

# Vietnamese Americans

LESSONS IN AMERICAN HISTORY

## Vietnam and Vietnamese Americans after 1975

### 1975

**VIETNAM** The new Communist regime begins rounding up former political officials and military personnel tied to the South Vietnamese government. They are sent to re-education camps, where they are “re-educated” in Communist ideology and forced into hard labor. Later, intellectuals, writers, religious leaders and leaders of ethnic minority groups are interned. Most are imprisoned on average in re-education camps for 4 to 8 years. Some are incarcerated for as long as 17 years.

**VIETNAMESE IN AMERICA** President Gerald Ford signs the Indochina Migration and Refugee Act, admitting 130,000 Southeast Asian refugees into the U.S. Of this cap, almost 120,000 are Vietnamese, with Cambodians comprising the remainder. Refugees first stay in Guam, Wake Island, or the Philippines, and then arrive in the U.S. at four relocation camps: Camp Pendleton, California; Fort Chaffee, Arkansas; Eglin Air Force Base, Florida; and Fort Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania.

### 1976

**VIETNAM** Sài Gòn, the capital of the fallen Republic of Việt Nam, is renamed Hồ Chí Minh City, to commemorate the father of Vietnamese Communism. However, many residents continue to call the city by its original name. Hà Nội becomes the seat of government of the new Socialist Republic of Việt Nam.

The 4th Party Congress calls for rapid socialization in the southern economy, with mass relocation of people and forced collectivization of agriculture, small industry and commerce. This leads to an economic disaster, provoking new waves of refugees.

### 1977

**VIETNAM** The U.S. continues its embargo on Việt Nam, and the nation was isolated from most of the non-Communist world, which meant little aid and investment.

A steady stream of Vietnamese were escaping Việt Nam to other Southeast Asian countries at about 2,000 refugees per month, starting the “Second Wave” of Vietnamese refugees.

Prime Minister Phạm Văn Đồng issues Resolution 297 to forbid the “spread of superstitions,” by severely restricting religious practices in Việt Nam and allowing the government to confiscate church properties. This is one of the first among a list of government actions in the next 25 years to restrict religious freedom in Việt Nam.

**VIETNAMESE IN AMERICA** Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA) sponsors a bill to change a refugee from a parolee to a permanent resident. This is called the 1977 Adjustment of Status Clause and is added to the 1975 Indochina Migration and Refugee Act. Prior to this amendment, the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952 indicated that a parolee’s stay is temporary.

### 1978

VIETNAM Việt Nam invades Cambodia to topple the Pol Pot regime and to expand Việt Nam's regional power. This brings on a new and costly cycle of war for Việt Nam.

Dr. Nguyễn Đan Quế is arrested for publishing two underground newspapers calling for human rights and democracy. He is imprisoned for ten years without trial. During this time, he endures torture, endless beatings and solitary confinement.

### 1979

VIETNAM China, in support of Cambodia, retaliates and attacks Việt Nam at the northern border. China's effort fails, and the 300,000 ethnic Chinese living in Việt Nam face persecution. Most flee Việt Nam into China or escape by sea.

The number of Vietnamese refugees leaving the country increases dramatically, with more than 50,000 in some months. The numbers are probably higher, since an estimated one-third die in passage. Some escape Việt Nam by land traveling north to China or west to Cambodia to end up in Thailand border camps. Others escape by boat, ending up in Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, or Hong Kong. Escaping Việt Nam was a hazardous journey, and the refugees leaving by sea became known as the "Boat People."

VIETNAMESE IN AMERICA The United Nations High Commission for Refugees and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam establishes the Orderly Departure Program, which accounts for about 5,000 Vietnamese to come annually to the United States. Hà Nội hopes a liberal emigration policy might help to improve its relations with the western nations.

By the spring of 1979, the plight of the "Boat People" has received enough international attention to prompt President Jimmy Carter to order the 7th Fleet of the U.S. Navy to seek out vessels in distress in the South China Sea.

Chùa Giác Quang in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, is among the first Vietnamese Buddhist temples built in the United States.

### 1980

VIETNAM A genuine economic crisis develops, with production shortages and extreme dependency on the Soviet Union. Việt Nam suffers from considerable food shortages resulting from bad harvests and from the disincentives of the collectivization system.

