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Vietnamese See Parallels Between Situation There, U.S.-led Iraq War

by **Ben Stocking**

HANOI, Vietnam - The Vietnamese people have some friendly advice for the United States: Don't make the same mistake twice. Get out of Iraq before it's too late.

As a divided America debates whether the U.S.-led Iraq war is "Bush's Vietnam," opinion in Vietnam is united: What the Vietnamese call the "American War" was a misguided adventure, and so is the war in Iraq.

In two dozen interviews, Vietnamese from across the country noted some key differences between the two conflicts, such as the lack of a unified Iraqi opposition.

But nearly all said there was a common theme: imperialist wars of aggression in which a rich, powerful country meddles in the affairs of a smaller, weaker foe whose culture it doesn't understand. The result, they say, could be another quagmire.

"It seems like the United States is going to be stuck in Iraq, just like they got stuck in Vietnam years ago," said Col. Tran Nhung, who writes for Quan Doi Nhan Dan, Vietnam's military daily. "No country in the world will accept a foreign invasion - this is a fundamental truth."

Nhung and others said the war was an unacceptable violation of Iraqi sovereignty.

"Iraqis need peace and freedom," Nhung said, "but they need to build it themselves."

Most Vietnamese were pleased when former President Clinton normalized relations between the two former foes in 1995, and they relish ever closer U.S.-Vietnam ties. So their criticism was offered in a friendly way.

Many people expressed sympathy for the victims of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, but they said the war in Iraq is unlikely to deter future acts of terrorism.

Their skepticism about the war is fueled in part by the fact that no evidence has been found to support the central claims that President Bush used to justify the conflict, said Nguyen Quoc Huy, 53, a college professor in the southern province of Long An.

"They have found no evidence of weapons of mass destruction," Huy said. "They have found no evidence of a link between Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden."

Others were more scathing. Nhu Y, 50, became visibly upset as she discussed the war from her sidewalk perch on a quiet Hanoi street. She dismissed Bush's justifications for the invasion as "a total fabrication."

"I don't know anyone who supports this war," she said. "Anyone who does must be on the CIA payroll."

It's difficult, but not impossible, to find Vietnamese who support the American invasion.

"Saddam Hussein was a dictator," said Pham Duc Phuong, 35, who works for a private business in Hanoi. "He didn't care about the lives of most Iraqis. Because of him, Iraq was cut off from the outside world. He lived in luxurious palaces, but his people lived in poverty."

Inevitably, Vietnamese view Iraq through the prism of their own experiences. And 75-year-old Mai Van Thuan's experience under French colonialism makes him deeply suspicious of foreign intervention of any kind.

Sixty years later, he still has vivid memories of his father's French employers slapping him across the face. Thuan worked with his father for a telephone company, installing phone lines. He remembers a daily barrage of insults. "They called me a monkey. They called me a pig."

He doesn't believe American promises about building democracy in Iraq or saving Iraqis from a brutal tyrant.

"The invaders always say nice things when they arrive," said Thuan. "They always have nice, elegant words."

Other Vietnamese voiced similar opinions.

"Everyone in the world can see that the United States went to Iraq for oil," said Hoang Van Thinh, a 27-year-old Hanoi resident. "And they had a political motive as well: to expand their influence in the Middle East."

When Bush vowed last week to send more troops if needed, his words reminded

many here of the American troop escalation in Vietnam.

"Surely this war will sow protests and divisions among the American people," said Tinh, recalling American protests against the Vietnam War.

Vietnamese see one major difference between their war and the one in Iraq: Four decades ago the Vietnamese were far more united and prepared to fight than the Iraqi people are today. They rallied behind Ho Chi Minh, the communist leader who represented Vietnam's strong nationalist spirit.

By contrast, Iraqi insurgents are leaderless, and the country is riven by hostile religious factions.

But the longer the United States occupies the country, said Nguyen Thi Han, an elementary school teacher from Long An, the faster Iraqis will put aside their differences.

"They need to learn from us," said Han. "Vietnam is a united country, and that strength was there when we defeated the United States. If the Iraqi people stand up and fight, surely they will win."

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