote in *Vietnam* that the decision not to use atomic weapons in the war did not moderate the conflict but instead led the military to overcompensate by developing conventional weapons to their maximum destructive capability. Referring to atomic bombs as “toys being kept in the closet,” McCarthy noted that American efforts to develop more adhesive napalm, flamethrowers to raise the temperature in subterranean tunnels to 1000 degrees Fahrenheit, more painful tear gas and more destructive defoliants were evidence of the military’s intention to eliminate resistance from not just the Vietnamese people but the environment in order to establish its dominance.⁶⁰

Arguing that the weapons were an effort to “take the risk out of war” for American soldiers, McCarthy wrote that the “human element” that was prone to lack of will or panic, was being checked by the “miracle” of American technology. McCarthy’s tone deeply mocked this faith in weapons and criticized the assumption that weapons would allow Americans to overpower the Vietnamese. McCarthy, like Fitzgerald and Emerson, wrote powerfully about the need to question the faith in technology that sustained the American presence in Vietnam, arguing “the same faith in technology commands the administration to go on with the war, in defiance of any evidence of failure.”⁶¹ McCarthy saw the drive to advance weapons technology not in explicitly gendered or moral terms, but as a product of amoral politicians and a compulsion of American capitalism, arguing that the tendency of American free-enterprise to appear to be an automatically functioning system requiring no consent from people and leading to a wholesale ignorance of the human damage that unfolded as a result. Just as Jeffords argued about later works on Vietnam, McCarthy’s book, published in 1967, suggested that President Johnson and

⁶⁰ Mary McCarthy, *Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1967), 97.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 100.

his advisors had already begun to separate the technology from the human consequences it wrought, an argument that would take on added urgency as the scope of the war expanded in the following years.

Though Mary McCarthy made only a few short trips to Vietnam, basing her works on brief interactions with military personnel and Vietnamese citizens, Francis Fitzgerald spent more than a year in the country. While Fitzgerald's primary interest seemed to be on the political machinations of the RVN, she spent considerably more time around the military than McCarthy did. Despite her greater familiarity, Fitzgerald also avoided an overt focus on battles or military engagements, a decision she discussed in an interview with *Life* magazine. Fitzgerald told the interviewer that she tried to avoid the "shooting war" more than other writers, a choice she attributed somewhat disingenuously to her own lack of bravery. In a stereotypically feminine gesture, Fitzgerald told the reporter, "I really don't like all that bang-bang. It might have been glamorous to go to the front, but if I'd done that I wouldn't have been able to study the politics of Saigon. The only reason I feel proud of myself is I didn't succumb to the glamour bit."⁶²

Fitzgerald's notion that the "glamour" of war as occurring exclusively on the battlefield is an idea that also appears in numerous works on Vietnam, including Herr's *Dispatches*. Herr wrote about his friend, journalist Tim Page, who suffered a brain injury after being hit in the forehead by shrapnel from a landmine, and was asked by a British publisher to write a book that would "take the glamour out of war."⁶³ Page, incredulous, said to Herr, "Take the glamour out of war! I mean, how the bloody hell can you do *that*?" Page compared the notion to "trying to take the glamour out of sex, trying to take the glamour out of the Rolling Stones." Herr noted that

⁶² Howard, *Frankie's Fire*.

⁶³ Herr, *Dispatches*, 248.

Page was dumbfounded by the “sheer insanity” of the idea, telling him that it just could not be done. “‘The very *idea!*’ he said. ‘Ohh, what a laugh! Take the bloody *glamour* out of bloody *war!*’” The inextricable connections between glamour and war that Broyles examined animate *Dispatches*. This notion of seeing combat as inherently glamorous is a common thread of war stories and war reportage, emphasizing the masculine bonding of the experience that unequivocally excludes women, not just from the fighting but also from the telling.

For Fitzgerald, avoiding the “glamour bit” was not just about a journalistic choice in what aspects of the conflict to cover, but her decision reflected a deeper commentary that the United States’ exclusive focus on armed struggle destined its mission to fail. An important and central argument of *Fire in the Lake* is that American overconfidence was responsible for the debacle in Vietnam, an overconfidence that Fitzgerald attributes in large part to the American faith in military technology. Because Fitzgerald’s works sought answers for the state of the conflict in an understanding of Vietnamese history, it is perhaps not surprising that she criticized the emphasis on military strength. At the most basic level, Fitzgerald questioned the fact that the American mission in Vietnam was defined by an “essentially negative, military goal” of holding the line at the seventeenth parallel, and gave little attention to building the political infrastructure necessary to sustain a democratic RVN.⁶⁴ Fitzgerald cited the fact that ninety percent of American aid to South Vietnam was spent on the creation of the RVN army and establishment of a military bureaucracy, a choice she saw as directly related to the American failure to apprehend the nature of the NLF’s political program.

Characteristic of Fitzgerald’s work and marking a sharp departure from the works of McCarthy and Emerson, Fitzgerald’s discussion of weapons technology focused not on

⁶⁴ Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake*, 121.

American excess but on the imbalance of firepower and the Vietnamese lack of technology. *Fire in the Lake* spent little time assessing the impact of American bombs and guns, and was more interested in evaluating the ways the Vietnamese made up for their deficiencies. For Fitzgerald, the answer was in ideology and morality, writing that for the NLF cadre, the “key to the vast, secret torrents of energy,” was simple hatred of foreign aggression and desire for independence. Fitzgerald wrote that this hatred conveyed a “power that to those who possessed it seemed limitless and indestructible,”⁶⁵ Fitzgerald noted that Ho Chi Minh said, “I have no army, I have no finances, I have no education system. I have only my *hatred*, and I will not disarm my hatred until I can trust you.” Fitzgerald cited an NLF member who said that the “decisive factor is the people. Weapons are dead things. By themselves they cannot function. It is the people who use the weapons and make them effective,” reflecting Fitzgerald’s view that technology was essentially ineffective in a war that Americans simply did not understand.

