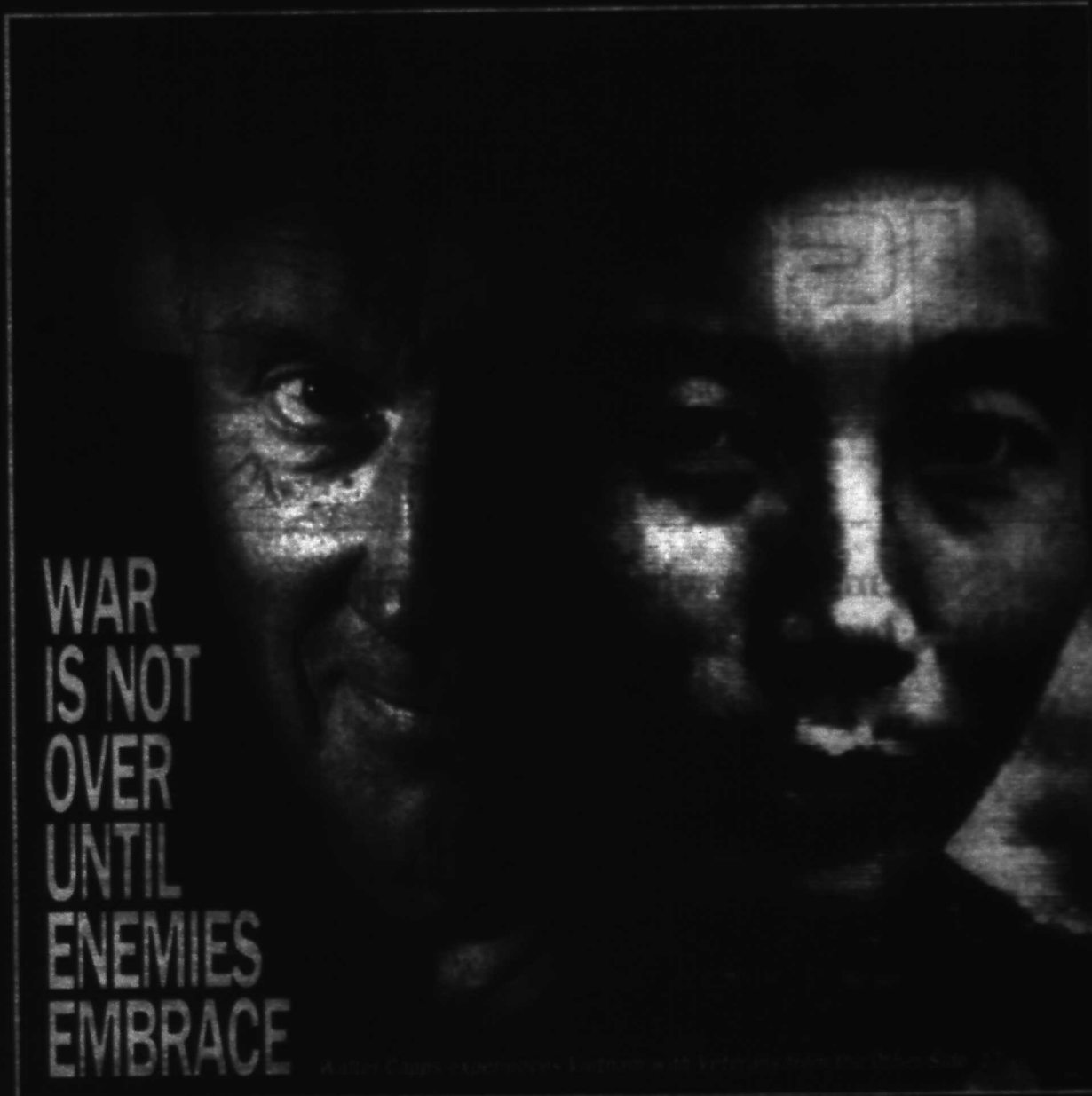


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WAR  
IS NOT  
OVER  
UNTIL  
ENEMIES  
EMBRACE

