

ing the wealth of oral testimony exposing the atrocities committed by the communist government, it is also fair to conclude that refugee nationalism played a small but significant role in shaping Washington-Hanoi relations.

But pressing the United States to punish Vietnam by starving it had a potentially hazardous effect on those who could not escape the country. Instead of promoting democratic reforms or an accounting for all missing U.S. personnel, the economic embargo nearly crippled the Vietnamese economy. It also contributed to the extreme liberalization of economic life, with individual remittances from overseas *Việt Kiều* subsidizing a significant portion of Vietnam's already struggling economy.

In the interim, the noncommunist world's recognition of the boat people—and by extension other post-1975 émigrés from communist Indochina—as “genuine” political refugees represented a bittersweet victory of sorts for Little Saigon. Only as refugees on the run could they shame the world—especially former antiwar activists—into admitting that the *Việt-Cộng* had committed an alarming number of human rights violations. The newfound virtue and heroism in refugee cultural identity explains why Little Saigon was never merely pre-1975 Saigon transplanted onto foreign soil. To suggest so would be to ignore the centrality of *exile*, *rescue*, and gratitude in shaping the orientation of the refugee community. They were a community of survivors whose admission into the country had been made possible by exposing the contradictions of post-1975 Vietnam, by turning the refugee crisis into an opportunity for America to redeem its humanitarian image, and by projecting an image as model minorities worthy of rescue that was nowhere to be seen during the Vietnam War. But promises of asylum did not address the root causes of the boat people crisis, which partly explains why the politics of rescue and Little Saigon became far more militant during the 1980s.

## 4 The Anticommunist *Việt-Cộng*

### *Freedom Fighters and the New Politics of Rescue*

They are our brothers, these freedom fighters, and we owe them our help. . . . They are the moral equal of our Founding Fathers and the brave men and women of the French Resistance. We cannot turn away from them for the struggle here is not right versus left; it is right versus wrong.

—Ronald Reagan on the Nicaraguan Contras, 1985

We the Vietnamese people are determined to fight until the Vietcong has been completely overthrown, until the Russian imperialists have been expelled from the national territory and their military bases abolished, and until peace, independence and freedom for our country are attained.

—National United Front for the Liberation of Vietnam, 1982

Becoming Refugee American took a strikingly extremist turn after 1980. The Vietnamese American population had doubled to 250,000, thanks in large part to a generous admissions policy enacted in the wake of the boat people crisis. Many Americans expected grateful refugees to forget about the past and focus on individual assimilation, but the exiles continued to dream of reclaiming their lost homeland. As a result of America's fear of losing yet another war—a condition dubbed the *Vietnam Syndrome*—the refugees were on their own in this effort. Well aware of this state of affairs, ethnic newspapers such as *Trắng Đen* [The Truth] devoted space to the underground anticommunist resistance movement in the jungles of Southeast Asia. In January 1980, one young staffer, overcome with nationalist fervor, contemplated joining that movement in Vietnam rather than enjoy what she termed a pointless middle-class future in exile, declaring, “Better to die there fighting.” Her editor, desperate to offer his people any glimmer of hope—and

presumably sell more papers—reached out to a little-known resistance agitator currently in Australia, informing Võ Đại Tôn that Vietnamese Americans were ready to join the movement to reclaim their homeland.<sup>1</sup>

The story of the resistance movement, mainly its rise and fall, is well known in Vietnamese communities throughout the world, but this seemingly trivial underground history of notoriously bad refugees has a larger significance for American studies. Conventional wisdom has depicted freedom fighters as wild-eyed zealots who brought the Vietnam War to American shores and deluded themselves into believing that they could do on their own what the world's mightiest military had failed to accomplish: defeat the Việt-Cộng. But they were not an isolated crowd of zealots who refused to assimilate. Rather, Refugee Americans increasingly saw it their duty as Vietnamese and Americans to continue the war against communism by other means. As Vietnamese, they had an opportunity to reshape their image from that of wartime losers who fled like cowards to that of the ultimate heroes of their nation. The resistance movement reflected acculturation insofar as the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan had suddenly conferred mainstream legitimacy to an unabashedly imperialist foreign policy that treated Vietnam as a war America chose not to win. Reagan's overt support and covert funding of anticommunist freedom fighters such as the Nicaraguan contras and Afghan mujahideen had powerful sway over an ethnic community constantly under pressure to justify its cost in American dollars, lives, and reputation. This was a path to model minority status many impoverished Vietnamese American men found appealing.

In short, the rescued had become the rescuers. In 1980, to help counter America's reluctance to engage in conventional warfare, President Jimmy Carter authorized the expansion of covert special operations units accountable only to the executive branch. What on the outside appeared to represent a scaling-back of military force was in fact a further shift to secret extrajudicial warfare. In this context, freedom fighters constituted an addition to the advanced mobilization of a permanent secret army consisting more than ever of mercenaries. As a result, refugees who were not far removed from appealing to American guilt and charity were now boasting that they could take out the Việt-Cộng all by themselves.

The new politics of rescue also featured a racial component. At the same time that America underwent its own remasculinization in films to compensate for the crisis in masculinity that defeat in Vietnam had wrought—a point made by cultural critic Susan Jeffords—the image of the freedom fighter enabled Vietnamese refugees to think of themselves as equal partners with America in

the war on communism.<sup>2</sup> Even though Vietnamese in the United States often worked menial jobs, this shift in worldview gave the refugees, particularly men, a second chance to command the basic respect and admiration Americans had denied them during the Vietnam War. The remasculinization of Vietnamese America featured military heroes destined to reclaim the lost nation, the women who loved them, and a nation that idolized them. A people who had gotten used to expressing eternal gratitude to the United States for rescuing them from a life without freedom were now claiming that they could save the United States from the shame of defeat in Vietnam.

