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GREG DAVIS

VIETNAM 15 YEARS LATER

Guilt and recrimination still shroud America's perceptions of the only war it ever lost

By PAULA A. WITTEMAN

Twenty-three years after the fact, Denny McClellan's recurring dream is still vivid. Once again he is 18, back on patrol ten miles northwest of Danang in the company of equally wary, heavily armed grunts of the 2nd Battalion, 7th Marines. His M-16 is loaded for Charlie, and a couple of grenades are within easy reach in his flak jacket. His field pack weighs 40 lbs., and the day is surpassingly hot. The lance corporal his buddies call "Red" is sweating heavily. His squad leader, not much older than McClellan, gives a hand signal, and the patrol moves off the road and down a narrow trail. Just the beginning of another very long day in the Republic of Vietnam. Says McClellan, now a 19-year veteran of the San Francisco police force: "I remember individual days there in perfect sequence like it was yesterday."

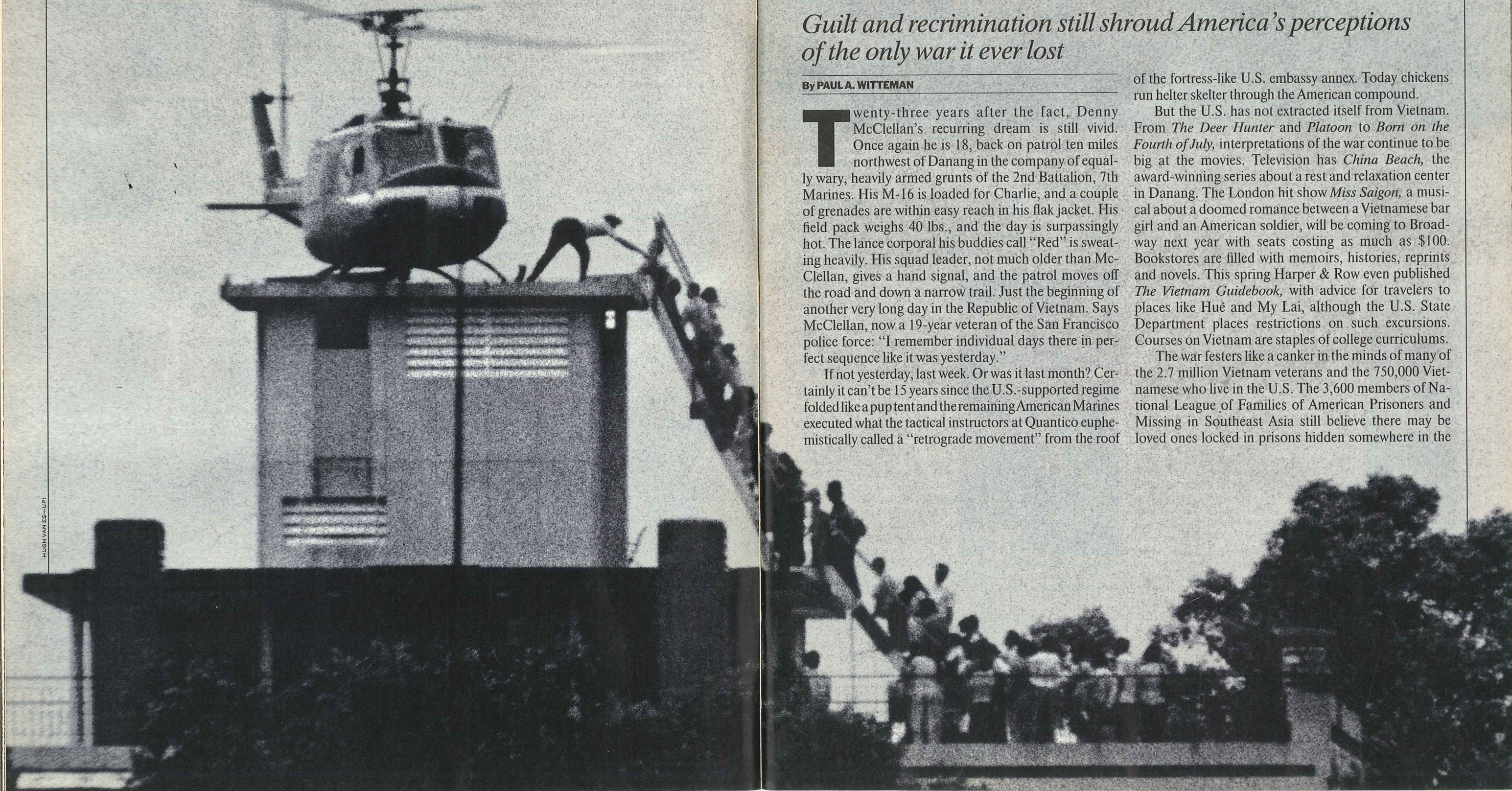
If not yesterday, last week. Or was it last month? Certainly it can't be 15 years since the U.S.-supported regime folded like a pup tent and the remaining American Marines executed what the tactical instructors at Quantico euphemistically called a "retrograde movement" from the roof

