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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The Tiger Cages of South Vietnam

In his May 24 letter to the editor, Elbridge Durbrow, former U. S. ambassador to South Vietnam, attempted to refute the tiger cage "myth." In turn, I would like to refute his letter.

He refers to the tiger cages of South Vietnam as an "outright propagandistic myth" and dismisses the accounts of the two congressmen (Augustus Hawkins and Wilnam Anderson, along with Don Luce and Thomas Harkin) who publicly exposed the tiger cages in 1970 during a fact-finding tour of South Vietnam, referring to their reports as "false allegations."

For evidence to back up his claim, Mr. Durbrow tells of a visit to Con Son island prison in July, 1970, by Rep. Philip Crane who wanted to see the tiger cages himself. Crane saw neither the tiger cages nor the inmates that Anderson and Hawkins had described. As further evidence, Durbrow cites a visit by a private group of eight people (including himself) who went to Vietnam to inspect the alleged tiger cages. Their findings served to endorse Crane's conclusion.

I do not question the accuracy of the findings of Rep. Crane and Durbrow's group. In all probability, they did not see the hideous tiger cages nor the "diseased, paralyzed, malnourished inmates" who occupied them. But do we then simply conclude that they did not exist? And in doing so, do we dismiss the numerous testimonies by informed and responsible sources who gave personal witness to their existence; dismiss the photographs that were taken of these cages and their prisoners; and, even go so far as to dismiss those very people who are living proof of their existence — the victims themselves? It is these people who gave living testimony to the tiger cages; their conditions bore out the horror stories. In short, the tiger cages were not a "myth"; they were not contrived propaganda, nor were they the figment of many peoples' wild imaginations. Concrete proof confirms this.

It does not surprise me that Crane and Durbrow's committee did not find the tiger cages, for they were hardly something that the Saigon government would be eager to display. In addition, they visited Con Son with the intended purpose of inspecting the tiger cages, a purpose known to the South Vietnamese officials. I feel it is safe to assume that they were shown only what the

South Vietnamese government wanted them to see. In contrast, when Reps. Hawkins and Anderson visited Con Son, the South Vietnamese prison officials were not aware that they had any knowledge of the existence of tiger cages nor that they had been briefed on their location by a former prisoner. Indeed, it was only stubborn persistence and some luck that enabled them to enter the tiger cage area, over the strong objections of both the South Vietnamese and an American adviser.

Mr. Durbrow refers to the tiger cages as "one of the most damaging bits of Hanoi-inspired propaganda to come out of the Vietnam tragedy." Not only do I disagree that it was "propaganda," but I feel that one of the most damaging features of the Vietnam war was instead the continuous deceiving of the American public by many U. S. government officials. Mr. Durbrow is further trying to perpetuate this deception. His successor, Ambassador Graham Martin, also refused to level with the American people; for example, he publicly denied the existence of political prisoners in South Vietnam, even one month after the Senate Appropriations Committee (on December 13, 1973) in its report officially recognized both the existence of, and the mistreatment and torture of, political prisoners in South Vietnam.

Mr. Durbrow "regrets" that The Washington Post in specific and the news media in general has not given the public the true facts about the tiger cages and that they take "delight in denigrating our policies and actions as well as those of our allies." I regret that he is attempting to conceal the facts from the American public. Facing up to the harsh realities of Vietnam will not be easy; but failing to face up to them will prove disastrous. We can not undo the many wrongs done in Southeast Asia, but we can own up to our mistakes and recognize the erroneous policy that was pursued there. Vietnam and Cambodia have many valuable lessons to offer us; we cannot afford to fall prey to those who urge us to try to forget what happened in Southeast Asia and to put it behind us. We have had enough lies, enough cover-ups, enough deception. We must now recognize the truth and face up to it.

Alexandria.

Liz Reiley.

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