



**Episode 1,055: The Truth About the Vietnam War, with Gareth Porter**

**Guest: Gareth Porter**

**WOODS:** The idea for this episode came from our friend Gene Epstein, who is now happily retired from *Barron's*, and he had commissioned a review from you, and it was all the timing – because of his retirement, it didn't quite work out, but he thought maybe this could be the genesis of a great episode between the two of us. So that's what we're doing.

I have not seen this Ken Burns – or who knows who's really in charge of it – series on the Vietnam War just because I watch so little TV, I realized the other day. But it doesn't surprise me that, even if it might be critical of certain aspects of how the war went or turned out or some decisions that were made along the way, a lot of the basic premises that are guiding the series seem to be just ripped out of the establishment playbook, and you were just not having it.

And in particular, in your own book *Perils of Dominance*, you offer some rather provocative corrections to the record. Now, what I'd like to start with is the thing that I believed in for a while – I believed in even after it didn't happen. I still believed in it – namely, the domino theory. I mean, I was barely – I was born in 1972, so in the 1980s I was like a young Republican and I read Richard Nixon's book *No More Vietnams*, which I'm sure you read at some point.

**PORTER:** I've looked at it, I'm sure.

**WOODS:** Okay, all right. Well, I read that because I felt like as a good, young Republican, I've got to read this book, absorb it, and repeat the talking points in it. And that thing, he did talk about the domino theory, that one country goes communist, then all of Southeast Asia goes communist, and Nixon's rhetoric to everybody who questioned that was always: well, the dominos believed it. What is your response to that whole theory?

**PORTER:** Well, I'm glad you've asked that question because it is such a huge shadow, if you will, over the understanding of people of several generations now of the dynamics that surrounded the U.S. war in Vietnam. And it's a very good question: what about the dominos? I mean, of course, the domino-in-chief in regard to this whole question was Lee Kuan Yew and Singapore, because they're the ones who talked about this incessantly.

And the reality is that Singapore was very successful in part because of foreign investment that came in, particularly from Japan, and this was true of the rest of the dominos in Southeast Asia, both during the Vietnam War and particularly later. The Japanese continued to invest in the nine communist governments – not governments, but countries and economies of Southeast Asia. And that capital was instrumental in then bringing about a lot of economic growth in the region.

But that had nothing to do with the U.S. intervention in Vietnam, because, had the United States chosen to negotiate in 1962, '63, '64, or '65 rather than to intervene militarily, the growth in the region probably would have been even more spectacular, because there's no question in my mind that the unification of Vietnam would have taken place on a much slower schedule than it actually did take place eventually after 1975, that North Vietnam would have been prepared to live with a non-communist, although certainly not anti-communist, South Vietnam for several years. And therefore, this whole idea that it was only the U.S. war that allowed the dominos to prosper is part of the fiction that surrounds the entire history of the Vietnam War. So that's at least one part of it.

Now, you know, I also go back into the history of the domino theory back to the Eisenhower administration when it first became a household word in the United States, because Ike used it in a press conference in the spring of 1954, saying that the United States was not going to allow Vietnam to go under because of the tin and tungsten in Southeast Asia and because of the fact that if it didn't the dominos would all topple. We know now that, in fact, Eisenhower and his closest advisors did not really believe that.

In fact, they had abandoned that in 1953 or even earlier because of the changes that had been taken place in Southeast Asia, the communist movements that had seemed so dangerous and on the march in the late 1940s had burned out by 1950, '51, '52. And by 1953, Eisenhower had changed his mind about the danger of communist takeover in the region and believed that it was not going to happen and that the United States should not intervene militarily in Indochina.

And so that in a nutshell is the background of this whole, really a myth, that has been perpetuated by one government after another and one administration after another to justify the U.S. role in South Vietnam. And it was always an instrumental idea rather than a true belief. That's what I document in my book.

**WOODS:** So if that's not the explanation, if it's not the domino theory, then we sometimes hear – I mean, there could be humanitarian explanations. There could be the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization obligated us to stand by our friend and if we don't stand by our friends, then we'll get a bad reputation in the world. Countries will be less likely to want to be our friends. They'll choose the wrong side in the Cold War. What about any of that stuff?

