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1970 Trip to Vietnam

As a 26 year old co-founder of the Yippies (the Youth International Party) I traveled to North Vietnam in 1970 as part of an all-women's peace delegation. I believed that the Vietnamese people should have been able to determine their own destiny, and that the U.S. had no business over there. When Ho Chi Minh said "Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom," I understood what he meant. Despite a ban by the U.S. government on travel to North Vietnam, I took the risk of an illegal trip to see for myself what was happening there so that I could report what I saw with my own eyes and be a more effective anti-war organizer back home. I also went to express solidarity with the Vietnamese resistance and to acknowledge our common humanity. I had no idea in advance that I would also have an opportunity to address the American GIs (in between rock songs) on Vietnamese radio and encourage them to lay down their arms.

Before the trip I already profoundly appreciated the Vietnamese. Like many others, I saw them through the lens of the David and Goliath story. Most Vietnamese are literally small in stature, and there were iconic photos in the media of a small Vietnamese woman juxtaposed with a huge, burly American GI who she was guarding as a prisoner. But more importantly, the U.S. military was the most powerful in the world with massive weaponry and unlimited resources. On the other hand, the Vietnamese had the collective strength of their people and the love of people throughout the world.

I was a socialist (still am), and I saw in the Vietnamese struggle an attempt both to wrest control of their country's destiny and to build a society where people cared more about each other than about amassing personal wealth. Much of the population was willing to sacrifice greatly for these goals. They were led by people like Ho Chi Minh, Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap and Mdm. Nguyen Thi Binh. I saw in those leaders individuals who were intelligent and caring, whose love for their people was their primary motivation. I was struck by the fact that Ho Chi Minh was a poet, Gen. Giap was a school teacher prior to leading the military effort, as was Madame Binh before her role in the Provisional Revolutionary Government of Vietnam and later as a

negotiator of the Paris Peace Accords.

In 1970, however, it was not the leaders of the struggle who we encountered in Vietnam. Rather we met with the “ordinary” people of Vietnam who were carrying out extraordinary tasks, some of them part of the “long-haired army,” the civilian movement composed largely of women who engaged in much of the legal political work in the movement for national liberation.

As a woman I was also impressed that the leaders of their struggle thought that women actually mattered. Ho said, “Women make up half of society. If women are not liberated, then society is not free.” My visit confirmed what I had heard, that women were involved in all levels of the struggle.

Some say my view of the Vietnamese struggle was a romantic one. I continue to believe it was basically accurate. That generation of Vietnamese inspired people and movements around the world to struggle for liberation. They asserted there was a commonality among the human family and fostered a world wide camaraderie among those who struggled. They proved that victory was possible, victory over the world’s most powerful military machine ever assembled. It was a mythic battle, one that continues to reverberate today.

I left Vietnam in 1970 armed spiritually and informationally to fight harder to end the war. But I also left with lessons that would energize my political activity for the next 43 years. I left believing that ordinary people could overcome extraordinary challenges, particularly if they worked together. I left believing that people united could change reality for the better. I left believing that the pursuit of justice was a worthy life activity.

Back in the U.S, I continued to participate in the movement to end the war, and later joined other social justice activities, opposing racism at home and U.S. wars in Central America. Beginning in 1985 I fought for 15 years to end long-term solitary confinement in U.S. prisons and I have the Vietnamese to thank for that. Well, not the long-term solitary confinement, of course, but the will to struggle for 15 years against the torture that exists within U. S. prisons. When we began that work in 1985, people thought I was crazy if I mentioned “torture”. It was a difficult, uphill battle. I am sometimes asked why we kept on battling all those 15 years as we watched state after state build control unit or solitary confinement prisons. What inspired us to keep going with such an uphill battle? One part of the answer is the people of Vietnam during the 1960s and 1970s.

