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Vietnam Revisited During Trump's Bonkers Brinkmanship

By Jack Heyman
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I returned to Vietnam in April, having not been there since the war, nearly 50 years ago. I'd sailed there as a seaman in the National Maritime Union (NMU) on a cargo ship carrying war materiel from the naval ammo base in Port Chicago, California. Having been active in the anti-war movement before the merchant marine, I was reluctant to go to Vietnam. Popular chants in the anti-war demonstrations in the '60's were "Hell No, We Won't Go!" and "Ho Ho Ho Chi Minh, the NLF is Gonna Win!" At Penn State I burned my draft card in 1965 along with several others including Andy Stapp, who had organized the anti-war American Serviceman's Union. That same year Marxist philosopher Isaac Deutscher, underscoring the power of the working class, said in a speech at Columbia University that he'd give a thousand of the mushrooming student anti-war protests for just one, solid workers strike against the war in Vietnam.

A Trotskyist seaman in the union convinced me that an individualistic act of refusing to sail to Vietnam wouldn't stop the war, that revolutionaries should go with the working class youth, that our task was to organize within the military and the trade unions to fight to stop the war. My father's family was steel mill workers from Steelton, Pennsylvania, and my mother's family had fled the Nazis in Vienna. Her mother who I adored was a socialist. So, it wasn't difficult to convince me of a working class perspective. Soon, a seaman's job on the S.S. Hoosier State was on the board at the union hall in San Francisco, destination: Vietnam. I took it.

While on duty on lookout one night on the bow halfway across the pond, I heard on my short wave radio that Ho Chi Minh had died. At the time he was my hero. So, I cut a piece of black cloth the next day and wore it on my shirt. When questioned about it by crew members, I explained that I was honoring Ho Chi Minh, the “George Washington of Vietnam” who led the independence struggle against the Japanese in WWII, then the French colonialists and now the American imperialists. It was my initial foray into organizing against such wars in the trade union movement.

Crew members responded with interest. But my biggest surprise came from a bar girl at the Peace Hotel in Danang who questioned me about the black ribbon. I told her it was to commemorate Uncle Ho, leader of the liberation forces. She said, “You, an American, support Viet Cong?” Then she leaned over and whispered, “I give money to VC.”

Later I learned that Vietnamese Communists—both Stalinists and Trotskyists—worked together in the 1930’s, but later Ho’s Viet Minh arrested and killed Trotskyists. After WWII, Ho’s Viet Minh welcomed the British troops to Vietnam and sought U.S. recognition of their independence. Instead, Truman sent U.S. freighters, manned by unionized merchant seamen, to transport French troops to re-colonize the newly-declared independent republic of Vietnam in collaboration with the British and defeated Japanese military. These imperialist coalition forces bombed Haiphong and Hanoi to pave the way for re-colonization that provoked the war of national liberation and social revolution.

Little did I know in 1969 that NMU merchant seamen on board those ships were the first to protest the “imperialist policies of foreign governments... in Vietnam” in 1945. The NMU, then the largest maritime union with 100,000 members, and the International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union (ILWU), both influenced by the Communist Party, had played a leading role in the militant Congress of Industrial Unions (CIO).

But it wasn’t until May Day 2008, forty years later, that I experienced the power of that class struggle strategy, mobilizing the working class against imperialist war. The ILWU shutdown all West Coast ports to protest the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. It was the union’s Vietnam veterans who spoke passionately for strike action that inspired other union members and prevailed at the union meeting despite contrary sentiments of the union leadership. That illegal strike was the first by American workers against an imperialist U.S. war.

Carpet Bombing, Napalm, Agent Orange and Massacres

When I arrived in Hanoi last month, I had arranged to meet former U.S. Army Military Intelligence Specialist Chuck Searcy, now a leading member of Veterans for Peace in Vietnam. The day before we met at the Metropole Hotel (where Joan Baez stayed during the American Christmas bombing of 1972). He lives in Hanoi, speaks Vietnamese and coordinates work with Project Renew to remove unexploded ordinances (UXO’s). Just the day before a 500 lb. unexploded bomb had been found in Quang Tri province between Hue, the ancient capital, and the DMZ. It was safely removed by the Vietnamese mobile team of Project Renew.

The U.S. dropped more than 7 million tons of bombs on Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, more than twice the amount dropped in Europe and Asia in all of World War II. Many remain unexploded. Chuck Searcy said that the equivalent of 8 atomic bombs were dropped around the DMZ. Over 40,000 Vietnamese, 20,000 Laotians and a similar number of Cambodians have been killed by UXO's since 1975, the end of the war. During the American war in Southeast Asia, 3 million people were killed in Vietnam, 1 million in Laos and another 1 million in Cambodia, a total of 5 million people. The Vietnam Veterans War Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C. has 58,307 names of U.S. military killed in Vietnam and is 247 feet long. If a wall were built for those Vietnamese, Laotians and Cambodians killed in the war it would be over 4 miles long.

