

KEYNOTE SPEECH BY AMBASSADOR HA KIM NGOC
AT THE LUNCHEON WORKSHOP “OVERCOMING WAR LEGACIES: THE
ROAD TO RECONCILIATION AND FUTURE COOPERATION
BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND VIETNAM”

(Washington, D.C., March 26, 2019)

Honorable Former Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel,

President of the U.S. Institute of Peace Nancy Linborg,

Senior Lieutenant General Nguyen Chi Vinh, Vice Minister of Defense,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

One of my American professors once told me: Never give speech while others are having lunch. Only the food gets their attention, not you. So rather than giving a speech, I would like to share with you my story.

1. I was born and raised in Hanoi, north of Vietnam. For me, war was not just a detached concept captured in a photo, a movie, or a piece of news from the Southern front. War knocked on our door. War blew off the roof of our home when U.S. bombers struck the capital. My childhood was built upon sad memories of the Vietnam War. During the first six years of my life, six times I was forced to leave my city, my parents, my home, to seek refuge in neighboring provinces.

My earliest memory stretches back to age two and a half. And regrettably, it was a memory born of war. I remember in painful detail my first evacuation from Hanoi in June 1966. Pressed up against my brother, who was barely six years old, I rode a small truck into the inky night, even as bombers rumbled overhead. The next morning, at our shelter in Ngu Kien commune, Vinh Tuong district, to the northwest of Hanoi, we stood frozen as a victim of bomb shrapnel rode past on the backseat of a shabby bike, his head wrapped in white bandage.

Anxiety engulfed my mind. This was supposed to be our shelter. But there was no safety; no peace. The shadows of war lurked in every corner. Every day was defined by an overcrowded living space, meager meals, and even life-threatening danger. With every breath, we tasted the sorrow of separation, and the longing for our parents' warm embrace. Every night, my brother and I stood for hours in the cold and dark, looking towards Hanoi—though we hadn't the slightest idea which direction Hanoi was. We thought of home, of our neighborhood. We thought of our parents who, even then, were standing their ground, toiling beneath the rain of explosives.

It was in December 1972 that U.S. bombers struck Hanoi for the second time. My brother and I left Hanoi amid carpet bombings of Bach Mai hospital, Kham Thien Street and other residential districts. Even to this day, I still wonder how our truck managed to skirt all the explosions. We reached the Red River just as the bombing ceased, fire and smoke residue choking our path. My heart clenched at the ruins and wreckage. The grief-stricken cries of the survivors nipped at our heels, even as we crossed the wobbly pontoon bridge leading toward Vinh Phuc. The second time I left Hanoi, I brought with me a shattered heart, an aching sorrow, and a smoldering resentment rooted in the death of my innocent people.

For all those long years, I dreamed a simple dream of peace. I dreamed of untroubled days beneath the roof of our sweet, sweet home. I dreamed of burrowing into my parents' embrace when the nights grew cold, of a fitful night's sleep, not interrupted by blaring sirens and sleepy terror and mad dashes for the bunkers. I dreamed of school mornings blessed with warm sunlight and clear skies, untainted by the echo of alarms or the shadow of warplanes. Back in those days, whenever a bomber zipped past, my friends and I would dive for the nearest shelter, uncaring for whatever rodent, snake or insect we might find within, carrying along with us all our straw hats, wooden splints, first aid kits and school bags. After the bombers had left, we would dig ourselves out of the bunkers, body and face smeared with dirt, we would carry on to school as if nothing had happened. Many years after, when I first watched a Hollywood movie, I realized that I had displayed a talent for being an action movie star. Had I not entered the foreign services, I suspect I would have become a famous actor, or at least an accomplished stuntman!

2. In the early 1980s, I enrolled in the diplomatic academy. I was told that diplomats were good at persuasion, and I liked to persuade for the sake of my people. The more I learnt, the more I was attracted to diplomacy. I realized that diplomats played a vital role in preventing war, building peace and developing

friendship between peoples. All of the above, I thought, were crucial for my country.

In 1988, I became a diplomat. As if by fate, since its very beginning, my work was tied to the United States. Ironically, my first job as a ministry official was related to war. But it was not the waging of war that I dealt with: I took part in a conference on the Causes and Lessons of The Vietnam War, a joint effort by the William Joiner Institute and our Ministry of Foreign Affairs. For days, we debated vigorously, sometimes vehemently, to find an answer to the one question: How could Vietnam and the United States avoid repeating past mistakes, and forever lock away the horrors of war? These conversations have motivated many of my thoughts and actions over my three decades of being a diplomat.

In the late 1980s, Vietnam was not at war, but neither was our country truly at peace. Many of our soldiers were lost in the East Sea (or South China Sea). Our people struggled to rebuild in the aftermath of the War, faced with trade embargoes and diplomatic isolation, poverty and hunger, uncertainty and grief. A foreign scholar once claimed: War was Vietnam's destiny.

