INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

GUNS ARE OUT. SPIRITUAL WAR IS IN

Vietnamese-Americans look for ways to foster democracy in Vietnam

Peter Bird Martin
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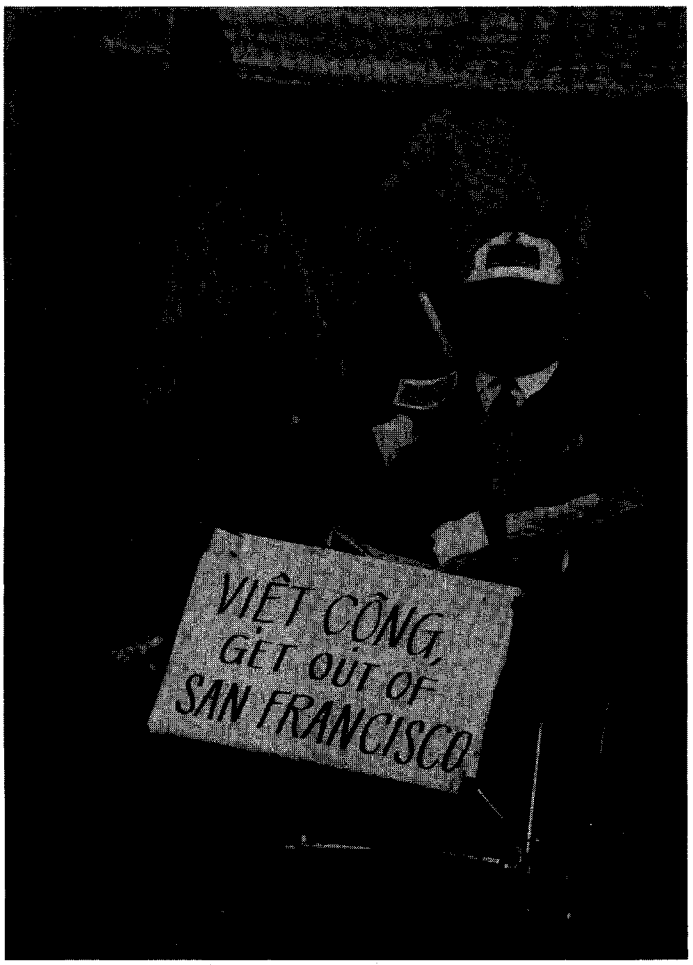
Dear Peter,

A young woman bends over the police railing, yelling out obscenities in English and Vietnamese. Her middle-finger repeatedly sticks it up to them, the "traitors", those who dare enter Vietnam-Expo 94, the first industrial exhibition of Vietnamese products held on American soil since the fall of Saigon. She is one of a hundred demonstrators standing near the entrance. Some wear army fatigues and red berets, chant slogans and wave placards. Others yell aggressive taunts and vulgar comments. "They killed your brother, they killed your father," an emotional young man yells at me. "And you are trading with those butchers." Before I can answer, he moves away, choking back his tears, clenching his fists.

It has been a long day, the last one of a three-day protest that has brought, according to organizers, about a thousand Vietnamese-Americans to Fort Mason, the large complex by the San Francisco Bay. Now the Expo is closing and Vietnamese exhibitors board chartered buses, protected by policemen on horseback and on motorcycles. "Killers, butchers," yell the demonstrators. Two hundred meters behind, on a 15-meter hill, a few hundred more protestors wave the red-striped yellow flag of the former Republic of South-Vietnam. "The battle is lost and we know it," says an engineer standing next to me. "But the pain and the anger are still within us. So we come here and we shout. It is good for the soul."

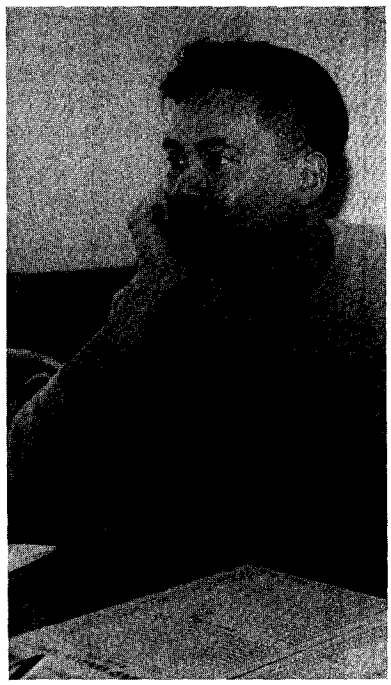
Those are troubling times for the Vietnamese emigres. Normalization between Washington and Hanoi is in the cards. Yesterday's enemy is becoming a trade partner, soon maybe an ally. Socialist Vietnam is not the pariah country it once was. And the refugees struggle to define their position. "Guns are not a viable option anymore," says a Vietnamese-Californian lawyer who requests anonymity. "But we are divided on other options. Some see business as a door to freedom. Others oppose it and focus on human rights protests. The young do not care. Twenty years after the defeat we still do not have a well-organized and united opposition, how can we change Vietnam?"

Carole Beaulieu is an ICWA fellow writing about the countries of former French Indochina, with a focus on Vietnam.


VIỆT CỘNG
GET OUT OF
SAN FRANCISCO


COMMUNIST

Not everyone agrees with the lawyer. Do Diem, a young 32-year-old MBA from Orange County maintains the young generation does care, but in a different way. The average age of the National Front for the Liberation of Vietnam, an international organization of which Diem is a member is 28,6 year-old. "Our generation is beginning to get involved," he says. "We are well educated, we understand America. Our methods and our objective are somewhat different. We are not anti-communist, we are anti-dictatorship. We want to modernize Vietnam, not to bring Confucius back. We believe in computers and education, not in guns."



Do Diem

The Vietnamese-American community has certainly come a long way in the past five years. "In 1988 you would not dream of telling your friends you were going back to Vietnam to see your family," recalls an Orange County businessman. "Everyone was afraid of getting shot by the anti-communists."

Orange County, a large area south of Los Angeles, has often been described as the home of the most virulently anti-communist Vietnamese emigres. Many of the 150,000 refugees who settled there after 1975 were related to the military.(1) In the past, some of the most daring and widely publicized attempts at militarily toppling the Hanoi government have been launched from here. Journalists, suspected to be "pro-communist", have been threatened. Some were shot and their murders remain unsolved.

Everyone I see in Orange County tells me there is a "crazy fringe" but no one wants to give me names or phone numbers. "Those are very few now," says lawyer Van Pham Pho, "and their following is disappearing quickly." While most Vietnamese-Americans denounce Vietnam for being a dictatorship, no one talks anymore of overthrowing the regime with guns. "Guns are useless," says Quang Van Pham, a counselor with the Vietnamese Community of Orange County." Overthrow by force is not possible. We want more change but we want it peacefully."

