As I come to understand Vietnam and what it implies about the human condition, I also realize that few humans will permit themselves such an understanding. (Watchmen)

The war which we can neither win, lose, nor drop is evidence of an instability of ideas, a floating series of judgments, our policy of nervous conciliation is extremely disturbing. (US Senator Hugh D. Scott, 1964)
Our Time in Vietnam

History and our own achievements have thrust upon us the principal responsibility for protection of freedom on earth ... No other people in no other time has had so great an opportunity to work and risk for the freedom of all mankind. (President Lyndon B. Johnson, 1965)

We were wrong. But we had in our minds a mindset that led to that action. And it carried such heavy costs. (Former Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, 2004)

I was a coward. I went to war. (Tim O’Brien)

This chapter interprets the early history of the Vietnam War through the lens of God’s self-giving as described by Hans urs von Balthasar, primarily in the fourth volume of his *Theo-Drama*. Balthasar’s theological drama allows us to stage the metaphysical interplay between time and eternity at the site of God’s relationship to creation as a historical performance. Within this performance, one discovers “time and eternity” embedded within God’s scripting of Creation, Reconciliation, and Redemption, that is, history. After World War II, America, with her freshly minted global dominance and its attendant responsibilities, came to view the world as increasingly hostile. The more American power grew abroad, the more America saw its interests threatened. In this chapter, the violent desperation of America’s containment policy will be read as symptomatic of a vision of time cursed to dominate as a mode of securing and justifying meaning.

The arguments of this chapter unfold in three parts. In “The Divine Kenosis and Being-Toward-Death,” I first contrast kenosis with privation and show how the certainty of death, according to Balthasar, rather than invoking authentic care for creaturely existence, emanates as desperation
for control. In “‘Our Time’ in Vietnam,” I turn to America’s official record of policy in the early days of the Vietnam War and characterize that policy as, in contrast to self-giving, privation and desperation under the guise of “progress.” In “When Time Is Nothing but Speed,” I return to Balthasar and argue that American killing in Vietnam was not simply a possible outcome of usurping the divine drama but a necessary and, in many ways, inescapable consequence. Here I relate what Winthrop Jordan calls the “burden” of hegemony in order to demonstrate how America’s war in Vietnam can be understood as the fate of privation: having replaced the saving drama of the slaughtered Lamb with an immanent temporal tragedy, America proscribed itself to securing its own existence over against temporal others who would challenge it.

The Divine Kenosis and Being-Toward-Death

Hans urs von Balthasar locates time within a larger account of God’s drama of salvation. In the fourth volume of his Theo-Drama, “The Action,” Balthasar lays out his account of salvation, the “primal drama” of divine kenosis, thus grounding salvation within the trinitarian life. The centrality of the Trinity inscribes salvation as a return to that life. According to Balthasar, the Father’s initial self-giving of divinity leads to a second moment of kenosis: the Son’s willful – *sponte* – obedience to the Father, where the Son surrenders himself in order to save humanity. The two moments of divine self-giving are not two separate dramas. Within the first is the second, and the second fulfills the first; God’s self-giving within the triune life does not result in loss but instead overflows to the act of creation and consummates in cross and resurrection. The Son’s self-giving does not hold an external relation to the Father’s self-giving; rather, the second moment of kenosis follows the first by the very nature of trinitarian eternity:

[The first moment of kenosis]: The Father, in uttering and surrendering himself without reserve, does not lose himself. He does not extinguish himself by self-giving, just as he does not keep back anything of himself either. For, in this self-surrender, he is the whole divine essence. Here we see both God’s infinite power and his powerlessness; he cannot be God in any other way but in this “kenosis” within the Godhead itself.¹

[The second moment of kenosis]: It follows that the Son, for his part, cannot be and possess the absolute nature of God except in the mode of receptivity: he receives this unity of omnipotence and powerlessness from the Father. *This receptivity simultaneously includes the Son’s self-givenness* (which is the absolute presupposition for all the different ways in which he is delivered up to the world) and his filial thanksgiving (Eucharist) for the gift of consubstantial divinity.²

By “action” Balthasar means the action of kenosis, the Father’s self-giving to the Son and the Son’s self-giving for the sake of creation. God’s self-giving from Father to Son to creation is activity from eternity toward temporality, for the sake of creation’s participation in eternity. Eternality and temporality constitute the scene of the drama of kenosis as well as the drama itself, since God in Christ assumes time in time. Accordingly, Balthasar begins the fourth volume on “The Action” with a rich description of temporality and the human condition as determined by time and death, from which sin enters the drama.

