

Tourism and Nation Building at the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

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Using evidence from what is probably Vietnam's most visited tourism site, the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, this article explores the presentation of the "American War" in the construction of nationhood. The article has three objectives. First, I illustrate how nation-building in a postcolonial and postimperial context is generated through tourism, specifying how the Communist Party communicates Vietnam to lay international tourist audiences. Tourism's political instrumentality for the party is highlighted here. Second, I show how the United States is imaginatively constructed to shape Vietnam's identity. Finally, I use the conclusion to reflect on the implications for the "Asian Century" when considering Vietnam's multifaceted connections to the United States and the West. *Key Words:* Asian Century, nationalism, tourism, Vietnam, Vietnam War.

本文运用来自于可能是游客至越南最常造访的旅游景点——胡志明市战争遗迹博物馆的证据，探讨国族建构中“美国战争”的呈现。本文有以下三大目标：首先，我将描绘在后殖民和后帝国脉络中的国族打造，如何透过旅游生产之，并明确说明共产党如何使越南能够和一般的国际游客阅听众沟通。本文于此强调旅游之于共产党的政治工具性。再者，我将展现“美国”如何透过想像建构之，以形塑越南的身份认同。最后我将于结论中，反思考量越南与美国和西方的多面向连结对“亚洲世纪”的意涵。 *关键词:* 亚洲世纪, 国族主义, 旅游, 越南, 越战。

Mediante el uso de evidencia de lo que probablemente sea el sitio turístico más visitado de Vietnam, el Museo de Objetos de Guerra en Ciudad Ho Chi Minh, este artículo explora las presentaciones de la "Guerra Americana" para la construcción de la nacionalidad. El artículo tiene tres objetivos. Primero, yo ilustro cómo la construcción de nación en un contexto poscolonial y posimperial se genera por medio del turismo, especificando la manera como el Partido Comunista le indica a Vietnam cómo manejar las audiencias turísticas internacionales. El carácter instrumental de la política del turismo para el partido es destacada aquí. Segundo, muestro la manera imaginativa como los Estados Unidos son dibujados para dar forma a la identidad de Vietnam. Finalmente, utilizo la conclusión para reflexionar sobre las implicaciones que tiene para el "Siglo Asiático" la presentación examinada al considerar las conexiones multifacéticas que tiene Vietnam con Estados Unidos y con Occidente. *Palabras clave:* Siglo Asiático, nacionalismo, turismo, Vietnam, Guerra de Vietnam.

This article addresses the imagery and narratives of the war known in Vietnam as the "American War" in what is likely to be the country's most visited paid tourist attraction, the War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City. In doing so, the article argues that the affective and livelihood-based undercurrents driving much of contemporary tourism studies fail to sufficiently capture the ways in which tourist spaces are produced by governments for politically expedient ends. The Communist Party of Vietnam (hereafter the Party), the singular party ruling the country since the end of the Vietnam War, is an example of a government that uses a site like a museum to elevate its legitimacy to tourists. At the War Remnants Museum, the violence of "the war of American aggression" or the "resistance war against the United States," as it is called by the Party, is depicted in brutal terms: The

U.S. government, with the support of its people, spent over a decade conducting an unceasing and multidimensional military campaign aimed at laying waste to the country, and in the museum the Party has the pictures to prove it. How the Party presents this tragedy to a tourist audience (and primarily to a foreign tourist audience) to discredit the United States and to shine an affirming light on its rule is the central purpose of this article. Relatedly, my chosen research method of repeatedly walking the museum, primarily alone and over the course of twelve years, provides me with a means to reflect on my own positionality and responsibility as a U.S. tourist and researcher in Vietnam.

If the war lives on as an instrument in the Party's toolkit and as a significant set of events in my own life and work, the imagery in the museum also portrays the war as influencing the everyday life of Vietnamese

people today. For example, black-and-white photos of landscapes razed by U.S. bombs (the “before”) now sit side by side with high-quality color images of rebuilt and revitalized Vietnamese cities and villages (the “after”). Contemporary pictures of disfigured bodies illustrate the ongoing violence the U.S. invasion has wrought on Vietnam’s citizens through the lingering effects of the herbicide Agent Orange. The implication in these photographs is that the Party continues to “fix” what the United States has “broken.” In this sense the museum’s message is not only a look into the past but also a vision of the present and future: A peaceful and strong Vietnam has been and continues to be victimized by U.S. imperialism but is in no way weakened as a result. This point resonates with another of the article’s central arguments and is one that is emphasized in the conclusion: Any understanding of the Asian Century, a nickname for the expected economic dominance of the region in the twenty-first century, must consider the postcolonial, postimperial, and postwar contexts by which the governments of Asian nations assert themselves today.

In sum, the article’s conceptual framework pivots on the political expediency of tourism in Vietnam: I argue that overseas tourism has transformed the ways in which a postsocialist and undemocratic government like the Party shares the weaknesses and destructive tendencies of “mainstream” political–economic systems such as that of the United States. I highlight the recent neglect in tourism geography and tourism studies in engaging with leisure as a means of building and avowing the validity of a one-party Asian nation like Vietnam. I call for a stronger role for tourism and leisure research—rather than other seemingly more intellectually noteworthy fields like urban restructuring (Mitchell 2009; Wu and Webster 2010), public space (Springer 2009), and neoliberalism (Harvey 2005)—in analyzing political contestations between the Global North and Global South and between the West and Asia (Zhang 2012).

This article unfolds in five additional sections. In the next section I show that contemporary critical tourism research’s focus on commodification, livelihoods, and encounter has meant that leisure research’s ability to critique state power and nation building has largely been disregarded. Additionally, in this section I discuss how tourism’s links to state authenticity come in to play. The ensuing section introduces the Vietnamese context by way of the presentation of colonialist, imperialist, and violent spaces in tourist sites like museums. The following section reviews my methodological approach to studying the museum. Here I compare how I believe the Party “sees” me (as a U.S. tourist visiting

the museum) versus how I see myself as an American held accountable to both the war and my professional responsibilities as a geographer.

