

Reconstructing Vietnam War History

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where people are told time and again how much things have improved, and about the number of MOUs that have been signed. The government refuses to acknowledge the extent of the rot that has set-in into the country's economy. For leading members of the government all that now matters is the slice of the commission they make on each deal. A similar myopia is also reflected in the way political problems are being handled.

It is likely that the Benazir Bhutto government will stay on, at least for another couple of years. If it continues to behave as it has in the past, the worst years of general Zia ul-Haq would look like golden age. At the moment, a misguided sense of purpose with utter indifference regarding real issues, epitomises government from Islamabad. There has never been so much despair and despondency felt in this country as seems to be the case at present. People are losing

hope amidst this all pervasive pall of gloom. While the incumbent government in Islamabad is not responsible for this situation alone, it does carry a heavier load. It must begin to rid itself of its arrogance, and look inwards, at issues which affect the people of Pakistan, defining their needs and requirements. Perhaps the government in Islamabad feels that with the army and the president on its side, and with commitment and support from Washington, its future is ensured and that it can look forward to a few more years of greed and irresponsibility. Let them forget, memory of another Bhutto, who's greed, indifference and arrogance caused his downfall, needs to be recalled. The rumbles of the thwarted 'fundamentalist' coup a few weeks ago bring other parallels to life. Surely, for both Benazir and her detractors, there must be a number of lessons here.

In Vietnam, the real debate now revolves around the contents and processes of this proposed conference. At least in four key areas Vietnamese express reservations and caution. Firstly, the format of this proposed meeting expects participants to bring archival material to support their memories of the events. Most archival material in Vietnam is sealed and not that easily accessible. Secondly, though there are many American versions of that war, the Vietnamese allow little variation from the official story. It is not clear as to whether Vietnam would now be prepared to acknowledge some parts of its fumbled diplomacy and failed strategies on their side when its leaders are currently concentrating on national development programmes. Thirdly, Vietnam will be careful not to thoughtlessly feed any new ammunition to the powerful US war veterans lobby which claims that Vietnam is yet to fully account for those US servicemen Missing in Action (MiAs) and Prisoners of War (PoWs) as that might disrupt building normal relations between the US and Vietnam. Fourthly, the communist party of Vietnam will hold its eighth congress in early 1996 and this event is important for the party and the government. One of the greatest challenges faced by the leadership is how to further develop the country and produce a 'road map' which is essential for any long-time national developmental pursuits. In sum, at this stage, party and the government are reluctant to face any new controversies on its thorny – but important – bilateral relationship with the US, and prefers a careful balancing act.

Cold war principles, such as the concept of geo-political grand area of US influence, 'containment' to withhold a constant threat of communist power, and the huge military-industrial complex needed to achieve this, developed naturally as the US-Vietnam conflict progressed. This explains some of the baffling aspects of the American presence in Vietnam. Cold war touched Vietnam with its chill hand as early as the time of the first Indochina war, when the French forces fought the Vietminh, from 1946-54, and in which the US paid approximately 82 per cent of French expenses. Meanwhile, the People's Republic of China, waging its own cold war from the oriental side, supported the Vietminh with massive supplies, thousands of technical advisors, and training camps for Vietnamese troops just across their border; so, the Vietnam war became proxy in nature.

The Pentagon Papers, a big collection of documents outlining the steps by which the US became involved in Vietnam, show clearly that from 1949, when the People's Republic of China was proclaimed, US foreign policy was set to block the further spread of communism in Asia, by force of

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M S Shivkumar

Vietnam's cautious response to the proposed US-Vietnam Conference on war history is prompted by earlier incidents when the CIA tried to blackmail Vietnam to release its wartime documents.

EARLY November 1995, Robert McNamara, US's former state secretary for defence (1961-1968) was in Vietnam. Though he did not offer any public apology for the war 'misdeeds' – he was the highest-ranking US official from the war era to return and meet his former foes. (However in the recently published war-time memoirs McNamara asserted that in continuing the Vietnam conflict the US was "wrong, terribly wrong"). In general, he was favourably received in comparison to Vietnam's previous foes, the French, saying that none of them came back to acknowledge past mistakes. McNamara's agenda for this visit was simple: to promote a bilateral conference to exchange information about Vietnam war strategy and learn as to why early peace initiatives failed, i.e., examine the reasons which led to the war, why it was not possible to end it early, (and) what necessary lessons one can draw from it. Key actors in the conflict are expected meet to in the conference. This conference is organised by the New York-based Council on Foreign Relations of which McNamara is a member. To solicit support for this event, McNamara met some of the high-ranking party and defence officials of Vietnam including General Vo Nguyen Giap, who lead the Viet Cong to successfully plot the defeat of the US and its allies.

McNamara was a peace dove all through his stay in Hanoi; for example, he repeatedly asked his audience; "The 20th century was the bloodiest century. One hundred sixty million human beings were killed by war between nations and among nations. Is it what we wish to repeat in the 21st century? Could not each of our nations realise their political objectives without that horrible slaughter?". He reasoned that to fulfil those objectives the proposed conference would require major efforts to put together a documentary base. For the conference to be purposeful, McNamara even offered to ship all the documents that he has in his possession to Vietnam and pleaded for counterpart documents.

