

THE VIETNAM WAR THIRTY YEARS LATER

April 30 '05 was a sad day for millions of Americans and (South) Vietnamese, marking the 30th Anniversary of the fall of South Vietnam to the Communist North Vietnamese Army (NVA). It dismays me as a retired US Army officer and Vietnam Veteran that there are so many misconceptions about the American involvement in the Vietnam War. To the former citizens of the Republic of Vietnam (the non-communist South Vietnam), ours was a noble cause.

To all those who condemn the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War, I suggest that they ask some of the millions of former South Vietnamese who fled the communists. Ask for their opinions about America's efforts and sacrifices made to help their country fight the communist invaders so South Vietnam could eventually develop from a young Republic into a fully free democratic society. America lost some 58,000 men and eight women in the Vietnam War. South Vietnam lost over 1,000,000 men, women, and children.

The 2003 United Nations

Commission on Human Rights Special Report of "The World's Most Repressive Regimes" lists Vietnam as one of the worst. Specifically, it states that the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) "...is one of the most tightly controlled societies in the world. The regime jails or harasses most dissidents, controls all media, sharply restricts religious freedom...". Further, the Berlin-based Transparency International watchdog group ranked Vietnam as "...the 16th most corrupt out of 102 countries..." covered in its 2002 survey. All religious groups must register with the government and must get permission to train, ordain, promote or transfer clergy. As recently as June 2004, the Vietnamese military massacred over 400 unarmed Christian Montagnards in the central Highlands.

Just a few days ago my Vietnamese wife, Lisa, sat in a dentist chair in Novato CA

as her dentist asked questions about Vietnam while he worked on her teeth. Much to her surprise, this well educated dentist in his late 30s asked her, "Do you hate Americans for invading your country?"

After the US withdrew its last forces in 1973, the communists violated the Peace Agreement and waged the massive conventional invasion in 1975 that toppled the Republic of Vietnam in the absence of American and other Allied assistance.

Lisa, now an U.S. citizen and a successful businesswoman, moved his hand aside to comment. Why would she "hate" Americans? To the contrary! She is forever thankful for the U.S. trying to save and protect her country from the Soviet and Chinese backed Communist North Vietnamese Army.

Lisa proceeded to explain that beginning in 1954 there were two Vietnams: North Vietnam which was Communist, and South Vietnam which was a Republic, just as there are two Koreas beginning in 1945, Communist North Korea and the Republic of (South) Korea.

She explained that America did not "invade" Vietnam. It was the better armed and

equipped Communist NVA forces that invaded the Republic of South Vietnam (RVN). The United States was helping the South Vietnamese fight the militarily superior Communist NVA forces, [similar to the 1950 North Korean invasion into South Korea which started the Korean War]. What started as a minor insurgency of Communist Viet Minh in 1955, gradually grew to a full scale Viet Cong and NVA communist offensive in the mid-1960s. After the US withdrew its last forces in 1973, the communists violated the Peace Agreement and waged the massive conventional invasion in 1975 that toppled the Republic of Vietnam in the absence of American and other Allied assistance.

Lisa is one of the several million South Vietnamese who fled after the North Vietnamese Communist forces conquered South Vietnam in

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1975. She lived in Rach Gia, a medium-sized city in one of the southern most coastal provinces of South Vietnam. Rach Gia largely supported the Republic government and was opposed to the Communist

takeover, and many of its citizens had fled from North Vietnam when the country was first divided in 1954. Lisa was raised in a conservative middle-class family by hard working parents who owned an ice distribution company and a small restaurant. Shortly after Saigon fell, the new Communist government closed her family's businesses and those of thousands of other South Vietnamese who were considered non-communist and who supported the former Republic and its growing democracy.

Civil liberties were striped away, food became very scarce, and hundreds of thousands were sent to "re-education" concentration

camp. The millions of South Vietnamese who enjoyed many freedoms in the former Republic suddenly felt like prisoners in their own homes. Lisa, who was studying to become a schoolteacher, suddenly had her life and future changed. With no prospects of the Republic government returning, Lisa and several million other South Vietnamese, escape seemed to be the only option for freedom.

After an initial failed attempt at escaping the country, Lisa and a small group of others managed to escape Vietnam to Malaysia in a small fishing boat in 1978. In another escape attempt, two of Lisa's siblings were killed. After six months in a primitive refugee camp in Malaysia, Lisa was granted asylum in the U.S.A. as a war refugee, and the opportunity to start a new life in a land of freedom of liberty.

As an American Vietnam Veteran with Purple Hearts earned in both Vietnam and Cambodia, and as the husband of a former citizen of the Republic of Vietnam, April 30 is indeed a sad day for me.

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