As a result, the resistance movement attracted more than its share of wild-eyed extremists, many of them former members of the military full of hope that a successful homegrown uprising against the Hanoi regime would propel them to transnational glory. Defining Vietnamese identity in extremely narrow terms, this demographic enforced an authoritarian ultranationalism. The ironic inability of so-called freedom fighters to tolerate dissent in their own ranks led to the murder of five Vietnamese American journalists accused of communist ties and to the silencing of many others. The freedom fighters' legacy of intimidation and violence against their critics explained why at least one researcher in the 1990s shied away from interviewing these people.<sup>3</sup> To defeat the Việt-Cộng, refugees created an anticommunist Việt-Cộng.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the overlap with neoconservative foreign policy, the dangers of dissent, and the general hatred of communism among the refugee population, the resistance movement's meteoric rise was no foregone conclusion. Many refugees had initially avoided politics, knowing full well that Hanoi's reprisals would fall most heavily on relatives who had remained behind. In addition, participation in the resistance movement virtually guaranteed that ultranationalists would be jailed or killed if they ever showed their faces in communist-run Vietnam again. The resistance represented a new instance of becoming Refugee American to the extent that ultranationalists, the quintessential bad refugees, were allowed by First Amendment rights and encouraged by the Reagan Doctrine to continue the Vietnam War by the most violent of means. The best way to convince ordinary people to take such a risky undertaking was to present victory as inevitable.

## Vietnam's Vietnam War

Stories about the resistance surfaced as early as June 1975, when Camp Pendleton's nearly seventeen thousand refugees woke up to the improbable news of Vietnam's "large-scale search for possible resistance troops" hidden

throughout the former South Vietnam. Quoting official sources from Vietnam, the camp newsletter indicated that nearly three hundred thousand former South Vietnamese troops had failed to meet the May 31 deadline for registering with the new government.<sup>5</sup> A communist newspaper, *Liberation Daily*, excoriated the “small number of soldiers of the puppet army” for having “murdered cadres and revolutionary fighters,” “spread reactionary propaganda,” and formed “bandit gangs that rob the people.”<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless the government insisted that new registrants would still receive “amnesty”: that is, they would receive only time in the reeducation camps. Resistance fighters, by contrast, would face “severe punishment.”<sup>7</sup>

The mainstream U.S. press offered various assessments of a potential counterrevolution.<sup>8</sup> The *Los Angeles Times* estimated the number of resistance fighters in the thousands, though the “long-range prospects for the anti-Communist forces appear virtually hopeless.”<sup>9</sup> The *New York Times* indicated that the new government’s acknowledgment of “security problems” across South Vietnam “could indicate a more serious and widespread resistance.”<sup>10</sup>

Seizing another opportunity to redeem his tarnished legacy, former South Vietnamese premier Nguyễn Cao Kỳ told a gang of reporters in Fullerton, California, that he was the people’s choice to lead the estimated twelve thousand resistance fighters in Vietnam.<sup>11</sup> “I really would prefer to die gloriously on the battlefield than to live here in exile,” he declared.<sup>12</sup>

Working out of the Orange County home he purchased in 1977, Phạm Duy composed a rousing anthem, “Hát Cho Người Ở Lại” [Song for Those Who Stayed], reminding refugees that the purpose of exile was to better the lives of those in Vietnam. The melody, which sounded like a country western cover, reflected Phạm Duy’s attraction to folk styles, while lyrics lionized the resistance movement and reflected Vietnamese refugee nationalism.<sup>13</sup>

Hát cho người hùng đang cầm súng  
 Âm thầm đang phục quốc  
 Hát cho người ở vùng nông thôn  
 Hay người đang ở ngay phố phường  
 Đồng bào ơi! Vùng lên tranh đấu!  
 Ngày chiến thắng sẽ không lâu.

[I sing for those, arms in hand,  
 Fighting underground in the resistance  
 I want to sing for villagers  
 For city dwellers.

Fellowmen! Let’s fight  
 Until our victory.]<sup>14</sup>

THE SYMPATHIZER

In April 1976, the thousands who subscribed to *Trắng Đen* discovered the first overseas organization dedicated to the resistance. Calling itself the Force of Renaissance, the San Diego-based group’s ultimate goal was to recruit and train soldiers to join the allegedly sixty-thousand-strong insurgency back home. Even though the Force had just two hundred members, it had attracted the support of three respected community organizations: the Vietnamese Association for Culture Preservation, the Vietnamese Community Foundation, and the Vietnamese Catholic Committee. But many refugees refused to join the Force because they feared that taking such a hard-line political stand would jeopardize the safety of family members still in Vietnam.<sup>15</sup> Even Nam Lộc and other single men fretted more about sending money to family than cursing the communists. Others, such as Mỹ-Bình, a devout Catholic mother in Orange County, cast a cynical eye on the potential of politics to deliver anything more than conflict, pain, and death. She found sanctuary in church and family, praying for her father’s release from the reeducation camps.<sup>16</sup>

Even if the early Vietnamese refugees had pushed for an aggressive anti-communist agenda that resembled a continuation of the Vietnam War, they would have been swimming upstream against the American political climate of the post-Vietnam period.<sup>17</sup> Americans generally opposed the entry of Vietnamese refugees until the advent of the boat people crisis, which eventually drew bipartisan support because it relied on soft power to address Vietnam’s human rights abuses and cited America’s moral obligation to help those escaping by boat.

After the 1970s, however, militant anticommunism briefly supplanted victim-based anticommunism as the dominant identity of the Vietnamese refugee community. This change occurred in the wake of a series of potential quagmires for Eastern Bloc countries intent on occupying their neighbors. Facing unanticipated resistance in Afghanistan, the Soviet Union found itself unable to provide Vietnam with significant material support. That left Hanoi on its own in its wars against Cambodia and China. These endless conflicts drained scarce resources—including human labor—from the rest of the Vietnamese economy. With productivity below subsistence levels, millions of Vietnamese civilians reached the brink of starvation. In addition, the rise of militant anticommunism among Vietnamese Americans was facilitated by President Ronald Reagan’s support of secret guerrilla insurgencies against communist-run countries.

