

# PEACEWORKS



## Pathways to Reconciliation

HOW AMERICANS AND VIETNAMESE  
HAVE TRANSFORMED THEIR RELATIONSHIP

By Andrew Wells-Dang and Carl Stauffer



UNITED STATES  
INSTITUTE OF PEACE  
Making Peace Possible

NO. 197 | OCTOBER 2024

# PEACEWORKS

NO. 197 | OCTOBER 2024

---



RECONCILIATION

## ABOUT THE REPORT

This report applies theories of reconciliation, drawn from the practice of peacebuilding around the world, to the trajectory of postwar US-Vietnam relations. It is based on a series of dialogues and discussions conducted through the Vietnam War Legacies and Reconciliation Initiative of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP). Draft findings were presented at the Association of Asian Studies in Boston in April 2023 and the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam in Hanoi in July 2023.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Andrew Wells-Dang is a senior expert on Southeast Asia at USIP, where he leads the Vietnam War Legacies and Reconciliation Initiative. He joined USIP in 2021 after 20 years living in Vietnam. Carl Stauffer is a senior expert on reconciliation at USIP, where he supports transitional justice, restorative justice, and peace process initiatives. He was born and raised in Vietnam.

---

**Cover photo:** A woman greets a flight marking the 30th anniversary of Operation Babylift in Ho Chi Minh City on June 15, 2005. The flight carried 20 Vietnamese Americans who were among the 2,600 infants and children the operation took from Vietnam to the United States in April 1975. (Photo by Julian Abram Wainwright/EPA/Shutterstock)

The views expressed in this report are those of the author(s) alone. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Institute of Peace. The boundaries shown on any maps in this report are approximate and do not imply official endorsement or acceptance of the United States Institute of Peace. An online edition of this and related reports can be found on our website ([www.usip.org](http://www.usip.org)), together with additional information on the subject.

© 2024 by the United States Institute of Peace

### United States Institute of Peace

2301 Constitution Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20037

(202) 457-1700  
[www.USIP.org](http://www.USIP.org)

Peaceworks no. 197. First published 2024.

ISBN: 978-1-60127-944-6



UNITED STATES  
INSTITUTE OF PEACE PRESS



# Contents



1	Introduction
3	Understanding Reconciliation
8	Key Components of US-Vietnam Reconciliation
21	Lessons for Sustained Reconciliation



# Summary



In September 2023, President Joe Biden and General Secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng announced an upgrading of US-Vietnam relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, the highest level of bilateral ties. This improbable partnership marks the culmination of one of the most underappreciated transformations of recent decades. From bitter enmity during and immediately after a war in which 58,000 Americans and an estimated 3 million Vietnamese lost their lives, the two countries and their citizens have established positive and cooperative diplomatic, trade, and people-to-people relations. This story deserves wider attention, as it provides insight into distinctive American—and Vietnamese—approaches to peacebuilding that offer lessons for other conflicts in Asia and beyond.

The road to reconciliation has not been a straight or easy one. Indeed, for the first decade or more after the military victory of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in April 1975, US-Vietnam relations continued on the same tragic path of missed opportunities and misunderstood signals that characterized the previous years of conflict. The key turning points toward normalization and partnership came from ordinary US and Vietnamese citizens—veterans, families of the missing, peace activists, businesspeople, and Vietnamese Americans—who took initiatives to reach out across geopolitical and ideological lines, sometimes at personal risk. Once these civil society–led efforts began to show results, governments followed. While significant aspects of the reconciliation process are not yet completed, undeniable progress has been achieved.

This report applies theories of reconciliation, drawn from the practice of peacebuilding around the world, to the trajectory of postwar US-Vietnam relations. It analyzes both political normalization and societal relationships among Americans and Vietnamese as key aspects of reconciliation. Consistent with the focus of the Vietnam War Legacies and Reconciliation Initiative of the United States Institute of Peace, the report addresses physical legacies of the war such as Agent Orange, unexploded ordnance, and missing persons, as well as the nonmaterial aspects of healing, trauma, and psychosocial recovery. The report concludes with several lessons for policymakers and peacebuilding practitioners for bolstering sustained reconciliation in the future. These lessons are pertinent not only to US-Vietnam relations but also to other countries seeking to transform postconflict anger and resentment into cooperation and even partnership.





US veterans John Abbey, Daniel Gregg, Mike Breuker, and Fred Grimm carry a helmet belonging to Bùi Đức Hùng, a North Vietnamese soldier who was killed in the Vietnam war, in northern Phú Thọ Province, Vietnam, January 14, 2014. The helmet, which had been kept as a souvenir by a US veteran for 46 years, was returned to Hùng's family. (Photo by Trần Văn Minh/AP)

## Introduction

The war in Vietnam was a “war with many names,” both a civil struggle between revolutionaries and anti-communists and a theater of the Cold War.<sup>1</sup> Americans call it the “Vietnam War,” while some Vietnamese refer to the “American War,” differentiating it from 20th-century wars against France and China. Historians prefer to call it the “Second Indochina War,” bringing in the regional dimensions that greatly affected the neighboring countries of Laos and Cambodia.

For many Americans, Vietnam was not only a war but shorthand for an epoch of sociopolitical upheaval, including widespread anti-war protests, a nonviolent

civil rights movement, and the feminist revolution. The war became an external focal point of the internal flux in the country over the role of the US military in international affairs and the domestic unrest around gender and racial injustices. For Vietnamese, the war was a consequence of postcolonial ideological struggles between a communist-led state based in Hanoi, a rival anti-communist state based in Saigon (later Ho Chi Minh City), and religious sects and minority ethnic groups that sought autonomy from both poles of authority. While the “Vietnam era” in the United States ended with the withdrawal of US troops in 1973 and subsequent congressional termination of military aid,

the internal Vietnamese conflict was resolved by force with the military victory of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (“North Vietnam”) in April 1975.

In both countries, the cultural repercussions of these events continue to influence contemporary society and politics. The greatest achievement of American and Vietnamese peacemakers has been to transform the deep-seated legacies from obstacles into foundations for bolstering trust and understanding. Yet the literature on the postwar period and US-Vietnam rapprochement is still thin, especially when compared to the vast literature on the Vietnam War.<sup>2</sup>

With support from Congress, the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) launched its Vietnam War Legacies and Reconciliation Initiative in 2021, a latecomer to the peacebuilding process.<sup>3</sup> The initiative aims to foster greater dialogue, research, and communication in both countries to address the remaining consequences of the war. This report, a product of dialogues and discussions conducted through the USIP initiative, argues that the US-Vietnam partnership forms an instructive, nuanced case study on sustained reconciliation after devastating war and is of significant relevance to preventing further violence and building peace in today’s world. It places relations between Americans and Vietnamese in the context of theories of reconciliation developed by practitioners of peacebuilding

and conflict resolution around the world. Most approaches to understanding reconciliation are based on experiences among conflicting social groups (ethnic or religious groups, for instance) within a society. Yet they also apply to reconciliation among people across international borders.

This report has three main sections. The first section explores the meanings of reconciliation and various models of application, including reconciliation axes and the spectrum of reconciliation, and theories of change driving reconciliation. This section closes with two examples of international reconciliation (France-Germany and the United States–Japan) that are instructive for the US-Vietnam case. The second section delves into key elements of the postwar US-Vietnam relationship, such as efforts to tackle the effects of Agent Orange and unexploded ordnance, the search for missing remains from all sides, citizen diplomacy, forgiveness, reconciliation among Vietnamese inside and outside of the country, and the deepening, or “thickening,” of US-Vietnam bilateral relations. Finally, in the third section, the authors identify lessons for policymakers and practitioners for bolstering sustained reconciliation in the future. These lessons are pertinent not only to US-Vietnam relations but also to other countries seeking to transform postconflict anger and resentment into cooperation and even partnership.



# Understanding Reconciliation

“Reconciliation” is a much-used (indeed, perhaps overused) term whose meaning can shift significantly according to context. It has been used, for instance, to describe interpersonal conflict resolution, good working relationships, successfully negotiated peace agreements, and political power-sharing arrangements. This report favors a narrower definition, one that is particularly applicable to postconflict peacebuilding: the construction of sociopolitical cohesion at individual, family, communal, and national levels. “Constructing cohesion” here refers to restoring meaningful relationships, nurturing collective concern for the common good, and establishing a shared view of a future to which all formerly divided parties belong.<sup>4</sup> Such reconciliation can encompass the normalization of diplomatic relations between former enemies, but it can also extend far beyond that and can involve changes in interpersonal relationships as well as in institutional and political relationships.

Like some other models of reconciliation, this definition outlines a three-pillar process that begins by acknowledging past suffering, moves on to changing destructive attitudes and behavior into new relationships and norms, and concludes by building a more just society with sustainable peace.<sup>5</sup> In a similar vein, Vietnamese American author Viet Thanh Nguyen calls for “just memory” based on an ethical awareness of humanity and inhumanity, equal access to sites of memory within and among countries, and the ability to imagine a new world. Such remembrance is contrasted with “unjust forgetting” that repeats a history of violence and leads inexorably to the next war.<sup>6</sup> These concepts of reconciliation are closely linked to theories of transitional justice, which include

features of accountability and reparations; (personal) reconciliation and healing; truth-telling and memorialization; and societal transformation.<sup>7</sup>

Despite these similarities, international comparative cases highlight important distinctions among different aspects and models of reconciliation. For example, the reconciliation axes model differentiates between *past* reconciliation (making peace with and letting go of revenge from historical harms) and *future* reconciliation (a joint visioning process that allows conflicting groups to imagine a shared future). A distinction is also made between *vertical* reconciliation (between the state and its citizens) and *horizontal* reconciliation (between individuals, communal networks, and societies).<sup>8</sup>

In the reconciliation spectrum model (see figure 1), varying degrees of reconciliation are positioned on a spectrum that ranges from minimalist to maximalist. The *minimalist* approach, sometimes referred to as the “moving on” or “thin” approach, focuses on a cessation of violence, the maintenance of rule of law, a functioning political community, and agnostic politics (i.e., a kind of politics that is efficient or universal but devoid of moral or normative imperatives). In such contexts, former enemies coexist with little trust or respect and few shared values. On the other end of the spectrum, a *maximalist* approach focuses on transformation and emphasizes social renewal, healing, repentance and forgiveness, restorative justice, and moral repair—all of which are understood as reversing structural marginalization and discrimination and restoring the rights and belonging of victim-survivors. Situated between the minimalist and maximalist understandings, a deliberative or *reform*

Figure 1. Reconciliation spectrum



**Source:** Adapted from Simon Keyes, "Mapping Reconciliation," Peacemakers Network, March 2019, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5d0d32005d7640000177b27d/t/5d6733dd0d5ff60001df2014/1567044574969/Mapping-Reconciliation-.pdf>.

approach to reconciliation prioritizes rights, institutional reform, justice and accountability, reparation, and new norms and narratives.<sup>9</sup>

Reconciliation processes can be differentiated not only by the axes they prioritize and their place on the reconciliation spectrum, but also according to the strategies they embrace and the theories of change that inform those strategies. Strategies can be applied singly by government or nongovernmental actors in their policies and programming, but more commonly several strategies are used in tandem at different levels and within different sectors of society. Some of the most commonly encountered strategies—several of which are strongly relevant to US-Vietnam reconciliation—are described in table 1: social identity; capacity building; contact/healthy relationships; shared goals; inclusive peacebuilding; arts and storytelling; trauma-informed healing, recovery, and resilience; and systems/structures.

