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REMEMBERING MICHAEL H. HUNT, 1942-

HARISH C. MEHTA
Editor-in-Chief

An Historian of Integrity, Reason, and Wit

Reading the literature of the Vietnam War with Professor Michael Hunt was an intellectual voyage over choppy political waters that few had undertaken at the time because he had assembled the latest historical studies on the topic and encouraged us, his graduate students, to view the war from the perspectives of all the actors involved.

I am surreptitiously borrowing a practice from the former state of North Vietnam to deliberately keep the date of the passing of Michael Houston Hunt blank in the strap line above, to memorialize his continuing residence in the hearts and minds of his students and colleagues who possess a rich legacy of the books and articles that he produced prodigiously. The Vietnamese Communist Party had left the date of the death of Ho Chi Minh blank to memorialize that he lived forever in their hearts, which I believe is

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appropriate for Professor Hunt as one of his specializations was the history of the Vietnam War, as well as China.

When I belatedly heard that Hunt had died in April 2018, memories came in a rush and I recalled his cackling laugh, pleasant drawl, and his fondness for snacking on Danone blueberry yogurt during a break in our graduate seminars at his office at 460 Hamilton, as well as his regular fitness regimen of mile-long swims in the pool.

I consider myself privileged to have known Professor Hunt as his graduate student in the semester of the Spring of 1995 that I spent in the Department of History at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and later as a colleague who had the good fortune of being mentored by him.

I first came to know about his scholarly accomplishments when I was rifling through the term guidebook, thick as a telephone directory, choosing the courses I would take. There it was. The Vietnam War taught by Michael Hunt. I walked over to the Davis Library to find out more about him. He had received two Stuart L. Bernath Memorial Book Awards, and a Bernath Memorial Article Award from the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, and he was elected president of SHAFR in 1989. It was enough to persuade me.



Michael Hunt at his office. Photo by the courtesy of the University of North Carolina Press.



I walked down to Hamilton Hall from my home department at the School of Journalism in Howell Hall and registered for Hunt's course with the departmental secretary. You see, back in January 1995, the Internet had not yet made an appearance on campus, and you had to personally visit each department in order to register, there being no such thing as online registration or email. This was a very good thing because it meant that Hunt would often phone me at home on the landline to inform me about some reading or the other, or about a change in our meeting time. I enjoyed the personal touch, as did Hunt. That was his style. He would phone each graduate student, and there were five of us, to bring us up to speed.

His office was an extension of his scholarly personality: lined with oversized red-bound volumes of Chinese archival documents, newspapers, and books. After welcoming us with a gregariousness emblematic of Carolinian warmth, he asked us to introduce ourselves. Among the five, I was the only one on leave from a full-time job as the Indochina Correspondent for the *Business Times* of Singapore. He encouraged me to talk about my work.

"Harish, tell us about your impressions of Vietnam," he said.

I informed him that I had visited Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos more than forty times since 1989, spending between ten days to three weeks on each trip when I met and interviewed government officials, scholars, and ordinary people engaged in the arduous process of social and economic reconstruction. He was pleased to hear my experiences and asked me to give a twenty-minute talk to his undergraduate class on the Vietnam War towards the end of the term. I promised I would prepare a proper lecture.

A few days later, at our first book discussion, he raised a couple of big questions about the Lederer and Burdick 1958 classic, *The Ugly*

American: What does *The Ugly American* say? What stands out about the account? He wanted us to think critically about the American intervention in Southeast Asia and the reason why Americans were covered in an unfavorable light.

We were all enthralled by the sheer latitude of the readings that Hunt had chosen: Duiker's *Sacred War: Nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam* that had come out just a few days ago; Bergerud's *Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning: The World of a Combat Division in Vietnam* that had just been released two years earlier; Chandler's *The Tragedy of Cambodia* that had come out four years ago; and recent works by Hallin (*The Uncensored War*), Herring (*America's Longest War*), Levy (*The Debate over Vietnam*), Sheehan (*After the War was Over: Hanoi and Saigon*), and Trullinger (*Village at War: An Account of Revolution in Vietnam*). And one additional reading, Chanoff and Doan's *Portraits of the Enemy*.¹ Like starving peasants at a grand cerebral buffet, we gorged ourselves hungrily on the readings.