## The Reagan Influence and Secret Armies

Although the former Hollywood actor started his adult life as a New Deal Democrat, Reagan's thirst for fame and power steered him toward neoconservatism and the Republican Party.<sup>18</sup> Neoconservatism, informed in large part by Social Darwinism, patriarchy, and nationalism, cynically believes that Americans must aggressively and unilaterally arm and defend themselves against an innately hostile world.<sup>19</sup> It is also informed by greed, given the vast wealth it has generated for the military-industrial complex. Ironically, this coalition of warmongers was spearheaded by Reagan and others who spoke like charismatic warriors despite never having seen combat.

On the stump, Reagan painted the political establishment as weak and effeminate so he could position himself as strong and masculine. Echoing the talking points of the emergent neoconservative movement, with its unshakable faith in U.S. global hegemony and disdain for multilateral institutions such as the United Nations, Reagan repeated his misguided belief that American military might was "the greatest guarantee for peace and freedom for this country."<sup>20</sup> Positioning himself as a populist outsider, Reagan argued that three decades of "weakness and indecision" in Washington had resulted in concession after concession to the communists, making defeat in Vietnam almost inevitable. In the aftermath of the Korean War, he argued, "our country decided for the first time that victory was not necessary."<sup>21</sup> The man those in his own party accused of being a warmonger countered that the "peace at any price" alternative would lead only to a Soviet-dominated world.<sup>22</sup>

In 1976, Reagan had led the neoconservative charge to secure some semblance of post-Vietnam victory by accusing current president Gerald Ford, a fellow Republican, of surrender if he normalized relations with the Hanoi government.<sup>23</sup> When Reagan received his party's presidential nomination four years later, he told a gathering of the Veterans of Foreign Wars that the Vietnam War was indeed a "noble cause."<sup>24</sup> Reagan's America, in which veterans deserved nothing less than the nation's undying gratitude, was as much about reasserting traditional masculine values as it was about validating conservatism.<sup>25</sup> Just as important, Reagan's vision reinvigorated the conservative line of argument that a combination of weak-willed leaders in Washington and the peace movement had lost the war in Vietnam. His emphasis on manipulating American faith and public opinion sounded like the China Lobby all over again.

Reagan still had to get around the problem of the Vietnam Syndrome. Defeat in Vietnam had amplified doubts about America's purpose and power

in the world in ways not too different from those experienced by Europe in the postcolonial era. Reagan exploited this crisis of confidence by increasing U.S. dependence on counterrevolutionary guerrillas to fight the Cold War in vulnerable zones across the globe. He had flirted with the idea as early as 1975, meeting in Florida with exile leaders from Panama and Cuba ready to give the failed Bay of Pigs invasion another shot.<sup>26</sup>

As president, Reagan trained his sights on communism in Latin America, authorizing nineteen million dollars for the creation of a secret anticommunist army, known popularly as the *contras*, to bring down the populist regime that had overthrown Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza. "They are our brothers, these freedom fighters," Reagan said, "and we owe them our help."<sup>27</sup> His brand of help, known as the Reagan Doctrine, constituted a radical—and technically illegal—departure from the prior Cold War containment policy.<sup>28</sup> Neoconservatives blamed Jimmy Carter for the "fall" of Nicaragua in 1979 and invoked a Latin American domino theory. Testifying under oath before the U.S. Senate in early 1982, one Reagan State Department official echoed the rationale for going to war in Vietnam: "There is no mistaking that the decisive battle for Central America is under way in El Salvador. If, after Nicaragua, El Salvador is captured by a violent minority, who in Central America would not live in fear?" General William Westmoreland, who had previously served the top American military official in Saigon, doubled down on the earlier testimony by stating, "The domino theory has validity in Central America. If El Salvador falls, after Nicaragua, then Guatemala, Honduras, and Costa Rica could go. After that, there's nothing standing in the way of the Panama Canal."<sup>29</sup>

Neoconservatives' obsession with American strength and military redemption, now through extralegal channels, knew no boundaries. In 1983, U.S. Special Forces illegally invaded the Caribbean island of Grenada in an effort to reverse the recent coup d'état that had put Marxists in power. Clint Eastwood's 1986 warrior flick, *Heartbreak Ridge*, described the episode as the military's first "victory" against the communists, counting Korea as a tie and Vietnam as a loss. Grenada's new leadership created a Thanksgiving holiday to commemorate the anniversary of the invasion. Speaking at the 1985 gathering of the National Conservative Political Action Committee, Reagan called the mighty unsavory band of Nicaraguan *contras* "the moral equal of our Founding Fathers," fighting the good fight of "right versus wrong."<sup>30</sup> Without the knowledge of Congress, Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North helped arrange the covert and illegal sale of weapons to Iran in exchange for U.S. hostages and extra funding for the *contras*. Ever the protector, Reagan vowed to keep Americans forever safe by authorizing

billions for an outer space missile defense shield—dubbed Star Wars—that never actually saw the light of day.<sup>31</sup>

— Policy aside, Reagan's promilitary, promasculine message resonated with a large swath of veterans still waiting to be showered with glory and honor for their service in Vietnam. In keeping with Reagan's "noble cause" speech, one veteran took issue with the winning design for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.<sup>32</sup> Testifying in 1981 before the commission in charge of designing the memorial, he stated that Maya Lin's proposal for an abstract monument reflected the home front perception of the war. Instead of honoring all of those who served, he contended, its roll call of the deceased concentrated too much on the costs of war. He objected to the granite V-shaped wall as "a black gash of shame and sorrow," surrounded on the Washington Mall by "well-known edifices of white marble rising in massive splendor to honor great American heroes."<sup>33</sup> He argued in favor of a more typical commemoration such as the Seabee Memorial, the 101st Airborne Division Memorial, and the Marine Corps' Iwo Jima Memorial:

These [memorials] show heroic figures rising in triumph on top of black pedestals, while the proposed Vietnam memorial is anti-heroic—a black hole, the reward we get, and the place we have been given in our national garden of history, for faithful service in a confused and misunderstood war. Black walls, the universal color of sorrow and dishonor, hidden in a hole, as in shame. Is this really how America would memorialize our offering? It may be that, in the future, all memorials to American heroes will be black and underground. I doubt it, but even if that's true, why should we Vietnam veterans have to be the first? The only underground memorial I know of is a tomb. Yes, we lost 57,000, but what of the millions of us who rendered honorable service and came home? Why cannot we have something white and traditional and above ground?<sup>34</sup>

Despite such objections, Lin's design was retained, and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was dedicated on November 13, 1982. However, a more conventional statue, *The Three Soldiers*, was built alongside the wall and was dedicated on November 11, 1984.

