

Thirtieth anniversary of US imperialism's defeat in Vietnam

Bill Van Auken
2 May 2005

April 30, the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of Saigon and the definitive collapse of the largest US military intervention since the Second World War, evoked virtually nothing in the way of serious commentary by the US media.

What passed for coverage of the anniversary consisted mainly of semi-cynical news articles noting the growth of capitalism in Vietnam and reminiscences by veteran correspondents of the fateful day that the remaining US officials and their hangers-on were forced to flee aboard helicopters from the roof of the American embassy.

The *New York Times* marked the historic milestone by opening up its opinion pages to Stephen J. Morris, a right-wing academic who made a name for himself during the last election campaign by denouncing Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry as a communist sympathizer. Morris's thesis is that the US should have won the Vietnam War and that the sacrifices of America's troops were "unnecessarily squandered" because of political pressures at home.

For its part, the *Washington Post* urged the Bush administration to "avoid repeating its Vietnam-era mistakes" in deliberately underestimating the strength of the resistance to the US occupation in Iraq. The implicit premise of this advice is that without such mistakes, Washington may yet achieve victory in its two-year-old imperialist war in the Middle Eastern country.

Almost universally obscured was the essential content of that day 30 years: US imperialism suffered a shattering defeat in what was a criminal war of aggression. Given the ongoing war in Iraq, the aversion of the corporate media to delving too deeply into the significance of the anniversary is understandable—it strikes too close to home.

The defeat in Vietnam delivered a shock to the American ruling class from which it has yet to recover. The traumatic effect on the US military itself was immense, as the American commanders saw their army virtually disintegrate in an atmosphere of demoralization and outright mutiny.

The debacle in Vietnam has played a major role in the shaping of the predominant right-wing ideology in US bourgeois politics, giving rise to revanchist sentiments and stab-in-the-back theories that share a marked similarity to the conceptions that animated Germany's right in the aftermath of the First World War.

From the 1980s on, there has been a ceaseless campaign to erase Vietnam from America's collective memory. Above all, this effort has focused on extirpating the so-called Vietnam syndrome—the

innate hostility of the American people to imperialist interventions abroad, powerfully reinforced by the deaths of nearly 60,000 American soldiers during the war in Indochina.

Yet, the shadow of the Vietnam War continues to hang over America. In addition to the tens of thousands killed, many more returned to the US physically and psychologically devastated by the war. The American ruling elite and all of its institutions were discredited in a manner from which they have yet to recover for waging a war—like the current one in Iraq—based upon lies and deception.

Top officials in both parties and in the leadership of the Pentagon, from the administration of John F. Kennedy through those of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, were responsible for massive war crimes in Vietnam. These atrocities merit the same treatment given to the leaders of Nazi Germany after their defeat in the Second World War. Yet no one has ever been called to account.

The death toll for the Vietnamese people rose to over 3 million. Millions more orphans and widows remain from the war, as do millions who were wounded and maimed. In a campaign that involved the wholesale carpet bombing of the country, the US military unleashed 15 million tons of bombs and munitions on Vietnam, more than was dropped by all sides during World War II.

Between 1961 and 1971, the US military dumped more than 20 million gallons of toxic chemicals on the Southeast Asian country, turning a third of it into a wasteland. It is estimated that the surviving victims of this massive exercise in chemical warfare number between 3 and 5 million. Children continue to be born with terrible birth defects and suffering from mental retardation, Down Syndrome, heart disorders, dwarfism and other maladies as a result of their parents or grandparents being poisoned three decades ago.

This criminal war of aggression produced savage crimes. These included Operation Phoenix, an exercise in wholesale assassination of village leaders and suspected sympathizers of the National Liberation Front that claimed the lives of at least 20,000 people. It also included massacres such as My Lai, in which US troops herded some 500 men, women and children into a ditch and slaughtered them at point-blank range. Such indiscriminate killing was not an aberration, but the logical result of a war waged to suppress the revolutionary mobilization of an entire people against imperialism.

The more grisly atrocities that were endemic to Vietnam—tossing

prisoners from helicopters, the rape and mutilation of women, beheadings, slicing off ears as trophies—were an expression of the criminal character of the war itself.