Little Saigon is the heart of the Vietnamese community in Orange County. It is a mile long neighborhood of drab-looking commercial centers lining Bolsa Street, the main thoroughfare of Westminster, a city of 78,000. Today, tourist agencies openly advertize trips to

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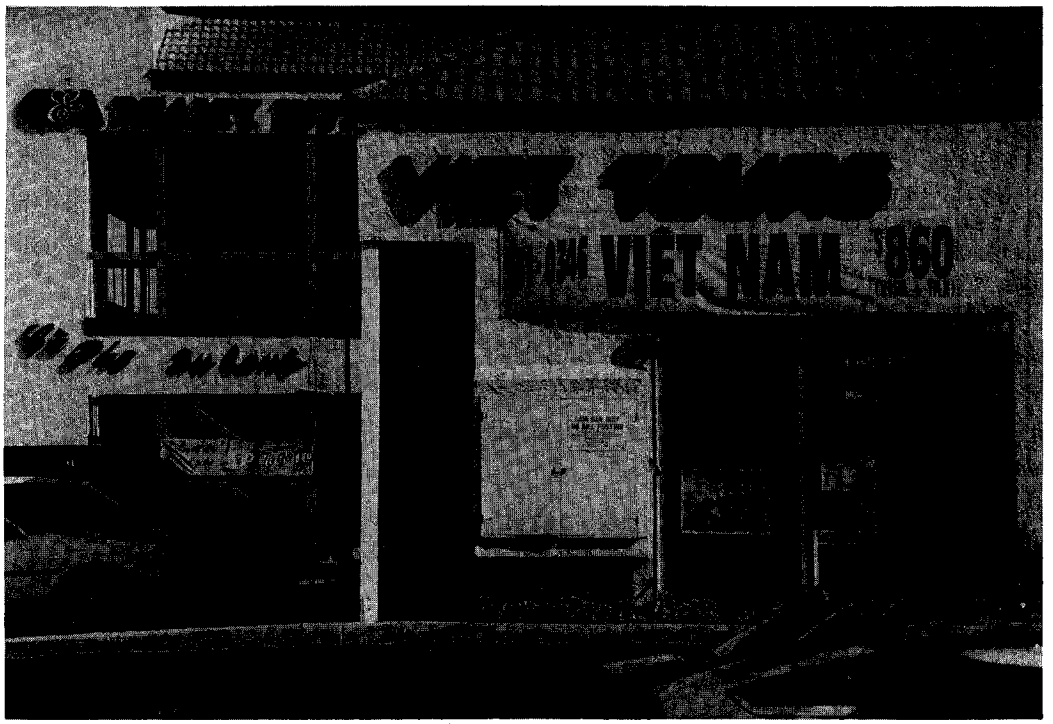
(1). According to the Washington-based SEARC, the Southeast Asia Research Center, over one million Vietnamese came to America after the fall of Saigon. The US now houses the largest population of persons of Vietnamese descent outside Vietnam. The Californian community is the largest in the US with close to 500,000 people.



Tourist agency on Bolsa Street.
Travelling to Vietnam is now politically correct.

Vietnam. But other tensions remain. The clinic of a local doctor who advocates trade relations with Vietnam has been picketed by over 1000 people. His clinic is being boycotted. A Vietnamese language television station had one of its trucks burned after it broadcasted a two-second zoom of a communist flag as background for a song. Death threats were made. "The arrival in 1989 of hundreds of former detainee who had just recently been freed from jail brought on a hardening of the community", explains a local businessman. "Those men were just out of labor camps, they could not understand the softening stance of the Western world regarding Vietnam."

A DIVIDED COMMUNITY

Phu Tuan Cuong, a San Jose social worker, admits the Vietnamese-American community is "very divided." Cuong blames the division on Vietnam's long history of colonization and on the emigres' lack of experience of democracy. Thirty-year-old journalist De Tran, a staffer with the San Jose Mercury News, the first American newspaper to have opened an office in Hanoi, believes the division has more complicated roots. "There is not only one Vietnamese community," he says. "What you have is three groups who came to the United States at different times and whose experience of Vietnam and of America has been very different."

A successful first wave: The first wave of refugees arrived in 1975, just after the fall of Saigon. Today, they are clearly the most successful. Their children have gone to the best schools and have often been described as americanized. They are also, according to Tran, the most open to normalization with Vietnam.

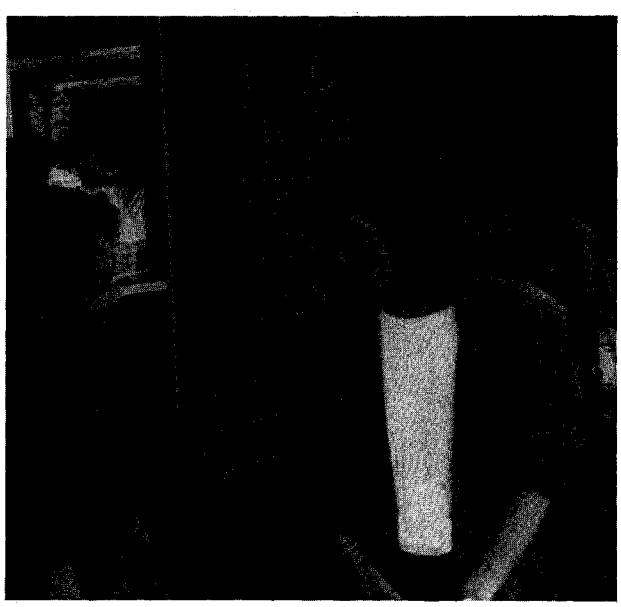
Journalist Andrew Lam, whose family escaped Vietnam by plane a few days before the People's Army entered Saigon, admits he sometimes feels bad saying he is a refugee. "My father was a general," he recalls while sharing a potluck supper in a comfortable San Francisco apartment, surrounded by friends, most of them refugees like him, most of them now established doctors and engineers, some married to non-Vietnamese sweet hearts. "The worst experience of my escape was when the airline stewardess slap my hand because I reached for a glass of champagne on a tray she was passing around."

Lam has gone back to Vietnam to visit but has no plan to go and live there. None of his friends do either, even though some have gotten involved in humanitarian work. "English is now my song," he says. "My very own personal song."

A struggling second wave: The second wave of Vietnamese refugees were the boat people. They had less money, less contacts than did the elite of the military and of the government. Their escape was more treacherous. Many lost everything at sea, robbed by pirates. "I left Vietnam with two sons," recalls 57-year-old artist Phi Loc, who now owns a small shop in one of Southern California's numerous shopping malls. "When I arrived here I only had one son left."

