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A Lament for Vietnam

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When the Communists took over North Vietnam in 1954, a million refugees fled to the South. I personally heard stories of their incredible suffering. But, along with other South Vietnamese, I refused to believe them. A generation later, I could not believe Solzhenitsyn's book "The Gulag Archipelago," either. I dismissed it as anti-Communist propaganda. But by 1979, I had published my own book, "The Vietnamese Gulag." Can those who have suffered the horror of Communism ever convince those who have not experienced it? From 1945, when I was born in the village of Caivon in Vinh Long province, 100 miles south of Saigon, until I left Vietnam in May 1978, I never enjoyed peace. My family's house was burned three times in the war against the French. To escape the fighting, my parents moved from one village to another throughout my youth. Like the majority of Vietnamese patriots, they joined the resistance forces fighting the French. As I grew up, I myself saw how the peasants were oppressed by the local officials of the successive Saigon regimes, how they were victimized by the French bombardments. I learned the history of my country's thousand-year struggle against Chinese occupation and its century-long effort against Western domination. With this background, my compatriots and I grew up with a hatred of foreign intervention.

When the students at Saigon University elected me vice president of the Saigon Student Union in 1969 and 1970, I participated in the different peace efforts, leading student demonstrations against the Thieu regime and against American involvement. I published a magazine called Self-Determination, and traveled in January 1971 to California to give antiwar lectures at Berkeley and Stanford. For my activities, I was arrested and jailed many times by the Thieu Government.

During that period, I believed that I was fulfilling my commitment to peace and the independence of my country. I had faith, too, in the program of the National Liberation Front (N.L.F.), which led the revolutionary resistance in South Vietnam. I hated Saigon's rulers, men like Gen. Nguyen Van Thieu, Gen. Nguyen Cao Ky, Gen. Dang Van Quang — former soldiers of the French colonial army. These were the men whom the French had recruited in the 1940's to help destroy the Vietnamese resistance. They had risen over the years to become leaders themselves, but they commanded no respect from the people. Because of their lack of popular support, they were predisposed to rely on foreign forces.

As a student leader, I felt I had to pursue the aspiration of the Vietnamese people for democracy, freedom and peace. Naively, I believed that the Hanoi regime at least had the virtue of being Vietnamese, while the Americans were foreign invaders like the French before them. Like others in the South Vietnamese opposition movements, I believed that our Communist compatriots in the North would be more amenable to compromise and easier to work with than the Americans. Moreover, I was hypnotized by the personal sacrifices and devotion the Communist leaders had demonstrated. Ton Duc Thang, former President of North Vietnam, for example, had been imprisoned for 17 years in a French jail. I was hypnotized also by the political programs advocated by the N.L.F., which included a domestic policy of national reconciliation, without risk

of reprisal, and a foreign policy of nonalignment. Finally, I was influenced by progressive movements throughout the world and by the most prestigious intellectuals in the West. My impression was that during the 1960's and early 70's the leaders of the American peace movement shared my convictions.

These convictions endured through the signing of the 1973 Paris peace accords and the subsequent collapse of the South Vietnamese Government two years later. When liberation was imminent, I was the one who told friends and relatives not to flee. "Why do you want to leave?" I asked. "Why are you afraid of the Communists?" I accepted the prospect of enduring hardships to rebuild my country and I decided to stay in Vietnam and continue working as a branch manager at a Saigon bank, where I had been for more than four years, writing secret reports about the economic situation in South Vietnam for the N.L.F. (After leaving the university, I had not been drafted by the South Vietnamese Government because I was the only son in my family. And I had not joined the Vietcong because the N.L.F. felt I could serve a more useful role providing financial reports from the bank.)

