
VIETNAM SINCE THE WAR (1975–1995)

BY FREDERICK Z. BROWN

Twenty years ago, Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese and the long war came to an end. With the communist victory, Vietnam seemingly became unified and independent. But "liberation" brought its own tragedies and sorrows. Now, with their Soviet patron gone and the U.S. trade embargo lifted, Vietnam's communist leaders are looking outward, betting on economic reform, and stirring new hopes.



Tanks with victorious North Vietnamese soldiers enter Saigon's Presidential Palace on April 30, 1975.

Khong co gi quy hong doc lap tu do.

—There is nothing more precious than
independence and freedom.

Bright, red-lettered banners bearing the words of the sainted communist leader Ho Chi Minh (1890–1969) hang from government buildings in Hanoi and other cities and towns throughout the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. But few citizens now pay much attention to once-rousing slogans. With fully half of the present population born since 1975, Vietnam is in more ways than one a new country. Today, its citizens are more concerned with the everyday demands of the present than with the struggles, however heroic, of the past—a reality that may well distress the aged veterans of Dien Bien Phu and other memorable battles, taking their ease in the parks along the shores of Hanoi's lakes. But ambitious city dwellers, working hard to earn a living by day and then, in many cases, learning WordPerfect for Windows, or studying English, or holding down a second job by night, are too busy to care about that. As for the farmers, who still make up three-quarters of Vietnam's 73.5 million people, their overriding concern is the same as it has been for 2,000 years: to plant the next rice harvest.

Yet the ubiquitous slogan of Uncle Ho carries more meaning than the busy populace perhaps quite realizes. His cherished "independence," bought with much blood and seemingly secured 20 years ago when Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese, remains a question mark—and a very important one. "Freedom" also remains a particularly elusive quality. Within the Communist Party, and especially among the 77-year-old General Secretary Do Muoi and other members of the ruling Politburo in Hanoi, there is much uncertainty about where Vietnam is going—and whether the party will still be in power when it gets there. Outside party circles, there is also widespread uneasiness. It is evident, for instance, in the cynicism toward party and government that ordinary Vietnamese often display, even to foreigners, after several bottles of "Seventy-Five" beer (the "revolutionary" brew that replaced the French-brewed "Thirty-Three" beer popular in South Vietnam). In Hanoi, one finds graffiti that pointedly truncate Uncle Ho's slogan: *Khong co gi* ("There is nothing").

The uneasiness is well-founded. The regime's policy of *doi moi* ("renovation"), now in its eighth year, is limited to economics in theory, with the party attempting to set its extent and pace. But control is increasingly difficult. Even though the stultifying bureaucracy has slowed down renovation, *doi moi* could easily go too far. As the party has come to understand, economic reform cannot fail to have political and social consequences. With the Soviet Union no longer around to prop Vietnam up, the communist leaders have had no real choice but to open the country to the outside world and hope that they can subdue the forces thereby unleashed. Whatever the ultimate fate of the regime, and of its Marxist-Leninist ideology, there is

an even larger question that cries out for an answer. For centuries, what has happened in Vietnam has been determined less by the Vietnamese themselves than by others—by the Chinese especially, but also, of course, by the French, the Japanese, the Americans, and, more recently, by nationalists in thrall to a foreign ideology. With Marxism discredited and Leninism increasingly un congenial to the younger generation, will the Vietnamese at last be able to find their own authentic identity, and with it, true independence and a greater measure of freedom?

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On April 30, 1995, it will be 20 years since the Democratic Republic of Vietnam ("North Vietnam") overcame the Republic of Vietnam ("South Vietnam"). To Vietnamese who were on the winning side, the "liberation" of the South in the face of the tremendous effort and vast resources of the United States still evokes pride. Shortly after the last U.S. chopper lifted off from the roof of the American embassy on the last day of April 1975, Vietnam became a unified country for the first time since 1887, when the French completed the absorption of the Nguyen dynasty into their Indochina empire.

Once the Americans were gone, Ho Chi Minh vowed, Vietnam would be rebuilt and made "10,000 times more beautiful." Yet today, in addition to pride, there is disillusion. It is not just those Vietnamese who fought on the losing side who are now dispirited. Twenty years after the "Great Spring Victory," the quality of education and of health services, once the pride of the communist regime, has declined, and most of the people continue to

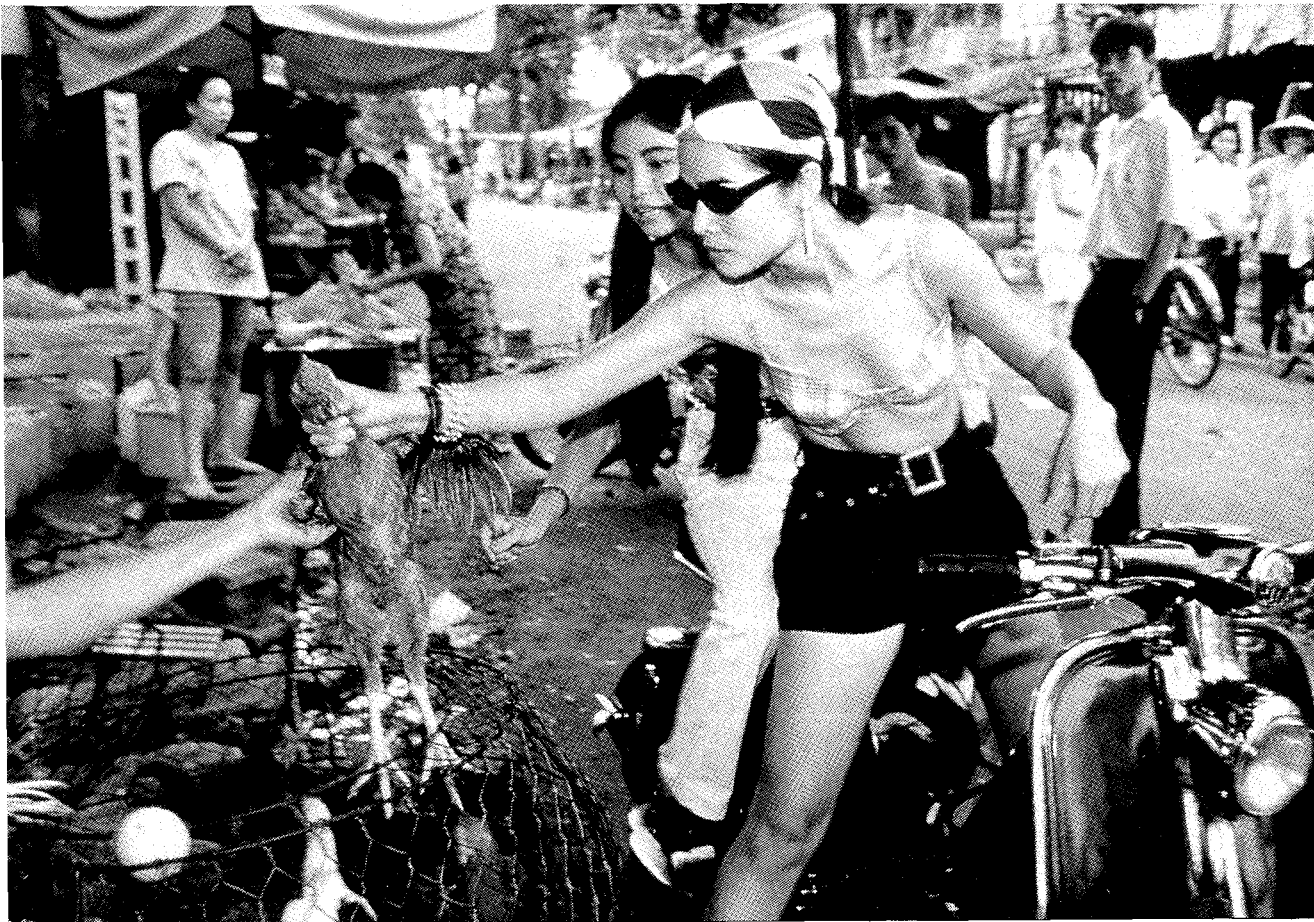
live in poverty. Annual per capita income is less than two million dong (about \$185).

Americans, too, have mixed emotions 20 years later. How could a venture begun with such good intentions have ended so tragically? Millions of veterans do not easily forget their own futile efforts or the deaths of 58,000 of their comrades. Avoiding "another Vietnam" has become the conventional wisdom of U.S. foreign policy. And despite President Bill Clinton's February 1994 decision to lift the embargo on trade with Vietnam, the wounds Americans suffered from the war that ended 20 years ago are not yet healed.

