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The Second Civil War, 1973–1975

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The signing of the Paris Peace Accords on January 27, 1973 brought neither peace nor a halt to the war. Although both Vietnamese antagonists had suffered tremendous physical damage during the 1972 offensive, their irreconcilable political visions prevented them from creating peace. Each state desperately needed the accords: their economies had been devastated, and hundreds of thousands of civilians and wounded soldiers needed care. Yet despite Hanoi's written pledge to end the fighting, it remained determined to conquer Saigon and unite the country under its flag.

There are four main reasons for the defeat of South Vietnam: North Vietnamese abrogation of the Paris Peace Accords, dire South Vietnamese economic conditions, the reduction of US aid and its debilitating effect on the South Vietnamese military, and Republic of Vietnam (RVN, or South Vietnam) President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's strategic military blunders. The first three forced Thiệu into an impossible predicament, which led to the fourth. The outcome was the fall of South Vietnam.

The 1973–5 period, important as it was, has received scant attention from Western scholars. For most, the war ended when the Americans left. The volumes that provide the best overview from the communist perspective are Hoàng Văn Thái, *The Decisive Years*, and Võ Nguyên Giáp, *The General Headquarters in the Spring of Brilliant Victory*.[1] Perhaps the best-known is Văn Tiến Dũng's *Our Great Spring Victory*, but Dũng's account begins in the February 1975 time frame, skipping the crucial lead-up to the main offensive.[2] Also well-known but focused mainly on the B-2 Front in South Vietnam is

1 Hoàng Văn Thái, *The Decisive Years: Memoirs of Senior General Hoàng Văn Thái* (Arlington, VA, 1987); Võ Nguyên Giáp, *The General Headquarters in the Spring of Brilliant Victory* (Hanoi, 2002).

2 Văn Tiến Dũng, *Our Great Spring Victory: An Account of the Liberation of South Vietnam*, trans. John Spragens, Jr. (Hanoi, 2000).

Trần Văn Trà's *Vietnam: History of the Bulwark B2 Theatre*.[3] All of these volumes have been translated into English. For the South Vietnamese and American perspective, see Henry Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War*, William E. Le Gro, *Vietnam from Cease-Fire to Capitulation*, Cao Văn Viên, *The Final Collapse*, Frank Snepp, *Decent Interval*, and George J. Veith, *Black April*.[4] There are also several excellent books by journalists.[5]

The View from Saigon

With the accords completed, on January 23, 1973, President Thiệu set several key domestic policy goals. First, mark all houses, buildings, and territory with South Vietnamese flags to assert government control. Second, develop an economic plan to rebuild the destruction caused by the 1972 offensive, and return thousands of refugees to productive lives. Some 600,000 people were still housed in temporary camps, of which 400,000 were in Military Region (MR) I.[6] Third, carefully guard against communist political or military attacks. Fourth, open talks with the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of Southern Vietnam (PRG) in Paris to create a National Council for National Reconciliation and Concord (NCNRC) that had been mandated by the Paris Accords to organize an election in three months.

Despite the strictures against further warfare, both sides continued the fighting. Shortly before the signing of the Paris Accords, communist forces launched numerous small-scale attacks across South Vietnam to seize hamlets, block roads, and capture key pieces of terrain. Called Landgrab 73 by the Americans, the goal was to occupy government-held land and seize population. The communist units then awaited the arrival of teams from the International Commission for Control and Supervision (ICCS), a body

3 Trần Văn Trà, *Vietnam: History of the Bulwark B2 Theatre, vol. V: Concluding the 30-Years War* (Washington, DC, 1982).

4 Henry Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War: A History of America's Involvement in and Extraction from the Vietnam War* (New York, 2003); William E. Le Gro, *Vietnam from Cease-Fire to Capitulation* (Washington, DC, 1981); Cao Văn Viên, *The Final Collapse* (Washington, DC, 1982); Frank Snepp, *Decent Interval: An Insider's Account of Saigon's Indecent End, Told by the CIA's Chief Strategy Analyst in Vietnam* (New York, 1977); George J. Veith, *Black April: The Fall of South Vietnam, 1973–75* (New York, 2012).

5 Arnold R. Isaacs, *Without Honor: Defeat in Vietnam and Cambodia* (New York, 1983); David Butler, *The Fall of Saigon* (New York, 1985).

6 AmEmbassy Saigon #968 to Department of State, January 23, 1973, Record Group (RG) 59, Subject Numeric Files 1970–1973, Box 2816, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland (hereafter cited as NARA). The cable cites the RVN statistics. South Vietnam had four Military Regions (MRs). They ran north to south and numbered I through IV.

created by the accords to monitor the ceasefire. The communists believed the teams, comprised of military officers from four separate countries, would then affirm communist control over the seized territory. However, allowing the communist units to maintain these positions would cripple South Vietnam. Consequently, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) counterattacked to drive out the communist units. The ARVN continued fighting past the ceasefire, scheduled for 8:00 a.m. on January 28, 1973. By February 7, all hamlets had been retaken and the roads had been reopened. Both sides suffered heavy casualties, and the physical damage was widespread.

In addition to the smaller skirmishes, two large battles also erupted, both in MR I, the northernmost part of South Vietnam. Several hours before the ceasefire, a task force composed of South Vietnamese marines and armor attacked and broke through the North Vietnamese defenses in northern Quảng Trị province. They moved quickly and captured the small river port of Cửa Việt. The People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN), fearful that the South Vietnamese could block supplies to its units, drove out the marines. At the same time, the PAVN launched an assault on the day of the ceasefire and captured the small port of Sa Huỳnh in southern MR I. The ARVN recaptured the town but only after almost a month of heavy fighting. Just as the ARVN could not allow the communists to expand their territory, General Võ Nguyên Giáp could not permit the South Vietnamese to disrupt Hanoi's hard-won gains from the 1972 offensive.

