

Sexual Legacy

American Influence and the Southeast Asian Sex Trade Since the Vietnam War

Kevin D. Reyes

Since the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s, the cross-cultural interactions between Southeast Asia and the United States industrialized the Mekong region's traditional sex trade into an international market of sexual consumption for American GIs, businessmen, sex tourists, and online lurkers. The issue of coerced prostitution of Southeast Asians, particularly minors, has since not only attracted American sex tourists, but also international concern and law. Unfortunately, following the war, the sex trade in the region has grown in parallel to the globalizing economy and has ineffectively been addressed by American foreign policy. As a part of the overarching issue of international human trafficking, the Southeast Asian sex trade needs continued attention from the United States which, until recently with the W. Bush and Obama administrations, has explicitly made efforts to thwart sex trafficking. Southeast Asia's haven for desire presents a controversial dilemma for human rights, development, and public health that can be traced back to American foreign policy during the Vietnam War. Drawing upon scholarship in the disciplines of sociology, law, economics, criminology, women's studies, and public health, as well as investigative journalism, this article presents a history of the relationship between American foreign relations and the Southeast Asian sex market, and even argues that the U.S. needs to further address this legacy of debasement.

Part I: Sex Trade Industrialization & Our Legacy

In the contemporary world of interdependent, global economics, capital and consumer goods move freely around the world. People have also been able to benefit from cross-cultural encounters through the compression of time and space. Despite the positives of globalization, these encounters elicit black market economies, causing people to find themselves as both agents of and captives to globalization. Human trafficking, specifically, has become a controversial topic since the 1990s. This era also marked both the end of the Cold War and the globalization of neoliberal economic ideology. The United Nations in 2000 defined "trafficking in persons" as:

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the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.¹

Although the sex trade is popularly recognized as “the world’s oldest profession,” it did not become industrialized—connected to the global market as a supply chain—until the 1990s.² In particular, Southeast Asia has become dominant in global human trafficking. Thailand benefited from thrived its legacy of being the ‘sex capital of the world,’ while the neighboring nations of Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar—the Mekong region—had, in addition, become influenced by this lucrative industry. Since the Vietnam War of the 1960s and 1970s, cross-cultural interactions between Southeast Asia and the United States have industrialized the region’s traditional sex trade into an international market of sexual consumption for American GIs, businessmen, sex tourists, and even online lurkers.

When American forces left Southeast Asia’s Mekong region by ending its efforts in the Vietnam War, the region had been left in a state of great instability. People were displaced across the region by the millions; the environment had been degraded by defoliants and napalm; and the region’s economies had become reliant on both American consumer and agricultural goods. Needless to say, political instability worsened. Both Laos and Cambodia were engaged in devastating civil wars that culminated in the victory of the insurgent forces of the Pathet Lao and Khmer Rouge, respectively. Vietnam was left to eventually be reunified under the North’s communist regime. Thailand, on the other hand, had been able to resist insurgency as a nation that, unlike the others, was never colonized.

One of the most striking legacies left behind by the United States’ involvement in the region was the industrialization of the region’s sex trade. This intraregional integration of the infamous Mekong sex trade has been made possible by the instability of national borders and government corruption since the Vietnam War. Today, if a sex tourist is arrested in one country in Southeast Asia for participating in illegal acts of the sex trade, he can easily flee to a neighboring country.³ The exorbitant amount of time it takes for both the U.S. and Southeast Asian governments to build a case allows tourists to evade laws by crossing borders.

The ease of traveling across the Mekong region is a result of the borderless destruction of the Vietnam War. By expanding into Cambodia and Laos, the war left behind millions of refugees

¹ United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, art. 3(a), G.A. Res. 55/25, U.N. Doc. A/55/383 (November 15, 2000).

² Keyes Beech, “Farm Girls Strike It Rich as ‘Masseuses,’” *Los Angeles Times*, April 2, 1980.

³ Kevin Bales and Ron Soodalter, *The Slave Next Door: Human Trafficking and Slavery in America Today* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 94.

without homes and family. Mass intraregional migration between Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar ensued, leaving the region's borders in a state of porousness. These refugees faced economic instability wherever they went. For many looking to work, the alternative to dangerous factory work was prostitution. When asked why they were sex workers, some Southeast Asians explain that (1) factory work is too dangerous and (2) the potential wages of prostitution provide a quick way out of poverty with the influx of Western tourists.⁴ However, the other reason has been that (3) they were forced into it, many after being sold by their parents, or deceived, or kidnapped by brothel owners.⁵ Unfortunately, the sex trade in the region since the war has grown in parallel to the globalizing economy and has ineffectively been addressed by American foreign policy. As a part of the overarching issue of international human trafficking, the Southeast Asian sex trade needs continued attention from the United States which, until recently, has explicitly made efforts to thwart sex trafficking.

