# THE LAST 55 DAYS

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**The Paris Peace Accords and the"Cease-Fire War"**

The Paris Peace Accords were signed on January 27, 1973, by the United States, the Republic of Vietnam, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, and the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam. Under the provisions of the agreement, a cease-fire was initiated and the United States agreed to a total withdrawal of all troops, military advisers, and other military personnel from South Vietnam within sixty days. Unfortunately, the Accords did not address the estimated 150,000 North Vietnamese (NVA, as they were known by most Americans, but more correctly, PAVN -- People's Army of Vietnam) troops that remained in South Vietnam.[1]

For the United States, the war was over. For the South Vietnamese, the cease-fire was but a momentary lull that preceded a move into the next phase of the war against the Communists -- one in which they would have to stand alone without any assistance from the United States.

When the cease-fire went into effect, the South Vietnamese controlled most of the populated parts of South Vietnam, but the PAVN occupied the extreme north and northwestern part of Military Region I south of the DMZ, northwestern Kontum Province in the Central Highlands, and parts of Phuoc Long Province and northern Binh Long Province in Military Region III along the Cambodian border.

After a brief period of calm following the cease-fire, intense fighting broke out all over South Vietnam as both sides vied for control of contested territory. U.S. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker later wrote, quoting a U.S. pacification official in Lam Dong Province, that the "cease-fire appeared to have initiated a new war, more intense and more brutal than the last."[2] In the first three weeks after the official cessation of hostilities, there were over three thousand violations of the cease-fire.

The North Vietnamese forces attempted to secure strategically advantageous positions that could eventually be used as points of entry for war supplies and to screen infiltration down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Between the end of January and July, there were significant battles in Quang Ngai, Kien Phong, Kontum, and Pleiku provinces, which resulted in heavy casualties on both sides.

Alarmed at these battles and intelligence reports of the North Vietnamese build-up, South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu went to the United States to confer with President Nixon in early April 1973. He complained about the PAVN violations and told Nixon that there were reliable reports that the Communists were preparing for a general offensive. Thieu found the American president "preoccupied and absent minded" during the meeting, but Nixon reiterated previous promises to support Saigon and spoke of renewed military aid at the "one billion dollar level."[3] Nixon, however, had other more pressing problems. The Watergate scandal was picking up momentum and the president was distracted by the mounting controversy. Kissinger wrote later that "Nixon clearly did not want to add turmoil over Indochina to his mounting domestic perplexities."[4]

Thieu, still worried about the veracity of Nixon's promises and wanting to gain as much

territorial advantage over the PAVN as possible, returned to Saigon and ordered his forces on the offense. Accordingly, the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) conducted attacks in the coastal lowlands, the Mekong Delta region, the western mountainous area close to the Cambodian and Laotian borders, and in several provinces surrounding Saigon. In October, the North Vietnamese responded with their own offensive designed to secure additional territory and keep open their supply lines. In these actions, the South Vietnamese held their own against the PAVN, but the "cease-fire war" claimed 26,500 ARVN dead in 1973 and would result in almost 30,000 the following year.

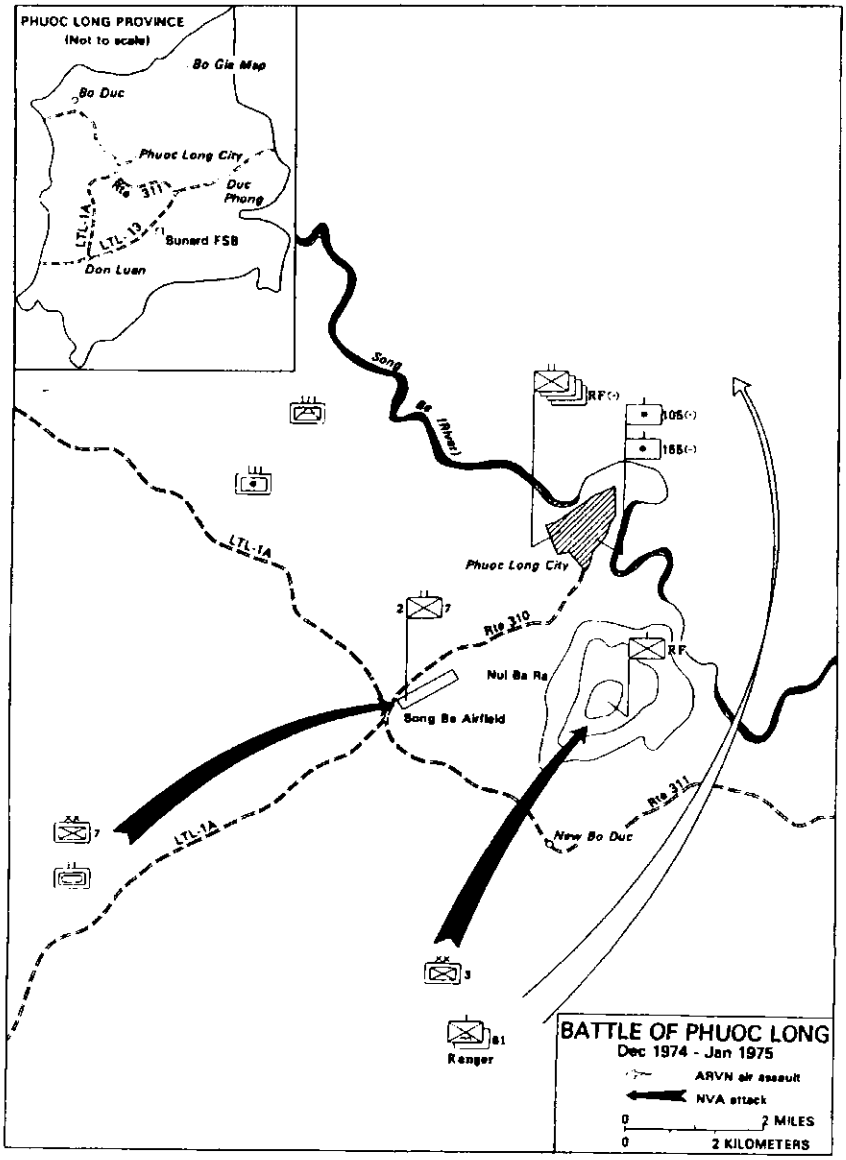
As the fighting continued into 1974, the South Vietnamese began to experience severe shortages in ammunition, fuel, spare parts, and other war material. As war stocks dwindled and were not replaced, Thieu was relegated to fighting a "poor man's war." On 9 August 1974, the South Vietnamese, in the midst of combatting the largest Communist offensive since the cease-fire, were dealt a devastating blow by the resignation of President Nixon. His successor, Gerald Ford, sent assurances that Nixon's promises of support would be honored, but the new president was not in a position to make these promises fact. This became apparent in October when Congress appropriated only $700 million in military and economic aid for the year ending 30 June 1975, a significant reduction from the $1 billion originally requested.[5] The one-two punch of Nixon's resignation and the subsequent reduction in military aid had a devastating impact on South Vietnamese morale.

**PAVN Attack on Phuoc Long**

The Politburo in Hanoi, emboldened by Nixon's demise and the reduction in U.S. military aid to Saigon, decided to launch an attack as a test case to see what the United States would do if the South Vietnamese got into serious trouble on the battlefield. The site of this attack would be Phuoc Long Province, a relatively isolated area only lightly defended by four Regional Force (local militia) battalions and a number of Popular Force (home guard) platoons. The PAVN 301st Corps, consisting of the newly formed 3rd Division, the veteran 7th Division, a tank battalion, an artillery regiment, and local sapper and infantry units, launched the attack on 13 December 1974, rapidly defeated South Vietnamese outposts and focused their main attack on the Song Be airfield (See Map 1). Saigon rushed reinforcements to the area, but the North Vietnamese overwhelmed the ARVN forces and the battle was over by the first week in January. The North Vietnamese had taken the entire province in just a matter of days. South Vietnamese losses were staggering -- of 5,400 ARVN and regional defense forces (RF/PF) committed to the battle, only 850 survived.

The loss of Phuoc Long Province had a crushing effect on both the South Vietnamese population and the armed forces. Making matters much worse in Saigon was the lack of any meaningful response from the United States. In his first State of the Union address on 15 January 1975, President Ford did not even mention South Vietnam. A few days later at a press conference,

## MAP 1 — THE BATTLE OF PHUOC LONG PROVINCE




Source: William E. LeGro, *Vietnam from Cease-Fire to Capitulation* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1985), p. 134.

Ford said that he could foresee no circumstances in which the United States would become actively involved in the Vietnam War again.[6] The South Vietnamese were stunned. Not only had the United States cut them off materially, now it had publicly disowned them. General Cao Van Vien, former Chairman of Joint General Staff, wrote after the war that Ford's statement shook the South Vietnamese as nothing had since the Tet Offensive in 1968: "The apparent total indifference with which the United States and other non-Communist countries regarded this tragic loss reinforced the

doubt the Vietnamese people held concerning the viability of the Paris Agreement. Almost gone was the hope that the United States would forcibly punish the North Vietnamese for their brazen violations of the cease-fire agreement. The people's belief in the power of the armed forces and the govemment was also deeply shaken."[7] The fall of Phuoc Long Province marked a major turning point in the Vietnam War. It demonstrated the impotence of both South Vietnam and the United States and signaled the beginning of a series of events that would ultimately result in the fall of South Vietnam.

## New PAVN Plans

Word of the ARVN defeat at Phuoc Long reached the members of the 23rd Plenum of the Lao Dong Party while it was still in session in Hanoi. The North Vietnamese leaders were jubilant. For the first time since 1972, the PAVN had "liberated" an entire province and rocked the already shaky confidence of the South Vietnamese. The inability of the ARVN to stop the PAVN assault and Ford's inaction and public declaration convinced the North Vietnamese leadership that the time had come to commence the final offensive. Saying, "Never have we had military and political conditions so perfect or a strategic advantage so great as we have now," First Secretary Le Duan directed the military leadership to develop plans to take advantage of the situation.[8] The result was an ambitious two-year strategy calling for widespread major attacks in the South in 1975 to create the conditions for a general offensive and uprising in 1976.

On 9 January, the day after the 23rd Plenum adjourned, the Central Military Committee and General Staff met to develop detailed plans for the opening phase of the new offensive. The decision was made to focus the initial effort on Ban Me Thuot in the Central Highlands (MR II), where a successful attack would give the North Vietnamese another province and provide staging areas and avenues of approach for a future follow-on attack to seize Pleiku, the most important city in the region. The Politburo approved the plan and ordered General Van Tien Dung to go south to take command of "Campaign 275," as the new offensive was to be called.

## Thieu's Response

Even though the South Vietnamese military leaders in Saigon were not privy to what the North Vietnamese planned in the Highlands, they knew that the PAVN would try to take advantage of its victory in Phuoc Long. They looked to President Thieu for guidance, but none was forthcoming, for Thieu was apparently still in a state of shock over the loss of an entire province. His indecision during the battle for Phuoc Long had resulted in the loss of a large number of soldiers and equipment that could not easily be replaced. Thieu's inability to deal with the mounting crisis would have disastrous results when the North Vietnamese continued their offensive.

The Joint General Staff recommended to Thieu that he consider a different plan of defense

that took into consideration the new situation on the battlefield. They advocated "truncation" or a shortening of the South Vietnamese lines to more defensible positions. Thieu refused to even consider the JGS recommendations and demanded that no territory be given up to the North Vietnamese without a fight. Former Ambassador to the United States Bui Diem maintains that one reason for Thieu's refusal to discuss the new strategy was that even after having lost Phuoc Long province, Thieu continued to hold "the belief that the Americans would never tolerate a takeover of South Vietnam by the Communist."[9]

Such was not to be the case. Ford realized that Congress and the American people would never agree to a new direct involvement in South Vietnam, but he sought to get additional funds for military aid to Saigon in order to honor the promises that he and his predecessor had made to Thieu. However, his administration was already being blamed for rising unemployment, ballooning national debt, and the continuing energy crisis that had followed the 1973 Arab oil embargo and in his attempt to aid the South Vietnamese, Ford was blocked at every juncture by a hostile Congress. Nevertheless, his administration lobbied hard for a supplemental military aid request, trying to convince Congress that a reduction in aid would "seriously weaken South Vietnamese forces during a critical period when Communist forces in South Vietnam were getting stronger and more aggressive" and that it was imperative to "show the world that the U.S. is standing firmly by its commitments and continues to be a reliable and steadfast ally."[10] Despite the administration's efforts, the new request for aid met stiff opposition in Congress. Eighty-two members of the bipartisan Members of Congress for Peace Through Law sent a letter to the president saying that they saw "no humanitarian or national interest" to justify aid to Southeast Asia.[11]

In February 1975, in an attempt to garner support for his military aid request, Ford sent a bipartisan Congressional delegation to South Vietnam to assess the military, political, and economic situation. He hoped that this trip would convince the members of the delegation that South Vietnam would fall without additional U.S. aid.

The delegation arrived in Saigon on 26 February and met with Ambassador Graham Martin and his staff. According to Saigon-based CIA analyst Frank Snepp, the delegation immediately assumed an adversarial relationship and was "suspicious" of Martin, "hostile" to his staff, and "determined to rely as little as possible" on embassy personnel for briefings, input, or advice.[12] During a frantic round of meetings, discussions, and trips to the field, the delegation members quickly formed a negative opinion of Thieu, his administration, and the entire situation in South Vietnam. When they met with President Thieu, he confronted them directly, noting the promises of five U.S. presidents and saying: "The issue now boils down to one simple question: is the commitment made by the U.S. to be of any value? Is the word of the U.S. to be trusted?"[13] The members of the delegation vigorously assailed Thieu with concerns and issues to the point that Ambassador Martin later apologized for their "rude and contemptuous" behavior.[14] The trip that

President Ford had hoped would convince the legislators to approve the additional aid for Saigon had exactly the opposite effect.

Upon returning to Washington, Representative Paul McCloskey (Republilcan, California) published a report that concluded that the North Vietnamese "will overcome the South within three years" regardless of what the United States did with regard to additional military aid.[15] A week after the return of the congressional delegation, the Democratic caucus in both the House and Senate voted to oppose any further aid to South Vietnam and Cambodia.

When the congressional delegation departed Saigon, they had been given copies of the latest DAO intelligence report, which clearly showed that the North Vietnamese were in a position to launch a major offensive. The report said that the North Vietnamese had increased its strategic reserve from two divisions to seven, thereby making more than 70,000 additional soldiers available for commitment in the south to augment the 200,000 combat soldiers and 100,000 support troops that were already there. The report further stated that these forces could be moved to positions in the Central Highlands in less than fifteen days. Predicting that there would soon be a major offensive in the northern half of South Vietnam, the report concluded that "the campaign is expected to assume country-wide proportions and a number of indicators point to the introduction of strategic reserve divisions from NVN."[16]

## Campaign 275

The DAO intelligence estimate was surprisingly accurate. While budget deliberations continued in the United States, the North Vietnamese made preparations for the commencement of Campaign 275. In late January, the PAVN began moving additional forces into Darlac Province. Five main force infantry divisions, fifteen regiments of tanks, artillery, antiaircraft, and engineers, a total of 75,000-80,000 North Vietnamese troops, began to close on the Ban Me Thuot. When the battle began, the ARVN defenders would include one regiment from the 23rd ARVN Division, a Ranger group, and various regional force units.

General Dung's plan was relatively simple, employing a tactic that he had developed and first used against the French in 1952 called "the blossoming lotus" -- a plan of operation in which the attack would avoid outlying strong points and began at the center of the enemy positions, then spread outwards "like a flower bud slowly opening its petals."[17] He intended to begin the attack by striking elsewhere in the Central Highlands so as to misdirect South Vietnamese attention from his main attack; then he would sever all access routes from the highland provinces to the II Corps lowlands (Pleiku and Nha Trang), thus precluding ARVN reinforcement of the Ban Me Thuot area. Once this was achieved, the main attack would be made on the city itself.