The subsequent section forms the empirical core of the article. Here I invite the reader on a floor-by-floor tour of the War Remnants Museum, which includes a ground floor and two upper floors.¹ I introduce three foundational themes of the museum by attaching one to each floor. The exhibits on the ground floor are labeled “the world is behind us.” On this floor I show how the Party employs commonplace terms used by the United States and the West to describe “atrocities” in the Global South like terrorism and torture to charge the United States as a violent offender that abuses sovereign nations. On the first floor, themed what I coin an “ongoing threat,” I turn to the museum’s representations of the relationship between the war and postwar eras. Vietnamese society was impacted by the vicious actions of the United States during the conflict, but it also continues to wage war today through the ongoing damages inflicted by Agent Orange. I call the dominant theme on the second floor an “alternative peace,” where the reconstruction and growth that has been achieved in Vietnam since the end of the war is explained. The intersection of U.S. and Vietnamese sovereignties is assessed in this section as well. In the Conclusion I offer some considerations over what tourism and state power means for Vietnam and its relationship to the Asian Century.

From Affect to Expediency: Finding Political Force in Tourism

This article’s conceptual framing situates tourism at the center of Vietnam’s nation-building strategies, a position that is deemed peripheral to tourism studies in geography and in the social sciences more broadly as scholars emphasize the engaged, emotional, and microscale host–guest leisure relationship. In geography, for example, recent critical studies on tourism have generally pivoted around commodification (P. Jackson 1999; Oakes 2006; Kingsbury 2011; Su 2011), livelihoods (Gibson 2009; McMorran 2012; Turner 2012), and encounters between resident and tourist (Hughes 2008; Duffy and Moore 2010; Gibson 2010; Scheyvens 2011; Durr 2012). These three topics are interrelated insofar as they reflect demands by tourists armed with money, knowledge, and a well-worn passport to experience, engage with, and contribute to authenticity in the far reaches of the globe (Cohen and Cohen 2012).

Relatively “new” forms of leisure like eco- and sustainable (Mowforth and Munt 2003; Honey 2008), slum (Dovey and King 2012; Frenzel, Koens, and Steinbrink 2012), volunteer/“pro-poor” (Hall 2007; Keese 2011), responsible (Sin 2010; Sin and Minca 2014), and “new age” (Rose 2010) tourism all share a recognition of how the host community’s knowledge, practices, and lifestyles unfold in relation to tourists’ preconceived notions, demands, and time, financial, or dietary restrictions. Relatedly, tourists and hosts involved in these kinds of tourism encounters enjoy a heightened form of authenticity scholars have relatively recently termed *existential authenticity* (N. Wang 1999; Rickly-Boyd 2013) that is marked by emotional and highly involved human activities emphasizing “physical challenges and sensory stimulation” (Lew 2011, 570). To summarize, the majority of the current debates in tourism geographies identify how leisure research has shifted from “permanence to flux, from being to doing, from structure to agency, from sedimented social patterns to the process of their emergence, and from a focus on the more stable fixtures of social life to the mobilities linking them” (Cohen and Cohen 2012, 2180).

In this light, national government systems and institutions and the political control they wield through tourism are absent or serve as background context to the more-than-representational approach to the production of space that is popular in much of critical human geography today (Thrift 2008). As work on dark tourism has shown, however, not all leisure experiences are affirming or even participatory for tourists (Richter 2004; Lennon and Foley 2010). Moreover, a few case studies have demonstrated the execution of political authority inherent to memorial museums and battlefield sites (see Richter 1989; Muzaini and Yeoh 2005; Su and Teo 2009). Prevailing ideas in dark and memorial tourism are not focused on the ways in which tourists aspire to enjoy an enriching and emotional leisure experience. Rather, dark, heritage, and memorial tourism sites connect tourism to political goals and highlight tourism’s role in shaping the national past, present, and future.

One way in which to link debates between the “bottom-up” multisensory tourist encounter and the “top-down” power exercised by national governments through tourism sites is by rethinking what kind of person, group, or institution has the power to successfully authenticate a tourism experience. For MacCannell (1989, 3), the answer is the Western tourist. MacCannell’s classic book on the Western tourist shows how they seek authenticity in exotic locales far from home because modernity has stripped

them of their ability to live a “real” and satisfying life at home. His research communicates the alienation that modern tourists feel from their labor and built environment. This alienation spurs them to leave their desks behind to experience the “other,” who does work that is understood by the tourist to be “timeless” (and therefore more faithful to a premodern past). Relatedly, the “other” is unencumbered by modernity’s restraints and leads a more vibrant life without the spoils of monetary wealth as a result. Modernity is therefore at once empowering and stultifying for the tourist. As noted earlier, today’s traveler attempts to overcome the problems MacCannell described by embedding herself in the day-to-day work and emotional spaces of host environments that are defined by tourists as more authentic than those at home. This is a process of authentication that confers power on the tourist to determine how and by what means an experience is deemed authentic or not. Today’s tourists search for and create experiences where strangeness and familiarity are coproduced through the host–guest encounter, with the result being largely what the tourist judges to be an authentic experience or not (see Conran 2011). They also seek a multidimensional experience that can be shared with hosts to the extent that both tourists and hosts have a stake in each other’s (and their own) emotional welfare during the tourist trip.

For the purposes of this article, however, it is the state that drives what is considered the “real” and authentic tourism experience. In an era of hypercompetitiveness between nations over tourist receipts (Chang and Lim 2004; Hall 2007; Keese 2011), host governments are more aware than ever of tourists’ desire to learn and experience foreign countries and their histories, forms of governance and rule, and customs. Governments take advantage of tourists’ quest to experience authenticity by feeding them sanctioned discourses of nationhood in official tourist sites that might differ from their own understandings at home. After all, the state is granted a particularly powerful kind of authority over space because its leaders establish systems of law and governance, introduce and sustain key institutions to support these systems, and create an “imagined community” among disparate cultures to shape and drive national identity (Anderson 1991). Therefore, the state is likely one of the most “authentic” producers of space (see Pretes 2003) and the tourist sites it operates are bestowed a public and official certification generally inaccessible to privately run sites. States use national museums to solidify their edge in presenting an authentic nation for tourists; indeed, Denton (2005)

argued that museums are “more closely associated with the state cultural bureaucracy than other cultural forms and institutions” (566). Yet the state’s identification and usage of tourism as a politically expedient tool is largely missing in tourism debates.