More ominously, despite the accords prohibiting the further infiltration of men and equipment into South Vietnam, Hanoi increased the flow of soldiers and war materiel into the South. The commander of Group 559, the unit responsible for the Hồ Chí Minh Trail, writes that, on February 5, the PAVN High Command ordered him to "step up its transport tasks, delivering about 80,000 tons of goods to various battlefields."[7] The accords had begun under a dark cloud.

By mid-February, the fighting had slowed, but it did not completely stop. Given Hanoi's ongoing infiltration, Thiệu ordered his commanders to hold all ground. This decision left his military badly overstretched and tied down in static defenses. It was a defensive posture dictated by the accords' stricture on no further fighting, but was also to ensure that Saigon continued to control the vast bulk of the population and territory. Thiệu's postwar choice reinforced his earlier, uncompromising formula known as the "Four No's": no

7 Đồng Sĩ Nguyên, *The Trans-Trường Sơn Route* (Hanoi, 2005), 215. This is the English-language version of his memoirs.

political recognition of the communists; no neutralization of South Vietnam; no coalition government; and no surrender of territory. Paramount for Thiệu was no coalition government. This was the crux of the issue. Known as the "political solution," many outsiders had advocated a coalition as the only possible resolution to the long war. Thiệu, however, held an unwavering conviction that the presence of enemy troops on South Vietnamese soil made any coalition a slippery slope to defeat.

Although Thiệu strongly opposed an alliance with the PRG, he had offered a national election with them several times in 1969. His main conditions were that the PRG renounce violence and that its candidates did not run as communists, since the RVN constitution barred any communist or neutralist candidates. The PRG had turned him down each time. In late 1972, aware that the accords would require both sides to participate in an election, Thiệu used the temporary decree powers that had been granted to him by the National Assembly in June 1972 to prepare for a possible future electoral contest with the PRG. He gutted the existing Political Party Law (#9/69, June 19, 1969). Thiệu sought to force the multitude of smaller nationalist parties to coalesce either with his own newly formed political organization called the Democracy Party or into an opposition party. In mid-1972, over twenty parties were legally operating under the previous law. Most were small and urban-based. Only a few, like the Progressive Nationalist Movement (PNM) or the Farmer–Worker Party, had even a modicum of a national presence.

Thiệu feared this proliferation of noncommunist political parties would fragment their vote in a political competition with the PRG. The new law was deliberately designed with tough operating requirements. Each party now needed a chapter in at least half of the provinces, plus one in Saigon. Each chapter must have 5 percent of the registered voters and have branches in 25 percent of the villages in that province. Each party had until March 27, 1973 to meet the validation conditions. Otherwise, the Ministry of the Interior would disband the party.

After the presidential election in 1971, Thiệu had decided to form a political entity called the Democracy Party. It was designed to win elections by using the existing governmental structure in the countryside to mobilize and convince the population to vote for nationalist candidates. By November 1972, organizational efforts had been completed. By early 1973, party leaders claimed they had enrolled several hundred thousand civilian supporters. By mid-March 1973, Thiệu's Democracy Party had met the legal requirements. An opposition organization called the Social Democratic Alliance, composed of several of the major opposition parties, had also been established, but it did

not yet meet the new law's prerequisites. Thiệu ordered the Ministry of the Interior to allow the new party to conduct organizational activities, hoping it could coalesce into a viable opposition.

Concurrently, Thiệu ordered his minister for the economy to create a plan to resettle the refugees and improve the economy. For Thiệu, fixing the latter was key to convincing the South Vietnamese people to vote for him in an election against a PRG opponent. Beginning in 1970, he had taken steps to reform the South Vietnamese economy, and a combination of new financial programs and a massive land reform had sparked economic growth. Despite this progress, the RVN budget deficit had doubled over the previous several years. Thiệu had greatly expanded the South Vietnamese military to replace departing US troops, the process known as Vietnamization. The sizable increase in government spending had kept inflation percolating at high levels despite efforts to contain it with increased US economic aid. The 1972 offensive had only accelerated that trend. Inflation had increased by 24 percent in 1972, the piaster's value had dropped, critical American economic aid was being reduced, and US military in-country spending was about to cease. To resettle refugees, pay for reconstruction, and feed a million soldiers and their families, Thiệu had to spend even more money, but he needed to accomplish that without making inflation worse or destroying the piaster's value. To achieve these goals, he desperately needed peace and more US economic aid.

Reaching agreement with the PRG on a process for elections quickly proved troublesome. On March 19, the negotiations to form the National Council began at a chateau called La Celle-Saint-Cloud outside of Paris. The Paris Accords had not specified what type of elections, whether for the presidency or a National Assembly, leaving it to the RVN and PRG to determine. The RVN's proposal was to form the National Council, hold presidential elections, and demobilize troops. The PRG countered by demanding Saigon first establish democratic liberties, form the council, and hold elections, in that order. The PRG insisted that ensuring "democratic liberties" (meaning the release of any civilians currently held in RVN jails on suspicion of communist sympathies) was "fundamental and must be resolved before there can be progress on the other issues."[8] The PRG also demanded elections for an assembly rather than for the presidency. Moreover, a Third Force, comprised of Vietnamese who supported neither side, was supposed to be included on

8 USDEL France #6786, March 19, 1973, Subject Numeric Files 1970–1973, Box 2816, RG 59, NARA.

the National Council. As on the other items, neither side could agree on who would comprise the Third Force.

