LONG T. BUI

RETURNS

SOUTH VIETNAM
AND THE PRICE OF
REFUGEE MEMORY

OF WAR

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NATION OF NATIONS: IMMIGRANT HISTORY AS AMERICAN HISTORY

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Returns of War

South Vietnam and the Price of Refugee Memory

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NOTE ON LANGUAGE

Modern Vietnamese is a monosyllabic tonal language that uses diacritical marks in written form. However, many Vietnamese living overseas have adopted different linguistic and writing patterns. The compound word "Vietnam" has somewhat displaced the once common spelling, "Viet Nam," in English, though the latter has regained popularity. Working between multiple languages lends visibility to the ways language can change depending on context or historical periods, thus creating inevitable problems and a variety of confusions of which readers must be aware. In Vietnamese, a person's last name or family surname comes first, and this causes confusion when names appear with the surname last in Western sources but first in Vietnamese sources. I have chosen to faithfully present names as I am introduced to them by primary and secondary sources. I often refer to the "American War" when talking from a Vietnamese perspective, but then refer to the "Vietnam War" when speaking from the U.S. context. I employ the phrase "South Vietnam" to refer to the former Republic of Vietnam (RVN) (1955–1975), but this term may be confused with the general territory of Vietnam's southern region. Most of the time, I am referring to the RVN, except when I explicitly refer to the south as purely a geographic space. The creative language I employ throughout the book offers a mix of anecdotes, puns, colloquialisms, and academic jargon that speaks to the creative disorderly nature of writing about the structure of memory and identity. This decision to include both formal and informal elements encourages readers to make their own sense of things as they are presented in the text.

Introduction

I grew up in a refugee family with vivid, lingering memories of war. Throughout my childhood, members of my clan would speak about Vietnam, but not about the war. Yet, the Vietnam constantly being referenced was the former republic of South Vietnam, the fledgling nation-state created with great fanfare as an ally of the United States in 1955 that later hemorrhaged, leading to a communist takeover in 1975. Though this ghost nation was firmly fixed at the center of Vietnamese diasporic exile imaginary, it was a place I found difficult to contemplate or imagine. Born a few years after the end of the Vietnam War, and with little actual knowledge of the war, I grew up with no memories of my own about what was formerly and officially called the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) or South Vietnam. However, this political entity still has staying power for me, my family, and my community. It is the place that many of my relatives still call "home" after so many years living abroad. In "Little Saigon" refuge enclaves, you can still hear about how "we" refugees must remember our heritage as South Vietnamese and honor our protectors and saviors, the Americans. The potency of this country I never knew, combined with the constancy to this fervent devotion to the United States, have prompted questions this book tries to answer. How does the stunning loss of South Vietnam instill a need to stage a return to the war's history again and again? How did the tense, often negative relationship between the United States and South Vietnam create a lasting bond that persists, one that created new social and economic bonds? How do people remember South Vietnam, and what price do they pay for remembering a lost nation?

Most of the material presented here in some way touches upon aspects of my life, a testimony to the sensitive nature of doing research on one's community, not just as an intellectual journey but as a personal exploration. Various chapters represent aspects of this journey. As discussed in chapter 1, interest in Vietnamese refugee histories led me to

visit the Vietnam Center and Archive (VNCA) in Lubbock, the largest holding of Vietnam War–related documents in the country outside the federal government archives and brought me back to my birthplace nestled deep in the heart of the Texas. My parents arrived there in the 1970s as refugees but left for Houston a year after my birth in search of better job opportunities and a larger co-ethnic population. While other members talked about the war, my parents never mentioned it or how they came to the United States to give wide berth to a traumatic generational history. There exist no letters or photographs. This void in my family history inspired my unexpected journey back to Lubbock three decades later, a local search that turned up transnational connections. At the VNCA, I searched for the stories of South Vietnamese refugees who, like my parents, came to the United States without any personal belongings. Thus, my return to the archive is a return to my own history, and the recognition of non-Vietnamese in crafting the place of Vietnamese in US history. The visit to the archive marked a homecoming of sorts, a visit to my "roots," a place to peel away the foggy layers of historical knowledge. Chapter 2 considers fictionalized memoir as a form of political reeducation insofar as the knowledge passed down from one generation to the next involves not only the transmission of trauma, but also a hardy economic asset offering hard lessons in survival from past prisoners of war in France, in the United States, and in other parts of the world. This chapter explores the challenges of remembering for Vietnamese refugee subjects in the face of postwar historical amnesia and trauma, and the economization of those things. It illustrates the ways the first and second generations must recuperate the political reeducation of South Vietnamese soldiers to understand the causes behind their own precarious lives "after" war as refugees. Chapter 3 considers two community protests that involved me and many friends, as we were accused by protesters of disrespecting the sanctity of our South Vietnamese heritage. The nation's original dismemberment by war, as a foundation for community dismemberment afterward, sparks constant fighting among different constituencies. Chapter 4, which discusses Vietnamese American soldiers and their stories of service in Iraq and Afghanistan, brings home the issue of multiple loyalties, a topic still resonant in many refugee families including my own, where all the men including me served in the military, either for the United States or South Vietnam. Chapter 5

follows a cohort of Vietnamese Americans, many of whom were former refugees, who have left the United States to return to South Vietnam in pursuit of better economic opportunities in a country that awkwardly seeks to embrace these national traitors. Inspired by the return migration of so many of my friends and colleagues, these now "glocal" informants helped me question my constant desire to come back to the very country my family had left long ago. The epilogue describes the problems of the South Vietnam refugee as a global model of success without accounting for the price they paid for losing the war.

