T. Christopher Jespersen, "The Bitter End and the Lost Chance in Vietnam: Congress, the Ford Administration, and the Battle Over Vietnam, 1975-1976,"*Diplomatic History,* Vol. 24, No. 2 (Spring 2000): 265-293.

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The Ford administration. How could something so brief and so seemingly inconsequential have left such an important legacy? It's been the subject of a minor novel by one of our best novelists (John Updike's, *Memoirs of the Ford Administration*). It stands at the center of a work of contemporary history with one of the best titles (Peter Carroll's *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened*). Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens, appointed by Ford, has been a model of probity and good sense on the bench. When Ford's attorney general Edward Levi died a few weeks ago, he was praised as the best in a generation. The Ford Library is the second best in the Presidential Library system. (It's hard, no, impossible, to match the resources of the Johnson Library in Austin. But when it comes to an attentive, professional staff and a well organized collection, the Ford Library in Ann Arbor is every bit as good as the LBJ Library.) Ford, himself, seems to have grown in attractiveness since he left office. He's befriended both Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, no easy feat. Clinton likes to spend more time with him than with any of the other living former presidents. He's just so comfortable to be around.

The memory of Ford's foreign policy has a wistful quality about it. It hardly rises to the level of tragedy, but those two-and-one half years are fraught with missed opportunities. On so many issues the Ford administration seemed to know what was the right thing to do, and they tried to do it. But they never could pull it off. They wanted to expand detente with the Soviet Union, but Ford later dropped the word detente from his political vocabulary. The promise of the Vladivostok Agreement of 1974 never reached the fruition of a SALT II treaty. The administration sought to expand the opening to China, but formal diplomatic relations waited until the Carter administration. The same was the case with the Panama Canal Treaties, which had to be shelved in the midst of the challenge from Ronald Reagan in 1975-1976. These treaties too had to wait for the Carter administration. Ditto the Arab-Israeli dispute. Everything the Carter administration gained by brokering the Camp David accords was tantalizingly within reach in 1976. But the Ford administration could not close the deal. Politics and electioneering, both in the United States and Israel, made it impossible to close the deal. Even Africa, long ignored by the United States, received attention from Henry Kissinger in 1975-76. The Ford administration perceived the outlines of an agreement for the end of white minority rule in Zimbabwe. But that too waited until the Carter administration came to power.

In these circumstances it is not so surprising that the Ford administration failed to bring about an improvement in U.S.-Vietnamese relations. In this case, unlike the ones I have just described, however, the Ford administration had little interest in closer relations with the victorious Socialist Republic of Vietnam. As Christopher Jespersen has shown in his excellent article, the Ford administration favored punishment and isolation rather than reconciliation with Hanoi.

Jespersen has made excellent use of the resources available in the Ford Library to paint a detailed picture of U.S. attitudes and policy toward Vietnam in the months immediately after the war. He shows that the Ford administration deferred to (many would say caved in to) the demands of the families of men listed as missing in action. At the same time, Ford administration officials paid no attention to, indeed they resisted, the well thought out efforts of members of congress to improve relations with the SRV. Instead of working with these members of congress to conclude a deal with the Vietnamese, the Ford administration slapped an economic embargo on the SRV. Washington vetoed Hanoi's application for membership in the UN, and the United States refused to exchange ambassadors with the SRV.

For about 19 months, from May 1975 until December 1976, Jespersen shows how the United States insisted that it would not exchange ambassadors unless Hanoi agreed first to make a full account g of American MIAs. The United States would not even entertain the possibility of making good on President Richard Nixon's 1973 pledge of approximately $3.2 billion in reconstruction aid to Vietnam. Jespersen demonstrates that members of congress interested in Vietnam were far more flexible than the administration. In negotiations with the Vietnamese in late 1975 and early 1976, members of congress believed that they saw signs that Hanoi would be far more forthcoming on MIAs if the United States dropped the embargo, and exchanged ambassadors. The congressional delegation also saw signs that Vietnam would modify its insistence on the reconstruction aid.

But the Ford administration would hear none of this. Ford, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft considered Representative Richard Ottinger (Dem., N.Y.) and Pete McCloskey (Rep., Calif.), who thought they saw signs of Vietnamese flexibility, meddlesome busybodies. The president and his principal foreign policy advisers wanted the members of congress to butt out and leave foreign policy to the executive.

Jespersen argues that the Ford administration therefore missed a once-in-a-generation opportunity to end the conflict with Vietnam. Estrangement continued for another twenty years, until the Clinton administration lifted the embargo in 1994 and restored diplomatic relations with Vietnam in 1975.