There was more: several folders of declassified archival material: Lyndon Johnson's White House meetings, and Central Intelligence Agency memoranda. The "declassified" material was in a class of its own, and only outclassed by Hunt's interpretations. These papers took us right inside the White House where decisions to bomb

¹ William J. Duiker, *Sacred War: Nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam* (1995); Eric M. Bergerud, *Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning: The World of a Combat Division in Vietnam* (1993); David P. Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History* (1991); David C. Hallin, *The "Uncensored War": The Media and Vietnam* (1986); George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (1986); William J. Lederer and Eugene Burdick, *The Ugly American* (1958); David W. Levy, *The Debate over Vietnam* (1991); Neil Sheehan, *After the War was Over: Hanoi and Saigon* (1992); James W. Trullinger, *Village at War: An Account of Revolution in Vietnam* (1980); and David Chanoff and Doan Van Toai, *Portraits of the Enemy* (1986).



North Vietnam were being made so casually, over lunch, over coffee, over dead bodies.

The starving graduate-peasants were soon getting sick in their stomachs reading about the politics that underlay the carnage in Vietnam, and how a Western superpower could devastate a weak Asian country.

At any rate, the readings Hunt had assembled were the state of the art. As they were recently published, they had an overwhelming currency, but being so recent also exposed a weakness which was evident in the lack of archival documents because back in 1995, the CIA was still declassifying documents of earlier administrations. For instance, in 1992, the CIA declassified some of the promised documents pertaining to the Cuban Missile Crisis that had occurred thirty years earlier, and the following year the agency sent thousands of declassified pages on the Kennedy assassination to the National Archives following public pressure resulting from the release of Oliver Stone's movie *JFK*.²

Hunt had led us into a tortuous world of foreign policymaking. We were learning to become historians. I went into a sort of winter retreat over the weekend with my copy of Herring's *America's Longest War* that Hunt had slated for discussion.

The first seminar began with all of us sipping paper-cups of hazelnut flavored coffee from the legendary Judge's Coffee shop on Franklin Street that I had brought for us, and Hunt eating his Danone yogurt. After a few of my colleagues had spoken, Hunt asked me for my perspective on Herring. I stated that the book presented an excessively establishmentarian view and not enough of the perspective of the other

² Zachary Karabell and Timothy Naftali, "History Declassified: The Perils and Promise of CIA Documents," *Diplomatic History* 18, No. 4 (Fall 1994): 615-626.

side. The Vietnamese side never seemed to come through. The author's unquestioning acceptance of the Domino Theory bothered me. The domino theory had been thoroughly discredited as Hanoi had never attempted to impose communism on any Southeast Asian state, and no domino ever fell to communism. This brought a sharp reaction from Hunt.

"You should write a book on Vietnam, Harish!" he said.³

He seemed to be taken aback by the audacity of my comment, but he appreciated its candor nonetheless. I worried about it for the rest of the day, hoping I had not upset him in any way. I was so wrong. With each seminar, we got to know each other better and I could sense the beginning of a long friendship.

It was an advanced-level course, and Hunt had issued firm admonitions that while there were no prerequisites, students should have "some exposure" either to Military History (History 69), the post-1945 History (History 18), Modern East Asia (History 34), or U.S. Foreign Policy (History 152). I had exposure to all of them, U.S. Foreign Policy excepted. I was here to learn.