Although ARVN intelligence correctly predicted that the NVA were making preparations to take Ban Me Thuot, Lieutenant General Pham Van Phu, II Corps commander, disagreed with this

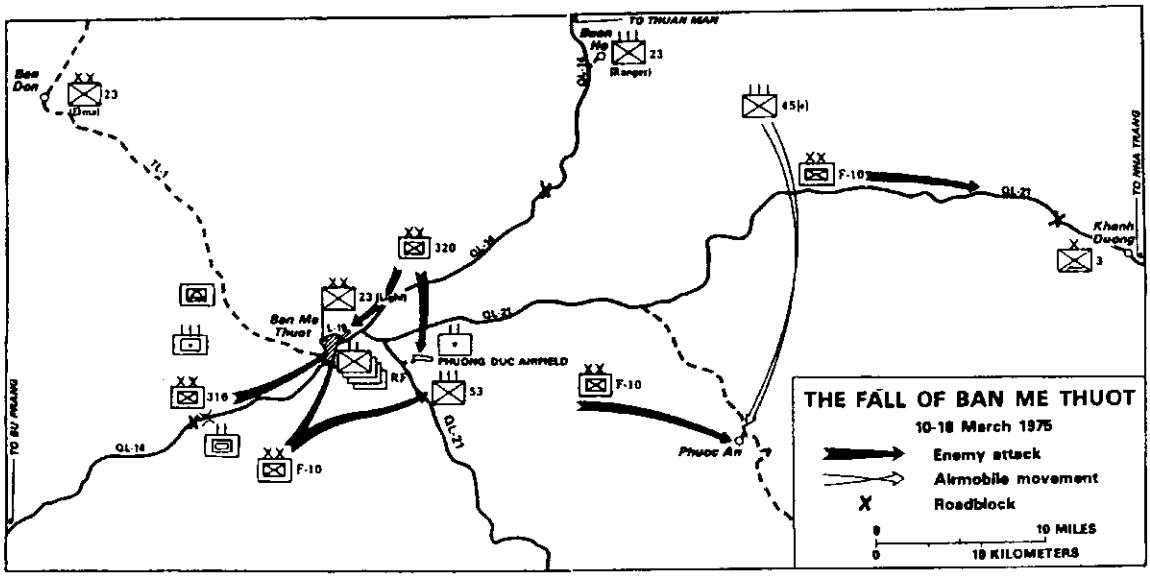
assessment, believing that the enemy's moves toward Ban Me Thout were secondary in nature and that the main objective would be Pleiku or Kontum. This perception was reinforced by Dung's diversionary attacks conducted by the 968th NVA Division on numerous outposts and firebases north and west of Kontum and Pleiku. Fooled by these opening attacks, Phu kept the 23rd ARVN Division in place at Pleiku and even when confirmation was received that the 320th Division was moving on Ban Me Thuot, he sent only one regiment, the 53rd from the 23rd ARVN Division, to the city.

On 4 March, PAVN troops cut Route 19 in two places between Qui Nhon and Pleiku. On 5 March, additional North Vietnamese forces blocked Route 21 in three places between Ban Me Thuot and the coast. Three days later, the 9th Regiment of the 320th NVA Division cut Route 14 north of Buon Blech, thus completing the isolation of Ban Me Thuot. By midday on 9 March, it became apparent to even General Phu that the PAVN were focusing their efforts on Ban Me Thuot. He rushed the 21st Ranger Group to Buon Ho, twenty miles north of the city and called the JGS for reinforcements, who promptly told him that none were available.

The battle for Ban Me Thuot itself began at 0200 hours on 10 March when the North Vietnamese launched a two-pronged, three-division tank and infantry attack (See Map 2). The honor of making the initial attack went to the 320th NVA Division, the unit that Dung had commanded early in his career, which attacked from the north to take the ammunition depot and a small airstrip for light aircraft. This attack was successful and the depot and airstrip were captured by mid-afternoon. A second part of the 320th attack was directed at Phuong Duc airfield, east of the city, where the 53rd ARVN Regiment put up a stiff fight, stalling the NVA attack.

While the 320th attacked in the north, the F-10 NVA Division and elements of the 316th NVA Division attacked from the south. This attack was aimed at the sector headquarters and it quickly became a pitched battle in which the ARVN defenders fought well, inflicting heavy losses on the NVA attackers. However, the tide of the battle turned when the ARVN, demonstrating a long-standing inability to coordinate fire support, dropped an artillery round intended for the attacking NVA tanks on the sector command post, knocking out communications and killing and wounding many key personnel.[18] At that point, the ARVN defense virtually fell apart and the sheer force of numbers overwhelmed the South Vietnamese. By nightfall, the North Vietnamese controlled most of the center of the city while the South Vietnamese retained isolated positions on the airfield and along the perimeter in the east, west, and south. The battle continued into the night with the PAVN using flame throwers to rout out the ARVN defenders. The next day, 11 March, the Communist forces increased the intensity of their attack. By noon, they had taken the 23rd ARVN Division Command Post and most of the remaining South Vietnamese positions, capturing many senior officers, including the province chief and the deputy commander of the 23rd Division.

## MAP 2 -- THE FALL OF BAN ME THUOT, 10-18 MARCH 1975



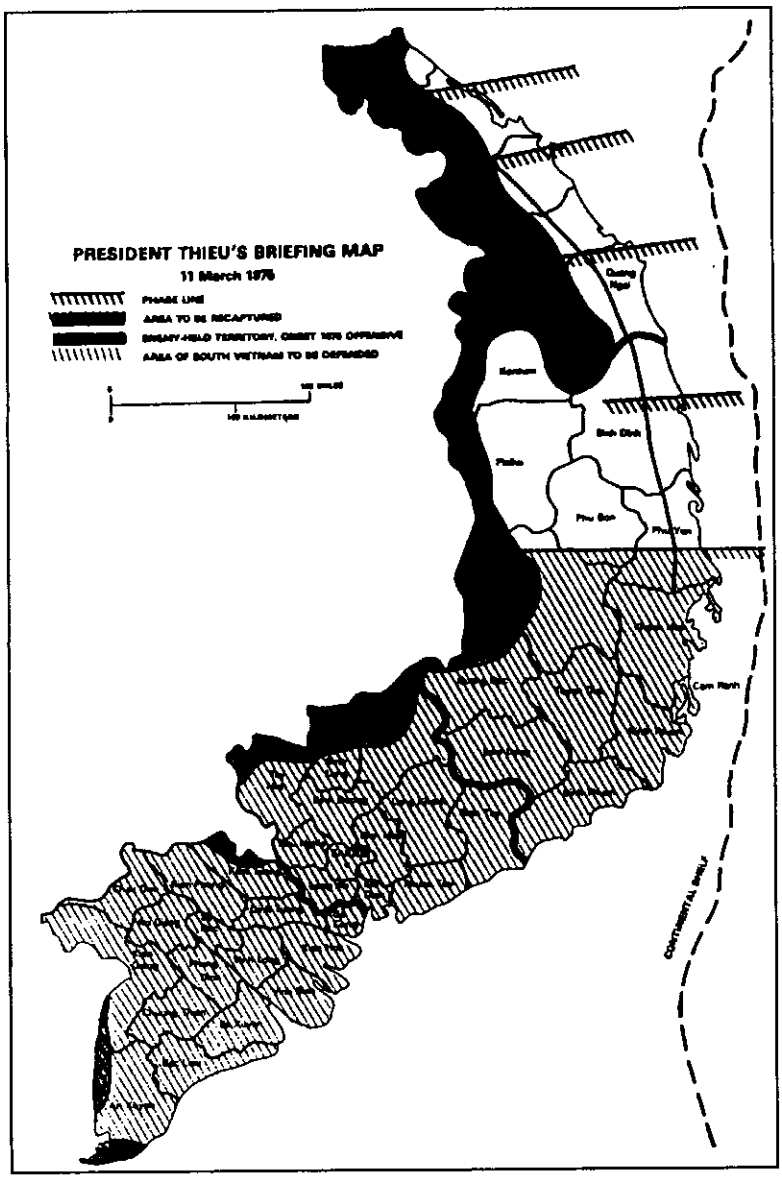

Source: General Cao Van Vien, *Indochina Monographs: The Final Collapse* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1985), pp. 70-71.

### The Fatal Decision

As the battle began in Ban Me Thuot, President Thieu made a momentous decision, one that would eventually prove the undoing of his nation. Reeling from the disastrous loss of Phuoc Long and with Darlac province under heavy attack, Thieu came to the conclusion that he had to do something drastic before all was lost. The RVNAF (Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces) were overextended and stretched dangerously thin. The preponderance of the strategic reserve was already committed. Previously, Thieu had demanded that everything be held "at all costs." However, the loss of Phuoc Long in January and the impending fall of Ban Me Thuot demonstrated to the South Vietnamese president that this strategy was no longer viable.

On 11 March 1975, as the NVA were in the process of overrunning the 23rd Division CP in Ban Me Thuot, Thieu met over breakfast with General Vien and Lieutenant General Dang Van Quang, his assistant for security affairs. Thieu said, "Given our present strength and capabilities, we certainly cannot hold and defend all the territory we want."[19] Accordingly, he had decided that RVNAF forces should focus on protecting only the populous areas deemed most essential. Looking at a small-scale map, he outlined the areas he considered most critical (See Map 3). He said that MRs III and IV were vital and had to be held at all costs. Any territory already lost in these regions had to be recaptured. This area, which contained most of South Vietnam's population and national

## MAP 3 -- PRESIDENT THIEU'S BRIEFING MAP, 11 MARCH 1975




Source: Cao Van Vien, *Indochina Monographs: The Final Collapse* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1985), p. 79.

resources, would be come the "untouchable heartland, the irreducible national stronghold." With regard to MRs I and II, Thieu, according to General Vien, appeared less sure of himself. There had been almost continuous combat in MR I since the cease-fire and the PAVN were particularly strong there. Still Hue and Da Nang were important. Therefore, in MR I, it would be a matter of "hold what you can." With regard to the Central Highlands, Ban Me Thuot had to be held because of its

economic and demographic importance and the key coastal cities also had to defended. In order to accomplish what he wanted, Thieu drew a series of phase lines on the map that indicated how the RVNAF would withdraw if unable to stand against the NVA onslaught. If the South Vietnamese were strong enough, they would hold the territory up to Hue or Da Nang. If not, they were to redeploy further south to Quang Ngai, then Qui Nhon, and ultimately a final defensive line just north of Tuy Hoa. This new strategy, later described as "light at the top, heavy on the bottom," revealed that Thieu was planning to trade space for time.[20] He was effectively "truncating" South Vietnam, just as his generals had previously recommended. General Vien later wrote that he vocally supported the president's new plan during the meeting, but privately had serious doubts because he "believed it was too late for any successful redeployment of such magnitude."[21]

Thieu's decision was not a bad one from a purely military standpoint. Seven of the ARVN's thirteen divisions were deployed in MR's I and II, defending only one-fifth of the population. Shortening his lines and withdrawing these forces to assist in the defense of MR's III and IV, where over twelve million people resided, made sense. However, withdrawal of forces under fire is one of the most difficult military maneuvers to attempt. If it is not done in an orderly and controlled fashion, it can turn quickly into a disaster. Thieu's strategy, if applied earlier, may have worked, but his decision to attempt a massive withdrawal under heavy enemy pressure at this juncture, poorly planned and even more poorly executed, resulted in the unraveling of the South Vietnamese armed forces and would have fatal ramifications for the Republic of Vietnam as a whole.

## Counterattack Fails

By the evening of 11 March, the North Vietnamese had captured most of Darlac province. However, remnants of two ARVN battalions still fought inside Ban Me Thuot and the South Vietnamese also still held Phuoc An airfield, about thirty kilometers east of the city. The ARVN attempted a counterattack by the 21st Ranger Group, which made it to the outskirts of Ban Me Thuot before foundering when Brigadier General Le Van Tuong, commander of the 23rd ARVN Division, halted the Rangers and ordered them to secure a landing zone outside of the town to protect the evacuation of his wife and children by helicopter.[22] Having lost the momentum, the Rangers tried to resume the attack, only to run into stiff resistance by NVA reinforcements who had been brought into the fight while the Rangers evacuated Tuong's family. A perfect opportunity to relieve Ban Me Thuot waslost.

President Thieu ordered General Phu to mount another counterattack. Phu ordered the 44th and 45th Regiments of the 23rd Division to be airlifted to Phuoc An from Pleiku. This attempt was doomed from the beginning because of major problems with helicopter support. Over a three-day period, the number of operational CH-47 helicopters being used for the movement to Phuoc An dwindled from twelve to one due to maintenance problems and the lack of spare parts. The result

was that by 14 March, only the 45th Regiment and one battalion from the 44th had arrived at Phuoc An. When the counterattack kicked off on 15 March, it did not get very far because by this time they were hopelessly outgunned by the PAVN, who were in blocking positions astride the road. Because of poor planning and continued helicopter availability problems, the ARVN had commenced the counterattack without artillery or tank support. The situation was made worse by the poor leadership that extended all the way to the top. On 16 March, General Tuong, 23rd ARVN Division commander who had aborted the successful Ranger attack and now in command of the counterattack, once again demonstrated his unfitness for command. He received a very slight facial wound and, rather than continue the mission, had himself evacuated by helicopter to the safety of a hospital at Nha Trang. Not surprisingly, the attack, beset by inadequate leadership and wholesale desertion, stalled. Indeed, by the next day, it turned into a retreat as the would-be attackers joined columns of refugees fleeing east. The remaining ARVN positions in Ban Me Thuot were overrun and the South Vietnamese holdouts were either killed or captured. On 18 March, the NVA overran the airfield at Phuoc An, thus eliminating the last staging area from which the ARVN could launch a counterattack. All of Darlac province had fallen to the Communist troops.

## Disaster in the Highlands

The fall of Ban Me Thuot was only a prelude to further disaster. The rapidity of the South Vietnamese collapse stunned Dung and his generals. North Vietnamese Major General Tran Con Man said after the war :

> "In the attack in Ban Me Thuot we surprised the South Vietnamese. On the other hand, the South Vietnamese troops surprised us, too, because they became so disorganized so quickly. We did not expect that to happen. We thought that after the attack on Ban Me Thuot the South Vietnamese would draw the line there and fight back. We had expected a very intense and long battle with the South around Ban Me Thuot."[23]

Just as surprising was the fact that the United States had done nothing to come to the aid of the faltering RVNAF. General Dung recovered quickly from his shock and saw the great opportunity before him. With the fall of the ARVN in Darlac Province, there were no organized South Vietnamese forces between the PAVN and the South China Sea. Dung was very close to cutting South Vietnam in two, isolating RVNAF units at Kontum, Pleiku, Binh Dinh, and farther north in MR I. Attempting to seize the advantage, Dung advised Hanoi that he planned to turn his forces north to take Pleiku and Kontum.

While Dung made preparations to continue the attack, Thieu and his generals tried to decide what to do about the situation. They met on 14 March at Cam Ranh and Thieu asked General Phu if he could retake Ban Me Thuot. Phu pleaded for reinforcements only to be told that there were none. Thieu explained his new strategy and ordered Phu "to redeploy its [II Corps] organic forces in such a

manner as to reoccupy Ban Me Thuot at all costs."[24]

Phu was stunned and at first thought the president was joking.[25] In order to have the combat power to conduct a counterattack on Ban Me Thout, he would have to pull the remainder of his forces from Kontum and Pleiku, effectively abandoning these key cities to the North Vietnamese. Once he overcame his dismay at what he had been ordered to do, Phu conferred briefly with his staff, then ordered a withdrawal from Kontum and Pleiku to the sea by way of Route 7, a little used logging road that ran 200 kilometers southeast from Pleiku to Tuy Hoa on the coast.

The withdrawal would commence two days later. On each of four days, a convoy of 250 vehicles would leave Pleiku and move down Route 7 to Tuy Hoa. The 20th Combat Engineer Group would lead the first column, repairing bridges and refurbishing the road as they went. The Ranger groups would bring up the rear in the last column. While the lead elements prepared to move out on the ground, VNAF would concentrate on evacuating aircraft, personnel, and family members.

General Phu and his staff were among the first to depart, leaving Colonel Le Khac Ly, Phu's chief of staff, to travel with the convoy. However, the actual command of the convoy was given to newly promoted Brigadier Pham Duy Tat, commander of the II Corps Rangers. Since Tat was busy preparing his six Ranger groups to move out, the planning for the withdrawal was left to Ly.[26]

Ford administration officials, already uneasy about the loss of Ban Me Thuot, were surprised by the sudden South Vietnamese withdrawal from Pleiku. Their concerns heightened when Thomas Polgar of the Central Intelligence Agency cabled Washington that "the game was over."[27] Despite such assessments, the administration continued to accentuate the positive. General Westmoreland, Army Chief of Staff, called the redeployment "prudent action."[28] This assessment was to change very rapidly and as the evacuation began to fall apart the White House and the Pentagon became increasingly alarmed.

Meanwhile, the situation on the ground in II Corps was well on the way to getting out of hand. What purportedly started out as a tactical repositioning of forces rapidly began to look like a panicked withdrawal. Word of the evacuation got out prematurely and some commanders in Kontum began their own withdrawal without waiting for orders from II Corps. When the PAVN began shelling Kontum, more soldiers and civilians fled down the road to Pleiku.

