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“Uneasy Allies: The Americanization of Sexual Politics in South Vietnam”

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Uneasy Allies: The Americanization of Sexual Politics in South Vietnam

If the military aspects of this war could be separated from the political, social and economic -- and they can't -- I'd say we have come a long way in a year.¹

– General William C. Westmoreland, Commander,
U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, 1966

What Westmoreland and his contemporaries living in Vietnam had already recognized in 1966, few in Washington chose to fully engage. U.S. nation building efforts in Vietnam focused on the countryside by securing hamlets or promoting the growth of more hearty rice crops, but the practice of side-stepping urban problems, where the majority of U.S. troops serving in-country lived and worked among civilians, allowed economic inflation, corruption, and the sex trade to flourish. Westmoreland's comment came during Senator J. William Fulbright's Senate Foreign Relations Committee Hearings on the legitimacy of the war in Vietnam, and only days after the titillating accusation from the Senator that Saigon was "both figuratively and literally an American brothel."² The Whitehouse quickly swept the issue aside as an irrelevant distraction. Sex, they felt along with many other Americans, was just a part of war. They failed to recognize in those early days, however, that sexual politics wove into many aspects of society upsetting traditional social and power boundaries, as well as disrupting political relations. I use the term sexual politics generally, to refer to political or diplomatic exchanges between diplomats,

¹ "Quotes by General Westmoreland at Press Conference," 2 July 1966, #7 History File, 29 May - 17 July 99, Box 8, Papers of William C. Westmoreland, Lyndon Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, TX.

² "Fulbright Calls Saigon 'An American Brothel'" *Saigon Post*, May 9, 1966, 1.

government officials, and U.S. or South Vietnamese militaries, as well as North Vietnam, over the various encounters of sexual or inter-personal intimate relationships that formed between foreign servicemen and civilians in South Vietnam and their repercussions.³ This includes, but is not limited to, debates over the legality of prostitution and the penalties for the purchase of sex. Beyond the brothels, international sexual politics also struggled to determine daily in-country contact between GIs and civilians, inter-cultural marriage laws, the placement of rest and relaxation facilities, punishment for crimes of sexual violence, and the laws regarding the adoption of orphaned children born to foreign fathers.

Foreign policy anxieties over the so called “American brothel” in 1966 evolved into a far more complicated series of concerns for President Richard Nixon and his advisors only a few years later. Skyrocketing venereal disease rates, rape, Amer-Asian orphans, rampant corruption, economic destabilization, and pleas to reunite lost lovers characterize some of the diverse elements of sexual politics officials negotiated later in the war. For the purposes of this article, I will focus on the debate and policy shifts tied to prostitution eradication and education policies through the war’s most active years, 1966 to early 1973. Nixon, his generals, and his advisors struggled to recover from years of the Johnson administration half-heartedly following South Vietnam’s lead in eradicating prostitution-related problems. Years of largely unregulated sexuality negatively affected American relations with their Vietnamese allies and threatened to sabotage psychological warfare tactics aimed at American hopes of winning the “hearts and

³ Mary Louise Roberts uses the phrase “sexual relations” in her book on sexual encounters in World War II, *What Soldiers Do: Sex and the American GI in World War II France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013). I have chosen to use the term “politics” as the relationship between the two countries over how to handle sexual or romantic encounters allude to a prolonged power struggle between the two that “politics” expresses more directly than “relations” in the Vietnam War context. I argue that Johnson’s politics toward sexual politics in Vietnam stemmed from his views on Vietnam and his administration’s gendering of the nation as feminine, but the gendered aspect of sexual politics is far less prominent during the Nixon period.

minds” of civilians.⁴ The slow shift toward more active American participation in sexual politics moved briskly forward after 1969. As the war underwent military and political Vietnamization, social policy towards intimacy followed a reverse trajectory in the Nixon era which I have dubbed an Americanization of sexual politics. The Americanization of sexual politics refers to efforts conducted by American military and diplomatic personnel to enact policies to curb the negative effects of sexual relationships between U.S. forces and Vietnamese civilians. This includes, but is not limited to, prostitution, dating, rape, marriage, and children born to GI fathers and civilian mothers. This article specifically addresses the question of how South Vietnam and the U.S. sought to control prostitution-related problems, the most prevalent of these encounters. The rapid expansion of the industry following the Americanization of the war in 1965 offers an unsurprising repercussion in increased troop numbers, but the scope of the industry challenged military and government officials unlike earlier wars and created a dynamic surrounding sexual politics that few scholars have explored from a policy perspective.⁵

As the protracted nature of the war became clear by 1969, so too did the risks associated with GI-civilian intimacy in its many forms, most notably prostitution. In the previous policy of checked support for South Vietnamese anti-prostitution laws including brothel closures and limiting GIs allowed in urban centers, Americans took a more reactionary stance and only helped in a limited degree. They assumed that troops would inevitably engage in sexual relationships

⁴ The U.S. military used the term psychological warfare when referring to their interactions with civilians, who they recognized as a crucial element in stabilizing to succeed in the larger war effort.

⁵ Prostitution in Vietnam has received considerable attention in popular culture from films like *Full Metal Jacket* or *Casualties of War*, but few scholars have devoted serious attention to the topic. Prostitution and sexuality have arisen as themes in several recent publications on Vietnam from the colonial period through the war, including: Trọng Phụng Vũ and Shaun Kingsley Malarney, *Lục Xi: Prostitution and Venereal Disease in Colonial Hanoi* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011); Heather Marie Stur, *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Keith, Jeffrey A. 2011. *Between the Paris of the Orient and Ho Chi Minh City: Imaginings and Reportage in Wartime Saigon, 1954-1975* (PhD diss., University of Kentucky, 2011); Richard Bernstein, *The East, the West, and Sex: A History of Erotic Encounters* (New York: Knopf, 2009).

with the local women.⁶ During the Nixon years, the far more active posture of the U.S. toward sexual politics came about through necessity rooted in the repeated failures of these reactionary policies. In addition, Vietnamization of the war and a push toward negotiations shifted the lens in South Vietnam toward the post-war era and brought the economic realities of American spending and aid into sharp focus amid the growing anti-war movements rising in the wake of the 1968 Tet Offensive.⁷

The United States and South Vietnam sought to reconcile their concerns over GI-civilian intimacy following the 1966 “Brothel Debate” through two primary means. First, both governments tried to repress the industry through the closure of bars, round-ups of prostitutes, and restrictions on how American troops interacted with civilians. The U.S., however, had little interest in fully pursuing a plan so potentially detrimental to troop morale. Conversely, they favored the treatment for the associated problems of venereal disease and corruption. The U.S. established clinics, nominally for the care and treatment of local women and not for their real purpose of helping eliminate disease among U.S. GIs.⁸ The clinics hoped to create opportunities for the education and treatment for women working illegally as sex workers, but struggled to employ Vietnamese medical workers who resisted any association with the illegal practices. Policies shaped under the conflicting ideologies of South Vietnamese laws on morality and U.S. interest in military morale led the nations to alternatively taking leadership roles regarding social policy in their uneasy alliance. This article examines why and how the Americanization of sexual

⁶ “Preventative Medicine in Vietnam, 1965-1966,” Proceedings of a Symposium of the Office of the Surgeon, United States Army, Vietnam, 27-28 June 1966, Robert Joy Collection, Texas Tech University, Vietnam Virtual Archive.

⁷ George Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, fourth edition (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2002 [1979]), 281-283.

⁸ Memo to The Minister of Health from Assistant Director for Public Health, “V.D. Clinic Le Loi Hospital, Vung Tau,” April 23, 1970; Box 32; Folder 1603-03 Venereal Disease – 1970: Advisory Team 79 (Vung Tau City Municipal Advisory Team) Administrative and Operational Records, 1967-1970, MACV/Office of Civil Operations and Rural Dev. Support (CORDS), Record Group 472; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

politics took root by first establishing the context of social problems related to intimacy during the war and its connections to the ideologies of French colonialism, and then by depicting the shift from the prominence of Vietnamese eradication programs to the period of Americanization where U.S. military and aid officials took the lead in instituting education, control, and treatment programs for prostitution related problems.

Historical Background: French Colony to “American Brothel”

Prior to U.S. involvement, inter-cultural intimacy and prostitution in South Vietnam received considerably less global attention. In line with imperial ideologies of sexualized colonial subjects, however, Europeans characterized women from the three main areas that make up modern day Vietnam, as well as Cambodia and Laos as desirable, exotic and sensual objects.⁹ French colonial control in Indochina spanned roughly seventy years from the late nineteenth century until 1954 with a four year interchange of Japanese control during World War II. Sexuality and exoticism of the “orient” during the colonial period continued on into the post-colonial era despite legal changes under the Diem government in the early 1960s meant to discourage sexual promiscuity. During this period, popular culture created an expectation that exotic Eastern women awaited Western men in Vietnam.¹⁰ Foreign imagery of the newly divided Vietnam during this period went from one of a French colony to American brothel, but the outside perception of sexuality remained consistent.

In 1956, the Saigon “Girl of the Week Club,” an escort service for Western men, allowed Foreign Service officers to indulge in the city’s erotic nightlife without ever needing to enter a

⁹ Dana S. Hale, *Races on Display: French Representations of Colonized Peoples, 1886-1940* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 72.

¹⁰ The adoption of colonial-era stereotypes of Asian women by Americans forms the first chapter of my dissertation in progress, *Foreign Affairs: American Policy and the Making of Love and War in Vietnam*. I argue that French treatment and portrayal of the Vietnamese largely shaped the United States’ understanding of Vietnamese culture. The West’s presence as academics from the MSU program and as government advisors in Saigon during the pre-war years shaped their relationship for the subsequent decade and forged the way in which Americans interacted with civilians.

brothel. The author insisted, “Scandal has wrecked more homes and careers in Foreign Service than you can shake a chopstick at” but this should not inhibit one’s ability to purchase sex in Vietnam.¹¹ As part of the duties of the Michigan State University Vietnam Advisory Group aiding the new South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem in the establishment of law, order, and a more culturally sensitive dialog, they obtained a brochure for this service termed, “Sex by Subscription.” The flyer illustrates the ubiquity of vice culture and sheds light on the sexual perceptions and expectations of officials working abroad in Southeast Asia. For married men traveling with families, the brochure instructed, “they must be discrete” to avoid possible scandal. Rather, the subscription delivered three women to hotels or apartments for fifteen dollars per week. It offered both fantasy and convenience. As such, even the earliest of American advisors in Vietnam contended with an already established culture of sexual expectation, and the related political and social concerns of corrupting local women and spreading disease, in the midst of legislation, elections, and nation building efforts.