Nor are they in Vietnam, where life nevertheless goes on. The war with the United States was only one of many wars in Vietnam's long history, and Saigon did not really "fall." It was renamed Ho Chi Minh City, and even that change was superficial. Today, most of its three million inhabitants, including the party cadres, still call their city Saigon.

On a hot summer's Saturday night, thousands of young Vietnamese boys and girls circle the center of the city on shiny new Honda and Kawasaki motorbikes. "Swarming," they call it, this seemingly endless circling of tightly packed bikes and bodies, sometimes three or four people to a bike, the riders clad in blue jeans or black leather or, in the case of some of the girls, silken *ao dais*. The colorful stream flows around the old Hotel Continental, where Graham Greene set his prophetic novel *The Quiet American* (1956), and around the Ben Thanh Hotel. Back in the days when the Ben Thanh was named the Rex Hotel, U.S. Army officers reported there to brief the press on progress in the war against the Viet Cong.

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Phuong Anh Nguyen escaped Vietnam with her family in 1978 and settled in California. The San Jose State College graduate moved in 1991 to Ho Chi Minh City, where she designs interiors for restaurants.

Reporters called the daily briefings the "five o'clock follies."

Today these hotels are filled with foreign tourists and businessmen. And in many ways, Ho Chi Minh City is as much a center of capitalist activity as it was in the days of Ngo Dinh Diem and Nguyen Van Thieu. Every imaginable commodity, from expensive European cosmetics to the most sophisticated computer devices, is available in Cholon, once the Chinese heart of Saigon's commercial district. Food markets abound, featuring a dozen varieties of rice and packed with succulent vegetables and fruit from the Mekong Delta, as well as imported delicacies. Bookstalls are crowded with students poring over American economics textbooks and the latest French novels. Not surprisingly, the Western influence, in the form of books, movies, music, and dress, is much more visible in Ho Chi Minh City than in the less prosperous capital of Hanoi, but even there, one finds a burgeon-

ing interest in the West.

To an American who took part in the U.S. crusade in South Vietnam, as I did (as a U.S. foreign service officer in Vinh Long

The photographs appearing on this and most subsequent pages of the article are from *Passage to Vietnam* (1994), created by Rick Smolan and Jennifer Erwit. Published by Against All Odds Productions/Melcher Media and distributed by Publishers Group West, *Passage to Vietnam* features the work of 70 photojournalists from 14 countries, including 15 Vietnamese photographers. For seven days in late March 1994, they were given unprecedented access by the government of Vietnam, resulting in what may be the most comprehensive look at Vietnam and the daily lives of its people ever assembled. To order the book, call 1-800-634-6850, department 400.

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province and in Da Nang), returning to that land now, during the era of *doi moi*, is especially poignant. Arriving at Tan Son Nhut airport in Ho Chi Minh City, one finds that the monument South Vietnam erected to "Our Gallant Allies"—a huge sculpture of an American and several other soldiers that once dominated the circle at the airport's gate—has been replaced by an open-air market. There is a vitality now that was absent as recently as 1988. That year, I was driven from Tan Son Nhut to my hotel in a 1947 Renault taxicab without floorboards. Six years later, many of the cabs in use are relatively new, good-condition Nissans, brought in from Singapore by way of Cambodia. On my taxi ride in 1988, the driver apologetically made a stop for gas, explaining that he wanted to fill up before noon, when the price was to go up another thousand *dong*. Inflation then was running at almost 1,000 percent; now, it is down to almost 10 percent.

Change is evident in the North, too, in what was once the capital of the enemy: Hanoi. The heavily traveled road from Noi Bai airport—which U.S. pilots had been instructed to bomb carefully in 1972 in order to avoid hitting Soviet planes on the runway—consisted in 1988 of two potholed lanes, lined with tiny family plots of vegetables and herbs destined for the city market. Today the roadway has become a smooth four-lane highway on which travelers are whisked through the rice fields . . . to end up, if they please, at the Hotel Sofitel, still known by its French name, the Metropole. At \$300 a night, it is Hanoi's finest. The bartender there—at least until two years ago—had studied nuclear physics in Moscow (and could make some fairly explosive drinks). Most evenings in the lounge, one is likely to see businessmen from Hong Kong, South Korea, and Taiwan cutting deals for offshore oil pipelines, computer assembly plants, and frozen-shrimp export licenses.

The economic reforms made under *doi moi*, the shift of the economy toward a free market, have made life better for many Vietnamese (although, it should be noted, few frequent the Metropole and 90 percent of Vietnam's roads remain unpaved). The improvement is especially evident in the South, where many of those who lived under the American-backed government possessed the entrepreneurial skills and outlook that were needed to take immediate advantage of the *doi moi* reforms. In the greater Ho Chi Minh City area, the average income of \$500 per year is more than twice the national average, thanks partly to dollar remittances from relatives living abroad. The American influence, clearly, is not wholly a thing of the past. Nor, for that matter, is the old split between the northern and southern regions of Vietnam.

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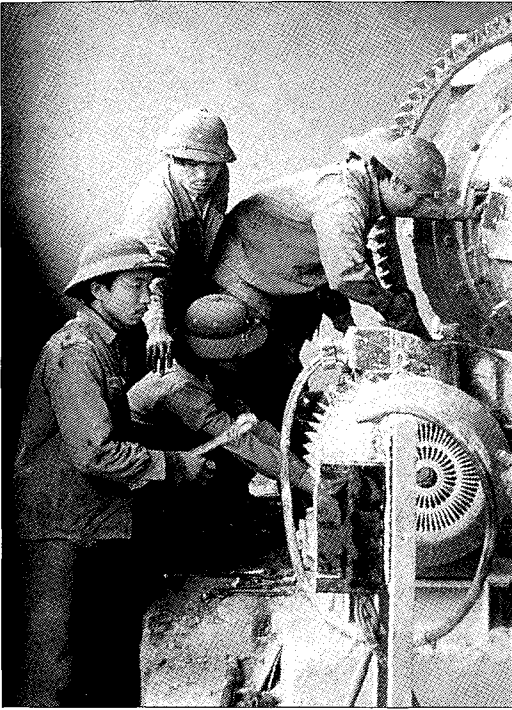
Ever since the 17th century, when the Vietnamese—after their centuries-long *nam tien* ("drive to the south")—reached the Mekong Delta and the Khmer fishing village

AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS



Born in central Vietnam, Nguyen Van Thanh became the revolutionary, Ho Chi Minh ("He Who Enlightens").





Workers repair a Soviet-made rock grinder at a cement factory in Lang Son, near the Chinese border.

that was to become known as Saigon, the northern and southern regions have developed along different lines. Life was easier in the South, which had a gentle climate and abundant agricultural resources; in the North, where physical conditions were harsher and the populace more numerous (since the Viet "tribe" had been living there for a millennium), life seemed more of a struggle. Meanwhile, the people living on the narrow coastal plain in the center of what is now Vietnam developed their own character: taciturn, tough, and somewhat disdainful of both the North and the South. The French accentuated these regional divisions during their colonial rule by creating three different administrative zones.

At the 1954 Geneva Conference, which ended France's rule and its war with Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh, the country was divided at the 17th parallel into two administrative zones, North and South. The division was supposed to be temporary. The Viet Minh

agreed to withdraw its forces from the South, while the French left the North; then, in two years, nationwide elections were to be held to select a leader of the whole country.

Although Vietnam was halved, Ho Chi Minh held effective sway over about two-thirds of the country. Largely because of American fears of a communist victory at the ballot box, the 1956 elections never took place. In 1954, the last of the Nguyen dynasty emperors, Bao Dai, who was living in indolence and luxury in France, chose Ngo Dinh Diem to be the prime minister of the new South Vietnamese administration. A devout Catholic who had once contemplated the priesthood, Diem was then staying in a Benedictine monastery in Belgium; earlier he had lived in the United States, at a Maryknoll seminary in New Jersey. There, he favorably impressed several influential Americans, including then-senator John F. Kennedy. With the assurance of U.S. material and political support, Diem was installed in Saigon in 1954 as the leader of the anticommunist South.

A civil war soon commenced between Ho's communist forces—supported, at first cautiously, later strongly, by the Soviet Union and China—and the U.S.-backed Saigon regime. Initially, the war pitted communist guerrillas, mainly in rural areas in the South, against the Diem regime; in 1960, recognizing that the South Vietnam government had become firmly established, Hanoi decided to unify the country by force and began infiltrating troops into the South. (The fiction was maintained, however, that the struggle for liberation was being carried on independently of Hanoi. The People's Revolutionary Party, formed in 1962, was ostensibly an independent organization of southern communists [Viet Cong], but it was actually under the control of Hanoi's Communist Party.)

