NORMALIZING VIETNAM: VIETNAM VETERANS AND THE
RECONSTRUCTION OF POSTWAR U.S.-VIETNAM RELATIONS, 1985–2010

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF HAWAIʻI AT MĀNOA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
IN
AMERICAN STUDIES
AUGUST 2011

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Keywords: Vietnam War, memory, veterans, U.S.-Vietnam relations
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In the process of exploring and writing this dissertation, I am most indebted to my father, who has provided me with valuable books, updated news and information from Vietnam, and instilled academic curiosity in me since childhood, through high school, and during college years. My mother, unfortunately, has not lived long enough to realize the day her beloved daughter fulfills her academic dream, but will always have my greatest thanks and affection. Her unconditional support for every decision I made or any thought I confided is invaluable. Writing about the American men who may have fought against her students, and those she used to call enemies back in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, I frequently experienced strong emotional recollection. I hope she will be pleased to know what I have worked on and accomplished. This dissertation is dedicated to her.

I am also quite thankful to my dissertation committee who has showed confidence in me and offered me great encouragement. My deepest gratitude goes to Mari Yoshihara, who has been a great mentor and supporter during every step of my academic life since my first days at the University of Hawai‘i eleven years ago. Robert Perkinson, with his great sense of humor and sharp critiques, kindly encourages me to think further and learn how to challenge myself. I am also very grateful for Vernadette Gonzalez’s timely and detailed comments. Being a young professor and mother of two small children, she has given me much needed energy and confidence whenever I find the dual tasks of being a mother and a dissertator too challenging. I am particularly thankful to my two other advisors from the Department of History—Liam Kelley and Suzanna Reiss. Professor Kelley, being the Vietnam War expert in my committee, is helpful to educate me with the most up-to-date
scholarship. His skepticism could be intimidating at times, but turns out to be exactly what I need. Professor Reiss’s straightforward critiques and supportive comments are particularly useful. It has been a great academic experience, sometimes a much needed emotional uplift, to work with these professors.

The next persons I always think of with warm affection and gratitude are my parents-in-law, Paul Turner and Susann Turner. Since I became a member in their home, I have always been gifted with love, support, and understanding. Their generous financial support and unwavering emotional support are definitely among the most important factors that make the completion of my dissertation possible. The many hours, days, and even weeks that they spent taking care of my daughter when I have to be away or too occupied with this project is immensely invaluable. Their enthusiastic compliment and pride in every step of my achievements have greatly motivated and revitalized me. I am so fortunate for having them as my second parents.

No researcher can work without a good library and also, in most cases, a well-organized archive. I am particularly thankful to Yale library administrators for providing me generous access to their collections and archives. This accessibility effectively helps to accelerate and refine my research. Ms. Elizabeth Mock, the retired librarian at Joseph P. Healey Library, University of Massachusetts at Boston, has been most helpful to provide me with the William Joiner Center’s newsletter archives and many other valuable materials related to the Center. Mr. Burt Altman, who is in charge of the special library collections at the Florida State University, has been most responsive and welcoming when I contacted him about doing archival research about “Pete” Peterson. My first and last chapters could not have been completed without the assistance that Ms. Mock and Mr. Altman have kindly offered.
As a non-native English user, I am especially grateful to Mr. Ernst Mueller and Ms. Kitty McCarthy, both of whom are friends of my parents-in-law, for having proofread and edited my draft. Not only did they generously offer me free assistance and kind-hearted encouragement, they also showed genuine interests in reading my whole dissertation. I truly appreciate their thoughtful notes on both personal and academic levels. Undoubtedly, it is a privilege to have them, two American intellectuals of the Vietnam generation, proofread my writing and comment on my dissertation.

Shortly before my dissertation defense, the Center for Biographical Research at the University of Hawai‘i awarded me their 2011’s honorable Biography Prize for my third chapter, “My Lai Peace Projects: Negotiating Memories.” I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to the selection committee for the monetary award and the invaluable credential. Also, I would like to give Scott Laderman the credit for this award. As a professor of History at the University of Minnesota at Duluth, he is the first one who encouraged me to look into the My Lai Peace Projects for a possible dissertation topic. I am so grateful to him for the idea and for the kind comments he made about my prospectus, back in 2009.

My final word of thanks is for my daughter, Lan Ngoc Turner. She is the constant source of love and energy that sustains me everyday and makes me want to keep trying. Shortly before this dissertation was complete, my daughter, in her sweetest and most sincere way, told me: “Mom, you are pretty when you are not on the computer, I love you when you are not working.” While I understood what she wanted and tried to respond to her as quickly as I could, I also realized that I should do a really good job finishing this dissertation, so that I could spend more time with her and show her an example of what a hard-working and motivated student is like.
ABSTRACT

The end of the Vietnam War in 1975 greatly estranged Vietnam and America which placed major cultural, humanitarian, and diplomatic barriers to realizing the normalization of U.S.-Vietnam relations twenty years later. This research project examines how this diplomatic event has been made possible, facilitated and reinforced with Vietnam veterans’ efforts to “normalize” Vietnam in American public memory. At the same time, they helped make America’s economic and cultural concepts acceptable, necessary, and “normal” to the Vietnamese people.

Because the U.S.’s political hostility toward Vietnam after the war involved the imagination of Vietnam as an abstract enemy and uncooperative people, the Vietnam veterans discussed in this dissertation managed to re-image the Vietnamese people as shared victims, pro-Western friends, cooperative, loyal, and potentially instrumental people to America’s interests. Their efforts not only helped to justify and enhance the normalization, but also reconstructed themselves as altruists, reformers of Vietnam’s polity, as noble and benevolent men. In this process of remaking Vietnam and rewriting memories to facilitate the normalization, these Vietnam veterans—including the Vietnam veterans authors and humanists at the William Joiner Center, James Webb, Mike Boehm, the veteran-turned-philanthropist and project manager of My Lai Peace Projects, and Pete Peterson, the first U.S. ambassador to Vietnam—framed their agenda or found their project reframed within the U.S.’s policy to incorporate postwar Vietnam into America’s new world order of neoliberal political economy.

The normalization decision in 1995, which extended the U.S.’s engagement in Southeast Asia, could be viewed as a cultural as well as a political process.
“Normalizing Vietnam,” I argue, in fact involves a revision of historical memory in which American soldiers are recast as the moral, humane, and fellow victims with the Vietnamese people. Vietnam veterans are reconstructed as the manly and benevolent carriers of America’s fundamental ideology—liberty, democracy, and market capitalism. Not only did they actively contribute to the implementation of U.S.-Vietnam postwar relations by helping to “normalize” Vietnam in America’s image, they also helped to redeem America and reinforce American hegemony in Southeast Asia.
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AO</td>
<td>Agent Orange</td>
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<tr>
<td>ARVN</td>
<td>Army Republic of Vietnam</td>
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<tr>
<td>BTA</td>
<td>Bilateral Trade Agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDEC</td>
<td>Combined Enemy Document Exploitation Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DRV</td>
<td>Democratic Republic of Vietnam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FSU</td>
<td>Florida State University</td>
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<tr>
<td>HCMC</td>
<td>Ho Chi Minh City</td>
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<tr>
<td>JVA</td>
<td>Jackson-Vanik Amendment</td>
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<tr>
<td>MFN</td>
<td>Most-favored Nations</td>
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<tr>
<td>MIA/POW</td>
<td>Missing in Action/Prisoners of War</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MLPP</td>
<td>My Lai Peace Park</td>
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<tr>
<td>NLF</td>
<td>National Liberation Front</td>
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<tr>
<td>PAVN</td>
<td>People’s Army of Vietnam</td>
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<tr>
<td>PTSD</td>
<td>Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder</td>
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<tr>
<td>RVN</td>
<td>Republic of Vietnam</td>
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<tr>
<td>SOE</td>
<td>State-owned Enterprises</td>
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<tr>
<td>SRV</td>
<td>Socialist Republic of Vietnam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TWEA</td>
<td>Trading With the Enemy Act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UMB</td>
<td>University of Massachusetts at Boston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USAID</td>
<td>United States Agency of International Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VFA</td>
<td>Veteran Foundation of America</td>
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<tr>
<td>VVA</td>
<td>Vietnam Veterans of America</td>
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<tr>
<td>VVAF</td>
<td>Vietnam Veterans of American Foundation</td>
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<tr>
<td>VVAW</td>
<td>Vietnam Veterans Against the War</td>
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INTRODUCTION: REMAKING VIETNAM

American national identity remains inexorably intertwined with the commemoration and memory of past wars.¹

In the East Room of the White House at 2 P.M. on the 11th of July, 1995, President Bill Clinton announced the normalization of diplomatic relations between the United States and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV). It was a difficult decision for him, considering the fact that Clinton had been “the most prominent draft-resister of his generation.” The presence of Sen. John McCain (R-AZ), Sen. John Kerry (D-MA), Adm. Elmo Zumwalt Jr., and Gen. John Vessey on stage, right behind Clinton, demonstrated that the Pentagon and the Congress had given their president generous political cover for this sensitive decision—recognizing Vietnam, their former enemy. While most of the attendants in the ceremony, including members from both Houses of the Congress and the Defense Department, remained formal and diplomatic, one Vietnam veteran sitting in his wheelchair was “unambiguously happy.” Speaking to a Washington Post reporter, he said he felt “ecstatic,” adding excitedly, “It is over historically now.”²

The man was Bobby Muller, the former executive director of the Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) and founder of Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation (VVAF). Since 1981, Muller has directed his organization to carry out a number of humanitarian projects that help alleviate war consequences in Vietnam. With a friend, he co-founded the International Campaign to Ban Landmines in 1992,

which won a 1997 Nobel Peace Prize. Muller is known for being an enthusiastic pro-
normalization activist who “has been from his wheelchair literally hell on wheels to
hawks and other people who do not share his idea of helping the Vietnamese.” Being
the first Vietnam veteran who returned to Vietnam in 1981, Muller said he has
worked hard to “bring peace and freedom to Vietnam” since then.\(^4\)

The fact that Muller found himself “ecstatic” upon hearing Clinton’s
announcement to establish normal diplomatic relations with Vietnam and the way he
had been so emotional about “helping the Vietnamese” suggest other personal and
physical effects that his humanitarian work and the subsequent Vietnam-U.S.
normalization may have endowed on him. A closer review of Muller’s rhetoric and
reaction reveals some intriguing, contradictory meanings. On the one hand, Muller
openly confronted Congressional hawks and those who were against normalization
with Vietnam, which makes him appear friendly and supportive to the Vietnamese
people. On the other hand, the way Muller described the goal of his work in Vietnam
as an effort to “bring peace and freedom” to Vietnam and “help the Vietnamese”
presents his identity as a paternal figure. Muller’s statement not only reverberates the
U.S.’s Cold War rhetoric of “defending freedom” behind its involvement in Vietnam,
but also reiterates the conservative, revisionist view that sought to remember and
redefine the Vietnam War as a “noble cause” on American part, embraced by
generations of postwar American presidents—Carter, Reagan, Bush, and Clinton.\(^5\)

\(^3\) Cecilia Capuzzi Simon, “Bobby Muller: A Bullet Transformed Him from Bad-ass Marine to Peace
Activist,” *Psychology Today*, March/April 2006, 72; Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation was
later renamed Veterans for America (VFA), see http://www.veteransforamerica.org/our-programs/post-
conflict-rehabilitation/vfas-programs-in-vietnam/ (last accessed May 18, 2011).
\(^4\) Mary McGrory, “Curtain Call on Vietnam.”
\(^5\) About Carter’s statement that called for a revival of American values and principles through the
failure of the Vietnam War, see Carter’s Speech at Notre Dame University, May 22, 1977, *Public
About Reagan’s announcement that the Vietnam War was fought for a noble cause, see Reagan’s
In his short speech that announced the normalization of relations with Vietnam, President Clinton offered Vietnam veterans generous credit for their support and constructive efforts to make the normalization decision possible. The goal of this research project is to seek the answers for the questions why and how Muller and other Vietnam veterans contributed to this diplomatic achievement, and what else may be involved in their efforts to work toward normalization with Vietnam. Also, Muller’s excited claim, “It is over historically now,” provokes questions: What exactly did he perceive as being “over”? Is it the contestations over the meaning of the Vietnam War in America? Is it the postwar hostility? Is it the political war that the U.S. prolonged in Vietnam for over twenty years after the end of combat, as Martini put it, the postwar “cultural front,” so as to make the U.S.-led economic embargo justifiable? Equally important, has “it” really been over?

This research project argues that the Vietnam veterans’ efforts to remake Vietnam War memories and postwar Vietnam have been a crucial part of the U.S.-Vietnam normalization process. Through their re-engagement with Vietnam after the war, a number of instrumental Vietnam veterans have helped to reshape American public memory about Vietnam and convince Americans that a normal diplomatic relation between Vietnam and the U.S. would be mutually beneficially. In short, this dissertation examines and assesses Vietnam veterans’ contributions to the normalization process in particular, and to U.S.-Vietnam postwar relations in general.

A close review of Muller’s background and re-engagement with the Vietnamese people in the early 1980’s helps reveal the overall agenda of Vietnam veterans’ pro-normalization advocacy. Born in a middle-income family in New York, with a clear goal to be a future business leader, Muller realized that his future career would be much enhanced if he had leadership experience. Inspired by former President Kennedy’s call for national service and a youthful desire to serve the country, Muller decided to defer his college education and enlist in the U.S. Marines in Vietnam from 1968 to 1969, first as a platoon commander, then company commander. A serious injury made him permanently paralyzed from the chest down and transformed him into a staunch advocate for peace and veterans’ rights after his discharge. Between 1970 and 1974, Muller joined the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW). In 1978, he founded the VVA, the only Vietnam veteran group recognized and supported by the Veterans Affairs, with a goal to help Vietnam veterans to address the consequences of war relating to the Agent Orange (AO), unemployment, and delayed stress syndrome.8

Convinced that Americans would never be able to find out about the fate of American missing servicemen (MIAs) or the effects of the AO if they did not go to Vietnam, Muller led a four-veteran delegation to return to Vietnam to initiate talks about the MIAs in the winter of 1981. As the first American, not to mention an American soldier, who came to Vietnam after the war during the strict embargo, needless to say, Muller’s post-trip report attracted sensational coverage. On the last day of their stay in Hanoi, Muller offered to lay a wreath at the tomb of Ho Chi Minh and at the memorial for North Vietnamese’s war dead with a card that said simply:

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“With respect, Vietnam Veterans of America.” This first reconciliatory act invoked rancor among a good number of Vietnam veterans, who equaled his act as “urinating on the American flag.” Two hundred death threats poured into his Washington, D.C.’s office. While the reaction of his fellow veterans toward his act was harrowing and intimidating, this incident reinvented Muller’s soldierly bravery and helped re-portray him as a daring hero venturing in the enemy’s territory.

Yet, Muller soon brought to the American public some soothing news about Vietnam. In his impressive language, Muller was almost “blown away” by the courtesy of the people. As he later recounted:

After all the stuff we dumped on them—20 millions tons of bombs and ordnance—I was stunned at how friendly they were. They have been indoctrinated on the difference between the administration and the people of this country. They are so deprived. It’s a shame to surrender these people to the Russians.

Despite his willingness to acknowledge the American destruction in Vietnam, Muller’s comment about the Vietnamese people’s friendliness obscured their victimization. While “friendliness” does not imply “forgetfulness” or a total absence of “bitterness,” his description rationalized how Americans could legitimately view the Vietnamese people not as the bitter victims of the U.S. government’s military endeavors, but as potential cooperators in the MIAs and the AO issues. While showing respect for the Vietnamese people, Muller alluded to the global contest between the former Soviet Union and the United States for the consolidation of their Third World allies and re-inscribed Vietnam as a “territory” rather than an independent country. By stating, “It is a shame to surrender these people to the Russians,” Muller was inclined to view the Vietnamese people as the residents of a

10 McGrory, “Vietnam Evokes Old Emotions.”
“colonial property in dispute,” who are subject to being won over or transacted from the hands of this imperial power to the hands of another while implicitly urging Americans to undo this “shameful” act by retaking it from the Russians.

Explaining Muller’s reaction and statements in Cold War terms, however, will make his contribution to U.S.-Vietnam postwar relations far too simplistic. Motivated by an interest to serve Americans, such as finding information about American missing servicemen and the AO to help cure the trauma of American families and Vietnam veterans, Muller was also pioneering an equally important project: remaking Vietnam and re-imaging Vietnamese people in America’s public memory. In so doing, he helped to reconstruct America’s social memory of Vietnam and the Vietnamese people in a way that not only revived American triumphalism and encouraged altruism, but also justified the reestablishment of diplomatic and economic relations between the two former adversaries. Muller’s post-visit description of the Vietnamese people and society in the 1980’s and early 1990’s should be critically assessed through this lens to highlight his political role in the shaping of American public memory and ultimately, the U.S.’s policy toward Vietnam.

In addition to the obscurity of the Vietnamese victimization and the projection of their cooperativeness, Muller’s description of the Vietnamese people also enabled Americans to envision their future roles as the benefactors and saviors. In a judgmental manner, he portrayed the Vietnamese people as being “deprived” and “indoctrinated.” The people who had defeated the United States and its South Vietnamese ally were now re-imagined as suffering economically and politically. Not only did this invoke a triumphant sentiment among the American vanquishers, this imagination of the former enemies also suggested a renewed opportunity for
Americans to show their benevolence and generosity to “help” the Vietnamese to obtain material fulfillment through economic and political freedom. A possible reversal of roles and a revival of American purposes were looming large. The former victors became the potential cooperators and their material deprival transformed them into future beneficiaries. The former vanquished now had the chance to recast themselves as the benevolent rescuers. This way, the bitter memories of war and postwar hostility could be reconciled and remade as a “belated victory” for Americans. The “Vietnam syndrome,” a phrase that implies not only the Vietnam veterans’ distorted view of the war but also the U.S.’s national weakness, has a strong chance to be cured after all.

Muller’s experience and perspective toward Vietnam were asserted and redefined nearly ten years later, when he was invited by CBS to be their special guest for a television show during the Veteran’s Day in 1990. Joining him was Nguyễn Ngọc Hùng, a former North Vietnamese soldier who was a college English teacher in Hanoi. Jointly presented to talk about the memories and consequences of war in both countries, the camera showed Muller and Hùng shaking hands, then Hùng walking through an American cemetery, visiting a therapy group for Vietnam veterans in Manhattan, and talking to mentally troubled veterans. Muller and Hùng then discussed their shared sufferings, demonstrated by the staggering number of deaths and missing servicemen that the war had inflicted on both sides and the effects of the AO. The documentary concluded, with Hùng and Terrence Smith, the CBS reporter, commenting almost in unison that, “the suffering is the same everywhere.”

While the messages of shared victimization and the mutual desire to look forward to a more constructive future were comforting, American politics was

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apparent in this show. The juxtaposition of a friendly, able-bodied Vietnamese veteran who speaks English fluently along with Muller, a paraplegic, and a roomful of gloomy, traumatized veterans diagnosed as suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) made American victimization plainly visible and painful, while the Vietnamese suffering was again rendered undetectable. The audience may observe what Julia Bleakney terms as the “politics of traumatized bodies,” or the “physical manifestation” of traumatic memory, which serves to reassert what Vietnam did to America while erasing what America did to Vietnam. On the one hand, Americans are portrayed as forgiving people offering their former foes generous friendship. On the other hand, the Vietnamese veterans appeared pro-Western, non-threatening, and most importantly, having “completely healed,” while their “American victims” have not. Even though the Vietnamese suffering was not entirely muted, as demonstrated by Hùng’s claim of 300,000 Vietnamese soldiers still listed as missing, a figure remarkably greater than the figure of 2,273 American missing servicemen claimed by the Americans, their unanimous statement at the end of the documentary, i.e., “the suffering is the same everywhere,” reinforced former President Carter’s “mutual destruction” rhetoric. This effectively released the U.S. government from any financial culpability to Vietnam. Hùng’s assertion added stronger ammunition to the U.S. government’s position to reject Vietnam’s demand for reparations and unwittingly released the U.S. from any responsibility while making Muller’s humanitarian assistance appear entirely benevolent and generous.

13 About the number of American missing servicemen claimed by the U.S. government at the time and the “prisoners of myth,” i.e., the debates about the unaccounted missing pilots that the U.S. accused Vietnam of keeping as live POWs, see Bruce Franklin, MIA, or Myth-Making in America (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 11–38. About Carter’s “mutual destruction” rhetoric, see Carter’s Remarks at Press Conference, March 24, 1977, Public Papers, 1977, book I, 501.
While Hùng was visiting the U.S., he and Muller were also co-featured in a *Washington Post* interview. Again, Muller recalled his pilgrimage to Hanoi in 1981 as a “transforming experience” that encouraged hundreds of other veterans to follow his example to come back to Vietnam, to learn how to view the Vietnamese people as “human,” and get rid of the “emotional luggage.” Hùng, in an upbeat forward-looking note, talked about the need to “convert” 80,000 Russian teachers into 80,000 English teachers in Vietnam, and about Vietnamese students’ desire to learn English instead of Russian, so that they could enter the job market and have access to new technology. Revealing the fact that there were only three American volunteer teachers in his college, Hùng welcomed the prospect of having more American teachers in Vietnam to facilitate the Vietnamese students’ need, concluding, “Their past is America, and so is their future.”

While Hùng’s sincerity was appreciated, his perspective further elevated Muller’s confidence in what he and other Americans could offer Vietnam—knowledge, language skills, humanitarian aid, and technology. The preference for English over Russian—representing a choice for a capitalist, free-market economy instead of the Soviet Union’s state-controlled economic model, justified Muller’s mission to bring such liberal values and a better future to the younger generation of Vietnam. The Vietnamese people came into full view not only as cooperative and needy friends, but also as young, open-minded, pro-Western college students who would likely mature in the future, embrace capitalism, and become potential consumers. This way, American business tutelage and benevolent paternalism were well justified.

Muller’s reconnection with Vietnam is largely constructed in humanitarian and pacifist terms. This made his project appear entirely benevolent and apolitical. His involvement in the reconstruction and naturalization of American public memory about postwar Vietnam facilitated political exchanges that relied on and reinforced this memory. Creating a positive and favorable image of the Vietnamese in the memory of Americans, Muller represented the Vietnamese people and helped them gain acceptance among the American public toward the resumption of ties with Vietnam. Motivated by self-serving interests, enhanced by genuine sympathy and respect for the Vietnamese people, Muller was confident about the supremacy of the American model of economic and political freedom. He was also convinced that, as an American, it is his mission to bring this freedom to Vietnam and help its young generation, who happened to be in the age of the Vietnam veteran generation’s children, to have an opportunity in Vietnam’s growing market economy. In other words, Muller’s re-imagination of Vietnam and the Vietnamese people was structured within the discourses of American neo-liberalism and paternalism. In turn, this energized his advocacy for diplomatic and economic relations between Vietnam and the United States.

Muller’s example and his contribution to the U.S.-Vietnam normalization process, before and during the Clinton administration, formulate the framework and setting for this research project. The Clinton administration serves as important background not only because it is the first Vietnam-generation presidency that recognizes Vietnam, but also because of the diplomatic and economic aspects of the “Clinton doctrine” it pursued. Often named as “the globalization president,” Clinton was most remembered for his narratives of inexorable economic globalization and his embrace of “market democracy.” In other words, Clinton’s foreign and economic
policy followed the neoliberal principle that economic freedom—including free-market economy, privatization, and state deregulation—will ultimately lead to economic growth, democratic peace, global prosperity, and political liberalization.\(^{15}\)

The Clinton Doctrine was both a continuation and a departure from the economic policies of the post-World War II era. While market economy has always been the guiding principle, the new international order that emerged after World War II encouraged the United States to implement an “overarching geopolitical and regulatory framework” that allowed capitalism to flourish not only in the U.S. but in its Cold War-allied countries as well. In other words, state intervention in the market economy was tolerated and justified if specific economic ends, often defined as full employment and consolidation of world capitalism, were met. By the end of the 1970s, this model gradually lost its impetus due to a number of factors—the breakdown of the U.S.-led system of exchange rates (often known as the Bretton Woods agreement), the rising oil price leading to inflation and fiscal crisis in various capitalist states, and declining employment. Neo-liberalism was thus introduced and embraced as the new economic solution. Considered to be a synonym of “market fundamentalism,” this new model preaches the primacy of free market economy. Other than the responsibility to control inflation, government intervention was limited on the assumption that free market economy possesses self-correcting properties once prices are kept under control. Full employment and other social welfare benefits, such as public education and healthcare, are no longer the primary goal. Social activism of civil society tends to be discouraged.\(^{16}\)


The U.S.’s policy toward the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) in the mid-1950s and through the 1960s was also under the same geostrategic logic of the post-World War II era that sought to assist the U.S.’s Cold War allies to sustain a strong capitalist economy. The U.S.’s “interventionist” macro-economic policy was considered not only as a necessary but also responsible approach in economic management, particularly in newly decolonized states such as the RVN.\(^\text{17}\) As early as 1956, John F. Kennedy, the then Senator of Massachusetts, adopted an American paternal and geostrategic point of view about the U.S.’s policy toward the RVN. Speaking to a delegation of the American Friends of Vietnam, the future president of the United States reminded the audience that America was the parent of “little Vietnam” because it had presided at the birth of this country, given assistance to its life, and helped to shape its future. Pledging the U.S. support for a fledgling nation of South Vietnam, Kennedy asserted, “this is our offspring, we cannot abandon it, we cannot ignore its needs.”\(^\text{18}\) Obviously, Kennedy defined the American-Vietnamese relationship as that of an adult (the fully developed U.S.) and a child (the growing, vulnerable RVN). This worldview later became the basis for American tutelage in South Vietnam.

American paternalism in the RVN was clearly demonstrated through its economic and political policies during the American occupation. Driven by the need to deter the expansion of the Soviet Union’s communist economic model, various economic and administrative strategies were implemented in the RVN through the 1960s. These policies were designed and promoted by the MIT economics scholar


Walt Whitman Rostow, who believed that all nations went through a set of development stages regardless of how distinctive they were in terms of history, culture, geography, or demography. Under this development theory, “modernization theory” was invented and applied in the RVN, which was considered to be gradually maturing from a “traditional society” to a “capitalist, consumerist society.” In his book *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*, Rostow argued a U.S.-supported “modernization process” would be the ideal alternative to the indigenous revolution in South Vietnam, which was believed by his cohorts to be motivated by North Vietnamese communism. In general, he envisioned a path to development for South Vietnam based on planned capitalism, humanitarian projects that sought to provide foreign aid, promote liberal development and politically democratic institutions. On the one hand, Rostow’s rejection of indigenous social revolution in South Vietnam demonstrated his skepticism toward the South Vietnamese people’s ability to govern themselves and make decisions. On the other hand, his strategy reflected his view of the U.S.’s political and economic system as the supreme model. While this pattern of thinking embraced by Rostow and other Cold War liberals was not blatantly racist, it sought to view the non-white people as less advanced than the white people. In the words of a U.S. diplomatic historian, non-white people who are in a lower stage of development possess a potential capacity to grow into maturity with the help of the U.S. This way, American paternalism was both justifiable and benevolent.

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Thirty-five years later, President Clinton re-stated the paternalistic worldview of the idol from his youth, President Kennedy. By this time, the state-regulated capitalist model of post-World War II era had lost its credibility. Yet, Clinton envisioned Vietnam in the same way as his Cold War predecessor—a growing nation in need of the U.S.’s paternal support. Boosted by the ultimate end of the Cold War and the long economic growth in the early 1990’s, the U.S. was determined to “unleash its hegemonic impulse” and justify its global project of “exporting” neo-liberal ideas to the rest of the world.21 Citing the examples of the former Soviet Union and Eastern European countries that had departed from state-controlled economic model and embraced “economic freedom” in his U.S.-Vietnam normalization speech as evidence of “progress,” Clinton once more viewed Vietnam in the same lens as Rostow had done—a potential country in the path of economic and political growth under the guidance of the U.S.’s neo-liberal principles.

However, before Clinton could waive the trade sanctions against Vietnam and materialize his economic visions in the country, it was first necessary to gain Congressional and public support. A “reconstructed memory” of Vietnam was the crucial pre-condition. In other words, the Vietnamese people needed to be re-humanized and re-imaged in American public memory as “pro-Western friends,” “materially deprived but cooperative partners,” “growing participants in a market economy,” “potential consumers,” or “young and changeable,” to justify the U.S.’s re-involvement and its transforming mission. At the same time, the Vietnamese people needed to be convinced that the American socio-economic model would benefit them, that America possesses great virtues and the resources to help them progress. Also, distressed war memories in Vietnam and “indoctrinated” socialist

ideology should be obscured or replaced with new signals of benevolent capitalism. This research project aims to examine this complex two-way task undertaken by a number of most instrumental Vietnam veterans, including those at the William Joiner Center (University of Massachusetts at Boston), Senator James Webb (D-VA), Mike Boehm, manager of the My Lai Peace Projects, and Pete Peterson, former U.S. ambassador to Vietnam.

In the process of reconstructing Vietnam and Vietnamese memories, whether through humanitarian activism or political advocacy, these veterans frequently resort to discourses of benevolent neo-liberalism and paternalism to justify their goals and serve the cause of normalization. First, they generally believe that humanitarianism and capitalism have a transformative power that can enhance international relations and liberalize society. Second, their economic and political authority conveniently places them in powerful positions as paternal rescuers, manly protectors, or benevolent providers. This way, Vietnam veterans have the opportunity not only to serve their country’s goals, irrespective of their original intent, but also to reassert their moral manhood. This dissertation examines the interconnectedness among humanitarianism, neo-liberalism, paternalism, and efforts to reconstruct social memories in order to reveal how Vietnam veterans’ private interests may have coincided with and become instrumental to the larger agenda of U.S.-Vietnam postwar relations.

The Vietnam era, with the U.S.’s military misadventures and the rise of American feminism, created a new crisis for American manhood. Numerous Vietnam veterans have attempted to undo this trend. A number of scholars have traced the complex racial and gendered origins of this crisis and demonstrated how this social phenomenon has been addressed or cured in Vietnam-related popular cultures from
the late 1970’s through the 1980’s. The public debates that were infused with rhetoric of American nationalism, heroism, and masculine connotations surrounding the construction of the Vietnam War Memorial also reflected an effort to uphold American manhood. The Vietnam veterans discussed in this research project are not excluded from this overall project.

Scholars of men’s studies have demonstrated that manhood is a socially and culturally constructed concept. Throughout American history, men have found myriad of strategies and venues to express, assert, and uphold their manliness. This could be accomplished by their efforts to establish fraternity, display masculine strength, exercise political authority, advocate self-mastery or sexual self-restraint, perform traditionally defined manly roles as providers or financial managers, assert paternal tutelage over the weaker, and offer benevolent material help to the lesser. This dissertation examines a group of pro-normalization Vietnam veterans who managed

22 About the argument that the U.S.’s military defeat and its many misadventures—the physical abuses of Vietnamese civilians, particularly the tortures of communist suspects, the rapes of women, and massacres of unarmed women and children—led to the death of American machismo, see Betty Friedan, The Second Stage: With a New Introduction (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 118–20. About the complex racial and gendered origins of the crisis of American manhood during the Vietnam War, as demonstrated in the captivity and vulnerability of American POWs in the hands of cruel, savage Asian male captors, the decreasing authority of men as a consequence of male absenteeism during the war, see Natasha Zaretsky, No Direction Home: The American Family and the Fear of National Decline, 1968–1980 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 34–40, 50–51. About the efforts to address and repair this social phenomenon through Vietnam War fictions, movies, and public rhetoric, see Susan Jeffords’s The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 116–43. About the attempt to remake American machismo and reconstruct Vietnam War memory, as demonstrated by the construction of the Vietnam War Memorial, the addition of the American flag and Frederick Hart’s soldiers’ statues alongside with Maya Lin’s design, see Patrick Hagopian’s The Vietnam War in American Memory: Veterans, Memorials, and the Politics of Healing (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 79–139.

to reconstruct their moral manhood by having themselves involved with one or two of these “manly” demonstrations, through their different venues and priorities.

Humanitarian and reconstruction projects, by far, have been the most popular venue for Vietnam veterans to re-engage with Vietnam. By the end of the 1980’s, the return of Vietnam veterans to Vietnam in what had been termed as “healing journeys,” enhanced by humanitarian activism and political advocacy, had become a new and effective vehicle to reassert American nobility, altruism, and moral manhood. In so doing, they either actively facilitate the U.S.’s postwar agenda in Vietnam or inadvertently serve to enhance and justify it.

Scholars in the field of humanitarian studies have demonstrated that transnational humanitarianism programs increasingly serve Western governments’ foreign policy goals and set the stage for liberal development. Also, these projects tend to reflect the needs, philosophy, and priority of the humanitarian actors rather than those of the receiving communities or the beneficiaries. Vietnam veterans’ humanitarian projects in postwar Vietnam are not only defined by this general characteristic of international humanitarianism but also infused with an underlying desire to remake American manhood and redeem America.

Fred Turner and Christina Schwenkel, in their ethnographic research about public memory of the American war in Vietnam, have taken a critical look at the meaning of “healing” commonly associated with Vietnam veterans’ projects. Vietnam veterans’ engagement in humanitarian projects in Vietnam helped “transform” and “heal” them precisely because of the moral and paternalistic aspects of this “salvation mission”—helping the poor and helpless people in Vietnam, who are mostly children.

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and women. Acting like the saviors of the Vietnamese people from poverty, which is often interpreted as the evidence of economic failure in the communist Vietnam, these veterans are able to reclaim their role as the paternal protectors and providers for the needy people in Vietnam. This way, they are able to redeem the nobility of their past involvement in the war. In the words of Turner, the uplifting and “healing” impact of these humanitarian missions lies precisely in the way they can make Vietnam veterans feel like their “long-delayed fantasies of rescuing Vietnam” were finally realized.25

Involved in such “rescuing” humanitarian projects, Vietnam veterans tend to also be involved in ideological politics, as demonstrated in their confidence in the liberating capacity of their activism. In fact, American humanitarianism is often structured within neo-liberal discourses that associate the provision of material aid with uplifting concepts of “progress,” “development,” “freedom,” or “peace” so as to celebrate the liberalizing and pacifying power of capitalism and economic freedom. In her study of American non-government humanitarian institutions and their participation in international development, Erica Bornstein argues that these humanitarian programs have their philosophical roots in American evangelicalism that nurtures a vision of the world that is modeled in the “moral politics” of neoliberal states. Using the case study of Zimbabwe, Bornstein demonstrates how a number of American religious and humanitarian NGOs in this country have defined their development strategy in this “benevolent prosperity” concept, and set out to remake Zimbabwe to be “both moralistic and materially prosperous.”26 The transforming

power of humanitarian programs is thus sustained and reinforced by the neo-liberal principles that they embrace. Vietnam veterans’ humanitarian projects in Vietnam are not an exception. Identifying themselves as saviors of the oppressed and providers of the needy, not only do these Vietnam veterans succumb to the philosophy of “moral prosperity,” they also become engaged in the uplifting fantasy of “benevolent paternalism.”

The reconstruction of social memory plays an instrumental role not only to shape and justify present economic or political relations among nations and people but also decide the future course of those relations. Various scholars of U.S. Diplomatic History, Cultural History, and Social Memory have done extensive research in this area. I must first of all name Robert McMahon’s 2001 Presidential Address “Contested Memory: The Vietnam War and American Society, 1975–2001,” as the basis for this research. His article summarizes the key concepts in the construction of social memory in general and the contested memories of the Vietnam War in particular, so as to stress the need to study the Vietnam War’s cultural history within an interdisciplinary framework that includes foreign relations specialists, cultural historians, cultural studies specialists, and political polemicists.27

A growing generation of U.S. diplomatic history scholars has embraced a new study approach of this discipline through its relationship with other fields of study. Their theoretical and methodological innovations have greatly revolutionized American Studies and the study of American culture in particular. The most important scholarship relevant to my research includes, but is not limited to, Amy Kaplan’s *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (1994) and McAlister’s *Epic Encounters* (2001), in which Kaplan and McAlister traced how American representation of other

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cultures and foreign people justified American hegemony and naturalized American supremacy abroad. Linenthal and Engelhardt’s *History Wars* (1996), Yoneyama’s *Hiroshima Traces* (1999), Fujitani, White, and Yoneyama’s *Perilous Memories* (2001), along with Scott Laderman’s *Tours of Vietnam* analyzed how war representations—exhibitions of war events, the construction of memorials in former battle sites or locations of massacres, and war tourism literature may critically facilitate the ongoing nature of diplomatic relations between former adversaries and re-write the history of past conflicts. Hoganson’s *Fighting For American Manhood* (1998) and Shibusawa’s *America’s Geisha Ally* (2006) investigated how gender politics may serve to justify American wars and American imperialism, for example, in the need to conquer foreign lands, the paternalistic instinct to uplift and protect the inferior foreign people to uphold American manhood, or the re-engendering of Japan as feminized and immature so that the U.S.’s military occupation and Cold War alliance with Japan after World War II could be viewed as necessary and benevolent.  

These scholars support my argument that non-state actors—museum curators, journalists, trade negotiators, tourists, exchange students, soldiers/veterans, philanthropists, poets, are all implicated in re-inventing public memory and becoming a political instrument in the formulation and reinforcement of U.S. foreign policies.

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This research project also aims to elevate the existing study about Vietnam veterans to another level. Marita Sturken and Julia Bleakney observed that Vietnam veterans’ reconstruction of Vietnam War’s social memory is categorized mainly in two themes. First, it is the personal motive to express “nostalgia, victimization, healing, and forgiveness.” Secondly, it reflects their desire to reassert American heroism and nobility of the war. A number of American Studies scholars and U.S. Diplomatic historians have touched upon the diplomatic aspects of the Vietnam veterans’ re-involvement in Vietnam after the war, for example, Robert D. Schulzinger and Patrick Hagopian. Their studies, however, either focus on veterans-turned-politicians or still view the veterans’ diplomatic contributions in limited capacity as an effort to redeem America and heal American wounds. This research project demonstrates that, in the process of remaking Vietnam and reasserting American moral manhood, these Vietnam veterans have truly played an advocate role in the bilateral diplomatic relations between Vietnam and America. Their activities in Vietnam did not only serve themselves but also helped to redeem America’s creditability in the world and reestablish American hegemony in postwar Vietnam. This dissertation offers the veterans the credit they deserve and also presents a more complex perspective about their diplomatic contributions.

While the Vietnamese partners do benefit from these Vietnam veterans’ humanitarian projects and political advocacy, as demonstrated in the opportunities to establish international fraternity, gain professional privilege and life fulfillment, or obtain a more secure position in Southeast Asia, these benefits are realized through an

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unequal relationship between the American male benefactors (who possess material and political power) and the Vietnamese beneficiaries (who are usually helpless women, needy children, disabled or less advantaged Vietnamese veterans, or young Vietnamese people looking up to America as the gateway to educational and material advancement). Precisely, this unequal relationship allows American benevolent paternalism to fuel and justify the American neo-liberal model as the irreversible, democratic, and charitable option.

My dissertation analyzes a variety of venues that different veteran individuals or groups managed to reconstruct the social memory of Vietnam and Vietnamese people in order to advocate for the normalization process. Chapter one examines the William Joiner Center’s pioneering effort to establish fraternity with their former adversaries and push for diplomatic normalization through war literature exchange and humanitarian programs. Chapter two analyzes how James Webb utilizes gendered politics—benevolent paternalism and masculinity—to justify America’s former tutelage and construct a new alliance with Vietnam. Chapter three takes a more critical look at Mike Boehm’s projects in Mỹ Lai—micro-credit programs and the reconstruction of Mỹ Lai’s memorial landscape—to reveal the humanitarian and political aspects of these projects. Finally, chapter four narrates the ambassadorial life of a former prisoner of war (POW)—Pete Peterson, who was a businessman and Congressman before becoming the first U.S. ambassador in Vietnam in 1997, and his tireless efforts to advocate for a Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) with Vietnam under the cultural logic of Clinton’s market democracy. This dissertation focuses on these veterans’ activities that started in 1988, which is marked by the first Vietnamese non-state visitor’s trip to the U.S., and concluded in 2001, when the BTA between the U.S. and Vietnam was finally signed. The pre-1988 and post-2001 eras are also
discussed in order to provide a conceptual background for the veterans’ re-involvement in Vietnam and allow room to reassess the lasting results of their efforts.

I select these individuals and groups to construct my narrative not only because they are helpful to my thesis but also because they represent diversity in the pro-normalization lobby, considering their different approach, interests, diverse backgrounds, and political arena. This dissertation is a compilation of their stories that can offer readers not only an overall explanation of why and how Vietnam veterans supported U.S.-Vietnam normalization but also a reassessment of their projects’ long-term effects in Vietnam. In addition, extensive research of printed primary sources produced by Vietnam veterans and their humanitarian groups reveal that these veterans leave a larger body of primary resources than most, including their writings, publications, newsletters, interviews, or speeches, which are relatively sufficient for me to formulate overarching concepts and support my arguments.

While I can look at other research subjects that also fit well in the narrative, such as Senator John Kerry, Senator John McCain, Senator Bob Kerrey, these politicians are either less important than Peterson regarding trade relations with Vietnam after the normalization, or not as uniquely paternalistic as Webb. Similar limitations are evident in the case of other veteran groups. While I could have found Chuck Searcy, the head of Vietnam Agent Orange Relief & Responsibility Campaign, or a number of humanitarian projects such as Vietnam Veterans Restoration Project, Vets With A Mission, or Project RENEW ideal research subjects, these private veterans’ humanitarian projects are generally underrepresented in public media channels. This makes them less influential in the construction of public memory and less instrumental to U.S.-Vietnam bilateral relations. Also, most of them were
established after the normalization in 1995, and were thus unable to play a prominent role in the advocacy for normalization.

Visiting Vietnam offered Vietnam veterans the opportunity not only to play an altruistic role and serve their country but also to reassert their manly morality and reconstruct public memory of the Vietnam War in both countries. The critical impact of this memory’s reconstruction is that it helps to justify American tutelage in Vietnam during the war, naturalize American paternalism in Vietnam today, and define American neoliberal capitalism as benevolent and necessary. Neither the Vietnamese partners nor the participating veterans may have realized the less flattering “by-product” of their renewed partnership, some of which turned out to be strikingly similar to the original geostrategic goal of the United States when it first became involved in Vietnam in the early 1950’s—then, to secure a non-communist market that was free from the communist-controlled areas in North Vietnam and China, and access to the sources of food and raw materials in Southeast Asia that was necessary for a healthy growth of the Japanese economy; and now, to counterbalance and moderate the aggressive expansion of communist China in Southeast Asia.³¹ Both the intended and the unwanted effects of their activities have been produced, accepted, and indigenized. By situating these different Vietnam veteran groups and individuals primarily in the timeframe of the Clinton administration, it becomes easy to realize how constructive and instrumental the veterans have been in the

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reinforcement of Clinton’s foreign policy in Vietnam. My research project, which
aims to reexamine the Vietnam veterans’ agency in the normalization period and the
reinforcement of American hegemony in Vietnam, suggests that nothing should be
taken for granted.

These veteran groups and individuals hardly agree with one another on every
issue regarding Vietnam. For example, Webb vehemently denies the postwar
traumatic consequences among Vietnam veterans and the need to “heal” them, and
thus is likely to be the last one to support the William Joiner Center’s programs.
Peterson turned down the invitation to participate in the thirtieth anniversary of the
My Lai massacre, explaining irritatingly that he himself is also a victim and this kind
of activity does not serve the interests of the U.S. government. While Boehm and
Bowen may first of all wish to see Vietnamese people as friends, Webb would like to
refigure them as a security ally, and Peterson envisioned Vietnam to grow and
become America’s potential market or business partner. Yet, they all share a common
goal of advocating for the normalization of diplomatic relations between the two
countries, believing the policy would benefit both American and Vietnamese people.
With different strategies and priorities, all of these four groups and individuals
managed to reconstruct the memory of Vietnam in pro-American terms, make
postwar Vietnam more acceptable to American public and politicians, and help
ameliorate the bilateral relations. As will be demonstrated, discourses of benevolent
paternalism and neo-liberalism not only appeared to be the useful instruments but also
became the unexpected reward of their project as well.
CHAPTER 1
WILLIAM JOINER CENTER: BREAKING THE BARRIERS

On April 30, 1975 the Vietnam War ended, but that same war remains unfinished for millions of Americans and Vietnamese. The William Joiner Foundation asks all Americans who fought the war, all Americans who questioned, protested, or supported the war, all Americans who have not forgotten the war, to help repair the enduring damage in America and in Vietnam. The Foundation asks this in the belief that only such generosity will bring us lasting peace.\(^{32}\)

-- Gloria Emerson, author of *Winners and Losers*.

Through the years 1989–1990, hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese people, young and old, rushed to bookstores to get a copy of the best sellers, *Một Thời Làm Lỗi* (An Era of Mistakes) and *Trở Lại Nước Mỹ* (Return to America), two U.S. travel memoirs written by Lê Lựu, the first Vietnamese author ever invited to visit the United States to attend a war literature conference at the William Joiner Center at the University of Massachusetts at Boston (UMB). Due to the U.S.’s trade sanctions against Vietnam from 1975 up to that point, Vietnamese visitors to the U.S. had been extremely limited and few in number. Needless to say, Lê Lựu’s visit fascinated both Vietnamese people at home and his American hosts.\(^{33}\)

Underlying the public interest in Lê Lựu’s books and travels was the fact that the author had been a Vietnamese veteran of the American War, a Communist Party member with no official title in the administration, who was directly invited to the U.S. by his former enemies—the Vietnam veterans at the William Joiner Center. In the months after his travel experience in the U.S., Lê Lựu was also a sought-after speaker and lecturer in various Vietnamese educational institutions. Vietnamese

\(^{32}\) William Joiner Center’s publicity pamphlet, William Joiner Center archives, Healey Library, University of Massachusetts at Boston.

entrepreneurs quickly made the recorded tapes of his talks a lucrative business. The fascinating details about his trips to the U.S. offered contemporary Vietnamese people brand-new concepts about America and American veterans of the Vietnam War—a friendly country with nice, conscientious, and humane people—after decades of unpleasant memories of U.S. bombing and postwar hostility. While a majority of the Vietnamese public never met those American veterans in person, the signals that positive diplomatic moves were being accomplished between the U.S. and Vietnam were apparent and welcome, especially among the younger generation.34

Twenty years after the veterans’ first adventurous exchanges, U.S.-Vietnam diplomatic relations have made long strides, moving from “deep-seated mutual distrust, to a robust partnership based on mutual respect and cooperation,” and the bilateral relationship between the two countries is “at its most productive since relations were normalized in 1995,” as the U.S. ambassador in Vietnam confidently concluded.35 In summer 2010, to celebrate the fifteenth anniversary of Vietnam-U.S. diplomatic normalization, a William Joiner Center delegation, headed by Professor Kevin Bowen, again visited Vietnam for a literature exchange symposium. Vietnamese and American veteran authors, whose friendship had been sustained and deepened by shared experience of war and literary interests, once again had the opportunity to recall their first daring efforts to overcome governmental restrictions and reach out for each other in 1988 and set the first stepping stones for U.S.-Vietnam diplomatic normalization. As in previous reunions, the recollection of past memories and the observation of positive improvement in Vietnam-U.S. relations, partly as a

34 This includes my personal recollections of Lê Lựu and his talks in Hanoi during my senior high school and early college years between 1989 and 1992.
result of their constructive efforts two decades earlier, always moved Lê Lưu and Bowen to tears.\textsuperscript{36}

In 2010, Lê Lưu had some sad news to communicate. At the age of seventy, he is now divorced, lonely, and in poor physical shape. In late 2009, Lê Lưu’s children and his ex-wife pressured him to approve the sale of their house and split the money, leaving him nearly homeless. They practically abandoned him when he was fatally sick and hospitalized. While the perspectives of his ex-wife and children are neither clear nor available, Lê Lưu is obviously suffering a family crisis, which is also a social crisis to a certain extent. What is more, Lê Lưu’s business project, Trung Tâm Văn Hóa Doanh Nhân Việt Nam (the Center of Vietnamese Business Cultures) that he had been managing for eight years, is facing an imminent failure.\textsuperscript{37}

In 2002, Lê Lưu came up with an initiative to enhance and promote Vietnamese business culture. He quit his job as a columnist at the \textit{Tap Chí Văn Nghệ Quân Đội} (Review of Soldierly Arts) so that he could work fulltime on the project. Motivated by the idealism that, great entrepreneurs should and could be financially successful, culturally refined, and socially responsible, Lê Lưu founded the Center of Vietnamese Business Cultures. According to him, this institution would help sustain business ethics while refining Vietnamese culture. Being its director, Lê Lưu used his literary credentials and reputation as the first military official who built relations with America to attract thousands of members nationwide from both the military and the literary circles of Vietnam. Since its establishment in 2002, Lê Lưu has launched


various projects to promote a refined, efficient, and healthy culture for Vietnamese entrepreneurs ranging from eco-tourism and recreation projects to joint clubs for poets, writers, veterans, and businesspeople. The most successful project accomplished so far has been the annual prize contest that his Center sponsors, from which 100 top Vietnamese businesspeople are selected, based on their successes, ethics, and contributions to the community. Despite this vision, since 2008, Lê Lữ has encountered numerous business difficulties, disillusionment, and witnessed social and business vices. At the moment, the Center is in shaky operating condition with dwindling staff due to a lack of supportive membership and funding, and inefficient marketing agenda, all of which are added burdens to his deteriorating health.  

