

BACKGROUND TO THE

VIETNAM WAR

JOAN COXSEGE

Background to the Vietnam War is authorised by the
Vietnam Moratorium Committee to commemorate the
50th Anniversary of the 1970 Moratorium Rally in Melbourne

'WARS WILL ONLY BE STOPPED WHEN SOLDIERS REFUSE TO FIGHT, WHEN WORKERS REFUSE TO LOAD WEAPONS ONTO SHIPS AND AIRCRAFT, WHEN PEOPLE BOYCOTT THE ECONOMIC OUTPOSTS OF EMPIRE THAT ARE STRUNG ACROSS THE GLOBE.'

ARUNDHATI ROY

PUBLIC POWER IN THE AGE OF EMPIRE

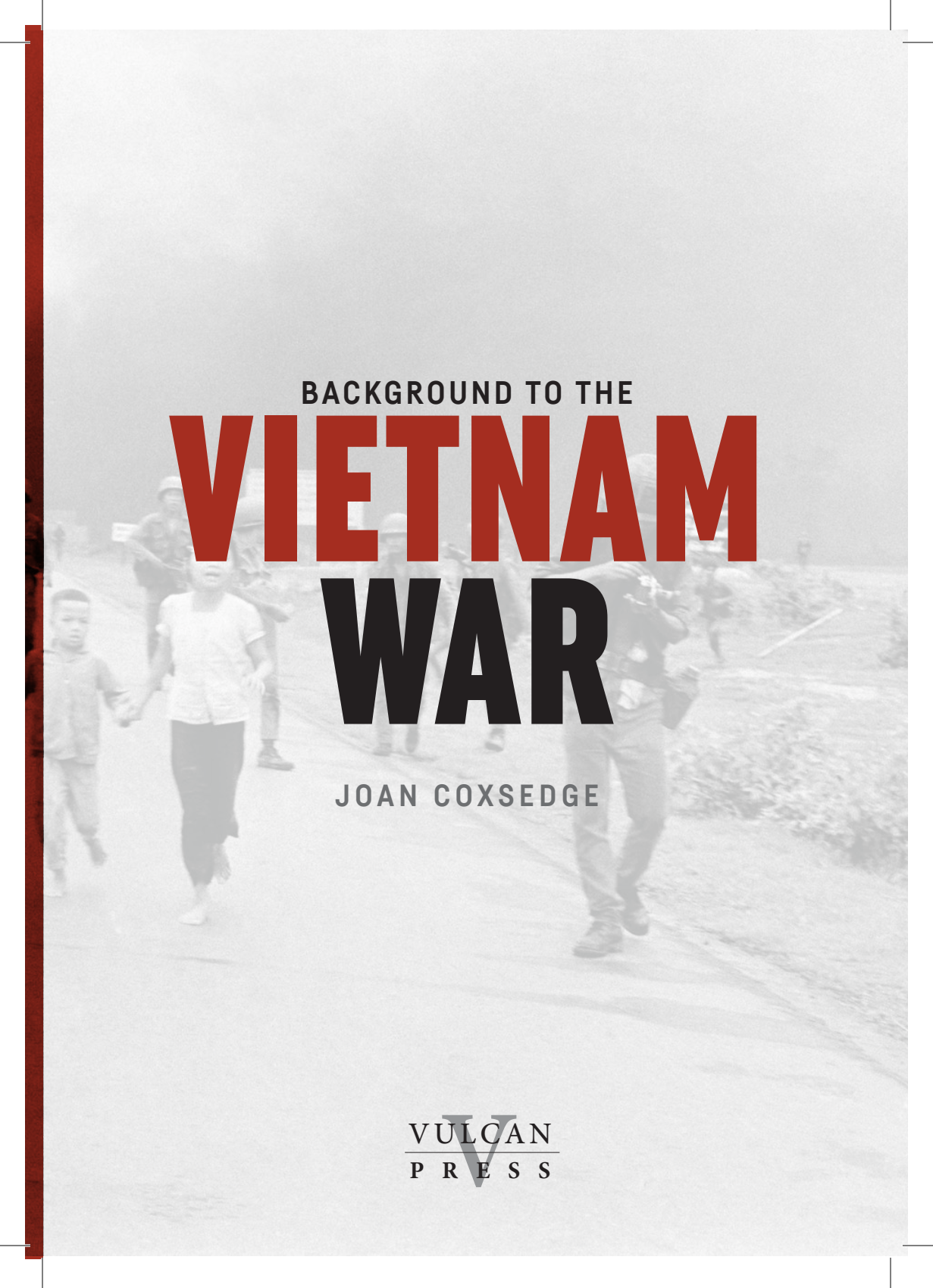
'NOTHING IS MORE BARBAROUS THAN WAR. NOTHING IS MORE CRUEL... NOTHING IS MORE PITIFUL THAN A NATION BEING SWEEP ALONG BY FOOLS.'

DAISAKU IKEDA

US foreign policy has nothing to do with morality, but everything to do with making the world safe for American corporations; to prevent the rise of any society that might offer an alternative to the capitalist model and to extend its political and economic hegemony over as wide an area as possible.

Since the United States was founded in 1776, it has been at war for 214 of its 235 years of existence. The only time it went for five years without fighting a war was during its isolationist period of the Great Depression.

