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Americans, Vietnamese: Mutual Misconceptions

By DAVID K. SHIPLER

The Vietnamese and the Americans never knew each other very well. By the time the United States troops withdrew, taking with them the epithet "gook," profound gulfs of ignorance still remained. Even those who tried to see beyond the stereotypes often slipped into subtler misunderstandings.

These problems of perception proved fatal for dissimilar peoples who depended on each other to fight one side of a nasty, politically complex civil war. Many Vietnamese overestimated American power and American resolve. Many Americans of differing views found that they could see whatever they wanted to, all in the murky, contradictory politics and culture of Vietnam.

From both ends of the American political spectrum, misinterpretations were often made, for example, of the suppleness that enabled so many Vietnamese to survive by masking and adjusting loyalties and attitudes as military control by one side or the other shifted and flowed over them and their villages.

American officials, who questioned peasants or refugees by using the vocabulary of one side in the conflict—terms such as "Communists," "Vietcong" and "South Vietnamese Government"—could get predictable and appropriate answers, while American Quakers, using another lexicon—"liberation troops," "Provisional Revolutionary Government," "Saigon regime"—would hear quite different responses.

As a result, an important cultural trait was frequently misread as a political attitude, when in fact political views and loyalties—to the extent that they existed at all—usually remained deeply buried beneath a complex set of defenses.

Similarly, the ethnocentrism of Vietnamese society—a traditional distaste for foreigners that kept the culture resilient through a long history of Chinese domination, French colonialism and American intervention—was sometimes seen by the American left as a rejection of the American-supported side in the war and as a popular affinity for the Vietcong.

The antiforeign feelings were so pervasive, moreover, that it was as easy to find them among strong anti-Communists and Government officials as among those sympathetic to the Vietcong. So ethnocentrism served poorly as an indicator of a man's politics.

It was true that for some Vietnamese, the Government of Nguyen Van Thieu seemed "foreign," and the Vietcong, by virtue of their long sacrifice and suffering in the wilderness, seemed more noble, more purely Vietnamese. But this view, usually vague and blurry, did not always correlate with support for the Vietcong. Rather, it underscored the deep ambivalence that many Vietnamese felt about their political choices.

Sympathy for the Suffering

"I hate all Vietnamese who have no sign of suffering on their faces," said a Vietnamese newspaperman one day as he sat in a restaurant watching a couple of pudgy army colonels at the next table.

The newsman had grown up in Hanoi, tried to join the Vietminh as a boy, migrated south in 1954, became an official in the Government of Ngo Dinh Diem, was jailed by that Government for his role in an abortive coup and then worked as an interpreter for high-ranking American military officers. He had spent much of his life trying to discover where he fit in his own society.

It was a common search, and it illustrated the degree to which the political matrix that was imposed on Vietnam by the war clashed with the most fundamental historical themes of Vietnamese culture.

Many Vietnamese felt revulsion for both sides. Even some who took direct, violent action against American intervention scoffed at the notion that the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese represented true Vietnamese nationalism.

'We Are Pacifists'

This was put succinctly about a year ago by a militant Buddhist student who had helped organize the fire-bombing of American cars and jeeps in the nineteen-sixties. He had spent recent years in constant hiding and fear, dodging the Saigon police, moving from house to house, friend to friend. But he did not feel comfortable with the idea of going to the Vietcong.

"If I lose my morale, perhaps I will go," he said. "But I'm not a Communist. There are certain parts of Communist policy that I don't accept. We are pacifists. We are against the fighting. The Buddhists do not like foreigners. The Buddhists do not accept foreign ideas, Marxist or capitalist."

Of course the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese, with roots in the anticolonialist struggle that defeated the French, tapped much of the

What They Said...

You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly.

—President Dwight D. Eisenhower explaining "the falling domino principle" at a news conference, April, 1954.

My solutions? Tell the Vietnamese they've got to draw in their horns or we're going to bomb them back into the Stone Age.

—Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, Air Force Chief of Staff, May, 1964.

But we are not about to send American boys nine or ten thousand miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves.

—President Lyndon B. Johnson, Akron, Ohio, October, 1964.

Come home with that coonskin on the wall.

—President Johnson to commanders at Cam Ranh Bay, October, 1966.

I see light at the end of the tunnel.

—Walt W. Rostow, President Johnson's national security adviser, in Look, December, 1967.

We had to destroy it in order to save it.

—American officer at Ben Tre after Tet attack, February, 1968.

We believe peace is at hand.

—Henry A. Kissinger, President Richard M. Nixon's national security adviser, October, 1972.

elemental drive for independence from foreign domination. But they had no monopoly on this, at least philosophically, for even in the elementary schools in Saigon, history lessons played the theme.

