The Fall of Saigon

Why Vietnam?
Why We Lost?

Professor Robert F. Turner
University of Virginia School of Law
I First Went to Vietnam in 1968

As a Journalist
I Returned as an Army Lieutenant in 1970 and Was Assigned to JUSPAO
And Returned Again in 1971 to the Same Job, This Time as a Captain
I even had *hair* once!
1971 Reunion of Senor Viet Cong Defectors

Ben Tre, South Vietnam
I Last Left Vietnam 35 Years Ago • April 28, 1975

During the Final Evacuation
In Vietnam I did a great deal of field research on Viet Cong terrorism and assassination, and while a Fellow at Stanford I played a leading role in the debate over whether there would be a “bloodbath” if we abandoned our allies.

Harrison Salisbury of the *New York Times* asked me to write an op-ed for the *Times* on this issue in late 1972.
In January 1973 I appeared on the PBS series “The Advocates,” on this issue opposite Yale Chaplain William Sloan Coffin and an unknown first-term congressman named Less Aspin. (Michael Dukakis was the moderator.)
“Turner’s volume is certainly one of the most refreshing to appear in several years on the subject of Vietnam, and it rekindles confidence that there is quality work again appearing after an interlude of emotional and severely biased pieces. In fact, Turner’s work must rank as a landmark in the treatment of Vietnamese communism.”

—American Historical Review
First Major English-language History of Vietnamese Communism

“. . . definitive account of Vietnamese Communism”

—American Political Science Review
More Recent Books on Vietnam

The Real Lessons of the Vietnam War

Reflections Twenty-Five Years After the Fall of Saigon

Edited by John Norton Moore & Robert F. Turner

To Oppose Any Foe

The Legacy of U.S. Intervention in Vietnam

Edited by Ross A. Fisher, John Norton Moore, Robert F. Turner
More Recent Books on Vietnam

This book consists of chapters written by students in a Vietnam War seminar I co-teach with another professor.
Why Vietnam?

Why did America send combat units to war in Vietnam?
Vietnam in the Cold War Context

Leninism committed to world revolution
Post-WW II guerrilla warfare in southern Europe (e.g., Greece, 1947)
Mao’s victory in China (1949)
Invasion of South Korea (June 1950)
NSC-68 Containment Doctrine
Chinese support for Viet Minh (1949-54)
The Real
Ho Chi Minh
In Dec. 1930 Ho Co-Founded French Communist Party
Ho Was Very Active in Communist International (Comintern)
A surprising source to correct the mythology . . .
“Ho Chi Minh was an old Stalinist, trained in Russia in the early ‘20s, Comintern colleague of Borodin in Canton . . . [and a man who presumably] spoke with authority within the upper echelons of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.”

- 1 Pentagon Papers 261 (Gravel ed. 1971)
VWP First Secretary Le Duan
Attacks “Titoism” (3d Party Congress, 1960)

“The modern revisionists represented by the Tito clique in Yugoslavia are trumpeting that the nature of imperialism has changed. . . . [I]f we want to lay bare the aggressive and bellicose nature of imperialism . . . the Communist . . . parties must necessarily direct their main blow against revisionism . . . . It is precisely the Chinese Communist Party, headed by Comrade Mao Tse-tung, which has most brilliantly carried into effect the teachings of the great Lenin.”

Some in America said a victorious Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam would be an “Asian Tito” and a buffer to Chinese expansionism . . . .
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Ho Chi Minh was no Tito!
Vietnam in the Cold War Context

Communist victory in North Vietnam (1954)
SEATO Treaty pledged U.S. to protect Indochina from Communist aggression (Feb. 1955)
Dulles (“massive retaliation” at a “time and place of our own choosing”) deterred Khrushchev
Mao said “people’s war” could defeat “Imperialists,” who appeared fierce by in reality were but “paper tigers” and could not resist guerrilla warfare
Vietnam War became a “test case” of Mao’s strategy.
“The United States has made South Vietnam a testing ground for the suppression of people’s war. . . . And everybody can now see that the U.S. aggressors are unable to find a way of coping with people’s war. . . .”
The Communists Saw Vietnam as a “Test Case”

[A Communist victory in Vietnam] “will lead to a chain reaction . . . . The people in other parts of the world will see . . . that U.S. imperialism can be defeated, and that what the Vietnamese people can do, they can do too.”

— Lin Biao
Vice Chairman
CCP Central Committee
3 Sept. 1965
“The Vietnam battlefront is most important for the future of all America. . . . Vietnam is the great laboratory of Yankee imperialism . . . . [T]he victorious end of this battle will also spell the end of North American imperialism.”

— The Speeches and Writings of Ché Guevara 289 (1968).
Article IV

“Each Party recognizes that aggression by means of armed attack in the treaty area against any of the Parties or against any State or territory which the Parties by unanimous agreement may thereafter designate, would endanger its own peace and safety, and agrees that it will in that event act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional processes.”

