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American Images of Denmark during the Cold War

by Anders Kristian Børholm Frikke

Preface

The study of the past is essential for our understanding of the present day. In other words, if you want to know something about your own time, a good place to start is to study the previous historical events.

The Cold War is in many ways a defining event for our world today. It was the central conflict of the post Second World War period, and as it was fought between the only two superpowers on earth, the United States and the Soviet Union, no nation could stay completely neutral. Denmark is an example of a country that had to choose sides in the Cold War, despite strong pacifist feelings in the general public, and a history of political neutrality since the Slesvig wars in 1848-50 and in 1864.

Denmark’s strategic and political position during the Cold War is worthy of attention because such a study can bring both knowledge of the small state’s role in the global conflict—seen from an American point of view—and insight into Denmark’s post Cold War foreign policy. The following article will focus specifically on how the Danish political system and the Danish decision-making were perceived by the American presidents and politicians in Washington D.C., during some of the most tense periods of the Cold War between 1950 to 1968.

I want to thank the Board of Directors of the Danish American Heritage Society, administrators of the Edith and Arnold N. Bodtker Grant for Research or Internship, for making this study possible. Their approval of my grant application provided the funds for my research trip to the United States during the winter and spring 2005. There I had the opportunity to collect the necessary archive material for this project—primarily in Washington D.C. at the National Archives II, later at several of the American presidential archives and at the University of Copenhagen.
I am grateful that the board decided to support what I consider to be an important project even though it does not specifically deal with Danish-American immigrant issues.

**Introduction**

Denmark has an important strategic-military and political position in Northern Europe. The small country's geography is unique—it could be called the delta of the Baltic Sea between the European continent in the south and the Scandinavian Peninsula to the north. This position made Denmark a relatively important and strong empire through medieval times, and later during the last 200 years Denmark probably only survived as a nation because none of the great powers surrounding the kingdom, Britain, Germany and Russia, could accept the idea that the strategic delta of the Baltic Sea was under control of one of the other two—Denmark stayed independent due to this rivalry, although Sweden got Norway after the Napoleonic wars in 1814 and a combined Prussian and Austrian army conquered the southern parts of the empire, Slesvig (Schleswig) and Holsten (Holstein), in the second of the Slesvig wars in 1864.

New technology, new types of transportation and more powerful weapons up through the twentieth century made Denmark's strategic position less important, but Hitler still choose to occupy the otherwise German-friendly country, because it could strengthen the position of his fleet and become a necessary bridgehead towards Norway.

With the Second World War it became clear that Denmark would be absolutely impossible to defend in case of a new major war. The country is too narrow and flat and has too many inlets and fjords—there are no natural defense lines against a large, mobile army. This knowledge was especially explicated by the Radical Liberal Party and the politician, P. Munch, but it was also used strongly by the Danish Communist Party as an argument to create a communist society. The communists gained many voters on this issue, and over the years this political debate created strong pacifist feelings among the Danes in general.
It is therefore not surprising that the allied powers and especially the United States after the Second World War had an interest in, but also a problem with, the small state in Northern Europe, Denmark. In sum, two factors were of major importance for the understanding of Denmark's international position after World War Two, namely the country's military strategic importance due to its geography, and the political system, which had a tendency to be pacifist and to quite a large degree socialist—and right after the war even communist, due to the party's important role in the resistance movement. In fact during the 1950s and 1960s – in the context of some of the most tense periods of the cold war – Denmark had an almost uninterrupted Social Democratic rule (from 1953 to 1968) under which the country developed into a modern, socialist inspired welfare state – quite far from the American concept of the ideal society.

It was essential for America that Scandinavia in general and Denmark in particular, became a part of the Western Powers after the war, and not a vacuum of political uncertainty in Europe. This problem became even more imminent as the Cold War slowly emerged in the late 1940s because socialism and to some degree communism, as mentioned, had strongholds in Denmark. These problems gave birth to the important debate about whether or not the relatively socialist Denmark could be trusted as a western allied? This debate continues among Danish historians of the Cold War.

In the following I will present some background information on the Danish-American relations in the period after the Second World War, and discuss some essential research on this topic. I will hereby narrow down my specific thesis for this investigation.

