Voiceover: This program is sponsored by the members of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library.
(Theme music)
Voiceover: The following is a production of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library. Bringing citizens and citizen soldiers together through the exploration of military history, topics, and current affairs, this is *Pritzker Military Presents*.
Williams: Welcome to *Pritzker Military Presents* with author Sir Max Hastings discussing his book *Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy, 1945-1975*. I'm your host Jay Williams, and this program is coming to you from the Pritzker Military Museum and Library in downtown Chicago. It's sponsored by the member of the Museum and Library. This program and hundreds more are available on demand at PritzkerMilitary.org. From the French attempts to re-impose colonial rule in Indochina after WWII to the evacuation of United States personnel from Saigon in 1975, the conflict in Vietnam was one of the world's most divisive modern events. In his new book, author Sir Max Hastings characterizes the war overwhelmingly as a tragedy for the Vietnamese people, of whom forty died for every American. Having spent the past three years interviewing scores of participants on both sides as well as researching a multitude of American and Vietnamese documents and memoirs, Hastings relies on political, social, and military history to support his position that US blunders and atrocities were matched by those committed by their enemies. With testimony from warlords and peasants, statesmen and soldiers, Hastings suggests that neither side deserved to emerge victorious from this polarizing and brutal struggle. Hastings also relies on his own personal memories to craft his narrative. These include reporting in 1967 and '68 for the United States where he encountered many of the war's decision makers including President Lyndon Johnson. He then had successive assignments in Indochina for newspapers and the BBC. Hastings himself rode a helicopter out of the US Saigon Embassy compound during the final evacuation in 1975. Ultimately Hastings presents a well researched and challenging account of the conflict in Vietnam and brings to bear lessons about the misuse of military might to confront the intractable political and cultural challenges that continue to face us today. Sir Max Hastings is the author of twenty-six books including the best sellers including *All Hell Let Loose, Catastrophe,* and *The Secret War*, and served as editor in chief of the Daily Telegraph and editor of the Evening Standard. He has won many prizes for his journalism and his books including journalist of the year, reporter of the year, and editor of the year at the British Press Awards. He is a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and the Royal Historical Society. In 2012 Hastings received the Pritzker Military Museum and Library Literature Award for Lifetime Achievement in Military Writing. Please join me in welcoming Sir Max Hastings back to the Pritzker Military Museum and Library.
(Applause)
Hastings: Good evening everybody. I can't tell you what a pleasure it is to be back here at the Pritzker Library. You're always an absolutely wonderful audience, and I've had the pleasure and privilege of talking to this group before. I know there's one of the most discerning audiences about all things military in the United States. So, how nice to be back with you. On the 28th of May, 1968 Michael Minehan, a twenty-year-old marine machine gunner in Vietnam wrote to his folks at home. "Today we had a nice day in the field. There isn't much to say because all we are doing is walking in the mountains looking for gooks. I thought I would drop you a line to say everything is fine." Five days later however it stopped being fine. Minehan's parents in Marlboro, Massachusetts received a telegram from Marine Corps commandant, "Deeply regret to confirm that your son died on the 2nd June. He sustained fragmentation wounds to the body from friendly