Currently, the US military has more than 1.3 million men and women on active duty, with more than 200,000 stationed overseas. With only 5% of the world's population, it has 800 bases in 160 countries, more than any other people, nation or empire in history, and spends more on the military than the next 19 biggest spending nations combined. Since 2001, the US government has spent in excess of \$4.7 trillion waging its endless wars and it's been estimated that the US military drops a bomb somewhere in the world every 12 minutes.



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VULCAN
PRESS

BACKGROUND

IT WAS A HISTORY of betrayal, broken promises and bullying. France started the war by refusing to hand back its 80-year old colonial possession, while Vietnamese nationalists were equally determined to win their independence by throwing out the French, who continued to cream off the profits from Vietnam's rubber and rice plantations. In their 1945 Declaration of Independence, the Vietnamese stated: *'They have built more prisons than schools. They have mercilessly slain our patriots. They have drowned our uprisings in rivers of blood to weaken our race. They have forced us to use opium and alcohol. They have fleeced us to the backbone, impoverished our people and devastated our land'.*

The War of Independence was fought by a United Front of various nationalist political groupings with the full support of the people led by patriot Ho Chi Minh which became known as the Viet Minh. The Viet Minh fought the French for eight long years from 1946 to 1954 when one million Vietnamese died. In May 1954, after 55 days and nights of fighting, the Viet Minh routed a 15,000 strong French Army at Dien Bien Phu, ending nearly 100 years of French colonialism in Indochina. It was a victory that shook the world, especially the Americans, who according to official records had been actively supporting the French War since 1950, not only advising on strategy, providing 'military assistance' and preventing peace talks, but funding it to the tune of 80%, costing US taxpayers about one billion dollars a year.

The man in charge of North Vietnam's military strategy for the entire war was Vo Nguyen Giap, considered by many to be one of the most capable military commanders of the 20th century. In the first few years he fought a low level insurgency campaign against the French, mostly in the North. The French had greater numbers and fire power, but Ho and Giap believed they could win by mobilising the peasants into a guerrilla force.

US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles did everything possible to save the French, pressuring the British to support air strikes at Dien Bien Phu because he wanted to 'internationalise' the war. He even offered the French two atom bombs, which they turned down on the grounds that they might come out of it worse than the Vietnamese. A day after the massive French defeat, a conference was held in Geneva attended by the world's major powers - the United States, Britain, France the Soviet Union and China - to use their combined influence to bring peace to the region with the Geneva Agreements, which stated:

1. Vietnam would be **temporarily** divided into two zones at the 17th parallel, not into two nations.
2. There would be an internationally supervised election by secret ballot to reunify the country under **whichever zone** was freely chosen by the Vietnamese people. The election would take place within two years, by the summer of 1956.
3. Until the country was reunited, neither zone would receive any outside military assistance or make any alliances.
4. The military forces of the two sides were to be separated and regrouped. French forces north of the 17th parallel would move south and the Viet Minh would move north, with civilians free to move to either zone.

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21 July 1954 At the Geneva Peace Conference, Vietnam reluctantly accepted the temporary division of their country at the 17th Parallel for a period of two years, an agreement it came to bitterly regret. Before the ink was even dry, the US established the Saigon Military Mission (SMM) to conduct sabotage and paramilitary operations in the North with the notorious Colonel Edward Lansdale in charge.

US leaders had no intention of allowing a free election because they knew - President Eisenhower actually made the admission - that more than 80 percent of the population would have voted for Ho Chi Minh against former emperor and pro-Western puppet Bao Dai. Washington swiftly wheeled in a new stooge, Ngo Dinh Diem, a Vietnamese aristocrat living in New York with absolutely no following in Vietnam. Diem, described by President Johnson as the 'Churchill of Vietnam', immediately cancelled the free election promised for July 1956, but needed US military support and US dollars to maintain control in the South, which it got in spades, with two-thirds of the entire cost being paid for by Washington.

The Diem regime was one of the most corrupt and brutal in modern times, instigating a reign of terror that included wholesale gaoling, torture and extortion, forcing the South Vietnamese to fight back. Washington, fearful that a successful revolt would reunite the country, cranked up its propaganda machine with the lie that the North was invading and conquering the South, even though the CIA's Foreign Broadcast Information Service admitted that Radio Hanoi was actually promoting a peaceful protest.

In December 1960, Buddhists, socialists, communists, liberals, nationalists and village leaders banded together to form the National Liberation Front, the NLF. Diem promptly labelled them 'Viet Cong', meaning Vietnamese Communists, despite the fact that the majority of them were not. The Americans, as usual, instead of trying to end the injustices that caused the rebellion, tried to suppress it by force. In February 1962, President Kennedy

stated that American 'advisers' would return fire if fired upon. A few months later, 5000 Marines and 50 jet fighters were dispatched to Vietnam '*in response to Communist expansion in Laos*', and by 1963, the number had grown to 16,300.

President Diem's brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu - who ran the brutal secret police - broke up a Buddhist celebration by killing eight children and one woman. In protest, Buddhists set fire to themselves. In the August, South Vietnamese government forces, led by Diem, attacked several Buddhist temples. Henry Cabot Lodge, the new US Ambassador to Vietnam, was told by the US State Department that it would '*no longer tolerate Ngo Dinh Nhu's influence*' on Diem's regime. Within two months, there was a military coup and Diem and his brother were assassinated.