There is no question that relations between the United States and Vietnam would have been better had the reconciliation begun in 1975. It is also likely, but not necessarily true, that economic conditions in Vietnam and rest of Indochina would have been markedly improved had there been normal trade between the U.S. and Vietnam immediately after 1975. The international relations of Southeast Asia may also have been better.

The question that remains, although it is probably unanswerable, is how likely such reconciliation was in 1975-1976. Jespersen acknowledges the difficulty of this question. He points to the substantial body of research on a similar question (the "lost chance" for reconciliation between the United States and the People's Republic of China in 1949-1950) which indicates that the chances then were not so great (p.293).

Here are some thoughts about why 1975-1976 may not have been a propitious time to stop the antagonism between the U.S. and Vietnam. It is hard to see the end of the Vietnam was as

anything other than a victory for the Democratic (later Socialist) Republic of Vietnam and a defeat for the United States. But in 1975-1976, the two states did not act the way victors or defeated powers might be expected. The model comes from the end of World War II. The victor acts with magnanimity and generosity and the defeated with apparent servility and deference (all the while trying to bend to victor to its desires.)

That's precisely what did not happen after the Vietnam War. Nothing shows this more than the tortured history of the promised billions of dollars in reconstruction aid. Washington stopped talking about the aid within months of Nixon's promise. Hanoi insisted upon it at least until the sorry end of negotiations with the Carter administration in December 1977. Kissinger claimed that the aid depended on the North keeping a cease-fire. In the aftermath of the revolutionaries' victory in 1975, Hanoi began to characterize the aid as reparations. This was the last word that the Americans cared to hear, with its associations with crimes and atrocities.

Jespersen performs a real service by showing that the Vietnamese occasionally hinted as early as late 1975 that they would drop their demands for the reconstruction aid. Most writers claim that Hanoi persisted in demanding the money, and calling it reparations, until well after Carter took office. But the Vietnamese were never consistent, and they did refer often to the money as if they could count on a promise made by President Nixon.

Probably the biggest mistake the Vietnamese made in their dealings with the Americans from 1975 until at last 1989 was to believe that there was a substantial body of opinion in the United States (perhaps even a majority) in favor of better relations with Vietnam. The Vietnamese probably thought that this majority also felt some pangs of guilt for the American conduct of the war. Such a view was natural, if mistaken. It derived from the Vietnamese view that the U.S. antiwar movement represented a majority, and that the antiwar movement was essentially a cry of moral anguish over American attacks on Vietnam. That element surely existed, but it did not make up a majority of the antiwar movement. Nor did the antiwar represent a majority of Americans. Most Americans did not care about Vietnam while the war went on; they cared even less after the U.S. forces withdrew from 1969-1973; and they cared almost nothing after 1975. Reconstruction aid to Vietnam had negligible support in congress. Vietnam was in no position to compel the Americans to provide it.

Of course the political strength of American advocates of MIAs was also greatly exaggerated. Most Americans had limited concern for the fate of MIAs. But the issue was extraordinarily important for those who did care about MIAs. And these people were highly important in the Republican Party. Ford's leadership over this party was tenuous at best in 1975-1976. His challenger, Ronald Reagan, had the support of advocates of the MIAs. Just as the Ford administration made little progress in its last year on issues such as detente with the Soviet Union, improvement in relations with China, mediating between Israel and its neighbors, or wrapping up the Panama Canal treaties, better relations with Vietnam became a casualty of American electoral politics.

I write this in the midst of another eruption of anger among Cuban-Americans at the government of Fidel Castro. Now that anger is also focused on the government of the United States. It is instructive to compare and contrast the estrangement between the U.S. and Cuba, which has gone

on now for more than forty years, and the breach in diplomatic relations between the United States and Vietnam, which lasted for twenty.

Émigrés have played a key role in shaping the contours of both relations. In the case of Cuban-Americans, the antagonism, no, the hatred, for Castro's government has made successive U.S. president blanch at the prospect of dropping the embargo and normalizing relations. How different has been the impact of approximately one million Vietnamese-Americans. They are probably as hostile to the government of the SRV as the Cuban-Americans are toward the government of Cuba. But the Vietnamese-Americans played a vastly different role in the eventual dropping of the embargo and the restoration of diplomatic relations. They supported and sometimes they even advocated closer economic and political ties to their former homeland. Their views proved to be a counterweight to those of the advocates for the MIAs after 1989. They made it easier, not harder, to effect a rapprochement with Hanoi.

In 1975, Vietnamese-Americans were not the force they were to become in American politics. Without them, it was harder to heal the breach between the United States and Vietnam. Most observers would agree with Jespersen, that it would have been better had wounds of Vietnam healed sooner. Whether they could have been is not so clear.

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