

FROM DIPLOMAT TO DISSIDENT: A STATE DEPARTMENT ODYSSEY



Ben Fishman

TA SELF-DESCRIBED “FALLEN FSO” RECOUNTS THE IMPACT OF VIETNAM ON HIS DIPLOMATIC CAREER — AND WHAT HAPPENED AFTER THAT ENDED.

By JOHN MARKS

The *Foreign Service Journal* published the first article I ever wrote in December 1971, during the height of the Vietnam War. At that time, some 20 percent of the FSO corps, including me, had served in Vietnam. My article, entitled “Vietnamization of the Foreign Service,” drew on my experiences and those of my colleagues to assess the impact of the conflict on the career we had chosen. For me, this question was intensely personal. The year before, the war had knocked me off the linear path of a State Department career and I had resigned from the Foreign Service.

Now, as I reread my *FSJ* article and look at my Vietnam slides for the first time in 25 years, I am carried back to a time when the Foreign Service faced intense division over the war.

I entered the Foreign Service in 1966 as an inexperienced 22-year-old, fresh out of college. I joined because I wanted to do something meaningful with my life — to do well by doing good. When posts were handed out to my A-100 class, I was assigned to what *Time Magazine* had just described as “Swinging London.” I was overjoyed at the idea of starting my career in a grand old European capital.

To Vietnam With Enthusiasm

It turned out that was too good to be true. Four days before I was supposed to sail to England on the USS *United States*, my draft board reclassified me 1-A. I did not want to go into the military, but State Department personnel officers said that there was little chance I could win a deferment as a diplomat in London. My best chance to stay out of uniform, they advised, would be to accept an assignment to the pacification program in Vietnam. In that capacity, I would be detailed to USAID as one of the first of about 350 FSOs who would eventually serve in what later became the CORDS, the Civil Operations and Rural Development Support program. As I wrote in the *Journal* in 1971: “During the middle ’60s, USAID conducted extensive recruiting campaigns throughout the United States in a search for sufficient volunteers. These campaigns invariably fell short of their goals, and after 1966 increasing numbers of FSOs were assigned to USAID to fill the gap.”

I reluctantly agreed to be reassigned, and I thus became one of the few members of my generation to have gone to Vietnam to *avoid* the draft.

Arriving in Vietnam in August 1966, I was still motivated by John Kennedy-era enthusiasm for government service, and I did not yet have strong views about Vietnam policy. I wound up in Xuan Loc, a dusty provincial capital about 50 miles east of Saigon, as an adviser to the local government. I was responsible for

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“new life development” — a catch-all effort to improve South Vietnamese government responsiveness to popular needs. With no training except three weeks of Southeast Asia area studies, I stepped into duties that included resettling refugees, helping the local hospital get U.S. medical supplies, dispatching helicopters on humanitarian missions and coordinating with U.S. military forces.

Early in 1967, I launched a pig project in a village that the South Vietnamese government had recently taken back from Viet Cong control. With a USAID warehouse to back me up, I offered to provide gravel, cement and roofing to every peasant who built a pig sty — and to put a pig in each completed sty. The peasants were initially skeptical. But after I helped build the first sty and gave away the first pig, about 20 Vietnamese joined this “self-help” effort. Then, one night the Viet Cong attacked the village with little opposition from government militia. By morning, most of the village had been burned down, the people who had cooperated with us had been killed and all the pigs had been carried off. Needless to say, I was devastated.

Over time, I came to see the failure of the pig program as emblematic of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Despite our good intentions and massive intervention, the South Vietnamese government was unable to provide adequate security or to function effectively.

I was becoming increasingly disillusioned with U.S. policy on the grounds that I did not think it was working well. Nevertheless, I still thought that somehow, if better tactics were used, the American side could win. I did not yet question whether the U.S. should be in Vietnam.

Working Within The System

In 1967, the Johnson administration took away control of the pacification program from USAID and gave it to the Pentagon. So after a year in Xuan Loc, I was transferred for the final six months of my tour to Saigon, where I worked at U.S. military headquarters as a plans and programs officer. Although I had the protocol rank of a mere 2nd lieutenant, my new boss and the other colonels seemed to listen to me because I had on-the-ground experience in the countryside.

John Marks, who describes himself as a “fallen FSO,” is president of Search for Common Ground in Washington, D.C. and the European Centre for Common Ground in Brussels.

