

Letters to the Editor

Our readers respond

Various Authors

2013

Send letters via email to **fe — AT — fifthestate.org** or Fifth Estate, P.O. Box 201016, Ferndale MI 48220. All formats accepted including typescript & handwritten. Letters may be edited for length.

Vietnam Debated

Jonny Ball's article on Viet Nam needs a rakeover. [See FE Winter 2012, "A Changing Vietnam."]

He defines the war as simply a proxy affair between the U.S. and the Russian Empire along with the Chinese; simply a Cold War phenomena.

This is seeing such wars the world was rife with during that era through the prevailing Western ruling analysis. It forgets the savage oppression the Indo-Chinese people suffered under Western colonialism.

In Indochina, the Vietnamese call the conflict The American War.

The U.S. occupied the southern part of Viet Nam. It was Americans who bayoneted pregnant women, torched entire villages, burned to death an innumerable amount of victims with napalm, bombed the country into craters, killing millions of civilians. The U.S. defined the war as one of "attrition," i.e., genocide.

[FE note: If there is doubt about this description, see Nick Turse's recently published, *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* from Dispatch Books. See also: FE #390, Letters to the Editor.]

Indochinese were shooting at American troops and it didn't mean shit that the bullets were Soviet. Anyone fighting for survival and against an invader will take help from the devil.

The Americans finally had to admit that the driving force among those being crushed by them was nationalism not Communism. Historically, the Vietnamese endured invasions and occupations from China, France, Japan, the French again, the Americans, Cambodia, and China. They are among history's bravest peoples and should not be brushed off as "proxies."

The proxy analysis has its place but far, far from the everyday lives of those who fought the American invaders.

I am an anti-Communist and anarchist and was a leader in the 1980s group, Neither East Nor West, that linked alternativist scenes in the East and West for mutual solidarity. I have no love for Viet Stalinism. But that's a far moon from the righteous fight of people for freedom from a Nazi-type American regime despite the geopolitical chess the world's imperial powers were playing.

Bob McGlynn
Brooklyn



War criminal Nixon orders invasion of Cambodia.
graphic—Liberation News Service, 1970. *Fifth Estate* files.

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Having made three trips to Vietnam in recent years to visit my wife's relatives in Ho Chi Minh City, I can heartily concur with the reflections in Jonny Ball's piece in the Winter 2013 FE. I, too, have seen the government's scant concern for human rights in its scamper to attract business from the West and pander to the wealthy.

I've noted the irony of a Communist country which widely opens the doors to foreign entrepreneurs that rush to set up factories because of the low pay scales and lack of pollution control.

The government allows these outsiders to fill their cities with KFCs and other franchises. The most egregious and astounding example of Western intrusion was when I turned on the TV during my visit in the summer of 2012 and saw the show Vietnam's Next Top Model hosted by former American model, Tyra Banks!

Ball says that although Vietnam technically "won" the war with the U.S., from another viewpoint, the U.S. still triumphed in that it wanted to make the Asian nation capitalist, something that is now happening. He quotes a journalist to the effect that "by delaying a communist government, the United States bought a crucial decade" for the country to move toward a capitalist orientation.

It might be added that the two biggest Asian capitalist powerhouses, Korea and Taiwan, had the foundations of their economies laid by the vast infusion of U.S. military money because, for the former, it was the site of a U.S.-backed war, and, for the latter, it needed bolstering to forestall a Chinese invasion.

It can be speculated, that if the U.S. had "won" the Vietnam war and there was a permanent national division of North and South, the U.S. would actually have lost in that Vietnam (with so much U.S. military money around) might have become another Asian tiger threatening American economic hegemony rather than what it is now, a rather small player on the economic field.

Secondly, Ball believes that the new level of government repression as foreign capital pours in will evoke "localized resistance." Indeed, rumbles of such resistance have already been heard. What should not be overlooked, however, is the elite's ability to rule through division.

