

**PURSUING THE VIETNAMESE DREAM: A CIVIL SOCIETY WITH
LIBERTY, JUSTICE, AND PROSPERITY FOR ALL**

Doan L. Phung.

May 22, 2008

Ladies and Gentlemen:

My name is Doan Phung, 68 years old. I have been educated and worked in Vietnam for 21 years, and in the United States for 47 years.

Let me read a poem by Nguyen Ba Trac that I have changed slightly to fit my life

*Truong phu da khong hay xe gan tre cat phu cuong thuong
Ha tat tieu dao bon be luan lac tha phuong
Trois Nam nghin dam tham
Non nuoc mot man suong
Giac mo ngay len duong.*

Translated as follows:

*I have not chosen the road to war to save the oppressed
I therefore wandered the five continents to look for answers
I have traveled many thousand miles
The venues were mostly foggy
I have a dream.*

The next few lines were also understood by me in a special way

*Chi chua thanh
Danh chua lap
Tuoi tre bao lau ma dau bac
Tram nam than the bong ta duong
Giac mo ngay len duong!*

Translated as

*I have not reached my goal
I have no achievement to speak of
My youth is fleeting away*

My hair is now grey

My life is at sunset

I have a dream.

Ladies and gentlemen. All of us have dreams as we grow up. We dream of what we would do, what we want to have, who we would become, what would make us happy, and how we would live our lives.

I was born 7 km downstream from here, in the village of Batrang, where my elders were very proud of the village's past, having produced many doctorates in the 15th to 17th centuries. Yet, as I remember my childhood between 1940 and 1949, the entire village did not have a kindergarten, not an infirmary, not a library, and we went about bare footed. The French then the Japanese were our lords, using Vietnamese functionaries to oppress the Vietnamese. I remember faintly the famine of 1945 when I was 6. And I remember my Dad leaving the family to join Ho Chi Minh's forces in the mountains. I remember the toil my Mom had to endure, at the age of 24 with 6 children and a 2nd grade education, working days and nights to get food for us. Two of us did not survive.

My dream at the time was to be rid of the French, to see my Dad return, and to be able to go to school in Hanoi.

In 1951, my Dad did get home, not because he was among the victorious, but because he was so sick with malaria that the Resistance found it better to let my Mom take care of him. Took care of him she did, by putting him in a hospital a few blocks from here, and cured him of malaria periodic hot and cold fevers. After passing two regional exams at the age of 11, I was accepted into Nguyen Trai middle school 3 blocks from this hotel, thus realizing my dream when I was 9. I would walk to school everyday, passing by the Hoa Lo (Fire Oven) prison where the Hilton now stands. I did not know until 20 years later that was the place of incarceration of many Vietnamese patriots including names that now adorn Hanoi streets such as Nguyen Thai Hoc and Luong Ngoc Quyen. And everybody now

knows that was also the place where the current American presidential hopeful John McCain was held.

My dream at the time was to have a bicycle to get to and from school if not faster then more pleasurably. I was not to realize that dream until 3 years later.

But I was a mediocre student, ranking 37 out of 49. And I was punished by confinement in two consecutive Sundays when I was caught falsifying my Dad's signature in the school report. I still keep that report today as the reminder that cheating does not pay. My parents realized that I was boarding in a bad neighborhood. They wisely arranged for me to stay with children of a trusted scholar in the old Hanoi quarters across the lake from here. They rented a 3 m x 3 m room on top of a kitchen for 5 of us, three uncles about our age, my brother and me. We had wooden planks to use as table by day and bed by night. My grades improved, and within a year, I ranked among the highest five students in the 7th grade.

My dream at the time was to have a good breakfast before going to class and a stick of ice cream at class break. I realized that dream when given a weekly allowance of a nickel. But I lost my first nickel to a card shuffler who preyed on school kids. Since then I do not gamble even now that I live in Las Vegas.

Then fate intervened. My Dad got a job, the first job to help my Mom with feeding us. He would be a coast guard telegraph worker at the Central Post Office in Saigon. Our family packed and left for Saigon on the boat entitled Ville de Hai Phong. That was the first time at the age of 13 I saw a huge ship, and the first time I saw the ocean. We would sleep in bunk beds among 4th class passengers. But during the day, we could get to the deck to observe the vast ocean to the East and the rolling mountains to the West. Wasn't all of that Vietnam? Why our lives were not as beautiful as the mountains and ocean, as glorious as the sunrise and sunset?

