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THE CAPITULATION of Saigon has ended a 30-year struggle by the Vietnamese Communists to achieve what the great powers of the West snatched from them after World War II: control over all Vietnam, and freedom from foreign domination.

Their struggle ebbed and flowed as years of relative tranquility alternated with years of death and devastation. The faces and nationalities of their foes changed, as did the political atmosphere of the world.

French cabinets, South Korean troops, American Presidents, South Vietnamese generals and international agreements came and went, but the objective of the Communists in Hanoi remained constant, and now they have gained it.

It is impossible to calculate the price that was paid by those who tried to stop them. Especially in the United States; but also in the other countries of South-east Asia, the political and social impact of the Vietnam war went far beyond the appalling statistics of lives lost, bombs dropped and dollars spent. Ultimately the war ended because it turned out not to be true that America would, in President Kennedy's words, "bear any burden, pay any price," to keep countries like South Vietnam out of Communist hands.

While the outcome may now seem to have been inevitable, the decades of bloodshed perhaps were not.

What if Woodrow Wilson had paid attention when Ho Chi Minh, in bowler hat and rented tuxedo, sought his support for Vietnamese independence at Versailles in 1919?

What if Franklin D. Roosevelt, who opposed a

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French return to Indochina after World War II, had lived another year?

What if Ngo Dinh Diem had been willing to compromise when the National Liberation Front still included non-Communists?

What if Congress had known the full truth about the Gulf of Tonkin incident?

What if America's most powerful men had listened to their own words?

When Vice President Richard M. Nixon proposed American intervention to save the French regime in Vietnam, Sen. Lyndon B. Johnson was strongly opposed. He was against "sending American GIs into the mud and muck of Indochina in a bloodletting spree to perpetuate colonialism and white man's exploitation in Asia."

Another opponent was John F. Kennedy, who said it would create "a situation . . . far more difficult than even what we encountered in Korea."

It turned out that it was Presidents Kennedy and Johnson who sent the U.S. troops in and it fell to President Nixon to get them out. They went in because American officials believed that the Vietcong guerrillas in South Vietnam were puppets of a monolithic international Communist power grab, led by the Soviet Union and China, that had to be stopped.

THE VIETNAM WAR that most Americans are familiar with, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, matched the United States and its South Vietnamese ally against Chinese and Soviet-equipped invading

Years' War

armies from North Vietnam—rather like the Korean War. But that was only one phase of a complex and sometimes murky conflict.

For years it pitted the Communist-dominated Vietnam of Ho Chi Minh against the French colonial forces; then it matched the fledgling American-supported Republic of Vietnam, based in Saigon, against a guerrilla insurgency; then the Americans against the North Vietnamese; and finally, the North Vietnamese against the South Vietnamese in a brutal and ironic denouement to what began as a national struggle for Vietnamese unity and independence.

Through all those phases, Ho and his companions in Hanoi, who believed they had the "mandate of heaven," never wavered from their objective. One by one, their foes fell away. They proclaimed themselves the heirs of a thousand-year Vietnamese tradition of resistance to foreign domination, and portrayed the Americans as no different from the Chinese and the French and Japanese who came before them.

While the American troops and planes were there the war reached the zenith of its fury. But by 1971, when U.S. troop strength was still near its peak of more than half a million, an assistant secretary of defense, John T. McNaughton, was writing to his fellow strategists that "the present U.S. objective in Vietnam is to avoid humiliation."

Even as they fought them, South Vietnam's leaders understood that only the Communists had the discipline, organization and determination to unite the masses in support of their cause.

In an effort to emulate their techniques, Diem put

civil servants in uniform and compelled them to attend "self-criticism meetings." President Nguyen Van Thieu, a decade later, ordered his bureaucrats yanked from their desks and sent off for paramilitary training, as was done in the North. But those programs were imposed from the top down; only the Communists succeeded in organizing the Vietnamese people the bottom up.