The representations of civilian women in the advertisement indicate the acceptable language of Foreign Service officials. The author referred to the women as “dolls [...] dressed in European clothes” to make them more accessible.¹² An exotic fantasy, but not overly so. The ethnic differences between Southeast Asian women add layers to the stereotype of the eroticized East. Each ethnicity, the advertisement boasts, had characteristics that might make them more attractive to any particular man. It described Annamites as slender, Cambodians as voluptuous, and Laotians as sensual. While these distinctions reveal little about the actual nature of Southeast Asian women, they say a lot about how foreigners viewed them and the market open to sex

¹¹ While the origins of the document are not known, even as a spoof it would point to the same belief system regarding sexual expectations of Vietnamese women and their relationships with Western men; “Sex by Subscription,” 1956, Box 1192, Folder 17, Wesley R. Fishel Papers, University Archives and Historical Collections, Michigan State University Libraries.

¹² Ibid.

workers. The advertisement provided evidence of the revitalized vice culture in cities like Saigon, as members of the MSU program responsible for working with the Diem administration in the establishment of the post-colonial civilian infrastructure evaluated culture and society in the newly formed Republic of Vietnam, commonly referred to as South Vietnam.

Prostitution remained hidden from American wives and families, perhaps, but to many the industry remained a visible threat to moral society in Vietnam. Diem's rise to power partially stemmed from his crack-downs on corruption, and the administration chose to pursue policies favorable to Western and Catholic leanings, including more conservative policies on sex and gambling.¹³ In practice, young GIs arriving in large numbers after 1965 likely expected to meet the sensual Asian women they had seen in films or read about in popular books like Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* and later film adaptation. To change the vice culture would mean to change how Western men interacted with civilians. A task that, much to the chagrin of Vietnamese politicians and police officials, eluded them throughout their alliance with the United States. Attempts to "be discrete" failed and the negative repercussions of the booming industry led to a distinct rise in American interests in managing the sexual behaviors of servicemen by the late 1960s.

The flood of U.S. troops and money after 1965 coupled with growing urban populations contributed to economic inflation, wide-spread corruption and powerful vice industries. Most explicitly, the revitalized illicit sex industry catered to military personnel frequenting bars and dance halls. Still, U.S. officials did not see the booming industry as much of a problem, aside from a noticeable growth in venereal disease rates. Locally it created higher levels of concern as the interactions violated South Vietnamese laws and challenged both old and new cultural

¹³ Jessica Chapman's account of Diem's fight against the Binh Xuyen and organized crime illustrates the instrumentality his attacks on their organization played in his rise to power in the 1950s; *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

taboos.¹⁴ The disregard for these laws seemed to many observers in South Vietnam to mirror a wider problem of American disregard for Vietnamese interests. The North Vietnamese certainly used this message in their propaganda. Even among western-supporters, intimate violations of Vietnamese society provided a point of tension and one that they deemed worth defending.

The Vietnam War both contributed to and helped frame the culture of the long and global 1960s, including the wider social acceptance for sexual promiscuity outside of marriage. Shifting cultural ideas challenged attitudes toward acceptable sexual behavior on a global scale during war, but the belief that soldiers away from home would engage in sexual affairs with civilians had long been seen as acceptable behavior.¹⁵ As others have argued, masculinity in Vietnam War training led to common practices of promoting heterosexuality through the ridicule of perceived homosexual traits and the feminization, or further, dehumanization, of the enemy.¹⁶ For GIs, the dangerous war, expendable income, and expectations of exotic women helped foster the boom in the urban prostitution industries. Young women fleeing to cities for security or more financial opportunities could regard relationships with U.S. servicemen as an opportunity for survival.¹⁷ While not all women who engaged in intimate relationships with Americans did so as prostitutes, many carried out long-term and meaningful relationships with servicemen resulting in marriage

¹⁴ Extra-marital affairs were made illegal, as well as divorce and by 1962, prostitution and contraception as well. Diem's sister-in-law and first lady Madame Nhu lobbied for the 1959 and 1961 *Code of the Family* as well as the 1962 Law for the Protection of Morality which imposed the restrictions to help women obtain new rights within marriage as well as uphold traditional values. For an account of Nhu's personal desire to ban divorce in order to avoid her own, see Monique Brinson Demery, *Finding the Dragon Lady: The Mystery of Vietnam's Madame Nhu* (New York: Public Affairs, 2013), 104.

¹⁵ Petra Goedde, *GIs and Germans: Culture, Gender, and Foreign Relations, 1945-1949* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), Marilyn Hegarty's *Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes: The Regulation of Female Sexuality During World War II* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), and Mary Louis Roberts, *What Soldiers Do*, 2013, all provide excellent analysis on the protracted belief of the U.S. military's accepting attitude toward the male soldier's need to satisfy sexual needs as a part of wartime morale building.

¹⁶ Longley, Kyle. *Grunts: The American Combat Soldier in Vietnam* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2008), 47-49.

¹⁷ Le Ly Hayslip describes the boyfriend/client relationships she developed between young Vietnamese women and American GIs in her memoir of the war using her sister's work as a hostess and girlfriend whose relationships all centered around sex as her primary example; Le Ly Hayslip with Jay Wurts, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (New York: Plume, 2003 [1990]), 169, 198.

or children, outsiders often viewed them as such, sparking comments like those of Fulbright in 1966.¹⁸

The conditions of war have always favored promiscuity.¹⁹ In Vietnam, however, these levels reached new heights and became a part of the war culture and reportage. Advertisements in the *Saigon Post* offered plentiful options for GIs seeking rest and relaxation in bars or massage parlors lining the streets of downtown Saigon.²⁰ Bars and baths advertised hostesses, air conditioning, or the ability to speak English, and always the beauty, youth or grace of their hostesses.²¹ As the war escalated, the advertisements became more conspicuously sexual and numerous, filling pages and even venturing onto the covers of select issues. Sheer demand for entertainment drove the sex industry into the mainstream despite the bans on prostitution, divorce, and adultery enacted by the Diem administration through the 1961 Code of the Family and the 1962 Law for the Protection of Morality.²² At the cultural level, America's respect, albeit limited, of these Vietnamese family and morality laws and their willingness to partially assist Saigon officials with early eradication campaigns against "social evils" like prostitution, illustrates that the U.S. did not simply seek to overrun their allies to establish social and cultural

¹⁸ Bar girls occasionally exhibited limited choice in who they interacted with, but their ability to choose clients rested heavily on their situation, and varied from bar to bar and brothel to brothel. Bar girls often owed a debt to the owner of the bar for rented space or drinks, and worked to repay this debt and earn income.

¹⁹ Medical scholars argue that the disruption of normal social and family activities often leads to increased prostitution during wartime. See, Ruth Sandoval Marcondes and Scott W. Edmonds, "Heath Knowledge of Prostitutes in Saigon, Vietnam: A Study of Health Attitudes and Habits Relating to Venereal Diseases Taken From a Group of Prostitutes," *Revista de Saúde Pública* 1, no. 1 (Jun 1967), 18.; Gavin Hart, "Sexual Behavior in a War Environment" *The Journal of Sex Research* 11, no. 3 (Aug. 1975), 218.

²⁰ The *Saigon Post* was one of the most popular English language papers available in Saigon during the war and along with other tourist magazines such as *Saigon Roundup* targeted Americans in their promotion of bars with names like "American Bar" or "Cowboy Bar."

²¹ Other establishments explicitly stated "no hostesses" to avoid misunderstandings about the waitresses; *Saigon Post*, January 2, 1969, 6.

²² The Family Laws placed bans on numerous activities deemed to potential weaken the morality of traditional family values; Seth Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin: Ngo Dinh Diem and the Origins of America's War in Vietnam, 1950-1963* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 91; The *New York Times* reported on the developments regarding the 1962 morality laws that banned dancing alongside prostitution and other activities, much to the frustration of American Foreign Service employees working in Saigon. In June, the Ambassador agreed to abolish square dancing, and thus officially acquiesced to the new regulations of social relations; Homer Bigart, "U.S. Accedes to Ban On Dances in Saigon," *New York Times*, June 3, 1962, 1.

dominance.²³ Still, they struggled over how exactly to approach inter-cultural wartime intimacy restricted by unfamiliar limits.

Looking to the historiography provides insight into reasons why the U.S. reacted slowly in regards to sexual politics. Previous major conflicts, particularly in Asia, lacked precedent for the situation in South Vietnam. Mary Louis Roberts has illustrated that American understanding of the invasion of occupied France in 1944 included far more sex and debauchery to the discontent of the locals than historians have previously understood, but the relatively small number of GIs and their brief time in country resulted in a much smaller industry.²⁴ Similarly, Petra Goedde depicts how intimacy between Americans and Germans during the occupation allowed for foreign relations and public perceptions of Germany to soften.²⁵ Writing about the Pacific theatre, Sarah Kovner explores the nexus of sex and power in occupied Japan exemplified by the conflict between economic benefits and social problems.²⁶ Most military leaders in Vietnam, however, learned from the starkly different situation in South Korea where, according to Katherine H. S. Moon, the government used sex to “reward” Americans for their support.²⁷ In Vietnam, the illegality of the industry did not stop record wartime levels of venereal disease for the post-penicillin era, which only remained outpaced by the levels in post-war Korea due to its unique open policy. These scholars have shown that examining negotiations of sexual politics provides a better understanding of not only how nations viewed foreign governments and civilians, which Heather Stur begins to examine in her work on gender and the Vietnam War, but

²³ Republic of Viet Nam, *Code of the Family*, 1959.

²⁴ Roberts, *What Soldiers Do*, 2013.

²⁵ Goedde, *GIs and Germans*, 2002.

²⁶ Sarah Kovner, *Occupying Power: Sex Workers and Servicemen in Postwar Japan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

²⁷ Katharine H. S. Moon, *Sex Among Allies: Military Prostitution in U.S.-Korea Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

also how they understood their ability to wield power in foreign relationships and the impact of social and cultural issues like prostitution on war making.²⁸

For GIs in Vietnam, the Vietnamese police's failure, or disinterest, to rigorously enforce government policies allowed sexual encounters with prostitutes to come to represent normative behavior and led to increased venereal disease rates. In an example of scope, an Australian medical facility conducted research and found that married Australian ground soldiers reported having intercourse with prostitutes at rates of nearly fifty percent, and seventy-five percent unmarried Australian troops admitted to being clients of prostitutes.²⁹ An American study conducted at the US Air Force Hospital from 1970 to 1971 saw only 25 venereal disease related hospitalizations over a six-month period, but reported roughly 400 cases of treated per year in that hospital alone.³⁰ The clinics prescribed penicillin for common ailments such as Gonorrhea which did not typically require hospitalization. By the later 1960s, the venereal disease rates in Vietnam outpaced those seen in Korea a decade previously and matched rates not seen since the World War I era, before penicillin became more readily available.³¹ Before the rates of disease were fully calculated or hit their record levels, the staggering growth of the prostitution had already attracted the world's attention only one year into the war.

