

TWO SIDES ON “NORMAL:” A COMPARISON OF EIGHT VIEWS ON U.S.  
RAPPROCHEMENT WITH VIETNAM, 1989-1995

By

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **TWO SIDES ON “NORMAL:” A COMPARISON OF EIGHT VIEWS ON U.S. RAPPROCHEMENT WITH VIETNAM, 1989-1995**

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This thesis is a comparative study of the views of eight entities regarding the prospect of normalization of diplomatic relations between the United States and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam from 1989-1995. It first describes the views and actions of five entities in favor of normalization. These include the four US presidential administrations from Carter to Clinton, the Vietnamese Communist Party, the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs (1991-1993), US Senators John McCain and John Kerry, and US businesses. It then examines the views and actions of three entities opposed to normalization. These include Ann Mills Griffiths, the Executive Director of the National League of POW/MIA Families; Texas billionaire Ross Perot; and politicians such as Robert Dornan and Vietnamese Americans from Orange County, California.

By using a comparative approach, this thesis identifies several strange political alliances and enmities that would not have been clear in a more linear history. It includes a review of Vietnamese Communist Party documents that challenges some of the conclusions of the earliest diplomatic histories about normalization. It uses primary sources from key Senate Hearings to challenge elements of cultural histories about the myth of live US prisoners of war abandoned in Southeast Asia, and it personalizes the views of Ann Mills Griffiths and some Vietnamese Americans to give better context to their ardent opposition to normalization.

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## INTRODUCTION

The history of normalization between two erstwhile enemies, the United States and what is now known as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) has yet to merit fractional representation among the host of textbooks and histories of the Vietnam War that grace the shelves of libraries across the United States and undoubtedly, the libraries of Vietnam. Many short chapters or sections can be found tacked on to the end of books on the memory of the Vietnam War or as a poignant epilogue to what was undoubtedly a most troubling period for both nations. While there are several complete works devoted to the history of the events leading up to the formal establishment of diplomatic relations on July 12, 1995, the majority of these were written by participants in the events themselves or are devoted to explaining the diplomatic context of the events.

While perhaps not unique to this event, the progress made towards normalization by successive US presidential administrations, beginning with Jimmy Carter, provided an ongoing opportunity for diplomats, pundits, historians, businessmen, Prisoner of War/Missing in Action (POW/MIA) advocates, Vietnamese Americans, veterans, concerned citizens, and politicians to hypothesize on the meaning of normalization well before the event occurred. The events preceding normalization included a series of government reports and investigations from 1976 forward that all expressed skepticism about the possibility of live POWs or US Soldiers Missing in Action in Southeast Asia.<sup>1</sup> They encompassed the 1986 death of the Vietnamese Communist Party Secretary General Lê Duẩn and the subsequent political reforms and Politburo shakeup in

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1. For the duration of this thesis I will generally use the unfortunate conflation of these two terms – POW/MIA as it relates to US concern for the fate of those unaccounted-for after the Vietnam War. This conflation has been written about extensively by H. Bruce Franklin, and Michael J. Allen. The series of government reports will be addressed later in the body of this thesis.

Vietnam.<sup>2</sup> The 1989 Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia partially removed an obstacle to normalization during both the Carter and Reagan Administrations. The fall of the Berlin Wall that same year and the subsequent demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 arguably isolated Vietnam both politically and economically, generating new foreign policy initiatives not only for the US and SRV, but globally. A series of bizarre discoveries related to the possibility of live POW/MIAs in Southeast Asia in both 1991 and 1993 forced further US investigation and sustained the popular belief of a US government cover-up.<sup>3</sup>

Despite these many fits and starts, from 1989 to 1995 there were markers in place which could at least demonstrate progress towards normalization, if not the “ripeness” that some diplomats later claimed was responsible for eventual rapprochement between the US and Vietnam. The *Final Interagency Report of the Reagan Administration on the POW/MIA Issue in Southeast Asia* of 1989 which, like government reports before and after it, not only found it unlikely that Americans were being imprisoned against their will in Southeast Asia, but also absorbed some of the political consequences of such a conclusion for Reagan’s successor, George H.W. Bush. Bush’s inaugural address included the remark now ubiquitously cited regarding the legacy of the Vietnam War, namely that, “the final lesson of Vietnam is that no great nation can long afford to be sundered by a memory.” What follows, “a new breeze is blowing, and the old bipartisanship must be made new again,” is almost as universally left out, a

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2. Diacritics for Vietnamese names, places and words will be provided when known or reasonably ascertained. They will be omitted for Vietnamese-American names if spelled in the original text without diacritics.

3. The two events were the publication in major US newspapers of a series of photos that appeared to be live POWs in Southeast Asia in July 1991 and the discovery by Australian scholar Stephen Morris of documents in Soviet archives seeming to prove that North Vietnam had held back hundreds of prisoners after Operation Homecoming in 1973. The photos were proved bogus and the documents unreliable. Edwin Martini, *Invisible Enemies: The American War on Vietnam, 1975-2000* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 170, 185-86; Lewis M. Stern, *Defense Relations Between the United States and Vietnam: The Process of Normalization, 1977-2003* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, 2005), 26.

particularly disappointing omission considering the enormous significance of bipartisanship to the ongoing efforts to establish ties with the SRV.<sup>4</sup>

Bush, through Secretary of State James Baker, provided the Vietnamese with a “Roadmap” towards normalization in April 1991 that, while frustrating for the SRV, at least demonstrated willingness to establish diplomatic ties if the Vietnamese provided the *quid pro quo* of forward progress on a Cambodian peace settlement and expanded cooperation on the recovery of POW/MIA investigations. Some degree of good faith was established that same month in the form of US prosthetic donations for Vietnamese amputees and was maintained by the efforts of the new personnel in the 7<sup>th</sup> National Party Congress seated in the SRV in June. A mere six months later, and during an ongoing investigation of a Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs that had been convened after the publication of photos appearing to depict live US prisoners in Southeast Asia, Bush allowed some businesses to sign tentative contracts in the SRV. By April of 1992, Bush had eradicated existing restrictions for telecommunication with Vietnam and allowed Vietnamese Americans to begin sending money directly to their relatives.

The conclusion of the Senate Select Committee convened in 1991 to investigate, yet again, the possibility of live POWs in Southeast Asia, found that “no compelling evidence suggests the possibility that a POW may have survived to the present,” was published in January 1993. This report served as a critical, and perhaps final turning point for the POW/MIA issue

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4. George H.W. Bush’s inaugural address is cited directly from <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/george-hw-bush-inaugural-address-1989/> but cannot be avoided in any survey of literature related to the memory of the Vietnam War or establishing diplomatic ties. See for example David E.W. Reed, “U.S.-Vietnam Relations: The Domestic Context of Normalization.” PhD diss., University of South Carolina, 1996; H. Bruce Franklin, *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies* (Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 26; Robert D. Schulzinger, *A Time for Peace: The Legacy of the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 43; Michael J. Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs and the Unending Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 261. Bi-partisanship will be addressed in the section on John McCain and John Kerry.

that had dogged efforts to normalize relations from the end of the Vietnam war. The newly-inaugurated Clinton, with support not only from veterans like John Kerry and John McCain on the Select Committee itself, but also from other veteran organizations, was able to overcome opposition from the National League of POW/MIA Families (the League) and other POW/MIA activists to remove existing US-led barriers to international lending to the SRV in July 1993. This progress towards normalization, albeit choppy, was recognized and appreciated by the SRV's Deputy Prime Minister Phan Văn Khải and followed by a 62-38 Senate vote to lift the longstanding embargo between the two nations in late January 1994, a move approved by Clinton a mere week later. Ongoing resistance to normalization by the League and some veteran groups was in some cases whittled away by including such entities on trips to Vietnam that same year. After the embargo was lifted, League representatives visited Vietnam in March, and leaders from several veteran organizations did so in July. While the League's opposition was never diluted, by the time Clinton officially announced normalization in July 1995, some of the largest veteran groups either supported normalization or at least stopped resisting it. When Clinton made his announcement, he did so with the outspoken support of key Vietnam vets in Congress such as McCain, Kerry, Bob Kerrey and others.<sup>5</sup>

This thesis does not attempt to narrate the brief history outlined above in a linear methodology. It rather employs a comparative approach of eight entities and their perspectives and actions regarding the possibility of normalizing relations between the two countries. Most of these entities played important roles in advocating for or against normalization. Those generally viewed as favorable towards normalization include the four presidential administrations from

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5. Stern, *Defense Relations*, 28, 42; Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 286. Although this thesis will not attempt a detailed recreation of normalization, many more details on key events leading up to normalization are available in the Appendix.

Carter to Clinton who played some role in moving the proverbial ball forward; the 1991-1993 Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs on which both John McCain and John Kerry served; and businesses who successfully lobbied for increased corporate access to the growing market in the SRV, which was itself a qualified advocate of normalized relations. Those who opposed normalization include Ann Mills Griffiths, the long-time director of the National League of POW/MIA Families, who remained a vocal opponent of normalization before, during and after it occurred. Ross Perot is included as an opponent of normalization as well. This is not because his views on the subject were necessarily well articulated, but rather because some historians have attributed his 1992 entrance into the election as vitally connected to his influence within the POW/MIA community, which was generally opposed to normalization. If, as some have assessed, Bush lost the 1992 election due to Perot's entrance into the race, it would thus seem that the relationships between Perot, the POW/MIA movement, normalization, and George H.W. Bush's loss may deserve more attention than it has received thus far. My final section moves from people to a place – examining the nearly unanimous political opposition to normalization by Orange County California's House Representatives and the county's most outspoken Vietnamese Americans. By using a comparative rather than a linear approach, this thesis attempts to outline strange alliances between those for and against establishing diplomatic relations with Vietnam.

This approach has necessitated consulting several historical genres, each of which have helped balance the claims of others. The clear majority of the secondary sources I have consulted are written by Anglophones and are typically US centric, even when, ironically, they complain of the invisibility of Vietnam. The Vietnamese sources I have consulted are compendiums of Vietnamese diplomatic efforts or Communist Party policy papers. My inability,



due to time and mobility constraints, to delve deeply into both Vietnamese and Vietnamese American newspapers is an acknowledged shortcoming of this thesis, and would be one of the first rectified were it to become a monograph. I am grateful to the likes of Lewis Stern, David W.P. Elliott and Carlyle Thayer for their efforts to dig into Vietnamese sources related to normalization.

The genre setting the earliest parameters for the subject of normalization are what I call diplomatic histories, several of which were written even before normalization transpired. These histories were usually written by US State Department officials either involved in or familiar with the history of the lengthy process of rapprochement with Vietnam. Some of these writers, such as Frederick Z. Brown, have been ongoing contributors to normalization studies by not only writing books themselves, but submitting chapters or essays to anthologies or other works related to normalization or foreign affairs.<sup>6</sup>

Such works established the first narratives around which normalization has since been discussed historiographically. This thesis gently probes at several of these narratives. It examines the validity of the trope of “ripeness” – the idea that the end of the Cold War and the desire of the Great Powers (especially the US, USSR, and China) to seek better relationships with each other finally allowed a settlement of the 1979-1989 war between Cambodia and Vietnam. Since this war, according to diplomatic histories, precluded relations between the US and Vietnam, it was a “ripe” geopolitical situation that eventually allowed Vietnam and the US to mend fences. These histories also tend to emphasize Hanoi’s political and economic isolation,

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6. These essays include, among others, Frederick Z. Brown, “Rapprochement with Vietnam,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 32, No. 3, *America Re-engages Southeast Asia* (December 2010): 317-42; Brown, “The United States and Vietnam: Road to Normalization.” In *Honey and Vinegar: Incentives, Sanctions, and Foreign Policy*, eds. Richard Haass and Meghan L. O’Sullivan (Brookings Institute, 2010): 137–158. The full-length books by Brown and Richard Solomon are in the next footnote.

resulting in a portrayal of Vietnam as a needy *demandeur* of normalization. Such histories were most helpful in establishing the basic policy concerns of successive presidential administrations regarding Vietnam, but have, ironically, obscured some of the heavy lifting done by politicians in both countries to overcome the significant resistance to normalization typically found in conservative political blocs. This thesis confronts the idea of ripeness, but does not investigate the claims of diplomatic histories about the importance of the war in Cambodia. I have found that the claims of such histories about the POW/MIA issue being the chief obstacle to normalization for the US to be accurate and generally well-established in other genres.<sup>7</sup>

Several other works which could be considered diplomatic histories deserve specific mention outside of the parameters mentioned above, however. Lewis Stern's *Defense Relations Between the U.S. and Vietnam* makes a heroic effort to examine policies from the perspectives of both the US and the SRV regarding normalization in what are two thick introductory chapters preceding the main subject of his book – military to military contacts. A key contribution in these chapters is the explanation of how the meaning of normalization changed over two decades for the SRV. While during the Carter Administration, Vietnam was intent on proving its independence, Stern points out that as the Soviet Union weakened, normalization became less about sovereignty than it was about ending Vietnam's relative isolation. Stern, however, softens the portrayal of Vietnam as the *demandeur* by also observing that normalization with the US was not among Hanoi's primary diplomatic objectives. Robert Schulzinger's 2006 *A Time for Peace*

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7. Among these diplomatic histories are Steven Hurst, *The Carter Administration and Vietnam* (New York: MacMillan Press, 1996); Richard H. Solomon, *Exiting Indochina: U.S. Leadership of the Cambodia Settlement & Normalization of Relations with Vietnam* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2000); Frederick Z. Brown, *Second Chance: The United States and Indochina in the 1990s* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1989); Desaix Anderson's book *An American in Hanoi: America's Reconciliation with Vietnam* (White Plains, New York: EastBridge, 2002) provides a firsthand, ex post facto apologetic for normalization, describing how quickly the two countries have become friends, and downplaying Vietnam's ties to Marxism-Leninism by emphasizing the "wonderfully warm, brilliant smile" of the Vietnamese living in "this exotic and uniquely tortured nation," 10-11.

should not be cast as a diplomatic history per se, but is included among them as it provides a balanced attempt to not only elaborate on the Vietnam War's memory in the US, but also explain the "effects" that such memories "have had on current events," to include diplomacy. While I would argue that Schulzinger falls just short in describing the *effects* on current events, his attempts to include the views of veterans and Vietnamese Americans on normalization nevertheless provided a starting point for this paper's attempts to include the viewpoints of these two groups.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps the most interesting genre that contributed to this paper are POW/MIA histories. These books invariably describe the deleterious effect that the belief that live POWs were abandoned in Southeast Asia has had on US culture and society. The earliest, and perhaps most prescient, as it was published before the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs concluded, is H. Bruce Franklin's *M.I.A. or Mythmaking in America*. Franklin's book is dedicated "to all those who have been trying for decades to stop this war," and reads very much like an "orthodox" book on the US conflict with Vietnam. It, like Michael Allen's 2007 *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, is generally sympathetic to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam's efforts to normalize, heavily emphasizes US military atrocity and government duplicity during and after the war, speaks of South Vietnam as a US "puppet government" or "client state," and includes rather one-sided recreations of the violations of the Paris Peace Accords in 1973 (usually describing how Nixon failed to pay reparations but omitting the fact that the North's 1975 takeover of the South was perhaps a more egregious breach of the Accords) enroute to describing how the myth of the live POW became "a profound psychological sickness." Franklin included a watered-down version of his book as a chapter in his more recent *Vietnam and Other*

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8. Stern, *Defense Relations*, 7, 19; Schulzinger, *A Time for Peace*, ix.

*American Fantasies* and contributed “The Last Chapter” to Marvin Gettleman’s 1995 *Vietnam and America: A Documented History*.<sup>9</sup>

These books also loosely equate some of those who believe in the myth of live POWs with modern conservatism by elaborating at length upon the role of the Reagan administration in increasing public awareness for the POW/MIA issue. The equation does not stop there, however. Michael Allen struggles to find much empathy for the plight of POW/MIA wives who to him “represented a High Cold war feminine ideal,” and more than hints at their connection to conservatism, pointing out, “for all their seeming peculiarity, POW/MIA wives were similar to the white middle-class married women” who were “key players in the burgeoning conservative movement.” I have reservations about the syllogisms of Franklin and Allen which equate the POW/MIA movement with modern conservatism. This thesis suggests that these women, and most (but by no means all) friends of the POW/MIA movement became politically active primarily because they were missing a loved one in Vietnam, although there were of course exceptions. While Franklin and Allen are somewhat cynical of POW/MIA wives’ affiliation with the Reagan and Bush administrations, it is unsurprising that these wives would warm to politicians expressing personal interest in recovering their loved ones. However, to be clear, my section on Orange County and any survey of the most vocal opponents of normalization does find a distinctively conservative Republican hue.<sup>10</sup>

Despite my reservations about the more polemical aspects of such books, they are immensely useful in documenting the creation of the POW/MIA “myth” during the Nixon

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9. For “puppet government” and “psychological sickness,” see H. Bruce Franklin, *M.I.A. or Mythmaking in America* (Brooklyn: Lawrence Hill Press, 41, 170; for “client state” see Martini, *Invisible Enemies*, 242. Martini points out that this “client state” had been in existence for less than twenty years. For a brief description of the orthodox field regarding the Vietnam War, which include the view that South Vietnam was a U.S. client state, see K.W. Taylor, “How I Began to Teach about the Vietnam War,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 43, Fall 2004: 637-47.

10. Michael Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs, and the Unending Vietnam War*, 26, 45.

Administration - a myth given new life during Reagan's tenure. Such books thicken and personalize what diplomatic histories had identified as the chief obstacle to normalization with Vietnam – resolution of the POW/MIA issue. While their exegesis of films contributing to the POW/MIA myth such as *Uncommon Valor* or *Rambo* may be tiresome, such books are invaluable descriptions of the roots of POW/MIA advocacy and of the reasons why what POW/MIA advocates have long sought, “the fullest possible accounting” of all POWs and MIAs, is all but an impossibility - “an infinitely elastic standard,” as Michael Allen eloquently puts it.”<sup>11</sup>

These POW/MIA critiques are balanced by the inclusion of books written in defense of the same POW/MIA movement by those often described as “the Rambo set” – people intent on proving a government cover-up by finally rescuing a live POW. Ronald Goldberg's *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America*, which happens to place the POW/MIA myth in the conspiracy theory category, describes those “activists and entrepreneurs” who form the “core” of conspiracy theories. According to Goldberg, these activists “spin theories that are strenuously logical and crammed with facts.”<sup>12</sup>

This is a most apt description of Billy Hendon and Elizabeth Stewart's *An Enormous Crime: The Definitive Account of American POWs Abandoned in Southeast Asia*, throughout

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11. Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 139. Several other books deserve mention in this category. The focus of Edwin Martini's *Invisible Enemies* is not about the POW/MIA issue per se, but a broader examination of the ways in which “cultural representations intersected and interacted with the formation of foreign policy” regarding the SRV from 1975-1995. To Martini, US foreign policy was “aggressively hostile.” Despite complaining about the invisibility of the Vietnamese, Martini includes very little in the way of Vietnamese sources or sympathy for the plight of Vietnamese Americans. It is, however, one of the strongest books surveyed here on the influence of US business in the push for normalization, 2, 242. Susan Keating reserves most of her journalistic polemics for those exploiting the plight of vulnerable families for commercial gain in *Prisoners of Hope: Exploiting the POW/MIA Myth in America* (New York: Random House, 1994). Thomas M. Hawley's *The Remains of War: Bodies, Politics, and the Search for American Soldiers Unaccounted For in Southeast Asia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005) is an interesting look at the legacy of the Vietnam war as related to bodies and provides valuable empirical and theoretical interpretations of ongoing US efforts to recover remains in Southeast Asia.

12. Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Cult of Conspiracy in Modern America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), x.

which Hendon speaks of himself awkwardly in the third person. Hendon's book is twice as long and arguably better sourced than Franklin's *M.I.A. or Mythmaking*. Some of his logic is strikingly good - I would argue almost incontrovertible. *An Enormous Crime* features lengthy catalogues of unheeded reports on live POWs, disinterested or actively conspiratorial government officials, and missed opportunities to capitalize on live-sighting reports. It is backed with 70 pages of endnotes. *An Enormous Crime* has served as a way to gauge the response of fringe POW/MIA activists to the various government reports or committees that have weighed in on the POW/MIA issue. Hendon's list of who was part of the government cover-up is helpfully compiled at the end of the book and includes dozens of high-ranking officials from Nixon to Clinton. It closes by imploring George W. Bush to "negotiate for as long as is necessary to gain release of the prisoners" in Southeast Asia.<sup>13</sup>

There are more balanced approaches in the myriads of books written by POW/MIA family members, a few of which have been consulted for inclusion here. These books do establish some surprisingly savvy political maneuvering by even the earliest League founders, a topic covered in detail by Allen and Franklin, but also gives a much more personal account of those families for whom I argue with League director Ann Mills Griffiths, "it [was] only human nature to hope." The co-written *You Are Not Forgotten*, much of which predates the focus of this study, offers similar insight into both the very real political power of the POW/MIA lobby and the League in particular, almost from its inception. There is of course, little balance between the plight of families and distrust of the North Vietnamese. Unlike Hendon's book, many

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13. Hendon's logic is particularly difficult to refute is in the case of the short notice Thanh Liet prison inspection, discussed in Chapter 1 of this thesis. Hendon and Stewart, *An Enormous Crime: The Definitive Account of American POWs Abandoned in Southeast Asia* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007). Rod Colvin's, *First Heroes: The POWs Left Behind in Vietnam* (New York: Irvington Publishers, 1987), is a similar albeit less personal and more dated resource on the subject of those men "still alive . . . and waiting . . . our first heroes," ix.

POW/MIA family books are heavily personalized and thus of limited research value. Such families are of course, far less interested in predicating a myth than they are in getting legitimate closure for themselves and other families in similar situations.<sup>14</sup>

While this thesis largely focuses on US entities, one section on Vietnam's efforts to normalize relations has required a look at Vietnam's stated policy goals. As time constraints precluded a detailed search of Vietnamese newspapers and magazines, several Vietnamese compendiums proved useful. Lưu Văn Lợi's *50 Years of Vietnamese Diplomacy* established an empirical base for the SRV's foreign policy actions while *75 Years of the Communist Party of Việt Nam [1930-2005]: A Selection of Documents from Nine Party Congresses* was used to trace Vietnam's foreign policy goals among the Communist Party's published primary sources. I found much of the context for these goals in David W.P. Elliott's excellent 2012 *Changing Worlds: Vietnam's Transition from Cold War to Globalization*. Elliott's was one of the few monographs consulted in this study which still stressed Vietnam's relative isolation after the collapse of the Soviet Union, yet did not cast normalization with the US as a goal that monopolized Vietnam's attention. Articles in books edited by Carlyle Thayer and Adam Fforde helped establish the idea that normalization with the US in 1995 was, rather than the crowning achievement of Vietnam's foreign policy after their 1986 *Đổi Mới* reforms, part of a trend of establishing better relations with many nations from 1989-1995.<sup>15</sup>

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14. The ones consulted were Melissa B. Robinson and Maureen Dunn, *The Search for Canasta 404: Love, Loss and the POW/MIA Movement* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2006), the quote from Griffiths is on 204-05, and Evelyn Fowler Grubb, Carol Jose and Henry Kissinger. *You Are Not Forgotten: A Family's Quest for Truth and the Founding of the National League of Families* (St. Petersburg, FL: Vandamere Press, 2008).

15. Carlyle A. Thayer and Ramses Amer eds. *Vietnamese Foreign Policy in Transition* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), especially "Vietnamese Foreign Policy: Multilateralism and the Threat of Peaceful Evolution by Thayer," 1-24; Adam Fforde ed. *Doi Moi: Ten Years after the 1986 Party Congress* (Canberra: Panther Press, 1997), particularly "Doi Moi and Economic Development in Vietnam: A Rapid Overview of a Decade of Reform" by Ray Mallon, 9-24, and "Sectoral Politics and Strategies for State Building from the VII to the VIII Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party (1991-1996)" by Thaveeporn Vasavakul, 81-136. Full publication information on the Vietnamese compendiums are available in the bibliography and are cited throughout the section on the SRV. As

The struggles of many Vietnamese immigrants to adapt to their new lives in the US has by now been covered well. Books such as Hien Duc Do's 1999 *The Vietnamese Americans* and Sucheng Chan's 2006 *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation* describe the problems of Vietnamese Americans regarding assimilation and how Vietnamese Americans have suffered due to the "model minority" myth that conflates them with all Asians, thus assuming that they excel academically and quickly join the American workforce as model citizens. While this paper does not personalize the experiences of many Vietnamese Americans, such books did allow it to place Vietnamese American resistance to normalization in Orange County into a broader context. The specific forms of resistance to normalization and the views of Vietnamese Americans were much more difficult to establish. The original goal of this thesis was to survey Vietnamese American newspapers in the larger ethnic enclaves of Texas, Washington State and especially Little Saigon in Orange County, California, where most of the Vietnamese-American debate on normalization likely raged, especially among first and second wave migrants less likely to speak fluent English. I was unable to accomplish this here, but including such sources in the future would likely prove a fruitful addition to my section on Orange County. In lieu of Vietnamese American newspapers, I relied heavily on California newspapers, *The Orange County Register* in particular, which kept close tabs on the progress towards normalization and the responses of its politicians and residents to the idea. Future efforts would include back issues of *Người Việt*, the Vietnamese language newspaper of Westminster, CA and the oldest Vietnamese-American Newspaper in the country. I would also attempt to interview key personnel of Los Angeles' Saigon Radio, which covered the normalization debate in its late stages, or listen to their stored

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mentioned, Lewis Stern's *Defense Relations* also included two balanced chapters on normalization which was heavily sourced by Vietnamese newspapers and public speeches.



archives from 1995, if available. These could be supplemented and compared with other Vietnamese-American newspapers from Texas, Florida and Washington.

The sources I employ here were of course supplemented with several miscellaneous books that helped round out this thesis. Such works included *Citizen Perot*, Gerald Posner's close-up biography of the Texas billionaire; memoirs by John McCain; a biography of John Kerry; and a book on Kerry's presidential vision entitled *A Call to Service*. Most of these, with the exception of *Citizen Perot*, afforded a surprising amount of space to the work of normalization. David Reed's PhD dissertation, "The Domestic Context of Normalization," while perhaps poorly titled, did help assuage my own fears about straying from a linear approach. While I am more understanding of the long delay in normalization than Reed is, his surveys of US government officials and their interpretations of the level of importance that their own administrations afforded normalization allowed me an interesting comparison with their Vietnamese counterparts. Additionally, the views that Reed elicited from US government officials on Ann Mills Griffiths were fundamental to establishing her legitimacy as a power player in Washington.

I did not consult many works specifically devoted to Cold War cultures, theory or politics. While this is partially covered by Elliott's *Changing Worlds*, including such a genre would undoubtedly strengthen the section of US presidential administrations and the SRV and allow this thesis more value as a post-Cold War case study. Although my limited mobility and finances prevented me from conducting archival research, many of the documents I used for small historiographical interventions such as the *Final Interagency Report of the Reagan Administration on the POW/MIA Issue in Southeast Asia*, the final report of the Senate Selection Committee on POW/MIA Affairs, presidential addresses to the League and presidential debates

were available in part or in whole online. Some testimony to the Senate Select Committee was available for viewing online in C-Span's digital repository as well. Such resources were invaluable to both chapters of this thesis. The Senate Select Committee's report in particular was critical because of the mixed reaction it produced in 1993 and the various ways it has been interpreted since.

These sources have been used to compile eight sections; five on entities supporting normalization, and three who were opposed to it during the years 1989-1995. These were the years when, according to diplomatic histories, the conclusion of the war in Cambodia opened the possibility of rapprochement between the US and Vietnam. I stray frequently from this periodization to give necessarily context. While no section can be considered exhaustive – each is only between 10 and 20 pages – this approach allows the reader to focus on these entities and their viewpoint on normalization with more cohesiveness than allowed by linear histories, which give historians the ability to let such entities surface periodically, perhaps when the subject best fits the historian's interpretation of their role. In most of the sections involving individual people, the reader should find more personal contingencies than have been allowed elsewhere. Using this topical, more comparative approach allows myself and the reader to identify strange alliances and enmities that might not surface in other formats. As almost each section will conclude, there is more work to be done. I have found great value in each of the genres described above, even while I disagree with some of their interpretations. I can only hope that my work here can be viewed by my readers as valuable, even if they challenge some of my interpretations.

## CHAPTER 1: People, Organizations, and other Entities in Favor of Normalization

This chapter will introduce five entities that were in favor of normalization. In the case of most, be they US presidential administrations or the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, support for normalization was qualified. For most presidential administrations, the importance of achieving “the fullest possible accounting” of US service members still missing in Southeast Asia meant that normalization had to take the concerns of POW/MIA families seriously. For the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, normalization was important, but not so important that it could come at the expense of significant changes to Vietnam’s political system.

The Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs, which convened from 1991 to 1992 and published its findings in early 1993, also had to balance the concerns of POW/MIA families, which were well-represented by several conservative Senators on the Committee, and also take into account the progress Vietnam had made in providing “full accounting.” John Kerry and John McCain, both of whom were on the Committee, may have been more purposive about normalizing with Vietnam, but proved to be judicious evaluators not only of the progress Vietnam was making, but of the need to remain sympathetic towards POW/MIA families. While US businesses had been determinedly lobbying for normalization with Vietnam since the late 1980s, their concerns were rarely acknowledged in the political debate as doing so would imply politicians were favoring big business over missing Soldiers. This chapter will evaluate and compare the views and actions of such entities during the critical years of 1989-1995 when normalization between the two countries was becoming increasingly likely. Doing so will highlight some strange alliances and some surprising discord that seems to be well outside normal political affiliations.

## US PRESIDENTIAL ADMINISTRATIONS

While an entire PhD dissertation has been written to explain why the process of diplomatic normalization between the US and SRV took so long, many have also pointed out that normalization could have occurred during the Carter Administration had not the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia in December 1978, and forestalled any potential progress towards this goal.<sup>16</sup> And while normalization did not in fact transpire during Carter's tenure as president, each successive executive, including Ronald Reagan, who is singularly vilified by most historians writing about the POW/MIA "myth," openly published executive statements overtly signifying willingness to normalize relations with Vietnam pending appropriate Vietnamese reciprocity regarding Cambodia and US POW/MIAs. The lengthy Cambodian war precluded normalization for the State Departments of both Reagan and Carter. Carter had normalized relations with China in 1978 after the groundwork laid by Nixon, and throughout the Cambodian War, the US, China, and Thailand supported a rather unholy alliance of noncommunist leaders with the infamous Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. Vietnam, with backing from its ally the USSR, fought to place the pro-Vietnamese Hun Sen government in Phnom Penh. The protracted war and almost as protracted diplomacy made any progress towards normalizing with Vietnam all but impossible. Before Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia, Carter had signified his willingness to normalize with Vietnam. As settlement of the war became a possibility, Reagan ended his second term with a veritable gift to the George H.W. Bush administration in the form of January 19, 1989 *Final Interagency Report of the Reagan Administration on the POW/MIA Issue in Southeast Asia*. This report, in offering something of a controversial conclusion on the

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16. David Reed's dissertation "U.S.-Vietnam Relations: The Domestic Context of Normalization" is written in an endeavor to answer this very question.

POW/MIA matter, absorbed some of the political fallout were the incoming Bush Administration to normalize with Vietnam. The subsequent administrations proffered unmistakable overtures and concessions to Vietnam, that, while both cautious and demanding, nevertheless demonstrated an ongoing, if frustratingly slow, willingness to normalize relations.<sup>17</sup>

As will be discussed, the work of normalizing relations with Vietnam was generally of low priority for US State Departments. The Cold War preoccupied Carter and Reagan while the end of the Cold War and Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait busied the Bush Administration. For Clinton, the conflict in Bosnia and his domestic programs required far more attention than did Vietnam. However, each president demonstrated an acute awareness of the meaning of "Vietnam" in American history and spoke most publicly about it, even while their views on what exactly constituted the American experience in Vietnam varied in their rhetoric. While Carter stands outside the general purview of this study, he is included here to demonstrate general continuity regarding a willingness to normalize relations with Vietnam, even if presidential views on the matter varied.

Closest on the heels of the "Black April" events of April 30, 1975 than the other three presidents of our study, Jimmy Carter spoke of Vietnam with a "rhetoric of atonement" that expressed his dismay with the American hubris and preoccupation with Communism that had led to the disastrous intervention in Vietnam. Such a view prompted more good faith towards Vietnamese overtures regarding normalization and a willingness to deal unilaterally with the SRV despite the Cold War paradigm than other subsequent presidents would evince.<sup>18</sup>

Conversely, Ronald Reagan eschewed Carter's "atonement" for a "noble cause," the now famous appellation he applied to US efforts in Vietnam. Reagan decried the "Vietnam

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17. Richard Solomon, *Exiting Indochina*, 12, 81-82.

18. Historian Robert McMahon, cited by Robert Schulzinger in *A Time for Peace*, 185.

Syndrome” that had allegedly plagued Carter’s timid foreign policy and thus figuratively reinstated North Vietnamese “aggressors” as an enemy worth fighting and the Republic of Vietnam (the South) as a friend that merited support. Reagan’s rhetoric presented a formidable challenge to normalization with the SRV and welcome succor to beleaguered POW/MIA families that had long viewed the SRV with distrust. Yet to avoid the possibility of “another Vietnam” in Lebanon (or elsewhere), Reagan’s Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger drew up a list of six principles ensuring US troops would never be deployed to fight wars unless the US had a “clear intention of winning,” a paradigm shift from the way the Vietnam war was prosecuted.<sup>19</sup>

George H.W. Bush agreed with Reagan, even in his inaugural address, that the United States could no longer afford to be “sundered” by the memory of Vietnam. While his address lamented the “political cleavage” of that conflict, he himself demonstrated a willingness to move past Vietnam by selecting a vice president with a dubious service record and claiming to have finally dispatched the Vietnam Syndrome with aggressive military actions in Panama and more thoroughly with the swift defeat of Saddam Hussein’s modern army in 1991, a victory prompting Bush’s statement that, “by God, we’ve kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all.”<sup>20</sup>

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19. Reagan’s views about Vietnam have been written about extensively by many of the books surveyed in the introductory literature review and generally derided by the cultural histories of Christian Appy, H. Bruce Franklin and Michael J. Allen. His comments on Vietnam come directly from an August 18, 1980 campaign speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars, available at <https://reaganlibrary.archives.gov/archives/reference/8.18.80.html> last accessed March 13, 2017. See specifically Christian G. Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity* (New York: Penguin, 2016), 245, 286, 289-90. The six principles of the “Weinberger doctrine are available among other places, at Jim Mokhiber and Rick Young, “The Uses of Military Force,” PBS available at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/military/force/> last accessed April 10, 2017.

20. George H.W. Bush’s January 20, 1989 inaugural address is available at <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/george-hw-bush-inaugural-address-1989/> last accessed March 13, 2017. For Bush’s attempts to renew bipartisanship and his selection of a running mate see James T. Patterson, *Restless Giant: The United States from Watergate to Bush v. Gore* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 219. Secretary of State James Baker commented on how Operation Just Cause in Panama reacquainted the American populace with the use of force after their negative experience in Vietnam while Bush was “jubilant” about the demise of the Vietnam Syndrome after the 1991 Gulf War. Appy, *American Reckoning*, 295, 299.

Bill Clinton had no illusions about the importance of Vietnam either, undoubtedly due in no small part due to his personal efforts to elude service in Vietnam and the furor that surrounded his duplicity in covering it up during his presidential campaign. While perhaps more muted regarding public pronouncements about Vietnam, he nonetheless was careful to make decisions about it slowly and with public support from veterans. His announcement of normalization on July 11, 1995, was made with Vietnam veterans John Kerry and John McCain at his flanks.<sup>21</sup>

Such observations are not intended to exaggerate the importance of normalization with Vietnam for US executives, but rather to emphasize their recognition of the specter of the Vietnam War in American history. The mechanics of normalization with Vietnam was generally the work of assistants and deputies, but the importance of the war made rapid reconciliation unlikely due to the war's historical significance and the almost unresolvable POW/MIA dilemma. Each administration after Carter suffered and continues to suffer heavy criticism from historians about their ponderous deliberations about normalization, yet their phlegmatic pace is hardly surprising. Vietnam was a troubling memory, and any debate on normalization inevitably brought more political turmoil than normalcy. Yet despite their concerns and misgivings about Vietnam, it remains accurate to say that each administration contributed something to a bipartisan effort to finally complete the process of normalization over a period of twenty years.

Although the Carter administration predates the primary focus of this study, and Carter's motives for normalizing relations with Vietnam may have been marked with more humility than were those of Reagan or Bush, I should briefly observe that Carter was candidly in favor of

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21. "U.S.-Vietnam Diplomatic Relations," C-Span, July 11, 1995, available at <https://www.c-span.org/video/?66095-1/usvietnam-diplomatic-relations> last accessed March 13, 2017.

normalizing relations with Vietnam under the right conditions. Having inherited a 1975-1976 Senate Select Committee that found that “no Americans are still being held alive as prisoners in Indochina” from the Ford Administration but still pledging constancy to MIA families, Carter determined to find out the facts for himself, and quickly. A commission to Vietnam was in fact “President Carter’s first foreign policy initiative,” a welcome effort that dismissed the more egregious Vietnamese demands for reparations from the war and echoed the findings of the Senate Select Committee regarding live POWs.<sup>22</sup>

The commission evoked Carter’s sentiments about Vietnam in a telling press conference. Noting that the Vietnamese had presented the commission with what had turned out to be 11 US sets of remains and pledging to establish a fact-finding agency for other missing US service members, Carter stressed the “good faith” of the Vietnamese and opined that, “I think this is about all that they can do.” While further efforts to normalize relations with Vietnam faltered when Carter’s State Department chose to normalize with China first even while China and Vietnam were on the brink of war regarding Cambodia, Carter, not without qualification, expressed his willingness to normalize relations and heal war wounds with tangible gestures of goodwill towards a country with whom the US had been at war a mere three years prior to his presidency. Although Carter’s efforts were “postponed indefinitely” due to the outbreak of the war in Cambodia, his efforts were surprisingly swift and pointed, and the level of importance he accorded to Vietnam dwarfed that of subsequent administrations.<sup>23</sup>

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22. Franklin, *M.I.A. or Mythmaking in America*, 130; “first foreign policy initiative” is in Frederick Z. Brown, *Second Chance*, 22.

23. “The President’s News Conference: March 24, 1977, available at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=7229> last accessed March 13, 2017; details on the interruption of the normalization process is in Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 190; for “postponed indefinitely” and a far more detailed representation of Carter’s efforts to normalize relations with Vietnam, judged to be a “goal of some importance in serving American interests in South-East Asia” and one to be achieved “as swiftly as possible” see Steven Hurst, *The Carter Administration and Vietnam*, 1. Hurst attempts to assess the meaning of Carter’s efforts in a far more international context than permitted by this section.



While Ronald Reagan has been heavily criticized for vilifying the SRV and retarding any possibility of normalization during the 1980s, his administration did in fact initiate dialogue with the Vietnamese on the POW/MIA issue and subsequently ended a two-year lull in which no US remains had been returned to the US by any Southeast Asia country. Histories critical of the POW/MIA movement in almost all of its forms are accurate in their representations of a Reagan responsible for the exponential growth of the plight of POW/MIA awareness, and, by extension, hostility towards Vietnam. Reagan's own *Final Interagency Report on the POW/MIA Issue in Southeast Asia* states similar sentiments, albeit in a different light. It is likely that Reagan himself had unrealistic expectations of Vietnamese ability to cooperate on the POW/MIA issue he established in policy as "the highest national priority." Any debate on Reagan's willingness to normalize with Vietnam is certainly clouded by the ongoing war in Cambodia that had, since the Carter administration, prevented any meaningful discussion of normalization. Yet even the Reagan administration cannot be accurately viewed as *against* normalization. As Lewis Stern points out, even to the Reagan administration normalization was, rather than a categorical impossibility, "a key bargaining chip in accelerating resolution of the POW/MIA issue . . . and the conflict in Cambodia." But a less-than-subtle transition can be seen even within a Reagan administration which elevated the POW/MIA issue to the "highest national priority," empowered the National League of Families, and appears to have tacitly sponsored at least one ill-advised raid in Laos designed to free POW/MIAs early in his administration.<sup>24</sup>

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24. US Government, *Final Interagency Report on the POW/MIA Issue in Southeast Asia* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government, 1989), 4-5; Lewis Stern, *Defense Relations*, 298. For Reagan's efforts in establishing POW/MIA concerns as "the highest national priority" see, among others, the Senate Select Committee, *Report of the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1993), 9 (hereafter, SSC Report); Reed, "The Domestic Context," 121. For Reagan's empowering of the League and sponsorship of POW/MIA raids see Franklin, *M.I.A. or Mythmaking*, 136-40. White House involvement in the raids mentioned by Franklin, namely those of Bo Gritz, are categorically denied in the 1993 SSC Report, 314-16.

By the end of his administration, Reagan gifted the incoming Bush administration with his *Final Interagency Report*. This report was indeed, as observed by some historians, explicitly skeptical of the efforts of the Vietnamese to provide the fullest possible accounting they had promised, and unabashedly proud of its campaign to increase public awareness (while later qualifying that awareness should be increased in “a productive manner”) of the POW/MIA issue. Nevertheless, it made several important disclaimers which were a marked change from an earlier receptivity to stories about live POWs and unswerving support for the POW/MIA community. First, it pointed out that some in this community lacked the altruism of family members of POW/MIAs and elaborated on how their “misinformation led to charges of conspiracy and cover-up.” While the 1991-1993 Senate Select Committee is lauded by H. Bruce Franklin and Michael J. Allen for making similar observations, they omit this earlier contribution by the Reagan Administration. Such a charge was a distinct change for a president who had earlier been more than receptive to attempts to rescue live POWs in Southeast Asia.<sup>25</sup>

Even more important was the report’s conclusion about live prisoners in Vietnam. While the document never completely erased the possibility of live US service members in Vietnam, it significantly found no credible evidence indicating live Americans had been held by North Vietnam after Operation Homecoming. POW/MIA activist Billy Hendon called the report both “historic” and “damning” and lumped it, along with the Bush’s “sundered by a memory” inaugural address together as part of “a calculated effort by the new administration to end the debate on live POWs once and for all.” This last-minute report would serve as an often overlooked contribution of the Reagan administration to an ever-increasing list of government documents skeptical of cover-ups and dubious about the possibility of live POWs.<sup>26</sup>

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25. *Final Interagency Report*, 17-18; Franklin, *M.I.A. or Mythmaking*, 139.

26. Hendon and Stewart, *An Enormous Crime*, 367-68.

The Bush Administration's posture on Vietnam was complicated by the September 1989 Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia. The withdrawal finally opened up the possibility of eventual normalization, but this possibility was delayed due to the inability of the various factions in the war to reach a timely peace settlement and because of ongoing concerns that Vietnam was not demonstrating adequate "progress" regarding the recovery of US remains. Yet the Bush Administration clearly demonstrated its willingness to normalize in the terms it used to delineate Vietnamese requirements for normalization, and in the halting, yet unmistakable steps it made towards that end. Additionally, several key events transpiring between late 1989 and early 1993 subtly degraded even the more legitimate POW/MIA entities. By the end of the Bush Administration, some major newspapers were urging Bush to normalize prior to Clinton's inauguration to spare both Vietnam and Clinton the necessity of a "draft dodger" finally ending the war against Vietnam.<sup>27</sup>

According to the language of the Bush administration, which presented its requirements for normalization in the form of a "Roadmap," normalization was attainable and the Vietnamese efforts to attain it were measurable. Each of the four requirements outlined in the April 1991 document required progress towards political resolution in Cambodia and cooperation on the POW/MIA issue. While much of the US scholarship on this roadmap has appropriately elaborated on the Vietnamese disdain for this document due to its heavy, seemingly unilateral demands, the roadmap at least renewed a possibility of normalization that had been all but dead for ten years.<sup>28</sup>

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27. "George Bush's Last Chance on Vietnam," *The New York Times*, December 18, 1992. Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/12/18/opinion/george-bush-s-last-chance-on-vietnam.html> last accessed March 14, 2017.

28. The phases of the Bush Roadmap were 1) The signing of the Paris Peace Agreement on Cambodia 2) the establishment of a UN transitional authority in Cambodia 3) adherence to the Paris agreement for six months and 4) a free election in Cambodia, the creation of a national assembly and the drawdown of the multiple military factions previously warring in Cambodia. Accompanying these requirements were additional requirements for "cooperation"

While scholars such as David Reed, have, as mentioned, wondered why it “took so long” to normalize relations with Vietnam, I would express some reservations about such a question in the light of the pace of events during the Bush administration. Following an undeniably popular president (at least until Iran-Contra in 1986), Bush juggled this relatively minor foreign policy endeavor plagued with potential political landmines with far more important diplomatic endeavors to build support for his Desert Shield/Desert Storm coalition and the subsequent invasion of Iraq from 1990 to 1991, and to make diplomatic sense of the demise of the Soviet Union in late 1991. Yet even during Operation Desert Shield Secretary of State James Baker and the Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyễn Cơ Thạch met in what constituted the highest US/Vietnam exchange since 1973. The Bush Roadmap itself was presented almost on the heels of Desert Storm. While the Roadmap might have been distasteful to Vietnam, when its provisions were fulfilled, the US reciprocated with concrete, although sometimes self-serving responses. When Phase II Roadmap requirements were met in April 1992, Bush terminated a long-standing telecom ban against Vietnam, eased restrictions for NGOs operating in Vietnam and permitted Vietnamese-Americans to send money to their relatives, even while a presidential delegation remained in Vietnam. Near the end of his administration Bush allowed some US companies to establish footprints in Vietnam even *before* the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA affairs published their findings that “no compelling evidence suggest the possibility of a POW may have survived to the present,” While Bush did not, as implored to by the New

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regarding missing service members, cooperation that “would influence the pace and scope of the normalization of relations.” Stern, *Defense Relations*, 11. Skepticism regarding the tone of and Vietnamese receptivity to the Roadmap can be found in *Ibid.*; Reed, “The Domestic Context,” 161; Martini, *Invisible Enemies*, 164.

*York Times*, normalize relations with Vietnam, his administration did outline formal procedures towards that end and demonstrated a willingness to reciprocate Vietnamese progress.<sup>29</sup>

The Vietnamese did not fulfill Phase III of the Roadmap until May 1993, during the Clinton Administration, thus forestalling more concrete progress. However, while the Roadmap was the most concrete indication of the Bush administration's willingness to normalize, another key, yet understated contribution of the Bush administration was the degradation of the POW/MIA lobby's power. During the Reagan administration, the National League of Families under its executive director Ann Mills Griffith, had enjoyed a great deal of access to the president and the ability to weigh in on decisions regarding Vietnam via its membership in the Interagency Group on POW/MIA Affairs (IAG), which seated Griffiths alongside members of DoD, the State Department and the Pentagon among others. This group, as both David Reed and the 1993 Senate Select Committee report observed, gave the League, which was a heavy hitter on this group, to sometimes serve as "the driver of Government policies" regarding diplomacy with Vietnam during the 1980s. By the end of the Bush administration, however, decision-making had been gently wrested away from this committee, blunting the direct influence the League had enjoyed for nearly a decade.<sup>30</sup>

While the mechanics of this removal are poorly documented, scholars are clear that near the end of the Bush administration and from the beginning of the Clinton administration this Interagency Group in general and the League in particular, had a reduced role in dictating terms of US/Vietnam relations. The concerns voiced by the Select Committee about the influential role of Griffiths and the League as "private" citizens was undoubtedly part of the reason the

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29. Reed, "The Domestic Context," 136; Lư Văn Lợi, *50 Years of Vietnamese Diplomacy: 1945-1995* (Hà Nội: Thế Giới Publishers, 2006), 485-86; Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 275; Stern, *Defense Relations*, 15; Schulzinger, *A Time for Peace*, 49; Hendon and Stewart, *An Enormous Crime*, 467.

30. SSC Report, 274, 280; Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 258; Reed, "The Domestic Context," 300.

LAG's influence was degraded. Additionally, just as the Vietnamese were becoming more transparent, there were a series of distasteful events centering on the possibility of live US service members in Southeast Asia that likely contributed to a stronger stiff-arm of the League. In May of 1991 Senators Jesse Helms of North Carolina and Bob Smith of New Hampshire, both of whom were harsh critics of Vietnam and strong believers in the possibility of live US service members in Vietnam, released a highly controversial report on the POW/MIA issue that was not only discredited, but later resulted in several senior aides associated with the report being fired from the Senate Select Committee for its egregious inaccuracies. Several false alarms regarding photos ostensibly depicting live POWs in Southeast Asia and a hint by Boris Yeltsin that Moscow may have held US POWs at some point were also effectively put to rest. In 1992, an apparently well-meaning Bush was shouted down with "no more lies" at the annual meeting of the League. While Bush recovered rather nicely, and the incident has since been overblown by Michael Allen and H. Bruce Franklin, it, along with the other events listed above, served notice that the League and especially its members believing in the possibility of live POWs, which likely included its executive director (at least in public), were growing increasingly shrill.<sup>31</sup>

On the other hand, Vietnam was proving surprisingly helpful. Not only did the SRV follow through regarding Cambodia, but it made what really were unprecedented efforts to aid POW/MIA recovery efforts that made the hostility directed at it by the likes of the League increasingly suspect. Not only had the verbiage of their foreign policy changed to reflect a desire to "be friends with all countries," their efforts on the ground substantiated this desire

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31. Ibid., 145, 313; H. Bruce Franklin, "The Last Chapter," in *Vietnam and America: A Documented History*, Marvin E. Gettleman, Jane Franklin, Marilyn B. Young and H. Bruce Franklin eds. (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 501, 504; Reed, "The Domestic Context, 140; Martini, *Invisible Enemies*, 170; Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 280. The entirety of Bush's speech to the League can be viewed at <https://www.c-span.org/video/?27363-1/powmia-affairs> last accessed March 14, 2017.

regarding the POW/MIA concerns of the US. In April 1992, it largely accommodated US demands for short-notice inspections of areas suspected to hold live POWs. It followed this accommodation by permitting inspection of helpful archival materials as well, gestures noted directly by Bush in a 17 October Rose Garden ceremony. In summary, the Bush administration was willing to normalize with Vietnam under the right conditions, proffered generally tangible methods by which the Vietnamese could do so, noted Vietnamese efforts to cooperate on POW/MIA issues and pushed the League and pushed more radical elements of the POW/MIA lobby outside the process of diplomatic decision-making. To be sure, Bush could have normalized relations himself and spared both countries another two years of distrust. The ponderous nature of the Bush administration and the imprecision with which it demanded and assessed Vietnam's progress on the POW/MIA issue have been, and deserve to be criticized. But the preponderance of evidence suggests that the Bush Administration itself was willing to ensure US relations with Vietnam would not forever be "sundered by a memory."<sup>32</sup>

The progress of the Clinton Administration towards normalization was rapid, and, had it not been delayed by yet another unlikely discovery of a document "proving" North Vietnamese duplicity regarding the POW turnover after the 1973 Paris Peace agreement, would likely have occurred early in 1994. Like his predecessor, Clinton inherited a report on Vietnam from the previous administration. However, this report, the final *Report of the Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs*, was the result of over a year of deliberations by influential Senators including John Kerry and John McCain. The report graciously acknowledged the combination of pain and hope that made the POW/MIA issue so poignant. Its conclusion, however, echoing preceding government reports, found "no compelling evidence" of live POWs held against their will.

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32. Lôi, *50 Years of Vietnamese Diplomacy*, 457; Schulzinger, *A Time for Peace*, 153; Reed, "The Domestic Context," 50.

Clinton, more interested in domestic programs than Bush and undoubtedly afforded far more opportunity than either Bush or Reagan to focus on domestic issues versus foreign affairs, proved savvy enough to maintain the relative momentum of the Bush Administration and capitalize on the Senate report. More likely than not, Clinton turned normalization with Vietnam into a more domestic issue than he readily acknowledged by privately acceding to the growing push by businesses, discussed later, to normalize relations with Vietnam.<sup>33</sup>

The milestones of the Clinton administration regarding normalization came rapidly after his inauguration, despite the potentially disastrous publication in 1993 of the Australian scholar Stephen Morris's discovery of Russian documents pointing to "US prisoners of war kept in Vietnam in 1972." Despite the subsequent protests, and with not only support but prompting from veterans in congress, Clinton rescinded US opposition to international lending to Vietnam less than three months later. In September Clinton further freed businesses. While Bush had allowed US firms to open, but stop short of conducting business, Clinton permitted them to at least bid on World Bank projects in Vietnam.<sup>34</sup>

Clinton then signed bills lifting the decades-old embargo on Vietnam and allowing for bilateral assistance of Vietnam in February and August 1994, respectively. Normalization under Clinton was by this point viewed by many opposed to it as a foregone conclusion after the eradication of the trade embargo. Clinton, however, may have prompted some angst among Vietnamese hardliners fearing that "peaceful evolution" would be the next great enemy of Vietnamese socialism by remarking that "normalization and increased contact between Americans and Vietnamese will advance the cause of freedom in Vietnam, just as it did in

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33. For a more detailed comparison of Clinton's desire to focus on domestic problems see Patterson, *Restless Giant*, 260.

34. Lôi, *50 Years of Vietnamese Diplomacy*, 487; Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 284; Martini, *Invisible Enemies*, 186-87; Stern, *Defense Relations*, 27; Reed, "The Domestic Context," 160, 172.



Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. I strongly believe that engaging the Vietnamese on the broad economic front of economic reform will help to honor the sacrifice of those who fought for freedom's sake in Vietnam." Following normalization, former President Bush not only explicitly condoned Clinton's efforts, but made a trip to Vietnam with the former first lady in September 1995, spreading good will between senior leaders in Vietnam and US businesses. In a continuation of one of the major themes of his inaugural address, Bush pointed to the need to "look to the future and not the past."<sup>35</sup>

Although the contributions of each administration vary, and normalization was all but impossible during the 1980s, a larger bi-partisan flavor can be detected in the handling of the POW/MIA issue and, by extension, normalization. While each administration undoubtedly was forced to evaluate relations with Vietnam individually, there were several contributions from each that helped the US move forward. As mentioned, the outgoing Reagan provided Bush with an *Interagency Report* on his last day in office. This report was a distinct change for a president who had been more than receptive to ill-advised attempts to rescue live POWs in Southeast Asia early in his administration.<sup>36</sup>

Additionally, Reagan also appointed General John W. Vessey, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to serve as a Presidential Emissary to Hanoi regarding POW/MIA affairs. Not only did the well-respected Vessey serve as Reagan's emissary, he was retained by both Bush and Clinton, and provided vital continuity and testimony to all three presidents during his tenure. Some of the criticism regarding Reagan's contributions to the strength of the POW/MIA

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35. William J. Clinton, "Remarks Announcing the Normalization of Diplomatic Relations with Vietnam July 11, 1995," available at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=51605> last access March 14, 2017. Bush's trip was sponsored and paid for by Citibank, an event that will be addressed in more detail later, Anderson, *An American in Hanoi*, 16-17; Mark Matthew, "Bush to Visit Vietnam on Corporate-Funded Trip," *The Baltimore Sun*, July 22, 1995 available at [http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1995-07-22/news/1995203003\\_1\\_minh-city-chi-minh-vietnam](http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1995-07-22/news/1995203003_1_minh-city-chi-minh-vietnam) last accessed March 14, 2017.

36. Franklin, *M.I.A. or Mythmaking*, 139.

myth are well deserved. Yet it is also undeniable that Reagan's enthusiasm for the more radical ideas of the POW/MIA community and the belief of his administration in the duplicity of Hanoi regarding live POWs had significantly waned, and momentum on these issues was passed on in an act of some political sacrifice.<sup>37</sup>

Bush not only sustained Vessey's appointment, but continued the subtle degradation of the POW/MIA movement by dethroning the Inter-Agency Group and casting significant doubt on the possibility of live POWs in Vietnam even as he acknowledged the pain felt by the National League of Families. The Senate Select Committee which concluded near the termination of the Bush administration merely added momentum to that already built by Bush and would likely have come to fruition far earlier in the Clinton administration were it not for the outcry surrounding the Morris documents. Although the Bush administration likely contributed the most to the process of normalization, each did indeed contribute some political capital to the possibility, attempted to discredit the belief in live POW/MIAs, and provided some tangible evidence of willingness to normalize - provided Vietnam remained committed to a peaceful resolution in Cambodia and demonstrated progress in assisting the United States on POW/MIA affairs. None of the three administrations categorically denied the possibility of normalization or suspended dialogue with the Vietnamese as occurred at the end of the Carter Administration. While Reagan deserves some criticism early in his administration for supporting "the Rambo set," and Carter may have proved normalization could have occurred sooner than allowed by Bush or Clinton, each nonetheless contributed, in the long view, to the possibility of diplomatic recognition that finally transpired in July 1995.

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37. *Final Interagency Report*, 8; Reed, "The Domestic Context," 163.

