

Last Trip to Vietnam

(April 4-22, 1975)

People have been urging me to get this last Vietnam experience down on paper while it is still fresh in my mind. I have resisted to date. My portable typewriter was left behind in ^{the} Bangkok hotel check room on April 18 when I shuttled back in to Saigon for the last time. All I have is a Government ballpoint unwittingly picked up along the way.

Also there is a reluctance to relive again an exhausting, tragic experience, and also, one has the depressing feeling that people would really not want to hear about it anyway, back here in the unreal world. For example news commentators are already busily assuring themselves and us that there will be no reprisals, no blood-bath in Vietnam. And that is what people will want to hear, despite all evidence of the way Stalinist Communists have acted everywhere, and despite all previous history in Vietnam itself. Two weeks ago in Saigon I asked a former file clerk who had worked in my office there in 1967-68 what would happen to her after a Communist takeover. "Nothing," she said, "for two to three years. Then, after Vietnam is no longer under the eyes of the world, and ~~now~~ after the more important people have been liquidated, then I will be tried for 'unloyalty' because I worked for the Americans and I will be killed." But this is not the sort of thing Americans want to hear or believe.

I had been living in Washington and observing with mounting disbelief the actions of the U.S. Congress. Years ago we had encouraged South Vietnam to become a "bastion of anti-Communism." For a time we even believed the cause was sufficiently important to send in our own troops (and no doubt the US military, at the outset, welcomed a chance to do its thing.) Then we had pulled out - our span of attention largely

exhausted - but in leaving had pressured the South Vietnamese to accept, over their protest, the legalized presence of North Vietnamese sanctuaries south of the 17th Parallel, so that Hanoi would, in turn, release American POWs. To the South Vietnamese this was about as safe as leaving live cancer cells in place as one sewed up a surgical incision. So to get their cooperation - which we had to have to get our prisoners out - we promised continued military aid, and even military counteraction (presumably by aircraft) if the Communists resumed their direct and naked military aggression. The Vietnamese struggle was unfortunately/an internal Vietnamese affair alone, because both sides, (having no domestic arms industry) depended totally on their respective foreign protectors for arms and ammunition. The cutoff of such supplies to either side meant ultimate defeat for that side.

So it was that in the winter and spring of 1975 the US Congress announced openly to the South Vietnamese, the North Vietnamese and the world that it would give no more military aid to South Vietnam. This was an announcement to friend and foe alike that our allies would, as a matter of mathematical certainty, be forced to lose, either sooner or later at their option. I remonstrated by mail and in person with Congressmen. I was told that these actions would force Thieu to "negotiate" with the Communists so that "self-determination for the South Vietnamese people would be achieved." I was told that it was not Communist aggression but rather the stubborn refusal of the South Vietnamese to "negotiate" that was the cause of the continuing war in South Vietnam (McGovern.) I was told that the South Vietnamese would lose anyway, so cutting off military aid was really an act of mercy (Fenwick.) Vietnam had long been the true home of the self-fulfilling prophecy, an art which had now reached near perfection.

I was told that cutting off military aid was an act of virtue because
South
the real problem in/Vietnam was that its largely elected government
was not representative of the people, (whereas the unelected Communist
authorities presumably were.) (Carr). I was astonished to learn that
the Communists in Vietnam really wanted to negotiate something other
than the total surrender of South Vietnam.

Since no Vietnamese I had met in service there off and on over
a 13-year period believed any of the foregoing, it was clear to me that
the US Congress must know something I didn't, or was itself ~~intelligent~~
hopelessly brainwashed. Quite apart from Vietnam or politics, I had
always placed a lot of credence in things like fair play, the importance
of keeping your word. When Senator Sam Nunn came along and said we
should provide to South Vietnam as much as Hanoi was getting from
Russia and China - and no more - this seemed so sensible and honorable
that I was amazed when no one reacted. This approach would have given
all parties to the conflict a real reason to negotiate - the alternative
being an endless war - whereas the Congress' preferred solution of
cutting off South Vietnam unilaterally gave the Communists no reason to
negotiate at all - and that is exactly what happened, even after Thieu
fell, and Huong fell, and Duong van Minh tried to surrender with
dignity.

