THE LOSS OF SOUTH VIETNAM: SOME FACTS AND PERCEPTIONS

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I still remember the words ~~from~~ of President Thieu when I saw him a few weeks before the signing of the Paris Agreement and received his instructions for one of my frequent trips to the U.S. at this period of time, as his special emissary to watch over the peace negotiations:

> "Go to Washington and Paris and try to do your best. To raise again at this hour the problem of the North Vietnamese troops in our territory is perhaps too late, but as long as we can still have a chance to improve the agreement, we have to try. If we cannot have now the basic requirements for our survival, it will be very difficult for us in the long run and the withdrawal of the North Vietnamese troops is one of the basic requirements."

Those words, I think, reflected the mood of all the South Vietnamese at that time and summed up to a certain extent the difficult situation that South Vietnam had to face then and later, during the two years to come.

The peace negotiations were already at the final stage when I arrived in Washington on January 5, 1973. In five days, I went around seeing as many people as I could in so short a period of time: Dr. Kissinger, Secretary of State Rogers, Under Secretary of State Alexis Johnson, Senators, Congressmen and countless members of the news media.

Dr. Kissinger was scheduled to return to Paris on January 7 so I rushed to see him on the day of my arrival. During our conversation, stressing the South Vietnamese point of view, I pointed out the necessity of specifying clearly that there were two states of Vietnam: the Democratic Republic of Vietnam or DRV and the Republic of Vietnam or RVN, and not one as the first draft of the agreement tacitly implied. I raised the crucial issue of the presence in the South of the North Vietnamese troops. My point was: for the U.S. the presence of these troops even the whole problem of Vietnam--was only one among its many

other worldwide problems. But for South Vietnam it was a matter of life and death. Dr. Kissinger assured me that he shared the concerns of our government but due to the fact that the principle of a stand-still cease-fire had been already accepted by all the parties involved, it was difficult for him to come back to this problem. He promised nevertheless to try to do his best once more with the North Vietnamese in his coming round of talks with them on January 8.

I found Dr. Kissinger sincere in his presentation of the American position but his visible lack of conviction on the problem of the North Vietnamese troops was a clear indication to me that minds were already set for an agreement with the Communists, and his words at the end of the meeting simply confirmed it. He said in effect that given the mood of the U.S. Congress and public opinion prevailing then, President Nixon and himself had already, "in cold blood," come to the conclusion that an agreement with the Communists was a necessity. In terms of "global strategy," the success or failure of the entire U.S. foreign policy depended on the conclusion of the agreement and as far as Vietnam was concerned, the agreement would provide "a new basis for the continuation of aid to South Vietnam." Anyway if worst should come to worst, the U.S. would be always there and would not tolerate violations to the agreement by the Communists.

My conversations with Secretary of State Rogers and other U.S. officials on January 7 were along the same line and a clear indication of the mood of the Nixon Administration. At one point during our conversations, Secretary Rogers told me that President Nixon had taken too many risks already with his Vietnam policy and that consequently the U.S. Government could not go further than the agreement being negotiated. "Time has come," he said, "for making a choice, we do not have many alternatives left."

I cabled back everyday to Saigon the substance of my conversations in Washington and along with it my overall assessment of the situation: that at this eleventh hour of the negotiations the die was already cast and nothing more could be done to improve the agreement except on some minor items; that everything at this moment--(the mood of

the U.S. Congress, the public opinion, the international situation)--was bringing strong pressure on the Nixon Administration and whether we--South Vietnamese--liked it, accepted it or not, an agreement would be signed in a matter of weeks. And the presence of the North Vietnamese troops inside South Vietnam would be tacitly accepted. Practically, South Vietnam had no choice at all. However, imperfect and dangerous the agreement was, South Vietnam had to swallow it or face abandonment by the U.S. To this effect General Haig told me in a conversation in his Pentagon office on January 9:

> "I have no doubt about the determination of our President to proceed in case there is an acceptable agreement. He will proceed, how painful it may be, and if your President decides to reject it, it will be the end of everything--in other words the abandonment of South Vietnam."

I flew to Paris on January 10 and there, a little more than two weeks later, South Vietnam acquiesced to the Paris agreement after registering protest until the last minute. Actually, the North Vietnamese adamantly refused to yield on the issue of their troops inside South Vietnam, and Washington, caught between Hanoi and Saigon, could not find a better solution than the one which by-passed the issue. A U.S. note was handed to the South Vietnamese Government stating, in effect, that the U.S. "did not recognize any right for the North Vietnamese to maintain armed forces of their own in the territory of South Vietnam." The note simply quoted some of the typical lies by Le Duc Tho, the North Vietnamese negotiator during his private negotiations with Dr. Kissinger; "these troops are voluntary troops and the children of South Vietnamese regroupees;" "We have put down a provision saying that the way to reunify the country is through peaceful means and step by step restoration through agreements between the two sides, so how can there be a use of military means by one side against the other." And the note said that the North Vietnamese, by making these statements, confirmed that they claimed no right to have troops inside South Vietnam.

Anyway, the Agreement was signed on January 27, 1973 to the applause of world opinion and to the relief of the Americans and of those South Vietnamese who had witnessed an obvious deterioration of the relations between the two countries during the final phase of the negotiations.

The final decision from Saigon to sign the Agreement came only after a rather painful exchange of messages between Presidents Nixon and Thieu--almost everyday during the week preceding the paraphing of the Agreement--with some of the messages from President Nixon drafted in the toughest language that the diplomatic practice has ever seen:

> "I am firmly convinced that the alternative to signing the present agreement is a total cutoff of funds to assist your country...If you refuse to join us, the responsibility for the consequences rests on the government of Vietnam... If you cannot give me a positive answer by 1200 Washington time, January 21, 1973, I shall inform the Congressional leaders that I am authorizing Dr. Kissinger to initial the Agreement even without the concurrence of your Government. In that case even if you decide to join us later, the possibility of Congressional assistance will be severely reduced. In that case also, I will not be able to put into my January 23 speech the assurances I have indicated to you, because they will not then seem to have been a voluntary act on my part." (excerpts from President Nixon's messages to President Thieu on January 18 and 21, 1975)

It was clear then, as it is now, that the Agreement was accepted by Hanoi because the final draft of the Agreement was not much different from the initial draft they had already accepted in October 1972, and because the Communists badly needed a pause to recuperate from the various wounds occasioned by the heavy B52 bombings in December 1972. As to Saigon, more reluctantly than willingly the South Vietnamese signed it because they were left with no choice, only the hope of securing a new basis for continuation of U.S. support, vital for their survival. (Dr. Kissinger had said to me in a conversation on January 12, 1973 in Paris: "Your overwhelming and urgent requirement is the continued U.S. support.")

The Paris Agreement was supposed to put an end to the war in Vietnam but none of the parties to the Agreement had any illusion about it. The fighting resumed almost immediately after the signing

although on a diminished scale, and each party got back to its own preoccupation: The Communists to their "grab land and population" strategy; the U.S. to its worldwide problems, particularly the explosive problem of the Middle East; and the South Vietnamese to their rather negative "hold on" policy, a policy which would be fatal to their survival two years later. (Mr. Thieu based his "hold on" policy on the conviction that the integrity of the South Vietnamese territory had to be defended at all costs, and that consequently, everywhere there was a Communist attack or infiltration, the South Vietnamese forces must respond immediately. Mr. Thieu foresaw too the possibility of a political settlement being forced on him and tried, through his "hold on" policy, to prevent the Communists from claiming that they controlled territory and population inside South Vietnam. So the flag of South Vietnam should be everywhere, even over the remotest outpost of the country, he believed.)

Diplomatically, the outlook was not entirely unfavorable to South Vietnam after the signing of the Paris Agreement. The somewhat uneasy and tense atmosphere between Saigon and Washington during the final phase of the negotiations quickly evaporated. Vice President Agnew was dispatched to Saigon to publicly assure the South Vietnamese Government and people that they could continue to rely on the U.S. support. Good news concerning the preparations for the return from Vietnam of the last U.S. troops, and the repatriation of U.S. prisoners from Communist camps favorably influenced the Congress and public opinion. To top it all, President Thieu was invited to a meeting with President Nixon at San Clemente on April 3 and 4 1973.

It is to be noted here that for quite a time already Mr. Thieu had wanted to have such a meeting; he attached great importance to it, and the San Clemente rendez-vous was part of an understanding between the two governments when Saigon agreed to sign the Agreement in Paris. Obviously, Mr. Thieu wanted to enhance his prestige at home by a meeting with the U.S. President but at the same time he needed to know to what extent he could count on the U.S. for the continuation of his uncompromising and intransigent attitude

vis-a-vis the Communists (and to a lesser extent vis-a-vis his political opponents in Saigon too). And because he always considered the American factor the most important element--if not the vital one--in every problem that he had to solve, whether it ~~was concerning~~ concerned the future of the country or his own political future, he thought that only a meeting "en tete à tete" with Mr. Nixon could give him the answer. ("What are the Americans really up to?"--in his own words--was a constant question in his mind during his entire political life.)

Mr. Thieu went to San Clemente with careful preparations (he sent me back to the U.S. in March for this purpose) and a lot of expectations. Much impressed at that time by the "long haul and low cost" strategy advocated by the English expert on guerilla warfare, Sir Robert Thompson, he pressed for the acceptance of the idea at the meeting and presented ambitious programs for the modernization of the South Vietnamese Armed Forces and the development of the South Vietnamese economy. The meeting went smoothly. Mr. Thieu got promises for more aid, a communique was issued warning the Communists not to violate the Paris Agreement, and he returned home confident and encouraged. Actually, Mr. Thieu did not get any specific promise in terms of volume ~~or amount~~ of aid, but he was greatly encouraged by the general tone of his conversation with Mr. Nixon. Mr. Nixon, himself, was obviously optimistic at this time about his political future and his ability to convince the U.S. Congress that help for South Vietnam must be continued. He conveyed to Mr. Thieu the idea that somehow an "adequate" volume of aid would be acceptable to the Congress, and that, as he had called peace in Vietnam an honorable and lasting peace, he would keep it honorable and lasting. Mr. Thieu drew, perhaps, his own conclusion that the U.S. would never let South Vietnam fall under the rule of the Communists.

As ~~was~~ mentioned above, Mr. Thieu based his strategy mainly on his reading of American policy. He got his reading at San Clemente where it happened that the American policy was personified by a reelected President at the height of his political career (landslide victory, peace in Vietnam, and no Watergate, yet) with basically strong anti-Communist views who promised not only aid but "vigorous reaction" too,

in case of Communist violation of the Paris Agreement. The off-the-record language was stronger than the language of the official communique, for instance:

> "The U.S. will meet all contingencies in case the Agreement is grossly violated. You can count on us."