This was a time when very senior U.S. officials were making optimistic public statements, claiming they could “see the light at the end of the tunnel.” That view came crashing down in January 1968 when, during the Tet offensive, communist forces launched coordinated attacks on Vietnamese cities and even penetrated the U.S. embassy compound. Fighting was everywhere in Saigon, and I could not get to work. For a week, I was on the roof of my apartment building, with camera and binoculars, watching the war play out across Saigon.

In March 1968, I returned to Washington for an assignment in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research. The very day of my return, President Lyndon Johnson announced that he would not run for re-election. The U.S. seemed caught up in a cultural revolution, at the core of which was opposition to the war. In this heady atmosphere, I became convinced that not only was U.S. policy in Vietnam ineffective, it was wrong.

So while I served in INR, first as an analyst of Belgian and French affairs and then as staff assistant to the director, I was a dove, working inside the system to end U.S. involvement in Vietnam. In November 1969, while a nationwide “moratorium” — a series of anti-war demonstrations — was taking place, I was in upstate New York recruiting college students for the State Department. I was so keen to show opposition to my employer’s position on the war that I fashioned a black sock into an armband, which I wore as I talked to students about Foreign Service careers.

During this period, I was one of a small group of junior officers granted a meeting with Secretary of State William Rogers to urge changes in U.S. policy. I remember well being ushered into the secretary’s grand office on the seventh floor and sitting down to chat. In response to our concerns, he talked mainly about his Navy service during World War II. I came away convinced that he was disconnected from my reality. Afterwards, a senior colleague told me how fortunate I was, because in all his years in the Foreign Service he had never met a secretary of State.

For me, the last straw was the U.S. invasion of

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Cambodia in April 1970. I felt personally abused because a few months earlier I had been part of a White House study group that had gone to Vietnam and written a relatively pessimistic report. It seemed that our group’s honest conclusions were being used to help justify expansion of the war into a new country. I felt I could not, with good conscience, continue to work for the Nixon administration, even as an opponent within the system. However, I lacked the courage to resign immediately, unlike my colleagues Anthony Lake — who later became President Bill

Clinton’s first national security adviser — Roger Morris and William Watts. I quit four months later, after I found a position as executive assistant to Sen. Clifford Case of New Jersey. Case opposed U.S. involvement in the war. My job was to get Congress to pass the Case-Church amendment which would, in 1973, finally cut off funding for American military operations in Vietnam.

Looking back now, while I still believe the United States made a huge mistake in getting involved in Vietnam, I also realize that I was wrong to have focused almost exclusively on the U.S. side of the war and not to have taken into account that communist victories in Southeast Asia would result in massive violations of human rights, particularly genocide in Cambodia.

Enter “John Claymore”

In 1971, the *FSJ* agreed to publish my article on “Vietnamization of the Foreign Service.” As was true in most senatorial offices, Sen. Case had a rule that staff members could not write for publication — except under his name. I decided to get around this by using a pseudonym. I chose John Claymore. A claymore is a type of landmine, and at that time in my life, I was very angry and wanted nothing more than to have an explosive impact.

The author’s biography attached to the article explained: “John Claymore is the pseudonym of a former FSO who served in Vietnam. The primary reason for his resignation from the State Department was disagreement with U.S. policy on Southeast Asia. He is

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not using his real name because of a limitation on publishing in his current job, but he would be glad to correspond or meet with anyone interested in discussing his article."

A few days after the article appeared I got a call from Benjamin Welles, a *New York Times* reporter who covered the State Department and who was the son of Franklin Roosevelt's under secretary of State, Sumner Welles. My cover had been blown. Someone — presumably not at the *Foreign Service Journal* — had told Welles that I was John Claymore. While I was concerned that I might get into trouble with the senator, I could truthfully state that I had had nothing to do with Welles's discovery of my identity. I was also thrilled that my article was going to be at the center of a *New York Times* story. (And the good-heart-

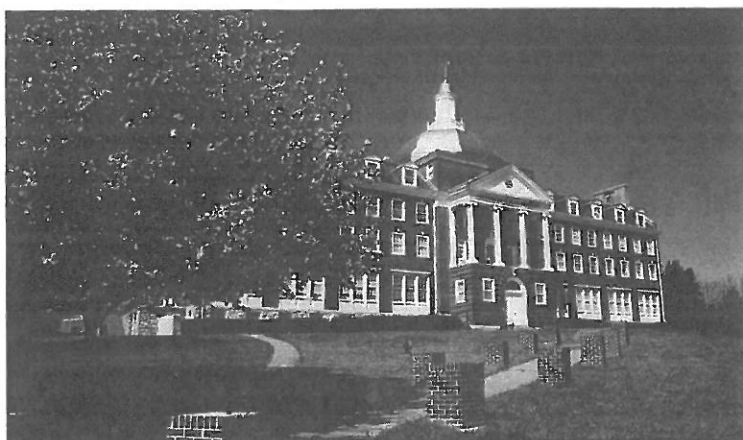
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ed Sen. Case forgave me almost immediately.)

