

Remarks of Tran Van Tong upon accepting the Truman-Reagan Medal of Freedom 2007 awarded to Tran Van Ba on November 15, 2007 at the Embassy of Hungary, Washington D.C.

NOVEMBER 15, 2007

Thank you very much. It is a great honor for me to be here to receive this award for Tran Van Ba

Mr. Chairman;

Mr. Ambassador;

Distinguished members of Congress;

Ladies and Gentlemen;

In honoring the memory of Tran Van Ba, the Foundation has returned Vietnam to the battleground and revitalized the values that you defend, together with our duty to history.

The world figures who are past awardees have given shining examples for our modern history.

In accepting this honor for my late brother, I recognize how greatly it exceeds the merits of just one man.

Therefore, in a spirit of gratitude and friendship, please allow me to try to explain, as simply as I can, how Tran Van Ba waged this fight and what he may have contributed to it.

Tran Van Ba entered this fight out of the simplest of motivation: for his identity, the responsibilities it entailed, and the action it compelled.

## ***First, identity***

Tran Van Ba was from SOUTH Vietnam. The identity, not just the geography.

As you know, it wasn't easy to be South Vietnamese when and where he was living.

Before April 1975, that is to say, BEFORE the fall of Saigon, pervasive communist propaganda portrayed you as a sell-out to "American imperialism." In your own country you were constantly subject to rampant terrorism -- a murderous war of communist subversion.

After April of 75, that same propaganda branded you a bourgeois parasite incapable of defending your own liberty. Within Vietnam, you were the targets of revenge and hatred by the triumphant North.

Tran Van Ba felt in his bones the effects of this "South Vietnamese condition." As a teenager, he had seen his father cruelly assassinated in Saigon at the time when he was devoting all his energies into establishing a Constitution for South Vietnam.

As a student in Paris, Ba was continually confronted with demonstrations clamoring for: "peace in Vietnam, down with imperialism, US go home."

But Tran Van Ba retained his South Vietnamese identity.

HE ACKNOWLEDGED HIS BELONGING TO A COUNTRY RICH OF ITS PEOPLE IF POOR OF ITS LEADERS. With pride and passion, not by way of reaction, nor through a rejection of others, but instead, through a love of his own people, those who were drowning in despair. Not for narrow or factional aims, but out of a sharp sense of conscience for the historic role of South Vietnam. He was conscious of the fact that South Vietnam had become the last refuge for the

Vietnamese people in their historic quest for liberty and progress, in the face of triumphant communist totalitarianism.

He was convinced that only a free South Vietnam could enable the Vietnamese people to respond to the challenge that, until then, had never been made to any other people: to rise above the cultural cross-currents that had always operated upon it. Vietnam stood at the crossroads of four of the most powerful civilizations of history: China, India, Europe and America. From these disparate strands, Vietnam sought to weave unity and to enter the modern world as a free and prosperous nation.

Tran Van Ba saw a free, non-Communist South Vietnam as a just and noble cause. All those who fought in its name deserve our thanks and praise, especially the more than 58,000 American soldiers who gave their lives for it.

### ***Second, responsibilities***

In assuming his identity, he recognized, without flinching, the role the Vietnamese people themselves had played in bringing about their own national disaster.

After the fall of South Vietnam, there was no end to the debate about responsibility. There was talk of the "American betrayal," even dating back to French colonialism.

He knew one could not call for a free Vietnam while denying all Vietnamese responsibility for the loss of South Vietnam.

While considering the politics of the Great Powers, Tran Van Ba was also haunted by Vietnam's own shortcomings and the critically important lessons that had to be learned from them. Vietnamese people who aspire to a renaissance, he said, could they allow such an elementary clarification to pass them by?

It was his reclaimed identity, more importantly his sense of responsibility, that led him to gather a handful of comrades, alone and WITHOUT ANY SUPPORT FROM ANY GREAT POWER, in the midst of devastation, abandonment, and despair, to stand up and declare: "we are still alive. All is not lost, anything is possible, liberty can be reestablished, justice can prevail over brutality, but only if we would be willing to PAY THE PRICE".

With a heavy heart, Tran Van Ba watched repression ravage his country. The facts and figures are well known: one hundred thousand summary executions; three hundred thousand deaths in so-called reeducation camps; more than six hundred thousand boat people drowned or killed by pirates, generations *immolated* on the altar of military expansion into Cambodia . AND these are only the documented figures.