This book examines new visions about South Vietnam as a reflection of the political views of its exiled refugees, the mangled historical policies of the American warfare state, and the neoliberal economies of present-day institutions like state archives, tourism, and the military. Focusing on the South Vietnamese side helps to truly "Vietnamize" the legacy of war, exposing a critical perspective that had been repressed within Vietnam's communist national imaginary and reprogrammed through the "Americanization" of the war's memory in popular Hollywood films (Ikul 2001). Drawn from the early twenty-first century, my case studies address the interplay of history and memory from different angles. What makes these examples compelling are the ways they catalog the efforts to rebrand the blotted image of South Vietnam and put it back on the map. As an intellectual exercise in political theory, *Returns of War* aims to revisit the term "Vietnamization"—the program that ran from 1969 to 1972, intending to extract U.S. soldiers from Vietnam and let the South Vietnamese fight their own battles—using it to explore problems of Vietnamese attempts to attain freedom and how they become legitimate as well as legible subjects of popular knowledge. It plays with the term Vietnamization, employing it far differently than Richard Nixon ever did, speaking to the unfulfilled wishes of the South Vietnamese to become a self-governing, self-sufficient people. I want to redeploy this controversial Cold War term to reveal the ways this supposedly discrete governmental decision is still with us, especially for refugees.

The Vietnamization of the Vietnam War was initially intended solely as a military maneuver, a bureaucratic and logistical transference of manpower, from the Americans to the South Vietnamese. Yet, Vietnamization was always far more than that. It has seeped into culture and memory, and I explore this cluttered arena through remembrances

and consecrations of South Vietnam, raising the following key questions: Where is South Vietnam today and how do individuals, groups, and institutions map this supposedly disappeared geopolitical entity onto new "Vietnamized" spaces? How does the "premature death" of South Vietnam refract the derailed hopes for postcolonial freedom for the Vietnamese people? How and why do people even want to raise and hold onto the country's memory? How does memory connect with class, inequality, migration, labor, state power, and international political economy? To begin to tackle these pressing queries, it is essential to first discern how and why South Vietnam became America's sullied "ally." Ultimately, this book has two major purposes: One is to examine South Vietnam's domestic and diasporic populations to better understand Vietnamese political history. Another is to critique U.S. foreign policy, exploring the ongoing imposition of American imperialism and cultural paternalism on Vietnam and beyond.

The Vietnamization of the Vietnam War

On November 3, 1969, newly elected U.S. president Richard Nixon, in a much-anticipated televised speech, unveiled the Vietnamization of the Vietnam War, a strategy to excise all American troops and military presence from the region.[1] This was an about-face in U.S. foreign policy from defending at all costs America's ally, South Vietnam, against the onslaught of communist North Vietnam. Handing over total responsibility for winning the war to America's beleaguered friend, this executive decision established a multipronged, and concomitant task: "Defending South Vietnam, winning the war, achieving peace and preserving American 'honor'" (Kimball 2006: 59). Originally conceived by Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird and later officially adopted by Nixon, Vietnamization put a name to Cold War machinations and the hurdles of procuring both economic and political freedom for a foreign people whose future remained uncertain. While the military buildup of South Vietnam was the litmus to curb a communist takeover of Southeast Asia, Vietnamization was a global test case for U.S. contingency plans for de-escalation and ramping up local fighting forces and aid to repel "anti-democratic" forces. Nixon sought to prevent more deaths of American soldiers by supplying more combat training to South Vietnamese troops in modern

military tactics and weaponry, shifting the burden of ground fighting to their battered partners while the United States would supply air protection. Vietnamization undersold the extent to which this could cause more problems later for South Vietnam and tipped the scales of war in favor of the northern Democratic Government of Vietnam (DRV) and the southern-based communist Viet Cong (PRG), pushing America's run-down friends to the brink of collapse.

By this time, the United States was facing strong public opposition to its involvement in this Vietnam War. According to Nixon, Vietnamization offered "a plan in which we will withdraw all our forces from Vietnam on a schedule in accordance with our program, as the South Vietnamese become strong enough to defend their own freedom."[2] Announced a few months earlier, in July 1969, at a press conference in the U.S. colony of Guam, Vietnamization was a cornerstone of the Nixon Doctrine, which essentially proclaimed that all U.S. allies were expected to take care of their own military defense from now on, and the leader of the free world would only support them from afar. While President Johnson had "Americanized" the war in Vietnam, Nixon sought to reverse this trend by "Vietnamizing the search for peace" (ibid.). As a declaration of independence for the country, Vietnamization mobilized whatever little popular support existed for the "political integrity of South Vietnam and, curiously, for the legitimacy of American soldiers fighting to preserve its integrity as a nation" (ibid.). Losing the war was not an option, but letting a friend go without support would spark violence, Nixon claimed, in the Middle East, the Western Hemisphere, and everywhere else.

With the Vietnamese fighting among themselves, Nixon initiated a salvo of aerial attacks and secret bombings of the country, making Vietnamization a smoke screen from behind which the United States could secretly and indiscriminately bomb the country as well as neighboring countries like Cambodia and Laos, a means of achieving "disengagement with escalation" with the appearance of "Asians killing Asians," a civil war with native people stuck in a "bloody test of arms and will" (Kimball 2011: 217). As subterfuge, it hid the fact that *most* of the carnage related to the war took place *after* the implementation of this policy. Things took a turn for the worst, where vows for the extraction of American military presence in the region led to more killing, mostly Vietnamese

(Asselin 2002: 22). It is generally agreed that Vietnamization fundamentally changed the nature of war since the United States no longer engaged in search and destroy operations, switching from an aggressor to an "advisory" role. The rhetorical message behind Vietnamization—South Vietnamese independence supported by the United States—was garbled by the political situation in the country and the question of who was in charge (Gartner 1998). While the South Vietnamese seemed to be taking charge of things, the policy allowed for a realignment of U.S. power in the Asian Pacific as it "internationalized" the Vietnam War, converting U.S. military bases in Okinawa, Japan, and the Philippines into the outposts for intensified aerial campaigns throughout Southeast Asia (Man 2014: 276).

