

Search

Frank Snepp Exclusives

(<http://franksneppexclusives.com/>).

Big Issue Investigative Stories You Won't Find Anywhere Else

NOVEMBER 13, 2022

[HOME \(HTTP://FRANKSNEPPEXCLUSIVES.COM/\)](http://franksneppexclusives.com/)

[FRANK SNEPP \(HTTP://FRANKSNEPPEXCLUSIVES.COM/?PAGE_ID=16\)](http://franksneppexclusives.com/?PAGE_ID=16)

[Home \(http://franksneppexclusives.com/\)](http://franksneppexclusives.com/) > [Vietnam \(http://franksneppexclusives.com/?cat=148\)](http://franksneppexclusives.com/?cat=148) > What Vietnam Should Have Taught Us About Afghanistan

What Vietnam Should Have Taught Us About Afghanistan

 [Frank Snepp \(http://franksneppexclusives.com/?author=2\)](http://franksneppexclusives.com/?author=2)  09/09/2022 
[Vietnam \(http://franksneppexclusives.com/?cat=148\)](http://franksneppexclusives.com/?cat=148)

A lot of young reporters and budding military historians who wouldn't know a Chinook from a Polish sausage are suddenly coming out of air-conditioned cloisters on the anniversary of the Kabul evacuation to offer glib comparisons of the Vietnam and Afghan end games. If you are to believe them, our performance in the latter departed markedly – with very different implications – from the scenario played out in the former.

The latest excursion into such once-over-lightly wisdom came packaged in a *Los Angeles Times* story published September 5, 2022, under the portentous headline “News Analysis: Vietnam and Afghanistan: America’s two longest wars, with very different lasting impacts.”

While letting a few neophytes have their moment at the podium, the reporter frontloaded some old Vietnam war dogs, who should have known better, and let them gabble on superficially about what can be inferred from both tragedies and the marginalia to be drawn from each.

After popping some gummy bears to damp down my apoplexy, I scribbled out a few thoughts based on my own takeaways as the CIA’s last intelligence analyst in Saigon. Rather than unpack my specific objections to the article, I confined myself to explaining how Vietnam had been a master class in lessons that should have warned us off Afghanistan or qualified our decision making there.

Here goes:

Craig Whitlock’s **The Afghanistan Papers**, based on interviews and documents collected by the Inspector General for Afghan reconstruction, quotes one decision maker after another, from Michael Flynn to Ryan Crocker, who acknowledged their full real-time awareness of the following:

- that corruption obliterated the Kabul regime’s capacity and will to fight.
- that the Pakistan borderland was a parking lot for hostile forces and...
- that all those in the US mission with any sagacity realized the crusade was doomed by these realities but could not bring themselves to admit publicly or even “within channels” that all the US blood and treasure had been expended for naught.

If you change the names of people and places, this could describe Vietnam and the self-defeating mindset of decision-makers there.

The fact is we learned little to nothing from Vietnam because no one wanted to acknowledge defeat.

I know, because I wrote one of the first public postmortems on the war, **Decent Interval**, and was buried by the US government for it.

Nor was mine an isolated case. One of my Vietnam colleagues, a lifelong Army [MENU](#) intelligence officer named Colonel Henry Shockley, who had come out of defeated Saigon in shock, later tried to persuade Pentagon brass to do a study of lessons learned, believing this would help save lives the next time we ventured into an overseas quagmire. But everywhere he turned, he was told that rethinking the war was unthinkable because it would likely demonstrate that all the US dead and wounded had been martyred in vain.

So, it was left to one-time Nixon cronies like ex-Defense Secretary Melvin Laird and scapegoaters from the US military like Oliver North to define the war retrospectively in the most distortive and self-serving terms. They did so by alleging a grand betrayal by a parsimonious Congress, accusing liberal lawmakers of killing Saigon by a thousand budget cuts, even though corruption had been so rife in South Vietnam at the end, as a General Accounting Office Report proved, that our allies could not have effectively absorbed or deployed any additional US aid even if it had been available.

