

# ART HOPPE



## The War That Never Was

"PEACE IS AT HAND," said the black headlines. Like others, I was stunned and elated and not a little disbelieving. For in this past decade I have learned never to trust what my Presidents tell me.

And now even that initial elation is gone. For the papers have been printing that old familiar map of South Vietnam. It is the old familiar map with white areas for territory held by the good guys and black blotches for that held by the bad guys — the old familiar map that looks like a diseased kidney.

It is the same old familiar map that has stared at us from the breakfast table this past decade and more — the same kidney shape, the same disease. Neither better nor worse. It is as though nothing has changed. Nothing at all.

DO YOU REMEMBER how it was way back then? The same Viet Cong ran wild in the countryside, waging terrorist guerrilla warfare. The same corrupt generals in Saigon struck back with cruelty and oppression.

There were broken promises of free elections. And the experts said the country would soon go Communist.

So President Eisenhower sent the first few millions of dollars and the first few hundred "military advisers," because it was our duty to "support freedom."

And President Kennedy sent the first few billions and the first few thousands of troops. And President Johnson poured in scores of billions and hundreds of thousands. And President Nixon, to wind down the war, escalated the bombing to heights unheard of in the history of man.

So now we are to have peace. Peace with honor. But few believe the promises of free elections will be kept. Many experts are saying the country will go Communist in a few years. And the diseased kidney looks exactly the same as it looked a decade and more ago.

It is as though we had never been there. It is as though we had never been there at all.

How easy it will be to forget. If the vicious guerrilla warfare continues, how easy it will be to ignore it. If the country goes Communist, how easy it will be to shrug and turn to other things. How easy it will be to pretend we were never there at all.

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YET, BECAUSE we were there, more than two million people are dead.

Because we were there, we rained 6.8 million tons of explosives on a small peasant nation — more than three times the amount we dropped on all our enemies in World War II.

Because we were there, we forced our young men to go kill and be killed in a war they didn't believe in — setting a whole generation against their parents.

Because we were there, we poured \$141 billion down a rathole — wrecking the economy and depriving those in need here at home.

And, because we were there, the Nation sank into a miasma of doubt and distrust, which today is reflected in a sense of individual powerlessness, a cynicism toward the democratic process and an overwhelming political apathy.

For, because we were there, our Presidents, enamored with the game of geo-politics, had to justify the mistakes they made. And, as humans do, they justified them with deceptions, subterfuges and outright lies.

So, because we were there, we not only destroyed two million lives and a small Asian nation in one short decade, but also our faith in ourselves. And I think it will take us a generation to recover, if we ever do.

Thus, the saddest thing of all is to realize that it is as though we had never been there — as though we had never been there at all.