

HIST 211A The Viet Nam Wars
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Oral History Project Reflection Paper

Chloë and I met not just with Mr. Nguyễn Tường Thuộc, but also four of his friends. At first this was overwhelming, but it came to be very helpful. I had thought we would need to step in more often to guide the conversation, but the others proved themselves contributors, not distractions. One of the friends was younger and white – he came from a very different background than Mr. Thuộc, but he had a much better rapport with him. Mr. Thuộc was more open to his questions, and he asked many that we hadn't considered. Another friend was invited to the interview to translate, since he was fluent in Vietnamese and English. He described himself as a "community member" and acted as an excellent go-between. Two other friends were the same age as M. Thuộc, and had clearly had very similar experiences in Vietnam. They spoke up once or twice to add their perspective on a particular event.

At first, Mr. Thuộc spoke about the events with great enthusiasm but very generally - he had a presentation of pictures acquired from the internet for us, and he and his friends summarized the conflict. It was a good setup of the context, and it hinted at his opinions and what he thought was important to talk about, but none of it contained his personal experiences. Still, I decided not to interrupt because he had clearly put much effort into the presentation, and dismissing it would be terribly rude. In order to lead us back to Mr. Thuộc's experiences, I thanked him for the context, and then asked about his family. Here I got a little more personal detail, as he said a little about his brother, and Mr. Thuộc's move to the south in 1954, but still the story was a minor detail under the overall movements of the war.

At some point in the interview, I began to suspect that Mr. Thuộc was sticking to general descriptions of the war because he didn't want to talk about his own experiences. This impression was strengthened when he declined to tell us about his fighting communists in the north pre-1954 (clearly a sore subject, I changed questions) and when he told us that when he got on the plane in 1992, he cast off all thoughts about the war. One instance in which he did tap into those painful memories was when he recounted how the communists had come into his catholic village and killed people in front of him. His uncle was cut into three pieces. He told us this with great anger and pain. Mr. Thuộc also evaded

answering some questions (specifically about his exact tactics while working as a counter-intelligence official in the ARVN) by saying “that’s my job.” These were declined because to this day, he wasn’t allowed to disclose that information. While that was an unfortunate impediment, it wasn’t one we could overcome with further questions.

There was a process of improvising questions as the interview continued, but also one of removing questions as more context was gained. There were several questions in the second half of our list which I realized had already been answered, or didn’t need to be asked after the first half of the interview. Questions like “did one side deserve to win?” were reasonable when we didn’t know about Mr. Thuợc’s experiences with the other side, but would’ve made him incredulous or even infuriated if asked after he had told us all the terrible things that he had seen. I struck those questions from our list before they could be asked.

Looking back on those questions we did ask and the answers we received, I wish I had pressed more about his first interaction with the Americans, because his opinion of Americans and his pride in their having worked together was key to his core message. As I continued my research, I also regretted not asking more about Radio Free Vietnam, as it came to take a large role in my paper. During our presentation on Monday, it was brought to my attention that we had neglected to ask about Thuợc’s opinion on the economic changes the communists had made. And while he was verbose on his opinion of the way American news had portrayed his side of the war, we didn’t know what he thought of the American civilian protests.

I would say the greatest learning experience of this project was the interview itself, which was an opportunity I had never had before and was honored to receive. Over the course of the rest of the project, I also learned a particular appreciation for history research: the context it can give and the perspectives it can present.

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Pride in Defeat, Doubt in Portrayal

First of all, I would like you, write, or you talk, exactly, what I am referring to you. Okay. Because a lot of paper, a lot of people, talk different way. We record it, too. If you will not talk, you not write, exactly as I talk to you today, we reserve the right to correct it. - Nguyễn Tường Thước

The recording of our interview with Mr. Nguyễn Tường Thước began with these words, as he expressed first and foremost the requirement that he be represented accurately. Without any prompting or questions, he made it clear that this was a constant thought of his as he narrated his experiences. Mr. Thước, an expatriate Vietnamese veteran of the ARVN, represents a people with a pride in the war; despite having lost their home, they are forever proud that they fought for it. Though they are faced with what is almost an expectation that they should feel nothing but regret regarding the war, they are so proud to have defended their home that they actively seek to raise the self-confidence of the Americans. But his is not a perspective which has been accurately represented in the mass media, and so he participates in these interviews, and so he ensures that his interviewers are accurate.

