

Coming to Grips With Vietnam  
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This week William Cohen went to Vietnam, the first defense secretary to do so since the end of the war. When asked about the coincidence of his visit and the 25th anniversary of the war's end, Mr. Cohen replied that "there is no perfect time" for such a visit. Yet there is little question that the timing of his trip raises delicate issues for America, for Vietnam and for the millions of people affected by the conflict. Despite his unwillingness to admit the awkwardness of the occasion, visits like Mr. Cohen's are important.

For America, this year marks a quarter century since our defeat. Despite all the talk of healing, of mistakes, even of apologies, Vietnam remains deeply ingrained in the American psyche as a gentle reminder of our fallibility. Events such as last year's hanging of a Ho Chi Minh portrait in Orange County, Calif., continue to prick at our national pride.

The Vietnamese government, meanwhile, would like to play up the anniversary to its own advantage. Thus, the commemoration and celebration that started on March 5 will continue past the actual April 30 anniversary of Saigon's fall.

But behind the jubilation lies a subtle humility. For just as surely as Hanoi won the war, it lost the peace. The same postwar period that saw America rise as the dominant world power witnessed the decline of Vietnam into the ranks of the poorest nations. The country has implemented only limited economic reforms, wary of what liberalization could mean to the government's political control.

But this geopolitical analysis, which has dominated recent commentary, ignores the war's primary legacy -- the millions of people whose lives were forever changed by the conflict. The U.S. was not alone in its defeat. Our ally, the Republic of Vietnam, and more broadly the people of Vietnam, also lost. The end of the war marked the beginning of a new life for hundreds of thousands of boat people -- my family among them -- who risked their lives to find freedom elsewhere. Those who remained saw the continuation of war via border conflicts with China and the invasion of Cambodia, severe shortages wrought by economic mismanagement, and the loss of basic freedom and dignity.

So Mr. Cohen's denial that his trip is awkward rings hollow. And yet another high-level delegation -- sponsored by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Foundation and including Sen. Chuck Hagel (R., Neb.) and various business leaders -- plans to visit Vietnam in the middle of commemorative activities. I have agreed to accompany them. Why?

At least for me, the reasons lie in potential unrealized and promise unfulfilled. Fortuitous public compassion made me a U.S. citizen, a rider on the wave of prosperity. But the

people of Vietnam remain the most impoverished in the world. Per capita income there hovers around \$300 a year, less than two shares of Yahoo!

In 1996 I returned to Vietnam for the first time since escaping in 1978. What struck me, aside from the prevalence of foreign business interests, was the degree of entrepreneurial activity among the people. Not a day passed when I was not accosted by a local businessman seeking investments or contacts that would make him a participant in the postembargo economy. There is no question of capitalist desire, and on any street the pace of commercial activity is pitched.

But activity to what end? Fitful efforts at reform have yet to produce the economic and legal infrastructure necessary to enable long-term commitments or sustain investments. In January, *The Economist* magazine bid "Goodnight, Vietnam" when it chronicled this "rags to riches to rags" story.

High-level visits such as those by Mr. Cohen and Sen. Hagel promise a new chapter in this continuing story. They can encourage the signing and full implementation of a bilateral trade agreement between the U.S. and Vietnam that contemplates the systemic reforms necessary for economic development. Sen. Hagel's delegation is also expected to launch initiatives to assist Vietnam's educational and technological development. Among them are a series on the fundamentals of market economics to be broadcast over state television, the donation of computers and printers for youths, and contributions to provide wireless broadband Internet access to some regions. Such visits may help win the hearts and minds of a younger generation of Vietnamese who are less likely to view America as the enemy.

But the benefits of these visits come with a very real danger. The Vietnamese government is in the middle of a propaganda campaign to commemorate its victory of 25 years ago. Wittingly or not, the U.S. delegations may be used in this effort to validate the regime's mistakes and abuses. Mr. Cohen was right to reject suggestions of an apology to Vietnam and to concentrate on moving relations forward. But the tension between working toward a prosperous future and glorifying a regrettable past will not disappear.

At best it can be carefully managed, and for a strict isolationist or a casual apologist the task of handling this tension would be easy. But those who believe in change through engagement must walk a tightrope that ensures our efforts will serve our ultimate goals. Those goals are the same ones that led us to fight in Vietnam and in other arenas throughout to Cold War -- advancing U.S. strategic interests, respect for the rights of man, and the betterment of life for people everywhere.

Henry Kissinger observed that, in post-Cold War diplomacy, paths are made by walking. Kudos to leaders like Messrs. Cohen and Hagel who have the courage to take the walk. But if discretion is the better part of valor, we should all be wary of the political and emotional minefield through which the narrow path traverses.