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Caged, Like Vietnamese, for Us All

By Liane Norman

PITTSBURGH — Most Americans would like to believe that the war in Indochina is over. It is an unlanced boil on the national conscience—there are too many wheelchairs in sight, too many empty places at the dinner table to forget entirely—but as a nation we would prefer to consider the problems of inflation and the reconstituting of honest government than the problems of atrocity, war crimes and guilt.

As a consequence, such formulae as "peace with honor" have been very seductive. Isolated newspaper reports and a staggering military and economic aid request trouble the mind, but it is easy not to know, and American officialdom, with far too much acquiescence from the press, is well supplied with soothing euphemisms.

For the last two months, ending Aug. 24, an extraordinary project on the top of the central steps of the United States Capitol has challenged the comforting idea that the war and its consequences are over. It was called the Tiger Cage Vigil and Fast. Conceived by several New Englanders from the American Friends Service Committee, the project centered on a replica of the infamous tiger cages on the island of Con Son, used for political prisoners since the time of the French.

overtly military, some of which, disguised as economic aid, buoys up an economy solely geared to waging war.

Ever since the Vietnamese defeated the French in 1945, they have struggled to rid themselves of American domination administered by the small clique of landlords, bureaucrats and generals who profited from the French and now profit from the American presence. Until the United States withdraws all support from the Thieu regime, leaving it to stand or fall, to find or fail to find indigenous support from its much abused people, it cannot be said the war is over.

The war's injuries are many and deep. In Indochina, the cost has been and will be for a long time incalculable.

The cages which are 8'x10'-or-smaller concrete boxes with iron grill-work on the top, and into which prisoners are shackled by one hand and both feet, are made in the United States, as are the handcuffs used on prisoners. Prisoners are chained to steel bars in such a way that they must sit or lie down: atrophy of leg muscles and paralysis are the nearly inevitable results. The United States, which pays nearly all of the Nguyen Jan Thieu regime's expenses, pays for a prison system that is far more extensive than the combined systems of schools, hospitals, churches and pagodas. To bring these realities to ordinary American men and women, who visit Washington with pride and wonder every day, the Tiger Cage project had people sit, in shifts, shackled into the replica tiger cage. Visitors had little choice but to take it in along with the marble splendor of the Capitol. All connected with the project fasted during their participation. One of the organizers fasted for the full 63 days of the project.

The fasting was meant to create a bond, in hunger, between voluntary project participants and those involuntarily hungry because of the misallocation of resources for engines of war. One consequence of the war, of course, is that land has been destroyed, people bombed into urban slums far from their rice paddies, and manpower diverted from plowshares

to swords. Hunger and starvation now mark a once rice-rich part of the world.

During the last week of the Tiger Cage Vigil and Fast, the same three people, including the woman who fasted for 63 days, remained shackled into the cage, fasting, around the clock from Monday morning to Saturday at noon. During that time they left the cage only to go to the bathroom. The Capital Police, pursuant to an earlier Justice Department ruling, insisted that they not sleep. They enforced this rule with what seemed to us participants, who fasted, kept a vigil, and talked with tourists, rather malicious strenuousness.

The ordeal of sleeplessness, as it turned out, created an immensely strong bond, a sense of unity between the American inmates of the replica tiger cage and their real prototypes in Vietnamese prisons. There was real suffering in the Capitol tiger cage, which only clarified the suffering we American taxpayers inflict on those in Indochina, whose chief offense may be desiring peace.

The most frequent comment I heard was, "I didn't know this was happening: I thought we were out of there." Children were especially curious, and with their vivid imaginations, their physical restlessness and perpetual hunger, seemed able to understand fully the cruelty of the tiger cages.

The simple fact is that Thieu cannot govern without millions of dollars in American aid—some of which is

ble. In the United States, curing the maladies that caused and are caused by the war will be difficult. It will be painful to admit the wrongs done, both to Asians and to Americans, to admit any national propensity to err or to acquiesce in error, to admit the human likeness of Indochinese and Americans. The Tiger Cage, its cramped and fasting occupants, its fasting vigilers, confronted Americans from every state with this difficult and painful task. On the whole, the Americans I spoke to were stronger than their leaders think; they are strong enough and compassionate enough to take on that task.

Liane Norman, a writer, describes herself as an "itinerant peace worker."