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Moving On From the War: The Factors That Influence Contemporary Perceptions of Former Enemies

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Moving on From the War

December 13
2009

Over three decades have passed since the end of the Vietnam War and it appears that Vietnam has moved on significantly. With the majority of the population born after the war's end, economic reforms, tourism, religion, and contemporary politics all shape the Vietnamese ability to seemingly forgive and put the war where it belongs – in the past.

The Factors
that Influence
Contemporary
Perceptions
of Former
Enemies

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At the Vietnam Wall

because i never knew you
nor did you me
i come

because you left behind mother, father,
and betrothed
and i wife and children
i come

because love is stronger than enmity
and can bridge oceans
i come

because you never return
and i do

i come

- Duong Tuong, 1995

Abstract:

Over 30 years have passed since the end of the Vietnam War, yet the memory still lingers for some. Mention of the war in correlation to contemporary politics today in the United States seems to demonstrate that Americans have not effectively put the past behind them. Similarly, the prevalence of Vietnam War-related media, such as films, music, and literature, implies that the war is still remembered strongly in American society. Why, then, do the Vietnamese appear to have put the war behind them? Most Vietnamese seem to avoid discussing the war or its consequences, and appear to revel in these first few decades of peace after endless years of conflict. One would expect that the destruction and lasting legacy of devastation caused by the war would leave wounds fresh and on the surface of daily life in Vietnam. However, it appears that this may not be the case in contemporary Vietnamese society. Of course the average Vietnamese person believes that Vietnam won the war against the United States, which holds deep significance in the degree that each country has come to terms with the conflict. Yet there are also other factors that seem to play a role in why Vietnam no longer appears hostile with the United States. With massive economic reforms opening new doors for the average Vietnamese, and contemporary relations with China tense, it appears that forgiveness of the Americans for the war and its repercussions is surprisingly easy for the Vietnamese. In addition, Buddhism and Confucianism seem to influence the Vietnamese ability to seemingly move on from the war and harbor little resentment toward the United States. Lastly, the Vietnamese media's depiction of Americans may also contribute to this phenomenon, encouraging a more positive relationship between the two countries after many years of conflict. Indeed, perhaps there is something the United States can learn from Vietnam about the value of forgiveness and not dwelling on mistakes and periods of hardship.

Methodology:

In order to better understand contemporary views of former enemies in Vietnam, I attempted to learn as much as possible about Vietnamese contemporary culture, as well as to come to identify the cultural traits of my own country in order to understand the factors that come into play with remembrance culture. It is my belief that cultural aspects shape the Vietnamese's appearance of having moved on from the war in a way that most Americans have not. Thus, during the Independent Research Project (ISP) period, I conducted interviews with many different people, attempting to represent numerous sides of the parties involved in the conflict. I met with American veterans who were drafted and did not want to fight, American intelligence officers, Vietnamese veterans fighting for the National Liberation Front (NLF), Vietnamese veterans fighting for the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). In addition, I had conversations with people who lived through the war even though they did not officially fight for any particular side, including Vietnamese farmers and American anti-war protestors. My interviews took place throughout Vietnam, although the bulk of the research was conducted in Hanoi. The vast majority of all of my interviews were informal, in an attempt to allow my subjects to feel more comfortable disclosing personal information to me. My attempt to really get at the heart of the cultural domains that perpetuate remembrance or forgiveness necessitated intense, honest interviews where the interviewees felt comfortable and were willing to analyze their own feelings and beliefs for me. Moreover, translation services were used for those interviewees with whom I could not effectively communicate in English. Thus, the majority of quotations in my paper from Vietnamese citizens were translated and appear in my article as how the translator at the time perceived and relayed the interviewees' claims.

Background:

As an American and as the daughter of a Vietnam War veteran, I expected that I would be met with some resentment or hostility in Vietnam. Only a few decades have passed since the end of the war, and I imagined the scars would be fresh on people's minds and play a big role in their contemporary perceptions of Americans. I arrived fully prepared to explain that I think the United States' involvement in Vietnam was a mistake, hoping that by so doing I would be able to navigate the culture and daily life with as few problems as possible. I fully expected that the war would be a common topic of conversation in my interactions with Vietnamese people throughout the country, and that even though I played no role in it, I would still be punished to a certain extent for my nationality. However, in the few months that I have spent in Vietnam, I have not been openly criticized for my nationality or what my country did to Vietnam a single time. The vast majority of people I have met seem to put the war behind them and discuss it quite rarely. While I am certain a part of this is caused by a desire to avoid upsetting me or other Americans with the truth of their feelings, I also believe that the Vietnamese have in fact moved on from the war, or are at least able to pretend to have, in a way that many Americans have not. Although there are obvious historical and political reasons for why this may be the case, I believe that there are also less obvious causes that may affect the degree of each country's remembrance and resentment regarding the war. This paper seeks to explore and identify those causes to understand the ways in which Vietnam has largely put the war in the past and been able to focus on the present and a promising future, a trait which has assisted them in dealing with centuries of hardship, and a trait which I believe we, as a nation, could possibly learn to adopt in order to be more optimistic of the future instead of dwelling on the past.