Several days after Saigon fell, the Provisional Revolutionary Government, formed by the N.L.F., asked me to join the finance committee, a group of intellectuals whose job it was to advise the Government on matters of economic policy. I complied willingly, taking a pay cut of 90 percent. My first assignment was to help draw up a plan for confiscating all the private property in South Vietnam. Shocked, I proposed that we should expropriate only the property of those who had cooperated with the former regime and those who had used the war to become rich, and that we distribute it in some fashion to the poor and to the victims of the war, Communist and non-Communist alike. My proposals, of course, were rejected. I was naive enough to think that the local cadres were mistaken, that they misunderstood the good intentions of the Communist Party leaders. I had many fights with them, believing as I did Hanoi's previous statement that "the situation in the South is very special and different from that of North Vietnam." A few months before the liberation of Saigon, Le Duan, the First Secretary of the Communist Party, had said, "The South needs its own policy."

In the end, I could not obey the order to help arrange the confiscation of all private property, a plan that was subsequently carried out. Such a scheme had nothing to do with fulfilling the aspirations of the South Vietnamese, and it went against my conscience. I decided to resign. But no one resigns in a Communist regime. The implication of nonconformity is intolerable to Communists. When I submitted my resignation, the chief of the finance committee warned me that my action "would only serve as propaganda to excite the people; here we never do it that way." Several days later, while I was attending a concert at the great National Theater (formerly the National Assembly Hall, which my fellow students and I had occupied so many times under the Thieu regime), I was arrested. No charges were made, no reasons were given. After the fall of Saigon, many progressive intellectuals and former antiwar-movement leaders believed that the new Vietnamese regime would bring internal democracy and freedom from foreign domination. They believed that the new regime would pursue the best interests of the people, honoring its promise to carry out a policy of national reconciliation without fear of reprisal. Far from adhering to their promises, the Vietnamese rulers have arrested hundreds of thousands of individuals — not only those who had cooperated with the Thieu regime but even those who had not, including religious leaders and former members of the N.L.F.

Vietnam today is a country without any law other than the arbitrary directives of those in power. There is no civil code. Individuals are imprisoned without charges and without trial. Once in jail, prisoners are taught that their behavior, attitude and "good will" are the key factors in determining when they may be released -whatever crimes they may have committed. As a consequence, prisoners often obey the guards blindly, hoping for an early release. In fact, they never know when they may be released — or

when their sentences may be extended. How many political prisoners are there in Vietnam today? And how many of them have died in prisons during the first six years of Communist rule? Nobody can know the exact numbers. The United States Department of State has said there are from 150,000 to 200,000 prisoners; Vietnamese refugees estimate about one million. Hoang Huu Quynh, an intellectual, a graduate of Moscow University, who served as a director of a technical school in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon), recently defected to France during his Government sponsored tour of European countries. He told the French press: "There are at least 700,000 prisoners in Vietnam today." Another witness, Nguyen Cong Hoan, a former member of the reunified National Assembly, which was elected in 1976, who escaped by boat in 1978, said that he himself knew "about 300 cases of executions" in his own province of Phu Yen. In 1977, officials in Hanoi insisted that only 50,000 people, who posed the greatest threat to national security, had been arrested. But Prime Minister Pham Van Dong said, in the French magazine Paris Match, on Sept. 22, 1978, "In over three years, I released more than one million prisoners from the camps." One wonders how it is possible to release more than a million after having arrested only 50,000.

When I was arrested, I was thrown into a three-foot-by-six-foot cell with my left hand chained to my right foot and my right hand chained to my left foot. My food was rice mixed with sand. When I complained about the sand, the guards explained that sand is added to the rice to remind prisoners of their crimes. I discovered that pouring water in the rice bowl would make the sand separate from the rice and sink to the bottom. But the water ration was only one liter a day for drinking and bathing, and I had to husband it carefully.

After two months in solitary confinement, I was transferred to a collective cell, a room 15 feet wide and 25 feet long, where at different times anywhere from 40 to 100 prisoners were crushed together. Here we had to take turns lying down to sleep, and most of the younger, stronger prisoners slept sitting up. In the sweltering heat, we also took turns snatching a few breaths of fresh air in front of the narrow opening that was the cell's only window. Every day I watched my friends die at my feet.

