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<http://history.state.gov/conferences/2010-southeast-asia/videos-transcripts> .

URL: <http://h-diplo.org/reports/PDF/AmericanExperience-SEAsia-Moyar.pdf>

Review by **Mark Moyar**, Independent Scholar

The prominent speakers featured during the first day of the conference revealed more about themselves and present-day U.S. foreign policy than about the history of the war. Positive remarks on Vietnam in the twenty-first century were standard fare for U.S. government officials like Hillary Clinton and Richard Holbrooke in late 2010, at which time the U.S. government was not especially opposed to authoritarian regimes. Now that the Middle East upheavals of early 2011 have pushed the Obama administration into political, philosophical, and military opposition to authoritarian rule, U.S. relations with Vietnam may well change, although the extent and shape of change are as yet far from clear. Certainly U.S. officials will find it harder to praise the world's remaining authoritarian regimes.

It was interesting to watch Hillary Clinton, who in her youth sharply opposed American involvement in the Vietnam War, avoid commenting on the merits of the war, and then see Holbrooke, a supporter of the war back then, argue that "our goals in Vietnam did not justify the immense costs of the war." According to Holbrooke, U.S. policymakers "were insufficiently aware of the effect of the Sino-Soviet split on Vietnam." The domino theory "turned out to be false" because "the dominoes didn't fall unless you count Cambodia and Laos." Holbrooke evidently had not read the histories written in the past ten years that show American policymakers were well aware of the Sino-Soviet split and understood that U.S. intervention in Vietnam was widening the split. Nor had he considered the argument that the shortage of falling dominoes in 1975 did not necessarily mean that the theory was invalid in 1965. The threat of Communist expansion was, in fact, very real in 1965, and American intervention during that year led to fundamental changes in Asian geopolitics that prevented most of the dominoes from falling ten years later.

Holbrooke and several others asserted that Vietnam's postwar shift to capitalism showed that the United States did not need to fight the war. Frank Cain took this argument the furthest, contending that foreign intervention caused needless destruction in what would otherwise have been a peaceful and prosperous Vietnam. Had the French and Americans left Vietnam alone, remarks Cain, they would have allowed "Indochina nationalism to emerge" and "the three million Vietnamese who died would still be with us and the 60,000 U.S. dead would be still with us and the 500 Australian dead would still be with us." Cain failed to recognize that Indochinese nationalism did emerge during the 1950s, in South Vietnam under America's aegis, while internationalist communism emerged in North Vietnam, led by the people whom Cain would have left to rule all Indochina. The Vietnamese Communists killed their political and class opponents, first in North Vietnam and then in South Vietnam, in much greater numbers than the Libyan tyrant who of late has aroused the ire of Western intellectuals. The bloodbath in China after the United States abandoned the Chinese Nationalists suggests that an earlier abandonment of Vietnam would not have lessened Ho Chi Minh's appetite for violence.

While the aforementioned speakers were correct in noting major economic progress in Vietnam in the past two decades, they left out the lack of political and cultural progress. The presentations of both Vietnamese representatives at the conference, Tran Van Dung and Nguyen Manh Ha, offered telling evidence that ideological dogmatism and conformism persist in Vietnam, as their words could have been pulled straight from Communist Party propaganda. Whether these individuals felt any pressure to adhere to the Party line, or whether they were expressing their own views unabashedly, is not clear. But in either case, the fact that the country's leading historians did not demonstrate independence of thought or engage in deep analysis is a poor reflection on their society. The gulf between their comments and the much more insightful and balanced comments of the moderator, Professor Lien-Hang Nguyen, signified what South Vietnamese politics and culture lost when Saigon fell to Communism. Had South Vietnam survived, its universities would not have been as strong today as Yale, where Lien-Hang Nguyen received her doctorate, but would undoubtedly have been closer to the universities of South Korea or Taiwan than the universities of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, for South Vietnam had a much greater tolerance for intellectual liberty than the Communist regime. Had the conference organizers included a presentation by any of the more than one million South Vietnamese who fought against Communism, we might have heard this perspective articulated.

Holbrooke and many of the academics took the view that Hanoi's victory was preordained because of North Vietnam's unshakable determination, the frailty of the South Vietnamese government, and the unwillingness of the United States to tolerate American casualties indefinitely. This position is hard to square with the fact that few people on either side viewed the outcome as inevitable or acted accordingly until the war's final weeks. In 1972, no one was certain what 1975 would look like, just as no one today is certain what Afghanistan will look like in 2014. Tom Schwartz provided a fine example of this uncertainty in his recounting of a conversation with the North Vietnamese official who said the North Vietnamese leadership feared a permanent partition similar to that in Korea.

More persuasive is the argument, advanced in pieces by John Negroponte and *in toto* by Henry Kissinger, that bad American decisions caused the defeat of South Vietnam. Supporting the overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem, refusing to conduct sustained ground operations in Laos, and slashing support to the South Vietnamese government near the war's end were decisions of decisive importance that could have gone either way. As Negroponte points out, many U.S. officials opposed the coup against Diem and attributed anti-Diem sentiment to inaccurate views of Diem's merits and to the contentions of a frivolous Buddhist movement. Negroponte is also effective in refuting the idea that South Vietnam was irreparably flawed later in the war, noting that the South Vietnamese Army defeated the Easter Offensive of 1972 without the U.S. ground troop presence that several other presenters said was required to preserve South Vietnam.

