Noam Chomsky
The Best-Selling of Vietnam
The distortions of Stanley Karnow's Vietnam: A History.
1984

Boston Review, January/February 1984 issue.
<www.bostonreview.net/articles/the-best-selling-of-vietnam>

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

The Best-Selling of Vietnam

The distortions of Stanley Karnow's Vietnam: A History.

Noam Chomsky

1984

Vietnam: A History
Stanley Karnow
Viking, $22.50

Whatever its merits as history, Stanley Karnow's *Vietnam: A History* is an important cultural event. The book is "a Companion to the PBS Television Series" intended for both the general public and the schools. It has been praised by Douglas Pike in the *New York Times* as "more objective" than the "angry" and "dogmatic" earlier work of partisans, and by Fox Butterfield in the *Boston Globe* for relying on "new scholarship" and interviews which have allegedly produced "surprising new facts and interpretations" that undermine the arguments of "antiwar writers." The book is high on the best-seller lists. Its influence is guaranteed.

Karnow does avoid the hysterical ranting of some earlier work; he does not wail about "Cinderella and all the other fools" who were "turning the countryside into a bedlam, toppling one Saigon government after another, confounding the Americans," mumbling "incantations" about solidarity,

justice and virtue (Douglas Pike, the leading government specialist on Vietnamese Communism, in his 1966 book *Vietcong*). However, the book leaves most serious questions unanswered and contains little that is new or surprising. After a survey of earlier history, Karnow presents an impressionistic account of the American war, undocumented and framed generally within the assumptions of familiar government propaganda. Though critical of American errors in a "noble" cause, it is, in short, exactly the kind of work that one would expect to be canonized as "objective history," at least for the general public.

George Orwell's hero in *1984*, Winston Smith, desperately attempts to hold on to the truth that 2+2=4, and fails as he succumbs to Big Brother. In the case of the Indochina war, 2+2=4 is the fact that, after taking over from France in 1954-5, the United States undermined a possible political settlement as outlined in the Geneva Accords and organized a campaign of state terrorism against the anti-French resistance (the Vietminh or "Vietcong") in the south. In 1961-2 U.S. military forces began their direct attack on the rural society with extensive bombardment and defoliation. The general plan, Karnow observes, "was to corral peasants into armed stockades, thereby depriving the Vietcong of their support." Continuing to block all attempts at peaceful settlement, including the offer of the N.L.F. ("Vietcong") to neutralize South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, the U.S. then expanded the war in 1964, and in early 1965, finding no other way to avoid political settlement, undertook a war of annihilation that spread throughout Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Back in the United States, an unprecedented popular protest raised the domestic costs of the war. In January 1973, Nixon and Kissinger were compelled to accept provisions similar to the N.L.F. program of the early 1960s, though only formally, since they announced at once that the U.S. would reject all the provisions of the scrap of paper it had signed and continue the war to impose its rule over South Vietnam, a it

McCoy's *Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asi*a which, Karnow informs us, recounts "how the French colonial administration organized the opium business." In fact, however, McCoy's study is primarily devoted to the role of the CIA in reconstructing the heroin trade after World War I and particularly in Indochina, as part of the U.S. effort to mobilize mercenary armies to fight the "Communists." Similar examples of misrepresentation of cited sources abound.

As Karnow sees it, the American peace movement was "strident" and "emotional," while those who destroyed Indochina were "motivated by the loftiest intentions." "Student opposition to the war was spreading in response to larger draft quotas"—he writes, unwilling to acknowledge that it was also a courageous and honorable response to massacre and aggression, a fact that is unacceptable to official ideology.

One can cite case after case to illustrate Karnow's avoidance of inconvenient fact, dismissal of the documentary and scholarly record, and reshaping of history. It is, however, unfair to criticize him for this sorry performance. By the general standards of our intellectual culture, this is a relatively honest and independent work. What it reveals is a degree of subservience to a state orthodoxy so pervasive as to pass entirely unnoticed, so profound that marching in the parade is often taken to be a posture of critical dissent. Many Americans did understand what happened in Indochina, but memories fade, and eventually only official history remains. If the educated classes are really incapable of honestly coming to terms with what the United States did in Indochina, if they can create and maintain a sanitized "history" with the comforting message that 2+2=5, then the consequences may be grave indeed.

Noam Chomsky is emeritus professor of linguistics at MIT and laureate professor of linguistics at the University of Arizona.

did, leading finally to a Communist response and the collapse of the Saigon regime.

