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US Warship Challenges China in South Sea

Ryan Pickrell

<https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/us-navy-warship-challenges-china-in-south-china-sea-as-us-blasts-beijings-unlawful-claims-and-gangster-tactics/ar-BB16Ju5l>

- A US Navy destroyer challenged China in the South China Sea with a freedom-of-navigation operation on Tuesday.
- The USS Ralph Johnson sailed near the disputed Spratly Islands, the Navy said, adding in a statement that "unlawful and sweeping maritime claims in the South China Sea pose a serious threat to the freedom of the seas."
- The operation, one of at least six such operations this year, comes after the US State Department officially rejected most of China's sea claims, declaring its maritime claims and efforts to assert sovereignty to be "unlawful."

After the US Department of State declared Beijing's maritime claims in the South China Sea and efforts to assert dominance to be unlawful, the US Navy destroyer USS Ralph Johnson further challenged China with a sail-by operation.

The Navy released a couple of photos on Tuesday of the destroyer sailing near the contested Spratly Islands, and a Navy spokesman confirmed that the ship conducted a freedom-of-navigation operation in the area.

"This freedom of navigation operation upheld the rights, freedoms, and lawful uses of the sea recognized in international law by challenging the restrictions on innocent passage imposed by China, Vietnam and Taiwan," the Navy explained in a statement.

The Navy stated that "unlawful and sweeping maritime claims in the South China Sea pose a serious threat to the freedom of the seas."

"The United States upholds freedom of navigation as a principle," the Navy said. "As long as some countries continue to claim and assert limits on rights that exceed their authority under international law, the United States will continue to defend the rights and freedoms of the sea guaranteed to all. No member of the international community should be intimidated or coerced into giving up their rights and freedoms."

The US is aligning its South China Sea policy with a 2016 international arbitration tribunal ruling and officially rejecting many of China's claims to the contested waterway, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Monday.

"Beijing's claims to offshore resources across most of the South China Sea are completely unlawful, as is its campaign of bullying to control them," the secretary said, adding that "the PRC's predatory world view has no place in the 21st century."

While China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Brunei all have overlapping claims to the strategic South China Sea, China is among the most aggressive in enforcing its claims. Chinese military outposts can be found in both the disputed Paracel and Spratly Islands, despite a 2016 arbitration tribunal ruling that discredited many of China's claims.

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US Warship Challenges China...

Beijing rejected the ruling by the international Permanent Court of Arbitration that made the decision at the request of the Philippines following China's seizure of Scarborough Shoal.

Much to China's frustration, the US routinely challenges Beijing's restrictions on innocent passage and excessive claims through regular freedom-of-navigation operations.

The Navy has conducted at least six such operations this year alone, as well as multiple presence operations. The Air Force also routinely conducts bomber overflights in the region.

Earlier this month, the US sent two carrier strike groups into the South China Sea to conduct dual-carrier operations at the same time the Chinese military was conducting exercises in the area.

In recent months, the US military has stepped up its activities in the South China Sea in response to what the Pentagon described as "increasing opportunistic activity by the PRC to coerce its neighbors and press its unlawful maritime claims in the South China Sea while the region and the world is focused on addressing the COVID-19 pandemic."

Strongly criticizing China's "gangster tactics," David Stillwell, assistant secretary of state for East Asia and the Pacific, stressed at a Center for Strategic and International Studies event Tuesday that the US "will not let China claim the South China Sea as its own," USNI News reported.

China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs called the US statement on the South China Sea "irresponsible," saying that "it violates and distorts international law, deliberately stokes territorial and maritime disputes, and undermines regional peace and stability." "We strongly deplore and firmly oppose the wrong move by the US and urge it to stop stirring up trouble on the South China Sea issue and stop continuing down the wrong path," foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said Tuesday.

Suggested by Bill Laurie

The Week Donald Trump Lost the South China Sea

Bill Hayton: Foreign Policy 7-31-2017

<http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/07/31/the-week-donald-trump-lost-the-south-china-sea/amp/>

Vietnam's history is full of heroic tales of resistance to China. But this month Hanoi bent the knee to Beijing, humiliated in a contest over who controls the South China Sea, the most disputed waterway in the world. Hanoi has been looking to Washington for implicit backing to see off Beijing's threats. At the same time, the Trump administration demonstrated that it either does not understand or sufficiently care about the interests of its friends and potential partners in Southeast Asia to protect them against China. Southeast Asian governments will conclude that the United States does not have their backs. And while Washington eats itself over Russian spies and health care debates, one of the world's most crucial regions is slipping into Beijing's hands.