Lê Lữ’s lifelong friendship with Bowen as well as his affiliation with the William Joiner Center and his helplessness with the tough reality of the market economy in Vietnam today can serve as a useful vehicle to identify and analyze the primary aspects of their reconciliatory and normalization efforts. Their reconciliatory missions, accomplished through literature exchanges and humanitarian projects, have brought about well-intentioned results for both peoples and also unexpected consequences to Vietnam. On the one hand, Vietnamese and American people have been gifted with lasting peace and friendship. For veteran participants like Lê Lữ and Bowen, the exchanges offered them respect and camaraderie, boosted their reputations, and greatly augmented their professional or political authority. For

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millions of Vietnamese people, normalization with the United States meant the gate had been opened to the outside world where they could find vast opportunities to enhance their life, intellectually and materially. On the other hand, the diplomatic and economic normalization with the United States, reinforced by bilateral trade agreements and accession to the World Trade Organization, has effectively placed Vietnam within the hegemony of U.S.-led global capitalism and presented Vietnamese people with new cultural and social challenges. The following sections will examine the history of the William Joiner Center’s relations with Vietnam and demonstrate how its programs—which were originally designed to address the war consequences in both countries—have helped pave the way for diplomatic normalization in the mid-1990’s and, at the same time, reinforced American neoliberal ideology in Vietnam. Also, in the process of remaking war memory and constructing fraternity with the Vietnamese veterans, participating American veterans managed to demonstrate moral manhood and reassert soldierly nobility.

1. The William Joiner Center: History and Relations with Vietnam

The William Joiner Center was founded in 1982, located on the campus of the UMB, and named after William (Bill) G. Joiner, Jr., an African American veteran of the Vietnam War. Joiner served as the university’s first director of Veterans Affairs until his untimely death in 1981 from liver cancer, which was believed to be associated with his exposure to AO while serving in the military. Before his death, Joiner had tirelessly devoted his life to raise public awareness about the negative impact of AO on Vietnam veterans, an issue that the Veterans’ Administration and the U.S. government had long denied. In addition, during his appointment as the director of veteran affairs at Boston State College and the UMB, Joiner worked hard to take
care of the physical and emotional health of Vietnam veteran students at these campuses. The William Joiner Center was established to commemorate his life endeavors and continue his goals—addressing and studying the social consequences of wars on American veterans.\(^{39}\)

During the first few years, the Center was primarily involved in the documentation of the archival and oral history of the Vietnam War, in addition to the organization of Vietnam War’s photo exhibitions on and off-campus. The Center also sponsored research projects relating to PTSD, the negative impact of AO on Vietnam veterans, and the psychological effects of the war on Southeast Asian refugees, Amerasian children, and underrepresented groups of Vietnam veterans (the female and the non-white). At the time of its establishment, the Center was co-directed by Professors Tommy Lott (who specialized in African American philosophy) and Paul Atwood (who was a Vietnam veteran and professor of American Studies at UMB). In 1985, the center named professors Paul Watanabe (who specialized in Asian American Studies and American Foreign Policy Studies) and Kevin Bowen to be its co-directors. In 1986, professor David Hunt replaced professor Watanabe.\(^{40}\)

David Hunt is a professor of French and Vietnamese history at the UMB. In the mid-1960’s, he received a draft deferment as a graduate student and became a prominent antiwar activist, participating in antiwar demonstrations with students and Vietnam veterans on UMB campus. During this tumultuous period, Hunt was influenced by the New Left philosophy of participatory democracy, civil rights, and


\(^{40}\) William Joiner Center’s chronology is posted at http://www.joinercenter.umb.edu/about/chronology.html (last accessed Dec. 9th, 2010).
anti-Vietnam War activism. In early 1985, he was invited to visit Vietnam as part of an educators’ delegation organized by the U.S.-Indochina Reconciliation Project. Having the chance to witness the devastating poverty in Vietnam, the war’s consequences on Vietnamese people’s lives, and the warm welcome of the Vietnamese people at all levels, he was both “touched and discomfited” for the way former antiwar members of the New Left in the U.S. had basically ended their “romance” with Vietnam and ceased their political support for the country by the 1980’s. A few months after his Vietnam trip, Hunt was appointed to be the co-director at the William Joiner Center, a great opportunity for him to draw the Center’s attention to the social consequences of war in Vietnam and to develop assistance programs that addressed the country’s needs.41

Bowen is a Vietnam veteran and poet who is currently an adjunct professor of English at UMB. He was sent to Vietnam to serve with the First Air Cavalry Division at the age of twenty-one in 1968. As a working-class son of the Catholic Worker movement, he went to war, believing in the altruistic and ethical values of military duty. In 1969, he returned with different ideas about the morality of the war and participated in the veteran-led antiwar movement at the UMB. When the Paris Peace Accord talks were underway in summer 1971, he spent all the savings he received from selling fruits to travel to France so that he could closely follow the news about the peace negotiation and the political future of Vietnam as well as the moral future of the U.S.42

In January 1987, Bowen joined a delegation of twelve college professors sponsored by the U.S.-Indochina Reconciliation Project to go back to Vietnam for the first time. Upon returning, he realized how such trips to Vietnam would be necessary and helpful for American professors in particular and American people in general to get an idea of Vietnamese history and society, so that they could speak, teach, and influence the public awareness about Vietnam with much “greater credibility.”

Commenting on the significance of these Vietnam trips, Bowen observed:

Most of the participants are going back to universities. So their largest audience will be students. It’s important that we have some knowledge of what happened in Vietnam since the war. And those who have been on the trip are now uniquely able to speak on that. What’s interesting is there’s been a great proliferation of courses and interest on Vietnam in the last 10 years, and very few people who teach these courses have had the opportunity to go there. The other influence is in terms of professional and political associations that people belong to. As citizens and as members of these associations, these people can speak with greater credibility now.43

While the insights that Hunt and Bowen gained after their first Vietnam trips were probably similar, i.e., the facts and reality of contemporary, postwar Vietnam, their visions of the Center’s future engagements with Vietnam were slightly different. Influenced by his antiwar experience and the New Left worldview, Hunt paid closer attention to the welfare conditions of Vietnamese people and pondered how his Center could help to alleviate the situation. For Bowen, going back to Vietnam would help Americans to learn about the country first-hand, thus enriching their academic as well as political professions. Ultimately, this experience would enhance and empower participating Americans. The beginning of the Center’s resuming contacts with Vietnam, therefore, illustrated its directors’ desire to combine benevolent acts with self-serving interests.

In Fall 1987, the Center’s interests in reconnecting with Vietnam were further reinforced when it acquired a copy of the Combined Enemy Document Exploitation Center (CDEC) collection from the U.S. National Archives. This collection includes over twenty-six miles of microfilm of copies of notebooks, diaries, letters, and documents collected from the dead bodies or captured soldiers of the People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN) and the National Liberation Front (NLF). For the first time, the Center’s staff was able to visualize concrete portraits of the Vietnamese soldiers as human beings, with their biographical details and physical belongings rather than the abstract, faceless, and heartless enemy.44

Going through pages of the collection, the Center’s staff, archivists, professors, and Vietnam veterans were struck by its contents. In addition to the specifically military entries or official Communist Party autobiographies, the collection teems with personal items such as diaries, poems, letters to and from the soldiers’ family members, pictures of wives and children, etc., which personify the Vietnamese enemies, revealing their loving thoughts, frustration, disappointment, worries, strengths and weaknesses, successes and failures. Occasionally, the pages of diaries and letters were dotted with bloodstain and bullet holes, which gave the Center’s staff an eerie reminder of the unique nature of such documents and what had happened to their owners, now clearly imaged as human beings with a history and culture.45

The visibility and humanity of the Vietnamese opposition forces during the war captured the William Joiner Center scholars’ attention. Hunt was excited to discover the value of the documents because “they gave the enemy a human face,”

believing that the collection would “allow researchers to study the war at the grassroots level, and reveal the Vietnamese revolution to be a social movement rooted in the countryside and villages.” William Turley, a Vietnam War scholar, also noted: “No one setting out to write seriously about the war can afford to ignore the ‘human face of the enemy’ as revealed in these documents. They also include many poems and songs, nonetheless moving for their simplicity.” From the perspective of a Vietnam veteran, Bowen was more impressed by the new insights about his former enemy combatants, as he observed:

> Just spending a few hours browsing through these documents is enough to open one’s eyes to a whole new dimension of the war. You begin to visualize these soldiers as human beings just like yourself, something that war does not allow but history must provide, if there is to be understanding and healing.46

The striking phrases “human faces” and “just like yourself” that these scholars used to express their amazement at the documents indicate a painful fact that, for a long time, the American people in general, and American GI’s in particular, had failed to adopt a humane view of the Vietnamese soldiers. In other words, the Vietnamese soldiers had been imagined as an entirely different type of creature from the Americans. This was apparently the unfortunate condition of the Vietnamese enemies that American soldiers had been programmed to visualize as non-human, so that they could go about during the war hunting and killing the Vietnamese. The observation made by professors Hunt, Bowen, and Turley reminded people of how Vietnamese people had long been dehumanized and their agency in the war had consistently been excluded from American scholarly studies of the “Vietnam War.” Ironically, while Americans named the war as “Vietnam,” up to that point, most politicians, scholars, and Vietnam

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Various scholars have traced the origins of the Vietnamese dehumanization. In her groundbreaking study, Renny Christopher pointed out that the racist portrayal of the Vietnamese and the minimization of their agency during the war came from a long history of American xenophobia against the Asian people. The first importation of the Chinese laborers in 1848 and the Philippines-American War in 1898 provoked the racist sentiment in America, from which racist terms such as “dink,” “chink,” and “gook” that referred to the Asians were coined. Also, international upheavals like the Boxer Rebellion in China and the Russo-Japanese War in 1904–1905 challenged the Western perception of white supremacy and evoked their anxious description of the Asian as the “Yellow Peril.” The Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941 further intensified the dehumanization of Asians as the threatening, inhuman race. With the success of Mao Zedong’s Communist Revolution in China in 1949, a new xenophobic and anti-communist vocabulary was added to perpetuate the racist stereotype of the Asians as the “Red Menace.” America’s state propaganda during the Cold War and the Hollywood enterprise greatly manipulated these racist terms to provoke public phobia of an imminent threat from Asian communist states, which became the registered image of the Vietnamese people in the imagination of the American public and American soldiers who were sent to Vietnam.\footnote{Renny Christopher, \textit{The Viet Nam War, the American War}, 111–29; J. Fred MacDonald, \textit{Television and the Red Menace: The Video Road to Vietnam} (New York: Praeger, 1985), 49–83, 147–221; T. Louise Brown, \textit{War and Aftermath in Vietnam} (London: Routledge, 1991), 34–38; John Laffey, \textit{Imperialism and Ideology: A Historical Perspective} (Montreal, QC: Black Rose Books, 1999), 70; Tom Engelhardt, \textit{The End of Victory Culture} (New York: BasicBooks, 1995), 5–15; Michael Renov, “Imaging the Other: Representations of Vietnam in Sixties Political Documentaries,” in \textit{From Hanoi to Hamburger Businessman: Vietnam in American Film and Television} (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996).}
For most American GIs who served in Vietnam, the dehumanization of the Vietnamese began in their military training sessions in the U.S. prior to tours in Vietnam. Under the supervision and training of American drill instructors, whose racism, chauvinism, and rudeness were notorious, American soldiers were encouraged to imagine the Vietnamese people as an abstract, savage, enemy who may threaten their home country and kill their country fellows. Before joining the war and while in Vietnam, most American soldiers had little knowledge of the history of civil conflict in Vietnam, of Vietnamese culture, or the international dynamics of the war. They did not know what the Vietnamese people really looked like, who their friends and foes would be, who might turn out to be “virtually the same people.” Their imagination of the enemy was largely framed in racist and threatening terms during those brutal drilling sessions. Larry Rottmann, a Vietnam veteran writer affiliated with the William Joiner Center, recalled this training experience in fanatic rhythms:

Vietnamain’tmuchofawar but it ‘s theonlyonewegottoday
Theonlygoodgook is adeadgook
Doyouwantgooks rapingyourmother inMissouri?
Yourmissionis tolocate closewith and destroytheenemy
Smoke’um ifyou got ’um

The vague identification of who the enemy was and unclear battle-lines tended to confuse American GIs and turn them into killers of innocent people. This created an unbearable load of guilt for some Vietnam veterans. Unlike other wars where soldiers could tell where exactly the war zone was, or who they were supposed to fight against, in Vietnam, it was difficult because the U.S. army got itself involved in a

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civil war in a country with complex topographical features. This had been one of the reasons many GIs finally gave up trying to identify the enemy. Their minds were gradually trained to imagine the enemy altogether as an abstract figure, an invisible haunting ghost, or a faceless “gook,” so as to enable and justify their killing. As William Broyles, a returnee Vietnam veteran, put it:

A soldier’s best weapon is not his rifle but his ability to see his enemy as an abstraction and not as another human being. The very word “enemy” conveys a mental and moral power that makes war possible, even necessary. I had never known my enemy, and I wanted to.\(^52\)

The killing of people, particularly innocent civilians, naturally left the killers ridden with guilt. For Vietnam veterans, this sense of guilt was more destructive to their mentality because there was no real victory, which could justify the killing. They usually felt unwelcome at home after the war, and they were discouraged to talk about their feelings. The general social amnesia that American society and public chose to embrace toward the war effectively shut down the veterans and caused severe mental problems for many of them. On the one hand, this denied the veterans recognition for their machismo and heroism. On the other hand, it deprived them of a needed context within which they could talk about the war, its immorality and brutality, to prove their humanity and let others know their sufferings. Veterans soon realized that they had better not talk about the war because it made their families and friends uncomfortable. This, in turns, made them feel as if a part of their life had been wasted, and their humanity was denied, as described by a veteran:

The sense of being silenced felt a good deal like being shunned. In over ten years, there has never really anybody who has asked me ‘What happened to you over there? What was it like?’ It’s like having the whole of your life that didn’t exist.\(^53\)


Dr. Erwin Parson, a former Army medic and psychologist specializing in PTSD who worked closely with the William Joiner Center, also believed that this was the major cause of PTSD that many Vietnam veterans suffered, as he explained:

Guilt is always present after killing in a war, but, unlike previous wars in which actions taken in battle were shared by family, local community, the nation and the world community—soldiers who fought in Vietnam bear the full responsibility of conscience alone. For many veterans, this feeling of aloneness becomes unbearable.54

The bitter memory of the war and the public amnesia toward it forced Vietnam veterans either to be silent about it or to find other venues to express it. It therefore was natural that many Vietnam veterans chose to write about their war experience and became writers or poets. Larry Heinemann, winner of the National Book Award in 1986 for his Vietnam War memoir Paco’s Story and a highly acclaimed Vietnam veteran novelist, explained the rage he felt after returning home from the war, the need to share and explain to people without getting emotional, and concluded that writing novels is “more polite than a simple ‘fuck you.’”55

Revisiting Vietnam offered Vietnam veterans the unique opportunity to further undo the causes of their trauma in several venues. First, this was a chance for them to meet their former enemies as normal human beings rather than as fearsome, mysterious ghosts. Secondly, these meetings offered them the legitimate condition to talk about the war with the people who would likely be more understanding or comfortable talking about it—the Vietnamese veterans. Finally, the observation of peace in Vietnam was comforting to them and helped them to expiate guilt. In fact, the sense of guilt and the desire to replace a troubled war memory with peaceful

images of Vietnam were the central concerns that motivated many Vietnam veterans to return. As Rottmann explained:

I wanted to meet these folks. To hold them. Touch them. Smell their life and sweat. I want to know they are alive, especially the children. I need to be reassured that we didn’t kill or poison them all.\footnote{Larry Rottmann, “A Hundred Happy Sparrows: An American Veteran Returns to Vietnam,” \textit{Vietnam Generation} 1, no. 1 (Winter 1989): 113–40.}

Philip Caputo, a former Marine platoon leader who returned to Vietnam as part of the William Joiner Center’s writer delegation in 1990, went through the same feeling and expectation. Before going to Vietnam, he admitted that he used to be gung-ho about the war but returned feeling ill-used by his government and joined the anti-war movement. Prior to his return trip to Hanoi in 1990, Caputo said he wished to “see what it’s like to be there and not hear a single rifle shot or mortar round…to know how it is to lie in a rice paddy and hear the music of silence.”\footnote{George Wilson, “A Meeting of Hearts and Minds,” \textit{Washington Post}, August 26, 1990, W10–12.} While Rottmann and Caputo tended to orientalize and romanticize Vietnam, their desire to witness peace in the country was both self-serving and genuinely concerned for the Vietnamese people.

The William Joiner Center realized that many Vietnam veterans had lacked some crucial knowledge about the Vietnamese people that would help them overcome war trauma as well as enrich their professional experience. The U.S. sanction against Vietnam made it virtually impossible for U.S. veterans to return to Vietnam as independent individuals. Starting in 1987, the William Joiner Center’s directors launched a number of exchange projects that facilitated American veterans’ returns to Vietnam in organized groups so as to further the “understanding and healing” journey for Vietnam veterans. The following part examines the Center’s two major exchanges with Vietnam: war literature exchanges and humanitarian assistance combined with
organized return trips for cathartic purposes. In general, these programs opened the opportunity for the veterans of both sides to meet and get to know each other in peaceful circumstances, which demystified their respective enemy and helped reduce the emotional burdens of the war. While these venues helped construct fraternity, establish soldierly camaraderie, and a certain level of political solidarity between the American and the Vietnamese veterans, they also served to empower participating Vietnam veterans politically and professionally, and reopened the channel for them to assert and re-introduce American ideology of freedom, democracy, and human rights in Vietnam. This chapter demonstrates how the William Joiner Center offered the legal and logistical venue for a good number of Vietnam veterans to be indirectly engaged in the normalization process during the George H. W. Bush administration (1989–1993) and the reinforcement of American neoliberal and global capitalism (1993–2001). Also, their return experience and political advocacy helped reconstruct their moral manhood and reasserted a sense of soldierly integrity for participating Vietnam veterans.

2. Literature Exchanges: Constructing Fraternity

The literature exchange projects between the Vietnam veterans at the William Joiner Center and Vietnamese veterans began with Bowen’s curiosity about his former Vietnamese enemies and what the Vietnamese people wrote about the war. During this discovery process, Bowen and his fellow veterans gradually managed to construct camaraderie and soldierly fraternity with the Vietnamese veteran writers. Also, through their literary exchange projects that helped to re-image the Vietnamese humanity, the William Joiner Center actively influenced its public audience and reshaped American imagination of its former adversary in positive, pro-American
terms. The ultimate result was a construction of goodwill between Vietnam and America that would justify future diplomatic normalization.

In January 1987, urged by a desire to meet, know, and understand the Vietnamese people he had fought against, Bowen joined a delegation made up of college professors and veterans to visit Vietnam. In a meeting, he suddenly realized for the first time something he had in common with the Vietnamese veterans who were sitting right next to him:

My first reaction in most every meeting was wanting to ask people on the other side of the table what they had done during the war. Part of it was curiosity. Part of it was a real desire to meet someone who had been a soldier like myself in the same place in the same time. When it did happen, it was quite by surprise that I met somebody....There were tense moments, but the tension broke at a point when I began to inquire about a priest in a church that had been along Highway 9. No one else knew of the church, but as it turned out this man not only knew about the church but had kidnapped the priest in 1970. After that moment, when he proudly revealed his kidnapping, it was as if we were friends. The tension broke because it was as if we shared this person in common.\footnote{Kevin Bowen, “Kevin Sees Signs of Cooperation,” \textit{William Joiner Center Newsletter} 1, no. 2 (December 1987): 3. (The church event that Bowen mentioned in his interaction with the Vietnamese counterpart was not explained in this text. It only served as a context for the two men to discover their common battle experience).}

For Bowen, the discovery of something—an event or person—that they had shared led to an unexpected sense of friendliness with his former foe and allowed him to see the former enemy as friends. This, he believed, helped break the tension between him and the Vietnamese veterans and enabled him to move on with normal exchanges with the Vietnamese people. It was after this realization of wartime bonds that Bowen began to direct William Joiner Center’s relations with Vietnam in ways that could involve their former foes—the Vietnamese veterans.

Bowen’s idea about setting up literature exchanges between American and Vietnamese writers of the Vietnam War was fully formulated during his third trip to Vietnam in January 1988. While taking a rough bus ride through the countryside of
Vietnam with a group of American professors and students, Bowen talked about

*Paco’s Story*, an award-winning novel written by Larry Heinemann, a Vietnam veteran. It was in this context that Bowen became curious about Vietnamese war literature as written by the Vietnamese veterans themselves. As he recalled:

> We talked about the great weight of writing that had come from the war and the fact that, twenty years after the U.S. war in Viet Nam had ended, American veterans were still writing novels, nonfictions, poetry, and plays and were winning some of our most prestigious national literary awards. We talked about the country we were traveling through, its roads still pockmarked by the war, abandoned tanks and military vehicles still straddling the highways, and we wondered who the great Vietnamese writers of the war were and what were their stories?[^59]

At the end of their country tour, Bowen expressed his interest in learning more about Vietnamese War literature. The Vietnamese officials at the International Relations office of the Vietnam News Agency (Thông Tấn Xã Việt Nam) introduced him to Lê Lựu, a well-known Vietnamese veteran writer who had just published his new sensational book two years earlier, entitled *Thời Xa Vắng*, with the compliment, “this is a writer with many innovative ideas.”[^60] Lê Lựu quickly caught Bowen’s attention as a kind-hearted, vibrant, and sincere veteran whose greatest concern was about the Vietnamese veterans’ life after the war. Soon after Bowen returned to the U.S., he issued a formal letter directly to Lê Lựu that invited him to attend their War Literature conference that summer.[^61] For Lê Lựu, this first meeting with Bowen was often interpreted as an American recognition of his book and his view of the Vietnamese veterans’ postwar life. As he recalled:


Mr. Kevin told me: “We would like to introduce something about your war literature but not yet find anything. American media have mentioned your book. We realized that your protagonist Giang Minh Sài has experienced emotional challenges after the war, just like American veterans of the Vietnam War. We decide to translate this book. In the search for war memories, we find out that, whether being an ordinary soldier like me or being a hero like Giang Minh Sài, once we return home from the war, we feel the same sense of alienation and loss in the vacuum of the society caused by the event of war. We need to study it more from other perspectives, for months and years to come.”

Commenting upon Bowen’s ideas and request, Lê Lưu later revealed that he had been “lucky” to be the target of “America’s exploitative nature,” but happy to accept the invitation nevertheless. In August 1988, he traveled to Boston to attend the first joint Vietnam War literature conference at the William Joiner Center, together with Nguy Ngã, a Vietnamese screenplay writer, veteran of the former Republic of Vietnam.

_Thời Xa Vắng_, the book that led to Bowen’s interest in Lê Lưu, was published in Vietnam at the time of the economic renovation in 1986. It revealed sober aspects of the North Vietnamese soldiers’ postwar life through the story of Giang Minh Sài, a North Vietnamese veteran. Unlike the conventional, mainstream representation of the PAVN as victorious, optimistic, and patriotic heroes, Sài—the protagonist of the story—was the victim of Vietnamese rural politics, shaped by the nationalist war against French colonialism and the land reform in the 1950’s. In the ambivalence of the country’s political future, Sài’s father wished to secure his family’s future by setting up an affiliation with both the anti-French Việt Minh and the pro-French landlords. He sent his older son to join the Việt Minh and married his younger son, Sài, to the daughter of a landlord. When the French were defeated in 1954, pro-French Vietnamese nationals were subject to political harassment. The public renunciation

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62 Lê Lưu, _Một Thời Làm Lỗi & Trở Lại Niềm Mừng_ [An Era of Mistakes & Return to America], 3rd edition (Hà nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Hội Nhà Văn [Hanoi: Vietnamese Writers’ Association Publisher], 2003), 27.

63 Ibid., 28.
and persecution of landlords during the land reform made Sài further hate the wife his father had thrust into his life. Being a smart student who could attend college and be exempted from the draft, Sài volunteered to enlist for the PAVN to escape his pre-arranged, calculated marriage with the woman he did not love and the hopeless relationship with his high school sweetheart.  

When the war was over, Sài returned to his village only to divorce his childhood wife. He then worked in Hanoi, where he met and fell in love with Châu, a venomous, selfish urbanite woman who never quite respected Sài but seduced him into a hasty wedlock so that her unwanted pregnancy with a married man would be legalized. Their married life was hell with numerous misunderstanding occasions and fights because Sài had hardly acquired any skills necessary for a civilian life. They ended up with a divorce. In the court, when Sài tried to take custody of their son, Châu told everyone, including Sài, the shocking and humiliating truth that the child he had been father to was not biologically his. At the end of the novel, Sài returned to his home village and wandered aimlessly. His life was left empty and meaningless.

Thời Xa Vàng painted an unconventional picture of North Vietnamese veterans’ difficult postwar life, stricken with tough readjustment to civilian society, family conflicts, health problems, and social alienation. Their homecoming after the war in mid-1970s also coincided with the difficult time when the food supply was short and enormous postwar reconstruction tasks had to be done. Vietnam also plunged into two other wars, against China and the Khmer Rouge. The subsequent U.S.-led trade embargo and international isolation, coupled with misguided domestic economic policies, caused further hardship and social discontent in the country. Lê Lựu’s book was a great success because it met the Vietnamese reading audience’s

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desire to express its frustration and share its perspectives. Also, the book offered a more straightforward look at Vietnam’s recent history and contemporary society. Lê Lựu was widely extolled as the innovative writer who first had the audacity to reveal the less heroic side of the American war—the tragic private life of Vietnamese veterans and the quick disappearance of postwar glory.65

Bowen’s interest in Lê Lựu and his novel Thời Xa Vắng came out of shared personal and political experience. In other words, Bowen was fascinated to see Vietnamese veterans having similar difficulties in their efforts to readjust to civilian life, with the same physical and emotional suffering as American veterans. While the heroism of the protagonist was recognized and appreciated, Thời Xa Vắng seemed to imply that Sài’s heroism had been the outcome of his personal desire to escape the unhappy life in his home village rather than the result of selfless patriotism. The knowledge that Vietnamese soldiers had also suffered emotionally and that the Vietnamese government had committed errors and victimized its own soldiers was somewhat comforting and easier to accept for American veterans. Bruce Weigl, a Vietnam veteran poet who has been a member of the William Joiner Center and a close friend of Vietnamese veterans, shared Bowen’s view about Lê Lựu and the Vietnamese government. Responding to Schroeder’s question about Vietnamese veteran writers, Weigl commented:

Shroeder: How have Vietnamese writers responded to your interest in the war? Weigl: Initially, in 1985, I thought they were baffled by our interest in it. They didn’t understand why we kept writing about it. I’ve come to understand that was just party line. Those guys suffered the same things we suffered. We have a lot in common, and now, of course, they’re also writing about the war in deeply personal, far less political ways…The opening up of Vietnam has allowed them to admit now that they made mistakes. Li Lu [original misspelling], one of Vietnam’s most important novelists, wrote a novel five

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years ago that was the first published literary document which accused the Hanoi regime of making mistakes in the war. It was a big deal for that book to be published. So now I understand we have a lot more in common than I thought.⁶⁶

Weigl made it clear that the William Joiner Center’s search for the “truth” about the Vietnam War and the Vietnamese soldiers, who potentially represented this “truth,” were viewed as standing against what Weigl called the “party line” of the “Hanoi regime.” From the beginning, the William Joiner Center’s veterans appeared prepared to cast doubt on the Vietnamese government’s version of the “truth” and align themselves with the Vietnamese veterans who were willing to write freely and honestly about their situations. By siding with the veterans like Lê Lựu, Bowen and Weigl not only expressed their sympathy and constructed fraternity with the Vietnamese veterans, but also positioned themselves as the fighters for the freedom of speech.

The William Joiner Center’s literature exchanges in Boston in the two consecutive years 1988 and 1989 opened up further opportunity for Vietnam veterans to become the fraternal and political comrades with the Vietnamese veterans. An event that always came up in the recollection of Bowen, Lê Lựu, Nguyễn Quang Sáng, Nguyễn Khải (the first three Vietnamese veteran writers who were invited to participate in the conferences in 1988 and 1989) was their joint physical struggle against the anti-communist Vietnamese Americans, former citizens of the RVN, in the Boston area. Interestingly, this new battlefield and shifted alliance greatly reinforced their newly created fraternity and fellowship.

In late August 1988, Lê Lựu participated in the William Joiner Center’s first Writers’ Conference. Informed of his coming to UMB, many anti-communist local

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Vietnamese Americans brought flags and banners to the Center that identified themselves as former military officials of the Army of Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), who were now leading “Ủy Ban Chống Văn Hóa Cộng Sản” (The Commission Against Communist Culture) who came with a mission to prevent any efforts to introduce “Vietnamese Communist culture” into the United States. These people attended the conference with prepared political hostility and turned the Q&A session into a harrowing fight teeming with offensive questions and verbal attacks. The Vietnamese veteran writers were accused of being the representatives of the communist regime, which tortured and killed people, lied and invaded South Vietnam, and had shamelessly come to the U.S. to “propose the exchange of MIA bones for poverty aid.”

The second Literature Conference that took place in August 1989 was even more disastrous. Being better informed of the event than in the previous year, a larger group of Vietnamese Americans, most of whom lived in Boston, along with many participants from other parts of the U.S., gathered around the Center and tried to sabotage the conference. They also provoked physical attacks against the Center members and the participants, both in their private homes (where the Vietnamese guests were staying), and on UMB campus. The Vietnamese writers’ scheduled talks had to be cancelled for fear of violent eruptions.

The hostility of the Vietnamese American community in Boston against the William Joiner Center and its Vietnamese guests could be explained partly by the characteristic of its formation. Unlike the Vietnamese American community in other popular locations in the U.S., such as Orange County and San Jose in California,

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Houston in Texas, or Arlington in Virginia where the concentrations tend to be more solid and dense, the Vietnamese American community in Boston area was significantly smaller and experienced more difficulties when it tried to construct its own commercial and residential district in Boston. With extremely scarce resources in an alien climate zone, its members used to encounter unwelcoming attitudes when trying to move in among multiracial neighborhoods, most of which used to be all-white suburbs. The local community often received the arrival of these Vietnamese American settlers either with reserved attitude or outright hostility.

The violent reaction of ARVN veterans and their followers toward the William Joiner Center’s staff, particularly Hunt and Bowen (both of whom were Boston residents with an anti-war record), and their Vietnamese guests, was misinformed, uncivil, but comprehensible. In addition to their inherent ideological dispute with the government of Vietnam and the PAVN veterans, most of these Vietnamese Americans had suffered harsh treatment and humiliation in Vietnamese reeducation camps after the unification of Vietnam in April 1975. A good number of them encountered unpleasant experiences dealing with corrupt and abusive administrators of the new government (SRV). Constant harassment from the Vietnamese authority, resentment toward the imposed socialist orthodox, nationalized and planned economy, discriminatory policies regarding employment and schooling, and a general sense of insecurity forced them to escape Vietnam. Embarking on leaky boats that carried them across the harrowing sea, these boat people only wished to find a place that offered them asylum and exit venues to the Western world. The lucky ones survived horrifying sea-borne experiences that involved starvation, thirst, encounters with sea pirates, rapes, and the death of families. Once they managed to

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land ashore, usually in the Philippines, Malaysia, or Hong Kong, these boats people were expected to wait for months or years in anguish and desperate living conditions in refugee camps for their exit permits, then migrate to a third country, which could be France, the U.S., Canada, the U.K., or Australia. Their trauma—dispossession, social and political discontent, involuntary migration, harrowing experiences at sea, tough struggles to gain pity and acceptance in alien countries, and finally the tough readjustment in America—caused their bitter antagonism toward the post-1975 government of Vietnam. To them, the SRV represented nothing more than a treacherous, brutal, invading state. The legitimate presence of North Vietnamese veteran writers in America triggered their indignation about past defeat, resentment against the SRV, deprivation of rights and privileges, and humiliation.

American veteran hosts at the Center managed to protect the Vietnamese veterans against the physical harassment. It was in this context that Vietnam veterans affiliated with the Center could demonstrate their soldierly bravery, amplify their fraternity, and revise their past political alliance. On the first day of the second conference in 1989, Bowen, the Vietnamese veteran writers, and a number of American veteran participants arrived at the Center, only to find it fully surrounded by anti-communist Vietnamese American activists. The literature forum was disrupted in violent chaos and cancelled. Bowen and the Center’s guests (including the Vietnamese and American veterans) stayed inside the building until very late that evening, waiting for the Vietnamese American “warriors” to leave. However, when they showed up outside the building entrance and walked toward the parking lot, thinking those people had all left, they were suddenly confronted again by a group of

militant Vietnamese Americans, who used flags and sticks to hit them. Bowen recalled seeing his friend, a former marine, “grab a South Vietnamese flag and snap it in fury over his knee.” The Vietnamese guests, being puzzled and unprepared, were pushed around and hit. Bowen himself was hit and yelled at by a Vietnamese American woman he knew: “You! What are you doing here? Communist! They are torturers!” The scene was almost like close combat. Their worst nightmare in Vietnam many years before repeated itself. This time, however, the Vietnam veterans allied and fought along the former PAVN soldiers, whose heroism and victory had already been attested. By shifting their battle side, the Vietnam veterans at the Center were now against the former citizens of the defeated RVN, which meant they would have a higher chance to win. The newly constructed camaraderie between the William Joiner Center veterans and the Vietnamese veterans would be better recognized.

Later that night, the guests were finally safe in Bowen’s house and recovering from the attack. The group began to sink into thoughtful silence and unspoken celebration, not only of their new alliance, but also of their rediscovered heroism, as Bowen recalled many years later:

> We drink beer, feeling the tension slowly wear off after the attack. But this time we have been on the same side. This becomes a subject of joking, my house labeled the headquarters of the Maquis. For the next few days we are very careful. We are followed everywhere we go.

Identifying themselves with the “Maquis”—the French resistance troops during the German occupation in World War II—Bowen and his Vietnam veterans friends managed to reconstruct their warrior heroism, yet clearly made the distinction that “this time” that they had been “on the same side,” unlike their last role in Vietnam allying with the ARVN. The establishment of political solidarity between them and

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72 Bowen, “Notes from When the War Was Over,” 533.
the visiting Vietnamese veterans reasserted their soldierly integrity and reinforced international fraternity.

Meeting with the visiting Vietnamese veterans who also wrote about the war, Vietnam veteran writers felt more accepted and understood. This sentiment encouraged them to embrace their newly founded fraternity. No longer feeling like the only “odd guy” who keeps talking about the war, Larry Heinemann found his meeting with the Vietnamese veteran writers particularly rewarding. It offered him a great chance to make good friends, and, as he put it, “perhaps the best of friends, because [I] share with these folks something [I] share with very few in the States.” William Ehrhart, a veteran-poet who aggressively opposed the “petulant stubbornness” of the U.S. government behind its embargo policy and criticized his government’s attempt to “punish the people of Vietnam for having the audacity to thwart U.S. aims,” had the same sentiment. Talking to the Vietnamese veteran poets and writers made him feel like being “in good company.” Ehrhart revealed that the honored title “Vietnam writer” he was given in the U.S. did not necessarily make him feel flattered. His close friends and relatives kept wondering when he was “going to write a book that isn’t about Vietnam,” with an irritating tone that showed their genuine concern for his psychological wellbeing, thinking he was still obsessed by the trauma of his Vietnam experience. However, in Vietnam, Ehrhart was pleased to discover that:

Everybody over the age of 35 is a “Vietnam writer,” and for once, I could feel like just one of the gang. No one thinks it is odd to be writing about the war, much less its painful and lingering legacies. No one looks at you as if you are emotionally retarded. What I’ve done with my life and my writing makes perfectly good sense to them.

73 Larry Heinemann, Black Virgin Mountain: A Return to Vietnam (New York: Doubleday, 2005), 118.
75 Ehrhart, In the Shadow of Vietnam, 187.
Various other Vietnam veterans discovered and constructed similar camaraderie with the Vietnamese veterans. To many of them, the William Joiner Center’s war literature conference in 1989 was the first opportunity to meet face-to-face with their former enemy—the North Vietnamese veteran authors who participated in the conference. Their conversations and exchanges greatly helped participating Vietnam veterans to demystify the Vietnamese “enemy” and encourage them to become friends. Upon hearing Lê Lựu’s frank admission about how Vietnamese veterans had to experience difficulties when they tried to return to civilian life after the war, about those who were abandoned by families and disillusioned, becoming alcoholic and penniless, Tim O’Brien—a highly recognized Vietnamese veteran author, was stunned, saying “they went through the same kind of thing we did.” The discovery of shared, unhappy experiences effectively served as the catalyst that pushed them close together and build solid friendship. Once the abstract enemy was demystified, their fright and haunting memories from the war were also gone. Before the conference, O’Brien admitted his lingering fear toward the North Vietnamese soldiers:

They had always been ghosts to me. They seemed to be able to take anything, to float through our barbed wire. On guard duty when we were scared, we’d say “the ghosts are out here tonight.”

After spending several days with them during the conference, O’Brien said he and other Vietnam veterans discovered these ghosts were really ordinary soldiers “who had it tougher than [we] did.” When the Vietnamese soldiers told him about suffering malaria and having to live in tunnels or eating bats, O’Brien concluded, “these stories built a sense of fraternity—the feeling of shared experience.” As it turned out, the

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77 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
demystification of an abstract enemy involved a mutual process of re-humanization that benefited both sides and further consolidated their fellowship.

It should be noted that the dehumanization of the enemy during the Vietnam War was mutual. It is necessary for soldiers to imagine the enemy as something less than normal human beings so that they could shoot, not only for their own protection, but also to ease the psychological burden of homicide. Michael Archer—a Vietnam veteran, was convinced that his fellow soldier had been dehumanized before being shot by the North Vietnamese soldiers. In his memoir *A Patch of Ground: Khe Sanh Remembered*, Archer described his return trip to Vietnam in 2003 with a joint American and Vietnamese MIA recovery team to look for the remains of Tom Mahoney, his high school buddy in the Marines who had gone missing in 1968. While going through the Vietnamese archives of after-action reports, Archer found information about Mahoney, written by a member of a five-person ambush team, which described their mission and their impression of Mahoney:

“The five-person team…waited for the enemy all night long. At 1400 on the following day (6 July 1968) we saw one American walking outside the entrance of the outpost. He wore a cement-colored uniform. His face was red and his eyes were blue like a mean animal. He was looking toward Mr. Luong’s team. The sounds of AK weapons roared immediately and the American fell. Mr. Luong and Mr. Long jumped out of their positions and dragged the American body down. They placed the body in front of them to create an ambush for the other Americans coming out of their bunkers.”

The Vietnamese team’s description of Mahoney’s blue eyes “like a mean animal” and the way they used his dead body as bait to lure other Americans to come out gave the impression that they were participating in a hunting for savage animals. In this case, the American soldiers were also dehumanized, so that the Vietnamese soldiers could go about killing them.

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Lâm Thị Mỹ Dạ, a Vietnamese female veteran who had participated in the 1968 Tết Offensive in Huế (along with the PAVN and NLF forces), was also aware of the humanity hidden behind the constructed fierce, animalistic cover for soldiers in combat. After the war, Lâm became a poet who wrote about her wartime service in the youth brigades and the women’s engineering units. In 2001, she was invited to attend a war literature conference at William Joiner Center, when she had her poems introduced, translated, and published. This meeting also gave her the opportunity to look back at her experience encountering American soldiers and realize how her former enemies had been dehumanized and needed to be re-humanized. Lâm later reflected this sentiment in the poem “Khuôn Mặt Ẩn Kín” [The Face Beneath]:

I want to be a small deer  
Running under the sky through green grass  

Don’t make me go into the thick jungle  
Or I will become a fierce wolf  

Who can foresee the tricks and snares of life?  
Deception  
is disguised by sweet tongues  

I was an unwitting deer  
Wandering far from my field of fresh grass  

My face was the face of a wolf  
In deep caves, in shadows, dark and still  

Then a call startled me awake  
And I remember that once my eyes  
Had been clear, the eyes of a deer  

At the end of the road I fell down  
When a bullet struck my blood-filled chest  

If you look under the wolf’s skin  
You’ll find the red heart of an innocent deer. 

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80 For information about Lâm Thị Mỹ Dạ’s background, her visit to Boston, and publication, see http://www.joinercenter.umb.edu/news/vietnampoets.html (last accessed Dec. 15, 2010).  
Apparently, the William Joiner Center’s literature exchange project offered both sides comforting sentiments and mutual benefits. Not only did the participating veterans have the chance to be righteously re-humanized, their wartime trauma was also relieved and replaced by genuine camaraderie. For the Vietnamese participants, such exchanges gave them further recognition, reputation, and authority in Vietnam and abroad, especially when their works of literature were introduced and translated with the William Joiner Center’s recommendation and assistance. For the American veterans, these exchanges offered them first-hand knowledge about Vietnam, the authority to speak about it, the proper context for them to demonstrate their integrity, and reconstruct comradely fraternity.

The construction of fraternity between the Vietnamese and the American veterans not only came from their similar wartime experience and hardship after the war, but also from the rediscovery of their savagery, i.e., their ability to kill and commit cruelty. During the third War Literature Conference held in Hanoi in 1990, after a whole day of exchanging experiences and poetry, the talk came down to the blunt question, that had nagged many Vietnam veterans for some time: “Who among these Vietnamese veteran writers had ever killed an American?”

One Vietnamese veteran writer after another testified that they had never shot or even seen an American in the war. After a while, the American veterans began to wonder if the Vietnamese were still “pulling their punches.” Finally, Cao Tiến Lê, a veteran novelist stood up and said he had killed lots of Americans, “the equivalent to a whole platoon,” and that he “was very good at it.” Upon learning that seemingly uneasy fact, Ehrhart found himself relieved:

The atmosphere of cordiality that had prevailed for the first day and a half had been delightful, even uplifting—but it also seemed a bit unreal, as though
these people were politely ignoring who had been responsible for their misery. Cao Tien Le was a dose of reality, unsettling but oddly reassuring.  

Lê then described how he had hastily chopped the limbs from the bodies of his Vietnamese comrades, so that they could bury the bodies quickly and erase all traces before the enemy planes came. Caputo, a former Marine lieutenant whispered to Ehrhart, “we could have used him in the Marines.”  

In a strange way, the knowledge that the Vietnamese soldiers had also committed killing toward the Americans, just as the American GIs had done toward the Vietnamese could be “reassuring” to the Vietnam veterans. Once a sense of mutual destruction and shared savagery was established, the feeling of guilt was exonerated and soldierly camaraderie was asserted.

The newly founded fraternity and political solidarity between the William Joiner Center’s Vietnam veterans and the Vietnamese veterans encouraged them to further their lobby for the U.S.-Vietnam normalization. Weigl, who was also a university professor of English, believed that “artistic expression of a traumatic experience can influence public attitudes,” which, in turn, “affect American authority—moral and economic authority.”  

As a vocal pro-normalization lobbyist, he was confident in the liberal, democratic forces in American civic culture that Vietnam veteran writers possessed. Along with other Vietnam veterans and the William Joiner Center, Weigl believed veteran writers had the power to change the U.S.’s postwar policy toward Vietnam. During an interview with Schroeder about the purpose of his reconnection with Vietnam, Weigl stated:

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All my efforts now are towards normalization. That is why I work with the Joiner Center; that’s our goal. Our government won’t do it, so the writers are doing it. Yes, I’ve been back to Vietnam twice since the war.\textsuperscript{85}

In the same interview, Weigl criticized America’s “cowboy ethic” that refused to recognize Vietnam because Vietnam had won the war, and offered his conception of the MIA/POW myth:

Schroeder: What sorts of problems raised by the war do we as Americans still face?

Weigl: The largest issue is the issue of MIAs. It’s become a cottage industry: MIA-izing. It is perfectly clear to anyone with an iota of intelligence that there are no Americans being held prisoner in Vietnam. There may be Americans in Vietnam, but if there are, the Vietnamese don’t know where they are, or what they’re doing there. The Vietnamese certainly have absolutely nothing to gain by holding anyone prisoner. I think people don’t realize what happens in a tropical country. When someone falls dead, two weeks later, there’s a tree there. And three weeks later, you would never know someone died there. It eats up entire airplanes, the jungle. The MIA issue has been orchestrated in part by members of our government because it’s a way to keep us from normalizing relations with Vietnam.\textsuperscript{86}

Weigl’s re-engagement with Vietnam not only helped him establish fellowship and alliance with the Vietnamese veterans but also qualified him as a speaker about contemporary U.S.-Vietnam relations and fueled his political activism. Revisiting Vietnam and coming back to the U.S. to share his knowledge of Vietnam, Weigl indirectly participated in the pro-normalization lobby that later won in the Congress. While he appeared to oppose the U.S. government, his very opposition affirmed his status as an American with civic participation in the government’s decision-making process—a political role that most Americans embrace.

One of the important contributions of the William Joiner Center’s literature exchanges with Vietnamese veteran writers was their joint translation and publication project, which help to visualize the Vietnamese people in American public, pacify the

\textsuperscript{85} Schroeder, \textit{Vietnam, We’ve All Been There: Interviews with American Writers}, 193–94.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 193.
war memories, and normalize their bilateral reconnection. Since 1987, Bowen has traveled to Vietnam many times to meet with Vietnamese writers and establish the agreement framework for this cooperation. In 1993, Rottmann published a collection of poetry entitled *Voices from the Ho Chi Minh Trail: Poetry of America and Vietnam, 1965-1993*. In this collection, each poem was placed side by side with a documentary photograph of Vietnamese or American people who lived and fought during the war, including men, women, and children, in ways that clearly humanized and enhanced them. In 1994, a collection of poems from the captured CDEC was translated by Thanh T. Nguyen and Bruce Weigl, and published in *Poems from Captured Documents*, which further revealed the emotions, inspirations, and humanity of the Vietnamese soldiers. Under the auspices of the William Joiner Center and the Vietnamese Writers’ Association, various other co-authored anthologies of Vietnam War poetry and literature have been published in English and introduced in American classrooms. The American and Vietnamese wartime stories selected in these volumes not only demystify and humanize the “enemy” but also celebrate the postwar peace and internalize the newly established friendship between two former adversaries.

In short, the William Joiner Center promoted the exchanges of culture and literature among the veterans of the two countries, which ultimately helped pacify war

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memories and normalize their newly constructed fraternity. These translated and edited volumes portrayed the Vietnamese soldiers in particular and the Vietnamese people in general as humane, honored, and loving people. Also, they urged American readers to recognize the burdens of war on Vietnamese people and encouraged them to look at the Vietnam War history from the perspectives of Vietnamese people.

Finally, this literary venue enabled the people from both countries to view Vietnam-America friendship as a natural and necessary concept.

The greatest translation and publication project so far is Thời Xa Vắng (A Time Far Past). After many years’ joint effort among two American and two Vietnamese scholars, the translation of this book was finally completed and published in 1997. In the introduction of A Time Far Past, Hunt provided a long political and social background of the story and its protagonist, Sài. His conclusion captured well the intangible, joint benefit that the William Joiner Center’s literature exchange projects had been able to offer their participants:

Given the formative role of “Vietnam” in the lives of nearly every person in the United States, we can not know who we are unless we know who they are. Le Luu’s work is a contribution to this joint self-exploration.91

In conclusion, the literary engagement between Vietnamese and American veteran authors first of all offered the participating veterans the chance to enrich their knowledge and enhance themselves professionally as well as politically. Second, it served as a channel for them to establish political solidarity and soldierly fraternity. Particularly for the American veterans, these exchanges provide them a convenient context to speak about their war experience with empathic Vietnamese veterans and “normalize” their wartime memories. In the pre-normalization era when diplomatic exchanges were obstructed, the experience also allowed American participants the

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chance to introduce American liberal values—the freedom to speak and rally for a political cause that defies the U.S. government’s policy.

Furthermore, the literature exchange and translation projects initiated by the William Joiner Center also helped inform the public audience in America and Vietnam of their respective former enemies in positive and humane terms, which created a supportive environment to lobby for the reestablishment of normal relations between the two countries. The following section will examine another dimension of the William Joiner Center’s relationship with Vietnam—the provision of humanitarian assistance coupled with Vietnam veterans’ return trips for cathartic purposes. As will be demonstrated, the logistical requirements of these programs created a forceful momentum and offered participating Vietnam veterans a strong rationale for their political cause: the lift of embargo in 1994.

3. Humanitarian Assistance: Lifting the Embargo

Humanitarian assistance was an important dimension in the William Joiner Center’s relations with Vietnam before the normalization. In June 1987, after the two preliminary survey trips carried out by co-directors Hunt and Bowen, the William Joiner Center began to send its delegations—including doctors, veterans, nurses, and scholars—to Vietnam and set up veteran-to-veteran programs that provided medical assistance to Vietnamese veterans and needy civilians. Drs. Erwin Parson, Louis Rodriguez, and Jaime Rodriguez, who were PTSD specialists at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center (Boston, MA), helped the William Joiner Center to implement two annual Full-Circle Projects in 1989 and 1990. Under the Center’s sponsorship, a couple of dozen Vietnam veterans were given the chance to travel to Vietnam and revisit their former battlefields for cathartic purposes. Usually, they traveled alongside
with American PTSD specialists and the Center’s humanitarian team. Robert Glassman, a Vietnam veteran who is a successful banker in Boston, was the financial sponsor for these projects. In 1988, he contributed $100,000 to establish the William Joiner Foundation, a non-profit organization that could provide both legal and financial coverage for the Center’s projects in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{92} The Center’s dual implementation of humanitarian and cathartic projects in Vietnam demonstrated an agenda and approach that combined benevolent motivations with self-serving pursuits.

