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Although the United States is now over forty years removed from its ending, The Vietnam War remains a dark stain on American history to this day. Highly controversial at the time, the war continues to act as a point of contention across the nation. Although most Vietnam veterans are now recognized favorably for their service, there is still a widespread acknowledgement that the U.S. military should not have intervened as forcefully as it did. Surprisingly, despite widespread controversy and the lingering scars left by the war, modern-day Vietnam retains a generally favorable opinion of the United States. According to Pew Research, “Four decades after the controversial war, the Vietnamese public sees the United States as a helpful ally and even embraces some of the core tenets of capitalism” (Devlin). Furthermore, in 2014, approximately 76% of Vietnamese citizens held a favorable opinion of the United States (Devlin). The United States and Vietnam have maintained a friendly relationship for years now. Yet the Vietnam War remains a large influencer on both nations. The U.S. continues to repair the damage of decades past, while Vietnam still must reconcile with the aftermath of the long, bloody conflict that changed the nation forever. Inextricably linked through economics, politics, and a shared history, the United States and Vietnam will continue to carry the past through both hard and soft power influences into the foreseeable future.

Prior to the mid-1950s and the outbreak of a war on Communism, U.S. involvement in Vietnam was minimal. In his book *Overthrow: America’s Century of Regime Change from*

Hawaii to Iraq, Stephen Kinzer documents the early days of the principle example of U.S. hard power in Vietnam. – the Vietnam War. Since the nineteenth century, Vietnam had existed as a French colony. However, during World War II, Vietnam was occupied by Japanese forces. During this occupation, Vietnamese guerilla troops – aided by American supplies – attacked the Japanese to weaken their control. France attempted to reassume control of Vietnam after Japan's surrender, but Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh had different plans. In September of 1945, Ho Chi Minh declared that Vietnam was an independent nation, no longer under either French or Japanese control. Oddly enough, during this speech, Minh quoted phrases directly from the Declaration of Independence, stating that "All men are created equal" and "They are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights. Among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" (Kinzer 150). While this speech was a clear demonstration of the global influence held by the United States, it may have also been Ho Chi Minh's way of appealing to the U.S. for support in his goal of Vietnamese independence. With few allies near or far, Vietnam needed the backing of a sympathetic power to succeed. However, the United States paid little attention to Minh's efforts; France retained control of Vietnam, and the Vietnamese guerillas were again called upon to weaken the occupying forces (Kinzer 150).

France's hold on Vietnam would continue until 1954, when eight years of relentless attacks from Vietnamese guerilla forces had drained enough French resources to render the colony in Vietnam an impractical expense (Kinzer 150). France and Vietnam entered peace negotiations, which finally piqued American interest. In the end, an agreement was made to divide Vietnam along the seventeenth parallel. Communist supporters, led by Ho Chi Minh, took up residence in the north, while those who once allied with the French settled in the south. The plan was for Vietnam to remain divided for two years, after which time a national election would

be held to choose a leader for the reunified nation. Now two separate nations, one of which lacked a strong leader or governmental structure, Vietnam demanded American attentions (Kinzer 151). The U.S. feared that Ho Chi Minh, leader of Communist North Vietnam, would rise to power of the reunified Vietnam due to his widespread popularity. The United States especially feared a possible “domino” effect in which more nations would quickly follow suit after one nearby nation embraced Communism (Kinzer 155).

Enter: Ngo Dinh Diem, an experienced politician, devout Vietnamese Catholic, and decidedly anti-communist. The United States government under President Eisenhower backed Diem for leadership in South Vietnam. Beyond this, the U.S. launched a forceful anti-Communist program in Vietnam, spearheaded by Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and military expert Colonel Edward Lansdale (Kinzer 151). Dulles and Lansdale’s plan included subtle manipulations of the South Vietnamese people by bribing fortunetellers to predict doom for Vietnam under Communist rule and beginning a religious radio campaign claiming that God had deserted North Vietnam because of its turn to Communism (Kinzer 153). The plan was successful temporarily successful; no elections were held as planned in 1956, and Vietnam was not reunified. Ho Chi Minh continued to lead in the Communist North, while Ngo Dinh Diem established his own constitution and government in the South.

