

AT LONG LAST

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At long last I reached Vietnam. After spending much of my time in the 1960s and 1970s trying to avoid that faraway Southeast Asian land, I finally had a chance to see the country with my own eyes. And that trip last summer, whirlwind though it was, made me realize just how important a role Vietnam has played in my own life. The name itself conjures up images of war fervor and passionate protest that are part of our national – and my personal – psyche. As we contemplate the crazy possibility of another war – this time in the Middle East – pundits are quick to remind us about the lessons of Vietnam, whether or not we choose to follow them. Books and movies continue to appear – most recently the rather simplistic Mel Gibson film *We Were Soldiers* – underscoring the point that even though the war ended more than 25 years ago, it's still very much with us today. Indeed, this paper might better be entitled "Vietnam on My Mind."

I can't remember hearing anything about Vietnam in high school. At one point in the early 1960s, I was invited to appear on a television show – the "Dorothy Gordon Youth Forum" in New York – but our subject there was the Belgian Congo, dealing with an international crisis in an altogether different part of the world, and we never touched on Southeast Asia at all. I have vague memories of reading newspaper headlines about the Cambodian conflict in the early years of John Kennedy's presidency, and I suppose I must have encountered the rest of Indochina in some form there. But I really have no recollection of Vietnam until the appearance of the front-page newspaper pictures of Buddhist monks dousing themselves with gasoline and burning themselves to death in Saigon in 1963.

The war was distant and remote. The overall international framework was not. For my friends and me, the Cold War was more immediate. After my early years playing cowboys and Indians, it was an easy transition to find a real foreign enemy to worry about, and I was part of the generation that grew up fearful of the Russians, afraid that they might take over the world. I remember going outside to try to see *Sputnik* in 1957 and wondering why we hadn't managed to get a satellite in the sky. And I remember, too, hiding under my desk in elementary school during air raid drills, in what I now realize was a futile attempt to avoid the consequences of a nuclear war. But "Duck and Cover" seemed very real back then, and many of us debated with absolute seriousness that crucial question: Better Red than dead?

The Cold War hit home with a real impact in my freshman year at Harvard. I was a member of the cross-country team, and learned from my fellow runners about the Cuban missile crisis as we rode a bus to work out in Franklin Park. Somehow I had managed to stay in a college cocoon, and had missed the first news stories. But as soon as I learned what was going on, I rushed over to the library and read all the newspapers I could find. This was back in October 1962, well before the sexual revolution had

changed American mores forever, and I recall many of the members of our team bemoaning the fact that we might die in a cataclysmic nuclear war with virginity intact.

The missile crisis – with the United States and the Soviet Union standing “eyeball to eyeball” in Secretary of State Dean Rusk’s phrase – ended, but the conflict in Vietnam did not. And gradually it came to consume us all, in ways we are still struggling to understand.

Today, the pattern of our involvement in Southeast Asia is clear. We have the benefit of the Pentagon Papers, which provided a vivid assessment of how policy was made after World War II. And we have a rich body of scholarship, all of it explaining how the United States became consumed. President Franklin Roosevelt hoped that colonies throughout the world could move through a trusteeship scheme toward full independence at the end of the Second World War, but he encountered firm resistance from America’s allies. “I have not become the King’s first minister to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire,” Winston Churchill barked on one occasion, and made it clear that Great Britain was not willing to relinquish its colonies without a fight. Fights broke out – ranging from the struggle for Indian independence in the 1940s to the Mau Mau conflict in Kenya in the 1950s – culminating in freedom for both nations. In Southeast Asia, France was likewise reluctant to leave. French leaders, devastated by the Nazi occupation during World War II, saw colonial strength as a requirement for being a great power. And even though the Japanese had controlled Indochina during the war, and the Vietnamese had fought both the Japanese and the French and then declared their independence at the end of the war, France was determined to return.

At Ho Chi Minh, the leader of the Vietnamese struggle, issued his independence proclamation in 1945, Vo Nguyen Giap, a former teacher and now a military leader, declared, “As regards foreign relations, our public opinion pays very much attention to the Allied missions in Hanoi because everyone is anxious to know the result of the foreign negotiations of the government.” And he spoke of “particularly intimate relations” with the Americans, “which it is a pleasant duty to dwell upon.”