By the early 1960s, Vietnam had become a prime battleground in the Cold War, with the United States eager to test its counterinsurgency techniques against communist

"liberation movements." In March 1965, some 3,500 U.S. Marines went ashore at Red Beach near Da Nang, and in May about 3,500 men of the U.S. Army's 173rd Airborne Brigade, stationed in Okinawa, were brought to the Bien Hoa air base, northwest of Saigon, and to the base at Vung Tau, on the coast. By the end of that year, there were 184,300 U.S. troops in the country—and the Vietnam conflict had turned into a "big battalion" war. As it went on, and expanded—and the oft-glimpsed "light at the end of the tunnel" seemed always to recede—the war became a source of great and prolonged agony in the United States. In 1973, the United States signed a peace agreement that all but guaranteed the demise of the Saigon regime—after a "decent interval." In April 1975, North Vietnamese Army tanks crashed through the gates of Saigon's Presidential Palace (which had served as the office of South Vietnam's President Nguyen Van Thieu), and the war finally came to an

end. Colonel Bui Tin, the ranking North Vietnamese officer on the scene and a veteran of the war against the French, accepted the South's surrender.

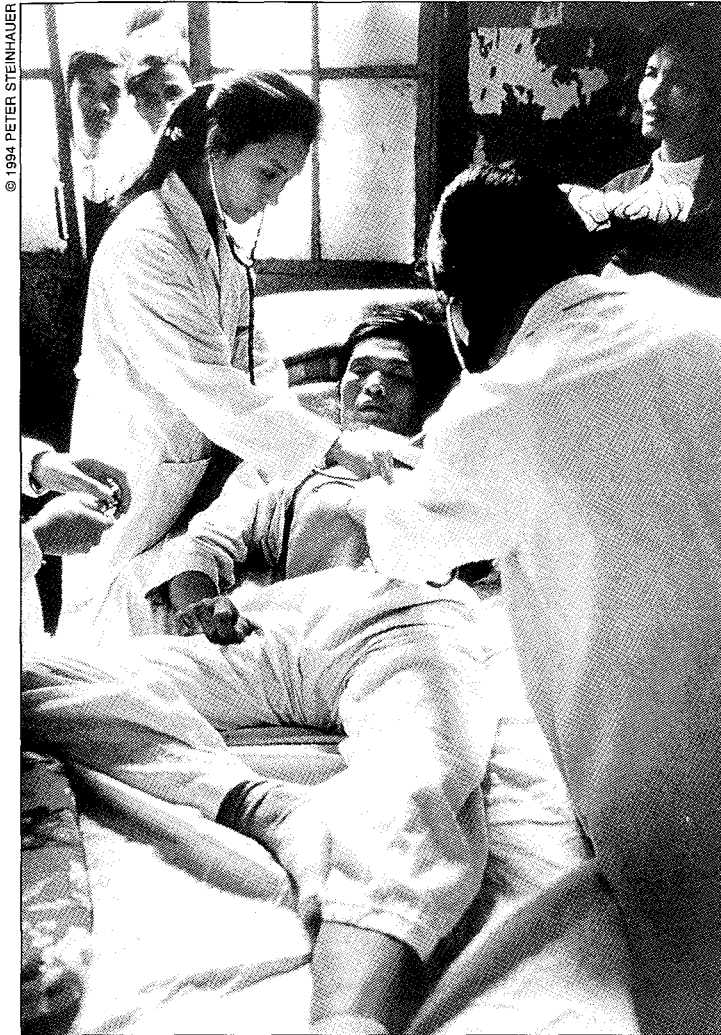
The "Great Spring Victory" had come far sooner than the North Vietnamese had anticipated. Heady with their triumph, they proceeded during the next four years to make a succession of disastrous political and economic decisions. It is no small historical irony that in 1991, Bui Tin, the lifelong Communist who had received the South's surrender, left the country and defected from the Hanoi regime, blasting the party's postliberation policies in an open letter to the Politburo. For the North Vietnamese, it turned out, winning the war was not quite the same as making Vietnam an integrated nation with a functioning economy and a reconciled population.

The communist "liberation" of the South, great "revolutionary" triumph though it was, and achieved only after dec-



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At French-built Vitta Factory in Hanoi, workers turn out bicycles under the watchful eye of Uncle Ho.



Doctors make their rounds of the cardiology ward at Hanoi's Bach Mai Hospital. Vietnam has 9,000 clinics and more than 23,000 physicians.

ades of hard and costly struggle, evoked little enthusiasm from the South's populace. Its most natural supporters, the indigenous Viet Cong, had seen their ranks severely thinned during the Tet offensive of 1968. Although most southern Vietnamese were still poor seven years after Tet, they had had a taste of capitalism and of multiparty politics. U.S.-sponsored "pacification" campaigns had poured resources into rural areas. Many villages had experienced rudimentary forms of self-government. The "land to the tiller" program in the Mekong

the historical mistrust that southerners harbored, and mutual hostility has affected life in Vietnam ever since.

The case of General Tran Van Tra illustrates the problem. Born in the South in 1918, Tra had joined the Indochina Communist Party during the 1930s, spent years in French jails, and taken part in a 1945 Viet Minh uprising just before Ho Chi Minh—with World War II over and Japan defeated—declared Vietnam an independent country. During the Viet Minh's subsequent war against the French, Tra rose through the

Delta had created a new class of independent farmers, who owned their own land. Several brands of "miracle rice" (which, with the aid of chemicals, multiplies the yield from a kernel of rice two or three times), developed specifically for Vietnam at the Philippines International Rice Institute, grew abundantly in the delta. And the war-stimulated economy had encouraged the growth of a middle class in the cities and towns.

Although the South Vietnam regimes, from Diem's (1954–63) to Nguyen Cao Ky and Nguyen Van Thieu's (1965–75), had often governed corruptly and with a heavy hand, most of the populace had little appetite for the communist alternative. The triumphant North Vietnamese were perceived less as liberators than as potential oppressors. Yet, exhausted by war, many southerners were probably ready to give the victors a chance. Hanoi, however, missed it. By its obtuse actions, the North confirmed

Victory Day at Tan Son Nhut

Kien, a North Vietnamese Army infantry officer in the long war against the South Vietnamese and the Americans, is the protagonist of The Sorrow of War: A Novel of North Vietnam (the English translation forthcoming from Pantheon Books), by Bao Ninh, a novelist who served in North Vietnam's Glorious 27th Youth Brigade and today lives in Hanoi. The Sorrow of War was a best seller in Vietnam in 1991. In the following scene, set shortly after his unit took Tan Son Nhut airport on April 30, 1975, Kien tries unsuccessfully to lose himself in the drunken revelry. But a haunting image from those strange first hours of victory—the naked corpse of a woman—will never leave his thoughts.

Kien began drinking. There was plenty of free booze at the airport. He wandered around watching the soldiers looting, and joined in the drinking and destruction. The entertainment seemed riotous, but it wasn't the least bit amusing. They turned over furniture, smashed and ripped fittings and scattered them everywhere. Glasses, pots, cups, wine bottles, were all broken or shot up. They used machine guns to shoot out the chandeliers and the ceiling lights. Everyone drank heavily and they all seemed to be drunk, half-laughing, half-crying. Some were yelling like madmen.

Peace had rushed in brutally, leaving them dazed and staggering in its wake. They were more amazed than happy with peace.

Kien sat in the canteen of the Air France terminal, his legs up on a table, quietly drinking. One after another he downed the cups of brandy, the way a barbarian would, as if to insult life. Many of those around him had passed out, but he just kept on drinking.

A strange and horrible night.

At times the noise of machine guns and the sight of the red, blue, and violet signal flares fired into the air at random created a surreal atmosphere. It was like an apocalypse, then an earthquake. Kien shuddered, sensing the end of an era.

Some said they had been fighting for 30 years, if you included the Japanese and the French. He had been fighting for 11 years. War had been their whole world. So many lives, so many fates. The end of the fighting was like the deflation of an entire landscape, with fields, mountains, and rivers collapsing in on themselves.

As dawn approached it grew noisier, then the racket died down.

Kien felt the sharp contrast between the loud, chaotic night and the peaceful morning. Suddenly, he felt terribly alone; he sensed he

would be lonely forever.