Vietnamization epitomized more than Nixon's evolving foreign policy, but a hope for risk-adjusted returns on the war and economic investment in its global circle of "friends," an ongoing reminder of the debt the latter might owe to their colonial creditor and paymasters for helping them out. Lending U.S. "aid" to the South Vietnamese on borrowed time, Vietnamization was far more than a military directive or benchmark of political success; rather, it was a double-dealing sham and back-door decision pointedly matched to the "bottom-line" interests of a government engaged in far-off fighting with overstretched resources. In a secret exchange with Nixon three years later, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger made an ominous remark demonstrating Vietnamization in action:

> If a year from now or two years from now North Vietnam gobbles up South Vietnam, we can have a viable foreign policy—if it looks like as if a result of South Vietnamese incompetence . . . so we've got to find some formula that holds the thing together a year or two, after which—after a year, Mr. President, Vietnam will be a backwater. If we settle it, say, this October, by January '74 no one will give a damn. (Hughes 2010: 501)

With a time line in mind, Kissinger seems to give free rein to America's Asian partner in planning and sealing its own fate. The prevarication of national self-determination and the business of defending of freedom was the setup for Vietnamization, as evident in a passage from Nixon's Vietnamization speech:

> The defense of freedom is everybody's business not just America's busi-
> ness. And it is particularly the responsibility of the people whose freedom
> is threatened. When you are trying to assist another nation defend its
> freedom, U.S. policy should be to help them fight the war but not to fight
> the war for them. In the previous administration, we Americanized the
> war in Vietnam. In this administration, we are Vietnamizing the search
> for peace. (Nixon 1969)

Nixon's policy established the pretext for extending U.S. goodwill
throughout Asian countries apparently imperiled by the shadow of
the Iron Curtain by forcing them to take care of their own business.
A compromising move to "buy" more time during a game-changing
moment in the war, Nixon's announcement to Vietnamize the conflict
in Vietnam served as an abnegation of U.S. responsibility for escalat-
ing and Americanizing the war in the first place. This proved to be a
poorly advised plan of action because the "puppet troops" of the South
Vietnamese military were supposedly ill-equipped in defending them-
selves against their more inspired and wily communist opponents (Jervis
2010). In the ensuing years of Vietnamization's implementation, thou-
sands more RVN soldiers perished and the communists extended their
territorial influence.

As later revealed in declassified government tapes, President Nixon
postponed full discharge of U.S. troops from Vietnam until after his re-
election in 1972, prolonging military evacuations long enough to "make
Saigon's fall look like Saigon's fault" (Hughes 2010: 500); this, coupled
with the reelection of South Vietnam's President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, who
torpedoed opponents using American backing as leverage, hobbled the
country's democratic potential. Along with an autocratic decision to use
any means to squash dissent, the U.S. policy of Vietnamization served
as a continuation of war by other means, governed by the credo that
"indigenization" of the conflict "could improve the military situation
for South Vietnam" (Hughes 2010: 505). It sought to "de-Americanize"
the conflict but served as a strategic cover-up for U.S. escalation of the
war effort (Kimball 2011: 225). The policy attempted to bring "honorable
withdrawal" and "honorable peace" to the United States by diverting at-
tention away from American wrongdoings toward a fully domesticated
theater of war, allowing final judgment for the conflict's outcome to be

reserved for the Vietnamese people despite the terrible hand they had been dealt (Hanhimaki 2004: 43).[3] The popular lore in South Vietnam as a friend/ally of the United States was always held in dispute, but that friendly relationship needed to be emphasized to implement the plan of Vietnamization. The private government memos leaked by the Pentagon Papers outlined the U.S. Defense Department's raison d'être for U.S. military presence as helping the "people of South Vietnam to enjoy a better, freer way of life . . . to emerge from the crisis without unacceptable taint from methods used . . . NOT to 'help a friend'" (Gravel 1971: 643). The memos also expressed fears that South Vietnamese could attack Americans when the former realized that the United States was leaving them. Upon hearing about this, Henry Kissinger said, "If we pulled out and left them in the lurch, we may have to fight the South Vietnamese" (ibid.).

Exposing several U.S. presidents and their deep involvement in Vietnam, despite their promise not to get involved, *The Pentagon Papers* released in 1971 bluntly revealed that South Vietnam was "essentially the creation of the United States" (Zinn 2003: 350). For all the edification of the South Vietnamese as friends, these secret government documents confirm the Johnson administration's view of South Vietnamese *not* as friends of the United States deserving of support, but as a sad, bewildered people deserving of a better "Americanized" way of life. Like Lyndon B. Johnson, Nixon felt it necessary, after providing "enough" support, to let go of this friend, now deemed a political "liability" and moral hazard; at the same time, he wanted to maintain a hold over them. In this way, the master discourse of Vietnamization does not completely mesh with the U.S. government's secret relations with foreign nations. The lopsided relationship between South Vietnam and the American Goliath was filtered through jingoistic "visions of righteousness"—a lexicon of war to bamboozle the masses—and revisionist ideas of the United States as a patron of South Vietnam, rather than as a foreign power that "invaded South Vietnam, where it proceeded to compound the crime of aggression with numerous and quite appalling crimes against humanity throughout Indochina" (Chomsky 1991: 30). Clearly, in the historic and allegorical case of South Vietnam, freedom is tied to being "unfree" and "unfreedom" (both the actual lack of freedom and the sense of feeling imprisoned or held back despite being a technically "free" person). The theme of freedom appears in my case studies; and despite all the issues

presented henceforth, like the globalization of Vietnam under communist controls, or protests among Vietnamese Americans, the question of social, economic, and political freedom relates back to the project of freeing South Vietnam not only from the communists but from the Americans as well.

