Faced with this deteriorating situation, General Truong, on March 25, requested that plans be prepared for the withdrawal of troops from I Corps Forward and that evening ordered the evacuation of Hue. One respondent recalls how the 1st Division Commander, General Diem, presented the decision to his staff:

"Diem came back...He came to the meeting room with a sad and uneasy voice, saying: We've been BETRAYED! WE HAVE TO ABANDON HUE, the loveliest part of South Vietnam. The purpose of the Hue abandonment is: save our forces. It now is 'sauve qui peut' ('everyman for himself'). Anyone may go down to the seashore, just walk along it to Danang and the VN Navy will pick up anyone who gets sick or tired of walking on the sand. The rally point: south of the Hai Van Pass. Good luck to you all and see you in Danang." Diem added: "Keep quiet while withdrawing, no radio will be turned on." (Thuc, p. 20)

The withdrawal plan approved by General Truong envisaged that a portion of the troops in I Corps Forward would be evacuated by sea at the Thuan An inlet northwest of Hue, while the remainder were to march to the Cau Tu Hien inlet (at Dan Cau Hai) southwest of Hue. The Navy had promised to sink some boats across the shallow tidal basin at Cau Tu Hien in order to provide a bridge across the inlet and the Marines were ordered to secure the high ground immediately south of the inlet (Hui Vinh Phong) to protect the crossing.

Unfortunately, the withdrawal turned out to be a "costly failure" as neither the Navy nor the Marines carried out their missions. The Navy failed to sink the required boats and many 1st Division soldiers were drowned at Cau Tu Hien in the rising tide and many more were to be shot down by NVA elements from Hui Vinh Phong which was supposed to have been secured by the Marines. Command over the withdrawing troops was inadequate and there was "not good discipline." (Truong, p. 13) As another former I Corps commander put it:

* General Truong states that he received another message from the JGS around March 25 which again ordered him to redeploy all his forces in I Corps to defend Danang and instructed him to send the Marines back to Saigon. (Truong, p. 11)
"There was a French saying, 'Hell was paved with good intentions,' of which Cau Tu Hien was a stirring illustration."

The withdrawal by sea at Thuan An to the north did not go much better. The Navy ships were late in arriving and strong seas prevented them from taking off more than half of the waiting troops. All the armor and other equipment had to be left behind, and enemy shelling disrupted operations, causing many casualties. All told, less than half of the troops scheduled for evacuation from I Corps Forward arrived in Danang, and those that did make their way there were completely disorganized.* Upon arriving in Danang, the 1st Infantry remnants dispersed trying to find their dependents and as a result were no longer of fighting value. (Truong, pp. 13 & 14)

Hue's abandonment apparently came as a surprise to President Thieu. Upon hearing the news, Thieu called Truong to confirm it and asked the I Corps commander "if I order you back to Hue can you do it?" General Truong is reported to have responded, "if you order me I could do it, but I'm not sure how long I could defend."

At the same time General Truong was attempting to execute the withdrawal from Hue, the situation suddenly collapsed in the southern sector of I Corps. On March 24, "after crashing through the defense lines of the 5th Regiment, 2nd Division, one NVA armored column, in a daring raid took the capital city of Tam Ky by surprise." This

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*Some local units in I Corps Forward apparently were not even informed of the withdrawal order. General Don reports that the District Chief of Huong Tra, near Hue, told him that he had received no orders at all. Commanding some 3,000 Regional and Popular Forces, the District Chief, who held the rank of colonel, was surprised one morning that he had no communication with his superiors and drove to the Province Chief's headquarters where he didn't see anyone: "I asked about the generals—no more generals—all these leaders had left the post in the night, and they didn't say anything to anyone." He encountered a regimental commander of the 1st Division and asked him what had happened. The commander replied, "Oh, there are no more leaders now." He said, "You are commander of this place." (Don, p. 24)
cut Route 1 between Chu Lai and Danang, and sealed off southern I Corps. The Communists also began to surround Quang Ngai City, and during the night of March 25 Quang Ngai Sector attempted to withdraw by land to Chu Lai. This maneuver was not successful, however, because the enemy was strongly emplaced between Quang Ngai and Chu Lai and only a few units managed to get through. The 2nd Division was also forced to withdraw to Chu Lai where, surrounded and disorganized, it was ordered evacuated by ship to the island of Cu Lao Re, some 20 miles off shore. (Truong, p. 12) Only a portion of the 2nd Division's force could be extracted, however, and only about 2,000 troops from this division were eventually brought down to the Saigon area.

With the collapse of its northern and southern fronts, the defensive forces of I Corps were now reduced to the 3rd Division, two Marine brigades, and various Regional and Popular units still resisting in the Danang area. These were soon confronted by an enemy force of almost five divisions. Moreover, behind this thin defensive line, the rear base at Danang was rapidly moving toward chaos. As more and more refugees poured into the city, government control began to break down, partly due to the lack of adequate police. Realizing the situation was becoming unmanageable, and unwilling to stop the flow of refugees for humanitarian reasons, General Truong urgently requested assistance

* Threatening them from the west were the Communist 304th and 311th Divisions, along with units from the 44th Front. Pressure was also being exerted from the south by the 52nd Brigade and from the north by elements of the 325th and 324th NVA Divisions. (Truong, p. 14)

** Check points had been set up outside Danang around March 17 or 18 to control the flow of refugees—but they proved impractical as any slow-down would cause the columns to back up and create "disorder" as far north as the Hai Van Pass. Since the Communists were shelling the refugee columns, General Truong says he could not stop their movement for "humanitarian reasons." (Truong, p. 14) The 3rd Division Commander also points out that had the refugees been prevented from passing through the GVN lines around Danang, the defending units would have been impeded by the mass of humanity directly in front of their positions. However, he also feels the overriding consideration was that the GVN had always thought in terms of getting the civilian population on its side and therefore could not "reject its own people." (Hinh, p. 5)
from Saigon: both for transportation to move the refugees out of Danang and for food and other vital provisions. However, except for a few transport flights, no help was forthcoming. In General Truong's words, Saigon was "silent on the refugee problem" and the people "saw no encouraging response from the government." (Truong, p. 12)

Danang soon was to contain an estimated two million persons, including many GVN soldiers, and with food reserves running out, looting became commonplace. Panic set in, with the rich, civil servants, and police among others, desperately trying to evacuate their families. (Hinh, p. 3) Describing this chaotic situation, a high ranking officer from I Corps writes:

"...Danang, now overcrowded with two million refugees from Quang Tri, Hue, and Quang Tin, was practically under siege. The population began to panic when they saw the evacuation of U.S. personnel and VN employees from the U.S. Consulate General. People were fighting to board commercial and American ships to flee the city. The airport was invaded; even military aircraft were seized and could not take off. Remnants of defeated units falling back on Danang and refugees coming from overrun district towns helped spread panic and disorder with any imaginable kind of rumor... Bands of children, hungry and thirsty, wandered aimlessly on the streets, demolishing everything which happened to fall into their hands. Danang was seized by the convulsions of collective hysteria.

While some "soldiers were still fighting well," increasing numbers of desertions began to occur in both enlisted and officer ranks. One general, who visited the 2nd Regiment of the 3rd Division on March 27th, reports finding that some "officers had left their units and came back to Danang, trying to send their families off to Saigon." He continues:

* Air Vietnam was instructed to increase its flights to Danang but "flights were often interrupted and planes returned to Saigon empty because landing in Danang was impossible due to the frantic and panicky situation of refugees at the airport." (Du"u Vien, p. 16)

** The ARVN 3rd Division commander reports that VC sapper units were also in the city which contributed to the chaotic conditions. (Hinh, p. 3)
"I left the 2nd Regiment and flew to Dailoc district town, but as we were approaching the town, I was warned by Corps Tactical Operations Center (TOC) that the town was now under enemy control. Later, I was informed that the RFs just left the district without a fight to go back to Daang and take care of their families. The same thing happened to the Danang ammunition depot where two RF companies just disappeared."