In the face of such horrific barbarity, Tran Van Ba understood that aspiration and spirit ALONE could accomplish nothing.

During his exile at Sainte Helena, Napoleon said: There are only two powers in the world, the spirit and the sword; and in the long run it is the spirit that always prevails.

NAPOLEON WAS WRONG. ONCE AGAIN. Spirit alone is powerless against the sword. The spirit must be backed up with swords if it is to defeat a sword drawn simply to destroy.

### ***Third, action***

Tran Van Ba understood that to defend life and human liberty, one had to wage war. YES TO WAGE WAR AGAINST THE CAUSES OF WAR. The communist tyranny in Vietnam had caused war. Revenge and hatred practiced by Hanoi against the population of South Vietnam had caused war.

The insanity of military expansion into Cambodia and Laos had caused war.

So abandoning his comfortable life in Paris, Tran Van Ba took up arms. HE WAS PAYING THE PRICE.

THAT "PRICE" in his case was the death sentence given by a kangaroo court, and then...THE FIRING SQUAD.

He had gone into battle bearing in mind the overarching idea of human dignity. And this, in the end, is what he did for his country and the universal value, unlike those who were stirred by hatred to rush into battle.

The North Vietnamese communist fighters eventually discovered this difference themselves. Having come to "liberate" the South, many of them sobbed, upon entering Saigon, "These are the civilized people and it is we, in the North, who are the barbarians."

The future of Vietnam remains open.

What is certain is that the current regime with its impossible and contradictory arrangement eventually will perish, although its downfall may be delayed by accident or as a result of conflicting interior and exterior forces, from individuals' apathy or corruption or through indifference or lack of resolve. However long it will remain in power, it will never last long enough to become firmly rooted in our native soil.

What else is certain? The current regime is founded upon usurpation and tyranny.

Since America is the only nation in history ever to built its national identity upon pure notions of liberty and justice, America would be denying and betraying its own national heritage if it condones this regime by giving in to archaic illusions of 'realpolitik' sprung from Bismarck or Richelieu. In

so doing America would lose all moral justification in the fight for its values and its own security, in addition to losing its friends and supporters around the world.

What else is certain? Today, throughout Vietnam and around the world, quite often in solitude and surrounded by indifference, brave men and women continue to uphold their beliefs in truth and freedom, and are prepared to die for those beliefs. These are the ones whom we should support wherever they may be. It is to all of these, and especially to all of those who have sacrificed themselves, that I would like to pass on the honor you have bestowed upon my late brother.

### ***To conclude***

Please allow me now to conclude on a more personal note:

I am sure that my late brother would have wanted a woman to be here today instead of me.

Twenty three years ago, this woman stood in front of Hanoi's embassy in Paris, on one of the coldest winter nights of Europe, behind a poster that says ONLY THREE WORDS: "SAVE MY SON."

Eighteen years earlier she had buried her husband, shot down in cold blood after he had declared his candidacy for the presidency of South Vietnam.

This woman, until her very death, sought the return of the body of her son.

She would have told you tonight, with humanity, about what it means to be a South Vietnamese woman in the turmoil of modern history. About Tran Van Ba and generations and generations of Vietnamese who have been looking to remake Vietnam.

This woman knew that she would not remake the country.

But the weight she carried in her lifetime was perhaps heavier and greater still. It was to prevent the dissolution of another Vietnam. One where people retain the purpose and sense of what it is to be human.

She would have felt perfectly at ease in this country, because one of its greatest Presidents, Franklin Roosevelt, has said: "IF IN OTHER LANDS THE ETERNAL TRUTHS OF THE PAST ARE THREATENED BY INTOLERANCE, WE MUST PROVIDE A SAFE PLACE FOR THEIR PERPETUATION."

This woman would have felt happy and among friends here, Mr. Ambassador, on this patch of Hungarian territory, the valiant Hungary whose fate reminds me in so many ways of Vietnam's. The brave Hungary who gave the world such an admirable lesson in liberty and courage when it rose up against its oppressors in 1956.

That woman is the mother of Tran Van Ba, our late mother.

Thank you so much for your patience.

November 15, 2007

Tran Van Tong