There's no tenser set of waters in the world than the South China Sea. For the last few years, China and its neighbors have been bluffing, threatening, cajoling, and suing for control of its resources. In June, Vietnam made an assertive move. After two and a half years of delay, it finally granted Talisman Vietnam (a subsidiary of the Spanish energy firm Repsol) permission to drill for gas at the very edge of Hanoi's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the South China Sea.

Under mainstream interpretations of the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), Vietnam was well within its rights to do so. Under China's idiosyncratic interpretation, it was not. China has never even put forward a clear claim to that piece of seabed. On July 25, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Lu Kang would only urge "the relevant party to cease the relevant unilateral infringing activities" — but without saying what they actually were. In the absence of official clarity, Chinese lawyers and official think tanks have suggested two main interpretations.

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China may be claiming “historic rights” to this part of the sea on the grounds that it has always been part of the Chinese domain (something obviously contested by all the other South China Sea claimants, as well as neutral historians). Alternatively, it may be claiming that the Spratly Islands — the collection of islets, reefs, and rocks off the coasts of Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, and the Philippines — are entitled as a group to their own EEZ. An international arbitration tribunal in The Hague, however, ruled these claims incompatible with UNCLOS a year ago. China has refused to recognize both the tribunal and its ruling.

In mid-June, Talisman Vietnam set out to drill a deepwater “appraisal well” in Block 136-03 on what insiders believe is a billion-dollar gas field, only 50 miles from an existing Repsol operation. The Vietnamese government knew there was a risk that China might try to interfere and sent out coast guard ships and other apparently civilian vessels to protect the drillship.

At first, China’s intervention was relatively diplomatic. The vice chairman of the Central Military Commission, Gen. Fan Changlong, visited Hanoi on June 18 and demanded an end to the drilling. When Vietnam refused, he cancelled a joint meeting on border security (the 4th Border Defense Friendly Exchange) and went home.

Reports from Hanoi (which have been confirmed by similar reports, from different sources, to the Australia-based analyst Carlyle Thayer) say that, shortly afterward, the Vietnamese ambassador in Beijing was summoned to the Chinese Foreign Ministry and told, bluntly, that unless the drilling stopped and Vietnam promised never to drill in that part of the sea ever again, China would take military action against Vietnamese bases in the South China Sea.

This is a dramatic threat, but it is not unprecedented. While researching my book on the South China Sea, I was told by a former BP executive that China had made similar threats to that company when it was operating off the coast of Vietnam in early 2007. Fu Ying, then the Chinese ambassador in London, told BP’s CEO at the time, Tony Hayward, that she could not guarantee the safety of BP employees if the company did not abandon its operations in the South China Sea. BP immediately agreed and over the following months withdrew from its offshore Vietnam operations. I asked Fu about this at a dinner in Beijing in 2014, and she replied, “I did what I did because I have great respect for BP and did not want it to get into trouble.”

Vietnam occupies around 28 outposts in the Spratly Islands. Some are established on natural islands, but many are isolated blockhouses on remote reefs. According to Thayer, 15 are simply platforms on legs: more like place markers than military installations. They would be all but impossible to defend from a serious attack. China demonstrated this with attacks on Vietnamese positions in the Paracel Islands in 1974 and in a battle over Johnson South Reef in the Spratlys in 1988. Both incidents ended with casualties for Vietnam and territorial gains for China. There are rumors, entirely unconfirmed, that there was a shooting incident near one of these platforms in June. If true, this may have been a more serious warning from Beijing to Hanoi.

Meanwhile, the drillship *Deepsea Metro I* had found exactly what Repsol was looking for: a handsome discovery — mainly gas but with some oil. The company thought there could be more and kept on drilling. It hoped to reach the designated total depth of the well by the end of July.

Back in Hanoi, the Politburo met to discuss what to do. Low oil prices and declining production from the country’s existing offshore fields were hurting the government budget. The country needed cheap energy to fuel its economic growth and keep the Communist Party in power — but, at the same time, it was deeply dependent on trade with China.