2013 Return to Vietnam

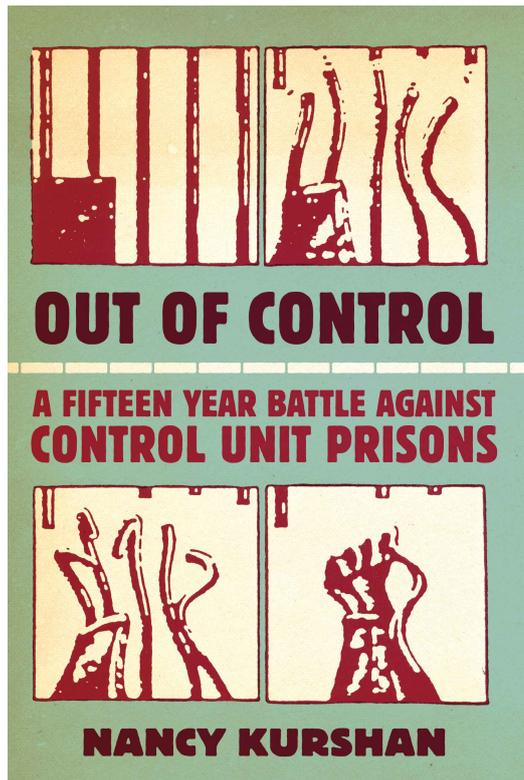
I had always wanted to revisit Vietnam but felt that returning as a tourist would be uncomfortable. When the Vietnamese invited American anti-war activists to return for the celebration of the 40th anniversary of the Paris Peace Accords, I jumped at the opportunity. It turned out to be an extraordinary two weeks. Very briefly, I found the land to be exquisitely beautiful, the people vibrant and welcoming. Visiting the schools attended by children who are victims of Agent Orange was a heart-wrenching, indelible experience. Crossing over the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) into a united Vietnam was a dream come true, and climbing down into the Cu Chi tunnels, feeling the history of the guerrilla insurgency, was amazing. The most striking moment, however, was having the opportunity to exchange a few words with, and be embraced by, Madame Binh. The experience that led me to think about my own work was the encounter with Vietnamese women and men who had been imprisoned and tortured in the Tiger Cages.

The Tiger Cages of Vietnam

At prisons such as the one on Con Son Island 200 miles off the south coast of Vietnam, there were the Tiger Cages, five feet by nine feet cages so named because of their similarity to those that housed such animals – they were the same size and one could not even stand up in them. Many Vietnamese were tortured directly by Americans before being turned over to the Saigon authorities. The torture at the Tiger Cages was carried out by Saigon police and military, with the U.S. complicity. The U.S. government paid their salaries, instructed them, delivered people to them, and was completely knowledgeable about the torture.

All this was kept secret from the American people, however, until then-U.S. President Richard Nixon sent a Congressional delegation to Viet Nam in 1970. In order to visit a prison in North Vietnam that held U.S. POWs, the delegation was required to by the North Vietnamese government to also visit the Tiger Cages in South Vietnam. Thanks to people like Don Luce, who would today be considered a “whistle blower,” the American public became informed about these cages. Armed with maps drawn up by a former prisoner, part of the delegation bravely took it upon themselves to deviate from the official tour in order to see what was really going on. Don Luce describes seeing a man with 3 fingers cut off, another whose skull was split open, and many with open sores on ankles as a result of shackling. Much of this was justified by the

U.S.-backed South Vietnamese government which claimed the prisoners were criminals, not prisoners-of-war, and therefore they were not protected by the Geneva Conventions of 1949-50



When we returned in 2013 to Vietnam for the celebration of the 40th anniversary of the signing of the Paris Peace Accords, we spent much of a day with Vietnamese survivors of the Tiger Cages. They told us that at the time of the Accords, there were about 6,000 political prisoners all of whom were opposed to the Saigon regime. The torture employed by the U.S.-backed Saigon regime, with the full support of the U.S. government and military, was extreme. Bamboo splinters were shoved under prisoners' fingernails. Soapy water was poured in their ears and their ears pounded. Many of the women were raped as well as tortured. Many prisoners were blinded in the course of the torture.

The people we met with had been imprisoned for 13 years, 10 years, and 7 years. They explained that the cages were down below ground level and the guards would walk overhead on the roof of the cage which was made up of iron bars. Sometimes prisoners would be thrown in there for no reason, for 50 days at a time. The prisoner would eat, sleep, and defecate there. At times, the guards would just leave the excrement in the cell. At other times, they would throw lime powder down into the cell in order to blind the prisoner. One night in 1961, 17 people were tortured. Five of them died and were thrown in a mass grave.

Understandably they were more excited to explain how they kept their spirits high and worked together to outsmart their torturers. Madame Hoang Thi Khanh informed us that the more active the anti-war movement, the better their life was in prison. What wonderful news that was to hear. Not one eye in our delegation was dry as Mme. Khanh sang one of the songs they sang to maintain their sanity and keep strong — in the face of U.S.-sponsored torture.

The Tiger Cages of the U.S.

In 1963 the United States shut down the infamous Alcatraz Prison located on an island in the San Francisco Bay. It had become too expensive to run and too infamous for its brutality. In its place Marion Penitentiary in downstate Illinois was opened. Marion became the prison where the U.S. would send those prisoners it most hated. Among these would be well-known political prisoners and prison organizers who had caused the U.S. “trouble” in other prisons. In 1983 prisoners led a peaceful work stoppage when guards brutally beat a Mexican prisoner. Among those leading this strike was Rafael Cancel Miranda, a sort of Nelson Mandela of Puerto Rico, which the U.S. held as a colony (and still does).

