Free World? Free Market: 
The Vietnam War and the Third World 
in a Global Economy

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In 1919, President Woodrow Wilson arrived in France to sign the treaty ending World War I. Wilson was proposing his Fourteen Points agenda, which was an idealistic settlement for peace calling for such provisions as open diplomacy, freedom of the seas, and self-determination for all colonies of greater nations. The latter point caught the attention of a young Vietnamese waiter named Nguyen Sinh Cung who desired to see the independence of his native land from Imperial France. He drafted a lengthy list of French abuses in Vietnam and went to the peace summit with the hope of presenting it to Wilson. Nguyen was turned away at the door and later realized that Wilson's Fourteen Points would never make the transition from theory to reality. Vietnam was to remain under the rule of the French. Nguyen would eventually become known as Ho Chi Minh, and lead the Vietnamese people from colonial rule. His struggle would have a tremendous impact on the history of the United States.1

American involvement in Indochina throughout the Cold War was spurred not by the threat of Communist aggression upon democratic institutions, but instead by the need to preserve markets and resources for the development of a global economy. American postwar planning documents shed light on the notion that Vietnam and other Third World nations were designated a key role in the development of a global market. These extensive economic goals caused America to aid France in suppressing Vietnamese guerrilla forces and to eventually take up the battle and commit U.S. troops. In addition, an analysis of Ho Chi Minh's relations to Soviet Russia and China assert that Ho was never a puppet to these other Communist nations, but was instead seeking a war of liberation against his nation's French colonizers. Finally, an assessment of U.S. tactics and strategy during the Vietnam War confirm the true purpose of our efforts in this region, and even more importantly, how this event as a military effort relates to other U.S.-Third World relationships. Overall, this era proves to be an enlightening case study for American intervention in the Third World and serves to explain many current trends in global affairs.

Postwar Planning and the Third World

In the period immediately following World War II the United States was in a historically unprecedented position of power and security. While most other industrial nations were attempting to recover from the massive effects of the war, the U.S. was beginning to embrace the benefits. American production had more than tripled, and with the exception of Hawaii, our territory was never under attack.2 In light of this position of immense prosperity, the State Department created the Policy Planning Staff to establish long-range goals for America in the
second half of the twentieth century. George Kennan, the head of this staff, elaborated on our nation's position and future objectives in Policy Planning Study 23:

We have about 50% of the world's wealth, but only 6.3% of its population. In this situation, we cannot fail to be the object of envy and resentment. Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity. To do so, we will have to dispense with all sentimentality and day dreaming; and our attention will have to be concentrated everywhere on our immediate national objectives. We should cease to talk about vague and unreal objectives such as human rights, the raising of the living standards and democratization. The day is not far off when we are going to have to deal in straight power concepts. The less we are hampered by idealistic slogans the better.3

This was a very significant statement for a number of reasons. First, the rhetoric that Kennan used was considerably blunt and straightforward. In fact, it was very uncharacteristic of the language commonly heard from government representatives. The language used between government officials, however, was very different from statements that were given to the public. In Kennan's words, the former style lacked hampering by "idealistic slogans." Take for example a speech Kennan gave on the differences between the Soviet and U.S. systems of government:

One involves the adoption of totalitarian authority and temporary depression of the standard of living. The other involves maintenance, and perhaps a steady expansion, of the standard of living, as well as, the maintenance of systems of government in which there is a considerable area of freedom.4

The contrast between public and private sentiments was quite noticeable, and especially ironic here with the reference to the standard of living as compared to Kennan's earlier statement. This was a recurring theme for many of the government documents and speeches on the topic of Vietnam, especially in the sentiments of public speeches by government officials compared to what was really being discussed within the Pentagon. In June of 1971 an extensive collection of internal U.S. government documents regarding the Vietnam War, the Pentagon Papers, were leaked to the public, allowing Americans a rare and candid look at the true dynamics of their government.

PPS 23 was also highly significant in the way that it represented a prevailing viewpoint within the postwar government that the U.S. must begin to construct a global system of relationships if it is to stay at the height of its vast wealth, or as Kennan had put it, "to maintain this position of disparity." A key aspect of this agenda, was to immediately begin rebuilding the war-torn industrialized nations so to eventually have them serve as markets for U.S. goods and investments. Sufficient resources, however, were crucial to this process. Therefore, American planners began to designate the intended role for the Third World. An early planning document titled The Political Economy of American Foreign Relations by a study group of elite economists
and American officials assigned the role of the Third World quite clearly, "Restoration of the economic health of many Western countries and re-creation of a reasonably efficient international economy require a more rapidly growing and calculable supply of primary products from underdeveloped areas." In a chapter on "The Underdeveloped Countries," the study suggested the reason why this assigned role will be beneficial for the Third World, "The American standard of living and political system provide universal models to which all 'sensible' nations will aspire once they become acquainted with them." 