In later years, when he heard stories of V-Day or watched the scenes of the fall of Saigon on film, with cheering, flags, flowers, triumphant soldiers, and joyful people, his heart would ache with sadness and envy. He and his friends had not felt that soaring, brilliant happiness he saw on film. True, in the days following 30 April he had experienced unforgettable joys after the victory. But on the night itself they'd had that suffocating feeling at the airport. And why not? They'd just stepped out of their trenches.

Yes, he had drunk his way through the night sitting in the Air France lounge. It wasn't until morning that his brain started reeling. He began to have nightmares about the naked girl they'd dressed up. The floor beneath him felt as though it was heaving, a glass wall before him seemed to go up in smoke. The apparition of a naked girl appeared before him, her chest white, her hair messy, her dark eyes swarming with ants, and on her lips a terrible twisted smile. He looked steadily at her, feeling pity. This was a human being who had been killed and humiliated, someone even he had looked down on. Those who had died and those who lived on shared a common fate in this war.

He reached out unsteadily and tried to embrace the ghostly shadow of the girl. In his drunkenness he was blubbering, generating deep pity for her poor lost soul as he blathered on with words of consolation for her.

When he spoke of these events in later life, others found it inconceivable he would waste his time becoming nostalgic over a girl at Tan Son Nhut airport who had not only been a corpse but the corpse of someone Kien had never met! Yet the woman had, strangely, left a tragic and indelible imprint on his mind. She became the last of his enduring obsessions.

ranks of the People's Army of Vietnam; during the late 1950s, he became deputy chief of staff, and during the 1960s, he served underground in South Vietnam and was the National Liberation Front's ranking military officer in the final campaigns. After the "liberation," Tra was immediately named head of the Military Management Committee in Saigon, in effect, the military governor of the defeated capital. Nobody, North or South, could doubt Tra's loyalty to the communist cause.

But during a liberal interlude from 1988 to '89, Tra's association of southern communist veterans, the "Club of Former Resistance Fighters," dared publicly to criticize the Communist Party for failing to practice openness. It also blamed party "conservatives" for the failure of *doi moi*. In response, the government in 1990 denied the club permission to exist independently of the "Fatherland Front," the party's official organization of more than 100 groups. Tra's club was forced to merge into the Vietnam Veterans Association, which is under firm central control. Southerners, as this action made quite clear, were still suspect.

In 1991, when several colleagues and I met him, Tra was living in retirement in Ho Chi Minh City in a modest bougainvillea-

draped villa that once might have housed a midlevel American diplomat. Tra, we knew, had been elected to a seat in the National Assembly, which in recent years has become more prominent in Vietnam's political life. (The election had been confined to communist-approved candidates.) During our conversation, we congratulated Tra on his chairmanship of the assembly's veterans committee. Smiling, he informed us that he had just been "dis-elected" from the Assembly. The reason: his leadership of the club of former southern resistance fighters.

* * *

In 1975, the Vietnamese Communists had achieved their long-sought goal. The Americans were gone, and South Vietnam was theirs. Now, Hanoi had to create a unified nation. To accomplish this, General Secretary Le Duan and other members of the Politburo decided, they had to get rid of what was left of the "enemy forces," consolidate their power, integrate the South into the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, and transform the southern economy into a socialist one. This was a tall order, and in trying to fill it, the Communists committed a series of blunders, with disastrous consequences.

First, they set about dealing with those who had been officials in the vanquished regime and with the military officers and men who had served it. General Tra, the newly installed military governor of Saigon, and his fellow Communists dealt harshly with those who had been in authority or who seemed to represent a future threat. The Vietnamese Communists were less barbarous than their counterparts in Cambodia, the notorious Khmer Rouge, but they were capable of brutality. Many thousands of



Amerasians are outcasts in family-centered Vietnam. About 75,000 Amerasians and members of their families have come to the United States.

A Southerner's 'Re-education'

Jade Ngoc Quang Huynh was an apolitical 18-year-old Saigon University student when the city fell to the Communists in 1975. He was sent to labor camps for "re-education." Escaping from Vietnam in 1977, he ended up in the United States. In this excerpt from his memoir, South Wind Changing (Graywolf Press, 1994), Huynh describes what happened in one of the labor camps after the commandant, Comrade Son, told the inmates, surrounded by armed guards, how a prisoner who tried to run away had been shot. "This is a very good lesson for all of you," Son said.

Come here!" [Comrade Son] pointed to a new captive who wore glasses.

The guard shoved the new man in the back with his gun to make him walk up to Son.

"You look handsome with your glasses. You are an intellectual from the south, huh? You know too much. You are the one who had a revolution against us, against our people, against our country for over 20 years and our people had to bleed all that time. You are a traitor, you are an idealist. Am I right, our citizens?" he rasped in his heavy accent full of scorn. Then he grinned.

"Yes, comrade, yes, comrade. He's our traitor!" we all shouted as if we were furious. Many guns were held at our backs ready to fire. I felt so bitter since every bad thing I said about others made my mouth dirty. Did I have any choice? The prisoner wearing glasses said softly:

"No, comrade, I'm not an intellectual person. I'm a mechanic in the army and I never held a gun to anyone. Look, look at my hands. They're all dirty with calluses. I'm not a traitor. Please forgive me!" He raised his voice louder and louder, repeatedly, but the crowd's voices were overpowering his.

"Don't lie to the party," Comrade Son shouted. "I have all your files here. You were working for the secret police. You have to confess to us now!"

The crowd quieted. The prisoner kneeled down and crawled over to him and begged for forgiveness. "I'm not a traitor, please forgive me!"

He patted his hands on Son's legs and bowed down; Son pushed him away. He crawled back again, but this time the guard who stood next to Son raised his gun and knocked him down. The blood began to dribble from his mouth.

"Who will volunteer to punish our traitor?" Comrade Son asked.

One of the men in the antenna group, the prisoners who spied for the guards, stood up and walked over to him like a dog obeying his master. Son threw him a rope. He held it, pulled the prisoner's arms to his back and firmly tied the left thumb to the right toe and the left toe to the right thumb. He jerked the man toward the flagpole, dragging him in the dirt like an animal. I didn't know if I was an animal or a human being at this moment. The antenna group man walked over, picked up the glasses and gave them to Son while the captive was moaning, trying to get up on his feet. He couldn't see anything without his glasses, his face was close to the ground. He pushed with his head, trying to sit up, but he didn't succeed. Son walked over to him and pulled him up. The inmate stood silently, his mouth bleeding. Son held his glasses in front of his face.

"Are you trying to act blind? We are the people; we are the justice. We know you so well, traitor. Why don't you come and get them?" Son waved the glasses in front of his face and the captive stood still. "You ignore me." Son dropped the glasses into the dirt, lifted his foot, then brought it down, grinding glass into the dust. He laughed.

southerners (the precise number is not known) were summarily executed, and at least one million were sent to "re-education camps."

The severity of the punishments meted out varied somewhat according to the loca-

tion and the whims of the local party organization. Generals and colonels in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, and senior civilian officials, were sentenced, as a rule, to terms of about 12 years in the camps, while captains and majors often got sentences of eight years.

In many cases, these terms were tantamount to death sentences because of the extremely harsh camp conditions. Enlisted soldiers and low-ranking civilians sent to the re-education camps were generally released after a few days or weeks.

The communist victory and ensuing crackdown on the erstwhile enemy prompted an exodus of refugees in the spring of 1975, mostly from South Vietnam's upper crust—officers, doctors, lawyers, senior civil servants. Almost 200,000 Vietnamese refugees came to the United States that year. They would be but the first wave.

Next on Hanoi's agenda came the consolidation of power. Before the defeat of South Vietnam, the Communists had hinted that unification of the country would take place in phases, over a 15-year period. This was probably no more than a ploy to win over "undecided" southerners who had misgivings about northern domination. In any case, only a few months after Saigon's fall, Hanoi decided to get rid of the separate communist organizations that had been set up for South Vietnam during the war. The leaders of the Provisional Revolutionary Government and of the National Liberation Front were obliged to vote their organizations out of existence in November 1975. Then, in April 1976, a new National Assembly for the entire country was elected, in a process closely controlled by the party. The assembly soon approved a new government for the newly unified country: the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. On paper at least, unification was finally a reality.

Hanoi then turned to the question of the southern economy. After the 1968 Tet offensive, the economy had revived somewhat thanks to President Richard Nixon's "Vietnamization" of the war and an infusion of U.S. resources into the rural "pacification" program. But the cumulative effect of the gradual withdrawal of U.S. military forces by 1973, the closing of American bases, and the drastic cuts made in U.S. aid in 1974, resulted

in massive unemployment. By April 1975, as provinces and whole regions of the South passed into communist hands, the southern economy was in desperate shape.

