



Why Little Saigon and Hanoi Found Common Ground in John McCain

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Editor's Note: As the U.S. Presidential Election draws near, both Hanoi and Little Saigon have suddenly found common ground and enthusiasm in one man: Sen. John McCain. Andrew Lam is an editor at New America Media. Lam is the author of [Perfume Dreams: Reflections on the Vietnamese Diaspora](#).

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SAN FRANCISCO - If Ho Chi Minh, the father of Vietnamese communism, is idolized in Hanoi and hated in Little Saigon, Orange County, it is to be expected. Hanoi, the stronghold of the Vietnamese Communist Party, and Little Saigon, formed by those it forced into exile, have never seen eye to eye on any modern political figure or issue.

That is, until now. As the U.S. presidential election date draws near, both sides have suddenly found common ground and enthusiasm in one man: Sen. John McCain.

The 2008 National Asian American [Survey](#) recently found that among Asian groups, Vietnamese Americans are by far the most conservative: two out of three said they would vote for McCain.

The Los Angeles Times recently published [an article](#) exploring why, but its sub-headline seems to say it all: "Vietnamese voters -- many of whom were tortured in North Vietnamese prisons like McCain -- say they identify with the Arizona senator and believe he'll support their causes." And what are those causes? Religious freedom and a multi-party system for Vietnam, and ultimately the eradication of the Communist Party.



The trouble is, those who believe that McCain is on their side shouldn't hold their breath. It is at best wishful thinking and at worst politically naive. McCain, despite his past of being jailed in a communist prison, has been palling around with the Hanoi regime since the early 1990s. With the help of fellow Vietnam vet Sen. John Kerry, he was instrumental in efforts to lift the U.S. embargo on Vietnam, then followed up with normalization with the country under Bill Clinton, and a push for more beneficial trade pacts under George W. Bush.

McCain Meets PM Pham Van Khai



As for democracy and freedom in Vietnam? In 2001 and 2004 the two Johns collaborated to block the Vietnam Human Rights Act in the Senate, though in 2004 it passed 410-to-1 in the House. The bill, had it become law, would have tied U.S. humanitarian aid to Vietnam's human rights record. For his efforts, John 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, who managed to avoid the Vietnam War by serving in the National Guard. Oddly enough, John McCain remained their hero.

But 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 United States. Vietnamese refugees to the United States 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. That party affiliation and loyalty remains strong even if the current Republican president didn't measure up to the old Gipper.

George W. Bush, in fact, went the other way. While Vietnamese Americans rallied to vote for him in 2004, he went on Fox TV on Sept. 27, 2004 and maligned South Vietnam while trying to beef up support for the war in Iraq. In [an interview](#) with Bill O'Reilly, 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.

[O'REILLY: The South Vietnamese didn't fight for their freedom, which is why they don't have it today.]



BUSH: Yes.

O'REILLY: Do you think the Iraqis are going to fight for their freedom?

BUSH: Absolutely.

O'REILLY: You do?]

In effect, Bush and O'Reilly disparaged the United States' former allies, never mind that 250,000 South Vietnam soldiers died fighting in that war compared to 58,000 Americans. To add salt to the wound, Bush went to Hanoi two years later in 2006 for the APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) Summit and promptly took Vietnam off the United States' "country of particular concern" list, even when dissidents there continued to be arrested, and afterwards human rights groups clamored for Vietnam to be [put back](#) on the list.

Bush at APEC Summit, Hanoi

Now, the majority of Vietnamese Americans are banking on John McCain. 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 has enjoyed unprecedented economic growth in the last eight years, and the communist regime has managed to legitimize its position on the world stage – entrance to the World Trade Organization, a seat on UN Security Council.



While his former jailers denied ever having tortured the old flyboy while he was a prisoner during the war, many admit fondness for McCain and consider him an adopted son. In a [Newsweek article](#) with this headline: "Why Vietnam Loves McCain -- They jailed him for five years. Now they want him in the White House," the retired prison director Tran Trong Duyet claimed McCain as a friend. Tran told Newsweek: "He had a very determined character, held strongly conservative ideas and was very loyal to the military and government of his country. If I were an American, I'd vote for McCain."

Vietnamese Americans, many of whom were imprisoned by the likes of Tran and his comrades and fled his regime, feel exactly the same way, and will vote accordingly. If they still hate Tran, they certainly share his enthusiasm for McCain. Politics make the strangest bedfellows, but in a world of permanent interests, persistent loyalty for the South Vietnamese has never paid off, neither on the battlefield over three decades ago, nor now on the political stage.

Senator McCain and his Vietnamese rescuer Mai Van On in Hanoi in 1996

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