THE HISTORIAN
2025, VOL. 87, NO. 1, 66–86
https://doi.org/10.1080/00182370.2025.2508530

"Blind, Lame, Chipped, Cracked, Neutered": The Protests of Disabled Veterans in the Republic of Vietnam during the Early 1970s

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ABSTRACT
The disabled veterans of the Republic of Vietnam had been invisible in political discourse during the Americanization of the Vietnam War. In spring 1970, however, they took to the streets in Saigon and protested against the government for a lack of jobs and housing. Their demonstrations were only symptoms of a deeper nationalistic, anti-capitalist, and anti-American ideology. They were worried about economic inequity and cultural decline, and frustrated about the inability of the U.S. to win the war. In the end, they believed that only a social revolution could win ordinary Vietnamese over and defeat the communists.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 07 Nov 2024; Accepted 13 May 2025

KEYWORDS Anti-American; Disabled Veterans; Republic of Vietnam; Social Revolution; Vietnam War

On 5 April 1970, the *New York Times* reported on the second page a demonstration in Saigon by disabled veterans of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN).[2] The highlight of the demonstration took place at the Independence Palace, the workplace and residence of the president of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN). It ended only after a presidential aide tape-recorded the demands of the veterans and promised them that he would present the tape to President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu. Among the demands was a need of new housing for many of the disabled veterans. "Hundreds of disabled veterans," describes the *Times*, "were building new homes on sidewalks and other land throughout downtown Saigon as a protest against the Government's apparent lack of concern for their welfare." [3] The *Times* followed one veteran, a former Infantry Ranger by the name of Pham Van Dan, who was 29 years old. Having earned five military medals, Dan was discharged after being shot and injured in 1965, and received a classification of 70% disabled at the time of the demonstration. After he left the military,

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[2]James P. Sterpa, "South Vietnamese War Veterans Charge Neglect," *New York Times*, 5 April 1970, 2.
[3]Ibid.

Dan and his family remained at his Rangers battalion compound for another two years due to a lack of housing. However, they had to leave when his commander, who presumably gave them permission to stay in the compound, was killed. The family lived in one hut attached to a villa in suburban Gia Định, then in another on the back street of Chợ Lớn, Saigon's Chinatown suburb. Dan joined the protest movement and, by the time the *Times* got a hold of him, "was hard at work on his new home on Yen Do Street, a previously uncluttered thoroughfare in a relatively clean neighborhood of large villas, many of them occupied by American officials."[4] The *Times* added that "Mr. Dan's life is typical of 40,000 veterans," who felt that "[n]obody seems to care about them."[5]

The local newspapers concurred with the estimate of the *Times* and gave more details about the activities of the protesters. A leading Saigon daily, the anticommunist *Righteous Opinion* (*Chính Luận*), reported that there was a "bloody scuffle" on March 8 among disabled veterans and the police in front of the Bureau of Rural Development located at the corner of two major boulevards.[6] The scuffle occurred after the veterans broke through the fences and started building huts on an "unoccupied piece of land" outside the building. The Bureau called the police; the police came; the scuffled ensued, resulting in the head injury of one policeman, the burning of a Suzuki police motorcycle, and the running away of the veterans, apparently without any arrests. By the end of the month, some disabled veterans had already occupied sidewalks of two major roads, the Hiền Vương and Yến Đỗ, and others began to move into some other lots throughout the metropolitan area, including a compound at Petrus Ky Boulevard. In the following month, a number of disabled veterans from the provinces came to Saigon to join in the occupation. On April 3, *Righteous Opinion* estimated that there were about one hundred huts already set up in the Petrus Ky compound, fifty in another lot, and five hundred in another area. Back to the intersection of Hiền Vương and Yến Đỗ, some disabled veterans cut the barbed wires protecting the villas and set up another one hundred huts. On the morning of April 4, around fifty disabled veterans, some in wheelchairs or on crutches, gathered at 9:15 AM at the Lower House of the National Assembly and gave a three-point request to the president of the House. They then marched past the Catholic Cathedral and headed to the Independence Palace. At an intersection, however, they were met by the South Vietnamese Special

[4]Ibid.
[5]Ibid.
[6]The information about these events is gathered from news reports published in the following issues of *Chính Luận* in 1970: March 3, 11, 29-30, and 31; and April 2, 3, 4, and 5-6. Each report appears on the third page and occasionally continues on 10.

Police, resulting in a scuffle as noted by the *Times*. Using batons and butts of their guns, the police resisted the advancement of the veterans, knocking down six veterans in wheelchairs and one veteran on crutches. Unlike March 8, however, cooler heads prevailed this time. The veteran representatives quickly urged the marchers to stop marching and stay put. Likewise, the police, in the presence of the Metropolitan Captain, were ordered to take cartridges off their pistols to avoid any intentional or accidental shooting. The disabled veterans went on to the Independence Palace and a presidential aide came out at around 11:30 AM and tape-recorded their demands.

It is an understatement to say that the protests caught the attention of the Nguyễn Văn Thiệu administration and other branches of the government. For at least the next several days, a smaller group of disabled veterans returned to the Independence Palace. On April 7, Thiệu even invited Nguyễn Định, who claimed to represent an association of disabled veterans, into the palace to listen to their issues and problems. The President sought a balanced approach in dealing with the demonstrations. On the one hand, he expressed sympathy for the veterans. "I am myself a soldier," he said in a public stament, "who fought for 20 years and now I have a number of relations who were wounded in the battlefields as you were therefore, I understand thoroughly all problems of servicemen and ex-servicemen."[7] On the other hand, he appealed to the veterans to stop their demonstrations, the occupation of public and private lands, and employment of weapons against the police. More than once, he declared that the demonstrators should not let their action be exploited by the communists. "For the sake of national interest," stated the President, "I must restore public order and make the laws of the land respected."[8]

Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's insistence on law and order was partially a response to the larger atmosphere in Saigon at the time. Besides the disabled veterans, a number of university students were actively demonstrating against the US. Their protests took place in several cities, most notably in Saigon under the organization of one of the student unions, the Saigon Student Union (SSU, or *Tổng Hội Sinh Viên Sài Gòn*), whose leadership consisted of members clandestinely affiliated to the National Liberation Front (NLF).[9] Although the number of pro-NLF students were small in comparison to anticommunist student groups, they were were very vocal and aggressive on the street, leading to injuries of police officers and damages of police

