

## Symbols

The American flag. The Nazi swastika. The Star of David. The Olympic circles. The Statue of Liberty. The Red Cross cross. The Cross. The state flag. The college mascot. Red Xs. Three Xs. Four Xs. The crucifix. The IBM logo. The World Trade Center Towers. Tombstones. Doves. The Smiley face. The UN initials. The American Eagle. The Vietnamese flag.

What comes to your mind when you think of these symbols? Of course, it depends on which symbol you are viewing. Symbols have the power to alter emotions in some people, to change the state of their minds, sometimes their physical countenance. For others, symbols are just abstract signs and have little or no effect on peoples' mental or physical dispositions.

I fit into a category between these two extremes. I am not transfixed by symbols, yet I am not oblivious to their disquieting drawing power. I use the term disquieting, because symbols are employed to influence and manipulate people's minds---surely a disquieting thought to intelligent and discerning humans who like to think they are masters of their own mental machinations.

Most people are aware symbols are tied to a propaganda agenda created by one party to sway another party's views and beliefs. A strict Webster's definition of propaganda implies propaganda may be truthful, partially truthful, or untruthful, *but* that it is used to harm a person, a group, movement, institution, etc.

I view the word in a more neutral light to mean *campaigns of persuasion*. These campaigns may be harmful or beneficial to those who are targeted. Advertising programs are propaganda; so are political campaigns; so are arguments between lovers; so are the bombasts hurled among Christians, Jews, Muslims; on and on. Truth be known, most communications between humans entail some form of propaganda---a campaign to persuade.

Yet what is propaganda to one person is gospel to another.<sup>1</sup> If a person disagrees with the ideas espoused by someone, the ideas are considered to be amiss, perhaps viewed as propaganda. Certainly, the ideas are looked upon with suspicion, perhaps disdain. If one embraces the ideas, they surely must be true. They may even be gospel.

Despite its strict dictionary definition, I do not view the word propaganda in an entirely negative light. I favor campaigns of persuasion to encourage people to stop smoking and cease using habit-forming substances. I am glad to know the effectiveness of propaganda and its associated symbols have been a factor in many other fine causes, such as the promotion of blood donations and safe-sex campaigns.

Nonetheless, I have tried to remain aloof from the arousals evoked by symbols and propaganda. In making this statement, I am not suggesting I am blasé about the matter. For example, the US national flag is a treasured symbol to me, and it is one I value and honor. But I do not choke-up when I see this flag at a ceremony, nor do I shed tears when it is flown at half-mast in honor of a deceased statesperson. I may shed a tear for the dead person, but not for the flag.

The story you are about to read is an ironic narrative. It is an account of the first time I succumbed to the power of the flag as a symbol. The irony is that the incident happened when I came upon the flag of another country and not the Stars and Stripes. Later in the week of this episode, I experienced my second flag-related emote in a reaction to seeing America's flag.

---

<sup>1</sup> In this story, I use the word gospel in the context of Webster's non-religious alternate definition as, "...something regarded as true and implicitly believed."

## A Return to Vietnam

These events took place during the summer of 1995. As a birthday present to my wife, Holly and I were taking a cruise in the Pacific. Starting in Singapore, we made our way north, stopping at Bangkok, Thailand. Our ship then weighed anchor and we headed for the port of Vung Tau, Vietnam, known as Cap St. Jacques during the days of the French occupation. Later, we stopped at two other Vietnam cities, Ho Chi Minh City, and Danang. We then proceeded to Canton, China, and ended our cruise in Hong Kong. Figure 1 provides a view of our voyage.



Figure 1. The cruise.

I wanted Holly to see some of my old haunts. I had been in the places on our cruise (except Vung Tau and Canton) during my Navy tours in the Far East, and later, during my work in the telecommunications industry. Yet I had another motive for taking this trip. I felt an urge to return to Vietnam. I thought visiting and then leaving the country this time might let me put Vietnam in the past. I believe we should not look in the rear-view mirror of life. There is much to see and experience by looking forward. The backward view consumes too much energy.

I had spent time in this part of the world during the Vietnam conflict, between the years of 1963 to 1966. I made courier runs from my ship into Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City), and participated in Marine landings and raids in Hue, Chu Lai, Phu Bai, Danang, as well as other places.

When I mentioned our vacation cruise to my friends, some of them told me I needed the trip for a catharsis. I concluded my friends had confused me with some veterans whose experience in Vietnam led them to a life of angst. I had not experienced any prolonged mental anguish during or after my assignments in Vietnam.