Under these circumstances, Mr. Thieu's perception of U.S. policy simply reinforced him in his conviction that his "hold on" policy was the viable course of action for South Vietnam. On his way home, he stopped over in Seoul and Taipeh, the two strongholds of die-hard anti-Communism and quite naturally he got even more encouragement there for his hard-line policy.

These visits gave a rosy hue to the political fortunes of Mr. Thieu and to the future of South Vietnam. The "grab land and population" strategy of the Communists was effectively countered by forceful and decisive South Vietnamese operations on the battlefields. Around the country, preparations were made for the nationwide senatorial elections. In the cities life went on as if there were no war at all. (Saigon, in fact, was in so confident a mood that Mr. Thieu sent me, as his Special Envoy, on a tour of Djakarta and Kuala Lumpur to see President Suharto of Indonesia and Prime Minister Razak of Malaysia in an attempt to renew diplomatic relations with these two countries. Their warm attitude during my visits was a sign to me that the stock of South Vietnam was not at a low point and that doubt of the South Vietnamese ability to survive had not yet occurred to them.)

This comparatively calm situation lasted only a few months. Very soon, the war broke out in the Middle East (October 1973) and on the Washington political scene, slowly but ~~inexpliably~~ INEXORABLY, Watergate loomed on the horizon. Apparently these two developments had little connection with Vietnam and could not seriously affect the situation there. In truth, they had devastating effects, and it was from this moment that the situation in South Vietnam began to deteriorate.

For almost a year, the North Vietnamese systematically continued their "grab land and population" strategy, in spite of important

setbacks and losses during the first part of the year. They kept coming back, attacking the isolated outposts along the borders, (seemingly trying to secure for themselves a safe corridor to the Cambodian borders) improving their system of communications and extending their pipelines. From an estimated 11 divisions of expeditionary corps at the cease fire days, they had emplaced some 13 divisions inside South Vietnam by the end of 1973.

By contrast, the South Vietnamese had increasing difficulties coping with this new situation. The "hold on" policy of Mr. Thieu seemed to play into the hands of the Communists and began to have its toll. Local commanders complained that their forces had been spread too thin, diffusing their fire power, their mobility and consequently their effectiveness. In the meantime the backbone of the Army, the Airborne troops and the Marines were held in static positions near the Demilitarized Zone, creating the precarious situation of an army fighting with virtually no reserves. (It was rumored that Mr. Thieu was concerned with the possibility of a military coup against him and kept the crack units far from Saigon; personally I do not believe it was true; in spite of the fact that Mr. Thieu was well known to have suspicions about everything, he had the situation well under control by the time those units left Saigon.) Finally, the desertion rate was on the rise and the normal size of the fighting units was down to a critical level.

The war in the Middle East (with its direct consequence, the world-wide energy crisis) and the Watergate affair, mentioned earlier, had devastating effects on the situation on Vietnam. One of my cables sent back to Saigon from Washington (where I was again in mission in October 1973, lobbying for an increase in aid for South Vietnam) described these effects as follows:

> "Nobody is paying any attention to Vietnam these days. News on Vietnam is buried in the inside pages of the newspapers. The mind of the Administration here is either on the Middle East, the fuel crisis, or on the Watergate affair. For reasons of their own, Senators and Congressmen are more

> concerned about Israel than about Vietnam. There is an emerging confrontation between the Congress and the Administration. The end result of this situation: it is extremely difficult for us to ask for an increase in military and economic aid."

The aid had already been reduced by at least one third, in terms of real value, due to the sharp rise of basic commodities and oil costs in the world market. And the practical consequences of this situation in Washington were to benefit the North Vietnamese: they were free to pursue their aggressive policy without concern for any punitive action, while the South Vietnamese suffered a sharp reduction in aid at a time they needed it most, both for the replenishing of their forces and the consolidation of their morale.

South Vietnam began the year of 1974 with gathering clouds on the horizon. On the battlefields, besides the two enclave-outposts Le Minh and Tong Le Chan (lost to the enemy in 1973), other outposts like Duc Phong, Bo Duc and Don Luan were targets for heavy enemy assaults, of battalion and sometimes of regimental size. From a tactical point of view, it appeared that the Communists initiated these rather strong attacks to test the American reactions. Very cautious and circumspect by nature, they were constantly alert to the unpredictable character of the Nixon decisions; theirs was quite a deliberate move to evaluate the ability of the Nixon Administration to react in the face of the Watergate affair and other worldwide preoccupations. The mining of the port of Haiphong and the B52 bombing during Christmas 1972 were deep in their mind and they kept the intensity of their attacks well under control; just enough to consolidate their earlier gains and to injure the South Vietnamese but not enough to openly challenge the Nixon Administration. There was no American reaction, so gradually and systematically they intensified the tempo of their attacks, pushing the South Vietnamese more and more into a defensive posture. With the fuel crisis the beginning of an ammunition shortage, the South Vietnamese were compelled to reduce the Air Forces sorties, and artillery support to the fighting units was down to a minimum.

On the pacification front, the situation was no better: the governmental troops continued to have control of the highways but outside the corridor along the highways control was at best mixed, and in many areas a pattern of local accommodation gave a false impression of tranquility and security (the accommodation took the form of a tacit understanding between the local commanders, Communist and non-Communist, with the practical meaning: if you do not attack me, I will not attack you).

Finally, it was on the economic, social and political front that the difficulties of the government were most apparent. During the first months of 1974, the inflation rate fluctuated between 40% and 60%; the cost of living was so high that for almost all those who worked for the government (mainly in the Armed Forces) meeting ends became impossible. The morale of the population was really at a low point; and in addition to this depressing atmosphere, true or false, there were constant rumors about corruption in the governmental and army circles contributing to the worsening of a situation already ripe for malcontents. The country had been through calamities for three decades, and during the years the trouble makers never ran out of opportunities and causes. But the circumstances of the Spring and Summer of 1974 were really the optimum for them.

The first half of 1974 went by anyway with no catastrophic development in South Vietnam, but, imperceptibly the situation on all fronts continued to erode. For more than a year and at comparatively little cost the North Vietnamese succeeded in strengthening and building up their positions inside South Vietnam. They increased attacks against the remaining outposts and employed more subversive activities to foment social and political troubles in the urban centers. The Republic of Vietnam was still in place with all branches of the government still functioning, but a quick glance at the map could easily establish that North Vietnam controlled the upper part of the two provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien; the totality of the corridor along the Laotian borders; many large spots in the Central Lowlands (mainly in the province of Quang Ngai and Binh Dinh) and other strongholds close to the Cambodian borders; not to mention the kind of mixed

control that they had already gained in many areas of the populated delta.

It is to be noted here that the South Vietnamese leadership was not entirely in the dark about this dangerous situation. I saw the map of South Vietnam well updated and with many portions of the territory under Communist control in vivid color in President Thieu's office. General Cao Van Vien, the Army Chief of Staff, pointed out to me the precarious character of the situation every time I visited him. General Don, the Vice Prime Minister, shared with me his concern about the bad leadership in the Army, the degree of insecurity in the provinces and the bad impression he got in each weekly inspection tour in the countryside. The concern was deep in the minds of people; everybody knew that the situation had sharply deteriorated, but somehow, through some sort of blind confidence in the resilient power of the South Vietnamese people (Did not they survive and spring back after the Tet attacks of 1968 and the big offensive of 1972?) nobody thought of the situation in terms of disintegration and collapse, either imminent or in a distant future.

In this connection I recall having many conversations with Mr. Thieu at this time. The regime in South Vietnam being a one-man regime, the mentality, the thinking of this one man greatly influenced the development of the situation and to a large degree reflected the situation. In March of this year, 1974, Mr. Thieu asked me to go on a tour of Japan and France to have talks with the governments of these two countries ~~in~~ (with a) view ~~of~~ to an increase in the volume of their aids to South Vietnam. As usual, before every trip abroad, I ~~came~~ went to see him to get his instructions for the trip. In most of these cases, we spent only a short time talking about the specific object of my missions, while several hours were devoted to a comparatively free exchange of observations and ideas on the overall situation of the country.

For reasons which are still unclear to me (Presidents seldom tolerated frank talks), Mr. Thieu was well disposed to listen to my candid observations about the weaknesses of his regime and the downward trend of the country. I pointed out to him the negative image

of South Vietnam abroad, the corresponding negative mood of the U.S. Congress and public opinion, the frustrating immobilism inside ~~the~~ governmental circles, the lack of coordination among the different branches of his government, the degree of corruption in the provinces, all this to lead him to the conclusion that something had to be done urgently to reverse the dangerous trend before it was too late. I drew his attention to the overnight downfall of the military dictatorship in Bangkok in late 1973, adding that politics develops its own dynamics and that sometimes a dormant stituation gets out of control just by a coincidence of imponderable factors.

I found Mr. Thieu aware of the seriousness of the situation and even receptive to the idea that he should reform his government and reorganize the Armed Forces to make the whole apparatus of the government more responsive to the needs of the country. I tried to convince him that these reforms were urgently needed, but obviously I failed because he did not feel the urgency of the situation. He had perhaps the wrong belief that the U.S. would never give up South Vietnam, and with this belief, he thought he could afford to wait for a more propitious time before attempting to do anything. Cautious and suspicious by nature, more inclined to wait than to take action, he hinted to me that the best time for him to act would be when the U.S. Congress increased military and economic aid to South Vietnam. (It was quite difficult for him to realize that within the context of American politics at this period of time, such an increase was impossible). He would then interpret that as a clear indication of U.S. support for his policy, and then proceed, in a position of strength, to implement his reforms.

He waited, and waited, till the days when the dramatic developments of the Watergate affair and the subsequent resignation of President Nixon made it clear that both the U.S. Administration and the U.S. Congress were in a sense, paralyzed and could not act one way or the other, except to further reduce the obviously inadequate level of aid already authorized and appropriated.

By the fall of 1974, the situation in South Vietnam continued to be calm on the surface, with the same pattern of strong attacks against the outposts but not yet with any well-coordinated real offensive. Intelligence gathering at that time indicated nevertheless that the Communists continued a steady rate of infiltration inside South Vietnam; they reactivated all the airfields that they had at their disposal along the Laotian and Cambodian borders. Tactically speaking, their troops were on a "ready" status, but the strategic decision to attack had not yet come from the political authorities in Hanoi. In this respect, the disappearance of Mr. Nixon from the American political scenes was a vital factor in the thinking of the Communists when they pondered the pros and cons of an all-out offensive against the South. Without an unpredictable Nixon reaction to take into account, with a newly-appointed President still trying to assert his authority on the national and international scenes, with a U.S. Congress more and more against any involvement abroad and with a regime in the South in deep trouble, both military and political, the Communists seemed to hold in their hands all the favorable conditions for making the big decision. And apparently they did, starting the irreversible process of meticulous preparations, probing attacks, and then offensives leading to their V Day in April 1975.