Part II: A History

In the early stages of the Vietnam War, the Cold War caused American policymakers to embroil the United States deep into the affairs of the Third World's anticolonial movements.⁶ As the leader of the international regimes of political economy, the United States constantly found itself not only aiding other economies, but also devoting itself to military alliances and interventions throughout the world. By the time the United States became heavily involved in Southeast Asia's Mekong region in 1961, the U.S. had assisted South Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, and Myanmar with over three billion dollars in economic and military aid.⁷ It was also then that American policymakers had begun to adopt the concepts of modernization and development to fight the Vietnam War and transform Southeast Asia into a region of capitalist allies.

The Vietnam War's aftermath, however, did not necessarily transform Vietnam and the rest of the Southeast Asian Mekong region through what Latham and Gilman have coined "the right kind of revolution."⁸ In addition to opening Southeast Asia to the global economy, the Vietnam

⁴ Jeremy Seabrook, *Travels in the Skin Trade: Tourism and the Sex Industry* (London: Pluto Press, 1996), 118; Beech, "Farm Girls Strike It Rich."

⁵ See, for example, Siddharth Kara, *Sex Trafficking: Inside the Business of Modern Slavery* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 6-14; Bales and Soodalter, *The Slave Next Door*.

⁶ For a thorough history of global interventions as a result of Soviet-American estrangement, see Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁷ See United States Agency for International Development (USAID), *U.S. Overseas Loans and Grants: Obligations and Loan Authorizations, July 1, 1945-September 30, 2013* ("Greenbook") (Washington DC: USAID, 2013), <https://explorer.usaid.gov/reports-greenbook.html>. Calculations on Economic and Military aid during the Mutual Security Act Period (1953-1961): Vietnam, 2,197.4; Thailand, 570.4; Cambodia, 304.7; Myanmar, 112.4 (in millions USD). In this paper, Southeast Asia and the Mekong region are used interchangeably and include Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar (Burma).

⁸ Michael E. Latham, *The Right Kind of Revolution: Modernization, Development, and U.S. Foreign Policy from the Cold War to the Present* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011). Latham cites Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future:*

War's borderless destruction throughout the region had allowed its traditional sex trade to also industrialize internationally. American GIs, and now anyone with a taste for this market, have since exploited the Southeast Asian sex trade through sex tourism, human trafficking, and pornography. The cross-cultural encounters between Americans and Southeast Asians of the Mekong region have since strengthened the sex industry.

It is important, however, to understand that Southeast Asia's sex trade was not created as a result of international anti-colonial wars. The region's sex work, Dr. Voravidh Charoenloet explains, "is ancient; but it used to be called a profession."⁹ Young daughters, particularly in rural communities, have traditionally been expected to provide materially for impoverished parents. They would often partake in housework for other families—possibly for the French in the case of Vietnam—and even engage in prostitution. These instances of feminine filial piety are rooted in such ideologies as Confucian Three Obediences and Four Virtues and Buddhism, and the mere need to economically survive.¹⁰ The Confucian principles guide women to conduct themselves in front of others and to serve the patriarchal family. Buddhism has similarly undermined the status of women in society. "To have a daughter," a traditional Thai proverb goes, "is like having a toilet in your backyard." Siddharth Kara notes this proverb and the "strict interpretations of Buddhist doctrine" in the context of historical inferiority of women in Thailand.¹¹ Nonetheless, prior to American interventions in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War, sex work was seen as an acceptable way of providing family remittance, especially in rural areas.

The Vietnam War & The Sex Trade

As more and more young American troops entered Southeast Asia during the transition from French to American intervention in the Vietnam War, the traditional sex trade of the region was soon realized and demanded. Decades prior, during American interventions and occupations of Japan and Korea, troops had used native women for their sexual desires. Historically, women "have long been considered the spoils of war."¹² In Southeast Asia, this tradition was no different. Besides stationing personnel in South Vietnam, the United States military also stationed a portion of its troops in Bangkok. From just 1964 to 1965, for example, the number of troops in Thailand tripled from three thousand to nine thousand. From 1964 to 1969, it grew by sixteen hundred

Modernization Theory in Cold War America, New Studies in American Intellectual and Cultural History (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 11-12.

⁹ Seabrook, *Travels in the Skin Trade*, 71.