Unlike many vets, during my Vietnam duties I was rarely in danger. As a US Navy Officer, my ship was safe from enemy fire. The only times I might have been in harm's way occurred during several amphibious raids on Viet Cong beach encampments and boat trips on rivers and tributaries around Hue. But during those days, the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese were avoiding direct confrontation with US raids and boat patrols. Later, things changed.

I carried feelings of remorse and regret about Vietnam, as did almost anyone who was associated with the war. I felt no guilt about my participation in the conflict. I was called to duty and I answered the call. Nor did I harbor resentment toward the war protestors----just deep-seated animosity toward draft dodgers and those celebrities who made cruel remarks about the fighting forces.

But not comments about the war itself. I believe the right to protest wars is vital to a democratic republic---and war protests certainly crystallize differing views. The reasons for my remorse and regret were the manner in which the war came to an end, the debilitating social effects the war had on our society, and the horrible consequences it had on North and South Vietnam.

I had another motive for making this journey. It was curiosity. I wanted to know how Vietnam was faring and I wanted to learn about the country once again for myself, not read about it in a magazine or a newspaper. I wanted see if the Vietnamese people I met thirty years ago were as tough and resourceful now as they were then.

## **The Flag**

On an early summer morning, before the sun had made its appearance in the east, our cruise ship made its way into the Vung Tau harbor. Since departing from Singapore, I had established a routine of arising early and going for a jog. Our ship had no exercise facility so I took advantage of the early morning to get in an early run on a vacant deck. After the jog, I walked to another deck, just above the captain's bridge, to check our sailing progress and to take in the sights.

We were cruising on a relatively small (and old) Royal Caribbean Lines ship. As a sign of its age, the ship had beautiful wood inlays in its decks, ladders, and railings. An upper deck overlooked the captain's bridge (this feature is not available on new cruise ships), and I spent several hours watching the ship's captain and the harbor pilots navigate the ship into and out of tight anchorages and docks. I became such a regular observer of the captain's performance that he stopped me in a hallway one day and jokingly asked if I were from the ship's headquarters, sent to Asia to check out his skills. He was a fine fellow and during this cruise, he invited Holly and me to dine with him at the captain's table.

Anyway, as I walked onto this upper deck and made my way forward, I could make out the distant lights on the Vung Tau shore. I looked forward to debarking and learning about this famous Vietnamese enclave.

The ship's crew had turned on several lights silhouetting the ship's superstructure, as they did each time they brought the ship into or out of a port. I took-in the sights of the approaching shore and looked around my immediate surroundings; basking in the satisfaction of a good run; anticipating a day of adventure and discovery.

During this relaxed, languid perusal of my distant and immediate surroundings I glanced up to the mast where Royal Caribbean displayed a variety of flags, such as the ship's country of registration, and the territorial waters in which the ship is sailing. On this mast flew the North Vietnam flag---now the flag for all of Vietnam: A red flag with one large yellow star in its

center, as seen in Figure 2. The diffused ship lights on the flag, as it waved in the breeze, gave it an almost surreal image, especially in view of my past experiences. The flag had been the symbol of an enemy I had been indoctrinated to hate.



**Figure 2. Vietnam flag.**

My immediate reaction was visceral. I made a gasp, surprised to see this flag a few feet above my head. For the next few seconds, I too experienced the profound feelings that can be created by a symbol. My reaction after the initial encounter was one of despondency. For reasons I did not understand, I became depressed. I continued to look at the Vietnamese flag with a sense of surprise and disbelief.

Why had this wave of dejection come over me? I still do not know the answer to this question. Perhaps it was the shock of seeing the flag of an old enemy so near me---a flag I had not seen for thirty years. Perhaps it was the recollection of my tour in Vietnam and eastern Asia. Or maybe it was the remembrance of the sadness the war brought to my family, me, and just about everyone I know who was associated with the Vietnam conflict.

I took a while to regain my composure. After re-establishing my emotional equilibrium, I then asked myself, *why in the hell is the Vietnamese flag flying from the ship on which I am embarked---a ship stuffed full of Americans and Vietnam veterans?* Of course, the answer was self-evident. Despite my initial obtuseness, I answered my own question, *Because the ship is in Vietnam waters. Vietnam is a nation. We lost the war. Get over it.*

I was okay after my initial gut reaction. But I learned a lot about symbols that day. I thought I was immune to their disquieting influence. Not so. I discovered I was subject to their power.

