THE FALL OF SOUTH VIETNAM
STATEMENTS BY VIETNAMESE MILITARY AND CIVILIAN LEADERS

by

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This report is a summary of extensive oral and written statements by 26 former high-ranking South Vietnamese military men and civilians on their perceptions of the causes of the collapse of South Vietnam in 1975. These statements were obtained by the Rand Corporation in fulfillment of a contract with the Department of Defense. Specifically, the study was undertaken for the Historian, Office of the Secretary of Defense.
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INTRODUCTION

When the Republic of South Vietnam collapsed in April 1975 under the massive enemy offensive launched in the course of that year, most, if not all, observers of the events were surprised by the swiftness and completeness of South Vietnam's disintegration. As we now know from enemy sources, even Hanoi leaders were surprised; according to their own statements, they had been prepared and expecting to fight well into 1976, the year of the presidential election in the United States.

Actually, the collapse took even less time than the period that elapsed between the launching of the last offensive and the unconditional surrender of Saigon. The military fate of South Vietnam really was sealed in about 20 days: from the attack on Banmethuot on March 10 until the fall of Danang on March 30th. Everything else was just prelude and final denouement. Significantly enough, even those 20 days saw no single decisive battle such as Dienbienphu. There only were some fierce, isolated engagements, some other contacts with the enemy here and there, and on the whole unsuccessful attempts at redeploying forces. There was panic, disorder, tragic numbers of military and civilian casualties by unopposed enemy fire and even by friendly air; and there were mass desertions, mutiny and flight — in brief a rout "unique in the annals of military history" as one South Vietnamese general put it. "As a matter of fact," added this general, "everything was unique in the closing days of the Vietnam war: there were three presidents in one week, a one-million-men army was annihilated in two months, five billion dollars worth of equipment was lost, a country with nineteen million people collapsed and joined the ranks of the communist countries, and the Bamboo Curtain fell on this once rich and beautiful land." (Thi, p. 1)

As soon as the sudden and complete collapse had become history, views and theories sprang up everywhere as to its causes. At that juncture, the Office of the Secretary of Defense tasked the Rand Corporation to conduct interviews with a number of leading Vietnamese
military men (and also a smaller amount of civilian leaders) who had taken refuge in the United States. The mission was to elicit from these men their personal recollections of what they had seen and done during the critical periods and what they perceived as the principal causes of the suddenness of the collapse; and to do this before memories dimmed and mythology set in. Rand thereupon contacted some of these former leaders and found most of them ready, indeed eager, to dwell at great length on the events as they saw them.

In the course of the effort, 26 leaders were given intensive interviews, and ten were asked to write essays as well. This report summarizes and quotes from these interviews and essays. Of the 26 Vietnamese former leading men who participated in this effort, 22 were high-ranking officers and four were civilians. The military men consisted of South Vietnam's former Premier, Air Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky, one general, eight lieutenant generals, two major generals, one brigadier general and nine colonels. Of these officers, about half held combat commands; the other half, staff positions. All had participated in the war for many years. Among them were men such as the Chief of the Vietnam Air Force; the Chief of ARVN artillery; the commanders of I Corps and I Corps Forward; the Chief of the Capital Military District; the deputy commander of the elite First Division; and other staff and combat officers.

The civilian officials who participated in this study were Bui Diem, former Republic of Vietnam Ambassador to Washington and advisor to President Nguyen Van Thieu; Buu Vien, formerly Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and (briefly) Secretary of the Interior and a close advisor to Prime Minister Tran Thien Khiem; Nguyen Ba Can, Speaker of the House since 1971 and Prime Minister in the month of April 1975; and Hantho Touneh, a Montagnard official in the Ministry of Ethnic Development.

The military officials were selected mainly on the basis of their presence in critical areas of interest, such as I Corps and II Corps and the region around Saigon; on the basis of their experience in such areas as air, artillery, training, operations; and on the basis of their accessibility. The civilian officials were selected on the
grounds of knowledgeability of South Vietnamese government operations. No officer from the Airborne Division or the Navy was debriefed for reasons of time and resource constraints, and availability. All sources were debriefed during the twelve-month period from February 1976 to January 1977.

The reader may ask himself whether the authors have selected quotations from the sources in a reasonably representative manner, given the fact that most of the quotes, whether they deal with U.S.--Vietnam cooperation, military aid, leadership or strategy, are on the negative side. Thus the reader might ask: Did the respondents not have anything positive to report? Or, if they did, did the authors deliberately neglect to quote such positive statements? In a word, is this a balanced account, and if not, why not? The answer is that the overarching question addressed to the sources was why the collapse was so sudden and so complete. Inevitably, this established a context for the responses in which the perceived causes of the collapse, i.e., negative features, had to predominate.

Despite the apparent candor with which the sources responded, they did not, presumably, respond without bias. On the whole this bias—as one would expect—runs in the direction of exonerating themselves and in placing the blame primarily on what they regard as poor leadership in Saigon, and on the United States for failing to support them more extensively after the Paris Agreements or come to their aid directly in 1975. All of them also severely criticized the Paris Agreements themselves. Whether or not such "frankness" with the investigator can be regarded as evidence that they were candid is not certain. But in general the respondent who is critical is more likely to be candid than not; the worst interviewee is a flatterer.
Whereas some of the broader statements by the respondents are not simple facts that can be checked, other statements such as alleged shortages or certain U.S. actions, are subject to verification. The authors have not examined the content of such statements by comparing them to U.S. sources, because the purpose of this study was to obtain the views of the Vietnamese and try to learn what they say.

In the text some of the quotations have been attributed to their authors by name and others have not. Those not identified were taken from statements that the respondents did not want to see attributed to them.

The authors of the Report have tried their best to summarize what the respondents have said, without evaluating their statements. The reader in turn is urged to remember at all times that the views summarized here, and the recollections given, are those of the South Vietnamese respondents. When presenting a summary as this in narrative form, it is difficult to avoid creating the impression from time to time that the views expressed are those of the authors, if only because a view found worth quoting often is a view shared. But the views presented here are not the views of the authors, whether the authors happens to share some of them or not. In short, should the reader find himself at any point agreeing or disagreeing with what is stated in these pages, he is reminded that he is then agreeing or disagreeing with former South Vietnamese officials, not with the authors.

The Vietnamese military and civilian leaders, when presenting their own views of the causes of the disaster, often went back in time, at least to the conclusion of the Paris Agreements of January 1973.

One thing most of them agree on: No single calamitous event or mistake can be held responsible. Nor do they state that the enemy's military power was so overwhelming that all resistance was futile,
even though many come close to that by saying that resistance without active help from the U.S. was futile against an offensive of such proportions as the enemy waged in 1975. Yet, some of the respondents say, at the same time: "We defeated ourselves." Still, they attribute a considerable share of the responsibility to the United States, for a wide variety of reasons.

Regardless of where they see the causes, in most of their accounts the general situation in South Vietnam before the collapse is described by them as so precarious that this configuration of military and political factors must be regarded as an integral part of the events. According to the respondents the patient did not die of the blows he was dealt so much as of his anterior vulnerability to these blows.

For this reason, the first part of this report will be devoted to the situation up to the beginning of the 1975 offensive. The second part will deal with the course of the collapse. The third part will then show what the respondents would have considered necessary for a different outcome.

The causes of the collapse, as the sources see them, are so many and so inextricably interwoven, that it is difficult to present them in linear fashion. For that reason, the subdivision of Part I into its seven chapters is at times quite arbitrary. As most things mentioned by the respondents are causally connected with most everything else, what we have put into one chapter could often just as well have been in the next.
EFFECTS OF THE PARIS AGREEMENTS

All respondents, when asked to present their perceptions of the course and causes of the sudden collapse of South Vietnam, went back in time and talked about the situation that prevailed in South Vietnam prior to the last big enemy offensive in 1975. And most of them sooner or later talked about the Paris Agreements of 1973 which they regarded as one of the turning points in the war—a turning point for the worse.

The Paris Agreements

Bui Diem, Saigon's ambassador to Washington from 1967 to 1972, reports:

"I still remember the words of President Thiệu when I saw him a few weeks before the signing of the Paris Agreements and received his instructions for one of my frequent trips to the U.S. as his special emissary to watch over the peace negotiations: 'Go to Washington and Paris and try and do your best. To raise again at this hour the problem of the North Vietnamese troops on our territory is perhaps too late, but as long as we still have a chance to improve the agreement we have to try. If we cannot now obtain the basic requirements for our survival, things will be very difficult for us in the long run. And the withdrawal of the North Vietnamese troops is one of the basic requirements." (Bui Diem, p.1)

According to his testimony, Bui Diem then did try his best, but was not successful. Particularly distressing, according to him, was a series of responses from President Nixon himself. Diem reports:

"The final decision by Saigon to sign the Agreement came after a rather painful exchange of messages between Presidents Nixon and Thiệu—almost every day during the week prior to signing—with some of the messages from President Nixon couched in the toughest language that diplomatic practice has ever seen: 'I am firmly convinced that the alternative to signing the present agreement is a total cut-off of funds to assist your country'... 'If you refuse to join us, the responsibility for the consequences rests on the government of South Vietnam'... 'If you cannot give me a positive answer by 1200 Washington time, January 21, 1973, I shall authorize Dr. Kissinger to initial the agreement even without the concurrence of your government.'" (Bui Diem, p. 4)

Even more pernicious than the Agreements themselves was, according to respondents, the fact that violations were tolerated by the United States. One respondent stated pointedly: "The only provision of the Paris Agreements that
was observed was the removal of foreign troops from Vietnam, namely American troops." (Buu Vien, p.2)  

Others had similar comments. One general who held a leading position in I Corps, comments:

"If the Paris Agreements were already bad and led to a situation where both sides fought each other viciously to control more land and more people, the ICCS (International Commission for Control and Supervision), which was set up to enforce the armistice, not only failed to do its job but was beset by the bickering among its members and--far worse--apparently served as a listening and spying post for its communist members. In fact, every day one could see Hungarians and Poles go freely around, snapping pictures at airports, bridges, and military installations. They had direct radio communications with Hanoi...whenever the Poles and Hungarians withdrew from certain areas, it was expected that these places would soon be attacked." (Thi, p. 14)

What also allegedly distressed some South Vietnamese was that the Americans had the wrong attitude toward Communist members of the Commission.