¹⁰ Thu-Huong Nguyen-Vo, *The Ironies of Freedom: Sex, Culture, and Neoliberal Governance in Vietnam*, Critical Dialogues in Southeast Asian Studies (Seattle: University of Washington, 2008), 137; Kara, *Sex Trafficking*, 173; Seabrook, *Travels in the Skin Trade*, 22.

¹¹ Kara, *Sex Trafficking*, 172-74. My point here is not to essentialize cultures in Southeast Asia for creating a sex trade, but merely to present conversations on the long existence of the sex trade in Southeast Asia.

¹² Alice Leuchtag, "Merchants of Flesh: International Prostitution and the War on Women's Rights," *Humanist* 55, no. 2 (March/April 1995), 14.

percent.¹³ The demand of American GIs was becoming an increasingly lucrative source of income for Thailand.

Soon after, the American and Thai governments reached agreements on measures for stationing American troops in Thailand. The 1966 Entertainment Places Act was enacted in Thailand to regulate the increase in sex work next to American bases. In the late 1950s, prostitutes in Thailand numbered twenty thousand; in 1964, the figure increased by more than eight hundred percent.¹⁴ Although prostitution in Thailand was outlawed in 1960, the Thai government allowed the industry to flourish near American bases in order to satisfy the military's demands, because it was proving to be a lucrative, but temporary, trade-off of five million dollars in revenue in 1967 and then twenty million in 1970.¹⁵ American bases, government aid, and the revenue generated by prostitution seemed like the strategic policy to endorse. In 1967, when American troops were allowed to relocate to Thailand for rest-and-recreation (R&R), U.S. troops in Thailand numbered around forty thousand, while the total number of GIs in Southeast Asia was reaching half-a-million.¹⁶ As the R&R base for that many young troops, Thailand helped to institutionalize the exoticization of Southeast Asian women and would thus help sow the seeds for the U.S.'s sexual legacy in the region.

With these policies, American commanders assumed they would be preventing rape with regulation and even countering "potential homosexual acts" within bases.¹⁷ The Thai government only reacted by considering the potential public health risks if the growing American demand for Thai women was not regulated. At least these policies would regulate the seemingly inevitable growth of brothels in parallel to the influx of American troops. A regulated-market model was implemented in which area commanders would hand out brothel tickets to their troops when they would go out for R&R. Assuming that this war-driven industry would eventually collapse after the GIs left was a concession of the sex trade for American support—in both developmental aid and military security.¹⁸ Geopolitically, Thailand was surrounded by the instability of postcolonial communist insurgence and relied upon American commitments of defense and aid. If it wanted to avoid having the violence of Vietnam invade its borders like in Cambodia and Laos, Thailand essentially needed to continually align itself with the United States, and especially the American modernization mission.

When base agreements were implemented, Thailand was becoming increasingly vulnerable as the war's destruction took on a more borderless character. American forces were already using defoliants, herbicides, and napalm in efforts to thwart communist insurgency. The Ho Chi Minh

¹³ Leslie Ann Jeffrey, *Sex and Borders: Gender, National Identity, and Prostitution in Thailand* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), xii.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, xii.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁸ Beech, "Farm Girls Strike It Rich."

trail, utilized by the Vietnamese National Liberation Front, extended the war's geography into neighboring Laos and Cambodia. Furthermore, the Pathet Lao movement in Laos had begun to enforce American assumptions of domino theory and the possibility of losing Southeast Asia as a whole.¹⁹ Not long after, the Khmer Rouge was emerging out of political instability in Cambodia. In the context of American grand strategy, it is no surprise that the United States reacted by pushing the boundaries of intervention from Vietnam into the rest of Southeast Asia's Mekong region. Unfortunately for American decision makers, "instead of destroying Vietnamese communist forces, it pushed them farther into" Southeast Asia's neutral dominoes.²⁰ The escalations in intervention only strengthened the neighboring movements of insurgency that contributed to the Mekong region's unstable borders, which would eventually work in favor of internationalizing sex trafficking.