[7] *Viet-Nam Bulletin*, vol. 4 (6), 12 April 1970, 4-5. The bulletin was published by the RVN's embassy in Washington, DC.
[8] Ibid.
[9] For the background to the student protests, see Van Nguyen-Marshall, *Between War and the State: Civil Society in South Vietnam, 1954-1975*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2024, 111-20.

vehicles.[10] They also received support from non-communist left-wing voices in urban South Vietnam, including a progressive Catholic journal that was often censored by the government.[11] The student protests led to the strongest condemnation from President Thiệu, who called them a "minority" that "colluded with various groups and factions which shared the same trouble-making advocation."[12] Although the protests of the disabled veterans were much smaller in scale, they contributed to the fears among government officials that they were fast losing control of the urban citizenry. It was in this context that Thiệu issued a firm declaration against "disorder."

At the same time, Thiệu sought to resolve the grievances of the disabled veterans as quickly as possible. The day after he made the aforementioned statement, the RVN prime minister, Trần Thiện Khiêm, went to the Upper House of the National Assembly for a day-long meeting with thirty-eight senators. (Twenty others were absent.) To judge from Khiêm's opening remarks, his original agenda was about the national economy and postwar prospects of economic development. It was not long, however, before the discussion shifted to the disabled veterans, which topic was discussed for over ninety minutes. A number of senators, including the committee chairs of defense and veteran affairs, praised the disabled veterans for their sacrifices to the republic. At the same time, Phạm Văn Đổng, chair of the veteran affairs committee, gave a robust defense against criticism of the committee that it failed the disabled veterans. Đổng pointed out that applications for benefits from disabled veterans, widows of deceased veterans, and their children had risen "tenfold" since 1967. Đổng further noted that since he began chairing the committee in September 1969, his office had "resolved" about 38,000 applications out of nearly 40,000 within the first three months. He went on to list a number of housing units, schools, and work places constructed specifically for disabled veterans and their families. Đổng was somewhat critical of the forceful tactics employed by the disabled veterans during their protests. So was Prime Minister Khiêm, who noted some of the damages to the police and spoke generally in favor of law and order. But even Khiêm

[10]The student protests received more attention from international news outlets throughout 1970. See, for examples, "Vietnam Student Protests Spread in Spite of Police," *New York Times*, 7 April 1970, 3; "Saigon Feels War's Strain and Chaos," *New York Times*, 8 May 1970, 15; "Student Protesters Denouncing Thieu Also Assails the U.S.," *New York Times*, 16 June 1970, 1; and "Saigon Students Are Making the U.S. a Major Target," *New York Times*, 4 July 1970, 3.
[11]*Chọn* [Choice] 1, 1 May 1970), 33.
[12]*Viet-Nam Bulletin*, vol. 4 (19), 13 July 1970, 1.

acknowledged the sacrifices of the protestors and spoke of finding a peaceful solution to their issues.[13]

The demonstrations also compelled Phạm Văn Đổng to address the issues to the Vietnamese society at large. On April 10, he appeared on the television program *Người Dân Muốn Biết* ["Citizens Want to Know"] and answered a series of questions about the rights and benefits of disabled veterans and their families.[14] Similar to his presentation at the Upper House two days before, Đổng went at length to explain the legal benefits accorded to disabled veterans while defending the government's efforts at meeting their rights and benefits. He also acknowledged that a number of disabled veterans were forced to illegally construct their huts. On the other hand, he alleged that dishonest and exploitative "real estate merchants" played a major role in fueling illegal occupation of land. Đổng offered a list of goals in the short term and the long term. Among three short-term goals was the need to verify who were really disabled veterans and who were not. Among five long-term goals were the construction of new housing units by using profits from the national lottery; and asking city governments to prioritize certain public jobs for disabled veterans, their widows, and children.

In short, government officials, from President Thiệu to his prime minister to the head of the office veteran affairs, insisted upon public order and a cessation to the protests. But they also took very seriously the demands of the demonstrators and quickly conveyed their sympathy and resolution to the disabled veterans and the public at large. On 9 July 1970, the Independence Palace issued Law 008/70, which was essentially an update and revision of previous laws, about "benefits of disabled veterans, families of deceased veterans, and veterans."[15] The order of emphasis, which began with the disabled veterans, left little doubt that their protests were crucial in bringing forth the new law. It specified benefits and "additional benefits" for disabled veterans and their family members, including medical care and support for finding jobs; although there was no mention about housing, the law and subsequent documents emphasized "additional benefits," especially monetary benefits, to suggest that the disabled veterans would be in a much better position to secure livable housing from now on.[16] At the same news conference that Thiệu condemned the student protests, he announced that the new law "will be promulgated in the near future."[17] From this perspective, it

[13] *Công Báo Việt Nam Cộng Hòa: Ấn Bản Quốc Hội (Thượng Nghị Viện)* [Public Records of the Republic of Vietnam: National Assembly (Upper House Edition)], 15 January 1973, 309–28. The quotations of Phạm Văn Đổng come from ibid., 314.

[14] *Người Dân Muốn Biết: Tập I* ["Citizens Want to Know: Volume 1"], Saigon: Việt Nam Thông Tấn Xã, 1972, 234–42. This is a collection of transcripts of different episodes in the program.

[15] Bộ Cựu Chiến Binh [The Department of Veteran Affairs], *Luật Số 8/70 ngày 9-7-70 và những Văn Kiện kế tiếp* [Law 8/70 Issued on July 9, 1970, and Documents that Followed] (Saigon, 1971).

[16] Ibid.

[17] *Viet-Nam Bulletin*, vol. 4 (19), 13 July 1970, 3.

was the start of a new chapter in the relationship between the RVN and its disabled veterans.

