

Strategic Remembering in Vietnam-US Relations: How a Monument of War Turns Into a Marker of Peace

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Abstract: *On October 26, 1967, John McCain (1936–2018), the naval aviator who later became a US Senator from Arizona was shot down while flying over Hanoi, Vietnam. McCain then became a war prisoner for five and a half years until his release in March 1973. Where McCain was captured became the site of a memorial, depicting a soldier kneeling with two arms raised in surrender. Originally intended to celebrate the Vietnamese victory, the memorial later turned into a symbol of McCain’s relationship with Vietnam and the US’s relationship to the country. McCain himself visited, as well as recent US leaders, including President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris. Upon McCain’s passing, both Vietnamese people and American expats brought flowers to the memorial to pay their respects. This commentary discusses how the memorial became an instrument of diplomacy, serving the present rhetoric of friendship the US has fostered with Vietnam and demonstrating both peoples’ desires for an amiable future. By honouring the memorial, the Americans and the Vietnamese have engaged in what we argue is strategic remembering, reconfiguring the meaning of a war artifact and making it not only a testament to the past but also a marker of renewed reality in the present.*

Keywords: John McCain, Vietnam, US, Memory, Monument, Vietnam War, Strategic remembering

On October 26, 1967, John McCain (1936–2018), the naval aviator who later became a Senator from Arizona and the Republican nominee for President of the United States in the 2008 election, was shot down while flying over North Vietnam. Injured, he parachuted into TrúC Bạch Lake and was arrested by the Vietnamese. He was then transported to Hanoi’s Hỏa Lò Prison and became a war prisoner in North Vietnam for five and a half years until his release in March 1973. The location of McCain’s capture

turned into the site of a memorial, depicting a soldier kneeling with two arms raised in surrender (Figure 1). A statue marking the spot was temporarily erected on the crash site in 1967, and then renovated during the 1980s and 1990s. The monument is 2.5 metres wide and 3 metres high, located on Thanh Niên, one of the most popular streets among Hanoi residents and a well-known tourist spot. The engraved script on the monument reads, “On 26 October 1967, in TrúC Bạch Lake, the Hanoi army and people captured pilot John Sidney McCain, a Lieutenant of the US Naval Air Force, who flew the A4 plane which was shot down at the Yên Phụ thermal power plant” (translated from Vietnamese).



Figure 1: President Joe Biden at the memorial of McCain’s capture on the banks of TrúC Bạch Lake in Hanoi on September 11, 2023. Screenshot from the White House page on X (formerly Twitter).

Originally intended to celebrate the Vietnamese victory, the memorial later became a symbol of McCain's unique relationship with Vietnam and, for some, the US's relationship with Vietnam as well. It has been visited by many US leaders, including Vice President Kamala Harris in 2021 and President Joe Biden in 2023, who came to show respect for McCain and honour his military service (Huy`ân Lê, 2021; Gardner and Sink, 2023). McCain himself visited the monument and took photos there when he was alive (Figure 2). Upon his passing, both Vietnamese people and American expats in Hanoi brought flowers to the memorial to honour his memory (Vũ Anh, 2018; V. Du`ân and D. Ngọc, 2018). This story exemplifies how memory can be reconstructed as the way people make sense of a historical event shifts. In what follows, we will discuss the way the memorial as a war artifact originally meant to celebrate the US defeat in the Vietnam War has morphed into a peace marker for the current Vietnam-US diplomatic relationship. This attempt, we argue, is an act of strategic remembering through which one prioritizes what and how to remember to serve present political agendas and national interests. In so doing, we do not suggest that the two countries' peoples choose to forget the traumatic loss caused by the war and the victory of North Vietnam or to erase the past to fit what they wish for in the present. We posit, nevertheless, that the way people engage with the monument is strategically adjusted to "direct the future in the name of the past" (Gong, 2001, p. 45), for both McCain personally as well as the Vietnamese and US people and governments.

John McCain's Relationship with Vietnam

For many, including Daniel Kritenbrink – a former US ambassador to Vietnam (2017-2021) – McCain was a peacemaker, helping foster ties between the two countries (Watson, Shelley and Phillips, 2018). The senator was a proponent of reconciliation between the two, playing a key role in lifting the US trade embargo against Vietnam in the early 1990s. In a number of public speeches, interviews, and appearances, McCain emphasized the need to address war

legacies between the two nations, including humanitarian issues such as raising money to support young victims of Agent Orange and providing technological assistance to track and remove the undetonated bombs that remain beneath the ground until the present day in many provinces in Central Vietnam



Figure 2: John McCain and US politicians by the memorial in 2012. Screenshot from John McCain's page on X (formerly Twitter).

(Dreyfuss, 2000; Egan, 1989). According to McCain, given Vietnam's geopolitical significance in South-east Asia, fostering diplomatic ties with Vietnam would also enhance the US national interest (Galloway, 1995, p. 21). Addressing the past, he said, "I've made my peace with Vietnam and with the Vietnamese...I try hard to make good use of my memories of Vietnam, as do most vets, to reconcile myself to the past and to find the wisdom we all aspire to in our old age" (McCain, 2000, p. 116). During his lifetime, McCain reportedly undertook more than 20 trips to Vietnam and visited the memorial in Truc Bach as well as Hỏa Lò Prison, now a war museum (Watson, Shelley and Phillips, 2018), multiple times. He even left a short message in the guest book of Hỏa Lò, which reads, "Best wishes, John McCain" (Watson, Shelley and Phillips, 2018).