When governance’s role in the unfolding of tourism spaces is acknowledged, it is reduced to three broad positions. In the first place, governance policies are sketched as background context as the tourism encounter is revealed (Bell and Lyall 2005; Hall 2013b). Second, the state’s level of responsiveness to the demands of tourists and residents is considered, with a concentration on regional planning and environmental sustainability policies (Waite and Cook 2007; Turner 2012). Finally, government leaders at the local and national scales are shown to be capitulating to the dictates of global capital through largely neoliberal economic policies that undermine government’s role as a social services provider (Harvey 1989; Winter 2008). Some recent work has linked tourism activities with the performative nature of governance policies (Lennon and Foley 2010; Silverman 2012; Oakes 2013), but this work tends to highlight tourism’s contestations between a number of different players and demands. There is a lack of focus in this work on the political will that is exerted through tourist sites and how tourism enlivens political discourses. Moreover, attention to the everyday and the affectual in tourism can distract us from the value that governments find in producing tourism discourses and spaces for a specific “extraordinary” economic purpose (or set of purposes; see Freire-Medeiros 2009), how tourism is harnessed to mythologize the nation (Yoneyama 1999), and how tourism has become an important delivery system to convey politically powerful and controversial messages in a “leisurely” setting. This is all the more important a point to make in the context of developing, non-Western, and nondemocratic governments like Vietnam’s where tourism’s role in the development of nationhood is emerging and therefore poorly understood globally (J. Wang 2001).

Geography as a discipline has, according to Hall (2013a, 606–07), shown that it has not had much time for tourism; Peet (1998), for example, rendered tourism “esoteria” to geographers, who should instead be interested in serious critical scrutiny over “ghettos, poverty, global capitalism, and imperialism” (109). This article does indeed use tourism as a lens to explore imperialism where leisure is used to create a space of political authenticity that also shapes the separation between “us” (Vietnam) and “them” (the United States). Before getting to this through a case study of the War Remnants

Museum, I outline tourism discourses and practices in Vietnam’s postwar context.

Touring Vietnam: Museums and Travel in a Postwar Context

Tourism, and especially international tourism, is a centerpiece of Vietnam’s economy (Suntikul, Butler, and Airey 2008). The Vietnam National Administration of Tourism (VNAT) reports that in 2012 Vietnam received 6,585,384 international tourists, up from 5,873,047 in 2011. Although statistical data beyond monthly international arrivals to Vietnam is difficult to access,² it seems clear that the majority of international visitors arrive through Vietnam’s two largest international airports, Hanoi’s Noi Bai and Ho Chi Minh City’s Tan Son Nhat. As Vietnam’s largest city in terms of population, land area, and economic production, Ho Chi Minh City is well positioned to receive a large percentage of international visitors.

The War Remnants Museum (*Bảo Tàng Chứng Tích Chi ến Tranh*) was established by the Party at the former site of a French villa shortly after the end of the American War in April 1975 (Figure 1). It has gone through a number of different names since its inception, perhaps most notoriously as the Museum of American Atrocities, and has evolved over the decades to become what is probably Vietnam’s most visited tourist site by foreign visitors. For example, it is consistently rated among the top five destinations in Ho Chi Minh City on the popular English-language tourism website Trip Advisor and it is one of the three or four key stops on group tours in the city³ (TripAdvisor 2014). Schwenkel (2009) noted that it is “one of the most anticipated stops on the itineraries of foreign tourists in Ho Chi Minh City” (70).

The museum’s message has changed over the years and “the increase in numbers of foreign tourists to Vietnamese museums has engendered certain changes to exhibits as museum officials refashion historical narratives with a view toward communicating with more diverse domestic and international audiences” (Schwenkel 2009, 146). For example, given the Party government’s newfound desire to welcome overseas Vietnamese to travel to and invest in the country of their birth, the anti-*Việt kiều* (overseas Vietnamese) rhetoric present in earlier versions of the museum is gone (Small 2012). This reveals that what Bennett (1995) called the “exhibitionary complex” (59) intrinsic to the modern state’s public displays is an evolving and unfinished endeavor. When I first visited the museum in 2002 it consisted of

Figure 1. The entrance to the War Remnants Museum. *Source:* Photograph by the author. (Color figure available online.)



a ground floor that included a large outdoor area with a hodgepodge of captured U.S. military transportation and equipment, like tanks and planes; a reproduction of the infamous “tiger cages” built by the U.S. government to house and torture Vietnamese prisoners of war (POWs); and an indoor area with photos, maps, and statistical evidence used to explain how much firepower was inflicted on Vietnam by the United States between 1963 and 1975. It also had a multipurpose room that was used to exhibit art by Vietnamese children or Vietnamese who were disabled by the war (e.g., victims of Agent Orange or amputees). The museum includes these features today and has expanded to include two additional air-conditioned floors and a semidetached gift shop. All exhibits are presented in Vietnamese and English languages. Admission fee is 15,000 Vietnamese dong (approximately U.S. \$0.75), with discounts available to war veterans and their families, martyrs, the elderly, and Vietnamese student groups. It is open every day of the year, including holidays.

The War Remnants Museum straddles the line between an extraordinary cultural site and one that mimics the narratives of other national museums throughout Asia and the Global South. Its extraordinariness lies in the relentless way it displays the brutality and pain of war and how bluntly it points a finger at the United States for inflicting so much damage on Vietnam. For example, there are hundreds of pictures that demonstrate the U.S. capacity for evil; there are dozens of high-quality color images depicting Vietnamese being harassed, tortured, maimed, and killed; there are photographs of razed landscapes torn apart by the herbicide Agent Orange; and more benignly there are im-

ages of demonstrations, meetings, and statements from around the world illustrating the broad global support that Vietnam enjoyed during the war. There are numerous large, color images of Vietnamese people living today who were horribly disfigured by the war, whether due to the violence wrought during the campaign itself or the birth defects, stillborn children, and physical problems that continue to affect the country as a result of Agent Orange’s poisonous remains (Martini 2012).

In these ways the museum does not exhibit many of the characteristics inherent to popular government-supported war cultural sites in Asia and around the world. It does not skim over the violence of war and the military industrial complex in favor of global harmony and reconciliation, like the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum and the Hiroshima Peace Museum in Japan (Yoneyama 1999). Because it is not a site where a known war atrocity was committed, it does not tread in the sympathetic language of remembrance and pilgrimage, like at the Holocaust sites in Europe (Lennon and Foley 2010). Rather, its message rests on the United States as aggressor, as the most consequential destroyer of Vietnam in recent history. It shows that besides France, few countries would ever claim to “operate” Vietnam in an authoritative sense like the United States did; it verifies in unequivocal terms that the United States was unsuccessful in its intentions; and it conveys in unrelenting terms that Vietnam experienced more of the fury of the Cold War than any other country in the world (Kwon 2012). In a related but no less substantial register, the museum narrates the nearly complete annihilation of Vietnam’s physical landscape.