While Fitzgerald focused most on the experience of the Vietnamese, of the three writers I discuss, *New York Times* reporter Gloria Emerson had the most direct experience with the battlefields, spending more than two years in the country and much of that time in the provinces. While Emerson’s reportage and her book, *Winners and Losers*, also paid little attention to specific military actions in the war, with the notable exception of her experience at Khe Sanh, her works betrayed a deep understanding of the gendered dynamics of the combat experience and journalistic coverage of battles, acknowledging at once her exclusion from understanding the experience and seeing it as an opportunity to evaluate the ways men were often blinded by their own aggression and their identification as part of a larger group of aggressive men. Emerson was also acutely aware of the deeply gendered ways military personnel perceived her. In an article for

⁶⁵ Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake*, 213.

McCall's magazine, Emerson recalled when an exchange between herself and a young Army captain that seemed to express larger ideas about women's exclusion from the battlefield:

“‘You don’t know the weaponry; you don’t understand tactics; you aren’t able to see that men can like living in the bush - well, hell, all you can think about are casualties, but every war has them,’ he said. He was right. That is all I did and do think about. The machines that make it possible to burn, bomb, and gun down any man disgust me.”⁶⁶

Emerson’s profession of disgust may overstate the degree to which she opposed the military’s use of force in Vietnam, as *Winners and Losers* evinces a deep sympathy toward the experience of the soldier, particularly lower ranking soldiers, who she argued were as abused as anyone in the war. By emphasizing the captain’s criticisms of her ability to accurately portray combat, Emerson exposed the perceived weakness and dismissed it, suggesting that an understanding of weaponry only impeded a deeper understanding of the conflict.

In a revealing article published in *Harper's* in 1973, Emerson demonstrated that the hyper-masculine consequences of the war’s weapons influenced not just soldiers but also her colleagues in journalism. Emerson wrote that journalists seemed constantly caught up in proving their own maleness when on the battlefields of Vietnam, a pressure that she concedes she never faced. Emerson said, “Most male reporters see war differently than I do, for they were testing themselves over and over again among other men, going out on combat assaults, humping the boonies to see if they could take it. I could do that too, but it didn’t matter at all if an officer thought I was hard core or a noodle. It did not matter at all what they thought of me - ever...”⁶⁷

While the other two women spent considerably less time in the field than Emerson, it is likely

⁶⁶ Gloria Emerson, “Hey, Lady, What Are You Doing Here?,” *McCall's*, August 1971, 61.

⁶⁷ Gloria Emerson, “Arms and the Woman,” *Harper's*, 1 April 1973, 34-40.

they would have agreed with her assessment that their gender difference, while preventing access to certain aspects of the war experience, opened up other avenues of inquiry, allowing them to de-romanticize combat, to strip it of the masculine competition and glamour that Fitzgerald invoked, and analyze other meanings of the war.

One of Emerson's most important points in *Winners and Losers* involves the ways technology, particularly the air war, abstracted the very idea of death in the Vietnam War. Emerson wrote in 1972 that "Americans cannot perceive - even the most decent among us - the suffering caused by the United States air war in Indochina and how huge are the graveyards we have created there."⁶⁸ In addition to the suffering of the Vietnamese, a theme that animated much more of Emerson's reportage than it did *Winners and Losers*, Emerson wrote that a significant part of the war's "moral horror" was the ability of Americans to "conceal its human significance" and "insulate our consciences by the remoteness of the killing."⁶⁹ *Winners and Losers* and indeed much of Emerson's other work, was infused by outrage over the willful ignorance of the American people in grasping the suffering of everyone involved, including to some extent her own. All three women wrote passionately, but distinctively, about the inability of technology to end the war and equally passionately about the ways the weapons inflicted such destruction.

⁶⁸ Gloria Emerson, "Voices No One Wants to Hear," *New York Review of Books*, 10 August 1972, 19-21.

⁶⁹ For an in-depth view of the sociology of air war, including its "unreality" and the responses of bombing crews, see Michael Sherry's indispensable, *The Rise of American Air Power: The Creation of Armageddon* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

“Small men with a talent for deceit”

Like the criticism of the failures of American technology, the idea that the loss in Vietnam was a result of flawed decision-making at the highest levels of government is another simplistic, if often-cited truism in explaining the end of the war in Vietnam. This idea that successive American presidents misled the American people about the scope of the war, its goals, and its consequences is an important theme in the works of McCarthy, Fitzgerald, and Emerson, each of whom were sharply critical of the war’s “experts,” political leaders, and military officials. Though the three writers often singled out particular leaders for blame, there was a tendency on the part of all three to subsume under the term “experts” the various academic, bureaucratic, and political figures that sustained the war.⁷⁰ Although all three writers tended to generalize about failures of leadership, all of the works seemed to locate the primary failure in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, presidents whom they viewed as responsible for the course of the war and the bureaucratic unwillingness to change that course.⁷¹

If Henry Kissinger embodied the notion of technological dominance, perhaps the person most representative of the notion that bureaucratic efficiency and rationality could determine success in Vietnam was Secretary of Defense under Kennedy and Johnson, Robert McNamara.

⁷⁰ For detailed treatments of the war’s planners, see David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1972), Larry Berman, *Planning a Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam* (New York: Norton, 1982), Robert Buzzanco, *Masters of War: Military Dissent and Politics in the Vietnam Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), for a gendered view, see Marc Fasteau, “Vietnam and the Cult of Toughness in Foreign Policy,” in Elizabeth H. Pleck and Joseph Pleck, *The American Man* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980), 377-415.

⁷¹ For the most useful collective biography of the Kennedy-Johnson cabinet members responsible for Vietnam policy in the 1960s, particularly Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy, his deputy Walt Rostow and Army General Maxwell Taylor, see David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1972).