Effects of the War:

There are a great number of claims about the length and losses of the Vietnam War, or American War as it is widely referred to in Vietnam. Mark A. Ashwill claims in Vietnam Today: A Guide to a Nation at a Crossroads that “an estimated four million Vietnamese soldiers and civilians on both sides – 10 percent of the entire population – were killed or wounded,” (Ashwill, 2005) along with 58,000 American soldiers. The United States’ involvement in the war was responsible for 15 million tons of munitions dropped on Vietnam, resulting in huge casualties and destruction. Even today, there are lasting effects of the war evident in the younger generations. As Ashwill claims, “To this day, the physical legacy of the war is seen in the victims of the herbicide Agent Orange, the effects of which are passed on genetically from one generation to the next. There are 150,000 children in Vietnam with hideous and debilitating birth defects that are the result of their parents’ exposure to Agent Orange during the war,” (Ashwill, 2005). Other estimates put the number of children affected by their parents’ exposure to the herbicide at over 500,000. Either way, one would think that because of this level of death and destruction that is still evident and occurring in contemporary Vietnam, the people may harbor resentment towards the people from the country that systematically ruined so much of theirs. As Ashwill claims in Vietnam Today: A Guide to a Nation at a Crossroads:

“Other legacies of the war include veterans without limbs and children who play with unexploded ordnance, sometimes resulting in loss of a limb or life... And, as in the U.S., posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) continues to afflict large numbers of veterans. Victory is not a balm that magically heals the psychological wounds suffered in combat,” (Ashwill, 2005).

With these devastating consequences of the war, why, then, are the Vietnamese so outwardly dismissive of the suffering? How have they been able to seemingly put the past behind them?

What aspects of their culture are responsible for this ability to persevere in the shadow of so much pain and upheaval?

“Vietnam” in the American Memory:

In the United States today, Vietnam still brings up memories of the war. In fact, many Americans appear to view the country as more of an event in our nation’s history than a small country half way around the world. A Vietnamese man who works as a guide at Cuc Phuong National Park named Bui Duc Tien summed up this mentality by saying to me: “The problem with Americans is that they think of Vietnam as a war, and not as a country or a people or a culture.” The lingering memory and regret of the Vietnam War experience in the United States is still critically evident in contemporary politics, appearing very often in discussions of the United States’ “War on Terror.” Yet although little has been written on exactly why the Vietnamese appear to have moved on from the war more than Americans, it is not difficult to find people who have come to Vietnam and had the same experience. As Laurel Wamsley writes in her article “The Fog of Peace,” “No matter what you were doing at the time, you remember. And even people my age, just 20 years old – we feel like we remember. We have seen the movies, heard the stories and the sound tracks. Vietnam is our country’s most famous mistake, and we can’t forget it.” As she goes on to say, “Though the Vietnam War and its lessons may not be taught in school, it has become a major part of our national ideology,” (Wamsley, 2005). In an attempt to explain this phenomenon, Jay Ellis, an American living and working in Vietnam as the owner of the R and R Tavern, claimed that “We’re just so full of ourselves, and our leadership failed, and we’re embarrassed.” During our interview, Ellis also briefly discussed an American “culture of complaining” that he believed could help to explain the United States’