To break the deadlock, on April 25 Thiệu offered significant political concessions. He agreed to general elections for an assembly and promised to remove the constitutional prohibition against communist political activity within thirty days. After sixty days, both sides would convene the National Council to discuss the election and demobilize a portion of their troops. Within ninety days, the council would enact an election law, and, a month later, a national election would be held that included all parties. The vote would be internationally supervised. Thiệu proposed that if the PRG approved and strictly implemented the ceasefire, Saigon would also "abolish the restrictions to the democratic liberties due to the war situation."[9] The PRG refused and instead offered its own six-point proposal, which Thiệu declined. The negotiations were stalemated and would never reach agreement on any issue.

The View from Hanoi

Why would the communists turn down Thiệu's offer? First Secretary Lê Duẩn in Hanoi certainly faced issues as difficult as those Thiệu confronted. After signing the accords, the Politburo also sought to focus initially on economic revival. As General Giáp notes: "Some people thought that the priority then was to preserve peace, achieve national concord, [and] create stability for about five or ten years."[10] North Vietnam urgently needed a respite from the war. After years of US bombing, particularly during the 1972 offensive, its limited infrastructure was in ruins. Roads were potholed with bomb craters, many bridges were damaged or unusable, and industrial output was barely functioning. Moreover, the PAVN had suffered heavy casualties in 1972, and a significant amount of its Soviet- and Chinese-supplied equipment had been destroyed. To conclude the Paris Accords, Hanoi had seemingly abandoned its long-standing demand for the removal of Thiệu and the formation of a coalition government before agreeing to a peace agreement.

Despite this concession, the Politburo viewed the settlement as providing three key advantages. First, the withdrawal of US forces. Second, an in-place ceasefire that allowed its troops to remain and that legitimized a communist political presence in South Vietnam. Third, their belief that the ceasefire was conditional on the accords' being successfully transformed into a

9 Saigon #7194, April 25, 1973, Subject Numeric Files 1970–1973, Box 2816, RG 59, NARA.
10 Giáp, *General Headquarters*, 33.

political contest. That did not mean elections, but that the United States would force a power-sharing agreement on Thiệu.

By late March 1973, however, Hanoi was confronted by a major propaganda problem. For years it had bandied the slogan "Americans out, puppets collapse." Although the Americans were leaving, Saigon showed no signs of disintegration. Consequently, on March 27, the Politburo met to review the first two months of the accords. Some Politburo members, like Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN) Premier Phạm Văn Đồng, wanted to emphasize reconstruction rather than new military adventures in the South. Lê Duẩn, who had lobbied for the 1968 and 1972 offensives, remained determined to conquer South Vietnam. He opened the session by claiming that South Vietnam had massively violated the accords, which was partially true, since the ARVN had continued fighting past the ceasefire date to remove the communist units that had seized territory during Landgrab 73. Lê Duẩn recommended that the Politburo begin planning for another offensive. General Giáp supported Lê Duẩn – a significant change, since he had been against both the 1968 and 1972 offensives. With the US withdrawal, however, Giáp believed that his military was stronger than the RVN's armed forces. In early April, Giáp formed a top-secret team named the Central Cell that would devise a plan to conquer South Vietnam by 1976.

Giáp spent the next two months gathering information from his commanders in the South to prepare for another Politburo meeting in May. His goal was simple: use their reports to sway those Politburo members who were reluctant to approve another offensive. On May 24, the Politburo held its meeting. According to Giáp, Lê Duẩn again began by claiming that the South Vietnamese were still massively violating the ceasefire and were encroaching on communist territory. He demanded the army fight back, proclaiming that "The revolution must march forward through the path of violence. By doing so, we are sure to win victory." Giáp then provided an overview of the military state of affairs, outlining the situations in the various regions. He postulated that the primary reason for the South Vietnamese success in seizing communist territory was the PAVN's refusal to fight back. Giáp offered the following sharp assessment: "If things continue like this, the situation will leave us at a tremendous disadvantage."[11] The two men's exhortations convinced the others, and the Politburo voted to return to war, even though public speeches continued to declare Hanoi's priority was economic reconstruction.

11 Ibid., 51–3.

On July 6, 1973, the Central Committee rubber-stamped the Politburo's decision. Giáp wrote that "Nobody thought any longer in terms of respites … The combat, we realized, would drag on." It was, he felt, "not possible to stop in mid-journey."[12] On October 4, the Central Committee formally approved Resolution 21, which codified the Politburo's decision to militarily conquer the South. The ramifications were immediate. On October 20, the PRG announced a decision to "fight back … in order to defend the liberated zone."[13] The accords were dead, although only Hanoi knew it.

The American Effort

Despite the continuing fighting, many provisions of the accords were still carried out. In Saigon, the communists were allowed to establish a delegation at Tân Sơn Nhất Air Base to coordinate the various procedures created by the accords, such as the return of prisoners and the demarcation of territory. The ICCS teams arrived in-country and began carrying out their duties, although the communists strictly limited their access within their territorial zones. Hanoi began returning US and ARVN prisoners but balked at forcing the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia to account for missing Americans or to convince them to begin negotiations for a peace settlement. Politburo member Lê Đức Thọ told Henry Kissinger that they were unable to influence them, which at the time seemed doubtful, given Hanoi's material support to its revolutionary allies. His plea, however, would later prove accurate. The communist Pathet Lao group did enter into negotiations with the Lao government, and a ceasefire was agreed and a peace settlement was signed by the two parties in April 1973.