### APPLICATIONS TO US-VIETNAM RELATIONS

Many of these theories of change are evident in the process of US-Vietnam reconciliation. Of particular interest are the practices of contact/healthy relationships, shared goals, arts and storytelling, trauma-informed

healing, and systems/structures. Over time, intensive citizen diplomacy and people-to-people interactions have strengthened the relationships between Americans and Vietnamese. In the process, whether intended or not, psychosocial healing has occurred, and arts and storytelling have increased levels of empathy and promoted educational and cultural understanding. These activities have helped minimize revenge and build tolerance. They allow each side to be recognized politically and socially by the other (see figure 2), which is necessary to maintain peace and reconciliation.

The shared goals theory of change is probably less central to US-Vietnam reconciliation, though it is by no means irrelevant. Diplomatic efforts and government goodwill helped steer reconciliation toward shared goals and common approaches to reparations, which allowed the two sides to cooperate on mutually beneficial processes of rapprochement. This collaboration helped both sides advance their own interests and meet their own needs without negating the interests and needs of the other side.

Social identity theory, while important, usually is not as relevant in interstate conflicts as it is in intrastate

**Table 1. Reconciliation strategies and theories of change**

Strategy	Theory of change	Focus
<b>Social identity</b>	Effective reconciliation must seek to create a shared superordinate identity encompassing conflicting groups.	This theory of change focuses on individual motivation and emotion, personality, and collective identity factors such as human dignity and recognition politics. <sup>a</sup>
<b>Capacity building</b>	Building the capacity of peacebuilding actors (individuals, groups, organizations, communities, and diplomats) in key conflict resolution and transformation skills will lead to reconciliation.	Phenomena of collective bias, emergent values and norms, and group structure as critical dynamics for the reconciliation process. <sup>b</sup>
<b>Contact/healthy relationships</b>	Positive, well-facilitated contact between conflicting groups can foster reconciliation.	Historical and ongoing relational dynamics of group assimilation, social comparison, positive and negative differences, and interdependence. <sup>c</sup>
<b>Shared goals</b>	Conflicting parties that take joint action on common goals (e.g., postconflict reconstruction) are more likely to engage in reconciliation.	Cooperative problem-solving as a means to create action plans for existing challenges, build key positive relationships, and constructively shift “conflict-saturated narratives.” <sup>d</sup>
<b>Inclusive peacebuilding</b>	Peacebuilding processes that are more inclusive of diverse social groups—including women, youth, and other traditionally marginalized populations—lead to better and more sustainable reconciliation outcomes.	Modeling prosocial relationships that include processes of restoration, processes of reintegration (reassertion), Indigenous/localized practices, and psychotherapy. <sup>e</sup>
<b>Arts and storytelling</b>	Using the expressive and performing arts along with storytelling will make reconciliation processes more responsive to local, cultural, and contextualized wisdom.	When music, dancing, poetry, drama, and theater are used to educate, advocate, and help people process a conflict they have gone through, it touches the subconscious level of human experience. This psychological, emotional space cannot always be verbally described; instead, it is often felt or understood from a deeper, intuitive place. <sup>f</sup>
<b>Trauma-informed healing, recovery, and resilience</b>	Addressing psychosocial trauma within conflict contexts will lead to more sustainable and transformative reconciliation.	Stress and psychological disorders as barriers or enablers for self-forgiveness and intrapersonal trauma healing. <sup>g</sup>
<b>Systems/structures</b>	Enduring patterns of social interaction have observable effects on human behavior and the institutions that are constructed.	Theories of structural violence, structure and agency, and structural conflict have helped to shape a systemic response to these structures. <sup>h</sup>

**Note:** See page 29 for citations.

conflicts, where identity is often a central issue. American and Vietnamese citizens have separately embarked on important social identity reconciliation efforts, but they have not necessarily done so together, with the notable exception of those key populations who suffered similar atrocities, whether they be veterans, prisoners of war, or survivors of Agent Orange spraying.

Least relevant to date have been strategies based on the capacity-building and inclusive peacebuilding theories of change. Nonetheless, those strategies certainly have the potential to develop the capacity needed to facilitate peacebuilding at all levels of society and to highlight and integrate the voices of marginalized groups.

## COMPARATIVE CASES OF POSTWAR INTERNATIONAL RECONCILIATION

Franco-German reconciliation and the US-Japanese experience following World War II illustrate important principles relevant to the discussion of postwar reconciliation between the United States and Vietnam. Although the contextual circumstances differ, both cases shared the experience of strong political will and citizen-led commitments to improve relations with former enemies after the war. Both cases also shared three aspects of reconciliation that assisted in their reconstruction: the building of informal societal and cultural exchanges; formal political and critical economic investment agreements; and the initiation of symbolic acts aimed at healing and recovery.

*Franco-German reconciliation* was set in motion early. In 1946, only a year after the end of World War II, Moral Rearmament (a global movement for reconciliation) began dialogues between French and German citizenry at the Caux Palace in Switzerland. In 1949, West German chancellor Konrad Adenauer wrote a letter to the French prime minister, Robert Schuman, asking for an end to the post-World War II dismantling of key parts of Germany's industrial sector. In 1951, through the influence of Schuman, Germany was allowed to

become a founding member of the European Coal and Steel Industry (a forerunner of the European Union), which in turn opened the door for Germany's reconstruction and reconciliation.<sup>10</sup>

In 2013, German president Joachim Gauck and French president François Hollande accompanied Robert Hébras on a visit to the ruins of his childhood home in Oradour-sur-Glane, France. Hébras was one of the few living survivors of a German massacre in his village during World War II. In his memorial speech, Gauck became the first German head of state to acknowledge publicly the suffering and losses caused by the massacre.<sup>11</sup>

In a 2020 essay for the website *Beyond Intractability*, Megan E. Huber describes key factors in the Franco-German reconciliation process:

Ultimately, in addition to a unique set of historical conditions that provided fertile ground for reexamining their relationship, French and German reconciliation was achieved through the creation of a dense web of institutional linkages in nearly every sphere of human activity, including political, economic, social, and cultural. Critically, these linkages were created not only on a government-to-government basis, but also through civil society institutions in both countries and through a commitment to increasing people-to-people ties between the German and French societies. The "special relationship" we see between France and Germany today is based not only on a bilateral and multilateral commitment to consultation and cooperation, but also on the deep connections formed between the French and German peoples.<sup>12</sup>

Several factors that contributed to reconciliation in this case are relevant to the US-Vietnam relationship. One is the complete rupture of World War II, which functioned as a separation between the past, on the one side, and the present and the future, on the other. Indeed, according to John Paul Lederach, an influential peacebuilding thinker and practitioner, separation is sometimes necessary after a long-standing violent

conflict before the process of healing and reconciliation can begin.<sup>13</sup> The rise of a new common enemy, the Soviet Union, also helped the reconciliation process, as did the fact that both the political leadership and postwar populations of the two countries were ready to improve relations. Other key aspects of the Franco-German process were building informal societal and cultural ties, institutionalizing peace (e.g., Élysée Treaty of 1963), and symbolic acts aimed at healing the wounds of the past.

*Reconciliation between the United States and Japan* offers different points of comparison. A 2018 *Time* essay examining the process provides this overview:

How did the US and Japan get from the situation in 1945 to the strong alliance they have today? The process of reconciliation began as soon as the war ended, but it didn't always go smoothly. The first phase was the United States' roughly seven-year occupation of Japan, which began following the surrender. When Japan got a new constitution, which took effect on May 3, 1947, its terms came largely courtesy of American influence, specifically that of US General Douglas MacArthur and his staff. The American occupation of Japan ended in 1952, after the US and Japan signed a security treaty for a "peace of reconciliation" in San Francisco in 1951. Not everyone was happy about the two nations' growing closeness. But the forces behind the scenes—especially the economic forces—were stronger than any individual's protests.<sup>14</sup>

Postwar US-Japan relations were initiated at senior government levels; the societies caught up later. Even in the 1980s, there was lingering anti-Japanese sentiment in the United States, and some controversy

about the use of atomic bombs continues. In 2016, Barack Obama became the first US president to visit Hiroshima, and Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe visited Pearl Harbor seven months later. Obama wrote in the guest book at the Hiroshima Peace Park: "We have known the agony of war. Let us now find the courage, together, to spread peace, and pursue a world without nuclear weapons."<sup>15</sup> In this way, the United States offered sympathy for victims' suffering without entering into specifics or discussing responsibility.

The US-Japan case, like the Franco-German case, differs contextually from the transition from war to peace between the United States and Vietnam. Japan was forced to surrender unconditionally, and the peace was enforced by US occupation and the rewriting of the Japanese constitution. None of these aspects were part of the US-Vietnam postwar reconciliation process; North Vietnam emerged victorious from its war with the United States and subsequently imposed its political system throughout Vietnam. Economically, both Japan and Vietnam experienced accelerated economic integration and investment with US markets, although the start of expansion in Vietnam was delayed for several decades due to geopolitics and a US-led trade embargo. While Vietnam did not suffer the devastation of nuclear warfare, the losses of the US-Vietnam war in terms of military and civilian deaths, infrastructural damage, and environmental destruction were severe. Against the backdrop of the Cold War era, the internal and external pressures for the United States to end the war in Vietnam also became an international cause for peace.

# Key Components of US-Vietnam Reconciliation

When the Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Viet Nam (“Paris Peace Accords”) was signed in 1973, US troops and prisoners of war returned home, but the war continued. President Richard Nixon’s promise of nearly \$5 billion in reconstruction aid to Vietnam was superseded by events. After Saigon was captured by North Vietnamese forces on April 30, 1975, the United States extended its wartime embargo on the North to cover the whole country. For the next two decades, there were no official contacts between the former enemies. (See figure 2 for key dates in postwar relations.)

What followed the unification of Vietnam was an unusual process of “asymmetrical peacebuilding,” in which a poor, developing country on the winning side faced a defeated superpower.<sup>16</sup> Although it had lost the war, the United States possessed overwhelming power to decide on the timing, sequence, and conditions of repairing relations. Public opinion in both countries was divided on the merits of reconciliation. In this impasse, individuals and civil society organizations—including veterans, peace activists, nongovernmental aid organizations, educators, businesspeople, and Vietnamese Americans—leveraged influence and resources to act, building social cohesion and taking the initiative to show governments what needed to be done. Eventually, after negotiations and delays, governments learned from citizens and started emulating and scaling up those efforts.<sup>17</sup>

This section of the report examines how this process unfolded, looking first at two legacies of the war around which cooperation gradually developed, then

at the trailblazing impact of citizen diplomacy on the preparedness of the two governments to work together, the underpinnings and limitations of Vietnam’s readiness to forgive, efforts to bridge the divide between Vietnamese in Vietnam and members of the diaspora, and finally at what remains to be done to move from “thin” to “thick” reconciliation.