MANY HAPPY RETURNS?  
Election Analysis/14

SHAKESPEARE'S IN TOWN  
A Tale of Three Plays/21

# WAR IS NOT OVER UNTIL ENEMIES EMBRACE

For the past 10 years, UCSB Professor Walter Capps has focused his considerable energies on coming to grips with a protracted war in which two million Vietnamese and 58,000 Americans were killed. Capps opposed the war while it was being fought, counseling young men on how they could stay out of the conflict by obtaining conscientious-objector status. But it wasn't until 1977 that Capps, who has taught religious studies at UCSB since 1964, actually spoke with an American veteran who served in Vietnam. After all, he said, most UCSB students managed to stay out of combat.

In 1979, Capps began teaching the class for which he has since become famous, "The Impact of the Vietnam War." The profound power of the class rested not only in the prominent role played by Vietnam vets themselves, but by the healing process that seemed to unfold every week in the classroom under Capps's auspices. "The intent was never therapeutic; it just happened," Capps said. "One of the points was to try to keep people who took opposing sides during the war in the same room and talking to one another."

The class was, and remains, immensely popular. Even Campbell Hall, where it is held, doesn't have enough seats to hold all the people who want to sign up or sit in, and such notable veterans as Nebraska Senator Bob Kerry, now running for the Democratic presidential nomination, take turns leading the class. For all his vast knowledge about the war, Capps had never been to Vietnam: So when he was contacted last year by the Council on International Educational Exchange to spend three weeks in Vietnam last January, he jumped at the chance.

While there, Capps played badminton in a Saigon park with a Vietnamese woman and her family; he met with high-ranking government officials, sang American songs with men who in their younger days had shelled U.S. troops, and discussed possible educational exchanges between Vietnam and the United States. Capps wanted to talk about the war experiences of the Vietnamese he met, but he discovered that such tales could be coaxed out only with great effort. The Vietnamese he met wanted to talk about healing. They made it clear they weren't interested in meeting with American veterans who wanted to "cry and hug"; rather, the Vietnamese wanted desperately to talk with people who could help them rebuild their economy, still in shambles from the effect of the war and its persistent aftermath. Everywhere Capps went, he was asked why the United States refused to normalize relations with Vietnam, even though the war ended more than 10 years ago. "The war is over," they said, "Capps reported. "Why not let bygones be bygones and put the past behind us?"

## Experiencing Vietnam for the First Time

by Walter H. Capps

**A**fter talking and thinking about Vietnam for at least a quarter of a century, I found it both sobering and exhilarating to actually visit the place. I had seen enough pictures and had talked with enough veterans to be prepared for some of what I was about to witness. Yes, the countryside remains visibly marked by huge bomb craters. Thousands of acres of forest lands have not yet recovered from the sterilizing effects of the defoliants that were dropped from the planes. Victims of the war move about the streets in the large cities, many without the benefits of the prosthetic devices that substitute for severed arms and legs. When asked, the citizens speak proudly of their success in the war of national liberation, but most have to be coaxed into talking about it. And Ho Chi Minh, though he died in 1969, is the most pervasive and prominent human presence: the subject of songs that the children sing, the object of the morality lessons parents and teachers teach, and without question the chief source of inspiration to lead the country forward.

We had come to Vietnam earlier this year as the first group of American educators to be invited in for formal discussion with scholars, university administrators, ministers of education, and other intellectuals. Sponsored by the Council on International Educational Exchange in New York City, we were there to talk seriously with our Vietnamese counterparts about the past, present, and future of their country—a nation of some 65 million people, the 12th most populous in the world, but also one of the five poorest.