On February 1, US President Richard Nixon had sent a secret letter to Phạm Văn Đồng offering over $3 billion in aid to help North Vietnam and the rest of Indochina recover from the war. The financial package, which Kissinger had discussed in October 1972 with Lê Đức Thọ, but which Nixon had not coordinated beforehand with Congress, was designed to induce Hanoi to comply with the accords. Kissinger visited Hanoi in mid-February to discuss future relations and to establish a Joint Economic Center to manage any forthcoming aid. Nixon, however, had provided strict instructions to Kissinger that any aid would be directly tied to Hanoi's rigorous compliance with the accords. In particular, Kissinger sought answers on Americans still missing in action,

12 Ibid., 64.

13 James M. Markham, "Vietcong Order Indicates Support for Battle Step-Up," *New York Times*, October 21, 1973, 3, quoting the communist document.

insisted Hanoi halt its infiltration, and demanded an end to the fighting. Phạm Văn Đồng deflected Kissinger's arguments and instead condemned Saigon's behavior. Although little was accomplished at these meetings, and Hanoi maintained its infiltration of men and equipment into South Vietnam, the US continued its withdrawal. By the end of March, the last American troops had departed. All that remained in Saigon of the once formidable American presence was the US Embassy and a small military team called the Defense Attaché Office (DAO) to coordinate ongoing military aid to the RVN.

Several days later, Thiệu departed Saigon to convene with Nixon in San Clemente, California to discuss future American support. His goals were to acquire significant new weapons for his military, gain new infusions of economic aid until South Vietnam could achieve self-sufficiency, and confirm Nixon's intentions for when – not "if," in his mind – Hanoi once more attacked the South. He was deeply worried about US military reactions to enemy incursions. Meeting on April 2, Nixon asked Thiệu for his analysis of the situation. Thiệu thought Hanoi might launch another offensive later that summer. He asked Nixon what his response would be if Hanoi attacked again. Since Nixon had already publicly threatened Hanoi about its numerous violations of the accords, the US president reaffirmed that "in the event of a massive communist offensive the American reaction would be sharp and tough."[14] To keep Hanoi guessing – and fearing congressional wrath – Nixon refused to go beyond his vague warnings. Thiệu was not reassured by Nixon's comments, but he did not insist on a more forthright statement.

Regarding aid, Thiệu said that South Vietnam "faced pressing emergency problems." These included resettling refugees and rebuilding the shattered economy. "We have to solve these problems," Thiệu said, "in order to ensure political and social stability." Saigon's "goal is to achieve self-sustained growth … in the shortest time [to reduce] the present excessive dependence … on external assistance."[15] Thiệu asked for $1.5 billion a year for three years, or $4 billion spread over eight years. Nixon, under heavy pressure from both the growing Watergate scandal and the increasingly antiwar stance of Congress, could only promise to review Thiệu's financial appeal. Although Thiệu returned home believing he had secured future US military and economic support, renewed fighting quickly soured his mood.

14 Memcon, "The President's Meeting with President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu," April 2, 1973, Richard M. Nixon Presidential Library (hereafter cited as RMNL), National Security Council Files, Country Files, Vietnam, Box 943, Folder 3.

15 "Aide-Memoire," April 2, 1973, RMNL, National Security Council Files, Country Files, Vietnam, Box 943, Folder 3.

The fighting, however, was not the only issue. Ignoring Nixon's warnings and the strict ban against further infiltration, Hanoi continued to pour men and equipment into the South. Nixon had delayed a military riposte until all US prisoners had been released. Moreover, Nixon had little support in Congress for further military action in Vietnam. Yet, given the obvious flouting of the accords, Nixon could no longer look the other way. Although he had declared that the US reaction would be "sharp and tough," in mid-April he sent US aircraft to strike targets in Laos along the infiltration routes. It was a weak response compared with the massive bombing that had helped turn back the 1972 invasion, but Hanoi did agree to a request for Lê Đức Thọ to meet with Kissinger in Paris in mid-May to review and solve the ongoing issues.

After tense negotiations between all three sides, they finally concluded a joint communiqué, called Ceasefire II, that was issued on June 14. Among its components, it ordered a halt to the fighting, prescribed that zones of control be determined between the opposing armies, and instructed the release of civilian prisoners and the formation of the NCNRC. None of these agreements were fulfilled. Although the fighting diminished, it did not end. Most prisoners were released, but no zones of control were delineated. North Vietnamese infiltration continued at a high pace, and the talks in Paris between the two Vietnamese sides remained deadlocked. For South Vietnam, the failure of Ceasefire II would mark the beginning of its decline, highlighted by a contracting economy and sinking morale.

Shortly thereafter, Graham Martin arrived on July 17 to replace the highly esteemed Ellsworth Bunker as the US ambassador to the RVN. Martin was a tough, hard-line anticommunist. Nixon's mandate to Martin was to save South Vietnam, but despite the new ambassador's frantic efforts, after years of war that had cost thousands of American lives, billions of dollars, and caused serious discord in US society, many congressional representatives had turned profoundly antiwar. The 1972 elections in the United States had given the antiwar opponents in Congress a majority, and they intended to legislate a halt to American involvement, regardless of its effect upon South Vietnam. Consequently, the attack on the infiltration routes in Laos in April, combined with the recent revelation that the United States had been secretly bombing PAVN troop concentrations and logistic bases in Cambodia since 1969, sparked a congressional reaction.

On June 4, as Kissinger and Lê Đức Thọ were in Paris discussing a new agreement, the Senate passed the Case–Church Amendment to ban any funds for US military operations in Indochina. The House agreed in late June, and with his congressional opponents holding a veto-proof majority, Nixon

was forced to sign the bill. It set August 15 as the terminal date for any US military activity in Southeast Asia without the express consent of Congress. To deter any effort by Nixon to circumvent this restriction, Congress passed the War Powers Act in November 1973, which required the president to seek congressional approval to send armed forces into combat anywhere in the world. Nixon's promise to respond forcefully to communist violations was now subject to congressional authorization, which would not come. Saigon's last, best hope to defend itself was ongoing military and economic aid. That, too, was about to disappear.

