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The United States: Stepping From the Shadows of the Vietnam Conflict

In 1975 the end of the Vietnam Conflict, came to a conclusion after ten years. In the past twenty years, the people of America have been working on a slow yet progressive healing process. The healing began in 1982, when the black granite Memorial Wall was erected, and has been visited by hundreds of thousands of people: people for and against the war, family members of the Prisoners of War, Missing in Action, and deceased who are chiseled in the granite, young and old, and many of those who do not understand why it ever happened. Besides the memorial, new welcoming-home parades and movies helped many to understand the conflict. The Memorial Wall has given many people a way to communicate, but one thing has recently begun to sever the healing. Relations with Vietnam have been rebuilt. The irony of this is that it took a president who avoided the military and resisted the draft to take the final step of recognizing Vietnam. The debate of Vietnam has once again divided the American people and has caused emotions to uproar. On the one hand some families of the Prisoners of War or Missing in Action feel that they have been cheated and lied to by President Clinton, while on the other, businesses are pleased that they are getting the opportunity for greater trade. Supporters say that, if the United States could rebuild relations with West Germany and Japan for "strategic significance" then it would be poor judgment not to rebuild with Vietnam (LeBoutillier 83). It has been a never ending battle and struggle for what is right. So the question remains: should the United States have recognized Vietnam? The division line between yes and no has been clearly defined by the families, emigrants, the US government, and the Vietnamese. Some Americans

believe that recognizing Vietnam on blind faith is foolish and a betrayal, while others see it as the final step in healing a nation.

For the past 30 years many families of Prisoners of War and Missing in Action, veterans, and emigrants have agreed that moving on is not what is needed for their healing. Family members of the POW/MIA's have either accepted that their loved ones are not coming back, or they still have the hope that they are alive and want to come home. Tamar Lewin, a reporter of the New York Times, interviewed several family members who all agreed that they expect to find less, not more cooperation from the Vietnamese government. In fact one daughter of a service man said that before the announcement she was welcomed anywhere in Vietnam for any amount of time, and in less than a week after the decision she was booted out (A8). Ann Holland, whose husband has been missing since 1968, says she believes that any prisoners left will now be killed because they are of no use to the Vietnamese government. She also added that Clinton was a Judas, telling them several months before that the United States would not recognize Vietnam until the POW/MIA's were accounted for. She believes that he had no right to make a decision because he had no relations to the war and never served in the military. Colleen Shine, whose father has been missing since 1972, says that the questions do not go away with the decision and hopes that the Vietnamese will cooperate as promised. Children who grew up not knowing where their fathers or mothers or siblings were have now grown up and can make their own decisions about this change. Many feel that Clinton has reached a "new low," and that this is and continues to be only about politics and lies. Dolores Alfond, of the National Alliance of Families and sisters of an Air Force pilot shot down over North Vietnam in 1967, believe that Clinton has betrayed the families of POW/MIA's and his only concern is with "big businesses" (Lewin A8). The National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia believe that POW/MIA's are still alive and that they believe that the search should not end with those who survived, but those that may have already died

(Subcommittee and Asian and Pacific Affairs 67). R.W. Apple, Jr. reported that the Last Firebase, a group composed of veterans and relatives of the missing, said that "today will forever be known by America's veterans as Black Tuesday" (A8).

Seth Mydans, a reporter of the New York Times, found that Vietnamese emigrants are just as upset with the decision of recognizing Vietnam. They see the decision as a business deal instead of an issue of human rights. Others see the opening as using Vietnam as a pawn once again against China. One person added that "there may be joy in Hanoi, but there certainly will be no celebrations in Little Saigon" (Mydan A9).

For the past 30 years many Vietnamese, businesses, some political leaders, and a handful of emigrants have tried to explain advantages of recognizing Vietnam to the opposition. According to an editorial in the New York Times, "from commercial competition to the defense of human rights in Vietnam, from the search for American remains to Pacific defense strategy, United States interests can only benefit" (Recognizing A16). According to a presidential advisor, opening the doors to Vietnam will be painful, but it is necessary to move on (Purdum A7). Vu-Duc Vuong, an Amerasian, said that rebuilding relations with Vietnam is a move that makes sense for the therapy of both countries (A19). Lu Thang, a 25-year-old business student in Vietnam, feels that all the Vietnamese want to do is move on with their lives doing the best they can to support their family with clothes, food, and shelter (Shenon A1). R. W. Apple, Jr. believes that the reason the United States will not help Vietnam is because we lost. When the war was over with Germany and Japan, the United States jumped right in and helped to rebuild their countries that desperately needed it. No one ever considered accounting for a small amount of men from the Korean War (8,170) or World War II (78,750). The loss from these two wars were greater than that of the Vietnam Conflict, and just as many north and south Vietnamese are unaccounted for (A1). Apple also adds that Jan Scruggs, a Vietnam veteran who was the "creative spark" behind the Wall,