In his 1995 memoir, McNamara admitted to many of the things that writers like McCarthy, Fitzgerald, and Emerson among many others charged at the time, that the Defense Department and the White House maintained a stubborn persistence to policies in Vietnam that they knew were failing, that they relied on data that they knew was inaccurate or simply fabricated.⁷² McNamara wrote that despite the fact that many in the White House and in Saigon knew that things were going badly, everyone involved saw the options of escalation and withdrawal as so equally bad that the only solution was to make the existing policy work. McNamara revealed that the war's planners maintained the perception that they knew what they were doing while secretly admitting that there were very few people in Washington who knew anything about Indochina, few who spoke the language, and few who understood the culture. McNamara was seen as a particularly useful target for the criticisms of McCarthy, Fitzgerald, and Emerson not just because of his background and professed faith in "management" as a key to winning the war, but because of his role in bridging the divide between civilian and military leaders, a split that David Halberstam argued intensified as the war dragged on.⁷³

Instead of engaging with the language of combat or giving attention to military maneuvers, the women devoted much of their work to criticizing government leaders like McNamara. A constituent element of this was evaluating the new jargon-filled, euphemistic language that was created in order to obfuscate the American mission and provide an intellectual buffer that functioned to deflect or placate domestic criticism. Like their commentary on the war's technology and the telling omission of military details, the women inflected their criticism of the

⁷² Robert McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Times Books, 1995). Errol Morris's documentary, *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (Culver City, CA: TriStar Home Entertainment, 2004) shows the former Secretary in an even less flattering light than his memoir.

⁷³ David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1972), 213.

war's experts with a gendered critique of male leadership, often lacing their criticisms with observations that reflected a keen awareness of the masculine pretensions and anxieties of the men involved. A foundational critique in all three of the women's work was a focus on the way the Vietnam War exposed the limits of government and military "intelligence," in the dual sense of military information and the more general sense of a capacity for reason. These works evaluated the ways that rationality, traditionally claimed as a masculine provenance, buttressed the American effort in Vietnam, despite no evidence of success.

McCarthy, Fitzgerald and Emerson all pointed out flaws in the execution of the military's strategy but placed more emphasis on the ill-conceived strategy itself, a strategy that they argued was predicated on masculine notions of rationality and quantification but ultimately resisted both. By focusing on the women's analysis of experts, both civilian and military, these works argued that the overconfidence of American experts was a corollary to the misguided faith in America's technological dominance. Although only Gloria Emerson made this argument an explicitly gendered one, I contend that all three imputed a gendered dimension in the idea that the government, as Hannah Arendt wrote, "relied exclusively on evidence of mathematical, purely rational truth," rather than honestly appraising the situation and admitting errors of judgment.⁷⁴

Mary McCarthy devoted a section of *Vietnam* to the intellectuals who conceived of the war, centering her general criticism on the collusion between academic departments of political science and the government officials who tasked themselves with designing the bureaucracies of the RVN. McCarthy writes that American academics 'stamped their vocabulary and their habits

⁷⁴ Hannah Arendt, "Lying in Politics: Reflections on the Pentagon Papers," *New York Review of Books*, 18 November 1971, 30-39.

of thought on this loony trial of strength in the Asian arena,” suggesting that academics used Vietnam as a laboratory for their ideas in the same way that weapons manufacturers tested new forms of violence.⁷⁵ McCarthy wrote disdainfully of the “gradual and typically modern fusion of intelligence with “intelligence,” criticizing the collaboration of the CIA with institutions like Michigan State University, who provided English language training to Vietnamese officials and supplied nearly every political scientist working in the south in the 1960s.⁷⁶

As an example of the consequences of the merging of academic theories and military power, McCarthy introduced a Marine tank commander, Colonel Corson, who would reappear in Frances Fitzgerald’s *Fire in the Lake*. Corson was a University of Chicago graduate, well read, politically conscious, and familiar with McCarthy’s novels. Corson liked to experiment with cherished principles of free market economics and American efficiency by redesigning pigsties and supplying livestock with the waste of American military bases. Corson seemed to be a figure out of *The Ugly American*, using dynamite in a river to show peasants that there were larger fish to catch, crafting paper mache models of ideal strategic hamlets. “Eleven thousand peasants are the material he has been given to mould,” McCarthy wrote.⁷⁷ Corson’s motive, McCarthy argued, was simply reducible to a desire for personal profit, symbolized by the large painted bronze dollar sign that Corson erected in the center of the hamlet he administered. McCarthy saw Corson as purely cynical, as he said, “I’m not doing any of this for the Vietnamese people. I’m

⁷⁵ Mary McCarthy, *Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1967), 62.

⁷⁶ John Ernst, *Forging a Fateful Alliance: Michigan State University and the Vietnam War* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1998) offers a detailed view of the partnership between MSU, the CIA, and the government of the RVN.

⁷⁷ McCarthy, *Vietnam*, 77.

doing it for *me*.”⁷⁸ In Corson McCarthy found an ideal straw man, a morally flexible military officer whose ingenuity was driven by cynicism and a masculine overconfidence. More than finding him personally offensive, though, McCarthy saw him as indicative of a military culture that valued those characteristics. McCarthy wrote of Corson’s popularity and good reputation among officers and enlisted men, earned “partly because he amused them,” and partly because of his self-described “Charisma of Success.”

Despite her somewhat lengthy exegesis of Corson’s character, McCarthy avoided framing him in gendered terms, at times in defiance of material that seemed to have clearly gendered undertones. Observing Corson’s use of the “opaque forest of jargon substantives” that characterized the official American rhetoric on the war, McCarthy wrote obliquely that Corson was “good at gauging your thoughts.” “A few moments later,” McCarthy wrote, “he said, as if idly, ‘There are no homosexuals in my battalion. If I find one, out he goes. The men that work for me have to like *girls*.’”⁷⁹ McCarthy offered no commentary on Corson’s non sequitur on the importance of heterosexuality to his unit, shifting mid-paragraph to complimenting him on the peacefulness of his hut in the woods. Corson tried to redirect McCarthy’s attention back to the masculine, telling her that he did not send men into the field “until they’ve been out and *killed*.” McCarthy, unwilling to engage in Corson’s discussion, ignored his provocative comments and left them unexplored.

