

Subject: submission "What Must Vietnamese Be Thinking re U.S. War Heroes? "
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What Must Vietnamese Be Thinking re U.S. War Heroes?

by Jay Janson

1 October 2004

Dear Editor of Rathaus, I believe our progressive community is unable to challenge this corporate media revamping the war on Vietnam. Laos and Cambodia as having been right (and glorious). It will ultimately have to spring up from sane journalism outside the U.S.

Seems weird that no one is writing about this insanity. It is in the category of denial of the Holocaust. Except everyone simply accepts THIS absurdity because it is mass media promoted and nice mild mannered anchors are not seen as extremists.

WHAT MUST VIETNAMESE BE THINKING RE U.S. WAR HEROES?

All these years of silence from the Vietnamese. Even the horror of 9/11 brought no reminder of the terror from the skies America threw on Indochina -- carpet bombing, free fire zones! Finally, on September 13, 2004, with the controversial presidential election issue of Vietnam war service, *Agence France Presse* thought to interview elderly Vietnamese generals in Hanoi. CommonDreams.org published an article about the interview for U.S. readers. ("Former Enemies Say Iraq Fueling America's Vietnam War Obsession", by Didier Lauras, *Agence France Presse*, 9/13/04; *See Also*: "Can a Vietnamese-American be Heard?," by Tiana Thi Thanh Nga, *Common Dreams*, 9/9/04)

Asked if Kerry was courageous while serving in the southern Mekong Delta in 1968 and 1969, General Hoang Minh Thao, a respected historian of the Vietnamese army, replied, "I do not want to comment on the personal military career of Kerry. Let history judge itself."

We can imagine what General Thao might have replied if he were not so polite in the Buddhist tradition of non-confrontation which one experiences quite consistently throughout Vietnam society. What might any informed Vietnamese have in mind on the subject? One could hypothesize something of what Vietnamese might be saying if they could permit themselves to speak candidly: maybe something like the following would come out:

(?) Mr. Kerry saw fit to enlist in the war against us. Whatever his reasons for doing so, the result for Vietnam led to at least one of our patriotic defenders losing his life by Lieutenant Kerry's own hand, with all the accompanying grief and suffering of this young man's family, friends and compatriots. From what I have read, Mr. Kerry also suffered with the realization of the human import of his deed as a soldier following orders, and was moved to protest the war against us vehemently after his discharge from the navy.

What we Vietnamese, who suffered nearly three million dead, millions severely wounded and enormous destruction, like to remember, is that hundreds of thousands if not millions of Americans did not believe that we Vietnamese were America's enemy and deserving of death and destruction. Some very famous Americans took our side. Actress Jane Fonda, heavyweight champion of the world Muhammad Ali and Martin Luther King received the most attention.

Those who opposed the war read the newspapers and watched the TV programs which justified the U.S. reintroducing and backing the French military to war on us and the subsequent attempt to create a separate client state named South Vietnam through the use of America's military power. Yet these millions of Americans were able to see the injustice being done to us, and hundreds of thousands participated in demonstrations against the war.

When we finally won a second time, or one could say when the U.S. left Vietnam, there were few claims of heroism for those who had come to fight us in our own country. Wealthy and powerful America had been defeated by a much poorer nation struggling out of two hundred years of brutal French colonialism. And the coverage of U.S. atrocities aroused feelings of shame rather than pride.

How curious it is for we Vietnamese to hear today the U.S. media hailing as heroes, anyone who had come to our Vietnam ready and willing to kill. Why? It was all for nothing. The Viet government the U.S. now trades with in peace, is the same government as the one you tried to eradicate. We listen and read of all this recent praising of the war in silence. How shall we Vietnamese consider our own soldiers, indeed all our people who resisted, fought and died for our independence?

In your Senate and House of Representatives sit many veterans of your war in our country. They appear to accept the media reporting them as heroes. What shall we think, feel?

The two Presidential candidates who currently vie for honors regarding their Vietnam service and all the other prominent "Vietnam veterans" had a good university education and would have known about our brutal colonial history of nearly 200 years of occupation and exploitation under the French. They would also have known of Eisenhower's statement conceding that Ho Chi Minh would have won 80+% of the vote had the U.S. allowed the all Vietnam election agreed upon in the Geneva Accords signed by the defeated French after nine years of war upon us. Then how is it the vets can believe the media anchors describing "Vietnam veterans" as having defended their country and freedom?