In March 1976, when a group of Western reporters visited my prison, the Communist officials moved out all the prisoners and substituted North Vietnamese soldiers. In front of the prisons, one sees no barbed wire, no watchtowers, only a few policemen and a large sign above the entrance that proclaims Ho Chi Minh's best-known slogan: "Nothing Is More Precious Than Liberty and Independence." Only those detained inside and those who guard them know what kind of place is hidden behind that sign. And every prisoner knows that if he is suspected of planning to escape, his fellow inmates and relatives at home will be punished rather than he himself.

We will never know precisely the number of dead prisoners, but we do know about the deaths of many well-known prisoners who, in the past, never cooperated with President Thieu or the Americans: for example, Thich Thien Minh, the strategist of all the Buddhist peace movements in Saigon, an antiwar activist who was sentenced to 10 years in jail by the Thieu regime, then released after an outpouring of protest from Vietnamese and antiwar protesters around the world. Thien Minh died in Ham Tan prison after six months of detention in 1979. Another silent death was that of the lawyer Tran Van Tuyen, a leader of the opposition bloc in the Saigon Assembly under President Thieu. This well-known activist died in Communist hands in 1976, although as late as April 1977, Prime Minister Pham Van Dong was telling French reporters that Tuyen was alive and well in a re-education camp. One of the greatest losses has been that of the famous Vietnamese philosopher Ho Huu Tuong. Tuong, a classmate of Jean-Paul Sartre's in Paris in the 1930's, was perhaps the leading intellectual in South Vietnam. He died in Ham Tan prison on June 26, 1980. These men were arrested, along with many others among the most prominent and respected South Vietnamese, in order to prevent any possible opposition to the Communists.

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Some American supporters of Hanoi have ignored or rationalized these deaths, as they have the countless other tragedies that have befallen Vietnam since 1975. It is more than likely that they will continue to maintain their silence in order to avoid the profound disillusionment that accepting the truth about Vietnam means for them. Yet if liberty and democracy are worth struggling for in the Philippines, in Chile, in South Korea or in South Africa, they are no less worth defending in Communist countries like Vietnam. Everyone remembers the numerous demonstrations protesting United States involvement in Vietnam and the war crimes of the Thieu regime. But some of those people who were then so passionately committed to democratic principles and human rights have developed a strange indifference now that these same principles are under assault in Communist Vietnam. For example, one antiwar activist, William Kunstler, refused to sign a May 1979 open letter to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in which many former antiwar activists, including Joan Baez, protested Hanoi's violations of human rights. Kunstler said, "I don't believe in criticizing socialist governments publicly, even if there are human-rights violations," and, "The entire Baez campaign may be a C.I.A. plot." This statement reminds me of the argument used by the Thieu regime to suppress opposition: "The peace movements and the opposition activists are all the Communists' lackeys."

There are other illusions about the current regime in Vietnam about which people should be disabused. Many people believed that Ho Chi Minh was primarily a nationalist and that the Vietnamese Communists were and are independent of the Soviet Union. I believed the same before they took over South Vietnam. But portraits of Soviet leaders now adorn public buildings, schools and administrative offices throughout "independent Vietnam." In contrast, one never saw pictures of American leaders even during the so-called puppet regime of President Thieu. The degree of subordination the present Government feels toward its Soviet patron is suggested by a famous poem by the well-known Vietnamese poet To Huu, a member of the Politburo and president of the Communist Party Committee of Culture. Here we have an opportunity to listen to a high-ranking Vietnamese weep on the occasion of Stalin's death: Oh, Stalin! Oh, Stalin! The love I bear my father, my mother, my wife, myself It's nothing beside the love I bear you, Oh, Stalin! Oh, Stalin! What remains of the earth and of the sky! Now that you are dead.