- Approved by Senate 82-1 (South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia were “designated” in a protocol to the treaty.)
Much of What We “Know” About Vietnam is Mythology

Many Americans Still Believe It was a “Senseless” and “Unnecessary” War
“To ensure the complete success of the revolutionary struggle in south Vietnam, our people there must strive to . . . . bring into being a broad National United Front.”

- 1 Democratic Republic of Vietnam, Third National Congress of the Viet Nam Workers’ Party 225 (1961)
Resolution of the Third Party Congress (1960)
“On the Tasks and Line of the Party in the New Stage”

“To ensure the complete success of the revolutionary struggle in South Vietnam, our people there must strive to bring into being a broad National United Front.”

Hanoi announced the formation of the “National Liberation Front for South Vietnam” three months later.

Third National Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party 225 (c. 1961?)
Any Subtle Hints the NLF Was Tied to Hanoi?
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In May 1984, *Vietnam Courier* admitted VWP’s decision to liberate South Vietnam was made on May 19, 1959, but kept “absolute secret” as the Ho Chi Minh Trail was built and hundreds of thousands of troops were sent south with supplies.
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America did not go to war over a "misunderstanding" or minor skirmish in the Tonkin Gulf, but to defend an ally we had solemnly pledged to defend by treaty and statute.
As in Korea in 1950, our troops fought in Indochina to uphold cause of human freedom and the non-aggression principles of the UN Charter.
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“U.S. combat forces are the most effective deterrent to aggression, and we should publicly offer such forces to South Vietnam without delay. ... No patriotic American will ever criticize President Kennedy for committing combat forces to protect freedom-loving people from aggression. Every patriot has the right and duty to criticize ineptitude and the too-little, too-late policies which invite aggression.”
Congress and Vietnam

The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution
(August 1964)
“Sec. 2. The United States regards as vital to its national interest and to world peace the maintenance of international peace and security in southeast Asia. Consonant with the Constitution of the United States and the Charter of the United Nations and in accordance with its obligations under the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty, the United States is therefore, prepared, as the President determines, to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force, to assist any member or protocol state of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty requesting assistance in defense of its freedom.”
Mr. Cooper. Then, looking ahead, if the President decided that it was necessary to use such force as could lead into war, we will give that authority by this resolution?

Mr. Fulbright. That is the way I would interpret it.
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Congress approved this authorization to use military force by a combined vote of 504-2.
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Mr. Fulbright. That is the way I would interpret it.

That is a 99.6% majority.
“In early 1964, a majority of Americans expressed dissatisfaction with Johnson’s handling of the war in Vietnam. However, after Johnson called for a resolution to permit him to respond to the alleged attacks on U.S. ships in the Gulf of Tonkin, his support zoomed to 85 percent.”

- The Lessons of the Vietnam War 175
  (Jerold M. Starr, ed, 1991)
Early Congressional Support for Vietnam

1955: Senate approved SEATO Treaty with 2 dissents

1964: Tonkin Resolution approved 504-2
      (Appropriated more than three times LBJ’s request for Vietnam along with enacting resolution)

1966: $13 billion supplemental appropriation passed 389-3 in House and 87-2 in Senate

1967: $12 billion supplemental passed 385-11 in House and 77-3 in Senate
      (House rejected amendment to prohibit funds for combat over North Vietnam 77-3)
We Were Winning the War by 1972
After the war was over, Hanoi admitted that it had lost more than a million troops in the war—nearly *four times* the losses of South Vietnam, the United States, and their allies combined.

'You know you never defeated us on the battlefield,'” said the American colonel.

The North Vietnamese colonel pondered this remark a moment. “That may be so,” he replied, “but it is also irrelevant.”


(Summers was the “American colonel” in this story.)
Douglas Pike on Could We Have “Won” in Vietnam?

“I believe we could have won the war in Vietnam. I believe future historians will say that not only could the war have been won, but that we had it won. But in the end it was defeat we snatched out of the jaws, not victory. … Had American credibility been maintained this would never have happened.”

—in Moore, The Vietnam Debate 87 (1990)
“This [Hanoi’s 1972 Spring Offensive] was the test. And the South Vietnamese met it. The North Vietnamese units did not take Hue; they were repulsed in the highlands. The major attack against the Saigon area stalled before the heroism and strength of the South Vietnamese Army.
“A free Vietnam had proven that it had the will and the capability to defend itself with the assistance, but not the participation, of its American ally against the enemy to the north assisted by Soviet and Chinese allies. **On the ground in South Vietnam, the war had been won.**”

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This point is important. I think all of us on this panel agree that the ARVN fought courageously and well and deserve praise today.
“Historians now acknowledge that American counter-insurgency operations in Vietnam were succeeding during the final years of that conflict; the problem was that support for the war had long since crumbled at home.”