A New Year – 1974

After the PRG announcement in October 1973, heavier fighting resumed. For Thiệu, speaking in the city of Cần Thơ on January 4, 1974, he declared that the war had begun again. It could not have come at a worse time, as the economy, despite Thiệu's plans, had sunk into a near depression. Shortly after the summit with Nixon in April 1973, the RVN ministry of trade and industry had proposed a short-term program "to get the economy moving toward recovery and development by the end of 1973." The only way to achieve Thiệu's reconstruction goals to resettle refugees and rebuild destroyed infrastructure was to increase the 1973 budget by 55 billion piasters.[16]

Thiệu hoped Nixon's promised aid would fill the budget gap, but the plan failed for two reasons. First, the United States cut aid instead of increasing it. Second, inflation in South Vietnam suddenly soared in the summer of 1973, triggered by a shortfall in rice, the country's most important food commodity. Even with increased miracle rice production in the Mekong River Delta, the country's breadbasket, South Vietnam could not overcome its food deficit. The growing urban population, the 1972 offensive that had prevented crops from being planted, South Vietnam's large military, plus thousands of refugees who needed to be fed and who were concurrently not farming, contributed to the sudden shortfall. Rice shortages had become so drastic that the first week of July 1973 saw the second-highest price increase on record. At precisely the same time, the RVN government in Saigon, desperate for revenue, had enacted a new 10 percent tax on all sales. By mid-July, prices had risen 31 percent since the beginning of the year.[17]

16 Saigon #7622, May 2, 1973: https://aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?rid=94223&dt=2472&dl=1345

17 Saigon #12985, July 18, 1973: https://aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?rid=57450&dt=2472&dl=1345

Public outrage forced Saigon to partially relent on the tax, but rice shortages combined with an acute surge in world commodity prices continued the inflationary uptick. By the end of 1973, a dreadful blend of increased warfare, low economic activity, and high unemployment had drained South Vietnam's financial coffers. Thiệu's earlier hopes to revitalize the South Vietnamese economy with a massive jolt of US aid were also crushed, as he did not receive the amounts he hoped for. Thiệu's reconstruction and economic revival plans were dead. Worse, American military aid, which his armed forces completely depended on, was also being drastically reduced just as enemy attacks were mounting.

The American official responsible for managing military aid to that war-torn land was Major General John E. Murray, who headed the DAO. The US Army had suddenly informed Murray in mid-December 1973 that all operational funds were frozen until the next fiscal year, which began in July 1974. Murray asked Ambassador Martin's permission to inform the South Vietnamese command so it could manage its remaining supplies, but Martin denied his request. He hoped Congress would grant more aid. Instead, Congress slashed the following year's budget even more, reducing it to $1.126 billion from the previous $2.1 billion.

After the vote, Martin allowed Murray to inform the South Vietnamese of the dramatic reduction. Thiệu was shocked: his military had been burning through supplies defending themselves against communist attacks without knowing that their logistic requests were going unfilled. On June 1, 1974, Murray wrote a prophetic cable to the Pentagon detailing the likely effects of the congressional action. He claimed that "In the final analysis, you can roughly equate cuts in support to loss of real estate." If there was a further reduction to a level around $600 million, Murray stated, the United States should just "write off [South Vietnam] as a bad investment and a broken promise."[18] Murray was proposing that aid cuts were destroying South Vietnam's territorial integrity because the military could not defend the country against the enemy's growing attacks.

Since Congress was unaware that Nixon had secretly promised Thiệu to provide robust aid in exchange for South Vietnam's signature on the Paris Accords, in late July the joint House–Senate conference voted to further reduce the amount of military aid to Vietnam. The congressional action was both an attempt to force Thiệu to politically compromise with the PRG, which he had attempted to do (only to be rebuffed), and a desire to extricate the United States

18 Le Gro, *Vietnam from Ceasefire*, 87, quoting the Murray cable.

from propping up what many antiwar leaders claimed was a repressive dictatorship. Congress further reduced the amount from $1.126 billion to $1 billion. Then, Senator John Stennis (D-Mississippi) decided to consolidate all money for Vietnam into one fund, called the "Defense Assistance Vietnam" (DAV) program. Everything was to be allocated to the DAV. All costs, including many not previously charged to the Vietnam budget, such as the packing and crating of ammunition and the DAO operating costs, now had to be expensed to the DAV.

The grim aid situation for South Vietnam only grew progressively worse. In early August, the House voted to appropriate only $700 million of the $1 billion authorized. Since all costs were to be charged to the DAV, by subtracting American operating expenses from the budget, the practical effect was to lower the $700 million to only $500 million for the South Vietnamese. This was below Murray's cutoff level where the South Vietnamese could adequately defend themselves. With $500 million, Saigon could barely afford ammunition and fuel, let alone other critical supplies.

The effects on Saigon's military performance were demoralizing. South Vietnamese military commander General Cao Văn Viên briefed Thiệu on the aid reduction. The president ordered the commander to "fight a poor man's war," but he repeated his earlier assessment that "giving up any real estate creates psychological problems for the [RVN government]."[19] Viên was forced to drastically reduce artillery ammunition usage and air force flight time, and he made deep cuts to other essential items like bandages and weapons.

