

Educator: Nation's Pain Keeps Viet War Fresh



The U.S. Senate voted last week 62-38 to recommend that President Clinton lift the trade embargo with Vietnam. The prospect of normal relations between the two countries remains controversial. Since 1979, Walter Capps has taught the nation's largest Vietnam War course. This semester the class is carried nationally by some cable systems.

BY C. DAVID KOTOK
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

Q. It appears that the United States and Vietnam are moving toward normalizing relations 20 years after the last U.S. troops were withdrawn. Why has it taken so long?

A. It is the same question as, Why doesn't the war end? Why, after having Desert Storm and Grenada and Panama, is the Vietnam War still the dominant war? The answer is there is still so much pain, trauma, grief and suffering, both on an individual basis and on the national psyche. It's difficult to know how to bring that kind of event to closure.

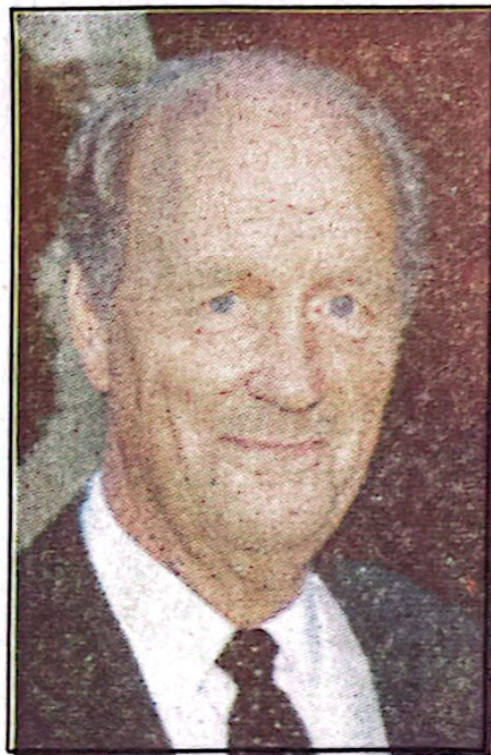
If we had won the war, as in World War II, the suffering and grief could be accommodated more easily. In

addition, the very thought that there are at least 2,300 Americans still missing there, with family members still holding out hope they are still alive, has kept the event alive.

They tell me 40 million Americans have some direct relationship to at least one of the 58,000 names on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington. In some ways I think it is the event that defined the century in the same way that the Civil War gave definition to the 19th.

Q. How does this move fit with the American tradition of rapprochement with past enemies, such as Germany

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Walter Capps

- **Age:** 59
- **Background:** Chairman of the Religious Studies Department at University of California at Santa Barbara; teaches a class on Vietnam; a graduate of Benson High School in Omaha.
- **Education:** Bachelor's degree, Portland State University; master's degree in divinity, Yale University; doctorate, Yale.

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and Japan after World War II?

A. It's different. I have heard it from veterans who say that until we can embrace the enemy the war won't end. In my class I had a veteran who lost a leg in Vietnam. He was the father of one of the students. He looked out at the student body and he saw Vietnamese-Americans there and he said he wanted to welcome them to this country. He wanted to forgive Vietnamese people that he was so angry with and he hoped they would forgive him.

Q. Many veterans groups oppose renewed relations with Vietnam. What impact would normal relations have on Vietnam veterans?

A. First, for the ones who are concerned about MIA-POWs, I think we would have a much better chance to get accurate information.

I think there is a historic dimension to this, that 1994, if this passes, will be the year when, after all the bloodshed, trauma and difficulty, there will be an official ending of hostilities. I think that will help the veterans. They can point to something.

Q. Many Vietnam veterans felt stigmatized after the war. Do you think today it is viewed as a plus or minus to have served in Vietnam?

A. I have to go both ways on that. There is, unfortunately, still the sense that if somebody served in Vietnam there is a likelihood that person is mentally unbalanced or psychologically scarred. There is truth to that. The statistics are that 40 percent of the homeless in Los Angeles County among males of the right age are veterans of the Vietnam War.

But I have also seen a very significant change in attitudes toward veterans. Veterans now don't have to keep secret the fact they served and can hold their heads high.

Q. Is the move to lift the embargo driven by economic concerns and competition for Vietnam markets, particularly against the French and the Japanese?

A. I was there two years ago. That economy has tremendous promise. There are vast resources in that country. If Americans don't get in on it, they will lose out.

Q. How important is the human rights issue to both the veterans and the Vietnamese community in the United States?

A. If the human rights component is not there and honored, I think people will say this lifting of the embargo was driven by economic incentives. The nation will feel cheated because the people who went to Vietnam

went there to assist that country. It would be a terrible aftermath if, after all that blood, sweat and tears, the country was left exactly the way it would have been if the Americans had not been there at all.

The Vietnamese community here is so mixed. I don't see that community coming together yet. Some are so anti-communist that they tell me they want to go back there, do the war over again and win.

Q. Are lifting the embargo and normalization more difficult because of lingering suspicion of President Clinton for avoiding military service during the Vietnam War era?

A. Unfortunately, that is a factor. The veterans I've talked with, even the ones who have come to terms with what happened to them, question whether he fully understands what they, in most cases, chose to go through for the sake of their country.

Q. There have been many pronouncements over the years that the trauma of Vietnam has passed. Has it?

A. No. I don't think it has. The lifting of the embargo is a step in the right direction. The people I know best of all will say to their dying day that the Vietnam experience was among the most primary definitional events in their lives, if not the most. I don't think it will ever go away for the people whose lives were defined by it. But this lifting of the embargo will in the long run make it easier to accommodate their experience.

Q. How do your students, many born after the war ended, view the Vietnam War?

A. In the class of 900, we have 150 who had relatives in the war, and we have about 60 whose dads were there. If you are in college today there is great curiosity about the Vietnam War because you know there is an event back there that had an impact on life today.

The students today are not conflicted by the war in the way the Vietnam War generation was. They don't know if they are hawks or doves.