air strikes which fell short of the target area. His remains will be prepared, encase, and shipped at no expense to you accompanied by an escort either to a funeral home or national cemetery selected by you. In addition you will be reimbursed to an amount not to exceed 500 dollars towards funeral and internment expenses." 16,899 such telegrams were received at homes across the land in 1968, over 300 a week. By the end of the war in May 1975, 58,220 of Michael Minehan's compatriots had died together with 18 Russians, 14 North Koreans, 771 Chinese, and more than two million Vietnamese--around forty for every American corpse together with numberless more Cambodian and Loa people. This bloodbath and a succession of conflicts that lasted three decades far exceeded the human cost of the 21st centuries wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria. Moreover Vietnam made a cultural impact upon its times greater than any modern strife. During its last phase especially it roused the dismay and indeed revulsion of millions of western people, destroying one US president and contributing to the downfall of a second. In the wave of protest against authority, which swept the West in the 1960s--rejection of old sexual morality and an enthusiasm for pot and LSD--became conflated with lunges against capitalism and imperialism of which Vietnam appeared an exceptionally ugly manifestation. Moreover many older Americans who lacked sympathy for any of those causes came to oppose the war because they saw themselves systematically deceived by their own government about an enterprise doomed to fail. The 1975 fall of Saigon inflicts its humiliation upon the planet's most powerful nation. Peasant revolutionaries have prevailed over western will, wealth, and hardware, the stairway up which on the evening of the 25th of April fugitives ascended to a rooftop helicopter, secured a place among the symbolic images of that era. For me as for all my generation of war correspondents, the struggle was among the foremost experiences of our careers. I was one of those who flew out of the US Embassy compound on that tumultuous, terrified day. But even before I first saw Vietnam, in January 1968, age twenty-two, I was among a group of foreign journalists who visited the White House. We were addressed by President Lyndon Johnson about his commitment to the war. That morning his personality seemed no less formidable for being close to caricature. "Some of you like blondes, some of you like redheads, and some of you maybe don't like women at all," he declared in that deadweight drawl, gesticulating constantly to emphasize his points and making broad pencil strokes on a notepad in front of him. "I'm here to tell you what kind I like. I'm prepared to meet Ho Chi Minh any time in a nice hotel with nice food where we can sit down and talk to settle this thing." After making his pitch this big man left the room abruptly without taking questions. We were preparing to leave when suddenly the president put his head around the door again. "Now before y'all go," he said, almost coyly, "I want to ask, do any of you feel any different from anything you'd read or heard about me before you came?" We were stunned into silence by this glimpse of the awesome vulnerability of this president of the United States at that moment of history. In those days Vietnam represented in the world's consciousness prodigies of both natural beauty and manmade horror. My book emphasizes that the struggle was above all a disaster for the people of Indochina on which an American tragedy was overlaid. I interviewed scores of Vietnamese men and women, communist and anticommunist as well as US fashions. I read thousands of pages of translated memoir and documents from both sides. Let me recount to you a miniscule wartime incident, such as was repeated 10,000 times. One morning in August 1964 Lieutenant Phan Nam of the South Vietnamese Air Corps was leading his platoon in search of communist guerillas. As they trudged through a ravaged village he saw a young woman sitting silent on the brick floor of a wrecked house holding a wicker basket. Her eyes looked straight ahead in a blank, stupefied stare. Nam asked why she lingered in the midst of a battlefield. She remained silent, her stunned eyes emitting a flash of terror.

Suddenly as if performing a gymnastic exercise, she thrust out the basket towards me. It contained two sets of clothes, a headscarf, two gold necklaces, and pair of earrings. The soldier motioned the girl away, but Nam called her back, holding out the basket. Her hands trembled so violently that she was unable to take it and instead, sobbing, began to unbutton her blouse. The young man was deeply embarrassed. She had read his rejection of her most valuable property as a sign that instead he wanted her body. What kind of life had she experienced that she would offer herself to a soldier who could be her younger brother while tears ran down her terrified face? Nam persuaded the girl to follow his platoon to a nearby river crowded with sampans carrying fugitives from the fighting. People were calling out among a voice that screamed, "Lai, Lai." This was an old woman who recognized Lieutenant Nam's traumatized acquaintance. The girl stopped as if she was trying to summon up a memory from a past life. Then she cried, "Mother, mother, our house has burned down! Our house is gone." The southern officer described her walking away towards the water like a person in a trance. This is what wars or so-called wars among the people are like for people, and especially women, who were not fast yet pilots or Green Berets, but instead victims, whether in Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria. Between 1945 and '75, such tiny tragedies were repeated countless times in Indochina. Foreign eyewitnesses concluded that most were the fault of first the French and then the Americans or their South Vietnamese clients unleashing devastating fire and air power. Yet a key theme of my own book is that blame seems rightfully to be serve with the communists who committed numberless atrocities in pursuit of a revolution that wrought misery among their own people. Photographs exist which have become notorious of a South Vietnam chief shooting a captured Viet Cong during the 1968 Tet Offensive, of a screaming child fleeing naked after a 1972 South Vietnamese napalm strike, of the homes of peasants set afire by American soldiers. Yet the policy of all matter, silence pursued by all communist regimes well served that of Ho Chi Minh. No pictures were ever published of a Vietnamese being buried alive before his fellow villagers for the mere crime of being a small landlord. He pleaded for a merciful gunshot and was told contemptuously by his murderers that they saved their bullets for the imperialists. No photographer recorded the thousands of innocents killed in cold blood and buried in mass graves during the communist occupation of Hue during the 1968 Tet Offensive. Nobody in modern Vietnam, where tourists are so warmly welcomed, is permitted to speak of the thousands killed as class enemies during the first years of Ho Chi Minh’s rule in the north. An American advisor, George Banville described a typical episode during the later struggle in the south in which a Miss Anh, typist in the headquarters of the Mei Kong Delta, was seized during the night at her parents’ home. Her head was beaten in with a rifle butt, her younger brother stabbed to death, because she refused to assist an attack on the US compound. The officer wrote, "She was maybe twenty years old, a devout Christian, very pretty, very much a lady. My team used to sit on the porch in the morning and watch her stroll into work in a long, flowing ao dai with a matching umbrella protecting her alabaster skin from the sun. She ignored their stares, and you could only guess that maybe she disliked these foreign devils admiring her beauty or maybe not.” Likewise, advisor Mike Sutton described to me landing a helicopter in a hamlet where they found her limp figure hanging from ropes lashed to a tree, the village chief disemboweled during the night. His wife had been less artistically murdered, their son castrated. Now my own point is not to suggest that the US and corrupt and incompetent Saigon regime which it supported were the heroes of the Vietnam Wars, merely that as usual with all historical events neither side commanded a monopoly of virtue or misconduct. We should pause before anointing the communists the good guys, as did naive young western protesters back in the 1960s. Many moralists would say, as I’m inclined to myself, that while Ho Chi Minh's people