### **Cu Chi Tunnels**

For the next three days, we stayed in Vietnam waters, cruising up the coast to Ho Chi Minh City and later Danang. The Vietnamese flag stayed on a mast of the ship during this time, and while I was aware of its presence, it no longer evoked a strong, emotional reaction in me. Nonetheless, I admit I still cannot look at this flag with complete dispassion. Such is the influence of a symbol.

While our ship was anchored off Ho Chi Minh City, my wife and I decided to take a tour of the Cu Chi tunnels. We had thought of taking a trip into the former Saigon to visit some of my old hang-outs, but with our limited time, we thought the tunnels would be a better choice. Besides, it was likely I could not locate the places I had known thirty years ago. What is more, the tunnels are a famous part of the Vietnamese landscape and are one of the extraordinary examples of the resourcefulness of the Vietnam soldiers and citizens.

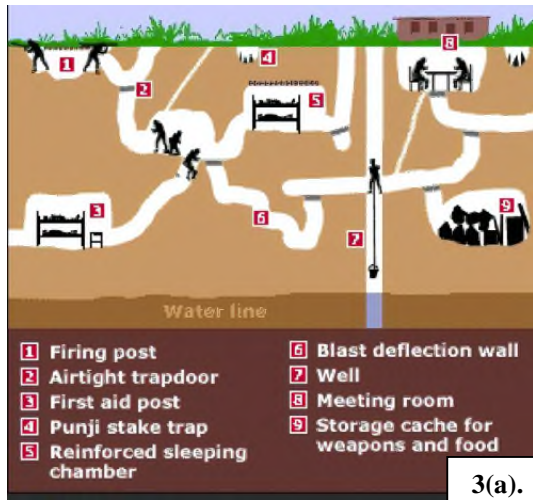
Several people from our ship took the tunnel tour. The group was large enough to warrant a chartered bus. As we lined-up to board the vehicle for the trip to the tunnels, I noticed many of

the tour members were male and about the same age as I. Approximately twenty U.S. Vietnam war veterans made the tour to the tunnels. With wives and other companions, our group numbered around thirty-five.

During our ride to the tunnels, one of our companions had stories to tell us about the Cu Chi area. In the early 1970s, he was a member of a tank crew who regularly patrolled the land over the tunnel system. Later, he was astounded to learn his tank's daily patrols took him *over* tens of miles of tunnels and hundreds of Viet Cong soldiers! Another man in our tour was a member of a B-52 crew. At the tunnel complex, he pointed out several large craters created by bombs dropped from a B-52. He offered the possibility that the craters we were viewing might have been dropped by his airplane. We suggested he not bring up this possibility to the tour guides---some were Cu Chi tunnel war veterans.

Our Cu Chi tour group effused a strange aura. For the entire trip, first to the tunnels, then through the tunnels, the visit to the tunnel museum, and the return to the ship, a collective sense of remorseful yet accepting *déjà vu* permeated our mannerisms, behavior, and conversations. This collective mood was oppressively pervasive. It seemed almost visible.

A word about the Cu Chi tunnels. Some of the tunnels were dug as early as the late 1940s during the French battles with the Vietnamese Communists and were expanded during the Vietnam conflict. Other tunnel systems are scattered throughout Vietnam. The Cu Chi system contains over 120 miles of tunnels, and during the war, supported a population of about 18,000 people. The tunnels connect a fantastic labyrinth of underground caves, consisting of several levels of sleeping rooms, kitchens, hospitals, arms caches--- everything needed for an underground fortress, as shown in Figures 3(a) and 3(b).<sup>2</sup>



3(a).



3(b).

Figure 3(a): The underground system.  
Figure 3(b): Example of the rooms.

Many traps had been installed containing punji sticks or deep holes. Loop back tunnels were prominent, offering escape routes to the caves' inhabitants. The tunnels were small and I had to bend down as I walked through them. I exited the tunnels with my clothes covered in dust. Holly, smaller than I, emerged dirt-free.

After paying our admission for the tour, we were directed into a room on the first level of one of the tunnels. Previously a kitchen, similar to the picture in Figure 3(b), it had been converted into a tourist briefing room. We filed into the small dug-out and sat down on benches. Several exhibits had been installed in front of us. The most prominent was a model of a section

<sup>2</sup> Courtesy of Bing.com. I took photos of these scenes but their quality does not match those of the Bing pictures.

of a tunnel, cut across to show a side view of the levels--- like an ant colony exhibit, similar to Figure 3(a), but unaccompanied with the legend and color images. After we were seated, a woman came to the front of the room and began a lecture on the Cu Chi tunnels.