The United States watched what was happening with detached interest. William “Wild Bill” Donovan, head of OSS – the Office of Strategic Services – cited a statement by Vietnamese independence leaders saying: “Should the French attempt to return to Indo-China with the intention of governing the country, and to act once more as oppressors, the Indo-Chinese people are prepared to fight to end against any such recognition.” But his was a lone voice in the wilderness, and no one in the United States paid any attention to what he said.

The United States stood back and let the French do what they wanted, out of respect for an ally, especially an ally bloodied by the war. American leaders took a hands-off approach, providing no real assistance until the late 1940s, when they wanted France’s support for the policy of containment of the Soviet Union in Europe. Then, beginning in 1947, the United States gave France substantial economic aid, which allowed the French to shift their own resources to Vietnam, where a bitter struggle for

independence was unfolding. By the end of 1949, with the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan and NATO now in place, the United States was willing to make an even stronger commitment, and by 1952 it was paying about one-third of France's cost of the war.

The climactic battle in that conflict came in 1954 at Dien Bien Phu, far to the north. Defending a garrison, the French found themselves surrounded by troops led by General Giap, who slowly but surely tightened the noose. After 56 days of shelling, the French surrendered. Earlier, they had agreed to place Indochina on the agenda of an international conference to be held in Geneva, Switzerland. American Secretary of State John Foster Dulles made a brief appearance at the conference, where he behaved, according to one biographer, "with the pinched distaste of a puritan in a house of ill-repute." In the end, in the push for a settlement, the major powers persuaded the victorious Vietnamese to agree to a temporary partition at the 17th parallel after a ceasefire. Ho Chi Minh and his forces could govern in the north. A puppet government, supported by the United States, would occupy the south after the French departure. Elections in the next year or two would allow the Vietnamese to determine their own fate.

Not many Americans were interested in either Vietnamese conflict or the disposition of the country. In my own case, at the age of nine, I couldn't have cared less about what was going on in that part of the world. But American policy makers, in the administration of Dwight Eisenhower, supported Ngo Dinh Diem, the southern leader, in his refusal to hold the promised elections, and provided him with increasing amounts of support. There seemed to be little understanding that Diem, a Catholic who had been living in exile in the United States at the time of the Geneva Accords, enjoyed little support from the largely Buddhist population. He was an anti-communist, and in the Cold War context, that was enough.

It's tempting to say that I wish we knew then what we know now, but our current unwillingness to stop the madness of invading Iraq makes me wonder if that would have made any difference. In any event, Eisenhower exercised a measure of restraint and avoided a full-scale commitment. But by the time he left office, there were about 1,500 Americans in Vietnam, about 685 of them military advisors (though not active soldiers).

All that changed when John Kennedy became President. When he wasn't cavorting naked in the White House swimming pool with his favorite bimbos, he sometimes played tennis with Bobby on a White House tennis court dressed up in Green Beret garb. JFK and his brother wanted to make sure that the new Special Forces equipment felt right as the nation followed the gauntlet he had flung down in his inaugural address when he proclaimed: "Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country." Meanwhile, the number of Americans increased to about 25,000 – 16,000 of them soldiers, and policy makers assumed arrogantly that they could accomplish their ends at will. As Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara observed, "North Vietnam will never beat us. They can't even make ice cubes."

But Vietnam was a mess. Diem's restrictive religious policies offended the largely Buddhist nation. His rigidity made reform impossible. And the South Vietnamese themselves began to protest what they considered an intolerable state of affairs. One day in June 1963, a Buddhist monk got into his car in Hue, drove down to Saigon, sat down cross-legged at a major intersection in the center of the city, poured gasoline over himself, and lit a match. The front-page headlines that appeared in newspapers around the world alerted people everywhere – me included – to the impending tragedy about to consume us all.

