

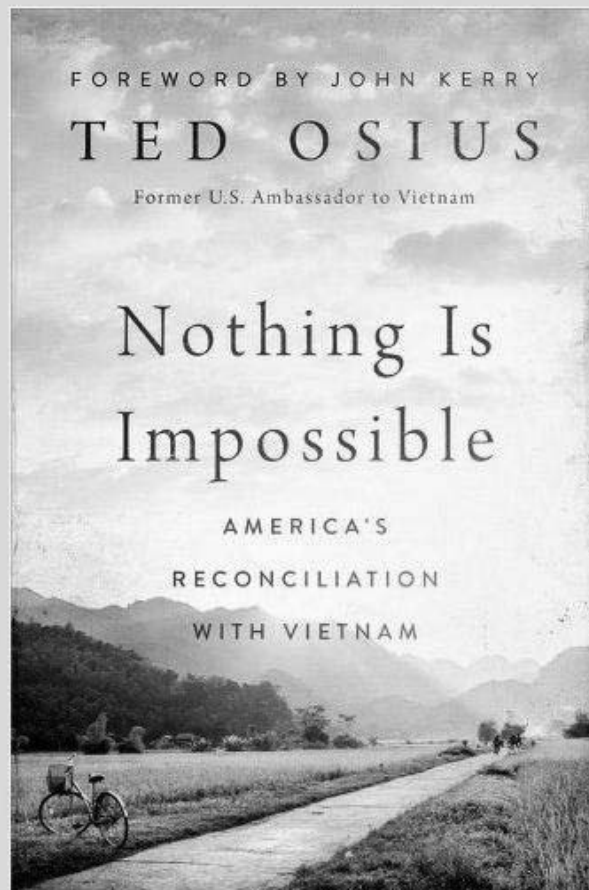


BOOK REVIEW

BOOK REVIEW: Nothing is Impossible: America's Reconciliation with Vietnam

By Ted Osius, Rutgers University Press, Chicago, hardcover and audiobook, 332 pp with notes and bibliography, US \$29.95

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By: David Brown

Lately, there's been talk in Washington about elevating the US-Vietnam relationship to a 'new level' -- that is, from 'comprehensive' to 'strategic.' Chiefly we hear that from people who consider Chinese ambition to be the most troublesome problem the US currently faces.

The half-dozen members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee who grilled Mark Knapper during hearings on his nomination to be the Biden Administration's ambassador to Vietnam seemed to regard upgraded ties as something that the US might bestow on the Hanoi regime if it were to ease its pressure on independent journalists and other dissidents and make more space for non-party groups (aka 'civil society organizations') in national life.

Coincidentally, I've just read an advance copy of *Nothing Is Impossible*, a memoir by Ted Osius, the American Ambassador to Vietnam from December 2014 to November 2017. Osius also considers repression of civil activism by the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) to be an impediment to improved bilateral ties, but unlike the senators, Osius recognizes that Hanoi hasn't been in a big hurry to jump into bed with the US, either.

In the first third of *Nothing is Impossible*, Osius explains how, as the US recovered from the trauma of its first 'forever war' and as the victorious regime in Hanoi surveyed the wreckage of an ill-conceived postwar effort to "build socialism," officials in both capitals began to work toward diplomatic relations. In fascinating detail, Osius credits the improbable alliance of US Senators John McCain, who survived six dreadful years in a Hanoi prison, and John Kerry, a war hero turned anti-war veteran, for turning Washington sentiment toward reconciliation premised on a DRV commitment to facilitate the repatriation of the remains of American soldiers.

In the quarter-century since relations were established between the DRV and the US, two consistent elements stand out. One is the uniformly high quality of US embassy leadership in Hanoi (all but one career diplomats). Osius pays particular homage to two under whom he served during his first posting to Vietnam: Desaix Anderson, who as chargé d'affaires in 1995-96 got a US embassy up and running, and "Pete" Peterson, another former POW, subsequently a congressman, who served as the first American ambassador to the DRV (1997-2001),

The other element of the US-Vietnam relationship that hasn't changed in a quarter-century is the ramshackle American chancery at 7 Láng Hà. Every ambassador since Peterson has made finding larger and more secure quarters a priority. In 2017, Osius and Foreign Ministry counterparts agreed on a site, but a host of details must be resolved before construction can begin.

