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"About a million South Vietnamese are still under Government arms, Saigon still has one of the largest air forces in the world, and there appears to be ample ammunition and equipment to carry on a war," Malcolm Browne of The New York Times reports from South Vietnam. In their flight from the Central Highlands and from the northern provinces of South Vietnam, moreover, Saigon's forces apparently abandoned hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of American-provided military equipment and supplies, and American military officials in Washington are conceding that it was not for want of guns and ammunition that these forces broke so suddenly and completely.

So there must be some explanation other than "niggardly" American support, as at first cited by Secretary of Defense Schlesinger, for the collapse of much of South Vietnam's military and Government structure. In just three weeks, under Communist pressure that appears to have been no heavier than offenses successfully resisted in the past, South Vietnam has come tumbling down, to such an extent that it becomes more obvious every day that nothing can put the pieces together again.

There can be no satisfaction in this for anyone, regardless of his or her past position on Indochina and American intervention there. The scenes of horror from the retreats out of Hue and the Highlands, the nightmare stories of the evacuation of Da Nang, the new wave of death and destruction that has overtaken the people of South Vietnam in their Job-like trial by suffering—this human reality is grievous enough to touch everyone.

It is essential, nevertheless, to try to see what has happened, and why, and to learn from it for the future.

I have been reading the last volume of Shelby Foote's magnificent "The Civil War: A Narrative," the closing chapters of which describe the crumbling of another artificial nation

An Illusion Shattered

IN THE NATION

By Tom Wicker

which never had much chance to survive. In the last stages of that American tragedy, Abraham Lincoln told a crowd celebrating his reelection: "Human nature will not change. In any future great national trial, compared with the men of this, we shall have as weak and as strong, as silly and as wise, as bad and as good. Let us therefore study the incidents of this, as philosophy to learn wisdom from, and none of them as wrongs to be revenged."

In that spirit, perhaps the first point to be made is that President Thieu of South Vietnam seems both to have panicked in his hasty orders to abandon so much territory and, when this produced further panic and precipitous flight by troops and civilians, to have been unable to reassert his control or to re-establish order. This raises the question more sharply than any critic could whether the intrinsic weakness of Mr. Thieu's position and leadership had not been papered over by the almost unquestioning support—in South Vietnamese politics—he has had from Washington, including American acquiescence in his repressive tactics and his staffing the army with corrupt and inept officers who were nevertheless loyal to him.

Surely the point also makes itself that after so many years of American training and supply, after all the boasts of "Vietnamization," the South Vietnamese Army, in the first real test of its ability to fight without American assistance, largely disintegrated. For one thing, it could not count on rescue

by flights of B-52's, or on massed American fire power from troops and planes, or from American diversions like the mining of Haiphong harbor during the Easter offensive of 1972. For another thing, its morale, leadership and discipline seem to have been sadly wanting when the test came—not just because of its political generals but because it did not have the motivation, the national pride or the ideological conviction of its adversary.

The conduct of this army in flight, by every account, has been scandalous—another suggestion that these soldiers were not in arms so much for cause and country as because they have been given no choice.

It seems clear also that the North Vietnamese forces moved swiftly and efficiently to exploit the collapse when it began to develop. Undoubtedly, one good reason was that they did not fear American bombing or other retaliation—a graphic suggestion that it was that threat, and not Vietnamization or any fancied political or military development of the South Vietnamese state, that in the past prevented North Vietnam from exerting final pressure on the weak structure maintained from Saigon and Washington.

Finally, a serious American miscalculation, following the Paris peace accords of 1973, appears to have permitted Mr. Thieu to ignore—as did Hanoi—the peace machinery established in the accord, and to rely on military strength to maintain the status quo. The long-term outlook, as is now clear, more nearly dictated a serious effort then at negotiation and reconciliation, to avoid the conquest that now seems at hand.

The wisdom to be gained from a study of all this may not come quickly, or be easily accepted. For the moment, it is enough to say that the American goal of a non-Communist, independent South Vietnam was an illusion now shown to have been sustained only by a full commitment of American power. The one could not long survive the end of the other.