

several weeks later, requesting political asylum.

In 1992, convinced that the end was nigh for Vietnam's ruling Communist Party given the worldwide collapse of Communist governments, he hatched a plot with friends in New Orleans, where he was a university student, to lead a popular uprising in Ho Chi Minh City. "Plan A was to infiltrate a Thai air-force base and steal a plane to fly to Vietnam," recalls his New Orleans-based friend Le Nhi, who helped him print 50,000 anti-communist pamphlets for the operation. Heavy security at air-force bases in Thailand forced Ly to activate Plan B: hijacking a commercial jetliner, in this case a Vietnam Airlines flight from Bangkok to Ho Chi Minh City.

Minutes before the plane landed in Ho Chi Minh City on September 4, 1992, Ly subdued the flight crew with the threat of a nonexistent bomb. Then he tossed the pamphlets out of the cockpit window and leapt from the main cabin door, parachuting into a muddy pond on the outskirts of the city. Locals, indifferent to his call to arms, handed him over to police. A year later, he drew 20 years in prison.

While praised at the time in the overseas Vietnamese community as a swash-buckling freedom fighter, many now believe that Ly's tactics were both unproductive and dangerous. "What he did was an act of terrorism," says the *Mercury News* editor.

Washington quietly lobbied for his release. The last moves in the diplomatic chess game took place on September 1, and two days later, in San Francisco, a crowd of 300 well-wishers greeted a thinner but still-defiant Ly.

Since that rapturous return, however, it has become clear that most Vietnamese emigres either do not care about or actively disagree with Ly's cause. The man once heralded as "Vietnam's James Bond" is now confronted, like his silver-screen counterpart, with the need to redefine himself in a post-Cold War world.

Ly says he plans to finish a doctorate in political science at the University of New Orleans, and work to re-energize anti-communist sentiment in the Vietnamese community. He will travel to Europe in February to speak to Vietnamese groups there. But if his experiences in the U.S. and Australia are anything to go by, most of those who turn out will be army veterans and first-generation boat people already in their 60s and 70s.

"The younger generation do not care much about fighting communism anymore," concedes Le Nhi. "There is no hatred in their hearts." ■

A Life Apart

Exiled dissident seeks to unite overseas Vietnamese

By A. Lin Neumann in Washington

For a political dissident, exile can be a path to political oblivion. Far from the front lines, it is easy to become an irrelevant voice from a receding past. Vietnam's Doan Viet Hoat, who spent 19 years in prison after 1975, is working to see that his fate is different. With his release and expulsion from Vietnam in

about tactics," he acknowledged. "But all agree on one thing: We do not accept the communist regime. We want to see change."

Hoat spends little time dwelling on his considerable personal sacrifice. He speaks without rancor of the 12 years he spent in a re-education camp from 1976 to 1988 or the years from 1990 until last year that he was imprisoned for subversion. He largely missed raising his three sons and was allowed to see his wife, Tran Thi Thuc, sporadically, sometimes for only 15 minutes in a year. In the late 1980s they were both in jail, after Thuc was accused of being a spy and held for 20 months. Two of their sons fled the country as boat people, and in 1994, Thuc reluctantly left Hoat behind at his urging to begin a new life for their family in the U.S.

Now free, the couple's political partnership continues. The seemingly frail and soft-spoken Hoat, 57, has been given a post at Catholic University in Washing-



Calling out to all exiles: expelled dissident Doan Viet Hoat and wife Tran Thi Thuc.

September, he wants to unite the fractured Vietnamese exile community.

It's a tough task, but some observers say that Hoat—with his religious and academic credentials and long personal experience of Vietnamese justice—has the potential to pull it off. "What I find striking is that Hoat is so widely respected by a broad cross-section of the Vietnamese community," said Mike Jendrzejczyk, the director of the Washington office of Human Rights Watch Asia, an international monitoring group.

In meetings across the United States and in Europe, Hoat has been spreading his gospel. "It is important to unite—not just in your hearts but also in your minds," he says. "Of course there are arguments

ton to lecture and do research on human rights. With Thuc constantly by his side, he is travelling widely, organizing and quietly pressuring the U.S. and other governments to push Vietnam on political reforms.

Most importantly, he is talking privately with leaders of Vietnamese exile groups trying to build a realistic movement. He emphasizes common principles—a desire for democracy, a free press, the release of all political prisoners, and an eventual end to one-party rule. "I want to work peacefully and to coordinate what we do here with what is done in Vietnam" by dissidents, he says.

The community he wants to unite has deep and abiding fault lines, representing

successive waves of immigration since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. Older "first-wave" immigrants arrived just after the war with close ties to the Saigon regime; some still hope that the South Vietnam of their memory can somehow be reborn. Immigrants from the communist period, though, also have differing perspectives. Some left because of poverty and turmoil in the years immediately after the war; others fled following their release from re-education camps where many southerners were imprisoned. Still others, like Hoat himself, were more traditional political prisoners, arrested for agitating directly against Hanoi.

For sympathetic Westerners, Hoat's credentials come from the long years he spent as a political prisoner. But that has little to do with what gives him standing in the Vietnamese community. "There are thousands of political prisoners, many of us have been in jail. That has nothing to do with it," said one Vietnamese activist. "Hoat stands apart for other reasons."

For one, he and his wife have their roots in the Buddhist student movement of the 1960s when Buddhist leaders were a moral force not beholden to either the communists or the Saigon government. Hoat's credentials as a Buddhist leader were enhanced when he was vice-chancellor of Van Hanh University, Vietnam's most prominent Buddhist college, from 1972 until the communist victory.

After 1975, he became a unifying force when he founded *Freedom Forum*, the short-lived underground magazine that drew Vietnamese authorities' ire and got him arrested for subversion in 1990.

"He can become a rallying point for the Vietnamese here because of his attitude, history and respect," says Nguyen Dinh Thang, the executive director of Boat People-SOS, an exile group.

Admittedly, his acclaim is not universal, particularly among the more fervent anti-communists. Hoang Duoc Thao, editor of *Little Saigon News*—a Vietnamese-language weekly newspaper in California—raises questions about Hoat's credentials as a journalist and political leader. "We are suspicious about him," she says. Thao believes that he was not poorly treated in prison and that he looked too healthy when he was released. "We don't think Doan Viet Hoat has the capacity to be a political leader," she adds, noting that Hoat has not been sufficiently angry about his treatment by Hanoi.

But such views appear to be rare. For Hoat, these are early days in his new circumstances and he simply wants to keep moving and talking. "I cannot stay quiet after so many years in jail. We have a cause and I won't stay quiet." ■