## POSTWAR DISPUTES: MISSING IN ACTION AND AGENT ORANGE

Two unique legacies of the post–Vietnam War context determined the trajectory of reconciliation: the effects of Agent Orange and the issue of US prisoners of war and military personnel missing in action (POW/MIA). Prisoners of war and unaccounted for military personnel are features of all wars, but in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, the two groups became linked in an unprecedented way. The 591 US prisoners of war, mostly officers and enlisted aircrew, held in North Vietnam were released in 1973 after signing of the Paris Peace Accords. Due to the exceptional organizational abilities of the National League of POW/MIA Families and similar groups, the fewer than 2,000 Americans still listed as missing in Vietnam became symbols for the suffering and dislocation of the war and, as portrayed on the ubiquitous black POW/MIA flag, were transformed into potentially living victims in the American public’s mind.<sup>18</sup>

The use of herbicides by the US military from 1961 to 1971 became the most visible and intractable legacy of the war.<sup>19</sup> Agent Orange and several other herbicides contained dioxin, a toxic and persistent manufacturing byproduct. The spraying of more than 10 percent of the



US ambassador to Vietnam David Shear, center, and Vietnamese deputy defense minister Nguyễn Chí Vịnh, third from left, and delegates attend a ceremony marking the start of a project to clean up dioxin from the Vietnam War at a former US military base in Danang, Vietnam, on August 9, 2012. (Photo by Maika Elan/AP)

land area of South Vietnam as well as parts of Laos and Cambodia, affected combatants and civilians from all sides through the immediate damage to the environment and through the serious yet indeterminate long-term health effects of dioxin exposure. Agent Orange became the preeminent obstacle to reconciliation on the Vietnamese side at the same time it was raised as a key concern of US veterans.

In the immediate postwar period, these barriers made rapprochement impossible. During the first negotiations on normalization in 1977 and 1978, Assistant Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke set preconditions that including increased cooperation on MIAs, no demands for reparations, and no discussion of Agent Orange.<sup>20</sup>

Former Vietnamese ambassador Lê Văn Bàng recalled that “relations between Vietnam and the United States were so bad we could not talk about anything but MIAs and POWs.”<sup>21</sup> Yet over time, the POW/MIA and Agent Orange issues “evolved from a subject of anger and resentment to one of appreciation and cooperation.”<sup>22</sup>

The first delegation of US veterans returned to Vietnam in 1981, led by Bobby Muller, president of Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation. “As the head of Vietnam Vets,” Muller said, “nobody was in a better position to do an outreach to Vietnam than the leadership of those who fought. Politicians are not going to get ahead of us.”<sup>23</sup> In Hanoi, Muller met Vietnamese foreign minister Nguyễn Cơ Thạch and spoke with leading

medical expert Tôn Thất Tùng about veterans' growing concern that exposure to Agent Orange was the cause of significant health problems. Subsequent American delegations included humanitarian assistance missions from the Quakers, Mennonites, and Church World Service, as well as sympathetic scientists and former anti-war leaders. Vietnamese refugees in the United States, such as South Vietnamese veteran Ca Van Tran and Professor Le Xuan Khoa, also began to return to Vietnam for humanitarian and charitable purposes. These visits served as key confidence-building mechanisms for reconciliation.

Agreement between the US and Vietnamese governments was reached first on the priority US issue: the fullest possible accounting of Americans missing in action. Ann Mills-Griffiths, CEO of the National League of Families and the sister of a missing pilot, visited Vietnam for the first time in 1982 to set up the first high-level negotiations between the countries. Initial suspicion that Vietnam was hiding information about living POWs gradually gave way to understanding and cooperation to search for remains of the missing. Mills-Griffiths returned in 1986 with General John Vessey, who was appointed by President Ronald Reagan as a special emissary. As a result of the 1986 negotiations, Vietnam permitted US teams to search throughout the country, starting in 1988.<sup>24</sup> The joint field operations that followed were the first cooperative activities between the United States and the reunified Vietnam.

From the late 1980s until 1995, the Joint Task Force—Full Accounting office (later renamed the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency) was the only official US representation in Vietnam. To date, with the cooperation of Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian government partners, the United States has been able to account for the remains of more than 1,000 US service members. The MIA program laid essential groundwork for later progress in other areas of US-Vietnam relations. A bipartisan group of Vietnam veterans in

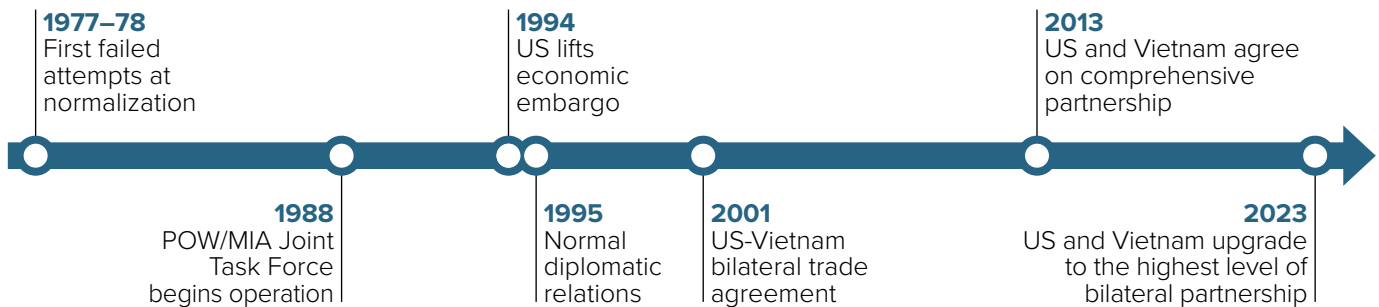
the US Senate, led by John McCain and John Kerry, cited progress on MIA accounting in their support for making peace with Vietnam, a politically risky and controversial position at the time. They were joined by Patrick Leahy, who extended his work on landmines and supporting war victims to Vietnam. In 1991, Leahy led a bipartisan congressional delegation to Vietnam.<sup>25</sup> The senators thought that ending the trade embargo and normalizing diplomatic relations would help “overcome a difficult period in American history” and serve US strategic interests; economic factors played little role in their calculations.<sup>26</sup>

Efforts to address the impact of Agent Orange met greater resistance, as Vietnamese and US officials and scientists disagreed on the available evidence of whether exposure to dioxin causes ill health and birth defects. After normalization in 1995, the United States increased support for people with disabilities in Vietnam and began a humanitarian program to clear landmines and unexploded ordnance (UXO) but still refused to discuss Agent Orange. Prominent Vietnamese scientists, including Hoàng Đình Cầu, Lê Cao Đài, and Võ Quý, conducted groundbreaking research on the effects of Agent Orange, and Vietnamese diplomats brought up the issue with American counterparts at every opportunity. Even though US veterans had become eligible for Agent Orange–related health benefits in 1991, the US government did not acknowledge or accept responsibility for Vietnamese victims. The debate about the human impacts of Agent Orange became “a political third rail, poisoning any hope of full reconciliation for well over twenty years.”<sup>27</sup>

Once again, private citizens entered the gap between governments. Starting in the late 1990s, the American Red Cross and Ford Foundation made grants to Vietnamese partners, enabling them to support Agent Orange victims and conduct research. The major breakthrough was the finding by Hatfield Consultants, a Canadian environmental firm funded by Ford and



**Figure 2: Major milestones in US-Vietnam postwar relations**



the Vietnamese government’s 10-80 Committee, that remaining dioxin was concentrated in a small number of “hotspots” around former US military bases in South Vietnam.<sup>28</sup> The Ford Foundation subsequently convened a US-Vietnam Dialogue Group on Agent Orange composed of prominent Vietnamese and Americans and co-chaired by Ambassador Tôn Nữ Thị Ninh and Walter Isaacson, president of the Aspen Institute. The group agreed on a declaration and 10-year plan of action, calling on the US government “to join with the Vietnamese to fund a comprehensive and humanitarian effort to resolve the legacy of Agent Orange/dioxin in Vietnam . . . and remove a barrier to fully normal U.S.-Vietnam relations.”<sup>29</sup>

According to former Vietnamese environmental official Lê Kế Sơn and Ford Foundation representative Charles Bailey, the key to resolving the impasse on Agent Orange was appealing to US responsibility in a positive, nonthreatening way and making the argument that “Agent Orange is a humanitarian issue that we can do something about.” The dialogue group emphasized practical solutions, not legal liability or reparations, and channeled assistance through Vietnamese and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) rather than government agencies.<sup>30</sup>

This framing also resonated with US ambassador Michael Marine and congressional leaders. Following a visit to Vietnam by President George W. Bush in 2006, Congress appropriated the first funding for Agent Orange–related environmental and health programs.<sup>31</sup> Four years later, Senator Leahy declared: “It would be hard to overstate the importance the Vietnamese give to addressing the needs of people who have been harmed. The legacy of Agent Orange, for years an issue that divided us, is now one that is bringing us together.”<sup>32</sup> Speaking in 2015, Leahy explained, “I felt that instead of turning our backs on the problem we had a moral obligation to do something about it.”<sup>33</sup> In the words of Lê Kế Sơn, “Cooperation in handling Agent Orange and landmines has led to the consequences of war no longer being an obstacle between Vietnam and the United States.”<sup>34</sup>

### **CITIZEN-LED RECONCILIATION EFFORTS**

“Citizen diplomacy”—defined as “the political concept of average citizens engaging as representatives of a country or cause either inadvertently or by design”—has taken many forms in the process of US-Vietnam reconciliation and was particularly crucial before 1995, when official channels between the two countries were blocked.<sup>35</sup> Since the war in Vietnam, Americans have

traveled to Vietnam to build relationships, find psychological and moral healing, make investments, pursue philanthropic and religious endeavors, explore the local culture, and sightsee. Vietnamese refugees, entrepreneurs, students, and diplomats have come to the United States with an equally diverse set of motives. Multiple sectors of society have benefited from these reciprocal bridge-building actions, including education, the economy, the arts, and environmental protection.

The following examples illustrate the diversity that has characterized this citizen diplomacy.

- John McAuliff, a former American Friends Service Committee (Quaker) activist, started the US-Indochina Reconciliation Project (later the Fund for Reconciliation and Development) in 1985 to advocate for normalized relations and promote US exchanges to and from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The deputy director of the Fund for Reconciliation and Development, Susan Hammond, daughter of a Vietnam veteran, later founded the War Legacies Project to raise awareness and take action to help Agent Orange victims and their families in Vietnam and Laos.<sup>36</sup>
- Ca Van Tran, a Vietnamese American businessman, returned to Ho Chi Minh City for the first time in 1990 and was struck by the needs of disabled South Vietnamese veterans living on the street. Back at home in Virginia, Tran founded Vietnam Assistance for the Handicapped (VNAH) to support victims of war.
- From 1991 to 2023, VNAH mobilized more than \$42 million in funding from the US and Japanese governments, as well as private organizations and individuals. VNAH has provided more than 90,000 people with disabilities with assistive devices and wheelchairs and has advocated for Vietnam to adopt a law on persons with disabilities that would improve rights and accessibility.
- In 1969, US Army Lt. Daniel Cheney died in combat in Vietnam. His sister, Jerilyn Brusseau, believed that one day ordinary American families like hers must reach out to the Vietnamese people to honor losses on all sides and to begin building bridges of peace and friendship. More than 25 years later, Jerilyn and her husband, Danaan Parry, founded PeaceTrees Vietnam to clear bombs and mines and bring international volunteers, including US veterans and their families, to plant trees with Vietnamese youth and community leaders on safely cleared land.
- As a medical student in Huế, Nguyễn Viết Nhân visited hundreds of families affected by Agent Orange and was one of the first researchers to demonstrate links between Agent Orange exposure and many types of birth defects. Later, Nhân established the Office of Genetic Counseling and Disabled Children at the Huế University of Medicine and Pharmacy to help child victims of Agent Orange and their families lead healthier and more dignified lives.
- Chuck Searcy, who served in Saigon in 1967 and 1968, was among the first US veterans to return to Vietnam. He was the first representative of the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation in Vietnam and later became the president of Chapter 160 (Vietnam) of Veterans for Peace. In 2001, he and Quảng Trị provincial official Hoàng Nam co-founded Project RENEW, focusing on UXO and risk education in the most heavily bombed province in Vietnam.