## THE SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM

As discussed briefly in the introduction, two career diplomats involved in normalization with Vietnam found the “first lesson” about rapprochement between the two former adversaries to be that the situation must be “ripe.” Ripeness evokes an image of a naturally-occurring process that transpires with some inevitability. The purpose of this section is not to argue with these same diplomats about the “momentous changes in the global power structure” taking place in the same six years framing this thesis, but it will gently prod at an image that evokes passivity and inevitability. This trope of “ripeness” prompts several problems with a thorough examination of the issue at hand. While Vietnam was indeed the “*demandeur*” in the normalization process, portraying it as a victim of ripening international circumstances forcing it ever closer to rapprochement with the US obscures its new orientations on ideological alliances and the other prongs of its foreign policy initiatives during the “New World Order.” While normalization with the US was not the “third rank foreign policy issue” for Vietnam that it may have been for the US, even a superficial glance at Vietnam’s stated (and often achieved) foreign policy goals should indicate that ties with the US was not quite of the magnitude described by those involved in the process.<sup>38</sup>

Two dangers lie in attempting to make such correctives. The first is overstating the need for a corrective - the classic pendulum swung too far. While the remainder of this section should correctly place normalization with the US near the end of Vietnam’s stated foreign policy goals in both word and deed, I am not implying that normalizing with the United States was insignificant. Vietnam, with financial assistance from the US, created entire new bureaucracies

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38. Frederick Z. Brown, “Rapprochement with Vietnam,” 318-19; Brown, “The United States and Vietnam: Road to Normalization,” 141.

devoted to resolving the central obstacle to US domestic objections to normalization. It developed personal relationships with the likes of Ann Mills Griffiths, the Executive Director of the National League of Families and leaders of prominent veteran groups. It put up with ubiquitous and intrusive presidential delegations probing for live POWs in their own sovereign nation. It repeatedly (although impatiently) brooked demands for “the fullest possible accounting” of the remains of POW/MIAs from the *losing side*, a demand almost certainly unprecedented in warfare and one that even some former US POWs found unreasonable. Vietnam trailled mightily to normalize relations with the US.<sup>39</sup>

Of course, the second danger is establishing a position so nuanced that the original thesis seems to escape unscathed. I will attempt to dispense with that danger by observing that the understandable focus of most historians on the bright shiny object that is the POW/MIA issue in the US overshadows the fact that both the United States and Vietnam chose to put China first - before the other. The US did so by normalizing with China in 1978 and then siding with its position on the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, but it often goes overlooked that Vietnam normalized relations with China a full four years before doing so with the United States. Additionally, if the POW/MIA issue can be even slightly displaced in favor of analysis of Vietnam’s stated policies, normalization with the United States can in fact be viewed as a logical, even timely extension of Vietnam’s explicit foreign policy goals, not merely the culmination of a lengthy US political process. Certainly Vietnam wanted to normalize its relationship with the US, but from a Vietnam-centric point of view, the six years from 1989-1995 were years in which the US was merely one among a host of “new normals” that included Yugoslavia, China, the European Union and ASEAN.

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39. Stern, *Defense Relations*, 58-60.

While the US may fall into a general trend of Vietnamese rapprochement, it would still do well to outline, with regrettable brevity, the “international context” that prompted geopolitical “ripeness.” It is perhaps difficult to overstate the impact of the Cold War on “Vietnam.”<sup>40</sup> What some of the world may have called “Cold,” was in fact hot for Vietnam (as well as for large swaths of the so-called “Global South”). The decades-long absence of global conflict was, for Vietnam, forty years of warfare against enemies the Vietnamese described as either imperialists or their proxies. But the end of the Cold War, punctuated by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the gradual decrease in much-needed Soviet aid, the political swaying of its ally and erstwhile ideological mentor the Soviet Union and its eventual collapse added up to what David Elliott calls “minishocks” that “added up to a major shock to the assumptions on which the world views of Vietnam’s leaders had been based.”<sup>41</sup>

Elliott’s theory of “major shock” can be supported with a survey of the Vietnamese preparations for and responses to both the minishocks and the major shock. First, Vietnam was undeniably unprepared for the cataclysmic global ruptures that resulted in George H.W. Bush’s declaration of a “New World Order” in September 1990. With the fall of the Berlin Wall imminent, in summer of 1989 the SRV’s Premier was still clinging to the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe as Vietnam’s best economic hopes. After a Soviet symposium in early 1990, Vietnam’s “chief ideologist” took issue with Soviet implications that the world might no longer be divided into two camps and published rebuttals in *Nhân Dân*, the Vietnamese Communist Party’s official newspaper. The published goals of the June 1991, 7<sup>th</sup> Party Congress listed as its

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40. When referring to “Vietnam” here I of course acknowledge the 1954-1975 split at the 17<sup>th</sup> Parallel that divided the “North” – the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, from the “South” – the Republic of Vietnam. I have found the few efforts to minimize the impact of the Cold War on Vietnam, although by worthy historians, to be unconvincing. See for example, Edward Miller, “War Stories: The Taylor-Buzzanco Debate and How We Think about the Vietnam War,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1 (1-2), February/August 2006, 453-484.

41. David W.P. Elliott, *Changing Worlds: Vietnam’s Transition from Cold War to Globalization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 59.

first objective, “to strengthen solidarity and co-operation with the Soviet Union . . . and improve the efficiency of Vietnamese-Soviet Cooperation.” Despite ominous and much-discussed signs of trouble in Moscow, hardliners maintained an ideological line in the sand to the bitter end by attacking Solidarity in Poland and praising the attempted coup against the reforming Gorbachev in Moscow. Although I am unfortunately omitting much of the debate between those advocating some level of reform and those usually described as “hardliners,” it nonetheless presents a distinct challenge to label the SRV as being fully prepared for the diplomatic isolation that accompanied the collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>42</sup>

Vietnam’s recognition of the need for a fundamental realignment of its foreign policy did not of course, come all at once in the form of a cathartic announcement of short-sightedness or without internal debate. In May 1988, in the wake of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, its Politburo passed Resolution No. 13, which the prolific Carlyle A. Thayer calls “a major landmark.” Resolution 13 explicitly acknowledged the need for a “multi-directional foreign policy,” but it closely followed other maneuvers such as a reduction in its standing Army and a withdrawal from Cambodia, events that hinted at prioritizing Vietnam’s still-needy economy over its bloated military. Additionally, the policy may have been “multi-directional,” but it would continue to prioritize socialist nations in general and, in the coming years, China in particular. This selectivity was a continuation of the expressed interest in normal relations between Vietnam and China as expressed by the 6<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 1986 and evidenced by

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42. I am heavily and undeniably indebted to David Elliott’s generally excellent *Changing Worlds* for much of the empirical material substantiating Vietnam’s general unreadiness for the “changing world.” See pages 60, 94, 102-103. However, the unpreparedness can also be seen in the lengthy trail of published Party documents such as those of the 7<sup>th</sup> Party Congress. *75 Years of the Communist Party of Việt Nam [1930-2005]: A Selection of Documents from Nine Party Congresses* (Hà Nội: Thế Giới Publishers, 2005), 884.

subsequent large-scale troop withdrawals from Cambodia aimed at appeasing Vietnam's historic hegemon to the North.<sup>43</sup>

Resolution 13 was followed by halting foreign policy movement on several fronts, most of which were almost directly favorable to normalization with both China and the US, but still hint at indecision on the part of a Vietnam decidedly unsure of its future friends. While the SRV temporarily halted POW/MIA operations with the US in August 1988 due to Ronald Reagan's "hostile policy" towards Vietnam, it recanted quickly and allowed what Michael Allen calls "the most extensive casualty resolution operations [of MIA remains] to date" in September with impressive results. In April 1989, Vietnam withdrew some of its troops from Cambodia, an action completed in September. That summer an international peace conference was unable to capitalize on Vietnam's troop withdrawals by reaching a viable resolution to Cambodia. While such events were viewed favorably by both the US and China, they were punctuated by other signals less ambiguous for China than they were for the US.<sup>44</sup>

In the wake of the Tiananmen Square protests in China and the now notorious Chinese response, the Vietnamese Party Secretary Nguyễn Văn Linh and others suggested the foreign policy direction Vietnam was to take in the immediate future. Rather than condemning China's heavy-handed crackdown, Linh and others instead condemned the "western subversion" that had ostensibly led to them. Such speeches may have been in keeping with Vietnam's generally conservative approach to the events of the late 1980s, but the choice to condemn the West instead of China betrayed more than a hint of Vietnam's increasing tilt towards China. The

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43. Carlyle A. Thayer, "International Relations and Security: A Rapid Overview of a Decade of *Doi Moi*," in Adam Fforde ed. *Doi Moi: Ten Years after the 1986 Party Congress*, 28; Vietnam's efforts to establish peace with China are in Lưu Văn Lợi, *50 Years of Vietnamese Diplomacy*, 442.

44. Michael J. Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 260; Don Oberdorfer, "Vietnam Suspends Cooperation on U.S. MIAs; Senator Calls Action 'Grave Error;' Conciliatory Moves Halted," *The Washington Post*, August 4, 1988.

direction was at this point still more muted than it would shortly become, and Vietnam was still engaging the US in multiple high-level meetings, but Linh's speeches and Vietnamese commentary on other international events made it clear that Vietnam's foreign policy priorities remained with the socialist camp, even if it meant defending China.<sup>45</sup>

For its part, China did not make normalization an enjoyable ride for Vietnam. During negotiations with Cambodia, the Chinese played tapes they had secretly recorded of Vietnam's agreement to downgrade their support for their ally Hun Sen to the man himself. In the face of declining Soviet aid, they offered their own - if Vietnam would officially recognize China's regional hegemony. They favored normalization with Vietnam as long as the alliance was not a "red solution," namely, one interpreted by anyone as a renewal of strong Cold War blocs or ideological camps.<sup>46</sup>

Despite China's exacting diplomacy, the convention of Vietnam's 7<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in June 1991 continued the trend of affording it diplomatic priority in the face of the now-acknowledged "overall and profound crisis in the socialist countries." This Congress featured several new leaders, many of whom were still "conservatives," including a new general secretary, Đỗ Mười, who would confront the various problems of a nation now ribbed by noncommunists as members of a "lonely hearts club" including only Laos, China, Cuba, and North Korea. Vietnam was clearly unwilling to leave this club in 1991, however, stating unequivocally in official party documents that "to hold to the socialist path is the only correct

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45. Eero Palmujoki, "Ideology and Foreign Policy: Vietnam's Marxist-Leninist Doctrine and Global Change, 1986-1996," in Thayer and Amer, *Vietnamese Foreign Policy in Transition*, 34.

46. Elliot, *Changing Worlds*, 91, 114, 118.



choice.” Yet this decision came with caveats important for a rudimentary understanding of Vietnam’s perspective on normalization with the US for the next few years.<sup>47</sup>

The Congress continued the “socialist-oriented mixed economy” initiated in 1986, but enhanced Resolution 13’s call for a “multidirectional foreign policy” by declaring instead a desire “to befriend *all* countries in the world community” (emphasis mine). While such a statement deserves and has received a great deal of recognition, such recognition has perhaps overshadowed other goals preceding this general statement. Leading the general statement was the specific goal of normalizing relations with China and improving relations with other Southeast Asian nations. There is, in fact, no mention of the United States anywhere in the Central Committee’s summary report of foreign policy goals, but the Party’s “political report” contained an oblique reference to failures to “make timely assessments so as to make judicious decisions.” This is almost certainly an oblique reference to the inability of the recently “fired” foreign minister Nguyễn Cơ Thạch to deliver on his promises of normalization with the US. Not only did Thạch, reportedly nicknamed “Mr. America,” fail to deliver on normalization with the US, he had been increasingly viewed as an obstacle to normalization with China and finally removed from government altogether by a Politburo clearly prioritizing China over the United States.<sup>48</sup>

With China prioritized by the 7<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, Vietnamese foreign policy followed suit, continuing its courtship of China and normalizing relations with it in late 1991. Conversely, Lewis M. Stern, author of the well-researched *Defense Relations Between the United States and*

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47. “Lonely hearts club” is in *Ibid.*, 89; “Report of the 6<sup>th</sup> Central Committee on the Documents of the 7<sup>th</sup> Congress,” in *75 Years of the Communist Party of Việt Nam*, 781.

48. *Ibid.*, 809; “The Political Report of the Central 6<sup>th</sup> Committee to Congress” in *75 Years of the Communist Party of Việt Nam*, 848; John McCain and Mark Salter, *Worth the Fighting For* (New York: Random House, 2002), 226, 233.

*Vietnam*, states that after the 7<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, “Hanoi accorded normalization [with the US] a fairly low priority.” The stated goals of the Party from 1991 to 1995 bear this out, as they placed “the process of normalization with the United States,” again, behind relations with China, Cuba, Southeast Asia and Japan. To be sure, over the next three years Vietnam continued to host US presidential delegations, US veterans, and POW/MIA families and also made good on pledges to allow the US access to archival material. Such efforts were noted and appreciated by some more discerning members of the United States Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs. And although China had been prioritized by the Party, it was by no means the only progress that Vietnam made in its endeavors to “befriend all countries in the world community” or in accomplishing its specific foreign policy goals from 1991 to 1995. In 1993 it was Francois Mitterrand who became the first Western head of state to visit Vietnam since the Vietnam War, even while the new Clinton administration frustrated the Vietnamese with yet another extension of the US trade embargo. But with normalized relations with China, more attention from the West and the end of the Japanese trade embargo on Vietnam in the end of 1993, it was becoming increasingly clear that it was, in fact, the US who was missing out on opportunities that China, Japan and Australia were enjoying.<sup>49</sup>

This section should establish that the SRV certainly belongs in a chapter on entities in favor of normalization. The SRV responded slowly to the momentous geopolitical changes of the years 1989-1992, but its Party documents and subsequent actions demonstrate that China took priority over the US and that Vietnam was not willing to normalize relations if it meant incessant pressure from the United States to veer from its decision to “hold to the Socialist Path.” This path was to Vietnam, the “only correct choice,” but the Vietnam of the early 1990s enjoyed

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49. Stern, *Defense Relations*, 18-19, for the extension of the embargo see *Ibid.*, 30-31;

far less Great Power support than in the halcyon days of 1976. Thus some conservatives in the Central Committee became increasingly concerned, some would say “obsessed” with the threat of “peaceful evolution,” the possibility that economic interdependence with capitalist nations would prompt political change.<sup>50</sup>

The geopolitical context and on-record speeches by many a US official certainly substantiated these worries. While concerns about peaceful evolution have been well documented by the likes of Carlyle Thayer, David W.P. Elliott and Lewis M. Stern, in closing I would merely observe that the worries were by no means creations of Western historians reading paranoia into SRV conservatives. The concern was voiced in all but the term “peaceful evolution” by Prime Minister Võ Văn Kiệt after Clinton had announced normalization the day prior. While Kiệt’s speech welcomed normalization, and promised continued cooperation on POW/MIA affairs, he observed that the new relations had to be based on “equality, respect for independence and sovereignty, and non-interference in the internal affairs of each other.” Unsurprisingly, Clinton had voiced no fear of Vietnamese interference in US democracy in his own speech. The 8<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, convening the year after normalization, listed “peaceful evolution” as one of “four dangers” that remained “acute challenges” for Vietnam, alleging that “many forces persist in their attempts” to destabilize Vietnamese politics. In coming years, well-meaning US diplomats found it necessary to address conservatives in Vietnam face-to-face to allay ongoing concerns and exegete comments made by President Clinton interpreted by some Vietnamese as threatening the existence of Communism.<sup>51</sup>

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50. Elliott, *Changing Worlds*, 75.

51. Thaveeporn Vasavakul, “Sectoral Policies and Strategies for State and Party Building from the VII to the VIII Congresses of the Vietnamese Communist Party (1991-1996),” in Fforde, *Doi Moi*, 115; Nguyễn Hữu Đạo ed. VIỆT NAM: NHỮNG SỰ KIỆN LỊCH SỬ 1975 – 2000 (Vietnam: Nhà Xuất Bản Giáo Dục, 2008), 552; “Political Report of the 7<sup>th</sup> Central Committee to the Congress,” in *75 Years of the Communist Party of Việt Nam*, 961; Desaix Anderson, *An American in Hanoi*, 24-25, 173-174.

While the US had its POW/MIA controversy to resolve, Vietnam had its own conservative concerns to overcome. Both sides proved to be frustratingly, if understandably recalcitrant at times. For its part, Vietnam offered *qualified* willingness to normalize with the US. While Vietnam may indeed have been the *demandeur* and exercised remarkable patience on the POW/MIA issue, it showed little patience for interference in its relations with China or its political system. Conversely, most leaders of the POW/MIA movement and some of their political representatives, unencumbered by the requirements of democratic centralism, would continue to oppose normalization with Vietnam before, during and even after it occurred. Their story and the reasons for their opposition, will be told in the next chapter.

## THE SENATE SELECT COMMITTEE ON POW/MIA AFFAIRS 1991-1993

Although there remains surprising variance among interpretations of the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs, standing from August 1991 to January 1993, its conclusion, and the reception thereof, should be interpreted as a cautious removal of the chief barrier to normalization – the suspicion that Vietnam had not been and was not being forthright about US POWs or their remains. The Senate Select Committee was initiated by Senator Bob Smith of New Hampshire and approved without a dissenting vote in the Senate after both *USA Today* and *Newsweek* published a photo depicting what appeared to be three US service members involuntarily detained in Southeast Asia. Perhaps ironically, Ann Mills Griffiths vocally opposed the creation of the Committee despite its sponsorship by a friend of the POW/MIA community, stating in the League’s position paper that, “The POW/MIA issue can’t afford another ‘conclusion.’” Besides the chair (John Kerry, D-Massachusetts) and its vice-chair (Robert Smith, R-New Hampshire) the committee comprised 10 additional members. Six were Vietnam War veterans, included the heavily-decorated Kerry, former POW John McCain, and Medal of Honor recipient Bob Kerrey. The Committee was not only bi-partisan, but included long-time POW/MIA advocates including not only the vice-Chairman, but Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa) and Jesse Helms as well (R-North Carolina). Few could argue that the Committee lacked the experience, moral capital or empathy required to handle an “Affair” so controversial – although some later would!<sup>52</sup>

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52. Michael Allen lays out the preconditions for the Senate Select Committee and Griffiths’s objections to it, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 269-270, 273; creation of the Committee and its agenda and many of its hearings are available at [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/pow/senate\\_house/investigation\\_S.html](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/pow/senate_house/investigation_S.html) last accessed March 15, 2017.

While the Committee's primary goals were to investigate the possibility of US survivors perhaps still alive in Vietnam, to "de-mystify the POW/MIA accounting process," and to improve procedures on a host of well-documented failures on the part of the government to follow-up on leads and improve communication with families missing loved ones. However, one of the goals, "to lend added weight to Executive branch efforts to obtain cooperation from foreign governments in Southeast Asia and elsewhere in accounting for missing Americans," related indirectly to the possibility of normalization with Vietnam, a possibility that surfaced with surprising frequency in hearings, especially from those concerned that such "leverage" might soon be removed.<sup>53</sup>

Although the POW/MIA issue may have remained "the highest national priority" for the Bush administration, the Committee seems to have felt little executive pressure. While John Kerry did volunteer for the chairmanship, ostensibly for altruistic reasons, others reportedly urged him to decline, including Bob Kerrey, who has since remarked, "nobody wanted to be on that damn committee. It was an absolute loser. Everyone knew that the P.O.W. stories were fabrications." While I am no expert on congressional hearings, the body language, frequent and lengthy side conversations and number of empty seats would seem to partially justify Kerrey's opinion. Nonetheless, the committee did conduct important work that can almost categorically be described as promoting the cause of normalization with Vietnam.<sup>54</sup>

First and foremost, the committee was deliberate. Standing for over a year, the committee held five lengthy hearings and interviewed well over 150 witnesses. While H. Bruce Franklin complained in the "Missing in Action in the Twenty-First Century" chapter of his book

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53. Ibid.

54. Hendon and Stewart, *An Enormous Crime*, 408. Hendon uses the alleged disdain for serving on the Committee to express his belief that the truth was "fraggged" by key members of it. Many of the hearings of the SSC can be viewed on C-Span at [https://www.c-span.org/search/?sponsorid\[\]=62991](https://www.c-span.org/search/?sponsorid[]=62991) last accessed April 10, 2017.

*Vietnam and Other American Fantasies* that “the only witnesses allowed to testify were either government apologists or POW/MIA movement partisans,” he seems to miss the mark widely. The committee listened to a host of testimonies not only from the likes of Griffiths, who could arguably be labeled a POW partisan, and DIA employees, who could perhaps best be labeled “government apologists,” but also from former military officers directly involved in POW exchanges, former Vietnamese and Laotian communist officials who would likely have enjoyed little more than implicating the governments that ostracized them, persons implicated in fraudulent efforts to enrich themselves via POW/MIA hoaxes and former POWs themselves.<sup>55</sup>

In their deliberations, the Committee ensured that older tales of government misdirection were clarified and denounced, but also shed light on a host of failed extra-governmental endeavors to free live POWs that had not only failed but often cost the government money directly or indirectly. One of its final mandates, “to review the activities of private organizations who participate in fundraising and educational efforts related to the POW/MIA issue” resulted in several scathing rebukes of scams profiting on the demise of alleged POWs. As even more legitimate groups, such as the National League of Families were named specifically in the final report, it in effect deflected some of the vitriol that had built up against the government for 20 years back at not some, but most of the organized POW/MIA groups. The Committee, stacked with well-regarded veterans, did so in language that still expressed sensitivity to individual

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55. I am somewhat puzzled at Franklin’s generalization about the SSC’s witnesses, and his claims are now being repeated by other scholars such Edwin Martini with no additional sourcing. Franklin himself asked to testify to the SSC, but was denied twice. While the witness list is noticeably short on academics, it is also understandable why the polemical Franklin might have been excluded on such a sensitive issue. Bùi Tín, a former People’s Army of Vietnam Colonel and author of *Following Ho Chi Minh* was one of the witnesses who might have willingly exposed a North Vietnamese cover-up. He testified that Vietnam had not, to his knowledge, kept any POWs after the war. He and McCain publicly embraced upon conclusion of his testimony. Franklin, *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies*, 198, 233 n. 78; Martini, *Invisible Enemies*, 171; SSC Report, 3, 425-26, 865-878; McCain and Salter, *Worth the Fighting For*, 246-47.

families and gently coupled reality with humanity in its conclusion that recognized a fundamental “conflict between the laws of probability and the dictates of human nature.”

Not only did the Committee listen to literally scores of witnesses, but its members travelled to Vietnam to conduct several fact-finding missions and conducted “short-notice inspections” of areas associated with live-sighting reports. Such openness can surely be viewed as almost unprecedented on the part of any two countries without established diplomatic relations. Nevertheless, Vietnam granted access for such visits, although many of them were touch-and-go and were later criticized, likely deservedly so, for being more advance than short notice. The Vietnamese first escorted members of one delegation to Thanh Liệt Prison, a former PAVN detention center. They later provided interview access to former reeducation camp inmates who could provide no knowledge of live service members in Vietnam, brought select Committee members to the Russian consulate and allowed Smith and Kerry to survey “three sensitive military areas.” None of these actions produced any leads on live service members, but they did demonstrate a general Vietnamese desire to accommodate US inspectors in a way that would be almost unimaginable on US soil. These highly publicized events were recognized and praised by President Bush and made allegations of Vietnamese foot-dragging by louder POW/MIA activists seem ever more shrill.<sup>56</sup>

The on-the-ground efforts of select Committee members and the relative cooperation of the Vietnamese dispelled some of the claims of Vietnamese deceit, but the key conclusions of the Committee, while interpreted with surprising variety, should be viewed as removing obstacles to normalization. The report was empathetic in tone towards the plight of families with more

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56. SSC Report, 384-387; Billy Hendon, to his credit, pointed out that Kerry gave the Vietnamese far too much advance notice for the inspections and allowed the Vietnamese more than a day to move prisoners from Thanh Liet if necessary. Hendon and Stewart, *An Enormous Crime*, 428.



questions than answers, and never claimed to be the final word on the POW/MIA issue, but it was straightforward regarding several important points. As mentioned, it found “no compelling evidence that proves that any American remains alive in captivity in Southeast Asia.” Furthermore, it helped discredit, in detail, a raft of past hoaxes including a “warehoused remains” rumor; pulled no punches regarding the inordinate and unusual power of the League and, perhaps most importantly; recognized the unlikelihood of Vietnam’s hiding prisoners and recognized its strict adherence to the Road Map regarding Cambodia. Its summary of recent progress on the POW/MIA issue labeled Hanoi’s improvements in the very early 1990s as “dramatic” but “irregular.” However, in describing the reception of the Committee and Vietnamese accession to US demands (which is what they unfortunately were), the SSC report was glowing, describing the Vietnamese as moving unilaterally and with alacrity. Not only Kerry, but also Bob Smith, who previously lacked faith in the integrity of the Vietnamese on the POW/MIA issue, “expressed satisfaction” with Vietnamese efforts on their final trip in December 1992. While the Vietnamese had been one part of the problem for many in the POW/MIA community, the Committee also relieved some pressure on the US government by declassifying over one million pages of documents on top of its efforts to improve transparency on the US side.<sup>57</sup>

Ann Mills Griffiths’ testimony at the Committee was, for a “private citizen” surprisingly focused on diplomatic endeavors. Some of the SSC report seems aimed almost directly at her qualms about normalization. Stressing in her early testimony to the SSC that the Vietnamese were not yet doing enough, Griffiths not only testified about POW/MIA issues like “warehoused remains” but stressed her (and thus the League’s) opinion that “the pace and scale of

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57. *Ibid.*, 9, 380, 388-390.

normalization must be governed by the pace and scale of POW/MIA relations.” The final SSC report explicitly discredited the logic of warehoused remains and simultaneously stressed that Vietnamese cooperation had never been better. Coupling Griffith’s position with that of SSC report would mean moving closer to normalization. Near the end of hearings, and after witnessing Vietnamese cooperation firsthand, Kerry clearly had little time for Griffith’s skepticism about Vietnam, claiming she did not “want to see progress” and siding with General Vessey on the issue of warehoused remains.<sup>58</sup>

Reactions to the SSC’s findings were closely tied to normalization. *The New York Times* reported on the SSC’s findings as being “authoritative, if not definitive.” As even the SSC had acknowledged it could not “prove a negative,” such an assessment is correct. The *Times* also critically pointed out how the POW/MIA issue had been an “impediment” to normal diplomatic relations, but candidly urged Bush to quickly “go ahead on normalization,” an enjoinder Bush failed to take during or after the SSC findings, almost certainly due to political calculations. A publication in far closer proximity to Vietnam, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, also felt the report authoritatively removed “the key obstacle” to diplomatic relations between the two countries, and prematurely claimed the US was “poised” in fact, to do just that. While Griffiths and other POW “activists” briefly licked their wounds, they quickly jumped on another obstacle to normalization, the discovery by Australian scholar Stephen Morris of Russian documents appearing to substantiate that there were live POWs in Vietnam. While these too would be proven false, they, like the 1992 presidential election, provided a temporary reprieve to the

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58. Ann Mills Griffiths testimony before the Senate Select Committee, November 10, 1991. C-Span, available at <https://www.c-span.org/video/?22612-1/powmia-issues-day-2-part-2> last accessed March 10, 2017; Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 275. Griffiths continued to stress her belief in warehoused remains not only in the US, but also to Vietnamese foreign ministers after normalization. Anderson, *An American in Hanoi*, 27.

removal of the last “leverage” that the League and other POW/MIA activists had long warned the US government about removing.<sup>59</sup>

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59. “Authoritative Answers on M.I.A.’s,” *The New York Times*, January 14, 1993; “Good Morning Vietnam,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, January 20, 1993; Thomas W. Lipman, “POW Document Renews Bitter Arguments,” *The Washington Post*, April 14, 1993.

## NEOLIBERALISM GREETES THE NEWEST “ASIAN TIGER”

The role of US corporations in the gradual, halting steps towards normalization has been one of the lesser-told stories of the rapprochement between the two former belligerents. From the Oval Office, the reasons for minimizing the impact of corporate pressure are manifold. As each subsequent administration from Reagan to Clinton established the recovery of POW/MIAs or their remains as the “highest national priority” (officially if not perhaps in fact, as John Kerry complained on the SSC), acknowledging the possibility that corporate interests in Vietnam were beginning to overtake concern for an increasingly weakened POW/MIA lobby was simply untenable. David Reed, who conducted a series of interviews with administration officials from several administrations, outlined this unsurprising attitude in his dissertation. He observed that Bush officials denied discussing normalization with Vietnam outside of POW/MIA and veteran communities. Similarly, he found reluctance among Clinton officials to discuss any sort of corporate pressure on America and frequently cited the need to find “political cover” when making important decisions on Vietnam. Clinton himself claimed that corporate lobbying was “not part” of his decision-making process on normalization.<sup>60</sup>

Those with more intimate knowledge of such proceedings observed far more agency on the part of corporations. Frederick Z. Brown, formerly the country director for Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia under Assistant Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke during the Carter administration and a prolific writer on normalization, claims that without lobbying from US corporations, normalization would certainly have been “delayed.” As far as political leverage, something the POW/MIA lobby had enjoyed for 15 years, Solomon observed businesses played

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60. Reed, “The Domestic Context,” 315, 319; Martini, *Invisible Enemies*, 195.

a role as a helpful and increasingly powerful “counterbalance” to this lobby. This paper does not pretend to provide definitive answers on the exact weight of business pressure on Congress or the White House, or to be precise on the sustained mechanics of influence wielded by various committees, organizations, corporations, and lobbying groups on the US political process. Such efforts are simply beyond the scope of the author’s time, mobility and access to business archives.<sup>61</sup>

What this paper can do, however, is outline some strong circumstantial evidence pointing to decidedly more influence than publicly acknowledged by the Bush or Clinton administrations, and slyly observe that US corporations clearly shared a desire for normalization with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, left-leaning University academics and some right-leaning veteran organizations even while they opposed the generally conservative agenda of the POW/MIA lobby. In the future, I hope to conduct more research on this issue myself or see someone else clarify and expand on it.<sup>62</sup>

Although the early 1990s were still punctuated by some eye-opening political victories by the POW/MIA lobby, there remains significant evidence of US businesses demanding and preparing for relaxed sanctions in Vietnam. It would not do, however, to merely catalogue such evidence without briefly mentioning that changing times in Vietnam likely enhanced US corporate interest in Vietnam as well. A series of events beginning in the late 1980s with the 1986 death of Party hardliner Lê Duẩn and subsequent reforms known collectively as *Đổi Mới* or “renovation” in Vietnam saw a shift from collectivist policies to “an avowedly pro-market

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61. Richard Z. Brown, “Rapprochement with Vietnam,” 321; Brown, “The United States and Vietnam” in *Honey and Vinegar: Incentives, Sanctions, and Foreign Policy* eds. Richard N. Haass and Meghan L. O’Sullivan (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2000), 151.