However, Ho Chi Minh saw U.S. interference in South Vietnamese affairs as another colonialist threat – the third he had faced in the past decade after the French and Japanese occupations (Kinzer 154). In 1960, Minh began a campaign against South Vietnam and the small U.S. military presence there. To make matters worse, a group of rebels within South Vietnam called the National Liberation Front also began challenging the new South Vietnamese government. Seeing that Diem’s political authority was in jeopardy, the newly elected President

Kennedy began to increase American military presence in Vietnam once he took office in 1961. The number of soldiers stationed in South Vietnam quickly grew from fewer than 1,000 to nearly 17,000 (Kinzer 154). Confident that this intervention from the U.S. would protect Diem's power against an encroaching Communist regime, the Kennedy administration failed to consider how their Diem would interpret their actions.

This forceful military response did little to endear the United States to South Vietnam; in fact, the increased military presence led Diem to harbor suspicions towards the United States, leading to a greater sympathetic leaning towards Communism in the previously independent South. With tensions rising, the United States became more and more nervous about the looming threat of Communism. President Kennedy's administration began considering a new course of action. Many government officials stated growing concerns about Diem due to his increased sympathy towards Communism and the unrest building in his own nation regarding his Catholic faith (Kinzer 156-157). Though several of Kennedy's advisors, including his Vice President, Secretary of Defense, and CIA Director advised against such a drastic course of action, it was decided that it would be best if Diem were removed from office – even though, despite his slight Communist sympathies, Diem was proving to be a solid leader in Vietnam, even promoting a plan of unification for the North and South (Kinzer 163). Ultimately, the U.S. decided to move forward with a coup against Diem, choosing General Duong Van Minh as Diem's replacement. As an unexpected result of the ill-fated coup, Diem suffered a violent death at the hands of a group of rebel insubordinates. Deeply troubled by the outcome of U.S. actions, Kennedy began to realize that there was no turning back for the United States in Vietnam; they had become too deeply involved in North and South Vietnamese politics. These actions led to the perpetuation of the U.S. – Vietnam conflict for another decade.

Following Kennedy's tragic assassination in 1963, Vice President Johnson rose to office and began yet again to increase American military presence in Vietnam. The coup that deposed Diem "drew the United States across a line of commitment" that was impossible to reverse once crossed (Kinzer 208). In 1964, the United States entered a more official (though undeclared) war "with the stated purpose of stemming the spread of Communism" in Vietnam (Albert). Although U.S. troops had already been present in Vietnam for ten years by this time, the conflict was only half-finished. The bloody and controversial Vietnam War would drag on for another ten years; many U.S. citizens began to lose focus on why their government had entered the war in the first place. Protests and draft-dodging were commonplace, and nearly everyone just longed for the fighting to end. It was only in 1975, as it became clear that there was no hope of salvaging what remained of South Vietnam, that U.S. troops were finally fully evacuated. Despite having the power of the United States military on its side, South Vietnam was invaded by the North, which reunified the nation under Communist rule.

The final death toll of the war was staggering; nearly 60,000 U.S. troops were killed in battle, with an additional 2,600 declared missing in action and at least 150,000 injured in conflict. For Vietnam, the loss of life was even greater, with an estimation of 2 million civilian deaths and 1 million military casualties. These numbers also consider neither the lingering health effects caused by environmental warfare through the use of toxic defoliants such as Agent Orange dropped on Vietnamese farmland and jungles, nor the countless civilian deaths that have resulted from explosives and mines left by U.S. forces in Vietnam after the evacuation (Albert). Perhaps most tragically, the conflict – which was chiefly precipitated and sustained by the U.S. – was all for naught. The war simply deferred Vietnam's inevitable reunification and fall to Communism.

Needless to say, years of violence did not facilitate easy relations between the United States and Vietnam in the years following America's military withdrawal in 1975. The U.S. fully restricted trade with Vietnam and shattered all ties of diplomacy. Immediately following the fall of Saigon, which was the final "nail in the coffin" for South Vietnam, South Vietnamese exiles sought support from the United States. "Operation New Life and New Arrivals" transferred some 130,000 Vietnamese refugees to U.S. soil (Stur). The U.S. did what it could by housing them in refugee camps, but the evacuees quickly sought to return to their home country several months later – bringing into question the validity of the United States' claims that these refugees were in crisis. In a critique of the United States' handling of the refugee situation, Stur writes that "the Vietnamese government accused the United States of fabricating a humanitarian emergency in order to continue meddling in Vietnam's affairs" (Stur 224). Furthermore, she writes that the issue of Vietnamese refugees:

...threatened to undermine America's efforts to rehabilitate its image of itself as a benevolent power at a time when the United States had lost credibility due to misguided policy decisions, atrocities committed by American troops during the Vietnam War, and the postwar embargo. Images of Americans embracing Vietnamese refugees served as a form of damage control as the United States sought to reclaim its moral authority. (Stur 224)

Even though claiming to have the wellbeing of Vietnamese citizens' best interests at heart, the United States' further involvement was not welcomed by Vietnam, mainly due to recent history of conflict they shared.

