

HUBRIS: AMERICAN INVOLVEMENT IN VIETNAM
1954-1965

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One justification for American involvement in Vietnam is captured in a statement made by Clark Clifford during an interview in the documentary *Hearts and Minds*. He said that at the end of World War II Americans believed they could control the future of the world and had the responsibility to do so. This implied that America knew what the future ought to be. This attitude led to American involvement in Vietnam and persisted leading to an ever-deepening commitment despite mounting evidence of its fallacy. In Greek tragedy this kind of fallacy is termed hubris, the fatal flaw. Hubris has been a part of US Foreign policy throughout the twentieth century. Vietnam was the greatest tragedy that resulted.

The greatest challenge in supporting this thesis is selecting the most salient examples. Hubris is pervasive in areas of racial, cultural and religious attitudes as well as in American political, military, and economic policies. In some cases, American popular perception differed from members of the government.

Jonathan Nashel points to Henry Luce's 1941 tract *The American Century*, as the starting point for post World War II US policyⁱ. He ignores the possibility that it dates back at least to the Roosevelt Corollary from December 1904 in which Theodore Roosevelt asserted US responsibility to exercise 'police power' over other nations in the Western hemisphere. The change in the next years was that the US was no longer a Great Power but *the* Great Power viewing the policy as global. It was based on a belief equating being the greatest power with omniscience. Hubris.

Racial superiority appears deeply ingrained in Caucasiansⁱⁱ. As Vietnam became a matter of public awareness in the mid 1950's memories of Japanese racial stereotypes during World War II had not been forgotten. Seth Jacobs discusses the way in which

Vietnamese were depicted as children in need of parentingⁱⁱⁱ. The book *The Ugly American* portrays the childishness in terms of the ease with which they can be tricked by communists^{iv}. In the Documentary *Hearts and Minds* General William Westmoreland explicitly states that Orientals do not value human life like Westerners. In *The Ugly American* film natives are depicted with a surreal ‘Hollywood’ simplicity. In the film Ambassador McWhite calls his friend, the Sarkanese Deong, ‘boy.’ In another heated exchange Deong asks scathingly if he is McWhite’s little *brown* brother. In a briefing book prepared by the US State Department Asians are called cheerful, passive, easily led and eager to have decisions made for them^v. In *Hearts and Minds* one native says that have a culture that is 5,000 years old. “We” are not the barbarians. A Vietnamese Roman Catholic Priest reminds us that the Vietnamese fought the Chinese for 12 centuries, the French colonialists for 100 years. “Then the Americans came, 500,000 of them and war became genocide.” No lesser word than hubris is adequate to describe American racial misconceptions about the Vietnamese.

Religion was a key factor in American backing and continued support for South Vietnamese Premiere Ngo Dinh Diem.^{vi} As Pope Pius XII was adamantly anti-communist, this led to the assumption by many in American government, that all Catholics were anti-communist. In the face of the support for the Communist Party in Catholic Italy, as one example, this logic is, to say the least, dubious! Yet within American government circles Catholicism was a factor in support for both Chaing Kai-shek in China and Syngman Rhee in South Korea. A key part of Seth Jacob’s thesis is that Ngo Dinh Diem’s Catholicism played a key role in being backed as America’s choice to govern South Vietnam. In addition to support within the government Jacobs

discusses the major increase in church membership and religious practice in the United States during the 1950's. He terms it a religious revival. While acknowledging other things might play a role, he minimizes them^{vii}. Elaine Tyler May, a well-regarded historian of American culture after World War II, disagrees. She argues effectively that both social conformity and fear of being perceived as a possible communist or 'fellow-traveler' were significant factors in American church membership and participation in the 1950's^{viii}. While Jacobs acknowledges that television was not yet the dominant entertainment factor in the 1950's he sees Catholic Bishop Fulton J. Sheen's growth in television ratings opposite Milton Berle as a clear indication of specific American support for the Catholic denomination^{ix}. In his book about American history in the 1950s, David Halberstam has a radically different explanation for the decline in Berle's ratings which merits serious consideration^x. While Jacob's arguments about religious revival in the US are weak, there is little doubt that Catholicism was important to many American officials, significant among them, John Foster Dulles and Senator Mike Mansfield^{xi}. Perhaps more important was fact that Diem was in the United States and, through influential backers, among them Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, used his religion to promote his candidacy^{xii}. While Diem's anti-communist credentials were impeccable, American officials ignored that fact he had no governmental experience, no political base in South Vietnam and was Catholic in a nation predominantly Buddhist. Given these conditions belief in Diem may be deemed hubris.