A State Department report in 1949 assigned a similar role of resource provider to the "underdeveloped countries," stating that the Third World was to "fulfill its major function as a source of raw materials and a market for the industrial capitalist societies." These concepts, however, were far from being recently developed. Smaller nations had been fulfilling this role throughout history. The gold brought back from Mexico by Cortes and Pizzarro furnished the European Renaissance. In fact, the success of many imperial nations depended greatly on the maintenance of their colonies. To imagine Britain building an empire out of the resources of its own tiny island simply would not be possible. Nineteenth-century European imperialism looked to lesser nations for resources such as labor, markets, and ports, and as a result carried out their own industrialization. The resources of the future Third World thus served as essential parts of the industrialized world, literally being the foundations to their growth and stability. Yet American planners were reassessing these roles, not because they were to be changed but because they had yet to be considered in light of what had not existed in the nineteenth century: functioning Communist states. Communism was the fundamental opposite of capitalism, and these ideologically opposed nations were not compatible in the area of economics. This was what most of these postwar studies are addressing: "A serious reduction of the potential resource base and market opportunities of the West owing to the subtraction of the communist areas from the international economy and their economic transformation in ways which reduce their willingness and ability to complement the industrial economies of the West." This recurring theme of potential resources and market opportunities, as well as the notion of complementing the West, was one of the most significant threats from Communist nations. They would ultimately undermine efforts towards a global economy.

In planning America's long term objectives, policy makers placed special importance on Japan as a major market for U.S. goods. Japan, however, had considerably meager resources (this is a major reason why Japan was never colonized by the West). As George Kennan stated in a 1949 State Department memo, the Third World was to be "exploited for the reconstruction of Japan." The tiny nations of Southeast Asia were assigned this role, for they were geographically close to Japan as well as abundant in the type of resources that Japan needed. As one of these nations, Vietnam possessed major resources for this task, namely rice, tin and rubber. Therefore, if Vietnam instituted a Communist government that functioned independently of Western economic goals, major resources would have been lost, and the development of Japan as a major market would have become extremely difficult. This threat was addressed everywhere in these post-war documents:

The fall of Southeast Asia would underline the apparent economic advantages of
Japan with the Communist-dominated Asian sphere. Exclusion of Japan from trade with Southeast Asia would seriously affect the Japanese economy, and increase Japan's dependence on United States aid. In the long run the loss of Southeast Asia, could result in such economic and political pressures in Japan as to make it extremely difficult to prevent Japan's eventual accommodation to the Soviet Bloc.\textsuperscript{13}

The Study Group made a special point to explore the dynamics of Japan's damaged economy as well as its lack of colonies from which to draw resources:

Japanese industry has long since out grown its meager domestic resource base and must find expanding overseas sources of food, fuel, and industrial materials which can be purchased with expanding exports of manufactures. In the interwar period, the Japanese industrialists threw in their lot with the militarists in an effort to solve this problem through imperialism. Today the same problem faces them in much aggravated form. The Japanese economy has now been shorn of its protected colonial markets, investment outlets and food and raw material sources, and its trade with the Chinese mainland has been reduced to a trickle.\textsuperscript{14}

This language maintained the role of the Third World as a resource provider. The reference to the Japanese economy being "shorn" of markets and resources asserted that Japan would not hold up as an industrial nation without it's Third-World foundations. Next, as this section closed with a passage stating that the logical way to maintain the Japanese market "would be to make possible greater Japanese participation in the development of Southern Asia," it suggested that America should reassign Japan the colonies that it had lost in World War II. And once more, the nations of Indochina were to serve that role.\textsuperscript{15}

Indeed, the loss of Japan as a market would have seriously undermined America's long term goals towards the global economy. This was one of the major threats of an independently functioning Vietnam, and was exactly why we began helping the French to save their colony in Indochina.