**Denmark, NATO and the Cold War**

The so called consensus-line-historians in Denmark point out that the post Second World War relations between Denmark and the United States were good, and without any serious reservations, because the attitude in the Danish public during the war had been pro-allied, British/American, and strongly against the German occupation forces. The warm relationship in other words just continued, and the recognition of Denmark as an allied state, and later the NATO-alliance was the natural continuation hereof.
is, however, a very simplistic view that most likely was written with a certain historic purpose in mind, namely the healing of the wounds after the war, when the Danish population was more supportive of Hitler-Germany than most people, including the historians, would admit in the tough years following the occupation. The story that is told by the historians today is, of course, much more complex, as I will explain in more detail in the following part.

This study should be seen as a supplement and extension of a central, ongoing debate about the Danish-American relationship in the Cold War era between two leading Danish Cold War historians, Poul Villaume and Bo Lidegaard. The debate focuses on whether Denmark acted as a real ally, and if the Danish politicians and population regarded themselves as conclusive NATO members and supporters of the United States.

Villaume’s thesis is that Denmark to some degree would not, and possibly could not, become a secure and trustworthy NATO member. Therefore he also calls his mammoth dissertation: *Allied with Reservations—Denmark, NATO, and the Cold War; A Study of Danish National Security Policy, 1949-1961.* The title is, in other words, a strong indication of his interpretation of the Danish security policy during the period. Villaume stresses that Denmark had one of the lowest per capita military budgets among the NATO members—much lower than Britain and the United States recommended—and this fact was only accepted because Denmark had competent (maybe even sly) politicians who acted strategically in international affairs. In this connection the so called “quite a free hand”, which the U. S. was given on the strategically important island of Greenland (the Thule Airbase) should not be underestimated. An important part reason for this attitude in Denmark was, Villaume underlines, that everybody knew that the country could not be defended in case of a major war—it simply was not part of NATO’s war plan, whereas the German river Elbe or later the Pyrenees would be the major defense lines against the Soviet Union—all to the west of the Danish border.

Denmark’s hard but unfruitful work to establish a Scandinavian military alliance (before NATO around 1947-49) between Denmark, Norway and Sweden, shows, according to Villaume, the strong wish
among the Danish politicians as well as the population to stay neutral in the slowly emerging Cold War conflict. It was in fact Norway that more or less forced Denmark into NATO.12

The Danish Social Democratic Party is immensely important when dealing with this question because it was in power during most of this period (prime ministers: Hans Hedtoft (1947-50; 1953-55), Hans Christian Hansen (1955-60), Viggo Kampmann (1960-62) and Jens Otto Krag (1960-68; 1971-72)). It was Hans Hedtoft who was the warmest supporter and the most prominent designer behind the Scandinavian defense alliance project, and it was later the Social Democrats that ensured that Denmark did not spend more money than necessary on the military. The Danish Social Democrats wanted to build a socialist welfare state. This was expensive and it was therefore natural to try to keep the defense expenses to a minimum. This small-state, socialist view of the world was quite far from the American interpretation of the international affairs in the 1950s and 1960s and this created tension. Villaume argues that the Social Democratic hinterland demanded a policy that was not too NATO friendly, but he also points out that for Prime Ministers Hans Hedtoft and H. C. Hansen the NATO choice was the least evil, and something they chose out of “bitter necessity”. The Social Democrats on the other hand felt that it was their duty to make the Danish public understand and accept the need for the NATO alliance and the internationalization of the Danish military involvement in general. The relations between the United States and Denmark/the Social Democratic Party were therefore somewhat tense during parts of the 1950s, because Denmark, according to Villaume, was an ally but with reservations.

