

Chapter 10

The War is Finished

This chapter tells the story of the collapse of the South Vietnamese army and government. It raises the question whether the U.S. deserted its ally at the end of a noble, if unsuccessful, effort or if it simply had made a serious mistake from the beginning.

Readers will remember that the final peace agreement signed on January 27, 1973, allowed President Thieu and his government to remain in power during the U.S. withdrawal. The treaty also allowed the North Vietnamese to stay in South Vietnam, and called for an election to unite North and South Vietnam. The election would be supervised by a 'National Council of Reconciliation', and not the present government of South Vietnam. This Council was to be set up 'immediately after the cease-fire.'

North Vietnamese government officials were prepared to use the election to take control of South Vietnam. They gave orders for their followers in the south to prepare for a political campaign. If they did not win, of course, North Vietnam still had a 145,000-man army in South Vietnam.

President Thieu, however, never planned to allow a communist take over of South Vietnam by way of an election. "If we allow the communists to operate," he said, "we will lose control of the country." That explains his order to his police the day after he signed the Paris Peace Accord, to kill Vietnamese "who suddenly begin taking a communist tone."

Violations of the Cease Fire

As it turned out, both sides cheated on the peace agreement before it even went into effect. Shortly after he accepted the in-place cease-fire, Henry Kissinger telegraphed Thieu to take more territory from the Vietcong. The day before the agreement was signed, the Vietcong took over some 300 villages controlled by South Vietnam. On the first day of the peace agreement the South Vietnamese government started attacking these villages to drive the Vietcong out.

From the winter of 1973 to the spring of 1975, the South Vietnamese government more or less followed the orders given by President Thieu. Communists were arrested and put in jail. No steps were taken to form the National Council of Reconciliation that was supposed to prepare for an election. And no elections were held.

Corruption in South Vietnam

According to an old Vietnamese expression, 'a house leaks from the top.' President Thieu promoted military officers based on their loyalty to him, and not their ability and performance as soldiers. He did nothing to stop the corruption in his government. Thieu's wife and her friends made millions of US dollars buying and selling real estate in Saigon. They made their purchases based on what they knew the government wanted to buy. Generals kept the money that was supposed to pay their soldiers. Army officers sold weapons and ammunition to the Vietcong. Soldiers who were supposed to deliver military supplies to the ARVN sold them on the black market. People who criticized the government were arrested and thrown in jail. At the very bottom of this chain of corruption, the South Vietnamese soldier did not have enough money to feed his family. Poorly motivated, led, trained, and fed, when the time came, he was not prepared to fight.

Stage 3 of Guerrilla War

The South Vietnamese had failed to take the first steps that were supposed to lead to the Council of National Reconciliation that would run free and democratic elections. The North Vietnamese subsequently prepared for their final military campaign. After years of guerrilla warfare, North Vietnam was prepared for Stage 3 – large unit attacks. The famous Ho Chi Minh trail, that for years had been used to infiltrate men and supplies into South Vietnam, was a narrow jungle trail under protective covering of trees. North Vietnam converted the trail into an all-weather highway. It stretched from North Vietnam, through Laos and Cambodia and into the Mekong delta, south of Saigon. With its various feeder roads, it covered 12,000 miles. A 3,000-mile long pipeline was built to supply needed gas for the North Vietnamese army. The road even had rest, service and repair stations. Anti-aircraft guns guarded the roadway. Trucks, tanks and armed cars drove south down these roads. The Vietnamese had come a long way from their guerrilla war days, and when the time came, they would be ready to strike.

Stage 3 of guerrilla warfare, full army attacks, began on March 10, 1975. First the South Vietnamese Air Force was chased off by Russian anti-aircraft guns. Then North Vietnamese tanks poured in to their first targeted town, Banmethout. Suddenly confronted by Russian tanks and a well-armed enemy, South Vietnamese troops panicked and fled.

President Thieu decided to give up all of his positions near the North Vietnam border to concentrate his troops in the southern region around Saigon. Then he changed his mind and ordered a defense of the North. But the army general defending Pleiku fled by plane, leaving his soldiers and their families to escape on their own. Before long some 200,000 leaderless men, women, and children were fleeing toward Danang on the coast. But Danang itself was under attack. Soon, the South Vietnamese army had turned into a terrorized mob of fleeing men. They used their weapons, if at all, to shoot civilians in their path. Reaching the water's edge:

the soldiers went down to the beach, where some threw away their weapons and their uniforms and dived into the sea to swim out to waiting American ships, while others commandeered boats and then began firing at one another on the open water. Soon the scenes in Danang were repeated in cities through most of South Vietnam. In one city, the soldiers were shooting at the owners of the restaurants where they ate. Something deeper than the collapse of an army's discipline was taking place. It was the disintegration of a society that had been pulverized by war and corrupted by foreign invaders for thirty years. A society that had lost all sense of self-respect and that despised itself for its subservience to one foreign master after another – a society that had been turned into a literal brothel for millions of soldiers from foreign countries – was tearing itself apart in a fury of self-destruction.²³

Similar scenes were taking place in other cities. Thieu's million-man army equipped with excellent American weapons simply self-destructed seeking some kind of safety, somewhere other than in Vietnam.

The Last Days of Saigon

This spreading panic threatened Saigon as that city prepared to defend itself. Gerald Ford, formerly Nixon's vice-President, became commander in chief in 1974 after Richard Nixon resigned because of his

²³ The New Yorker, (April 14, 1975), pp. 27-28.

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involvement in the cover up of a break-in of the Democratic Party headquarters in Watergate. President Ford and his Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, asked Congress for another \$700 million to defend the rest of South Vietnam. But Congress, by this time tired of the long war, refused. Kissinger, Thieu and others later blamed the U.S. Congress for the defeat, which followed.



Desperate Americans and Vietnamese escaping from Saigon, April 30, 1975

One month after the fall of Danang the North Vietnamese army marched into Saigon. As the enemy army approached the capital, the ARVN collapsed completely and surrendered with hardly a fight. With it, billions of dollars of U.S. equipment fell into the hands of North Vietnam. Meanwhile men, women and children tried desperately to escape the enemy. Fifty thousand people fled Saigon the week before the communist forces arrived. Seven thousand were air lifted by helicopter to waiting U.S. ships off shore in the last 18 hours. The million Vietnamese who had depended on the U.S. had good reason to fear living under control of the victorious communist army

after 29 years of brutal warfare.

Although the outcome certainly could not please the U.S., at least the long war was finally over.

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Describe and try to account for the failure of the 1973 peace agreement and the subsequent collapse of the South Vietnamese government in the Spring of 1975.
2. Do you think that Congress made the right decision not to vote for an additional \$700 million to defend Saigon? Why or why not?
3. Given the final outcome of the war, evaluate U.S. policy in Vietnam - a mistake from the beginning or a noble, but unsuccessful effort. Explain. (Note: last chapter focuses totally on this question).