of the fortress-like U.S. embassy annex. Today chickens run helter skelter through the American compound.

But the U.S. has not extracted itself from Vietnam. From *The Deer Hunter* and *Platoon* to *Born on the Fourth of July*, interpretations of the war continue to be big at the movies. Television has *China Beach*, the award-winning series about a rest and relaxation center in Danang. The London hit show *Miss Saigon*, a musical about a doomed romance between a Vietnamese bar girl and an American soldier, will be coming to Broadway next year with seats costing as much as \$100. Bookstores are filled with memoirs, histories, reprints and novels. This spring Harper & Row even published *The Vietnam Guidebook*, with advice for travelers to places like Hué and My Lai, although the U.S. State Department places restrictions on such excursions. Courses on Vietnam are staples of college curriculums.

The war festers like a canker in the minds of many of the 2.7 million Vietnam veterans and the 750,000 Vietnamese who live in the U.S. The 3,600 members of National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia still believe there may be loved ones locked in prisons hidden somewhere in the

HUGH VAN ES—UPI





DENNIS BRACK—BLACK STAR

impenetrable Annamese Cordillera. What-might-have-been gnaws at some of the draft dodgers who fled to Canada or into the National Guard. Certainly the war prompted career choices for young men who joined the Peace Corps or enrolled in graduate school to stay out of the Army.

VIETNAM YESTERDAY AND TODAY

Was the U.S. right or wrong to get involved in the Vietnam War?

U.S. PUBLIC	VIETNAM VETS
RIGHT	
29%	58%
WRONG	
57%	32%

Are you proud of the role the U.S. played in Vietnam?

YES	NO
39%	61%
48%	28%

From a telephone poll of 1,000 adult Americans taken for TIME/CNN on April 9 and 10 by Yankelovich Clancy Shulman. Sampling error plus or minus 3%. This poll also questioned 208 veterans at the Vietnam Memorial in Washington on April 7, and 12-14.

For the families of the 58,022 U.S. servicemen and -women who died in Indochina, the war continues as a dull ache, a pain shared by the kin of the millions of Vietnamese killed on both sides. For most other Americans, Vietnam is as much a mystery as it was 25 years ago, when apprehensive Marines in full battle gear first waded onto the beaches near Danang. But the mystery has long been stripped of its innocence and is shrouded instead in guilt and recrimination.

Some of the bafflement arises from a curious inability to come to terms with a failed policy, with America's greatest military defeat. But it is also due to the continuing attitude of the U.S. Government. Fifteen years after U.S. Ambassador Graham Martin slipped away in the predawn darkness of a collapsing Saigon, the U.S. has yet to establish diplomatic relations with the government of Vietnam. Washington continues to act as if Hanoi had sent its troops to invade Virginia instead of down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Since 1975, the U.S. has imposed a trade embargo against Vietnam that has been more effective than the mining of Haiphong harbor ever was. It has helped keep Vietnam's badly managed economy on its knees, which in turn has encouraged a steady flow of refugees to Hong Kong and Malaysia.