Whether she felt they were the bluster of a self-important officer or whether she felt his masculine demonstrations were too obvious to bother deconstructing, McCarthy noted the relative power in his position. “Colonel Corson was playing God and the Devil up there in the

⁷⁸ Ibid., 78, italics in original.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 80.

hills behind Da Nang,” she wrote, and “he held the little country of Vietnam - where the people wore conical hats and lived in bamboo thickets - like a toy in his hand.”⁸⁰ McCarthy again repeated this idea that soldiers and military officials treated the Vietnamese people and the war’s weapons as toys, an assertion that mirrors the arguments in Broyles’s essay and *Dispatches* that for its soldiers, the Vietnam War often felt like a game, “a brutal, deadly game, but a game, the best there is,” as Broyles wrote.⁸¹ Unlike the male writers, however, McCarthy evoked the analogy as a way of exposing the war’s senselessness, and criticizing it as a combination of juvenile notions of destruction and unwillingness to acknowledge the consequences.

As in McCarthy’s work, one of the most basic arguments in Fitzgerald’s *Fire in the Lake* is in pointing out the “impotence of intellectuals,” arguing that the war was being lost because of a failure of “intelligence,” again in the dual sense. Fitzgerald’s criticism of the American government’s incompetence and bad faith was aimed squarely at the war’s planners. While her work was more interested in untangling the broad cultural origins of the crisis, she devoted a considerable amount of time to analyzing the ways that the American mission invented its own language, and in doing so “fashioned a country called ‘Viet Nam’ out of the original chaos, a country which bears no simple relation to the country that the Vietnamese live in.” “Like all such constructions, Fitzgerald averred, “‘Viet Nam’ describes the shape of its creators’ mind.”⁸² Indeed, more than government agencies or even individuals, Fitzgerald argued that the seeds of the war could be found in the “can do attitude” of Americans in general, a “sense of righteous mission” that led the government ever deeper into debacle in Vietnam. Fitzgerald posited bluntly

⁸⁰ Ibid., 81.

⁸¹ Broyles, “Why Men Love War.”

⁸² Frances Fitzgerald, “Viet-Nam, the People” *Vogue*, May 1967, 174-175, 260-263.

that the American vision for Vietnam was “essentially colonialist,” its mission intent on replacing France and dominating the Vietnamese who were expected to be malleable pupils of American experts. The American sense of “moral infallibility and moral invincibility” infused the American mission, compounded by the fact that the “enemy was not only Communist but small, yellow, and poor.”⁸³

In her evaluation of Vietnamese culture, Fitzgerald found in Confucianism a way of understanding what structured the Vietnamese worldview, knowledge that Fitzgerald argued was frankly disregarded by the American government. Fitzgerald used the broad strokes of Confucianism as an explanatory device for the diffusion of power in Vietnamese society, asserting but never interrogating the notion that the central relationship in Confucian ideology was the one between father and son, that paternalism was the organizing social principle. *Fire in the Lake* suggested that the Americans did not understand the primacy of filial piety in social relationships, that Vietnamese children were raised not to analyze or follow abstract principles but to accept the authority of men. Despite the American failure to apprehend this point, Fitzgerald argued that the American government sought to displace this paternal relationship by inserting its own authority and the newly formed military of the RVN in the place of the father. Cultivating Vietnamese dependence on American goods, money, and protection, Fitzgerald asserted that the American presence in Vietnam changed the nature of social relations in Vietnam, substituting individualism and a government bureaucracy for the more familiar government of the family.

This point is important in that it undergirds the primary assertion of *Fire in the Lake* that the Vietnamese had an “entirely different organization of mind” that Americans did not attempt

⁸³ *Fire in the Lake*, 462.

to understand, and thus the war unfolded as a tragic cultural misunderstanding. It is also an important framework for understanding Fitzgerald's arguments about the ways the NLF capitalized on these confusions and appealed to different notions of the family to rationalize its view of revolution. Fitzgerald posited that one of the reasons for the support the NLF had among the peasants was the movement's suggestion that the Front soldiers were children of the people, that they enjoyed the protection and support of the villagers because the villagers acted as the mother of the NLF and its cadres played the role of dutiful children.⁸⁴ Fitzgerald noted that this arrangement was the inverse of the paternalism of the Diem regime, which sought to replace the father with the authority of a central government. The people of the countryside, Fitzgerald asserted, nurtured the soldiers and gave them support, in contrast to the Saigon government, which simply demanded the support of its people.⁸⁵

One of the reasons *Fire in the Lake* succeeded where the works of McCarthy and Emerson did not was this sensitivity to Vietnamese culture, however broad-brush or functional Fitzgerald's view of history appeared to some historians and Vietnam specialists. By attempting to understand the nature of NLF support, Fitzgerald further exposed the reasons American experts failed in their attempts to dominate the country. Though *Fire in the Lake* did not explicitly address the gendered elements of its analysis, Fitzgerald seemed to argue, like McCarthy, that an inflexible devotion to quantifying and rationalizing revealed a masculine delusion of mastery. In a *Vogue* article, Fitzgerald wrote, "On the strength of language the army

⁸⁴ *Fire in the Lake*, 201.

⁸⁵ Some sources on Vietnamese culture that would have been used in this period include Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), Gerald C. Hickey, *Village in Vietnam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964).

has won miraculous victories against the unpleasantness of war,” observing the ways that the logic of numbers “flattened the landscape of Viet Nam into points, lines, and spaces, sweeping a geography of strange and untidy names away beneath plane geometry.”⁸⁶ Seeming to refer directly to Robert McNamara, Fitzgerald argued that numbers were for Americans “like Martinis or tranquilizers,” creating an unbridgeable distance between the data being generated and the war being waged.

McCarthy and Fitzgerald’s evaluation of the ways government leadership was responsible for the disaster in Vietnam contained latent gender critiques in their assertion of policymakers’ and military leaders stubborn adherence to data over reality. This theme was clear in Gloria Emerson’s work, both in her reportage and as a central thesis of *Winners and Losers*. In an article in *McCall’s*, Emerson demonstrated a rage directed at the war’s planners that many critics saw as a hallmark of her writing. “Something has coarsened within me,” Emerson wrote, “and I do not think there is a cure. A deep, angry suspicion and scorn are what I feel for: the White House, the Pentagon, the Army, the Diplomats, the experts in Vietnam. For among them are some stunning lunatics and liars who have done their own country much damage, and nearly killed this one.”⁸⁷ Emerson’s scorn for the failures of leadership was unusual in its aggressive condemnation of the military, a thread that ran through much of her writing. In *Harper’s* magazine, Emerson wrote of her visit to the First Cavalry Division:

I hated Cav Country because I found many officers to be small men with a talent for deceit. They lied about body counts, military targets, the war they insisted they were winning, and even the morale of their own troops. Vietnam taught most of us more than we ever wished to know, and one thing I learned was what the American Army

⁸⁶ Frances Fitzgerald, “Viet-Nam, the People” *Vogue*, 5, May 1967, 174-175, 260-263.

