

# For Americans who answered the call in Afghanistan, who paid the price, take it from a Vietnam vet - the failures are not on you: Patrick M. McLaughlin

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Three former American soldiers who fought in Vietnam relax on the roof of the Rex Hotel, an officers' quarters during the war and now a tourist hotel in Ho Chi Minh City, Jan. 31, 1989. The author, a U.S. Army squad leader during the war, spent a 2005 anniversary with his wife at the hotel looking out over a city he remembers as Saigon and a giant neon sign advertising Ford Motor Co. -- palpable evidence that wars are never the last word. *(AP Photo/Nick Ut)*

CLEVELAND -- By April 1975, I had paid my dues, gone on to college and was a second-year law student when Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese army. Our combat forces had departed Vietnam two years earlier, but America's air and logistics support continued until Congress pulled the plug. Our ally would soon fall, and Americans everywhere were horrified, watching the Huey's evacuate men from the rooftop of our embassy while thousands of Vietnamese begged to be taken — but were left behind.

Thousands of boat people fled Vietnam and many more should have been helped to escape.

After two decades in Afghanistan, is America going to see the replay of a similar finale? One that exposes a failed strategy from George W. Bush to Joe Biden costing billions of dollars and thousands of our dead and wounded?

What will the Taliban exact in revenge to all, but especially those who aided our side?

What lessons, if any, did America's elected and appointed leaders learn from the Vietnam War experience? What lessons will those leaders learn from the failed experience in Afghanistan? Who, besides the warriors sent to Afghanistan, will pay a price for those failures?

I do not have answers for these questions. Current events and the demands of history will sort it out.

The men and women who paid their dues in Afghanistan are experiencing some of the same emotions that Vietnam veterans felt 46 years ago. Same questions, still no answers.

Warriors, do yourselves a favor and do not judge your service to the country by the failings of elected and appointed civilian and military officials. That is on them. That is not on you.



Patrick M. McLaughlin, left, is shown in Vietnam with fellow members of Charlie Company in 1967. In a guest column today, McLaughlin, a former U.S. attorney in Cleveland, urges U.S. Afghanistan War veterans to reflect not on today's scenes of chaos and stories of Taliban brutality and revenge-taking but on their service and that they answered when their nation called. *The Plain Dealer*.

You answered when the nation called. You went where you were told to go, and you served with incredible distinction. You did everything that America asked of you, and then some.

Thankfully, unlike the Vietnam experience, the nation has been able to separate the war from the warrior.

I didn't appreciate it in January 1968 when I returned from serving with Dogface Charlie that time can heal wounds.

In October 2005, I returned to Vietnam, and my wife of 35 years came with me. I sold it to a dubious spouse as an anniversary trip. The jury was out for a while.

We checked in to the Rex Hotel. Having read about the Rex, I was anxious to head up to the rooftop bar and toast my return to Vietnam.

It was a balmy evening that brought me back to similar evenings decades ago but, joyfully, without ambush patrol or incoming rounds of whatever. The 2005 version, drink in hand, was better.

Looking over the Saigon (I don't do "Ho Chi Minh City") cityscape, the building to my right had a large flag blowing that was the flag of my enemy on the first visit. The building to my left had a neon ad that consumed several stories. The ad spelled out "FORD MOTOR COMPANY." Taking in this moment, all I could say was, "There it is."

We booked a tour of the Vietnam historical museum. The tour guide walked us through centuries of Vietnamese history, exhibiting pride in recounting his country's efforts over the centuries to fight back Chinese encroachment. Similarly, he was boastful in describing that his countrymen defeated the French, focusing on the battle of Dien Bien Phu. In contrast, the guide said very little in hurrying us through the section on the "American War."

As we exited the museum, I learned from the guide that he worked for the government. I informed him that I was an American who had been to Vietnam "before 1975," and so why did he not speak with equal pride as to the "American War?" He replied, "In relations with our American friends, we look to the future and not the past."

On my return after 37 years, the Vietnamese people were gracious hosts. We experienced no resentment or bitterness. I did not foresee that in 1968 or 1975, but time does march on.

I take personal pride in my service, and that of all 'Nam vets, in the Vietnam War. We answered when it was our turn to keep America free.

And you Afghanistan vets answered when it was your turn. America owes you more than it will repay.



*A Vietnam veteran, former U.S. Attorney Patrick M. McLaughlin is president of the Greater Cleveland Veterans Memorial Inc. (GCVM), a 501(c)(3) organization that rededicated the Greater Cleveland Veterans Memorial in 2004 and again in 2014, adding names of Greater Cleveland war dead.*