The situation deteriorated quickly. Just before Kennedy's assassination, when angry South Vietnamese generals quietly informed the United States about the possibility of a coup, American leaders gave their tacit consent. The coup occurred, and instead of driving Diem into exile, the protagonists killed him and his equally rigid brother and sister-in-law. Madame Nhu, Diem's sister-in-law, was hardly a sympathetic figure. As monk after monk immolated himself, her public retort – "I could clap hands at seeing another monk barbecue show" – bordered on the obscene. But Kennedy and his top advisers were still disturbed by the murders. Kennedy, however, soon lost his own life, and that propelled Lyndon Johnson into power.

Johnson knew little about foreign affairs. He had made a trip to Vietnam while he was Vice President, and had proclaimed that Diem was a "tough miracle man" – the "Winston Churchill of Asia." Now he found himself face-to-face with Henry Cabot Lodge, the American Ambassador to Vietnam, who had been on his way home to report to Kennedy about the fragile situation in Vietnam, and ended up talking to Johnson instead. When Lodge told Johnson that if wanted to save the country and the entire region, he had to stand firm, Johnson replied, "I am not going to lose Vietnam. I am not going to be the President who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went." With that, the die were cast.

I knew nothing about that conversation at the time, of course. But the consequences soon became clear to us all, for Vietnam was now very much in the news. I followed the campaign of 1964 avidly. That spring, I drove down to Swarthmore University with a friend who went to school there, and listened to Johnson deliver the commencement address. I applauded his domestic efforts that culminated in what we came to call the Great Society. I watched the Republican Party nominate Barry Goldwater, and listened to him argue for an aggressive military stance. And I heard LBJ echo Franklin Roosevelt's comment on the eve of World War II when he said, "We don't want our American boys to do the fighting for Asian boys. We are not going to send American boys nine or ten thousand miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves."

For escalation was in the air. During the campaign, North Vietnamese gunboats attacked an American ship engaged in electronic surveillance in the Gulf of Tonkin. Two days later, reports appeared about another attack, though there is now doubt than any such strike took place. But Johnson denounced this "deliberate aggression on the high seas" and asked for a congressional resolution authorizing "all necessary measures to

repel any armed attacks against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.” It was an all-inclusive resolution, that we now know Johnson had been carrying around in his pockets for several weeks, waiting for an opportunity to present it to Congress. He was delighted with the authorization he received. It was, he said, “like Grandma’s nightshirt. It covered everything.”

As all of this was occurring, Vietnam appeared regularly in the news. It was not yet a daily front-page story, but I was now much more aware of this trouble spot halfway around the world. Like most Americans, though, I was caught up on a “Father Knows Best” syndrome. I had grown up watching that early sitcom, with Robert Young and Jane Wyatt as Jim and Margaret Anderson, working through innocent family dilemmas with their children Betty, Bud, and Kathy. Every week, the family faced another problem, and every week, Father somehow managed to make things right. As we looked beyond the confines of a fabricated family, most of us were willing to make the same assumptions about our national leaders. Hadn’t Franklin Roosevelt led us to victory during World War II. And hadn’t Harry Truman done the right thing in Korea, even if we hadn’t really won that war.

I can recall writing a letter to my own father sometime in my sophomore year in college. I must have been full of myself back then, and I remember pontificating about public affairs. Commenting on the growing focus on Vietnam, I suggested that it was a good idea to support the President, for after all, he knew best. Within days I got a response. My father suggested gently that such a simple-minded acceptance of what we were being told was not necessarily a good thing, and pointed me toward an articulate criticism of American policy by University of Chicago political scientist Hans Morgenthau. I knew nothing of his theory about a “will to power” that was the dominant influence in international politics. But his critique of American foreign policy in the early 1960s was compelling, and forced me to change my mind. From that time on, I read the papers and watched the news much more critically and became increasingly troubled about our national plunge into the quagmire of Vietnam.