There has been ample opportunity throughout this century for Vietnamese other than Communists to assert themselves as leaders and take control of the nationalist movement, but none was able to muster the organizational skill, effective brutality and collective determination that the Communists put to unified use.

It is still not clear what kind of government will be installed in the South, whether the Vietcong's Provisional Revolutionary Government will be allowed to retain some semblance of independence from the North, or whether the country will be reunited, as provided by the 1973 Paris cease-fire agreement. What is clear is that those decisions will be made by the Vietnamese Communists.

Hanoi is now master of a country that has the potential to be a major force in Asian affairs. A little known, predominantly rural backwater when the war began, Vietnam was catapulted into the mechanized age as the United States, the Soviet Union and China poured in equipment, trained technicians and pilots, built airports and roads and installed communications facilities that are still in place.

With a combined population of about 40 million, abundant food, potential oil resources and a pool of trained manpower, Vietnam is hardly prostrate as the war ends.

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In fact, a reunited Vietnam is potentially so powerful that American intelligence analysts and diplomats used to say that was a reason for the Chinese to restrain the North Vietnamese. Peking, they said, was apprehensive about creating a powerful rival on its immediate flank, and so was anxious to keep South Vietnam independent.

That was only one of the myths and self-deceptions about the Vietnamese Communists in which the Americans and South Vietnamese used to seek encouragement. It was said that Hanoi's reserves were exhausted and its new recruits were untrained boys; that North Vietnam's morale had broken under the pounding of B-52s, and its tank drivers had to be chained to their vehicles; that the leaders of the Politburo were old and feeble and squabbling among themselves; that the Soviet Union was tired of equipping the North Vietnamese for a war that never seemed to end.

As it turned out, there was impatience and weakness and wavering and broken morale, but less on the side of the North Vietnamese than of the South.

Both sides fought brutally. Terrorism and torture against individuals, shelling and bombing against whole communities, propaganda and intimidation were techniques common to both sides. But the question of who the two sides really were and what they represented is still arguable, after all these years. The war of the non-Communist South and its American ally defending itself against Communist-led invaders from the North was only the last phase of a war that had many.

Throughout most of World War II, Vietnam was under the control of the Japanese, who left its day-to-day administration to the collaborationist Vichy French. A Vietnamese nationalist movement, dominated by Communists under Ho Chi Minh but comprising many other elements, had been formed in China in 1941 with the aim of fighting Japan and, eventually, securing the independence of the country. This group came to be known as the Vietminh.

The term vietminh is the popular contraction of Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh, the league for the Independence of Vietnam. The term "Vietcong" was coined years later by the Saigon government and means "Vietnamese communists" in a pejorative sense.

The Vietnamese had a thousand-year history of resistance to foreign domination, and the desire to be rid of the French ran deep. A Vietcong colonial, a

lifelong dedicated revolutionary, told me 30 years later that it was a "slap on the face from a French punk" who usurped his place at a ping-pong table that launched his career of rebellion. The nation, like its individuals, felt itself humiliated.

WHEN THE JAPANESE took over direct rule in Vietnam just before the end of World War II, the Vietminh began guerrilla action against them, in cooperation with the American Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the forerunner of the CIA. With captured weapons and some direct OSS aid, the Vietminh seized effective control of large parts of northern Vietnam, and were in a position to claim consideration after the war as a partner in the fight against Japan.

President Roosevelt believed that France had done nothing for Vietnam, and opposed the restoration of French rule in Indochina. Instead, Roosevelt proposed an internationally supervised trusteeship. But the idea died with him.

Apparently convinced that the United States was genuinely anticolonialist and knowing that the United States was about to give independence to the Philippines, Ho made repeated requests for American support. But the great power diplomacy of the West intervened.

At the Potsdam conference, it was decided to give Indian troops of the British army the task of restoring order in Vietnam below the 16th parallel, and troops of the Nationalist Chinese the same role north of the 16th parallel.