Giap and government officials welcomed the proposed conference on the US-Vietnam conflict but remained non-committal as to what extent Vietnam would participate. Vietnam official media was also guarded in its comments. Despite extending a warm reception to McNamara, Vietnamese newspapers and electronic media said little about the purpose of his visit, perhaps because the party leaders could not decide how to explain it to their veterans who felt overlooked in the new drive for economic development, on the merits of such collaborative discussions.

arms, if need be. So the US policy-makers did not notice the charisma that the personality of Ho Chi Minh had for the Vietnamese people. The messages of history went unheeded, too. The Vietnamese had had, before modern times, 2,000 years in which to perfect the skills of fighting off invaders. The national reverence for ancestors, a tradition of centuries was still powerful at the time of the war with the US, and could cause the Vietnamese to fight to the death for a place where their ancestors were buried - such factors were overlooked. But many key decisions by the US administration were taken based on the cold war scenario and expectations. Viewed in that context, obviously this proposed conference would be of immense value for Vietnam War and cold war period historians and analysts, as the evolution of that conflict was apparently the result of errors in judgment. However, Vietnam is alert in responding to the requests, especially after its recent experience, i.e. Stephen Morris incidents, 1993, to share counterpart documents with the US.

In the spring of 1993, a dramatic discovery seemed poised to revive the excitement on the PoWs/MiAs issue. Harvard researcher Stephen J Morris announced that he had unearthed an old Soviet document proving that about 700 American PoWs had been left behind in Vietnam. Morris had found that document in Moscow, in Soviet Communist Party archives. It was purportedly the transcript of a 1972 speech by Vietnamese army lieutenant general Tran Van Quang before the North Vietnamese politburo. In the speech, Quang said that Hanoi had held 1,205 PoWs at a time when it admitted holding only 368.

When Morris announced his discovery, he did not use the cautious language generally favoured by researchers; instead, he spoke unequivocally, declaring his find authentic. And relatives of PoWs/MiAs returned to Washington hoping for an US intervention in rescuing their near and dear ones. Yet there was much to suspect about the Quang document discovered by Morris and the report was eventually determined to be a forgery.

For example, this document contended that after the US failed in an attempt to rescue its prisoners at Son Tay, North Vietnam increased the number of its prisons from four to eleven. In truth, though North Vietnam was so shaken after Son Tay event that it in fact decreased, not increased, the number of its prison camps. The document also said that there was a secret secondary camp system in which prisoners were held according to rank. One such camp supposedly held a hundred colonels. But nowhere that number of colonels was ever

held captive, let alone in a special prison. The document has other inconsistencies, as well, including numbers and ranks for PoWs that did not correspond with pentagon figures. Many even suspected that the document was most likely Soviet-generated propaganda.

In June 1994, two independent researchers, Susan Katz Keating and Bruce Franklin, in separate but complementary efforts, convincingly established that the Quang document forgery was actually the work of CIA. The agency created the document as part of an effort to force Vietnam to release additional information on MiAs (and ultimately place Vietnam government in an awkward situation, giving an upperhand to the US). The CIA specifically wanted a copy of the Vietnamese 'Blue Book', a handwritten record of the wartime whereabouts and eventual fate of American PoWs. The phony and inflammatory Quang document was deliberately placed where an unwitting Morris would find it. The spy agency gambled that Morris would publicise the document and that the Vietnamese would go to great lengths to prove it false. The ploy worked. Soon after the Quang document was made public, Vietnamese officials gave CIA a copy of the coveted 'Blue Book' (for more details see *Prisoners of Hope, Exploiting the PoW/MiA Myth in America*, by Susan K Keating, Random House, 1994; and *MIA or Mythmaking in America* by Bruce Franklin, Rutgers University Press, 1994).

The Morris incident merely exposed as to how the issues could be fabricated and then converted into powerful myths. It also adds credence to the argument that illegal operations to obtain more documents on the war that was authorised by president Reagan,

the role of **Ross Perot** and the 1991-1992 senate investigations into MiA/PoWs issue all were simply meant to harass Vietnam. In addition, it demonstrated the vulnerability of Vietnam to any threat from the US war veterans lobby and the US government. For Vietnam, such experiences were recent and the journey towards reconciliation with the US and its allies is torturous.

In short, McNamara, however honest, is probably (and may be unintentionally too) trying to rip open the scab on the Vietnam wound, and what we discover is that underneath that scab there had been very little real healing. The Vietnam war remains a deep and festering wound in the psyche of America. In addition, over time, Vietnam has become a cottage industry in the US. It is an industry with many varied organisations, leaders, spokespeople and interest groups. It is an industry which has managed to set the framework for any debate regarding Vietnam. It is an industry that vilifies those who have been supportive in moving forward with Vietnam. And yes, it is an industry that also vilifies those who have been obstacles to normalisation. We realise that though the US government has normalised its relationship with Vietnam - through extraordinary work in building bridges of peace and friendship with the Vietnamese people - it has failed to build those same bridges in the American society. It is going to take much more than a president normalising relations with Vietnam. In that sense, for those engaged in the Vietnam War debate a new line of questioning may be helpful, for as W H Auden has said:

We know the answers, we know all the answers
It is the questions that we do not know.

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