On top of the barbaric use of the toxic defoliant dioxin or Agent Orange 400,000 people were killed or maimed, a half a million children for over 3 generations have been born with serious birth defects and 2 million people suffer from cancer and other serious illnesses. The Veterans for Peace (VFP) are doing a yeoman's job of cleaning up that poison in the Danang area.

Perhaps what most aroused anti-U.S. anger around the world was the horrific images of children running naked after being seared by napalm and the pictures of the My Lai massacre with bloody bodies of dead babies, mothers, children and elderly strewn along a dirt road, a horror story exposed by Seymour Hersh. Nick Turse's well-researched book *Kill Anything That Moves* from recently declassified Pentagon files on the American war in Vietnam, documents how such massacres occurred all over South Vietnam. The Pentagon demanded higher body counts of the Viet Cong. Pentagon brass considered anyone living in VC-controlled villages, babies included, as foes. None of the Pentagon brass was ever charged with war crimes. All of these war crimes are meticulously and graphically documented in the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, originally called the American War Crimes Museum. The name was changed to placate American tourists.

The bold January 1968 Tet Offensive, by Vietcong sappers and militia along with the North Vietnamese Army, launched a coordinated attack in several cities that belied the Pentagon propaganda that the U.S. was winning the war. In the Tet Offensive the U.S. Embassy in Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) was occupied by the Viet Cong for several hours, according to Chuck Searcy who was based there. The U.S. military and South Vietnamese army lost control of several cities temporarily. Hue was held for a month by insurgents, many of them university students. It only fell after a massive U.S. bombardment of the ancient capital, destroying much of that archeological site.

Ironically, one of the first casualties of the American war in Vietnam occurred in 1964 in Halong Bay which nowadays is full of tour boats. After President Johnson claimed (falsely as it was later shown) that North Vietnam attacked an American destroyer in the Gulf of Tonkin, the U.S. "retaliated" by bombing the main port Haiphong and nearby beautiful Cat Ba Island in Halong Bay which is of no military significance.

If Air Force General Curtis LeMay had his way, he declared, the U.S. would have won the war by using nuclear bombs in Vietnam. Before that he had advocated dropping atomic bombs on Cuba and North Korea. No wonder North Korea felt the need to develop nuclear arms for

defense. In the 1968 elections, LeMay (Kubrick's Dr. Strangelove) ran for Vice President with racist Alabama Governor George Wallace.

Kicking the “Vietnam Syndrome”

Massive protests erupted and grew to the end of the war and afterwards leaving a strong distaste of wars for empire. George H. W. Bush inveighed against the “Vietnam Syndrome”, honing the American sword for the next war. Over a hundred years ago Mark Twain, a fervent member of the Anti-Imperialist League, had warned in the wake of the Spanish American War that democracy and empire are irreconcilable. Karl Marx had already analyzed capitalism's highest stage of imperialism, recognizing that as a natural consequence of the tendency of the falling rate of profit imperialist countries are compelled to seek new markets through coercive trade agreements or war, if necessary. At the museum in the village of My Lai, there's a film on that massacre pointing out the relevance of the Vietnam War to the wars in the Middle East today.

While I was in Hanoi, President “Make the Empire Great Again” Trump reversed his electoral “isolationist” foreign policy after increasing the military budget. He hitched onto the trajectory of liberal hawk of Hillary Clinton. In rapid succession he sent a flurry of Tomahawk cruise missiles hitting an air base in Syria used by the Russians while accusing, without any evidence, the Assad regime of a deadly chemical attack on civilians in ISIS-occupied territory. Then the U.S. military dropped the “mother of all bombs” on ISIS tunnels in Afghanistan, where the Taliban control half of the country. Now, he's threatening nuclear-armed North Korea with a U.S. naval armada. Elected Democrats in Congress supported the bombing of Syria, were essentially silent on the “Mother of All Bombs” dropped on Afghanistan and criticized Trump for misstating that he was sending the U.S. “naval armada” toward North Korea when it was heading away, implying that he was not acting sufficiently militaristic enough against a nuclear-armed country. Over 3 million Koreans died in the other American war in East Asia.