The situation for South Vietnam was further complicated by a major political crisis in Saigon during the last part of 1974. Throughout the years Mr. Thieu was in power, his political opponents never really lacked "good causes" for their activities against the government, but by the fall of 1974, it almost looked as though they had some connivence from Mr. Thieu himself. Monopoly of power in the hands of the President and a limited number of men of his entourage, widespread corruption, high cost of living, inefficient government, no-win policy with not a single prospect of peace in view--almost everything concurred to offer them the most attractive platform they could possibly dream of. These opponents were from all the horizons of the political spectrum in South Vietnam: leftist elements, neutralists, frustrated politicians, Buddhists, Catholics, and mixed with them a sizable number of sincere

nationalists who were honestly convinced that the country could not stand against the Communists with the corrupt and inefficient government of Mr. Thieu. (Some of them expressed the opinion that President Park Chung Hee of South Korea suppressed political opposition, but at least there was a degree of efficiency in his regime which permitted a boom on the economic field and maintained discipline around the country.) Obviously, in a confused atmosphere like the one in South Vietnam where the lines separating the Communists from the dissidents of leftist tendencies could not be clearly defined, no one could expect the Communists not to play their subtle subversive games, but Mr. Thieu's intransigence and stubbornness, played into the hands of the Communists. Instead of trying to reach out for those genuine nationalists who opposed him for legitimate reasons, he threw them all ~~against the wall~~ aside, leaving them to side with the Communist opposition, creating for himself (and unfortunately for the country, too) a perfectly avoidable major political crisis which complicated the situation in a country already at an extremely dangerous impasse.

The crisis started at the end of the summer almost immediately after the resignation of Mr. Nixon in Washington, (which was considered by all in Vietnam as a bad sign for the political fortune of Mr. Thieu). A public campaign of anti-corruption was organized by a catholic priest who challenged the government to tell the truth about the corrupt activities of some of the men and women in the entourage of Mr. Thieu. The priest's purpose in starting the campaign was perhaps of a modest and genuine nature but the anti-corruption issue was so popular around the country that in a matter of weeks all those who opposed the government for one reason or another — leftists, rightists, Buddhists, Catholics, — all of them joined the priest's banner and quickly transformed the anti-corruption campaign into a vast anti-governmental crusade. Nobody knew exactly to what extent the Communists or those who acted on their behalf exploited the situation, but somehow manifestations against the government were organized almost daily in Saigon and in many of the provinces. A glance at the newspapers each morning gave the impression that the whole country was in flames, and in the passionate political atmosphere of pro- or anti-government, no one seemed to remember that

it was precisely at this moment the Communists were activating their offensive.

This retrospective essay is not the history of war in South Vietnam, it is rather a recollection of the final phase of the situation there, an assessment, a study of the various causes of the swift disintegration and finally the collapse of the regime in Saigon. For this purpose I will omit any description of the fighting and concentrate on those aspects of the situation which I consider important to the understanding of the hows and whys of this disintegration and collapse.

THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE LEADERSHIP

The tragic end of the non-Communist regime in South Vietnam was due in part, in my opinion, to poor leadership and to the failure of this leadership to assess the situation in time of crisis.

The leadership problems were both of men and of a system. Obviously, systems are but men's creations, and whether we have good or bad leadership depends more on men than on systems, but the system in South Vietnam with its ambiguities had its share of responsibility in the overall situation, and the inadequate South Vietnamese leadership had its roots in the system itself.

That system did not develop naturally, over a period of time sufficient to prove itself. It was a kind of melange, a government on paper but not in actuality; moreover, it resembled neither the emperor's rule nor the colonial regime which preceded it. An inexpert, poorly informed people attempted to elect equally uninformed, poorly-trained representatives. It was a half presidential system but, as in the French Gaullist and Korean Governments, there was a Prime Minister whose role was to implement the policy of the President. In principle, in such a system the Prime Minister should take care of the everyday governmental problems, freeing the President for important national security problems. That was not the case in South Vietnam. I do not recall, now, how many times during my years of dealing with Mr. Thieu, the President and Mr. Khiem, his Prime Minister, I heard

complaints from one of these two men about the other, but that there were no lines of responsibilities clearly defined between these two was of common knowledge in Saigon. Mr. Khiem complained about the fact that for almost everything even for small problems he had to refer to the President for decisions, while Mr. Thieu told his entourage that Mr. Khiem was just sitting in his office, doing nothing and that consequently he had to devote too much of his time to solve the problems which normally should be solved at lower echelons.

The question was why Mr. Thieu did not fire Mr. Khiem if he found the man not up to his task and why Mr. Khiem did not resign if he felt he could not have the basic conditions to fulfill his duty. Seemingly, because of his lack of self-confidence and his suspicious nature, Mr. Thieu avoided having men of strong personality around him, and for lack of moral courage Mr. Khiem choose to stay in his post, pursuing his own personal interests. This bizarre situation lasted for many years and the almost complete vacuum of leadership during the final weeks of the war was in part a consequence of the attitudes of the two men at the top of the South Vietnamese Government.

In general terms, a one-man regime is usually a strong and efficient regime. Quite the contrary was the case in South Vietnam. The President had all the power in his hands and could impose his policy easily but somehow there was no sense of purpose or direction in his regime, strange enough in a country so pressed by the requirements of the war. Moreover not a single member of the government, including the President himself, had any sense of urgency about the situation. Almost everything was routine. Junior as well as senior officials simply waited for decisions from higher officials, decisions which in many cases never came or at least took weeks to come. This waiting habit became a sort of pattern at all levels of the administration and generated a depressing atmosphere of apathy and immobility. A typical example was the case of the key Ministry of Defense. The country and the Armed Forces really needed a man who could handle the complex problems of defense and military affairs, but Mr. Khiem kept his position for himself (as if it was his own preserve) and did

nothing. He delegated authority to senior officials inside the Department for minor problems and referred to the President for important ones.

The economic sector was in no better state. In one instance, the Minister of Economy favored the devaluation of the piastre, the Minister of Finances publicly opposed it, the Minister of Planning knew nothing about what the other ministers in his sector were doing and in the end none of them could make a decision. Interministerial meetings sometimes lasted for the whole day, but at the end of the meeting no decision was forthcoming. In this connection, I remember attending a restricted meeting of the Cabinet, convened by the President himself, on the eve of one of my trips abroad in March 1974. The cabinet members were supposed to brief me on the economic situation of the country and after that the President would give me his instructions for the trip. The meeting turned into a fiasco. The ministers spent their time quarrelling among themselves, while the Prime Minister sat silent during the whole meeting, and the President, visibly exasperated, had to put an end to the session, saying, "What else do you want me to say to you now?"

I was left alone afterwards with the President who then said to me, "Now you understand in what conditions I am working." My reply to his remark was polite but to the point, "I did draw your attention to the problem many times already during the past few months. You seem to have your own reasons for not acting yet, but we cannot go on asking for more external aid while our own house is not in order and our government does not know how to use the requested aid."

The situation in the countryside was different. There, the Corps commanders and the Chiefs of Provinces were kings in their fiefs. Each of them had his special channel of communications to the President, to the Prime Minister, or their entourage, and once his own protection was assured, he ruled his territory as if it was his own, ignoring very frequently the instructions coming from Saigon. Everyone in the provincial administration was proposed and selected for appointment by the Chief of Province with the approval of the Corps commander and

was consequently under their direct and total control. In addition to that, the atmosphere in the provinces was different from the one in Saigon where there was certain degree of freedom. All the Chiefs of Provinces were without exception, military men thus making the army and the police all-powerful in everything. And if it happened that they chose to dip into business there could be no resistance. Their influence was felt throughout in every field of activity. For those who lived in the provinces, Saigon was too far away and the only government they were aware of was the government of the Chief of Province and in some instances of the Corps Commander.

The description here above applies to the entire governmental apparatus of South Vietnam, but in a country at war with one General as President, another one as Prime Minister and the influence of the military practically unchecked for many years, special attention should be focused on how the military performed.

In the time of former President Ngo Dinh Diem (before 1963) the military was under tight control, but starting with the military coup of November 1963, they became a sort of permanent power base without which nothing could be accomplished. They continued to play a dominant role in the affairs of the country even after South Vietnam had its second constitution in March 1967, and became for more than a decade, the ruling class in South Vietnam. In that capacity, they had their share of responsibility in the loss of the country to the Communists.

It had been said in Saigon, as part of a joke, that South Vietnam was a country with half of everything. It was half a democracy, half a dictatorship and the measures taken by the government were most of the time half-measures. The result was that nothing worked as it should. In terms of hierarchy, below the President, Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces there were the Prime Minister, the Minister of Defense and the General Chief of the JGS. This scheme existed only on paper. In fact the Prime Minister was concurrently Minister of Defense but did not take decisions on military matters and the General Chief of the JGS deliberately played a passive role whenever his participation was required. As to the Corps Commanders, Division Commanders and

Chief of Provinces, they went directly to the President short-circuiting all the other intermediary levels of command. This rather unorthodox relationship between the President and the military commanders left the JGS quite often in the dark about the real situation around the country and about the way the local commanders conducted their operations on the battlefield. It explained to a certain degree why, for instance, the JGS did not know the detailed planning of the withdrawal from the Highlands which triggered the disintegration of the regime. It explained too how, especially during the six final weeks of the war, the President, whether preoccupied by other important political problems (rumors about the eventuality of a military coup staged by the discontented generals, rumors about the activities of the neutralist groups) or unable to have an accurate follow-up of the situation, could not react in time to developments in the fighting and consequently, missed the opportunities for regaining the control of the situation.

In this regard, many times during 1973 and 1974, General Cao Van Vien described to me his passive role as Chief of the JGS and talked to me about his intention to resign from his post. Actually, he twice submitted his resignation but Mr. Thieu, for political reasons, did not accept it, and General Vien for his own reasons did not force the issue. (I learned from General Vien himself that General Weyand--the U.S. Army Chief of Staff--during his last visit to South Vietnam in March 1975, in a confidential note to President Thieu--a note considered at that time by the South Vietnamese as a tacit condition for additional U.S. military aid--requested the restoration of the authority of the JGS over military operations. President Thieu accepted it but it was too late to affect the outcome of the war.)

The basic weakness of the system in South Vietnam was in itself dangerous enough already, but most important of all were men's failures.