The debate over sexual encounters in Vietnam first entered into the American public purview with media coverage of Senator Fulbright's controversial lecture "The Arrogance of

²⁸ Heather Stur, *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Additional work on military interactions with civilians in the Philippines and Thailand show cultures more willing to condone the persistence of the sex industry with American GIs; Sandra Pollock Sturdevant and Brenda Stoltzfus. *Let the Good Times Roll: Prostitution and the U.S. Military in Asia* (New York: New Press, Norton, 1993).

²⁹ Gavin Hart, "Sexual Behavior in a War Environment" *The Journal of Sex Research* 11, no. 3 (Aug. 1975).

³⁰ MAJ Stephen R. Shapiro, USAF, MC and LTC Louis C. Breshi, USAF, MC, "Venereal Disease in Vietnam: Clinical Experience at a Major Military Hospital" *Military Medicine* 139, no. 5 (May 1974): 374-379.

³¹ Jerome H. Greenberg, M.D., "Venereal Disease in the Armed Forces" *The Medical Clinics of North America* 56, no. 5 (September 1972): 1087-1100.

Power” and his claim two days later on May 8, 1966 that Saigon was an American brothel.³² Fulbright’s brothel accusation came in the wake of the Senate Foreign Relations Hearings questioning the United States’ role and purpose in Vietnam which had begun that February.³³ He argued that the Vietnamese resented “the disruptive effect of our strong culture upon their fragile one,” and cited reports of Vietnamese men forced to send their wives and daughters to work as bar girls and mistresses.³⁴ He dubbed the possible problem of over-saturating Vietnamese society as one of “fatal impact.” Fulbright labeled this impact “of the rich and strong on the poor and weak,” as a primary cause of resistance to American power in the region. He, in part, blamed Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara for boasting about sending 9.2 pounds of goods per day for each GI, much of which ended up on the black market. Like Fulbright’s metaphor, prostitution represented both the moral-challenging vice culture and the solicitation of Vietnamese culture to benefit and pacify American needs.

On May 11th, Fulbright took his allegations to McNamara directly during the Secretary’s testimony in front of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. When asked to comment on the brothel allegations by press dispatches, McNamara “displayed indignation” at the question. He quipped, “I don’t think we ought to characterize our men by that name... I don’t think we ought to characterize the city by that name. I haven’t been to Saigon since November but it wasn’t a brothel then and I don’t think that it is today.” He concluded, “I don’t mean there are not prostitutes in Saigon. There are prostitutes in Washington. And I don’t mean that servicemen don’t patronize prostitutes there just as they do in the U.S. But nobody has called Washington a

³² *Vietnam Addresses, Arrogance of Power, Senator Fulbright [sic] (Saigon an American brothel)*, 89th Cong., 2nd sess., *Congressional Record* (May 17, 1966): 10803; “Ground Action,” *Saigon Post*, May 5, 1966, 1.

³³ Taking place midday, CBS and NBC initially aired the hearings, but after they began to garner more than expected attention, the Johnson administration put pressure on the networks to return to the regular programming of *I Love Lucy* re-runs; Woods, Randall Bennett. *J. William Fulbright, Vietnam, and the Search for a Cold War Foreign Policy* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 116-117.

³⁴ “Fulbright Calls Saigon ‘An American Brothel’” *Saigon Post*, May 9, 1966, 1.

brothel.”³⁵ With the levels of disease and corruption of unchecked social interactions not yet apparent, McNamara despised the efforts to shift attention away from his prepared testimony on the effects of American bombing campaigns on the morale of their enemies.³⁶

The “brothel” debate accelerated on May 17th, when Minnesota Senator Eugene McCarthy requested Fulbright’s lecture be introduced to the Congressional Record.³⁷ This sparked a whirlwind of press coverage on the issue highlighting America’s shifting cultural anxieties regarding war and sexuality. Fulbright later claimed to regret his declaration of Saigon as an “American brothel,” but the damage had been done. He apologized for the way the media had reported his statements, but did not deny that the statements were true.³⁸ Prostitution and cultural infiltration had become a significant part of the war’s culture and the American military had to compensate for the activities of its soldiers. Sex in Vietnam could not simply be an acceptable means of morale building for the U.S., but became a delicate point of contention over morale versus morality, discretion versus elimination, and the importance of safety to national interests’ on all sides.

Fulbright’s reports of Saigon as an “American Brothel” brought sexual politics in Vietnam to national attention for the first time as prostitution escalated alongside the war, efforts to downplay the industry and its effects on foreign relations failed to solve growing associated

³⁵ Belair Jr., Felix, “M’Namara Says Foe’s Hopes Fade” *New York Times*, May 12, 1966, 1, 14.

³⁶ During this session, McNamara’s testimony was on the effects of bombings on the morale of the National Liberation Front.

³⁷ It was entered along with two of his other addresses challenging the White House intellectuals’ abilities to handle of the war *Vietnam Addresses*, 89th Cong., 2st sess., *Congressional Record* (May 17, 1966): 10803.

³⁸ The media reported that Fulbright was speaking against the troops, but he contended that he was referring instead to “the inevitable impact on a fragile Asian society of Western soldiers ... behaving in the way that is to be expected of men at war.” Although he claimed to regret the coverage, he followed up with members of the air programs in Vietnam who confirmed his claims; “Fulbright Declares He Regrets Charge of U.S. ‘Arrogance’” *New York Times*, May 18, 1966, 8.

problems like disease, inflation, and anti-American sentiment.³⁹ While the conflicts within the alliance stretched far beyond inter-cultural intimacy, the unease over sexual politics illustrates how the confident nature of U.S. power failed to initially take into consideration the significant roles culture and sexuality played in shaping Vietnamese attitudes towards Americans, and thus, American policy regarding sexuality.

The Vietnamese Eradication Campaigns

The South Vietnamese government(s) actively participated as agents of social and cultural policy regarding the behavior of U.S. servicemen in Vietnam and not simply as a puppet state fulfilling American needs.⁴⁰ As troop numbers in Vietnam grew, a focus on suppressing brothel culture ranked highly at the local level with city mayors and police forces who dictated day-to-day eradication operations, especially in highly populated urban spaces. Their daily attacks against inter-cultural intimacy, specifically prostitution, evolved from the illegality of the industry and the recognition that it often bred social and police corruption. The Diem administration merged traditional Vietnamese conservatism toward sexuality with similar Western and Catholic views toward prostitution insisting that extra-marital affairs potentially threatening to the core values professed by the young government.⁴¹ Vietnamese officials pushed

³⁹ Susan Brownmiller addresses the rising of American involvement with brothels escalating in line with the war in her classic 1975 feminist study, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (New York: Fawcett Books, 1993 [1975]), 93.

⁴⁰ Historiographical debates over the role and agency of the South Vietnamese state extend beyond the scope of this article except to note that in relation to sexual politics, the governments, especially that of Nguyen Van Thieu, persistently resisted acting as a pawn to the Americans and took a firm stance against behavior he viewed as potentially detrimentally to Vietnamese moral culture. At the same time, the United States used the negotiations with the North Vietnamese to pressure Thieu to act in their favor. The most telling archival documents I have seen regarding Thieu's pressure for continued American military and economic support are in the Kissinger Papers at the Nixon Presidential archives; Memo, "July 4 Meeting with Thieu," Henry A. Kissinger, July 4, 1971; Box 103; Folder "Saigon – Background Documents [1 of 2]." National Security Council Files, Henry A. Kissinger Office Files, Country Files - Far East, Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Archives, Yorba Linda, CA; John Prado also shed light on this relationship in his 2003 article for the Vietnam Veterans of America website, "Diplomacy on Multiple Fronts," www.vva.org, January/February 2003.

⁴¹ City-level officials like the Mayor for Vung Tau in 1971, Major Nguyen Van Tinh, showed a particular concern for not violating the constitutional bans on prostitution; City Mayor, Maj Nguyen Van Tinh, to Municipal Senior Advisor MACCORDS, Lawrence L. Swain, Vung Tau, August 21, 1969; Entry # A1 724; Box 32; Folder 1605-

against demand for access to sex for foreigners by upholding this set of desired moral standards through proactive anti-prostitution campaigns, strict intercultural marriage policies, and resistance to venereal disease campaigns they feared might be misconstrued by GIs as legalizing prostitution. Even those at lower levels in the government stood up to Americans to an extent, although they typically acquiesced to some proposals as the war waned on. In contrast, many Vietnamese civilians, including peasant refugees who relocated to cities for safety, benefitted financially by pursuing relationships, sexual or otherwise, with Americans.⁴² Prostitution offered the fastest means to more financial stability but the unforeseen costs of the industry in terms of economics, health, and security which prompted more political and military attention.

When the Americans began sending combat troops to Vietnam in 1965, Vietnamese police forces in Saigon had already established a practice of regularly raiding bars and brothels frequented by U.S. servicemen. Through early fall, nightly raids by Vietnamese police resulted in dozens of arrests of prostitutes and occasionally brothel-owners, while the servicemen were sent back to their barracks. During an August 11th brothel raid, six women were caught in the act of prostituting themselves. Only the women and the bar owner were taken into custody, their male patrons were not.⁴³ The placement of blame on the women for repercussions of prostitution, like disease, further heightened tensions. The raids, meant to discourage the instantly popular Saigon nightlife, failed to hinder its growth. American currency proved too powerful, sparking a culture of black markets selling sex and goods in addition to the growing culture of protection and corruption funded by the inflationary economy. Fear of what might happen after the

05 Venereal Diseases - 1969: Advisory Team 79 (Vung Tau City Municipal Advisory Team) Administrative and Operational Records, 1967-1970, MACV/Office of Civil Operations and Rural Dev. Support (CORDS), Record Group 472; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁴² Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), 624-625.

⁴³ "Brothel Raided," *Saigon Post*, August 11, 1965, 2.

