

* After retirement in 1972 I became consultant to the Minister of Defence of Singapore, Dr. Gou.

I discussed this point at ASEAN meetings with Indonesian Generals. They would not of fought against the Communist Coup if we had not landed combat troops in Vietnam.

Saigon's Fall Masked a U.S. Victory in Vietnam

By GEOFFREY WALKER

Saturday we commemorate, or try to forget, the fall of Saigon to the North Vietnamese invaders eight years ago.

Of the traumatic events that led up to that collapse, only one point, even now, is the subject of universal agreement: that the whole enterprise ended in the abject and unmitigated defeat, not only of South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, but also of all the political and military objectives of the United States and its allies.

Like many conventionally accepted propositions, this view is wrong. The Vietnam struggle was to a considerable extent successful in its main objectives. The grievous allied losses were therefore a sacrifice, not a waste. Veterans of that conflict, especially the combat veterans, who lost no major battle, should be honored for achieving what they did, with a ruthless aggressor in front of them and a disloyal intelligentsia to the rear.

Vietnam strongly parallels the War of Spanish Succession of 1701 to 1713, in which Britain, Austria, Holland and Prussia joined in a grand alliance to prevent Louis XIV of France from placing his grandson Philip on the throne of Spain, to succeed the Spanish king who was dying childless. Spain was then perceived as a powerful country, and had a vast and opulent empire. If it had fallen under the tyranny of Louis XIV, the future prospects for freedom and the rule of law in continental Europe and in Britain (and therefore in North America and the other English-speaking lands as well) would have been much dimmer.

With the Duke of Marlborough and Prince Eugene of Savoy turning in a succession of victories, the war was popular with the British people for the first eight

years. But after Marlborough was replaced for domestic political reasons, the tide began to turn against the alliance. In 1712 the British commanders were ordered not to take part in any further battles. Sensible people started to look toward peace. But the peace which Britain signed was a humiliating one. Behind the backs of its allies, Britain gave up the whole point at issue and allowed Louis to leave his grandson on the Spanish throne.

Englishmen of the time felt that a militarily successful war had ended in betrayal and defeat. But as Walter Bagehot argued a century and a half later, these feelings were mistaken. For there are occasions, he wrote, "when a war itself does its own work." To concede the issue in 1713 when France and its king were weakened by the conflict was very different from conceding it in 1700, when they were both at the peak of their power and aggressiveness.

In the same way, history may judge that the time purchased by the struggle in South Vietnam was ultimately more important than its outcome. From the outset, allied opposition to North Vietnam had two openly stated objectives: first, to save South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia from invasion and, second, to give the other developing countries of Southeast Asia time to build up their economies and societies in order to make them better able to resist communist military expansion when it later turned its attention back to them. The "national liberation fronts" established by the communists in these countries had made long-term communist intentions quite clear.

This second objective was the more important, since in terms of population, resources and strategic location, other threatened countries in the area—Indone-

sia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, the Philippines and perhaps Taiwan and South Korea—far outweighed the three embattled states of Indochina.

The allies succeeded in this second objective. These countries are now among the most economically successful and politically stable, and the most liberal, in the Third World. Subject to certain reservations about the Philippines, they are today incomparably tougher nuts to crack than they would have been in the early 1960s had Hanoi (and its Soviet and Chinese backers) enjoyed a speedy victory over the South. And in the intervening years the Chinese-Soviet rift became so deep that the two great dictatorships were no longer able to collaborate in backing wars of "national liberation"—even to the point where China would occasionally support Western interests for the sake of offsetting Soviet influence.

A particularly crucial pass during those years came when the communists sought to overthrow the Indonesian government in September 1965. The fact that the U.S. and its allies were resisting the communists in Vietnam strengthened the determination of Indonesia's soldiers to stand united behind their commanders, rather than throw in their lot with the supposedly invincible communists, as many of them might otherwise have done. The attempted coup was decisively defeated.

Had even that single issue gone the other way, the long-term consequences for Southeast Asia, the Pacific and the world would have been inestimably greater than those of the tragic event eight years ago.

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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Published since 1889 by

DOW JONES & COMPANY, INC.

Editorial and Corporate Headquarters:
25 Cortlandt Street, New York, N.Y. 10007.
Telephone (212) 265-5000

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