

Under the Banner of (Whose) Freedom?  
A Series of Poems on the Cold War

The Businessman

He traverses the dirt aisles of his office  
in a conscious stupor

brushing his fingers  
on his lacquered wooden desks  
and his laminated paper-leaf files.

He is a rhetorician,  
tall and mighty,  
who speaks in stars and stripes

his words so coruscating  
that you cannot hear  
the muffled cries of the soil beneath him.

Perhaps you are too dazzled  
by his blue suit and gold watch,  
his sharp eyes and aquiline nose

to notice that he does not shake hands,  
but seizes them with threatening tenacity.

Perhaps you are too charmed  
by his dignified air,  
his urbane grin

to notice that behind him is a long trail  
of footsteps that have hardened  
and now lay stubbornly imprinted on the silenced ground.

## Eagle

Its magnificent wings graze the clouds  
as it glides over its vast abode.  
It stops to rest,  
hooking its long black talons  
on to a stone crag  
as it discerns  
the infinite world below.  
The King of the Birds,  
they call it.  
Freedom and Independence  
in physical form,  
with bold beak  
and beguiling eye.  
Its resounding screech  
is the melody of the people's voices,  
who vow to help the voiceless.

But I'm afraid you have been deceived.  
For when you actually go outside  
you will discover  
that it's perch is not a stone crag  
but several glorious towers  
dispersed over land where it does not belong,  
you will discover  
that the glint of its keen, yellow eye  
when it looks at the promising world below  
is not one of a benevolent liberator  
but of a self-proclaimed sovereign  
You will discover  
that the eagle's call  
is not the noble screech of the many,  
but the irksome whistle of avarice  
that threatens,  
fears  
the voice of the sickle and hammer  
that makes a dent in its pervasive kingdom

For how can towers fructified by blue grow in soil sullied with red?  
The eagle must take flight,  
must eliminate this red contagion,  
with a blue prescription

The blue  
It shimmers like coins  
and smells like inky-cotton soap.

*\*The United Fruit Company (UFCO) was a large, American, multinational fruit company that monopolized the trade of tropical fruit in Latin America. This poem is about the United Fruit Company's presence in Guatemala in the early 20th century, and it is written from the perspective of a Guatemalan UFCO worker.*

## The Banana Spider

I vaguely remember a time  
when I could see the clouds in the sky,  
the gentle shades of white and blue  
just like our flag.

Now when I look up I am greeted  
by the lurid yellow body of the banana spider  
its eight legs outstretched throughout the land  
overseeing its precious 'republic.'

Republic

I never knew a word could be so humiliating.

Everyday it is harder and harder  
to distinguish the dark, native soil  
from the spider's extraneous limbs and eyes.

For every spangled import and export  
is an acrid reminder of our contrived subservience,  
of this sticky, unrequited business trap  
we cannot seem to break free from.

We lay paralyzed,  
ensnared in empty words  
and gold-rimmed silk strands,  
as the spider ravishes  
our fruits, our labor.

Our leader on puppet strings,  
his wooden eyes are fixed,  
unblinking and unseeing,  
to the preying of his people.

So we must bow  
To the great banana spider,  
the U.S.'s yellow soldier of fortune.

All hail the great American monopoly.

*\*When Jacobo Arbenz became president of Guatemala, he issued Decree 900- a land reform that threatened the UFCO's holdings in Guatemala. As a result, the U.S. framed Guatemala as a dangerous Communist threat, and President Eisenhower authorized a secret CIA operation called*

*PBSUCCESS to depose Arbenz. This poem is about the 1954 Guatemalan Coup D'etat to and the subsequent Guatemalan Civil War that killed over 180,000 Guatmelans. It serves as a continuation of the poem above, but it is not written from any definitive perspective.*

### Has Bared its Fangs

And under its lurid yellow body, is a plundered wasteland whose heart, coursing with venom, has ceased to beat. Thousands of corpses lay strewn on the soil, their faces sliced and cut beyond recognition, their mouths sewn shut with silk. But still etched upon their cicatrized features, just barely discernible, are the ghosts of their last resentful cry. Almost as if they had been robbed. Almost as if they had been condemned to this wretched supine position with a tainted gavel.