Soon after his successful reelection, Johnson escalated the war. While moving forward with his Great Society goals, he decided at the same time to send many more American soldiers to Vietnam, and the number increased from 25,000 at the start of 1965 to 184,000 at the end of the year. The number swelled to 385,000 in 1966, to 485,000 in 1967, and to 543,000 in 1968. And still there was no end in sight. At the same time, Johnson ordered a massive bombing campaign – Operating Rolling Thunder – targeting both the North Vietnam and enemy Viet Cong soldiers in South Vietnam. Worst of all, we now know, thanks to the transcripts historian Michael Bechloss recently edited, that Johnson knew he could never win the war. “I’m very depressed about it,” he declared to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara in mid-1965, “because I see no program from either Defense or State that gives me much hope of doing anything except praying and gasping to hold on during monsoon and hope they’ll quit. I don’t believe they’re *ever* going to quit.” Yet he resolved to push ahead nonetheless.

I worried about the war, but was not overly concerned, for I had a student deferment, and as long as I stayed in school, I was safe from the draft. After graduating from Harvard in 1966, I moved on to Columbia to work first for a Master's degree, then hopefully for a PhD. My draft board continued my deferment, and I continued my studies without further concern. With luck, I would have stayed in school until I was 26, at which time I would no longer be eligible for the draft.

Alas, I got tired of school. In the spring of 1967, I was sitting in the apartment of the woman I was about to marry in a few months, reading the *New Yorker*, when I came across an advertisement for the Peace Corps. I knew all about the Peace Corps. A few college friends had joined after graduation. I had lived in Winthrop House at Harvard, where all three Kennedy brothers had lived, and members of the House viewed JFK as one of our own. But I had never much thought about the Peace Corps for myself. Now I was intrigued by the ad. "Join the Peace Corps. See the world," it said. I read it aloud and said to my fiancée, "Want to join?" I never expected an affirmative answer. After all, I had a lucrative multi-year fellowship at Columbia and she had a good job at an elite secondary school in Manhattan all lined up for the next year. But she said yes. I called Washington the next day, and got the application process underway. We took an exam testing language ability on a beautiful spring afternoon, when about 300,000 other New Yorkers were marching in protest against the war, but we couldn't participate if we were serious about going abroad. Before we knew it, three weeks after our wedding, we were on our way. Ironically, we headed for Southeast Asia, but for the Philippines and not Vietnam.

The campuses where I was a student had been quiet. The first teach-in, where people spoke for and against the war, occurred at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor in 1965, and the format, which soon highlighted only opposition to the war, spread to campuses around the country. But neither Harvard nor Columbia had erupted in protest while I was there. In Peace Corps training on the Big Island of Hawaii, I encountered a good number of people strongly opposed to the struggle, and they helped educate me in my own growing opposition to the war.

As we went through training and embarked for the Philippines, we found ourselves in an awkward position. We were government employees, to be sure, but with a different mission than diplomats or soldiers. According to historian and presidential aide Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., the Peace Corps was meant "to replace protocol-minded, striped-pants officials by reform-minded missionaries of democracy who mixed with the people, spoke the native dialects, ate the food, and involved themselves in local struggles against ignorance and want." But we received our in-country orientation at the American embassy in Manila, and were ultimately responsible to the State Department. We could – and did – distance ourselves from the diplomatic establishment, but were not always sure how far we could go. Some Filipinos, I'm sure thought we were members of the CIA, or, at the very least, diplomatic officials. We felt more independent, and were free to be critical, but were still afraid of going too far. If our protest was too public, the men at least ran the risk of being reclassified 1-A by their draft boards back home.

I was aware of the American military in the Philippines. The United States had bases on a number of islands, and so we saw sailors in Cebu and Olongopo, and soldiers all over the country. Casualties were often flown from Vietnam to Clark Field in the Philippines, where surgeons tried to keep them alive. One Peace Corps friend was fascinated by the war, and went over to Saigon on vacations just to experience the conflict at close range, but I had no desire to accompany him. Even though I was living for two years in Southeast Asia, I was content to keep my distance from the war zone. An old friend from back home who was serving in the Peace Corps in Malaysia asked us to join him in Cambodia to travel to Angor Wat, but I declined the invitation and went to Japan instead, much to my everlasting regret when the Khmer Rouge took over the country and destroyed the semblance of normal life.

