

The Old Revolutionaries of Vietnam

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During Christmas 2007 I traveled back in time with my family, to Vietnam, for the first time in thirty-two years. I was feeling a deep need to see the place once more, a regret at having withdrawn from a country I had visited four times during the war. I wanted to understand the long-term lessons and, on a personal basis, track down the Vietnamese guides and translators, men and women, who assumed an ideological faith in the American “people” they escorted through ruins inflicted by the American “enemy.” They would become important diplomatic bridges between our two countries in the postwar period. Most were survivors of the French and American wars and would be in their 80s by now. Were they still alive? How had they suffered? After the exuberance at their victory and reunification after 1975, how had they adjusted to a Vietnam without war? Vietnam’s consul in San Francisco, Chau Do, said many of these old revolutionaries were alive, excited by my return and inquiring whom I wanted to see. I told him that my closest Vietnamese friend was a poet, musician and translator, Do Xuan Oanh, who was perhaps 40 in those days. “I can help you find him,” Chau replied with a smile. “He’s my dad.” My eyes filled with tears. It would be quite a trip.

Before I would reunite with these old friends and contacts, however, I plunged into the shocking contrasts between past and present in Hanoi. Between Christmas 1965 and November 1972, when I made four unauthorized visits to Hanoi, the wartime city was unlit and ghostly. Most people had been evacuated to the countryside. Air-raid sirens and public-safety broadcasts were the only urban sounds. There was no economic development beyond the construction of pontoon bridges to replace bridges bombed by the Americans. The only motorized vehicles were military ones. Most residents rode bicycles or carried their meager wares on bamboo poles across their shoulders. Water buffalo pulled the heavier loads. To outward appearances, Gen. Curtis LeMay’s plan to bomb Vietnam back to the Stone Age was on track.

Finally came the Christmas bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong by 200 B-52s, from December 18 to December 28, 1972. The United States says that fifteen of the giant Stratofortresses were shot down and ninety-three American airmen went missing before the bombing ended (Hanoi says thirty-four B-52s and eighty-one fighter planes were put out of action). Estimates of civilian deaths range from 1,600 to 2,368 in those eleven days, and Hanoi listed 5,480 buildings destroyed. In the American narrative, the Christmas bombing forced Hanoi to sign the Paris peace agreement one month later. But under terms agreed to by the Nixon Administration, North Vietnamese units remained positioned in the south, and in 1975 they stormed Saigon. What is beyond

dispute is that crowded Hanoi neighborhoods and the Bach Mai hospital were reduced to rubble during the Christmas B-52 raids. The last time I had seen Hanoi was in 1974, when Jane Fonda and I walked through the hospital debris and interviewed still-furious victims of the Christmas 1972 bombs.

Now, suddenly for me, it was Christmas 2007 and Vietnam was ablaze with festive holiday lights, from Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City. Though billboards of Ho Chi Minh were pervasive, the most ubiquitous bearded one this Christmas season was Santa Claus, beckoning shoppers from department store doorways, seen incongruously riding motorbikes, waving to little children. Spectacular strings of red and green lights were draped over the streets and stores, blinking at thousands of Vietnamese rolling along on bicycles and motorbikes, parting smoothly like schools of fish around pedestrians crossing the street. Restaurant-goers applauded Christmas carols sung by young Vietnamese women strapped in Heineken Girls sashes. None of this was about Jesus—Christmas is not a tradition in this Buddhist and secular-Marxist country—but all about corporate branding. The fancy Diamond department store next to Independence Palace was filled with shoppers, gawkers and Santas wandering the aisles of Lego, Calvin Klein, Victoria's Secret, Nike, Converse, Estée Lauder, Ferragamo and Bally. The nearby Saigon Centre bore a billboard proclaiming, More Shops, More Life.