Vietnamization, too, is not a military policy, but an ideology and discourse manifested from and informed by culture. It laid out an "imperial contract" between the United States and its foreign allies, one that ensured continued neocolonial relations of domination based on stereotypes. In her interpretation of Carl Schmidtt's distinction between friends and enemies as the basis for political society, Denise Ferreira da Silva (2005) finds that the expanding boundaries of U.S. empire requires the reconfiguration of those racial "others of Europe" within the shifting divide between "true friends" and "new friends." As opposed to its true friends in NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), the new friends based in Third World places like Saigon, Vietnam, or Fallujah, Iraq need to be developed modern subjects-in-becoming within a Eurocentric idea of the government and "rights of man." Their poverty and lack of self-development render "the newcomers to the territory of freedom both unreliable friends and indistinguishable from the enemies of freedom" (2005: 125). As unreliable friends due to their economic and political underdevelopment, South Vietnam could never stand equal to its ally, the United States. Claiming to wean these Southeast Asian children off America's teat, U.S. military officials rated their Vietnamese counterparts poorly in combat preparedness, looking upon them as "little people," "animals," "squint eyes," and "gooks," and failing to distinguish between foe and friend. This added up to a lot of misunderstanding and a decisive breakdown of relations between the U.S. military and the army of South Vietnam (ARVN). Sour relations contributed to the ARVN's many problems: high defection, poor morale, ineffective training, and uncoordinated leadership. Per military historian Gregory Daddis, "Vietnamization could not undo racism or years of critical attitudes held toward Asians"; it instead revamped those same attitudes (2011: 170–171). The South Vietnamese were depicted as an inept and guileless by America's top statesman, undeserving of further assistance from the United States. President Nixon noted in a private conversation to advisors: "Well, if they're that collapsible, maybe they just have

to be collapsed . . . We've got to remember, we cannot—we cannot keep this child sucking at the tit when the child is four years old" (Hughes 2010: 505).[4] Not only does this graphic metaphor hold forth the notion of South Vietnam as dependents of American beneficence, it pinpoints the careless, rather callous attitude of the Nixon administration toward the Vietnamese people.

An Imperial Contract between Friends

Returns of War reflects upon the contradictory process of societies both expunged and embraced by Western imperial powers, recognizing Vietnamization as what Denise Ferreira da Silva calls a "governing political signifier" for what South Vietnam means (2007: xxxii). That politics can have a cultural dimension is not surprising when one views Vietnamization as not just a political failing of the South Vietnamese government, but a cultural failing of the South Vietnamese people to win independence for themselves, unable to achieve freedom and be modern. Using culture to show the scripting of the South Vietnamese as lost "travelers on the road to transparency," the book marks their position as those "placed outside history . . . fixed in an earlier time or altogether outside time" (168, 166). This is more than a political issue, as the problem of economics bears weight on the exchange as a problem of the relationship between the West and "the rest." In this manner, the "new territories" of consumption and investment such as South Vietnam have been "mapped onto previous racial and colonial (imperial) discourses and practices" (Chakravartty and Silva 2012: 60). My use of economic metaphors like returns of war and others perhaps gets at this financialization of everyday life, which has both a geopolitical and historical basis.

In popular writings by the American news media, South Vietnam's crippled ability to become an independent nation on its own was time and again attributed to the economic and political deficiencies of the local people. This rhetorical sleight-of-hand in Vietnamization discourse suggested that the South Vietnamese then must be *made* free by a superior paternalistic power able to act as a guarantor of life, liberty, and happiness. Vietnamization is part of an older colonial strategy, one used earlier to justify U.S. colonization of Samoa, the Virgin Islands, Guam, Hawai'i, and Puerto Rico. Comparable to the U.S. strategy of "Filipiniza-

tion" in the Philippines at the turn of the twentieth century, Vietnamization essentially proclaimed that the South Vietnamese republic and its "natives" were not strong enough to be on their own, and required the United States to help them find their way. As a different kind of colonial formation, "United States policy makers cast this alleged temporary relation as a tutelary project aimed at preparing otherwise incompetent, effectively infantile populations for self-government" (Goldstein 2014: 16). Going beyond the racial suggestion of disability, Vietnamization formed a new "imperial contract," offering another source (and possibly theory) of dependency that marks the unfair trade balance and exchange between imperial powers and their colonial subjects now labeled as "allies." South Vietnam, of course, was not a colony of the United States in the formal sense, but the comparison is relevant because the prickly history of U.S. involvement in other countries forms the larger colonial background for Vietnamization, and why this program—seemingly innocent in giving a nation the right to fight for its own freedom—was so controversial and remains so even now.

In the United States, the name "South Vietnam" describes dependency and tragic victimhood as shown by the perceived dishonesty of RVN government leaders needing U.S. foreign aid, Saigonese prostitutes needing American GIs and dollars, and finally, the neediness of the "boat people" escaping their country requiring adoption by American families. While in communist Vietnam there was silence or repression about South Vietnam, in the United States there is general ignorance about America's former and belittled friends, if not misinformed by cultural typologies that habitually sort South Vietnamese into ill-fated "freedom fighters," unfortunate "boat people," criminalized poor "welfare cheats," or assimilable "model minorities" (Nguyen 2006: 14). All this focus on individuals and group distinctions distracts from the structural processes of nation-building and empire-building, which created those social categories.