Although the museum is by any measure a shocking portrait of the American war, its broader messages of peace, resilience, and strength also closely connect to other ideologies driven by the Vietnamese government since independence (see Gillen 2011a). Indeed, the War Remnants Museum is one of a suite of museums that contribute to the performance of Vietnam's sovereignty in Ho Chi Minh City, confirming that there is a rising global demand for national museums due to "the increase in consumer markets for culture, perhaps especially with the development of global tourism" (Denton 2005, 565). Those that are regularly visited by tourists include the Reunification Palace, home of the "puppet" South Vietnam leadership regime during the American war; the Ho Chi Minh City Museum, which traces Saigon's humble origins as a small fishing community to its time under the specter of French and American colonialism to its present-day recognition as the country's primary economic machine; and the Ho Chi Minh Museum, which develops an account of the country's deified leader as a simple and unassuming man who would go on to lead Vietnam's successful independence movement. In the case of the Ho Chi Minh City Museum, Vietnam's resistance toward the French colonialists is more prominently featured than the city's time as the capital of a separate country known as South Vietnam. The Ho Chi Minh Museum focuses on "Uncle Ho's" return to Vietnam after many years overseas and his stewardship over Vietnam's fight against foreign aggression. Taken as a whole, the national museums in Ho Chi Minh City "embody state power" (Denton 2005, 567).

In its staging of Vietnamese nationhood, the War Remnants Museum mirrors other national museums in Asia. For Lepawsky (2008), who follows Anagnost's (1997) research on modern China, Kuala Lumpur's Telekomuzium becomes a space where "the nation becomes an object of contemplation for visitors" (121). Telekomuzium is an ode to Malaysia's aspiration to become "modern" by 2020. The museum illuminates these goals through an interpretation of Malaysia as a pinnacle of global technology in the twenty-first century. Whereas Telekomuzium is a love letter to government-led multicultural development rather than a damning indictment of a foreign country, both are "boundary making machines" (Lepawsky 2008, 122) in the sense that they draw on prominent governmental narratives of the nation to furnish museum space with discourses separating "us" from "them." In Japan, Yoneyama (1999) told the story of the creation of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park, a site established to pay homage to the victims of the nuclear bomb dropped

by U.S. military forces on the city in August 1945. Both the Hiroshima and Ho Chi Minh City sites pivot on narratives of mass destruction, carnage, and post-war national redemption and prosperity. In contrast to the War Remnants Museum, which charges the United States for its role in the destruction of Vietnam, the Hiroshima park (which includes a number of memorials, monuments, museums, and lecture halls; Yoneyama 1999) largely scrubs the U.S. role in Japan's devastation out of the museum. The Peace Memorial Park and War Remnants Museum are alike, however, in that they are pieces of broader national projects aimed at honoring government successes at establishing and maintaining peaceful sovereignty after wars that they argue were not of their making. Similar efforts in Southeast Asia to represent the government's role in the staging of nationwide peace and prosperity after colonialism, imperialism, and war exist in Cambodia, at the National Museum of Cambodia and at the Cambodia-Vietnam Friendship Memorial in Phnom Penh; in the Philippines at the Rizal Monument in Manila; and in the Lao People's Democratic Republic at the Lao National Museum in Vientiane. The War Remnants Museum connects to other postwar tourism sites like these because it mirrors the ways in which national museums create narratives that define the nation and territorialize state rule. My study of the War Remnants Museum, however, is less interested in how the past is memorialized at the site (see Tai 2001; Wood 2006; Hughes 2008; Schwenkel 2009) than it is in questioning how the Vietnamese state connects tourism and war to exert state power.

Walking the Museum: A Note on Positionality and Responsibility

I have visited the War Remnants Museum approximately twenty times over the past twelve years, with a gap in visits between 2006 and 2012 when I did not travel to Ho Chi Minh City. In preparation for writing this article, I visited and walked the museum alone four times in 2012 and eight times in 2013.

When walking the museum, I see myself as a U.S.-born tourist and a U.S.-trained geographer and do not separate those two parts of my identity in this article's analysis of the museum. I keep the division intentionally blurry for three reasons. In the first place, geographers, especially those who read the landscape as "discourse materialized" (Schein 1997, 663), are more like tourists than they care to admit (see Hall 2010).⁴ In this sense, a "tourist" is not a dirty categorization

of a clueless, gullible, and culturally deprived bore; the best kinds of tourists are inquisitive, open-minded, and interested in challenging themselves much like geographers in the field are. Second, I believe that it is crucial to assess the museum through the “eyes” of the state (Tai 2001). Admittedly this is a difficult undertaking given the opacity of the Party’s decision making and its arbitrary enforcement of law (Gainsborough 2010). I believe, however, that discourses and representations of the nation in tourist sites, especially at the War Remnants Museum, provide a much clearer picture of the state’s intentions than do their policy decisions. In playing its benevolent rule off of the inhumaneness of the U.S. government, the Party provides one of the least ambiguous statements about its role in the governance of the state. In turn, the Party sees itself as a sort of performer for the nation in the museum, with someone like me as its core target audience. I was born after the war ended and in the eyes of the Party I have only a patchwork and biased understanding of the Vietnam War and no understanding of the American War. The narrative driving the museum is of such targeted force and with such contemporary relevance that it is arguably one of the goals of the museum to create a sense of personal responsibility about the American War among tourists like myself who would not ordinarily give it much sustained thought.

Third, and relatedly, the tension between tourist “outsider” and researcher “insider” forms the backbone of my positionality (M. Jackson 1995; Oakes 2006). I decided during my initial trip to Vietnam as a tourist to take up Ho Chi Minh City and tourism as my field site and topic of inquiry, respectively. I have found that regular returns to the War Remnants Museum do not weaken my feelings of anxiety and despondency about my own positionality as a U.S. tourist visiting Vietnam. However, I am also an “insider,” in the sense that I have been trained in critical discourse and content analysis of cultural sites, in the Vietnamese language, and on researcher reflexivity. The interplay between “insider” and “outsider,” between scholar and tourist (see Gillen 2011b), provides me with a productive tension by which to investigate Vietnamese nationhood and my own identity as an American. Thus, I have chosen to write this article as if I am walking through the museum like a tourist would, with an eye toward the repetitive stories of anti-Americanism, the sustained glories of Ho Chi Minh and Vietnamese independence, and the profound sense of shock and sadness at the relentless cruelty of war. In other words, I choose to showcase the museum in part through the vulnerability of the foreign

U.S. tourist because I think it is a crucial dimension of a visit there.