Americans left led some to suggest the government needed to enforce their laws more rigorously.⁴⁴

Due to the anti-prostitution stance of the South Vietnamese, the U.S. reacted differently to the war and sexual relationships than they had in France during World War II, the occupation of Japan, or the Korean War. General Westmoreland initially allowed American forces to aid efforts to shut down bars in the cities, but at the same time gradually allowed a larger sex-work presence around bases. In many reports, they helped bar owners move closer to military camps, or reorganized entertainment venues in secure areas like Long Binh, a base built outside Saigon to keep troops out of close contact with the city.⁴⁵ The efforts to move brothels and institute fines did little to discourage Vietnamese civilians from participating in the practices. Reports claimed girls working near bases occasionally received some forms of medical treatment from the medics that allowed them to continue working, but many of the transferred bars and brothels returned to their original locations along or near Tu Do Street at the epicenter of Saigon's bar area within a matter of months.⁴⁶ Vietnamese bar proprietors and madams viewed brothels set up near bases, like the infamous area known as Sin City in An Khe, as infringing on their profits as these condoned brothels were largely controlled by the U.S. military and requiring weekly check-ups for employees who may have been able to work elsewhere.⁴⁷ Around smaller cities like An Khe and Pleiku, the "semi-official" brothels failed to become an acceptable model nation-wide.⁴⁸ Even if brothels were not overtly sanctioned by the American government, the military attempted to control their actions when they were out of the city-centers.

⁴⁴ "Saigon Editors Speak – Bars," *Saigon Post*, November 30, 1965, 4.

⁴⁵ Meredith Lair, *Armed with Abundance: Consumerism and Soldiering in the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 32-34.

⁴⁶ "Saigon's Mayor Orders Bars to Quit City Center" *New York Times*, March 7, 1972, 6

⁴⁷ Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 64.

⁴⁸ "Saigon Plans to Transfer Prostitutes to Enclosure" *New York Times*, June 7, 1966, 6; Jonathan Randal, "Red-Light Limits Opposed in Saigon" *New York Times*, November 14, 1966, 13

Following Fulbright's brothel claims in June 1966, South Vietnamese Welfare Minister Tran Ngoc Lien revitalized efforts with a large operation seeking to "transfer" Saigon's prostitutes to a "suburban colony" where they could be "kept in an enclosed area, away from the population and under medical control."⁴⁹ In line with the South Vietnamese interest in elimination of the industry, the minister predicted that isolation would help eliminate prostitution and provide an occupational purgatory before moving on to "earn a normal living." Again, the profitability of the industry showed through in the boldness of public protests held in Saigon. Reports suggest that over 600 Vietnamese protested this plan to move the industry out to what they viewed as an underhanded attempt to "legalize" prostitution under state control. The relocation of sex-work outside the city would eliminate the potential of private profits from American spending, cutting them out of one of the most profitable options for those struggling to survive in the inflationary economy.

A year later in December 1967, 200 professionals who represented a reported 50,000 bar girls and taxi dancers marched to protest General Westmoreland's response to Vietnamese official pressures to reduce the negative impacts of U.S. servicemen in the cities, named "Operation MOOSE."⁵⁰ This military-directed program, standing for "Move Out of Saigon Expeditiously," sought to reduce the presence of Americans in Vietnamese city-centers.⁵¹ Although the program reduced the number of troops in Saigon from 71,000 to 36,000 with plans for further cuts, it failed to eliminate the industry which flourished near surrounding bases like

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ The term "taxi dancer" referred to women who danced with customers for a fee. Their services could also be purchased for longer periods of time, like an escort, but their services were not necessarily sexual; William Westmoreland, *Vietnam War: After Action Reports – Lessons Learned Documents – Battle Assessments*, (Beverly Hills: BACM Research, 2009); Also see, "South Vietnam: Cleaning Up Saigon," *Time*, December 1, 1967, web; This represented at least the second attempt to move the majority of U.S. forces from cities. Westmoreland cabled about the concerns and challenges of such a move in August 1966; Cable, Westmoreland to Personnel for Lodge, Sharp, Wheeler, August 1966, April 9, 1966," #77 Eyes Only Message File – TO – 1 July - 30 Sep 66 [2 of 3], William Westmoreland Papers, Lyndon Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, TX.

⁵¹ "South Vietnam: Cleaning Up Saigon," *Time*, December 1, 1967.

the popular coastal base of Vung Tau, just south of Saigon, or by the Long Binh complex, north of the city.⁵² Enough GIs remained and moved through Saigon that bar owners felt their industry was safe. Years after Vietnamese eradication efforts appeared to wane in favor of U.S.-led education and containment, a bar owner reflected, “[t]hey’ve tried to close us down for years but we are still in business.”⁵³ Following repeated failed attempts, businesses no longer feared government crackdowns, only the prospect of the Americans, or more accurately American money, leaving town. Mixed civilian reactions to eradication efforts, including protest marches, reflected the complexity of an industry where many benefitted and many suffered as the previous social structure dissolved.⁵⁴ The sex-work culture of the colonial period turned into a far more visible yet also newly illicit industry during the American War. Not recognizing the potential detriments of the growing industry through mid-1960s, the U.S. military acquiesced to Vietnamese requests by reducing troop numbers in hopes that it might strengthen their relationship, but at the same time their contribution in establishing bars nearer to bases and failing to punish servicemen who violated the laws which served to create more barriers between the allies exemplifying their war-long struggle to collaborate effectively on social issues.⁵⁵

⁵² Attempts to remove the brothels continued throughout the war, including an attempt in March 1972 to close and move 100 bars to an area outside the city near the joint American and South Vietnamese Ton Son Nhut Airbase. This effort was instigated by Saigon’s Mayor Du Kien Thieu who ordered over 100 bars in downtown Saigon and Cholon to close or make the move. By this point, it seems, several of the bars were leaving downtown Saigon, but the industry continued to flourish until the Americans began to leave the following year; “Saigon’s Mayor Orders Bars to Quit City Center” *New York Times*, March 7, 1972, 6; Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* (New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company, 2013), 147; Lair, *Armed with Abundance*, 32-33.

⁵³ “Saigon’s Mayor Orders Bars to Quit City Center” *New York Times*, March 7, 1972, 6.

⁵⁴ Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), 264; In 1967, 200 professionals representing up to reportedly 50,000 bar girls and taxi dancers, or dates for hire, marched to protest the reduction of American troops in urban centers; “South Vietnam: Cleaning Up Saigon,” *Time*, December 1, 1967, web.

⁵⁵ At the National Archives in College Park, I was temporarily given unrestricted access to FOIA protected Military Police Desk Blotter from Vietnam that indicate prostitution between American GIs and Vietnamese women constantly challenged officials who found ways to work around the problems. The women were often taken to the Le Loi Hospital in Vung Tau for V.D. screening while men were charged most commonly with curfew violations. In one particularly clever write-up, a man caught engaged in intercourse with a prostitute was charged with a uniform violation while she was arrested by South Vietnamese police; I uncovered numerous valuable stories like

An undated transcript for a Vietnamese workshop titled “Seminar on the Eradication of Prostitution” held in South Vietnam examined participants on their ages and the nationality of the patrons. The workshop illustrates how the South Vietnamese viewed Americans as the source of much of the prostitution problem and highlighted several bars and regions of Saigon known for illicit activities.⁵⁶ Discussants, however, recognized that restrictions against advertising openly for prostitution only sent the industry underground.⁵⁷ Still, the focus on social problems remained centered on eradication rather than changing the laws despite repeated failures and the flourishing corruption culture of an industry known for steep profits tied closely to the influx of American goods and inflationary spending.⁵⁸

By the early 1970s, Thieu’s focus shifted to the 1971 Presidential election and then steadily to maintaining a voice in the peace negotiations in Paris. Still during this period, Thieu remained concerned over the social problems in South Vietnam and once again his office called for a closure to bars, but like prior years the efforts ultimately failed to make any serious impact.⁵⁹ Prostitution only added to the already tense alliance. Several contested gun-shot deaths of civilians, for instance, motivated the South Vietnamese Minister of National Defense to send

these before the collection was taken away. I was able to obtain access to: USARV/1st Infantry Division, Provost Marshal - Military Police Desk Blotters; 01/13/1967-02/17/1970, Boxes 5-8, Records of the US Forces in Southeast Asia, 1950-1975, Record Group 0472, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

⁵⁶ “Hội thảo về bài trừ mại dâm [sic]” [“Seminar on the Eradication of Prostitution”], n.d., Tài liệu ghi âm 058-04, Vietnamese National Archive Center II, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 2-3.

⁵⁸ The term “bài trừ” for “eradication” or “elimination” of prostitution exists as a standard term in the titles of circulating records related to prostitution at the Vietnamese National Archive Center II in Ho Chi Minh City. Compiled reports focused on the industry’s links to social corruption and the need to eliminate the industries: Hồ sơ v/v bài trừ nạn số đười, mại dâm tại các tỉnh miền Trung Nam phần năm 1968-1973 [Documents related to the eradication of prostitution in the southern part of the central provinces, 1968-1973], Hồ sơ Phủ Thủ Tướng [Prime Minister], Ký hiệu 31232, Vietnamese National Archive Center II, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam; To Department of State from Am Embassy Saigon, Airgram, “GVN Anti-Corruption Campaign,” February 3, 1969, Gov’t of SCVN – Corruption, 1967-73 (4) NSC VN Info Grp: Intel; other Reps NSA, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, MI; To Department of State from Am Embassy Saigon, Airgram, “Corruption In Vung Tau,” November 10, 1967, NSA/NSC VN Info Grp: Intel; Other Reps/Box 2/Gov’t of SCVN – Corruption, 69-73 CD, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, MI; To Department of State from Am embassy Saigon, Airgram, “Recent Events in the Fight Against Corruption,” November 24, 1969, NSA/NSC VN Info Grp/ Box 2/ Gov’t of SCVN, Corruption, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, MI; Lair, *Armed with Abundance*, 207.

⁵⁹ “Saigon is Closing Sleazy Bars for G.I.s” New York Times, December 7, 1971, 10.

hostile letters to Commanding General Creighton Abrams requesting that Americans curb the number of men allowed to leave their compounds and enter the cities yet again.⁶⁰ Still, inflation provided the primary language for the Vietnamese to discuss the industry in a way the Americans would understand. Meeting with Kissinger in 1971, Thieu listed three necessities to win the war: air support, army support, and long-range economic assistance.⁶¹ The U.S. influence on economic inflation directly linked prostitution with black markets which sold everything from hairspray to nude pictures. The U.S. for the most part maintained their position regarding social issues with the continued promotion of discretion over all else, but found their passive stance increasingly problematic. Concerns related to social issues grew more pronounced as the war continued and they compounded with the more dire statistics related to death tolls and bombings. A shift in Nixon's policies to behave more aggressively in relation to South Vietnamese society and the economy showed through in the exceedingly aggressive stance of the U.S. regarding social problems in relation to the pre-1969 policies' of the Johnson administration.