The U.S. discourse of South Vietnamese cultural impoverishment and deficit enabled the justification for Nixon's feigned support for the country's political sovereignty under Vietnamization, which worked in concert with the U.S. mainstream media's scapegoating of the fledgling Republic of Vietnam government (RVN) for the problems of the war. For the ARVN soldiers struggling to hold onto a dream of liberation that

might not come true, the war became "no longer about the freedom and independence of South Vietnam but rather about the long-term stability of families" (Brigham 2006: 109). The press, politicians, and eventually even the president himself upbraided the RVN for its incompetence, maligned the South Vietnamese soldiers who were unable to properly handle "modern" military equipment, and looked down on the local civilians who were unwilling to protect their own homes (Willbanks 2004: 287). As a way of making imperial personhood, the idea was that if the South Vietnamese nation could not muster enough strength to stand on its own to carry out the anti-communist mission without the United States, rising to the occasion to stand on its own and stay the course, so the story went, the debacle that followed was the fault of *those* people for not loving freedom enough to fight or die for it. Vietnamization, in other words, updates the old Western "civilizing mission" of *helping others help themselves*, infusing this ever-problematic effort with a postcolonial maxim: *We can't help you if you can't help yourself*. As cultural historian Patrick Hagopian (2009) writes, the Vietnamese were considered childlike in their endeavors to develop as a nation in need of U.S. tutelage:

> The U.S. commander in Vietnam, General William Westmoreland, justified the American military effort in Southeast Asia by saying that Vietnam reminded him of a child—it had to crawl before it could walk and walk before it could run. Thus, pro-war propaganda overlaid two images: the South Vietnamese state as a child, a newly found "nation" in need of tutelage and support; and South Vietnamese children as representative inhabitants of the country. The two child images converged in their ideological meanings, because by protecting the children, the United States forces helped the young nation, and vice versa. (321)

If these adopted children were abandoned by their parents, they would become orphans, but, eventually, the childlike nation must learn to walk on its own. The drawing of curtains on the nation by the war's end led many South Vietnamese to become seen as infantilized refugees, again needing to be adopted, protected, and sponsored by Americans.

As a plan for decolonization steeped in imperialist thinking, Vietnamization deferred decolonization to the extent that the United States did not fully give independence to South Vietnam as the Americans re-

tained custody of the country's freedom. Put differently, the program of Vietnamization signifies the on-the-surface liberation of a foreign people by the United States, the latter pretending that its "temporary" occupation of Vietnam was never a form of imperial imposition. As a racial project, too, it tailors the European mission of molding nonwhite populations into Westernized "modern people." In other words, Vietnamization is still going on and serves as a neocolonial discourse, referring at once to the condition of being dominated by an external force and being without self-determination (and thus needing that external push). As two historians put it, "Vietnamization involves more than just the asking of new questions. It also aims to provide new answers for some of the oldest and most persistent questions about the war" (Miller and Vu 2009: 2). As a framework, it helps uncover the histories of American war-making, things now being defoliated in the thick jungles of our historical memory.

Returns of War contends with the inescapable shadow of the Vietnam War, but more specifically the shadow of South Vietnam upon current events, written and completed during a time when a global "War on Terror" compels the United States to follow errant commitments abroad just as it did in Vietnam. As the country enters new quagmires without proper endings, such conflicts are routinely compared in the press to the controversial war waged decades earlier in Southeast Asia. Media comparisons of the U.S.-led conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan—news reporters dubbed them Obama and Bush's Vietnam—with the epic war in Vietnam symbolically and synecdochically linked American aggression across world stages and historical periods. The analogizing of the U.S. wars in the Arab world as "another Vietnam" stamps out the specificity of the Vietnam War to help explain the sense of déjà vu experienced by the United States in its many geopolitical shell games. American politicians and pundits point to our recurring "Vietnam Syndrome," summoning the shame of U.S. military losses in the Vietnam War as the model—depending on whether one is a peace dove or war hawk—for later wars. In the overuse of the term "Vietnam Syndrome," South Vietnam's legacy is resuscitated in sporadic fashion to justify U.S. incursions in distant places that are supposedly going to collapse from terrorism—much like the Cold War truism that weak nations would fall like dominoes to the red menace (Carter 2008). The popular portrait of the South

Vietnamese government as a shoddy regime that fell effortlessly to communism—due in whole or in part to Vietnamization policy—makes it the prime example of what to do or what not to do to other countries. As a nation considered deceased, unable to return to its original form, after being deserted by the Americans and overtaken by communists, South Vietnam's memory inspires further thinking about the recursive power of war. Vietnamization even inspired the British pacification of North Ireland through a strategy of "Ulsterisation" (Kiernan 1974: 323). A better explanation of how the Vietnam War constitutes a flash point in larger anticolonial struggles and Cold War geopolitics in Vietnam is long overdue.

The Neocolonial History of South Vietnam

The Vietnamese people first engaged in anticolonial struggles against the French in the 1880s, fighting to gain independence as a sovereign nation. Attempts by the French to strip the power of Vietnam's young emperor, Hàm Nghi, drove the royal family to flee the capital city in Central Vietnam. High in the mountains, a guerilla anticolonial movement was forming that loathed any form of external control. European cultural influence and efforts to create a colony amenable to its interests spurred a growing sense of nationalism among sectors of Vietnam's educated elites (Chesneaux 1955). French military commanders recruited support in the south, where it had established a colony for two decades, enlisting pro-French collaborators and wealthy Vietnamese in its fight against nationalist forces in the north. The strongman tactics by which the French suppressed northern rebels and their supporters served to stimulate further hatred of the colonizers. With the outbreak of World War II, France found itself busy fighting a war on its own continent to deal with a colonial war in Asia. Anticolonial resistance took definitive shape as a mass populist movement in the 1940s with a coalition of forces led by leader Hồ Chí Minh and his Việt Minh nationalist party.