As the war intensified across the Mekong region, American forces left behind greater poverty and schisms in populations. The damage ensued upon South Vietnam had turned a nation rich in rice paddies into a rice-importing country. The solution, American decision makers believed, was to flood Saigon with consumer goods while simultaneously taking the burden of feeding the population.²¹ The disruptions in the populations of Southeast Asia were even worse. By 1968, "approximately four million refugees" were struggling to survive in Vietnam while hundreds of thousands of others in Laos and Cambodia fled from the Pathet Lao, Khmer Rouge, and American invasions.²² Furthermore, American GIs exploiting the sex trade wherever they deployed had left behind "tens of thousands" of children when contraception during intercourse with sex workers was neglected.²³ Since the GIs were only stationed at certain locations for short periods of time, there were no real incentives for them to consider using contraceptives. They would eventually either relocate back to the fields from R&R or finish their tours and head back to the United States. The resulting population of 'Amerasian' children became a public health issue without the proper policies or institutions to address them. Thus, many ended up becoming beggars or resorted to prostitution for survival.

The prioritization of modernization policy in Vietnam allowed the United States to fight off communism from spreading in Southeast Asia. In addition to increasing the number of troops and bombing tactics in the war, President Johnson promised "to bring the blessings of the New Deal to Southeast Asia," with proposed construction of hydroelectric dams and infrastructure.²⁴ Even President Kennedy had previously suggested that tourism would facilitate Third World

¹⁹ Mark A. Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 60-67.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 146.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 108.

²² Latham, *The Right Kind of Revolution*, 142; Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, *Seeking Shelter: Cambodians in Thailand; A Report on Human Rights* (New York: Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, 1987), 7.

²³ William Branigin, "Hanoi Lets Some Children of GIs Leave... But Thousands of Others Stay Behind," *Washington Post*, September 30, 1982.

²⁴ Latham, *The Right Kind of Revolution*, 142.

development.²⁵ Leading the World Bank (1968-1981), Robert S. McNamara, who had also served as Secretary of Defense during the Kennedy-Johnson administrations (1961-1968), had prioritized building a mass tourist industry in Southeast Asia. In 1971, the World Bank developed recommendations for Southeast Asia's development. Tourism was believed to be able to bring about economic development that would allow Thailand "to grow out of the worst of the squalor," including helping eliminate the prostitution industry once American GIs left.²⁶ Unfortunately, these plans did not promote the reconstruction of the war-torn agricultural sector. As Bangkok sought to be modernized, the agricultural "north was left behind."²⁷ Once the already suffering farmers felt the disproportionate effects of "laissez-faire attitude" development, younger daughters turned to the growing market that continued to guarantee an income for remittance—the brothels of Bangkok.²⁸ The Thai government was now on a track to modernization that brought in businessmen and sex tourists to fill the void left by American GIs at the end of the war, and that allowed the influence of neoliberal policies on its neighbors as well.

Filling the Void: Sex Tourism

Along with the rise of mass tourism in Southeast Asia came the emergence of sex tourism. Thus, the Thai government was forced to reconsider its policies regarding prostitution in the 1980s when sex tourism had brought in three million tourists in 1986 and children were increasingly becoming a part of the market because of the ready supply of stigmatized Amerasians and rural migrants. The increase in demand has also been attributed to popular assumptions that children were safer commodities in the industry, considering the risk of HIV/AIDS.²⁹ Also, Thailand's fast economic growth brought Vietnam to liberalize its command economy. The legacy left behind by American GIs during the Vietnam War and taken up by Western businessmen and tourists eager to invest in Southeast Asian development transformed the region's sex trade into a sex industry available to any potential consumer. What marked the industrial shift from the supply-side is illustrated in several accounts of sex workers and their entrance in the market.

Once the startling inequality of wages was realized by young farm girls whose families were displaced throughout Southeast Asia from the war's destruction, the sex industry did not seem so unpleasant. When Thailand's development approached robust economic growth based on tourism, the potential wage for a sex worker was significantly higher than the average starting

²⁵ Siripom Skrobaneck, "Exotic, Subservient and Trapped: Confronting Prostitution and Traffic in Women in Southeast Asia," in *Freedom from Violence: Women's Strategies from Around the World*, ed. Margaret Shuler (New York: UNIFEM, 1992), 127-37.

²⁶ Nicholas D. Kristof, "Asian Childhoods Sacrificed to Prosperity's Lust: Children for Sale," *New York Times*, April 14, 1996.

²⁷ Kevin Bales, *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 40.

²⁸ Marina Budhos, "Putting the Heat On Sex Tourism," *Ms. Magazine*, March/April 1997, 16.