Desertions eventually spread to even Truong's headquarters. His Chief of Staff, reports that:

"...even at I Corps headquarters, the men deserted. Our drivers, our communication people, men from the headquarters companies, they deserted." (Dang, p. 16)

On March 28, General Truong received information from Saigon that the Communists were concentrating their forces for a major attack against Danang the next day. At the same time, the NVA started to heavily shell the air and naval bases at Danang, and the "civilian mass" compressed within the city. Considering the situation to be "hopeless," General Truong called President Thieu and requested permission to withdraw his remaining forces from Danang. Thieu, however, equivocated and would not "make any clear decision" (Truong, p. 15) Communications were soon cut by artillery fire and General Truong took the decision on his own to withdraw.** (Truong, p. 15)

The evacuation on March 29 was not successful; in General Truong's words, "not many got out." Only about 6,000 Marines (60 percent of

*General Truong told Tran Van Don he was "alone" in his command post at the very end. "When he came to find his people, his staff, he said nobody was there. He was alone. No soldiers, not even soldiers." (Don, p. 19)

**Thieu eventually did come to a decision after the withdrawal was already underway which was transmitted through Navy channels to the Naval Task Force off Danang. A high ranking officer, who was aboard ship at the time, was presented with the message from the JGS stating that according to Presidential instructions the order to defend Danang was still valid." The officer comments: "At that time, the evacuation of the Marine Division was almost complete and [the] NVA had already occupied the city of Danang. Either Saigon was completely in the dark or the message was just for the historical record."
the Division) and 4,000 other assorted troops succeeded in reaching Navy ships and civilian craft. (Truong, p. 15) The Marine evacuation was the most successful because they were, for the most part, "under good control" and were the Navy's "top priority." (Truong, p. 15 and Hinh, p. 4) The 3rd Division fared the least well. Of its original complement of 12,000 men, only 5,000 reached the embarkation point, and only about 1,000 of these could be evacuated on the single ship available there. (Hinh, p. 4) When asked why the evacuation had gone so badly, General Truong responded: "We did not have a plan for withdrawal" and had to "use what was on hand." It was a "reaction of the moment" and not well organized.

Indeed, in many instances there was no organization or command at all. As one senior officer describes it:

"Some Marine stragglers mixed up with the population and boarded civilian barges and commercial ships. Frustrated, hungry, leaderless, they went wild and some of them indulged in inadmissible acts of banditry. Billions of dollars of equipment were destroyed or left to the enemy. Thus fell the second largest city of Vietnam. She had gone through a stage of insanity before she died of suffocation."

General Truong, whom most of our respondents consider an "able" and "honest" officer, attributes the fundamental cause of I Corps' collapse to a "disadvantageous" balance of forces. In his view, a sustained defense was "impossible" with the forces at hand. He contends he would have required at least two additional divisions to have "held" against those NVA units already operating in I Corps in March, not to speak of the additional Communist reserves across the DMZ. (Truong, p. 1) Thus the withdrawal of the Airborne placed an

*Most 3rd Division troops deserted during the course of the withdrawal to the sea in an attempt to rescue their dependents in Danang. However, their families were no longer at their homes and the troops could not locate them in the morass of seething population. (Hinh, p. 4)
intolerable strain on a defense posture that was already inadequate. Indeed, General Truong suggests that he would have lost Danang in 1974 without the Airborne, and even with them, would have had great difficulty "stabilizing" the situation had the Communists chosen to launch a general offensive throughout I Corps in that year. (Truong, pp. 2 & 4)

To underline the magnitude of the military problems confronting I Corps in 1975, General Truong compares that situation with the Easter Offensive in 1972: in 1972 the Communists had to launch their armored drives from North of the DMZ and as a result had to "maneuver" their mechanized units over considerable distances before they could attack major GVN population centers. In 1975, however, the NVA, using the numerous feeder roads they had built, could start their armored and other forces from close-in and could rapidly attack fixed GVN positions throughout the Corps area. Communist firepower was also much stronger than in 1972, as they now possessed the capability to deliver massed artillery-fire with great effect even on well-fortified and dug-in GVN positions. (Truong, p. 19)

The major difference between 1975 and 1972, however, was the absence of U.S. air support, which had played a decisive role in arresting the earlier Communist drive. In 1972, I Corps had averaged some 260 tactical air and 25 B-52 sorties daily, whereas in 1975, the VNAF could mount less than 50 sorties a day. (Truong, p. 16)

General Truong contends that "without B-52s, it was difficult to stop the enemy" and that he would have "contained" the 1975 offensive had he been able to call upon the U.S. air support available in 1972. (Truong, p. 3)

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* General Truong states that had the Airborne not been withdrawn the situation would have been "much better" but that he still would not have had adequate forces to hold against a general offensive.

** General Truong puts the average number of VNAF sorties at 30-40 a day in March. Our respondents differ as to the effectiveness of VNAF during the last weeks. General Truong thinks they gave "very good support," particularly at Phu Loc, whereas his Chief of Staff characterizes VNAF as "terrible...They were not effective. They always went at such high altitude and did not hit anything. They were afraid of the enemy anti-aircraft." (Dang, p. 12)
Another former I Corps general also stresses the importance of U.S. air support, particularly B-52s, to the defeat of the 1972 Communist offensive and points to a change in Naval fire support as well:

"...Whereas in 1972 the American 7th Fleet could provide massive area fire up to 20 km inland, in 1975 the naval fire support was practically nil. The entire Vietnamese Navy had five old destroyers whose guns could reach targets only from five to seven km inland."

Noting other critical changes in ARVN's capabilities since 1972, this high ranking officer goes on:

"Combat and combat support units were acutely short in artillery and mortar ammunition. While in 1972 we could shoot an unlimited number of artillery rounds (provided that the rate of fire was not too fast to damage the bore of the tube), in 1975 the available supply rate was less than ten percent of what we fired in 1972."

"While the combat units badly needed ammunition, the service units were acutely short of POL...and spare parts. Due to the lack of gasoline, the air force had to ground many types of aircraft...The helicopters available for troop transportation and supplies were also critically reduced. In MRI in 1975 we could barely move by helicopter one infantry company at one time..."

"The artillery units were short of trucks and even prime movers to tow guns and I knew of no one artillery battery in MRI capable of carrying its basic load of ammunition...The transportation units experienced the same shortage of trucks and POL. Whereas in 1972 we could move at will any units from one area to another (for instance, the Airborne Division with two brigades were flown in from Saigon to Hue in a few days); in 1975 the shortage of trucks and POL greatly jeopardized the movement of troops and hence our strategic mobility. I Corps, for instance, didn't have in March 1975, when the situation became critical, the means to transport one single regiment, while the NVA had the capability of moving their troops at will..."
"The one by one replacement authorized by the Paris Agreement never materialized. A tank, an Armored Personnel Carrier (APC), a truck or a bulldozer, for example, destroyed by a mine during an operation, or lost in an accident, were never replaced; and the 10th Combat Engineer Group in Danang which supported the entire MRI, had less than ten bulldozers operational in 1975. Even worse, the basic infantry weapons, the M16 rifles, were lacking in the closing months of the war..."

"It went without saying the lack of supplies and adequate fire support resulted in a dramatic increase in the rate of casualties. Military hospitals were overcrowded and had to double the number of beds...As a result, the combat units saw their ranks rapidly depleted and were hard put replacing their losses; as a matter of fact, in 1975 no infantry battalion ever had more than 400 men available for operations, and the Ranger battalion no more than 300...All of this, added to the increasing economic difficulties, were having a devastating effect on the morale of the army and of the country as well, and were a major cause of their final collapse."

The effects of weaknesses such as those listed above* along with the more immediate and pernicious effects of rumor, refugee movements, and command indecision, no doubt help to explain why I Corps collapsed so rapidly and with so little combat. Aside from the initial clashes of early March and the heavy fighting around Phu Loc and Phu Bai later in the month, there appear to have been no major battles of note. I Corps' Chief of Staff estimates total GVN combat losses in March to have only been between one and two thousand:

"I have to say there was no big battle. Only small engagements so the losses were not much. Maybe a thousand, maybe two thousand. But not much because no big battles." (Dang, p. 11)**

As General Truong points out, the troops did not have an "opportunity" to fight in most areas because of the redeployments, the mass of

* However, General Truong does not consider ammunition or other material shortages to have been an immediate or "big factor" in the collapse. This would only have become a critical problem, in his view, had the fighting in I Corps continued for several months. (Truong, p. 17)

** General Hinh reports that the 3rd Division was never heavily engaged before its evacuation, and had lost only about 50 men per regiment. This compared to the division's 1973 losses of 2,200 men and 1974 losses of 3,500 men. (Hinh, p. 2)
refugees on the LOCs, and the breakdown in command and control. The defense had been inflicted by a fundamental "depression of morale." (Truong, p. 17)

While the I Corps commander was generally satisfied with the performance of his subordinate officers, other respondents suggest that one reason there was not more fighting was because some senior officers were among the first to abandon the battlefield. Colonel Loi reports that he had talked with "some escaped officers from I Corps who told (him) that the division commander disappeared, next the regimental commander disappeared."

"I heard that all the lower echelon battalions didn't know what they had to do. Their regimental commander just left, and they don't know where they go and no one instructed them as to what they have to do. After so many frustrating situations, no one was responsible for the whole area." (Loi, p. 84)

He attributes this behavior, in part, to a loss of spirit following the setbacks at Ban Me Thuot, Pleiku and Kontum.

