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MidWeek

Why I've Never Returned to Vietnam

By: Jerry Coffee

The young North Vietnamese interrogator slouched back in his chair as he finished his half-hour commercial on the virtues of living in a communist society, obviously pleased with himself and his growing grasp of the English language. "So ... what you think? Do you understand?"

I answered as I had so many times before. "Yes I understand, but I don't agree!"

His frustration was genuine. "But if you understand, you must agree. Why you don't?"

Without answering his question, I asked one of my own: "How can you call your country the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, when in your country there is *no* democracy?"

He sat up straight in his chair and leaned forward, "My country is the most democratic one in the world!" "Well then, tell me your definition of a democracy."

In his most pedantic voice and with raised finger for emphasis he answered, "A democracy is someplace where everyone agrees with the government! And besides, how would you know? In your prison room you are like a tiny frog at the bottom of a well looking up into the sky."

Yes, in some respects I was a tiny frog at the bottom of a well, experiencing Vietnam very differently than my fellow *MidWeek* columnist, Bob Jones, who has cumulatively spent several years there in varying roles and circumstances - but none at the bottom of a well. He makes it clear in his column that during those years he understandably developed a keen appreciation - even a "love" - for the beauty of the country and its people. And I think he must wonder why it is that I have never gone back.

And, frankly, I'm not sure myself. I don't think I have any psychological hangup about going back. It just hasn't been a high personal priority. Some vets, I think, have gone back to find "closure," but for me that hasn't been necessary. I didn't come away hating my captors, and the speaking career that has evolved from that experience has been good to me. But what my young interrogator failed to appreciate - and perhaps to some extent, Bob as well - is that there was a heck of a lot goin' on there at the bottom of my well.

I arrived in Vietnam well-versed in its political and military history, and how the situation at that time had come to be: the Communist Viet Minh defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu, strategized by Ho Chi Minh; the Geneva Convention of 1954 divided the country into North and South; the communists' elimination of tens of thousands of land owners and other "bourgeoisie" in the North, and resulting desperate migration of more than a million to the South, and the sorrowful string of corrupt, inept governments in the capitol of South Vietnam, Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City).



I had flown over much of the country and had been impressed by its natural beauty, even from a few thousand feet above. But while I was there in the *original* Hanoi Hilton, and especially when in solitary, I availed myself of every opportunity to learn more about Vietnam, its people and communism. I devoured every piece of propaganda they were eager to provide: books, pamphlets, newspapers. I digested the twice-daily “news” broadcasts piped into my cell from “Hanoi Hannah” and the occasional propaganda films in the prison courtyard. “Orientation interrogations” ... “where everyone agrees with the govern-ment” were a great source of insight. I spent hours tapping on the walls to my POW neighbors, analyzing the news, the tack of the interrogations, the tightening or loosening of the treatment, the quality of the food and what meaning could lie in subtle changes.

And what did I learn? I had already known, but it was now confirmed, that people in a purely communist society - which Vietnam was but no longer is - are fed a constant diet of lies, slander and deceit. They are kept in a constant state of poverty, need and dependence upon the government. And, of course, freedom of any kind is nothing but an abstract concept. Despite losing many comrades there to systemic physical torture, withheld medical care or simply neglect, I have never hated my captors. But I hate communism because I’ve seen up close and personal what it does to people and a country. It is how I learned that *evil does exist*.

I share my *MidWeek* colleague’s sorrow about the millions of lives lost during the Vietnam War, but I think we may have differing perspectives on that, too. Most Americans of liberal persuasion still say that war was a waste of American (and Vietnamese) lives, treasure and national virtue; that nothing was accomplished, that when South Vietnam fell the “Domino Theory” (that communist subversion goes across borders from country to country, and the countries fall like dominos) never materialized, so what was accomplished?

Well, the “Domino Theory” never materialized *because* we were there!

During the decade from 1965 to 1975, America provided the holding action against the momentum of Chinese and North Vietnamese communism for the other countries of Southeast Asia - Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and quite possibly the Philippines - to consolidate their post-colonial democracies and economies. By the time we withdrew in 1975, the communist army of North Vietnam was too depleted and exhausted to extend its reach any farther. For the past 35 years, millions of people in those otherwise “domino” countries have enjoyed life in relatively free, prosperous and democratic societies. No small thing, Vietnam vets!

Even though I kinda envy Bob’s experiences in Vietnam and his love for that country (and I do look forward to getting there someday, and would love to go with him), if up until now it had to be one or the other, I’ll take the card I was dealt.

It’s amazing how much a frog can learn at the bottom of a well!