We followed the script precisely. Gathering each morning for four hours of formal discussion, we quickly recognized that we were being treated to the best current thinking of the nation's leading scholars. Tran Van Giau, a political philosopher who had been Ho Chi Minh's secretary, compared the political ideology of his country to that of China and the Soviet Union. Tran Bach Dang, who spoke officially on behalf of the government, interpreted current Vietnamese attitudes toward

the United States. General Tran Van Tra, the commander of wartime National Liberation forces in the south, described the military strategy he employed when matching wits with American generals William Westmoreland and Creighton Abrams. We were also given extended glimpses into current Vietnamese educational thinking both for the universities and for the elementary and secondary schools.

Though the subjects varied, the message was clear. According to official but revisionist interpretation, the 1945-1975 conflict with the French and the United States was a war of "national salvation," inspired by a growing sense of the dictates of an emerging national consciousness, in opposition to which the French and the Americans were intruders and invaders. In this drama, the French were the original "colonialists" who were succeeded by American "neocolonialists," both of whose designs on the country had to be forcefully rejected if this always fragile third-world nation was to gain freedom from domination and oppression.

Toward this end, we were told, the establishment of a Marxist-Leninist philosophy was not the nation's primary objective, but instead was the programmatic means to achieve the objective. Why Marxist-Leninism? Because of this philosophy's deliberate sensitivity to the dynamics of class conflict, social and cultural alienation, and economic exploitation.

But the Vietnamese scholars who spoke to us insisted that Ho Chi Minh owed as much spiritually and intellectually to Thomas Jefferson as he did to Karl Marx. When he declared Vietnamese independence on September 2, 1945, as the United States Army Band joined in the celebration, Ho quoted Jefferson extensively, fully anticipating the United States' unqualified support. Tran Van Giau affirmed that Ho resolutely believed that the freedom he was advancing was of the same spirit as the freedom avowed in our Declaration of Independence in 1776.

All of this was presented to us as background to help explain Vietnam's current and official aspiration. The nation's leadership desperately wishes to enter a new chapter in its relationship



Images: Professor Walter Capps (left), who spent three weeks in Vietnam as part of a program sponsored by the Council on International Educational Exchange, captured many indignant faces on video.

with the United States. The war having ended in 1975, the people wish, as it was said, "to forgive and forget," and thus to normalize relationships with their former enemy. In specific terms, this includes lifting the trade embargo, increasing travel opportunities, encouraging investments and capital ventures, and creating educational

exchanges. We were told that though Vietnam was badly shaken by the war and has not fully recovered, it nevertheless can boast of vast natural resources (coal, oil, and timber in particular) as well as an inexhaustible human energy. That effective development requires outside assist-

PHOTOGRAPH BY



**We Are the World:** The spirit of friendship predominated throughout Walter Copps's visit to Vietnam.

**PRECEDING**

ance. Other nations, notably Germany, Japan, Canada, Australia, and (yes) France are already extensively involved. "Do not wait too long, Americans," the leaders counseled, for other nations may reap the business benefits that could just as easily be yours.

We discussed the painful lingering POW-MIA issues at length. The Vietnamese leaders insisted that they are keeping no prisoners of war. Regarding MIAs, they acknowledged that there are bodies there that will never be discovered, and others that can never be identified. Some pilots crash-landed as far away as Burma; planes exploded over the Vietnamese hill country; in such instances there is little if anything for remains-seekers to uncover. They reminded us that the Vietnamese lost two million of their own people during the war, and that 36,000 war dead in the Saigon area alone remain unidentified. Virtually everyone with whom we spoke had lost fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, and other family members. But they spoke of such matters with the greatest reluctance.

We were given numerous enthusiastic interpretive appraisals of the work of Ho Chi Minh. Here the primary point was that he was a genius in his ability to blend political stratagems with spiritual insights, and to direct both toward effective national aspiration. Consistently he understood the national aspirations of his people to be most compelling, and then looked for the political means to bring such aspirations into reality. Tran Van Giau told me that Ho had studied the life stories of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Thomas Jefferson. Lincoln was his personal favorite, though Jefferson's vocation carried more parallels with his own. When I asked Giau to identify "the lessons of the Vietnam War," he responded that it was essentially a drama about "justice." "How so?" I asked. He responded that Ho saw in Jefferson's story vivid illustration of the truth that inalienable human rights can never forever be suppressed or crushed by military weaponry or the oppressor's cunning.