Not all citizen diplomacy efforts, it should be noted, have been successful or helpful. Numerous challenges always confront citizen activism, among them issues of how to communicate accomplishments and raise public awareness; how to ensure sustainability of funding and local leadership; and how to manage the potential overreach of government regulation and escape co-optation. Another problem is posed by the fact that civil society initiatives (e.g., private donors funding



Chuck Searcy greets Trịnh Thị Hồng Thắm, the leader of a demining team, in Vietnam's Quảng Trị Province on February 28, 2024. Searcy, who served as an intelligence analyst for the US Army in Vietnam, co-founded Project RENEW, a group that finds, removes, and deactivates unexploded ordnance left from the Vietnam War. (Photo by Linh Pham/New York Times)

social services or environmental remediation) may unintentionally relieve governments of their obligations to deliver effective goods and services. However, while these concerns have clouded some initiatives in US-Vietnam reconciliation, taken as a whole, citizen diplomacy has helped create a powerful fabric of social cohesion that has contributed to laying the foundation (or safety net) for the two governments to build confidence and solidify bilateral goodwill.

### **BREAKING THE OFFICIAL DEADLOCK**

The personal relationships that developed between Americans and Vietnamese were critical to building trust on Agent Orange, MIAs, and other divisive issues. Ted Osius, who served as US ambassador to Vietnam from 2014 to 2017, concluded that “showing respect

meant figuring out what was truly important to our Vietnamese partners and taking that seriously.”<sup>37</sup> Senator Leahy formed a distinctive bond with Vietnamese deputy defense minister Nguyễn Chí Vịnh that transformed initial distance and resentment into an appetite for joint problem-solving.<sup>38</sup> With Leahy’s and Vịnh’s backing, US funding for Agent Orange cleanup and disability programs increased from an initial \$3 million in 2007 to \$50 million in 2024, totaling more than \$500 million over that period.<sup>39</sup> This includes support to people with significant disabilities in 10 heavily sprayed provinces; cleanup of the Danang airport hotspot; and launch of the restoration of Biên Hòa Air Base, the largest contaminated area. In addition, the US State Department has been the leading international donor for UXO action, providing over \$230 million for UXO

clearance, risk education, and survivor assistance since 1993 and contributing to a drop in casualties per year from hundreds to fewer than 10 by 2020.<sup>40</sup> Taking an ambitious new direction for cooperation, in 2021, the United States began a program (in which USIP is a partner) to assist Vietnam in accounting for its own estimated 180,000 missing and 300,000 unidentified wartime remains, including development of DNA analysis capacities.<sup>41</sup>

It is notable that the shift in US policy has occurred without a formal apology, something that (as illustrated in figure 1) is often seen as a key stage in the spectrum of reconciliation. Vietnam made demands for an apology and reparations early in the postwar period but dropped the issue during negotiations for diplomatic normalization. Speaking in 2023, former ambassador Tôn Nữ Thị Ninh remarked that present-day Vietnam is “not asking for or expecting an apology. That makes things much easier.”<sup>42</sup> US leaders, for their part, concerned about legal liability and political pressures not to apologize for America, have avoided explicit apologies in favor of expressions of regret for past losses. But during his visit to Laos in 2016, President Barack Obama echoed Leahy’s language, stating, “Given our history here, I believe that the United States has a moral obligation to help Laos heal.”<sup>43</sup> This formulation of moral, if not legal, responsibility allowed the US government to acknowledge the past, build trust, and demonstrate good faith as a partner of Vietnam.<sup>44</sup>

The trust built through cooperation on war legacy programs has become the basis for progress in other areas of US-Vietnam relations. A bilateral trade agreement signed in 2001 paved the way for Vietnam to enter the World Trade Organization and integrate into the world economy. President George W. Bush included Vietnam in his signature HIV/AIDS initiative, the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, which contributed to successful containment of the HIV epidemic in the early 2000s. The bilateral comprehensive partnership in 2013 institutionalized US-Vietnam

cooperation on maritime security, economic engagement, climate and environment, education, and human rights. When General Secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng visited the White House in 2016, President Obama emphasized that the United States respects Vietnam’s different political system and is not trying to replace the Communist Party, while stressing that human rights are a core US commitment.

These diplomatic steps culminated in the 2023 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, which establishes and expands a broad range of government-to-government initiatives in multiple sectors.<sup>45</sup> The joint declaration includes a specific chapter on war legacy cooperation in which the United States and Vietnam agree to complete dioxin remediation at Biên Hòa, expand disability assistance, provide additional funding for UXO clearance, and increase training and support for DNA analysis and identification of missing Vietnamese.<sup>46</sup> Vietnam maintains its multidirectional foreign policy, including having comprehensive strategic partnerships with China, Russia, and other regional powers; avoiding military alliances; and seeking “to be friends with all countries in the world community, striving for peace, independence and development.”<sup>47</sup> This policy enables Vietnam to cooperate with the United States and other democratic countries as long as that cooperation is not presented as part of an alliance against China.<sup>48</sup> While refraining from taking sides in geopolitical competition, Vietnam now has the closest relations with the United States at any time in its history.

## THE FORGIVENESS FACTOR

Americans who visit Vietnam today find little evidence of the country’s pre-1975 division and are almost uniformly struck by the welcoming attitude of Vietnamese people toward them personally and toward the United States in general. The feeling is more than a lack of animosity: Americans experience their reception as warm, even “effervescent.”<sup>49</sup> The finding applies equally in former North and South Vietnam, in cities and rural areas, among old and young, and among Communist

Party members and those who are not members. Survey data backs this up: in its 2017 survey of global opinion, the Pew Research Center found that 84 percent of Vietnamese had a positive view of the United States, the highest rate of all 37 countries surveyed at the time.<sup>50</sup>

The surprise, confusion, and relief at Vietnamese attitudes is strongest among returning US veterans. During the war, US pilots who were shot down over North Vietnam—John McCain being the most famous example—had to be protected by local civil defense forces from hostile mobs before they were taken to prison. Several decades after the end of the war, however, such violent animosity had disappeared. Even in the early 1990s, President George H. W. Bush was “amazed at how Vietnam had gotten over the war [and by] a Vietnamese ability to forgive past actions and to look to the future without recriminations.”<sup>51</sup>

Vietnamese and international observers propose three sets of (nonexclusive) explanations for this dramatic shift in Vietnamese attitudes. Pragmatic arguments include the fact that Vietnam has a young population overall, most of whom were born after 1975 and who thus have no memory of the war; economic interests in trade with the United States; and an overriding concern about China, which invaded Vietnam more recently and historically more frequently.<sup>52</sup> As a Vietnamese foreign ministry leader admonished a US diplomat in 1995, “Never forget that Vietnam also does what is in its own interest.”<sup>53</sup> And yet positive views of the United States are not limited to the young or to those benefiting from US trade and investment. Other countries that also have strong economic ties with Vietnam, and that have never gone to war with Vietnam, are also viewed positively, but not to the same extent as the United States.

The political explanation for why the Vietnamese look to the future, not the past, of their relationship with the United States is, first, that the revolutionary side won

the war, so the victors have no shame or resentment about the outcome, which is, indeed, presented as a great national victory. Second, leaders such as Hồ Chí Minh emphasized that they had no argument with Americans as a people, only with the wartime policies of the US government. And many Americans vigorously opposed the war. This Marxist-inflected view neglects the fact that Americans nevertheless elected officials and paid taxes to governments who funded and conducted the war.<sup>54</sup> Nonetheless, peace activists demonstrated that not all Americans thought alike. Former revolutionary negotiator and later vice president Nguyễn Thị Bình writes that the anti-war movement was essential to shortening the war and reestablishing peace. According to her, many Americans, especially women, believed the war was not in the interests of the American people, and this made later reconciliation efforts possible.<sup>55</sup>

Cultural arguments go further back in history to explore why Vietnamese have not held grudges or continued to lament wartime losses. Former ambassador to the United Nations Đặng Đình Quý notes that “forgiveness is hard, but it’s a Vietnamese tradition.” Vietnamese champions for normalization of relations, such as former prime ministers Võ Văn Kiệt and Nguyễn Tấn Dũng, were veterans who lost family members during the war; they and other veterans did not forget the past, but decided to move past it, much as their US counterparts did.<sup>56</sup> Cultural scholar Hữu Ngọc holds that “the true face of Vietnam is not war. Buddhism for the Vietnamese means the heart and compassion and pity.” Although Vietnamese have fought numerous wars with their neighbors throughout the country’s history, they have learned how to make peace afterward and showed “human realism” to former enemies.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, although Vietnamese schoolbooks (and many US writers) emphasize repeated conflicts between Vietnam and China, in fact the two countries have coexisted and traded peacefully for far longer than they have been at war.

**Contemporary Vietnamese discourse is comfortable with naming and addressing different aspects of the US role in the Second Indochina War, but there are gaps in the official memory when it comes to events that preceded and postdated US involvement.**

All of these explanations for Vietnamese openness and forgiveness contain aspects of truth and are probably valid for some Vietnamese more than others. Without subscribing to an essentialist view of national character, the question of historical Vietnamese experiences of peacebuilding deserves further attention, as does the role of religious practices—primarily Buddhist, but also Catholic, Cao Dai, and from other faith traditions—in shaping the Vietnamese approach to reconciliation. What is clearly insufficient is a pragmatic-only view that the Vietnamese “generosity of spirit towards Americans” is conditional on an “undertone of profit,” on US investment in Vietnam, and on protection from China.<sup>58</sup>

Yet forgiveness, as difficult as it can be to offer, is not the same as full reconciliation, which has yet to be achieved. Forgiveness absolves a former enemy of crimes it committed without necessarily critiquing one’s own role in the conflict. Contemporary Vietnamese discourse is comfortable with naming and addressing different aspects of the US role in the Second Indochina War—such as invading Vietnam and spraying Agent Orange—but there are gaps in the official memory when it comes to events that preceded and postdated US involvement: the division of the country into two competing states, the struggle against the Republic of Vietnam from 1973 to 1975, the establishment of reeducation camps, the exodus of ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese boat people, and the invasion and occupation of Cambodia in response to Khmer Rouge cross-border attacks. These gaps have made it harder for Vietnamese in Vietnam to reconcile with Vietnamese in the United States than with other Americans.