### The Resistance Movement Takes Flight

If Reagan's bellicose foreign policy alarmed the mainstream media and a political establishment weary of war, it delighted Little Saigon and other refugee communities. After all, Reagan promised a stronger America finally capable of putting the Soviet bloc "on the moral defensive, the intellectual

defensive, and the political and economic defensive."<sup>35</sup> An obscure organization, the Vietnamese American Republican National Federation, tried to get coethnics on board the 1980 Reagan-Bush ticket by linking it to the resistance movement in Vietnam.<sup>36</sup> Another refugee organization likened the Vietnamese resistance to the rest of the Reagan Doctrine:

Resistance movements are an effective bulkhead to impair and contain the spread of Soviet hegemonism. This approach is also commensurate with the American ethical standard of human rights. It is also obviously, an economical measure. Blocking Soviet expansion in Afghanistan by assisting the Afghanistan Resistance is certainly less costly than any other measure of a military build-up. The Vietnam case requires similar consideration. Freedom-fighters around the world have actually eroded the expansionist capability of the Soviet and their henchmen. Weakening the Soviet Union by adequate assistance to these resistance movements is an effective course of action, because it is morally right and it is the least expensive alternative.<sup>37</sup>

Only in the context of neoconservatism and the increasing U.S. dependence on secret counterrevolutionary guerrillas to fight the Cold War can we more fully understand the meteoric rise of the resistance movement in Little Saigon. And Reagan's alliance with some of the more barbarous elements of humanity in the name of anticommunism set the precedent for the increasing right-wing authoritarian climate associated with freedom fighters.

Võ Đại Tôn, a former colonel in the South Vietnamese army, vaulted to notoriety in 1980, when he founded the Overseas Vietnamese Volunteer Forces for the Restoration of Vietnam. He answered *Trăng Đen's* call and volunteered to lead an overthrow of the communist regime. He first agreed to visit Los Angeles on July 19, bringing with him an exiled Laotian general, *Vang Pao*.<sup>38</sup> The general, who had been employed by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency during the Vietnam War, claimed to have three hundred thousand Hmong resistance fighters under his command already situated in the jungles of Laos, awaiting orders for the next mission.<sup>39</sup> The event in Los Angeles was followed by rallies in Anaheim and San Diego organized by the local college student organizations. Attendees hoped their support of the resistance would help reunite them with family and put a much-desired end to the observance of April 30 as the day their country had perished.<sup>40</sup> Tôn's influence faded after he was captured a year later on his way from Laos to Vietnam, but he electrified the refugee community one last time, refusing Hanoi's orders to implicate the United States, China, and Thailand in a prepared public confession and instead vowing to "liberate Vietnam once and for all."<sup>41</sup>

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While Võ Đại Tôn languished in a communist prison cell, other resistance organizations tried to win over his large following. Nguyễn Cao Kỳ, speaking in Tokyo in December 1982, told those in attendance that Vietnamese Americans were training for combat in America's national parks. And like other resistance types, Kỳ proclaimed that the potential for counterrevolution in Vietnam negated the need for U.S. troops: "With 75 to 80 percent of the people against the regime, we do not need [U.S. troops]. Give me guns, and we'll kick them out!"<sup>42</sup> But refugees paid closer attention to another organization as footage of its exploits began to surface. The February 5, 1982, issue of Seattle's *Đất Mới* newspaper featured a photograph of an M16-toting guerrilla allegedly training just outside of Vietnam. He was dressed in the same black pajamas and had the same initials made famous by the Việt-Cộng's leader. His organization had a similar name and appropriated much of the Việt-Cộng's rhetoric. Hoàng Cơ Minh was an admiral in the Vietnamese navy who had commanded a fleet of ships to safety as the war was ending and then received passage to the United States. There, he initially worked as a self-employed painter, earning a decent living but suffering severe status depreciation. In 1980, he cofounded the National United Front for the Liberation of Vietnam with the belief that "supporting a liberation movement is a mandatory duty . . . not a charitable act."<sup>43</sup> By March 30, 1982, CBS News had attained a copy of the video footage and correspondent Morley Safer was commenting on the uncanny resemblance between the Front and its nemesis except that

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these Vietcong are the new anti-communist Vietcong. A rag tag of refugees who have taken it upon themselves to liberate South Vietnam, to do to the present regime what the present regime did to them. . . . They return to the jungle from places like Arlington, Virginia, and Sacramento, California. They dress in camouflage and the black pajamas that were the trademark of their enemies . . . They even called the jungle path they have cut *The Hoàng Cơ Minh Trail*. *Giải phóng*—"liberation"—is the way these would-be insurgents salute each other. Their form of address is "*comrades*." They spend their evenings in political education and indoctrination. It is unclear how much actual fighting they have done. They say in their speeches that they are the nucleus around which an entire nation will rally and throw off the chains of Communism.<sup>44</sup>

The Front ultimately failed in its mission, and Hoàng Cơ Minh, commanding an army of far fewer than ten thousand men, lost his life in 1987 trying to lead an incursion through the jungles of Laos. By 1991, the U.S. Justice Department had prosecuted the Front's top brass for tax evasion, conspiracy, and other offenses, but for a brief period during the 1980s, they had the

no!

full attention of the refugee community. They had an extensive operation designed to raise money from Vietnamese refugees around the world and to promote awareness of the Front's activities among government officials through their political party, *Việt-Tân* [Reform Party], a name that reflected Hồ Chí Minh's influence on the movement.