Three Administrations in Washington have insisted that Vietnam meet several conditions before diplomatic or commercial relations can return to normal. All Vietnamese troops must be permanently withdrawn from Cambodia and a peaceful settlement must be reached in that ravaged land. The roughly 15,000 Amerasian children (now young adults, like many of the children of the MIAs) must be allowed to leave Vietnam if they wish, and political prisoners freed from re-education camps. Questions about the remaining POW/MIAs should be resolved. So

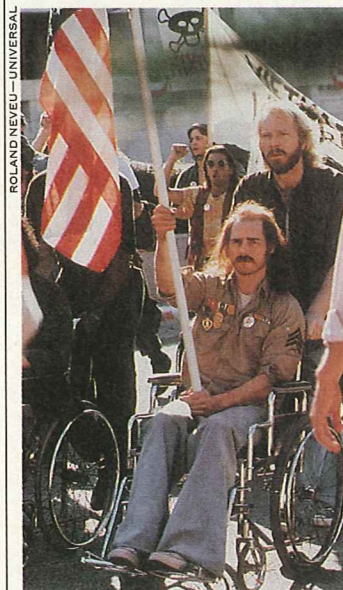
runs the checklist of U.S.-Vietnamese policy, as it has for much of the past decade. Hanoi insists that it has met the conditions. Although progress has been made on all of these issues, Washington is not yet satisfied.

Either way, a sizable number of Americans are saying the time has come for a different course of action. In a poll for TIME/CNN by Yankelovich Clancy Shulman, 48% of those questioned said the U.S. should re-establish relations with Vietnam; 32% are opposed. Vietnam veterans seem to agree: of the 208 vets surveyed for TIME/CNN at the Vietnam memorial, 44% said the U.S. should open an embassy in Hanoi.

"Of course we should establish relations," says Rob Pfeiffer, a high school counselor in Oakland, Me. "We're pretending Vietnam just doesn't exist." An official in the Maine chapter of Veterans for Peace, Pfeiffer says his fellow members support recognition as a means to gain more on-site information about the effects of Agent Orange. "Open it up," says McClellan. "If we established relations with China, why not with Vietnam?" Former antiwar activist Anne Weills, who created a furor in 1968 when she went to Hanoi with a delegation that brought back three American prisoners, comes to the same conclusion from a different perspective. "We owe Vietnam a great debt," says the Berkeley attorney. "Americans have a role to play in the reconstruction of Vietnam because we had such a large role in destroying it."

Weills' view is not widely shared: in the TIME/CNN poll, 80% say the U.S. does not owe Vietnam anything. Nor is the push to establish full diplomatic relations generally embraced by the Vietnamese who escaped in 1975 or have fled in flimsy boats since then. "The U.S. should not normalize until the Vietnamese government guarantees human rights," says Phac X. Nguyen, advertising manager of a Vietnamese-language newspaper in San Jose. "They lowered people to the life of animals."

Antipathy toward the regime in Hanoi is highest in the ranks of



Bafflement shrouded with guilt and recrimination: Tom Cruise in Born on the Fourth of July

The Vietnam memorial in Washington earlier this month. The war continues as a dull ache for the families of the 58,022 American servicemen and -women who died in Indochina

South Vietnamese rangers and paratroopers, many of whom have settled in California. In a speech in San Jose early this month, former President Nguyen Van Thieu, now living in London, suggested that if political changes are not forthcoming in Hanoi, the refugees should be prepared to head home, shoulder weapons and seize control again.

The passion in the Vietnamese exile community is a puzzle to many Americans. That is no surprise to Phuong Dai Nguyen, a sophomore at the University of California, Berkeley, whose family fled Saigon in 1975: "The Americans don't know much about the Vietnamese." Yet the same has been true of the Vietnamese government's inability to fathom the importance to the U.S. of the POW/MIA issue. Fully 62% of those polled by TIME/CNN—and 84% of Vietnam veterans—believe there are still MIAs alive in Vietnam.

