

# Coming to Terms with America's Vietnam War

by Gail G. Billington

From Nov. 16 to 19, President William, with his wife and daughter and an estimated 1,000-person official entourage, made an historic state visit to Vietnam, 25 years after the United States withdrew, politically and militarily, from Saigon. Clinton is the first U.S. President to set foot in Vietnam since former President Richard Nixon's brief touchdown in 1969. By all accounts, the American delegation was generously received by the government, and overwhelmed by the warm reception of the population, who turned out in tens, if not hundreds, of thousands in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, formerly Saigon, to welcome the Clintons. U.S. Trade Representative Charlene Barshefsky summed up the visit: "Of all the trips we have taken over the last eight years, this is the one that will always stand out. This is a very emotional visit."

It is quite possible that this will be President Clinton's last official trip abroad as President, with the lingering, but unlikely, possibility of a trip to North Korea in the next eight weeks. The Clinton Administration has achieved the greatest progress toward reconciliation with Vietnam since the 1975 U.S. withdrawal, a task backed by a bipartisan group of former Vietnam veterans in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, and much broader backing among veterans across the country, without whose support this trip would have been well-nigh inconceivable. One such veteran and former prisoner of war, whose role has been crucial to transforming U.S.-Vietnamese relations, is U.S. Ambassador to Hanoi Pete Peterson, a former Congressman from Florida.

The visit was a direct result of the process launched within the first year of Clinton's Presidency, which led to the lifting of the 19-year-old U.S. trade embargo on Vietnam in February 1994, followed in July 1995 with restoring full diplomatic relations. In May 1996, then-Congressman Peterson was named Ambassador, and on July 13, 2000, the two countries signed a landmark trade agreement, which still awaits ratification by national legislatures in both countries.

Today, Vietnam is a nation of 79 million people, making it the third largest member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and within range of the ten most populous countries in the world. An estimated 60% of the population were born after Vietnam's "American War." Of that 60%, some 1.4 million youth enter the job market every year.

## No Miracles Expected

President Clinton set the stage for the trip in a statement delivered on Armistice Day at Arlington National Cemetery: "In our national memory, Vietnam was a war. But Vietnam is also a country emerging from almost 50 years of conflict, upheaval, and isolation, and turning its face to a very different world, a country that can succeed in this new global age only if it becomes more interdependent and open to the world. . . . I will make clear to Vietnam that we expect continued cooperation. I will also offer the support of the American people as Vietnam becomes more open to the world, promoting trade and more ties among our people and championing human rights and religious freedom. . . . I go to open a new chapter in our relationship with its people."

National Security Adviser Sandy Berger and National Economic Adviser Gene Sperling downplayed the prospects of any spectacular breakthroughs during the trip, despite the fact that the President's arrival coincided with the arrival of some 64 U.S. business leaders, for their own mission to discuss investment opportunities and to address existing obstacles to investment. At least ten major deals were reportedly negotiated during the Presidential visit, the largest of which was the initialing of a letter of intent between Vietnam Airlines and Boeing for the purchase of three wide-body jets, worth \$480,000, barely beating out French competitors.

U.S. construction firms Stanley Consultants and the Louis Berger group won a contract to supervise the building of the Vietnamese section of a major road link connecting the Vietnamese coast to Bangkok, Thailand via a route through Laos and Thailand's northeast, under the Asian Development Bank-sponsored Greater Mekong Subregion. This was perhaps the only reference to this crucial infrastructure program during the entire trip. (*EIR* reviewed the GMS plan in its May 26, 2000 issue.)

## Talking Past Each Other?

There is no question that the Clintons were profoundly moved by the phenomenal popular reception they received, both in Hanoi and in Ho Chi Minh City, as well as the unprecedented access to the public they were accorded by the government, starting with President Clinton's nationally televised address to an audience of 600 students at Hanoi National University on Nov. 17. In addition to a state dinner in Hanoi, President Clinton held private meetings with President Tran Duc Luong, Prime Minister Phan Van Khai, and Communist Party General Secretary Le Kha Phieu.

