learned from involvement in the Vietnam war?

Certainly there is one great lesson from Vietnam. It is the same for most wars and revolutions: people of prejudice and power will halt at nothing when that power is threatened or when political (i.e., irrational) tempers rise. The preservation of political power by any means is a human characteristic that knows no bounds of country or century, and the possessor of authority wants the world to know only those facts which will add gloss to this authority, policies, and decisions. The destruction of human life in Vietnam and Cambodia since the "peace" of 1975 illustrates a side lesson: that the absolute power of life and death of one person over another, no matter the seeming benevolence of his or her ideology, will always corrupt the holder of power and will always lead to abuse.

The United States became deeply involved in Vietnam in the early 1960s when four forces came to encounter each other and intermingle in one geographical area: (1) a continuous century-long East Asian peasant revolt; (2) the grasp for identity and power by the Asian middle class with new Western-style educations but one still largely Confucian in temper; (3) the ever-expanding market imperialism of the West; (4) the expanding territorial imperialism of marxist-leninist forces pushed on by Russia and China. The United States stepped in with contradictory motives, some innocent, some aggressive, some idealistic, some predatory -- and stepped in after nearly 100 years of piracy, arrogance, love, escapism, and near-erotic cultural fondling by the French. (French colonialism always leaves behind three heightened tendencies: intellectualism, vice, and improved cuisine, and Indochina is no exception.)

The major forces and factions at war in Vietnam and Cambodia during the years of U.S. involvement are all guilty of duplicity, murder, and irresponsibility toward the people of those two national groups. Moscow, Peking, Hanoi, Saigon, and Washington all committed crimes against nature and reason, explicable only through a lust

for power, stupidity and a hatred for those classified as enemy. All warring parties were careless as to the human cost of their actions, and none showed authentic decency toward the millions of peoples whose lives were in their hands.

Since 1975, the Russians (as supporters of Vietnam) the Chinese (as sponsors of Cambodia's Pol Pot), and the Vietnamese and Cambodian communists themselves have continued this suffering needlessly but in line with their basic purpose: an old fashioned territorial expansionism common in marxist-leninist mentality. The U.S. hands-off, put-it-all-behind-us policy of the Carter and Reagan regimes (not that the CIA hasn't been conniving in southeast Asia for the last ten years) has come at the very period when southeast Asia most needed contact with open societies, direct aid for reconstruction, and relief from dependence on fanatical ideology. The West and its Asian and Pacific allies largely have denied this assistance and no one can be surprised by the renewed fighting now taking place on the border of Thailand and Cambodia.

The United States came to defeat in the Indochinese wars ten years ago because it followed a strategy characterized by ignorance of the American virtues and faults, the virtues and faults of the southeast Asians, and the strengths and failing of highly conservative Soviet Russia and China. The Western democracies, Japan, and segments of Chinese and other southeast Asian communities have an easy genius for commerce, free thought, and for looking inward to the dynamic of community. The cliche is that these nations of enterprise -- whatever variety of injustice they harbor inside their social existence -- are societies of private persons, private ambition, and of desire for material possibilities. The capitalist mythmakers never tire of telling this to the world, but like all cliches and myths there is a foundation of truth to this judgement. Despite the particulars of natural genius to be found in non-Soviet societies, the foreign policies of their nation-states often fail because they are based on archaic notions of power, not on the talent