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U.S. Public Diplomacy in Vietnam ^[1]

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In the minds of many American, when mentioning Vietnam, the first thought is still, undoubtedly, the Vietnam War. The Vietnamese people on the other hand, most of which are below the age of thirty, don't remember the war, but are reminded of it regularly by propaganda billboards, monuments and politicians, especially if they live in big cities in like Ho Chi Minh City. These reminders are an inescapable part of the life in the big cities, with Uncle Ho's watchful eye and sickle and hammer looming over people's heads like a beware sign for anyone attempting to doubt or (God forbid) change the communist way. Prisoners of war and MIAs are still a huge bilateral issue. Not a single Vietnamese person I encountered during my stay in Ho Chi Minh City spoke or understood a word of English, but one could not help the impression that the Vietnamese people are very curious about the world outside of the confinements of their communist mother land and, undoubtedly, the America of today.

Goal of the U.S. public diplomacy efforts in Vietnam is to build mutual understanding and civil society. This goal is being realized through educational exchange, information programs, media presence, cultural exchange and promotion of English language programs. The focus of the PD efforts is on the 33 provinces and not the biggest cities, understandably so since the majority population lives in rural areas. Since 1995, the United States and Vietnam have engaged in a long and eventful journey through cultural exchanges. From classical concerts to boy choirs, from country singers to jazz singers, from step dance to hip hop, from photography exhibits to film festivals and from university soccer to volleyball, each activity brings the diversity of American culture to Vietnam.

Cultural and educational programs - like the Performing Arts Initiative and the Cultural Envoy Program – promote mutual understanding and warmer relations between Americans and Vietnamese. Los Angeles band Ozomatli's visit to Ho Chi Minh is a shining example of the outreach program success. The band's performances in Ho Chi Minh City were sponsored by the Consulate and drew a huge Vietnamese audience. Apart from the public shows, the band also performed at several centers for the disabled, orphaned and for the people living with HIV/AIDS. Whether it is through music, fine art, or literature programs, both the U.S. and Vietnam have opportunities to share their cultural values and deepen their connections.

Through its International Visitor Leadership Program and the Voluntary Visitor Program, the U.S. Mission has invited more than 500 Vietnamese citizens to participate in short-term exchange programs in the United States. The participants come from all walks of life: Vietnamese senior officials, think-tank experts, researchers, educators, journalists, human rights activists, democracy activists, and legal and judicial systems experts. These programs provide Vietnamese leaders with opportunities to better understand the United States and learn about American people, society, values and institutions.

Since 1995, the U.S. Consulate has brought a number of U.S. experts working in different fields to Vietnam, including a speaker on reproductive rights, a pressing issue in a country with one of the highest abortion rates in the world. They have also sent U.S. government officials and Foreign Service Officers to Vietnamese schools, universities and institutions to speak on topics related to the United States. They have spoken about issues as varied as legal reform, intellectual property rights, trafficking in persons, online journalism, creative writing, politics and history, economics and the environment, and bilateral relations between the United States and Vietnam.

Another great addition to the U.S. public outreach efforts in Ho Chi Minh City is the Information Resource Center, where visitors can come in (after going through the security check) and relax in a very inviting environment and obtain material (most of which is not available elsewhere in Vietnam) on American culture and society, government, economy and social issues. Visitors to the center can also find material on studying in the United States and learning English, read newspapers, periodicals, access the internet, watch a film or attend one of the many guest speakers' events at the center. The IRC programs and activities are free of charge and have attracted 50,000 visitors in the 15 years the center has been open.

For the U.S. Department of State's diplomatic staff, Vietnam definitely falls under hardship post. The bilateral relations were reestablished in 1995, but any public affairs activities and diplomatic efforts can easily be misinterpreted as a threat for the communist regime. Strong public diplomacy efforts, cultural diplomacy being the most benign yet most powerful aspect of it, can be seen as propaganda trying to overthrow the Vietnamese government. These are serious limitations to the everyday work of the U.S. Consulate General staff in Ho Chi Minh City, which they have learned to cope with successfully.

If we look at the numbers, public diplomacy activities in Vietnam seem to have hardly scratched the surface, but when we take into consideration the obstacles that have to be overcome by the US diplomatic staff in their work in Vietnam, one cannot help but think they are finally succeeding in painting the picture of America in different light.

Emina Vukic, in March 2010, participated in a research trip to Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, which was partially funded by the USC Master of Public Diplomacy program and the Dean's office of the Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism. Emina is a first-year Master of Public Diplomacy student. Born and raised in Croatia, former Yugoslavia, she was subjected to ethnic cleansing in Croatia and had a refugee status for eight years. Before attending USC, Emina worked for the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Bosnia, the Hague Tribunal office in Belgrade and the USAID Local Government Reform Program in Serbia. Her public diplomacy interests lie in nation branding, primarily of the post conflict countries through cultural diplomacy efforts.