Việt Nam takes steps away from harsh economic controls by backing away from socializing family farms, accepting small-scale retail private enterprises and decentralizing decision-making in state-run enterprises. But, Việt Nam does not abandon plan to socialize the southern economy.

"Boat People" continue to escape Việt Nam throughout the 1980s. An estimated 500,000 refugees died at sea, or one-half of those attempting to escape Việt Nam.

VIETNAMESE IN AMERICA A second wave of immigrants peaks, largely "Boat People" escaping Vietnam by sea.

President Jimmy Carter signs the Refugee Act of 1980, which provides a definition of a refugee, creates the Office of Refugee Resettlement, sets the number of refugee admissions at 50,000 per year (unless in case of an emergency), and allows a refugee to adjust his/her status after one year to become a permanent resident and, after

four more years, to become a U.S. citizen.

Trường Hòa Bình Vietnamese Language School is established in San Leandro, California. Parents encourage their children to hold onto their Vietnamese roots.

### 1981

VIETNAM Additional actions are taken to liberalize agriculture, such as allowing peasants to keep some of what they produce and sell it on the open markets. By the mid-1980s, the measures taken in the late-1970s and early 1980s result in modest improvements in agricultural production.

Việt Nam dissolves the Unified Buddhist Church of Việt Nam (UBCV), the main Buddhist organization in south and central Việt Nam prior to 1975, and replaces it with a state-sponsored Việt Nam Buddhist Church. This event marks the beginning of ongoing tensions between the government and the UBCV.

VIETNAMESE IN AMERICA Boat People S.O.S. is formed in San Diego, California, to assist the Vietnamese refugees escaping Vietnam by sea.

The Southeast Asia Resource Action Center is formed in Washington, D.C., to provide services and resources to the Vietnamese refugee population in the United States.

In Galveston Bay, Texas, American fishermen turn to the Ku Klux Klan to terrorize Vietnamese fishermen, claiming unfair competition. The Southern Poverty Law Center advocates on behalf of the Vietnamese refugees and wins the case, securing protection from U.S. Marshals.

### 1982

VIETNAM The Venerable Thích Huyền Quang, the Supreme Patriarch of the UBCV, and Venerable Thích Quảng Độ, the second highest figure in the Church, are arrested for calling for official recognition of the Church. They are internally exiled to separate locations.

Pastor Nguyen Lap Ma, superintendent of the former protestant church of South Việt Nam, is arrested for refusing to hand over church buildings and to join the state church. He is under permanent house arrest.

VIETNAMESE IN AMERICA The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, “The Wall,” is dedicated in Washington, D.C.

### 1983

VIETNAM The Vietnamese government forms the Committee for the Solidarity of Patriotic Vietnamese Catholics in an attempt to separate the Vietnamese Roman Catholic church from papal authority. Nguyễn Kim Điền Philippe, archbishop of Hue, defied the formation of this committee and is later placed under house arrest until his death in 1988.

VIETNAMESE IN AMERICA By September, the United States has received a total of 678,057 refugees from Southeast Asia, close to two-thirds of whom entered the U.S. between 1979-82, during the period of the refugee crisis. Vietnamese refugees accounted for about two-thirds of all Southeast Asian refugees in United States.

### 1984

VIETNAM After nine years of efforts to socialize the country’s economy, more than 80% of the economy in the south remains in private hands; and little economic recovery has occurred in the north.

### 1985

**VIETNAMESE IN AMERICA** The National League of POW/MIA Families forms in the U.S., calling for tough sanctions on Vietnam for not helping locate U.S. troops considered “missing in action” during the Vietnam War. These public emotions block any potential normalization of U.S. policy towards Vietnam.

### 1986

**VIETNAM** There is widespread public dissatisfaction among the people who have been waiting for improvement in the standard of living. Inflation shoots up by 500-700 percent, making life more miserable for the people.

The Sixth Congress of the Việt Nam Communist Party meets in December. Economic reformers and younger officials gain more power and influence. Socioeconomic renovation policies, collectively called “Đổi Mới,” are adopted to further liberalize the economy.