"One story which made the cocktail circuit in Saigon had it that after VC General Tran Van Tra, head of the VC delegation who in 1968 had directed the Tet offensive in Saigon and became military governor of Saigon after the war, expressed his love of classical music, the Americans presented him the next day with a set of stereo with all paraphernalia of loudspeakers and assorted records of classical music." (Thi, p. 14)

That the Paris Agreements were continuously violated over time did not come as a surprise to Vietnamese leaders. However, in their estimation there was a disproportion in the significance of these violations, in that every violation of the agreements by the enemy, beyond its immediate effect or purpose, represented a challenge to the U.S. and a test as to whether or how the U.S. would respond. And the fact that the U.S. did not respond to the violations apparently depressed and worried the leaders more than the violations themselves. Lack of U.S. response was one of the reasons why the Vietnamese, as they put it, felt "abandoned" after the conclusion of the agreements, a term that recurs frequently in their statements.
Many respondents regard the Paris Agreements as the fundamental cause of the collapse. Among them is a high-ranking officer who cited as the major disadvantages that in his view accrued from the Agreements to the Government of South Vietnam: 1. the in-place cease-fire...which made its area of control vulnerable to communist "land grab" tactics and made military difficulties for the GVN; 2. the fact that the agreement left North Vietnam troops in South Vietnamese territory; and 3. the political disadvantages, particularly the clause calling for the establishment of a Committee of Concord and National Reconciliation.

"Enhancement" and Aid in General

But the Paris Agreements were associated in the minds of Vietnamese leaders with more than violations by the enemy and lack of U.S. response. Even though U.S. troop withdrawals had been almost completed when they were signed, the agreements somehow ratified the departure of American arms. And even though, technically, the agreements had nothing to do with U.S. aid, the decline of U.S. aid in the years after the signing seems associated in the minds of Vietnamese leaders with the agreements themselves, perhaps because aid in the form of the "Enhancement" and "Enhancement Plus" operations was used, as they occasionally put it, to induce them to sign.

When asked about the "Enhancement" resupply efforts which preceded the signing of the Paris Agreements, another high-ranking officer responded that this equipment was not of much use and most of it stayed in storage. He said that the "Enhancement" effort was a political ploy to establish a basis for a one-for-one replacement program later on and was also mounted as an inducement for the GVN to sign the Paris Agreements. Citing examples of the dubious equipment provided, the officer mentioned the problems ARVN had with the C130s. He said of the 32 aircraft received, on the average only 8 to 12 could fly on any given day because of lack of spare parts.
One high ranking officer in the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had an almost identical view on the Enhancement operations. By and large, this general's appraisal of the Enhancement operations was negative. He said ARVN 'never used' the majority of the equipment. It was his belief that the Enhancement operations were laid on to reassure President Thieu about continued U.S. support and to convince him to sign the Paris Agreements...He noted the fact that much of the equipment was second-hand (the F-5s which were provided by South Korea and Taiwan), and that South Vietnam later had to pay for this equipment.

But the Enhancement operations were only a part of the supply and aid situation in general. Summing up, the general said that "the lack of adequate military aid to South Vietnam following the 1973 Peace Agreements was the second fundamental cause of the collapse." (The first being the Paris Agreements.)

Former Ambassador Bui Diem states:

"The 'tightening of the screw' period began right (after the Paris Agreements). Persistent antiwar feelings, illusions of peace generated by the peace agreement, (American) antipathy against the one man regime—all these factors resulted in the fact that the South Vietnamese received during the calendar year 1973 barely what they needed for their survival. And this was but the beginning of the trend, because the real difficulties came only in 1974 when an unfortunate confluence of reverses came along:

1. Of a requested 1.6 billion in military aid, the U.S. Congress appropriated only 700 millions (in spite of the fact that an earlier bill had authorized already 1 billion).

2. An unexpected action by the DOD, charging off $300 million worth of equipment against FY 1975 (while normally it should have been charged against FY 1974), thus further reducing the volume of military aid to 400 millions.

3. Economic aid being almost totally consumed by soaring costs of fuel and commodities in the world market.

4. An urgent request for additional aid which was ignored by a U.S. Congress too much absorbed by Watergate and, most important of all,

5. The resignation of Mr. Nixon who was considered rightly or wrongly as the solid supporter of Mr. Thieu and of the anti-Communist cause." (Bui Diem, p. 32)
On the subject of "Enhancement" Bui Diem had this to say:

"This ... costly equipment was considered at the time as a gesture from the U.S. Administration to induce the Thieu Government to sign the Agreement. It had perhaps its political value—practically everything which could be construed as a form of guarantee from the U.S. not to abandon South Vietnam was welcomed by Mr. Thieu. But it was hastily and ill-conceived, and the whole program had little military value; in fact a lot of this equipment could not be effectively used by the South Vietnamese Armed Forces who later complained that they needed men and money just for the maintenance of this unusable equipment." (Bui Diem, p. 32.)

And Bui Diem concludes his observations on the old problems:

"These reverses, quite naturally, had immediate and dangerous effects on the situation in Vietnam: The already fragile economic and social stability of the country was seriously affected, signs of political instability began to appear and the South Vietnamese Armed Forces were forced to reduce their activities to a critical minimum, leaving the field free to their enemies. But topping it all, in a sort of cumulative effect, there was the psychological impact provoked by the succession of bad news which in turn created an atmosphere of uncertainty in Saigon during the final months of 1974 and caused the collapse of the morale of the whole South Vietnamese regime." (Bui Diem, p. 35)

According to the men on the battlefields like General Lam Quang Thi, commander of I Corps Forward and Deputy Commander of I Corps, the effects of reduced aid were having the following impact on their operations:

"It went without saying that the lack of supplies and adequate fire support resulted in a dramatic increase in the rate of casualties. Military hospitals were overcrowded... they were critically short in medicines, especially dextrose, antibiotics, and also plasma... As a result the combat units saw their ranks rapidly depleted and were hard put to replace their losses. As a matter of fact, in 1975 no infantry battalion ever had more than 400 men... and a Ranger battalion no more than 300. The recruiting operations became more difficult, while the desertion rate
increased. All of these, added to the increasing economic difficulties, were having a devastating effect on the morale of the army and the country as well, and were a major cause in their final collapse." (Thi, p. 12)

According to Thi, Med-Evac operations were also affected.

"In Saigon, the ambulance units were so short in gasoline that in order to evacuate the wounded, they had to tow four ambulances in a row with a 2-1/2-ton truck...even worse, a wounded soldier sometimes had to wait for the company of two or three more of his comrades to be worth an evacuation by ambulance, and many unnecessarily died this way." (Thi, p. 11)

Long-time Speaker of the House and short-term Prime Minister in 1975, Nguyen Ba Can, had this to say on the subject of aid:

"The deep cause of the surrender must be attributed first to the Vietnamese defects, such as government inefficiency, the loss of the people's confidence, the declining morale of the Armed Forces, and secondly to the disastrous cut-off of vital military aid." (Can, p. 1)

Actually, the decline in aid was regarded as possibly necessitating drastic strategy realignments. One staff officer responded that on the problems created by the cutbacks in U.S. military aid he and other members of the JGS had speculated from time to time about the amount of South Vietnam's territory that could be defended with differing amounts of U.S. military aid. He said they had run a rough mathematical exercise...and concluded that with 1.5 billion dollars in military aid they would be able to defend all four corps but with only 700 million they would only be able to defend III and IV Corps. He said the results of this exercise were discussed with Prime Minister Khiem, General Vien, and General Khuyen of the JGS, and even with President Thieu. However, even with the 1.5 billion it would have been very difficult to hold South Vietnam in the absence of U.S. air and naval support. As to the amount of stocks actually available in South Vietnam in the Spring of 1975, the officer estimated that the munitions and other materials on hand would have allowed South Vietnam to have continued its defense only until about May or June.
Vietnamization

If some leading personalities in South Vietnam did not feel good about U.S. aid in the days before the enemy offensive, they did not feel good about Vietnamization either. General Tran Van Don, I Corps Commander in the sixties, Deputy in the Assembly and, finally, Minister of Defense, had this to say:

"I was an opponent of Vietnamization...I will tell just one story. I visited (some units in the field) and tried to understand the program of Vietnamization of the war...it was in the headquarters of the 5th Division. I discussed the question with the commander of the division, General Minh Van Hieu, a most honest general, and capable, too. I was surprised by his answer; it opened my eyes. I asked him, what do you think of Vietnamization? He said to me: 'It is impossible to be implemented.' Why? He said: 'The 5th Division covers an area where there were two other divisions, Americans, and now with the departure of the two American divisions I have only my division to cover the whole area. I have three regiments for this area and must use one regiment to replace one division. How can I face the enemy like this? I have become weaker. He looked very disappointed. I was surprised; he was a quiet man, a polite man, and he tried to do his best. But he said to me that this was impossible. 'How can I cover a bigger area with less units?' So the Vietnamization of the war means that we are becoming weaker." (Don, p. 2)

A staff officer said he did not agree with the Vietnamization program. He felt that South Vietnam should have been given more infantry divisions and that the country needed more economic aid as well. He said that the buildup of the fourth brigade for both the Airborne and Marine Divisions was accomplished out of equipment stores that the GVN already had on hand and once this was expended there were no additional replacements. Thus, it was impossible to create additional reserve divisions without U.S. support.