Mr. Thước has lived a long and exciting life, only some of which he was able to share with us in the hours we had together, and through the language barrier. An astounding amount of it was spent in service in Vietnam, and when he emigrated to America, the country and the cause he fought for never left his mind. He became the leader of Radio Free Vietnam, a news outlet for the Government of Free Vietnam (GFVN), a revolutionary movement with the aim to create a democratic Vietnam. The strongest themes in his recollection are paralleled and made still clearer in the words of the GFVN. They also share a perspective on the Vietnamese people, and the assumption that the people agree with them, though that may or may not be the case.

Regardless, two strong emotions prevail: pride in the fight against communism, and frustration in its being forgotten.

The pride comes from many sources, much of it originating in defiance of the communists. The interview began with a reflection on why Mr. Thuợc, having come from the North, had joined the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). He recounted his experiences at their hands. Having come from a catholic village, his community was threatened by the communists; a neighbor had been kidnapped less than a mile from the village, and when he returned, he had “the bone, the backbone” – so thin he was skin and bones. Mr. Thuợc’s uncle-in-law was cut into three pieces. Witnessing these acts of the communists, it was obvious that he join the opposing side, and later, that he be proud for defending against them. In Pleiku, Mr. Thuợc recalled that it was his responsibility to provide security for the local military base, and that he ensured there was minimal communist activity. In the words of his translator, Phil Boi, “He was so proud that he ... suppress them.”

To speak of the cause Mr. Thuợc aligns himself with today, the GFVN also presents this pride in defiance. Its online “Open Letter,” written by member Nguyen Huu Chanh, calls for Vietnamese expatriates by expressing appreciation for those already acting: “deeply touched by the valiance of our soldiers who, in spite of innumerable obstacles, continue the battle to liberate the nation from the worst dictator we have known throughout our long history.”¹ In situations where the communist government of Vietnam represses their movement, the GFVN presents it as a reaction out of fear: “Since the Communists regime in Vietnam had become too fearful of GFVN forces, they demanded the Cambodian government to deport these freedom fighters.”² The GFVN strikes fear into the hearts of the communists because they “are a threat to the regime.”³

¹ Nguyen Huu Chanh, *Open Letter*, (Government of Free Vietnam), (web).

² GFVN, *Timeline*, (Government of Free Vietnam), (web).

³ Eugene Balk, *Waging a war of words*, (Government of Free Vietnam), (web).

By appealing to this pride, the movement ensures events that are physically damaging to their cause translate into psychological reasons to continue the struggle.

On the basis of those traumatic experiences that he suffered, Mr. Thuợc, as well as the GFVN and those expatriates it represents, argue that the ‘people’s movement’ is not for the people. Mr. Thuợc recalled that he had met with his younger half-brother many years after the war, and the two attempted to convince each other of their side’s reasons. As Mr. Thuợc’s friend, Chinh Tran put it, Mr. Thuợc “tried to convince that communism isn’t good for everyone in the war, and it was very bad for the country.” The GFVN takes a more distanced, broad angle as it attacks the communists’ policies since they have taken over the country, which have left “the vast majority of our people and nation ... starved and destitute, struggling day and night for scraps of food and shelter,” while “the CSVN purposely ignores their cries and continues to allow its party officials to wantonly steal from the public coffers.”⁴ The GFVN goes still bolder to say that “All the suffering in Vietnam today has been directed by International Communism ... continuing their oppression of the people they have conquered.”⁵

The reasoning of the GFVN follows that since the communists have perpetrated these acts against the people of Vietnam, most of those people today don’t want the communists in charge: “Under such burning condition [*sic*], I strongly believe that with the exception of a privileged few who are enjoying special powers and benefits, the absolute majority of the people of Vietnam wish nothing but the earliest possible demise of CSVN regime.”⁶ Continuing with this expectation of agreement with the majority of Vietnamese nationals, Chanh’s “Open Letter” says that “The majority of our people realize the value of freedom, democracy, and the true meaning of market economy,”⁷ and Nguyen Hoang Dan’s Open Letter estimates that majority,

⁴ GFVN, *Call to Action*, (Government of Free Vietnam), (web).