**PORTER:** Well, I'm glad you've asked about that too. The idea that it was the Southeast Asia Treaty obligation of the United States that really forced the U.S. hand to intervene in South Vietnam, this of course was an argument that was made by Secretary of State Dean Rusk, a name that people may not have heard for a while, but

who was the guy who was constantly reiterating these legal, moral arguments for the U.S. intervention.

The reality again historically is that Eisenhower was asked by some of his more warlike advisors in 1955, '56 to agree to an obligation to the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization before it was signed – talking about in 1956. He was asked by his advisors to go ahead and agree that the United States would intervene if there were a communist uprising in South Vietnam that required U.S. military assistance. And he refused to do it. The only circumstances under which he agreed to intervene militarily was a North Vietnamese invasion of the South, and therefore, he was not willing to go along with the idea that you are now suggesting is in fact in the SEATO treaty. It was never one that obligated the United States to intervene militarily, except in the case of a crossing the border, a classical invasion by a foreign army.

Now, that invasion did ultimately happen, but the United States had already intervened militarily before it did happen. So it was really the Vietnam War began as an indigenous South Vietnamese communist uprising for several years, and the United States began its intervention obviously well before the North Vietnamese military became seriously involved in the South. So again, it's really a major myth that has never been cleared up in the discussion and the discourse on the war in the United States over several generations now.

**WOODS:** Well, I think it may be repeated because people are trying to look for some explanation for why the U.S. got in. And if none of these work, then what is the real explanation? I mean, I don't even – I don't believe it's tin and tungsten either.

**PORTER:** It's not tin and tungsten, clearly. I don't think very many people now really believe in that, although perhaps there's still a shadow still over people's understanding about that. But no, I mean, the real reason is very deep in the bureaucratic interests of the Pentagon, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the military services, and other elements of the war bureaucracy in the United States.

**WOODS:** Wait a minute. Hold on a minute. Are you suggesting that the military establishment has interests of its own apart from the well-being of the American public?

**PORTER:** [laughing] That's exactly what I'm suggesting, and in fact –

**WOODS:** How about that?

**PORTER:** Yeah. And let me begin with a bit of history that I did not capture in my book, because I didn't find out about it until after the book was published. But there is a doctoral dissertation that was written in the late 1970s, and the author of the dissertation interviewed more than one member – I believe he interviewed three of the four Joint Chiefs of Staff during the decision-making process leading up to the U.S. invasion in 1965. And those then members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff told the researcher that they believed that they would stand to get a better deal in the budget in 1961, '62, and beyond – get a higher level of military appropriations if there were U.S. troops in South Vietnam.

And therefore, they acknowledged this was a major consideration in their calling on John F. Kennedy to send U.S. combat troops to South Vietnam in late 1961 – well, it wasn't even late '61. They were starting this in mid 1961. They continued to press for this for the next six months, and ultimately, Kennedy made a compromise with the military, the Pentagon, and these other advisors, all of whom were calling on him to agree to send combat troops in November 1961. And he agreed not for combat troops but for "advisors." And of course, most people now are perhaps aware that those advisors were actually, in the case of the Air Force, were carrying out combat operations, so it was a distinction without a real difference in many cases.

**WOODS:** What is the role of the U.S. presidents in any of this? Isn't it weird that I even have to ask you that question?

**PORTER:** No, it's not weird. I mean, in a sense, the dominant understanding – I would say the almost universal understanding of how the United States goes to war, not just on the part of people who are readers of books, but the authors of histories of the Vietnam War, have believed I think almost religiously that it is the president who decides this, and his advisors are merely there to give him their views. Well, the political reality is that no president can ever make a decision about going to war without taking into account the views of particularly the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the secretary of defense. And if the secretary of state and the head of the CIA and his national security advisor are all lined up down the same side and want to go to war, it is doubly, triply, and quadruply difficult for a president to defy them and simply say no, I'm not going to do it.