deserved their triumph over the French colonialists, neither side deserve victory in what came afterwards. Let me recap the chronology. The French colonized Vietnam in the 1880s, lost it to the Japanese in WWII, and then in 1945 embarked on an almost deranged attempt to regain control in the face of a vigorous communist nationalist movement led by Ho Chi Minh. When Mao Zedong secured stewardship of our neighboring China in 1949, he threw support behind these so-called Viet Minh. The French suffered soaring losses and defeats until in November 1953 they launched an operation to lure the enemy into a battle on their terms by fortifying a chain of low hills called Dien Bien Phu. There over the ensuing five months they suffered catastrophe. Ho's military chief General Giap mobilized 60,000 peasant porters to manhandle 2-ton artillery pieces 500 miles across some of the most terrible country in the world to ravage the French camp. The saga ended in surrender of survivors of the 12,000-man garrison to the raggedy communist army. At the ensuring Geneva Conference on Indochina, what was amazing was that the Russians and the Chinese proposed a partition of Vietnam instead of insisting that following Ho's victory at Dien Bien Phu the whole country should be surrendered to him. The explanation, ironically in the lies of later events, was that following recent western intervention in the Korean War, the communist powers were desperate to avoid a nation replay. Beijing and Moscow tell the North Vietnamese, as we so hereafter call them, to content themselves with half a loaf and wait for the south to fall into their hands when elections were held and the Americans lost interest. A hitherto unknown South Vietnamese, a Catholic anticommunist named Diem, was installed as ruler in Saigon. Having ingratiated himself with the French and their puppet emperor, and more important with influential American coreligionists including Congressman John F. Kennedy. He took over in Saigon while Ho Chi Minh's politburo assumed power in Hanoi. The communist regime implemented its ideology with conspicuous brutality. Privation, oppression, and sometimes starvation became the common lot of North Vietnamese, though their plight and occasional revolts were curtained from the world. Amid food rationing, there was a desperate search for taste treats, which include stewed rat with saffron, grilled rat with lemon leaves, locusts, grasshoppers, beetles, silkworm larvae. No pet was safe. I met a man who as an eleven-year-old boy found himself moving home and hugging a cherished pooch that he had to leave behind. He told me some strangers took it away in the morning, and I understood that they were going to kill it. Dog was said to taste best if the flesh was beaten and softened before the animal was killed. In the relatively rich south almost everybody had enough to eat, but the Diem regime persecuted its enemies promoted Catholics in an overwhelmingly Buddhist country, and ruled with abysmal incompetence. Though both Vietnamese became rival tyrannies, Ho Chi Minh's had advantages. He had secured monopoly ownership of Vietnam nationalism, heroic status as victor over the French. The cruelties and blunders of his regime were concealed from the world by ironclad censorship. The war slowly started up again in the south with so-called Viet Cong taking place of the Viet Minh. The new guerillas reflected peasant hostility to the Diem regime and spontaneous activism by southern communists rather than being driven by Hanoi or even Beijing as Washington diluted itself. Only in 1962 did the North Vietnamese, now led by the implacable Le Duan, rather than the aging Ho Chi Minh, began to provide serious backing. In 1964 the US decided that unless it dramatically boosted military aid the south was doomed to collapse which President Johnson believed would be unacceptable to the American people. The following year he began dispatching major combat units on a scale which climaxed in 1968-69 with half a million troops awaiting mostly regular communist formations dispatched from the north. Each month US forces unleashed an average of 128,000 tons of munitions. The culture shock was huge for young Americans meeting Asia for the first time. Private Reg Edwards' first surprise had nothing to do with