When Japan surrendered, Vietminh forces took control of Hanoi and Saigon and proclaimed an independent republic. But Ho did not have the resources to prevent the British and Chinese from coming in.

Vietminh control over the South lasted a week. The British, apprehensive about their own colonial empire, turned their responsibilities over to the French and went home. In exchange for French concessions within China, the Chinese also turned over their portion of Vietnam to France. Troops of the French army began pouring back in.

Ho Chi Minh said he preferred occupation by France to occupation by China, Vietnam's historic enemy, since he believed that colonialism was doomed and the French rule was weak and transitory.

In March, 1946, he signed an agreement with France that allowed French

troops back into Hanoi without a fight in exchange for French recognition of Vietnam as a "free state." But he did so because he had no choice. President Truman had not responded to his repeated pleas for support or his offers of cooperation, and the French had the guns.

By the end of 1946, the tenuous agreement had collapsed, Ho and his cabinet had left Hanoi for the mountains, and the first Indochina war was under way.

Part of the French problem, and later part of the American problem, was that no other Vietnamese held the esteem of the people as Ho Chi Minh did.

His appeal was based not on Marxist economics or Communist ideology, which would have meant little to the Vietnamese anyway, but on his role as the foe of foreign domination, as the embodiment of the Vietnamese peo-

ple's aspirations for independence. That was a role that the U.S. sought in vain to bestow on a series of leaders in South Vietnam.

The Vietnamese saw that no other nationalist leader offered them what Ho was offering—certainly not the collaborationist Emperor Bao Dai, whom the French were trying to install as the head of a puppet state of Vietnam based in Saigon.

The Vietminh beat the French, and the French did not really fight alone. They had massive logistical and economic support from the United States, which by 1954 was paying 78 per cent of the war's financial costs.

The Vietminh won because they fought a classic guerrilla war against a heavily encumbered opponent, and because the French government had lost its will to carry on the war even before the final defeat at Dienbienphu.

Ambushing French columns, retreating when attacked, cutting off cities and roaming freely through the jungles, the Vietminh harassed the French to a point where it was clear that French had nothing to gain by continuing the war.

The destruction of an elite French force known as Groupe Mobile 100—at the isolated Ankhe Pass on a road between Pleiku and the coast where Koreans and Americans were to suffer heavy casualties years later convinced the French that a negotiated settlement was urgently needed.

The decision to convene the Geneva Conference of 1954 had been made even before the Vietminh, commanded by the now-famous Gen. V. Nguyen Giap, destroyed the French garrison at Dienbienphu.



Herblock in The Washington Post, Oct. 5, 1971

"A Vietnamese solution to a Vietnamese problem."

—Nixon administration officials on the Thieu "re-election"

By that time, the issue, as seen by the United States and other Western participants, was not colonialism vs. nationalism but freedom vs. Communist slavery. In the Cold War atmosphere of 1954, with memories of Korea and the Communist takeover of China still fresh, the objective for the non-Communist negotiators at Geneva was to salvage some part of Vietnam that would not be under the control of the Vietminh.

With Pentagon encouragement, the French sought American bombing support at Dienbienphu. But President Eisenhower turned them down.

According to historian Joseph Buttinger, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles "did not want a one-strike American intervention to save the

French at Dienbienphu. He wanted Indochina—all of it—saved from communism.

"Dulles was not interested in having the United States intervene merely to improve the French position at Geneva. He was opposed to compromise.

"He wanted the war to continue until communism was defeated and he did not want the war to be conducted under the tainted banner of French colonialism. The war had to be internationalized and the French replaced by a Western coalition under U.S. leadership."

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THE VIETMINH, according to some historians, also wanted the war to continue, because they were winning. They feared what actually came to pass at Geneva: an agreement imposed on them by the great powers that would deprive them of what they believed would be the spoils of victory, control over all Vietnam. For reasons of their own, the Chinese wanted a cease-fire—and the Vietminh were obliged to accept its terms.