⁸⁷ Gloria Emerson, “Hey, Lady, What Are You Doing Here?,” *McCall’s*, 61-63.

was not. It was not the bravest and the best among us.⁸⁸

Emerson's sharp, general criticism of the failures of military leadership in the Vietnam War was not limited to questions about competence or morality, but often relied on exposing its masculine roots. Writing about the men of the First Cavalry Division, a unit with a long and fabled history, Emerson said, "It always surprised me that so many of them were such fussy men, always quite anxious to prove how hard core they were and that there was really something between their legs."⁸⁹ It is apparent in the *Harper's* article that Emerson was testing the limits of assumptions and expectations about gender roles and the military, and it seems that the article was intended to provoke a gendered argument. The subtitle of the article tellingly described Emerson's piece as "the feminine view: a wry recollection of U.S. military men as the weaker sex." Emerson continued to prod the soldiers, telling a young major that MacArthur was "unusually attached" to his mother. Emerson wrote that "the major could not have been more insulted if I had accused him of wearing women's underwear beneath his fatigues."

The *Harper's* article was clear in its articulation of Vietnam as a site of masculine anxiety and performance, and the tone of *Winners and Losers* as well as her reportage for the *New York Times* made similar gender arguments. In *Winners and Losers*, Emerson evaluated the relationship between the enlisted men and their officers, playing with notions of gender roles by arguing that the "grunts" were treated like women in the military, pawns who operated at the whim of higher ranked officials. Emerson described an enlisted Marine's observation about why officers did not like women or want them around, writing that the soldier said "something

⁸⁸ Gloria Emerson, "Arms and the Woman."

⁸⁹ Ibid.

startling and wise: ‘We are their women. They’ve got us.’”⁹⁰ Emerson wrote, “I had always known how women were leashed, confined, made so small and uncertain. But in Vietnam, among the most helpless and humiliated were the soldiers themselves.” Describing the draftee as helpless, humiliated, and hassled, Emerson contended that the “real victims of men are other men.”⁹¹

While Emerson wrote sympathetically about the experience of enlisted soldiers and the fluidity of masculine roles, she also remarked on the ways this masculine hierarchy affected women. “When the Army has to deal with women on deadly matters, you see what a confused and childlike image they have of us,” Emerson wrote, noting the general attitude of the military toward women correspondents. Despite this, Emerson clearly felt that her position was imbued with some power, and this position was clear when Emerson published one of her best-known stories in the *Times* that she referenced in *Winners and Losers*. The story was first published on the front page of the *New York Times* in 1970 and exposed how a Brigadier General in the First Cavalry Division had received a Silver Star for valor for heroic acts in Cambodia that were “invented by enlisted men under orders.”⁹²

Emerson detailed the process by which the required eyewitness testimony was not collected and how a group of enlisted men, wracked by guilt over participating in the lie, ultimately exposed the citation as a fraud. The soldiers told Emerson that they complied with the order to draft the fictional award under “extreme pressure,” and one soldier admitted to making up vivid fictional details of the general’s bravery, even inventing the date of the supposed event.

⁹⁰ Emerson, *Winners and Losers*, 7.

⁹¹ Gloria Emerson, “Arms and the Woman.”

⁹² Gloria Emerson, “Facts Invented for a General’s Medal,” *New York Times*, 21 October 1970, 1.

In *Winners and Losers*, Emerson discusses the process of checking the story, telling of a meeting with high-ranking officers at MACV headquarters to straighten out the details. The purpose of the meeting was for the leadership to convince Emerson not to print the story. Emerson wrote that a colonel's "final plea to me was based on everything he thought was decent and maternal in women," pleading, "'If you print the story, think how it will affect all the mothers of all our dead boys who won decorations.'"⁹³ The colonel's appeal to universal maternal virtues and a gendered notion of propriety not only failed to stop Emerson from submitting the story, but the assertion also seemed to offend her. In reflecting on the situation in *Winners and Losers*, Emerson said of the whole affair, "It was a mistake," unclear about whether the mistake was in publishing the story or the colonel's mistake in appealing to her femininity. It seems likely that Emerson believed the latter, as she took offense to the suggestion that her work devalued the sacrifice of dead soldiers. The lack of clarity is typical of Emerson's work, and was the foundation of its criticism, but vagueness was to a certain extent Emerson's intention. Even the title of her book reflected her intentions to expose the murkiness of the war's ending, alluding to the interchangeability of winners and losers, and the lack of consensus on exactly who and what was won and lost.

Emerson's article on the fraudulent Silver Star raised a number of interesting questions about the way the American military was functioning in Vietnam in 1970 and more profound and troubling questions about the mission's credibility. In assessing her work, as well as the works of McCarthy and Fitzgerald, it is important to remember the period that the women were writing in, as they faced the dual obstacles of being questioned about their credibility as war commentators and were writing for a public that was largely uninterested in taking up the questions they raised.

⁹³ *Winners and Losers*, 251.

Mary McCarthy's *Medina* captured the tone of the final years of the war, as her prose dripped with the exasperation of a writer whose work was falling on deaf ears. McCarthy wrote that after the spectacle of the trial of Lieutenant William Calley, that Americans had made their peace with My Lai, and that the subsequent trial of lower ranking officer Ernest Medina was a "dud," a "box office turkey," and that the "once lurid material seemed stale."⁹⁴ Writing six years after *Medina*, Gloria Emerson faced similar popular hostility and resistance, particularly to a project that urged Americans to be introspective about the nation's failures in Vietnam.