62. The views of some academics - which include several Vietnamese-American professors and authors - and veterans’ organizations will be described later in this paper. While I disagree with the wholesale linkage of the POW/MIA lobby with the modern conservative movement described by Michael J. Allen, the strong connection between the League and the Reagan Administration does deserve consideration.

stance” in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Such changes prompted economic growth averaging eight percent per year for the period most germane to this study and were coupled with an ever firmer Vietnamese thumb on domestic inflation. Such indicators, along with increased activity on the part of other countries with no POW/MIA problems with Vietnam indubitably fostered a growing corporate concern that the US was missing out on golden opportunities in the Socialist Republic.<sup>63</sup>

It is also an interesting, ironic, and overlooked possibility that mere exposure to POW/MIA recovery efforts in Vietnam must have been revealing for Party cadre. Those focusing on POW/MIA efforts regularly bemoan the exorbitant cost of recovering one single set of remains in Southeast Asia. While this is one angle from which to approach the issue, from another standpoint, the Vietnamese regularly observed a US willing and able to pay well over a million dollars per set of remains. US POW/MIA efforts led to whole new offices in Vietnam such as the Vietnam Office for Seeking Missing Persons and has required and paid for expensive Vietnamese logistical support for Joint Field Activities and organizations permanently headquartered in Vietnam. These were certainly a boon to the SRV’s economy and likely a not-unnoticed indicator of US economic strength, especially for a country unable to recover the over 300,000 Vietnamese missing from the same war.<sup>64</sup>

Although corporate pressure on the Bush Administration was scarcely acknowledged by executives, the business world was clearly gearing up to conduct trade in Vietnam well before the embargo was lifted in 1994. As early as 1990 the board of the US Chamber of Commerce

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63. For a comprehensive statistical overview of the impact of *Đổi Mới*’s impact see Raymond Mallon, “*Doi Moi* and Economic Development in Vietnam: A Rapid Overview of a Decade of Reform,” in Fforde, *Doi Moi*, 9-24.

64. Thomas M. Hawley, *The Remains of War: Bodies, Politics and the Search for American Soldiers Unaccounted for in Southeast Asia*, 89; Michael Allen claims the average cost for a set of remains is 1.7 million dollars, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 285.

voted unanimously to normalize relations with Vietnam even while the World Bank compared the SRV's economic profile to pre-boom 1965 South Korea. "It's time" said one of the Chamber's vice presidents nearly four years before Clinton officially expressed the same sentiment. By 1991 a US-Vietnam Trade Council boasted the membership of blue-chip companies and law firms in full support of normalizing with Vietnam. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee voted, ineffectually, to do just that by a 12-1 margin in June of the same year. Both Edwin Martini and Richard Solomon have noted that the efforts by Bush to gradually relax international sanctions against Vietnam eventually hurt US companies and complicated diplomacy because Bush was forced to prolong the blockage of international lending to Vietnam because lifting such sanctions would allow foreign companies to pre-empt those in the US, which were still prohibited by law from conducting business in Vietnam. Although Bush was unable to take the political plunge and normalize with Vietnam, by the end of his administration businesses, forums and newspapers were pleading with him to do so, pleas that had to sound welcome after his 1992 run-ins with unhappy POW/MIA families during his address to the League.<sup>65</sup>

With the findings of the Senate Select Committee published immediately prior to his inauguration, Clinton not only heard more pleas for normalization, but also saw business insert itself more frequently in a debate once dominated by the POW/MIA lobby. While *The New York Times* lamented the fact that Bush might pass the buck to a Clinton administration more vulnerable on Vietnam, it nonetheless urged Clinton to build on Bush's momentum with the SSC results in hand. Lobbyists from major corporations bemoaned "missing out" in Vietnam even

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65. Clyde H. Farnsworth, "U.S. Urged to End Hanoi Trade Curb," *The New York Times*, October 9, 1990; Thomas J. Schwartz and Eugene A. Matthews, "Forum: Lift the Trade Embargo on Vietnam," *The New York Times*, September 15, 1991; Merrill Goozner, "U.S. Firms Losing Out in Emerging Vietnam," *The Chicago Tribune*, March 7, 1993; Martini, *Invisible Enemies*, 164-65.

while some, like Caterpillar, were picketed by POW/MIA advocates for their complaints. Clinton, while still voicing support for the POW/MIA community, appears to have listened. Immediately following a July 1, 1993 call from 19 veterans in Congress to relax economic sanctions against Vietnam, Clinton announced on July 2 that the US would stop blocking international lending to the SRV and dispatched a presidential delegation that same month to resolve more problematic POW/MIA issues. He seems to have wisely kept US business entities off the guest list. In September 1993, Clinton finally permitted US companies to bid on World Bank projects in Vietnam and satisfied many corporate demands by finally lifting the embargo over the protests of the League on February 3, 1994. By the time Clinton did so, he shockingly enjoyed the enthusiastic support of the Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce in Orange County.<sup>66</sup>

The above catalogue of business pressures and the slothful US progress towards normalization is all but redundant in secondary literature. However, a sketch of business activity surrounding the end of the embargo and normalization should prove humorous, in keeping with our nation's earliest history, and demonstrative of the fervor with which the corporate teakettle had been long boiling in anticipation of trading in Vietnam.

On February 22, 1784 two "US" ships departed from New York Harbor. One was The *Edward*, which bore the signed Articles of Peace between the United States and England. The second was the *Empress of China*, the first ship under a star-spangled banner to make its way to China to conduct trade. Although the newly-formed and unknown United States made this first attempt to initiate trade on its own before Great Britain had even received the Articles of Peace,

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66. "George Bush's Last Chance on Vietnam," *The New York Times*, December 18, 1992; "Stop Punishing Vietnam," *The New York Times*, June 27, 1993; Reed, "The Domestic Context," 169; Tina Nguyen and David Reyes, "Conflict Over Normalization: Normalizing Vietnam Relations Stirs both Anger and Optimism," *The Los Angeles Times*, July 11, 1995.



the rapid commercial response to the lifting of the trade embargo in Vietnam may have superseded even the haste with which the *Empress* was launched.<sup>67</sup>

The very day the US embargo against Vietnam was lifted, February 3, 1994, a massive inflated Pepsi can sprang up in Ho Chi Minh City and bottles of Pepsi were available in stores immediately. Within ten hours of Clinton's signature, American Express became the official credit card of Vietnam. Boeing was finally able to make good on a statement of understanding regarding the sale of \$40 million of aircraft it had signed even before the embargo was lifted. Tourist and rental car companies scrambled to establish a foothold in a new market anticipated to grow ten percent a year for the remainder of the 1990s. Golf, long considered a bourgeois sport by the Vietnamese Communist Party, was quickly introduced to Vietnam with an 18-hole course opening in Đà Lạt soon after the embargo was lifted, and with a \$200 million pledge to open five future courses. Cruise lines quickly added Vietnamese port calls to their itineraries with positive, sometimes sold-out results.<sup>68</sup>

But the frenetic commercial consummation by no means stopped there. In September, former president and first lady George and Barbara Bush were "sponsored" by Citibank to make a goodwill tour of Vietnam. They met with multiple senior officials and dined with both the Citibank president and the SRV's Deputy Prime Minister. Over the next decade, with Vietnam's entry into the World Trade Organization, and the signature of a bilateral trade agreement, commercial contact between the two nations trade continued and grew. And while large

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67. Kariann Akemi Yokota, *Unbecoming British: How Revolutionary America Became a Postcolonial State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 115-16.

68. A few examples of the "cola wars" are in Philip Shenon, "New Vietnam Combat: Coke Versus Pepsi," *New York Times*, February 7, 1994 and Martini, *Invisible Enemies*, 195-96. Murray Hiebert and Susumu Awanoara also describe the cola wars as well the maneuvers of Boeing and American Express, "Making up for Lost Time: U.S. Firms Rush in Where Once They Could Not Tread," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, February 17, 1994, 16; Charles Wallace, "American and Vietnam: A New Era," *Los Angeles Times*, July 12, 1995; George Dooley, "Vietnam Trade," *Chicago Tribune* March 27, 1993.

corporations may have been the primary, if belated beneficiaries to more trade with Vietnam, even Vietnamese Americans, many of whom had opposed normalization, benefitted as well. Perhaps ironically, by the year 2000, “hundreds of Vietnamese Americans had started joint businesses in Vietnam” and these business contacts contributed to the ongoing US/Vietnamese reconciliation. The rapid commercial response to the lifting of the embargo and normalization may not prove the extent to which business influenced normalization, but it certainly indicates that many large US-based corporations had enough corporate intelligence to anticipate and act on the lifting of the trade embargo in 1994.<sup>69</sup>

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69. The Bush trip is in Anderson, *An American in Hanoi*, 17. A *Baltimore Sun* article published before the trip was a little more pointed than Anderson, replacing “sponsored” with an observation that the Bushes would in fact be paid something over six figures to conduct the trip, “Bush to Visit Vietnam on a Corporate-Funded Trip,” July 22, 1995; Schulzinger, *A Time for Peace*, 128.

## JOHN MCCAIN AND JOHN KERRY

The influence of these two long-seated senators from Arizona and Massachusetts, respectively, on the normalization process is perhaps difficult to overstate. As mentioned, both served in Vietnam, and both were highly decorated. Kerry tossed his medals away after the war as a leader of the Vietnam Veterans against the War while John McCain turned his experience as a POW into a political career and several books. Thus, while from different political backgrounds, both of these legislators had the “moral authority” to discuss POW/MIA issues, assess if what Vietnam was doing on POW/MIA affairs was sufficient, suggest appropriate legislation when it was, cross-examine those with vehement (and often dubious) anti-normalization arguments and travel on presidential delegations to interact directly with the Vietnamese. Both senators did this and more.

Although their role on the Senate Select Committee for POW/MIA affairs (SSC) was undoubtedly important and pivotal, and will be expanded upon in this section, this was by no means their only contribution. Nor would it do to suggest Kerry and McCain were merely “pro-Vietnamese.” They were not, and were just as capable of noting either delinquency or progress on the part of the Vietnamese as they were of pointing out that some US demands of the SRV approached the absurd. Nor of course were McCain and Kerry necessarily opposed to POW/MIA families or even the agencies that represented them. The efforts they made and the language they used almost always reflected a desire to be fair with Vietnam and yet acknowledge the pain of POW/MIA families. I would suggest that criticism by both Edwin Martini, author of *Invisible Enemies: The American War on Vietnam, 1975-2000*, for an “anti-Vietnamese tone” in the language of the Senate Select Committee and the condemnation of both McCain and Kerry’s work on the SSC by those who might be labeled extreme POW/MIA activists, suggests that these

two were in fact, striking a necessary balance in moving normalization forward. Such balance was seen in efforts to deal justly with Vietnam, by their voluntary efforts on the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs and in the legislation that both sponsored to facilitate forward progress on normalization.<sup>70</sup>

Before the creation of the Senate Select Committee in 1991, a willingness to deal fairly with Vietnam and to open conciliatory doors was already evident in the actions of both McCain and Kerry. While the Reagan Administration and the Bush Roadmap precluded open diplomacy between the US and Vietnam on the basis of its occupation of Cambodia, neither McCain nor Kerry swallowed the US position on Cambodia whole. In 1988, McCain pushed for progress with Vietnam by calling for “interest sections” in both the US and Vietnam that could facilitate forward movement on a variety of diplomatic fronts to include both POW/MIA concerns and progress on Cambodia. McCain’s proposal was explicitly opposed by Frederick Z. Brown and the POW/MIA lobby, but ultimately went unrealized due to a short-lived suspension of Vietnamese cooperation on POW/MIA issues. The rebuffed, perhaps humiliated McCain unequivocally condemned Hanoi’s about-face as “a grave error” and voiced his concerns directly to the Vietnamese ambassador to the UN.<sup>71</sup>

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70. Gerald Nicosia describes the ambivalence with which a “duty bound” Kerry returned his medals. Kerry did not see the return of his medals as anti-American, but rather as something to do because he still loved it, *Home to War, The History of the Vietnam Veterans’ Movement* (New York: Crown Publishers, 143; John McCain and Mark Salter, *Faith of My Fathers* (New York: Random House, 1999).

71. The suspension of cooperation came at a time when Vietnam seems to be in some degree of political turmoil. An August 4, 1988 article in *The Washington Post* by Don Oberdorfer, “Vietnam Suspends Cooperation on U.S. MIAs; Senator Calls Action ‘Grave Error;’ Conciliatory Moves Halted,” notes an internal “struggle over foreign policy within the Hanoi regime.” Michael J. Allen focuses almost exclusively on the League’s opposition to such interest sections, failing to note that Hanoi’s announcement came *while* the interest section proposal was still on the table and that McCain himself favored suspension of it unless Hanoi changed tack, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 258; McCain and Salter, *Worth the Fighting For*, 224. Frederick Z. Brown wrote an Op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal* claiming, “The McCain Proposal Would Send Hanoi Wrong Signal,” April 26, 1988.

Despite Hanoi's vacillations, McCain demonstrated a patience and balance with Vietnam that was increasingly led or backed by Kerry. The two had distrusted each other early in their careers for understandable reasons, but in early 1991 that changed after a lengthy flight to the Middle East that gave the two an opportunity to discuss their experiences in Vietnam. McCain found Kerry to be the "genuine article" despite their markedly different attitudes on the Vietnam War, and the two purposefully set about normalizing relations with Vietnam to help their own nation heal.<sup>72</sup>

The two were undeniably active, influential and outspoken in this endeavor for the next three and a half years. Later in 1991 McCain and Kerry both pointed out the hypocrisy of a US "Roadmap" for normalization with Vietnam which offered de facto support for China, and thus by extension, the Khmer Rouge – the genocidal, nominally communist force ravaging Cambodia during the 1980s. McCain, who had personally debated the merits of The Roadmap with the Vietnamese Foreign Minister, drily quipped that he would feel better "if we were applying as much pressure to the Chinese as we are on the Vietnamese." John Kerry one-upped McCain by suggesting gratitude towards Vietnam. To the face of Richard Solomon, Kerry pointed out that the Vietnamese had done "what nobody else was willing to do . . . kick the Khmer Rouge out." Although both criticized the US position on Cambodia as outlined in the Roadmap, both supported the Bush administration's move towards normalization, unlike most POW/MIA groups and their advocates in the Senate.<sup>73</sup>

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72. Michael Kranish, Brian C. Mooney and Nina J. Easton: *John F. Kerry: The Complete Biography by the Boston Globe Reporters Who Know Him Best* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004), 267-68; McCain and Salter, *Worth the Fighting For*, 243-44; Kerry claims, "I set out literally to bring that ending (US-Vietnam normalization) about," James Carroll, "A Friendship that Ended the War," *The New Yorker*, October 21, 1996; John Kerry, *A Call to Service* (New York: Penguin Book, 2003), xi.

73. Martini, *Invisible Enemies*, 165-66; McCain generally supported The Roadmap as it "clearly articulated the steps that would lead to normalization," but was surprised at the angry response to it of the SRV's Foreign Minister, Nguyễn Cơ Thạch and engaged in a heated debate with his "friend" about which government had historically shown more "bad faith." McCain and Salter, *Worth the Fighting For*, 230-31.

Both Kerry and McCain would receive and embrace the opportunity to deal directly with both POW/MIA activists and their empathetic legislators in the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs on which they served from 1991 to 1993. Both embraced service on the Committee as an opportunity to, in the words of the Committee's Executive Summary, "open the door" on a POW/MIA controversy long enshrouded in rumors of government secrecy and which had long been the primary "domestic factor" preventing normalization with Vietnam. While both had already voiced their willingness to move towards normalization, neither can accurately be said to have taken sides on the issue in the Committee, but rather recognized and acted upon a belief that forward progress would require a tough, fair review of the actions of the US government, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and POW/MIA families and their representatives regarding the fate of those still missing from the Vietnam War.<sup>74</sup>

Kerry, as mentioned, volunteered to chair the Committee in an effort to do just that while McCain deferred the co-chair to Bob Smith, the sponsor of the bill creating the SSC. McCain later regretted such reticence as he increasingly doubted his own party member's "open-mindedness." While the need for brevity unfortunately precludes a detailed treatment of their individual efforts, the temperamental McCain clearly welcomed an opportunity to challenge the testimony of those suggesting that "five presidential administrations" and possibly "thousands" of US military officers "had joined in an elaborate conspiracy to conceal the fact that Americans had been knowingly left behind." McCain's personal experience in Vietnam and intimate contact with "military culture" made him not only suspicious, but outright offended by such a claim. He proved adept at cross-examining such allegations, veiled or direct, by those such as Ross Perot,

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74. SSC Report, 2; while David W.P. Elliot's *Changing Worlds: Vietnam's Transition from Cold War to Globalization* is refreshingly devoid of any overemphasis of the normalization of relations between the US and Vietnam in favor of examining the effects of Vietnam's transition in a broader context, I nonetheless agree with his assessment of the POW/MIA issue as a critical domestic factor unique to the US, 153.

and capitalizing on testimony from more grounded (and informed) witnesses such as the presidential delegate for POW/MIA affairs General Vessey or researcher Ted Schweitzer to help put contentious issues like “the remains warehouse” to rest, while recognizing that there were of course still many US remains yet to be recovered in Vietnam. He tried to retain support from fair-minded families not only by expressing concern for them, but by urging the prosecution of scammers who had been preying on them financially.<sup>75</sup>

Kerry’s interventions as Chairman, while perhaps more diplomatic than McCain’s, were still pointed yet fair. Kerry joined McCain’s diatribes against frauds while unabashedly confronting an Ann Mills Griffiths determined to stall normalization. He subtly questioned the validity of many “live-sighting reports,” and pointed out that some “unresolved” cases were in fact resolved and should be stricken from the list. Kerry also willingly inserted himself into several debates with a remarkably nuanced and realistic appraisal of Vietnam’s willingness and ability to cooperate. Such remarks helped offset allegations by POW/MIA advocates of Hanoi’s ongoing deceptions. Kerry frankly admitted that, “if we (the US) were to apply that standard (of cooperation on POW/MIA issues) to ourselves in this point in time about Vietnamese MIAs, we would be sorely wanting.” Kerry also handled Perot with remarkable restraint, praising him for his interests in resolving the POW/MIA issue, but firmly establishing General Vessey as a far better authority than Perot on the possibility of “negotiations” resolving the POW/MIA issue.<sup>76</sup>

Interestingly, while the executive summary of the SSC report speaks of opening, not closing doors, Kerry does briefly, and perhaps accidentally, hint that some on the Committee were in fact, trying to “put it (the POW/MIA controversy) to rest.” While the “authoritative” if

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75. McCain and Salter, *Worth the Fighting For*, 243-444; SSC Report, 1054, 1124, 1144, 1223.

76. SSC Report, 1003, 1008-1011, 1054; Ross Perot, Testimony to the Senate Select Committee, August 11, 1992, 26-27; Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 275.

not “conclusive” statement about “no compelling evidence” may not have officially done so, it was viewed by many in the POW/MIA community as dangerously close. But while Kerry may have intended more finality in the findings than he explicitly betrayed, he nonetheless remained balanced in his approach to the hearings and frequently directed his ire at government officials who had previously had opportunities to rectify problems of accounting for the MIA.

Additionally, neither Kerry nor McCain ruled out the possibility of live POWs outside the control of the SRV, and the committee noted its inability to prove a negative. Finally, although the congressional issue is muted on this issue, and Bob Smith did dissent from some of the findings of the Committee, Kerry somehow delivered 12 signatures on the document decried as a death knell to live POWs in Southeast Asia by POW/MIA activists. The findings were virtually unanimous, and Smith, Grassley and Helms – all Committee members with long records of advocacy for POW/MIA families, penned their names to the document.<sup>77</sup>

There is simply no doubt that Kerry and McCain played purposeful, active, and balanced roles on this committee. Massachusetts Senator Ted Kennedy offered a bit of rare bipartisan praise for the duo’s work on the Committee, stating that they, unlike many SSC members, stood firm when others were “pandering to the emotions of people.” Some of these understandably emotive people were POW/MIA advocates like the National League of Families who were now forced to dissent from findings that included the written approval of some of their supporters and perhaps the most decorated and prestigious veterans of the Vietnam War in government, a position of increasingly tenuous political validity.<sup>78</sup>

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77. SSC Report, 933-34, 940-41, 953-55.

78. "Clinton Lifts Trade Embargo Against Vietnam." In *CQ Almanac 1994*, 50th ed., 467-68. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, 1995. <http://library.cqpress.com/cqalmanac/cqal94-1102509>.



While their efforts on the Senate Select Committee tipped the political scales towards normalization, it should be briefly mentioned that both regularly added weight in the form of sponsored legislation. Kerry pushed for more certain measures than the Roadmap in 1991 by co-sponsoring the Vietnam Access Act which would have eliminated some economic sanctions in return for progress on POW/MIA issues - had it become law. Kerry balanced this effort with a Vietnam Veterans' Coin Act in 1992 just months prior to the release of the SSC results. He also expanded on his efforts to "de-mystify" the POW/MIA recovery effort in the SSC by sponsoring a bill requiring DoD to provide war documents to POW/MIA families, a bill co-sponsored by McCain. McCain himself sponsored the bill finally lifting the economic embargo on Hanoi while Kerry sponsored its eventual substitute, which passed by a 62-38 vote. The same day the Senate resoundingly defeated a bill, sponsored by Bob Smith, that would have required yet more "certification" that Vietnam was "providing the fullest accounting possible." In their efforts on the SSC and in legislative endeavors, both McCain and Kerry demonstrated the political acumen to balance their efforts to reconcile with Vietnam with the need to acknowledge the service of Vietnam veterans and the very real loss suffered by POW/MIA families. Although such balance resulted in criticism from multiple sides, the criticism, much of which strikes the reader as agenda-driven, likely indicates these two were in fact, ideal candidates to see normalization become reality.<sup>79</sup>

The lifting of the embargo in the Senate was the crowning achievement of the efforts of McCain and Kerry to purposefully end the Vietnam War since 1991. Their position at the side of Clinton for official normalization on July 11, 1995, while perhaps symbolic, was undoubtedly

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79. "Clinton Lifts Trade Embargo Against Vietnam." In *CQ Almanac 1994*, 50th ed., 467-68. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, 1995. <http://library.cqpress.com/cqalmanac/cqa194-1102509>.

deserved. Their friendship grew during their crucibles on the SSC and it is perhaps fortunate that their best efforts predated the 1994 “Republican Revolution” in which the GOP captured both the House and Senate and the 1998 revelation of the Clinton/Lewinsky affair, both events contributing to increased unwillingness on the part of Clinton to take political risk. While historian James Patterson describes politicians of these Clinton years as “more fiercely partisan and unforgiving . . . than at any other time since Watergate,” the work of these two regarding Vietnam emerges as a stark and welcome contrast to such divisiveness.<sup>80</sup>

While the McCain-Kerry friendship was initiated and sustained by “Vietnam,” it did not end there. Both grew increasingly appreciative of the integrity of the other. The conservative “Maverick” McCain flatly refused to campaign against Kerry in Massachusetts in 1996, although he had done so in 1984. He also vocally opposed the efforts of “The Swift Boat Veterans for the Truth” to discredit Kerry’s service record in Vietnam during Kerry’s presidential campaign in 2004. For his part, Kerry filled the introduction of his 2003 book *A Call to Service*, intended to outline his presidential vision for America, with descriptions of his work on the SSC with McCain. “I have had no greater privilege in all my life than finding, then standing on common ground with John McCain,” remarked a Kerry who went on to note with pride the work that the “two Vietnam vets named John” who came from different parties and had different war experiences had accomplished due to their “common call to service.” In the light of their significant contributions to normalizing relations with Vietnam, it is difficult to argue otherwise.<sup>81</sup>

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80. Patterson, *Restless Giant*, 293.

81. Although Michael Allen claims McCain was not as vociferous as Kerry would have liked, the article Allen cites claims McCain “repudiated” the ads and quotes McCain as saying, “I think the Bush campaign should specifically condemn the ad.” Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 296; Jim Rutenberg, “Anti-Kerry Ad is Condemned by McCain,” *The New York Times*, August 6, 2004; Kerry, *A Call to Service*, xi-xvii.

## CHAPTER CONCLUSION

This paper has thus far sketched a tumultuous domestic and international context that, while perhaps not “ripe” for the resolution of long-standing tensions between the US and Vietnam, nonetheless fostered increased willingness on the part of both governments to offer qualified support for normalization. It has sketched the efforts of a Select Committee and two key members of it that helped overcome the most daunting political obstacle to normalization in the US. While it has not attempted nor will it attempt to examine how Vietnamese society responded to the prospect of normalization, it has pointed out that the Communist Party’s efforts to normalize have been slightly overstated. Normalizing with the US was low in a series of foreign policy priorities for the Socialist Republic. The survey of Vietnam was painfully brief, and must, for the purposes of this paper remain so. It remains for other writers to dig into more comparative approaches of pro-US and pro-China factions and their influence in Vietnam. While David Elliott’s *Changing Worlds* and Lewis M. Stern’s *Defense Relations with Vietnam* both make valiant efforts to do this, Stern’s treatment of normalization is too tangential to his primary subject and Elliott’s, though impressive, is largely (and understandably) limited to public pronouncements that mask some of the internal debates of the early 90s. I nonetheless applaud both authors for their willingness to grapple with the SRV’s various factions, sectors and perspectives. Both were essential to the writing of this thesis.

There remain several entities “for normalization” in the United States, however, that deserve further mention. Some of them were initially intended to receive the exegesis of the preceding five sections but must be left for others due to concerns of time and space. This paper would not be complete if it did not at least attempt to outline sociocultural responses to the possibility of normalization. It is certainly likely that far more Americans watched *Rambo* or

*Uncommon Valor* than followed the windings of the Senate Select Committee. Perhaps too much work has been done by cultural historians explaining the impact of such films and providing detailed exegesis of at least one of them. And cultural histories have made much use of several polls demonstrating that a large percentage of Americans believed in the possibility of live POWs left in Southeast Asia due to the negligence of their own government and the perfidy of the Vietnamese. These factors undoubtedly had to be (and were) weighed by presidential administrations and congressional representatives.

