

# A Second Opinion by an American on Higher Education Reform in Vietnam PART II

Neal Koblitz

Dept. of Mathematics, Box 354350  
Univ. of Washington, Seattle, WA 98195 U.S.A.  
koblitz@math.washington.edu

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The purpose of this sequel to my earlier article is to comment on a paper titled “The Intangibles of Excellence: Governance and the Quest to Build a Vietnamese Apex Research University.”<sup>1</sup> That paper was written by people connected with the Fulbright School in Hồ Chí Minh City, the Vietnam Program of the Harvard Kennedy School’s Ash Institute, and The New School. On the one hand, the report contains some interesting accounts and analyses of experiences with higher education in different parts of the world. On the other hand, in its discussion of Vietnam it is essentially a more elaborate version of the Valley report. But it goes beyond the Valley report in making some surprising and troubling recommendations. For brevity I will refer to this long paper as the Ash/Fulbright report.

## 1 Introduction

A common criticism of the disciplinary viewpoint of many people in the social sciences is that they have an excessive preoccupation with abstract and formalistic matters, and fail to notice when reality contradicts their theories.

For example, in the 1950’s most established American political scientists accepted as an axiom the notion that the U.S. stands for “democracy” in the world, whereas the Cold War opponents of the U.S. were “undemocratic.”<sup>2</sup> But if we look at Vietnam during this period, we see that this theory fails to explain the crisis of those years, and in particular the tragic 21-year partition of Vietnam.

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<sup>1</sup>[http://ashinstitute.harvard.edu/ash/apex\\_university\\_paper\\_september.pdf](http://ashinstitute.harvard.edu/ash/apex_university_paper_september.pdf)

<sup>2</sup>When I was a child in the 1950’s and early 1960’s, this theory was part of the political indoctrination to which I and all other American schoolchildren were subjected.

The Geneva Accords of 1954 that ended the French War provided for a partition of Vietnam for a brief transition period, to be followed by democratic elections in 1956 to unify the country. Was it the “undemocratic” Hồ Chí Minh who blocked elections? Not exactly. It was the “democratic” United States, which was the main financial and military backer of the Bảo Đại/ Diệm regime in the south, that refused to abide by the Geneva agreement. The reason was stated plainly in the memoirs of the U.S. President at the time, Dwight Eisenhower:<sup>3</sup>

I have never talked or corresponded with a person knowledgeable in Indochinese affairs who did not agree that had elections been held as of the time of the fighting, possibly 80 per cent of the population would have voted for the Communist Hồ Chí Minh as their leader rather than Chief of State Bảo Đại.

According to standard American political theory of the 1950’s, communists come to power through force and violence, never through a process of free elections. In order to make that theory hold true in Vietnam, the Americans had to cancel the elections! The forced division of Vietnam did not end until nineteen years after the elections were supposed to have been held, with the liberation of Saigon and expulsion of U.S. forces on 30 April 1975.

## 2 “Governance” and Substance

Even though times are very different a half-century later — and the Cold War is over — nevertheless the same criticism of excessive formalism and theory can be made of many American social scientists today. The Ash/Fulbright authors have put the word “governance” at the center of their analysis of higher education. This word refers to the administrative structures and formal allocation of authority in a university setting. To them, good governance means essentially a formal structure that as closely as possible resembles those at American universities. Their basic thesis, proclaimed in the title, is that this is the way to ensure the “intangibles of excellence.”

Using two examples from their paper, we shall see that reality often contradicts their theory.

### 2.1 Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia

In order to illustrate “the important issues of decentralization and autonomy,” the Ash/Fulbright report cites a study of “increasing institutional autonomy in post-Soviet Russia” (page 26). They regard universities in Russia now to be a big improvement over the Soviet-era institutions. Russian universities are increasingly following U.S. models of organization, in contrast to universities in Soviet times, which, in the view of the American policy analysts, violated the principles of good governance.