And that was the case for both John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. They were both confronted with a phalanx of a united set of advisors who were all calling on them to go to war. In the case of Kennedy, it was a matter of sending combat troops to South Vietnam in 1961, and in the case of Johnson, it was really to initiate an air war against North Vietnam, which Johnson knew perfectly well and so did his advisors was an introduction to a ground war that would certainly follow, because once you began the war against North Vietnam, you were going to have to protect your troops in the South, you were going to have to protect the assets that you already had there from retaliation. And that's exactly what happened.

So the reality is – this is what I talk about in some detail in my book – that both John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson were very reluctant to go to war. And in some ways, Johnson was even more determined to avoid war than John F. Kennedy, although that's not his reputation historically. But I show in a variety of ways that Johnson really was very much opposed to this. But he was politically afraid that his own advisors would turn against him and essentially go to the press, go to Congress, and blame him for the loss of South Vietnam, and he was deathly afraid of the consequences of that. Politically, he was not able to withstand the pressure.

John F. Kennedy, we're not sure what he would have done, of course, unfortunately, but he did a lot, as I show in my book, to undermine his own administration's policy once he realized that he'd made a big mistake in late 1961 and tried to get the Joint Chiefs of Staff to agree to a three-year time table for pulling out all U.S. troops. That was perhaps a kind of wishy-washy approach to it. Instead of saying we are going to

pull out, he felt that he needed to get their approval, and that of course never happened before he was shot down.

**WOODS:** More with Gareth Porter after we thank our sponsor.

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I want to skip ahead. I want to use the host's privilege to skip ahead a bit idiosyncratically to something that's interesting to me, and then I want to get back to things like the real nature of the way the war was waged, because that's the real question. Was it deliberately targeting civilians? That's the thing that still divides people also.

But I want to move on to the Cambodian Incursion of 1970, because I remember again as a young Republican reading about this after the fact and thinking, all right, this is not an ideal situation but here's what's going on: you've got a weak, neutral Cambodia. The communists are exploiting the weakness of Cambodia to carry on the war effort, and then they can find sanctuary in neutral Cambodia. And Nixon at least claimed that the Hague Convention authorized intervention in a case like this where there was a country that was too weak to do anything about another country exploiting its neutrality like this, and so he went in and tried to clear out these sanctuaries.

And I felt like, well, that just seems only right. If you're going to be waging the war, you ought to be able to clear out those sanctuaries. Now, I don't favor the war anymore, but I'm going to be honest with you: there's still 7.3% of me that kind of feels like, if I'm in that situation, I'm clearing out those sanctuaries. So what's wrong with that?

**PORTER:** Well, I think that there's a great deal of logic to that position. Obviously, once you're in a war, then you have to act in such a way as to take full advantage of everything you can to win the war. And obviously, there were communist troops in Cambodia. They had taken refuge from U.S. bombing in South Vietnam, the bombing that began in 1965 and continued right up until 1973, although it was not as heavy apparently in the final years as it was earlier.

And that bombing, which, by the way, that goes to the question that you intended to ask later but we'll go into that further, was so heavy that it was really impossible for Viet Cong troops to avoid the U.S. massacring them with B-52s except by crossing the border into Cambodia, where there was heavy cover with triple canopy forests. And so that was the situation that existed in 1970.

And the problem is not so much the legality of that in a narrow sense. That's not the issue. The issue is the larger question of whether the United States had any business getting into the war in the first place.

**WOODS:** Yeah, right.

**PORTER:** And that is the problem with saying that there was a justification for going into Cambodia. The reality is historically that Sihanouk was powerless, as you

indicated, and everybody knew that. He was powerless against the communists and he was powerless against the United States. Both sides could do whatever they wanted in that part of Cambodia because they had no control over it. But the fact is that the United States changed all that in 1970 when they got rid of Sihanouk and put in his place a pro-U.S., anti-communist regime, which was totally feckless, had no popular support, and which then cleared the way for the Khmer Rouge to rise to power in Cambodia.

