

A situation in which the relations between the two allies were outwardly correct but not at all normal considering the fact that the war obviously required a closer coordination among partners. This situation lasted until the final days of the war when on a last and historic visit to the Presidential Palace in Saigon (April 20, 1975) Ambassador Martin presented to Mr. Thieu a blunt and grim assessment of the overall desperate situation of the country. Mr. Thieu resigned the next day and the war ended practically one week later. In this connection and in retrospect, many South Vietnamese now express the opinion that if more of these frank, blunt, to-the-point conversations had happened in the earlier years of the war, perhaps a non-Communist South Vietnam would be still alive.

Ambassador Martin was a man of conviction with strong views about the role of the U.S. in Asia and particularly about what the U.S. should do for helping South Vietnam to become "economically viable and militarily capable of defending itself with its own manpower." He fought hard for his views and spent a lot of his time in Washington, trying to convince members of the Congress that economic and military aid for South Vietnam should continue, at least for a limited number of years. Partly because nobody at that time in Washington paid any attention to the problem--the minds were elsewhere, on Watergate, the Middle East war, the fuel crisis and, the atmosphere of confrontation between the executive and legislative--and partly because he was too optimistic himself, Ambassador Martin's efforts were not crowned with successes. His cool determination to get aid for South Vietnam (and perhaps his habit of keeping to himself his disappointment concerning the negative attitude of the U.S. Congress) contributed however, to lead Mr. Thieu into error. The South Vietnamese leader in effect took it as a good guarantee for him and accepted a proposal from the U.S. Administration to prepare for the later part of 1974 by making a request for additional military aid. That request, unfortunately, proved to be wrong tactical move which in many respects precipitated the downfall of the Saigon regime. It crystallized the opinion in

Washington, heightened the tension in South Vietnam to a dangerous breaking point and indirectly through the impact of the negative reaction of the Congress to the request, contributed to the collapse in morale of the South Vietnamese in 1975.

#### THE VIETNAMIZATION PROGRAM

I have mentioned in the preceding paragraphs that as far as I knew, during the years of active U.S. involvement in South Vietnam and after, when the U.S. got gradually disengaged from the war, the fundamental issues involving the two parties, American and South Vietnamese, were never seriously addressed.

The Vietnamization program was a case in point. In terms of concept, it could not be a better one and the face of the war would be definitely different if the implementation of the idea <sup>had</sup> started, as it should, from the very beginning. Unfortunately that was not the case and when it started in 1969, more was done to calm the public opinion than to meet the real problems of the program.

Officially it began in June 1969 with the announcement of the first increment of combat troops to be withdrawn after the summit meeting between Presidents Nixon and Thieu on the island of Midway but in fact the idea made its way already in early 1968 when it became obvious that the war was going to last and that under the increasing pressure of the public opinion, the Johnson Administration had to stop sending additional troops to South Vietnam. In a private meeting on July 12, 1968 with Mr. Nixon (at that time still a Republican Presidential Candidate) I brought up the idea of Vietnamization. Mr. Nixon's reaction was positive but I did not expect that it would become in the later years one of the main characteristics of the Nixon policy in Vietnam.

The announcements of troop withdrawals in 1969 were necessary in the sense that they helped to sustain the public support for the continuation of the war but somehow the policy makers seemed to attach more importance to the announcements than to the problems which were

occasioned by the withdrawal. In addition to that, the emphasis was more on the number of American troops to be withdrawn, the number of South Vietnamese battalions and divisions to be formed for replacing the American units than on the training of the South Vietnamese so that they could be ready to face the enemy in the eventuality of a complete U.S. withdrawal. Not many South Vietnamese Generals thought of the war in terms of strategy and to my knowledge Americans and South Vietnamese had never among themselves held serious discussions or exchanged ideas on strategic matters or on contingency planning. Sometimes it appeared as if there was even a lack of coordination among Americans about what should be done to help the South Vietnamese. In 1972 for instance, while at the Paris secret talks through his proposal <sup>at the secret Paris peace talks</sup> to the Communist side and in Moscow during his conversation with Mr. Brezhnev, Dr. Kissinger clearly hinted that the important issue of the presence of the North Vietnamese troops inside South Vietnam was negotiable, and could be eventually dropped (as a consequence of this, the South Vietnamese had to be prepared to face by themselves a large number of regular North Vietnamese divisions), <sup>but</sup> many U.S. military planners, apparently unaware of the vital policy decisions on the part of Dr. Kissinger, continued to map out routine plans for the South Vietnamese. Along the same line, there were in 1973 many contradictory recommendations to the South Vietnamese Government as to the level of troops to be kept under arms after the Paris Peace Agreement; hardliners were of the opinion to keep it the way it was before the agreement, at one million and one hundred thousand men, while others, more concerned about the downward trend of the U.S. aid, recommended the trimming down of the South Vietnamese Armed Forces with emphasis switched from quantity to quality.