My sense that the whole thing was dirty pool grew slowly to
a feeling of outrage and shame, and finally I felt compelled to return
to Vietnam. If there was still any hope for the South Vietnamese, I
wanted to encourage them. If none, then I wanted to help the refugees.
If that was impracticable I wanted to help some people escape, if I
could. Perhaps more than anything else I wanted to call on men and
women I had known and worked with in Vietnam, to let them know that

their erstwhile friends were still their friends; that not all Americans were indifferent to their plight. Perhaps just to express a symbolic solidarity with people in time of trouble, with individual friends facing death.

I explained some of this in a letter to the Seattle Post-Intelligencer as I passed through on my way to Vietnam. On the flight from Tokyo to HongKong (April 2) some Chinese fellow-passengers inquired with amazement why I was returning to Saigon at this time. When I told them they said nothing at first, but later in the flight each came by and honored me with expressions of support and good wishes.

I arrived in Saigon on April 4, in the evening, and showed up unannounced at the house of my old friend and colleague Mark Huss. The Vietnamese cook recognized me from years before and beamed. Mark seemed to find nothing surprising in my return. To both of us the concern was natural.

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In the morning I first walked some ten blocks to deliver a letter to a Vietnamese family from their relatives in the US. There were no Americans or foreigners on the streets. The Vietnamese either took no notice of me, or returned my smiles with their usual good manners. I had always felt instantly at home in Saigon - as had a long line of French and Americans before and after me. This time - with the US presence largely gone - the city seemed more like the Saigon I had first known in 1956, cleaner, quieter and less cluttered with military vehicles and barbed wire. Tennis was still being played at the Cercle Sportif, but the former crowd of foreigners drinking "citron presse" or ~~make~~

"biere 33" on the Continental terrace was largely gone. The city seemed calm and people went about their usual routines, but under the surface one could sense the tension.

For the first few days I tried simply to learn what the situation really was. Why had the South Vietnamese position deteriorated so rapidly in the Northern regions ? I learned some answers. Regarding the pullback from Banmethuot, one problem was that the South Vietnamese army, with its soldiers spending their entire working lives in uniform, had the families living with the troops. One could attack, leaving the families in safety behind, but one could not retreat without first getting the families out. But this was not done, and the retreat became chaotic as soldiers worried more about their families than their units. Bad planning, bad leadership.

Farther North units panic had occurred, even in crack units that had fought the North Vietnamese to a standstill in past engagements. Why ? Contradictory orders from Thieu, or no orders. Disastrous psychological blunders, as when the top Vietnamese commander moved his headquarters to a ship - which looked as if he was running away. Some said - and there was sharp disagreement about this - that the closing of the US Consulate, particularly the furtive manner in which it was done, was crucial. After all, the Vietnamese always assumed the Americans knew things they didn't know, and if the Americans were slipping out over the back fence, things must really be hopeless.

Clearly the stream of refugees voting with their feet inundated the South Vietnamese in places like Danang, but having said all this, the US role was of crucial importance. Of course there was to be no air support this time, but the daily word from Washington

went much farther. There was also to be no replacement of weapons or ammunition, no spare parts, no nothing. To make sure all South Vietnamese got the message clearly, the US Congress and the President had all gone on vacation. The growing sense of frustration and despair among the South Vietnamese was of course matched by growing elation among the North Vietnamese.

In Saigon things were still much calmer. Refugees had not been allowed to enter Saigon itself, to spread the panic and possibly to include enemy sappers. The city had adequate stocks of food, water and other necessities. The ARVN 18th Division, formerly one of the worst in the South Vietnamese army, was preparing to fight tenaciously and successfully at Xuan Loc. A spirit of resistance could still have been kindled, but two things had to happen first: Thieu had lost the confidence of the country because of the ~~disasters~~ in the North and clearly had to go, but was hanging on. Secondly, some note of encouragement had to be sounded from America. If the same message of no resupply, no support continued, then any resistance would ultimately be futile anyway. President Ford's message to the Congress seemed hopeful, but the Vietnamese were becoming increasingly aware that the Congress was now dictating US foreign policy and hung on every word that was being said by the august arbiters of their destiny on Capitol Hill.