Although I embrace the tourist part of my positionality, it must also be acknowledged that my training in tourism studies is likely richer than that of many other visitors to the museum. By casting a critical eye on the site, this article unveils some of the intentions of the Vietnamese government through the tourism industry, explores the ways in which the Party uses tourism to project a specific imaginary of Vietnam, and sharpens our understanding of how a country in Asia shapes its identity through representations of a country in the West. Methodologically, this article follows from other work where researchers examine how a museum’s exhibits, narratives, and multisensory tourism spaces represent particular identities and ideologies (Anagnost 1997; Keil 2005; Lepawsky 2008; MacLean 2008; Modlin, Alderman, and Gentry 2011).

The sense of personal responsibility I feel when touring the museum is an emotionally difficult and reflective experience and lends itself to fashioning my method around walking the museum by myself. As I walked through the museum, I stopped to take notes and photographs, eavesdropped on tour guide explanations of the exhibits and conversations among tourists, and recorded the overall mood of the museum (tense, noiseless, unsettling, helpless, angry, desperate). At its most basic, walking is perhaps the principal way in which tourists move through space, so by walking the museum I am mimicking typical tourist behavior. Walking is also the dominant means by which many geographers move through or “transect” space when undertaking fieldwork (Paasche and Sidaway 2010; Sidaway et al. 2014). Despite my walks being solitary experiences, “walking is not thoughtless” (Wylie 2005, 240) but “irreducibly multiple and complex” (235), transformative, and in the museum it is frequently terrifying. Walking promotes “preoccupation and self-reflection” (Wylie 2005, 237) of the sort that is not relegated to self-absorption but with clarifying how I connect to, challenge, and reflect the world (M. Jackson 1995). As I hope to show, my focus on the details of the narratives of the site is a direct outcome of the slow, deliberate, and methodical nature of my walking method. Said a different way, the museum is so rich in empirical volume and associated meaning that I feel the site’s messages are only accessible if one takes his or her time.

As a bodily movement, solitary walking in the museum is preferable because it allows me independent mobility; walking offers me a “shortcut” way for the museum to end when it becomes too overwhelming to

continue. This is what Sidaway (2009) meant when he discussed the “subjectivity and spatiality derived from walking” (1093): The meanings and experiences of the Vietnam/American War are emplaced in the museum and embodied in my identity as a tourist-geographer from the United States.

I would like to finish this section with a brief comment about the U.S.’s broader geopolitical relationship with Vietnam and my responsibility as a geographer with “expert” knowledge on the country, a subject I have written about before (Gillen forthcoming). In the empirical section that follows, I “map” the museum by describing and analyzing its exhibits. Because the museum is not organized thematically, historically, or geographically (it does not seem to be curated along any identifiable conceptual path), I have chosen to organize it according to what I see are its three dominant conceptual themes: “the world is behind us,” “an ongoing threat,” and “an alternative peace.” This is a deliberate yet problematic decision because I am choosing to interpret the Party’s narrative along lines that might not reflect their intended message in the museum. During the American War, the Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, and Ford administrations made decisions about how to “run” South Vietnam based on their interpretations of South Vietnamese communications and activities as well as the multifaceted goals of the United States (Bradley 2009; Clayton 2013). Their understandings of Vietnam led to decisions that had catastrophic consequences for its people and for Americans, too (among other nations). In other words, I recognize that in categorizing the museum in the ways that I do, I am “speaking for” and writing about the messages of a sovereign government whose goals in presenting the museum might be far different than my interpretation of them. I believe, however, that it is also imperative to document positions, interpretations, and beliefs about a site like the War Remnants Museum as a means of clarifying tourism, war, nationalism, national identity, and global citizenship.

“Agent Orange Aftermath” and “Historic Truths”: Reliving the American War at the War Remnants Museum

Ground Floor: The World Is Behind Us

After walking in the front of the open-air entrance to the museum and paying the entrance fee, visitors are faced with approximately twenty pieces of large U.S.

military equipment captured by the Vietnamese during and after the war. There are helicopters, including a CH-47 Chinook, a variety of tanks (including an M.48 A5 model), fighter jets, missile launchers, a bulldozer, a flame thrower, and a howitzer, all prominently labeled “U.S. Army” or “U.S. Air Force.”

On the left side of the outdoor portion of the ground floor there is a photographic exhibit called “Crimes at Phu Quoc Prison.” The photos and narrative from this exhibit illustrate the fierceness inflicted by the U.S. military in the prison system on the island to the west of mainland southern Vietnam. The torture techniques employed by the United States to elicit information and manipulate the prison population are also prominently on display. A few examples of the seventeen techniques mentioned in the exhibit are “Burning Prisoners,” “Burning Sex Organs,” “Disembodying Prisoner’s Teeth,” and “Beating the Prisoner with Cane [sic].” Importantly, and in keeping with a dominant theme of the museum, explanations of U.S. violence against the Vietnamese are contrasted with Vietnamese resilience and strength. Although Phu Quoc Island is described as “Hell on Earth” in the museum, the Vietnamese soldiers were noble in their efforts to resist the U.S. military. “Patriotic soldiers,” the museum’s English-language narrative explains, “didn’t yield to cruel suppression and terror but resiliently hold many fighting activities such as eliminating security guards” [sic]. The final paragraph of the section reads, “Phu Quoc prisoner-of-war camp is not only one of the evidences [sic] of aggressive war crimes but also a convincing proof [sic] of patriotic soldiers’ resilience in the war against aggression to protect the country’s independence.”

