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Worth a Thousand Words

Four unsettling images, long buried in the brain, suddenly resurface in the darkroom of my memories as *The Vietnam War* documentary is broadcast, decades since that conflict ended badly in sordid defeat.

The first photo is of ancient dread made anew: a wide-hatted peasant, drawn towards to a heavy stamping sound, stares at an alien invasion of armed Marines, marching us into battle between North and South—

a fruitless face-off, the Vietnamese hijacked as pawns in a Cold War game—the hearts and minds of the people who live here.

The second picture freezes war's atrocities in horrifying stop motion, as a suspected Viet Cong is assassinated by police. Viewers flinch when the point-blank bullet enters his skull.

The third shot is of “collateral damage”: napalmed “by mistake”, a naked girl shrieks in agony, burnt arms outstretched as if to rise above this hell. *We had to destroy the village in order to save it.*

The last photograph shows the finale, helicoptering in humiliation as Saigon fell in 1975. We bolted from rooftops, abandoning allies, leaving a land devastated by defoliants, bombs, a million casualties.

We lost, and then we lost faith in ourselves, no longer World War II heroes, merely a greedy, clumsy empire, like Romans before barbarians breached their undefended boundaries.

What went wrong? Despite the nightly news coverage, bodies appearing on TV as a stew of red and green, nobody felt the war was unwinnable, except politicians, who lied to cinch elections.

They betrayed those they sent there, and the courageous South, who made desperate attempts to save themselves as we tipped the last of our choppers into their waters.

The Vietnam War isn't really over; there's polarization, anger, and walking wounded among us, suffering nerves and mental illness, shooting up with bullets or with drugs—

Vietnam drove a stake into the heart of this country.

—Alison Farley Jennings

thanks to “Merely an Empire” by David Thomson, London Review of Books