

Final Weeks in Saigon: The

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ON BOARD USS OKINAWA, South China Sea — The Republic of Vietnam, for which Americans fought and which they supported so long, no longer exists.

The last few weeks of that republic are the stuff of high drama, as are the desperate efforts of a divided American embassy to find a settlement less humiliating than what history finally decreed.

The drama involves a sick and aging

American ambassador who battled for his own often hidden goals and against his subordinates, but who in the end must be credited with leading a successful evacuation, although he risked much.

It involves a tough Central Intelligence Agency station chief who foresaw the impending disaster and argued fruitlessly for an early U.S. pullout, while struggling behind the scenes for a political settlement that would buy time.

It involves a series of venal and dreamy Vietnamese politicians whom the United States influenced to placate

the Communists by throwing aside the constitutional process which the Americans had taught them in the first place.

Ambassador Graham Martin, 63, a grey-haired, crusty North Carolinian,

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arrived in Saigon in the summer of 1973. The Paris cease-fire agreement had been signed and the last American combat troops withdrawn a few months earlier. Martin took a hardline position, spurring South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu into a

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bellicose and uncompromising attitude toward the Communists despite the agreement, which prescribed political talks for national reconciliation and concord.

Martin's support of Thieu led him to discourage his embassy from reporting objectively and strongly on corruption and other blemishes on the Thieu government, embassy insiders believe. This in turn led to the surprise in the embassy and in Washington at the rapid unraveling of the government and its armed forces. Both were rotten to the core, but Martin had not allowed it to be reported.

Martin instead concentrated much of his energy in a battle against the U.S. Congress, which he earnestly believed was wrong in cutting aid to South Vietnam while aid continued to flow to Hanoi from China and the Soviet Union. Martin spoke passionately and vaguely about the importance of history's view of America's final exit from Vietnam.

A few days ago he was still speaking of the same issue when he appeared suddenly in the press room of an evacuation ship in the South China Sea. Pale, sick with pneumonia, and drugged for it, Martin mumbled in a soft,

barely audible voice. "The verdict of history will be that we did not have to leave Vietnam in the way we did if we had done what we said we would do in the first year after the Paris agreement, if we had kept the commitments . . ." His voice trailed off.

After the cease-fire agreement, the Communists systematically violated it by bringing men and material into the South, and by improving their supply networks and extending them deep into new areas.

In the first year following the agree-

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ment, government violations were more obvious than Communist ones as well-armed South Vietnamese soldiers expanded the area of government control. In 1974, that began to change, however, as the government was forced by congressional action to begin conserving ammunition. The Communists went on the offensive and began regaining territory they had lost and taking new areas.

With the resignation of President Nixon and the election of a new liberal congress in 1974, it became increasingly clear that the

American commitment to the Saigon government would continue to be reduced. Then late last year, the Communists began their annual dry-season offensive.

In January 1975, the Communists captured Phuoc Long province—the first time they had permanently captured an entire southern province. The loss sent shockwaves through Saigon and Washington.

There followed a lull more than a month during which, sources say, the Communists watched for some strong American reaction or retaliation to this. None came, and on March 3 the Communists launched the series of attacks in the Central Highlands that led to the unraveling of South Vietnam.

Martin had been in the United States for medical care. By the time he returned to Saigon at the end of March, Hue had fallen and Danang was about to fall. The CIA station chief in Saigon, Thomas Polgar, briefed Martin on the desperate situation, but Martin refused to believe things were as bad as Polgar indicated.

Gen. Frederick C. Weyand, the Army chief of staff, was sent to Vietnam by President Ford along with high-rankers from the State Department and CIA. They instantly grasped the gravity of the situation and immediately reported back to Washington through channels independent of Martin.

It was clear that unless something drastic was done, ultimate defeat would be the result.

The question was what to do, and the options were few.