It may seem incredible that such a poem could have been written in Vietnam, which is known for the strength of its family traditions and its feeling for filial piety. Yet this poem occupied a prominent place in a major anthology of contemporary Vietnamese poetry recently published in Hanoi.

Moreover, Le Duan, First Secretary of the Communist Party, said in his political report to the reunified National Assembly in 1976: "The Vietnamese revolution is to fulfill the internationalist duty and the international obligation," and to do so, in the words of the 1971 party platform, "under the leadership of the Soviet Union." The glorification of Soviet life is, in fact, a major goal of Communist Vietnam's censorship policy.

Immediately after the fall of Saigon, the Government closed all bookshops and theaters. All books published under the former regimes were confiscated or burned. Cultural literature was not exempt, including translations of Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Dale Carnegie. Margaret Mitchell's "Gone With the Wind" was on the list of decadent literature as well. The new regime replaced such books with literature designed to indoctrinate children and adults with the idea that the "Soviet Union is a paradise of the socialist world."

Another argument made at times by Western apologists has to do with freedom of religion in Vietnam. One article in the new Constitution of Vietnam, adopted this year,

declares that "the regime respects the liberty of the believers and also the liberty of the nonbelievers." In regard to this article, Le Duan has repeatedly proclaimed: "Our present regime is a million times more democratic than any other in the world." The reality, though, is suggested by an incident involving the desecration of a Buddhist pagoda, in which a nude woman, on orders from the Government, entered the pagoda during a worship service. When Thich Man Giac, a prominent Buddhist leader, protested, the Government used the opportunity to try to discredit the Buddhists as enemies of democracy -specifically, of the freedom to disbelieve. Thich Man Giac, who had served as liaison between the Buddhists and the Communist Government, escaped Vietnam by boat in 1977 and is now living in Los Angeles. All of those who supported the N.L.F. in its struggle should be aware of how they were betrayed and deceived. When Harrison Salisbury of The New York Times visited Hanoi in December 1966, the leaders in Hanoi told him: "The direction of the struggle in the South is by the South and not by the North." Pham Van Dong, Prime Minister, said to Salisbury: "No one in the North had this stupid, criminal idea in mind" that the North wanted to annex the South.

Yet in a victory-day celebration speech made on May 19, 1975, Le Duan said, "Our party is the unique and single leader that organized, controlled and governed the entire struggle of the Vietnamese people from the first day of the revolution." In his political report to the reunified National Assembly in Hanoi on June 26, 1976, Le Duan said: "The strategic task of the revolution in our country in the new stage is to achieve the reunification of our homeland and to take the whole country rapidly, vigorously and steadily to socialism, and Communism."

In 1976, the Provisional Revolutionary Government formed by the N.L.F. was abolished, and South and North Vietnam were reunified under Communist rule. Today, among 17 members of the Politburo and 134 members of the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Communist Party, not a single one is from the N.L.F. (there are several members who had been North Vietnam Communist Party representatives with the N.L.F.). Even Nguyen Huu Tho, former chairman of the N.L.F., holds only the post of acting President of State, a ceremonial position that involves greeting visitors and participating in festivals. But his position will be abolished under the new Constitution.

Listen to Truong Nhu Tang, 57 years old, a founder of the N.L.F., former Justice Minister of the Provisional Revolutionary Government, more recently one of the boat people. Tang escaped in November 1979 and is now living in Paris. He told reporters of his experience in a news conference in Paris in June 1980. Twelve years earlier, he said, when he had been jailed by the Thieu regime for his Communist activities, his father came to visit. "Why," he asked Tang, "have you abandoned everything — a good job, a rich family — to join the Communists? Don't you know that the Communists will betray you and persecute you, and when you finally understand, it will be too late to wake up?" Tang, an intellectual, answered his father: "You would do better to keep quiet and accept the sacrifice of one of your sons for democracy and our country's independence. ..."