As party leaders tried to figure out what to do, an old debate was revived. During the war, Truong Chinh, who had been general secretary from 1941 to 1956 and was the party's premier ideologist, had argued that building socialism in the North was more important than waging the war in the South. Le Duan, the general secretary since 1960 and a former Viet Cong leader in the South, had taken the contrary view: the liberation struggle deserved priority. Now, with that "liberation" accomplished, the same argument came back in new guise. Truong Chinh, the ideologist, argued that the South should be forced to change course immediately, undergo a "revolution in production relations," so that its economy could be transformed into a socialist one. Le Duan, once again, took the opposite view: that the "growth of productive forces" in the country as a whole was more important, and that, in effect, the South's economy should be kept in roughly its current form and its considerable economic potential harnessed to serve the entire nation and, in particular, to help reconstruct the North. He and others were keen on tapping the rich agricultural resources of the Mekong Delta to feed the undernourished North.

At the Fourth Party Congress in 1976, the party resolved the debate by deciding that it wanted *both* economic development (so what was left of capitalism in the South could remain, temporarily) *and* the complete "socialist transformation" of the South by 1980. In pursuit of these contradictory ends, the congress's Second Five Year Plan set extremely ambitious—and totally unrealistic—production goals for the entire nation. Central planners, not market forces, determined the targets. Heavy industry was stressed, farms and light industry in the South were collectivized, the need to give farmers and workers incentives was disregarded. And, in practice, it all worked about

as well as might be expected, which is to say not at all. Popular discontent grew, and by late 1979 the Vietnamese economy had ground to a near halt.

As if that were not bad enough, Hanoi in 1977 and '78 mounted vicious campaigns to close down all small private businesses in the South, in the Saigon area and the Mekong Delta. The result was a stampede of hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese small businessmen and their families to get out of Vietnam. The refugees—many of whom were “Hoa people,” ethnic Chinese whose families had been in Vietnam for generations—came not only from the South but also from the North, skilled mechanics from Haiphong’s port, for example. Escaping by sea in most cases, these “boat people” wound up on the Chinese mainland or in camps in Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia, and some made their way to the United States and Canada, the second wave of the Vietnamese exodus.

Why did Hanoi, with military victory achieved, follow so self-destructive a course? Why did Le Duan and the other communist leaders, having achieved the independence for which they had fought so long and suffered so much, take their nation down the road to economic ruin, and then drive away so many people who could have been of use to their country?

The main reason has to be that they were simply blinded by their Marxist-Leninist ideology: they could not analyze the situation they faced, except in terms of communist dogma, and this, to put it mildly, was a poor guide to reality. But fear also played a part—fear that unless they used all available means to secure their control over the former South Vietnam, they might again be faced with enemies there, either from the old Thieu regime or, even worse, from the cadres of the erstwhile National Liberation Front. (That fear would not go away, which is why Hanoi would

later not tolerate General Tra’s independent club of southern veterans.)

And hubris, the sort of pride that comes naturally to people who have won a great victory, also played a role in determining Vietnam’s self-destructive course—and not just at home but beyond its borders as well. By virtue of their stunning victory, Le Duan and the others saw Vietnam, in his words, as “an impregnable outpost of the socialist system, an important factor of . . . national independence, democracy, and social progress in Southeast Asia.” With Moscow’s encouragement, the communist leaders saw a now-unified Vietnam as a springboard for revolutionary movements elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

* * *

Throughout its long history, Vietnam has been buffeted by forces beyond its borders, and frequently beyond its control. Foremost among those forces is China, Vietnam’s colossal northern neighbor. In the Hanoi Historical Museum today, the exhibits pertaining to the French and American adversaries occupy just two rooms, but the exhibits about the Chinese take up most of the large building. Vietnam’s struggles with the Chinese have been going on for millennia.

In 111 B.C., the Han dynasty conquered the Sinitic tribe that lived in the North’s Red River Delta, and for the next thousand years China ruled over “Vietnam.” In A.D. 39, a successful but short-lived revolt against that rule was led by two sisters named Trung; the *hai ba Trung* became a legend (and streets are named after them in every modern Vietnamese city). Nearly 900 years later, in A.D. 938, the Vietnamese finally drove the Chinese out, and then, between 1257 and 1287, repulsed several invasions mounted by Mongol China and Emperor Kublai Khan. Tran Hung Dao, a military leader during this period, is venerated today for the ingenious tactics he used to defeat a vastly superior Chinese force.

But Tran Hung Dao and the emperors of the Le dynasty, who reigned from the 15th through the 17th centuries, were feudal lords who commanded only limited populations and resources. Subsequently, Vietnamese kings decided that their interests were best served by paying tributes to China. The Confucian and mandarin influence of the "Greater Dragon" to the north remained dominant until the French began their colonial conquest of Vietnam in the 19th century. By then, the Vietnamese had expanded steadily south, absorbing the Cham Empire and what was left of the Khmer Empire in the Mekong Delta.

The French turned the South (Cochinchina) into a colony, and the Center (Annam) and the North (Tonkin) into protectorates, ruling all three Vietnams with more or less an iron hand. But the hand stayed inside a glove of cultural velvet. The French used the beauty of their literature and art to seduce the Vietnamese aristocracy and commercial class. And in the South, the French even allowed political parties to be formed and elections to be held, although the electorate was very narrow; in the North and the Center, no such political participation was permitted. Meanwhile, as the 19th century gave way to the 20th and the years went on, the masses of exploited peasants and a generation of intellectuals began to develop a hatred of the French *colonis*. Through the charismatic Ho Chi Minh's clever manipulations, Vietnamese nationalism became intertwined with communism, and Vietnam began moving down the road that, in time and after much bloodshed, led to the "liberation" of April 30, 1975.

After the war, Hanoi's leaders presumed that the ideology that had served them well in their struggle against the French and the Americans would also serve them well in building a "socialist" Vietnam and in encouraging the growth of socialism elsewhere. They were wrong. For reasons that were deeply historical as well as ideological, Hanoi soon found itself embroiled in costly conflicts with

its neighbors that diverted badly needed resources at a time when the regime was coping with severe economic problems at home.

China, Vietnam's ancient foe, could not be ignored. The bitter quarrel between China and the Soviet Union that erupted in the early 1960s had made life difficult for Hanoi during the war, since it needed the support of both communist "big brothers." After the 1972 rapprochement between China and the United States, Hanoi's and Beijing's mutual suspicions increased. When in 1978 Vietnam strengthened its economic links to the Soviet Union and concluded a new mutual-security treaty, China saw itself "encircled" by unfriendly powers. But Vietnam now had a more urgent problem: Cambodia (Kampuchea).

Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital, had fallen to Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge just 13 days before Saigon was taken by the North Vietnamese. Once in power, the Cambodian Communists proceeded to kill more than one million of their fellow countrymen. During 1977-78, Pol Pot's forces made bloody forays into Vietnam's southern provinces, inflicting thousands of casualties, as well as disrupting the Mekong Delta's reconstruction. Pol Pot's men also systematically executed several thousand Khmer Rouge guerrillas who had been trained in Vietnam during the 1960s and '70s, and did not neglect to kill their families as well.

In December 1978, Hanoi struck back. Vietnamese forces invaded Cambodia, deposed the Khmer Rouge regime, and, using former Khmer Rouge military figures who had fled for their lives from Pol Pot's madness, installed a client regime in Phnom Penh in 1979. The new government's socialist character (and pro-Vietnamese orientation) was declared "irreversible." But that did not end the war with the Khmer Rouge.

As a result of its aggression—even though the victim was an extraordinarily heinous regime—Vietnam became a politi-

cal and economic pariah, condemned by the United States, the European Economic Community, Japan, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. But there was an even more forceful response to Hanoi's actions: in early 1979, Chinese forces invaded Vietnam, devastated its northern provinces, and then withdrew about two months later.

For the next decade, the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) was involved in a guerrilla war in Cambodia that it could not win, a quagmire from which it found it hard to extricate itself. To an American with experience in Vietnam, the situation seemed all too familiar. In August 1988, on a flight from Da Nang to Ho Chi Minh City, I happened to be seated next to a PAVN colonel who had just finished a nine-year tour of duty in Cambodia. He told me of the frustration he had had in dealing with his former Khmer allies. Vietnam's invasion and long occupation of Cambodia, he had come to believe, had been a grave mistake: Vietnam's forces could not achieve a military solution to the Cambodian problem. "Never again," he seemed to be saying.