Things were no better at Pleiku. Panic broke out when Colonel Ly informed unit commanders that they had to prepare to move. While some of the more aggressive of the regular force commanders questioned the order to evacuate, the Regional and Popular Forces, perceiving rightfully that they were about to be abandoned, began to riot in the streets. Soon thereafter, as the chaos grew, the regular forces also panicked. In Colonel Ly's words, "the troops, the dependents became undisciplined. Troops were raping, burning things and committing robbery. The troops became undisciplined when they heard the order. I can't blame them. There was no plan to take care of the troops' dependents."[29] In the midst of this confusion, the NVA began shelling the

airfield. The demolition of ammunition dumps and fuel storage areas by departing ARVN soldiers only added credence to a growing perception that Pleiku was in imminent danger of being abandoned to the North Vietnamese, thus creating panic among both soldiers and civilians.

When the first convoy departed on the night of 16 March, the panic assumed a new dimension. One reporter later wrote that physicians abandoned their hospitals, policemen shed their uniforms, and arson and looting were rampant.[30] Civilians grabbed what meager belongings they could carry and rushed after the army. A Catholic nun remembered "babies and children were put into oxcarts and pulled. Everyone was in a panic. People were trying to hire vehicles at any price."[31]

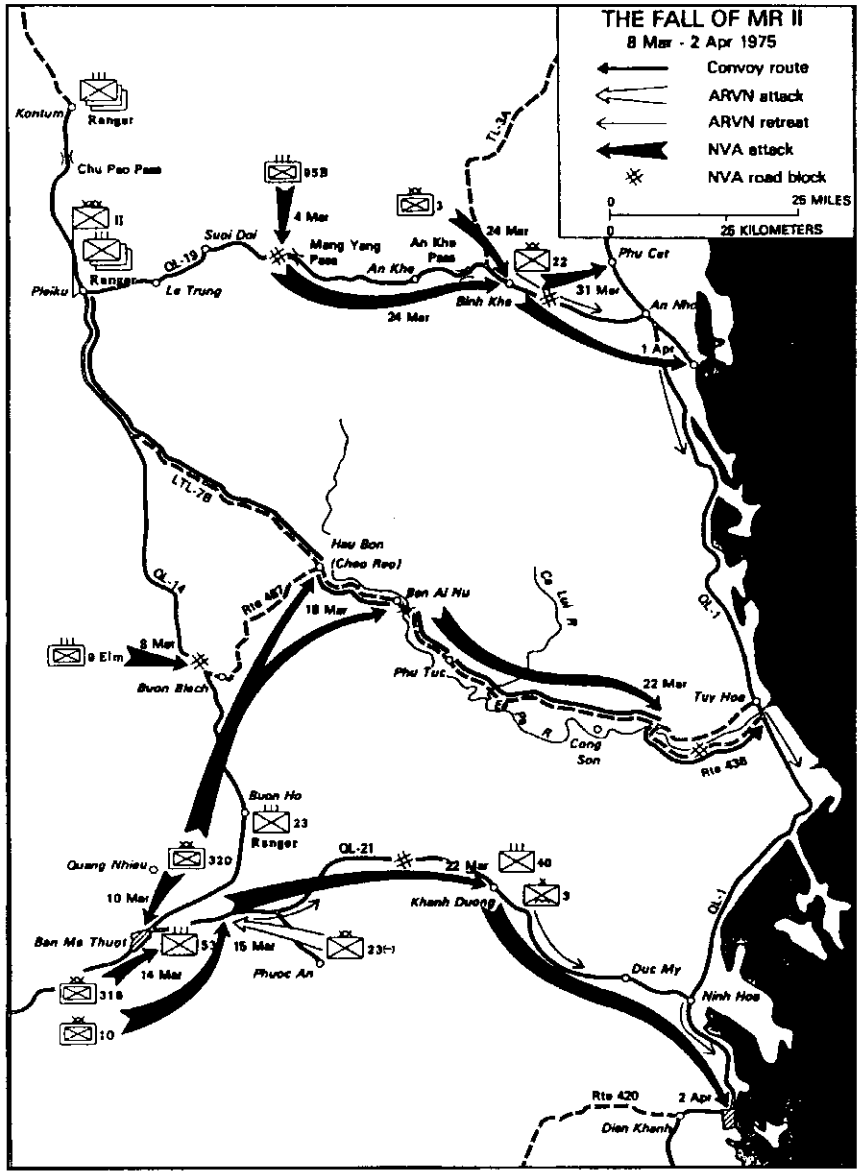
The desperation to get out of Pleiku increased when a rumor spread that Thieu had made a deal with Hanoi. Supposedly, Hanoi would guarantee the neutrality of the remainder of South Vietnam if Thieu abandoned the northern provinces. Such rumors added to the mounting panic of the civilian population. There is evidence to suggest that this and similar rumors were planted by PAVN propaganda units and Communist agents who had penetrated the military and civilian government of South Vietnam.[32] Regardless of their origin, the rumors had a devastating impact on the military, who began to question the worth of fighting against the inevitable.

The retreat from Kontum and Pleiku -- over secondary roads through rough country -- would have been difficult under the best of conditions. However, with the North Vietnamese in close pursuit and crowds of panic-stricken civilians intermingled with the military units, the retreat disintegrated into total anarchy. By 18 March, over 200,000 troops and refugees were packed tight and strung out along a short stretch of road. This became known as the "convoy of tears." Chaos reigned. Unit integrity disappeared, as did all semblance of control. Units were blocked by the hordes of civilians and could not move. The civilians, many of whom had rushed out of Pleiku with only what they could carry on their backs, had little food or water. Additionally, they were harassed by roving bands of deserters. This chaotic mass of humanity made it almost impossible for the ARVN to establish a cogent defense along the road.

When the ARVN began to evacuate Pleiku, General Dung, although once again taken by surprise, recovered quickly. Realizing that he had a chance to destroy an entire South Vietnamese corps, he ordered the 320th Division to move from its position along Route 14 to strike the escaping South Vietnamese in the flank. At the same time, he directed the 968th Division to strike the rear of the column while B-1 Front forces were told to cut Route 7B in front of the lead column. This was a traditional Viet Cong ambush technique, but never before had it been used on such a large scale.

As night fell on 18 March, the NVA opened fire on the densely packed soldiers and refugees along Route 7. Shortly thereafter, the 320th NVA Division struck near the head of the column at Cheo Reo. As the same time, other NVA units hit the rear of the main column near the town of Thanh An at the crossroads of Routes 14 and 7 (See Map 4). Throughout the night, the NVA shelled

## MAP 4 — THE FALL OF THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS




Source: William E. LeGro, *Vietnam from Cease-Fire to Capitulation* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1985), p. 148.

the column and raked it with small arms, machine gun, and antitank fires. The effect on such closely packed soldiers, vehicles, and civilians was devastating. One wounded soldier evacuated from Cheo Reo, describing the NVA attack along the road, said, "They hit us with everything....People were lying all over the road as we tried to fight our way out. Soldiers died and the people died with them."[33]

Some units fought valiantly against overwhelming odds, but eventually unit discipline disintegrated and the situation rapidly deteriorated. As at Ban Me Thuot, hundreds, if not thousands, of ARVN soldiers deserted in the face of the enemy to try to find their families and take them to safety. Others just tried to save themselves. General Thinh, the former commander of the Corps artillery, later praised those leaders who tried to keep their units together, but described how things generally came apart:

> "We must salute the battalion commanders and lower officers for having marched with their units but they were no longer able to control their finished and tired men. The soldiers kept shouting insults at Thieu for this impossible and terrible retreat. Some reached the limit of their despair and killed the officers. An artillery battalion commander who was marching in the retreating column was shot to death by some Rangers who wanted his beautiful watch. The despair was so great that at one point two or three guerrillas arriving at the scene could make prisoners of a hundred Rangers. Wives and children of retreating soldiers died of hunger and sickness on the road. It was a true hell."[34]

On 21 March, the NVA overran the rear of the main body, quickly moved down the road and took Che Reo, completely severing Route 7. During the course of the next week, the North Vietnamese soldiers wrought havoc up and down the length of the South Vietnamese column. On 27 March, the survivors at the head of the ARVN column linked up with soldiers from a Territorial Force unit that had been fighting east of Tuy Hoa, but the withdrawal had been an unmitigated disaster. Only some 20,000 of the 60,000 troops that had started out from Pleiku and Kontum finally reached Tuy Hoa, and most of these were not fit for combat; only about 700 of the original 7,000 Rangers escaped.[35] General Vien reported that in the span of just ten days "seventy-five percent of II Corps combat strength...had been tragically expended."[36] The withdrawal had also been a nightmare for the refugees. Of the estimated 400,000 civilians who had attempted to flee Kontum, Pleiku, Phu Bon, and Cheo Reo, only about 60,000-100,000 got through.[37]

The loss of materiel and equipment was also staggering. Hundreds of artillery pieces and armored vehicles had been abandoned in Pleiku or destroyed on the road. Nearly 18,000 tons of ammunition, a month's supply for the corps, was left in depots in Ban Me Thuot, Pleiku, and Kontum.[38] Scores of good aircraft were left for the enemy at Pleiku.[39]

One former South Vietnamese general later said that the retreat from Pleiku was "the greatest disaster in the history of ARVN."[40] One of his fellow generals was even more emphatic, saying that it "must rank as one of the worst planned and the worst executed withdrawal operations in the annals of military history."[41] As drastic as these assessments may seem, they are accurate. The South Vietnamese gave up Pleiku and Kontum virtually without a fight. General Phu directed an ill-timed, ill-planned, and poorly executed withdrawal that decimated almost an entire corps. Plans to retake Ban Me Thuot were now out of the question. This "self-inflicted defeat," as General

Vien later described it, "amounted to a horrible nightmare for the people and armed forces of South Vietnam. Confusion, worries, anxiety, accusations, guilt and a general feeling of distress began to weigh on everybody's mind."[42] The South Vietnamese had lost six entire provinces in a very short period of time and their confidence was fatally shaken. Arnold Isaacs, Saigon correspondent for the *Baltimore Sun,* witnessed the debacle in II Corps and wrote: "There was a feeling of a vital part come loose. After suffering so much for so long for so little reward, these [ARVN] soldiers had now experienced a betrayal that even their remarkable resilience could not bear. Deserted by their officers and left to the terrible shambles of the road from Pleiku, they had been robbed even of the chance to redeem their pride by fighting back....it was impossible to believe they would ever again be an army."[43] As bad was the defeat in the Central Highlands, an even worst calamity was unfolding two hundred miles to the north.

## Debacle in MR I

The commander of I Corps in Military Region I was Lieutenant General Ngo Quang Truong, one of Thieu's best field generals, who had established a sound defense in his area of operations. For the first two months of 1975, Truong's forces had done very well, successfully countering PAVN attacks at Quang Tri, Hue, and along Route 1. This all changed with the fall of Ban Me Thout and the disaster in II Corps. President Thieu was convinced that the target of the new North Vietnamese offensive was ultimately Saigon, and at the urging of the JGS began to pull forces from I Corps to protect the capital city. In March, he ordered Truong to release the Airborne Division for immediate redeployment to the Saigon area. Thieu then told Truong that he was to hold Da Nang at all costs, implying (to Truong at least) that he was to consider the rest of MR I expendable.

Under the assumption that he had been ordered to give up most of I Corps, keeping only Da Nang, its seaport, and the immediate surrounding area, Truong began the redeployment of his forces. As the South Vietnamese units began to move from Quang Tri, the local people, suspecting that they were to be abandoned to the North Vietnamese, became frightened and began fleeing Quang Tri for Da Nang. By 18 March, the highway was inundated with terrified refugees frantic to escape. The next day, the North Vietnamese troops reoccupied the ruins of Quang Tri without a fight (they had taken the city during the 1972 Nguyen Hue Campaign, but lost it when the South Vietnamese conducted a successful counterattack in September of that year).

That day General Truong returned to Saigon for another meeting with President Thieu to discuss the situation. Truong explained that he would try to retain both Hue and Chu Lai for as long as possible before the final defense of Da Nang, which would become a stronghold to block the NVA advance south. Thieu reluctantly agreed to Truong's plan.

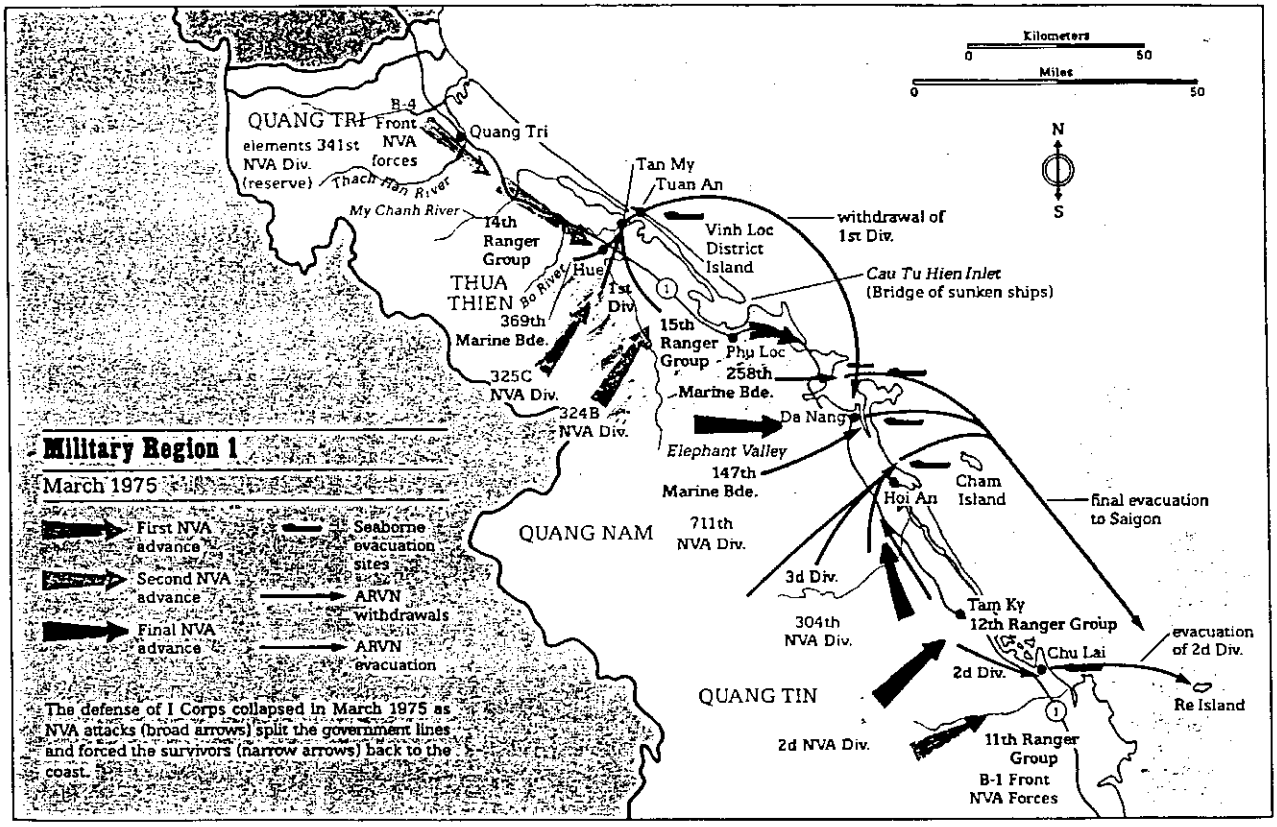
Despite Thieu's less than ringing endorsement of his plan, Truong returned to Da Nang

determined to "fight a historic battle."[44] However, in his absence, the situation had gotten much worse. The flow of refugees into Da Nang was growing daily, and long-range NVA artillery had begun shelling the I Corps forward headquarters near Hue. North Vietnamese troops had swept aside the regional forces screening the withdrawal of the South Vietnamese troops from Quang Tri and were now attacking the next ARVN defensive line along the My Chanh River, halfway to Hue. Additional NVA forces attacked the 1st ARVN Division and 15th Ranger Group in their positions strung out along Route 1 south of Hue (See Map 5). Additionally, the NVA had begun to shell the highway itself, which was jammed with motorcycles, autos, buses, trucks, and masses of people on foot.