Fundamental religious bias was significant in America's perception of Vietnam. Ignoring differing denominations, Christianity is the most common religion in the US. Buddhism dominates Vietnam. From at least the time of St. Paul Christianity has been

evangelical embodying a mandate to carry the message of salvation and eternal life to all mankind. Anyone who is not Christian is deemed damned to hellfire. In the 1950's Communism had already been stereotyped as Godless. Billy Graham saw the need for God as fundamental and unassailable. He railed against Godless communism^{xiii}. Eisenhower condemned all Buddhists equating them with Godless communists^{xiv} Seth Jacobs notes that America's mission was seen as religious as early as Lincoln. The American press derided Buddhism^{xv} Buddhists were seen as feminine, weak, and passive. The fact that Buddhists has trounced the French at Dien Bien Phu was conveniently forgotten. Hubris. However it must be noted that in *The Ugly American* there are subtle allusions to religion that appear more realistic. Deong, clearly a hero and a fighter, is shown in a Buddhist temple. In the scene at the cutting of the ribbon on Freedom Road, the puppet King is clearly shown as Catholic.

There are general cultural matters, neither truly racial nor religious, where American refusal to understand the Vietnamese also fueled the tragedy. Americans, in and out of government new little or nothing about oriental culture and thought democracy impossible^{xvi} In *The Ugly American* this is subtly embedded. Deong's home is far more Western in appearance than Eastern. The capital of Sarkan looks like DeMille's Rome. Sarkanese are dressed like Westerners. The contrast from the real Vietnam as seen in *Hearts and Minds* shows this clearly. Looking at the scene in *Ugly American* when McWhite first visits Deong he fails to remove his shoes, a serious matter in the East. McWhite unquestioningly accepts the Sarkanese Prime Minister's statement his country is not ready for democracy. Lack of knowledge about Southeast Asia and Vietnam is a failure but belief that knowledge is unnecessary is hubris

In the political realm, among America's government officials the evidence of hubris is overwhelming. Washington would not believe Vietnamese Ambassador Heath when he expressed doubt about Diem. Eisenhower's friend Joe Collins was sent. When Collins reports were also negative, he too was not believed^{xvii} Senator Mike Mansfield, considered America's outstanding authority on the East, saw no paradox in imposing Diem on Vietnam and then asserting we could not tell Diem who to put in his cabinet^{xviii} From the time Collins left Vietnam no one in the Eisenhower era voiced opposition to Diem^{xix}. Charles de Gaulle warned John Kennedy that the US would fail, as did France^{xx}In *Hearts and Minds* Walt Rostow asserts that all that was needed was more military. Johnson stated that only America could do the job. Privately, on July 21, 1965, when George Ball tells Johnson we can't win and Eisenhower says more military power is needed, Johnson feared the political impact of pulling out^{xxi}. This concept that all that is needed is more weaponry defies belief. Strategic bombing did not stop Britain, Germany or Japan in World War II. Like George Washington, Ho Chi Minh needed only to keep an army in the field to win. Even Eisenhower could not see the parallel. Hubris.

American military involvement became a significant factor after 1960 when the North Vietnamese began operating in South Vietnam. By the time of Kennedy's assassination there were 16,000 'advisors.' This number exploded to over half a million during the Johnson administration. Throughout this period Robert McNamara was Secretary of Defense. McNamara's God may have been numbers. He certainly worshipped them. He promoted ideas such as building a barrier across the entire border between North and South Vietnam with graphs and statistics to support the idea. Responding to skepticism from the Joint Chiefs he asserted that the US could do anything

militarily it wanted to. He informed Johnson the enemy was losing 60,000 soldiers per year but there was no break in morale and no difficulty replacing losses. He acknowledged no understanding of what *ideals* might make this possible^{xxii}. In *Hearts and Minds*, William Westmoreland tells us the capture of the US Embassy was like the Battle of the Bulge, the turning point! More troops would win the war! As already noted Walt Rostow never changed this opinion. Despite all evidence, hubris prevailed.