⁵ GFVN, *A Program to Save and Build the Nation*, (Government of Free Vietnam), (web).

⁶ GFVN, *Call to Action*, (web).

⁷ GFVN, *Call to Action*, (web).

expressing that “more than 70 million people inside Vietnam ... are now disillusioned with the communist government.”⁸ Mr. Thuợc agreed, enthusiastically expressing his belief that the communists had brainwashed peasants with propaganda and “promises” in order to make them part of their movement, but that the tide of public opinion had turned against them: “Now in Vietnam, a lot of people who helped the communists, now they raise up, to protect against the communists, right now, today. Now, they found out, the communists, they lie, lie, lie.”

But it was not the communist’s misrepresentation of the conflict that most concerned Mr. Thuợc. Throughout the interview, from the first line quoted above, to his final request, he expressed a deep frustration with the way his fight was portrayed in American media. He connected it to modern conversations about the media by referring to it as “fake news.” It was not the simple fact of incorrect reporting that frustrated him, but the consequences. He, and as he and the GFVN implied, much of the Vietnamese expatriate community, charge that the war was condemnably misrepresented: not just that the war could've been won, but that the people of South Vietnam could've won it, were it not for its fatalistic portrayal.

That subject is complicated. Opinions on the media’s effect on the Vietnam War vary wildly from the exposing of the truth, to the exposing of confidential information, to the active damaging of the conflict it was reporting on. *Black April*, by George J. Veith, was recommended during the interview as an excellent representation of the conflict as Mr. Thuợc and his fellow Vietnamese expatriates experienced it. A large part of Veith’s argument centers on “fake news.” He writes that the opinion of South Vietnam as corrupt, oppressive, and opposed to the desires of the majority of the Vietnamese was a theory “fed” by the American Left. In its goal to end the war, the Left portrayed the South Vietnamese government in as “a dictatorial regime refusing to share power and suppressing the will of the people ... and hence the war was unwinnable.”⁹

⁸ Nguyen Hoang Dan, *Open Letter*, (Government of Free Vietnam), (web).

⁹ George J. Veith, *Black April. The Fall of South Vietnam 1973-75* (New York: Encounter Books, 2012), 4.

In an opposing position, Susan A. Brewer argues in *Why America Fights* that the media was not an organization oriented towards one goal, but one which gave any information it got. For much of the war, the media relied on government sources and reported as the government asked it to, being “supportive, or, at time, ambiguous,” which “tended to disguise the flaws in the administration’s war aims.”¹⁰ Its chief role in these early years was “communicating emotional messages of patriotism, trust, and reassurance.”¹¹ Because of this, the media was compelled to report on “radical” civilian protests over the “main peaceful demonstration ... and the excessive force used by the soldiers against the protestors.”¹² Brewer alleges that in fact, it was not the media that shifted events in Vietnam, but events in Vietnam that shifted the media. Only then “did television coverage begin to reflect the public’s growing doubts about the war.”¹³ As media began to adopt a more government-independent stance, the Tet Offensive occurred, which “proved both sides [of the combatants in Vietnam] wrong by showing the war to be what it was – a stalemate.” The news, Brewer concludes, “reflected this conclusion.”¹⁴

And here is a moment where Mr. Thuợc had much to say. He recounted his own experience in the Tet Offensive, when he operated in Pleiku as a counterintelligence officer, and was actually given some warning that the offensive was about to take place. He spoke of how his men had recovered an NLF tape reel that was to be played in the radio station, about a week before the offensive. Though it took several days to determine its purpose, he still had time to warn his superiors of the offensive, and to be ignored by them. There were “alerts every day,” said Mr. Thuợc, and so his warning was brushed off. Nevertheless, he was proud that he had been able to prepare his own men for the coming conflict, and that the Allied forces had repelled

¹⁰ Susan Brewer, *Why America Fights. Patriotism and War Propaganda from the Philippines to Iraq* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 181.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Brewer, *Why America Fights*, 203.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 181.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 207.

the offensive. He made a point of this, directing the story at us: “I would like you to know, in that case, the South Vietnamese Army not too bad. Even we were surprise-attacked. But we defend, we fight back.”