Uneasy Allies: Containment, Corruption, and Venereal Disease

Prior to the Americanization of sexual politics, the global press picked up on the growing prominence of social issues like prostitution in Vietnam while Johnson continued to downplay the importance of vice and corruption that might have tarnished their image abroad.⁶² The long-standing American tradition of intimately engaging with civilian populations abroad had helped his case and caused many to scoff at Fulbright's 1966 "brothel" accusation. That year, the

⁶⁰ Nguyen Van Vy, Minister of National Defense, Republic of Vietnam to Creighton Abrams, Commanding General, US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (Feb 18, 1971), Hồ sơ Phủ Thủ Tướng [Prime Minister], Ký hiệu 1060, Vietnamese National Archive Center II, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

⁶¹ Memo, "July 4 Meeting with Thieu," Henry A. Kissinger, July 4, 1971; Box 103; Folder "Saigon – Background Documents [1 of 2]," National Security Council Files, Henry A. Kissinger Office Files, Country Files - Far East, Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Archives, Yorba Linda, CA.

⁶² References to the prostitution industry tarnishing America's image in Vietnam came before the Fulbright hearings brought the industry's scope to a national audience. In an article from December 1965, journalist Beverly Deepe discussed the perception of the industry as American "decadence" and the dangerous effects the industry had on Saigon's economy and American security; Beverly Deepe, "Bar Hostesses Present Social, Moral Problems," *The Tuscaloosa News*, December 3, 1965, 11.

Kentucky New Era reported, “officials say the situation is nothing new -- that all this has existed before, in Paris, Rome, Naples and the bombed-out cities of occupied Germany after World War II ... and back into the mists of the history of war.”⁶³ These conflation belittled Fulbright’s claims and ignored the significance of the industry that altered South Vietnamese society and strained foreign relations. The perceived connections between sex work and police or political corruption resonated more in 1966 than the more pragmatic considerations of venereal disease that eventually took precedence.⁶⁴

In regards to prostitution’s close relationship with corruption, President Johnson redirected the media to domestic problems, downplaying the importance the private/personal actions of GIs in Vietnam.⁶⁵ In contrast to the Administration’s downplay of vice, anti-war advocates used the issue in their favor. Democratic Senator Ernest Gruening argued that corruption was so widespread that, “it is shielded by its very pervasiveness.”⁶⁶ For the White House, the goal became not to eliminate, but rather to make the problems “less obvious” to outsiders.⁶⁷ Corruption activities including prostitution proved difficult, and in relation to morale, undesirable, to root out. In the end, the seemingly far away social issues appeared more tolerable than more bad press on the war.

Rising Anti-American sentiments directly linked to involvement with civilian populations, however, created tensions over how to balance the U.S.-South Vietnamese alliance

⁶³ “‘American Brothel?’: Bar Girls’ Business Flourished in Saigon,” *Kentucky New Era*, July 7, 1966.

⁶⁴ Leland Gardner’s, *Vietnam Underside!:* “Don’t Worry Mom... We’ve got Penicillin,” (New York: Publisher’s Export, 1966) pointed to the longstanding tradition of Western interest in Vietnamese sexuality, and as his subtitle suggests that venereal disease already represented a concern.

⁶⁵ At a rally in Beaumont, when asked about corruption in Vietnam, Johnson proclaimed, “Certainly they have corruption and we also have it in Boston, in New York, in Washington and in Johnson City. Somebody is stealing something in Beaumont right now,” to a crowd in Beaumont; Gerald Ford Presidential Library. Vietnam Information Group Files: Box 2 - Folder “Government of [South] Vietnam - Corruption, 1967-73 (2)”

⁶⁶ Ernest Gruening, *Corruption in South Vietnam, IV - Must Our Boys Continue To Die To Protect It?*, 90th Cong., 2st sess., *Congressional Record - Senate* (March 8, 1968): 5863.

⁶⁷ David Brown, October 17, 1967, Box 2, NSA/NSC Vietnam Information Group: Intel; Other reps/ Government of South Vietnam - Corruption, 69-73CD, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, MI.

with the practical need to raise GI morale. In order to maintain a positive image of U.S. servicemen's behavior in Vietnam, officials balanced keeping troops safe in the face of loose health regulations and anti-American hostility.⁶⁸ Sources of anti-Americanism were closely monitored, from protests to even the rising popularity of hippy culture and the "mini jupe."⁶⁹ These thigh-flashing skirts represented a loosening of cultural traditions of modesty in Vietnam that many associated with the more conservative *ao dai* tunic and slacks. A 1967 report on the health knowledge of prostitutes reported that this trend had not enveloped all young Vietnamese women, but particularly targeted a generation of city girls coming of age during the war.⁷⁰

On the ground in Vietnam, South Vietnamese and American Military Police worked to limited interactions between civilians and troops. Especially in cities away from Saigon, GIs presented acute risks to the U.S. Cold War strategy of using psychological warfare to promote Western democracy among local populations. Prostitution with its associated culture of drinking, corruption, and occasional violence only added to what was already a tense political relationship. Several contested gun-shot deaths of civilians around the popular coastal city of Qui Nhon, for instance, motivated the South Vietnamese Minister of National Defense, Nguyen Van Vy to send hostile letters to Commanding General Creighton Abrams requesting that Americans needed to curb the numbers of men allowed into cities.⁷¹ The more U.S. servicemen entering cities and villages to visit bars, the greater the risk they would engage negatively with civilians. In addition, he recommended marking certain areas completely off limits. He feared "this bubbled situation may boil into a fiery explosion beyond our control" if civilian protests led to infighting between

⁶⁸ Neil Sheehan, "How Saigon Sees All Those G.I.'s," *New York Times*, May 8, 1966, E3.

⁶⁹ "Miniskirts Create Uproar in Saigon," *The Free Lance-Star*, September 12, 1968, 12.

⁷⁰ , Ruth Sandoval Marcondes and Scott W. Edmonds, "Health Knowledge of Prostitutes in Saigon, Vietnam: A Study of Health Attitudes and Habits Relating to Venereal Diseases Taken From a Group of Prostitutes," *Revista de Saúde Pública* 1, no. 1 (Jun 1967).

⁷¹ Nguyen Van Vy, Minister of National Defense, Republic of Vietnam to Creighton Abrams, Commanding General, US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (Feb 18, 1971), Hồ sơ Phủ Thủ Tướng [Prime Minister], Ký hiệu 1060, Vietnamese National Archive Center II, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

the allies. GIs feared attacks on brothels and rumors flourished about undercover National Liberation Front guerrillas working as prostitutes to launch attacks or obtain information, but the primary means of safety regulations related to venereal disease.⁷²

The efforts to trivialize the impact of the prostitution industry in South Vietnam by figures like McNamara were damaged by subsequent reports illustrating the repercussions of ignoring social problems. In early 1967, General Earle Wheeler warned congress that the venereal disease rates among military men in Vietnam were already ten times higher than their stateside rates. The General expressed surprise at these numbers, but admitted that the military's efforts to minimize the risks were "not eminently successful."⁷³ The rate of 280.7 infections per thousand men in Vietnam represented high rates even for the American military. In the Korean War, the rates had grown as high as 193 per thousand in 1952, but remained far lower than those during Vietnam.⁷⁴ Wheeler placed the blame from these high numbers on the soldiers themselves, suggesting that the high percentage of young troops accounted for much of the behavior.⁷⁵ He also pointed to their morality, suggesting that brief military training could not be expected to alter their desires.

Both medical and social concerns over the repercussions of the booming prostitution industry were more visible in Vietnam than in the United States. The 1967 study on the health knowledge of prostitutes reported that fifty percent of the roughly 5,000 women treated at the Venereal Disease Control Center tested positive.⁷⁶ Although the clinic claimed to provide them

⁷² Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 40.

⁷³ "High Viet VD Rate Revealed," *Air Force Times*, March 1, 1967, 13.

⁷⁴ It is significant to note, however, that in 1967 post-war rates in Korea were higher than Vietnam's at 321.7 cases per thousand.

⁷⁵ He was specifically referring to troops under the age of 25.

⁷⁶ The women seen at the clinic were those arrested by Vietnamese police on suspicion of solicitation. They were then held and treated for illness if necessary.

education as part of their treatment, most were repeat offenders.⁷⁷ Likely due to the government prohibition of contraceptive sales, sixty-two percent reported that they did not use any form of protection while working. Few recognized the symptoms of venereal disease or understood how they were contracted, but mainly feared the financial consequences of getting sick or pregnant.⁷⁸

The study relied on testimony from 60 women interviewed by a female Vietnamese social worker. Despite the limitations of a survey style questionnaire, it presents useful information about the socio-economic status and basic understanding of healthcare for prostitutes. Only twenty-eight percent of the women were over the age of twenty-five, and many were as young as fifteen years old. Education and literacy rates among the women were low, with only two percent having had more than five years of schooling. Home lives were equally desperate as ninety-one percent did not have running water in their home and lived in overcrowded conditions with fewer than ten percent having their own room. In addition, seventy percent reported being married, and sixty-two percent had at least one child. The report did not indicate if these children were with spouses or patrons, but concerns over being able to marry and have children worried many. Despite their ignorance concerning the risks of their profession, almost all of the women surveyed feared contracting a venereal disease.⁷⁹ These fears provided U.S. military and civilian aid workers with a more receptive audience for their envisioned treatment and education programs.

⁷⁷ Seventy-two percent reported they had been to the clinic more than once and twenty-five percent had been in more than five times; Marcondes and Edmonds, "Heath Knowledge of Prostitutes," 18-19.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 19, 21.; Many feared getting sick due to the financial burden and "later consequences" related to problems with marriage or pregnancies.

⁷⁹ In stark contrast to this and other medical reports on prostitutes and prostitution during the war, Mai Lan Gustafsson's "'Freedom. Money. Fun. Love.': The Warlore of Vietnamese Bargirls" *The Oral History Review* 38, no. 2 (2001): 308-330, paints a picture of bargirls working happily for their American clients. She points to this discrepancy in her article between these women and what she calls "more traditional Vietnamese women, who spoke solely of their suffering and the horror of war."

