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State Fumbles in Hanoi

By MARY KISSEL

The Obama Administration's State Department hasn't been an especially strong advocate for human rights, as the recent mishandling of Chinese dissident's Chen Guangcheng's case made painfully clear. Now there's news of more fumbles—this time, in Vietnam.

In a letter to President Obama sent Monday, House Republican Frank Wolf lambasted Ambassador to Vietnam David Shear for failing to invite "the most prominent democracy and human rights activists in Vietnam" to the embassy's July 4 celebration—after explicitly promising the Virginia congressman that he'd do so. When Mr. Wolf called Mr. Shear to ask what happened, "his response was appalling," wrote Mr. Wolf. He talked about maintaining a "balance" of guests and made it difficult for the congressman to obtain the guest list.

This is a classic State Department maneuver, practiced throughout Asia-Pacific but especially in repressive countries in which the U.S. has economic interests. Diplomats say they care about human rights, but not so much that it creates a political uproar that they'd have to work to resolve. Thus when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton went to Vietnam this week, she made a generic statement about human rights and a "Senior State Department Official" gave journalists a briefing. Vietnam's Party bosses must be shaking in their boots.

More serious is Mr. Shear's handling of the Nguyen Quoc Quan case. Mr. Quan, a U.S. citizen and democracy activist, was arrested in Ho Chi Minh City on April 17 and has been imprisoned ever since on trumped-up charges. Mr. Shear and other State Department officials didn't even bother to contact Mr. Quan's wife until Mr. Wolf urged them to do so. Nor has the U.S. embassy in Hanoi made a public stink about Mr. Quan's detention, preferring to work mostly behind the scenes with party bosses to urge his release. So far, that hasn't worked.

Mr. Shear's handling of the Quan case "has been unacceptable," Mr. Wolf wrote, noting also the July 4 debacle and calling on President Obama to fire Mr. Shear. "America must be a voice for the voiceless. The U.S. Embassy in Vietnam must be an island of freedom, headed by a bold American ambassador. Ambassador Shear is not that man," the Virginian concluded. Well said.