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Author

Bui, Long T.

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The "Vietnam" Corona-Quagmire: Rescripting Forever Wars in a Time of Chronic Crisis

LONG T. BUI
University of California, Irvine

Abstract

This essay considers the legacies of "Vietnam" through the lens of contemporary events of global scale such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The fiftieth anniversary since the end of that conflict occurs right after the cessation (but not end) of the worst socio-health crisis facing the planet and humanity in recent times. As a frame for remembering militarized Cold War histories in the face of ongoing crises and political quagmires, I consider how the Cold War specter of Viet Nam has been marshalled against biopolitical threats in the twenty-first century. That cultural and ideological rescripting reinforces racial, colonial, capitalist, and imperialist logics of control that simultaneously invite us to revisit and refashion that infamous war's meaning. I approach the "war on coronavirus" through the prism of "Vietnam" to conceptualize what I am designating as "Vietnam corona-quagmire." By looping conflicts of the past into the cascading crises of the present future, corona-quagmire presents critical opportunities for rethinking the fraught global relations among society, self, subjects and states. From the spread of disinformation to America's mishandling of the new coronavirus to Viet Nam's martial response to the problem, the "Vietnam-sized" language mobilized against COVID-19 presents a means to analyze the dialectics of permanent wars, as they are reproduced within an era of endless violence. Corona-quagmire in the end shines light for scholars seeking to disentangle ongoing processes of militarization, nationalism, and empire.

Rescripting Forever Wars

This essay considers the enduring legacy of "Vietnam" through contemporary events of global scale, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic. Such events are becoming more frequent or noticeable by dint of the hazardous nature of global politics and topsy-turvy times. In thinking with and beyond "Vietnam," I mark fifty years since the end of this conflict after COVID-19, the worst health crisis facing the planet in decades.[1] The so-called "war on coronavirus" exacerbated power politics, exposing fault lines produced by a post-war siege mentality based on engendering and propagating forever wars. The mobilization of the memory of "Vietnam" during COVID-19 works in service of attacking new elusive hidden enemies and transnational threats in Viet Nam and the United States.

As an interdisciplinary scholar of Vietnamese postwar cultural memory, I approach the semicentennial with an overwhelming sense of historicity as well as caution with thinking of the war in a conventional sense, which is why I look to anti-COVID-19 campaigns in the United States and Viet Nam through the prism of our "Vietnamized" past to conceptualize what I call the corona-quagmire.[2] A quagmire in the context of war gestures to an entrapping or embarrassing predicament that is hard to get out of (English-language media often referred to the Vietnam-American War as a quagmire).[3] For my own purposes, I define corona-quagmire as the geopolitical struggles around diseases such a coronavirus, as it mimics or is mired in traditional state war-making. The Vietnam corona-quagmire therefore denotes how the powersliding against a novel coronavirus draws on the history and memory of "Vietnam" to enact militarized campaigns over COVID-19. Whereas corona-quagmire proffers a lens for assessing the myriad difficulties and minefields and crosshairs of pandemic politics, "Vietnam" stands not as a thing of the past but a form of viral knowledge and politics for conflict-ridden nations to easily deploy the language of forever wars in dealing with chronic global crises.

Studying the "war on COVID-19" as it is compared to "Vietnam" invites scholars to revisit that iconic war's meaning to contemplate what value it still holds for people suffering under pandemics of global scale. Here, I ask what does it mean to raise the signpost of "Vietnam" amid an international health emergency, and what are its intended devastating effects and productive work for power concentration and power grabs? How does the war on COVID-19 relate to the hypermilitarization and hypernationalization of diseased societies? To answer these questions, I first discuss the War's significance for current US cultural discourse. Secondly, I turn to the United States and its "Vietnamized" campaign to thwart COVID-19 in conjunction with discussing Vietnamese Americans' responses. I then turn to Viet Nam the country to discuss how it dealt with the novel coronavirus in the similar way it fights national enemies during what it called the American War. The last section or conclusion wraps up my thoughts on the "Vietnam" corona-quagmire and its import for transnational American studies. From the spread of media disinformation to state quarantines, I

argue that the polemical language and actions against COVID-19 proffers a rich transnational site to scrutinize the afterlives of "Vietnam." This legacy built on the collective memories of forever wars gets reproduced within chronic social problems that build on cascading crises that get considered as wars, but in the sense that the urgency of these new wars present a method to mobilize technologies of violence, surveillance and control. I now turn to parsing out why Viet Nam remains a militarized metaphor.

"Vietnam" as a Militarized Metaphor

Let us explode the historical binaries and structural antagonisms that animate postwar memory formation. Recognizing this COVID-19 pandemic's entanglement with Viet Nam signals a framing device and affective frame for reconceiving unwinnable, protracted forever wars, whether against communism or disease. To this point, I argue that the ongoing discursive scripting of "Vietnam" as a corona-quagmire points to the ways that war was a galvanizing event and flashpoint for continuing the war by other means.