Every day I met with old friends to exchange views. Among the press there were people like Bill Stewart of Time, Don Oberdorfer of the Washington Post, Keyes Beech of the Chicago Daily News. Also I called on present and former senior officials in the Vietnamese Government. One former cabinet minister saw me coming as he was working in old clothes in his yard. He rushed into the house as if he had seen a ghost, to emerge after a few moments in "proper" attire,

with beaming smile and old-world courtesy. Over the traditional tea I asked him about his plans. He smiled and said "I am more than 60 years old. At my age a bullet is no great matter. But I am worried for my children. If they are allowed to live they will have miserable lives. The Communists place great stock in genealogy." (Now, weeks later in my house in Washington, the dogwood blossoming outside my door matches the flowers on the lacquer panel he gave me in 1969 when I left Vietnam. I look at them and my thoughts go back to him. I honor him. If he is still alive today, his days are numbered. He showed me how a man can face an implacable destiny with grace and courage.)

Between April 4 and April 13 I remained in Saigon. The Vietnamese Government was understandably denying all exit visas even to Vietnamese who had passports. A few rich Vietnamese and Chinese were buying passports at astronomical prices - which went from \$ 2000 to \$15000 in a matter of days - and some Vietnamese girls were able to leave because they were married to Americans or other foreigners. I remembered the old joke about some bachelors being too old to be eligible and others being too eligible to be old. The latter was certainly the case in Saigon in April 1975. Any unattached American interested in matrimony, however homely or decrepit, could have caused a riot by placing an ad in a lonely hearts column, I mean literally :

On April 13 I took a commercial airline flight to Bangkok and then on to Vientiane, Laos. I wanted to get away from the atmosphere of doom and betrayal in Saigon, where I felt increasingly ashamed to be an American, and I wanted to stay with old friends in Vientiane where I might be able to hire a pilot and small aircraft to attempt to smuggle some people out of Vietnam.

Accordingly I hung around the "Feathered Flight" bar where the pilots often congregated. Right away I met some US air force officers who were more than sympathetic because, like every American I met in Southeast Asia, they were contemptuously bitter about the US Congress's attitude. With their help I did meet some private pilots, but many were out of town in Singapore, and in the time available I could locate none who had a suitable aircraft. So, after a pleasant evening with Len Maynard and Harvey Neese, I had to return to Bangkok.

On April 18 I flew back to Saigon, having carefully made a return reservation to Bangkok/the same evening. I would make one last attempt to discover a way to rescue Vietnamese friends, and if unsuccessful would extricate myself. As a private citizen I could not be sure where I would fit into any official evacuation plans, and I was increasingly afraid for my own hide. On arrival I found that whereas Saigon had been tense before, now there was real terror. The Vietnamese had heard enough of executions in Banmethuot, Danang and Nha Trang from relatives and refugees. Communist atrocities are never covered by the US television networks - which is one reason for the unreal perceptions of the American people about Vietnam - and the media themselves seem all too willing to overlook this slight deficiency as they purvey their "balanced" truth to the American people every evening. Thus it was hard for a foreigner to assess the real facts of Communist takeover in the northern regions. Photographic evidence of executions which one heard described with some specificity was obviously virtually non-existent. I did meet one Vietnamese connected with the US Information Service who told me she had personally seen photographs in their files, with the name of the photographer and the circumstances detailed, which depicted the punishment accorded to

one Vietnamese army colonel in Danang whose wife had the misfortune to be wearing red nail polish when captured by the liberators. Her finger- and toenails were pulled out before his eyes. Some Americans will of course wish to discredit ~~such~~ and deny such atrocities. Unfortunately torture and reprisal is a long-established tradition in Vietnam. It is also a common feature of Stalinist Communist, as Solzhenitsyn has recently reminded us, if reminder is necessary. Those who expect the victorious Communists in Vietnam to act with Christian charity are simply fools and wishful thinkers.