This is plainly unacceptable as popular "history." Although the facts are difficult to disguise—and one will find some relevant ones scattered through Karnow's book—the true story is effectively obscured here. To begin with, Karnow obscures the fact that U.S. policy was motivated by concern over the strategic resources of Southeast Asia and their significance for the global system which the U.S. was then constructing, incorporating Western Europe and Japan. Documentation concerning this matter is now extensive, and it has been widely discussed since the issue was raised by Walter LaFeber in 1968, both in the critical literature on the war and in mainstream professional journals. Karnow's "history" entirely avoids the documentary record and scholarship, and offers no plausible account of the background for U.S. policy.

For Karnow, the American war was basically "a failed crusade" against Communism, undertaken for motives that were "noble" though "illusory." We were, throughout, fighting "to defend South Vietnam's independence"—even though this entailed creating "surrogate" regimes and attacking the peasant majority. (By similar logic, the Russians are now fighting to defend the independence of Afghanistan against terrorists supported from abroad.) Indeed, Karnow's interpretation makes sense only if we understand "independent"' to mean "dependent on the U.S."

In the interests of such "independence," the U.S. had to ensure that the organized political forces in the south be barred from any participation in the government (the G.V.N.). There were two such forces, the N.L.F. which even Douglas Pike conceded to be the only "mass-based political party" in South Vietnam, and the Buddhists, whom Ambassador Lodge described as "equivalent to card-carrying Communists" and who were not "acting in the interests of the Nation," according to General Westmoreland. Our dilemma, as Pike observed in 1966,

was that in a political settlement our "minnow" would be swallowed by "the whale," the South Vietnamese enemy. For this reason, the U.S. was compelled to resort to violence. In contrast, the N.L.F., according to Pike, "maintained that its contest with the G.V.N. and the United States should be fought out at the political level and that the use of massed military might was in itself illegitimate" until the N.L.F. was forced by the U.S. and its surrogate regime "to use counter-force to survive." The issue is largely evaded here.

Like U.S. officials of the time, Karnow recognizes that the U.S. was unable to foster a sense of nationalism in the south but cannot admit the reasons for this repeated failure—even when the facts stare him in the face. By 1954, he writes, "reputable Vietnamese nationalists outside the ranks of the Vietminh were scarce," and in later years "The South Vietnamese (sic) were competing against a Communist movement that, having defeated the French, could rightly claim to represent the vanguard of Vietnamese nationalism." He also quotes General Maxwell Taylor who lamented that the Vietcong "have the recuperative powers of the phoenix" and "an amazing ability to maintain morale," to "rebuild their units and to make good their losses"—"one of the mysteries of this guerrilla war."

The Vietcong, of course, were southerners, in fact the southern branch of the Vietminh, as Karnow notes. The "mystery" is quickly dispelled if we are capable of seeing that 2+2=4: that there was a powerful sense of nationalism in the south, which the U.S. attempted to destroy, leading to an eventual North Vietnamese takeover after indigenous forces were virtually annihilated, as had been predicted by "antiwar writers." In short, the U.S. was fighting against the forces of Vietnamese nationalism in the south. This truth being inexpressible, we are left with "mysteries."

Karnow is impressed with Col. John Paul Vann, "the American in the middle of the muddle" in Vietnam, and his "irreverent candor" based on unmatched direct experience in the

directed to the East—as they sent their troops to "defend" Hungary and Czechoslovakia. How would we respond to a "history" that took such rhetoric seriously, presenting it without comment or analysis as the belief of misguided men of noble intent?

———————

These devices are typical of Karnow's history. The Communists are "terrorists," "ruthless," "merciless," "brutal," etc. The Americans made "mistakes" with "noble" motives; they were "utterly sincere in their naive belief that they could really reconstruct Vietnamese society along Western lines" – by demolishing it – and their "instincts were liberal." We read of the torment suffered by Johnson, McNamara, and other American leaders. Particularly moving is McNamara's "anguish" over the war as revealed in a "display of emotion" in February 1968. After describing the air war, McNamara's "voice broke, and there were tears in his eyes…" Why? Because of the millions of corpses and additional millions of refugees, the land destroyed, the carnage? Not at all; it was because of "the futility, the crushing futility, of the air war." This is apparently intended as a sympathetic portrait of a leading dove.

The treatment of the rest of Indochina is comparable. With regard to Laos, Karnow states only that in 1961 "the Soviet Union had stepped in to take advantage of a confused civil war." Not reported is that after the left won the 1958 election, U.S. pressure led to the downfall of the government in favor of a "pro-Western neutralist" who was in turn overthrown by the extreme right in a CIA-backed military coup in 1959, and in the ensuing civil war, leftist and neutralist elements were aligned against the CIA's clients – with support from China and the U.S.S.R. The background seems relevant.