## **RECONCILIATION PATHWAYS AMONG VIETNAMESE**

The “last corner of reconciliation that needs to be looked at,” according to Tôn Nữ Thị Ninh, concerns

the history of Vietnamese division and the resulting Vietnamese diaspora.<sup>59</sup> The war in Vietnam was both a civil war between communists and noncommunists and a postcolonial war between Vietnamese nationalists and French (later US) occupiers. After the Geneva Accords divided the country in 1954 at the end of the First Indochina War, there were two competing states in Vietnamese territory: the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), led by Hồ Chí Minh, with its capital in Hanoi, and the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), led by Ngô Đình Diệm in Saigon. Both claimed to represent the entire country, not just the half assigned to their control.<sup>60</sup> The majority of rural Vietnamese in both zones supported Hồ Chí Minh’s revolution, whereas urban centers in the south favored the RVN. The war was a political and ideological conflict, not a regional one: key leaders of the DRV were from central and southern provinces, and the RVN leadership included anti-communist northerners. Many families were divided, with members on both sides of the conflict. Thus, healing from wartime trauma—for instance, through recovery and identification of remains and artifacts of family members who died during the war—is an intensely personal process for many Vietnamese. The family, more than public spaces, is where healing begins and is often centered, especially because few public or donor resources have been devoted to mental health and trauma recovery.

In 1975, the two halves of Vietnam were reunited through military victory. People who had “regrouped” from the south to the north in 1954 came back to their home provinces, in some cases taking up leadership positions in local government. Northern officials and civilians who traveled to the south came back with an appreciation for Saigon-style music, culture, and entrepreneurship.<sup>61</sup> Some moved south because they were sent there; others migrated by choice for personal and

economic reasons. Over time, the party-state loosened its control over many aspects of daily life.<sup>62</sup> Economic and educational opportunities became available regardless of family background, although Communist Party members retained important advantages.

To be sure, not all Vietnamese were reconciled to unification in what was named the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV). The victors sent high-ranking RVN military and civilian officials to reeducation camps, nationalized most businesses, expelled ethnic Chinese, and collectivized agriculture against the wishes of most southern farmers.<sup>63</sup> Facing dwindling economic and societal opportunities in the late 1970s and early 1980s, desperate southerners (and some northerners) fled the country by boat, many arriving in the United States as refugees. Later, US programs allowed for formal migration for ex-RVN officers, Amerasian children, and their families. In all, 720,000 Vietnamese emigrated to the United States; Americans of Vietnamese origin, part of the global Vietnamese diaspora, now number over 2 million.

When the SRV launched the *Đổi mới* (“Renewal”) program of economic reforms in the 1980s, it opened the country’s doors to visitors, including Americans, and made some effort to welcome overseas Vietnamese (*Việt kiều*), who are viewed more as “returning” Vietnamese than as foreigners. *Việt kiều* can enter Vietnam without a visa and have limited rights of land ownership.<sup>64</sup> At first, committed anti-communists opposed any engagement with the SRV. Over time, however, more and more Vietnamese Americans have visited relatives, studied, or invested in Vietnam—particularly the younger generation born during or after the war, but also prominent politicians, singers, and intellectuals.<sup>65</sup>

Beneath the apparent normalcy, tensions remain. Many Vietnamese Americans proudly fly the former RVN flag (three red lines on a yellow background) rather than the DRV and SRV national flag (one large yellow star on

red). “Reconciliation,” or the near-equivalent Vietnamese term *hòa hợp hòa giải*, is a suspect concept to those who associate it with efforts to reassimilate overseas Vietnamese on the communist government’s terms. While welcoming *Việt kiều* to visit, study, and work in Vietnam, the current Vietnamese state does not accept that the pre-1975 RVN ever had legitimacy, and therefore the officials who served it and the soldiers who fought for it (whether as officers or draftees) are not officially recognized. As noted earlier, in present-day Vietnam, the Second Indochina War is usually referred to as “the American war,” to distinguish it from wars that the DRV and SRV fought against the French and the Chinese. In other words, the nationalist-revolutionary aspect of the Vietnam War is emphasized, and the civil war between communists and noncommunists is played down.

*Việt kiều* note that their families’ wartime losses are not commemorated either by the United States, which honors its own veterans and MIAs, or by Vietnam, where memorials, cemeteries, and pensions are maintained only for those on the winning side.<sup>66</sup> The former RVN military cemetery near Biên Hòa, outside of Saigon, is a symbolic place of uneasy reconciliation. Abandoned for decades after the war, the cemetery fell into disrepair until the early 2000s, when reform-minded SRV officials transferred it to civilian control. This enabled the Vietnamese American Foundation (VAF), a non-profit based in Houston, to propose action to maintain the cemetery, starting in 2011. As researcher Alex-Thai Vo has documented, the VAF’s initiative continued for several years but lost momentum due to internal organizational issues and pushback from members of the diaspora who still opposed any cooperation with the SRV.<sup>67</sup> Efforts to preserve the cemetery are ongoing with support from multiple US-based groups; successive US ambassadors and consuls general have taken the initiative to facilitate connections with Vietnamese authorities. Even modest steps to improve conditions at the cemetery would demonstrate to Vietnamese



Vietnamese veterans gather for a parade in Ho Chi Minh City on April 30, 2015, to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War. (Photo by Na Son Nguyen/AP)

Americans from the former South that their own family histories are recognized.<sup>68</sup> Vietnamese officials agree on the importance of the site, while noting the obligation of the United States to take responsibility for its former allies and take part in joint efforts with Vietnam to maintain the cemetery.<sup>69</sup>

Aware of the difficulty of acknowledging the past and reconciling with the diaspora, pragmatic Vietnamese leaders emphasize an envisioned future of technology, arts, educational exchange, and a green economy that will attract younger *Việt kiều* to come (back) to their “homeland.” *Tôn Nữ Thị Ninh* recommends that conversations among Vietnamese in and outside the country avoid the term “reconciliation” and instead “move straight to engagement and connectivity” with

Association of Southeast Asian Nations and Indo-Pacific partners.<sup>70</sup> Regardless of whether or not the word “reconciliation” is used, however, no other group of Americans has as close a connection to Vietnam, and their engagement and return to Vietnam brings them back to the original source of the trauma and dislocation of war. Ted Osius concludes that Vietnamese Americans are the “key to reconciliation . . . critical for the long-term success of ties between the two countries.”<sup>71</sup> Beyond bilateral relations, the process of reconciliation depends on the active involvement of Vietnamese Americans in, for instance, accounting for casualties from all sides of the war, reaching out to those associated with the RVN and their descendants, and engaging young people from both countries in exchanges and cooperation.



## FROM “THIN” TO “THICK” RECONCILIATION

Thus, while reconciliation between governments and among American and Vietnamese people has shown remarkable progress, reconciliation between Vietnamese in and outside the country remains incomplete. In terms of the spectrum of reconciliation presented earlier, the US-Vietnam partnership has moved beyond the “apology and pardon” stage to start on the maximal stage of “mutual justice and collaboration.” Vietnamese Americans, however, are still at the middle of the spectrum, striving for “recognition of the ‘other.’” Whether US-Vietnam reconciliation is shallow or deep—“thin” or “thick”—depends on which group or groups being assessed and which aspect of reconciliation is being considered. Much progress has focused on dealing with the physical legacies of war—UXO, MIAs, disabilities associated with Agent Orange—while nonmaterial legacies of trauma, mental health, and family relationships remain underemphasized. As trust has increased over time, Americans and Vietnamese have moved from weaker to stronger forms of reconciliation, but the journey is by no means over. In Leahy’s words, “We have come a long way. We have further to go.”<sup>72</sup>

A three-pillar model of reconciliation helps map out what has been accomplished so far and what still needs to be done: dealing with the past, creating new relationships and norms, and constructing just societies.

**Dealing with the past.** While neither country has issued a formal apology, launched an official transitional justice process, or established a truth commission, truth-telling has been advanced below the level of government through documentation of war atrocities by NGOs, citizen diplomacy and exchanges, advocacy campaigns, and efforts at memorialization in both countries. A plethora of publications, films, and media coverage has also contributed to truth-telling about the past.

The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s final report identifies four kinds of truth: forensic

truth (fact-finding), personal truth (individual experiences and stories), social truth (cultural and societal narratives), and healing and restorative truth (mutually reinforcing and integrated truth that leads to social cohesion).<sup>73</sup> In the case of Vietnam, all sides have worked to establish the forensic truth (sometimes in cooperation with each other), and the personal truth of those most affected by the war has been amplified, including the voices of the next generations of Vietnamese in the diaspora. Important efforts at shifting the sociopolitical narrative about the Vietnam War have also been made on all sides. But more work needs to be done to get to the healing and restorative truth. Some identified gaps in this area revolve around accountability for war crimes, membership in international treaties, apologies for wartime atrocities inflicted on vulnerable populations, truth-telling mechanisms that set out a clear historical record of the war, and a review and revisioning of school educational curricula for the next generations to be more inclusive of marginalized voices and more expansive in their analysis of the roots, aftermath, and legacies of the war.<sup>74</sup>

**Creating new relationships and norms.** This pillar is arguably the sturdiest of the three. Citizen diplomacy and people-to-people exchanges have flourished over the decades. US activists and veterans continue to make pilgrimages to Vietnam to return to wartime haunts, make amends, and assist in reconstruction and material development. Children of veterans, through groups such as the 2 Sides Project, Children of Vietnam Veterans Health Alliance, and Mission: POW-MIA organize trips to visit their counterparts in Vietnam for educational, advocacy, and solidarity purposes.

Multiple nonprofits and international NGOs have been founded to meet humanitarian and local development needs in Vietnam.<sup>75</sup> These include programs focused on refugee rights and protections, support for Agent Orange survivors, women’s economic empowerment, and local income-generation projects. US Amerasian

organizations have emerged to tell their members' stories of marginalization and advocate for more open immigration policies and family reunification.<sup>76</sup>

Many US veterans, Vietnamese American refugees, and their families have visited Vietnam, and some have moved to live and work there. More than 30,000 Vietnamese are now studying at US colleges and universities, more than from any other country in Southeast Asia.<sup>77</sup> Nine US cities have sister-city relationships with Vietnamese cities, and more partnerships are being developed.<sup>78</sup>

**Constructing just societies.** Key to this pillar are the agreements reached and actions taken to provide redress, recovery, and institutional reform. In addition to US assistance on physical war legacies detailed above, both Vietnam and the United States have allocated considerable monetary resources toward medical, educational, and mental health services for veterans and their families. Organizations of veterans and families of the missing have mobilized and launched campaigns to secure needed benefits and promote healing. Cleanup of dioxin contamination at Biên Hòa and clearance of provinces most affected by UXO will take years to complete, but a situation in which people are no longer at risk is now possible to envision. As health and disability assistance becomes more available for people

affected by Agent Orange, a Vietnamese-led solution to the humanitarian impacts of wartime herbicide use is also conceivable.

Significant memorialization projects have been undertaken in both countries to educate people about the war and to learn from history with the hope of not repeating it. In Vietnam, these efforts include the popular War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City and the memorial at the Quảng Trị citadel, the site of intense battles in 1972. In the United States, in addition to the iconic Vietnam Veterans Memorial near USIP's headquarters in Washington, DC, other veterans' memorials and exhibits have been created nationwide. Monuments to South Vietnamese losses have been constructed in California's Orange County and several other US locations with large Vietnamese American populations.

More resources should be directed toward facilitating processes that help parties build trust and better relationships by jointly envisioning scenarios of what a shared future could look like. The relationship should include a greater recognition of the role played by the Vietnamese diaspora in the United States and other countries. Symbolic, nonpoliticized commemoration of all sides of Vietnamese history—for instance, through preservation of the former South Vietnamese military cemetery at Biên Hòa—would be an important contribution to this goal.

