â€œA Front Seat to Historyâ€
Interviewer

Could you state your name, please?

Stanley Karnow

Stanley Karnow.

Interviewer

And your age?

Interviewer

86.

Interviewer

And you are a former?

Stanley Karnow

Reporter.Â  Iâ€™m a former reporter, foreign correspondent; and later, a historian, because reporters canâ€™t play shortstop all their lives, so eventually, if they got any sense, they begin to use the material that they gathered as reporters in order to write books.Â  So very often?I mean Iâ€™ve written?I havenâ€™t written a lot of books; Iâ€™ve written three or four or five books, and using a lot of the material that I gathered as I was a reporter.Â  So itâ€™s history, but itâ€™s not academic history?itâ€™s journalistic history, if you want.Â  But very often, journalists are closer to the realities than the academics are, although Iâ€™m not blaming?there are very good academics. Â  But, you know, I can tell you an anecdote. Iâ€™m on a panel?Iâ€™m on a panel?

Interviewer

Let me just state here that you are the author of Vietnam?

Stanley Karnow

Okay.

Interviewer

The book Vietnam?one of the first?the first big histories of Vietnam, which came out in 1983.Â  You were involved with the 1983 PBS series, which was based upon the book, and you also covered the war from 1959 to its conclusion.

Stanley Karnow

Well, let me just tell you this anecdote.Â  You can do what you want with it.

Interviewer

Okay.

Stanley Karnow

Youâ€™re on a panel with a bunch of academics.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Stanley Karnow

And they will blabber around about what Ngo Dinh Diem meant to do in Vietnam, or what Chiang Kai-shek meant to do in Taiwan, or whatever.Â  And you listen to them and you say, â€œWell, thatâ€™s very interesting, but I donâ€™t think youâ€™re quite right.â€Â  And then you give your version, and they say, â€œHow do you know that?â€Â  You say, â€œWell, I interviewed them several times,â€ to which they say, â€œThatâ€™s interesting, but itâ€™s just anecdotal,â€ they say, â€œjust anecdotal.â€Â  And as if itâ€™s not?if itâ€™s not somewhere in a document, then they donâ€™t believe it.Â  So journalists do have a front seat?they have a front seat to history, so to speak, and thatâ€™s?I was very fortunate in being able to do this.Â  Now?

Interviewer

How did you?tell me about your arrival in Vietnam in 1959.

Stanley Karnow

Okay.Â  Prior to going to Vietnam, I was covering the French war in Algeria, and I guess my editors back in New York for TIME Magazine?I was working for TIME Magazine?figured that I was suited to cover suitcase jobs, running around.Â  So they sent me to Asia to be based as a chief Asia correspondent for TIME and LIFE Magazines in Hong Kong.Â  And I had to cover all of Southeast Asia.Â  Now, in 1959 part of my territory was Vietnam. So I started going down.Â  Now, there was no?not really a serious war going on, but I began to see the beginnings of what later became the Vietnam War. Â

Stanley Karnow

I was?at various times in my life, Iâ€™ve been lucky enough to be at historic occasions that I didnâ€™t realize were historic at the time.Â  So I happened to be in Vietnam in my first visit to Saigon in 1959, when there was an incident at a campâ€”South Vietnamese Army camp north of Saigon, at a place called Bien Hoa.Â  So I went up there, and I found out thatâ€”I discovered that communist guerillas had attacked a South Vietnamese Army camp and killed two American advisors, one called Buis and the other one called Ovnand. And I reported on that for TIME Magazine. Â

Stanley Karnow

It made about three paragraphs in the magazine, because it was just a far-away incident?a little incident in a far-away place that nobody could identify on a map.Â  Today, those two guysâ€™ names are at the top of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington.Â  And, of course, I could never have imagined at that point that there was going to be a memorial with 60,000 other American names, or that maybe a million Vietnamese civilians and soldiers on both sides of the war would die in Vietnam.Â  So from then on, I didnâ€™t?I didnâ€™t live in Vietnam, I didnâ€™t base in Vietnam.Â  I based in?still based in Hong Kong. But I began to go down to Vietnam quite often; I had to cover everything from Burma to India to Indonesia and so forth.Â  But Vietnam became one of my main areas to cover.

Stanley Karnow

So I began to watch the development of this war, and like a lot of other reporters, I was a product of the Cold War, so at the very beginning of the war, I wasnâ€™t anti-war.Â  In fact, there were some reporters who later began calling themselves anti-war, which is not true.Â  Most reporters supported the war, but gradually began to see?and others began to see?that it was kind of a hopeless situation.

Repeating History, Recycling French ClichÃ©s
Stanley Karnow

Now, I had had experience watchingâ€”when I was a reporter in Paris, I watched the development of the French war, which was also a hopeless war, and I began to realize that in Vietnam, we were repeating the French experience.Â  I began to realize that one of the things that we failed to doâ€”what the United States failed to doâ€”was to learn from the French.Â  The French had ruled Vietnam?Indochina, which they called it?as a colony, and they had a lot of scholars who knew a lot about Vietnam.Â  And I got to know some of the French scholars, even when I was there?when I was covering France, but later when I was covering Vietnam, and learned a lot from it. Â

Stanley Karnow

One of the things was that the American establishment didnâ€™t really want to believe, didnâ€™t want to trust anything the French told them.Â  You know, the American attitude is, â€œWell, the French?weâ€™re John Wayne.Â  We never lose anything.â€Â  You know, Vietnameseâ€”the French lost it?they were?lost World War II?theyâ€™re incompetent, and so forth.Â  And strangely enough, you began to find a lot of Americans repeating French clichÃ©s.

Interviewer

Such asâ€”could you give a few examples?

Stanley Karnow

Well, there was a French general called Navarre, and just before the French were defeated in the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954â€”May 7, 1954, he was very optimistic.Â  He saysâ€”he said, â€œWe see the light at the end of the tunnel.â€Â  Well, when General Westmoreland addressed Congress in 1967, he said, â€œI see the light at the end of the tunnel,â€ not realizing that that was a French phrase before defeat.Â  So there was a lot of that kind of thing going on. Theâ€”thereâ€™s an interesting thing that I learned over the years, is thereâ€™s a famous phrase by a philosopher called George Santayana, which was, â€œPeople who forget history are bound to repeat it.â€Â

Stanley Karnow

But there was another professor at Harvard called Ernie May, who Iâ€™d much?had great admiration for, who wrote a book.Â  He said, â€œPeople who remember history do repeat it,â€ and they donâ€™t learn?a lot of people donâ€™t learn from history, and I think if you look back and retrace the whole history of the Vietnam War, youâ€™ll discover that so many of the decision-makers didnâ€™t pay any attention to history.Â  And they had these, this hubris?if you want to use that word?that â€œWe canâ€™t lose.â€Â

Stanley Karnow

And sometimes guys that you have respect for believe the same thing. Now, one of the French historians of the Vietnam War was Bernard Fall, who was killed in Vietnam.Â  I had

lunch with him.A  He came to my house in Hong Kong; we had lunch.A  And in the course of the lunch, he said, â€œYou know, thereâ€™s so much American equipment in Vietnam.Â  You have everything.Â  You have tanks, you have aircraft carriers, you have aircraft, you have everything imaginable.Â  You may not win the war, but you canâ€™t lose it.â€Â

Stanley Karnow

Well, he was wrong.Â  With all that, we lost, and many years later when I interviewed General Giap, who was the commander of the Communist forces in Vietnam, his argument was: equipment is not the most important thing.Â  He said equipmentâ€”â€The most important thing is the will to fight.â€ And I think he had something there.Â  Thousandsâ€”millionsâ€”of Vietnamese Communist soldiers were killed, and yet they went on fighting.

Buildup in Vietnam
Interviewer

Do you recall sort of the build-up in Vietnam in the early â€™60s?Â  Did you cover the first deployment of American advisors in?

Stanley Karnow

The first thing that happened was we began to send advisorsâ€”and during the Eisenhower administration we got to send some advisors.Â  The Kennedy administration we got to send supervisors, advisors.Â  At the conference, the Geneva Conference in 1954, which the United States attended but did notâ€”was not involved in the decision-making.Â  The Geneva Conference was basically a conference between the French and the Vietnamese Communists, who had defeated the French in the Battle of Dien Bien Phu.

Interviewer

Now, I watched that conference very closely.Â  Later, I learned something from the Vietnamese communist delegate to the conference, who wentâ€”heâ€™s a delegate.Â  Heâ€™s Pham Van Dong, later the premiere or prime minister of Vietnam.Â  I interviewed him years later in Hanoi, after the war. Â  During that conference, the Soviet foreign minister, Molotov, and the Chinese foreign minister, Zhou Enlai, came to the conference, and at the conference they forced the Viet Minhâ€”the communistsâ€”to accept the parallel.Â  And why did they do that?Â  Because they wanted to ingratiate themselves with Europe, with the French, and they wanted to cut the French off from the United States.

Stanley Karnow

So the United States said, â€œOkayâ€?the American representative, General Bedell Smith, and the Eisenhower administration, said, â€œOkay.Â  We didnâ€™t sign?we werenâ€™t part of this?but we will abide by the decisions.â€Â  One of the decisions was that Vietnam was going to be divided, and it was going to be disarmed.Â  We werenâ€™t going to send any weapons in there. Â  A few years later, I was sitting on the terrace of a hotel in Saigon, the Majestic Hotel, with an American Army public affairs officer, and as I was sitting there near the Saigon River, we see an aircraft carrier coming down the river with American helicopters, in a clear violation of the Geneva agreements.

