

Vietnam

We Will Never Forget, We Will Never Forgive

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U.S. “normalization” of relations with Vietnam ignores the slaughter of the war and continues the myth of the MIA/POW.

Why did President Clinton (whose opportunistic-draft dodging was the only worthy thing he’s ever done) lift the almost twenty-year ban on trade with Vietnam in February, beginning a process of “normalization” between the two countries?

Was he tired of the ongoing violence—since 1975, more economic than military—against a small nation with the gumption to defy U.S. geopolitical hegemony? Was he planning to pay reparations for the immense damage done to Vietnam (and the rest of Indochina) by the U.S. war machine, or to pay the \$3.25 billion in reconstruction aid promised by Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger when the peace treaty, with North Vietnam was signed?

Hardly. The February 4, 1994 *New York Times* headline made it clear: “Move Opens Potentially Lucrative Market for American Products.” Though die-hard right-wing veterans groups like the American Legion opposed the policy change, powerful business interests had long pressured for “normalization” in order to enter a market that, according to the *Times*, could be worth up to \$6 billion in trade for U.S. corporations. And Clinton is the businessman’s business president if he is anything.

The resumption of trade was endorsed by former U.S. military commanders, war criminals-at-large like retired General William Westmoreland (commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, who once explained the courage and determination of his peasant enemies as an “oriental” indifference to death), and retired Admiral Elmo Zumwalt (who was head of naval operations in the war, and more recently famous for shrugging his shoulders at his own son’s Agent Orange-caused death). Speaking at the White House ceremony, Zumwalt declared it time to “put away bitterness and revenge...and begin the process of the peaceful penetration of Vietnam.”

Not only was the admiral’s language an impeccable example of masculinist military mentality (the same attitude that called sex with prostitutes “boom-boom” during the war, linking its mechanized violence to the exploitation of women’s bodies), his remark revealed the direct connection between military conquest and economic “penetration.” To paraphrase Clausewitz, business is simply war by other means.

Every War A Meatgrinder

In fact, Mobil Oil and American Express had already signed agreements with Hanoi bureaucrats. The day after the ban was lifted, Pepsi—which was actually already distributing its product in the country through other companies—was handing out free samples in Ho Chi Minh City. This is what two to four million Vietnamese, Laotians and Cambodians died for? The independence to drink Pepsi rather than Coke? Can Bazooka Bubblegum be far behind, distributed perhaps by U.S. soldiers and sailors (on leave, say, from the Second Korean War) looking

for “boom-boom”? Who knows, maybe they’ll even open a new naval base at the former U.S. facility at Cam Ranh Bay.

Clinton, worried about backlash over the phony issue of missing U.S. soldiers in Vietnam, marshaled military men and Vietnam vets from Congress for his ceremony, telling reporters that his “one factor only” for reopening trade was to gain “the fullest possible accounting” of U.S. soldiers missing in action. Thus he continued a vicious myth—that Vietnam is still holding Americans prisoner—that grew out of Nixon and Kissinger’s cynical tactic to avoid serious negotiations with the North Vietnamese in the early 1970s. Later, under the auspices of right-wing ideologues including Ross Perot and the fascist mercenaries he sponsored, the lie took on a life of its own.

Every war is a meat-grinder for the working classes, and consequently produces MIA’s—those poor devils blown and burned to unrecognizable and unrecoverable shreds by the unholy merchandise of the arms manufacturers. But the percentage of U.S. MIAs among total casualties in the Vietnam War was far lower, dramatically lower, than in any previous war, including Korea and the Second World War. H. Bruce Franklin, author of *MIA: Myth-making in America*, told the FE that MIAs constituted 20% of the World War II dead, but less than 4% of those in Vietnam. (Franklin’s book is alone in exposing the cynical fraud perpetrated by the politicians, opportunists and media hounds, and has recently been issued in an expanded paperback by Rutgers University Press.)

Of course, it is rarely if ever asked in the imperial heartland how many Vietnamese MIAs there were. (Few in this country have any sense of what Vietnamese casualties were, and when surveys are done, people usually guess in the hundreds of thousands, which, as Noam Chomsky once pointed out, would be the equivalent of contemporary Germans “guessing” the number of Jewish deaths in the Second World War as perhaps 300,000.) The fire power disparity between the U.S. and its Vietnamese adversaries was at least fifty to one, and as high as 500 to one. And given such U.S. policies as mass burials of Vietnamese civilian and military dead in ditches with giant bulldozers, the dumping of bodies at sea, and interrogation techniques like flinging prisoners to their deaths out of helicopters, the percentage (and total) of Vietnamese MIAs is obviously vastly greater than the number of Americans.