The Communists used to have a slogan for the training of their cadres: "Cadres are a decisive factor in everything." They have won the war in South Vietnam for many reasons, but one of these reasons

was no doubt the good quality of their cadres who were well motivated and ~~by~~ far more disciplined than those of ~~the~~ South Vietnamese ~~ones~~. That is not to say that the South Vietnamese did not fight. Quite the contrary, during decades and in spite of many handicaps, they fought bravely and thousands of them died as unsung heroes of Vietnam. In terms of individual endurance and combat effectiveness, the tough South Vietnamese soldier could be compared with any of his counterparts in the Communist army; nevertheless those who were supposed to lead the South Vietnamese Army failed in their task. There were exceptions, of course, but the majority of the military men who held important posts in the South Vietnamese Army and Administration reached their positions through a system of promotion and selection based on loyalty to the President and skillful corruption. It was not an official system sanctified by the President or the Government, but the men in the entourage of the President, and the men in the party of the President simply operated behind the scenes, and whether for influence or for money, selected for the approval of the President the list of those who were to fill the vacant important posts. In effect, those who bought their jobs thought more of their money than of doing their jobs, submitted more rosy reports than accurate ones and ~~with that~~ in this way lured the top leadership into a false impression of stability and security.

I quote here the own words of a Colonel, Chief of Province, who answered me when I asked him about the percentage of good men among his peers: "The maximum I can think of is 20%, perhaps 25%, and they are more or less corrupt" (This assessment of the Chief of Province was confirmed by another sources: Ambassador Bunker told me that in an unofficial communication to President Thieu in 1972, he handed to the South Vietnamese President a whole file of more than 70 cases of notorious corruption involving the military men and detected by the Americans.)

Under normal circumstances and at peace time, such a leadership could perhaps last a little longer and in the process get progressively better. (In many other parts of Asia, corruption was no less widespread and obvious than in South Vietnam). But in a struggle for life

like the one in Vietnam against the Communists, this leadership could hardly sustain the pace of competition with the other side.

I saw President Thieu for the last time on March 15, 1975, five days after the loss of Ban Me Thuot and one day after the fateful meeting at Camranh Bay where allegedly he gave the fatal strategic order to withdraw from the Highlands. I was scheduled to leave Saigon on March 18 on a mission abroad and as usual I went to see him before my departure. It was not however, an ordinary meeting, because instead of coming to see him alone, I insisted on having with me two friends of mine: Dr. Tran van Do, the former Foreign Minister and Mr. Tran quoc Buu, the President of the South Vietnamese Confederation of Labor. We were in fact, at this time, very concerned about both the political and military situation of the country, and our purpose in requesting the meeting was to try to draw his attention to the urgency of the situation and the necessity of forming a national union government with a view to mobilizing all the energies of the nation for the fight against the Communists and their Spring offensive. The formation of such a government would strengthen the morale of the population and of the Armed Forces. We talked more about politics than about military matters but, apparently still preoccupied by the session he had the day before with his military advisors, President Thieu talked to us about the possibility of having to regroup the South Vietnamese ~~Armed Forces~~ in certain areas. He did not mention in specific terms the withdrawal from Pleiku-Kontum but clearly indicated that we did not have enough forces to defend all the Highlands. He accepted our suggestion about the formation of a national union government and at the end of the meeting (which lasted for more than four hours) he urged us to give him concrete suggestions as to the various formulas that could be eventually implemented.

I found Mr. Thieu this day still in control of the situation but in a depressed mood. I got the impression too that he did not fully realize how critical the situation of the country was. (To illustrate the point, it is worth mentioning that Mr. Vu Ngoc Tran, Legal Advisor to the President, told me that approximately at the same time, Mr. Theiu sought his advices on the eventuality of a third term as

President!) Personally, I have to confess that at this point I myself could not foresee the quick collapse of South Vietnam, but Mr. Thieu was far too optimistic if indeed he thought of running for President for a third term in March 1975.) In fact a few days later (by the time I arrived in Paris on March 20) the debacle of the withdrawal from Pleiku was already on the front pages of the world press.

During his years in power, Mr. Thieu undoubtedly did not invent corruption and incompetence as a system of government but he tolerated it. He did not encourage bad performances among his men, but his system of ruling the country through a limited number of incompetent, men (and in many cases notoriously corrupt) could not produce reliable leadership. The consequences became evident during the weeks of March and April 1975: Neither his government nor his military commanders were in control of the situation, and he did not even know it, or knew about it only when it was too late to do anything. In this connection, the following concrete examples speak for themselves.

According to General Cao Van Vien who with four other persons--namely President Thieu, Prime Minister Khiem, General Quang, Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs and General Phu, the II Corps Commander--attended a meeting held at Camranh Bay on March 14, 1975, Mr. Thieu did not specifically order the withdrawal from Pleiku-Kontum. The discussion this day centered on the overall situation of the Highlands after the loss of Ban Me Thuot. Mr. Thieu wanted to counterattack, reoccupy this first provincial capital lost to the enemy and as a general approach to the problem, ordered a "redeployment of forces." With General Vien saying that there were no more reserves available, General Phu then came up with the proposal to take his forces from the Pleiku-Kontum area down to the coastal area for using them later in the counterattack. Whether or not Mr. Thieu thought along the same lines is not clear, but Mr. Thieu did not object to the proposal advanced by General Phu who subsequently understood that he had a free hand to redeploy his forces the way he proposed. And, strangely enough, as if it were an operation of minor importance, everything was in the hands of General Phu from then on. Practically, there was no serious consideration of the pros and cons

of such a difficult and important strategic withdrawal; there was no consideration of the detailed planning of the operations. Almost total authority had been given to a general who was not up to his task. And on March 19, Mr. Thieu was as surprised as anyone by the immensity of the debacle.

Afterwards, while the world press pondered the diminishing chances of survival of South Vietnam and the entire people of South Vietnam wondered what their government was up to, Mr. Thieu remained completely and strangely silent. (I tried to have some clarifications on this rather unexplicable lack of reaction from Mr. Thieu and one explanation was given to me by General Weyand, who ~~during his~~ on a visit in South Vietnam saw Mr. Thieu several times during these days: "He gave the impression of a man numbed by the huge dimensions of the debacle." George Carver ~~from~~ of the CIA who went along with General Weyand on the same trip had a similar explanation: "We spoke to him about the urgent matters of the hour but his mind seemed to be elsewhere.")

Mr. Thieu finally came out of his silence--the South Vietnamese Embassy in Washington sent him an urgent cable urging him to speak out and General Weyand in Saigon talked to him to the same effect--but here again, the details about how he prepared his speech reflected the unreliability of his intelligence sources. Before going on the air for the television speech, Mr. Thieu called General Truong, Corps Commander of the I Corps, and twice asked the General if he could defend Hue and Danang. Twice, the answer from the General was affirmative. Mr. Thieu then based his speech on that affirmative answer and promised the South Vietnamese people as well as the rest of the world that Hue and Danang would be defended. Whether General Truong did not know at the time he gave his answer to the President that General Lam Quang Tri, Commander of the Northern Front and under his direct command, had given up Hue already by withdrawing his command post to a floating barge along the coast, or whether General Truong did not want to tell such an unpleasant truth to the President; it was only a few days later that Hue and Danang fell to the enemy. (Mr. Thieu did

not ~~know~~ learn about the fall of Hue; until his entourage got the bad news from indirect sources about the fall of the old imperial city; informed, Mr. Thieu telephoned his military commanders and only then got the confirmation.)

Summing up this chapter on the South Vietnamese leadership, I would say that:

1) In general terms, the military class who practically ruled South Vietnam for more than a decade failed in their task. They had to face tremendous difficulties, especially during the two final years of the war (mainly due to the shrinking U.S. support), but they cannot be excused for having failed to prepare the defenses of the country during the previous years, and they failed because they tolerated corruption and social injustices which could only favor an enemy who implacably waged total war, conventional and subversive.

2) There was almost a complete vacuum of leadership during the six final and critical weeks of the war and the loss of morale which quickly turned into panic--the most important factor which caused the disintegration of the whole regime--was but a natural consequence of this failure at the top.

THE ARVN RESPONSE AND THE REACTIONS OF THE POPULATION TO THE COMMUNIST OFFENSIVE

The Spring 1975 Communist offensive did not come in a sudden, or a brutal way, unexpectedly. It came, almost unnoticed at the beginning. In effect, the country had been during long years so immunized to war and there were so many offensives already in the past (Tet 1968, Easter 1972) that unless it was of sizable proportions, an attack could be easily regarded as a sort of normal seasonal renewal of military activities.

As if it was a warning to the South Vietnamese, the small city of Phuoc Binh (province of Phuoc Long) was captured by the Communists on January 8, 1975, after an attack conducted by both regular North Vietnamese and local Communist forces. Mostly due to the fact that the city was surrounded on all sides for a long period of time already,

and consequently taken for lost by the South Vietnamese, the attack was viewed more as an attempt to eliminate the South Vietnamese enclave inside the Communist controlled territory than as a prelude to a real offensive.

That is not to say that the South Vietnamese High Command did not expect an offensive. All the Corps and Division Commanders were in Saigon in December 1974 for an important meeting to review the military situation around the country and they speculated on where the first Communist attack would occur.

Their guesses on the matter centered on the three most likely areas: 1) the western part of Quang Tri, Hue in Military Region 1, 2) the Pleiku-Kontum area in Military Region 2, and 3) the Tay Ninh area in Military Region 3, and the Corps Commanders as well as the Division Commanders were, mentally at least, prepared to face an attack in their zones. In terms of strategy, it could not be a surprise attack then. Unfortunately, if there was no strategical surprise, there was a sort of tactical surprise. The Communists attacked Ban Me Thuot, the southern flank of the Pleiku-Kontum area on March 10, 1975. General Phu, the II Corps, Corps Commander was alerted a full month in advance about the probability of such an attack by the J2 bureau of the JGS. (This is a fact confirmed by General Cao Van Vien.) General Phu was himself inside the city on the eve of the attack, instructing his men to be ready for an enemy attempt. Only a few hours later, the attack came and the next morning more than half of the city fell to the enemy, who managed to come close to the airport without General Phu's knowing it. Tactically surprised by a massive use of tanks coupled with a carefully concealed infiltration of sappers, the South Vietnamese could not react in time to defend the city. Bad luck made their situation worse: the command post of the 23rd Division was hit by the South Vietnamese Air Forces trying to bomb enemy tanks a few yards away from the command post and the whole system of defense of the only division in Ban Me Thuot was completely disorganized after that unfortunate bombing.

The South Vietnamese units fought well against superior forces and continued to fight even after the loss of the city (helicopter operation at the vicinity of the airport two days later)*, but the badly executed withdrawal from Pleiku-Kontum with its catastrophic effects on the morale of the whole South Vietnamese Armed Forces around the country destroyed everything.