It is through the open horizon of such untenable wars that we are forced to witness new hard-fought ones like the one against COVID-19. This observation carries forward the memory of "Vietnam" past the end date of 1975 to wrestle with the various uses of history, such as the various state and social commemorations of fifty years since the end of war. The War's enormous influence on current affairs begs scholars to do more than freeze the war's memory in time, forcing us to ask hard questions about the cyclical mutations of Vietnamese nationalism, US militarism, and biopolitical empire.

After fifty years, Viet Nam continues to matter for a world undergoing pandemics. My discernment that the geopolitical quagmire that was "Vietnam" has been rescripted into a corona-quagmire puts Cold War histories in dialogue with biomedical processes. Situating them in relation to the series of actions around COVID-19 ponders the militarized legacy of "Vietnam" via a broader terrain of violence, resistance, and solidarity and puts it in global relationality. In my book *Viral World*, I discuss how the spread of COVID-19 proliferated world-building and world-destroying efforts.[4] Whose social worlds have to be protected or get destroyed depends on perspectives, and the different relationalities attached to them. Inasmuch as warring doubles as worlding, it becomes easy to compare "Vietnam" as a total disaster and failed war for the United States (and a win for Viet Nam) to the war on COVID-19.

Here, we can ask to what extent the world-health and viral components of COVID-19 are constituted by the viral worlds of "Vietnam." How can war in Viet Nam be compared to the protective efforts against COVID-19? What does "Vietnam" today mean then for a global audience witnessing life-death dilemmas that aren't overtly about military conflict such as COVID-19? What does it mean to recenter "Vietnam" in these coronavirus times?

As I document later, "Vietnam" has emerged as one set of "viral" rationalities within general market capitalism, which territorialized and sickened nations to the point of collapsing economies. Literary scholar Belinda Kong denaturalizes the notion of an infectious disease like SARS and reframes it within discursive relations, specifically the discourse of infection and biosecurity around the borders of bioterrorism and the diseased Other. I am following Kong's provocation, framing the pandemic as a corona-quagmire to think more concretely about the layered political discourses and levels of power waged through the COVID-19 pandemic. This suggests that "after" the Cold War, we are not at the ideological end of history with neoliberalism, but in the age of permanent crisis management and permanent war, where "every point of disruption from within will be swarmed and brought to heel under the sheer heft of the whole."[5]

These days, there is a sense of the permanency of military violence or forever wars, whose causes need to be disentangled. In the next section, I turn to responses by the US government and Vietnamese American community to the pandemic to consider how they draw on the lessons of Vietnam to describe a new state of war.

The War on COVID-19 as "Another Vietnam"

If war is a force that gives us meaning, to paraphrase war correspondent Chris Hedges, then "Operation Coronavirus" finds meaning in getting Americans to participate in another "unwinnable" war by trying to defeat an enemy through the rhetoric of military necessity. I argue that the American war in Viet Nam supplies a blunt organizing principle for studying various orders of magnitude such as pandemics.

The day of April 30, 2020, marked the forty-fifth anniversary of the end of the War. Had it not been for the COVID-19 dominating headlines, there would be a flurry of articles marking that occasion. That date forever etched in history marks the stunning conclusion to an infamous war and shattered America's self-aggrandizement as the world's greatest military.

"Vietnam" or the Vietnam War (the Second Indochina War) as it is called in the United States—and the American War in Viet Nam—names one of the most infamous (undeclared) wars whose termination is accented by victory of the Vietnamese communists defeating South Vietnam in 1975. The US never fully recovered from its "Vietnam Syndrome" with new wars; and a paranoid Cold War-era politics reinvigorated by Donald Trump, whose "Make America Great Again" slogan has put forth a deep distrust of government, increased citizen polarization, mass protests and activism, and economic instability.

News reports dredged up memories of "Vietnam" to shape the narrative around COVID-19, but they point to the greater decline of the United States. In a *New York Times* piece, writer Viet Thanh Nguyen comes to grips with the "social virus" of American exceptionalism that sits at the heart of matters, awakening us to the preexisting conditions of our body politic. Nguyen believes that "if the illusion of

invincibility is shredded for any patient who survives a near-fatal experience, then what might die after COVID-19 is the myth that we are the best country on earth."[6] The War should have shattered that militarily enforced national myth, but COVID-19 was a good reminder of that myth's weakness.