The William Joiner Center’s humanitarian and cathartic projects soon proved to be popular and successful. Talking about the Center’s future direction, Bowen said in an interview that he received “dozens of calls every week from Vietnam veterans in the United States who are trying to find a way to go back to Vietnam and do something positive.” This widespread desire among U.S. veterans “encouraged the Joiner Center to plan a limited ‘hearts and minds’ program run by veterans on both sides.” Bowen explained that he “wanted to keep it simple, such as supplying medical equipment and training midwives caring for newborns and their mothers.”\textsuperscript{93} Through its simple “hearts and minds” project, the William Joiner Center began to facilitate the wish of a number of Vietnam veterans to undo their former destructive roles and redefine their identity as the humanists and providers. This way, the William Joiner Center also managed to reshape the Vietnamese memory of American GIs in positive, welcoming terms.

At the time of the Center’s first overtures, the U.S. government had not recognized Vietnam and strictly maintained its trade embargo against the country,

\textsuperscript{93} George Wilson, “Vietnam Veterans Bridge Animosities.”
which effectively limited most non-government exchanges. The Center’s humanitarian project in Vietnam could be seen as one of the first defiant acts exercised by the Vietnam veterans against the U.S. government’s postwar policy toward Vietnam. Undertaking these “hearts and minds” programs, the William Joiner Center asserted the Vietnam veterans’ political rights to direct and remake the Vietnam War history, a privilege that they had been denied during the war as young men. As Bowen viewed it:

Fifteen years have passed since American disengagement from Vietnam. Now for many veterans it seemed the time has come for reengagement, for a new campaign of hearts and minds, a campaign that involves returning to the land where they fought.  

By using the phrase “campaign of hearts and minds,” Bowen reminded us of the U.S. government’s so-called “pacification” programs that focused on community building, education, and humanitarian aid in order to win the allegiance of the South Vietnamese populace or their “hearts and minds” so to speak. The key goal of these programs was to isolate the NLF and communist forces. Due to America’s lack of knowledge about grassroots village relationships among the South Vietnamese farmers and their mismanagement of the program, this policy had been more a failure than success, considering the huge amount of state funding they had expended which could easily dwarf the accomplishment. Re-introducing the phrase “hearts and minds,” Bowen did not necessarily embrace and endorse the strategy. Rather, he suggested that the Vietnam veterans could implement a similar postwar campaign with a better chance for success.

Thus, the Vietnam veterans who came back to Vietnam on humanitarian missions under the sponsorship of the William Joiner Center had a clear objective for their returns: make up for their lost cause, reconstruct their idealistic roles as “saviors” rather than “destroyers,” and redo the history of their involvement in the Vietnam War. Ralph Timperi, a Vietnam veteran who helped run the William Joiner Center’s medical assistance programs, rationalized it:

By returning and working with the people as friends rather than enemies, we can do the kind of work we thought we were doing to begin with. We thought we were doing something good when we were in the war. It turned out we weren’t. By returning and doing what in our idealistic framework we see as what Americans ought to be doing, it helps us find ourselves again.96

Reminiscing the painful experience that almost all Vietnam veterans had been told to go to Vietnam to “fight for the Vietnamese,” but returned “in silence,” feeling nothing but “loss and destruction,” and being forced not to talk about the war because it “made people feel uncomfortable,” Bowen contemplated a new role that Vietnam veterans could take to undo their loss and remake the meaning of their military service:

Going back the second time around is an attempt, not to reclaim the past, but to reclaim its significance for us. It is an attempt to reassert through our own action the probity of our purposes. At 19 or 20, entering a first passage into maturity, we were caught between two worlds that destroyed each other. At 39 or 40, entering the second phase of our lives, we seek again to endow these worlds with meaning. The problems of Vietnam are different today from what they were 20 years ago. Many of these problems are the consequences of war. The effects of bombing, deforestation, lack of economic aid, are evident to the eye. Visits to hospitals and production centers for the disabled are chastening. Veterans who visit see there an opportunity through assistance to renew and redirect the history of their involvement.97

While Bowen asserted the veterans’ return was “not to reclaim the past,” he envisioned that the Vietnam veterans’ humanitarian work would help reassert the

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97 Bowen, “Seeking Reconciliation in Vietnam.”
“probity of [our] purposes” and “redefine the contexts of memory.” This suggests Bowen and participating Vietnam veterans did wish to reclaim and rewrite the past. Calling other Vietnam veterans to go back and do something constructive “whether it be simply purchasing a cow for an orphanage or chickens for a rehabilitation center for drug addicts and prostitutes,” Bowen convinced his fellow veterans that these actions “speak loudly for who we were and are as soldiers, veterans, and Americans.”

In other words, coming back to Vietnam and being involved in humanitarian work offered Vietnam veterans the chance to erase their former identity as savage killers, destroyers, or accomplices of the U.S. imperialism. At the same time, they were able to construct new, positive images that not only obscure unpleasant personal memories for themselves, but also for their American fellows. In other words, America’s prideful image would be saved by the restored humanity of returnee Vietnam veterans. The word “reconciliation” that Bowen chose to include in the title of his article in order to describe the objective of the Vietnam veterans’ activities in Vietnam is, therefore, subject to multiple interpretations. It is not only the reconciliation between the Vietnamese and the American involved in the Vietnam War. It is also about efforts among Americans themselves to make peace with each other after that tragic and divisive war.

Contemplating the significance of “going back” and the reconciliatory role that Vietnam veterans could take, Bowen also acknowledged that the costs of war had been a shared burden for both American and Vietnamese veterans, and thus, the reconciliation is primarily theirs:

Going back, for many, stirs the mind, rekindles the imagination, and reopens the heart to hope. It cannot change the past, but it can reconnect the past with

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98 Ibid.
the present, so allowing the silence to be broken. Many veterans sense this intuitively and – as this country moves closer to diplomatic relations with Vietnam – wants to claim their place in the process.

The costs of the war were borne on their shoulders and on the shoulders of Vietnam and the Vietnamese. The first overtures of reconciliation have been theirs and those of the Vietnamese. When the time comes for reconciliation, they want and deserve the opportunity to publicly write their own history, an opportunity they didn’t have 20 years ago.99

In this context, Bowen stresses the need for American veterans and the Vietnamese people to reconcile with each other. The costs and trauma of the war, as “borne on their shoulders,” are made mutual. While not following the American conservative position that interpreted the “Vietnam War” as a “tragedy” inflicted upon America by the Vietnamese or as an “experience” that “happened to America and Americans,”100 Bowen’s use of the word “reconciliation” seemed to indicate a mutual process in which each group of veterans recognized the emotional as well as physical suffering that their adversaries had to endure. By helping Vietnam to heal its war wounds, American veterans can make peace with their former enemy and heal their own emotional suffering in the process.

In calling for harmonious support from all Vietnam veterans for the William Joiner Center’s mission, Bowen noted that among the veterans and civilians who returned to Vietnam, their “motivations, combat experiences, and ideological leanings” were “diverse,” but for all, the act of going back was an “affirmation.”101 In this context, “reconciliation” refers to the wished-for state of harmony among Americans themselves regarding their positions toward the Vietnam War, as Gloria Emerson has stated in her appraisal of the William Joiner Foundation’s missions.102

The William Joiner Center’s projects in Vietnam provided Vietnam veterans and non-

99 Ibid.
100 Martini, Invisible Enemies, 76.
102 William Joiner Center’s publicity pamphlet, William Joiner Center archives, Healey Library, University of Massachusetts at Boston.
veteran Americans the environment to settle past conflicts about the morality and legitimacy of the war in Vietnam. Coming back and having themselves engaged in shared humanitarian projects seemed to be the way for them to set aside ideological differences, undo their past flaws, and work toward the reaffirmation of American moral and liberal values.

The William Joiner Center’s humanitarian program was combined with the Full Circle Project, a program that organized pilgrim trips for Vietnam veterans—including soldiers and nurses—in hope of achieving certain cathartic effects for their mental problems. The positive cathartic effects of their returns, while varied in degree and speediness, were evident. Coming back to Vietnam, participant veterans could see the welcoming attitude of the Vietnamese hosts and witness the emerging market economy in Vietnam. These indicated Vietnamese people’s forgiveness and their embrace of free market capitalism, which not only relieved their guilt but also restored their sense of self-worth. Also, the peaceful and lively scenes in Vietnam obscured remnants of destruction and enabled returnee veterans to erase the troubled memories of combats. To put it differently, the William Joiner Center’s Full-Circle Projects facilitated the reconstruction of Vietnam War memories and allowed participating Vietnam veterans to move on with “normal” memories of a new Vietnam that welcome them and embrace American neoliberal paradigm.

Gumersindo Gomez and David Pye, two veterans who joined the Joiner Center to return to Vietnam during the January 1990’s Full Circle Project trip,


discovered that they had both fought on Black Virgin Mountain in Tây Ninh province during the war. Revisiting the mountain together, seeing that once fearsome, bunkered and highly contested mountain at peace, proved a relief for both of them. As Gomez recalled:

The mountain is still the same, except the foliage is gone. I walked halfway up that mountain where so many of my friends had died. We were supposed to be guarding the Army engineers on that mountain one night in January 1967. The Vietcong slipped through us and killed every one of the engineers. About 12 of them.
I’m crying. I’m hurting because I lost some good friends there. I’m walking away. It is a release. Everything in my chest comes out. No more pain. No more being afraid. All those bad images go away—the bunkers, the concertina wire, the shooting.  

For many Vietnam veterans, returning to Vietnam doing “good work,” so that they could feel better about themselves was considered a “belated victory” that they thought they had always deserved. Before going back to Vietnam, Pye said to his friends, “Last time nobody welcomed me home. This time I wanted a brass band.” His friend, who was also on the staff at the veterans’ counseling center in Massachusetts, did more than that. She persuaded the brass-men of Gloucester to play, free of charge, a rousing welcome for Pye and other veterans when they returned to Boston’s Logan airport. She also arranged for a crowd to be there to waive American flags and signs of “Welcome Home!” The need to be welcomed back is inherent in almost all returning soldiers because that is the evidence of how their valor and sacrifice have been recognized as worthy. By facilitating Vietnam veterans’ returns to Vietnam, the William Joiner Center enabled them to reclaim military honor and re-identify themselves as the winners in the new struggle for “hearts and minds.”

106 Ibid.
The returnee veterans’ desire to reclaim an honorable place in the U.S. history and reinsert their contributions in the current history was richly endowed with Cold War politics and postwar neoliberal ideology. Generally viewed as “the gospel of salvation,” American neoliberal capitalism asserts that one needs free market capitalism to gain economic, political, social, and moral progress.\textsuperscript{107} Upon returning to the U.S. from their Vietnam return trip, many veterans expressed an objection against the ongoing U.S. embargo, which obstructed a free flow of economic and cultural exchanges, while nurturing the confidence that their returns could have a changing effect both on the U.S. government policy toward Vietnam and on the Vietnam’s authoritarian system. The usual anecdote that these returnee veterans shared was how Vietnamese people were “friendly to Americans” and “pro-capitalist” while they “dislike the Russians.” Moreover, many Vietnam veterans expressed “love” and “respect” for the Vietnamese people who were open-minded, brave, and capable of asserting their freedom of speech to state their preference for the “number one” Americans over the “number ten” Russians. This encouraged many returnee veterans to embrace American neo-liberalism as a benevolent state model, believing that an improved relation between the U.S. and Vietnam would “help liberalize that nation and move it away from communism.”\textsuperscript{108} O’Brien, the renown Vietnam veteran writer who had been to Vietnam on several occasions, urged his fellow veterans who were still hesitating about coming back:


The war is over. Why not be friends? It can’t hurt. It might help push them toward democracy and freedom. It doesn’t mean you have to like their political system.\textsuperscript{109}

George Wilson, a Vietnam veteran who was a reporter for \textit{The Washington Post}, attended the William Joiner Center’s third literature conference in Hanoi in June 1990 but brought with him other plans beyond the literary exchange. In a featured article exclusively for the \textit{Washington Post} that summer, Wilson offered readers his stark observations about contemporary Vietnam where the people were eager to learn from the outside world, to move toward a free market economy but hardly had freedom of expression. In addition, he asserted that the country was going through economic and political crisis, and that the government of Vietnam was losing its legitimacy, as illustrated by its attempts to crack down on dissidents and exercise surveillance over the people.\textsuperscript{110} Apparently, a number of returnee Vietnam veterans tended to uphold anti-communist conviction and the rhetoric of “freedom, democracy, and human rights” when they re-encountered Vietnam. Their sentiment added further weight to their long-held belief in the benevolent and noble cause of the war they fought: fighting for the “freedom of the Vietnamese people.” For them, revisiting Vietnam also offered them the chance to reassert the morality of the U.S.’s Cold War goals in Vietnam. Part of the “healing” that these U.S. veterans gained through such return trips to Vietnam lies in their ability to reclaim moral manhood and remember their Vietnam War service as contribution to a noble and legitimate effort.

The William Joiner Center’s humanitarian projects in Vietnam not only helped returnee Vietnam veterans to reclaim their soldierly integrity, and rewrite the history of their involvement in the Vietnam War, but also made them a part of the U.S.-

\textsuperscript{109} George Wilson, “Vietnam Veterans Bridge Animosities.”
Vietnam normalization. Going back at the time when the U.S. was moving closer to
diplomatic relations with Vietnam, Bowen observed, “Many veterans want to claim
their place in the process.” By 1991, hundreds of Vietnam veterans, under the
auspices of the William Joiner Center and the U.S.-Indochina Reconciliation Project,
had returned to Vietnam and begun to participate in the U.S. government’s policy-
making process toward Vietnam. Their political agency was most clearly
demonstrated by their forceful lobbying for the lifting of the U.S. trade embargo and
the U.S. ban on organized travel to Vietnam.

The strict implementation of the U.S. embargo against Vietnam during those
years was an obstacle to Vietnam veterans’ returning efforts because it placed a
veritable stranglehold on every item of humanitarian aid to be delivered to Vietnam
and any amount of money transacted or carried to Vietnam. The bureaucracy and the
costly logistic expenses made the William Joiner Center’s projects to alleviate the war
consequences in Vietnam quite difficult. As Bowen critically assessed:

I remember my first trip, hearing someone flippantly claim the poverty to be
typical of most third world countries. But in the hospitals and rehabilitation
centers, we now see the thousands of amputees, paraplegics, and disabled. The
difference comes across, and the cost of the embargo.

By 1990, most Western countries and Japan had abandoned their embargo against
Vietnam, and the U.S. became the lone trade warrior that continued its restriction.
Since 1987, with the introduction of the Foreign Direct Investment Law, Vietnam had
opened up the country and its market to foreign investment, trade, and tourism, which
greatly increased the availability of consumer goods and other services. This
created a lot of troubles and frustration for Vietnam veterans who returned to

112 Bowen, “Notes from When the War Was Over,” 528.
113 Brian Van Arkadie and Raymond Mallon, Vietnam: A Transition Tiger? (Canberra: Asia Pacific
Press at the Australian National University, 2003), 38–55.
Vietnam. Numerous Vietnam veterans did not only bring medical equipment and supplies, but also cash for their own expenses. Also, it was far more economical to bring money to Vietnam and purchase necessary medical supplies in the country so that they could save transportation costs. This put them in the risk of being subject to fines and imprisonment according to the Trading with the Enemy Act (TWEA) imposed upon Vietnam alongside with the trade embargo since 1975.\textsuperscript{114}

According to this Act, Americans were banned from traveling to an enemy country in organized groups. They were not allowed to establish any financial linkage and make any monetary transaction with Vietnam. In 1989, several groups of Vietnam veterans were warned not to organize group tours to Vietnam by the U.S. Treasury Department. These veterans then went to the American Civil Liberties Union in Washington D.C. to attend a Congressional hearing on this issue. Responding to the veterans’ accusation that the U.S. Treasury Department and the State Department had worked together to limit such return trips, the officials from both Department said: “This is a policy from the White House, and the Hill (Congress) wants it that way. There are high policy reasons.”\textsuperscript{115} The U.S. trade embargo against Vietnam was no longer detrimental only to the Vietnamese people, but also obstructive to the U.S. veterans’ desire to achieve their personal goals. While it is important to recognize the Vietnam veterans’ contribution to the removal of the U.S. trade sanction in Vietnam, their effort may not have gained its full force and


effectiveness if it had not primarily been for the benefit of Vietnam veterans
themselves.

Several other nuisances caused by the TWEA further pushed the lobby to lift
the U.S. ban on traveling and trade embargo in Vietnam. In 1990, Bowen brought
10,000 USD to Vietnam for the Joiner Center’s literature conference’s expenses. He
was summoned back to the United States earlier than his plan for a testimony in front
of the Congress about the amount of money and his intended use of it.\footnote{Nguyễn Quang Thiều, “Chuyện Nhà Văn Cựu Chiến Binh Đầu Tiên Đến Việt Nam” [Stories About
accessed Dec. 15, 2010).}

In 1991, a Vietnam veterans’ group was denied permission to organize travels to Vietnam, their
efforts to deliver humanitarian aid were blocked, and the group faced legal
punishment.\footnote{Andrew Sherry, “American Peace Walkers Leave Hanoi by Van,” Agence France Presse, August
29, 1991, 1.} These incidents caused the concerned Vietnam veterans in general and
those at the William Joiner Center in particular to call for the removal of the embargo
and the normalization of diplomatic relations between the two governments.

Through the need to find mental peace for themselves, Vietnam veterans
began to draw attention to the U.S.’s current foreign policy and actively lobbied for
the lift of group travel ban and trade embargo. Sponsored by the William Joiner
Center, Myron Allukian Jr., a former Navy dentist who served with the Marines in
Vietnam in 1965, was in charge of coordinating and providing medical assistance to
Vietnamese hospitals and clinics. He termed the embargo forbidding U.S. Trade and
aid to Vietnam “a moral outrage” because “it hurts children the most.” In Fall 1990,
as head of the American Public Health Association (APHA), Allukian mobilized
50,000 members of the association to support his effort to press the Bush

\footnote{Nguyễn Quang Thiều, “Chuyện Nhà Văn Cựu Chiến Binh Đầu Tiên Đến Việt Nam” [Stories About
accessed Dec. 15, 2010).}

\footnote{Andrew Sherry, “American Peace Walkers Leave Hanoi by Van,” Agence France Presse, August
29, 1991, 1.}
administration to normalize relations with Vietnam, so that U.S. health specialists could help combat severe health problems in both countries.118

Ralph Timperi Jr., one of the most vocal Vietnam veterans affiliated with the William Joiner Center, enthusiastically supported the Center’s humanitarian projects in Vietnam and actively lobbied for the removal of the TWEA. As a public servant in Boston, Timperi returned to Vietnam many times as part of the William Joiner Center’s humanitarian assistance team and the Full-Circle Project in the late 1980’s. He returned to the U.S. with positive reports of the healing effects for himself and other fellow veterans.119 In 1990, he served as the Assistant Commissioner of Public Health for Massachusetts and the Chairman of the Vietnam Caucus, which consisted of approximately eighty American Public Health Association (APHA) members, who unanimously called for normalization of U.S.-Vietnam relations to facilitate research on the effects of AO on soldiers and civilians. Dr. Parson, the specialist on PTSD who had traveled to Vietnam with Timperi and other Vietnam veterans during the implementation of the Full Circle Project in 1989, told the Assistant Secretary at the Department of Health and Human Services that “collective guilt” about the Vietnam War “is the heavy weight” that must be removed to bring the two countries together. Lifting the embargo and taking other steps to help the Vietnamese, Parson asserted, would “relieve the burden not only on the Vietnamese people but on Americans as well.”120

Returnee Vietnam veterans at the William Joiner Center, through their connection with Senators John Kerry and Edward Kennedy, began to lobby for the lift of the trade embargo and normalization. Senator Kerry, who has been a supportive

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120 George Wilson, “U.S. Health Group Seeks Normal Contact with Vietnam.”
friend of the William Joiner Center since 1989, highly approved of the Center’s humanitarian and literature exchange programs. In a ceremony that announced the grant of $500,000 from the State of Massachusetts for the William Joiner Center to use as fellowship funds for writers and humanists in the United States or abroad, Kerry stated:

We can not afford not to invest in programs that seek solutions and common ground in our local and global community. William Joiner fellows work to understand the underlying causes of conflict so we can look toward peaceful solutions—this important work must be continued.\(^{121}\)

Kerry had a long record of favoring a normal diplomatic relations with Vietnam. In the opening statement that preceded a lengthy, heated debate with Senator Robert Smith and Senator Jesse Helms, two right-wing Congressmen who opposed the normalization on the MIA/POW pretext, Kerry expressed doubt toward President Bush’s announcement after the success of the first Iraq war about kicking “the Vietnam syndrome.” As he commented:

We keep hearing the President say that the statute of limitations has run its course, that the syndrome has been put to bed. But, for a lot of us, I can’t help but question whether that’s really true. I wish it were and I want it to be, but the syndrome does a lot of different things. It is clearly not just lessons about how you wage a war, and it is not just lessons about committing American troops, and once you’ve done it, making sure that you have a victory. It is obviously a lot more than that.

In the following part of the speech, Kerry stressed that his major doubt was “about the veterans” and shared his intimate concerns for the wellbeing of Vietnam veterans in his home state. He specifically mentioned those veterans who experienced chronic unemployment or underemployment, suffered the effects of AO, or remained homeless due to financial and mental problems. Finally, in an indirect way, Kerry linked his concerns for the welfare of Vietnam veterans with the current issue of the

U.S. trade embargo against Vietnam that prevented them from coming back and doing humanitarian work:

I will be leaving next week to go back for my first trip to Vietnam. I will be in Cambodia and in Vietnam. And happened to be looking at Morley Safer’s Flashbacks the other days sort of as I do some reading and thinking about going back, and was struck in his writing about the degree to which his life and the life of so many other people were affected by this experience. I think it’s really the light that we have to measure today’s testimony and our policy most importantly.122

The book Flashbacks that Kerry referred to was one of the best selling travel memoirs that tells the story of the author, Morley Safer, a CBS journalist who went to Vietnam in 1965 to cover the Vietnam War and his return to the country in 1989.123 In this book, Safer recalled his return to Vietnam to make a documentary for the CBS’s 60 Minutes program. Throughout the book, vivid “flashbacks” about the killing, the smells, the sounds of the war were constantly intertwined with the current images of Vietnam—a warm, friendly people who still lived in devastating poverty and bore many war scars, physically and emotionally, but were struggling to move ahead with energy and optimism. Somehow, the distressing feeling of visualizing troubled flashbacks and sad realities became settled with his trip to Hanoi and his meeting with North Vietnamese veterans. Safer described how he finally managed to overcome the memories of the war by engaging with the simple humanity of the former enemy:

Hanoi at last, via twenty-four years of curiosity that amounts to almost yearning to just look at these men in their natural state...After spending so many years of being briefed on how they are the faceless menace or mindless pawns of evil masters or cowardly bastards who will not stand up and fight, I feel a need to engage them in the most banal kind of conversation.124

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124 Ibid., 3–4.
Safer’s experience with the North Vietnamese veterans sounds quite identical to what had motivated returnee Vietnam veterans: the desire to demystify their former enemies and see them as human friends. In the book, Safer recounted his encounters with hundreds of Vietnamese and American people who lived and fought during the war. Safer’s impression of returnee Vietnam veterans was best captured in the photo of Bill Baldwin. In the photograph, Baldwin, wearing a cap that read “Vietnam Veteran & Proud of it,” looked down in the mode of thinking introspectively. The caption under the photo quoted his intimate sentiment:

Everybody has a sense of unfinished business. I’ve longed for Vietnam ever since I came home. I dreamed about it. I think when I go home, the chapter will be over.  

The fact that Kerry was impressed by the book and thoughtfully cited it to make his pro-normalization position during the Congressional hearing convincing was indicative of the influential impact that the Vietnam veterans at the William Joiner Center had been having on him. Kerry’s reference to the veterans’ emotional and social issues verified his belief that a lift of trade embargo and subsequent normalization would be a beneficial thing for those Vietnam veterans who wished to return to Vietnam. This way, they could overcome their war trauma and come back to America ready to pursue a normal, healthy life. Even though the road to full US normalization with Vietnam was still a long way, it is clear that the returnee Vietnam veterans at the William Joiner Center played a crucial lobbying role in this process. Their efforts worked. Six months after Kerry’s hearing, President Bush lifted the ban on U.S.-organized travel to Vietnam on the condition that Vietnam had made significant progress on the Cambodian settlement and the MIA/POW resolution. According to the U.S.’s Department of State’s announcement, the travel permits were

125 Ibid., 112.
given to groups and individuals listed in the order of priority as “veterans, journalists, businessmen, and tour groups.”

4. Conclusion

The William Joiner Center’s two most important projects with Vietnam, literature exchanges and humanitarian assistance, have helped break part of the barriers between former adversaries. From individual interaction to political lobby, Vietnam veterans affiliated with the Center managed to change the general American perception of postwar Vietnam and its people, hence, creating the necessary and favorable environment for normal relationship. As the director of the William Joiner Center, Bowen firmly believed in the constructive role that he, together with other Vietnamese and American veterans, had played in the lifting of the trade embargo. At the same time, Bowen was aware of some unintended, less desirable results of their effort. In the last section of the article “Notes from When the War Was Over:

Remembering the Embargo,” Bowen contemplated:

Only hours after the embargo was lifted, a giant can of Pepsi was inflated and lifted into the air above the streets of Ho Chi Minh City. Free Pepsi was given out at over fifty spots around the country. I wonder what my friends in Vietnam thought? How they felt? What has this all accomplished? Have we succeeded in only bringing the Pepsi back? Meanwhile, I opened a letter that arrives in the mail, postmarked Ho Chi Minh City. “Dear sirs,” it reads, “I have the honor to inform you that I have one set of bones of America, with following numbers…”

The discomforting sight of the giant Pepsi can juxtaposed with the letter from Vietnam stating that a new set of MIA bones had been recovered enabled Bowen to

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127 Bowen, “Notes from When the War Was Over,” 538.
accept the unintended impact of his normalization effort—the triumphant reemergence of American neoliberal capitalism in Vietnam twenty years after the collapse of the pro-American government in South Vietnam—and to convince himself as well as other Vietnam veterans who shared his goal that things always have two sides, the good and the bad. At least, Bowen seemed to contend, they had facilitated the MIA search project and helped some American families to partially recover from the loss of their loved ones.

This ambiguous position seemed to vanish five years later, when Bowen optimistically reviewed all the events that Vietnam veterans had participated in before the normalization. This time, he was positively confident in the constructive roles that Vietnam veterans had played to make normal and peaceful relations possible for both countries. Looking back in retrospect, he believed that it was he and other Vietnam veterans who had contributed to the rebuilding of relations between the United States and Vietnam:

From the first tentative trips taken by individual veterans in the early and mid-eighties, through the trips sponsoring the rebuilding of clinics, of hospitals, of orphanages, and schools, through the first diplomatic visits of General Vessey, of Senators John Kerry and John McCain, through the first exchanges of writers and artists, there has been a steady flow of veterans returning to Vietnam, most with the purpose of reconstructing a peace.128

Bowen’s rethinking about the Vietnam veterans’ role in the construction of peace and diplomatic normalization between the two countries came at a moment of high optimism, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War and the fifth anniversary of U.S.-Vietnam normalization. This celebratory atmosphere seemed to obscure the uncomfortable sight of the inflated Pepsi balloon flying over the sky of Ho Chi Minh City that he had noticed five years earlier. The unexpected outcome of

their effort—a penetration of the U.S.’s global capitalism into Vietnam, was now resigned to the background. By ignoring that less desirable message and celebrating the chronology of Vietnam veterans’ involvement in postwar U.S.-Vietnam relations, Bowen reasserted the righteous and constructive significance of his projects.

Ten years after that celebratory moment of the year 2000, Bowen again had to face his question about the unintended result of his pro-normalization effort. By this time, Vietnam had fully embraced free market economy and endorsed full-fledged global integration. In fact, there seemed to be no way to step back since Vietnam’s accession to the WTO in 2006. Socialism—with its ideal about social egalitarianism and guaranteed state welfare—had become a distant past. Individual freedom to compete and pursue material wealth was unleashed. While a majority of Vietnamese people have been able to raise their living standards, private pursuits and job migration contributed to a general phenomenon of social and family disconnectedness. However, 2009 was also the year when Vietnamese economy was hit hard by global financial crisis, which resulted in macroeconomic instability, two-digit inflation, soaring real estate and land prices, industrial production stagnation, and trade deficits. Between 2008 and 2009, Vietnamese people experienced the lowest point of growth in a decade with rising unemployment and living expenses, more rampant social unrests and economic crimes. Social contentment was low, and so was the people’s optimism in social and economic stability.129

When the society suffers economic and employment crisis, traditional values and commitment to business ethics tend to be compromised or sacrificed in exchange to the accomplishment of financial goals. As a realistic author, Lê Lựu again captured these social changes in his newest book Thời Loan (A Time of Chaos). The book

allegorically sums up almost all the disillusionment that he has experienced during the years he managed the Center of Vietnamese Business Cultures and his bitterness toward Vietnam’s decadent business ethics—one of the chaotic, unexpected consequences of a mismanaged free market economy in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{130}

In summer 2010, Bowen and Weigl, the two most active members of the William Joiner Center, reunited with Lê Lựu in his home. The three men remained best friends. They again wept over their past and also about Lê Lựu’s present misfortunes. To his American friends, Lê Lựu could not help shedding tears over his own family tragedy, his poor physical shape, and the imminent failure of his dream—promoting the business ethics and high culture among Vietnamese entrepreneurs. The context of the 2010 reunion among Lê Lựu, Bowen, and Weigl symbolically verified the positive side of William Joiner Center’s relationship with Vietnam—a lasting friendship and peace among former warriors. It also revealed the negative side effect of Vietnam’s integration into global market economy. Lê Lựu’s failure to keep his family together and to sustain his business ethics promotion project could be seen as an unwanted consequence of Vietnam’s subscription to unregulated market capitalism.

The participation of the William Joiner Center’s Vietnam veterans in the normalization process between the U.S. and Vietnam, however indirect, was crucial. Through the literary and humanitarian channels, these veterans helped to pacify war memories, construct and internalize mutually beneficial relationship with the Vietnamese people. Whether they participated in literature exchange projects or offer humanitarian assistance, the motivations were both self-serving and altruistic. Some

came back because of the desire to absolve guilt, trauma, and overcome PTSD. A few of them wished to reassert moral manhood and redeem American morality by doing humanitarian work and pushing for diplomatic normalization. Most of them managed to reconcile the ideological differences among themselves about the U.S. involvement in Vietnam in their shared projects. A good number of them sincerely believed they were doing “good work” for the Vietnamese people and helping to lessen the war’s consequences in both countries. In addition to the intended contributions, the returnee Vietnam veterans affiliated with the William Joiner Center also played a significant role in the revision of the U.S.’s postwar policy toward Vietnam and, inadvertently, became instrumental to the promotion and justification of American neoliberal capitalism during and after the U.S.-Vietnam normalization process.
The Vietnamese do deserve better, and it is a tribute to their amazing resilience that those who became exposed to Western ideals and practice before Saigon’s fall were able to keep hope alive despite the conditions into which American naïveté and abandonment delivered them. One doubts whether Mr. McNamara, who understood only numbers, or the antiwar leaders, who found solace and even hope in the preaching of Hanoi’s hard-line leaders, will ever understand the true Vietnamese character—or for that matter the nobility of the Americans who attempted to save it.\footnote{James Webb, “Robert McNamara, the Anti-War Left, and the Triumph of Intellectual Dishonesty,” \textit{Strategic Review}, Fall 1995. Available at http://www.jameswebb.com/articles/strategicrvw-triumph.html (last accessed May 25, 2011).}

In April 1991, James Webb returned to Vietnam for the first time after the war as a companion in Senator Bob Kerrey’s diplomatic team.\footnote{James Webb, “Our Saigon Friends Still Need Help,” \textit{New York Times}, April 29, 1991, 17; Editorial, “U.S. Senators Meet Indochinese Communist Leaders,” United Press International, April 5, 1991.} He spent two days in Hanoi with the team, and five more days touring Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) almost by himself. While in HCMC, Webb walked the streets wearing his old combat hat like a badge of honor, rolling his shirt sleeve up over the shoulder to reveal his U.S. Marine Corps tattoo, smiling and waiving at old allies—veterans of the Army of Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), who were rickshaw drivers waiting for customers by the street. Webb began to think of his excursion as “a kind of victory parade.”\footnote{Robert Timberg, \textit{The Nightingale’s Song} (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 456.}

In the foreword of the book \textit{Vietnam’s Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN}, Webb offers readers a detailed recollection of his feelings and observations during this first visit, as if to explain his motivations to reengage himself with Vietnam:

As one of only a small handful of Americans roaming the city, usually by way of a xichlo pedicab, I was both celebrated as a returning hero and inundated with intense, emotional barrages. Again and again, Vietnamese men and
women came up to me, clasping my hands, at times with tears in their eyes. “It has been so hard, sir,” was a common refrain. “We always knew you would come back.”

While touring the less exciting areas of this vibrant city, Webb saw hundreds of destitute ARVN veterans, many of whom lost their limbs, living a hopeless and vulnerable life. Most of them were marginalized in social welfare programs, being denied jobs and medical care. Webb was particularly touched when a racially mixed child came to him and screamed: “I am not Vietnamese! My father was a soldier, killed at Cu Chi! They gave me nothing! You are American! You must help me!”

From the beginning, benevolent compassion and paternal instinct were the guiding motives that urged Webb to re-engage with Vietnam.

Webb was quick to conclude that the Vietnamese government was maltreating former ARVN veterans. Without ever really contemplating the situation as a consequence of the American war in Vietnam, the U.S. trade embargo, or assessing the ARVN veterans’ situation as compared with that of other Vietnamese veterans who also suffered lack of medical care and loss to amputations, Webb was prepared to accuse the Vietnamese government of the socio-economic problems he saw. Webb believed that even though Vietnam was “beginning to climb out of its status as a hardcore Stalinist state” and moving further away from “outmoded socialist economic practices” to escape its poverty and shortage, the Vietnamese government had established a system that discriminated against those who had a past affiliation with the U.S. Rejecting the Vietnamese officials’ disclaimers of such an accusation, Webb was certain that the Vietnamese government was “practicing a form of blood guilt, disfranchising not just the men, but also their families through two or three

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135 Ibid., xiv–xiv.
generations.”136 In other words, Webb appeared ready to resume his connection with Vietnam with a paternal mission and a prejudice against the communist state of Vietnam.

After this emotionally wrenching visit, Webb returned to the U.S. and intensified his efforts to help these disenfranchised Vietnamese. He began to study Vietnamese language and arrange demonstrations of solidarity among Vietnam veterans and Vietnamese Americans. He also eloquently wrote and spoke on behalf of the South Vietnamese people he met in HCMC. In his public advocacy and private consultations, Webb informed the American audience, particularly the Vietnamese American community, about the economic and political situations within Vietnam, the risks as well as the opportunities for America regarding its intention to resume contacts or engage in business ventures. One of the key arguments he frequently made was to call for the U.S. government’s attention to its former allies left behind in Vietnam, in order to fulfill America’s past commitments and the tasks which remained “unfinished morality.”137

This first return experience urged Webb to travel to Vietnam again in 1992 with Trần Văn Ca, a former soldier of the ARVN, who had become a successful Vietnamese American businessman, to deliver prosthetic limbs to handicapped ARVN veterans.138 In 1993, Webb and Trần returned to Vietnam for the third time with a new agenda—securing a film-shooting deal with the Vietnamese administration. During this trip, he revisited his former battle sites, had peaceful debates with those he had fought against about his old battles, and made friends with his former enemies—the local officials. Webb shared with them the film project that

136 Ibid.; Timberg, Nightingale’s Song, 456.
137 Timberg, Nightingale’s Song, 456; Webb, “Our Saigon Friends Still Need Help.”
he had long nurtured: shooting his *Fields of Fire* screenplay in those hollow grounds that he sentimentally described as places “that had tasted holy blood.” Webb’s efforts finally bore fruit when his authorized film production company, Esparza-Katz Prods., signed a deal with Giải Phòng Film Company in HCMC to shoot *Fields of Fire* at former battles sites in Vietnam.\(^{139}\)

Webb’s return experience in those three consecutive years and his activities upon coming back to the U.S. represent the core of his personality and define the way he views himself vis-à-vis the Vietnamese people. His interaction with the former citizens of the RVN convinced him that they were loyal protégés of the United States who longed for its return and desperately needed its rescue. This reaffirmed and justified Webb’s paternal role as the savior and benevolent protector of the South Vietnamese people, which lay at the center of his advocacy for U.S.-Vietnam normalization a couple of years later. By representing the South Vietnamese people in a “narrative of the loyal native,” Webb in fact utilized the strategy that Diana Wong describes as an empire-centered approach to justify and reinforce colonial authority.\(^{140}\) While being anti-communist and highly skeptical of the Vietnamese administrators, Webb was willing to set aside their differences and construct a friendly environment with his former enemies to facilitate his film project and achieve mutually beneficial goals. In other words, Webb’s perception about Vietnam and his attitude toward the Vietnamese people was shaped by the ideals of American paternalism and benevolent imperialism which assigned American men a sacred role as protectors and saviors of people worldwide, especially those who were loyal and instrumental to the goals of Americans and the United States in general.


This chapter relates how Webb’s personal identity as a male American soldier, born in a Southern family with a long military tradition, shaped his self-assigned paternal duties, reinforced his geostrategic vision about the U.S.’s role in the world, and motivated him to support the U.S.’s renewed relation with Vietnam after the war. The chapter is thus divided into three parts. The first part will examine Webb’s family, military, and political backgrounds to shed light on the way he defines the Vietnam War and his relationship with Vietnam. The second part discusses further details about Webb’s perception toward postwar Vietnam and the Vietnamese people in both countries. Interestingly, Webb’s paternalistic instincts served to justify both of his seemingly contradictory positions toward Vietnam—first, his support for the U.S. embargo against Vietnam in the 1980’s and, secondly, his advocacy for diplomatic normalization in the mid-1990’s. In both cases, it will be argued, American paternalism, anti-communism, and benevolent imperialism were the driving force behind Webb’s positions.

The third part is a literary critique of Webb’s political fiction *Lost Soldiers*, one that best illustrates his conservative ideas about the Vietnam War, postwar Vietnam, and the Vietnamese people. While the discussion of the U.S.’s geostrategic interests in Vietnam is less apparent in *Lost Soldiers*, Webb’s self-portrait is vividly revealed through its protagonist, a former U.S. Marine named Brandon Condley, who returned to Vietnam on MIA searching missions. Throughout the book, Condley is constructed as the model of American machismo, benevolent paternalism, and soldierly nobility. These characteristics justify and enhance the American involvement in Vietnam during the Cold War. Via his constructed

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protagonist, Webb convinces readers that the renewal of American tutelage in Vietnam today is a necessary, welcome, and benevolent policy.

1. Family and Military Backgrounds

Senator James Webb (D-VA) is the son of James Henry Webb, a career officer in the U.S. Air Force and veteran of World War II. Even though his father came from the countryside of southwestern Virginia, Webb grew up on military bases all over the country where his father was assigned. Webb thus developed his sense of military honor and patriotism early in his youth. In his 2004 quasi-autobiographical, family history book Born Fighting: How the Scots-Irish Shaped America, Webb not only traced the genealogical history of his family as Scottish-Irish Americans but also highlighted their prideful military service to America in every major American war. Revealing the fact that many of his family had fought during the Civil War for the Confederacy, and when the war was over, they—the losing side—had no hope or benefits, Webb explained his sentiment and concern for the wellbeing of ARVN veterans when the Vietnam War was over. Webb’s family’s military background, undoubtedly, shaped his military idealism in which loyal service to the country, allegiance to the U.S. Army, affection for comrades, and care for veterans are highly valued. These sentiments are often manifested in Webb’s journalistic writings, public statements, and ultimately in his reengagement with Vietnam after the war.

In 1968, Webb graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy. He then served in the U.S. Marines in Vietnam during the years 1968–1969. After the war, Webb attended Law School at Georgetown University where he became a polemical public figure.

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Around campus, Webb recalled feeling “enraged” to find people who neither went to Vietnam, nor understood it or cared about it, but kept thinking that “all Viet vets were pathological killers.” This experience motivated Webb to write political essays and commentaries to defend the Vietnam War and the American GIs who fought in it. While at Law School, Webb penned his essay “The Sad Conviction of Sam Green: The Case for the Reasonable and Honest War Criminal,” which discussed the Vietnam War soldiers’ inexperience, youth, and the obligation to follow orders to defend Sam Green, who was charged with murder of Vietnamese civilians and, unable to bear the emotional burden, committed suicide before his sentence came into effect. This defensive argument was later reiterated in his aggressive denial of the stereotypical images that media and antiwar activists used to portray Vietnam veterans as “suicidal,” “baby-killers,” or “losers.” He further asserted his opinions about the war in novels, as he put it, so that people would know “what it had really been like” in Vietnam.144

Upon graduation in 1975, Webb began to work as a legal counselor at the House Committee on Veterans Affairs in the U.S. Congress. At that point, he had become a professional polemicist, enthusiastically defending the morality and dignity of American soldiers involved in the Vietnam War. Not only did Webb wholeheartedly believed in the moral integrity of his comrades, he also denied the general assumption that Vietnam veterans suffered psychological trauma, thereby reasserting the righteousness of Vietnam veterans’ military service and the Vietnam War.

In 1976, Veterans Affairs awarded Webb the title “Vietnam Veteran of the Year” for his dedicated service on behalf of American veterans. During the award ceremony, Webb took the opportunity to declare that he was not at all ashamed of his service in Vietnam and that he would no longer let his generation be represented by draft-evaders, drug-crazed ex-GIs, and embittered antiwar veterans. He also demanded that the voice of the men and women who had fought the war should be recognized with a sense of personal gratitude. His audience broke into applause upon hearing his eloquent speech. While Webb’s defense of ex-servicemen put him in direct conflict with draft-resisters and anti-war activists, he nonetheless managed to assert the nobility of the Vietnam War and the dignity of Vietnam veterans.  

Webb’s vehement belief in the righteousness of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam and the moral integrity of American soldiers who fought the Vietnam War effectively prevented him from accepting the concept of “American war crimes” in Vietnam. Commenting upon President Carter’s plan to extend a pardon to some deserters, Webb demanded clemency and honorable discharges for marine veterans who had been convicted of point-blank shooting of unarmed women and children in Vietnam, arguing that, “they were not innocent civilians because they supported the Viet Cong.”  

During his first trip to Vietnam in 1991, Webb toured the Museum of American War Atrocities in HCMC by himself. When he had seen enough, Webb walked slowly over to a guard, and speaking in Vietnamese, stated that such atrocities had “never happened,” then adding in English, “it’s bullshit.”  

Undoubtedly, Webb’s loyal subscription to the U.S. Army and its honorable missions in Vietnam—bringing freedom and defending the South Vietnamese people from the Communists,

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147 Timberg, *Nightingale’s Song*, 456.
encouraged him to unconditionally believe in the virtuous performance of his fellow soldiers. Thus, in his mind, the elimination of Vietnamese Communist forces and Communist-sympathizers became completely justifiable.

Webb’s military idealism and his worldview are well demonstrated in his book trilogy, *Fields of Fire* (1978), *A Sense of Honor* (1981), and *A Country Such as This* (1983).148 Generally viewed as a “liberally conservative” writer, Webb acknowledges the full confusion and outright horror of combat, accepts the unbearable costs of moral and emotional bankruptcy imposed upon the souls of American soldiers in Vietnam, and assesses the war as a “national failure.”149 At the same time, he attempts to construct a theme of heroism and comradely solidarity (*Fields of Fire*), affirms the belief that old soldierly virtues of duty, honor, courage, self-discipline, and personal sacrifice will eventually overcome hardship and be rewarded (*A Sense of Honor*), and uplifts readers with the optimistic prediction that a renewed sense of national purpose will finally prevail and be reaffirmed (*A Country Such as This*). To put it differently, in the words of literary critics Philip Beidler and Timothy Lomperis, Webb’s novels, with their “essentially conservative and revisionary nature,” reflect Webb’s sense of military honor and his belief in the bravery and capability of American soldiers. Ultimately, he defended the “validity of the American mission in Vietnam” and blamed the U.S. government’s flawed policy and the Anti-war Left for having made the war “unwinnable.”150

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Webb’s military background in the U.S. Navy, his loyal service in the U.S. Marines in Vietnam, and his achievement in the Veterans’ Affairs Department made him a qualified appointee as Assistant Secretary of Defense in 1984 and Secretary of Navy in 1987. However, it was Webb’s fervent concern for the U.S.’s maritime security and the desire to make the U.S. Navy an unrivaled power that put him in conflict with the Reagan administration. In 1988, Webb aggressively lobbied for an expansion of the U.S. Navy and proposed a 600-ship naval fleet to be prepared for an imminent Gulf conflict. The Reagan administration not only disapproved his proposal but also further reduced the Pentagon budget. This enraged Webb and led to his abrupt resignation in protest. Webb’s unfulfilled dream of the U.S. Navy’s supreme power in 1988 later found an opportunity to resurrect when he vocally lobbied for the U.S.’s strategic reengagement with Vietnam in 1994.

Webb’s unbridled and enthusiastic concern for military integrity reveals a problematic aspect of his personality when he tries to articulate it in gendered terms. In his public statements and writings, Webb tends to associate the honorable performance of military service with being a true man. At the same time, he contends that being a true man required having the willingness to take arms, defend the nation, and protect other peoples. Thus, Webb’s perception of masculinity and paternalism are central to his military idealism.

In a Memorial Day event in 1980, The Washington Post hosted a long discussion among seven alumni of the 1960s, who had different experiences and perspectives relating to the Vietnam War—Philip Caputo, Robert Muller, Dean K.

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Phillips, James Webb, John P. Wheeler (all of whom served in Vietnam), and James Fallows and Lucian K. Truscott IV (who opposed the Vietnam War and did not serve). During this discussion, Webb asserted that men were evaluated based on their willingness to perform military duty and defend society. Commenting on the challenging statement that the feminist activist Betty Friedan had made during her pro-ERA rally several weeks earlier “machismo is dead. It died in Vietnam,” Webb stated:

My reaction to that is no, it didn’t die in Vietnam. If it died at all in this society, it died among the people who have to question who they are as a male because, through one way or another, they avoided what is the quintessentially male function in a society, and that’s going into uniforms. They are having to deal with that.\textsuperscript{153}

Associating manliness with men’s military duties to defend the nation and protect other people, Webb also merged his personal identity as a male Vietnam War veteran and his honorable commitment to help his former ARVN friends with the American duty to defend South Vietnam from communism. Webb’s perception of the essential interplay between manliness and militarism, in fact, had been published one year earlier in his notorious \textit{Washingtonian} article “Women Can’t Fight.” Referring to Bancroft Hall at the U.S. Naval Academy in 1979 where 300 female students were housed among 4,000 male students, Webb derisively described it as a “horny woman’s dream,” and proposed that women should not be admitted to the U.S. Naval Academy, nor assigned in combat units. Webb reasoned his chauvinistic view by asserting that women cannot fight as well as men, nor do they possess the necessary

qualities to lead other men in combat. Furthermore, Webb argued, men would fight more effectively without women around.\textsuperscript{154}

This gender-biased conviction came from what Webb viewed as a dangerous situation at the U.S. Naval Academy resulting from the introduction of female students in the Academy in 1976. Shortly after this new policy was implemented, there was a sharp increase in the number of midshipmen at the Academy disciplined for sexual misconduct. By 1981, several dozen women and men at the Academy had suffered or committed sexual offenses, which resulted in harsh punishment ranging from demerits, probation, or discharge from the Academy.\textsuperscript{155} Webb’s assertion that “women can’t fight” and his objection to admission of women in the Academy denied women combat leadership opportunity, cast doubt on their military capacity, and made it far harder for them to establish a military career. His patriarchal opinion in the article also demonstrated his concern about soldierly machismo. According to Webb, men should have the exclusive privileges of fighting in combat and leading troops. Moreover, he argued, the male role should be upheld and protected at the U.S. Naval Academy as well as in the U.S. Army. By advocating for a non-female military institution, Webb demonstrated his concern for the emasculation at the Naval Academy, which, in his opinion, would “sterilized the combat leadership training.”\textsuperscript{156} In attempting to uphold the old style of “masculine indoctrination” and the manly

\textsuperscript{156} Editorial, “A Battler Abandons Ship,” \textit{St. Petersburg Times}, February 28, 1988, 1D, (excerpted from John H. Cushman Jr.’s \textit{New York Times} article “Navy Chief Quits, Assailing Carlucci over Budget Cuts,”). When Webb was attacked for his gender-biased position during the Senate election campaign in 2006, he explained his motivation of writing the article came from the concern that the admission of women in the Academy “sterilize the whole concept of combat leadership training.”
capacity to restrain sexual instincts, Webb in fact embraced the Victorian ideology of moral manliness that defined sexual self-restraint as one of the manly qualities.157

Twenty-seven years later, when Webb was running for the U.S. Senate in Virginia as a Democratic candidate, this article almost cost him the seat. His opponent, the then incumbent Senator of Virginia, George Allen (R-VA), appealed to thousands of women who were infuriated by Webb’s chauvinism to join him in an aggressive denunciation campaign based on the objectionable tone in the 1979 article. To such attacks, Webb offered no apologies for the content of the essay but admitted, “to the extent that my writing subjected women at the academy or the active armed forces to undue hardship, I remain profoundly sorry.” He rationalized what motivated him to write that article, reminding the audience that it was written at a time when “emotions were still high about the Vietnam War and the role of women in combat.” At the same time, Webb offered the evidence that he had tried his best to crack down on sexual harassment in the military during his appointment as the Navy Secretary in 1988 and assured voters that he was “completely comfortable with the roles of women in today’s military.”158

Webb’s election campaign was a success, which helped the Democratic Party win control of the Senate in November 2006. Described as a maverick, a Republican-turned Democrat, Webb actually possessed a bipartisan quality that could appeal to the majority.159 On the one hand, Webb’s strong military background made him a

159 Editorial, “James Webb for U.S. Senate,” Virginian-Pilot, October 27, 2006, B8; Andrew Zajac, “Election 2006: The Aftermath; Virginia; Democrats Appear Close to Taking Reins in Senate; Webb’s Lead of Less than 1 Percent is Expected to Hold,” Chicago Tribune, November 9, 2006, A18; Tim
convincing and legitimate person to discuss national security, which could appease a large number of Republicans. On the other hand, Webb’s opposition to former President Bush’s invasion and the prolonged occupation of Iraq, his concerns for middle-class Americans, the growth of economic inequality, job losses, and his pro-gay/pro-choice positions put him on amicable terms with the Democrats. His campaign also received important backing from Senators John Kerry, Hillary Clinton, and Bob Kerrey.  