tendency to dwell on the war, adding that in the United States, people often think in a negative manner, refusing to let the bad things go and try to have a more optimistic approach to daily life. Indeed, Douglas Jardine, a professor at Hanoi National University stated, “Every American walks around with this big hole in their souls... I think Americans need to deal with Vietnam. I mean, we’ve all just been alcoholics on a bender when it comes to Vietnam.” Moreover, he believed that the differences in the unwillingness to discuss the war could be attributed to the Confucian culture of Vietnam, adding that in Vietnam people do not like to discuss uncomfortable things, whereas “In the West we praise and value frankness a lot more.” This assertiveness of Americans may, in fact, be a leading contributor to our willingness to discuss the war, our beliefs about it today, and the prevalence it still plays in contemporary American society. From my interviews with both Americans and Vietnamese, the fact that Americans seemed more willing to discuss the war in a stark, blunt manner was very evident. American society seems to train people to believe that talking about problems is the best and most effective way to overcome them, which I believe is not the same practice taught in Vietnamese society. The role of regret in remembering the Vietnam War is very important, however. As Suel Jones, a former veteran who now lives in Vietnam attempting to heal the wounds of the war says, “As for American vets, we know, if not acknowledge, this was an immoral war, as if there is such a thing as a moral war. There is no way to justify the killing. There is no way to justify the brutal assault on this country.” Perhaps because so many Americans came to believe that the United States’ involvement in Vietnam was a mistake they now attempt to vocalize those feelings in order to come to terms with something that many believe should never have happened. In addition, a large number of Vietnam War veterans in the United States still appear to suffer from psychological problems because of their role in the brutality of war. Suel Jones went on to say,

“We in the US can not live with the idea that we did not and do not hold the moral compass for the rest of the world to follow. Four million were killed in Vietnam, so we must find a way to justify those deaths or ask of ourselves some very hard questions.”

Media as Reminder:

Another aspect of American culture that influences current views about the war and how it is remembered is the media. As Mai Bo, a Vietnamese woman working at the World Bank office in Hanoi stated, “In the US there are no movies or books about Vietnam today. They’re all focused on the war. What they (Americans) have in their minds is very different. It represents Vietnam but not in a modern way.” Indeed, many scholars and academics have criticized the United States’ availability of knowledge regarding contemporary Vietnam. Most of the media about Vietnam is about the war, and so this remains in people’s heads as the only knowledge they have of the country. How is it possible for Americans to move on when the literature about Vietnam only discusses the war? In my opinion, it is a self-perpetuating problem. By only providing ourselves with knowledge of the past, it is somewhat difficult to address the present. Similarly, Mai Bo also said, “Americans are kind of spoiled when it comes to difficulties, wars, bombings, whatever, that if anything happens, it takes them forever to get over it.” Indeed, it is quite likely that the United States having never really lost a war before plays a large role in why they dwell on Vietnam so much. Furthermore, the economic differences between the two nations may also be responsible for this discrepancy in remembrance of the war. The view among many of the people I talked to in Vietnam was that Americans dwell on the war because they have the time and money to do so, compared to their counterparts in Vietnam, many of whom are struggling to make a living, and thus more wanting to focus on the present and the future. As

Fulbright Lecturer Dinh Vu Trang Ngan stated quite harshly, “The Vietnamese cannot "afford" the luxury of dwelling on the past. They need to get up, go to the field, grow some rice, and move on.” Although this statement appears to be rather callous, its truth is very evident; the role of poverty and austere living conditions plays a large role in the amount that people can manage to dwell on unfortunate and tragic events.

Stuck in the Past:

It is clear that there are numerous aspects of American culture that contribute to the borderline obsession that the United States has with the Vietnam War. From my interviews with Americans in Vietnam as well as Vietnamese people who have had many interactions with Americans, I have been able to glean some insight into how the media, economics, and politics enable our fascination with the war and prevent us, as a country, from really moving on in the way that Vietnam appears to have. Firstly, because it is widely believed that the United States did not win the war, it is somewhat natural for them to hold resentment and be embarrassed about it. As one of the largest and most powerful countries in the world, being defeated in that sense was tragic for the United States. In addition, the anti-war sentiment in the United States was very prevalent and many opposed the war from the beginning and are thus ashamed of the country’s intervention in Vietnam. Moreover, the media surrounding Vietnam today does very little to address the country’s achievements and progress since the end of the war. Due to our lack of up-to-date material about Vietnam, it is understandable that many Americans still think of it as a war and not a real country. With films like *Forest Gump*, *Apocalypse Now*, and *Born on the Fourth of July* seemingly following us and appearing all the time, it is not hugely surprising that we have not been able to put the past in the past and move on. David Lamb, a

war reporter who returned to Vietnam decades after the war, analyses the reasons why Vietnam has moved on so much more than Americans. As he writes, “Part of the reason, I think, is that when confronted with Vietnam, time-frayed black-and-white images and Hollywood stereotypes of Vietnamese and American combatants spring to mind. To update those images, to humanize today’s face of Vietnam in order to understand postwar Vietnamese is, for many, to lay the pain and guilt to rest,” (Lamb, 2002). Perhaps there is something about forgiveness that we, as a nation, a people, and a culture, can learn from the Vietnamese.