Within Balthasar’s drama, death is an inexorable feature of creaturely being: “I am always thrown back into a fundamental solitude in which my death – my very own death – is unavoidably getting nearer and nearer.”³ Creatures conscious of death speak of its impending reality in the language of time. “Time” ensues as various local ways of speaking about human being-toward-death. Time signifies humanness as provincial, habituated, and social in the same way that death marks createdness as finite. Time denotes locality whereas death denotes embodiment. Humans age toward death; time signifies different ways of talking about that inevitability. This is what Balthasar means by “the givenness of time.” Creatures conscious of their deaths interpret their lives “in time” to the extent that they understand themselves as oriented toward death. By making a distinction between time and death, Balthasar is not denying all creaturely existence as fundamentally temporal, but instead is encouraging care for


difference and laying the groundwork for a type of ethics of death. Like Martin Heidegger, whom I consider in detail later, Balthasar admonishes temporal authenticity rather than lamenting finitude. For Balthasar, death names contingency as gift: “The individual lives in finite time. This is not something he takes; it is given him. This, perhaps more clearly than anything else, shows him that his very existence is gift.” Since creatures are created in time for the sake of participating in God’s eternal life, it is critical to rightly articulate one’s discourse about time, to describe being-toward-death within the drama of God’s self-giving.

For Balthasar, there is “our time” to the extent that everyone is dying. The “givenness of time” speaks not only of one’s being-toward-death, but to the extent that for Balthasar the “thou” precedes and realizes the “I,” selves discover themselves situated toward death amidst others so situated, the “totality of human destiny.” Humans share languages of time because they, collectively capable of self-consciousness, share a sense of death. Death happens to the individual – “Every man dies alone, even if he dies at the same time as another” – but dying is not an isolated experience; all humans die. Thus the common language of time – “our time” – speaks to a form of life that all humans practice: being-toward-death.

Since “our time” connotes this being-toward-death as the possibility of authenticity and care, then “time” as a habituated way of speaking necessarily indicates limitation but not desperation, frustration but not panic. All will die, and the “pathos” of desiring the eternal always meets its limit in death. According to Balthasar, human desires are immanently unfulfilled, and in this sense human existence is frustrated. However, this conception of finitude can also gesture toward human existence as given. Finitude, rather than tragic, helps humans to recognize and embrace their deaths, leading to authentic existence and care for selves; embracing one’s mortality positions one toward ethical participation in the “totality of human destiny.” Thus “our time” is not only a social designation but also a political claim: to the extent that I understand myself as situated along with others toward a common destiny, practicing a common language game about death, I can see myself as “co-responsible” for how we live toward that destiny. Because creaturely “pathos” takes place within the larger drama of divine kenosis for the sake of creaturely return to God’s eternal life, return made possible by paschal self-giving, “pathos,” following Augustine, evokes eros, desire for God’s life. Human longing, then,
quickened by consciousness of death, seeks authenticity in time and return to the eternal, which itself remains accessible in time by care for death as the marker of givenness. Balthasar writes in *A Theology of History*,

Hence the importance of patience in the New Testament, which becomes the basic constituent of Christianity, more central even than humility: the power to wait, to persevere, to hold out, to endure to the end, not to transcend one’s own limitations, not to force issues by playing the hero or the titan, but to practice the virtue that lies beyond heroism, the meekness of the Lamb which is led.7

The entry of the God-man into “our” time and death intensifies and reveals divinity within the given boundaries of createdness; self-emptying kenosis circumscribes time and death in the eternal life and affirms their ethical possibilities.

But death and time can also bring about desperation and panic. The “pathos” of human existence, the privative desire to possess the absolute in the relative, leads to what Balthasar calls “gestures of existence.” As stated, for Balthasar, finitude and death can lead to authentic care for “our time,” ways of conceiving God in the midst of finitude. However, the “pathos” of human being tends to distort finitude. The combination of frustrated desire for the absolute and a rebellion against one’s being-toward-death provokes forms of violent grasping, where time and eternity, humanity and God, are presumed co-equal. Rather than wait patiently for the fulfillment of divine kenosis, desperate creatures fashion instead idolatrous “pseudo-solutions” to what is now considered a fundamental crisis.8 Secularism, the result of a humanly posited antinomy, amalgamates these pseudo-solutions into increasingly nihilistic and destructive modes of grasping. Rather than authentic care, Balthasar recounts how being-toward-death becomes “pure resignation in the face of the prison of finitude; or more profoundly, with a despairing skepticism about the task of our existence.”9 Shared human existence, “our time,” no longer imbibles finitude as gift discovered by ethical communities. Rather, “our time” gets proclaimed as struggle, the attempt to affix idols amidst tragic existences; “these harden into ideologies, giving substance to the view that ‘conflict is the father of all things.’”10 Terrified of death, frantic creatures