"The Vietminh delegates must have left Geneva bitter and disappointed," Chester L. Cooper wrote in his book, "The Lost Crusade." Forced to accept the idea of partition, they expected that their zone would extend much farther south than the 17th parallel, where the conference set it, and, according to Cooper, they "certainly hoped to have the ancient capital of Hue included in their zone; this was denied them." Cooper wrote, "They wanted a commitment of early elections throughout Vietnam, confident that they would soon be able to gain control over the whole country; the agreement called for a period of two years before elections (and in fact these elections were never held.)"

President Eisenhower wrote in his memoirs that experts agreed that "possibly 80 per cent of the population would have voted for the Communist

Ho Chi Minh as their leader" if elections had been held.

And so, for the second time, Ho's Communists lost at the international bargaining table what they thought they had won by force of arms.

While the partition of the country under the Geneva accords was theoretically temporary, the United States—which was not a party to the agreement—set out to make it permanent.

Events unfolded quickly in the summer of 1954. Ngo Dinh Diem, an obscure, autocratic Catholic mandarin who had favorably impressed such Americans as Francis Cardinal Spell-

man and Justice William O. Douglas, was installed as head of the incipient government of South Vietnam in Saigon.

The United States began giving direct aid to the new country, while a team of operatives headed by Col. Edward Lansdale undertook subversive operations against the North.

The blueprint for another war was drawn. The United States was committed to an attempt to create a non-Communist nation-state in the South and contain communism in the rest of Asia.

Diem's task was difficult, if not impossible. While the powers with which he was invested by Bao Dai, the nominal head of state, were theoretically great, power in South Vietnam did not rest with the government.

The religious sects and river pirates had private armies that controlled entire provinces. The traditional mandarin held sway over social customs. And Vietminh political cadres by the thousands remained in the South after partition.

The Vietnamese masses were receptive to the Vietminh appeal, historian Buttinger wrote, because "Hanoi's triumph over the French impressed the entire population. The great patriotic demand for freedom from foreign rule had become a reality as the result of the armed struggle led by the Vietminh.

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AFTER ALMOST 15 years, peace was at last returning to their ravaged land, and all because the Vietminh had beaten the French. The Vietminh, to be sure, was Communist controlled, and the masses were anything but Communist.

"But to denounce the Vietminh as Communist was completely pointless. If the Vietminh was Communist, then the Communists had to be given credit for having liberated Vietnam."

With American support and American military advisers training his army, Diem succeeded in subduing the

private armies. He scuttled Bao Dai. He cemented his personal power over southern Vietnam. He rebuffed the North Vietnamese when they demanded that elections be held as provided in the Geneva accords.

But the relative tranquility that prevailed in Vietnam by the end of the 1950s was deceptive, for the seeds of disaffection were everywhere. When the Communist Party congress in Hanoi in 1960 decided to support and en-

courage an insurrection in the south, backing what later came to be known as the Vietcong, the Communists found plenty to work with.

Hanoi had troubles of its own in the years after Geneva. The country was economically weak, its dependence on the aid of China and the Soviet Union was growing, and the north was beset by internal turmoil. There was an outright rebellion in the province of Neg-an in 1956 that had to be put down by the army, for example, and Ho had to deal with power struggles inside the Politburo. Not until late 1960 was North Vietnam able to commit itself to supporting the insurgency in the south.

TO THIS DAY there is disagreement among scholars, military and diplomatic experts, journalists and politicians about the nature of the Vietcong uprising in South Vietnam. To Washington and Saigon, it was a brutal Communist attempt to take over an independent South Vietnam by force. To Hanoi, it was a patriotic insurgency of Communists and non-Communists alike against an autocrat puppet government. The truth probably lies somewhere in between.

The Vietcong were undoubtedly brutal and unscrupulous. And they were undoubtedly directed, if not controlled, by Communist cadres trained in Hanoi.