"This is one of the reasons. But the overall situation was hopeless. Because they knew about the aid cut; the Americans were out; Saigon as in turmoil politically; everything seemed to collapse. So, this contributed to the collapsing situation. And even the decision to withdraw from Pleiku. I think that was wrong but it just accelerated the collapsing process." (Loi, p. 85)

Air Marshall Ky also believes the bugging out of commanders to have been an important factor contributing to the collapse. He portrays a climate where, "Everyone watched everyone and when you see the guy next to you move...then you move. You run away." (p.44) He relates how the process of desertion had infected a helicopter unit in I Corps:

"I can tell you an example of an air force pilot. With that little example we can see the whole story. That guy went to sleep after attending a meeting of all officers in the afternoon and (all) the air division commanders (had) said, we are
going to stay and fight. Big meeting for all of them. So he went to sleep. About 11, he was waked up by soldiers. A soldier said, 'You see, Captain they all left,' and, of course, before that, the rumor about the debacle of Ban Me Thuot and others had reached I Corps, so the pilot was waked up at about 11 that night by a soldier and he said 'they all left, what about you and me?' So he went up to the briefing room, no one (there), but all the chiefs were packed and packing. So without asking information, without waiting for any orders, he jumped into one of the helicopters and took off south. And the others took off, and that night 26 helicopters left the base without any orders, to go south. And many ran out of the gas in their hurry." (Ky, pp. 42-43)

The Final Month—April 1975

All respondents agree that with the loss of I and II Corps South Vietnam faced a precarious situation. Barring the intervention of U.S. air (particularly B-52s) most senior Vietnamese officers saw the military situation as irretrievable. More than half of the ARVN's effective fighting strength had been lost in the two northern Corps areas and this had "dealt a serious blow to the prestige and morale of the RVN armed forces because it involved the defeat of the most capable units in ARVN. It also increased the fear that U.S. abandonment of Vietnam would become a reality." (Buu Vien, p. 18)

Except for the two Airborne brigades previously withdrawn from I Corps and the few units which could be reconstituted from the estimated 18,000 or so generalized troops which had been successfully extracted from the northern Corps areas, the defense of South Vietnam now rested with the six divisions, two armored brigades and the various Ranger Groups, Regional and Popular Forces organic to III and IV Corps. However, most of these indigenous units were themselves already hard pressed and tied down by local Communist forces and could not be disengaged to form reserves to meet the fresh enemy divisions moving down from the north. Of the three organic divisions responsible for the defense of III Corps, the 25th Division was situated northwest of Saigon in the Tay Ninh area where it was being harassed by local Communist units, the 5th Division was guarding the northern approaches to the capital along Highway 13 in Binh Duong province and the 18th
Division was located to the northeast at Xuan Loc, which was soon to become a major battle ground. As a result of enemy pressure, these units would remain more or less static for most of the month of April and aside from guarding their immediate operational areas, would provide little mutual defensive support in the final weeks.

The situation was no better in the Delta where the three regular divisions deployed in the IV Corps area (the 7th, 9th, and 21st) also found themselves pinned down by local Communist units and thus were not available to help with the defense of III Corps or Saigon. The military balance was sufficiently critical that the IV Corps Commander, General Nam, informed the Minister of Defense that if one of his divisions was moved out he would "lose the Delta." (Don, p. 46)

By tying down GVN forces in IV Corps, the Communists had obviously "learned a lesson from 1972" when their forces in the Delta had remained quiet and thus allowed the GVN to reinforce III Corps from this area. But "this time they tied up those troops by the activities of the local Communist forces." (Nguyen Van Minh, p. 56) Aside from preventing GVN redeployments, Communist units from the IV Corps area were themselves used to bring pressure on Saigon. A number of troops were put in captured vehicles and transported to Long An province south of Saigon where they threatened to cut Route 4, Saigon's major communication artery to the Delta and to link up with NVA forces coming from the north to surround the capital. (Nguyen Van Minh, p. 56) In order to counter this threat the JGS re-equipped the remnants of the ARVN's 22nd Division which had been evacuated from Binh Dinh and inserted them in Long An in an attempt to keep Route 4 open. However, these 22nd Division troops numbered less than a regiment and were "in really bad shape" and eventually became encircled. (Loi, p. 93)

For the immediate defense of Saigon itself the Capital Military District (CMD) had a mixed force of about two divisions. This included three Airborne battalions which were considered "striking forces," local Regional and Popular Forces, and a mixture of Rangers, Marines,
and other troops withdrawn from I and II Corps. However, the latter were disorganized, demoralized, without sufficient weapons, and in many respects were of negative utility. General Minh who was appointed Commander of the Capital Military District at the end of March, describes the two Ranger brigades under his command as having "very poor cadres, insufficiently equipped" and not wanting to "fight anymore." (Nguyen Van Minh, p. 12) Elaborating on the overall problem, Gen. Minh states:

"The strength of the troops withdrawn from the highlands and assigned to me were understrengthened. So the government hurried to fill out their forces among the draftees and military laborers. They had no time to get fresh training and the weapons--most of them received about 50 percent of the weapons and ammunition. The morale of the cadres was very low because they had just returned from II Corps and I Corps. They were not aggressive at all. Thus, the Regional Forces and the Popular Forces are in position watching their fellow regular forces come back from the battlefield with low morale, so they didn't have any confidence about the effectiveness of those forces. And every day they learned from the refugees coming from the northern provinces, from I Corps, II Corps, many stories about the enemy so the morale of those forces was going down." (Nguyen Van Minh, p. 54).

General Minh's assistant, Colonel Loi, corroborates that these "troops were in really bad shape" and "not a fighting force." (Loi, p. 90)

The Marine units which had become undisciplined when they withdrew from Danang ("they raped, killed people, everything") continued to present a problem when they arrived at Vung Tau, east of Saigon:

"When they arrived in Vung Tau no one was in charge of them. They ran to Saigon by every means, a bus, everything. So Minh had to set up a block at Thu Duc to stop all the Marines. So we got hold of the Commander of the Marines, General Lam, and had him reassemble and re-equip all these people and tried to use them to defend Saigon. We reorganized one brigade of Marines, and the remaining still stayed in Vung Tau." (Loi, p. 92)

The situation with the South Vietnamese Air Force was hardly better. Many pilots, planes, and crews had been lost in the retreats
from I and II Corps and according to Colonel Uoc, the "operational capability of the Air Force was cut down to less than half" by early April. Air units were now restricted to the four remaining operational bases still controlled by the South (Phang Rang, Bien Hoa, Tan Son Nhut, and Can Tho) and there was great congestion at these facilities. Operations were limited because "pilots and mechanics were too busy taking care of their families so there were not enough people to operate them." The biggest problem was in maintenance, finding persons to repair the aircraft. As Colonel Uoc describes the situation:

"Every time an aircraft comes from Pleiku or some where else to Saigon they leave it in the open air like an air show--before the fall of Saigon, you know, 40 or 50 percent of the aircraft--helicopters, fighters, and transport planes, all kinds of aircraft--no one touched them, no one took care of them. We did not have space to deploy the aircraft--it was like a junk yard." (Uoc interview pp. 5-6, & Uoc essay pp. 4-5)

In contrast to the diminished and demoralized forces of the GVN, the Communists were able to divert the numerous divisions originally targeted on I and II Corps to the final assault on III Corps and Saigon. In as much as little hard fighting had taken place, these divisions were up to the strength, fresh, and obviously buoyed by their enormous successes in the north. Therefore, however, a brief hiatus before the bulk of these NVA divisions were in position to attack III Corps. This delay was attributed to the fact that Communist commanders were caught by surprise by the sudden collapse in I and II Corps and were not postured to exploit this opportunity immediately. In the words of Colonel Loi, "...the Communist forces did not expect us to run like this. It took time for them to move and reorganize." (Loi, p. 104) But this delay was only temporary and "Communist motorized units (began) to quickly flood the South Vietnamese territory north of Saigon" and were even able to bring down a battery of SAMs on Route 13 for the protection of the convoys. (Thinh, p. 27) Toward the end of April, there were some 13 NVA divisions ringing Saigon with another four or so held in reserve.

*At the end when the GVN controlled only the bases at Tan Son Nhut and Can Tho some "2,000 aircraft" were jammed into these facilities.
Given the state of their defenses and the existing balance of forces, it is understandable that our respondents had grave doubts about the GVN's ability to contain a Communist offensive. One high ranking officer on the JGS, states that after the loss of I and II Corps he did not believe a successful defense could be mounted but nevertheless attempted as best he could to stop the Communist drive. General Truong, who was reassigned as Deputy Chairman of the JGS to work on the organization of Saigon's defenses after his evacuation from I Corps, saw that there was "no well-coordinated defensive line" around Saigon. The area was too large, the terrain too unfavorable, and not enough troops were available. The defenses were simply not sufficient to deal with a strong attack. (Truong, p. 16)

While pessimistic about containing the offensive by their own resources, many senior GVN officers and officials nevertheless believed that the situation still could be rescued through U.S. intervention, particularly by the resumption of F-52 bombing. Commenting on this phenomenon Buu Vien writes:

"The faith of the Vietnamese people in the United States was so strong that even when the Communists had occupied all the provinces and MR I and II and closed in around Saigon, there were people, including senior officials in the government, who still believed that the U.S. would soon react to drive back the Communists to save Vietnam. They believed that the U.S. was being 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 people's confidence was in the U.S." (Buu Vien, p. 36)

He goes on to state that "we thought that the U.S. couldn't afford losing Vietnam" because "it might lead to the eventual loss of other countries in Southeast Asia" and because "it was still in the interest of the U.S." to defend the country having "poured in so many resources and sacrificed so many American lives." Finally people still had faith in the "solemn pledge from the U.S. Government that the U.S. would react strongly in case of Communist renewed aggression." (Buu Vien, pp. 36-37)
Agreeing there was a prevalent belief among senior officers that American help would still be forthcoming, one high ranking general attributes this in part to the successful assistance provided by the U.S. during previous military crises in South Vietnam, the Tet offensive in 1968 and the Easter offensive in 1972:

"They said, we will have a third miracle. The first is Mau Tan. The Tet Mau Tan (1968), the second in 1972, and the third one will be the last. But the third one never came you see."