death and devastation, but instead with finding that even tiny children smoked, which seemed to him horrible. "The first Vietnamese words I learned to say were, 'Cigarettes are bad for your health.'" In the boondocks, many men were nervous of snakes, disconcerted by the gibbons shrieking in the trees, they loathed the ubiquitous leeches. The Johnson Administration also embarked on an air campaign against North Vietnam, which hurt its own cause far more than that of the communists. The bombing united Ho Chi Minh's people as the earlier unification struggle had not, rather in the fashion that the Nazi blitz brought together the British in 1940. There was so little industry in the north that air attack made small impact, and although completely contrary to western perceptions, the Russian and the Chinese were reluctant to lavish resources on the struggle and had little control over the Hanoi politburo. In the face of US bombing, Moscow dispatched flak guns and SAM-2 missiles, which shot down almost a thousand US aircraft. In the eyes of foreigner, the war making of against, symbolized by the B-52 bomber which killed tens of thousands of Vietnamese, seemed repellent contrasted with the courage of communist soldiers wearing coolie hats and tar rubber sandals, their women digging trenches and repairing bomb damage. In Hanoi in December 1966 Premiere Pham Van Dong inquired urbanely of New York Times journalist Harrison Salisbury, "How long do you Americans want to fight, Mr. Salisbury? One year, two years, three years, five years, ten years, twenty years? We shall be glad to accommodate you." As for the men doing the fighting, infantryman John Del Vecchio wrote, "For many years Vietnam was depression, despair, a valley of terror. Much of the anxiety came not from the enemy, not from the jungle. It came from being taken away from wives and friends and family and being totally out of control." Many firefights were brief. One that lasted just thirty seconds. Fifteen of thirty-five patrolling marines were killed or wounded. Often a handful of VC used their weapons for only a minute or two and then pulled out before artillery could work on them. Amid incoming the great Tim O'Brien wrote of the stiff thump of the bullet like a fist, the way it knocks the air out of you and makes you cough, how the sound of the gunshot arrives about ten years later and the dizzy feeling, the smell of your self, the things you think about and say and do right after, the way your eyes focus on a tiny white pebble or blade of grass and how you start thinking "Oh, man, that's the last thing I'll ever see. That pebble. That blade of grass," which makes you want to cry. There were booby traps, booby traps, booby traps, what the 21st century calls IEDs, and how they hated them all. Most were manufactured form scavenged US ordinance. A 60mm round removed a foot while an 81 took of a leg and maybe some fingers and an elbow. A 105mm round would take both legs and often an arm. A 155 vaporized its immediate victim below the waist and almost certainly killed anybody else within twenty yards. Grunts engaged in macabre debates about which limb they'd soonest lose. Most claimed a preference for keeping knees and what was above them. In one three-month period a single company lost fifty-seven legs to mines and booby traps, which as an officer bleakly observed amounted to almost a leg a day. Among some terrible deeds virtuous ones deserve emphasis. Texan Shirley Purcell was a veteran summoned to active duty in 1966. She took a passionate pride in her work. "I really didn’t have a political commitment, but there were American troops there that needed help." She was thinking for instance of an infantryman who triggered a Bouncing Betty mine. This young man had literally been ripped in half from his knees up and from just below his ribs down. “It was like hamburger meat. All of the internal organs were just chopped up, but his legs were perfect laying on the litter and his hands, arms, upper chest were all perfect, and his mind was still very much alert. He was looking up at us, and the sense that went over the entire unit, with that man lying in the emergency room dying because it was absolutely nothing we could do for him, was like nothing I'd ever experienced. He looked at me and said, ‘Well, how does it look?’ I had to tell him, ‘It