On the other hand, the Vietcong had a strong appeal to many Vietnamese because they were Vietnamese doing their own fighting, and preaching against the oppression and corruption of the foreign-supported, artificial state that was in power in Saigon.

"The crucial fact today," a Rand Corp. analyst wrote after a 1960 visit to Vietnam, "is that the Communists are arousing the people to fight and work for them. It is easy but wrong to attribute their success solely to terrorist methods . . . Diem has been unable to win popular support either on a nationalist basis or with personal loyalty as a motivating force.

"Until his government has the active and continuing support of the Vietnamese masses and the troops, all the economic and military aid in the world, though it may delay it, will not halt the Communist advance."

FOR JUST THAT reason, the American phase of the war in Vietnam was always more than military. It involved also the massive effort known as WHAM—winning hearts and minds.

Land reform programs, nationwide television, miracle rice, police department computers, railroad equipment, tractors, health clinics, roofing material and political advice were poured into the country at an ever-escalating rate.

From 1953 to the end of the war, the total amount of U.S. economic aid to South Vietnam was \$7.3 billion. The belief was that, as American advisers used to say, "If you give 'em something to fight for, they'll fight."

When John F. Kennedy became President, a few weeks after Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev had pledged to support "national liberation wars" throughout the world, there were about 900 American military advisers in South Vietnam. By the time of his assassination in November, 1963, the number had grown to about 17,000.

By that time, domestic turmoil prevailed in Saigon, Diem was dead, and the Vietcong were on the verge of taking over the country.

Diem's assassination in 1963 touched off a series of coups and counter coups that brought 11 governments to power in two years, none of them really effective, while more and more of the burden of fighting the war fell to the U.S.

"There is no question," Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara said in

Saigon on March 8, 1964, "of the United States abandoning Vietnam. We shall stay as long as it takes. We shall provide whatever help is required to help you win your battle against Communist insurgents. The United States government and people stand shoulder to shoulder with you people, and together we shall win."

It was beginning to be known as "McNamara's war," a war of statistics and "body counts" and logistics and euphemisms, a war that grew bigger and bigger but never seemed to get anywhere.

Defense Department figures issued March 27 this year gave the totals since 1960, the year of the first American death in the war, as 46,370 Americans killed in action, 254,257 South Vietnamese soldiers slain, and 1,027,085 "enemy." Another 10,000 Americans died of non-combat causes.

How many North Vietnamese died under American bombs in the North may never be known. The bombing began in 1964, after the Gulf of Tonkin incident.

The United States charge that it was the victim of an unprovoked attack on two destroyers in international waters, and whipped through Congress a resolution authorizing the President to

take unspecified actions to "prevent further aggression."

In reality, as the Pentagon Papers later revealed, the Johnson administration had been looking for an excuse to bomb the North, against which it had already undertaken a campaign of subversion, and the attack on the destroyers was not as clear-cut an incident as portrayed.

American bombing was followed by the dispatch of North Vietnamese troops to join actively in combat in the South—one of many escalations of the war that eventually showed that North Vietnam was both willing and able to perform military feats and sustain losses that confounded American analysis of their capability.