²⁹ Kristof, "Children for Sale."

salary for someone with a graduate degree in economics.³⁰ The alternatives to participation in the sex industry were jobs in the emerging manufacturing sector. Yet, many sex workers preferred the sex trade after taking into account both the potential wages of the lucrative sex industry and the dangers of factory work. A boy who Seabrook interviewed had friends who died operating dangerous machinery in a factory, and he vowed never to work in manufacturing.³¹

Noi, a young teen sex worker in Bangkok in 1980, was able to substantially provide for her material desires and send remittance to her family in the rural north of Thailand.³² Becoming very used to the strong Westernized consumer culture of Bangkok, Noi vowed never to return home. Also, seeing that emerging service and manufacturing jobs at the time were “considered supplementary to men’s,” the fruitful wages of working in nightclubs, brothels, or massage parlors presented a new opportunity for social mobility.³³ However, not all sex workers were able to make the decision of entrance as many were sold and enslaved by parents and pimps.

Back in the villages where parents sent off daughters, and even sons, to work in this new sector for family remittance, the traditional necessity of the trade was abandoned. Instead, many were becoming largely influenced by the influx of American consumer goods in Southeast Asia since the Vietnam War. Several reports and investigative journalists have noted that parents started selling their children to opportunistic pimps recruiting in villages for “large lump sums” and consumer appliances, like karaoke machines or televisions, which distinctively stood out in a rural household.³⁴ Parents’ new consuming mentality in villages effectively increased the supply of sex workers. Although many sex workers chose to enter the market, younger Southeast Asians were forced into prostitution due to consumer temptations that parents faced.

After the Vietnam War’s disregard for national borders and the displacement of millions of people throughout the Mekong region, the legacy of intraregional migration became a significant factor in the industrialization of the sex trade. As the infamous sex capital, Bangkok, became “a springboard for illegal entry” into developed countries, it also required a larger supply of sex workers for its consolidation of international sex trafficking networks.³⁵ The weak borders of the Mekong region allowed pimps and brothel owners to easily smuggle many forced women and children from Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Vietnam to and from Thailand. Girls in their early teens that have been moved depending on where they would be most profitable in Southeast Asia

³⁰ Pasuk Phongpaichit, Sungsidh Piriyaarangsana, and Nualnoi Treerat, *Guns, Girls, Gambling, Ganja: Thailand’s Illegal Economy and Public Policy* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1998), 169-70.

³¹ Seabrook, *Travels in the Skin Trade*, 118.

³² Beech, “Farm Girls Strike It Rich.”

³³ Skrobaneck, “Exotic, Subservient and Trapped,” 127-37.

³⁴ Sudarat S. Srisang, “Tourism and Child Prostitution in Thailand,” in *Caught in Modern Slavery: Tourism and Child Prostitution in Thailand*, ed. Koson Srisang, International Campaign to End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism (Bangkok: Ecumenical Coalition on Third World Tourism, 1991), 41; Bales, *Disposable People*, 40; Kristof, “Children for Sale.”

³⁵ Margaret E. Beare, “Illegal Migration: Personal Tragedies, Social Problems, or National Security Threats?” in *Illegal Immigration and Commercial Sex: The New Slave Trade*, ed. Phil Williams (London: Frank Cass, 1999), 36.

or even abroad were often under indentured sexual servitude after being heavily indebted in strategic fees from their smugglers and pimps.³⁶ However, whether through economic pressure or through enslavement, many sex workers of Southeast Asia did not resent the traditions of Southeast Asia's sex trade. "How can I be angry with her?" asked a fourteen-year-old Cambodian girl sold by her mother.³⁷ Unfortunately, this notion of traditional servitude, along with modernization, is used to justify the demand for the Mekong region's industrial sex market.

On the other end of the industry, are the consumers: the sex tourists. Sex tourism took off at the end of the Vietnam War when American GIs left behind both a void in the demand for prostitutes and the infrastructure that had witnessed the turn of commercialized sex into "big business."³⁸ After Western businessmen flooded Thailand with capital for investment in, the industry became further internationalized with the advent of agencies for sex tourists in the United States and other Western nations. These agencies thrived off of global networks of human trafficking and the emergence of the Internet. Agencies like Big Apple Oriental Tours circulated underground pamphlets to their American consumers on the benefits of sex tourism. "Young and exotic Oriental women," presented a "sexual playground for American men, where they can buy whatever they want."³⁹ These guidebooks, produced for potential clients, featured brothel ratings, "inside scoops" on specials, as well as images of American men engaging in highly tempting sexual acts with groups of what appear to be underage girls and boys. Some even went as far as to include the benefits of sex tourism. A gay Thai guidebook in 1997 claimed that sex tourists had an obligation to keep the sex industry functioning.⁴⁰ This obligation felt by sex tourists not only justified their taboo sexual desires but also worked off of the legacy left behind by previous American efforts to modernize Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War. Instead of government-funded aid, the 'obligation' to help the region develop had been funded by the industrialized market for flesh that consolidated as a result of the Vietnam War.