**Communist Puppet: Justifying Involvement**

At the end of World War II, Vietnamese guerrillas led by Ho Chi Minh controlled nearly all of Northern Vietnam and soon proclaimed a Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1946. Preoccupied with domestic affairs, France recognized Ho's new government as a "free state" within the French Union. Yet Ho Chi Minh sought a completely unified Vietnam free of foreign involvement, and the First Indochina War soon broke out.\textsuperscript{16} In 1950, American officials deemed the potential independence of Vietnam detrimental enough to its capital agenda to begin committing both aid and advisors to help the French. On deciding to get involved in these matters, intelligence services were assigned the task of portraying Ho Chi Minh as a puppet of either Russia or China. In doing so the U.S. government could justify intervention on the basis
of Communist aggression. The State Department first concluded that there was "no evidence of a direct link between Ho and Moscow" (but "assumes it exists"). Later that year they found evidence of "Kremlin-directed conspiracy... in virtually all countries except Vietnam." The next year the State Department noted that "There continues to be no communication between the USSR and Vietnam." American officials in Saigon added, "No evidence has yet turned up that Ho Chi Minh is receiving current directives from Moscow, China or the Soviet Legation in Bangkok." This information, however, led these same officials to concluding that, "It may be assumed that Moscow feels that Ho and his Lieutenants have had sufficient training and experience-to be trusted to determine their day-to-day policy without supervision."18

In reviewing such documents, the evidence that Ho Chi Minh was a nationalist leader guiding his people towards liberation is overwhelming, and modern scholars from all ends of the political spectrum now acknowledge this as obvious. The former Chief of the Division of Southeast Asian Affairs in the State Department concluded:

I have never met an American, be he military, OSS, diplomat, or journalist, who had met Ho Chi Minh who did not reach the same belief: that Ho Chi Minh was first and foremost a Vietnamese nationalist. He was also a communist and believed that communism offered the best hope for the Vietnamese people. When I was in Indochina it was striking how the top echelon of competent French officials held unanimously the same view.19

To assume that Ho Chi Minh was part of a foreign plot to control Vietnam was to neglect the most basic factors of the region's history. The case for Chinese involvement was especially weak. To begin with, Ho's forces, the National Liberation Front (NLF), took power while the Chinese Communists were still fighting for control of China. Why would the Chinese have been involved abroad when they were not even stable at home? In addition, China was literally in ruins from the Japanese invasion of World War II as well as the civil war that ensued afterwards. The recently cited passage of the Study Group report on Japan's damaged economy made note that "trade with Chinese mainland has reduced to a trickle."20 This was not because China had become isolated, but was a result of continuous war reducing Chinese production to almost none. Famine was about to ensue.21 Foreign conquest would not have even been considered.

Ho kept a "middle-of-the-road policy" in dealing with Russia and China. Though both nations were communist, they eventually came to be at great odds with one another. China was developing a form of Communism far different from Russia, eventually frustrating diplomats in Moscow enough to cause them to pull all advisors out of China in 1960 and assume distant relations. Ho was well aware of this and chose to stay detached of the two so as not to make enemy of either country.22 In their memoirs, both former Secretary of War Robert McNamara as well as former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger acknowledged that Ho was clearly a Vietnamese nationalist fighting for his country's independence.23 This is not to say, however, that Ho Chi Minh was completely isolated from them. Vietnam did trade with both nations and received varying amounts of aid at different times. Vietnam was among the world's chief exporters of rice at the time and was trading with several nations within the region, including
Russia and China. Yet, as mentioned earlier, Ho knew well enough to keep even distance between the two.²⁴

All of this information was well understood by U.S. policy makers, yet they believed the American public would never consent to armed intervention on the reasoning that the resources of Vietnam were vital to rebuilding the economy of Japan. As a result, the depiction of Ho Chi Minh as an agent of Communist aggression was still delivered to the masses. In a public speech, Secretary of State Dean Acheson stated that Ho Chi Minh "was the mortal enemy of native independence in Indochina."²⁵

The irony of this situation was that if there was a foreign puppet in Vietnam, it was Ngo Dinh Diem: a French colonial official who was plucked out of a Catholic Seminary in New Jersey at the command of the U.S. government to head the South Vietnamese state.²⁶ The role of Diem as a U.S.-installed puppet became such common knowledge in this history that it is now undisputed background information for even the most conservative of historians. The Pentagon Papers referred to Diem as if he were a piece on a chessboard (including detailed plans of how to dispose of him).²⁷ If anyone was a mortal enemy to Vietnamese nationalism it was Diem. As the Pentagon Papers concluded, "Ngo Dinh Diem presided over a state which, for all the lip service it paid to individual freedom and American-style government, remained a one party, highly centralized, familial oligarchy in which neither operating democracy nor the prerequisites for such existed."²⁸