Far be it from me to question the desire of Vietnamese to share our globalized consumer culture like everyone else, or to reject their aspiration to be the next Asian Tiger, or freeze them in memory as icons of selfless revolutionaries. Gentrification and consumerism, after all, have destroyed the character of my favorite American haunts, like North Beach, Berkeley, Venice and Aspen. It seems the way of the world. As I walked through the busy Christmas streets, however, I was gripped by the question of why the Vietnam War was necessary in the first place. Why kill, maim and uproot millions of Vietnamese if the outcome was a consumer wonderland approved by the country's still-undefeated Communist Party? The whole wretched American rationale for the war, that Vietnam was a dangerous domino, a pawn in the cold war, seemed so painfully wrong. Was there any connection between destroying so much life and causing the Vietnamese to go Christmas shopping? Would the same outcome—a one-party socialist government leading a market economy—have occurred in any event, without the destruction? Now that US naval ships were paying peaceful visits to Da Nang, this question nagged at me: is it possible that Marxism and nationalism won the war but capitalism and nationalism have won the peace?

Those who still believe Vietnam was a “necessary” war must take pleasure at seeing that country in the camp of corporate neoliberalism. A proud new member of the World Trade Organization (WTO), Vietnam is welcoming a \$1 billion Intel project to Ho Chi Minh City this year, and has accepted the wholesale privatization of telecommunications and other industries.

Some in Hanoi are dismayed by all this. An American expatriate, Gerry Herman, a former antiwar activist turned businessman and film distributor who has lived in Vietnam for fifteen years, told me the Vietnamese were so desperately eager to normalize relations with the United States that they accepted the most liberal market reforms of any developing country. Having some internal knowledge of the trade negotiations, he says bitterly that Vietnam was blackmailed by the US negotiators. To gain export markets for their textiles, shoes and seafood, they slashed subsidies and opened markets in banking, insurance, services and advertising to private corporations. For Herman, the distressing prospect is that Vietnam will follow the failed model of the Philippines, not the more successful Asian Tigers whose development benefited from government subsidies.

China, Herman says, got a better deal than Vietnam, winning twenty years of protection for its telecommunications industry. "The American negotiators said to Vietnam that they were beaten by the Chinese on certain issues and would never do it again, and Vietnam could take the deal or leave it." The Americans, in deference to domestic political pressure, even demanded market access for Harley-Davidson, against the Vietnamese complaint that the larger, faster Harleys would worsen the high accident rates on their narrow, congested roads. "The Vietnamese negotiator broke down in tears," Herman said, over the Harley concession. I suddenly remembered the cynical 1960s strategy of Harvard's Samuel Huntington, that forced urbanization would transform the Vietnamese into a "Honda culture." It was coming true before my eyes, with the Honda Dream motorcycle and, sooner or later, the Harley. As a Vietnamese named Pham Thong Long blogged last July, "I have only one dream is buy one of brand new Harley-Davidson, now I waiting for Harley-Davidson deal to open in Saigon. I need a Fatboy."

It is difficult to discern the truth across these cultural divides. Scholars like Gabriel Kolko have predicted the disintegration of the Vietnamese Communist Party for decades, but the political situation by most accounts is stable, even improved. Thao Griffiths, a 30-year-old who directs the Hanoi office of Vietnam Veterans of America, reminded me of certain fundamentals on my first day adjusting to the new Hanoi. "Since thirty years ago when you were first here, we have motorbikes in addition to bicycles, cellphones more than land lines, an Internet, and most of our population like myself was born after the wars. It has been a time to catch up in peace." As for Hanoi's accepting the WTO, Thao said, "We knew the mechanism was not fair, but the strategic reason is that we had to get inside. We didn't really have 'normal' economic relations with the US until 2006, for four decades. Even last year, Bush was saying America should have stayed the course in Vietnam." Thao herself reflected postwar Vietnam: fluent in English and a former Fulbright scholar, she spent two years at the Vietnam veterans' office in Washington, DC, deeply involved in the normalization process. She has two children with her Australian husband, Patrick, a researcher for the United Nations. Her little boy, Liem, immediately befriended our 7-year-old Liam on sleepovers and trips to fabled Ha Long Bay.