At the personal level, this is best illustrated with a sex tourist who felt he was "offering a girl security in a cruel, insecure world" that had been "scarred by social disruption, war, violence."⁴¹ This burden to offer security has been developed as a justification among consumers of the sex industry seeing that the legacy left behind by American military intervention in the Mekong region has produced a sense of guilt in the American conscience. Finally, as previously noted, tourists also resorted to the historical presence of the sex trade in Southeast Asia to pass off their actions as merely taking "part of the culture of the host country."⁴² Of course, what helped spur

³⁶ Phongpaichit, Piriyaarangsana, and Treerat, *Guns, Girls, Gambling*, 167-71.

³⁷ Kristof, "Children for Sale."

³⁸ Beech, "Farm Girls Strike It Rich."

³⁹ Budhos, "Putting the Heat On Sex Tourism," 14.

⁴⁰ Damon Hammer, *Thai Scene, 1998: Gay Guide* (London: Millivres Prowler, 1997), 18.

⁴¹ Seabrook, *Travels in the Skin Trade*, 62.

⁴² Skrobaneck, "Exotic, Subservient and Trapped," 127-37.

the legacy of the region's sex trade goes back to the American GIs stationed in the Mekong region during the Vietnam War.

Part III: Recent Efforts in American Foreign Policy

The issue of *coerced* prostitution of Southeast Asians, particularly minors, has not only attracted American sex tourists, but also evoked international concern and discussion about relevant laws. As a result, the United States has recently taken measures to address sex trafficking as an issue of foreign policy.

Policing the World: The W. Bush Administration

By 2001, as the United States was transitioning into a new era of grand strategy, it had passed the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA). The annual Trafficking in Persons Report was then initiated by the newly created Department of State's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons (TIP). The Trafficking in Persons Report's assessment on international human trafficking has allowed the United States to lead the prioritization of human rights around the world. Through its tier system, the Trafficking in Persons Report ranks each nation on its ability "to address trafficking."⁴³ To some, "the TIP Report is one of the most powerful policy tools that the U.S. government has come up with to enforce human rights" using "U.S.-defined standards."⁴⁴ Since the transition into the Bush Administration in 2001, the change in overall grand strategy of taking liberties in clearly defining issues of American foreign policy, human trafficking was finally brought to the forefront through what many consider a "global police presence."⁴⁵

However, in regards to the Southeast Asian Mekong region, there have yet to be any significant changes. Myanmar has only been 'promoted' from Tier 3 to Tier 2WL in 2012. Cambodia has had fluctuations from 3, 2WL, and 2. Laos has seen improvement from a 3 in 2006 to a steady ranking of 2, until its 2WL in 2014 and 2015. Thailand has actually dropped from 2 to 2WL in 2010, and then to Tier 3 in 2014 and 2015. Finally, Vietnam has seen a steady ranking of 2 with a deviation of 2WL ranking in 2010 and 2011. Thus, none of the Mekong region nations have been able to reach Tier 1. Even then, Tier 1 only means nations are complying with "minimum standards." Although the TIP Report is a powerful tool, it has not been effective to get other nations to comply with, possibly because they lacked the fear of sanctions from the United States. The report is also limited in that it focuses almost entirely on prosecutions for tier placements.⁴⁶

⁴³ Marie Segrave, Sanja Milivojevic, and Sharon Pickering, *Sex Trafficking: International Context and Response* (Portland, OR: Willan, 2009), 129; See Appendix for Tier classification.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 129-30.

⁴⁵ Eric Lichtblau and James Dao, "U.S. Is Now Pursuing Americans Who Commit Sex Crimes Overseas," *New York Times*, June 8, 2004.

⁴⁶ Furthermore, the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons (TIP Office) is often seen internally in the Department of State as hindering grand strategy and diplomacy. Interview with former TIP Office official, March 12, 2015, Washington, DC.

In addition to the TVPA and annual TIP Reports, the United States in 2001 has funded organizations that are active in the fight against sex trafficking. Through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), these organizations have worked substantially in the Mekong region. In fact, in 2003, the United States mandated these organizations to pledge to “not promote, support, or advocate” prostitution in order to receive funding.⁴⁷ Unfortunately, this forced pledge has led NGOs to oppose it. American foreign policy as the ‘world police’ has not been appreciated for defining its own terms of eliminating the sex trade. As a result, efforts to do so have not taken off.