At our second seminar on January 27, Hunt must have been expecting some more sparklers from me. He was not disappointed with my comment that although Duiker's *Sacred War* was a fair and balanced account, it was not about why the United States lost the war, but rather about why Vietnam won. He began smiling when I added that Duiker's account of how the French captured Vietnam was perfunctory: it seemed too easy. Moreover, as the author presented too few cases of French exploitation of the Vietnamese, I suggested that Duiker should

³ Harish Mehta, Lecture Notes, Michael Hunt's Graduate Seminar, The Vietnam War, History 153a: Peace, War, and Defense 117, Spring 1995, 460 Hamilton Hall, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.



take into consideration Nguyen Khac Vien's *Vietnam: A Long History*, written in French and translated into Vietnamese, English, Russian, German, and Spanish, which does a fine job of listing the forms of French exploitation of Vietnamese.⁴ Hunt was nodding appreciatively at my self-anointed role as a reviewer of course readings. I, then, pointed out that while I was intrigued by Duiker's suggestion that Vo Nguyen Giap plotted to oust Ho Chi Minh, I believed that this point was not properly supported with evidence as Giap worshipped Ho Chi Minh. Further, I argued that Duiker presented a weak outline of the Dien Bien Phu war, and suggested that Peter Macdonald's *Giap: The Victor in Vietnam* gave a fuller and exciting version of that conflict.⁵ Yet, I loved Duiker's book for its fairness and balance because he argued that the war in Vietnam was not a result of Hanoi's aggression but the consequence of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem's oppression. I commended the author for his non-partisan spirit seen in his copious citations of North Vietnamese leaders and ensuring their viewpoint was heard. I went on: the author did not offer a detailed analysis of the secret bombing of Cambodia. And I was surprised to find an error on page 89, where Duiker wrote that the head of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam delegation, Pham Van Dong, demanded at the Geneva conference following the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, that "delegations representing the revolutionary movements of Laos and Cambodia (the Pathet Lao and its Cambodian counterpart, the Khmer Rouge) be seated at the conference" as the legitimate representatives of those two states. Actually, the delegation representing Cambodia was the Khmer Issarak, not the Khmer Rouge

⁴ Nguyen Khac Vien, *Vietnam: A Long History* (Hanoi: The Gioi, 1993).

⁵ Peter Macdonald, *Giap: The Victor in Vietnam* (New York: Norton, 1993).

which did not exist in 1954.⁶ Dong had, in fact, wanted the Khmer Issarak, or Free Khmer, led by Song Ngoc Thanh, to be a participant at the conference. Duiker clarified in his book, *U.S. Containment Policy and the Conflict in Indochina*, that the Khmer Issarak “would eventually become better known as the Khmer Rouge.”⁷ A more nuanced assessment of the Khmer Issarak reveals that it was an anti-French colonial group with several factions, some of which were non-Communist, but it fell under the ideological sway of the Vietminh of North Vietnam. In later years, I carried Duiker’s book into my doctoral studies and made it required reading for the courses I taught on the Vietnam Wars because it was a good survey of history.

Back in the seminar, Hunt was again asking the big historical questions, and provoking a response from us. Was Communism spontaneous? Was North Vietnamese society a Communist monolith? Was Communism nationalism? What was the nature of the people of the North? How do peasants work under Communism?

Hunt explained: “The moral economy argument is that peasants’ response to revolutionary change is guided by their sense to restore their moral equations within their community. The other argument is that peasants are fairly calculating when they decide to embrace a revolutionary movement. North Vietnam fitted the moral economy model, whereas the South did not.”⁸

⁶ “First Plenary Session on Indochina, Geneva, May 8, 4.35 p.m.: The United States Delegation to the Department of State,” *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-1954, The Geneva Conference, Volume XVI, U.S. Department of State*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v16/d464>.

⁷ William Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy and the Conflict in Indochina* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 175.

⁸ See, James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976).



As an aside, the idea of the “moral economy” is properly attributable to the scholar James C. Scott who identifies the crisis of “subsistence” as the critical problem of the peasant household. At the core of his argument is the proposition that the fear of food shortages explain some of the “moral arrangements” in peasant society, such as resistance to innovation, the desire to own land even at some cost in terms of income, relationships with other people, and relationships with institutions, including the state. In his book, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, Scott posited that once the centrality of the subsistence problem is recognized, its effects on how economic and political justice is interpreted can also be seen. Scott demonstrates how the transformations brought about in the colonial era in Vietnam and Burma systematically violated the peasants’ “moral economy” and created conditions for potential rebellion and larger revolution.