President Clinton paid homage to America's and Vietnam's war dead, referring to the latter in one statement as "the other names on the wall," referring to the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. He joined the twin sons of a U.S. pilot in witnessing the attempted retrieval of their father's remains from a jet crash-site, and took part in a somber ceremony to repatriate the remains of three other U.S. soldiers, representing three of the armed services. On



*President Bill Clinton greets Vietnamese officials after a signing ceremony at the Presidential Palace in Hanoi on Nov. 17. A bust of the late revolutionary leader Ho Chi Minh is in the background.*

that occasion, President Clinton announced that he would turn over to Vietnamese authorities 350,000 pages of documents, followed by another 100,000 soon to be released, to aid Vietnam in locating the remains of some of their 300,000 missing in action, even though Vietnamese authorities have made clear that they lack the means to conduct such intensive searches. Rather, they have prioritized landmine removal and medical treatment for those suffering the continuing effects of dioxin poisoning, in order to prolong the lives of the survivors. A U.S. pledge to assist in developing a database for tracking unexploded ordnance, a pledge of a further \$1.8 million for landmine removal, and allocation of \$22.5 million over the next five years to combat HIV/AIDS, will further that objective.

The greater challenge in President Clinton's trip lies less in coming to terms with past wars, than it does with avoiding the wars ahead, especially, in relation to the direction of global economic policy. Despite U.S. press hype about quite plausible factional differences within the Vietnamese government between "reformers" and, presumably, "hard-line socialists," it should come as no surprise that Hanoi is looking over President Clinton's shoulder to see who and what comes next in Washington. They are not alone in indulging in an abundance of caution.

Difficulties arose from the content of the message delivered by President Clinton, and others in his entourage, in particular U.S. Trade Representative Charlene Barshefsky. U.S. relations with Vietnam, since 1975, have been held hostage to the issue of accounting for U.S. personnel missing in action. Ahead of this trip, five U.S. Senators, representing

both sides of the aisle, lobbied the President to deliver a strong message from the United States in support of greater "freedom of information, freedom of religion, and human rights." Under such domestic constraints, compounded by Clinton's "lame-duck" status, the President did deliver that message in every statement he issued, albeit far more delicately than one could imagine either Al Gore or George W. Bush could conceive. However, in so nailing the "human rights, rule of law, globalization" catechism on the government's door, President Clinton took the risk of appearing to be making an appeal to the majority of the population born after "the American War," against the leadership in power.

Vietnam, rightfully, has extreme pride in having won its independence, in wars against the French and the Americans, but the price of those wars set the physical economy back by decades, and left it without the resources to overcome the human and physical deficits. The United States, weighed down by its own war grief, has yet to face up to the reality of what it exacted from Vietnam. Consider the following: Estimates of the cost of the war to the United States range between \$350 and 500 billion; in total, some 8.7 million Americans performed Vietnam-era military service; 2 million of them fought in Vietnam or operated offshore; U.S. forces suffered an estimated total of 58,000 killed, of which 47,244 were in battle, with 153,329 serious casualties, 150,375 minor casualties, and 2,483 missing in action.

On the other side, U.S. bombers dropped 6.162 million tons of bombs on the country, equal to more than three times the total tonnage dropped on Japan and Germany in World War II, killing an estimated 300,000 civilians in the south and

65,000 in the north. South Vietnamese forces lost an estimated 223,748 killed and 570,600 wounded, and North Vietnamese forces lost 660,000 killed and an unknown number wounded. As many as 3 million Vietnamese died as a result of the war, 1 million military and 2 million civilians, with 300,000 missing in action. The U.S. used an estimated 20 million gallons of herbicides to clear the tropical rainforest, which led to the death or injury of 400,000 people directly, and is believed to have contributed to severe deformities in another half-million children born to North Vietnamese soldiers who fought in the south.

