It was in 1945 that the United States first emerged as a global power. Ironically, it was also 1945 when the Vietnamese declared their independence from Western colonial rule. At that time they used the same words that had inspired our own revolution 170 years earlier: "All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights. Among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

For the past thirty years Vietnam and the United States have been protagonists in a great historical drama. In one way or another we have all been participants. Now the war is over.

What have we learned?
For thousands of years historians have recorded and analyzed the rise and fall of empires. The Persians, the Greeks, the Romans, the French, the Spanish, the British -- they have all come and gone. In one sense the American empire has not been unique. It has been subject to the same forces of growth, development, and decay that shape all empires. But in another sense the decline of the American empire, symbolized by the liberation of Vietnam, has a special meaning.

For the last thirty years the United States has thought of itself as the strongest and most sophisticated world power. In Vietnam it has attempted to impose its will through every psychological, political, economic, and military device imaginable. But it failed -- against a technologically underdeveloped nation of 40 million people.

Viewed in a global context, the failure of American policy in Vietnam signals a decisive shift in the world balance of forces to the point where it is no longer possible for a major power to impose its will on a smaller nation. A well-organized popular resistance struggle, supported by progressive forces throughout the world, can defeat even the world's strongest military power. It is this decisive shift in the world balance of forces that American foreign policy makers must now accommodate themselves to. The limits of American power have been reached. Any attempt to go beyond those limits can only invite disaster.

Although the United States is no longer in Indochina, the tentacles of American power still extend deep into Africa, Asia, Latin America, Europe, and the Pacific. The Vietnam war has hardly ended and we are already hearing rumblings and dire warnings from Washington of the possibility of military intervention in Korea or the Middle East.

It would probably be naive to expect that the men who presently hold power in Washington are willing or even able to learn from the American experience in Indochina. Until there are fundamental changes in our own society -- involving a broad re-distribution of wealth and power -- future Vietnams are not only possible but inevitable.

But those fundamental changes can only be brought about by the American people. Just as we have helped to put an end to the war in Vietnam, so now can we help to prevent future Vietnams. But before we can do that, we must first learn the lessons of the war.
The American people must realize that the basic ideals of American society -- equality, justice, and human dignity -- are shared by all the world's people. Just as American revolutionaries struggled two hundred years ago to achieve those ideals, so now are people everywhere struggling in their own ways to achieve them.

The American people must realize that we can oppose these national liberation struggles only at the expense of betraying our own heritage and distorting and ultimately destroying our own institutions. We cannot have democracy at home and at the same time support and finance oppression abroad.

Those truths were apparent or quickly learned by the millions of progressive Americans who have steadfastly opposed US involvement in Indochina for the past ten years. But for the millions of other Americans -- Richard Nixon's "silent majority" -- the lessons of the Vietnam war remain to be learned. Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, and Gerald Ford all lost their own Indochina wars. But the warmakers are still desperately trying to win the war's interpretation. Having "lost" Indochina, they are desperately vying for the "hearts and minds" of the American people.

"Let's put Indochina behind us!", we're exorted. But can the American people actually blot out ten years of American history? -- Ten years that revealed not only the worst but also the best in American society. "America's resolve remains unshaken", Ford and Kissinger say -- as if they are the only ones who can speak for America, as if there aren't profound divisions within our society, divisions as to what America should stand for throughout the world.

The responsibility for teaching the lessons of the war now lies with those of us who have so long actively opposed it. We represent the progressive tradition within American society and as such we have an historical responsibility. But before we can begin to meet that responsibility we must first appreciate what we have done. For us the Vietnam war and our struggle against it should have a special meaning.
Role Of The Peace Movement

The emergence and growth of the American empire since 1945 has coincided with an unprecedented accumulation of power within the executive branch of the US government. The Indochina wars were executive wars — conceived and directed by a relatively small group of global strategists in Washington. Through the manipulation of public opinion and the quiet assent of a pliant Congress they were able to commit 500,000 American troops to a war that few Americans wanted or understood.

By 1965 the disparity between US policy in Vietnam and growing popular sentiment against the war had become an important factor in American politics. Popular sentiment, however, had to be translated into effective political action. The inability to create a change in American policy through the established political framework led to the creation of the independent mass movement of the late 60's and early 70's. Through teach-ins, marches, and civil disobedience, the peace movement was able to articulate domestic opposition to the war and to mobilize people against it.

By 1969 Lyndon Johnson had been forced to step down from the presidency. On November 15th of that year hundreds of thousands of American citizens came to Washington monument to demonstrate against the war. Across the street in the White House sat the new president, Richard Nixon. He was casually pretending to ignore the people outside but, in reality, he knew that they represented a powerful force in American society. Nixon knew that the peace movement would force him to withdraw American troops from Vietnam and to negotiate at least what appeared to be a final settlement.

The withdrawal of American troops and the signing of the Paris Agreement represented both a victory and a turning point for the peace movement. Many Americans had been hoodwinked into believing that the war was really over, or, if they knew that it continued, they just didn't want to think about it. Even many peace activists were frustrated with the continued funding of the war and their apparent inability to put a stop to it.

But an opportunity did exist to put a complete and final end to American responsibility for the continuing war. That op-
portunity was built upon the previous eight years of struggle and achievement. By 1973 the overwhelming majority of the American people were opposed to any form of US involvement in Indochina. The executive branch had been seriously discredited by both the war and Watergate, and for the first time since the war's inception it appeared possible to muster an anti-war majority in the one institution best able to end it -- the US Congress. The sentiment was there -- it just had to be organized.

That has been your role. It is clear that Congressional aid cuts and restrictions on direct military intervention hastened an end to the bloodshed in both Vietnam and Cambodia. But the main motivation to do so did not necessarily come from Congresspeople but in most cases from their constituents. Two years ago political prisoners were just not an issue. But you made them an issue. Two years ago the US Congress had not yet taken its first step toward ending American involvement. But you forced it to do so.

Beginning with the passage of the Cambodian bombing halt in June, 1973, constituent activism developed to the point where it was strong enough to achieve the passage of the Flynt-Giaimo Amendment cutting military aid to South Vietnam and the Conte-Aspin-Esch Amendment placing a ceiling on aid to Cambodia. It was through your work to motivate and organize other constituents that the options for executive war policy were minimized and the bloodshed finally ended.
What can we learn from that experience? Probably one of the most important lessons is that correct policies or changes in incorrect policies seldom come from an elite group of "managers". They are, instead, the result of organized, mass action among a broad, well-informed and well-motivated constituency. The isolation of political and economic power inevitably makes it destructive.

Secondly, we can learn that effective political action invariably requires a commitment to long term activity with the ability to adjust to different circumstances with different methods. Two years ago it was very fashionable for the press to say that "The peace movement is dead." It had, in fact, simply ceased to be a media event. People were no longer in the streets, but they were in their communities telling their neighbors and their local newspapers that the war continued and that they could do something about it.

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Now the war is over. We have helped to end it. We have saved lives. We have shared our own lives and our ideals with a nation struggling for its own independence. By doing so we have raised the consciousness of millions of Americans and have begun to reclaim our heritage from those who would usurp and distort it.

Let's continue.