A New Voice in the National Discourse

The White House was also briefed on the developments of these protests from its South Vietnamese representative, Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker. In late April 1970, Bunker cabled a report to Washington and compared the demonstrations to the student protests:

> The disabled veterans represent a totally different kind of problem [to Thiệu than the protests by university students]. The veterans have borne heavy sacrifices for the country–as their mutilations starkly attest–and they have dropped to the social and economic bottom of the society they have been defending … Since every ARVN combat soldier knows himself to be a potential disabled veteran, the government recognized the need to deal urgently with the disabled veterans' demands. Accordingly, after the confrontation occurred, [the government] moved to take remedial steps. It presented to the National Assembly a veterans benefit bill which will provide for rather generous pensions, and it devised a plan for providing emergency housing to the disabled in distress. The promises were well received. The veterans ceased their demonstrations and construction of shacks stopped. The government has bought time with promises, but it must now make good on them.[18]

As indicated by the American ambassador, the persistence and ferocity of public demonstrations prompted quick response from the government that had sought to "buy time." Although the protests did not completely stop after April 1970, coverage of the disabled veterans generally faded over time in the US and RVN presses. Among many South Vietnamese, however, the protests opened up to the public a discourse about the relationship between disabled veterans and nationalism, anticommunism, the relationship with the United States, and, more broadly, the construction and development of a postcolonial noncommunist republic. Previously a largely invisible group in the public sphere, the disabled veterans entered this sphere after the demonstrations and seized the moment to keep their voices heard thereafter.

For they knew that they could become invisible again if there were no venues beyond public protests. They formed an association headed by Nguyễn Định as president and Đinh Trung Thu as general secretary, themselves disabled veterans. On 7 April 1970, or three days after the protest that ended at the Independence Palace, both men visited the office of the weekly

[18]"For the President from Bunker, USDEL France for Ambassador Habib," 24 April 1970, in Ellsworth Bunker, *The Bunker Papers: Reports to the President from Vietnam, 1967-1973*, vol. 3, Berkeley, CA: Institute of East Asian Studies, UC Berkeley, 1990, 767.

Life (*Đời*), whose publisher and editor, Chu Tử, was a well-respected journalist and novelist among anticommunist intellectual circles of South Vietnam. The association's leaders had acquired a permit for a periodical called *Steel Crutch* (*Nạng Thép*) and they were waiting for funds to begin publishing and selling it. Định and Thu asked Chu Tử for two kinds of assistance. First, *Life* would publish a supplementary section about the disabled veterans in the next few issues. Second, it would allow the association to purchase some copies of each issue for a lower cost, so that members of the association could resell them at the market price for profit. Chu Tử agreed to this arrangement. As *Life* normally carried a specific theme or topic for each issue, he further decided to devote the April 16 issue to the topic of disabled veterans. Two weeks later, or shortly after the National Assembly passed the bill noted in Ambassador Bunker's cable, the first issue of *Steel Crutch* was published on a weekly basis. It ran from May to September 1970 for nineteen issues before folding, probably due to insufficient funds as well as internal disputes.[19] Seven months later, several writers of *Steel Crutch* joined forces with others to publish the weekly *Screaming* (*Gào Thét*), which ran from April 1971 to September 1972 for sixty-eight issues.[20] Although the new weekly was not specifically devoted to disabled veterans, it occasionally published articles about them. From September to December 1971, it also included a section called "Steel Crutch," appearing on the last page of each issue and publishing news and announcements from the association. In early 1972, the name of this section was changed to "Disabled Veterans [and] Children and Widows of Deceased Soldiers."

These publications provide valuable sources to understand the beliefs and ideology among the disabled veterans, whose voices had been largely mute in the discourse of the society and politics in the RVN. Led by Nguyễn Định and Đinh Trung Thu, themselves disabled veterans, published many articles and editorials through a legally and culturally accepted venue in the public sphere of urban South Vietnam. Examining this ideology in these publications, especially *Steel Crutch*, is the goal in the remainder of this article. Moreover, I seek to contextualize their ideology by linking it to a broader turning point in the South Vietnamese society. In the standard periodization of the Vietnam War, the spring of 1970 marked the start of the second year of Vietnamization as the US continued its withdrawal of combat troops since the peak of over 543,000 in April 1969. Although American intervention kept the RVN from falling to the communists, it could not defeat the enemy while

[19]Although the nature of internal disputes was not clear, disputes within the association were alluded to in some articles and columns of *Screaming* during 1971.

[20]Both weeklies were newspaper-sized, and most issues were between twelve and sixteen pages long.

contributing to many social and cultural problems in South Vietnam. As a result, many voices in the South Vietnamese society spoke loudly against Vietnamese corruption as well as American failure. They believed that a social revolution (*cách mạng xã hội*) was necessary to usher in economic and political justice to South Vietnam, win the support of citizens, and defeat the communists in the end.

Disabilities and Grievances against Economic Exploitation

As shown by the street demonstrations and marches to the Independence Palace, grievances over economic well-being were important in the publications by and about disabled veterans. Such grievances appeared in the very first article of the Vietnamese *Life* issue devoted to disabled veterans. Writing this article under the pen name Vương Hữu Bột, the journalist Đỗ Quý Toàn reminded readers that anticommunist governments–from Bảo Đại in the State of Vietnam to Ngô Đình Diệm in the First Republic to Nguyễn Cao Kỳ during the interregnum to Nguyễn Văn Thiệu in the Second Republic–had consistently signed into laws different types of benefits for disabled veterans. Yet, argued Toàn, "all is only theory" at this time and disabled veterans had been "forgotten" by both "society and nation." [21] He gave four reasons for the neglect: high inflation; a competitive "capitalist economy" that made them undesirable to employers; the lack of organization among themselves; and "sickness" in governmental administration that were not attentive to their rights.[22] It was not a singular reason but a combination of factors that led to their economic plight.

