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SOUTH VIETNAM IN 1975: THE YEAR OF COMMUNIST VICTORY

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A MAJOR TURNING POINT of the war in South Vietnam was the loss of Phuoc Long Province 70 miles north of Saigon on January 7, 1975, after a three-week communist offensive. It was not of great strategic importance but it was the first province to fall since the temporary loss of Quang Tri in 1972, and this time national mourning was proclaimed.

To the writer, in Saigon at the time, the public reaction was one of mounting apprehension mixed with widespread cynicism; corruption in the Army was believed by many to be so gross that outpost defenders were having to pay other units for artillery support and air supply. The dread in Saigon was compounded by the knowledge that the North Vietnamese gradually had extended the "Ho Chi Minh trail" after the 1973 ceasefire into a network of all-weather roads from the North through Laos and Cambodia, cutting down travel time to the Mekong delta from four months of night marches to 17 days.¹

The government had moved belatedly in August 1974 to thin out and consolidate its over-extended outpost system in the delta (as the communists had done earlier), abandoning a considerable number in the process since it could no longer afford the prodigious artillery and air support to which it had become accustomed through American training.²

The communists had built up their forces considerably and varying estimates of their eventual total strength in the South ranged up to 350,000 regular northern combat and supply troops plus 100,000 southern guerrillas. The government had about 465,000 regulars plus 1,400,000 local defense personnel and over a half million men in other paramilitary formations; its airforce of about 1200 operational aircraft at any given time was the only one used in action (aside from two small

¹ *New York Times*, Feb. 19, 1975.

² *Ibid.*

isolated communist air attacks late in the war). And both sides could justifiably charge that the other had violated the Paris Agreement's provisions on arms limitations.³

On March 4 the communists launched a new offensive in the highlands by cutting highways 19 and 21 leading from Banmethuot and Pleiku to the coast. The government, concluding that a major attack would be directed against Pleiku, shifted the 23rd Division there from Banmethuot, but the communists assaulted Banmethuot on March 10 and captured it the next day. The 23rd was ordered to return but was attacked on the road and fled to the hills, throwing away its equipment. Mutinying and dissident montagnard elements were claimed by Vietnamese sources to have played a significant role in this episode but incomplete evidence indicates that the major enemy forces were North Vietnamese.⁴

It developed that government planes mistakenly had bombed ARVN headquarters on the ground, as they had at Phuoc Long, and for the same reason: anti-aircraft missiles from communist portable launchers had forced the planes to stay above 10,000 feet where their bombing was inaccurate. Moreover, maintenance problems and limited fuel supplies had cut down air support and only one large helicopter had been available for ferrying troops into the beleaguered city.

President Nguyen Van Thieu now made the fateful decision to abandon all positions that could not be supplied by road or sea. Pleiku and Kontum were ordered evacuated and Pleiku was put to the torch. Hordes of civilians joined fleeing troops in a 50-mile long column along Highway 7 to the coast. The communists did not harass them at first but later fired on them repeatedly and many died from gunfire, hunger and exhaustion. Many officers deserted, making no provisions for their troops' or the civilians' subsistence and when remnants of the 23rd Division reached Nha Trang on March 25, they resorted to looting. By the end of March, all highland province capitals except Dalat had fallen.

After renewed communist attacks in the South in mid-March, President Thieu ordered the Airborne Division in Quang Tri moved South to protect the capital region—and to forestall a possible coup by officers indignant at his highland withdrawals. The communists re-

³ It was widely conceded that the only significant result of the Agreements had been to end direct U.S. military involvement. U.S. and PRG allegations of each other's violations of the Agreements are listed in a U.S. note of January 11, 1975 and a PRG retort of January 14 reported in *ibid.*, January 12 and 15, respectively. The U.S. admitted at that time that its planes were flying reconnaissance over North and South Vietnam and Cambodia and contended that it was free to do so because North Vietnam's gross violations had rendered the Agreements invalid.

⁴ Increasing Montagnard bitterness against the GVN had been reported as contributing to insecurity here over the preceding year. *Ibid.*, January 25 and March 12, 1975.

newed their pressure in the north against the government's seriously weakened defense line and some northern commanders requested authorization to withdraw. Though this picture is still murky, Saigon appears to have issued orders for withdrawal to Danang and then revisions and countermands in a hasty, ambiguous and confusing fashion so corrosive to unit commanders' confidence that many deserted thinking only to save their families. These troops then joined civilian refugee columns choking the roads and they rampaged and looted in several cities.