Before getting to the question of Vietnam’s independence, a topic that runs through the rest of the ground floor, I wish to draw brief attention to the museum’s usage of *terrorism* and *evidence of war crimes* (*ch’ng tích v’ê t’oi ác ú’a chi’ên tranh xâm lu’o’c*) in this portion of the museum. In my interpretation, the Party uses words like *terrorism* and *war crimes* because they are a recognizable part of the foreign tourist lexicon and help frame the post-11 September 2011, militaristic, violent, highly securitized, unpredictable, and often uncomfortable world that tourists must now pass through. The usage of these words in the museum would seem to be a means by the Party to relate the American War to foreign tourists who are familiar with the consequences of eliciting this language on issues of imperialism and homeland security but who might not have considered

them in relation to the U.S. role in “terrorizing” other nations.

Moving through the Phu Quoc Island display, the tourist enters the ground floor of the main museum building. This section of the museum is committed to showing the breadth of support that Vietnam had in its quest for independence against the United States. There are photographs of protests, demonstrations, and marches from more than forty-five nations that show how widespread anti-American and pro-Vietnamese sentiment was during the 1960s and 1970s. What is striking about this indication of support is that what might be considered clichéd Asian and Communist backers of Vietnam’s independence against a Western, democratic, and capitalist country, such as China, North Korea, Cuba, and Burma, mix with “atypical” supportive countries from Europe, South America, and Africa. There is a sense in this part of the museum that Vietnam’s allies are not categorized with respect to the recognizable regional and political divisions often used to distinguish the West from the East. Here the pursuit of sovereignty is considered to be a peaceful and “global” enterprise, and imperialism is a unilateral act perpetrated by the U.S. government. The Party, it seems, wishes to make the U.S.’s “mysteries more plain” (Gregory 2004, 21) for tourists at the museum.

First Floor: An Ongoing Threat

After wrapping up downstairs, the tourist walks up a flight of stairs or takes the elevator to the first floor, a floor that emphasizes Vietnam’s current relationship with the United States and the American War. Entering on the left side through the air-conditioned exhibit hall, the tourist is faced with statistical, photographic, narrative, and material evidence of a mass murder against unarmed villagers and peasants by U.S. troops in My Lai, Vietnam, on 18 March 1968 (Figure 2; Kwon 2006). The detail seen in these materials is accompanied by photographic representations of the cruelty of the U.S. soldier who appears looting, burning, and killing members of the My Lai community. Color images of the pained faces of Vietnamese being held for questioning, of those being held while their family members are tortured or killed, and of U.S. soldiers proudly showing off heads of dead Vietnamese dot this section of the floor. Nearby, less well-known massacres by U.S. troops are described: In one, which the museum states occurred the night of 25 February 1969 in Thanh Phong, Ben Tre province, there is a list of twenty members of the community who



Figure 2. The first floor of the museum. Note the now famous photo behind the tourists of bodies piled up in the aftermath of the My Lai massacre, 1969. *Source:* Photograph by the author. (Color figure available online.)

died at the hands of the Americans. Their ages and genders suggest that they were innocent bystanders to the war: Nine are children, two are described as being pregnant when they were killed, and three are elderly. The preponderance of examples of U.S.-led massacres against Vietnamese civilians calls to mind Arendt’s (1963) “banality of evil” theory. This time, instead of the everyday evil that permeated Nazi Germany in Europe during World War II, the description has been foisted on the form of the U.S. soldier.

In its use of statistical and historical evidence to expose the American war in Vietnam, the Party makes explicit ties to modernity and rationalist thought. On this floor the Party exercises data (specific massacre and bombing dates, body counts, tonnage of bomb activity, ages, gender, marital status, and hometown of victims; Figure 3) to show the impact of the war on Vietnam

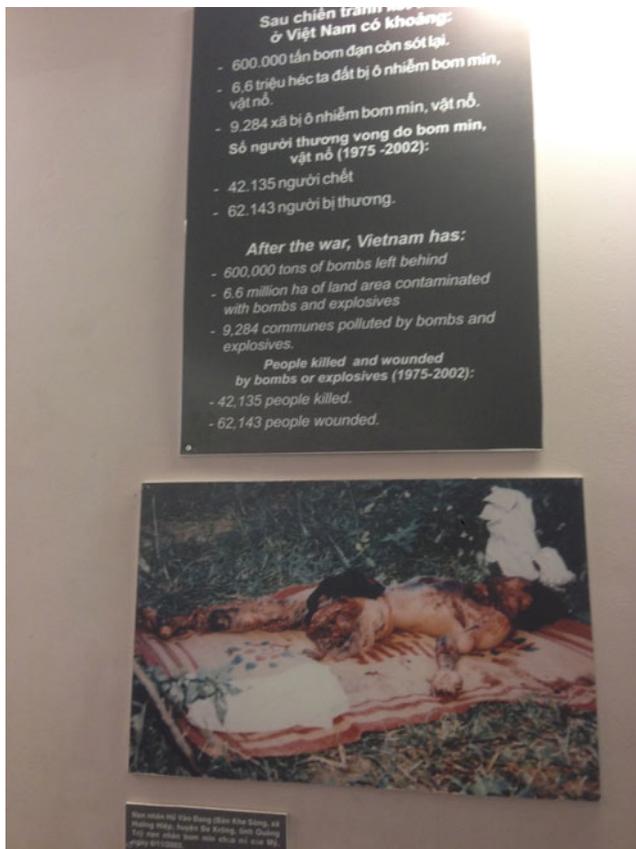


Figure 3. Statistical and photographic evidence of the impact of the U.S. bombing campaign on Vietnam and its people. *Source:* Photograph by the author. (Color figure available online.)

in terms that are scientifically “proven” and therefore challenging for the tourist to question. Additionally, the range of quantitative, photographic, and narrative evidence of U.S. actions in Vietnam establishes that the United States is irrational, immoral, and vicious. This is one of the most powerful aspects of the museum: The Party draws on select elements of Western thought to authorize itself as an equal to the West but not a reflection of it.

A similar point can also be made with reference to the Party’s exhibition of foreign policy in the museum. Prominently displayed behind glass on the first floor is a concluding statement in Vietnamese and English from the Nuremberg International Military Tribunal, held in 1945 and 1946 by the Allied powers to prosecute Nazi leadership: “To initiate a war of aggression is not only an international crime, it is the supreme international crime, differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evils of the whole.” The suggestion in this passage is that the United States, as one of the leading authorities of the Nuremberg trials, should be well aware of the defini-

tion of a war crime because it had perhaps the biggest hand in defining what a “war” crime is compared to an “international” crime.