Wars are multisided affairs with irreconcilable effects and uneven playing fields, and the selective memory of who remembers what depends on the one telling the story and who has authority. An op-ed piece in *The Bulwark* published in April 2020 titled, "COVID-19 is this Generation's Vietnam," opines that the Vietnam debacle gives us clues as to why people don't trust institutions or authorities, and how the counting of pandemic dead could (as seen during the War) induce people to demand change through large-scale revolutions to sweep away an old dying corrupt order based on waging war permanently.[7]

On a Facebook post, Vietnamese American novelist Monique Truong wrote this indictment of the COVID-19-as-war analogy: "Do not use other wars as a gauge for the lives lost, especially when the body count of the War was more than three million, not just the 58,220 Americans who died. COVID-19 is a pandemic." As a former refugee, Truong boldfaces the perils of deploying the war's body count using it as a point of comparison. This criticism disputes the instrumentalized "ends of empire" and the persistent and preoccupying issue of America's (unresolved) attempts to work through its anxieties about defeat in Viet Nam—via a "repetition compulsion" of an imperialist, masculinist, nationalist, and racist knowledge project that does not remember the (number of) Vietnamese who died in the war.[8]

Ethnic studies scholar Yến Lê Espiritu recalls that the term "body count" came about during the War.[9] It referred to the daily enumeration of perished Vietnamese "enemy combatants," where a higher dead human count was proclaimed a military victory for the United States. She says that this act of enumerating must provoke questions about who and what counts.[10] The US media conflated the statistical body count in Viet Nam to that of the COVID-19, but this kind of "epidemic media" and geospatialization of data contributes to a biomedical empire run by American companies and institutions. With a subtext of locating and killing a foreign enemy, the mortality count—nationally and globally—inscribed anthropogenic drivers of pathogenicity and transmitted human vulnerabilities accruing from diseases that arise from systemic inequities and social neglect. These are the politics of epidemic media that need to be contextualized.[11]

Critics of US involvement in this pandemic war point out a malady of which the symptoms are a "deeper disease that 'must be faced' in the American polity."[12] Like the war in Viet Nam, the true victims and survivors of this "war" are easily dismissed like the over one million US residents that died, often from refusing to mask. Pandemic death as war death points to the global system of colonial racial capitalism, dividing people into endangerable and vulnerable at-risk populations, between those who cannot and those who "should" be saved.

In Orange County, California, the site of the largest number of Vietnamese speakers in the United States and outside of Viet Nam, Vietnamese Americans experienced a low burden of infection despite the high numbers everywhere else for all other ethnic minorities, given their early awareness of what was happening in Viet Nam, California's early lockdown, and the work of local public health advocates. The OC had the first-ethnic-specific testing in the country, a contributing factor for community immunity. *The Los Angeles Times* lumped Vietnamese in Viet Nam with Vietnamese Americans suggesting, "the same cultural values seen in Little Saigon may have also served as a protective force in the Vietnamese homeland."[13] One could read this in many ways. One is that it showcases Vietnamese collective resilience against foreign enemies.

Collective immunity was smeared with the trace of racial politics, when one local community newspaper featured a photo of a woman holding a sign that said, "I'd rather die with COVID-19 than live with Biden 2.0."[14] For conservative, mostly older Vietnamese, their pro-Trump politics led them toward sympathizing with the MAGA movement, which sought to undermine American vaccination efforts. They didn't vaccinate but many did not get COVID-19, a privilege of living in (sub)urban areas with fast access to medicines and information as opposed to Native reservations with higher threats of infection. On the other hand, their behavior is part of the cultural lessons and countercultural legacies from the war, where refugee anticommunism emerges from the complexities and contradictions of what American Studies scholar Karín San-Aguilar describes as Vietnamese place-making in a white-dominant society.[15] Their politics forms a remnant of the war, and they are complicit in fascism, but at the same time (South) Vietnamese are asserting their political power in a country that overlooks them and forgets their losses from the war. This observation accords with sociologist Christina Hughes who argues Vietnamese Americans are acting out the war's "ongoing form of territorialization and state violence."[16]

Community leaders that did support mask mandates in Little Saigon were accosted by racists. This is what happened when a man attacked a Vietnamese American elected official saying: "You come to my country, and you act like one of these communist parasites. I ask you to go the fuck back to Vietnam!"[17] Sharp war cries against Vietnamese as enemy outsiders and communist vermin cast them as the Other in a manner reminiscent of the war. Trump's supporters decried "corona-communism" for how Democrats promised to deal with the pandemic (free healthcare, generous unemployment benefits, rent moratoriums). Much like the disease of communism, the coronavirus needs to be eradicated and "contained" in Cold War style.[18]

That nightmarish war against COVID-19 never seemed to have an end throughout 2020. Seeking reelection, Donald Trump marshalled his authority as a "wartime president," spoiling for a fight against "an invisible enemy." Just as Richard Nixon capitalized on the War and fear of social contagions like communism, many US citizens speculated if Trump would do the same with his corona-quagmire. Despite the

intended will of leaders, unwinnable wars chip away at America's global standing and "Trump's Vietnam," aka COVID-19, promised to do the same.