By April 3 the general rout had abandoned Central Vietnam to the communists and government forces made their only real stand for three weeks at Xuan Loc, 37 miles east of Saigon, before being outflanked and withdrawing on April 21. So chaotic was the military denouement that \$2 billion of serviceable government military equipment eventually was left behind.⁵ A communist writer later claimed that a salient factor in the victory had been the classical general uprising which had not been adequately reported abroad,⁶ but it appeared obvious to western observers that the decisive factor had been the collapse of government forces in the face of the communists' conventional military force.

The Political Collapse

The non-communists sputtered in frustration but down to the end could not muster the cohesion to challenge Thieu's tight political controls and emerge as an entity capable of negotiating with the communists.⁷ In 1974, Catholic Father Tran Huu Thanh's Popular Anti-Corruption Movement had served as a catalyst for an oppositionist effervescence which included a spate of demonstrations and newspaper criticism of the regime, some of which were dealt with violently. Father Thanh issued a new "political indictment" of Thieu on February 1 for treasonable leadership; by April 1 even the hitherto pro-Thieu Senate called for his replacement, and a similar appeal was made by the Archbishop of Saigon the next day and others followed suit.

Thieu merely named a supporter, House Speaker Nguyen Ba Can, to replace Gen. Tran Thien Khiem as premier, and his cabinet of April 14 contained only holdovers and minor political figures. Thieu admitted some Army indiscipline (including defections by some units in Phu Bon Province) but he blamed the U.S. for most of the crisis.

PRG and NLF spokesmen insisted they would talk only to a new

⁵ *Ibid.*, May 13, 1975.

⁶ Nguyen Khac Vien, writing in the *Vietnam Courier*, No. 37 (July 1975), claimed that Thieu's "police terror" had prevented foreign newsmen from "having really close contacts with the population" and being able to perceive this.

⁷ Nguyen Cao Ky and others plotted an unsuccessful coup against Thieu in the last days of the regime.

administration devoid of Thieu and on condition that the U.S. end all intervention in Vietnamese affairs.⁸ Thieu, increasingly remote and withdrawn in his determination to cling to power, finally resigned only after Xuan Loc was abandoned, giving the communists control of the roads to Saigon.

In his television resignation speech, Thieu amplified his earlier charge that the Americans had reneged on earlier promises to "react vigorously" to further North Vietnamese aggression and to give sufficient aid, so that the government's combat potential had fallen by 60%, severely weakening military and civilian morale.⁹ He said he had resisted for three months American pressure for a settlement scheduled for October 26, 1972, but all he had accomplished was the substitution of the three-way National Council for National Reconciliation and Concord for a projected tripartite coalition government.

Nixon had threatened, Thieu said, that if he did not sign, Congress certainly would cut off economic and military aid and even if he signed later, he would be up against the irreversible earlier Congressional decision and would not get aid. The contention that Nixon had given at least vague assurances of forceful American intervention was substantiated in copies of two Nixon letters to Thieu released in Washington later by a former cabinet minister, but President Gerald Ford stated that the correspondence did not contradict explicit U.S. policy.¹⁰

Thieu flew to Taiwan and Vice President Tran Van Huong replaced him, but as part of the "Thieu clique" he also was unacceptable to the communists. Prime Minister Can resigned on April 23 and Huong was reported to have been told by French Ambassador Merillon that the PRG insisted on ex-Gen. Duong Van ("Big") Minh becoming Chief of State. Huong strove futilely to remain at the helm and finally led the National Assembly in turning over power to Minh on April 28, but not before the communists showed their impatience by rocketing Saigon and cutting all roads to the city except the one to the airfield.¹¹

Minh named as vice president and premier Senators Nguyen Van Huynh, a respected Catholic and Thieu opponent, and Vu Van Mau, leader of the An Quang Pagoda-sponsored National Reconciliation Force, respectively. Intensive efforts were continued by Minh, the U.S. and the French to restore negotiations, reportedly including appeals to the Chinese and Russians to use their influence, but communist forces continued to advance on Saigon and bombed Tan Son Nhut airfield with three captured American planes. They rejected appeals for negotiations on grounds that the U.S. still had not honored the Paris Agreements and that the GVN "machinery of war and oppression" had not

yet been dismantled.¹² Minh thereupon requested the U.S. embassy to close its military attache's office and he decreed a series of liberalization measures.

