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## SAIGON ARTS, CULTURE & EDUCATION INSTITUTE



### To Research, Document & Promote Vietnamese Culture

NEWSLETTER # 83

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## Forty-Two Years Ago, "It Seems Like Peace"

*Nguyen Ngoc Bich*

On January 27 forty-two years ago, U.S. Secretary of State William P. Rogers and Hanoi's Foreign Minister Nguyen Duy Trinh put their signatures on the "Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam." Next to Secretary Rogers' signature is the signature of the Republic of Vietnam Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Tran Van Lam, and next to Nguyen Duy Trinh's signature is the signature of Madame Binh, the Foreign Minister of the so-called "Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam."

What is odd about this document is that neither of the two main negotiators of the Paris "Peace" Accord, namely U.S. National Security Advisor, Dr. Henry Kissinger, and Hanoi's "Advisor," Mr. Le Duc Tho, had his name appear anywhere in the document. Despite this, they went on being the recipients of that year's Nobel Peace Prize (1973), which Le Duc Tho at least had the decency not to accept.

In retrospect, all of us must no doubt admit to the fact that the whole process of negotiation which lasted nearly five years (May 1968 to March 1973) and its product, the so-called Paris "Peace" Agreement, were no more than spectacular bluffs set up to throw the wool over people's eyes, not excluding the then UN Secretary General, Kurt Waldheim, and the Swedish Nobel Peace Prize Committee. Either that, or if they were in the know, then they were part of a contemptible cabal.

In these circumstances, one may be pardoned for cussing at all the great powers at the time, and the more powerful the nation the more it was to be blamed. Take the U.S., for instance, when it took upon itself to overthrow President Diem it had to assume the main burden of thwarting the Communist aggression in South Vietnam. When it decided to send massive troops to Vietnam (in March 1965), it didn't bother to ask for the permission of the southern administration (then headed by Premier Phan Huy Quat), and when it decided to leave Vietnam it did its best to twist the arms of President Thieu and force him to accept an arrangement wholly unfavorable to the South (as it allowed for the North Vietnamese, called PAVN, troops to stay south of the 17<sup>th</sup> Parallel).

Admittedly, President Thieu did not blindly sign on to the agreement. Before he reluctantly agreed to the RVN signing onto the accord, he fought tooth-and-nail to get the U.S. to promise "one-on-one" replacement of depleted war material and ammunition and managed to get written commitments from President Nixon to react vigorously to any Hanoi violation of the agreement. In the end, however, neither Nixon nor the U.S. Congress could honor their words—which prompted a famous composer (an artist, he is usually more clairvoyant about these things) to write: "It only seems that we are having peace"! What a perfect hit!

However, when we speak about the damage done to the Vietnamese people (the people bearing the brunt were the South Vietnamese but we should not forget either about the North Vietnamese who, as expressed by the poet Nguyen Chi Thien on their behalf, had been waiting for many, many years for true liberation by the South Vietnamese: "O South Vietnam, ever since the day of your destruction / I have lived a thousand, ten thousand agonies." We should not forget, though, that even a great power like the U.S. had its own limitations and commitments. For instance, do we, even now, know what was the part played by Israel in the loss of South Vietnam? If only we could put ourselves in the shoes of the Americans who had to face at least two fronts, the Soviet Union and Red China, with feet caught in the Vietnam quagmire!

We must take this larger view in order to see why Nixon had taken the road he pursued at the time. In facing two formidable enemies, he had chosen to go with Beijing in order to confront

*Continue on next page*

## Forty-Two Years Ago ....

the Soviet Union—not unlike the choice made by Winston Churchill and F.D.R. during the Second World War to go with the Communist Stalin to fight the Fascist Hitler, to choose what is the lesser of the two evils, despite the fact that earlier Stalin had made a secret pact with Hitler (the August 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact).

But in order to go with China, Nixon had to let go of something. And that something was the hint intimated by Kissinger when he met with Zhou En-lai when the two met in 1972: Kissinger told Zhou that if the U.S. cannot and would not remove an ally in South Vietnam it could still live with a communist regime in Vietnam if it resulted from the normal evolution of things. One can imagine that Zhou immediately flew to Hanoi after that encounter to let Hanoi know the one information that it needed to launch everything it had into an attack known as the Easter Offensive of March 30, 1972. With this offensive Hanoi has thought that it could secure a victory as decisive as Dien Bien Phu, which earlier had concluded the anti-French war.