While the champions of the "unwinnable war" thesis were largely silent on the Easter Offensive, a few did take on the claim of revisionists that counterinsurgency operations virtually wiped out the Viet Cong in the late 1960s and early 1970s. David Elliott went into the most detail, contending that pacification was not a success based on his research on Dinh Tuong province. While acknowledging a sharp decline in insurgent activity after Tet, he attributed it to the depopulation of the countryside rather than to any improvement in counterinsurgency activities. Extrapolating from Dinh Tuong province to the country's other forty-three provinces is, however, a serious mistake, for Dinh Tuong was atypical. Dinh Tuong's population had long been unusually sympathetic to the Viet Cong. It was one of only two provinces where the Viet Cong caused serious damage to the strategic hamlet program in the last months of the Diem government. Dinh Tuong was, along with two other provinces, the site of Speedy Express, a military campaign in 1969 that caused much more damage to civilian dwellings than the average American or South Vietnamese campaign. A multitude of Vietnamese Communist sources have revealed that in the majority of provinces, the South Vietnamese government and its American allies effectively mobilized the population against the Viet Cong and defeated the Viet Cong militarily after the 1968 Tet Offensive.

Many of the talks on the conference's second day delved into topics of regrettably limited relevance to the big questions of the Vietnam War. Only the "Fighting While Negotiating" panel engaged in compelling debate on the great issues. The first presenter in that panel, Professor Harish Mehta, went overboard in accepting Ho Chi Minh's assertion that "the diplomacy practiced by the mass organizations and individuals was equally important as the diplomacy of the state." Professor Robert McMahon pointed out many of the flaws in that argument, so I will not explore them here.

The presentations of Stephen Morris and Stephen Randolph, on the other hand, presented bold arguments on key historical controversies and backed them with real evidence. In his discussion of Cambodia, Morris rejected arguments from both the right and the left that the 1970 coup was a boon for the United States and GVN. His argument that a Cambodia fully dominated by the North Vietnamese would have been a great hindrance to Vietnamization seems questionable, for the North Vietnamese already had a relatively free hand in Cambodia. It is to be hoped that he will write an article or book that fleshes out the argument.

Randolph's contention that Linebacker II was intended to compel both North Vietnam and South Vietnam to accept the American peace proposal is similarly intriguing. Central to this argument, and to Morris's comments about American strategy in 1972, is the question of whether Nixon, Kissinger, and Alexander Haig had any intention of living up to Nixon's promise to return with air power. Further dialogue was warranted on this question, and on the question of whether Congress would have slashed aid to South Vietnam and tied the President's hands had Watergate not occurred.

Of the other presentations on the second day, Fabian Hilfrich's raised some of the most important and interesting questions. His answers, however, were less helpful. Hilfrich contended that those favoring intervention in Vietnam were "instinctive patriots" who reflexively wanted to use military force whenever the United States seemed in danger, while those opposing intervention were "reflective patriots," whose patriotism was superior because it was based on reason and required more courage. Only the "reasoned support" of the "reflective patriots" could "produce sustainable national unity." This interpretation has long been used to justify opposition to the war, and to malign the war's supporters, but Hilfrich, like his predecessors, did not substantiate it. What we know of U.S. policymakers and the American public sharply contradicts this simplistic formula. Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, and Richard Nixon had plenty of foibles, but disregard for reason was not one of them. Among the populace, irrational factors played a role in generating support for the war, but so did rational ones—as is invariably the case with public opinion. Surveys taken during the war indicated that most American supporters of the war adhered to some version of the domino theory, demonstrating a degree of critical reflection comparable to that of individuals who claimed the domino theory was bogus. The extent of irrationality in their support is impossible to measure, but there is no reason to believe it was greater than the irrationality of the millions of Americans who denounced their country's foreign policy without knowing much about it.

Reflection could and did lead people to support the Vietnam War, and every other controversial war, by a variety of paths. Virtually all citizens of a democracy find some of the government's activities objectionable but go along with them anyway because reason leads them to respect the law or the concept of majority rule. Enhancing the reasonableness of patriotic support is the historical evidence that certain countries (e.g. the United States) generally behave in a more just manner than their mortal enemies (e.g. North Vietnam). Many individuals will support a war or avoid opposing it despite deep inner reservations because they believe opposition will undermine morale at home or among the troops, or will provide comfort to the enemy. In addition, many share the view of professional military officers that objecting to a course of action before it has been selected is acceptable, but once the course has been settled it is preferable to put the objections under the mattress and unite for the accomplishment of a common objective.

In historical instances where the population's large majority condemned antiwar sentiment, opposing a war has required courage, but in the United States during the Vietnam era, antiwar activity was fashionable in much of the country, particularly in elite circles. Supporting the war, therefore, was often the act requiring courage. Hilfrich's claim

that reasoned dissent produces national unity is not supported by the history of the Vietnam War or America's other wars. The opposition to the Vietnam War shredded the national unity on foreign policy that had existed from World War II to the mid-1960s. The denunciations of George W. Bush over the Iraq War similarly drove Americans apart. While reason might be compatible with Hilfrich's platitude, history is not.

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