Understanding if and how Vietnam has Moved On:

It is most likely not fully possible to ever identify the myriad aspects of culture that enable and promote a single belief or tendency in a society. Being able to critically determine what does and does not shape a culture’s attitude is never an easy task, especially with language barriers and a limited amount of time. For this particular topic, there are numerous ways in which to measure and define a particular phenomenon, like how much the Vietnamese have “moved on” from the war. For all intents and purposes, I define this by how much the Vietnamese people, from all sides and perspectives, have forgiven the United States. I do not intend to claim that the majority of people do not think about the war, or that veterans do not feel sad, bitter, morose, or angry. Rather, I seek to understand why many Vietnamese are able to appear as if they do not dwell on the war in comparison to many Americans. As Mark A. Ashwill claims in *Vietnam Today: A Guide to a Nation at a Crossroads*, “All may seem to be forgiven and forgotten, even among members of the older generation of Vietnamese. Many have horrific memories they will take with them to their graves. But they live out their years quietly, rarely giving voice to their pain, bitterness, and sense of loss. Any remaining animosity is likely to be

so muted as to be undetectable,” (Ashwill, 2005). At the same time, though, I believe that are some inherently Vietnamese traits which, when combined and correlated, contribute to the ability of some people in Vietnam to put the war behind them to a certain extent and potentially forgive the United States for what our government did to their country. It is crucial to recognize that this is not the same as arguing that the Vietnamese are completely content when it comes to remembering the war, and especially not that they do not think about it at all. Indeed, basic human nature dictates that those experiences, especially unfortunate ones, which shape us as individuals, societies, and cultures will play some role in our daily lives. I simply believe, through my research and observations in Vietnam, that for numerous reasons the majority of the Vietnamese do not seem to talk about the war or remember it as bitterly as many Americans. I seek to explore why this may be the case.

A History of War:

Firstly, taking into account Vietnam’s long history of war and conflict may help to explain why the Vietnamese seem, on the surface at least, to have forgiven and moved on so much. As David Lamb claims in “Vietnam Now: A Reporter Returns,” “A thousand years of conflict – against China, France, Japan, the United States, Cambodia, and among one another – is what made the Vietnamese who they are,” (Lamb, 2002). Indeed, of all the Vietnamese people I spoke to, the majority seemed to claim that in comparison to 1000 years of occupation by China and 100 by France, the United States’ role in Vietnam was not as big of a deal in terms of length of time. As Jay Ellis at R and R Tavern said, “10 years is just a little blip on their map.” And as Vietnam National University Professor Lê Hồng Hiệp said:

“Throughout the country’s history there have been many examples showcasing this. For example, in the Binh Ngo Dai Cao (Declaration of Victory over the Ngo (Chinese Ming

dynasty) in 15th century, Nguyen Trai pointed out that after defeating the Ngo, Le Loi (the leader of the uprising movement against the Ming) gave the defeated Ming army boats and horses for them to get back to China. This move was mainly to maintain peace with China, but it also reflected Vietnamese people's tradition of forgiveness and peace-loving, given the grave atrocities that Ming army committed before they were defeated.”

In addition, Mr. Duong Trung Quoc, a member of the Vietnamese National Assembly, pointed out to me that Vietnam is the only country to have defeated three of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. The majority of Vietnamese appear proud of their past and do not seem to regret their defense of the country against foreign invaders. This in itself is a crucial difference when it comes to remembering the war and moving on. Many Americans view the Vietnam War as a mistake in our foreign policy, whereas the majority of the Vietnamese were simply defending their country against a foreign invader, which may make it easier for them to forgive and move forward. As Professor Hiep goes on to say during the interview, “The winner tends to have a more positive attitude to the past than the loser, especially when the loser was stronger and supposed to have been the winner. Americans seem not to have come to terms with the fact that they themselves, as the most powerful country in the world, lost the war to such a small and weak country as Vietnam.”

