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Why Not Invade Vietnam Too?

by Jacob G. Hornberger

Amidst all the comparisons of the Vietnam War with the occupation of Iraq, people seem to be ignoring an important question: Why not invade Vietnam too?

After all, everyone knows that Vietnam is not a democracy. In fact, unlike Saddam Hussein's dictatorial regime in Iraq, the Vietnam dictatorship is communist, and as U.S. officials reminded us throughout the Vietnam War, communists are committed to burying America. Moreover, let's not forget that the Vietnamese communists killed almost 60,000 American men — that is, many more Americans than Saddam ever killed and, in fact, 20 times the number of Americans killed on 9/11.

Wouldn't an invasion of Vietnam not only spread democracy in that country but also avenge the deaths of tens of thousands of American men?

So why was President Bush recently visiting Vietnam and shaking hands with its communist dictators instead of leading a U.S. invasion force into Vietnam in his capacity as commander in chief?

By shaking hands and partying with the Vietnamese communist dictators, Bush was implicitly conceding that the issue of regime change in Vietnam properly lies with the Vietnamese people, not with the U.S. government. By his actions, he was saying that the U.S. government would have no more right to invade Vietnam and liberate the Vietnamese people than the Vietnamese government would have to invade the United States to liberate the American people. Regime change — whether through the ballot box or through violent revolution — properly lies with the citizenry of each particular country, not with foreign governments, especially since the price of such regime change is oftentimes extraordinarily high in terms of death and destruction, as the people of Iraq have involuntarily discovered.

Bush's refusal to invade Vietnam is not much different from how U.S. presidents treated Eastern Europe during the Cold War. As miserable as the citizens of Eastern Europe were after U.S. officials delivered them into the clutches of the Soviet communists at the end of World War II, the issue of violent regime change properly lay with the Eastern Europeans, not with the U.S.

government. They chose peaceful means, even though it took almost half a century to throw off the shackles of Soviet tyranny. Who is to say that Eastern Europeans would have been better off with a U.S. invasion that would have killed hundreds of thousands of them and left Eastern Europe a wasteland?

Why did Bush invade Iraq rather than travel to Baghdad and shake hands with Saddam, as U.S. envoy Donald Rumsfeld did during the 1980s on behalf of the U.S. government, and as Bush himself recently did with the Vietnamese communist dictators?

The answer lies in a very simple fact: U.S. presidents use their standing army, which loyally and obediently follows presidential orders, to attack weak and relatively defenseless Third World countries, such as Panama, Grenada, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, and Iraq, and only when U.S. casualties are expected to be low. With Iraq as with Vietnam, it's obvious that they simply miscalculated a bit.

As the Iraq debacle continues to spiral downward, sucking ever-growing numbers of people into its death throws, all too many Americans continue to judge the invasion and occupation of Iraq by how many U.S. troops have been killed. But from a moral standpoint, Americans should also be asking themselves two important questions: (1) Under what moral or legal authority did the U.S. government invade Iraq, killing hundreds of thousands of people in the process? and (2) If the U.S. government invaded Iraq to spread freedom and democracy, as U.S. officials maintain, why is it cozying up to such totalitarian regimes as the communist dictatorship in Vietnam?

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