believes the war is long over and we should be friends (A8). Apple adds that having Vietnam on the side of the United States would be an advantage at a time when so many problems are occurring in China. Robert Matthews, a Vietnam Veteran and Teacher of Lessons of the Vietnam War at William G. Enloe Senior High, at first disagreed with the move to open relations with Vietnam. After visiting Vietnam last fall, he found that opening relations would be a step in the right direction. He saw that the private sector of America could do more than politicians. Mr. Matthews added that the Vietnamese people are willing to talk to people, trying to find family members, and want to help in finding remains. Alison Mitchell, a journalist at the New York Times, says that rebuilding relations with Vietnam would give them an important ally when things are so wrong with China right now, though the Clinton Administration denies it (A8). A recent Gallup Poll was conducted and showed that 67 percent actually backed rebuilding relations and 27 percent were in the minority (Apple A8). In Clinton's speech on July 12, he told the people that we should work at a "free and peaceful Vietnam," and develop trade with the help of a proper United States government represented in Vietnam, and that broadening economics in Vietnam would honor those who died for the sake of freedom in Vietnam (Clinton A8). Todd S. Purdum found that Senator John McCain, a veteran of the Vietnam conflict and POW for five years, supports the decision of President Clinton, believing that reform is needed to help set up a stable Vietnam. Senator John Kerry adds that the United States must return to Vietnam with their heads held high continuing to believe that we did and will continue to fight for the freedom of the Vietnamese people (A7).

Seth Mydans talked to some emigrants of Vietnam and found that some believed that the release of political prisoners, by Hanoi, is possible after the announcement was made by President Clinton. Others believe that South Vietnamese high officials may now revisit Vietnam without worries (A9). When Tim Larimer talked with residents of Vietnam he found some interesting feelings flowing through the country. For the

Vietnamese the recognition of Vietnam by the United States is a chance for a due apology and government assistance. Those who fought alongside the Americans feel there is only one thing for the government to do: they need prostheses for over 200,000 Vietnamese that were left unaided. The government of the north says that they felt it was important to help out the People's Army before those who had fought against them. Nguyen Huu Quynh, a veteran from North Vietnam, believes that not only will the recognition open new ties, but the United States should help solve the problems left from the war (A9). Frank Jao, an emigrant and now an American businessman, says that "speaking in the context of being an American businessman . . . it's good for the United States" (A9).

LeBoutillier said in his book that a lifting to the embargo should be supported so that technology may be brought in. Americans can take advantage of what the Vietnamese have missed out on. LeBoutillier reports that some veterans of the conflict have said that if "you could channel the Vietnamese battlefield spirit into workplace spirit, you'll have the best workers anywhere" (85).

Over time, Vietnam has proven their desire to be helpful in the search for the POW/MIA's usually after the United States has shown cooperation in assisting them. A report has shown that of the 2,211 MIA's only 196 have had reports of being seen alive once and that number in the past years has decreased to 55, and that lately there has been more progress in other cases to lower that number (Fedarko 42).

Furthermore, it has been reported that a few years before the United States opened the doors to Vietnam, they opened the doors to a United Nations worker and university librarian to view the Red Book, a book that cataloged what Vietnam knows about American servicemen. The book enclosed photos of people, dog tags, uniform strip names, flight suits, eyeglasses, ID cards, class and wedding rings and other items. After Washington realized that what Ted Schweitzer had brought to them was actual proof of the missing persons they began to investigate (Van Voorst 59).

Weighing the options carefully I would have to say that the government was correct in their decision to recognize Vietnam and work harder at rebuilding relations. Coming to this conclusion has been a hard one. After visiting the Wall last fall I was effected by what it stood for . . . the names. Those names are what mattered most. Each one of those names are engraved there for us to remember, and not to forget the tragedy of the past, and that is what it is . . . the past. We as Americans have almost reached the end of the "healing nation." We must move on, not forgetting those names, but rebuilding a desperate country for those names. As for the families of the POW/MIA's this decision was not done out of spite. It was done because we must forgive, but not forget. We must learn from the lessons we have learned and be prepared to not let it happen to our future generations.

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