

President Misled On South Vietnam



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THE SWIFT COLLAPSE of South Vietnam badly surprised President Ford who was misled, according to White House sources, by the national intelligence estimates.

These estimates are supposed to provide the President with the best possible analysis of what is likely to happen.

He was assured, for example, that the South Vietnamese army would be able to hold off the advancing Communists for several months. Even after the Saigon defenses began to crack, the national intelligence estimate predicted that Hanoi would negotiate with Saigon and form a coalition government.

The beleaguered Central Intelligence Agency was the first, say our sources, to warn that a Communist victory was imminent. The CIA recommended that the United States use its leverage to persuade the Saigon leaders to form a "peace government," which could negotiate a truce.

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“THIS WOULD have given the United States more time to arrange an orderly and dignified evacuation. The CIA was overruled, however, upon the advice of U.S. Ambassador Graham Martin who called upon President Nguyen Van Thieu instead to form a war cabinet supposedly to stiffen the resistance.

Although the Joint Chiefs correctly predicted more than two years ago that President Thieu would not survive and that the Communists would win the final

struggle for Vietnam, the Pentagon badly misjudged the South Vietnamese army's ability to hold the line.

The Pentagon estimate was that the South Vietnamese would battle the Communists to a standstill along the approaches to Saigon. The only exception was the Air Force intelligence chief, Major General George Keegan, who warned that the defenses would collapse.

It was the Pentagon's assessment that the South Vietnamese infantry divisions on the line were as good as any U.S. division. Then why did they buckle? From the secret cables, here is a thumbnail analysis.

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PRESIDENT THIEU was shaken by the capture of Ban Me Thout in the Central Highlands last March. He concluded that his troops were spread too thin and ordered a strategic withdrawal.

But Thieu was indecisive. He would issue orders, then cancel them. He couldn't decide where to make a stand.

Finally, the commander of the Second Military Region, after a meeting with Thieu, returned to his men and announced: "We're pulling out tonight."

They not only abandoned their heavy equipment but left the First Military Region outflanked. What was supposed to be an orderly withdrawal, thereafter, turned into a pellmell rush for the coast. Panic spread, with every man for himself, until the hasty retreat became a total rout.

Written with Les Whitten