While the aid cutbacks, the crumbling economy, and the ongoing war were lowering morale, at the same time Prime Minister Trần Thiện Khiêm was pressing Thiệu to remove the Democracy Party from government policy. The senior leadership of the party had begun to exert undue influence over the provincial chiefs, and Khiêm wanted it stopped. After several internal battles, in June 1974 Thiệu publicly ordered all military personnel and civil servants to no longer participate in political activity. It was a seismic change from the frantic days of late 1972 and early 1973, when he was laser-focused on building a state party for a potential future political contest against the PRG. By November, US Embassy representatives in MR III found that the Democracy Party "is totally inactive" and "there are no meetings, no activities," and party headquarters "are deserted."[20] Thiệu's design to build a government party to mobilize the masses to win an election had also failed.

19 Saigon #11475, August 31, 1974: https://aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?rid=167268&dt=2474&dl=1345.

20 Biên Hòa Consulate #587, November 18, 1974.

While Congress was cutting aid to South Vietnam, Hanoi's allies had also cut its aid to North Vietnam. For example, after the 1972 offensive, the PAVN had a critical shortage of artillery shells, which the Soviets had not replenished. According to official PAVN statistics, from 1973 to 1975 China and the Soviet Union supplied a total of "724,512 tons, consisting of 75,267 tons of logistics supplies and 49,246 tons of weapons, ammunition, and technical equipment. Of this total, the Soviet Union provided 65,601 tons, China provided 620,354 tons, and the other socialist countries provided 38,557 tons."[21] This aid was primarily small arms and food, and the amounts were significantly lower than the 1969–72 period.

Despite its own aid issues, Giáp's Central Cell planning team had been carefully monitoring the battlefield situation and devising strategies to conquer South Vietnam. At a meeting in March 1974, the Cell reported to the High Command that the PAVN had regained the initiative on the Southern battlefields. Consequently, the High Command decided to step up attacks to wear down the ARVN and force it to burn supplies. According to PAVN Senior General Hoàng Văn Thái, all of this was designed for one purpose: "When the comparison of forces between ourselves and the enemy underwent a fundamental change, when the US was encountering many difficulties at home and abroad, when our preparations had been completed, we would … win victory."[22]

Major combat broke out west of Saigon and in the Central Highlands, but the largest clash since the ceasefire erupted in MR I at the town of Thượng Đức, a remote district headquarters west of Đà Nẵng. Elements of two PAVN divisions seized the town and a mountain commanding the approaches known as Hill 1062, and appeared poised to strike at Đà Nẵng. The South Vietnamese sent elements of the Airborne Division to retake the town and hilltop. After two months of fierce fighting, by November the Airborne had retaken the hill but could not recapture the town.

The stalemate at Thượng Đức had ramifications for both Saigon and Hanoi. The population in MR I believed that the Airborne Division had saved Đà Nẵng, and it was critical for their defense. Equally important, ARVN casualties for 1974 were the second-highest on record, leaving the army exhausted and its supplies drained.

The Politburo had met earlier in October to hear the latest plans and updates from the Southern battlefields. General Hoàng Văn Thái briefed

21 "Large Sources of Aid for the Vietnamese Revolution," *Vietnamese Military History* [*Lịch Sử Quân Sự Việt Nam*], May 3, 2008.
22 Thái, *The Decisive Years*, 38.

them that the aid cuts had badly weakened the ARVN and that economic difficulties had eroded troop morale. Moreover, a combination of Nixon's resignation as president in August from the deepening Watergate scandal, growing opposition to Thiệu's rule in Saigon, and the fact that the PAVN's strength had recovered from the 1972 offensive had all coalesced at precisely the right time for Hanoi. When news came of the "victory" at Thượng Đức, the Politburo was ecstatic. General Giáp concluded that if his regular troops could hold their own against South Vietnam's best, the war had definitely swung in his favor. Consequently, Lê Duẩn ordered him to finalize the plan to conquer South Vietnam by 1976, and he also approved large-scale attacks in MR III that had been devised by the local PAVN commander, Lieutenant General Trần Văn Trà. Although Giáp had at first been reluctant to allow Trà to use his few remaining tanks and heavy artillery, Lê Duẩn approved Trà's proposal.

In early December, Trà's forces launched a major attack against the thinly populated and remote province of Phước Long, situated on the Cambodian border. Local PAVN commanders concentrated two infantry regiments against several lightly defended towns. They quickly overran both towns, and by late December they had captured most of the province except the capital city. Trà's command brought in more infantry, armor, and heavy artillery. A tough street battle raged for over a week as the ARVN defenders, mostly local militia and some elite 81st Airborne Rangers who had been flown in at the last minute, tried to hold off tank-led infantry assaults. On January 5, the PAVN overwhelmed the badly outnumbered and outgunned defenders and seized the town, making it the first province completely captured by communist forces during the war.

Ambassador Graham Martin immediately cabled Kissinger to demand action: "We have arrived at a turning point in the history of the Paris Agreement." North Vietnam, he wrote, is "determined to use whatever military force is required to gain its objective of conquering South Vietnam. The US reaction to the North Vietnamese conquest is thus of critical importance for the success or failure of our policy in Indochina."[23] Gerald Ford, who had replaced Nixon as president, attempted to convince congressional leaders to approve more aid, but most remained against increasing funding. Congressional hearings were held on January 30 to review Ford's request. While administration spokesmen provided detailed

23 Saigon #267, January 8, 1975: https://aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?rid=124937&dt=2476&dl=1345.

Figure 10.1 Fighting continues in South Vietnam despite the ceasefire (June 5, 1974). Source: Evening Standard / Stringer / Hulton Archive / Getty Images.

information about the dire situation caused by the aid cuts, few congressmen changed their position.

