

## BOOKS

## THE FUTURE

issues evidenced in the book is only a modest one, that may be because many of the authors are able to assume that when the crew of the spaceship, especially its staff officers, are selected, they will be among them. Indeed, some already have been. Among the participants are former secretaries of the Army and Defense, and representatives of some of the nation's largest corporations and private fortunes.

These people believe in the beneficence of their values and good intentions, and their general expertise is intimidating in its range and articulateness. They and their proteges would seem to be the logical candidates to take over the controls as our vessel enters its dangerous passage.

But what of the rest of us, the majority who are and will remain plain passengers? Can we have full confidence in the values and intentions of these aspiring pilots? Should we?

In many areas covered in the book, probably most, the answer would seem to be a qualified yes; at least, we would be safer in their hands than we have been under the guidance of the current crew. But in one key area the answer is a resounding nay, and a negative that has disturbing implications for the rest of the discussion.

### The population bomb.

That area is population, and appropriately the authors put it at the front of their "agenda," as Chapter One. In doing so, however, they not only buy completely the mythology of the "Population Bomb," they even recommend that the U.S. and Canada form an OPEC-like grain cartel that would use the threat of withholding food exports to extort compliance by poor countries with population control schemes.

There is not space here to treat this issue in detail. But three objections to the cartel proposal arise at once and with urgency: first, it wouldn't work; second, it would be an almost sure recipe for World War Three; and third, it would be immoral.

But in the context of the book, what is most disturbing is the way the recommendations were arrived at. The authors put together completely contradictory pieces of information and neglect the fact that they do not support their conclusion.

For instance, consider the following statements about data: "Census, birth, and death statistics around the world are so uncertain that the human population can only be estimated with 10 percent accuracy. World population has been growing exponentially with a doubling time estimated to be between 35 and 40 years."

Note that in the first sentence there are no fewer than five qualifying terms, indicating how risky it is to make dogmatic assertions, and especially projections, about population numbers. Yet the authors go right on to declare flatly and without qualification what world population has been doing and what it will do for the next 50 years, as a basis for their proposal for dealing with the "crisis" thus invented.

### Consumption the problem.

Similarly, the authors hear, yet do not hear, the complaints of the would-be clients of this program: "An active, sincere effort

to stabilize U.S. population could increase the credibility of our aid to family programs abroad. Third World countries have been quick to point out that each new American consumes five times as much food and 60 times as much energy per year as the average South Asian."

How do they miss such a glaring *non sequitur*? Why can't they see that the Third World's primary interest is in limiting and redistributing our *consumption*, not controlling our *population*, the growth of which is virtually at zero now anyway?

Whatever its explanation, this lapse of perception is a typical and very dangerous characteristic of too much discussion concerning population. Yet if anything will sabotage Spaceship Earth from the inside, such schemes as the cartel idea, which would deliberately threaten large numbers of the passengers with politically-motivated starvation while the few in the first-class berths and at the captain's table are mostly overweight, will do it.

The fundamental shortcomings of the population chapter show that even this generally enlightened body of activists is subject to mistakes, lapses of understanding, and class bias that could have far-reaching consequences for all of us. And this myopia would seem to be the most likely source of the book's failure to address several questions that are repeatedly evoked, but never adequately dealt with in the book, questions that are likely to be of overriding importance for the public as the transition from abundance to administered scarcity unfolds. Of these questions, three stand out:

First, how can we preserve the largest possible measure of control over our personal and community lives outside the enlarged central authority that appears to be coming?

Second, how can we maximize the accountability of the system and its managers to the people, and provide for real redress of individual and community grievances within it?

And third, how can we act now to make the managed order in fact only a transitional phenomenon, one that will be succeeded as soon as possible by a new social order that will more fully embody the values of human scale, openness and participation, which will likely be severely challenged in the meantime?

It seems very likely that the transition outlined in *The Unfinished Agenda* will come to pass. In California, where I live, the evidence is as close as the nearest unflushed toilet.

This being the case, it would seem to be time for those whose lives will be rearranged by it, and that includes just about everyone, to begin paying attention to the human and political issues involved in these epic changes.

These values make up only a minor and neglected part of *The Unfinished Agenda*, as formulated by its environmentalist activist authors and sponsors. The implication is clear that if we don't figure out how to preserve these values, the new crew of our beleaguered spaceship isn't going to do it for us.

—Chuck Fager

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## The Legacy of Vietnam



Drawing by David Levine. Reprinted with permission of New York Review of Books © 1968, NYREV, Inc.