They lost the 23rd Division in Ban Me Thuot and the equivalent of two divisions during the ill-fated withdrawal along route 7b but above all they lost their spirit and that was what caused the subsequent disintegration. In fact, the South Vietnamese forces in Military Region 1 did not fight at all. Quang Tri, Hue, Danang successively fell to the enemy without a single attempt of resistance during the ten last days of March 1975, and from then on to the final day of collapse, there was no more real fighting (except at Phan Rang on April 19 and Xuan Loc during the final week).

It would be fair to mention here that General Phu, the II Corps, Corps Commander, had to cover too vast a territory and the Saigon High Command had no reserves available to send to his rescue, but by all accounts he lacked experience for fighting in the Highlands. Too hesitant a man and even warned in advance about the probable attack on Ban Me Thuot, he committed the intial mistake of neglecting the defense of this city. He concentrated in the Pleiku-Kontum area the entire 7th multi-battalion of Rangers sent to him earlier by the JGS and after that made the monumental and fatal mistake of precipitately withdrawing his main forces without careful preparation which could perhaps have saved some of his forces and avoided the demoralizing spectacle of hundreds of tanks, armored cars, trucks, vehicles of all

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*Two examples, among others, on how the South Vietnamese fought in Ban Me Thuot: 1) A lieutenant-colonel of the 23rd Division, with his entire family--wife and four children--killed by the enemy during the night of the attack, and his regiment down to only nine men, continued to fight until all his ammunition was exhausted, succeeded afterwards in capturing a small enemy unit using the heat-seeking missile. He compelled the enemy to tell him how to use the missile and finally made his way through jungles down to Nha Trang a few days later. 2) Colonel Vu The Quang, deputy Commander of the 23rd Division asked friendly planes to bomb the enemy tanks knowing perfectly well that with these tanks only a few yards from his command post, he had ~~all~~

sorts abandoned amidst tens of thousands of troops and civilians fleeing in disorder, a spectacle which in turn triggered a chain reaction: the panicky retreat from Hue, Danang, and set the scene for total collapse a few weeks later.

So, in general terms, it can be said that except at the beginning of the Communist offensive and later in some areas like Phan Rang and Xuan Loc, the ARVN (Army of the Repulic of Vietnam) did not fight, to the surprise of an enemy who did not expect to win a total victory so easily.

How could the same ARVN who fought so bravely and valiantly during the years of 1968 and 1972 perform so badly in March 1975? To such an obvious question, there is no simple answer and even the most pessimistic among the observers of the Vietnamese war could not predict this almost overnight disintegration but a plausible answer probably would have to include the following factors:

1) In 1968 and 1972, the South Vietnamese had a solid morale. They knew that in any event, they could rely on reinforcements from their mobile reserves (the Airborne and Marine units) and on the strong support of the U.S. forces or at least of the U.S. Air Forces.

2) Left alone in 1975 and with rather weak support from the South Vietnamese Air Forces, they committed mistake after mistake, each one more serious, more damaging than the previous one and up to the no-return point of losing the entire Highlands and the Central part of South Vietnam.

3) Warned in advance about the activities of the Communist 320 Division in the Ban Me Thuot area, the High Command of the II Corps failed to detect the whereabouts of this division and permitted their tactical surprise attack on Ban Me Thuot.

4) Whether or not there was an immediate and direct order from Mr. Thieu to withdraw from Pleiku-Kontum, General Phu ordered the withdrawal too hastily without the necessary preparations and precautions normally required in such a difficult and dangerous operation.

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the chances to get the bombs on his own position. That was exactly what happened. Yet he was not killed, and was captured by the enemy.

5) As if they did not have enough difficulties already, a sort of bad luck helped to disorganize the South Vietnamese defending and retreating forces in Ban Me Thuot and along route 7b: the South Vietnamese Air Forces hit the command post of the 23rd Division on March 11 and the retreating column near Phu Bon on March 17.

6) The Saigon High Command failed to buildup the reserve units during the years of 1973 and 1974, in spite of the fact that they knew it would be vital to their defense in any Communist offensive. (In this regard, if their failures could be explained partially by the lack of manpower and the reduced U.S. military aid, their responsibility was total on the matter.)

7) An almost complete vacuum of leadership at the top during the most critical days of the regime provoked a crisis of confidence among the armed forces and made it too late for any attempt to get the situation back under control.

8) The reduced U.S. military and economic aid to South Vietnam in 1973 and 1974 made it difficult, if not impossible, for the South Vietnamese to buildup their reserves and maintain an adequate system of defense against an increasingly well-equipped enemy. In this regard, it is to be mentioned that the lack of spare parts and the shortage of fuel grounded a sizable number of South Vietnamese helicopters and transport planes, thus taking away from them a big advantage that they had before: the mobility of their forces, while the shortage of arms and ammunitions certainly made them less confident and less aggressive than during the previous years.

9) The quickly deteriorating situation in Cambodia, the negative reaction of the U.S. Congress to the request of additional military aid to South Vietnam, the political crisis in Saigon, all these factors created an atmosphere of uncertainty and a favorable terrain for all sorts of defeatist rumors which played an important role in the loss of faith and morale among the fighting men.

I have described earlier, in the first part of this essay, the South Vietnamese leadership as living in a curiously unreal atmosphere during the final weeks of the war and keeping a kind of unjustified

and blind confidence in their ability to survive the Communist offensive. It is not an exaggeration to say that the South Vietnamese people, as a whole, shared the same feeling. Nobody believed that the country which weathered all the storms of the two previous Communist offensives in 1968 and 1972, stood for months against the hell of the Communist artillery at An Loc, would succumb in 1975. For the man in the street, the usual way of reasoning was: the Communists could not stage their offensive for long. They had been in the streets of Quang Tri, Hue and even Saigon, before, but could not manage to stay, so it would be the same this time.

It turned out to be a very fragile confidence because as soon as the story of the disaster of route 7b was known, Saigon was seized by a sort of fear quickly transformed into the panic; paralyzing the whole country. The worst was not long to come with the stories of hundreds of children and women drowned during the evacuation of Danang. The country as a whole, instead of rallying behind the government for a last attempt to defend the Southern part of the country turned against the government and blamed Mr. Thieu for everything. Everyone wished his departure, and his generals as well as his supporters were among the first to look for a negotiated solution. Along with the whole population and completely absorbed by their wishful thinking, they did not realize that the hours were too late for any sort of settlement and that the Communist troops and tanks were already in the outskirts of the capital.

THE U.S. POLICY AFTER THE PARIS AGREEMENT AND ITS EFFECTS ON THE SITUATION IN VIETNAM

I happen to be one among the South Vietnamese who strongly believed from the beginning of the war that if a non-Communist South Vietnam was to survive and emerge as a viable nation, the prime responsibility was on the South Vietnamese, not on the Americans, and that consequently, whether the U.S. involvement was right or wrong, it was up to the South Vietnamese to make the best of it.

That is the reason why, all along the first part of this essay, I focused may attention on the South Vietnamese side of the problem,

trying to find out first among other things, why and how the South Vietnamese failed in the defense of their own country.

It is nevertheless useless to say that the U.S. policy, attitudes, actions--or lack of actions--did influence and affect greatly the developments of the situation and the outcome of the war. In fact, North Vietnamese as well as South Vietnamese based their strategies almost entirely on their reading of U.S. policy. And the "American factor" as the South Vietnamese used to call it, never lost its influence, even when the U.S. began to disengage itself from the active war.

I will try to deal with this aspect of the problem in the following paragraphs and from my own South Vietnamese point of view.

In a sort of general characterization, it can be said that, starting by 1965, the U.S. involvement in Vietnam went from one extreme to another. From the days of the landing of the Marines in Danang in March 1965 to the end of 1972, it was like an American show with the Americans trying to do everything by themselves, the South Vietnamese notwithstanding, and from the signing of the Paris Agreement in January 1973 to the days of the end of the regime in Saigon, it was a kind of policy of neglect, to the point where it appeared that, in conducting its policy, the U.S. forgot completely or at least had no consideration for the huge U.S. investment in Vietnam of the previous years, in terms of human lives, resources and prestige.

It is not within the scope of this essay to pass judgements on why and how the U.S. got involved in Vietnam, but the many contradictions of the U.S. policy affected in many ways the situation in Vietnam especially during the period of two years which preceded the collapse of Saigon.

In an attempt to define briefly the U.S. objectives in Vietnam after the conclusion of the Paris Agreement, I would like to borrow here a few words from Ambassador Graham Martin's testimony before the House Committee on International Affairs on January 27, 1976:

> "My great concern was to get the U.S. out of Vietnam as quickly as it could possibly be done, leaving a

South Vietnam capable of defending itself with its own manpower, economically viable and free to choose its leaders and institutions as its own people might freely determine."

The South Vietnamese could not have a better friend than a man who spoke such words nor a better definition of the U.S. objectives but the realities are: the U.S. did achieve the first part of these objectives--to get out of Vietnam--and failed to achieve the second part of it, that is to leave a South Vietnam military capable of defending itself and economically viable.

After being somewhat forced to sign the Paris Agreement which tolerated the presence of the North Vietnamese troops inside South Vietnam, the South Vietnamese pinned their hopes on:

1) the U.S. influence as a deterrent against a large scale Communist offensive

2) the U.S. military and economic assistance as a necessary part of their own program of defense and economic development.

Unfortunately, it turned out that the U.S. for its own reasons chose not to or could not exert its influence and failed in the promise to help. It is possible that South Vietnam would have lost anyway to the Communists, no matter what amount of aid the U.S could give to Saigon. It is obvious too that by the mistakes of their leaders the South Vietnamese themselves contributed greatly to the loss of their country, but from a South Vietnamese point of view, it is equally obvious that the U.S. policy by its inaction, contributed in no small measure to encourage North Vietnam to launch the final offensive, and to undermine the efforts of South Vietnam to resist the offensive. Those who were familiar with the American political scene can argue that the "neglect" policy of the years of 1973 and 1974 was forced upon the U.S. Administration at that time by the developments of U.S. internal politics, but whether it was true or not, the effects were the same. The North Vietnamese took it as a boost to their dream of conquest and the South Vietnamese considered as a fatal blow to their struggle for survival.

As it has been mentioned already in earlier paragraphs, during the whole period of the Paris peace negotiations, the problem of the presence of the North Vietnamese troops was first on the list of concerns of the South Vietnamese; they considered a solution to the problem a prerequisite to any agreement, or the way Mr. Thieu put it, a basic requirement for their survival. They failed to have their allies, the Americans, sharing their point of view and finally had to accept an agreement which practically left the problem untouched. Obviously unhappy, they did it simply because they could not do otherwise and their signature was a sort of price they had to pay in exchange for the promise of U.S. support, vital for the continuation of their struggle against the Communists. They knew, while signing the Agreement, that they were on a slippery road but certainly did not expect that the promise of U.S. support would be missing in so short a period of time, two years later.

