
Clayton Fritchey

The Vietnam

Before the argument over the collapse of South Vietnam and Cambodia goes much further, it might be useful to note that there is a significant distinction between a legitimate, purposeful post-mortem on the one hand and bitter, political recrimination on the other.

There is, as always, the need to review momentous national experiences such as U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia. How else do we learn? Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield put his finger on what is needed when, noting the recent setbacks in Asia, he called for a constructive reassessment of American foreign policy.

That is not too much to hope for and expect. It has been done before, and it can be done again. Under similar circumstances years ago, the State Department showed that, under the right kind of a directive from the Secretary of State, it is capable of an objective post-mortem. The one in question candidly showed the State Department and the White House had backed a losing policy in the Chinese civil war of 1945-49.

At the end of that long conflict, as Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist troops fled before Mao's Communist army, just as Gen. Nguyen Van Thieu's South Vietnam forces are now retreating before Hanoi's, the State Department issued a remarkable 1,054-page white paper, writing off Nationalist China and attributing Communist successes to Chiang's military and political errors.

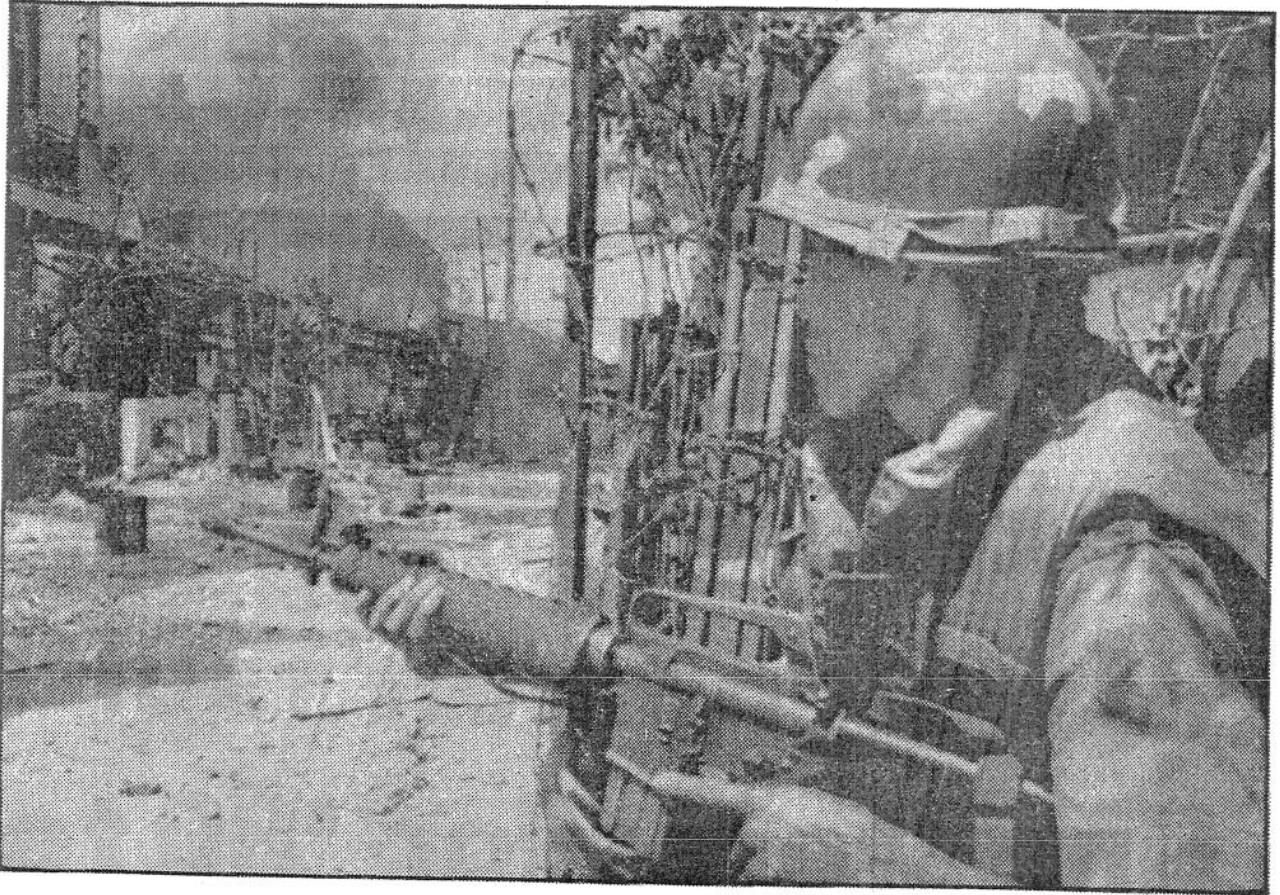
Unlike the renewed testimonials to Gen. Thieu by President Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, the 1949 white paper openly indicted Chiang for dissipating \$3 billion in military and economic aid he received from the United States between 1945 and 1948.

In what could be a model for a new white paper on Vietnam and Cambodia, the 1949 one frankly recognized the futility of additional U.S. help for Chiang. What then Secretary of State

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Post-Mortem



Dean Acheson said in the white paper could now be read with profit by both Dr. Kissinger and Mr. Ford. Secretary Acheson said, in part:

"A large proportion of the military supplies furnished the Chinese armies by the United States has fallen into the hands of the Chinese Communists through the military ineptitude of the Nationalist leaders, their defections and surrenders and the absence among their forces of the will to fight.

"It has been urged that relatively small amounts of additional aid—military and economic—to the Nationalist government would have enabled it to destroy communism in China. The

most trustworthy military, economic and political information available to our government does not bear out this view.

"A realistic appraisal of conditions in China, past and present, leads to the conclusion that the only alternative open to the United States was full-scale intervention in behalf of a government which had lost the confidence of its own troops and its own people."

As can be seen, the white paper sounds as if it were written yesterday about the debacle in Vietnam and America's responsibilities. Not long after publication of the white paper, another extraordinarily frank assessment

of the Chinese civil war came from Chiang himself, then in melancholy exile on the island of Taiwan.

"I must put the blame on myself," said the Generalissimo. "The disastrous military reverses on the mainland were not due to the overwhelming strength of the Communists but due to the organizational collapse, loose discipline and low spirits of the Nationalist Party members."

How much misery South Vietnam might yet be spared if only Gen. Thieu could bring himself to make a similar confession—and then allow others to negotiate a peace.