Vietnam's annual economic growth of 7-8 percent in recent years has been remarkable, though it has come at the price of rising inequalities, a pattern in many other countries under neoliberalism. Per capita GDP has risen from \$200 in 1993 to \$835 last year. That's still less than \$2 per day for most Vietnamese, but it comes close to removing Vietnam from the World Bank's category of the poorest nations. The Vietnamese government estimated foreign direct investment at \$13 billion in 2007, the highest investors being South Korea, the British Virgin Islands (a conduit for offshore Hong Kong money) and Singapore. Poverty has fallen from 58 percent to 20 percent, though the majority of ethnic minorities and rural Vietnamese still live in poverty, and growth has created catastrophic problems of infrastructure, traffic congestion and pollution.

The party introduced its drastic doi moi market policies in 1986, a "renovation" plan that opened doors to private foreign investment and a Gorbachev-style internal perestroika. An exhaustive European study concluded in 2006 that a remarkable result of the doi moi reforms has been "the absence of organized social opposition among workers, peasants and youth. They are generally content with their growing economic opportunities."

Of course, Vietnam is a one-party state that closely monitors the Internet and pockets of dissent among religious and ethnic groups. But the institutional controls have been steadily relaxed since the 1970s, with none of the uprisings that accompanied the fall of Soviet or Eastern European Communism. Nor has there been a Tiananmen Square in Hanoi. "Democratic debate within the party and within the National Assembly, as well as personal freedoms, have made much progress since the war," observes John McAuliffe, a reconstruction specialist who has made an estimated fifty trips to the country. "It's true that it wouldn't be wise to stand up on a soapbox and advocate the overthrow of the government," says Lady Borton, a longtime American expatriate and translator in Hanoi. "But there is widespread criticism of the party leaders"—whom she describes as "bulldogs"—"on all levels in private and in the press." In an observation I shared, Borton described Vietnam as "a place of constant talk, all the time, and they talk freely."

Kent Wong, the director of UCLA's labor studies center, discerns a positive spirit among Vietnam's working class based on taking several union delegations to Vietnam. "I've seen poverty in many developing countries, and Vietnam is different. There are no shantytowns," Wong says. Vietnamese unions, Wong acknowledges, are not constituted as adversarial bargaining units, but the many members he has interviewed have high morale. "Four years ago when I was there, they had a plan to organize 1 million more workers in the public sector, and they actually met the goal," he says. Wide income disparities prevail in the private sector, but inequalities in the public sector are less pronounced. Wong, who wants to turn the AFL-CIO away from its lingering cold war (and CIA-financed) heritage of anti-Communism toward Vietnam

and China, is working to build direct worker-to-worker relationships to foster labor solidarity strategies in the age of globalization.

To make sense of the contradictions between Vietnam's grinding poverty and rising affluence, between defeating Americans in war but joining the WTO in peace, one must consider Vietnam's history. Perhaps no country in the modern world has suffered the sorrows of war more heavily and for a longer consecutive period than Vietnam. Leaving out the century of French colonialism, the Vietnamese survived, even prevailed, during the Japanese occupation in World War II, the nine-year war against French reconquest (365,000 battle deaths), the fifteen-year war with the Americans (2.1 million battle deaths) and the ten-year war with Pol Pot's Cambodia and China in the 1980s. Millions of Vietnamese died of famine as well, or lived with hunger and deprivation as everyday experiences. After the American war, at least 38,000 more Vietnamese were killed by unexploded bombs and landmines, and countless numbers continue to live with the deformities resulting from 20 million gallons of dioxin-laced Agent Orange and other defoliants. Their sufferings are beyond Western imagination. All this sacrifice was accepted as either a duty in the war for independence or a reality to be accepted and survived. It was accompanied by the deep personalized pain of Vietnamese killing one another, not simply the French or American invaders. At least 185,000 Saigon soldiers died, for example, dishonored as the losing side.

Here, perhaps, is the explanation for Vietnam's two-decade quest to achieve something resembling a normal life, to avoid exclusion from the world community. This memory is why they believe normalization with the United States, accession to the WTO and a (nonpermanent) seat on the UN Security Council are strategic "victories" on a long road to recovery. It is a matter of great pride that a Vietnamese Bronze Age drum is placed at the entrance to the UN Security Council today.