Statements such as these were well understood in Pentagon circles, yet at the same time the American public was being told that South Vietnamese democracy was being threatened by the aggressive North under the puppet Ho Chi Minh. Once again the difference between statements made to the American public and those made in documents among U.S. officials were literally polar opposites. American officials were well aware of Ho's true role as early as 1950, yet still asserted the opposite as persuasion to commit U.S. ground troops some fifteen years later. In short, America was involving itself in a foreign struggle of a colonized nation trying to shed its European rulers of nearly a century.

**Dominoes and the Threat of a Good Example**

American planners firmly believed that the potential loss of Vietnam to its own independence would cause a chain reaction in which other underdeveloped nations of Indochina would soon follow. This was the basis of the famous Domino Theory, another main cause sold to the American public to legitimize intervention. Eisenhower first conveyed this to the public at a news conference in 1954: "You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over."²⁹ This analogy was meant to illustrate a tremendous threat to the democratic world, in which the evil Soviet empire would spread its influence in succession. The idea of a looming Soviet threat began to play a vital role in American foreign affairs. In fact, for much of the Cold War it served as a cover for policy initiatives that otherwise would have been supported by the American public. This was how interventions were justified in the cases of Greece, Afghanistan, Nicaragua, Chile and Grenada (to name but a few) over the course of the Cold War. American planners never believed
that the Soviet Union was aggressively seeking to take over the free world, anymore than they believed that a small agrarian nation like Vietnam would somehow go on to world conquest should it become independent. What these planners were aware of and talked about quite often, however, was the notion that if Vietnam becomes independent of the American economic agenda, and did not fulfill the role assigned to it, then other nations in the Third World will realize that it was possible to function outside of Western influence, and retain their natural resources for their own development. In this sense, the Domino Theory makes very much sense. The importance of underdeveloped nations as markets and resource providers led American planners to worry over a single nation like Vietnam, especially when they imagined a half dozen Third World countries taking up this course of action. Long-term plans for a global economy would collapse and industrial nations would struggle to maintain themselves due to a lack of resources. Kennan asserted in PPS 23 that "our attention will have to be concentrated everywhere on our immediate national objectives." If one of these nations stepped out of line and developed both independently and successfully, then the dominoes may have begun to topple. This dilemma was not just a theory but was seriously discussed quite often among American planners.

In a report to the Secretary of State, General Maxwell Taylor outlined President Lyndon B. Johnson's options in Vietnam:

[The U.S. could] passively watch... the development of a popular front, knowing that this may in due course require the U.S. to leave in failure; or... actively assume... increased responsibility for the outcome following a time schedule consistent with our estimate of the limited viability of any South Vietnamese government... If we leave Vietnam with our tail between our legs, the consequences of this defeat in the rest of Asia, Africa, and Latin America would be disastrous.30

It is not hard to realize which option Taylor favored. In a later statement Taylor directly acknowledged the potential detriment of Vietnam serving as a model of successful insurrection. He asserted that if America could be defeated in Indochina, a message would be sent to the rest of the colonized world and therefore inspiring similar uprisings. A year later, the Secretary of Defense John McNaughton states the same line of reasoning:

- U.S. aims; 70%- To avoid humiliating U.S. defeat. 20%- To keep South Vietnam and then adjacent territory from Chinese hands. 10%- To permit the people of South Vietnam to enjoy a better freer way of life. ALSO- to emerge from crisis without unacceptable taint from methods used. NOT- "to help a friend".31

In this order of priorities maintaining American credibility was placed as the top objective, while the people of South Vietnam, who's homeland the U.S. was occupying, were mentioned as a side note. The notion of not helping a friend was yet another example of the differences between private and public rhetoric. This was at a time when the President was assuring the public of his
noble intentions: "Yes, as you know, the U.S. for more than a decade has been assisting the government, the people of Vietnam, to maintain their independence." McNaughton also made reference to adjacent territory, meaning Laos and Cambodia. The example of the NLF forces under Ho Chi Minh had influenced neighboring countries to seek their own independence. The dominoes were already falling.