But there is other evidence to consider as well. By the time normalization transpired, two-thirds of Americans believed such rapprochement was the right thing to do, at a time when mistrust in government and a belief in a wide range of conspiracies, to include the POW/MIA “myth” were peaking. In 1992, a presidential candidate, Ross Perot, garnered 20 per cent of the popular vote on a campaign replete with distrust of the federal government. And yet a president now almost notorious for scrutinizing polls felt comfortable moving forward with normalization shortly after his party experienced significant losses in Congress. There is of course, no one factor that can explain how the US progressed to the point where Clinton felt normalization was politically safe in early 1995. In conclusion, I will however, outline several potentially fruitful, and I would argue likely, directions for further study that should of course be considered alongside the qualified willingness of four successive administrations to normalize with Vietnam, the published findings of the SSC which attempted to dispel the most egregious rumors about the POW/MIA myth, and the often-public efforts of McCain and Kerry to end the War.<sup>82</sup>

There were of course many voices offering reasons for normalization, but one prominent one must certainly be major newspapers. The editorials of several major newspapers pointed to

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82. Robert Goldberg, *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America*, 259.

staffs receptive of relations with Vietnam. On the East Coast, *The New York Times* created awareness of business pressure to normalize as early as 1990, and was thereafter regular and unequivocal with editorials promoting normalization, especially targeting the Bush administration it viewed as dilatory in its efforts to recognize Vietnam. It was the *Times* that called the SSC “authoritative;” the *Times* that, to its credit, balanced skepticism about the Morris document while agreeing that Morris’s claims warranted investigation; and the *Times* that pointed out what exactly US businesses were losing out on in Vietnam. Upon normalization *The Times* merely pointed out that the US was, at long last, merely “Recognizing Reality in Vietnam.”<sup>83</sup>

While *USA Today* paid less attention to the debate than did the *Times*, it did cover multiple angles of the controversy with some regularity. On July 14, 1995, however, its founder greeted normalization with “Kudos for Clinton on Vietnam: Cuba Next.” While the conservative *Wall Street Journal* had been, according to H. Bruce Franklin, “one of the master builders of the POW/MIA myth” and had warned against normalizing relations with communist nations, a year before normalization it also began to highlight the plight of businesses losing out in Vietnam, and, after the results of the Senate Select Committee and nearly two years before normalization, urged President Clinton to “Normalize Ties with Vietnam.” Surprisingly even editorials of *The San Jose Mercury News*, a paper in close proximity to opinionated Vietnamese-American communities, warned against absolutist requirements of Hanoi, and welcomed normalization

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83. See among others, the following, all from *The New York Times*. Clyde Farnworth, “U.S. Urged to End Hanoi Trade Curb, October 9, 1990; “Coming Soon: The Vietnam Peace,” October 28, 1992; “Useful Junkets: A Timely Brief on Vietnam, November 23, 1992; “George Bush’s Last Chance on Vietnam,” December 18, 1992; “Authoritative Answers on M.I.A.’s, January 14, 1993; Thomas L. Friedman, “Good Morning, Vietnam,” January 18, 1995 and “Recognizing Reality in Vietnam,” July 12, 1995.

both before and after the fact, although on July 13 it did provide space for a dissenting “Clinton Has Sold Us Down the Mekong” viewpoint by former POW Sam Johnson.<sup>84</sup>

But Johnson by no means spoke for all veterans. While McCain and Kerry provided high-profile veteran top cover for Clinton, the efforts of the Select Committee and increased openness on the part of Vietnam split the veteran community in ways that deserve better analysis in the future. However, many veteran organizations, after political courtship and trips to Vietnam, were convinced that Hanoi had done enough or that so much time had elapsed that ongoing hostility was unnecessary. One of the largest, the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) had long opposed normalization with Vietnam and continued to do so until the 11<sup>th</sup> hour, despite its face-to-face meetings with senior Vietnamese officials. In early 1994 it still favored an extension of the trade embargo, but a month prior to normalization it promised that it would at least stop opposing it. Its executive director greeted normalization with far more hope than animosity. The Vietnam Veterans of America (VVOA) was supportive after 1993, and its president, John Terzano, pleaded with the Senate to lift the embargo because of what it was doing to the Vietnamese people, and hinted that he himself did not believe any live US service members were being held against their will in Southeast Asia. VVOA and the VFW were joined by AMVETS on June 20, 1995, its Commander finally convinced that normalization might allow for better recovery of US remains. While not all veterans or veteran groups supported normalization – the American Legion thought normalization removed the only leverage the US had against Vietnam - by 1995 neither politicians nor citizens opposed to normalization could

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84. Al Neuhath, “Kudos for Clinton in Vietnam, July 14, 1995; “Normalize Ties with Vietnam, March 8, 1993; “Talk to Vietnam – Shutting Out the Communists Won’t Improve Human Rights,” *The San Jose Mercury News*, January 14, 1994; “The Vietnam Peace Diplomatic Recognition is a Start on Healing of Wounds, *The San Jose Mercury News*, July 12, 1995; “Clinton Has Sold Us Down the Mekong,” July 13, 1995; Franklin, “The Last Chapter,” 513.

claim the full support of a veteran community ennobled and empowered by the Reagan Administration.<sup>85</sup>

US veterans still opposed to the war were almost certainly joined in opposition by veterans from the former Republic of Vietnam (“South Vietnam), the “paratrooper crowd” Douglas Pike identified as one of the most violent and dangerous opponents not only of normalization, but also of those Vietnamese Americans who dared support it. While these former “ARVN” often carried significant weight in Vietnamese American communities, it is also clear that they were not the only voice. As mentioned, the Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce in Orange County supported normalization and there were many Vietnamese-American voices of varying volume that questioned the unyielding but unsurprising “five no’s” stance of much of the Vietnamese American community on normalization. While the worthy subject of Vietnamese Americans is almost absent from the history of normalization itself and regrettably forms only part of a section in Chapter 2, some initial studies suggest that while nearly all Vietnamese Americans opposed Communism, those who fled Vietnam the earliest were often the most forgiving and willing to consider reconciliation. Those who stayed longer, especially those traumatized in reeducation camps were unwilling to even listen to arguments about dialoguing with their former communist oppressors.<sup>86</sup> Nevertheless, the flood of US veterans and Vietnamese Americans and their money to Vietnam after normalization is also powerful

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85. Stern, *Defense, Relations*, 59, 61, 64; Martini, *Invisible Enemies*, 189; Thomas Farragher, “U.S. and Vietnam: Old Enemies Embrace - Full Diplomatic Ties to Be Resumed Two Decades After War – Clinton Risks Political Damage to Open New Opportunities, *The San Jose Mercury News*, July 11, 1995.

86. My own professional and academic experience has generally supported the limited evidence in this paragraph. I can sympathetically observe that ARVN are often upset with my Vietnamese as they feel it is larded with “Communist words” and are unwilling to listen to anything a communist or even former communist such as Bùi Tín has to say. Douglas Pike is quoted by Seth Mydans, “War Continues for Vietnam Refugees,” *The New York Times*, August 25, 1989; the “five no’s” of some Vietnamese Americans are “no recognition, no contact, no communication, no negotiation and no cooperation” most of which would preclude any POW/MIA recovery. Bích Ngọc Nguyen and William J. Stover, “Normalization of Relations Between the United States and Vietnam,” *International Journal on World Peace* 12 No. 4 (1995): 25-41.

evidence of growing support among both communities for some form of reconciliation.

Interrogation of this flow, while beyond the scope of this study, would be a worthy addition to any analysis of these two groups.

Of even shorter shrift in this study is the nuance and influence of various governmental and nongovernmental agencies on normalization. While undoubtedly the US Chamber of Commerce was a powerful advocate for normalization, the work of the Indochina Reconciliation Project and the opinions and work of more well-known NGOs have been all but untouched. While I can but weakly point to the need for filling such gaps, I will also gratefully observe that a PhD dissertation is forthcoming to address some of them.<sup>87</sup>

In conclusion, semantics of “normalization” between the US and Vietnam are almost laughable. The titles of books relating to normalization and the contentious issues surrounding it speak of either POW/MIA *Mythmaking in America* or the *First Heroes* or *Prisoners of Hope* abandoned due to the *Enormous Crime[s]* of the US government’s unwillingness to dig *Inside Hanoi’s Secret Archives*. They speak of *Invisible Enemies* the United States first fought on battlefields for ten years and then in a contentious economic standoff for twenty. While this list may seem trite, this chapter has been an attempt to show progress on just such contentious issues. Progress that was at times slow, and always qualified, and may never result in true “normalcy,” but progress nonetheless. Such progress included contributions from the unlikely Reagan administration and more qualified contributions from the SRV than are generally acknowledged. It required input from a unanimous conclusion by a Senate Select Committee staffed with several fair-minded politicians determined to move past a painful war and with the POW/MIA lobby’s

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87. Amanda Demmer, “The Last Chapter of the Vietnam War: Normalization, Nongovernmental Actors and the Politics of Human Rights, 1975-1995,” PhD Diss., University of New Hampshire, forthcoming.



most ardent supporters. It included little-known input from large US businesses that all but exploded into action the moment they were legally able to do so in Vietnam.

Although I will elaborate on this further in the next chapter, strange alliances and enmities resulted from these positions on normalization. A Republican Senator felt far more comfortable with his Democratic counterpart than he did with his fellow Republicans on the SSC and one of his future presidential candidates (Bob Dole). A generally conservative POW/MIA lobby was at odds with big businesses of a similar political outlook. Many veterans and veteran groups came to advocate for normal relations with the country they had fought in while many of the family members of the fallen opposed their arguments. While each of these issues has been written about by others with more talent, time and resources than I, I hope my approach will at least expand our ability and willingness to grapple with the complex reasons for the various positions on normalization between the US and Vietnam.

## CHAPTER 2: People and Groups Opposing Normalization

This chapter will describe two people and one US county in opposition to normalization, namely Ann Mills Griffiths of the National League of Families (the League); Ross Perot; and Orange County, California. Again, this chapter does not to presume that everyone in the National League of Families adamantly opposed normalization. This would be misrepresenting the group. Nor will it suggest that Ross Perot would have necessarily opposed normalization had it been his idea or if he had the opportunity to personally conduct the diplomacy leading to normalization. And obviously with a county as expansive as Orange County, California there were a host of people with different opinions on the matter within its borders.

I would also suggest that these three topics are in fact tiered. For reasons I will outline, Griffiths and the League were officially in opposition to normalization and Griffiths' opinion carried the most weight with the federal government of the entities surveyed here. While Perot's opinion is harder to pin down and perhaps more tangential, he deserves inclusion because of the surprising discrepancy between POW/MIA histories and electoral politics relating to Ross Perot. Books about modern conservatism or the election of 1992 include very little about the influence of the POW/MIA issue on Perot's success in politics. POW/MIA histories which have loosely linked much of the POW/MIA issue with modern conservatism, have gone so far as to state that the POW/MIA issue and Bush's position on Vietnam cost him the 1992 election.

Finally, while this study originally intended to include an entire section on Vietnamese-Americans specifically, I have chosen instead to focus on Orange County, California for two reasons. First, as the acknowledged epicenter of the "rise of modern conservatism," to employ a perhaps overused phrase, it can be most helpful in interrogating the validity of links established by Michael J. Allen and H. Bruce Franklin between the POW/MIA issue and modern

conservatism. Second, Orange County is home to a large and visible Vietnamese American community. With the exception of Robert Schulzinger's *A Time for Peace*, Vietnamese Americans, many of whom have strong anti-normalization opinions, have been almost completely absent in the literature regarding normalization. This chapter will at least introduce some of their opinions and the ways in which they were expressed.<sup>88</sup>

These voices may sound both more faint and shrill than those in the first chapter. This is not due to the opinion of the writer. While my section on John McCain and John Kerry likely betrays my appreciation for their bipartisan efforts in normalizing relations, it should also more than hint that I appreciate the language they used with POW/MIA families. McCain and Kerry generally demonstrated an empathy that Allen and Franklin frankly find difficult to express. This chapter will express a degree of empathy for the much-maligned Ann Mills Griffiths and the difficult role she embraced for decades, but will also attempt to be judicious in pointing out her shortcomings. While there have been few attempts to rehabilitate Ross Perot's involvement in the efforts to recover live POWs, it is more difficult to marginalize the opinions of all but the most intransigent Vietnamese Americans opposing normalization. As few Americans have experiences quite so jarring as losing a war and then being removed to a new nation where language barriers and a strange culture threaten one's "old" way of life, this chapter has little that amounts to "get over it." However, neither this treatment of Griffiths nor some expressed empathy for transplanted Vietnamese should be interpreted as approbation. As I will conclude, the aftereffects of normalization have led to more POW/MIA families getting closure; and has

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88. For Orange County's place in modern conservatism see Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011) or Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

reconnected hundreds, if not thousands of Vietnamese Americans with family members in the SRV. Thus, the reader may find empathy if not sympathy. Perhaps someday Griffiths and even “bitter end” Vietnamese Americans may admit that they were in fact misguided in their opinions and that normalization has been a boon to POW/MIA families and Vietnamese in both the US and SRV.

## ANN MILLS GRIFFITHS

Ann Mills Griffiths' opinion on normalization with Vietnam is important because she served as the executive director of the National League of Families from 1978 until 2011. As such, she was the highest official representative of a small yet generally influential interest group consumed with finding information that could finally resolve the fate of a loved one missing since the Vietnam War. Although there were of course many such groups of varying legitimacies, the focus on Griffiths here is warranted since the League was, for the period most relevant to this thesis, "the main official liaison between the Department of Defense and the American public on all POW/MIA matters." While the League's establishment is often self-described as a "grassroots" movement, even some involved since the League's inception showed what I would argue is remarkable political awareness that has by no means dissipated. As the League's courtship by the Nixon Administration and its receipt of federal dollars has been well-established, I will but mention them here before further establishing Griffiths as an undeniable power player.<sup>89</sup>

Establishing Griffiths' commanding influence is by no means a unique contribution of this paper. Much ink has been spilled on the cultural potency of the POW/MIA issue in general and the political power of Griffiths in particular. From a cultural standpoint, the League was behind the design and implementation of the POW/MIA flag that is, with the US flag, the only banner flown above federal buildings. When flown, it holds a spot on the pole just beneath the

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89. Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 153, 191 speaks of Griffiths' takeover of the League. Her retirement in 2011 is on the League's website, available at <http://www.pow-miafamilies.org/chairmans-corner> last accessed March 27, 2017. Griffiths still retains a role as Chairwoman of the League's board. The official role of the League is in Franklin, *M.I.A. or Mythmaking*, 53. In the early fund-raising days of the League, Maureen Dunn, an early leader, astutely declined support from the John Birch Society, stating she "had to be careful about political affiliations." Robinson and Dunn, *The Search for Canasta* 404, 100.

Stars and Stripes. In 1990, the POW/MIA flag was designated by Congress as “The symbol of our Nation’s concern and commitment to resolving as fully as possible the fates of Americans still prisoner, missing and unaccounted for in Southeast Asia.” On the third Friday of September (POW/MIA Recognition Day) along with Armed Forces Day, Independence Day, Veterans Day, Memorial Day and Flag Day it is to receive “prominent display.” While other cultural representations such as the ubiquitous VIVA bracelets were strongest in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and many a 1980s film have highlighted the plight of live POWs in Southeast Asia, there also many indicators that the League’s influence was more than just cultural.<sup>90</sup>

The League’s political clout can be measured by a number of different yardsticks. Representatives of the League have met in person or been addressed by each president from Richard Nixon to George H.W. Bush. While Nixon’s courtship of the League has been heavily emphasized in POW/MIA histories, even Jimmy Carter met with the League in 1977 while he was considering sending a delegation to Vietnam. The meetings would, however, would become longer and more frequent with a Reagan Administration committed to increasing “public awareness” for the POW/MIA issue. It is important to add that the peak of Griffiths’ influence likely predated the years focused on in this paper and that much of this power can be traced to the explicit desire of Reagan to enhance public awareness. Nor, frankly, is there significant debate on the magnitude of the POW/MIA issue during these years. While POW/MIA apologist Rod Colvin wrote in 1987 that “at no time since the war’s end have more Americans, including

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90. The League is proud of its influence in shaping the POW/MIA flag and POW/MIA Recognition Day. See the flag’s history on its website at <http://www.pow-miafamilies.org/history-of-the-flag.html> or at the VA website at <https://www.va.gov/opa/publications/celebrate/powmia.pdf> both accessed March 27, 2017. Christian Appy calls the flag “U.S. History’s bleakest symbol of American Victimhood,” *American Reckoning*, 242. The sale of VIVA (Victory in Vietnam and then Voices in Vital America) bracelets figure prominently in all POW/MIA literature. Franklin, *M.I.A. or Mythmaking*, 55-57, Keating, *Prisoners of Hope*, 84; Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 57-60, 76. The books by Appy, Allen and Franklin each contain heavy exegesis of at least one of the 1980s films involving the rescue of POWs in Southeast Asia such as *Uncommon Valor*, *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, or the *Missing in Action* films.

lawmakers . . . been more aware of the POW/MIA controversy,” H. Bruce Franklin fingers Reagan for his prominent role in creating a POW/MIA myth “in the shape of an ominous Frankenstein monster.” Griffiths, as the executive director of what was officially recognized as the spearhead of civilian POW/MIA concerns, was undeniably empowered by a Reagan Administration explicitly calling the POW/MIA issue “the highest national priority.”<sup>91</sup>

The Reagan Administration bequeathed power to Griffiths that would be criticized by POW/MIA historians, the Senate Select Committee, and even some POW/MIA families. Already mentioned was the position Griffiths, as the League’s representative, was given on the Interagency Group on POW/MIA Affairs (IAG), a group which, according to journalist Susan Keating, “set U.S. government policy on POW/MIA affairs.” As the POW/MIA issue, was, after the resolution of the war in Cambodia, the critical “obstacle” between the US, Vietnam and diplomatic relations, its political influence on the issue was, for a time at least, paramount. In fact, in his dissertation David Reed makes this logical jump, stressing the importance of Griffiths’ position on a group that controlled “the decision-making of the Reagan administration toward Vietnam.” As the IAG included representatives from DoD, the State Department, and DIA (among others), Griffiths’ seat gave her a powerful connection to the department conducting diplomacy with Vietnam, the one concerned with recovering its service members in the SRV, and the overworked intelligence agency tasked to investigate whether Vietnam was doing what it could to resolve “the highest national priority.”<sup>92</sup>

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91. Carter’s meeting with the League is related by Austin Scott, “White House Reveals Trustee for Carter Has Wide Leeway,” *Washington Post*, February 12, 1977. Colvin, *First Heroes*, 275; Franklin, *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies*, 190-96.

92. Keating, *Prisoners of Hope*, 50-51; Frederick Z. Brown: *Second Chance*, 20; Reed, “The Domestic Context,” 43, 300. The term “obstacle” is mentioned specifically by Brown referring to the POW/MIA issue and Reed referring to Griffiths herself. For a very brief treatment of Griffiths’ relations with families, see the last footnote in this chapter.

Bush also permitted Griffiths a seat on the IAG and continued the tradition of addressing the League at their annual convention. This of course included the headline grabber in 1992, discussed earlier, when a few hecklers briefly frustrated the president with “no more lies.” But Griffiths did not merely sit on influential committees or coordinate speaking engagements with sympathetic presidents. While no catalogue of her range of political options may be exhaustive, it included direct access to a host of US government officials with whom Griffiths interacted regularly, inclusion on multiple fact-finding missions to Vietnam where she applied direct pressure on Vietnamese officials, the ongoing power to “educate” rotational DoD and State Department personnel, and maintenance of editing rights for the League’s newsletter, which was read by POW/MIA families and concerned veterans nationwide. Even this list omits the hard-to-quantify power she maintained due to her contacts within the veteran community and her influence on a Pentagon undoubtedly concerned about government efforts past, present, and future to ensure no one was “left behind.” By the time the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs convened in 1991, I would argue there was almost no alternative than Griffiths to testify as to the League’s position on the issue.<sup>93</sup>

It is important not only to articulate what Griffiths’ (and thus the League’s) position on Vietnam was, but also to expand on how Griffiths tried to make its position felt before briefly commenting on its inability to forestall normalization during the Clinton Administration. Griffiths inherited a League position in the late 70s characterized by immense distrust of the SRV. Such a colored and unsurprising outlook dictated a position that POW/MIA families

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93. Stern, *Defense Relations*, 49. Griffiths’ ability to call officials like National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft (1989-1993) and Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Paul Wolfowitz (1989-1993) among other “high level contacts” is established in Reed, “Domestic Context,” 302; her ability to educate rotational employees is in Josh Getlin, “Unfriendly Fire: POW-MIA activist Ann Mills Griffiths is a Power player in Washington. Critics Say that Power Has Gone to Her Head,” *The Los Angeles Times*, August 11, 1991.



receive tangible progress on accounting for their loved one before the US responded with reciprocal steps towards normalization. The League felt this position was compromised by Carter's willingness to take Vietnam's word almost at face value. As the possibility of normalization during most of the Reagan administration was precluded by Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia, it was forced to temporarily ask for (and generally receive) Vietnamese assistance on POW/MIA issues as a strictly humanitarian problem separate from diplomacy. This position was not entirely dissimilar to that of the SRV, who wanted to proceed with diplomatic recognition while keeping the POW/MIA issue separate due to its humanitarian nature. With the Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia however, the League, through the voice of Griffiths of course, unequivocally backed the Bush Roadmap because it allowed "the pace and scale of normalization" to be "governed by the pace of POW/MIA relations."<sup>94</sup>

Such a quote might seem to indicate that Griffiths is in fact, in the wrong chapter. After all, this paper has already pointed out that the SRV itself had a qualified position on normalization. How does the position of Griffiths differ?

It is on this specific point where most POW/MIA histories are immensely useful and important. The difference between Griffiths' qualified position on normalization and that of the SRV is not only one of scale, although it is clear that the Vietnamese, if generally distrustful of the US, nonetheless pushed for normalization while Griffiths certainly never did. The key distinction lies in what Allen, Franklin and Keating have all effectively pointed out, sometimes even in their titles such as *Until the Last Man Comes Home*. The mission of the League has been, and still is, to "provide the fullest possible accounting for those still missing, and

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94. Hurst, *The Carter Administration and Vietnam*, 40-41; Reed, "The Domestic Context," 123; Ann Mills Griffiths, Testimony to the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs, November 10, 1991, available at <https://www.c-span.org/video/?22612-1/powmia-issues-day-2-part-2> last accessed March 27, 2017; Stern, *Defense Relations*, 12, 15.

repatriation of all recoverable remains.” With such a mission set and over 1200 service members still missing in Vietnam alone, the League can simply never fulfill its mission nor can Vietnam ever complete the tasks that Griffiths has historically demanded of it. Despite unprecedented access to Vietnam’s central provinces, digs through the SRV’s archives and “unilateral investigations” all over the country, there is simply no way that all the still-missing remains can ever be recovered. With the declassification of many military documents by the SSC, there were and always will always be families (whom Griffiths would try to represent) claiming that there is *something else* that the SRV could and should do to help recover their loved one – and that Vietnam’s “pace and scale” does not merit normalization.<sup>95</sup>

Thus, what other leaders began and Griffiths continued until she finally stepped down in 2011, was to conduct what is in effect a lengthy delaying action. As many of the reports, commissions, and delegations regarding the POW/MIA issue have been to determine what the SRV can and should do, and thus could potentially result in normalization, Griffiths has generally stiff-armed anything that smacked of finality. This has historically meant not only opposing the findings of such commissions, but the opposing the formation of fact-finding enterprises as well.

While the League had formally denounced the findings of Carter’s 1976 Woodcock Commission and the press conference in which the president stated, “I think that’s about all they [the Vietnamese] can do,” I would point out that as the war had ended a mere three years prior and shut the US off from almost all access to Vietnam, this reaction was perhaps understandable.

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95. Ibid.; In her testimony not only does Griffiths discuss “pace and scale,” but dubious requirements of Vietnam are on full display, demands which include “unfettered immediate access” to verify live-sightings reports and a demand for classified documents. Again, John Kerry pointed out in the SSC how unlikely it would be for the US to consider such requests from the SRV. Allen points out the “infinitely elastic standard” of the term “fullest possible accounting,” *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 139. The League’s mission, which still refers to recovery of live POWs is on their website at <http://www.pow-miafamilies.org/about-the-issue.html> last accessed March 27, 2017.

Yet this trend by no means ended with the Carter Administration. In 1986, Griffiths opposed the formation of a [Ross] Perot Commission on Americans Missing in Southeast Asia and, despite the Senate Select Committee's professed desire to "open" and not "close" doors, Griffiths adamantly opposed the formation of the Committee. Her reason, as expressed in a League position paper, was that the "POW/MIA issue can't afford another 'conclusion.'" I partially agree with, but will return to, Michael Allen's conclusion on Griffiths' position, namely that, "she knew that such an entity would seek to resolve the issue that gave her influence."<sup>96</sup>

Griffiths did indeed lose influence due to the findings of the SSC, which publicly voiced concerns about her ability to "unduly influence[d] government policies" and in which John Kerry berated her for not wanting progress. Kerry's concerns about Griffiths are not dissimilar from Michael Allen's statement about resolving the issue that gave her influence. At the SSC, she also had to face opposition from more radical POW/MIA personalities with far less political acumen than she possessed, including former House Representative Billy Hendon, who would later label Griffiths as part of the government cover-up and would chain himself to a gate in Vietnam to protest the betrayal of American POWs. The SSC results, a blow to the POW/MIA community in general, but certainly Griffiths in particular, were followed by the full dissolution of the IAG under Clinton, removing her ability to "influence government policies."<sup>97</sup>

The rest of Clinton's administration would not prove kind to the woman who had resisted finality for her organization for decades. This should not imply that Clinton was inherently ungracious, however. In fact, Clinton extended an invitation to the ceremony lifting the embargo on Vietnam in February 1994 not only to Griffiths, but to the American Legion, which, with Griffiths, still opposed normalization. Griffiths, unlike the American Legion, declined the

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96. Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*. 254-55, 273; Hurst, *The Carter Administration and Vietnam*, 40.

97. Reed, "The Domestic Context," 161; Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 277; Stern, *Defense Relations*, 63.

invitation, further distancing herself from the first president since Carter who had not spoken to the Annual Convention of the League. Clinton likely chose to distance himself from the POW/MIA issue and the League for a variety of reasons that included business pressure, increased veteran support, and the luxury of being the first Democrat since perhaps Grover Cleveland who would not need to define himself against the foil of an evil ideological empire.<sup>98</sup>

I have already pointed out the syllogistic logic behind the POW/MIA link between the modern conservative movement in the introduction. However, if Lisa McGirr is anything close to correct in what she includes in her “package of conservative concerns” that include not only Communism, but “sexual liberation, liberalized abortion laws, and the women’s movement,” there seems to be some validity in a loose connection to anti-communism with the POW/MIA movement. While it would certainly be difficult to find connections between League families and the other listed concerns of McGirr’s conservatives, anticommunist rhetoric pervades Griffiths’ speech to the point where this one tenuous link to the conservative right might prove valid, and even better established by Clinton’s willingness to break with Griffiths once the concern about Communism had abated.<sup>99</sup>

However, my portrayal of Griffiths, has not, thus far, strayed a great distance from that of H. Bruce Franklin, Susan Keating or Michael J. Allen. I find arguments of Griffiths’ unwillingness to brook finality, her unwillingness to cede political influence and her ongoing vocalization of the possibility of live POWs in Southeast Asia (of scant mention here) to be persuasive. The last is of course, factual. Griffiths is regularly on record stating the need to recover service members, alive or dead, from Vietnam. In fact, she followed one address by

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98. Douglas Jehl, “Opening to Vietnam: Clinton Drops 19-Year Ban on U.S. Trade with Vietnam; Cites Hanoi’s Help on M.I.A.’s,” *The New York Times*, February 4, 1994.

99. Reed, “The Domestic Context,” 161; Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 277; Douglas Jehl, “Opening to Vietnam,” McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, 15-16.

President Bush to her League in which Bush heavily discredits the possibility of live POWs by restating the League's commitment to those alive or dead in Southeast Asia. However, while I can, or must, recognize Griffiths' contributions to what Franklin and Keating would call the "myth" of the live POW/MIA, I must digress slightly from their portrayal of her as a power-hungry former nobody.

In doing so I will first restate the simple fact that Griffiths became involved with the POW/MIA issue because she lost a brother in Vietnam, not out of any stated political ambition. Michael Allen suggests nepotism when Griffiths "took over" the League, "backed by her father." Only in an earlier section does he acknowledge Griffiths was in fact, voted in overwhelmingly by League members, although of course, such a vote does not prove the absence of political maneuvering. Nowhere do Allen, Franklin or Keating include the fact that Griffiths' father was dying from Leukemia at the time Ann "took over." While I am not suggesting strict altruism on the part of Griffiths, I can at least acknowledge the distinct possibility that she entered what would truly become a fray for familial reasons.<sup>100</sup>

I can also acknowledge that while she may have attempted to hold onto whatever degree of political power she enjoyed under Reagan and Bush, it may have been inspired in part because she understood the government was simply a far better alternative to resolving the POW/MIA issue than were the host of private efforts that had, without exception, failed miserably to repatriate remains or discover live POWs. Griffiths herself supported at least one of these misguided efforts in the late 1970s, but during the period of this study made significant efforts to distance herself from those advocating private efforts to free POWs and from other fringe elements of the POW/MIA group. While Allen, Franklin, and Keating in particular have done a

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100. Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 193; Getlin, "Unfriendly Fire."

great service to POW/MIA histories with their portrayals of these fringe groups, described variously as “the Rambo set,” “grey flannel Rambos,” “kooks,” “nutjobs” or even “crazies,” they also make it clear that Griffiths was not the friend of such fringe elements either.<sup>101</sup>

While time and space will not allow for a detailed exposition of Griffiths’ efforts to distance herself from politically unsavory characters and private POW/MIA recovery efforts, a few bear specific mention. Keating’s “grey flannel Rambo,” Billy Hendon, who supported several efforts to recover live POWs, including offering a \$2.4 million reward to “anyone who brought an American POW to freedom” as late as 1989, was regularly at odds with Griffiths and viewed Griffiths as being co-opted by a US government intent on hiding its failures to recover live Americans. Millard Peck, an Army Colonel who briefly ran the DIA’s Special Office for Prisoners of War and Missing in Action and famously penned a 1991 memo alleging the US government had a “mindset to debunk” leads on live POWs, singled Griffiths out as co-conspirator in the endeavor.<sup>102</sup>

Perhaps ironically, Griffiths did indeed possess just such a mindset. Her testimony at the SSC, in which she demanded the ability for the US to respond immediately to live sighting reports *within* Vietnam almost certainly discredits Peck’s accusation about conspiring with the government, however. And while Griffiths opposed finality and clung to beliefs in the *possibility* of live POWs and warehoused remains, she often debunked poorly researched or obviously fabricated reports about such POWs or (after the early 1980s), people proposing rogue endeavors to free them. When an explosive interim report on POWs was released by Senator

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<sup>101</sup>. In the early 1980s, Griffith supported Operation Skyhook, an effort to obtain information about live POWs by working with the Lao Resistance. Her support is chronicled in the SSC Report, 303-309.

<sup>102</sup>. Keating devotes an entire chapter to Hendon and several other office Rambos, *Prisoners of Hope*, 175-192; Hendon was an outspoken critic of Griffiths and documents his reward efforts in *Enormous Crimes*, 242-44, 393. The Peck memo is in *Ibid.*, 401, and *Prisoners of Hope*, 56, but is also cited in most POW/MIA histories as well. The phrase “mindset to debunk” was addressed specifically in the SSC report, 20.