The loss of Phước Long and the lack of an American military response convinced the Politburo that a major offensive in the spring of 1975 might badly wound the South Vietnamese, enabling them to win the war in 1976. Plans were developed to launch assaults in each MR. The offensive would commence with an attack against the city of Ban Mê Thuột in the southern part of the Central Highlands. Like Phước Long, the town was also isolated. With the United States cutting aid, and Ford unwilling to challenge Congress over the War Powers Act and launch airstrikes against the gathering communist forces, the South Vietnamese were on their own. They would need national unity and well-developed plans to defeat the expected communist spring offensive. They had neither.

The Final Year – 1975

To prepare for the looming attacks, Thiệu chaired a two-day meeting in early December 1974 to develop the defensive plan for 1975. The South Vietnamese Joint General Staff estimated that there would not be a coordinated

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countrywide offensive similar to 1972, but that the PAVN would follow a pattern like 1974: short but intense regional attacks, probably beginning in late March. South Vietnamese General Cao Văn Viên stated that if Hanoi did not send into battle any of its reserve divisions stationed in North Vietnam, he could defeat them with only limited loss of territory. He surmised that the communists would strike in the Central Highlands first "in an effort to drain our reserves" before making their main attacks in the northern part of South Vietnam and around Saigon.[24] However, Viên felt that if the PAVN reinforced the northern front with its reserve divisions stationed in North Vietnam, the ARVN would be forced to retreat to Huế and Đà Nẵng. His analysis would prove prescient.

The impending attack was not Thiệu's only concern. South Vietnamese society, which had always been a quarrelsome collection of religious divisions, regional animosities, ethnic dislikes, and political feuds, had begun to fracture. After the coup in 1963 against President Ngô Đình Diệm, these societal rifts had almost torn South Vietnam apart. But since the presidential election of September 1967, and particularly after the 1968 Tet Offensive, the South Vietnamese had attempted to overcome their differences. The US withdrawal under Nixon's Vietnamization program had further muted rampant factionalism.

By 1974, however, the poor economy and the ongoing peril had reawakened old schisms. Several religious and ethnic groups in South Vietnamese society became restless. Two religious sects, the Hòa Hao and the Cao Đài, located in the western part of the Delta and in Tây Ninh province, had decided to seek greater autonomy. At the same time, a resurgent rebel faction of Montagnards (tribal people from the Central Highlands) began raiding Vietnamese farms and attacking logging companies, and demanded that the tribes be allowed to form their own nation. Thiệu dispatched the police to forcibly disband an armed Hòa Hao gang protecting army deserters, and he sent the army to hunt down the Montagnard insurgents. While he maintained the country's political integrity, beneath the surface, simmering economic resentment was also coming to a boil.

While the terrible economy had not sparked any urban-based protests, corruption – long the *bête noire* of South Vietnam – soon became the vehicle for expressing popular dissatisfaction. In the summer of 1974, a Catholic priest named Father Trần Hữu Thanh had formed a group called the People's Anti-Corruption Movement. Although Thiệu had recently fired numerous military

24 Viên, *The Final Collapse*, 56.

officers for corruption, on September 8, 1974 Father Thanh and a group of several hundred people launched a demonstration in Huế against corruption. When the local authorities teargassed the crowd, protests in other cities immediately erupted. Father Thanh then accused Thiệu and his family of corruption and called for his resignation. While many people sympathized with Father Thanh's demands for anticorruption efforts, insisting on Thiệu's resignation was too much. Many feared that the president's removal would disrupt the country and leave it easy prey for the communists. By February 1975, Thanh's movement had died out, but the combination of protests, continuing economic dislocation, and ethnic and religious feuds showcased Saigon's weakness.

In the United States, after the failure of the January hearings on aid, President Ford asked congressional leaders to form a delegation to visit South Vietnam and report on conditions. Ford hoped that the report would sway enough legislators to restore funding. Choosing the members was badly delayed, and the group did not depart until late February. It returned to the United States in early March, and while some members were sobered by conditions, others remained adamantly against increased support. Despite the president's hope, the delegation's report failed to sway Congress to grant more money. Even if it had, it might have been too late. The PAVN was gathering in the jungles and mountains to strike the next blow.

Although the High Command and the Politburo had debated where to mount the opening attack for the spring campaign, after further study, by late January 1975, they had chosen the town of Ban Mê Thuột. The city straddles the key crossroads of Route 14 and Route 21 and was less well-defended than either Kontum or Pleiku, the other main towns in the Central Highlands. The High Command sent Senior General Văn Tiến Dũng to command this assault. Giáp dispatched a reserve division from North Vietnam, plus other units, including armor, anti-aircraft guns, and heavy artillery, to attack the city. The assault on Ban Mê Thuột would signal the advent of the spring offensive.

Although the ARVN acquired some intelligence that indicated that the PAVN intended to attack the town, the commanding general of South Vietnam's MR II, Major General Phạm Văn Phú, refused to accept it. He believed the enemy would strike Pleiku, the capital of the Central Highlands, and he did not reinforce Ban Mê Thuột. As the PAVN units were secretly surrounding Ban Mê Thuột, the first blow came when communist troops attacked on March 4 and blocked the three main roads in the Highlands. By severing land communications between Pleiku and Ban Mê Thuột, and between both towns and the coast, each city was cut off from reinforcements, except by air.

In the early hours of March 10, a PAVN sapper regiment seized several key targets in Ban Mê Thuột. Shortly thereafter, five columns of infantry and armor burst from the surrounding forest and made a mad dash into the town. By the next morning they had captured Ban Mê Thuột. The ARVN attempted to retake the city, but its counterattack was defeated.

