

From Pennridge to Vietnam: What I Knew and Didn't Know

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A talk I gave to the students of my old high school, Pennridge, Perkasio, PA, 52 years after I graduated.

Let me start by telling you that I am a 1966 graduate of Pennridge High School. I am also a veteran of the American War in Vietnam. I was not drafted. I volunteered for the US Marine Corps when I was 17 years old, went to Vietnam when I was 18 years old, and earned the rank of sergeant by the time I was 19 & ½ years old. I was wounded in combat, and eventually received the Good Conduct Medal and an Honorable Discharge.

My first memories of television, back in 1966, were of Soviet tanks crushing the Hungarian Revolution in 1956. I'd seen and heard Nikita Khrushchev pounding his shoe on the podium at the UN while shouting, "We will bury you." I'd awakened one morning to the Berlin Wall, and I'd lived through the Cuban Missile Crisis. When Lyndon Johnson said that if we didn't fight the Reds in Vietnam, we'd be fighting them on Waikiki Beach, it sounded very much as if my country needed me.

I didn't know that Franklin Roosevelt had all-but-handed Eastern Europe over to the Soviets at Yalta in 1945. Or that the Soviet Union had lost as many people in WWII as all other nations combined, and was not about to see this slaughter repeated in another war with the West. Or that the Soviet Union was, by 1962, completely encircled by US nuclear ballistic missiles. Most of all, I did not know that what was happening in Vietnam had nothing to do with whatever worldwide struggle between communism and capitalism was actually taking place. I did not know that Ho Chi Minh had spent a lifetime trying to free his country from foreign domination. That the Americans had simply replaced colonial France in that struggle. That in fact Ho Chi Minh was deftly playing Russians and Chinese off against each other in order to navigate between them and pursue his own agenda, which remained what it had always been: independence for his country. I did not know that the nation I thought I was defending from the scourge of communism—the Saigon-based Republic of Vietnam—never really existed. I did not know that Vietnam posed no danger to my country, nor that I was in danger only because I'd gone half way around the world to make trouble for the Vietnamese. Interestingly enough, as soon as I went home, the Vietnamese communists stopped trying to kill me. But I digress.

Because of what I did not know when I got to Vietnam, imagine my confusion when I discovered that the people I was sent to help didn't welcome me with open arms, didn't seem to like me, didn't seem to want me there or appreciate my help. But as my thirteen months in Vietnam slowly ground forward, I regularly witnessed and participated in the destruction of civilian homes, the most brutal interrogations of civilians, and the routine killing of men, women, and children along with their crops and livestock. And I began to realize that the Vietnamese people hated us because we destroyed their forests with chemical defoliants, burned their fields with napalm, flattened their villages with 500-pound bombs, and called them gooks, chinks, slopes, dinks, and zipperheads while turning their sons into shoeshine boys and their daughters into whores. No wonder my so-called allies and brothers-in-arms, the South Vietnamese army, seemed to be indifferent cowards with no will to fight while my enemies, the Viet

Cong, seemed willing to fight to the bitter end, though they possessed only the most rudimentary of resources.

I once, for instance, killed a man in an ambush who was dressed in a thin cotton shirt and pants with sandals made from discarded tires (we called them Ho Chi Minh sandals). He had in one pocket a few balls of rice wrapped in a banana leaf. His weapon was a 1936 French bolt action MAS-36 with a bent hide-away bayonet, a stock held together with wire, and a bamboo strip to replace the leather sling that had rotted away a decade or more earlier. He had five bullets, and the barrel of his rifle was so pitted that I dared not fire it for fear it would explode in my face. And that is how that man had gone out to do battle with the most powerful army on earth.

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You can kill people like that, but you cannot defeat them.

One has to wonder why one side that seems to have everything going for it won't fight while the other side that has nothing going for it won't surrender, and I sure as heck did wonder. But I had no way to find my way through the myriad welter of information and experience that was pouring in on me as my time in Vietnam unfolded. It simply did not make sense. Nothing made sense. It was all just crazy. Or seemed so.

I returned to the United States from Vietnam in March 1968. I spent the next two years and two months trying to convince myself that it didn't matter to me what was happening in Vietnam anymore because I was out of it, and I still had all ten fingers and all ten toes; it was no longer my problem.

Then in early May 1970, soldiers of the Ohio National Guard opened fire on students protesting the war at Kent State University, murdering four of them and leaving another permanently paralyzed. The news stunned me. It wasn't enough to send us halfway around the world to die, I thought; now our own government was killing us in the streets of our own country.

That was the day I joined the anti-war movement. It was also the day I set out to discover what was happening in Vietnam and why. What I discovered was even more shocking than what had happened at Kent State.

I learned that Ho Chi Minh and his Viet Minh army had been allies of the US in fighting Japan during the second World War, that American OSS officers had worked with Ho, training and equipping his men. I learned that State Department diplomat Abbott Moffat had spent time with Ho, and had determined that Ho was first and foremost a nationalist, and urged the US to support Ho's bid for independence from French colonial rule. I learned that instead, the US had supported France's war to retake its colony, paying 80 per cent of the cost of the French War, and when France finally threw in the towel, I learned, the US had plucked an obscure Vietnamese Catholic mandarin from a Maryknoll seminary in New Jersey and set him up to be the leader of South Vietnam, a nation invented by none other than the United States.