During the Vietnamese Communists' struggle for liberation, Marxism-Leninism had served as a fighting faith, promising the downtrodden that a better future would come with national "independence and freedom," and that ultimate victory was scientifically guaranteed. The ideology also had been the glue that enabled Ho and his supporters to put together an effective fighting organization. Without the bond of communist ideology, it is highly unlikely that they would have received the support they did from the Soviet Union and China—and without that support, North Vietnam could not have won the war. Ideology was not everything. Ho, the masterful General Vo Nguyen Giap, and other Vietnamese leaders brought great political and military skills to their cause, as well as the required ruthlessness. (They killed noncommunist Vietnamese nationalists or otherwise eliminated that threat to their movement, and

in the process drove many noncommunist nationalists into the arms of the French and later the Americans.) Nevertheless, the communist ideology counted for a great deal.

After liberation, however, Marxism-Leninism became part of Vietnam's problem, helping Hanoi's leaders to send their economy to the brink of ruin. Socialist solidarity did not keep Vietnam out of the Cambodian quagmire. Nor had the ideological glue continued to stick in China's case—and, in time, the bond with the Soviet Union also would come apart.

* * *

The state of ruin to which their ideologically driven policies had reduced the economy by 1979 forced Vietnam's communist leaders to recognize that some change was necessary. Conservatives contended that, with perhaps just a bit of modification, the Marxist-Leninist program would produce prosperity. But reformers such as Politburo member Nguyen Van Linh—a native of the South who had spent much of his life advancing the communist cause there—believed that tinkering with the economic system now was useless, that there had to be profound changes. The very survival of socialism, they argued, depended on renovation, on change that was *selective* but nonetheless real.

As an influential member of the ruling Politburo during the late 1970s and early '80s, and as party chief in Ho Chi Minh City from 1981 to '86, Linh pushed hard for economic reform and achieved some modest results. The party in 1979 approved the use of "output contracts" in both agriculture and industry, allowing families in cooperatives to sell on the open market any excess they produced above the quota they had to deliver to the state. This approach was first tried in limited areas, and the incentives increased production significantly. In early 1981, "output contracts" went into use throughout the nation. Other market-oriented reforms also were cautiously introduced.

Vietnam's economy began to recover—but the hyperinflation that accompanied the

nascent recovery wiped out much of the improvement. The reforms were deemed a failure, free-market activities were curtailed, and the reformers were made scapegoats. At the Fifth Party Congress, in March 1982, Linh was ousted from the Politburo and kicked off the party's central committee. "Restore socialist order in the market," *Nhan Dan*, the party newspaper, demanded.

But this retreat did not do much for the economy. On the contrary, production in all areas declined and inflation soared to 700 percent by 1986. The situation once again turned desperate. That December, after the death of General Secretary Le Duan, Linh (who had been brought back to the Politburo the year before) was chosen at the Sixth Party Congress to succeed him. No doubt inspired somewhat by the example of Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* in the Soviet Union, Linh and the party now took bold steps to move away from a command economy and toward a free-market one. The trick for the party was to do that without abandoning "socialism"—or, perhaps more to the point, power.

In 1989, as Hanoi was about to withdraw its forces from Cambodia, Moscow began to cut back deliveries to Vietnam of fuel, fertilizer, steel, chemicals, and cotton. After independence, Vietnam had been heavily dependent on Moscow, receiving \$1 billion a year from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in economic and military assistance. Now, tens of thousands of Vietnamese guest workers in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, witnesses to the failure of communism there, were sent home. These developments spurred Nguyen Van Linh's reform efforts, pushing Vietnam toward a free-market economy.

During 1988–89, Linh and the party somewhat relaxed their controls on the press in the South, which led immediately to outspoken criticism. After that, Linh's influence in the party began to diminish. The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989 and of the Soviet Union itself

in 1991 made it crystal clear to the Hanoi Politburo that while economic change was urgent, any political change would have to be very carefully controlled. At the Seventh Party Congress, in June 1991, Linh was replaced as general secretary by conservative Do Muoi, whom the party judged better equipped to achieve those objectives.

Recognizing its growing isolation and the limits of its military power, Vietnam tried to improve its relations with China and began to seek a negotiated exit from Cambodia. In October 1991, it joined in a United Nations-sponsored comprehensive political settlement of the war. With the Soviet Union crumbling, Hanoi, still keeping a wary eye on its Chinese neighbor, had come to see that its own interests now lay with the other, noncommunist nations of Southeast Asia, with Japan, and with the West. By agreeing to an end to the Cambodian war, Vietnam was now able to move closer to those nations and to its former enemy, the United States.

Since 1991, Vietnam has made some impressive economic progress. The Communist Party and the government have sanctioned private entrepreneurship in a wide range of small and medium-size enterprises, and collectivism in agriculture has been all but abandoned. The party has agreed, in principle at least, to reduce its effort to administer the economy on a daily basis. Prices of commodities—with the notable exceptions of gasoline, electricity, public transportation, and certain food staples—are determined now by market forces. Gross domestic product increased by eight percent in 1993 to 125 trillion dong (\$11.5 billion), and was expected to grow by about nine percent in 1994. Inflation was around 11 percent in 1994, roughly one-hundredth of what it had been during the late 1980s.

Total trade amounted to \$6.25 billion in 1993, and was expected to increase by about 30 percent in 1994. With last year's lifting of the U.S. embargo on trade and investment, pledges of foreign investment have grown,



The Soviet Union may have fallen but Lenin continues to be honored in Hanoi, with a statue and a park that bears his name.

adding up to more than \$10 billion as of last September. By that time, Americans had announced 21 investment projects worth \$187 million. U.S. firms are building part of a new highway system along Vietnam's central coast, and an American-led consortium is creating a huge resort area near Da Nang. Citibank and Bank of America have opened branches in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. With Mobil, Continental, and other U.S. firms involved, oil has become one of Vietnam's most important exports. Rice is another. Food-deficient until recently, Vietnam is now the world's third-largest rice exporter, after Thailand and the United States. Despite the lifting of the U.S. embargo, American investments so far have been relatively modest. Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Japan have

been far ahead of the United States in trade with, or investment in, Vietnam.

Even with *doi moi*, Vietnam is far from being the picture of economic health. With help from international financial organizations, rehabilitation of the country's physical infrastructure has begun, but it will take decades for Vietnam to catch up with its noncommunist neighbors. The international trade market now is intensely competitive, and office space in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, because of the scarce supply and big demand, is almost as expensive as in Hong Kong and Tokyo. According to one survey, a square meter of prime office space in Ho Chi Minh City now rents for as much as \$475, which is more than in any other major city in Southeast Asia—and is a clear disincentive to foreign investors.

The full-fledged conversion of Vietnam's economy to anything like a free market one is by no means accomplished, or even assured. Many basic problems remain. Under the 1992 constitution, the state is still the sole owner of land, although individuals have the right, avowedly extending for 50 to 70 years, to use, divide, and inherit it. The ultimate ownership of the land remains a controversial issue.

Moreover, the regime seems to be deliberately dragging its feet on privatization, and it could well reverse course at any time. A large number of state-owned enterprises are being kept alive through subsidies or special loans from the state bank. And in the more market-oriented economy, Communist Party members and party-controlled organizations still have significant advantages. Even the army has gotten heavily involved in business. The net result of all this is that "private" enterprise in Vietnam has become the preserve of those with connections.

Letter from Vietnam: Hopes and Sorrows

Carole Beaulieu, a Canadian journalist and senior writer for the Montreal-based newsmagazine L'actualité, lived in Vietnam with her husband, Pierre, during 1992-94, when she was a Fellow of the Institute of Current World Affairs, in Hanover, N.H. One of the many newsletters she wrote for the institute during her time in Vietnam concerned "people who do not make the news." Some edited excerpts from that February 1993 report:

It is freezing cold in Hanoi. I am typing with my gloves on as the sounds of exploding fire-crackers fill my room. Tet, the Vietnamese New Year, is approaching. The narrow streets are filled with holiday shoppers buying sweets, rice wine, peach trees with pink blossoms, and *banh chung*, the traditional rice cake which is boiled for seven hours. In four days, the Year of the Rooster will begin. "And the American embargo will be lifted," says Son, a 19-year-old student and rock singer from Hanoi. "There will be many changes then."

