

I Have Met The Enemy ... And They Are My Friends A Short Journey In The Socialist Republic Of Vietnam

By Rudy Brueggemann, December 2003



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Arriving in Hanoi's Nobai international airport in late November 2003, I could already sense a country in transition. A phalanx of large billboards advertising products and moneymaking enterprises greeted visitors to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam as they left the terminal and drove from the rural countryside to the capital of nearly 5 million people. Rice paddies and water buffalos gave way to factories and slim three- and four-story buildings, which I later saw being built everywhere throughout the country.

Soon, my taxi entered Hanoi, a swarming metropolis. Here hundreds of thousands of small-engine motorcycles ruled the road. Only recently, these had replaced bicycles as the dominant form of public transportation. Cars and SUVs were now common. While I had an open mind to soak up these sites and their accompanying sounds and smells, I also

carried perspectives that colored how I was seeing this land and its people.

This was, after all, Vietnam, a communist nation and the former enemy of the government of the United States of America, my homeland. Throughout my two and a half week stay, I could never let that thought go. Every day, I inevitably asked myself, what feelings did Vietnamese have towards America and to me, an American? What impact did our involvement have here?

It was impossible to avoid these mental exercises, given such a blunt and fresh historic reality. The ongoing U.S.-led occupation of Iraq, and its daily bloodletting, also made it difficult for me not to think about my own country's actions in foreign lands.

That involvement in southeast Asia was significant, and also tragic. For more than a decade, the United States indirectly and

directly waged a violent struggle in Vietnam. The brutal conflict ended with the communist conquest of the South Vietnam in 1975. By that time, more than 4 million Vietnamese people had been killed or wounded in almost continuous fighting since 1946.

Under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh and the Vietnamese communists, the Viet Minh army waged an independence

struggle to route the French colonial authority for good after nearly eight decades of rule. That occupation bled the Vietnamese people to the benefit of France. Though France left their former colonies in southeast Asia in the mid-1950s, the United States filled the void, propping up what became South Vietnam against communist North Vietnam, after the country was divided amid the backdrop of the Cold War.

By the mid-1960s, after Congress passed the controversial Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, the United States intensified its involvement, which ultimately engaged more than 3 million U.S. service people. By war's end, the U.S. military had lost more than 58,000 personnel and spent more than \$150 billion in a conflict that ultimately failed to win the hearts and minds of the ordinary Vietnamese people.

Critics during and after the war condemned the U.S. government's involvement. The conflict sharply polarized the American people and led to massive anti-war protests. Today, senior



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Signs of emerging capitalism are the first images to greet visitors to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam when they arrive at Hanoi's Nobai airport.

officials such as former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara have claimed their Cold War-driven foreign policy in Vietnam to contain the spread of communism in Southeast Asia was misguided. "We were wrong, terribly wrong," wrote the architect of U.S. military intervention in Vietnam in his recently published memoirs. "We owe it to future generations to explain why."

The American chapter in the Vietnamese people's struggle for independence also brought the full might of America's technological and military prowess on an undeveloped, largely agricultural land. Wide swaths of fertile areas were sprayed with the chemical defoliant Agent Orange that poisoned the environment, civilians, and the American servicemen who delivered the toxins to support military operations. Civilians and combatants were bombed with napalm by American forces. The U.S. military and their South Vietnamese allies also unleashed a rain of ordinance, some 15 million tons of ammunition, and massive air strikes in Vietnam and neighboring Laos and

Cambodia. The latter also set the stage for the horrific reign of Pol Pot in Cambodia, which ended only after the Vietnamese military intervention in 1979.

For their part, the communist victors had a dark legacy of political oppression against common citizens in the north. After the reunification, they opened brutal reeducation camps that for years jailed former military and civilian "collaborators" of the "puppet regime." During the war, American military personnel

were tortured and kept in harsh conditions in North Vietnamese jails, the most famous being Hoa Lo, or the "Hanoi Hilton." It was here where the French held senior communist party members. Among the prison's most famous residents was former U.S. Navy pilot and now Sen. John McCain; his flight suit is part of the museums' permanent display.

Following the war, hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese civilians fled the country, many dying in overcrowded vessels or facing incarceration as non-citizens in prisons in Hong Kong or refugee camps in neighboring countries. The refugees who did transit from these camps resettled in United States, France, Canada, and other

countries.

Prior to my trip, I had met numerous officers of the South Vietnamese armed forces, as well as refugee families who had left after the fall of the South. Some

of those officers had been jailed for nearly a decade. None of their stories was pleasant. I thought about them while in the yellow-painted Hoa Lo.

Such is the continuing legacy of Vietnam, one of the few remaining communist regimes in the world. Yet

today a visitor who knew nothing of these events would be hard-pressed to find lingering anger or resentment among ordinary Vietnamese against their former adversaries. The emergence of state-managed capitalism and the furious pace of development throughout the country are the forces most visible to visitors, and perhaps the most important ones to ordinary Vietnamese.

