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Bush Praises Vietnam's Rapid Economic Growth

By Michael A. Fletcher

HANOI, Nov. 17 -- President Bush arrived in poor but economically vibrant Vietnam Friday on a mission to strengthen business ties that he hopes will help eclipse bitter memories of the unpopular and ultimately unsuccessful war the United States waged here more than three decades ago.

"History has a long march to it," Bush told reporters, when asked how he felt about being hosted by a former U.S. enemy. "Societies change, and relationships can constantly be altered to the good."

Bush is here to take part in the annual Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit, but arrives with a host of issues on the table -- from the recent North Korean nuclear test to the mounting U.S. trade deficit with China and his own political setbacks at home. Earlier this week, Congress shelved a free trade agreement with Vietnam that Bush had hoped to have in hand for his trip here, and Democratic success in last week's congressional elections highlighted voter concern about American jobs lost overseas, among other issues.

Bush is the second U.S. president to visit Vietnam since the end of the war, following President Clinton's visit here near the conclusion of his second term in 2000.

Although the time of Clinton's arrival was not announced in local newspapers or on television, thousands of Vietnamese lined the streets to catch a glimpse of his motorcade and many others crowded into the square outside his hotel.

By comparison, interest in Bush's visit here appeared muted, if friendly. Residents stopped their motorbikes to watch as the president's motorcade drove by, while others gathered along the streets to wave and quietly take in the spectacle.

But Bush's route into Hanoi offered ample evidence of the communist government's embrace of private enterprise. Billboards advertising the Hanoi Golf Club, farming equipment and Toyota and Chevrolet cars beckon along the main road from the airport, which also runs past huge Panasonic and Canon manufacturing plants.

In the years since the communist victory in the war led to reunification of Vietnam, the impoverished country has become a significant economic player, with a growth rate of 8.4 percent, but a per capita income of just \$638 a year.

"I have seen firsthand the great vibrancy and the excitement that's taking place in Vietnam," Bush said to Vietnamese President Nguyen Minh Triet. "You're like a young tiger, and I look forward to continuing to work to make sure our bilateral relations are close."

Bush held a luncheon meeting with Australian Prime Minister John Howard and met with Vietnamese government and Communist Party leaders following his arrival here from Singapore Friday morning. Later, he was scheduled to attend a state dinner, before holding several more meetings and taking part in APEC activities Saturday.

Bush's visit to Vietnam prompted comparisons between the war in Iraq and the failed U.S. military intervention here, a contrast that Bush himself seemed to acknowledge last month. Then, he answered an interviewer's question by saying a surge in violence in Iraq "could be" comparable to the Tet offensive during the Vietnam War, a succession of battles in 1968 that helped turn the American public against the conflict and the U.S. political leadership.

Asked Friday whether any lessons from Vietnam apply to the unpopular war in Iraq, Bush took the opportunity to restate his resolve. "One lesson is, is that we tend to want there to be instant success in the world, and the task in Iraq is going to take a while," he said.

Bush's press secretary, Tony Snow, said that rather than focus on the history of the war, the president is interested in Vietnam's seemingly bright economic future.

"This is not going to be a look back at Vietnam," Bush said. "It really is going to be a looking forward to areas of cooperation and shared concern."

Bush, who as a young man joined the Texas Air National Guard rather than serve in Vietnam, will spend part of his visit focusing on the lingering wounds from the war, including a visit to the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command, which is working to determine the fate of servicemen still missing from the Vietnam War.

On his drive into Hanoi, Bush passed many sites of note here, including the tomb of Ho Chi Minh and Truc Bach Lake, where Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) was shot down in 1967 when he was a Navy pilot. McCain was held as a prisoner of war for more than five years.

"Laura and I were talking about -- we were talking about how amazing it is we're here in Vietnam," Bush said. "And one of the most poignant moments of the drive in was passing the lake where John McCain got pulled out of the lake. And he's a friend of ours; he suffered a lot as a result of his imprisonment, and yet, we passed the place where he was, literally, saved, in one way, by the people pulling him out."

In fact, according to McCain, who broke both arms and his right knee while ejecting from his A-4 Skyhawk, he was hauled out of the lake on two bamboo poles and beaten on the shore by an angry mob.

In his autobiography, "Faith of My Fathers," McCain wrote that the crowd, shouting wildly, stripped his clothes off, "spitting on me, kicking and striking me repeatedly." He said someone

smashed a rifle butt into his shoulder, breaking it, and another person stabbed him in the ankle and groin with a bayonet. A woman, possibly a nurse, intervened, and a Vietnamese Army truck arrived "to take me away from this group of aggrieved citizens who seemed intent on killing me," McCain wrote.

He described subsequently suffering repeated beatings and torture at the hands of his captors in the notorious Hoa Lo prison, known to American POWs as the "Hanoi Hilton."

Staff writer William Branigin contributed to this report from Washington