In April 1975 the people of Saigon who had worked with the Americans or with the Vietnamese Government ~~in~~ at official levels, and the 1954 refugees from North Vietnam, had a clear view of what awaited them. In fact many families had already bought pills with which to commit suicide. Once the dust settles in Vietnam, the newsmen depart, and the new regime has had time to complete the paperwork already under way, the purges will begin in earnest. Over the next few years a great many Vietnamese will go before "peoples' courts" for public humiliation, ~~in~~ or end their days alone and in unmarked graves, delivered to the executioners by the follies of their own leadership and by the pious decisions of the US Congress. As this paper is being typed, I read that there are some 60,000 refugees on Guam and 45,000 in camps in the continental U.S. Uprooted, homesick and miserable as many of them are, only 150 have asked to be sent back to Vietnam to date. George McGovern assures us and them that they would all be better off back in Vietnam. Can it be they know something he doesn't?

In any case, one Vietnamese friend in particular begged me to stay over at least until the 21st, Monday. This meant for me an ominous weekend. By this time there were 10 North Vietnamese divisions within striking distance of Saigon, with only three South Vietnamese divisions to oppose them. Xuan Loc had held but was being bypassed. As I walked about Saigon I found, to my surprise, none of the anti-Americanism I had expected. Perhaps my presence as an American gave a sense of normality and reassurance. If the Americans were still there, perhaps doomsday had not arrived. Perhaps one would wake up tomorrow and find the whole nightmare was really only a dream.

But in fact the Americans were leaving, and it was not always a noble spectacle. The departures had to be gradual, even discreet, to avoid a panic in which no one might get out. Thus one evening American personnel in a US Government office simply left their offices and got on a plane. In the morning, when the Vietnamese staff reported for duty as usual, there were no Americans there. One Vietnamese was quoted as saying: "Mr. _____ and I worked together daily for ten years. I felt he was my elder brother. But last night he left us and he didn't even say goodbye." Another such spectacle was provided when the American management of US banks in Saigon drove out to the airport ~~one~~ in the pre-dawn light to board a chartered aircraft for Hong Kong, having quietly turned their affairs over to European banks. When the Vietnamese clerks showed up, no one was there. Hardier American businessmen like Lincoln Brownell refused to panic and upheld the US image with greater dignity and grace.

The weekend of April 19-20 was a personal nightmare. The Vietnamese army was still being told it would get no more military

supplies from the US Congress, but that there would be "humanitarian aid," which was understandably regarded as something of a sick joke by people who were trying to figure out how to save their lives and freedom. The Communists were pressing Bien Hoa, 15 miles from Saigon. If the South Vietnamese continued to fight we still had a few days to get out of town. If they did not, we were already trapped. (May I hereby thank the unknown South Vietnamese soldiers who in fact bought time for us and for thousands of their countrymen, many with their lives, and with no hope of gratitude or reward.)

During the weekend I continued to monitor the situation regarding evacuation of Vietnamese. The restrictions imposed by the Vietnamese Government were breaking down with the general disintegration of the regime. On the US side efforts were increasingly being made to get US citizens to leave Saigon, as American passport-holders could still do by commercial carriers. But those same Americans, disgusted with US policies and particularly by the abandonment to their fate of Vietnamese co-workers or relatives, were digging in their heels and in effect telling the bureaucracy, and ultimately the US Congress, that they would not leave unless some Vietnamese left also. As a result of these pressures, it began to appear that perhaps Vietnamese could now be extricated by Americans willing to sponsor them, even though not related by blood or marriage. So on Monday morning, April 21, I told one Vietnamese friend whose years of employment with Pan Am World Airways and other American companies placed her in jeopardy to collect her daughter and a few hand-carry parcels of clothes, and we would try to escape. Mark Huss loaned us his car to go as far as the airport police checkpoint. There we bribed a policeman to let us get on the bus for the DAO Compound - the former US military headquarters in Vietnam - where the outprocessing was going on.