Đỗ Quý Toàn's four points might be debatable, but his summary of government support, at least in the legislature, was not incorrect. Long before the protests in 1970, the RVN had already established clear policies regarding benefits for disabled veterans. For years, the Ministry of Defense ran a "directorate" of pensions and benefits for veterans (including disabled ones called invalids) and widows and children of deceased veterans. Policies on their pension and benefits had originated in laws passed by the State of Vietnam in 1953 and the RVN in 1956. In 1966, the RVN created the Ministry of Veteran Affairs, which was absorbed into the Ministry of Defense in 1968. In March 1969, however, the RVN reactivated the Ministry of Veteran Affairs because, as stated by the head of the ministry, it was "conscious of multiple problems concerning war veterans, invalids and

[21] *Đời* [Life] 28, April 16, 1970, 4-5. In addition to journalism, Đỗ Văn Toàn taught literature at a high school in Saigon.
[22] Ibid.

dependents of the deceased."[23] Although it did not state the reasons for the reactivation, it offered two guiding "principles" for the Ministry. The first principle was to "enhance community responsibility and concern for those who have served the country in the war against communist aggression"; the second was to "provide necessary and adequate assistance to [the parties involved] in order to facilitate their readjustment to community life and guide them towards reconstruction activities."[24] The reactivation of the Ministry in 1969 was a response to the rising human costs of warfare, as there were about 51,000 disabled veterans among an estimated number of 200,000 veterans overall.

In another article of the same issue of *Life*, Nguyễn Văn Đông emphasized the dignity of the disabled veterans in regard to their economic grievances. Implying that disabled veterans were not beggars, Đông stated that their situation should not be improved on "the basis of aid" but on the basis basis of their "rights."[25] Đông recommended the model of Taiwan, whose government provided funds to train disabled veterans for new jobs in light industries. He considered this urban-oriented policy superior than the RVN's policy that was giving a small number of veterans land for farming in the countryside. Đông's recommendation reflected the practicality and appropriateness of labor for disabled veterans. Not only farm land was limited at the time, but farm work was not suitable for people with physical disabilities.

The need for appropriate labor was one side of the coin; the other side was the more immediate need for housing:

> The struggle of disable veterans has two goals, near and far [the first issue of the weekly declares in a regular column called "Blind soldiers look at life" (*Lính mù nhìn đời*), adding,] the immediate goal is possession of living quarters and treatment appropriate to the sacrifices given to the nation and society.[26]

Playing off the recent reform program "Land to the Tiller," the periodical emphasized the association's motto of "land to the tiller, housing to the disabled veteran." In issue after issue, it called for increased benefits, better housing, better policies in hiring disabled veterans into governmental jobs,

[23]Pham Van Dong, *War Veterans, Invalids, Widows & Orphans in Viet* Nam, Saigon: Vietnam Council on Foreign Relations, 1970, 1.
[24]Pham Van Dong, *War Veterans*, 1-2.
[25]*Đời* 28, 16 April 1970, 23.
[26]*Nạng Thép* [Steel Crutch] 1, 1 May 1970, 4. Hereafter, the weekly is abbreviated as *NT*. Although it is newspaper-sized, most pages show only one article or column, which was similar to a smaller-sized journal in the South Vietnamese press. Only some articles and columns include the name or pseudonym of the author, and some do not. For the sake of uniformity, citations only show the page number(s) and not the author's name. Researchers with access to these periodicals would have no problem identifying the citations.

and training programs for new and appropriate lines of work. *Steel Crutch* argued against the proposal 138/70/HP that would determine benefits for disabled veterans and widowed families, the paper calculated that a child of a deceased veteran would receive about 80 piasters a month, well below the 200 piasters that the then prime minister Nguyễn Cao Kỳ had allegedly pledged during the 1967 elections campaign.[27] It also expressed unhappiness and anger at what it perceived to be the government's favoritism towards former communists who went over to the RVN through the Open Arms Program.

How did the disabled veterans justify their economic and occupational grievances? Not surprisingly, they appealed to the sacrifices that they had made in battle on behalf of the non-communist nation and the RVN government. This they did in part by highlighting their disabilities. Throughout the issues were scattered images of disabilities and impotency. Under the front-page name *Steel Crutch* is a line calling the weekly the "screaming field of soldiers blind, lame, chipped, cracked, neutered."[28] Its issues include many drawn images of disabled and bandaged men. Many issues published passages and whole articles describing their experiences of impotency. Populating the pages were terms and phrases highlighting disabilities. Besides the aforementioned "blind soldiers look at life" (the pun was clearly intended), oft-used phrases included "the deaf fear no gun [noise]" (*điếc không sợ súng*), "neutered" (*thiến dế*), "legless soldiers" (*lính què*), and "the blind piggy-backing the lame" (*thằng mù cõng thằng què*), among others. The last phrase was also the title of a regular column written by Đinh Trung Thu, who served as the weekly's general editor. Addressing the Special Police in the form of an open letter, Thu wrote that "without hands we can't pull our lovers towards us, without arms we can't embrace our wives; we can't even hold a cap begging on the street; our wooden legs can't chase after our disrespectful sons; without knees we can't make love to our wives."[29] Disabilities were tied to expected roles among Vietnamese men as husbands, fathers, primary earners, and, implicitly, heads of the family. Thu's phrasing sought to evoke sympathy for the veterans, but it was also a reminder of traditional roles allotted to men. An implication, perhaps, was that disabilities were a national rather than a sectarian issue, and that treatment of disabled veterans reflected how Vietnamese saw their nation and society.

[27] *NT* 3, 15 May 1970, 10.
[28] Vietnamese original: *vùng gào thét của người lính đui, què, mẻ, sứt. . . mất dế*. The last adjective literally means "pecker lost."
[29] *NT* 1, 1 May 1970, 9.