Bo Lidegaard’s interpretation of Danish Cold War policies and Danish-American relations is different.13 In fact he does not disagree with Villaume in his argumentation, but he claims at the same time that Villaume tells us only part of the whole story. It is, according to Lidegaard, necessary to look deeper on the more structural layers of history to get a consistent and solid understanding of the events. In a way Lidegaard’s interpretation is therefore more indirect, which I will explain in more detail in the following.
Lidegaard focuses specifically on the role of the Social Democratic Party when he analyzes the Danish-American relations during the period. In this connection it is important to keep in mind that the Danish Social Democratic Party was in power in Denmark with very few exceptions from the war ended and until the early 1980s, and had uninterrupted rule during the period 1953-1968, which is the period of interest here. So instead of looking on the Danish-American relations he analyzes Danish Social Democratic-American relations—hence he is able to “dig” a little bit deeper than Villaume. Lidegaard calls Denmark an American ally without reservations. He claims that of course there were some tensions once in a while on the surface over small and often unimportant problems, but that on the deeper level there was a warm understanding between the two countries. The global American fight against communism and the Soviet Union could very well be compared to the daily battles the Danish Social Democrats fought against the communists – the Social Democrats and the Communists were bitter opponents in the Danish parliament - and that created a connection and understanding between the party and the U. S. administrations. It was in other words well known in the U. S. that the best way to fight communism in Europe was to support the Social Democrats. Lidegaard’s argument is that the American administrations never really pushed the different Danish governments, although they of course had the political muscles to do so. It was accepted by the U.S. that Denmark spent less money on defense and that Denmark at least officially never accepted nuclear weapons on Danish soil—including Greenland.

Lidegaard concludes that there was, what he calls, a strategic alliance between the two countries. It was known in America that it would create domestic political problems for the Social Democratic governments if they were pushed too hard on, for example, the defense questions—therefore the Americans did not do that. The central point is, according to Lidegaard, that the American administrations knew that the Danish governments would fight and try to contain communism—which was the American Cold War strategy at the time. The two nations did agree totally on what the United States found most important, and therefore it was possible to
overcome some minor disagreements. Lidegaard's thesis is, however, as I stated above, more indirect than the one Villaume brings to light. It is much more difficult to find evidence that supports Lidegaard, unless you look at the broad, strategic picture and over a long period of time—it is clear that the small "surface" cases (Lidegaard) takes up a lot of space in the archives, and that is what has made Villaume draw the wrong conclusions, according to Lidegaard. Denmark was in other words an ally without reservations.

The question that comes to mind now, is how this research dispute can be solved? My project, as I mentioned above, can be seen as a supplement and extension of the central, ongoing debate between Poul Villaume and Bo Lidegaard. My scope is, however, different than theirs. I will turn the problem 180 degrees around and try to view Denmark from an American point of view. My starting point is therefore the American archives and the politics of the different American administrations during the period. What the Danish politicians did and thought during the Cold War period is one thing, but what the American politicians, officials and bureaucrats thought and especially wrote about Denmark internally within the American system is a different matter. The specific purpose of this study is therefore to investigate how the different American administrations perceived and assessed the Danish political development from 1950-1968, with a special focus on the Danish Social Democratic Party and the creation of the welfare state. Did the different presidents and their administrations (Harry S. Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon B. Johnson) see the Danish socialist model as dangerous and half Soviet-communist? Or did they view the Danish model as a secure safeguard against communism and the Soviet block, which could possibly be used as a role model for other states in the so-called western world?

My research provides a picture of the American attitude from within towards one of the, seemingly, most socialist members of NATO in Europe, Denmark. In addition to this, my research gives a better understanding of both the role of the United States in Europe, and the American attitude towards and "management" of the of the European states during the Cold War.
My primary source material consists of American embassy reports sent from Denmark to the State Department. Occasionally officials in Washington D.C. commented on these reports, sometimes with proposals to American political initiatives towards Denmark.

**American Images of Denmark during the Cold War**

Based on my analysis the American view of Denmark’s political development from 1950 to 1968 can briefly be summarized as follows: During the early 1950s, American evaluations of Denmark are primarily positive. However, in some areas a wait-and-see policy is clearly evident due to the fact that Denmark is a new and not so well known ally, and maybe more importantly due to the somewhat limited Danish commitment to NATO. There is, however, also a general understanding of the fact that Danish political life is dictated by the voters, of whom many are quite skeptical of NATO, in part because of the earlier mentioned strong Danish tradition of pacifism. Particularly around 1953-54 when Eisenhower takes over the presidency, Denmark is viewed in a more negative perspective. The weakened relationship between the two countries is caused most likely by the rejection of an expanded NATO presence on Danish soil. After this low in the US-Danish relations, the American opinion of Denmark is slowly becoming more and more positive, which seems especially apparent after H. C. Hansen becomes prime minister during the mid 1950s. Extensive Danish welfare programs – that even at a certain point result in a cut in the defense expenditures – do not change this tendency of an improved understanding between the two countries.