Speaking in Fort Worth, Texas, on the morning of November 22 on the day he too was assassinated, President Kennedy stated that: '*without the United States, South Vietnam would collapse overnight...we are still the keystone in the arch of freedom.*' Newly elected President Lyndon Johnson agreed with him and steadily increased troop levels to more than half a million, while quadrupling the number of bombing raids, a course of action Eisenhower had strongly opposed. But '*I am not going to be the president who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went*', Johnson said. The bombing was not limited to Vietnam. From 1964-73, the United States covertly dropped two million tons of bombs on neighbouring, neutral Laos during the CIA-led 'secret war', making Laos the most heavily bombed country per capita in the world.

Midway through 1964, American TV showed North Vietnamese patrol boats in the Tonkin Gulf. Within two days it was claimed they had attacked two US destroyers, a claim later shown to be a deliberate lie. President Johnson asked Congress for the power to '*take all necessary measures to repel an armed attack against the forces of the United States to prevent further aggression*'. The Tonkin Gulf resolution was approved by Congress by a vote of 416 to 0 and the Senate by 88 to 2.

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PM Menzies loathed communism and believed that China, along with all other countries that came under its control, posed a threat to Australia. In 1951, with New Zealand, Australia signed the ANZUS Treaty hoping to strengthen ties with the United States and to keep it involved in our region. In 1965, Australia had already sent a battalion of our troops to Malaysia to support resistance to Indonesia's Sukarno government, and with the support of Cold War Warrior and Minister for Foreign Affairs Paul Hasluck, the pair also decided to send an Australian battalion to Vietnam, displaying an unseemly haste to involve us in Washington's latest war.

In November 1964, six months before we formally entered the war, Menzies introduced a compulsory selective national service scheme (conscription) in a speech he gave late at night to an empty House of Representatives with neither Opposition leader Arthur Caldwell, an ardent anti-conscriptionist, nor his deputy, Gough Whitlam, being present in the chamber, both of them having left Canberra to return to their electorates. The intense secrecy surrounding the scheme ensured no widespread debate took place until the system was firmly in place.

By early 1965 when it became clear that the North was fighting back hard, the US escalated the war by sending in 200,000 troops to the conflict, requesting further assistance from 'friendly countries in the region'. Naturally we responded. Menzies announced on 29 April 1965 that Australia would join the United States in its war against the 'Communists of Vietnam' because they were a 'direct military threat to Australia'. No official declaration, just a bald statement to shore up our alliance, although our involvement actually started in 1962 when we sent over a small contingent of 30 'military advisers', dispatched as the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam (AATTV), also known as 'the Team'. And in August 1964, the Royal Australian Air Force had sent a flight of Caribou transports to the port of Vung Tau.

By sheer coincidence (like hell) a few days before Menzies' announcement, then Treasurer Harold Holt had been dispatched to Washington and was

successful in unblocking the flow of US investments to Australia, winning some handy trade concessions on the side. We called it 'Blood for Dollars,' knowing that President Johnson was desperately seeking 'respectable-looking' allies for a war that even back then had incurred the odium of growing numbers of people.

The US commitment kept climbing and by 1965, it had 184,300 military personnel in Vietnam, with its Air Force launching 'Operation Rolling Thunder' as the first combat troops arrived. On Christmas Day, 'Operation Rolling Thunder' was suspended for one month and then resumed. Cambodia broke off diplomatic relations with Washington. By New Year's Eve, 1966, there were 385,300 US military personnel in Vietnam with 6,644 killed in action. But not enough apparently.

General Westmoreland asked for 'fresh manpower'. Believing that Australia's involvement should be both strong and identifiable, in March 1966 the government sent off a taskforce of two battalions and a RAAF squadron of Iroquois helicopters with its own area of operations, a taskforce that also included conscripts. In August 1966, Operation Rolling Thunder was said to be closing in on Hanoi. This was followed by Operation Tiger Hound and Operation Masher/White Wing/Than Phong 11 which caused 2,389 'known enemy casualties'.

Public support for the war remained surprisingly strong even after PM Harold Holt visited Washington on 29 June 1966 and told President Johnson that Australia was 'all the way with LBJ'. When 'Bossman' President Johnson and his ugly entourage paid us a visit later that year, huge crowds came out to greet him, but there were also visible signs of dissent, and the dictum 'all the way with LBJ' along with Premier Atkin's recommendation to 'run the bastards over' was balanced by a substantial splatter of paint thrown at the presidential limousine, causing a media furore. At year's end, PM Holt went for a swim and vanished in the wild surf at Portsea.

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By 1967, there were 485,600 US military personnel in Vietnam with 16,021 killed in action, but by early 1968, the numbers had ballooned out to more than half-a-million with 30,610 killed in action, fuelling the anti-war movement with thousands chanting, '*Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?*' But General Westmoreland ignored them: '*we have reached an important point where the end begins to come into view,*' he said, but that was before the Tet Offensive, a traditional Vietnamese holiday when there was normally a cease-fire. Not this time.