This, in current Vietnamese political thinking, is what was chiefly responsible for the outcome of the war. To this day the Vietnamese revolutionaries find it astounding that a small nation, with limited military resources, could have defeated the world's most powerful nation. They attribute

their success to the reassurance that they were on justice's side, and to two additional factors that seemed inexplicably to come to their assistance. In the first place, they believe United States military strategy to have been overly optimistic. Why did the military commanders believe that they could blanket the country, fighting, as it were, in all places at all times? General Tra proposed that a more effective stand against his forces would have come from establishing a stronghold, expanding from that stronghold outward, and then maintaining the stronghold against the enemy's attack. But even more important strategically, they were quick to acknowledge that they could not have won the war without the support of the anti-war protesters within the United States. They firmly believe that the majority of the American people did not support their nation's war effort, thus frustrating official governmental intentions. They are also eager to distinguish American warriors from the American government. They are confident, in this regard, that the warriors did what they had to do in support of the government's resolve, but they do not confuse the combatants with the formulators of official governmental policy.

The tone through the three-week discussion was manifestly conciliatory. The Vietnamese admitted that their military forces were indeed

exchanged brief and careful words, raised our eyebrows when something was said that we found arresting, and engaged in other acts of nascent but wary friendship. The breakthrough came after I offered him a rather full supply of American candy bars. Through tears he responded, "Much better to exchange candy than bullets; much better to meet across a conference table than across the battlefield." In succeeding conversations he told me that he had left home when he was 18 years of age to serve in the military, and he did not return for 25 years. Not until then did he learn that his mother had been killed by American bullets. When he left home his sister was 10. When he returned she was a grown woman, the mother of five children. Looking back on the wasted years, the devastation, the misery and sorrow, he concluded: "How very much our two civilizations lacked love for one another."

We Americans visited the tunnels of Cu Chi one afternoon. This is the remarkable underground network of trails and rooms in which Ho's forces took refuge under intensive American bomb attacks. Several miles away we encountered a cemetery of close to 7,000 Vietnamese war dead, one of numerous community cemeteries in a region where loss of life had been extensive. Observing the bomb craters all around, then the

eyes, so I tried to perform a similar mediating technique with buttons. Pointing to a button on my shirt and then to a button on the shirt of two or three of the children, I said "same-same" until they were saying, then singing, it back to me.

This spirit of intended friendship predominated throughout the visit. Wherever we traveled we found people who wanted to practice English. While walking by myself through one village north of Hanoi, I saw two children who were watching me carefully and curiously from the doorway of their house. When I got closer, the little boy smiled and sang "Open the door, Richard—a phrase someone had left behind from the days the Americans were there. I carried two badminton rackets and a shuttle cock, for there was always someone who wanted to play. And with the people with whom we spent most time, we formed close associations and lasting friendships. One night after singing every song we knew, including "You Are My Sunshine" and "Red River Valley," we commented to one another about how much things had changed. "Yes, we were in the army," one of the Vietnamese confided, "and we fought you Americans. But let's never do it again—no more war, no more war!"

One morning I was informed by the people who operated the hotel in which we were staying that I would learn more about Vietnamese life and culture were I to have dinner at a restaurant they recommended. I thanked them for the suggestion, but stayed with the itinerary that had been planned for our group. The next morning the same people told me they were disappointed that I had not come to the restaurant; they said their families had come, expecting to meet me. Sensing that I had been too casual about the original invitation, I told them I would come that evening. When I walked in they showed me to a table in the center of the room that had been decorated with flowers and ribbons. As the dinner was getting started, the restaurant's manager came to the table and, speaking to the entire group, welcomed us warmly, explaining that I was the first American to have dinner there since the ending of the war. As families cheered, the manager said that he wanted to sing a song to me. While he sang, a translator explained to me that he was singing "a Chinese ballad." When he finished, he handed me the microphone. I thanked him and the others who were there.