To make matters worse, war for Vietnam didn't end with U.S. involvement in the fight against Communism. In 1978, Vietnam invaded Cambodia and deposed Cambodian leader Pol

Pot and his totalitarian Khmer Rouge regime. These actions were followed by a Chinese assault on Vietnam in 1979 as a response to Vietnam's interference in Cambodia. Drained by years of political maneuvering and military campaigns and now under heavy disapproval from other, more powerful nations such as U.S. and China, Vietnam of the 1980s was in peril; economically floundering, they began to seek outside help (Albert). That help would come, once again, from the United States.

Throughout the latter end of the 1980s, Vietnam began to slowly allow the United States back into their political sphere. The United States sought cooperation from the Vietnamese government on the return of POWs and MIA troops still held in Vietnam. Vietnam allowed U.S. recovery teams into the country, which began the gradual process of repairing diplomatic ties between the two nations. However, 1991 was the most decisive year in the repair of diplomatic relations between the United States and Vietnam; this was the year that peace talks between Vietnam and Cambodia, which had commenced in 1989, concluded with an official, signed accord. Vietnam withdrew its remaining occupying soldiers and allowed the United Nations to establish a peacekeeping operation in its place (Albert).

Encouraged by these steps from Vietnam, the United States established a U.S. Office in MIA Affairs in Hanoi shortly after. This field office was the first official U.S. outpost in Vietnam since the war's end. President George H. W. Bush also lifted the previously established travel bans against Vietnam in 1991 as a part of his "roadmap to normalization" plan (Thompson). Further steps included the establishment of U.S. and Vietnamese foreign affairs offices in one another's capital cities in 1993, and President Bill Clinton's removal of trade restrictions against Vietnam in 1994 (Albert). After the hard power fiasco that was the Vietnam

War, the two nations were finally beginning to return to a more positive level of hard power equilibrium.

Not surprisingly, a past scattered with such abuses of hard power from the United States has left Vietnam somewhat skeptical of the motives behind renewed diplomatic ties with the U.S. There are many reservations on the American side as well, especially considering Vietnam's current status as a Communist state and their questionable stance on human rights for their citizens. According to Albert, "Vietnam's position on human rights is a recurrent source of contention with some members of the U.S. Congress, as well as other governments and global rights watchdog groups." Vietnam's overbearing government is one that "suppresses dissent, including from the political oppression, independent religious communities, bloggers, journalists, and human rights advocates and lawyers" (Albert).

Interestingly, the reality of Vietnam's suppression of free speech from its citizens has been somewhat countered in recent years by American soft power. In a 2015 overview of the current state of Vietnam, London expresses optimism for the future of Vietnamese rights through the advent of American-born social media and microblogging sites, such as Facebook and Twitter (223). These sites have allowed Vietnamese citizens to express political dissatisfaction alongside other like-minded individuals. Because the use of such social media is such an integral part of everyday life, criticisms of the government have become more common. Although the Vietnamese authorities often silence these dissident voices through prison sentences or exile, "the result is often a flurry of Internet activism critical of the state's repressive tactics – and more new blogs" (London 223). Though not directly responsible for some of these changing attitudes in Vietnam, the United States had begun to affect Vietnamese sentiments against their

authoritarian government through the export of something as simple as its social media applications.

The transfer of these influences from U.S. soil to Vietnam is facilitated heavily by the Vietnamese youth. According to the U.S. Department of State Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, nearly 21,000 Vietnamese students pursue higher education within the United States. This has facilitated the founding of the Fulbright University Vietnam, a school dedicated to “help bring world-class, independent education to Vietnam,” (U.S. Department of State). Ties between Vietnamese and American youth have existed since the days of the Vietnam War. One lasting legacy of U.S. wartime influence in Vietnam are the many illegitimate children fathered by U.S. troops during the conflict. According to New York Times journalist James Dao, “By some estimates, tens of thousands of American servicemen fathered children with Vietnamese women during that long war.” Many of these children, now middle-aged adults, have never met their American fathers, whether they live in the United States or in Vietnam. This generation of Vietnamese-American children have been named “Amerasians,” and they were the frequent targets of discrimination in Vietnam following the war (Dao). In 1987, after hearing reports of these Amerasian children living in horrible poverty, Congress granted them unique immigration status, allowing them to come to the U.S. Although they were allowed entry into the United States, the government never assisted any of these immigrants in finding their fathers, though many children and veterans have tried. Only some have succeeded. Many of the children of these Amerasians, curious about the two worlds their parents are a part of, have been a vital stepping-stone in connecting both nations in the modern world.