#### THE COLLAPSE OF APRIL 1975

As it <sup>can</sup> be seen throughout this essay, both Americans and South Vietnamese committed serious mistakes through all the years of the war in Vietnam. These mistakes paved the way for the gradual deterioration

of the Saigon regime two years later, and although the collapse of April 1975 could not be considered in absolute terms as an ineluctable consequence of these mistakes, the situation in South Vietnam at the beginning of 1975 was such that a simple error could turn a dangerous situation into an irretrievable one. And that was exactly what happened.

That error came in early March 1975; the loss of the provincial capital, Ban Me Thuot, causing the decision of the South Vietnamese High Command to withdraw the troops from the Pleiku-Kontum area.

From a strictly tactical point of view, the fall of Ban Me Thuot into the hands of the Communists could be considered as a local setback, important and serious, yes, but not at all decisive. It was nevertheless the starting point of a disintegration process, triggering the whole series of tragic developments which led to the final collapse. Without Ban Me Thuot, the ill-fated retreat from the Highlands probably would not have happened, or at least not the way it actually did, and the course of the war could be different.

Van Tien Dung, the North Vietnamese General who was in charge of the Communist offensive in 1975, claimed in his own account of the fighting\* that his troops prepared carefully and meticulously the attack on Ban Me Thuot. What he said could be true but one thing was clear: his counterpart on the Highland front, General Pham Van Phu, contributed in no small measure to his victory. In effect, in spite of many warnings about the possibility of an imminent attack on the city, General Phu persisted in concentrating the most important part of his troops on the northern flank of the front (Pleiku, Kontum) and left its southern flank wide open to the infiltration of the Communist sapper units which together with the massive tank assault during the night of March 10, 1975, sealed the fate of the poorly defended city.

Public opinion in South Vietnam was not really alarmed by the fall of Ban Me Thuot. A feeling of concern had been in the minds of everybody for quite some time already but this was due more to the increasing

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\* "Great Spring Victories," Nhan Dan, 1976.

deterioration of the overall situation than to the event, then still considered as a local development of the war. Many other important cities had been lost to the other side in the past and all of them had been reoccupied, so in the eyes of many South Vietnamese the occupation of Ban Me Thuot by the enemy forces could be but temporary.

The illusion lasted only a week. On March 19, 1975, as soon as people learned about the debacle of the South Vietnamese retreat along the road from Pleiku, Kontum down to the coastal area, the concern quickly turned into panic and the whole population of South Vietnam seemed to be in a state of shock and consternation. In their haste to run away both from the war zone and the Communists, hundreds of thousands of refugees subsequently poured on to the roads heading south, immobilizing in the process, all the military moves and creating the most horrendous confusion. By then the die was cast and in practical terms the whole country was going to be delivered piecemeal to the enemy.

The mishandling in the case of the loss of Ban Me Thuot was damaging, but the mishandling of the withdrawal from the Highlands (whether it was the responsibility of Mr. Thieu himself or of his Generals) was too much for the country. From one error to another, from bad to worse, the situation became more and more critical every day. The Communists conquered cities and provinces at the rate of one or two per day not only because they fully exploited their initial military advantages but because the South Vietnamese in a strange mood of fear mixed with false hopes a negotiated settlement were influenced by a combination of psychological factors and simply lost the will to defend their country.

The psychological factors exerted their disastrous influence particularly during the final weeks of the war. We mention here:

- o The campaign of defeatist rumors apparently launched by the Communists themselves.

- o The effects of the rapidly deteriorating situation in Pnom Penh, Cambodia.
- o The false hope for peace through a coalition formula generated by a French attempt to play the middle man between the parties at war.

The defeatist rumors spread throughout the country (especially in the northern part, Hue and Danang) immediately after the debacle of Kontum and Pleiku. Since there was not a single word from the Government in Saigon explaining one way or the other the rumors filled a sort of natural vacuum and gave a logical explanation as to why the Government in Saigon took the decision to abandon the provinces of the borders. The rumors specified that there was a deal between the Americans and the Communists, conceding the upper part of South Vietnam to North Vietnam and that consequently governmental troops had to be redeployed below a line starting westward from Nha Trang. To a large extent these rumors undermined the morale of the troops in the I Corps and at the same time the morale of those among the population who did not like the prospect of having to live under the Communist rule. And the end result was, of course, the massive exodus of military and civilians which blocked all possibilities for defending the port of Danang during the late days of March 1975.

Running parallel with the campaign of defeatist rumors was the disastrous news from Cambodia. There around Pnom Penh, each day that passed put one more nail in the coffin of the Lon Nol regime, and the spectacle of a dying government was not all encouraging for Saigon. The South Vietnamese watching the developments in Cambodia, saw that the Americans did little to help the Cambodians (The request for additional military aid to Cambodia was rejected by the U.S. Congress on March 13, 1975.) and feared <sup>for</sup> their own fate.