Stanley Karnow

This is maybe 1960-61, later itâ€™s?Iâ€™m sorry?it seems like during the Kennedy

administration.A  So I said to this American public affairs guy, I said, â€œHey, Joe, look at that aircraft carrier with the helicopters.â€Â  He said to me, â€œI donâ€™t see no aircraft carrier.â€Â  Uh-huh.Â  So gradually we began to send in more and more advisors to train and train the South Vietnamese Army.Â  Now we have in Vietnam a government under? separate government under?anti-communist, supposedly anti-communist government under Ngo Dinh Diem, and gradually youâ€™re sending in American advisors.Â  It became apparent that the advisors could not induce or train the South Vietnamese Army to fight the growing insurgency in the countryside. Â

Stanley Karnow

One of the reasons why they were incompetent was to be an officer in the French?in the South Vietnamese Army, you had to have a baccalaureate degree, which was the equivalent of a high school degree; it was the French term.Â  It was influenced by their French background.Â  Which meant that if you were a high school graduate, the chances are you came from a middle-class family, and the chances are you didnâ€™t know anything about the countryside, you didnâ€™t know anything about the peasantry.

Stanley Karnow

And your aim when you become an officer is not to go out in the countrysideâ€”just to stay in Saigon, because thatâ€™s where the nightclubs are, thatâ€™s where the girls are, and so forth.Â  And thatâ€™s where the promotions are.Â  So the South Vietnamese Army was really quite incompetent, and we tried to set up a program called Vietnamization.Â

Interviewer

Getting back to your?before getting on to Vietnamization?did you witness that incompetence firsthand?

Stanley Karnow

Well, there was a famous battle very early on, about 1963, called the Battle of Ap Bac in which the Vietnamese Army was defeated by this Viet?they didnâ€™t call them Viet Cong; in those days, they called them Viet Minh.Â  Later, the term Viet Cong was invented.Â  Viet Cong means â€œcommunist.â€Â  Yes, it was invented by the Diem government, not the communists.Â  But later everybody began to call themselves Viet Cong, including the communists.Â

Stanley Karnow

So they were defeated there, and this is where there was an American colonel called John Paul Vann, who was out there trying to rally the South Vietnamese Army. And he was quite upset with their inability to do anything, and he was very hawkish and thought that he could train the South Vietnamese Army to do things.Â  But he was incompetent as well, and heâ€™s a subject of a book by Neil Sheehan called A Bright Shining Lie, because a lot of the journalists believed him. Â  You know, the journalists have a tendency to believe anybody whoâ€™s negative.Â  If youâ€™re critical of the establishment, good?youâ€™re a good source for information.Â  But not all the critics of the establishment were better informed than?

Counterinsurgency: A Mysterious Concept
Interviewer

Why do you say Vann was incompetent? What mistakes did he make?

Stanley Karnow

Why do you say Vann was incompetent? What mistakes did he make?

Interviewer

What was Vannâ€™s mistake?

Stanley Karnow

Vannâ€™s mistake was to think that he could train the South Vietnamese Army to fight a guerilla war. And he was no better at doing that than anybody else was, and they began to use words like?bandy words around like â€œcounterinsurgency.â€ Â I havenâ€™t ever quite understood what counterinsurgency means.Â Itâ€™s a word that a lot of people borrowed from Mao Tse-Tungâ€™s books on fighting the communists through insurgency, and it included everything byâ€”you go into a village, you open a school, you open a well.Â You get doctors in there?all thatâ€™s part of counterinsurgency, see, not just military. Â I learned one time, when I was covering the war in Algeria, when the French came in using that term, that they would?they were absolutely, totally competent to do that.Â And theyâ€™d go into a place, and theyâ€™d build a well, and theyâ€™d teach the kidsâ€”they teach the young people and everything, thinking that would turn the rebels against rebellion and for the French. Didnâ€™t make any difference?the rebels continued to be rebels, because the French were French, and they were outsiders, and the rebels were Algerians.Â And the Algerians supported them. Â And the same thing became true in [the] Vietnam [War].Â And they had all kinds of schemes, those early schemes in Vietnam? counterinsurgency.Â They had a scheme called Strategic Hamlets? youâ€™re going to move people out of there.Â It didnâ€™t work, because youâ€™re taking people out of their own villages to move them into these enclosures. Â And when you take them out of their own villages, youâ€™re taking them away from their ancestral graves.Â Youâ€™re taking them away from places theyâ€™re familiar with.Â And you move them into these camps, so-called camps.Â Also, you never understood thatâ€”failed to understand that a lot of the Vietnamese that you took out of the villages and moved into these camps were in fact Viet Cong that ended up being in those camps. And they were, obviously, against the regime. Â So you began to realize, as a reporter, that this is not going anywhere.Â The President of Vietnam then was Ngo Dinh Diem.Â The real power in Vietnam was his brother, called Ngo Dinh Nhu.Â Diem was a very sincere guy; he was a sincere nationalist.Â He was a devout Catholic.Â And I might just digress to say that the Vietnamese are not anti-Catholic?a lot of Vietnamese are Catholics; about 10% of the population was Catholic.Â They had been converted to Catholicism centuries before. Â The problem with Diem was he had no idea?he never went out to the countryside. If he did, once in a while, to see what was going on, he had these flacks, these lackeys, who would tell him that, you know, â€œWeâ€™re growing trees,â€ which means what they did was theyâ€™d stick some branches in the ground to say thatâ€™s a tree thatâ€™s growing. Â But most of the time, he sat in his palace, chain-smoked, and babbled away in French.Â And I had many interviews with him?my French is fluent.Â So I listened to him babbling away about the things he wanted to do, and he gradually alienated his own army.Â He gradually alienated a large part of the Buddhist population, which began to turn against him. And even the Americans, who had plucked him out of a seminary in New Jersey to send him back to Vietnam after the Geneva agreements.

Interviewer

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Stanley Karnow

And when you take them out of their own villages, youâ€™re taking them away from their ancestral graves.Â  Youâ€™re taking them away from places theyâ€™re familiar with.Â  And you move them into these camps, so-called camps.Â  Also, you never understood thatâ€”failed to understand that a lot of the Vietnamese that you took out of the villages and moved into these camps were in fact Viet Cong that ended up being in those camps.Â  And they were, obviously, against the regime.

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Stanley Karnow

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Stanley Karnow

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Interviewer

A seminary in New Jersey?

Stanley Karnow

Yeah.Â  Heâ€™d gone to a seminary in New Jersey, and?where?and once they?when the communists were taking over Vietnam, he escaped Vietnam.Â  He went to a seminary, and various people brought him back to Vietnam after then, in Vietnam?mostly the French brought him back, too. Â

Stanley Karnow

I interviewed him for the first time in Paris when he stopped off on his way from New Jersey back to Vietnam.Â  I had my first interview with him, actually, at Palais dâ€™Orsay Hotel in Paris.

Interviewer

What year would that have been?

Stanley Karnow

1959.Â  And there he was, chain-smoking, babbling. What we were doing at that point wasâ€”the head of Vietnam, of anti-communist Vietnam was going to be the former emperor, Bao Dai.Â  So he stopped in Paris on his way back to Vietnam to be?he was going to be the Prime Minister; Bao Dai was going to be the resurrected emperor.Â  So he went off to see Bao Dai down?Bao Dai used to spend a lot of his time chasing floozies on the French Riviera, so Diem went down to see him to get his blessing. Â

Stanley Karnow

Later, Bao Dai went back to Vietnam, but Diem, with the aid of the CIA, had a plebiscite referendum in which Bao Dai was ousted.Â  Bao Dai was not competent to rule, but neither was Diem.Â  And a lot of Americansâ€”when Diem was sent back, had grave doubts about whether he could do this.

Stability Unravels: The Assassination of Ngo Dinh Diem
Stanley Karnow

But anyway, just to fast-forward for a moment, I once was covering Lyndon Johnsonâ€™s trip to Vietnam when he was Vice President, and Johnson, who had a tendency to bloviate, called Diem, â€œthe Winston Churchill of Asia.â€

Interviewer

Iâ€™ve heard that.

Stanley Karnow

And I was on Johnsonâ€™s plane as we left on his way to Bangkok, and I stopped to say, â€œDid you really believe that heâ€™s the Winston Churchill of Asia?â€Â  And Johnson said, â€œShit, heâ€™s the only boy we got out there.â€Â  So it was not much enthusiasm for Diem, but heâ€™s the only boy we got out there was exactly the thesis. Â  So I spent a lot of time with Diem, and I began to realize that this wasnâ€™t going to work. [0:24:02] So we kept hoping?the United States kept hoping that things would work out with Diem, but they werenâ€™t working out.

Interviewer

Did you have any contact with his brother, too?Â  His brother was also a power, too, wasnâ€™t he?

Stanley Karnow

His brother was the real power.Â  The brother, Nhu, was the guy who?now, brother Nhu was a very interesting guy?heâ€™s an intelligent guy?somewhat sinister?had gone to

school in Paris and studied in Paris.A  Had taken up with a French philosopher called Mounier, who had a philosophy called â€œpersonalism,â€ which was supposed to be?it was supposed to be a Catholic philosophy, but a liberal Catholic philosophyâ€”[0:24:59] supposed to be involved in getting the working class?which was largely communist in France?to come over to be supported by Catholics.Â  And there was that movement in the United States [Inaudible]?it was the church and the working class and so forth.Â

Stanley Karnow

So Diemâ€™s brother started adopting thisâ€”something called â€œpersonalism,â€ but it had nothing whatsoever to do with the French philosophy.Â  Itâ€™s something he just picked up, and in fact, what he was doing was calling it the philosophy of his secret party called the Can Lao Party, which was supposed to be made up of Catholics, and it was kind of a cabal. Â

Stanley Karnow

That was in June of â€™63, I think, wasnâ€™t it?

