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To: The Editor, The Globe and Mail. Toronto
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Dear Mr. Editor,

I am sending you an article on "Vietnam – Who really lost the war?".

This article was prompted by the controversy raised by Mr. McNamara. It follows the article of Mr. Van Praagh in your paper on 18 April.

You may be interested in giving Canadian readers a Vietnamese view on this subject.

I shall hold the article until April 25. If I do not hear from you by fax by then I shall assume that you do not want it.

Sincerely,
Ton That Thien

**VIETNAM – WHO REALLY LOST THE WAR?
JUST LOOK AT THE FACTS, YESTERDAY AND TODAY
Ton That Thien**

Mr. McNamara has started a new controversy about the Vietnam war by calling it “terribly wrong”. But was it really wrong? And, today, from the long term historical perspective, has the United States really lost that war? If it has not, then who has? The right answers to these questions should be looked for in the facts.

To say that the war was “terribly wrong” is the supreme insult to those 58,000 Americans who had been asked to give their lives to defend something they were told was vital to their country, and to their families who want to feel proud of the today. Now they are made to look and feel immoral and stupid. If admiration and gratitude are not shown to those who died in the defense of freedom, which was the official war aim of the United States at the time, and still is today, then at least some respect must be shown to those Americans and their families, not to say anything about the Vietnamese who died in the war, for the same reason.

To say that the management of the war was terribly wrong would be perfectly correct and honest. The war was lost, as David Van Praagh has pointed out (*Globe and Mail*, 18 April 1995), not on the battlefield, but at home. The American media painted such a bleak picture of the battlefield that the American public – and Mr. McNamara – thought the war was being lost. However, ironically, not to say tragically from today’s perspective, the top manager of the war on the Vietcong side thought otherwise.

In a secret letter sent from Hanoi to Nguyen Van Linh and the Central Committee in the South in *July 1962*, Le Duan, secretary general of the Vietnamese Communist Party, said: “There are moments when in southern Vietnam, as in Zone 5 [the northern part of South Vietnam] the situation was difficult to the point where it looked as if the revolution could not be preserved and developed... We must absolutely not allow ourselves to become alarmed and to lose faith because of the temporary difficulties occasioned by the enemy’s gathering of the population into the strategic hamlets...”

Le Duan’s secret letters to the Central Committee in the South, in which he explained in details Hanoi’s strategy and tactics and difficulties – obviously unknown to American policy makers then – were published only in 1986. They reveal Hanoi’s strategy and tactics, its doubts about winning, and its recovery of confidence about victory after it became clear at the conference on Laos (1961-1962) that the U.S. resolve had faltered (as shown by its acceptance of communist conditions and the inquiries made secretly by Mr. Harriman during the conference whether Hanoi would accept the same kind of settlement for Vietnam). These developments convinced Le Duan that the Americans were prepared to give up South Vietnam as well, and if they clinched their teeth, took the blows, and persisted, they would win in the end.

The abandonment of Laos, which cleared the way for Hanoi’s free and massive dispatch of troops and material to South Vietnam incensed Mr. Diem and caused him to mistrust the Americans and to stop listening to them. The result was mounting tensions between him and Washington, which led to the engineering of the coup that overthrew and

killed him in November 1963. The White House and State Department officials who advocated the coup asserted that the generals would be better war leaders than Mr. Diem, and there was a better chance of winning the war under their leadership. But these generals immediately dismantled the strategic hamlets network – which Le Duan found so effective against the revolutionary forces --, and spent time squabbling, plotting and staging coups against each other instead of running the war. We know the results.

So, the war was not “terribly wrong”. It was only the management at the top on the American side which was terribly wrong. In particular, if Mr. Diem, and especially his brother Nhu, who were stubbornly opposed to the introduction of American troops to Vietnam, had not been removed, the war might still have been lost, but 58,000 American lives would surely have been saved.

The war was not wrong for another very important reason, which is tied to the second question: in long terms, from today’s perspective, who really lost the war?

It is clear that the war prevented the communists from seizing power in all Indochina between 1945 and 1975 (if the French period is counted in). It forced them to dissipate their energies, kept them busy, and denied them the free use of Vietnam’s vast resources and the control of strategic positions from which to stir up revolution in the rest of Southeast Asia. The countries of this region were thus given 30 precious years of peace and security to engage in economic development, solve their social problems, and avoid Vietnam-like communist-led revolution. The 400 million people of Southeast Asia would not enjoy great prosperity today and have a very bright future if Americans and free Vietnamese had not fought to stem back the communist tide in Vietnam during those years. Looked at it from another angle, *the communists failed to win control of all Southeast Asia*.

With regard to Vietnam proper, as mentioned earlier, the communists were held back for 30 years, from 1945 to 1975. But more than that. During those years, with American help and aid, the South Vietnamese built up a non communist political, and especially economic structure which turned out to be so solid that, after 1975, for all their ferocious and cruel determination to carry out the “socialist transformation” of the South, the communists, weakened by long years of war, were unable to eradicate it. Worse, the democratic, independent and enterprising spirit of the Southern Vietnamese – whom people in the North call admiringly “anh hai mien Nam” (elder brother from the south) – has infected the people of the North.

Thus, in spite of very determined efforts, 20 years after their sweeping military victory of 1975 the Hanoi communist leadership has not only failed to break the psychological resistance of the South and to impose communism on the southerners, but now face even similar problems in the North as well, and especially *inside the Communist party itself*, where a rebellion has been growing. More and more members have raised their voice, now openly and fearlessly, to demand the abandonment of socialism, the adoption of pluralist multiparty democracy and the recognition of the right to own property. They owe it to the Americans and free Vietnamese who fought and died to make it possible for them to speak out freely today without fear of being crushed because the VCP, feeling its weakness, is reluctant to take the risk of shaking its beehive.

Thus, it is clear today that, in reality, if the Communist Party has won a military war, it has definitely lost the war in regard to the imposition of communism on Vietnam and on Southeast Asia, and that, slowly perhaps, but surely, communism is losing out to democracy and free enterprise in Vietnam. Is that not what the Vietnam war was really about? So, in a sense, one can say, 20 years after the guns became silent, that if the U.S. has not won the war, it has not really lost it either, because the goals for which it fought are being achieved.

We should therefore not insult those – Americans, Vietnamese, and Canadians – who have fought and given their lives to make such a development possible. If those who managed the war on the American side, Mr. McNamara among them, have adopted the wrong strategy, the wrong tactics, and exercised poor leadership, thereby bringing defeat and shame on their country, the war itself was not, and could not be considered, “terribly wrong” for those who have died, and for the families deprived of their loved ones.

18 April 1995

Biographical note: formerly managing editor of *The Vietnam Guardian* and dean of social sciences of Van Hanh University, Saigon, before 1975; professor of the University of Quebec after 1975; now retired and living in Ottawa.