During the first Vietnam War or "First Indochina War" (1946–1954), the French were on the losing end of their own finagling in overseas territories, failing to crush the stirrings of Vietnamese nationalism. Undaunted, France sought to reclaim its wayward colonies again after World War II. This project of restoring French sovereignty in Indochina

was bankrolled by the United States (which paid for 80 percent of this war effort) and approved by President Truman, backsliding on the promise of President Woodrow Wilson to respect the self-determination of all people. Inspired by the American colonial resistance to England, Hồ Chí Minh had earlier appealed to Wilson for assistance against the French, but his requests were repeatedly rebuffed. Such negligence was motivated by racism as Wilson and subsequent American presidents did not consider the Vietnamese "fit" for self-rule, especially given the weakness of the Saigon-based Bảo Đại imperial regime in southern Vietnam, the puppet regime of France. The Americans wanted to turn South Vietnam into a "protected" territory, but the pretenses of the United States as a democratizing force in the world meant the Americans would retain "temporary" control over the country, until they felt the Vietnamese were ready to stand on their own. The U.S. Cold War policy of containment, the domino theory, and fears of Soviet involvement (who supported the Việt Minh) could not hide the fact that American intervention mostly represented the neo-imperialist principles of "power acquisition in the international arena" (Soddu 2012: 7).

With the sound defeat of the French again by the Việt Minh at the Battle of Điện Biên Phủ, plans for a postcolonial Vietnam were articulated in the 1954 Geneva Peace Accords: A demilitarized zone along the seventeenth parallel would temporarily divide the country into two parts, with the northern region controlled by the Việt Minh and the southern region under the informal "administration" of the United States, until national elections were held in 1956 (Bradley 2000). Soon after, the Republic of Vietnam (or South Vietnam as it was and still is called colloquially) was decreed an independent state by Ngô Đình Diệm, a renegade politician and former French colonial bureaucrat. This illegal action, a violation of the Geneva treaty, was supported by the United States. Diệm's declaration stymied any progress toward national elections, which at the time many predicted the very popular Hồ Chí Minh and his party would win (Vlastos 1991: 55–57). In the ensuing years, John F. Kennedy sent military advisors and soldiers to the country, later supporting a coup to overthrow Diệm to produce a more manageable local administration. Through such actions, the Americans succeeded in "mapping their own imaginative geography, [where] American policymakers attempted to transmute a colonial war into a

civil war through the creation of South Vietnam" (Tyner 2009: 49). Despite President Kennedy's inaugural speech in 1961 stating that the fight to create South Vietnam was a "limited war," the deracinated efforts to unify Vietnam ignited an even bigger war.

With France's imperial clout in Indochina waning, the United States adopted an aggressive policy of "containment" to stanch the tide of communism believed to be flowing into Southeast Asia, sparking the Second Indochina War, or what is called "the Vietnam War" in the United States and "the American War" in Vietnam. Redeploying similar colonial language used by the French to shortchange Vietnamese independence, the United States took over the imperial reins to assume power as the new regional hegemon, another colonizer trying to succor the South Vietnamese people to desire a "better" life (SarDesai 2005).[5] Countries like South Korea, benefiting from U.S. foreign aid and Western offerings of "a better life," furnished economic monies and military troops to the U.S. cause in Vietnam. President Kennedy dispatched military advisors and the Green Berets to help overthrow the insubordinate Diệm dictatorship regime. Successive administrations continued to display erratic behavior as these regimes existed semi-autonomously. With South Vietnam technically under its wing, the United States launched psychological warfare and chemical warfare against the local population. A firm sense of white supremacy backed the U.S. program of total war against a people already deemed incapable of being on their own. Secretary of State John Dulles and then-Vice President Richard Nixon, in their 1954 paper, "Taking Up the White Man's Burden," surmised that if the United States did not drum up support for South Vietnam as a bulwark against communism, the fallout would severely diminish America's ability to "save Asia" from its own ethnic forces of anarchy and totalitarianism (Dulles and Nixon 1995: 52).[6] Both Nixon and Dulles recognized early on that the South Vietnamese would attempt to fight for their independence if the United States exerted total control, but they still believed the Vietnamese lacked "the ability to conduct a war by themselves or govern themselves" (ibid.).

There is no definitive date for when the United States entered war with Vietnam, and, depending on who is providing the information, the war could have begun with the United States sending advisors to help the French in 1950, or in 1964 with the Gulf of Tonkin resolution. Either way, for the next two decades, the United States was in some way at

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war with Vietnam, but this war was concerned with the cultural depictions of the Vietnamese who were, up to that point, a mysteriously exotic unknown population in the "Far East" to most Americans. During the Vietnam War (it was never officially declared a war by the United States Congress), the Vietnamese were represented as impressionable Western supporters but also potential enemies because many American soldiers could not distinguish by sight between friend and foe (Leventman and Camacho 1980). The war was not solely a military enterprise but a "subject-making" event that determined how South Vietnam entered modern history as "a nation without its own history, culture, heritage and political agenda" (Espiritu 2005b: 313). It is assumed that the story of South Vietnam veritably concluded in 1975 with its invasion by joint northern revolutionary forces and the southern-based communist National Liberation Front (Viet Cong). If we take 1975 to be the end of the war, the subject of South Vietnam should be dead or put to rest. But what would speculating about South Vietnam's past mean for postulating its viable *future*? What happens to the history of a war when the outcome and meanings of that war, as well as its designation of winners and losers, were never really settled? A discourse of war that is not caught in the past but always still unfolding in the *now*, Vietnamization's continued existence and geographic memories are carried forth by the South Vietnamese diaspora and refugees displaced by the war.