Stanley Karnow

Yes, and?which was something that Buddhists did, and unfortunately, I saw some of that; it was pretty horrible to watch.Â  Diemâ€™s mother?sister-in-law, Nhuâ€™s wife, Madam Nhu, was kind of a dragon lady. And she sort of cackled and said the Buddhist monks are barbecuing themselves?it didnâ€™t go over very well. Â  Anyway, everything began to unravel, and among other things, there was a story going around that Diem and his brother were unhappy with the Americans, and that they were secretly negotiating with Hanoi, with the communists, to see if they could find some alternative to that?to the American connection.Â

Stanley Karnow

Anyway, hearing about that, there was an American in the administration who sent out a telegram in the summer of 1963 saying, â€œWe have to do something to prevent that from happening. Because if the communists make a deal with Diem, then Diem might become neutralist and expel us from Vietnam, and that would be a victory for the communists.â€ Â

Interviewer

Okay, when you look back in retrospect that wouldâ€™ve been a fine solution and wouldâ€™ve saved a lot of lives.Â  But anyway, a new ambassador came out there, Henry Cabot Lodge, sent out by Kennedy?smartly so, because he had run against Cabot Lodge for the Senate earlier.Â  Cabot Lodge was a Republican.Â  Smart political move, because if things go down the drain in Vietnam, itâ€™s a Republican whoâ€™s going to be there. Â  But Lodge was a very smart guy, and when he got there he realized this thing was unraveling.

Stanley Karnow

So he began to hear these stories about plots to overthrow Diem, and through his CIA guy? Conein, Lou Conein, who was his CIA guy.Â Â Now, Conein was a good friend of mine, and a great source of information for me, and his story itself?I spent 70 hours interviewing Conein.Â Â I have taped interviews with him.Â Â I donâ€™t know what to do with them eventually.

Stanley Karnow

And so here he is, he speaks fluent English; heâ€™s French, and so forth, so he also joins the OSS, which is a precursor to CIA.Â Â And he gets involved in the French Resistance, and he has all kinds of adventures, and interviewing him was a real difficulty, because itâ€™s very hard to tell whether he was telling you the truth or not.Â Â But he was a great source of information and a very heavy drinker, and we spent a lot of time drinking plum brandy in various restaurants in Washington and Vietnam and god knows where.

Stanley Karnow

So we know a lot of these guys fromâ€”Vietnamese

Stanley Karnow

officers who had been in the French Army and so forth, so when Henry

Stanley Karnow

Cabot Lodge came in and he wanted to begin to think of getting rid of

Stanley Karnow

Diem, he got Conein to talk to these French?sorry. Heâ€™d gotten Conein to

Stanley Karnow

talk to these Vietnamese officers who were, as he used to put it, you

Stanley Karnow

know, â€œThey were corporals in the French Army; now theyâ€™re generals in

Stanley Karnow

the South Vietnamese Army.â€Â Â So he began to clue into these guys who

Stanley Karnow

were making plans to overthrow Diem.Â Â

Interviewer

At any rate, so heâ€™s in Vietnam now, and he had been in the OSS in the early days of the Second World War, the OSS had gone into?met with Ho Chi Minh, because Ho Chi Minh was fighting, helping to fight?he was moving to fight against the Japanese.Â Â So he was with Ho Chi Minh and he knew a lot of the French, the Vietnamese, who were involved in the early days of Vietnam, some of whom were communist, someâ€”

Stanley Karnow

Various

Stanley Karnow

French Vietnamese officers were in on plots.Â Â There was a South

Stanley Karnow

Vietnamese colonel called Phung Yak Thau who was involved in one of the

Stanley Karnow

plots, and although I didnâ€™t know it at the time, he was secretly a

Stanley Karnow

communist. It was very hard to keep track of all this stuff.Â Â Rumors

Stanley Karnow

were floating around and swirling around, and youâ€™re a reporter and

Stanley Karnow

youâ€™re trying to figure out whoâ€™s doing what to whom.Â Â It wasnâ€™t easy.Â Â

Interviewer

Now, it was more than one plot.Â Â There were several plots.Â Â There was this plot, and that plot, and then various guys were plotting.Â Â One of the plotters was a guy that I knew quite well who was named?Dr. Tuyen, his name was.Â Â He was the secret police guy, chief, under Diem, but now was turning against Diem, and heâ€™s involved in one plot or another.Â

Stanley Karnow

But eventually, all these plots melded or gelled into one single plot, and they turned against Diem, and overthrew him.Â Â Now, when they overthrew him, he fled with his brother from the palace in Saigon to a church in the Chinese district of Saigon called Cholon.Â Â And the head of the junta that had overthrown him was a South Vietnamese general.Â Â We called him â€œBig Minh,â€ but his name was Duong Van Minh.Â

Stanley Karnow

So Diem called up and said, â€œOkay, Iâ€™m surrenderingâ€ and Minh said, â€œOkay, Iâ€™m going to send someone to get

Stanley Karnow

you.â€Â Â Now, the question became what do you do with Diem after you get

Stanley Karnow

him?Â Â Now, the South Vietnamese, the guys who overthrew Diem, were kind

Stanley Karnow

of worried about this.Â Â What they wanted to do, because when they

Stanley Karnow

overthrew the?Lodge calls Diem, and he said, â€œIf you want to get out of

Stanley Karnow

the country, weâ€™ll get a plane for your disposal.â€A A Where do you send

Stanley Karnow

him?thatâ€™s a big problem?Â

Interviewer

Were you there at the time?

Stanley Karnow

I was there, but I wasnâ€™t in the headquarters.

Interviewer

No, no, no, but you were in Saigon.

Stanley Karnow

Conein tells me all this stuff in the course of our interviews later.Â  So?

Interviewer

Were you shocked by the assassination, or you?

Stanley Karnow

Everybody was shocked.Â  Kennedy was shocked, and he himself gets assassinated not long afterward.

Interviewer

Right.

Stanley Karnow

So?but Henry Cabot Lodge was overjoyed that they got rid of Diem.Â  I mean he didnâ€™t want to see him assassinated, but his final words when the Diem government was overthrownâ€”he sent a cable back to Washington, which I quote in my book, says, â€œNow we can go on to win the war.â€ Â  Well, what happens is the junta that takes over is even more incompetent to wage the war than Diem had been, so they get overthrown by another guy, another South Vietnamese General called Nguyen Khanh, and heâ€™s incompetent.Â

â€œTurnstile Governmentsâ€ Follow Diemâ€™s Regime
Stanley Karnow

Now, I think that itâ€™s been misunderstood many times by thinking that [Lyndon] Johnson wanted to get into [the] Vietnam [War].Â  What Johnson wanted with the Tonkin Gulf Resolution was to take control of the whole situation himselfâ€”he wanted?he didnâ€™t want Congress to bulldoze him into, propel him into the war.Â  And he used as his model something that Eisenhower had done many years before when there was some talk about the United States getting involved to prevent Communist China from invading Taiwan? whatâ€™s called the Taiwan Gulf Resolution.Â  And that gave Eisenhower control over the situation, and the last thing he wanted was to get involved in a war between China and Taiwan.Â  Johnson doesnâ€™t want to get involved in a war in Vietnam. He doesnâ€™t

want to send troops in until he decides what he wants to do.

Stanley Karnow

So what happens is youâ€™re in?so whatâ€™s going on now in Vietnam in the wake of the Diem overthrow is youâ€™re having one government following another, and by this time, [Lyndon] Johnson is President. And one of Johnsonâ€™s advisors, by the way, is Jack Valenti, who I remember his phrase is, â€œItâ€™s like a turnstile. Theyâ€™re all going in and out.â€ Well, eventually, the decision is made that these guys canâ€™t get? they canâ€™t find?they canâ€™t get their act together. Weâ€™d better send in American forces. Now, I think thereâ€™s something misunderstood about the American forces. The? in the beginning?

Interviewer

This is now 1965 and?

Stanley Karnow

1954?â€™64, sorry.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Stanley Karnow

â€™64.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Stanley Karnow

Okay.Â  You have to have some justification for sending in American troops.Â  [Lyndon] Johnson?â€™64 is an election year.Â  Barry Goldwater is now teasing Johnson, saying Johnson doesnâ€™t know what heâ€™s doing, and so forth.Â  So you have something called the Tonkin Gulf incident, where allegedly, some South?communist gunboats attacked American destroyers.Â  It never happened, but that became a pretext for Johnson to pass something called the Tonkin Gulf Resolution.

American Involvement in Vietnam: An Inevitable Fate?
Stanley Karnow
Interviewer

I just want to ask a question at this point. To you, there at the time, did all of this seem inevitable? Was it clear to you that this is the way it was going? That this was the way it was going to play out, in a way?

Stanley Karnow

It began to, yeah.Â  As a matter of fact, I wrote a note to somebody?I canâ€™t remember who it was?saying something like, â€œYouâ€™re not going to get anywhere with the South Vietnamese Army.Â  The only way youâ€™re going to get anywhere is if you put American forces in.â€Â  But [Lyndon] Johnson doesnâ€™t want to put American forces in

right away.