Little did Hanoi expect that with all U.S. ground troops having been removed from the South, the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) was still strong enough to repel the communist attacks against Kontum and especially An Loc (later dubbed the Stalingrad of the Vietnam War) and eventually to retake the Quang Tri Citadel in September of that year (after killing off one PAVN company per night for nearly two months). These resounding victories, on top of the U.S. mining of harbors and waterways in North Vietnam and especially the Christmas bombing of Hanoi, forced Le Duc Tho to go back to the negotiation table.

Instead of exploiting this upperhand situation, the U.S. chose to keep its word to Beijing to concentrate on bringing down the Soviet Union, an objective in which it eventually succeeded when Eastern Europe collapsed in 1989, to be followed by the collapse of Communism in its very cradle, the Soviet Union.

The ARVN victories of 1972, glorious and costly as they were, in the end only bought the Republic three more years of freedom. It finally fell into the hands of the communist North in April 1975 after the Soviet Union and China competed in showing Hanoi with so much military hardware that it could simply overwhelm the underarmed South Vietnamese, this time abandoned by the U.S. (most especially the U.S. Congress).

## Conclusion

What can we then say about the lesson of the Paris “Peace” Accord of 1973?

Not a few Vietnamese, in fact probably the majority, blame it all on the United States. This is hardly fair since no matter what one thinks, the U.S. has incurred 58,000 fatalities, not to count hundreds of thousands of wounded and some 4.5 million men-in-arms who have served in Vietnam. What other country has sacrificed so many of its beloved sons (and daughters) for another country?

One of the most telling lessons of Vietnam is probably that the U.S. is a young nation and that the American people, with their youth and pragmatism, do not have a great deal of patience. When they came to Vietnam they came en masse and were truly gungho but failing to get immediate results, they soon tired out and wanted to turn their attention elsewhere. Besides, there were also other priorities that they could not foresee when they went in, such as the OPEC-inspired crisis in gasoline at the end of 1973 which caused the unimaginable—long queues for gas even in the most powerful nation on earth.

Also, who could imagine that in a little more than one year after Paris President Nixon would have to resign because of Watergate. With him out the White House, it becomes a given that his successor, President Gerald Ford, could not, with a belligerent and hostile Congress, continue with his policy even if it were a good one. Dr. Kissinger, to exculpate himself, has made Watergate the scapegoat for the U.S. final defeat in Vietnam.

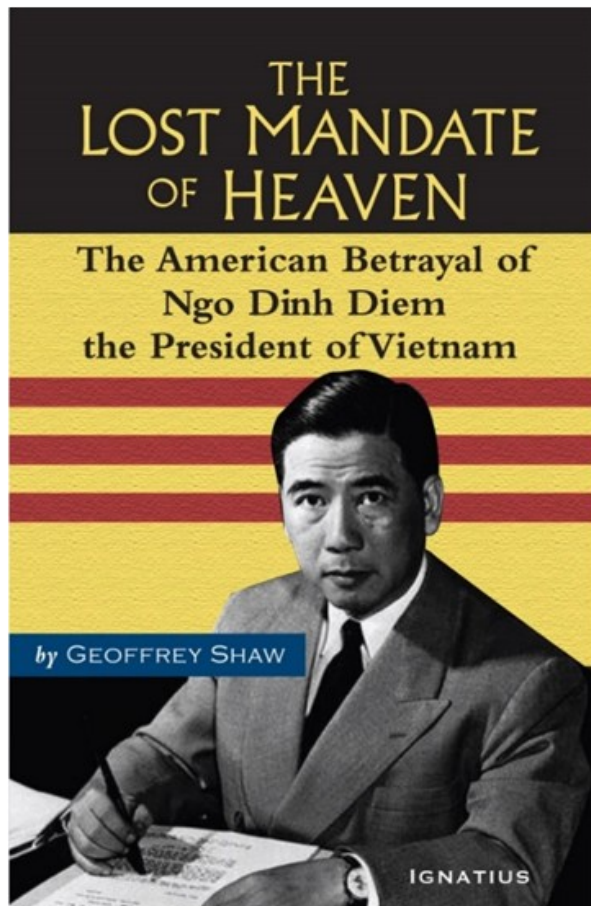
In the end, the political leaders of South Vietnam should also take their part of blame in the whole fiasco. For no matter how brave, even heroic, the ARVN was (“brave in defeat” is how Rear Admiral Ho Van Ky Thoai described the Vietnamese navy in the Paracel islands battle against the Chinese in January 1974, or as demonstrated in George J. Veith’s book *Black April*, which came out last year), the political leaders of South Vietnam should have internalized this fundamental truth—that the fate of one’s nation, even in a highly interdependent world, cannot simply be trusted into the hands of another nation even if it were one’s closest ally. With a nation in glory or in crisis, the common man has its share of responsibility, says an old adage, let alone the very top leaders of the nation!