One of the last US Defense Attachés in Saigon, General John Murray, who had howled Congress down for allegedly nickel-and-diming the South Vietnamese to death, admitted after the war that he had never been sure of the size of government forces because of endemic corruption, especially the “ghost soldier” scam that had counted dead Vietnamese troops as live ones so their commanders could collect the unclaimed salaries. That meant he had never been able to verify by actual headcount whether or to what extent our allies *needed* the helmets and combat gear whose alleged shortages he had claimed were condemning them to defeat.

After the My Lai massacre in March 1968 and the ensuing rank-and-file coverup, Pentagon investigators discovered from extensive interviews that a culture of mendacity had captured the US Army officer corps in Vietnam, leading lieutenants, captains and colonels to routinely lie about their own performance and that of their Vietnamese counterparts in order to ensure their next promotions. This was corruption of a very special order. Then, as Vietnamization drained away the American presence in the countryside, what we knew or thought we knew about our South Vietnamese allies came largely from South Vietnamese sources who were congenitally self-serving and unwilling to admit weakness and shortcomings on the part of fellow troops.

The result: a spreading fog bank of lies and misperceptions.

When Ambassador Graham Martin arrived in Saigon in mid-1973, after the ceasefire, he ordered us all *not* to engage in any proctologic examinations of the South Vietnamese body politic lest Congress be persuaded our allies were unworthy of additional aid. MENU

The sparse mission-wide reporting that was still being done about corruption, security problems in the countryside and leadership deficiencies within Saigon's political and military establishments dried up.

And from then on, we were truly flying blind.

In the end Martin proved so addicted to fact-free wishful-thinking that he refused to believe intelligence that predicted precisely what the enemy intended. As a result, he slow-walked evacuation preparations and planning to such an extent that we didn't even have a master list in the embassy on the final day of the war identifying Vietnamese who deserved our protection because of their past association with us.

What we did have in abundance were misplaced hopes and recycled lies. And our closest Vietnamese associates paid dearly for them.

Indeed, by any measure Biden's handling of the final airlift out of Afghanistan was a masterpiece of deft planning and execution compared to the precedent we had set in Vietnam thanks to Martin's delusions and Kissinger's own. In a mere two weeks US agencies and coalition partners working out of the Kabul airport evacuated twice as many people as escaped Saigon with some sort of official US help during the entire final month of the Vietnam war

And yet, in both Vietnam and Afghanistan self-deception was the hallmark of abominable scene-setters, the policies that set us and our allies up for the kill.

Vietnam should have served warning.

It didn't.

And given the often-shallow evaluations of Saigon's indecent end now being served up by some of the original guilty parties and by young tenure seekers at military academies who are wholly reliant on the archived falsehoods and selective memories of such sources, the lessons will continue to go unlearned.

◆ [Afghanistan \(http://franksneppeclusives.com/?tag=afghanistan\)](http://franksneppeclusives.com/?tag=afghanistan), [CIA \(http://franksneppeclusives.com/?tag=cia\)](http://franksneppeclusives.com/?tag=cia), [Graham Martin](http://franksneppeclusives.com/?tag=graham-martin)

<http://franksneppexclusives.com/?tag=graham-martin>), [Henry Kissinger](#)

[MENU](#)

<http://franksneppexclusives.com/?tag=henry-kissinger>), [Vietnam](#)

<http://franksneppexclusives.com/?tag=vietnam>).

[← Holding Trump Accountable for Abusing US Secrets: a Supreme Court Precedent Points the Way](#) (<http://franksneppexclusives.com/?p=489>) | [Stop Kvetching About Biden's Afghan "Screw-Ups" – Kudos Are Owed](#) [→](#) (<http://franksneppexclusives.com/?p=519>).

Leave a Reply

Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked *

Comment *

Name *

Email *

Website

Post Comment

Archives
