

How Did It Happen? Some Replies

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Saigon Did Not Gain From Examples of the Communists

SAIGON, South Vietnam, April 23—The Communists, in the words of the Pentagon, now have "unlimited military options," and, as the Army Chief of Staff, Gen. Frederick C.

Weyand, has testified, they "have the capability to overwhelm South Vietnam if they want to."

The war has reached this point, despite the virtual equality in numbers of men under arms on the two sides over the years; despite the incalculably greater aid in firepower and technology that the Saigon side received from abroad, and despite nearly seven years of direct participation by American troops, aircraft and warships.

How did Saigon get into the situation it is in? What were the factors that brought that situation about?

Many Vietnamese, including former President Nguyen Van Thieu, ascribe the primary blame to the United States, which, Mr. Thieu asserts, failed to continue military aid at a time when the Russians and Chinese poured matériel and supplies into North Vietnam.

Others maintain that morale was rotted away by corruption and by the mistakes of poor officers.

The Achilles Heel

Neither factor fully explains the collapse of Saigon's military apparatus in two months or the Communists' sweep over two-thirds of the country, in which they routed and disarmed a large proportion of the defenders and reached the gates of the capital.

In the view of many Vietnamese the Achilles heel of Saigon's army was and is a fondness for military luxury—an appetite for which the United States must bear special responsibility.

Since South Vietnam came into being as a result of the Geneva agreement that followed the Communist victory over France in 1954, that army has ever lacked for arms, transport, accommodations and even physical comforts that were denied the Vietcong and their North Vietnamese allies.

Thirteen years ago this correspondent was accompanying a Government battalion in a raid

on a suspected Vietcong stronghold in the southernmost part of the country. It stumbled on a Communist arms depot and factory.

The factory, concealed in huts in a banana grove along a canal, was producing grenade casings from scrap aluminum, shotgun cartridges made of brass tubing and of French coins with holes in the centers accommodating percussion caps, and serviceable 60-mm. mortars designed to fire captured ammunition.

Full Supply of Equipment

With such crude weapons the Vietcong were already making life difficult for Government troops, which, even then, were equipped with up-to-date American rifles and carbines, howitzers, landing craft and communications equipment and had cover from fighter-bombers.

North Vietnam's now-ailing Defense Minister, Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, writing after his victory at Dien Bien Phu, said of the early stages of the war:

"The sole source of supply could only be the battlefield—to take the materiel from the enemy and turn it against him."

North Vietnam and the Vietcong have received major foreign arms and economic aid, including the Soviet-built missiles that defended Hanoi against American bombers, and most of the tanks, heavy artillery pieces and small arms with which they invaded the South.

Even at this hour Saigon's forces are being hammered by captured American-made howitzers and machine guns and other weapons. The Communists recently captured more than 600 tanks and personnel carriers in Central Vietnam alone—enough to supply a good-sized army.

More important than arms is attitude.

"You give an army the means

to get around in helicopters or on roads, you accustom them to unlimited artillery and air support for long enough, you get them used to sleeping in bed at night, and what happens?" a South Vietnamese officer asked in conversation with an American.

No Longer Willing to Walk

"I will tell you what happens. At a certain point neither the troops nor the officers are willing any longer to walk to battle, hacking their way through jungles if necessary. So they stay in their helicopters and get shot down or cut off from American rescue, or they drive along the road, where they get shelled or ambushed, and cut to pieces.

"Every officer knows this, but our army has become flabby and lazy over the years, and we owe some of that to the kind of luxury aid you gave us."

In contrast the Communist formula, today as it was in the final stage of the French Indochina war, is to operate even large units as if they were guerrillas, which in many ways they are.

The secret of the Communists' defense against whatever weapon or force has always been to try to avoid offering a big target and to disperse men and weapons.

Tran Hung Dao, the medieval Vietnamese general who brought guerrilla warfare to a high art against the occupying Chinese, taught his army to assemble only at the point and time of battle, and then in greater numbers than the enemy had. After the fight his troops would disperse again to avoid inevitable enemy reinforcements.