"No More War was the lesson after Vietnam for our people," said Bao Ninh, author of *The Sorrow of War*, a 1993 antiwar novel that ranks in my mind with the classics of Remarque, Heller, Vonnegut, Mailer, Tim O'Brien and Philip Caputo among war veterans. We visited Ninh one evening at his Hanoi residence, where he and his wife received us with tea, fruits and cake. His first floor was a bright reception room with a couch, chairs and, in one corner, a motorbike. Ninh's novel was banned at first for allegedly undermining the national consensus that the war had been patriotic, victorious and glorious. But under *doi moi* the book gained a huge audience in Vietnamese and other languages, and this year it is being produced as a film.

When he was 15 in Hanoi, Ninh saw his first American. It was John McCain, parachuting into Truc Bach Lake from his burning fighter-bomber after destroying a power plant. Ninh watched as McCain, drowning with two broken arms, was pulled from the lake by a local fisherman at a spot marked by a small monument today. Ninh later joined the army to fight in South Vietnam, was among the soldiers who liberated Saigon in 1975, and

searched for the decomposing bodies of dead soldiers after the war. His book is more about man's inhumanity to man than a tale of triumphant revolution. I was stunned at the jacket's description of Ninh as one of only ten survivors of a youth brigade of 500. With a laugh, he surprised me by saying the numbers were made up by his publisher, Pantheon/Random House. "Not only governments but soldiers themselves make up war stories, too," he laughed again, not unlike sardonic American Vietnam veterans. "I like writing. I write about what I know. I wanted to tell a soldier's story, not a political or ideological one."

Ninh visited the United States in 1998 with other Vietnamese writers, gaining an impression of US diversity, including surprise at how many Americans were "quite fat." That aside, even in conservative towns like Missoula, Montana, he found Vietnam memorials and town officials who were veterans like himself. Ninh came away impressed that so many Americans still "remembered, discussed and agonized over Vietnam," and formed the opinion that this memory of Vietnam could be "a tower of strength from the past" on which to build better relations in the future.

Beneath his friendly bearing, Ninh carries the scars and guilt that only some war veterans are capable of expressing. The most painful, perhaps, is his "sorrow at having survived," the belief that the very best of his generation died for Vietnam's present peace:

Look carefully now at the peace we have, painful, bitter, and sad. And look who won the war. To win, martyrs had sacrificed their lives in order that others might survive. Not a new phenomenon, true. But those still living to know that the kindest, most worthy people have all fallen away, or even been tortured, humiliated before being killed, or buried and wiped away by the machinery of war, then this beautiful landscape of calm and peace is an appalling paradox.

Ninh was repelled by Vietnam's Marxist postwar policies. "In the war, I had lived like an animal. Now I couldn't stand this [the peace]. Some Americans may sympathize with Communism but I lived under it and couldn't stand it. Everybody was fed up with the hardship. That's what led to the doi moi in the '80s." One of Bao Ninh's sons is making millions in the global high-tech industry and travels frequently to the United States. It's not the future he fought for at the same age, he says, but he's proud and happy for his son. "We Vietnamese are not like North Korea or China. If Communism doesn't work, we move on. But North Korea, for example, has a very tough time because they keep going on with Communism."

Not many Vietnamese today think of the war with America with Bao Ninh's profound cynicism, for that would mean questioning their country's very identity, much like questioning the Indian wars or the Revolution for Americans. Rather, the American war is perceived as a necessity forced on Vietnam by invading powers, as has happened for more than a thousand years, beginning with the Chinese. Vietnamese take pride in having defeated so many great powers

and feel deeply about their losses. There is a suppressed anger that they were willing to join the search for American MIAs while the United States and Monsanto refuse to take responsibility for Agent Orange.