Just a year after the USAID pledge requirement, the United States also began to prosecute American sex tourists for child molestation abroad. This expansion of legal authority comes as a part of the 2003 PROTECT (Prosecutorial Remedies and Other Tools to end the Exploitation of Children Today) Act. Although the PROTECT Act (known for the creation of Amber Alert) is seen as a domestic law meant to prevent multiple forms of child abuse, it illustrates the convergence of both domestic and foreign policy in recent history. Interestingly enough, the Bush Administration has been noted for this type of convergence in investigations of terrorism and its overall grand strategy of the homeland security state.⁴⁸ Furthermore, with the ease of international communication through the Internet, the United States has had to expand its scope of child pornography prosecution with other governments. Doing so has allowed international programs to identify and thwart global rings of child pornography. These new tactics require American foreign policy to converge its domestic agencies of justice with issues of foreign policy.

The Bush Administration’s unilateralist foreign policy has had a tremendous impact and “has done a much better job than his predecessors in pressing this issue.”⁴⁹ The amount of bipartisan support that anti-trafficking measures enjoy illustrates the ample amount of opportunities for addressing the infamous Mekong region in getting rid of its legacies of sex tourism. “Adopting a more aggressive agenda to protect interests at home and attacking what President Bush has called the ‘special evil’ of child trafficking and exploitation” has called nations out on their efforts, or lack of, to abide with the U.S.’s new interests in stamping out human trafficking.⁵⁰ However, that the attention of this paper is given to mainland Southeast Asia is because of its countries’ notorious reputations of having become “havens for molesters, turning a blind eye or even tacitly welcoming such tourists to promote their economies.”⁵¹

⁴⁷ Matt Steinglass, “The Question of Rescue: The Leading Advocate for Prostitutes in Cambodia Has Little Patience for Aid Groups That Seek to Liberate Them from Their Work,” *New York Times*, July 24, 2005.

⁴⁸ American grand strategy in 2002, for example, acknowledged this and stated that the U.S. “must ensure the proper fusion of information between intelligence and law enforcement.” The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, September 2002), 30-31.

⁴⁹ Nicholas D. Kristof, “A Cambodian Girl’s Tragedy: Being Young and Pretty,” *New York Times*, December 12, 2006.

⁵⁰ Lichtblau and Dao, “U.S. Is Now Pursuing Americans Who Commit Sex Crimes Overseas.”

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

Ending Debasement: The Obama Administration

Certainly, the highly criticized Bush Administration had built a necessary infrastructure for its successors. The Obama Administration began almost immediately after the reauthorization and revision of the TVPA with the Wilberforce Act of 2008. The Wilberforce Act clarified ambiguous language and updated minimum sentences. This inherited legacy of the Bush Administration has seen “significant developments” with “a fresh outlook on the issue” of human trafficking in general.⁵² Both President Obama and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton have explicitly expressed the need to prioritize the dilemma of human trafficking, the “debasement of our common humanity.”⁵³ Early on in the administration, commitments were made to view this issue “at home and abroad, as an important priority in our foreign policy agenda,” with the cooperation between other “governments and organizations around the world.”⁵⁴ Thus, the domestic criminal justice system and foreign policy continue to converge.

Part IV: Conclusions

Since the government’s sponsorship of prostitution in American bases in Thailand during the Vietnam War, the Mekong region’s trade has grown into a multi-billion dollar industry representing what some studies estimate as more than fourteen percent of Thailand’s GDP.⁵⁵ Thailand’s “numerous hotels that were originally built as rest-and-relaxation getaways for soldiers on leave from the Vietnam War” continue to offer prostitutes to American men.⁵⁶ The Americans are now tourists varying from pedophiles and those that exoticize Southeast Asians, trying either to escape the stigma of their desires in the United States, or to genuinely look for companions in a culture of traditional servitude. Furthermore, the Internet has allowed potential sex tourists to participate in online forums as well as accessing websites where Southeast Asians stream “live pornography for customers,” and acts of child pornography and rape.⁵⁷ American interventions, both military and economic, in the Mekong region of Southeast Asia since the Vietnam War caused international industrialization of the region’s tradition of sexual servitude.

Southeast Asia’s haven for desire has produced a dilemma for human rights, development, and public health that can be traced back to American foreign policy during the Vietnam War.

⁵² Bales and Soodalter, *The Slave Next Door*, vii.

⁵³ Barack Obama, quoted in *Ibid*.

⁵⁴ Hillary Rodham Clinton, “Partnering Against Trafficking,” *Washington Post*, June 17, 2009.

