

The Demise of South Vietnam

NYTimes

MAY 17 1975

By William C. Westmoreland

CHARLESTON, S. C.—Senior American and Vietnamese officers who observed at first-hand the collapse of the Vietnamese Army and the disintegration of morale of the people have given me further insight into the recent tragedy in South Vietnam.

To appreciate the predicament of South Vietnam one must understand several salient facts. First, any military force on the offensive has the advantage of the initiative. The North and South Vietnamese Armies could not be viewed as two boxers in a ring with no initial advantage to either. North Vietnam, as the invader, was capable of massing its forces at points of its own choosing without fear of an attack on its home territory.

Conditions of the cease-fire enabled the North Vietnamese to outflank the South Vietnamese Army on every front. Hanoi's violations of the Paris cease-fire agreement greatly strengthened its military advantage by use of the demilitarized zone, Laos and Cambodia, to say nothing of the large-scale build-up of forces and their reinforcement with modern Soviet matériel.

South Vietnam's sole aim was to hold on to its territory and avoid encroachment along the cease-fire line. Its troops were spread, making them vulnerable to defeat at any point that the enemy chose to mass his forces for attack. Hanoi was prepared to engage twenty divisions in the South. (It subsequently did. South Vietnam fielded thirteen divisions.) The stage was therefore set adversely for the South Vietnamese last January.

In 1973 and 1974, there had been only local engagements along the cease-fire line, with both sides jockeying for key territory, in some cases in technical violation of the cease-fire agreement, but with no widespread violations.

In those skirmishes, the South Vietnamese acquitted themselves well. But last January Hanoi decided to test the South Vietnamese leadership and the United States. A large attack was made in Phuoc Long Province some forty miles north of Saigon.

President Nguyen Van Thieu chose not to commit his reserve strength to defend the area, or to counterattack when it was lost; he did not want to suffer the inevitable personnel and equipment losses or expend limited supplies fighting for an area not deemed critical.

The United States passive reaction after this major violation of the Paris peace agreement by the North Vietnamese dismayed the Government in Saigon. During January, February and March, many Congressmen visited Vietnam, and President Thieu drew the obvious conclusion that further United States support was uncertain. He established policies to husband supplies and conserve trained manpower and equipment. (As an example, the ration imposed on ammunition was one grenade per combat soldier per month and 85 rifle bullets per soldier per month.)

Foreseeing a big enemy offensive, he conceived a withdrawal strategy to concentrate his regular forces in the critical areas along the coast and around Saigon.

Mr. Thieu's carefulness and caution served him well as the political head of the country for ten years. But undue caution is not a virtue for a military commander. Thus, for political and psychological reasons, he delayed putting into effect a strategy that could have temporarily thrown the enemy off balance and put the South Vietnamese Army in a sounder military position.

In March, the Communists attacked from bases in Cambodia and seized the remote provincial capital of Ban Me Thuot. By accident, South Vietnamese bombs devastated the command headquarters of the defending brigade, and efforts to recapture the city failed.

President Thieu wanted to make a stand at Ban Me Thuot since it was considered the capital city of the montagnards and its loss would destroy the morale of the tribesmen who populated the highlands.

Subsequently, the commander of Military Region II, Maj. Gen. Pham Van Phu, ordered a withdrawal from the highlands to the coast. His plans and preparations were inadequate to accomplish the most difficult of all military maneuvers. Hampered by hordes of refugees, closed roads, demoralized montagnard soldiers expected to secure the route, and by inaccurately delivered bombs, the withdrawal became a disaster. General Phu, an officer of excellent reputation, had been fighting for 24 years and had worked himself up through the ranks.

The enemy then began to put strong pressure on the outnumbered, outflanked and overextended South Vietnamese troops in the Hue area to the north.

