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REVISITING VIETNAM

IT'S EASY TO VILIFY WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW. It's easy to vilify what you don't understand. It's easy to vilify what is far, far away. In 1966, when the war in Vietnam began to loom larger in the American consciousness, I was sixteen years old and living in Lorain, Ohio—a blue collar city, a steel mill city, a Ford plant city. It was the kind of place where boys joined the army after high school or were drafted because they had no college deferment. I'd never traveled outside the United States—I'd never even been west of the Mississippi River—and I supported the war because I trusted President Lyndon B. Johnson and my government. I believed that communism was evil and that American soldiers were needed to protect the people of South Vietnam from the communists in the north or they would conquer the whole country and be one step closer to conquering the world. I was naive and ill-informed—as were many other Americans.

The Vietnam War became real for me in April 1968, when we learned that Pete Shagovac was dead. He was the first soldier from Lorain to die in Vietnam and one of 16,899 soldiers who died there that year. The news of Pete's death shivered like a cold wind through the halls of my high school. He was a tall, cute football player who had graduated from Admiral King the year before. I did not know him personally, but his sister Janice was in my class. I saw her crying in the school cafeteria during lunch. She was only a few tables away, but I didn't know what to say to her, so I said nothing. I should have said something.

The war was always real to the Vietnamese. More than a million soldiers and two million civilians died during the conflict; 70,000 children were orphaned; 350 hospitals, 2,923 schools, 465 shrines, and 484 churches were attacked or destroyed; 6.6 million hectares of land were contaminated by explosives; and 4.8 million people were exposed to Agent Orange—a herbicide sprayed over jungle foliage that is still in the groundwater.

In December 1969 the U.S. Selective Service conducted the first military

draft lottery since 1942. As a sophomore at Northwestern University, I was a little older, less naive, better informed, and totally opposed to the war. I distrusted the president, questioned my government, and realized the “truth” we were told was as slippery as an oil spill. I had been horrified by the My Lai Massacre in March 1968, when a platoon of U.S. soldiers had brutally murdered most of the population of a South Vietnamese hamlet, including 500 unarmed civilians, many of them women, children, and the elderly. I’d since joined a Vietnam War Protest in Chicago and carried a wet washcloth in a plastic bag in case police sprayed us with tear gas. I’d listened to Jerry Rubin—one of the Chicago Seven, who were put on trial for inciting violence at the 1968 Democratic Convention—when he spoke on campus with his attorney William Kunstler. On the evening of the lottery, I gathered with my sorority sisters in the living room of the Sigma Delta Tau house. We stared at the television, grim as mourners at a grave, and watched as draft numbers were drawn and fates were sealed for boyfriends, pin mates, fiancés, brothers, cousins, and friends. By the end of 1969, the number of U.S. soldiers who had died in Vietnam was 48,736. By the end of the war, it was 58,220.

The dynamics of the Vietnam War were always confusing to me. As nearly as I can discern, North Vietnam was fighting for reunification and many northerners believed that they were liberating South Vietnam from invading Americans, while South Vietnam was fighting for independence and many southerners believed that they were defending themselves against an invasion from North Vietnam. Both groups called it “The American War,” but it was only one war among many others that had been fought against the Chinese, the Khmers, the Chams, the Mongols, the French, and the Japanese. The Vietnamese had been fighting invaders for over 2,000 years, and perhaps they considered the Americans no worse than any other.

It is now January 2015—forty years after the war ended—and I am travelling to Vietnam with my friends Ned and Louise. Unlike my partner Arnie, who refuses to visit any communist countries, I have no qualms about exploring here. Over 94 million people live in Vietnam, and only three percent are members of the Communist Party. I don’t feel that I’m supporting the government; rather, I believe that my tourist dollars support people like us—people who want to prosper and provide for their families. Despite the war, the U.S. still trades with Vietnam and it is a popular destination for American travellers and investors. Even President Obama visited here, and

we have an embassy in Hanoi. I have come because I want to experience the country firsthand—to see the sights, taste the culture, and challenge my preconceptions.

I didn't know much about Ho Chi Minh in the 1960s, but his very name scared me. These three short syllables sounded like gunshots: Ho. Chi. Minh. I knew he was a communist leader. I knew he was a villain. I knew he'd said, "You can kill ten of my men for every one I kill of yours. But even at these odds, you will lose and I will win." That was enough to know.

