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## Opinion: Vietnamese fondness for McCain belies his record

By Andrew Lam  
Special to the Mercury News  
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Hanoi, the headquarters of the Communist party, and Little Saigon, Orange County, the stronghold of anti communism abroad, have never seen eye-to-eye on any modern political figures or issues. Until now. Both sides have suddenly found common ground in one man this election season: John McCain.

The National Asian American Survey found that among Asian groups, Vietnamese are, by far, the most conservative: two out of three said they would vote for McCain. Many believe he'll support their causes: Religious and political freedom for Vietnam, and ultimately the eradication of the Communist party.

### Wishful thinking

They shouldn't hold their breath. It is wishful thinking, and worse, politically naive. McCain, despite his having been jailed in a communist prison, has been palling around with the Hanoi regime since the early '90s. With help of fellow Vietnam vet Sen. John Kerry, McCain was instrumental in lifting the U.S. embargo on Vietnam and the push for normalization with the country under President Clinton.

In 2004 the two Johns collaborated to block the Vietnam Human Rights Act, HR-2833, in the Senate, though it passed 410-1 in the House. The bill, had it become law, would have tied U.S. humanitarian aid to Vietnam's human rights records. For his efforts, Kerry, who fought to defend South Vietnam from communism, became a hated man in Little Saigon, and they showed it in the 2004 election by voting

overwhelmingly for Bush.

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Why do so many Vietnamese-Americans consistently vote Republican? Party loyalty. President Gerald Ford, a Republican, at the end of the Vietnam War,

championed Vietnamese refugees' causes and helped many settle in the U.S. Vietnamese refugees subsequently found strength and inspiration in Ronald Reagan, who stood steadfast against communism during the Cold War and who made boat people into political symbols of the horror of communism. Many credited Reagan for bringing down the iron curtain. Their loyalty remains strong even if the current Republican president hasn't measured up to the old Gipper.

George W. Bush, in fact, went the other way. In an interview with Bill O'Reilly on Fox TV in 2004, he agreed with his host's premise that the South Vietnamese didn't fight for their freedom and therefore didn't deserve it, whereas Iraqis, he said, were willing to do so. Never mind that 250,000 South Vietnam soldiers died fighting in that war compared with 58,000 Americans. To add salt to open wounds, in 2006 Bush took Vietnam off the United States' "country of particular concern" list even when dissidents continued to be arrested.

### The past record

Will a McCain presidency force the issues of democracy and freedom of religion in Vietnam? Judging from his past record, the answer is no. After all, thanks to McCain and Kerry's joint efforts, Vietnam is now enjoying unprecedented economic growth, and the communist regime has found legitimacy on the world stage, including entrance to the World Trade Organization and a seat on the U.N. Security Council.

In a Newsweek article recently, the retired prison director of the famous Hanoi Hilton, where McCain was jailed, claimed him as a friend. "He had a very determined character, held strongly conservative ideas and was very loyal to the military and government of his country," Duyet Tran said. "If I were an American, I'd vote for McCain."

Vietnamese-Americans, many of whom were jailed by the likes of Duyet, feel exactly the same way and will vote accordingly. If they still hate Duyet, they certainly share his enthusiasms for McCain.

Politics, indeed, make the strangest bedfellows. But in a world of permanent interests, persistent loyalty for the South Vietnamese hasn't paid off, neither on the battlefield of Vietnam nor in the American political theater.

"Andrew Lam is an editor at New America Media and the author of "Perfume Dreams: Reflections on the Vietnamese Diaspora." He wrote this article for the Mercury News.

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