Vice President Huynh stated on April 29 that although the government was complying with PRG demands, the latter had advanced two new ones, namely, withdrawal of the U.S. fleet and disarming of the Vietnamese Army and police. On the morning of April 30, President Minh ordered government forces to cease fire and appealed to the communists to do the same, and to work out with him an orderly transfer of power avoiding bloodshed. Shortly after noon, communist troops entered Saigon to the cheers of some of the populace and no military resistance. They went to the Presidential Palace, received Minh's surrender, and led Minh, Huynh and Mau away (all of them reappeared after a few days of detention), demonstrating that since they commanded overwhelming power, they felt no obligation to negotiate.

Thus the war that had dragged on for 30 years ended with surprising swiftness. French sources later reported that Saigon's collapse came more quickly than the PRG might have considered ideal, for the rapid North Vietnamese advance placed such power in Hanoi's hands as to eclipse the PRG. According to this interpretation, the PRG would have preferred a negotiated settlement with a prominent political figure succeeding Thieu (e.g., ex-Gen. Tran Van Don or even better, Duong Van Minh), which could have set up a coalition government in which the PRG would have had a specified, important role.¹³

The fear of a "bloodbath," fostered for many years by the South Vietnamese and American governments, and reinforced by periodic atrocities (perpetrated not only by the communists, however) had received but scant substantiation during the communists' campaigns over the preceding four months. The attacks on refugee (and military elements) fleeing the highlands were verified but later reports of killings in Banmethuot and elsewhere were not. Nevertheless, the contagion of fear caught up hordes of people, particularly in the towns and cities, and some 130,000 who fled Vietnam eventually were taken to the U.S. But the suddenness of the final collapse caused the evacuation to be conducted so feverishly and terminated so abruptly that many "high risk" Vietnamese were left, despite promises of evacuation, and in many cases family members were separated.¹⁴ However, those choosing to remain included well-known oppositionist politicians, such as Tran Van Tuyen, motivated in part by the hope that if they stayed in sufficient numbers, they might alleviate the anticipated harshness of communist rule.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, June 12, 1975.

¹⁴ Alan Dawson in *ibid.*, June 1, 1975, reported that 150 top ranking police officials and their families were left, for example. Refugees interviewed by the present writer have claimed that current and former cabinet ministers left behind included Dr. Phan Huy Quat, Tran Chanh Thanh, Tran Trung Dung and Ngo Khac Tinh.

⁸ *Ibid.*, April 8, 1975.

⁹ *Ibid.*, April 12 and 21, 1975.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, May 2, 1975.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, April 29, 1975.

The Communists In Power: Indoctrination Instead of a Bloodbath

Instead of executions, the new regime prescribed political reeducation classes. All former Army men were required to register by an extended May 31 deadline (later extended again) and then they and former civil officials were sent to political training centers.¹⁵ Anxiety developed among family members of some of those former officers and officials sent away and the government reported it had reassured one group of representatives of fifty such families that the indoctrinees would return safely in due course. Eventually, large trainee groups were released but some grim stories circulated of corpses of some trainees being shipped home with explanations suggesting they had been killed while working to clear unexploded bombs and possibly mines from former combat areas.¹⁶

Ordinary citizens also were enrolled in political courses, many given in the evenings, and some requiring attendance from one member of each family. Some former soldiers and officials evidently were assigned to group labor in rural areas after training.¹⁷

Many books were banned as anti-revolutionary or pornographic, and reorientation was given to schoolteachers before they participated in a new education program using millions of new textbooks apparently of the same series as those used in North Vietnam. Old newspapers were replaced by *Saigon Giai Phong* (Saigon Liberation), complemented by a national *Giai Phong* beginning July 23.

Youths of both sexes wearing red armbands patrolled the Tu Do former bar strip on the watch for signs of decadence, and the remaining prostitutes also were rounded up for reeducation. A communist journal claimed that "Fifty days after liberation, vice, crime and corruption had disappeared" and "the depraved and hybrid culture is being eradicated and replaced by a revolutionary national culture."¹⁸

Armed and Other Resistance

The PRG said in June that up to one-third of former enemy personnel had failed to register as instructed, but they believed most of them had simply returned home. However, it appeared that many had fled to remoter areas to avoid contact with the new government, and

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, June 12, 1975.