In a tactical coup-de-force, some 85,000 North Vietnamese attacked more than 100 South Vietnamese towns. President Johnson announced he would not stand for re-election, Robert Kennedy, brother of John, was assassinated and Richard Nixon made a come-back and returned as President of the United States. Tet showed the levels of resistance in Vietnam and made it abundantly clear that the US was losing the war and we had all been lied to.

As we watched the nightly horror show of Buddhists setting fire to themselves and napalm raining down on defenceless human beings and defoliants drenching and destroying the earth, opposition within Australia grew and our country split down the middle. Even the 20-year old son of a former Liberal minister in the Holt, Gorton and McMahon Governments - Billy Snedden - was forced to register for National Service, but shot off overseas. 'For God's sake, leave my son alone,' whined Snedden, showing a total disregard for other people's sons. In May 1968, in a desperate bid to crack down on mounting civil disobedience, Minister for Labour and National Service Leslie Bury tightened the National Service Act by increasing fines and gaol terms, among other draconian measures. It didn't work. Protest actions continued to flourish.

In March 1971, Lieutenant William Calley was convicted of premeditated murder for the butchery at My Lai. Calley had led a platoon of 30 men into the Vietnamese hamlet, known as 'Pinkville,' where between 200 and 500 unarmed villagers were brutally slaughtered and girls as young as five were

raped - one of many such massacres. It was disclosed by journalists after being suppressed by the Pentagon for more than a year. During Christmas 1972, for 12 days and nights, Nixon ordered the bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong when more than 40,000 tons of high explosives were dropped on the people trying to force concessions at the Paris Peace talks. It failed.

The withdrawal of Australia's forces began in November 1970 under the Gorton Government when eight Royal Australian Regiments who had completed their tour of duty were not replaced. A phased withdrawal followed and when Whitlam was elected in December 1972, he immediately abolished conscription and pulled Australia out of the war and by 11 January 1973, our involvement was over. By the time the last Australian personnel left, it remained Australia's longest military engagement and its largest contribution to a foreign conflict since WW2 - and its most controversial.

Approximately 60,000 Australians served in the war, including ground troops, naval forces and airmen, with 521 killed and 3,000 wounded. Between 1965 and 1972, 804,000 young men registered for National Service with 63,375 conscripts serving in the Army, out of whom 15,381 went to Vietnam, with two hundred killed and 1,479 wounded. Countless others were killed and injured during training and in road accidents. For much of the war, opinion polls showed that although a majority broadly supported the war, they weren't too happy about conscripts being sent to Vietnam.

Years later, in a bumbling effort to 'explain' how we became involved in the whole sorry mess, PM McMahon tabled copies of two letters dated 29 April 1965. One was from a Mr Quat, who served briefly as an interim Prime Minister of South Vietnam. Luckily for Menzies, after a series of negotiations between Australian, American and Vietnamese representatives and after much persuasion, Dr Quat belatedly 'accepted' Australia's offer of troops. The pro-war lobby seemed to believe we were not culpable for joining in the butchery but for not getting ourselves a formal invitation to do so, even if

it was an extremely dodgy one. After the fall of Saigon, Dr Quat went into hiding. In August 1975, he was arrested and gaoled after a failed attempt to leave Vietnam, and eventually died of liver failure in 1979.

For the Americans, the war dragged on until 1975 with its ignominious defeat. Estimates of US military personnel who served in Vietnam vary from 2.6 to 3.8 million. There are 57,939 names of those who died or are missing as a result of the war written on Washington's Vietnam Veterans Memorial. It was a war Washington never forgot nor forgave this insult to its national pride. As a consequence, Vietnam was punished by a trade blockade and by political and economic isolation which lasted for more than two decades.

We are now seeing a rewriting of the history of that wicked war in an attempt to erase from our memories Washington's merciless bombing of civilians in Laos and Cambodia, its use of napalm and defoliants, the rapes and tortures by crazed GI's in hamlets like My Lai, because the war has been recognised - even in America's heartland - as an obscenity they would prefer to forget, making it imperative to remind people of what actually happened.

Project 100,000

This was a draft programme outlined by Secretary of defence Robert McNamara in 1966. Of the first 240,000 Americans inducted into the military between 1966 and 1968, 40% were below 6th grade level; 41% were black; 75% came from low-income families and 80% had dropped out of high school. *'The poor of America have not had the opportunity to earn their fair share of this nation's abundance,'* McNamara mouthed, *'but they can be given an opportunity to serve in their country's defence'.*



South Vietnamese police chief Gen. Nguyen Ngoc Loan killing Viet Cong suspect Nguyen Van Lem in Saigon in 1968. **Eddie Adams Adams/ap**

Agent Orange and Dioxin

Between 1961-71, the US military sprayed more than 21 million gallons of lethal defoliants and herbicides across 4.5 million acres of South Vietnam in a defoliation programme called 'Operation Ranch Hand,' which affected almost 5 million Vietnamese civilians living in the sprayed area, figures that do not include the Vietnamese soldiers serving on both sides of the conflict. Launched by President Kennedy on December 4, 1961, to test its 'effectiveness,' in August 1962 he gave the nod for 'Ranch Hand' to be substantially upgraded: to remove foliage along thoroughfares used as a cover for ambushes, to defoliate trees and plants to improve aerial visibility and to destroy subsistence food crops. **The number of missions increased sixteen-fold from 107 in 1962 to more than 1,600 in 1967.**

Five million acres of mangrove and upland forest were defoliated and 500,000 acres of crops were destroyed, approximately 12% of southern Vietnam. **Today, 2.1 million acres are still barren and unproductive and it is estimated that it will take more than 100 years of intensive replanting to bring the forests back to their original state.** Cambodia was also sprayed, along with Laos, although little is known about the extent of spraying in Laos during the CIA's 'secret war,' except that it was a huge amount.