Regarding the Iraq War (2003), Webb neither supported Bush’s occupation policy nor endorsed the Democratic Party’s proposal to set a deadline for withdrawal. Bringing up the Cold War lessons in which “containment worked better than confrontation and occupation,” Webb argued that the U.S. should first make clear that the United States did not intend to stay in Iraq indefinitely, then seek to involve other Middle Eastern countries in diplomatic efforts to balance Iraq’s domestic forces and stabilize the region, and finally formulate a careful plan to withdraw gradually.

Webb’s concern for national security, social equality, and his multilateral diplomatic approach earned him the Senate seat for Virginia and appointments on three U.S. Senate Committees—including the committees of Foreign Relations, Veterans' Affairs, and Armed Services. Shortly after his election, Webb was selected by his party to deliver a response to President Bush’s State of the Union Address in

Craig and Michael D. Shear, “Webb May Be Senate Maverick; Newest Member Expected to Take Antiwar Lead,” Washington Post, November 12, 2006, C1.


2007 to challenge his Iraq strategy and economic policies. Commenting on the selection of Webb, Senate Majority Leader Harry M. Reid (D-NV) praised him:

He represents to me what the new America is all about. Someone who understands what it means to go to war, what it means to have peace, what it means to work on a bipartisan basis. I think he’s the perfect person to answer the president. \(^{162}\)

Webb’s background in the Navy, plus a strong concern for America’s post-Cold War security and economic interests play a key role in his advocacy for renewed relations with Vietnam. His maritime security vision enabled him to re-imagine the former enemies as friends and construct a new alliance with Vietnam. In addition, Webb’s paternalistic sentiment toward his former Vietnamese allies and his prejudice against the Vietnamese communist state rationalized his pro-normalization position. The following part will discuss in more detail how Webb’s benevolent paternalism and anticommunism, together with his pragmatic and nationalistic concerns for the U.S.’s business and security interests in Southeast Asia, influenced Webb’s positions toward postwar Vietnam from the late 1970s through the present.

2. (Re)-Embracing Vietnam

Webb’s political positions toward postwar Vietnam and the renewed relations between the U.S. and Vietnam were best illustrated in his *Wall Street Journal* articles “Lift the Embargo against Vietnam—Help Old Allies” and “History Proves Vietnam Victors Wrong.” \(^{163}\) While the titles immediately ring a paternalistic and revisionist tone, Webb does not only explain his position in gendered or Cold War terms, but


also supports it with his concerns about America’s inability to intervene in China’s political expansion in Southeast Asia in the 1990’s and the lost chance for American businesses to participate in Vietnam’s growing market economy due to the U.S. trade embargo. In short, Webb’s strategic and economic interests, reinforced by American benevolent paternalism and Cold War triumphalism, are the key features in his pro-normalization lobbying.

Listed as the first between two “vital concerns,” Webb stresses the need for the U.S. to rebuild its hegemony in Asia by warning American politicians and administrators of the U.S.’s “diminished presence in Asia at a time when China is growing ever stronger and more dangerous.” Arguing that Vietnam retained a “historical antipathy” to China, whose economic and political influences are expanding, and the potential that Vietnam could become a “strong, Western-oriented ally” to America, Webb envisioned a future in which America and Vietnam shared the same interests, i.e., counterbalancing the “ever-burgeoning strength of China.”

Webb has always been concerned about the U.S. naval power in the world and its capacity to defend America. After resigning in protest from the position as Secretary of the Navy in 1988, he kept writing polemically and commenting on the U.S.’s security and maritime policies.164 In 2003, he reemerged as a vocal figure protesting against the Bush administration’s invasion and occupation of Iraq. Webb’s concern for the weakening of the U.S. Navy remained consistent, as he pointed out in 2005 that the U.S. “only” possessed a 290-ship Navy, a statistic that he considered “thin” and might even be shrinking. Thus, Webb argued that the U.S. “needs some

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better advocates to really argue about strategic issues” relating to sea power because “that is where the Navy is the strongest.”

In July 2009, half a year into his Senate term, Webb held a long discussion with Senator Reid on the radio about the direction to change the course of war in Iraq. While the conversation hardly offered any new information except for the “good news” that there was a bipartisan decline of support for the war, Webb, in a slightly impatient tone, commented that he had just gotten off a plane after a trip to Southeast Asia, which Webb considered to be of great strategic interests to the U.S. but had not been given due attention because the U.S. was “too obsessed with the Iraq situation.”

As the chair of the Senate Foreign Relations' subcommittee on East Asia and Pacific Affairs, Webb’s comment about the U.S.’s inadequate attention to Southeast Asia was hardly casual. In fact, during the previous week, from July 2 to 7, 2007, Webb had met the top leaders of Vietnam (President Nguyễn Minh Triết, Deputy Prime Minister Phạm Gia Khiêm, and others) to discuss areas of cooperation between the United States and Vietnam. Their conversations were mostly diplomatic and constructive, in which Webb said he was “happy to see Vietnam’s continued development” and added that he was “ready to be the link boosting relations between the two countries as well as between people in Vietnam and the Vietnamese population in the U.S.”

Webb’s interest in the reinforcement of the U.S. role in Southeast Asia and his concern about the strength of the U.S. Navy was further demonstrated in his opening

166 Federal News Service, News Conference with Senator Harry Reid (D-NV), Senate Majority Leader, and Senator James Webb (D-VA); Topic: Changing Course in Iraq; Senate Radio/TV Gallery, July 9, 2007.
remarks during a U.S. Senate Hearing about Maritime Disputes and Sovereignty Issues in East Asia that took place in July 2009. After outlining the increasing tension in Sino-Vietnamese territorial disputes relating to the maritime control of the Spratly and Paracel Islands (in the south of China and east of Vietnam’s coastline), and the ongoing debates within Vietnam about policies toward China, a country that Webb described as having “a pattern of intimidation that may hinder free and fair economic development in the region,” Webb commented further:

These disputes seriously impact third countries in the region, and it is important to point out that only the United States has both the stature and the national power to confront the obvious imbalance of power that China brings to these situations. In that regards, we have an obligation to do so if we wish to maintain a geostrategic balance in the region that ensures fairness for every nation in Asia, and protects the voice of every country seeking a peaceful resolution to their disputes. The participation of the United States in these disputes also affects how these countries perceive threats in their regional environment, and what options they may have available to them as they seek to protect their interests.168

In closing the opening remarks, Webb stated:

If the United States is to remain an Asian nation, and a maritime nation, our nation’s leaders have a choice to make. Our diplomatic corps and our military—and especially our Navy—must have the resources necessary to protect U.S. interests and the interests of our allies.169

Webb’s remarks demonstrate his strong advocacy for stronger U.S. military involvement in Southeast Asian Sea area. His conviction that the United States is the country that has the uniquely strong power, stature, and also the obligation to “protect” affected Asian nations, to bring about fairness and peace in the region against Chinese expansionism helped justify the American presence in the region for

the well-being of all involved countries and internalize American paternalism in the region. It is unclear in Webb’s statement, however, whether regional Southeast Asian countries would accept or welcome the U.S.’s protection the same way as he envisioned it. By differentiating “China” from “our allies,” Webb’s endorsement of militarized paternalism in Asia not only revived the U.S. Cold War policy in Southeast Asia and the perceived threat of China but also reasserted the U.S.’s responsibility to monitor Asia and perpetuate American hegemony in the region.

Paternalism also characterizes Webb’s second rationale for lifting the U.S. trade embargo against Vietnam—helping America’s old allies, the ARVN soldiers and former RVN citizens. To Webb, loyalty to former comrades is crucial and his relationship with Vietnam after the war was strongly shaped by this comradely commitment. Webb’s view was further elaborated in the foreword of the book *Vietnam’s Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN* as follows:

"I have worked for many years to help bring reconciliation both inside Vietnam and between Vietnam and the United States. In this process I have come to know and respect many people inside the Vietnamese government. I have become friends with people who served in the Army against which I fought. I have strengthened and nurtured my respect for those Vietnamese who fought alongside the Americans. And I have, on more than a few occasions, met Vietnamese who switched their loyalties as the war began to go badly for the South Vietnamese. In human terms, few of us have the standing to condemn anyone who decided to choose a different side in a brutal, seemingly never-ending war. But loyalty to one’s comrades is the glue that binds all military service. It is a far stronger cohesive factor than the political reasons that compel a nation to fight."

Webb’s military idealism, with its emphasis on allegiance to allies and the paternalistic duty to defend other peoples, has motivated his numerous efforts to assist and protect the veterans of the ARVN and their families. Through his extensive writings and actions, Webb demonstrated his commitment on two separate fronts:

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first, by defending the legitimacy of the RVN and the competence of its former citizens, and secondly, by helping them to rebuild their lives in the U.S. and establish business ties in Vietnam.

Webb’s belief in the righteousness and nobility of the American war in Vietnam is necessarily juxtaposed with his fervent defense of the RVN and its Army. First, he believed that President Nixon’s “Vietnamization” program that began in late 1969 “enjoyed great success.” Secondly, by citing the death toll statistics that the PAVN and the ARVN had suffered (in which the former, with 1.1 million dead soldiers and 300,000 missing in action, dwarfed the latter, with 254,000 dead soldiers), Webb argued that the ARVN soldiers had in fact fought well, unlike the negative stereotype in America that portrayed them as inept soldiers.\textsuperscript{171} Out of convenience, Webb deliberately ignored the fact that the U.S. Air Force provided powerful air and ground support for the ARVN and, at the same time, implemented thousands of air strikes and bombing missions in North and Central Vietnam, which effectively reduced ARVN death tolls and increased the PAVN’s casualties.\textsuperscript{172}

Refusing to blame the ARVN for the loss of their battles and the fall of the RVN, Webb condemned the anti-war Congress elected in 1974, the Left media, the antiwar activists, and North Vietnam’s violation of the Paris Accords for the gradual deterioration and complete fall of the RVN between 1973 and 1975. In a paternalistic mode of thinking, Webb maintained his conviction in hindsight that, if the “young democracy” of the Nguyễn Văn Thiệu administration had been given a few more


years, and if the South Vietnamese had been given an adequate chance to adjust their strategy after the American withdrawal, the “young leaders” of the RVN, who had “come of age” on the battlefield under American tutelage would have been unbeatable and their “struggling democracy” would have survived.\textsuperscript{173}

Webb’s observation was mistaken or wishful at best. The tactical failures of the ARVN in Laos and along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the PAVN’s perseverance despite its heavy losses, the repressive nature of the Thiệu administration and its severe collapsibility long before the signing of the Paris Accords (as revealed in the taped Oval Office exchanges between Nixon and Kissinger in June 1971, April and May 1972, October and November 1972) did not support his hypothesis.\textsuperscript{174} Webb’s loyal confidence in the competence of the ARVN and his blaming of the U.S. Congress and American antiwar groups for the fall of the RVN perpetuated the idea that it was America’s antiwar movement that helped North Vietnam win the war. This way, Webb not only denied the North Vietnamese soldiers and leaders the credit for victory, but he also upheld total belief in the superiority as well as the integrity of the U.S. Army and the U.S.-backed ARVN.

Webb’s paternal comradeship with the RVN and its soldiers is also demonstrated through his relationship with the Vietnamese community in the U.S., and later with the South Vietnamese people in Vietnam. During his service at the House Committee on Veterans Affairs (1977–1981), Webb developed a supportive


relationship with the large Vietnamese exile community in the Washington D.C. area, many of whom were ARVN veterans who had fled Vietnam after the fall of Saigon in April 1975. During this period, Webb spent a remarkable amount of time providing voluntary counseling services to this newly formed community to facilitate their transition and assimilation into American society. Also, he pressed the U.S. Veterans Affairs to grant former ARVN veterans the same benefits that U.S. veterans received for having fought alongside them. While assisting Vietnamese American groups in community-building projects, Webb became concerned and interested in the lives of hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese people, particularly his former comrades who Webb describes as “the best and the brightest” that were left behind in Vietnam, suffering imprisonment, discrimination, and socio-economic marginalization in general. Out of this genuine concern, Webb returned to Vietnam in 1991 to confirm his conviction. He then made two other return trips in 1992 and 1993 to deliver prosthetic limbs to handicapped ARVN veterans in South Vietnam.

Webb’s benevolent paternalism and comradely fraternity toward his former South Vietnamese allies not only made him highly critical of the Vietnamese Communist government regarding their mistreatment of the RVN’s former citizens, but also fueled his aggressive lobbying efforts on behalf of the South Vietnamese from 1991 onward. Referring to the Bush administration’s approval for $1 million in prosthetic aid for Vietnamese veterans in 1991, Webb complained that the State Department “received no guarantees that former South Vietnamese soldiers will get such help.” While recognizing the sound economic and humanitarian reasons to become involved in Vietnam again, i.e., the business opportunities for American

enterprises and the MIA/POW resolution, Webb demanded that any agreement that allowed U.S. investment to flow into Vietnam should also guarantee that the benefits would be shared among all Vietnamese, especially America’s former allies and their families. Otherwise, he argued that agreement would be viewed as “little more than capitalist greed” and a “prop for the regime and reinforcement of the shame” felt by those who supported the U.S., an attempt to forget the “sincere intentions of [our] failed effort to preserve South Vietnam from Communism.” Acting as a policy advocate, Webb again voluntarily took the paternal role of saving and defending the interests of his Vietnamese allies.

Webb’s third marriage with a Vietnamese American woman, Hồng Lê Webb, a successful corporate securities lawyer, created a more favorable ambience in his relationship with the Vietnamese people in both countries. In 1994, when they were planning to travel to Vietnam, Webb met Hồng Lê in a social function. Later, they both secured a divorce from their prior spouses and got married in 2005. As it turned out, Webb’s personal relationship with Hồng Lê not only benefited his political career but also justified and enhanced his paternal role to the Vietnamese people.

During the final month of Virginia’s Senate race in 2006, Allen and his campaign team faced a downturn prospect because of a racist term “macaca” that he had “unknowingly” addressed to an Indian-American student who volunteered for Webb’s campaign. Allen desperately tried to win Virginia’s female voters by attacking Webb’s gender-biased assumption from his 1979 notorious article “Women

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Can’t Fight.” Attempting to boost support for her husband’s campaign, Hong Lê appeared in public a week before the voting date, telling her audience that Webb comes from a family of strong Virginian women and that he has supported her as a working mother. Reminding the crowd of her escape saga at sea in 1975, when she and her family were fished from the water by a U.S. Navy ship and eventually sent to Fort Chaffee in Arkansas, Hong Lê acknowledged, “without his service in Vietnam, I could not be the woman I am today.” Furthermore, she informed the audience that Webb had “adopted” the Vietnamese community over the years, helped them to build their community and businesses, and that the Vietnamese Americans “love him.”

While Hong Lê appeared to be intellectually and financially independent, her gratitude to the U.S. Navy for saving her life and her acknowledgement of Webb’s paternal efforts to assist the Vietnamese community in the U.S. both justified and reinforced Webb’s paternalism toward the Vietnamese people in the U.S. as well as in Vietnam.

According to Rita M. Gerona-Adkins, reporter for the newspaper *Asian Fortune* in Fairfax county (Falls Church, VA), where Webb and a large number of Vietnamese Americans reside, Hong Lê’s last-minute participation in Webb’s campaign helped generate a “big turnout of Vietnamese American and other Asian Pacific American voters” for Webb. Hundreds of Vietnamese American voters flocked to the polls and joined the Asian Pacific American (APA) rally with banners that read “Please know that Jim has deep appreciation for the Asian culture and history, and will make us all proud when he gets to the Senate. Thank you, and God Bless!” Considering the damage of the racist phrase “macaca” that Allen had inflicted...
on his own campaign, support for Webb from Virginia’s Asian-Pacific ethnic groups in general and the Vietnamese American community in particular, thanks to his Asian connection, certainly gained him a decisive offset. Shortly after Webb became the Senator-elect, Vietnamese American business circles in northern Virginia celebrated Webb’s triumph, calling it a “political and economic plus” for the Vietnamese community in the U.S. Vietnam’s concurrent sponsorship of the Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in November 2006 and its accession to the World Trade Organization did not miss its significance in the midst of Webb’s political victory. Tuy Le, an enthusiastic Vietnamese American campaigner for Webb, upon being asked if Webb’s ties to Vietnam may have been the motivation for his support, explained:

The fact that he fought in my country with a very good record means he will fight for fairness in other areas of business. As one who cares for people, he will promote fairness, good education for families, and will protect you from unfairness coming from people who may hate you.  

Le’s confidence in Webb’s ability to assure and protect business fairness had its roots in Webb’s relationship with the Vietnamese American business community since 1979. This relationship was further strengthened after Webb’s first return trip to Vietnam. Since 1991, Webb has been closely involved with American business circles, particularly among the Vietnamese American entrepreneurs. Using his first-hand Vietnam experiences and what he termed as “knowledge about Vietnamese culture and history,” Webb spent several years in the early 1990’s working as a business consultant and educating American business circles about the risks, potentials, and opportunities of doing business in Vietnam. In short, as Webb revealed

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during his election campaign, he worked hard to “bring American businesses into Vietnam.”

Economic interests rank third among Webb’s rationales for the lifting of the trade embargo against Vietnam after the security concern in Southeast Asia and the wellbeing of former allies. Pointing out the fact that “changes have occurred” in Vietnam since the Soviet Union fell and Vietnam’s consequential loss of Soviet’s financial subsidies, and that many U.S. anti-communist allies—Japan, France, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong—have become the biggest investors in the country, leaving the U.S. the sole outsider of the Vietnam market, Webb called for an end to the U.S. trade embargo, arguing that it had lost its original purpose, i.e., punishing Vietnam and creating an economic leverage.

Indeed, since Vietnam introduced economic reforms in 1986 and subsequently, the foreign direct investment law in 1988, foreign enterprises had begun to set up business ties with Vietnam regardless of the U.S.’s trade sanction policy. Like the outcry of most American businesses against the U.S. embargo at the time, Webb’s self-serving position suggested the question was not whether the U.S. trade sanction was proper and fair toward Vietnam, but whether it remained effective as a punishing measure against Vietnam and how this policy may be “unfair” or inadvertently damaging to American businesses.

During the previous decade of the 1980’s, Webb had been supporting the embargo against Vietnam. As an ardent anti-communist, Webb believes that

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communism is an “intrinsically brutal system” that seeks to repress people and pursue “disastrous state-run economies.” He thus endorsed the U.S. policy that sought to contain expansionist communism.\textsuperscript{185} Convinced that the Vietnamese communists were repressive and dishonest, Webb maintained his opinion that the U.S.-imposed embargo against Vietnam since the fall of the RVN was entirely proper. First, Webb contended, North Vietnam “blatantly” violated the terms of the Paris Peace Accords regarding the return of American POWs and the promise to hold internationally supervised, free election. Secondly, he claimed that North Vietnam had imposed a repressive system after its 1975 takeover. Finally, Webb stated, it let itself become a “client state” of the Soviet Union in 1978. For these pretexts, Webb consistently opposed the lifting of trade embargo against Vietnam in the 1980’s.\textsuperscript{186}

This anticommmunist sentiment forced Webb to find a way to justify his advocacy for the lift of embargo against Vietnam in the early 1990’s even though he was still very critical of the repressive government of Vietnam. In addition to the conviction that the lifting of the embargo would secure the U.S.’s security and economic interests and offer its former allies a better life, Webb embraced the neoliberal concepts, which dictate that economic freedom will eventually lead to political liberalization. Arguing that the conditions emerging in Vietnam in the early 1990’s were approaching what had “brought us [the Americans] into South Vietnam in the first place,” Webb was convinced that it had been time for the U.S. to lift the


embargo and return to Vietnam so that it could fulfill the “unfinished moral duty” to its former allies and announce the normalization as “a belated victory.”

As demonstrated, a pattern of thinking that involves paternalism, neoliberalism, and anticommunism consistently guides Webb’s policy and actions toward Vietnam. During a 1994 meeting with a group of American banking CEOs, while talking about Vietnam’s contemporary demographics, economic future, business opportunities, Webb was asked why he, a former Marine who had tried to kill communist soldiers, would now advocate doing business with them. Webb offered his explanation:

[...] I have always believed in the strength of the culture and people of Vietnam, that the conditions now emerging in that country are approaching, however slowly, what I and others wanted to see twenty-five years ago; and that it was the communist government’s actions, not American intransigence, which had held back the country during the last two decades.

This statement was a strong indication of Webb’s prejudice against the Vietnamese communist government. By blaming it exclusively for the country’s postwar economic and political problems, Webb also defined the United States as an innocent party. First, Webb refused to recognize the destructive role of the U.S. embargo against Vietnam. Second, his claim that Americans had pursued the same goal during the war, i.e., seeing Vietnam emerging and growing because the people deserved it, again justified American paternalism in South Vietnam back then and today. Webb’s attempt to separate the “strength of the culture and people of Vietnam” from the “communist government’s actions” further castigated the undemocratic nature of the


government of Vietnam, which was described as badly in need of renovation and intervention by an American comeback.

In short, Webb held the opinion that Vietnam’s policy change was the preceding factor that led to America’s change in policy. Webb and his home country America thus appear like a reactive and rewarding party that grants Vietnam the lifting of the embargo and normal trade status because of the Vietnamese leaders’ change of heart. In fact, Webb explained his shift toward postwar Vietnam with his judgmental recognition of the Vietnamese officials’ “improved behavior,” “competency,” and “open-mindedness.” Also, Webb defined Vietnam’s improvement precisely because of its shifting away from the “outmoded socialist policies” and its toning down of the pro-PAVN and anti-ARVN propaganda. In an exclusive interview with *The San-Diego Union-Tribune* in 2005, Webb complimented Vietnam for being “pretty good” in the previous three or four years, with a new generation of government and provincial leaders that “impressed” him because they “have been able to groom some very competent people,” and which made the situation in the country “fairly hopeful.” Re-imaging Vietnamese leaders in favorable terms, Webb justified and enhanced the U.S.-Vietnam diplomatic normalization.

Cloaking his anticommunist sentiment in neoliberal and paternalistic rhetoric, Webb orchestrated a policy that the U.S. should pursue in Vietnam in order to recreate the same old Cold War goal of containing Chinese communism, i.e., making Vietnam “a strong, Western-oriented ally with a mutual interest in counterbalancing the ever-burgeoning strength of China.” Citing “corruption, bureaucratic stagnation, and unenforceable contract laws” as Vietnam’s inherent problems that had held it

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from development, Webb demanded that the Vietnamese government allow “all
citizens equal access to the benefits of the new relationship with the U.S.,” and
asserted “the evidence of the past 25 years clearly upholds the validity of our
intentions.”190 Again, Webb’s tone is that of a patronizing American who perpetually
defines U.S.-Vietnam relations within the confines of Cold War geopolitical
worldview. Considering the U.S.’s history of embracing the dictatorial and corrupted
regimes of Ngô Đình Diệm and Nguyên Văn Thiệu in order to uphold them as an
America’s buffer against communism in Southeast Asia, it is unclear what Webb
meant by “our intentions” and whether these had anything to do with America’s
efforts to prevent corruption and promote freedom.191 Rather, this statement served to
legitimize the restoration of American paternalism in Vietnam in which the U.S.
continued to play the role as guarantors of justice and providers of welfare and
security to the Vietnamese people. In Webb’s post-Cold War vision, Vietnam is still
imagined to be a potential site for a U.S.-guided economic and political liberalization
and the balancing tool for U.S.-China rivalry. His strategic vision toward postwar
Vietnam was boosted by the reemergence of the U.S. security concern about China
when this country became a rising hegemonic power in the Asia-Pacific region in the
1990’s.

190 Webb, “Lift the Embargo against Vietnam—Help Old Allies.”
191 About the Ngô Đình Diệm administration’s repressive and corrupted regime, see John F.
Kennedy’s Press Conference Comments, 17 July 1963, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United
reproduced in Michael H. Hunt’s A Vietnam War Reader: A Documentary History from American and
Vietnamese Perspectives (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2010), 50–51; also in Philip E.
Catton’s Diem’s Final Failure: Prelude to America’s War in Vietnam (Lawrence: University Press of
Kansas, 2003), 60–73. About the Nguyễn Văn Thiệu administration’s regime, see Pierre Asselin’s A
Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement (Chapel Hill: University of
North Carolina Press, 2007), 112–21, 134–39, 166–67; about Nixon’s efforts to sustain the Thieu
regime in 1969, see “Meeting Minutes” by Alexander Haig in Foreign Relations of the United States,
1971), 370–72, 374 (reproduced in Michael H. Hunt’s A Vietnam War Reader: A Documentary History
from American and Vietnamese Perspectives, 103–5).
A number of Webb’s close acquaintances also noticed his Cold War conservatism. In *The Nightingale’s Song*, Timberg concluded the biographical narrative about Webb with a quotation from an unnamed naval officer who worked with Webb at the Pentagon: “Webb was frozen in time as a Marine in Vietnam and he saw the whole world through those glasses.”\(^{192}\) Indeed, Webb’s fixation with his Vietnam War experience remains today, as demonstrated by his conservative views about the Vietnam War, its aftermath, and U.S.-Vietnam postwar relations. Driven by a strong sense of comradely loyalty, militarized paternalism, an unshakable belief in the nobility of the American missions during the Cold War and in Vietnam, and a genuine distaste for communism, Webb’s strategic worldview toward Vietnam hardly changed. If anticommunism once urged Webb to support an embargo against Vietnam because of its alliance with the Soviet communist state, the same political conviction motivated Webb to support the lifting of the trade embargo against Vietnam because of its adjacent location with the expansionist state of communist China.

Webb’s lobby for the lift of the U.S. trade embargo was further rationalized by a re-imagination of his former enemies. In other words, U.S.-Vietnam diplomatic normalization would make more sense when the Vietnamese officials were perceived as non-Communist and pro-American. While this was evident in late socialist Vietnam, Webb was keen to use these evidences to reconstruct a justifiable alliance with the Vietnamese government to pursue a decade-old national purpose: securing America’s economic and political hegemony in Southeast Asia. The following section will re-illustrate Webb’s patterns of thinking in the reading of his political fiction *Lost Soldiers* to further explain how Webb attempted to construct U.S.-Vietnam postwar

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\(^{192}\) Timberg, *Nightingale’s Song*, 457.
relations within discourses of paternalism and neo-liberalism, and reveal how these ideas could effectively persuade a large American audience.

3. *Lost Soldiers: Americans the Big Brothers Who Love Vietnam*

Based on Webb’s personal experience during his first return trips to Vietnam in the early 1990’s, *Lost Soldiers* is constructed around the multiple relationships that Condley Brandon, the main character of the novel, establishes in Vietnam (hereafter named throughout by his first name “Condley”). Through Condley’s relationships with a dozen Vietnamese and foreign characters in the novel, Webb helps readers imagine him as a suave, intelligent, masculine, and benevolent man who is popular among Vietnamese people. Through such a characterization of Condley, Webb justifies and enhances American missions in Vietnam while further asserting his worldviews about the Vietnam War and America’s post-Cold War supremacy.

From the first pages of the book, *Lost Soldiers* impresses its readers with its authenticity. Inside the front flap cover, a carefully drawn map of HCMC with detailed information—including names of rivers, streets, hotels, roads, districts, restaurants, sites of interests, and especially the specific marking of two house addresses, where the two main Vietnamese characters reside—effectively provides readers with a sense of realism and persuasiveness. Webb, in fact, proudly embraced this realistic approach. Asked to describe his writing style, Webb stated: “I am of the realist school of writing. You have a duty to portray things as they really are.”

Condley is a former Marine who feels alienated in America after his service in Vietnam. He then decides to return to Southeast Asia, doing various jobs as consultant or journalist in Thailand before embarking on an American mission that requires him

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193 Lippy Copeland, “Don’t Call Him Redneck.”
to relocate to Vietnam. Here, he is assigned to be the country liaison person for the
U.S.’s MIA joint searching team. His job involves meeting with Vietnamese
administrators at municipal and provincial levels, traveling to remote areas in
Vietnam where planes were shot down or bloody battles took place, and maintaining
regular communication with the Central Identification Laboratory in Hawai‘i.
Throughout the novel, Condley appears to be a capable, manly, and charitable
Vietnam veteran with great common sense. Depicted as a U.S. Marines Corps veteran
of Scottish-Irish origin who is fluent in Vietnamese language and well read about
Vietnamese history and culture, Condley is predictably a replica of Webb himself.

In the course of his MIA searching mission in Vietnam, Condley pursues close
relationships with three Vietnamese characters. These relationships define not only
what kind of person Condley is, but also the nature of Webb’s relationship with
Vietnam and the way he interprets U.S.-Vietnam postwar relations. The first of these
characters is Dzung, a former ARVN soldier, who works as a tricycle rickshaw driver.
The second one is Colonel Pham, a former Communist cadre who is assigned to work
with Condley in the MIA searching project. The last one is Van, Colonel Pham’s
pretty and spoiled daughter. Through his relationships with Dzung, Col. Pham, and
Van, Condley becomes acquainted with three other sub-characters—Manh (a
communist official at the Ministry of Interior Affairs), Petrushinsky (Col. Pham’s
Russian comrade during the war), and Petain (Van’s French boyfriend). These
personalities add further international and political dimension to Condley’s
relationships with the Vietnamese people and demonstrate how Webb perceives the
Vietnam War as well as contemporary Vietnam. As the stories unfold, Condley’s
benevolent paternalism, anticommunism, machismo, and his belief in the legitimacy
of the American war in Vietnam gradually reveal themselves.
The prominent relationship in *Lost Soldiers* is the fraternity between Condley and Dzung, in which Condley plays the benevolent and paternal role while Dzung is the loyal and innocent protégé. For one, the naming is by no means accidental, but rather is endowed with political implications. Dzung means “brave” in Vietnamese. Condley is modified and lovingly nick-named by the Vietnamese tricycle rickshaw drivers as “Cong Ly,” which means “fair” or “justice.” In other words, Dzung is the brave man who represents the former soldiers of the RVN while Condley is the representative of Americans who come back to provide fairness and justice. The naming of these two characters and their fraternal relationship reconstruct the nobility of American soldiers and the integrity of their South Vietnamese allies.

The brotherhood between Condley and Dzung is not an equal one. Condley is not only the charitable patron of Dzung’s transportation service but also someone who can see through things. In the meantime, Dzung, the beneficiary, is naïve, financially disadvantaged, and thus dependent on Condley. To Dzung, Condley is his “well-paying friend” who offers great material help to his poor family, which had been ravaged by the communist government’s discrimination policy (94). When Condley takes Professor Muir, a scientist who also works in his MIA search team, to visit Dzung’s house in the distressed district where former ARVN soldiers and their families are relocated after the war, he refers to the people with Muir in possessive form as “our people.” Condley feels “angry and helpless” when he sees Dzung’s poverty and his sick children. After giving Dzung’s wife some bread, Condley is still emotional and restless. He keeps asking Professor Muir the frustrating questions: “What do we do to help them? I am no fucking politician, what do we do, professor?” (142). These questions demonstrate the frustration that Webb felt when he first came back to Vietnam and saw the miseries of his former allies but could not help because
of the ongoing embargo. Also, Webb suggested American politicians should be responsible for the misfortune of their former Vietnamese allies. The implication is that American politicians should either lift the embargo against Vietnam or pressure the Vietnamese government to amend its discriminatory policy so as to help their old allies.

In response to Condley’s frustration, Muir tells Condley about the excited reaction of the children and people in Dzung’s neighborhood when they see him, commenting, “they are too happy to see you” (143). In an admirable exclamation, Muir describes Condley’s act as something so sacred and noble that only brilliant saviors can perform because it is “almost Christlike in its power and simple humility” (143). Not only is Condley portrayed as the legitimate patron for the needy South Vietnamese people, he is also imagined as the noble rescuer of his former Vietnamese allies and their families—including helpless women and children. Being welcome back by the Vietnamese people, Condley embodies a holy mission—defending justice and saving the Vietnamese people from poverty and hunger. Condley’s paternal role to the Vietnamese people is rendered natural and benevolent. The involvement of Americans in Vietnam during and after the war is therefore well justified.

Throughout the book, Webb—via Condley’s intimate thoughts and observations—asserts that the Vietnamese people in the central and south of Vietnam love Americans, despite all the communist propaganda that suggests they do not. During one of their business trips out to Đà Nẵng, a coastal city in central Vietnam, Condley and Colonel Pham hire a local taxi driver, who appears excited to see Condley as if “they were long-lost friends.” To this encounter, Condley recalls and contemplates:

Colonel Pham would never understand, but Ngoc [the driver] and his childhood friends secretly loved Americans. Except in the worst areas further
out from Da Nang, the children had always crowded around the American perimeters during the war. They had chosen special friends among the Marines and whiled away the lonely, boring hours with them, helping them wash at village wells, joking with them, playing cards, competing for their favors and for rewards of food, cigarettes, and chewing gum, even mourning the ones who were killed or wounded. True, many of the children gave information to the other side about Marine gun positions, morale, and casualties. But they still remembered the Americans with an intimate, knowing fondness that all the propaganda since the war could never erase (158).

Again, in Condley’s eyes, the Vietnamese people embrace American paternalism and sincerely love Americans, despite the communist efforts to make them betray Americans or brainwash the children. Condley’s personal observations about the Vietnamese people’s favorable sentiment toward the returned Americans can be easily removed from the private sphere to enter the public space (the reading public), and become a welcome and comforting “fact” to its reading audience. Walter Anderson, the chairman and publisher of the military journal *Parade* said about *Lost Soldiers*:

Jim Webb did not set out to write a healing book, but that is what he has done. I suspect *Lost Soldiers* will bring my country together after years of debate and division—and it took a warrior to write it. You will come away a different person after you’ve read it.194

Anderson’s fond comment about the book suggests his embrace of the narratives in *Lost Soldiers* as “factual.” The final interpretation is that Americans have always been popular and welcome in Vietnam, while the Vietnamese government is not only unpopular but also ineffective in its undemocratic propaganda that futilely tried to erase the “undeniable popularity” of Americans. To put it differently, Webb justifies America’s endeavors in South Vietnam as necessary and desirable, democratically chosen by the South Vietnamese people, thus making American involvement a noble

effort. America’s tutelage in South Vietnam during the Cold War is rendered legitimate.

While Condley plays the protective and benevolent role as the Big Brother, Dzung returns his favors by offering Condley unconditional loyalty. Described as a lesser person than Condley, Dzung always appears “happy with the bright face of a small child” whenever he sees Condley walking toward him (94), and waves his hand enthusiastically at Condley with “the innocent happiness of a young boy” when he meets Condley outside his hotel after Condley’s brief absence (132). The way Webb infantilizes Dzung suggests Dzung’s vulnerability and naiveté, which justifies Condley’s protection over him. In Webb’s imagination, Dzung is made the symbolic image for his former country: an immature state that needs American tutelage.

Condley’s relationship with Dzung leads to the participation of a sub-character named Manh, a communist official, in the story. In Vietnamese, “Manh” means “strong,” which may accurately describe him as a powerful person in the Ministry of Interior (also known as the Public Security Department). Somehow, Manh knows that, in the search for American MIAs, Condley has accidentally found out something about the whereabouts of Deville, an American deserter who murdered his fellow soldiers, and then, in Condley’s speculation, joined the communist troops during the war. Having followed Dzung and known about his brotherly relationship with Condley, Manh uses terror tactics to intimidate Dzung. He reminds Dzung of his past misplaced loyalty to the Americans and his unpleasant experience in the reeducation camp after the war. Manh’s goal is to use Dzung’s good shooting skill to assassinate Deville before he can see and talk to Condley (349). Threatened by Manh and highly concerned for his poor family, Dzung agrees to take further shooting training then travels to Thailand with Manh in the disguise of a rice entrepreneur to find and kill
Deville, who is now involved in drug trafficking activities in the border areas of Thailand. Before his mission, Dzung secures Manh’s promise to take care of Dzung’s family in case any misfortune occurs or reward him if the mission is successful. Dzung does succeed, and Manh keeps his promise to grant Dzung a driver’s license and a car, so that he can be upgraded to be a cab driver and make more money.

Dzung’s relationship with Manh further demonstrates Dzung’s vulnerability, which is not only the result of Manh’s manipulation of power but also because of Dzung’s sentimental commitment to his family. While the former ARVN veterans are portrayed as vulnerable, innocent, and kind-hearted, the Vietnamese communist officials are seen as smart, but cruel, and manipulating people (258–60). This description of Manh seems to fit well with the Cold War stereotype of the Communists as the “Red Menace.” While it is not explicitly explained, Manh’s desire to kill Deville suggests that the Vietnamese government did not want Condley to find Deville and run the risk of having a certain “secret” revealed, assuming Deville had participated in the Vietnam War alongside with the Communist forces and known some confidential information. The whole mythical drama reaffirms Webb’s prejudice against the communist government, with its heartless staff, who use their strength and intelligence to intimidate people and operate assassination missions to cover up unpleasant “truths.”

While Dzung and Manh are after Deville in Thailand, Condley is also there, looking for Deville with the intention to kill him in order to avenge the American soldiers he murdered. Without knowing each other’s presence, Condley and Dzung both ambush to wait for Deville, who drives a truck daily across the border, carrying food stock and possibly hidden drugs. Dzung, signaled by Manh, manages to press the trigger faster than Condley, killing Deville and simultaneously saving Condley. At
first, Condley does not know it is Dzung who saves him because of Dzung’s disguise. Telling his American partner about the “mysterious gunner,” Condley recalls he “looked Vietnamese” with generous compliments, “the fucking guy was a pro” and “the boy could shoot” (346–47). While admiring Dzung’s professional shooting skill, Condley’s use of the word “boy” implies his casual, inherent perspective toward the Asian/Vietnamese people as childlike despite their maturity and achievement.

Dzung, on the other hand, maintains his innocent and firm loyalty to Condley. While he has no idea why he is supposed to kill Deville or who Deville is, his glimpse of Condley at the scene and the awareness that he has saved Condley’s life is “good enough” for him to believe unconditionally that he has been on “the right side.” (364–65). At the end, the story gives readers the impression that while Condley and Dzung are both brave and dignified men, Condley is much better informed and mature while Dzung is simple-minded and wholeheartedly loyal to Americans. The story also demonstrates how Condley represents fair play and open justice (if Deville killed his comrade, then Condley would kill him in revenge), while his opponent Manh represents the mean guy with a hidden agenda driven by those in power in the communist government of Vietnam. In other words, Condley the American is the “good” guy in stark contrast against Manh the communist, the “bad” guy. The Vietnam War thus has been reduced to a miniature, like a good vs. evil mythical crusade.

Webb is not entirely cynical about all Vietnamese communist officials. In fact, through the construction of Condley’s relationship with Colonel Pham, a former communist soldier who is now a high-rank government official assigned to assist Condley’s MIA searching mission, Webb attempts to send the message that Vietnam today does have a number of highly competent, open-minded, and kind-hearted
administrators. Condley’s pleasant acquaintance with Pham despite their past hostile encounter suggests that Americans are willing to befriend and reward those former enemies who can change their perspective and cooperate with the U.S. This again asserts America’s righteous position toward Vietnam and reinforces the assumption that any diplomatic changes between the two countries stem from the reformed conduct of the Vietnamese communist government.

In general, Pham is described as a kind, helpful, sensible man in peacetime and a resilient, brave fighter during the war. He is fluent in Russian, fascinated with playing golf, and used to study in Russia where he had a child out of wedlock with a Russian woman. The construction of Pham’s characteristics both conforms to and rejects the stereotypical imagination of the “communist cadres.” Through this character, the Vietnamese government official is depicted in more “humane” terms with his mundane habits and pleasure-seeking activities while remaining formal and rigid about government’s duties. To put it differently, the Vietnamese communist soldiers are humanized and seen as capable of appreciating a consumer lifestyle. They are also re-imaged as being able to reform their way of thinking, which showed the positive potential for a newly constructed alliance between the U.S. and Vietnam after the war.

The business relationship between Pham and Condley symbolizes the normalizing environment full of friendly camaraderie among former enemies from the two countries. As the cooperation goes further, Condley manages to establish an “odd and unbreakable bond” with Pham because of their past shared war experiences (47). Even though Condley knows that Pham is responsible for the death and punishment of many South Vietnamese comrades, he feels as if they are having a silent conversation every time they meet:
We both endured and we both killed. But that was then, and this is now. So, where do we go from here? (47).

Their secret sharing of battlefield experience and bitter convictions against each other during the war actually pushed them closer in an unspoken kinship. By having his protagonist character Condley ask the rhetorical question “where do we go from here?,” Webb seems to suggest that it is time for the former enemies to leave past hostility behind and move forward out of mutual interests.

Condley and Pham’s joint tasks in the MIA searching project took them to Russia where Condley had a brief interaction with Petrushinsky, Pham’s former Russian comrade during the war (259). While their exchange is quite short, the political implication of the meeting between Condley (an American soldier) and Petrushinsky (a Russian soldier), both of whom took part in the Vietnam War, is obvious. After all, the legitimacy of American involvement in Vietnam’s civil conflicts between 1950 and 1973 rests upon American perception of the Vietnam Wars—whether the North Vietnamese leaders were fighting for national independence and unification, or for the consolidation of Lenin, Stalin, and Mao’s socialist/communist idealism in Indochina. If the first case is well proven, the American intervention in Vietnam appears illegitimate. Conversely, if Vietnam’s civil conflicts were driven by an ideological contest of the communist/socialist camp motivated and guided by Stalin and Mao (North Vietnam) against the capitalist model directed and fueled by France and the U.S. (South Vietnam), the American involvement in Vietnam seems more justified, however problematic their anti-communist motivation is.

There is hardly a black and white answer to the question. Vietnam War historians generally interpret Vietnam’s civil conflicts as both nationalist and ideological. Furthermore, this war was fueled and motivated by multiple factors from
both within and outside Vietnam. Condley and Pham’s meeting with Petrushinsky obviously gave extra ammunition to the latter explanation (the Vietnam War as an ideological contest), thus making American intervention appear properly informed and justifiable. This setting of the story reflects how Webb views the Vietnam War and America’s allegedly justifiable involvement in it. Webb is apparently certain about this interpretation, as he asserted during a Fox News interview:

China was playing inside Vietnam when I [Webb] was in Vietnam. So was the Soviet Union. […] There wasn’t a weapon they [the Vietnamese communist force] would use against me that wasn’t made in Eastern Europe or China.

Webb’s interpretation of the Vietnam War is self-proven as “fact” when Webb lets Col. Pham express verbal grateful recognition of the participation of Russian soldiers in the Vietnam War. When Condley and Pham arrive at Petrushinsky’s apartment, Pham knocks at the door and introduces himself as “a soldier for our common cause,” adding that he comes to see Petrushinsky in order to bring him “the greetings of [my] government” and “[our] thanks for all of your assistance to us, both during and after our glorious war of liberation” (255). These statements obviously confirm the second school of thought—that the American war was a righteous one against communist expansion, and the Soviet Union was actually engaged in the Vietnam War on North Vietnam’s side, thus justifying the American involvement as properly informed.

The circumstance of Condley’s meeting with Petrushinsky, who is now a depressed and lonely alcoholic, is also telling. Portrayed as a reclusive loser after the collapse of the Soviet Union who was forced to sell his military trinkets and medals to

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tourists in the flea market, Petrushinsky symbolizes the Soviet Union’s ultimate loss in the Cold War and the crushed economy of post-Cold War Russia (3). During their conversation, Condley reminds Petrushinsky “you may have won, but then you lost, didn’t you?” And, “we may have lost, but then we won, didn’t we?” To these questions, Petrushinsky responded darkly “you are too clever” (256). The description of Petrushinsky and his short exchange with Condley suggest that America’s post Cold War supremacy is a “fact” that has been acknowledged by a proud Russian soldier himself. By constructing this situation, not only does Webb strengthen the rationale for the U.S.’s Cold War efforts, but he also asserts the contemporary unrivaled position of the United States, a belated triumph and a renewed sense of national greatness.

The third major relationship that Condley pursues in Vietnam is his brief dating and romance with Van, the beautiful and spoiled daughter of Col. Pham, through which Webb constructs Condley’s nobility and machismo. Having gained his favor and trust, Pham invites Condley to his private house and introduces him to his wife and daughter. Upon being told that Pham lost three sons to the war, Condley burns incense to pay homage to the deceased men. His respectful act deeply moves Van, who looks at him fondly with grateful eyes, and Pham’s wife, who tells Condley “with genuine affection” that she is “very honored” to receive him in her house as a “special guest” (111). Condley then begins to meet Van, who is already dating a French businessman named Francois Petain.

It is no accident that the name “Petain” was given to this French man, Condley’s potential romantic rival. In fact, the name reminds readers of Marshal Philippe Pétain, the head of the French Vichy government whose anti-Semitism and collaboration with the Nazis during World War II made him a negative figure in the
Whenever Condley and Petain meet each other (usually in Van’s presence), they engage in personal and emotional exchanges that are reminiscent of the political conflicts between the United States and France over Vietnam after World War II. The rivalry between Condley and Petain in front of Van is, interestingly, constructed in ways that represent the international politics of America, France, and Vietnam.

The conflicts between Condley and Petain also reflect how Webb defines the difference between America and France’s respective goals in Vietnam with America the protector of Vietnam from communism and France the colonizer who aspires to exploit Vietnam. While Petain is proud of being the “Asian president for Lanvin perfume,” Condley makes it clear to him that the Vietnamese people “don’t smell bad, they’re hungry” (48). Condley’s comment not only criticizes the bourgeois and exploitative nature of Petain’s business—catering and making profits from the rich in Vietnam, but also explains his sympathy and benevolence toward the Vietnamese people. In response to Condley’s critical statement, Petain argues:

What do Americans know about Viet Nam? They came in and blew it up with millions of bombs and then left. We French have been here for—what shall I say? Two hundred years or more (48).

To this arrogant statement, Condley retorts, “As I recall, they kicked your asses out of here a couple wars ago” (48). While Condley tries to humiliate Petain by telling him that the Vietnamese people do not want the French to be in their country, he

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198 After World War II, there was a split within the Truman administration about the perceived threat from Communist China, and a brief debate whether the U.S. should support France to re-insert its colonial regime in Vietnam. While France would like the U.S. to support its colonialism in Indochina, for a while, the Truman administration was split between the U.S. commitment to self-determination in former colonized states and the need to secure Western allies in response to Soviet and Chinese communist expansionism, see Arnold A. Offner, *Another Such Victory: President Truman and the Cold War, 1945–1953* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 308–41.
conveniently glosses over the fact that most Vietnamese people did not wish to accommodate American occupation in their country either.

What is most interesting in all of their encounters is Van’s role. The two men, like two inherent rivals, never get along and always fight in front of Van. Naturally, Van becomes the judge during their verbal battles. Being a girlish, consumer-oriented, and spoiled woman, Van quickly admits she loves the perfume and the nice, stylish clothes that Petain provides, but always recognizes Condley’s political statements as correct with obvious admiration of Condley’s smart and sharp retorts (48–49). When Petain complains that Condley is “too aggressive over nothing,” Condley casually responds, “Testosterone does that” (50). Readers begin to sense that Condley’s perception of the political relationship among France, the United States, and Vietnam is defined in gendered terms, in which France and the United States are the two masculine rivals competing for the feminine Vietnam. While Petain only has money and perfume to attract Van, Condley’s intelligence and testosterone make his potential conquest of Van something really genuine and sexually substantial. The tense debate between Condley and Petain no longer remained only about their relevant country’s politics toward Vietnam but more importantly extended to their sexual rivalry and who would end up winning Van, physically and emotionally.

As the story moves along, Van becomes increasingly fond of Condley who is also physically attracted by her. The climax point comes when Van calls Condley from a fancy, western-style restaurant where she is dining with Petain and his expatriate business friends from Europe. Van asks Condley to come and “rescue” her immediately (266). When Condley arrives, he finds Van humiliated in a group of wealthy foreign males drinking and talking about Vietnamese women as if they were some pretty objects that could be bought with expensive jewelry and clothes (271).
Van, upon seeing Condley, stands up in a dramatic but determined manner and announces that she will leave Petain and go with Condley. During this whole dramatic episode, Condley acts like a calm, sensitive, and innocent guy. He arrives to take Van home at her request, refuses to sit down and drink with the cocky male expats who enjoy objectifying women and claims that he is not there to “replace” Petain (272). This situation suggests that it is the non-American guys who sexualize and objectify Vietnamese women and the former American marine soldier is the one who respects and protects Vietnamese women. While Petain stupidly shouts after them that “the two of you match” and, particularly to Van as if to mock her materialism, “you can keep the dress, that looks good on you!,” Condley clearly lets Petain know that he only intends to come and “give Van a ride” (272). Condley thus plays the role of white noble men who rescues non-white women from other inept and shallow white men. Symbolically, Van’s change of heart reminds readers of how the United States replaced France in Vietnam after the Geneva Accords of 1954 because France appeared incapable of keeping its Indochinese colony.