# The Lost Mandate of Heaven

## The American Betrayal of Ngo Dinh Diem, President of Vietnam

*Geoffrey Shaw*



### Description

Ngo Dinh Diem, the first president of the Republic of Vietnam, possessed the Confucian “Mandate of Heaven”, a moral and political authority that was widely recognized by all Vietnamese. This devout Roman Catholic leader never lost this mandate in the eyes of the people; rather, it was removed by his erstwhile allies in the United States government in a coup sponsored by them resulting in his assassination.

The commonly held view runs contrary to the above assertion by military historian Geoffrey Shaw. According to many American historians, President Diem was a corrupt leader whose tyrannical actions lost him the loyalty of his people and the possibility of a military victory over the North Vietnamese. The Kennedy Administration, they argue, had to withdraw its support of Diem.

Based on his research of original sources, however, including declassified documents of the US government, Shaw found a Diem who was up for Mass at 6:30 every morning, who was venerated by the Vietnamese as a great leader at all levels of government and society, a kind man who did not even like the thought of Communist guerrillas being killed. Also, according to historical record, Diem did not persecute Buddhists; on the contrary, he did more to preserve and to fund Vietnam’s Buddhist heritage than any other Vietnamese leader.

A candid account of the killing of Ngo Dinh Diem, the reasons for it, who was responsible, why it happened, and the disastrous results . . . This book is not a happy read. But it is a careful record to set the issue straight.

What is particularly agonizing for Americans who read this clearly stated and tightly argued book is the fact that the final Vietnam defeat was not really on battle grounds but on political and moral grounds, or, even worse, on personal grounds of prideful diplomats and reporters. The Vietnam War need not have been lost. Overwhelming evidence supports it.

— From the Foreword by **James Schall, S.J.**, Professor Emeritus, Georgetown University

“Did I find a veritable Conradian ‘Heart of Darkness’? Yes, I did, but it was not in the quarter to which all popular American sources were pointing their accusatory fingers; in other words, not in Saigon but, paradoxically, within the Department of State back in Washington, DC, and within President Kennedy’s closest White House advisory circle. The actions of these men led to Diem’s murder. And with his death, nine and a half years of careful work and partnership between the United States and South Vietnam was undone.”

— From the Preface by **Geoffrey Shaw**

## Captain H. B. Le

### US Navy Kicks Off Naval Engagement Activities with Vietnam

Story Number: NNS150406-01 Release Date: 4/6/2015 7:44:00 AM From Commander Task Force 73 Public Affairs

DA NANG, Vietnam (NNS) -- The U.S. Navy began the sixth annual Naval Engagement Activity (NEA) with the Vietnam People's Navy April 6, as both nations celebrate the 20th anniversary of diplomatic relations in 2015.

This five-day collaboration will focus on non-combatant events and skills exchanges in military medicine, search and rescue, and maritime security.

Subject-matter expert exchanges will focus on maritime domain awareness, shipboard damage control, submarine rescue, legal symposia, band concerts, community service events, and team sports. A brief at-sea phase will allow ships from both navies to practice the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) and ship handling. These naval activities underscore the deepening and diverse relationship between the United States and Vietnam.

"By bringing our navies and our people closer together each year, these activities advance our relationship in ways that benefit our nations directly, and by extension, promote a peaceful, prosperous and stable region," said Rear Adm. Charlie Williams, commander of U.S. 7th Fleet's Task Force 73 (CTF 73).

NEA evolved from annual port visits to Da Nang by U.S. Navy ships, which began more than a decade ago. Guided-missile destroyer USS Curtis Wilbur (DDG 54) was the first U.S. Navy ship to visit Da Nang, July 28, 2004, and most recently USS John S. McCain (DDG 56), also a guided-missile destroyer, visited last April as part of NEA 2014. Each year, NEA becomes more complex, and last year marked the first time ships from both navies conducted exchanges at sea.