*Người Việt Daily News* publisher Yên Đỗ, hardly an extremist, acknowledged that "in 1982, the second phase of the newspaper began with the appearance of the National Liberation Front of Hoàng Cơ Minh . . . a group that provided a lot of local news for the newspaper to report."<sup>45</sup> During 1982 alone, the Front held five of its twenty-nine rallies in Southern California.<sup>46</sup> With the help of popular Vietnamese actress Kiều Chinh, the Front recruited 150 artists to participate in the largest event yet at the Los Angeles Shrine Auditorium on July 3, 1982.<sup>47</sup> More than four thousand guests paid between five and eight dollars each to attend the sold-out event. Later that year, more than five thousand people paid five dollars each to pack the Anaheim Convention Center.<sup>48</sup>

On the surface, the attendees did not appear to be fanatics. A respected Anaheim physician handled Southland fund-raising duties. Some attended merely to enjoy the musical performances. The front row included high-ranking Saigon officials and Catholic priests and nuns. Front members stood out in their trademark brown shirts and beige slacks.<sup>49</sup> Otherwise, most performers wore conventional Western dress or traditional Vietnamese clothing, while the one-hundred-member all-woman chorus sang from songbooks resembling the South Vietnamese flag.<sup>50</sup> "I must have sung in 50 places," said one of the choir members. "The crowds were screaming and cheering. There were speeches and patriotic songs." Capturing the spirit of the times, she recalled, "You felt that soon you'd be back in Vietnam."<sup>51</sup>

Inevitable return was part of the sentiment on April 17, 1983, when an overflow crowd of five thousand converged on Garden Grove High School to see Hoàng Cơ Minh in person. Although they came from different parts of the West Coast, all had invested their hopes and their funds in the Front's promise to reunite them with their loved ones. Front members often boasted an army of ten thousand, recruited from the ranks of Vietnamese Americans and recent refugees still in Thailand. When audience members heard from Chairman Hoàng Cơ Minh that the Front had made progress, they went home happy enough. One young attendee proclaimed, "The battle can never end," despite the fear that her support for Minh would jeopardize her family's safety in Vietnam.<sup>52</sup> The Front's popularity reached its height in 1984, when eleven thousand people packed the Anaheim Convention Center on March 17 to catch a glimpse of Khánh Ly and other singers and to celebrate



Figure 4. Hoàng Cơ Minh, leader of the National United Front for the Liberation of Vietnam, waves to a crowd of five thousand in Garden Grove, April 17, 1983. Photo by Debora Robinson, Copyright 1983, *Los Angeles Times*. Reprinted with Permission.

the event's theme: Liberating Vietnam. Organizers used the opportunity to talk about the Resistance Radio, which had begun beaming to Vietnam in December 1983, urging young people to defect from the regime and join the underground resistance movement.<sup>53</sup>

Vietnamese American organizations wanted the United States to take the resistance movement seriously because they already saw their struggle as part of a larger united popular front against communism.<sup>54</sup> Readers of the refugee press found inspiration in the anticommunist struggle in Poland or other parts of Eastern Europe.<sup>55</sup> In the mold of the anticommunist Polish Solidarity Party, the Front founded a political party in opposition to the Vietnamese Communist Party. An April 30 observance in Seattle included representatives from the Polish Anti-Communism Organization, the Free China Foundation, the Christian Anti-Communism Crusade, and the Laotian Refugee Association.<sup>56</sup> For its part, the Front's newsletter claimed that much could be learned from the exploits of the Nicaraguan contras.<sup>57</sup>

Economic concerns also underlay the resistance movement in Little Saigon. Rank-and-file ultranationalists, especially the men, had less economic

incentive to stay in the United States. By the mid-1980s, the infusion of less urbanized refugees and reduced public benefits meant that somewhere near four hundred thousand Vietnamese Americans were competing in a tight job market. In 1985, the Indochinese unemployment rate in Orange County had reached 36.4 percent, which was better than the rate for their brethren in Chicago and Seattle but much worse than the national average. Moreover, a staggering 44 percent of Indochinese men had no jobs. Though women were more likely to be employed, they earned just eighty-three cents for every dollar men earned.<sup>58</sup>

According to Nazli Kibria, Vietnamese American families had a difficult time adapting to women breadwinners, low household incomes, and patchwork family structures. Women felt compelled to balance their traditional roles as subservient wives with their new roles as economic authority figures, while men suffered from depression and dysfunction as a consequence of their inability to fulfill their gendered obligations. This combination of a shaky family structure and scarce material resources had the potential to restrict the life chances of members of the next generation.<sup>59</sup> But in light of the fact that if these Vietnamese had remained in their home country, they would have remained poor, refugee identity may have helped them to make sense of their predicament. The situation could be blamed on the communists. Not surprisingly, resistance-style refugee nationalism, with its embrace of the exiled masculine warrior plotting a heroic return, provided a more appealing worldview than did identification as a fearful refugee. Like the rest of America, refugee nationalism underwent its own remasculinization.<sup>60</sup> The Front's shady fund-raising certainly provided wealth for its top brass, but its mafia-like operation also provided rank-and-file refugees with jobs. Just as important, its connections with U.S. politicians gave refugee men the respect and dignity they had been denied during the war.