And yet, to his lifelong infuriation, the event was not portrayed as a victory. Despite Brewer’s claim of a stalemate representation, the examples she proceeds to use – the famous quote “It became necessary to destroy the town in order to save it,” the image of the public execution, Walter Cronkite imploring Americans to negotiate as “honorable people” – are all media coverage that portrayed the event as a poorly-executed tragedy.¹⁵

In Mr. Thuợc’s eyes, this same dynamic continued through the end of the war, and after. There is an American belief that in the final days before the fall of Saigon, the forces of the ARVN fled without a fight. But as Mr. Thuợc knows, units fought until the end, often unreported by the news.¹⁶ Mr. Thuợc gave as example the second battle of Ap Bac: the first one had been reported widely as exemplary of the ARVN’s hopeless weakness, unable to gain victory even with superior numbers and better equipment. The second battle of Ap Bac, to my knowledge, was never reported in English. The only accounts of it have been from ARVN veterans, such as in Lam Quang Thi’s *The 25 Year Century*, in which he recounts that he had proposed and directed the attack, which was well-strategized but still difficultly-won.¹⁷ But Lam as notes sardonically, and as Mr. Thuợc said angrily of the reporting, there was “Nothing, nobody said nothing.”

Having this experience with misportrayal, those with Thuợc’s perspective are constantly concerned with the manner in which they and their goals are presented. And fascinatingly, it is not just a good portrayal they are determined to achieve, but an accurate, transparent one. The GFVN website lists on its news page several articles written by local papers, some of which are

¹⁵ Ibid., 208.

¹⁶ Veith, *Black April*, 4.

¹⁷ Lam Quang Thi, *The Twenty-Five Year Century*. (Denton: University of North Texas, 2001), 130-131.

surprisingly impartial. They include conversations with Vietnamese nationals who are unconvinced of the GFVN's goals, as well as previous allegations of corruption that have been made against the movement.¹⁸ These articles are not even listed as convenient methods to wage counter-arguments, as there are no challenges or responses posted with them. There is also a letter authored by Chanh explaining a conflict that occurred in Thailand between the local government and the GFVN, one which was reported very sparsely in the West, but which was of critical importance to the GFVN and the expatriates they represent.¹⁹ The organization is explicit on their goals, including the reassurance and promise that they do not intend to restart the war, theirs being a forward-thinking movement oriented for "the people of the future."²⁰

As can be seen, many of the GFVN's arguments are addressed to the "people," who they promise to "bring Democracy, Freedom, Prosperity, and Happiness."²¹ This is due to the GFVN's strong belief that the Vietnamese people have "aspirations in democracy."²² But other accounts of the people organize their priorities differently. Tony Zinni recounts his realization that "we were convincing ourselves that we were building hope and promise in the Vietnamese people while the people were seeing themselves as caught between two stones."²³ The priority of the people, their allegiance, was not to democracy. "We were promising some vague future hope of democracy and well-being. She needed immediate security and assurance of survival."²⁴ Zinni observed that the goals of America were far too abstract to match the goals of the Vietnamese people. The "democracy, freedom, self-determination, prosperity" couldn't appeal when the Vietnamese's only experience with the concepts was through the infamously corrupt Saigon

¹⁸ Balk, *Waging a war of words*, (web).

¹⁹ Nguyen Huu Chanh, *Open Letter*, (web).

²⁰ GFVN, *Call to Action*, (web).

²¹ GFVN, *A Program to Save and Build the Nation*, (web).

²² GFVN, *Mission Statement*, (Government of Free Vietnam), (web).

²³ Tony Zinni, *The Battle for Peace. A Frontline Vision of America's Power and Purpose* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 16.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

government.²⁵ America presented these things as a counterpoint to communism, but the people couldn't be considering philosophies while they were worrying about their next meal.