In response, for the first time ever, the U.S. “locked down” the entire prison (the Marion Lockdown) in retribution for the strike. This came to be called a “Control Unit” since its purpose was to totally control prisoners 24-7, frequently never even allowing them out of their cells. Two years later, some of us living in Chicago came to believe that if there was no opposition to this horror that the Lockdown would never be ended. Thus was born the Committee to End the Marion Lockdown (CEML). I was one of the founding members of CEML, as was my life partner Steve Whitman and radical attorney Jan Susler.

We stated from the beginning that such a brutal institution could not exist in a genuine democracy. The U.S. said their intention was to put all of the “bad apples” there and thus be able to free up the rest of the prison system. We said that it was just the opposite: if we (society) gave them Marion they would build more and more Marions, more and more Control Unit prisons. Sadly, we were correct and over the next 15 years Control Unit prisons were built in virtually every state, each one more brutal than the next, each one condemned by Human Rights activists as inhumane and essentially torture chambers. Many people joined CEML over our 15 years of existence. We varied in many ways but had as our core beliefs:

a) that U.S. prisons were mechanisms of control to stop insurgency efforts, particularly by Black people and that prisons had very little to do with crime, despite the claims of the ruling elites;

b) that just as prisons were instruments of control for U.S. society, Control Units were instruments of control for the prison system;

c) that the obscene fact that Black people were 8 times more likely to be sent to prison than white people indicated the truth of assertions a) and b) above and made it imperative to combat that system;

d) that unless we all did something about this injustice this monstrous process would continue unimpeded. Consistent with all of this Steve, a statistician, analyzed “criminal” “justice” data and wrote a series of articles called the “[Crime of Black Imprisonment](#)” and the “Continuing Crime of Black Imprisonment”) that became widely read throughout the movement in the United States and even beyond.

I eventually wrote a history of CEML, *Out of Control: A Fifteen Year Battle Against Control Unit Prisons*, that is available in book form and on line at <http://www.freedomarchives.org/CEML.html>

. The African-American scholar Michelle Alexander has produced a wonderful book called [The New Jim Crow](#) that addresses mass incarceration. I hope that you will be able to read and study these sources.

Control Unit prisons (frequently referred to as isolation prisons) spread everywhere, most notoriously in California, which holds more prisoners than any other state. As the brutality has

continued and even intensified, prisoners have said that they can no longer stand it and would rather die than live in such conditions. In July 2013, 30,000 prisoners in California's penitentiaries began a hunger strike with the abolition of long-term solitary confinement at the center of their demands. As I write it is now Day 45. Reading the reports of their extreme sacrifice, I remind myself how important it was that we tried for years to shut down the first such Control Unit prison in downstate Illinois. Yes, for 15 years citizens of Illinois tried to shut down Marion federal penitentiary and prevent the proliferation of these institutions. And more relevantly how important that fight remains today.

Connecting the Dots

We can view political and social reality as a matrix of dots, as problems unconnected to one another. But doing so will leave us with a superficial understanding of reality. Or we can try to connect the dots and try to understand what patterns emerge. When we connect the dots, we can see there is an intimate connection between the Tiger Cages of Vietnam, the U.S. Penitentiary at Marion, California's Pelican Bay Prison, Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo and all the rest.

Torture

The torture employed by the U.S.-backed Saigon regime, with the full support of the U.S. government and military, was extreme. Although there are definite instances of physical torture in U.S. prisons, more characteristically the torture is of a psychological nature. In California, 500 prisoners have been in solitary for over 10 years, 200 for over 15 years, and 78 for over 20 years! A *New York Times* editorial on 2/8/2011 entitled "Cruel Isolation" lamented that "For many decades, the civilized world has recognized prolonged isolation of prisoners in cruel conditions to be inhumane, even torture. The Geneva Convention forbids it. Even at Abu Ghraib in Iraq, where prisoners were sexually humiliated and physically abused systematically and with official sanction, the jailers had to get permission of their commanding general to keep someone in isolation for more than 30 days."

Political Prisoners

Most of the prisoners in the Tiger Cages were political prisoners opposed to the Saigon regime. In U.S. prisons, most of the 80,000 people in long-term solitary confinement were not initially incarcerated as a result of political activity. However, the political contours of U.S. society are of course responsible for delivering hugely disparate numbers of people of color to the prison doors. Albert Hunt's article in the NY Times on Nov. 20, 2011 entitled ["A Country of Inmates"](#) reported that "more than 60 percent of the United States' prisoners are black or Hispanic, though these groups comprise less than 30 percent of the population." One in nine black children has a parent in jail! As noted above, a black person in the U.S. is 8 times more likely to go prison than is a white person.