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9 Ibid., 106.
10 Ibid.
craft ontologies of violence, envisaging the world as necessarily and inherently desperate. “Our time” writ large gets shipped abroad, because now “co-responsibility” means that humanity, or at least those so enlightened, must alert the world to the crisis of frenetic existence and the ferocity of shared being. Rather than articulating the telos of creaturely existence (participation in God’s peaceable life), “time” now implores desperation. Privatized time, ironically, spreads outward, colonizing as assertions of autonomy grasp and swell collateral. Severed from eternal being, creaturely positivity thrashes about for meaning. Desperation now becomes not only “ours” but indeed, “humanness itself,” because self-certainty must secure recognition upon the “world stage.” The history of Western colonization, including Vietnam, is to some degree an imposition of Western temporality upon other ways of keeping time. By grounding time within totalities such as market capitalism, travel schedules, the internet, and so on, time is no longer predicated as a local form of life but rather as Aufklärung itself, unity that no longer requires translation and care for difference. Indeed, the history of “civilization” has often been mythologized as the spread of technologies that allow for greater efficiency and control of the unexpected. In the material instantiations of its so-called “manifest destiny,” the West has too often viewed itself as offering the world a more productive temporality. To be sure, within Balthasar’s drama, all sinful humans, not exclusively Westerners, remain vulnerable to such desperation. Still, because its brand of efficiency emanated from nihilistic presumptions and practices, Western ways of keeping time could

11 In his commentary Aidan Nichols writes, “Owing to original sin, man’s natural desire for God is crossed by a negative desire to be for himself. As a result of this distorted solidarity in which we now find ourselves in the first Adam, the form of the grace God offers is no longer based on the Son’s mediatorship in creation. Rather is that grace’s fashion as agonal, as much of a struggle, as fallen existence itself; it comes now through the Cross, so that only by dying to self with the Second Adam can fulfillment be.” Aidan Nichols, No Bloodless Guilt: A Guide Through Balthasar’s Dramatics (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 155.

12 The global spread of Western market capitalism is one of the most potent forms of this imperialism. Subsuming the world under a single clock is not simply the spread of one form of economics, but also the obliteration of traditional cultures. Western conceptions of time derive from market capitalism and its central notions of competition and scarcity. Creation under capitalism is understood as fundamentally insufficient. In capitalism, this is most readily acknowledged through scarcity as a principle in terms of limited supply over against demand. It is not difficult to see that the backdrop of this schematic relies as well on another form of scarcity: time. For a theological explication of the tragic logic of scarcity, see D. Stephen Long’s Divine Economy: Theology and the Market (London: Routledge, 2002).

not help but be productive in peculiarly grotesque ways. Balthasar writes, “The fundamental human paradox, namely, the need to write the absolute upon the relative, to put some ultimate mark upon fleeting time, can be expressed in various wars at different periods.”\(^{14}\) The Vietnam War is a privative instance internal to the larger story Balthasar is telling regarding the “pathos of the world stage” in response to God’s self-giving. The Vietnam War was yet another “pseudo-solution,” one among many, to the “pathos” of human finitude which unfolded in an unwillingness to construe “our time” as gift and an insistence that the world submit to temporal impositions.

“Our Time” in Vietnam

In the 1950s, America changed its policy of non-involvement with French colonialism in Southeast Asia. The communist takeover in China precipitated great alarm regarding Asia, which was now viewed as a potential threat to the balance of power in Europe, due to the potential spread of communism southward from China and then westward to Europe.\(^{15}\) After the French acquiescence in 1954, even after significant US aid, the Geneva Conference was set in place to garner stability between the Viet Minh in the north and the newly created state of South Vietnam; the Geneva accords mandated democratic elections within two years, during


\(^{15}\) Because American intelligence was unable to establish any clear connection between Ho Chi Minh’s Viet Minh and Moscow, and because American policy remained ambivalent toward French colonization, the Truman administration was initially unsure how to respond to Vietnam, as stated by Secretary of State George C. Marshall: “Frankly we have no solution of the problem to suggest.” *The Pentagon Papers*, ed. Neil Sheehan, Hedrick Smith, E. W. Kenworthy, and Fox Butterfield (New York: Bantam Books, 1971), 8. Truman was unresponsive to direct communiqués from Ho Chi Minh himself requesting American support in Vietnam’s disavowal of French colonial rights, and he was also unsupportive of French requests for American military and economic aid during the revolution. “But when Mao Tse-tung’s armies drove Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek out of China in late 1949, Washington’s ambivalence ended dramatically” (ibid., 9). Thereafter, American military aid began at $10 million and reached its peak in 1954 at $1.1 billion, or 78 percent of French expenses. (The amount would only increase as America took France’s place after 1954.) As Vietnam gained strategic import in America’s purview, American pressure increased in favor of French colonization, culminating in the National Security Council’s threat that “French acquiescence in a Communist take-over in Indochina would bear on its status as one of the Big Three … U.S. aid to France would automatically cease” (11).
which time the Vietnamese would choose their own fate.\textsuperscript{16} Even though American intelligence predicted Ho Chi Minh would duly win the mandated South Vietnam election with 80 percent of the popular vote, the very possibility that those elections, democratic or not, could produce a united communist Vietnam proved too menacing for American policy makers, who immediately began covert military and political operations in both the north and south.\textsuperscript{17} Ironically, Central Intelligence Agency reports forcefully stated that American involvement in Vietnam, without clear and appropriate initiatives and plans, was doomed to fail, and that the current political situation in South Vietnam was not conducive to American intervention.\textsuperscript{18} The question is: Why did America insist on intervention when both international and internal analyses strongly recommend against it? If Geneva and Langley discouraged intervention, why were these “pseudo-solutions” initiated?\textsuperscript{19}

The answer, according to 1971’s \textit{The Pentagon Papers}, is clear: “Indochina’s importance to the U.S. security interest in the Far East was taken for granted … The domino theory and the assumptions behind it were never questioned.”\textsuperscript{20} And what was the domino theory? According


\textsuperscript{17} The immediacy of the American escalation directly contrasted with what happened for the communists in the south. See Francis Fitzgerald, \textit{Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam} (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2002), 147.

