

Remarks by
Senator Tom Harkin
Opening of “Exit Saigon, Enter Little Saigon” Exhibit
Smithsonian Castle Building
January 18, 2007

Thank you, Betty, for that very kind introduction. And thank you, Long, for your kind invitation to be here, this evening.

I realize that Long’s family and business are based in Northern Virginia, but – for the record – I consider him an honorary Iowan. He received his doctorate from my alma mater, Iowa State University. And he is in the process of establishing the first-ever endowed chair at Iowa State’s computer sciences department. Thank you, Long, for your generosity! And thank you for your great work as founder of the Vietnamese American Heritage Foundation.

This exhibit is absolutely beautiful. And I can’t imagine a better way to celebrate the first three decades of the Vietnamese experience here in America.

As some of you may know, my state of Iowa is very proud of its role in welcoming Vietnamese refugees. After the fall of Saigon in April 1975, nearly 5,000 Vietnamese were settled across Iowa.

But Iowans are especially proud of the role we played in 1979 in bringing a new wave of Vietnamese refugees to the United States. In January of 1979, CBS aired a documentary about the terrible plight of the so-called “boat people” in Malaysia.

Iowa’s governor, Bob Ray, was moved by that documentary to contact President Jimmy Carter with the offer to accept *double* the number of Vietnamese refugees that Iowa had taken in several years earlier.

What Governor Ray did was truly an act of global moral leadership. He jump-started an international rescue effort that resulted in hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese boat people being resettled in Iowa and elsewhere across the United States.

Most of us in this room have vivid memories of our experiences during the Vietnam War. Senator Webb was there as a Marine officer. I was there in 1970 as a

Congressional aide, and I played a major role in exposing the horrific condition of political prisoners being held in “tiger cages” on Con Son Island.

The Vietnam War was a tragic chapter in American history. But for the last three decades, Vietnamese Americans have been writing a *new* chapter. It has been a story of struggle and courage, achievement and success.

Your experience as refugees strikes a personal nerve with me. My mother came to America as an immigrant. She was raised in Slovenia, in a house with a dirt floor.

She came here as a young woman with next to nothing. But she was welcomed with open arms. She was given the opportunity to become a productive citizen -- and, in turn, to give back so much to her adopted homeland.

The Vietnamese who came here after the war brought their energy, their talents, and their passion to be free. Today, you and your children are full-fledged members of the American family. And it’s wonderful to see your success story documented here tonight.

Thank you for inviting me to share this evening with you!