If the Vietnamese people had their wall in Washington, it would probably stretch down to Sarasota. And nothing that occurred in the “Hanoi Hilton” (the name U.S. prisoners gave the camp where they were held), even in the fevered imaginations of the sorcerers who concoct mass culture, comes close to the kinds of torture and mayhem perpetrated by the U.S. and its puppet allies at the front and in the prisons of the South Vietnamese regime. Yet the postwar malaise of self-pity and victim-blaming remains in effect, exemplified by the *Times* reporting the recent policy change would bring about the closest ties between the two countries “since the long and painful war that left 58,000 Americans dead...” No mention of Vietnamese casualties at all—why would the imperial “newspaper of record” bother to report that unpleasant data?

Turning Victims Into Executioners

Imagining the executioners as the victims, and turning the real victims into the executioners, is a common form of psychological denial occurring in the wake of colonial defeats in this century. This current post-war Big Lie is not the idiosyncratic delusion of a marginalized milieu (extreme right and misguided relatives). The delusion that Vietnam holds prisoners of war continues to be taken seriously in the ruling discourse despite the fact that no reputable independent investigation has ever found any credible evidence of the existence of surviving POWs.

Rather, there has been a clear pattern of fabrication by the reactionary organizations and public relations hustlers who keep the myth alive, including even the use of doctored photographs of alleged POW’s that turned out to be of gulag inmates in the 1930s (which didn’t stop some hysterical relatives of missing pilots from “recognizing” their loved ones). As the White House’s apparent need to manage the fiction demonstrates, the figure of the POW/MIA has become an ideological fetish in late imperial American society—a fetish to which any ruling politician must genuflect to show proper respect for the war heroes and their widows and orphans. Indeed, the only flag ever flown over the U.S. Capitol other than the U.S. (with one exception) [1] was the POW/MIA banner.

One important source of this mass psychology has been an entire genre of Hollywood movies produced in the 1980s that served to aggravate racist projection fantasies generated by the post-traumatic stress of imperialist military failure. The POW/MIA fiction helped to create a post-war mystique strikingly similar to the protofascist “stab-

in-the-back” psychosis among Germans after World War I. The cinema’s function in the manipulation of mass (un)consciousness is notable, with the demonization of the real victims (in the Rambo and Chuck Norris films) having parallels in other periods, particularly, the motif of the evil Jewish outsider in pre-nazi German film. (See Kracauer’s fascinating study, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychoanalytic History of the German Cinema*.) During more than a decade, this and other similar themes were exploited by German filmmakers, thus psychologically predisposing many Germans to accept Hitler and fascist rule.

The POW/MIA mystique is closely linked to another post-war ideology with proto-fascist aspects: the cult of the (betrayed) veteran. This significant strand in national socialist ideology, prevalent in the German population in the years leading up to the fascist triumph, played into an authoritarian rejection of politics that delegitimized bourgeois business-as-usual in favor of a patriotic party-police state, an attitude that should be familiar to any observer of American politics today. (See Daniel Guerin’s *Fascism and Big Business*.)

Nowadays, the Vietnam veteran has become an icon of sentimental patriotism, even among the liberal counter culture. (This while the actual life conditions of many Vietnam veterans, genuinely suffering from what happened to them in the war—or perhaps also from the suffering they caused others—is wretched. The number of veterans who have committed suicide now surpasses the number of U.S. soldiers killed in the war, and Vietnam veterans account for an enormous percentage of the urban homeless and mentally ill.)

In many circles today, expressing relative indifference to the fate of the invaders of Vietnam, missing or otherwise (given the enormous contrast in suffering between the two peoples), is tantamount to sacrilege. One is allowed to criticize the war (as a stab-in-the-back by elites or traitors, or as an example of failed idealism, or as a halfhearted crusade, never as the imperialist holocaust it was), but one is expected unconditionally to “love the warrior.”

