

The Capture of Danang—A

By John Burns

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PEKING—Thousands of civilians who fled the South Vietnamese city of Danang last week ahead of the conquering Communist troops were not refugees voting with their feet but ordinary people, with pro-Communist sympathies, who were forced to go at gunpoint—or so the readers of China's People's Daily newspaper are being asked to believe.

Comparing accounts of recent developments in Vietnam and Cambodia that have appeared in the Western press with those in the Chinese press, it is difficult to believe they refer to the same war.

The contrast was never so starkly apparent as in the coverage of the fall of Danang. Most Western accounts told of panic in the city, with desperate civilians trying to get out before the Communists took over. But Chinese accounts described a jubilant populace rising spontaneously to seize control of the city.

Citing a Vietcong communique, the People's Daily recounted how hundreds of thousands of civilians "who had been forced to retreat with the enemy (from Danang) firmly frustrated the vicious enemy scheme and returned to the city, where they gave the liberation armed forces a rousing welcome."

In another report, the paper told how those who had not been able to break free had been herded into "concentration camps" in areas still under Saigon's control.

A similar line was taken by the paper in its report on the Vietcong capture of the old imperial city of Hue, which fell three days before Danang. The Hanoi correspondent of the official Hsinhua news agency described how "group after group of people whom the enemy had forced to evacuate returned with jubilation to their homes by boat along the beautiful Perfume River."

The report continued: "Waving their bamboo hats,

old women and girls on board the boats warmly greeted the liberation fighters A hairdresser accused the Nguyen Van Thieu clique of forcing the people to evacuate."

The use of U.S. and British military ships in the evacuation of Danang was presented in a similar light. The paper's report mocked the claims of Washington and London that the exercise was humanitarian and supported Hanoi's charge that it was part of the forced evacuation scheme.

The representation of the South Vietnamese populace as being strongly pro-Vietcong is essential to the Chinese contention—in accord with the line taken by Hanoi

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Different Version From China

—that it is the Saigon government that has been violating the Paris cease-fire agreement, not the Communists.

The day after Danang fell, the People's daily set forth the Chinese line under a front-page headline that read "punish the Nguyen Van Thieu Clique Severely for Its Crime of Sabotaging the Paris Agreement." The article contended that the Saigon side had violated the cease-fire hundreds of thousands of times with its "nibbling attacks" on Communist-held areas.

To underscore its point about the people backing the Communists, the People's Daily frequently chronicles conditions in the

areas under Saigon's control. A report last week described how the "poverty-stricken laboring people and other people under the reactionary rule of the Saigon regime are starving and in danger of death."

The report said: "Many people take only one meal a day while many others live on wild vegetables. Tens of thousands of people are beginning in the streets . . . Quite a number of people are compelled to sell their sons and daughters or even commit suicide. But the high-ranking officials and officers of the Thieu clique live extravagantly by embezzlement, speculation and squeezing the people."

Reporting on Cambodia

has been in a similar vein, with daily assaults on the Phnom Penh government for its oppressive rule and frequent protests against the alleged killing of civilians by Phnom Penh troops. The civilians death toll taken by Communist rocket attacks on Phnom Penh and other cities is ignored in the welter of praise for the "liberation forces" and their "lofty ideals."

To Western analysts, this seeming lack of objectivity or concern for facts is nothing new. Indeed editors who take visitors on a tour of the People's Daily make only passing reference to the need to report what they call "objectivity realities"

and stress instead that the paper's first duty is to propagate the policies of the Communist Party, on Indochina and everything else.

That the political context dictates how stories are written was illustrated this week by two contrasting references in the paper to President Ford and his wife Betty. A story on the use of U.S. naval vessels to evacuate Danang spoke contemptuously of the President as acting "under the signboard of humanitarian evacuation," while another article in the same edition recorded proudly that Mrs. Ford had twice visited the exhibition of Chinese relics that closed at the weekend in Washington.