doesn’t look good, but you won't be long.’” And that was really all we had to offer that he would not be long. Shirley had been a teetotaler all her life, but at the officers club in Chu Lai she started on screwdrivers and who could blame her? Later she could never bring herself to watch MASH on TV because her memories imposed a veto on laughter. Could the US involvement have had a different outcome? Many Americans who went to Vietnam were inspired by high ideals of service. One of them, a fine officer named Colonel Sid Berry, wrote home in 1966. "I would be nowhere else. I'm convinced of the rightness and importance of being her. I’ve come to have great respect and affection for the Vietnamese. They do surprisingly well under circumstances more difficult than our country has ever imagined. But we have a long road ahead. I hope that our country and our countrymen have the maturity, stamina, patience, guts, faith to stay in the fight as long as is necessary." A colleague recalled the words of legendary manic advisor Colonel John Paul Vann, who devoted most of the last decade of his life to the war. John said that we had assisted the Vietnamese to rise high in the sky in a heavier-than-air machine and must help them come down as gently as possible rather than crash. Asked what the difference would be he said, “There are more survivors that way." Two men once landed a tiny chopper at an outpost that had been overrun during the night. They crammed into the cockpit a badly wounded Vietnamese and then headed fast for the hospital, yet the man died in the air. And when they landed Van stood banging his fist furiously on the cockpit Plexiglas saying again and again, "Just another twenty minutes. Just another twenty minutes and he would have made it." His companions thought, "This is a guy who John never met in his life, yet he cared terribly about him because he was on our side." The anecdote is moving and yet the American commitment was fatally flawed by its foundation not on the perceived interest Vietnamese people, but instead on the perceived requirements on US domestic and foreign policy. An American prisoner Doug Ramsey, who spent an unspeakable seven years in the jungle at the hands of Vietnamese in a bamboo cage, once described to me how he told his communist interrogators that he thought his compatriots’ presence in their country was prompted ten percent by concern for the Vietnamese and the rest by determination to check Mao Zedong. His puzzled captors demanded, "In that case, why you not go and fight him in China? We do not like the Chinese either." The decisions for escalation by successive US administrations command the bewilderment of posterity because key players recognize the rickety rackety character on the regime on which they depended to provide an indigenous facade for American (30:). Yet grey states unsurprisingly like to fight the kind of war that suits their means rather than the one they've got. America’s leaders deluded themselves that all the social, cultural difficulties identified above could be overcome by an overwhelming application of firepower as if by using a flamethrower to weed a flower border. Since this was the core policy failure it seems to me wrong to lay extravagant blame upon America’s generals, unimpressive though some of them were. David Elliott, a wise civilian who spent years in Vietnam for RAND said to me, "There never was a clever way to fight the war." General Jim Gavin the WWI paratroop hero was among those who warned at the start, "If a village is fought over five or six times a great many civilians will die. The whole path of life will be altered. As the war continues to drag on we ourselves destroy the objective for which we fight." Even before considering the consequences of bombs and shells, Washington's decision makers failed to recognize the culture impact of a foreign host upon an Asian peasant society. A local secretary earned more working for the Americans than did a South Vietnamese colonel. Bulldozers and airfields, armored vehicles, watchtowers, sandbags, concertina wire ravaged the environment even before guns began to fire, helicopters to swirl overhead, huge soldiers to purchase the sexual favors of tiny women. This was not a curse unique to Vietnam, but in the 21st century overhangs all western interventions in

far-flung places, however well intentioned. The communists enjoyed the critical propaganda advances that they were almost invisible to most of the people most of the time. They set up a light footprint on the land contrasted with that of the foreign path. Four million tons of American bombs fell on the south. To this day western military commander fail to understand the folly of sending their soldiers to wage wars among the people wearing sunglasses, helmets, and body armor that give them the appearance of robots empowered to kill, impossible to love or even to recognize as fellow human beings. In both North and South wherever the communists writ around they propagated terror and confiscated personal freedom. For all the adulation peaked by the western left upon Ho Chi Minh and Le Duan, they presided over a fundamentally inhumane totalitarian regime. Yet its mandate seemed more credible than that of the Saigon generals. While few Vietnamese have much interest in Marxist Leninist theory, many were seduced by the promise of a revolution that would cast of the yoke of landowners and moneylenders, expel foreigners. A southerner said to me, "The communists could ceaselessly remind us how humiliating it was to be occupied by the Americans. The other side had the monopoly of patriotism." A key lesson of Vietnam for the 21st century struggles in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria is it's very hard to exploit mere battlefield successes to build sustainable societies. That fine American officer HR McMaster once described to me his successes commanding an armored cav regiment in 2004 Iraq. He concluded sadly the problem was there was nothing to join up to. Former Saigon correspondent Neil Sheehan says, "In South Vietnam too there never was anything to join up to. In the absence of credible local governments winning firefights was and always will be meaningless." Yet if the war couldn’t have been won on the battlefield, the US might have contrived to inflict less damage through the excesses of its armed forces on its stature as a standard bearer for civilized values. It’s a common illusion that beneath fatigues young westerners including the British fighting aboard remain decent hometown boys. Some do, others don’t. Soldiers are trained to kill. Circumstances of combat oblige them to live a semi-animal existence. Many warriors come to hold cheap the lives of bystanders they don’t know, especially when their own casualties are high. In Vietnam soldiers were often baffled by rules of engagement designed to curb civilian casualties. One protested to journalist Michael Herr, "That's what a war is getting to be. I mean, if we can’t shoot these people, what are we doing here?" It's hard to fine-tune the conduct of half-educated young men in possession of lethal weapons who are, like most soldiers most of the time, hot or cold, filthy, hungry, suffering constipation or diarrhea, thirsty, lonely, weary, ignorant, holding their nerves and rifles on hair triggers because only thus can they hope to survive. Soviet and Nazi precedent suggests that merciless occupiers can suppress resistance by force. In Vietnam the US Army contrived to be sufficiently intrusive and racially contemptuous, also intimately murderous to earn the hospitality of the whole population but not cruel enough to deter many peasants from supporting the communists. Accesses were not universal, were sufficiently common to show that many Americans considered Asians inferior beings, their lives worth less than those of round eyes. It was a terrible symbolic mistake, I believe, to enlist Vietnamese to shine the humblest Pfc's boots and to sweep his quarters. In the later stages of the US commitment from 1969 to '73, guerilla warfare gave way to conventional clashes between large forces, at which it's possible that the US Army might have defeated the communists had not the will of the American people and the commitment of many of its soldiers already been broken. Even had firepower prevailed, however, it's hard to envision to what good end. The Saigon regime commanded negligible popular support. There was still nothing to join up to. When a South Vietnamese officer discussed his hundred-odd generals with comrades, they concluded that around twenty were competent and honest, while ten were both monstrously corrupt and irredeemably