We have almost rebuilt our country. We look to the future. We make an effort to forget "My Lai", to forget what was shown on "60 Minutes" of former Governor and Senator Bob Kerrey when he was a Navy Seal Commander. Former bomber pilot Senator John McCain also wishes to put the past behind and works for reconciliation. But praising your veterans for what they did to us is hardly friendly toward us. How shall we take your meaning.

Your Secretary McNamara now thinks the war which he supervised was "mistaken." Must every American war be seen as just? Even one lost and "mistaken," that took the lives of millions? This "mistake" on us continued under seven U.S. presidents. Why are those who participated in the mistake now hailed as heroes? There were, after all, so many other Americans who refused to participate, and saw the "mistake" immediately, and not after so many of us had already been killed.

Most Vietnamese feel compassion for these latter day American "heroes," and for the families of those Americans who fell in our land, even though they caused us such intense fear and suffering thirty years ago. In our culture humanity and kindness overcomes all past ignorance and the misery it caused. But now we must extend our compassion to include those who feel pride in their mistakes and ignorance and killing. It is wearisome in its confusion. Especially as our children look to America for its advanced technology and wealth. (?)

[end of hypothetical Vietnamese view]

All the members of the Vietnam National Symphony lost family. "Killed by the Americans" they would mention with a wisp of a disarming smile. This writer had the honor of being Assistant Conductor in Hanoi and on tour under Japanese sponsorship during the 1990s. I got to know something of their gentle traditions, one of which is having a joyous dinner, as sumptuous as the year's prosperity permits, on the anniversary of the death of a family member.

The orchestra, which Ho Chi Minh founded, played all four Brahms symphonies, and Beethoven, Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Haydn, Mozart, Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninov, dozens of Overtures and concertos including both Chopin concertos with the only Asian winner of the Moscow Tchaikovsky Piano Competition, Dan Tai-son, who practiced for the competition in a Hanoi bomb shelter. I don't know whether John McCain was making his twenty-nine bombing runs at the time.

The concerts were held in the beautiful yellow stucco Opera House, a smaller copy of the old Paris Opera. It was from a balcony overlooking the huge square that Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnam independence flanked by an American Major and a British Colonel in 1945, not long after receiving a decoration from the U.S. OAS for his having led the fight against the Japanese and the Vichy French Army. One day Robert McNamara came to town, invited to hold his symposium on the war.

My little hotel was just across from our new American Embassy in Hanoi, and the Ambassador was just so happy to be arranging business contracts with the same government many American boys died trying to defeat.

Americans mourn the memory their sons who died fighting in Vietnam and never mention the many many more lives taken unfortunately by their sons. What shall the Vietnamese make of it? That American lives are more important? And that the destruction to their country means nothing to Americans?

Neurologists maintain that around age five, a child begins to create a sensitivity for imagining how other people are feeling. Why the ability, of a representative amount of Americans, to put themselves in the shoes of others, seems to stop at the border, is difficult to understand. On TV talk shows it is the norm to discount the death and destruction of the peoples we conquer by omitting any mention of it.

Thus the collective awareness of the America public seems to parallel that of a four year old when when it concerns people of foreign countries suffering casualties from U.S. military action. It has been coined as an expression that "Vietnam" for us is not a nation of people, rather just a war by that name, our war, and it was only experienced by American military personnel. Maybe we inherited a European colonial attitude. Maybe has to do the insensitivity of industrialized society. Maybe part of it is racist.

Westerners who spend time in the Third World are often struck by the warm and sincere caring, sense of shared common nobility and innocence. In 1993 I encountered the Vietnamese as soulful musicians, with a kind and charming sense of humor, and the most soft-spoken people in the world.

Jay Janson in New York City
September 25, 2004

P.S. One wonders, are we ever going to say that we are sorry to the survivors of our war in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia? Maybe if we addressed this still open wound of the past, we could apply what we learn to correct present insensitivity regarding ongoing Afghan and Iraqi casualties.

JJ

To the Editor of CommonDreams.org re Former Enemies Say Iraq Fueling America's Vietnam War Obsession
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