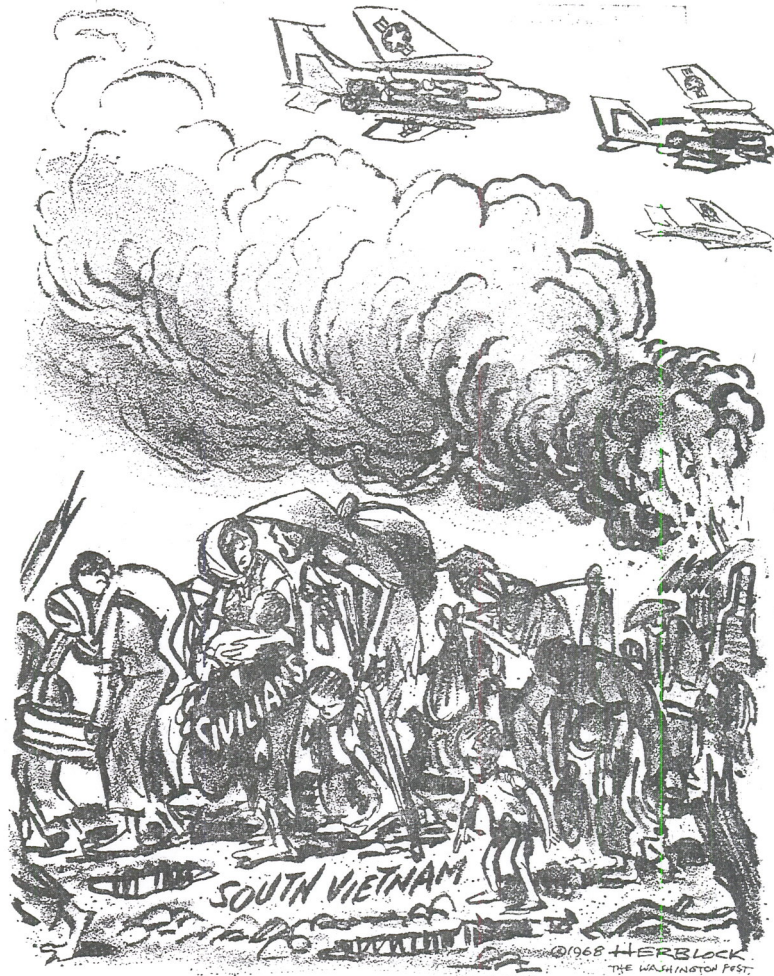
The installation of a government headed by Nguyen Cao Ky and Nguyen Van Thieu in 1965 put a stop to the revolving door government, Buddhist protests and internal turmoil that had proved so embarrassing for the United States. But the Americans' attempt to create a democratic, constitutional system similar to our own in South Vietnam never really succeeded.

YEAR BY YEAR the American involvement deepened, the number of combat troops grew, the costs went up, and the war seemed to take on a momentum of its own that kept it going long after high-ranking officials began to have their doubts.

Six members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee reported in January, 1966, that the previous year's American effort, including the introduction of combat troops, had done little to alleviate a situation in which "a total collapse of the Saigon government's authority appeared imminent." At that time, there were 170,000 American troops in Vietnam—a figure that grew to 536,000 at its eventual peak just after the inauguration of Richard Nixon in 1969.

There were Americans, as the U.S. radio station in Saigon used to say, "from the Delta to the DMZ," dying under artillery fire at remote firebases, dying in booby traps on trails through villages they were trying to "pacify," dying in jungle ambushes.

And with the American troops came an overwhelming American physical presence that spread ugly rubble and tawdry honky-tonk over much of the bountiful, elegant Vietnamese landscape. Vietnam's standard fencing material now is barbed wire, and homes everywhere are made of and filled with the leavings of the American war machine—crates, cans, boxes, pipes, ve-



Herblock in The Washington Post, Feb. 13, 1968

"I don't know if either side is winning, but I know who's losing."

hicles.

The international effort to save South Vietnam that Dulles envisioned never really materialized, but in the 1960s, the U.S. made a stab at it by persuading Australia, Thailand, the Philippines and other countries to send small detachments. The only other country to send large numbers of troops was South Korea, whose forces acquired a reputation for brutality that contributed little to the effort at winning hearts and minds.

Through it all, the North Vietnamese and Vietcong kept saying that in the end it would be the "imperialists" and the "puppet troops," and not they, who would weary of the war effort. That this was true was perceived early in the war by some American critics, but it took more years than anyone would have believed for the implications of this to become clear.