### Robert Dornan and the Front's American Sympathizers

Little Saigon was part of the Thirty-eighth U.S. Congressional District, virtually the only California House seat in which a competitive election would occur in 1984. Republican candidate Robert Dornan, a typical neo-conservative hawk who had never seen combat, had represented west Los Angeles County from 1976 until 1982, when he chose not to run for reelection. Two years later, he took aim at the only Democratic congressman left in heavily Republican Orange County, ten-year incumbent Jerry Patterson. The campaigns combined to spend \$1.5 million on the race, making it one

of the nation's costliest, and Dornan cruised to victory in November with 53 percent of the vote.<sup>61</sup>

Dornan pandered for votes wherever he could, and his extreme anticommunism found a receptive audience among Vietnamese Americans. When the Front invited Dornan to speak at a September rally, he told the eight hundred in attendance "that he was ready to support policy of the refugee groups. That made him the only candidate until now to support them. If he is in Congress, he will be the spokesman for that policy."<sup>62</sup>

Dornan was not the only major U.S. official supporting the Front. The organization's literature quoted future Republican vice presidential candidate Jack Kemp's declaration that "all Americans admire [the Front's] devotion to the freedom of Vietnam and [the] Vietnamese people, just as we appreciate the rich contributions you have made to America."<sup>63</sup> Colorado Republican senator William Armstrong praised Hoàng Cơ Minh's willingness to leave "his family and safety in the West to turn clandestinely to Vietnam to lead the freedom fighters there in their unequal struggle with Communist despots."<sup>64</sup> In early May 1983, just prior to a major Front gathering, the organization's second in command met in Washington with United Nations ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick, deputy undersecretary of defense for policy Richard G. Stillwell, and deputy assistant secretary of defense for East Asia and Pacific affairs Richard Armitage.<sup>65</sup> Armitage, a veteran of the Vietnam War who had given himself a Vietnamese nickname, Trần Văn Phú, had developed a good relationship with Hoàng Cơ Minh.<sup>66</sup> According to the senior Front official, Armitage secretly persuaded the Thai government to allow the Front unrestricted movement within the country's borders.<sup>67</sup> Such meetings represented a huge symbolic victory for Vietnamese Americans, who were used to being treated as far less than equals by their American counterparts.

## Popular Culture of the Resistance

Resistance organizations placed a premium on propaganda and popular culture that appealed to the heroic masculine theme of the times. The Front's second in command realized the importance of popular culture while attending the group's first culture night on April 3, 1982, in Washington, D.C. Attendees watched a play, *The Prisoner*, that provoked tears and outrage over all the freedoms people in Vietnam had lost at the hands of the communists.<sup>68</sup>

For six dollars, supporters could purchase cassette tapes with titles such as *Kháng Chiến Ca* [Resistance Songs] and *Em Vẫn Đợi Anh Về* [I Still Await My Man's Return] and cases that featured photos of gallant freedom fighters marching through jungles or beautiful women clad in áo dài dress

waiting to be rescued.<sup>69</sup> This musical genre subsequently gave rise to a class of woman warriors whose presence and voices challenged traditional South Vietnamese gender roles. Appearing nearly as uninterested in sentimental love songs as their Việt-Cộng counterparts, vocalists Nguyệt Ánh and Ngọc Minh performed songs tailor-made for a male military audience, often oceans apart from their spouses. Resistance-era music often encouraged listeners to see themselves as the heirs of the Vietnamese independence movement.

To sustain their movement beyond the refugee generation, the Front reached out to young children. Front members operated booths at Tết lunar new year festivals and organized autumn festivals all over the world. Underneath banners that read "Vì Các Châu Thiệu Nhi Toàn Dân Kháng Chiến" [Because Children Are Part of the Resistance, Too], young boys and girls in ethnic dress made their parents proud by singing Vietnamese songs. The Front published popular books such as *Anh Hùng Nước Tôi* [Heroes of the Nation] (1986) that invariably included former South Vietnamese president Ngô Đình Diệm. Though dismissed by the Hanoi government and many Western scholars as an impotent dictator, Diệm received near-universal adoration from the refugee generation for making unpopular but necessary choices during his presidency.<sup>70</sup> In case their revolution succeeded, the Front invented national holidays such as the National Day of Founding, commemorating occasions unrelated to either the Hanoi or Saigon regimes but instead going back to the days of Emperor Hùng Vương in 2880 BC. These annual festivities continued through the 1990s in Vietnamese communities not only in Orange County but also across the United States (San Jose, Phoenix, Houston, Hawaii, Oklahoma, Atlanta, Chicago, St. Paul, Denver, Seattle, Portland, Pennsylvania, Washington, D.C.) and around the world (Tokyo, Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal, Hong Kong, London, Birmingham, Paris, Berlin, Munich, Melbourne, Sydney, and Norway).<sup>71</sup> As a result, children in refugee communities became accustomed to a form of Vietnamese nationalism banned in their parents' homeland.<sup>72</sup>

The Front's newsletter, a propaganda piece that bore some resemblance to the procommunist *Thái Bình* tabloid published in Santa Monica, kept readers abreast of the latest offensives supposedly taking place in Vietnam. The November 1986 newsletter alleged an assault on a reeducation camp, the sabotage of a chemical plant, and a cascade of defections from the Việt-Cộng.<sup>73</sup> By 1986, the organization had released six videotapes that purported to show Chairman Hoàng Cơ Minh's men setting up bases in Vietnam and taking over one village after another.<sup>74</sup> "The Front knew people would not contribute money for a long time if they did not see some progress," confessed a former member.<sup>75</sup>

The Front sponsored beauty pageants in San Jose and Long Beach to showcase its own version of idealized femininity.<sup>76</sup> Contestants had to be older than age fifteen and be nominated by an active member of the resistance movement.<sup>77</sup> One contestant from Garden Grove explained that she participated because “if we cannot fight on the battlefield, then we can still make a difference from the home front.”<sup>78</sup> Another contestant confessed, “It was not until I attended college and participated in political activities that I fully understood the significance of the resistance movement and my role within it.”<sup>79</sup> Even the 1982 winner of one of the regular Vietnamese American beauty pageants, Dương Ngọc Huệ, “support[ed] the struggle” by donating half her prize money to the Front.<sup>80</sup> Students at the University of Southern California invited senior Front member Trần Minh Công to join them in Taper Hall on October 5, 1984.<sup>81</sup> One student, twenty-three-year-old Quân Nguyễn, had no doubt that the struggle would last for years and require “lots of sacrifice” but nevertheless believed that Vietnamese Americans must not shy away from their “duty and destiny.”<sup>82</sup>

Tired of seeing the world “feel pity for the ‘boat people’ tragedy” every April 30, the Front preferred to shift the focus to more heroic characteristics, such as “the endeavors of the Vietnamese people to liberate their country, and about the Vietnamese resistance.”<sup>83</sup> Thanks to all the violent red-baiting and political assassinations taking place in Little Saigon, the Front got its wish.