I dreamed one day our country would be independent and our lives would be plentiful. As you all know, I have seen part of that dream today. We are now an independent country. But many of Vietnamese lives are not yet plentiful.

In Saigon, I was lucky to be enrolled in Petrus Ky High School, one of the four large public high schools in the city. I enjoyed five years of normal schooling, being now well fed thanks to my Dad's steady job and my Mom's side commerce. I got my first bicycle at the age of 14, which our family kept for the next 20 years. I got my first watch after I passed the 9th grade national exam, without which one could not get to senior high. We school boys had our groups, and I belonged to a group of bookworms. We had great teachers. I remember clearly three teachers who inspired me the most: Prof. Nguyen Xuan Nghien, teaching physics; Prof. Nguyen Van Phu, teaching mathematics; and Prof. Le Xuan Khoa, teaching history. These teachers influenced me so much that I became a math and physics major in college, and I won a national history prize at the age of 15. I am proud to recognize Professor Le Xuan Khoa, who is with us today. After 1975, Prof. Khoa was president of the Southeast Asia Refugee Action Committee in Washington DC where he was known to many policy makers and charity foundations. Just as he had inspired me, he inspired and guided a whole generation of young Vietnamese Americans to get involved in community work. Many of them are here today. I wish to recognize

- Diep Vuong, president of Pacific Links Foundation of California
- Quyen Vuong, president of International Children Assistance Network of California
- Dee Dee Nguyen, of Impacts International, and
- Binh Rybacki, president of Children of Peace, Inc. of Colorado.

In his retirement, Prof. Khoa is more active than ever. He just published a remarkably objective book on the history of Vietnam between 1945 and 1975, a

period that is probably more tumultuous than any in the 1000-year history of Vietnam. Prof. Khoa, thank you, Sir.

When learning with Prof. Khoa, at the age of 16, I was intrigued with the history of Vietnam. We have approximately 2000 years of legend-based stories, 1000 years of sparsely recorded Chinese domination during which there were sporadic uprisings whose leaders are now revered as our earliest heroes and heroines. And we have 1000 years of independence punctuated by wars with the Chinese from the North, with the Chams from the South and with ourselves from within. All of us are aware of the 1945-1975 wars during which we the Vietnamese from all walks of life suffered immensely. But few know that our forefathers had a North-South war for two hundred years between the 17th and 19th centuries. In my opinion as a high school student at the time, this country, Vietnam, had many heroes but few statesmen. Heroes are courageous and skillful people who sacrifice themselves or deploy their followers who had little to lose but their lives to win over much stronger forces. But after each war, our heroes became the new lords, wielding absolute power over the lives of the mass. They had little education and experience in the art of governance, and they mismanaged the nation in time of peace.

My dream at the time was that one day Vietnam would have many statesmen who would build Vietnam into a strong nation, a prosperous people, and a society that is free, just, democratic and civilized. Little did I realize that all Vietnamese have the same dream that I now call the Vietnamese Dream.

In 1958, I was among the first 14 selected to go study in the United States. To this poor boy from Bat Trang this was equivalent to getting a key to paradise. America, America! I had studied it in history books. I had drawn its map a hundred times. In those days it took us three days to cross the Pacific Ocean in propeller airplanes. From the first day I set foot on America, I saw with awe the Golden Gate Bridge across not a river, but an ocean inlet. I saw with awe the wide and clean streets, the

neat rows of houses none of them had any similarity with our slummy huts in the Ban Co district of Saigon. Then as I enrolled at Florida State University, I learned first hand what is a free, democratic, and civilized society. America certainly was not and is not perfect. But I see efforts by leaders and citizens to improve it everyday. There people practice liberty by open debate, open demonstration, open publications. There, political leaders campaign house to house, make promises and are held accountable for those promises. There, churches and civic organizations assist the needy to the point that if one does not make it, one should question one's own efforts. There, students were encouraged by their teachers to explore, to think, to imagine, to initiate, to create.

The Vietnamese Dream became my tormentor. Could it be realized within my lifetime? When, yes when, could Vietnam offer the same kind of opportunities to its citizens and protect them from all sort of ills caused by poverty?