Even President Thieu who had apparently ordered the redeployments in I and II Corps because he could no longer count on American assistance, seems to have harbored a residual belief that American support would still be forthcoming. When Tran Van Don told Thieu on April 6 that he had reliable information from official French sources that things were "finished for South Vietnam", Thieu responded, "I don't believe it. It is impossible that we would be abandoned by the U.S. If it would be, it would have already been in 1973." (Don, pp. 58-59)

One officer writes that even after the fall of Phnom Penh in early April (an event which was another major psychological blow to the South Vietnamese) he and his friends still "were thinking that there was a difference between the U.S. relationship with Cambodia and that with South Vietnam."

"The U.S. only came to Cambodia because of tactical reasons which had been to defend SVN and that need no longer existed. Besides, the U.S. had spent hundreds of billions of dollars on the VN war, lost tens of thousands of lives and risked its honor on the VN battlefield. It would not let SVN fall into the Communist hands. Having those thoughts, I looked to the U.S. and followed with concern President Ford's request of special assistance to SVN in his speech to the Congress on April 16, 1975." (Nhân, p. 30)

But others, including those who put more stock in U.S. actions, had their doubts. Lt. General Thinh, Commander of the Artillery Command, recalls his disappointment at the limited number of artillery pieces and other equipment delivered by American cargo planes at Tan Son Nhut airport in April, which, in his view, constituted "only
a drop of water in an arid desert and cannot show the Americans
good will to continue the engagement." (Thinh, p. 31) Air Marshall
Ky was convinced no further American support would be forthcoming
and told his colleagues "again and again (there) is no way that
American military forces will come back to Vietnam." (Ky, p. 22)

It is possible that expectations regarding American intervention
were influenced by judgements about the potential efficacy of
American air power even at this late stage of the war. There were
senior officers who still believed that III Corps might be defended
if substantial U.S. air were available. Lt. General Thinh is most
emphatic on this point, "In April 1975 they (the Communists) never
could have placed their divisions around Saigon, if the U.S. had
intervened with B-52s. Truly, this bomber could have changed the
face of the Vietnam War." (Thinh, p. 13) But another senior commander
strongly disagrees that B-52s could have helped. The enemy had too
many troops around Saigon and the situation was beyond repair:

"Besides the three organic divisions, the 5th, 7th, 9th, they
disposed seven additional divisions and an artillery division,
a tank division, and many troops reinforced from I Corps, II
Corps. Their whole strength, I don't know how many—more than
10 divisions. At that time I frankly tell you, no more B-52
strikes will be effective, no more aircraft because there
was panic. You could shoot them, do anything you want, but
no more disciplining of the troops, no organization. We didn't
have cadres, we lost cadres. The cadres that remained had
very low morale, they lost their families, their wives,
children, properties, everything. I do not believe that even
B-52 strikes could have helped because it was too late.
The mass of population, and panic caused much trouble."

However, the above seems to have been the minority view as most still
felt U.S. air support would have been effective and many remained con­
vinced that the U.S. would resume their bombing "right up until the
end." (Loi, p. 43)

One consequence of this prevailing faith in a last minute U.S.
rescue may have been to discourage at least some Vietnamese officers
from attempting to do more in their own defense. When one officer
proposed to a senior commander in the JGS that action be taken to establish a rear headquarters in the IV Corps area, he was told it was "not necessary...because we lose the war or win the war with the intervention of the U.S. Air Force."

Whether for this reason or others, senior civilian and military leaders in Saigon appeared, to several of our respondents, unable or unwilling to organize themselves for a final defense of the country. The propensity toward inaction which had characterized Saigon's role in the events of I and II Corps became even more evident as the enemy closed in. The government seemed stunned and "bewildered" by the fate that had befallen Vietnam and appeared unable to function. A frequent characterization of the leadership during this period was that "no one was in charge of anything." (Loi, p. 95) President Thieu is described as "demoralized" and "more isolated than ever before." (Don, p. 10 and Can, p. 29) Buu Vien notes that "since after the fall of Ban Me Thuot, President Thieu was no longer accessible to his Ministers. He didn't hold any Council of Ministers meeting, didn't talk to the press, didn't address the National Assembly." (Buu Vien, p. 56) To at least one member of his staff, the Chairman of the JGS also appeared inactive and inaccessible. Colonel Loi states that after the disaster in the two northern corps, General Vien "didn't talk with anyone. He almost disappeared. After that he didn't do anything...nobody could get in touch with him." (Loi, p. 68) Air Marshall Ky sums up the "atmosphere of the last few weeks" as being one where "no one was in command, no one (was) responsible for nothing." (Ky, p. 26)

This passiveness may be attributed in part to the uncertainties associated with changes in government. On April 4 Prime Minister Khiem resigned, apparently at the request of President Thieu, and the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Can, was asked to form a new government. According to several respondents, the reason for Khiem's removal was that Thieu suspected him of plotting a coup with Air Marshall Ky. There were grounds for this concern because Ky, by his own admission, had begun to approach other senior officers about removing Thieu after the loss of Ban Me Thuot. While those he approached apparently agreed that Thieu should go, they were reluctant to move without American approval, which was not forthcoming. Ky
reports that the officers, after checking with the Americans, had come back to him and warned "now be careful Marshall we don't want you to be killed by Thieu before you move. Because American officials (have) come to us and told us not to listen to Marshall Ky." (Ky, p. 22)

During the period prior to the formation of a new government on April 14, "the government remained more or less inactive." (Buu Vien, p. 20) Or as another senior official put it more strongly, "...between the two governments nobody worked...nobody took the initiative to do something." (Don, p. 78) According to his own account, Can agreed to become Prime Minister because he was the only man in Thieu's camp "capable of dealing with other political and religious parties when the level of protest was disturbing the country and sapping the army's morale. He hoped that he would obtain a sort of modus vivendi that would allow the armed forces to fight as long as they could." However, he asserts that "no man could have saved Vietnam at that time." (Can, p. 32) An immediate priority of the new cabinet was to relocate the hundreds of thousands of refugees who were fleeing the northern provinces so as to "prevent the uncontrolled rout from spreading hysteria in Saigon itself." (Can, p. 32) However, this proved a difficult task, for in General Minh's words, "the problem of the refugees increased daily. We didn't have enough camps to set them up. Most of them were sent from the coastal regions by boat and instead of locating them away from the capital, they penetrated the city and became disorganized, and the people living in the cities were afraid." (Nguyen Van Minh, pp. 54-55)

Upon taking office, the new Minister of Defense in the Can Cabinet, General Don, persuaded Thieu to place under "house arrest" about a dozen generals and province chiefs pending an investigation of their role in the collapse of I and II Corps. Don requested this action "to show the Army that we would like to stop" the Communists and "can be very firm, very hard." (Don, p. 10) After making a tour of the battlefields, Don also met with his senior generals and tried to impress

* The major exception was General Truong, the former I Corps Commander, who was on a new assignment with the JGS.
upon them the importance of containing the military situation if a political solution was to be found:

"I said to the generals, I met with them three times, I said to them even if we have a political solution, a cease fire, we need on this side to hold the military situation. We cannot talk, we cannot discuss with the other side, if we lose completely the military situation. And I told these people, these generals, including the Chief of the General Staff and he agreed with me. He said, yes, you are right. It is the first time somebody talked to us like this. I don't tell you to fight until the last man, but to fight in order to allow the government to find a political solution. What the political solution would be I don't know." (Don, p. 44)

However, despite these exhortations he found it difficult to get action out of the JGS. To quote General Don, the Chairman of the JGS "didn't want to do anything." (Don, p. 45) "I pushed Cao Van Vien every morning from the day I became Minister of Defense...I pushed him to use the units in the Delta, to reinforce Long An, at least south of Saigon and reinforce maybe the 25th Division at Tay Ninh and Hau Nghia. And he told me we have plan and so and so, and I said 'well, do it.' And I warned about what happened in the north." (Don, p. 32) "If we have blame," again to quote Don, "he (Vien) is one of the persons to blame for his negative action. No coordination. No orders to anyone." (Don, p. 42)

The Minister of Defense also found the III Corps Commander, General Toan, unresponsive and allusive during the final weeks of the war. When Don was asked what General Toan had done during this period, he replied, "He moved. When I asked him where he was, he was all the time moving. I only met him once in Phan Rang. Because I went there. If I didn't go there I would have never met him. It is very difficult for me to tell you what he has done during this time. I can't tell he did anything." (Don, p. 42) He also relates that the artillery officer in charge of coordinating all fire in the III Corps region had told him that General Toan never attended any briefings and that "they never saw the Corps commander." (Don, p. 43)
It was during the tenure of General Don that the final two military engagements of any note took place in Vietnam. These occurred at Phan Rang and Xuan Loc.