Condley’s relationships with Dzung and Van seem to testify that American men have the capacity to protect both men and women from the abusive communist government and from other arrogant, manipulative foreign men. To put it differently in a broader context, Condley represents his creator, Webb, and his vision of America’s patronizing and paternalistic roles in Southeast Asia, i.e., transforming Vietnam and its western-oriented people into America’s regional ally and protecting them from other foreign bully states. The participation of Petrushinsky and Petain in the story serves to uphold Webb’s perception of Anglo-American supremacy.

What happens at the end of their romance seems predictable but is nonetheless dramatic. Van asks Condley to let her stay with him in his hotel room, and they
become physically involved. Although Condley admits he is attracted to Van, it is Van who proactively proposes an erotic relationship. Condley’s chivalry remains pure and innocent. Van harbors fantasies about freedom, travels, and luxury. She then follows Condley to Bangkok during his mission trip to hunt for Deville. In Bangkok, she soon leaves Condley for Simolza—a wealthy American bar-owner in Bangkok. Condley wins her heart, mind, and body from Petain, but cannot or does not want to keep her. Van is represented as a rather shallow, immature, consumer-driven girl even though she is smart and desirable. Before leaving Condley, Van writes him a letter, recognizing that “you love Viet Nam more than you could ever love a woman” (324). Readers have the impression that Van leaves Condley not because she does not love him but rather because she knows she will never win him wholeheartedly. Because Van admits that Condley loves Vietnam more than her (and her body), Condley’s nobility appears untainted.

Upon learning about Van’s change of mind, Condley does not appear particularly disappointed. In a benevolent and paternalistic tone, Condley tells Simolzak to be “nice” to Van because “she is a good girl” (328). Their casual transaction relating to Van’s body reduces Van’s value to being merely provider of sexual pleasure, partly because of her shallowness and partly because Condley holds more idealistic ideas about true love. In fact, as Condley reveals, his heart is still for Mai, the girl he lived with in Saigon while being a Marine, who was allegedly killed by the Communists because of her love for Americans (444). Obviously, the daughter of a communist official cannot match the daughter of a former ally. At any rate, Condley’s integrity, loyalty, and virility are thus upheld.

At the end of the novel, when all the dramas in Bangkok are over, Condley returns to Saigon and finds out that Dzung has become a cab driver, being rewarded
by the government for his successful assassination mission. Implicitly, they both understand what happens in Bangkok and further consolidate their brotherhood.

While taking a leisure car ride, Condley thinks loudly to himself, as if to verify Van’s comment:

Viet Nam, Viet Nam. It had suborned him all those years ago like a wily beggar, luring him inside the tangle of its tragedies and stealing away his boyhood…And after all the years in the wilderness it had welcomed him back again only to tease him, asking everything of him but giving nothing in return except his heart, the same heart it had once so cruelly stolen. But despite it all he had remained, unable to end his passion for its jungles and its alleyways. Was that not a monumental sort of love? (366)

To Condley, his love for Vietnam, the country, is greater, more sacred than any other sort of romantic love. Calling it a “monumental sort of love” that has been with him since his military experience in Vietnam, Condley indicates his willingness to be permanently committed to it, despite the fact that it asks “everything of him” but gives “nothing in return.” Condley is therefore seen as a holy, selfless, noble character, who has only “given” to Vietnam, and not “taken” anything from it. Condley, nicknamed as “justice,” is created to represent his country, its noble cause in Vietnam, and ultimately, Webb, who sees himself as selflessly serving his home country’s missions while devoting a kind of sacred love to Vietnam.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, *Lost Soldiers* is by no means only a literary fiction. Rather, it is truly a political and diplomatic text of postwar Vietnam-U.S. relations. Through the protagonist Condley’s interactions with other characters—Colonel Pham, his wife, his daughter, his daughter’s ex-boyfriend from France, Dzung, the former Russian soldier in Vietnam Petrushinsky—Webb reasserts his perceptions about the Vietnam War, Vietnamese people, and U.S.-Vietnam postwar relations. First, he justifies the
American involvement in South Vietnam during the Cold War—one that legitimately protected Vietnam’s freedom and democracy from world communist expansion. Because of its noble intentions, Americans have always been welcome by the Vietnamese people. Second, Webb rationalizes the return of Americans to Vietnam after the war to offer justice and protection not only to their “loyal native” South Vietnamese allies, but also to all other people in Vietnam who may be exploited and abused by greedy and unmannered foreign businessmen. Vietnam and Vietnamese people appear desirable, capable, but immature and vulnerable. Therefore, American paternal benevolence seems to be what they need. Finally, Webb manages to reach a compromising view toward the Vietnamese communist government. While being critical of its cover-up tactics and its mean, unfair treatment of the former ARVN soldiers, Webb also depicts Pham as a sensible, kind-hearted, intelligent, and cooperative man—a promising indicator of a possible, fruitful relationship between the two governments.

Being a male soldier, Webb honors his manly duties as a savior and fighter. As an American man of the Vietnam generation, Webb believes in America’s noble crusade against world communism and its paternal role as the protector of other peoples. Webb’s visions of postwar U.S.-Vietnam relations are informed by American paternalism and imperial benevolence around the world. In his effort to come to terms with U.S.-Vietnam normalization, Webb reasserts his paternal obligations toward America’s former ally while trying to construct and justify a new alliance with the communist state of Vietnam.

To sum up, Webb’s paternalistic attitude, his military and family upbringing, and his commitment with America’s allies are the key factors that affect the way he viewed Vietnamese people and formulated his strategic visions toward Vietnam. As
demonstrated in his public pronouncements as well as his fictional texts, Webb believes a reestablishment of America’s diplomatic and business relations with Vietnam will revive American triumphalism and help Americans to reconcile with their unpleasant past in Vietnam. Also, America’s renewed presence in Vietnam will enable the U.S. to re-perform its paternal roles in the region as a moderator and protector against the threatening rise of China. Considering Webb’s position as a senior Senator and his active participation in the making of the U.S. foreign policies, his revised version of the Vietnam War history has been critically instrumental to the reinforcement of the U.S.’s geopolitical interests in Southeast Asia.  

Sen. Webb recently announced that he would retire from the U.S. Senate when his term concludes in 2012 and return to the private sector. However, he said he had “every intention of remaining involved in national issues.” See Michael Felberbaum and Ben Evans, “Webb Decides to Retire from U.S. Senate,” Florida Times Union, February 10, 2011, A5.
CHAPTER THREE

MY LAI PEACE PROJECTS: NEGOTIATING MEMORIES

I think there is a good deal of evidence that we thought all along that we are a redeemer nation. There was a lot of illusion in our national history. Now it is about to be shattered.200

For more than 42 years media writing or filming about My Lai concentrated on the massacre. My organization is focused on helping those still living.201

From January 24 through March 4, 2001, at Michelangelo’s Coffeehouse, a popular café in the arts district of Madison, Wisconsin, visitors had the chance to see an amazing photo exhibition of My Lai Peace Projects, a humanitarian program in Vietnam that is sponsored by the Madison Friends (Quakers) and managed by Mike Boehm, a Vietnam veteran of Madison. Even though these photos did not really possess prize-winning quality, in the words of Jacob Stockinger, the Wisconsin State Journal reporter, they were the “perfect combination between arts and social activism” that communicated “images of cooperation and caring.” The same photo collection was also displayed at the Civic Center and the Madison Public Library.202

In the mind of most Americans, the phrase “My Lai” tends to invoke disturbing memories of the infamous 1968 massacre committed by the U.S. Army that fuelled anti-war activism in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s.203 To the Vietnamese

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200 Reinhold Niebuhr, quoted in Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim’s Four Hours in My Lai (New York: Viking, 1992), 3.
people, this name reminds them of American war crimes against innocent people and of the U.S.’s unfulfilled justice to the victims of Mỹ Lai. The photos Boehm took and displayed at the coffeehouse conveyed an entirely different memory. They were about hopeful Vietnamese women tending family businesses, farmers raising livestock or shrimp, about happy Vietnamese children smiling cheerfully on the schoolyard, reading, or drawing pictures in a newly refurbished classroom. One photo particularly attracted a lot of attention from the audience and, in Stockinger’s opinion, deserved to win some major photo award because of the impressive message it communicated. The photo shows a Vietnamese woman standing side by side with an American veteran who is missing a leg. They are both commemorating the war death in front of the Mỹ Lai Massacre Memorial, which is a collection of statues that depict several unarmed civilians killed and wounded by the Mỹ Lai perpetrators.

A photographic moment can tell a long story and accommodate divergent perspectives. Looking at the photos, viewers are reminded of past traumatic memories. At the same time, such memories are offset and pacified by uplifting images of peace, harmony, and productivity in the present. The American soldier in the photo is visibly imaged not only as the emotional but also the physical victim of the war, who is extending sympathy and generosity to help his former enemies to rebuild their lives. In other words, the historical memory of the Mỹ Lai massacre has been negotiated. On the one hand, it recognizes past tragedy and the American

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205 Stockinger, “My Lai Art Aims at Healing,” Wisconsin State Journal. Most of these photos were later printed in Winds of Peace, the newsletter for Madison Friends’ Projects in Vietnam, in Loan Fund Profiles section (in 9 issues of the newsletters circulated between Oct. 1999 and May 2002). Particularly, photos of Mỹ Lai children, new elementary schools, classrooms, and Boehm standing among the cheering children are featured in Winds of Peace, issue 8, October 2001, 8–9.
compensatory responsibility in it. On the other hand, it emphasizes that the tragedy is a shared one between the peoples of two countries. However, viewers have the impression that the My Lai villagers’ claims for compensation appear to be already responded to, financially and spiritually, through the My Lai Peace Projects. Also, their demand for justice is rendered less justifiable in this newly constructed logic of shared victimization. Furthermore, a portrait of American paternal beneficence and nobility is created, and the absence of the U.S. government’s formal reparations for Mỹ Lai victims becomes more or less acceptable.

Cultural historians have argued that the projection of happy, innocent children and grateful, smiling civilians around American GIs, educational, and medical staff in a U.S.-occupied country attempts to construct evidence of American benevolence and popularity among the local people. In turn, these images reinforce American benevolent paternalism and justify the U.S. tutelage in the occupied nations. In the case of Vietnam, such uplifting images are even more important instruments to offset the disturbing memories of American atrocities against Vietnamese civilians. Since the release of ghastly photos showing brutal American GIs burning houses, mutilating Mỹ Lai civilians, killing women and children in late 1969, American public memory has been troubled with evidence of the U.S. military’s brutality and savagery. In addition, these images illustrated America’s failure to be a “redeemer nation.” The awareness that many Vietnamese civilians and children directly participated in the killing of American GIs was also too difficult to accept because it fundamentally de-legitimized the U.S. claim to “protect” the South Vietnamese people from

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207 For the photos of the My Lai massacre, see Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai* (New York: Viking, 1992), 240–41.
communism. For these reasons, the photographic projection of happy children and grateful civilians in Vietnam is particularly needed to reassert America’s good intentions, affirm the righteousness of America’s paternal missions—protecting and uplifting the Vietnamese people. In other words, these images verify the Vietnamese people’s recognition and appreciation of American soldiers’ noble efforts. The presence of American military and personnel in South Vietnam is rendered benevolent and necessary.

Photographic images are powerful vehicles that can convey and publicize memory, emotions, history, and ideology. Not only do they assert what they record as “self-evident” or “real,” photos also offer political or historical insights about past events, produce new knowledge or meanings, and provoke new responses from the viewers that can challenge previously held assumptions. Also, photos help recreate memory or ideology in ways that reflect the authority and points of view of the photographers or photo displayers in the present. From this interpretive lens, it is apparent that Boehm’s photo display at Madison’s public places aimed to construct a new public memory of the Mỹ Lai massacre. The photos convey messages that Americans in Vietnam today are engaged in noble salvation acts, Vietnamese people are friendly, needy, hard-working, and Vietnamese-American partnership is prospering. Not only did images of “cooperation and caring” among the former adversaries effectively replace the gruesome, disturbing images of the massacre, “evidence” of the American benevolent paternalism were also reenacted.

Boehm’s photo display did more than just erase the disgusting recollection of American destruction and the My Lai massacre in American public memory. It also created a new “truth” of peace, cooperation, and American beneficence. Furthermore, the photos help to portray who Boehm is, what he believes in, and the ideology underlying his humanitarian effort. Firmly convinced in the uniqueness of his contribution and the humanitarian spirit of the Madison Quakers projects, Boehm explains:

If you bring up the word My Lai, it’s like instant rage and recrimination. What we’ve done is move beyond that. In all these years, with all the books and TV programs, nobody has tried to help the people themselves. So the people are very pleased.

Since 1994, the Madison project has raised more than $200,000, and through 13 funds, helped six villages. This show helps you see the results. Here are women – many of them war widows – who have set up home businesses with money donated by their former enemies.210

Boehm’s sincere effort to do something practical that can help Mý Lai people and make them “pleased” is dependent on the capital “donated by their former enemies” and American endorsement of market economy, in which private businesses are unregulated. By putting an emphasis on “war widows” as the primary beneficiaries of their “former enemies,” Boehm not only demonstrates the generosity that he and the Madison Quakers friends extend to those women and their children but also asserts the legitimate exercise of American benevolent paternalism in the project. Being the manager, supervisor, and indirect provider of My Lai Peace Projects, Boehm also affirms his male authority. Taken together, in the process of remaking Mý Lai memory with humanitarian tools, Boehm manages to reconstruct his manliness while being indirectly engaged in what the Clinton administration pursued and endorsed in Vietnam—the American neo-liberal economic model and liberal paternalism.

210 Stockinger, “My Lai Art Aims at Healing.”
The U.S. government has never apologized or offered reparations to Vietnamese victims of Mỹ Lai massacre or any other similar cases.\(^{211}\) Boehm’s projects are completely privatized, and he resented his own government for its irresponsibility in the matter. Being one of the first Vietnam veterans who sought to pressure the U.S. government to lift the embargo and normalize relations with Vietnam, Boehm also harshly criticized the Clinton administration’s refusal to apologize to the Vietnamese people and pay reparations to Vietnam.\(^ {212}\) It is thus paradoxical that Boehm’s peace projects in Mỹ Lai and their underlying ideologies both defy and support the U.S. government’s postwar policy in Vietnam. While Boehm may not intend to facilitate American neo-liberalism and political hegemony in Vietnam, and his Mỹ Lai projects are neither recognized nor funded by the U.S. government, he nevertheless becomes instrumental to the U.S.’s normalization agenda and helps to rename the American concepts of market economy and free capitalism as charity and necessity.

This chapter examines the various outcomes and meanings of the My Lai Peace Projects, mainly during the first decade of their implementation (1993–2003). The first part of the chapter overviews the My Lai massacre event and its aftermath.

\(^{211}\) About the U.S. ambassador Pete Peterson’s refusal to attend the 30th anniversary of My Lai massacre in 1998 and his unpleasant note that he is also a victim of the war and commemorative activities in My Lai do not serve the best interests of the U.S. government, see Jim Auchmutey’s “Returning to Mourn My Lai Massacre; It was a Shameful Day in 1969, but It Produced Two U.S. Heroes, and They were Present Sunday,” Atlanta Journal and Constitution, March 16, 1998, A4; also see Peterson’s letter, dated Oct. 14, 1997, to Captain Laurence Rockwood, the Vietnam veteran who organized the My Lai Commemoration Campaign, that states: “Neither the policy of the United States nor the current relations between the United States and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam would be served by Embassy participation,” (cited in Patrick Hagopian’s The Vietnam War in American Memory, 420n102). About Clinton’s assertion that he would not apologize to the Vietnamese people for the U.S.’s war crimes and destruction in Vietnam, stated prior to his arrival to Vietnam in November 2000, see “Ambassador Pete Peterson Holds News Briefing on the President’s Trip to Vietnam,” Federal Document Clearing House Political Transcripts, November 15, 2000; Editorial, “Urgent Hanoi, Vietnam,” Associated Press, November 16, 2000.

\(^{212}\) Phil Brinkman, “Group Battles Vietnam Embargo,” Capital Times (Madison, WI), April 1, 1993, 5A; Mike Boehm, “Clinton Could Have Begun Healing in Vietnam, But Didn’t,” Capital Times (Madison, WI), November 29, 2000, 7A.
marked by American public debates about the cause of the Mỹ Lai massacre, its gradual sinking into social amnesia, and Carter’s “mutual destruction” rhetoric. During the decades after Mỹ Lai, the Vietnamese victimization was nearly wiped out and replaced by American victimization, which served to justify American alienation and embargo against Vietnam. These provided Boehm with a legitimate framework and philosophical visions to formulate the Madison Quakers’ My Lai Peace Projects.

The second part focuses on the Madison Quakers’ two earliest and also most sustainable projects: the provision of micro-credit Loan Fund and the construction of the My Lai Peace Park (MLPP). While Boehm’s projects were first established as a denunciative statement against the U.S. embargo and its irresponsibility toward Vietnam, over the process of their maturation, his goals gradually converge with the U.S.’s postwar policy in Vietnam rather than diverging from these.

My Lai Peace Projects are far more than simply humanitarian, reparatory, and pacifist projects for the Mỹ Lai people. The materials about the projects reveal that they also aimed to re-portray America as a redeemer nation, repair the damaged image of the U.S. Army, and re-humanize American soldiers. The greatest merit of the projects, which is also their most remarkable paradox, lies in their ability to obscure the past brutality in the background and rewrite the memories of Mỹ Lai in a way that helps relieve American guilt, rebuild America as a virtuous nation, and also release the American government of responsibility. In this process of recreating the landscape and reconstructing memory, Boehm, the founder and manager of the projects, rediscovers his self-worth and reconciles with his fellow veterans, particularly the Mỹ Lai perpetrators. My Lai Peace Projects served as the reconciliatory location for all the people involved—the Vietnamese locals, the U.S. Army, former American anti-war activists, those who committed atrocities in
Vietnam, and Vietnam veterans, including Boehm, despite their diverse positions about the war. The final outcome is to obscure the past and expiate American guilt while serving to make the U.S.’s postwar agenda in Vietnam appear legitimate, charitable, and necessary to the Vietnamese people.

1. My Lai Massacre and the Aftermath

My Lai massacre is the worst event in the U.S.’s war in Vietnam because of its unbelievable level of brutality and insane destruction of innocent life. On the morning of March 16, 1968, Charlie Company of the 11th Light Infantry Brigade, Americal Division, U.S. Army, under the leadership of Captain Ernest Medina, landed in several hamlets that belong to Sơn Mỹ and Mỹ Lai villages in Quảng Ngãi province. They were ordered to launch a search-and-destroy mission to eliminate the NLF force and its support network in the region. Although Medina’s troops did not encounter any NLF fighters, within four hours, these perpetrators destroyed all the hamlets, poisoned the water resource, raped young girls and women, mutilated and killed unarmed civilians, including senior people, women, children, and infants. The death toll is at least 400 and can be as high as 504. Most of the killing was committed by the 1st platoon troops under the command of Lt. William Calley.213

The American public reaction toward the My Lai massacre shifted from being indifferent and skeptical (when Ronald Haeberle, the U.S. Army photographer who took pictures of the My Lai massacre, first showed the photos to small groups of his

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acquaintances), to feelings of shock and indignation that intensified anti-war activism (when the massacre became known publicly in late 1969 and the same photos appeared almost unanimously on the front pages of nationwide and international periodicals along with Seymour Hersh’s detailed report of the massacre).\textsuperscript{214} While the graphic evidence of American GIs’ brutality was shocking, little public attention was given to what happened to the survivors in M\textsuperscript{ý} Lai after the massacre. At the time of its revelation and for a long time afterward, American public, polemists, and politicians were more concerned about American reputation abroad and the legitimacy of the U.S.’s war in Vietnam. The images of dead bodies were more often used by antiwar activists to point out the wrong use or outrageous waste of American tax dollars in Vietnam, to lament on the detrimental impact of the event on American consciousness and its proud assertion as a virtuous nation. Hardly did any public debate try to elicit thoughtful ideas about the impact of the massacre on Vietnam and the Vietnamese people. From these U.S.-centric perspectives, American public began to question the government, criticize its military strategies, and pressure the Nixon administration to end the war.\textsuperscript{215}

In the many years that followed, various Americans, including scholars, military strategists, journalists, and concerned citizens, attempted to explain the causes of the massacre and commented how this ignoble incident had damaged

\textsuperscript{214} About Haeberle’s private attempts to show the photos to Americans and their reaction, see Bilton and Sim, \textit{Four Hours in My Lai}, 242. About the national and international shockwave toward the revelation of the massacre and the American public’s concerns about their reputation abroad after seeing Haeberle’s photos on newspapers and Hersh’s article titled “An Atrocity is Uncovered,” \textit{St. Louis Post Dispatch}, Nov. 13, 20, 25, 1969; see Michal R. Belknap, \textit{The Vietnam War on Trial: The My Lai Massacre and the Court-Martial of Lieutenant Calley} (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002), 111–20.

American national consciousness. By far, three most common positions are perpetuated. The first one argues that the massacre is an isolated, individual act, (commonly termed as an “aberration”), that neither represents the general attitude of American GIs nor reflects the policy of the U.S. Army. The second position holds that the way the U.S. Army managed the war and organized troops in Vietnam was seriously flawed which led to misunderstanding, confusion, and a general deterioration of morality among American GIs. The third group of debaters draws attention to the questions of “human nature” and the “primitive impulse of men” that tend to allow the good and the evil to co-exist under the façade of civilization and modernity. While the first position attributes the cause of such brutal acts to the individuals directly involved in the massacre and sets the military free of responsibility, the second puts blame on military leaders, the Congress, and the Administration, which partially releases the perpetrators of guilt. Both of these positions appear inadequate and unjustified to the blamed party. The third one seems to be most effectively compromising but also most problematic. In the words of Kendrick Oliver, by abstracting the causes of massacre to “human nature,” this third position allows both the perpetrators of the killing and those who granted them the license to kill—including the military command, the Administration, the Congress, and the “quiescent masses” at home—to receive a “release from conscience.” To put it differently, this ambivalent and compromising position made the My Lai massacre become nobody’s sole responsibility. Not only did the just punishment of those specific perpetrators become impossible and unjustified, the survivors in Mỹ Lai also lost their chance to see justice done to their torturers or to be redeemed.

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Regardless what direction the media debates and public reaction have concluded, the effects of the My Lai massacre on Vietnam veterans were detrimental. Even though it was committed by a group of over a hundred mentally disturbed American GIs, the graphically horrifying and widely publicized images of the event—dead, burnt, and mangled bodies of women, children, and babies—left such a powerful and repulsive impression upon America that almost all American GIs returning to the U.S. from Vietnam during the months after its revelation in 1969 could be subject to the disgraceful identification as “baby-killers.” Instead of being welcomed back and compensated for the military hardship they had endured, a good number of Vietnam veterans were alienated in social functions, discriminated from employment, or scorned by the civilians at home as if they had been at Mỹ Lai or involved in similar massacres. The conflicts between these traumatized veterans and the civilians who could maintain a safe emotional distance from the war were often bitter, long, and almost irreparable. Numerous veterans painfully recalled the distressing, unjustified treatment they suffered and the way they were made the scapegoats of their government’s mismanagement of the war or the insane acts of Medina’s troops. For many of them, the moral and psychological burden of this unpopular war that they had to carry was too heavy to bear, which led to suicide attempts, serious mental breakdowns, or self-destructive habits such as alcoholism or voluntary isolation.217

For the people directly involved in the event, the consequences were hardly just. The U.S. commanders who tried to cover up the massacre, the U.S.’s legal and military institutions, and the reaction from the American public all contributed to the failure to administer justice. By 1970, most of the former members of the 1st and 2nd

platoons of Charlie Company (the perpetrators) had become civilians. They were thus no longer subject to prosecution at a martial court. While almost all of the people involved (including Charlie Company troop and half a dozen of their commanders) were interrogated, only Medina and Calley were ruled as guilty and brought to trial. Still, Medina ended up being acquitted of all charges on the premise of “following orders” from his superior Frank A. Baker, the Lieutenant Colonel who commanded the Task Force Baker and gave him the order to destroy the NLF forces in Sơn Mỹ and Mỹ Lai villages. Baker, whose name was given to his own Task Force, was killed in Vietnam before the investigation. Calley was the only convict found guilty. He was sentenced to life for directly murdering twenty-two civilians and ordering others to commit murders.²¹⁸

What happened to Calley after the trial was as unbelievable as the massacre itself. Instead of being dismissed as a cold-blooded murderer, the majority of Americans who were concerned about the case suddenly showered Calley with support, sympathy, and even extolled his heroism. Hundreds of thousands of protest letters poured to Nixon’s office within days of the court’s decision. These protesters pressured the president and the court to reduce Calley’s life sentence to a total of four and a half months in a military quarters, plus three and a half years in relatively comfortable house arrest. The first position that attempts to put the blame of My Lai massacre on individual soldiers obviously did not work. Instead, most Americans tilted toward the second position that seeks to condemn the U.S.’s war-making engine and accepted Calley’s claims that he was simply a patriotic soldier, faithfully acting out his duty, but having wrongfully evaluated the life of his troops higher than that of the Vietnamese civilians. Even many peace activists were willing to believe that

²¹⁸ Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, 322–37.
Calley was merely a low-level scapegoat for the real architects of the war, such as General William Westmoreland and the top cabinet at the Pentagon or the Department of State.219

In an incredible twist of justice, the outcome was particularly distressing for Hugh Thompson, the pilot who tried to rescue Mý Lai civilians from being murdered. While flying his helicopter on ground troop support mission that day, Thompson, together with door gunners Larry Colburn and Glenn Andreotta, discovered the killing of civilians and witnessed Medina’s murder of a wounded woman. Thompson decided to land and interfere between a group of hiding villagers and several American soldiers, giving Colburn and Andreotta the permission to fire at their own fellow soldiers if they blocked the rescue of civilians. Ten villagers were lifted and dropped in a nearby civilian hospital. On the way, Thompson landed one more time to pick up a wounded boy lying in the midst of dead bodies and also sent him to the hospital.220

Soon after the event, Thompson reported the massacre to his superior but saw no particular interest from the military leadership to investigate. Instead, a series of cover-up actions were taken. Medina’s false report of 123 “Vietcong fighters” (NLF troops) killed in the operation was filed at the U.S. military headquarter in Quảng Ngãi as the only result of the March 16, 1968 attack. Over the next few weeks, Charlie Company troops were gradually dispersed or relocated to a remote mountain-based area for almost two months. Thompson was assigned in distant, dangerous chopper missions without adequate backup from gunships, which he doubted to be

someone’s intention to put him at life risk and shut him down. These flying conditions resulted in five crashes and an accident that broke Thompson’s back. After the fallout in 1969, Thompson was summoned to testify in a secret hearing before the House Armed Services Committee about what he had seen in Mỹ Lai. At the end of the testimony, Chairman Rivers of the Committee announced, “Thompson gave us no information to lead us to believe that anyone committed a massacre at My Lai.” Rivers even tried to make Thompson admit that he had threatened to kill a lieutenant who was holding ground combat authority, which could turn the legal case against him. In 1971, Thompson testified against Medina at the court martial. Once more, his evidence was ruled as “inadequate.” Quite contrary to the kind of social empathy that Calley received, Thompson was shunned in public, mistreated by fellow soldiers as if he were a traitor, threatened with death messages and unidentified midnight phone-calls. For a long time, he was confused about his defying act and fell into deep depression.  

The utmost tragedy, of course, fell upon the residents and survivors of Mỹ Lai hamlets in the two target villages. An estimated total of 504 people were killed, and fewer than 20 villagers survived the massacre. When American soldiers had all left, the few of them came out of their hiding spots and saw bloody, dead bodies of relatives scatter on the ground, burned houses, mutilated corpses, chopped trees, dead animals, smoldering fires, and piles of ashes all around. The whole place was hopelessly devastating and deadly silent, as a survived Mỹ Lai villager recalled, “When there were no more sounds of guns, they came home to bury the dead. I ran

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home, and there was nothing left. My house was burned and destroyed. I couldn’t recognize my relatives. They were all burned.”

By the time the U.S. occupation ended in 1973, the My Lai massacre had lost its role as an anti-war weapon in the U.S. and more or less fallen into public amnesia in America. However, in the postwar period of 1976–1977, when the newly established SRV government and the United States were trying to normalize relations, questions about the U.S.’s offer to pay reparations for Vietnam and the repatriation of American MIA/POW were brought to the negotiation table. Flashbacks of the My Lai massacre briefly re-emerged in American media at the onset of Michael Cimino’s The Deer Hunter. Yet, they were soon obscured with the American POWs’ testimonies and memoirs of their brutal incarceration in North Vietnam’s prisons that helped reinforce the victimization of American veterans and ignored the Vietnamese victims entirely.

A new concept of “mutual destruction” was introduced, first pronounced by President Carter and later continually reiterated to justify the halt of normalization and the denial of reparations. During a press briefing about the prospect of normalized relations with Vietnam, Ed Bradley, a CBS reporter, exchanged with Carter:

Bradley: Mr. President, on the subject of Vietnam, if you feel the United States is not obligated to uphold the terms of the Paris Peace Accords because of the North Vietnamese offensive that overthrew the South Vietnamese Government, do you feel, on the other hand, any moral obligation to help rebuild the country?

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222 Trần Nam and Phạm Thành Công, My Lai survivors, My Lai, PBS.
Carter: I can’t say what my position would be on some future economic relationship with Vietnam. I think that could only be concluded after we continue with negotiations to see what their attitude might be toward us.

Bradley: Beyond that, do you still feel that if information on those America servicemen who are missing in action is forthcoming from the Vietnamese, that then this country has a moral obligation to help rebuild that country, if that information is forthcoming?

Carter: Well, the destruction is mutual. You know we went to Vietnam without any desire to capture territory or to impose American will on other people. We went there to defend the freedom of the South Vietnamese. And I do not feel that we ought to apologize or to castigate ourselves or to assume the status of culpability. Now, I am willing to face the future without reference to the past. And that is what the Vietnamese leaders have proposed. And if, in normalization of relationships, there evolves trade, normal aid processes, then I would respond well. But I don’t feel that we owe a debt, nor that we should be forced to pay reparations at all.224

President Carter’s perception of the consequences of war as “mutual destruction” to Vietnam and America was both illogical and self-serving. His willingness to “face the future without reference to the past” allowed the U.S. government to simply walk away from the destruction of human life, infrastructures, and living environment in Vietnam. Also, Carter’s statement justified his administration’s refusal to pay reparations or to acknowledge its responsibility for any consequences of the U.S. war in Vietnam, which was unacceptable to the SRV and led to the breakdown of the normalization talks in the summer 1978. Carter’s position remained to be the principle of U.S.’s diplomatic policy in Vietnam for the next two and a half decades.225

The My Lai massacre, shelved to its hidden dark spot in American psyche, thus never received legal or reparatory justice nor reemerged in any future

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negotiations between Vietnam and America. In fact, in the decade following the failed normalization attempts in the late 1970s, a whole new project of cultural and political reconstruction of the war took place in America in which Vietnam was represented and perpetuated as an emotionally destructive experience that happened to Americans and caused American sufferings. In other words, Americans became the victims, and the Vietnamese government, along with its military personnel and soldiers, became the victimizers expected to repay for the emotional and financial damages it had inflicted upon America. This reversal of the war responsibility relieved the U.S. government from any confession of guilt or any moral as well as financial obligations to compensate for Vietnam. By the end of 1987, with the initiative of the Vessey Mission, the term “reparations” had been completely replaced by “reconstruction aid” or “humanitarian assistance,” which effectively repositioned the United States as a benevolent, generous provider of “aid” instead of being the guilty party expected to repair the damages it had caused to the people and the land of Vietnam. Once the concept “compensation” is renamed and ruled as “humanitarian aid,” the U.S. government and American individuals involved in these reparation programs become the legitimate exercisers of benevolent paternalism. Mike Boehm is one of them. The following section will trace the path that led Boehm to Mỹ Lai and his role in the materialization of My Lai Peace Projects.

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2. Mike Boehm: The Awakening

U.S. institutions and American individuals began to provide medical assistance in Vietnam as early as 1987, after General Vessey made his first official visit to Hanoi and proposed separate pathways to address the war consequences in both countries. Under this proposal, the Vietnamese government was expected to fully cooperate in the search for American missing servicemen. In return, the U.S. government considered allowing a limited number of American institutions to provide prosthetic limbs, medical supplies, and humanitarian aid to war’s victims, including orphans, disabled people, and victims of the alleged U.S.’s chemical warfare. However, for a long time, Mỹ Lai remained the forbidden area in American consciousness, safely placed outside the agenda of these humanitarian projects.

Twenty-four years after its occurrence, the My Lai massacre again found its way into American media. In February 1992, Boehm and eleven other Vietnam veterans joined the Veterans Vietnam Restoration Project to return to Vietnam and helped build a medical clinic. Boehm recalled listening to his fellow veterans’ talking about their traumatic PTSD syndromes. He himself experienced an “emotional turmoil” when he witnessed the sufferings of the Vietnamese people—the colossal loss of lives, the physical destruction of the land, and the people’s hopeless destitution as a direct result of the American War and the U.S.-led postwar embargo. On the way to Hanoi, Boehm asked to stop by Mỹ Lai village, where he again observed the distressing poverty of the people in the region and the dreadful symbol of massive death at the Mỹ Lai massacre museum. Playing “taps” with his violin in front of the

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memorial, Boehm said the music was “for the Americans like me, for the Vietnamese, for everyone.” Despite his non-combat experience during the war, Boehm admitted he suffered from the trauma of what he had been a party to—the genocide and thought he would never be able to make it up. In short, Boehm’s sense of guilt, his desire to cure his own emotional burden and relieve his fellow veterans’ emotional sufferings, along with his sincere wish to compensate for the Mỹ Lai victims, became the primary motivations for the My Lai Peace Projects.229

Boehm often recalls how he has traveled a “tortured path” and transformed himself from being an uninformed member of the U.S. Army to be a distressed and disillusioned Vietnam veteran before he finally turned into an enlightened pacifist and philanthropist. Talking about his decision to enlist into the U.S. Army to go to Vietnam, Boehm attributed it to his abused childhood and the desire to escape it as a young man. Unlike many of his peers, Boehm was disappointed to fail the military physical examination, so he volunteered to perform non-combat assignments in the army to free himself of the constraining sphere at home and his abusive father. Boehm admits he was “not influenced” by any ideology—patriotism, anti-communism, democracy, or the like, and had little empathy for the Vietnamese people as a young military staffer. During his military service (1968–1969), Boehm enjoyed working as a communication clerk at a headquarter office and recalled how he used to look back at the experience in Vietnam with fond memory because it was the first time in his life that he was “treated with respect.” By the time he returned to the U.S., Boehm found himself almost intact physically and emotionally, unlike other tortured fellows that he knew coming back to the States suffering various kinds of mental illnesses. In

other words, Boehm survived his military service in Vietnam in decent shape and spent the several post-war years in a relatively normal condition, thinking he was safe and distant from all the conundrum of the Vietnam War.230

Boehm began to question the U.S.’s military intervention abroad and his role in it for the first time in the summer 1977. Between 1976 and 1978, he attended a 2-year program at the Madison Area Technical College on the G.I. Bill. During the summer break of 1977, he happened to come across several articles that denounced American wars in Vietnam and Latin America. For the first time, Boehm realized he had taken part in an unjust war, and the atrocities that occurred in Vietnam were more like a “rule” rather than an aberration. His first reaction was to throw away all the medals and uniforms stored in his attic. Next, he went to meet the representative of the Veterans Affairs at his college and announce that he would stop accepting “the government’s blood money.” No longer on the G.I. Bill payroll, Boehm worked through his college and started to educate himself about the history of the U.S.’s economic and military policies around the world.

Because of this awareness, Boehm began to loathe the way American society had been constructed and driven by crass consumerism. During this phase of revolutionary rethinking, Boehm retreated to a completely non-material life, living in a shack with no electricity or plumbing for seven years. He began to suffer from alcoholism, depression, and failed to maintain stable employment. For a long time, Boehm lived on the charity of an anonymous Quaker couple in Madison and occasionally did carpentry work for his landlord when he needed money. He also learned to play violin, took care of orphan animals in the wood, and only socialized.

with the few friends he had. In general, Boehm’s awareness about the Vietnam War turned him into a defiant and depressed figure, who was not only anti-war but also anti-social. In the midst of that hopeless and frustrating life, Boehm rediscovered the meaning of his life. The 1992 visit to Mỹ Lai village fundamentally changed the course of his life and helped him see what he “had been looking for” to “heal” himself and all the unfortunate victims of the war.²³¹ Boehm never regrets this return experience and his subsequent commitment to the My Lai Peace Projects.

3. The Madison Quakers’ Loan Fund

When Boehm returned to the U.S. after the spring 1992 trip, he became “obsessed with a desire to apologize for the war” and was determined to make a “personal response” to the people of Mỹ Lai. He began to talk to friends and sympathizers in his home state, Wisconsin, and at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. This led to his close partnership with the Madison Quakers and various liberal anti-war scholars as well as former antiwar activists in Wisconsin. Being certain that the U.S. government would not “behave in a moral way,” Boehm decided that he would invite others to join him and “do it themselves” to make his project an “antidote” against the U.S. government’s postwar position about Vietnam and to denounce its irresponsibility.²³² While Boehm is highly critical of the U.S. government, his undertaking of the projects in My Lai served to re-channel the


massacre guilt to the private sphere and thus allow the U.S. government’s irresponsibility as legitimate. Even though Boehm tries to compensate for the Vietnamese victims and redeem American altruistic values, he at the same time also releases the American government from guilt and responsibility.

Boehm’s affiliation with the former anti-war activists in Wisconsin and the philanthropic Madison Quakers motivates some critical thought about the political and economic principles of his humanitarian project. On the one hand, this connection offers the logistic and financial support for his project to mature and develop. On the other hand, however, this partnership also places him within his sponsors’ liberal principles, which, paradoxically, both fuelled and opposed the U.S.’s policy in Vietnam. This paradoxical position was best illustrated by their anti-war philosophy. Back in the 1960s, the state of Wisconsin already established an intimate connection with Vietnam, when Wisconsinites took a lead in opposing the U.S.’s involvement in the Vietnam War through their votes and activism. Believing that “the best way to fight communism was not with the lives of American young people but with human and economic ties that would ultimately show the Vietnamese people the value of democracy and an open and fair economy,” the Wisconsinites did not necessarily object to the U.S. Cold War anti-communist crusade. Not only did they conveniently ignore the nationalist engine that motivated Vietnamese people to fight against the U.S. and unite the country, they also shared the same paternalistic perspective of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations—one that asserts the U.S.’s responsibility to guide and “show” Vietnamese people the path to capitalism and

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democracy. Their disagreement with the U.S. government’s policy during the Vietnam War only lay in the method of fighting communism and not in the philosophical question whether it would be legitimate to fight Vietnamese communism or not. At heart, they embraced American model of free and open capitalist economy, democratic society, and believed it was righteous to bring such values to Vietnam. To put it differently, they belonged to the anti-war group that protested the war for pragmatic and moral reasons rather than on legal ground.

Similar ambiguity can be found among the Quaker anti-war activists and members of the American Friends Service Committee (often termed as Society of Friends). Primarily driven by peaceful idealism, they believed that a non-violent approach was the best way to resolve social conflicts. While not openly anti-communist, Quaker peace activists argued that the conflict in Vietnam could be settled more effectively by the “use of [our] best economic and sociological resources instead of military efforts.” Motivated by an anti-military attitude and humanitarian philosophy, various American Quakers directly challenged the U.S.’s containment policy (the U.S.’s trade embargo imposed against North Vietnam in 1964, after the Tonkin Gulf Incident) and engaged themselves in civil disobedience. Many of them, including Betty Boardman of Madison, who first offered Boehm support, traveled to North Vietnam to deliver medical supplies to Vietnamese victims of the war. This courageous act put them in direct confrontation with the U.S. government and cost Boardman some loss of freedom behind jail bars in the U.S.234 In the mid-1960s, a large group of American Quakers began to call the U.S. government to “move toward an orderly society in Vietnam” by constructive means rather than by unilateral military acts. Yet, unwilling to challenge America’s “noble mission” in South

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Vietnam, they published antiwar pamphlets arguing that militarism in fact destroyed democracy and prevented peaceful social change. Fully aware that even though very few Americans actually killed Vietnamese people, Quakers anti-war activists were firm in their demand for the U.S. withdrawal by 1966 in the belief that many Americans indirectly contributed to the war in one way or another, for example, serving in the military logistics, making weapons in factories, and paying taxes.²³⁵ Again, the Quakers’ anti-war activism was driven more by tactical and moral reasons rather than a legal concern about the war’s legitimacy.

In short, American Quakers, including those from Madison who later supported Boehm’s projects, believed in America’s “good intentions”—bringing democracy and radical social changes to Vietnam. Their position toward Vietnamese communism appeared ambiguous, neither supportive nor denunciative. Like the Wisconsinite anti-war activists, the Society of Friends (Quakers) were prone to disagree with the U.S. government about the manner or method to bring about “social order” in Vietnam (presumably in American image) instead of being willing to fundamentally challenge the legal and moral aspects of the U.S.’s interventionist policy. Their pacifist and humanitarian approach effectively obscure the problematic aspect of their ideology—an endorsement of free market economy and the confidence in its ability to reinforce democratic institutions—which reveals itself later in the implementation of the Madison Friends (Quakers) Projects in Vietnam.

Thirty years after their first pacifist engagement with Vietnam, the Wisconsinites revisited their ideal vision of coupling a humanitarian approach with a

free economic model in their plan to revive Mỹ Lai. The projects received effective publicity in their home state. Upon learning about the newly resumed ties between Wisconsin and Vietnam through Boehm’s projects, Dave Newbart, the business analyst and reporter for The Capital Times in Madison, visited Vietnam and returned with a series of business report articles advocating stronger economic linkage with Vietnam. In general, Newbart argued for the need to start a “serious business of building economic ties between the state and Vietnam,” adding that trade representatives in other U.S. states were already working on building such links, but they “lack the clear connection that Wisconsin can claim.” His report included explicit reference to Madison’s people’s former antiwar activism and Boehm’s efforts to develop a sister-city relationship between Madison and Bếc Giang, a province in northern Vietnam. Also, he informed the local audience that Boehm was “trying to raise funds for rebuilding the war-ravaged Vietnamese village of My Lai.” Taken together, Newbart contended, Boehm’s projects could help link Wisconsin’s past activism with its present humanitarianism and become instrumental to the promotion of his home state’s business interests in particular and the development of U.S. trade in Vietnam in general. While Boehm and the Madison Quakers may not necessarily share Newbart’s tendency to combine humanitarianism with the state’s business promotion goals, their fund-raising efforts were rewarded by this promotional strategy nevertheless.

Undoubtedly, Boehm nurtured no intention to “fight communism” or bring democracy to Vietnam. Nor did he envision a project to promote radical social change or capitalism in the country. The valuable logistic and financial support that he

receives from the Madison Quakers, however, made it hard for him to stay outside their philosophical principles, which have been sustained over the years since their first involvement with Vietnam. In the process of getting his projects materialized, Boehm has chosen to embrace the Madison Quakers’ pacifist, neo-liberal vision of “promoting human and economic ties” to repair Mỹ Lai and rebuild relations with Vietnam.\(^{237}\)

After his 1992 trip to Vietnam, Boehm began to send words around about his wish to start a humanitarian project in Mỹ Lai. Before long, Carol Wagner, who is also a Madisonian working with a California-based study tour program, contacted him with a potential lead. Wagner informed Boehm that the Women’s Union in Quang Ngai province was seeking to create an interest-free, revolving loan fund that follows the Bangladesh economist Muhammad Yunus’ Grameen Bank concept. The Grameen Bank, also known as micro-credit loan or micro-finance, aims to help poor women in rural Bangladesh to have access to small amounts of capital, so that they can start small-sized, family-based businesses and elevate themselves out of poverty.\(^{238}\) The Women’s Union in Quang Ngai hoped to set up a similar loan fund for poor women in Mỹ Lai villages to alleviate the remarkably high poverty rate in the area.\(^{239}\) What the Mỹ Lai women needed was the seed money—about $3,000. Boehm immediately took the proposal, believing that it could greatly help to undo the poverty and devastation in Mỹ Lai. Together with Wagner, he worked with former antiwar


\(^{238}\) Muhammad Yunus, *Banker To The Poor: Micro-Lending and the Battle against World Poverty* (New York: Public Affairs, 2003), 115–52. For further discussion about the different perspectives toward the Grameen Bank concept, see Mark Engler, “From Microcredit to a World without Profit? Muhammad Yunus Wrestles with Moving Beyond a Society Based on Greed,” *Dissent* 56, no. 4 (Fall 2009): 81–87.

activists of Madison—Betty Boardman and Joe Elder—to found the Madison Indochina Support Group in February, 1993 and began to raise money. In January, 1994, the first batch of seed money worth $3,000 was delivered to the Quảng Ngãi Women’s Union (which oversees the activities of various Women’s Unions in smaller villages like Mỹ Lai). The union administrators then made loans from $5 to $100 to needy women in Mỹ Lai villages, so that they could buy essential commodities, repair houses, or start a private home business, which usually involves raising cows, shrimp, fish, or the manufacture of food and consumer goods.\(^{240}\)

In May, 1994, Boehm received a letter from the Quảng Ngãi Women’s Union. They informed him that the initial amount of $3,000 was causing problems during the selection process because there were far more needy women than those it could afford to give loans. The Women’s Union in Quảng Ngãi requested that the Mỹ Lai Loan Fund be expanded by an additional amount of $10,000. This significantly larger sum of money required the Madison Indochina Support Group to come up with serious financial and administrative decisions. Boehm often recalls how he pondered this new request and made a “historic” decision to put aside all the “hatred, grief, denial, and recrimination” which had prevented Americans to take actions to address the consequences of the Mỹ Lai massacre. After thinking over and talking to partners, Boehm decided to make a long-term commitment to Mỹ Lai Loan Fund project, as he put it, and “take on the responsibility for what happened at Mỹ Lai” that the U.S. government had refused to accept.\(^{241}\)

In May, 1995, Boehm returned to Mỹ Lai to meet with the local female administrators who were in charge of the Loan Fund and interview the beneficiaries to


\(^{241}\) Giffey, *Long Shadows*, 93.
determine its success and sustainability. He was pleased to find out that the loans were in general helpful and successful (except for only one lost case due to the death of a cow). The women who received the loans were highly motivated and extremely hard working. Also, the local Women Union encouraged them to diversify the businesses to minimize risk, promote peer correction, and increase success rate. Boehm decided that the Mỹ Lai Loan Fund could become a long-term, sustainable project. When Boehm returned to Madison, he began to advocate for an expansion of the project and work closely with the Madison Society of Friends to raise funding.

Upon Boehm’s feedback and recommendation after his field survey trip, the Madison community launched a new round of fund-raising and publicity for the Mỹ Lai Loan Fund. The spring of 1996 was a busy and exhilarating season for Boehm, as he tried hard to raise $10,000 for his project in Vietnam. On the morning of April 23, 1996, Boehm spoke on the Wisconsin Public Radio about the revolving loan fund for poor women in Mỹ Lai, stressing the practical significance of his projects:

In the 28 years since the Mỹ Lai massacre, the only aid to the people of that rural Vietnamese village has come from Madison. For all the publicity, there’s been no material aid for the people of Mỹ Lai except from the Madison Indochina Support Group. It’s amazing.

The next evening of April 24, Boehm hosted a fund-raiser photography exhibit event called “The Women of Mỹ Lai” at the Arthouse Café, Madison. This photo exhibition featured images of poor Mỹ Lai women who were working hard and struggling to improve their life with small business projects invested from the loan provided by the Madison Indochina Support Group. They were seen engaged in private home husbandry, raising pigs, cows, fish, shrimp, or doing small-sized businesses to

243 Susan Lampert Smith, “I Think It Shows We Haven’t Dealt with It,” Group Provides Only Aid to Village of Mỹ Lai,” Wisconsin State Journal, April 23, 1996, 5B.
produce marketable commodities, such as fishnets, mattresses, bean cakes, or cassava flour. One of the most important results of these women’s businesses is, as the photos suggested, their children could continue schooling. The photographs were arranged in a chronological order that highlights how their living situations dramatically change after receiving the loans, despite how small the amount is. As Boehm commented:

> It’s incredible what these women can do with $50. They are so poor that just a small amount of money can radically transformed their lives. They have, in some cases, parlayed the loans into new houses and very successful businesses.\(^\text{244}\)

*The Capital Times* also joined in this publicity effort with an article featuring Boehm’s path to his philanthropy. The article includes Boehm’s large-size photo in which he is seen enthusiastically raising his hands, standing among cheering children of Mỹ Lai and a couple of women who have benefited from the loan fund. The caption of the photo reads: “Madisonian Mike Boehm says the children of My Lai are free of hatred that existed during the Vietnam War. He is working to build a brighter future for them with a revolving loan program that has helped women like Trần Thị Mẫn and Đoàn Thị Liên build small businesses.” Interviewed by Nichols, *The Capital Times* reporter, Boehm said his fund-raising campaign for $10,000 had been a success “with support from both veterans and peace activists,” and predicted he would achieve the goal by the Memorial Day weekend.\(^\text{245}\) Far more than a philanthropist that helps to uplift Mỹ Lai people out of poverty, Boehm helped construct a prospective “reality” of Vietnam growing out of hatred and ready to enter a life of prosperity. In so doing, he managed to unite former veterans and anti-war activists for the common cause of reconciliation and reparation. Also, it is clearly communicated to the Madison community that children and women in Mỹ Lai have been able to enjoy a

\(^{244}\) John Nichols, “Restore Hope in My Lai,” *Capital Times*, May 27, 1996, 1C.

happier and more prosperous life thanks to the generous aid from his organization. Again, the Vietnamese forgiveness and recovery are asserted, and Boehm recreated himself as the paternal benefactor of Mỹ Lai villagers while effectively encouraging others to support his projects.