—Prof. John Lewis Gaddis
Yale Univ.
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If that’s true, how did we lose the war?
What Went Wrong

1. I haven’t mentioned the civilian micromanagement of the war and the refusal of LBJ and McNamara to heed the consistent advice of the JCS and CIA that “gradualism” would not work. Prof. Parks will discuss part of that problem next.

2. That strategy changed under Nixon and Abrams. By late 1972 we were clearly winning on the ground in South Vietnam and in the air over North Vietnam—and Hanoi returned to Paris and accepted the peace agreement.

Under pressure from anti-war “peace” activists, in May 1973 Congress by statute snatches defeat from the jaws of victory.
Congress “Pulls the Plug”: The 1973 “Fulbright” Amendment

“Notwithstanding any other provision of law, on or after August 15, 1973, no funds heretofore or hereafter appropriated may be obligated or expended to finance the involvement of United States military forces in hostilities in or over or from off the shores of North Vietnam, Laos, or Cambodia, unless specifically authorized hereafter by Congress.”

Q. Was the American antiwar movement important to Hanoi’s victory?

A. “It was essential to our strategy. . . . Every day our leadership would listen to world news over the radio at 9 a.m. to follow the growth of the American antiwar movement.”
“Congress disastrously reduced military aid to Saigon’s forces—from $2.27 billion in fiscal year 1973 to $700 million in fiscal year 1975.”

—R.J. Rummel, Death By Government 258
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Roger Canfield will talk about this in more detail in a few minutes.
North Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Van Dong said in late 1974 of the possibility U.S. combat troops might return to help South Vietnam:

“They won’t come back even if we offered them candy.”

—Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* 661
Confident that the United States would not reintervene, Hanoi sent more than 20 PAVN divisions—virtually its entire Army, minus 1 division left in all of North Vietnam, 1 division in Laos, and 2 divisions in Cambodia—into South Vietnam to overthrow the Government of the Republic of Vietnam by force.
Consequences of Deterrence Failure: The 1975 Invasion of South Vietnam

Confident that the United States would not intervene, Hanoi sent more than 20 PAVN divisions—virtually its entire Army, minus the 325th division left in North Vietnam, 1 division in Laos, and 2 divisions in Cambodia—into South Vietnam to overthrow the Government of the Republic of Vietnam behind columns of Soviet-made tanks.
President Thieu Resigns

(Turner photo—April 1975)
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But it was not all in vain.
What We Bought By Delaying a Communist Victory

In 1964 Thailand and Indonesia were very vulnerable. By 1975 both were stronger and much more secure.

In 1964 China was exporting revolution to Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, and as far away as Mozambique. That stopped during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-69).

But it was not all in vain. By delaying the end a decade, good things resulted.
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The Consequences

Were the peace movement’s goals of promoting **human rights** and **stopping the killing** realized?
In the former South Vietnam

Prof. Lewis Sorley writes that as many as 250,000 former ARVN and GVN officials died in “Reeducation Camps” in South Vietnam.
In the former South Vietnam

Another 1.5 million people were forced to move to “New Economic Zones,” where another estimated 48,000 perished from starvation, disease, or abuse.
In the former South Vietnam

Prof. R.J. Rummel estimates **400,000** “boat people” died while trying to flee Communist Vietnam.
Cambodia Was Even Worse!
“The Cambodian genocide of 1975-1979, in which approximately 1.7 million people lost their lives (21% of the country's population), was one of the worst human tragedies of the last century.”
“Guides explain that bullets were too precious to use for executions. Axes, knives and bamboo sticks were far more common. As for children, their murderers simply battered them against trees.”
“Even by the most cautious estimate, more Indochinese have died violently since the end of the Vietnam War than during the war itself, perhaps by two million . . . . Human suffering has been on an unprecedented scale, far worse than the wartime days.”
“Guides explain that bullets were too precious to use for executions. Axes, knives and bamboo sticks were far more common. As for children, their murderers simply battered them against trees.”

It didn’t have to happen.
If this seems personal . . .

In April 1975 I was in Saigon trying to get to Cambodia to rescue orphans.
“[N]o other megamurderer [in 20th century] comes even close the the lethality of the communist Khmer Rouge in Cambodia during their 1975 through 1978 rule.”
Other Consequences of Our Abandoning Vietnam

- The Soviets moved 50,000 Cubans to Angola (500,000 died after Congress again cut off funds);
- Soviets invaded Afghanistan (killing another 1.3 million and creating Taliban);
- Soviets unleashed Communist movements in Latin America (wars in El Salvador and Nicaragua – fought in part with M-16s provided by Hanoi), killing another 150,000 or so;
- Iran seized U.S. Embassy; . . . .
Was it important to stop Communist aggression?

If you have any doubts, read this book.
Was it important to stop Communist aggression?

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The total death toll of international Communism in the 20th century is estimated at 80 to 100 million lives.
Any Questions?

During the Q&A period I will reserve the first question for someone who is really upset.