The question is whether the future, aside from the obvious advantages of peace, will be worth the sacrifices of the past. Is the period of anticolonial revolution—which Vietnam symbolized and so dominated our thinking in the '60s and beyond—becoming an obsolete memory in the era of globalization? Has the promise of those inspiring revolutions faded with the decline of naked colonialism and the emergence of so many corrupt authoritarianisms in the Third World? Or are the supposedly scientific models of history long embraced by the left being replaced with a kind of chaos theory of unpredictability? Is this all that was ever possible?

Perhaps this was why I had stayed away so long but had to return after so many decades. Much as I still opposed war and imperialism, from Vietnam to Iraq, I no longer expected joyous endings.

I wanted to see my oldest acquaintances in Vietnam for personal reasons but also as guides in sorting out these troubling questions. I will call these people, now in their 80s, Vietnam's old revolutionary generation. Their roots went back nearly a century, to young Ho Chi Minh's odyssey to the West—in particular, France and America—to study the spirit of republican revolutions for lessons he might bring home. Ho, then known as Nguyen Ai Quoc, presented a petition to the 1919 Versailles conference asking for Vietnam's inclusion in the call for self-determination. There he learned that Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points did not apply to the colonies. In the period of the Russian Revolution, Ho was waiting tables in Harlem and making diary notes on lynchings. He embraced Marxism-Leninism because of Lenin's opposition to colonialism. Twenty-five years later, Ho collaborated with American intelligence agents in resisting the Japanese occupation. Then he cited the US Declaration of Independence in declaring Vietnam's freedom in 1945. From long tradition grew the practical, and even sentimental, belief that the "American people," in Walt Whitman's mythic invocation, could be appealed to against American imperialism.

Thus arose Viet-My (Vietnamese-American) solidarity committees and cultural exchanges from the very beginnings of the war with the United States, staffed by bright young Vietnamese who were asked to host American wartime visitors and in the process learned more about American culture and politics. Now long retired, many of these old revolutionaries went on after the war to become diplomats and ambassadors to European countries. These days in Hanoi many still arise at 5:30 for morning exercises at the Flying Dragon Club, an old building with a curved roof, then, with bodies limber and spirits balanced, go out for tea and conversation.

In general, the old revolutionaries are busy, active in community affairs, proud and nationalistic, and shared with me the unanimous sense that Vietnam has become too materialistic and

acquisitive. "The new generation lacks a balanced approach," said 81-year-old Nguyen Ngoc Dung, who runs shelters for street children in Ho Chi Minh City. "The situation is out of balance," said one. "They are not looking—how do you say?—at the other side of the coin."

Dung is a former deputy to the most well-known of the old revolutionaries, 81-year-old Nguyen Thi Binh, who presides over the Peace and Development Foundation in Hanoi. During the war, "Madame Binh," as she was known, was a striking global icon and nemesis denounced by Henry Kissinger in the Paris peace negotiations. When she welcomed me for tea, she seemed smaller than the woman I remembered, but the energy remained vibrant. The formality of the reunion was derailed by the arrival of the "two Liams," arm in arm. They sat on her grandmotherly lap while Binh held forth on the challenges of healing the damage of Agent Orange and developing Vietnam past the status of other poor countries. She showed a keen interest in sponsoring workshops with critics of globalization. Meanwhile, the two little Liams lobbied to be taken to the local Lego franchise.

On another morning, the sudden arrival of an older man in a blue windbreaker surprised me. He walked toward me peering carefully through wide spectacles. "Do you remember who I am?" he asked with an expectant look. Then he held before me a black-and-white photo of myself, ten pounds lighter and thirty-five years younger, staring at Vietnamese graves, notebook in hand. The man with glasses was Pham Khac Lam, an interpreter and photographer whom I last saw deep within a cave in rural North Vietnam, in 1972.