The summer months of 1973 were comparatively quiet. Only those who watched closely the developments of the situation took note of the few perfunctory statements coming out from Washington condemning the violations of the Paris Agreement by the Communists. A reluctant Dr. Kissinger met again in Paris with Le Duc Tho but there was no significant result and as a consequence the Communists resumed their activities on the battlefield, aiming at reinforcing their bases for an eventual overall attack. These activities, timid and rather small in scale at first, grew in intensity and turned into a regular pattern for testing the ability to react as soon as it became clear that the U.S. was more and more absorbed on the international scenes by the explosive problems of the Middle-East and energy crisis and especially on the internal political scenes by the sinking muds of Watergate. The gradual and systematic process of testing was a long one but the results were not long to come; for one reason or another, the U.S. did not react. In January 1975, Le Duan, the first Secretary of the Lao Dong Party summed up these results in his own way, in a meeting of the Political Bureau and Central Military Party Committee by saying that:

"Having withdrawn from South Vietnam, the U.S. could hardly jump back in."* These words from Le Duan were more than a conclusion for the North Vietnamese; it was a "resolution" which triggered the attack on Ban Me Thuot a few weeks later and the subsequent disintegration and collapse of Saigon.

So, as we see it now confirmed by the Communists themselves, the U.S. inactions and failures to provide adequate help to the South Vietnamese contributed to the shaping up of the aggressive Communist strategy.

Those same inactions and failures on the part of the U.S. affected the South Vietnamese too, of course, but quite the reverse way. They did not get the help they needed from their allies but more important than that, they got the impression that they were being abandoned and lost their morale.

It had been argued in many circles that in their hasty retreat from Pleiku, Kontum and Hue, Danang, the South Vietnamese left behind hundreds of thousands of tons of equipment, the value of which amounted to billions of dollars, and that consequently they did not lose the war for lack of arms and ammunitions, that with the equipment they had in hand in March 1975, the South Vietnamese could resist the Communist offensive if only they had the will to fight and did not run. (According to many eyewitnesses their stock of rice and ammunitions could last from two to three months.) But the causes of the South Vietnamese defeat were complex. Involved in the issue were more factors than arms, ammunition and equipment and it would be too simplistic a view to say that the South Vietnamese lost simply because they did not fight.

Going back to the days when in his famous press conference in October 1972 Dr. Kissinger asserted that "peace is at hand," it is to be mentioned that following Mr. Thieu's refusal to accept the draft of the Agreement brought back from Paris by Dr. Kissinger, almost a billion of dollars of equipment was shipped to Saigon

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*"Great Spring Victories," a summation of General Van Tien Dung's accounts of the combat situation during the months of Spring 1975, from Nhan Dan April 1976.

between November 1972 and January 1973. (The program with the coded name "Enhance Plus" had a ceiling of 1.3 billion but actually only 800 million were shipped.) This important and costly equipment considered at the time as a gesture from the U.S. Administration to induce the Thieu Government to sign the Agreement had perhaps its political value (practically everything which could be construed as a form of guarantee from the U.S. not to abandon South Vietnam was welcomed by Mr. Thieu) but hastily and ill conceived, the whole program had little military value: in truth much of this equipment could not be effectively used by the South Vietnamese Armed Forces who later complained that they had to have men and money just for the maintenance of the unusable equipment.

The shipment represented nevertheless, in terms of volume, the high point of the U.S. military aid to South Vietnam. The "tightening of the screw" period began right away afterwards. Persistant anti-war feelings, illusions of peace generated by the peace agreement, antipathy against a one-man regime, all these factors made what the South Vietnamese got during calendar year 1973 barely what they needed for their survival. And it was but the beginning of the trend because the real difficulties came only in 1974 when by an unfortunate coincidence, a series of reverses came:

1) From a requested 1.6 billion in military aid, the U.S. Congress appropriated only 700 millions (in spite of the fact that an earlier bill had authorized 1 billion).

2) An unexpected action from the DoD charging 300 million worth of equipment against FY 1975 (while normally it should be charged against FY1974) further reduced the volume of military aid to 400 millions.

3) Economic aid was almost totally consumed by the soaring costs of fuel and commodities in the world market.

4) An urgent request for additional aid which was ignored by the U.S. Congress too much absorbed by Watergate and most important

of all:

5) The resignation of Mr. Nixon who was considered rightly or wrongly as the solid supporter of Mr. Thieu and of the anti-Communist cause.

These reverses, quite naturally, had immediate and dangerous effects on the situation in South Vietnam: the already fragile economic and social stability of the country was seriously affected, signs of political instability began to appear and the South Vietnamese Armed Forces were forced by political leaders to reduce their activities to a critical minimum. But topping it all, in a sort of cumulative effect, there was the psychological impact provoked by the succession of bad news which in turn created the atmosphere of uncertainty in Saigon during the final months of 1974 and caused the collapse in morale of the whole South Vietnamese regime.

HOW WAS THE U.S. POLICY PERCEIVED BY THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE?

All the above considerations on the U.S. policy in Vietnam after the Paris Agreement and its influence on the developments of the overall situation would not be complete however if another important factor in the equation is not brought into the picture: the U.S. policy as it was perceived by the South Vietnamese.

In general terms, it can be said from the outset that not many South Vietnamese really understood either American politics or American policies and in my personal opinion, one of the tragedies of the war in Vietnam is the fact that due rather to an unexpected happening of international circumstances, two peoples quite apart in terms of civilization, mentality, international status, geographical positions were thrown together into a war against a common enemy at a time when Americans understood very little about Vietnam and Vietnamese knew nothing about America.

During the fifties and early sixties, the only things that the Vietnamese knew about the U.S. were the generous Marshall plan, the strong anti-Communist and moralistic stands of John Foster Dulles and the idealistic inaugural address of John F. Kennedy. For them, the U.S. involvement in Vietnam under the Johnson Administration was but a logical development of the U.S. intervention in Korea; many among

them did not even question the right and wrong of this involvement simply because they thought that the powerful U.S. could not be wrong. This almost total faith in the U.S. was reinforced by the presence of more than half a million of G.I.s. No one could conceive that the U.S. would give up only a few years later.

The majority of the Vietnamese (and the South Vietnamese political elite was included in it) did not understand the American political process. Having lived too long perhaps under one authoritarian regime or another, they could not evaluate the influence of the public opinion on the Congressmen and Senators, and by the same token, could not understand the nature of the control that the U.S. Congress had over the U.S. Administration in terms of budget and foreign policy. I remember in this respect having spent, in my capacity as Ambassador of Vietnam in Washington, many of my days on these problems with the Vietnamese legislators each time I was called home for consultation or each time they came to the U.S. on their fact-finding tours. I tried to describe to them, the way I saw it from my observation post, the changing mood of the U.S. public opinion, the anti-war feelings, the emerging conflict between the executive and legislative branches of the U.S. Government which made foreign aid more and more difficult. But for them, the possibility of a reduced role of the U.S. in Vietnam after so huge an investment in the mid-sixties was inconceivable. These fixed ideas about the U.S. and its policy were even stronger in the minds of the military class in South Vietnam. In touch for many years almost exclusively with the U.S. military men and to a large degree conditioned by the generally conservative ideas of the U.S. military establishment about the role of the U.S. in the world, they could not figure out that the U.S. would lack the stamina to stay till the end in the fight with them. (In fact, many South Vietnamese Generals believed until the final days before the collapse of April 1975 that the U.S. B52 would come back to blast away the Communists and help them out.)

Finally, for the man in the street, those who had nothing to do with politics and had no vested interest either for or against the government in Saigon, the way of reasoning was more down-to-earth

though carrying a lot of common sense. In their eyes, the U.S. somehow forced its way into South Vietnam by sending hundreds of thousands of troops into the country and should bear the consequences of its decisions whether it was good or bad. A big nation and world power like the U.S. should have some sort of responsible behavior or at least a moral obligation to help the South Vietnamese out of a situation that the presence of the U.S. troops helped to create. The Americans could not simply call it quits after putting the whole house of Vietnam in a shambles and say for instance:

> "That is enough for us, we have now our own problems at home, besides we have discovered that the involvement in Vietnam stemmed from a wrong decision."

It was within this context and in this atmosphere that Mr. Thieu, the man in whose hands were all the powers in Saigon, strove for his own perception of the U.S. policy. As a Vietnamese and a military man he shared many of the ideas held by his countrymen and comrade in arms, but as a cautious politician and complex man he had rather complicated ideas about the U.S. policy. Basically he did not question the solidity of the U.S. support, and how a man whose constant question was "what are the Americans really up to" could fail to take into consideration the possibility of an American pull-out. In this connection, an explanation is given by Mr. Hoang Duc Nha, cousin of Mr. Thieu and one of his closest aides during his years in power: Mr. Thieu was suspicious about the Americans only as far as his political future was concerned.

During times of crisis, periods of tension or political instability in Saigon, his suspicion was centered on the eventuality of American-sponsored coups against him, but basically he held the belief that the Americans would never tolerate a take-over in South Vietnam by the Communists, at least in a foreseeable future. Various factors contributed to help him hold to this idea until the very final day of his regime when, at the end of the rope, he lost all hopes of U.S. support, resigned from office and publicly blamed the Americans for

not being true to their words. Mr. Thieu believed strongly that if there was ever a President of the U.S. who would not let South Vietnam fall under the Communists, it would be Mr. Nixon. He had complete faith in the written assurances given to him by Mr. Nixon through a long series of exchange of messages between November 1972 and January 1973. He took Mr. Nixon's words at San Clemente in April 1973 as equivalent to a solemn commitment from the powerful America not to let the Communists violate the Paris Peace Agreement. (He was so happy after San Clemente that on the plane leaving the U.S. for Europe, he ordered champagne immediately after the take-off and talked to me as if the doubts he had a few months earlier about the solidity of the U.S. support were completely wiped out of his mind).

For Mr. Thieu, Watergate was a silly thing but he could not believe that Mr. Nixon would be forced to quit the White House simply for having tolerated Watergate. He was visibly shaken at the news of Mr. Nixon's resignation on August 8, 1974 and talked at length with his advisors about the possible repercussions on the Vietnamese situation. His concerns and worries did not last long however because just one day after, on August 9, he received from President Ford a letter reassuring him about the continuity of the U.S. policy, a "policy of five Presidents" the letter said. (He produced the letter in a meeting of the Council of Ministers in Saigon, apparently in an attempt to boost up the morale of his entourage and of the members of the South Vietnamese Government.)