The US government did not mount war in the conventional military sense, but its war against COVID-19 drew on all levers of power. At the societal level, "fake news" spewed out from pro-Trump vaccine deniers, which trotted out government conspiracy theories and scientific disinformation—items that can be traced back to the War.[19] One editorial suggested that the president should be prosecuted as a war criminal for imperiling America's most marginalized: "The botched pandemic response resembles America's failed wars in Viet Nam and Iraq not just in ineptitude but also in terms of injustice [against] working-class Americans, often people of color."[20]

In light of America's recurring "Vietnam Syndrome," there are repeated comparisons between divisive new wars to the United States' past controversial involvement in Southeast Asia such as the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which were dubbed by commentators as "another Vietnam." The war against the coronavirus was no exception. In spring of 2020, two days before April 30 or the anniversary for the Fall of Saigon, the COVID-19 death toll exceeded the number of veterans who died in combat.[21] As the epicenter of the pandemic, the United States had a mortality rate that dwarfed any other country, including China.

An op-ed piece in *The Washington Post* faulted this comparison, laying out the differences between a guerrilla war fought in the jungles and one that dwelt upon biosecurity. Believing it easier to sway public opinion by crook than hook, US politicians such as Trump resorted to a brute show of force to defeat this hidden adversary. Here, we can think about the durability of US nationalization and militarism as they resonate strongly in the context of "declining" US empire and white nationalism.

Amid all the gamesmanship and wars of attrition during the pandemic, the swift collapse of Afghanistan's government to the Taliban after the US pullout in 2021 marked the "returns" of the War in full force. The war that journalists called "Biden's Saigon" finished the same way it began: in the middle of a pandemic, starting with SARS and ending with COVID-19. These return engagements with the ghost of "Vietnam" made for a new ugly theater of war and brought forth a full recognition of the "interconnected, intimate web of social, cultural, and military relations."[22]

A good example of this complex web comes from Vietnamese American Thuy Dinh, who experienced déjà vu. Dinh underwent home schooling and distancing under two separate "wars"—first "Vietnam" and then COVID-19.

> The loss of South Vietnam, and the coronavirus pandemic —are linked by political expediency and poor leadership. My Vietnamese American identity is a direct result of past US presidents making decisions about Vietnam based on their political viability, not on their concern for the well-being of the people involved, particularly the Vietnamese.[23]

Having survived the Tet Offensive in 1968, she feared for her life during military-enforced curfews in Saigon. She stayed away from all strangers due to the misrepresentation of the war by US leaders that everyone is a potential Vietcong or communist spy. Inasmuch as the war normalized danger, distrust, and death with daily movements circumscribed, the sense of fatalism of living in South Vietnam built up a resilience in refugees like Dinh who used that to survive the coronavirus war and its culture of fear. Her homeschooling occurred during a war and the second as part of the pandemic lockdowns. These two wars gave acknowledgment to life as coping with cycles of crisis and hoping for better times.

Vietnamese Americans on social media put out their own interpretation of the COVID-19 disinformation war. Many older Vietnamese Americans fell for fake news by a YouTube social media influencer and threw vitriol against the outgoing Biden administration. Some of their children did not believe elders were simply duped, but they equally identified the lasting psychological effects of war. One reddit user said, "My folks escaped communist rule…I sympathize where their generation's republic attitudes might come from.""[24] To break the cycle means not demonizing elders, particularly for those that served as soldiers during the war, dealt with reeducation camps, and who are now quarantined in their homes.

The postwar script of the South Vietnamese as the ultimate losers compels refugees and their offspring to recall the specificity of Viet Nam in personal not just political or historical terms. While they might fall prey to dominant US discourses, they have their own ambivalent relation to it. Following Espiritu, I put up the critical juxtaposition of "Vietnam" and COVID-19 to conceive new knowledge, focusing on refugee stories and epistemologies. Corona-quagmire realizes the war on interpersonal and intergenerational terms as it relates to how people also conceive of war beyond the nation-state, even if we must also grapple with official state discourse. State discourse in Viet Nam is a topic to which I turn to in the next section.

Viet Nam's War on an Enemy of the State

"Recently, we got a hot virus. Their name is Corona … people everywhere are ready … We got to push away the Corona, Corona!" The lyric comes from a song put out by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam that gained fame as a pop song to enliven personal hygiene, while valorizing national morale with lyrics such as "Vietnam dares to win." Igniting a rousing global dance craze on social media, the viral cultural product made by the Ministry of Health worked with Vietnamese influencers to crush COVID-19, which it did well.