After the war, Loc spent eight years in jail before escaping to America. His wife and their two daughters joined him in California last year. The family is somewhat typical of the thousands of Vietnamese refugees who have settled in Westminster, a town of shopping malls in the heart of Orange County, an hour from Los Angeles. The family gets by but money is tight. "Those people are in no position to invest in Vietnam," says Co Nguyen, deputy editor of Nguoi Viet, Southern California's largest and most influential daily newspaper in Vietnamese. "They are busy putting their children through school, paying off the car. And they have many family problems." Education children is one.

Take for example Westminster's La Quinta High School. The sprawling white building has the largest Vietnamese population in the United Stares. Over 65% of the 12,000 students are of Vietnamese descent; about 15% are Mexicans. There are as many fights between Vietnamese as there are between Mexicans and Vietnamese. "The kids are at different levels of acculturation," explains principal Mitch Thomas. "Relations are not always easy."



Speaking with Lam in front of La Quinta High School.

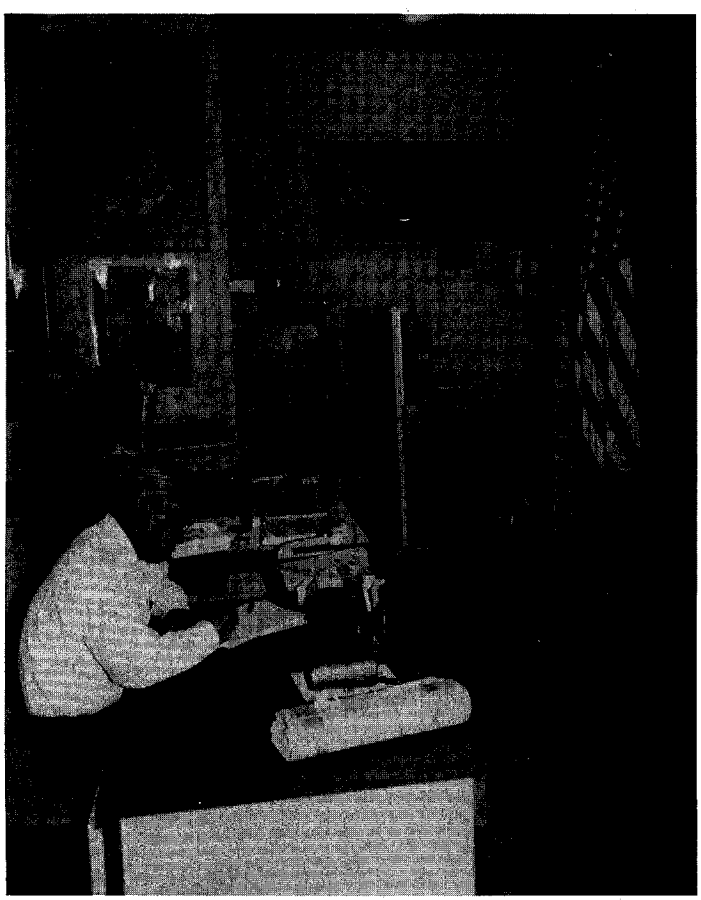
Young student Lam, who came to California only four years ago, sneers at the Vietnamese kids who are "whitewashed". "They hang around with white boys,

they even dress like white boys," he says, waiting for a friend in the courtyard. "Sometimes they do not even know how to speak Vietnamese. They have lost their culture."

Loss of culture is a lament I will hear over and over from Vietnamese-Americans. "My sons will not speak Vietnamese with me," complains a San Jose electrician, his voice breaking. "My two children do not read or write Vietnamese," complains publisher Quang Nguyen.

When the US embargo against Vietnam was lifted, Thomas invited someone to talk about the issue and to field questions from students. Very few, he recalls, had an opinion about the subject. "It is amazing how little they know about their homeland and about the war," says Thomas. Finding it difficult to adjust to so many demands, many young men fall astray. Some, like the teenagers portrayed in a moving reportage by Andrew Lam for the Los Angeles Times, get guns and take hostages hoping to get money and a plane to go fight the communists and regain their parent's lost honor.

A third wounded wave: The last wave came after 1988 and today they are most often the worst off. Many are former detainee who spent ten to fifteen years in jail. (Hanoi calls it "reeducation camp". The detainee call it "concentration camps. I call it jail or labor camp.) Few of those men, now in their late 40's early 50's, have managed to integrate the labor market. Language is a problem. Fragile health is another one.

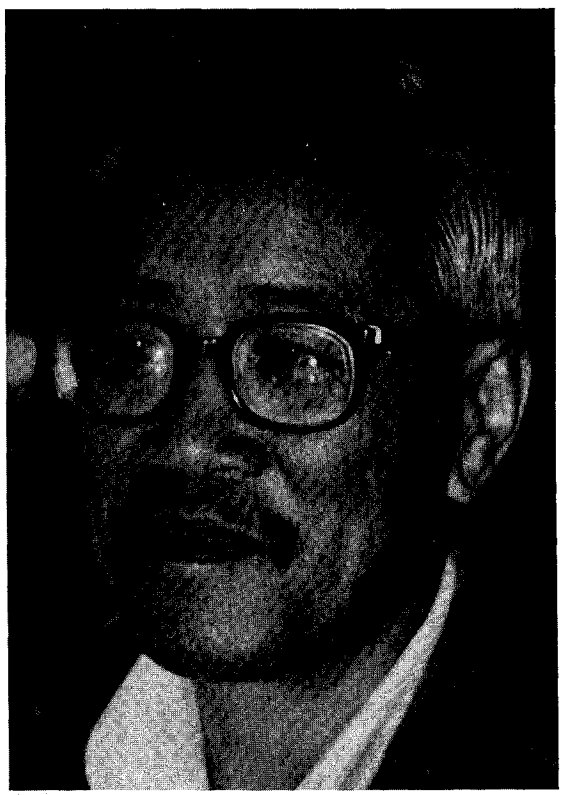


The Former Detainee office in Westminster.

"No one listens to us anymore," says Nguyen Hau, President of the Political Detainee Mutual Association, a non-profit organization headquartered in Westminster. "America wants to do business now. Not to hear our stories." Formed in 1986, the association helps former detainee start a new life in America. Most of the work revolves around finding jobs for recent arrivals, gathering donations of furniture etc. The Association lives off donations from the Vietnamese community or from sympathetic american politicians. In May, it received $2,262 and spent close to $5,000.

