

# REASSESSING THE VIETNAM WAR

April 2012

Escorting a  
suspected  
Vietcong,  
1960s,  
Public  
Domain



## Jessica Achberger

As Americans, we are all familiar in some way with the Vietnam War. Some of us were drafted, others had a loved one fight, and those of us who are younger learned about it in school. Many of us have even stood at the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C., paying tribute to the thousands of Americans who lost their lives during the war.

However, the Vietnam War, like every war, has two sides.

After World War II, the United States became a global superpower, embroiled in an ideological confrontation with the Soviet Union. However, while the Cold War conflict between the

U.S. and U.S.S.R. stayed “cold,” many other conflicts, related to both the Cold War and decolonization, were undeniably “hot.”

The First Indochina War (1946-1954) was fought between French imperialists with the support of the Vietnamese Emperor against Ho Chi Minh and the Vietnamese communists. Following this war, Vietnam was divided into two. During the Vietnam War, which began in 1955, the North Vietnamese communists fought the South Vietnamese who were supported by the United States. For the United States, the war was part of

a broader bid to stop the spread of communism.

Lasting almost twenty years, the Vietnam War resulted in the death of not only almost 60,000 Americans but also several million Vietnamese, as well as Cambodians and Laotians.

For Americans, the Vietnam War represented not only a great loss of life, but also a profound loss in the battle with communism and a pervasive domestic social battle over the legality and ethics of the conflict.

For the Vietnamese, the War is known as the War of American Resistance, or, more simply, the



**In America, the Vietnam War Memorial has served as the nation's touchstone for the War.**

Image Courtesy of Skyring

American War. Just as the United States paid tribute to the conflict through memorials, museum exhibits, and through the "official" history of school textbooks, the Vietnamese have created a national history and way of remembering this war.

The War Remnants Museum is one of the most significant memorials to the war.

The Museum first opened in September of 1975, less than six months after the war had ended, with the name "The House for Displaying War Crimes of American Imperialism and the Puppet Government." It was later called the Museum of American War Crimes and then the War Crimes Museum, and finally changed to the War Remnants Museum in the 1990s, when relations with the United States improved.

While the name of the Museum has changed, the contents of the Museum are still decidedly oriented towards the official Vietnamese version of the history. Visitors are greeted beyond the entrance with an outdoor display of American military vehicles, including a Huey helicopter and an A-1 attack bomber.

These are certainly "remnants" leftover from the War, but of course the legacy of the war in Vietnam itself is much greater. In particular, the museum

highlights, through graphic photographs, the effects of Agent Orange, the chemical used by the United States military as a form of chemical warfare. In addition to the photographs, there are also jars displaying preserved deformed fetuses, showing the after-effects of Agent Orange on the Vietnamese population.

The museum also houses an additional gallery of (including both famous and less well-known images), a guillotine used by the French to decapitate prisoners, and replications of prison conditions for POWs from North Vietnam.

While everything in the museum can be classified as emotional and taxing to witness, the most disquieting exhibit on view during a 2009 visit was an exhibit of pictures created by local school children depicting their interpretations of Agent Orange. Seeing American history from the other side through exhibits such as these can be extremely painful but it is crucial if we Americans are to understand the Vietnam War.

In Vietnam itself, memories of the War remain vivid, even more so than they do in America.

Most Americans who travel in Vietnam today are treated with respect and even friendliness, but at the museum, a man came up to my traveling companion and extended his stub of an arm in greeting—a very subtle, yet obvious, gesture of hostility. This man was too young to have been in the War himself but his missing arm, probably destroyed by a leftover land mine, represented the long fallout from the War. It was also a reminder of the struggles the Vietnamese continue to face as they deal with their own history.

Located in District 1 of Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), Vietnam, the museum is open from 7:30am until 5:15pm, but closed for lunch from 11:45am until 1:30pm. Many of the exhibits are very graphic and disturbing and visiting the museum is not recommended for children under the age of 16, without parental supervision and discretion.

Jessica Achberger is a historian, writer, and editor who divides her time between Lusaka, Zambia and Suzhou, China. She is a PhD Candidate in History at the University of Texas at Austin, set to graduate in 2012.



**U.S. Army Tank outside the War Remnants Museum**