Through most of the 1960s Congress kept giving the administration what it wanted to fight the war—the total appropriated for the Vietnam war ultimately reached \$135 billion, according to Congressional Quarterly—but Congress also began to respond to the doubts raised by what seemed to be an endless war.

These doubts became widespread after the 1968 Tet offensive, in which the Communists whom the American command claimed to be wiping out rose up in dozens of cities and staged a series of spectacular attacks.

Gen. William Westmoreland, who was U.S. commander in Vietnam for four years, and others always claimed afterward that the Tet offensive was a major defeat for the Vietcong, because thousands of them died without achieving any immediate military objective. But the Tet offensive had a devastating political impact in the United States, where antiwar sentiment was becoming a potent force, spurred by reports of discontented, bored GIs becoming addicted to drugs and attacking their own officers.

Nixon was elected in 1968 promising to end the American involvement in the war, but that proved to be an elusive goal.

Formal peace talks began in Paris in 1968, though the South Vietnamese balked at participating. Those talks quickly became ritual sessions of denunciation instead of negotiation and it was 1973 before the American combat role came to an end.

Year after year of failure to achieve promised results in Vietnam, coupled with shattering domestic events such as the Kent State shootings and the publication of the Pentagon Papers, made the war more and more unpalatable, chipping away at the open-ended commitment that had been given in the Johnson administration. Dragging Cambodia into the war and escalating the bombing of Laos only exacerbated domestic criticism without bringing military victory.

The policy worked out by Nixon and his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, was to "Vietnamize the war"—that is, pull out gradually, turning more and more of the combat role

over to the Vietnamese, while continuing full political, military and economic support of the Saigon government. That policy appeared to be working until the spring of 1972. At that time, very few Americans were still participating in ground combat, though more than 100,000 U.S. troops were still in Vietnam and the navy and air force were bombing regularly.

Then came the so-called Easter Offensive of 1972. North Vietnamese troops marched across the demilitarized zone, swept away the disorganized South Vietnamese defenders of Quangtri province, threatened Hue, seized huge chunks of the Central Highlands and the coastal provinces, and marched toward Saigon from the previously peaceful provinces on the Cambodian border.

This brought on massive American air strikes, more bombing of the north, and a new influx of supplies and equipment to replace what was lost. Once again bolstered by the U.S., the Saigon government survived, though it had wavered ominously.

"The knowledge that the United States had once again fully committed itself to the defense of South Vietnam, after the Vietnamese had begun to believe that the United States was prepared to leave them on their own, obviously had done much to arrest a crisis of confidence which had reached major proportions in the wake of the fall of Quangtri, a military reversal which many thought would be followed by the fall of Hue, the encirclement of Danang and the demise of the Thieu government," two investigators for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee wrote at the time.

THAT PROVED to be a prophetic analysis, because when a new North Vietnamese offensive began this year and Quangtri providence—retaken after months of bloody fighting in 1972—once again fell, there was no American military support, and the South Vietnamese army and government disintegrated. After 20 years, South Vietnam was required for the first time to face its future alone, and within six weeks all that those hundreds of thousands of people died for was swept away.

Even if it had been politically acceptable in the U.S., there could be no military response by the Americans this time because of the cease-fire agreement signed in Paris in January, 1973. While that is a complicated document with elaborate political and economic as well as military provisions, it basically provided that North Vietnam would release its American prisoners if the U.S. would cease military operations in Vietnam.

President Thieu protested—rightly, as it turned out—that this agreement was a death blow for his country, for it left at least 100,000 North Vietnamese troops in place in the south and limited the amount of military equipment the U.S. could supply Saigon.

Kissinger proclaimed that agreement to be "peace with honor," the best American could hope for under the circumstances. It was viewed more cynically in Saigon, where there was talk mostly of the "decent interval"—the time it would take between the departure of the U.S. military and the fall of the country. No one believed that after all those years, the North Vietnamese would settle for their half of the loaf. They didn't.