Agent Orange was the most commonly used defoliant, a liquid compound made up of an equal mixture of the herbicides 2,4-D and 2,4,5-T. Toxic for only about a week before they broke down, during the manufacturing process the herbicides were contaminated by a lethal by-product, dioxin, arguably the most dangerous chemical known to science. Dioxin leached into people's bodies, their food, and their groundwater, sentencing millions to mutilation, starvation, miscarriages, deformities and cancer. US and allied veterans - and their children, grandchildren and great grandchildren - who were exposed during the period of heaviest usage also had elevated rates of various cancers. The toxin is lethal for at least 100 years.

The defoliants came in 55-gallon drums, the barrels of which were often re-used by the military and civilians for showers, BBQs and water storage - further contaminating the users with traces of dioxin that remained in the barrels. The herbicides were provided to the US military by Dow, Monsanto, Diamond Shamrock, Occidental, Hercules and other American chemical companies. **The companies were well aware of methods that would have reduced their toxicity, but they ignored standard manufacturing guidelines.** As a result, dioxin levels averaged 13 ppt.

Napalm

Despite its horrific history, Napalm - a word formulated by mixing naphthenic and palmitic acids with gasoline - played a major role in war, both in the air and on the ground. It was created by a top secret collaboration between Harvard University and the US government in 1942 and used to devastating effect in Europe and the Pacific during WW2, especially in Japan, where napalm destroyed 64 of its largest cities. On March 9, 1945, 330 bombers dropped 690,000 pounds of napalm over Tokyo in one hour, bathing it in a firestorm, incinerating more than 87,500 people. As the appalling US General Curtis LeMay, who directed the Tokyo bombing and the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, stated: *'we scorched and boiled and baked to death more people in Tokyo on that night than went up in vapour at Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined.'* Arguably the greatest cataclysm in the history of war.

After 1945, it was used extensively in Korea and Vietnam. In Korea, the US Army claimed that napalm was 'the most outstanding weapon', even though its consequences were among the most inhumane and brutal, but having been pronounced as the war's winning weapon, napalm became part and parcel of the US arsenal from the beginning of its hostilities in Vietnam. **The last time it was used - as far as we know - was during America's invasion of Iraq in 2003.**

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Terrified children running from the site of a Vietnam napalm attack in 1972.



September 12, 1966: Family of Vietnamese awaiting interrogation in a Viet Cong village

On a TV programme in 1969, the president of Dow Chemicals that made the wretched stuff, said: *'This napalm is a good discriminate strategic weapon and we feel those folks oughta have it'*. Mr Dow was talking about a continuous column of flaming gel projected with speed and accuracy to small targets (people) that reached a temperature of 2060 degrees.

In the decade between 1963 to 1973, 388,000 tons of napalm were dropped on Vietnam, ten times the amount dropped on Korea. First it was used via flamethrowers to clear out bunkers, foxholes and trenches and even if the flames could not penetrate the entire bunker, it consumed all the oxygen and suffocated everyone inside. Its use was then extended to destroy 'enemy villages' (full of civilians). Later in the war, US bombers dropped napalm bombs, which proved to be even more destructive than the flamethrowers, leaving an area of 2,500 square yards engulfed in unquenchable fire with an even higher numbers of civilian casualties. Not surprisingly, it became a potent psychological weapon as its use created sheer terror.

The brutality of napalm was exposed by the media in all its horror. Thousands of pictures and videos about napalm's devastation was reported daily in the press and on television and gradually became a symbol of the barbarity of the Vietnam War. **One of the most indelible pictures about its cruelty was the photograph of a nine-year old girl and group of children running down the road after a napalm attack on their village.** The girl was naked and screaming because napalm was burning deep within her body.

Out in the open, napalm causes severe burns everywhere. Human skin becomes covered with a viscous magma that resembles tar and causes wounds that do not heal. In contact with humans, it immediately sticks to the skin and melts the flesh, with no way to extinguish the fire without causing unbearable pain. In panic, many victims try wiping it off, which only causes the fire to spread, expanding the burns area. And yet, in 1952, the US Patent Office issued a certificate for 'Incendiary Gels', making napalm's formula available worldwide.

The use of napalm against a 'concentration of civilians' was banned under Protocol 111 of the 1980 United Nations Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons and at present, 106 states have adopted the protocol. President Obama signed it when he assumed office, almost three decades after it was adopted by the UN General Assembly, but America's ratification is subject to a diplomatic reservation that says it can 'disregard the treaty at its discretion if doing so would save civilian lives', which seems one hell of a cop-out.

In 1984, after years of court battles and official denials, seven American chemical companies paid a measly \$US180 million to settle a class action by US war veterans who claimed that Agent Orange had caused their cancers, birth defects and other health problems. Not surprisingly, the companies chose this slap on the wrist rather than have the court find them guilty and thereby set a precedent.