Stanley Karnow

So he starts stalling, looking for excuses not to get involved.Â  So you get one incident after another?for example, something happened in Thanksgiving, or something like that.Â  Some people say, â€œOkay, this is the time to put in American forces.â€ â€œNo, no, we donâ€™t got to get involved in a war on Thanksgiving.â€ Â

Stanley Karnow

There was an incident that happened in Saigon?an American officerâ€™s billet was blown up?I think BOQ, it was called.Â  And someone said, â€œOkay, this is the time to get involved.â€Â  But Johnson said, â€œNo, no, we donâ€™t want to bomb Santa Claus.Â  We donâ€™t want to get involved.â€ Â

Stanley Karnow

So finally, thereâ€™s some incident that happens in February of 1965, and that becomes the trigger for him getting involved. There was an attack against an American base in Pleiku in the Highlands. Â Now, again, one of the interesting things about how we learned things after the war

Stanley Karnow

[Lyndon] Johnsonâ€™s National Security Advisor, Mac Bundy, was in Vietnam at that particular time, and when that incident occurred, Mac Bundy seemed?it seemed in Washington that Mac Bundy thought something ought to be done.Â  We have subsequently written a book?read a book about Mac Bundy, and he didnâ€™t want to get involved.Â  The new book about him says he was very dovish about the war, but he was misinterpreted.Â  And so much misinterpretation was going on in Washington about whatâ€™s going on in Vietnam.Â

Stanley Karnow

I mean Iâ€™ll tell you?one of these anecdotes wasâ€”Johnson later had a National Security Advisor, Walt Rostow.Â  Thereâ€™s an attack by some Viet Cong unit against American?an American camp in the Highlands or something, and Rostow says, â€œYou know why they did that, donâ€™t you?because the House Appropriations Committee is meeting tomorrow.â€Â  What?Â  The Viet Cong guys, theyâ€™re tuned into the Washington Post and they were?I mean this kind of idiocy about whatâ€™s going on in Vietnam, tied to all these things.Â  So anyways, so the first bombing starts in February of 1965.Â

Interviewer

You mean the bombing of?

Stanley Karnow

Of the north.

Interviewer

By the U.S. Air Force.

Stanley Karnow

Yeah.Â  Now, itâ€™s not going to be the regular bombing, which is later, goes on and everything. This is a one-time bombing.Â  Actually, the first bombing took place after the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, when Johnson sent an airplane up to bomb the north, flown by a guy called?whatâ€™s his name?Everett Alvarez?who, incidentally, is my neighbor here.Â He survived, and he was the longest prisoner of war in Vietnam. Â

Stanley Karnow

Anyway, so the bigger bombing, the next bombing, starts off in February of 1965.Â  One of the stupidities of that bombing was that Soviet Prime Minister Kosygin happens to be visiting Hanoi at that time, and trying to urge Vietnamese Communists not to continue the war.Â  He thinks they ought to make a deal, but of course, that didnâ€™t make any difference, so the bombs are falling all over. And the Chinese?Chinese Communists, who by this time are having these terrible?their fights with the Soviets?start putting out these statements about how the Soviets are trying to sell out our Vietnamese comrades, and probably telling them that.Â  So thatâ€™s how I got my information, from the Chinese. Â

Stanley Karnow
At any rate, so the bombing starts, itâ€™s only brief, but the bombing is going to?the planes that are leaving are going to start leaving from American bases in Da Nang, and you have to get some protection for those bases.Â  So you send in Marines, and the first Marines start landingâ€”the American Marines start landing in Da Nang in the spring of 1965. Â
Stanley Karnow

Okay.Â  [Lyndon] Johnson is still?doesnâ€™t know quite where heâ€™s going. He once said?Bill Moyers, who was his press guy once, told me that Johnson once said to him, â€œI feel like a hitchhiker on a Texas highway during a thunderstorm.Â  You know, I donâ€™t know what to do.â€ Â

Stanley Karnow

He comes up in â€™65 with a plan to see if he can get the communists to negotiate.Â Heâ€™s going to have a big program, a kind of TVA program for the Mekong Delta.Â What is that called? Â

Interviewer

Public works?

Stanley Karnow

Public works program.Â  And heâ€™s inviting the communists to come in on it.Â  And he gave a speech in Baltimore?Johns Hopkins?and heâ€™s flying back to Washington in the plane. And again, my source, whoâ€™s Moyers, is with him?heâ€™s a press officer.Â Heâ€™s sitting in the plane, and heâ€™s saying, â€œOld Uncle Ho canâ€™t turn me down.Â  Uncle Ho canâ€™t turn me down.â€Â  Now, he thinks heâ€™s going through Texas, right, and dispensing plums to town mayors and so forth, but they did turn him down.Â  And I think that was a big?in my own view, itâ€™s a big mistake on their part. Â

Stanley Karnow

They shouldâ€™ve known if they continued the war, eventually American combat forces would go in, but they didnâ€™t.Â  Now, I have consulted various people for their guesses

about why Ho Chi Minh didnâ€™t accept that plan, and one guy, whoâ€™s written a very good biography of Ho Chi Minh, a guy called Bill Duiker, says, â€œYou know, Ho Chi Minh was probably very old at that stage and wasnâ€™t functioning quite well, and he was being?the hard-liners were coming to power. And they turned him down.â€ Â

Stanley Karnow

At any rate, they did turn him down.Â  Now, when you?when Iâ€™ve thought about this? and a lot of what I thought about the war is subsequent to my covering the war. Â

Stanley Karnow

When we go back?and I talked to you about the Vietnamese being sold out by the comrades at the Geneva Conference, when Molotov forced them to accept a partition.Â  The communists had great suspicion of negotiations. Â

Stanley Karnow

In 1968, I was covering these talks going on in Paris, and I had a couple of colleagues of mine, we arranged a thing to have dinner once a week with some of the North Vietnameseâ€”the communist reporters. And after one of the?one of the?I said to the communist reporters, â€œSo how are these negotiations going?â€Â  He said, â€œTheyâ€™re not negotiations, theyâ€™re talks.â€Â  I said, â€œWhatâ€™s the difference?â€Â  He said, â€œWhen you negotiate, it means youâ€™re looking to a compromise.Â  Weâ€™re not compromising.Â  These are just talks.â€ Â

And thatâ€™s the old clichÃ©

â€œTalk and fight.â€Â  So there was great suspicion among the Vietnamese communists about negotiating, and so we get to, now, the summer of 1965.Â  The governments in Saigon are in a turnstile.Â  Itâ€™s obvious that the South Vietnamese Army canâ€™t hack it.

Interviewer

Ia Drang?

Stanley Karnow

In Ia Drang Valley, about which is a very good book written by Joe Galloway and General so-and-so?I canâ€™t remember his name?

Interviewer

Hal Moore.

Stanley Karnow

Who?

Interviewer

Hal Moore.

Stanley Karnow

Hal Moore, yep.Â  They made a movie out of it.

Interviewer

Yeah.

Stanley Karnow

At any rate, so?

Interviewer

When did you?

Stanley Karnow

So here I am?

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

An Unwinnable War, Even for John Wayne
Stanley Karnow
Stanley Karnow

Donâ€™t forget, Iâ€™m not only covering [the] Vietnam [War]. Iâ€™ve got other places to go to as well.

Interviewer

Okay.

Stanley Karnow

But I am down?Iâ€™m down there as much as I can.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Stanley Karnow

And the American troops come in. Are they going to make a difference? Well, we donâ€™t know. These are American troops. These are John Waynes, right? John Waynes donâ€™t lose wars. So there we are, and we go on and on.

Stanley Karnow

Weâ€™re in â€™65, right? Gradually, thereâ€™s a build-up of American forces. Now, let me go back for a moment. One of the things that went on during the Vietnam War over and over again?and you began to find it out at the time, but then you began to find it out later. There were lots of people in the administration in Washington who have grave doubts about whether we should be there or not.

Stanley Karnow

One of the earliest ones was a guy who was the Vietnam desk officer in the State

Department?trying to think of his name. Help me out. Anyway, he was in favor?he said at one meeting, he said, â€œMaybe we ought to get out of there.â€ This was during all the Buddhist crises?it was Kattenburg, Paul Kattenburg. I knew him quite well. He was of Belgian origin.

Stanley Karnow

And I saw him after that, and I said, â€œWhatâ€™s going on? I heard you dissented there at one of those meetings. You know, there are no secrets around.â€ He says, â€œYeah, but,â€ he says, â€œwell, Iâ€™m going to Georgetown.â€

Stanley Karnow

So I said, â€œThatâ€™s terrific. What are you going to study?â€ â€œGeorgetown, Guyana.â€ So that was his fate. And later it began to get more and more?even McNamara began to tell you, off the record. And that was one of the things that was so?when I look back on it, so really awful, was the guys who would say, â€œMcNamaraâ€™s saying this is a hopeless situation,â€ and he told us in a background meeting at a hotel in Honolulu or someplace. And then gets up that same night and telling us everything is going great.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Stanley Karnow

And over and over again.Â  And one guy who consistently kept saying that things were going badly was George Ball.Â  And George Ball, had some function in the Kennedy administration, and as the?George Ball was a lawyer who belonged to a firm called Gottlieb, Cleary, and Ball, which had an office in Paris.Â  And he was very Frenchified, and he remembered the French war [the Algerian War], and he had grave doubts about being involved in that, in [the] Vietnam [War].Â  So he said to Kennedy, â€œYou know, if you go on like this?â€ at this time, we had 800 advisors in Vietnam, thatâ€™s all? â€œif you go on like this, youâ€™re going to have a half-million troops in Vietnam.â€ Â

Stanley Karnow

Kennedy said, â€œGeorge, youâ€™re one of the smartest guys around.Â  I never heard anything more stupid than that.â€Â  Okay.Â  So George Ball is shoved aside. The [Lyndon] Johnson Administration, he says to Johnson, â€œDonâ€™t get involved.â€Â  Johnson would say, â€œI listened to all the points of view, and I made up my mind.â€Â  Heâ€™d include the factors he ignored [Inaudible]. Â

Stanley Karnow

After the war, I interviewed Ball, and I said, â€œWhy didnâ€™t you resign?â€Â  â€œOh,â€ he says, â€œyou know, it wouldâ€™ve been a page one story in the New York Times, and then that wouldâ€™ve been the end of me.â€Â  But he wouldâ€™ve been a heroic figure. Â

Stanley Karnow

And you have, over and over again, people who have the doubts about the war who stayed on because they would say, you know, â€œIâ€™m betterâ€”I can do more on the inside than I can on the outside.â€ Â

Stanley Karnow

Let me do a fast-forward for a moment.Â  You know, Dick Holbrooke was a good friend of mine.Â  Heâ€™s also a Vietnam?we know each other in Vietnam.Â  I said to him?now it is, â€œWhat are you doing in [the] Afghanistan [War]?â€Â  He says, â€œWell, I can do more good on the inside than I can on the outside.â€Â  Well, he couldnâ€™t.Â  So you had a lot of these guys doing that, and they did it over and over again in Vietnam.