President Eisenhower warned Americans about the danger of the “military-industrial complex”. But this is the same Eisenhower who prepared the Bay of Pigs invasion (carried out by Democrat Kennedy) in a failed attempt to crush the Cuban Revolution. In fact, it is not just a particular pressure group but U.S. imperialism that has carried out military interventions continuously since the end of WW II, under Democrats and Republicans alike, using the cover of “American exceptionalism”. The Pentagon now has American troops stationed in 150 countries. Is it any wonder when you google which country is the greatest threat to world peace the answer is the United States? (Except for Breitbart!)

Is Vietnam A Failing Revolution?

When the Vietnamese Revolution triumphed in 1975, it was not only a civil war of national reunification but also a social revolution replacing the U.S. puppet capitalist regime in South Vietnam with what Trotskyists call a deformed workers state, a social gain but a bureaucratically-run state. It was a stunning defeat for imperialism. Liberals and Nixon cried “No more Vietnams,” but the victory of the Vietnamese Revolution inspired struggles from southern Africa to Central America.

Author Viet Thanh Nguyen's novel *The Sympathizer* portrays American exceptionalism as delusional. His protagonist is a Vietnamese Communist counterintelligence agent in the U.S. after the victorious Vietnam Revolution. Ultimately, he himself is imprisoned and tortured in Vietnam by the Stalinist regime. His jailers sadistically interrogate him, "What is more important than independence and freedom?" Viet shows the dark, repressive side of the Vietnamese state, but he maintains that revolution is still necessary. So, what *is* happening in Vietnam today?

When I was in Danang in 1969, soldiers and seamen used to take R & R on China Beach, hang out at the bars and drink Saigon tea with the bar girls. Today, it has been replaced with miles and miles of upscale hotels on China Beach being built for wealthy tourists. It's a new American invasion, this time not by troops but by capital. Surprisingly, the mantra of many young Vietnamese who didn't live through the war is "We need to forget about the past and look to the future." As the Spanish philosopher George Santayana remarked, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

I talked to Le Phan Linh, president of the 30,000 member Vietnam National Shipping Lines Workers' Union (VWU). I asked why crews on the tourist boats in Halong Bay and the Mekong River were not being organized by the union. (The communist-led NMU was begun with a strike on a passenger ship, then organized all ships.) He said his union only organized cargo vessels and if seamen on tourist vessels wanted a union they could join a local union. The seamen onboard the passenger vessels that I talked to had no union and some didn't even know what a trade union was. Mr. Le explained that Vietnam was a poor country, that foreign investment was important. Apparently, workers in the tourist industry—on tour boats and luxury hotels— are not being organized.

The Vietnam General Confederation of Labor (VGCL) is the only union federation recognized by the government and the restrictive labor code makes it difficult to strike. Yet, over the last 12 years there have been militant, wildcat and sit-down strikes. The Australian Green Left Weekly (Dec. 10, 2003) poignantly reported: "In Vietnam's precarious balance between mobilising private and foreign capital to help develop the war-ruined country and trying to maintain a dominant state-owned sector and a 'socialist orientation', the role of organised labour is crucial in stopping "market forces" from undermining labour standards."

In 2006, 350,000 workers were involved in 541 strikes in factories mainly owned by foreign capitalists from Hong Kong, South Korea, Taiwan and Japan. 5 years later wildcat strikes over wages and working conditions nearly doubled to 981. Even the U.S. State Department conceded that the Vietnamese government tolerated strikes and not only didn't punish the strikers but often mediated contract settlements in the workers' favor. In some cases the government even penalized employers for illegal practices that provoked the strikes.

Now, the Vietnamese government is caught in a dilemma. It seeks to attract foreign investment based on low wages and political stability. Yet, with the average monthly wage of \$145, lower than most South East Asian countries, workers are organizing to increase their wages and working conditions. With the run-up to the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), the state harassed and imprisoned some strike leaders. Independent unions are seen as a threat.

I asked why in Cuba socialized medicine and free education are the hallmarks of their revolution, yet in Vietnam workers had to pay for health care and schooling. He explained that there were major changes in the Vietnamese economy in the 1990s, the period of enhanced neo-liberal capitalist trade agreements. The Communist Party of Vietnam decided to follow that path and attract foreign capital in an attempt ostensibly to raise the low standard of living of workers. Yet, they don't tax foreign investors sufficiently to cover the expenses of health care, education and other social needs for fear of discouraging investments. Instead workers complain that they have to shoulder the cost of these social needs which should be free under socialism. Moreover, the Vietnam government favors the TPP that was resoundingly rejected by American workers. Such glaring contradictions will have to be resolved in favor of the working class or the social gains of the Vietnamese revolution will be torn asunder not by brute military force but by the capitalist behemoth.