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THE END OF THE GAME

The collapse of South Vietnam, so often discussed, predicted, yet always averted, arrived unexpectedly in late April 1975.

North Vietnamese regulars struck hard in the Central Highlands during early March. Banmethout fell easily on the 10th, and President Nguyen Van Thieu ordered a complete withdrawal to the coast: Saigon mattered, not the north. But nothing had been prepared: neither key officers nor the Americans were consulted: some commanders abandoned their men; soldiers deserted to save their families; refugees clogged the roads; and the Communists attacked from the flanks.

In 1972, American advisers and airpower had helped repel a Communist offensive; now they were gone. Discipline and cohesion vanished in 1975, with the stampeding army disintegrating into a mob, as had the Italians in 1917 and the French in 1940. The ARVN troopers spread panic around them, brawling and pillaging, infecting fresh units, and fighting only to board planes for Saigon. Hue fell on the March 25, Danang on the 30th, and Camranh Bay on April 4, as the country was rolled up from the north. Only during mid-April did ARVN units fight well northeast of Saigon, but they were too few.

Phnom Penh, the Cambodian capital, fell on April 17, the Americans having fled by helicopter. Cambodia had been sucked into the war since 1970 by outsiders - the United States included - to whom it meant little. Now the Khmer Rouge took over, eager to smash the old order.

Saigon itself was panicking by mid-April. The Americans had been in South Vietnam politically for 21 years, militarily for 10; now they were leaving within days. Power, the ultimate aphrodisiac in an autocracy, had gained them thousands of friends, admirers, agents, political proteges, female camp followers, em-

ployees past and present. Historians write of "the great fear" that swept France in 1789; fear also terrified these Americanized Vietnamese (though the predicted Communist bloodbath - as opposed to systematic repression - never materialized).

Cash and contacts became decisive, as deals were struck everywhere. Many officials made a killing selling documents, and some Americans joined in to sponsor refugees - for a price. After resigning, Thieu was unobtrusively escorted to Tan Son Nhut airport by armed CIA men and by aides bearing huge suitcases from which, Frank Snepp has written, "the clink of metal on metal broke through the stillness like muffled wind chimes." The flamboyant airman, Nguyen Cao Ky, spent the month plotting against Thieu before helicoptering away at the end. The bloated machinery of American power, only partially dismantled since 1973, was crumbling overnight, with the incinerators working incessantly and lines of people snaking toward the planes.

Still, for Saigon to leave the Western orbit, as Shanghai had in 1949 and Hanoi in 1954, and as Tehran and Beirut were eventually to do, seemed unthinkable. Ambassador Graham Martin, arguing that Vietnamese morale depended on the American presence, dragged his feet; his wife stayed until the end. The CIA station chief, Thomas Polgar, trained in the Agency tradition of deals, fixes and bargains, could not realize that Hanoi held all the cards. In Washington, Henry Kissinger and Gerald Ford were more concerned with shifting the blame to Congress (whose cuts in aid to Saigon still left very large military stockpiles), than in stirring a public outcry by sending the B52s against Hanoi.

With Kissinger's stratagems rendered irrelevant, the helicopters were sent in to pluck frightened people from Saigon rooftops while the unlucky raged in the streets below.

- LEONARD BUSHKOFF

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