incompetent. In the midst of the discussion with the Americans about how the morale of Saigon troops might be improved, one South Vietnamese general's contribution was to propose reintroduce the French army's system of mobile field brothels. Arguably the people of Vietnam had to experience the communist model as they did at dreadful cost after the North Vietnamese achieved final victory in 1975 before they could reject it. The war cost the United States 150 billion dollars, much less than Iraq two generations later. Yet the true price was paid not in money nor even in lost American lives, but instead in the national trauma that it inflicted. The American people's belief, both in their moral rectitude and military invincibility created by the outcome of WWII, matched by an economic success so awesome that it seemed only logical to believe that it reflected the will of a higher being, was sorely injured. General Walt Boomer says, "The Vietnam War did more to change this country than anything in our recent history. It created a suspicion and mistrust we've never been able to redeem." Walt Boomer says that the great lesson he himself carried home from Vietnam was, tell the truth. I myself argue that the overarching mistake made by America's political and military leaders was less to lie to their people about Vietnam than to lie to themselves. Major Don Hudson who commanded an infantry company in 1970 said of the disillusionment of US veterans, "They thought they were going home with their uniforms on and their little medals and everybody would be really happy to see them, and they found out that was not true." Another veteran, Corpsman David Rogers is among many who still looks back with profound emotion. He told me, "The experience was huge. I had a lot of trouble coming home and going to church. I couldn't confess. I felt dirty. I'd been part of killing." The only memory that matters to Rogers, like hundreds of thousands of his comrades, is that of his own platoon. To be able to say that as a corpsman I was there for them, around one third of his people were killed or wounded. Living close to Washington, he sometimes visits his memorial wall at five, six in the morning. I won't go when there are others around. To me it's a big headstone. I'm glad I have it. I have about ten names. Tony from Chicago. Jerry Johnson from Minnesota, Sam in Samoa. Moments come back. Seeing a tree line up at Martha's Vineyard, I thought that's like Vietnam. The prettiest sights I saw there were choppers over tree lines. Reading writes like Neal Sheehan, I get so angry with them, the people who ran America. They knew what was happening. We didn't. I did the pace count, and that was it. In 1993 David Rogers returned to Vietnam as a guest of its government and was taken to the area where his own unit had fought. He found himself fated by former Viet Cong who were under orders to embrace Americans because they needed Congress to pass a trade deal. Rogers found himself reflecting, "If all these guys wanted was a McDonald's surely we could have worked this out a long time ago!" Modern western tourists are disarmed by the warmth of the welcome they receive in Vietnam, from people mostly unborn when the war was fought. This is partly because an overwhelming majority privately at least now recognize the virtues of liberal democracy and the shortcomings of the alternative. President Obama received a rapturous reception when he visited Vietnam in 2015, contrasted with the extraordinary frosty one given a year later to China's President Xi. Visitors impressed by the glitzy towers of Saigon, the natural beauty of the countryside, often fail to notice the harsh rural poverty and absolute denial of freedom of speech. The rulers of 21st century Vietnam concede to their people some latitude to make money but none to express political opinions, frankly to debate the past. I write much in my book about the American so-called credibility gap during the war years, yet in Hanoi mendacity remains institutionalized. A conspicuous lesson of the past century is that economic forces are at least as informed as military ones in determining outcomes. North Vietnam's dead revolutionaries would recall in this gust from modern Saigon, the name Ho Chi Minh City is falling from favor and will probably eventually vanish in the way that Leningrad has

become St. Petersburg again. Its glittering shops, temples of consumerism, burst with brand names, jewelry, and designer clothes. I would argue that while US lost the war militarily almost half a century ago, it has since seen its economic and cultural influence reverse that outcome. Where America's armed forces failed with B-52s, defoliants, and Spooky gunships, YouTube and Johnny Depp have proved irresistible. Chung San was a thirteen-year-old boy, wrestling playfully with a friend on a hillside in North Vietnam on the day in 1975 when his village loudspeakers announced triumphantly that Saigon had been liberated. He wrote long afterwards in a book entitled *The Winning Side,* "According to what we had been taught in school, this would be the end of two decades of misery for South Vietnam. I thought we must quickly set about educating its misguided children." Yet in 2012 that same boy observed, "Many people who have carefully reviewed the past were stunned when it realized that the side that was really liberated was the north. South Vietnam," he argues, "has proved historic victory because its values increasingly dominate the country." As for Americans Walt Boomer muses, "What was it all about? It bothers me that we didn't learn a lot. If we had we would not have invaded Iraq." Thank you all very much.