My wife's family is Chinese, a group that suffered redoubled repression during the border war of Vietnam and China in 1979. Even before this, when the Communists took over Saigon in 1975, the Chinese owned small businesses were expropriated and many merchants jailed.

When my wife and I first visited the country in 2010, we were interested to see if such anti-Chinese sentiment still existed. Instead, we saw something else, another type of division that could be exploited by the state to divide workers.

My wife was shocked to find that her niece's three children, all in high school, spoke Vietnamese with heavy Northern accents. All the school teachers in Ho Chi Minh City were Northerners. Southern teachers need not apply.

This was part of a marked caste system of a sort, which treated those from the South as second class citizens. Ultimate proof: every contestant on Vietnam's Next Top Model was from the North

Jim Feast

New York City

FE Note: See Jim Feast's article Vietnam: Where the Political is Still Personal, FE #385.

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I think it's risky business for any Westerner—me included—with limited exposure to a foreign country to pass judgment on that country's government and social order. That said, my impressions of Viet Nam are more favorable than Jonny Ball's.

I "met" Viet Nam as an antiwar activist, made my first visit to Hanoi in 1970, and am just back from my third trip there. I love the country and its people.

Is it utopia? Of course not—although a case can be made that it is the most admired nation on the planet. World-wide esteem notwithstanding, Viet Nam openly acknowledges and widely discusses its problems of poverty, income disparity, corruption, pollution (including the aesthetic and psychological pollution that comes with "marketing"), trash management and urban sprawl.

A leading Vietnamese intellectual, Madam Ton Nu Thi Ninh, recently told a group of US anti-war activists, "Peace is harder than war." She makes a valid point.

Many nations have been victimized by the imperial military brutality of the United States. Viet Nam in particular is still dealing with the legacies of US abuse: more than 3 million killed; entire villages bombed off the map;

birth defects and other ongoing issues from Agent Orange and unexploded ordnance; the effects of the artificial division of the country into north and south from 1955 to 1975; an economic blockade that lasted for 20 years after the war ended and more.

Those dynamics alone would be a challenge for any government to overcome. Add in being invaded by China in 1979 and having to oust the murderous Pol Pot regime in Cambodia in the same time frame and the challenges are even greater.

Nevertheless, Viet Nam has been a worldwide leader in recent years in poverty reduction. It has a robust trade union movement. There are 500 strikes a year on average, often against foreign owned companies. A new Labor Code was recently enacted that further strengthens worker rights. There are a growing number of worker owned enterprises. A nationwide conversation is underway regarding Constitutional reform. For better or worse, there is a real sense of economic vitality evident in cities and rural areas.

What to make of recently arrived Western based luxury stores in Hanoi and a Starbucks in Ho Chi Minh City? That's an interesting and important question, but I doubt that such Western capitalist outcroppings will ultimately produce the same outcome for the Vietnamese as the capitalism that lies at the end of 500 years of chattel slavery, genocide against indigenous populations and world wide conquest, as with the US, Britain and other Western powers.

It seems to me that to think otherwise with all knowing certitude can itself be a form of cultural imperialism. Defeatist, too. I am struck again and again by how easy it is for Westerners all across the political spectrum to come up with some version of—see, the capitalists always win. And, the point is what? That white people really are smarter or better? That the struggle against America's war on Viet Nam was a waste of time? That capitalism can only use Viet Nam for its own ends, not the other way around?

At the very least, as Chou En Lai was said to have responded to the question, what do you think of the French Revolution? "It's too soon to tell."

Frank Joyce

Detroit

FE Note: Frank Joyce was the News Editor of the *Fifth Estate* during the late 1960s when this publication appeared bi-weekly and weekly.

Jonny Ball responds: Frank Joyce takes issue with my piece on modern-day Vietnam, but beginning his criticisms with the assertion that it's "risky business" for a "Westerner" to "pass judgment on another country's government or social order." This is a curious statement, given that this would make any kind of debate or discussion about the politics of any country other than our own near-impossible.