The 1967 study offers a view into the mindset of Vietnamese street prostitutes arrested in Saigon. Throughout Vietnam the sex trade varied dramatically with uneven access to care or knowledge about the repercussions of their work. From bar girls who worked in some of the rare air-conditioned locations in Saigon to brothel and alley sex workers and those sold by their families, the diversity complicated potential policy programs. While those working in elite clubs profited richly during the war, those working from the streets often survived day-to-day.⁸⁰ The statistics on health knowledge provided an alarming data set for the American government to digest concerning the percentage of prostitutes who did not comprehend how venereal disease spread or what the symptoms looked like. The lack of control over the industry in Vietnam presented a risk to the health of the numerous soldiers who visited these women for their services. Prostitution and corruption spread rapidly throughout South Vietnam, and the hotly debated treatment of venereal disease illustrates that both governments took notice.

To maintain a positive image of GI behavior in Vietnam, military leadership considers how to keep the troops safe and happy during their inevitable contact with civilians. Safety risks came in many forms from the diseases caused by unsafe sexual practices, to the security weaknesses caused by distracted and often intoxicated soldiers. Brothels provided Nation Liberation Front infiltrators with targets that represented both the indulgences of the West and capitalism, but also the intimate violations of Vietnamese women by Americans. In addition to this, the concern over the U.S.' image played a role in maintaining a safe environment for soldiers. Primarily, the South Vietnamese complained about the effects of the Americans on the economy and daily life, and officials worried this resentment could develop into open hostility.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Sheehan, *Bright and Shining Lie*, 264-265.

⁸¹ Neil Sheehan, "How Saigon Sees All Those G.I.'s," *New York Times*, May 8, 1966, E3.

The potential of prostitution to attract negative attention from allies, anti-war protesters or communist publications slandering the West's behavior in Southeast Asia compounded the negative repercussions of U.S.-Vietnamese intimacy.⁸² The Nation Liberation Front's Liberation Radio broadcasted reports labeling the industry as a "humiliating scourge" as early as 1965.⁸³ In 1966, Nguyễn Hữu Dương published a book titled *To Prostitute Oneself: A Social Evil? A Career? A Form of Slavery?* debating the varying perspectives arising as a new mass of foreigners moved into a space long associated with French rule in Vietnam, and thus linking the Americans to imagery of colonialism.⁸⁴ The following year, in 1967, the Vietnamese Women's Union published a report on the problem. United Press International, a news agency focused on global civil rights, ran a story on the sharp rise in venereal disease in areas with high concentrations of American GIs. The Vietnamese Women's Union reported this story in an issue of their anti-American publication *Women of Vietnam*. In particular, these reports highlighted the spread of venereal disease and abuse of Vietnamese women. The spread of venereal disease and its links to prostitution provided useful propaganda against the American presence in South Vietnam. The links, they reported, threatened the dignity of Vietnamese women and the future of the Vietnamese race. In response to these growing concerns, sympathetic South Vietnamese held forums to discuss how to handle the future of their problems, and eventually set up the "Committee in Defense of the Rights and Dignity of Vietnamese Women," a domestically developed program to better educate Vietnamese women of their options.⁸⁵

In the wake of increasingly negative attention, the U.S. military made efforts to establish "friendship councils" to open a dialog between the Vietnamese public, American military

⁸² Bernstein, *The East, the West, and Sex*, 226.

⁸³ Quoted in, *Ibid.*, 226.

⁸⁴ Nguyễn Hữu Dương. *Mãi dâm: Một tệ đoan? nghề nghiệp? Hình thức nô lệ?* Saigon: Văn Học, 1966.

⁸⁵ Chi Tam, "Why the Setting Up In Saigon of 'Committee in Defence [sic] of the Rights and Dignity of Vietnamese Women'?" *Women of Vietnam*, no. 1, Hanoi, Democratic Republic of Vietnam (1967): 20-21.

command, and GIs. Lines of communications were accompanied by limitations of the number of GIs stationed in the cities and allowed out of the barracks at once and the establishment of recreation facilities for soldiers away from the city centers.⁸⁶ At the same time, contemporary western media often portrayed the industry as harmless, reporting that the prostitutes simply added “brilliant splashes of color to the drab, war-tinted thoroughfares,” while others feared possible repercussions regarding the livelihood of prostitutes after the American withdrew.⁸⁷

To reach an agreement over prostitution in South Vietnam, the allied governments needed to strike a balance between one nation’s need for morale and the other’s concerns over morality. Early efforts at collaboration failed to stabilize vice problems. The demonstrated lack of engaged American interest and the industry’s overall profitability prevented its complete elimination. Monitoring local police, American Embassy reports reveal that American’s viewed South Vietnamese anti-vice efforts as a mockery, noting that “the force also ‘protects’ most of [the city’s] bars and brothels.”⁸⁸ This rise of a “protection” culture surrounding those engaged in the prostitution industry allowed it to continue to flourish.⁸⁹ From early into the war, determining

⁸⁶ Jacques Nevard, “U.S. and Vietnam Form Councils to Avoid Incidents in Saigon” *New York Times*, June 10, 1965, 4.

⁸⁷ “Miniskirts Create Uproar in Saigon,” *The Free Lance-Star*, September 12, 1968, 12; Charles Mohr, “Amid Cease-Fire Battles, Peasants Remain Stoical” *New York Times*, February 1, 1973.

⁸⁸ David Brown, NSA/NSC VN Info Grp: Intel; Other reps/Box 2/Gov’t of SCVN - Corruption, 69-73CD, October 17, 1967, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, MI.

⁸⁹ Despite the publicized coverage of the growing corruption problem, officials made little progress in their attempts to clean up the South. The National Police claims to actively engage in anti-corruption activities failed to make an impact. Over two years, 604 policemen were arrests for alleged misconduct and most were punished for their actions. Statistics show of these 604 cases, 286 involved corruption allegations. The punishment for convictions ranged from disciplinary transfers (25%), demotion (20%), and reprimands (25%). Cases with lesser punishment or a combination of punishments constitutes the remaining 30% of cases.; To Department of State from Am Embassy Saigon, Airgram, “GVN Anti-Corruption Campaign,” February 3, 1969, Gov’t of SCVN – Corruption, 1967-73 (4) NSC VN Info Grp: Intell; other Reps NSA, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, MI; To Department of State from Amembassy Saigon, Airgram, “Corruption In Vung Tau,” November 10, 1967, NSA/NSC VN Info Grp: Intel; Other Reps/Box 2/Gov’t of SCVN – Corrpption, 69-73 CD, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, MI; To Department of State from Am embassy Saigon, Airgram, “Recent Events in the Fight Against Corruption,” November 24, 1969, NSA/NSC VN Info Grp/ Box 2/ Gov’t of SCVN, Corruption, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, MI.

how to maneuver between internal corruption and external American pressures signified the continued struggle of South Vietnam's policies regarding sexual politics during the war.

In their efforts to shut down vice industries, however, Vietnamese mayors and police forces were occasionally met with support from civilians not working for the U.S. They reported resentment toward officials connected to corruption scandals which they believed stemmed from cooperation with the Americans. Political instability and corruption led to numerous leadership changes in South Vietnamese local politics. In one fall 1967 case, Vung Tau City ousted Mayor Lt. Col. Ho Nhat Quan after twenty-six months in office on charges of corruption. The citizens reported a deep distrust for their local government during the war, but expressed this as the fault of city authorities under the U.S. influence, and not the Americans themselves.⁹⁰ Public concerns over corruption extended beyond the high-level dealings in power, money and real-estate, to the more mundane problems involving licensing, gambling, draft evasion, and prostitution.

The American Embassy in Saigon's report sheds light of the depth of corruption through records on the various Vung Tau corruption rackets. These 1967 reports reveal the extent to which the prostitution industry had infiltrated Vietnamese society in the two years since the war's escalation. Protection occurred on many levels from dealing directly with the police to purchasing military security to intervene in the instance of a police raid, or simply buying protection to oversee the safety of the women and to work as a look-out for police.

Brothel workers interviewed for a Vung Tau survey reported paying monthly fees for protection from military officers or the local police as a means to avoid time in jail or rehabilitation centers. One woman reported indignantly about potential raids, "in this place we are all sponsored by the paratroopers. Every month, each of us pay them one thousand piasters,

⁹⁰ David Brown, October 17, 1967, Box 2, NSA/NSC Vietnam Information Group: Intel; Other reps/ Government of South Vietnam - Corruption, 69-73CD, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, MI.

and our Madam pays them four thousand. So – how dare the police search here?!”⁹¹ Other women were instructed to take policemen as their lovers in order to avoid trouble. During round-ups, police would step in and claim a relationship, either familial or sexual, with protected women to prevent their arrest. The rise of a “protection” culture around the prostitution industry allowed it to continue flourishing regardless of the seemingly persistent eradication efforts proposed by the president. The constant undermining of official policy by Vietnamese civilians and police encourage U.S. patronage of seemed to be an only nominally illicit industry. Despite recurrent government attempts to shut down the bars and brothels, especially in central Saigon and Vung Tau, illegal establishments continued to resurface throughout the duration of the war.

Involvement of officials in illegal sex-trade corruption held a particularly high concentration among the police force, according to the corruption records. In a report to the South Vietnamese government, Senator Bui Van Giai reported that the population continued to distrust the police for their involvement in the various corruption rings in the cities.⁹² Paid protection for bars and brothels generated a portion of illegal police activity in cities as far from Saigon as Da Nang. The National Police claimed to actively engage in anti-corruption activities, but efforts failed to make an impact on the prostitution industry.⁹³

The Americanization of Sexual Politics

In the face of rising health concerns and Vietnamese efforts for eradication in a culture plagued by corruption, the U.S. continued their focus on education and treatment. U.S. medics who monitored the results of prostitution on troops throughout Asia kept their expectations about what politicians and military executives could do to stop it low. At a medical leadership seminar

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² To Department of State from Amembassy Saigon, Airgram, “Corruption In Vung Tau,” November 10, 1967, NSA/NSC VN Info Grp: Intel; Other Reps/Box 2/Gov’t of SCVN – Corruption, 69-73 CD, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, MI.