(Applause)

1:Did the subsequent wars after Vietnam that Vietnam engaged in, Cambodia and then later China, did that have an influence on the warming up to the US culturally and economically?

Hastings: I felt that I hadn't tried to write about Cambodia and Laos in this book because it's already probably about as long as anybody can take, but I did spend quite a bit of time in Cambodia and Laos myself in--I think one mistake, some American historians I think adopt what I would call an almost flagellatory approach to writing about the war in that for example they regard the destruction of Cambodia as entirely America's doing. Once again I would say that all blame must be shared with the communists because in the end the reason that the Americans got into Cambodia and Laos was that the communists were using it as an arterial, estuarial route into South Vietnam to run the war. So it was a huge tragedy but it was also, it was the North Vietnamese who created the Khmer Rouge in the South. And while I would not defend--I think it was a huge tragedy, the secret bombing of Cambodia in 1970 and thereafter, Operation Menu, which was largely Henry Kissinger's creation--but I do think again one has to see this. The Americans would not have gotten involved in Cambodia and Laos. Whatever misjudgments they made once they did get involved, if the communists hadn't been using it as supply routes. But it was. These were colossal national tragedies.

2: Thank you. When I was a boy, they taught us of the Domino Theory. The Domino Theory seemed to be false, especially after Sukarno was overthrown.

Hastings: There are still some today, some Americans quote Lee Kuan Yew, the prime minister of Singapore for many years who often told the American that he didn't believe that the rest of Southeast Asia could have been stabilized had not the Americans fought in Vietnam through all those years, which enabled many Southeast Asian and Asian governments to achieve a degree of stability that they hadn't got before. I'm not quite sure I totally go along with this. What is for sure is the original Domino Theory did not turn out in that way in that the idea that just because one country goes down that the neighbor has got to go down. But one of the things I try to do as a historian is, again, I think a big mistake made by some historians, they see everything in terms of a 21st century prism. I try to close my eyes and think, how did things look at that time. And again while I think that the United States completely misjudged the situation in Vietnam, there was a genuine, very serious global communist threat. And Vietn--I happen to think--I 've written a whole book about the Korean War, and I'm absolutely convinced that the United States and its allies including Britain were absolutely right to intervene in Korea,

and South Korean today is a model for democracy and capitalism, whereas North Korea is a model for the alternative. But I think the biggest tragedy, the one lesson I feel from writing this book and other books is that in so many of these situations, the big things are the social and cultural and political things, there's a military dimension, but you can't see them in purely military terms. And I think the biggest mistake in the United States was, in the era of McCarthyism, a lot of people were kicked out of the state department, a lot of people who knew a lot about Asia and Southeast Asia. And to leave the whole thing to soldiers, even today in Iraq and Afghanistan, of course you've got to have soldiers there and you've got to have generals there, but I would never put a general in total command because there are so many more dimensions than this. And again and again throughout the whole '50s and '60s process that it was seen as an overwhelmingly military problem when it wasn't. And the Domino Theory, yes, Eisenhower wrote in 1954 to Winston Churchill who was still in his last days as British prime minister, begging him to accept the validity of the Domino Theory that if we don't resist these people in Indochina, they're gonna take over everywhere. And I got some sympathy because yes there was a genuine global communist threat, but it's an awful shame they didn't understand the nuances, the cultural nuances in Indochina much better. For a start the fact that the Vietnam, the traditional enemies of the Chinese, and one thing I didn't understand when I started writing this book, and it's absolutely fascinating, far from the Vietnamese being the cat's paws of the Chinese and of the Russians, in many ways the Russians and the Chinese, they felt obliged to help these revolutionaries, and they felt obliged to support them against the United States, but they hated the whole business. Brezhnev when he was running Russia told the Soviet ambassador in Washington, "I have no wish to drown in the swamps of Vietnam." This is a Russian leader speaking. Nobody understood that at the time. So at the very end you've got Kissinger and Nixon at the White House believing that if the Russians pick up the telephone to Moscow that the whole war can be ended. It wasn't like that at all. So that's another dimension. Our intelligence toward these places was terrible. It was terrible in the 1950s, terrible in the 1960s. I'm not really persuaded that our intelligence in Iraq and in Afghanistan is none much better today.