Karnow's discussion of the involvement of GVN officials in the opium traffic is similarly sanitized. His only source is Alfred

the invading Americans, who, in turn, are seen merely as successors to the French"? The U.S. "did indeed rip South Vietnam's social fabric to shreds" and the Communists "predictably blamed the dislocations on American 'imperialism,' and their diagnosis was not entirely wrong." But this is as close as he comes to raising the forbidden question and its implications are not pursued.

For the U.S. government, it was, of course, Moscow and "Peiping" who played the role of the Nazis. There is an intriguing documentary record outlining the often comical efforts made to demonstrate this necessary truth; for example, U.S. intelligence services made desperate attempts to find links between Hanoi and its masters, and concluded, after total failure, that the lack of contact simply demonstrated that Ho Chi Minh was such a loyal slave of Moscow that he could be trusted to act "without supervision." A minimally serious history would ask why the dogma was maintained despite the absence of evidence, just as any historian would ask why the Soviet rulers constantly invoke U.S. imperialism as justification for their "defensive" interventions. The answer seems obvious enough in both cases.

Karnow does not ask such questions; he merely accepts assumptions uncritically, not only with respect to Vietnam. Thus, he writes that Dean Acheson was guided by the lesson of Munich in his response to "Russian truculence… when the Soviet government appeared to be subverting the postwar regimes in Greece and Turkey." The Soviets never "appeared" to be doing so, and a look at Acheson's memoirs shows that he invoked the "Russian threat" with perfect cynicism to frighten Congress into backing the Administration's intervention in Greece. As throughout, Karnow simply accepts the doctrines enshrined in official accounts, never asking the obvious questions.

It is of course true that American political leaders constantly invoked Munich. Perhaps their Soviet counterparts also invoked Munich—when the forces of Nazi Germany were

field. He does not, however, expose the reader to this candor—for example, to Vann's 1965 conclusion that there was a genuine social revolution in process in the south "primarily identified" with the N.L.F., while "a popular political base for the Government of South Vietnam does not now exist." (He concluded that the U.S. should therefore institute a dictatorship that would realize the "aspirations of the majority" since it would be "naive" to suppose that the "unsophisticated" peasants understand their own interests as well as we do.) Karnow also does not report that the U.S. mission and Pike estimated that half of the population supported the N.L.F. in the early 1960s (considerably more than George Washington could have claimed among the English colonists). The problem, as recognized by U.S. government experts and officials, was that the Communist-led Vietminh, later the "Vietcong" in the south, were the major political force, regarded generally as the representatives of Vietnamese nationalism, while the U.S. was perceived as the inheritor of French colonialism and the G.V.N. as merely a creation of the U.S.

Many U.S. commentators on the war are compelled to argue that most Vietnamese peasants were passive bystanders, as willing to live under governments supported (installed) by the U.S. as under the government of Ho Chi Minh. Karnow is no exception. "South Vietnam's leadership and population were apathetic," he informs us, but the Vietcong could replenish their losses "through recruitment"; in fact, their ranks swelled after the vast escalation of the U.S. war against South Vietnam in 1965. Evidently not all South Vietnamese were "apathetic." In earlier years, a "nationalistic culture, nearly xenophobic in intensity, inspired in Vietminh activists the concept of a virtually holy war against the foreign invaders and their native clients"; it is an intriguing idea that resistance to foreign aggression reflects "xenophobia." But, Karnow assures us, "The fervor scarcely pervaded the Vietnamese masses; which watched and waited in traditional Asian style, bending like bamboo before

the prevailing wind." He does not explain how this convenient judgment accords either with official assessments or with the "amazing recuperative powers" of the southern resistance in the face of the ferocious American assault. Nor does he draw comparisons to other revolutionary nationalist struggles, for example, the American revolution.

Karnow asserts that North Vietnamese General Tran Do "dispelled the myth, in which many Westerners then believed, that the Vietcong was essentially an indigenous and autonomous insurgent movement." He did this by telling Karnow that in 1964 "instructions came from the Communist hierarchy in Hanoi." It is not in question that the Vietcong were indigenous, and no one believed that the Vietcong did not receive instructions from Hanoi. Karnow writes that "there were serious divergences between the northern and southern Communists" which perhaps "could have been exploited." Apart from the last phrase, which expresses the assumptions of this "objective history," this is the version of the "myth" that was "believed by many Westerners." It is, however, useful to pretend that unsentimental hard-headed inquiry has undermined the naive illusions of critics of the American war.