The idea of avoiding a "humiliating U.S. defeat" soon began to take precedence in Indochina during the mid 1960s. The stakes had now become much higher than merely the preservation of the Japanese market. American planners were no longer merely attempting to maintain this single aspect of their plans for a global market, but were now desperately trying to keep the entire foundations of these policies from collapsing. The question of how to accomplish this required some drastic solutions.

To begin with, American officials were becoming very well aware that this war could not be won. After all, North Vietnamese forces had successfully maintained their struggle for nearly twenty years at this point. On assessing the current situation of American military efforts in 1965, McNaughton asserted that the situation "is bad and deteriorating." Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara was well aware of the worsening situation in Vietnam as well as the now looming threat to America's military reputation:

The South Vietnam conflict is regarded as a test case of U.S. capacity to help a nation meet a Communist "war of liberation". Thus purely in terms of foreign policy, the stakes are high. McNamara eventually concluded this memo by stating that the "situation has been growing unquestionably worse," and he went on to cite about a dozen reasons in support of this, such as increasingly low morale among both U.S. advisors and South Vietnamese peasants, as well as a continuing increase in the popularity of Ho Chi Minh. These sentiments were quite pervasive among U.S. planners in the years ranging from 1963 to 1966. General Maxwell Taylor was amazed by the endurance of the North Vietnamese forces:

The ability of the Viet-Cong continuously to rebuild their units and to make good their losses is one of the mysteries of the guerrilla war... Not only do the Viet-Cong units have the recuperative powers of the phoenix, but they have an amazing ability to maintain morale. Only on rare cases have we found evidences of bad morale amongst Viet-Cong prisoners or recorded in captured Viet-Cong documents.

Although the war was unwinnable in the sense of a traditional military victory, the solution to how America could save it's reputation in this affair and how the U.S. effort would relate to other Third-World struggles seems to have been well agreed upon and discussed quite often. National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy echoes the sentiments of many others: "Sustained bombing of North Vietnam will damp down the charge that we did not do all we could have done, and this charge will be important in many countries." He went on to explain
that the bombing will "set a higher price for the future upon all adventures of guerrilla warfare, and it should therefore somewhat increase our ability to deter such ventures."37

In short, Bundy argued to escalate the war to such a degree so as to send a message to all of the Third World that guerrilla ventures or nationalist insurgencies will be met with a heavy price. The commitment of ground troops and the air war over Vietnam was reflective of an effort, in Bundy's words, "to damp down the charge that we did not do all that we could."38 Or perhaps as General Maxwell Taylor urged, "Never let the DRV (North Vietnamese) gain a victory, without having paid a disproportionate price."39 The disproportionate price will be a sustained saturation bombing of both North and South Vietnam (as well as Laos and Cambodia) and a ground war that will lead to the nearly complete destruction of Indochina. Basically, American officials had resolved that the Vietnamese would pay for their independence through the annihilation of Indochina.

These sentiments were not merely restricted to the Pentagon. Some reporters, though mostly those that had been to Vietnam in this era, had an idea of these policies as they were occurring. Robert Scheer summed it up well in 1972:

the spectre that was haunting the United States in the Cold War - not Russian or Chinese aggression, but rather the thing that comes up continuously throughout the papers but is never brought together - the specter of popular revolutionary struggle. The deeper the U.S. got in, the more ominous the specter. It is one thing for a revolution to defeat a dying French colonialism, another to thwart the U.S. in the finest hour of its burgeoning empire. Particularly after it has committed a half million troops to the effort. That is the "humiliating defeat" John McNaughton was talking about. Humiliating as an example to the world that, with all its power massed, Uncle Sam could be taken. And if thirty million Vietnamese with their primitive technology could do it, what people in the world, with similar organization and politics, couldn't? That was the specter. What exactly was being threatened? Imperialism.40

The concept illustrated here was one that is well known and discussed within the Pentagon among U.S. planners as the war dragged on into its twentieth year in the mid 1960s with no sight of a military victory. In this sense, the nationalist insurgents under Ho Chi Minh were already sending a dangerous message to the underdeveloped nations around the world—that imperialists could be shed and defeated despite their superior military technology, and that these same nations need not fulfill a "service role" in providing their own natural resources to industrialized nations. This was the threat of a good example and the reality of the Domino Theory. So when Henry Kissinger later commented that the free and democratic elections in Chile in the early 1970's were a "virus that could infect regions as far as Italy" he was illustrating this exact train of thought.41 In fact, to follow his line of thinking one could consider the National Liberation Movement in Vietnam to have been a virus. How would the U.S. safely deal with this? First they could inoculate the infected region and then vaccinate all those exposed. In Indochina this amounted to inoculation through saturation bombing and a fully escalated war within Vietnam,
and then similar measures to vaccinate neighboring Laos and Cambodia who had indeed been exposed to this virus. In all, it amounted to a situation in which the U.S. is sending a clear message to the world, of what will happen if underdeveloped countries stepped out of their assigned roles and failed to fulfill the tasks expected of them.