A teacher, standing one morning at an intricate battle map drap drawn with colored chalk on a blackboard, described with delight an ancient Chinese defeat at the hands of the Vietnamese. "We escaped being colonized by the Chinese," the teacher told her pupils. "What is the lesson? The lesson is that the Vietnamese people are determined to fight all aggression."

Nevertheless, Western notions of "nation" and "country" always seemed somewhat inappropriate to Vietnam, for while the Vietnamese retained a strong sense of themselves as a people and as an ethnic group, the institutions with which they indentified first were usually family and village, rarely the central government.

Even when refugees were uprooted by the war, they often moved as whole villages, surviving the turmoil and squalor of the refugee camps and resettling together in the shanty-town slums of city neighborhoods. They carried with them the structure of village organization, often retaining the same village chief and village council through the years.

Similarly, despite the powerful, wrenching crosscurrents of war, many Vietnamese kept their family loyalty intact; ancestor worship remained a central element of religious life, not merely for the Buddhist majority, but to some extent among the Roman Catholics and other minorities as well.

Old Ties Weakened

The strong family and village ties, combined with the religious mandate for descendants to stay close to the graves of their ancestors, may once have welded the Vietnamese peasant to his land, though no more. The war, some Americans believe, has been doubly cruel, for the introduction of intense American bombing and shelling of rural areas broke the bond between peasant and ancestral land, forcing him to flee and leave the souls of the dead untended.

Some among the Vietnamese regard the notion of religious attachment to the land as little more than a foreign stereotype that fails to take account of the historic mobility of the Vietnamese, or the Annamites, as they were once known, who have migrated southward over the centuries into the fertile Mekong delta.

However strong a pull ancestral land once exerted on the peasantry, it is considerably weaker now. What remains among many who have crowded into the cities is a nostalgia for the land, a belief in rural, village life as truly Vietnamese, a distast distate for the city as Western, foreign.

Urbanization may have been the most durable American impact on Vietnamese society. From 1960 to 1974, the proportion of South Vietnam's population living in cities jumped to 45 per cent from 15 as millions of farmers sought refuge from the saturation bombing and shelling that accompanied American drives into much of the countryside.

Peasants who had stayed in their villages through Vietcong raids and propaganda drives, through terrorism by both sides and through skirmishes between guerrillas and Government troops could not stand the heavy carpet of bombs and artillery brought by the United States. Many of them left, not to "vote with their feet," but, as they described it, to save their lives.

The economic and social consequences were severe. Food production dropped sharply, and Vietman stopped exporting rice in 1965. When the American withdrawal was complete in 1973, there was virtually no industrial base to justify what had been a false urbanization.

The wives and families of soldiers as well as of civilians struggled in a primitive economy of petty commerce and small marketplaces to feed themselves. The grinding deprivation, some South Vietnamese officers believed, contributed to the sagging morale of their troops.

Many Families Disintegrated

Simultaneously, the sprawling, disorganized cities corroded the important institutions of village and family. Many families held together, but others disintegrated. Marriages collapsed, boys took up lives in the grimy streets, orphanages overflowed with abandoned children, drug addiction spread, teen-age delinquency multiplied.

Yet even as the despair grew and the weariness deepened, the society bred less malignancy than might have been expected. The Vietnamese were full of paradoxes, and this baffled many Americans.

If corruption was rampant, so were honesty and pride. If the army collapsed and ran, the people bore much of the war with a tough stubbornness, rarely succumbing to the lethargy of defeat, scratching out a living through tireless enterprise and inventiveness.

The Vietnamese were often open about their sorrow, yet subtle and oblique in their anger. They wept freely and they held back their tears; they smiled in joy and embarrassment and sadness, and they wore masks of cold correctness.

The Americans, in turn, were misread by the Vietnamese, who misunderstood American power and American resolve.

"Some of my students think the Americans are responsible for everything good and everything bad that happens in Vietnam," a Saigon high school teacher observed about a year ago. It was an extreme version of a common view.

Combined with a certain fatalism and resignation, it produced a sense of helplessness and dependency. Oppositionists waited for a gesture from the American Embassy. Students felt themselves without power. A bizarre, conspiratorial view of politics bred rumor and distrust.

Military skill and efficiency were seen as the exclusive property of the Americans. Vietnamese could not depend on Vietnamese.

Vietnamese Saw Turmoil and Death

At left, Buddhist monk commits suicide by fire in Saigon in 1963, during the demonstrations against President Ngo Dinh Diem. At right, women cry over coffins of victims of the Vietcong massacre in Hue in 1968. Below, children flee from their village after South Vietnamese planes dropped napalm on it by mistake.

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