# Lessons for Sustained Reconciliation



Many factors explain the remarkable progress made by the United States and Vietnam in transforming their relationship from one of bitter enemies to close partners. Some of those factors are specific to the historical circumstances of the Second Indochina War and its aftermath and cannot be replicated in other contexts. But other reasons for progress resonate with other conflicts and reconciliation processes.

This report concludes by identifying eight lessons drawn from the US-Vietnam experience of postwar cooperation and progress toward reconciliation. These lessons are pathways that lead to enduring reconciliation. They are not only relevant to the work of peace-builders focused on legacies of the Vietnam War but may also be instructive for people advancing reconciliation processes in other postconflict contexts.

**If official separation occurs in the postwar period and diplomacy breaks down, bridge the gap and build relationships through citizen diplomacy.** The US government cut off diplomatic relations with Vietnam for 20 years after the end of the war. In terms of achieving reconciliation, separation—especially an extended period of separation—is likely to be counterproductive. Decades of silence significantly reduce the chances of former enemies later being able to build a productive bilateral working relationship.

Yet one reconciliation theory contends that after long, violent conflict, separation may be required before healing and reconciliation can begin.<sup>79</sup> Separation in and of itself is not healing, however; it depends on

what is done during periods of separation to bridge gaps and build relationships. The experience of separation can be a mechanism for isolation, or it can work toward integration. At an informal level, in times of separation, some people and organizations defy the physical and social divisions placed on them and find ways to take joint humanitarian action in the midst of a crisis, engage in dialogue, or even work on healing together. At a formal level, civil society and educational institutions can organize activities around peer exchange, sharing of cultural learning and practices, and awareness-raising programs that foster understanding.

In the case of US-Vietnam relations in the immediate postwar period, some Americans and Vietnamese were not willing to wait for their political leaders to begin the process of reconciliation. Indeed, US-Vietnam political normalization would not have occurred had it not been preceded and then accompanied by citizen diplomacy. Since 1975, people-to-people relations have set the agenda and driven progress on reconciliation, despite ongoing political differences between the US and Vietnamese governments.

Looking forward, both public and private resources should continue to foster cross-pollination of ideas, dialogue, and individual and community healing among Americans and Vietnamese. Citizen-to-citizen relations are inextricably linked with return visits of the Vietnamese diaspora and the burgeoning economic and technological investments from the United States in Vietnam. Citizen diplomacy is a virtuous circle that leads to expanding contacts in other sectors.

**Create a foundation for future multifaceted cooperation by emphasizing recovery from conflict in the early stages of reconciliation.** Efforts to reestablish US-Vietnam relations began by focusing on “repair work”—efforts to repair psychosocial well-being at both personal and collective levels. These confidence-building mechanisms resulted in direct, material actions and programs that were seen as both meeting fundamental human needs and benefiting both sides. War legacy cooperation and MIA recovery efforts have contributed to building mutual trust among Americans and Vietnamese, including the militaries of both countries. On this basis of trust, more controversial topics such as diaspora relations, trade barriers, and religious freedom were able to be raised through both intergovernmental dialogues and private initiatives.

Sensitive issues of domestic politics and international relations are bound to arise in the future. Maintaining the trust that has been established through war legacy cooperation is crucial to reducing the risks of new forms of conflict.

**Recognize the need for both vertical and horizontal reconciliation.** Horizontal (people-to-people) reconciliation is typically more common than vertical (government-to-people) reconciliation, chiefly because individual citizens have more direct experience of violent conflict than do government officials, and there is less power asymmetry to deal with among citizens and communities than between states. US-Vietnam relations continue to be fortified by an array of horizontal connections between the citizens and communities of both countries.

Following a conflict, vertical reconciliation between citizens and their government needs to occur internally in each country separately. This process has been a different experience for American and Vietnamese citizens due to the disparate impacts of the war and the countries’ contrasting political systems. With the steps that have been taken toward horizontal reconciliation,

it is now possible to advance joint vertical reconciliation efforts in which American and Vietnamese people work together on social and humanitarian causes, such as education or climate change, in cooperation with both governments.

**Cultivate interdependence in reconciliation.** For purposes of US-Vietnam reconciliation, it is important to differentiate between intrastate and interstate conflict. Reconciliation in the wake of an internal conflict, such as among political factions, requires an acknowledgment of a long-term relationship of coexistence in a specific geographic location based on an awareness of interdependence.<sup>80</sup> Vietnam faced these challenges after 1975 with the reunification of the country under the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. For the interstate aspects of the Vietnam War, however, the urgency to acknowledge and negotiate interdependence is not the same. After all, Americans and Vietnamese do not share the same land, politics, economy, or culture.

If US-Vietnam reconciliation is to endure, however, the two governments and peoples should nurture the transnational interdependence that has emerged in recent decades to strengthen goodwill among policymakers, advocates, and individuals in both countries. A clear example of this interdependence is the web of connections among the Vietnamese diaspora and between the Amerasian communities that span the two countries. At the governmental level, the 2023 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership includes concrete areas of interdependence in trade and investment; security ties; and social, cultural, and educational exchanges. When implementing the partnership, both governments should emphasize cooperation and interdependence among private enterprise, religious leaders, educational institutions, and the media.

**Recognize the need for both past and future reconciliation.** US-Vietnam reconciliation has involved elements of addressing the past as well as a

**US-Vietnam reconciliation illustrates the power of pursuing a multipronged approach to peacebuilding that has proceeded through a balanced progression of political, economic, social, cultural, and technological components.**

forward-looking agenda focusing on the future benefits of closer political and economic relations. Official Vietnamese discourse employs the phrase *xếp lại quá khứ*, which can be translated as “shelving the past” or “putting the past aside,” which has replaced initial calls for apologies or reparations in the immediate postwar period. This idea of “forgetting” the past, however, has been applied quite unevenly. Memories of the war are preserved at historic sites, cemeteries, and public sites of memory such as the War Remnants Museum, but they are not highlighted in other areas of contemporary Vietnamese society. As a result, some aspects of the past are acknowledged and examined more than others: the US intervention and atrocities are presented in detail, but there is no critique of (North) Vietnamese actions, and there is scarcely any mention of the former Republic of Vietnam. A similar pattern exists in American public discourse, with emphasis on the US role in the war and the experiences of US veterans rather than those of Vietnamese opponents or allies. For example, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial wall in Washington, DC, includes names only of the American fallen, not North or South Vietnamese.

Among veterans and civilian survivors from all sides of the war, there is a common tendency to offer few details about their experiences when speaking in public and even within their own families. Yet sustained reconciliation requires that the past be acknowledged and addressed rather than ignored or repressed. As noted earlier, a variety of activities have been undertaken by NGOs and individuals, including veterans themselves, to help correct the imbalance between the past and future. To continue progress in this direction, it is important to include voices of the Vietnamese diaspora, of young people who are the descendants of those who experienced the war, and of women and

ethnic minorities. Educational curricula, museums, and media in both countries could be more inclusive of marginalized voices and more expansive in presenting the roots, immediate aftermath, and lingering effects of the war on all sides. For instance, USIP is currently cooperating with the War Remnants Museum to design a new permanent exhibition (scheduled to open in 2025) on postwar efforts to address consequences of Agent Orange and unexploded ordnance.

**Adopt a multidimensional approach to reconciliation that builds a critical mass of people and organizations committed to protecting against geopolitical realignments.** US-Vietnam reconciliation illustrates the power of pursuing a multipronged approach to peacebuilding that has proceeded through a balanced progression of political, economic, social, cultural, and technological components. The trajectory of reconciliation was not planned in advance or managed by any single agency. It resulted instead from the intersecting, nonlinear efforts of multiple actors, gradually moving further from the thin toward the thick end of the reconciliation spectrum.

Continued progress toward reconciliation will require the addition of deeper areas of interaction and engagement, including psychosocial trauma recovery and healing of memories between Vietnamese who stayed in the country and those who left after 1975. In commemorating the 50th anniversary of the end of the war in 2025, cultural and educational aspects of reconciliation will come to the fore in both countries.

At the same time, the US-Vietnam relationship is threatened, as it was in the immediate postwar period, by instability in the international system, particularly by the rise of China as first a regional and now a global

power. Should US-China competition become more confrontational, certain dimensions of the US-Vietnam relationship may be affected or temporarily derailed. To date, the multidimensional character of US-Vietnam reconciliation—which includes multiple mechanisms for dialogue, exchange, and listening, both governmental and nongovernmental—has fostered political goodwill on both sides and helped the process survive such disruptions. To keep the process moving forward, continued confidence-building measures, both material and symbolic, should be encouraged.

**Encourage dialogue with and within diaspora communities about attitudes toward reconciliation.**

Diaspora communities of people who have fled war are complex. Due to the atrocities that war refugees have lived through and the harms that many of them have experienced in the process of forced migration, these communities often bring unhealed trauma responses to their new locations. The conflict in their home country is forever frozen at the point in time that they were forced to flee. This helps explain why diaspora communities throughout the world often harbor more extreme positions about conflicts in their home countries than do their compatriots living in those countries. Many members of diaspora communities are at least initially opposed to reconciliation, although they may become more open to the idea over time.

Vietnamese Americans have diverse views about the term “reconciliation” and the extent to which it is taking place, with significant differences evident between the attitudes of the older generation (refugees who experienced wartime and postwar trauma) and the outlooks of their children and grandchildren who grew up or were born in the United States. Dialogue between generations—and across other fissures, such as North/South, communist/capitalist, veterans/nonveterans—should be facilitated with multiple, interlocking spheres of engagement, both among diaspora groups and between the diaspora and people in Vietnam.

In a recent USIP report, Fanie du Toit and Angelina Mendes identify four key signs of progress for sustained reconciliation: acknowledgment of the need for a common future; concrete measures to mitigate and repair past and ongoing harm and to prevent future harm; improved levels of trust between stakeholders; and meaningful inclusion of marginalized and minority groups.<sup>81</sup> As this study has shown, US-Vietnam relations have demonstrated progress in the first three areas. Americans and Vietnamese are together promoting a shared future, repairing past and present harms, and working to prevent future harms. Trust in all parts of both societies has increased. But the fourth sign of progress, inclusion of marginalized and minority groups, is yet to be fully realized. It is crucial to acknowledge multiple wartime and postwar narratives in Vietnam and among the Vietnamese diaspora in order to heal generational war trauma for all.

**Capitalize on narrative shifts in reconciliation.** Social narratives are the “preferred realities that we live by”—in other words, they are not just words but guide the actions we take on a daily basis.<sup>82</sup> Thus, a critical element of reconciliation is the process of shaping, changing, and even transforming the conflict narratives surrounding war and violence. Any opportunities to shift conflict narratives away from destructive harms and toward constructive actions should be seized.

In US-Vietnam relations, at least two significant narrative shifts have occurred to promote reconciliation. The first was the discourse around the end of the Cold War that allowed both the United States and Vietnam to pursue a more favorable relationship and to imagine more flexible economic reforms and reciprocities. For instance, investment and trade agreements and collaborations increased after Vietnam decided to take on a more mixed economic approach. The second discourse shift was expressed by a growing number of Americans who agreed that the Vietnam War was not only a mistake but fundamentally immoral.<sup>83</sup> US majority public opinion

turned against the war while it was still raging, but an anti-interventionist consensus in both political parties emerged more recently, perhaps as a reaction to the war in Iraq. Coupled with increased exposure to changes in contemporary Vietnam, Americans began to adopt a more empathetic attitude toward the Vietnamese people and the suffering they are still enduring, such as via the effects of Agent Orange. This shift ultimately influenced US political leaders and policy decisions to respond to the Vietnamese government's requests for humanitarian assistance.