Economically American thinking in the 1960's was dominated by a concept generally termed 'modernization theory.' It held that large infrastructure projects encouraged capitalist integration and were a key factor in building a democratic nation and preventing communism. Walt Rostow and other experts felt such development was mandatory for the "take-off" of democratic societies^{xxiii}. Johnson endorsed spending a billion dollars to make the Mekong Delta into another TVA^{xxiv}. In supporting large-scale projects, while admitting he knew little of Vietnam, David Lilienthal of Columbia University opined that the TVA changed the whole spirit of the affected populace^{xxv}. Jonathan Nashel scathingly indicts such large-scale projects asserting that small projects of immediate benefit to local populations were far more important^{xxvi}. Nashel also saw modernization theory as an attempt to re-write Marxist theory^{xxvii}. In *The Ugly American* this is dramatized by the contrast between Freedom Road and the hospital started by Homer Aitkin's wife, Emma. Atkins, supervisor for the building of Freedom road, begs McWhite for \$50,000 to build a real hospital. McWhite can't comprehend this. When fighting has broken out and soldiers arrive at the hospital Homer, his wife and others line up forming a barrier between the soldiers and the hospital. The soldiers refuse to cross it. The kind of thinking that dominated the American government's commitment to large-

scale projects is flawed not so much by sheer ignorance of local conditions as by indifference about them. Again, this is hubris.

Hubris is a common thread found wherever we look. We find it in Racial, Religious, and Cultural attitudes. It is embodied in the political, military, and economic policies of the American government. Inevitably a brief overview such as this can only attempt to touch on the issues. One might say it is like the Grand Jury returning an indictment rather than proving each charge ‘beyond a reasonable shadow of a doubt.’

There are shortcomings the work of Seth Jacobs and Jonathan Nashel. Jacob’s basic thesis is that had America backed a different leader, a Buddhist with popular support, it would have made a difference. This ignores the possibility that while the problem was partially who was chosen, it was also the fact that someone *was chosen* by an outside nation. Jonathan Nashel rightly feels that it was wrong to engage in large projects rather than small projects with immediate impact. Yet to succeed Emma’s hospital must have supplies, medicine, and bandages. Ultimately it will need electricity and the other appurtenances of a modern world. Small projects are needed but require large projects to support them.

Daniel Ellsberg in *Hearts and Minds* reminds us that every president from Truman though Nixon lied to the American public. Democracy rests on the necessity for an informed public. In *Hearts and Minds* the father of a young man killed in combat tells us he trusted our leaders. America’s leaders callously, wantonly, and repeatedly betrayed public trust. That is hubris and it is the *American* tragedy of Vietnam.

Notes

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- ⁱ Jonathan Nashel, *The Road to Vietnam Modernization Theory in Fact and Fiction*, 133.
- ⁱⁱ Cross cultural studies of North Americans, Europeans, and Africans indicate that infants can discern racial characteristics at an age of around one year. It also seems that by age three Caucasians have a sense of racial superiority and Blacks one of racial inferiority. This seems true for both races regardless of the continent in which they are raised. There do not seem to have been studies of this nature involving Asians.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 95-96.
- ^{iv} Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam*, 112.
- ^v Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam*, 179.
- ^{vi} Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam*, 160-61.
- ^{vii} Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam*, 60.
- ^{viii} Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1999).
- ^{ix} Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam*, 67,96.
- ^x David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York, NY: Random House, 1993), 185-187,
- ^{xi} Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam*, 4.
- ^{xii} Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam*, 41-43.
- ^{xiii} Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam*, 60.
- ^{xiv} Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam*, 263.
- ^{xv} Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam*, 112.
- ^{xvi} Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam*, 38.
- ^{xvii} Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam*, 173-76.
- ^{xviii} Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam*, 184.
- ^{xix} Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam*, 220.

^{xx} Thomas Paterson, J Garry Clifford, et. al. *American Foreign Relations A History Since 1895 Seventh Edition* (Boston, MA: Wadsworth), 344.

^{xxi} Paterson, Clifford, et. al. *American Foreign Relations A History Since 1895 Seventh Edition*, 353

^{xxii} Nashel, *The Road to Vietnam Modernization Theory in Fact and Fiction*, 143-145.

^{xxiii} Nashel, *The Road to Vietnam Modernization Theory in Fact and Fiction*, 140.

^{xxiv} Nashel, *The Road to Vietnam Modernization Theory in Fact and Fiction*, 150.

^{xxv} Nashel, *The Road to Vietnam Modernization Theory in Fact and Fiction*, 151.

^{xxvi} Nashel, *The Road to Vietnam Modernization Theory in Fact and Fiction*, 137.

^{xxvii} Nashel, *The Road to Vietnam Modernization Theory in Fact and Fiction*, 153.