That members of the U.S. government have not yet been prosecuted for war crimes in any of the “American” wars⁵ is the obvious conclusion to draw from this image, but here I want to draw attention to the performative nature of tourism. The Party performs its knowledge of historically accepted “universal” foreign policies in this image to problematize the role of the United States as a leader in the authorship and execution of international law. In conventional studies of tourism, the concept of performance is presented in fun and story-like ways (like acting; see Larsen and Urry 2011), but the War Remnants Museum shifts this terrain by emphasizing the political implications of tourism performances.

As mentioned previously, however, the museum is not entirely a historical record. Further along on the right side of the first floor of the museum, the narrative of the contemporary impact of the war on the Vietnamese population is represented in the form of maps, lists, and photographs detailing areas affected by U.S. ordnance and Agent Orange defoliants. The museum’s narrative with respect to Agent Orange argues that although the United States was forced out of Vietnam in defeat, the violence inflicted on its population has not concluded. Agent Orange’s legacy on the Vietnamese landscape and water supply is sketched, and contemporary, color photos of deformed babies, children, young people, and adults mark one exhibit on this floor, entitled “Agent Orange Aftermath in the US Aggressive War in Vietnam” [sic]. Victims’ range of illnesses,⁶ their geographic locations, and their achievements in spite of their illnesses are explained. The cohesion of the Vietnamese people is also portrayed in this particular exhibit. The room shows numerous photographs of family members, friends, and caregivers who are raising and supporting those affected by Agent Orange. This presentation shifts tourists from considering Vietnam as a victim of imperialist violence and toward the strong community spirit that permeates the nation. This is all the more striking, this exhibit suggests, given the horrors that Vietnam continues to experience at the hands of the U.S. government. The theme of Party-led recuperation and its remarkable growth continues on the second floor exhibitions, to which I now turn.

Second Floor: An Alternative Peace

The second floor includes three large collections. One is called “Agent Orange in the War,” and it

largely replicates the account of the war's aftermath on the first floor and therefore is not described here. One room is designated for temporary exhibitions related to the American war. Entitled "Requiem: The Photo Collection of the US Aggressive War in Vietnam [sic]," this exhibition, in place since 2011, includes a number of original photographs taken by war correspondents from countries in the West, such as the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom. The third room, and the one that I emphasize in this section, is called "Historic Truths" (*Những Sự Thật Lịch Sử*), with a smaller attached room entitled "Dove (Peace)." Alongside the familiar imagery of the misdeeds of the U.S. military during and after the war, including torture, mass death, postwar abuses from Agent Orange and ordnance, and broad quantitative evidence portraying the multifaceted assault on Vietnam, is more contemporary imagery about the role of the Party in Vietnam's postwar development. A large section of the Historic Truths exhibit includes "before the war" and "after reform" photos of approximately thirty-five cities in Vietnam. Cities in the north, central, and southern parts of Vietnam are pictured in low-resolution, black-and-white images in the aftermath of the war, reduced to piles of rubble and devoid of life. Next to them sit high-quality, color photos of similar vantage points in the same cities today. Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Haiphong, Phu Quoc, Con Dao, Tien Giang, Thai Nguyen, Dien Bien Phu, and Hue are some of the sites shown in this exhibit. The photos provide a timeline for the transition from wartime to the nation's current successful reform period: For example, Thai Binh city promotes a bird's-eye view of a "new urban area" (*khu đô thị mới*) that glistens with new buildings, wide streets, and bustling sidewalks. To the image's left is a photo taken in 1969 from a comparable point above the city but with large pockets of empty and burnt spaces (leaving the tourist with no doubt that this is the result of bombing activity), empty sidewalks, and homes and businesses with their roofs and rooms demolished. In photo after photo, the visitor is presented with the modern, bustling, uncontaminated cities of contemporary Vietnam. These photos sit alongside frequent recognitions of Ho Chi Minh as father of the country, founder of the Party, and visionary shepherding Vietnam through the American war. The link between the images and the narrative is clear: Only through the Party's enduring leadership against foreign aggression has Vietnam's renewal been possible.

Another significant exhibit in the Historic Truths area features Ho Chi Minh's declaration of indepen-

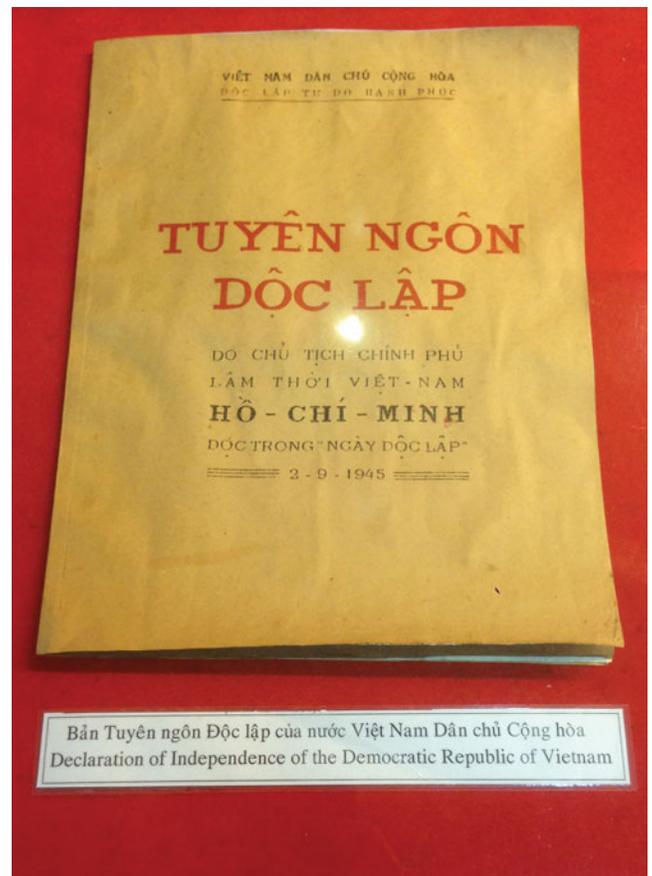


Figure 4. A copy of the Vietnamese Declaration of Independence, read by Ho Chi Minh in Hanoi on National Day, 2 September 1945. Source: Photograph by the author. (Color figure available online.)