The upcoming 2025 anniversaries marking 50 years since the end of the war and 30 years of normalized

US-Vietnam relations offer an opportunity to consolidate these shifts in narrative. The United States and Vietnam are now partners in peace: through the efforts of individuals and governments in both countries, the postwar era has witnessed a transformation from separation to friendship. Agent Orange and other physical legacies of the war have changed from obstacles to foundations for cooperation. And the Vietnamese diaspora in the United States, once a symbol of trauma and division, has become central to social, cultural, and economic ties between the countries. Continued progress in reconciliation will depend on integrating these elements into a shared, inclusive narrative of peace-building and cooperation for the future.

# Notes

---

---

1. Paul Morrow and Shelley Inglis, “Coming to Terms with Legacies of the Vietnam War,” University of Dayton Human Rights Center, 2021, 3, [https://ecommons.udayton.edu/human\\_rights\\_rpts promo/3](https://ecommons.udayton.edu/human_rights_rpts promo/3).
2. Among the first-person accounts that capture postwar experiences of reconciliation are Le Ly Hayslip, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (New York: Doubleday, 1989); Lady Borton, *After Sorrow: An American among the Vietnamese* (New York: Viking, 1995); and Desaix Anderson, *An American in Hanoi: America’s Reconciliation with Vietnam* (White Plains, NY: Eastbridge, 2002). Recent additions include Ted Osius, *Nothing Is Impossible: America’s Reconciliation with Vietnam* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2022); and George Black, *The Long Reckoning: A Story of War, Peace, and Redemption in Vietnam* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2023).
3. For more information, see “Vietnam War Legacies and Reconciliation Initiative,” United States Institute of Peace, <https://www.usip.org/programs/vietnam-war-legacies-and-reconciliation-initiative>.
4. Carl Stauffer, “Support Structures for Sustained Reconciliation,” United States Institute of Peace, April 2023, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/Support-Structures-for-Sustained-Reconciliation-Evidence-Review-Paper.pdf>.
5. Other reconciliation models include Karen Brounéus, “Reconciliation: Theory and Practice for Development Cooperation,” Sida, September 2003, <https://cdn.sida.se/publications/files/sida2982en-reconciliation---theory-and-practice-for-development-cooperation.pdf>; and Simon Keyes, “Mapping Reconciliation,” Peacemakers Network, March 2019, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5d0d32005d7640000177b27d/t/5d6733dd0d5ff60001df2014/1567044574969/Mapping-Reconciliation-.pdf>. Eileen Borris refers to reconciliation as “political forgiveness”: healing individuals, rebuilding communal relations, and pursuing just political order. See Eileen Borris, “Political Forgiveness,” accessed August 28, 2024, <https://www.drborris.com/political-forgiveness/>.
6. Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 283–84, 291.
7. Morrow and Inglis, “Coming to Terms with Legacies of the Vietnam War.”
8. Lina Strupinskienė, “What Is Reconciliation and Are We There Yet? Different Types and Levels of Reconciliation: A Case Study of Bosnia and Herzegovina,” *Journal of Human Rights* 16, no. 4 (2017): 452–472.
9. Ernesto Verdeja, *Unchopping a Tree: Reconciliation in the Aftermath of Political Violence* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009); and Paul Seils, “The Place of Reconciliation in Transitional Justice: Conceptions and Misconceptions,” ICTJ Briefing, International Center for Transitional Justice, June 2017, <https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-Briefing-Paper-Reconciliation-TJ-2017.pdf>.
10. Megan E. Huber, “The Franco-German Relationship: From Animosity to Affinity,” *Beyond Intractability*, May 2020, <https://www.beyondintractability.org/casestudy/huber-franco-german-relationship>.
11. Fanie du Toit and Angelina Mendes, “Coordinates for Transformative Reconciliation,” *Peaceworks* no. 192, United States Institute of Peace, September 2023, 17, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/09/coordinates-transformative-reconciliation>.
12. Huber, “The Franco-German Relationship.”
13. John Paul Lederach, *The Journey toward Reconciliation* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999).
14. Olivia B. Waxman, “How the U.S. and Japan Became Allies Even after Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” *Time*, August 6, 2018, <https://time.com/5358113/hiroshima-nagasaki-history-reconciliation/>.
15. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “The President of the United States Visits Hiroshima,” May 27, 2016, [https://www.mofa.go.jp/na/na1/us/page4e\\_000462.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/na/na1/us/page4e_000462.html).
16. Elizabeth Becker, remarks at “Overcoming War Legacies” (conference), panel 3, United States Institute of Peace, March 26, 2019, <https://www.usip.org/events/overcoming-war-legacies>.
17. Tim Rieser, remarks at “Overcoming War Legacies,” panel 3.
18. Michael Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs, and the Unending Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 6.
19. Phan Xuân Dũng, “Agent Orange Victims in Vietnam: Their Numbers, Experiences, Needs, and Sources of Support,” Special Report no. 522, United States Institute of Peace, September 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/09/agent-orange-victims-vietnam-their-numbers-experiences-needs-and-sources>.



20. Osius, *Nothing Is Impossible*, 14–16.
21. Cited in Le Ke Son and Charles R. Bailey, *From Enemies to Partners: Vietnam, the U.S. and Agent Orange* (Chicago: G. Anton Publishing, 2017), 145.
22. Patrick Leahy, remarks at “Overcoming War Legacies,” panel 1.
23. Cited in Le and Bailey, *From Enemies to Partners*, 143.
24. Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, “Vietnam War Accounting,” accessed August 29, 2024, <https://dpaa-mil.sites.crmforce.mil/dpaaFamWebVietnam>.
25. Patrick Leahy, *The Road Taken* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), 399, 215–16; and USAID Vietnam, “History,” <https://www.usaid.gov/vietnam/history>. Other senators supporting normalization with Vietnam included Max Cleland, Chuck Hagel, Bob Kerrey, and Chuck Robb.
26. Radio Free Asia, “Cựu Đại sứ Ted Osius bàn về hòa giải và an nghỉ người đã khuất trong chiến tranh” [Former Ambassador Ted Osius discusses reconciliation and rest for the war dead], October 31, 2022, [https://www.rfa.org/vietnamese/in\\_depth/former-ambassador-ted-osius-discusses-reconciliation-and-resting-the-dead-in-war-10272022151504.html](https://www.rfa.org/vietnamese/in_depth/former-ambassador-ted-osius-discusses-reconciliation-and-resting-the-dead-in-war-10272022151504.html).
27. Black, *The Long Reckoning*, 152.
28. Le and Bailey, *From Enemies to Partners*, 151–52.
29. Aspen Institute, “U.S.-Vietnam Dialogue Group on Agent Orange Declaration and Plan of Action,” 2010, 4–5.
30. Le and Bailey, *From Enemies to Partners*, 79–81.
31. Congressional Research Service, “U.S. Agent Orange/Dioxin Assistance to Vietnam,” 2021, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R44268>.
32. 156 Cong. Rec. 15904 (2010) (statement of Sen. Leahy).
33. Patrick Leahy, “Addressing War Legacies in Vietnam” (speech), The Banyan Tree Leadership Forum with Senator Patrick Leahy, Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 23, 2015, transcript, 2, [https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/files/content/docs/agent-orange/Patrick%20Leahy%20\\_Addressressing%20Agent%20Orange\\_Speech%20Transcript\\_CSIS%206.23.2015\\_0.pdf](https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/files/content/docs/agent-orange/Patrick%20Leahy%20_Addressressing%20Agent%20Orange_Speech%20Transcript_CSIS%206.23.2015_0.pdf).
34. Lê Kế Sơn, email message to author (Andrew Wells-Dang), October 4, 2023.
35. United States Department of State, “You Are a Citizen Diplomat,” archived February 20, 2019, at the Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190220033604/http://diplomacy.state.gov/discoverdiplomacy/references/169794.htm>.
36. Andrew Wells-Dang, one of the authors of this report, is a former Washington representative for the Fund for Reconciliation and Development and a current War Legacies Project board member.
37. Osius, *Nothing Is Impossible*, xxv.
38. Tim Rieser, remarks at “The US-Vietnam Relationship and War Legacies” (panel discussion), Stimson Center, July 15, 2020, <https://www.stimson.org/event/the-u-s-vietnam-relationship-and-war-legacies-25-years-into-normalization/>.
39. Susan Hammond and Đặng Quang Toàn, “US Assistance to Vietnamese Families Impacted by Agent Orange,” Special Report no. 523, United States Institute of Peace, September 2023, 9, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/09/us-assistance-vietnamese-families-impacted-agent-orange>; and Mark E. Manyin and Liana Wong, “U.S.-Vietnam Relations,” In Focus 10209, Congressional Research Service, May 23, 2024, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10209>.
40. United States Department of State, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, “Fact Sheet: U.S. Security Cooperation with Vietnam,” 2023, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-vietnam>.
41. Phuong Vu and Andrew Wells-Dang, “Time Is Running Out to Account for Vietnamese War Dead,” United States Institute of Peace, November 2022, <https://www.usip.org/blog/2022/11/time-running-out-account-vietnamese-war-dead>.
42. Tôn Nữ Thị Ninh, remarks at United States Institute of Peace (USIP)–Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam workshop, “10th Anniversary of the Vietnam-U.S. Comprehensive Partnership: Deepening Reconciliation and Strategic Trust,” Diplomatic Academy of Hanoi, Hanoi, July 31, 2023.
43. White House, “Remarks of President Obama to the People of Laos,” September 6, 2016, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/09/06/remarks-president-obama-people-laos>.
44. Osius, *Nothing Is Impossible*, 124, 127.
45. White House, “Fact Sheet: President Joseph R. Biden and General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong Announce the U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership,” September 10, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/09/10/fact-sheet-president-joseph-r-biden-and-general-secretary-nguyen-phu-trong-announce-the-u-s-vietnam-comprehensive-strategic-partnership/>.
46. White House, “Fact Sheet.”

