


The background of the entire cover is a high-contrast, black and white photograph of soldiers silhouetted against a bright, hazy sky at sunset or sunrise. The soldiers are positioned along a dark, uneven horizon line, some standing and others in motion. The overall mood is somber and historical.

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Cover design by Suzanne Nall

Cover photograph © by Marc Riboud/Magnum

ISBN 978-0-06-092107-1



9 780060 921071

5 1499

EAN



USA \$14.99

0991

The book cover features a black and white photograph of a soldier in silhouette, running or jumping over a low wall against a bright sky. The title "THE VIETNAM WARS" is printed in large, bold, red capital letters across the top half. Below it, the author's name "B. H. LIPPMAN" is written in smaller, white, sans-serif capital letters. At the bottom, there is a small logo consisting of a stylized figure holding a torch, followed by the publisher's name "Harper Perennial" in a serif font.

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# THE VIETNAM WARS 1945-1990

Marilyn B. Young



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First HarperPerennial edition published 1991.

*Designed by Alma Orenstein*

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The Library of Congress has catalogued the hardcover edition as follows:  
Young, Marilyn Blatt.

The Vietnam Wars 1945-1990 / Marilyn Young.—1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-06-016553-7

1. Vietnamese Conflict, 1961-1975. 2. Vietnam—History—1945-1975.  
3. Vietnam—History—1975- 4. United States—Foreign relations—  
Vietnam. 5. Vietnam—Foreign relations—United States. I. Title.

DS557.7.Y678 1991

959.704'3—dc20

90-55560

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ISBN 0-06-092107-2 (pbk.)

**THE  
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# Preface

**W**HY ARE WE IN VIETNAM?" Through a decade in which the United States was divided perhaps more deeply than at any other time since the Civil War, the question became a refrain, the inquiring voices more and more discordant and demanding. In the end, "Why are we in Vietnam?" was no longer a question but an accusation addressed beyond the war to the nation's very identity.

There were many explanations offered and these will unfold over the course of the book. At first we were in Vietnam for the sake of stability in France, which held the American plan for European security and recovery hostage to its colonial war in Indochina. We were also there to provide Japan with Southeast Asian substitutes for the China trade the United States had embargoed. In the largest sense, the United States was in Vietnam as a crucial part of the enterprise of reorganizing the post-World War II world according to the principles of liberal capitalism.

Each of these explanations explains something, and together they add up to a pretty fair account of things; indeed, in retrospect, the war does not seem so inexplicable after all. But over the years of contention, the question came to demand more than an explanation, a justification. When an interviewer posed it late in the war to former national security adviser Walt Rostow, he fumed: "Are you really asking me this goddamn silly question?" Though the question was hardly "silly," the interviewer may not have been "really" asking it, for by then those who so queried public officials were sure they knew the answer: There was no conceivable justification for the horrors daily inflicted on and suffered in Vietnam.

While this book discusses the standard explanations and justifications, it interprets the "why" as "how." How did we get to Vietnam? How did we keep expanding the war, and how did we get out? Paralleling the development of the question "Why are we in Vietnam?" from inquiring



about motives to denouncing the acts of war, I have come to believe that in the daily, weekly, monthly, yearly progress of the war lay many of its most decisive reasons and irrationalities.

Official justifications for the war changed with the political season, although the climate was always that of the Cold War. As I was finishing this history of the Vietnam-American war, the Cold War was, astonishingly, ending. There is no way to know what this will mean for the next era of world history. But events in the summer of 1990 suggest that peace with the Soviet Union has not necessarily lessened the American propensity to wage war elsewhere. The Iraq crisis is the post-Cold War era's first approach to war. It would be simply foolish, as this book goes to press in August 1990, to attempt any analysis of the crisis or to speculate about its outcome. But in its progress it has already raised old spectres.

Why are we in the Middle East? As of now, President Bush and his administration have told us that we are there to control the source of "our" oil and through that to protect our very way of life. They have invoked Munich and transcendent principles of territorial integrity. I do not suggest any comparison between Southeast Asia and the Middle East or between Vietnam and Iraq. But we had better look very closely at how we approach this or any other intervention. Watching the Iraq crisis unfold as I read the galleys of this book seemed to provide it with a new, harsher, and unwanted conclusion: that war continues to be a primary instrument of American foreign policy and the call to arms a first response to international disputes.

We have been at war since the end of World War II. The Vietnam War itself has not ended. As of this writing, the U.S. still declares Vietnam an enemy nation, prohibits or restricts travel, trade, humanitarian aid, and exchange visits by U.S. citizens, and exerts heavy pressure on its allies to discourage any constructive relations with Vietnam. The ongoing war in Cambodia that came to an uneasy truce in July 1990 received U.S. support throughout. One way the Vietnam war might at last end, and the post-Cold War peace begin, would be for an American president to acknowledge, as a Soviet foreign minister did with respect to Afghanistan, that the United States invaded Vietnam against our stated values and ideals and that it did so secretly and deceptively, fighting a war of immense violence in order to impose its will on another sovereign nation. Otherwise only the name of the country changes, and Americans will continue to ask, "Why are we in Vietnam?"