By this time, the South Vietnamese forces in MR I were opposed by five NVA main force divisions, nine separate infantry regiments, three sapper regiments, three tank regiments, eight artillery regiments, and twelve antiaircraft regiments, the equivalent of nearly nine divisions. The NVA plan was to attack the South Vietnamese positions in I Corps simultaneously from the north, west, and south and to drive Truong's forces into Da Nang where they could be surrounded and destroyed. As the first move, General Dung ordered the B-4 Front and 2nd Army Corps to cut Route1 and isolate Hue. Indecison on the part of Thieu and conflicting orders to General Truong ultimately joined to make this task much easier for the North Vietnamese. The situation was best explained by one U.S. observer who told a *Time* magazine correspondent: "It was like a yo-yo. First, Thieu gave the order to pull back and defend Danang. Then he countermanded it and ordered that Hue be held. Then he changed his mind again and told the troops to withdraw. A reasonably orderly withdrawal turned into a rout."[45]

The orders to abandon Hue were not well received by the soldiers of the 1st ARVN Division, many of whose families lived in the area. ARVN Brigadier General Nguyen Van Diem, division commander, told his men, "We've been betrayed. We have to abandon Hue. It is now *sauve qui peu* [every man for himself]....See you in Da Nang."[46] Given this guidance, the withdrawal of the division quickly became a fiasco. The roads to the coast were already overrun with civilian refugees and as the chain of command broke down under General Diem's edict, many ARVN soldiers simply melted into the crowd and began to look for their families. While this disaster was in the making, the NVA entered the Citadel in Hue unopposed. The withdrawal from Hue in late March was a complete disaster that rivaled the one in the Highlands in scope. The South Vietnamese had started the battle in northern I Corps in reasonably good condition. Many soldiers and Marines fought valiantly, but confusing orders leading to the abandonment of strong defensive positions demoralized the troops. Poor leadership, the disintegration of unit integrity and discipline, and concern over family members quickly led to panic and total chaos. Things were so bad that the troops did not even bother to destroy the weapons and equipment they left behind. One officer reported that he had left thirty-seven tanks, all fueled and operational, on the beach when he and his

## MAP 5 — MILITARY REGION I, MARCH 1975




Source: Clark Dougan and David Fulghum, *The Vietnam Experience: The Fall of the South* (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1985), p. 69.

men rushed to the boats.[47] Another senior officer, coming ashore at Dan Nang, summed up the general attitude, when he told a reporter, "I don't know even know where my wife and family are. Why should I care about my division command?"[48] Only about one-third of the troops finally made it to Da Nang and untold numbers of civilians died in the panic-stricken evacuation. The 1st ARVN Division, the pride of the army, "was lost as an identifiable unit" and never reconstituted.[49]

While this disaster was unfolding, General Truong also had to deal with the NVA attacks in southern MR I, where the situation was not much better. Tam Ky, capital of Quang Tin Province had fallen to the Communists on 24 March. Further south in MR I, the North Vietnamese had stepped up their attacks on Quang Ngai Province, cutting Route 1 midway between the city of Quang Ngai and Chu Lai.

Meanwhile, the situation in Da Nang itself had become even worse. The city was under attack in the north from two PAVN divisions, reinforced by a tank regiment and two artillery regiments; in the south, two additional reinforced divisions attacked the district towns of Duc Duc and Dai Loc. As the North Vietnamese pressed the city from all sides, the mass of humanity, both

military and civilian, inside the city was in total disarray. By this time, Da Nang, a city of 300,000 was inundated with nearly two million refugees from Quang Tri, Hue, and Quang Tin, all clamoring to get out. The situation was made much worse by thousands of stragglers and deserters who preyed on the refugees and looted the city. A high-ranking officer from I Corps later recalled that Da Nang was "seized by convulsions of collective hysteria."[50] The result, according to Major General Homer Smith, U.S. DAO Saigon, was that "the pandemonium which overtook reason in Da Nang literally wrested control of the city from all official presence."[51] All order and discipline had broken down. An attempt to stage a massive airlift failed when hordes of refugees overran the airfield and mobbed the airplanes as they tried to take off.

From Saigon, Thieu tried to rally his forces. On 26 March, he went on the radio and issued an Order of the Day urging his soldiers to stop the enemy advance "at all costs" He proclaimed, "I have led you through many dangerous circumstances in the past. This time, I am again by your side and, together with you, determined to fight and win!"[52] Unfortunately, the troops and civilians in I Corps were long passed rallying and Thieu's urging had no effect.

As night fell, the North Vietnamese shelled Da Nang airport and the naval base. At the same time, they fired on the I Corps command post and other key military installations in the city. Although the ARVN 175-mm guns attempted counter-battery fire, it was largely ineffective and the PAVN kept firing into the city. Under this pounding, what remained of the defenses of Da Nang collapsed and General Truong called President Thieu to request immediate evacuation of the city. General Vien reports that Thieu, although very concerned about the situation, was very noncommittal in his response to Thuong's request. Apparently, the president did not want another disaster like the one in the Central Highlands, but as in previous instances, he was less than direct in providing the I Corps commander guidance as to what he wanted him to do. As soon as General Truong hung up the telephone, the North Vietnamese shelling severed the lines between Da Nang and Saigon. Truong, believing that the situation was hopeless, decided to withdraw what was left of his forces from Da Nang. Truong ordered the displacement of his troops to three embarkation points where they would be evacuated by sea.

At dawn on 29 March, I Corps began the evacuation. A dense fog had settled in along the coast and the tide was low. Accordingly, the ships could not get to the beach. Even though the troops had to wade and swim out to the ships, the embarkation went smoothly at first. However, by midmorning the PAVN artillery began to fall on the beaches and the operation became a rout. It became a repeat of the disaster at Hue. Thousands of soldiers and civilians ran for the sea where they drowned trying to reach the safety of the ships. Thousands of others died under the continuous artillery fire. Only about 50,000 of the two million civilian refugees managed to escape Da Nang.[53] Approximately 6,000 Marines and 4,000 soldiers made it to the rescue ships, but in General Truong's words, "not many [others] got out."[54]

By 30 March, the NVA occupied Da Nang and controlled all of Military Region I, taking over 100,000 South Vietnamese soldiers captive in the process.[55] With a few notable exceptions, there were no pitched battles in the I Corps area of operations prior to the fall of Da Nang. The South Vietnamese military in the region, in most cases, merely ceased to function as a fighting force. Not many of the 50,000 South Vietnamese soldiers stationed in and around the city even raised their rifles in its defense. One observer remarked that "Da Nang was not captured; it disintegrated in its own terror."[56] Faced with superior numbers and firepower and beset by poor leadership, lack of discipline, rumor, conflicting and confusing orders, and concern for family members, the South Vietnamese troops, for the most part, quit fighting and began to fend for themselves. One senior officer described the situation:

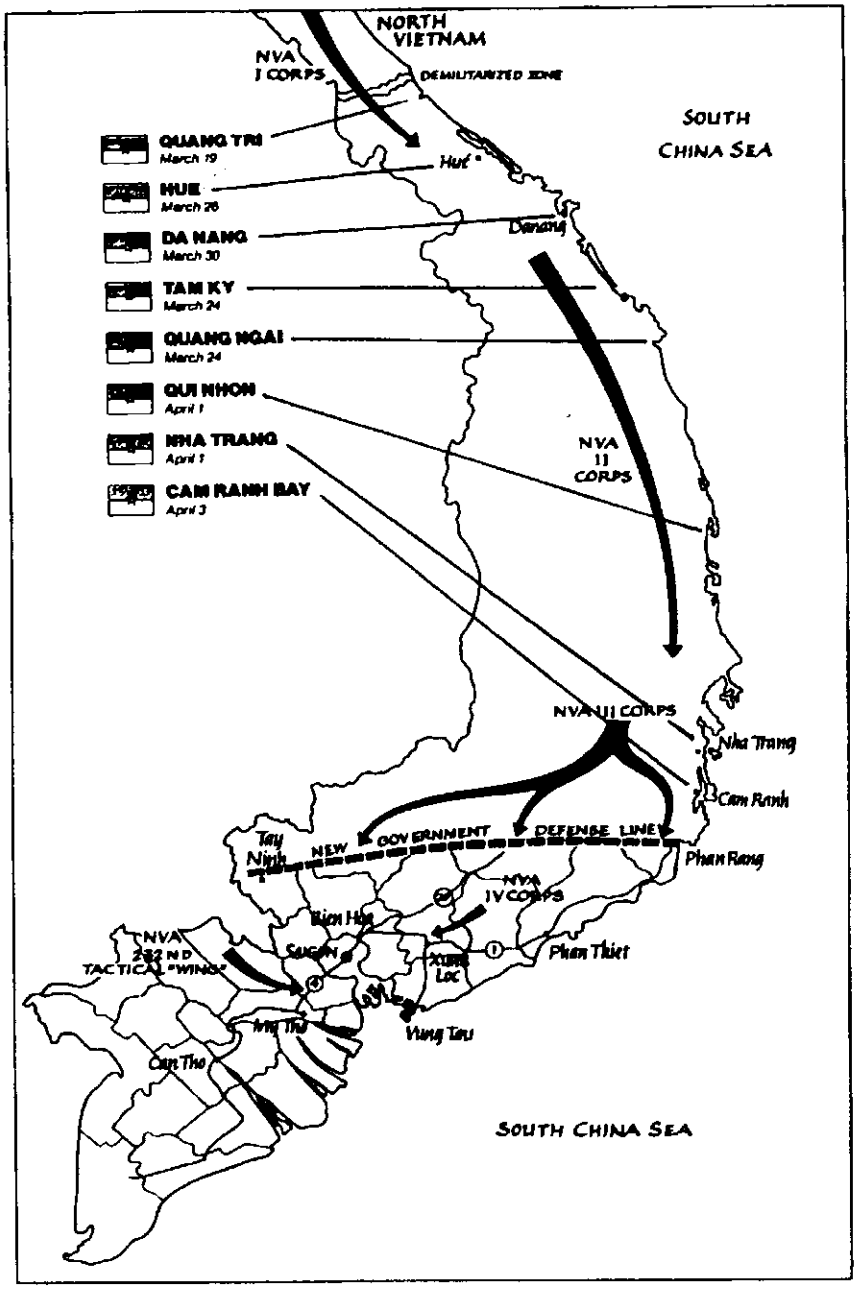
> "...stragglers mixed up with the populations and boarded civilian barges and commercial ships. Frustrated, hungry, and leaderless, they went wild and some of them indulged in inadmissable acts of banditry. Billions of dollars of equipment was destroyed and left to the enemy. Thus fell the second biggest city of Vietnam. She had gone through a stage of insanity before she died of suffocation."[57]

By 1 April, the North Vietnamese held all of MR I and most of MR II. In the process of taking these areas, they had destroyed the preponderance of two ARVN corps, over one half of ARVN's effective fighting strength. One division, the 22nd ARVN, managed to hold out in MR II, controlling the three cities of Qui Nhon, Tuy Hoa, and Nha Trang, but eventually North Vietnamese reinforcements began to flow into the area from the north. The ARVN defenders were overwhelmed and had to be evacuated by sea. Only about 2,000 officers and men escaped. By mid April, the North Vietnamese completed the destruction of the few pockets of RVNAF resistance and the remaining provinces along the coastline "fell like a row of porcelain vases sliding off a shelf."[58] (See Map 6)

The loss of Military Regions I and II rocked South Vietnam to its very foundation. Half the country had been given a way with relatively little resistance. The loss of Da Nang, the nation's second largest city, was, in the words of South Vietnam's Deputy Premier Dr. Phan Quang Dan, "the worst single disaster in the history of South Vietnam."[59] In addition to the loss of territory, the South Vietnamese, fleeing in panic, abandoned mounds of ammunition, supplies, and equipment to the advancing North Vietnamese. In the Qui Nhon depot alone, over 4,410 tons of ammunition was left.[60] VNAF left behind thirty-three A-37 jet fighters on the runway at Da Nang and nearly sixty aircraft at Phu Cat Air Base.[61]

Evacuation of the northern two military regions, as General Phillip Davidson has written, turned into "a craven, every man for himself scuttle for the exits."[62] In rare cases, the South Vietnamese troops, when ably led, fought well, in many of these cases demonstrating skill and valor.

## MAP 6 — LOSS OF THE COAST, MARCH-APRIL 1975




Source: Adapted from Arnold R. Isaacs, *Without Honor: Defeat in Vietnam and Cambodia* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), p. 384 and Frank Snepp, *Decent Interval* (New York: Random House, 1977), p. 274.

For the most part, however, the soldiers followed their leaders, who more often than not were the first to abandon the battlefield. The army collapsed, as one observer wrote, "like a house with its

timbers eaten away by termites, which has continued to look sound until the moment it crumbles."[63] Since the initiation of Vietnamization, a question mark had always hung over the existence of the South Vietnamese armed forces. Always before, the question had been how many years can they hold out? Now the question was how many weeks will they fight?

## New Orders From Hanoi

Observing the fall of the northern half of South Vietnam and realizing that Thieu and his forces were on the ropes, the Politburo in Hanoi decided that it was not necessary to wait until 1976 to launch the final offensive. General Giap first recognized that the time was right for the final blow. He had concluded that it was highly unlikely that the United States would interfere on the battlefield and that the South Vietnamese forces, being wiped out at the rate of more than a battalion a day, were so weakened that they "cannot cope with the ever stronger forces of the Vietnam revolution, militarily or politically."[64] Le Duan agreed with Giap and together they convinced their colleagues that it was time to crush the "puppet" administration with a decisive campaign designed to end the war. On 25 March, the Politburo cabled General Dung to "make a big leap forward" to seize a "once in a thousand years opportunity to liberate Saigon before the rainy season," thus insuring the "reunification of the Fatherland."[65]

Responding to these orders, Dung pushed his forces more than a thousand miles down the coast in rapid fashion, accomplishing one of the largest and most complex feats of the war. Massive columns of troops, equipment, and vehicles, many captured from the South Vietnamese, moved down the coastal highway toward Saigon. Other elements closed on the capital city from the west and south.

On 3 April, General Dung arrived at his new command post west of Loc Ninh, only sixty miles north of Saigon. By this time, he had at his disposal sixteen infantry divisions supported by tanks, sappers, artillery, and antiaircraft units and organized into five corps (1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and Tactical Force 232, a newly formed corps-size formation of four divisions). As these forces maneuvered toward attack positions, Dung and his staff completed their plans for what would be called the "Ho Chi Minh Campaign."

As Dung marshaled his forces, Thieu surveyed the South Vietnamese troops available for the defense of the capital. These comprised three divisions (5th, 18th , and 25th) in ARVN III Corps and three in IV Corps (7th, 9th, and 21st) plus remnants of the Marine and Airborne Divisions, several armor battalions, some depleted Ranger groups, and the survivors of the debacles in I and II Corps, a total of approximately 60,000 troops. The South Vietnamese were clearly outnumbered, but sheer numbers do not tell the whole tale. While the North Vietnamese, riding a tide of victory, began to step up their offensive, the RVNAF were disorganized, demoralized, and already demonstrating the characteristics of a beaten army even before the climactic battle for Saigon began.

The civilian population, too, was distraught because of the unending string of North Vietnamese victories, which fell, as one despairing government official said, "like an avalanche."[66] Unfortunately, fear and shared adversity did nothing to draw the people together behind the government and the army. The primary concern seemed to be one's own fate. One journalist observing the growing sense of panic and desperation in Saigon noted "that no spirit of support or sacrifice has been summoned."[67] The South Vietnamese at all levels were terrified of a Communist victory, but most did little or nothing to forestall it. Terror began to spread among the people, civil servants, and military. Catholics and anyone who had anything to do with supporting or working with Americans were particularly frightened. Ironically, statements by officials in the United States served to feed the spreading hysteria. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, testifying before the Senate Appropriations Committee, said that those considered "seriously endangered" in Vietnam included "all those who served in the administrative machine of the government of South Vietnam, in the various legislative bodies in the provinces, in the various police forces, [and] all those who worked for the United States in its various programs."[68] Defense Secretary James Schlesinger said that as many as 200,000 Vietnamese might be massacred in a Communist takeover.[69] Such statements were widely reported in Saigon, fueling the desperation and terror. Although the past performance of the Communists in such instances as the Hue massacre were grounds for alarm, the fear that overcame South Vietnamese society was a gross over-reaction and caused almost complete paralysis when it came time to defend the city.