I learned that the regime this man, Ngo Dinh Diem, created was no more democratic than Ho Chi Minh's regime in North Vietnam, nor—when Diem failed and was overthrown by

a US-backed coup d'etat—were his successor military governments any more concerned with democracy. I learned that the attack on the USS Maddox in the Gulf of Tonkin in early August 1964 was not unprovoked, the Maddox was not operating in international waters but within the territorial waters of North Vietnam in support of combat operations against North Vietnam, and the Johnson Administration knew it at the time. The second attack a few days later never actually happened, and the Johnson Administration knew it at the time. The Johnson Administration knowingly and flagrantly lied to the American people and the Congress of the United States. This is not speculation. This is fact, provable by examining the documents compiled

at the order of Robert McNamara himself and commonly known as the *Pentagon Papers*.

I learned a whole lot more than these few facts, but time does not permit me to give you complete history lesson. If you're interested, you might read Marilyn Young's *The Vietnam Wars: 1945-1990*, which is by far the best single-volume history of the war.

But perhaps the most important thing I learned about is the long history of China and Vietnam. From the 2nd century BCE to the 10th century AD, China occupied and ruled Vietnam. Maps of China all through this long millennium show what was then Vietnam, extending down as far as Hue, as a province of China. The Vietnamese saw things differently, however. All through this period, there was rebellion after rebellion after rebellion—the Trung Sisters, Li Bi, Ly Tu Tien & Dinh Tien, Mai Thuc Loan, Phung Hung, Duong Thanh, or Hwang Chao—all led rebellions, and all were crushed, until finally in 938 the Vietnamese rebelled yet another time, and this time succeeded in defeating their Chinese occupiers and throwing them out. Three successive Chinese invasions, along with two Mongol invasions and a Siamese invasion, were all defeated over the next nine centuries before the arrival of the French on Vietnamese shores. A thousand years of resistance to Chinese occupation, nine hundred years of successfully defending Vietnamese independence, and—what I have not yet mentioned but will now—immediate and unceasing resistance to French colonization even before French rule had been fully consolidated.

The US began to intervene in Vietnam in 1945, first by proxy via the French, then from 1954 to 1965 through increasing levels of direct support to a succession of dictatorships in South Vietnam, and finally by direct insertion of US combat troops on a massive scale. Within three years of the arrival of the first Marines in 1965, the American people were growing skeptical of the war. Within five years, huge numbers of Americans wanted the war to end. Within seven years, most Americans no longer cared what happened in and to Vietnam so long as young Americans stopped dying there.

The Vietnamese resisted Chinese domination for a millennium. For one thousand years. Americans were tired of it within a decade. When you understand that the Vietnamese were

prepared to fight us for as long as it took: 10 years, 50 years, 500 years; when you understand that there never would come a time when the Vietnamese would lay down their arms, accept foreign domination, register Republican, and go shopping at the mall, the idea that Americans could ever have won the Vietnam War becomes, quite frankly, chimerical, absurd, even ridiculous.

Let me tell you about an interesting evening I spent in post-war Hanoi in 1985. I was having dinner with two old North Vietnamese generals who between them had six stars and 85 years of experience with war and fighting. When I learned that one of them had commanded a unit fighting against the Marines at an outpost where I'd been stationed called Con Thien, I asked him what he thought of the Marines.

"You were—brave," he'd replied, a twinkle in his voice.

"You are too diplomatic," I'd said. "Seriously, what did you think of us?"

"Your fixed positions were useless," the general replied. "And you were too dependent on your helicopters and air support. You did not know how to become one with the land, and so you sacrificed true mobility for a false sense of security."

"Would it have mattered if we had done things differently?" I had asked.

"No," he'd replied after a pause. "Probably not. History was not on your side. We were fighting for our homeland. What were you fighting for?"

After an even longer pause, the only honest answer I could give him was, "Nothing that mattered." And indeed, though the communists won and the US was sent ignominiously packing, the world did not come to an end, the universe did not implode, all of you are still able to worship in the church of your choice and marry whomever you like and think whatever you want to think.

Not only that, but the US and Vietnam are now great friends. The Vietnamese government and military receive financial and technical aid from the US. The US and Vietnam regularly hold joint naval exercises. Just recently, the aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson paid a port call to Da Nang, the first place in Vietnam where US Marine combat forces had come ashore in March 1965.

Why are the US and Vietnam so chummy these days? Because the US needs all the help it can get to counter the rising influence of China in Southeast Asia. But the question should not be "why are we so chummy these days," but rather why didn't US policymakers know enough in the 1940s and 1950s and 1960s to realize that we could have made Vietnam an ally over 70 years ago, saving millions of Vietnamese, Laotians, Cambodians, and Americans a whole lot of blood and grief and treasure.

And it makes me wonder what obvious realities and truths are US policymakers missing in the world today as we wage war in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere in the Muslim and Arab worlds. What preconceived notions and arrogant assumptions are US policymakers making today that will appear, in the cold light of history, to be sheer folly and head-shaking stupidity?

You might want to ponder all that before you thank me for my service.



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