All the while, in this period from 1967 to 1969, my fellow volunteers and I anxiously followed the turbulence brought on by the war. The military struggle itself was becoming increasingly intense, and we read about the mounting loss of life in Vietnam. We didn't get to see the nightly news broadcasts, with pictures of body bags and graphs of the body count. But we got a sense of the struggle at second-hand from the periodical press. Meanwhile, the anti-war movement was heating up, and demonstrations on college campuses and in city streets were polarizing American society. "Hey, hey, LBJ. How many kids did you kill today?" was one common chant. "One, two, three, four. We don't want your fucking war!" was another. College deferments were no longer automatic, and students about our age were being drafted and sent to fight. I was astonished to learn of the upheaval at Columbia – one of the quietest campuses I had ever known – in the spring of 1968 and then to read about the rioting at the Democratic national convention in the summer of that year. Many of us felt a profound sense of ambivalence. We were grateful to be far away from the United States, sorry to be missing the chance to protest against the war.

At the same time, the country was changing before our very eyes. In the brief two-year stretch I was abroad, the counterculture came of age. I missed the excitement taking place in the Haight-Ashbury section of San Francisco, and returned home thinking I was about the only person in the world who hadn't smoked marijuana, though that didn't last long. While abroad, we contented ourselves reading about the psychedelic shifts taking place halfway across the globe. Some of the male volunteers grew longer hair and beards, as if in solidarity with friends back home. I resisted both alternatives until terminating for the Peace Corps, for the Filipinos associated beards with the Japanese who had occupied their country – this was just 25 years after the Second World War – and I didn't want to lose whatever effectiveness I might have had. We contented ourselves with dancing to the astonishing new album of the Beatles – Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band – sent to us by family members back home.

The war became much more personal toward the end of my service. I had gotten my Master's degree just before joining the Peace Corps, and now felt ready to go on for a Ph.D. But after two years of living in the sugar cane fields and rice paddies, I couldn't bear the thought of going back to the concrete and chaos of the Columbia campus in New York. When I graduated from college, I had applied for graduate study at Harvard, and

had been offered a fellowship, which I turned down. Now I decided that I wanted to go back to Harvard, and assumed that with a credible college record and my Master's thesis in print, I would be given a fellowship again. Much to my surprise, not only was I granted no financial aid, but I was turned down for admission at the same time. A brief three-line letter informed me of my fate.

I wasn't sure what to do. I realized immediately that I was vulnerable to the draft. It wasn't even clear that a deferment was possible if I got back into school, but now it was late spring and I wasn't sure where I could go. I worried about all of this myself, trying to get advice from family and friends at home. This was, of course, in the days before e-mail. And while a telephone call might have been possible from Manila or Cebu, it would have been prohibitively expensive, and the possibility of calling never crossed my mind.

I later learned, from my sister Karen, who was in high school at the time, that my parents were extremely upset. Worried about the war, even more worried about the draft, they evidently talked about the situation incessantly, much to Karen's chagrin, for she bore the brunt of their frustration and fear. Mercifully, I knew little about this at the time, as I got myself together and made a number of late applications to PhD programs.

As we prepared to leave the Philippines in the summer of 1969, we received draft counseling from the Peace Corps itself. In one of the curious quirks of our federal government, one branch was threatening to take us away, while another was telling us how to resist. We learned about alternatives that others at home were already considering: requesting conscientious objector status; going to Canada resisting the draft and hoping for a sympathetic judge; having a child, thereby gaining a parental deferment; or complying with the draft and hoping for the best. None of the alternatives sounded very good, and I set off for home, unsure where I might be in the fall, increasingly worried that I might end up spending another couple of years in a different part of Southeast Asia at a point when I finally knew what I wanted to do instead.

Somehow, I managed to bumble along. I spent about six weeks in Japan en route home. While there, I learned that Yale had accepted me into the doctoral program. It didn't even matter that I was going to pay my way as the 49th member of a class in which the other 48 were all on full fellowship. At least I had a place to go.