Since 1994, the United States has provided less than \$50 million in humanitarian aid to Vietnam, while Vietnam, as one of the conditions for reestablishing relations, must pay back \$145 million in U.S. loans *extended to the former South Vietnamese government*, loans that Hanoi will continue to pay, with interest, for another 20 years.

At present, the United States ranks ninth among investors in Vietnam, with projects worth about \$1 billion. Current Vietnamese exports to the United States are mainly seafood, footwear, and garments. If the trade agreement is ratified, trade could increase to \$800 million in the first year after ratification, and Vietnam's Trade Ministry projects that the total could rise to \$3 billion by 2005. But until both sides ratify the bill, punitive tariffs of 14% and higher, mean that Vietnamese goods are overwhelmingly kept out of the U.S. market.

When President Clinton urged Vietnam, repeatedly, to open up to free market economics and globalization, surely, he could not have been surprised by the response from President Tran Duc Luong: "The war has taken a very heavy toll on Vietnam. As such, the Vietnamese people all come to the view that the U.S. government should be aware of its responsibility for the tremendous losses that the Vietnamese people have suffered."

With the examples of Russia and the former East bloc countries before them, the Vietnamese are understandably cautious. One "man in the street" commented to foreign journalists: "What exactly do the foreign companies want? Foreign investors don't just bring money. They also bring outside influences that are out of step with Vietnam's values." Journalist Clay Chandler reported in the Nov. 20 *Washington Post* that aides travelling with President Clinton insisted that the huge state sector in Vietnam must be privatized, starting with

telecommunications and banking. The much-ballyhooed comments of Communist Party General Secretary Le Kha Phieu in his meeting with President Clinton have to be seen in this light: "The resistance wars brought the Vietnamese people national independence and reunification to advance the country towards socialism, so for the Vietnamese people, the war was not ultimately a story of darkness, sadness, and unhappiness. . . . Vietnam waged the resistance war to end the country's occupation by imperialists. But why did the U.S. forces invade Vietnam, which did not seek to invade the U.S.?"

### **Attempt at Reconciliation**

Throughout his trip, President Clinton conveyed a message of reconciliation and offered partnership to build a better future for both nations. He also referenced the long history of U.S.-Vietnamese contacts, noting in his speech to students at Hanoi National University how Thomas Jefferson tried, but failed, to establish trade ties with Vietnam during his administration, after acquiring rice samples for cultivation. Newly released research shed even more light on repeated efforts over more than 50 years by independent Vietnam's founding father Ho Chi Minh, to secure U.S. support for lifting the colonial yoke from his country. Ho studied the writings of America's Founding Fathers, admired Abraham Lincoln, and incorporated into the text of his declaration of independence for Vietnam, the fundamental idea in the American Declaration of Independence: "All men are created equal. They are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." As Ho himself said in later life, "It was patriotism and not communism that originally inspired me."

It is the United States that changed. After the death of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in April 1945, the U.S. abandoned Roosevelt's determination to bring an end to the European colonial grip on Asia, Africa and Ibero-America. The Anglophiles in the Truman and Eisenhower Administrations, centered on Allen and John Foster Dulles, steered the United States into the disastrous Cold War, from which the world has yet to recover. The United States foolishly took on fighting the colonial wars for the European powers.

In one of his last speeches in Vietnam, at the site of a wholly computerized container shipping terminal in Ho Chi Minh City, President Clinton declared: "I have been deeply moved by my visit here. I came here, in part because I believe that America and Vietnam are linked not just by a shared and often tragic past that must be honored and remembered, but that we have a bright future that we can build together to liberate our people and their potential.

"The years of animosity are past. Today we have a shared interest in your well-being and your prosperity. We have a stake in your future and we wish to be your partners. We wish you success."

The Vietnamese would like to believe us; can they?

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