Beside setting up full-body disinfecting cabins on the street, Viet Nam set up huge quarantine centers in rural communes and military camps in Vinh Phuc province outside the capital of Hanoi. Sealed off residents could not leave the premises and could only buy food at the border gate. Viet Nam escaped the snare of the novel coronavirus with a smattering of cases. Assuming the chair of the UN Security Council

(as a nonpermanent member) in 2020, the Southeast Asian communist country had scored a major victory, according to the UN Resident Coordinator for Viet Nam, offering a "whole-of-political system and whole-of-society approach, [which] transforms the crisis into a better future for its citizens, especially the most vulnerable, emerging as a leader at both regional and global levels in the post-COVID-19 world."[25]

Heads of state in other countries described the united front against COVID-19 as a real war. Leaders who used the military metaphors include Emmanuel Macron in France, Xi Jinping in China, Donald Trump in the United States, Boris Johnson in the United Kingdom, Uhuru Kenyatta in Kenya, Narendra Modi in India, and Angela Merkel in Germany.[26] While the United States was flailing under COVID-19, Viet Nam was grappling with this "war" successfully, with a communist twist. Historian Michelle Nicholasen explains why Viet Nam was poised to win over the pandemic:

> One of the main sources of the Vietnamese Communist Party's legitimacy today is its success in the war [against the Americans and colonizers]. Being able to tap in to the triumphalist rhetoric of average people mobilizing for victory resonates quite strongly in Vietnam. The government has very effectively deployed rhetoric similar to what the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the National Liberation Front had used to mobilize people during the war.[27]

For over half a year, Viet Nam reported no deaths by COVID-19 and closed its distancing proscriptions. The government used patriotic posters and loudspeakers evocative of past military conflicts to encourage collective action and unify the country, while shoring up state surveillance, exclusion, and extraction of bodies. Viet Nam mobilized national defenses, rallying nationalist sentiment and public resources to ward off the enemy.

Vietnamese musicians composed war motifs against the "virus-invader" referring to doctors and medical staff as "shock troops," while a daily newscaster announced, "we will prevail over this virus, as we've prevailed over many previous enemies."[28] Doctors under lockdown in Da Nang sang a famous war victory song written in 1975 to celebrate North Vietnam's victory over American forces. More than a lockstep response of restricting freedom by an authoritarian state, Viet Nam's unique history and culture of conflict explains how it responds to current circumstances, says international politics expert Maya Nguyen.

By turning military bases into quarantine centers, Viet Nam's military-run isolation units fell into step with a "decisive" battle plan to smash and vanquish COVID-19—a campaign that Prime Minister Xuan Phuc Nguyen described as a Spring General Offensive of 2020, referencing North Vietnam's communist forces' final successful push against South Vietnam in 1975.[29] With government spies already planted in every

province and community, Viet Nam's all-out war against COVID-19 relied on political propaganda and the broad net of state surveillance instituted since the end of the war.

Viet Nam's president said during a meeting of politburo falling during the New Year TET festival: "Fighting this epidemic, means fighting the enemy … Every business, every citizen, every residential area must be a fortress to prevent the epidemic."[30] The narrative that "every citizen is a soldier" enlarges citizens' fear of the government as well as foreign invaders. With anti-COVID posters that projected fears onto the "outside" world, Viet Nam had been prepared for the "enemy," since Viet Nam has been aggrieved in the past by multiple foreign invaders such as the United States and China. Lina Le, a professor in Viet Nam, finds that "the legacy of the Vietnam War is so strong, soldiers are propped up as the true heroes. Those who make remarkable contributions to the community are given the title 'soldier of emulation' (*chiến sĩ thi đua*)."[31] Another motto repeated by government officials is: "We do not leave anyone behind." This message was sent even to Vietnamese people overseas. Aviation authorities organized flights to 'rescue' citizens stuck in foreign countries ravaged by the pandemic such as the United States. The government also announced it would pay for all healthcare bills and spending of Vietnamese people presenting symptoms of COVID-19, as well as those who spend 14 days in quarantine.[32] Viet Nam by all appearances was ready to win this "war" and once again beat the Americans at this game.

The idea of Viet Nam as a COVID-19 success story in 2020 was upended in January 2021 with the rise of cases. This change of fate occurred with falling fatalities in the United States and as Viet Nam began to have ten thousand cases per day from the more infectious Delta variant and new subvariants. As the first country to be hit by SARS after China, which sits close to its border, Viet Nam in the intervening years tried to up its biomedical defenses but also its military capabilities, receiving support in ammunitions from its former enemy the United States, while preparing for the next pandemic and war stemming from China.

In its bid to put more oil rigs and claim land in in the East Sea, Viet Nam's coast guards have collided with Chinese fishing ships many times, as China resumed its claims on the Spratly Islands. As the adjoining Asian countries clawed back from quarantine, this normalization meant resuming aggressive military postures and nationalist defenses instead of perhaps proposing the sea does not belong to anyone.