During the drive to the tunnels and after bantering with our companions, I sensed our group had a mood of quiet resignation about the Vietnam War. But during the moderator's talk, their frame of mind changed from resignation to resentment. I glanced occasionally at my companions---most were sitting with clenched teeth, red faces, and (probably) taut buttocks. So was I. The lecture was an abrasive, insulting, propagandistic diatribe against Americans.

But propaganda to whom? To the audience, the lecture was propaganda. To the moderator and the other Vietnamese in the room, the lecture contained authoritative, truthful, and trustworthy facts. We Americans were listening to propaganda. The Vietnamese were listening to gospel.

How one stands on an issue, how one views it, depends on where one sits. Corporate bosses, sitting behind their desks, have a different view of their business than the employees who sit in front of these desks. Likewise, war adversaries view their causes in the light of their philosophies and self-interests, and of course, the side on which they are fighting. The Americans' views during the war were from the perspective of saving South Vietnam from the communists and preventing Southeast Asia from falling to the Soviets and/or the Chinese. The Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese had different views: Liberating part of their country from the imperialist powers' creation of a divided Vietnam. The separation of Vietnam into two separate political entities was at odds with centuries of cultural conflicts. But of more importance, the separation was at odds with centuries of cultural assimilations.<sup>3</sup>

The speaker made a statement which I will never forget: *The expulsion of the colonial authorities was a moral imperative for the Vietnamese people.* Female or not, that woman had balls to make that statement to a roomful of former enemies.

There we sat, listening to her harangue, trying to focus on our belief that America had embarked on this war to save Vietnam from godless communism.

The moderator spoke of other views on the war. She stated the Americans were criminals because of our aggression, the B-52 bombs, and the use of Agent Orange on non-combatants. She failed to mention the Viet Cong insurrection, the North Vietnamese invasion, and their murder of hundreds of unarmed civilians; several hundred in the Hue massacre alone. Her diatribe was propaganda, but what made her harangue astounding was the fact it was being delivered to twenty men whom she flat-out stated were war criminals.

I was surprised none of us walked out of the dug-out and returned to the bus. But no one moved. We sat through the lecture, showing remarkable restraint. But what were we to do? We were in the country of Vietnam, surrounded by its citizens. We were in their tunnels, in their lecture, and in their show. No one forced us to come to the Cu Chi tunnels.

And what should we have expected the lecturer to say, other than what she said? As I suggested earlier, where one stands depends on where one sits. I had seen TV programs about equally accusatory and vindictive propaganda about North Vietnamese war crimes.

Thankfully, the lecture did not last long. Shortly, we left the briefing room and started the tour through the tunnels. The tour was a fascinating trip. For the story I am telling you now, it

---

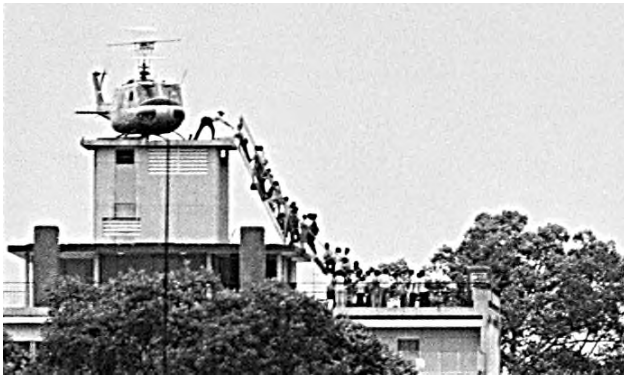
<sup>3</sup> The precedent for the West creating the political entities of North Vietnam and South Vietnam is cited by some historians as being based on the history of various warlords of Vietnam establishing their fiefdoms in the north and south regions of what became modern-day Vietnam.

is instructive to note our encounters with Vietnamese citizens in the tunnels were pleasant and civil. We were treated with kindness and consideration.

Not so with the military personnel. The soldiers in the tunnels, some young, and some old, were unfriendly---cold. Our tour guide told us many of the soldiers had served during the war.

If so, what were we supposed to expect from these soldiers, Glad Handers? Candy Stripers? We practically destroyed their country, killing thousands of people along the way. For the South Vietnamese, we abandoned thousands of our loyal comrades and friends to the fate of North Vietnamese revenge.

War is war. People die. Persons are maimed. Societies are destroyed. Economies are



**Figure 4. Symbol of defeat.**

ruined. Families are ravaged. These facts are the parcels of war. But notwithstanding these tragedies, our conduct of the Vietnam conflict was catastrophic. I shall never forget the images of our retreat from Vietnam, leaving our comrades pounding on our embassy gates, frantically climbing a helicopter ladder toward physical escape in its cockpit. Begging for a window to their freedom, perhaps their very lives. A powerful symbol, one of pathetic, sad irony, is captured in this photo (Figure 4).

