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Remembrance of things past

A stormy conference on the Vietnam War

By H.D.S. Greenway
Globe Staff

LOS ANGELES - A few hawks and a great many more doves descended upon the University of Southern California's campus last week for a four-day conference on "Vietnam Reconsidered - Lessons from a War."

Journalists, veterans, academicians, spies and anti-war activists participated in or listened to panel discussions from early morning to late at night. They were probing the past and trying to draw conclusions for the future.

In many ways, as one panelist complained, it was more Vietnam Revisited than Reconsidered. Jour-

H.D.S. Greenway, foreign and national editor of The Globe, covered the Vietnam War for the Washington Post and Time magazine.

nalists, many of whom, like David Halberstam, rose to fame in Vietnam, watched television film clips, read from their dispatches, congratulated - or, in one or two cases, bitterly attacked - each other's works and reputations.

Old friendships and enmities were renewed but emotional scabs were rubbed raw too - especially by Vietnam veterans who spoke with passion and anger at what they perceived as an indifferent and even hostile public. Vietnamese exiles carried placards and flags of the old South Vietnamese republic outside the hall and shouted with anger from within at suggestions that they had come to America for economic rather than political reasons.

To the students, many of whom were not even born or were in grade school when the events under discussion took place, the fig-

ures on the stage may have seemed, as author Gloria Emerson said, "ghostly figures emerging from Flanders Field."

If the conference were to be faulted, it would be because so few of those who supported or conducted the war attended. Conference organizers said it was not for want of trying. Robert McNamara, Dean Rusk, McGeorge and William Bundy, Gen. William Westmoreland and Henry Kissinger, to name a few, had all been asked but declined, according to USC's John Languth, a professor of journalism who once represented the New York Times in Saigon.

Also noticeable by their absence were the Vietnamese. There were only three Vietnamese out of more than 60 panelists. Former South Vietnamese leader Nguyen Cao Ky was scheduled to come but did not.

Nguyen Ngoc Dung, a deputy permanent representative of the Hanoi regime's United Nations delegation, was denied permission by the US State Department to attend, according to conference organizers. She addressed the conference by radio hookup between Los Angeles and New York, however, stating her country's established positions.

Through all the rehashing of the past, the subject of Central America loomed like the spectre of Vietnams yet to come. Was the United States committing the same mistakes in Latin America as it had in Vietnam? Or would the lessons of Vietnam stay the hand of any present and future President?

The issue was addressed directly by former US Ambassador to El Salvador Robert E. White on the last day. He said that "fear of change" guided all our policies in Latin America, caused the United States to "wink" at repression, corruption and dictatorship. We should, he said, work toward a non-Communist "model for change"; Latin Americans turned away from the United States, he added, only when they saw that we did not mean what we said about democracy and human rights.

The beginning of American involvement in Vietnam was discussed by old Asia hands such as the New Yorker's Robert Shaplen, who has covered Vietnam since the 1940s, and Archimedes Patti.

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