dence speech in pictures on 2 September 1945. What is depicted as the authentic written copy of the speech sits protected under glass alongside grainy photos from that day (Figure 4). In the museum (as in museums throughout Vietnam) the Party unambiguously details the ways in which Ho Chi Minh borrowed freely from the passages in the U.S. Declaration of Independence in writing Vietnam's own pronouncement of sovereignty: "All men are created equal," both documents state, "they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." Ho Chi Minh's intention behind the usage of these excerpts was to write a speech that used the West's own words of equality and the pursuit of happiness to speak to the United States about the parallels between Vietnam's fledgling sovereignty and that of the United States. In other words, part of the power behind Vietnam's declaration of independence was that it used an anticolonial language that countries in the West like the United States were

familiar with and sympathetic to (Duiker 2000; Brocheux 2007). The museum's intention in presenting the original Ho Chi Minh authored document in the contemporary era is to affirm state power by showing how the United States disobeyed its own words when it invaded Vietnam. The U.S. invasion and subsequent takeover were destructive and powerful, the exhibit stresses, but the resistance, guile, and fortitude of the Party ensured eventual triumph. Tourism is a critical platform for the Party to educate a mass foreign audience of this position.

Conclusions

In a recent article suggesting the end of tourism, Gale (2009) wrote that "there is little of the world that is left to be 'discovered'" (120) and that "tourism is no longer *special*" (121). This article has offered an alternative to these arguments by showing tourism's power in the pronouncement of state authority in Vietnam. I conduct a walking tour of the museum to shed light on how tourism and state-building work in tandem in modern-day Vietnam. The War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City is a deliberately provocative and one-sided presentation of a well-known episode in history, but it is also more than that: It is a museum whose authors use tourism to generate "new" truths about what the American war is and how it affects Vietnam today. It uses tourism to force people to make sense of the Vietnamese government's perspective on the war. Additionally, it accesses tourism to "other" the United States by depicting it as irrational, inhumane, "aberrant, undeveloped, inferior" (Said 1978, 300).

In this sense, tourism is an important and still unfolding currency for the Party. Vietnam uses its position as an up-and-coming tourist destination for foreigners to draw attention to the savagery of the U.S. government through the museum (Kwon 2012). A tourism venue, rather than a policy decision, a popular media outlet, a diplomatic outing, a billboard, a memorial, an international conference, or a performing arts installation has been chosen by the Vietnamese state as a suitable site for performing the superior Vietnam–inferior United States binary. A tourism venue like the museum is both a more permanent and a more malleable space to showcase the Party's version of the historical war and its role in the country today. The museum allows the Party to create a shifting narrative of itself to a diverse and international audience. If legitimizing its authority to its own citizens is a significant component of the Party's daily

activities (Pelley 2002; Kerkvliet 2003) this article has also demonstrated that it is also vital to present the Party in a victorious and healing light to outsiders as well.

In speaking to the importance of tourism to Vietnam, Lema and Agrusa (2012) stated that employment in travel and tourism will exceed 10.4 percent of total employment by 2020. This statistic parallels other countries in Asia with economies that are becoming increasingly reliant on both domestic and international tourism (Winter, Teo, and Chang 2008; Singh 2009; Minca and Oakes 2011). Thus, the numbers indicate that the Asian Century—a phrase used to describe the current era's expected political, economic, and cultural domination by Asia—will be driven in large part by tourism receipts. What we do not yet have a clear view on is the extent to which states in Asia will embrace and drive the Asian Century designation or how the Asian Century will be shaped by representations of both Asia and the West by states in Asia. The War Remnants Museum sheds light on how a government in Asia depicts itself as a global leader by showing that it has won a war against a state in the Global North and rehabilitated itself in the process. For the Party, winning the war against the United States is an analogy for the ascendance of Asia as the dominant player in the world today because the museum shows how a country with a nascent sense of sovereignty was nevertheless able to curry favor and support from a host of countries around the world in its resistance to the world's then-hegemon. Moreover, in its depiction of a David versus Goliath type of titanic struggle for independence, the museum makes clear how strong, resilient, and bound together Vietnamese people are when faced with hostilities from the West.

A recent review of the tourism studies literature notes that contemporary theorizing on leisure in the global north has not kept up with the rapid increase in Asian tourism, leaving "tourism studies conceptually ill-equipped" to engage with issues, performances, and spaces of tourism in the non-West, and in particular in Asia (Cohen and Cohen 2012, 2195; but see Minca and Oakes 2011). This article seeks to remedy this gap in the literature and in the process presents a richer picture of the role of tourism in nation building in Asia and geopolitical relations arising from Asia. More broadly, it illustrates how the debates over the Asian Century will be shaped by Asian representations of East and West, North and South, self and other, us and them, and indigenous knowledge and "global" knowledge, as much as it will be driven by Asia's projected economic dominance.

Acknowledgments

Conversations over the years with Gerard Sasges, Jonathan Rigg, Simon Springer, Ginger Davis, James Sidaway, Tim Oakes, Dau Duy, Harnng Luh Sin, Taro Futamura, Herbert Covert, Neil Coe, Colin Flint, Alice Chen, Chris McMorran, and Alan Ziegler have helped me think through Vietnam and my arguments in this article. I presented pieces of this article in Honolulu in 2012 at the Engaging with Vietnam conference and in Kyoto in 2013 at the International Geographical Union conference. Thanks to the audiences at those meetings for their helpful feedback. I express my gratitude to Richard Wright and the reviewers for their contributions. The Political Economy and Space Research Group at the National University of Singapore Geography Department made this article a much better product.

Funding

The support of National University of Singapore Start-Up Research Grant WBS R-109-000-128-133 is acknowledged.

Notes

1. In contrast to many countries in the Global North, in southern Vietnam the ground floor is not called the first floor, but rather the ground or “0” floor. In this article I adopt the floor numbering system from southern Vietnam.
2. The Party is notoriously reluctant to publicly release any sort of statistical data related to tourism and its reliability when it does is an open question (see Scott, Miller, and Lloyd 2006).
3. The others are Ben Thanh Market, the Saigon Central Post Office, the Saigon-Notre Dame Basilica, and the Reunification Palace.
4. Thanks to Tim Oakes for pointing this out to me.
5. I am including here the recent wars against Iraq and Afghanistan. A possible exception is Second Lieutenant Frank Calley’s war crimes conviction as a member of the U.S. Army for his role in the My Lai massacre.
6. Examples include photos of people who are blind, deaf, physically disabled and deformed; who have breathing problems; who are fighting various strains of cancer; and who have other genetic diseases.

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