Colonel Nuyen Huy Loi, a veteran staff officer with the JGS and a military adviser to the SVN delegation to the Paris Talks, thought that Vietnamization had not been approached properly.
"...when I was in Paris, people come to ask me, how do you feel about the Vietnamization? I think a Vietnamization program was possible, really because we did it before, in 1954 with the French. But the main thing is to Vietnamize the whole structure, right from the top, from those who conduct the whole war, not just the small units, because the soldiers on both sides are the same. We had good officers who would stand and fight but we needed to put them at the top or in the middle, not just in small units.

Q. How would you have Vietnamized?
A. Oh, we talked for a long time in 1966/67 on how the Vietnamese Army had to reorganize in order to become a really effective armed force and to get by alone, with just some support from the U.S.. Because the American Forces wanted to train the Vietnamese Army in the image of the American forces. And, as you know, even with American Forces we (had not been able to) fight this kind of war. So you have to design some other kind. For a long time I tried to convince our leaders, and I talked with Americans as well, we have to reorganize into two forces. One is a territorial force and one is the main force, ready to move anywhere we want. And all these mobile forces have to have adequate support, some ground support...I think we needed a large force, from ten to fifteen divisions, about 600,000 men. When I was with the JCS I made a study of that and tried to submit it to the U.S. and talked to our leaders. And it would have been necessary for the Americans to withdraw step by step until we were ready to fight alone. Not just taking the equipment and leave. However, the JCS did nothing. They just did nothing until the end...they only received suggestions (from the Americans). But everything is done at MACV Headquarters and sent to us, that is all.

Q. And you merely translate them and send them...
A. Out into the field.
Q. So the JCS didn't do anything?
A. They didn't do anything.
Q. Why?
A. Because everything is done by MACV. And you have the whole system integrated." (Loi, pp.13-15).
A high-ranking civilian, Nguyen Ba Can, who for a brief period toward the end was Prime Minister after having served for several years as Speaker of the House, reports that

"Vietnamese officials used to call Vietnamization the 'U.S. Dollar and Vietnam blood sharing Plan.' Vietnamization was often praised, but the assistance promised to the Vietnamese, upon which they had come to rely as the key of containment of Communist expansion in South East Asia was denied them after the signing of the Paris Agreements -- one might say after the U.S. had staged a 'peace with honor' solution. (Can, p. 27)

Yet—Complete Reliance on the U.S.

However, paradoxical though it may seem, feelings of disappointment with the U.S., even bitterness for the U.S., and feelings of having been "abandoned" by the U.S. because of Paris and declining aid, went hand in hand, it seems, with an unshakable conviction that the U.S. would come to South Vietnam's aid in case of real trouble. One might put it this way: Despite their diminishing confidence in U.S. goodwill or good judgment (as for example in the case of non-response to the cease-fire violations, the cease-fire itself, and the declining aid), the leaders, it seems, relied on the U.S. without reservation. This was based on two factors.

One of these factors was the series of face-to-face encounters the Vietnamese had had with American leaders, especially President Nixon, and the written assurances they had received from him. Perhaps the high point in this connection was President Thieu's meeting with President Nixon in San Clemente on April 2-3, 1973 -- the first (and only) meeting of the two leaders after the traumatic circumstances surrounding the signing of the Paris agreement. The meeting had pleased the Vietnamese leaders by producing a joint communique that threatened "vigorous reaction" to any blatant cease-fire violations by Hanoi.

But Thieu had been even more pleased with what, according to Bui Diem who was present at the meeting, he was told by President Nixon privately. "The off-the-record language was stronger than the language
in the official communique," writes Diem, "for instance: 'The U.S. will meet all contingencies in case the Agreement is grossly violated' and, 'You can count on us.'" (Bui Diem, p. 7) So pleased and relieved was Thieu with these results of the San Clemente meeting that, again according to Bui Diem, he had champagne broken out to celebrate as soon as his plane was in the air. (Bui Diem, p. 8)

Not untypical for the firm belief in U.S. help in case of true need is this passage from a transcript of the interview with a high-ranking staff officer. He was critical that U.S. had failed (he said) to live up to its promise of support to South Vietnam in the event of a major Communist offensive. He had been told that before the GVN had signed the Paris Agreement, President Thieu had received a letter from President Nixon promising a strong U.S. reaction in the event the other side violated the Paris Agreement.

What had especially convinced this officer that U.S. air power would come to their aid in case of need was the following: Regarding JGS's expectations for U.S. air support, he stated that there had been a plan worked out with the U.S. Defense Attache's Office outlining the procedures for requesting U.S. air support in the event of a major Communist offensive. He said this plan was never put on paper but resulted from an oral agreement stipulating that President Thieu should formally request U.S. air support through the U.S. Embassy in Saigon, which would then forward the request to the U.S. President. The President in turn would place the request before the U.S. Congress, and it was agreed that South Vietnam had to be prepared to hold on its own for a period of 7 to 15 days until the U.S. procedures could be consummated and a decision on the bombing could be made. This general further stated that hot lines were established between various South Vietnamese commands and the U.S. air base at Nakhon Phanom in Thailand. Among others, hot line communications were opened between Nakhon Phanom and the JGS, RVNAF headquarters in Saigon and with each of the four corps headquarters. Hot lines were established so as to provide communication links with ARVN units in the event bombing strikes were required. The general also reported that there was a systematic program to update target lists for the U.S. Air Force in Nakhon Phanom.
This staff officer then added that "every day" new targeting information was transmitted to the Defense Attache's Office in Saigon who in turn passed it on to Nakhon Phanom. Targeting was also updated through periodic visits of senior GVN officers to the air base. He said that he flew to Nakhon Phanom three times in 1974 and that General Vien, the Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, and General Truong had also made similar base visits. According to him the agreement concerning target updating, the hot lines and procedures for requesting air support were put into effect during the first part of 1974. According to the officer this procedure was instituted at the initiative of the U.S. Defense Attache's Office in Saigon and he assumed that it must have flowed from an order from a higher echelon within the U.S.

According to the general, he had "personally briefed President Thieu on the procedures for requesting U.S. air support in 1974." He added that even though he and others relied on it that there would be U.S. air support in an emergency, efforts to facilitate a positive U.S. decision were not neglected. He said that every corps commander had received instructions to organize appropriate defense lines and to hold defense lines in case of attack so as to make a good impression on the U.S. Congress. He had briefed every corps commander personally about the procedures for requesting U.S. air support and impressed upon them the necessity of holding, in order to increase the chances of Congressional approval.
Thus most Vietnamese leaders, it seems, including President Thieu himself, expected that the U.S. would intervene. A man close to Thieu during the final months reports:

A. "They (the various leaders) believed until 1975 that the Americans would never abandon South Vietnam. A strong feeling from the beginning, all the time."

Q. "And in case of outright aggression, we would resume bombing?"

A. "People didn't pay attention to the mood in the U.S. Congress. They don't know the importance of Congress. They think your Congress looks like our Congress. You must understand the psychology of the people. They did not live in America. How could they know how powerful the American Congress is compared with the Vietnamese Congress?"

Q. "When did this belief (in U.S. intervention) start to erode?"

A. "The last day."

Q. "They believed up to the end?"

A. "That is right."

Q. "Do you think Thieu believed that?"

A. "I think so...." (Duh, p. 31)

Perceived U.S. Self-Interest

One factor underlying Vietnamese expectations of U.S. help was that the leaders apparently believed, as shown in the above, that they had been promised help. The other factor underlying the unquestioning faith on the part of the South Vietnamese leaders in U.S. help in the event of a truly destabilizing attack on them was their perception of how the

*Apparently, Air Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky was an exception. He stated: "My impression is that Thieu always believed that the Americans, because of world-wide interests, because of strategy, because of this and that, would never let South Vietnam down, in other words, be occupied by the communists.... I was the (only one) to repeat and repeat again, even with a map. I told them, look at Vietnam on the map. Of course, America never wants Vietnam to lose to the communists but some day when... it's obvious that the Vietnamese cannot handle the problems themselves, what can Americans do to save us?" (Ky, p. 36)
United States viewed its own situation globally. They seemingly were
convinced that the U.S. could not and would not suffer the conquest of
South Vietnam by the North and its allies for simple reasons of its own
self-interest. In many of their statements, sentences like the follow­
ing recur: "You sacrificed over 50,000 killed in the war. You had
over 200,000 wounded. You spent over 150 billion dollars. You had at
one time over 500,000 men there. You staked your prestige on a free
South Vietnam. How could we ever expect that you would let South Vietnam
...