The Luxury of Grief:

In addition, because the battles occurred on Vietnamese soil and the destruction from heavy shelling and defoliants devastated the country, rebuilding and reconstructing Vietnamese society was crucial after the war’s end in 1975. As Mai Bo at the World Bank pointed out to me, “After the war, people didn’t have time to stop and grieve. Americans didn’t have to rebuild. They rebuilt their memories, performed upkeep to their memories and not their country. The

Vietnamese just didn't have the same time to dwell." In a finally peaceful society after decades of conflict, the Vietnamese struggled to focus on the present and the future, in an attempt to reconstruct a country that had been torn apart through the war. Moreover, further occurrences contributed to the need of the Vietnamese to focus on improving their lives in postwar Vietnam.

As Mark A. Ashwill writes in Vietnam Today: A Guide to a Nation at a Crossroads:

“A combination of factors contributed to the poverty of Vietnam in the postwar era, including two generations of war, subsequent conflicts with the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia and with the Chinese, the crippling effects of the U.S.-led trade embargo, and the country's rigid command economy,”

This stifling poverty and rapid decline in standard of living caused people to put the war behind them in an attempt to fix the more urgent, pressing problems of food insecurity and crippling poverty. Compare this to the United States, where veterans came home to very little support and few jobs or housing options, and it is clear that this factor played a large role in the degree that each country dwelled on the war. American veterans talk of coming back to the United States and feeling like they did not belong in society and as if there was nothing they could do to come to terms with the war. By getting on a plane and flying half-way around the world, they left the war behind them in a place that was so far removed that they were not able to witness the changes occurring and so to many of them, Vietnam remained a war, a tragedy, and not a redeveloping country.

Economic Reforms Changing the Focus:

In December of 1986, the Vietnamese government introduced new economic reforms called *doi moi*, or “renovation,” that sought to balance a market-based economy with socialist

orientation. This decision increased the role of the private sector, created more jobs, and increased the amount of foreign direct investment (Ashwill, 2005). As Ashwill goes on to write,

“The decade of the 1990s, when the effects of the reforms first became visible and Vietnam welcomed companies from around the world, was a time of high expectations and rapid growth. There was a feeling of exuberance and unbridled optimism, a sense among the pioneers – both Vietnamese and foreign – that everything was possible in this virgin capitalist economy. It was also a decade of adjustment, transition, and learning for the Vietnamese.”

As Professor Lê Hồng Hiệp at Vietnam National University told me, “Vietnam's economic reform makes Vietnamese people busier. They are more concerned about how to find a good job, have better education, or earn more money for themselves and their family rather than thinking about the past. Also due to the economic reform, Vietnamese people see the US as a good investor and trade partner rather than an old enemy.” Indeed, this massive economic change following several decades of conflict in Vietnam justifiably led to many more opportunities and the chance to put the war in the past and focus on rebuilding the economy. Professor Douglas Jardine stated: “I think the primary paradigm of their reality is economic, and I think that’s – more than anything else – why people have moved on. Now that’s in conjunction, of course, to remembrance tendencies of the victors.” The government’s act of giving the Vietnamese people a means to progress economically thus enabled, and continues to enable society to focus more on the present and the future. The economy, indeed, may be one of the largest contemporary contributors to Vietnam’s ability to not dwell on resentment over the war. As Fulbright Lecturer Dinh Vu Trang Ngan stated:

“Since the normalization of the US-Vietnam relationship, lots of aids and assistance from the U.S. has been sent to Vietnam for economic development. US firms

are now coming to Vietnam with large amount of FDI. Donors from the U.S. are coming to Vietnam for research development, NGOs, consulting, and other governmental relationships. On the other hand, Vietnam is sending more and more kids to the U.S. for education (now ranked in the top ten in the number of international students in the US). Vietnam is adopting a lot of US models for education, health care, and technology. The US is also a significant partner for Vietnam's exports. So lots of economic factors are in play. When you are busy developing, and developing really fast, there is less room for moaning about the past but to move on.”

In conjunction with this, Suel Jones said, “They, like every country on earth, need the American consumer to create wealth in their country. So they reach out with a hand and a smile to a former enemy so he will trade with you. Why starve when all you have to do is say yes and smile?”

Because of this economic interdependence, the Vietnamese seem very willing to forgive the disasters of the war and focus on a bright future with the United States. Former President Bill Clinton’s lifting of the trade embargo with Vietnam in 1994 signified not only a change in the economic ties between the two nations, but also another reason to fortify a stronger relationship out of necessity. In this sense, it is clear that economic opportunities that present themselves from a better relationship with the United States influences Vietnam’s willingness to somewhat forgive the pain and suffering inflicted by the United states on Vietnam, in an attempt to raise living standards.

