

HISTORY

Vietnam's lessons for U.S., Iraq

This summer I spent nine days traveling throughout Vietnam. I visited Hue, the setting for the bloody Tet Offensive. I saw the small brick forts or "pillboxes," at Hai Van Pass. I toured the infamous "Hanoi Hilton" prison, where Sen. John McCain — then then Lt. Commander McCain — and other American soldiers were held prisoner and tortured.

I saw the Cu Chi Tunnels, the narrow underground passageways through which Vietcong soldiers secretly maneuvered, enabling them to confound their enemies.

I took the trip for two reasons.

- I needed to get away after work hard on my short-lived campaign for Miami-Dade County mayor.

- I wanted to see for myself a country in which political circumstances just one generation ago so parallel the current situation in Iraq.

So many American men of my generation were forever changed by their experiences in the Vietnam War, to say nothing of those who lost their lives. I have gained an appreciation for America's power, responsibilities and vulnerabilities within the worldwide community that I hope will guide my thinking as an education policymaker.

Thirty years ago, the North Vietnamese bitterly hated and killed Americans. But in 2004, we are welcomed. In fact, a travel agent told me that Vietnam is one of the safest places for Americans to visit. How ironic, when we consider that

Americans have become targets of frustration and scapegoats for everything evil.

It's odd that France — a nation that is now critical of U.S. foreign policy — through its policy of colonization of Indochina, created the ill-fated dynamic that we later inherited. And today, Vietnam, ruled by the powers that so bitterly fought South Vietnam and its former ally, the United States, is delving into free enterprise and commercialism.



PEREZ

Thirty years from now, will terrorist networks atrophy in the face of an increasing acceptance of the religious, political and economic freedom enjoyed by Americans and others around the globe?

Or will America face yet another conflict with a nation still undergoing its transformation?

The parallels between Vietnam and Iraq are too eerie and tragic for us to ignore. We must use them to illustrate for our children the horrors of war. And leaders must learn from these historic lessons as they make the choices that shape the future — not just America's future, but the world's future. It is embarrassing that many young people know more about athletic-shoe brands and video games than the fragile, evolving circumstances that have earned our country its de facto leadership role.

Policies that promote innovative and comprehensive history and economic education are a critical step

in shaping how future generations will learn from our mistakes. Students need opportunities to think for themselves about global ethics. The very minds that today are concerned with soft drinks and action movies will one day face choices with global implications.

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My trip to Vietnam helped me put into better perspective how public officials, from national leaders to school-board members, must create a global vision for our children's future in a world that has become smaller and smarter. Character education, values and ethical discourse become increasingly important for children as they prepare to face a future of radically different points of view.

On its best days, America has been a beacon of morality, optimism, and fairness. Communities, schools and families should foster the best of these ideals. Parents must be role models for educational leadership and civic responsibility.

We should all recognize that American abundance, including our Constitutional rights, are hardly guaranteed. A young and hungry — and often desperate — world is watching.

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