When Viet Nam ordered a blockage shutting down its border as pandemic precaution, the Chinese newspaper *Global Times* said this amounted to declaring war with China.[33] Viet Nam's stratagem for dealing with a foreign enemy differed not so much from Xi Jinping's rosy forecast of a "people's war" to outmaneuver an invading force, mobilizing the state's entire resources and population. Despite donations and exchanges of medical supplies between the neighboring countries, the US cybersecurity company FireEye believed a Vietnamese intelligence group launched cyberattacks against Wuhan's government and China's Ministry of Emergency Management to gleam information about the novel coronavirus, a charge that Hanoi denied. Here,

COVID-19 intensified tensions among two countries that fought each other before. The end of the War didn't put a stop to warmongering; it extended it, although we can think about proportionality and the differences in the militarization of smaller countries like Viet Nam against bigger dominant nations like the United States or China. COVID-19 only exposed those loose ends of war and empire.

Hanoi's war against coronavirus was a multi-pronged nationalist strategy, one that does not quite announce a new phase of militarism but can perhaps be seen as an effort to decolonize from the West, while playing into the geopolitical warscapes set by Western powers like the United States. The government deployed thousands of troops in a warlike display to Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), its former (conquered) enemy. Formerly called Saigon, HCMC was once the capital of South Vietnam and the ally of the US during the American "war of aggression." Nothing of this scale in terms of military mobilization had been seen since the communists "liberated" the South back in 1975. While Vietnam today is unified, the postwar command economy of that Cold War division between north and south persists, due in part to the traces of war which are sedimented and reactivated by global/national crises, because new structures are not capable of responding to such novel existential threats. With centralized decision-making powers granted to the Vietnamese prime minister, the northern Army marched into southern territories to smother "COVID-induced social unrest."[34] Hanoi deployed the military to patrol streets and enforce curfews, an action similarly done in Bulgaria, Jordan, Italy, and South Africa. Shutting its borders as the pandemic picked up steam, the state considered only "national survival" by any means necessary and this means quashing any southern dissent or rebellion. One example of the north-south divide is a story promoted by the Hanoi government about a physician named Dr. Khoa who sacrificed himself for their patients, which turned out to be false and initially and heavily doubted in the south as communist propaganda. [35]

During this time, it was common for social media users to cite the triumphs of Asian countries like Singapore, Malaysia, China, and Viet Nam to browbeat Western-style electoral democracies for being too complicated to get anything done. One blogger wrote that countries such as Viet Nam "have a much easier time imposing 'draconian measures'" and "the Western governments have got ways to go to play catch up with Eastern governments, especially the Vietnamese government."[36] Corona-quagmire can serve here as an analytical pathway for surveying concatenations of bio-orientalism and biopower that appear in "positive" attributions of Asian communitarism and illiberalism. It also suggests racialized bodies and populations are easily confined or caged (and deserve to be) by not just national governments but also a modern harsh system of discipline for which Viet Nam is the model.

Sociologist Barbara Katz Rothman writes that "biomedicine now functions globally much the way we have always understood imperial powers to function."[37] The sociologist delves into the history of Big Data to illuminate American geopower in the numeration, datafication, visualization, and distribution of death globally through

intergovernmental organizations, such as the WHO, where the US is the largest contributor and a founding member—something that has changed with Trump defunding and abandoning the US commitment to the organization). With this change and the US abandonment of global health security, we can see these sacrificial zones created in the Global South and economically struggling countries. Practices of US sovereignty and neoliberal governmentality in the Global South aligned with global pandemic biopower to "economize" life in Viet Nam.[38]

The domination of US biomedical empire—as an extension of US global biopower—sits in awkward alignment with Viet Nam's national health management program and its attempts to accommodate American intervention through specific moments of collaboration. The US Global Health Protection Program worked closely with the Vietnamese to suppress COVID-19. While Viet Nam appeared to conquer the novel coronavirus, it faces numerous cascading crises as they have come to converge and play out in the context of the country with rising citizen discontent, political unrest, and income inequality. COVID-19 enlarged and magnified those internal crises. Even if Viet Nam could temporarily suppress the virus, it cannot tamp down the disruptive things the virus exposed about Vietnamese society.

The close partnership between the United States and Viet Nam stands out as one of ambivalence, with the former asserting its sphere of influence and the latter holding its semi-independent stance within an uneasy pact with a former enemy that previously blocked its application to join the United Nations. With the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war, we can consider the context of Viet Nam's remarkable history of asserting itself against US imperialism (again)—together with its current global status as an independent and growing industrial nation. At the same time, what would it mean to "denationalize" or demilitarize Viet Nam, thereby extricating from warmaking as evidenced by COVID-19? There are no easy answers, but there must be demands that countries like the United States and Viet Nam try to disarm themselves, and the whole world needs to dismantle state-based armed violence and proclivities for permanent conflict or answer to past wrongs like giving more money to war victims of Agent Orange. Approaching the war on COVID-19 through the lens of "Vietnam" serves to elaborate upon the logics of the war machine that continue to reverberate throughout different times and spaces. There was no lasting peace with the end of "Vietnam" and yet we can desire such a thing in the face of "Vietnamized" wars that never end.