Marilyn B. Young  
*Union Village, Vermont*  
*August, 1990*

# Acknowledgments

**T**HIS BOOK is a work of synthesis that could not have been attempted without the extraordinary work of scholars and writers on both the history of the American war and the history of the Vietnam war of resistance. My narrative has relied heavily on the published work of William Conrad Gibbons and the staff of the Congressional Research Service, James William Gibson, George Herring, James P. Harrison, George Kahin, Huynh Kim Khanh, Ngo Vinh Long, David Marr, Edwin E. Moise, Gareth Porter, Jeffrey Race, and Christine Pelzer White, and I gratefully acknowledge them here. In the history of the Vietnam-American war, the work of journalists has been as important as that of scholars, and the books of Nayan Chanda, Gloria Emerson, David Halberstam, Seymour Hersh, Arnold Isaacs, Jonathan Schell, William Shawcross, and Neil Sheehan have been invaluable.

In addition to their published work, conversation and correspondence with Noam Chomsky, David Hunt, George Kahin, Don Luce, Ngo Vinh Long, Gareth Porter, Jayne Werner, Christine Pelzer White, and Howard Zinn has deepened my understanding of Vietnam and the United States. A trip to Vietnam in January 1988 made concrete what had been until then abstract: Vietnam as a real and wounded country. I want to thank Don Luce, who led the trip, and my fellow travellers, especially Len Ackland, Michael Call, Geoffrey Gates, Carlie Numi, Rick Pyeatt, and Hugh Swift, whose sensitivity to what we were seeing and readiness to talk with me about their wartime experiences in Vietnam brought past and present powerfully together.

I have learned, too, from the work of my friend and colleague, Moss Roberts, with whom I teach a course on the history of Vietnam at New York University. In that course, the Vietnam-American war is only one chapter in Vietnamese history.

The book began as a much shorter project, suggested to me by James Peck, and I want to thank him and all those who read that slimmer version in whole or part: Christina Gilmartin, Gail Hershatter, Carma Hinton, Emily Honig, Mary Nolan, Ernest P. Young, Howard Zinn, and Rosalyn Zinn. As the manuscript grew, some of these good friends read it all again, and others were enlisted to read it in whole or part, including Carolyn Eisenberg, Tom Grunfeld, and Moss Roberts. In its final version the book has benefitted greatly from the careful annotations of Christine Pelzer White. Tom Grunfeld assembled the illustrations and maps, and I am grateful to him for his calm efficiency and excellent judgment.

My understanding of American ideology and its incarnation in foreign policy deepened in the course of long discussions with Myra Jehlen. In the last stages, I took comfort and encouragement from frequent conversations with Sara Ruddick on matters of war, peace and the process of writing.

The book was written, as is often the case, far from the world it describes: during a semester's sabbatical leave from New York University, extended with the help of a friend; in the peace and civility of Fairlee, Vermont; among new and old friends: Don Henderson, Pat Henderson, Suzanne Lupien, Maryssa Navarro, Robert Nichols, Steve Niederhauser, William Noble, Grace Paley, Nora Paley, Dorothy St. Peters, Harold St. Peters, and James Tatum. In addition, the Department of History at Dartmouth courteously extended library privileges to the rich collections of Baker Library; I should like to express particular appreciation to Patricia A. Carter, whose Inter-Library Loan Office supplemented Baker's holdings.

I thank my intelligent and patient editors, Hugh Van Dusen and Stephanie Gunning.

I am grateful to all but alone responsible for the use to which I have put the good advice and help.

# List of Abbreviations

AID	Agency for International Development
ARVN	Army of South Vietnam
CIP	Commercial Import Program
COMECON	Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (USSR)
COSVN	Central Committee Directorate for the South
CPK	Khmer Communist Party
DMZ	Demilitarized Zone along the seventeenth parallel
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam
FAC	Forward air controller
GVN	Government of Vietnam (Saigon)
MACV	Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
MAAG	Military Assistance Advisory Group
NLF	National Liberation Front
NVA/VC	North Vietnamese Army/Viet Cong
PAVN	People's Army of Vietnam (North)
PLAF	People's Liberation Armed Forces (South)
POL	Petroleum, oil and lubricants
PRC	People's Republic of China
PRG	Provisional Revolutionary Government
RVAF	Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (Saigon)
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization
VC	Viet Cong
VVAW	Vietnam Veterans Against the War



For Mollie and Aaron Blatt,  
Carole Gonshak,  
Leah Glasser,  
Lauren Young,  
and Michael Young



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