The Weyland visit led to Mr. Ford's request in mid-April for \$722 million in emergency military aid. This was the boldest gesture the Administration came up with, and it was not enough.

Throughout this period, there was widespread hope that Thieu would resign, clearing the way either for a political settlement or for a stronger figure who might wage war more successfully.

During the first half of April, Communist armies were moving down the coast taking one major city after another. In most cases, there was very little fighting. Where government forces did make heroic stands, they were overwhelmed and cut to ribbons.

Saigon's final crisis began on the weekend of April 19 and 20, when the Communists transmitted a note by diplomatic channels to the Americans and South Vietnamese. It said Thieu must resign immediately and suggested the communists would be amenable to a tripartite coalition government—if it were set up immediately and on their terms. The U.S. evacuation fleet was ordered to leave the Philippines for Vietnam's coast on the 19th.

The U.S. Embassy went into high gear—or at least Polgar and the CIA did—to bring pressure on Thieu to resign. Sources say this may have included strong-arm pressures bordering on threats, although the sources declined to specify what these might have been. Thieu resigned Monday night, April 21, with a tearful speech in which he said he hoped for peace but urged his countrymen to continue to hold the line.

With Thieu's resignation—just nine days before the fall of Saigon—it seemed possible that a military take-over might be avoided. The Communists were giving signals, in secret messages and in public radio broadcasts that a political settlement

was possible. On the battlefield a lull developed.

It was equally clear that if the Saigon regime did not make the right moves rapidly, the Communists would simply walk into the city.

During those nine days, embassy insiders say, Martin must be grouped with the woolly-headed Vietnamese politicians who were moving far too slowly and placing far too many conditions on their surrender to suit Hanoi.

"Part of it was that Martin was moving in traditional diplomatic ways to get the government moving," said one observer. "It just wasn't enough." At the same time, the CIA was using stronger tactics, sources say, but these weren't enough either.

Martin did not respond to a request for a post mortem interview on board ship after the evacuation. But embassy insiders say that, despite his slowness in grasping the speed of deterioration, in the end he pulled off a massive final evacuation under difficult circumstances as well as anyone could have done.

Martin was in a terrible position. Any move he made during the last weeks to indicate American abandonment of Saigon could have touched off panic in the city that would have resulted in a chaotic, bloody, unsuccessful evacuation.

Thus Martin was criticized for not getting Americans out more quickly. A few weeks before the end, there were 8,000 Americans in Saigon, and the logistical problems of getting them all out at one time would have been enormous.

In addition, there were tens of thousands of Vietnamese whom Martin wanted to get out, and an early pulling-of-the-plug would have doomed them to stay in Saigon. As it was, thousands were left behind anyway.

Martin was playing for time Weeks before the end, he began slipping Americans and Vietnamese out as quietly as possible in legal and illegal ways. A few days before the end, this process was known to all Saigon, but had been so successful that all but 1,000 Americans plus perhaps 50,000 Vietnamese on the lost were gone.

The American embassy kept the process going by bribing policemen and generals who controlled the airport. Their families were out in the first groups and the officials themselves were promised safe have in the United States. Toward the end, the embassy worried that order would break down in the city because most officers of the National Police force had been evacuated.

In Washington, there was a strong feeling at the top that the plug should be pulled sooner. The CIA's Polgar was said to share this view, he was aware of the continuing Communist military advance and remained skeptical that any political settlement would be reached.

By April 25 the Communist armies were in positions that would enable them to capture Saigon within hours.

But Martin continued to resist both Washington and Polgar. Inside sources say he not only wanted to continue the evacuation of Americans and Vietnamese—but by the end it was almost exclusively Vietnamese—but he also wanted to avoid the kind of massive U.S. military operation that an early plug-pulling might have involved.

Martin always had opposed the return of U.S. combat troops, and the last thing he wanted was to preside over a military operation which might in valve

heavy fighting and loss of life. In the end, about 1,000 Marines were used in the final evacuation, two Marines died

There were no other deaths and the injuries, military and civilian, were insignificant.