The Role of Contemporary Politics:

One may also argue that contemporary politics have encouraged a better relationship between the United States and Vietnam. As Mark A. Ashwill writes in *Vietnam Today: A Guide to a Nation at a Crossroads*: “China continues to be both a positive and a negative role model for Vietnam. On one side of the coin, its ability to create a flourishing market economy with the

world's highest growth rate while maintaining the primacy of the Communist Party is applauded. On the other side, China remains a force to be reckoned with, both economically and militarily," (Ashwill, 2005). The issue of the Spratly Islands in the potentially oil-rich part of the South China Sea has been a source of much tension between Vietnam and China for many years, and many people believe that China will always "loom large on Vietnam's political, economic, social, and cultural horizon," (Ashwill, 2005). Both Vietnam and China claim that certain parts of these islands belong within their national boundaries, and this conflict has led to intense debates and disputes. The majority of the Vietnamese people with whom I spoke stated that it is crucial for Vietnam to be on good terms with the United States in case events with China in the future require American support to Vietnam. In addition, having a positive relationship with a country like the United States serves to balance Vietnam's tense relationship with China. Professor Le Hong Hiep argued that "many Vietnamese people see the US a model democracy that Vietnam should strive for. The potentially antagonistic relations with China also make more Vietnamese people sympathetic with the US, which Vietnamese people see as a super power that can help the country balance against China." This concept of balancing is one that is ever-present in Vietnamese culture; there is an emphasis on the importance of balancing the good and the bad, the salty and the sweet, *yin* and *yang*. This aspect of Vietnamese culture is clearly evident in their desire to remain on neutral terms with the United States to counteract the tense relationship they have with China. Thus, it is clear that political happenings in today's world of globalization and geo-political diversity influence the tendency of the Vietnamese to forge better relations with the United States, which may encourage putting the war in the past while creating a more positive connection between the two nations for the future.

How Religion Influences Level of Forgiveness:

Another potential factor in how much the Vietnamese largely seem to put the war behind them is religion. Buddhist philosophy in Vietnam encourages thinking only of the present and not dwelling on the past, being self-aware, and being willing to forgive. Firstly, the emphasis on thinking of the present and leaving the past behind is crucial to why the Vietnamese do not seem to talk about the war or its consequences. All of my interviewees could not seem to understand why I would expect them to think about the war all the time and discuss it among one another. It appeared as if this tendency to put the past in the past and move on was one of the most influential cultural factors in the Vietnamese propensity to forgive and move forward from the war. This emphasis on forgiveness in Buddhist philosophy clearly plays a large part in how the Vietnamese view Americans today. Although the number of fully-practicing Buddhists in Vietnam may in fact be quite small, the traits and teachings of such a religion surely influence even those who do not devoutly practice Buddhist philosophy. As Professor Le Hong Hiep claimed, “Vietnamese people's tradition of forgiveness, I think, is also connected with Buddhism, the popular religion in the country, which also encourages forgiveness and harmony.” This factor was very evident when interviewing Vietnamese people. Every person with whom I spoke told me that they have forgiven and do not dwell on the war, but could not seem to identify why – or, for that matter, why Americans may not. It appears to be a trait so deeply entrenched in Vietnamese culture that the people with whom I spoke were not able to identify to root cause of it. As one Vietnamese veteran in Ho Chi Minh City told me, “Vietnamese people are just compassionate. We forgive. That’s how we are.” Former NVA Commander Nguyen Cao Phong said during one of our interviews, “The war is on our shoulders, but we’d like to look for a bright future.” It is rather impressive that a man who was in the army for 20 years, in combat

for 7, and was severely wounded by American artillery rounds in 1972 is so willing to “respect and preserve peace,” as he told me during our first meeting. Similarly, the overwhelming majority of the Vietnamese veterans I interviewed claimed that the American War was the past, and that they have all forgiven and do not hold any negative views of Americans today because of the war. Many pointed out to me the futility of dwelling on the losses and destruction inflicted by the war, like Bui Van Co who said “What was lost is lost and there is nothing we can do about it except move forward and promote peace.” Mai Quang Vinh, a 51-year-old former soldier lost both of his brothers to the American War, yet he assured me that he does not hate Americans at all, saying “It’s not that we don’t think about the past, it’s just that we forgive and move forward.” Vinh’s statement is crucial to remember; the war is not forgotten, nor will it ever be; rather, the Vietnamese appear to keep their feelings to themselves and weather the storm of emotions as best as they can while simultaneously enjoying peace for the first time in hundreds of years.