Following the evacuation of Nha Trang, the provinces of Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan were placed under the operational control of III Corps. While Communist forces already controlled most of these two provinces, the GVN still held a portion of Phan Thiet city in Binh Thuan and the airfield a few miles north of Phang Rang, the provincial capital of Ninh Thuan. Initially the Communists did not press their attack heavily in Ninh Thuan and therefore the decision was made to reinforce the ARVN units at the Phang Rang airfield with hopes of reoccupying the province capital, which appeared to be lightly held by Communist forces. Two regiments of the 2nd Division (fleshed out with Regional Force personnel) which had been withdrawn from I Corps were inserted into the airfield along with one brigade of Airborne troops. The latter was later needed at Xuan Loc and was replaced by a Ranger Group. Despite these reinforcements, Communist tanks and infantry units attacked and overran the Phang Rang airfield on April 16, after a brief but bitter struggle.

As with most GVN military operations in the last month (the major exception being Xuan Loc) our respondents had much to criticize about the management of the Phang Rang operation. General Don, who had flown to Phang Rang just before it fell, found that the JGS had failed to provide adequate logistic support to the forces there. Among other things, the JGS had sent them 105 artillery pieces "without any sights" and the units lacked "radio for the platoons to be in communication." (Don, p. 15) He considers Phang Rang an example of the "many requests for support by the unit commanders (that) were never answered by the General Staff." (Don, p. 16)

However, others were critical of the whole operation and questioned the motivation behind it. General Tho states that it was "criminally poor judgement" to weakly reinforce Phang Rang with units that were so badly needed further to the South. He goes on to charge that the

*According to General Tho, who was briefly in Phan Thiet, "the city was in an indescribable state of disorder, half of it was occupied by the enemy, with the rest of the city receiving heavy shelling." (Lam Quang Tho, p. 36)
decision was influenced by the fact that Phang Rang was President Thieu's native province. (Lam Quang Tho essay, p. 37) Although other respondents also believed this to be the motivation, some considered the Phang Rang operation simply a "delaying action." If the President's motives were personal, it is indeed ironic that local troops stationed there "bulldozed and leveled" his ancestors' graves at Phang Rang in "an ultimate expression of hatred and anger."* In one senior officer's words, President Thieu was by then "probably the most hated man in Vietnam."

In contrast to Phang Rang, the defense of Xuan Loc is considered by all respondents to have been the high point of South Vietnamese resistance during the last days of the war. The battle at Xuan Loc had several attributes which set it apart from the previous military engagements, (1) it was the only sustained battle of division sized forces; (2) it was the one place where tactical air support was employed with significant effect, and (3) it was the one engagement where major ARVN forces stood their ground and consistently fought well.

As the provincial capital of Long Khanh, Xuan Loc controlled the important highway links to the northeast of Saigon, including the access route to the vital base at Bien Hoa. Communist units began to apply pressure around Xuan Loc on the 7th of April and in time some four NVA divisions were committed to battle there. Defending at Xuan Loc, was the ARVN's 18th Division, reinforced by one regiment of the 5th Division and the 1st Airborne Brigade. The fighting eventually became "very fierce" as the NVA used massive artillery fire and "human sea" infantry tactics to launch one assault after another against the GVN's defensive positions. The 18th Division and other defenders held on grimly with the help of heavy air support. C-130 transport aircraft were converted to a bombing mode and were used to drop 15,000 lbs. "Daisy Cutter" bombs on enemy troop concentrations. CBU's were also used with great effect at Xuan Loc and are credited by General Don as having "stopped the Communists" there. (Don, p. 37) However, *This respondent goes on to write: "It was rumored that this single event was the most devastating blow to his morale and a decisive factor which caused him to resign."
South Vietnam's supply of CBU's was very limited and after it had been exhausted, the defense could no longer be sustained. Unable to be further reinforced and endangered of becoming totally surrounded, the 18th Division and other defenders were withdrawn to Phuoc Tuy on the 21st of April.

According to Colonel Nhan, during "14 days of fighting in Xuan Loc, SVN troops received more than 20,000 rockets and artillery shells, but they destroyed 37 Communist T54 tanks and killed more than 5,000 Communist attackers." (Nhan, p. 28) All our respondents manifested considerable pride in the "heroic" performance of the ARVN units defending Xuan Loc. In the words of one respondent, "we could still find in our troops the An Loc fighting spirit, even a higher spirit." (Dong, p. 11) Another officer writes:

"From the psychological point of view, the Xuan Loc resistance was a great help to relieve the extremely agitated mental state of the people and soldiers. It brought back the courage and self-confidence in military commanders whose guilt complex was torturing them after the rout from the central highlands. The heroic resistance at Xuan Loc revived everyone's hope that finally the South Vietnam troops could stop the enemy aggression and thwart the enemy offensive as they had done in 1968 and 1972." (Nhan, p. 27)

However, this was not to be as Xuan Loc was the last significant battle of the Vietnam war.

Our respondents report that there was very little fighting after the loss of Xuan Loc. General Minh's units in the Capital Military District were never seriously engaged and most of the ARVN's remaining divisions appeared to have remained static. (Nguyen Van Minh, p. 68) The Minister of Defense reports that he "didn't see any action" from the 18th Division after it retreated from Xuan Loc and states that the "commander of the 5th Division in Lai Khe didn't move." (Don, pp. 40-41) General Don attributes inactivity and absence of further combat to the fact that the military leaders no longer wanted to "fight" and that nobody was coordinating the defense; "not only the defense, but all the battles from the beginning to the end." (Don, pp. 41-42)
One military option, apparently discussed informally by a number of officers, was to withdraw the remaining GVN forces to the Delta and to continue the resistance from there. Under this concept, all the bridges from the Mekong River north would have been destroyed and the GVN would have defended from Can Tho south:

"We planned to move everything to Can Tho and try to hold the Delta—and set up a kind of resistance movement and stay there in the Can Tho area, the only area we can hold because Hanoi cannot move tanks and heavy equipment down in this area." (Loi, p. 94)

It was this officer's view that "with the help from the population, the Hoa Hao, and all," it would have been possible to have held the Can Tho area for some time. (Loi, p. 94) However, there is no evidence that such a plan got beyond the informal discussion stage or was ever seriously considered by the JGS.*

One reason no serious attention was given to a withdrawal to the Delta, was because of the political paralysis which gripped Vietnam upon the resignation of President Thieu. (Don, p. 47) On April 21, Thieu unexpectedly convened a meeting of the Council of Ministers, the first held since the fall of Danang, and resigned office in favor of his Vice President, Tran Van Huong. In his resignation speech, he said that he was stepping down "in order to prove that it wasn't really because of him that the U.S. Government no longer afforded military assistance in Vietnam." (Buu Vien, p. 20) Most respondents believe Thieu had been finally forced out as a result of American pressure. (Buu Vien, p. 21 and Bui Diem, p. 58) According to Bui Diem, "Thieu's resignation completely paralyzed the government which was already half paralyzed by the disastrous losses: Pleiku, Kontum, Hue, and Danang." (Bui Diem, p. 58) Because of this disruption the Minister of Defense felt the resignation ill-timed:

*The Capital Military District commander doubts that it would have been a "realistic plan." (Nguyen Van Minh, p. 59)
"If he had to resign, it should have been a long time before, or never. Because when he resigned we met many difficulties. First, the government had to resign. There is nobody to work. His loyal followers and all key people in all units of administration, also tried to follow him, tried to escape—disorder everywhere and, with the new, Tran Van Huong, he moved slowly, very slowly and he didn't give specific orders to the troops to fight until the last day, the last hour." (Don, p. 47)

While our respondents considered the new President a "true patriot" they did not view him to be an effective leader in the crisis facing Vietnam. Former Prime Minister Can, who had also resigned, writes: "All that President Huong did in those couple of days he led the country was to have endless conversations with U.S. and French Ambassadors and Vietnamese top politicians, who all tried to convince him to resign for he was not accepted by Hanoi as an interlocutor." (Can, p. 33) The new President also spent much of his time personally reviewing visa applications from Vietnamese seeking to leave the country. Apparently outraged by the corrupt practices involved in granting exit visas, Huong wanted to decide each case himself. (Don, p. 48)