This almost total confidence in the continuity and solidity of the U.S. support on the part of Mr. Thieu was reinforced by a lot of rosy reports given to him by many of his advisors who either were over-optimistic or had only a superficial knowledge of American politics. Some of them like General Dang Van Quang, the well known Assistant for National Security Affairs, did not want to give bad news to their boss and simply concurred with him whether he praised or blamed the Americans. Others like the Minister of Planning, Mr. Nguyen Tien Hung, were over-optimistic and gave him incomplete information about the mood in the U.S. I remember in this respect having been really taken by surprise when during a restricted meeting at the Presidential Palace in Saigon (the meeting was convened for an overall assessment of the 1974-75

U.S. Aid Program to South Vietnam) Mr. Hung reported to President Thieu that according to his own sources, "close to the Pentagon," an amount of 850 millions of dollars was ear-marked in the budget of the Pentagon for an eventual bombing of North Vietnam. With my colleague, Ambassador Tran Kim Phuong from Washington, I protested against this rather wishful thinking, but in these difficult days perhaps in need of encouragements, Mr. Thieu was more inclined to listen to what Mr. Hung reported than to take note of what we said.

True to his nature, Mr. Thieu did not trust anyone of course but he attached great importance to his conversations with the U.S. Ambassador in Saigon, whose attitude constituted for him a sort of guideline for his interpretation of the U.S. policy. Generally not bad at all as far as analyzing people was concerned, he wrongly assessed nevertheless the attitude of the last U.S. representative in Vietnam, Ambassador Graham Martin. Ambassador Martin was known among the South Vietnamese to be a dedicated friend of the anti-Communist cause and nobody had any doubt about his sincerity when again and again he tried to convince the members of the U.S. Congress to vote aid for South Vietnam, but Mr. Thieu somehow interpreted his calm assurance as an indication of a continued and undiminished U.S. support. Mr. Thieu could not in fact evaluate correctly the difficulties of the U.S. administration with the U.S. Congress (He asked me whether or not these difficulties were fake.) and thought perhaps in his mind that if the U.S. Ambassador in Saigon showed no visible signs of concern, the situation could not be hopeless. This shortsighted interpretation of the U.S. policy on the part of Mr. Thieu combined with his complex nature led him to a series of mistakes which later proved to be fatal for his regime and for the non-Communist State of South Vietnam as well:

1) He refused systematically to explore the possibility of political arrangements with his enemies (Communist and non-Communist alike) while he was still comparatively in a strong position to do so. The possibility of arrangements with the Communists probably never existed but a less intransigent attitude on his part might have induced them to adopt another strategy than the one they did: military frontal attack.

2) He neglected to put his own house in order and thus opened the way for the disintegration of his regime.

THE RELATIONS BETWEEN THE U.S. GOVERNMENT AND THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE GOVERNMENT

We have seen here above how the U.S. policy in a decisive way, either directly or indirectly, affected the development of the situation in Vietnam (both North and South). We have seen too how by failing to assess this policy correctly, the South Vietnamese leadership missed the opportunity to develop a strategy required by the changing international circumstances and especially to get their country adapted to the new situation created by the Paris Agreement and by the diminishing U.S. aid and support. All these factors, one way or the other, contributed undeniably to the loss of South Vietnam to the Communists.

Let us now have a look at another aspect of the problem: the relations between the U.S. Government and the Government of Vietnam.

Quite often up to now questions have been raised in this connection as to what the Americans could do in their relations with the South Vietnamese for helping them in a more efficient way. Each South Vietnamese had his own answer to the question, and depending on the political spectrum of the Vietnamese you talked to in Saigon you could have these answers varying from one extreme to another, but strange enough, all of them were more or less critical of the Americans. Obviously, there were a number of South Vietnamese who tended to forget that South Vietnam was their country and that before putting blame on the Americans they had to ask themselves whether or not they were at fault in relying too much on the Americans. There were as well a number of other South Vietnamese who were obsessed by their die-hard anti-Communist point of view and argued most of the time in absolute terms about what the Americans should do to help their cause. They did not take into account or even were unaware of the limitations imposed upon the U.S. Administration by public opinion and by a Congress literally tired of the war. But setting aside the criticisms of those South Vietnamese,

there is still plenty of room left for comments about the way the Americans handled the South Vietnamese affairs.

The South Vietnamese thought that against an enemy who waged an unlimited and total war the Americans were basically wrong with their concept of "limited war" and their strategy of "gradual pressures."

The Americans apparently believed that they could eliminate the Communists quickly or at least the main Communist forces, and turn over to the South Vietnamese the pacification of the country. They underestimated the patience and resourcefulness of their elusive enemies who most of the time avoided the fighting and withdrew to the safe areas of the borders where precisely the "limited war" concept gave them shelter and time both for the healing of their wounds and for the preparation of consistent comebacks. As for the "gradual pressures" strategy, the Communists did not succumb to it simply because they knew about the limited nature of the pressures and could plan their responses in advance.

In the eyes of the South Vietnamese, the Americans created for themselves many extra difficulties by making the war too expensive and through the way they fought it. In fact, the men from the "affluent society" brought into Vietnam a new kind of war, a sort of affluent war never seen or thought of before. The South Vietnamese opened their eyes in bewilderment and saw the U.S. forces often supplied with hot meals by helicopters while they were still in combat activities. They saw the thousands of unnecessary gadgets piled up in huge PXs for the use of the GIs, the hundreds of planes crossing back and forth the Pacific for the transport of American troops coming to and returning from South Vietnam on a rotation basis. They witnessed the more than generous use of bombs and ammunitions by the U.S. forces, hours and hours of bombing or strafing by planes and of artillery barrages triggered in many instances merely by snipers fire. They said among themselves, especially during the difficult days of 1974 when the U.S. Congress rejected their request of additional military aid, that the critics of the war were really unfair in putting all the billions of the war on their shoulders and that if the Americans could only save

on the cost of a few single weeks of their stay in South Vietnam and use it for some sort of long range aid to South Vietnam, the outcome of the war could be perhaps different.

The Americans acted in the mid-sixties as if the war in South Vietnam was strictly an American affair. Partly because they were convinced that they could finish the war in a short period of time, partly because they were impatient by nature, the Americans tried to do everything by themselves. They did not realize that in the process:

- They spoiled the South Vietnamese and made them too dependent on American aid. The South Vietnamese acquired in effect during the period of heavy U.S. involvement the bad habits of relying constantly on Americans, and got the false expectations that their allies, having already committed their ground troops in large number, would stay for good in the fight until the day of victory ~~days~~.
- They neglected to train and equip the South Vietnamese for a job which should be theirs; the defense of their own country. Not to win the war with half a million men backed by the mighty U.S. Air Forces and Seventh Fleet was so unthinkable a proposition for the Americans that the problem of training was not even considered or at least seriously considered as it should have been. As far as the equipment was concerned, it is to be noted that until January 1968 while most of the Communist units were well equipped with the deadly AK 47, only a limited number of South Vietnamese units had the roughly equivalent M 16. The need of the M 16 by then was so evident and urgent that I was instructed by the Government in Saigon to raise the problem with President Johnson in my meeting with him in early March 1968, after the Tet Communist offensive of that year.

The Americans based their strategy mainly on the fire power and mobility of their forces. Whether it was a success or a failure depended on the circumstances of the fighting, but somehow the South Vietnamese got only the wrong lessons from it. They built up their strategy in the later years on fire power and mobility too, forgetting the fact that a poor and small country like South Vietnam could not afford it and that the fire power and mobile forces left in their hands at the time of the U.S. withdrawal would be at the mercy of the single cut of U.S. supplies of arms and ammunitions. That was exactly what happened in 1974-75 when the U.S. Congress reduced to less than a minimum the volume of military and economic aid to South Vietnam.

The above criticisms, directly or indirectly related to the conduct of the war, were usual in Saigon, but even more usual were the criticisms concerning the American attitude vis-a-vis the internal problems of South Vietnam. More than anything else, the South Vietnamese blamed the Americans for the many contradictions of American policy which led them to encourage, help and support mediocre leadership in South Vietnam.

The South Vietnamese could not understand why the Americans had to assert that there was no interference in South Vietnamese politics, as if they could avoid it in practice after imposing the presence of the five hundred thousands American troops in the country. Such a presence of foreign troops had its pros and cons and many South Vietnamese were aware of it. The Communists in effect boasted about the purity and the legitimacy of their cause (fight for the total independence of the country and against the presence of foreign troops), and the South Vietnamese did not want to carry a handicap on their back. They accepted it however as a matter justified by the international circumstances and the rapidly deteriorating situation in South Vietnam. There was after all a ferocious war going on and there was no substitute for victory even if the cost was to be some sort of interference.

The South Vietnamese saw the Americans trying to do their best to consolidate the men in power in Saigon. In many respects, they shared the American point of view as to the necessity of having some sort of governmental stability (because the war required continued

efforts) but did not see why stability had to be always bad leadership. They faulted the Americans for having neglected the future in favor of the mediocre present and for failing to realize that stability with bad leadership could be as dangerous as instability itself. They could not visualize how, with the tremendous and almost irresistible influence of the American military and civilian establishment in Saigon, the Americans could not help the South Vietnamese form a government responsive to the needs and aspirations of the people so that all the South Vietnamese could contribute usefully to the common war effort against the Communists.

In politics, quite often appearances and perceptions count more than facts. Nowhere the situation was more true than it was in South Vietnam during all the years of the American presence between the mid-sixties and seventies. Whether or not the Americans really intervened in the internal politics of South Vietnam and American denials notwithstanding, all the South Vietnamese took it for granted that the Americans were behind any coup or change of government.

They believed (more rightly than wrongly) that the military coup against the late President Ngo Dinh Diem would not occur if there was no green light given to the South Vietnamese Generals. They were convinced that the subsequent coups in 1964 and 1965 were more or less inspired, if not organized, by the Americans themselves, and along the same line the Americans were thought to have maneuvered behind the scenes when General Nguyen Van Thieu (instead of Air Vice Marshall Nguyen Cao Ky) was selected by other generals as candidate for the Presidency of South Vietnam in 1967.

Perhaps the truth in the matter was not exactly like that. In many instances, the Americans proved to completely powerless to prevent the coups from happening and had to be content with an unpleasant *fait accompli*. Undoubtedly, the South Vietnamese went too far in their imagination when they visualized every American as Machiavellian plotter with CIA affiliation, but all this ended up in a situation of truths mixed with half truths and the Americans had to bear the responsibility for everything without having the advantage of having brought it about.

For the South Vietnamese, interference in their internal affairs was a sort of natural consequence stemming from the presence of the foreign troops in the country, a fact of life against which they could do nothing. From a theoretical point of view, American interference was perhaps the last thing that proud and responsible Vietnamese would ever want to see. They understood well that it served no purpose at all if after the years of sacrifices in the fight against the Communists, they had to end up with becoming dependent on Americans. From a practical and realistic point of view, there was nevertheless a war to be won and by then interference was to be considered as an unavoidable *moindre mal*, the least of the evils available.