## The U.S. in Vietnam, a case of grasshoppers against elephants

### GRASSHOPPERS & ELEPHANTS: Why Vietnam Fell

By Wilfred Burchett  
Urizen Books, 1977, paper \$4.95

### OUR GREAT SPRING VICTORY: An Account of the Liberation of South Vietnam

By Gen. Van Tien Dung  
Monthly Review Press, 1977, \$15

### A SOLDIER REPORTS

By Gen. William C. Westmoreland  
Doubleday, 1976, \$12.95

### CAN AMERICA WIN THE NEXT WAR?

By Drew Middleton  
Scribner's, 1975, \$8.95

It amounted to Ronald McDonald giving cooking lessons to the chefs of Paris.

During the Vietnam war Washington spent billions of dollars teaching political and military skills to the Vietnamese, a people who, by the historical record, are among the most politically sophisticated and militarily adept on earth.

At the time we chose to educate them in our Ding Dong schools of anti-communism and counter-revolution, we had just gotten over being mauled in Korea and humiliated at the Bay of Pigs. They had just finished knocking off the French empire, not to mention those in their time of Japan, China and Mongolia. Our influence on them was to be but that of an oil spill in the ocean of their history—polluting but, by and by, degradable.

About 1284, Tran Hung Dao Vietnam's military leader during the third Mongol invasion, wrote: "The enemy must fight his battles far from his home base for a long time.... We must further weaken him by drawing him into protracted campaigns. Once his initial dash is broken, it will be easier to destroy him."

It was essentially this strategy, fortified by the Vietnamese brand of Marxist revolution, that wrecked the American war machine and the American system's bid for franchise in Indochina.

### The ironies of Vietnam.

The fascinating books by Wilfred Burchett and Gen. Van Tien Dung, the former the international left's foremost chronicler of war and revolution, and the latter the Chief of Staff of the Vietnam People's Army (VPA), mine the ironies of the war that Washington prefers to leave buried.

Reading them, it's clear that "pragmatic" Washington's dogmas about communism and Asians were as responsible for its defeat as "dogmatic" Hanoi's practical realism about American power and the way to cope with it. In Burchett's metaphor (borrowed from Ho Chi Minh), the U.S. used elephants to catch grasshoppers while the grasshoppers used their wits to drive the elephants into the sea.

Self-proclaimed individualists, our leaders opted for a war dependent on mindless agglomerations of troops and technology, guided by a bureaucratized officer caste whose chief strategy was "cover



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## LEGACY OF VIETNAM

your ass" and whose main tactic was the evasion of responsibility—the old Army game in a new corporate version. A lone VPA sniper rated an artillery barrage, and the rumor of an enemy squad in the area was enough to bring the B-52s into action.

It was a self-serving, dishonest war. The CIA got into the habit of writing its own "captured enemy documents" because the real ones didn't say what the top brass wanted to hear.

Accused collectivists, the communists fought a war that by its very nature relied upon the loyalty, ingenuity and guts of individual cadres and largely autonomous battle formations. The VPA's command structure was, perforce, decentralized. It expected, and got, more in the way of personal initiative from the ranks than probably any other army in history.

While democratic Washington was trying to bomb Vietnam into rubble on the liberal premise that communism would somehow be crushed in the wreckage, totalitarian Hanoi was using political weapons to woo people on every level of South Vietnamese society.

The NLF managed to create a dense web of cadres, spies and helpers who, at the right moment, were able to sow panic in Saigon's ranks, organize the rear areas, and pave the political way for the fast-moving VPA spearheads.

Burchett tells us they were so successful at this broadscale recruiting that in the closing days of the war hundreds of "loyal" Saigon cadres, many converted or planted years before, were able to take over most of the capital's key facilities from the inside and present them in pristine condition to the VPA troops at the hour of liberation. Even the invaluable files of Thieu's cops and spies were saved from removal or destruction by "plants."

#### Ordinary people.

Burchett is at his best detailing the resourcefulness and courage of ordinary people engaged in the extraordinary work of making a revolution. He talks about their suffering, the atrocities they endured, but to evoke respect rather than pity.

On the other side of the battlefield, he writes of his meetings with Kissinger and Harriman, letting their self-deluding statements speak for themselves.

Burchett deserves a bouquet here. He has covered most of the major hotspots of the postwar world—Germany, Eastern Europe, USSR, China, Korea, Cuba, Portugal and southern Africa—providing us with more and better information than the money press sees fit to print. He's a John Reed and a half, a legitimate hero for aspiring radical journalists.

Gen. Dung's book is a straight military history of the war-winning spring 1975 offensive that he led in the field. It should be read in conjunction with the book by Gen. William C. Westmoreland, Dung's erstwhile counterpart on the American high command. The differences are revealing.

The Vietnamese, a weaver by trade, a criminal agitator by the lights of Paris and Washington, is a political revolutionary with military expertise. The American, a technician, frankly admits that

the politics of a supremely political war only confused him.