\textsuperscript{18} In the days prior to the American entrance into the war, the Chiefs of Staff in a May 20 memorandum to then Secretary of State Wilson stated, “From the point of view of the United States, Indochina is devoid of decisive military objectives and the allocation of more than token U.S. armed forces to that area would be a serious diversion of limited U.S. capabilities” (Sheehan et al., \textit{The Pentagon Papers}, 13).

\textsuperscript{19} In 1967, then Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara commissioned the Pentagon report that would eventually become the \textit{New York Times’} publication, \textit{The Pentagon Papers}. From those reports it is clear that the government was still trying to figure out “why” and “how” America had gotten involved in Vietnam. Unfortunately, by then approximately 45,000 American soldiers and three million Vietnamese had died, an estimated two million of which were civilians.

\textsuperscript{20} Sheehan et al., \textit{The Pentagon Papers}, 6, 7.
to President Dwight Eisenhower: “You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is a certainty that it will go over very quickly.”21 The answer to “Why Vietnam?” became “Well, the domino theory of course.” Unfortunately, the question “Why the domino theory?” was never raised with any seriousness. This failure to question the most basic assumptions would become the central paradox throughout “the developing tragedy of the war”: “As a rationale for policy, the domino theory — that if South Vietnam fell, other countries would inevitably fall — was repeated in endless variations for nearly two decades.”22

The domino theory was iterated specifically in relation to Vietnam by the National Security Agency in 1950:

> It is important to U.S. security interests that all practicable measures be taken to prevent further Communist expansion in Southeast Asia. Indochina is a key area and is under immediate threat. The neighboring countries of Thailand and Burma could be expected to fall under Communist domination if Indochina is controlled by a Communist government. The balance of Southeast Asia would be in grave hazard.23

During John Kennedy’s administration, the same conception of time as “critical” and “flammable” continued.24 In a 1961 memorandum from the Joint Chiefs to Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, the Chiefs wrote:

> In considering the possible commitment of U.S. forces to South Vietnam, the Joint Chiefs of Staff have reviewed the overall critical situation in Southeast Asia with particular emphasis upon the present highly flammable

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23 Ibid., 6.
situation in South Vietnam. In this connection the question, however, of South Vietnam should not be considered in isolation but rather in conjunction with Thailand and the over-all relationship to the security of Southeast Asia.\textsuperscript{25}

Secretary of State Dean Rusk and McNamara wrote to Kennedy,

The loss of South Viet-Nam would make pointless any further discussion about the importance of Southeast Asia to the free world; we would have to face the near certainty that the remainder of Southeast Asia and Indonesia would move to a complete accommodation with Communism, if not formal incorporation with the Communist bloc.\textsuperscript{26}

On the rare occasion when “why” was asked, as in the case when Kennedy asked why Vietnam was of such critical importance, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs responded emphatically, “We would lose Asia all the way to Singapore. Serious set back to U.S. and F.W. [free world].”\textsuperscript{27} The domino theory became a self-affirming justification: “If we lose Vietnam, we’ll lose it all.”

Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense during the most critical years of the war, argued that the communists would know “we mean business” by way of a massive escalation of US forces.\textsuperscript{28} The escalation would continue gradually for several years until August of 1964 when, purportedly, the destroyer \textit{Maddox} in the Gulf of Tonkin was attacked by the North Vietnamese, leading to the passing of the resolution that would afford President Johnson broad capability to wage war on North Vietnam. By this point, America had been conducting covert warfare for over 15 years in Vietnam. By April 1965, under Johnson’s leadership, America began the process of full-scale offensive warfare undertaken primarily by American soldiers assuming the burden of the ground war. By year’s end, there would be 184,314 American military personnel in Vietnam, a number that pales in comparison to what would become nearly half a million by

\textsuperscript{25} Sheehan et al., \textit{The Pentagon Papers}, 125.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 150.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 108.
1967. Even in 1968, a year that would see the Tet Offensive, the Paris Peace Talks, President Johnson’s announcement that he would not seek another term in office, and other obvious signs that America was losing the war in Vietnam with no foreseeable victory in sight, America stood resolute in its domino theory, as it had for over 20 years. Assistant Secretary of State McGeorge Bundy states in a memo to Johnson,

If we can avoid escalation-that-does-not-work, we can focus attention on the great and central achievement of the last two years: on the defeat we have prevented. The fact that South Vietnam has not been lost and is not going to be lost is a fact of truly massive importance in the history of Asia, the Pacific, and the U.S. An articulate minority of “Eastern intellectuals” (like Bill Fulbright) may not believe in what they call the domino theory, but most Americans (along with all Asians) know better. Under this administration the United States has already saved the hope of freedom for hundreds of millions – in this sense, the largest part of the job would be done.