The loss of Ban Mê Thuột set in motion a series of decisions that triggered the spectacular collapse of the RVN. With the fall of the city, the roads in the Highlands blocked, and enemy forces also making strong attacks across the country, Thiệu faced the most serious military situation since the grim early days of the 1972 offensive. On March 13, given the strong enemy attacks and no US response, Thiệu made a drastic change in strategy. He would no longer attempt to defend every inch of territory but instead pull his army divisions back into more defensible positions. Consequently, he ordered the return of the Airborne Division to Saigon, a plan he called "Light at the Top, Heavy at the Bottom." The idea was to protect the more populous and economically important sections of South Vietnam. At the same time, he told Phú to meet him on March 14 in Cam Ranh Bay to discuss their next move. At the meeting, Thiệu ordered Phú to retake Ban Mê Thuột. With the main roads cut, Phú proposed to move his forces out of Pleiku along a little-used and badly maintained road to the coast, and then turn west along Route 21 to recapture Ban Mê Thuột. Thiệu agreed, and he ordered Phú to begin immediately.

With little planning, Phú's troops began the movement the next day. They quickly encountered serious difficulties. The road was barely traversable, and when they reached the Be River, they had to stop and build a bridge to cross it. Worse, the civilians living in Pleiku, including the families of the military men who had just left, bolted as well. Military units lost cohesion as fleeing civilians intermingled with them. Although initially caught off guard, the PAVN recovered and attacked the retreating troop column and the civilians mixed in among them. By late March, the bulk of the ARVN forces in MR II were dead, captured, or scattered.

In MR I, ARVN units had initially held their ground, but Thiệu's order to send the Airborne Division back to Saigon left Lieutenant General Ngô Quang Trưởng, the commander of MR I, with few reserves. When the PAVN finally managed to cut Route 1 south of Huế, blocking any retreat south to Đà Nẵng, Trưởng ordered a withdrawal from Huế. He attempted to rescue his troops by sea, but it was a catastrophe. Soon, a combination of the departure of the Airborne, news of the disastrous retreat from the Central Highlands, the rout in Huế, and a malicious rumor that Thiệu intended to cede MR I to

the communists generated panic among the civilian population. Hundreds of thousands of people fled to Đà Nẵng to escape the advancing communists. Horrific scenes occurred at Đà Nẵng port as terrified civilians and deserting soldiers attempted to cram on board a few Vietnamese Navy ships sent to rescue them. By March 29, the once formidable I Corps had collapsed, and PAVN troops easily entered Đà Nẵng.

With the downfall of the two northern MRs, Lê Duẩn ordered Giáp to conquer the rest of South Vietnam. Giáp began sending almost all of his remaining reserve divisions south. These units moved along the Hồ Chí Minh Trail on the western side, while in Đà Nẵng the PAVN commanders organized a massive convoy, called the Coastal Column, to advance on Route 1 on the eastern side of the country. By early April, both convoys were making steady progress toward Saigon to join in the final battle to capture the South Vietnamese capital.

Near Saigon, PAVN Lieutenant General Trần Văn Trà attempted to take Saigon with his own units. He launched a three-division attack on April 9 against the 18th ARVN Division at the small town of Xuân Lộc, some 40 miles (64 km) northeast of Saigon. Believing that ARVN morale had collapsed due to the disasters in the north, Trà expected an easy victory. He was wrong. The 18th ARVN, led by Brigadier General Lê Minh Đảo, threw back the enemy and, over the next several days, inflicted heavy casualties. The 18th held out for ten days, but it was surrounded, and with the massive Coastal Column closing in, he was ordered to retreat. The 18th ARVN broke out to the south and executed a masterly nighttime withdrawal. Despite the 18th ARVN's valiant fight, the arrival of the Coastal Column and the reserve divisions meant that most of the PAVN was now menacing Saigon from all directions. Giáp and Văn Tiến Dũng had marshaled almost 300,000 soldiers near Saigon in less than a month, an incredible logistical feat.

Politically, the fall of Đà Nẵng created numerous calls for Thiệu to resign. Thiệu managed to fend off attempts by his former vice president, Nguyen Cao Kỳ, to replace him. However, when the PRG in Paris announced that it would negotiate a ceasefire only if Thiệu resigned and was replaced by former ARVN General Dương Văn Minh, Ambassador Graham Martin visited Thiệu on April 20 to urge him to resign so that this faint glimmer of diplomacy might be tried. Bowing to the inevitable, Thiệu resigned the next day, but, rather than turn power over to Minh, he turned it over to his vice president, Trần Văn Hương. The PRG, however, would not negotiate with Hương. Despite Thiệu's resignation, on the morning of April 26 Dũng launched his attack against Saigon. Shortly thereafter, Hương also resigned,

and the National Assembly voted to install Minh as president, hoping that negotiations might stall the PAVN assault.

It was too late. With PAVN troops poised to enter the city, the US Embassy was ordered to evacuate. Thousands of Vietnamese and the few remaining US personnel were moved from the embassy and other nearby sites by helicopter to US ships at sea. After heavy fighting on the outskirts, by the morning of April 30 PAVN units entered the city. Around 10:00 a.m., tanks and infantry captured Independence Palace. Minh announced over the radio the surrender of South Vietnam. The long war had ended.

Conclusion

The seeds of the destruction of South Vietnam were sown in the final days of 1972. Hanoi had refused to remove its troops from the country after the offensive, and despite a signed agreement not to continue infiltration or resume the fighting, it had promptly broken the accords. When an exhausted United States withdrew and left behind a badly damaged South Vietnam, Saigon was not able to recover. With South Vietnam's economy in tatters and its army fighting on all fronts, both sides interpreted the aid reductions as the United States shedding itself of South Vietnam. With morale crushed on the one side and the other side emboldened, the PAVN executed a well-planned and brilliant attack that caused Thiệu to shift his strategy. His risky maneuver collapsed, which enabled Hanoi to finally achieve what previous onslaughts had failed to accomplish: final victory.