As one business man told me, "Making money is what matters," he said. "No one cares about Dien Bien Phu," he added, in reference to the battle in which the Viet Minh trounced the French military force in northwest Vietnam in 1954.

Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, the commander who successfully led the Vietnamese



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A memorial marker surrounded by trash, near an open air market, in Dien Bien Phu celebrates the historic battle where Vietnamese communists routed a French colonial force in 1954. Dien Bien Phu also was the first battleground where Americans (two civilian pilots) died in the Vietnamese conflict.

communists against the French at Dien Bien Phu and against the Americans, had reinvented himself as a patron of emerging markets. In 1988, Truong Gia Binh, Giap's son-in-law, and a group of Russian-trained scientific hotshots set up FPT, or the Corporation for Financing and Promoting Technology. It is now Vietnam's largest software firm. Having family connections like Gen. Giap no doubt has helped the budding enterprise. Binh recently told CNN that Giap was an IT enthusiast. "Vietnam knows how to mobilize resources to achieve a target," Binh said. "I think the government has certain concerns and the government is also interested in using the Internet as a tool for development. It will think how that should be done."

New challenges in 2003 required the Vietnamese to compete in the new economic battlefield of global capitalism. And, as I saw everywhere, the Vietnamese are very competitive and don't like to lose. They are a people that successfully fought both the Americans and the Chinese (in 1979) and held their own.

During my stay, the country was hosting the 22nd annual Seagames sporting competition among ASEAN nations. The Olympics-styled event provided the government an excuse to clean up dirty streets, whisk away unsightly street children, and build new sporting complexes throughout the country. It also let the government pump propaganda into every Vietnamese TV set and throughout the region. The event's gaudy stadium pageants were a mix of the Superbowl and May Day parades. The games and their wall-to-wall media coverage also reminded me of Hitler's 1936 Olympics pageant, minus the Nazis' grotesque racial ideology.

When I left the country on Dec. 9, 2003,

Vietnam was neck and neck with competitor Thailand in the medal count. The night the national soccer team beat Laos 1-0, it appeared that all of Hanoi had spilled into the streets. For hours, young people zoomed around the city with red national flags affixed to their honking motorbikes.

Vietnamese pride, however, did not carry any hostile overtones I could see. As an American citizen visiting northern and central Vietnam – areas that carried the heavy human cost of the conflict – I was never greeted with any hostility.

A new generation of Vietnamese has matured in this land of nearly 80 million people, many with no direct experience in the war. Yet, all generations warmly welcomed me, even into their homes. One family who lost their eldest son to the conflict, whose picture adorns a family shrine in their rural home, treated me with kindness and an enormous meal broken by repeated glasses of rice wine. (It was very tasty local wine, I must add, and the meal was an elaborate, delicious multi-course affair.)

The war's legacy, instead, has become a tourist curiosity. Visitors – American, Japanese, Chinese, Aussies, Kiwis, and Europeans – tour areas along the old DMZ, in Quang Tri province, straddling the 17th parallel. Some companies provide guided bus tours that take visitors to sites such as the Doc Mieu U.S. Army base, the Khe Sanh battle area, and the Vinh Moc tunnels, built by the North Vietnamese to help move weapons and keep civilians safe from B-52 air strikes, just north of the old DMZ dividing line. Hills once barren from Agent Orange are now covered in green brush.

In the old imperial city of Hue, U.S. military hardware such as tanks and long-range artillery sit as displays with communist propaganda affixed to signs.

Similar propaganda with U.S. and French weaponry also is housed in the Army Museum in Hanoi. Communist history touting the defeat of imperialists is on full display.

In the end, Vietnam far exceeded my expectations. In fact, I loved the country, mainly because of the hospitality and spirit of the countless Vietnamese I met. Next to Iceland and Greenland, it's about the safest

place I've ever traveled on this planet. It's also a place where person-to-person contacts are remarkably easy to make, and nearly always positive.

During my 17 days in Vietnam, I kept thinking, how could these people have been the enemies of the United States? How could we have fought a bitter war against people that I have absolutely nothing but good feelings about? And, at night, I would watch news about the latest U.S. military involvement, in Iraq, where the U.S. military clearly were failing to win the hearts and minds of the Iraqi populace and dying in guerilla skirmishes from die-hard anti-American insurgents.

Comparing Vietnam to Iraq was too easy, perhaps, and impossible not to do. But, while eating fresh, delicious food at a local restaurant and meeting local residents in cities like Hue, Dien Bien Phu, Hanoi, and Hoi An, I inevitably



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A rusting U.S. tank sits as a prop at the old Khe Sahn Combat Base, along the old DMZ, in Vietnam's Quang Tri Province. One of the bloodiest and biggest battles of the Vietnam War between U.S. forces and the Army of North Vietnam was fought here in 1968, as a diversion to the Tet Offensive the same year. The battlefield now hosts a museum marking the battle, with two captured helicopters and small U.S. firearms as displays.

thought, would I feel this relaxed meeting ordinary Iraqi citizens. Would I feel as welcomed? My gut told me, probably I would, probably I would.

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