Finally, as if the situation was not yet complicated enough, at the time when the South Vietnamese were in a complete state of disarray not knowing what to do or where to go, a French attempt to play the middle man between the parties at war stirred hope as to the possibility

of a negotiated settlement. It proved later to be a false hope but during these difficult days a semblance of hope was hope. About two weeks before the war was over, the French Ambassador in Saigon, Mr. Merillon, hinted in his conversations with the political leaders in the capital that he had contact with the Communist side. Perhaps with the tacit approval and encouragement from his Government, he let it be known that the Communists might eventually accept a coalition government as a first step toward a peace settlement. Mr. Merillon apparently thought that his efforts would result in an advantageous position for France after the Communist take over and consequently tried hard to play the role of negotiator. Openly advocating the Big Minh solution, he indicated to whomever he talked to that the only remaining obstacles on the road to peace were Mr. Thieu and his Government. The Communists for their part did not discourage these behind-the-scenes French maneuvers. Instead, they used the maneuvers to their own advantage and concentrated all their efforts into accelerating their military march on the capital. In the meantime, under pressure from his political enemies as well as from his own supporters, and most importantly after realizing that he could not count any more on the U.S. support (the Americans sought his departure, though not openly and reluctantly) Mr. Thieu resigned on April 21, 1975. Overnight Mr. Thieu's resignation completely paralyzed a government which was already half paralyzed by the disastrous losses: Pleiku, Kontum and Hue and Danang. Mr. Huong, the Vice President, legally succeeded Mr. Thieu but everyone knew that the old man could not stay in power, so everything came to a standstill waiting for General Duong Van Minh to form the new government and start the negotiations. As to the politicians in Saigon, they found time to argue for more than a week about the legalistic aspects of the transfer of power between the one week President Huong and the some day President General Minh, and by the time when everything was legally done, the Communist units without firing a single shot were already in the suburbs of Saigon. The Big Minh government, after just one day in office, attempted to start the negotiations with the other side by asking the Americans to evacuate all

their military personnel. It served to nothing because only a few hours after the Americans concluded their evacuation, the Communist tanks forced their way through the gates of the Presidential Palace in downtown Saigon, putting an end to the war and achieving finally their dream of the conquest of South Vietnam by military force.

A few words here about the evacuation.

In terms of military operation within the time frame imposed by the circumstances at that time, it was perhaps a success because in less than 24 hours thousands of Americans and South Vietnamese had been evacuated under precarious conditions and with only two Marines killed during the bombing of the Tan Son Nhat airport just one day before the operation began. In terms of human tragedy and from the South Vietnamese point of view, it was another story. Hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese who had put all their hopes in being evacuated are now suffering inside Communist jails and camps. Thousands of others who were evacuated in haste are condemned to live separated from the other members of their families without any hope of being reunited. Obviously, by the time the Communists had their advance units around Saigon, the situation was difficult for the Americans. How many South Vietnamese were to be included in the evacuation? Could it be started while the Saigon Government was still operating, moribund as it was? How about the shock effect on the population? Could panic be avoided? To all these questions there were no easy answers but somehow through lack of clear cut decisions from Washington (according to the testimony of Ambassador Martin before the House Committee on International Relations, January 1976) the U.S. Mission in Saigon got the authority to evacuate 50,000 South Vietnamese only four days before the final collapse. Lack of coordination, confusion and loss of control ensued and in the end thousands of South Vietnamese of high risk were left behind, defenseless in the hands of the Communists. They were promised help by the representatives of the U.S. Mission but at the last minutes those who had promised help did not show up. Thousands of others who could well have stayed behind without too much risk were evacuated instead because they had some American good friend who claimed them as relatives, or in many cases, simply

because they succeeded in getting in touch with some of the American adventurers who unscrupulously organized the evacuation for their own profit.

Many evacuees are crippled by the simple fact that they had to leave South Vietnam and try to start a new life in another country far away from their ancestral land with no practical hope of coming home. And by the way the whole program was carried out, the evacuation was sad, even heart-breaking for many South Vietnamese.

The whole operation was in a way an unhappy ending for an unhappy chapter of American history and the Americans can quickly turn the page; but for all the South Vietnamese, whether they stayed in South Vietnam or succeeded in going abroad, the war and the evacuation was a continuing nightmare. For them, the tragic scenes of those South Vietnamese families at dawn on the roofs of the buildings in downtown Saigon, waiting anxiously but hopelessly for the blinking lights of a helicopter which never came back, or the scenes of those innumerable barges and sampans rushing eastward into the high sea with the hazardous expectation of being rescued by the U.S. Seventh Fleet will be remembered for all time to come.