Foreword

It's almost clichéd now to suggest that America has no permanent enemies. After the horrors of World War II, through the Marshall Plan, the United States helped rebuild Germany as a pivotal player in a peaceful Europe. The United States helped transform Japan into a boisterous democracy, a contributor to stability and prosperity in Asia. These were simply some of the best investments even a war-weary United States could ever imagine making: instead of turning inward, we turned adversaries into close allies, and that has defined seventy-plus years of progress.

In retrospect, there was both an ease and almost an inevitability to those decisions. After all, in both cases, the United States was the victor on the battlefield, and we were entering a new global struggle between ideologies that would shape the second half of the twentieth century. Helping rebuild capitalist democracy was part of our post–World War II mission. The rare question for the United States is, what happens afterward when we don't win the war?

Enter Vietnam: seven letters that have meant everything from misunderstanding to division and from civil war to proxy war, and which a generation of unlikely allies—in the United States and in Vietnam—chose to redefine not as a war or as a bitter memory but as a partnership between two proud nations. How improbable, and how rewarding.

In *Nothing Is Impossible: America's Reconciliation with Vietnam*, my friend Ted Osius, former U.S. ambassador to Vietnam, tells the extraordinary story of how two enemies became friends. Relationships are at the core of this story,

because for reconciliation and for diplomacy relationships matter. As ambassador, Ted showed that demonstrating respect and building trust could strengthen the U.S.-Vietnam partnership. Working together on important challenges—climate change, global health, and peacekeeping—built trust. These diplomatic lessons should inspire us as we redefine and rebuild our relationships with the rest of the world.

This is also a story of diplomacy lived every day, in ways big and small. Not all diplomacy is grand strategy. Ted had fun doing his job. He loved Vietnam, and it showed. Each time I visited, I saw how thoroughly he enjoyed the opportunity to represent America abroad. Riding his bicycle or traveling with his young children, Ted touched the hearts of many Vietnamese. Because he embraced Vietnam's people, history, culture, and language, Ted won over not only Vietnam's leaders but also its citizens. He made full use of a moment in history when it was possible to create meaningful friendships for the United States.

Flash back to a very different but not too distant time in our two countries' history, and such diplomacy seems a world away. The early days—after the war and before we normalized diplomatic relations with Vietnam—were difficult. Ted describes the imperfect but determined people on both sides who took risks to bring Vietnam and America together. Writing about my friendship with John McCain, he recounts what drew us to the same conclusion: we needed to make peace with Vietnam. We needed to end the war about the war because it was in America's interests to do so. On an overnight flight to Kuwait in late February 1991, John and I began to talk about our very different experiences in Vietnam, and even about our disagreements in the 1970s. That conversation literally lasted for decades. We both saw the need to have a relationship with a country as important as Vietnam.

We served together on a Senate select committee to dig into a seminal and haunting question: Were there American soldiers still alive in Vietnam? A historic effort was launched to bring people home—and to bring answers and closure to their families. Never in the history of warfare have a former foe and its opponent engaged in such exhaustive accounting of the missing.

Healing wasn't easy. Reconciliation requires hard work, courage, compromise, and—most important—recognition of the humanity of brothers, sisters, friends, and loved ones on both sides. Vietnam and the United States have pursued this process every day for the past twenty-five years. Together, Vietnamese and Americans found and returned the remains of soldiers who perished, blew up unexploded ordnance, and cleaned up Agent Orange. Step-by-step, Americans and Vietnamese deepened the pool of trust that

allowed us to become, if not allies, at least close economic and security partners.

Today, Vietnam participates in more military engagements with the United States than it does with any other country. Vietnam has twice welcomed a U.S aircraft carrier to its shores, and the largest ship in its fleet came from the United States. Vietnam and the United States collaborate on challenges in the South China Sea, the Mekong River, and North Korea. Our diplomats work together in multilateral fora, including the United Nations, the World Health Organization, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. These actions demonstrate trust, and they advance the process of reconciliation.

To build trust, we must keep earning it, and that means doing what we say we will do.

The task of reconciliation is not complete. As Ted notes, even after Washington and Hanoi were reconciled, divisions persisted. The war was simultaneously a fight for independence, a contest of ideologies, and a civil war. Reconciliation needed to take place not only between victors and vanquished, but also between north and south, and between Americans of Vietnamese origin and citizens of Vietnam. Reconciliation between the Vietnamese diaspora and the motherland involves deeply emotional matters, including honoring the dead and acknowledging past horrors. It depends on ties between people: the back-and-forth activities of businesspeople, veterans, students, tourists, and family members. It requires more time.

Reconciliation requires continued nurturing. The United States and Vietnam must continue to engage on challenges that matter not only for dealing honestly with the past, but also for the future—including clean energy, climate change, economic transformation, human rights, and education.

For twenty-five years, the United States has shown respect for and built trust with Vietnam by being honest about the past, even as we've both been determined to overcome it. We both chose the path of reconciliation, and as a result, we are walking toward a better future—together. What better story could any of us write than this account by Ambassador Ted Osius to explain the difference that determined diplomacy can make in the twenty-first century?

John Kerry

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "John F. Kerry". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping "J" and "K".