By evaluating the contemporary reviews of the three women's works we can learn more about the expectations women writers faced when discussing war, including cultural assumptions about the most "natural" way for men and women to tell war stories. While critics and popular book reviewers have suggested that the polemic is a suitable way for a man to narrate a war, the same angry, engaged style in a female author was often regarded as vacillating between hysterical and naive. An important point is that the works were rarely criticized for errors or outrageous arguments, but rather for matters of style and tone, often framed in explicitly gendered language. Contemporary reviews revealed two important facets, both gendered, that confirm the assumption that women were unable to write about war, thus justifying their exclusion from narrating the Vietnam conflict. First, critics tended to focus on the women's anger, as nearly all reviews asserted that the three women wrote in a fierce, polemic style that often veered into "shrill and carping." The second common theme was that many reviews paid a disproportionate attention to the author's self-representation and self-presentation in the text, as all three women were criticized for inserting themselves too much into the narrative. Through the reviews it becomes apparent that with the frequent exception of Fitzgerald's more moderate,

⁹⁴ Mary McCarthy, *Medina* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), 10.

academic approach in *Fire in the Lake* that the women's works were often devalued or dismissed largely because of criticisms of their own positionment with their narratives.⁹⁵ The criticism of the women's work was often phrased in distinctly gendered terms that evoked old stereotypes of the expected feminine responses to war. Reviewers betrayed the assumption that women were too sensitive to be reliable narrators of violence, too obsessed with emotion to get at a deeper understanding of the war.

Many reviews of all the women's works lingered on this notion of moral outrage, which was not seen as a virtue or a narrative strategy but as an impediment to the dispassionate reason needed to make solid judgments and assessments of the war. In many reviews of *Winners and Losers*, Emerson was described as pejoratively "obsessed" with the war. *Time* magazine noted that had Mary McCarthy not been a 55-year old woman, she could reasonably be described as an "angry young man." Years after *Fire in the Lake*, Frances Fitzgerald was described as haunted by the memory of the war, in ways not unlike the men who served in the military and in the more traditionally masculine books on the war. In the women's works, however, this obsession was criticized as being channeled through a palpable rage, and this was seen as a central and critical flaw, as evidence that women could not understand the experience of war. For antiwar women like WSP and for male writers seeking to convey the horror of the Vietnam experience, a sense of moral outrage lent a narrative power to activism and to their works, made them affecting and important. For Frances Fitzgerald, a current of outrage was balanced by a more detached narrative position and as a result her book was not remembered as a particularly angry work, though it is clearly animated by it. For McCarthy and particularly Emerson, however, the notion

⁹⁵ Importantly, the only book of those I discuss that is still in print is Fitzgerald's *Fire in the Lake*.

of a misplaced and overblown moral outrage became a fundamental basis of criticism for their work.

The authors' relationships to the conflict and the way they present themselves in the text led to frequent criticisms of the works as self-indulgent, self-referential and self-absorbed, a charge that, like the argument on misplaced moral outrage, was rarely put to authors of male combat memoirs or male journalists' work on the war, works that were often very much about the author's own relationship to the war. The self-indulgence in the works of Michael Herr and William Broyles were interpreted by reviewers and by readers as conferring authority in male participant-observers, as if their credibility as war commentators was judged only by their proximity to battle, and threats to their lives. As Jeffords argued, the gendered notion that women were at best unreliable narrators of war and at worst wholly unqualified, simply incapable of understanding and explaining the nature of a military conflict was so naturalized, so ingrained in American culture that the female subjects of this chapter often held each other to these unexamined standards.

Often, in fact, the women were each other's harshest critics, with insults again aimed not at the arguments but at the authors themselves. For example, in 1974, three years before she would be subjected to similar attacks, Gloria Emerson's review of Mary McCarthy's *The Seventeenth Degree* argued that despite the fundamental correctness of McCarthy's arguments that her interest in their own self-representation or the obsessive attention to her own emotional response to the war nullified the larger point of the work. Emerson wrote that McCarthy "made herself the main character," and that her descriptions of Vietnam were often "made meaningless by the weight of her sarcasm and contempt."⁹⁶ While Emerson's review seemed to unearth some

⁹⁶ Gloria Emerson, "Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary," *Washington Post*, 2 June 1974, BW5.

longstanding doubts about the quality of McCarthy's work, she seemed particularly concerned about the notion that McCarthy felt herself a sort of celebrity. Emerson criticized McCarthy for bypassing the drudgery of in-country research on Vietnam in favor of writing pieces from a comfortable distance, writings that relied on a "great flair for descriptive writing" and high-minded liberal judgment. "Perhaps she feels Norman Mailer gets away with this, and so should she," Emerson wrote revealingly.

It would prove interesting that Emerson savaged McCarthy's Vietnam works in 1974 in much the same terms that *Winners and Losers* would be criticized three years later. Emerson told *Publishers Weekly* that she worried about the book's critical reception, because she knew it did not adequately portray the experience of the war for any of her subjects, even herself. While she rejected criticisms of the book's tone and style as missing the point, she equally rejected the praise of readers who told her they enjoyed the book. "They're not supposed to enjoy it, for God's sake!" Emerson said, "It should be painful, so painful you want to throw it across the room."⁹⁷ *Winners and Losers*, in its broad scope and scathing criticism of military leaders and culture, was an attempt by Emerson to express her anger by exposing the misdeeds of corrupt individuals and the suffering of soldiers and civilians on both sides, and the anger that animated the book was for some critics its singular strength and for others its fatal flaw.