¹⁶ The fifth contingent of officers, numbering "several hundred," completed training and returned home in late October. *Ibid.*, Oct. 23, 1975. Thirty-three thousand former military men, police and officials were reported attending a political program at Vung Tau in July but refugees said an even bigger reeducation center was operating at Thu Duc. Vu Xuan Ban and Nhu Hien article in *South Vietnam in Struggle*, No. 308 (July 7, 1975); Fox Butterfield article in *New York Times*, Sept. 21, 1975.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Sept. 16, 1975.

¹⁸ "Pregnant Changes in South Vietnamese Towns and Cities," *South Vietnam in Struggle*, No. 306 (June 23, 1975).

Liberation Radio said in late October the government was trying to persuade thousands of them to leave their hide-out and surrender.¹⁹

Others, though, were more aggressive. During the first month, numerous incidents of looting and lawlessness were reported involving particularly unemployed ex-soldiers in Saigon and surrounding areas.²⁰ The government organized citizens' groups to ferret out these elements and also held "people's trials" with huge crowds to mete out imprisonment or death by public execution to dramatize its sternness toward crime and armed resistance.

Reports of resistance by holdout militia and other units of usually under 50 men continued through the first months, along with the alleged hiding of weapons, spreading of rumors and "setting up phony revolutionary committees."²¹ There also were claims that some dissident bands had been wiped out by the Army and/or citizen self-defense groups.

The heaviest armed resistance seemed to be centered in Soc Trang Province in Hoa Hao territory and Hoa Hao faction leader Luong Trong Tuong was said to be leading a "National Resistance Movement."²² An official broadcast in October said one delta band had comprised about 500 soldiers and "many officers."²³ And a clandestine radio was broadcasting appeals to join the resistance in the "mountains and jungles in the West."²⁴

The Buddhist An Quang Pagoda originally mounted a huge demonstration to welcome the communists, but in July the Venerable Tri Quang was reported to have publicly criticized the regime for its public executions. Similarly, the Catholic community was called on by Archbishop Nguyen Van Binh to cooperate with the government, but there were vague reports of some Catholic opposition to the regime.²⁵

Political Organization

Lt. Gen. Tran Van Tra, former head of the PLAF military delegation to the Saigon military talks with the GVN, headed a Saigon Military Management Committee of 11 members responsible for governing the city until elections could be held, after which the PRG, no longer "Provisional," would rule.²⁶ On June 6, however, the PRG formally

¹⁹ *New York Times*, Oct. 26, 1975.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, May 21, 1975.

²¹ *Ibid.*, May 13, 1975.

²² *Ibid.*, Oct. 19, 1975; correspondence with Prof. Nguyen Van Canh.

²³ *New York Times*, Oct. 19, 1975.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, Sept. 21, 1975.

²⁵ Correspondence with Prof. Nguyen Van Canh; *New York Times*, May 13, 1975.

²⁶ Earlier Tra, a southerner who went North in 1954, served as Deputy Chief of the North Vietnamese Army, reportedly returned South in about 1959 and held very high rank in the southern wing of the party and the military, possibly as head of the party's Military Committee. There long was uncertainty as to whether he and Tran Nam Trung were the same person, but the June 6, 1975 cabinet included both names.

took office after appointment of a 17-member cabinet including Tra. Actually, the Military Management Committee continued to govern Saigon, and PRG President Huynh Tan Phat and NLF Chairman Nguyen Huu Tho, although visible enough, still were not in charge. In late July, a 59-member advisory board for the still non-existent Saigon People's Revolutionary Committee was formed, led by Nguyen Van Hieu and including other PRG leaders plus a number of non-PRG former Thieu oppositionists.

The real political power appeared to reside in Pham Hung, southern born, fourth-ranking member of the DRV Politburo (North Vietnam), who had led the southern communist People's Revolutionary Party (PRP) and directed military operations in the South since 1967.²⁷ He remained behind the scenes, but he headed the South Vietnam delegation attending the 30th independence day celebrations in Hanoi in September. Le Duan, Lao Dong Party First Secretary, shuttled between Hanoi and Saigon during the first weeks by Ilyushin jet. Furthermore, other ranking members of the PRP with extensive experience in the DRV appeared to occupy authoritative positions in the dominant Military Management Committee.²⁸

A sizeable number of old regime officials who sought to remain at their posts were allowed to do so at least temporarily in view of the communists' vastly expanding administrative tasks.