"There is no logic to this," says Douglas Pike, a retired State Department analyst who assiduously read accounts of every reported MIA sighting but was never able to come up with verification by a second source. A resident of northern Vietnam, released after 13 years in re-education camps, is equally incredulous. "Americans? There are no Americans here. I never heard of any." The Vietnamese people long ago gave up looking for their own missing. Bodies decompose quickly in the subtropical climate. Although no U.S. official will say so publicly, the widespread conviction is that there are no more live Americans.

Still, the National League of Families issues regular status reports of sightings on a hundred or so of the 2,303 men listed as missing in action or unaccounted for in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. Since a Japanese lieutenant hid on a Philippine island for 30 years after World War II before surfacing, anything is possible.



Dana Delany as the compassionate nurse in China Beach; interpretations of the war are big on the home screen and at the box office

But it is more likely that any Americans still in Vietnam remain there for conjugal reasons and have led retiring lives. Either that or the people sighted were really East Europeans or the now grown Amerasian offspring of former G.I.s.

Because issues surrounding the war are so emotionally charged even now, some people counsel continued caution in dealing with the government of Vietnam. "Any improvement has to be gradual," says Republican Senator John McCain of Arizona, who spent 5½ years in a North Vietnamese prison after his Navy attack bomber was shot down over Hanoi in 1967.

"Below the surface, there is a very strong anti-Vietnamese feeling. When you get down to the V.F.W. halls, the American Legion halls, these people still have the feeling that the U.S. was damaged and humiliated in that conflict." Nonetheless, says McCain, who in the past has favored legislation for reopening ties to Vietnam, "it is in our interest, over time, to have an improvement in relations."

A similar assessment comes from a senior Bush Administration official who follows Vietnam closely. "I don't think having a society that is armed to the teeth and poor to boot is good for the region," the official says. "Our long-term interest is in the peace and stability of the Southeast Asian peninsula." For its part, the Vietnamese government sees the Soviet presence fading in the region and wants renewed American involvement as a counterweight to growing Chinese influence. Two years ago, Hanoi floated a proposal to let the U.S. military reoccupy its former bases in Cam Ranh Bay and Danang. This month, following reports that the Soviet navy was scaling back its forces in Cam Ranh Bay, the Vietnamese repeated the offer. The Vietnamese would benefit from the dollars flowing into their economy from the bases. The U.S. would regain the use of facilities that the Pentagon loudly bemoaned losing and in turn would gain invaluable leverage in the ongoing negotiations with the Philippine government over renewing the leases at Subic Bay and Clark air base. It could be what Pentagon planners call a "win-win" scenario.

Strategy aside, there is a more humane reason for recognition. American involvement in Indochina was more than just an exercise in global strategy. The desire to help people preserve their freedom and improve their lives was an important justification for committing U.S. soldiers to battle. The lingering pain of Vietnam is due, in part, to the realization that the idealism turned sour. For the half-million Vietnam vets suffering from post-traumatic-stress disorder and even for those who have adjusted well, a U.S. return to Vietnam might ameliorate the sense that America left a job unfinished. McClellan puts it this way: "Every time we walked down that road at the beginning of a patrol, we turned off. I've always wondered what was around the next bend. I want to go back before I get too old, and walk around that bend to see what's there. Then maybe I'll be able to put Vietnam to rest." —With reporting by Michael Duffy/Washington



A scene from the hit London play Miss Saigon, which is headed for Broadway next year

Should the U.S. re-establish diplomatic relations with Vietnam?