Most veterans, it is true, were themselves victims of the war machine—poor and working class draftees, with a greatly disproportionate number of blacks, Latinos and Indians among them, with no stake in the war and no desire to be in it. And to their credit, soldiers and sailors helped bring an end to the war as much as or more than the anti-war movement back home, by staging mutinies and refusing to fight, once it became clear they were not going to win. A significant number became courageous, principled, public opponents of the war, and some became conscious revolutionary enemies of the U.S. Empire. (See “The Collapse of the Armed Forces: The Lessons of Vietnam,” in FE #335, Winter 1990–91, and “The Lessons of Vietnam: The Government Spit on Vietnam Vets, Not the Anti-war Movement,” in FE #336, Spring 1991, available for \$2 each from the FE Book Service.)

The Real Victims

But before anyone forgets the differences between the war’s impact on the two countries and their peoples, it never hurts to repeat a few figures to remind ourselves who the real victims were. Some 58,000 Americans died in the war, in contrast with two to four million Indochinese (two million were probably Vietnamese). Some 6,600,000 tons of bombs were dumped on Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia by the U.S., more than the First World War, the Second World War and the Korean War combined. There were approximately 25,000,000 bomb craters left when the Americans quit the country.

About 400,000 tons of napalm were dropped and nearly 20 million gallons of deadly Agent Orange and other related herbicides were sprayed on the Vietnamese countryside. It is commonly known that U.S. veterans and their families suffer myriad health problems from exposure to the dioxin in these herbicides; far less is acknowledged here about the epidemic of cancers and other diseases they have caused in Vietnam. 25,000,000 acres of farmland and 12,000,000 acres of forest were destroyed; of some 15,000 South Vietnamese hamlets, 9,000 were destroyed in the war.

In contrast with some 2,200 Missing Americans, the Vietnamese government calculates some 300,000 MIAs of its own. In one of the very few references ever made to these people in the U.S. press, Philip Shenon of *The New York Times* writes that military death certificates (frequently all that is left of the war dead), typically displayed in Vietnamese households, are “as common...as wall calendars and family photographs.” According to Shenon, in the single province of Lang Son in northern Vietnam, there are nearly 2,400 soldiers listed as missing—more than

the U.S. total. Approximately 1,000 northern Vietnamese families apply each month to go south to search for the remains of missing relatives. (See “The Vietnamese Speak Softly of 300,000 Missing in the War,” 11/30/92.)

More than three million Indochinese were left wounded, and by 1975, 14,305,000 people had been turned into refugees. The U.S. stopped short in its efforts only at an all-out invasion of a million or more troops, which—even in the unlikely event that it was successful militarily—would have brought about complete chaos at home among a populace disenchanted with the war. The other unused option was the atom bomb, which world public opinion prevented. Yet, in the obscene parlance of the war criminals (like George Bush, who used the cliché while pulverizing Iraq), this necessary strategic limit was fighting “with one arm tied behind our backs.”

Those who identified with the invaded rather than the invaders might find it difficult to get too upset about the fate of those Americans who were taken prisoner. Sadly, human sympathy does have its limits. Yet while there may be room in the sympathies for a young, confused draftee, the pilots (who made up the bulk of the U.S. prisoners of war in Vietnam) are another story. They were officers and professional soldiers, highly educated elites with strong loyalties to the war machine and few scruples about carrying out its orders.

It was they who sprayed the herbicides and jellied gasoline, incinerated and carpet bombed villages, farms, hospitals, schools and even dams and dikes at one point, causing massive flooding, destruction and the disruption of agriculture. (This is a technique the Pentagon improved during the war against Iraq in the 1990s: focusing much of the bombing on infrastructure, they inflicted mass death indirectly through disease and famine.)

The Vietnamese would have been justified in hanging captured pilots on the spot. And if there were any justice in the world, some of the POWs might have been forced to stay in Vietnam, for years, perhaps, to clean up the mess they made. Even today, people die every year in Vietnam from unexploded ordnance; the victims include Vietnamese directly engaged in searching for the remains of Americans, in response to the demand of a heartless, racist nation ghoulishly insistent on having every last particle of its “heroes” returned home.