In Saigon—the former capital of South Vietnam, which was re-named Ho Chi Minh City in 1975—we visit the mausoleum where Ho Chi Minh was laid to rest. He is a national hero—perhaps Vietnam's greatest hero—who is revered for his lifelong battle to build an independent and unified country. He died in 1969 while the war ravaged on, and his body is now displayed in a glass case in a cool, temperature-controlled room, as if he were a work of art.

During the war we often heard about the "Hanoi Hilton"—the sarcastic name given to the Hoa Lo Prison. It is a fortress in the center of Hanoi where American pilots (including Senator John McCain) were isolated, starved, and tortured after being shot down during bombing raids. McCain broke his right leg and both arms when he ejected from his plane and landed in Truc Bach Lake, but his captors denied him medical treatment until they learned that he was the son of a navy admiral. His arm was rebroken and his ribs were cracked during his captivity. Today he is unable to raise his arms above his shoulders, and he walks with a limp due to a botched surgery by Vietnamese doctors.

Hoa Lo Prison is now a museum that displays cells, artifacts, and staged photographs of imprisoned pilots playing games and celebrating Christmas. The museum brochure claims that "[d]uring the wartime in Vietnam when people faced numerous difficulties and shortages in their daily life, U.S. prisoners of war including pilots were humanely treated by the Vietnamese Government which gave them the best possible living conditions...including the smallest things to meet their daily needs."

While visiting the prison we also learn that its horrible history predates the Vietnam War. Built in 1896 by the French, it housed thousands of Vietnamese men and women who fought for freedom from colonial rule. The conditions then were subhuman, as the prison was often so overcrowded that prisoners had to lie on the floor. Open-air WCs were placed in the cen-

tre of the rooms and and were not cleaned. Prisoners who disobeyed the rules were thrown into cement dungeons, where they were shackled, beaten, starved, and drenched with cold water—even during the winter.

My friends and I stop in Dong Anh Village on our way back from a cruise on Halong Bay. Our guide, Tuy, leads us down a street with large, pagoda-inspired houses. Land is available here, he says, and cheaper than in the cities. We pause in front of one house. The owner smiles and invites us in for tea. We cross the courtyard amidst chickens pecking for food. A twentyish-year-old boy—the man’s son—fiddles with his scooter. His ancient grandmother, her teeth black from chewing betel nuts, sweeps the concrete. We join our host, his wife, and his mother in the living room. He asks us questions in a loud, animated, and friendly way while Tuy translates.

“Are you from the United States?” he asks.

We nod.

“What is your profession?” he asks Ned.

Ned says he’s a retired banker.

“You must be rich and have several wives or lovers,” he says.

“Just one,” Ned says and points to Louise. We all laugh. We are American, and we are welcome in this stranger’s home.

In Ho Chi Minh City, at the War Remnants Museum, I see the atrocities of war more vividly and undeniably than ever before. The museum mostly ignores the atrocities committed by the north and the south and dwells instead on those committed by Americans, but that in no way lessens the impact. I see a graphic image of bodies piled on a road outside My Lai. I silently view the “Requiem” exhibit of dramatic pictures taken by photographers who died chronicling the war. I stare at photographs of adults and children burned by bombs and napalm. I feel sick at the sight of people marked with birth defects caused by Agent Orange, such as adults whose faces are deformed by enormous growths and monstrous bags of skin and children born with truncated limbs or without eyes. (The Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs estimates that there are 500,000 of them.) I also see medals awarded for distinguished service to Sergeant William Brown of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, which are displayed with a letter-punched label: “To the people of the United Vietnam, I was wrong. I am sorry.” I feel guilty and ashamed for being American.

Despite the war—or rather because of it—many U.S. Vietnam War veterans return to the country where they fought, where they were injured,



Grandmother in Dong Anh Village © Louise Kurabi

where their friends died. They go back to atone, to make amends, to raise money for people poisoned by Agent Orange, to remove land mines, and to search for the children they fathered. In short, they go back to find closure, to find peace, to live.

On April 23, 1975, President Gerald Ford announced that the Vietnam War was “finished as far as America is concerned.” On April 30, North Vietnam captured Saigon and rammed a tank through the gates of Independence Palace, officially uniting the country. Vietnam now celebrates “Liberation Day” each year on April 30.

We ride by Independence Palace—now called Reunification Palace—and the former U.S. embassy, where the last Americans and over 5,000 Vietnamese were evacuated from the roof by helicopters. Desperate Vietnamese tried to climb over the embassy wall and secure spaces on helicopters while U.S. Marines booted them off. About 135,000 Vietnamese fled the country, including the “boat people,” who risked everything on hazardous journeys across the South China Sea. One of them, Thu Tieu, now owns the Issaquah, Washington nail salon where I get manicures and pedicures.