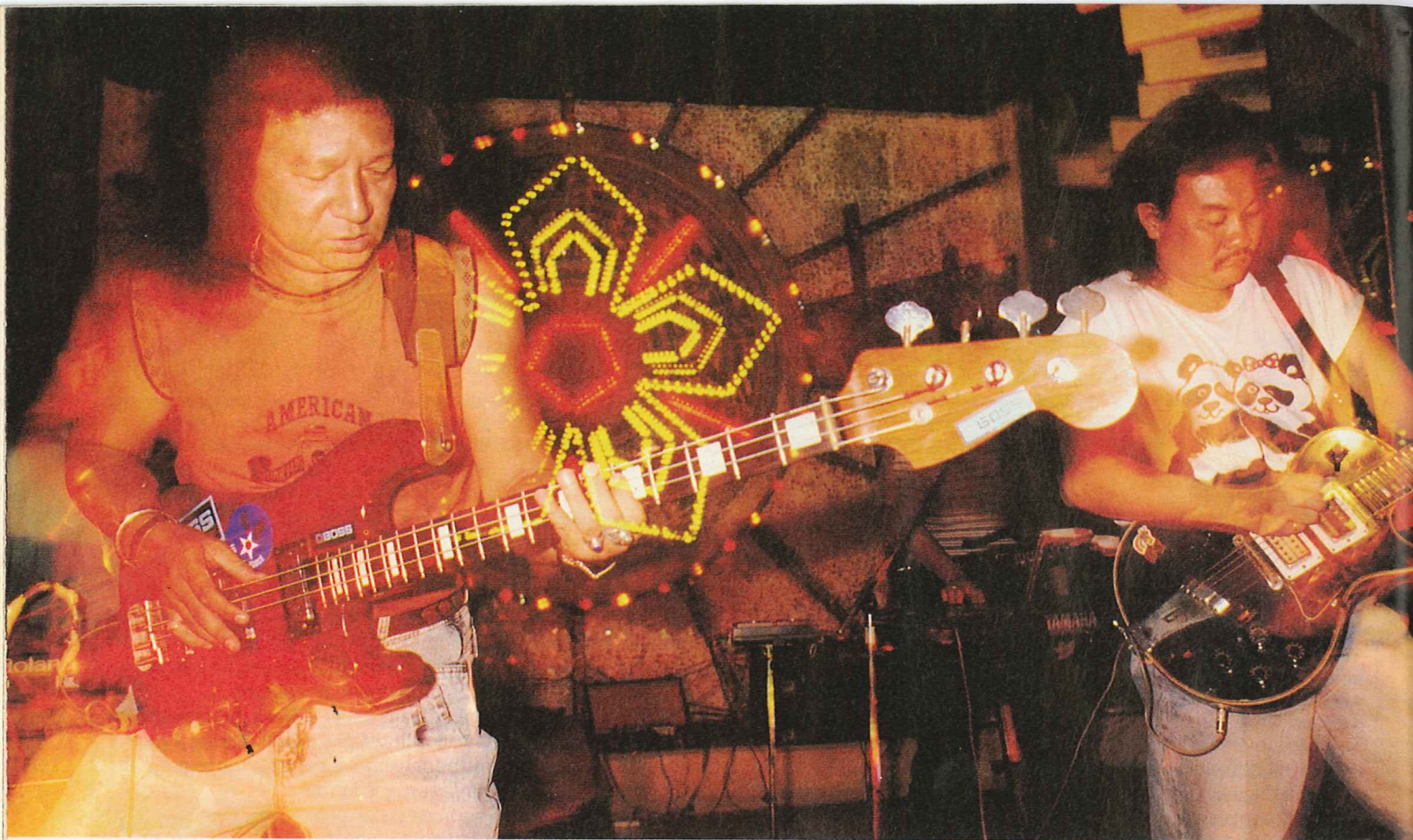
U.S. PUBLIC	VIETNAM VETS
YES	
48%	44%
NO	
32%	42%

Should the U.S. admit more Vietnamese boat people?

YES	NO
35%	51%
55%	31%

Do you believe that any American MIA's are still alive in Vietnam?