The Effect of the American Anti-War Movement:

Another interesting factor that may help to explain the readiness of the Vietnamese to promote positive relations with Americans after the war’s end is the anti-war movement of the United States, among other countries, during the years of conflict. The most obvious example of how the millions of anti-war protestors in the United States created a level of respect for Americans from the Vietnamese is the story of Norman Morrison, an American who burned himself to death to protest the war in Vietnam outside the Pentagon. In the book *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered From All Sides*, author Christian G. Appy tells the stories of hundreds of people who were involved in some way or another with the Vietnam War. One such

story is that of Anne Morrison Welsh, the former wife of Norman Morrison. She writes of going to visit Vietnam in 1999 and how the memory of her husband's act of resistance against the American government was continuously prevalent. She writes, "It was amazing how many people remembered Norman. We met a lot of people and they all wanted to tell us where they were when they heard about Norman's death and how it affected them. It was so vivid in their hearts and in their memories, thirty-four years later," (Welsh, as told by Appy, 2003). Knowing that so many people were so greatly opposed to the decisions of the government in the United States certainly played a role in why the Vietnamese do not blame the average American for the destruction and deaths that were a result of the war. Indeed, during many of the interviews I conducted with Vietnamese veterans, names like "Morrison," "Jane Fonda," and the like were mentioned many times. And as Ashwill writes in Vietnam Today: A Guide to a Nation at a Crossroads, "While Vietnamese are rightfully proud of their victories over the Chinese, French, and U.S. forces, and continue to celebrate these victories in festivals and holidays, they have followed Ho Chi Minh's advice by distinguishing between peoples and their governments," (Ashwill, 2005). As a veteran of both the French and American Wars told me, the war was "caused by the government, not the people in America, and so we do not resent Americans." The comparisons that can be made between this outlook and the tendency in the United States to generalize and not distinguish between governments and average people is striking to say the least.

Differences in Mentality and Outlook:

All of these cases promote the claim that the majority of Vietnamese people have been very willing to put the war behind them and move forward, albeit perhaps only on the surface.

Cultural differences between Americans and Vietnamese certainly help to explain why “Vietnam” is still such a controversial word in the United States. Le Hong Hiep told me that he believes “Vietnamese people do not dwell on the war as much as Americans because Vietnamese people are more optimistic than Americans. Vietnamese people care more about the future than the past.” In addition, he went on to say: “American people have the tradition of adventure, taking challenges (like the first settlers in the former colonies, or the cowboys in the Wild West), and they were successful in overcoming all the challenges to become the winners. Gradually I think Americans developed the mindset of "always-to-be-the-winner". Therefore, the defeat in Vietnam was something unacceptable to them.” Speaking with American veterans in Vietnam enabled me to witness the inexplicable pull this country still holds on them. So many American veterans return to Vietnam to purportedly come to terms with the war and their involvement in all of it. However, it can be assumed that because most of the Vietnamese who lived through the war are still in Vietnam, they have the ability to witness the country’s progress and are reminded in smaller ways, and more commonly, of the war’s effects on the country. Of course it is a different story for the American veteran who must travel 7,000 miles to see the place where he once fought.

The Role of the Media in Moving on From the War:

One must also take into account the role of the media and the freedom of the press in both countries to understand why it may appear that American’s hold more resentment today about the war. In the United States, the media tends to be relatively open and free, allowing for discourse about the war and comparisons between the Vietnam War and the current war in the Middle East to appear more often. The majority of the people feel comfortable sharing their

thoughts about contemporary and past politics, which of course means that the subject of the Vietnam War is broached more often. Conversely, freedom of the press in Vietnam is quite limited, and most people have been raised believing that saying something inappropriate or too politically heated could result in trouble. Suel Jones said about the Vietnamese's comfort with free speech: "One learns from years of suppression to never speak out. To never say what is true. To be quiet and suffer with dignity. To never show ones real feelings. To be in control of ones thoughts and feelings... It is ingrained into the Vietnamese psyche. In America we say the truth will set you free. Under a feudal system the truth will only get you killed or injured." In addition, the majority of people I interviewed in Vietnam claimed that contemporary pop culture in Vietnam depicts Americans and the United States as appealing in some way, which clearly influences how people in Vietnam think of Americans, perhaps demonstrating that despite what our government and soldiers did here, not all Americans are bad people. Indeed, Mai Bo at the World Bank in Hanoi went as far as to say that the media is even more effective in this respect than government propaganda urging reconciliation between the two nations. Whether or not the media's portrayal of Americans in this light is intentional, the effects of such popularly disseminated material certainly serves to create a better impression of Americans in Vietnam and change the light in which the Vietnamese view Americans. Compare this to the availability of modern portrayals of Vietnam in American media and it is clear that the media and pop culture play a large role in contemporary perceptions of former enemies.

