

Westward Ho!

We seem to have won the Vietnam war, after all.

BY MIKE MURPHY

Saigon
IN OUR NATIONAL PSYCHE, the word “Vietnam” remains heavily loaded with meaning, a synonym for failure. But as I travel through Vietnam, witnessing the explosion of free enterprise and the affection for so many things American, a divergent thought keeps recurring: We won, and we won big. Communism is dying fast. Vietnam’s new revolution is Coca-Cola red, ubiquitous, and authentic. It marches forward on the power of its own force instead of at communism’s bayonet point.

Ho Chi Minh City, still called Saigon by most residents, is the economic spark plug of the country. Six million people live here, and the local economy is growing by nearly 20 percent a year. Despite the slow regional recovery from the Asian financial crisis of 1997, Ho Chi Minh City hums with the reckless, frantic capitalism of the new Asia. Cell phones and the Internet are everywhere, and bright new office towers rise discordantly over the street poverty.

The city is very crowded. Cars are expensive and rare. The streets are thick instead with motorbikes racing about in a free-market blizzard of transportation desires instantly matching up with routes. This terrifies you since it is all done in a mad anarchy without traffic lights or stop signs. You cross the street or pilot your scooter through this moving tangle with a wary understanding that while everyone will make a sporting effort not to run into you, boomtown Vietnam is in a very big hurry. Saigon’s main hospital sees more than 200 head injuries from scooter and motorbike injuries each night.

Americans are popular. The Viet-

namese-American community is very much in touch with relatives back home, sending perhaps a billion dollars of aid and investment last year. The U.S. dollar and the Vietnamese dong act as dual currencies. America is seen as a land of opportunity, not an enemy (a designation reserved for



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Vietnam’s ancient invader, China).

As you move north from Ho Chi Minh City you see a more austere Vietnam, but one that is rapidly yielding to the invading mercantile armies from the south. Danang is developing as a resort area. A Ford plant has sprung up near Haiphong. The new Hanoi Hilton is a shiny skyscraper. A sliver of the old POW prison remains as a museum, but the rest was leveled to build a modern office building.

Vietnam is not yet a capitalist paradise. While her leaders have abandoned collectivized agriculture and the country is now a significant food exporter, too many government policymakers act like proud alumni of Moscow’s Patrice Lumumba University, class of ’69. Bureaucracies still need to be shuttered, patents and intellectual property fully protected, and corruption stamped out. Most of all, though, this increasingly free-market nation needs to be free. Vietnam’s government remains sternly authoritarian. Speech is not free. The children of families accused of complicity with the old South Vietnamese regime are discriminated against. Still, the government is tolerating more open criticism, and even the state’s hand-picked interpreters roll their eyes at some of the Communist boilerplate they are instructed to recite. Vietnam’s new economy is outracing her obsolete state.

The war casts a long shadow, though, and it forces a question. A frequent stop for Western tourists and Vietnamese school kids alike is the dank Viet Cong tunnel complex northwest of Saigon. Retired Viet Cong fighters serve as guides to the sprawling underground redoubt. You walk along old jungle paths once patrolled by U.S. soldiers. The concealed trip wires are now rigged with firecrackers instead of land mines (the European tourists laugh far more when you trigger one than do the Americans). Smiling guides pop out of hidden trap doors. There is a burned out hulk of a destroyed American tank, a vile exhibit on booby traps, and an insulting propaganda film from the late sixties full of crude lies that only Jane Fonda could have believed. This ghastly theme park, the most popular tourist attraction in Vietnam, is for me the most disturbing. It is impossible to see the surging victory of free enterprise in Vietnam and then not wonder about the bloody cost of the war: Was it necessary? The miles of insurrectionary tunnels displayed at the gruesome theme park answer the question. We had no choice.

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The high stakes of the time are too easily forgotten. The Communists of the '40s, '50s, and '60s were not hapless comedy commissars to be chuckled about today. We won the Cold War so we wrote its history, and in doing so we have depreciated our old enemies into impotence. The truth is far different. The Communists of the Stalin and Mao era built vast snarling armies, slaughtered innocents across the globe, and swore our destruction. They were evil and they really did want to rule the world. They lost only because they lacked enough strength, not because they were not serious.

The great waste of Vietnam was not our noble war to save Southeast Asia from communism, but our abandonment of the southern regime after 1972. We did not fight the enemy to win, and when America finally withdrew, the Democrats in Congress and their allies in the media and policy-making elite compounded that mistake by abandoning our far-from-perfect friends in South Vietnam and denying them the money they needed to fight for survival against an exhausted North Vietnam. We can never know if South Vietnam would have endured, but we do know that after the South fell, the innocent people of Vietnam endured a horrific lost decade of bloody repression and political murder, forced reeducation, property confiscation, agricultural disaster, pogroms against ethnic Chinese, more war, and great poverty. That slaughter might have been prevented.

Ho Chi Minh City runs mostly along the western bank of the Saigon River. From downtown, you look across the busy river to a long line of enormous billboards advertising various consumer brands and products. The largest sign of all is bright red. It features a kindly profile of Ho Chi Minh issuing a windy revolutionary hurrah. Despite the sign's peeling paint, it is starkly visible from a long distance. At night, however, Ho's great sign disappears. It's extravagantly rigged for illumination, but nobody bothers to turn the lights on. The commercial signs burn all night, and you can see them for miles. ♦