About a day after I reached the United States, my draft board in New Jersey reclassified me 1-A. Now that draft was not just a remote possibility; it loomed over my head. A few months later, in November, I was asked to report for my physical exam at the draft center in Newark.

My physical turned out just like Arlo Guthrie's in his marvelous song – and film – *Alice's Restaurant*. I arrived bright and early, to face a written exam, monitored by a clean-shaven sergeant who threatened to disembowel us if we made deliberate mistakes. After passing that hurdle, we had to take a hearing test. My headphones turned out to be defective – I got no sound out of one ear – but the military officials in charge thought I

was playing resistance games and promised to draft me on the spot unless I report what I was hearing with both ears. Eventually, I got a new set of headphones, and managed to pass that part of the exam.

My last hope was the brief meeting with a physician at the end. When I had applied for the Peace Corps, my regular doctor had carefully neglected to mention childhood allergies that might have kept me out of service. Now he recalled those attacks, and carefully documented them in writing for the military officials. At the same time I had written to the Filipino doctor who had treated all of us on the island of Leyte. Jaime Gatchalian was a wonderful physician, with his own clinic where he performed surgery and provided all kinds of medical care. He also spoke superb English, and I never managed to beat him at Scrabble in the entire two years I was overseas. Facing my draft physical, I asked Jaime to document the infection, much like athlete's foot, he had treated in my toes and in my groin. He wrote back by return mail with full documentation of what he called a tropical fungus *from* my toes *to* my groin. The doctor took one look at the letter, smiled and said, "We don't want you, kid." Much to my relief, I was free.

I must admit, I felt guilty at the same time. Many of the other people taking physicals were African American. Some of them were eager to go into the service; others were not. But I had the connections and was able to work the system to avoid the war. As a silly reaction to that sense of embarrassment, I threw away the voucher that would have provided me with a free lunch. A few days – or maybe weeks – later, the first draft lottery was held. I drew a very high number – somewhere in the 300s – meaning that I would have been safe even if I had passed the physical. But I hadn't known that at the time.

Back in New Haven, I finally had a chance to get involved in the protest movement. A mobilization rally against the war was being planned for Washington, D.C. in the fall, and a number of graduate school friends were planning to attend. I decided to go with them. I didn't have a car at the time – with no fellowship I could hardly afford a car – and we all ended up riding for seven or eight hours in an old yellow school bus enlisted for the march. On the bus I got to know a number of people who are still fast friends. Even more important, I had a chance to feel part of the opposition campaign, to be among the several hundred thousand who descended on Washington that day. I listened to the music – songs from the civil rights movement recycled for the antiwar effort – and to the speech of antiwar activists. But by the time President Richard Nixon rose at dawn to talk to demonstrators at the Lincoln Memorial – about football of all things – our party had gone home.

As things turned out, there were even more fireworks at New Haven later that year. In the spring of 1970, Yale, a painfully quiet campus so far, finally erupted. The immediate cause was the arrest of Black Panther activist Bobby Seale for allegedly having murdered another Black Panther. Given the police track record with the Panthers in other cities, it was hard to believe that Seale was ever going to emerge from imprisonment alive. The African American community began to mobilize, and radical

elements at the university joined the campaign. Soon a rally that came to focus on the war as well as discrimination was planned for the New Haven green, and organizers from outside flocked to the city. Among them were Abby Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, David Dellinger, and William Kunstler, all activists who had earned their stripes at the Democratic national convention of 1968 and other campaigns against both racism and the war. The huge two-day rally took place around May Day, and it was a lively affair. The community had been frantic as the crucial weekend approached, and had taken emergency precautions. City officials had welded manhole covers shut, to block off access to underground tunnels. National Guardsmen lined the streets. Professors stood guard at labs and other spots to ensure that disruptions didn't occur. In the end, this turned out to be politics as theater, and was entertaining for all. It also helped that Yale University President Kingman Brewster took some of the wind out of the radical sails by publicly declaring his belief that a black revolutionary probably could not get a fair trial in the United States.