Hope. There is so much hope these days in Hanoi that you can feel it in the air. Hope is everywhere. In the new neon signs, in the thumping of the bricklayers, the whizzing sound of the blowtorches. Hope also shines in Son's long, unruly black hair. "I got in some trouble at school because of the long hair," says the 19-year-old, laughing. "But God gave us hair, why cut it?" Son's favorite songs are the American hits "Hotel California" and "Stairway to Heaven." The small band he sings with favors heavy-metal groups such as Black Sabbath, a British band, and Metallica, an American one. "We practice in a warehouse," says Son in his shaky English. "At home we cannot turn the volume up because of the neighbors."

We are sitting in a century-old lakeside coffee-shop eating sunflower seeds and drinking coffee so strong it could start a car engine. "The war was crazy," says Hoang, bass guitarist in Son's group and a student of foreign trade. "We lost 20 years."

Born during an American bombardment, Hoang dreams of visiting the United States. In his room, near the ancestors' altar, he has pinned a Metallica poster. "I wanted to study at the Conservatory," he says, "but my parents would not let me. They said I had a better chance of earning a living if I studied foreign trade."

Hoang and Son both believe the Year of the Rooster will bring the end of the long-standing

American embargo. Others, like Tran (not his real name), hope it will not. A government official in his mid-thirties, Tran could be called a progressive. He supports the market reforms and wants them speeded up. He sees the American embargo as a way of putting pressure on the Vietnamese government.

Nguyen Xuan Phong, head of the Americas Department of the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, disagrees. "Our reforms were not triggered by the pressure of the embargo," he says. "The reforms came out of a need to give a better standard of living to our people."

But Tran has other reasons to hope the lifting of the embargo will be delayed. "When the embargo is lifted, a lot of money will be dropped in the hands of the government," he insists. "They are not ready. They will not know how to use it well. They need time to learn about the market economy, to learn to decide on facts, not pride or wishful thinking."

We originally had planned to live at Tran's house in Hanoi. He had suggested the idea and his enthusiasm won us over. But when we got to the capital, Tran had changed his mind. It was mainly because of his father, who is not as progressive as his son, more of a hard-line Communist. When he heard about the plan, he was not at all pleased. "My father feared he would come under attack if others found out his son was renting a room to foreigners while he was criticizing the open-door policy." Tran was so worried about letting us down, he did not tell us until we arrived in Hanoi.

So, back to square one: looking for a house. Renting to foreigners is one of the hottest businesses in town. Many people are renovating their houses, creating small apartments for rent.

"This house is brand-new," insists Fon, a mathematician, as he shows us a two-story house a half-hour's bike ride from the center of

town. The owner wants \$1,000 a month for it. Fon has found housing for quite a few foreigners, but we are not as rich as they, so he takes us to another house, smaller and less modern.

* * *

In Ho Chi Minh City, Pierre and I lived with a revolutionary and a bear. No joke. I can tell you the bear's name but not the old man's name. You see, his wife broke the law. She did not pay any tax on our rent. (She was no exception. Most people around here seem either to totally ignore that law or declare a much lower rent than the one they really collect.)

We enjoyed staying on the second floor of their villa, where our room was a perfect picture of what life must have been for the French in colonial times: high ceilings, slow-turning fans, large windows with wooden shutters, a roofed terrace where you could slowly rock in a hammock while listening to the rain beating on the roof.

The old man was a founding member of the Communist Party in the South. Until he fell ill a few months ago, he was a high-ranking party officer. He lived in the large French villa and kept a black Soviet-made Volga sedan with green government plates in his garage.

In early morning, through the shutters, we could hear Saigon wake up. The roosters sang at 5:30. At 6, the two maids washed pots in the courtyard, and after that, there was no point trying to sleep as the hubbub of Saigon honked its way into our room amid the songs of street vendors.

We did not see the old man much. Despite his illness, he was often in Hanoi. And when he came home, many people came to talk to him. I wish he had been home more often. He had deep-set, bright eyes, a warm smile, and a firm handshake. He understood French well but did not speak it with us.

We saw more of Baloo the bear: a small black vegetarian bear, roughly the size of a large dog. The old man's wife bought it from poachers who had intended to sell it to Taiwanese buyers who would have cut off its paws and sold them. Baloo led a peaceful life in the courtyard, swinging from a fence, eating bread and fruit.

The old man had a sister-in-law, a bright woman who had earned the highest honors at the Sorbonne in Paris and spoke flawless French. Years

of hardship had dimmed her beauty, but one could see behind her mass of gray hair and finely shaped face the striking beauty she must have been in her Parisian youth. I called her "Madame Soeur."

She did not talk much, especially not about politics. But one night, as we sat together watching the news, she said: "I should have stayed in France. I was offered a good job as the head of a research laboratory. I could have discovered something. Silly girl I was. I felt a responsibility to my people, my family, my country. I came back and found these imbeciles running the university. We had no resources. I could do nothing. I wasted my life. I lost everything."

I sat motionless. The depth of her sadness was overwhelming. "Maybe your presence helped the students you taught during all those years?" I tried. The look she gave me shut me up. Only she knew what the past 15 years had been: the incompetent but politically correct teachers being promoted, the good ones demoted, disciplined, silenced; the students being taught unscientific methods; the sons and daughters of officials getting the overseas fellowships that better students should have received.

Madame Soeur was lucky. Members of her family were powerful. She was spared a lot. "I know of a simple-minded man who was sent to re-education camp because he played an American song on his accordion," she recalls. "He died there."

Life is easier now, she admits. The openness is real and a new wind blows through the universities. But she feels old, too old to start over again.

Never again was Madame Soeur to be so open hearted with me as she was that night. Like most of the Saigonese I met whose lives were crushed by the wheels of the revolution, she usually carried her burden with a dignified serenity.

It was the same with our friend Hung. In his youth he had been a promising embassy secretary, well-educated and fluent in foreign languages. Since 1975, he has been unemployed. Whenever I spoke about improvements and hopes for the future, he listened carefully. But he never agreed.

[P.S. (September 1994): *Hung writes me that he has been offered a job teaching law at Ho Chi Minh University. While his doubts and sorrow linger on, the country's apparent new effort at legal reform is rekindling his hopes.*]

Corruption is massive and growing at all levels of Vietnamese life, a condition that the party seems unable to rectify—in large measure because it is itself a part of the system.

* * *

As Chinese prodemocracy students were assembling in Beijing's Tiananmen Square in May 1989, college students in Hanoi were making their own demands on the Communist Party and the state regarding food, housing, and scholarships. In contrast to the bloody crackdown that took place in China, the local party committee in Hanoi quickly declared the Vietnamese students' demands "legitimate" and made some concessions.

The episode was an indication of the stirrings in the country that were prompting intense debate in the party's upper reaches. During the 1988–89 liberalization, journalists for the first time were encouraged to investigate official wrongdoing and permitted to publish their stories without prior consultation with party censors. Having gotten a whiff of freedom, journalists hoped for more. The editor of *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, the army daily, expressed regret that the press could debate only "the means of applying policies," not the correctness of the policies themselves.

Vietnamese writers and artists also were given greater leeway during this period. As Gareth Porter, author of *Vietnam: The Politics of Bureaucratic Socialism* (1993), noted in 1990, "Writers are increasingly choosing themes based on their own lives rather than on the party line and writing in styles far removed from the 'socialist realism' that had been in official favor." In popular plays of the late 1980s, war heroes returned to a life of alienation and spiritual emptiness, and party officials were shown as petty and arrogant. The dramas played to packed houses in Hanoi.

Many publishing restrictions that had been in force were dropped. "Popular literary works by anti-communist authors of the prerevolutionary period—such as Nhat Linh and Khai Hung—that had been banned pre-

viously were now allowed to be published or performed," Porter observed. And, like journalists, writers and artists began to voice their desire for greater freedom. At a meeting with General Secretary Linh in October 1987, a group of them called for an "untying" of culture from party control. Linh pledged to act on their complaints, and an official resolution a few weeks later said that literary works—other than those that were "anti-people, anti-socialist, or anti-peace"—could be "freely circulated and placed under the assessment and judgment of public opinion and criticism."

But as demands for greater freedom began to be linked to the idea of ending the Communist Party's monopoly on power, Linh and other party leaders began to speak out strongly against political pluralism. "Why We Do Not Accept Pluralism" was the title of a major speech Linh, the leading proponent of *doi moi*, delivered in May 1989. In another important address later that year, he stated, "Democracy does not mean that one is free to say what one wants to, write what one wants to write." Those, he said, were "anarchist acts," and political pluralism was just a "scheme of imperialism." His two speeches—collected and published under the title *Following the Road Chosen by Uncle Ho*—were widely distributed for study by party members and others.

