

By Fred Branfman

*"A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death."*

--Martin Luther King Jr. "Beyond Vietnam" speech, April 4, 1967

I recently watched, and was tremendously moved by, all 10 episodes of Oliver Stone's "Untold History of the United States" (on Showtime.) I strongly recommend it to all of us, but particularly America's young people who have been robbed of a most precious legacy: an understanding of their true history - and thus their future. I can't think of a more meaningful birthday or holiday gift to young people for, as Stone says, "history must be remembered or it will be remembered until the meanings are clear." As the same U.S. Executive Branch mentality that produced Vietnam is today illegally murdering and weakening U.S. national security interests through the Muslim world, and threatening its own citizens as never before, it has never been more urgent to learn from America's real history.

I was most moved by Episode 7, on the war in Indochina, whose closing words below constitute not only an epitaph for the Vietnam War but America itself. I thought of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s warning as I watched this segment, which so movingly chronicled how U.S. leaders waged aggressive war, killing over 3.4 million Vietnamese according to former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, and hundreds of thousands more Laotians and Cambodians; have never even apologized for doing so, let alone cleaned up the tens of millions of unexploded bombs and environmental poisons which continue to kill, wound and deform tens of thousands of innocent civilians until today, let alone paid the reparations they still owe the Indochinese; and then successfully erased their crimes and misjudgments from the history taught America's young people, guaranteeing that they will be repeated now and in the future.

I watched this episode after reading Nick Turse's monumental new book, Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam, which documents the systematic "industrial-scale" slaughter of Vietnamese civilians by U.S. troops, ordered by top U.S. military officers. Anyone who wants to know what the term "American" really means abroad should read this book.

I cannot say that I am surprised that America's political leaders, media and public intellectuals continue to ignore the U.S. Executive's ongoing inhumanity and murder of the innocent - particularly through its global and spreading drone and ground assassination programs and increasing reliance on the automated warmaking I first saw in Laos 40 years ago. America's elites are as indifferent to the "mere Muslim Rule" today as they were to the "mere Gook Rule" in Vietnam which Turse so painstakingly documents.

But I must say that I am astonished that even those who justify U.S. leaders' actions on the grounds of national security have failed to notice the obvious fact that U.S. warmaking in the 1.8 billion strong Muslim World is jeopardizing U.S. national security as never before. Just as shortsighted U.S.

backing of the Shah of Iran created a U.S. foreign policy disaster in 1978, the continuation of such policies today will guarantee many more Irans in the future.

Nothing will threaten Americans more in the coming decade than an irrational U.S. foreign policy that, in return for killing a handful of "senior Al Qaeda" leaders (often replaced by more competent deputies), has turned hundreds of millions of Muslims against it including countless potential suicide

bombers, greatly strengthened anti-U.S. forces, destabilized friendly or neutral governments and, as revealed by Wikileaks, vastly increased the danger that materials from Pakistan's nuclear stockpile - the world's fastest growing and least stable - will fall into terrorist hands. It must be understood that today's U.S. Executive Branch poses a far greater threat to U.S. national security, and to each of us, than its foes. (Please see my piece on this.)

It is understandable that many of us breathed a sigh of relief when Obama beat Romney, and hope for a Hillary Clinton or Joe Biden victory in 2016. But such hopes should not blind us to the fact that Obama, Clinton, Biden and the Democrats have continued a bipartisan and suicidal foreign policy that is

not only illegal and immoral, but threatens the deaths of countless Americans at home and abroad, and increasing attempts to turn the U.S. into a police-state in response.

Stone's words below pose basic questions: has Martin Luther King's warning come true? And, if so, what can we do to promote the birth of decency, humanity, and rationality in this spiritually dead nation of ours?

*See excerpts from Episode 7: "Vietnam, LBJ, Nixon & Third World: Reversal of Fortune", from "Oliver Stone's Untold History of the United States" (Showtime)*

The accepted mythology of the time was the U.S. lost the war in Vietnam. But as linguist, historian and philosopher Noam Chomsky has pointed out, "it's called a loss, a defeat, because they didn't achieve the maximal aims. The maximal aims being turning it into something like the Philippines. They didn't do that. They did achieve the major aims. It was possible to destroy Vietnam and leave". Elsewhere he wrote, "South Vietnam had been virtually destroyed, and the chances that Vietnam would ever be a model for anything had essentially disappeared."

When an aging and wiser Robert McNamara returned to Vietnam in 1995 he conceded, somewhat in shock, that despite official US estimates of 2 million Vietnamese dead, 3.4 to 3.8 million Vietnamese had perished. In comparison 58,000 Americans died in the fighting and 200,00 were wounded.