Bundy, as well as the administrations from Truman to Nixon, would be proven wrong. South Vietnam would not stand, falling in 1975, and yet communism would not spread throughout Southeast Asia. That McBundy could not foresee these possibilities is in large part because his – and America’s – way of viewing the world’s time made unlikely their ability to imagine history any differently than their determined and panicked discourses allowed.

The domino theory became the American manner of keeping time with regard to Asia and the world. America’s way of talking about time

29 Sheehan et al., The Pentagon Papers, 384, 385, 460–1. General Westmoreland would eventually request more than half a million – 671,616 – a request that was denied (558). Westmoreland’s incessant requests for additional troops would become one of the major themes of the war. Johnson at one point clairvoyantly asked, “When we add divisions can’t the enemy add divisions. If so, when does it all end?” (567).

30 Ibid., 572.

31 For a visual record of the early history of the war, see Emile de Antonio’s controversial In the Year of the Pig (Home Vision Entertainment, 2005). Antonio’s critically acclaimed documentary, originally produced in 1968, features figures such as David Halberstam, who wrote The Best and the Brightest (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), and Yale’s Professor Paul Mus, who deeply influenced Fitzgerald’s The Fire in the Lake (referenced throughout this chapter). See Mus, The Vietnamese and Their Revolution, trans. John T. McAlister (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).
during those long, generally unquestioned decades was assumed to be the only way of keeping time – that the desperation by which America imagined others, the “pseudo-solutions” conjured up, and the “co-responsibility” it felt for the world’s being-toward-death were simply given, as if dates on a calendar. The Americans assumed a facticity to their time, as if their version of “our time,” as much as it ignored the alternatives expressed by the international community and by an increasingly vitriolic student protest, somehow coalesced with a chimerical “neutral world-clock.” American policy before and during the Vietnam War assumed that “our time” was Vietnam’s time, subsuming alterity under a violently imperial “our.” America’s way of keeping and talking about its own being-toward-death was now projected upon all human being-toward-death. Such dubious prognostications, backed by a virulent and nihilistic secularity and puppet government police states and bombs to prove it, had a way of fulfilling its own dark, agonistic prophecy. America’s being-toward-death did become Vietnam’s being-toward-death in a way imaginable, and acceptable, if only to America’s best and brightest.

Within Balthasar’s theological drama, humanity, created from nothing, relates to God as that which situates existence beyond itself. Faithful existence in this paradox expresses a desire for the eternal, desiring beyond the finite self. However, sinful humanity begins to seek only the self, and therefore usurps power and squanders freedom within the temporal, which can neither ground freedom nor employ power appropriately. As created, humanity is ordered toward the eternal, but having rejected the eternal God, humanity is fated to seek the eternal within its own finitude. “Thus all human life becomes an uninterrupted, chaotic searching and feeling after a totality of meaning.”

Modern conceptions of time like the domino theory insatiate humanity’s tragic condition. Desperation objectifies nature in the name of self-worship as it throws off its creaturely givenness. Time takes on the ruse of always running out. Without eternity, a horizon beyond itself, humanity envisages existence within the antinomious polarities of life and death, a horizon thoroughly enclosed. In the name of “progress,” creatures chase after ways of fashioning time as purposeful, often by making time come out right or championing the promise of time as pagan infinity. According to Balthasar, the relentless march of time and its abrupt finale in death precludes the possibility of uncovering the lie; what cannot be imagined is any other way of living, “that negativity is the creative, the innermost essence of spirit; and that the ‘absolute point’ in man is only the cause of

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his eternal search for power – and as such implies the destruction of everything that has been.”

Western global domination, and its manifestation in Vietnam, is but one strategy of humanity’s war with the divine kenosis, subverting eternal self-giving by temporal self-possession. From America’s perspective, her intentions in Vietnam were noble – indeed nothing could be more noble – and as such warranted limitless aggression. As the pinnacle of civilization, America had become what everyone else wanted, even if that desire remained in its most seminal state; it was the role of American expansionism to nurture, even through the use of Agent Orange, those seedlings of civilization. Loren Baritz characterizes this well: “An important part of the reason we marched into Vietnam with our eyes fixed was liberalism’s irrepresible need to be helpful to those less fortunate. But the decency of the impulse … cannot hide the bloody eagerness to kill in the name of virtue.” America knew what Vietnam wanted and needed – for the Americans to be in Vietnam and the Vietnamese to become Americans – even if Vietnam did not yet know it. As the wizened officer tells the newly arrived marine in Stanley Kubrick’s film Full Metal Jacket: “We are here to help the Viet-nam-mese because inside every gook is an American trying to get out.” The ultimate end of this line of thinking was the supposition that America symbolized the very telos of Vietnamese history, a progressivist view which relegated all prior moments of world history, including pre-American Vietnam, to the instrumental and dispensable. Americans were drawn into Vietnam by America’s rationale that, if left unchecked, communism would conquer one Southeast Asian country after another, “falling” like dominos. Time was running out. Yet, the relentless pursuit of progress, the attempt to master time in order to overcome finite existence, is as unattainable as it is seductive. This hard causal