After graduating from FSU I went on to graduate school at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The two and half years between 1961 and 1964 at MIT gave me another perspective on American science and technology. I was able to learn first-hand from the titans, many of them were Nobel laureates. They were pushing the frontier of science and technology. Teflon, lasers, fiber optics, gene splicing, quarks, big-bang... are some of the ideas being pursued at the time. I realized for the first time the true meaning of the immensity of knowledge and the relativity of everything in life. And in higher education, one has to pursue one's own thing lest one becomes only a "me too" parakeet. As I was working on my master's thesis in 1963, I was faced with two momentous career decisions: (1) to continue in physics or to practice nuclear engineering, and (2) to avoid the war or to go home at the end of the scholarship. While I got a Master's degree each in Physics and Nuclear Engineering, I chose the second discipline as a career because I was fascinated with the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. While I could flee to Canada or

France to avoid the war, I chose to return to Vietnam to fulfill the conditions of my scholarship. To this day, I do not regret those decisions.

The challenges I faced in Vietnam in the early 1960s were neither art nor science, but the art of survival and the science of helping my parents raise 9 siblings. President Diem of Vietnam and President Kennedy of the United States had just been assassinated. The war was heating up in madness. I worked at the esoteric nuclear research center in Dalat, getting only some “me too” results and being paid a salary so small that it would take 10 years to buy a car. In such situation, I realized that the country had been wasting precious foreign aid money on building the nuclear research center and on training me to be a nuclear engineer. What could we do to improve the lives of millions whose poverty is the cause of all ills that befall them? What could we do to help solve problems of food supply, health care, education, disaster relief, and law and order? Political leaders pursued the obvious and short term: Spending foreign aid to train the “best and brightest” with modern science and technology in advanced countries, bringing them home to help the country leapfrog into the 21st century to be tigers and dragons. But the reality then and the reality now shows that the majority of these best and brightest learn things that could not be applied in Vietnam because social, political and physical systems are not ready for their application. They either form a new class of snobs or become misfits in the Vietnamese setting. The majority would be lost to advanced nations in what we call the brain drain.

My dream was to have the opportunity to convince leaders to plan 100 years into the future, first to establish the vision of what Vietnam and the Vietnamese people could be and would be, then to build up a system model to plan to get there, taking into account of realistic factors that change all the time but must be corrected for continuously. Thus, a methodology and constancy of purpose is needed to facilitate the majority of the 85 million

people to reach the Vietnamese Dream. I call this methodology Vietnam 2100.

As the war took on its mad pace since 1964, like all young people of my time, I was bewildered by factors that were beyond my control. I withdrew into my cocoon. I had 9 siblings ranging in ages from 2 to 18, and it was my dream to help my parents getting them educated in order to fend for themselves. I went back to the United States to work in the field I was trained in. I earned money and worked with the system to realize this cocoon dream: one by one my siblings got a college education in the United States. I also gave myself an additional education at MIT and obtained a PhD degree in nuclear engineering in 1972.

I worked as an engineer in the nuclear and environmental field that became more and more important when the international oil cartel was formed and when the massive construction of nuclear power plants had their growing pains. I was involved in the construction and operation of four nuclear power plants and in the planning of many others. I was involved in the emergency planning to deal with major nuclear accidents such as Three Mile Island in the US, Windscale in the UK, and Chernobyl in the Soviet Union. I was involved in the planning and design of super-safe nuclear reactors to be deployed in what we called the Second Nuclear Era that is now taking form. I was involved in the study of energy sources such as coal, natural gas, hydro, wind, ocean thermal, and solar power. And I was involved in what Al Gore called “*An Inconvenient Truth*”—the greenhouse effect that would eventually cause drastic changes in the climate and major flooding of the world’s coastal plains such as the Red River and Mekong deltas of Vietnam. Throughout all of these rubbing shoulders with the titans and influencing policy makers in Washington DC, I was tormented with the Vietnamese Dream.

When will the per capita energy consumption for Vietnam reach 10% of what American now enjoy? When will the GNP of Vietnam grow at the pace I witnessed in South Korea, Taiwan and Malaysia? When

will the average Vietnamese be free from having to worry whether tomorrow he has food for his family, money to pay the doctors, books for his children, and a shelter in case of a storm?

I saw my Vietnamese Dream receding to oblivion as problems of postwar Vietnam loomed bigger and bigger. Vietnam was on the verge of famine in the 1980s. Wars continued to befall the country, in the North with China and in the South with Cambodia. More than a million people left the country by boat, and they met countless miseries on the high seas including being robbed, raped and killed by fishermen turned pirates. Facing with that kind of tragedies, my wife and I joined hands with many others, particularly Americans, to help resettle the refugees, finding them jobs, teaching them English and customs in the new society. God bless America. Today, most of the 2 million Vietnamese Americans have a roof to live under, a car to drive to work, a bank savings account, and food in the refrigerator. Our children could go to any school they want to or are capable of. Yes, America has allowed us to realize the Vietnamese Dream in America—and that is the familiar American Dream known to refugees from all over the world. America has assisted us to transform ourselves from wretched victims of war to proud citizens of this civilized country where we have freedom to seek happiness and protection by law. Of course, I know that America has lots of problems, but the government and its people honestly acknowledge those problems, and debate and implement solutions for them. Patriotism in America often comes from the heart and from facts, not from being indoctrinated with propaganda.

As Ambassador Michalak is in the audience, I wish to represent hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese Americans, to ask you to convey our thanks to the American people and government, for having taken us in and facilitated our achieving the American Dream.

When the last of my siblings and my wife's siblings graduated from college and embarked on their own career, we felt that our obligation with the greater family was completed. We established the PAI Corporation in our basement. The reason was simple. I was always able to complete the work required of my bosses in an excellent manner, and therefore, I had the confidence that I could continue to do so working for myself. We also needed two incomes to get the best of education for our children since the civil society of America expects those who can afford pay for it.

I dreamed I would earn enough to give my children all the education they wanted. Indeed, my first daughter took 10 years to train to be an excellent eye doctor, and my second daughter took 7 years to train to be an excellent environmental engineer and businessperson. We are really proud of this achievement as truly contributing Vietnamese Americans.

But I continued to be haunted by the Vietnamese Dream. By 1989, I became 50 years old. News from Vietnam continued to be murky, mostly bad. Our relatives were in lack of food, housing, medicine. We did what we could by sending aid to them, sometimes with great difficulty because of poor communication. Since I never wanted to get involved in politics, humanitarian work was the only means for me to stoke alive my Vietnamese Dream. My wife and I established the Vietnamese American Scholarship Fund (VASF) and put most of our income into it, with help from the Uncle Sam in the form of tax-free contribution. We first sent money to schools in Saigon, Hue and Dalat for them to buy equipment such as computers and xerox machines. We next established an award program, giving out 500 awards each year to excellent students selected by their teachers and excellent teachers selected by their peers. But after ramping up the program for 3 years and awarding 500 such awards from the northernmost town of Ha Giang to the southernmost town of Ha Tien, the program was shut down by the political commissar of the Department of Education, who at that time sat some 5 blocks from this ground. He did not approve of our open selection process. The prohibition was arbitrary but would not be lifted

in spite of intercession from my uncle who was deputy to Speaker of the Parliament Nong Duc Manh, who is now the head of the Vietnamese Communist Party; and from the American ambassador Pete Peterson who hailed from my alma mater Florida State University. Since we did not want to bend our program to the commissar's desire, we used the money to help the children of Vietnamese refugees and to endow five award programs at US colleges and universities. Several hundred Vietnamese American students have benefited from this program. The programs are still alive and well today.

My Vietnamese Dream was rekindled when President Clinton lifted the embargo after Vietnam made clear its intention to embark on the road to a market economy. Everybody knows this is the right road but is full of problems that decision makers in Vietnam may not have sufficient experience to navigate. The infrastructure was weak in laws, finance, education and business. It was weak in communication, transportation, and services. There would be a rush by those close to power to amass wealth at the expense of the state and of the poor majority. There would be mistakes and disputes in dealing with international companies, because the lawless methods of war are no longer valid in a peaceful environment when protocols are in place and to be observed. My wife and I established the Fund for the Encouragement of Self-Reliance (FESR) in 1997 with the purpose of using the little money we have to encourage those disadvantaged people we got in touch with in Vietnam to stand on their own feet to earn a living with dignity. We would use the Grameen method advanced by Prof. Mohammad Yunus of Bangladesh, who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006 and who is speaking this year to the graduates at my graduate school, MIT. We would lend micro amounts of money to the poor with low interest and without bureaucracy, to enable them to conduct micro businesses to feed their families. We were lucky to get the assistance of the Director of City of Hue Office of Foreign Affairs and a highly respected teacher in the City. Quietly working with the poor since 1999, we have been able to help 12,000 families in 37 communities in

Hue and surrounding areas to be self-reliant, over 3000 of them have graduated. Our program was recognized in March of this year with the UN-HABITAT Civil Society Innovation award. I am proud to introduce you to Mr. Phan Van Hai, the Director-General of the program. Mr. Hai has wisely and patiently provided leadership to a group of 18 social workers, all college graduates, who work full time to seek out the poor to assist in a self-reliant way. The poor love them because they are truthful, provide a real service, and bring the bank to their home without much fuss. Mutual trust exists between the program and the borrowers. And mutual trust exists between us in America and in Hue. The program was run completely by Vietnamese, and next week will be the first time I visit it in 9 years.