During the pandemic, the US Secretary of Defense continued to meet with Vietnamese officials with the US, donating five million doses of Moderna vaccines to the country, while continuing the search of US soldiers gone missing and to recover the war dead. The US collaboration with Viet Nam to search for the MIA of the War suggests wars are never resolved but linger. Wars of devastation which kill millions do not cease; they mutate like a new deadly virus and the goal is to track them and make sense of them. One example of this mutation is the fact that Donald Trump with his Secretary of Health Robert F. Kennedy Jr. defunding USAID and denying vaccines to

the rest of the world, thus dissolving US biopolitical empire into what we do not know yet. Perhaps, China, India, or some other great power will fill the void, but there are no clear answers on the future, but one thing still remains, the militant penchant to fight wars and get stuck in messy political situations. The "vaccine" to prevent future corona-quagmires include better policies but also an intellectual praxis that can help scholars to probe the discursive and recursive terms of war as well as their co-variants.

Conclusion

Since 1975, "Vietnam" analogies have haunted "America," and the war equally haunted Viet Nam, coming back with a vengeance when there is a global emergency like COVID-19. A life-altering pandemic that mirrors "Vietnam" compels scholars to tinker with the usual war scripts for remembering a forever war, rewriting its "permanent" legacy for our crisis-prone global times. This "war" against COVID tore up the collective psyche and ripped apart the social fabric much like "Vietnam" did, but this facile comparison compels a deeper analysis of why such an analogy would be made. While the COVID-19 pandemic appears at first blush not directly connected to the Vietnam-American War, I spotlight the Vietnamized attempts to defeat an enemy "Other" as a rehash of Cold War binary logics of containment, but also the postwar viral logics of the enemy is everywhere (similar to a coronavirus).

Corona-quagmire as a term sheds light on the biopolitical nodes and networks of power/knowledge through which states and communities are categorized or understood via permanent conflicts and nationalist militaristic warfare. At the same time, the portmanteau centers a viral worlding as witnessed in the ambivalence toward COVID-19 vaccination by Vietnamese Americans. A golden anniversary is a timely occasion for deep reflection around not just a warring past but our warring present. In the twenty-first century, "Vietnam" sits as the synecdoche of attenuated decolonial futures (and forever wars) that have matriculated into untenable conflicts and wars against disease. COVID-19 continues to mutate as we speak. Corona-quagmire serves to destabilize what it means to think with and beyond "Vietnam" by signaling the war's many afterlives as it influenced a forever war ethos.

The year 2025 marks the semicentennial of what has been referred to as either the "Fall of Saigon" by those in the United States and former South Vietnam or "Day of the Liberation of the South and National Reunification" by the Republic of Vietnam. The problems of "Vietnam" remain unresolved and outlive us. Like coronaviruses, militarized nations and communities can never seem to get rid of wars, only rehash them in "novel" fashion. By approaching the fiftieth anniversary of the War by way of the war against COVID-19, this article elaborates on the multifold consequences of war. Positing the politics of COVID-19 as corona-quagmire poses vigorous critical inquiry and opposes the memory of "Vietnam" as a static object of mourning. In doing so, I explore the entanglement of history, memory, politics, nation, globality, and identity. This jump

across the time-space continuum has implications for Transnational American Studies, since my rescripting of the politics of COVID-19 as corona-quagmire overcomes disciplinary restrictions and alerts us to convergent conditions of crises, such as the politico-economic destabilization and rise of fascism that preceded COVID-19 in Europe and the United States.

As scholars look back on five decades since "Vietnam" and peer into the next half century, they must understand how the war has been mobilized in ferocious times of fighting and consider ways to highlight as well as destabilize our political common-sense. This is where I advocate for thinking about the multi-stranded "ends" of "Vietnam" and our Vietnamized corona-quagmire.

Notes

[1] I put "Vietnam" in quotations mark to designate the war as it is presented in shorthand in American English as opposed to the country of Viet Nam.

[2] The US policy of Vietnamization induced a discursive process of Vietnamese trying to reclaim the War's memory on their own terms, one which has been ironically "Viet-namized" though actually Americanized. Long T. Bui, *Returns of War: South Vietnam and the Price of Refugee Memory* (New York University Press, 2018).

[3] Quagmire was often used in war reporting, and the term is highly associated with that and rarely used now. The term "quagmire" puts blame on the enemy, like a military-political trap they set for outsiders, whereas now wars are waged on behalf of establishing US global and economic hegemony. During COVID-19, particularly regions were referred to as corona-quagmires in general, but especially war-torn areas like Syria. Hanin Ghaddar, "Hezbollah's Corona Quagmire: An Opportunity to Empower the LAF," *Washington Institute Policywatch*, 31 March 31, 2020, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollahs-corona-quagmire-an-opportunity-to-empower-the-laf

[4] Long T. Bui, *Viral World: Global Relations during the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Taylor and Francis, 2024).