And so if you want to look at the actual consequences of the U.S. intervention in Cambodia, not just the bombing but the regime change, which the U.S. clearly engineered – it would not have taken place without the CIA's permission. Although this has never been proven, I mean, the circumstantial evidence is extremely powerful here. And so the U.S. bears responsibility for everything that happened in Cambodia after that, which as all of your listeners know, include the deaths of a very large percentage of the Cambodian population, of a significant percentage of that population. And so the Khmer Rouge were of course the ones who were immediately responsible, but in the larger historical perspective, the United States has to bear full responsibility for everything that happened because Cambodia was living in peace before the Vietnam War began.

**WOODS:** All right, let's go back to the Vietnam War and again the way it was fought, because there's been some controversy – now I can't remember the name of the book, but a few years ago, a book came out, very controversial, making the case that it was not anomalous when you hear a story like the My Lai Massacre, for example. It was not anomalous that this sort of thing happened. This was the way the war was waged. And what you hear on this are differing response from veterans of the war. You have some veterans who say, *It was horrible and it's just unspeakable what I saw and what I was a part of*, and you've got other veterans saying, *How dare you impugn my character?* How do we who weren't there sort through these different testimonies?

**PORTER:** Well, the book you're referring to I'm sure is the one by Nick Turse –

**WOODS:** Yes, that's right.

**PORTER:** – who did – yes, he spent a great amount of time, years, really researching this, and it is very well documented. I have no doubt that he's captured the essence of the situation in his book. I actually did some research on this many years ago as well. I asked for and received the full text of the crucial policy document, which was issued by Westmoreland's command – General Westmoreland, the commander of the U.S. forces in South Vietnam in 1965, '64, '65, and beyond – that this MACV, as they called it, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, directive is the crucial piece of evidence that the Peers Commission – some of your listeners may not be familiar, but the Peers Commission was created by the U.S. Army to investigate the cover-up of the My Lai Massacre after it was reported by Sy Hersh and made into a major issue in the United States. And the Peers Commission identified several officers and enlisted men who they found to have been guilty of having covered up or participated in the My Lai Massacre.

But what the Peers Commission did not do was to investigate the chain of command and the responsibility of various levels of the chain of command all the way up to

Westmoreland himself. And what I discovered in my research is that Peers was someone who was clearly still under the command of Westmoreland and was hoping for a plum command position in South Korea, to be the commander of U.S. troops in South Korea. And he was clearly told that he would get that plum assignment only if he did the right thing in his investigation, and so very notably he did not carry on an investigation above the level of the commander who was in charge in the region.

And so he basically went beyond that to essentially give a clean slate to – a clean bill of health, I should say, to Westmoreland and try to suggest that Westmoreland's directives actually required that U.S. forces respect the civilians and not do anything to kill civilians unnecessarily. It had very carefully defined rules of engagement that would protect civilians from harm.

The reality is, if you look at the full text of that MACV directive in 1965, you find that those rules of engagement that were cited by the Peers Commission were only for those areas which were under either the control of the South Vietnamese government or had been only for a short term under the control of the Viet Cong. They were not to apply to areas that were long-term Viet Cong strongholds. In other words, it was clearly understood by the command and by the commanders that, in those areas, the population had to get out. If they didn't get out, they were considered to be the enemy. And that is exactly what Nick Turse says in his book, and that is the problem that has never been addressed really by historians, except for Nick, in the discourse on the Vietnam War.

**WOODS:** I want to just share with you, if I may, just from my own recollection one of my proudest moments on this podcast. And I think it's a very underrated moment. I thought it would get more of a response than it did. But I had Pat Buchanan on the show, and for a lot of reasons – I know a lot of people don't like Pat Buchanan – I like him and I just think he's got some blind-spots on things. Now, on Vietnam, there ain't no way I'm going to persuade Pat Buchanan, who was in the Nixon White House, about the wrongness of that.

**PORTER:** Right.

**WOODS:** But what I did say to him – and I'm curious just to get your visceral response to what I said. At one point, I said, all right, let's think this through. Let's imagine from the point of view of a Burkean-style conservative, let's evaluate the Vietnam War. Now, maybe we can agree that it would be a tragedy for Vietnam to go communist, but the thing about conservatism is that we have a limited scope of what our concerns are. Like, my main concern is my family and friends, and then my town, and then my state, and then my country. And then Vietnam, I mean, of course I want them to do well, but I have a series of concentric circles, and Vietnam is way, way on the outer edge.