The Face of War

An amazing aspect of the Pentagon Papers was that they failed to ever make any reference to notions such as “death,” “injury,” or even “people”. The U.S. planners of this era were far removed from what their strategies were actually producing. The strategies called for B-52 bombers to consistently unleash tons of bombs on a tiny agrarian Third World the size of Florida for over a decade. A study prepared for the Pentagon stated the result was “that innumerable crimes and absolutely senseless acts of suppression against both real and suspect Communist and sympathizing villagers were committed. Efficiency took the form of brutality and a total disregard for the difference between determined foes and potential friends.”

Johnson fully escalated war in Vietnam, sending increasing number of troops in the latter half of the 1960s. Rural areas of Vietnam were turned into free-fire zones, meaning that all persons remaining within them—civilians, children, old people—were considered the enemy, and were subject to indiscriminate bombing by American planes. The use of poisonous defoliants desecrated the landscape, forcing Vietnam, one of the world's chief rice exporters, to import food, and leaving both Vietnamese and Americans with severe and strange illnesses as well as birth defects in their children. Much of the landscape, from both bombing and defoliants, came to resemble "moonscapes" of desolate land with an estimated 20 million bomb craters. The death toll for all of Indochina was estimated at a minimum of 2 million, with the U.S. claiming another half million.

Laos and then Cambodia were subjected to the same saturation bombings as Vietnam. The result in Laos was a "secret bombing" of over 2 million tons of bombs on Laos from 1965 to 1973. This caused a good part of the Laotian population, mostly consisting of peasant farmers, to take refuge in caves for years at a time. These extensive U.S. attacks upon Laos are still virtually unknown to the American public. Neighboring Cambodia had sought to stay independent of the conflict since 1955. When the U.S. military began to make claims that the North Vietnamese were supplying southern forces through Cambodia, however, American planes begin to focus their "saturation bombings" on the Cambodian border. When Cambodia's sovereign leader, Prince Sihanouk, denounced the U.S. for this at a major press conference, he was soon deposed; creating a situation for Pol Pot, the leader of the notorious Khmer Rouge, to come to power. From 1969 to 1975, U.S. bombing killed 600,000 Cambodians and caused a full-scale famine. All this for a nation that strove to stay independent of the conflict. More bombs were dropped individually on Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam then the total number of bombs dropped by all sides in World War II combined: almost one 500 pound bomb for very human being in Vietnam. In 1975, the U.S. imposed a harsh economic embargo on Vietnam for the crimes that they had committed against America. The embargo included all humanitarian aid as well as all projects by non-profit and non-governmental organizations. President Clinton
recently lifted the embargo as a result of Vietnamese cooperation with American policies as well as from significant pressure from an international business community that feels that Vietnam is ready to re-assume its role in the global economy.46

Overview

The long-term policies sketched out at the end of World War II by U.S. policy planners sought to establish a developing global economy that enabled America to maintain the position of wealth, power, and prosperity that it enjoyed as a result of the war. Quick reconstruction of the battered industrial nations was a key aspect of this plan. Japan was to play a major role as a market for U.S. goods and investment. The reconstruction of Japan, however, depended largely on resources from the Third World which Japan had begun to lack as a consequence of its losing the war. American planners assigned Southeast Asia the role of providing Japan with the resources and markets that it would need to develop and maintain industrial capacity. The prospect of a unified Vietnamese nation, independent of its French colonizers, threatened this model of the global market that the U.S. had developed for the post-war period. Since the planners deemed the resources as essential to the rebuilding of Japan, it chose to begin aiding the French in defeating the Vietnamese war of liberation. Although America could not link the Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh to Russia or China, therefore establishing a case of foreign aggression, they went forth with their intervention with a public reasoning that was virtually the opposite of what government studies and staff members knew to be true. Still worried over the loss of Vietnamese resources, America eventually began assuming full responsibility for the effort of defeating Ho Chi Minh’s forces.