As shown by the public demonstrations, the disabled veterans formally presented their grievances for housing and jobs to the government of the RVN. They kept on pressing for the same on the pages of *Steel Crutch* and emphasized patriotism as the rationale for their grievances. In the second issue, for example, Nguyễn Định addressed President Thiệu and stated that the criticism of governmental neglect came out of not of selfishness among the disabled veterans, but their patriotism. He furthered the theme of "critique as patriotism" by blaming "capitalists" who avoided "criticism" and "protests" of other Vietnamese. Định's implication was that Thiệu operated within a capitalist system that favored the haves over the haves-not, and the president and his administration should have heeded the voices of the haves-not. In the first issue, the journalist and disabled veteran An Khê, who had joined the association's leaderhip as its vice president, published an analysis about a proposal in the legislature for a new law on the benefits of veterans, disabled veterans, and widows and children of deceased soldiers.[30] Under a measured tone for much of the article, An Khê interpreted the proposal with statistics, mathematical calculations, and references to past laws. Later in the article, however, the tone turned somewhat strident as the author leveled accusations at "fraudsters" (*những ai ăn chặn*) and others who "suck blood" out of disabled veterans, widows, and fatherless children.[31] He called for the government to tighten its laws and strictly enforce them.[32]

Soon enough, criticism extended beyond the blood-suckers and exploiters of veterans and their families. In an unsigned column of "Blind soldiers look at life," the author reported on a group of disabled veterans trying to take over land in suburban Chợ Lớn, mostly populated by ethnic Chinese. Calling the suburb "capital of the most fraudulent merchants," the author condemned them to be were "without conscience" and to "have made high profits over the suffering of the people."[33]

In important respects, then, it was not the government but the well-to-do in business and industries that received the biggest blame and criticism from the writers for *Steel Crutch*. They might have been implicated under a large "capitalist" umbrella, or they were called "blood suckers." All the same, the variations supported the weekly's belief is that they were exploitative players in the economy that led to undue and unjust suffering among ordinary Vietnamese. Due to housing issues, real estate agents and owners were a common target on the pages of *Steel Crutch*. A column in "Blind soldiers

[30] *NT* 1, 1 May 1970, 12-13.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.
[33] *NT* 7, 19 June 1970, 2.

look at life," for example, stated that disabled veterans and "many other groups" occupied land and built huts.[34] As the occupiers showed up in larger number, they were countered by wealthy real estate owners, who fought back, not directly but by employing others to do their dirty work. The column, unsigned but probably written by Đinh Trung Thu, considered the conflict to be a good thing. Why? Because it would lead others to see that there were two types of Vietnamese: The majority who were poor and fighting to claim their basic right to own a place to live; and a small minority that exploited the economy with advantageous laws on their side.[35] Though rare, *Steel Crutch* also alleged collusion between the government and wealthy to deepen economic injustice. A column argues, for example, that disabled veterans should be employed by the government as tax collector, accusing a number of unnamed wealthy Vietnamese to have dodged paying taxes and suggesting that President Thiệu had appeared to "protect them and defend them."[36]

The critique of fraud and exploitation was populist in tone, rhetoric, and ideology. It drew a sharp contrast about the haves and the haves-not, and the anger against the government was surpassed by the rage at the wealthy and powerful, especially at Vietnamese who were taking advantage of war to profit their own pockets:

> All Vietnamese have the authority to own lots for home-building [and] land for farming . . . Those greedy Vietnamese, leaning on their foreign masters to conquer land, are national traitors and foreign agents, in need of judgment and punishment from the people's court on two crimes: the crime of relying on the power of their foreign masters to bully other Vietnamese, and the crime of being Vietnamese yet oppressing [their own] Vietnamese people.[37]

An Anti-American Critique of Cultural Decline

One would expect this kind of a passionate denunciation emanating from the propaganda of North Vietnam or the NLF rather than an anticommunist group like the ARVN disabled veterans, but the roots of this rhetoric were likely deeper seated in modern Vietnamese history. There was furthermore a touch of xenophobia in associating "foreigners" to economic exploitation. In addition to ethnic Chinese in suburban Chợ Lớn, other groups of people were called by derogatory names in the same article.

[34] *NT* 9, 3 July 1970, 2.
[35] Ibid.
[36] *NT* 18, 4 September 1970, 4.
[37] *NT* 2, May 8, 1970, 4.

> Our side opposes the landlords and landowners, people like Benoit Châu [possibly a reference to a mixed-race Vietnamese], Chú Hỏa [ethnic Chinese], Bà Lớn [Big Madame], Thằng Tây [Westerner], Thằng Chà [Malay or Indian]. In this campaign for housing, our side includes 97 % of ordinary people. Our side also has 250,000 disabled veterans, a majority of soldiers and civil servants, laborers, and poor factory workers … [We] work for neither French nor Americans, nor we cater to powerful rulers. We have been suppressed and exploited by colonialism old and new, and by feudalism old and new, to the point of having lost the land to build our homes on.[38]

The differences were starkly drawn and the stances uncompromising in the "us vs. them" rhetoric. The evocation of colonialism and feudalism, which were two of three main ideological foes in the First Republic–the third being communism–indicated the belief that South Vietnam was still under the yoke of the old, if in new forms.[39] Even military leaders were not spared, especially when it was about corruption and self-enrichment. One article included the following outburst against ARVN's top level of leadership, arguing that "foreign newspapers wrote that Vietnam has 8 filthy-rich generals," but in fact there were "at least 30 filthy-rich generals."[40] The corrupt generals were further "ancient" because they had worked in the French military in the 1940s and 1950s. "Our military has plenty of talents," pressed the article, "so why does it depend on these "ancient" men especially since they are super-rich?"[41] The article further associated wealth to ineffective leadership: "Being super-rich means they are cowardly . . . the evidence being not a single general has died during this twenty-year conflict (except for one who was killed by an air crash) while at least a few American generals have died."[42]

This accusation of corruption implicitly tied the government to economic and political problems of the country. Moreover, the word "corruption" (*tham nhũng*) became a rallying point and a clarion call among the disabled veterans to fight for their rights. Not infrequently, they drew parallels between corruption and communism. "Corruption," opens another "Blind soldiers look at life" column, "is a problem both despicable and dangerous, [and] it is as bad as the subversion of the Communists, if

[38]Ibid.
[39]The slogan *Bài phong, đả thực, chống cộng*—meaning "eliminate feudalism, oppose colonialism, fight communism"—was popularized by the government of Ngô Đình Diệm during 1955–1963. Although it is not clear what the *Steel Crutch* writers had thought about Ngô Đình Diệm, their evocation of anticolonialism and anti-feudalism followed this tradition from the First Republic. See Nu-Anh Tran, *Disunion: Anticommunist Nationalism and the Making of the Republic of Vietnam*, Honolulu: University of Hawai,i Press, 2022.
[40]*NT* 1, 1 May 1970, 5.
[41]Ibid.
[42]Ibid.

not worse."[43] In addition, the communist enemies "could only fool citizens and expand their influence when our society is still corrupt and unjust."[44] Corruption was a central political problem on top of being an economic one. It had also penetrated all top levels of South Vietnam, and the problems faced by the disable veterans were not unique to them at all.