Conclusion:

Myriad factors influence the ways in which the Vietnamese appear to have moved on from the war. With the majority of the population born after the war's end in 1975 it is

understandable that resentment regarding the war is not as wide-spread as it may have been with a larger population of survivors. In addition, the fact that the war was fought on Vietnamese soil and that the Vietnamese considered the war as a resistance war against a foreign invader and most were simply defending their own country is crucial in how the Vietnamese have seemingly forgiven and put the war in the past. Americans, on the other hand, still seem to hold a great deal of resentment in their lives when it comes to the United States' foreign policy in Vietnam during the 1960s and 1970s, and there are many potential factors which perpetuate this difference in mindset regarding remembrance and regret of the war. Firstly, the availability of material in the United States about Vietnam seems to dwell on the Vietnam War, ignoring the fact that in the more than three decades since the war's conclusion in 1975, Vietnam has undergone immeasurable progress and change. The dismissal of contemporary Vietnam in American media prohibits a widespread understanding of Vietnam as a country; rather, to many Americans, the word "Vietnam" still invokes mental images of napalm, destruction, bombs, booby traps, and death rather than the very different images that people would identify with a modern, industrializing nation if they had availability of resources. Contemporary media in the United States about Vietnam focuses on the war, with movies like *Forest Gump*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Apocalypse Now*, and *Good Morning Vietnam* widely available and intensely popular among people of all ages. The prevalence of such media is, of course, a large factor in why Americans appear to still think about the Vietnam War so much and to have not really moved on, at least emotionally, as a nation and a culture. In comparison, the rigidity of the press in Vietnam has hindered the frequency of American War-related discussion in popular culture. In addition to these factors, one must keep in mind that the luxury of dwelling on the war was not really feasible for the Vietnamese, who had to set to work immediately to rebuild the nation and

improve the infrastructure of a country that had been devastated by destruction for decades. However, American veterans went back to a nation half the world away, where the majority of people could not relate to the experiences they had had in Vietnam. That psychological problems regarding the war and returning from the war were so widespread after Vietnam is not surprising and certainly contributes to why “Vietnam” is still such a controversial word in the United States. To many, “Vietnam” is symbolic of one of our nation’s largest mistakes, and with it following us constantly and its references in pop culture as well as its prevalence in contemporary politics, it is unsurprising that we, as a nation, have not been as able to seemingly put the war behind us and focus on the future. Although it is absurd to think that Vietnam will ever forget the deaths, or abandon thoughts of those they lost and what they suffered, it is clear that forgiveness has enabled a better relationship between the two nations. To a large extent, this willingness to forgive may be attributed to Buddhist philosophy that permeates contemporary Vietnamese society in conjunction to a Confucian tendency to not discuss those things that are negative or uncomfortable. Buddhism also emphasizes the importance of focusing on the present and not dwelling on the past, an action also encouraged by the new economic reforms in Vietnam that shift focus from the struggle of the past decades to the promise of those to come. Furthermore, tense relations with China caused by economics and land disputes serve to encourage a better political relationship between Vietnam and the United States, as Vietnam has come to rely on the United States to balance the relationship it has with China. All of these factors influence the ways in which the two nations, who were once enemies, have now developed a more positive rapport. In addition, these cultural differences, as well as the very fundamental differences in lifestyle between the two nations, serve to explain the discrepancy in the degree to which each country appears to have moved on from the war.

Of course the atrocities of war will never be forgotten by either the Americans who fought in Vietnam or the Vietnamese who lived through the bombs and hardships. Rather, it is my belief that differences in mindset and belief between the two cultures have enabled the Vietnamese to put the past behind them and look forward to a future of peace and prosperity instead of obsessing over events which cannot be changed. This propensity to move forward in the shadow of so much pain is a crucially Vietnamese trait which I believe many would do well to practice. Indeed, the American insistence upon remembering our history for fear of repeating it may hold some truth, yet I believe that there should perhaps also be room to move on and focus on things that we have the possibility to change, in an attempt to dismiss negative feelings and hopefully aim for a more promising future.

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