In addition, although the U.S. denies it, there are without a doubt, scores (perhaps hundreds) of political prisoners in the U.S. When we started our work, people like Black Panthers Sundiata Acoli and Sekou Odinga, Native American Leonard Peltier, revolutionary Bill Dunne, Puerto Rican *independentista* Oscar Lopez-Rivera, just to name a few, were all at Marion. All of those people I just mentioned are still in prison in 2013, as are many other political prisoners. Of course the Vietnamese political prisoners have been free for many years now. None of them were imprisoned as long as Leonard Peltier, Sundiata Acoli or Oscar Lopez Rivera who have all been incarcerated for more than 30 years! Just for comparison, Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for 27 years. (I wonder, will it take a liberation movement to free these political prisoners?) U.S. political prisoners are probably the longest-held political prisoners in the world. In a 2008 court hearing for the Angola 3, the prison warden Burl Cain said he would never transfer Albert Woodfox out of solitary where he's been for over 40 years because "I still know that he is still trying to practice Black Pantherism, and I still would not want him walking around my prison because he would organize the young new inmates. I would have me all kinds of problems, more than I could stand. And I would have the [whites] chasing after them."

Secrecy

It wasn't until 1970 that the American people found out about the Tiger Cages. It was because of the bravery of Don Luce and others who were willing to believe what they heard from the Vietnamese and to deviate from the official tour of the prison on Con Son island, that the horrendous conditions were revealed. Today American prisons are shrouded in a similar secrecy. The media are almost completely barred from entering and when they are able to enter, they are presented with a sanitized tour, allowed to speak only with handpicked prisoners.

Demonizing

The Geneva Conventions, signed after World War II, forbid the kinds of torture carried out 20 years later in the Tiger Cages. The U.S. rationalized the torture by insisting that the prisoners were not political and therefore not protected as POWs. They were merely criminals. Madame Dang Hong Nhut explained to us during our visit that there was a major campaign to “criminalize” the prisoners so that they would not have to be released as was agreed to in the Paris Accords. This involved taking photos and fingerprints from the prisoners. There were 500 women prisoners, and they were aware the Accords had been signed thanks to a radio smuggled in by French supporters. When the prisoners found out about the scheme to “criminalize” them, they decided to resist by refusing to allow fingerprints or a normal photo to be taken. When the guards demanded photos, the prisoners closed their eyes, opened their mouths, and contorted their faces. When fingerprints were demanded, some scraped their fingers on cement to deform their prints.

Today in the California prisons, the prisoners are not even thought of as ordinary criminals. If they were, longterm solitary confinement would be difficult to defend. So the authorities justify these extreme conditions by insisting they are all gang members or affiliates, and many Americans accept this explanation as a rationale for torture.

Hunger Strike as a Tool

As one of the few options available to protest unacceptable conditions, the Hunger Strike has been a tool used by prisoners around the world from Vietnam to Ireland to Palestine to Guantanamo. The Tiger Cage survivors explained to us that in 1971 there was a 47 day hunger strike in one of the prison camps, and the following year it moved to the other camps. Even when they were on hunger strike they tried to remain optimistic because “if we weren’t happy, we couldn’t survive.”

The Devil’s Bargain

Madame Hoang Thi Khanh told us that the Saigon regime gave them a choice— you can be killed or you can be released by renouncing the cause. “Give up your ideology, the call of Ho Chi Minh, and you will be free.” In the California prisons, people have been offered better conditions in exchange for naming other people as troublemakers or gang members.

Outside Support

When we asked the survivors of the Tiger Cages how they kept their spirits up, they told us that they sang all the time. They composed songs about prisoners' defiance, and songs about the feeling of separation and the romantic reunion that would come. But their spirits were also lifted by the knowledge of support by peace activists around the world. Similarly the support of activists on the outside helps prisoners in the U.S. continue to struggle and to maintain the Hunger Strike.

Ho Chi Minh was a poet who himself endured harsh imprisonment. In one of his poems, he writes "When the prison gates are open, the real dragon will fly out." Not long after I returned to the United States in 1970, I moved to Kent, Ohio where the 4 students had been killed protesting the war. I returned to help rekindle the movement there, to help people overcome the fear that remained from the murders of Allison Krause, Jeffrey Miller, Sandra Scheuer and William Schroeder. We started an underground newspaper that we named "The Real Dragon." Many of our stories were about Black political prisoners in the United States and liberation struggles around the world in addition to the movement at home.