Jesse Helms in 1990 which more than suggested a government cover-up, Griffiths “rushed” a critique of the report to the League. This followed a more humorous 1987 episode in which Griffiths published a research paper refuting the egregious claims of a book by notorious scammer Scott Barnes. The title, *Bohica* [Bend Over, Here it Comes Again]: *A True Account of One Man’s Battle to Expose the Most Heinous Cover-up of the Vietnam Saga!* may say enough. Although John Kerry may have been respectful of Perot during the SSC hearings, Griffiths opinion of Perot was less flattering. In an interview with Ross Perot’s biographer, she pointed out that while her own superior research had found the possibility of live POWs to be negligible, Perot was responsible for encouraging people who were “off-the-wall. Every nutcase, everybody claiming to have information, all found their way to him.”<sup>103</sup>

While such incidents could almost certainly be expanded upon almost exponentially with a more thorough review of the League’s newsletter, the point is not to disagree directly with those who have decried Griffiths’ political power grab. They should however, at least hint that Griffiths was unwilling to cede power at least in part because she felt the League was in fact the best representation that POW/MIA families could expect, and that the stronger the political position the League enjoyed, the better opportunity families would have to resolve the fate of their family members. Griffiths was familiar with (and had been burned by) jungle heroes promising to bring home live POWs. She was surrounded by people with powerful, albeit temporary positions in Washington. Griffiths surely felt herself the most knowledgeable, competent and even compassionate representative POW/MIA families had. While Griffiths may

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103. Hendon and Stewart, *An Enormous Crime*, 396; Gerald Posner, *Citizen Perot: His Life and Times* (New York: Random House, 1996), 303. While Allen recounts Ross Perot’s dealings with Barnes and the publication of *Bohica* and cites Posner to do so, it is interesting that he omits Griffiths’ rebuttal, as Griffiths is far more incidental to Posner’s book than she is to Allen’s. *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 278-79. Griffiths’ interview is in *Citizen Perot*, 194.

have enjoyed proximity to presidents and the ability to review classified documents, it is hard to argue she pursued such ends devoid of real concern for the families whom she had known for decades. Her outlook often resulted in heavy-handed diplomacy that could prove abrasive to both US and Vietnamese politicians and even POW/MIA family members. This paper is not suggesting Griffiths necessarily possessed all the skills needed to balance Washington politics with angry, often demanding family members. There are indeed few who do. What it does suggest, however, is better balance in the appraisals of Griffiths. As a divorcee, she for years supported three children on \$65,000 a year in Washington. She deflected accusations that she was nursing investments in Vietnam by observing that she in fact had “no investments in any country.” She lost a brother in Vietnam and replaced her father, who died of a terminal disease, as League Director because she felt she “had to be the one.” She became a true subject matter expert on POW/MIA affairs, and even in the early 2000s was personally interjecting herself into problematic cases in Southeast Asia for families with few resources and less knowledge. To be sure, normalization presented a very real political problem for the League and for Griffiths. Undoubtedly, she was a part of propagating the POW/MIA myth. But almost undoubtedly her motivations also exceeded collecting an average Washington salary and “hobnobbing” with power brokers in Washington DC.<sup>104</sup>

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104. It is unfortunate that this paper must omit discussion of Griffiths’ often tense relations with family members, to include accusations that she denied them access to classified material. I would suggest that even such activity fits in with the pattern outlined above, namely that Griffiths felt such access would prompt unilateral actions on the part of ill-equipped family members that would be damaging to the POW/MIA cause at large. Keating, *Prisoners of Hope*, 52. Griffiths’ jokes about having no investments came in a July 24, 1992 speech to the League. Figures on Griffiths’ salary and her feelings about taking over for her father are from Getlin, “Unfriendly Fire.” In my own experience at the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command from 2002-2004 I recollect Griffiths getting personally involved in more difficult recovery cases.



## NORMALIZATION, ROSS PEROT AND THE 1992 ELECTION

Up until this point, this paper has focused on six entities which had significant influence on normalization. Presidents, senators, executive directors, businesses, and of course, the SRV all had votes of varying influence. Griffiths and businesses found themselves on opposite ends of the seesaw, and it is clear than in the early 1990s, the business end rose while the League sank. Several presidents enjoyed increasing veteran support for normalization and perhaps less opposition from a society that, while still enthralled by the POW/MIA myth, also believed it was time to let bygones be bygones. Here this paper diverges slightly. The next two sections are not going to suggest that Ross Perot or Orange County, California were necessarily power players with well-articulated policies on normalization like the League. In fact, the next two sections will raise just as many questions as it answers. What the first will do is outline a historical discrepancy of scale in the weight afforded the POW/MIA movement's political power in the context of Ross Perot's 1992 run for the presidency. The second will attempt to do two things. First it will interrogate the alleged link between the modern conservative movement and the POW/MIA movement, and then it will add some faint and overlooked Vietnamese American voices to the normalization debate in a county with a disproportionately high percentage of said minority.

The previous sections have outlined, to some extent, the *nature* of the debate about normalization. When influence and priority has been addressed, it has been addressed primarily in the context of politicians and special interests. POW/MIA and diplomatic histories are nearly unanimous about the political clout of the League and the POW/MIA issue *regarding normalization*. What remains to be evaluated is the importance of the issue to the American public. While POW/MIA histories have made much use (especially in prefatory material) of

several polls that firmly establish the fact that most Americans believed that there were live Americans in Southeast Asia, and in some cases that the government was not doing enough about it, such polls do not necessarily establish the importance that the public afforded this issue or the impact it had upon society. Many of the POW/MIA histories do of course, more than hint that the issue was a significant and unwholesome component of American culture. And the influence of these books has influenced the field. For example, in complaining that H. Bruce Franklin was not allowed to testify at the SSC, Edwin Martini claims that Franklin could have exposed the belief in live POWs as a “pernicious and pervasive myth.”<sup>105</sup>

This section will only examine one component of this statement, namely, was the myth pernicious and pervasive enough to influence, and perhaps swing a presidential election? I believe this is a fruitful question because of the existing historical discrepancies surrounding it. Perot’s biography, a history of the 1992 election and a sociological survey of *The Perot Voters* all have almost nothing to say about the POW/MIA issue as it relates to Perot’s ability to garner nearly 20 per cent of the popular vote. Conversely, POW/MIA books have accorded some surprisingly heavy weight to the issue. Thus while Perot’s poorly-articulated views on normalization will be addressed, it is not his views that are the chief focus of this section.<sup>106</sup>

Before addressing this discrepancy, I should first outline why Ross Perot’s name is even tied to the POW/MIA issue. Perot has a long history of extra-governmental attempts to help

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105. By far the most ubiquitous of such polls is the August 2, 1991 *Wall Street Journal* poll showing that 69% of Americans believed there were still live POWs in Southeast Asia. Not all the POW/MIA histories explicitly connect the poll’s data to the fact that a mere two weeks prior several major newspapers published photos supposedly depicting live Americans in captivity in Southeast Asia, but all cite the exact same poll. Franklin, “The Last Chapter,” 502 and *M.I.A. or Mythmaking*, xi and *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies*, 197; Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 2; Keating, *Prisoners of Hope*, 224. “Pernicious and pervasive myth” is in *Invisible Enemies*, 171.

106. These books include Posner, *Citizen Perot*; Albert J. Menendez, *The Perot Voters & the Future of American Politics* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1996); and Peter Goldman et al, *Quest for the Presidency: 1992* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1994). Claims made by POW/MIA historians literature will be inserted later in this chapter.

POWs in Vietnam. In 1969, Perot masterminded the attempted delivery of Christmas gifts to POWs in Vietnam. In this highly-publicized stunt, Perot filled one plane with gifts and journalists and another with POW wives and children. The first flew to Laos and the second to Paris, as both countries had embassies wherein Perot or the wives could plead with the Vietnamese to allow the POWs to accept these gifts. After striking out in Laos, Perot attempted to fly to the Soviet Union but had to settle for Alaska. Although Perot overcame some last-minute demands by the North Vietnamese to put the gifts into smaller packages (possibly a delaying ploy) he was unable to land in Russia or meet the December 31 delivery date set by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Although the Nixon administration had originally been supportive of the venture, Perot diverged from his original plans so frequently, that the takeaway for the White House was, “that he actually thought he knew what to do, better than anyone else . . . that cowboy approach could be dangerous.”<sup>107</sup>

This was only one of many gambits Perot would suggest, undertake and usually finance. In 1970, he created United We Stand, an organization echoing the main themes of Nixon’s “Go Public” POW awareness campaign. That same year Perot, with the help of two House members, arranged for a bamboo cage to be displayed in DC to call attention to “the plight of our POWs.” While these contributions highlighted the plight of US POWs in Vietnam and the anguish of their families at home, when the POWs returned in Operation Homecoming, Perot attempted to be the first and most conspicuous to greet them. Almost immediately upon their repatriation in 1973, he welcomed them with a party in San Francisco. Perot sunk \$250,000 into this gala that included John Wayne, Clint Eastwood and other celebrities and entertainers. That same year Perot was also one of 23 Dallas organizers who financed and staged a “Dallas Salute to Vietnam

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107. Posner, *Citizen Perot*, 60-64;

Veterans Homecoming Celebration,” which featured an enormous parade and subsequent reception at the Cotton Bowl in Texas, which was, of course, attended by Perot and emceed by Bob Hope.<sup>108</sup>

Sidney Blumenthal summarizes Perot’s involvement with the POW/MIA issue in the 80s as, “the billionaire became enthralled with the Rambo set,” meaning a disparate group of people attempting to rescue live POWs from Southeast Asia. Blumenthal’s observation serves to distinguish Perot from the League, which by the mid 1980s had begun to discourage private efforts to recover MIAs. Perot, unlike the League, had no interest in the unglamorous recovery of bones, only of live POWs, and later told this to Ann Mills Griffiths in person. In the mid 80s Perot chased a promising video purporting to show 39 POWs forced to dig for gold in Southeast Asia, spending well over \$50,000 in the process and receiving nothing for his time or money. Convinced of a government cover-up in 1986, Perot convinced the House to create a Perot Commission on Americans Missing in Southeast Asia. To the relief of Griffiths, the committee was killed, but the very next year Perot went to Vietnam on “a one-man task force for the president.” When Perot proved to be the same “cowboy” to Reagan that he was to Nixon, Reagan named a different, perhaps more respectable White House representative to Hanoi on POW/MIA affairs - former general John Vessey. Despite Perot’s demonstrated disdain for the claim that the government could or would do anything to rescue live POWs, he nevertheless did not want traitors to that cause in office. When he concluded that Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard Armitage was one such traitor, he engaged in a lengthy series of personal attacks on Armitage,

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108. Keating, *Prisoners of Hope*, 50; Ross Perot, Testimony to the SSC, August 11, 1992, 4, available at [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/pow/senate\\_house/pdf/hear\\_8\\_92.pdf](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/pow/senate_house/pdf/hear_8_92.pdf) last accessed March 29, 2017; Sidney Blumenthal, “Ross Perot’s Vietnam Syndrome,” *New Republic*, July 6, 1992, available at <https://newrepublic.com/article/90592/ross-perot-vietnam-texas> last accessed March 29, 2017; Posner, *Citizen Perot*, 89.

and asked him in person for his resignation. Perot later “torpedoed” Armitage’s appointment to be Secretary of the Army with underhanded tactics that seem to have been at least partially responsible for Armitage withdrawing his name for the office. At a minimum, Perot purposefully passed files of dubious provenance to the FBI in an effort to discredit Armitage and followed up to make sure the FBI investigated them.<sup>109</sup>

For such efforts, Perot was rewarded at least twice with the opportunity to testify about the possibility of live POWs to the federal government, although he had discussed the subject personally with at least three presidents as well. He testified at the House Committee on Foreign Affairs in 1986, where he cited but did not produce “overwhelming evidence” of live US service members in Southeast Asia. As mentioned, he was also a controversial witness on the Senate Select Committee. While Kerry, as previously mentioned, was gracious with Perot, and McCain was civil, icy and generally eviscerating, Senators friendlier to the live POW belief such as Bob Smith were almost fawning. Smith quoted Nixon to remind the committee of Perot’s past efforts and clearly felt Perot was one effective “private channel” that might eventually produce results. Chuck Grassley stated that “there is probably not anyone in America who has been more closely involved with the POW/MIA issue for as long as Ross Perot. At least not one has been such a diligent student of the problems as well as so active in attempts to seek resolution . . . as a private citizen.” Such statements should be tempered with two observations. First there is no doubt that live POWs were in fact appreciative of Perot’s efforts to help them. Second, after his efforts during the war, evidence again suggests that Perot was only interested in one aspect of the issue – the issue of live POWs. To state that Perot was a more diligent student of the problem than

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109. Blumenthal, “Ross Perot’s Vietnam Syndrome;” Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 254, 256-57, Posner, *Citizen Perot*, 193, 199-200, 202-210. Posner has written suggestively that when Perot had casual conversations with presidents about his efforts in Southeast Asia, Perot tended to interpret any positive responses as executive mandates to continue or expand upon his efforts to rescue POWs.

POW/MIA families or Ann Mills Griffiths, who seems to have *privately* had some reservations about the possibility of live POWs however, is an assertion that deserves scrutiny.<sup>110</sup>

While the above should document the general nature of Perot's activities to aid live POW/MIAs, his personal opinions on the matter also deserve some explication, as they are loosely connected to his views on normalization. Several key themes emerge. First is Perot's belief in the inability of the government to resolve the issue and its unwillingness to hold its own people accountable. In his testimony to the SSC, much of which merits full quotation, Perot states that the government's incompetence has been far more damaging to the POW/MIA cause than have been "hoaxers." Perot felt "hoaxers" were "bush league, minor league, non league compared to Federal employees who have covered up, dissembled, and finessed this issue for 20 some odd years." He uses the term "coddle" to express his disdain for the possibility that the government would hold its employees accountable. Perot expressed faith in his own ability to negotiate to the point where he offered former POW John McCain "a one-on-one lesson on negotiation." Perot, however, had difficulty expressing how his form of negotiation differed from what General Vessey had already done. Perot believed that his skilled, businesslike ("Let's go to the Middle East...I want to buy a camel") negotiation style coupled with whispers of immunity if the Vietnamese (or US government employees!) would produce POWs would do the trick. Perot also stooped to explain the Vietnamese mindset to McCain, one that is "so sensitive . . . so angry . . . so frustrated . . . they so desperately want to be a part of the world community." The nature of Perot's testimony makes him, again, a qualified supporter of normalization, but Perot would offer normalization to the Vietnamese only if they produced the POWs they had been

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110. Statements of Hon. Robert C. Smith and Hon. Charles E. Grassley to Ross Perot at the Senate Select Committee, August 11, 1992 in the SSC Report, 4-7, 9. Although Griffiths' public statements suggest the possibility of live POWs, her early investigations into the matter seem to have made her privately dubious of such claims, Posner, *Citizen Perot*, 194.

hiding for some 18 years, an event unlikely to occur. From another angle, which will unfortunately go unexplored here, Perot indirectly opposed normalization for years by substantiating and funding the belief in live POWs and discrediting government efforts to recover remains with distracting, extra-governmental efforts to recover POWs.<sup>111</sup>

While establishing the nature of Perot's involvement in Vietnam and briefly establishing his view of how to resolve its lasting POW/MIA problems has not been brief, it is not the main point of this section. As Perot felt POWs had been abandoned by a knowing government and that successful negotiations should precede normalization, it remains to discuss whether such a belief influenced the 1992 election which pitted of course, incumbent George H.W. Bush against Bill Clinton and Ross Perot.

Any such claim must begin with the assumption that Albert J. Menendez and others who have written about the 1992 election are correct in the assertion that "there is no doubt that Perot's candidacy harmed the Republicans more than the Democrats." If Menendez is accurate, and his data backing that assertion seems convincing, there are several points that deserve consideration in assessing the impact of the POW/MIA issue and the 1992 election.<sup>112</sup>

The first is to contend with H. Bruce Franklin's assertion that "POW activists and organizations were *central* [emphasis mine] to the petition campaigns that got Perot on the ballot in every state" and that since, without Perot, "George Bush would have beaten Bill Clinton;" thus "the POW/MIA issue was *central* [emphasis mine] to the election's outcome." Such a contention is indeed significant, as it is true and well-documented that Perot was unwilling to

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111. Perot, Testimony to the SSC, August 11, 1992, 12, 43-44. Griffiths was frustrated with Perot's inability to understand that remains proved someone was no longer alive. Richard Childress said, "without live prisoners, he [Perot] would probably lose interest." Posner, *Citizen Perot*, 193.

112. Menendez, *The Perot Voters*, 59. Much of Menendez' analysis is based on the demographics of Perot voters and analysis of those states and counties in which Perot fared well but that had gone heavily in favor of Bush in 1988.

enter the race if he was not on the ballot in all 50 states. Thus had Perot never entered because “POW/MIA activists” never not get him on the ballots, there may be some validity in considering the POW/MIA issue as one among many factors (although perhaps not central) influencing the 1992 election. I would suggest Franklin’s assertion is by no means disingenuous, but perhaps lacks full evidentiary support. While there are no quotations from the phone interviews he cites as evidence, in the two newspaper articles he refers to, the closest thing supporting Franklin’s claim is a quote from Dallas Congressman and former POW Sam Johnson. Johnson, who did not support Perot, stated, “the POW/MIA organization is scattered all over the United States, so it has given him an entry base at every state level.” *If* this base actively pursued getting Perot on the ballot, which Franklin’s record does not fully support (although it comes close), it would seem clear that histories of the 1992 election and the candidacy of Perot should at least include “the POW/MIA vote” along with the other factors outlined by Menendez and others.<sup>113</sup>

There is however, some sleight of hand in Franklin’s portrayal of POW/MIA activism – sleight of hand that might also have been part of Perot’s campaign. In the paragraph devoted to the 1992 election, Franklin conflates “the POW/MIA movement” and their “grass-roots fervor” with Perot’s selection of ex-POW James Stockdale as his running mate before going on to make his claim about Perot’s “POW activist” support. This is worth noting because Franklin shortens “POW/MIA” to “POW,” which are in fact two different things, although, to be fair, and as

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113. Franklin, *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies*, 199; Posner, *Citizen Perot*, 246; David Goldman et al, *Quest for the Presidency*, 423; David Jackson “Perot’s people - Top Campaign Advisers Politically Diverse; Most Have Business or Personal Ties to Him,” *The Dallas Morning News*, July 19, 1992; Jackson, “MIAs’ Kin Want Perot as President,” *The Dallas Morning News* May 19, 1992; Timothy Noah, It’s Businessman Perot and Not War Hero Bush Who Attracts a Following Among US Veterans,” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 2, 1992. I believe Franklin’s claim does in fact deserve more research, but should include a detailed look at the names and affiliations of those getting him on the ballot, likely beyond the scope of Franklin’s book (to be fair - one chapter in that book) and my own abilities in this thesis.



Franklin may be hinting, the public may not have seen them as such. Stockdale had never felt the US government abandoned POWs and had testified as such to the Senate Select Committee. In fact, Stockdale's position on the issue was, in a sense, diametrically opposed to Perot's. Familiar with warfare, Stockdale felt that both the belief in live POWs and demand for full accounting were misguided. Stockdale blamed a "litigious society" for propagating the idea "that somebody owes us an explanation and an apology and a payback . . . that's just an unrealistic goal." When Stockdale spoke of *POW* support (in the very sources Franklin employs), he is in fact referring to the support of former POWs (several hundred people) for Perot, many of whom remembered his various efforts to help them while in captivity. While his wife did indeed help found the League, I would argue that Stockdale's views on live POWs and the impossibility of full accounting put him well outside the "POW/MIA movement" into which Franklin suggestively slides him. Stockdale had historically played a limited role in discounting the claims of those who might be considered *POW/MIA* activists. This does not of course discount the very real possibility that *POW/MIA* activists helped get Perot on the ballot or that many voters would mistakenly conflate Stockdale with the *POW/MIA* movement. However, if there were a section on Stockdale in this thesis, it would most certainly be opposite of the one in which his running mate is placed.<sup>114</sup>

While the role of *POW/MIA* activism in the Perot candidacy seems to deserve more research, it is not the only potential impact it had on the presidency. The second and final aspect of the 1992 election that this paper will briefly examine is the possibility that the *POW/MIA* issue significantly damaged George H.W. Bush. Again, such a claim is nowhere in election histories, but Michael Allen claims *MIA* activists supported Perot as they saw Bush edging

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114. See specifically Jackson, "M.I.A.'s Kin." Franklin, *Vietnam and Other American Fantasies*, 198-99; Admiral Stockdale, Testimony to the SSC, December 3, 1992, 910-11.

towards normalization and eventually “shaped” the election even if they could not “prevent change.” Robert Schulzinger has a more specific and perhaps quantifiable allegation, not only that Bush “planned to proceed with normalization after he was safely reelected,” but also that “Perot particularly attacked Bush” on that very issue in the presence of veteran groups, hinting “that the Bush administration simply did not care.” Schulzinger does not, unfortunately, elaborate on what these attacks cost the Bush campaign. Allen is less convinced the Perot candidacy cost Bush the election outright, but does hint at some indirect political damage because of Perot’s belief, expressed on *60 Minutes* and originating from the allegations of notorious POW/MIA “con man” Scott Barnes, that Republicans were playing “dirty tricks” on him. Shortly after *60 Minutes* ran, Bush addressed the League, whom Allen insinuates would have seen *60 Minutes* (“Bush must have known that the League rank and file preferred Perot”) agreed with Perot’s assessment, and verbally attacked Bush as a result, thus prompting Bush’s angry response that must have cost him at the polls. The evidence cited by Allen is generally underwhelming that it did.<sup>115</sup>

I would thus contend that one interesting allegation about how the POW/MIA issue got Perot on the ballot deserves further investigation, that the possibility Perot damaged Bush with attacks on his Vietnam record comes up a bit dry, but still suggest that both are, of course, fruitful subjects for further research. However, this is not the only evidence for my skepticism. Other evidence suggests Bush was not shy about bringing up his wartime record or even the lessons of Vietnam in debates with Perot. Bush’s history of working slowly towards normalization played no part whatsoever in any of the three presidential debates between Bush,

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115. Schulzinger, *A Time for Peace*, 50; Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 253, 278-83. The evidence Allen cites is the production of “SHUT UP AND SIT DOWN” (an unfortunate phrase Bush used during his speech) T-shirts by the little known “POW House,” the fact that the Vietnam Veterans Coalition declared the same phrase “the quote of the summer,” and one story in the *New York Times*.

Clinton and Perot. If normalization was such a political sore point for Bush, the text of the debates makes it most evident that Perot missed multiple opportunities to attack Bush on this area in discussions of foreign or even domestic policy. While Perot may have denounced Bush in front of veteran groups, it would seem that neither he nor his advisors felt the subject was worth highlighting in any of the national debates. When Perot does briefly mention his work helping POWs in one of the debates, he felt compelled to add that “within a year the Vietnamese had sent people into Canada to have me and my family killed,” probably to the chagrin of his already beleaguered campaign advisers.<sup>116</sup>

In conclusion, however, there is a great deal of circumstantial evidence supporting a very loose affiliation of the POW/MIA cause with Bush’s loss - if Menendez’s analysis is correct. First, it is undeniable that Perot’s fame and outsider reputation stemmed in no small part from his efforts to help POWs as far back as 1969. Such efforts contributed to a “Perot of Myth” that included the image of a “Rambo in a business suit.” Perot’s swashbuckling, anti-governmental or extra-governmental crusades in Vietnam almost certainly sat well with some voters who were looking for a candidate with a conspiratorial bent or whom Menendez characterizes as “anti-establishment and anti-incumbent.” A study of Perot supporters found their “political cynicism” to be “especially evident” and calculated that 95 per cent of them “believed they could trust the federal government only some of the time or almost never.” Such a belief was certainly in line with many POW/MIA families by the early 1990s. In addition, Perot suggestively titled his

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116. These conclusions are made after a review of the three presidential and one vice presidential debate transcripts all available at <http://www.debates.org/index.php?page=debate-transcripts>. There are few mentions of Vietnam and Perot missed opportunities to compare his “record” in Vietnam to either Clinton’s or that of Bush. The Perot quote comes from the third debate on October 19, 1992, available at <http://www.debates.org/index.php?page=october-19-1992-debate-transcript> last accessed March 30, 2017.

campaign book *United We Stand: How We Can Take Back Our Country*, a hearkening back to his 1970s POW organization.<sup>117</sup>

Thus while it is difficult to place too much weight on the POW/MIA issue or Bush's views on normalization swinging the election, if Menendez is correct and either of the questions addressed earlier were answered with more substance, I would suggest that the POW/MIA issue as related to the 1992 election should at least get more coverage in the likes of *Restless Giant* (which devotes significant attention to the 1992 election), *Citizen Perot*, *The Perot Voters* or *Quest for the Presidency* than it currently receives. I would currently argue that until these questions are answered more authoritatively, such issues are slightly exaggerated by Franklin. I can agree with Michael Allen's premise that "Perot's POW/MIA advocacy was key to his campaign," if it only means that "everything he did had a POW subtext," but would also counter that it remained a subtext and that Perot spent exponentially more time and effort on his economic ideas, his infomercials and even his views on the controversial social issues of the early 1990s.<sup>118</sup>

This paper has placed Ross Perot in the same general category as Ann Mills Griffiths. Such placement could perhaps be argued. Both could be placed, with some difficulty, in Chapter 1. However, the demands Griffiths made of the Vietnamese and Perot's enduring belief that Vietnam was secretly holding live POWs make them a better fit here. There was almost no possibility that either could be convinced that normalization was the right diplomatic move. The irony of this juxtaposition is, of course, that Griffiths and Perot by no means saw eye to eye. While Griffiths saw Bush as a key political ally, Perot detested not only Bush, but most of

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117. James A. McCann and Ronald B. Rapoport, "Heeding the Call: An Assessment of Mobilization with H. Ross Perot's 1992 Presidential Campaign," *American Journal of Political Science* 43, No. 1 (January 1999): 8; Goldman et al, *Quest for the Presidency*, 416; Menendez, *The Perot Voters*, 216

118. Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 277.

Washington DC. Griffiths had little but disdain for Perot and his stunts while Perot generally allied himself with POW/MIA radicals equally hostile towards Griffiths. Had he become president, Perot's stance on normalization might have changed, as it would, ironically, have placed his administration between other large corporations and businesses in Vietnam. Perot himself might have been tempted to revert to the 1970s position of the League and treat the POW issue as a separate humanitarian issue while proceeding with normalization. Such speculation aside, Perot's hostility towards the "frustrated" Vietnamese, his belief that secret negotiations and promises of immunity would work new magic in the POW/MIA arena, and his hostility towards the government best identify him as an opponent of diplomatic normalization.

## POLITICAL UNANIMITY AND PAINFUL SILENCE IN ORANGE COUNTY

After receiving news that President Clinton had announced normalization with the SRV, House Representative Robert Dornan minced few words. He first denounced Clinton as a “triple draft dodger” before pledging, “this is a disgrace, you bet the fight is on.” Dornan, was a Republican rep from Garden Grove, California, a racially diverse city in Orange County California. The background for Dornan’s polemics regarding normalization form the subject of the final section of this paper.<sup>119</sup>

As this paper transitions from people to a place - Orange County - it does so not without trepidation. By drawing a political line around a concept of “anti-normalization” this paper shifts dangerously close to the “groupism” that Rogers Brubaker confronted in his 2004 book *Ethnicity Without Groups*. While Brubaker was addressing ethnicity most specifically, his warning about the problems in histories attempting “to take bounded groups as fundamental units of analysis,” can and should be heeded in this this paper as well. And Brubaker’s “groupism” could surface in this chapter in various ways. First, and perhaps most fundamentally would be the simple problem of stating “Orange County” *was* for or against normalization. Such an approach would be faulty not only on a theoretical level, but clearly on an empirical level as well – this paper has already mentioned the surprising position of the Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce in Orange County regarding normalization. Another danger lies in divorcing Orange County from the very elements that make it so compelling. First, Orange County is regarded as something of an epicenter of modern conservatism. This of course makes it a tempting test case

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119. Thomas Farragher, “U.S. and Vietnam: Old Enemies Embrace - Full Diplomatic Ties to Be Resumed Two Decades After War – Clinton Risks Political Damage to Open New Opportunities,” *The San Jose Mercury News*, July 11, 1995.

for the syllogisms of Michael Allen regarding the connection between the POW/MIA movement and modern conservatism. Writing about Orange County in microcosm should not be done without also grappling with the county's place in the politics of the late 1980s and early 1990s, especially as Lisa McGirr's *Suburban Warriors* has warned us that "Orange County exaggerated trends occurring elsewhere – trends that were harbingers of national change."<sup>120</sup>

Nor can this section even attempt to elaborate on the viewpoints of Vietnamese Americans in "Little Saigon" without acknowledging their connections to other Vietnamese in and outside of the United States. Many Vietnamese Americans had shared experiences, and such experiences are typically written about in a larger national context. Orange County cannot of course, assimilate a large immigrant community without changing itself. Thus, to avoid evoking Orange County as a political line with agency, but to retain the goal of interrogating the claims of Michael Allen and to give some sense of the Vietnamese American perspective, I will set very modest goals in this section. The first is to outline the expressed views of select Orange County leaders about normalization with Vietnam. The second is to examine the opinions of Vietnamese Americans on the prospect of normalizing with the government many of them had fled. The last is to tentatively evaluate whether there was in fact anything close to a communal response to the issue in Orange County, and if so, to briefly outline it.<sup>121</sup>

This paper will focus primarily on the leadership role of Garden Grove's Bob Dornan for two reasons. First, he seems to be the most outspoken non-Vietnamese politician on the issue in

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120. Rogers Brubaker. *Ethnicity without Groups* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 2; McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, 13. Again, for Orange County's place in modern conservatism see *Suburban Warriors*; Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt* or Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*.