The same can be said also about the 1960s. The temporary setback occurs during Viggo Kampmann’s short and hectic term as prime minister, when the extreme political left undergoes a revival under Socialist Folk Party (SF) leader, Aksel Larsen. This does not, however, have any serious or long term consequences for the generally excellent relationship between Denmark and the United States, despite almost mandatory disagreements about the size of the Danish NATO budget. From 1962 and onwards under Prime Minister J. O. Krag, Denmark is evaluated by the American diplomats in unprecedented positive terms as a good friend who is
able to play an ambassador role for the United States within the international community.

My research has shown, however, that a number of factors in the years following the Folketing election in 1966 impair the relations between the two countries, and especially the opposition to the American warfare in Vietnam has an important role to play in this respect. However, the election in 1968 and the new liberal-conservative government coalition that comes into power afterwards in most ways restore the good relations. My investigation also indicates that the above-mentioned disagreements between Denmark and the United States in the second half of the 1960s are temporary and not fundamental by nature.

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The chronological outline above of the Danish-American relations during the 1950s and 1960s points to four general results, which change the image previously shown in the research about Danish-American relations during the cold war. I will discuss these four points in more detail in the following:

1) The United States never questions Denmark's overall position among the western democracies despite a strong Social Democratic Party and a socialist inspired welfare state. This does not mean, however, that the US-Danish relations are always unproblematic. Especially in connection with the size of the Danish NATO budget there are almost mandatory disagreements, but this does not, however, seem to have any long term effect on an otherwise generally good relationship between the two countries. My study therefore indicates that the Danish-American relations should be seen in a more positive and non-intervening light than Poul Villaume indicates in his research.

2) There is in Washington D.C. a surprisingly low interest in Danish domestic policies that are not related to defense – for example social laws, taxation and union policies, all which are strongly inspired by a socialist way of thinking. There is, however, a fair interest in the outcome of elections, and
especially the Radical Liberal and Communist parties (and from 1958 the Socialist Folk party, SF), due to their pacifist policies and the strong bond between the Danish communist party and the Soviet Union.

3) The Social Democratic Party and its policies are rarely subject to thorough scrutiny and strong suspicion, although they often cooperate with the Radical Liberal Party and during the 1960s the Socialist Folk Party (SF).

4) It is to my surprise not possible to measure a change in the attitude towards Denmark during the presidencies of Democrats John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. There is not a measurable difference between the Democrat and Republican presidents, in connection with how Danish policies are perceived—although the Republican policies and values are further away from the Danish social democratic way of thought than the Social Democratic Party platform.

Denmark's Overall Position in the Cold War seen from the USA

Denmark became a member of NATO in late 1949, and the earliest American "pictures" of Denmark I include in this investigation are from that period—the late 1940s and early 1950s. The perception of Demark is more a wait-and-see attitude during this period compared to the later 1950s and the 1960s. This could be expected due to the fact that Denmark is a new ally with a pacifist tradition.

A Policy Statement from State Department from 1949 states: "...a large segment of the Social Democratic Party is dubious that the Government was correct in abandoning neutrality and adopting the NATO philosophy." It furthermore says that the Danish people tended toward reaffirming the former policy of neutrality, and that the government is keenly sensitive to attacks by the Communists. The Truman administration probably was not afraid that Denmark would become a communist nation, but it is also clear that the position of the country, within the general, international landscape was not really settled yet. If one compares this statement, with the later policy statements and political reviews, the differences become more distinct. The Attaché from the American embassy in
Copenhagen wrote in a paper on Danish political developments during 1953: “In spite of becoming increasingly passive participants in NATO, there were continued strong official expressions of support for the organization.” Later he said that the Social Democratic parties were evolving away from the doctrinaire socialism toward a more moderate welfare philosophy, and that there is no danger that the democratic system will be overthrown from within by rightists or leftists. In the end the Attaché states that Denmark is: “Regarded as a prime example of Western Democracy.” The picture is more or less the same during the later part of the 1950s and most of the way up through the 1960s – the tone actually becomes more positive during the 1960s.