33 Ibid., 144–5.
34 Loren Baritz, Backfire: Vietnam – The Myths That Made Us Fight, the Illusions that Helped Us Lose, the Legacy that Haunts Us Today (New York: Ballantine, 1985), 27.
35 Full Metal Jacket (Warner Bros, 1987). The movie’s screenplay was based on Gustav Hasford’s The Short-Timers (Bantam, 1983) and co-written by Dispatches author Michael Herr.
36 America was also obligated to help reclaim France’s former territories if it had any hopes of utilizing French lands as staging areas against Eastern European communist aggression. For further analysis of the Allies’ complicated post-war entanglements, see Mark Atwood Lawrence’s “Explaining the Early Decisions: The United States and the French War, 1945–1954,” in Making Sense of the Vietnam Wars: Local, National, and Transnational Perspectives, ed. Mark Phillip Bradley and Marilyn B. Young, 23–44 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
linearity left no room for patience, exactly the virtue Balthasar enjoins in the interstice between temporality and eternal fulfillment. Thus, from 1950 to 1975 America waged its longest war in order to secure, ironically, that which ostensibly would “fall” at any second.37

“When Time Is Nothing but Speed”

Amidst the idolatry of progress and the ensuing succession of violence, Balthasar proclaims Christ’s salvation. Only the Son’s self-giving in and for time can offer lasting meaning for human history: “that is in the God who has taken the initiative in revealing, proclaiming, disclosing and giving himself.”38 The pathos of humanity becomes the pathos of God through the second moment of divine kenosis as the God-man, Jesus Christ, “unravel[5] the paradox whereby man is forever trying to translate what is absolute into terms that are relative and transitory.”39 Rather than violently manipulating, ordering, or forcing himself onto history, Jesus surrenders to the fate of humanity’s death-dealing manipulation, order, and force. It is precisely here that the incarnation, the Son’s kenosis, demonstrates itself as authentic care for temporal existence. Though Christ assumed temporality, he did not succumb to the temptations of time: “He does not do that precise thing which we try to do when we sin, which is to break out of time, within which are contained God’s dispositions for us, in order to arrogate to ourselves a sort of eternity.”40 By substitution, Jesus “expropriated” impatient creation into his patience, thus drawing temporal existence back into the eternal kenosis of the triune life.41 Christ saves humanity from its presumptions not by violently forcing himself onto history – “all of these things I will give you if you fall down and worship me” (Matt. 4:8); not by violently ordering history so that it will come out right – “… so that you will not dash your foot against a stone” (Matt 4:6); and not by violently manipulating history by way of an ultimate and decisive technocracy – “command these stones to become

37 Boredom, as a strange bedfellow to temporal desperation, will be taken up in the next chapter.
39 Ibid., 94.
40 Ibid., 36.
41 Christ’s patience is not made possible by some kind of “eternal perspective,” an existential Stoic disinterest in turn made possible by a secret gnosis. Such a notion is another form of temporal escape rather than temporal authenticity. (Balthasar, *A Theology of History*, 38–9)
loaves of bread” (Matt. 4:3). Rather, Jesus saves humanity from its violence by his refusal to save it by violence. By submitting himself to “our time,” the Son re-enacts the human drama from disobedience to obedience, from self-possession to self-giving, and from temporal privation to eternal participation.

Unfortunately, in the drama’s penultimate act, between the Son’s self-giving and the final glorification of the Lamb, kenosis (lordship as self-giving, “this unity of omnipotence and powerlessness”) threatens the prior eon of desperation. God’s peace in Christ brings a sword, and now the rival temporalities – one patient, the other impatient – stand illumined as two cities. The world’s “peace” reveals itself by claiming totality, recalcitrance once again declaring, “This is our time!” According to Balthasar, “we are faced with a titanic rejection on man’s part: he resists being embraced by this very mystery of the Cross.” Unwilling to wait patiently, humanity encroaches on the drama of cross and resurrection and distorts it from the inside. Interpreting the Lamb’s self-giving as a threat to its security, desperation intensifies into what Balthasar calls “the law of heightening”: “The more I called them, the more they went from me” (Hos. 11:2). The divine kenosis, once good news, now sounds the clarion warnings of history’s last stand, the end of man’s privation, which might be prolonged by fear and loathing, killing and hiding, and ever-expanding borders. Humanity rejects the Word’s incarnation by a counter “disincarnation.” Human mastery twists the drama of self-giving into a distorted positivity, warping the gospel into a monstrous mission to the nations. What was centrally the drama of God’s self-giving now gets privatized into anti-drama: the final convulsions of humanity’s violent usurping and thrashing unleashed on the pathos of the world stage.