47. Quoted in Đặng Cẩm Tú, “Vietnam’s 25 Years of ASEAN Membership and the Stage Ahead,” *Tạp chí Cộng sản*, May 24, 2021, [https://www.tapchicongsan.org.vn/web/english/international/detail/-/asset\\_publisher/ZeaSwtFJtMgN/content/vietnam-s-25-years-of-asean-membership-and-the-stage-ahead](https://www.tapchicongsan.org.vn/web/english/international/detail/-/asset_publisher/ZeaSwtFJtMgN/content/vietnam-s-25-years-of-asean-membership-and-the-stage-ahead).
48. Jeffrey Ordaniel, “The United States and Viet Nam: Charting the Next 25 Years in Bilateral Security Relations,” *Issues & Insights* (Pacific Forum) 21, CR1 (September 2021), <https://pacforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/US-Vietnam-Issues-and-Insights-2021.pdf>.
49. Anderson, *An American in Hanoi*. For a different viewpoint, see Tom Hayden, *Hell No: The Forgotten Power of the Vietnam Peace Movement* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).
50. Pew Research Center, “U.S. Favorability,” June 26, 2017, [https://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2017/06/26170737/PG\\_2017.06.26\\_US-Image-Report\\_Appendix-A-Detailed-Tables.pdf](https://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2017/06/26170737/PG_2017.06.26_US-Image-Report_Appendix-A-Detailed-Tables.pdf). Vietnam has not been included in Pew surveys since 2017.
51. Anderson, *An American in Hanoi*, 17.
52. See Mark Mills, “Why Has Vietnam Forgiven America?,” *Matter of Facts* (blog), January 7, 2017, <https://matteroffactsblog.wordpress.com/2015/01/07/why-has-vietnam-forgiven-america/>; and Dorothy Zinberg, “All that Glitters: An American in Vietnam,” *Huffington Post*, March 7, 2011, updated December 6, 2017, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/all-that-glitters-an-amer\\_b\\_832063](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/all-that-glitters-an-amer_b_832063).
53. Anderson, *An American in Hanoi*, 18.
54. Borton, *After Sorrow*, 84.
55. Nguyễn Thị Bình, “Afterword,” in *The People Make the Peace: Lessons from the Vietnam Antiwar Movement*, ed. Karin Aguilar-San Juan and Frank Joyce (Washington, DC: Just World Books, 2015), 236–37.
56. Dawn Clancy, “Vietnam’s UN Envoy on Reasons to Forgive but Not to Forget,” *PassBlue*, February 8, 2022, <https://www.passblue.com/2022/02/08/vietnams-un-envoy-on-reasons-to-forgive-but-not-to-forget/>.
57. Daniel Zwerdling, “Revisiting Vietnam: History and Reconciliation,” *Stanley Center for Peace and Security and American RadioWorks*, 2008; and Tôn Nữ Thị Ninh, remarks at USIP–Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam workshop.
58. Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*, 287.
59. Tôn Nữ Thị Ninh, remarks at USIP–Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam workshop.
60. Christopher Goscha, *The Penguin History of Modern Vietnam* (London: Penguin Books, 2016), 294.
61. Goscha, *The Penguin History of Modern Vietnam*, 411–12.
62. Hy V. Luong, ed., *Postwar Vietnam: Dynamics of a Transforming Society* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2003), 23.
63. Huy Đức, *Bên Thắng Cuộc, Quyển 1: Giải Phóng* [The Winning Side, vol. 1: Liberation] (Hanoi: Songbook, 2012).
64. Bao Anh and Thanh Chung, “Vietnam’s New Law Eases Property Ownership for Overseas Vietnamese,” *Tuổi trẻ*, January 31, 2024, <https://tuoitrenews.vn/news/society/20240131/vietnams-new-law-eases-property-ownership-for-overseas-vietnamese/78093.html>.
65. David Marr, “A Passion for Modernity: Intellectuals and the Media,” in *Postwar Vietnam*, ed. Luong, 288–89.
66. Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*.
67. Alex-Thai Vo, “Accounting for the Stateless: In Search of the Republic of Vietnam War Dead,” *Human Remains and Violence* 9, no. 2 (December 2023): 76–95.
68. Alex-Thai Vo, “It Is Time to Account for All Missing Vietnamese,” *United States Institute of Peace*, August 17, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/08/it-time-account-all-missing-vietnamese>.
69. Speaker at USIP–Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam workshop.
70. Tôn Nữ Thị Ninh, remarks at USIP–Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam workshop.
71. Osius, *Nothing Is Impossible*, 103.
72. Leahy, remarks at “Overcoming War Legacies.”
73. South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report* (1998), 1:110–17.
74. Morrow and Inglis, “Coming to Terms with Legacies of the Vietnam War,” 2–7.
75. In addition to the organizations and groups profiled in this report, other prominent groups include East Meets West Foundation, Pacific Links Foundation, Children of Vietnam, War Legacies Project, Veterans Restoration Project, and Madison Quakers, Inc.
76. See, for instance, Amerasian Coalition, “Who We Are,” 2022, <https://www.theamerasiancoalition.org/thisisus>.
77. Lauren Mai, Gregory B. Poling, and Japhet Quitzon, “An Indispensable Upgrade: The U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Partnership,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, August 19, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/indispensable-upgrade-us-vietnam-comprehensive-strategic-partnership>.
78. East-West Center, “ASEAN Matters for America/America Matters for ASEAN,” 6th edition, 2023, <https://asiamattersforamerica.org/uploads/publications/2023-ASEAN-Matters-for-America.pdf>.

79. Lederach, *The Journey toward Reconciliation*.
80. Du Toit, *When Political Transitions Work*.
81. Du Toit and Mendes, "Coordinates for Transformative Reconciliation," 6.
82. Jill Freedman and Gene Combs, *Narrative Therapy: The Social Construction of Preferred Realities* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996).
83. Data cited in Tappy Lung, "U.S.-Vietnam Reconciliation: Reassessing U.S. Discussion of Vietnam War Legacies," blog post, Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 14, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/new-perspectives-asia/us-vietnam-reconciliation-reassessing-us-discussion-vietnam-war>.

## TABLE 1. RECONCILIATION STRATEGIES AND THEORIES OF CHANGE

- a. Eran Halperin, Keren Sharvit, and James J. Gross, "Emotion and Emotion Regulation in Intergroup Conflict: An Appraisal-Based Framework," in *Intergroup Conflicts and Their Resolution: A Social Psychological Perspective*, ed. Daniel Bar-Tal (Psychology Press, 2010); Dacher Keltner and Brenda N. Buswell, "Embarrassment: Its Distinct Form and Appeasement Functions," *Psychological Bulletin* 122, no. 3 (1997): 250–70; Donna Hicks, *Dignity: Its Essential Role in Resolving Conflict* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013); Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition"* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992); and Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 1995).
- b. James M. Jones and John F. Dovidio, *The Psychology of Diversity: Beyond Prejudice and Racism* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013); and Dacher Keltner and Robert J. Robinson, "Defending the Status Quo: Power and Bias in Social Conflict," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 23, no. 10 (1997): 1066–77.
- c. Fannie Du Toit, *When Political Transitions Work: Reconciliation as Interdependence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).
- d. John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1998); and Gerald Monk and John Winslade, *Narrative Mediation: A New Approach to Conflict Resolution* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).
- e. Marc Gopin, *Compassionate Reasoning: Changing the Mind to Change the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).
- f. Lisa Schirch, *Ritual and Symbol in Peacebuilding* (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, 2005); John Paul Lederach, *Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Peacebuilding* (Oxford University Press, 2005); and John Paul Lederach and Angela Jill Lederach, *When Blood and Bones Cry Out: Journeys through the Soundscape of Healing and Reconciliation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
- g. Robert M. Yerkes and John D. Dodson, "The Relation of Strength of Stimulus to Rapidity of Habit Formation," *Journal of Comparative Neurology and Psychology* 18 (1908): 459–82; Phuong N. Pham, Harvey M. Weinstein, and Timothy Longman, "Trauma and PTSD Symptoms in Rwanda: Implications for Attitudes toward Justice and Reconciliation," *JAMA: Journal of the American Medical Association* 29, no. 5 (2004): 602–12; Lydia Woodyatt and Michael Wenzel, "Self-Forgiveness and Restoration of an Offender Following an Interpersonal Transgression," *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 32, no. 2 (2013): 225–59; and Ervin Staub et al., "Healing, Reconciliation, Forgiving and the Prevention of Violence after Genocide or Mass Killing: An Intervention and Its Experimental Evaluation in Rwanda," *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 24, no. 3 (2005), 297–334.
- h. Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969); Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984); and Richard E. Rubenstein, *Resolving Structural Conflicts: How Violent Systems Can Be Transformed*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2017). These systemic responses include Glenda Eoyang's human systems dynamics (see Human Systems Dynamics Institute, <https://www.hsdinstitute.org/what-is-hsd.html>) and Louise Diamond's whole systems approach (see Louise Diamond and John McDonald, *Multi-Track Diplomacy: A Systems Approach to Peace* [West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press, 1996]).







---

## ABOUT THE INSTITUTE



The United States Institute of Peace is a national, nonpartisan, independent institute, founded by Congress and dedicated to the proposition that a world without violent conflict is possible, practical, and essential for US and global security. In conflict zones abroad, the Institute works with local partners to prevent, mitigate, and resolve violent conflict. To reduce future crises and the need for costly interventions, USIP works with governments and civil societies to build local capacities to manage conflict peacefully. The Institute pursues its mission by linking research, policy, training, analysis, and direct action to support those who are working to build a more peaceful, inclusive world.

---

## BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Judy Ansley (Chair), Former Assistant to the President and Deputy National Security Advisor under George W. Bush • Nancy Zirkin (Vice Chair), Former Executive Vice President, Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights • Jonathan Burks, Vice President, Global Public Policy, Walmart • Joseph L. Falk, Former Public Policy Advisor, Akerman LLP • Edward M. Gabriel, President and CEO, The Gabriel Company LLC • Kerry Kennedy, President, Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights • Michael Singh, Managing Director, Washington Institute for Near East Policy • John J. Sullivan, Partner, Mayer Brown • Mary Swig, President and CEO, Mary Green • Kathryn Wheelbarger, Vice President, Future Concepts, Lockheed Martin • Roger Zakheim, Washington Director, Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute

## MEMBERS EX OFFICIO

Uzra Zeya, Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights • Lloyd J. Austin III, Secretary of Defense • Michael T. Plehn, Lieutenant General, US Air Force; President, National Defense University • George Moose, Acting President and CEO, United States Institute of Peace (nonvoting)

---

## THE UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE PRESS

Since 1991, the United States Institute of Peace Press has published hundreds of influential books, reports, and briefs on the prevention, management, and peaceful resolution of international conflicts. The Press is committed to advancing peace by publishing significant and useful works for policymakers, practitioners, scholars, diplomats, and students. In keeping with the best traditions of scholarly publishing, each work undergoes thorough peer review by external subject experts to ensure that the research, perspectives, and conclusions are balanced, relevant, and sound.

---

# PEACEWORKS

NO. 197 | OCTOBER 2024

---

This report applies theories of reconciliation, drawn from the practice of peacebuilding around the world, to the trajectory of postwar US-Vietnam relations. It analyzes both political normalization and societal relationships among Americans and Vietnamese as key aspects of reconciliation. Consistent with the focus of the Vietnam War Legacies and Reconciliation Initiative of the United States Institute of Peace, the report addresses physical legacies of the war such as Agent Orange, unexploded ordnance, and missing persons, as well as the nonmaterial aspects of healing, trauma, and psychosocial recovery. The report concludes with several lessons for policymakers and peacebuilding practitioners for bolstering sustained reconciliation in the future.

---

## OTHER USIP PUBLICATIONS

- *Panama, Ecuador, and China: The Dangers of Short-Term Calculations* by Alvaro Mendez and Chris Alden (Special Report, July 2024)
- *China in Peru: The Unspoken Costs of an Unequal Relationship* by Juan Pablo Cardenal (Special Report, July 2024)
- *US-China Rivalry in Asia and Africa: Lessons from the Cold War* by Gregg Brazinsky (Special Report, June 2024)
- *Traumatic Decarbonization in Fragile States* by Aditya Sarkar, Benjamin Spatz, Alex de Waal, Jared Miller, and Tarun Gopalakrishnan (Peaceworks, May 2024)
- *Huawei's Expansion in Latin America and the Caribbean: Views from the Region* by Parsifal D'Sola Alvarado (Special Report, April 2024)



UNITED STATES  
INSTITUTE OF PEACE PRESS

2301 Constitution Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20037  
(202) 457-1700  
[www.USIP.org](http://www.USIP.org)