The two most critical reviews of *Winners and Losers* appeared in the pages of Emerson's former paper, the *New York Times*. Book reviewers Christopher Lehmann-Haupt and James Fenton wrote that despite a frenzy of praise for Emerson's work in other publications that the book was an utter failure. Lehmann-Haupt wrote that Emerson's motivation in writing the book was to "remind the Americans of the full extent of their trauma, lest we be inclined, as she

⁹⁷ "Gloria Emerson," *The Publishers Weekly*, issue 2, 1977, 8-9.

believes we are, to gloss over or simply forget it.”⁹⁸ Fenton agreed, arguing that the project was to be applauded, but the execution deplored. Lehmann-Haupt criticized Emerson’s lack of objectivity, citing her inability to mediate between her own commentary and her narrative, the fact that she “writes execrably,” and the lack of focus as she attempted to interview “every category of person that participated in the war.”⁹⁹

Lehmann-Haupt was particularly put off by Emerson’s “persona of moral outrage - a moral outrage so vehement and triumphant that a reader is almost bound to feel corrupt by comparison, unless of course he or she has been anointed by Miss Emerson as one of her moral equals.”¹⁰⁰ Indeed, Lehmann-Haupt seemed to find in *Winners and Losers* not just a palpable and off-putting tone of rage but also an implication of moral superiority, superiority that he felt motivated Emerson to put herself so fully into the text. Emerson, in the reviewer’s mind, was generous in “imputing collective guilt,” but failed to offer “some constructive explanation as to where we went wrong.” Fenton also noted that Emerson’s book somewhat needlessly plumbed the depths of her own guilt and the collective guilt of a nation in the postwar years. Fenton’s review was particularly revealing in terms of its gendered assumptions and language, criticizing her for not using more typically feminine tactics to persuade readers, who he argued she challenged too much. Fenton, similarly employing some time-worn gendered stereotypes, chided Emerson for failing to charm her readers, writing: “It would have been better to have wooed him and seduced him, before hitting him on the head with the rolling-pin of her conscience. Better to have allowed him to make up his own mind more often. Better to have displayed a higher

⁹⁸ Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, “More about Us in Vietnam,” *New York Times*, 20 Jan 1977, 35.

⁹⁹ James Fenton, “Once Again, With Feeling: Winners and Losers,” *New York Times*, 16 Jan 1977, 236.

¹⁰⁰ Lehmann-Haupt, “More about Us”.

opinion of his moral sensibility.”¹⁰¹

In spite of Emerson’s harsh take on McCarthy’s work on Vietnam, there is evidence that the women offered support to one another. Frances Fitzgerald, apparently moved by Fenton’s stinging and sexist review of Emerson, wrote a letter to the *New York Times* in defense of *Winners and Losers*, praising the book’s “success in expressing a woman’s sensibility.”¹⁰² Fitzgerald pointed out that Emerson’s book was important in its broad scope and its argument that Vietnam was a defining experience for a generation. “Emerson looks afresh at everything in that masculine world of war,” Fitzgerald wrote, arguing that Emerson’s identification of masculine vulnerabilities deserved more careful attention and less vitriol. Fitzgerald was also supportive of Mary McCarthy’s work on Vietnam, as the two women were friendly and frequent correspondents. In a note of congratulations for McCarthy’s articles in the *New York Review of Books*, Fitzgerald praised McCarthy’s characterization of American military men, telling her “the number of American types you caught and froze are perfect and accurate enough for a wax museum.” Fitzgerald also admired McCarthy’s abilities to orient herself to the confusing conditions in Vietnam, confiding to McCarthy that “It took me at least two months to figure out (metaphysical problems aside) what JUSPAO was.”¹⁰³ The relationship between McCarthy and

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Letters to the Editor, *New York Times*, 17 April 1977, BR14. This statement is difficult to interpret, as it reveals Fitzgerald’s own fears for the reception of her own work and could be seen as a pejorative view of Emerson’s book. Given the tone of the letter and Fitzgerald’s otherwise positive comments on *Winners and Losers*, it appears that Fitzgerald’s remark is intended to be complimentary.

¹⁰³ Letter from Frances Fitzgerald to Mary McCarthy, 20 June 1967, Mary McCarthy Papers, Archives and Special Collections, Vassar College, Series V, 194.1, Frances Fitzgerald Correspondence. JUSPAO, or the Joint United States Public Affairs Office, was responsible for coordinating psychological warfare operation under the aegis of the US Information Agency (USIA), operating in conjunction with the military and the State Department. Goals to boost

Fitzgerald was close and characterized by mutual respect and a shared perspective on American failures in Vietnam, but their works have aged very differently, as contemporary reviews foreshadowed.

At least in part, the inward orientation of all three of the women's books led to criticism of their work as being more about themselves than about the conflict, a contention that could be made about much of the literature of the Vietnam War that has been praised for being evocative of male visions of the war. My point in this chapter has not been to argue that these works were better, more sensitive, or more insightful about the conflict, but to evaluate the ways they contributed to a more nuanced understanding of gender politics in the Vietnam War era. While *Fire in the Lake* remains in print and is still regarded as an important contribution to the understanding of the Vietnamese, Gloria Emerson's work and the three Vietnam books by Mary McCarthy have faded into an irretrievable obscurity. My purpose is not to rescue these works or attempt to restore the authors to a place of prominence in Vietnam War literature, but to suggest that the works have been marginalized because they do not fit neatly into the male-dominated canon of Vietnam works, which is precisely why they are interesting and revealing. A close reading of the works and attention to the ways they were reviewed by contemporaries reveal a persistent clinging to the notion that women were not capable of reflecting meaningfully on a war, despite producing works that raised difficult, fundamental questions about the war that seemed to indicate otherwise.

Of course, McCarthy, Fitzgerald, and Emerson did not invent this notion of collective

morale in South Vietnam, provide information to journalists, Michael Herr famously said that JUSPAO "had been created to handle press relations and psychological warfare, and I have never met anyone there who seemed to realize that there was a difference." Cited in Susan Moeller, *Shooting War*, 366.

trauma and guilt that their works convey. They were, however, early proponents of the idea that all Americans should examine their complicity in the war, a notion that met with significant resistance from reviewers who suggested that this impulse only revealed the writers' self-absorption. The three women saw themselves as witnesses to war, but acknowledged the special character of combat trauma. Frances Fitzgerald wrote in 1981:

“Many vets have suffered – and continue to suffer – from a whole series of emotions and existential disorders which they call ‘post-Vietnam syndrome.’ The word ‘syndrome’ of course suggests a pathology, and by accepting the term, they have in effect accepted their victimization. They have accepted the displacement of responsibility from the sphere of politics to the sphere of individual psychology. And from this solipsism there is no exit.”¹⁰⁴

In many ways the works in this chapter represented attempts to encourage Americans to accept their own responsibility for the way the nation waged war in Vietnam, by suggesting that this Vietnam “syndrome” was a shared affliction. While American audiences became more receptive to this idea over time, when these works were published, most Americans, including their president, simply wanted to forget Vietnam and move on. While Fitzgerald’s academic approach ensured it a place in the canon of Vietnam War literature, the emotional, angry, and morally-charged arguments McCarthy and Emerson made found few sympathizers, but serve as important artifacts of the ways women experienced the war and attempted to make sense of it.