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<sup>3</sup>D. D. Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change 1953-1956: The White House Years*, 1963, p. 372.

But whatever one's opinion of these formal issues, the indisputable fact is that Soviet universities and government institutes were centers of scientific research that rivaled and in certain areas surpassed U.S. science. I recall the meetings of the Moscow Mathematical Society in the 1970's and 1980's. The gatherings in a giant lecture hall of Moscow State University on Lenin Hills brought together a concentration of brilliant mathematicians that was unequaled anywhere else in the world.

In contrast, as I said in Part I, in our day Russia has become a scientific backwater. It is peculiar that the Ash/Fulbright authors would expect Vietnamese scientists to regard present-day Russian universities and institutes as an improvement over the Soviet ones. Even if the authors are correct that Russian universities are better organized now than in Soviet times (and one shouldn't trust their judgment about that, since resembling American models is not the same thing as good governance), it doesn't make much difference because the substance of what is done there is just a pale shadow of what it once was.

## 2.2 The University of Washington's Board of Regents

In all 64 pages of the Ash/Fulbright report there is not a single word that acknowledges that American universities might have failings. The authors present an ideal model of how American universities are run, and their tacit assumption is that the reality conforms to that idealization.

Because I teach at the University of Washington (U.W.), I suppose I should have been very pleased to see my university's governing board given in the Ash/Fulbright report as a shining example of good governance in American universities. The report accurately describes the formal structure of our Board of Regents, and explains that

In practice, the most important role of a U.S. governing board is to hire and fire the president.

Let's examine the most recent case of the hiring and firing of a U.W. president. Richard McCormick was president of the University of Washington from 1995 to 2002, at which time he unexpectedly announced that he was going to leave U.W. to become president of Rutgers University (the state university of New Jersey).

Most U.W. faculty were glad to see him go, since there were many complaints about his ineffectiveness. For example, he made the two worst senior administrative appointments that I have seen during my 30 years at the university, both of them in the area of undergraduate education. (I discuss this in some detail in Chapter 15 of *Random Curves*.)

There was no transparency in McCormick's removal. In fact, Rutgers University was not aware of the true situation when they hired him.<sup>4</sup> The full

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<sup>4</sup>In the United States in cases of ethical violations by high-ranking employees it is common to make an arrangement that avoids scandal. The employee agrees to resign, and the employer agrees to keep the true reason secret and provide him with a sterling recommendation to his next employer. This is what happened in the McCormick case.

story didn't come out until a year later, when an article in the November 2, 2003 issue of *The Seattle Times* revealed that McCormick had resigned under pressure from the Board of Regents because of ethical questions related to an extramarital affair with a subordinate.

In addition to being a womanizer, our president also had a problem with alcohol. Within a few months of becoming president of Rutgers, he was arrested in New Jersey for driving while intoxicated. This is the man whom the U.W. governing board chose to run my university from 1995-2002 and whom the Rutgers governing board chose to run that university from 2002 to the present.

The Ash/Fulbright authors are experts on the theory of American university governance, but not on the reality. That is why they chose my university to be their main example of the type of governance that Vietnam should want to emulate.

### 3 IIT Kanpur

There is one example (and apparently only one) of the successful development of a university in the Third World through a partnership with an American consortium of universities: the Indian Institute of Technology in Kanpur. The Ash/Fulbright authors give a brief history of IIT Kanpur, and are justifiably proud of the role the U.S. played in constructing an excellent university in India.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, the Kanpur example has little relevance to modern Vietnam. As the Ash/Fulbright report says, it was financed by the U.S., not by the Indian government. For this reason it did not divert any Indian resources away from other educational needs.

Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was a leader of the movement of non-aligned nations. He was able to cleverly position India between the Soviet Union and the United States and thereby get aid from both. Among the four largest countries in the world, India was the only non-aligned one, and the American government did not want India to move closer to the socialist camp. When Nehru asked President Kennedy to finance the Kanpur campus of IIT, Kennedy agreed. He knew that if he said no, then Nehru would ask the Russians.