⁹³ To Department of State from Amembassy Saigon, Airgram, “Recent Events in the Fight Against Corruption,” November 24, 1969, NSA/NSC VN Info Grp/ Box 2/ Gov’t of SCVN – Corruption, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, MI.

for the various U.S. military service branches in 1966, each officer gave a brief synopsis of the problems observed in their units or regions. While discussing whether venereal disease moved from prostitutes to GIs or the other way around, a U.S. Air Force Commander Eisman acknowledged with a sense of futility, “For the Air Force VD is a problem. But the Air Force can’t clean up Saigon – the French and Vietnamese together couldn’t do it. We have just accepted it as a fact of life.” In response, Lieutenant Commander Champlain settled the issue, “I think that is what we all should do.”⁹⁴

With up to of seventy-five percent of GIs engaging in sexual relations with Vietnamese civilians and disease rates increasing by the late 1960s, however, it became inevitable that the military needed to reassess their training methods on infectious diseases. To do so, the U.S. military utilized soldiers’ noted concern over syphilis, despite infrequent contraction of the illness. Syphilis represented only two percent of venereal disease cases in Vietnam, but the long-lasting effects of the disease made it one of the most fears for GIs visiting a brothel, street prostitute, or bar girl. Playing on these fears, the American government developed the training film, “Where the Girls Are: VD in Southeast Asia,” in 1969 to educate soldiers on the potentially traumatic and lasting effects of having unprotected intercourse in Vietnam.⁹⁵

After a trip to the region in 1968, Air Force Secretary Harold Brown passed along the information about shockingly high venereal disease rates among soldiers to Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford which then passed to Air Force Chief of Staff General John P. McConnell.⁹⁶ This information created a stir in the State Department to produce a better means to educate the troops

⁹⁴ “Preventative Medicine in Vietnam, 1965-1966,” Proceedings of a Symposium of the Office of the Surgeon, United States Army, Vietnam, 27-28 June 1966, Robert Joy Collection, Texas Tech University, Vietnam Virtual Archive.

⁹⁵ “Where the Girls Are” on Boom Boom, Chop-Chop: R&R During the Vietnam War. Military Video, 2011 [1969], DVD.

⁹⁶ Sue Sun, “Where the Girls Are: The Management of Venereal Disease by United States Military Forces in Vietnam” *Literature and Medicine* 23, no. 1 (2004): 66.

about disease. The film they commissioned promoted abstinence as the safest option, but stressed the importance of protection for those who indulged in Vietnam's nightlife. American officials felt they could not prevent intimate encounters between GIs and civilians, but instead chose to focus on the potentially distracting and dangerous medical effects for soldiers in the field.

The film they commissioned promoted abstinence as the safest option, but stressed the importance of protection for those who indulged in Vietnam's nightlife. The short video follows a young GI, Pete, through his life in the city where the officers and doctors advise him to avoid the scene altogether, but another GI convinces him to visit a bar with him and then a sauna where he contracts gonorrhea. Following that encounter, the doctor advises him to change his ways before things become worse. Just as Pete prepares to move on with his life and makes plans marry his girlfriend, Julie, the doctor informs him by phone that he contracted syphilis as well. This film ends on a note of uncertainty about Pete's future, but the viewer feels he might be spending it alone. Despite the sterile portrayal of bars and soldiers in the film, the military hoped this updated training video would present the GIs with realistic problems related to their sexual behavior in Vietnam.⁹⁷

Educational training failed to eliminate either prostitution or venereal disease. In the early 1970s American military officials began exploring alternative suppression options, the simplest method being separation. To fulfil the sexual desires of the GIs and reduce tensions with the South Vietnamese government, the Americans began to encourage out of country Rest and Relaxation destinations over the iconic Vietnamese locations like China Beach.⁹⁸ Better still,

⁹⁷ For a detailed analysis of the film see, Sue Sun, "Where the Girls Are," 66-87.

⁹⁸ Memo to The Minister of Health from Assistant Director for Public Health, "V.D. Clinic Le Loi Hospital, Vung Tau," April 23, 1970; Box 32; Folder 1603-03 Venereal Disease – 1970: Advisory Team 79 (Vung Tau City Municipal Advisory Team) Administrative and Operational Records, 1967-1970, MACV/Office of Civil Operations and Rural Dev. Support (CORDS), Record Group 472; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

married men were encouraged to spend their leave in Hawaii where they could visit their wives.⁹⁹ To better control rates in Vietnam, USARV officials responsible for Command Health experimented with strict “off limits” periods for urban spaces.¹⁰⁰ In Da Nang, officials lifted restrictions for one month to track any changes. Previously steady rates of roughly 150 monthly cases of venereal disease infections among GIs spiked to 500. After replacing the restrictions the rate dropped back to 250 cases the following month. The correlation between GI-civilian contact and venereal disease demonstrated its popularity and morale benefits, but also the risks, of wartime intimacy. Rates remained low as long as the men avoided contact with urban women, linking disease to the local population in their minds. U.S. officials thus focused sexual policy in Vietnam on women and cleanliness.

Vung Tau developed a similar reputation to Da Nang. In a 1968 survey trip to the area, Blair Sheire, Petty Officer First Class in charge of the epidemiology section of the 20th Preventative Medicine Unit reported on the steady stream of bar girls who solicited him in bars and along the streets. As he reused their offers, some simply moved on to another man in the bar while others taunted him. Cryptically, Sheire concluded that the survey proved “interesting” and recommended regular follow-ups.¹⁰¹ One year later, a similar trip report showed venereal disease rates had increased three-fold in in three months. The letter from Captain William Fisherman of the Medical Corps recommended keeping records for each case reported. His suggestion was rejected, but the reports of rising disease levels encouraged medical officers to push for some

⁹⁹ Office of Information for the Armed Forces Department of Defense, *A Pocket Guide to Vietnam* (Washington D.C.: Superintendent of Documents, 1970), 73.

¹⁰⁰ Report Assistant Adjutant General Captain W. H. Smith to Commanding General United States Army, Vietnam, “Command Health Report RCS MED (R5) for the month of May 1971,” June 12, 1971; Box 13; Folder 923-09 24th Corps – 1970: USARV, Office of the Surgeon/Preventative Med Div, General Records; 1961-1972, Record Group 472; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

¹⁰¹ Report from Blair F. Sheire, PFCIC, Epi. Section, 20th PMU SUX, “Survey ‘Trip’ to Vung Tau – Epidemiology Section,” May 18, 1968; Box 16; Folder 923-10 Outbreak of Skin Disease - 1971: USARV, Office of the Surgeon/Preventative Med Div, General Records; 1961-1972, Record Group 472; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

change, and Fisherman reported in 1969, that a doctor in Saigon and the senior advisor for MACCORDS planned to meet with seek approval from local government to provide free medical treatment for Vietnamese nationals.¹⁰²

Debates over social disruption weighed on the alliance between the U.S. and South Vietnam already strained from mutual distrust during the fledgling peace talks. During Nixon era, American policy makers took a more direct stance to find solutions to social problems in the slowing war, but their methods met resistance from Vietnamese politicians. On 21 August 1969, Nguyen Van Tinh, the Mayor of the coastal resort city of Vung Tau south of Saigon boldly replied to American requests for easing prostitution regulations and insisting they add more venereal disease treatment programs with a curt memo standing his ground. In his statement he reiterated that the Vietnamese government forbade sex work, and thus the solutions proposed by the American Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) Advisors to monitor the practices “cannot be realized.”¹⁰³ He also firmly condemned the actions of U.S. Medical Team #20 who entered local establishments to pressure snack bar girls into seeking care. The team reportedly questioned working girls and even “examined their vaginas” for signs of disease. For the Americans, the checks represented safety and modernity, while the Vietnamese official clearly saw the exams as an intimate violation of the women and an off-handed disregard for their laws.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Memo for the Record from William N. Fisherman, Capt. M.C., Epidemiology, “Trip Report – Vung Tau,” March 10, 1969; Box 16; Folder 923-10 Outbreak of Skin Disease - 1971: USARV, Office of the Surgeon/Preventative Med Div, General Records; 1961-1972, Record Group 472; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

¹⁰³ City Mayor, Maj Nguyen Van Tinh, to Municipal Senior Advisor MACCORDS, Lawrence L. Swain, Vung Tau, August 21, 1969; Entry # A1 724; Box 32; Folder 1605-05 Venereal Diseases - 1969: Advisory Team 79 (Vung Tau City Municipal Advisory Team) Administrative and Operational Records, 1967-1970, MACV/Office of Civil Operations and Rural Dev. Support (CORDS), Record Group 472; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

¹⁰⁴ Minutes of the Special Meeting Held on 21 March 1970-1030HRS to Discuss Problems of Public Health Cards, VD Control Program in Vung Tau; Entry # A1 724; Box 32; Folder 1603-03 Venereal Disease [sic] - 1970: Advisory Team 79 (Vung Tau City Municipal Advisory Team) Administrative and Operational Records, 1967-

Local health procedures to license restaurant waitresses, bar girls, and hostesses provided a potential means of monitoring women likely to offer sex as a service. In the late 1960s, American development officers saw a way to use the cards to their advantage. As service industry workers, the girls were required to hold sanitation permits similar in principle to a food-handling. Many bars in South Vietnam, however, failed to even serve food but simply used the term “restaurant” to circumvent legal restrictions.¹⁰⁵ American military and aid workers viewed the cards as a potential means to control the spread of diseases among girls not working near bases with required medical examinations. Lawrence Swain of the American pacification CORDS program, proposed instituting sanitation cards to women working in these industries as many were known prostitutes.¹⁰⁶ This version of the sanitation cards would require regular visits with a doctor to check for illness or venereal disease, who could then mark the card. Those who failed their exams would have their cards revoked for the duration of their treatment.

The Mayor of Vung Tau argued in his letters to Swain that he doubted the assertion of an American medical specialist who claimed that bar owners and girls appreciated the examinations and treatment performed by U.S. Medical Teams. Rather, he asserted, their interference in bar culture created a “bad rumor ... that all manpower and facilities of the GVN Public Health Service have been utilized to protect health condition for US militarymen [sic] only and not to protect the local Vietnamese people as majority.”¹⁰⁷ For the most part, this seemed true. The

1970, MACV/Office of Civil Operations and Rural Dev. Support (CORDS), Record Group 472; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

¹⁰⁵ “Saigon is Closing Sleazy Bars for G.I.s” New York Times, December 7, 1971, 10.

¹⁰⁶ Minutes of the Special Meeting Held on 21 March 1970-1030HRS to Discuss Problems of Public Health Cards, VD Control Program in Vung Tau; Entry # A1 724; Box 32; Folder 1603-03 Venereal Disease [sic] - 1970: Advisory Team 79 (Vung Tau City Municipal Advisory Team) Administrative and Operational Records, 1967-1970, MACV/Office of Civil Operations and Rural Dev. Support (CORDS), Record Group 472; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

¹⁰⁷ City Mayor, Maj Nguyen Van Tinh, to Municipal Senior Advisor MACCORDS, Lawrence L. Swain, Vung Tau, August 21, 1969; Entry # A1 724; Box 32; Folder 1605-05 Venereal Diseases - 1969: Advisory Team 79 (Vung Tau City Municipal Advisory Team) Administrative and Operational Records, 1967-1970, MACV/Office of Civil

Department of State's Agency for International Development (USAID) eventually worked out an agreement to send in a female envoy to provide information that might aid Vietnamese women to take a more active role in politics and the economy, but this occurred months after the signing of the Paris Peace Agreement and the start of troop withdrawal.¹⁰⁸ During active conflict, protecting the health of U.S. servicemen took precedent in sexual politics. Venereal disease seemed best contained by stopping its spread at the source, which the advisors perceived through their previous experiences and experiments like that conducted in Da Nang and Vung Tau, through the women.