When the Americans encountered the Vietnamese, they were once again given an opportunity to re-envision temporal existence, to understand “our time” as indeed only “our time.” Yet their certainty of how clocks and calendars run foreclosed such repentance and quickened their appetites for control and containment. Instead of seeing in the Vietnamese a new possibility, Americans saw yet another opportunity to save the savage from falling behind the times; what the Americans needed to do

42 Samuel Wells, in Improvisation, identifies the church as the fourth act, between the Son’s mission in the third and the eschaton in the fifth. Wells uses Balthasar’s drama to explicate how Christian ethics negotiates the “already and not yet” of the third and fifth acts. Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004).
44 Ibid., 217.
was bring the Vietnamese up to speed in a world now determined by the clock. Whether such modernization was to be achieved through “Vietnamization” or carpet-bombing was simply a detail to be worked out: “As a result, the pathos of the world stage becomes grotesque, grimacing, and demonic.”

At the end of The White Man’s Burden, Winthrop D. Jordan makes the argument that at the moment Europeans began enslaving Africans, they were met with an opportunity to overcome the worldview that made chattel slavery imaginable. Driven by a self-perception of themselves as comprising the zenith of civilization and the stranger as, by definition, inferior, Europeans encountered what they considered to be animalistic savages and could not envisage doing anything else but en-slaving them. However, Jordan argues that the same othering that led to domination could have also led to self-examination. The African in all her difference was a challenge to the European’s sense of self; at that point, the European could stop and reconsider his notion of humanity, or he could divide the world between humans and slaves. Unfortunately, Europeans in Africa in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries chose the latter. But the challenge could have turned out differently.

Conceivably there was a way out from this vicious cycle of degradation, an opening of better hope demanding an unprecedented and perhaps impossible measure of courage, honesty, and sheer nerve. If the white man turned to stare at the animal within him, if he once admitted unashamedly that the beast were there, he might see that the old foe was a friend as well, that his best and his worst derived from the same deep well of energy. If he once fully acknowledged the powerful forces which drove his being, the necessity of imputing them to others would drastically diminish. If he came to recognize what had happened and was still happening with himself and the African in America, if he faced the unpalatable realities of the tragedy unflinchingly, if he were willing to call the beast no more the Negro’s than his own, then conceivably he might set foot on a better road. Common charity and his special faith demanded that he make the attempt. But there was little in his historical experience to indicate that he would succeed.

45 Ibid., 73.

For the European, the opportunity to overcome his distorted worldview availed itself every time the “white man” confronted the African, whether as a “savage” on the coast of Africa or as a slave in the plantations of America. True, such openness would require more courage and imagination than he could muster; still, there was the possibility. To the extent that he did not avail himself of truthfulness, “whiteness” from its inception to the present would warrant continual propagation of a lie; “the white man’s burden” became the fate of a people determined to live untruthfully.

In a sense, the tragic deaths of 58,191 Americans became the burden of America’s presumptions from 1950 to 1975 and humanity’s usurpation of temporal significance. During the war America was repeatedly given opportunities for reappraisal when confronted by the Vietnamese. The Vietnamese understood and ordered time differently. This might have, but did not, effect change in the American presumption of a “neutral world-clock.” As Frances Fitzgerald explains in her unequalled history _Fire in the Lake_, “the traditional Vietnamese, like so many peasant people, saw history not as a straight-line progression, but as an organic cycle of growth, fruition, and decay; for them these seasonal changes were associated with textures and pictures – the images of China itself.”

Fitzgerald lucidly describes the difference:

Americans ignore history for to them everything has always seemed new under the sun. The national myth is that of creativity and progress, of a steady climbing upward into power and prosperity, both for the individual and the country as a whole. Americans see history as a straight line and themselves standing at the cutting edge of it as representatives for all mankind. They believe in the future as if it were a religion … With a stable technology and a limited amount of land the traditional Vietnamese lived by constant repetition, by the sowing and reaping of rice and by the perpetration of customary law. The Vietnamese worshipped their ancestors as the source of their lives, their fortunes, and the civilization. In the rites of ancestor worship the child imitated the gestures of his grandfather so that when he became the grandfather, he could repeat them exactly to his grandchildren. In this passage of time that had no history the death of man marked no final end. Buried in the rice fields that sustained his family, the father would live on in the bodies of his children and grandchildren. As time wrapped around itself, the generations to come

would regard him as the source of their present lives and the arbiter of their fate.\textsuperscript{48}

From the vantage point of Vietnamese “time wrapped around itself,” American temporal linearity must have seemed simplistic. From the patience such repetition makes possible, the American willingness to secure that linearity through indescribable violence must have seemed insane.\textsuperscript{49}