### 4 Focusing on Undergraduate, Not Post-Graduate Education

In a section of the recommendations titled "Start with undergraduate education," the Ash/Fulbright report says that

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<sup>5</sup>To a number theorist like me, the excellence of IIT Kanpur is well known. One of the most impressive breakthroughs in computational number theory in the past decade — the development of a deterministic polynomial time algorithm to determine whether a number is prime — was achieved in 2002 by three people at IIT Kanpur.

A new apex university in Vietnam should focus on undergraduate education.... [I]t would be impractical for Vietnam to focus on graduate education before building a strong base in undergraduate studies.

What justification do the Ash/Fulbright authors have for saying that the level of Vietnamese undergraduates is too low to provide a basis for post-graduate programs?<sup>6</sup> Would those authors ever say such a thing about American universities? Let's take the University of Washington, for example. In my colleague's course on atmospheric science, 63% of the students were unable to correctly divide  $25 \times 10^8$  by  $5 \times 10^{-5}$ . Are such students on track to enter a high-quality post-graduate science program? Perhaps we at U.W. should abandon our post-graduate programs until we can raise the level of undergraduate education? The argument for doing this in the U.S. is stronger than in Vietnam. After all, science students at VNU know the area of a circle, and they know how to use scientific notation for numbers.

Of course, no one would be so foolish as to tell U.W. scientists that we should focus only on undergraduate education for a while. Yet the Ash/Fulbright "experts" tell Vietnamese scientists that even their apex university cannot start out with a post-graduate focus. Again we see a neocolonialist double standard at work.

#### 4.1 Consortium of Small Liberal Arts Colleges

In the first section of its policy recommendations, the Ash/Fulbright report suggests that an approach that is "particularly pertinent because of our final recommendation, that Vietnam focus on undergraduate education" would

consist of assembling a consortium of smaller, U.S. liberal arts colleges with strong science programs.

According to this recommendation, Vietnam's apex university would be developed by a group of American colleges that do not themselves have any post-graduate programs.

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<sup>6</sup>The Ash/Fulbright report says that "Vietnamese students and their families are increasingly expressing dissatisfaction with the education system by exiting it.... One is immediately struck by the high percentage of Vietnamese who are enrolled in [U.S.] undergraduate programs...the great majority of these are at community colleges.... it is reasonable to infer that Vietnamese students and families have little confidence in the quality of undergraduate education within Vietnam." But the reason for the high enrollment of affluent Vietnamese students in U.S. community colleges is not that the quality of education there is higher than at Vietnam National University. Rather, as explained in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* ("American Colleges Raise the Flag in Vietnam," 15 May 2009), "Much of the appeal...to Vietnamese undergraduates is that it caters to those who failed to get into a Vietnamese university... the competition for the relatively few seats at the inexpensive public universities is cutthroat." For students who intend to return to Vietnam, a big incentive to come to the U.S. for undergraduate studies is that any degree from America is accorded excessive prestige in Vietnam. (Unfortunately, some Vietnamese people are ignorant enough to believe that an Associate Degree from Houston Community College is worthy of more respect than a 4-year degree from VNU.) In other cases the students intend to remain permanently in the U.S., either with or without legal immigrant status.

This is an especially muddle-headed idea. How can small colleges that are not themselves universities construct a world-class university? The only type of “university” that could result would be a third-tier institution with a weak or non-existent post-graduate program.

I do not mean to disparage the type of U.S. college that would form the Ash/Fulbright consortium. Colleges such as Reed (in Oregon), Oberlin (in Ohio), and Harvey Mudd (in California) provide undergraduates with some of the best learning environments in the U.S. However, these colleges have no post-graduate programs and have little involvement in scientific research.