My interview with Hau has hardly begun that more people join us. An hour later, nine former detainee are crowded around my sofa, competing for my attention. I am getting lost in the details of too many crushed lives, too many sad stories, hard labor and no food, too many terrible ironies. "It is not the 13 years in jail that anger me," says 58-year-old Nguyen Vu Khuong," or the three daily piece of manioc we had to eat for over a year, it is the fact that the French ignored me when I was released."

A Paris-trained Ph.D. in economy, Khuong played ping-pong in his youth with François Léotard, now French Minister of Defence. In Vietnam, Khuong worked with French-Vietnamese organizations for years before the fall of Saigon. "When I was freed in 1988 the French consulate refused to see me," says the former student from Thu Duc Army school of officers. "I tried many times. To no avail."



Nguyen Vu Khuong.

In 1988, a new *realpolitik* had settled in. Paris, like many other western capitals, was wooing Hanoi for its share of government contracts. Former prisoners were not the most sought after guests at the French consulate. Today, Khuong draws welfare and reminisces on his last years in jail. "After a while we realized our jailers were starving as much as we did and we began to share with them what we got from our family, that way life in the camp became more bearable." Khuong despises American culture and longs for France but he admits the United States was the only country generous enough to offer him asylum.

Asked about the number of political prisoners left in Vietnamese jails, the former detainee cannot agree. Arguments flare up in Vietnamese. Finally, Nguyen Hau concludes that about 40,000 former detainee, now released, are waiting to come to America. According to him about 500 people opposed to the communist regime are still in the jail. Most of them, he says, are "recent" prisoners.

Former detainee have nothing good to say about the current regime in Vietnam. "It is stupid to do business there now," says 65-year-old Hau. "There are no laws to protect investments."

During his first year in labor camp, Hau had to chop trees to build his own jail. His bad teeth and fragile health are leftover from the years spent in labor camp. "We only had a bowl of rice gruel a day," he recalls. "Only the following year were our families allowed to visit. Then we had more food." In America, Hau has

mainly worked voluntarily for the Association while his wife worked in a factory to feed the family. The nail of Hau's small finger is kept very long in the manner of the old mandarins, those whose education shielded them from manual labor.

Former Colonel Duong Dinh Thu, 64, also complains about the lack of support the U.S. government gives its former allies but admits to be living comfortably. His eight children live in America. Four are doctors, and four are engineers. They are all well-established professionals thanks to his wife's work. "I am too old to start again," he says. "Too proud to be a busboy in a coffee shop."

For most of the former detainee, the wounds are still fresh. When a demonstration is held against Hanoi, they come out in large numbers. "When I went to concentration camp my children were forbidden from entering university," recalls former detainee Nhon Nguyen. "My wife lost her job as a teacher." A former district chief in a Mekong Delta province, Nhon spent twelve years in jail. Today he wears jeans and an hearing-aid and his eyes sparkle at the thought of getting back at those who denied his children an education.

Nhon and his wife Loan.
Behind them the pavilion where VietExpo 94 was held.

Nhon's wife Loan says she was "saved" by her students who "loved her and cared for her." Someone gave her a little garden to farm so she could feed her children. She sold some produce on the black market to buy necessities. When her husband was released in 1987, they all came to America with the Orderly Departure Program (ODP), the US-Vietnam negotiated agreement that aimed at replacing the

daring sea escapes with more "orderly departures". Today, Loan wears a straw hat with a yellow and red ribbon, the colors of the defeated South. She looks more like a gentle gardener than a raving anti-communist activist. Something about her smells of milk and warm cookies, of bedtime stories and cuddling grandchildren. But she has been up till six, standing on that hill overlooking the VietExpo, holding the flag of South Vietnam, demanding the fall of the Communists. "Every time communists come here, I go to protest," she says between chants of "No Human Rights, No business. VC liars. VC killers." (VC for VietCong)

TRADING WITH THE "VC KILLERS", the "VC LIARS"

Not everyone share the detainee's point of view. Some, like Southern Californian gynecologist Co Pham, believe it is "time to reconcile". "We have been talking for the past twenty years," he says. "It is time to act, time to help Vietnam develop. We are educated, we are rich, we can change Vietnam in ten years."

Pham is a controversial figure in Orange County. A successful businessman, President of the Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce of Orange County, he stunned the community by announcing last year he supported renewed commercial ties with Vietnam. Under his leadership, Business Digest, the Chamber of Commerce's bimonthly review, began to publish lists of business opportunities in Vietnam and news briefs on US-Vietnam trade relations. In April of 1994, he accompanied 12 other doctors on a mission to Hanoi. He was back again in October 1994, meeting high level communist officials and the Vice-President of Vietnam, Mme Nguyen Thi Binh.

Bolsa Medical Center.

Reaction is Orange County was swift. Opponents picketed his clinics. At one point, close to 1000 people were assembled in front of his office. Vietnamese organizations called for a boycott of his Medical Center, an elegant Asian-looking new million dollar clinic he recently inaugurated on Bolsa Street, in the heart of Little Saigon. It was not Pham's first brush with political correctness. Last year, after he had entertained at his home Vietnam's delegate to the United Nations, ambassador Le Van Bang, the Vietnamese Association of Californian Physicians, of which Pham was then President, immediately called a meeting and toppled him. Still, Pham is undaunted.

As a young man, Pham saw his share of suffering. Born in Hanoi to a catholic family he was part of the refugee wave that fled the Communist North in the early 50's. Raised in Saigon, he was a freshly married man of 31 when he was sent up to Danang to serve as an army doctor. "There I saw how precious life is," he says.

On that October morning, Pham is just back from a trip to Vietnam, and he is clearly upbeat. While he was away some members of the Chamber of Commerce tried a "*coup d'état*" to have him replaced and failed. "I have more support than they think," says Pham briskly, answering calls and shuffling papers while we try to talk.

Two health care businessmen from Tennessee are interested in doing business in Vietnam and are here to see Pham this morning. A fax machines hums right next to Pham's elbow and a small video screen on his left constantly flashes various scenes of the clinic, allowing him to check on his staff and monitor security.

The busy businessman-doctor says the boycott has not affected his business. The protestors, he says "are people on welfare who have nothing better to do. They sadden me more than they scare me." On that morning the soft-colored carpeted waiting room of his clinic is pretty quiet though. A technician from a local laboratory under contract with Pham's clinic says the business is "really down". But Pham maintains he receives a lot of calls from people who support him but are afraid of speaking out. "The silent majority is with me," says Pham. And that is what's the anti-Hanoi militants resent about him. "No one would have cared if he had gone out quietly to do business in Vietnam," says pro-democracy militant Do Diem. "But he claimed to represent me and I could not accept that."

