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The US has forgotten about the Vietnamese



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Americans tend to think only of what they suffered during the war



US authorised personnel and civilians are evacuated from Saigon in April 1975

If there is one thing that can be said for sure about Americans, it is this: we have had a very weird relationship with the people of Vietnam. For a long time, during the past century, we cared a lot about their hearts and minds, and their hopes and schemes. Then, for decades after that, we hardly gave a hoot about any of them, really.

Next week brings a reminder of the period when our feelings about the Vietnamese began to change in earnest. Thursday marks the 40th anniversary of the fall of Saigon, the day when the forces of communist North Vietnam captured the capital of the US-backed south, paving the way for the reunification of the country after a civil war that took the lives of hundreds of thousands — or maybe even millions — of people.

Any American who was old enough to walk and chew gum at the same time in 1975 will remember the day. I was 15 when the last helicopters lifted off from the US embassy in Saigon, and by that time, the war in Southeast Asia had been raging for as long as I could

remember. I grew up on body counts and arguments about the war; no family gathering in those days was complete without an airing out of differences.

It was almost as if there was a national competition under way to see who cared the most about the Vietnamese, and their neighbours in Cambodia and Laos.

On one side were the Americans who were willing to sacrifice their own sons to protect the Vietnamese from the communists. In all, more than 3m members of the US armed forces were sent to Southeast Asia on that mission. More than 58,000 Americans died. Thousands upon thousands more came home wounded — in body or in spirit, or both.

On the other side were Americans who felt there were better ways of showing affection for people than showering them with napalm. Some of them grew so unhappy that they rebelled against their own leaders, pledging allegiance to Ho Chi Minh's government in Hanoi and its allies in the south, the National Liberation Front, also known as the Viet Cong. I can still remember hearing the chants on the news: "Ho! Ho! Ho Chi Minh! The NLF is gonna win!"

But after those choppers climbed into the Saigon sky, Americans of all political stripes found reasons to ignore the Vietnamese. As the brutality of the communist government grew more evident, opponents of the war switched their focus to causes in other places where the oppressed were more appealing. The hawks, meanwhile, found new enemies all over the world, from Grenada to the Middle East, and eventually dedicated themselves to the war on terror.

All the while, Americans have never stopped squabbling about our role in Southeast Asia, if only because the what-ifs of the situation remain unanswerable, and the rifts in US society created by the war have never healed. But a funny thing has happened to the Vietnamese in the process. They slowly, but surely, have faded from the US view.

When Americans think about Vietnam now, we think about ourselves: our pain and our suffering, our national travails. It is almost as if the war was some sort of natural disaster — a storm blowing in from the sea — and the Vietnamese were not even there.

Probably the best examples of what I am talking about can be gleaned from the Hollywood films made about Vietnam. They typically portray the US forces in two ways. The Americans are either stranded in the jungle battling an unseen enemy, à la *Forrest Gump*, or they are stuck in some other godforsaken hellhole, wrestling with the demons they acquired in the Vietnamese heart of darkness, as in *The Deer Hunter*.

The Vietnamese are rarely in the picture — and hardly ever in a close-up. No blockbusters have been produced on the life of Ho Chi Minh or the battles of the Viet Cong, even by all those Hollywood leftwingers who drive the conservative radio talk show hosts to despair. No one bothers to look at the war from the Vietnamese side.

Nor, for that matter, have Americans shown tremendous interest in the Vietnamese who were exposed to the millions of gallons of Agent Orange and other “tactical herbicides” that we sprayed from the skies to clear away trees and vegetation that were providing cover for the enemy.

The defoliants contained dioxin, a chemical linked to cancer, birth defects and a long list of other maladies. US veterans who served in Southeast Asia and develop these diseases are eligible for assistance. But I can’t remember any major telethons being staged for the Vietnamese victims of the herbicides.

When it comes to Vietnam, we have all learnt to forget, to paraphrase the late Jim Morrison, who was both the lead singer of The Doors rock group and the son of the US naval officer who commanded our fleet during the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964 that led to the escalation of US involvement in the war.

In the end, Vietnam came to be seen as some sort of bad trip, to borrow an expression from the drug culture of the day. It was easier that way. The Vietnamese were no longer people who bled when you bombed them. They became more like figments of our collective imagination. Out of sight, out of mind and finally out of harm’s way.

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