

Dangers in Exaggerating Vietnam's Current Failings

There are dangers in exaggerating the extent of corruption and administrative incompetence in Vietnam. In the first place, when Westerners (such as Valley and Wilkinson of the Fulbright program in Vietnam) make these overstated claims, they are showing a double standard, because in many cases the governments and institutions they represent have been rocked by corruption scandals that dwarf anything that happens in Vietnam.

In the second place, the exaggerated allegations can be used as justification for a policy of U.S. intervention and direction. That is, Americans are quick to claim the right to make decisions on the grounds that the national authorities in the Third World country are too incompetent or corrupt to be entrusted with that responsibility. The alleged failure of leadership in that country becomes a convenient rationale for neocolonialism.

The dangers I am talking about are not unique to Vietnam, but rather are causes for concern in much of the Third World. Historically the clearest illustrations come from Africa, and most of the scholars and diplomats who have commented about this threat to national sovereignty and national interest in the Third World are actually Africa specialists.

One of the most famous is the Canadian Stephen Lewis. He is a former Canadian ambassador to the U.N., deputy executive director of UNICEF, and U.N. Secretary-General's special envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa; in 2005, *Time* magazine named him one of the 100 most influential people in the world. In his book *Race Against Time*, he wrote:

I would have liked to confront the frequent preoccupation with African "governance" on the one hand and African "corruption" on the other. The corruption issue is particularly gnawing since it forever seems to tarnish the continent's right to health and recovery. I always flinch when people bandy about charges of corruption: it constitutes such a double standard in the face of our own Canadian sponsorship scandal, or the billions unaccounted for in the U.S. administration of Iraq's oil revenues. I've learned that corruption is an accusation most eagerly hurled by people in glass houses.

Later in his book Stephen Lewis has a detailed discussion of the disastrous introduction of school fees in Africa in the 1990's, which he describes as the direct result of World Bank pressure. He characterizes the education policies of the World Bank as "neo-colonial chic."

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Unfortunately, it is not only Americans who indulge in exaggerated criticisms of Vietnam; some influential Vietnamese commentators have also done this. For example, in the English translation of a paper by the IDS group titled "Petition: Reforming and Modernizing Education" we read that Vietnam has "nothing but failure to show for the past quarter of a century" in education.

This type of hyperbole -- whether by Americans such as Valley or by Vietnamese writers -- has two harmful effects. In the first place, it provides a justification for the viewpoint of Americans associated with the Fulbright program, the Ash Institute, and The New School that any "apex" university in Vietnam must be designed and controlled by Americans.

In the second place, when Vietnamese young people read that all 30 institutes of the Vietnam Academy

of Science and Technology together produce only 44 papers per year (this statistic, which appeared in the newspaper Tuoi Tre as part of the Vietnamese translation of the Valley report, is completely false) or that Vietnamese education has "nothing but failure to show for the past quarter of a century," they are likely to react with shame and cynicism. The effect will be to reenforce their tendency to think that Vietnamese scientists, professors, and leaders are inferior, and that only what's in the West is good. For example, they will think that an Associate's Degree from a U.S. community college is worth more than a 4-year degree from Vietnam National University. Two of the traditional strengths of education in Vietnam -- young people's respect for their teachers and their pride in Vietnam's ancient culture -- are being undermined by the (widely disseminated) grossly exaggerated statements criticizing science and education in Vietnam.

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