Interviewer

Did you have much contact with McNamara?

Stanley Karnow

No, but I did?you know, those one meetings.Â  And I had a very odd experience with McNamara.Â  He was very hard to get to?you know, he didnâ€™t want to talk to the press very much. Â

Stanley Karnow

I was at a conference in Kyoto in Japan, and he was then the head?heâ€™d been fired by Johnson.Â  He was now head of the World Bank and he was one of the speakers at the conference.Â  And some brash guy at the conference stood up and said to him, â€œWhy should we believe anything you tell us, because you were involved in Vietnam andâ€”? â€Â  And Johnson said, â€œWell, we were wrong.Â  We were terribly wrong.â€

Stanley Karnow

You mean McNamara said.

Stanley Karnow

Iâ€™m sorryâ€”I take it back.Â  McNamara says, â€œWe were wrong.â€Â  So I went up to him and I said, â€œLook, Iâ€™ve never heard you say that in public. How about doing an interview?â€Â  And I think I was then working on my television series and I wanted him to be on it.Â  He said, â€œOh, I donâ€™t want to do that.Â  Iâ€™m not ready for that.â€Â  So that next morning at about 7:00 in the morning, the phone rings, and heâ€™s on the phone to me.Â  And he says, â€œLet me tell you why I canâ€™t do that.Â  Iâ€™m not ready to do it,â€ and he goes on babbling. Â

Stanley Karnow

My wife is in the bed?sheâ€™s with me.Â  She said, â€œWhatâ€™s going on there?â€Â  I said, â€œItâ€™s McNamara?heâ€™s on the phone.â€Â  So he gets on babbling for the next hour about why he canâ€™t do it, heâ€™s not ready, and you know, he has to do his research, and all that kind of stuff.Â  I came to the conclusion after listening to him that heâ€™s a casualty of the war.Â  And [Lyndon] Johnson thought he was?Johnson thought? when Johnson fired him, Johnson thought that heâ€™d lost?you know, Johnson fired him.

Stanley Karnow

To go back a moment?Johnson fired him because McNamara had?as he told us off the record, that the bombing wasnâ€™t doing any good.Â  And then he testified before the Stennis Subcommittee in the end of 1967, to a bunch of hard-liners, and there are a lot of generals and admirals who are talking about the necessity to continue the bombing.Â  And McNamara says itâ€™s stupid. Â

Stanley Karnow

So one of these guys said, â€œWell, you got to bomb the power plants in North Vietnam.â€Â  And McNamara said, â€œThereâ€™s less power generated in North Vietnam than there is in the PepCo plant in Northern Virginia.â€ Â

Stanley Karnow

And so that turned?so all these, the Stennis Subcommittee?and you know Johnson had to keep?one of the things Johnson had to do?and Stennis was a southern senator or congressman. He had to keep placating the hard-liners to get his Great Society stuff through, so he felt he had to continue the war.Â  So [Lyndon] Johnson, when he heard what McNamara had done, he said, â€œMcNamaraâ€™s losing his marbles, right?â€Â  So then he fired him.Â  And McNamara didnâ€™t know he was being fired?he was on a trip to London, and he discovered he was being fired. Â

Stanley Karnow

So?but it was very hard to get to him, and as I say, then I had that telephone conversation with him much later.Â

Interviewer

So was there any sign?did he give any indication to you that he was relieved to be finally fired from his job?

Stanley Karnow

No.

Interviewer

No.

Stanley Karnow

No.Â  But he was a figure around Washington, and I think people began to feel sorry for him. And then when he did his book, you know?who was that paraplegic Senator from Georgia?

Interviewer

Max Cleland?

Stanley Karnow

Cleland.

Interviewer

Who lost three limbs in [the] Vietnam [War].

Stanley Karnow

Yeah.Â  When he recalled the book in retrospect, Max Cleland said he shouldâ€™ve called the book, â€œSorry About That.â€Â  That was a Vietnam clichÃ©.Â  And he said in

the book the reason?you know, the question was always asked, â€œWhy did you?why didnâ€™t you resign earlier?â€Â  He said, â€œBecause I was loyal to the President.â€ Â

Stanley Karnow

I did a review of the book for the New York Times, and my thesis was, â€œYou shouldâ€™ve been loyal to the public, then, rather than the President.â€Â  Anyway, it didnâ€™t make much difference. Â

Stanley Karnow

So McNamara goes down as one of the tragedies of Vietnam, but also a guy who is responsible for the death?you know, a lot of people think he shouldâ€™ve been a war criminal, I mean, this kind of stuff. Â

Stanley Karnow

So you go back and you look at Vietnam, you see all these guys who had grave doubts about the war, but didnâ€™t want to do anything about it.Â  And to this day, you find revisionists who will tell you that, you know, we couldâ€™ve won the war if weâ€™d done this, that, or the other thing.Â  But somewhat earlier, as I said, I had come to the conclusion that it was an unwinnable war.

Grasping for Political Solutions
Interviewer

When did you come to that conclusion?

Stanley Karnow

Well, it didnâ€™t happen overnight. I mean I wasnâ€™t like, you know?it wasnâ€™t like a character in a cartoon, thereâ€™s a light bulb goes on in your head. Probably after the American forces went in, and one of the things that swayed me was a comment by one of the South Vietnamese generals, Nguyen Cao Ky, I think it was.He said, â€œWhen the American forces came in, the South Vietnamese Army didnâ€™t want to fightâ€”let the Americans do it.â€

Stanley Karnow

And all this talk about how we couldâ€™ve?we couldâ€™ve Vietnamized the situation went on and on and on. Thereâ€™s a guy called Sorley wrote this book about how the Vietnamization was a great success because it turned back the North Vietnamese in the spring of 1972. What turned back the North Vietnamese was B-52s dropping napalm?it wasnâ€™t the?I mean everybody was looking for an excuse as to why we couldnâ€™t ofâ€”in the end, Iâ€™m rambling around, what happens is the big question isâ€” All wars end up with political solutions. I mean you hardly win the war on the battlefield. The battlefield helps you to position yourself in the political.American policy had been speaking to the communists, saying, â€œOkay, we will withdraw our forces when you withdraw your forces from the south.â€ Hanoi responded, â€œWhat do you mean, withdraw our forces from the south? Vietnam is one country.â€

Stanley Karnow

â€œYeah, but you violated the 17th Parallel.â€ To which they answered, quite rightly, â€œYou violated the 17th Parallel when you started bombing the north.â€ So eventually we get to the stage in 1972 where this thing is not going to work. Youâ€™re not going to

get them to withdraw. There are three or four hundred-thousand. So Kissinger in his negotiations with Le Duc Tho drops his demand that the South Vietnamese forces withdraw and lets them stay.

Interviewer

You mean the North Vietnamese forces withdraw.

Stanley Karnow

Sorry?I take it back.

Interviewer

Okay.

Stanley Karnow

The North Vietnamese forces stay in the south.Kissinger didnâ€™t make that decision, although he gets the Nobel Prize for this?baloney.Â  Nixon made that decision.Â  Kissinger just followed with it. Â

Stanley Karnow

So Kissinger says, â€œOkay, weâ€™ll let the North Vietnamese forces stay in the south.Â  The Saigon government will agree to some kind of a coalition government in the south,â€ and so forth.Â  When Kissinger agrees to allow the North Vietnamese forces, one of his advisors with him is John Negroponte, who says to him, â€œYouâ€™re writing a death warrant of the South Vietnamese government.â€ Â

Stanley Karnow

To which Kissinger says, â€œYou want us to stayâ€”should we stay there forever?is that what you want?â€Â  I mean Kissinger wanted to get out.Â  Nixon wanted to get out.Â  Nixon wanted to get out of Vietnam?certainly wanted to get out by the beginning of 1973.

Stanley Karnow

Because by this time heâ€™s beginning to think about going to China?heâ€™s needing to think about big things, and Vietnam has become a kind of a cockamamie little sideshow.Â  I mean thousands of guys have been killed, millions of Vietnamese are killed?okay, letâ€™s forget it.Â  And also, thinking that maybe if the communists do something afterward, weâ€™ll send in airplanes. Â

Stanley Karnow

But Congress then?Church?I forgot who the other guy was?Case.Â  Church-Case Amendment votes not to send any more forces back into Vietnam, regardless of what happens.Â  Then the question becomes, what does the North do?Â  How are they going to take over the south?