The defeat of US imperialism on April 30, 1975, represented a stunning victory of the oppressed against overwhelming odds—the culmination of a struggle extending over three decades.

The Vietnamese people had defeated the most powerful imperialist power in the world, which had deployed a half a million troops on their soil backed by overwhelming air and sea power. The corrupt and dictatorial puppet regime of Gen. Nguyen van Thieu that Washington left behind boasted of a 700,000-strong army, but collapsed virtually without a fight. The victory of the Vietnamese people represented the culmination of a 30-year struggle in which they had confronted not only American intervention, but that of Japanese and French imperialism before it.

The heroism of the Vietnamese people inspired millions across the globe—including in the US itself—who came into political struggle in the 1960s and the 1970s.

It also marked the highpoint of the postwar upsurge that saw a wave of militancy in the industrial working class that reached insurrectionary proportions in country after country. These social struggles erupted in the context of an historic crisis of world capitalism marked by the 1971 collapse of the Bretton Woods system of dollar-gold convertibility and the “oil shock” two years later that gave rise to the worst recession since the 1930s.

Yet the struggle in Vietnam remained essentially separated from this global working class offensive. This was due in part to the perspective of the Vietnamese leadership itself, which saw the fight to defeat US imperialism and unite their country largely in nationalist terms.

More fundamental was the role of the existing leaderships in the workers movement, particularly in the United States and Europe. In country after country—France in 1968, Italy in 1969, Chile in 1973, Portugal and Greece in 1974, Spain in 1975—Stalinist-led Communist parties, social democracy and the trade union bureaucracies worked consciously to divert the working class from the path of social revolution and to stabilize capitalist rule.

In the US itself, the war in Vietnam was accompanied by a wave of tumultuous mass struggles, from the protests against the war and urban riots among the most oppressed sections of the working class, to a massive strike wave that embraced millions of workers.

But the working class remained dominated by an anticommunist AFL-CIO bureaucracy that had itself supported the war and which relentlessly subordinated every struggle at home to its alliance with the Democratic Party.

It was this party—historically identified with American liberalism and the New Deal—which was responsible for launching the war. It was the “best and the brightest” recruited by the Kennedy administration, not the right-wing ideologues of the Republican Party, who shaped the US imperialist aggression.

To the extent that elements within the Democratic Party leadership turned against the war, it was a matter of their adaptation to the massive wave of opposition that swept the country. The party’s attitude to the war remained one of duplicity, finding its consummate expression in the 2004 presidential campaign of John Kerry, who entered politics leading veterans

protesting the war, but ran for president three decades later posing as a hero of an intervention that he had previously branded criminal.

Those who were in the leadership of the mass antiwar protests in the US—the Communist Party, the Socialist Workers Party and a number of other middle class radical and pacifist groups—worked to subordinate the protests to the Democrats and to refurbish the party’s image after the collapse of the Johnson administration.

By opposing any settling of accounts with either the Democratic Party or the labor bureaucracy, those who led the protests played a major role in the disarming of the American working class in face of the offensive launched by the ruling elite in the years that followed. These years were characterized by wholesale union-busting, the slashing of social programs and the widening of the gap between wealth and poverty to a level unknown in the past century.

At the same time, the subordination of the working class to the Democrats and the capitalist two-party system paved the way for the rehabilitation of American militarism and the launching of a war in Iraq that is reproducing the horrors visited upon Vietnam three decades ago.

Just as full-scale war in Vietnam began with Johnson’s fabricated Tonkin Gulf incident, so the invasion of Iraq was launched in the name of nonexistent weapons of mass destruction and Al Qaeda ties. The infamous Vietnam-era statement that it was “necessary to destroy the village in order to save it” has more than found its match in the US ravaging of the entire city of Fallujah.

Thirty years after the end of the Vietnam War, its political lessons remain decisive in the struggle to end the US occupation of Iraq and defeat American militarism internationally. Key among these is that the fight against imperialist war can only be won through the mobilization of American working people, politically independent of and in opposition to the two parties controlled by big business and in unity with the broad masses of workers all over the world. The critical question remains the building of a mass socialist movement of the working class.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact