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Twenty-five years ago this month as North Vietnamese troops advanced southward, watching town by town, city by city falling into communist hands like dominoes, I wondered what would happen to the Republic of Vietnam. Ban Me Thuot, Hue, Da Nang fell in March; Qui Nhon, Binh Dinh in early April, then Nha Trang, Phan Thiet. Would Saigon be next? And when?

As the fighting intensified, thousands of Vietnamese were evacuated from Saigon to Guam. Tens of thousands more swarmed into the city. Horror stories were told: executions by the communists forces; young men with long hair and bell-bottom pants were stopped on streets to have a quick trim by communist cadres. As a young university student who joined the anti-Saigon government movement, loved hippies clothes, hair styles and Beatles songs I wondered whether such thing would happen to me and my friends if the communists took control of Saigon.

More refugees fled to the city. More stories of atrocity were told. Should I be afraid? At the same time another thought crossed my mind. If the communists win, the war would finally end and the country would be reunified. Years of fighting had killed millions of Vietnamese, among them my relatives and friends. What should I do to prepare for the coming days?

Hope for a peaceful end was high as President Duong Van "Big" Minh took office in the afternoon of April 28th, 1975. Unfortunately, the violence did not stop. Terror fell into the city with rockets and bombs. That night was the longest night I have ever gone through. Worse than the Tet Offensive when the city was attacked. All kinds of explosions echoed throughout the night. Several rockets landed very close to my house.

The next day a cousin and I rode our motorcycles around the city to see what was really happening. Shops were closed. Barbed wire was everywhere. A 24-hour curfew was in effect but people ignored it and kept pouring into the city. Amidst fear and chaos, I followed the stream of people running toward the Saigon River bank where thousands of people trampled each other to get on a dozen ships.

I saw a boat with an empty deck and nobody was getting on. A young woman saw us standing like wondering souls and asked if we wanted to go. I questioned her where will it go. She responded hastily: out of the city to avoid the fighting. Let's get on, she said. I just followed her, jumped on the boat. There were about twenty people on the boat, but I soon realized it did not have an engine. The lady assured me it would be tugged out later.

My mind was full of speculation and confusion. From the deck, looking toward Tan Son Nhat Airport, in the direction of my home, columns of black smoke sprang onto the muggy yellowish sky. Helicopters flew in from the sea, then out in groups. I was scared, felt totally lost. I let my destiny dazzle along the river when a trawler pulled the boat out,

cruising slowly in the river then to open sea. I became seasick and fell sleep that night in the basement.

The next morning I heard people saying that we were going to Singapore. I just cried. Am I really leaving my country, friends and family without saying goodbye.

After three months of passing through refugee camps in Philippines, Guam and Camp Pendleton, I arrived in Berkeley, California to begin a new life in the new land.

Culture shock and homesickness often made me cry at night. For the first time in my life I was away from my parents. I had nightmares? Did my family survive all the shelling and fighting? Was leaving the country a right choice? The war had finally ended and the country was reunified. Why shouldn't I be home to celebrate the country's new era.

It was seven months before I received the first letter from home via a third country since all communications between the United States and Vietnam were cut off after the war. My family had survived but their lives changed for the worse. Furniture in the house were sold piece by piece to exchange for food. Many relatives and neighbors were sent to re-education camps. Saigon University Law School was closed and replaced with an economic school. Communist North Vietnam did not have a law school for 30 years, now the policy was imposed onto the whole country. My classmates had to spend weeks in the countryside doing laborious work instead of studying.

I felt relieved and had a strong feeling about life under communism. My aspiration for a more democratic Vietnam rejuvenated.

As a student leader at the University of California at Berkeley I spoke on the plight of the boat people and human rights abuses in my homeland. Not many years before students filled the well-known Sproul Plaza to demand U.S. withdrawal and release all political prisoners in Vietnam. In the late 1970s at the same plaza, the appeal for the release of political prisoners was again being heard.

When the war ended the communist regime did not bring the country reconciliation and peace as it has promised. Instead, the National Liberation Front was dismantled, tens of thousands of former officials and officers of the Republic of Vietnam were locked up in re-education camps. Then Vietnam invaded Cambodia. Hanoi again sent young Vietnamese into the battlefields. Tens of thousands were killed in actions. To solidify its tight control, Hanoi put in jails artists, writers, lawyers, priests, monks. All freedom was severely restricted. Meanwhile the socialist economic model also proved to be a failure in building a prosperous Vietnam. Since the late 1980s Hanoi changed its economic course with doi moi - Vietnamese glasnost version - to reform its economy. The market-oriented economy has brought Vietnam substantial growth during the past ten years.

In 1995 I returned home for the first time. The destitute house where I grew up in the 1970s has been fixed up and refurnished with a television set, video recorder and

refrigerator. Ho Chi Minh's portrait - once prominently adorned the living room - has been replaced with photo calendars advertising modern household products. Many Vietnamese now enjoy a new lifestyle with Korean gas stoves, Australian telephones, Singaporean beers and Made-in-USA computers which are the products of joint ventures between Vietnamese and foreigners.

Today Ho Chi Minh's teaching "Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom" is given a different interpretation. My 33-year-old brother-in-law said independence now means having your own house and the freedom to do business. With a liberalized economy he and his wife have succeeded in business deals and saved enough money to buy a house. Seventy percent of Vietnam's population are now 30 years old or younger. They know little or have no experience with war. Ho Chi Minh's communist followers' successes in reunifying the country under communism was things of the past and Ho's popularity is no longer appealing. Couple of students from Hanoi University told me that business people nowadays believe visiting Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum would only bring bad luck to their deals. The Vietnamese today do not pay much attention to communism. The younger do not believe in any doctrine if it does not help them to find jobs and bring them a more comfortable life. My Linh, one of the best singers in Vietnam, recently asked a foreign reporter why she has to join the communist party if it does not have anything to do with her life. Doi moi brought new wealth to some people; however, has not improved everyone's life. In the countryside where 80 percent of Vietnamese live, living conditions are still poor.

At the same time Hanoi insistently flexes its iron hands over those who appeal for democratization of the system. The government-controlled media frequently publishes articles to warn people of a "peaceful evolution" plot to overthrow the communist regime. This is a pretext for arresting or restricting those who peacefully express their opposition to government policy. Today political dissidents in Vietnam include artists, writers, poets, engineers and former communist party members. Those are people who simply express their appeals for social justice and political reforms so all citizens can contribute to build a prosperous nation. Just to cite a few cases:

Dr. Nguyen Thanh Giang is a graduate from Hanoi Polytechnic University in 1962. He worked as geologist in Hanoi until his retirement in 1996. Since 1997 Dr. Giang has written many essays calling on the government to respect human rights in Vietnam as a universal practice. He was arrested in March 1999 and charged with the crime: "abusing the democratic right" but was never brought to trial. Due to international pressure, Dr. Giang was released after two months in detention. He is currently under close watch by police.

General Tran Do is a former member of Vietnam Communist Party Central Committee. In the past two years General Do has circulated his appeal for political reform, for freedom of the press and for a true democracy in Vietnam. Subsequently he was expelled from the Party. He and his family were put under strict surveillance.

Dr. Nguyen Dan Que was sentenced to 20 years imprisonment in 1991 for disseminating his appeal calling for freedom and democracy in Vietnam. He was released in 1998 in a government amnesty with the condition that he go abroad. Dr. Que refused to exile. He now lives in Saigon under police surveillance. His devotion to the cause of human rights inspired several U.S. lawmakers to nominate him for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Tieu Dao Bao Cu is a writer from Central Vietnam. He was a member of the VCP and a deputy editor-in-chief of Langbian Magazine published from Lam Dong Province. Bao Cu and poet Bui Minh Quoc in 1988 circulated an appeal to the VCP to implement genuine democracy. He was expelled from the party and put under house arrest in Dalat. His family was often summoned by police for interrogation.

Religious people suffer the same fate:

Thich Huyen Quang, the leader of the independent Unified Buddhist Church, was forced into exile in Quang Ngai for almost two decades. His successor, Thich Quang Do, also was detained for many years before his release in 1998. His movement and activities from a pagoda in Saigon are closely monitored. This year Quang Do has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by more than one hundred lawmakers from the U.S. and European countries.

Father Chan Tin was a catholic priest who has been advocating for the improvement of human rights in Vietnam since the 1960s and was detained numerous times by South Vietnamese police. During Lent 1990 he delivered a series of sermons appealing for the repentance of past mistakes by all, including the communist government. As a result he was put under house arrest for three years. He is now still a vocal voice advocating for social reforms and freedom of religion. He is currently under close watch by police.

While expanding trade and relations would be beneficial for Vietnam and the United States, however the basic rights of Vietnamese people should not be ignored. A more democratic Vietnam would encourage its citizens to contribute in building a prosperous country for themselves and it also better serves the American interests and principles.

When visiting countries like Thailand, Malaysia, South Korea or Taiwan I often ask why it is better than my homeland while Vietnam has the same source of man power and natural resource. On a flight from San Francisco to Vietnam with China Airlines, the plane was full with Vietnamese coming home, some to do business, others to visit family. Among the passengers were some 50 Taiwanese-Americans returning to their homeland to vote in a presidential election. I wish someday Vietnamese-Americans will have the opportunity to fly home on Vietnam Airlines and cast their votes for the candidates of their choice in the national election.

This is not only my dream but the dream of all Vietnamese.