————————

Throughout Karnow's account, the war is "between North and South Vietnam," not an American war against the politically organized forces of South Vietnam and then all of Indochina. In accordance with this conception, only a few pages are devoted to the American war in South Vietnam; the torment of the primary victims of the American assault receives scarce and wholly inadequate mention. This astonishing omission revealsa good deal about Karnow's history and its ideological framework.

Karnow claims that in 1964 "neither side was willing to consider a compromise," the two sides being the U.S. and

by Gareth Porter, who showed that crucial passages were mistranslated and that the actual document provided no basis for these charges. Oberdorfer also cites Len Ackland, not mentioning, however, his conclusion after an on-the-scene study in 1968 that some 700 Vietnamese (not 2800) were killed by the Vietcong, not "during the initial phase of their occupation" in accordance with some massacre plan, but primarily during the last days of the bloody month-long battle as they were retreating. There is much additional evidence that raises further questions, nut Karnow prefers to ignore them in favor of "Communist butchery."

In this and other cases, it is useful to compare Karnow's treatment with that of Canadian journalist Michael Maclear's companion volume (*The Ten Thousand Day War*) to the Canadian TV series on the war. On Hue, he cites U.S. military sources that estimate 5800 civilian dead and notes merely that "the U.S. military would later say that half the civilian deaths were Communist executions," adding that the North Vietnamese, according to a U.S. Colonel, put a stop to Vietcong assassinations when they learned of them. On My Lai, Karnow has a casual one-line reference to 100 killed, while Maclear devotes 4 pages to the massacre, noting that the official figure was 200 killed and that a further survey by a U.S. army officer estimates 700 killed.

We hear much of American "exceptionalism" and the "liberal ethic," and of the lesson of Munich that weighed so heavily upon American leaders: Communist aggression must not be permitted to succeed. Karnow regards this as exaggerated: "South Vietnam was threatened not by outright aggression, but by a combination of internal instability and subversion." In fact, South Vietnam was threatened and virtually destroyed by outright aggression, namely, U.S. aggression. As for the "lesson of Munich," who plays the role of the Nazis in this drama? Was it those Vietnamese, north and south, who, Karnow observes, "see the war entirely as one of defense of their country against

by Western observers was still greater. We learn virtually nothing about these matters from this sanitized record.

Karnow is eloquent in his denunciations of the "unprecedented brutality" and "slaughter" committed by the Communists in Hud and the "ghastly atrocities during the initial phase of their occupation." He claims that some 3000 victims of this "merciless" brutality were buried in mass graves. Though Tran Do "blamed most of the civilian casualties during the battle on American bombing," "balanced accounts have made it clear" that it was "Communist butchery" that was responsible, "perhaps on an even larger scale than reported during the war." He adds that "An estimated five thousand Communist soldiers" were killed, "most of them annihilated by American air and artillery strikes that also inflicted a heavy toll on the civilian population."

Turning to the two sources he cites, we learn from Air Force Undersecretary Townsend Hoopes that "2000 dead civilians" lay in the "smashed ruins" left by the American bombardment while "a sizeable part" of the Communist military force of 1000 men escaped. The U.S. command did give a figure of 5000 "Communists" killed. A little arithmetic suggests that Tran Do's account may not be far from the mark, as a number of western journalists on the scene had reported. British journalist Philip Jones Griffiths, for example, concluded that most of the victims "were killed by the most hysterical use of American firepower ever seen" and then designated "as the victims of a Communist massacre." Hoopes gives the figure of 300 victims of Communist atrocities found in mass graves; the policechief of Hue gave the figure of 200.

Karnow's second source, Don Oberdorfer, provides no evidence that the many victims found in graves long after the fighting were the victims of Communist brutality. He accepts the figure of 2800 Communist victims, relying on a study by USIS employee Douglas Pike based on a "captured document." Pike's study was completely discredited in a careful analysis

Hanoi. This is surely true of the U.S., possibly true for Hanoi, apparently false for the N.L.F. who were advocating neutralization, political settlement and independence. As for the Saigon generals installed in power by the U.S., they and non-Communist politicians were "seeking a negotiated agreement among the Vietnamese parties themselves without American intervention," and regarded the N.L.F. as "overwhelmingly non-communist" and "sufficiently free of Hanoi's control to have made [a political settlement in South Vietnam] quite possible," with a neutralist government (George Kahin, Pacific Affairs, Winter 1979-80). But the U.S. was having none of this, since, as explained by official dove George Ball, "Nothing is further from USG mind than 'neutral solution for Vietnam.' We intend to win." Again, only bare hints of all this appear in Karnow's history.