**VIETNAMESE IN AMERICA** Mary Queen of Việt Nam is built in New Orleans, Louisiana, becoming the first church built and owned by Vietnamese Americans.

### 1987

**VIETNAM** Another major food crisis begins and forces the government to dismantle agricultural cooperatives. As a result, agricultural production grows and prompts capitalistic activities in urban areas.

Đổi Mới actually consists of a series of actions taken over a period from 1987 to 1998, but key decisions were adopted in the 1987-1989 period, including liberalization of agriculture, opening Việt Nam to international trade, establishment of a commercial banking sector, end of almost all centrally managed prices, and elimination of most subsidies to state enterprises. In subsequent years, a legal system is slowly developed, and major efforts to reduce corruption take place.

**VIETNAMESE IN AMERICA** Congress passes the Amerasian Homecoming Act, an effort to resettle Amerasians, the children of American servicemen and Vietnamese women, in the U.S. Amerasian children face severe social and economic discrimination in Vietnam. About 75,000 Amerasians and family members have come to the U.S. under this Act.

### 1988

**VIETNAMESE IN AMERICA** The television documentary *Rescue Mission on the High Seas*, with Vu Thanh Tuy is aired on national television, exposing the plight of Vietnamese Boat People to the American public.

Tùng Nguyễn, 26, sets a record at the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) by earning seven undergraduate degrees. Such academic success stories coupled with news of increasing youth gang violence create and fuel extreme mainstream stereotypes of the younger Vietnamese American generation — that of academic wizard or violent gangster.

### 1989

**VIETNAM** Resettlement countries become increasingly impatient with the continuing outflow of Vietnamese refugees, and other Southeast Asian countries threaten to push back new arrivals.

The first forced repatriation of Vietnamese refugees in Southeast Asian camps occurs under Comprehensive Plan of Action by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. The new Plan requires asylum-seekers from Việt Nam to be screened for refugee status. Many are deemed economic migrants, and not refugees. In the next 10 years, over 110,000 are forced to return to Việt Nam.

Việt Nam agrees to take back the boat people living in camps, and promises not to punish people for having escaped the country. The United Nations agrees to monitor the return of the boat people for government harassment or discrimination.

**VIETNAMESE IN AMERICA** The musical *Miss Saigon* appears on Broadway and quickly becomes a highly popular show. The play's racist and sexist undertones anger many Vietnamese and Asian American community members.

The Vietnam Center opens at the Texas Tech University. The Center focuses on the study of the American / Vietnam experience.

### 1990

**VIETNAM** Political dissident Dr. Nguyễn Đan Quế is rearrested for issuing an appeal calling for a non-violent struggle for democracy in Việt Nam, tried for treason and condemned to prison for another 20 years.

**VIETNAMESE IN AMERICA** Under the Special Release Reeducation Center Detainee Resettlement Program (known as the Humanitarian Operation or "H.O." Program), the first group of former Vietnamese political and reeducation camp prisoners is admitted to the United States.

Actor Dustin Nguyễn stars on the popular television drama series, *21 Jump Street*. The show ends after three successful seasons.

### 1991

**VIETNAM** The United States and Việt Nam begin a joint *MIA effort* designed to test Vietnamese willingness to cooperate and to begin a process that would lead to normalization of relations.

### 1992

**VIETNAM** First ratified in 1982, the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* is ratified by the Vietnamese Constitution. The Covenant obligates governments to respect freedom of opinion and expression, including press freedom, as well as rights to peaceful assembly, freedom of association and other fundamental human rights. However, Việt Nam continues to fall short of Covenant standards.

**VIETNAMESE IN AMERICA** The flow of Vietnamese immigrants into the U.S. peaks once again, after an increase in refugees released from re-education camps through the H.O. Program and immigrants sponsored by families living in the United States.

University of Miami pre-med student Luyen Phan Nguyễn, 19, is chased down and brutally beaten to death outside a Coral Springs, Florida, college party by a mob of about 15 young white men who used their fists, feet and beer bottles. Nguyen had protested an insulting reference to his Vietnamese origin earlier at the party. The party crowd ignores the murder, as some chant "Gook, gook, gook," while the killers are heard screaming "Chink," "Gook," and "Việt Cộng." Six white men, between the ages of 18 and 22, are convicted of the hate crime and sentenced from 13 months to life in prison.