Welles wanted to know more about the following passage in the article: "Many [FSOs in Vietnam] served in proto-combat roles with command responsibility. While not participants, they received reports of war crimes and what often seemed like the unnecessary loss of human life. Some were faced with the moral dilemma of how far they should go in exposing incidents they knew to be wrong."

"One FSO currently serving in Washington possesses a file of documented atrocities, including photographs. He has written extensive

reports on these apparent war crimes he investigated in Vietnam. As far as he knows, no action has ever been taken to punish the guilty. Because he is a supporter of



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the president's Vietnam policy, and because he fears the effect on that policy of additional war crime controversy, he has not chosen to make his information public. He also is undoubtedly aware of the negative result disclosure would have on his career prospects."

The FSO in question had entered the Foreign Service in my A-100 class. I knew that, unlike me, he would not be thrilled by the *New York Times*' interest, so I decided to safeguard his identity. (I still do, even after he has risen to the rank of ambassador.) Still, I told Welles

everything else I knew about the incident. I suppose that in other times I might have remained completely quiet to protect a colleague. In 1971, however, how one felt about the war seemed of overriding importance.

I talked to Welles just before the Christmas holidays, and Washington soon shut down. I kept checking the *New York Times*, but no article appeared. Then, on Dec. 29, 1971, the *Los Angeles Times*' George McArthur wrote a piece from Saigon entitled "U.S. War Atrocity File Alleged." The article began:

"A semiofficial publication of the U.S. State Department this month rather casually presented the charge that an American diplomat now serving in Washington has a file of documented U.S. atrocities in South Vietnam about which nothing has been done. (In Washington, a State Department spokesman said that the department is not currently trying to identify the author or obtain more details on the atrocity allegations.)

"The unsubstantiated charges of atrocities in a semi-official publication which obviously reflects the sentiments of a broad segment of State Department officers raised hackles among military men. 'Let them put up or shut up,' one staff officer snorted."

This *Los Angeles Times* article was inaccurate in two respects. First, the *FSJ* is not and never has been a publication of the State Department, either officially or semi-officially. Second, I had not written that Americans had committed the atrocities. In fact, I had already told the *New York Times* that the perpetrators were South Koreans.

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The Fallout Continues

The *Los Angeles Times* did not identify me, but the next day the *New York Times* did, when Welles's article finally appeared under the headline: "U.S. Diplomats in Vietnam Said to Face Moral Issue." I had negotiated with Welles that the article would describe me simply as "a foreign policy consultant to Congress" and that it would not mention Sen. Case. Welles wrote:

"State Department sources said that the alleged atrocities were investigated by the Department and were also reported in the United States

press on Jan. 12, 1970. They are said to have concerned the South Korean "Tiger" Division, one of two South Korean infantry divisions serving in Vietnam, and not United States forces. A Pentagon spokesman said that officers in its Southeast Asia section had not been able to obtain the current issue of the *Foreign Service Journal* and thus could not comment."

The matter probably would have died there if the State Department's Vietnam Working Group director, Josiah W. Bennett, had not written a letter in the February 1972 *FSJ*, in which he said about my article: "Concerned that this account might convey a misleading impression of the conduct of one FSO and of Foreign Service attitudes generally, I looked up the file on the matter. I found that the alleged atrocities do not involve American troops, as one might infer from reading the article, but Korean forces in Vietnam. The files show that the Department of State took action on the reports it received from various sources regarding these alleged atrocities and that MACV [the U.S. military command], along with our Embassy in Saigon, sought to get to the bottom of the allegations and have corrective action taken.

"The files also show the FSO referred to by Mr. Claymore did far more than write reports on incidents that came to his attention in the field. On his return to Washington, he took a prominent part in the Department's efforts to follow up on these and similar reports."

The *FSJ* graciously gave me the right to reply in the same issue, and I wrote: "I would agree with Mr.