Alongside its article on the ending of the trade embargo, the Times printed the now famous photograph of children running down a road after being burned by napalm. Kim Phuc, the little girl shown in the photo running naked with her arms out from her body in pain and distress, is now a young woman. A couple of years ago she came to the U.S. to receive further treatment for the burns she received that day in 1972. When interviewed by the press, she said that she felt no rancor toward those who had injured her and her country, and that she forgave the same pilots who napalmed her village, and would tell them if she met them, “the war is over. The past is the past.”

One can only honor such a generous spirit and respect her for getting on with her life. It’s her life, after all. [2] But in a certain sense, no one with a conscience in this country has a right to take the same magnanimous attitude; we cannot yet forgive and forget because neither the perpetrators nor the culture has properly faced U.S. crimes against southeast Asia. (This country hasn’t even come to terms with its crimes against Native Americans, Africans and many others.)

Golf Resorts For Aging Vets?

No, we can never forgive the crimes of the U.S. war machine. Too many war criminals are still living out their lives in luxury as corporate functionaries, consultants, pensioners and “elder statesmen.” Perhaps after generations of reparations and atonement for the terrible crimes committed, forgiveness might be appropriate. But the imperial overlords aren’t returning with heads humbly bowed to acknowledge any responsibility for the atrocities; rather, after damaging and killing millions of people and causing horrendous destruction to the earth itself, the plunderers are planning to carry out the only project they understand, the penetration and exploitation of the land they once attempted to subjugate by other means.

This denunciation of the monsters who administer global capitalism is not meant to mythologize or glorify the Vietnamese. Certainly, the Vietnamese stalinists never abolished the market economy in an attempt to create a liberatory, communal society. And the country has been no paradise since the U.S. was ousted; as one might expect, after generations of foreign invasion, slaughter and brutalization, the Vietnamese are governed by an impoverished, bureaucratic police state, with a mostly state capitalist economy mixed with private entrepreneurial enterprise. It’s one of those painful ironies of the modern world that a small country suffers from being locked out

of the world market; of course, apart from a thin stratum of elites, once let in, the country will simply find itself with a new set of problems and new layers of oppressive social relations.

“Normalization” only serves human ends when the idea of what is “normal” is seriously examined and redefined to create a humane, genuinely egalitarian, ecological society. Otherwise, exploitation and alienation will inevitably expand. With the growth of the capitalist economy, one kind of poverty will replace another. This time, however, the exploiters will not be the old classes of aristocratic landlords, foreign investors, and Saigon warlords, but government functionaries, new foreign investors and tourists (golf resorts for aging U.S. war veterans, with Viet Cong veterans as the caddies?), and a new milieu of aggressive, westernized Vietnamese entrepreneurs.

The new invaders will without a doubt have their revenge on the land and on the people once the market gets cooking. The prostitution of the spirit that rules wherever capital determines the content of life will find full entry where once the most powerful war machine in history could not have its way. Business, to return to the Clausewitz idea, is war by other means. Tragically, the war against Vietnam, like all of industrial capitalism’s war against life itself, is far from over. We’re in no mood to forgive, to put this sordid past behind us, or to deceive ourselves about what is to come. The present is the past is the future.

We will never forgive, and we will never forget.

FE Note: George Bradford authored “Looking Back on the Vietnam War: History and Forgetting,” FE #320, Spring, 1985, and “Vietnam’s Untold Victim: The Land,” in FE #321, Summer 1985 (both out of print but available from FE Books in photocopy on request with a self-addressed stamped envelope).

Notes

1. In August 1814, British troops led by Admiral Sir George Cockburn (a direct ancestor of radical political commentator Alexander Cockburn), hoisted the Union Jack over the Capitol before setting the building on fire.

2. The generosity of the Vietnamese is remarkable. Said one Vietnamese widow to Times reporter Philip Shenon, “I understand how the Americans feel. When I read in the newspapers how the Americans come here to search for the missing soldiers, I know exactly the pain of the families. We share the same grief.” One would not likely encounter the same sentiment among the POW/MIA families in the U.S.

And since movies have played a role in this discussion, it is worth mentioning that one had to be struck by the same forgiving attitude expressed by Le Ly Hayslip in the flawed but worthwhile treatment of her life by Oliver Stone in his recent film, “Heaven and Earth,” which, in telling this Vietnamese woman’s remarkable story of the war on several levels, is, despite its problems, the only effort so far of an American director to portray the war from an angle other than that of the sufferings of the invaders.

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