The South Vietnamese became even more frightened when word spread that the U.S. was making plans to evacuate Americans from Saigon. Ambassador Martin tried to quash such rumors. He continued to maintain the official U.S. view that the South Vietnamese, if provided additional aid, could stabilize the battlefield. His deputy, Wolfgang Lehman, told listeners at one embassy meeting a few days after the fall of Da Nang that in his view, "Militarily, the North Vietnamese do not have the capability to launch an offensive against Saigon."[70]

This statement was preposterous. By the end of the first week of April, except for a few small enclaves in Phan Rang and Phan Thiet on the coast, two-thirds of South Vietnam was now in North Vietnamese hands. Six of the ARVN's thirteen divisions had vanished, along with many more troops in Ranger, territorial, air force, and support units. Losses of weapons, combat vehicles, aircraft, supplies, and equipment were staggering. On the other hand, the North Vietnamese, piling up victory after victory, were advancing on Saigon almost unscathed. General Dung wrote, "The numbers killed and wounded was very small in proportion to the victories won, and the expenditure in terms of weapons and ammunition was negligible."[71]

## No Help from Washington

The Ford administration was stunned by the suddenness of the South Vietnamese collapse in

I and II Corps. On 22 March, President Ford had written to Thieu, pledging that he was "determined to stand firmly behind the Republic of Vietnam at this crucial hour. With a view to honoring the responsibilities of the United States in this situation, I...am consulting on an urgent basis with my advisers on actions which the situation may require and the law permit."[72] Thieu responded on 25 March, just as Hue was abandoned to the Communists, with a letter of his own describing the "grave" military situation and making an appeal for "the Government of the United States of America [to] live up to its pledge" to "safeguard the peace in Vietnam." He specifically requested that Ford "order a brief but intensive B-52 air strike" against the enemy's concentration of forces and logistic bases within South Vietnam and "urgently provide us with necessary means to contain and repel the offensive."[73] Ford replied with a letter to Thieu in which he said: "You and your people may be assured of my continued firm support and of my resolve to do everything I can to help the RVN. Once again, I am confident that our joint endeavors will be successful."[74] Ford added that he needed a first-hand assessment of the military situation in South Vietnam and that he was sending Army Chief of Staff Frederick Weyand to Saigon. According to his close adviser Nguyen Tien Hung, Thieu was not impressed by Ford's assurances because he believed that Ford and his advisers were downplaying the seriousness of the situation and were backing away from previous commitments. Hung reported that Thieu complained: "Ford doesn't seem to care. He is going off on vacation to Palm Springs while we are dying. When is he going to respond?"[75]

General Weyand arrived in Saigon on 27 March. He immediately called on President Thieu and assured him of President Ford's "steadfast support."[76] After meeting with Ambassador Martin and Major General Smith, Weyand and his party spent the next six days in making a comprehensive assessment of the military situation and conducting inspection trips to various places throughout South Vietnam. Prior to departing Saigon, Weyand told President Thieu, "We will get you the assistance you need and will explain your needs to Congress."[77]

Weyand returned to the United States on 4 April and met the next day with the president at Palm Springs. While deeply pessimistic about the situation, he told Ford that he thought one more infusion of dollars and arms might somehow rescue American purposes in South Vietnam. He reported that the government of the Republic of Vietnam was on the "brink of a total military defeat," but the South Vietnamese were fighting hard with all available resources.[78] Weyand said that they would not be able to recapture lost territory, but with more ammunition and equipment, they could probably establish a strong defense around Saigon. He proposed that Ford submit a supplemental aid request to Congress for $722 million to replace the material lost in the disastrous retreat from I and II Corps.[79] With this equipment, according to Weyand's assessment, the South Vietnamese could outfit eight infantry and Ranger divisions and another twenty-seven independent regiments formed from existing territorial forces — a force that approximated the Communist forces advancing on Saigon. Weyand said that the supplemental request, aside from meeting the material

needs of the RVNAF, would provide a psychological boost to the South Vietnamese people, who were "very near the brink of a slide into the kind of hopelessness and defeatism that could rapidly unravel the whole structure."[80]

There was disagreement even within the administration about Weyand's plan and the wisdom of any attempt to obtain further aid for Saigon. First, many of the president's advisers believed that it was unlikely that Congress would approve such a request. One administration memo during this period stated: "Any request for supplemental military assistance, however, is likely to be turned down cold. There is strong criticism of ARVN abandonment of supplies and abuse of women and children in the chaos of retreat."[81] Ford's staffers, having polled Congress, informed the president that many legislators would not support him and others would actively oppose any new aid requests. Some advisers doubted that the South Vietnamese could hold out long enough for the aid to reach them, even if by some miracle Congress authorized part or all of the funds. They cited a Defense Intelligence Agency assessment of 3 April that gave South Vietnam only thirty days.[82] Nevertheless, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, always mindful of the symbolism of American actions, urged Ford to request the full $722 million proposed by General Weyand in order to send a signal not only to South Vietnam, but also to America's other allies around the world, that the United States would stand by its commitments.[83]

Given the evolving disaster in South Vietnam, Ford faced an uphill battle to convince Congress to allocate more money for South Vietnam. On 3 April, the president had suggested in a press conference that 55,000 American lives had been wasted because Congress refused to honor commitments made under the terms of the Paris agreement. "I think it is up to the American people to pass judgment on who was at fault or where the blame may rest," he stated.[84] This incensed many in Congress. Senator Richard Byrd said, "Some commitments are invented where no commitments exist, and then Congress is blamed for not living up to those commitments."[85] On 8 April, Senator Henry Jackson (Democrat, Washington) charged that Nixon had made "secret agreements...in writing" without consulting Congress and demanded to know the nature of these promises.[86] The Ford administration responded that Nixon had promised nothing in private that he had not promised many times in public. This was true as far as Ford knew at the time, because extant evidence suggests that the new president had not himself yet seen the entire file of Nixon-Thieu letters himself.[87] Despite Ford's explanation, many in Congress were convinced that there had been a secret deal with Thieu.

At this juncture, President Ford, against protests by domestic adviser Robert Hartmann and Press Secretary Ron Nessen but urged on by Henry Kissinger, went before a joint session of Congress on 10 April to ask for the full $722 million military aid supplement and another $250 million for economic aid and refugee relief. Ford asserted that the current debacle in South Vietnam was due to "uncertainty of further American assistance," because the reduction in aid "signaled our

increasing reluctance to give any support to that nation struggling for its survival." He asked Congress to help him "keep America's word good throughout the world." The president insisted that the supplemental aid to Saigon "must be swift and adequate" and that failure to act would only lead to "deeper disaster."[88] He asked Congress to approve the bill by 19 April, only nine days away. If doubt existed about the likely congressional response to the new aid request, it was quickly dispelled by the reaction on the floor to the president's speech. Not one clap of applause greeted Ford's appeal for additional aid for Saigon, and two Democrats even walked out in the middle of the speech.[89]

Despite the administration's efforts, the supplemental aid request was doomed from the beginning. Events in Cambodia did not help the situation. The Communist Khmer Rouge had been on the verge of completely overrunning Cambodia for some time. Two hours before the president spoke to Congress, Ambassador John Gunther Dean cabled from Phnom Penh requesting initiation of Operation EAGLE PULL, the final phase of the American evacuation from the Cambodian capital. The end of U.S. involvement in Cambodia, which included five years of effort and the expenditure of more than a billion dollars, occurred on the morning of 17 April when the victorious Khmer Rouge entered Phnom Penh.

The shadows of the imminent fall of Cambodia and the ongoing disaster in South Vietnam loomed as Congress considered the president's military aid request. As White House staffers had predicted, even previous supporters of U.S. policy in South Vietnam, such as Senator Byrd, spoke against new aid for Saigon. Byrd announced that "any additional military support for either Cambodia or South Vietnam would fall into the hands of those we are now opposing" and expressed "considerable doubt that additional expenditure of American funds, except for humanitarian purposes, would change the course of events."[90] Other legislators were even more adamant. Representative Bella Abzug wrote the president, charging that the "wrong policies and illegal military intervention for the past decade" of the U.S. government were "largely responsible for the current tragic plight of the South Vietnamese." She demanded that Ford "cease at once all military aid to the discredited government of President Thieu."[91]

Administration representatives received a chilly reception during congressional hearings on the aid request. Secretary of State Kissinger testified before the House Committee on Appropriations, saying "South Vietnam has nowhere else to turn. Without our help, it has no hope, even of moderating the pace of events which it has bravely resisted for years." He further warned that "...if the U.S. projects the impression of abandoning people who have dealt with us for so long, totally -- without making any effort to achieve control over the situation, it would not help our international position."[92] These arguments fell on deaf ears.

Congress denied the president's request and then focused their attention on the expected evacuation of U.S. citizens. When the administration asked for a waiver of legal restrictions on

military force so that Vietnamese citizens who had worked for the United States could be evacuated with the Americans, liberals in both houses denounced the proposal in the most extreme terms. In the House of Representatives, Bella Abzug loudly pronounced: "This legislation is just an excuse to enable the United States to remain in Vietnam and to use military force if necessary to maintain control...so that if we do not happen to like what happens there we can again re-engage the United States in the affairs of that country....It borders on a new Gulf of Tonkin resolution."[93] It was clear that the Vietnamese would receive no further help from the United States.

In a nationally televised speech on 4 April, a thoroughly demoralized and disillusioned Thieu blamed everyone for the military defeats, attributing the disasters to treachery by Montagnard troops (in the territorial forces), cowardice and defeatism in the armed forces, the intrigues of foreign agents, and even the broadcasts of "foreign radio stations such as the BBC and the Voice of America." Rather than personally accepting a large part of the responsibility, he then attacked the United States for failing to come to South Vietnam's aid as two presidents had promised. "One wonders," he said, "whether U.S. commitments can be trusted and whether U.S. words have any value." Having bitterly chastised the Americans, Thieu then said that only the United States could provide the miracle that would save the day. If American aid continued to arrive "drop by drop...we will lose our land gradually to the North Vietnamese Communists until the day when we lose it all. Therefore, I hope that the American people and Congress now will see clearly the real situation...and the consequences of their actions over the past two years and that they will assist us in a more practical, more rapid, more efficient and more adequate manner so that we can defend our remaining territory."[94]

Such was not to be the case. How far the fortunes of Thieu and his nation had fallen was made strikingly clear on 8 April when 1st Lieutenant Than Trung, a VNAF F-5E fighter pilot, made two bombing runs on Independence Palace and then flew to the NVA-occupied airfield at Phuoc Long where he landed to a hero's welcome.[95] Thieu, long frightened about the possibility of a coup, was all but immobilized by this attack on the palace, which was later found to have been an isolated act and not part of a coup. However, it clearly demonstrated that the situation was beginning to unravel.

## The Ho Chi Minh Campaign

While Thieu worried about coup attempts and President Ford and his advisers battled with Congress, General Dung, his staff, and field units finalized preparations for launching the Ho Chi Minh Campaign. Dung's plan called for a three-pronged attack on Saigon. The main attack would be in the east and would be led by 4th Army Corps, consisting of the 6th, 7th, and 341st NVA Divisions. They were to leave their positions in Tay Ninh and Binh Long Provinces north and northwest of Saigon, march easterly along the foothills of the southern Highlands, occupying Lam

Dong Province and then attacking from there to take Xuan Loc, capital city of Long Khanh Province and the key ARVN stronghold defending Saigon along Route 1. In order to tie down ARVN forces defending Saigon so they could not reinforce Xuan Loc, the recently organized 232nd Tactical Force, consisting of four NVA divisions, would drive up from the Delta and cut Route 4. At the same time, the 3rd Army Corps would increase its attacks in the Tay Ninh area to keep the 25th ARVN Division in place and divert attention away from the move east by 4th Army Corps.

By 8 April, 4th Army Corps was in position around Xuan Loc. The next day the 341st NVA Division launched the main attack from the northwest following a 4,000 round mortar, artillery, and rocket barrage, which set a large part of the city on fire (See Map 7). Supporting attacks were conducted from the north-northeast and east by the 7th NVA and 6th NVA Divisions respectively. Attacking with T-54 tanks, the 341st Division pushed toward the heart of the city. By dawn the next day, the North Vietnamese held the police station, the CIA compound, and the local Ranger base. However, the 18th ARVN Division, under Brigadier General Le Minh Dao, put up a stiff fight, fighting hand-to-hand in many cases. One of the reasons that these soldiers fought so well is that they were ably led. General Dao and his officers stayed and fought alongside their men, a situation not often seen in the earlier debacles to the north in MR's I and II. Too, the soldiers fought hard because they were not worried about their family members, most of whom had been evacuated to Saigon before the main battle began.

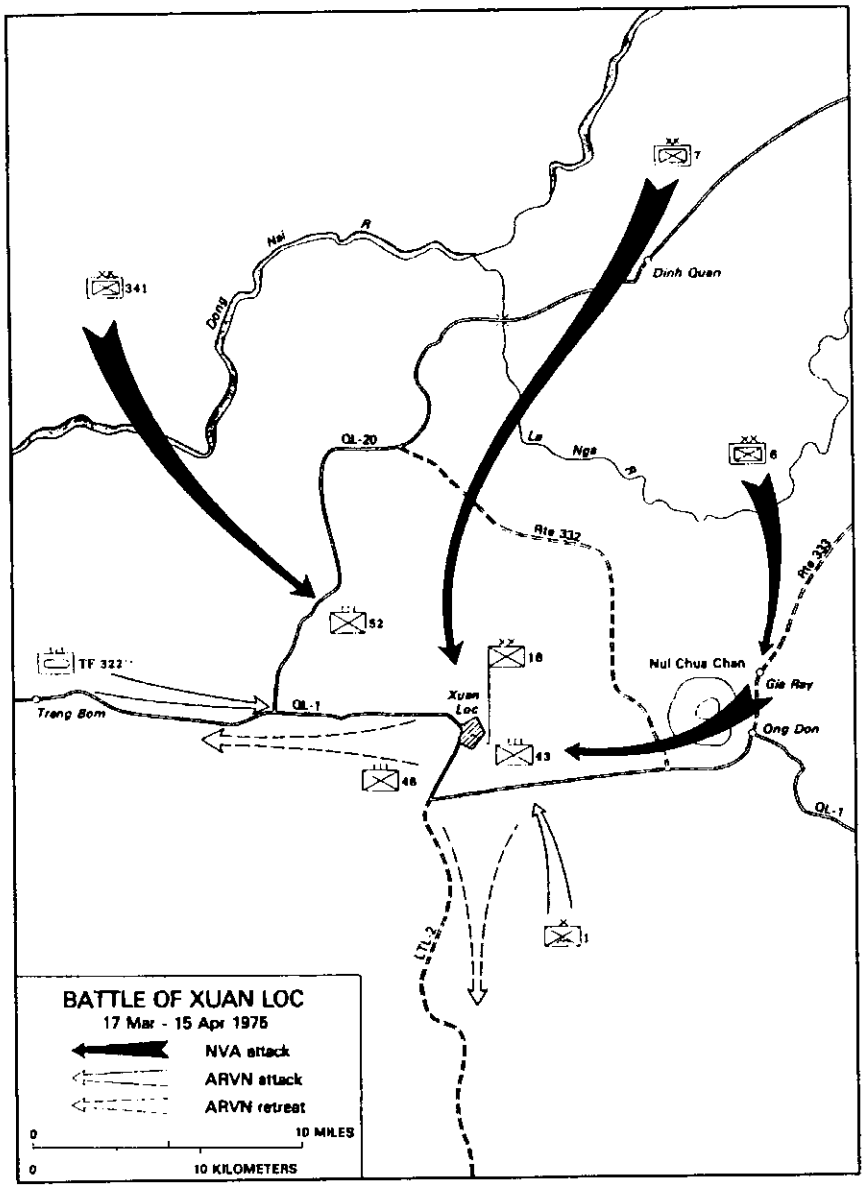
On the morning of 10 April, the ARVN forces counterattacked, causing the PAVN to yield ground. Major General Le Trong An, the North Vietnamese corps commander, ordered reserve regiments from the 6th and 7th NVA Divisions into the fight, but the ARVN doggedly held on to their positions in and around Xuan Loc. Dung, who had become accustomed to gaining ground without a fight, was impressed with "the enemy's stubbornness."[96]

The JGS saw that Dao and his troops had a chance to stop the North Vietnamese onslaught and rushed reinforcements from the 25th ARVN Division and the 1st Airborne Brigade to the Xuan Loc area. There were now more than 25,000 ARVN troops committed to the defense of Xuan Loc, almost a third of what remained of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam.