The U.S. had destroyed 9,000 of South Vietnam's 15,000 hamlets - in the north all 6 industrial cities, 28 of 30 provincial towns, and 96 of 116 district towns. Unexploded ordnance still blankets the countryside. 19 million gallons of herbicide had poisoned the environment. Almost

all of Vietnam's ancient triple canopy forests are gone. The effects of chemical warfare alone lasted for generations, and could be seen today in the hospital in the South where Agent Orange was used. Dead fetuses kept in jars. Surviving children born with horrid birth defects and deformities. And cancer rates much higher than in the North.

And yet, incredibly, the chief issue in the United States was, for many years, the hunt for 1300 soldiers missing in action, a few hundred of them presumed taken as captives by the North Vietnamese. High-grossing action movies were made out of them.

No official apology from the United States has ever been issued, and absolutely no appreciation of the suffering of the Vietnamese.

President Bill Clinton finally recognized Vietnam in 1995, 20 years later. Ever since the war American conservatives have struggled to vanquish "the Vietnam Syndrome", which became a catchphrase for Americans' unwillingness to send troops abroad to fight.

For a war that so mesmerized and defined an entire generation, surprisingly little is known about Vietnam today among American youth. This is not accidental. There has been a conscious and systematic effort to erase Vietnam from historical consciousness

Reagan: "It is time that we recognized ours was in truth a noble cause. We dishonor the memory of 50,000 young Americans who died in that cause when we give way to feeling of guilt, as if we were doing something shameful."

It was not only conservatives who whitewashed American history. Bill Clinton: "whatever we may think about the political decisions of the Vietnam era, the brave Americans who fought and died there had noble motives. They fought for the freedom and the independence of the Vietnamese people."

The outcome has been shrouded in sanitized lies. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, dedicated in November of 82, now contains the names of 58,272 dead or missing Americans.. The message is clear. The tragedy is the death of those Americans. But imagine if the names of 3.8 million Vietnamese and millions of Cambodians and Laotians were also included.

The supposed shame of Vietnam would be finally avenged by Ronald Reagan, the two Bushes and even to an extent Barack Obama, in the two decades to come.

The irony is that the Vietnam war represented a sad climax of the WWII generation from which Johnson, Nixon, Reagan, Bush Sr., and all the generals in the high command came, those proclaimed by the mainstream media in the late 1990s as "the greatest generation."

Yet that same media ignored the arrogance of a generation that, overconfident from WWII, dismissed Vietnam as a fourth-rate power that could be easily defeated. From what the ancient Greeks

called hubris or arrogance comes the fall. And from this initially obscure war came a great distortion of economic, social and moral life in America. A civil war that polarized the country till this day - with much denied, little remembered, nothing regretted and, perhaps, nothing learned.

History must be remembered or it will be remembered until the meanings are clear. The second President of the United States, John Adams, once said, "power always thinks it has a great soul and that it is doing God's service when it is violating all His laws".

Which makes the details of the oncoming history a sad, inevitable bloodbath that repeats itself again and again, as the U.S.A., much too often, stood on the side of the oppressors, propping up allies with financial and military aid, war on drugs programs, police and security training, joint military exercises, overseas bases, and occasional direct military intervention.

The U.S. empowered a network of tyrants who were friendly to foreign investors who could exploit cheap labor and native resources on terms favorable to the Empire. Such was the British and French way. And such would be the American way. Not raping, looting Mongols, but rather benign, briefcase-toting, Ivy-league educated bankers, and corporate executives who would loot local economies in the name of modernity, democracy and civilization, to the benefit of the United States and its allies.

During the Cold War politicians and the media sidestepped debate over the basic morality of U.S. foreign policy, by mouthing platitudes about U.S. benevolence and insisting that harsh, even dirty, tactics were needed to fight fire with fire. The Kissingers of the world called it "realpolitik". But even when the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s, our nation's policies did not change, as the U.S. time and again, has taken the side of the entrenched classes or the military against those from below seeking change.

It was the American war against the poor of the earth, the most easily killed, the collateral damage.

As was asked at the beginning, was it really about fighting communism, or was that a misunderstood or disguised motivation?

It was George Kennan, America's leading early Cold War strategist who went to the heart of the matter in a memorandum written in 1948. "With 50 percent of the world's wealth but only 6% of its population, we cannot fail to be the object of envy and resentment. Our real task is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity. To do so we will have to dispense with all sentimentality and daydreaming. We should cease to talk about vague and unreal objectives such as human rights, raising of living standards and democratization. We are going to have to deal in straight power concepts. The less we are hampered by idealistic slogans the better."

But George Kennan, who lived to be 102 years old in 2005, was an intellectual who never sought political office.

Never in his wildest dreams could he have imagined the barbaric proportions of the upcoming Presidency of Ronald Reagan.