It is interesting to see how Karnow deals with the factors that led to the 1965 escalation of the war. To apologists for the American war, it is crucial to determine that Hanoi sent troops to the south not so much to respond to U.S. actions as to execute a long-standing plan of "taking over" South Vietnam. Karnow relies on his 1981 interviews with General Tran Do and Colonel Bui Tin to establish that North Vietnam was responsible for the 1965 escalation. Bui Tin "disclosed" that "preparations" to send North Vietnamese troops south began sometime in 1964; "And the North Vietnamese were engaged in battle against Saigon government detachments months before the U.S. marines splashed ashore at Danang in March 1965." By fall 1964, "the first complete North Vietnamese unit, " a regiment of the 325th division, "had already departed for the South," and "at the end of 1964" General Tran Do reached the Communist command base "in a corner of Tayninh province, conveniently near the Cambodian border." Life was not easy there; "soon after I arrived," Tran Do reports, "American airplanes dropped thousands of tons of bombs around us," as indeed they had been doing for several years, while "defending South Vietnam."

Taking this account at face value, what can we conclude? That long after the U.S. had blocked the Geneva settlement and organized a war to destroy the southern representatives of Vietnamese nationalism, long after the direct U.S. military attack against the peasant society of South Vietnam, and well after the escalation of the war against the North (February 1, 1964), Hanoi infiltrated soldiers to the south where they "were enlarging the Vietcong contingents and strengthening them with commanders, political commissars, communications experts, ordnance technicians, and other specialists." Meanwhile U.S. military forces continued to carry out intensive bombardment, to block political settlement, and to organize the planned escalation of early 1965. What isremarkable is that Hanoi delayed so long in supporting the southern resistance against U.S. aggression.

We learn more by turning to U.S. government documents. We find that the regiment or battalion of the 325th Division was detected by U.S. intelligence on April 21, 1965, though the report was considered dubious; by early July, the Pentagon was still speculating as to whether there were any regular North Vietnamese (PAVN) forces in the south or in Laos nearby, while the President approved the decision to raise the U.S. expeditionary force to 175,000 in addition to thousands of mercenaries who had arrived in January. The bombardment of the north began in February, along with the far more extensive bombardment of the south, and the U.S. ground combat forces landed in March. In short, the U.S. had vastly escalated the war well before it knew of any PAVN forces in the south. Furthermore, the famous regiment of the 325th division left North Vietnam in October 1964 (two months after the bombing of strategic targets in North Vietnam after the fabricated Tonkin Gulf incident), and "at least until 1959" this division was composed entirely of South Vietnamese (its later composition is not given)—so that quite possibly South Vietnam was "invaded" by a regiment of South Vietnamese soldiers in early or mid-1965. Karnow

again ignores the documentary record, preferring unsupported claims about "an estimated 10,000 North Vietnamese troops" who entered the south in 1964, and, through some colossal intelligence failure, were not detected by mid-1965, even though they had been "engaged in battle" months earlier.*

Although Karnow barely discusses U.S. military operations in the south, he does take brief notice of the bombing of the north, a topic that is less threatening since it can be interpreted in the framework of U.S. defense of South Vietnam against aggression from Hanoi. He reports from his 1981 trip that Hanoi and Haiphong were "hardly bruised" though "bombs devastated parts of North Vietnam, particularly the area above" the seventeenth parallel, where troops and supplies were massed to move south"; this qualification is regularly added. Other western journalists saw something quite different. Visiting Haiphong after the first B-52 raids in 1972 (which took place at night, with no ground control or spotter planes to guide target selection), Anthony Lewis described "areas flattened like German cities that were subjected to strategic bombing in World War II," hundreds of acres "virtually flat with just a wall standing here or there," a bombed hospital remote from any military target, and so on.

It is true that Hanoi and Haiphong were *relatively* unscarred, for the simple reason that what happened there would be too visible. But a little further removed from western eyes, the bombing was intensive and devastating, and had no relation to "military targets" (the hospital in the center of Thanh Hoa, for example). In southern sectors, the city of Vinh, with 60,000 population, was flattened in 1965 according to Bernard Fall, and the whole region was turned into a wasteland. British war correspondent John Pilger reported in 1978 that Vinh was bombed so heavily that not even the foundations of buildings remained, and that "much of North Vietnam is a moonscape from which visible signs of life…have been obliterated." In South Vietnam the destruction reported