My aim was to highlight and censure aspects of Vietnam's socioeconomic and political order that are antithetical to any kind of anarchist or left-libertarian politics and run contrary to the interests of poor and disenfranchised Vietnamese.

I do not deny the enormous sacrifice made by the Vietnamese people for independence from Chinese, Japanese, French, and American imperialism over the centuries. However, this sacrifice has been manipulated by the leaders and propagandists of a one-party state in order to legitimize and preserve their dictatorial stranglehold.

In doing so, this corrupt, nepotistic and nefarious elite have enriched themselves at the expense of ordinary people. They have benefited enormously from the market reforms introduced since the '80s, often through the sell-off of state-owned enterprises or bribes taken for awarding contracts to businesses.

Poverty has certainly been reduced since the 80s, and this has been the trend almost the world over, but the gap between Vietnamese rich and poor is widening exponentially and far too many are being left behind and excluded from the so-called "economic miracle." As a visitor to Vietnam, Joyce will be well aware of the opulence of a nouveau-riche that sits side-by-side with destitution and squalor.

Joyce's adoration for Vietnam's "robust" trade union movement is almost surreal. As he should know, every union in the country is affiliated to the government-controlled umbrella organization, the General Confederation of Labour.

The GCL rarely, if ever, authorizes strikes and the "500 strikes a year" that he refers to are nearly all wildcat, completely illegal and unauthorized. These incidents are, in fact, what I referred to as "localized resistance."

It is sad to see that so many on the left see fit to defend or even admire the actions of governments abroad whilst they themselves are the first to criticize their own leaders implementing the same policies.

Joyce, it seems, has fallen prey to this. I'm sure he'd be happy to launch into a critique of uneven wealth distribution in the US, but squirms when I critique it in Vietnam, a country I have lived in for more than a year.

I wonder what he'd say if Obama routinely locked away bloggers or pamphleteers calling for freedom of speech? Or, if dissenting websites and social networks were blocked by an internet firewall? Or, if all unions were government-controlled? Or, if there was no freedom of the press? Or, if all street protests were illegal

Or, am I just being a "cultural imperialist?"

Still At It

Back in the 1960s, when I was young, I lived in Detroit and would read your newspaper. I got it at a head shop, The Mouse House, on Grand River Avenue. My mother would complain, "I don't want you reading that newspaper where they call the police pigs."

I am happy to see the *Fifth Estate* still exists today. As a supposedly free society, America needs to have alternative opinions and perspectives publicized.

A *Fifth Estate* Friend,

Houston, Texas

War Woop re: Skool

"Skool Sucks!" is the war-woop of the pupiletariat! Bruce Levine is dead on when he writes about attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) being leveled at rebel students. [See Winter 2012, "Anti-Authoritarian Personalities and Standard Schools."] I would've been diagnosed with both as I scathingly, violently hated skool and acted on it.

A relative who is a teacher (and as dumb as an empty can of paint, i.e., she/he can't think independently) told me, "Oh yes, you have ODD, the book says so," after I related this story:

When I was forcibly whisked away from play when I was a child and dumped into kindergarten, we were forced to color a couple walking

Teach says, "Now, students, use the right colors and color inside the lines."

I was furious at being told what to do, so I took a purple crayon and scribbled all over the page. I smartly, rationally acted against a dumb teacher, a dumb assignment and being forced into a jailish class.

Well, that led to my poor parents being called into school for a conference to see if I was OK. Luckily, there were no pills back then to control me. But teach did degrade and punish me. ODD is totalitarian and not even psychology pseudo-science. It's not science at all; it's pure politics.

Christ, I was only a 6 year old child. I did my sentence of standard schooling and things only got worse and more irrational, hateful and violent. I'll never forgive. And, I'll never forget.

I'll never respect the many radicals, even anarchists, that teach in standard schools thinking they'll "make a difference." Just stay away, motherfuckers.

Joey Homicides,

Yonkers

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Fifth Estate #389, Summer, 2013

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