

April 30 Speech [Excerpt]

Andrew Lam

Often times when we mention the word “Vietnam” in the US, we don’t mean Vietnam as a country. Vietnam is not Thailand or Malaysia. Its relation to the US is special: it has become a vault filled with tragic metaphors – it stands for American loss of innocence, of tragedy, legacy of defeat, and failure. For the first time in our history Americans were caught in the past, haunted by unanswerable questions, confronted with a tragic ending.

So much so that my uncle, who fought in the war as a pilot for the South Vietnamese Army, once observed that, “When Americans talk about Vietnam they really are talking about America. “Americans don’t take defeat and bad memories very well,” he added. “They try to escape them,” he said in his funny but bitter way, “They make a habit of blaming small countries for things that happens to the United States. AIDS from Haiti, flu from Hong Kong or Mexico, drugs from Columbia, hurricanes from the Caribbean.”

Then there’s my father, who only talks about the Vietnam of wartime after a few drinks. When he gets drunk his memories go back to the time when he was a big shot, a warrior, when he fought battles and won, a time when he was still full of vigor and promises. But he can’t talk about the aftermath, about losing and the end and ensuing humiliation and the horrible losses. Of his comrades and his own brother sent to reeducation camps. Of the soldiers he left behind when he escaped.

He can only go further backward to a time before the war was lost. He holds so much anger still about what happened to Vietnam, to his comrades, that he, like so many of his generation, hasn’t been able to go past vehemence, hasn’t been able to make peace with the past.

I’ve been back to Vietnam many times. And each time I’ve come back, I have tried to put Vietnam into some perspective...

History is trapped in me, indeed, but history is also mine to work out, to disseminate, to discern and appropriate, and to finally transform into aesthetic self-expression. So I write. And write. And write.

And it is in stories about Vietnam, in looking at its current needs and its current problems, and trying to offer some insights, that I find my way home.

And I am not alone.



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