Dung's narrative, laced with poetry, is warm and worldly. Westmoreland's words march in lockstep while his mind remains at parade rest.

The collectivist, a colleague of the legendary Vo Nguyen Giap and the product of an incredibly complex and prolonged revolutionary experience, is a singular human being. The individualist, stamped out by the West Point cookie cutter, is indistinguishable from any other time-server in uniform.

#### A "no-win" policy?

Westmoreland's book is mainly a gripe about Washington's supposed "no-win" policy. It sounds vaguely plausible until Dung reminds us that at the apogee of the "no win" war, his troops were successfully engaging over 60 percent of total American conventional forces and a Saigon army of a million-plus (ineffectives).

Or that the U.S. dumped ten million tons of bombs on Vietnam, more than were dropped in all previous wars put together. If this amounted to "no win" then the Normandy invasion must have been an exercise in surrender!

The yahoo's reply to this is that, after all, we could have nuked our opponents into oblivion. Implicit in this barbarous cop-out is the admission that American conventional forces, no matter how powerful or numerous, were inferior to those of a small peasant country.

#### Outfought.

The U.S. didn't lose the war because it was evil and Vietnamese revolutionaries were righteous, though there is a kind of truth in that romantic notion. It lost because it was outfought. The communists, inferior only in material things, were better organized, had higher morale, were more capably led, and were served by a Marxist praxis that, in very practi-

cal ways, was superior to the myths and wishful thoughts that guided the American warmakers.

Since 1950 the American military has been regularly drubbed by the small communist countries it has chosen to pick on. Drew Middleton, the Clausewitz in residence at the *New York Times*, says in his post-Vietnam book that the American losing streak is likely to continue. He believes that the Russians would whip us in a war in which, for one reason or another, nuclear weapons weren't used.

He even sees our military chances as dim in the kind of limited war situation that could erupt, say, in the Mideast. His pessimism is based on technical and social factors, but he evades the toughest issues.

It was American capitalism's decision after World War II to make our military both the guardian of empire and a function of our waste economy. The goals were incompatible.

Armies, like boxers, should be lean, clean and quick. Ours was made corrupt, infected with gout, and largely unable to apply its new supermarket doctrines of warfare to the real thing.

The Pentagon was turned into another of our great, business-serving state bureaucracies. Its ability to fight wars has become equal to HEW's ability to fight poverty.

We assume the Pentagon can blow up the world (providing, of course, that the missiles are more reliable than our Pintos or Mr. Coffee machines), but that's about all we can assume.

Meanwhile, an underlying truth in all four of these books can be boiled down to what an admiral told Drew Middleton: "Lendin said that an army reflects the society. Well, God help us if he was right, and our forces reflect our society."

—Peter Karman

Peter Karman is a freelance writer in Connecticut.

**The U.S. didn't lose because it was evil and the Vietnamese righteous; it was outfought.**



Wilfred Burchett, the quintessential left journalist, above on the scene in Vietnam. Below, Larry Heinemann.

## John Wayne-ing it with the Romeo platoon

### CLOSE QUARTERS

By Larry Heinemann  
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977,  
\$10

This first novel is the most convincing condemnation of America's imperialist war in Vietnam thus far. It is all the more remarkable for not once addressing popularly held conclusions about the war to support its vision. *Close Quarters* is pure fiction: it exists in its own time, on its own landscape, with its own moral scheme, and reads as if it were the first American book ever about Vietnam.

Philip Dosier is the unromantic anti-hero and narrator, Pfc. and later Sgt. Dosier in the Third Battalion of the 33rd, U.S. Army, Vietnam. In Tay Ninh City, Dosier meets his motorized reconnaissance unit, Romeo platoon, the most unmistakable slice of Americana since the Big Mac. It is autumn 1967. Tet has not yet happened; Washington has not been marched upon.

Dosier's friends in Romeo platoon are crude, arrogant, racist, violent and sentimental; archetyp-

ical American men of the range and battlefield. They like to "John Wayne it"—walk tall, swagger, cock their jaws towards the sunset, drink beer, smoke Cambodian grass like Castro smokes cigars and screw dink women ("dinks" are all Vietnamese, enemy and ally). They drive the most rugged land vehicles, call in the most sophisticated artillery and aircraft with sophisticated radios. They might have won the war if they had ever figured out what they were fighting for.

"I'll fill your sandbags or burn your shit or wander around in the bushes," Dosier says, "because I simply do not care about anything but a drink and some smoke and laying my head down every once in a while to rest my eyes."

These are not James Jones' soldiers, nor Hollywood's. Heinemann's intimate, unflattering portraits of Dosier's Romeo platoon are of war criminals, committed to no one or nothing but action and a general loathing of Asians. Yet Heinemann's indictment is so subtle, oftentimes done with such