Gen. Ngo Quang Truong, considered the best field commander in South Vietnam, advised President Thieu that he could hold Hue. Mr. Thieu announced on the

General W. C. Westmoreland, now retired, is former Army Chief of Staff and headed United States forces in Vietnam.

radio that Hue would be defended to the last man. Without knowledge of Mr. Thieu's statement, but confronted by the overwhelming forces, General Truong ordered a withdrawal. Upon learning of this development, Mr. Thieu ordered General Truong to retake the city. It was too late. The tens of thousands of fleeing civilians clogged the roads, communications were lost and military units disintegrated. General Truong was helpless; he had lost control. Panic reigned.

The strongest link in the Vietnamese society is the family unit. Dependent families usually live near the soldiers. As soldiers learned of the withdrawal, they thought of their families first, and many broke ranks to find and try to move them to safety.

This debacle made it impossible to organize the defense of Da Nang, South Vietnam's second largest city, and it fell without a fight. Unnoticed at the time, South Vietnamese troops fought hard and successfully in the Mekong Delta and Saigon regions.

After twenty years of struggle, morale was shot. It was a tragedy of errors and circumstances. North Vietnam had flagrantly violated the Paris agreement. The United States had not provided adequate support in contrast to that furnished North Vietnam by the Soviet Union and China. (Twenty per cent of all aircraft were grounded for lack of spare parts.) The United States Congress appeared to be disposed to stop military aid. The signatory powers who were to assure success of the Paris agreement were silent.

Despite a letter from President Richard M. Nixon to Mr. Thieu saying that the United States would react vigorously to a major Communist violation of the Paris cease-fire agreement, we were paralyzed by the Church amendment, which prohibited the use of funds for Southeast Asia combat activities. That action by the Congress not only tied the hands of President Ford but also removed our only deterrent to large-scale attack. I am told that members of the South Vietnamese National Security Council were in possession of copies of the Nixon letter and that they did not fully understand the implications of the Church amendment.

South Vietnam had suffered a major defeat and Mr. Thieu had lost face. Saigon's elite general reserve troops—paratroops and marines—were crippled by heavy casualties. The end of the Republic of Vietnam was near at hand. The Machiavellian Hanoi regime and its lock-step, closed society had virtually achieved their long-sought goal, domination of Indochina.

Was defeat of South Vietnam inevitable? Ultimately yes, under the conditions that prevailed: specifically, total violation of the Paris agreement by Hanoi; United States impotence, and the negative conduct of those nations that were to assure success of the agreements. But emphatically not from a lack of courage and heart by the long-suffering Vietnamese soldier.

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Could the outcome of our involvement, based on actions by several Administrations, have been realistically different? Yes, perhaps. Between 1962 and 1965, when political chaos was rampant in South Vietnam and the lack of cohesiveness of that heterogeneous society became clearly evident, we could have severed our commitment with honor—but not without strong political reaction in light of President Kennedy's Inaugural address.

Again, after defeat of Hanoi's Tet offensive in 1968, we could have used our military power, brought Hanoi to its knees, and negotiated on our terms. At that time we had in Vietnam the finest military force ever assembled. But again the political reaction in the United States would have been intense.

Born of our post-World War II policy of "containment" of aggression, our Vietnam venture suffered from over-extension of our nation militarily, economically, and psychologically.

We failed to accomplish our objective in Southeast Asia and can take little solace from that fact that we delayed a Communist take-over of Indochina by ten years. The military power and the cost required to accomplish our idealistic purpose in Vietnam exceeded that which was apparently acceptable to many of our people.

I hope our vast expenditure of precious resources will not be a total loss. We are challenged to overcome our current international image of disorganization, unreliability and impotence. Let's have no witch-hunt, but let's not sweep under the rug. If we are introspective, analyze our mistakes, and heed in the future the lessons to be learned, we can emerge a stronger nation.

All segments of our nation must share the blame for our failure and should engage in self-examination—policy-makers, planners, diplomats, military leaders, politicians, bureaucrats, the news media and the body politic.

The comic strip character Pogo has aptly summed it up: "We have met the enemy and he is us."