We found ourselves in due course in an auditorium along with several hundred milling people. Two US vice-consuls sat at a desk stamping papers, while another American wandered around with a bullhorn telling people to line up over here or over there, for no explained reason. Eventually I found a form and filled in the names of my "dependents," listing them as "adoptive daughters," (undeterred by the fact that one was the mother of the other.) That seemed good enough and in due course I presented my stamped paper and got assigned a manifest number. We then waited in line or sat in the sun from 9 a.m. on April 21 to 3:30 a.m. on April 22. I ran into Americans like Wes Milligan who were bringing out 13 "relatives." It seemed that most Americans were overwhelmed with the indecency that was being inflicted on the South Vietnamese by deliberate US policies and were determined to protest in their own way by getting out as many people as possible. The US Congress was pushing to get the Americans out and generally was unsolicitous about our allies. The local Americans reacted by refusing to leave unless their families, friends and co-workers could go too. This forced liberalization of the evacuation rules. When one considers that these Americans had to accept responsibility - financial and otherwise - for these Vietnamese for an indefinite period, it becomes apparent that this impulse to save the Vietnamese was an act of conscience as well as a gesture of contempt for Capitol Hill.

At 0330 we were bussed to a waiting 6-130 boxcar, its engines all revved up to go, and were strapped to the metal floor in rows like so many two-legged sardines. About four hours later - after 24 hours on the way - we arrived at Clark Field.

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Up to this point I can safely say there were no proud Americans

left in Vietnam. There was only a matter of degree in the shame, contempt and anger universally felt by all. But Clark Field helped to change this, for at once we saw Americans of a different stamp - Air Force personnel working around the clock, lady volunteers bringing water and cookies, smiling, patient and tireless. After checking in we were bussed to "tent city." Here military tents were set up with cots for about 12 people per tent, the whole being located in the heart of the Base, with access to a real cafeteria, real showers, and even an outdoor movie theatre. We were made to feel welcome, the weather was superb, and the operation smoothly managed by a team of Air Force sergeants apparently led by an outstanding black sergeant with a loudspeaker microphone perpetually in his hand. The patience of these people was unbelievable. It seemed nothing could disturb their calm efficiency. A long line of Americans and Vietnamese will not soon forget the great people of Clark Field. They showed us America at its best.

After four days we were flown to Guam. Apparently the Philippines Government was drawing the same conclusion I had observed in Bangkok, which might be phrased like this: If the Americans won't stand up for what they used to believe in and will even cut off aid to those whom they set up as exponents of American anti-Communist policies, then who the hell needs the Americans? Besides, to succour South Vietnamese refugees will only irritate the new rulers of Asia, so why do it? It was also rumored that the US authorities had not bothered to check with the Philippines Government before bringing in the refugees. In any case we had to go.

Guam, under the Navy, appeared to face a particularly difficult problem, with many refugees converging both from Clark

and from Saigon itself, by the thousands. We were moved to a tent city still being constructed at Orote Point, at the opposite end of the island from Andersen Air Force Base where we had landed amidst rows of B-52s. The bus ride gave us a chance to see Guam, its beautiful harbor at Agana, and finally the Navy Base. The tent city was not located in the heart of the Base as at Clark Field, but on freshly-bulldozed scrub land well removed from any permanent installations. Thus there was no access to Base facilities, although as an American I could and did hitch-hike to a snack bar where I could buy some food before my lack of a Navy ID card was perceived.

In tent city itself the Seabees were working around the clock to set up tents - not spaced apart as at Clark but packed together. Running water was just being installed, as also was electric wiring for lights. Latrines were still about 300 yards apart. Dust was everywhere, and one had to scrounge to get a cot to sleep on, in my case with a bath towel for the only blanket. Each hour new supplies would arrive, which the Seabees would try to distribute. There was no public address system, so no orders could be given. The Americans and Vietnamese organized themselves, bringing group pressure to bear to clean up tent areas, discourage non-use of latrines, etc. There seemed to be little evidence of sickness. I recognized one Vietnamese millionaire (or perhaps ex-millionaire.) I was told he had purchased passports for his family at exorbitant prices, but the airport officials had refused to accept them anyway, so he had rushed over to the US evacuation center and somehow managed to get included.

