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A Former POW on Vietnam, Four Decades Later

I've made friendships with former enemies. A regret is that they don't yet enjoy the freedoms Americans hold dear.

By John McCain

Forty years ago on March 14, my fellow prisoners of war in North Vietnam and I, dressed in cheap civilian clothes that had been provided to the 108 of us for the occasion, boarded buses for Gia Lam airport on the outskirts of Hanoi. A big green American C-141 airlifter was waiting there to fly us to Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines.

At the airport, we lined up in formation according to our shoot-down date, and we tried to maintain a military bearing as cameras whirred and clicked and a noisy crowd of Vietnamese observed us. American and Vietnamese officers sat at a table, each holding a list of prisoners.

When it was time for a prisoner to step forward, representatives from both militaries called out his name. They called my name, and I took a few steps toward the table and saluted. A U.S. naval officer returned my salute, smiled and shook my hand, and escorted me across the tarmac and up the ramp into the plane.



Getty Images

John McCain leads a column of men released from a POW camp, March 14, 1973, in Hanoi, North Vietnam.

I made the trip with two of my closest friends, Air Force officers Bud Day and Bob Craner, whose example and encouragement I had relied on for over five years. A few minutes into the flight, the pilot announced that we were "feet wet," which meant we were now flying over the Tonkin Gulf and were in international air space. Everyone cheered.

I doubt that any of us expected we would ever return to the country we had yearned to leave for so long. It was hard to say goodbye to each other at Clark, and our farewells were very emotional.

We made promises to stay in frequent contact, which we would do over the years, until death began to thin our ranks. There were no mixed emotions, however, as we took our leave of Vietnam, and no desire to renew the acquaintance in the future.

As it turned out, I would return to Vietnam. I've been back many times since the end of the war. It's a beautiful country, and the Vietnamese are welcoming hosts. Most of my visits have been for official business: accounting for American POW/MIAs, helping to facilitate the normalization of

relations between our countries, and promoting a future relationship that will serve both countries' interests.

I've made friendships with people who were once my enemies. I've become fond of a place I once detested. I am pleased that America and Vietnam have made so much progress in building a productive, mutually beneficial relationship in the wreckage of a war that was a tragedy for both our peoples.

Today, old grievances are being replaced by new hopes. Increasing numbers of Americans visit Vietnam every year—including three U.S. presidents while in office—drawn to the country's spectacular natural beauty and friendly people. Bilateral trade is more than 80 times greater than it was in 1994, when the U.S. lifted its trade embargo. This has benefited the people of both countries and enabled millions of Vietnamese to lift themselves out of poverty.

Similarly, the two countries' defense relationship has evolved to an extent that was simply unimaginable even a decade ago. Our militaries exercise together, and Cam Ranh Bay is again a port of call for the U.S. Navy. Indeed, the USS John McCain, a Navy destroyer named after my father and grandfather, recently made a port visit into Danang, which shows that if you live long enough, anything is possible.

And yet, when it comes to the values that Americans hold dear—freedom, human rights and the rule of law—our highest hopes for Vietnam still remain largely just hopes. The government in Hanoi still imprisons and mistreats peaceful dissidents, journalists, bloggers, and ethnic and religious minorities for political reasons.

It still maintains sweeping laws, such as Article 88, that give the state nearly unlimited power over its citizens. The government still hasn't taken modest actions that could put Vietnam squarely on the right side of internationally recognized human rights, such as ratifying and implementing the Convention Against Torture.

In a positive recent step, the Vietnamese government has begun a dialogue with Amnesty International and suggested that Vietnam may finally reform its constitution to better protect civil and political rights for its citizens. I sincerely hope so—for while great relationships can be built on the basis of common interests, as the U.S.-Vietnam one is now, the best and most enduring partnerships always rest on a foundation of shared values. In this challenge, as in every other challenge that the two countries have overcome together, I intend to remain Vietnam's dedicated friend.

Our countries had a difficult and heartbreaking past. But they didn't bind themselves to that past, and they are now traveling the road from reconciliation to true friendship. This promising prospect is among the biggest and most satisfying surprises of my life, one that I expect will astonish me more in the years ahead.

Mr. McCain is a U.S. senator from Arizona.

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