With VNAF flying close support, the soldiers of the 18th ARVN began to get the upper hand in the battle. Encouraged by the RVNAF's determined resistance, General Smith sent a message to the Joint Chiefs, declaring that the South Vietnamese "had won round one" of the battle for Xuan Loc. He lauded the "valor and aggressiveness of GVN troops" and concluded that their performance "appears to settle for the time being the question, 'Will ARVN fight?'"[97]

Meanwhile, General Dung, not wanting to get tied down in a battle on the periphery of Saigon, urged his forces to redouble their efforts to annihilate the defenders. He ordered more reinforcements into the battle and told the 2nd Army Corps, which was in the process of taking Phan Rang, to continue south along the coast to seize Phan Thiet, then swing westward to hit Xuan Loc

## MAP 7 — THE BATTLE OF XUAN LOC




Source: William E. LeGro, *Vietnam from Cease-Fire to Capitulation* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1985), p. 168.

from that direction if the South Vietnamese still held the city by the time they got there. The battles that ensued were hard fought on both sides. The 18th ARVN Division fought valiantly, but by 15 April, sheer numbers and superior firepower turned the tide. General Dao was forced to evacuate his forces from inside the city. On 16 April, helicopters extracted the survivors of the 43rd Regiment.

That same day, the NVA finally overran the 52nd Regiment, which by this time had lost 70 percent of its original strength.

The North Vietnamese had taken Xuan Loc in what would prove to be the last major battle of the war; after Xuan Loc fell, there was nothing between the North Vietnamese forces and Saigon. According to Colonel William E. Le Gro, a member of the Saigon DAO who watched the battle at Xuan Loc unfold, the South Vietnamese had fought "splendidly," forcing the PAVN high command to use the battle as a "meat grinder," sacrificing its own units to destroy irreplaceable ARVN forces.[98] The 18th ARVN had held out for three weeks against overwhelming odds, destroying thirty-seven NVA tanks and killing over 5,000 attackers. Had the rest of the South Vietnamese fought as valiantly as the 18th ARVN Division, the outcome of the war might have been drastically different.

On 16 April, Thieu sent Nguyen Tien Hung to Washington as his personal emissary to plead Saigon's cause one last time. With him, Hung took the file that contained letters from Nixon and Ford promising support for the South Vietnamese. His mission was to petition Ford for a loan of three billion dollars a year for three years, at an interest rate to be determined by Congress. In a letter that Hung presented to Ford, Thieu said this money would be a "'freedom loan,' a loan that would permit us to defend ourselves against the aggressors and give us a reasonable chance to survive as a free country."[99] Thieu believed that he could still hold on and resist the Communists in the Mekong Delta if assured of continued American support. Hung was sent, he later admitted, "to play the part of a cabinet minister turned beggar."[100]

Unfortunately for the South Vietnamese, it was too late even for begging. On 17 April, the administration's final aid request was effectively killed when the Senate Armed Services Committee voted not to approve the additional aid for Saigon. Although the bill was still being debated in other committees, it was a dead issue. Hung later wrote that he was overwhelmed by the news of the Armed Services Committee vote. His mission disintegrated because "there was no one to talk to about the Freedom Loan."[101]

## Thieu Resigns

Thieu's position and personal safety had become precarious. On 18 April, NVA sappers struck the Phu Lam radar station on the outskirts of Saigon. General Toan, III Corps commander, called to inform the president of the new development. He also confirmed that the defense in Xuan Loc was on the verge of collapse and that Phan Rang had fallen. Then he told Thieu that ARVN soldiers had "bulldozed and leveled" Thieu's ancestral grave site outside Phan Rang.[102] This was a terrible insult and demonstrated just how far Thieu had fallen in the eyes of his countrymen. By this time, wrote former ARVN Brigadier General Lam Quang Thi, Thieu had become "the most hated man in Viet Nam."[103]

Later on 18 April, a group of political moderates and opposition figures confronted Thieu and told him that they would publicly demand his resignation if he did not voluntarily step down within six days. Thieu responded by arresting several high-ranking military officers, including II Corps commander General Phu, who he insisted were more responsible than was he for the military disaster. General Dong Van Khuyen wrote after the war that Thieu had believed until almost the last moment that the Americans would not let him and his countrymen go down in defeat; but the South Vietnamese president finally realized that time had run out.[104] His capital was surrounded by the North Vietnamese Army, his people no longer supported him, and it was now painfully clear to all concerned that the U.S. had abandoned Thieu and the South Vietnamese.

On Sunday evening, 20 April, Ambassador Martin called on President Thieu. He brought with him the latest CIA intelligence estimate. The picture he painted was desperately bleak. Martin stopped short of telling Thieu that he should resign but, saying that he was speaking only as a friend and not in an official capacity, commented that the decision to leave office was Thieu's and Thieu's alone to make. Thieu listened quietly to all this and assured the Ambassador that he would "do what is best for the country."[105]

Later that day, Thieu was visited by French Ambassador Jean-Marie Merillon, who told Thieu that he had heard rumors that various generals were prepared to force him out if he did not resign.[106] There is some controversy about whether there really was a movement to remove Thieu. General Vien, the JGS chairman, later maintained that Merillon was wrong: "I am certain that on our side there was absolutely no pressure from any general to force [Thieu] to resign."[107] However, Vien has admitted meeting with a group that included Defense Minister Tran Van Don, Prime Minister Nguyen Ba Can, and Economics Minister Nguyen Van Hao, but has insisted that this group met to discuss the situation and not to plot against Thieu.[108]

Regardless of the nature of the meetings, the next day, in an effort to preempt any ouster, Thieu called the key members of his government to Independence Palace. He began by relating the details of his discussions with Ambassadors Martin and Merillon. He then said he would base his decision on their reaction and whether they considered him an obstacle to peace. No one said a word. According to presidential adviser Hung, Thieu decided at that moment to resign.[109]

The next day Thieu appeared before a joint session of the National Assembly. In this nationally televised three-hour speech, a rambling and emotional tirade, he vilified the United States for failing to live up to its commitments. "The United States has not respected its promises. It is inhumane. It is not trustworthy. It is irresponsible," he proclaimed.[110] Likening the recent congressional debate over the supplemental aid request to "bargaining at the fish market," he said that "I could not afford to let other people bargain over the bodies of our soldiers." He then announced his decision to resign and turn over the government to Vice President Tran Van Huong. Thieu concluded: "I depart today. I ask my countrymen, the armed forces, and religious groups to

forgive me my past mistakes I made while in power. The country and I will be grateful to you. I am very undeserving. I am resigning, but I am not deserting."[111]

By the time Huong assumed office, the North Vietnamese, moving closer to Saigon every minute, were not interested in negotiations with the new president or anyone else. The official North Vietnamese news agency called the change in leadership a "puppet show" and denounced the new government as the "Thieu regime without Thieu."[112]

By this point, American attention had shifted to the evacuation. On 23 April, Ford spoke at Tulane University in New Orleans. The president said, "America can regain the sense of pride that existed before Viet Nam. But it cannot be achieved by refighting a war that is finished as far as America is concerned."[113] That same day, Ambassador Martin cabled Kissinger that it would soon be time to execute Operation FREQUENT WIND, the American evacuation of Saigon.[114]

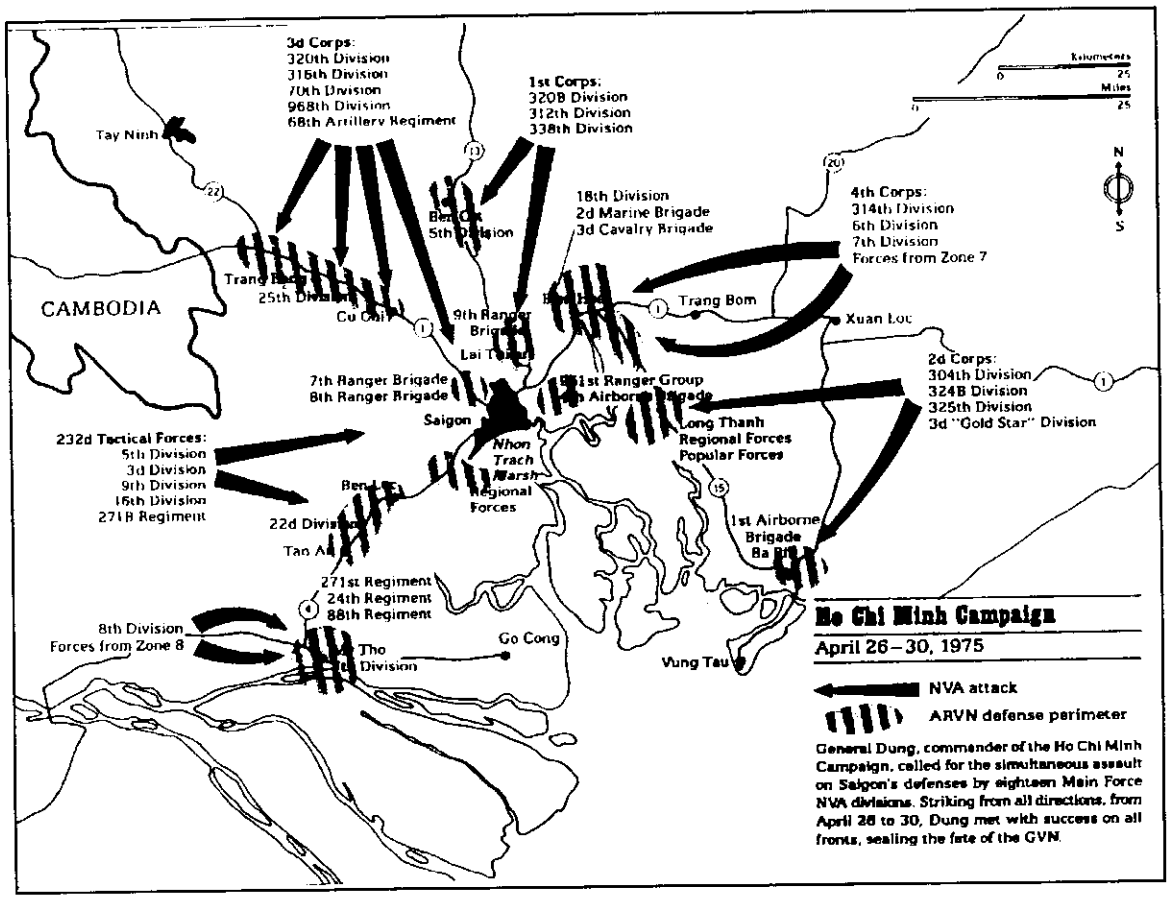
## The Fall of Saigon

While the new South Vietnamese government vainly searched for a way to save Saigon, General Dung and his staff completed preparations for the final assault. Dung's plan, a variation of the "blossoming lotus" tactic used so effectively at Ban Me Thuot, called for quick thrusts to seize five key points in the city: Independence Palace, Joint General Staff headquarters, the National Police headquarters, Tan Son Nhut Air Base, and the Special Capital Zone headquarters, whose commander controlled the ARVN troops defending the city. Dung reasoned that once these vital "nerve centers were smashed...the Saigon army and administration would be like a snake without a head. What remained of their system of defense and repression would fall apart, the masses would rise up...and Saigon would be quickly liberated."[115]

Saigon was defended by the remnants of five ARVN divisions arrayed in a ring thirty to fifty kilometers from the center of the city. Dung did not want to get into a prolonged battle with these forces and did not want them to withdraw into the city, where his troops would have to fight them house-to-house. Therefore, he proposed to divide his forces. While one part of his troops tied down the ARVN troops on the outer perimeter, the other force would drive for the center of the city. To facilitate this scheme, he planned to send forces to secure the major roads, bridges, and key positions leading into Saigon to prepare the way for an armored thrust that would strike for the key installations. At the same time, he proposed to use artillery, a battery of SA-2 anti-aircraft missiles, and a group of captured A-37 bombers to shut down Tan Son Nhut Air Base.

Dung set the attacks on the perimeter for 26 April and the main attack on the city center to follow the next day. After finalizing the plan, Dung ordered his forces, now totaling over 130,000 troops, into attack positions (See Map 8). The 4th Army Corps (three divisions), having captured Xuan Loc and Trang Bom, would continue down Route 1 from the east to attack Bien Hoa and then Saigon itself. The 2nd Army Corps (four divisions) moved down Route 2 toward Ba Ria and Vung

## MAP 8 — THE HO CHI MINH CAMPAIGN




Source: Clark Dougan and David Fulghum, *The Vietnam Experience: The Fall of the South* (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1985), p. 140.

Tau.

In the southwest, the 232nd Tactical Force (four divisions) and several independent regiments prepared to attack the ARVN positions along Route 4 to cut off access to Saigon from the Mekong Delta. In the northwest, the 3rd Army Corps (four divisions) prepared to attack the 25th ARVN Division in their positions along Route 1 vicinity of Trang Bang and Cu Chi. As the other corps completed their moves, the three reserve divisions of the 1st Army Corps arrived at assembly areas east of Ben Cat. The climactic battle for the survival of the Republic of South Vietnam was about to begin.

On 26 April, the North Vietnamese launched supporting attacks by the 6th, 7th, and 341st NVA Divisions against Bien Hoa and the former U.S. base at Long Binh. At the same time, the 304th and 325th NVA Divisions attacked ARVN positions at Long Thanh in an attempt to cut Route 15, the remaining overland link between Saigon and Vung Tau on the coast. The 312th Gold Star

Division struck Ba Ria, at the base of the Vung Tau peninsula. These attacks were meant to hold ARVN defenders in place, so that they could not reinforce Saigon when the city came under direct attack.

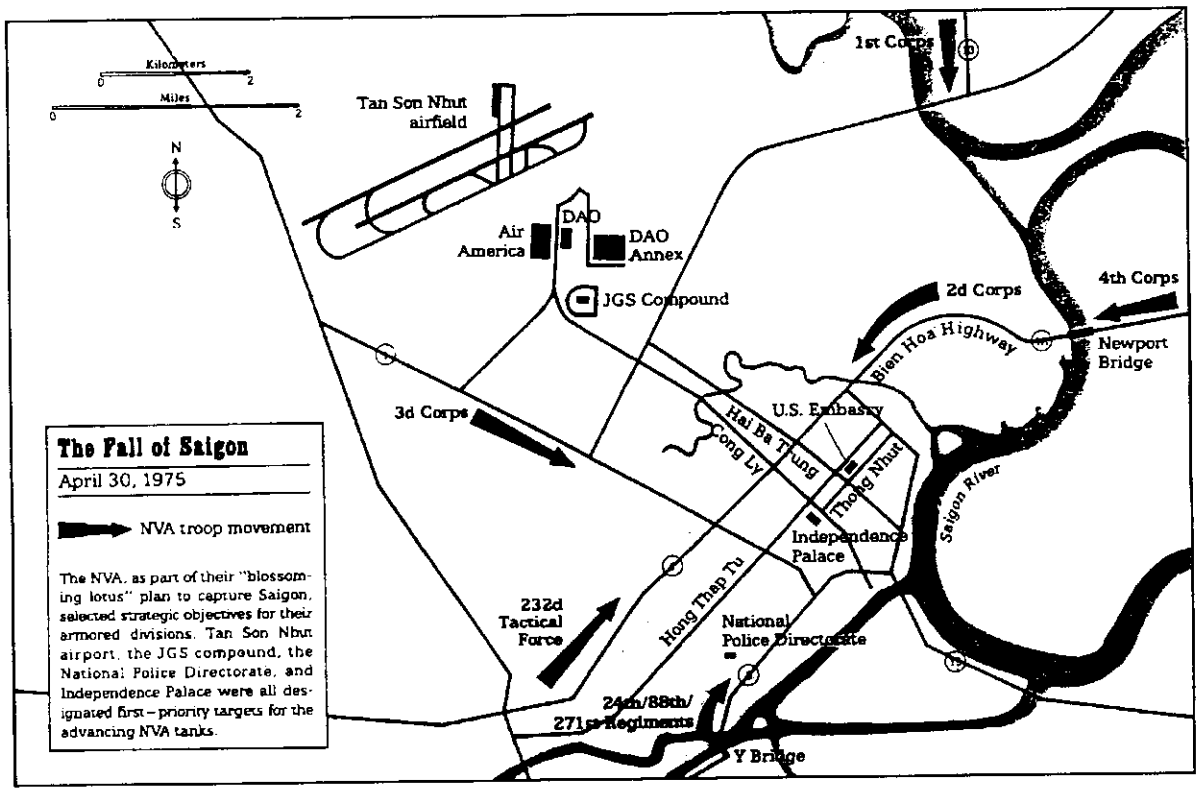
In the early morning hours of 27 April, the North Vietnamese main attack on Saigon began. As the Communists troops closed in on the city, South Vietnamese politicians were embroiled in a debate over who should lead the nation. Although many felt that President Huong would step aside soon after assuming office in favor of someone stronger who could either lead the fight against the Communists or negotiate an accommodation, he had not done so. Huong was a well-meaning man, but he was sick and not up to the demands of the crisis at hand.[116] He soon came under intense pressure to relinquish his office. After a period of vacillation, Huong, citing a respect for the Constitution, said that if the National Assembly no longer wanted him as president, it was up to them to vote him out of office. The Assembly replied that it was up to Huong to resign. At the same time, a heated debate broke out in the Assembly between those who supported the elevation of General Duong Van ("Big") Minh, old-line Thieu supporters, and still others who believed that Air Vice Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky should be made president to carry on the fight.