Yet, the war dragged on for a considerable period of time, and after twenty years American officials began to logically assess that it could not be won. This soon gave rise, however, to a new cause that American planners found more significant than the potential loss of the Japanese market. This new threat was the danger to America’s reputation as a global force. American generals and officials began to realize that if America withdrew from Vietnam and allowed it to function independently of U.S. policies and objectives, then Third-World nations around the globe would soon seek a similar path. As a consequence, American officials escalated the war in this region so as to set a very high price on such ventures, therefore teaching the Vietnamese a lesson and sending a message out to the rest of the world. After a decade of this escalation, American planners proved correct that the war could not be won, even with all-out American military involvement. The result of this escalation left Vietnam, and the rest of Indochina, in literal ruins. This prevented Vietnam from being a successful model of sovereignty and prosperity to others in the Third World that sought to shed their colonizers. The death toll of this thirty-year affair reached a total of between two and five million (depending on which sources are used), with billions of dollars and resources expended on all sides. The long-term effects of saturation bombings resulted in immense destruction upon the individual nations of Indochina. The events of escalation in Vietnam amounted to tremendous domestic dissent and widespread disillusionment towards the American government that still lingers today. Vietnam eventually had a strict economic embargo placed on it by the U.S., assuring that an independent
Vietnam would never have the resources to rebuild itself and function as an autonomous or prosperous nation. The embargo was then recently lifted as a result of pressure from the international community that recognized Vietnam to be ready to fulfill its necessary role in the global market. Finally, the history of this era tends to reflect the rhetoric that American officials used, yet never truly believed.

**Conclusion and Interpretations**

The war waged by the U.S. in Vietnam was an act of aggression in which American forces intended to suppress an indigenous national movement that sought its own sovereignty and freedom from foreign intrusion. American officials saw the Vietnamese quest for independence as a threat to their own global priorities and guidelines for the development and maintenance of a world market. This is not the first time in human history that war has been waged for the preservation of lucrative market. A similar example had occurred in Asia when Britain waged the Opium Wars of the 19th century against China so as to maintain the profitable markets that Great Britain was currently exploiting. In this sense, American involvement had little to do with the concept of the Free World (as was continuously told to the public), but instead was an affair that was primarily concerned with free markets: the cause was capital, not democracy.

After reading the Pentagon Papers, which recorded the American government's execution of this intervention in extreme detail, it is not the least bit surprising that its editors were tried by the federal government for an act of espionage in exposing the public to these documents. After all, the Pentagon Papers had the potential to portray what was really happening in the Vietnam War, as well as what America's true motives were. The public and private rhetoric of our government officials has been a leading concept in this study. The *Pentagon Papers* can be difficult to read because they reveal the disparity between reality and what was being sold to the public. In fact, had the implications of this façade not caused so much death and destruction, the distortion provided by America's elected officials would almost seem humorous. It amazes the reader that a major government figure such as George Kennan could cite human rights, democracy, and the raising of the living standard as "vague and unreal objectives" in a top secret document, while in a public speech he praised America for its commitment to freedom and the maintenance of the living standard. Are American so naturally apathetic as a people that they would allow such men to pose as our representative leaders with slogans of high and noble ideas, while in private they commit themselves to the causes that they publicly denounce? While the American public was constantly reminded of their obligation to maintain democratic governments, in private their elected officials were continually referring to these smaller nations as commodities, rarely ever acknowledging the quality of the Vietnamese government or the welfare of its peoples. If there is a bright spot to this entire dark history it is that the Supreme Court defended the public's right to view the real reason why American soldiers were sent to fight. The exposing of the true dynamics of this war and its leader's true intentions and beliefs somewhat accounts for the current trend of American disenchantment with the U.S. government.
It is not the least bit surprising that the American people are suspect of plots and conspiracies in the corridors of the Pentagon.

The preservation of this history is yet another injustice to the people of Indochina. A Time magazine article from 1998 asserted Ho Chi Minh to have been a puppet of Moscow and literally places the death toll of this war on his head for not giving in to American pressure. While there have been countless volumes written on this history, the true facts of the era are relatively unknown to the general populace. In addition, it is unfortunate that a man like Henry Kissinger would receive a Nobel Peace Prize for his involvement in these affairs, especially with a logic that asserts "that if the world truly wants peace, it needs to apply America's moral prescriptions." Obviously he is referring to his own choice to use saturation bombing on an agrarian Third World country seeking its own independence. In eulogizing his former colleague, Kissinger asserted that the world is a safer place because of Richard Nixon. Here Kissinger may have been referring to Cambodia, a nation that suffered close to a million casualties under this political duo. To allow this history to be distorted with the same sloganeering that caused it to happen is to create an environment for similar events.