What was unimaginable to America’s mythos of progress was that the Vietnamese, or any other people for that matter, simply could not be co-opted to its assumptions, that they were irreducibly different and that the concerns of America did not necessarily concern those who were not American. The American “domino theory” was a world-historical emergency foreign policy constructed as the intensification of its own temporality, and America as the world-historical figure had to bring the fight to the world, even at the world’s expense. Americans were in no position to see the Vietnamese beyond what they wanted to see: themselves. As Fitzgerald writes, “For the Americans in Vietnam it would be difficult to make this leap of perspective, difficult to understand that while they saw themselves as building world order, many Vietnamese saw them merely as the producers of garbage from which they could build houses. The effort of translations was too great.”\textsuperscript{50} Confrontation with this difference

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 8, 9. One should avoid idealizing such an account of time. For example, consider Ta Duy Anh’s “The Broken Curse,” a story about one village’s relational curses that go back generations, fating children to ancestral repetitions. “Love After War” in \textit{Love After War: Contemporary Fiction from Viet Nam}, ed. Wayne Karlin and Ho Anh Thai, 604–26 (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 2003). Lashing out, the story’s narrator protests, “You respectfully haul the dead out to worship them and ruthlessly force down into the grave those who live and love” (625).

\textsuperscript{49} This is not to deny that many Vietnamese were warring and violent people. To the extent that the Viet Minh held communism as salvific, they too were imposing a war of worlds upon the peasant population. Yet, the cyclical view of time held by the peasant made her, in a significant sense, largely uninterested in the continual changes of ideologies and unthreatened by that which warranted violence by the Americans and the Viet Minh.

\textsuperscript{50} Fitzgerald, \textit{Fire in the Lake}, 5. While the American either/or perspective viewed village harboring of Viet Cong (VC) as endorsing northern incursion, many villagers tolerated and even participated in communist activities due to pragmatic reasons such as adherence to cultural values (e.g. communal harmony) or simple survival, rather than allegiance to the VC rhetoric. See Heonik Kwon, \textit{After the Massacre: Commemoration and Consolation in Ha My and My Lai} (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 52–9.

Mark Phillip Bradley and Marilyn B. Young observe that Americans have written about the war (in literally thousands of books) as they fought it: Everything revolves around
could have been, as Jordan claimed of the Europeans, “an opening of better hope demanding an unprecedented and perhaps impossible measure of courage, honesty, and sheer nerve.” Unfortunately, there would be none of this “courage, honesty, and sheer nerve”; “courage, honesty, and sheer nerve” of the warring kind took over in such a way that reappraisal and repentance were never real possibilities. America would spend 25 bloody years shoring up its self-certainty, attempting to eradicate the counter-temporality of the Vietnamese.

Already in 1935, Martin Heidegger observed,

Russia and America, seen metaphysically, are both the same: the same hopeless frenzy of unchained technology and the rootless organization of the average man. When the farthest corner of the globe has been conquered technologically and can be exploited economically; when any incident you like, in any place you like, at any time you like, becomes accessible as fast as you like … when time is nothing but speed …

Privatizing time is not a sin unique to America, nor was it unique to Cold War America; if Balthasar’s portrayal characterizes the world accurately, desperation infects everything. I have only told the Americans-in-Vietnam version of Balthasar’s story. Anyone so willing could as well stage the North Vietnamese or Viet Cong adaptations of the drama. The threats to American security during the Cold War were as real as the historical monstrosities that Balthasar anticipates. America’s enemies during the Cold War were themselves infected with a temporal hysteria and, if given the opportunity, would have imposed their “world clock” on others. The claim of this book is not that American desperation produced an illusory threat (though much of its attention will focus on the unique form of American desperation), but rather that America and her perceived America (instead of “how we won the war” – winners writing history – “how we lost the war” – losers writing history), such that even now, Americans refuse any other perspective. Certainly this current book is guilty of the same error, though my goal has been to give neither an American nor Vietnamese perspective but a Christian one (which undoubtedly has been inflected through Vietnamese-American biases). See their “Introduction” in Making Sense of the Vietnam Wars: Local, National, and Transnational Perspectives, ed. Mark Phillip Bradley and Marilyn B. Young, 3–19 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

52 Martin Heidegger, Introduction to Metaphysics, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 40. While I utilize Heidegger here without comment, his association with German cultural politics, including that which would deplore and later war with America and Russia, will be taken up in Chapter 3.
enemies were infected by the same temporal madness, a madness that continues today. Humanity, of whatever political stripe, when divorced from God’s self-giving drama, will find itself fated to desperate violence. This was the case with the Americans and the communists in Vietnam, as they would demonstrate in the years following the war through cruelties in the name of “re-education”; and such is the case with every insurrectionist community in rebellion against the divine kenosis. When time becomes a threat to everything, it seems unlikely that humanity can overcome its self-made monsters, especially when self-creation is its only trusted mode of existence.