3: Why didn't the United States ever look for a noncommunist nationalist leader in the 1950s and 1960s that could have really led Vietnam in a different direction?

Hastings: I think one has to put a lot of the blame on the French, that if the French had ever tried to promote a serious non-communist political class then you might have had some people there who were able to stand, but the worst problem was that Ho Chi Minh secured monopoly ownership of Vietnam nationalism by defeating the French. And when Diem took power in Saigon, virtually everybody whom Diem appointed to significant positions had worked for the French colonialists, and one thing they had certainly not done was work for the revolution and for the struggle against the French. And if you wanted, the one thing that all Vietnamese people, communist and anticommunist agreed about in the late '40s and early '50s, they wanted the French out, and the people who got the French out were heroes. And so you were on the wrong foot after '54 if you didn't have impeccable credentials as a fighter against the French, and virtually nobody around Diem did. But it was a great misfortune. If you'd wanted to have a noncommunist Vietnam, you had to start way, way back promoting noncommunist politicians.

4: How would you apply your experience of Vietnam to the evolving situation between the US Trump Administration and China?

Hastings: I'm not sure that there's a direct parallel there. I will tell you one story, which actually is not related to Vietnam but about, as far as the Chinese now, about five years ago there was a group of Chinese generals visiting Britain. And I was asked to--I was one of those who was asked to speak to them. And they had been told that I then just published a book about 1914 and the beginning of WWI. One of these Chinese generals

asked me, he said, "Do you see any parallels between 1914 and today?" And I said, "Yes, I do see one. To me the great irony is that in 1914 Germany had become overwhelmingly the most successful economic and industrial power in Europe, and that if the Kaiser had not gone to war in 1914 nothing could have prevented them in twenty years from becoming the most dominant power in Europe." And I said, "I can't help looking today at China's quite extraordinary economic and industrial achievement and thinking, is it worth putting all this at risk for whatever's going on out there in the South China Sea." And one of the generals said, "But we've got claims." And I said, "Well, I might even have a bit of sympathy with some of those claims, but that's not the point. The point is, is it really worth putting all this at risk?" But I don't see a parallel, I don't think you can relate--or I can't off the top of my head--relate Vietnam to the Chinese situation. But I do think the danger of miscalculation, I do think there are other historic parallels because the Chinese are playing a game in the South China Sea, which is incredibly dangerous and seems out of all proportion to anything they're getting at gain down there.

5: Well, you actually presupposed my question about Henry Kissinger. He had a lot to do with promoting the Vietnam War. He also orchestrated an overthrown of the Chilean democratic government in 1973. And there was a British humanist, atheist, Hitchens, who toured the United States with a program to declare Henry Kissinger a war criminal.

Hastings: No, no, no, I don't believe in that sort of thing at all.

5: You don't believe in that?

Hastings: What you can say, and what I've said in the book--the most recent declassified White House tapes, which were only released in 2015 and which I've made extensive use of, Kissinger and Nixon's conversations in the White House in the last phase of the war to me are awe-inspiringly cynical. And from the moment Nixon became president in '69, they never kidded themselves for a second that the war was winnable. They were determined to get out. But everything they did was directed towards trying to convince the American people that they had not suffered a defeat or humiliation. And 22,000 Americans died and countless more Vietnamese while Kissinger and Nixon are, if I'm not being to cynical to say, were playing a very elaborate political game. And to me one of the most devastating exchanges on these White House tapes was October '72, a month before Nixon faces McGovern in the presidential reelection campaign, Kissinger comes back from secret talks in Paris with the North Vietnamese, and he rushes into the oval office and says, "Mr. President, we have got a deal better than anything you could ever have dreamed of." And he doesn't then say, this is gonna bring peace, this will save countless lives. He says, "This will absolutely, totally screw McGovern."

(Laughter)

Hastings: And the cynicism of these people. And what of course is amazing is that what you can say--as a historian I can say that through the ages heads of state and their advisors have had equally cynical conversations about events. But of course now that it's all on tape you can't run away from this stuff, and I like to think I'm fairly well versed in the stuff that goes on in high places, but reading the transcripts of those White House tapes, boy, I mean, these two were something else again. Anyway, thank you so much.

(Applause)

Williams: Thank you to Sir Max Hastings for an outstanding discussion and to the members of the Museum and Library United States World War One Centennial Commission for sponsoring this program. The book is *Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy, 1945-1975*, published by Harper Collins. To learn more about the Pritzker Military Museum and Library, visit us in person or online at PritzkerMilitary.org. Thank you for watching, and please join us next time on *Pritzker Military Presents*.

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