So while we are going there presumably to make those people better off, meanwhile, our own country is going through tremendous turmoil. There's a cultural revolution going on in large part caused by the war itself, causing the kind of domestic turmoil that you no doubt oppose on many levels. Meanwhile, there's an enormous expenditure of resources, which you also generally oppose, that throws the budget out of whack, that leads to monetary policy that results in the 1970s stagflation.

And you know what? Vietnam goes communist anyway. Even after all that, they went communist anyway. And the result was, yes, I wouldn't want to live in Vietnam at that time, but that was the same outcome. We could have had that outcome without the expenditure of the resources, without maybe some of the turmoil society went through. In other words, you could have avoided a whole lot of terrible consequences from your own point of view, not to mention the unspeakable number of civilian deaths that were caused, the horrors that were rained from the sky. How can you say on balance that maybe it would have been better to just not to do it in the first place?

And in his response, I got a glimmer of a suggestion that maybe I might actually have been right. And I thought that is the biggest coup I've ever had on this show.

**PORTER:** Well, I'm not surprised that you did get that glimmer, because of course, as a paleoconservative, he I think viscerally, certainly in his later years, is opposed to exactly the kind of war that Vietnam represented. I mean, that is the absolute perfect example of the kind of war that he has continued to oppose. So I think that your argument certainly must have touched some kind of chord with him, even though he must have been reluctant to acknowledge that.

**WOODS:** Yes, yes, he was. Now, let me ask you this. This is the key thing to me, is that, because the Cold War is presented to us as this unique period of unusual and extraordinary peril, we act as if the wars, the cold and hot wars of that time are not comparable to wars that have occurred since then, that it's not right to compare the War in Iraq with – because we needed Vietnam. In other words, this is the way a conservative would argue, a paleocon would argue: we may have needed some of these hot wars from the 1950s up through 1990. We may have needed some of those. The ones we have now are totally elective and we're against those, but with the Soviet threat, we – So they make it seem as if the paradigm is completely different, so therefore comparisons are invalid.

**PORTER:** Yes, I think that's a fair statement to make about the discourse on America's history of wars, both during the Cold War and after. And I think that's fundamentally wrong. I agree with you that what we really need to do is to examine – we need a totally different paradigm. And I think the paradigm has to be what are the real interests of the United States and what are the real interests that have pushed the United States into these wars.

And you asked the right question earlier in the conversation, and I didn't really spend very much time in answering that, and so let me go back to that question. Because in the case of Vietnam, I indicated that it was indeed the bureaucratic interests of the military and the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Pentagon that were really primarily responsible for this. And I indicated that the Joint Chiefs told this researcher that they believed that they would get more money out of Congress by having troops in South Vietnam. It was that level of narrow, bureaucratic self-interest that pushed them into making a fateful decision that was not in the interest of the United States.

And I think that's – There were other things as well. In my book, I talk about the fact that it was not the theory of falling dominos. They knew, because the CIA told them over and over again in the 1950s and right up until in the early 1960s that there were

not going to be falling dominos all over Southeast Asia. At worst, it was going to be Cambodia and Laos that would follow South Vietnam into the communist orbit, if you will, but not the rest of Southeast Asia. That wasn't going to happen.

What was likely to happen, they were told by the CIA, is that Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand will go neutralist and they will not participate in a Cold War against China. And that was what was unacceptable not just to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, but to the civilians who were at the Pentagon, in the State Department, the hawks that were supporting this war. They wanted to continue to have all those military bases surrounding China. They wanted to have a phalanx of anti-communist allies throughout Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia that we could cite to support our continued hostile policy toward China. Of course, in the end, we gave it up because, who did it? It was Nixon and Kissinger. They had an opening to China and ended the Cold War against China on their own. But in 1964, '65, this was what was on the minds of the people who finally said, yes, we're going to go to war.