Throughout *Nothing is Impossible*, there's a great deal of such incidental detail about what American embassies do, the myriad small interactions that build, broaden and sustain a bilateral relationship. In the case of two former enemies, in the wake of an ignominious intervention by the US and a victory achieved at incredible cost by the Hanoi regime, the

overarching goal was building trust. Twenty years after the fall of Saigon, Vietnam may have been an economic basket case but no degree of hardship would induce it to grovel. For the US, Osius stresses, "showing respect meant figuring out what was truly important [to Vietnam] and taking that seriously. Respect cost America very little and gained us almost everything."

A substantial part of *Nothing Is Impossible*, Chapter 5 in particular, details years of effort to forge consensus within the US government that the US must acknowledge its responsibility for 'legacies of war' by deeds as well as words. Osius argues persuasively that honest engagement by the US to help remediate soil contaminated by Agent Orange and to fund clearance of unexploded ordnance cleared the way to reconciliation and, in due course, startlingly positive cooperation between former enemies.

In Chapter 7 (of 14), Osius turns to his own three-year tenure as ambassador to Vietnam. He's justly proud of his engagement on a people-to-people level with the Vietnamese, whether bicycling to support charitable causes or debating with students in, he says, his "fluently imperfect" Vietnamese.

Vietnam's new year holiday stretches over a week or more; foreign residents customarily head for resorts elsewhere in the region. Ambassador Osius, however, made a point of "celebrating Tet properly." Each year he'd attract a media crowd as, in traditional Vietnamese costume with his husband and their two small children, they'd burn incense at Hanoi temples. This is a tough act to pull off without seeming peculiar. Osius did it with class.

A reader curious to learn why Washington and Hanoi are now contemplating a "comprehensive strategic relationship" won't be disappointed by Ted Osius' book. There is lucid discussion, *inter alia*, of the step-by-step development of 'strategic trust' between the military establishments of both nations. Osius illuminates the lengthy negotiations that persuaded Vietnam to take on the obligations of the "Trans-Pacific Partnership" trade pact (a breakthrough junked by Donald Trump as soon as he took office). Osius writes also of the persuasion operations that culminated in General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong's July 2015 visit with Barack Obama -- the first Oval Office meeting between a Communist party head and a sitting US president (Obama) since Nikita Khrushchev in 1959.

Nothing is Impossible pays scant attention to the elephant in the room, Xi Jinping's "rising China." Already during Osius' tenure, Beijing was pressing its preposterous claim to sovereignty over the South China Sea. It manifested this existential threat to Vietnam's security by increasingly provocative naval maneuvers. That's the main topic of US Embassy

attention and one that's regularly chewed over by countless pundits. Osius prudently declines to share any secrets.

Notwithstanding, China's evident ambition has been the principal driver for Vietnam's increasingly close relations with the US and its allies. While the other members of the ASEAN group have rationalized low-posture denial, for Hanoi the "China threat" is both real and existential. It replays a 2000-year-old motif of Vietnam's history and must be managed very carefully. Any sign that the nation's leaders are wimping out can bring tens of thousands of demonstrators into the streets. Chinese pressures can perhaps be deflected or managed for now, but they are very unlikely to be solved until cooler heads take charge in Beijing.

Toward the end of *Nothing is Impossible*, Osius addresses the VCP's repression of civil activism, which has considerably intensified since 2016, when General Secretary Trong secured a lock on the party's governance and proceeded to steer it back toward doctrinaire Leninism.

Though the General Secretary has rationalized 'socialist-oriented capitalism,' he's dead set against any easing of political controls. In this context, it's hard to imagine even incremental success for the human rights advocacy that the senators urged on Ambassador-designate Knapper. Trong is now 77; he won't be a player much longer. In the meantime, as Ted Osius makes very clear, there are plenty of other reasons for Vietnam and the US to deepen their understanding and their cooperation. That should do for now.

A note to those considering purchase: *Nothing Is Impossible is having a soft roll-out. Nominally, it will be published by the Rutgers Press in mid-October, but 'pre-orders' will ship on August 27. [Check out details here](#). Including promo code RFLR19 unlocks a 30% discount.*



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