It is all but impossible to know for sure how big decisions are made in Vietnam, but the version apparently told to Repsol was that the Politburo was deeply split. Of its 19 members, 17 favored calling China’s bluff. Only two disagreed, but they were the most influential figures at the table: the general secretary of the party, Nguyen Phu Trong, and Defense Minister Ngo Xuan Lich.

After two acrimonious meetings in mid-July, the decision was made: Vietnam would kowtow to Beijing and end the drilling. According to the same sources, the winning argument was that the Trump administration could not be relied upon to come to Hanoi’s assistance in the event of a confrontation with China. Reportedly, the mood was rueful. If Hillary Clinton had been sitting in the White House, Repsol executives were apparently told, she would have understood the stakes and everything

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would have been different.

The faith in Clinton isn't surprising. Her interventions on behalf of the Southeast Asian claimant states, starting in Hanoi at the July 2010 meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum, are well remembered in the region. The Barack Obama administration's focus on the regional rules-based order was welcomed by governments fearful of domination by either the United States or China.

That said, some U.S. observers are skeptical that any other administration would have been more forthcoming. Bonnie Glaser, the director of the China Power Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, questions this apparent contrast: "What would the U.S. have done differently [under Obama]? I find it unlikely that the U.S. would militarily defend Vietnam against China. Vietnam isn't an ally."

Yet it wouldn't have taken much: a statement or two about the rules-based order and the importance of abiding by UNCLOS, some coincidental naval exercises during the weeks of the drilling, perhaps even some gunnery practice in the region of Block 136-03 and a few quiet words between Washington and Beijing. "Forward-deployed diplomacy," as it used to be called. The Obama administration warned Beijing off the Scarborough Shoal in April 2016 this way. Has Donald Trump's Washington forgotten the dark art of deterrence?

The implications of China's victory are obvious. Regardless of international law, China is going to set the rules in the South China Sea. It is going to apply its own version of history, its own version of "shared" ownership, and it will dictate who can exploit which resources. If Vietnam, which has at least the beginnings of a credible naval deterrent, can be intimidated, then so can every other country in the region, not least the Philippines.

This month, Manila announced its intention to drill for the potentially huge gas field that lies under the Reed Bank in the South China Sea. The desire to exploit those reserves (before the country's main gas field at Malampaya runs out in a few years' time) was the main reason for the Philippines to initiate the arbitration proceedings in The Hague. The Philippines won a near total legal victory in that case, but since taking office just over a year ago, President Rodrigo Duterte has downplayed its importance. He appears to have been intimidated: preferring to appeal to China for financial aid rather than assert his country's maritime claims.

In May, Duterte told an audience in Manila that Chinese President Xi Jinping had warned him there would be war if the Philippines tried to exploit the gas reserves that the Hague tribunal had ruled belonged to his country. Last week, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi was in the Philippine capital to discuss "joint development" of those energy resources.

Where Duterte and the Vietnamese leadership go, others will follow. Southeast Asian governments have reached one major conclusion from President Trump's first six months: The United States is not prepared to put skin in the game. What is the point of all those freedom of navigation operations to maintain UNCLOS if, when push comes to shove, Washington does not support the countries that are on the receiving end of Chinese pressure?

Why has Washington been so inept? Secretary of State Rex Tillerson knows the stakes well. His former company ExxonMobil is also investigating a massive gas prospect in disputed waters. The "Blue Whale" field lies in Block 118, farther north and closer to Vietnam's coast than Repsol's discovery — but also contested by China. Like so much else, it's a mystery whether this is a deliberate choice by the Trump White House not to get involved in the details of the disputes or if it is a reflection of the diminution of the State Department's capabilities, with so many senior posts vacant and so many middle-ranking staff leaving. The most worrying possibility would be that Tillerson failed to act out of the desire to see his former commercial rival, Repsol, fail so that his former employer, ExxonMobil, could obtain greater leverage in the Vietnamese energy market. But what government would ever trust Tillerson again?