At the grass roots, networks of groups comprising about a dozen families and combinations of these were organized early to serve as basic local government entities. They were directed by people's revolutionary committees at the village, town and province levels and these in turn operated under provisional military management committees at province and city levels.²⁹

Indirect elections for the first ward elections in Saigon in early July set a pattern to be used at all levels of government in the future. Here, government officials selected 152 representatives from among the 10,000 ward residents and they elected seven persons from an approved list of nine candidates to form a new committee replacing the people's revolutionary committee for that ward.³⁰

²⁷ Pham Hung reportedly was secretary of the People's Revolutionary Party (PRP), the southern wing of the Lao Dong Party. In Hanoi he had served, *inter alia*, as First Deputy Premier, beginning in 1960. After he returned to the South, it is believed that Gen. Tra was his military deputy. *New York Times*, May 20, 1975.

²⁸ There were muted indications of tensions between the PRG/NLF and the North Vietnamese. One Vietnamese intellectual who chose to remain in Vietnam wrote the present writer (in a letter mailed by a refugee) that some of his friends who also were staying wanted to help PRG leaders such as Tho, Phat and Hieu, the "intellectual socialist romantics," against what he described as the violent, "extremist and backward" group which included Pham Hung and Nguyen Thi Dinh.

²⁹ *New York Times*, Sept. 16, 21, 1975. There also were special organizations such as an Intellectual Action Committee which was said to direct secretly associations of university professors, writers, artists, doctors and pharmacists, for example. *Ibid.*, June 4, 1975.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, July 8, 1975.

Economic Reconstruction

PRG President Huynh Tan Phat claimed that unemployment affected 3.5 million people—1.5 million former servicemen, 1.5 million unemployed from the previous regime and a half million "social cases" including beggars, prostitutes and others.³¹ The new government at first moved slowly in setting up controls, and shops, foreign restaurants, hotels and even the black market continued to operate. Prices remained stable and food supplies were adequate, though the closing of the banks caused business disruptions and consumer hardship. A vast reconstruction program to be sponsored by North Vietnam was announced in early May and the people were scheduled to work longer hours for the same pay (the Saigon populace was to give up its two-hour mid-day siesta).³²

Many factories returned to production in a short time; in cases where the owners had fled, workers' committees were formed to run them and where the owners stayed on, workers were given new authority in the management. Assurances were given of a decent minimum wage, a measure appearing to benefit women workers in particular.³³ "Liberation" trade unions were set up on a wide scale and played an important role in this reorganization and in the general political and economic mobilization of workers.

The government also announced that "national bourgeoisie, businessmen and plantation owners" would retain their right to private ownership and that foreign firms were welcome to exploit Vietnam's offshore oil if they respected its sovereignty.³⁴ Gradually, more official controls were imposed, as on sales of medicine and gasoline, and on September 22 the old currency was replaced. The old piastre (*dong*) had fallen from 700 to 3,000 to the dollar in the last days of the Thieu regime and had then stabilized; now it was exchanged at the rate of 500 for each new piastre having the same value as that of North Vietnam.³⁵ The government announced consumer price rises but shortly afterward again demonstrated its moderation by rescinding the rise as liable to cause unwarranted hardship.³⁶ However, a national campaign was launched against compradores and those suspected of hoarding and speculation, crimes punishable by imprisonment and confiscation of property.

Large-scale construction projects helped to dent the unemployment totals, including road, rail and bridge rebuilding and rehabilitation of rubber plantations,³⁷ but the major policy to lessen unemployment was

³¹ *Ibid.*, Sept. 21, 1975.

³² *Ibid.*, May 5, 1975.

³³ *Ibid.*, June 1, 1975; broadcast interview of the Rev. Richard Fernandez, Committee of Concerned Clergy and Laity, who recently had visited South and North Vietnam, Station WUHY, Philadelphia, October 8, 1975.

³⁴ *South Vietnam in Struggle*, No. 313 (August 11, 1975).

³⁵ *New York Times*, Sept. 24 and Oct. 7, 1975.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, Oct. 8, 1975.

³⁷ *South Vietnam in Struggle* carried a number of articles on this in various issues from May through August, e.g., No's. 306 and 308 (June 23 and July 7, 1975).

