

FLF - the People's March for World Freedom - What happened to a free Vietnam

Louise Strait
April 10, 1975



If Thieu hadn't ordered that disastrous Retreat...

If Congress had voted more aid...

If the Paris Agreement had been honest and workable...

If the North had followed the Agreement...

If the Soviet Union and China had refrained from supporting the North...

If Americans had been united in pursuing the official policy...

If only our policy had been clearer...

Especially since I visited Vietnam only nine months ago, I could have had recriminations on all these scores. But I joined the April 10 People's March for World Freedom because I, like the other 800 participating from the Freedom Leadership Foundation, knew that those who believed that communism was right were conquering those who believed differently. And America wasn't doing anything to stop them and wouldn't until a fundamental change could take place in the heart of America herself.

We arrived at the Capitol steps after we had gone to the Vietnamese Embassy and to the White House, delivering a letter of comfort to the ambassador and one of exhortation to the president. I listened carefully to the speeches at the Capitol waiting to hear a call for this necessary change of heart-from isolationism to internationalism, from selfishness to service.

Most of the speeches were of the expected variety: Congressmen pressing their own points or upbraiding their colleagues for lack of memory and loss of principle. A representative from the Vietnamese community expressing concern for the fate of his countrymen under communism. Representatives from political organizations-Young Republican National Federation, American Conservative Union, and others- expressing endorsement or agreement.

The words of an ex-POW came closer to my barely articulated standard -- he was aware that his freedom had been bought with a peace agreement paving the way for the slavery of millions. Said Laird Guttersen: "I, for the first time in fifty years, am ashamed to call myself an American. I'm ashamed not only because the people of America are being represented by a Congress that has seen fit to surrender the honor of my nation but I am ashamed because my freedom is going to cost thousands of Vietnamese lives because in 1973 we sold out the Vietnamese to bring me and about 500 other people home. I don't like being a pawn in that kind of arrangement. One of the prisoners who was in solitary like myself tapped on the wall one

day: 'Laird, we came over here to do a job. If in order for us to go home we have to turn our backs on the people of the world, I'd rather stay here.' And now we are turning our backs on those people."



Neil Salonen, president of the Freedom Leadership Foundation, defined the problem well as he described the central problem of the ideological struggle against communism. "The fundamental meaning of our march is that communism is not just a military threat, it is an ideological threat. It represents the complete antithesis of our way of life. Our belief in God, our belief in freedom, and our belief in the value of each individual's life will lead us to continue to work, not just in Vietnam, but everywhere on an ideological level, to make people understand by telling them the things that have not been told them by the media or by the universities for the last twenty years.... Just as the wars in Vietnam and in Korea, the war for freedom in the Middle East, and the war to support the emerging nations of Africa are not being fought in those places but in America as a propaganda war, we are going to focus our war here in America. That is our commitment in this march."



So that was the problem. But what was the hope? Bruce Herschenson, former presidential assistant, said: "I've been taking pictures today because I want to preserve the moments that are bright about America. And unfortunately, due to some elements of the Congress and some elements of the media, there are not too many bright moments to photograph these days. But this stairway, this group, this moment, is one of the brightest I've seen."

Could it be that what "We were doing was itself the hope? At first I thought that it was tragic that for the Vietnamese there was little basis for hope in Congress, in politics, or in America itself. Indeed, we did not have pat answers about ways for Vietnam to get out of its dilemma or who was to blame.

America had found darkness, not light, at the end of the tunnel. There was no way out of the dilemma, and all America was to blame. But by honestly facing this situation, we were free to speak with conviction about the deep wrongs of communism -- its denial of the human spirit, its aggressive materialism, its designs on world domination. We did not have political or economic power; the real battle, however, was in the sphere of ideas -- here we were united while no one else was.

Neil Salonen was skeptically asked by reporters what he hoped to accomplish by the march at this late date. He conveyed his response to us: "It was very hard in a short time to communicate the depth of the feeling that we had about what is at stake in this march. But more powerful than anything we could have told them were the faces of all the people in the demonstration, the determination in their cheers, and the power of their songs. We told them that this march was just a symbol of our commitment.... "So the message was our faces. The hope was our faces.