As Dreyfuss (2000, p. 11) puts it, the shadow of Vietnam “defines the man.” According to this journalist, one of the factors that made the US media adore McCain was his status as a tortured prisoner of war. In this sense, the Vietnam war and his war-associated relationship with Vietnam became part of his personal and political identity. Images of McCain’s smiling face next to the memorial by Trúc Bạch Lake signal a reconciliation with a past in which he was a defeated soldier in the Vietnamese eyes. Later, the locals’ respectful engagement with the memorial also turned it into a marker of McCain’s relationship with Vietnam rather than a testament to his defeat. Here, the image of a surrendering soldier is no longer linked to shame and defeat, but simply a marker of a historical event. For McCain himself, the memorial may have become an endearing reminder of his enemy-turned-friend relationship with Vietnam as well as his survival of the war. To some extent, it marked the birth of his political identity and the beginning of his political career trajectory that was closely linked with the Vietnam-US diplomatic relationship.

Vietnam War and the Diplomatic Relationship Between Vietnam and the US

On April 30, 1975, with the fall of Sài Gòn, the war ended. However, only in the early 1990s was the diplomatic relation between Vietnam and the US normalized. The desire to return to Vietnam post-war and embark on “healing journeys,” like McCain’s, is not uncommon among former Vietnam War soldiers. In the past decades, thousands of former service-members have journeyed to Vietnam to seek closure and reconcile with the past after years of battling post-traumatic stress disorder (Dreyfuss, 2000; Egan, 1989). Research has linked American veterans’ returns to Vietnam with a veteran-tour industry (Hobbs, 2023). Many veterans find it the most effective therapy when they work to alleviate the trauma of war. Organizations such as Veterans for Peace and initiatives such as Project RENEW (Restoring the Environment and Neutralizing the Effects of War)

are examples of reconciliation efforts operating with a purpose of peace-making.

After the Vietnam War, the US began embracing its own “politics of healing” characterized by endeavours to commemorate its casualties apolitically and celebrate peace (Hagopian, 2009). Vietnam also championed a rhetoric of forgiveness with phrases such as “khép lại quá khứ, hướng tới tương lai” (closing the past, turning towards the future) and promoted a new peaceful, win-win relationship with the US. There is now a clear-cut distinction between the US as the enemy in the past, and the US as a friend of the present. American war veterans’ visits to Vietnam are normally met with welcoming attitudes from the Vietnamese. Economically, both the US and Vietnam now see each other as strategic partners in hopes of counterbalancing China’s rising influence in Asia. Politically, both the US and Vietnam have reasons to seek alliance. While the Biden administration has directly addressed China as a “strategic competitor” of the US and “an emerging threat to the world order,” Vietnam also perceives China as a risk to its territorial sovereignty and national security (Vu, Soong and Nguyen, 2023, p. 256-257). Thus, deepening the bilateral ties between the US and Vietnam has become critical in both nations’ development trajectories. The number of high-level visits to both nations has significantly increased over the decades, exhibiting closer cooperation in multiple areas, especially on economic and defense and security issues (Vu, Soong and Nguyen, 2023). Recently, Vietnam was among the top countries receiving vaccine doses from the US during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Considering such a context, both Vietnam and the US have resorted to “strategic remembering,” that is, the use of memory as a strategic resource as Viet Thanh Nguyen (2016) argues, in order to strengthen their relations and solidify mutual interests. Strategic memory practices seek to commemorate certain aspects of historical events while fostering the forgetting of other aspects deemed unfavourable to one’s interests (Nguyen, 2016). As realities

on the personal relationship between McCain and Vietnam as well as the reinterpretation of a memory that has now become the enabler of a cooperative future for both countries.

How Reconstructed Memory is Embodied in a Monument

This is a curious case in which not only the victors get to reinvent memory through a monument they built, but the defeated also join to refashion the past via the same work. The choice of US politicians to visit this site, that is, to commemorate McCain's fall during their often-short trips to Vietnam, is also fascinating; one may wonder, out of all the possible places, why was this place considered worth a visit? This fluid engagement with the monument is an example of how "each age attempts to refashion and remake memory to serve its own contemporary purposes" (Mitchel, 2003, p. 443). Echoing Andreas Huyssen (2003), Mitchel (2003, p. 446) notes that a monument may become a form of palimpsest, being revisited and reworked to reflect both "present pasts and past presents." The visits of high-profile US leaders, widely reported by Vietnamese media, have lent it greater visibility and invigorated the memory of McCain not only as a prisoner of war but as a patriot and a friend of Vietnam. These visits have turned the memorial into an instrument of diplomacy, serving the present rhetoric of friendship the US has fostered with Vietnam. After McCain passed away in 2018, the US Embassy in Hanoi and many people, including both Vietnamese and Americans, placed incense and flowers at the foot of the monument to pay their respects to a man who helped normalize relations after the Vietnam War (Vu Anh, 2018; Watson, Shelly and Phillips, 2018). Against this backdrop, US politicians' visits to the memorial of McCain's capture, who served as more or less a bridge to the sour-turned-warm relationship between the two countries, were symbolic of their desires for a future of peace with the former enemy-turned-friend. By honoring the site, both the Americans and the Vietnamese have engaged in strategic remembering, reconfiguring the meaning of a

war artifact and making it not only a testament to the past but also a marker of a renewed reality (the two countries' friendship) in the present. To this end, we posit that the memorial has multiple functions that change across time. It started as a celebratory site of the Vietnamese in the Vietnam War, turned into a political site that witnessed a transformed relationship between McCain and Vietnam personally and the US and Vietnam diplomatically, then became a "grave", a "makeshift shrine" for McCain in Vietnam after his death where the Vietnamese and Americans visit to pay tribute. This shift in meanings and significance of the monument can only occur because of changes in the US-Vietnam relationship across multiple domains, most notably political and economic. The memory and narrative embedded in the memorial have been reconstructed strategically thanks to the engagement of both parties.

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