But I did not believe that. I did not wish to see my children, and all the children of Vietnam, suffer what I suffered. Our people must not be forever trapped in a vicious circle of war and devastation. I wanted to validate a saying I learnt in school: That the art of diplomacy makes possible the impossible. The people of Vietnam must break free from their supposed destiny, and reach forward, with all our might, to peace, prosperity and a better future.

I joined the very first attempts toward lifting all sanctions and embargoes against Vietnam, and normalizing our relations with ASEAN, China, the European Union, and then the United States. In the following years, I took part in joint field activities to account for American soldiers missing in the War. We crested steep mountainous ridges where few dared to walk, and navigated forests and rice fields dotted with unexploded ordnance or remnants of Agent Orange. We visited residential areas ravaged by war, where mourning portraits lined the walls, and tombstones intermingled with the homes of the living. MIA activities paved the way for reconciliation and trust-building, a difficult yet crucial process for both peoples.

Even as I contributed to promoting Vietnam – U.S. relations, I also took part in efforts to dispose of explosive ordnance, provide assistance for victims of war, and account for missing Vietnamese soldiers. I roamed the country, using the funds I

raised to assist organizations trying to address the Agent Orange legacy. The further I travelled, the more I understood the heavy toll of war across all corners of the country; the more I empathized with war victims whose every minute was marked by agony and grief. It was through these experiences that I tempered my resolve—to strive tirelessly to protect my homeland from the merciless touches of war.

3. Even decades after the war, I struggled to leave behind the ghosts of my war-torn childhood. When I went to study in the United States in 1992, before the embargoes were lifted, I would scramble out of bed at the faintest sound of fire alarm, body drenched in sweat, my mind suffused by echoes of air raid sirens in Hanoi.

As I took part in war remediation activities, I gradually stitched the wounds in my heart, and learnt to look towards the future, toward peace, cooperation and warm friendship with the United States and its people. I came to realize that reconciliation with one's inner self is as important as reconciliation within a war-torn nation, and reconciliation with other nations in the world. My earliest memories of war haunted me for many long years, but I learnt to turn them into a positive source of energy, a reminder of my calling in life. The past is history. We cannot rewrite the past! But we can work to prevent that bitter past from repeating itself.

It is not that I have forgotten the past. At times, when I watch my children, I recall my childhood; the sorrow of separation, of death, the loneliness and helplessness that defined those years. But like my people, I direct my anger and hatred *not* at the American people, but at war, and those who wage wars. My generation is forever indebted to President Ho Chi Minh, who travelled to the United States in 1912, who lived and worked closely with Americans. He has taught us that the American people has been, and always will be, friends of the Vietnamese people.

Today, Vietnam and the US are good friends and strong partners. Even as we promote relations, we work hand in hand to address war legacies. What better way is there to heal the wounds that mark our soil, our flesh and mind? More importantly, it helps build trust. And trust is the glue of everlasting friendship.

Let us pay our respect and appreciation to generations of Vietnamese and Americans who have contributed to this effort. On behalf of the Vietnamese people, I wish to thank our American friends, whose courage, compassion, great vision and strategic thinking have helped our countries to overcome the shadows of

the past. President Bill Clinton, Senator John McCain, Former Secretary of State John Kerry, Senator Patrick Leahy, Former Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, Mr. Bobby Muller, Ms. Ann Mills-Griffiths, Mr. Tim Rieser, and many others—thank you. You are an infinite source of inspiration to us all, those who embark on the journey to set aside the past, bridge differences, deepen similarities, and reach towards a better future.

I also would like to take this opportunity to express my appreciation to Ms. Ann Mills-Griffiths, Chairman and CEO of the National League of POW/MIA Families, for her tireless efforts over the past decades. Our cooperation has led to incredible results. A few days ago, Ms. Griffiths and I watched a powerful documentary about the discovery and retrieval of her beloved brother, Mr. James Mills, from deep under the sea. The journey to find the remains of Mr. James Mills and many other Americans and Vietnamese is the journey of reconciliation, trust-building and deepened cooperation between the two peoples.

I have had the honor to work with General Nguyen Chi Vinh, Vice Minister of Defense, and many of my colleagues here in preparing for and carrying out Vietnam's role in the UN peacekeeping operations in Africa. Today, we are part of the joint efforts towards peace talks between the United States and the DPRK. Once a war-torn nation seeking her own peace, Vietnam is now an active contributor to preventing war and building peace for all the world's peoples.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

A few weeks ago, on the first day of the 2019 Lunar New Year, President Donald Trump announced in his State of the Union Address that the 2nd U.S. - DPRK Summit would be held in Viet Nam. That night, 50 years after the last bombing of Hanoi, I slept fitfully, without disturbance. And I had a sweet, sweet dream. I dreamed that peace would be restored on the Korean Peninsula, in the Indo - Asia - Pacific, and across the globe. I believe, with all my heart, that dream is achievable. And being here today with all of you—that is our way of showing the world what we can achieve if we tried.

That was my story.

Thank you very much!