A lot primarily negative attention is, however, drawn to the pacifist Radical Liberal Party, the Socialist Peoples’ Party (from 1959 onwards) and the Communists. It is due to their reserved attitude towards NATO, and the socialist views (only Communists and SF) that these parties are mentioned.

The fact that the Communist Party attracted so much attention is probably not that surprising, and the same can be said about the Socialist Folk Party, that had the earlier leader of the Communist Party, the charismatic Aksel Larsen, as chairman. It is more interesting that the Radical Liberal Party is so much in focus in the source material, because their policy is in general mid-centered, and cannot (at least according to Danish standards) be said to be socialist. This only stresses that the United States during the period is heavily focused on Danish defense policies, and not on its domestic policies.

It, however, also seems to become a less important matter over time. When the Radical Liberal leader, Hilmar Baunsgaard, becomes Prime Minster in 1968, it does not create any severe problems between Denmark and the United States. This is, however, most likely due to a Radical Liberal softening on the defense issues over the 1960s—as an analysis from the State Department underlines in 1968 after the election, where the Social Democratic party had been overthrown: “They [Radical Liberals] are unlikely to change domestic or foreign policies significantly.”
The war in Vietnam, however, seems to weaken the relationship between the U.S. and Denmark. In general the Johnson administration still seems to trust the Danish politicians, but it is also a fact that the voice of the people can be powerful. The embassy states in 1967: “Criticism, particularly over the bombing of North Vietnam is widespread, even among pro-American Danes. This criticism has not yet been endorsed by the government leaders, who have tried to induce a balanced approach to the problem within the parameters of a weak domestic political position”. Later the embassy concludes: “The effect of all this has been a slow consistent deterioration of relations. Most Danes, and the Danish government, continue to be friendly to the United States, and there is doubtless a considerable reservoir of good will and even affection, in addition to an effective working relationship in most areas. Equally unmistakable, however, is the fact that the ties are loosening.”

Problems and criticism in relation to the Vietnam War was, however, a general problem also in domestic American political life, and there is nothing in the source material to suggest that the problems concerning the Danish-America political relations around 1966-1968 were long term or unsolvable.

In conclusion there were small disagreements and problems at the immediate level between the U.S. and Denmark, for example the fact that Denmark’s NATO contribution is smaller than that of many other comparable countries. On the deeper structural level, however, there is seemingly no doubt concerning the Danish position. Denmark is considered a strong and secure ally in terms of the shared set of human and democratic values between the two countries.

The Welfare State

From the 1950s onwards the Danish Social Democratic party created the foundation for the welfare state Denmark is today. Several of the biggest steps in this process were taken during the 1950s and 1960s. Many of these initiatives were inspired by a socialist ideology, and were, as mentioned earlier, in many ways quite far from the values in the American society—for example high taxation, universal healthcare, general pension plans, a “large state” with more security
for especially the poor people, but also less individual freedom. This fact could possibly lead American analysts to think that Denmark would be susceptible to Soviet propaganda or that the country slowly was developing into a communist type of state. This does not seem to be the case, however.

In this connection it is worth dwelling a little bit on one of the most important Danish social laws ever made, and the American reaction to it—the general pensioning plan from 1956. In September that year nationwide pensioning became a reality for the first time in the Danish nation’s history. There are only few comments on the very expensive plan in the American archives— in this connection it is worth mentioning that the plan resulted in the significant 50 million kroner cut in the defense budget. The American embassy in Copenhagen concludes that the law will be costly for the Danish state, and that it is a shame that: “Although strong supporters of this bill, the Radical Liberals have seized every opportunity since its introduction to press their traditional demands for military budget cuts and reductions in the period of conscript service in order to finance it”.

This report in specific or the pensioning plan from 1956 in general, however, never creates a reaction in Washington D.C., which shows the strength and amount of trust in the Danish-American relations in the late 1950s—Denmark is considered a firm and strong ally—social laws or a welfare state do not change that fact.

The picture of a quiet American acceptance of domestic Danish politics can be seen throughout the 1960s as well. If one looks at other important and comparable laws during the period the conclusion is the same. A good example is the large complex of economic laws in 1961 to 1963, where, for example, the high Danish sales tax was introduced (the OMS (omsætningsafgift—a sales tax) and later MOMS (mere omsætningsafgift—more sales tax).

