

The history of warfare should not be entertainment

By Sarah Lipman, Correspondent

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HO CHI MINH CINTY, VIETNAM -- In Vietnam, it is not called the Vietnam War. It's not even called the Vietnamese-American War. It's simply called the "American War."

To learn this before even entering the country three weeks ago, was a startling eye-opener to things I would witness in the various museums and excursions in the weeks to come in the Southeast Asian country that has been rattled by war for well over 100 years.

Throughout my trip through Vietnam, I was most interested in learning the differences between how the war is portrayed in the country where it occurred and how I learned about it throughout my education in the United States.

Before even beginning to be able to comprehend the conflict that millions around the world marched in protest of, I first made it a mission to better understand Vietnamese history, something I knew very little about, aside from the conflict in the 1960s and '70s. Before the Vietnam War, the country was controlled by the French and considerably oppressed and mistreated.

The Hao Lo Prison in Hanoi, before being used during the war against the United States, was built in the late 1800s and was used as a means of punishing and abusing Vietnamese men, women and children during the French-Indochine War.

Finally, as I made my way from the north of the country to the south, I was able to gain a second perspective on the war I learned so much about during school.

The contrast between perspectives is stark. Although in the United States, some of the things the U.S. did are now generally accepted as wrong and relationships have since been slowly repaired, some of the hostility the Vietnamese still feel toward Americans is evident in their museums and memorials.

When entering the [War Remnants Museum](#) (formerly known as the [American War Crimes Museum](#)) in Saigon, it's impossible to escape the images of acts of brutality and accounts of journalists and photographers who witnessed the abuse of Vietnamese villagers firsthand. The museum was not for the faint of heart, showcasing the effects of the deadly chemical Agent Orange (millions of tons of this chemical was dropped throughout Vietnam in a matter of three years) in the years following the war. It shows images of women and children being burned and soldiers decapitated.



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In fewer words, it made the U.S. military in Vietnam look barbaric.

As a journalist, however I understand there are two sides to every story and where there are such severe differences in history, it becomes harder to tell where the middle ground lies. During such an unfavorable war, propaganda was used by both sides to encourage and frighten the respective home fronts. Much of what is displayed in the museums is lingering propaganda, leftover from a war and wounds that are still less than 50 years old.

For as U.S. soldiers may have been wrong to destroy innocent villages and kill civilians, the Vietnamese were equally as wrong to torture and hold captive U.S. soldiers in Hao Lo Prison, including U.S. Sen. [John McCain](#), R-Ariz., after shooting down their planes.

And while at the museums, I could not help but feel a sense of exploitation of the war in Vietnam. While it's true many tourists come to Vietnam to learn and see the remains of a war still so fresh in the memory of baby boomers and veterans, a line needs to be drawn.

The photographs on display were almost too gruesome to be shown to the public in the War Remnants Museum. At the end of the Cu Chi Tunnels tour, tourists have the option of shooting wartime guns -- AK47s, M16s or M60s -- at targets at an actual battlesite outside of the tunnels.

By allowing these types of activities and putting these sites on display, visitors to Vietnam are not learning, but rather, are being entertained by war -- something that should never be considered entertaining.

As I sit on the bus to Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and reflect on the last three educational (and fun!) three weeks in Vietnam, I'm curious to see how it will compare in its neighboring country, where a history of bloody genocide and totalitarian rule ended only 30 years ago.

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