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Bennett that the FSO who compiled the file did everything possible inside the State Department to see that justice was served. His persistence was remarkable within the system. The existence of the file — mentioned in my article and confirmed by Mr. Bennett — underscores the fact that there was official American knowledge of Korean atrocities. I would be grateful if Mr. Bennett or anyone else in the State Department could explain to me how the identification of the guilty as Koreans makes their war crimes any less heinous or regrettable." No reply was forthcoming.

On Feb. 13, 1972, Ben Welles wrote a second article for the *New York Times* — this time about the exchange of letters in the *FSJ* — entitled "Letters Raise Question of U.S. Responsibility for

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Allies' Atrocities." By then, Welles had managed to learn the date and place of the massacre, along with specific details. There had been a death toll of 60 to 80 civilians, he reported, and "many of the dead were found with powder burns — indicating execution at point-blank range."

A Generation Gap

The controversy that erupted around my article supported one of the basic points I was trying to make — namely, that "Vietnam is different. Serving [there] is not like serving elsewhere. It meant a violent

breaking away from the traditional diplomatic life and an exposure to the realities of war.

"Vietnam has undoubtedly sharpened the genera-

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tion gap between young and old FSOs. In some of the junior grades, a disproportionately large number have been to Vietnam. Almost all return with a healthy skepticism, often bordering on contempt, for the Foreign Service. One recent returnee says, 'Vietnam is where you learn that your elders aren't what you thought they were.' Another describes Vietnam as his 'final disillusionment with the Foreign Service as an institution.' He says 'he can no longer take the Service

at its word,' and he goes on to mention the lack of integrity in the reporting process he saw in Vietnam.

"Yet this same officer feels that his own and his colleagues' disillusionment with the Foreign Service bodes well for the future of the American diplomatic establishment. He believes Vietnam has created a new, skeptical type of diplomat able to work more effectively within the foreign affairs bureaucracy than the old striped-pants set. Shorn of the mythology of protocol and cocktail parties, these new skeptics see themselves as 'operators' who know how to infight. The emphasis in Vietnam was on doing things whether inside or outside the system. If Vietnamese officials would not feed hungry refugees, the FSO usually found a way to get the job done himself."

Having left the service, I cannot be sure to what extent FSOs who served in Vietnam continued to be entrepreneurial infighters. My impression, however, is that at least a few, such as Richard Holbrooke, now U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, and Frank Wisner, a former under secretary of State and Defense and a four-time ambassador, became especially good at proactive behavior.

A classic example of Vietnam-era FSOs showing courage under bureaucratic fire occurred in 1975. As the South Vietnamese government was falling, Lionel Rosenblatt and Craig Johnstone pushed successfully in Washington for creation of an interagency task force to rescue Vietnamese who might be in danger because of their ties to the U.S. government. Still, they still felt that the U.S. mission in Saigon was not doing enough to honor its obligations to individual Vietnamese. Although specifically told by senior officials not to go, they took leave and flew off to Saigon. Disregarding the risks,

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both to their careers and their safety, they managed to put several hundred Vietnamese on flights out of the country. When they returned to Washington, they thought they would be disciplined or fired. Instead, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger called them into his office to honor them.

I very much admire such behavior. At the same time, I will never forget that when I resigned, another of my A-100 classmates, who later became

an ambassador, told me in all seriousness that an FSO should not have policy views. My sense is that his perspective also persists.

The Road Not Taken

As for me, I have few regrets about having left the Foreign Service. I went on to co-author a best-seller, *The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence* and write *The Search for the Manchurian Candidate*. These books reflected my strong opposition to a foreign policy that included covert manipulation and intervention. But as the 1970s were ending, I realized that my work, first in battling against the Vietnam War and then in taking on what I considered to be the abuses of the intelligence agencies, had become largely defined by what I was against. I made a decision that, rather than continue to tear down the old system, I would try to help build a new one. Influenced by a series of personal growth workshops, I gradually became immersed in the practice of conflict resolution.

I reinvented myself as a "social entrepreneur" — still with that "can do" spirit learned in Vietnam — and founded Search for Common Ground in 1982 and the European Centre for Common Ground in 1995. These organizations share a vision of transforming how the world deals with conflict by moving from adversarial, win-lose approaches to non-adversarial, win-win solutions. Together, they have grown into the largest NGO in the world working in conflict prevention and conflict resolution.

I still stand by the conclusion I wrote to my 1971 FSJ article: "The Vietnam War may someday come to an end. But many Foreign Service officers, and perhaps the service as a whole, will never be the same again." ■