

Vietnam: Unfinished Reporting

We Americans left Vietnam with the calm dignity of a guilty party leaving the scene of an accident. Mighty deeds were done during the evacuation, but orderly it was not.

As often happens, the press coverage of those last chaotic weeks took on the tone of the events covered. It was marked by flashes of brilliance and dedication beyond the call of duty. It also left a lot of loose ends that need to be gathered up.

The press is often accused—with some reason—of being like the man with the "grasshopper mind" in the old correspondence school ad. Preoccupied with the moment, flitting from crisis to crisis, we have trouble finding the time and space to put the past, even the recent past, into perspective. Too often the mistakes and misconceptions that were unavoidable in the heat of the action never get corrected or clarified.

Progress is being made. The press is breaking away from the old concept of news as a one-dimensional record of the now. So-called follow-up stories are a growing part of the print and electronic news diet. But we still have a long way to go.

As a small step along that road, here are some loose ends from the closing days of the Vietnam adventure that need gathering up:

• *The "bloodbath."* The inevitability of a bloodbath in the wake of a Communist victory in South Vietnam has been a tenet of our continued involvement there. Last month, as the Saigon army and government began to crumble, the usual predictions of bloodletting were mingled with reports that it was actually occurring. A main source of these reports was the American embassy in Saigon. They were cabled to Washington and leaked to the press.

The reports were bloody enough, but less than firm. Many were of the "I wasn't there but I heard" variety. And they did not jibe with some of the news dispatches filed before Vietnam

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coverage by the American press ended.

Were the reports true or weren't they? We may never know for sure. If there is confirmation of atrocities it will be fully reported. But if there is acceptable evidence that the reports from the embassy were false, that evidence should be reported.

There is another story that also should be told: Did the embassy and the administration use atrocity reports in an attempt to push Congress into approving aid legislation? Were the embassy's reports edited to screen out those that would contradict the bloodbath story? Was the whole operation, in other words, a deliberate attempt to keep alive the bloodbath tenet?

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Those questions represent more than after-the-fact nit-picking. Certainly the fear of a bloodbath contributed to the chaos of the evacuation. If that fear was fed by a propaganda campaign, the passage of time does not make it less than news.

• *The refugees.* Did large numbers of bar girls, pimps, armchair officers and fat cats take space on evacuation ships and planes that should have been occupied by Vietnamese to whom we had promised refuge?

There were press reports indicating that, including several in The Post. One Post story set its tone by quoting a Vietnamese saying: "Only when the house burns do you see the faces of the rats."

As the processing of the refugees is completed, information to refute the

charge or to show to what degree it is true should become available. The press should not forget to go after it and publish it.

Again, this is not pointless post-mortem. The reports that an undue proportion of South Vietnam's sleaziest citizens were being evacuated undoubtedly contributed to American resistance to taking the refugees in. It will still be news when we can report accurately who came.

• *The payoffs.* There were published reports that some Vietnamese were required to make large payments inside the American embassy in order to be cleared as evacuees. These reports have not been substantiated and are said to be under investigation. The press should make sure that the results of the investigation are made public. If the reports were untrue, members of the embassy staff should be cleared. If they are true, those involved in profiteering in human lives should be exposed.

Already a new crisis—our brief but violent confrontation with Cambodia over an American merchant ship—has been played out. And tomorrow or the next day there will be another. One can still hope, though, that the press will find the will and the space to complete the unfinished business left by the collapse of the American position in Vietnam.

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