By the end of spring 1996, another $10,000 had been raised and the Madison Friends Committee (Madison Quakers) took over the fiscal administration of the My Lai Peace Projects. The Madison Indochina Support Group that Wagner and Boehm had founded was disbanded, and Boehm became the representative and manager for the Madison Friends’ Projects in Vietnam. Since then, the original My Lai Loan Fund was extended in five other neighboring villages and hundreds of women have become the beneficiaries of the revolving loan funds. Sharing the result of his work to Madison area reporters, Boehm celebrated that My Lai had been “given new life and hope.” Most of the borrowers managed to “pull themselves out of poverty and become self-sustaining.” Their families were “led away from the devastation left by the Vietnam War.”

The metaphor “new life and hope” that describes the renewed state of life that Mỹ Lai and its people enjoy, thanks to what Boehm and his fellow veterans provide, suggests further gendered meaning for Boehm’s projects. To put it differently, Boehm is inadvertently engaged in a gendered process called a “re-birth” of life. Introducing this post-Vietnam War phenomenon, Susan Jeffords argued that a good number of Vietnam veterans, in their fictional writing about the war, tended to use biologically reproductive concepts to reconstruct American heroic salvation, reassert their

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masculinity, and “re-masculinize America” in the process.\footnote{Susan Jeffords, \textit{The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 87–115.} Although Boehm’s projection of Mỹ Lai’s “re-birth” refers to a social and environmental reproduction rather than biological, i.e., the revival of life in a devastated land, his description serves to assert his benevolent male authority over the land and the Mỹ Lai people.

The most frequently publicized success story of Boehm’s “resurrection” effort was about Mrs. Phạm Thị Hường, who lives in Trường Khánh village, Quảng Ngãi province. On April 18, 1969, the notorious 11\textsuperscript{th} Brigade of the Americal Division killed her two children and her aunt among about sixty villagers.\footnote{Mike Boehm, “Projects in Vietnam Sponsored by the Madison Friends (Quakers),” \textit{Winds of Peace}, July/August 2000, 6; About Trường Khánh massacre in 1969, see Citizens Commission of Inquiry, \textit{The Dellums Committee Hearings on War Crimes in Vietnam: An Inquiry into Command Responsibility in Southeast Asia} (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), cited in Noam Chomsky and Anthony Arnove, ed., \textit{The Essential Chomsky} (New York: New Press, 2008), 114n30.} Thirty-one years later, the Madison Friends established their revolving micro-credit fund in Trường Khánh village. The local Women Union recommended that Hường would be among the first beneficiaries of the micro-credit loan fund, and her loan was approved. Hường used the loan to buy a cow and had it artificially inseminated, expecting to be able to produce calves and sell them so that she could repay the loan and gain some modest profit. Shortly after she took the loan, Boehm and his translator, Mr. Phan Văn Đỗ, made a casual checking visit at her house. They took a picture of Hường and her husband standing bare-feet in front of their hovel, looking unhappy and wary. Asking Hường about her life, they learned the distressing story of her two children’s death. Hường broke down in tears, and Boehm felt like she had already died with her children the day she buried them, and that Hường was “walking and talking but dead inside.”
Two years later, Boehm visited Huong again in a regular project reassessment trip and found himself “stunned” by her “resurrection.” Huong now lives in a newly built, brick house with a herd of five cows and three buffalo. Boehm again noticed Huong’s facial expression, but unlike last time, “she was talking and laughing and her eyes were bright and shiny and alive.” Boehm and Đỗ asked the neighbors what had happened to cause such a dramatic change in her. The neighbors told them that Huong had been able to sell calves from her cow and lift the crushing burden of poverty off her back. This helped her to finally “begin to heal.” This “success story” is continually retold and re-published in various media channels as a telling evidence of how the micro-credit loans, provided by Boehm on behalf of the Madison Quakers, are able to make “dramatic change in the lives of women” not only economically but also “spiritually.”

Reasserting that Huong’s story is not “unique” and that, over the years, he has witnessed many similar situations, Boehm further demonstrates the widespread “re-birth” effect of his project.

Manliness is not only asserted by the capacity to reproduce and resurrect life or by acting a parenting role to children but also demonstrated by men’s financial authority in domestic and public spheres. The successful performance of traditionally male roles in financial professions (as supervisor or decision-maker) or at home (as the provider or breadwinner) helps to cast men as manly and consolidate their male authority.

For Boehm, the Loan Fund project that targets women and children is

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particularly rewarding because it helps construct his identity as a “moral man” and internalize his benevolent paternalism among the Mũ Lai community. Indeed, Boehm has become a dear and honorable friend to the local people. Whenever he returns to Vietnam or visits families in the areas of his projects, he is met with welcoming atmosphere all around by cheerful women and excited children who could not have enough hand holding with him to express their appreciation and gratitude. In the local administrative level, Boehm particularly and the Madison Quakers in general have been graciously recognized for their financial support and administrative assistance to help “many women escape hunger and poverty.” Since 1994, Boehm has been made an exceptional and honorary member of Quảng Ngãi Women Union. Being surrounded by grateful women and cheerful children of Vietnam, Boehm is able to reaffirm the success of his projects and the life-changing power of micro-credit programs. Also, his prominent, paternal role as the financial provider for needy women and children conveniently obscures the role of the Vietnamese authority in the picture of “re-birth” in Mũ Lai. This way, unregulated market capitalism and American benevolent paternalism are rendered inevitable and necessary.

The fact that all the Vietnamese beneficiaries of the My Lai Loan Fund are helpless women with or without needy children indicates that a subtle environment for gendered relations of rescue has been re-staged in a way that fits the stereotypical machismo storyline of the Vietnam War—American GIs play the rescuing roles while


children and civilians are the beneficiaries of their generous salvation and protection. While it makes perfect sense that war widows, poor single mothers, or lonely old women who lost their children during the war were given priority in receiving the loans, this arrangement also conveniently reconstructs Boehm’s identity from being a mentally traumatized, socially isolated, and materially deprived veteran to being the life savior of Vietnamese women and their children. Boehm’s experience of working with the persevering and motivated women of Quảng Ngãi province helped him to recreate his energy, rebuild his spiritual balance thanks to the “gift of humanity” it offers, and finally rediscover his own strength. In short, the supervisory authority that Boehm possesses, his new identity as the philanthropist, rescuer, provider, and re-creator of life in Mỹ Lai help sustain his morality and internalize his paternalism.

Furthermore, Boehm’s success and popularity offer him the authority to speak about Vietnam—its radical changes since Vietnam embraced market economy, and inadvertently serve to justify and implement Clinton’s global project of exporting American market capitalism in Vietnam. By celebrating the “life-changing impact” of micro-credit loans on borrowers and publicizing uplifting views about Quảng Ngãi women’s participation in free market economy, Boehm helps to enhance the neoliberal economic concept and make capitalism a charitable and irreversible option of life. Asked to describe the changes in contemporary Vietnam since he first started the projects, Boehm enthusiastically comments on the “unbelievable changes” and

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253 Al Santoli, To Bear Any Burden: The Vietnam War and its Aftermath in the Words of Americans and Southeast Asians (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 105–51; for further narratives of American GIs’ “rescue” efforts given to the Vietnamese children and civilians, as demonstrated in public monuments and memorials in the U.S., see Patrick Hagopian, The Vietnam War in American Memory, 334–47.

supports his observation with evidence that religious freedom has been “greatly improved,” the people have become “outspoken,” and the Vietnamese government “has no control over the economy.” While freedom of religion and speech can be seen as optimistic signs of social transformation, Boehm’s celebratory statement about the unregulated state of Vietnamese economy appears problematic, especially when this reality is situated in the neo-liberal characteristic of micro-credit programs.

Various economists and anthropologists have pointed out that while this micro-credit model deserves ample recognition for its “survival strategy” (which is often described euphemistically as “panacea for poverty” or “revitalization of the community”), it does not necessarily help end poverty nor does it intend to provide a social safety net for the poor should a catastrophic situation arise. By stressing the motivated individuals’ ability to make their own investment decisions and their responsibility to work hard in a free market economy, the micro-credit model endorses the removal of the state-led economy and promotes a market-led society. This economic model tends to approve the elimination of the welfare state and shift the responsibility of poverty from the government policy-makers to the individuals. With all the good intentions that Muhammad Yunus, the creator of the micro-credit model, and his followers envisioned—lifting people from starvation to subsistence, from destitution to a dignified life as a way to counter the insensitivity of the global economy and its profit-driven market ideology—this pro-market development strategy aligns itself in “market principles of discipline, efficiency, and competitiveness.” Its tendency to leave governmental authority out of the socio-economic picture inevitably discourages state institutions to sponsor social welfare programs or provide social services. According to Mark Engler, the economist who

reviews both the pros and cons of the micro-credit model, microcredit for the poor “makes little sense” when it does not address vital needs, such as “health care, job training, and other public services.” In other words, microcredit may only be able to help the more fortunate people and leave the less fortunate ones to market risks without any social safety net to back them up. The effectiveness of micro-credit loans thus remains incomplete.

This incomplete picture is also found in the case of the My Lai Loan Fund. On the one hand, “success stories” are common in Boehm’s recollection, in the newsletters, and on the website of the My Lai Peace Projects. The repayment rate is regularly reported as near perfect, and images of new schools and happy children are frequently depicted. On the other hand, there is almost no reference about efforts to address long-term community and medical services. While it is hard to determine the sustainability and helpfulness of the Madison Quakers’ Loan Fund, immediate positive results are overwhelming and placed in prominent view, which suggest that unregulated capitalism is appreciated as the necessary way to restore “hope and life” for the people. The projects’ success, as indicated in the increased level of prosperity thanks to the provision of loans and its promotion of free, small-sized enterprises, is made apparent and co-related to optimistic evidence of political freedom. The absence of an overall socio-economic assessment of Mỹ Lai’s welfare conditions may either reflect Boehm’s perception about a genuine alleviation of problems thanks to his projects or his deliberate choice to look at the local community from the bright side. However, as late as 2003, Quảng Ngãi province was still among

the few provinces in Vietnam with the highest number of villages classified as “poor” both in terms of income and in the availability of educational and medical facilities.\textsuperscript{257} State-subsidized welfare programs are still much needed in the area.

In short, the My Lai Loan Fund helps raise the living standard for a good number of families in the villages and makes free market capitalism charitable and necessary but fails to address its risks and imperfect implementation. In the process of revitalizing M\check{y} Lai, Boehm manages to recreate his own life and restore his moral manliness while helping to promote a market-led economy in Vietnam. No longer the damned and outcast Vietnam veteran, Boehm transforms into an appreciated philanthropist and honored man. Primarily motivated by the ideal vision that his project would help to “heal both the physical wounds of Vietnam and the emotional wounds of the Americans who fought there,” Boehm recognizes the Vietnamese people as the victims while at the same time perpetuates the images of victimized Americans and teeters on the rhetoric of “mutual destruction.”\textsuperscript{258} Also, Boehm’s choice to embrace micro-credit loan programs as the solution for poor people in various victim villages in Quang Ngai province effectively puts him in the approving position of neo-liberal capitalism. His effort to reconstruct M\check{y} Lai and rewrite its public memory reveals its imperfect side when he is more concerned about making a privatized response to the victims of My Lai massacre with “human and economic ties” than taking issue with the ideological ambiguity of his Quakers’ sponsors and promoting a state-led socio-economic program in the area. Boehm’s defiance against the U.S. militarism and its postwar policy in Vietnam fell short when he ended up

\textsuperscript{257} Lê Quốc Quân, \textit{Participatory Poverty and Governance Assessment}, 14–25.

making market capitalism as a benevolent policy. The Clinton administration’s neo-
liberal agenda in Vietnam was both justified and enhanced.

From the beginning, Boehm’s humanitarian impulse to vocalize his dispute
with the U.S. government’s postwar policy in Vietnam and help improve the
livelihood of the people of Mỹ Lai went side by side with a personal desire to “heal
the emotional wounds” for himself as well as his fellow veterans. Over the years,
these initial inspirations have developed into a large-scale reconstruction project of
public memory. While the Loan Fund program sought to transform the economic
environment and eliminate poverty in Mỹ Lai, the Madison Quakers’ reconstruction
of Mỹ Lai’s memorial landscape and other commemoration activities added further
meanings in the public memory of the My Lai massacre. The Madison Quakers and
Boehm’s intervention in Mỹ Lai’s memorial landscape forces us to revisit Robert
McMahon’s assertion about efforts to (re)-construct memories that aim to meet
present needs of the individuals and societies involved.259 This evokes several
questions. First, what exactly are the “present needs” between the people of Mỹ Lai
and America? Secondly, are those needs different or shared, and how are their
possible differences negotiated? Finally, how do Boehm and the Madison Quakers
address these needs through their projects in Quảng Ngãi? The following section that
examines the construction of My Lai Peace Park will analyze related events and their
impact to answer these questions.

4. My Lai Peace Park (MLPP)

Phan Văn Dỗ, a teacher of English in Quảng Ngãi province who serves as a
project coordinator and translator for the Madison Quakers’ projects in Vietnam, and

Diplomatic History 26, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 164–70.
Nguyễn Thị Hạnh, the chairwoman of the Women’s Union in Quảng Ngãi Province, had never heard about the concept of a “peace park” before Boehm talked to them about it in a summer afternoon of 1995. At the time, Boehm was conducting the first field survey trip to assess the result of the first $3,000 microcredit batch. While they were reviewing Mỹ Lai borrowers’ profiles, Boehm revealed to them that he was going to meet several Vietnamese and American veterans to discuss the plan to build a park called “Vietnamese-American Peace Park” on the top of a hill in Bắc Giang province near Hanoi. This peace park, Boehm told them, would be modeled after the peace-promoting shape of Dove Mound, the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial in Madison. Đỗ and Hạnh were stunned. They had only known about war memorials or monument to commemorate war heroes. They never thought people could also build monuments to celebrate peace. Boehm explained to them that such a monument would have no statues, no artillery pieces, just trees, flowers, shrubs, fish ponds, and a green environment dedicated to observe and honor peace. Đỗ and Hạnh remained thoughtful for a while then asked if Boehm and the Madison Quakers could help them build a peace park for Mỹ Lai. 260

The idea of constructing a peace park or peace memorial, according to Lisa Yoneyama, signifies “post-war recovery—what was positive, future-oriented, and not bound by ‘bitter memories’ of the past.” 261 A peace park necessarily possesses the function to eliminate traces of war, death, biological destruction, and replace those with signs of life and recreation. While the idea is noble and often mutually pursued, both by the former victims and the victimizers, peace park projects offer the chance

for history to be rewritten, atrocities to be forgotten or even erased, and justifiable compensations for the victims become less than necessary. This is where the inherent contradiction of MLPP can be seen. Begun with a privatized effort to compensate for the former victims of the Mỹ Lai massacre as a defiant act against the U.S.’s postwar policy toward Vietnam, the projects end up releasing the American government from compensatory responsibility and de-emphasizing the need to make formal reparations for the people of Mỹ Lai. In the process of reconstructing public memory, projected images of “recovery” and “forgiveness” are often used to relieve the U.S. from moral and financial burdens.

Peace parks built by Vietnamese and American veterans in Vietnam provide former adversaries from the two countries a needed symbolic public space where they can make peace with each other and construct the necessary diplomatic and harmonious environment for further cooperation. This is also the significant backdrop for the U.S.-Vietnam normalization process in the mid-1990’s. Pro-normalization civilians, veterans, and politicians from both countries used to join in the shared task of building peace parks, friendship forests, peace villages, or peace monuments as a way to address “the legacy of war” in Vietnam. Working side by side with the Vietnamese people and getting to know them, American organizers and participants made the normalization concept become a necessary and natural process to reinforce mutual relationships.

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262 About the Vietnamese people’s desire to honor peace and their support for the construction of My Lai Peace Park, see Mike Boehm’s “A Peace Park for My Lai,” *Winds of Peace*, no. 2 (January 2000): 8–9.

Embracing the peace park concept as a symbol of reconciliation and a departure from hostility, Boehm and the Madison Quakers invited Vietnamese and American veterans, including the then U.S. Ambassador Pete Peterson, to participate in a tree-planting event and the opening ceremony of Bác Giang Peace Park (a.k.a. Vietnamese-American Peace Park). Since its opening, local Vietnamese people have helped to maintain the park, its orchards, and received American visitors. Referring to this first peace park, Nguyễn Ngọc Hùng, the Vietnamese veteran who had become a close friend with Muller and Boehm, commented on its symbolism as “very powerful for the local vets and the American vets.”

David Giffey, the Vietnam veteran who designed the peace park in Madison, found the idea of building a peace park in Vietnam “extraordinarily moving” because it could help “put bad memories to rest.” Asked about the prospect of a similar peace park in Mỹ Lai, Hùng supported it, explaining: “It doesn’t mean to say we should forget about the deaths, but it is to say that it should be a part of the past.” John Hosier, a Vietnam veteran who contributed to the peace park project, was hopeful: “This new peace park will bring full closure for me and bring healing to my brother veterans who are still hurting. I want them to know the peace I have found.” The need to create a sense of closure to the past conflict was mutual, shared among all the concerned Vietnamese and the American veterans.

These veterans’ statements about the goal and structure of MLPP apparently demonstrate the wish of both sides involved to reconstruct Mỹ Lai’s memory for their

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own spiritual healing. While not calling people to forget the devastating events that took place there, Boehm and his Vietnamese partners felt the need to re-image the place to be a symbol of constructive peace and hope for the future. Public memory of the war is negotiated in ways that help reduce physical and emotional evidence of wartime destruction by placing the tangible remnants in the background and moving uplifting images of lush greenery and peaceful partnership to the foreground. In other words, while the unpleasant memory was not erased, it is offset and made less visible by new messages of peace, recovery, prosperity, and forgiveness.266

Although both the Vietnamese and the American veterans involved in these peace projects wish to put the “bad memories of the past to rest” with a physical symbol of peace, American veterans may have expected something more than that. Being a part of the party that committed dehumanizing acts on a foreign land, against foreign people, they are more likely to be the one who wish to remove that negative, stereotypical image from the public memory. To do so, American veterans often choose to participate in constructive, reconciliatory activities that can recast their images as the decent citizens of a virtuous, generous nation. To put it differently, many returnee Vietnam veterans attempted to join a project in Vietnam where they can be re-humanized, their victimization can be empathized, and their humanity is appreciated. Boehm’s projects offer them precisely the venue to achieve these goals. In the conceptualization and construction process of MLPP, Boehm is directly involved in the re-imagination of the American soldiers and helps to repair the

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damaged image of the U.S. Army in Vietnamese imagination. Not only did he manage to portray a more humane face for his fellow veterans, Boehm also promoted American soldierly integrity and heroism. These are accomplished through Boehm’s efforts to publicize the heroic acts of Thompson and Colburn, the two pilots who rescued Mỹ Lai civilians, in the Madison Quakers’ newsletters and other publicity channels.

Boehm’s commitment to the construction of MLPP primarily came from his wishful vision to recreate Mỹ Lai to also be a peaceful place for future hope to arise than simply a sober reminder of loss and destruction. The existing Mỹ Lai Massacre Memorial in the village seems to trouble him. Constructed with a group of grey stone statues, this Memorial is structured in what Boehm termed as “the stiff Stalinist style” with one statue depicting a woman with her fist upraised and her other arm holding a dead baby. Several other statues are placed at her feet, either lying dead or wounded, including the figure of a senior man. Adjacent to the memorial is Mỹ Lai museum, which houses the photos of the massacre, household utensils, names of the dead, and the daily items that belonged to them. The Mỹ Lai victims’ life before their death is reconstructed and they are imagined as innocent civilians, which further condemns the inhumanity of the Mỹ Lai perpetrators. The exhibition is a reminder to people about what happened in Mỹ Lai on March 16, 1968, and the frequent use of the phrase “quân đội Mỹ” (U.S. Army) in references to the Mỹ Lai perpetrators serves as a polemical denunciative statement against the U.S. Army in general.267 Walking away from the memorial, Boehm observed, one is easily “filled with fear, pain, sorrow, and animosity against those who had committed the crime,” and feeling “no

267 Cao Chu, Nhìn Về Sơn Mỹ [A Vision of Son My], tourist brochure (Quảng Ngãi Historical Museum, 2005).
Therefore, his determination to change the memorial practice and landscape of Mỹ Lai first reflects his distaste for the “Stalinist” way of provoking fear and hatred, as the existing war monument represents. Secondly, the vision of a peace memorial in Mỹ Lai demonstrates his desire to replace unpleasant memories and guilt about the massacre with a new meaning that transcends peace and hope.

It took several years for the MLPP plan to materialize. The application for a land grant and construction permission required a long bureaucratic procedure. The Madison Quakers and the Vietnamese administrators also spent an extended period of time working on a memorandum about the goals of the project, the supervision of its construction, and future maintenance of the park. In the meantime, Boehm was actively engaged in its promotion and fundraising. It was during this planning period that concrete ideas for the peace park were established and fully visualized.

According to the Memorandum of Understanding signed between Mr. Lê Phượng Tuấn, Vice-Chair of the Sơn Tịnh district, Quảng Ngãi province and Mike Boehm, representative of the Madison Quakers, the peace park will be built on an open yard with fish ponds, trees, plants, and flowers and pathways among them. The goal is to make it become a symbol of “peace and life.” Also, a gazebo constructed in “Vietnamese architectural style” will be built in the middle of the park to represent “friendship and reconciliation between the people of the United States and the people of Vietnam.” As the agreement states:

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My Lai Peace Park is to provide a place for children to entertain and a place where people can meditate over the past with its suffering and losses and also to hope for a better future.  

Discussing the project with The Capital Times reporter in Madison, Wisconsin, Boehm was more specific about the goal of the peace park:

When people think of My Lai, they think of piles of bodies. I’m trying to break people away from that image. One of the reasons we haven’t dealt with these painful memories is because we feel overwhelmed by them. It’s too much for us.

Together with the My Lai Loan Fund program, MLPP project greatly changed the economic and environmental picture of Mỹ Lai with newly constructed memory of the war. First, it helps obscure the past tragic images from the people’s mind and replace that memory with positive, green-covered, uplifting visions of the villages. These physical images are aided by evidence of moderate affluence and a sense of optimism among the local Vietnamese, particularly those who benefited from the Loan Fund. In the midst of this new public memory, Boehm constructs his newly registered image—a Vietnam veteran playing a violin to dedicate to the dead and to celebrate peace on earth. The documentary The Sound of the Violin in My Lai particularly documents Boehm and his projects, with almost half of the film showing him walking along shadowed paths of the peaceful village and talking about his life, the philosophical and emotional awakening that he went through, from being an uninformed soldier to being an enlightened philanthropist. Here and there, Boehm is seen around happy children and smiling villagers. Joining him are other Vietnam veterans who contributed to the projects and participated in commemoration.

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The evidence of peace and harmony in Mỹ Lai today, brought about by benevolent and conscientious Vietnam veterans, is unmistakable.

Yet, the perspectives and objectives of the Vietnamese and the American people about the My Lai massacre remain in conflict. This is best exposed during the annual memorial day of the massacre, March 16. Since 1998, the thirtieth anniversary, this commemoration day has become a widely publicized event that attracts hundreds of visitors, including media representatives, international pacifists, tourists, and civilians from Vietnam, the U.S., and other countries. While great gathering events like these allow the new public memory to be appreciated and authenticated, they also provide the setting for ideological differences to arise, as demonstrated by the diplomatic and media tensions in the two countries about the meaning of the My Lai massacre.

In media coverage, American television reporters tend to disassociate themselves from the Madison Quakers projects while the Vietnamese mass media deliberately pursue the opposite direction. Also, the Vietnamese government officials persistently attend the commemoration every year, and the event is often given widespread publicity in Vietnamese mainstream media. In contrast, there has never been any U.S. government official attending the event. Over the years, various American TV show hosts have come and interviewed Boehm, but once their reports are broadcast in American media, all the information about the My Lai Peace Projects is “edited out.” Interviews with Thompson and Colburn, reports about their emotional reunion with the rescued, and images of the grateful villagers are always projected. In other words, footage that shows Thompson and Colburn’s heroism and benevolence is

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made evident and appreciated while Boehm’s acts of reparation and atonement are muted. 272

The opposite position of Vietnamese and American government officials and their respective media coverage of Boehm’s projects are telling evidence of how the Vietnam War memories, particularly regarding the question of American responsibility toward the My Lai massacre, continue to be a contested arena between the two countries. On the one hand, American mass media was apparently not yet ready to address the My Lai massacre as a national collective guilt, nor did it feel appropriate to recognize those Americans who accept the financial responsibility for this atrocity. Also, they tend to be more interested in projecting American heroism and soldierly integrity with the publicity of Thompson and Colburn than making any reference about the perpetrators that Thompson and Colburn defied, or the American effort to compensate for the victims. The broadcasting policy that a majority of American television networks pursued toward Mỹ Lai also fit with the U.S. government’s policy that offers neither reparations nor apology. Any American

project that seeks to express repentance or offer material reparations to the Mỹ Lai victims is to be kept strictly privatized and voluntary. The paradox of this policy is that even though it refuses to recognize and support Boehm and his projects, it effectively enhances Boehm’s image as the benevolent altruist who is practicing the American ideals of political and ideological freedom. This is not necessarily a lost cause for Boehm and the Madison Quakers.

On the other hand, the Vietnamese media’s embrace of the event and its generous compliment to Boehm’s projects demonstrate the Vietnamese people’s endorsement and appreciation of the My Lai Peace Projects. The generous publicity of Boehm’s projects in Vietnam further asserts the Vietnamese point of view that the My Lai massacre is an “American crime” that should be addressed and compensated by America. While the Vietnamese people are aware that Boehm and the Madison Quakers are not the representatives of the U.S. government, they prefer to make the political choice to officially recognize and publicize the My Lai Peace Projects as part of America’s reparatory efforts. The Vietnamese demand for compensation and apology thus became justifiable and righteous. Even though Boehm and his American partners do not necessarily refute the justice of reparations for Vietnamese victims, their philanthropy and benevolence may be downsized if viewed from the perspective of the Vietnamese people. In other words, the Vietnamese way of viewing My Lai massacre as an “American crime,” which subjects America to certain “financial culpability,” may make Boehm’s projects less a voluntary or benevolent act, but more like an expected obligation. In this case, Boehm’s “generosity and beneficence” may be slightly de-valued. The Vietnamese people may remain grateful and courteous but interpret Boehm’s projects as something that the Mỹ Lai people naturally and legitimately deserve to have, considering the absence of the U.S.’s government’s
compensation. This potential clash of perspectives suggests that Boehm’s goodwill and sincere efforts to construct harmony may lack its sustainability while creating further complexity. In short, Vietnamese people and the media’s enthusiastic welcome of Boehm’s projects could either signal their acceptance of Boehm’s benevolent paternalism or reflect the way they view his role as an unofficial repayment agent working on behalf of the U.S. government and American people.

While Boehm and the Madison Quakers may critique the U.S. government’s postwar policy toward the My Lai massacre and object to the way most American television networks treat their projects, they do not necessarily wish to challenge American mainstream position toward the massacre and those Americans who were involved in it. This is first demonstrated by Boehm’s effort to include Thompson and Colburn in the new public memory of My Lai massacre in Vietnam. In the website and newsletters of the Madison Friends’ projects, Thompson and Colburn are always given generous coverage and compliment. Their heroism is made permanently evident in Vietnam. Furthermore, during the project’s maturation process, Boehm’s philosophical position regarding the My Lai massacre is gradually mainstreamed toward the compromising interpretation of the massacre, i.e., the third position that seeks to explain American atrocities with arguments about “the human nature.” His rethinking about the “human’s capacity to be evil” serves to give pardon to all the American soldiers who committed atrocities in Vietnam and, as Oliver put it, releases American public conscience of the burdensome guilt that Mỹ Lai invoked.  

To put it differently, Boehm’s relationship with Thompson, Colburn, and his shifted perspective toward the Mỹ Lai perpetrators help to enhance the Madison Quakers’

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publicity, re-humanize the images of American soldiers, and reinforces the notion that
the U.S. Army is, after all, a dignified institution.

Ten days before the thirtieth anniversary of the My Lai massacre, the Madison
Quakers and Boehm were greeted with great news from fellow Vietnam veterans
about their “most unlikely ally”—the U.S. Army. Thirty years after the event, after
much debate and delay, Thompson, Colburn, and Andreotta (posthumously) were
finally recognized for the moral courage they displayed on the day of the My Lai
massacre. The U.S. Army agreed to award them the medals as early as 1996.
However, for a long time, the Army insisted on keeping the award reception a private
ceremony so as not to evoke negative messages of the atrocities in public. Thompson
and Colburn disagreed with this evasive approach. For two years, they remained firm
about their request to have the ceremony held at the Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial.
This caused a prolonged standoff, and even the Congress had to be involved. In
March, 1998, just days before the anniversary, the Army finally stepped down. In a
formal ceremony at the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C., on March 6,
1998, Army Maj. Gen. Michael Ackerman solemnly presented them with the “long-
overdue Soldier’s Medal” and personally pinned it on their chests. Shortly after the
ceremony in Washington, D.C., Thompson and Colburn joined Boehm in Mỹ Lai to
inform the great news to the villagers of Mỹ Lai. In an effort to prove that the U.S.
Army did produce some “decent soldiers” and that “not everyone went crazy that
day,” Thompson and Colburn presented the Mỹ Lai Massacre Museum with framed
copies of their Soldier’s Medals. A year later, at Thompson’s authorization, Boehm
handed three autographed copies of Trent Angers’ 1999 book The Forgotten Hero of

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Howard, “Saviors in ’68 at My Lai, 3 Get Medals; GIs in Copter Rescued Some from Massacre,”
Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, March 07, 1998, A1; Lou Waters and Bruce Morton, “My Lai Medal
My Lai: The Hugh Thompson Story to two Mý Lai women that Thompson’s crew rescued. The third one was presented to the director of the Museum.275

The act of leaving artifacts or adding items such as statues, books, flags, or medals at a war memorial space indicates an individual’s attempt to bring his or her own narratives of the war to the public and perpetuate them in the public memory. Those who perform this act actually assert their political agency in the history and their rights to participate in the construction of historical memory.276 Thompson and Colburn’s dedication of the medals and Boehm’s dedication of the books help to add a new version of historical memory to the My Lai massacre event in which American soldiers are re-imaged as humane, dignified, and brave men. Also, the presence of the medals informed Mý Lai villagers and visitors that the massacre is neither the U.S. Army’s policy or tolerated by the U.S. government. The U.S. government is therefore not obliged to apologize for the massacre or compensate for it.

The fact that these tangible artifacts will be displayed in a public museum (in the case of the medals and the book for the museum director) or likely given a respectful, easily visible location in the residences of the two women suggest that these new narratives of historical memory will be perpetuated and communicated to a large audience—the villagers of Mý Lai, Vietnamese visitors to Mý Lai, and foreign as well as American visitors. In addition to the Madison Quakers projects that help to


rebuild the economic and environmental landscape of Mý Lai, this supplementation of physical evidence will further assist the reconstruction of Mý Lai public memory. Visitors to the villages and the museum no longer only see horrific remnants and reminders of the massacre. They now can also learn about the American heroes who had tried to prevent it, the conscientious American veterans who try to repair past damages, and about the U.S. Army’s integrity and nobility. Apparently, Boehm plays an important role in this memory reconstruction process.

Interestingly, Boehm and his effort to acknowledge Thompson and Colburn’s noble acts in Mý Lai’s memorial space do not automatically recast the Mý Lai perpetrators as ignoble. In fact, a good part of Boehm’s reconciliatory effort is helping to forge an acceptable, humane image for all American soldiers. As Boehm became further engaged in the projects, he discovered that the re-making of Mý Lai’s public memory and a positive re-imaging of American soldiers are important parts of his own “healing.” While envisioning the park’s construction and its concepts, Boehm experienced a new awakening that really healed him and enabled him to make peace with those American soldiers who committed crimes during the Vietnam War.

Talking to the Wisconsin State Journal reporter and Trần Văn Thủy, the director of the documentary The Sound of Violin in My Lai, Boehm attributed his healing to the realization that “as human, we are all capable of evil.” Once he was able to accept this fact, Boehm admitted, he could “overcome the anger” he felt at those who perpetrated the war. To elaborate on the path of his re-awakening, Boehm revealed how he used to loathe the Mý Lai murderers and try hard to “disassociate” himself from them altogether, but changed his mind over the years. It is Boehm’s wholehearted engagement in the projects that allowed a new reality to gradually sink in his mind:

I finally learned that we are all capable of evil. Those soldiers at My Lai were 18- and 19-year-old kids. But they were involved in this evil. And, if they
were capable, then it could have been me—it could have been you. The healing response, then, is to try to help one another, to build understanding through compassion and generosity.\textsuperscript{277}

Learning that everyone is capable of evil, Boehm could only be grateful that he had not been there in My Lai on that shameful day:

Mike Boehm: It could have been me. You know, because every human being is capable of evil. And I just thank God I wasn’t there, because I would hope I would have done the right thing, like Hugh Thompson, but don’t know.\textsuperscript{278}

While Boehm may not intend to lift the “murderer’s guilt” off the My Lai perpetrators’ shoulders, his humble position suggests that he would refrain from being a moral preacher condemning the atrocious act. Furthermore, by admitting that even he himself may have done the same thing, Boehm effectively uses the logic of “human nature” to explain the perpetrators’ murderous actions so as to lessen their inhumanity. By calling them “kids,” Boehm offers them further defense and asserts that American soldiers in Vietnam were, in fact, innocent but inexperienced human beings who were capable of acting in humane as well as evil ways. The fact that they allowed the evil part in them prevail at that moment was thus viewed only as something unfortunate beyond their control. Boehm’s tendency to resort to “human nature” to explain American soldiers’ atrocious acts helps to re-humanize them and recast them as worthy of being forgiven. This explanatory logic serves to release America of collective guilt. The implication of Boehm’s rethinking is that neither American individuals nor America itself should be blamed for the My Lai massacre even though Boehm himself may not have endorsed this position. Once the American collective guilt and individual responsibility toward the My Lai massacre are released, Boehm’s “humanitarian” projects become entirely selfless and benevolent, and the

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U.S. government is free of any moral or financial responsibility as well. Any “assistance” that the U.S. government provides Vietnam could be interpreted as American “goodwill” or reciprocal gesture to Vietnam’s “cooperation.”

The agency of Vietnamese residents in the area in particular and the Vietnamese people in general is not to be neglected. A majority of them actually welcome the projects and the constructive results. The physical return and the positive contribution of American soldiers in the projects are viewed as evidence of American repentance and their willingness to admit the atrocity, which is comforting to the villagers. Not only did the Vietnamese locals personally participate in the reconstruction of peaceful landscape in Mỹ Lai and express their desire to escape from the haunted past, they also viewed the change as a reflection of reality—their current life, society, and the desirable future vision.\(^{279}\) This strengthens Boehm’s legitimate ground and partially obscures his authority. During the photo exhibition at the Michelangelo’s Coffeehouse in spring 2001, Boehm explained the situations in the photos to his audience, saying: “The Vietnamese are really focused on reconciliation. It’s more than policy; it’s what the people really want.”\(^{280}\) By asserting that the re-presentation of My Lai’s public memory as something “the people really want,” Boehm’s authority in the projects is downsized, and the new memory of Mỹ


Lai that he himself had greatly contributed to appears natural, internalized, and grass-rooted. People may have the impression that Boehm has in fact responded to what the Vietnamese people want rather than being a proactive implementer of the projects. The Vietnamese people become the co-authors of the new public memory of Mỹ Lai. Boehm’s political agency is thus justified, but obscured at the same time. In a nutshell, Boehm’s beneficence remains while his paternal authority is upheld, thanks to the multi-task position that he undertakes as the supervisor, advisor, and loan distributor of the projects.

5. Conclusion

This chapter explains how the reconciliation among different parties can be reached through the reconstruction of a shared public memory. A close examination of the My Lai Peace Projects reveals the complicated and diverse meanings of reconciliation. While the Vietnamese people and their government wish to reconcile with the United States, their primary desire is to remove unpleasant memories of war to the back of their mind, so that they can move forward to construct friendship and partnership with the Americans. In this regard, the Vietnamese people’s vision of “reconciliation” is slightly different from what Boehm and his fellow Americans envisioned and accomplished.

For the Americans and Boehm, reconciliation is a more complex process. The Vietnam War was a divisive war in American public memory that left deep-seated conflicts among Americans, the left-wing and right-wing antiwar activists, i.e., those who were against the war for moral, legal, and pragmatic reasons, the pro-war and
anti-war U.S. veterans, the government and the U.S. Army.\textsuperscript{281} To compromise and reconcile these conflicting perspectives is not easy. Taking charge of the My Lai Peace Projects, Boehm is posed with challenging tasks to accommodate different positions and compromise them. It seems he has managed to do so. Not only did he manage to construct peace and harmony between the Vietnamese locals and the Americans, Boehm has been able to create a common ground in the name of “peace and hope” for different groups of Americans, many of whom used to alienate each other in one way or another due to the war. His rethinking that attributes American war crimes to the unfortunate consequence of any human’s evil nature helps release all Americans and the U.S. government from the burdensome guilt. The individuals need not accuse the Army and vice versa. The public and the Congress are also no longer right to condemn the government or the specific soldiers. This is precisely how “reconciliation” is reached among Americans, thanks to Boehm’s reinterpretation of the Mý Lai incident and his reconstruction of Mý Lai memorial landscape.

Despite his defiant position against the U.S. policy in Vietnam, during the maturation process of his projects, Boehm inevitably retreated to the U.S. mainstream path and reinforced the U.S.’s policy in Vietnam. Boehm’s contribution in the reconstruction of Mý Lai’s public memory enables everyone to walk away from the peace park or the village feeling good about the projects and their respective society—the Vietnamese people become better off with the newly constructed friendship with the U.S. and benefit from American benevolent capitalism, while America resumes its reputation as a virtuous nation with conscientious people. The American veterans, in particular, are re-humanized and re-dignified.

\textsuperscript{281} For a brief historiography of a divisive America and the various conflicting positions toward the Vietnam War, among pro-war and anti-war groups, the merits and inherent flaws in their rhetoric, see Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, \textit{Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media} (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002), 169–252.
However, Boehm’s effort to reconstruct Mỹ Lai and negotiate the Mỹ Lai massacre memory is accomplished at a cost for the Vietnamese people. By supporting the Quảng Ngãi Women Union’s proposal to develop micro-credit and using it as the instrument to reconstruct life and public memory in Mỹ Lai, Boehm naturalizes the infiltration of neo-liberal capitalism into Vietnam and fully endorses the removal of state regulation without really addressing the long-term public welfare services for the people. In the process, he gives this economic model a charitable and indigenous name, thus serving to justify and materialize the Clinton Doctrines of market fundamentalism. Also, Boehm’s attempt to rationalize the inhuman acts of the Mỹ Lai perpetrators and reassert the nobility of the U.S. Army did not come without a detrimental result. In effect, this permanently deprives the Vietnamese people of their legitimate claims for the U.S. government’s formal reparations and apology.

Social memory is constructed and contested not only in oral and written historical narratives but also in a myriad of creative cultural expressions. This is not a unique phenomenon of non-Western societies, but, as the anthropologist Natzmer asserts, it is “a primary arena for the struggle over memory in all societies.”282 This chapter further argues for the complex and often unintended effects of war memory reconstruction. Amidst all good intentions, and despite all the positive achievements, the remembrance of My Lai massacre memory in Vietnamese and American societies remains a contested area in U.S.-Vietnam relations. On the one hand, Boehm’s contribution to the socio-economic improvement of Mỹ Lai and the re-presentation of Mỹ Lai massacre museum serve to repair the damaged images of the U.S. Army and forge further goodwill between the two peoples. On the other hand, his tendency to

282 Cheryl Natzmer, “Remembering and Forgetting: Creative Expression and Reconciliation in Post-Pinochet Chile,” in Social Memory and History: Anthropological Perspectives, ed. Jacob J. Climo and Maria G. Cattell (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2003), 161–79.
resign to the “human nature” when making sense of the massacre justifies the public reaction after Calley’s trial rather than to challenge it. In his sincere effort to “correct” the massacre, Boehm both identifies himself with the mainstream American view about the event and distances himself from it with his privatized compensation project. To put it differently, Boehm’s opposition against the U.S. government’s policy, which motivated him in the first place, fell short when he ended up negotiating with himself and his fellow Americans, and finally endorsed the U.S.’s postwar policy in Vietnam. In conclusion, Boehm’s philosophical reasoning and his authority in the My Lai Peace Projects not only re-assert American moral manhood and redeem America, but also help to rationalize the implementation of the U.S.’s neoliberal agenda in Vietnam. The room for future clash of perspectives over the My Lai massacre remains open.
CHAPTER 4

PETE PETERSON: HEALING AMERICA, MARKETING VIETNAM

I’m acutely aware that America’s relationship with Vietnam is a special one. Our nation’s psychological wounds resulting from the early conflict there remain. But a healing process is underway. I hope that if confirmed and subsequently posted to Hanoi as ambassador, I can play a critical and constructive role in helping our nation mend further. I’m also aware that Vietnam today is significantly different from the country we engaged in combat some 20 years ago. Vietnam’s population today is about 75 million compared to about 49 million during the war years. With roughly 60 percent of that population under the age of 25, given just that one statistic, one immediately recognizes a country undergoing major transition and one with enormous potential.

In the late morning of September 11, 1997, U.S. ambassador Pete Peterson stepped down from a Toyota Land Cruiser flying an American flag and walked into the village of An Đoài, a rice-farming village about 30 miles north of Hanoi, where he had been captured thirty-one years earlier. Surrounded by U.S. security guards and welcomed by the villagers, Peterson’s new important status was a great contrast against what the villagers could recall about his captivity. On that fateful night of September 10, 1966, two local militiamen of An Đoài—Nguyễn Danh Sinh and Nguyễn Việt Chợp—captured Peterson after his plane crashed in flames. Thirty years later, all Chợp and Sinh could remember about Peterson—their biggest military achievement, was that the “American Yankee” they captured was wounded, thirsty, and harassed by angry villagers. After the military authority came and took him away for interrogation, Chợp and Sinh never heard about him, did not know his name or

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whether he was dead or alive. Peterson’s revisit offered them the answers for their wondering and the chance to reset their memory of the POW they captured.284

Scholars specializing in men’s studies have argued that manhood is a socially constructed and changeable condition, depending on the social, economic, or political situations that men face. Manliness is often challenged when men are dominated, humiliated, materially deprived, or subject to outside violence. Therefore, one’s attempt to resist his dominators, to remove or escape vulnerable situations is also seen as the effort to uphold and revive his manhood.285 Peterson’s physical reappearance in the village effectively changed An Đoài villagers’ memory about him. By giving the local people the opportunity to meet him again, he was able to demonstrate his manly capacity to prevail over domination, to survive imprisonment, and to achieve high social status.286 In other words, Peterson’s return helped to erase his vulnerability and humiliation as a captive, and at the same time, to reassert his manliness with the new economic and political authority that he possessed.

In addition to the personal effort to reshape public memory of his wartime experience, Peterson’s return to the village sent a strong diplomatic message of reconciliation between former adversaries. Once in the village, he cheerfully offered handshakes to local administrators, visited Chợp and Sinh in their homes before

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284 Kristin Huckshorn, “One Man’s Vietnam Welcomes Him Back, Villagers Recount their Capture of Pilot Now Due to be U.S. Envoy,” San Jose Mercury News, April 1, 1996, 1A.
285 Michael S. Kimmel, Manhood in America: A Cultural History (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 9–10; Michael J. Allen, Until the Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs, and the Unending Vietnam War (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); about the use of POW/MIA rhetoric to construct a narrative of American loss and victimization, see pages 16–29; about the use of POW captivity narratives and their homecoming as a tool to reconstruct their heroic survival, patriotic martyrdom, manliness, and triumph over the Vietnamese interrogators or prison guards, see pages 76–83.

286 About Peterson’s personal recollection of his efforts to survive torture and hunger in Hanoi prison, the way he manipulated the Vietnamese interrogators and learned to read Vietnamese officials’ inner thoughts, and his return with the U.S. congressional delegation to investigate the POW/MIA issues, during which he met and interrogated his former camp commanders, see David Olinger’s “War Stirs Memories for ex-POW,” St. Petersburg Times, February 3, 1991, 1D; Fred Mogul’s “True Grit Douglas ‘Pete’ Peterson,” Omaha World Herald, July 21, 1996, 1E.
heading through the village toward his former crash site. Speaking to the local officials, Peterson expressed his hope to return in a “constructive role instead of being destructive,” adding that he held “no bitterness” and had “moved beyond being haunted by his years in prison” to forget the “brutal treatment that he and other POWs were subject to.” Impressed by Peterson’s effort to confront his painful past, David Lamb, the Los Angeles Times reporter called his return “another symbol of reconciliation between the former warring nations” and metaphorically described Peterson as a “walking billboard for Vietnamese-American friendship.”

The metaphorical images about Peterson’s determination to forget the “haunted” POW experience to enable his constructive role and Lamb’s description of Peterson’s reconciliatory act like a “walking billboard” (an effective marketing tool) are worth further thinking. What exactly are Peterson’s diplomatic achievements? How did he achieve them? Being a “billboard” that “sells” Vietnamese-American friendship, what did Peterson gain in return for himself and the two countries? As expressed in his Congressional testimony prior to his appointment as an ambassador, Peterson was committed to building a constructive relationship to further heal America’s “psychological wounds.” Peterson’s statement clearly presumes that America was a victimized country and a diplomatic relationship between Vietnam and America would be a mending tool for America.

In order to convince the Congress to approve diplomatic relations with Vietnam, Peterson was literally engaged in a “marketing campaign” for Vietnam. One of his strategies was the description of Vietnam as a “young” country “in transition” with an “enormous potential” to transform. More importantly, most of its population

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287 Scenes from Peterson’s visit to An Đào can be viewed in Pete Peterson: Assignment Hanoi, directed and produced by Sandy Northrop, Winds and Stars Production, 1999; also, see David Lamb, “U.S. Envoy Returns to Scene of Capture,” Los Angeles Times, September 11, 1997, A9.
was “under 25,” i.e., too young to experience or remember the war, thus holding little hostility against America. “Reconciliation” between the two nations and “healing” America with a constructive relationship therefore necessarily involve American victimization and a re-imagination of Vietnam as an immature, growing, and changeable state. This way, American re-involved is unthreatened, with a great likelihood to become the paternal supporter and legitimate guide of Vietnam.  

The assertion that the Vietnamese today are “significantly different” from what America knew twenty years earlier further assured the U.S. Congress and American public that wartime hostility is mostly gone, and so is the older Vietnamese generation who fought against America. By removing them from the lobbying language and highlighting the young Vietnamese people of his children’s age as the country image, Peterson envisioned America’s paternal role in the transformation of Vietnam. Representing America in the new responsibilities as the supporter and the leader of a “young and transforming” Vietnam, Peterson’s paternal authority is further asserted and presented as a benevolent mission.

This chapter assesses Peterson’s diplomatic achievements during his ambassadorial assignment in Vietnam and examines how he achieved them. Peterson’s congressional testimonies before and during his ambassadorship, in addition to media representations, including newspapers, documentary, radio interviews, illustrate a diplomatic approach that he typically adopted—combining the healing of America with the marketing of Vietnam. In other words, America’s lost war in Vietnam was best redeemed with the transformation of Vietnam to be the

economic and political protégé of the U.S., a consumer and labor market for America. Throughout his engagement with Vietnam, with all the good intention and self-serving goals, Peterson worked hard to promote the re-positioning of Vietnam within America’s neoliberal and benign hegemony.

The beginning of this chapter outlines Peterson’s background and political career before his ambassadorial nomination. A brief narrative of the diplomatic environment in U.S.-Vietnam relations between 1995 and 1997 (from Clinton’s announcement of diplomatic normalization in 1995 until Peterson’s official appointment in 1997) is presented to reveal the multi-layer meanings of “reconciliation” that Peterson managed to achieve. Peterson’s reconciliatory efforts will then be broken down into two parts. First, it focuses on Peterson’s instrumentality in the U.S. to rally Congressional and public support for Clinton’s policies in Vietnam. Secondly, Peterson’s people-to-people diplomacy and his persuasive powers in Vietnam enabled him to insert influence on the transformation of Vietnam’s economic and political conditions. The ultimate result of Peterson’s diplomatic efforts is the bilateral trade agreement (BTA), which was finalized in July, 2001, right before his term concluded.289 In these diplomatic and lobbying contexts, Peterson’s paternalism, good faith, and loyal subscription to American neo-liberal principles are all mobilized to serve his goals which are also U.S.’s goals in postwar Vietnam.