Linh's efforts to limit the movement for political change could not disguise the fact that political liberalization had taken place under his leadership. In mid-1991, as earlier noted, he was replaced as general secretary by the conservative Do Muoi. Party leaders soon retreated from the dangerous liberalization.

In Article Four of the new national constitution, adopted by the National Assembly in 1992 after months of debate, there was, however, a slight change of wording. The 1980 document had declared that the party was "the only force leading the state and society." In the new constitution, the word *only* was deleted.

As the modesty of that modification suggests, Vietnam's leaders continue to try to

limit political change. "Stability" is the watchword. Improvement of the material lives of the people can happen only if political order is maintained, and that can be accomplished only if the Communist Party remains in sole control of Vietnam's political life. Although the National Assembly assumed a more prominent role with the 1992 constitution, it remains firmly under party control. "The South had pluralism, a lot of political parties bickering among themselves—look what it got *them*," as one party official told me once.

The party's determination to preserve "stability" limits the respect it shows for human rights. According to Amnesty International, at least 60 prisoners of conscience were in jail at the end of 1993. No criticism of "Ho Chi Minh thought" or advocacy of pluralism is permitted. Freedom of religion is carefully circumscribed. The government has set up its own "Vietnam Buddhist Church" to pre-empt the existing Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, which has demanded the right to have education and social groups independent of party direction. Some demonstrations during the last few years have resulted in violence, and several Buddhist leaders have been arrested. The Catholic Church has fared somewhat better, thanks to the Vatican's long reach, but here, too, the government has co-opted many Catholics through various party-dominated groups it has set up.

Despite the absence of political freedom and other liberties as they are known in the West, the promise of *doi moi* remains. But can the government deliver on it without paving the way to a liberalism that would destroy the party's political monopoly? I have asked young professionals in Vietnam about the contradictions in their country today and about whether or not there really is a desire for more change. They have been amused by my puzzlement, and their reply is almost standard: "We don't talk about peaceful evolution. We just *do it*."

* * *

The ideological preachments of the Vietnam

Communist Party seem very remote from what one sees and hears now in the streets. Vietnamese listen to foreign news broadcasts without interference. Many Western magazines and books—so long as they do not violate major taboos—are available. American rock music and Vietnamese variations on it are almost impossible to avoid. American films are shown in theaters and available on videotape. Blue jeans and other types of Western dress are popular with the young. Many young people are studying English, French, and Japanese in hopes of getting jobs as tourist guides for foreign firms in Vietnam. Fax machines and copiers are widely available. The gradual increase in foreign companies doing business in the country can only add to the sense of a traditional society that is more and more in a state of flux.

Despite the restrictions on them, Vietnamese writers and artists still seek to express the truth as they see it about themselves and their people. Filmmaker Luu Trong Ninh's *Please Forgive Me* (1993) explored the generational conflict between the older Vietnamese who romanticize their role in the "liberation" of the country and the younger people, who are more fun-loving and cosmopolitan. The movie was shown briefly before official censors banned it, insisting that Ninh cut several scenes (including one in which a character declared that Vietnamese communist troops, as well as U.S. soldiers, had committed acts of brutality during the war). Outspoken novelist Duong Thu Huong—who at age 20 led a Communist Youth Brigade into action during the war, and later chronicled the 1979 conflict with China—became a vocal advocate of human rights and democratic reform. She was expelled from the Communist Party in 1989 and imprisoned without trial for seven months in 1991. Her four novels, including *Paradise of the Blind* (Morrow, 1993) and, forthcoming in English, *Novel Without a Name*, have been effectively banned in Vietnam.

Making their own, less dramatic contribution to the ferment in Vietnam are the one million Vietnamese living in the United States, the *Viet kieu*, as they are known. Some of them have gone back to live in Vietnam. The number is



A veteran of both the French and the American wars, 71-year-old Le Chau Phong today tends the graves at a cemetery in Thanh Trach village, Quang Binh province. "Many of my friends are in this cemetery," he says.

small, but since the lifting of the U.S. embargo, it has been growing. Camellia Ngo, a 28-year-old American lawyer who fled Vietnam with her parents two decades ago, is one who has decided to go back, along with her Vietnamese-American husband, a mechanical engineer. Her memories of Vietnam are not of the war but of the beauty of the country and the joys of childhood, of "playing hopscotch with my friends and using things like banana peels and stones." She will represent her Oakland law firm, which

is acting as a middleman for foreign investors. "We want to do business here," she told a *New York Times* reporter, "but business is mainly our means of getting here."

For the most part, however, the influence of the *Viet kieu* is exerted from afar. The refugees who fled their homeland in 1975, and their children, are now well-established as doctors, nurses, engineers, businesspeople, even graduates of U.S. military academies. Many *Viet kieu* send back to their relatives and friends in Vietnam remittances that in all are estimated to amount to \$500 million a year, and the total has increased since the end of the U.S. trade embargo in 1994. The government no longer permits dollars to circulate freely and instead requires them to be officially exchanged for Vietnamese currency. This has enabled the government to take a share of the money—and also has revived the black market. The remittances not only allow the recipients to live better but let them buy more foreign goods. And the *Viet kieu* are sending more than money or gifts home.

They also are transmitting ideas and information. The impact of these is hard to gauge, though the government in Hanoi fears that it may be considerable. But because the regime cannot shut out the outside world that it needs, there is little it can do.

The pressure for greater economic and political latitude seems to be growing ever stronger. The knowledge of Western affluence, the sight of Western and other foreign goods, have

stoked popular discontent with the economy. The reforms of *doi moi* hold out hope, but the lumbering bureaucracy and massive corruption diminish it. The South's increasing prosperity makes people in the North and in central Vietnam more resentful. The gap between rich and poor has widened.

Do Muoi and his colleagues in Hanoi, leaders of one of the few remaining communist regimes in the world, know that they must change—or perish. They are reluctant to take *doi moi*'s reforms much further—but they cannot go back. Nor can they keep unwanted foreign ideas and influences out. Technological advance alone has seen to that. And Hanoi now needs the United States and its allies not only to improve its economy but also to serve as a political counterweight to its northern neighbor, China.

Just how closely Vietnam is reading the strategic tea leaves is suggested by the warm welcome extended last October to Admiral Richard C. Macke, the commander-in-chief of U.S. forces in the Pacific. Hanoi has shown "tremendous" cooperation, Macke said, in the continuing effort to account for the 2,214 U.S. servicemen still considered "missing in action." He and Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet discussed not only that subject but also the question of maintaining stability in the region. The possibility of future U.S.-Vietnam military cooperation was not ruled out.

Vietnam now has "observer" status in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), whose members include Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Brunei Darussalam. These relatively prosperous nations have had free-market economies for decades, and also had, during the Cold War, a U.S. security "umbrella." Vietnam is likely to be invited to join the association this year, which will be a distinct plus for the nation's commercial relations. Membership will also enable Vietnam to take part in the association's "Regional Forum," where security issues are discussed. There, it will find strong

agreement that the oil and mineral resources of the South China Sea should be shared regionally, not exploited solely by China.

As Vietnam shifts its position in the world, so, inevitably, will it have to change at home. "Peaceful evolution" is dismissed by the Vietnamese communists as something cooked up by foreigners, an anti-Vietnam plot. But, in truth, peaceful evolution—perhaps toward the sort of "soft authoritarianism" practiced in Singapore, which draws on Confucian values and allows multi-party elections, or toward the "guided democracy" of Indonesia—now appears to be the only realistic course open to them. Giving the Vietnamese people more say in their own governance seems essential if the regime hopes to build popular support. Independence alone, it is evident, is not enough.

Pluralism is not the only thing Vietnam needs. It also needs to be honest and conciliatory in dealing with the past. Along virtually every road one travels in the South, there are small cemeteries in which are buried the local Viet Cong soldiers killed in their long struggle for Ho Chi Minh's "independence and freedom." The cemeteries—in some of which doubtless lie the bodies of North Vietnamese soldiers—are carefully preserved. Families come to leave flowers and worship at the graves of their loved ones. And yet, to the best of my knowledge, there are no such cemeteries for the Vietnamese soldiers killed fighting for South Vietnam. Indeed, after 1975, some cemeteries containing the graves of soldiers in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam were deliberately bulldozed over.

It may well not be until generations hence that *all* the dead of that war can be given the respect they deserve. But it seems to this writer that until the Vietnamese come to terms with their own recent past, their quest for an authentic and secure national identity will not be at an end.