According to one witness, the belief that America would come to
their aid held by the leaders was also shared by the people. Buu Vien,
Assistant Secretary for Defense in 1972/73 and later one of Prime Min­
ister Khiem's principal assistants, writes:

"The faith of the Vietnamese people in the United States was
so strong that even when the communists had occupied all the
provinces in MRs 1 and 2 and closed in around Saigon, there
were people, including senior officials in the government,
who still believed the U.S. would soon react and drive back
the communists to save South Vietnam. They believed the
U.S. was 'up to something' maybe to lure the communists
into a trap to destroy once and for all their forces. It
sounds naive, but it shows how strong the Vietnamese's
people's confidence was. The U.S. would intervene to stop
the aggression, that was the assumption the Saigon govern-
ment also made." (Buu Vien, p. 17)

Buu Vien, summing up what others also said, continued:

"And it was not without sense to reason that way. To begin
with, we thought the U.S. couldn't afford losing Vietnam
because, as a superpower, the U.S. would lose face....
Second, losing Vietnam would mean that the free world lost
the first country to the communists by war....Third, (if it
had not been in the U.S. interest to intervene) the U.S.
would not have poured so much resources and sacrificed so
many American lives in Vietnam in the first place. The dis­
covery of oil off the Vietnamese coast gave us one more rea­
on to believe the U.S. wouldn't abandon Vietnam....Fourth,
the government of South Vietnam had the solid pledge from
the U.S. government that the U.S. would react strongly in
case of communist renewed aggression. In the closing ses­

delegation, President Nixon made it clear that the U.S. wouldn't let the North Vietnamese communists take over South Vietnam by force. As Vice Minister of Defense, I was present at the meeting." (Buu Vien, p. 37)

And the Vietnamese leaders expected U.S. help not just in one way (B-52s) but also along a different route: through diplomatic demarches in Moscow or elsewhere.

Finally the Vietnamese leaders reasoned that the enemy would reason the same way they did and therefore desist from waging the type of attack that would precipitate major U.S. military or diplomatic responses. This thought seems to have led them to faulty assessments as to what the enemy would do. Thieu himself is reported to have stated at a meeting in 1974 that the enemy would in all likelihood not make a major attack and instead resort increasingly to guerrilla warfare and political subversion.

"Even though President Thieu had time and again warned against the possibility of a major communist final offensive he assumed that political subversion would probably be the main tool the communists would use to seize control of the country." (Buu Vien, p. 37)

From this one must assume that Thieu, too, assumed that the enemy would not want to risk U.S. reactions to a major offensive.*

Results of Reliance on U.S. Help

As a result of their conviction that in case of an emergency the U.S. would come to the rescue in *deus ex machina* fashion, the Vietnamese apparently got the worst of two worlds. On the one hand they never made any efforts to attain at least some form of continued national existence through accommodation or negotiation with the other side, social reform, change in leadership, or some coalition government. On the other,

*As we are told in the account of the North Vietnamese commander Van Tien Dung, truthfully or not, the Politburo in Hanoi deliberated carefully on the question whether the U.S. would respond to a major attack on their part. They eventually concluded that the U.S. would not. (Great Spring Victory, FBIS, APA-76-110, p. 5)
relying so unconditionally upon the Americans for help in an emergency, they never "pulled up their socks" to prepare for it. This same attitude later carried over, it seems, into their defense against the last enemy offensive.

"Why fight...? They (the Americans) will do something; they will be tough." (Don, p. 39)

They seem to have reasoned that without U.S. intervention or sufficient aid even the most strenuous efforts at self-improvement could at best be only of marginal utility. Hinting that it was foolish on the part of the Americans to expect otherwise, Buu Vien says in his otherwise quite self-critical analysis of the debacle: "No country in contemporary history has been able to prevail against superior military power, no matter what the patriotism of its people or the quality of its government." (Buu Vien, p. 77)

This general view, whether it was justified or not, help prevent military or civilian reforms—reforms which, in the eyes of a number of the participant/observers, were necessary yet at the same time futile. The only real purpose of undertaking, or at least seeming to undertake them appears to have been to propitiate the Americans who, in the minds of South Vietnamese leaders, were impatient, unpredictable, all-powerful, and hard to understand. The only person, they assumed, who knew the Americans and their designs well was Thieu, their only true connecting point with their ally. It is all the more ironic then to learn from one of Thieu's closest confidants (Bui Diem) that the President kept forever asking: "What are the Americans up to?" This was, says Bui Diem, "an obsession in his mind." (Diem, p. 42)

In all, one might say that the mood in Saigon on the eve of the last big enemy offensive was a climate of considerable discouragement caused by the "abandonment" by the Americans—as evidenced, in their view, by the "imposition" of the Paris Agreements, the lack of American response to enemy violations of these agreements, and the declining aid. Yet, at the same time it was an article of faith with the leaders (and apparently the people, too) that for reasons of self-interest and
reasons of commitment the U.S. would never let them fall prey to the North. These feelings of magic invulnerability coupled with profound pessimism about their own capabilities apparently undermined their resistance to such a point that they crumbled more quickly than even the enemy had anticipated. Besides, their blind faith in U.S. help and their conviction that, even from a distance, the U.S. remained in control of their destinies, lent credence to the rumors that circulated through I Corps in March of 1975, to the effect that a "deal" had been made surrendering northern portions of Vietnam to the enemy—rumors which apparently greatly contributed to panic and lack of resistance.

*More on that subject in Part II, The Fall of I Corps.
THE POLITICAL SITUATION

Conflicting Basic Views

Even though South Vietnam's government was, according to Bui Diem, "half a dictatorship," there is reported to have been a range of genuine political forces and activities in the country that under more favorable circumstances might have given the people of South Vietnam a working democracy, but apparently only had the net effect, when the big enemy push came, of speeding its disintegration.

Underlying some of the manifestations of opposition to Thieu's regime were some profound ideological differences, and also some fundamental differences as to what forms any pragmatic approach should take. On the ideological side, what emerges from some statements by the respondents, is that there was disagreement whether South Vietnam, in the critical situation created by the war against a powerful and relentless enemy, could "afford" democracy. Some military men, but also Saigon's last Prime Minister, did not think so.*

For example, General Nguyen Duy Hinh, the commander of the 3rd Infantry Division and an officer whose fighting ability was praised by his fellows, stated that there was a need for South Vietnam to fight a "total war" and that national mobilization was imperative. However, said Hinh, this could not be accomplished given the nature of the free society in the South, individuals tended to pursue their own interests, e.g., seeking higher pay or conducting their own business. In General Hinh's view, democracy was adopted "too early" in South Vietnam because of American pressure. He cited the criticisms of South Vietnam's authoritarian stance in the U.S. Senate and the way this was used, in his opinion, to justify aid cutbacks. (Hinh, p. 9)

Hinh also felt that U.S. pressure for village elections in Vietnam was a mistake. He said that the "good people" who would have made desirable candidates in such elections had either left for the cities or been killed by the communists, leaving only "bad people," "draft dodgers" or people "designated" by the VC infrastructure as candidates for such elections. He considered this "American fostered village democracy" to be one of the main failures of pacification. In order to successfully

*See page 29.
compete with the hard-core communist organization confronting it, it was incumbent on the GVN to set up a counter-organization manned by good cadres. The South needed "regimentation," said Hinh, as well as good leadership both at the presidential and the province chief level. In General Hinh's view it had been a "mistake" to kill President Diem. (Hinh, p. 10) Hinh was not sure, however, that a different system could really have worked "because the people had suffered too much, and every family had lost at least one person."

Some other respondents took what seemed to be the opposite view. Rather than thinking that democracy should be relegated to "later," they felt strongly that social and economic reforms were needed in order to give the people a cause worth fighting for. The most prominent among proponents of new political policies was General Tran Van Don, for several years member of the Senate and a member of a party opposed to Thieu.

