

## **Stop Comparing Afghanistan's Fall to South Vietnam's**

**Americans are still using the lens of a half century-old conflict.**

By Chris Humphrey, based in Hanoi as the Vietnam Bureau Chief for Deutsche Presse-Agentur.

As Kabul fell, headlines waxing nostalgia over the fall of Saigon were impossible to avoid. Vietnamese Americans whose families fled southern Vietnam as refugees in the aftermath of the communist victory said the events unfolding in Afghanistan stir up heartbreaking memories. Yet while images showing desperate diplomat and refugee evacuations as well as Washington's humiliating defeat resonate powerfully, reports comparing Afghanistan's fall to South Vietnam's are deeply inaccurate—and dangerously misleading.

Vietnam has long been wielded as a catch-all term for U.S. foreign-policy failures, yet the glib comparisons in this instance not only distort the past but also distract from the present suffering of Afghan civilians and the imminent danger they face. It also risks alienating the Vietnamese government.

There is no moral equivalence between North Vietnamese forces and the Taliban. During World War II, the Viet Minh actually supported the United States and its allies by serving as the only Vietnamese force resisting Japan's invasion of Indochina. This preamble for conflict hardly compares to the Taliban militia, which massacred minority Hazara communities and forced Hindus to carry yellow badges to set them apart from Afghan Muslims—like Jews in Nazi Germany.

In September 1945, Vietnam's founding leader, Ho Chi Minh, opened his speech by proclaiming his country's independence, saying "all men are created equal," lines verbatim from the United States' own Declaration of Independence. The following year, his admiration for the United States and its revolutionary war saw him write a letter to then-U.S. President Harry Truman asking for support in ending French colonial rule in Vietnam.

This is a long way from the sentiments of the Taliban's founders or of the al Qaeda forces they sheltered. Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden's attacks on September 11, 2001 and prompted the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan. Vietnam never carried out an attack on U.S. soil, and even the clash in the Gulf of Tonkin on a U.S. patrol boat that served as an excuse for escalation was wildly distorted and lied about by U.S. leaders.

In May 2009, the Taliban carried out a targeted gas attack against a girls' school in Kabul that saw hundreds of young female students suffer headaches, nausea, and vomiting—one of a plethora of assaults and bomb threats that closed girls' schools across entire districts in Afghanistan.

During the Vietnam War, it was U.S. airplanes that rained hell across vast swathes of the southeast Asian country between 1961 and 1971, dropping 13 million gallons of the lethal toxin Agent Orange—an act of ecocide that left a legacy of horrifying physical deformities for generations of Vietnamese families.

Once the Paris Peace Accords arrived in 1973, Vietnam sought to collaborate with the United Nations—efforts then-U.S. President Richard Nixon tried to sabotage. By contrast, Taliban suicide bombers disrupted Afghanistan’s presidential elections in 2009 by storming a guesthouse in Kabul, killing six U.N. staff members and six civilians in the process.

Although one must not ignore the atrocities committed in Afghanistan by U.S-led forces or those inflicted by North Vietnam both before and after the fall of Saigon—the Viet Minh’s brutal land reforms, tortuous reeducation camps for those affiliated with the former government of South Vietnam, and the Viet Cong’s mortaring of refugee camps—they are not comparable. Few would suggest Afghans face anything other than a profoundly grim future under Taliban rule.