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Vietnam: North/South and the Party Line

Last July, Will Nguyen, a 32-year-old Vietnamese-American, was convicted of “causing public disorder” in a June 2018 demonstration in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) against controversial plans to create three Special Economic Zones (SEZs), and immediately deported.

SEZs are a popular means of attracting additional foreign direct investment (FDI) that offer land leases for up to 99 years, plus various financial and legal incentives to encourage businesses to invest. As a result of perceived Chinese interest in these long-term projects, they have become a national bone of contention among Vietnamese who are concerned about encroachment on their country’s national sovereignty and were the target of early summer demonstrations in Hanoi and HCMC.

An essay Nguyen wrote earlier in the year for *New Naratif* entitled [North/South](#) offers some insights into his thoughts and actions. He doesn’t waste any time getting down to business with this telling rhetorical salvo: *I’ve always been into the idea of counterparts—‘separate but equal’, to borrow the politically dangerous phrase.*

The date of publication, 30 April, was probably not a coincidence. That is a national holiday in Viet Nam known interchangeably as Reunification, Victory, or Liberation Day. It was the day that Saigon was liberated by the People’s Army of Viet Nam (PAVN) and National Liberation Front (NLF) forces. In the Vietnamese diaspora, of which Nguyen is a second-generation member, the week of 30 April is known as *Black April*.

Toeing the Party Line

In this case, the party line is strict adherence to the US/overseas Vietnamese narrative and consensus. Here are some choice excerpts from the essay (in *italics*) worthy of a counterpoint.

The 1954 Geneva Accords split Vietnam into directional counterparts once more—a communist north versus a democratic south—with nationwide elections set to unify the country in two years' time. Ho Chi Minh was predicted to win. Knowing this, Ngo Dinh Diem declared the formation of an independent southern republic that technically was not signatory to the Geneva Accords and thus un-beholden. The United States supported the non-communist South Vietnamese government, pouring in financial aid. The northern victory in the Vietnam War in 1975 unified the country once more, but different perspectives persist. Depending on who you talk to, 30 April 1975—the day the People's Army of Vietnam and the Viet Cong captured Saigon—is described either as a liberation or an invasion.

Well, yes and no. What is it that Will Nguyen doesn't understand about the part in bold? Was it really simply a matter of agreeing to disagree? Was it right that Ngô Đình Diệm did this, thereby making the 2nd Indochina War inevitable at a cost of nearly 4 million Vietnamese and 58,300 US lives, not to mention war legacies, most of which affect Viet Nam and its people, and retarding the nation's development, to say the least? Diệm did not do this single-handedly; he had some help from his benefactor within whose borders he was plucked from obscurity to be *their* boy in the southern part of what was supposed to be a temporarily divided Viet Nam. His sponsor had provided the lion's share of financial support for the last gasps of French colonialism and, against the advice of no less than Charles De Gaulle, picked up where the French left off.

When they met in May 1961, De Gaulle told John F. Kennedy the [following](#): “You will find that intervention in this area will be an endless entanglement. Once a nation has been aroused, no foreign power, however strong, can impose its will upon it. You will discover this for yourselves. For even if you find local leaders who in their own interests are prepared to obey you, the people will not agree to it, and indeed do not want you. The ideology which you invoke will make no difference. Indeed, in the eyes of the masses it will become identified with your will to power. That is why the more you become involved out there against Communism, the more the Communists will appear as the champions of national independence, and the more support they will receive, if only from despair.” De Gaulle later said that “Kennedy listened to me but events were to prove that I

had failed to convince,” perhaps the understatement of the century for the US and Viet Nam.

Daddy (think *Father Knows Best*) didn't want the national election to take place, an election that President Dwight D. Eisenhower himself said would have resulted in Ho Chi Minh becoming president of a unified Viet Nam. Therefore, Viet Nam remained divided. That is an indisputable historical truth not open to interpretation or spin. In an era of peace, perhaps prosperity would have followed. At a bare minimum, about 4 million human beings, mostly Vietnamese, would have survived the 1960s and early 1970s and the nation's cemeteries wouldn't have so many graves with dates of death from those years.

While I know this sounds like fingernails on a chalkboard to the ears of loyal Republic of Viet Nam (RVN) supporters, young and old, Vietnamese, US and others, who are in denial about history, and while I know the truth can sometimes hurt, I can assure you that 30 April 1975 was and will always and forever be remembered as a joyous day of liberation by the vast majority of Vietnamese. It's only *Black April* in the refugee communities of the Vietnamese diaspora.

Here's another observation that reveals the author's true colors (think three horizontal red stripes on a yellow background):

Even so, it must be acknowledged that the war was a manifestation of North and South both wanting the best for the Vietnamese people while choosing drastically different paths. It would be unforgivably cynical to believe otherwise, to view either government as monolithic entities not made of Vietnamese individuals who loved their country. The root of the conflict stemmed from both sides competing to be the only good. Both the North and the South had causes they believed to be just—a fact which native and overseas Vietnamese have yet to fully accept.

Then color me cynical. Guilty as charged. Unforgiven. Did the RVN leadership, which chose to do the USA's bidding as a Cold War client state and participate in the mistreatment, torture, and slaughter of its own people a la Vietnamese killing Vietnamese, really “want the best” for them? Did they really want the best for those who were not one of them, “them” being Catholic, urban, and pro-US American? Whose cause was just? Which side's actions caused the American War in Viet Nam? Let's stop giving the RVN, which owed its very existence, fleeting as it was, to the money, weapons, and arrogance of the US, a pass. Let's be honest.