Stanley Karnow

Some of them begin to get worriedâ€”this was all post-war that I learn a lot of this stuff.Â Â They begin to get worried that if they try to take over the south, somehow American forces would come in, despite everything thatâ€™s been said.Â Â I canâ€™t

remember who it wasâ€”maybe it was Pham Van Dong, or somebody, or maybe Ho chi Minh, I donâ€™t know.Â Â Ho Chi Minh is dead by now.Â Â

Stanley Karnow

He said, â€œLook, if we offered boxes of chocolate to the American soldiers, they still would not comeâ€”the warâ€™s over for them,â€ and â€œLetâ€™s go down south.â€Â Â So â€œLetâ€™s go down and take over the south.â€Â Â Now, theyâ€”one of the reasons why they get worried about doing that is because they donâ€™t know whatâ€™s going to happen.Â Â But thereâ€™s a lot of pressure on them from the southern Viet Cong, the southerners, who said, â€œCome down here and liberate us,â€ because the southerners rememberedâ€”you go way back when the United States didnâ€™t go in, and a lot of the southerners during the early days of the Diem regime were wrapped upâ€”even were guillotined.Â Â In Vietnam they still had an old French guillotine that they sometimes used.Â Â

Stanley Karnow

So there was a lot of pressure on the North to go down.Â Â There was some Vietnamese Southâ€”the communist generals said, you know, â€œWe got to get a southerner by origin.â€Â Â So they went down there, and then, you know, then you had the famous April 30, 1975, takeover, and everyone getting on to helicopters, and all the rest of it.Â Â

Stanley Karnow

Soâ€”but here you were in a situation.Â Â Here I am?Iâ€™m a reporter, right?Â Â Iâ€™m not on the insideâ€”Iâ€™m on the outside of it, but I, you know, one of the keys to being a reporter is to have access to sources that are telling you things. And if youâ€™ve been around a long time, and especially if you work for the Washington Post?

Stanley Karnow

You know, when I worked for TIME Magazine, there were lots of good things to say about TIME Magazine, because they had lots of money.Â Â And I?whenever I wanted to do something, they justâ€”if I wanted to hire a helicopter, theyâ€™d pay for everything.Â Â

Stanley Karnow

One of the advantages of the Washington Post is lots of people in the establishment knew that the President was reading the newspaper the next morning at breakfast.Â Â So theyâ€™re leaning on you to feed you stuff.Â Â Now, you have to be very, very careful.Â Â You donâ€™t want to become a conduit for them, and especially the CIA.Â Â The CIA guys, by the way, in Vietnam were very well-informed.Â Â Not the operators, but the intelligence guys.Â Â CIA intelligence on Vietnam was extraordinarily good, and theyâ€™d always come to you, you know, â€œHereâ€™s a story for you,â€ you know.Â Â â€œOkay, let me check it out,â€ right?Â Â So.Â

Stanley Karnow

So I was getting that sort of thing.Â Â I mean I couldâ€™ve been the greatest reporter in the world, but if I was working for the Podunk Bugle, I wouldnâ€™t have had that access.Â Â Soâ€”and then Iâ€™d been around a long time, and also, if youâ€™re around a long time, you get that.Â Â

Stanley Karnow

Youâ€™ve got to be very, very careful when youâ€™re a reporter, because you donâ€™t want to get sucked intoâ€”and there were a lot of reporters who did, you know?who believed a lot of stuff that they were fed.Â Â

Stanley Karnow

There was a reporter in Vietnam for the New Yorker magazine, Bob Shappell. Shappell was a guy with tremendous experience.Â Â At one stage, he interviewed Mao Tse-Tung.Â Â He interviewed Ho Chi Minh.Â Â But he was a terribly naÃ¯ve guy?terribly naÃ¯ve.Â Â

Stanley Karnow

And Iâ€™ll tell you one anecdote.Â Â I mean I hate to dump on him?heâ€™s a very nice guy?but one funny story, one time. I hadâ€”when I was covering Vietnam during the Diem period, I went down into one of the provinces in the south, Ben Tre province?Kien Hoa, itâ€™s called.Â Â And the province chief was a guy calledâ€”he was a colonel in the South Vietnamese Army?his name was Pham Ngoc Thao.Â Â

Stanley Karnow

I went down there with a LIFE photographer, Johnny Dominic.Â Â And this guy tortured a Viet Cong prisoner for us, not necessarily?it wasnâ€™t a terrible torture, it was pretty?he tied him up to a field telephone and shocked him.

Stanley Karnow

Okay, later he becomes a big deal, and I told Joe Alsop about him, and Alsop thought he was the catâ€™s meow.Â Â He was sent to Washington to be a liaison with the CIA and so on.Â Â After the war, Iâ€™m back in Vietnam for the first time. And I was talking to my handler?oh, this guy, by the way, who was then murdered?not because?for not reasons? because he was an inveterate plotter of some sort.Â Â Anyway, I was with my handler and I mentioned his name.Â Â He said, â€œOh, weâ€™ve just reburied him in the patriotsâ€™ cemetery.â€Â Â I said, â€œWhat do you mean?â€Â Â He said, â€œWell, he was one of us the whole time.â€Â Â

Stanley Karnow

I was writing a column in those days, so I wrote about that.Â Â I ran into Shappell one time in Boston.Â Â He said, â€œI read your column.â€Â Â He said, â€œYouâ€™re absolutely wrong.Â Â How could that be?Â Â He was a regular friend of mine.Â Â He couldnâ€™t have been a communist.â€Â Â Thatâ€™s?that I call naivete.Â Â

Stanley Karnow

And I ran into lots of people.Â Â You know, there was a reporter for TIME Magazine who was a communist agent.Â Â He was a very good friend of mine.Â Â He was a very good friend of all the reporters.Â Â But he wasnâ€™t a disinformation guy, so.

Stanley Karnow

There was a marvelous woman doctor, Dr. Zin Quin Hoa, who was also a communist agent.Â Â Saigon was frogging, teeming with guys who were working with people.And I once asked the Northâ€”the communists, why is there no book on that subject?Â Â Itâ€™s a great subject for a book.Â Â Anyway?so sometimes?and then?

## Five Oâ€™Clock Follies

Interviewer

Did you ever go to the Five Oâ€™Clock Follies?

Stanley Karnow

Yes, I did.Â  Now, the Five Oâ€™Clock Follies, every afternoonâ€”itâ€™s called Five Oâ€™Clock Follies because the reporters used to make fun of it.Â  Okay, so whenâ€”at the height of it, which was at the height of the war, there were aboutâ€”it could be anywhere from 300 to 500 guys whoâ€™d come in.Â  It was at that time?it was hundreds of American reporters. Â  And there were two briefings going on.Â  There was a military briefing and there was a civilian briefing. And the military briefing, theyâ€™d get up and theyâ€™d tell you that some incident happened somewhere, and theyâ€™d fill you in on the incident. Â  And if you wanted to find out what was really going on, youâ€™d go in and get yourself in the helicopter, go out to the place, and find out that what they told you was a lot of baloney or something?whatever happened was?something else happened. The civilian briefing was conducted by Harold Kaplanâ€”he was a marvelous guyâ€”and whatâ€™s his name againâ€”Tell me, he just died.Â  Zoyaâ€”not Zoya? also with an Armenian name.Â  Anyway, itâ€™ll come back to me in a minute.Â  We just had a dinner for him just before he died. Â  Kaplanâ€”Iâ€™d known Kaplan in Paris, and he was a terrifically?very sophisticated guy.So he would invite you to come back to his house after the briefing, where he was shacked up with some beautiful Vietnamese woman, because his wife was in Hanoi?in [Inaudible]. And heâ€™d come back, and he called it â€œaprÃ¨s ski,â€ so weâ€™d go back to his house and heâ€™d undo everything he told you. Â  Now, who is the guy again?Â  Goddamnitâ€”itâ€™s on the tip of my tongue.Â  So what happened at those briefings is, if you had any sense, I mean you might not want to go to them.Â  But again, if you look at the press corps, a lot of guys would use what they got at the briefing as their?first of all, the agency guys are in a hurry to file.Â  A lot of guys wanted to get away because they had dates with their girlfriends.Â  A lot of guys are too lazy to goâ€”and so on and so forth. Â  So youâ€™re better offâ€”if you want to go, you can go, but, you know, you can live without it, and youâ€™re better off if you go out in the field or something or you tap your own sources.

Stanley Karnow

And so it became the Five Oâ€™Clock Follies because it was kind of a joke. There were lots of things that were going on in Vietnam that were kind of marvelous anecdotes.Â Â Holbrooke and I were going to do a book one time?a kind of Catch-22 about some of these things.Â Â  Like in the 1960 election, the USIA decided theyâ€™re going to teach democracy to the Vietnameseâ€”I think Iâ€™m telling you stuff thatâ€™s in my book, but anyway, Iâ€™ll tell you anyway.Â Â Theyâ€™re going to teach democracy, so they get a window downstairs in a building where the USIA is, and they get a big map, and theyâ€™re going to show the election returns.Â Â  So a big crowd forms, and they have the results coming in from Oregon and Washington, blah, blah, blah, and you can tow them up. And itâ€™s a big crowd, and the USIA guys, â€œTerrific, weâ€™re teaching them democracy.â€Â Â What they were really doing, what the crowd outside was betting on the [Inaudible].Â Â So a lot of that kind of stuff that was going on, andâ€”go ahead.

## Westmoreland: A Fish Out of Water in Vietnam

Interviewer

What was your estimation of Westmoreland?

Stanley Karnow

Westmoreland was a conventional general in an unconventional situation.Â  He was a nice guy.Â  He had no idea what was going on.Â  He didnâ€™t understand.Â  He would say stupid things; I mean I think theyâ€™re stupid.Â  He didnâ€™t understand the nature of the war.Â  He would say things likeâ€”heâ€™d go out and look at the scene after a battle? thereâ€™s a lot of bodies piled up. â€œOh, these Asians, they have no regard for human life,â€ you know. Â  I once, you know, I nudged him or something to remind him of what happened at the Battle of Antietam, or what happened at the Battle of the Somme, you know, when great piles of Americans were killed.Â  He didnâ€™t understand it.Â  He didnâ€™t understand it, and that wasâ€”he didnâ€™t understand the nature of the war.Â  The nature of this war was that we were up against an enemy that was prepared to take unlimited losses to achieve its goals, and American policy was to break their will.Â  And we never found a way to break their will. Â  What they did was they broke our will, â€™cause eventually the American public turned off on the war, and also, again, one of the misunderstandings about Vietnam is that the Tet Offensive of early 1968 changed American public opinion.

