

The end--and a beginning

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NEW YORK — What constructive comment, if any, can be made about this week's ignominious end to a generation of United States efforts to preserve a non-Communist state in Vietnam?



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That is the question reluctantly faced here today in the wake of our country's worst foreign policy disaster — a humiliating tragedy which has gravely damaged the position of the U.S. in world affairs.

The question must not be avoided — by any of us. Never again must the American public wind up watching one of our ambassadors having to flee the enemy in a hectic helicopter evacuation, clutching the nation's folded flag on his knees.

Our rout was as complete and demeaning as the unconditional surrender of the Saigon government. It was a climactic cut and run operation, a disgraceful retreat wholly out of character with American traditions.

Only by good luck and a certain judicious forbearance

—Theodore H. White

—From Page 1A

of the conquerers were we able to remove the last 5,000 or so of our citizens in the besieged capital.

It is hard to fully grasp the implications, just as it is difficult to realize that 30 years of warfare in Vietnam finally have ended. Yet the implications of our failure today are the chief international concern of our allies everywhere. While most of our citizens would like to forget the war and the role played in it by the U.S., our allies cannot.

They realize that a truly historic step in this nation's history has been taken — that for their own welfare and global stability they must reassess the reliability of our status as leader of the Free World.

The American people must do the same. It is in their hearts and minds, collectively, that the ultimate answers will be found.

The outlook right now is admittedly bleak, as detailed here in a number of columns anticipating the final debacle in Saigon. There is no point in raking the bad news all over again, just as there is no point in raking over all the mistakes we made in Vietnam.

What is important is to draw some lessons from this terrible war which cost so much of America's blood and bounty, disrupted its economy, divided and eventually demoralized its people.

The first lesson to be learned and never forgotten again, I think, is to appreciate just how dedicated and diabolically clever the big Communist powers are. They give unlimited money and supplies to forces fighting their cause, but avoid committing their own troops unless they are attacked.

This is a basic rule with them — to fight by proxy. Probably nothing could have delighted the Red superpowers more than the day when an idealistic but naive U.S. committed its armed forces to a debilitating struggle far from its shores and direct personal interests.

They correctly guessed that we would be drained not only of immense resources, but eventually of the will to continue. Unlike our own leaders, theirs anticipated that our public resolve would collapse once they signed the papers permitting the withdrawal of our troops.

And that's what happened — to our shame. The Communists went on to encourage massive violations of the 1973 Paris accords. We not only failed to insist on enforcement of the cease-fire provisions but our Congress — reflecting the public mood — tied the hands of the President and progressively began withdrawing aid from Saigon.

The key point to be recognized in this is that our democracy has a built-in psychological and political weakness. Its leaders must respond to public sentiment. Those of the Communist superpowers do not; furthermore their goals are very long-range and they have infinite patience.

Americans lack that kind of patience. When they make a decision they want it quickly implemented and disposed of. If it is a nasty matter like a war, it must be finished fast and in no uncertain terms. No matter how important the cause, impatient Americans lose interest in any dragged-out conflict.

This happened in our own Civil War, for example. Because it dragged on for so long many people in the North got fed up and started saying: "Oh, the hell with it. Let them go."

They thus forgot or willingly overlooked the all-important goal kept forever uppermost in his mind by Abraham Lincoln, namely the vital importance of keeping the Union together at any cost.

Another matter needing critical self-reappraisal is that Americans seem able to focus attention on only one part of the globe at a time. This is true even in our State Department.

The big Communist powers, by contrast, are like vaudeville jugglers. They have a whole variety of enterprises going on at the same time — all coordinated, disciplined and calculated to one purpose.

Still another flaw in the American character — and it could be fatal — is our tendency to favor maintenance of the international status quo. In that respect we are like a fire company, sitting in our station house until an alarm sounds and rouses us to action.

We do not really plan ahead, whereas the Communists are like arsonists. They always are the ones who act first; they are the ones always on the offensive.

As a result they have the tactical advantage of surprise and the strategic advantage of choosing the time and place. Detente, furthermore, by and large to them is just another device to help keep us quiet and sleepy.

If all this sounds pretty grim, it should. What we have suffered in Vietnam is about as grim as it can get. What we thereby face in our international relations also is far from encouraging, to make an understatement.

This great nation of ours, with its vast resources of human and natural strengths, still is the leader of the Free World. All we have to do is fully restore our credibility.

Withdrawal into the cocoon of isolationism is impossible, no matter how tempting. We live in a dangerous world whose stability is kept in relative balance only by matching forces of terror. Most Americans know this and are willing to make sacrifices it entails — if they know the honest facts.

There must be no more glossing of truth by our elected officials — something that has occurred far too often both about Vietnam and other matters in the recent past.

The United States, for the safety of the world, must remain as strong as its proven enemies. That is the duty which automatically guarantees our own well-being and our position of leadership.

The United States, in addition, henceforth must make commitments only after the most serious consideration of possible consequences. Americans will back them if the commitments are valid, and honestly explained.

Above all, the American people must realize how tough our enemies are and resolve to match them with equal or superior force and determination.

Our country is engaged in a deadly sort of chess tournament with the Communists — winner take all.

In Vietnam we have lost a major match, but the tournament goes on.

We can still win if we become fully awake and aware of the stakes involved.

We must.