Martin was playing an exceedingly dangerous game. It was feared the final evacuation would be swamped in Chaos as the North Vietnamese entered the city.

After Thieu's resignation, the new president, Tran Van Huong, tried to reorganize his government to make a final stand against the Communists. To many, Communist victory seemed inevitable and Huong's bellicose statements inappropriate.

Any hope of a military stabilization really ended a week earlier when the Communists cut off government forces at the provincial capital of Xuanloc, 40 miles northeast of Saigon.

The final days and hours of Saigon then went as follows:

Thursday, April 24—The last day of the brief battlefield lull. A Communist radio broadcast convinces the U.S. embassy that the Communists are still open to a political settlement.

There is intense back-room political maneuvering aimed at getting Huong out of office and replacing him with Gen. Duong Van (Big) Minh, an opposition or neutral politician though to be acceptable to the Communists in a coalition government organized under the rubric of the Paris agreement.

Martin meets with French Ambassador Jean-Marie Merrillon and others in pursuit of a political settlement. Merrillon meets with President Huong and others. Many of the meetings are vague, although their purpose—the ascendancy of Big Minh—is clear.

At the same time, Polgar and his CIA staff are working feverishly toward the same goal, but using, according to sources, more direct methods. At the same time, intelligence sources are continuing to report Communist advances and military preparations.

Ever since the fall of Danang and the North, the Communists have been rushing their divisions south. About this time they had brought overwhelming military force to Saigon's outskirts.

The Saigon armies have virtually ceased to exist as viable fighting units. Their officers have fled or are fleeing, and the common soldiers, for the most part, have privately decided on ways to surrender and avoid being killed, field interviews indicate.

Friday, April 25—Although the U.S. embassy still believes a political solution is possible, events now turn in another direction. The Communists renew their advances north of Saigon. It is clear to all but the blind that the end is at hand.

Strangely, many Vietnamese, including top politicians, seem blind. Some psychological defense mechanism seems to keep some people from believing the obvious and all its terrible implications. President Huong continues his bellicose posture.

At 6 p.m., Ambassador Martin makes a strange, unprecedented appearance at a cocktail party given by the Polish delegation to the International Commission of Control and Supervision, the four-nation body set up by the Paris agreement to supervise the cease-fire.

The party is small, and the few people there are nervous. Most foreign embassies have already left town. The Vietcong delegation set up by the Paris

agreement fails to show up, although it frequently appeared at similar parties in the past.

Martin drinks with several Communist diplomats, exchange pleasantries, leaves. The Polish and Hungarian ICCS members have been transmitting notes from the Vietcong to the Americans, sources say, and perhaps Martin's visit is linked to this.

Saturday, April 26—The Communists are getting tougher all the time, and word goes through the U.S. embassy about another, tougher Communist radio broadcast. They are step-

ping up their earlier demands, which called for the withdrawal of the U.S. military and establishment of a government in Saigon they approved of. Now they demand dismantlement of the entire Saigon government and military machinery.

In a press conference with Western journalists at Tan Son Nhut airport, a Vietcong spokesman is asked what will happen if the Communist demands are not met. He answers, "Nothing can prevent the people from continuing their struggle if the demands are not met."

President Huong asks the National Assembly to order his own replacement by Minh if its members so desire. Huong is unhappy about the possible unconstitutionality of such a change, although to Polgar and some others it seems quite late in the game for such ni-

cities. The Assembly votes to throw the ball back into Huong's court, authorizing him to transfer power to Minh if he wants.

Sunday, April 27 — Rockets land in Saigon before dawn, the first in years, and there is fighting near Bienhoa. Top generals brief the National Assembly members, telling them the situation is militarily hopeless. The assembly votes to install Minh as president in hopes he can form a government acceptable to the Communists.