Dr. Eugene Trinh, a NASA astronaut, becomes the first Vietnamese American in space, when he serves as the primary payload specialist on the Space Shuttle Columbia, the 48th shuttle launch.

### 1993

**VIETNAM** Under President Bill Clinton, the United States takes several steps toward diplomatic normalization,

including agreeing to let multilateral lending agencies (like the World Bank and Asian Development Bank) make loans to Việt Nam.

**VIETNAMESE IN AMERICA** The motion picture, *Heaven and Earth*, directed by Oliver Stone, appears in theatres everywhere. The film is based on Lê Lý Hayslip’s autobiography, making it the first major motion picture from the perspective of a Vietnamese American woman.

**1994**

**VIETNAM** President Clinton lifts the U.S. trade embargo against Việt Nam that was in place since 1964, allowing U.S. firms to export to Việt Nam and to compete for business opportunities in Việt Nam that had been previously closed.

The Venerable Thích Quảng Độ is rearrested on charges of organizing a Church flood relief operation in the Mekong Delta and is sentenced to five years in prison.

**1995**

**VIETNAM** The U.S. opens normal diplomatic relations with Việt Nam. The U.S. Embassy opens in Hanoi.

**1996**

**VIETNAM** Malaysia and Indonesia end their refugee camps, shipping their final boat people “hold-outs” back to Việt Nam.

A CBS News program reports of labor abuses at several Nike shoe factories in Việt Nam, where workers have been hit, forced to kneel or physically abused as punishment for supposedly poor-quality work. Workers are typically paid \$40 per month, or 20 cents per hour. Nike Corporation takes no responsibility for their subcontractors in Việt Nam.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama calls on the Vietnamese government to release all imprisoned leaders of the Unified Buddhist Church of Việt Nam, including Thích Huyền Quang and Thích Quảng Độ.

**VIETNAMESE IN AMERICA** The U.S. Senate approves measure to compensate more than 200 Vietnamese commandos for time spent in Vietnamese prisons after the CIA and U.S. military infiltrated them into North Vietnam in the 1960s. Despite contracts assuring the commandos would be paid \$2,000 annually even if captured, they were written off as dead by the United States. Many of them languished in prisons for as long as 25 years before being freed. Public Law #105-18 earmarks \$20 million for reparation payments.

Danny Graves becomes the first Vietnamese-born player in Major League Baseball. In 2000, the half-Vietnamese relief pitcher for the Cincinnati Reds earns his first All-Star appearance.

**1997**

**VIETNAM** Douglas (“Pete”) Peterson, a former prisoner of war during the Việt Nam War, is named the first U.S. Ambassador to Việt Nam since the War. Việt Nam, in turn, names Le Van Bang as its Ambassador to the United States.

The last of Vietnamese boat people to voluntarily return home from Hong Kong refugee camps board a UN flight back to Việt Nam. Since the UN’s repatriation started almost ten years ago, about 57,000 people have returned voluntarily to Việt Nam. Nearly 3,000 people remain in Hong Kong. Also, Thailand empties its own refugee camps.

The Administrative Detention Decree 31/CP is implemented, allowing officials to detain individuals suspected of posing a threat to national security without a warrant or prior judicial approval.

**VIETNAMESE IN AMERICA** The Vietnamese American Studies Center is established at the San Francisco State University, dedicated to the study of the Vietnamese American experience.

In Santa Clara, California, Thảng Barrett becomes the first Vietnamese American judge to sit on a court of general jurisdiction in the United States.

Attorney and writer Lan Cao pens *Monkey Bridge*, the first fictional novel written by a Vietnamese American and published by a major publishing house.

### 1998

**VIETNAM** Twenty-four political and religious prisoners are released, including the Venerable Thích Quảng Độ and Dr. Nguyễn Đan Quế, as part of presidential amnesties. Under Article 30 of Việt Nam's criminal code, they continue to be under close and constant surveillance, and are often harassed.