After the Tet offensive in 1968, Tang was exchanged for three American colonels who had been prisoners of war held by the Vietcong; then he vanished into the jungle with the N.L.F. He had visited many Communist and third-world countries on behalf of the N.L.F. during the war. Tang said in his news conference: "I was well aware that the N.L.F. was a Communist-dominated national united front and I was naive enough to believe that Ho Chi Minh and his party would place national interests above ideology and would place the interest of the Vietnamese people above the party's. But the people and I were wrong."

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Truong Nhu Tang told of his own knowledge of the way Communist ruling circles operate: "The Communists are expert in the arts of seduction and will go to any length to woo you over to their side, as long as they don't control the Government. But once they are in power they suddenly become harsh, ungrateful, cynical and brutal." Tang summarized current conditions in Vietnam: "The family is divided, society is divided, even the party is divided."

Looking back now on the Vietnam war, I feel nothing but sorrow for my own naivete in believing that the Communists were revolutionaries worthy of support. In fact, they betrayed the Vietnamese people and deceived progressives throughout the world. The responsibility for the tragedies that have engulfed my compatriots is mine. And now I can only bear witness to this truth so that all former supporters of the Vietcong may share their responsibility with me.

While I was in jail, Mai Chi Tho, a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, addressed a selected group of political prisoners. He told us: "Ho Chi Minh may have been an evil man; Nixon may have been a great man. The Americans may have had the just cause; we may not have had the just cause. But we won and the Americans were defeated because we convinced the people that Ho Chi Minh is the great man, that Nixon is a murderer and the Americans are the invaders." He concluded that "the key factor is how to control people and their opinions. Only Marxism-Leninism can do that. None of you ever see resistance to the Communist regime, so don't think about it. Forget it. Between you — the bright intellectuals — and me, I tell you the truth."

And he did tell us the truth. Since 1978, the Vietnamese Communists have occupied Laos, invaded Cambodia and attacked Thailand, while the Soviet Union has invaded Afghanistan. In each of these depredations, the Communists have portrayed themselves, incredibly, as liberators, saviors and bulwarks against foreign aggression. And each time, world opinion has remained relatively quiescent.

But in Vietnam, people often remark: "Don't believe what the Communists say, look instead at what they have done." One South Vietnamese Communist, Nguyen Van Tang, who was detained 15 years by the French, eight years by Diem, six years by Thieu, and who is still in jail today, this time in a Communist prison, told me: "In order to understand the Communists, one must first live under a Communist regime." One rainy evening in Saigon's Le Van Duyet prison, he told me: "My dream now is not to be released; it is not to see my family. My dream is that I could be back in a French prison 30 years ago." This is the one wish of a 60-year-old man who has spent his entire adult life in and out of prison fighting for the freedom and the independence of his country. At this moment, he may already have died in his cell or have been executed by the new rulers.

The Vietnamese people wish to achieve the real revolution; they do not want Communism. The measure of popular hatred for the Communists is that thousands of Vietnamese have abandoned their historical attachment to the land. Under French colonial domination, throughout the long war years, even during the catastrophic famine of 1945 when two million starved to death, Vietnamese simply did not willingly leave their homeland — the land of their ancestors' graves. The recent outpouring of refugees is a direct result of the terror of the present regime. Listen to another refugee, Nguyen Cong Hoan, former N.L.F. agent and member of the new unified Assembly elected in 1976: "This current regime is the most inhuman and oppressive (Vietnam) has ever known." Hoan escaped by boat in 1977, after abandoning his position in the Communist Assembly. "The Assembly," he declared, "is a puppet, the members know only how to say yes, never how to say no."

Among the boat people who survived, including those who were raped by pirates and

those who suffered in the refugee camps, nobody regrets his escape from the present regime. I am confident that the truth about Vietnam will eventually emerge. It is already available to those who wish to know it. As Solzhenitsyn has said, "Truth weighs as heavy as the world." And Vietnam is a lesson in truth.