While this issue was under debate, the North Vietnamese Army continued to close the ring around Saigon. Finally, on 27 April, shortly after four NVA rockets landed in the city, Huong recalled the National Assembly "to choose a political personality to replace the head of state and negotiate with the other side."[117] At 6:45 in the evening, Senate President Tran Van Lam called the Assembly into session and read a letter from President Huong. Conceding that "we are lost" and "have no choice but to negotiate," Huong announced that he was prepared to turn over the reins of government to General Minh, who long had boasted of contacts in the Communist camp.[118] After the letter was read, Defense Minister Tran Van Don, along with General Vien of the JGS and Lieutenant General Nguyen Van Minh, commander of the Saigon defenses, gave a briefing on the bleak military situation. Shortly thereafter, the Assembly, with one third of the members abstaining, voted to make Minh president, charging him to "carry out the mission of seeking ways and means to restore peace to South Vietnam."[119] Those who voted for the new president clearly hoped that he would use his contacts to open negotiations with the North Vietnamese.[120] These were unrealistic hopes. The Communists held the upper hand on the battlefield and final victory was in sight. The Politburo had already unanimously decided against a negotiated settlement, regardless of any political changes in Saigon.[121]

At dawn on 28 April, PAVN commandos from 4th Army Corps took the far end of the Newport Bridge, only five kilometers from the center of Saigon, cutting the only remaining land route between the capital and Bien Hoa (See Map 9).

NVA infiltrators had been entering the city for several days, joining the columns of refugees streaming into Saigon to get away from the fighting. Once inside the city they reconstituted

## MAP 9 — THE FALL OF SAIGON




Source: Clark Dougan and David Fulghum, *The Vietnam Experience: The Fall of the South* (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1985), p. 161.

themselves in groups of ten to fifteen men. Each group had an assigned target. The target list included key installations such as barracks, munition dumps, and police stations. These groups would go into action as the main NVA body began its attack on Saigon. Other infiltrators were assigned to protect bridges to preclude the South Vietnamese from trying to block PAVN tank and mechanized columns from entering the city. An Italian reporter later wrote that he had been told by a high ranking North Vietnamese officer that over fifteen hundred commandos infiltrated the city in the week before the South Vietnamese surrendered.[122]

At 5:15 P.M. in the afternoon of 28 April, as the North Vietnamese were making final preparations for the assault on Saigon, President Huong officially stepped down in a ceremony at Independence Palace. Huong spoke first, addressing Minh: "General, your mission is very heavy, [but] if you wholeheartedly save the country...and strive to restore peace and ensure that bloodshed stops, the meritorious service you render will be remembered forever by younger generations."[123] When Minh took the podium, he said, "I can make you no promises. In the days ahead we will have nothing but difficulties, terrible difficulties. The decisions to be taken are grave and important, our

position is a difficult one."[124] He paused for a moment and one reporter later wrote that he and his colleagues present thought that Minh was going to announce surrender.[125] However, the new president continued, "The order to our soldiers is to stay where they are, to defend their positions, to defend with all their strength the territory remaining to us." Then he announced: "I accept the responsibility for seeking to arrive at a cease-fire, at negotiations, at peace on the basis of the Paris Accords. I am ready to accept any proposal in this direction." As a gesture of good faith, he announced that he would release all political prisoners and lift the restrictions on the press.[126] He concluded by appealing to those attempting to flee the country to "remain here to join us and all those with good will in building a new South for the future."

Just as Minh finished his speech, five captured A-37s made an attack on Tan Son Nhut, destroying three AC-119s and several C-47s.[127] This was the only North Vietnamese air strike of the war. A North Vietnamese colonel later explained the raid to Italian journalist Tiziano Terzani:

> "The planes took off from and returned to Phan Rang. Trung [the same pilot who had bombed Independence Palace] was the squadron leader. He had a good knowledge of the airport and its defense system. For a week we'd been training the other four pilots, since they were accustomed to Migs. During the attack they maintained radio silence, so they would not be discovered. Surprise was important. We thus succeeded in hitting many enemy planes still on the ground. The puppets thought we could never attack the airport because our comrades were still in Camp Davis. In fact we thought about it for a long time before giving the signal for the operation, but we had to do it. The air force was Saigon's last defense, and it was indispensable to attack Tan Son Nhut and Bien Hoa."[128]

The air attack on Tan Son Nhut served as one sort of answer to Minh's attempt to foster negotiations. However, the Communists broadcast the following response over Radio Liberation an hour after Minh's speech:

> "After the departure of the traitor Nguyen Van Thieu, those who are replacing him, namely the clique Duong Van Minh, Nguyen Van Huyen and Vu Van Mau, are holding fast to their war, to keep their present territories while calling for negotiations. It is obvious that this clique continues stubbornly to prolong the war in order to maintain American neocolonialism. But they are not fooling anyone. The fighting will not stop until all of Saigon's troops have laid down their arms and all American warships have left South Vietnamese waters. Our two conditions must be met before any cease-fire."[129]

While North Vietnamese pilots attacked Tan Son Nhut and the South Vietnamese transferred power to General Minh, NVA forces moved into position for the final assault on Saigon. To the southeast of the city, the 325th NVA Division reached the town of Nhon Trach, from with its long-range 130-mm guns could fire on Tan Son Nhut. To the west of the capital, another NVA Division under Major General Di Thien Tich spent the daylight hours under cover. When it became dark, they moved into attack positions along the Van Co River, which flowed along Saigon's

southwestern edge.[130] Dung later wrote, "there was no longer any safe place" for the government forces.[131]

To the east of Saigon, following an overnight artillery barrage, the final assault on Bien Hoa began. Lieutenant General Nguyen Van Toan, ARVN III Corps commander, had already left Bien Hoa for Saigon. When the artillery fire began, the rest of Toan's staff also fled.[132] *Time* magazine reported that Toan had privately conceded the battle for Saigon was already lost and quoted a U.S. military observer as saying that most of the ARVN top leadership had virtually resigned themselves to defeat: "Their morale and their leadership was just flowing away."[133] The impact of this situation on what was supposed to be the climactic battle for Saigon was devastating. As one young pilot from the South Vietnamese Air Force later said, "We — the young ones — we expected to continue fighting. But how could we fight when there were no generals to lead us any more?"[134]

In the early morning hours of 29 April, the North Vietnamese began a rocket attack on Tan Son Nhut. During the attack, two U.S. Marine security guards were killed. Lance Corporal Darwin Judge and Corporal Charles McMahon, Jr. were the last American servicemen to die in the Vietnam War.[135] The rocket attack was followed by shelling from the long-range 130-mm guns located near Nhon Trach. Chaos broke out as South Vietnamese soldiers and airmen tried to board anything that flew. The crew of one already overloaded C-130 pushed soldiers off the rear cargo ramp so that the aircraft gained enough ground speed to take off. Another plane, a C-7 Caribou transport, spun off the runway, crashed, and burned. VNAF pilots manned anything that would fly and took off for Thailand. This symbolized the disintegration of the Vietnamese Air Force; eventually 132 aircraft were flown to U Tapao Air Base in Thailand.[136] Later that day, Lieutenant General Tran Van Minh, VNAF commander, and a group of thirty armed senior air force officers rushed into the DAO compound at Tan Son Nhut and demanded that they be evacuated immediately. General Smith directed his assistant air attache, Lieutenant Colonel Dick Martin, to inform the officers that they would be shot on the spot unless they surrendered their weapons and calmed down. They did so and Martin placed them under lock and key in a nearby office. Later, they were evacuated. In its final assessment, the DAO later reported that this incident "signaled the complete loss of command and control" of the air force "and magnified the continued deterioration of an already volatile situation."[137]

While desperation and terror reigned at Tan Son Nhut, President Ford convened a meeting of his advisers in the White House. After much discussion, President Ford directed the implementation of the final phases of FREQUENT WIND.[138] The artillery and rocket attacks had effectively ruled out Tan Son Nhut for any further evacuation by fixed wing aircraft. Over the next several days, U.S. helicopters airlifted some 7,100 American and South Vietnamese military and civilian personnel out of Saigon, many of them from the roof of the Embassy. Navy ships ferried more than 70,000 South Vietnamese to American vessels in the South China Sea. In one of the

many tragedies of the war, the Americans left behind 420 South Vietnamese who had worked for them and had been promised evacuation. Colonel Harry Summers, an Army officer assigned to the U.S. Embassy, later wrote that this incident was "a shameful day to be an American" and that the evacuation of the embassy was "the Vietnam War writ small."[139] As had happened in the larger sphere, the Americans had made promises that they did not fulfill.

When the American evacuation began in earnest, chaos engulfed the city. Mobs took to the streets, overturning cars, setting fire to buildings, and looting. Former residences and offices of Americans were the primary targets for the looters, who took everything they could carry, even bathroom fixtures. One reporter later wrote: "In a flash it became an orgy of people opening drawers, ripping down curtains, emptying refrigerators, taking sheets, blankets, dishes....It was an impressive show of rage, frenzy, and joy by people bent on plunder."[140]

The North Vietnamese columns advanced slowly on the center of the city, encountering very little resistance. The Saigon military command virtually ceased to exist. Shortly before 7:00 P.M., the new chief of the Joint General Staff, Lieutenant General Vinh Loc, issued his first and only Order of the Day, admonishing his officers and soldiers against "running away like a mouse," he promised, "From now on, I and the commanding generals will be present among you...day and night."[141] Shortly afterward, Loc boarded a helicopter for the evacuation ships. Most other senior commanders had already departed. A reporter who observed the collapse of the South Vietnamese armed forces and the civil government in Saigon later wrote: "Like a puppet no longer supported by its strings, the whole government apparatus of Saigon was collapsing. There was no order, no army, no authority other than that of the guns and weapons that many, a great many still had and were using."[142]

Just after 5:00 A.M. on 30 April, Ambassador Martin, carrying the furled American flag that he had taken from his office, departed by CH-46 helicopter for the *U.S.S. Blue Ridge* standing off the coast in the South China Sea. At 10:24 A.M., President Dong Van Minh announced the unconditional surrender of the Republic of Vietnam. Almost immediately, the South Vietnamese soldiers began to divest themselves of weapons and uniforms, attempting to melt into the crowds to avoid retribution from the victors. Some chose another way. One ARVN colonel went to Lam Son Square, site of the memorial to South Vietnamese war dead. He saluted the huge statue of a South Vietnamese soldier and shot himself with his pistol.[143]

By noon, General Dung's 2nd Corps tanks rumbled through the outskirts of Saigon and rolled into the city unimpeded, followed by open trucks full of heavily armed PAVN soldiers. One column of tanks rolled down Thong Nhut Avenue across Cong Ly Boulevard toward Independence Palace. The lead tank, Number 843 commanded by Major Nguyen Van Hoa, crashed through the gate of the palace.[144] Other tanks followed, parking in a semicircle on the palace grounds in front of the steps. One PAVN soldier jumped down from his tank, ran up the steps, and began jubilantly waving the

blue-and-red flag with the yellow star of the Provisional Revolutionary Government. Neil Davis, a war correspondent for Reuters, asked the soldier his name and the young man replied, "Nguyen Van Thieu."[145] On that ironic note, the Vietnam War was at an end.

There is no doubt that the South Vietnamese were decisively defeated in the field during the actions of 1974-75. However, the United States cannot escape a large part of the blame for this defeat. Nguyen Van Thieu signed the Paris Accords only at the urging of Richard Nixon, who repeatedly promised that the United States would provide military aid and support to South Vietnam if the North Vietnamese attempted to take advantage of the situation after the cease-fire. In its haste to conclude the peace negotiations, the United States agreed to leaving over 150,000 PAVN soldiers in South Vietnamese territory when the cease-fire went into effect. When the North Vietnamese made their move, the United States failed to provide the promised support. The failure to honor that commitment dealt a devastating blow to South Vietnamese morale and fighting spirit. Without the continued support and backing of the United States, the South Vietnamese ceased to function as a cogent fighting force and collapsed in 55 days.

Many have asked whether this defeat was inevitable. Nothing in war is inevitable, but the signing of the Paris Peace Accords leaving 150,000 enemy troops in South Vietnam clearly set the preconditions for defeat. One can only wonder what would have happened if the U.S. had insisted that the North Vietnamese troops be withdrawn as a condition of the Paris Accords. Even given the provisions of the Accords as signed, the situation was not completely lost. With U.S. support in 1972, the South Vietnamese had resisted an all-out assault by 130,000 North Vietnamese troops. One can only wonder what would have transpired if the United States had provided the promised support when the PAVN began their final offensive in 1974-75. Tragically, such was not the case and the results were calamitous for both the Republic of Vietnam, which ceased to exist as a sovereign nation, and the United States, which lost the first war in its history and abandoned its comrades on the field of battle.

# ENDNOTES

1. William E. Le Gro, *Vietnam From Cease-Fire to Capitulation* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1981), p. 2. This number did not include an estimated 100,000 regular troops in Laos and Cambodia.

2. Message, Bunker to Kissinger, 2 Mar 73, NSC Convenience Files, Nixon Presidential Materials, NARA.

3. Nguyen Tien Hung and Jerrold L. Schecter, *The Palace File* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), p. 163; Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), p. 315.

4. Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 318.

5. The total amount was also to cover all shipping, as well as the operational costs of the U.S. Defense Attache Office in Saigon, thereby leaving only $500 million for the South Vietnamese.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

7. Cao Van Vien, *Indochina Monographs: The Final Collapse* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1985), 67-68.

8. Quoted in Clark Dougan and David Fulghum, *The Vietnam Experience: The Fall of the South* (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1985), p. 22.

9. Quoted in Dougan and Fulghum, *The Fall of the South*, p. 28. The authors also maintain, p. 30, that according to PRG Minister of Justice Truong Nhu Tang, Thieu's faith in the Americans was due to the "ingrained Confucianism" of Vietnamese culture: "Among the very deepest feelings on one raised in a Confucian society is the inhibition against betraying those with whom one enjoys a relationship of trust...[Thieu was] betting on the American geopolitical investment in South Vietnam...a relationship of personal commitment had been created. Trapped in his Vietnamese habits of thought, Thieu imagined that this relationship must prevail, regardless of apparent political realities and logic."

10. Memorandum, Timmons to Ford, Subject: Foreign Aid Legislation, 12 Aug 1974, William E. Timmons Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.

11. Letter, Members of Congress for Peace Through Law to Ford, 6 Feb 1975, White House Central Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.

12. Frank Snepp, *Decent Interval* (New York: Random House, 1977), p. 162.

13. Transcript of Thieu address to Congressional Delegation, 1 Mar 1975, Robert K. Wolthuis Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.

14. Vien, *Final Collapse*, p. 76; Hung and Schecter, *The Palace File*, pp. 259-262.

15. U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Extension of Remarks, Report of Representative Paul N. McCloskey, Jr., "The North Vietnam-South Vietnam Confrontation," 94th Cong., 1st Sess., *Congressional Record* (14 Mar 1975), pp. 6775-6779; Paul N. McCloskey, Jr., "Report, Vietnam Fact-Finding Trip, February 24-March 3, 1975," 14 Mar 1975, Walthuis Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.

16. All figures and estimates are from USDAO Saigon, Monthly Intelligence Summary and Threat Analysis, Jan 1975, Robert K. Wolthuis Files, Vietnam Fact Sheets, Gerald R. Ford Library. By this time, according to the report, the NVA had 17 divisions already in the south, supported by 500 tanks and 500 artillery pieces. Additionally, they had over 200 air defense weapons of various calibers, including surface to air missiles. These figures do not include 40,000 NVA soldiers operating inside Cambodia or a separate campaign or 50,000 support personnel in Laos

17. Van Tien Dung, *Our Great Spring Victory: An Account of the Liberation of South Vietnam* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977) , pp. 31-32.

18. *Ibid.*

19. The description of this fateful meeting comes from Vien, *Final Collapse*, pp. 77-82.

20. Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "Why the Vietnamese Collapsed," *Washington Post*, 5 Apr 1975.