Today another guided-missile destroyer, USS Fitzgerald (DDG 62) and, for the first time, littoral combat ship USS Fort Worth (LCS 3) are continuing this tradition during NEA 2015. **The officer in charge of these ships is Capt. H.B. Le, deputy commander, Destroyer Squadron (DESRON) 7. A Vietnamese-American, Le commanded guided-missile destroyer USS Lassen (DDG 82) when it visited Da Nang in November 2009.**



"It's great to be back in Vietnam, and we're very much looking forward to working with our Vietnamese Navy counterparts over the next five days," said Le. "There are many highlights of this week's engagement. One of the most significant activities will be the opportunity to conduct CUES exchanges underway, which will help both navies prevent miscommunication at sea and foster mutual understanding."



## Captain H. B. Le ...

In addition to Fitzgerald and Fort Worth, U.S. units participating in NEA Vietnam include personnel from CTF 73, DESRON 7, Undersea Rescue Activity San Diego, Explosive Ordnance Disposal Mobile Unit (EODMU) 5, and the U.S. 7th Fleet Band "Orient Express."

Occurring during the 20th anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic relations between the United States and Vietnam, these activities were designed to foster mutual understanding, build confidence in the maritime domain and develop relationships between the people and navies of both nations.

This is the sixth NEA Vietnam since it was established as an annual engagement in 2010. NEA Vietnam was last conducted April 7-11, 2014.

**Captain H. B. Le is a native of Hue, Vietnam** and attended GarField Senior High School in Woodbridge, Virginia. He graduated with merit from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1992 with a bachelor's degree in economics. At sea, Captain Le served as auxiliary officer and first lieutenant in USS Ticonderoga (CG 47), fire control officer in USS Wasp (LHD 1), weapons officer and combat systems officer in USS Hue City (CG 66), executive officer in USS Curtis Wilbur (DDG 54), and commanding officer, USS Lassen (DDG 82). During his command tour, Lassen won the Battle "E" Award for 2009 and Association of Old Crows Outstanding Navy Unit Award for 2010.

Captain Le has served on the staffs of U.S. 2nd Fleet and U.S. Joint Forces Command and as executive assistant to two commanders, U.S. 7th Fleet. He most recently served as junior military assistant to the secretary of defense.

Captain Le is a graduate of the Naval War College nonresident seminar program and the Joint Forces Staff College, a Fellow of Harvard University's Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, and was selected as an MIT Seminar XXI Fellow.

He earned a master's degree in operations research with distinction from the Naval Postgraduate School in 1999 and a master's degree in business administration summa cum laude from Touro University International in 2005.

<https://www.youtube-nocookie.com/embed/UuB9dPalDak?rel=0>



## Saigon Street in Westminster, CA

Forty years after their arrival in the US, the Vietnamese-Americans finally have a street named SAIGON in Westminster, the heart of the Vietnamese community in California.

## Tri Tran, Investor & Co-Founder of Munchery

Meet Tri Tran, the man who wants to end home cooking

<http://www.usatoday.com/story/money/business/2015/07/04/ozy-tri-tran-end-home-cooking/29614763/>

Tri Tran will never forget the stench of puke that filled the belly of the fishing boat. Or the feeling of elation when he saw trash floating in the water — it meant he was near land. Tran, then 11 years old, along with his brother and grandmother and a hundred or so others, was nearing the shores of Indonesia six days after escaping from his homeland of Vietnam. Tran would later find out his parents didn't board the vessel in a different group, as he had thought, but had stayed in Vietnam. He would never see his mother again.



I meet Tran a long way from the Indonesian refugee camp where he lived after landing. Now in an industrial area of San Francisco's trendy Mission District, he's all smiles. Small wonder — venture capitalists reportedly value Munchery, the meal-delivery company he co-founded only a few years ago, at \$300 million. (Munchery says that figure is inaccurate but declined to give an accurate one.)

With a decades-long background as an engineer, Tran brings more than a pinch of experience in tech to the table. It's a good thing, given that Munchery is pretty much a massive restaurant that's been re-engineered specifically for delivery orders. So instead of you traipsing to the grocery store and cooking for yourself (God forbid) or ordering greasy takeout, Tran — who admittedly isn't much of a cook or foodie himself — wants you to order gourmet dishes, whipped up by Munchery chefs, that start at \$10 excluding delivery. Of course, the startup launched in San Francisco, where even dinner isn't safe from "disruption." It eventually expanded to New York City, Seattle and, most recently, Los Angeles.