⁵⁵ Marci Cottingham, Thomas Nowak, Kay Snyder, and Melissa Swauger, “Sociological Perspective: Underlying Causes,” in *Human Trafficking: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Mary C. Burke, Criminology and Justice Studies (London: Routledge, 2013), 59. This calculation is presented in this article with the caution that deviant globalization, by very nature of being illicit, cannot accurately be quantified by researchers. On the concept of deviant globalization, see Nils Gilman, Jesse Goldhammer, and Steven Weber, eds., *Deviant Globalization: Black Market Economy in the 21st Century* (New York: Continuum, 2011).

⁵⁶ Kara, *Sex Trafficking*, 156-57.

⁵⁷ Sheila Jeffreys, *The Industrial Vagina: The Political Economy of the Global Sex Trade*, RIPE Series in Global Political Economy (London: Routledge, 2009), 79-85.

After learning the lessons of intervening in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War and, more recently, after having exhausted its authority as world police in the Bush Administration, should the United States continue to attempt to address sex trafficking as a critical priority of foreign policy? Does the United States have a particular responsibility to Southeast Asia considering the region's historical sex trade's relationship with the United States? American GIs during the Vietnam War and American-backed modernization industrialized the infrastructure for today's sex tourism in which much of the demand is from American sex tourists. United States foreign policy needs to understand this historical relationship it has had with Southeast Asia in order to provide the proper policies to address and eradicate this global problem. If it is able to eliminate the "sex capital" associations with Southeast Asia, the United States will be taken seriously as a proponent of human rights. It will, however, actually need to provide those nations with *proper* infrastructure and resources for modernization and not leave the region with instability as has been done at the moral withdrawals from Southeast Asia in the 1970s and even Iraq in the recent past. In essence, we are responsible for alleviating Southeast Asia from our legacies of debasement.

As human trafficking and the sex industry are becoming increasingly profitable for international networks of the black market, they also attract great international concern. There are countless newspaper articles since the Vietnam War on Southeast Asia's sex trade and its evolution. Scholarly works in the disciplines of sociology, law, economics, criminology, women's studies, and public health continue to be produced with "much of the research... centered on Asian victims."⁵⁸ However, possibly because this market has yet to fade, there has yet to be a handful of historiography on the cross-cultural sexual encounters between Americans and Southeast Asians in the context of prostitution and sex tourism. Historians need to partake in the evaluation of this issue and, as Howard Zinn argues, commit themselves to the "single objective of therapy."⁵⁹ Historical analysis is needed to understand the world of modern slavery so as to help adopt the policies that can alleviate the symptoms of human trafficking.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Kimberly A. McCabe and Sabita Manian, "Part II: East Asia and Pacific," in *Sex Trafficking: A Global Perspective*, ed. Kimberly A. McCabe and Sabita Manian (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), 33.

⁵⁹ Howard Zinn, "History as Private Enterprise," in *The Politics of History*, 2nd ed. (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 31.

⁶⁰ For very recent efforts in combating human trafficking in Southeast Asia and as a whole, see both: Ligia Kiss et al., "Health of Men, Women, and Children in Post-Trafficking Services in Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam: An Observational Cross-Sectional Study," *Lancet Global Health* 3, no. 3 (March 2015): e160; and the End Modern Slavery Initiative Act of 2015, S.R. 553, 114th U.S. Congress (2015).

Appendix

Figure 1: Southeast Asian Mekong region



Source: Google Maps

Figure 2: “The Tiers” of the TIP Report

The Tiers

Tier 1

Countries whose governments fully comply with the Trafficking Victims Protection Act’s (TVPA) minimum standards.

Tier 2

Countries whose governments do not fully comply with the TVPA’s minimum standards, but are making significant efforts to bring themselves into compliance with those standards.

Tier 2 Watch List

Countries whose governments do not fully comply with the TVPA’s minimum standards, but are making significant efforts to bring themselves into compliance with those standards AND:

- a. The **absolute number of victims** of severe forms of trafficking is very significant or is significantly increasing;
- b. There is a **failure to provide evidence of increasing efforts** to combat severe forms of trafficking in persons from the previous year; or
- c. The determination that a country is making significant efforts to bring itself into compliance with minimum standards was based on **commitments by the country to take additional future steps over the next year.**

Tier 3

Countries whose governments do not fully comply with the minimum standards and are not making significant efforts to do so.

Source: U.S. Department of State, Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, *Trafficking in Persons Report* (2014), <http://go.usa.gov/NhKR>.

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