

McCain in Vietnam: the ugly face of American imperialism

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The twenty-fifth anniversary of victory of the National Liberation Front in Vietnam was marked by parades and official ceremonies in Ho Chi Minh City and elsewhere in the country, and by a flood of media commentary in the United States, where the historic defeat of American imperialism by the Vietnamese people still rankles in US ruling circles.

On April 30, 1975 Vietnamese military forces marched into Saigon, capital of the puppet regime of South Vietnam, completing the reunification of the country after a more than 30-year struggle against Japanese, French and American intervention. It was the culmination of one of the great popular revolutionary struggles of the twentieth century, in which more than three million Vietnamese were killed, and millions more were wounded, injured, burned, poisoned by chemical defoliants, or turned into homeless refugees.

The last American diplomatic and military officials fled the city aboard helicopters, along with thousands of stooges in the corrupt military dictatorship of Nguyen Van Thieu. So rapid and panicky was the withdrawal that, on the waiting aircraft carriers in the South China Sea, Navy seamen had to push helicopters over the side after their passengers disembarked, to make room for subsequent waves of incoming aircraft fleeing Saigon.

Despite the commitment of more than half a million troops, unmatched capabilities in terms of firepower, total control of the air and sea, and enormous superiority in economic resources, the US military could not prevail over an opponent whose will to fight was seemingly inexhaustible. Vietnam was a shattering experience from which neither the American ruling class nor American society as a whole have ever recovered, and it was one which left the Pentagon military establishment deeply shaken.

This enduring bitterness was on display last week in the person of Senator John McCain, the Arizona Republican who was defeated for his party's presidential nomination by George W. Bush. The former Navy pilot, who dropped bombs on the Vietnamese people and then was a prisoner of war in Hanoi for five and a half years, paid a visit to the country on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary, a tour paid for by NBC's *Today* program.

McCain played a key role in mobilizing congressional support for the Clinton administration's restoration of diplomatic and trade relations with Vietnam in 1994-95, and he has visited the country a half a dozen times since then. But his latest trip had a much different tone. It followed his racist comments during the South Carolina primary, in which he repeatedly used the slur "gooks" to refer to his Vietnamese captors.

In both Hanoi, the country's capital, and Ho Chi Minh City, the former Saigon, McCain made provocative attacks on the Vietnamese, concluding with the bald claim that "the wrong guys" won the war. "I think that they lost millions of their best people who left by boat, thousands by execution and hundreds of thousands who went to re-education camps," McCain told reporters as he toured Ho Chi Minh City.

He also sharply criticized the policies of the current regime, claiming that "some in the Vietnamese government don't want" a positive relationship with the United States. "There's a difference in the attitude here of the government toward foreign investment, toward a trade agreement. I see the hammer and sickle out here on the banners," he said. "I'm a bit concerned about both the policies and attitudes, and the increase in corruption in this country."

McCain's tour and his comments had an immediate

political motivation. US officials have made no secret of their impatience with the pace of Vietnam's opening to the world capitalist market, an opening which was initiated by the Stalinist authorities in Hanoi in 1986 under the slogan “doi moi,” but which slowed significantly after the 1997 Asian financial crisis, which first emerged in nearby Thailand. A US-Vietnam trade agreement was negotiated in principle last year, but the Vietnamese government has pulled back from signing or implementing the deal, a turnabout which McCain denounced on several occasions during his trip.

But there is a deeper significance to his remarks. They are typical of the arrogance of American imperialism, which has never reconciled itself to defeat at the hands of a largely peasant nation. While McCain gives sermons to the Vietnamese, let us recall that American military forces carried out mass executions, bombed civilians, defoliated half the country, carried out rape and torture, burned villages, shot children, threw prisoners out of helicopters and cut off the ears of people both alive and dead, keeping them as mementos and trading them for cans of beer. Not every soldier perpetrated such crimes individually, of course, but the military intervention as a whole was of a brutal, anti-democratic, imperialist character, which inevitably found expression in such sadistic conduct.

What can only be characterized as crimes against humanity and war crimes were planned at the highest levels of the Pentagon brass and the Johnson and Nixon administrations, where men in expensive suits and full-dress uniforms made decisions to authorize Operation Phoenix (the assassination of 20,000 village leaders as suspected NLF cadres), the Christmas bombing of Hanoi, the 1970 invasion of Cambodia, the widespread use of Agent Orange and napalm, and, as was documented in 1998, the use of nerve gas.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Phan Thuy Thanh made an appropriate response to McCain, declaring in a prepared statement: “It runs counter to the norms of morality that those people who brought bombs and shells to sow death among our people and wreak havoc with a country now pass themselves off as having the right to criticize their victims-cum-saviors.”

McCain never addressed the question of why those he regards as “our guys,” the South Vietnamese puppet forces, collapsed so dismally in 1975. Nguyen Van

Thieu controlled the fourth largest army in the world—after the US, China and the Soviet Union—and an air force to match. But his regime was perhaps the most corrupt in history, with officers of the South Vietnamese ARVN siphoning off money into their overseas bank accounts as fast as the dollars could be shoveled into the country by the United States.

Vietnam today is tightly controlled politically by the Vietnamese Communist Party, but in some areas of human rights and social conditions this one-party state compares not unfavorably with the so-called “land of the free.” A twenty-fifth anniversary amnesty reduced the prison population of Vietnam from 70,000 to 60,000, less than one out of every one thousand people. By contrast, the United States has more than two million people in its jails, nearly one out of every one hundred. Many thousands of those are Vietnam War veterans, disoriented and psychologically crippled by their experience in southeast Asia.

Vietnam is desperately poor, but it nonetheless maintains educational facilities that exceed those of many richer countries. Nearly 90 percent of the adult population is literate, a figure far higher than most other less developed countries in Asia and higher than many American states. Through a painstaking recovery of land damaged by saturation bombing, rice production has been restored to a level where Vietnam has gone from being a net importer, with frequent food shortages, to the second biggest rice exporter in the world.

A historical balance sheet of the Vietnamese revolution must be drawn, with a full accounting of the crimes committed by Stalinism, both internationally and within Vietnam, against the liberation struggle. But Vietnam, which has never received either reparations or the slightest expression of regret for the devastation and loss of life inflicted by American aggression, needs no lectures on morality from American politicians.



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