When the U.S. attacked Laos, we organized a protest demonstration at Kent State. I was later arrested on felony charges for spraypainting "U.S. OUT OF LAOS" on a brick wall. I was offered a deal— leave Kent and the charges will be reduced to a misdemeanor with no jail time. Kent is a small town and we had already received bomb threats at our home. I was anxious to move on and took the deal.

The following year there was a huge uprising at Attica, a prison in upstate New York which was brought to a brutal end by a murderous assault by the New York State Police that killed 43 guards and prisoners. I began to be concerned about the mass incarceration of people of color, as well as the imprisonment of political activists. I believed that the rebellion at Attica was motivated by the same spirit that proclaims "Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom" as the Vietnamese had expressed. At Attica they said "We are men, we are not beasts, and we will not be treated as such." This was said by L.D. Barkley, shortly before the Rockefeller-led NY State police moved in to massacre 43 men, the 24 year old Barkley among them.

Skip now to 2013, and it is this same spirit that motivates prisoners in California to use one of the only tools available to them, the Hunger Strike, to attempt to transform their conditions. Long-term solitary confinement has been acknowledged as a form of torture by all the significant human rights organizations in the world. And yet on any given day 80,000 people in the U.S. live under these conditions.

I worry about the prisoners who are risking their lives in this California Hunger Strike. I wonder if people on the outside will respond in sufficient numbers and strength? Will Americans recognize our common humanity, or will we just go about business as usual, as if these people were of another species? The State of California would have us believe that all these people are gang members or affiliates and therefore have no credibility or humanity. It reminds me of the argument the U.S. government made to justify the torture of the Vietnamese in the Tiger Cages. They said they were “criminals”, not POWs, and therefore the protections of the Geneva Conventions did not apply. Across time and space, from Vietnam to Abu Ghraib to Pelican Bay, the U.S. engages in torture. When will we demand of our “leaders” that in times of peace or times of war, at home or abroad, torture is not acceptable?

As I was finishing this chapter, Michelle Alexander placed this magnificent post on her Facebook page. She wrote:

For the past several years, I have spent virtually all my working hours writing about or speaking about the immorality, cruelty, racism, and insanity of our nation’s latest caste system: mass incarceration. On this Facebook page I have written and posted about little else. But as I pause today to reflect on the meaning and significance of the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington, I realize that my focus has been too narrow. Five years after the March, Dr. King was speaking out against the Vietnam War, condemning America’s militarism and imperialism – famously stating that our nation was the “greatest purveyor of violence in the world.” He saw the connections between the wars we wage abroad, and the utter indifference we have for poor people, and people of color at home. He saw the necessity of openly critiquing an economic system that will fund war and will reward greed, hand over fist, but will not pay workers a living wage. Five years after the March on Washington, Dr. King was ignoring all those who told him to just stay in his lane, just stick to talking about civil rights. Yet here I am decades later, staying in my lane. I have not been speaking publicly about the relationship between drones abroad and the War on Drugs at home. I have not been talking about the connections between the corrupt capitalism that bails out Wall Street bankers, moves jobs overseas, and forecloses on homes with zeal, all while private prisons yield high returns and expand operations into a new market: caging immigrants. I have not been connecting the dots between the NSA spying on millions of Americans, the labeling of mosques as “terrorist organizations,” and the spy programs of the 1960s and 70s – specifically the FBI and COINTELPRO programs that placed civil rights

advocates under constant surveillance, infiltrated civil rights organizations, and assassinated racial justice leaders. I have been staying in my lane. But no more. In my view, the most important lesson we can learn from Dr. King is not what he said at the March on Washington, but what he said and did after. In the years that followed, he did not play politics to see what crumbs a fundamentally corrupt system might toss to the beggars of justice. Instead he connected the dots and committed himself to building a movement that would shake the foundations of our economic and social order, so that the dream he preached in 1963 might one day be a reality for all. He said that nothing less than “a radical restructuring of society” could possibly ensure justice and dignity for all. He was right. I am still committed to building a movement to end mass incarceration, but I will not do it with blinders on. If all we do is end mass incarceration, this movement will not have gone nearly far enough. A new system of racial and social control will be born again, all because we did not do what King demanded we do: connect the dots between poverty, racism, militarism and materialism. I’m getting out of my lane. I hope you’re already out of yours.

And this brings us full cycle. We will either connect the dots and understand what is happening to us, or we will face barbarism. I hope we choose the former!