Phoenix - The Definitive Terror Campaign

**Used by the United States in Vietnam between 1967 and its defeat in 1975
A conservative estimate of the death toll - 40,000 Vietnamese**

Years later, a reminder of democracy-US style, came out in the form of a book called 'The Phoenix Program' by Douglas Valentine. It exposed the depravity of this super-secret American operation set up by the CIA during the Vietnam War, which used murder, torture, rape, kidnapping, blackmail, psychological warfare, disinformation and a complete denial of democratic processes for civilian detainees, apparently happy to rely on a computerised blacklist based on unreliable reports by anonymous informers. In 1968, there was even a monthly quota of 1800 'neutralisations', CIA newspeak for assassinations. Phoenix ran from 1967, when it was given final approval by a White House Committee that included Dean Rusk and Richard Helms, until Saigon fell in 1975. **Australian Defence Minister Killen admitted in Parliament that members of the Australian Army had taken part in Operation Phoenix.**

The National Service Act (Conscription)

In November 1964, six months before we formally entered the war, PM Menzies introduced a compulsory selective national service scheme (conscription) in a speech late at night to an empty House of Representatives with neither Opposition Leader and ardent anti-conscriptionist Arthur Caldwell, nor his deputy Gough Whitlam, being present in the chamber, both having returned to their electorates. The intense secrecy surrounding the scheme ensured no widespread debate took place until the system was firmly in place.

The scheme required 20-year old males to register with the Department of Labour and National Service (DLNS), who were then randomly selected in a lottery system by picking marbles with birthday dates out of a barrel, a ratio that varied according to the number required by the army. If selected, the unlucky ones were deemed to be conscripted for two years service in the Regular Army, which meant serving in Vietnam after the Defence Act was amended in May 1965. This was reduced to eighteen months in 1971, followed by three years in the Reserve.

Failure to register at the correct time, notify a change of address, attend a medical examination, report for the call up or make false or misleading statements, were illegal. The government tracked down non-compliers through electoral records, the Commonwealth Employment Service and child endowment files. They also obtained information from newspapers, employers and anonymous individuals. In 1968, amendments to the National Service Act increased penalties for breaches and increased the government's powers to track down defaulters, 'requiring' individuals and organisations to disclose information while increasing penalties for a further range of offences - burning registration cards and providing false information and making false statements. Parents, solicitors, doctors and ministers of religion were exempt from the need to report.

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Various categories of eligible young men were granted either indefinite or temporary deferments. Applications were considered individually and only after the ballot had been drawn. When no exemptions applied, the conscripts had to be as fit as those enlisting in the Army. The process involved a medical examination by a civilian doctor, which was followed by an interview and finally a security check carried out by the Attorney General's Department, ASIO and the Commonwealth Police. Those who passed were usually given a month's notice before having to report for military service.

And while historians tend to refer to conscripts as 'men,' it should be remembered that during the 1960s 20-year olds were legally under age, were not allowed to vote, to drink or take out a bank mortgage, and yet were being forced to kill or die for imperialism. Non-compliers had to front up to the Magistrates Court where they could receive a gaol sentence equivalent to the time spent in national service - two years - but unlike regulars they were not entitled to a military pension. Fourteen were prosecuted and sent to military prisons. Later, they served their time in civilian gaols. The only way out of military service was to fail the medical, become a conscientious objector or confront the system full on and become a draft resister and swiftly disappear from view by taking refuge in 'safe houses'. Some were allowed to join the Citizens Military Forces because they were in reserved occupations, such as farming.

1970 Moratorium Rally in Melbourne.



Opposition to the War

The National Service Act triggered off growing opposition to the war in general and to conscription in particular and was a pivotal moment in Australia's radical history. It grew from a handful of students and anti-war activists in 1962, when our involvement was supported by the vast majority of Australians, to the huge Moratorium Rally in 1970 when more than 100,000 people took over the centre of Melbourne. Left-wing unions played a vital role, many of their burliest members acting as bodyguards when overseas anti-war visitors came to town and for some of our local high-fliers like Jim Cairns. One of their first actions involved wharfies, seamen and builders labourers walking off the job in 1966, and the Seamen's Union refusing to sail a cargo to Boonaroo. But there were tensions among some of the more conservative elements who argued that trade union muscle should only be used for industrial matters.

But we knew we had a hell of a lot of work to do if we were to turn public opinion around. Polls were not on our side, consistently showing that about two-thirds of Australians supported the war, shown by the 1966 election when the Liberals won in a landslide, the largest margin since Federation.

The massive Moratorium turn-out didn't happen out of the blue, but was the result of months of planning and an endless round of meetings at the Railways Institute in Flinders Street and the Richmond Town Hall. Each group picked two delegates to represent their views who had to sign on before entering the meeting room. And what a motley collection of warring factions we were, encompassing a wide range of ages and opinions, from 'old left' working class communists to 'new left' university students, along with a swathe of church people, and everything in between. Like all movements, some tried pushing their own line. A war of words would drag on for hours but somehow or other we battled through our differences and managed to maintain a workable coalition because we had a common purpose and a high degree of optimism that we could not only stop the war but create a fairer, more independent society.

