

Letter from Vietnam

James K. Boyce

As a first-time visitor to Vietnam I'm struck by three things. First, the sheer beauty of the countryside, from the green sheen of rice paddies to the mist-shrouded mountains. Second, the vibrancy of the economy, tangible not only on the streets of its cities but even in the ethnic villages of the far north. Finally, most remarkable to me as an American, the lack of acrimony left by the war fought in my youth.

The American War, as it's called in Vietnam, [killed one million Vietnamese](#) combatants and civilians, maybe many more – no one kept reliable score. It [took the lives of 58,000 Americans](#), including some of my high school classmates. It cost American taxpayers [over \\$100 billion](#) – more like \$800 billion in today's money – in military spending alone, not counting the deferred costs of veterans' benefits and interest on government debt.

As I travel, a recurring thought loops through my mind: We fought the war to prevent ... *this?*

On weekend evenings, the promenade and streets around Ho Kiem Lake in Hanoi's old quarter fill with people – families with children toting luminescent toys, seniors relaxing on lakeside benches, youngsters playing shuttlecock hacky sack and listening to live music. High school kids, torn between eagerness and shyness, approach us to practice the English they're learning in school. And I think: We fought the war to prevent ... *this?*



March 1965: U.S. marines land near Danang.



Today: Hyatt Regency Resort & Spa near Danang.

When the first U.S. combat troops waded ashore on a beach near Danang in 1965, they were greeted by women who gave them flower leis. Unfortunately, the marines did not simply say “thank you” and go back home. Today bullet holes pockmark the buildings that survived the war and bomb craters pockmark the landscape, reminders of spilled blood that soaked into the earth. Fancy hotels line beaches near the city. I ask myself: We fought the war to prevent ... *this?*

Vietnam is open for business. Construction is booming. For better or worse, the logos of Burger King and Starbucks are popping up alongside local noodle joints and coffee shops. The [top destination for Vietnam's exports](#) today is the United States. Again I think: We fought the war to prevent ... *this*?



In "Operation Ranch Hand" from 1962 to 1971, U.S. forces sprayed [almost 20 million gallons](#) of defoliants in Vietnam, covering an area roughly the size of Massachusetts. Today coarse "[American grass](#)" grows on many defoliated lands, and Vietnamese children suffer [birth defects attributed](#) to the toxic residue.



Hanoi's Nội Bài international airport, April 2017.

America's war aim was to prevent a united Vietnam under communist rule. My nation's leaders assured us that this benefit justified the costs. A communist victory in Vietnam would trigger a "[domino effect](#)," as country after country fell to the Soviet empire, threatening the survival of the Free World and ultimately America itself.

But in the end, America lost the war. A decade after the first marines landed, the last American personnel were evacuated ignominiously by helicopter from the roof of the U.S. embassy in Saigon. The outcome that America wanted to prevent happened. Today the results are there for anyone who wants to see. And the idea that preventing this outcome was worth the cost seems, well, just plain nuts.

It turns out that Vietnam was not a domino tile, differing from its neighbors only by the number of spots. The communist victory did not herald an inexorable cascade to world dominion. Instead, within five years of America's exit Vietnam fought wars with its communist neighbors, China and Cambodia.

Our 32-year old guide tells us, "Now we understand that Vietnam was a victim in the contest between America and Russia and China." During the war his father worked in a brigade that maintained the Ho Chi Minh trail, along which the north sent fighters and supplies to south Vietnam. "Back then, we just thought we were defending our country." For the majority of Vietnamese who opposed the Americans and their client regime in the south, the war wasn't about communism. It was about patriotism.



Ho Chi Minh led Vietnam's fight against Japanese occupation during World War Two. After the war, he hoped his American allies would back his struggle against French colonial rule. Instead the U.S. government sided with the French.

Traveling in Vietnam today, we find no trace of bitterness toward Americans. A [2015 poll](#) reported that 78 percent of Vietnam's people hold a favorable view of the U.S., more positive than in Britain, Australia or Japan.

But in my own mind a bitter residue still burns. How was it possible that we fought this war, and squandered so many lives and so much wealth, to prevent an outcome that turned out to be so ... normal? With hindsight one can say the war was stupid, tragic, criminal – all true. But these verdicts fall short of a full reckoning.

The men who orchestrated the war weren't stupid. They were, in the phrase of the era, "the best and brightest." They knew about the slaughter and body bags, but they were sure that the benefit was worth the costs. Men like Johnson, McNamara, Nixon and Kissinger saw themselves as statesmen, not war criminals.

The question is not why they believed this – books have been written trying to explain it – but what permitted their hubris to go unchecked for so long.

To answer, we must turn the lens on ourselves. You have a republic "if you can keep it," Benjamin Franklin famously declared at the end of the Constitutional Convention in 1787. But the Vietnam war revealed a yawning deficit between the promise and reality of our democracy. Americans proved willing to trust their government to do the right thing – even if this meant sending their boys to die in a far-away land. Was it fear that explains it? Gullibility? Father-knows-best faith in a daddy state? These are questions we have never as a country faced squarely.

The irony is that the disillusionment fed by the war only widened the gulf between the American people and their government, rather than inspiring the responsibility and hard work needed to keep the republic alive and well.

The same civic maladies that brought us the Vietnam war – dread, ignorance, capitulation to smug leaders – haunt us today, and America continues to dissipate its wealth and power in war after war.

Vietnam has moved on. But in this regard America hasn't.

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