(South) Vietnamese Refugees in the Diaspora

Returns of War solicits a nod to the melancholic sentiment of not being fully Vietnamese, something felt by many former citizens of South Vietnam given the loss of their homeland. The book moves beyond our common misperceptions of South Vietnam and reveals the complex and often ignored position of the postwar Vietnamese diaspora, whose subjects not only are refugees that have migrated overseas but remain "stateless" when it comes to being South Vietnamese. A number of scholars have studied the memory-making of the Vietnam War and gauged what it even means to be a Vietnamese refugee in the present context of globalization, diaspora, and transnationalism (Espiritu 2014; Aguilar-San Juan 2009; Valverde 2012; Nguyen 2016; Nguyen 2012). These projects refer back to and hint at the South Vietnamese

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nation-building project but focus more on the refugee experience. My work is more direct and specifically aimed at exploring how the discredited memory of South Vietnam poses a challenge to the manner in which the Vietnam War is remembered and for whom. By focusing on the premises for the founding and loss of the South Vietnamese nation, I am not assigning little importance to the experiences of North Vietnamese or other groups still reeling from the war's effects. My research unscrambles the memory of South Vietnam in the messiness of the current historical moment, throwing the legacy of this ill-fated nation into a continuous play of interpretations to find another way out of what Phuong Nguyen calls refugee nationalism (2017).

The complex reality of South Vietnamese history and U.S. imperial culture are erased by the stereotypical image of the Americans as saviors and the South Vietnamese as helpless subjects and hapless allies. Through a flexible understanding of what it means to *be* South Vietnamese, a paradoxical figure that is co-extensively colonized and colonizer (the South Vietnamese military invaded Cambodia and southern Laos in the early 1970s with the encouragement and sponsorship of the United States), one develops a significant understanding of how "Vietnamese people" are divided, ordered, and classified among the many imaginings of "Vietnam." When we talk about Vietnamese refugees, we should be talking about Vietnamese Americans (the overwhelming majority of refugees found new homes in the United States) and the South Vietnamese diaspora to acknowledge that most Vietnamese who left after the war came from South Vietnam. These exiles continue to hold onto the memory of the RVN even as they adapt to new politico-economic priorities and national identities. Considering the ways South Vietnamese history and memory crop up again within current affairs serves to challenge "South Vietnamese" as a discrete category of geopolitical identity and recognize the irreducibility of this freighted term of belonging, one that can be reworked as a multifaceted object of study deserving of much scrutiny.

For many in the Vietnamese diaspora, their homeland is not some simply idyllic place of ancestral ethnic origin. The Vietnam many remember is South Vietnam, a spatial geopolitical construct born out of the Cold War, one that formally existed only for a short 20 years. This military context shapes the perspectives of Vietnamese diasporic sub-

jects who always consider South Vietnam as the "political unconscious" operating beneath their narratives as displaced peoples (Jameson 2013). One major criticism of diaspora is that the term is much too broad, referring generally to populations strewn about the world away from their ancestral roots, defined by a population's sense of homelessness and desire for return to the homeland. Namsoon Kang (2014) deduces that scholars often miss out on the militarized contexts that caused populations to leave their homes in the first place.

Returns of War writes against the common perception of the South Vietnamese as tragic victims of war, either as innocent bystanders or guilty culprits in their downfall. A focus on South Vietnam and its very politicized diaspora is not meant to bolster South Vietnamese nationalism, but to provide a way to bring nation, economics, identity, culture, politics, and history into play with one another. This book is not a labor of historical revisionism, seeking to inject the perspectives of those overlooked to offer a more "correct" version of history. Such exhaustive work has already been done by many scholars who have documented U.S. historical relations with South Vietnam, all of whom provide the following constants: South Vietnam was put in a bind by American withdrawal; Vietnamization tapered off resources to the war effort and "no military mission since Vietnam has come close to that war . . . in its consequences" (Diehl 2009).[7] A convergence of psychological sensibilities (return is significant for considering trauma) and economic concepts like getting a profit return can be fruitful in unpacking the productivity found in things associated only with negativity and failure. Insofar as the traumatized subject can return to something emotional to make sense of or salvage the past (and clear a path for their future), the future-oriented sense of economic return on past investments suggests a similar course, if one understands how there is a psychology behind economics and an economics behind psychology. When it comes to cultural work of memory, nothing is clear-cut, as there is always a loss in gains, and gains to be uncovered from loss.

The Price of Refugee Memory

If culture allows the United States to represent Vietnamese people in a certain way, it also helps to draw out the unfinished stories of history,

introducing unofficial and unrecognized voices of the Vietnamese. Culture can be found everywhere that shared meanings accrue and accrete, particularly in aspects of our daily lives that are far too commonly excluded from the stuff of "serious business" like government or international relations. Through urban ethnography, historical archives, newspaper reports, visual art, oral histories, and literary memoirs, *Returns of War* offers a far-ranging picture of South Vietnamese culture today and a detailed portrait of refugee life that emerges within the shifting gradients of contemporary life. These cultural forms contextualize the propensity to remember the Vietnam War in all its vicissitudes. Looking across culture and memory brings to light the various points of interest and obverse frames of reference through which war "returns" to modern thought. All examples presented herein were chosen because they deal with people trying to soldier on after the war, constructing alternative discourses about Vietnam, the Vietnam War, Vietnamization, and South Vietnam in the early twenty-first century.