YES	NO
62%	84%
23%	11%



SAIGON A-GO-GO Rocking 'n' rolling at the spruced-up Majestic Hotel in Ho Chi Minh City

VIETNAM

A War on Poverty

Finally at peace, Vietnam is struggling to open up its economy and close the gap between the backward North and bustling South

By **WILLIAM STEWART** HANOI

The scene is far more grim than anything portrayed in the decrepit U.S. veterans hospital in *Born on the Fourth of July*. In a forgotten corner of Ha Bac province, about 40 miles from Hanoi, 200 Vietnamese army veterans, many paralyzed from the waist down, eke out their lives in a primitive government shelter. Tucked away from the nation's gaze, they are among more than 10,000 severely wounded veterans from the four wars Vietnam has fought since 1945. An additional 300,000 disabled soldiers are scattered throughout Vietnam, doing the best they can without the help of the government. In wheelchairs, the ex-soldiers at Ha Bac move quietly among the low-slung buildings, a poignant and disturbing sight.

Like their American counterparts, the patients at Ha Bac are both proud and reticent, resigned to their wounds, sometimes angry, often confused. Says Vu Trung Hien, 43, paralyzed since 1968 by a shrapnel wound in the back sustained in Phuoc Long province: "I did my duty. But after I was wounded, I wondered if the war was right or wrong. It cost so much. I still wonder." His roommate, Hoang Dinh Trung, 39, was similarly disabled in 1972 in

Quang Tri province during a B-52 raid. "I was only 18 when I was mobilized," he says. "Looking back to wartime, it was awful. Really awful. I'm afraid of any more wars." When told that many American veterans share his feelings, he says tentatively, almost shyly, "I'd like them to come see us, to see how we live."

The voices of disabled Vietnamese soldiers are only a small echo of the sometimes hopeful but often disenchanted and uncertain views voiced everywhere in Vietnam. Fifteen years after the fighting ended on April 30, 1975, the country remains impoverished and embittered. While it has been at peace since most Vietnamese troops left Cambodia last September, there is great discontent over living conditions and an annual per capita income of less than \$200, far below that of South Vietnam in 1975. Last year 75,000 boat people set sail for the refugee camps of Hong Kong and Southeast Asia, attempting to escape not so much an oppressive regime as grinding poverty. Free-market economic reforms begun in 1986 have sparked a revival in the cities, but they have yet to improve living standards in the countryside, where 80% of Vietnam's 65 million people still live.

The moves toward a market economy have been hobbled by Vietnam's economic and diplomatic isolation. Hanoi and Washing-



YESTERDAY'S HEROES War casualties live out their days at an isolated government shelter near Hanoi

ton have long disagreed on how to restore relations, and the U.S. strengthened a 1975 trade embargo following Vietnam's 1978 invasion of Cambodia. Other industrial countries, including Japan, are waiting for a U.S. lead before committing themselves to major trade and investment. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union has served notice that it will drastically curtail the aid it has provided in the past, especially fertilizers, structural steel and critical oil supplies.

North and South were formally united in July 1976, but for all practical purposes Vietnam still consists of two countries. According to Nguyen Xuan Oanh, twice acting Prime Minister of South Vietnam and currently an economic adviser to Hanoi, the economic infrastructure in the South remains about 35 years ahead of that in the North, despite great efforts to bridge the gap. The differences are immediately apparent between Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, which is still called Saigon, even by local officials.

Hanoi, with a population of 3 million, has retained its architectural integrity as a once lovely French colonial capital. The city was scarcely damaged by U.S. bombs. But the roads and bridges are dilapidated and marred with potholes, and haphazardly repaired electrical lines have made firetraps of many public buildings. Although Vietnam has designated 1990 the "Year of Tourism," Hanoi hardly boasts a hotel worthy of the name.

Yet there is a liveliness about the city, an authenticity as a national capital that somehow always eluded Saigon. May 19 marks the 100th birthday of Ho Chi Minh, the man who fought the Japanese, the French, the Americans and his own countrymen to win an independent, unified nation. For the past month, Hanoi has played host to thousands of visitors, foreign and Vietnamese alike, as they paid homage to the frail little man with a will of iron. The pilgrims move slowly past Ho's body lying on a glass-enclosed platform in the neo-Stalinist marble mausoleum, stopping only for a short, formal bow.