Tent City, Orote Point, was a bit of an ordeal. On the second day, after six ~~maxx~~ hours standing in line, I was able to present myself before a US immigration official and get us cleared to proceed to the next stop, the "Bachelor Civilian Quarters." Here we were assigned seven to a small room, but it had a bathroom and shower and we felt almost overwhelmed by the luxury of our situation. After one night we were put in busses and told we were going to airplanes and on to the mainland United States. But no - the bus went only as far as a defunct Japanese honeymoon hotel - the Tokyu Guam - which the Marines had put back in operation on 24-hour notice. We ate C-Rations with gusto, slept eight to a smaller room - but it also had a bathroom and shower - and ~~the~~ in the morning were bussed again "to board aircraft." By this time we had all developed a sixth sense for reality and were not surprised when the bus unloaded us at a barracks within the confines of Andersen Air Force Base. Each move brought us nearer to ~~the~~ planes. Another hour or two in line and we got our names on a manifest and bussed once more - this time to a indoor basketball court. From here we could actually see the plane - a World Airways 747. One last busing and we were on our way non-stop to Travis Air Force Base, California, ten hours away.

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What is one left with at the end of such an experience, other than the continuing responsibility of helping people build a new life in America? (And I might interject here that "Ann", the 13-year old, is already happily enrolled in school in Arlington, Va. while "Nancy" her mother, seems to have a chance to get a job doing what she already knows well, behind an airline ticket counter.) I think many of us had

a chance to reflect on and discuss this question as we sat in Tent City at Clark Field. We had witnessed not only the fall of South Vietnam and Cambodia, but also the destruction of US influence in mainland Southeast Asia. Thailand now regarded us as a liability and was demanding withdrawal of our forces. We sensed the same situation in the Philippines. We asked ourselves, where would America draw the line now? If the offshore areas - Indonesia and Japan ~~in~~ particularly, and also the Philippines and Taiwan, were to be abandoned, we and Western Europe would be materially weaker, militarily and morally, than the Communist-controlled world. It seemed to us that there are fringe-areas in the world, and if one group did not care to assert its influence, interests and ideals in such places, others certainly would. We wondered why it was that a miserable system like Communism, which virtually no one lives under by choice, should have discipline, zeal and the desire to grow, while the open societies sought only comfort, retrenchment and rest. Why was it that the containment of Communism was regarded as an outmoded and derided concept, while its converse, the expansion of Communism, was highly respectable in the eyes of its adherents, and apparently of the world at large.

I for one felt that America was fast asleep. We had never known World War II as the countries of Europe did. Our own security at home had never been threatened since the Civil War. No Americans, except those who had survived Nazi concentration camps in World War II, or were Hungarian refugees, or who were in Vietnam in April 1975, had ever felt in their own homes what thousands of South Vietnamese are

now feeling - the helpless, hopeless, abandoned horror of waiting for the axe to fall. Will Durant, in discussing his philosophy of history, points out that there is a process of competition and selection going on between human groups all the time, and if individuals do not feel it, it is only because they are protected by the group. Here in America, protected by two oceans, we are unaware of this competition as it exists at the fringes of our world. Yet in the longer term, our place in the sun and that of the Western world demand that we hold our own in this process of competition at the fringes. It is not an irrevocable gift of nature. As we recede, others advance and the next stand becomes more difficult.

Our recent performance is not encouraging. We will spend more on "humanitarian aid" than was originally requested for military aid. We will resettle people who could more easily have remained at home. The US Congress, since it assumed direct responsibility for foreign policy in recent months, has achieved near-disaster in the Eastern Mediterranean; diminished emigration from the Soviet Union while diminishing trade at the same time; and the loss of mainland Southeast Asia. No US administration since World War II, however bungling, can make such a claim. Without the advantages of Congressional wisdom, South Vietnam could still exist, and we would not be an object of derision in much of the world. In recent days we have neither been wise nor honorable. One can only hope that the resultant humiliation will bring us to our senses before other such disasters are upon us. At the moment I suspect we need Harry Truman and George Marshall (and maybe even George Patton) more than George McGovern and Jane Fonda.