To some like Diem, Pham is more an ambitious and greedy businessman than a philanthropist. "It disgusts me to hear him say he is doing it for the poor Vietnamese people," says Diem. "All he cares about is his own pocket. And that's OK as long as he is honest about it."

Some say Pham is a shrewd politician-in-the-making. "He tried to gain influence within the Vietnamese-American community and failed," recalls Co Nguyen, deputy editor of the influential Orange County Vietnamese daily, Nguoi Viet. "Now he is gambling he can become influential in Vietnam."

Pham counters he is only pursuing the dream of his youth to help his people, to bring them better health care, a better standard of living. "Two years ago, I tried to unite them," he says (talking about the Vietnamese-American community). "They did not give me a chance to speak. They beat me up. What I am suppose to do? I went to Hanoi to find support for my dream and I was well received."

Pham's description of his first visit to Hanoi sometimes sounds like a commercial. "There is food on the streets," he says. "People wear simple but clean clothes. The leaders are very polite, bright, smart and very well organized. I see they have a future."

Officially, Pham has little support. The Vietnamese Association of Physicians from Southern California maintains its opposition to any medical assistance to Vietnam that could sustain the credibility of the Hanoi government. The Southern California Chapter of the Vietnamese Professional Society rejects the idea that increase in trade will opens doors to more democracy. "History of other nations has shown that foreign investors, in most cases, sided with the existing government, no matter how bad they were," says an association spokesperson.

Others are more philosophical about Pham's business drive. "He means well," says Le Dinh Dieu, former press-secretary of South-Vietnam's President Thieu who now heads the Vietnamese-American Arts and Letters Association in California. "He is not pro-communist. He is a very much a capitalist. But the way he does it is awkward. Others are more clever."

Participants and organizers of the San Francisco VietExpo 94 also support Pham's vision. "Those people are businessmen not politicians," says Nguyen T. Hao, referring to the Vietnamese exhibitors. "All they want is a chance to make money, a chance just like the one the protestors out there got when they came here." Director of the Vietnam-San Francisco Foundation, a non-profit organization, Hao hopes to develop ties between Vietnam and the city of San Francisco.

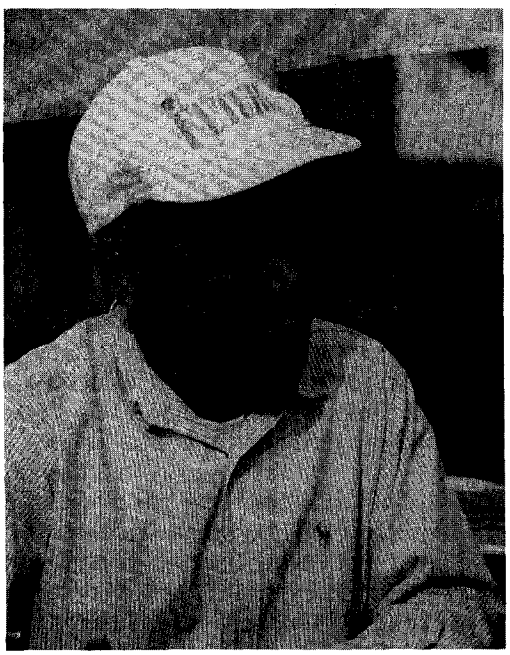
Many of the 50 Vietnamese firms who took part in the Expo - many state-owned enterprises but also some private ones - quickly realized that the prices of their goods were too high, especially compared to Chinese products. "Our prices are a little high," admits Son, Export Manager for Viseri, Vietnam's main silk maker. "But I went downtown and I saw a shirt just like ours selling for $500. Ours is $40. What we are missing is the trademark."

Seven months after President Bill Clinton ended America's embargo on trade with Vietnam, few of the Vietnamese exhibitors hoped to signed contracts. Most said they came to get to know the American market and to build a network of contacts. Without the Most Favored Nation Status, Vietnam's goods are hit with 25% import duties that price them out of the American market but exhibitors felt confident they would break the US market sooner or later. Tan Tien, a HoChiMinh City garment maker, has already sold sweaters to Canada and hopes to do the same in the United States but must wait until America gives Vietnam a quota.

The Tan Tien kiosk at VietExpo 94.

Vietnam's largest shoe manufacturer, Bitis, has also been exporting to Canada for four years. Thamyfa, a private manufacturer of wooden kitchen utensils has been exporting widely to Europe and Japan but has yet to break into the North-American market.

Outside the exhibition hall, demonstrators make no difference between politicians and businessmen. "Doing business with Vietnam is trading on the tombs of those who sacrificed their lives for freedom", says 42-year-old Nguyen Son who came to the US in 1990 after escaping on a small boat with ten people. "I got up at 5 am to come and protest here," he says.



Nguyen Son.

Many Vietnamese-Americans disagree with Co Pham's upbeat vision of the role the emigre community can play. "He says we are rich and we can develop Vietnam," recalls 50-year-old Quang Nguyen, editor of the weekly Vien Dong Kinh The Tuoi Bao (Pacific Rim Economic Times), California's first Vietnamese economic newspaper. "He is wrong. Except for a few people, the community only has small businesses. We cannot do much for the Vietnamese economy."

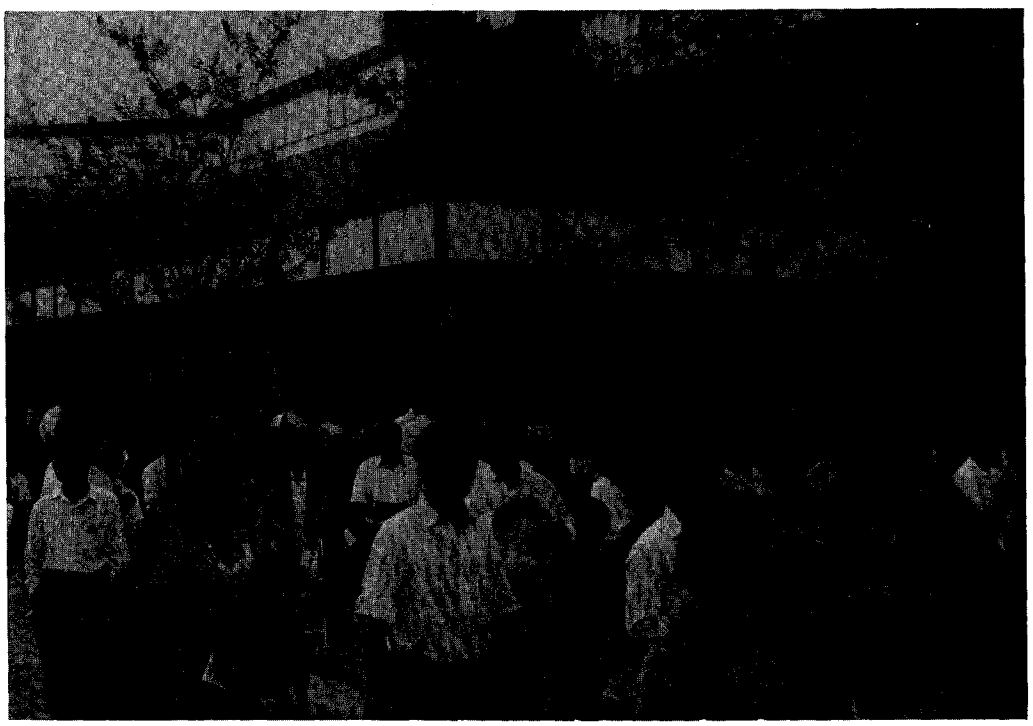
According to Quang, many Vietnamese-Americans have gone back to Vietnam to invest but few succeeded. "Close to 70% failed," he says, admitting the figure has more to do with coffee shop talk than a real scientific survey but believing it to be an accurate description of the situation. "Some of my friends invested $100,000, sometimes $200,000 and they lost everything. There are too many authorizations to get, to many payments to be made under the table. We do not know the rules of that market."