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directed at putting the surplus urban population back on the farms which so many had left. The government relied on persuasion to do this, plus guarantees of funds, food, and housing materials. It also abolished the former government's "land to the tiller" program and began its own redistribution of land to thousands of farmers who had owned little or no land previously. By late September the authorities claimed 239,758 persons had returned to the farms, and in October plans were announced to encourage 1.5 million of the 4 million Saigon population to resettle during the next 15 months in "new economic zones" little cultivated because of the war.³⁸

Moves toward Reunification

The new government handled this issue very tentatively for some months, originally indicating that the differences were so great between the two zones' social systems and popular attitudes that unification was at least five years away; and during the summer both zones applied for separate UN membership. However, an inclination to accelerate the process became evident after the DR National Assembly called on June 8 for reunification and the naming of Hanoi as the capital.

In numerous practical ways, the barriers between the two regions already had been lowered: thousands from both sides were reported to be visiting relatives across the line, South Vietnam was now operating in Hanoi standard time, and repairs on the thousand-mile rail line from Saigon to Vinh were being completed rapidly.³⁹ Finally, on November 21, plans were announced for joint elections in the first half of 1976 to elect a joint National Assembly which then would write a new constitution. A week-long parley in Saigon had arrived at this decision and the final communique was signed by Truong Chinh and Pham Hung, representing the North and South.⁴⁰

Conclusions

Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap's oft-quoted prediction that the struggle in the highlands would have a crucial bearing on the outcome of the war was borne out here as in the earlier Indochina war, but the central issue was the great dependence of the GVN on its American patron and the psychological and morale problems ultimately stemming from this. By contrast, the communists stressed "self-reliance," and though this did not preclude their receiving large-scale aid from their allies, the aid did not become the crutch there that it did in the South.

The extent to which the GVN was a client state with a crippling

³⁸ *New York Times*, Oct. 19, 1975.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, Nov. 9, 1975.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, Nov. 21, 1975.

psychological dependence on massive foreign assistance was illustrated in the depression of civilian and military morale after the signing of the 1973 Paris Agreements and the American troop withdrawals. One aspect of this was the reportedly serious spread of heroin usage among Vietnamese Army and Air Force personnel in the highlands due not only to the isolation and boredom of that assignment, but also to the broader anxiety and despair that had afflicted many South Vietnamese since January 1973.⁴¹

The U.S. alone probably spent over \$112 billion there since 1950 on all forms of assistance, including the aid given originally to the French and, later, to the American military campaigns, far more than the DRV received from its allies. But a crucial factor was the feeling of many South Vietnamese officials and military men that they were being abandoned by the U.S., which was curtailing its aid at a time when the communists were growing stronger through an increasing inflow of aid, now equalling or surpassing their own. This situation struck them as particularly dangerous in view of the fact that most GVN operations and programs had come to be predicated on the availability of generous funds and materiel during the tutelage of their American advisors.

The reduction in aid obviously contributed to the flagging of South Vietnamese morale. So did Washington's ignoring of Nixon's secret pledge of crisis intervention, though the unlikelihood of intervention had become increasingly evident since August 1973 with the Congressional ban on U.S. military operations there.⁴²

Ultimately, though, it was not a lack of military materiel that brought the GVN's collapse so much as the artificiality of the political system that had been shaped to respond primarily to the American

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, Feb. 24, 1975.

⁴² In January 1975, some Vietnamese officials interviewed by the writer showed deep anxiety over the prospect that the U.S. would not again intervene militarily if the communist drive continued. The Ford administration tried vainly in the spring to get a \$300 million supplementary aid bill through Congress (an amount which had been approved in the original military aid bill for fiscal 1975 but not allocated, as was \$700 million), for by this time a substantial segment of the U.S. political leadership and public opposed it. A procession of politicians ranging from Senators Mansfield and Jackson to Governor George Wallace condemned it on grounds that after all the aid that already had been given, another \$300 million could not deliver South Vietnam from its predicament—and, as some of them acknowledged, it would at most prolong the war. This aid project died in a House-Senate conference committee and the only aid bill the Administration did get passed was one on May 2 appropriating \$405 million for Indochina refugee programs.