Another more recent example of U.S. soft power in Vietnam is from earlier this very year (2018). In March, the *USS Carl Vinson* visited the Vietnamese port of Da Nang. The visit was

meaningful on both sides, as Da Nang was the first city where U.S. ships docked to deliver troops in 1965, when American military involvement in the war began in earnest. While the presence of an American aircraft carrier in a Vietnamese port can easily be interpreted as an act of hard power, journalist Xuan Loc Doan of *Asia Times* identifies the historic visit as an expression of soft power. He writes:

During their stay in Da Nang, American sailors took part in various social, cultural, sports and humanitarian activities and interactions with local people, all of which were widely covered by state news outlets and discussed on social media. Many of their gestures and efforts – such as holding and embracing orphans or performing a popular Vietnamese song about national unity, solidarity and peace – deeply touched the Vietnamese. Hardly, if ever, has any visit by a foreigner or a foreign group generated such widespread coverage or elicited such a positive reaction. (Doan)

Such visits are a continued effort by the United States to maintain a positive influence within Vietnam. By simultaneously embracing Vietnamese culture and displaying its own, the United States shows its commitment to continued positive interactions with Vietnam on a personal and political scale. The sailors also visited a shelter in Vietnam dedicated to the care of victims of Agent Orange, a toxic chemical used during the war by the U.S. military as a defoliant.

Agent Orange, a chemical compound containing, among other things, trichlorophenoxyacetic acid (TCDD), was used extensively throughout the Vietnam War by American forces to kill off foliage cover used by enemy troops moving through South Vietnam. Stellman and Stellman estimate that more than 20 million gallons of the toxic herbicide were sprayed over the Vietnamese landscape between 1961 and 1971 (726). Although Agent Orange

is perhaps the most notorious of the chemicals used, it existed in multiple other forms, each named in correspondence with the colored stripes that appeared on the outside of the 55-gallon drums in which they were stored. “Agent Blue,” “Agent White,” “Agent Pink,” and others were all used throughout the Vietnam war, each varying in the levels of TCDD present in the chemical mixture. However, despite its wide use, the toxic effects of TCDD were not fully understood until the 1970s, well after untold millions of Vietnamese civilians and U.S. military personnel had been exposed to the contaminants. There is strong evidence to suggest that such exposure to Agent Orange and its various related forms causes elevated risks of severe birth defects, cancer, and other chronic health concerns (Stellman & Stellman 727). Perhaps most concerning of all, countless acres of both inhabited and fenced-off land in Vietnam remain contaminated to this day.

Fortunately, the United States is beginning efforts to right the wrongs of the past. In October of 2018, the United States began planning the largest ever Agent Orange cleanup since the Vietnam War. Journalist Phil Stewart, for Reuters, writes: “U.S. officials... hope that addressing America's wartime legacies like Agent Orange can become a vehicle for further strengthening ties.” The efforts to restore contaminated land is led primarily by U.S. Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, who visited General Ngo Xuan Lich, Vietnamese Defense Minister, in Ho Chi Minh City on October 17 (Stewart). The visit was a clear indication to the Vietnamese populace that the United States is concerned with the lingering effects of the war and how to remedy them. Through humanitarian efforts such as these Agent Orange cleanups and peaceful visits by U.S. military members, the United States hopes to remain on friendly terms with Vietnam throughout the foreseeable future.

The United States has had a rocky relationship with Vietnam in the past, largely due to the difficulties and controversies preceding, during, and following the Vietnam War. The war has left lasting scars on both nations, but recent decades have seen a bond form between the two countries. Most recently, the U.S. has been continuing its efforts to maintain this positive relationship with Vietnam, and Vietnamese opinions of the United States are generally positive. Vietnam has seen how the U.S. is adamant about maintaining a peaceful relationship between the two nations. Through hard and soft power, the United States and Vietnam remain linked. Time will tell if the positive relationship will continue, but current climates leave plenty of room for hopeful optimism.

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