It was a world-wide view that took many different forms. Paris saw workers and students put up the barricades and engage in running battles with police and the army, but public marches and rallies were more our style and became a feature of our political life, although it was tempered with a fair whack of civil disobedience. We soon learned that if you broke the law you had to face the consequences and that frequently meant gaol.

The US anti-war movement played a prominent role in the global scene but lacked a fundamental ingredient we had, the support of trade unions and leadership from the formidable Dr Jim Cairns, Federal Labor Member of Parliament. In a further show of support, our actors, artists, poets and musicians joined forces in 1967 to take part in an afternoon of protest at Melbourne's Princess Theatre entitled 'Vietnam Comment'. This was Indicative of the breadth of opposition to the war and the way people from across the political spectrum managed to unite around a common cause.

One of our other strengths was the presence of active local groups who worked at a grassroots level and the strong support from the Victorian Branch of the Australian Labor Party, which wasn't replicated in other states or by Gough Whitlam at that time. The branch even held its annual state conference outside Pentridge Prison, where draft resister John Zarb had been temporarily incarcerated, to make an official very public protest. Sections of the ALP were also prepared to stick their neck out and break the law as an identifiable body. After a prolonged debate, the Balwyn Branch in the highly conservative electorate of Kooyong once held by PM Menzies, agreed to risk a head-on clash with federal authorities when they put a paid ad in the local paper announcing that the branch was a Draft Resistance Centre which would not only give advice, but provide shelter for those on the run. No-one was ever prosecuted.

But first we had to win the right to hand out leaflets on the streets of Melbourne, which meant a direct challenge to an ancient Melbourne City Council by-law

banning the distribution of written literature on its streets. By-law 418 was supposed to stop littering, but was being used in a highly selective manner. A small group assembled and duly handed out some anti-war literature, was quizzed by a parking inspector, arrested by a nearby copper and put into an MCC Parks and Gardens mini-truck that had wooden slats on the floor and going by the pong had previously been used to transport manure and haul in drunks. The group was questioned at Russell Street Police HQ and released on bail, but over the weekend, Melbourne's Lord Mayor had a rethink and dropped all charges.

In between the marches and rallies and 'occupations', we held candlelight vigils, wrote letters to all and sundry and letterboxed our neighbourhoods. We distributed leaflets outside railway stations and shopping centres, frequently copping abuse, and engaged in a range of stunts to keep our campaign alive. We painted and pasted up messages in strategic places, burned flags, effigies and draft cards during the freight registration periods, especially outside our favourite possie, the Bourke Street GPO, now a shopping mall. We padlocked the entrance to the army building in Flinders Lane and in a creative quid pro quo a few hardies defoliated the US Consul's South Yarra garden with a chemical similar to Agent Orange.

We even organised our own citizen's arrests when authorities became coy about our blatant breaches of the law. On one occasion, more than twenty protesters sat on the hard wooden benches in one of Melbourne's magistrate's courts waiting for His Honour to appear. His Honour poked his head in the door and just as swiftly, disappeared. Without missing a beat, a 'wild one' took over the court, banged the gavel and announced he was convening the People's Court. Pure madness because the court was directly opposite Russell Street Police HQ and the few police present called in the cavalry and in they came.

And then there was the Caulfield Railway Station action with information passed by word of mouth because no-one trusted the phones. We were

protesting the incarceration of draft resister John Zarb in Sale gaol and planned to stop the train by blocking the tracks after being told the train driver was 'on our side'. We fervently hoped so. But when we rounded the corner near the station it looked as if half the Victoria Police Force had turned out to welcome us. There was pandemonium, but from memory no-one was arrested.

One of our early rallies focussed on the HQ of Dow Chemicals in St Kilda Road, where we started proceedings with a small fire to symbolise its role in manufacturing napalm, a hideous substance that killed and maimed hundreds and thousands of Vietnamese. A serious topic but it wasn't one of our better demos. The fire brigade turned up to douse the flames and a horse and cart that was part of the proceedings also turned up, but the driver was drunk and the contraption headed off in the wrong direction. And then the rain came bucketing down.

A few weeks after PM Menzies' announcement to wage war, a handful of women met and established Save Our Sons (SOS), an independent pressure group opposing the war and conscription, with Jean McLean setting up the Melbourne group. SOS branches sprang up around Australia, developing their own distinctive style to give the broad anti-war movement an important extra dimension by providing a specific voice for women who were against the war, the majority of whom had never publicly opposed anything before in their lives. Young families and husbands in high-profile jobs, or hostile households cheering on the war, made protesting even more difficult for some, but regardless of their motivation, once the women were in, they could work at whatever level they wanted.

Many SOS actions were low-key but necessary, attending meetings, writing letters, networking and organising fund-raising ventures, but as time wore on there was scope for more creative actions. One really took the cake. In the late 1960s Billy Graham came to town to convert us to Jesus. He was known to be rabidly pro-war and close to newly elected US President Richard Nixon,

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a double we couldn't ignore. Billy G was presiding over a huge gathering of the faithful at the Myer Music Bowl in Melbourne and a few of us decided to turn up to publicise our cause.

Billy Graham stood centre-stage going for his life and after a few prayers we decided the time was ripe. Silently and in single file, we walked down the main aisle and stood in a semi-circle directly behind him, holding up our anti-war placards. Preacher G didn't miss a beat and nor did his flock. Not a soul moved. The silence was awesome. Hefty characters standing at the back who were supposed to be ushers but looked more like bouncers, stayed put. After more prayers and without a single word acknowledging our presence, we walked back down the aisle and stood in a line at the rear holding our placards ready to talk to the people and explain our presence. Few bothered to do so.