At just about the same time, Richard Nixon invaded Cambodia. American planes had been flying clandestine combat missions for some time already, but now Nixon announced that the United States would not stand back like a "pitiful helpless giant" while the Viet Cong used Cambodia as a sanctuary in pressing its own attack. College campuses around the country erupted. Yale by now was in the thick of things, but managed to stay peaceful. At Kent State, up the road from here, the university was less lucky. After Governor James Rhodes called in the National Guard to quell the disruption and the soldiers ended up firing on demonstrators, four lay dead and nine were wounded. Even more disruptions occurred as the nation reeled in shock at the unwarranted attack. Yale, like many universities, closed early that spring, with students free to go home without taking final exams.

Despite the tragedy at Kent State, Nixon managed to deflate the protest movement by his policy of bringing American troops home. His effort at what he called Vietnamization paid off. Once American troops began to return, the American public proved less consumed with the war. Never mind that the bombing campaign became more intense, culminating in the Christmas bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong on the eve of a peace settlement in late 1972. American boys were coming home, and that was all that counted.

A ceasefire was finally signed in early 1973, and the United States effectively left the war. When at last the North Vietnamese consolidated their control over the entire country in the spring of 1975, Gerald Ford, Nixon's successor as President, called for another \$1 billion in aid, even as the South Vietnamese were abandoning arms and supplies in chaotic retreat. But mercifully Congress refused, and at long last the war came to an end. The *New Republic* wryly observed that Secretary of State Henry Kissinger brought peace to Vietnam the same way Napoleon brought peace to Europe in the early 19th century: by losing.

We in the United States have spent the last 25 years trying to come to terms with the war. Ironically, the conflict ended at the very time just as I was completing my

graduate training and beginning to teach about it. And so, inevitably, Vietnam has been an important part of my life. I took my teen-age daughter to see the movie *Platoon* when it came out some years ago, for I wanted her to know more about the struggle. Every time I travel to Washington, D.C., I go down to the mall, and wander by the simple, stark, stunning Vietnam Memorial, thinking about the war dead, Americans and Vietnamese, as well as the economic and political consequences of the war.

But I never really thought about going to Vietnam until this year. For much of the past quarter century, it would have been difficult, for in the aftermath of the war, the United States imposed an embargo on trade with Vietnam and refused to grant diplomatic recognition to the victorious nation. In 1986, in response to a Vietnamese policy of economic liberalization, a free market began to flourish, tempting nations who saw the possibilities of growing trade. By the end of the decade, a number of countries had begun to break with the United States over the issue of the embargo and to trade with Vietnam. There was money to be made and investment encouraged economic growth. In 1994, President Bill Clinton lifted the American trade embargo, and in 1995, 20 years after the end of the war, the United States finally extended diplomatic ties to Vietnam. Claiming that the two nations had made progress on finding and identifying the MIAs – those missing in action – Clinton took the step his predecessors could not take and opened the way to a much closer relationship between the two countries. In the year 2000, he became the first President to visit a unified Vietnam.

This year, I jumped at an opportunity to go to Vietnam myself. Once there, I was overwhelmed with what I saw. I've traveled extensively in developing countries, and have seen nations with crumbling infrastructures all over the world. Vietnam seemed to me to be far better off than many of those countries. There appeared to be a sense of purpose in both the cities and the countryside. In Kenya, it's common to see people loitering by the side of a road, not working, even if there is work to be had. There was less aimless lingering in Vietnam. The roads I traveled on, from Hanoi through Haiphong and Hue, and on to Ho Chi Minh City – formerly Saigon – were all paved and well-maintained, filled with cyclos – bicycle taxis – motorbikes, and cars. There was a bustling vitality, in part a result of the youth of the nation. Today, 60 percent of the population is under 30 years of age, 85 percent under 40.