For sure, there are some successes. Quang knows of some Vietnamese emigres who successfully launched an ice-maker business back home. Others opened car rental companies, tire shops. "Between 1988 and 1990, there was a lot of respect for the Vietnamese-Americans," says Quang. "Not now. The people have seen too many failures. They know that our community cannot deliver what it promises."

WHAT ROLE FOR THE VIETNAMESE COMMUNITY?

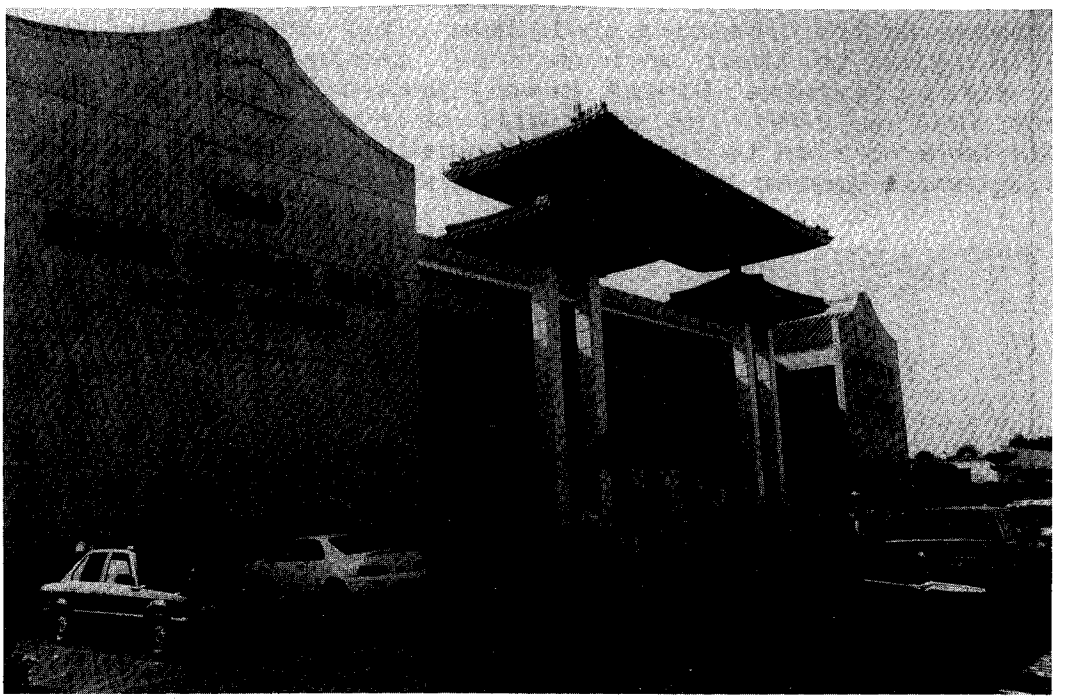
So is there a role for the Vietnamese-overseas in the future of Vietnam? Some people say no. "There are too many poor people in Vietnam," says Linh, a young usher at St-Columban's Catholic Church, the largest Vietnamese parish near Little Saigon. "We cannot help. We have to take care of our own poor people."

It is 3 pm on a Sunday afternoon and St-Columban's is full of Vietnamese faithful wearing their best. They overflow on the porch, kids clinging to their mothers arms, teenagers hiding to smoke their first cigarette. Ushers in well-pressed black pants and white shirts tell me the 7 pm mass will be even more crowded. "Most people have no time to follow up on what is happening in Vietnam," says Catholic lawyer Van Pham Pho. "They are busy living here."



Sunday on the porch of St-Columban's.
The crowd exits the Vietnamese afternoon mass.

Even more crowded than St-Columban's is the Asian Garden, Little Saigon's most elegant shopping center. The building has large glass windows, an upturned red-tiled roof and tall white statues of the three wise men (Happiness, Wealth and Longevity). The parking lot is crowded and well-dressed women driving expensive cars fight over parking spaces. Little girls wear ruffled dresses and velvet bows. So many people are entering the Mall I begin to wonder if some special event is taking place. But there is nonet. Today is a usual Sunday. Inside the complex, families mingle, gawking at the display of the gold shops, greeting friends, exchanging news, buying sweets. Coffee shops are packed with young men drinking iced coffee. The high-pitched tones of the southern Vietnamese accent fills the hall.With the two security guards, I am the only non-Vietnamese in the building. "People like to come here," explains a bookstore employee. "It is a good place to come on Sunday."



The Asian Garden Mall on Bolsa Street in Westminster.

Outside the Asian Garden, volunteers collect signatures to protest human rights violations in Vietnam but their booth attracts less people than another booth selling phone cards. "I can do nothing for Vietnam," says 65-year-old Nguyen Thi Quy. "I hate communists. They took my property."

Before 1975, Quy owned a manufacture in Saigon, a big villa on Ca Thang Street, and lots of jewelry. Today, she lives alone in Santa Ana with her 75-year-old husband Ninh. "We are poor," she says, clutching her small purse tightly.

Nguyen Thi Quy.

Quy's eight children and 25 grandchildren live all over North-America. This November, Quy will vote for the first time in an American election and she will vote Republican. "I vote for Pete", she says referring to Republican governor Peter Wilson. "Why not Kathleen Brown?" I ask, appealing to her solidarity for strong women. Quy does not know who Brown is, much less what the Democratic candidate stands for. Pete, she says, "is like Nixon who fought the communists."