Repsol is currently plugging its highly successful appraisal well with cement and preparing to sail away from a total investment of more than \$300 million. Reports from the region say a Chinese seismic survey vessel, the *HYSY760*, protected by a small flotilla, is on its way to the same area to examine the prospects for itself. UNCLOS has been upended, and the rules-based order has been diminished. This wasn't inevitable nor a *fait accompli*. If Hanoi thought Washington had its back, China could have been deterred — and the credibility of the United States in the region strengthened. Instead, Trump has left the region drifting in the direction of Beijing.

Children of the Vietnam War

By **DAVID LAMB**

SMITHSONIAN MAGAZINE

JUNE 2009

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/children-of-the-vietnam-war-131207347/>

They grew up as the leftovers of an unpopular war, straddling two worlds but belonging to neither. Most never knew their fathers. Many were abandoned by their mothers at the gates of orphanages. Some were discarded in garbage cans. Schoolmates taunted and pummeled them and mocked the features that gave them the face of the enemy—round blue eyes and light skin, or dark skin and tight curly hair if their soldier-dads were African-Americans. Their destiny was to become waifs and beggars, living in the streets and parks of South Vietnam's cities, sustained by a single dream: to get to America and find their fathers.

But neither America nor Vietnam wanted the kids known as Amerasians and commonly dismissed by the Vietnamese as "children of the dust"—as insignificant as a speck to be brushed aside. "The care and welfare of these unfortunate children...has never been and is not now considered an area of government responsibility," the U.S. Defense Department said in a 1970 statement. "Our society does not need these bad elements," the Vietnamese director of social welfare in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) said a decade later. As adults, some Amerasians would say that they felt cursed from the start. When, in early April 1975, Saigon was falling to Communist troops from the north and rumors spread that southerners associated with the United States might be massacred, President Gerald Ford announced plans to evacuate 2,000 orphans, many of them Amerasians. Operation Babylift's first official flight crashed in the rice paddies outside Saigon, killing 144 people, most of them children. South Vietnamese soldiers and civilians gathered at the site, some to help, others to loot the dead. Despite the crash, the evacuation program continued another three weeks.

"I remember that flight, the one that crashed," says Nguyen Thi Phuong Thuy. "I was about 6, and I'd been playing in the trash near the orphanage. I remember holding the nun's hand and crying when we heard. It was like we were all born under a dark star." She paused to dab at her eyes with tissue. Thuy, whom I met on a trip to Vietnam in March 2008, said she had never tried to locate her parents because she had no idea where to start. She recalls her adoptive Vietnamese parents arguing about her, the husband shouting, "Why did you have to get an Amerasian?" She was soon sent off to live with another family.

Thuy seemed pleased to find someone interested in her travails. Over coffee and Cokes in a hotel lobby, she spoke in a soft, flat voice about the "half-breed dog" taunts she heard from neighbors, of being denied a ration card for food, of sneaking out of her village before others rose at sunrise to sit alone on the beach for hours and about taking sleeping pills at night to forget the day. Her hair was long and black, her face angular and attractive. She wore jeans and a T-shirt. She looked as American as anyone I might have passed in the streets of Des Moines or Denver. Like most Amerasians still in Vietnam, she was uneducated and unskilled. In 1992 she met another Amerasian orphan, Nguyen Anh Tuan, who said to her, "We don't have a parent's love. We are farmers and poor. We should take care of each other." They married and had two daughters and a son, now 11, whom Thuy imagines as the very image of the American father she has never seen. "What would he say today if he knew he had a daughter and now a grandson waiting for him in Vietnam?" she asked.

No one knows how many Amerasians were born—and ultimately left behind in Vietnam—during the decade-long war that ended in 1975. In Vietnam's conservative society, where premarital chastity is traditionally observed and ethnic homogeneity embraced, many births of children resulting from liaisons with foreigners went unregistered. According to the Amerasian Independent Voice of America and the Amerasian Fellowship Association, advocacy

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groups recently formed in the United States, no more than a few hundred Amerasians remain in Vietnam; the groups would like to bring all of them to the United States. The others—some 26,000 men and women now in their 30s and 40s, together with 75,000 Vietnamese they claimed as relatives—began to be resettled in the United States after Representative Stewart B. McKinney of Connecticut called their abandonment a "national embarrassment" in 1980 and urged fellow Americans to take responsibility for them.

