

Could Some Top Vietnamese Officials Be Having Second Thoughts?

Among the names of Vietnamese education officials listed as "Task Force Members and Representatives", a conspicuous omission is Nguyen Thien Nhan, who is the Minister of Education and Training and a Deputy Prime Minister. Perhaps he was simply too busy to participate in any way. But given the high-profile U.S. names listed, it would have been natural to include Nhan at least in an honorary capacity.

As I mentioned before, on October 17 Nguyen Thien Nhan telephoned me to thank me for writing my "Second Opinion" article. His extremely positive reaction was not expected, since the article argued strongly against the policy of his Ministry of using Vietnamese government money (borrowed from the World Bank) to construct new universities. I especially criticized MOET for using money on American "experts" rather than to help Vietnamese teachers and professors. In view of this, I was pleasantly surprised that Nhan liked my article so much.

After Nguyen Thien Nhan invited me to meet with him during his U.S. trip in November and mentioned that he would be in San Francisco on November 15, I contacted the Vietnamese Consulate in San Francisco to set up a meeting. The Deputy Prime Minister was slated to lead a two-day event, organized by the Consulate, that would include meetings on U.S.-Vietnam collaboration in higher education. But soon after, Nhan's office informed me that he had canceled his visit to San Francisco. So my meeting with DPM Nhan will have to wait until Ann and I visit Hanoi in March.

Admittedly I have no knowledge of and have heard no gossip about the inner workings of the Vietnamese leadership in education. But I'd like to speculate -- perhaps this is an exercise in wishful thinking on my part -- that some top officials in Hanoi have been having second thoughts about the expensive and poorly thought-out plans of the Harvard/Fulbright/New School group. They might be wondering whether Thomas Vallely, Ben Wilkinson, Bob Kerrey, and a bunch of administrators from the California university system would make the best "partners", and about whether it is in Vietnam's interest to take out a World Bank loan of USD 400 million and pay most of it to Americans.

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