Reunification was blighted by political repression. Hundreds of thousands of people with ties to the previous regime were rounded up, their property was confiscated, and they were sent to “re-education camps” for years of forced labour and Marxist indoctrination. The new communist government banned private enterprise and took control of every sector of the economy. This resulted in stagnant growth, high inflation, and rabid poverty. An estimated one-fifth of the population was starving. The government changed course when the Soviet Union collapsed, introducing economic reforms to promote international trade and stimulate the economy. The government is still communist, but the economy is now primarily capitalist and it is thriving.

Ned, Louise, and I also explore Hanoi—the capital of modern-day Vietnam. We cross streets, dodging commuters on motor scooters who race by as if they are competing in the Grand Prix. We stare at power grid cables as tangled as a pit full of snakes. We stroll past peasant women selling produce from thatched baskets and market stalls brimming with rice, lotus flour, fruit, vegetables, fresh herbs, seeds, sausages, eggs, bowls of meat paste, strands of noodles, live chickens, roosters, frogs, and crabs. We also stroll past Starbucks-like coffee shops, trendy restaurants, night clubs, American chain stores (Nike, Converse, Levi’s, The Gap), and designer boutiques



Streets of Hanoi © Louise Kurabi

(Chanel, Cartier, Jimmy Choo, Versace, Ralph Lauren). Vietnam teems with entrepreneurs, competition, and new money. I'm surprised to see so much consumerism, wealth, and Western influence. The old appears to be overshadowed by the new, and I still feel naive and uninformed.

Even though Vietnam is not a democracy, many American ex-pats choose to live here. We take a street food tour with one of them, Daniel Hoyer, who has lived in Hanoi since 2008. He married a Vietnamese woman and wrote a cookbook, *Culinary Vietnam*. In addition to the food tour, he also operates a restaurant and a travel agency. Daniel says Vietnam "called to him." We ask him what it's like to live in a communist country, and he describes the government as "communism-lite." It's more haphazard and less committed to communism than China. Freedom of speech is still suppressed, but only in a half-assed manner. For example, the government isn't very good at shutting down Facebook, especially on weekends when no one is working.

Perhaps Daniel is minimizing the situation. According to Freedom House—a non-governmental organization that works to defend political rights and civil liberties—Vietnam's media environment is one of the harshest in Asia, as the authorities use both legal mechanisms and physical harassment to punish and intimidate critical reporters. A report issued by the Committee to Protect Journalists also ranks Vietnam as the sixth most censored country in the world, which places it above Cuba, China, and Iran.

Although Vietnam is now united, the rift between the north and the south remains as harsh as bitter melon. Journalist Huy Duc, author of the book *The Winning Side* (not published in Vietnam, but read online and in bootleg copies), explains the breach this way: "After the war, the winning side did nothing to reconcile the people. They dug the divisions deeper and deeper, even inside the families of the losers of the war. So reconciliation has now become more difficult than on the day of April 30."

That is true for the generations who endured the war, but the younger generation is focused on the future rather than the past. In fact, two-thirds of the population was born after the war, so they have no memories and no baggage. Our guide in Ho Chi Minh City, Yu, is a vivacious 28-year old who only wants "harmony," but her mother threatened to disown her if she married a boy from the north. She'd married a local boy only three days earlier. There was no time for a honeymoon, as her husband also works as a tour guide. We look at their wedding photos on her cell phone, just as we would



Lanterns in Hoi An © Sharon Goldberg

for an American couple. Most millennials like Yu are optimistic that their lives will be better than their parents' lives.

We fly to Da Nang and drive by China Beach, so named because the young American soldiers who arrived there in 1965 had never seen Vietnamese people before and thought the thousands of people welcoming them were Chinese.

From Da Nang we head to Hoi An—a charming historic town and shopping paradise with superb food. Our stay coincides with the Full Moon Lantern Festival—a monthly event, during which the Vietnamese honour their ancestors and thank the gods for their good fortune. Electricity is shut off in the old town, and silk lanterns glow along the streets.

We walk across the bridge spanning the Thu Bon River and see candles floating down the river in lotus-flower-shaped containers, the little flames flickering like lightning bugs. They carry wishes and prayers for luck, love, and happiness—things we all want. I buy two candles (one U.S. dollar each) and make a wish for health and happiness for myself and my partner.

My wishes join the parade of wishes—the hopes and dreams of the young and the old, the tourists and the locals, the Americans and the Vietnamese.