And so this represented a desire to continue the status quo in the Far East because it was good for the bottom line. It was good for the justification of U.S. military bases, of the alliances, of all of the money that went into that and the jobs that went into that and the prestige. All those things were on the line, and they were unwilling to give it up.

And let me just add that that paradigm can be applied, in my view, to every single one of the wars that we have fought in the post-Cold War period, starting with the First Gulf War, which was a war that was really started by Dick Cheney, who was then Secretary of Defense in the George H.W. Bush administration, in order to find a post-Cold War rationale to replace the Soviet Union, which was no longer available.

**WOODS:** Well, as we wrap up, I want to share I guess my main reason for being pessimistic. And I don't like being pessimistic. It's not my natural temperament, and maybe you can lift me out of it – or maybe you're going to make me more pessimistic. I don't know. But when I think about, let's say, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, okay, well, they want probably to increase their budget just like any other part of the government.

**PORTER:** Right.

**WOODS:** But when the Fish and Wildlife Service asks for a budget increase, you don't have this response among the general public that the Fish and Wildlife Service keep us safe and they are sacrificially offering themselves in the defense of our way of life. They don't have that special advantage. Whereas the military interest, they have that advantage. We stand up for soldiers on the airplane and soldiers get a 10% discount at the ice cream parlor and things like that. It has suffused American society, and it is very hard, therefore, to say to people: just because somebody's calling for military intervention does not mean that, therefore, the correct, patriotic, moral approach is for you to stand up and salute and then disparage everybody who doesn't. There's something much more venal and crude going on here. It seems impossible to crack through. And I feel like the military interests and military industrial complex must get a good chuckle out of this, how easy it is to snooker people, because you just get them waving the flag and they think they're doing something that they've been taught to do

as kids and their daddy taught them to do, which is to back the military. How do you crack through that?

**PORTER:** Well, you're absolutely right, Tom. That is the essence of the political problem that we have with American wars. I couldn't agree more. And I think that that goes back to several decades of misinformation passed on by the news media, of course, but I think historians, those people who are supposedly out to capture the truth and to relay it to people who are most concerned about understanding the truth, have to bear a huge amount of blame here for failing to put together an accurate picture of the past.

And so we have this paradigm that, as you suggest, has never been cracked, really, that what's really at stake here is an honorable set of military institutions without distinguishing between those people who have made sacrifices and who have to be honored for their sacrifices, but at the same time have been sent to war by people who have been motivated by – whether they acknowledge it or not. And I think this is a question that I cannot really answer personally, the extent to which they understand that they have their own organizational and personal interest at stake. These are people who are divorced from the interests of both the American people and from the interests of the rank and file troops who are sent to war. And that is, in my view, the essence of this problem.

And so we have to create a new paradigm that makes this distinction clear and that shows that the national security elite, which is profiting not just in terms of the corporate allies of the Pentagon and the military services, but the bureaucratic officials themselves, the people who stand atop these most powerful bureaucracies the world has ever known – they profit personally and organizationally from this. And that point has to be driven home. I'm trying to find a way to publish a book that will make this point, and that's my challenge in the coming weeks and months and years. But I think that that's the problem that we face. No one really understands that. Even people who are antiwar don't understand it.

**WOODS:** Well, your book is called *Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam*. I'm going to link to that of course at the show notes page, [TomWoods.com/1055](http://TomWoods.com/1055). Do you have a website I can direct people to?

**PORTER:** Well, I'm ashamed to say that I don't, Tom. I should, and I've been thinking about how to do that and I just haven't pulled the trigger on it yet, but I'm going to be doing so in future. But I'm published in a number of places, including *The American Conservative*, *Truthout*, and the *Consortiumnews*. Those are perhaps the few places that I've published in the most in the last couple of years.

**WOODS:** All right, I'll see if I can find a Gareth Porter archive over there and I'll link to that on the show notes page as well. Well, thanks for your time today. I mean, obviously there's a lot that could be discussed here, but I just wanted to get some basic – just this short conversation is probably more and better information than anybody's likely to find anywhere on this, so I appreciate that. Thank you.

**PORTER:** Well, I thank you for your interest. Thanks so much for having me on, Tom.

