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Bush Prods Vietnamese President On Human Rights and Openness

By Peter Baker
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[President Bush](#) pressed Vietnamese President [Nguyen Minh Triet](#) yesterday to address human rights abuses and open up his communist nation's autocratic system, during the first [White House](#) visit by a head of state from [Hanoi](#) since the countries were at war.

Bush hailed the growing trade ties between the two former enemies and the signing of a new agreement that could lead to formal free-trade talks. But as flag-waving Vietnamese American protesters demonstrated outside the White House gates, Bush used the opportunity to urge Triet to permit opposition and end crackdowns on religious minorities.

"I also made it very clear that, in order for relations to grow deeper, that it's important for our friends to have a strong commitment to human rights and freedom and democracy," Bush said with Triet at his side in the Oval Office before hosting a lunch of black sea bass and gazpacho. "I explained my strong belief that societies are enriched when people are allowed to express themselves freely or worship freely."

Triet told reporters that he and Bush had a "direct and open exchange" on human rights but offered no indications that he intended to do anything as a result of the discussion. "We are also determined not to let those differences afflict our overall, larger interest," he said.

Triet's visit was the latest step in the evolution of U.S.-Vietnamese relations. President [Bill Clinton](#) normalized ties in 1995, later sent the first U.S. ambassador to Hanoi and, in his last two months in office, became the first American leader to visit the country since the war. Bush followed suit with a trip to [Vietnam](#) in November and has hosted the Vietnamese prime minister at the White House. The United States exported roughly \$1 billion in goods to Vietnam last year and imported \$8.4 billion, a tenfold increase since Bush took office.

But the growing links between the two nations often raise uncomfortable comparisons for Bush, as many politicians and pundits equate his troubled war in [Iraq](#) with the ill-fated conflict in Vietnam. Bush has said there are some parallels and some differences, but he usually avoids discussing the two in the same breath, acutely aware of the political hazards if the public

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increasingly sees them as similar.

The aftereffects of the war flavored yesterday's meeting, as the two leaders discussed continuing efforts to find missing remains of U.S. soldiers killed in Vietnam. Bush also told Triet that Congress recently passed a spending bill to help Vietnam deal with the effects of Agent Orange, a dioxin sprayed by U.S. forces to defoliate jungles during the war. Triet thanked him for the aid.

Human rights abuses shadowed the visit, though. Members of Congress and activist groups urged Bush to put more pressure on Triet. [Reporters Without Borders](#), for instance, asked Bush to intervene on behalf of nine journalists and "cyber-dissidents" in prison. Religious groups are severely critical of Vietnam's record on religious freedom.


The [State Department](#)'s latest human rights report criticized Vietnam for abuses: "Individuals were arbitrarily detained for political activities. Persons were denied the right to fair and expeditious trials. The government limited citizens' privacy rights and freedom of speech, press, assembly, movement, and association. The government maintained its prohibition of independent human rights organizations."

[Amnesty International](#) last month said more than 20 people have been arrested and detained since November in an ongoing crackdown on dissent, including three political activists sentenced to as long as five years in prison last month for "conducting propaganda" against the government.

Triet has dismissed the criticism. In a [New York](#) speech before arriving here, he asserted that everyone in prison in Vietnam is a criminal. And in an interview with the [Associated Press](#) after his session with Bush yesterday, he said Vietnam's human rights record does not need to be fixed. "Vietnam has its own legal framework," he said, "and those who violate the law will be handled."

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