But no more than 3 percent found their fathers in their adoptive homeland. Good jobs were scarce. Some Amerasians were vulnerable to drugs, became gang members and ended up in jail. As many as half remained illiterate or semi-illiterate in both Vietnamese and English and never became U.S. citizens. The mainstream Vietnamese-American population looked down on them, assuming that their mothers were prostitutes—which was sometimes the case, though many of the children were products of longer-term, loving relationships, including marriages. Mention Amerasians and people would roll their eyes and recite an old saying in Vietnam: Children without a father are like a home without a roof.

The massacres that President Ford had feared never took place, but the Communists who came south after 1975 to govern a reunited Vietnam were hardly benevolent rulers. Many orphanages were closed, and Amerasians and other youngsters were sent off to rural work farms and re-education camps. The Communists confiscated wealth and property and razed many of the homes of those who had supported the American-backed government of South Vietnam. Mothers of Amerasian children destroyed or hid photographs, letters and official papers that offered evidence of their American connections. "My mother burned everything," says William Tran, now a 38-year-old computer engineer in Illinois. "She said, 'I can't have a son named William with the Viet Cong around.' It was as though your whole identity was swept away." Tran came to the United States in 1990 after his mother remarried and his stepfather threw him out of the house.

Hoi Trinh was still a schoolboy in the turbulent postwar years when he and his schoolteacher parents, both Vietnamese, were uprooted in Saigon and, joining an exodus of two million southerners, were forced into one of the "new economic zones" to be farmers. He remembers taunting Amerasians. Why? "It didn't occur to me then how cruel it was. It was really a matter of following the crowd, of copying how society as a whole viewed them. They looked so different than us.... They weren't from a family. They were poor. They mostly lived on the street and didn't go to school like us."

I asked Trinh how Amerasians had responded to being confronted in those days. "From what I remember," he said, "they would just look down and walk away."

Trinh eventually left Vietnam with his family, went to Australia and became a lawyer. When I first met him, in 1998, he was 28 and working out of his bedroom in a cramped Manila apartment he shared with 16 impoverished Amerasians and other Vietnamese refugees. He was representing, pro bono, 200 or so Amerasians and their family members scattered through the Philippines, negotiating their futures with the U.S. Embassy in Manila. For a decade, the Philippines had been a sort of halfway house where Amerasians could spend six months, learning English and preparing for their new lives in the United States. But U.S. officials had revoked the visas of these 200 for a variety of reasons—fighting, excessive use of alcohol, medical problems, "anti-social" behavior. Vietnam would not take them back and the Manila government maintained that the Philippines was only a transit center. They lived in a stateless twilight zone. But over the course of five years, Trinh managed to get most of the Amerasians and scores of Vietnamese boat people trapped in the Philippines resettled in the United States, Australia, Canada and Norway.

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When one of the Amerasians in a Philippine refugee camp committed suicide, Trinh adopted the man's 4-year-old son and helped him become an Australian citizen. "It wasn't until I went to the Philippines that I learned of the Amerasians' issues and ordeals in Vietnam," Trinh told me. "I've always believed that what you sow is what you get. If we are treated fairly and with tenderness, we will grow up being exactly like that. If we are wronged and discriminated against and abused in our childhood, like some of the Amerasians were, chances are we will grow up not being able to think, rationalize or function like other 'normal' people."

After being defeated at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 and forced to withdraw from Vietnam after nearly a century of colonial rule, France quickly evacuated 25,000 Vietnamese children of French parentage and gave them citizenship. For Amerasians the journey to a new life would be much tougher. About 500 of them left for the United States with Hanoi's approval in 1982 and 1983, but Hanoi and Washington—which did not then have diplomatic relations—could not agree on what to do with the vast majority who remained in Vietnam. Hanoi insisted they were American citizens who were not discriminated against and thus could not be classified as political refugees. Washington, like Hanoi, wanted to use the Amerasians as leverage for settling larger issues between the two countries. Not until 1986, in secret negotiations covering a range of disagreements, did Washington and Hanoi hold direct talks on Amerasians' future.

But by then the lives of an American photographer, a New York congressman, a group of high-school students in Long Island and a 14-year-old Amerasian boy named Le Van Minh had unexpectedly intertwined to change the course of history.