Stanley Karnow

One of the great canards of the war is Walter Cronkite going out there and expressing some doubts about the war, and Lyndon Johnson said, â€œHeâ€™s turning American public opinion against me.â€ If you know Walter, Walter Cronkite, he reflected American opinion rather more than make it. And if you look at the polls, you find that most people were turned against the war at the fall of â€™67, before the Tet Offensive. The polls showed that most Americans, at that stage, thought that the war was a mistake. And this is at a time when Westmoreland is addressing the joint houses?the Houses of Congress, and then everybodyâ€™s expressing a light at the end of the tunnel, and all that kind of stuff, and not realizing. And not realizing, also, when the Tet Offensive took place, it shocked the American public, but it wasnâ€™t the beginningâ€”the Vietnamese communists took a terrible beating.

â€œThe Sorrow of Warâ€
Stanley Karnow

The guy who worked for TIME Magazine, who was really a communist agent, who was a good friend of oursâ€”what was hisâ€”[Inaudible]â€”oh, damn.Â  Iâ€™m sorry, so.Â  Anyway, he learned that it was going to happen.Â  He advised the communists.Â  He said, â€œDonâ€™t do it.Â  Youâ€™re not going to get an uprising.â€Â  They thought there would be an uprising. â€œItâ€™s not going to happen.â€Â  And it didnâ€™t happen, and the communists took a terrible beating. Â  And when I interviewed Giap many years later, I asked him about that, and he glossed over.Â  He didnâ€™t want to admit it, you know.Â  He said, â€œWell, we had difficulties here and there,â€ that kind of stuff, so?but they did take a big beating. But they came back.Â  They were tremendously resilient. Â  And again, it was this thing that the amountâ€”when you traveled in the north, as I did after the warâ€”you couldnâ€™t go during the war.Â  I wish we couldâ€™ve.Â  I think they made a big mistake, the communists, not allowing reporters in there except for Paris and Salzburg. Â  When you traveled in the north, you went to all these villages, and each one had a cemetery, and they have all these white stones and kind of an obelisk in the middle.Â  Thereâ€™s nobody buried in those cemeteries.Â  All the guys from that village were bulldozed into mass graves in the south.Â  But on each stone, it said, â€œHero,â€ in Vietnamese, or whatever the phrase was. Â  So everybody inâ€”everybody in Vietnam, the sacrifices that they made were quite phenomenal.

Stanley Karnow

Quite phenomenal.A A And soâ€”and I think in the United States there was not the appreciation of the sacrifices they were prepared to make.Â Â

Stanley Karnow

There was, is a marvelous book that was written by a North Vietnamese who had been in the Army, called The Sorrow of War.Â Â I donâ€™t know whether youâ€™ve heard of that book.Â Â Itâ€™s a beautiful book.Â Â And it was translated into English, and it won some prize in London, and he wanted to go to London to take the prize, but the government wouldnâ€™t let him out of it.Â Â And his book was banned in the north, because The Sorrow of War depicts the war as sorrowful.Â Â They didnâ€™t want that.Â Â They wanted all these guys to be heroes.Â Â

Stanley Karnow

But if you read his book, you see they werenâ€™t all heroes, and one of the things about his book which is so telling is a bunch of these North Vietnamese guysâ€”they were on drugs; they were schtupping girls.Â Â I mean they were just like their counterparts.Â Â I mean you know they were soldiers.Â Â They were moaning, they were writing letters to their mothers, I mean they were having all these problems that soldiers would have anywhere in any battle.Â Â And yet they went on fighting.Â Â

Stanley Karnow

And I interviewed that guy one time when I was in North Vietnam.Â Â He was terrific, but he felt very sad and felt very badly that he wasnâ€™t allowed to go to London to tell his story, but the book is a good book.Â Â It should be read by everybody whoâ€™s trying to figure out the war still, because we donâ€™t have much stuff on what was going on.Â Â

Stanley Karnow

Now, I have one very good source, communist source of information.Â Â Well, I had a few.Â Â But one in particular was a good friend of mine, was a colonel called Bui Tin.Â Â Does that ring a bell with you?Â Â Okay, I met Buiâ€”when we were doing our television series in the north, I met Bui Tin.

Stanley Karnow

He was a colonel, and I got to interview him because he not only wasâ€”heâ€™s in the seriesâ€”he was also, later, when the last American troops were leaving, he was the one who took them to the airplane, as he told the story.Â Â And he gave everyoneâ€”he gave them all, he said, a copy of some scroll painting by Ho Chi Minh and says, â€œAnd I hope youâ€™ll come back here as a tourist one day.â€Â Â

Stanley Karnow

Then he defected.Â Â He defectedâ€”he had some problems with the government, the Communist governmentâ€”and he was at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, he had a lot of experiences.Â Â And he wrote a book, which he dedicated to my wife and me, and then he defected.Â Â Then he startedâ€”he had some problems with the government.Â Â Now, whatever they wereâ€”oh, he was the editor of the army newspaper. And there were various reasons why he didnâ€™t want toâ€”he was very opposed toâ€”this is after Ho died.Â Â First of all, Ho Chi Minh had written a will in which he said when he dies he wants to have his ashes buried in various parts of Vietnam.Â Â

Stanley Karnow

Instead, they did a Lenin mausoleum, whichâ€”and he was the one who broke the story in his newspaper about how Ho Chi Minhâ€™s will had been traduced.Â Â And one thing or another, and he was on a trip to Paris to meet with some French communists, and he defected.Â Â

Stanley Karnow

No, what he did wasâ€”the first thing he did was to broadcast on the BBC his disagreements with the government.Â Â Then, of course, he couldnâ€™t go back.Â Â And then they started smearing him and whatnot, so heâ€”so I saw him several times in Paris, and he wrote his book.Â Â He stayed here one time with us, and then he became a kind of a figure.

Stanley Karnow

Heâ€™d go to some Texas Tech and that.Â Â I kind of lost track of himâ€”sometimes I didnâ€™t agree with what he was doing.Â Â Soâ€”but anyway, whatever.Â Â He was a great source of information.Â Â Soâ€”and then I interviewed Giap one time for some time.

The Horrors of the Century Canâ€™t Be Told
Interviewer

Was there anyone on the American side in the military orâ€”who you think got it right, who understood the situation?

Stanley Karnow

Yeah, sure.Â  It was Colonel Summers, Harry Summersâ€”does that ring a bell to you?Â Harry Summers was a terrific guy, Colonel.Â  He said one time, after the war he was meeting withâ€”I donâ€™t know where he wasâ€”with some communist counterpart.Â And he said to the communist counterpart, he says, â€œYou know, we won every battle in Vietnam?â€ And the communist colonel said, â€œThat may be true.Â  Itâ€™s irrelevant.â€Â  And he did a bookâ€”Harry did a book, which I did an introduction to, or part of one, anyway.Â  It was a book of maps of all the battles, you know, with theâ€”thereâ€™s s a very good book on the press in Vietnam by Hammondâ€”you know him?Â  Bill Hammondâ€”he Hammond was a militaryâ€”he used to work for the Pentagon as a historian.Â  And I just ran into him the other day at Montgomery Mall.Â  I see a lot of him. Â But he did a book on the news mediaâ€”press, in Vietnam, you know, in which his conclusion was there was more credibility to newspaper reporting than there was to the official reporting.Â  And a lot of the reporting was, you know, was designed to make everyone feel good in Washington. You know, Johnson had this phrase there, â€œNo promotions for defeatists,â€ you know? Â  Soâ€”you tie the Vietnam Warâ€”I mean itâ€™s a warâ€”I mean I was in the army, but I wasnâ€™t a reporter; I was just an ordinary G.I.Â When you get to be a reporter and you have access to so many sources, and youâ€™re prepared to spend morning, noon, and night covering it.Â  But as I say, I was covering a lot of other things, too.Â  Then you tie itâ€”then you think of yourself, you know.Â Iâ€™mâ€”here I am.Â  Iâ€™ve lived through much of the last century.Â  The horrors of the century canâ€™t be begin to be told, and I mean I, you know, I didnâ€™t live through the Holocaust or anything like that. But, you know, thatâ€™s of course good.Â  I didnâ€™t through the Gulag Archipelago, either, although I did know a lot about the Khmer Rouge. Â But you realize, you know, that the horrors in Vietnam is just another one of them, and it was soâ€”the thing is itâ€™s soâ€”when you go back and you look at the history of our involvement, you have to come to the conclusion it was totally unnecessaryâ€”what for?Â Whatâ€™s happening today? Â  At a anniversary of the fall of Saigonâ€”the liberation of

Saigon, or whatever you want to call itâ€”I wasâ€”Iâ€™ve been back a few times.A  But there was a time when I wasnâ€™t back, but I think somebody wasâ€”I think Jan Scruggs told me this.Â