"We needed the minds of the people because the problem in Vietnam was not only military but also social, economic, and political. When I say "political" I don't mean political party, I mean 'people'... We needed to have a people's army as we have seen in Israel. (But) we could not ask the people to be involved and to support the struggle, if in this fight we did not change the social order. We (needed) a new social order because whatever we had was the social order we got from the French side, and it was not a real new social order made by the Vietnamese themselves. The other side, when they opened the war against the South, their motivation was independence and unity and a new social order. We must give the same motivation for the people if you want them to follow you. Independence yes, unity yes; but also a new social order, and we failed to do it." (Don, p. 3)

Beyond such ideological differences, there were also differences between two forms of pragmatism: to strengthen the armed forces at the expense of the economy, or to strengthen the economy at the expense of the Armed Forces? The leaders, who state that they were at times subjected to conflicting pressures on this issue by Americans, were vacillating. One general reports that after the Paris Agreements, the GVN was focusing on problems of "post-war reconstruction." National emphasis,
particularly after the beginning of 1974, was placed on economic development. Great hopes were pinned on the development of Vietnam's offshore oil resources. In this environment "everyone neglected the military" and, said the general, the JGS even received an order from President Thieu to demobilize 100,000 men out of the regular forces. The general understood these 100,000 were to be used to help the South Vietnamese increase food production and satisfy manpower requirements of the civilian ministries. The general added the JGS had complied with this order and prepared plans for demobilization. However, by the second half of 1974 President Thieu, according to him, realized that communist violations of the cease-fire made this plan impractical and cancelled the order.

There also were disagreements on the crucial question as to whether or not to seek any kind of accommodation or contact or coalition with the other side. Those who favored the latter course criticized Thieu's policy of the "4 No's" and called him "as inflexible as Diem" but with less basic ability. Those who wanted to be more accommodating and flexible wanted to do so primarily on the assumption that there were, in their view, exploitable differences between Hanoi and the VC "who had nothing and knew it." (Don, p. 6) Men who wanted to change the political posture of Saigon vis-à-vis the VC also wanted to "open their hands" to dissenters in Saigon, such as neutralists. None of these tendencies were ever put into operation until the very end when in April 1975 "Big Minh" was chosen to negotiate some new arrangement with the other side. But then it was too late. As Buu Vien put it: "Everything is too late now. The Communists will not accept anything less than unconditional surrender. The rice is already in their mouth. It does not hurt them a bit to chew and swallow it." (Buu Vien, p. 22) Such efforts at negotiating, thinks Buu Vien (among others), should have come much earlier, right after the conclusion of the Paris Agreements.

Finally, there were differences of opinion with regard to the political picture in the world at large. General Thi presented the following reflections on the subject:

"President Thieu was probably the man who was most afflicted by the new mood of detente. His staunch anti-Communism seemed
to be anachronistic and sometimes bordered on the ridiculous in the new atmosphere of international relaxation of the 70's (the Peking thaw; President Nixon's epochal visits to China and Russia; the tentative rapprochement between North and South Korea; the normalization of relations between East and West Germany). Furthermore, he created a sort of credibility gap by acting differently from what he professed: as a matter of fact, he preferred not to talk to the Communists, yet he had sent a delegation to Paris; he professed not to make territorial concessions to the Communists, yet he had de facto conceded to them all the territory which extended from Thach Han to Ben Hai river and the city of Loc Ninh; he professed never to accept any kind of coalition with the Communists, yet he signed the Paris Agreement which prescribed the creation of the three-party Council for National Concord and Reconciliation, which was regarded by the Communists as a definite coalition government. Then reversing himself and sticking to his no-coalition policy, he refused to implement this provision, thus providing the Communists with an argument to accuse SVN of bad will and to justify their overt violations of the agreement and their dark intention of annexing the Republic of Vietnam by force." (Thi, p. 28)

Considering that General Thi presents himself as a very conservative person politically, this shows that even among the conservatives there were serious rifts with regard to general political postures.

The Mounting Opposition to President Thieu

Partly springing from such basic differences as outlined above, partly for reasons of practical politics, the political situation in South Vietnam was said by some of the respondents to have deteriorated until, on the eve of the last great enemy offensive, it had become, in the words of Saigon's last (and briefly functioning) Prime Minister Nguyen Ba Can, "political chaos."

According to Can, who was Speaker of the House for six years before his service for a single month as Prime Minister of South Vietnam at Thieu's behest (April 1975), most political forces in the country had turned away from President Thieu in the predisaster period at the beginning of 1975. These political forces had not always been unable to rise above partisan concerns in times of emergency. They had done just that, according to Can, in 1968 and 1972, during the two big enemy
offensives, when despite their lack of sympathy for Thieu they had thrown their support behind him and the war effort. But, according to Can, "in 1975 most people not only failed to support the government, they opposed it--strongly." (Can, p. 2)

There was, said Can, "political chaos" in Saigon in 1974 and early 1975--in fact, "anarchy." For one thing, Thieu had lost the support of the Catholics who had been his staunchest anti-communist allies. Can attributes this to a shift in Vatican policy toward "accommodation," which, according to Can, the Pope had recommended to a disappointed Thieu when they had met in 1973, (Can, p. 7) and to an obedient Catholic hierarchy in South Vietnam. Presumably, the Vatican had concluded already then that the cause of South Vietnam was lost, and, as Thieu observed to Can, "had begun to lean toward a policy that would perhaps make life easier for Catholics behind the Iron Curtain." (Can, p. 6)

However, some Catholics went much further than merely failing to support the Thieu government. In mid-1974, Father Tran Buu Than's "anti-corruption movement" that was backed initially by only a dozen out of some three thousand priests living in South Vietnam had, according to Can, had as the unnamed, though obvious, target the President himself. The campaign snowballed into a major political force in the country, and carried with it the switch of Catholics in the Assembly from a friendly to a hostile posture. This occurred, says Can, at a "strange time" because Thieu had just purged the Armed Forces of many corrupt officers. Thereby, he had incurred the anger of the Armed Forces without alleviating the fervor of the anti-corruption campaign. (Can, p. 7)

This turning away of the Catholics is called by Can "the most catastrophic political move." (Can, p. 6) He adds:

"The Vietnamese Catholic community, which was the best organized (force) in the country fighting communism now (1974) abandoned its will to resist and took steps toward coexistence." (Can, p. 9)

At the same time, the Hoa Hao in the Mekong Delta, which had supported the government, changed their stance toward the Thieu government.
Their new opposition expressed itself unfavorably for the Thieu government by their practice of not only giving refuge and protection to the hundreds of thousands of deserters from ARVN and the draft, but by organizing them into a force and arming them with American weapons they had purchased from corrupt officers. Having formed what they called a "Civil Guard Force," the Hoa Hao became a formidable adversary for Thieu, who was faced with the dilemma of either letting them be or of openly fighting them. All this still according to Can. (p. 6)

The An Quang Buddhist, who had long been a problem to authorities in Saigon, also increased their resistance in 1974-1975. They created a variety of movements with clandestine Communist leanings and connections; fomented street disorder in Saigon; and, in cooperation with Buddhist congressmen, once even seized the Lower House and covered it with anti-government slogans. (Can. p. 24)

Finally, according to a prominent Montagnard who was active in the Ministry for Ethnic Developments in Saigon, the Vietnamese had seriously alienated the Montagnards in the Highlands over the years by a policy of ruthless exploitation of their territories and suppression of the people.

Nantho Touneh, a Montagnard who served as Secretary General in the Ministry of Ethnic Minorities in Saigon until the end of the war, reports

"When I was (in my post) I received many reports from the Ethnic Minority Services ... which mentioned many incidents in the Montagnard areas (between Vietnamese and Montagnards) ... The Vietnamese soldiers came to the villages and stole the chickens and killed the animals, destroyed crops, burned houses and arrested... villagers.... (Touneh, p. 37)

and further

"The Montagnards believed in the military strength of the government (Saigon) but were disappointed with many high-ranking ARVN officers who supported Vietnamese contractors to exploit the lumber in the Montagnard's areas... (Touneh, p. 42)
"It was also reported to me that the Montagnard soldiers were treated unjustly... whenever there was a question of promotion, it was always given to the Vietnamese and denied to the Montagnard soldier (Touneh, p. 43)

Thus, a catalogue of grievances against the Saigon regime had eventually accumulated among the Montagnards, too.

Thieu's Reaction

When Thieu was faced with all this opposition, the power base on which he had operated after he had used Prime Minister (and General) Khiem to deprive Air Marshal Ky of most effective power, began to erode rather rapidly. This became even more so when Thieu and Khiem allegedly had a falling out with regard to Thieu's efforts to retain the presidency for a third term. (Can, p. 4)

When in 1975 Khiem managed to have most of Thieu's special assistants transferred to a newly formed Cabinet (which he headed), a situation arose which was described as follows by Nguyen Ba Can:

"With his presidential office and the party dismantled, Thieu was reduced to impotence. He spent his time playing tennis and water-skiing on the Saigon River more often than at any other time, while the security situation was deteriorating and becoming worse than it had ever been before. And the people were disoriented by so much internal trouble happening all of a sudden.

"In the meantime, either because of a fatal combination of circumstances or as a result of some magical orchestration, the religious and political parties, the press and other influential groups such as the lawyers—even those traditionally regarded as favorable to the government—expressed their discontent and seemed united in a front of protest which brought disorder to the country, thus affecting seriously the Armed Forces' morale and population's confidence." (Can, p. 5)

As a result of the many political pressures and the endless strains of the war, the country, in the view of Can, was, when the
big attacks came, on the verge of a "psychological collapse that struck every South Vietnamese, be he top leader or regular citizen, military or civilian, commander or private soldier" and led to Thieu's "inconceivable strategic mistakes, the panicky mass exodus from the cities, and ARVN's total collapse." (Can, p. 1)

Can added: "It is important to consider that there were two categories of people in Vietnam. One category had to fight for the other category -- I mean the armed forces. Only the armed forces had the responsibility to fight the war, in the opinion of the people. The people remained outside of this. They were not involved in the fight. It was the opposite of a 'people's war'. The way we conducted the war, we should have realized in the long run we had to lose it."