The reference to the US generals above, positive in comparison to the critique of corrupt generals in the ARVN, was ironic because *Steel Crutch* was often stinging in its criticism of the American military intervention. One of its biggest criticisms was the failure of the US military to defeat the communists. On the one hand, the weekly recognized the necessity of intervention. "Americans often said," writes Nguyễn Định, "that they came here to help [South] Vietnam fight. We acknowledge this point. We are not ungrateful people."[45] But the weekly consistently voiced against the takeover by the US armed forces the fight against the communists without regard for the input and action of South Vietnamese. The complete takeover meant that the RVN lost considerable political autonomy. The critique of American intervention continued in *Screaming* during 1971. Commemorating the coup against Ngô Đình Diệm, for example, a writer declared that "Southern Vietnamese do not accept American manipulation of anticommunist policy to work on capitalistic colonialism."[46] Referring to the new relationship between America and China, it stated, "American dealings with world communism and betrayal of allies show them to be a wicked colonial nation."[47] At times, the tone took on a contrarian perspective. As a brief editorial puts it, "Americans are not our benefactors; on the contrary, we are their benefactors, since Vietnam took on an [anti-communist] role and has born many sacrifices for the Free World."[48] Like many other anti-communist Vietnamese, the disabled veterans believed that the American takeover led to an erasure of their contribution in the fight against communism. "The US gave us military ranks but only up to sergeant," goes a sarcastic remark in an article that compares the ARVN veterans to "wounded and screaming animals," who had fought the NLF and North Vietnamese troops long before Washington's direct intervention, which further contends that, "We have been victims of two war-mongering sides," that is the US and the communists.[49]

[43] *NT* 8, 26 June 1970, 2.
[44] Ibid.
[45] *NT* 11, July 17, 1970, 9.
[46] *Gào Thét* (*Screaming*) 28, 30 October 1971, 1. Hereafter, citations of this source are abbreviated as *GT*.
[47] Ibid.
[48] *GT* 27, 23 October 1971, 1.
[49] *NT* 3, 22 May 1970, 12.

The veterans' critique of the American takeover echoed concerns already voiced by different anti-communist elements in the South Vietnamese society. At the start of 1970, for example, a writer for (Vietnamese) *Life* opined that the "role of the government and other forces in South Vietnam from 1965 to 1967 has been thankless, shameful, gloomy" due to the American takeover.[50] Americanization had made South Vietnamese dependent on the US and, therefore, an effective means of propaganda for the communist enemy. Worse, the Vietnamese felt dominated by the American-led war effort, which led to the ubiquity of "American soldiers, American [civilians], American rice, American money, American power all over the South."[51] Although the Vietnamese "do not like the communists, they find it hard to like the Americans."[52] The contrast continued because "no genuine and brave Vietnamese patriot could say loudly that I love America, like America, worship America, follow America, fight for America, obey orders from America, receive salary from America, and eat American food."[53] Palpable was the anger about the neocolonial Americanization of South-Vietnamese society on top of the earlier Americanization of the war.

The author of this article proposed to take the fight to the north to end the war, which was by then a most unrealistic solution. But the fact that it was suggested at all indicated that the concern was more about the frustration of South Vietnamese than it was about the ability of the US and the RVN to wage war in territories controlled by North Vietnam. This frustration was not new. In mid-1968, *Life* itself had published a special issue on the theme of "Americans in Vietnam," in which one writer was critical of the money that the US "ha[d] thrown" at South Vietnam and, especially, the manner that it was thrown at the country, which was "[a] big error"; another asked,

> [what] was the role of advisor that some American have called themselves . . . in the military and civil administration[, w]hat advice could they give us? How could they understand the issues, actions, circumstances, and sensibilities among Vietnamese? What did they advise? They spent some money, transportation, machinery, weaponry for Vietnam–does it give them the right to be advisors for Vietnam? It's difficult. Vietnam would never accept foreigners to be their advisors.[54]

Life was also critical of social and cultural problems created by the massive presence of US troops. In a mocking poem published in the same special issue, American advisors were portrayed to have enjoyed the best alcohol and

[50] *Đời* 16, 1 January 1970, 14-15.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid.
[54] *Đời* 7, 27 July 1968, 4.

cigarettes plus sex with Vietnamese women. They were further criticized for carelessness in driving their automobiles that led to accidents harming mostly Vietnamese civilians.[55] Less sarcastic and more subtle than the writers of *Life*, the writers for *Steel Crutch* were nonetheless critical of American deleterious effects on the Vietnamese society. In the aforementioned open letter addressed to the Special Police, Đinh Trung Thu asked them to wear the shoes of the disabled veterans and imagine whether they could "let our wives work as prostitutes [and] our children as pimps for bordellos."[56] The implication was that prostitution was exploding in South Vietnam due to the influx of a new American clientele who would pay more for sexual services. In the same column four months later, Thu was more open in his critique while writing about the US naval base in the Cam Ranh Bay. He began with a criticism of an alleged collusion between local government officials and wealthy business people in restricting disabled veterans from building huts. Soon, the critique shifted to Vietnamese women working at US offices in the base. Thu accused Vietnamese "pimps" for having arranged sexual encounters between Americans and young Vietnamese women before the women would be hired to work at the base.[57] He did not spare American men either, calling them "the blue eyes demanding [sex] with the power to fire [the women]."[58] "How many young women," asked Thu, rhetorically, "bit their tongues so they could keep their jobs?"[59]

The treatment of young women was a local example of the broader critique of American power over its small ally. When US Vice-President Spiro Agnew visited Saigon, *Steel Crutch* mocked him as "ambassador of monetary aid."[60] It was unclear if Agnew came to persuade Thiệu to accept American terms for negotiations (according to Reuters) or to discuss military matters (according to the Soviet press). But the week stated that it was clear enough that "American aid has strings attached" now as it always did before.[61] For their populist rhetoric, the weeklies employed colorful Vietnamese expressions and colloquialisms, and here they described American policy in terms of *tiền trao cháo múc*: "cash handed over and soup scooped out."[62]

[55]*Đời* 7, 27 July 1968, 28. The critique of careless driving receives its own article in this issue, see ibid. 38-9.
[56]*NT* 1, 1 May 1970, 9.
[57]*NT* 18, 4 September 1970, 4.
[58]Ibid.
[59]Ibid.
[60]*NT* 18, 4 September 1970, 12.
[61]Ibid.
[62]Ibid.