Old Ideas Ignored

The Communist acknowledge that they borrowed many of their tricks from Tran Hung Dao, but the Saigon side ignored his ideas.

Tran Hung Dao and his tactical disciple, General Giap, also relied enormously on the skillful use of camouflage. As Saigon's dwindling air force makes its last sorties it is still failing to find most of the big 130-mm. guns shelling outposts around the city, though they cannot be far away.

There has always been general agreement that the Communist forces are better disciplined than those of Saigon; this is even applauded in some quarters as demonstrating the relatively more democratic quality of life in the South.

It is said that Communist tank drivers have occasionally been found chained to their vehicles, but Communist discipline, stronger than mere chains, was developed not just for tank drivers but for an entire people.

Discussing this total national involvement in a single cause, General Giap, in his most famous theoretical work, "People's War, People's Army," wrote:

"The application of the strategy of long-term resistance requires a whole system of education, a whole ideological struggle among the people and party members, a gigantic effort of organization in both military and economic fields, extraordinary sacrifices from the army as well as from the people, at the front as well as at the rear. Each inhabitant is a soldier, each village a fortress, each party cell and each administrative committee a staff."

Diem Emulated Giap

Successive Saigon governments and, to some extent, their American allies, copied the theoretical wisdom aspect of the Giap doctrine along, and attempts to emulate it. The late Ngo Dinh Diem, firmly believed that the Communist system should be adapted.

Hundreds of thousands of his civil servants wore blue uniforms, or, as he called them, his Personalist police.

zation and even compelled to attend "self-criticism" meetings—the equivalent of party cells.

Mr. Diem also devised the short-lived system of "strategic hamlets"—political, economic and military units supposedly capable of survival on their own according to General Giap's dictum "each inhabitant a soldier."

The imitations of Communism died with Mr. Diem in 1963. His party had no momentum of its own and, in any case, the glaring gulf between South Vietnam's rich and poor was reflected even in his political system, enormously weakening whatever broad appeal it might have had.

Apart from rigid discipline, Vietnamese Communism has also been held together by real loathing for foreign domination, actual or imaginary. Communist exploitation of "the class war" has also fallen on receptive ears. This was particularly true among the great masses of farmers and urban slum dwellers exposed to the graft, bribery and gross injustice that characterized successive Saigon administrations at the grass-roots level.

Won Hearts and Minds

The Communists, with all their patent brutality in dealing with opponents, succeeded fairly well in what Americans used to refer to as "winning hearts and minds." Though much of the Communist propaganda was based on lies and half-truths and much on trickery, it was skillful, motivated patient. As a result, when Saigon's army collapsed in Central Vietnam last month many of the victims of rampaging troops were from among the hated rich.

The typical Communist leader is the son of a Communist and has dedicated his life to a cause, the desertion of which would be a major psychological wrench. Furthermore, the tradition has been fed by the hatred engendered by a long war in which friends and relatives fighting have been killed; an element of vengeance has always played a big role on both sides.

"You know what I believe?" a well-known Saigon journalist asked after the resignation of President Thieu. "If a free election was held today—and I mean really free—the Communists would win it easily. They would not have my vote or those of any of my friends. We know them as totalitarians under whom the human brain must force itself to atrophy or die. But in a sense we are the foreigners and the Communists are the real Vietnamese, God help us."

It is the fashion in Saigon now to blame the Americans for everything that has gone wrong, though enormous numbers of Americans have fought and worked over the years with dedication, courage and insight to a degree most Americans at home will never fully realize. Despite their perceptions, shared with and largely learned from Vietnamese colleagues, the war was lost.

"Some of us knew what was wrong," a Vietnamese veteran said to an American. "Some of you knew what was wrong. But on the whole both our peoples remained blind, and even now we seem to have learned nothing. Well, it no longer matters."