Outside, Hanoi's narrow tree-lined streets are filled with bicycles and pedicabs, for private cars are a rarity in the city. In the busy market area, customers crowd into a tiny but popular café that serves white coffee with a whipped raw egg to help ward off the pervasive dampness of the rainy season. Around the corner on Hang Gai

Street, shoppers wander past privately owned clothing and novelty shops that are little more than window fronts. Nevertheless, they are the busiest stores in Hanoi. One of them is owned by Dao Thi Huan, 71, a retired government worker. For her, life is much better than it was even five years ago, though she feels that living standards are still low. The long war is a receding memory. "In the past I was angry, but not now," she says. "It's over. I gave up my anger." A few doors away sits Ngo Thanh Binh, 26. A university graduate with a degree in economics, Binh has been unable to find a job. To make ends meet, he works in his parents' shop selling jeans. "It's been very difficult for me to get a job as an economist," he says. "I need to know more English because our country is in an opening, developing stage. We need even more openness."

The budding economic energy has spread even further north. Six thousand people a day cross the Chinese border at Dong Dang. Going into China, they take mostly local foodstuffs; returning, they bring Chinese machine tools and kitchenwares carried on their backs, the heavy packages balanced at either end of a bamboo pole. The goods are modern, but silhouetted against the sky, the endless stream of peasants, workers and merchants is a scene from timeless Asia.

A thousand miles to the south, Ho Chi Minh City basks in the hot sun at the end of the dry season. But the difference is more than a matter of weather. Roads are in better repair, and the streets are clogged with motor-scooter and automobile traffic. New hotels and fresh paint are everywhere as the city asserts its claim to be the home of Vietnam's indomitable entrepreneurial spirit.

Anchored in the Saigon River is the Saigon Floating Hotel, offering single rooms at \$150 a night and a BLT sandwich—"Ho Chi Minh-style"—for \$8.50. It is crowded with Hong Kong, Singaporean and European businessmen. On Dong Khoi Street, the Continental Palace Hotel has undergone a complete renovation. The famous "Continental shelf," once an open-air terrace where American journalists and government officials camped out, is now enclosed and air-conditioned. The Rex, formerly a U.S. Army billet,



SOUTHERN COMFORT The streets and cafés are coming back to life outside the Continental Hotel

Vietnam

has reopened as a luxury hotel, and the Majestic, facing the Saigon River, has been spruced up. The hotels take only hard currency.

In the past year the city has encouraged the opening of "mini-hotels" for Vietnamese visitors. The managers are often enterprising city employees eager to make more money. Says Nguyen Cong Ai, vice chairman of the local People's Committee: "Our private economy is much stronger now. We are learning the lessons of the market. We want to cooperate with foreign cities, to be an open door for Vietnam." Metropolitan Saigon has a population of 3.9 million. The port itself and textile and garment manufacturing are the city's biggest industries.

The revival is attributable almost entirely to Vietnam's own *perestroika*, or *doi moi*, a program of radical economic "renovation" begun in 1986. Says Le Dang Doanh, a senior government economist and a principal architect of the program: "Vietnam does not consider Marxism to be holy dogma. We need to be creative." Only a few years ago, the state accounted for close to half of national income. Now it generates only 28% of national income, Doanh notes, while private enterprise makes up 40% and the remainder is a mixture of public and private ventures. The reforms include the abolition of subsidized prices and the reorganization and separation of commercial banks from government banks. The state has also adopted a favorable foreign-investment law and changed investment policy to assign top priority to food production.

Although all land is owned by the state, a revised contract system between farmers and government cooperatives gives individual farmers control of the land and production for 15 to 30 years. Farmers grow what they want and sell at the market price. Largely as a result, Vietnam has become the world's third biggest rice exporter, after Thailand and the U.S. The turnaround is remarkable, given the near famine conditions that existed in the spring of 1988 in parts of central and northern Vietnam. A further indica-

tion of improved conditions in the North is the sharp reduction in the numbers of boat people arriving in Hong Kong, down from almost 1,800 in March 1989 to 730 in the same month this year.