Steel Crutch suggested that along with the explotation of young women, the muscling of the RVN by the US helped to emasculate the anticommunist Vietnamese men, whose impotency symbolized national impotency. "Histories of national decline," intoned an article in the first issue of *Steel Crutch*, "prove that leaders who took their countries into annihilation were undone by two factors."[63] The first factor was the belief of leaders in the "false praise by their courtiers to the point of not seeing the truth and unable to distinguish right from wrong."[64] The implication was that Vietnamese leaders had surrounded themselves with yes-men who offered terrible advice out of personal gain rather than national interest. The second factor was closer to the critique of cultural decline was the second reason: those leaders were "neutered by either their women or their Allies and obeyed without conditions," and "once neutered they had no ability for resistance."[65]

Note the blame placed on women as well as the American "Allies," which in turn suggested the frustration and anger that the disabled veterans felt over rapidly changing social mores. Coupled with economic problems besieging the family was a cultural decline that threatened the familial structure of Vietnamese men as the head of the household. In this case, the target was not prostitutes and young women working at US offices, but wealthy women who had benefited from the influx of money and goods since the Americanization of the Vietnam War. In the end, the anti-Americanism in *Steel Crutch* reflected a culturally conservative reaction on the part of the disabled veterans. They believed that the American ways of waging war were neither militarily successful nor culturally compatible. They were further angered by American disrespect for Vietnamese authorities, who were predominantly male; and the rise of some Vietnamese women that exploited the new situation for personal economic gain. Their street demonstrations focused on demands for housing and jobs, but the demands were only one side of a coin. On the other side was a critique of cultural decline caused by capitalists and neo-colonialists since direct military intervention by the US in 1965.

A Social Revolution to Defeat Communism

The cultural conservatism among the disabled veterans was countered by a progressive outlook on economic distribution. They believed that the differences between the haves and the haves-not were too great for small

[63] *NT* 1, 1 May 1970, 5.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid.

changes. Instead, they insisted on the solution being a "complete social revolution" (*cách mạng xã hội toàn diện*). As shown in the very first issue of *Steel Crutch*, the disabled veterans were further convinced that they were a "vanguard force" (*lực lượng tiền phong*) of this social revolution.[66] Writing in *Screaming* the following year, Nguyễn Định reiterated that disabled veterans must keep their presence seen and their action done towards "the progress of the SOCIAL REVOLUTION OF JUSTICE [capitals in the original]."[67] This participation was especially important, Định contended, as the RVN looked towards the end of the war and sought postwar developments. He believed that disabled veterans played a crucial role in keeping the government accountable and equitable in the postwar era. Inbetween these articles was the aforementioned column about young women working at the US base in Cam Ranh. At the end of this column, Đinh Trung Thu affirmed that the veterans were "devoting our disabled bodies to make a real Social Revolution," adding that "whether our work succeeds would depend on the participation of the people."[68] Thu considered the disabled veterans to be a vanguard force because they were seeking equity for all Vietnamese, not merely benefits for themselves.

Many other articles in *Steel Crutch* and *Screaming* kept on the call for a social revolution. One article, for example, offers a seven-point outline of this revolution. The first three points were about resolutions of housing and labor issues among disabled veterans *as well as* other impoverished Vietnamese. The next three points were belabored in small steps. The fourth point, for example, argued for the nationalization of the biggest industries in the economy; for the installment of a better system of management (and, presumably, taxation) in order to distribute profits more equitably to Vietnamese; and creation of a stronger social net of insurance and welfare to support ill and wounded victims of warfare. The eradication of corruption, especially the exploitation of the few over the many, colored much of the fifth and sixth points. Rather grandiosely, the seventh point asserted that "following the steps 4, 5, and 6 in this social revolution would [lead] to a victory over the Communists, eliminate corruption, stabilize society, and bring forth strength and wealth for the country."[69] Three months later, a different article reiterated many of the points above, this time with an added request that the government would need to develop and put in practice a "humane theory of social revolution" (*chủ thuyết cách mạng xã hội nhân bản*).[70] The assumption

[66]*NT* 1, 1 May 1970, 4.
[67]*GT* 19, 28 August 1971, 3.
[68]*NT* 18, 4 September 1970, 4.
[69]*NT* 3, 15 May 1970, 4.
[70]*NT* 14, 7 August 1970, 2.

was that this theory would adopt the ideas and proposals made by the disabled veterans, whose experiences paralleled the experiences of Vietnamese at the low ends of society. Behind this assumption was another assumption that had been raised: only a large-scale social revolution could defeat the Vietnamese communists who had successfully exploited societal inequities to rally many Vietnamese against the RVN. The disabled veterans believed that a military solution alone, especially as it was directed by the US Army, might have kept the communists at hand but it could not lead to a victory. In addition, the disabled veterans and their allies contended that the US consistently intervened in RVN affairs yet it failed to help bring forth such a revolution. They now judged the US to be "somewhat responsible for the bleak situation and the corruption today."[71] This indictment could be viewed as an extension of their critique of cultural decline caused by the overwhelming presence of American wealth and military power.