### Conformity at All Costs and by All Means

Unlike the boat people crisis, which brought people across all different social backgrounds together in solidarity with Vietnam’s newest refugees, the resistance movement gained little traction among the general population outside those who had served in uniform or supported the Vietnam War. Mainstream publications referred to the Front as a largely “longshot,” “symbolic,” or “quixotic” effort.<sup>84</sup> The Front denied receiving any aid from the U.S. government, and fund-raising proved one of the greatest challenges. In addition to the admission fees charged at concerts, the Front’s members canvassed neighborhoods for donations, with some families happily contributing as much as twenty dollars each month when the collection people arrived.<sup>85</sup> Others contributed less happily: saying no could have dangerous consequences. “We heard some reports about extortion,” said Westminster police detective Marcus Frank. “The front was going around to businesses and factory assembly lines asking for contributions. They told Vietnamese

if they did not contribute, people might think they’re pro-communist.”<sup>86</sup> By the mid-1980s, estimates showed that the Front had raised between five and seven million dollars, a substantial sum, although if the organization had actually been maintaining an army of ten thousand guerrillas, as it claimed, far more money would have been required.<sup>87</sup>

It was common knowledge in the Vietnamese community that the Front had invested some of its funds in a chain of restaurants serving phở, a popular noodle dish.<sup>88</sup> Hoàng Cơ Minh’s brother opened the first franchise in Sacramento as Phở Kháng Chiến [Resistance] but soon changed the name to Phở Hòa [Peace].<sup>89</sup> Additional restaurants soon opened in San Jose, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Santa Ana, Monterey Park, and San Diego.<sup>90</sup> In late 1984, Ty Võ moved to Seattle at the Front’s request and opened up another Phở Hòa restaurant, with partial financing from the organization. The space once occupied by Kentucky Fried Chicken now sported a painting of soldiers raising the yellow flag and a collection can for donations to the Front.<sup>91</sup> In 1986 alone, the Phở Hòa chain brought in \$2.9 million in revenues.<sup>92</sup> One federal investigator picked up on the rumor that Delta Savings and Loan in Westminster had been launched almost exclusively with funds generated by resistance groups and served as the Front’s main financial conduit.<sup>93</sup> Residents of Little Saigon did not object as long as the money actually went to the resistance movement, but when Front leaders appeared to be reaping personal profits, two top officials, Phạm Văn Liễu and Trần Minh Công, stepped down in 1985. They escaped violent reprisals, but journalists who raised legitimate criticisms of the resistance movement were less fortunate. This wave of violence and the culture of fear it encouraged in Little Saigon led to the Front’s downfall.

None of Little Saigon’s seventeen newspapers were immune from the wrath of anticommunist extremists, who engaged in a private grassroots version of McCarthyism, seeing it their duty as new Americans to oust suspected communists in their midst, no matter the cost to a functioning civil society. One editor kept an M16 and two handguns at work in case of attack, precautions he described as “the price of doing business in the Vietnamese community.”<sup>94</sup> In early 1982, an editor of a San Jose-based Vietnamese weekly questioned where the Front’s money was going and soon received telephoned death threats. A local merchant was ordered to take that magazine off his shelves.<sup>95</sup> Later that year, another editor, Kiều Nguyên Tá, received a ferocious beating after his Orange County newspaper, *Quê Hương*, accused the Front of fraud. As far as Tá was concerned, “The scenes in their film clips of guerrilla fighters looked staged. I also did not like the way they were

going around with containers collecting money." Although the controversy destroyed Tá's marriage and bankrupted his newspaper business, he at least walked away with his life.<sup>96</sup>

Beginning in 1981, five other Vietnamese American journalists were not as lucky. The string of murders, all of which remain unsolved, ended after columnist Triet Le and his wife, Tuyet Thi Dang-Tran, were found shot to death in their home near Washington, D.C.<sup>97</sup> A number of non-Vietnamese subjects interviewed by the police and FBI believed that the Front might be involved in the killings.<sup>98</sup> There was no doubt that the organization promoted a climate of fear and violence in Little Saigon. In 1982, Houston police investigating the murder of another journalist, Nguyen Dam Phong, had found Triet Le's name on a hit list next to Nguyen's body. Various terrorist organizations claimed credit for the killings.<sup>99</sup> The Vietnamese Party to Exterminate Communists and Restore the Nation sent a letter explaining that it had carried out the 1987 arson that resulted in the death of Tap Van Pham of Garden Grove in retaliation for Pham's decision to run ads from three allegedly communist-run money collection and remittance centers—Laser Express, Vinamedic, and QTK—as well as a 1985 firebombing at the businesses' Montreal offices.<sup>100</sup> Ads for Laser Express and Vinamedic indeed appeared in the procommunist *Thái Bình*, but other refugee newspapers printed them without incident.<sup>101</sup>

Before his death, Pham had complained that gangs were extorting protection money from him even though journalists made far less money than others.<sup>102</sup> Ironically, many Vietnamese businesses had moved to Orange County to avoid the gangs and violence infesting Los Angeles Chinatown to the north.<sup>103</sup> Fearing retribution, many businesses reluctantly paid between two hundred and three hundred dollars per month to extortionists. In January 1984, syndicated columnist Jack Anderson accused Nguyễn Cao Kỳ of having left Saigon with eight million dollars and of leading the gangs that extorted Vietnamese businesses throughout the Southland. Kỳ certainly had a motive, since he had recently filed for bankruptcy after incurring roughly twenty thousand dollars' worth of gambling debts at Caesars Palace.<sup>104</sup>