[5] Maximillian Alvarez, "The End of the End of History," *Boston Review*, n.d., https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/maximillian-alvarez-end-end-history/

[6] Viet Thanh Nguyen, "The Ideas That Won't Survive the Coronavirus," *The New York Times*, April 10, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/10/opinion/sunday/coronavirus-america.html

[7] Jonathan V. Last, "COVID-19 Is This Generation's Vietnam," *The Bulwark*, April 28, 2020, https://www.thebulwark.com/p/covid-19-is-this-generations-vietnam

[8] Jodi Kim, *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War* (University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

[9] Yến Lê Espiritu, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)* (University of California Press, 2014), 2.

[10] See Espiritu, *Body Counts*, especially 81–139.

[11] Bishnupriya Ghosh, *The Virus Touch: Theorizing Epidemic Media* (Duke University Press, 2023).

[12] Cited in Kevin Bruyneel, *The Third Space of Sovereignty: The Postcolonial Politics of US-Indigenous Relations* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 147.

[13] Lila Seidman, "Coronavirus Today: Lessons from Little Saigon," *LA Times*, September 22, 2020, https://www.latimes.com/science/newsletter/2020-09-22/how-little-saigon-kept-covid-numbers-low-coronavirus-today

[14] Tony Bui, "Tha Chet Vi Co Vit 19, Hon La Song Voi Bi Den 20," *Viet My*, November 28/29, 2020.

[15] Karín Aguilar-San Juan, *Little Saigons: Staying Vietnamese in America* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

[16] Christina Hughes, *Bad Refugees: Manufacturing Statelessness at the Margins of Global Northern Citizenship*, PhD diss, University of Washington, 2022.

[17] Josie Huang, "In Orange County, Anti-Vaccine Activists Attack Top Elected Official For His Vietnamese Heritage," *LAIST*, July 30, 2021, https://laist.com/news/orange-county-anti-vax-activists-attack-supervisor-andrew-do-vietnamese-heritage

[18] Dengue Fever or the Hong Kong Flu. Influenza A pandemic raged during the Vietnam-American War, plundering the lives of one hundred thousand individuals (one million globally), twice the number of US soldiers who died in that conflict.

[19] It supposedly began with the rancor over the Battle of Hue in 1968. Mark Bowden, *Hue 1968: A Turning Point of the American War in Vietnam*, *Atlantic Monthly Press*, 2017.

[20] Jeet Heer, "If This Pandemic is a War, Trump is a War Criminal," *The Nation*, May 7, 2020, https://www.thenation.com/article/politics/trump-coronavirus-war-criminal/

[21] One month earlier, media outlets beheld the number of COVID-19-related deaths as it surpassed three thousand individuals who passed away from the 9/11 attacks.

[22] Viet Le, *Return Engagements: Contemporary Art's Traumas of Modernity and History in Sai Gon and Phnom Penh* (Duke University Press, 2021), 48. These ghostly apparitions of the war are similar to what I argued in my first book.

[23] Thuy Dinh, "What Coronavirus and the Vietnam War Share: Homeschooling, Distancing, Fearing for Your Life." *NBC News*, May 29, 2020, https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/what-coronavirus-vietnam-war-share-homeschooling-distancing-fearing-your-life-ncna1217776

[24] Phuong Tran Nguyen, *Becoming Refugee American: The Politics of Rescue in Little Saigon* (University of Illinois Press, 2017).

[25] Vietnam was also the 2020 chair of ASEAN, Association of Southeast Asian Nations; Kamal Malhotra, "Việt Nam's COVID-19 Crisis Response Can Increase Opportunities for the Country to Emerge as a Leader at Regional and Global Levels," *Việt Nam News*, May 12, 2020, https://vietnamnews.vn/opinion/op-ed/716534/viet-nams-covid-19-crisis-response-can-increase-opportunities-for-the-country-to-emerge-as-a-leader-at-regional-and-global-levels.html

[26] Matilda Gillis, "Ventilators, Missiles, Doctors, Troops … The Justification of Legislative Responses to COVID-19 Through Military Metaphors," *Law and Humanities*, 14, no.2 (2020): 135–59.

[27] Michelle Nicholasen, "How Vietnam Was Poised for the Pandemic," Epicenter, June 22, 2020, https://epicenter.wcfia.harvard.edu/blog/how-vietnam-was-poised-for-the-pandemic

[28] Maya Nguyen, "Vietnam's War against COVID-19," *The Diplomat*, October 19, 2020, https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/vietnams-war-against-covid-19/

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