Munchery is doing its best to stand out from the crowd, although Tran looks like he could work at any other Silicon Valley startup. He sports a fitted, dull gray patterned shirt that's tucked into blue jeans, and a pair of worn sneakers. He has a jovial and childlike smile, but a streak of gray through his hair hints at his 40 years. He brings lunch — from Munchery, natch — to the interview but doesn't touch it. The dish of salmon and broccolini sits on the table like a prop as Tran explains how millions will be eating a variation of the meal cooling before us.

Here's how he does it. Munchery chefs cook a massive amount of food every day and then cool it in a way that maintains freshness, says Tran. That means Munchery can make more food, of greater variety, and hold on to it a bit longer. But meals you need to nuke are still more convenient than shopping and cooking from scratch, Tran says — and arguably cheaper, too. Munchery's meals used to cost \$25 apiece, but bulk buying and new equipment, like a \$50,000 oven that can serve up 500 salmon at once, have cut prices by more than half for some meals.

The big question is whether Munchery can be a standout dish on a menu crowded with food startups like Instacart, Sprig, Spoonrocket, Blue Apron and GrubHub. Overall, the sector is looking increasingly

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## Tri Tran ...

risky as investors shovel cash into companies at extraordinarily high valuations, says Robyn Metcalfe, director of the Food Lab at the University of Texas at Austin. "It's a really unstable base but a lot of opportunity," she says. But partisans such as Pravin Vazirani, a managing director at Munchery investor Menlo Ventures, believe that first-time CEOs like Tran are more likely to succeed in consumer-facing industries such as food because of their fresh perspective.

An admittedly delicious mushroom risotto with asparagus and a side of roasted tomato soup costs about \$20 after everything is said and done, which Tran admits is still too high for many families every night of the week, even with just the cheapest food. Nightly dinner for one person at Munchery would cost almost \$300 more than the entire monthly food budget for a parent and a child living in San Francisco (and that's breakfast, lunch and dinner), as calculated by the Economic Policy Institute.

It's an even bigger step up from Tran's childhood diet. Even white rice was a luxury in Ba Ria, a town some 50 miles from what is now Ho Chi Minh City along the southern coast of Vietnam. When Tran first arrived in San Jose, California, speaking only a few words of English, he wasn't exactly Mr. Popular, at least among his peers. With teachers for parents, Tran was always a bookworm, and thus more comfortable burying his head in schoolwork than navigating American social mores.

To Tran's own amazement, he'd soon drawn even in advanced literature and excelled in science, which is why MIT picked him up. After graduating with a bachelor's and master's in electrical engineering, Tran made his way to the legendary company Silicon Graphics, which provided the hardware for Pixar's early animated films. As a technology officer in other companies, Tran was always playing with ideas for his own business. While struggling to find time to make dinner for his family, he came up with the idea that spawned Munchery. The food-delivery market isn't a bad place to be — the industry has received some \$800 million in funding so far in 2015, up from \$182 million the year before, according to Crunchbase. In other words: Tran is striking while the iron's hot.



Directed by Lam Lê; Produced by Pascal Verroust for ADR Productions  
(2012); in French with English subtitles;  
116 minutes

## Công Binh - la longue nuit indochinoise

(Screening co-sponsored by the **French Mission For Culture and Higher Education at the French Embassy**)

On the eve of the Second World War, twenty thousand Vietnamese people were recruited in French Indochina and were forced to come work in French weapon factories to stand in for workers who had been sent to fight the Germans. Mistaken for soldiers, they were stuck in France after the defeat in 1940; during the Occupation, these workers – who were called “Cong Binh” – were left at the mercy of the Germans and lived like pariahs. They were pioneers in rice culture in the Camargue. Wrongly accused of betraying their native Viet Nam, they were all actually great followers of Ho Chi Minh and rooting for the Independence in 1945.

The film follows around two dozen survivors in Viet Nam and in France. Five of them died during the editing of the movie. They tell us today what their everyday life in a colonized country was like. Here is a page of the history between France and Viet Nam which has shamefully been erased from the collective memory. See: <http://www.congbinh.net/synopsis>

See also: <http://frenchculture.org/film-tv-and-new-media/interviews/lam-le-presents-his-new-film-cong-binh>