I hadn't realized that the great eagle had so violently changed its course.

That we had decided to fight with fire. That to stop the venous flow of the tyrannical red stream, we must press down with an iron talon ourselves. I hadn't realized that a man waving the mended flag of his country was equivalent to a man brandishing a sharpened sickle. That his endeavors to fix his nation, so cruel to the poor and so gate kept by the wealthy, was such a perilous left-marked danger.

Iron corrodes in unsuitable conditions. Perhaps that is why traces of green- greed's distinctive complexion- were visible on the iron talon's silvery gray surface when we trampled the streets of an innocent republic. Perhaps that is why we whispered synthetic tales into the ears of our allies to avert their eyes from the green rust and fix them on our garish red painting.

Perhaps we did this because the language of hegemony is wealth and we cannot bear to not be wealthy.

The damage has been done. The tainted gavel beared down with alacrity. The green rust more visible than ever before. The true leader is gone and the puppet leader has returned to serve us. And the corpses. They reek of the sickly, acidic smell of rotten bananas. All that is left is a plundered wasteland, indelibly smeared with red- the red of human blood.

## A Very Condensed Timeline of the Vietnam War

*“The ultimate goal of the United States in Southeast Asia, as in the rest of the world, is to help maintain free and independent nations which can develop politically, economically, and socially and which can be responsible members of the world community. In this region and elsewhere many peoples share our sense of the value of such freedom and independence. They have taken the risks and made the sacrifices linked to the commitment to membership in the family of the free world. ”*

- Robert McNamra (U.S. Secretary of Defense)

Call it 1941

Japanese soldiers are parading  
around the streets of Vietnam,  
ignorant of the pot of ebullating pride  
churning below their feet.  
All the people needed  
was the mighty liberator,  
the cold, steel bullet  
of the U.S,  
to lift the pot,  
explode its contents  
and scald the bottoms  
of the colonizer's feet,  
and snag their long awaited independence.  
Now Franklin D. Roosevelt locks Ho Chi Minh  
in a cordial embrace,  
promising to never abandon  
the true American oath,  
the promise of autonomy.

Call it 1945

Vietnam revels  
for a fleeting moment  
in the warmth of independence  
only to be faced once again  
with another relentless colonizer,  
a former enemy.  
The French.  
Surely the assuring American embrace,  
the decisive American bullet,  
the freedom prophet *faithfully committed  
to membership in the family of the free world,*  
will swoop in to help.  
But Roosevelt's friendly face has morphed  
into that of Harry S. Truman  
and in his hand he holds a knife,  
pointed at Ho Chi Minh's unsuspecting back.  
The scenery has changed  
The Cold War has started.  
The Red Scare runs rampant,  
and Vietnam is no longer  
an oppressed colony  
but a dangerous red nation.  
For this is a battle of principal,  
and red is the color of tyranny.  
Red is the color of cold-blooded murder.

This is a battle of power,  
a megalomaniacal rivalry  
waged by the wealthy,  
and the mighty liberator  
is willing to do anything  
to secure its victory in the *free world*,  
even confine,  
oppress,  
murder.

For only the nations loyal  
to the blue anthem  
can be free and independent,  
only the nations who yield  
to the American rule,  
who feed the ever growing American plant  
have the right to autonomy.

Call it the Vietnam War  
The people of South Vietnam  
look up from their spangled pamphlets  
guaranteeing peace and democracy,  
only to see Premier Diem  
mercilessly quenching  
every flame  
he can lay his hands on,  
all under the governing  
eye of the mighty liberator.

In North Vietnam,  
Operation Rolling Thunder is underway.  
The deafening boom  
of bombs fills the people's ears  
and the flying debris flies  
into their eyes, as if  
they're being punished  
for their resistance

American troops are thrust  
on to the battlefield  
forced to walk side by side  
with death, to mend the problems  
of a nation 8,000 miles from  
a home that remains broken.

And so the people must ask themselves.  
Who is the real enemy?

*"I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society...A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. With righteous indignation (anger) it will look across the seas and see individual capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa, and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries, and say, "This is not just." It will look at our alliance with the landed gentry of South America and say, "This is not just."*

- Martin Luther King Jr