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Vietnam Then + Now

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he bus ride on Sept. 4, 1969, is spectacularly clear in my mind. Earlier that morning about a dozen of us—all draftees—had been inducted into the Army, and we were on our way to Ft. Dix for basic training.

What did you talk about with a stranger on the way to war? In those days, you talked about how you ended up on that bus. All the conversations were about failure to avoid the draft. Couldn’t find a physician to certify an “injury.” Couldn’t get a draft-deferred job. Didn’t have any political connections to get into the National Guard. Failed a course and lost a student deferment.

Not then, nor in any of the time I spent in the Army or in Vietnam, did I meet a single person who had gone to war because he believed in the administration’s policy or because he felt the Viet Cong were a genuine threat to American freedom. Maybe such people existed and simply escaped my acquaintance. In the rare moments when we tried to put a noble face on what we were doing, we spoke of “fighting for our country.” Politicians might say those words with a straight face; the grunts couldn’t.
The Vietnam I saw in 1970 was, of course, a country under siege. Yet even in the darkest moments, the beauty of the place and its people shone through. So often I thought, “If only we could stop burying it in bomb craters, what a country this could be.” I was awfully happy to leave in April of 1971—just in time to get home for the first birthday of the son I’d never seen.

I left Vietnam, but Vietnam never left me. As the years passed, the hope grew that I might find a way to return. In 2011 I applied to be a Fulbright professor in Vietnam. On my application, I wrote:

Forty years ago, I was drafted into a war I did not support and sent to fight an enemy I did not hate. Yet, in the midst of the agonies of war, I came to develop a deep affection for the ingenuity and endurance of the Vietnamese people and for the powerful beauty of their country. Those feelings have never dimmed. I would like to return now, unarmed and unashamed, on a more positive mission: to help the people of Vietnam in every way my skills and experience will permit. I look forward to this, not as a guilt trip, but as the most important opportunity I will ever have to right the balance sheet of my life.

The application succeeded, and in January 2012 my wife (Sarah Vose Mackenzie ’70, also a Fulbright professor) and I flew to Hanoi and began a six-month stay in Vietnam. I was assigned to the Institute of Americas Studies, a Vietnamese government agency whose task was to help the country’s leaders better understand America and its foreign policies.

At the invitation of Colby, I offer here, in words and photographs, a reflection on the powerful ways in which my life has been shaped and enriched by Vietnam and its people.

Cal Mackenzie is the Goldfarb Family Distinguished Professor of American Government.
"The landscape is dotted, nay shot through, with thousands upon thousands of artillery and bomb craters. ... How many thousands of rounds, how many millions of dollars do these craters represent? One wonders what marvels of good could have been done with the huge sums of money that we have spent to make holes in a jungle."

—Letter home, August 23, 1970

★★★

When I was in infantry training and becoming expert with an M-16 and bayonet, I used to look around me and see all the young and innocent faces. I'd think to myself that, while they could teach these people to shoot, they could never teach them to kill. And yet it seems like every day now I cross paths with someone I knew then, and each has some new war story to tell me. ... These people I thought incapable of killing have become rather expert and ingenious at it.

—Letter home, 1971

★★★

I had hoped to be young forever, to live in the brightness of unstinting optimism, to know that things would always work out. But now I'm afraid that I'll leave my youth behind me here. You cannot watch all these young men slowly losing their sanity and not knowing it. You cannot see the same stumbling, inept mistakes made over and over again by fools. You cannot smell the smell and see the dark sights of death without losing a very valuable part of your youth in the process. ... I will come home and I will be older in so many ways, and you will sense that.

—Last letter home, 1971
At 6 in the morning the streets and alleys are full of little markets with everyone out doing the food shopping for the day. There are flowers and vegetables and fruits of every kind, tables covered with pork and chicken, fish swimming in tubs, live chickens and ducks in cages ready for purchase, slaughter, and plucking. The morning comes alive at daylight and vibrates.

– Journal, June 29, 2012
Vietnam: Then and Now

War, like cancer, is an affliction without a cure. It’s never completely gone. But every day here now, in this beautiful country, the black tumor on my soul shrinks a little.

— Journal, April 10, 2012

Vietnam poses many challenges, of course, but so rewarding when the challenges are met. It’s chaotic, noisy, hot, sometimes dangerous, but I felt closer to humanity here, more in touch with the human condition than anywhere I’ve ever been. Vietnam fills up the senses.

— Journal, June 29, 2012
In the evening, the sidewalks are full of people eating and drinking Bia Hoi, playing games and chattering away. Later, there are still plenty of eaters—Vietnamese never stop eating—and ca phe and tea drinkers in all the cafes. The rhythm is the same almost every day, but the beat never stops. I have loved it here.

- Journal, June 29, 2012
41 years have passed and now the circle closes. Here, of all unimaginable places, in Hanoi. What now for me, Vietnam? What now, Vietnam? Indeed. The same question I asked myself in Bien Hoa on February 10, 1970.

—Journal, January 8, 2012