**'Much better to exchange candy than bullets,' said the man sitting across from me. 'Much better to meet across a conference table than across the battlefield.'**

guilty of hostile retaliatory activity, which, in numerous instances, broke the bonds of civility. They acknowledged that acts were committed of which they are certainly not proud today. What they did, they affirmed, they did under the conditions of war for purposes of repelling an invader. They understood that the Americans were acting out of the same wartime compulsion. But they wanted to relegate all of this to the past. "We are not diehards," a former Viet Cong military leader told me. "When one dwells on the past one becomes old too quickly."

Day after day I sat across the conference table from Tran Thanh Dam, holder of a chair in Vietnamese philology at Ho Chi Minh City University. At first we smiled at each other,

row upon row of grave markers, I chose not to walk through the cemetery, but simply to stand in front of one of the names and ponder what this young man's life had been. Within minutes I was surrounded by children, no one of them, I would judge, more than 10 years of age. They had not witnessed the war but must have been significantly affected by it.

I thought of Jim Garrett, a good friend from the Lakota Nation in South Dakota and a Vietnam vet, who told me about being approached by some children and wondering if one of them might be carrying a weapon. Jim said one of the little boys came right up to him, and said "same-same," pointing to Garrett's eyes and then to his own eyes. My eyes are neither Vietnamese nor Lakota.

Then they wanted a song from me, so (for the first time in my life) I sang the song they requested, the Beatles' "Yesterday." On the day of our departure, I was handed a painting, painted by one of the women from this same group of people, with the explanation that the picture "will help remind you of your Vietnamese family."

I was moved and exhilarated by all of this, but I was always mindful of my American friends—Vietnam vets all—who had given so much of themselves in this beautiful but still sorrow-ridden country. This feeling of deep and abiding sadness became most vivid for me in the Hanoi airport, as our group was preparing to leave. In the waiting room were half a dozen American servicemen in full uniform. They had come to pick up remains (bodies and pieces of bodies) of Americans left behind. This was not the first time they had done this, and several additional such missions have been planned. One of the officers told me, "This is necessary to end the war."

"To end the war," he said, but the fighting stopped in 1975. Why hasn't the war ended? Will Vietnam ever end?

I know numerous vets who have returned to Vietnam, on their own, to end the war. Larry Heinemann, author of *Close Quarters* and *Pace's Story* (which won the 1987 National Book Award for fiction), returned to Vietnam after 22 years to visit the places he had been. In front of a grave of a man named Phuong, who was born the year Heinemann was born and was killed the year Heinemann served in Vietnam, he got down on his knees and left a medal he had earned for bravery. "I imagined that Phuong worked harder than I did, and simply put, deserved it more," Heinemann explained. "And when I stood up, suddenly I was profoundly sad that this man was dead—killed trying to free his country, but dead just the same—sorry that he and I never got a chance to meet."

In another village some Amerasian children confronted the former-warrior-turned-writer with the question, "Are you my daddy?" Unable to respond, Heinemann called it an "unanswerable question, an unsolvable conundrum, an unravellable knot." He observed that "They were none of

them my children and they were all of them mine."

Frederick Downs, Jr., who lost an arm in combat in Vietnam, has been back to the country on numerous occasions as a member of General Vesco's committee. But he didn't experience closure on the war until he invited a former Vietnamese military officer to visit him in his home in the United States. Downs tells of looking from the kitchen as the retired officer is trying to read bedtime stories to Downs's children. One child is sitting on the man's lap; the other is tugging at his pant leg, mimicking his accent. As Downs observes the scene, it strikes him that he would have found the greatest satisfaction, 20 years ago, in "blowing the man away." Now the two of them are in the same house, enjoying dinner together, and playing with the children. Downs's conclusion is that "the war doesn't end until we are able to embrace the enemy."

