

November 20, 2006: Praying in Hanoi - New York Sun

New York Sun

November 20, 2006

President Bush's visit to Vietnam is newsworthy for plenty of reasons - the trade talks, the effort to counter North Korea's nuclear program, the symbolism of a president impatient for progress in the Iraq War visiting the place where America lost another war - but the moment of Mr. Bush's itinerary that we found the most striking was his visit, yesterday morning, to a church in Hanoi. It followed the administration's decision, days before Mr. Bush arrived in Vietnam, to announce that Vietnam had been removed from a list of "countries of particular concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998.

That statement prompted the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, a bipartisan federal agency, to issue a statement expressing "strong disappointment" and noting that "religious prisoners remain confined, only a fraction of the churches closed since 2001 have been re-opened, forced renunciations of faith continue in many different provinces, and Vietnam's new laws on religion are being used to detain or intimidate religious leaders who refuse affiliation with the government-approved religious organizations."

Mr. Bush made his own views clear as he left the church with his wife, Laura. "A whole society is a society which welcomes basic freedoms, and there's no more basic freedom than the basic - the freedom to worship as you see fit," the president said, describing their visit as, "Our way of expressing our personal faith and, at the same time, urging societies to feel comfortable with, and confident in saying to their people, if you feel like praising God you're allowed to do so in any way you see fit."

The Bill of Rights recognizes freedom of religion as America's first freedom - the first among many, but yet the first, which is not surprising given the role that persecution of religion in Europe had in the European settlement of North America. That the president of America is needed to deliver this message in Vietnam, even 30 years after the war's end, is a sign of what a loss for freedom the American defeat in that war was. That Mr. Bush was able to do so - and to a receptive audience - is a sign that in the long run the victory may yet belong to those American ideals shared by the people of Vietnam.