Ultimately, the crique presented by the disabled veterans was about growing social inequity since the Americanization of the war. Now that the RVN was engaging in Vietnamization, the veterans took advantage of their positions as wounded soldiers, tied social justice to patriotism, and argued for an expansion of their roles in contributing to the future of a postcolonial nation. As one writer asked rhetorically,

> Soldiers engage in battles not only to protect the country but also to create a just society . . . What would they do? Does patriotism force them to bear injustice and poverty in silence, to watch injustices expand each day? Or rather, isn't leveling injustices also a patriotic duty?[72]

By reminding South Vietnamese of their status as veterans, the disabled upended the equation of disability to uselessness, as some disabled adults were viewed to be good only to be begging on the street and at the market. By insisting upon their patriotism, they shaped a compelling rationale for demanding basic economic needs and situating their needs within a postcolonial societal and economic structure. Their belief that American intervention did not succeed at defeating the communists was one aspect of their aspirations. As postcolonial non-communist Vietnamese, they rejected Marxist-Leninism yet also believed that American capitalism encouraged greed and selfishness, leading to greater economic and political disparities between a small minority of the haves and a vast majority of the haves-not. They were not alone among non-communist Vietnamese displaying a twin distrust of communism and

[71] *GT* 3, 2 May 1971, 4.
[72] *NT* 3, 15 May 1970, 9.

capitalism.[73] It was the perception of inequity, which they believed to have been caused by greed, selfishness, and capitalism, that drove them towards advocating for long-term changes on top of short-term gains.

Conclusion

The demonstrations of ARVN disabled veterans should be contextualized to the broader situation of the Second Republic–and to the evolving scholarship about the RVN. In the last quarter-century, this scholarship has gained most traction on the First Republic under Ngô Đình Diệm. The traction came out of long-standing interests in understanding American support for Diệm–and to the fact that his assassination led to direct military intervention by the US.[74] In comparison, the scholarship about the Second Republic has always played catch-up because American withdrawal and Vietnamization tend to draw less interest overall. In the last decade, however, historians have researched and published more about the South Vietnamese society and politics during the late 1960s and early 1970s. While they may have varied in emphasis, the sum of this scholarship suggests that citizens in the RVN led and contributed to a non-communist momentum towards reforming their society and politics.[75]

I wish to end this article with two implications drawn from the analysis above. First, the disabled veterans were only one among many groups of South Vietnamese seeking a social revolution or, more narrowly, a reform on a particular issue during the early 1970s. Some groups, notably the SSU, were led or infiltrated by NLF members who sought the demise of the RVN. However, most groups, including

[73]South-Vietnamese criticism of capitalism remains an underrated topic in the scholarship on the RVN. Although non-communist Vietnamese celebrated the lives of capitalists such as Andrew Carnegie and Thomas Edison, they focused and promoted "modern" values like personal dedication and inventiveness rather than purely economic capitalistic qualities such as entrepreneurship. For a sustained argument that Ngô Đình Diệm and Ngô Đình Nhu were as much anti-capitalist as they were anti-communist, see Duy Lap Nguyen, *The Unimagined Community: Imperialism and Culture in South Vietnam*, Manchester: Manchester UP, 2020. For an analysis of South Vietnamese intellectuals were drawn to French existentialism as a rejection of capitalism as well as communism, see Wynn Gadkar-Wilcox, "Existentialism and Intellectual Culture in South Vietnam," *Journal of Asian Studies* 2, 2014, 377-95.

[74]Representative works of this scholarship include Tran, *Disunion*; Nu-Anh Tran and Tuong Vu, eds, *Building a Republican Nation in Vietnam, 1920–1963*, Honolulu, HI: U. of Hawai,i P., 2023; Nguyen, *The Unimagined Community*; Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2013; and Philip E. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam*, Lawrence, KS: UP of Kansas, 2003.

[75]In addition to Nguyen-Marshall, *Between War and the State*, see Trinh M. Luu and Tuong Vu, *Republican Vietnam, 1963-1975: War, Society, Diaspora*, Honolulu, HI: U. of Hawai,i P., 2023; George J. Veith, *Drawn Swords in a Distant Land*, New York and London: Encounter Books, 2021, especially 401-533; Heather Marie Stur, *Saigon at War: South Vietnam and the Global Sixties*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2020; Tuong Vu and Sean Fear, eds, *The Republic of Vietnam, 1955-1975: Vietnamese Perspectives on Nation Building*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2019; and K.W. Taylor, ed., *Voices from the Second Republic of South Vietnam, 1967–1975*, Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2014.

prison reform, anti-corruption campaigns, and anti-censorship campaigns, were created or led by non-communist Vietnamese who sought greater government accountability as well as greater democratic exercise among the citizenry. Recent scholarship has suggested as much.[76] Deeper studies of these movements should enhance our understanding about the complexities of the society and politics of the RVN during a changing if chaotic period. Second, the disabled veterans themselves deserve greater examination. Having been largely invisible until the demonstrations brought them to national and global attention, they have been virtually invisible in scholarship since the end of the Vietnam War.[77] This article seeks to make a modest first step by studying their publications in order to flesh out the ideology behind their organization in 1970 and thereafter. For a deeper understanding and a longer history, however, there should be sustained research and engagement with documents at Archives II in Ho Chi Minh City and elsewhere.

In some respects, the demonstrations of the disabled veterans were distinct from other movements and campaigns because the demonstrators carried a unique status as physically wounded veterans. Their uniqueness did not preclude them from being a part of a broader momentum towards reform that might have marked a turning point in the history of the RVN. The total victory by North Vietnamese troops in April 1975 made it impossible to know what could have come out of this momentum towards a social revolution. With the gift of hindsight, however, it is reasonable to think that the years 1970-1975 marked a vibrant and flowering period if, again, also chaotic, among non-communist citizens of the RVN. The disabled veterans, whose lives became miserable after the war, should not be forgotten for having played a not unimportant role during that period.

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[76]On reform movements and campaigns during the early 1970s, see Nguyen-Marshall, *Between War and the State*, 138-59; and Stur, *Saigon at War*, 195-240. On anti-censorship, see also Trùng Dương, "*Sóng Thần*'s Campaign for Press Freedom," in Vu and Fear, eds, *The Republic of Vietnam*, 139-54.

[77]The only scholarly work about the disabled veterans is Quan Tue Tran, "Broken, But not Forsaken: Disabled South Vietnamese Veterans in Vietnam and the Vietnamese Diaspora," in Brenda M. Boyle and Jeehyun Lim, eds. *Looking Back on the Vietnam War: Twenty-First Century Perspectives*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2016, 34–49. It is, however, about the activities of the diasporic Disabled Veterans and Widows Relief Association, which was founded in 1992 in southern California, to raise funds for disabled veterans still in Vietnam. There is however nothing of note about their lives before 1975.