In October 1985, *Newsday* photographer Audrey Tiernan, age 30, on assignment in Ho Chi Minh City, felt a tug on her pant leg. "I thought it was a dog or a cat," she recalled. "I looked down and there was Minh. It broke my heart." Minh, with long lashes, hazel eyes, a few freckles and a handsome Caucasian face, moved like a crab on all four limbs, likely the result of polio. Minh's mother had thrown him out of the house at the age of 10, and at the end of each day his friend, Thi, would carry the stricken boy on his back to an alleyway where they slept. On that day in 1985, Minh looked up at Tiernan with a hint of a wistful smile and held out a flower he had fashioned from the aluminum wrapper in a pack of cigarettes. The photograph Tiernan snapped of him was printed in newspapers around the world.

The next year, four students from Huntington High School in Long Island saw the picture and decided to do something. They collected 27,000 signatures on a petition to bring Minh to the United States for medical attention. They asked Tiernan and their congressman, Robert Mrazek, for help.

"Funny, isn't it, how something that changed so many lives emanated from the idealism of some high-school kids," says Mrazek, who left Congress in 1992 and now writes historical fiction and nonfiction. Mrazek recalls telling the students that getting Minh to the United States was unlikely. Vietnam and the United States were enemies and had no official contacts; at this low point, immigration had completely stopped. Humanitarian considerations carried no weight. "I went back to Washington feeling very guilty," he says. "The students had come to see me thinking their congressman could change the world and I, in effect, had told them I couldn't." But, he asked himself, would it be possible to find someone at the U.S. State Department and someone from Vietnam's delegation to the United Nations willing to make an exception? Mrazek began making phone calls and writing letters.

Several months later, in May 1987, he flew to Ho Chi Minh City. Mrazek had found a senior Vietnamese official who thought that helping Minh might lead to improved relations with the United States, and the congressman had

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persuaded a majority of his colleagues in the House of Representatives to press for help with Minh's visa. He could bring the boy home with him. Mrazek had hardly set his feet on Vietnamese soil before the kids were tagging along. They were Amerasians. Some called him "Daddy." They tugged at his hand to direct him to the shuttered church where they lived. Another 60 or 70 Amerasians were camped in the yard. The refrain Mrazek kept hearing was, "I want to go to the land of my father."

"It just hit me," Mrazek says. "We weren't talking about just the one boy. There were lots of these kids, and they were painful reminders to the Vietnamese of the war and all it had cost them. I thought, 'Well, we're bringing one back. Let's bring them all back, at least the ones who want to come.'"

Two hundred Huntington High students were on hand to greet Minh, Mrazek and Tiernan when their plane landed at New York's Kennedy International Airport.

Mrazek had arranged for two of his Centerport, New York, neighbors, Gene and Nancy Kinney, to be Minh's foster parents. They took him to orthopedists and neurologists, but his muscles were so atrophied "there was almost nothing left in his legs," Nancy says. When Minh was 16, the Kinneys took him to see the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., pushing him in his new wheelchair and pausing so the boy could study the black granite wall. Minh wondered if his father was among the 58,000 names engraved on it.

"Minh stayed with us for 14 months and eventually ended up in San Jose, California," says Nancy, a physical therapist. "We had a lot of trouble raising him. He was very resistant to school and had no desire to get up in the morning. He wanted dinner at midnight because that's when he'd eaten on the streets in Vietnam." In time, Minh calmed down and settled into a normal routine. "I just grew up," he recalled. Minh, now 37 and a newspaper distributor, still talks regularly on the phone with the Kinneys. He calls them Mom and Dad.

Mrazek, meanwhile, turned his attention to gaining passage of the Amerasian Homecoming Act, which he had authored and sponsored. In the end, he sidestepped normal Congressional procedures and slipped his three-page immigration bill into a 1,194-page appropriations bill, which Congress quickly approved and President Ronald Reagan signed in December 1987. The new law called for bringing Amerasians to the United States as immigrants, not refugees, and granted entry to almost anyone who had the slightest touch of a Western appearance. The Amerasians who had been so despised in Vietnam had a passport—their faces—to a new life, and because they could bring family members with them, they were showered with gifts, money and attention by Vietnamese seeking free passage to America. With the stroke of a pen, the children of dust had become the children of gold.