Where politics is often considered narrowly, in terms of competing state interests, the politics of culture encourages us to consider symbolic meaning sculpted through our daily interactions, exposing those buried elements and conflicts in society. In this register, the cultural politics of remembering the Vietnam War is "the continuation of war by other means" (Foucault 2003: 15). As cultural critic Lisa Lowe (1996) tells us, culture is the "site of struggle in which active links are made between signifying practices and social structures . . . Where the political terrain can neither resolve nor suppress inequality, it erupts in culture. Because culture is the contemporary repository of memory, of history" (22). Culture acts as the primary medium for grasping the fragmented present and restless past, but I argue it also gives divination to our uncertain futures. The incomplete memory of the Vietnam War, Vietnamization, and South Vietnam forms the harbinger of the unrealized things to come and our lagging sense of what came before. That process of memorialization is made easier due to the great lapse of time, and changing cultural tastes, many decades after the Vietnam War when an older generation is trying to hold onto its fading memories and a new generation is trying to learn more about it. There are costs associated with attaching oneself to a loser nation, and an inherent value that needs to be held onto dearly.

Returns of War: South Vietnam and the Price of Refugee Memory tracks the multi-directional frictions of state power, the economic damages, culture flows, and human insecurities caused by war. The phrase "returns of war" is a play on words, the term cues us to the ways the memory of the past reappears to us, especially in moments of crisis. The pluralistic meaning of "returns" also contravenes the received wisdom of history as a linear progressive movement. *Returns of War* recapitulates the recycled memory of the Vietnam War, marking war's haunting presence in our future-oriented global era. It points to the ways Vietnamese and Americans dredge up the inveterate violence wrought by the landmark event of war in their lives. As much of the research for this book was conducted at the peak of the "War on Terror," which made the U.S. national debt balloon to unforeseen heights, and during the greatest economic slump since the Great Depression, "returns" hints at the pecuniary sense of talking about war in fiscal terms and what kind of profits one can make from major losses, even those from war. Focusing on the "price" of refugee memory shows that historical remembrance can, and often does, take place along uneven lines, where price refers to the sorting and assignment of value, either by refugees themselves or by others. The psychological returns *of* war (memory) is an opportunity to make some economic returns *of* war (capital).

In some sense, the many topics that we will explore are all reconstructive historical projects, all aiming to bring the contentious politics of the past into cultural life today, burdened by the weight of that effort. By assembling an array of texts, images, and documents from the first decade of this millennium, the book builds a unique archive around the ghostly figure of South Vietnam. A "Vietnamized" field of vision helps to see the many returns of South Vietnamese memory and the repetition as well as difficulty of those returns. The book engages with the sticky matter of discussing a country not found on any current official map of the world. In this light, individuals and organizations have retooled this prior sense of the South Vietnamese as mere stooges or imitators of the Americans, the shill of the U.S. military establishment, and a people who cannot represent or speak for themselves. Though many decades have elapsed since the Vietnam War, America's military intercession in South Vietnam triggers thorny and tangled memories that need to be freed from their twisted roots.

As we shall see, the haunting ghost and absent presence of South Vietnam foreground questions of memory and movement within public spaces like urban development, historical archives, ethnic enclaves, and military service. It provides the through-line of my critical appreciation of (and attempts to move beyond) Vietnamization as Nixonian policy and military project of the United States appearing to cede responsibility to proxy forces or allies. For me, Vietnamization is a much more individual endeavor and community-based phenomenon, an ongoing process of giving voice and independence to South Vietnamese people. This personalizing of the political gives traction to the cultural production of memory around South Vietnam as that nation embodies the historical focus of that earlier mission of national self-determination. Using this concept to unfold the case studies gathered in the following chapters, I describe for example elderly refugees in the United States whose memories of the defunct state motivate their need to assert South Vietnamese nationalism in the United States, American archivists trying to incorporate South Vietnamese stories in their historiographies, young Vietnamese American soldiers fighting wars in U.S.-occupied countries like Iraq that resemble another South Vietnam. These case studies serve to "Vietnamize" a U.S.-centric postwar narrative by asking: Who has ultimate power in defining the imaginary and borders of a nation? What official knowledge is made possible? My intellectual project recognizes that South Vietnamese–related stories do and do not conform to the ideological premises of national or cultural belonging; such stories reveal the contradictions and structural injustice beneath the original creation (and propagation) of South Vietnam, the Vietnamese Communist Party silencing of South Vietnam, and the U.S. self-designation as the arbiter of freedom for Vietnamese people abroad and domestically. Some chapters emphasize the ambiguities found in this critique, recognizing that South Vietnamese refugee stories express an ambivalent desire for the continuation of American support, rather than its abandonment. Meanwhile, others are more focused on what happened to the South Vietnamese after the Americans left, recognizing that the Americans are still responsible for the postwar racialization and subordination of South Vietnam.

Returns of War breaks ground in the study of the memory of the Vietnam War and Vietnamese refugees by selecting unique case studies that

take stock of the many imaginings and re-imaginings of South Vietnam and what they bode for emerging projects of development, community, nationalism, militarism, and feminism. Taken together, the book's various sites of investigation involve some struggle over representation, making for a tantalizing conversation about ways the arrow of South Vietnam enters people's hearts and minds again, while gaining a better picture of war's trauma within the intransigence of modern life. The following chapters forge a path to a place that has no real beginning or end, setting the stage for the many returns of war.