I had carried with me on this cruise a packet of photographs taken while I was in Vietnam. When I returned to the ship, I went to my room, opened the packet of pictures, and looked at them once again. One picture shows an enlisted man and me sitting at the back of a boat, depicted in Figure 5. The boat was the captain's gig, and I was the officer in charge of its care. My crew and I had taken the boat for a short spin up a river near Hue, checking out some repairs the crew had made to the engine. We were armed with carbines and pistols, but not expecting any trouble, several of us stripped-down to bathing suits for a short swim, while the others stood guard.

I had looked at this picture scores of times, but for the first time, I noticed the Stars and Stripes was waving behind the two of us, on a short mast at the stern of the gig. Perhaps it was the result of an emotional day, or the buildup of the past three days, but as I looked at the flag in the picture, I lost my composure.



**Figure 5. The flag.**

I do not know why this specific viewing of the picture evoked such strong emotions. Perhaps it was because of the sense of failure so many veterans carry about this war. Perhaps it was the realization we abandoned many of our allies to the fate of death or years of misery in a communist re-education camp. Who knows? Maybe I will write Dear Abby and ask for a clue. But as I said, I discovered my emotions were not immune to symbols.

For the catharsis? I guess I had one in my stateroom the afternoon after I visited the Cu Chi tunnels. But I am certain of one thing: Vietnam is in the rearview mirror, and I am not looking back (Looks like a good title for a Country song; just change the “am not” to “ain’t” and I might have a hit).

### **Watching the 1975 Debacle**

As they say, the Vietnam War or Vietnam Conflict (called the American War by the Vietnamese) is history now. My son knows I served in Vietnam, but he knows little about the war and why we were there; how we lost the physical war, but won the economic war. One of my more curious nephews once asked me about the war in a general way, and I held his attention for a few milliseconds. Most friends and relatives are not interested in my stories of Vietnam.

Perhaps their distant, removed view of the Vietnam War is best, but it is my hope we do not forget this war, especially the catastrophic way in which our leaders conducted it, and the fact that our initial commitment to South Vietnam was a mixture of altruism and cold war xenophobia. Nothing as complex as Vietnam is black and white. It is many shades of gray.

A few years ago, I composed a ditty about some of the times while I was in Vietnam, back when we were landing Marines on the Vietnamese coasts and generally kicking ass---in the mid-1960s. I did not have a chance to finish my song and it remained as you read it below for many years. When I penned these lyrics, I titled the song, *Vietnam Boogie*. As you read it, you will realize why the title of songwriter is not in my resume.

To help in getting into the spirit of the song, try to visualize a rapper beat. I thought the tempo to accompany it might be on the order of folk music when I wrote it in 1966, but I think the verses go better with rap. If you have not heard of the names in the verses, they are Vietnamese cities, battle sites, and harbor inlets.

### ***The Vietnam Boogie*<sup>4</sup>**

*Danang, Chu Lai, Phu Bai, Hue!  
Take a city with each day.*

*Capture Quang Nga, that's our duty,  
while we dance the Vietnam Boogie.*

*Hai Phong, Hanoi, Khe Sanh, too!  
They'll be ours when we get through.*

As I said, I did not finish the song. For one reason, I lost interest. For another, I had no idea what verse should constitute an appropriate ending. But as the US efforts in Vietnam

---

<sup>4</sup> This doggerel is also in *The Cepee Dialogues*, IEI Press, 2900 N Government Way, #334, Coeur d'Alene ID, 83814.



reached its end, I remembered this old song. I pulled it out of a box of my navy stuff, and as I watched the 1975 debacle and the events of the following years, I added the verses below.

*During these times of guns and smoke,  
how about a fun time stoke?  
Dancing! Prancing! Tuti Fruiti!  
While our troops do the Vietnam Boogie.*

*Hey! Where did all those Vietcong go,  
while we watched the Bob Hope show?  
They can't do our boggie dance,  
but look-out soldier, they kicked-ass France!*

*Sooooo...*

*Hello, Saigon,  
Du-wa-ditty.  
Well, wha'da you know?  
You're Ho Chi Min City!*

*So long Saigon, your name's sunset.  
Lowered by the tune of a Vietnam Tet.*

*Danang, Chu Lai, Phu Bai, Hue!  
Lose a city with each day.  
Goodbye Vietnam, you're now broke!  
We'll see you later with our Macs and Cokes.\**

\*America is now Vietnam's number one trading partner