1. Hanoi Assignment: Reconciliation Missions

The first ambassador placed in a former enemy country after any war has to take on the challenging responsibility of reconciliation. After World War II, James B. Conant left his presidency of Harvard University to be the first U.S. envoy to

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Germany. During his term, Conant used his intellectual merits to promote mutual respect and cooperation between the two peoples. General Douglas MacArthur, being the American viceroy of Japan in 1945, defied any punishment policy against the nation he had defeated and advocated cooperation in hope of seeking postwar “solace.” However, as the *Christian Science Monitor* commentator put it, the “olive branches” that these first envoys carried with them were not as heavy as what Peterson would have to bear. After World War II, most Americans were “united in an unambiguous cause,” and the United States was in a winning position. On the contrary, the U.S. lost the Vietnam War, and there was a burdensome need for post-Vietnam reconciliation within the U.S. also.\(^{290}\) Being a destructive bomber over Hanoi and having to endure a long, grim prison term in that city, Peterson found his ambassadorship in Vietnam—the opportunity for him to undo the past—both fascinating and challenging. Not only did he need to mitigate hostility between the Vietnamese and the American people, he also had to narrow down the gap of perspectives among Americans toward Vietnam. Plus, on a personal level, Peterson had to balance between his past double identity as a bomber (victimizer) and a prisoner (victim) of the Vietnamese. These complex layers of reconciliation required Peterson to take a delicate middle position while serving American interests. As it turned out, the pursuit for common economic interests was one of his most effective tools.

Peterson (a.k.a. Brian Douglas Peterson) was born in Omaha, a rural town of Nebraska. When he was thirteen years old, his family moved to Missouri. One year later, they again moved to Iowa where Peterson completed high school and attended college. At the age of twenty, Peterson quit college to join the Air Force and embark

on a military career that sent him to Vietnam in 1965. Between September 1966 and March 1973, he was imprisoned in Hanoi. After his release in 1973, Peterson continued college and received his bachelor’s degree in 1976. Peterson retired from the military in 1981 and began his computer retailing business. At the same time, he administered a special education program for boys with behavioral problems, which was affiliated with Florida State University’s Psychology Department. In 1990, Peterson began his political career by running for a Democratic seat in the House of Representative, representing counties in North Florida. From 1990 to 1996, Peterson served three terms as a Democratic Congressman of Florida. His voting record demonstrates a middle-of-the-road approach of support for both Democratic and Republican initiatives. For example, he supported Clinton’s military spending cuts and, at the same time, opposed Clinton’s assault rifle ban in 1994. In general, Peterson appeared to possess a bipartisan quality that could appeal to both sides of the Congress.291 This characteristic, added with Peterson’s diverse background in the military, business, and educational fields, made him one of the most qualified candidates for the ambassadorial position in Vietnam.

However, it is Peterson’s credential as a POW that earned him the position. The American public’s residual bitterness about American defeat after the war and the MIA/POW politics made Peterson’s ambassadorial nomination one of the most carefully calculated decisions of the Clinton administration. The demand for “full accounting of MIA/POW in Vietnam” had always been a decisive and emotional issue in the Vietnam-U.S. normalization process. In the Congress, there was a constant and overwhelmingly concern that a friendly diplomatic relation between the U.S. and Vietnam would be an undeserving reward for Vietnam. Several anti-

Vietnam Congressional hawks believed that America would lose its “leverage power” to pressure Vietnam to cooperate in the MIA/POW investigation once a positive diplomatic move is made. In other words, hostility against Vietnam and lack of trust toward the Vietnamese people remained through the 1980’s and the 1990’s. In fact, from the beginning of diplomatic talks in 1987, spearheaded by General Vessey’s presidential delegation to Hanoi until the signing of the Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) in 2001, the search for American missing servicemen was always stated as a “top priority.”

The selection of Peterson, a former POW who had actively been involved in the POW-MIA investigation, was viewed as the Clinton administration’s best choice to appease the anti-Vietnam groups. As early as 1991, Peterson became highly involved in the resolution of the POW-MIA issue. His travel to Indochina in 1991, to the former Soviet Union in 1992, to Vietnam again in 1993 with the U.S. Senate’s MIA/POW investigation team demonstrated his commitment in the matter. In 1993, after his second Vietnam trip, Peterson convinced the U.S. Congress, the Bush administration, and American public that there was likely no live POW in Vietnam. Also, his report praised the Vietnamese government for their understanding and cooperation in the POW-MIA investigation and recommended that Vietnam deserve positive reciprocal gesture from the U.S. Peterson, along with Senators John Kerry and John McCain, boosted his advocacy for a positive diplomatic link with Vietnam, arguing that the lift of embargo would significantly “aid the search for American

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Peterson’s re-involvement with Vietnam was primarily concerned with American needs. His support for the Vietnamese needs, i.e., the removal of American embargo, was defined as a “reward” for the Vietnamese cooperation in the early 1990’s. Interestingly, both advocate groups regarding relations with Vietnam—the doves and as well as the hawks—used the POW-MIA politics to justify their position. Vietnam was thus re-invented from being the “uncooperative enemy” in the Reagan administration to be a “cooperative government” in the Clinton administration. In either position, Vietnam was subject to American self-serving goal and the U.S. paternal power to “punish” or “reward” it for its behavior. Peterson was not an exception to this point of view toward Vietnam.

Despite Peterson’s outstanding credentials and the strong endorsement from the Democratic Party, his official ambassadorial appointment was delayed because of various political and constitutional obstacles. First, the election-year politics in 1996 that involved the controversy about Clinton’s Vietnam War records (his draft evasion and critique against the U.S. military) forced the Congress and the White House to postpone the approval for Peterson’s appointment. Secondly, the decision faced opposition from those in the Congress, headed by Senator Jesse Helms, a fervent anti-communist and also chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, who believed that Vietnam had not fully cooperated in helping the United States determine the fates of more than 2,000 prisoners of war (POWs) and missing servicemen (MIAs). While these politicians had little objection against Peterson, they were vehemently against

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diplomatic relations with Vietnam and the placement of an ambassador there. Next, Peterson’s acceptance of former President Clinton’s nomination was not allowed while he was still a Congressman. According to the U.S. constitution, Congressmen cannot accept a newly created government job. Even though many pro-Vietnam Congressmen argued that the post of ambassador in Vietnam was not a “newly-created” job because the U.S. had already had an ambassador in the RVN before 1975, their objection could not overcome the rule and those who embraced it on the premise that the SRV was a “new” country. Thus, Peterson could not accept the ambassadorial nomination until the end of his term in January 1997. Finally, a late-breaking theory revealed a political rumor that some foreign-linked donors to the Democratic Party may have influenced President Clinton’s decision to establish diplomatic ties with Vietnam. After lengthy investigation, the Clinton administration denied any link, and Peterson’s appointment was finally approved in April 1997.

The delay in Peterson’s ambassadorial assignment frustrated both American and Vietnamese business circles. As early as 1993, various American businessmen and U.S. Congressmen complained that the hold in diplomatic normalization with Vietnam had actually caused a “great commercial loss for America” because other foreign companies, free from the competition of American companies, were acquiring “their own experience and business relationships” while U.S. businesses were banned from participating. Speaking on behalf of American businesses that were present in Vietnam one year after the normalization, Greig Craft, the then vice chairman of the

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American Chamber of Commerce in Hanoi, complained that U.S. businesses were for a long time “at an enormous disadvantage” in Vietnam and that “major contracts are being lost” because of the hesitant approval procedure from the Congress. Without an official embassy that could protect or represent their interests in Vietnam and work toward a trade agreement, U.S. firms could not compete with Asian and European companies that had financial and legal support from their governments. American businesses, many of them had been in the country for several years, had not been able to obtain licenses or effectively operate in Vietnam because no trade agreement or most-favored-nation trade privilege (MFN) had been reached.  

Similarly, Vietnamese businesspeople and diplomats were disappointed at the slow progress of diplomatic and economic ties. Commenting on the American Overseas Private Investment Corp. and the Export-Import Bank’s long pending approval status, an unidentified Vietnamese government official impatiently urged: “We need to move ahead quicker as it will become our most important foreign relationship.” Chi Pham Am, a Vietnamese embassy official in Washington D.C., while avoiding to make any comment about Peterson’s slow appointment process, diplomatically expressed his frustration: “The Vietnamese have always wanted to have a U.S. ambassador in Vietnam as soon as possible. We’ve had diplomatic relations for more than a year, but no ambassador.” Vietnamese officials working in the Ministry of Commerce in Hanoi also expressed “increasing frustration” over the failure to quicken and broaden trade links between the two countries. According

to them, it was essential for Vietnam to receive low-tariff status for its exports to the U.S. (which could only be obtained with a trade agreement with the U.S. and an enclosed MFN status) before Vietnam could launch a large-scale infrastructure development project to support an export-oriented manufacturing economy. In general, Peterson’s ambassadorial assignment was largely viewed by both Vietnamese and American businesspeople as an official and reliable gateway to protect and support their business operations.

In addition to the perceived loss of business opportunities in the blooming market of Vietnam, a number of American trade lobbyists viewed the delay of Pete Peterson’s assignment as a political loss as well. Frances Zwenig, the vice president of the U.S.-Vietnam Trade Council said the death of Peterson’s nomination in 1996 would be “more than just a disappointment,” but it would be “really terrible for U.S. foreign policy.” In her reasoning, 1996 was the year that Vietnam was trying to revamp its innovative economic policies and revise business laws. The U.S. should have been actively present in Vietnam at that moment to “exert its influence.” Zwenig also asserted, “The sooner we get over there, the better chance we have to ensure that Vietnam develops along the model we would like it to.”

American business interests in Vietnam were apparently linked with the American agenda of institutional reforms in Vietnam. It is therefore crucial to see how Peterson contributed to these goals.

In the top government levels, Vietnam and America had different priorities and visions about this relationship. On the Vietnamese side of the table, the key

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expectations were generous flows of U.S. investment, favorable trade relations with the U.S., access to international financial institutions, educational and technological assistances, and humanitarian aid—especially in war-related areas. On the side of the U.S. government, trade with Vietnam was not a great interest because Vietnam was still an underdeveloped market economy. Its trade flow was remarkably smaller than that of its giant neighbor China, which had long established firm trade and strategic relations with the U.S. government. Also, the bitter legacies of the war, including the MIA/POW issues and the outcry over human rights violations in Vietnam from the Vietnamese American community, forced the Clinton administration to prioritize humanitarian and political concerns over commercial interests in its public statements about relations with Vietnam. Prior to Clinton’s lift of the embargo, Congress members repeatedly assured themselves and the public that the lift of the embargo would only “increase the prospects of attaining the fullest possible accounting” because the U.S. would have “greater access to Vietnam” and the Vietnamese people would be committed to “cooperation and a consistent level of assistance to joint field investigations.” Trade relations with Vietnam were therefore both a goal and also a venue leading to further U.S.’s influence in Vietnam’s domestic policies.

After much delay, on April 29, 1997, Peterson finally took part in the swearing-in ceremony before his envoy mission to Vietnam. At the time of his


departure for Vietnam, American media widely picked up the news and unanimously showered Peterson with praises toward his willingness to take this responsibility in highly heroic and martial vocabulary. The Washington Times commentator metaphorically called Peterson’s appointment “the 68th mission,” which referred to his incomplete 67th bombing mission in North Vietnam before his captivity.305 The San Jose Mercury News reporter named his envoy mission “an amazing odyssey.”306 Lamb, the Los Angeles Times reporter, greatly admired Peterson’s “zeal of a warrior-turned-missionary” in his reconciliatory effort.307 It became a “must” for American reporters to remind the American public of Peterson’s heroic conduct during his six and a half years as prisoner of war—tolerating torture, isolation, horrible living conditions, and brutal interrogation sessions in the notorious “Hanoi Hilton.” The tone of the media about Peterson’s assignment served to construct his heroic manhood, generosity, and his fitness to the challenging task.

Peterson was aware of various expectations and challenges presented to him. His first statement upon his arrival to Hanoi showed his willingness to balance and accommodate American needs. Speaking to the media as he walked toward his waiting car, Peterson said, “The exchange of ambassadors is a historical event and the beginning of a new era of constructive relations between Vietnam and the United States.” He then elaborated by reiterating that his “top priority” was working “for the fullest possible accounting of the more than 2,000 U.S. personnel still listed as missing in action from the war” but expressing hope that “a comprehensive trade

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agreement can be signed soon.” While paying due attention to America’s perception of American victimization and the need to address it, Peterson’s statement suggests that he, like most American business expats in Vietnam at the time and their Vietnamese potential counterparts, was eager to move on fast with the trade agreement.

The American expatriate community already based in Vietnam by the time of Peterson’s arrival also nurtured different expectations in Peterson. More or less, they understood that the POW-MIA rhetoric was only a “reason” for American presence in Vietnam, not entirely a “goal” of its presence. To the American business circle, a favorable business environment in Vietnam was the key. Peterson’s much-hoped for arrival was therefore greeted with a “tall order”—helping U.S. firms to catch up in Vietnam’s expanding market and nudge its socialist government to speed economic reforms. American humanitarian groups in Hanoi had a little different expectation of what Peterson could do. Offering Peterson a very warm welcome at the airport, several of them said they hoped “the presence of an ambassador would strengthen ties in areas other than the MIA issue.” Chuck Searcy—one of the reception team who was the Vietnam vet director of a humanitarian project that provided prosthetics to war victims and children—also expressed hope that Peterson would provide “a level of credibility and respect” between the two countries and strive toward “a more coherent and enlightened American policy” in Vietnam. In general, unlike the climate in the U.S. Congress, the POW-MIA issue was hardly significant to American

309 James Cox, “Envoy to Vietnam Faces Tall Order, US Firms Hope Former POW Can Expand Markets, Mellow Rhetoric,” *USA Today*, May 9, 1997, 4B.
expatriate community in Vietnam. Business growth and promotion of mutual friendship were their greater interests.

Several experienced American expats expressed concern about Peterson’s diplomatic approach. Bobby Watts, a business consultant in Hanoi, suggested that Peterson adopt a friendly manner instead of trying to lecture Vietnamese people too soon on business, politics, or institutional reforms. Using his experience in Vietnam to authorize an advice to Peterson, Watts said:

I am hoping that he’ll come in and play golf and learn to like the people. Vietnamese people are poor, and we are preaching an ethic based on shiny cars and air-conditioned offices. We’re always talking about what’s right and what’s wrong from a position of comfort and power.  

Peterson, as the first envoy to Vietnam, would have to accommodate all of these diverse positions and serve multiple interests outlined by the U.S. government and American people. At the same time, he would need to address and respond to the Vietnamese expectations while making an impact on Vietnam’s policy-making institutions to facilitate the implementation of American agenda. Peterson’s first reconciliatory task seemed to be trying to incorporate all of these expectations in his own agenda.

Peterson seemed ready for the challenge and quite confident. Defining his primary role as a “bridging person” undertaking a “reconciliatory mission,” Peterson was determined to use his own example to connect the two former adversaries and make the diplomatic relations between Vietnam and the United States “the best in Asia in ten years’ time.” Shortly before his flight to Hanoi, Peterson revealed that one of his objectives was to “bridge” what he had seen as “a river of pain” that ran

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311 James Cox, “Envoy to Vietnam Faces Tall Order.”
between the two countries. As a person with such a harsh history, Peterson hoped to make himself a model for others to follow. In his opinion, Vietnamese and Americans alike should learn how to leave unhappy memories behind and move on with more constructive, meaningful acts to “move from hostility to healing.” By demonstrating the good will to forgive, forget, and strive toward reconciliation, Peterson believed he could assist the U.S. to become a benevolent and paternal party that brings peace and international harmony to Vietnam. As he put it:

I hope I can do that by my own example, and allow Vietnam to enter the community of nations in a peaceful way. That would be unprecedented. They have always been at war.313

The meaning of the word “reconciliation” should be understood in far more complex layers. Even though Peterson widely used the phrase “between our countries” when he talked about being a bridge that connects Vietnam and the United States, this “bridging” task was a lot more diverse. First, it was the reconciliation among the American people who held conflicting opinions about Vietnam. Secondly, it was the reconciliation between the peoples of Vietnam and the United States, agonized and distanced by the tragic war. Thirdly, it was the reconciliation within Peterson himself, which involved his struggle to come to terms with his past destructive role during the war, his painful experience as a POW, and finally his desire to undo the past and be constructive in his current role as an ambassador.

The objection against diplomatic relations with Vietnam did not only take place in the Congress but among the public, among Peterson’s fellow veterans as well. This is clearly demonstrated during the debacle over Peterson’s proposal to found a joint educational program between Florida State University (FSU) and the Ministry of Education and Training in Hanoi in 1997. Shortly before his departure for

Vietnam, Peterson approached the FSU administration and pursued an opportunity to develop an educational cooperation program between FSU and Vietnam in the areas of economic development and Southeast Asian Cultural Studies. This required the appropriation of $270,000 granted to FSU, so that it could open a representative office for FSU researchers at the U.S. embassy in Hanoi. The proposal enraged many Vietnam veterans in Florida. Representative Bob Stark, a decorated Vietnam veteran and Delta Airlines pilot, furiously called the money allocation “an insult to war veterans everywhere” and vowed to remove the Vietnam item from the state’s budget. Citing the pretext that the United States should not have any relationship with a Communist country, these opponent veterans seemed to forget that Florida was also operating large-scale business projects with China, the world’s largest Communist power. Upon being pointed out the flaw in their argument, these anti-Vietnam veterans again resorted to the conventional excuse that Vietnam was “not cooperating in returning the remains of American servicemen.” Even though Peterson and other Senators of Florida repeatedly explained that it was the state money that went to FSU, not to Vietnam, the state legislature of Florida voted 92-21 to urge the governor to veto the $270,000 appropriation and effectively killed the proposal.314 Peterson’s biggest challenge in Vietnam would be a quick proceeding on the “full accounting” of American missing servicemen in Vietnam to please MIA/POW lobby groups. Also, he would need to erase the image of the “demonized” Vietnamese communist government among the Congress and Vietnam veterans, so that the pro-Vietnam and the anti-Vietnam groups could see their perspectives and interests intersect.

The second layer of “reconciliation” was helping the two former adversaries to establish a friendly relationship. Peterson’s visit to An Đôai is one of the examples. However, this reconciliatory effort involved a reconstruction of historical memory and a compromise of war consequences. Because the word “reconcile” implies a mutual process of two parties remaking peace with each other after a period of shared conflict, Peterson’s reconciliatory mission necessarily encouraged him to view the American war in Vietnam as “mutual destruction” and not solely an American destruction inflicted upon Vietnam. During his first ambassador’s car ride from the airport to Hanoi, Peterson noticed the rice fields along the runway and the countryside roads still “pockmarked with wartime bomb craters” yet refused to view the tragic consequences of war as solely inflicted on the Vietnamese people. Resorting to the metaphor “the river of pain” to describe the shared suffering of the two countries, Peterson deliberately de-historicized past events or sought a logical explanation of the war. Instead, he visualized war consequences in an abstract and mixed condition like river water. Focused on the concept “mutual destruction,” Peterson stressed that the war had brought about “great losses suffered on both sides.”  

315 This way, the tangible evidences of war destruction were downplayed and re-portrayed by a metaphor that stresses vast emotional suffering. American losses were brought into this picture of “mutual destruction.” Again, this pattern of thinking delegitimized the Vietnamese people’s demand for war reparations or American apology because it is inclined to view both sides as painful victims of each other.

Furthermore, Peterson’s repeated statement about prioritizing the MIA issue could be seen as his announcement to the Vietnamese government and Vietnamese

people that the United States was also a victim of the war. This would sound comforting to the National League of POW/MIA Families who were most hostile about relations with Vietnam. At the same time, he informed the media that “progress on a bilateral trade treaty was a top priority,” which was certainly what the Vietnamese people and those Americans who were pro-business or pro-normalization would like to hear.\footnote{316} By putting these two priorities side by side in his public statements, Peterson managed to reconcile the conflicting interests and perspectives among different groups in both countries.

The third task of reconciliation would be for Peterson himself. In fact, this seems to be the most important, challenging project for Peterson. Prior to his visit to An Đoáí, Peterson admitted he had experienced some lingering apprehension. Although he was “adamant” that he held “no bitterness” and had “moved beyond being haunted by his years in prison,” the painful recollection remained and was occasionally re-evoked to put the Vietnamese sufferings in perspective. Talking to the Associated Press journalist thirty years after his capture, Peterson still “grimaces when he recalls the relentless beatings, torture, and interrogation” during the early years of his captivity.\footnote{317} When a 60 Minutes reporter asked him for the reason for his refusal to attend the 30th anniversary of the My Lai massacre in March 1998, Peterson “bristled” and pointedly reminded him, “I was somewhat a victim of the war myself.”\footnote{318} At the same time, he was aware that he had caused a lot of damage to the Vietnamese people and “fairly sure” that he had killed civilians during his bombing missions. Like most Vietnam veterans who had to encounter the unpleasant memory

about their killing acts in Vietnam, Peterson came up with a justification that he was “a combat fighter pilot who was doing his job,” saying he had “no remorse.” Yet Peterson recognized, “there are going to be civilian losses in any war,” and added that he was “sorry if people were killed in that process, but war is hell and there is no other way to put that.”

Asked about how he felt about his bombing missions and the subsequent POW experience, Peterson said he had “forgiven his captors” because they were just “doing their jobs,” and he had “no regrets about flying strike missions over northern Vietnam.” While Peterson tended to recognize the Vietnamese losses during the war, his personal experience perpetuated the mainstream, postwar sentiment about American victimization.

However, unlike those who insisted on punishing and isolating Vietnam for daring to put the United States in a “victimized” situation, Peterson was determined to undo his past destructive act by engaging in a new constructive relationship. For this reason, Peterson did not think he needed to make an apology to the Vietnamese people, a practice he faithfully followed through the whole time of his ambassadorship. This political choice was further justified by his observation that the Vietnamese people are “really focused on the future” instead of “looking for an apology.”

In March and April, 2000, during his third year as an ambassador, Peterson was invited to various ceremonies and festivities, most of which celebrated the victory of the Vietnamese communist forces in 1975. He was determined not to attend them, saying they were “Vietnamese shows,” and he needed not “insert” himself in those activities. On the contrary, Peterson was regularly involved in events

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that “look toward the future and the recent past,” for example, the fifth celebration of
U.S.-Vietnam diplomatic engagement in July 2000.\(^{321}\) Peterson’s deliberate choice of
which diplomatic or public events to attend indicates how he views his assignment in
Vietnam as a chance to balance his past resentment toward the POW experience with
the guilt of an American bomber pilot. This consistently served as a diplomatic action
 guideline throughout his ambassadorship. While representing the U.S. government,
Peterson was only willing to remember and recognize positive achievements in U.S.-
Vietnam postwar relations. The past destruction and hostility were largely washed
away, and so was American responsibility toward them.

With his own example, Peterson believed he could encourage Americans to
view him as the model and help them reconcile among themselves. Also, Peterson
hoped to narrow the ideological distance between Vietnam and America by focusing
on a bilateral trade link. The following two sections will closely examine the way
Peterson utilized the rhetoric of free trade, neoliberal visions, and American
paternalism to reinforce and justify Clinton’s policy in Vietnam. Between 1997 and
2001, Peterson tirelessly tried to convince the Congress and American public that a
consolidated relationship with Vietnam would serve America’s best interests. In so
doing, he gradually united the Congress in policy issues related to Vietnam. Also,
Peterson appeared successful in his effort to persuade the Vietnamese people that a
full-fledged relation with the United States would greatly benefit them. In both of
these lobbying and marketing channels, Peterson demonstrated his good intention,
constructiveness while embodying American paternalism and neo-liberalism in his
rhetoric.

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\(^{321}\) Mark McDonald, “Nation Going All Out to Mark Fall of Saigon, Series of Celebrations Will Lead
up to 25th Anniversary Bash in April,” *San Jose Mercury News*, March 10, 2000, 25A.
2. Marketing Vietnam

Soon after Clinton’s reelection in November 1996, Peterson was re-nominated to be the first U.S. ambassador to Vietnam. The first challenge for Peterson was to lobby for his own ambassadorial post; then second, for Clinton’s proposed policies toward Vietnam. Responding to the presidential re-nomination, Peterson made it clear to the public that he would first proceed on the “fullest possible accounting” of missing American servicemen and pursue some “issues of human rights,” including the Vietnamese people’s rights to freely emigrate and practice religions. Next, he would promote other issues critical to U.S.-Vietnamese relations including “bilateral trade, protecting American patents, fighting a trans-Asian drug trade, and increasing humanitarian aid.” Juggling among a myriad of priorities, Peterson adamantly stressed that the pace of normalization of economic and political relations with Vietnam would “depend on progress in accounting for MIAs.” In general, Peterson’s public announcement consistently prioritized humanitarian needs over commercial interests. The U.S.’s engagement with Vietnam appeared to be guided by charitable principles.

The greatest challenge for Peterson lay with the U.S. Congress. This was particularly challenging because this approval finally rested with the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, chaired by Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC), the most militant anti-Vietnam Congressman. Along with several other Congressmen, Senator Helms and Senator Bob Smith (R-NH) were determined to block formal diplomatic

relations with Vietnam. While there was no objection against Peterson personally, the approval of his ambassadorial assignment had to be justified with convincing evidence of how Vietnam may be instrumental to American pursuit of its humanitarian, political, and economic interests. At the time of Peterson’s testimony, a majority of the Republican Congressmen remained hostile toward Vietnam and used the “human rights” pretext to boost their position. According to Senator Thomas Craig (R-WY), Vietnam did not yet deserve a diplomatic tie with the U.S. because it was still “a communist dictatorship that regularly maltreats and imprisons its political and religious detractors.” Senator Craig’s final question in his opening statement of the hearing “we don’t maintain relations with North Korea, or Cuba—why Vietnam?” presented Peterson with another “tall order”—justifying U.S.’s diplomatic relations with Vietnam.

The approval of Peterson’s post was only the beginning of a long process to reach full diplomatic and economic normalization. His ambassadorship would not effectively function without a waiver of the Jackson-Vanik Amendment (JVA) that had been imposed on Vietnam since 1974. This is a legislation created to punish countries that restricted free emigration. Under the stipulation of this law, any exports or imports between the U.S. and those countries would have to bear the highest tax rates and tariffs. The continued implementation of JVA was financially damaging to both the Vietnamese exports to the U.S. and the American exports or investment to Vietnam. In June 1997, the Congress held the first hearing to discuss the possibility to

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waive this law. The majority of the Congress approved it, which allowed Clinton to lift the JVA restriction for the year 1998. In the next three years, the waiver had to be renewed every year by the Congress, who would hold hearings about the “Vietnam progress” before voting for (dis)approval. This procedure only ended in 2001, when the bilateral trade agreement was finally signed in July and became effective in December. In each of these annual hearings, Peterson consistently testified and advocated for a consolidated diplomatic relations between Vietnam and the United States.

From the first hearing about his ambassadorial appointment to the next three hearings about the JVA waiver, Peterson successfully convinced the Congress about the benefits of the U.S.’s continued engagement with Vietnam. This involves several marketing strategies that define Vietnam as instrumental to the U.S.’s humanitarian, economic, and political pursuits. First, Peterson helped those in the Congress to visualize Vietnamese people and government as “cooperative” in serving American humanitarian needs. Second, he stressed the values of Vietnam as a young, potential market and enthusiastic subscriber to American economic and cultural model. Lastly, he highlighted the potential of Vietnam becoming a strong player in regional security, which would ultimately serve American geostrategic interests in Southeast Asia. In short, Peterson’s promotion of Vietnam was convincing precisely because it is constructed in the rhetoric of American paternalism and hegemonic capitalism.

Peterson’s first ambassadorial task was to address the American public’s primary concern about the MIA/POW resolution and mitigate the residual anti-communist sentiment among a number of the Congress members. Convincing Americans about the Vietnamese cooperativeness will be the tool to repair this unfavorable climate. Opening his advocacy for a continued relationship with Vietnam, Peterson reviewed past achievements in the POW-MIA program and asserted:

I have watched this progress very closely in the past five years while serving as the American chairman of Vietnam Working Group, a subdivision of the U.S.-Russian Joint Commission on POW-MIA Affairs. In my view, the level of cooperation between the United States and the Vietnamese government on POW matters now has never been better.\(^\text{327}\)

The Vietnamese “cooperation,” according to Peterson, is not limited to their assistance to resolve the POW-MIA issue but also demonstrated in its willingness to dismantle its state-controlled economy and follow the American economic model. By offering this insight, Peterson helped smooth the fervent anti-communist feeling among a good number of U.S. Congressmen. Referring to Vietnam’s economic renovation and the need to have a permanent ambassador in Vietnam to secure American interests, Peterson commented:

Vietnam has clearly signaled to the world its desire to enter the community of nations as a peaceful, cooperative participant. Since the leadership of Vietnam adopted the policy of domoi (ph) renovation in 1986, the transformation from a centrally planned to a market-based economy has been under way. Economists from around the world have said that that transformation in the past decade has been truly remarkable, and at the Eighth Party Congress held in Hanoi in June last year, Vietnam’s political leadership reconfirmed its commitment to the reforms it began a decade ago.\(^\text{328}\)

The POW-MIA question remained a thorny issue in the hearing. Senator Thomas was particularly frustrated and suspicious about the level of cooperation from Vietnam,


\(^\text{328}\) Ibid.
citing his observation that the Vietnam government had not allowed American access to its intelligence archive. Responding to this concern, Peterson again offered his constructive and sympathetic view of the Vietnamese archives to ease Thomas’ suspicion toward the Vietnamese officials in charge of the MIA/POW program:

I think there’s a perspective of what an archive looks like in Vietnam that is grossly maligned. The—we don’t have an archive in Vietnam, that I’ve seen at least, that looks at all like anything we have just down the street from here. The paper that documents were written on 25 years ago was the equivalent of toilet paper. Those documents were stored in an environment where the potential for them to actually still be intact where you could read them is frankly questionable—no air-conditioning, high humid conditions, and essentially as I say the deterioration of the paper. I personally doubt that we’re going to find a lot of documents. There are still some documents that we are likely to discover—but not high quality documents. I have in my home some notes that I wrote on the back of a set of papers that the Vietnamese gave me just before I was released that really were the accords from the Paris talks. And I had a pen—it was the—I was the only one in camp that I think that had a pen—and I wrote down these notes, and I tried to read them out here just a week or so ago, and I could barely read them because of the quality of paper. These have been very closely controlled in an air-conditioned environment and so on.\(^{329}\)

By giving a realistic description of the amount of information on MIA that was accessible and decipherable in Vietnam, Peterson strongly suggested that failure to obtain full accounting of POW-MIA could be an objective situation and beyond the Vietnamese control. In other words, the fact that many lost American servicemen had not been accounted for is not caused by the lack of Vietnamese cooperation. This way, the Vietnamese people are no longer or less subject to America’s prejudiced imagination as “cruel tormentors,” or “inhuman jailors” keeping a “warehouse of live American POW” for bargain.\(^{330}\) In fact, during Peterson’s first year in Vietnam, he personally supervised the POW investigation and site excavation in search of American MIAs. His report to the media and the Congress was invariably positive

\(^{329}\) Ibid.  
about Vietnamese people’s cooperation and trustworthiness. As someone with strong authority to comment on the emotional POW-MIA issue, Peterson’s positive recommendation helped remove one of the strongest barriers against the U.S.’s full-fledged economic relations with Vietnam.

Peterson also stressed the importance of having a U.S. ambassador on site to facilitate the search for POW-MIA to justify his post. Tactfully and realistically, he tried to shift the Congress’s attention away from the archives by emphasizing that America’s real opportunity would be capturing “oral histories,” i.e., meeting local people and witnesses to events in former battle sites. This, according to Peterson, is an effective search channel that required regular on-site staff and positive people-to-people diplomacy. By assuring that he would “do everything” that he can to “gather whatever information,” Peterson convinced the Congress that he would personally participate in this process of retrieving “oral histories” from cooperative Vietnamese people. The need to have an in-country U.S. ambassador to further the search for MIAs was undeniable.

Peterson’s unswerving confidence in the Vietnamese cooperation was consistently reiterated in the following three Congressional hearings in the years 1998, 1999, and 2000. These events were held to consider the renewal of the JVA waiver that Clinton first signed in March 1998. In each of these hearing, Peterson demonstrated good faith and constructiveness toward the “Vietnamese progress.” His testimonies that called for an extension of the JVA waiver always sounded optimistic and persuasive. The Vietnamese government was regularly reported as having faithfully continued their commitment in providing the U.S. “excellent cooperation in

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the accounting efforts” while “making significant human rights improvements.” The results of those were “closure for many families of [our] missing warriors” and the rapid immigration procedure for Vietnamese people who wished to resettle in the United States, including the former re-education camp detainees, refugees, reunion programs for family members of the former RVN citizens, and the Montagnard people. In short, Peterson affirmed that the Vietnamese government responded well to America’s humanitarian concerns. For this reason, Peterson recommended, the U.S. should “validate Vietnam’s cooperation” and recognize its “good faith” with an extension of the trade privilege.

Peterson’s positive report about the Vietnamese people’s cooperation served the interests of the U.S., Vietnam, and also his interest. On the one hand, it indicates his good intention to the Vietnamese people and genuine attention to the Vietnamese needs (a profitable trade relation with the U.S.). On the other hand, it situates the Vietnamese people and the government in a serving position to the American interests. The fact that Vietnamese officials were “cooperative” also enhanced Peterson’s sense of self-importance and authority. Described as “the only man in Southeast Asia whose calls are returned in the same day by both President Clinton and Vietnamese Prime Minister Phan Văn Khải,” Peterson was aware of his powerful role between the two governments and never tried to deny it. Asked by the San Jose Mercury News about his access to the top people in the Vietnamese government, Peterson confidently responded: “Almost whenever I want. Generally I can see anybody I want in a very short time.”

333 Mark McDonald, “Top Envoy to Hanoi Finds No Animosity, Ex-Fighter Pilot, POW Marks 2 Years as Ambassador,” San Jose Mercury News, May 14, 1999, 23A; C. David Kotok, “Peterson Heals
needs and to Peterson personally turns out to be proof to verify his paternal authority in the policy-making process in both nations.

Another demonstration of the Vietnamese cooperation that Peterson used to further his lobby is the Vietnamese people’s openness to market economy. As a matter of fact, Vietnam had been engaged in a market-based economy long before the U.S. reestablished a diplomatic relationship with Vietnam. Often known as the renovation policy, it was introduced in the mid-1980’s out of Vietnam’s needs to transform domestic economy and respond to the demands of the Vietnamese people. Yet, in Peterson’s rhetoric, Vietnam’s late embrace of market economy was imagined as evidence of its immaturity, its potential as a market for U.S. goods and service, and finally, the opportunity for institutional reform in Vietnam. This offered the great pretext for the U.S. to provide guidance to the Vietnamese people. Also, American neo-liberal principle which co-relates economic liberalization with political liberty is reinforced. The exercise of American paternalism over the country is further justified by America’s self-interest in the Vietnamese market.

America’s economic interests in Vietnam, while often overshadowed behind humanitarian concerns, were apparent during the first Congressional hearing regarding Peterson’s appointment. Senator Thomas, for example, questioned the potential trade relations with Vietnam and raised his concern about America’s “losing leverage” to pressure Vietnam to continue the POW-MIA problem. Senator Grams inquired about Vietnam’s membership in the ASEAN, a large commercial ally of the U.S., and the possibility of “better footing” for American companies in Vietnam as a result. Senator Hagel expressed doubts about Vietnam’s commitment to develop a

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Scars in Vietnam; The Omaha Native and Former POW is Praised for His Reconciliation Efforts as U.S. Ambassador,” Omaha World Herald, August 22, 1999, 1A.

stock exchange market to facilitate and secure foreign investment. In response to these questions, Peterson stressed the importance of building trust instead of keeping leverage and offered a realistic picture of Vietnam’s potentiality despite (or because of) its underdeveloped financial infrastructure. Regarding Senator Hagel’s concern about Vietnam’s stock exchange market, Peterson revealed:

Senator, the stock exchange I think is a leap from where we are to where they need to go. There’re many other commercial infrastructure problems that frankly in my view have to be addressed before we get to that. There is a very weak banking system. The insurance system, the other kind of normally accepted commercial services that one would expect to have in a free-market economy just do not exist. Coupled with that is just a dramatic problem within the commercial legal sector. And given that, I think we’re going to have to help and encourage the Vietnamese to move ahead in the basic commercial infrastructure process. And that, I think, then will lead them to maybe the establishment of a stock market and the kinds of things that one would see in a fully opened economy.335

While Peterson appeared sympathetic to the Vietnamese situation, he also revealed a promising picture for America to play a guiding and uplifting role, which is not only paternalistic but also potentially beneficial for American investors. In the 1998 testimony, Peterson emphasized the changes in Vietnam and American opportunities from such changes:

Vietnam is a nation undergoing an enormous political, economic, and generational transition. After years of self-imposed isolation from its neighbors and the West, Vietnam’s leaders have adopted a policy of political and economic re-integration with the world. At the same time, they also embarked on a policy of domestic renovation, or “Doi Moi,” which sought to reduce the role of central planning and encourage the development of a free market system, particularly in the agricultural and retail sectors. This policy unleashed a surge of economic growth in the 1990’s and a steady stream of foreign investors and traders going to Vietnam to seek new business opportunities. Our policy of re-engagement with Vietnam builds on and supports these changes.336

Peterson’s statement about Vietnam’s “self-imposed isolation” is stunning. Not only did this completely remove the U.S.-imposed trade sanction against Vietnam out of the picture, it also portrayed the older generation of Vietnamese leadership as senseless and irresponsible. The “surge of economic growth in the 1990’s” served to attest that their old policy was short-sighted and undemocratic. The U.S.-modeled free market system that the Vietnamese leaders “adopted” in the late 1980’s was viewed as an “improved” state of the economy which brought more business opportunities to the people than the “disadvantaged” central planning system. Market economy appeared to be a superior, more mature, and natural choice of life for the Vietnamese. By calling for America’s continued engagement with Vietnam in the middle of such changes, Peterson offered America the great opportunity to be a creditor, tutor, and benefiter of Vietnamese transformation.

The economic changes in Vietnam and its young population encouraged Peterson to envision Vietnam as a learner and the United States as a teacher. These views are most clearly demonstrated in his testimony in front of the Congress in June 1998, when the waiver of the JVA was being considered for the second time. Paralleling the renewal of the waiver as the U.S.’s signal to the Vietnamese and the international community that America will “continue to reach out to the world and export [our] capitalism,” Peterson enthusiastically reasserted his perspective of a “growing Vietnam” inviting American benevolent guidance:

This is a nation in major transition. It is being transitioned politically, economically, and generationally, and we, as a nation, have the opportunity to influence that transition in every one of those aspects. My staff and myself work diligently in promoting American interest in that transition process in Vietnam, every single day, and as a result of that we have created an incredible amount of goodwill, goodwill that has taken us now to helping the Vietnamese understand what a free market is. They essentially woke up one morning and said: “This is what we have to do, we have to transition from a centrally-planned economy to a free market economy if we are going to be successful in the rest of the world,” and they are starting to move into that.
They don’t know how to do it. They are asking for help, and they want American help because they look to us, strangely enough, as the leader in this effort. While making the Vietnamese people’s choice for free market economy appear like an internalized decision, Peterson contradicted himself with the assertion that America needed to continue its effort to “export capitalism.” His judgmental statement that the Vietnamese “don’t know how to do it” further made American capitalism an idea introduced from the outside. By viewing the Vietnamese people as those who “look to us [America]” as the leader, Peterson not only subjects the Vietnamese people in the position of a student learning from American teachers but also justifies American tutelage in Vietnam. In short, Peterson appealed American benevolent paternalism with the evidence of Vietnam becoming a follower of American neoliberal economic model.

The imagination of Vietnamese people in terms of a young, growing population is also enticing to American business minds. This way, Vietnamese people are not only viewed as “learners” but also “consumers” of American goods and services. Peterson’s observation of the young Vietnamese population in transition is later translated into his advocacy for stronger economic relationship with Vietnam. In order to help the U.S. Congress members to visualize Vietnam as a “potentially lucrative market,” Peterson cited examples of Vietnamese young people learning English “from dawn until after midnight,” looking at America as “the leader in the cultural side,” and looking to America for a “leadership of the technology, management skills, and overall business entrepreneurial advice.” To make Vietnam more attractive to American traders, Peterson asserted that the Vietnamese people

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337 Hearing of the Trade Subcommittee of the House Ways and Means Committee; Subject: Trade Relations with Vietnam, chaired by Representative Philip M. Crane (R-IL), Federal News Service, June 18, 1998.
“know that American products are generally the products that are desired most around the world, and they seek those.” To counter-argue for the continued waiver of the JVA in 1999, Peterson reminded the Congress that the end of U.S. engagement in Vietnam would deny important supportive programs to U.S. businesses operating in Vietnam. The result of this would be “the U.S. jobs that might have otherwise been created are lost,” a situation that would immediately sound objectionable. Peterson’s visualized rhetoric effectively re-imaged Vietnam as a growing consumer market for American goods and services that the Congress should not underestimate or abandon. Continued engagement with Vietnam, Peterson argued, actually benefits America. Again, the discourse of American benevolent paternalism was utilized to reinforce American pursuit of material interests.

The final booster to convince the Congress of the significance to maintain diplomatic relationship with Vietnam was political benefits. Built on the fact that Vietnam is made of a “young and growing population” who were nurturing great aspirations, Peterson informed the Congress that they possessed a strong potential to put pressure on the Vietnamese leadership and force it to change. For this reason, Peterson called for the U.S.’s paternal support for Vietnam’s increased contact with the outside world so that the young Vietnamese people could continue to enjoy the economic and political openness. He then cited the positive impact of the Vietnamese people’s contact with America:

In the recent years, increased citizen-to-citizen contacts through the media, internet, trade and investment, travel and cultural and educational exchanges have exposed the Vietnamese people to international standards and values.\textsuperscript{340}

Obviously, American benevolent paternalism needed some substantial incentives to be justifiable. These are no doubt the economic, political and geostrategic benefits for America. By informing the Congress that the Vietnamese people were pressuring their government to broaden job opportunities and implement legal reform, Peterson argued that the U.S. should continue its commitment to “encourage the process of change in Vietnam.” The U.S. Congress’s support for bilateral trade relations would help Vietnamese people to follow the path of their on-going transition. The benefit would be, as Peterson put it, ultimately for America:

Bilateral trade negotiations and WTO accession provide additional leverage, holding out the prospect of normal trade relations. These processes provide us with the opportunity to obtain from the Vietnamese commitments to undertake necessary economic reforms and to make changes to their trade and investment regimes that will directly benefit U.S. business.\textsuperscript{341}

By using the logic of “leverage,” Peterson coupled American economic interests with the U.S.’s political authority to pressure Vietnam to exercise further economic and political reforms. This certainly sounded convincing to a good number of Congress members who did not like the Vietnamese political system. The political aspect in U.S.-Vietnam relations was always a sensitive issue, as demonstrated in the way the U.S. Congress constantly pressed the Vietnamese government to improve its human rights practice and democratize its institutions. Also, a number of Congressmen persistently remained hostile against a totalitarian, communist government. During his testimony sessions, Peterson hardly ever failed to address these concerns in realistic but positive perspective. To put it differently, while admitting that Vietnam did not

\textsuperscript{341}Ibid.
yet have a democracy, he also offered new information about the potential for positive change. This is most clearly seen in his 1998 testimony in front of the House’s Ways and Means Committee.

Using the same rhetoric of “maturity,” Peterson informed the Congress that the Vietnamese government was “moving toward a democracy” and “actually trying to respond to the aspirations of its citizens.” He then revealed the potential for political liberalization in Vietnam and supported it with some upbeat statistic. In 1998, “sixty-one members of the [Vietnamese] National Assembly are not members of the communist party.” Many National Assembly members “had to go back to the province and campaign for their seats” because there were more candidates than seats (680 candidates but only 480 seats). Citing this evidence, Peterson suggested that democracy is emerging in Vietnam. Also, his assertion that “the reformer advocate” was basically “having the upper hand” in Vietnamese leadership over the “conservative advocate” helped provide the Congress a sense of optimism about Vietnam’s opened market and U.S.-Vietnam trade relations.342 To persuade the U.S. Congress to continue its approval decision regarding engagement with Vietnam, Peterson listed Vietnamese human rights progress:

I am please to report that our policy of engagement and dialogue has produced encouraging results. This year, Vietnam liberalized its policy toward tolerating public dissent, and the Vietnamese Communist Party continued its efforts to reform procedures on internal debate and to allow a mechanism for citizens to petition the Government with complaints. We have seen evidence of this in various publications, but one of the clearest demonstrations can be seen on the streets outside the National Assembly Hall, where delegates are currently in session. Ordinary Vietnamese citizens are carrying placards demanding change on political and economic issues.343

In Peterson’s logic, regime change, humanitarian, economic, and political development are interrelated. The U.S.’s pursuit for human rights in Vietnam, Peterson argued, would “contribute to aspirations for liberalization and the rule of law.” Also, he reasoned that “economic development” and “trade liberalization” are the precedents of “greater individual freedom.” In other words, the achievement of “economic development” will lead to the rise of life quality, including “development of individual freedom.”" Talking to a CNN reporter, Peterson said he firmly believed that “economic development is probably one of the most humanitarian things that any nation can engage in.” Peterson asserted his confidence in the inter-relationship between economic and political freedom during his Congressional testimony about economic reform in Vietnam, which, in his observation, had led to “increased openness and relaxation of restrictions on personal liberty,” and “improved access to information and foreign media.” Assisting institutional reforms in Vietnam appeared to be a charitable act that the U.S. should pursue and support. What is more, this charitable act would ultimately benefit the U.S. economically and politically. Peterson’s embrace of neo-liberal principle, which supports economic liberalization because of its potential to further political liberalization, appeared convincing to the Congress. Marketing Vietnam by using American neoliberal principles, Peterson successfully persuaded the Congress to continue their benevolent support for Vietnam’s ongoing progress.

Peterson pushed his lobby further by the vision of a Vietnam placed within America’s benevolent protection and geostrategic security. A constructive U.S.-Vietnam relation, Peterson argued, will help make “a prosperous and peaceful Vietnam,” which will benefit not only the Vietnamese people but also American people and regional community. Vietnam, with its large population and economic potential, has the great prospect to be a strong regional player and assist the United States to construct a “peaceful, stable Asia.” In Peterson’s vision, the U.S. commitment in providing support and guidance to Vietnam will benefit every party involved—the Vietnamese, the American, and the Southeast Asian people in general. American paternal benevolence in Vietnam is not only coupled with economic interests in this country but also needed for the U.S. security interests in Asia-Pacific region. The waiver of the JVA in three consecutive years—1998, 1999, 2000, and the finalization of the bilateral trade agreement in 2001 was the strong validation of Peterson’s successful lobby and marketing campaign for Vietnam. The following section will examine in more detail Peterson’s most important legacy—the bilateral trade agreement.


While both the U.S. and Vietnam hoped to establish fruitful diplomatic relations, the Vietnamese expectation in this relation was far less diverse than that of the Americans. Absent of the postwar resentment against their own government and the humiliation of defeat, the Vietnamese people generally welcomed Peterson’s

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ambassadorial post. Some hard-line Communist Party members, however, were a bit annoyed at first about Clinton’s selection of a former POW to be the first envoy. To them, Peterson represented American victimization and his ambassadorial post would put Vietnam in the position of a victimizer. An unnamed high-ranking Vietnamese official privately said Vietnam should have sent a war victim as its ambassador to Washington rather than the career diplomat Lê Văn Bằng. Nevertheless, most Vietnamese people, politicians and civilians alike, were eager to see how Peterson would use his unique position as a former POW-turned-ambassador to maneuver a “highly delicate relationship” in Vietnam and whether he would be helpful in forging commercial and diplomatic progress in their country.  

Several Vietnamese officials could hardly hold their impatience about the trade relations between the two countries. Shortly after Pete Peterson’s arrival on May 9, 1997, an official at the Vietnam News Agency optimistically and impatiently said over the weekend that the two sides “should by August sign a bilateral trade agreement and reach most favored nation status.” Vietnamese officials at the Foreign Ministry, while diplomatically demonstrating a lukewarm welcome to Peterson’s arrival, privately revealed their expectation that Peterson’s presence will “contribute to further promoting relations between Vietnam and the U.S., especially in the fields of economics and trade.” During Peterson’s first meeting with Madame Nguyễn Thị Bình, the vice president of Vietnam, he restated Washington's desire to continue the search for the remains of missing US servicemen. To this rhetorical request, Madame Binh politely showed her approval and, at the same time, appeared to be

“keen for a far more swift action to boost economic co-operation with the US.”

From the perspective of the Vietnamese people, Peterson’s ambassadorial assignment was largely viewed as an official venue leading to further trade relations with the U.S. It turned out that the discussion of trade terms with the U.S. would be far harder than they expected.

Below the diplomatic and constructive surface, both countries were reserved about each other and cautious about the finalization of bilateral trade ties. The Vietnamese government was not completely happy about the U.S.’s repeated concern about the POW-MIA and human rights issues. American demand for access to the military intelligent archives and their critique of Vietnam’s human rights practice were interpreted as unfriendly intervention to Vietnamese sovereignty. However, the American party did not necessarily view their demand for archival access or their critical comment on human rights as an offense to Vietnamese independence. Rather, they viewed those as humanitarian obligations that both countries should respect.