For their part, the Americans did not seem to hold this view; they intervened but reluctantly and most of the time by half measures as if they did not want to hurt the government in power or had doubts about their ability to influence the situation. The South Vietnamese politicians who used to complain about the corruption and inefficiencies in Saigon heard the Americans saying in many instances:

> "As a matter of principle, we do not think that it is proper for us to intervene in your own affairs. Besides, even if we try, we would not know how to begin or where to end."

This apparently sincere and logical argument did not convince the South Vietnamese. They thought that the Americans had actively and effectively helped the men in power in Saigon to consolidate their control over the country. These men had the Army well in hand, the Police and all the money, consequently there was not much room left for the South Vietnamese people who found their hands tied solidly behind their backs. If reforms were to be made for the improvement of the situation, the Americans were the only ones who could bring pressure on the South Vietnamese leaders.

So, back and forth went the arguments between Americans and South Vietnamese. In a vicious circle and through different ways of reasoning, they expected from their partners the impossible and subsequently missed all the good opportunities for reform. In the

meantime, the military in South Vietnam continued their rule, happy beneficiaries of a situation in which a mediocre status quo was maintained throughout the years.

The status quo seemed to be acceptable to the Americans. They found that, starting in 1967, South Vietnam apparently had everything that was needed for a successful pursuit of the war: regular Communist units pushed back to the borders, stability all around the country, a government elected through more or less regular elections, and an Army of almost one million men under arms. They did not realize, however, that it was only the surface they saw and that underneath the substance was fragile. The heart of the matter was that whether the Americans failed to detect the fragility of the regime they came to help, or did not know what to do about it, or even did not care about it, their withdrawal made all the difference in the days of the reckoning in 1975 when the Communists launched the last offensive of the war.

At the height of their involvement in South Vietnam, the U.S. had thousands of military and civilian men roaming around the country, helping the South Vietnamese with different programs either at the level of the central government or at the level of the provincial authorities. In this number were not included the staff of the Embassy in Saigon and the military advisors to the commanding officers of the various South Vietnamese units. Yet, in spite of this huge number of their men in direct contact every day with the South Vietnamese and closely involved in the task of winning the war, the Americans did not have an accurate assessment of the mood, or the ability, or the performance of their partners. They had all the details, the statistics (and the rumors, too) but they lacked the view in depth of the situation in terms of long range possibilities and prospects.

Undoubtedly, Americans and South Vietnamese had different mentalities and habits, therefore, it was not easy for Americans to understand their partners but the Americans made it more difficult by the rotation system through which they came to South Vietnam for a short tour of

duty and after that went home, making room for others to come. With such a system millions of Americans came to South Vietnam, but not many of them really had time to get fully acquainted with the men they were supposed to help nor with the complexities of the war. And it was not a surprise at all if under these circumstances the Americans did not see the fallibility of the Saigon regime and did not consider it as a serious problem, indeed, a priority.

To the credit of the Americans, it is to be noted that not all the Americans were blind to the fact that the situation in South Vietnam could be in the long run potentially dangerous and that the basic weaknesses of the regime should receive immediate attention. The hard facts were known in some quarters but somehow, for one reason or another, no real attempt was made for improving the situation.

From 1965 to 1968, there was a complete lack of concern. Nobody at that time could think of losing the war and taking into account the heavy weight of the huge U.S. involvement, the South Vietnamese weaknesses had no practical significance. Later, in 1969, by the time the war had dragged on inconclusively and the idea of Vietnamization began to surface, it was a sort of neglect. The risks were not totally ignored but the Americans did not know whether or not and to what extent it was appropriate for them to put pressure on the South Vietnamese for reforms. They chose instead to throw the ball back to the South Vietnamese under the convenient pretext that it was strictly a South Vietnamese affair. South Vietnamese, it really was, but unless the Americans wished to write off completely their investment of the previous years in terms of prestige, human lives and resources in the billions, they were deeply in it too, and that was what they seemed to forget.

Here, in connection with this controversial and highly debatable issue: to interfere or not to interfere, is it worth or justified, and how to do it, some concrete examples can usefully serve to illustrate the case.

I happen to have throughout my years of service in the South Vietnamese Government very friendly relations with the U.S. Ambassadors in Saigon, particularly the two last ones, Ambassadors Bunker and

Martin. Due to the nature of the problems I was assigned to look after in my capacity of Ambassador in Washington or later as Ambassador at Large, I frequently had very frank conversations with the two Ambassadors about the situation in South Vietnam and about what should be or could be done to meet its requirements. In general terms we all agreed that:

- The image of South Vietnam abroad and especially in the U.S. was bad (sometimes the criticisms were not entirely justified but that was beyond the point because perception was what counted).
- The support of the U.S. Congress and public opinion for the war in South Vietnam was diminishing.
- South Vietnam was to take over gradually all the war effort.
- Priority number one should be given to the task of strengthening the South Vietnamese Armed Forces and Government.
- For this purpose, urgent steps had to be taken to reduce corruption and nepotism inside the Armed Forces where honest and able officers should be appointed to positions of responsibility.
- Competent people should be brought into the Government.
- Some sort of broaded based government with the participation of moderate and competent elements of the opposition should be formed for disarming the critics abroad and securing more popular support at home.

The above mentioned points of agreement among us were obvious to any independent observer of the situation and the problem was not to reach an agreement on these points, it was rather how to have these reforms started, and at that point Americans and South Vietnamese began to have different points of view.

As it had been noted in other paragraphs, the Americans were either reluctant to intervene or intervened half way. The South Vietnamese on the contrary thought that given, on one hand, the mentality of Mr. Thieu who had all the powers of decision in Saigon and the other hand,

the inescapable weight of the American influence, American pressures on the South Vietnamese leader should be considered as necessary and unavoidable if reforms were to be started. It was a paradoxical situation, a sad fact but practically there was no other alternative.

I remember in this respect that, in the early seventies, each time I came home for consultations and had opportunities to talk to Ambassador Bunker, he urged me to take up the problem of the reforms with the South Vietnamese President.

> "You should mention to the President that reforms are badly needed both for strengthening your defense postures and for improving the atomsphere in Washington, a condition for the U.S. to continue its support."

I did try to convince Mr. Thieu of the necessity for reorganizing his government, but in terms of influence on him, there was no comparison between my position as Ambassador in Saigon. If, with the tremendous bargaining power he had in his hands, the U.S. Ambassador could not do anything to influence Mr. Thieu, how could I?

The relations between Mr. Thieu and Ambassador Bunker were quite close, perhaps the closest that the South Vietnamese President ever had with an American Ambassador. (He had all sorts of suspicions about Amb. Cabot Lodge, did not know Amb. Martin well but he credited Amb. Bunker with having supported him during his difficult early days as President.) With this kind of relationship and comparatively easy access to the Presidental Palace in Saigon, Ambassador Bunker probably did not miss the opportunities to bring up in his frequent conversations with Mr. Thieu the touchy problems of the regime but somehow he was too much a gentleman and did not press hard for his case. He intervened with his highly polite, aristocratic manners, the casual way as if he was reluctant to use his influence and did not want to hurt the South Vietnamese leader. For his part, Mr. Thieu never refused anything. He usually promised to have remedies to the shortcomings but depending on the circumstances he switched tactics back and forth. If he sensed that the American intervention was not

forceful or energetic enough, as was the case most of the time, he used delaying tactics, waiting for the issues to disappear by themselves or to lose their urgency by the piling up of other more urgent issues in the meantime. If, on the contrary, he felt that he was near the end of the rope then he acted diligently and quickly: in 1972, in the midst of the April big Communist offensive he complied almost immediately with the request made by Ambassador Bunker and General Abrams to remove General Hoang Xuan Lam from his command of the I Corps after the loss of Quang Tri to the Communists (he knew that General Lam was not up to his task, but for years had refused to replace him); in 1973, after a short resistance to the draft of the Peace Agreement brought to Saigon by Dr. Kissinger in October 1972, he accepted the Agreement in spite of the fact that its substance was not much different from the one of the draft.

These two examples among others clearly indicated that although Mr. Thieu was a shrewd politician and a hard bargainer, he was not the man to stick to his principle to the ~~last~~ bitter end. He cared about his position and yielded if real and appropriate pressures were put upon him. It indicated too that setting aside the marginal considerations about whether or not American interferences were justified on moral grounds, the Americans, at least from the eyes of the South Vietnamese missed the opportunities to help South Vietnam to improve its own situation by failing to apply pressure on the South Vietnamese leadership when it was really needed.

Now that the war was already lost, for the South Vietnamese, almost everything about what they and the Americans could do in the past ~~is~~ became matter of conjectures, but they could never ~~can~~ rid their minds of the thought that the outcome of the war could have been different if only the Americans ~~knew~~ had known how to use their power in terms of conduct of the war against the North Vietnamese Communists and in terms of their relations with their allies in the war, the South Vietnamese.

The atmosphere of half-interventions by Americans and half-promises by South Vietnamese lasted for many years and was furthermore complicated by two new developments in 1973: the signing of the Peace Agreement

in January of that year and the arrival in Saigon, soon after, of the new U.S. Ambassador Martin.

The Paris Peace Agreement changed the basic nature of the relations between the U.S. and South Vietnam, prevented Washington from helping Saigon militarily and created doubts of all sorts in the minds of the South Vietnamese. As for the new U.S. Ambassador, he needed time to get acquainted with the local scenes and particularly with Mr. Thieu who at that time was himself trying to size up the attitude of the new envoy. All this was at the root of a situation mainly characterized by a sort of lack of communications at the top, misunderstandings and wrong assumptions, the South Vietnamese failing to have an accurate evaluation of the mood in Washington wrongly assumed that if ~~worst ever comes~~ worse came to worst, the U.S. would not abandon South Vietnam, and the Americans failing to detect the fragility of the Saigon regime and wrongly assumed that the South Vietnam Armed Forces would weather another Communist offensive.

Ambassador Martin was viewed by many South Vietnames in Saigon as a sincere and dedicated friend of South Vietnam. He saw Mr. Thieu only on necessary occasions and his relations with the man were not close.

> "I want to help your country and your President," He once said to me in 1974, "but the only thing your President has asked me to do up to now was to make arrangements for your Vice President to go to Washington for a check-up at the Walter Reed Hospital."

I was rather surprised by these half casual, half serious words from the Ambassador and told him that if he did not mind I would talk to Mr. Thieu about it. I tried in fact to serve as a sort of unsolicited intermediary bridging the gap between the two men. I got the reaction from Mr. Thieu a few days later, a reaction which described well the situation:

> "I do not know him well yet so I have to go slow in my relations with him."