Can, like some other respondents, states: "Even the political concepts of the regime were not suitable for such a war. There was modern democracy. There was disorder, chaos. We would have needed a strong power. We needed more discipline to get the people involved. To get all the people to fight for themselves."

(Can, p. 11 b)

It may be appropriate to conclude this section with two more statements by Nguyen Ba Can who was one of the most knowledgeable respondents on the subject of political affairs in South Vietnam, having held high office for many years. He introduced his observations with the words:

"Sooner or later, South Vietnam had to fall into Communist hands. That had been expected by those who had followed closely the development of the endless war in that area of the world. This was expected of the leaders of the Republic of Vietnam too. But what astonished all of them was the sudden collapse of the nation that had one of the most powerful forces in Asia and that demonstrated its determination to fight regardless of the price it had to pay... (Can, p. 1)

and concluded them by saying

"To sum up, the war was lost from its inception" (Can, p. 35)
These words may be significant not just for the assessment they express (which may or may not be right), but also for the fact that some men in leading positions (at least Cim himself and, according to his testimony, some other leaders too) were men of such profoundly pessimistic opinions.
THE LEADERSHIP

Thieu

When talking about the leadership in South Vietnam before the collapse, one is talking in the first instance about President Thieu. Thieu's was—or appeared to be—a one-man rule, or what goes by the name dictatorship. But, from what the respondents report, the man was nevertheless sui generis, and so was his regime.

Bui Diem relates:

"It used to be said in Saigon as a joke that South Vietnam was a country with half of everything. It was half democracy and half dictatorship, and the measures taken by the government were most of the time half-measures. The result of this was that nothing worked as it should." (Diem, p. 15)

In a more serious vein, Diem continues:

"A one-man regime is usually a strong and efficient regime. Quite the contrary was the case in Vietnam. The President had all the power in his hands, and could easily impose his policy, but somehow there was no sense of purpose or direction among the high officials of the government and strangely enough, in a country so pressed by the requirements of war, not a single member of the government, including the President himself, had any sense of urgency about the situation..." (Diem, p. 16)

What were the origins of this man, and how was he looked upon by other leading men in South Vietnam? General Lam Quang Tho, among other stations in his career the commandant of the Military Academy in Dalat, has this to say:

"President Thieu was a good officer but he was a mediocre general. His combat record was unimpressive. He was born in the Province of Ninh Thuan (Phan-Rang), south of Cam Ranh Bay, of middle-class parents. His character and moral values

*Our underlining.
were strongly influenced by the hard life in his native village where the lands are poor and rocky, and where it rains during only one month of the year. People there must struggle without respite against nature to extract enough to eat from the recalcitrant soil and from the sterile sea. Young Thieu left his village to try his fortunes in the French Colonial Army until the time he enrolled in the officers school in Hue. In 1948 he became an officer in the Vietnamese Army. Thieu was very suspicious by nature and would not hesitate to fight viciously to attain success in life. He was also very patient and able to wait for a long time. And he waited until the self-destruction of his opponents was complete and he could come to power without competition." (Tho, p. 14)

In all, the respondents have very few good things to say about Thieu, and a great deal that is unfavorable. The principal points of criticism against him are that he was inept as a political and military leader; that he appointed incompetent and corrupt men to high military positions; that he had a virtual passion for vindication; that his leadership was impaired by the fact that he trusted nobody and was not trusted by anybody; and that he personally participated in the extensive corruption plaguing the country. And neither his military nor his civilian appointments of others to high office have any admirers even among the men who participated in this study (and owed their own positions to Thieu).

"Thieu was a man of conflicting personality. He trusted no one and if he had a few confidants whom he sometimes listened to, they were all corrupt and arrogant. This conflicting personality was reflected in the field of strategy. We may say that as far as national strategy is concerned, we had no strategy at all, but rather we had a conflicting strategy. For instance, President Thieu first ordered his field commanders to defend everything, to defend every inch of terrain, even the smallest and most remote town; then he decided, after the fall of Banmethuot, to surrender too many things. It is true that we could not have an independent strategy as long as we had to rely too much on foreign aid, but the lack of a coherent military strategy was due most of all to the ineptitude of our military leaders and the lack of a good planning organization. The National Security Committee was headed by General Dang Van ("Fat") Quang, Special Assistant for Military and Security Affairs, the most corrupt and the most hated man in Vietnam, who spent all of his time for a better way of making money instead of planning a sound and coherent strategy for the country." (Thi, p. 29)
Allegedly, most of Thieu's thinking was aimed at staying in power. This required two things above all, both perhaps not too conducive to good governing: that he avoid becoming the victim of a new coup, and that he continue to have the exclusive support of the Americans.

"President Thieu had in his mind all the time the fear of a coup against himself, and he was very happy to have General Cao Van Vien, a very quiet man, a not very exciting man, to be chief of staff. And Thieu also liked not to see close cooperation between the General Staff and Corps Headquarters... He was all the time afraid of a government by the generals. (He did not even want them to meet with each other.) He had in mind that if all these people (got) together to talk about the military situation, they would also discuss the political situation and make a coup." (Don, p. 12)

General Tran Van Don described Thieu as "méchant" (lapsing at that point into French), a word that has a meaning somewhere between nasty and evil. Don, who states that Thieu "didn't like me very much," further characterizes Thieu as follows:

"Every move he made was to consolidate his position with the Americans, or at least not put it in danger. He never trusted anybody in his entourage or in the Armed Forces; this had a corroding effect. Yet, he did not trust the Americans either, despite their support. He was afraid every day that he would lose their support and therefore was not more comfortable with them than he was with his compatriots. He was very intelligent, but used that intelligence mainly to (cement) his position. He was also corrupt." (Don, 2a)

Most portraits drawn of Thieu by other South Vietnamese leaders—aside from being mostly uncomplimentary with regard to Thieu's leadership ability and personal integrity—converge on Thieu's having been given, almost dedicated, to inaction.* In fact, the thought occurs that,

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*This is in striking contrast to Nguyen Cao Ky, a flamboyant activist, nicknamed by some of his fellow officers "the cowboy," who was always trying to "go North," or imporing General Vien to let him counterattack at Banmethuot at the head of a tank column, or hoping to transform Saigon "into a Stalingrad," or some such. In his own interview, when asked to assess the probability of the success of such undertakings, Ky would say that "you don't know unless you try."
aside from being a personal proclivity on the part of Thieu, inaction may have been a deliberate policy on his part to assuage possible U.S. apprehensions concerning rash actions. In any event, Thieu's basic military and political policies were all encompassed by four "Nos" which he promulgated after the Paris Agreements: no negotiating with the enemy; no Communist activity in the country; no coalition government; and no surrender of territory to the enemy. These are all negatives, and guides to inaction rather than action. Not unlike the famous Roman General Fabius Maximus Cunctator who obtained his byname "Cunctator"—the hesitator—from refusing to give Hannibal battle until the latter defeated himself through unwise moves, Thieu apparently believed that the policy of waiting out his opponents that had worked so well for him on the way to the top might also work in the war against the enemy. (According to the respondents) Thieu also was very slow to change his mind.

One former staff officer reports that aside from the fact that Thieu stubbornly clung to ideas and policies once he had developed them, nothing was gained even if someone could convince him that a certain policy might be wrong. In such cases, says the respondent, Thieu still refused to act in alternate fashion, saying: "All right, perhaps the current policy is wrong. But how can I be sure that the new policy you suggest will not also prove to be wrong?" (Dong, p. 5b) Another witness of high military rank and responsibility reports that Thieu was extremely difficult to talk to because "he was joking all the time." (Thinh, p. 3b) This would be yet more evidence that Thieu had his own ways of evading demands for action.

Thieu—so suspicious by nature—seems to have been at the same time quite naive or gullible on occasion. An example was the discovery of off-shore oil.

"Most dramatic...was the discovery of oil off the Vietnamese coast....I recall a meeting at which the oil news was announced by the Minister of Economy. President Thieu, in a jubilant mood, nodded to me, saying: 'Regarding the new cars ordered for the coming state visits, let's now buy ten of them instead of two'. He went on to remark jokingly: 'Maybe in the future all we need for a government will be a President and one minister of oil'. For all those present at the meeting (including
Thieu), it seemed that the discovery of oil might hold the magic power to solve all the country's economic problems, and for a moment it seemed that the news had dissipated all their worries." (Buu Vien, p. 7-8)

Apparently, in his relations with the Americans Thieu was very slow to communicate. Bui Diem reports that Ambassador Martin once told him, "I want to help your country and your president, but the only thing your president has asked me to do until now is to make arrangements for your vice president to go to Washington to Walter Reed Hospital for a checkup." Bui Diem queried Thieu about this, who told him: "I do not know him [Martin] well yet, so I have to go slow in my relations with him." This, says Bui Diem, was a situation in which the relations between the two allies were outwardly correct but not at all normal, considering the fact that the war obviously required a closer coordination. This situation lasted until the final days of the war." (Diem, p. 52)

One observer says: "Thieu was suspicious of all personalities who showed any potential to replace him as president. This was true in particular with regard to Prime Minister Khiem. Thieu (believed) that Khiem would be his rival in the next presidential election."