Community members seemed to condone political assassinations that weeded out actual communist agents. Front cofounder Phạm Văn Liễu claimed that Hanoi had sent two thousand operatives to America to infiltrate the refugee community: "Their first goal is to destroy the Vietnamese communities. Secondly, to set up financial organizations to get money to send back to Vietnam. The Communists have plans to cause all kinds of troubles in the Vietnamese community so that it will not create a good impression among the Americans." He thus supported the FBI's 1985 program to pin-

point Việt-Cộng hiding in America.<sup>105</sup> Likewise, many community members sympathized with another Front member who confessed to shooting a fellow Vietnamese suspected of promoting normalization with Hanoi. An end to the U.S. embargo would, according to publisher Yên Đỗ, "destroy the dream of returning to a free Vietnam." Đỗ frequently likened Vietnamese refugees to other stateless people, including Cubans and Jews: "Sometimes they look irrational to the average American who has put the events of the past behind. But for Cubans and Vietnamese, it is the meaning of their lives. A lot of them were political prisoners. Revenge lies with them forever."<sup>106</sup> In addition, according to Đỗ, "Young Vietnamese have studied how Jews came back from the Holocaust and built the Israel nation. Through the sorrows of our exodus, young Vietnamese feel the emotional experience of the Jews."<sup>107</sup>

In addition to the journalists, Edward Lee Cooperman, a professor at California State University at Fullerton, was murdered in 1984 by a young Vietnamese student who accused Cooperman of sending high-tech goods directly to the Vietnamese government.<sup>108</sup> Though all exiles sought to reclaim their lost homeland, ultranationalists believed that anything less than complete and unequivocal victory amounted to weakness or surrender to the communists. "I love my country," said a community leader in 1987. "I have a father, mother, five sisters and a brother in Vietnam. But I will not go back. No refugee should."<sup>109</sup>

## The Fall of the Front

The resistance suffered many fundamental flaws, the most obvious of which was that, like its neoconservative and communist counterparts, members talked about democracy but seldom practiced it. The demand for blind patriotism constituted a method of social control for the benefit of a small cadre. The resistance had defined itself in radical terms, thus relegating the boat people crisis and human rights reform in Vietnam to secondary status, symptoms of a larger problem that "liberating Vietnam" would ultimately eradicate. The resistance movement claimed that refugees comprised the more peripheral overseas operation, when in actuality, the overseas component was the center of the resistance movement and operations in and around Vietnam itself were peripheral. Conditions in Vietnam, exacerbated by imprisonment or the exodus of potential underground resistance leaders, prevented the creation of a long-term mass uprising against the Hanoi regime. In 1983, the Front counted five thousand official members, a figure that dwarfed the actual number of freedom fighters under Minh's command.<sup>110</sup>

People inevitably doubted that the Front could do on its own what its members had failed to do with the U.S. military by its side, but ultranationalists, like their white counterparts, felt that anything less than blind patriotism jeopardized the movement.

Soon after Phạm Văn Liễu and Trần Minh Công departed in 1985, the organization fell apart. Hoàng Cơ Minh died in battle, and his brother leveraged his way into power. Vietnamese authorities reported killing more than one hundred guerrillas and capturing seventy-seven. Before the end of 1987, eighteen had been convicted of treason, implying they had not obtained U.S. citizenship before joining the Front. Hanoi wanted them to confess to receiving aid from the United States and Thailand but presented no evidence to support those charges. From San Jose, Front spokesman Đông Sơn Nguyễn (originally Nguyễn Xuân Nghĩa) tried to reassure supporters that “Chairman Hoàng Cơ Minh is alive and leading the liberation struggle.”<sup>111</sup> Another fourteen years passed before the Front finally acknowledged Minh’s death and held a memorial service for him.<sup>112</sup>

But the real tragedy befell average Vietnamese Americans and the rank-and-file members of the Front. “We trusted them and they stole our dream,” said a former supporter.<sup>113</sup> In a painful irony, those most passionate about overthrowing the Hanoi regime became the least likely ever to return to Vietnam. A former Front member who had contributed essays for the resistance reflected in 2008 on why he had not returned to his native land since 1975: “I know the Vietnamese government is not pleased with my work and I may be put in jail. Some of my friends have already been put in jail for what they did. All my friends came because they had to visit their ill parents or visit their home village. And they did not do anything wrong on that trip. But they still went to jail.” Nevertheless, the man claimed to have no regrets: “I did the right thing. I did nothing wrong.” “When things change enough,” he and his wife would “go back together, or we will not go at all.”<sup>114</sup>

## 5 Assimilationists and the Postwar

### *Model Minority Politics in Little Saigon*

I found that Democrats always talk about helping the people with a handout. I said no. I do not like handouts. I never went to Social Services asking for a handout. The first two jobs I worked were as a service station attendant and a shipping and receiving supervisor.

—Tony Lâm, former Westminster City Council Member, 2007

Our success in America [is] a direct answer to the failure of the Communists in Vietnam. We may have lost the battle in 1975, but we are winning the Vietnam War.

—Danh Chau, Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce in San Jose, 1995

When Tony Lâm, the cofounder of the Vietnamese American Chamber of Commerce, became a U.S. citizen in 1982 and a registered Republican the following year, his rationale—“I do not like handouts”—sounded like typical conservative propaganda except for the important fact that memories of Vietnam past, including the magical holiday of Tết, carried with it painful reminders of America’s most disastrous foreign policy venture.<sup>1</sup> Whatever Lâm’s actual political beliefs, the refugee experience virtually guaranteed a public performance true to the model minority script. Becoming Refugee American, a form of social formation and sense of belonging based on moral obligation rather than legal rights, imposed on the Vietnamese a moral debt that practically demanded perfection in exchange for rescue from communism. Vietnamese refugees, who often testified to entering the United States with little more than the clothes they wore, nevertheless felt immense pressure to climb out of poverty. Many of them inevitably and publicly failed to live up to such unrealistic expectations, leading regret to threaten to overshadow compassion in the American social imagination. In 1980, on the eve of Tết, a *Washington Post* headline declared, “California’s Asian