Despite their efforts to keep positive relations with South Vietnam, the U.S.'s focus on the health and security of its troops did not outwardly discourage GIs from having relations with civilians nor did it encourage locals to maintain cooperation.¹⁰⁹ Vung Tau's mayor continued his protests against the idea of sanitation cards for months, reiterating fears of violating the constitution.¹¹⁰ Talking past each other, the Americans moved boldly ahead with some of their initiatives like building a venereal disease clinic in the Le Loi Hospital in Vung Tau and hiring a joint American-Vietnamese team. They opened the clinic in the hospital located directly next door to the Military Police barracks who oversaw many of the prostitution cases from the American side. By March of 1970, the mayor acquiesced to the growing pressures in the name of

Operations and Rural Dev. Support (CORDS), Record Group 472; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

¹⁰⁸ Department of State Agency for International Development, Project Implementation Order/Technical Services, , Cò quan PTQT Hoa Kỳ - Nhà Tài Vụ / 4776, Vietnamese National Archive Center II, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

¹⁰⁹ As early as August 1965, National Security Council member Chester Cooper noted that the military-civilian relationships could potentially blow up in the faces of the American war effort; Memorandum for Mr. Bundy, "The Week in Asia," August 9, 1967, 3, National Security File, Name File, Cooper Memos, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library and Archives.

¹¹⁰ City Mayor, Maj Nguyen Van Tinh, to Municipal Senior Advisor MACCORDS, Lawrence L. Swain, Vung Tau, August 21, 1969; Entry # A1 724; Box 32; Folder 1605-05 Venereal Diseases - 1969: Advisory Team 79 (Vung Tau City Municipal Advisory Team) Administrative and Operational Records, 1967-1970, MACV/Office of Civil Operations and Rural Dev. Support (CORDS), Record Group 472; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

public health. He began revoking the cards of sick stewardesses, and accepted this more organized system of monitoring prostitution in Vung Tau. Still, the mayor held reservations over the decision. He reported,

Please be careful to avoid some misunderstanding that local authorities are publicly authorizing prostitution among stewardesses, which is unconstitutional. [...] I think we can agree to make additional issuances of Public Health cards for stewardesses, because it is legal in principle and our goal is to control diseases; but it will make different sense for US/Allied troops who practically mistake public health cards for ‘prostitution cards.’ So, please think over the matter to avoid any misunderstanding that we are legalizing prostitution. Our purpose is good, but the public can understand it differently.¹¹¹

The decision to institute and enforce sanitation cards linked with venereal disease examinations marked an opportunity for Americans in Vung Tau to not only establish a dialog, but to link their efforts of negotiating sexual politics in a way that accomplished their goals of reducing disease while not overtly violating Vietnamese laws.

In the southern city of Can Tho, a similar debate between military, USAID, and Vietnamese city officials over the institution of sanitation cards boiled over in 1971. USAID officials working through friendly channel for permission to open a venereal disease clinic upset local authority, Dr. Le Van Khoa of the Ministry of Public Health in region IV, who resented their correspondences with a different Vietnamese doctor, Dr. Luu Huu Loc the Chief of Anti-venereal disease efforts, who did not hold the sign agreements over clinics. Like the mayor of Vung Tau, Khoa stressed the prostitution remained illegal in Vietnam, and the links between the disease and the practice placed all working in clinics at risk. On top of its basic illegal nature, Khoa stressed that American closures of bars in Can Tho to “teach Vietnames [sic] peole [sic] a lesson” about the importance for the Americans for sustaining snack bars and the local economy

¹¹¹ Ibid.

was a “big dishonor of [the] Vietnamese people.”¹¹² In his letter of June 26, 1970, Khoa devised a solution to American officials to step-up control efforts and Vietnamese pressures to close American-endorsed clinics. Switching the language from venereal disease to communicable diseases, the clinics in Vung Tau would examine snack-bar girls every sixth months as part of their regular health exams. American pressures for change appear to have been more effective, however, as only two weeks later, Khoa sent in a telegram to the Minister of Health in Saigon to issue a decree for an allocated “[pilot] place of anti VD in Can Tho,” and copied the American CORDS official in the region.¹¹³

The institution of sanitation cards or communicable disease clinics marked a few moments of compliance between the two governments, but one where the U.S. clearly took a more active role. Significantly, U.S. CORDS officials attempted to work with local governments like that in Vung Tau or Can Tho to handle the most detrimental repercussions of prostitution, at least from the American perspective, disease. Venereal disease rates still remained high throughout the end of the war, but their existence provided government and military officials with a way to discuss the problem of prostitution without the threat of directly challenging the Vietnamese constitution. To manage venereal disease provided both sides with a loophole to better manage the impact of sexual encounters between the two populations. The longer the war drew on, the less clear it became when it might end. When the U.S. put forward a more rigorous

¹¹² Letter to Dr. LTC. Burham DMAC Surgeon from Dr. Le Van Khoa Regional Health Officer, Region IV, June 26, 1970; Box 29; Folder 1606-03 VD + TB CONTROL - 1970: MACV, HQ CORDS, MR 4/Public Health Div, General Records, 1966-1972, Record Group 472; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

¹¹³ Telegram to Minister of Health MOH Saigon from Dr. Le Van Khoa Regional Health Officer, Region IV, “INFO: Director of Anti VD program - Saigon,” July 10, 1970; Box 29; Folder 1606-03 VD + TB CONTROL - 1970: MACV, HQ CORDS, MR 4/Public Health Div, General Records, 1966-1972, Record Group 472; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

effort to hinder prostitution and its effects in any way, they found the Vietnamese willing to concede on certain issues, but overall committed to their anti-prostitution stance.

Conclusion

Prostitution remained both a constant threat to health, security, and even morality, as well as a source of recreation throughout the war. The images reported in the Saigon papers in the days following the signing of the Paris Peace Agreement in January 1973 depict a sense of despair among those who had capitalized upon Saigon's role as a GI playground.¹¹⁴ Journalist Charles Mohr reported, "vice is a depressed industry in Saigon.... [t]he charm is gone." Bar girls reportedly gathered together on the roof of the once illustrious Continental Palace Hotel where they had worked since the government shut down many of the bars in downtown Saigon. The group watched as their primary source of income and protection against strict morality laws began to flood out of the city to return home.¹¹⁵ As the decade long conflict that turned American politics and Vietnamese life upside-down began to draw to a close, popular press reports on the fate of prostitutes illustrates how severely initial efforts to limit the effects of Americans on South Vietnam had failed.¹¹⁶ Fulbright's fear of "fatal impact" seemed not to far from the truth for those who had previously profited so richly from the war.

More than a decade after the first advisors from Michigan State University arrived in Saigon to offer advice to the newly forming nation, South Vietnam and the United States continued their struggle to find balance between fighting a war and stabilizing social problems. Disagreements between the allies rooted in deep-seated cultural beliefs and pragmatic necessity

¹¹⁴ Concern over the plight of the peasant rose during the initial weeks after the signing of the ceasefire agreement, formally known as the *Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring the Peace in Vietnam*, but for most this concern did not last. Many women who acted as prostitutes, or were accused of doing so, would be prosecuted in the years following the American exit from Vietnam. After Saigon fell in 1975, many were sent to re-education camps and Amer-Asian children often became orphans and received poor treatment.

¹¹⁵ Charles Mohr, "Amid Cease-Fire Battles, Peasants Remain Stoical" *NYT*, February 1, 1973.

¹¹⁶ William Westmoreland, "General Westmoreland's Historical Briefing, April 9, 1966," #5 History File (13 Mar - 26 Apr 66), William Westmoreland Papers, Lyndon Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, TX.

led to an unexpected foreign policy dispute as state and non-state actors attempted to negotiate their stance on inter-cultural intimacy in urban spaces. Through conflicting points of view of acceptable public behaviors to westernization and related inflationary problems, Vietnamese civilians who engaged in intimate relationships with U.S. servicemen, whether through acts of prostitution highlighted in this article or through long-term committed relationships resulting in marriage, their relations represented a potential threat to tradition, local authority, and the legitimacy of the state. As the war progressed, the impact of open wartime sexuality created undeniable threats to public health, urban security, as well as international politics. South Vietnamese officials, however, held their ground in relation to how American GIs interacted with civilians. Where Americans sought morale building, the Vietnamese followed a morality-based constitution, and where Americans sought discretion, the Vietnamese sought eradication. Repetitive failures and limited solutions marked their efforts to cooperate across such conflicting points of view. Banning soldiers from hiring prostitutes represented not only an unrealistic goal, but also risked a serious blow to troop morale and an exceedingly powerful vice culture.¹¹⁷ In their efforts to sweep aside the initial claims of Saigon as a brothel, U.S. policymakers overlooked a significant element of the war's culture and their subsequent efforts to handle the problems illustrate the power of inter-cultural relationships during wartime to create foreign relations obstacles.

The opposing approaches to venereal disease treatment and the Americanization of sexual politics related to prostitution exemplify shifting policy views toward the social and cultural elements of warfare that made significant and lasting day-to-day impacts on the lives of the majority of GIs and civilians who participated in the Vietnam War away from jungles and

¹¹⁷ The number of prostitutes is impossible to determine but estimates range upwards of 50,000. The numbers shifted greatly over the course of the war, and some did not serve openly as prostitutes but participated in sexual relationships with American soldiers under more ambiguous terms.

battles. By then end of the 1960s, Washington recognized that it could no longer sweep the “American Brothel” aside. Reworked training materials, stricter limitations on boundaries, limited R&R opportunities in Vietnam, and the enactment of education and control programs by U.S. military and aid workers on Vietnamese civilians marked their revitalized efforts to limit the negative effects of an industry so effective for improving morale. With the South Vietnamese unable or unwilling to enact significant change, the U.S. pressured for changes they approved of to control the undeniable problems caused by the nation-wide explosion of prostitution. Perhaps McNamara was correct in stating that it was unfair to characterize Saigon simply as an “American Brothel,” but the convergence of power relationships that took place surround the brothel culture provides new ways of understanding the delicate intersections of war, policy and culture during the American War in Vietnam.