¹⁰⁴ Frances Fitzgerald, “The War That Won’t End,” in Walter Capps, *The Vietnam Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 87-88.

Conclusion

This study has sought to contribute to existing historiography on the Vietnam War by evaluating gendered discourses that created usable female symbols and by examining the lived experience of American and Vietnamese women, women whose lives often bore little resemblance to their symbolic counterparts. By integrating a study of women on opposing sides of the war, despite their vast and irreconcilable differences, I have argued that both Vietnamese and American women themselves and larger, shifting ideas about gender played key roles in all phases of the conflict. From the earliest years of the war in the 1950s when Vietnam was almost completely unknown to Americans to the final months of collective soul-searching in the late 1970s over the massive toll the war had taken on both Vietnamese and Americans, women - both as symbols and actors - helped to shape the narrative of the war for the American public.

Much of the existing scholarship on women and the Vietnam War has approached the topic of gender and the war from a narrowly conceived and highly specific lens, one that often has focused on the shared experiences of discrete groups of women directly involved in the conflict, such as nurses, WACs, home front wives, or activists. I have attempted in this study to approach the topic from a wider angle, using evidence drawn from popular literature and film, propaganda, government documents, and heavily from the American news media. By focusing on specific images across a broad variety of contexts, my intention has been to demonstrate that women and gender ideology were not tertiary issues separable from the real story of the war, but to suggest that gender was a pervasive if rarely acknowledged way that Americans came to understand the war and their nation's role in it.

I have chosen to focus on gendered images of the war, both the visual imagery of iconic photographs and television broadcasts as well as the imaginary images conjured by extensive

American press coverage of the war and literary renderings of the conflict in part because of the power and resonance of the images and also because of the unique role that images played in shaping the course of the war. As discussed in chapter four in the context of photographs of napalm injuries, the unprecedented access journalists had in Vietnam, improved photographic technologies, as well as an increasing curiosity about the nature of the war led to the publication of dozens of visual images of the conflict that influenced antiwar groups and changed the way Americans thought about their country's involvement. While a deeper discussion about how journalism affected the course of the war is beyond the scope of this study, my extensive use of media sources suggests the importance of news coverage and the prominent place news outlets often gave to gendered images. For many Americans the Vietnam War has been remembered through images, a surprising number of which featured women or spoke to dominant social constructs of gender.

The task of this project was to make coherent a string of these discrete visual and figurative images depicting the contributions of both Vietnamese and American women, women whose experiences have been largely relegated to historical footnotes, when they are mentioned at all. Telling the women's stories and making them visible, as Elaine Tyler May argued, was the first step in establishing the importance of gender and the war, but evaluating the ways the images functioned to bolster various political agendas and raised questions about the role of women in war was the next task. In evaluating how gender and women themselves shaped political discourse, I have sought to show how important women were to the prosecution of the war in pragmatic ways and also how gender punctuated the dominant narrative throughout the conflict.

What emerged from this evaluation was not a parallel, even arc of women's progress that fitted women's liberation with increasing involvement in the Vietnam War, but a narrative that emphasized the unevenness of progressive change in ideas about gender equality. While this dissertation does not suggest that the story of women's liberation can be mapped neatly onto a history of the Vietnam War or vice versa, it does propose some ideas about the changing ways that women participated in the politics of the conflict. Chapter one's thesis that women in the news and in literature about the region functioned as explanatory devices that helped Americans to frame Vietnam in the 1950s as a place in need of American intervention and rescue suggests a very different picture than the final chapter's assertion that women writers played key roles in the way the war – as a military endeavor and a national experience - was remembered. Chapter two's discussion of the enigmatic figure of Madame Nhu points out the difficulty in assigning labels such as "feminist" to political figures of the period, and chapter four's focus on Women Strike for Peace suggests that some American women's involvement in the antiwar movement came from a place not of left-wing liberalism but from deeply conservative maternal instincts. Both chapters complicate the notion that involvement in the war led to a more progressive role for women, particularly since both Madame Nhu and WSP had inconsistent views of what constituted progressive gender politics.

The evolution of American women's experiences in the war and their political involvement was complex and important, but never matched the critical role that Vietnamese women played in the war. This study sought to demonstrate, in broad and admittedly generalized terms, the depth with which Vietnamese women contributed to the war efforts and the ways that their actual functions contrasted with their popular images, hyperbolic images that were presented both in the American press and in their own organizations' propaganda. Many familiar

with the history of the war might call into question any study that juxtaposes the iconoclastic persona of Madame Nhu with the guerrilla women of the NLF, but doing so reveals the diversity of the women who figured in the war and the divergent, but equally exotic and unknowable Vietnamese figures over which the American press obsessed. In many ways both Madame Nhu and the market seller suspected of aiding the NLF were both the products of American, and at times Vietnamese mythologizing, but they were also real women who had measurable impacts on the course of the war. The nature of their representations in America reflected not just complicated views about race and class but also about expectations of gender that extended to American women who involved themselves in the war.

In the early years of the Vietnam War, feminized images were mobilized to make the nation of Vietnam legible, relatable, and sympathetic to American audiences, but as the conflict wore on, both Vietnamese and American women revealed themselves to be critical to myriad aspects of the war, from the fighting to the telling. In their participation, the women whose stories are featured in this dissertation reflect the ways that gender discourse was a useful, mutable way of framing the war and demonstrate how women themselves became embroiled in multiple conflicts, both internal and external. Both American and Vietnamese women faced internal conflicts about their own participation in the war, the morality of a war that increasingly affected women and children, and their ability or responsibilities of involving themselves politically. As women on both sides struggled with their own roles in the war, they also revealed the cleavages in discursive constructions of gender and their lives revealed the conflicts between the war's famous feminized images and the real experiences of women in the era.

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