Apparently, this had adverse consequences on the conduct of government business. One witness close to Khiem, relates: "In order to avoid arguing any further suspicions in Thieu, Prime Minister Khiem chose to be quiet. He hardly ever expressed his views in the Council of Ministers meeting. He confided to me that it did not serve any purpose to argue with the president in the presence of his ministers. Anything he found important to convey to him he would say privately to the president. This discreet attitude might have saved Khiem trouble with Thieu, but it also contributed to the confusion of the leadership and sometimes caused regrettable delays in the implementation of government programs. Ministers became confused..." In fact, according to Buu Vien, conversations with Thieu at the meetings were so guarded and Thieu's own statements so vague that on many occasions long meetings were held by the ministerial council just for the purpose of interpreting
what the president might have meant by what he said.

As for Thieu's proclivity to interfere in military operations personally, bypassing the JGS and dealing directly with the Corps commanders, one witness reports that Thieu did this not just for reasons of personal expediency. "Being an Army general, the president actually enjoyed the idea of personally exercising his authority as the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, and he could not resist the temptation to direct military operations from his office...Meanwhile the Ministry of Defense had no real authority over the JGS (which itself had little authority)....During my three years in the government, I had occasion to observe that the president seemed to want to decide on everything himself. He was reluctant to share the heavy national burden with other members of the government, causing the latter to evade their own responsibilities; and when the president failed to act, nearly everything came to a standstill."

Clearly, these traits and this style of governing became even more pronounced during the great crisis in 1975.

One aspect of Thieu's leadership that seems to have changed drastically over time was that whereas in earlier days his orders to military leaders, according to several of them, had been very "precise," they later became increasingly Delphic. Conceivably this may also have had to do something with the fact that, according to General Tran Van Don, Thieu as a man and a leader had been in decline for several years.

A. "I said to Thieu many times to regroup the Regional Forces. But I feel that in 1974 Thieu had decreased his capability.

Q. He became tired?

A. Not tired; physically he was in good shape. But he seemed not to believe, and I was not sure that he (wanted) to be relected in 1975. The summer of 1972 he was on top of his power...He was on top in 1972 and 1973. After that he was decreasing. (Don, 50)

*Some sources opined that one reason for Thieu's giving orders personally after the Paris Agreements was that there was then a distinct political component to every military move.
According to one staff officer whose opinions differ from what other witnesses think, Thieu deserves credit for some good judgment, even though Thieu had ruled against him, when he and the corps commanders had recommended to President Thieu that remote outposts be abandoned and the forces defending them be regrouped. President Thieu had declined to accept this recommendation and insisted that the outposts be kept at any cost.

According to the source, Thieu's reasoning was that the maintenance of the outposts was necessary to assure South Vietnamese control of the countryside surrounding them and that it was necessary for South Vietnam to insist that the Paris Agreements be respected on all counts. When asked how he reacted to President Thieu's rejection of this military advice from his senior officers, the source responded that Thieu was "Commander-in-Chief" and a "general who knows his business." He stated that Thieu probably had his own political purposes in refusing to give up the outposts, and speculated that perhaps the president was trying to prove Communist violations of the cease-fire.

Tran Van Don -- no friend of Thieu's -- also gives him credit for "intelligence" in recounting the following revealing episode.

"In 1974 Thieu called (a well-known astrologer to the palace) and presented him one question: 'If I resign...can you with your astrology see who is capable to replace me, including Big Minh?' (The astrologer) said to Thieu: 'I don't see anyone, including Big Minh, to take your place if you resign.' And you know how Thieu reacted? Very intelligent. He is a very intelligent man. He was with me when I commanded I Corps. He was not too intelligent when he was one of my division commanders. But he was more intelligent when he became president. And Thieu said: 'If nobody can replace me, that means I will be replaced by the Communists..."" (Don, p. 23)
Ky, who is one of Thieu's bitterest critics, sees the solution to what some observers regard as the Thieu riddle in one single, simple answer which does Thieu little honor: That Thieu expected from the beginning that things would not work out in Vietnam and that he eventually would have to flee the country. Thieu, according to Ky, prepared for his departure from Vietnam "all along". This readiness on the part of Thieu to leave the country, says Ky, was known to or at least sensed by other generals, and had a devastating effect on them in 1975.

A. At that time (early 1975) Thieu was preparing to go and (so was) Cao Van Vien.

Q. Thieu was preparing to go? To leave the country?
A. Yes. And Cao Van Vien also, ready to go.

Q. This was before Danang fell? They were preparing to leave already?
A. Yes.

Q. What were they doing? Were they packing suitcases? How does one know they are preparing to leave? What physical evidence? Did you talk to their wives, servants, how do you know?
A. Actually, Thieu prepared his retreat years ago...I know Thieu very well, and he knows the military situation.

(Ky, p. 46)

Strangely enough, Thieu, despite the solid support he received over the years from the Americans, was, according to some witnesses, constantly worried about that support even though (or maybe because) he often procrastinated in fulfilling his promises to the U.S. Ambassador. Ky goes further than most in his description of Thieu's insecurity on the score of American support.

Q. ...apparently (Thieu) always worried about the support of the Americans...Even though he had all the support he still worried about it.
A. Oh, always. I remember when I was head of the Vietnamese
delegation in (the) Paris talks, every time I came back and told him about the developments, and of course, all the problems, every time I discussed with him, the first question he asked me is "what Americans think"? He always was worried about that. He even said, "well, you know, they may kill me any time if I do something against them." He was always scared about what would happen.

Q. About being assassinated?
A. He was always worried about that.

Q. He was serious about that? That was his serious fear?
A. Oh, very serious... (Ky, pp. 12, 13)

And in the end, says Ky, Thieu slept every night in a different room in order to forestall assassination attempts.

This fear of being killed by the Americans, or perhaps by others with American consent, which Ky ascribed to Thieu, is also ascribed to him by General Tran Van Don. This source says that Thieu was not so much afraid of a "soft" coup as of what he called a "hard" coup in which he would lose his life. For this reason, rather than to protect Saigon, Thieu is said by some to have recalled the Airborne Division from I Corps before the fall of Saigon. (Don, p. 29) This is a matter of controversy among respondents; some agree that this was Thieu's motive, others do not. If it is correct that Thieu withdrew the Airborne Division for the single purpose of protecting his own life, one might say—given the truly disastrous effects this withdrawal is said by most respondents to have had in I Corps—that Thieu in the end took a step that he must have known would or at least could greatly endanger the defense of the country.

One observer concludes his observations on Thieu as follows:

"If anyone is to be blamed for the fall of South Vietnam, the Vietnamese military leaders were primarily responsible. It was they who brought Thieu to power. When it became clear that Thieu failed the Vietnamese cause, they and they alone had the responsibility and the capability to dismiss him. Unfortunately for the Vietnamese people, they failed to do so." (Tho, p. 46)
Other South Vietnamese Leaders

As for other aspects of the leadership situation in South Vietnam besides Thieu, mostly negative features were reported by the respondents. We are told of incompetent generals who were "improvisers" without having acquired the fundamentals of the military arts in the appropriate colleges; of scheming and rapacious wives of high military and civilian officials who wielded vast powers over goods and people; of cowardly commanders who avoided enemy action; of blatantly corrupt military and civilian leaders in Saigon and in the provinces; and—to single out one individual who for many observers symbolized all that was wrong with the leadership in Saigon—the respondents point frequently to General Dan Van Quang, contemptuously referred to as "Fat Quang," a man who was said to have huge black market dealings in rice, the people's main food and opium as well, and who as emprise grise (or one might say noire) behind Thieu's chair apparently enjoyed a close relationship with the president and wielded enormous power. Such leaders, according to some of the witnesses, had little concern for the people, and the people had little respect for them. This disrespect was aggravated by the fact of most leaders' prior overly close connection with the Americans. One general said that in times of extreme national emergency it should be possible to sacrifice some of one's national sovereignty (he saw the American presence in Vietnam as such an abridgment of sovereignty), but that this was creating political and ultimately military hazards in Vietnam.

"Since the dependence and subordination of the Vietnam government was so obviously demonstrated by the predominant presence and power of the Americans, the Vietnamese general public could not refrain from viewing their government as a puppet deprived of all national prestige, lacking in national mandate and thus being untrustworthy. In a highly ideological struggle as the Vietnam war, this aspect had a strong negative impact and worked much to the detriment of the RVN cause. Moreover, reacting to the negative attitude of the Vietnam public, RVN officials were unwilling or afraid to take any initiative and were thus reduced to adopting a defensive attitude." (Tho, p. 39)
This long list of negative statements made by former South Vietnamese leaders about their own leadership, was punctuated only very rarely by positive statements about anyone, and even such positive statements were highly qualified. General Truong, I Corps Commander, was occasionally given credit for being an "honest man" and a "good officer," but some sources stated that he lacked the schooling for a Corps Command. General Phu, II Corps commander (about whom more in the second section of this report), was also described by some as a good combat officer, but also as a sick man unsuited for a higher command. The late Ngo Dinh Diem was described by several observers as a good national leader, better, in their view, than anyone who followed. Finally, quite a few positive statements of a general nature were made about lower grade officers. But that almost exhausts the meager list of praise any of the respondents had for anyone in the leadership structure.

