

Session 6: Lessons of Vietnam and Military Reform

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“Juxtaposing Hearts and Minds”

“[...] the ultimate victory will depend on the hearts and minds of the people who actually live over there.” – Lyndon B. Johnson, Hearts and Minds (1974)

In his documentary “Hearts and Minds” (1974) Peter Davis examines both American and Vietnamese attitudes towards the Vietnam War as well as how American culture facilitated the onslaught. The documentary is not narrated, but images, film clips and interviews of American soldiers, politicians, policy makers as well as Vietnamese nationals are juxtaposed in a way that brings out stark and poignant contrasts. “Hearts and Minds” focuses on the Vietnamese perspective of the war as well as the American, rather than just American.



Throughout the documentary Peter Davis portrays American culture as pseudo-violent and too willing to accept and surrender to authority without question. This coupled with the opinions of several American soldiers that the Vietnamese are sub-human lead to atrocious acts.

Clips of American bomber pilots describing their missions as feats of technical skill are juxtaposed with images of decimated Vietnamese villages underlining how far removed the American soldiers could be from the practical actions of war they performed. Especially towards the end of the documentary, though, there are clips of American soldiers, hitting, kicking, slapping Vietnamese prisoners as well as holding a prisoner’s face under water.



“As long as there is rice to eat we will resist. If we run out of rice we will plough the fields and fight again.”- Mui Duc Giang, Saigon, Hearts and Minds (1974)

The Vietnamese resistance to American presence is in several instances linked to the idea of America’s own struggle for independence, though here Americans are the oppressive and invasive force. Thus the documentary infers that American actions in Vietnam are hypocritical when compared to the stated political intentions.

Several Vietnamese nationals give voice to the growing resentment of the people to the presence and actions of the Americans. Villagers, carpenters, editors of magazines, monks and many others speak out against the unnecessary brutality and bombardments carried out by the Americans.

Through them the documentary portrays how the “hearts and minds” of the Vietnamese people are lost to the United States.

The anti-war movement gains traction as many of the most infamous images and clips from the war reach American audiences. American men burn draft cards and veterans returning home throw away their medals in protest of the actions in which they earned them.

“The history of conflict among nations does not record another such lengthy and consistent chronicle of error as we have shown in Vietnam.” – Senator Robert Kennedy, Hearts and Minds (1974)

The documentary explores the dichotomy of American culture and American conflict and how these have greatly affected the Vietnam as indeed America as well. The documentary is highly subjective in both its form and function with its emphasis on American culture as a whole without going into detail with specific strategies, political or military. Nonetheless the documentary played a significant role in portraying the Vietnam War with its focus on the Vietnamese perspective.



Bibliography and suggestions for material:

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William F. Steirer, Jr, *Review: Hearts and Minds*, *The History Teacher*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Aug., 1976), pp. 611-665, found on JSTOR

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Peter Davis, *Hearts and Minds*

<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-8502739857306070849>