Since the beginning of April, there had been a steady movement of persons out of Vietnam, some with U.S. help. "Everybody was impatient to escape before the worst would occur like Danang, where soldiers and civilians mobbed planes and ships to get aboard." (Can, p. 29) Even before Can had become Prime Minister, "all banks were crowded with customers drawing out their deposits, and the immigration office, friendly embassies, the DAO, the U.S. AID offices were full of people seeking papers to get out of the country." (Can, p. 31)
During the final days, Saigon was rife with rumors. Many Vietnamese still believed that the Americans would find some kind of solution. Colonel Loi reports that:

"Even the week before the fall of Saigon... there were rumors that there had been a coup d’état in Hanoi. Giap had been killed and that the order to the northern divisions was to withdraw to the North. Rumors that the Chinese had moved into North Vietnam and all the Northern divisions had to go back to the North to face the Chinese. Even at the last day at Saigon, everyone thought that this was an American coup because they had the power to do something like this." (Loi, p. 44)

Other Vietnamese believed that the collapse itself was an American doing. Again according to Colonel Loi, they thought there was "an overall agreed plan with the North Vietnamese and this was carried out very closely by the Americans." The rationale of this rumor was that the "Americans want to get rid of the Vietnam problem. And secondly, they have already agreed with the North Vietnamese on something in the future. Some plan for the future for all of Indochina. So they want to get rid of the Saigon regime and do something in the future." (Loi, p. 46) And there were those who still hoped for American intervention; "They can intervene or they can work out some measure with China and Russia and find out some solution. And the advance of the Communist troops was just to carry out the plan that you had already set up. But we still believed that the Americans can control the situation and they can do what they want. I think that a lot of people believed this." (Loi, p. 47)

The most prevalent rumors, however, were about the "Big Minh Solution." Said for years to be the only acceptable South Vietnamese leader to the Communists, people were waiting for General Duong Van Minh to replace President Huong and start negotiations with the Communists. In the words of General Don, "His name was in the mouth of everyone, now, as the next leader, the next solution. Nobody
wants to fight because too many rumors about the Big Minh Solution, about Mr. Huong wanting to resign, and so forth. You realize now the atmosphere in Saigon at that time. If we find some units still fighting we must be grateful for these people." (Don, p. 49)

Much of the speculation about the Big Minh Solution was fired and given credibility by the attempts of the French Embassy in Saigon to play a "middleman between the two parties" during the last two weeks of the war. According to Bui Diem these activities stirred hope as to the possibility of a negotiated settlement during "these difficult days when a semblence of hope was hope."

Bui Diem continues:

"About two weeks before the war was over, the French Ambassador in Saigon, Mr. Merillon, hinted in his conversations with the political leaders in the capital that he had contact with the Communist side. Perhaps with the approval and encouragement from his government, he let it be known that the Communists might eventually accept a coalition government as a first step toward a peace settlement. Mr. Merillon apparently thought that his efforts would result in an advantageous position for France after the Communist takeover and consequently tried hard to play the role of negotiator. Openly advocating the Big Minh Solution he indicated to whomever he talked to that the only remaining obstacles on the road to peace were Mr. Thieu and his government. The Communists for their part did not discourage these behind the scenes Frenchman's maneuvers, instead they used the maneuvers to their own advantage and concentrated all their forces into accelerating their march on the capital." (Bui Diem, p. 58)

Big Minh did indeed come to power on April 28 but a "solution" was no longer in the cards. The American airlift to evacuate U.S. and Vietnamese nationals had already been underway for several days and Communist units were pressing in on Saigon. The new President Minh appealed to the other side to cease hostilities and attempted to start negotiations by asking the Americans to evacuate all military personnel. (Buu Vien, p. 32 and Bui Diem, p. 58) The Communists reacted by strafing the Presidential Palace and bombing Tan Son Nhut airport with aircraft captured from the VNAF. "That
was their pointed response to Minh's proposal." (Buu Vien, p. 23)
And then "shortly after midnight of April 28, the Communists began
to pour heavy artillery into Tan Son Nhut airport, killing two U.S.
Marines, the last to die in the Vietnam war, and interdicting any
further use of the air base. The collapse of Saigon was imminent
and the U.S. Embassy ordered the final and hasty evacuation by
helicopters." (Buu Vien, p. 23)

Even at this last moment, however, there were still some Viet-
namese who wanted to resist. Lt. General Vinh Loc volunteered to
become the Chairman of the JGS to replace General Vien who had fled
on April 29th. Colonel Nhan volunteered to assist Vinh Loc in attempt-
ing to stabilize the military situation. Contact was made with local
military units:

"All encouraged us and offered suggestions to stabilize the
situation...many units reinstated their old commander. Many
deputy officers took responsibilities of commanders whose
whereabouts were not known. Some armored, Airborne and Ranger
units requested to be placed under the direct JGS control and
seek new missions because they had lost contact with their
immediate headquarters." (Nhan, p. 32)

Plans were drawn up for counterattack and the logistic command
estimated that it could supply gasoline and ammunition for the next 15
days if the depots were not lost to the enemy." (Nhan, p. 34) However,
these last desperate efforts came to nought when on the morning of April
30th President Minh decided to unconditionally surrender to the Commun-
ists. Colonel Nhan writes:

"This news caught me by surprise because up to that moment, the
JGS had never been consulted on such an important matter. Gen-
eral Loc and we had done all we could to reestablish the
vitality of the disintegrating Armed Forces. The troops were
regaining confidence and got ready for the fight to defend
the country. But we were betrayed by the cowardly and naive
politicians who choose reconciliation as their objective.
They did not realize that they had no capacity to cope with
the Communists who only used war and peace as a means to
achieve their political goal of establishing a Communist
regime SVN...Now that the government had decided to surrender,
that Armed Forces could no longer exist." (Nhan, p. 35)
Perceptions of the Evacuation

For most of our respondents the evacuation from Vietnam remains a vivid experience and many described in detail the harrowing circumstances of their own escape. Those who were among the last to leave manifested considerable pride in the fact that they remained longer than many other leaders. While obviously appreciative of their own rescue, some respondents were nevertheless critical of the U.S. evacuation effort believing that it had started too soon and as a result, undermined the will to resist.

General Tran Van Don, for example, attributes the rapid collapse of Phan Thiet to the premature evacuation of the families of senior Vietnamese officers.

"I heard that some families from the generals, colonels, were evacuated already through the DAO. And I tried at my meetings with the generals to ask them 'Don't be in a hurry to do it. Don't try to do it' and no response. I thought that they understood. That is all. But I knew after that when I was in Guam and Gen. Chafee and I understood now why some families were evacuated one week or ten days before, families from the generals, families from the colonels, families from the pilots of the Air Force, families from the Marines at Vung Tau. I understood when I meet some people why they were not very excited to fight. If their families went away already, the only thing to do was follow them. I know some planes had left already. I don't say all. And the lower officers, the NCOs, knew already." (Don, pp. 35 & 36)

Another senior general considered the early evacuation of orphans to the U.S. to have been a visible manifestation of "American abandonment," causing "South Vietnamese morale to be shaken." He extends this criticism to the evacuation of Americans as well:

"At the same time as the evacuation of the orphans, there was the evacuation of the Americans themselves, beginning at the end of March 1975, of those whose presence in South Vietnam was not absolutely required. This hasty evacuation,
done at the moment that provinces were falling one after the other to the enemy, had the effect of inciting most Vietnamese to leave Vietnam if possible. It spread fear among those who saw their futures as uncertain and cloudy. It was partly responsible for the suddenness of the country's fall." (Thinh, pp. 31-32)

Another general who served on the JGS says he was also disturbed by the fact the U.S. moved out families of senior officers first and believes this hurt the morale of those remaining. He implies there may have been some kind of ulterior motive; "a political decision" on the part of the U.S. to hurry South Vietnamese leaders outside the country. He refers to "an exaggeration of the situation" by the U.S. DAO and the CIA, and states he personally felt the Americans were trying to "hurry him" out of the country.

Former Ambassador Bui Diem, however, directs his comments at an entirely different point, suggesting that too many Vietnamese had been left behind:

"In terms of military operation within the time frame imposed by the circumstances at that time, it was perhaps a success because in less than 72 hours thousands of Americans and South Vietnamese had been evacuated under precarious conditions and with only two Marines killed during the bombing of the Tan Son Nhat airstrip just one day before the operation began. In terms of human tragedy and from the South Vietnamese point of view, it was another story. Hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese who had put all their hopes in being evacuated are now suffering inside Communist jails and camps. Thousands of others who were evacuated in haste are condemned to live separated from the other members of their families without any hope of being reunited. Obviously, by the time the Communists had their advance units around Saigon, the situation was difficult for the Americans. How many South Vietnamese were to be included in the evacuation? Could it be started while the Saigon Government was still operating, moribund as it was? How about the shock effect on the population? Could panic be avoided? To all these questions there were no easy answers but somehow through lack of clear cut decisions from Washington (according to the testimony of Ambassador Martin before the House Committee on International Relations, January 1976) the U.S. Mission in Saigon got the authority to evacuate 50,000 South Vietnamese only four days before the final collapse. Lack of
coordination, confusion and loss of control ensued and in the end thousands of South Vietnamese of high risk were left behind, defenseless in the hands of the Communists. They were promised help by the representatives of the U.S. Mission but at the last minutes those who had promised help did not show up. Thousands of others who could well have stayed behind without too much risk were evacuated instead because they had some American good friend who claimed them as relatives, or in many cases, simply because they succeeded in getting in touch with some of the American adventurers who unscrupulously organized the evacuation for their own profit.