Stanley Karnow

The parade down the main street of Saigonâ€”Ho Chi Minh Cityâ€”is a bunch of beautiful girls wearing their ao dai costumes, pushing supermarket carts.Â Â And at the head of the parade is two guys with sandwich signs.Â Â One says â€œAmerican Expressâ€ and the other says â€œVisa.â€Â Â  So whatâ€™s happened in Vietnam?Â Â The same thing thatâ€™s happening in China, which is the Chinese governmentâ€™s trying to stop.Â Â The consumer revolution has replaced the Marxist revolution.Â Â Who the hell believes in Marxism anymore?Â Â Who believes?Â Â If you go back and you read The Communist Manifesto, â€œthe dictatorship of the proletariatâ€? itâ€™s a load of baloney.Â Â But what does the proletariat want?Â Â They donâ€™t want to take power, like Marx thought they would.Â Â They want to make?they want to become middle class.Â Â They want to buy automobiles and so forth.Â Â  You know, one of the Marxist theoriesâ€”the labor theory of valueâ€”you know, thatâ€”which is all baloney; itâ€™s not true.Â Â I mean what happened to theâ€”and anybody whoâ€”you know, when I grew up, communism was quite fashionable in spiteâ€”when I grew up as a kid, my brother, my next-door neighbor, my best friend was a member of the Young Communist League.Â Â We used to collect silver paper to send to the loyalists in Spain.Â Â I mean it was allâ€” anybody who believed in that stuff was all baloney.Â Â  When I lived in France, you know, youâ€™d see all these guys, these Communist Party guysâ€”theyâ€™re absolutely idiotic.Â Â And, you know, and some of the great philosophersâ€”Jean-Paul Sartre was a Stalinist, for godâ€™s sakes, and so forth, and we donâ€™t realize the crimes that are committed in the name of this idiotic ideology that nobody believes in anymore.Â Â And Maoism, you know, I have trouble understanding why you have a big picture of Mao Tse-Tung.Â Â He killed more Chinese than Hitler and Stalin killed together.Â Â  I mean he killed 50, 60, 70 million people, and so forth.Â Â So the worldâ€™s gone mad. Anywayâ€”so you try to figure out what to make of it all.Â Â So I, you know, so I do a book, I give a report of it, so I drop my little word into my?into the many, into the many comments.Â Â And there are lots of good books, by the way, on Vietnam.Â Â I think Neil Sheehanâ€™s book is very good.Â Â The Best and the Brightest is a very good book, the other books by Halberstam.Â Â  In my retrospect, Halberstam wasâ€”he was only there for a while, you know.Â Â He was only there for 14 months, and I think his main contribution was beating the drums to get rid of Diem.Â Â Otherwise, he gets a lot of credit for things he didnâ€™t do.Â Â In fact they named a street for him up in Cambridge.Â Â Terrible thing that he died, thoughâ€”he was a nice guy, he was a good friend of mine. So Vietnamâ€”there arenâ€™t many Vietnam reporters left anymore, but occasionally we had theâ€”whatâ€™s that guy? Â Â Goddamnit, whoâ€™s the spokesman again?Â Â You know.

Interviewer

You said itâ€™s an Armenian name.

Stanley Karnow

Yeah.Â  We had a dinner for him not long ago. That was before he died.

The Power of Nationalism
Interviewer

Did you ever have anyâ€”what was your impression of Ku and Thee, or Thieu and Ky, I should sayâ€”the South Vietnamese leadersâ€”President Thieu and Prime Minister Ky.Â

Did you ever have much contact with them?

Stanley Karnow

Yeah, I had contact with them, but, you know, Conein used to call them formerâ€”they used to call them â€œformer French Army Corporals.â€Â  I mean they were notâ€”they were not up to dealing with it.Â  When you go back and you look at the whole history of Vietnam, thereâ€™s one guy whoâ€™s become synonymous with Vietnamese nationalismâ€”thatâ€™s Ho Chi Minh.Â Itâ€™s not only nationalism but communism.Â  And even anti-communists, when the Frenchâ€”when the Viet Minh defeated the French at Dien Bien Phu, all Vietnamese thought it was a Vietnamese victory. You didnâ€™t have to be a communist to think it was aâ€”I mean all Vietnamese who had any sense of pride in Vietnamese nationalism thought that Dien Bien Phu was a Vietnam victory. Â  When I first went to Vietnam in â€™59, and you look back on Dien Bien Phu, which was only a few years before that, they all tell you that it was a victory.Â  They were proud of it.Â  The problemâ€”it seems to me that one of the great mistakes that we made is not finding a way to come to terms with Ho Chi Minh. Â  There was a moment when Tito broke with Stalin, Ho Chi Minh recognized Tito. Perfect evidence that he wasnâ€™t a pawn of the Soviet Unionâ€”I mean Tito became Stalinâ€™s enemy number one.Â  So all this nonsense that, you know, thereâ€™s some guy sitting at a control panel in Moscow pressing buttons, and Ho Chi Minh is one of these guys thatâ€™s respondingâ€” When the OSS guys came inâ€”if you go back and read the stories, everyone should learn about the stories.Â  Archimedes Patti wrote a book; he was a bit of a naÃ¯ve guy.Â  Charles Fenn wrote a book about it.Â  My boss in Paris, who was a guy called Frank White, who was in the OSS, later became the TIME bureau chief; he was there, too. Â  And all these guysâ€”I mean here was Ho Chi Minh and Giap relying on the Americans to bring them weapons.Â  Ho Chi Minh almost died. Then one of these guys cured him of whatever he had, and so forth.Â  Ho Chi Minh writes this letter to Trumanâ€”and you can get the text of the letter; itâ€™s very simple.Â  You can get it on Googleâ€”congratulating the United States for recognizing Philippine independence, and why donâ€™t you do the same for us, and all that stuff.Â  All of that is ignored.Â  All of that, ignored.Â  Okay.Â  Iâ€™ve had arguments with people.Â  For example, take the Ho Chi Minh letter. So Iâ€™m talking to a certain friend of mine, who has served in Vietnam, whoâ€™s still very hawkish about how we couldâ€™ve won and so forth.Â  Okay.Â  Why didnâ€™t we do something about helping Ho Chi Minh?Â  Well, we didnâ€™t help him because we wanted the French to agree to German rearmament, and that was one of the prices we paid.

Stanley Karnow

So this guy says to me, â€œWell, German rearmament in Europe was meant to stop the Soviets.Â  It was much more important than Vietnam.â€Â  I say, â€œWhy does one thing have to surpass the other?Â  You couldâ€™ve had both of them.â€Â  I mean Ho Chi Minh had nothing to do with stopping French rearmament, but thatâ€™s one of the prices that the French exacted. Â  De Gaulle wanted?I mean, de Gaulle in â€™46, de Gaulle had come in as provisional President.Â  One of the interesting things that people donâ€™t understand is when de Gaulle decided to send American forcesâ€”French forces back into Vietnam, his decision was seconded by the Vice President of France, who was none other than the communist?whatâ€™s his name again?Â  Iâ€™ve been forgetting names. The communist Vice Presidentâ€”the communists supported going back into Vietnam, too, despite the fact that the Viet Minh was communist.

Interviewer

Getting back to yourâ€”before getting on to Vietnamizationâ€”did you witness that

incompetence firsthand?

Stanley Karnow

Nationalismâ€”we never understood the power of nationalism.Â  Soâ€”and thatâ€™s what Ho was all about. I mean why did Ho become a communist?Â  Heâ€”there are some good books.Â  Mine doesnâ€™t tell the story.Â  I mean Duikerâ€™s book is very good on the subject.Â  Duiker was a State Department guy who went to Vietnam, speaks Vietnamese, and so forth. Â  When Ho Chi Minh was living in Paris, from 1917 onward, he attended the Socialist Congress, the Socialist Party Congress, in the Loire Valley. And stood up and accused the socialists of not doing enough to support anti-colonial activities. Â  At that particular time, the communistsâ€”the Soviet Union had just come into power in 1917 was the Bolshevik Revolution.Â  And one of their platforms was to fight against colonialismâ€”I mean imperialism.Â  So Hoâ€”so one of the things the Socialist Party did at that Congress was to split into two groups, and one group became communist and gave its allegiance to the Soviet Union, and Ho joined that French Communist Party at that point.Â  And from then on, he was a communist.Â  So here he isâ€”I mean heâ€™s obviously a communist. But he becomes a communist for nationalist reasons, andâ€”just a secondâ€”hello?Â  My housekeeper might be coming back. Â  So Iâ€™ve heard other people say the same thing, guys who became communists became for nationalist reasons.Â  So what can you say about all this?Â  I mean, you can say thousands of millions of lives are squanderedâ€”not just Vietnam, but lots of places around the worldâ€”because people didnâ€™t understand what was going on.Â  And Iâ€™m not claiming to be theâ€”to have the corner on realism.

Stanley Karnow

But things you learn laterâ€”I have arguments with friends of mine who read Red Star Over China, by Edgar Snow.Â Â Edgar Snow was the most naÃ¯ve guyâ€”he was a raving idiot.Â Â Heâ€™s in Yanâ€™an, and hereâ€™s Mao Tse-Tungâ€”all around him, Mao Tse-Tung is burying alive various people he disagreed with that disagreed with him.Â Â Edgar Snow didnâ€™t know any of thatâ€”didnâ€™t pay any attention to itâ€”and to this day, there are guys who tell you what a great book he wrote.Â Â  Edgar Snow went to China in 1954, said, â€œThe Chinese Communist Party is the most cohesive political party in the world,â€ just before the Cultural Revolutionâ€”Mao Tse-Tung starts overthrowing everyone.Â Â And on and on it goesâ€”I mean the amount of ignorance in the world is terrible when, you know, all we do is strive to learn a little bit about it.

Interviewer

That was in June of â€™63, I think, wasnâ€™t it?

Stanley Karnow
Getting back to yourâ€”before getting on to Vietnamizationâ€”did you witness that incompetence firsthand?