As Asia Goes, So Goes New York

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By James Thomson

CAMBRIDGE, Mass.—At last it begins to end, suddenly very quickly. A re-run of Nationalist China's collapse, but delayed by 25 years of great-power interventions.

The horror of present Indochina suffering should be intensified for Americans by a sense of history: how it happened, and how it could have been avoided.

One beginning came thirty years ago this autumn when the United States permitted France to reoccupy her Indochina colonies after Japan's surrender.

A bigger beginning was the Truman-Acheson decision in early 1950 to recognize the French puppet Bao Dai as ruler of Vietnam, to spurn Ho Chi Minh's independent revolutionary government, and to commit American arms and dollars to the pro-French side in the Vietnamese civil war.

"With [this act] the United States embarked upon another ill-conceived adventure doomed to end in another self-inflicted defeat." So wrote veteran journalist Harold Isaacs back in the April 11, 1950, issue of The Reporter magazine. "The real problem," he added, "is not how to implement this policy but how to extricate ourselves from it."

This week, precisely a quarter-century later, Mr. Isaacs' prophecy is fulfilled as that ill-conceived adventure finally careens to a halt. Not tidily, arranged under chandeliers by men in morning coats around the green table. Not even gradually, allowing for the protection of the innocents. But suddenly, with breakneck speed and with suffering beyond belief.

The swiftness of the collapse is a surprise. But not the human tragedy. For how else do civil wars end? They are always an all-or-nothing contest; anything less than an ending is merely a suspension.

Three times now, in 1946, 1954 and 1973, Vietnam's revolutionary leaders —that potent early fusion of Communists and nationalists who threw out the French—were persuaded to accept a suspension. But only a suspension each time, an imposed intermission in an unfinished civil war.

For the overriding question, from 1945 onward, has been: Who shall rule a united Vietnam? And the mission of Vietnam's would-be liberators—Ho Chi Minh, General Giap, the party and the army—has been successively, for thirty years, to oust the French, to oust the Americans, and to displace those Vietnamese élites that collaborated with the foreigners.

True, of course, that those élites—officers, bureaucrats, politicians, businessmen, landowners, professionals, intellectuals, clergymen—included some who appealed to our best instincts, whose Westernized liberal values had little in common with the rampant venality, corruption, and barbarism of Saigon's changing cast of warlords.

True, too, that our Vietnam intervention had been in early times an explicable product of American ignorance and panic. Ill-informed about the indigenous nationalist roots of Vietnamese Communism, fearful of Moscow-run "monolithic Communism" after Mao's China triumph and blackmailed by the French (the price Paris demanded for joining any European defense arrangement), we took the wrong road in early 1950. And kept to it—even after the French went home—because of our enduring fear of Communism.

True, as well, that once anti-Communism receded as an overriding rationale, South Vietnam still seemed to some Americans a beguilingly special place: a congery of ethnic, cultural, religious, and geographic complexities worth preserving under our tutelage, separate from the North. Hence the South's strong attraction not only to our military "counterinsurgency" specialists, C.I.A. operatives and A.I.D. advisers, but also to a wide variety of our academic social scientists, church groups and journalists. Couldn't South Vietnam somehow prove a point or two, at least be a useful laboratory for "Free World" development? So was born the resilient canard that it was not, after all, a civil war.

Finally, of course, there was that wondrous Eisenhower invention of 1954, the "domino theory"—the proposition that all Asian states act alike (perhaps because they all look alike, to those who don't look closely); and that if one were to fall over, so too would all the others. Vietnam today, Thailand tomorrow, then Japan, and not far ahead, the beaches of Waikiki.

Even sophisticates, not alarmed about Hawaii, did worry about Laos and Cambodia. And well they should have, for reasons having nothing to do with Communism, but rather with one of the peninsula's traditionally potent forces, "Annamite imperialism."

At best the domino theory described a mere commonplace: a "ripple effect," meaning that what happens in Holland does in fact hit Belgium and Luxembourg quite heavily, France and Germany less so, Spain and Rumania hardly at all.

And for some time now that ripple effect has been belatedly at work. Laos, a traditional buffer between Vietnamese and Thais, has arranged a coalition of Communists and others that reflects the political realities of that backward kingdom. Thailand, after two decades of un-Thai behavior—putting all its security eggs in one American basket—is returning to the politics of multiple baskets (call it neutralism or a balancing act) that have guaranteed Thai independence from foreign conquest for centuries.

But Cambodia, most cruelly, is a victim of whiplash: preserved as an island of relative peace under the quick-footed Prince Norodom Sihanouk, it was betrayed by the Lon Nol coup of 1970 and then destroyed by the American "incursion," an invasion that created the successful Cambodian insurrection.

Of all the high crimes for which Richard Nixon must be held to account by history, none can be higher than the senseless destruction of Khmer civilization. What's left of Cambodia, after American aerial destruction, will be ruled by what's left of Cambodia's Communists.

There was, of course, a further reason for the continued durability of the domino theory. And that is—as Daniel Ellsberg and others have noted—the compelling feeling among Democrats and Republicans alike that the most important domino of all (perhaps the

only one all along) was the Administration in power in Washington: the conviction that if an Administration were to "lose" any Asian country to "Communism," that Administration would proceed to lose the next national election. The alleged lesson had been learned when the Democrats were turned out of office in 1952 after President Truman and Secretary of State Dean Acheson had "lost China."

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The question now is still that same old Isaacs question of 25 years ago: Having chosen the path to a self-inflicted defeat," how do we "extricate ourselves" from the policy that brought it about?

There are two ways. One is to replay the "loss of China" script. That would involve (quite soon) an open season in the search for scapegoats. President Ford and Henry Kissinger have already tilted in that direction: had not the Congress reduced Vietnam aid and "frustrated" Presidential freedom to "deter," etc., there would still be hope.

And who runs the Congress? The same party that "lost China" — the Democrats. (Actually, it was the Chinese Nationalist Party that lost China; but that is a different and too long story.) A dicey Presidential election is coming up. Can many Republicans and even some Democrats resist the temptation to return us now to the McCarthy-McCarran era?

But there is another way—short of the admission of error, the mea culpa of which governments seem all together incapable. A way to face not Vietnam's "loss," but the misery-ridden end to our tragic intervention in the Vietnamese civil war. That would be simply to say we did our best, but that events went otherwise, that the Vietnamese chose otherwise. And that we will now allocate all we can to the relieving of immediate suffering, to the providing of safe haven for those whose lives are endangered through close allegiance to us, and to the rehabilitation of shattered lands and peoples—in the North and the South, and also in Cambodia. Even Lyndon Johnson offered as much in his famous Johns Hopkins speech on April 7, 1965, while our bombs were widening the bloodbath.

Who knows how we will choose, at a time of shaken economy at home and possible war in the Middle East. One way lies further folly, the wrath of spoiled children whose will has been thwarted.

The other way lies maturity: the willingness to learn from error, to accept our chastening, to cast off our grandiosity, to forgive and ask forgiveness, and to show the magnanimity of a strong and compassionate people.

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