The Social Democratic Party—The Democrats and Republicans

The Social Democratic Party had uninterrupted power in Denmark from 1953 to 1968 in a long and very decisive period of Denmark’s recent history, Denmark is therefore in many ways shaped by that party and its policies. It is a party that is normally placed slight to
the left side of the center in the Danish political spectrum, and although it is not normally considered pure socialist, it is strongly inspired by a socialist way of thinking. That fact does not seem to affect the party and its leaders’ relations with the United States, which seem to be surprisingly good during the period under investigation here. A 1964 Airgram from the American Embassy in Copenhagen shows this clearly. William Blair from the Embassy writes: “The foreign policy objectives of the United States are in large measure supported by the Social Democratic, Conservative, and Moderate Liberal Parties. (...) The Radical Liberal Party has from time to time thrown cold water on the Social Democrats’ willingness to fulfill more adequately Denmark’s NATO obligations.” It is even stated in the analysis that it would be best for America, if Denmark kept some kind of majority or minority Social Democratic Government, because they act responsibly when they are in power and have control over the trade unions. In a later policy assessment, made by the State Department, it is said that Denmark is a country that by large pursues many of the same policies and objectives as the United States. The Danish Social Democratic Prime Minister, Jens Otto Krag, (served from 1962), even developed a relatively warm relationship with President Johnson. Before J. O. Krag’s first visit to the United States as Danish Prime Minister, it is written in President Johnson’s memorandum: “He [J. O. Krag] left doctrinaire socialism (...) A strong supporter of his country’s pro-Western, pro-NATO and staunchly anti-Communist foreign policy, J. O. Krag seems to be favorably disposed toward the U.S.” The base for a friendship between the two was there even before J. O. Krag set foot on American soil.

It is, however, also concluded in a National Security Council Report (NSC) that the Conservative and Liberal parties take a stronger line on increasing defenses and opposing the USSR than the Social Democratic or Agrarian parties. This insight is not surprising, though, since the liberal parties in Denmark by nature are closer to an American ideology of society. On the other hand several reports also mention that the Social Democratic Party has stronger and more experienced leaders – so it is very possible that the American officials, the embassy staff etc. favor the Social
Democrats, because then they know what to expect from Denmark. This is possibly also an important reason why there supposedly is no measurable difference between the evaluations of Denmark during democratic and republican administrations respectively. Secondly has a form of “path dependency” among American government officials probably also an important role to play in this matter. Simply due to the fact that the staff at the embassy or in the State Department influence each other – in many cases the persons that evaluate Danish domestic politics over the years are the same.

**Conclusion**

This study has a number of important general connotations seen in relation to the conclusions of the existing research of the cold war era as presented earlier, because it provides a somewhat different view of the Danish-American relations during the period. My analysis has shown that America should be viewed in a more passive and non-intervening light in Danish cold war history. If the focus as for example Poul Villaume is more or less exclusively on the NATO and security policies there were considerable conflicts especially during the 1950s. However, the impression is much more positive if the perspective is to give an overall characterization of the civil political relations between the two countries seen from an American point of view. The American diplomats had a general understanding and respect for the Danish political system and a confidence in the general common democratic and humanitarian goals of the two countries. My analysis indicates that these shared values were much more important than the exact size of the Danish NATO budget. This can be explained by the fact that the American ‘project’ in Europe during the 1950s and 1960s was built on a democratic foundation, which allowed Denmark considerable domestic political latitude – it was in other words an “Empire by Invitation” more than by force. Therefore, Denmark supposedly did not depend on a strategic alliance between the US administrations and the Danish Social Democratic party in order to keep good relations as Bo Lidegaard argues. However, it is fair to say that a more detailed analysis seen on a more general European scale is necessary to finally confirm or reject Lidegaard’s hypothesis.
1 The article at hand presents the overall results of my history thesis: *Amerikanske danmarksbilleder – Interne amerikanske vurderinger af dansk politik under den kolde krig*. University of Southern Denmark, Odense, 2006.


11 Ibid. pp. 844-852.


14 It is no doubt on purpose that he uses Villaume’s dissertation title, but with the opposite meaning.


The plane crash at the Thule airbase in Greenland (a B-52 aircraft with atomic weapons on board) and several other factors also have a role to play in addition to the Vietnam War.