It might be added that some of the respondents opined that the poor quality of their leadership, as they saw it, was doubly pernicious in a poor country with new institutions. One general prefaced his observations on leadership as follows.

"In a poor country, torn and divided by a long war, the leadership is very important." (Thinh, p. 14)

Others expressed similar views, pointing to what they considered to be the difference between the United States where a well-established system was less dependent on the personalities of the leaders, and South Vietnam where in their opinion personalities were of paramount importance.

In sum, according to the respondents, who often roundly and acerbically denounced the very leadership of which they had themselves been part, that leadership encompassed all the worst features: It was authoritarian without having true authority. It was military without being competent or aggressive in strategic affairs. It was a form of a one-man rule
without the leader being a popular man. It was corrupt, inefficient and regarded by the people to some extent as a puppet of the Americans. It was a nonfunctioning government at the top and, as some claimed, had no dedicated cadre at the middle levels. And in the most urgent situation it had no sense of urgency.

**Corruption and Leadership**

One central feature of the South Vietnam regime, according to most respondents, was corruption. It would serve no purpose in this overview to render all the "juicy details" about certain wives making lavish gifts to commanders in order to obtain or retain profitable posts for their husbands; about trade in food stuffs and drugs; about "cinnamon generals" who used division size forces to trade in their favorite commodity; about others who supported courtesans on a grand scale with ill-gotten gains or about rackets reaching into the highest quarters of government, including President Thieu himself; or about the ubiquitous wives of prominent men who had their bejewelled fingers in every lucrative pie and were highly skilled in giving bribes and receiving payoffs. These stories have received ample news coverage. From what most of the respondents say, one gets the impression that most of these stories were true.

Instead, the essentials of corruption, as reported by the respondents will be summed here in a few sentences. In the first place, there is not one high-ranking person, be it Thieu, Ky or Khiem, who was not accused at least by some of the respondents as having participated and profited. Second, corruption principally took these forms: racketeering in scarce and often vital goods; bribery of officials; buying and

*On the subject of "popularity," respondents do not seem to share the widespread American view that at least "Big Minh" was popular. "Perhaps as a tennis partner for Maxwell Taylor," said one general with a laugh. Where, then, does his reputation come from? "From the United States! You built him up!" (Tho, p. 2a)*
selling big jobs and appointments; and -- last but no means least -- the collection of army pay from "ghost soldiers" and "roll-call soldiers". As to the last named category, the method was simple. Soldiers who had either been killed or had deserted were not taken off the pay roll, and their salaries were pocketed by their superiors; similarly, "roll call" soldiers who actually existed but appeared only for roll call, would yield their salary to their superiors in return for being permitted to be absent from duty. If it is considered that casualties throughout the entire war were very heavy and that an estimated 100,000 soldiers deserted annually, it becomes clear how enormous the sums were that were collected on a regular basis by those who participated.

One crippling effect of such corruption, according to the witnesses, was that, because of it, men obtained offices which they were not qualified to fill in a crunch, particularly military commands. Another was that corruption destroyed morale.

"Clans existed from the lower to the higher rank; the majority of the high-ranking commanders were servants of the Thieu regime and they brought up a number of lazy, corrupted and unqualified generals for their servile obedience, destroying the fighting morale of the young ARVN officers." (Uot, p. 11) The Montagnard leader Touneh Han Tho attributes the erosion of leadership in the Ministry for the Development of Ethnic Minorities to the corruption of the Thieu administration. And Colonel Nguyen Huy Loi makes the observation that the cutbacks in American aid ended the flow of profits to the Vietnamese leaders, thus affecting their motivation to fight in 1975. From their point of view, it made more sense "to take your winnings and run." (Loi, p. 37)
But the effects of the all-pervading corruption, according to the witnesses, went even deeper than that.

"Corruption always engenders social injustice. In Vietnam, a country at war, social injustice was more striking than in any other country. Corruption had created a small elite which held all the power and wealth, and a majority of middle-class people and peasants who became poorer and poorer and who suffered all the sacrifices. It was these people who paid the taxes to the government, the bribes to the police, who had to buy fertilizer at exorbitant prices and to sell their rice at a price fixed by the government, and it was also these people who sent their sons to fight and die for the country while high government officials and wealthy people sent theirs abroad. (An army doctor once told me that he was disheartened to see that all the wounded, all the amputees who crowded his hospital came from the lower class, from the peasants' families, and that they had suffered and sacrificed for a small class of corrupt elite.) The government professed to win the heart and the mind of the people, but all it had done was to create a widening gap between the leadership and the mass; and this increasing conflict, this internal contradiction, if we were to use Communist parlance, could not last, it had somehow to be resolved. Unfortunately it was resolved in the Communist way." (Thi, p. 41)

From this and similar statements it would appear that corruption was considerably more than a problem that could have been solved by the firing of a few generals and civilians. It is regarded by many of the respondents as a fundamental ill that was largely responsible for the ultimate collapse of South Vietnam. As with respect to other grave disabilities of the system, the respondents do not, on the whole, present measures that in their view could have been the remedy. They do, however, politely hint on occasion that in their view, with Thieu at the hub of the corruption, there was not way of curbing it as long as the Americans supported him in office.
U.S. - VIETNAMESE RELATIONS

There is no aspect to the war in Vietnam — or to any subject matter in this report — that is not to some extent connected with U.S. - Vietnamese relations. Vietnamese politics, strategies, force posture, hopes and expectations — these are all part of and permeated with what the Americans did or wanted, and what the Vietnamese thought the Americans did and wanted. It may seem incongruous, therefore, to have a separate section on the subject of U. S. - Vietnamese relationship. Nevertheless, such a section is included here because it offers an opportunity to present specific aspects of that relationship.

In all, the respondents seem to feel that the cooperative relationship with the Americans was not a success. They place a good deal of the blame for this upon American shoulders, but by no means all. They fully accept some of the burden for the failures. But they seem to leave open whether in fact such cooperation could have been more fruitful.

One respondent says

"The South Vietnamese understood neither American policies nor American politics, and in my personal opinion one of the tragedies of the Vietnam War was the fact that due rather to an unexpected happening of international circumstances, two peoples quite apart in terms of civilization, mentality, international status and geographic position were thrown together in a war against a common enemy when Americans understood very little about Vietnam and Vietnamese knew nothing about America...the few things that the Vietnamese knew about the U. S. was the generous Marshall Plan, the strong anti-communist and moralistic stand of John Foster Dulles, and the idealistic inaugural address by John Kennedy. For them the U. S. involvement in Vietnam was but a logical continuation of Korea.... The Vietnamese faith in the U. S. was reinforced by the presence of more than half a million G.I.'s, and no one could believe that the U. S. might give up only a few years later."

(Diem p. 35)
Personal proximity apparently did not always enhance understanding.

"In the eyes of the South Vietnamese, the Americans created for themselves extra difficulties by making the war too expensive by the way they fought it. The men from the 'affluent society' brought into Vietnam a new kind of war never seen or even thought of before. The Vietnamese opened their eyes wide in bewilderment when they saw U.S. forces supplied with hot meals by helicopter while still in combat. They saw the thousands of unnecessary gadgets piled high in huge PXs, the hundreds of planes crossing the Pacific for the transport of American troops on rotation. They witnessed the more than generous use of bombs and ammunition by the U.S. forces, and hours of bombing and strafing...triggered in many instances by mere sniper fire. They said among themselves, especially when (in 1974) the Congress rejected their request for more military aid, that the critics in the U.S. were really unfair in putting responsibility for all these billions consumed by the war on their shoulders; and that if the Americans could only have saved part of the cost of just a few weeks of their stay in Vietnam and used the saving for aid, the outcome could perhaps have been different." (Diem, p. 41)

Diem adds:

"For the man in the street, for those who had nothing to do with politics and had no vested interest either for or against the government in Saigon, the way of reasoning was more down-to-earth, though based on a lot of common sense. In their eyes, the U.S. somehow forced its way into South Vietnam by sending hundreds of thousands of troops into the country, and should therefore bear the consequences of this decision, whether it was good or bad. A big nation and world power like the U.S. should show some kind of responsible behavior or at least a moral obligation to help the South Vietnamese out of a situation that precisely the presence of the U.S. troops had contributed to create. The Americans should and could not simply call it quits after putting the whole house of Vietnam in shambles and say, for instance: 'That is enough for us, we now have our own problems at home; besides we have discovered that the involvement stemmed from the wrong decision.' ...It was within this context and in this environment that Mr. Thieu...shaped his own perceptions of U.S. policy. As a Vietnamese and military man he shared many of the ideas held by his compatriots. But as a cautious politician and complex man he had rather complicated ideas about the U.S. policy. Basically, he did not trust the Americans. But at the same time he was convinced, deep in his heart, that the Americans would never give up in Vietnam. One might wonder...how Mr. Thieu, so suspicious by nature, did not have questions in his mind about the solidity of the U.S. support and why a man whose constant question was