Many evacuees are crippled by the simple fact that they had to leave South Vietnam and try to start a new life in another country far away from their ancestral land with no practical hope of coming home. And by the way the whole program was carried out, the evacuation was sad, even heartbreaking for many South Vietnamese.

The whole operation was in a way an unhappy ending for an unhappy chapter of American history and the Americans can quickly turn the page; but for all the South Vietnamese, whether they stayed in South Vietnam or succeeded in going aboard, the war and the evacuation was a continuing nightmare. For them, the tragic scenes of those South Vietnamese families at dawn on the roofs of the buildings in downtown Saigon, waiting anxiously but hopelessly for the blinking lights of a helicopter which never came back, or the scenes of those innumerable barges and sampans rushing eastward into the high sea with the hazardous expectation of being rescued by the U.S. Seventh Fleet will be remembered for all time to come." (Cua-Bien, pp. 39-60)
PART III: "FATE WAS NOT ON OUR SIDE"

Could the outcome have been different? What, in the eyes of the South Vietnamese military and civilian officials with whom we spoke, should or could have been done to preclude the collapse, or at least so sudden a collapse, in 1975? While giving ample reasons for the defeat of South Vietnam, the respondents offer relatively few specific comments on how the outcome of the war might have been different except for the continuation of American support in the form of aid at 1975 levels and reintroduction of B-52s against enemy concentrations in the South in 1975. This would have, in their view, prevented defeat in 1975.

Of course, it can be inferred from the reasons they give for the collapse -- corrupt and incompetent commanders, the lack of a strategy, inadequate support -- what suggestions our South Vietnamese respondents would have made to alter the course of events: remove corrupt leaders, alter military strategy, and so on. Past mistakes are identified, and some suggestions are made, as we shall see. These range over a wide field. There seems to be little consensus and seldom are the suggestions linked in any direct fashion to the outcome of the war. To observe that more divisions were needed or that it was difficult to mobilize national resources and impose the discipline necessary to fight a long war within the democratic norms imposed by the United States is not really to suggest a specific course of action that the South Vietnamese could have taken. The respondents seldom say, "If we had only done this." This contrasts with American officials and observers of the war who readily offer views on how the war could have been won. Thus, it is not what the Vietnamese respondents say, but why they say so little on viable alternate courses of action that first attracts our attention.

It is possible that the magnitude and suddenness of defeat, with geographical and psychological displacement to a distant and alien culture as a consequence for our respondents, does not lend itself to futile and probably painful speculation about what might have been. The former political leaders and military commanders are faced with immediate problems of economic survival and adjustment. It may be too soon for them to piece things together and reflect on whether if this or that had been done, the war might not have been lost. As Lieutenant General Tran Van
Don remarked in 1976, "It was very difficult during the last year when we just [arrived] here to tell many things and also it would be very correct to say that we had not enough evidence of what exactly happened." The interviews, however, do provide clues for the lack of such speculation.

The paucity of comment on whether and how events might have turned out differently may be due to the fact that the South Vietnamese simply do not think in terms of one or two things they alone could have done that would have changed the outcome of the war. As Konrad Kellen pointed out in Part I of this report, the South Vietnamese tend to view the collapse multidimensionally. In their view, all of the factors that contributed to South Vietnam's collapse were so "inextricably interwoven" that changing one thing in the conduct of the war would not have changed the outcome, and in any case, because of other factors, would not have been possible. It was impossible to get competent military commanders because of the corruption in the promotion system. It was impossible to clean up the corruption because President Thieu was in on it, or a captive of it. It was impossible to get rid of Thieu because only he had the support of the Americans. Yet, without American support, the South Vietnamese could not carry on the war.

By early 1975, it appears that many in the South Vietnamese Government and armed forces were pessimistic about U.S. support, and without U.S. support they were resigned to eventual defeat by the Communists. Resignation to ultimate defeat would certainly work against subsequent speculations as to how things might have been different. With continued American support at 1973 levels, some South Vietnamese felt they might have held out longer. Without it, eventual defeat was considered inevitable. Only a couple thought that with American help, South Vietnam might even outlast the North Vietnamese. A few, however, thought that South Vietnam would lose even with continued American support. The word "victory" does not appear in the interviews. Even the few visions of how the war would end in other than an eventual Communist victory are blurry. Traces of such defeatism appear throughout the interviews.

One general noted that "The war had gone on too long," and that "there had been too many deaths." "The one demoralizing factor . . . was that the Communists would never give up." The collapse came as no
surprise to this same general. He said that he had predicted it in 1975 and would have made the same prediction in 1972. Others among the correspondents reveal similar feelings. Colonel Hoang Manh Dang, the I Corps Chief of Staff, noted that "everybody was pessimistic after [the loss of] Ban Me Thuot, but even before for the long run." Like many others, Dang simply did not see how South Vietnam could hold without American support. Asked how long he felt the war could go on after the 1973 Paris Agreements, Dang answered, "I predicted a maximum ten years, as a minimum five years." "But in any case, it would be lost?" asked the interviewer. "Yes, that it would be lost."

Asked when he thought the war was lost, Colonel Truong Tan Thu, the deputy commander of the First Infantry Division, answered "Strategically, in '73." "And immediately?" asked the interviewer. "After Ban Me Thuot was overrun." To Mr. Buu Vien, the Deputy Minister of Defense for Manpower and Defense Budgeting, such comments would not be evidence of unwarranted defeatism, but rather "the realistic expectation that without adequate American support, the country could not survive the North Vietnamese Communist aggression that was fully supported by the Communist world."

American support, some say, could not be expected to go on forever, but conversely, "the Communists would never give up." For these men, then, the question was not if South Vietnam would be defeated, only when. This comes through in Colonel Pham Ky Loan's comments. Asked if the outcome would have been different had South Vietnam's armed forces received adequate supplies, Loan answered, "I think we could have held indefinitely." But when pressed by the interviewer, who asked, "But the war would never have come to an end?" Loan answered, "No, but we would have been in a stronger position. We might then have gotten a better deal through political discussion. Of course, we could not have defeated the enemy." Loan summed up the various problems South Vietnam faced with regard to supplying the army and the civilian population, and concluded, "It was just too much."

Lieutenant General Tran Van Don thought that South Vietnam had been lucky to last until 1975. "If it were not so sad to say, I would say we could not win the war with the way of working on our side. It was
impossible. We were fortunate to keep South Vietnam free until 1975. We could have lost it before, you know."

Lieutenant General Tran Van Minh, the commander of South Vietnam's Air Force, thought that the supplies on hand for the Air Force in 1975 were sufficient to defend South Vietnam for at least another year, but saw inevitable defeat as long as South Vietnam was not able to attack North Vietnam. "Well, as long as that was the case," asked the interviewer, "do you still think you could have defended South Vietnam?" Minh answered, "Maybe in the long run we couldn't have, but at this point we could have."

Lieutenant General Nguyen Xuan Thinh, however, saw little utility in simply delaying the inevitable defeat that would come if South Vietnam did not have American support.

During the first months of 1975, President Ford asked Congress several times to vote $300 million as supplementary aid for South Vietnam. This demand was coldly rejected by the Congress. This rejection created a profound despair in South Vietnam just at the moment when the Communist offensive began in earnest. The Vietnamese army no longer had sufficient ammunition to contain the enemy advance or material to replace its losses. What good did it do to resist when the defeat was inevitable? To prolong the war by several months, or several weeks, could only cause Vietnamese blood to be shed in vain, be it Communist or Nationalist blood.

Thinh goes on to say, "With the Americans gone and all factors considered, South Vietnam could only have lasted indefinitely if there had been some effective scheme keeping the other side from bringing pressure to bear on the South."

Some believed that even with American support, South Vietnam could not defend itself indefinitely. "Sooner or later, South Vietnam had to fall into Communist hands," said Nguyen Ba Can, Saigon's last Prime Minister. "That had been expected by those who followed closely the developments of the endless war in that area of the world. This was expected by the leaders of the Republic of Vietnam as well." In Can's view, defeat was inevitable. Nothing would change the outcome. "Had Thieu stayed in office [that is, not been compelled to step down in 1975], the result, one may say, would have been the same. Should the United States have continued providing aid and support, the result
would also be the same." He concludes, "To sum up, the war was lost from its inception." Thus, the views range from possibly being able to hold out longer with American support, but not seeing victory, to a perception of eventual defeat, even with continued American support.