Bob Kerrey, also severely wounded in Vietnam, returned to the country during the Senate's spring break in 1990. In Hanoi he helped establish a clinic to enable Vietnamese war amputees to be fitted with prosthetic instruments so that they can use their arms and legs again. So personally compelling was this visit for the American Medal of Honor recipient that he returned to the same place, a year later, to continue the work.

There are probably numerous stories of this kind—some known, some not yet known, some being kept private—about veterans who have made the journey back to the place of the war. Various veterans organizations and groups are involved in building hospitals, clinics, and schools for the Vietnamese people. Others have sent delegations there to embark on peace walks throughout the country. But for most of those with whom I have spoken, the desire is simply to return to the setting of those unforgettable formative months of their lives, to vivify the events that shaped their identities, so that they can put the pieces of the narratives of their lives together.

Does Vietnam end this way for them? Does it continue, but in revised mode? I don't know if I

yet know the answer to any of these questions. But having been there myself, I am confident about a few observations.

First, the American men and women who served in Vietnam were as valiant and as heroic as any member of any fighting force at any time in our history. The vast majority of them did not create or formulate the policy that brought them there. Yet they gave of themselves unselfishly, doing their duty as they understood this duty, because they had been summoned. Without question they deserve the nation's highest respect and our heartfelt consideration.

Second, from an educational standpoint, the socio-political lesson must be that when we as a nation do not know sufficiently about the societies and cultures into which we insert ourselves, we may find ourselves, unwittingly and unintentionally, doing less good than harm. And when we are disrespectful of the fact that the enemy is human too, we bring a judgment upon ourselves that is difficult, if not impossible, to eradicate.

Third, the most arresting matter of all is that both sides seem to have been fighting for the same cause. Both sides were motivated by the same truth. Both sides were dedicated to the same objective. Each side fought in defense of the principle that all governmental authority imposed from the outside, no matter with what degree of intended benevolence and good will, must always be subject to the integrity of the collective will of the people. The Vietnamese wished above all to honor this principle. The Americans wished above all to honor this principle. The paradox is

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that it was in defense of this principle that they found themselves waging war against each other. To protect this principle—a principle, his associates attest, he learned most profoundly from Thomas Jefferson—Ho's military forces resisted United States military ventures. We, Jefferson's heirs, were fighting there, so we affirmed, because we believed the fundamental principle to have been wantonly violated by Ho's ambitions. From whichever side the story is told, the plot has the same dynamics, though, of course, the assignment of roles and parts is contrastingly opposite.

So, now that the war is over, since the two sides did indeed agree on the thesis, isn't there basis from which to make amends? Hasn't the time come for the United States and Vietnam to enter a new era together, in full cognizance of the tensions and tragedies of the past, in hopeful dedication to a constructive future?

This, in the long run, is the way the war will end. No, the Americans who fought there did not win the military contest. But it must be remembered that, at least in the beginning, the Americans did not go there to fight; they went to help. And in wanting to help, many of them discovered, as Bob Kerrey has said, that "it is often more difficult to kill for one's country than to die for one's country." Helping was the stated intention, but the fighting intervened. However, now that the fighting is over, the help is still needed, not for charitable motivations but out of enlightened self-interest. The realization of this collective posture is still some distance away. But it may eventually become the most fitting tribute to all who served in Vietnam, on this and all the Veterans Days to come. The effort to which they dedicated their lives, in unanticipated ways, may yet come to fruition. The wisdom they acquired in the process helped create the day wherein the two nations could work and live together on cooperative terms, each discovering a more resilient future because of the other, each now more respectful of life itself by virtue of what they have learned about each other. This is the kernel of truth I brought back with me after experiencing Vietnam for the first time.

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