By the late sixties, police and protesters were playing a cat-and-mouse game, but at least we were winning the propaganda war. For the first time, a majority of Australians wanted our troops brought back home. And as more and more young men refused to register, the government slowed down its call-up notices and introduced measures to classify pacifists as conscientious objectors whether they'd applied for exemption or not. By May 1970, there were some 72 non-compliers who were supposed to be issued with call-up notices automatically once they'd announced their intention not to register.

Civil disobedience campaigns escalated and broadened out. People engaged in a range of highly publicised illegal activities, sometimes acting singly and sometimes acting together. 'Don't Register' statements were widely distributed far and wide along with 'Fill in a Falsie' actions to help buggers up the system and were extremely popular, so popular that the government made it harder to get hold of the forms. An Underground Draft Resistance Centre was set up to provide 'safe' houses for the young men on the run. People from all walks of life volunteered despite risking one year's gaol as laid down in the Crimes Act, and were equally happy to drive them from one safe house to another.

From time to time, the draft resisters would pop up at pre-arranged rallies, student gatherings and churches, and then be whisked away before they could be arrested.

A few police were sympathetic on an individual level, but there were some who harboured a strong ideological hatred of everything we stood for. At an all-night vigil in front of the US Consulate during a midnight-to-dawn shift when energy levels had fallen to zero, a large man emerged from a shadowy corner of Commercial Road and started bellowing at the top of his lungs that we must keep walking. A time when the protesters wished there was a police presence to curb his fury, when someone recognised that he was not only a policeman but a very senior one at that.

Early in 1971, a small group of SOS women decided to confront the draconian National Service Act by turning up at the Melbourne headquarters of the Department of Labour and National Service to hand out leaflets and give advice to the trickle of anxious young men who had turned up to register. One turned tail stating he would not sign up and a few others announced they would become conscientious objectors. From being a nuisance, the women had suddenly become a threat. Commonwealth police were called in and asked them to leave. They women refused and were dragged outside the office. More officialdom followed accompanied by a posse of Victoria Police. Same result. Taken to Russell Street Police HQ, the five women, Jean, Joan, Rene, Chris and Jo, were charged with wilful trespass under the Summary Offences Act used by Victoria's reactionary Bolte Government to stifle dissent.

After months of waiting, on Easter Thursday the five turned up at the Melbourne Magistrate's Court before a magistrate well-known for his far-right views, the last case to be heard that day. After going through some legalistic mumbo-jumbo, Mr League of Rights dished out a mandatory fourteen-day gaol sentence to Fairlea Women's Prison with no option of a fine. By this time, the media pack had departed for their holiday break, except for one lone ABC reporter who ensured their gaoling was number one on all national bulletins,

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and was then picked up by other media outlets, which caused shock waves throughout the country.

During their incarceration, vigils and large rallies took place outside the prison almost every day by people who had cancelled their holidays. There was even a 24-hour stoppage on the docks. And many who had previously sat on the fence or supported our involvement in Vietnam were shocked to learn that the mothers of 25 children were so strongly opposed to conscription and the war they were prepared to go to gaol. A seminal moment in the anti-war movement as opposition to the war deepened among the Australian people. It ended, along with conscription, when the Whitlam Government was elected in December 1972.

The soldiers in that war were victims in every sense of the word, as shown by the government's later callous disregard for its impact on their health and well-being. It was the government, not the anti-war movement, which sacrificed the lives of these young men by sending them to an unjust US-run war based on a lie, and for ravaging and butchering the Vietnamese people and their land

VIETNAM COMMENT

in Song, Sketch, Talk, Mime and Picture

RAY TAYLOR

with CORINNE KERBY
GEORGE WHALEY
WYN ROBERTS

TERRY NORRIS

JOHN PATON

THE LUMSDENS

JANET LAURIE

GLEN TOMASETTI

CLEM CHRISTESEN

KEITH EDEN

PRINCESS THEATRE — SUNDAY, JUNE 2 — 2.30 p.m.

ONE PERFORMANCE ONLY. ADMISSION BY DONATION.

ARTISTS, WRITERS, AND PLAYERS FORUM

is a group of professionals working in the arts who came together because of a common concern about our role in Vietnam. It is the intention of the Forum to play an active part in all matters affecting the conscience of the community. Although the subject of Vietnam, because of its extreme importance to Australia, is the major concern of this group at the moment, it is not the only one. By using the professional talents of its members the Forum wishes to exist as a permanent source of responsible comment on any subject involving social conscience whether it is national, international or domestic.

FOR INFORMATION CONCERNING THE FORUM WRITE TO: George Whaley, 25 Hawthorn Rd., Nth. Caulfield, 3161. 'Phone 50-8277 or 88-3625.

Donations to help this and other activities would be gratefully received.



BACKGROUND TO THE
**VIETNAM
WAR**

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**50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE
1970 MORATORIUM RALLY
IN MELBOURNE**

The celebration will take place
6pm on Friday 8 May 2020
Victoria Trades Hall, Lygon Street, Carlton