Meanwhile, the annual inflation rate has been cut from 700% in 1988 to 50%. The goal, says former Prime Minister Oanh, is to bring it down to about 12% to 15% by year's end. This has been done through tough austerity measures, part of a stabilization plan carried out in cooperation with the International Monetary Fund. The dong, Vietnam's currency, has stabilized at a black-market rate of about 5,000 to the dollar, not far from the official rate of 4,500. Still, in the past two years foreigners have invested only \$850 million in Vietnam, most of that in off-shore oil exploration.

Given these problems and challenges, it is not surprising that the Vietnamese leadership has been alarmed by the startling and rapid changes in Eastern Europe. But political reforms were emphatically rejected earlier this month in a closed session of the 8th plenum of Vietnam's Communist Party. While the plenum promised to revitalize the party's frayed relations with the people, it also fired an outspoken liberal member of the Politburo, Tran Xuan Bach. That leaves only one liberal in the 13-member ruling body, Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach.

To make up for losses in Soviet aid, China has reportedly offered to provide Vietnam with \$2 billion in assistance. In return, Beijing is said to have demanded assurances that the Vietnamese will launch no Gorbachev-style political reforms.

Vietnam has seen no major public demonstrations for greater democracy, though there has been a lively debate in some of the state-controlled press and among academicians and trade unions. In part this may be because Hanoi has ruled with a lighter touch than Beijing. Says Tran Phuoc Duong, the American-educated rector of Can Tho University, deep in the Mekong Delta: "Something has happened. There has been a lot of internal relaxation. The pace of change has taken people by surprise."



NORTHERN INDUSTRIOUSNESS Traders returning from China with consumer goods across their backs

Tran Bach Dang, a political adviser to General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh, told a group of foreign reporters that if pluralism were allowed tomorrow, there would be 200 political parties the next day. Notes a senior government official: "Factionalism has been the bane of our national existence. We are still two countries, though I fought to make it one."

The weight of Vietnamese history indicates that the official is right. Nevertheless, there is more to celebrate in Vietnam

than the 100th birthday of Ho Chi Minh. Vietnamese in the North and South alike are beginning to hope their country can transcend its old divisions and enter a new age of prosperity. In Hanoi, Nguyen Van Su, 75, sits in front of his sewing machine in his own little shop. Says he: "I remember when Ho Chi Minh declared independence. We all liked it. Now the government is calling for reform. I like that too. It's the direction the whole world is moving in, isn't it?" ■

"It's Time to Heal the Wounds"

Vietnam's Foreign Minister, Nguyen Co Thach, spoke in Hanoi with TIME's Washington bureau chief, Stanley W. Cloud. Excerpts:

Q. Is anything going on between Vietnam and the U.S. that we don't know about?

A. Up to now, we have met all the requirements of the U.S. [on MIAs, family reunification, human-rights abuses in the re-education camps]. But in the State Department there is no change. For example, I am not allowed to go beyond 25 miles of New York City when I am in the U.S. [retired General John] Vessey can come here and go everywhere. American Congressmen

are free to go everywhere in Vietnam.

Q. Does the situation in Cambodia interfere with the normalization of relations between Vietnam and the U.S.?

A. The Cambodian problem serves only as a pretext. The greatest mistake of the U.S. is not the Vietnam War. It is this strategy of using Vietnam as a pawn in the relationship between China and the U.S. It would be much better if the U.S. considered Vietnam in terms of its intrinsic value.



Nguyen Co Thach

Q. What would be the main benefit to the U.S. of normalization?

A. Why can the U.S. have good relations with the Soviet

Union and China and not with small [Communist] countries? This is not good for the image of the U.S. in the Third World.

Normal relations between the U.S. and Vietnam could contribute to peace and cooperation in Southeast Asia and to maintaining the independence of this area vis-à-vis China.

Last but not least, it is time to heal the wounds of war. I don't mention the physical or the mental wounds, but the moral ones. As long as this state of abnormal relations drags on, the moral wounds will bleed. It is time to sit down and talk and play and have fun. Why only hostile attitudes? When I meet the people from the State Department, their faces never smile. It is a pity. We could help you have good health and good morale. ■