On the Administration's claims that the South Vietnamese were in danger of running out of fuel and ammunition for lack of aid while aid to the DRV was increasing, see, e.g., the Leslie H. Gelb article in the *New York Times*, March 20, 1975, reporting Administration claims that economic and military aid to the DRV, mainly from China and the Soviet Union, had come to \$1.7 billion in 1974 as compared to \$1.2 billion in U.S. aid to South Vietnam. Other reports came out of Washington in this period, though, indicating that sizeable aid funds were still in the procurement pipeline and that substantial funds had not yet even been committed, as, e.g., *ibid.*, March 28 and 29, 1975.

interest in continuing the war and the use of a compliant but corrupt and ineffective military leadership for this purpose. Thus, it was critically unresponsive to indigenous political interests and realities, including a vigorous native communist movement oriented toward revolutionary change and capable of exploiting the corruption and incompetence in mobilizing its own mass support.

The GVN was incapable of developing strong loyalties to or within its leadership. Top leaders repeatedly were kept in place by American backing rather than real leadership ability; and subordinate leaders down through the echelons tended to be selected primarily on the basis of narrow, personal fealty shaped by careerist self-interest, all too often of a venal kind. For many in the leadership, these relationships and their financial rewards came to overshadow the "national cause." This is not to deny the impressive leadership and honesty of leaders such as Lt. Gen. Ngo Quang Truong, Commander of the First Military Region, but this system simply was incapable of producing and properly utilizing enough persons of that caliber. Therefore, when Thieu and his high command demonstrated such shocking incompetence during a truly serious crisis, the discipline of the officer corps and then the rank and file quickly unraveled in a desperate *sauve-qui-peut*.

The communists have followed much more moderate policies since the takeover than many anticipated, for reasons which appear fairly obvious. As Gen. Tran Van Tra remarked at the outset, such a large city as Saigon had never been liberated so quickly before and the end came so fast that the communists evidently were not prepared to deal immediately with the complex political, administrative and economic problems involved there and across the whole of southern Vietnam generally. They therefore were obliged to go slowly and attempt to avoid antagonizing their new constituents as they recruited and trained more cadres to flesh out their new administration. It also is conceivable that the swiftness of the GVN's fall and the lack of resistance in Saigon and elsewhere in the South tended to increase the communists' magnanimity in this regard.

Some observers have read considerable political significance into the contrast between the amounts of power evidently held by the northern-trained communist leadership group headed by Pham Hung and by the PRG/NLF leaders such as Huynh Tan Phat and Nguyen Huu Tho. Too much probably should not be made of this "North versus South" proposition, however, for men like Hung and Tra are southerners despite their years in high office in the North. They were "regroupees" who went North after Geneva 1954 and the number of southerners in this category who returned South as prestigious cadres is significant. Their roles illustrate the national character of the Vietnamese communist movement as much or more than they do the "northernness" of the dominant leaders in the South today. It is nevertheless true, of

course, that the 1975 military campaigns were pressed by the North Vietnamese Army with the southern PLAF making a comparatively small contribution.

The sudden acceleration of the reunification schedule is not easy to interpret, particularly since it would seem to impose an additional economic burden on the DRV. It appears that complex security considerations figured in this but the picture is not clear.

NORTH VIETNAM IN 1975: NATIONAL LIBERATION, REUNIFICATION AND SOCIALIST CONSTRUCTION

Carlyle A. Thayer

No matter what difficulties and hardships lie ahead, our people are sure of total victory. The U. S. imperialists will certainly have to quit. Our Fatherland will certainly be reunified. Our fellow-countrymen in the South and in the North will certainly be reunited under the same roof.

President Ho Chi Minh's Testament
(May 10, 1969)

THE YEAR 1975 began with the same basic problems confronting the leaders of the Vietnam Workers' Party (VWP) as in previous years: how to carry out the two strategic tasks drawn up by the Party at its Third National Congress in September 1960—socialist construction in the North and a national democratic revolution in the South. As a result of a policy review made 18 months after the signing of the 1973 Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam, the VWP leadership decided to initiate an upsurge in "revolutionary violence" with the aim of pressuring the Thieu regime to implement certain of the political provisions of the 1973 Agreement. What resulted was totally unplanned and unexpected: in the short space of 55 days, the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) and its armed forces, completely demoralized and disorganized, surrendered unconditionally to the Communists. In short, the era of national liberation was at an end. Throughout the remainder of the year the Party set about reuniting the two parts of Vietnam. According to the official VWP newspaper, *Nhan Dan* (September 5, 1975), there remains but one strategic task, socialist construction:

With the complete, comprehensive and thorough victory of the anti-U.S. national salvation resistance, the Vietnamese revolution has entered a new stage. This change consists mainly of our country's shift from war