When the war ended, it was feared that the wave of communism would spread. If for no other reason, that was why the Allies should be ashamed of their fight. The very first words of Frederick Kagan's *Finding the Target* are "The Vietnam War hurt the American armed forces badly." Never before had the American military lost a major war, or been so distrusted by the public.²⁶ When 173 army generals were surveyed for their reactions to the war, 70 percent of them said they didn't understand its objective. "Why were we doing this?"²⁷ U.S. leaders had feared that if America lost, that would damage its "image of strength considered to be vital in the stand-off with the Soviet Union."²⁸

But as it turned out, the Vietnam War had its costly benefits for America, particularly for its military: it became the impetus needed to transform the military's "manpower policies, training, doctrine, and equipment," eventually making it "the most effective armed force in modern history."²⁹ The military was forced to up its expenditures on providing for its members, as well as to improve its training with better, more realistic maneuvers. All in all, the experience of defeat made the American military into an appealing career, a place where people today can find occupation, experience, and even citizenship.

Still, America lost. Communism prevailed in Vietnam. But for many of the South Vietnamese, it was never so absolute. Zinni recalls that his Vietnamese comrades had a more long-term perspective in the war – where the American soldier appeared for one year, did his part and hoped it was enough to end the war, and then left, the Vietnamese weren't ever

²⁵ Ibid., 21.

²⁶ Frederick W. Kagan, *Finding the Target. The Transformation of American Military Policy* (New York: Encounter Books, 2006), 3.

²⁷ Brewer, *Why America Fights*, 182.

²⁸ Ibid., 179.

²⁹ Kagan, *Finding the Target*, 3.

expecting the scenario to shift so quickly.³⁰ And when Saigon fell, the next domino did not. This was central for Mr. Thuợc. “We stopped the, stopped the red wave that come from the North, China. Stopped the red wave.” The fight may have been lost, but it had an impact. It was his opinion that the Vietnam War had stalled the advance long enough to stop it. Although it had cost him his home, the communists had not progressed.

Among our prepared questions: “Was the war worth it?” By the halfway point of the interview, there was no need to ask. While Americans find themselves asking “why were we doing this,” Mr. Thuợc and his community already know. It was expressed to us in the interview, and there is no need to paraphrase. As Boi put it, “even though there’s the Vietnam War as everybody know, the Vietnamese people, American soldiers, but he so proud of his duty during the Vietnam War, not only him but the Vietnamese people in general. So proud that we fought for freedom, we fought together very well, together with American soldiers, and the support from America. And send a message to all of the countries, especially in South Asia.” And in Mr. Thuợc’s own words, “I very happy I fulfilled my obligation. Very very happy. I proud to fulfill my obligation, to serve my country, to serve the people.” Mr. Thuợc hasn’t moved on from the war, but neither has he allowed it to consume him. He is proud of the progress he and his family have made, and the dream they have been able to fulfill in exile.

Though those elements of the Vietnamese expatriate community we’ve witnessed appear to be confident in the good nature of their fight, the same cannot be said of their American allies. Due to the portrayal of the war and its heavy affect on American society, and due to the belief that the majority of Vietnamese wanted to become part of the North, to this day the public mind believes it was wrong to have ever fought.³¹ But as Veith argues, there were many Vietnamese who fled the communists, who fought them, and who fled again when the war ended. “Why is

³⁰ Zinni, *The Battle for Peace*, 18.

³¹ Veith, *Black April*, 4.

their desire for freedom not seen as valid, their viewpoint dismissed?” The end of the war and the fleeing of people such as Mr. Thuợc “reveals the depth of their aspirations, a desire America tried to develop and protect. We should not be ashamed of that impulse.”³² Mr. Thuợc, in his post-war work with Radio Free Vietnam and the GFVN, in his pride in fighting the battle, in his dismay with its portrayal, and in his support of his American allies, shares this opinion.

It is only appropriate that we end as the interview ended. Mr. Thuợc directed his final request towards that misportrayal of the conflict, towards that belief that the people of Vietnam agreed with the goal of democracy, and that those who defended it should be proud.

But, please, the last question: I would like you, you to write something about American soldier and Vietnamese soldier. They did very, very well their job. To serve his country. Now whole my family, they US citizen. We like to serve the country. Even as before. But now, a lot of fake news insult the American soldier, I'm unhappy. You, please, today, you got information from me, okay, write something about our friend. American friend. Okay. He served very, he did very good job. Okay?

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³² Ibid., 499.

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