Việt Nam becomes one of the fastest-growing economies in the world, averaging 8% annually (GDP) from 1990 to 1998. Investment grows threefold, and domestic savings quintuples. Agricultural production doubles, making Việt Nam the world's second largest rice exporter.

**VIETNAMESE IN AMERICA** Congresswoman Loretta Sanchez (D-CA) drafts and secures passage of legislation in the House National Security Committee honoring former Vietnamese commandos who worked for the U.S. during the Vietnam War. Some of the commandos were killed, and most were captured and imprisoned by the North Vietnamese for up to 25 years.

The U.S. grants the first waiver of the Jackson-Vanik Amendment extending U.S. export promotion and investment support programs to Vietnam. The waiver is then renewed in 1999 and 2000.

### 1999

**VIETNAM** The 1999 Press Law passes, allowing media outlets to be sued for defamation whether the information they publish is accurate or not. The Ministry of Culture also proposes new regulations that would triple the number of activities, from 200 to 650, defined as offensive to Vietnamese culture. Việt Nam continues to jam public access to certain international radio stations, to crackdown on some foreign publications, and to disallow media contact with prominent dissidents.

In an unprecedented demonstration of unity, leaders from four of Việt Nam's major religious institutions demand the restoration of religious freedom and a clear separation of church and state. The letter is signed by Thích Quảng Độ, Father Chân Tín of the Catholic Church of Việt Nam, senior priest Trần Quang Châu of the Cao Đài Church, and leader Lê Quang Liêm of the Hòa Hảo Buddhist Church.

**VIETNAMESE IN AMERICA** The film *Three Seasons*, directed by Vietnamese American Tony Bùi, receives recognition as the first American movie filmed entirely in Vietnam. The film won both the Grand Jury Award as well as the Audience Award at the 1999 Sundance Film Festival.

Đạt Nguyễn, the most productive linebacker in Texas A&M University history, becomes the first Vietnamese American drafted into the National Football League, despite the perception that he was too small to play professional football. Proving his critics wrong, he becomes the starting middle linebacker in his second year.

with the Dallas Cowboys.

Twenty-nine U.S. Congress members nominate the Venerable Thích Quảng Độ for the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition for his lifelong efforts for religious freedom and democratic reform in Vietnam.

## 2000

**VIETNAM** The U.S.-Việt Nam Trade Agreement is signed, clearing the way for an open economic relationship that is meant to reduce tariffs on goods and services, protect intellectual property and improve investment relations. The Agreement has yet to be ratified by Congress.

President Clinton visits Việt Nam, becoming the first U.S. president to do so since the Việt Nam War.

The last closing of Vietnamese refugee camps occurs in Hong Kong.

**VIETNAMESE IN AMERICA** Vietnamese Americans Tawny Binh, Michelle Đỗ, and Khoa Nguyễn participate in the 2000 Summer Olympics in Sydney, Australia, as members of the U.S. Olympic Team in the sport of table tennis. Binh and Nguyễn are Gold Medalists at the 1999 Pan American Games. Đỗ, 17, is the 1998 Nationals Under-22 Women's Singles Champion.

## 2001

**VIETNAM** In February, Việt Nam is swept by the worst protests in years by ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands who are angry over land rights. The protests trigger major crackdowns by authorities. Key reasons behind the protests are the government turning the hill tribes' ancestral forests into the country's largest coffee-growing region and government repression of Protestant churches, which have attracted many followers from ethnic minorities in recent years. The central highlands are home to many of the country's 54 ethnic minority hill tribes. Ethnic minorities make up 15% of the country's population.

The well-known and outspoken Rev. Nguyễn Văn Lý Thadeus is arrested and indefinitely detained for his recent activities advocating for religious freedom. The arrest is his third, having previously served 10 years in prison for similar charges. Lý was an Amnesty International-adopted prisoner of conscience.

**VIETNAMESE IN AMERICA** The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom urged the Treasury Department to oppose \$800 million in new loans to Vietnam pending before the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The Commission cited surveillance, imprisonment and other restrictions imposed on Catholics, Buddhists and other religious followers.

Việt Đình, a law professor at Georgetown Law Center, is appointed by President George W. Bush as Assistant Attorney General for legal policy, becoming perhaps the highest-ranking Vietnamese American official in the U.S. federal government.