121. The term "Little Saigon" technically refers to an area split between Garden Grove, Santa Ana, and Fountain Valley – all in Orange County – which is heavily and disproportionately populated by Vietnamese Americans. <http://visitanahaim.org/blog-post/2016/04/12/spotlight-little-saigon> last accessed March 30, 2017. This section will use the term "Vietnamese Americans" rather than Việt Kiều (overseas Vietnamese) as the former more precisely acknowledges that the Vietnamese of Orange County are in fact American citizens and consider themselves as such.

Orange County. As I will relate, Dornan was active and opinionated regarding normalization for much of his political career. Second, Dornan's 46<sup>th</sup> District, along with Dana Rohrabacher's 48<sup>th</sup>, encompassed many of the Vietnamese Americans who made up an estimated 12 per cent of Orange County's population during the early to mid 1990s.<sup>122</sup>

While Dornan, as the Garden Grove Representative, may have been the most outspoken, he was by no means isolated in his opinion. In fact, all five representatives from Orange County, also all Republicans, were vocally opposed to normalization even as the news of it went to press. Their reason for such opposition included not only Vietnam's human rights violations, but also because these representatives felt Vietnam was not doing its part to fully resolve POW/MIA issues. The US Senate had voted (in a non-binding resolution) rather handily to lift the embargo in 1994 and the "yea" votes included both Californian Senators Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein. As such, Orange County's unanimous anti-normalization stance in the House seems to have been something of an anomaly and in keeping with the voting pattern of conservative, POW/MIA advocates still in the Senate such as Jesse Helms, Bob Smith, Chuck Grassley, Bob Dole and Strom Thurmond, all of whom opposed the measure in the Senate.<sup>123</sup>

While Rohrabacher was by no means a passive opponent of normalization, Dornan deserves special mention as his reasons for opposing normalization would seem to fit well with both POW/MIA advocates *and* those Vietnamese Americans in Orange County who opposed

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122. The congressional districts of these two covered most of Little Saigon as well as Westminster, which also had a relatively high Vietnamese-American population. Little Saigon was in fact an official term given to this area by the California Governor in 1988. "Wiki: The History of Little Saigon and the Vietnamese in Orange County," *The Orange County Register* (hereafter *OCR*), April 24, 2015, updated February 1, 2016, available at <http://www.oregister.com/articles/vietnamese-659434-saigon-little.html> last accessed April 3, 2017; Leslie Berman, "O.C. Vietnamese Want Guarantee of Rights First," *The Los Angeles Times*, January 28, 1994.

123. The non-binding voting results are available at "Clinton Lifts Trade Embargo Against Vietnam," *CQ Almanac 1994*, 50th ed., 467-68. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, 1995. The unanimous response against normalization by OC representatives is described by Dina Elboghday, "O.C. Lawmakers Oppose Full Relations; They Say Normalization Should Hinge on MIA and Human Rights Issues," *OCR*, July 11, 1995.



normalization. This paper has previously pointed out the difference between POW/MIA advocates and POWs themselves, observing that while Ross Perot sought political support from both, they were not in fact, the same thing.

A variation of this same idea can be seen in Dornan's opposition to normalization. He was both a firm believer that the US had abandoned POWs *and* a committed Cold Warrior, even after the collapse of the Soviet Union. It was this second element, not the first, that likely appealed to those Vietnamese Americans, some of whom, rather than seeking allies in the POW/MIA community, went so far as to voice the opinion that the POW/MIA issue had unduly overshadowed the fact that Vietnam remained an oppressive communist regime still persecuting intellectuals and religious minorities. Dornan did not approach normalization strictly as a POW/MIA issue, however, and like some of his Vietnamese-American voters, saw normalization as a capitulation to a repressive political system. Speaking specifically about his opposition to normalization, Dornan stated, "I never accepted the loss against communism, it became an obsession with me." This obsession was particularly evident not only in Dornan's opposition to normalization, but also in his colorful recreations of Clinton's views on Vietnam, again, elements likely appealing to more outspoken Vietnamese-American critics of normalization. When *Orange County Register* reporter Eldon Griffiths' claimed, "Dornan makes a specialty of firing verbal missiles at the Clintons," he was hardly exaggerating. Dornan regularly spoke of Clinton as a "draft dodger" (be it single, double, or triple) but sometimes added more thoughtful readings of Clinton, such as, "he always thought Ho Chi Minh was George Washington." Dornan was more critical than were McCain or Kerry of Vietnam's human rights violations, but was, to be

accurate, willing to couple the SRV's progress on human rights with some diplomatic and economic reciprocation by the US.<sup>124</sup>

While Dornan's strongly-expressed anti-communism likely appealed to some Vietnamese Americans, his record on the POW/MIA issue is even easier to substantiate. While the efforts of Dornan, himself a Vietnam vet, to support POWs, alive or dead, do not approach those of Ross Perot, they were by no means negligible. In 1970, while a talk show host, Dornan took four POW/MIA wives to Saigon to help them find their husbands. Dornan was also behind the POW/MIA bracelet worn by millions of Americans in the 1970s and 1980s. His website claims that he "originated it" and Dornan believed its importance secondary in American culture only to "religious symbols such as the cross or Star of David." In the early 1980s, Dornan, along with Ann Mills Griffiths, had been temporarily duped into supporting Bo Gritz's now infamous efforts to rescue POWs from Laos. In 1984, Dornan chaired the House's POW/MIA task force and boldly confronted Ronald Reagan at a freshman [House Representative] class orientation with a recent article in *The Wall Street Journal* about how "Vietnam Didn't Return Some American POWs," telling Reagan his staffers were not doing all they could to help POWs.<sup>125</sup>

By 1988, then National Security Advisor Colin Powell had to meet with Dornan in person to gently inform him that his theatrics and his ongoing support for "the Rambo faction" were actually getting in the way of legitimate recovery efforts by the likes of presidential emissary Vessey. Robert Schulzinger linked Dornan with "other members of the Congressional Rambo faction" although he appears to have been a bit premature in his assessment that this

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124. Eldon Griffiths, "Oranges and Lemons," *OCR*, July 5, 1994; "Topic Watch: Government," *OCR*, December 17, 1992.

125. Colvin, *First Heroes*, 19. Dornan's involvement with POW/MIA bracelets is supported by his own website [http://www.bobdornan.com/on\\_civil\\_rights.html](http://www.bobdornan.com/on_civil_rights.html) last accessed April 1, 2017; "Danielle Herubin, "Since Moscow Allegation, Dornan's Phone Just Keeps Ringing," *OCR*, October 7, 1992; Franklin, *M.I.A. or Mythmaking*, 8; and Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 183-84. For Dornan's interaction with Reagan see Hendon and Stewart, *Enormous Crimes*, 260-61. For his support of the Gritz raid see Keating, *Prisoners of Hope*, 136.

faction “appeared to be relics of a bygone era as the Cold War faded.” While this claim proved true in 1995, in the early 1990s they still had enough clout to get a 96-0 vote authorizing the creation of the Senate Select Committee in 1991 and most of this faction, including Dornan, would win reelection at least until 1996. However, the sum of Dornan’s actions and his unanimous support from his fellow Orange County representatives in Congress would seem to partially justify historians’ loose conflation of the POW/MIA movement with modern conservatism, especially if Orange County can be considered a bastion of the conservative movement.<sup>126</sup>

In closing, it would only be fair to mention that Dornan was at least bipartisan in his vitriol and that his motives seem to reflect genuine concern for POW/MIA families and the suffering of the Vietnamese people themselves. Although League director Ann Mills Griffiths was cautiously supportive of George H.W. Bush’s 1995 Citibank trip to Vietnam, Dornan was repulsed by it. While Dornan might have labeled normalization by Clinton a “disgrace” enabled by a “draft-dodger,” he eschewed the ambivalent rhetoric of Griffiths about the Bush trip. “It takes my breath away,” said Dornan, “the only possible, honorable thing for him is to slip his fee to some slimy Communist and say, 'I'm buying the bones of an American hero.'" Dornan, by coupling his concern for POW/MIAs with an “obsession” with Communism well after the collapse of the Soviet Union, undoubtedly appealed to POW/MIA advocates and to veterans suspicious of Vietnam’s efforts to repatriate remains. It almost undoubtedly resounded with the Vietnamese Americans of Little Saigon as well, whose distaste for the SRV’s form of government was perhaps even stronger than Dornan’s.

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126. Schulzinger, *A Time for Peace*, 38-39.

In addressing the Vietnamese Americans of Orange County with what will be a hopelessly introductory account, it would do well to revisit the structure of this paper. Nowhere have I claimed that the various entities in either chapter should be viewed as categorically for or against normalization. Were all 1200 service members missing from Vietnam “fully accounted for,” Griffiths and her League might have dropped its opposition to normalization even as the League ceased to exist. Presidential administrations allowed for the possibility of normalization, but could also have been put in this chapter had some of their more stringent demands from the Vietnamese been the focus of this paper. Yet with some Vietnamese Americans, be they in Orange County or in other enclaves in Florida, Texas or Washington, there is no place but in this chapter. Some Vietnamese American were categorically opposed to ever normalizing relations with a government known as The Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Had this group more political clout, it might have eventually found itself formally at odds with the League’s position that “the pace and scale of normalization” should be dictated by the SRV’s progress on POW/MIA issues. This hypothetical could be supported by their complaints, mentioned earlier, about the weight accorded the POW/MIA issue in the debate about normalization.

It is also vital to recollection my concerns about “groupism” in the use of Orange County. Nevertheless, Orange County is indeed a good starting point for research on Vietnamese-American perspectives on normalization. It was home to the largest community of Vietnamese Americans, some 140,000, outside of Vietnam itself. It had received official sanction to dub an area encompassing parts of multiple municipalities “Little Saigon.” While the borders of Orange County cannot serve as the only representation of the Vietnamese-American experience regarding normalization, it was nevertheless an important one, and Orange County was viewed

by some as the rightful, if ineffective, leader of the national community of Vietnamese Americans because of the sheer number of them residing there.<sup>127</sup>

While the advocacy of Robert Dornan and Dana Rohrabacher against normalization should establish some degree of political representation at the local level for the Vietnamese Americans against normalization, the story of their resistance to normalization did not read as I had anticipated. While I expected to hear stories of political marginalization, marginalization is only part of the story. It is undeniable that most Vietnamese in Orange County did not favor anything resembling *carte blanche* normalization with Vietnam. Such results are unsurprising. Yet even a cursory examination of the opinion of the Vietnamese of Orange County reveals far more division than unanimity. At both the national and local level Vietnamese Americans were unable to form anything resembling a united front. Hien Duc Do has claimed in *The Vietnamese Americans* that on the national level Vietnamese-American political participation is “not as well developed as in other and more established racial and ethnic communities.” This generality seems particularly true when applied to the story of normalization – there was (nor necessarily should there be) a united voice either nationally or within Orange County on the issue. Yen Do, founder of Westminster’s *Nguoi Viet Daily*, perhaps the most-read Vietnamese-American newspaper nationwide, disagreed with those who claimed, “no one gives a damn about the Vietnamese.” To the contrary, Do pointed out that Clinton had in fact reached out to Vietnamese Americans, but his overtures had recently declined, not because Clinton was unconcerned with their input, but because his administration could not decipher who within the community was in fact their best representative. The Heritage Foundation’s Director of Asian Studies Kenneth

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127. Anh Do and Jeffrey Brody, “Vietnam as Friend? Some See Profits in Diplomatic Ties; Others Say Nation Must Change First,” *OCR*, November 1, 1992; Anh Do, “Vietnam Conference Highlights Democracy; Activists Urged to End the Infighting, Mobilize for Change,” *OCR*, October 6, 1991.

Conboy had already laid this problem out in 1991 to an Orange County audience. Conboy had expressed his belief that “they are all chiefs and no Indians” and that to become politically relevant they needed to unite rather than continue with their infighting.<sup>128</sup>

This paper will not focus on the running dialogue in Vietnamese American newspapers or radio as would be befitting any fair treatment of immigrant opinion. It will point out, however, that the issue mattered a great deal to Orange County Vietnamese Americans, and only after normalization transpired did they feel truly free to voice their opinions on the matter. Nor am I exaggerating a general atmosphere of hostility towards the SRV. In fact, the list of crimes related to or appearing to be directly related to the views of Vietnamese Americans on normalization is nothing short of disturbing and required FBI involvement to prevent more deaths at the hand of “right wing hit squads.” In 1984, a Cal State Fullerton professor was gunned down on campus after expressing his belief that academic exchanges with the SRV might be a good idea. In 1986, a housing official was shot and the following year a publisher died in an arson incident. Both had been advocating normalization. Four hours north of Orange County in Fresno, Doan Van Toai, author of *The Vietnamese Gulag*, hardly a pro-SRV book, was shot in August 1989, ostensibly for his pro-normalization position. While Toai survived, his experience was not unusual in Orange County - to the point that residents were unwilling to give their opinion on normalization for fear they would suffer similar fates. Robert Schulzinger states that these were only a few of the “dozens” of violent crimes directed against those whose actions or speech indicated that that they were willing to “feed the hungry tiger that is Vietnam today.”

When state senator Art Torres and Irvine Mayor Larry Agran went on a delegation to Vietnam to track down missing family members, they refused to publish the list of families they were trying

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128. Anh Do, “Vietnam Conference Highlights Democracy;” Martin Evans, “Vietnamese Here, Around Nation Say Views Ignored; They Say Washington's Focus on MIAs Has Pushed Aside Other Concerns,” *OCR*, July 8, 1995.

to help. The *OCR* editorialized that “reaction to the mission has been divided among local Vietnamese. Some oppose such efforts, fearing they will lead to normalization.”<sup>129</sup>

Violence was not only directed towards Orange County residents; however, it was also directed towards Vietnam. Orange County proved to be a receptive audience for the National United Front for the Liberation of Vietnam, an organization promising to lead a guerilla uprising in Vietnam. The group, with a strong contingency of former Republic of Vietnam officers, had attracted thousands of supporters in Orange County in the 1980s before several of its members were finally indicted in 1991 for funneling money raised for the Front, much of it in Orange County, to support a noodle restaurant chain. Even after the indictments for the crimes and after news circulated that the FBI was beginning to link the Front to some of the violence in Orange County, the group remained active in the Little Saigon area. Douglas Pike thought the ongoing support was unfortunate, as he saw the group as a “rip-off.”<sup>130</sup>

While not all efforts to forestall normalization were of course illegal, other evidence of a relatively uncompromising stance within the community was seen in its political engagement. Garden Grove sent its first delegate, the marketing consultant Ky Ngo, to the Republican National Convention in 1988 and 1992. At both delegations Ngo, who first became a Republican campaigner because the party was stronger on Communism than the Democrats, appears to have attended as a single-issue delegate. In 1988, his best ideas for the convention were “not recognizing the Vietnamese government and allowing more Vietnamese refugees to come to this country.” For his 1992 trip to the GOP convention, Ngo was unchanged, listing his “key issue” as “ensure party opposes normalization of relations with Vietnam.” Between his two

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129. Brown, *Exiting Indochina*, 147 n. 7; David Reyes, “FBI Failing to Protect Vietnamese Who Advocate Ties to Hanoi, Activist Claims,” *The Los Angeles Times*, September 1, 1989; Schulzinger, *A Time for Peace*, 127; Do and Brody, “Vietnam as Friend.”

130. Jeffrey Brody, “Front Not Upfront, Some Viets Lament,” *OCR*, May 20, 1991.

presidential delegations Ngo helped organize an Asian-Pacific festival attended by President Bush, in which a somewhat noncommittal Bush told a receptive Republican audience that “we’re never going to forget that Vietnam is not free and democratic.” While other Orange County politicians could not, like Ngo, focus on a single issue, even as late as the July 4 recess in 1994 an Orange County foreign affairs Q & A still included Vietnam on its list of pressing foreign affairs concerns.<sup>131</sup>

In such a climate, it is unsurprising that many Vietnamese Americans in Orange County kept their opinions on normalization private, especially if they did not align with “the paratrooper crowd” or the Front. A regrettable failure of this paper is a detailed look at the Vietnamese language newspapers of Orange County to trace the nature of the debates about normalization, as subdued as they may have been. Yet, as mentioned before, Orange County did have its normalization advocates. Dr. Co Pham, who had also heard his share of threats against his person and headed up the Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce in Orange County, was a staunch advocate of normalization despite also wanting more freedom in Vietnam. His opinion was shared by dozens of businesses in Orange County, some of whom had quietly begun to conduct business with the SRV even before the embargo was lifted. After that, however, connections between Orange County and Vietnam flourished, with the customs district serving Orange County seeing a 1600 per cent increase in goods shipped to Vietnam the very first year the embargo was lifted.<sup>132</sup>

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131. Larry Peterson, “Orange County’s Delegation to the Republican Convention,” *OCR*, August 14, 1988; Bob Beaver and Eldon Griffiths, “O.C.’s Congressmen Tackle Tough Questions,” *OCR* July 5, 1994; “20 Delegates Represent OC Republicans,” *OCR*, August 16, 1992.<sup>131</sup>

132. Dan Rose, “OC Vietnamese Happy, But Cautious Over US Talks With Their Homeland,” *OCR*, April 10, 1991; Martin C. Evans, “O.C. Firms Already Exploring in Hanoi; Dozens of Area Companies Welcome the President’s Decision to Normalize Relations,” *OCR*, July 13, 1995.



If polls are accurate, by 1995 Orange County had approximately 10 per cent less support for normalization than the nation at large, with 56 per cent in favor of the event. Among Vietnamese Americans the number was lower, with 38 per cent in opposition, 34 per cent in favor, and 28 percent undecided. This polling data, along with the unswerving resistance of Orange County politicians to normalization, and the recurrent election of Dornan and Rohrabacher, does lend a great deal of circumstantial support for some connection between conservatism and the POW/MIA cause. Although not everyone in Orange County voted Republican during the 1990s, the majority did, and the POW/MIA cause undoubtedly found a positive climate among politicians and Vietnamese Americans that shared their distrust of the SRV.<sup>133</sup>

The poll only tells part of the story for Vietnamese Americans, however. In a similar poll a month and a half later, the number of Vietnamese Americans approving of normalization jumped over 20 per cent. While there are of course any number of reasons for the increase, the poll's publication was juxtaposed with a marked and unprecedented openness to discuss what normalization meant throughout Little Saigon. A kiosk worker remarked to the *OCR* that before, "everybody had an opinion, but they wouldn't share it." A business man from Garden Grove also felt that "people are speaking more openly now." The managing editor of *Nguoi Viet* and the president of a local TV and radio enterprise in Little Saigon, both of whom arguably understood their community well, noted the same thing – more discussion and a change in tone.<sup>134</sup>

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133. Paul G. Zielbauer, "Poll: O.C. Mostly Favors Ties," *OCR*, July 11, 1995.

134. Martin C. Evans, "Two Views of What's Next Between U.S., Vietnam; Vietnam's Leading Advocate in the United States and a Staunch Opponent of Normalized Relations Talk about the Future," *OCR*, July 17, 1995; Evans, "For Many, Hearts Still in Vietnam; More than Half of Respondents Say They Would Move Back if the Government Became More Democratic," *OCR*, July 28, 1995.

One interesting example is that of Ban Bui, president of the Vietnamese Community of South California, who had been gently accused of “harassing” Vietnamese Americans by *The Orange County Register* in the past. Immediately after normalization, Bui was on record as unwilling to even consider the prospect of Vietnamese Americans serving as a reconciliatory bridge between the US and the SRV, even though it would empower them. A mere week and a half later, Bui took the opposite tack, organizing a meeting to determine just how Vietnamese Americans could influence US policy on Vietnam moving forward. The *Register* summarized the general trend among Vietnamese Americans as, “greater toleration of those who believe that normalized relations with Vietnam can lead to . . . improvements in the lives of people there.” What started with “a wave of anger” seems to have transitioned to some of the most productive discussions on normalization that the Vietnamese American community had enjoyed in its brief history. While in 1992 the anti-normalization Ky Ngo could get over 20,000 people to listen to George H.W. Bush, he was not nearly as successful in getting people to protest normalization ex post facto and support Robert Dornan’s last-ditch effort to block diplomatic funds for normalization. When only 30 to 50 Vietnamese Americans joined Ngo’s organized protest, he weakly remarked, “many had to work.”<sup>135</sup>

The discrepancy between the two polls can likely be attributed to a variety of factors, but I would suggest that open discussions about the possibilities normalization opened up may have prompted the jump. In the next few years, travel by Vietnamese Americans to Vietnam would explode. There was undoubtedly more contact between relatives who had long been estranged. Funds sent to help relatives could be given directly or at least tracked with far more transparency. Almost instantly there had to be more awareness that anything resembling the

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135. Evans, “Two Views of What's Next;” Evans, “For Many, Hearts Still in Vietnam; More than Half of Respondents Say They Would Move Back if the Government Became More Democratic,” *OCR*, July 28, 1995.

“five no’s” position that had precluded open discussion of normalization had in fact been responsible for keeping families farther apart than they had to be, regardless of one’s opinion on government. This is of course, not to suggest that Vietnamese Americans’ opinions on the SRV’s form of government were transformed. If anyone was hoping for a “peaceful evolution,” it was undoubtedly Vietnamese Americans who, regardless of their views on normalization, were at least united in their disdain for the government that had ostracized either themselves or many of their acquaintance.

## CHAPTER CONCLUSION

Further research would undoubtedly add more depth and complexity to Vietnamese American attitudes regarding normalization. Alongside the likes of Dr. Co Pham, the physician in charge of the pro-normalization Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce, were the developer Frank Jao and undoubtedly a host of others who wrote anonymous letters to *Nguoi Viet* in support of normalization, chided the bellicose attitudes of husbands seeming to live in the past, or at least wondered if normalization might help them see a loved one again. These voices deserve far better exposure in a future work, whether by myself or another.

This chapter has also described a hostile climate in which voicing support for normalization was met with swift and sometimes violent censure. This paper has already hinted that former Republic of Vietnam officers likely played a role in stymying contact with their former adversary, sometimes carrying their efforts to the point of physical violence. Some of their targets, like the author of *The Vietnamese Gulag*, evoke bewilderment.

But most were undoubtedly not violent even while they opposed normalization. Hien Duc Do's *The Vietnamese Americans* is well worth the read for any one too quick to criticize an anti-normalization stance as a relic of the past. Many older Vietnamese Americans (who were far more likely to oppose normalization than their younger counterparts), did indeed have a lot to forgive. All but forced out of their own country (many after being "re-educated") and often escaping on rickety boats, many of them languished in refugee camps before finally making their way to a US that was initially hostile to them. Once in the US, many lost control of their children who were better able to speak the host country's language than they were and began to view their own parents as "backwards." They saw many second and third generation Vietnamese Americans join gangs or drop out of school even while much of the country lumped them into a

“model minority” Asian category. They struggled to reconcile America’s gender norms with those of Vietnam. They suffer disproportionately from mental illness and a poverty rate twice the national average. Such factors have often led to “many older Vietnamese” feeling “increasingly lonely.” When one feels, whether justified or not, that a government is responsible for putting you in a such a predicament, it is understandable why the prospect of “normal” with said government might be repugnant. Some of their pain is reflected in the fact that same post-normalization poll that showed a 20 percent jump in approval for normalization also showed that nearly 60 per cent of the Vietnamese in Orange County would move back to Vietnam were the government to become more democratic.<sup>136</sup>

This chapter has also lampooned some of Ross Perot’s theatrics that today, twenty years removed and with nary a POW walking out of a jungle, seem to approach the absurd. Yet Perot undoubtedly has a trail of loyal POWs and appreciative families stretching across the nation that likely comprised some small part of the nearly 20 per cent of Americans who voted third party in 1992, a feat last bested by Theodore Roosevelt in 1912. While it is easy to impugn the motives of someone from behind a computer screen, it is likely that many Americans felt that the time, effort, and money that Perot spent to help POWs was money well spent. While others might have doubted the ability of Perot to get two of his employees out of Tehran during the height of the Iranian Revolution, Perot never did, and it is doubtful that these employees and many a POW/MIA family ever forgot his tenacity in the finally successful endeavor. Such efforts, while perhaps not directly responsible for keeping Bush out of office, were undeniably part of the image of the man that may have cost Bush a second term.<sup>137</sup>

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136. Do, *The Vietnamese Americans*, 27, 29, 35-36, 55, 60-61, 65, 75; Robert Schulzinger, *A Time for Peace*, 122-23. The poll was conducted by Cal State Fullerton, details are in Evans, “For Many, Hearts Still in Vietnam.”

137. Perot was actually in Iran looking for ways to get two of his imprisoned Electronic Data Service employees out after the Shah had already left the country. Perot’s ideas included a paramilitary rescue that never materialized. The

And while Ann Mills Griffiths has never, nor will ever, enable a live POW to escape from Vietnam, she has provided comfort to hundreds of families even as she has angered many as well. This paper has done scant justice to these families, either the ones who felt she was too cozy with Washington to care about their individual concerns or the scores of families she helped navigate the complications of recovery efforts requiring the input of multiple federal agencies. For her efforts, Griffiths has been criticized, often fairly, for her role as a china-breaking power player in Washington. Yet no one watching her testimony at a Select Committee can doubt her command of the issues or wonder if she feels she can adequately represent the POW/MIA issue in Washington. Few who count the hours she spent away from her children in efforts to do that would covet her job. The families Griffiths represents deserve better coverage in this thesis and their opinions on her performance would serve well to balance, or perhaps even justify the portrait painted of her by historians, POW/MIA activists and federal employees.

This chapter, like the first, has some necessary omissions. Those colorful characters described as “the Rambo set,” among other creative appellations, deserve recognition in this chapter, even as they drew the ire of the Senate Select Committee. They were omitted as their efforts were often too individualistic to be retold in a work of this brevity and their image as captured in film has been recounted perhaps too frequently by cultural historians. Nevertheless, the reader should be aware that some of these played a role in delaying normalization for a host of reasons, chief among them distraction and the propagation of faulty evidence ostensibly proving live POWs were abandoned. More time and space would allow the likes of Billy Hendon, Red McDaniel, Bo Gritz, and others more prominence than they have received here.

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two were eventually freed due to a prison break and made their way to Turkey, where an elated Perot picked them up and flew them back to the US. Posner, *Citizen Perot*, 100-22.

There are of course some mirror images of the subjects in the first chapter that deserve mention as well. Veterans and veteran groups that could never come to terms with the prospect of reestablishing diplomacy with an enemy still suspected of holding back. Conservatives in the SRV's Politburo who thought the threat of peaceful evolution too high and still hoped for successful ideological alliances. There are these but a few additions that would better round out this thesis.

But nonetheless, the comparative approach has hopefully yielded some fruit. Both the staunchly Republican Vietnamese-American community of Orange County and Ann Mills Griffiths were political advocates of George H.W. Bush. Yet they never formed an anti-normalization alliance, a fact that was belatedly mourned by at least one Vietnamese American. Ann Mills Griffiths and Ross Perot might not have liked each other or agreed upon the importance of bones, but they were both committed to making the lives of POW/MIA families better, for reasons that have of course been heavily criticized. Bob Dornan's outspoken position against normalization brought tension with his fellow Californian Ronald Reagan and caused him to blast Bush's "fee" when Bush went to Vietnam. His service in Vietnam, his political affiliation, and his reputation as a Cold Warrior undoubtedly made him popular not only his with his fellow California House Representatives, but also with POW/MIA families and Ky Ngo and his Vietnamese followers as well. This chapter has but scratched the surface of such strange relationships by using the framework of an event given little space in most contemporary US histories.<sup>138</sup>

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138. Van Thai Tran, "Holding Clinton's Feet to the Fire on Vietnam," *OCR*, February 9, 1994.

## EPILOGUE

This past summer I had the pleasure of attending a Vietnamese language course for a much-needed brush-up on my limited ability to speak Tiếng Việt. During this conference the instructors organized several social events, to include dining out at local Vietnamese restaurants and short trips. One of these events was a picnic that was attended by local Vietnamese-American businessmen, our male Vietnamese-American instructor, two female instructors from the SRV, the students from my class and a young SRV family who were on location so that the husband could obtain an engineering degree. The men from the community, many of whom had fought in the Vietnam War for the Republic of Vietnam (the South), enjoyed hearing about my military career and gently sparred with me about my Vietnamese vocabulary that was, according to them, larded with communist words. However, the food was largely prepared by the two women from the SRV and shared by all. The young couple mingled with all present and seemed to enjoy being able to converse with the students, despite our limited Vietnamese.