Quy is not the only Republican supporter in the area. On the wall of Doctor Pham's office there is a color photograph showing former

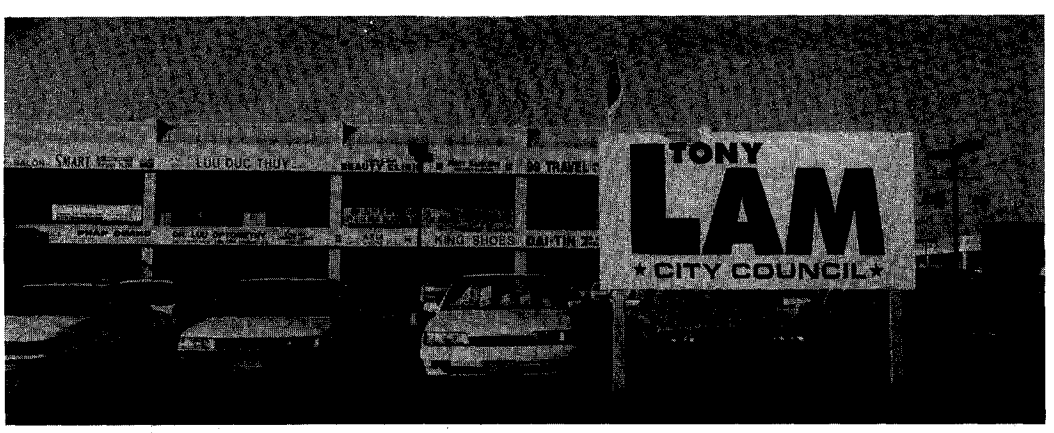
United States' presidents Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan, George Bush and Richard Nixon. The photograph is dedicated to doctor Pham,thanking him for "his outstanding commitment to the Republican Party and our principles." The walls of the Former Detainee's office also proudly display a diploma earned by the group's president. "We do not have the money to influence politics, but maybe we can have the vote," says lawyer Van Pham, President of Vietnamese Catholic Community of Orange County and a committed Republican.

For the first time, in 1992, Democratic Committees were set up in Orange County with names such as the Phoenix Club and the Vietnamese-American Democratic League. According to the Southeast Asia Resource Center, in Washington D.C., their main supporters are recruited among the young generation who perceives the Democrats as "more concerned with people of color."(2)

PRESSURE GOVERNMENTS TO PUT PRESSURE ON VIETNAM

Many Vietnamese-American militants I meet say their new strategy is to "put pressure on American congressmen to put pressure" on Vietnam to improve its human rights records and move toward democracy."That's why we have to register more Vietnamese voters," explains social worker Van Pham who came to Vietnam in 1991 and wants to improve Vietnam's human rights record. "Our people do not see the importance of the vote. We are now trying to educate them."

Vietnamese-Americans have tended to stay away from American politics. They have only recently began to field candidates in local elections. And the lucky few did not owe their victory to their ethnic constituency. "My father only got a small part of the Vietnamese vote," explains Carol Lam, the 22-year-old daughter of Tony Lam, California's first Vietnamese city-councillor. "We have not learned to stand with our own yet but the college students are getting involved me now." (In Westminster, it is estimated about a third of Lam's 7119 votes came from the 72,000 potential Vietnamese voters.)



A campaign sign for Tony Lam on Bolsa Street.

(2). The Vietnamese American Community, A statistical and political perspective, Southeast Asia Resource Center, Washington D.C. 1994.

A DIVIDED COMMUNITY... STILL TRYING TO UNDERSTAND DEMOCRACY

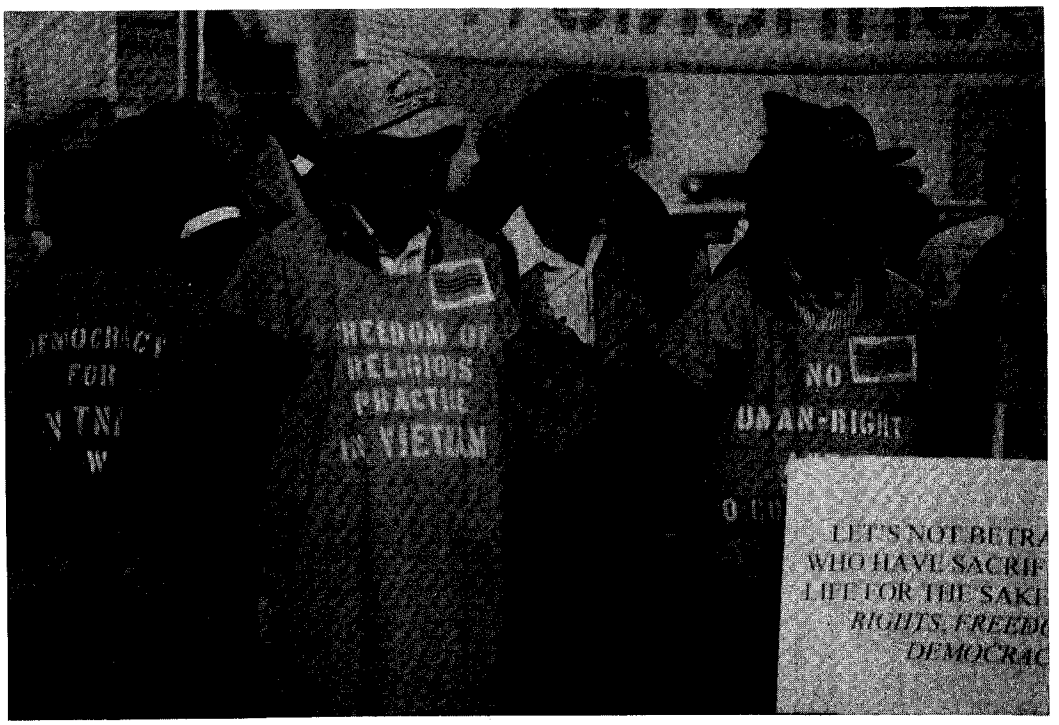
Almost twenty years after the end of the war, the Vietnamese-American community remains divided. "I am always amazed to see how unable we have been to generate a good leadership," says journalist and economic publisher Quang.

Even on rallying issues such as freedom of religion and respect of human rights, getting people to work together is tough. "I can hardly believe we have succeeded in bringing them all here today," says Reverend Bastille, a former army chaplain who served a year in Vietnam and is among the organizers of California's first Vietnamese Interfaith Council.