Michael Scown, an attorney in HCMC, noticed the hidden rancor in U.S.-Vietnam contemporary relations. Viewing the ongoing reservations held by both sides toward the other as a great barrier to any positive move, Scown commented:

> At some point, the Vietnamese government has got to get past the idea that everything the US does is designed to topple the government or effect radical change. And the US government has got to get over its lingering mistrust that stems from the war.³⁵¹

While Peterson was well aware of the conflicting perspectives among his fellow Americans toward relations with Vietnam, he may not have possessed equivalent knowledge about Vietnamese internal politics. The driving engine and the future of

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Vietnam did not only rest with its young population. Far from being a monolithic one-party government driven solely by communist ideology, the Vietnamese government and its top cabinet was regularly split about the development direction of the country.\footnote{Hy V. Luong, ed., \textit{Postwar Vietnam: Dynamics of a Transforming Society} (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003); see Benedict J. Tria Kervliet’s “Authorities and the People: An Analysis of State-Society Relations in Vietnam,” 27–54; Hy V. Luong’s “Wealth, Power, and Inequality: Global Market, the State, and Local Sociocultural Dynamics,” 81–106.} Also, Vietnam’s general enthusiasm to strive toward economic and diplomatic relations with the U.S. obscured the concern and suspicion that many Vietnamese people had toward the United States. Most Vietnamese people still held mixed feelings and ambiguous reactions toward their country’s re-engagement with the U.S. even during the peak of their optimism about relations with America, when former president Clinton visited Vietnam in November, 2000.\footnote{Seth Mydans, “America Today: Through Vietnamese’s Eyes,” \textit{New York Times}, November 15, 2000, A1. For further observation about Vietnamese people’s street reaction to Clinton’s visit, see Christina Schwenkel, \textit{The American War in Contemporary Vietnam: Transnational Remembrance and Representation} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 1–5.} Vietnamese negotiators, including the top officials at the Ministry of Trade and Commerce, did not exclude themselves from these public sentiments. Their caution and unwillingness to hasten the signing effectively delayed the finalization of the trade deal for a good five years (1996–2001).

From the beginning, Peterson believed that a U.S.-Vietnam trade agreement would have a psychological and historical significance to America. First, it would help “close the final chapter of the war” by removing hostility and mistrust between the two countries. Secondly, it would help American businesspeople to feel protected and confident in their investment in Vietnam. Finally, it would transform Vietnam’s socio-political institutions closer to American model and make Vietnam further involved in the U.S.’s geostrategic goals in the region.\footnote{Albert R. Hunt, “Ambassador Peterson Would Close Vietnam Chapter,” \textit{Wall Street Journal}, June 20, 1996, 19; Mark McDonald, “U.S., Hanoi Seal Historic Trade Accord,” \textit{San Jose Mercury News},} The slow progress of the
negotiation process, needless to say, frustrated Peterson and American business expats in Vietnam.

This required Peterson to mobilize his persuasive skills to push the Vietnamese negotiators to come up with the agreement while upholding optimism among American business people. On the one hand, the great insider insight about Vietnam’s economic and political engines that he earned through his contacts in Vietnam provided him with both authority and the ability to empathize with Vietnamese situations. On the other hand, the gap of knowledge about trade terms between the Vietnamese and American trade negotiators allowed Peterson to adopt a preaching and patronizing position over the Vietnamese people. In effect, Peterson’s interaction with Vietnamese trade officials in this situation reinforced Peterson’s paternalism.

From the Vietnamese perspective, a cautious, slow approach in trade relations with the U.S. was not only required but also desirable. Many Vietnamese government officials were highly concerned about the U.S.’s demand for the privatization of state-owned-enterprises (SOE) within a fixed timeframe. First, they perceived this as the U.S.’s attempt to intervene in Vietnamese sovereignty and a threat to their monopoly of controlling power in the country’s economy. Second, they had some genuine concern for the welfare of Vietnamese employees. Third, it reflected their deep-rooted suspicion toward private business people as all “tax cheats.” The privatization of SOEs meant exposing the Vietnamese manufactures to a vulnerable and competitive position against American and other foreign companies. The legitimate concern about the loss of state employment was furthered by the fear that unemployment would lead
to the loss of welfare benefits for these state workers. For these reasons, a delay of
the privatization process turned out to be desirable because Vietnamese SOEs would
have more time to adjust and get accustomed to free market competition.

Also, various new economic concepts introduced in the draft agreement forced
the Vietnamese negotiators to spend extra time carrying out further research.
Basically, the trade terms included government procurement transparency, secured
and equal access to Vietnamese market for American businesses, U.S.-modeled
intellectual property copyright, and foreign investment laws. The access to the U.S.
market, while tempting, was not strong enough to push the signing of the trade
agreement. From the perspective of the Vietnamese negotiators, America’s alien
business concepts and the required changes posed a threat to Vietnam’s contemporary
political and economic system. Also, they were seen as examples of American
arrogance and its self-serving ambition to make profits in Vietnam disregarding the
Vietnamese people’s wellbeing. From the perspective of the American negotiators,
Vietnam needed to make these changes to mitigate corruption, confusion, and
domestic protectionism—important criteria for American investors to see it as a
friendly business environment. The failure to understand each other’s perspective
and find common ground appeared to be the most troubled area that significantly
slowed down the negotiation process.

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Bilateral Trade Agreement,” Agence France Presse, September 24, 1997; Nguyen Van Long, “The
Bilateral Trade Agreement: Negotiations, Commitments, and Implementation Issues,” in Dialogue on

and Other Topics Involving US-Vietnamese Relations,” NBC News, May 26, 1997; House of
Representatives, House International Relations Committee, Asia and the Pacific Subcommittee,
Hearing Regarding U.S.-Vietnamese Relations, chaired by Rep. Doug Bereuter (R-NE), Federal News

While the Vietnamese government was willing to step down to make several changes in business law and copyright issues, it preferred to maintain a state-regulated economy and only gradually privatize part of its state-owned-enterprises. Although the Vietnamese negotiation team included both the reformer advocate (pro-market reform and foreign trade) and the conservative advocate (pro-state economy and trade protectionism), the top level of the negotiation was overwhelmingly skeptical about the “benefits” for Vietnam as a result of this BTA. In general, the review and negotiation process of the trade agreement demonstrated the Vietnamese effort to accommodate not only the American demands but also to compromise the differences among the Vietnamese themselves.

The trade agreement terms, outlined and imposed by the Americans, were unsettling to the Vietnamese leadership. The U.S.’s demand to dismantle the state sectors and implement institutional reforms seemed to justify the Vietnamese suspicion about America’s “peaceful evolution” scheme to topple Vietnamese communist government by gradual economic and cultural engagement. At the same time the government of Vietnam was under the pressure from domestic interest groups to untie its economic regulations and go ahead with the agreement to provide employment and produce trade revenues. Apparently, while the Vietnamese people and government expected to materialize a normal trade relation with the United States, they were not yet ready to accept the U.S. free market model nor willing to comply with the various regulations that American negotiators proposed. Peterson’s task would be to persuade the Vietnamese negotiators to believe in long-term benefits.

358 Ibid.
of the trade pact and have them sign the bilateral trade agreement while not appearing threatening or impatient.

Around the negotiation table, Peterson appeared friendly but no less patronizing, understanding but self-serving at the same time. In the documentary *Pete Peterson: Assignment Hanoi*, viewers could catch a glimpse of Peterson’s cheerful and respectful manner at the negotiation meeting with the Vietnamese counterparts. The documentary also showed discouraging scenes of American business representatives queuing in a long line outside the building of the Ministry of Investment and Planning in Hanoi waiting to get their business licenses. Some of these applicants had been waiting for business permits from the Vietnamese authority for years. While the Vietnamese negotiators were hesitant, the American businesspeople in Hanoi were discouraged. Peterson’s persuasion was directed at both parties. On the one hand, he tried to patiently explain aspects of the trade agreement to the Vietnamese counterparts and encourage disappointed American business expatriates in Vietnam to view the slow progress as an objective consequence of the Asian financial crisis rather than as the Vietnamese government’s fault. On the other hand, he upheld the optimistic spirit of a weathered businessman to convince his fellowmen to remain in the country. Admitting that, “Our [America’s] goals are very self-serving,” Peterson also reminded American businesses of Vietnam’s “78 million people” with an “enormous potential for economic growth.” He then tried to persuade American businesses to patiently hang on until “that economy gets perking along.”

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and becomes “a market for [our] products.”

In general, Peterson appeared to be a persuasive lobbyist who could uphold optimism and constructiveness.

Peterson’s paternal authority and assertiveness were nevertheless apparent. In Fall 1997, the Vietnamese negotiators submitted their proposed trade pact after reviewing the U.S.’s draft trade agreement. Basically, it suggested a continued protection over the state sector for a longer time frame. Peterson read the proposal and concluded that the United States was “wasting its time.” He then bluntly told the Vietnamese representative to “call us when you are serious.”

By 1999, after three years of negotiation, the “outstanding issues” had gradually narrowed down. Commenting on the trade progress, Peterson said that he and other American negotiators no longer had to talk “Macroeconomics 101 anymore,” but already moved to forthright negotiation. At the same time, he acknowledged that the American party had been “asking the Vietnamese to do too much too fast.”

In short, during the negotiation process, Peterson demonstrated himself as a pleasant, understanding partner at one moment, and as an arrogant, patronizing negotiator at another time. His attitude toward the Vietnamese partners is characterized by American paternalism and an unswerving confidence in market-based capitalism.

Outside the negotiation table, Peterson appeared to be friendly and interested in learning about Vietnamese culture and addressing Vietnamese people’s concerns. He was actively involved in humanitarian projects, including disaster relief assistance, helmet and traffic safety campaign, or school construction, while engaged in people-

to-people diplomacy. One of his most important contributions in U.S.-Vietnam partnership was the supervision of the Vietnam Fulbright Program, one of the U.S.’s largest educational exchange programs in the world, and the MIA partnership that included the search for Vietnamese missing servicemen. Since 1998, with Peterson’s report and the Congress’s approval, the U.S. searching team began to provide the Vietnamese with military documents and searching facilities to assist Vietnamese families to find their own missing soldiers, a diplomatic move that was considered to be a crucial progress in the diplomatic relationship between the two countries.

When he did not work, Peterson was often seen riding his motorbike, talking to ordinary Vietnamese people, and eating in Hanoi’s street-side restaurants like an average American. Through his cheerful and pleasant manner, added with the willingness to immerse himself into the Vietnamese public, Peterson managed to export American goodwill and internalize neoliberal capitalism to Vietnam.

To those Americans who still associate the “Vietnamese Communist Party” with a negative meaning, Peterson managed to bring it a better name and a nicer look. Instead of hammering the “totalitarian regime” in Vietnam, Peterson looked at it from the bright side that may be constructive to both peoples. Talking to the Time reporter on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the fall of Saigon, Peterson reassured American investors of the stable investment environment in Vietnam:

“The party is serving a very useful purpose in the sense that it provides stability, and only through stability can an economy develop. We're not

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365 Mark McDonald, “Vietnam Bids Fond Farewell to Ambassador, Veteran Was Respected as First Post-war Envoy,” San Jose Mercury News, July 15, 2001, 1A.
looking at the necessity of a multi-party system. As long as the communist leadership is compassionate, benevolent and aware of people's needs, then the people on the street don't care, and the international community won't care, as long as international standards of human rights are respected. I don't think that our national policy aims to overthrow the party. We want whatever systems exist in this country to become more efficient, more effective and thus more productive.  

In trying to portray a positive picture of the Communist Party of Vietnam and making an official denial about the U.S. intention to “overthrow the party,” Peterson served double goals. On the one hand, he helped to relieve the paranoia among a good number of Vietnamese people—within as well as outside the government, about the U.S.’s goal to topple Vietnam’s one-party government. On the other hand, he helped to uphold American diplomatic goodwill and boost the confidence among American investors. Ultimately, this helped secure a trustful business environment in Vietnam that can best serve the needs of American businesspeople. To sum up, Peterson effectively used his paternal authority, his enthusiasm for market capitalism, and his amicable manner to win Vietnamese and American support for the conclusion of the bilateral trade agreement.

4. Conclusion

Peterson’s lobbying and marketing for full-fledged economic relations with Vietnam finally succeeded with the realization of the bilateral trade agreement. On July 13, 2000, the Vietnamese government finally signed the Bilateral Trade Agreement. Named as “the architect of the BTA,” Peterson received great credit for this achievement. Talking after the signing event, president Clinton especially sent a word of thanks to Peterson for having worked so hard to build ties among the two

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nations and peoples. On the same day of Clinton’s statement, Peterson had an interview with the *News Hour* program, in which he viewed the signing of the BTA as the symbol of Vietnam-U.S.’s economic normalization that completely “heals the wounds.” Peterson also called the achievement of the trade pact as a journey in which America completed “a full circle.” While he acknowledged the potential of widening income gaps in Vietnam as a result of the market economy, Peterson overshadowed this insight with his optimistic observation that what he was going to see was, “77 million people in Vietnam becoming major consumers for American goods ultimately.”

As demonstrated, Peterson helped Americans to cease seeing Vietnam as a war. However, he at the same time re-imaged Vietnam as a “consumer market” rather than a country. The “healing” of America’s “psychological wounds”—their lost war in Vietnam—turned out to be the realization of Vietnam as a market full of happy consumers of American goods. American occupation and planned capitalism in South Vietnam in the 1960’s was replaced by the U.S.’s neoliberal hegemony in Vietnam at the turn of the century. In either case, the reinforcement of American capitalism and paternalism in Asia are the final goals. The “Vietnamese goodwill for America” that Peterson managed to achieve turned out to be a means that preceded the BTA, a healing tool for America, rather than a goal itself. Peterson’s statements made his diplomatic struggle in Vietnam an effort to achieve America’s self-serving interests rather than one for mutual benefit and friendship. The fact that Peterson consistently

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exercised paternal authority while representing American business interests in Vietnam actually undermined part of his goodwill.

Peterson’s commitment to U.S.-Vietnam trade relations continued after the ambassadorial term concluded. Upon announcing his decision to leave the ambassador’s post, Peterson assured all parties involved—Vietnamese and American business people in Vietnam, the Bush administration and the Vietnamese government—that he would continue his engagement with U.S.-Vietnam trade relations. In fact, Peterson did return six months later as the chairman of the U.S.-Vietnam Trade Council, after the BTA had been permanently approved. This time, his agenda was to put forward international trade policies and provide the technical assistance that Vietnam needed to realize and make full use of the BTA. It was obvious that Peterson was very interested in seeing a well-functioning trade relation between the U.S. and Vietnam.

Three months later, Peterson founded his own business consultancy company named Peterson International. This time he was partnered with his Vietnamese Australian wife who was also a leading Asia-Pacific trade expert, and Robert Schiffer, former Vice President for Investment Development at the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC). Peterson’s new company served as a gateway that provided consultancy on legal regulations in the U.S. and Vietnam for American businesses, particularly those from the state of Florida, to explore and succeed in the growing markets of the Asia-Pacific region. Marketing for the market of Vietnam, Peterson praised Vietnam as the place where “there is no end to what we can sell” and that Vietnamese people “like American goods and are brand conscious.” Also, he

observed that the Vietnamese work force was not only “reliable and industrious” but also quite “cheap” like those working along the U.S.-Mexican border. To further his trade promotion, Peterson asserted that the pursuit of economic goals was “the way to build relationship because it is lasting and helps improve the quality of life on both sides.” Again, in Peterson’s vision, Vietnam was imagined solely as a lucrative market made up with consumers and laborers who would support and benefit Americans. Being a diplomat, Peterson was a businessman at heart. Furthermore, his businesslike characteristic is often presented as necessary and charitable for the Vietnamese people. In short, Peterson represents American benevolent paternalism and the U.S. neo-liberal hegemony.

Re-imagining Vietnam as a labor and consumer market, Peterson nurtured different visions for the two groups of Vietnamese people—one urbanite and elite who could afford world-brand products, and one identified as skilled intensive laborers who would produce cheap products for American consumers. In the end, Peterson seemed to believe that global trade and market economy would trickle down benefits to everyone involved and social stratification was taken for granted. Peterson’s unshakable confidence in the life-elevating effects of free market made him become a persuasive diplomat and businessman alike. Departing with a personal and government mission to pursue mutual economic interests and make peace for the peoples of Vietnam and the U.S., Peterson played a key instrumental role in the realization of the U.S. benevolent hegemony in Southeast Asia. Peterson’s sincere compassion for the betterment of human life, his well-meaning intention to help the less advantaged country of Vietnam, and his confidence in the liberalizing power of

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the global market framed his decade-long involvement with U.S.-Vietnam relations and the reinforcement of American hegemony in Asia-Pacific region.

Peterson was, after all, a successful diplomat and businessman. American and Vietnamese people who knew him generally appreciated his constructiveness and respected his public manner. At the end of his term in July, 2001, Vietnamese people and officials were “very sad and very sorry” to know that Peterson had changed his mind and would leave Vietnam.375 Vietnamese ambassador to the U.S., Lê Văn Bàng, expressed his genuine disappointment beyond diplomatic gesture. Commenting on Peterson’s greatest contribution in Vietnam, Bàng said on behalf of the Vietnamese people “we want him to stay,” and recognized Peterson’s merit in having “the Vietnamese people feeling about the United States like a country, like a caring people.”376 Upon hearing about Peterson’s leaving, Representative Zoe Lofgren (D-CA) expressed her admiration for Peterson’s diplomatic manner and contributions, calling him an “honorable” man who had a “great passion” for the country of Vietnam and really “cared about the Vietnamese people.” At the same time, however, Lofgren said she did not “agree with Pete on every item.” As a Congresswoman who had a long commitment to the human rights issues in Vietnam, she believed that the Vietnamese government had not respected its citizens’ basic rights and that Peterson had been too rush on the BTA finalization. In fact, she has consistently opposed the trade deal.377

377 Mark McDonald, “Ambassador to Vietnam Sets Sights on Florida, Peterson Prepares to Quit before Trade Deal is Sealed,” San Jose Mercury News, May 24, 2001, 1A; House of Representatives, “Human
Representative Lofgren’s concern suggested the question whether Peterson’s contributions to U.S.-Vietnam relations were sustainable and substantial. Shortly after Peterson had ended his term, Vietnam and the U.S. were engaged in a trade war. Vietnamese catfish exporters were sued for having “dumped” catfish to the U.S. at a much lower price and posing unfair market competition to American catfish farmers. Vietnamese catfish was forced to either change its trade name or subject to strict food quality controls in America. Similar skirmishes occurred in the shrimp industry in 2002.\(^ {378} \) Vietnam was subject to anti-dumping taxes and lengthy lawsuits. Hostility and distrust reemerged between the peoples on the two sides of the Pacific. In the meantime, exports were delayed and the Vietnamese farmers who had already invested in the aquaculture facilities were the primary sufferers.\(^ {379} \) Once trade was used as a tool to construct peace and “healing,” it could also become the issue to revoke peace and re-provoke pain if the two trading partners could not compromise their interests. As it turned out, the Vietnamese people were always subject to be the losing side in their economic war with America.

Peterson’s upbeat statements about Vietnam’s human rights improvement and its great labor market were also problematic. In March, 2001, while he was in the U.S. seeking Congressional support for ratification of the trade agreement, large-scale ethnic unrest broke out in Central Vietnam. Several mass protests against the

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Vietnamese government’s intolerance of Protestant religion also occurred. With the support of a U.S.-based minority exile group, the Montagnard Foundation, these protestors called for rebellion and an independent nation for minority people in the region. The Vietnamese government neither endorsed their sovereignty nor their strategy of using religion to provoke public unrests. Despite Peterson’s intervention during his ambassadorship and his optimistic claims about Vietnam’s improved human rights record, minority religious groups in Vietnam were regularly subject to government’s surveillance and harassment. Tensions between America and Vietnam over human rights issues remained after Peterson concluded his term.\(^{380}\)

At the turn of the century, the labor market in Vietnam also showed an unsettling signal during the later phase of Peterson’s ambassador term. More labor strikes occurred between the year 2000 and 2002 than during the whole previous decade. Workers who went on strike mainly were from Industrial Parks and Export Processing Zones in southern provinces of Vietnam. Their complaint was invariably related to poor working conditions and delayed or low pay. The absence of a helpful trade union was part of their discontent. Along with the privatization of state-owned companies was the loss of state subsidy. Profit-driven entrepreneurship was thus promoted while labor rights tended to be sacrificed. By 2005, the U.S. had become Vietnam’s largest trading partner, and Vietnam’s labor rights record remained the poorest among the U.S.’s trade partner countries.\(^{381}\)


Undoubtedly, many Vietnamese people were fond of Peterson. Throughout his term in Vietnam, “constructive” and “friendship” were Peterson’s common public rhetoric. In a way, Peterson did manage to reconstruct Vietnam, heal Vietnamese scars, and forge positive friendship between the peoples. Particularly, the people in An Đào always remember Peterson with appreciation and respect. During the last year of his ambassadorship, Peterson intervened in the arrangement of a $42,000 grant through the Vietnam Children’s Fund to build eight new primary-school classrooms in An Đào. Located on a plot of land not far from where he had landed, the school was opened in February, 2001, which helped hundreds of children in the village to have easier access to schooling. The site of his captivity—symbol of American loss—was effectively replaced by proof of American benevolent paternalism. Also, by the end of Peterson’s term, a huge Ford Assembly plant had been built by the newly constructed main highway, just across from the railroad tracks that he had tried to bomb thirty-five years earlier. The Ford trademark, a symbol of American capitalism and modernity, physically erased and enhanced America’s former bombing site. The presence of the Ford Corporation in the area was in part thanks to Peterson’s tireless effort to promote American investment in Vietnam. The absence of the bomb crater and the appearance of the Ford factory suggested that the memories of American loss and Vietnamese destruction had become a distant past.

However, the contest of memory persists. An Đào people were keen to respond to the change in their rural landscape and the economic environment between the two countries. Upon learning about Peterson’s conclusion of his ambassadorship, the villagers and the local officials all expressed their sadness to see him leave Vietnam. On behalf of the villagers, Nguyễn Quang Dũng, the Communist Party

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382 Mark McDonald, “Vietnam Bids Fond Farewell to First Postwar Ambassador; Veteran was Respected as First Postwar Envoy,” *San Jose Mercury News*, July 15, 2001, 1A.
Chief of the village expressed his appreciation to “the contributions of the ambassador” to Vietnam and to their village. Their sincere recognition of Peterson’s merits turned into something Peterson may not have endorsed. D enclosure and other local officials were confident that the blooming war tourism in Vietnam would bring “legions of American sightseers” to their village to see where their first ambassador to Vietnam was shot down and captured. Based on this speculation, D enclosure and his associates came up with a plan to build a village museum for tourists out of Peterson’s captivity experience in the village. They would first need some money to upgrade the village path and restore the stucco French villa where Peterson had been kept the first night of his captivity. Then the crumbling old house would likely turn into “a historical site,” D enclosure said.\footnote{McDonald, “Vietnam Bids Fond Farewell to First Postwar Ambassador.”} To them, Peterson’s experience in the village no longer served merely as an evidence of their wartime triumph and postwar reconciliation. It could be made into a valuable commodity as well. On the one hand, Peterson’s effort to introduce market economy concepts in Vietnam seemed to work well. On the other hand, the possible exhibition of Peterson’s captivity in the village rendered his attempt to forget and erase that unpleasant memory incomplete. Peterson’s legacy and his contributions to U.S.-Vietnam relations remain a contested and ambiguous achievement.
EPILOGUE

PEACEFUL COOPERATION, AMBIVALENT MEMORY

More and more American veterans visit Vietnam these days and they all acknowledge the friendly and sincere attitude of the Vietnamese people. They have shown deep understanding and carried out concrete activities to help the war victims in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{384}

In June 2005, thirty years after the end of the war that greatly divided America and ravaged Vietnam, the former Vietnamese Prime Minister (PM), Phan Văn Khải, became the first leader of Vietnam to visit the United States. Former President George W. Bush celebrated this event as a “new stage of development” and both leaders confirmed their commitment to further the bilateral ties. Trade relations between the two countries had been flourishing. In 2004, U.S.-Vietnam trade flow reached 6.4 billion, a twenty-fold increase compared to 1995 and six-fold increased since the signing of the BTA in 2000. Beyond trade, the two leaders agreed to forge stronger cooperation in health training and English training for Vietnamese military officials, educational exchange, and technological transfer.\textsuperscript{385} During this meeting, Bush and Khải also signed an accord that guarantees greater religious freedom for Vietnamese parishioners. In return to Bush’s word of thanks for Vietnam’s effort to help find missing American servicemen and his reaffirmed support for Vietnam’s bid to join the World Trade Organization, Khải offered what American businesses would like to hear—Vietnam’s population of 80 million hard-working, cooperative, and creative

people—which means “a huge market for American businesses.” In short, the two countries were committed to focus on peaceful co-operation.

Outside the White House, the atmosphere was not so peaceful. Approximately two hundred Vietnamese Americans were gathering to protest Khai’s visit. Shouting “Van Khai terrorist” and “Van Khai go home, you are a liar,” some of them tried to block Khai’s limousine as it entered the White House grounds. While the presidential meeting was going on, they continued to rally outside the gate, raising high the former RVN flags and waving placards that said “human rights and democracy for Vietnam.”

While the protest was less violent than Lê Lựu’s first encounters with the Vietnamese American protestors in Boston in 1988–1989, the anti-communist messages sounded more or less the same, despite the many positive changes that had taken place in U.S.-Vietnam relations. In the midst of all celebratory and diplomatic rhetoric, smoldering fires from the past civil war in Vietnam and signals for lingering, ongoing conflicts between the two countries still remained.

Other than the Vietnamese American protests, Khai’s diplomatic trip to the U.S. was productive and well received. One of his most pleasant meetings during this visit was the exchange with Bobby Muller, the president of VVAF. During their meeting, Muller reassured his honored guest that his foundation would continue to provide assistance to Vietnam in landmine clearing and promote Vietnam-U.S. relations in the future, to which Khai expressed his great appreciation. Shortly after

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this historic visit, *Foreign Affairs* issued a special edition that features his speech in the first page, followed by a twelve-page report of U.S.-Vietnam diplomatic achievements.389 Crafted in diplomatically saccharine language, Khái’s note again celebrated bilateral trade relations and recognized returnee Vietnam veterans’ efforts to help Vietnamese war victims. Nevertheless, these two separate issues symbolized the ups and downs in U.S.-Vietnam relations. On the one hand, Khái praised the fact that the U.S. had become Vietnam’s “third largest trading partner” and the eleventh biggest investor in Vietnam. On the other hand, his note pointed out that American efforts to alleviate war consequences in Vietnam were still largely undertaken by private U.S. veteran groups and the U.S. government had not properly responded to such issues. Ten years after the U.S.-Vietnam normalization, U.S.-Vietnam bilateral trade flourished, and American capitalism in Vietnam triumphed.390 Yet, outstanding issues that defined the conflicts between Vietnam and the U.S.—human rights, religious freedom, the U.S.’s hesitant recognition of Vietnamese victimization and its responsibility to address war consequences in Vietnam—had not been settled.

A decade after Clinton’s announcement of the diplomatic normalization between Vietnam and the U.S., Muller’s exciting claim “It’s over historically now” at that moment may ring a skeptical tone. For many Vietnamese and American people, the war was still not entirely over. Its lingering negative impacts remained in diplomatic, domestic, and personal contexts. For Americans, this is most clearly seen in America’s public debates related to its foreign wars. In fact, since the American disengagement from Vietnam in 1974, American people have continued to struggle

with the Vietnam War’s memory whenever the U.S. was engaged in a foreign war. In the course of thirty years—from the Ford administration’s effort in 1975 to use Angola as a test case to prove that the United States “had not been paralyzed after Vietnam,” to the election campaign debate between John Kerry and George W. Bush over the resolution for the Iraq War in 2004, to Senator James Webb’s criticism against Bush’s Iraq policy during his own senatorial campaign in 2006, the terms “Vietnam” and “Vietnam quagmire” were frequently brought up as a symbolic reminder of the U.S.’s military misadventure abroad. Scholars of U.S. foreign policy and public intellectuals have continued to write about it, both within and outside the context of America’s ongoing war abroad. The unpleasant ending of the Vietnam War in American public memory was apparently a lasting legacy, far beyond the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Vietnam.

As demonstrated in the previous four chapters, the Vietnam War’s lasting memory has also been shaping the way Vietnam veterans view Vietnam today and their role in the new relationship between the two countries. The establishment of diplomatic normalization has not ended the war for them. While their involvement in this diplomatic process helps revitalize their sense of self-worth and manliness, the occasional reemergence of war memories, for example, Seymour Hersh’s report about U.S. military personnel’s abuse of Iraqi prisoners, or persisting debates about Vietnam’s human rights issues, continue to haunt Vietnam veterans and the U.S.-

Vietnam relations. These events also encourage scholars to question whether the “Vietnam war” in America’s public history had been really over for Vietnam and the United States.°

For a good number of Vietnam veterans, the traumatic memory of the war hardly ever goes away, even after they have reasserted the nobility of the war they fought. Former Senator Bob Kerrey, a highly decorated Vietnam veteran, is probably the one who knows this the best. Prior to the announcement of U.S.-Vietnam normalization in 1995, he enthusiastically supported the decision, viewing it as a way to re-demonstrate military pride:

We must return there, heads held high, and say proudly that we fought for the freedom of the Vietnamese people then and will continue to fight for it until it is achieved. Freedom is the best vehicle for promoting solid relations, both diplomatic and economic, between our people.°

Kerrey’s statement could be read in multiple meanings. First, it indicates how this difficult decision had to be cloaked in America’s benevolent Cold War propaganda—fighting for the freedom of the Vietnamese people as a way to reassert the nobility of America’s lost war in Vietnam. Second, it suggests that returning to Vietnam was the opportunity for a number of Vietnam veterans to demonstrate American machismo and to uphold public confidence in the virtues of the U.S. Army. In other words, Kerrey believed in the dire need to “fight for American manhood” with constant validation of the U.S.’s paternalistic mission in Vietnam. To him, the normalization of


diplomatic relations between Vietnam and the U.S. was largely defined in gendered
terms.

In 2001, Kerrey faced his Vietnam War ghosts again. Despite the fact that
U.S.-Vietnam diplomatic normalization had been in place for six years, his war
experience thirty-two years earlier continued to haunt him with the revelation of his
involvement in the killing of unarmed civilians, including children under twelve years
old, that took place in Thanh Phong hamlet in February 25, 1969. The incident
reminded Kerrey of his shameful, unmanly act of atrocity that could hardly support
his paternalistic statement in 1995. Talking to The New York Times reporter after the
revelation, Kerrey admitted his anguish and permanent guilt:

The thing that I will remember until the day I die is walking in and finding, I
don't know, 14 or so, I don't even know what the number was, women and
children who were dead. I was expecting to find Vietcong soldiers with
weapons, dead. Instead I found women and children.
You can never, can never get away from it. It darkens your day. I thought
dying for your country was the worst thing that could happen to you, and I
don't think it is. I think killing for your country can be a lot worse. 394

The spirit of military machismo that Kerrey had tried to uphold did not seem to be
sustainable. It remained to be challenged probably for the rest of his life. Kerrey’s
particular experience and its subsequent revelation suggest that attempts to
reconstruct the memory of wars always run a potential risk of being contested and
rejected. Such is the case of war memories in Vietnam. The fight over their meaning
and consequences continues.

In fact, a good number of Vietnamese people are still fighting the war—
coping daily with war consequences, the most devastating of which was the
detrimental health effects from the AO. During the war, the U.S. Army sprayed 80
million liters (21 million gallons) of dioxin-based herbicide on Vietnamese forests

and soil to kill the green cover of the North Vietnamese troops. This chemical has been proven to cause birth defects, mental retardation, and seven other types of illnesses. For a long time, the U.S. government refused to recognize the negative health impacts of the AO on the Vietnamese people. After much pressure from the Vietnamese government, conscientious Vietnam veterans, and American scientists, the U.S. government agreed to provide financial and technical assistance to clean the contaminated areas around former U.S. military bases in 2005. Vietnamese victims of the AO, after lengthy lawsuit, outright demands, and civil requests, finally saw their justice done when the U.S. Congress approved the budget proposal to pay $300 million over a period of ten years to alleviate the consequences of AO on Vietnamese people, to de-contaminate the environment, and assist in job training programs for AO victims. Vietnam’s decade-long pressure on the U.S. government to make it recognize the Vietnamese AO victimization and take responsibility for it finally succeeded. Even though the compensation is mostly still on paper and far too modest to compensate what the Vietnamese AO victims have had to endure, this diplomatic

achievement has helped to end another sad battle of the war. It remains unknown when and whether the lethal remnants of the AO will ever be really eliminated. The reminder of America’s military ravages in Vietnam is likely to be visible for a long time.

Unlike the prolonged war on the AO issues, U.S.-Vietnam economic relations rapidly picked up. Out and about the Vietnamese market, free market capitalism is not only accepted but also internalized. A majority of Vietnamese people, who knew the dark side of an economically controlled life in the late 1970’s and through the 1980’s, tended to downplay socialist, egalitarian ideals and welcomed American capitalism. Particularly, the younger generation is fascinated with the liberating effects of U.S.-Vietnam economic relations, American technology, new career opportunities, and the abundant influx of luxury and essential commodities in the country. American journalists and reporters hardly ever miss the upbeat depiction of a “new Vietnam” embracing American consumerism, pop culture, and liberal ideals. In their perspectives, free market concepts introduced and imported from America possess an enhancing and civilizing power to upgrade the life and spirit of Vietnamese people. In this light, the American press seems to contend, the Vietnamese communist government should be given some good credit for having the audacity to relinquish their age-old communist economic model to “revive” the Vietnamese economy with market capitalism.

Flourishing trade with the U.S. and widened opportunities to have access to world-class commodities or American values have not led to political democratization and guaranteed human rights in Vietnam. This remains to be a thorny issue in U.S.-Vietnam relations. The anti-communist Vietnamese American community regularly makes this issue an electoral pressure on U.S. representatives and denounces the way the Vietnamese government treats its dissidents. Prior to important national events, the Vietnamese often exercise crackdown campaigns to control the press or public protest in order to pre-empt social unrests. In such events, political dissidents are often summoned or arrested. New restrictive press policies are enforced. These have been the major source of social discontent. Currently, Vietnam’s human rights issues are mainly related to free press, political blogs, human trafficking, and religious freedom. Since 2008, the freedom of press in Vietnam has been seriously limited. Several prominent journalists have been arrested and control of writings on the Internet has been reinforced. In January 2009, the Ministry of Communication in Vietnam requested Google and Yahoo to regulate Vietnamese blogs and websites.  

Most of the arrests are targeted at Vietnamese individual or organized efforts that advocate for peaceful democratic change. Vietnamese-Americans are often thought to be associated with Vietnamese domestic protestors. The recent maritime conflicts between Vietnam and China over the possession of several islands off the eastern shore of Vietnam and the southern shore of China have provided Vietnamese nationalists and anti-communist Vietnamese Americans with extra ammunition. Patriotism is motivated and utilized to be the tool to protest the government.


Numerous nationalistic bloggers have demanded the Vietnamese government take more drastic defensive actions against China’s imperialist and bullying behaviors. When their demands are not well responded to, these bloggers tend to criticize the Vietnamese government and accuse them of being inept, cowardly, or betraying the nation. To shut these criticisms down, the Vietnamese authorities often restrict these bloggers’ access to the Internet, summon them for police interrogation, or arrest them. These incidents have forced American politicians to voice their concern and objection. As the Vietnamese government does not demonstrate any intention to change its authoritarian system or to forcefully confront China, the contemporary war on human rights is likely to continue for a long time.

This reveals the ambivalent impact of American neo-liberalism exercised in Vietnam since the normalization. On the one hand, the unleashing of Vietnam’s entrepreneurial dynamism, Vietnamese consumerism, Vietnam’s economic growth, and its embrace of market capitalism were recognized as “positive achievements” in U.S.-Vietnam relations. On the other hand, the Vietnamese government continued to

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be criticized by the U.S. about its inadequate respect for human rights and the free press. These two contradicting messages effectively encapsulate the inherent contradictions in the neo-liberal paradigm. The way the American media tends to celebrate the Vietnamese consumerism and compliment its potential as a “paradise” for foreign investment while loudly criticizing Vietnam’s authoritarian state makes it appear hypocritical and disingenuous. The neoliberal concept, which prioritizes the liberalization of the economy over the democratization of the state with a wishful vision that economic freedom will ultimately lead to prosperity, democracy, and political freedom, has revealed its weakness in Vietnam. Political stability and reliable, cheap labor forces—the catalyst for Vietnam’s export-led economy and the signal of a secure environment for foreign investment—are usually the products of a tightly controlled society where public expression, social activism, and labor associations are repressed. American reporters, politicians, and the public may make themselves hypocrites when they condemn the “Communist regime in Vietnam” for violating human rights while they continue to extol the miraculously fast economic growth and enjoy cheap consumer products made in Vietnam. American neo-liberalism, a euphemism of the already discredited “Washington Consensus,” appears to be a flawed policy for having placed much greater attention on America’s self-serving goals—trade promotion, privatization of state enterprises, Vietnam’s lucrative consumer market and cheap labor—than on the sustainability of the agrarian economy that impacts most of the Vietnamese population and the promotion of the quality of life in the country.

The Vietnam veterans discussed in this dissertation have indirectly and directly contributed to the reinforcement of America’s hegemonic neo-liberalism in Vietnam. Flush with good intentions and altruistic fervor, they nevertheless are either naïve or complicit in the U.S.’s application of the “Washington Consensus” in this country. Webb’s and Peterson’s efforts to promote American trade and investment in Vietnam and their genuine interests in the betterment of Vietnamese people’s life make them not only instrumental to America’s capitalist hegemony but also overly optimistic about the life-changing effects of market capitalism. While Boehm and the Vietnam veterans at the William Joiner Center are eager to celebrate Vietnamese people’s greater freedom of expression and their newly gained economic liberty, they tend to downplay the state role in providing social safety nets and subsidizing educational and medical services. Being American men of the baby-boomer generation who unfortunately fought an unpopular war, their visions in postwar Vietnam have been shaped by a legitimate desire to undo their lost cause in Vietnam and by the 1960’s culture—one that highly promoted free market capitalism, international altruism, and individual liberty. As it turns out, the Vietnam veterans who positively contributed to U.S.-Vietnam diplomatic relations and facilitated Vietnam’s accession to the global market may end up having to confront some unintended results of their well-meaning efforts. While the bottom lines in the accounting books of American business people are concrete and thus their ventures in Vietnam are easy to gauge on a daily basis, the impact of Vietnam veterans’ re-involvement with Vietnam is a lot more ambivalent and unforeseeable in the near future.

By way of conclusion, I want to recall how the movie *The Quiet American*, directed by the Australian director Philip Noyce, was received in America and
Vietnam. Finished in 2001, the political sensitivities of the 9/11 event forced *The Quiet American* to stay “on ice” in America for almost two years due to concerns that the scenes of carnage and America-staged terrorist bombing in Sai Gon in the movie may be emotionally wrenching to American viewers. Plus, American filmmakers were worried that the critical way the movie depicts American’s intervention in South Vietnam would make *The Quiet American* a financial failure in America. However, in Vietnam, the film was given a red-carpet reception. Vietnamese film censors approved its release, lauding the movie as “progressive” and “respectful” to Vietnamese history and culture.⁴⁰¹

The Vietnamese reaction to *The Quiet American* was in sharp contrast to a concurrent Hollywood movie *We Were Soldiers*, which praised American heroism and integrity while depicting the Vietnamese forces as ambivalent about their cause and cruel to American prisoners. For this reason, *We Were Soldiers* was banned in Vietnam on the grounds that it is “historically distorted.”⁴⁰² During the opening night of *The Quiet American* in Vietnam, an unidentified Vietnamese representative in the film administration explained to Noyce, much to his astonishment, that *The Quiet American* was welcome in Vietnam because “it shows Americans as bad people in the Vietnam War.” Upon hearing this, Noyce winced, but walked up on stage to say, “Americans are not bad people. The movie is about an American with good intentions

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who made bad mistakes.” Thirty years after the American withdrawal from South Vietnam and eight years after the “constructive engagement” between the U.S. and Vietnam, Vietnamese and American perspectives toward the morality of their respective struggle over South Vietnam remained antithetical. Their historical war was hardly over.

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1975: The United States completely withdraws from Vietnam; South Vietnamese begin to flee abroad.


1978: Normalization talks failed.

1979: Vietnam invades Cambodia, offends China, and overthrows the Khmer Rouge.

1987: Reagan Administration appointed General John Vessey to be emissary to Vietnam and initiate diplomatic talks.

1989: Vietnam withdraws from Cambodia.

1991: George Bush Administration presents Hanoi with a “roadmap” plan for phased normalization of ties; Post-War USAID assistance begins; United States Office for MIA Affairs opens officially for business in Hanoi; Washington lifts the ban on organized U.S. travel to Vietnam; U.S. Congress authorizes the United States Information Agency (USIA) to begin exchange programs with Vietnam.

1993: Clinton Administration clears the way for resumption of international lending, including that by the IMF and World Bank, to Vietnam.


1995: Clinton begins normalization process; The United States and Vietnam sign agreements settling property claims and establishing liaison offices in each other’s capitals; Veterans of Foreign Wars announces support for normalization of U.S. diplomatic relations with Vietnam; President Clinton announces “normalization of relations” with Vietnam; Secretary of State Warren Christopher visits Hanoi and officially opens the U.S. Embassy. Vietnam opens an embassy in Washington.

1996: The United States presents Vietnam with a trade agreement blueprint.

1997: U.S. Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin and Finance Minister Nguyễn Sinh Hùng sign accord in Hanoi for Vietnam to repay debts of $145 million from the former government of South Vietnam; Senate confirms Douglas “Pete” Peterson, Vietnam War veteran and former prisoner of war (POW), as Ambassador to Vietnam; Lê Văn Bằng presents his credentials as Ambassador in Washington, D.C.; Secretary of State Madeline Albright arrives in Vietnam.
on an official visit; the United States and Vietnam signed a Copyright Agreement.

1998: President Clinton issues waiver of Jackson-Vanik Amendment for Vietnam; Minister of Planning & Investment Trần Xuân Giá and Ambassador Pete Peterson finalize signing of the OPIC Bilateral Agreement; the U.S. Senate votes 66-34 to continue funding for the U.S. Embassy in Vietnam based on ongoing cooperation on the POW/MIA issue.


2000: Secretary of Defense William Cohen becomes the first U.S. Defense Secretary to visit Vietnam after 1975; Vietnam Trade Minister Vũ Khoan and USTR Ambassador Barshefsky sign a Bilateral Trade Agreement at USTR; President Clinton visits Vietnam; the U.S. Department of Labor and Vietnam’s Ministry of Labor, Invalids, and Social Affairs sign a Memorandum of Understanding on Labor cooperation; Assistant Administrator for the Asia and the Near East Bureau; Robert C. Randolph opens the Office of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in Hanoi.

2001: The U.S. Congress passes the Vietnam Education Foundation Act, which provides annual funding of $5 million until 2019 to enable Vietnamese students to study in the United States; Secretary of State Colin Powell visits Vietnam; President George W. Bush signs the Bilateral Trade Agreement into Public Law No: 107-52; Deputy Prime Minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng heads a high level delegation to Washington, D.C., New York and San Francisco; U.S.-Vietnam Bilateral Trade Agreement is signed in Washington, D.C. by USTR Ambassador Robert Zoellick and Deputy Prime Minister Dũng, Trade Minister Vũ Khoan.

2002: The first Vietnamese-U.S. scientific conference on Agent Orange opens in Hanoi; Deputy USTR Ambassador Jonathan Huntsman opens the Bilateral Trade Agreement Joint Committee in Hanoi; Vice President Nguyễn Thị Bính visits Washington, D.C.

2003: Congressman Chris Smith reintroduces the Vietnam Human Rights Act (H.R.1587) into the U.S. House of Representatives; The Vietnam Human Rights Act is added as an amendment to the House Foreign Relations Authorization Act (HR 1950). The authorization bill passes in the House on July 15 and is sent to the Senate; the Vietnam-U.S. Garment and Textile Agreement is signed in Hanoi; Minister of Defense Phạm Văn Trà visits the United States to discuss cooperation in regional security promotion; the United States and Vietnam sign a Bilateral Aviation Agreement, Letter of Agreement on Counternarcotics Cooperation is signed by Lê Văn Bàng and Ambassador Raymond Burghardt.
2004: Formation of the Congressional U.S.-Vietnam Caucus, which seeks to monitor and support normalized relations between the United States and Vietnam; Trương Đình Tuyên, Vietnam’s Minister of Trade, meets in Washington with key U.S. government officials to discuss Vietnam’s accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO), the U.S.-Vietnam Textile Agreement, and implementation of the U.S.-Vietnamese Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA); Vietnam holds the 8th Working Party round of WTO accession negotiations in Geneva, Switzerland; President George W. Bush designates Vietnam as one of 15 “focus countries” for the $15 billion President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief to combat HIV/AIDS; The Viet Nam Human Rights Act of 2003 (H.R. 1587) passes the House of Representatives by a vote of 323-45; Vietnam is designated a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the U.S. Religious Freedom Act; United Airlines’ inaugural flight from San Francisco to Ho Chi Minh City, making United the first U.S. carrier to provide direct service between the United States and Vietnam.

2005: The U.S. International Trade Commission upholds the February 2004 preliminary finding that imports have injured, or are likely to injure, U.S. shrimp processors and fishermen. The Panel reaffirms with a 6-0 vote that frozen shrimp have hurt the U.S. industry, but votes 4-2 to scrap tariffs on canned imports, which make up about 0.4% of imports; the USS Gary arrives in the port of HCMC, marking the celebration of the 10th anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic relations between the United States and Vietnam; Prime Minister Phan Văn Khải meets President George W. Bush in Washington, D.C. During his visit, the two countries sign an Economic and Technical Cooperation Agreement, as well as agreements on international adoptions, intelligence, and military cooperation.

2006: The United States and Vietnam resume bilateral talks in Hanoi on human rights after a three-year break. Department of State Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Barry Lowenkron presents foreign ministry officials with a list of prisoners of concern; The United States and Vietnam signed a bilateral agreement on Vietnam’s accession to the WTO; Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld visits Vietnam to discuss ways to broaden defense cooperation; U.S. President George W. Bush begins a four-day visit to Vietnam where he participates in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders’ meeting; President Bush signs proclamation extending Permanent Normal Trade Relations to Vietnam.

2007: Vietnam becomes the 150th Member of the World Trade Organization, Admiral Gary Roughead, Commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, pays a two-day visit to Vietnam; The U.S.-Vietnam Bilateral Maritime Agreement is signed in Washington D.C.; President Nguyễn Minh Triết visits the United States. The visit includes a call on President George W. Bush to discuss cooperation in the areas of economics and trade; The U.S. House of Representatives passes the Smith Bill to promote human rights reform in Vietnam; Vietnam Prime Minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng pays a five-day visit to New York to attend the 62nd Session of the UN General Assembly and has meetings with world leaders to garner support for Vietnam’s bid for a UN
Security Council non-permanent seat; Ambassador Lê Công Phượng is appointed as Vietnamese Ambassador to the U.S.

2008: Ambassador Michael W. Michalak inaugurated the first American Center in Hanoi which serves as a one-stop source of up-to-date information on all aspects of the U.S.; The U.S. House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific and the Global Environment convened a hearing on Agent Orange (AO) in Washington, entitled “Our Forgotten Responsibility: What Can We Do to Help Victims of Agent Orange”; Prime Minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng officially visits the U.S. as a guest of President George W. Bush to strengthen ties in economics, trade, investment and education; U.S. Deputy Secretary of State John D. Negroponte visits Vietnam; U.S. Democratic Senator from Virginia, James Webb, visits Hanoi and meets with National Assembly Vice Chairman Nguyễn Đức Kiên. Senator Webb is in Vietnam to examine the impact of the global recession on the country and prospects for U.S.-Vietnam investments and trade relations.

2009: Assistant to U.S. Secretary of State in charge of Consular Affairs, Janice L. Jacobs visits Vietnam to discuss issues connected to the establishment of diplomatic offices, child adoption programs and general consular matters; U.S. Senator John McCain visits Hanoi and has meetings with Prime Minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng and National Assembly Chairman Nguyễn Phú Trọng; Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Phạm Gia Khiêm receives a delegation from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom; State President Nguyễn Minh Triết visits New York for the annual session of the U.N. General Assembly; Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Phạm Gia Khiêm visits the U.S. at the invitation of U.S. Secretary of State Hillary R. Clinton; U.S. House of Representatives passes House Resolution 672 introduced by Representative Loretta Sanchez, (D-CA) of the Foreign Affairs Committee supporting the right of Vietnam's citizens to access websites of their choosing and to have the freedom to share and publish information over the Internet; the United States Government and Vietnam’s Ministry of Natural Resources and the Environment (MONRE) signed a memorandum of understanding laying the framework for implementing environmental health and remediation programs. The Vietnam and the United States to implement health and environment remediation activities relating to Agent Orange/Dioxin.

2010: U.S. Embassy Hanoi holds third annual Education Conference: Building Partnerships in Higher Education: Opportunities and Challenges for the U.S. and Vietnam; Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs and Ambassador for ASEAN Affairs Scot Marciel visits Hanoi; Vietnam opens a Consulate General in Houston, TX; The Pacific Angel 10-2, a U.S. Pacific Command Mission, took place in Can Tho city to provide humanitarian assistance to local residents. U.S. and Vietnamese personnel successfully treated over 12,000 local patients and fully renovated two village medical clinics in the districts of Tan Thoi and Trường Thanh; the third U.S.-Vietnam political, security, and defense dialogue takes place in Hanoi (June); The U.S. and Vietnam sign an agreement in Hanoi to begin a cooperative effort to deter, detect and interdict illicit smuggling of nuclear and other
radioactive material; U.S. Senators Tom Harkin, Bernard Sanders and Al Franken visit Vietnam to commemorate the 40th anniversary of Senator Harkin’s investigation of the Con Son Island “tiger cages” and visit USAID-funded disability rehabilitation and Agent Orange remediation projects; Senator Jim Webb visits Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City and Can Tho to meet with senior government officials and to give the keynote address at a symposium commemorating the 15th anniversary of normalization of diplomatic relations.
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