Continuing in the same vein, Hunt believed that North Vietnam had won the political war right from the start. “The United States may have overlooked the North’s nationalist spirit. The United States did not understand that the Northern leaders were giving them [the people] land reforms.” And on U.S. intelligence inputs, he commented: “Had the United States got early information, would things have turned out differently? There was a lack of solid, reliable information or intelligence by the OSS [U.S. Office of Strategic Services] and the CIA.”

A mild Carolina winter made a brief visit with a couple of saltshaker snowfalls, and Spring arrived with gusting winds and blowing pollen. Towards the end of term, Hunt asked me to deliver the scheduled talk in his undergraduate class. I had prepared an outline on how Vietnam had emerged from war, and the kinds of postwar foreign policy challenges it faced, and how it had begun an

impressive drive to win foreign investments. He gave me a glowing introduction to his undergraduate students and allowed enough time for them to question me.

We meet weekly at his office for our seminars, and at least three or four times at his house on Rosemary Street, which had a wooden swinging sofa on the porch, and on one occasion the Hunts, Paula and Michael, came to our studio apartment on Vance Street when my new bride, Julie, prepared an Indian meal of lamb korma and mustard fish. We remained good friends since then. He wrote a recommendation letter for me to enter a doctoral program at McMaster University. I later learned from my supervisor, Stephen Streeter, that Hunt's letter, in gist, was that McMaster's History Department "would be mad if they did not take me." I could almost hear Hunt cackle as he delivered those words.

Michael was a proud Texan, who owned a pair of cowboy boots that he wore back in his home state. As his father was posted abroad, he got to travel to Japan, Turkey, Italy, Iran, China and Vietnam. Michael earned an undergraduate degree from Georgetown University's Walsh School of Foreign Service in 1965, an M.A. in 1967, and a Ph.D. in history from Yale University in 1971. It was at Yale that he grew interested in China, which was a nice segue to his books on China-U.S. relations. Michael taught at Yale and Colgate before moving to UNC-Chapel Hill in 1980 where he was subsequently honored with the title of Everett H. Emerson Professor of History. Over the course of his distinguished career he authored or co-authored eleven published books, and several as yet unpublished manuscripts.

One of his several obituaries remembers him lyrically as a "ground-breaking scholar; mentor; deeply devoted husband, father, brother, and cousin; loyal friend. Swimmer, hiker, soccer enthusiast.



Seeker of social justice. Lover of music and of nature; of mysteries; of fires in the hearth, blazing against the chill. A man of integrity, reason, and wit.”

This student thinks of him often.

Note on the Author

Harish C. Mehta holds a PhD from McMaster University in Canada in the history of American foreign relations and Southeast Asia, with specializations in the twentieth-century history of China, and Christian–Muslim Encounters in the Early Modern World. He did graduate studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is the author of four books on Cambodian politics and media, and the Vietnam War (*Cambodia Silenced: The Press Under Six Regimes*, White Lotus, Bangkok and Cheney, 1997; *Warrior Prince: Norodom Ranariddh, Son of King Sihanouk of Cambodia*, Graham Brash, Singapore, 2001; *Strongman: The Extraordinary Life of Hun Sen*, Marshall Cavendish, Singapore, 2013; and *People’s Diplomacy of Vietnam: Soft Power in the Resistance War, 1965–1972*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2019). His articles on Vietnamese diplomacy have appeared in the academic journals *International History Review*, *Diplomatic History*, *Peace and Change*, *The Historian*, and *History Compass*, and his review articles have appeared in *H-Diplo*. He has taught history at McMaster, the University of Toronto, and Trent University. He has twice won the Samuel Flagg Bemis research award from the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, and has received the Asian Print Media Write Award from the Asian Media Information and Communication Center, Singapore, and a Freedom Forum Fellowship, Washington, D.C., among other awards. He is the Editor-in-Chief of *Rising Asia*

Journal. Harish is a former Senior Indochina Correspondent for the *Business Times* of Singapore, and he was based in Singapore and Thailand for seventeen years, covering both Southeast Asia and Asean.