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The Americans Depart

The United States left Vietnam with the same confusion and lack of direction that took this country there in the first place. The scenes of agony and tumult in Saigon yesterday, as the helicopters lifted American diplomats and panic-stricken Vietnamese away, add up to one more sorrowful episode at the conclusion of an American—and Vietnamese—tragedy.

Untangling the meaning of the rapid events that have flashed past the American and South Vietnamese people these last few days will be an arduous task for the historians. Too many questions are unanswered in the heat of defeat; too many others will be deliberately obscured in the days—and years—to come, for the protection of reputations and ideals that will not easily be given up.

There surely have been instances of genuine heroism; the Marines and helicopter pilots who accomplished the ultimate evacuation, for instance, could hardly have been handed a more difficult task, and they seem to have carried out their part with efficiency and bravery. But a strong note of relief which has been felt in the actions of the final 24 hours reflects the narrowness of the American escape and the fact that no massive military force had to be employed to rescue the last remaining United States personnel.

Furthermore, it is a source of some satisfaction that a large number of people in South Vietnam who had put their personal trust in American servicemen and civilians were able to be removed—though not nearly so many as could have been taken out if the evacuation process had begun as early as it should have been.

There is still no convincing explanation why the Administration and Ambassador Graham Martin allowed thousands of American personnel to remain on the spot in Saigon long after their functions had become superfluous. Even when evacuation had started a thousand American officials remained and became by their presence a force to obstruct the political bargain that might have prevented a final rout.

For their part, the North Vietnamese military commanders and their southern allies have taken upon themselves a heavy responsibility before their own people by pressing for military surrender.

What could have been an orderly transfer of power by procedures internationally agreed upon in the Paris accords of 1973 now appears to be becoming a simple takeover by force—despite the assurances which Vietnamese Communists had been giving that they were ready for a compromise solution short of open surrender.

Why this change of heart came about is another of the questions which cannot now be answered. But its consequences could be crucial for the future well-being of the Vietnamese people. The Vietnamese Communists would only compound the problem which they obviously face upon imposing their idea of a military solution, if they shun the readiness of this country to participate in the rebuilding of Vietnam in peace.