Monday, April 28 — Early in the morning, more rockets land and a Vietcong company cuts the Bienhoa highway at the Newport Bridge, which is in the Saigon suburbs and just a few minutes drive — under normal circumstances — from downtown Saigon.

People in the city are in a frenzy, and this is noticeable in the traffic jams everywhere.

In an angry argument with other embassy staff, Martin refuses to cut down a tree in an embassy parking lot. The lot, just big enough to accommodate a large helicopter in a difficult and dangerous landing, is to be one of the key pick-up points in the event of a final helicopter evacuation. Martin agrees that cutting down the tree might induce panic, but his colleagues think it late for such concerns.

Huong bows out of power in the afternoon with a tough speech saying he

hopes the defense line around Saigon can still hold. Minh assumes power with a conciliatory speech saying he will set up a "Government of reconciliation and concord" to negotiate peace.

However, Minh also tells government soldiers "to defend the territory which is left and to defend peace. Keep your spirit high, your ranks intact, and your positions firm, in order to accomplish that duty."

As Minh delivered his 15-minute speech in the Presidential Palace, a vast thunder and lightning storm swept Saigon. It was the season's first strong monsoon storm, and it ended about the same time Minh's speech ended, leaving the city fresh and wet.

Minh's speech was not acceptable to the Communists, who had expected him at least to order his armies to lay down their arms.

Shortly after the speech, three captured warplanes flown by Communist pilots from Pleiku bombed Tansonnhut airport and then made dry runs over downtown Saigon. Their message — at least to Polgar of the CIA — was clear. Sources say Polgar ceased to believe there would be any political solution, or even a veiled surrender. It seemed clear to him that the Communists were bent on military takeover.

It seemed likely the Communists had obtained an advance copy of Minh's

speech, and had arranged the post-speech bombing to announce their dissatisfaction.

Martin, sources said, continued to believe there could be some sort of political settlement but realized time was very short.

Tuesday, April 29 — At 1 a.m. a meeting of top U. S. embassy officials decides the evacuation of Americans and Vietnamese by fixed-wing aircraft from Tansonnhut airport can continue for perhaps 24 hours. It is thought that 6,000 Vietnamese already scheduled to be taken out in this fashion, plus another 4,000 or so, can still be flown out.

At about 4 a.m., the Communists open a heavy shelling attack on Tansonnhut. Their big Russian-made 130mm guns pound the airport, hitting ammunition depots and fuel storage areas. Reporters at the top floors of downtown buildings see vast rolling balls of red fire in the direction of the airport. One sees what he identifies as a Strella missile shooting into the air and destroying an airplane with a large yellow flash. He can see the flaming bits of plane drift to the ground.

It is clear to some in the embassy that the game is over. The embassy plan had always provided that if Tansonnhut could not be used by fixed-wing planes, then a total American evacuation by helicopter would begin.

At 6 a.m., top embassy of-

icials again meet but Martin refuses to assume, even after the shelling, that the helicopter plan is needed.

Others like Polgar argue that the helicopter evacuation, known as Option Four, should begin immediately. During this meeting, Martin speaks by telephone to Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger in Washington. Kissinger says Washington feels Option Four should immediately be put into effect, but that the final decision is up to Martin.

At 7:30 a.m. Martin leaves the downtown embassy building by car to drive to Tansonnhut and inspect the runways in order to insure that there is no chance of continuing fixed-wing operations. These are preferred to helicopter operations because more people can be evacuated.

At 7:55 a.m., a voice over the embassy radio network says, "Hello, this is Jacobson. Tell the ambassador to proceed to Tansonnhut with utmost caution. We understand a bus going there took fire."

A Washington Post reporter tries to follow Martin but is stopped at Tansonnhut's outer gate. There is small arms fire from many directions and shells are landing on the airport itself.

At 10:30 a.m., Martin returns to the embassy and informs subordinates the airport is unusable. It is time for Option Four.