Panelists assess Vietnam War aftermath

A refugee from South Vietnam and a Vietnam War historian joined Pentagon Papers figure Daniel Ellsberg on Thursday for a panel discussion about the Vietnam War.

“We are all echoes of the Vietnam War,” said Thuy Tran, who left South Vietnam with her family just days before Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese Communists on April 30, 1975. She was just 9. Although her family did not suffer en route to relocation in Southern California, she said, “so many others did not have it that easy.”

About 900,000 Vietnamese refugees settled in the United States in that first wave after the war. Oregon has a Vietnamese population of around 30,000, mostly in the Portland area.

Tran earned her optometry degree in 1994 from Pacific University in Forest Grove. She then opened Rose City Vision Clinic in Portland. In 2008, she joined the 142nd Medical Group of the Oregon Air National Guard, where she is a lieutenant colonel. In 2012, she was appointed to the Parkrose School Board — and elected to a two-year stint in 2013 — and sought but lost the Democratic primary for the House District 47 seat. She also is on the board of advisers for the Vietnamese Community of Oregon.

“We cannot change the past, but we can affect the future,” she says.

Christian Appy is the author of two books on the Vietnam War. One is “Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides,” and the other “Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam.”


He is a professor at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

“More than any other event in our history, the Vietnam War shattered the belief in American exceptionalism,” Appy says, that the United States is unique in the world because of its ideals.

Although Wayne Morse did not know many of the deceptions that led to congressional approval of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution under later, Appy says, “he was appalled by the way the American people were lied to and excluded from the making of foreign policy.”

Morse was joined in opposition only by Alaska Sen. Ernest Gruening.

On a 2001 congressional resolution authorizing President George W. Bush to use military force to repel terrorism after the attacks on the East Coast, there was a single vote against it.

On a 2002 congressional resolution authorizing Bush to use military force against Iraq, the votes were more divided: 297-133 in the House and 77-23 in the Senate. All of Oregon’s Democratic members opposed it, and the two Republican members supported it.

“Congress continues to abdicate its responsibility” to the president for war-making authority, Appy says.

“I do not think the American public is blameless, either.”

But public weariness with U.S. military involvements in Iraq and Afghanistan after more than a decade, he adds, may signal a shift in attitudes that America is not the “indispensable” nation.

“I remain hopeful that we can learn” those lessons from Vietnam, he says.

The panel was sponsored by the Wayne Morse Center for Law and Politics at the University of Oregon, Oregon Historical Society, and World Affairs Council of Oregon. It was the fourth program in a year-long series observing the 50th anniversary of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which President Lyndon B. Johnson invoked to widen the Vietnam War.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Oregon also sponsored the program.

Morse, a Democrat from Oregon, was one of just two votes against the resolution. Morse lost a re-election bid in 1968 and died in 1974 while attempting a comeback.

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