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Vietnam: 'The End Was Inevitable'

For at least eight years it seemed reasonable to me to assume that sooner or later, no matter what we did in Vietnam, things would end badly for us. This feeling was not based on any desire to see us humiliated, or any feeling that the other side represented the forces of goodness and light; it just semed that the only way to stave off an eventual Communist victory was with an open-ended, and therefore endless, application of American firepower in support of the South Vietnamese regime. No matter how much force we were willing to use, this would not end the war, only prevent Saigon's defeat. And the human suffering would be bottomless. The war would go on until the North Vietnamese achieved their objectives. As Ho Chi Minh tried to tell the French 30 years ago, his forces would outlast everyone else—by one day.

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The end was inevitable, and our efforts to avoid or delay it were wrongheaded and against everyone's interests — political, strategic, humanitarian, even (to use a phrase so rarely invoked in Washington) moral.

But even believing that, as many other people also did, I was almost totally unprepared for the dimensions and speed of the tragedy that began unfolding in Indochina a few weeks ago. It seemed reasonable to expect the offensive in South Vietnam to come in 1976, timed to coincide with the presidential elections here, as had the last two great offensives, in 1968 and 1972. It also seemed reasonable to suppose that there would be some intelligence warning that it was coming.

"You can't believe how bad things are around here," a friend working in the administration told me on the day Phnom Penh fell. "We are simply and totally without leadership, and the situation in Indochina is so horrible...." His voice trailed off, and I said, "I know." "No, you don't," he replied. "It's worse than you think."

There are a large number of things that need to be said now about the tragic denouement in Indochina; others require time and a little distance. We must, for example, begin to look beyond Indochina and toward the question of the proper role of the United States in Asia and in the rest of the world. Reports of the imminent demise of American influence around the world, many of them emanating curiously from high administration officials, are clearly very premature. So too is the effort to portray the Democratic Congress as a group of crazy isolationists who are thwarting Henry Kissinger's grand design for a generation of peace. Many Democratic "doves" are deeply concerned lest recent events be misunderstood, and stand ready to clarify to the world what our real national interests should be. But in the current debate one can hear clearly the opening salvos of a presidential campaign in which, for the first time since 1948, "the role of Congress" will be a major issue. And with that as background noise, it is not surprising that the present relationship between administration loyalists and Congress will be dyed through with distrust and hostility.

But these are issues to discuss some other day. These are days for those who lived in Indochina to be jarred anew each morning as they pick up their newspapers, to be shaken each night as they watch television. For each of those obscure place names means something to some American, and it is worth remembering what we tried to do out there, and how we tried, and how we failed.

My own images, three years after I last visited Vietnam, six years after I last worked on the area in the government, nine years after I last lived there, are mostly of the wild, weird contrast between the people of Vietnam and the Americans who had come to help them. The distance between them seemed immense, unbridgeable, with all the good will in the world.

The other day, as I went up an escalator in the Pentagon, I ran smack into a huge photograph on the wall of an army officer standing in a rice paddy, in combat fatigues, hand on hip, M-16 on his shoulder, looking squarely and confidently into the camera. Behind him strung out across the paddy, slightly out of focus, were South Vietnamese soldiers, presumably the ones in the unit he was advising. The plaque under the photograph said "Vietnam 1964." The look of confidence on that man's face somehow went through me and brought back other rice paddies, other false hopes.

I remember a trip with the Ninth Marine Regiment through the area south of Da Nang in 1965, about eight months after the Marines had landed. Their original plans had called for the establishment of a beachhead in the Da Nang area, then the gradual sweep outward into the surrounding countryside, westward and southward, pacifying the area, that is, cleansing it of Vietcong. Then the South Vietnamese would take over behind them as they moved forward.

That was the plan and kneeling in some sand in a tiny hamlet south of Da Nang, Gen. Lewis Walt, the commander of the Marine Amphibious Force, showed me how it would work. Walt was a powerful and unforgettable figure, a man who looked the way you would want a marine to look. He was one of the true heroes of the Marine Corps' fight through the South Pacific in World War II, and it was impossible to dislike him. He was also the wrong man for the job, and besides, it was the wrong job. He was pushing the sand in front of his hand in a wide semicircle, and explaining that the Marines would push the Vietcong out in the same way. All around us curious children watched this giant of a man pushing sand around, and chattered in Vietnamese. "But the VC will just move in behind you," I offered; having lived in Vietnam for several years, it was not hard to see the flaw in the concept. But Walt persisted in his belief, and went right on pushing sand, literally and figuratively, for the remainder of his command.

The Ninth Marine Regiment carried with it its battle flags from past wars, and while I do not remember them in detail I do remember that the impression they made on me was profoundly moving. Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima —the names seemed so historic—and here they were somewhere between Da Nang and Hoi An; even they didn't know where. We walked to a hamlet where the Marines had helped build a schoolhouse for the children, and as we approached, the regimental commander proudly told me how there had been no school here before the Marines came, but now they had a schoolhouse and a teacher. This was the way the Marines would win the hearts and minds (the phrase was actually used, it must be remembered) of the people.

When we got to the schoolhouse it was burned down. A young Marine captain, company commander, explained to his superior that one of the children—they didn't know which one—had burned it to the ground a few hours earlier. The Marines puzzled over that a while, but couldn't understand it. Why would anyone want to burn down the school?

We went on to another hamlet, where the Marines had already been for several months. They knew all the people in the hamlet and were obviously very popular with them. Everyone came out and waved and spoke a few words of English. I was told by the Marines that they would be leaving this hamlet soon to go on, but that this was still a secret. A few minutes later a Vietnamese girl came up to me and said, in half-English, half-Vietnamese, "Why the 3/9 [the actual battalion designation for that unit in that hamlet] go? We want them stay."

The Marines interpreted that as a sign of their success, but it was really a sign of their trap. They would be either liked and therefore trapped because the people would not like the South Vietnamese troops who would replace them; or they would be hated and the schools they built burned down. Or, in fact, they would be both at once—liked for their strange generosity and naiveness, for the money that came with them; and hated for their heavyhanded ways, for their lack of understanding, for their use of the women (who of course invited it in many cases), for simply not belonging in South Vietnam at all.

These stories are about the Marines, but they could have been about any Americans. Only a very few understood where they were, and they could not, no matter how well placed they were, influence the behavior and policies of a 500,000-man expeditionary force.

Our behavior in Vietnam can be judged on many levels. In historic and global terms, it stands under examination as a part of a worldwide policy, and will be judged on that basis. In domestic terms it will be judged for what it did to our national soul, to our self-image, which will not be the same again. In Vietnam itself, which is what concerns me here, it was the most curious mixture of high idealism and stupidity, of deceit and self-deceit, of moving heroism and inexcusable cruelty. For a long time I tried to separate out these contradictory strains, to understand why some things seemed right and some others seemed wrong, to see also if there was any way that some good could come out of the whole mess. But then finally it all seemed to come down to one simple, horrible truth: we didn't belong there, we had no business doing what we were doing, even the good parts of it.

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