Lam, now 77, was the top assistant to Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap in preparing the battle plan for Dien Bien Phu in 1954. His father was a mandarin adviser to Emperor Bao Dai, the last Vietnamese king. Lam's father is said to have written Bao Dai's abdication speech in 1945. Lam, in other words, grew up in the absolute center of Vietnamese anticolonialism, joined the solidarity committees during the American war and participated in the postwar process as director of the country's first television network. He was part of the Rose Garden ceremonies when Vietnam's leaders met Presidents Clinton and Bush. He takes modest credit for the idea of flying both Vietnamese and US flags on the stretch limousine that carried Hanoi officials to the White House door. And he once told Civil War buff Ted Turner, who opened media relations between CNN and Hanoi, that "it was important to let the past be 'gone with the wind.'" Turner generously sold Lam the rights to broadcast CNN for a nickel.

Lam edits Viet-My, a glossy magazine that seems devoted to promotional reports on commercial and diplomatic ties with the United States, including critical commentary on issues like Agent Orange. Occasionally Lam inserts a strategic analysis of the US quandary in Iraq, buried amid advertisements beckoning tourists to such attractions as health clubs at the beach. How did he really feel, I wondered, about the world he had done so much to shape?

Lam seemed relaxed and diplomatic. His duties have included welcoming former Saigon dictator Nguyen Cao Ky, who has visited Hanoi frequently in recent years, against vociferous complaints from Vietnamese exiles in America. "Ky said that he always wanted to unify Vietnam, so I have to salute him," Lam says wryly. On the question of his country's deepening inequalities, however, Lam parted from the optimistic party line. "The government is trying to reduce poverty, but it's already a reality. The rich are getting richer because they have the means. And the poor don't. We are better off materially, but not mentally, ethically," he said, brushing his forehead.

The world had changed all around him, from the caves of resistance to welcomes in the Rose Garden, from Dien Bien Phu to the global media stage. The geopolitical balance was altered forever with no more Soviet Union or "socialist camp" and tensions simmering beneath the "fraternal relations" with China. "We and the Chinese used to call each other comrade; now it's mister," he reflected wryly. The most ironic piece of the puzzle before me was falling into place. While it could not be said explicitly—and while Vietnam inevitably would strive to maintain close relations with China, its giant northern neighbor—the United States could serve as a strategic balance in Asia for Hanoi, while Vietnam serves as a silent check on the expanding Chinese power Washington fears most. Ironically, it's becoming the domino theory in reverse.

Finally, there was a visit to my oldest friend, Do Xuan Oanh, who first greeted me at Hanoi's airport on a December day forty-two years before. He went through a "bitter period" after retirement, someone told me, but was feeling better, having recently translated into English an edition of Vietnamese women's poetry. He lived alone, his wife having died after many years of illness, his three sons all abroad. As I remembered him, Oanh loved America in unique ways. For example, after learning English from the BBC, he translated Huckleberry Finn into Vietnamese, a massive challenge. A musician, he could sing many American protest songs. A romantic, he wept easily and became close to many Americans.

Now, in a carload of old revolutionaries, I traveled along a narrow cement path past houses, until we came to the gate of Oanh's home of fifty years. He was standing in the door, a thin shadow of the Oanh I remembered. Taking my hand, he led me into a windowless room where a couch and piano were the most prominent fixtures. There were alcoves for painting and a kitchen. We sat and looked at each other. He held my hand on his knee, while the others sat in a quiet circle. It was more a last visit than a time to renew an old conversation.

"Do you want some booze?" Oanh asked with a low chuckle, pointing to a half-bottle of Jim Beam. I deferred, worried what might happen after a few drinks. My wife said Oanh seemed fit and energetic for an 85-year-old. She asked if he would play the piano, and he performed an original piece in a classic European style. He gave me a copy of the

song, signed to his “precious friend,” and a small carving of a beautiful Vietnamese woman carrying a student briefcase, which he said reminded him of his wife “before the revolution.” He repeated the phrase, then relaxed. Gradually, the others began to reminisce about the old days. I wondered if we would ever meet again. I remembered an e-mail from Oanh’s son in San Francisco: “I believe God assigned my father and myself to serve the American people.” His son would come for a visit in the summer, Oanh said.

We walked back along the dark path to the street filled with motorbikes and strolling couples out for a coffee. Oanh looked at me intently, pointing a finger for emphasis. “Nothing can be predicted,” were his last words before we said goodbye.

P.S.

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