Some South Vietnamese stressed that the war was not simply a contest between themselves and the Viet Cong or the North Vietnamese, but only part of a global struggle between the Soviet Union and China on the one side and the free world led by the United States on the other. In such a global struggle, the will and the actions of the South Vietnamese made little difference. The Americans held the real power. The course of the war and its outcome would depend on decisions made in a higher arena, specifically on the decisions made by the United States. In the eyes of the South Vietnamese, detente with the Soviet Union and rapprochement with China, along with the troubles of the American president as a result of Watergate, reduced the desire and the capability of the United States to further resist Communist expansion, thus sealing South Vietnam's fate. As Colonel Do Ngoc Man put it,

Most believed that the U.S. change of policy had been the cause [of South Vietnam's collapse]. The VN war developed because of the conflict between the two powers: the Communists and Free World. Therefore, the VN war naturally had to end with the U.S. changing from an adversary position to detente with regard to the Soviet Union and Communist China.

Thus, although the South Vietnamese were dismayed by the Paris agreements of 1973 which in their view gave an unfair advantage to the Communists, "South Vietnam," as Ambassador Bui Diem states, "had no choice at all." Mr. Phu Vien believed that

One of two things would have had to be done: either SVN had to get sufficient aid to match the Communist aid to NVN, or international arrangements had to be made to have the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China discontinue their aid to NVN, leaving NVN and SVN alone. No country in the Free World could do either of those two things except the United States. Thus, when the U.S. deemed it not in their interest to get involved again in Viet Nam, or when the U.S. found it too heavy a burden to engage in an aid race with the Soviet Union and Communist China, SVN's collapse was inevitable. Not only the Republic of Viet Nam, but any other country in the Free World, would have had the same fate.
General Pham Quoc Thuan expressed a similar view and used as an analogy the rapid collapse of France in 1940.

... in World War II, the French government had more than 2 million soldiers, more than 2000 armored vehicles, and England as a loyal ally and Belgium and after that America. And the troops withdrew and collapsed in 14 days because when German attacked the people and the soldiers saw that the only ally is England, and England has the intention to withdraw too. And in 1975 we collapsed in one month because we don't have any support, any allies. In the last minute, no ally.

According to Mr. Nguyen Ba Can, the Vatican recognized the change in the world's power relationship and took measures that undermined South Vietnam's defense.

Some other bishops returning to the country after several Vatican meetings, told their closest co-religionists to get ready for an imminent coexistence with the Communists, a political solution which they had stubbornly opposed since the partition of the country in 1954.

In Can's view, apparently this was a judgment made by the Vatican as to the inevitability of South Vietnam's defeat and the emergence of some sort of government with Communist participation or domination. Can goes on to say, "Thus, the Vietnamese Catholic community which was the best organized segment of the country determined to fight Communism, now abandoned its will to resist and took steps toward coexistence."

The widespread view that South Vietnam's survival depended on Washington's decisions in a broader, political context, and that the Americans could even at the very last minute work out a solution with the Russians or the Chinese that would halt the Communists' advance, led some to the belief that South Vietnam's collapse was due to a bargain struck between the superpowers. As mentioned before, Colonel Nguyen Huy Loi said that "almost everyone" thought that the Americans were behind the collapse. "This was an overall and agreed plan with the North Vietnamese and this was carried out very closely by the Americans."

One firm believer in the "sell-out" theory was a senior South Vietnamese general who commanded troops in I Corps and who refused to be identified in his interview. He claimed that the retreat in 1975 had not been a military move ordered by Vietnamese generals or even the central authorities in Saigon, but rather had been ordered by the Americans for political purposes against the will of the South
Vietnamese. Pursuing the point, the interviewer asked him, "In other words, you mean to say that in order to have better relations with China and maybe the Soviet Union the people in the United States wanted to sell out Vietnam? Is that what you mean?" The general answered, "I don't mean all the people in the United States." The interviewer then asked, "You mean some of the people in the United States. Who? In the government?" "Sure, policymakers -- people like that," said the respondent. Asked again, "But do you really believe that a trade was made at some point where Mr. Kissinger would go to Mr. Brezhnev or Mr. Mao and say, 'If you give me such and such, I will give you South Vietnam.'" The general replied, "My answer is yes!"

Fate and destiny play powerful roles in Vietnamese culture. In applying for jobs, Vietnamese refugees often list "fate" as the reason why they left South Vietnam. It is not unusual to hear one of the respondents remark that he knows he will return to Vietnam, for example, in 1979, because it is his destiny to do so. The South Vietnamese leaders with whom we spoke tended to be fatalistic about the outcome of the war. "Fate was not on our side," said Pham Ky Loan. Fate was interpreted for President Thieu by a former colonel, who was a well-known astrologer in Saigon consulted by many of South Vietnam's leaders. According to one intriguing tale cited earlier in this report, several weeks before he resigned, Thieu asked the astrologer, "If I resign, among the names of military people, politicians, etc.; can you by your astrology see who is able to replace me, including Big Minh [Duong Van Minh], too, you know?" After studying the problem, the astrologer replied, "I don't see anyone, including Big Minh, to take your place if you resign." Hearing this, Thieu reportedly reasoned aloud, "If nobody can replace me, that means I will be replaced by the Communists." To the extent that fatalism may have been prevalent before the collapse, it would operate against arguing for specific changes. It would have been fighting against a script already written.

That it was a contest that could at best be prolonged with continued American assistance but never won; that without American help South Vietnam could not expect to defend itself against the
military strength that North Vietnam had acquired; that the war in Vietnam was only a small piece of a global struggle the course of which ultimately decided South Vietnam's fate; that it was fate itself that was against South Vietnam; such statements are really different ways of saying the same thing: In the view of the South Vietnamese leaders, the situation was out of their hands. They saw themselves as pawns unable to control or alter the course of events. And they, therefore, offer few suggestions as to how they themselves might have changed the outcome.

A number of the respondents complained that passivity had become ingrained in South Vietnam's leadership. The inherent power and omnipresence of the United States and South Vietnam's situation of total dependency reduced South Vietnam's own leaders to submissive order takers. Lieutenant General Pham Quoc Thuan asserts that the Americans guaranteed this by insuring the selection of Vietnamese who were willing to be cooperative. "Okay, General Vien [the Chairman of the Joint General Staff], if you follow me [a hypothetical American official] I will back you to the Chief of the General staff forever. The same as President Thieu and President Diem."

According to Tran Van Don, General Vien recognized the subservient role of the South Vietnamese. We have reported earlier that responding to Don's inquiry in 1969 about the military doctrine that South Vietnam was following, Vien reportedly replied, "We Vietnamese have no military doctrine because the command of all operation in Vietnam is in the hands, is the responsibility of the American side. We follow the U.S. military doctrine. We cannot have a Vietnamese military doctrine. We can get it only on the day when we will be in charge, when we will be responsible for operations in South Vietnam." General Thuan agreed that South Vietnam's leaders had been reduced to carrying out American plans. He provided an example. "When I was division commander and a corps commander, every year I got a heavy book and it was the operation plan. And when I read the plan on one side is Vietnamese and on the other is English. And I see that it is translated from the English and is not the plan of General Vien. So I think this is no good because General
Vien didn't do anything—he let General Westmoreland's staff write the plan and they sent a copy of the plan to General Vien and he translated it into Vietnamese and signed—it's no good."

Buu Vien notes that pleasing the Americans became the principal goal of South Vietnam's officers.

"The presence of American advisers at all levels of the military hierarchy created among the Vietnamese leadership a mentality of reliance on their advice and suggestions. Even though some officers didn't like the intrusive presence of their American counterparts, most of them felt more confident when they had their advisers at their side. The ideas might be theirs, but they felt more assured when those ideas were concurred in by American advisers, then when they were suggested by their superiors. Officers talking about their performance never failed to mention how much they were being appreciated by their American counterparts as though appreciation by American advisers were evidence of their success, their command ability, their honesty."

This feeling extended to the highest levels of South Vietnam's government. As Bui Diem observed, President Thieu always considered the American factor the most important element—if not the vital one—in every problem that he had to solve, whether it was concerning the future of the country of his own political future. Colonel Nguyen Huy Loi supports this observation. "I think that in Thieu's mind the Americans were responsible for everything and they [the South Vietnamese leaders] didn't need to do anything. And everyone just sit down and wait and because they think the Americans are made responsible for everything." Most South Vietnamese would have agreed with Thieu for in their eyes his selection as president was itself an American decision.

It should be noted that many of the observations made by senior South Vietnamese officials after the collapse closely paralleled those made by the younger officers, mostly of the post-1954 generation, who were interviewed in Saigon in 1971. At that time, they pointed out that many officers of the older generation had served as NCOs in the French army. As a result, said the younger officers, they had developed French tastes and a mentalité de colonisé, and would still be saluting French officers if the French army were still in Vietnam. The younger officers derogatorily referred