21. Vien, *Final Collapse*, p. 78, also wrote: "I said something to the effect that this redeployment was indeed necessary, and I had embraced such an idea for a long time. But so far I had kept it to myself and considered it an improper proposal. First of all, it conflicted with the prevailing national policy, and second, if I had made such a suggestion, it could well have been interpreted as an indication of defeatism."

22. Stephen T. Hosmer, Konrad Kellen, and Brian M. Jenkins, *The Fall of South Vietnam: Statements by Vietnamese and Civilian Leaders* (Santa Monica, California: Rand Corporation, 1978), p. 84.

23. Larry Englemann, *Tears Before the Rain: An Oral History of the Fall of South Vietnam* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997), p. 302. This is a comprehensive oral history in which soldiers and civilians, both American and Vietnamese, describe what it was like in the spring of 1975 as the NVA carried out its final offensive against the Republic of Vietnam. It provides the perspectives of a wide range of participants and observers, including soldiers, generals, ambassadors, journalists, children, doctors, and even those from the other side.

24. Vien, *Final Collapse*, p. 86.

25. Alan Dawson, *55 Days: The Fall of South Vietnam* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1977), p. 58. According to Dawson, a UPI reporter who was in Vietnam in 1975 and reported on the fall of South Vietnam, Phu was told by Thieu to carry out the order to evacuate or be replaced and jailed.

26. The Americans from DAO, CIA, and other organizations working in Pleiku knew nothing about the evacuation until informed by Colonel Ly on 15 March. The South Vietnamese had taken the Americans completely by surprise, but by nightfall, the Embassy, using Air America, was able to evacuate 450 American and Vietnamese employees of the various U.S. agencies in Pleiku.

27. Larry Engelmann, *Tears Before the Rain: An Oral History of the Fall of South Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 63.

28. Drew Middleton, "Saigon Defenses Now Are Stretched," *New York Times*, 20 Mar 1975.

29. Quoted in Hosmer, Kellen, and Jenkins, *The Fall of South Vietnam*, p. 94.

30. Denis A. Warner, *Certain Victory: How Hanoi Won the War* (Kansas City: Sneed, Andrews and McKeel, 1978), pp. 60-61.

31. Quoted in Dougan and Fulghum, *The Fall of the South*, p. 58.

32. Dawson, *55 Days*, p. 13; Vien, *Final Collapse*, p. 146.

33. Quoted in Dougan and Fulghum, *The Fall of the South*, p. 60.

34. Hosmer, Kellen, and Jenkins, *The Fall of South Vietnam*, pp. 95-96.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 96

36. Vien, *Final Collapse*, p. 95.

37. James S. Olson and Randy Roberts, *Where the Last Domino Fell: America and Vietnam, 1945 to 1990* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), p. 259.

38. Defense Attache Office, U.S. Embassy Saigon, RVNAF Final Assessment, 15 June 1975, pp. 5-28.

39. Stuart A. Herrington, *Peace With Honor* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1983), p. 123.

40. Hosmer, Kellen, and Jenkins, *The Fall of South Vietnam*, p. 96.

41. *Ibid.*

42. Vien, *Final Collapse*, p. 95.

43. Arnold R. Isaacs, *Without Honor: Defeat in Vietnam and Cambodia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), p. 345.

44. Hung and Schecter, *The Palace File*, p. 272.

45. "The Anatomy of a Battle," *Time*, 14 Apr 1975, pp. 16-17.

46. Hosmer, Kellen, and Jenkins, *The Fall of South Vietnam*, p. 109.

47. Don Oberdorfer, "Danang Diary: From Threat to Panic to Collpase," *Washington Post*, 7 Apr 1975.

48. Bernard Weintraub, "Saigon's Forces Are in State of Shock After Decision to Quit Northern Area," *New York Times*, 27 Mar 1975.

49. Defense Attache Office, U.S. Embassy Saigon, RVNAF Final Assessment, 15 June 1975, p. 5-15.

50. Hosmer, Kellen, and Jenkins, *The Fall of South Vietnam*, p. 111.

51. Homer D. Smith, "The Final Forty-Five Days in Vietnam." Unpublished paper, U.S. Army Center of Military History, Washington, D.C., 22 May 1975, p. 6.

52. Broadcast quoted in Isaacs, *Without Honor*, p. 365.

53. Warner, *Certain Victory*, p. 75.

54. Hosmer, Kellen, and Jenkins, *The Fall of South Vietnam*, p. 111; Lam Quang Thi, *Autopsy: The Death of South Vietnam* (Phoenix: Sphinx Publishing, 1986), pp. 158-159.

55. It is estimated that more than two million civilian refugees were left stranded in MR I after the evacuation of Da Nang.

56. Isaacs, *Without Honor*, p. 363.

57. Hosmer, Kellen, and Jenkins, *The Fall of South Vietnam*, p. 112.

58. Isaacs, *Without Honor*, p. 380.

59. "Growing Gloom in a Shrunken Land," *Time*, 7 Apr 1975, pp. 28-33.

60. Defense Attache Office, U.S. Embassy Saigon, RVNAF Final Assessment, 15 June 1975, p. 6-31.

61. William W. Momyer, *United States Air Force Southeast Asia Monograph Series: The Vietnamese Air Force, 1951-1975, An Analysis of Its Role in Combat* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975), p. 76.

62. Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History 1946-1975* (Novato, California: Presidio Press, 1988), p. 706.

63. Isaacs, *Without Honor*, p. 361.

64. Tran Van Tra, *Southeast Asia Report, No. 1247, Vietnam: History of the Bulwark B-2 Theater, vol. 5, Concluding the 30-year War* (Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam: Van Nghe Publishing, 1982), p. 125.

65. Dung, *Our Great Spring Victory*, p. 120-121.

66. Isaacs, *Without Honor*, p. 392.

67. "The Communists Tighten the Noose," *Time*, 21 Apr 1975, p. 14.

68. U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Appropriations, *Hearings on Emergency Military Assistance and Economic and Humanitarian Aid to South Vietnam*, 94th Cong., 1st sess., 15 Apr 1975, pp. 35-36. Kissinger had replaced William Rogers as Secretary of State in 1973.

69. John W. Finney, "Pullout of 5,000 to Leave 1,000 Americans in Saigon," *New York Times*, 16 Apr 1975.

70. Herrington, *Peace With Honor*, p. 172.

71. Dung, *Our Great Spring Victory*, p. 62.

72. Letter from Ford to Thieu, 22 Mar 1975, NSC Convenience Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.

73. Letter from Thieu to Ford, 22 Mar 1975, White House Central Files, Gerald R. Ford Library; Hung and Schecter, *The Palace File*, pp. 286-287.

74. Letter from Ford to Thieu, 25 Mar 1975, NSC Convenience Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.

75. Hung and Schecter, *The Palace File*, p. 291.

76. Memorandum for the President from Weyand, 4 Apr 1975, NSC Convenience Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.

77. Hung and Schecter, *The Palace File*, p. 300.

78. Memorandum for the President from Weyand, 4 Apr 1975, NSC Convenience Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.

79. U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Appropriations, *Hearings on Emergency Supplemental Appropriations for Assistance to the Republic of South Vietnam for Fiscal Year 1975*, 94th Cong., 1st sess., 21 Apr 1975, p. 3. This money would be used to provide 744 artillery pieces, 446 tanks and armored personnel carriers, more than 100,000 rifles, over 5,000 machine guns and 11,000 grenade launchers, about 120,000 tons of ground and air munitions, and about 12,000 trucks.

80. Memorandum for the President from Weyand, 4 Apr 1975, NSC Convenience Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.

81. Memorandum, Kempton B. Jenkins to Jack Marsh, 2 Apr 1975, J. O. Marsh Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.

82. Le Gro, *From Cease-Fire to Capitulation*, p. 171.

83. Transcript, Kissinger Press Conference, 5 Apr 1975, Vernon Loen and Charles Leppert Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.

84. Gerald R.Ford, *Public Papers of the President of the United States, 1975* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1975), pp. 420-421; Transcript of Press Conference, 3 Apr 1975, David Gergen Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.

85. "Seeking the Last Exit from Vietnam," *Time*, 21 Apr 1975, p. 8.

86. "Criticism of the Congress is Muted by Schlesinger," *New York Times*, 7 Apr 1975.

87. Anderson, "Gerald R. Ford and the Presidents War in Vietnam," p. 196. The best account of the Nixon-Thieu letters is found in Hung and Schecter, *The Palace File*. Altogether, there were twenty-seven letters from Nixon to Thieu and four from President Ford. On April 21, Ford was interviewed on live television and radio by Eric Sevareid and Bob Schiefer about the situation in South Vietnam. When the president faulted Congress for not appropriating the requested military aid, he was asked about "secret agreements" between Nixon and President Thieu and he replied that "The personal correspondence between President Nixon and President Thieu corresponds with the public record." The transcript of this program can be found in the David Gergen Papers, 1974-77, General Subject File, Gerald R. Ford Library.

88. Address by President Gerald R. Ford to Joint Session, 10 Apr 1975, Loen and Leppert Files, Congressional Liaison Office, Gerald R. Ford Library; Ford, *Public Papers, 1975*, pp. 459-473.

89. The two who walked out were freshmen Democrats Toby Moffett of Connecticut and George Miller of California.

90. Byrd's comments quoted in Memorandum from Kempton B. Jenkins to J. O. Marsh, John O. March Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.

91. Letter, Abzug to Ford, 3 Apr 1975, Robert K. Walthuis Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.

92. Transcript of Kissinger testimony before Committee on Appropriations, 21 April 1975, Nessen Papers, Gerald R. Ford Library.

93. U.S. Congress, 94th Cong., 1st Sess., *Congressional Record*, 22 Apr, 1975, p. 11268.

94. Speech quoted in Isaacs, *Without Honor*, pp. 414-415.

95. Dung, *Our Great Spring Victory*, p. 82. Tiziano Terzani, an Italian journalist , reported in *Giai Phong! The Fall and Liberation of Saigon* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), p. 39, quotes Colonel Con Man, editor of *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, the North Vietnamese armed forces newspaper, on the incident:

> "Nguyen Than Trung has been a Party member ever since he was a student. It was the Party that ordered him to join the Saigon air force and go to the United States where he obtained his pilot's license. Such a man was important for a crucial occasion, and for this reason Trung did not reveal himself and had never been used before. The bombing of Doc Lap Palace was a blow well worth the trouble. The air force was Thieu's trusted weapon, one of the foundations of his power. With the bombs of 8 April we wanted to destroy that trust, to spread suspicion within the air force itself. The attack succeeded magnificently."

96. Dung, *Great Spring Victory*, p. 80.

97. Message, Smith to CJCS, 13 Apr 1975, NSC Convenience Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.

98. Le Gro, *From Cease-Fire to Capitulation*, pp. 173. Although VNAF had done an admirable job in the early phases of the battle for Xuan Loc, a large part of the NVA victory was due to the degradation of VNAF close air support caused by extremely accurate artillery fire which continued to fall on Bien Hoa air base, damaging six F-5A fighters and fourteen A-37 Dragonfly fighter-bombers and seriously curtailing air operations from the base. The South Vietnamese, already greatly outnumbered, were unable to hold their positions in the absence of effective close air support.

99. Text of letter is found in Hung and Schecter, *The Palace File*, pp. 320-321.

100. *Ibid.*, p. 323.

101. Hung and Schecter, *The Palace File*, p. 327.

102. *Ibid.*, p. 326.

103. Thi, *Autopsy*, p. 187.

104. Dong Van Khuyen, *Indochina Monographs: The RVNAF* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1979), p. 387.

105. Account of the meeting is from Hung and Schecter, *The Palace File*, p. 330.

106. *Ibid.*, pp. 335-336; Olivier Todd, *Cruel April: The Fall of Saigon* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1987), pp. 293-294.

107. Vien, *Final Collapse*, p. 143.

108. Ibid. Frank Snepp, *Decent Interval*, p. 324, maintains that this group called on Thieu to convince him to resign

109. Hung and Schecter, *The Palace File*, p. 331.

110. *Ibid.*, pp. 331-332.

111. With the assistance of U.S. officials, Thieu departed Saigon for Taiwan.

112. Quoted in Isaacs, *Without Honor*, p. 422.

113. *Washington Post*, 25 Apr 1975; Ron Nessen, *It Sure Looks Different from the Inside* (Chicago: Playboy Press, 1978), p. 108.

114. Message, Martin to Kissinger, 23 Apr 1975, NSC Convenience Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.

115. *Ibid.*

116. Huong was 71 years old and suffered from asthma and arteriosclerosis.

117. From a radio broadcast recalling the members of the National Assembly quoted in Terzani, *Giai Phong!*, p. 22.

118. Quoted in Isaacs, *Without Honor*, p. 439.

119. *Ibid.*

120. According to Isaacs, *Without Honor*, pp. 432-433, and Terzani, *Giai Phong!*, pp. 23-24, the French Ambassador, Jean-Marie Merillon, was a strong proponent of what became known as the "Minh solution" and tried to convince everyone he knew in the Saigon government that the elevation of Minh might save Saigon.

121. Tran Van Don, *Our Endless War* (San Rafael, California: Presidio Press, 1978), p. 253.

122. Terzani, *Giai Phong!*, p. 26.

123. Quoted in Isaacs, *Without Honor*, p. 440; Todd, *Cruel April*, p. 341.

124. Speech quoted in Isaacs, *Without Honor*, pp. 442-443; Todd, *Cruel April*, pp. 342-343; Terzani, *Giai Phong!*, p. 41.

125. Terzani, *Giai Phong!*, p. 41.

126. In order to demonstrate to the North Vietnamese his sincerity, Minh later wrote to Ambassador Martin requesting the evacuation of all American personnel in the Defense Attache Office "within twenty-four hours beginning April 29, 1975, in order that the question of peace for Viet Nam can be settled early." Text of letter is in Hung and Schecter, *The Palace File*, p. 478.

127. Defense Attache Office, U.S. Embassy Saigon, RVNAF Final Assessment, pp. 16-E-14.

128. Terzani, *Giai Phong!*, p. 43.

129. Quoted in Todd, *Cruel April*, p. 343.

130. Wilford G. Burchett, *Grasshoppers and Elephants, Why Vietnam Fell* (New York: Urizen Books, 1977), pp. 38-39.

131. Dung, *Our Great Spring Victory*, p. 109.

132. Brigadier General Tran Quang Khoi, "Fighting to the Finish," *Armor*, March-April 1996, p. 23.

133. "Preparing to Deal for Peace," *Time*, 5 May 1975, pp. 12-14.

134. Englemann, *Tears Before the Rain*, p. 248.

135. Defense Attache Office, U. S. Embassy Saigon, Final Assessment, p. 16-B-4; Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr., "Final Days of South Vietnam," *American History* (Apr, 1995), p. 67. Two other Marines died taking part in the evacuation when their helicopter crashed into the sea. They were Captain William C. Nystul and First Lieutenant Michael J. Shea.

136. Momyer, *The Vietnamese Air Force*, p. 79. Among the aircraft that reached U Tapao Air Base in Thailand were 26 F-5 fighters, 27 A-37 fighter-bombers, several gunships, and numerous transport planes.

137. USDAO Saigon, Final Assessment.

138. Gerald R. Ford, *A Time to Heal: The Autobiography of Gerald R. Ford* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), p. 256; Snepp, *Decent Interval*, pp. 292-299.

139. Harry G. Summers, "Final Days of South Vietnam," *American History*, April 1995, p. 68. Another tragedy that also had similar symbolic implications to many was the April 4 crash of an Air Force C-5A transport loaded with 243 "Baby Lift" children and thirty-seven American women, mostly secretaries and staff from the U.S. embassy. Robert D. Schulzinger, *A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam, 1941-1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), wrote: "Americans saw it all on television. For many of them the plane crash symbolized much of the horror and futility of the American involvement in Vietnam. Whatever their good intentions, the Americans had never comprehended Vietnamese culture or politics. Modern technology seemed mocked and defeated by Vietnamese tenacity."

140. Terzani, *Giai Phong!*, p. 76.

141. Order quoted in Isaacs, *Without Honor*, p. 467, and Terzani, *Giai Phong!*, pp. 66-67. General Cao Van Vien, former Chief of the Joint General Staff had departed with his family by airplane for the United States, without even bothering to turn in his resignation.

142. Terzani, *Giai Phong!*, p. 77.

143. Dawson, *55 Days*, pp. 7-8; Terzani, *Giai Phong!*, p. 87.

144. An article commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the fall of Saigon in *Time* magazine, "The Final 10 Days," 24 Apr 1995, pp. 25-35, related the experiences of Major Hoa.

145. Olson and Roberts, *Where the Last Domino Fell*, p. 263; Dougan and Fulghum, *The Fall of the South*, p. 175.