"It was wild," says Tyler Chau Pritchard, 40, who lives in Rochester, Minnesota, and was part of a 1991 Amerasian emigration from Vietnam. "Suddenly everyone in Vietnam loved us. It was like we were walking on clouds. We were their meal ticket, and people offered a lot of money to Amerasians willing to claim them as mothers and grandparents and siblings."

Counterfeit marriage licenses and birth certificates began appearing on the black market. Bribes for officials who would substitute photographs and otherwise alter documents for "families" applying to leave rippled through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Once the "families" reached the United States and checked into one of 55 transit centers, from Utica, New York, to Orange County, California, the new immigrants would often abandon their Amerasian benefactors and head off on their own.

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It wasn't long before unofficial reports began to detail mental-health problems in the Amerasian community. "We were hearing stories about suicides, deep-rooted depression, an inability to adjust to foster homes," says Fred Bemak, a professor at George Mason University who specializes in refugee mental-health issues and was enlisted by the National Institute for Mental Health to determine what had gone wrong. "We'd never seen anything like this with any refugee group."

Many Amerasians did well in their new land, particularly those who had been raised by their Vietnamese mothers, those who had learned English and those who ended up with loving foster or adoptive parents in the United States. But in a 1991-92 survey of 170 Vietnamese Amerasians nationwide, Bemak found that some 14 percent had attempted suicide; 76 percent wanted, at least occasionally, to return to Vietnam. Most were eager to find their fathers, but only 33 percent knew his name.

"Amerasians had 30 years of trauma, and you can't just turn that around in a short period of time or undo what happened to them in Vietnam," says Sandy Dang, a Vietnamese refugee who came to the United States in 1981 and has run an outreach program for Asian youths in Washington, D.C. "Basically they were unwanted children. In Vietnam, they weren't accepted as Vietnamese and in America they weren't considered Americans. They searched for love but usually didn't find it. Of all the immigrants in the United States, the Amerasians, I think, are the group that's had the hardest time finding the American Dream."

But Amerasians are also survivors, their character steeled by hard times, and not only have they toughed it out in Vietnam and the United States, they are slowly carving a cultural identity, based on the pride—not the humiliation—of being Amerasian. The dark shadows of the past are receding, even in Vietnam, where discrimination against Amerasians has faded. They're learning how to use the American political system to their advantage and have lobbied Congress for passage of a bill that would grant citizenship to all Amerasians in the United States. And under the auspices of groups like the Amerasian Fellowship Association, they are holding regional "galas" around the country—sit-down dinners with music and speeches and hosts in tuxedos—that attract 500 or 600 "brothers and sisters" and celebrate the Amerasian community as a unique immigrant population.

Jimmy Miller, a quality inspector for Triumph Composite Systems Inc., a Spokane, Washington, company making parts for Boeing jets, considers himself one of the fortunate ones. His grandmother in Vung Tau took him in while his mother served a five-year sentence in a re-education camp for trying to flee Vietnam. He says his grandmother filled him with love and hired an "underground" teacher to tutor him in English. "If she hadn't done that, I'd be illiterate," Miller says. At age 22, in 1990, he came to the United States with a third-grade education and passed the GED to earn a high-school diploma. It was easy convincing the U.S. consular officer who interviewed him in Ho Chi Minh City that he was the son of an American. He had a picture of his father, Sgt. Maj. James A. Miller II, exchanging wedding vows with Jimmy's mother, Kim, who was pregnant with him at the time. He carries the picture in his wallet to this day.

Jimmy's father, James, retired from the U.S. Army in 1977 after a 30-year career. In 1994, he was sitting with his wife, Nancy, on a backyard swing at their North Carolina home, mourning the loss of his son from a previous marriage, James III, who had died of AIDS a few months earlier, when the telephone rang. On the line was Jimmy's sister, Trinh, calling from Spokane, and in typically direct Vietnamese fashion, before even saying hello, she asked, "Are you my brother's father?" "Excuse me?" James replied. She repeated the question, saying she had tracked him down with the help of a letter bearing a Fayetteville postmark he had written Kim years earlier. She gave him Jimmy's telephone number.