On paper and in diplomatic circles, there is only one “true” Vietnam. Although the Republic of Vietnam ceased to exist after 30 April 1975, it lives on in the hearts and minds of millions of Vietnamese who abhor communist totalitarianism. It lives on in its enforced absence within Vietnam’s national discourse. A silent, de facto ban of the yellow flag with three red stripes, of any positive mention of the southern republic, of anything related to the former state is, in a way, perpetuating South Vietnam’s existence. And if history is any indication, the South remembers.

The RVN (“South Viet Nam”) “lives on in the hearts and minds of millions of Vietnamese” who hitched their collective cart to their US senior partner and willingly accepted their second-class status as yet another US client state, a bastard state, if you will, that was illegitimate from day one. Let’s not whitewash history.

The RVN was an authoritarian regime run by a Saigon Catholic clique that had no virtually popular support outside of the metropolis. And the “millions of Vietnamese who abhor communist totalitarianism” but held their noses under a brutal dictatorship that persecuted anti-war Buddhists and tortured and executed its political opponents? A dictionary definition of hypocrisy. The South will die with its remaining refugees, both internal and external. Besides, as mentioned, it wasn’t about “North” and “South” Viet Nam, a division that should have ended in 1956.

There is not a “silent, de facto ban of the yellow flag with three red stripes;” it is illegal to fly that flag just as it is illegal to do the same with the flag of Nazi Germany in the Federal Republic of Germany. Freedom of speech does have its limits. Think shouting “fire!” in a crowded theater or yelling “I’ve got a bomb!” on a passenger jet, to name a few.

Faux Democracy

To call the South “democratic” is disingenuous, at best. It was a democracy on paper only, much like the country to which Will’s parents moved as refugees, the source of their suffering, as Linh Dinh, a fellow Vietnamese-American refugee, writer and poet, noted in his spot-on 2010 essay, *House Slave Syndrome*.

Again, this is part of the Việt kiều (VK: overseas Vietnamese)/US party line that he’s parroting from his parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, et al., *all on the losing side*. In fact, going farther back, some held the distinction of being on two losing sides, first that of the French colonialists and, later, the US Americans neocolonialists. Their fate and punishment were to live the remainder of their lives as refugees and self-imposed exiles in an alien land.

Many of its original supporters were the “errand boys” (and girls) of whom national heroine and resistance fighter, Võ Thị Sáu, spoke before her execution in 1952. The only reason “the modern Vietnamese nation-state existed as two separate entities” is because that is what the US government wanted and, while might doesn’t make right, it can sure help you get what you want whether or not it is just and whether or not you stand on the right side of history.

Ideology vs. Historical Truth

North/South? Unfortunately, for many, the world is not that simple, not that cut-and-dried, and not that black and white. Up is not down, cold is not hot, and evil is not good. Reality is a rich and complex technicolor scene infused with every shade of every color of the rainbow.

Coming full circle to my original point about a binary thinking, some people prefer to inhabit a fantasy world of half-truths and outright lies in a vain effort to justify key components of their world view. Call it the adult Santa Claus Syndrome. Call it the power of ideology. If you confront them with facts and historical truth, in this case, their reaction is anger, resistance and, at times, violence.

To call a spade a spade in the overseas Vietnamese community in the US has sometimes resulted in the bringers of truth being silenced by a bullet, not unlike during the ill-fated days of the artificial entity and faux democracy that was the Republic of Viet Nam, except now Vietnamese blood is being shed on US soil, as this ProPublica account of assassinations entitled *Terror in Little Saigon: [An old war comes to a new country](#)* details. Sadly, Will’s Ivy League education wasn’t very useful in helping him understand this pivotal part of Vietnamese history. (He has a BA in East Asian Studies from Yale University and recently completed a MA in Public Policy at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at NUS, where he studied Vietnamese history, culture, and politics.) It’s abundantly clear that he’s swallowed the US-centric and VK party line, hook, line, and sinker. In fact, if deciphering historical truth were target shooting, his *North/South* essay is proof that Will Nguyen couldn’t hit the broad side of a barn.

“Those Who Do Not Move, Do Not Notice Their Chains.”

My advice to Will Nguyen is this: read more, ask more questions, explore more history through the written word and those of its eyewitnesses. Liberate yourself from the intellectual and emotional shackles of a mindset that is holding you prisoner. Move so that you notice your chains, a reference to Rosa Luxemburg’s famous quote about false

consciousness. If you're ever able to obtain a visa to return to your parent's homeland, talk to more people beyond the narrow confines of your sociopolitical circle.

I can understand why your parents and grandparents believe and live this lie because that part of their lives is a cornerstone without which the entire story and therefore part of their existential *raison d'être* would shatter into a thousand pieces. It explains, in part, who they are and why they ended up in the US and other countries. It's a justification, a rationale, a salve on the still raw pain of dislocation and inner upheaval.

If Humpty Dumpty – as world view and personal identity – were to have a great fall, I'm afraid it would be exceedingly difficult for all of the king's horses and men to put him back together again, especially among older Việt kiều. There are no excuses, however, for members of the younger generation. If they are to move forward, they must think anew and act anew, to paraphrase Abraham Lincoln, who presided over a very different kind of war.

Will Nguyen tweeted on 27 July 2018, "I will never regret helping the Vietnamese people exercise #democracy ...and I will continue to help #Vietnam develop for the rest of my life." For the time being, he will have to act on his savior complex from his home in Houston, TX, one of the nerve centers of the Vietnamese-American community and its ongoing resistance to the legitimate Viet Nam. I'm confident that latter will continue to make significant progress on all levels without Will's help.