I do not believe any of the other students picked up on the interesting sociopolitical dynamics of this picnic. This study hopefully makes them that much more interesting. There is almost no doubt in my mind that most of the Vietnamese American men present would have been vocal opponents of normalization 22 years ago. Their personal histories closely fit Douglas Pike's description of the "paratrooper crowd," and their criticism of my Vietnamese betrayed their ongoing dislike for the SRV's form of government. The two women from the SRV both longed to return home after a long absence from their country. Yet these men were still able to mingle with these patriotic SRV women, neither of whom wanted to remain in the US longer than their job required, enjoy their food, welcome a young Vietnamese family, and dialogue with all present. There is simply no way such a gathering could have occurred had not the US and



Vietnam established formal diplomatic ties in 1995. It is interesting to observe that even the most ardent opponents of normalization seem to be enjoying some positive fruits of the reconciliation they had for so long opposed.

Vietnamese Americans are by no means the only beneficiaries of normalized relations, and I will commence describing others shortly. Lest I be accused of being naïve, however, I should point out that there is of course, room for skepticism just as there for approbation. The very timeline of the inflatable Pepsi can's ascension in Ho Chi Minh City is cause for such skepticism. Critics have (and should) continue to point out the very real cause for concern regarding human rights in Vietnam. It was one of the first things Clinton mentioned in his speech announcing normalization, but his speech also included an observation that the US did not have a perfect historical record either. Perceptive athletes may have noted that their favorite brand of compression shirts is now "Made in Vietnam," and should of course wonder at the pay rates that textile workers receive in the Socialist Republic. Vietnamese still suffering the after-effects of Agent Orange might wonder why their government allows US entities to spend billions of dollars traipsing around their country looking for remains even while many living Vietnamese continue to suffer as a result of the war their own histories call an act of imperialism. These are valid concerns that deserve inclusion in any debate about the merits of normalization.<sup>139</sup>

But it would seem that for those entities described in this thesis who opposed normalization, diplomatic relations have been beneficial. Although some US veterans had thought normalization with the very government they had fought to keep North of the 17<sup>th</sup>

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139. William J. Clinton, "Remarks Announcing the Normalization of Diplomatic Relations With Vietnam," July 11, 1995. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=51605> last accessed April 5, 2017. Edwin Martini offers a decidedly less favorable take on normalization than I do here, and does submit important caveats to the stories I relate here such as sweat shop exploitation and ongoing opposition in some quarters (to include opposition from the League) to allowing Vietnam anything resembling a level economic playing field, *Invisible Enemies*, 235-37.

Parallel to be foolish, when provided an opportunity to visit the Socialist Republic, many of them took it. The opportunity provided many with emotional closure and a positive view of the people of Vietnam, the clear majority of whom welcomed them. The experience of many veterans in the SRV, enabled by normalization, proved to be one important part of their ability to “come to terms with their own service.”<sup>140</sup>

One veteran in particular has not only been able to come to terms with his own service, but has been instrumental in helping both nations come to terms with their new relationship. The appointment of Pete Peterson, a POW in Vietnam for six years, to be the first ambassador to Vietnam is a remarkable part of the history of normalized relations between the two countries. Despite his own painful history in Vietnam, Peterson approached his job with remarkable zeal, acknowledging that he and the Vietnamese had both seen each other at their worst. Despite this, Peterson pledged to help “heal the wounds between the United States and Vietnam. It’s a tragic history that we’ve shared as two peoples. No one can change that, but there is a great deal we can all do about the future. And that’s why I’m here in Vietnam.” Although admittedly from an Anglophone source, Robert Schulzinger’s summary of Peterson’s work in Vietnam bears full quotation.

He proved to be enormously popular with both the Vietnamese and the Americans. He traveled everywhere in the country, visiting schools, university hospitals, government offices, and businesses in the North and the South. Everywhere he supported reconciliation. He never complained about his suffering as a POW and he never apologized for the American War in Vietnam. Everywhere he went he stressed the need for greater communication, cultural exchanges, and business contacts.

It is perhaps fitting to close by pointing out that while in his post, Peterson met the woman who would become his second wife, Vi Le, a Vietnamese Australian. The two were

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140. Schulzinger, *A Time for Peace*, 108-09.

married about ten blocks away from the infamous “Hanoi Hilton,” where US POWs had been held in captivity by the North for years during the war.<sup>141</sup>

Ann Mills Griffiths was no longer part of the decision-making process about Vietnam during the Clinton administration, but she remained the executive director of the League until 2011, and even retained a position on the League’s board after that. Despite Griffiths’ concerns, recovery efforts in Vietnam have by no means slowed since normalization, even after the Joint Task Force – Full Accounting lost seven Americans and nine Vietnamese in a helicopter crash while conducting a recovery investigation in 2001. Griffiths’ fears about losing leverage for recovery efforts in the SRV have clearly not materialized. In 1995, the very year of normalization, there was an increase in remains repatriated from Vietnam - and these numbers held steady or even increased through the early 2000s despite a dwindling number of cases considered resolvable. The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA), the most recent acronym employed for the DoD entity tasked with coordinating recovery efforts, still maintains a detachment in Hanoi and multiple Joint Field Activities (remains recovery efforts) in Vietnam each year. In 2015, the DPAA opened a new \$86 million facility in Hawaii and the federal government continues to fund transportation for two family members of each Vietnam MIA to attend the League’s annual meeting. Despite Griffiths’ opposition to normalization, the process of obtaining “the fullest possible accounting” has continued, with impressive success in Vietnam.<sup>142</sup>

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141. Ibid. 64; PBS, “Pete Peterson: Assignment Hanoi,” available at <http://www.pbs.org/hanoi/>; Anderson, *An American in Hanoi*, 72, 254. Petersons’ first wife died in 1995.

142. Description of the helicopter crash is in Hawley, *The Remains of War*, 242. Hawley uses this incident to criticize ongoing recovery efforts, clearly feeling that the crash was “an unjustifiably high price” that should have resulted in “the admission that the accounting effort could not be validated in terms of further lives lost in Vietnam.” Numbers for repatriated remains are from a Government Accountability Office report from 2013 entitled, “DOD’S POW/MIA MISSION: Top-Level Leadership Attention Needed to Resolve Longstanding Challenges in Accounting for Missing Persons from Past Conflicts,” 11, available at <http://www.gao.gov/assets/660/655916.pdf> last accessed April 5, 2017. The DPAA’s new building comes from a 2016 DPAA brief to the VFW available at

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam has not of course, experienced anything resembling “peaceful evolution.” If the US had any long-term strategy to change Vietnam’s political system, as conservative blocs within the Party had warned in December 1995, this strategy has either failed or proved to be long-term indeed. The SRV’s Party organs remain intact and Party publications are still issued regularly. Normalization has led to stronger economic and defense ties between the US and Vietnam that make the possibility of renewed military or even economic hostilities seem increasingly unlikely. In 2000, the US and Vietnam signed a Bilateral Trade Agreement, followed by the US granting Vietnam Most Favored Nation status in 2001. In 2007 Vietnam was granted entry into the World Trade Organization with US approval. Trips by Presidents Clinton and Obama to the SRV in 2000 and 2016, respectively, have been generally well-received by key leaders and the people of Vietnam. While Clinton visited a MIA recovery site on his visit, by the time Obama made his trip, POW/MIA concerns were no longer at the top of the presidential agenda.<sup>143</sup>

While Edwin Martini has dug deep to contend that Vietnam is still an invisible enemy of the United States, I believe the stories above are part of what has been an important and generally positive piece of post-Cold War reconciliation. By no means the product of “ripeness,” the process of normalization took work. It took purposive work to dispel the myth of live POWs abandoned in Southeast Asia at the hands of two determined Senators, one of whom came from a

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<http://www.dpaa.mil/Portals/85/Documents/Briefings/VFW/2016VFWBrief.pdf?ver=2016-08-11-134913-423> last accessed April 5, 2017. Federal funding for transportation is available in the League’s March 9, 2017 Mini-Newsletter, available at <http://www.pow-miafamilies.org/newsletter.html> last accessed April 5, 2017.

143. Vasavakul, “Sectoral Politics and Strategies for State and Party Building,” 98-99; Carl Thayer, “Obama’s Visit to Vietnam: A Turning Point?” *The Diplomat*, May 31, 2016; Helen Clark, “Obama Lifts U.S. Arms Ban on Vietnam,” CNN, May 23, 2016 available at <http://www.cnn.com/2016/05/23/politics/obama-vietnam-trip/> last accessed April 5, 2017; Anderson, *An American in Hanoi*, 255. Clinton’s report on his trip was generally favorable, although he did encounter some criticism of US involvement in the war from Party Secretary Lê Khả Phiêu and President Trần Đức Lương, Bill Clinton, *My Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 930-31; Martini, *Invisible Enemies*, 237-38.

political party whose 1964 presidential candidate had considered the use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam. It took work for undersecretaries and assistants in both Vietnam and the US to coordinate multiple delegations to Vietnam and eventually defeat conservative factions opposing normalization in their own government. While such work on normalization does not seem to have been influential enough to directly impact a US presidential election, I have here argued that even those entities in opposition to normalization have in fact benefitted from it.

Are there lessons to be learned from this story? Perhaps. In the short term, Cuba has had no POW/MIA issue to overcome, but hopefully the experience of Vietnamese-American opposition to normalization can be of some benefit to Cuban Americans who, before normalization, had an outlook like that of Ban Bui of Orange County. And while the traumatic memory of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the subsequent hostage crisis, and the ongoing struggle of the Iranian people under a rigid theocracy will likely continue to preclude normalization with Iran, one can at least hope that the day will come when that memory will fade for both nations and rapprochement with that country, be it named the Islamic Republic of Iran or not, will become a possibility.

## APPENDIX

# APPENDIX

## Normalization Timeline

1967 – Sybil Stockdale organizes the predecessor of what will become the National League of Families

March 1, 1969 – The Nixon Administration launches the “go public” campaign to generate enthusiasm for the release of American POWs in Vietnam

December 1969 – Ross Perot attempts to deliver two airplanes worth of humanitarian aid to POWs in Vietnam, but his efforts are rebuffed by North Vietnam

May 1970 – Victory in Vietnam (VIVA) bracelets go up for sale, Mrs. Ross Perot accepts the first one

May 9, 1970 – Ross Perot is named Man of the Year at the Salute to Armed Forces Ball

May 28, 1970 – The National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia incorporates in Washington, D.C.

1973 – By the end of the Vietnam War, an estimated 10 million POW/MIA bracelets are being worn across America

January 28, 1973 – The Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam is signed in Paris by the United States, South Vietnam and North Vietnam

June 1974 – Scott Albright resigns as executive director of the League after intense jeering at the League’s Fifth annual meeting

1975 – A Senate Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia initiates fifteen months of investigations, then reports in December 1976 that “no Americans are still being held alive as prisoners in Indochina”

May 12, 1975 – Mayaguez incident. The Khmer Rouge seize a US ship, only to release it later after 18 Marines are killed in combat attempting to regain it

March 1977-The Woodcock mission to Vietnam breaks ice on US/Vietnam returns with remains of 11 MIAs, comes to similar conclusions as House Senate Select Committee

March 1978 – Vietnam ends “bourgeois trade” in the south, seizing the goods and currency of thousands of Chinese merchants, forcing 30,000 businesses to close

June 1978 – ASEAN meets to discuss taking a stand on refugees from Indochina

November 1978 – Vietnam signs Treat of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union

August 1978 – Ann Mills Griffith becomes executive director of National League of Families

October 1978 – The Carter Administration decides to defer normalization due to impending violence in Cambodia, increased friendship between the USSR and Vietnam and concerns over refugee flight from Vietnam

December 1978 – US and China normalize relations

December 1978 – Vietnam and the Soviet Union sign friendship treaty

Christmas, 1978 – Vietnam invades Cambodia

January 16, 1979 – the Shah and his family flee Iran with Ross Perot still in Iran attempting to negotiate the release of two of his imprisoned Electronic Data Services employees

February 1979 – China invades Vietnam’s northern provinces

July 1979 – Geneva Conference drastically restructures refugee intake volume among countries of first and second asylum due to refugee crisis in Southeast Asia

January 1980 – Interagency Group on POW/MIA affairs is created to review and assess current events and policies to consider future direction/policy to resolve the POW/MIA problem

January 1988 – Reagan states that if the Cambodian issue is resolved, the US will normalize with Vietnam based on progress in MIA, Amerasian children and reeducation camp issues

June 14, 1980 – Conference on Indochinese Refugees in Geneva, Switzerland, results in creation of Orderly Departure Program and Humanitarian Operation Program

Late 1980s – Soviets stop providing Vietnamese with assistance

March 1980 – Congress passes 1980 Refugee Act to provide increased support for refugees of particular humanitarian concern, including those from Southeast Asia

1981 – Ann Mills Griffiths sets up Skyhook II, an organization that funds Lao resistance organizations in an effort to free live US POWs

1982 – Passage of the Amerasian Immigration Act of 1982

1983 – Ronald Reagan reinstates the use of military airlift for League families to attend the annual meeting



Late 1983 – the film *Uncommon Valor* becomes a surprising Holiday success

October 1984 – Edward Cooperman, a Cal State Fullerton professor advocating for increased scientific cooperation with Vietnam is killed, prompting requests for more FBI protection of those advocating cooperation with the SRV

May 1986 –retired DIA Director Eugene Tighe reports a “large volume of evidence” that there are still live Americans in Southeast Asia

1986 – Foreign Claims Settlement Commission rules that Vietnam has 192 valid and outstanding claims by private American companies and individuals

July 1986 – Resolution 32 of the Politburo prioritizes economic development over military expenditures

December 1986 – Nguyen Van Linh succeeds Truong Chinh as General Secretary of the Central Committee

February 1987 – General John Vessey Jr., former Chairman to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, is appointed by the Reagan administration to be the Presidential Emissary on issues related to POW/MIA affairs

1987 – Garden Grove publisher Tap Van Pham, who had been advocating normalization, dies in an Arson fire

March 1987 –Ross Perot undertakes trip to Hanoi in what was likely a form of freelance diplomacy to dig to the bottom of the live POW controversy

August 1987 – John Vessey goes to Hanoi as special representative to seek agreement for investigations, results in more Vietnamese cooperation regarding searches for remains, US agrees to address some of Vietnam’s humanitarian concerns in return

August 1987 – CIA publishes report denying evidence of live POWs in Indochina

December 29, 1987 – Vietnam’s National Assembly approves a Law on Foreign Investment aimed at improving the legal operating environment for foreign businesses

1988 – Decree #10 implements agricultural decollectivization in the SRV

Late 1980s – Soviets stop providing Vietnamese with assistance

January 1988 – Thailand announces it will no longer offer first asylum to any future refugee arrivals and pushes boats back out to sea

January 1988 – The Soviet Union initiates withdrawal from Afghanistan

January 20, 1988 – Ronald Reagan states that if the Cambodian issue is resolved, the US will normalize with Vietnam based on progress in MIA, Amerasian children and reeducation camp issues

March 1988 – Tom Ridge and John McCain introduce resolutions for “interest sections” in Hanoi and Washington to facilitate better accounting of remains, bill is unsuccessful after Hanoi suspends recovery efforts

May 1988 – Politburo Resolution No. 13 stresses a ‘multi-directional foreign policy’ orientation

July 29, 1988 – Ronald Reagan addresses the League, points out that immense improvements in infrastructure have been added to support MIA recovery

August 3, 1988 – Vietnam announces suspension of cooperation on POW/MIA and other issues due to the Reagan Administration’s “hostile policy”

Late 1988 – early 1989: informal meetings in Jakarta bring Khmer leaders together, but fail to establish a political process to settle Cambodian War

September 1988 – largest excavations to date take place in Vietnam, with 59 sets of remains repatriated within in eighty days

1989 – Food rationing is largely abolished in the SRV, creating opportunities for small street shops and marking the beginning of Vietnam’s market economy

January 1989 – *Final Interagency Report of the Reagan Administration on the POW/MIA Issue in Southeast Asia* finds it highly unlikely live POWs remained in Southeast Asia

January 1989 – George H.W. Bush gives his “sundered by a memory” inaugural address.

April 1989 – Vietnam withdraws all of its troops from Cambodia

June 1989 – Tiananmen Square incident in China complicates “Great Power” negotiations, seems to increase willingness of China to broker deal to distance themselves from Pol Pot

June 1989 – Second Geneva Conference on refugees settles on a Comprehensive Plan of Action advocating increasingly stringent screening requirements of Southeast Asian refugees

July 28, 1989 – Paris Conference on Cambodia begins

August 1989 – Doan Van Toai, author of *The Vietnamese Gulag* among other works, is shot. likely due to his position on normalization with Vietnam

August 4, 1989 – Iraqi embassy writes the League asking for help facilitating a prisoner exchange with Iran

August 30, 1989 – Paris conference issues final announcement suspending negotiations indefinitely

September 1989 – Vietnam takes formal steps in its efforts to normalize relations with Yugoslavia

September 1989 – Party Secretary Nguyễn Văn Linh issues two condemnatory speeches about Western subversion in the wake of Tiananmen Square

September 26, 1989 – Vietnam withdraws its troops from Cambodia

October 1989 – Nguyễn Cơ Thạch, the Vietnamese Foreign Minister, becomes the first Vietnamese communist diplomat to travel to Washington DC

December 1989 – the Malta Summit results in a de facto declaration of the end of the Cold War. Vietnam endorses this change in Soviet policy, but this will be the last such change in Soviet policy of which Vietnam will officially approve

January 1990 – First of 6 Perm5 meetings on Cambodian issue (after Paris Conference failed)

July 1990 – Chuck Robb of the VA announces agreement with Hun Sen government to allow JCRC to retrieve remains in Cambodia, Griffiths approves

July 1990 – Bush Administration Final Report finds no evidence of live prisoners of war in Southeast Asia after 1973

July 1990 – in the face of growing concern over the future of Communism, the Vietnamese media is forbidden to make references to Stalin while the Soviet Union reevaluates his legacy

August 1990 – UN Security Council reaches consensus on framework for international peace in Cambodia

August 1990 – Iraq invades Kuwait

September 1990 – with Perm Five plan public, China/Vietnam attempt to resolve their differences in a series of secret bilateral deliberations

September 1990 – Secretary of State Baker meets with Vietnam Foreign Minister Nguyễn Cơ Thạch for the highest level diplomatic exchange since 1973

September 1990 – The Soviet Union and China mutually agree to suspend their support for the war in Cambodia

October 1990 – Thạch promises John Vessey greater cooperation on POW/MIA issues and more access to Vietnamese records

December 1990 – Vietnam reportedly declines a secretive offer by China for aid that the Soviet Union can no longer supply in exchange for coordination on foreign policy with China

March 1991 – Senator Bob Smith, a POW/MIA advocate, proposes creation of Senate Select Committee (this on the heels of the Peck memo)

April 9, 1991 – Assistant Secretary of State Richard Solomon presents Trinh Xuan with the Bush Administration’s four-step “Road Map” to gradually normalize relations

April 1991 – US agrees to establish a presence in Hanoi to aid resolution of Americans still MIA, this meeting was announced as unrelated to the normalization process

April 25, 1991 – Richard Solomon announces first aid donation by U.S. to Vietnam since 1975 in the form of prosthetics for Vietnamese amputees

May 1991 – Senators Jesse Helms of North Carolina and Bob Smith of New Hampshire produce a controversial report on the history of the POW/MIA issue

May 1991 – Colonel Millard Peck resigns from the DIA’s Special Office for Prisoners of War and Missing in Action, accusing both the government and other figures as conducting a cover-up

June 24, 1991 – the 7<sup>th</sup> National Party Congress convenes with a new lineup of Politburo, Secretariat and Central Committee members, with Đỗ Mười taking over as General Secretary; Foreign Minister Nguyễn Cơ Thạch loses his Politburo seat after this major leadership shakeup

June 1991 – 7<sup>th</sup> National Party Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party modifies its foreign policy to reflect a desire “to be friends with all countries” and establishes “six special characteristics of Vietnamese socialism and seven basic directions to guide the process of building socialism” due to warning signs of the imminent demise of the Soviet Union

July 17, 1991 – Three series of photos surface supposedly depicting live American POWs in Southeast Asia and are published in major newspapers

August 2, 1991 – Wall Street Journal poll shows 69% of Americans still believe in live POWs in Southeast Asia

August 2, 1991 – Senate votes unanimously to create a Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs and to authorize a POW/MIA flag over federal buildings

October 1991 – Vietnam signs Agreement on a Comprehensive Political Settlement of the Cambodia Conflict on 23 October 1991, meeting key requirements of Phase One of the Bush Road Map

October 1991 – The final Congress of the Cambodian Communist Party meets, in which it jettisons Communism and renames itself the People’s Party

November 1991 – collapse of the Soviet Union, removing another key obstacle to normalization with Vietnam

November 1991 – Vietnam normalizes relations with China

1991-1992 – Congressional hearings on POW/MIA issues continue chaired by John Kerry. John McCain, Bob Smith and other influential veterans in congress are on the committee

October 23, 1991 – UN Peace plan formally ratified at Paris, enabling noncommunist resistance leaders to disassociate themselves from Khmer Rouge

December 1991 – George H.W. Bush administration allows some companies to sign tentative contracts with Vietnam

January 1992 – senior aides, including Tracy Usry from Senator Jesse Helms office, are fired from the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs due to congressional pressure related to the inaccuracies of the Helms report in May 1992

February 21, 1992 – On *Larry King Live*, Ross Perot announces he will run for president if volunteers manage to get his name on the ballot in all 50 states

Early 1992 – UN Settlement plan for Cambodia implemented

April 13, 1992 – US ends telecom ban with Vietnam, ends all restrictions on NGOs in Vietnam, meeting most (not all) of Phase II Roadmap landmarks and allows Vietnamese Americans to wire money directly to kin in Vietnam

April 1992 – Senate Select Committee members conduct a series of short-notice inspection of potential holding areas for live US prisoners, finding none

April 1992 – Kerry and McCain reportedly derail an intelligence briefing about the possibility of live POWs/MIAs as a Senate Select Committee classified briefing

June 15, 1992 – Boris Yeltsin announces the possibility of live American POWs as a result of an archives scrub in Russia

July 1992 – George H.W. Bush gets shouted down a speech to the National League of Families

July 1992 – Two aides to Bob Smith of the Senate Select Committee - Bill Hendon and Dino Carluccio - are fired by chairman John Kerry, but remain in Smith's office

July 15, 1992 – Ross Perot withdraws from the presidential race

October 1992 – Vietnam pledges to allow US inspection of all archival materials related to US MIAs, Bush praises their cooperation in a Rose Garden ceremony on the 17th

September 18, 1992 – Ross Perot’s name makes its way onto the last state yet to have him on the ballot – Arizona

October 1, 1992 – Ross Perot announces his reentry in the presidential election

November 1992 – Bush allows some US firms to open in Vietnam, but not to conduct business

January 13, 1993 – Final report of the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA affairs states that there is “no compelling evidence suggests the possibility of a POW may have survived to the present”

January 20, 1993 – William Jefferson Clinton inaugurated President

February 1993 – Francois Mitterrand becomes first Western head of state to Visit Vietnam since “reunification”

April 12, 1993 – Press releases describe how Australian scholar Stephen Morris recently discovered a document seeming to show that North Vietnam held back hundreds of prisoners after Paris. The document is later proved to be in “unreliable,” but protests surrounding it delays lifting of the US veto of IMF funds for Vietnam

May 1993-elections held in Cambodia. Prince Sihanouk wins plurality, fulfills Phase Three of the Bush Roadmap

July 1, 1993 – 19 veterans in Congress call for Clinton to relax economic sanctions against Vietnam

July 2, 1993 – Bill Clinton announces the US will no longer block international financial institutions from lending money to Vietnam

July 1993 – Winston Lord (Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs) heads presidential delegation to Vietnam to continue to work on troublesome aspects of the POW/MIA issues. The delegation also includes the Deputy Secretary of the VA and representatives of several veterans groups

July 1993 – The Defense POW/MIA Office is established as a Pentagon field activity headed by Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for POW/MIA affairs

September 1993 – Sihanouk enthroned as king of Cambodia

September 1993 – Clinton announces that US companies are now allowed to bid on World Bank projects in Vietnam

October 4, 1993 – Deputy Prime Minister Phan Van Khải affirms Vietnam’s commitment to building a new relationship between the US and Vietnam despite what are seen by the Vietnamese as unnecessary delays by the US

November 1993 – Japan drops its fourteen-year-old embargo on Vietnam

January 27, 1994 – Senate votes in favor of lifting embargo on Vietnam in a 62-38 non-binding resolution

February 1994 – Commerce Secretary Ron Brown is cleared of charges that he accepted money from Vietnamese-Americans in help lifting the US embargo

February 3, 1994 – Bill Clinton announces the end of the US trade embargo with Vietnam

February 3, 1994 – Pepsi begins production outside Ho Chi Minh City the same day Clinton makes his announcement

March 1994 – National League of Families representatives visit Vietnam and criticize US government statements regarding Hanoi's efforts to cooperate with POW/MIA issues

March 1994 – State, Justice and Treasury specialists meet with Vietnam to discuss disposition of frozen Vietnamese assets

1994 – US exports to Vietnam rise from \$7 million in 1993 to \$160 million

July 1994 – Winston Lord (Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs) takes reps from VVA, VFW and AL to Vietnam to show them search efforts firsthand

July 1994 – Conservative politburo members demand the 1994 World Cup semifinal is taken off the Vietnamese airwaves after the urban population becomes transfixed by this “global” event

July 1994 – Vietnam is granted entry into ASEAN

August 1994 – Foreign Operations Appropriations Act removed two of the legal roadblocks preventing the US from providing bilateral assistance to Vietnam

January 28, 1995 – The US and Vietnam sign Agreement Concerning the Settlement of Certain Property Claims, holding the SRV responsible for over 200 million dollars in debt to US persons

Early 1995, Vietnam suggests the US merge the US Liaison office (USLO) and Joint Task Force-Full Accounting (JTF-FA) due to costs and degree of difficulty finding remains from outstanding cases; the US rejects this recommendation

February 1995 – Politburo issues Resolution No. 9 confirming Ho Chi Minh's linking of Marxism-Leninism and national independence, but also advocates the ongoing development of a market economy under state oversight

April 1995 – John McCain publicly announces his support for normalization taking place prior to the 1996 election campaign

April 1995 – Đỗ Mười travels to both South Korea and Japan, the first such visit undertaken by the Vietnamese Party Secretary

May 1995 – Senator Robert Smith introduces a resolution on normalization of relations with Vietnam with demands for strict accounting of POW/MIA progress on the part of Vietnam

May 15-17, 1995 – the third presidential delegation since 1993 finds Vietnam is making significant efforts to cooperate in searches for missing U.S. personnel

June 1995 – Vietnamese approach Anne Mills Griffith, expressing their friendship

June 1995 – The “Hoang Minh Chinh Affair” in which two former party members are arrested on charges of threatening the security of the state

June 4, 1995 – former Representative Bill Hendon chains himself to the JTFFA gate twice to force an investigation of an alleged POW/MIA detention site (Stern, 63)

June 15, 1995 – The Veterans of Foreign Wars announces it is no longer opposed to normalizing relations with Vietnam

June 20, 1995 – National Commander of Am Vets announces normalization is a fair way to signal recognition of Hanoi’s cooperation in the POW/MIA issue

July 1995 – Bosnian Serbs murder between 7,000 and 7,500 Muslim men and boys in Srebrenica

July 11, 1995 – Bill Clinton announces normalization of relations with Vietnam in the White House with John McCain and John Kerry at his sides

July 1995 – Vietnam signs a trade agreement with the European Union

July 28, 1995 – Vietnam officially joins ASEAN

August 1995 – Secretary of State Warren Christopher and Foreign Minister Nguyễn Mạnh Cẩm sign paper work to open a US embassy in a Hanoi ceremony

September 1995 – George H.W. Bush and former first lady Barbara Bush visit Vietnam in a good-will trip sponsored by Citibank

December 1995 – a report likely prepared by ideological and security blocks within the Party discusses “the US long-term strategies to undermine Vietnam’s political system”

May 1996 – Douglas (Pete) Peterson becomes the first US ambassador to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam

October 1997 – The US terminates its refugee admission program for Vietnamese refugees



1996 – VIII Party Congress report reconfirms existence of “four dangers” to include a plot of peaceful evolution by non-socialist countries and the danger of straying from Socialism

November 1997 – Congress passes law requiring post offices and some federal buildings to fly the POW/MIA flag several times a year

October 1998 – Vice minister of Defense Trần Hanh visits the United States

1998 - The most notorious leaders of the Khmer Rouge are granted various forms of amnesty

July 13, 2000 –Bilateral Trade Agreement signed between the US and Vietnam

November 2000 – President and Mrs. Clinton visit Vietnam

October 16, 2001 – President George W. Bush signs bilateral trade agreement into law, granting Vietnam temporary most favored nation status

November 10, 2003 – Major General Phạm Văn Trà becomes the first Defense Minister of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam to visit the Pentagon

January 2007 – Vietnam enters the World Trade Organization

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