This study also sheds light on current trends of the global market (or as it is paradoxically named, neoliberalism). The Third World is still designated the role of resource providers and exploitable markets, and continues to serve as the foundations of industrialized nations. A perfect example exists within the current global economic crisis that is devastating Asia and gradually spreading westward. The recent economic collapse of Thailand as well as political upheaval in Indonesia (a direct result of neoliberal policies) have set in motion a series of dominoes that has sent the Japanese economy reeling and has crippled the whole of Russian society. This is precisely what American planners were fearing with Vietnam—that instability in Indochina would undermine the foundations of the neighboring industrial nations. Japan and Russia are currently in turmoil because their Third-World markets and resources have dried up. These dominoes are still in motion. Western Industrialists are in a panic as they worry that the next domino to fall could be Brazil, a major foundation to the American economy. Also significant is the nature of global economic policies. Agreements such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) are implemented with little involvement of the American public. These programs have tremendous effects on Third-World nations and typically hinder their development. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the Zapatista guerillas of Mexico declared war on the Mexican government the same day that NAFTA was put into effect. Also significant is the question of why there is still an embargo placed upon the nation of Cuba, for it relates directly to the American reasoning for escalation in Vietnam. If Castro can produce a state independent of American goals that enjoys sovereign prosperity, it will still prove a dangerous example to the rest of Latin America, especially in light of recent neoliberal programs. Yet, if the people of Cuba remain immersed in poverty and starvation this can never happen. Finally, one must make note of the fact that Vietnam is currently being flooding with Western goods and trends. Their embargo was removed after they grew weary of isolation and the starvation and misery that comes with it. In this sense, the Vietnam war was to some extent quite successful: Vietnam is currently incorporated into the flourishing global economy, foreign products have a new stable market, and
even American companies such as Nike have cheap labor in the form of sweat shops. These were the true reasons for sending American troops to die a world away.

The most ghastly conclusion that can be drawn from this history, however, is also the most subtle. In the mid 1960s American planners and military commanders were very much aware that this war could not be won. Every aspect of the situation confirmed this. The North Vietnamese guerrillas had been waging a successful war for over twenty years. The conflict had become the core reality for a generation of these people. They were fighting on their native terrain and were backed by a sense of righteousness in seeking their liberation from foreign oppressors. American soldiers were therefore sent to die for a cause that was simply unwinnable. They were committed not to defend democracy, but to contribute to the wholesale destruction of Vietnam. Simply put, American soldiers were never intended to win the war in Vietnam!

Last, we must consider that American aggression on Indochina was an act of genocide in which an indigenous people were systematically exterminated because they wouldn't fulfill the role set for them by a foreign power. In concluding, perhaps the most accurate assessment of this war was put forth by Anthony Russo, one of the two editors of the Pentagon Papers. After reading all of the Pentagon documents on this war, he remarked that "the American B-52's and their ruthless saturation bombings were the gas chambers of the sixties and seventies."48

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6 Ibid., 154.
7 Chomsky, 12.
9 Zinn, 290-293.
10 Study Group, 42.
11 Chomsky, 12.
12 Zinn, 466.
14 Study Group, 134.
15 Ibid., 135.
16 Tindall, 1234.
17 Young, 22-24.
20 Study Group, 135.
21 Scheer, 96-97.
24 Giap, 34-35, 52
25 Scheer, 130.
26 *Ibid.,* 139.
27 *Pentagon Papers,* 159, 233.
28 Scheer, 135.
29 Katsiaficas, 34.
30 Young, 126.
31 *Pentagon Papers,* 432.
32 Zinn, 466.
33 *Pentagon Papers,* 355.
36 Zinn, 466.
37 Young, 136.
38 *Ibid.,* 126.
39 Scheer, 143.
40 *Ibid.,* 129-130
41 Chomsky, 24.
42 Young, 249.
43 Zinn, 468-69.
44 Young, 230-238.
45 Zinn, 69.
47 Kissinger, 18.
48 Scheer, 151.