And how to realize the Vietnamese Dream? I have realized it for myself and my family. The majority of Vietnamese in the audience and our friends have realized it. But what about the other 80 million Vietnamese? What about those millions who worry about food for tomorrow and tuition payment for their kids? What about those millions whose little belongings are blown away by typhoons and floods. What about those students dropping out of school to go earn a dollar a day to help their parents stay alive? What about hundreds of thousands of laborers and osins selling their labor in foreign countries and often got mistreated like slaves?

I am now 68 years old. I know the wisdom that a 5-year old already knows: One cannot get everything one wishes! I have no power and very little money. Neither I nor anyone else could help the majority of Vietnamese realize the Vietnamese Dream today, next year, or the next ten years. But with a clear purpose and the VN21 methodology, perhaps we could do so in a hundred years, the year 2100. VN21 advocates a systematic plan to grow human resources from kindergarten up. It advocates realistic and cost effective application of lessons from other countries to solve the Vietnamese problems. Instead of minting new PhDs massively, it advocates retooling existing talents and giving them real responsibilities for building

infrastructures with the help from international experts and Vietnamese in the Diaspora.

With tons of work to be done to build a better tomorrow for the Vietnamese mass, it dawned onto me that the best way for me to be effective is to help others doing the work that I always want to do.

Therefore, ladies and gentlemen, I stand before you today to announce that my wife and I, humble individuals among many people who are much richer and more talented than we, would like to contribute \$3 million dollars as a challenge for my fellow social workers to redouble their efforts to help the disadvantaged. We will request the Vietnamese American NGO Network, which is the umbrella organization serving all VA NGOs, to use our contribution to help work toward three objectives:

- Help VA NGOs in the US to build capacity by organizing, collaborating, and raising more funds to invigorate their work of helping the disadvantaged people in Vietnam
- Help VA NGOs in the US to work with grassroots NGOs in Vietnam to build capacity by organizing, collaborating, and raising funds from Vietnamese and friends both inside and outside Vietnam, in order to assist the disadvantaged in Vietnam.
- Help educators and planners inside Vietnam and in the Diaspora look for funds and opportunities to devise sustainable solutions for the mass to realize the Vietnamese Dream. Education, health, and jobs for the mass are of course some of the musts for us to achieve the Vietnamese Dream of "A Prosperous People, a Strong Nation, and a Society that is free, democratic, and civilized."

I would like to conclude by reading a poem by the self-reliant American educator and poet, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who was born one year after king Gia Long unified

Vietnam in 1802 and who died two years before the French completely turned Vietnam into its colony in 1884. I have also translated it into Vietnamese.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)

<p>To laugh often and love much To win the respect of intelligent people And the affection of children; To earn the approbation of honest critics And endure the betrayal of false friends; To appreciate beauty To find the best in others; To give one's self To leave the world a little better Whether by a healthy child A garden patch Or a redeemed social condition; To have played and laugh with enthusiasm And sung with exultation; To know even one life has breathed easier Because you have lived... This is to have succeeded.</p>	<p>Ban oi! biet cuoi luon, biet yeu nhieu Duoc nguoi doi kinh trong Duoc con tre yeu men Duoc phe binh la “tam duoc” Chiu dung duoc cai dau bi ban be phan boi; Biet thuong thuc cai dep Biet tim ra cai tot dep nhat noi nguoi khac; Biet cong hien het minh De lai cho doi mot cai gi tot hon Vi nhu nuoi con cai nen nguoi Hoac vun soi mot manh vuon tot tuoi Hoac xa hoi duoc cai thien; Da choi say me va cuoi thoai mai Va hat vang lung; Biet da giup mot cuoc doi duoc de tho hon Vi minh da lam da song... Ban oi! nhu vay la da thanh cong.</p>
---	---

I am far from being a success. But together, we will succeed in attaining the Vietnamese Dream for our grandchildren and the children of our grandchildren.

Thank you.