Today, about one hundred leaders of various Vietnamese-American organizations have gathered at the Liberty Christian Reformed Church, a warehouse-looking building located in an industrial park of San Jose. Representatives from all religions are here: Buddhist monks, Cao Dai leader, Catholic priests, Protestant pastors, Hoa Hao believers. Each take a turn relating the violence their followers have suffered under communism. Most of it goes back to the late 70's and the early 80's. Some is more recent. "Even the Vietnamese ignore how brutal the repression has been," says the Hoa Hao delegate. Most participants are men. Few are under 30. "Young people are sick of Vietnamese politics in America," says Nguyen Anh Tung, a former navy captain turned software engineer. "They do not want to get involved with the old organizations, they see too much factionalism, too much bickering."

Today's meeting is the first of its kind. Never before have representatives of all faiths gathered to plan a strategy to defend religious freedoms in Vietnam. "You should have seen the first meeting of the Council," recalls Bastille. "I had to give a course in democracy. We took minutes, we voted, I introduce Roberts rule of order. Those people argue to win. Nothing else. They do not compromise. The meeting went on and on for hours."

A group photo of the Interfaith Conference delegates.



Demonstrating for religious freedom and human rights at VietExpo 94 in San Francisco.

Are Vietnamese-American organizations really so undemocratic? Doctor Nguyen Trong Viet, United States spokesperson for Vietnam Alliance, a worldwide organization of 34 democratic movements, admits many groups are struggling. "The concept of democracy is new to us," he says. "South Vietnam was a repressive regime too. We have to learn to accept different ideas, work with people who do not totally agree with us. We are making progress. If we want our country to become a democracy, we must learn about it too."
Even former detainee like Khuong admit South Vietnam did not quite have a democracy prior to 1975. "We had many political parties but we did not have democracy," he says.

The pressure to change is strong now, especially coming from the new generation of young educated Vietnamese-Americans. Turned off by the infighting and the dreams of revenge they see in Vietnamese-American politics, many travel to Vietnam in search of their roots. "We all romanticize the homeland," says Vinh, a San Jose software engineer. "After as while, the lack of freedom gets to us."

Then it is back to square one. Some get involve in American politics. Others join Vietnamese-American groups hoping to change them from within. On "Open Forum", a private electronic discussion group for young Vietnamese-Americans my question about the lack of democracy in Vietnamese organization triggers a lively debate. "I am a member of the Yale Vietnamese-Americans Student Association," answered one "uvie", as the participants to Open Forum call themselves. "Sometimes I think our organization is too democratic. It takes so long to make a decision we rarely get anything done." Most other participants admit the "older generation" has trouble accepting different points of view.

"Our community needs to be more educated about freedom of speech," says journalist Co Nguyen whose own Orange County newspaper has often been threatened by anti-communist militants angry with the newspaper coverage. "We must learn to respect other people's ideas, to respect democracy."

Nguoi Viet's office in Westminster.
Coverage of anti-communist groups has to be moderate.

Nguyen Anh Tung argues the emigres must respect democracy in their own organizations before they demand it in Vietnam. On September 24th, 1994, Tung got himself elected one of two representatives of the Vietnamese Community of Northern California. The September election was the first ever for the leadership of the 19-year-old organization. The community is 200,000 strong and according to Tung, 9,000 voted by mail to elect their representatives. Still, some Vietnamese-Americans say the election was an exercise in futility that did not fundamentally alter the autocratic way in which most Vietnamese organizations are run.

But many disagree. "We know Washington will soon normalize with Hanoi," says social worker Cuong, a member of California's Interfaith Council and one of the organizers of the San Jose Interfaith Conference on Human Rights in Vietnam. "We have to learn new ways to make our voice heard. In the past the American authorities were on our side. Now it is different. We have to learn about human rights. We know of them but we do not know how to lobby for them. We must learn activism, learn how to reach the media, how to contact senators."

To learn about it, the Council had invited that day an aid to congressman Tom Lantos, co-chairman of the Congress Human Rights Committee. The aid talks of the need to be "open to new information", to be "careful of cultural gap between your representatives and the young congressional aids who have no similar experience of war"

At the San Jose conference, and with almost all Vietnamese-American militants I meet, the expression "spiritual war" keeps coming up.

FIGHTING A SPIRITUAL WAR

"Our worry is not with communism," says lawyer Van Pham. "We know communism will fall. We worry about the reconstruction, we need to restore moral values."

A member of the Interfaith Council, Pham used to teach Law in Hue before 1975. In America he sold insurance, worked in manufactures to put himself trough law school. "Young people today have no respect for their elders," complains Van Pham. "They do not respect discipline and sacrifice."

Many of the Vietnamese-Americans militants I meet in Orange County sound just like some of Vietnam's communist hard-liners. They worry about family values, about traditional conduct, about drugs, prostitution and youth's undiscipline. They disparage the urban's youth new freedom, their embrace of consumerism, their rebellion against the authority. (The fact that those may be the very seed of the rebellion to come seems to escape them.)

Doctor Co Pham himself supports a "strong government". "Vietnam needs a one party state for a while," he says. "A clean and strong government. I can not imagine democracy like in France or in the US taking hold in Vietnam."

Pham admits Vietnam does not have a perfect record of human rights. "But it is not like China," he says. "The communists did not kill as many people. There are problems but the majority of the people want economic progress more than they want political change."

Pham, the lawyer and human rights militant, supports the return of confucianism and religious values. "Democracy in the West is too liberal, too soft on crime, there is too much individualism," he says admitting his interest for more "disciplined" models such as Japan and Korea.

Pham even worries that for many, in Vietnam, democracy means they can do anything they want. He fears chaos and anarchy. "They do not know that in a democracy you have responsibilities and that there are rules too," he says. "Vietnamese-Americans have to understand 100% democracy could not be applied in Vietnam now."

Health manager and talk-show host Do Diem, is one of the few militants I meet who does not sound like a preacher. "I am not anti-communist," says the 30-year-old MBA. "I am anti-dictatorship. If the actual government is replaced by another dictatorship, I will fight it too. We need to modernize Vietnam, not bring confucianism back. My main goal is to change Vietnamese society, to

open it up to the world, to modernize it. This is not about capitalism against communism, it is about modernizing a feudal society."

A member of Free Vietnam Alliance, a large international umbrella group of 34 democratic groups whose central objective is to foster development of a new civic society as a breeding ground for democracy, Do believes the real forces for change are in Vietnam not in America. Among the Vietnamese emigres, scenarios for the future of Vietnam vary widely but most center on this concept of a "spiritual war."

Carole Beaulieu
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In San Francisco, a new generation of militants with the flag of the former Republic of South Vietnam.

(NEXT: Fighting the spiritual war. A story of books, cultural values, Vietnamese-language newspapers harassed into self-censorship by anti-communist militants, a courageous radio station and the hopes of electronic mail.)

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