

Wall Street Journal
November 17, 2006

Visiting Vietnam, Bush Sees Hope for Iraq Policy

By YOCHI J. DREAZEN

HANOI, Vietnam -- President Bush used his first visit to a politically stable and economically prosperous Vietnam to argue that it was too soon to write off Iraq, breaking with his usual reluctance to link the two unpopular wars.

On his first day in this Communist capital, the president said Vietnam, where the U.S. fought a bloody and divisive war, holds a lesson for Americans disheartened by the seemingly intractable bloodshed in Iraq: Progress takes time.

"My first reaction is history has a long march to it, and societies change and relationships can constantly be altered to the good," he told reporters Friday after a meeting with Australian Prime Minister John Howard. "It's just going to take a long period of time for the ideology that is hopeful -- and that is an ideology of freedom -- to overcome an ideology of hate."

Mr. Bush implicitly criticized his Democratic opponents in Congress, who are increasingly calling for a phased withdrawal from Iraq. Many Democrats argue that the country can't be salvaged, even as the White House tries to rally public support for the war by arguing that the U.S. and its allies can still prevail there. "We'll succeed unless we quit," he said.

The president's three-day visit to Vietnam underscores the transformation in ties between the two countries. The Vietnam War was the longest armed conflict in American history, leaving dead tens of thousands of Americans and an estimated three million Vietnamese. It ended 31 years ago in defeat for the U.S. after the American-backed South Vietnamese government in Saigon fell to Communist forces.

Today, the U.S. enjoys increasingly strong political and economic ties with Vietnam, a Communist regime with a thriving private sector. American products, from videogames to sodas, are widely sold here, and the dollar is commonly accepted.

Vietnam's enthusiasm for American products and businesses was on display at the Hanoi airport, where an array of world leaders are arriving to attend this weekend's Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum. Mr. Bush is scheduled to meet Saturday with South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun and Japan's new prime minister, Shinzo Abe, during the event. Mr. Bush is also expected to meet with Chinese President Hu Jintao.

A banner hanging near the airport's runway listed the names and logos of the corporate backers of the assembly. They include prominent U.S. companies such as Microsoft Corp., General Motors Corp. and Citigroup Inc. It represented a rare instance where a gathering of world leaders has the type of corporate sponsorship more commonly seen in sporting events such as the Olympics.

Mr. Bush praised Vietnam's Communist rulers for their stewardship of the country's fast-growing economy. The president met with Vietnam's top leader, Communist Party head Nong Duc Manh, at the party's headquarters, a building in central Hanoi with a hammer and sickle on its facade. The two men sat beneath a bronze bust of Ho Chi Minh, the Communist guerilla leader widely seen as the father of modern Vietnam.

Write to Yochi J. Dreazen at yochi.dreazen@wsj.com