Two of my close colleagues and friends have taught at this type of college. The one who taught at Reed has left, and the one teaching at Oberlin would like to leave. Both feel that these colleges, while providing a rich learning experience for beginning students, do not provide a good research environment for faculty.

## 5 American Meddling

In Part I, in reference to the negative judgments in the Valley report about Vietnamese who received advanced training in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, I commented that

...the authors seem to be trying to foment conflict between different groups of Vietnamese... it serves no useful purpose to try to set one group of Vietnamese against another.

Unlike representatives of organizations from other countries, the Ash/Fulbright authors seem to believe that as Americans they enjoy a special prerogative to make public statements denigrating Vietnamese people and institutions with which they have disagreements.

Both the Valley report and the Ash/Fulbright report have many disparaging comments about higher education leadership and the current public universities. Their feeling is that it would be hopeless to try to improve them; rather, an entirely new university must be built from scratch.

### 5.1 Only One New University

The authors criticize the current government plan for building four new universities, saying that that is too many. For anyone who knows a little bit about Vietnam, if four is too many, then the obvious position would be to advocate two — one in the north and one in the south.

Since the earliest days of our visits to Vietnam, my wife Ann and I learned to think of Vietnam as represented symbolically by a woman carrying two baskets at the ends of a pole. That picture is evocative of the map of Vietnam: the two baskets of course represent the north and the south. Ever since reunification, a top priority of the Vietnamese leadership has been to foster a balance of resources and strengths between the two regions, while at the same time promoting the development of secondary centers in the central provinces and

elsewhere. As in many other countries, harmonious relations between different regions and a careful balance of power and resources are a basic requirement for national security and development.

Yet the Ash/Fulbright authors strongly favor constructing just one new apex university. A section of the policy recommendations is titled “Focus on building one institution.” Judging by the authors’ statements elsewhere in the report, it is obvious that they will insist on this university being built in the south. The Hồ Chí Minh City region contains the largest concentration of industry, and locating it there, they will argue, will facilitate ties between higher education and industry. In addition, given their antipathy to the universities and leaders in Hanoi, they would want the American-style university to be far from Hanoi.

If their recommendations are followed, there will be a big new expensive university in the south that will be a focal point for the spread of American influence. Meanwhile, Vietnam National University in Hanoi will get nothing — both the Valley report and the Ash/Fulbright report state that there is no need for increased funding of the existing universities — and VNU will decline because of inattention to its needs.

The Ash/Fulbright people have their main base of influence in Hồ Chí Minh City. If their proposal is adopted, they will have achieved a significant transfer of political and economic power to the south, and a concomitant increase in U.S. influence.

I believe that it is wrong for representatives of the U.S. State Department’s Fulbright program to meddle in the internal affairs of the host country. Even if the Fulbright people had good ideas for Vietnamese higher education, their insistence on political meddling makes them unworthy of the trust of the people and government of Vietnam.

## 5.2 A Personal Story from My Father

About a half century ago, when I was a child, my father was a Fulbright professor in India for a year. He tells me that in India at that time the Fulbright people were always respectful of the Indian academic authorities and would never make arrogant or disparaging remarks about them or about the level of Indian intellectuals or officials. My father read the Valley report, and was surprised and shocked that representatives of Fulbright would write in that way. He agreed that the term “neocolonialist arrogance” in my response to the Valley report is an appropriate way to describe it.

## 5.3 Recommendation Number 9

I listed eight recommendations in §10 of Part I of my article. I would now like to add a ninth:

9. In the event that Vietnam chooses to partner with foreign universities, it would be ill-advised to work through the Harvard/Fulbright group. There are many countries, such as India, South Korea, Japan, and China, that have some excellent universities which might make suitable partners. Most likely

there is no country besides the U.S. — not even China, although I realize that many Vietnamese people have feelings of mistrust toward China — that would attempt to interfere in Vietnam's internal affairs in the way that the American group does.