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James called his son ten minutes later, but mispronounced his Vietnamese name—Nhat Tung—and Jimmy, who had spent four years looking for his father, politely told the caller he had the wrong number and hung up. His father called back. "Your mother's name is Kim, right?" he said. "Your uncle is Marseille? Is your aunt Phuong Dung, the famous singer?" Jimmy said yes to each question. There was a pause as James caught his breath. "Jimmy," he said, "I have something to tell you. I am your dad."

"I can't tell you how tickled I was Jim owned up to his own child," says Nancy. "I have never seen a man happier in my life. He got off the phone and said, "My son Jimmy is alive!" Nancy could well understand the emotions swirling through her husband and new stepson; she had been born in Germany shortly after World War II, the daughter of a U.S. serviceman she never knew and a German mother.

Over the next two years, the Millers crossed the country several times to spend weeks with Jimmy, who, like many Amerasians, had taken his father's name. "These Amerasians are pretty amazing," Nancy said. "They've had to scrap for everything. But you know the only thing that boy ever asked for? It was for unconditional fatherly love. That's all he ever wanted." James Miller died in 1996, age 66, while dancing with Nancy at a Christmas party.

Before flying to San Jose, California, for an Amerasian regional banquet, I called former Representative Bob Mrazek to ask how he viewed the Homecoming Act on its 20th anniversary. He said that there had been times when he had questioned the wisdom of his efforts. He mentioned the instances of fraud, the Amerasians who hadn't adjusted to their new lives, the fathers who had rejected their sons and daughters. "That stuff depressed the hell out of me, knowing that so often our good intentions had been frustrated," he said.

But wait, I said, that's old news. I told him about Jimmy Miller and about Saran Bynum, an Amerasian who is the office manager for actress-singer Queen Latifah and runs her own jewelry business. (Bynum, who lost her New Orleans home in Hurricane Katrina, says, "Life is beautiful. I consider myself blessed to be alive.") I told him about Tiger Woods look-alike Canh Oxelson, who has an undergraduate degree from the University of San Francisco, a master's degree from Harvard and is dean of students at one of Los Angeles' most prestigious preparatory schools, Harvard-Westlake in North Hollywood. And I told him about the Amerasians who got off welfare and are giving voice to the once-forgotten children of a distant war.

"You've made my day," Mrazek said.

The cavernous Chinese restaurant in a San Jose mall where Amerasians gathered for their gala filled quickly. Tickets were \$40—and \$60 if a guest wanted wine and a "VIP seat" near the stage. Plastic flowers adorned each table and there were golden dragons on the walls. Next to an American flag stood the flag of South Vietnam, a country that has not existed for 34 years. An honor guard of five former South Vietnamese servicemen marched smartly to the front of the room. Le Tho, a former lieutenant who had spent 11 years in a re-education camp, called them to attention as a scratchy recording sounded the national anthems of the United States and South Vietnam. Some in the audience wept when the guest of honor, Tran Ngoc Dung, was introduced. Dung, her husband and six children had arrived in the United States just two weeks earlier, having left Vietnam thanks to the Homecoming Act, which remains in force but receives few applications these days. The Trans were farmers and spoke no English. A rough road lay ahead, but, Dung said, "This is like a dream I've been living for 30 years." A woman approached the stage and pressed several \$100 bills into her hand.

I asked some Amerasians if they were expecting Le Van Minh, who lived not far away in a two-bedroom house,
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to come to the gala. They had never heard of Minh. I called Minh, now a man of 37, with a wife from Vietnam and two children, 12 and 4. Among the relatives he brought to the United States is the mother who threw him out of the house 27 years ago.

Minh uses crutches and a wheelchair to get around his home and a specially equipped 1990 Toyota to crisscross the neighborhoods where he distributes newspapers. He usually rises shortly after midnight and doesn't finish his route until 8 a.m. He says he's too busy for any spare-time activities but hopes to learn how to barbecue one day. He doesn't think much about his past life as a beggar in the streets of Saigon. I asked him if he thought life had given him a fair shake.

"Fair? Oh, absolutely, yes. I'm not angry at anyone," said Minh, a survivor to the core.

David Lamb wrote about Singapore in the September 2007 issue.

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Sons and daughters of the Vietnam conflict claim roots on two continents. Jimmy Miller (with his two girls in Spokane) reunited with his father, retired Army Sgt. Maj. James Miller II, in Fayetteville, North Carolina. (Catherine Karnow)