The first years of independence were rough. Hanoi imposed a brutal land collectivization policy and forced more than 400,000 people into “reeducation” camps, where some stayed for a decade. Truc, our Vietnamese guide told us the story of his family and its troubles. His father had been an air traffic controller at the Saigon airport. He had to work during the final evacuation, and so his family ended up staying behind, despite an eagerness to flee, in 1975. Truc's father spent several years in an unpleasant reeducation camp before he was finally freed. But even then, because of his associations with the South, he had a hard time finding work. Meanwhile, the government imposed its communist framework nationwide, and restricted freedom of speech and religion. A decade or so later, with the difficulties of its approach visible, the government shifted course. Maintaining its verbal allegiance to communism, it ended the collectivization of agriculture and encouraged free enterprise in a market-based economy. In 2000, the

government signed a bilateral trade agreement with the United States that promises increased commerce. The results are clear. Business is booming. New buildings are springing up all over the country. And there is an energy that cannot be ignored.

All of this is accompanied by strains, to be sure. Economic liberalism encourages movement toward democratization, yet the government is resisting such a move, at least formally. Younger people dominate the economic sphere, while elderly Vietnamese, in a Confucian society that venerates seniority, dominate the political realm. What will happen next in the upper echelons of government is still unclear.

There is still serious poverty in Vietnam. Listen to a description by Vietnamese-American Andrew Pham, in his recent book *Catfish and Mandala*, about a bicycle journey through Vietnam: “Saigon was thick with almsfolk, every market, every street corner maggoty with misshapen men and women hawking their open sores and pus-yellow faces for pennies.” But poverty is not the only thing that meets the eye.

I was struck most of all by the lack of hostility toward Americans and the apparent unconcern with the war. We in America, myself included, remain obsessed with the struggle. We mourn our 58,000 dead, and find it hard to forget. Vietnam lost an estimated three million people in the war, and yet the conflict has seemed to fade into the background. There are war cemeteries all over, to be sure, and the Cu Chi tunnels – not far from Saigon – remain one of the country’s most popular tourist sites. But I finally realized that what the Vietnamese call the American War is but a small blip on the larger radar screen. After all, the Vietnamese fought the Chinese, Japanese, and French long before they fought the United States. And even more important, they prevailed in each and every struggle. Victory goes a long way in undermining a sense of anger and irritation at the other side.

Younger Vietnamese – and there are many in this country of 80 million – cannot remember the war or the turbulence it brought. Older Vietnamese sometimes look back on it with a sense of glee. An elderly 80-year-old North Vietnamese general, chuckling to himself, related to us how his unit trained bees to attack Americans. The Vietnamese fed the bees on sugar water laced with salt, providing a solution found nowhere else in nature, so the bees always returned to the Vietnamese site. Meanwhile, Vietnamese soldiers stole American soap, put it in the hive, and then shook the hive, making the bees angry. When they encountered Americans with that same soap smell, the anger burst forth, leading them to sting the enemy soldiers.

Ironically, the United States is achieving in defeat many of the goals it fought for in the war. A united Vietnam has proved to be a stabilizing force in the region. Vietnam has stayed away from independent Thailand. Vietnam helped drive out Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, and end the genocide of the killing fields there. Vietnam has become a trading partner of the United States, and can look forward to prosperous years ahead.

But Vietnam still remains an open wound for many Americans and a focal point for my own life. Last year, while teaching a course on the 1960s, my students did an oral history exercise, in which many of them spoke to their parents about the war. Some reported that fathers or uncles still would not speak about their experiences in the struggle. At one point, I invited W. D. Ehrhart, a veteran who has written eloquently and extensively about his experiences in the war, to speak to the class, and he had my students' undivided attention. Last month, Tim O'Brien, perhaps the best-known American author dealing with the war, was riveting in a Miami University convocation address as he talked about his involvement, and ours, in that devastating struggle.

I find myself drawn inexorably back to Vietnam. Last summer, while over there, I began playing with the idea of bringing students there in connection with a course about the war. Just last month, I was able to propose such a course, and to raise the money to subsidize such a trip, that will occur for 15 Miami University seniors during spring break this March. There has been real enthusiasm so far, and the major problem is going to be to choose who will have the chance to go. For my students, born long after the conflict ended, the war is something they want to learn more about. For me, it will be another chance to visit Vietnam again at long last, in the continuing effort to deal with the impact of Vietnam on my mind.
