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Inside Story of

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This is the anatomy of a debacle, the disastrous collapse of South Vietnamese resistance within weeks amid almost incredible scenes of treachery, greed and brutality, as related for the first time by high-level intelligence sources.

The story covers the total breakdown of military and civilian authority in the Republic of Vietnam, running battles among fleeing soldiers and with civilians, an absolute paralysis of will on the part of then-President Nguyen Van Thieu, the large-scale treachery of the ruling Vietnamese elite, and the presumed fate of 7.4 tons of gold worth approximately \$30 million, as well as additional millions in hard currency reserves.

Above all, the debacle was precipitated, the sources say, by military desertions — not soldiers deserting their units, but officers deserting their soldiers.

The information comes not from American, but other sources, at least one of whom was high in Vietnamese councils. This source's knowledge and integrity are virtually unchallengeable.

Three main causes brought about the spectacular Communist victory:

- A major shortage of promised U.S. supplies left the defenders of the two northern sectors of South Vietnam, military regions I and II, in an untenable position against opponents whose numbers and arms were swelling rapidly, and

Vietnam

Disaster

who had committed nearly all their forces to a conquest of the south.

- Then-President Thieu was paralyzed by the danger and could not make up his own mind to act or allow anyone else to act — except to safeguard his own wealth and person.

- Despite almost 20 years of American involvement, the caste-stratified Vietnamese social structure, civilian and military, had hardly altered, so that the society remained deeply divided, and

a small group of the urban elite wanted to continue using the rural peasantry to protect their own privileges.

Against that background, perhaps the clearest way to tell the tale is in chronological order, beginning on January 15 of this year.

At that time, Thieu was urgently advised by a group of senior generals and intelligence officers that he had no option but to order evacuation of the two northernmost military regions, covering almost half of South Vietnam's territory.

Thieu was told that a massive strategic withdrawal must begin no later than February 15 if there was to be any realistic hope of saving the southernmost military regions, III and IV, where well over half the country's population lives. If he reduced his territory and concentrated his forces, Thieu was advised, he would almost certainly possess sufficient manpower to defend those regions for a long time. Besides, American supplies would be just adequate to enable those units to fight effectively.

But Thieu, already caching away a good part of his "personal" fortune in Switzerland, could not make up his mind.

Finally, about March 10, with the Communist attack on Ban Me Thuot in the Central Highlands, Thieu ordered the withdrawal from the two northern military regions. The order came almost a month after the generals' deadline.

The alienated officer corps began a mass flight upon receiving Thieu's order. Generals and others with access to helicopters piled themselves, their families and their favorites into those short-range machines. According to one source, Quang Nai province, south of Da Nang, "is now littered with the wreckage of helicopters that ran out of fuel in their mad, unthinking, southward flight."

When the senior officers had deserted their units, it was the turn of the colonels, majors and captains—indeed anyone who had access to any form of road transportation. Jeeps possessed "cross-country capability," while the ambu-

lances' red crosses were, initially, respected by the common soldiers and civilians—if not necessarily by the enemy. But the enemy was the officers' last concern by then.

Many military vehicles also were abandoned when they broke down or ran out of fuel. All civilian vehicles, even the ubiquitous Honda motorcycles, became fair game as panic spread among the leaderless troops, who abandoned equipment worth at least \$800 million.

Soldiers armed with M-16s stood by the roadside and sprayed the riders of passing motorcycles. Kicking aside the bodies, they mounted the Hondas—often meeting the same fate after a few miles.

Although many did not make it, the survivors of the spontaneous rout jammed into Da Nang, which possessed an excellent harbor and airport. Da Nang became a jungle, with every person fighting for his own survival, the armed soldiers naturally holding the advantage. All authority and order broke down in the rush to save oneself.

The various services turned against each other. The most grotesquely macabre incident occurred when the Vietnamese air force, anxious to save its own, sent three C-130 transports to Da Nang from its main base at

Bien Hoa.

Hundreds of airmen and their families piled onto those desperately overloaded planes, which began taxiing with their big rear cargo-ramps open. Armed soldiers threatened the unarmed airmen and piled onto the ramps, overloading the planes still more.

The first two C-130s barely waddled into the air—and crashed in flames a few hundred yards from the end of the runway. The pilot of the last, learning from his comrades' fate, frantically appealed through the public-address system for his passengers to lighten the ship.

Everything portable went out the hatches. Men and women even tossed off clothing and wristwatches, while the infantrymen threw away their weapons. The air force men, massed in front of the plane, then rushed on the soldiers and hurled almost a hundred off the rear cargo-ramp at an altitude of from 3000 to 4000 feet. That plane reached Bien Hoa safely.

Although the fleeing units were disorganized, demoralized and largely unarmed, the South Vietnamese still had a significant military preponderance in the two southernmost military regions. Even at that point, South Vietnam might have saved its heartland, although it had dissipated almost half its military assets.

But almost all combat-worthy troops were gathered into a static perimeter defense around Saigon itself.

Thieu deployed the entire South Vietnamese army as if it were an immense body-guard intended to protect himself and his clique—and to ensure that they could escape with as much of their wealth as possible.

Thieu's wife already had left the country when Thieu announced his resignation last Monday. Otherwise, 7.4 tons of gold bars, treated as if they were private property, were the clique's chief concern, as were a few millions in foreign-currency reserves. Some informed estimates, incidentally, are vastly larger, ranging up to ten times as much.

After failing to induce air carriers to move the gold, the clique reportedly shipped three tons on a freighter bound for Europe. The ship's name and its exact destination are not known to informants.

An additional ton of gold, according to some informed reports, was moved by Air Vietnam, the national airline, late last week and early this week. Again, the exact destination is unknown, although it is almost certainly in Europe and probably in Switzerland, where Thieu is likely to settle.

The Vietnamese navy was concentrated in the approaches to Saigon. There could be only one conceivable purpose, and it was not tactical. Those ships were to serve as a backup evacuation force for Thieu, his clique and their loot. Already, a substantial, if unknown, portion of the three tons of gold presumably remaining had been distributed among the clique.