

CHAPTER 12

The End of a Long War

At the start of 1975 South Vietnam and Cambodia faced uncertain prospects. The United States was markedly scaling back its aid to the Saigon and Phnom Penh governments. A North Vietnamese military buildup made a major offensive feasible and more dangerous to South Vietnam, because it was by no means certain that Washington would come to Saigon's rescue. The North Vietnamese Army had established a network of paved roads and depots along the Ho Chi Minh Trail and stockpiled supplies as part of a major logistics effort to push war materiel into the South. In addition, Hanoi had stepped up conscription and boosted the numbers of fighters infiltrating into South Vietnam. Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger did not seem unduly alarmed as Hanoi's military buildup proceeded. In May 1974 he had stated publicly that he did not expect the enemy to launch the kind of all-out assault in 1975 that they had mounted in 1972. Rather, he thought, North Vietnam would continue its efforts to reverse the gains of pacification and weaken South Vietnam's control of the countryside.¹

The secretary's relatively hopeful assessment proved short-lived and unfounded. In late December 1974 a national intelligence estimate concluded that communist forces in South Vietnam were "more powerful than ever before" and capable of launching an all-out offensive. It found that deep reductions in U.S. military aid to South Vietnam had left communist forces "in a position of significant advantage," and forecast that in the absence of new infusions of aid the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces would probably exhaust its stocks of ammunition and other critical supplies within five to six months. A mass communist offensive was not necessarily likely, the estimate found, but given the weakened state of South Vietnam's military such an offensive was possible if a "major opportunity" presented itself. As of January 1975, North

Vietnam held seven divisions—approximately 70,000 soldiers—in its strategic reserve, available to bolster the 200,000 fighters and 100,000 support personnel that Hanoi had already positioned in the South. This force totaled 17 divisions supported by 500 tanks and 500 artillery pieces. In addition, the North Vietnamese Army had 50,000 soldiers inside Cambodia and 50,000 support personnel in Laos.²

In early January 1975 Leonard Sullivan, assistant secretary of defense for program analysis and evaluation, sent Schlesinger a bleak assessment of South Vietnam's situation. He foresaw a countrywide enemy offensive within the year. Sullivan regarded communist forces as a more serious military threat to the Saigon government at that point "than at any time in the war." Even if the United States substantially increased its assistance to South Vietnam, Sullivan's office concluded, the NVA would still capture "outlying areas" in the northern Military Region (MR) I and the central highlands of MR II (see chapter 11 for map). Failure on the part of the United States to provide adequate assistance would probably lead to the loss of two major provinces, Quang Tri (in MR I) and Kontum (in MR II). Despite this ominous prediction, Sullivan paradoxically asserted that the South Vietnamese government "is not in danger of a decisive defeat during the 1975 dry season." Rather, a major offensive in 1975 would give communist forces "a potentially decisive edge" during the 1976 dry season. Unfortunately for South Vietnam, Sullivan and the analysts in Program Analysis and Evaluation were wrong: 1975 would be the decisive year.³

Shrinking U.S. Aid

By the end of 1974, Congress was in no mood to fully fund the Pentagon's requests for military assistance to Vietnam. For fiscal year 1975, the administration wanted \$1.45 billion. Congress

authorized \$1 billion but appropriated only \$700 million. Senator John Stennis, chairman of the Armed Services Committee and normally a strong supporter of defense requests, recognized the waning appeal of South Vietnam's cause. In September 1974 he advised President Gerald Ford that he would only back additional funds for South Vietnam if the Pentagon gave more "rigid supervision" to the \$700 million already appropriated, and if that amount proved to be inadequate by mid-March 1975. Given the prevailing sentiment against South Vietnam on Capitol Hill, in January 1975 Erich von Marbod, the principal deputy assistant secretary of defense (comptroller), wanted to delay making a supplemental request until the South Vietnamese military's need for it could be clarified in light of recently intensified combat. These were stringent, difficult-to-prove conditions for South Vietnam. As of December 1974, the comptroller had obligated only half of the \$700 million appropriation. He planned to obligate an additional \$175 million and leave \$175 million in reserve at least through April 1, absent a major enemy assault. He was required to keep FY 1975 funding for Vietnam assistance within the \$700 million appropriated by Congress.⁴

Schlesinger publicly criticized the cuts in U.S. military assistance, characterizing them as a reflection of the "disgruntlement of the American society." Speaking in public at the Federal City Club in Washington, DC, in May 1974, Schlesinger lamented the unfairness of this attitude: "Surely, after all of the involvement in South Vietnam, the South Vietnamese deserve better than a kind of retrospective punishment for our having gotten involved in the war on their side."⁵

Schlesinger and Graham Martin, U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam, both insisted that Saigon needed at least \$1 billion (the full amount authorized by Congress) in military assistance for adequate self-defense, even though prospects for anything beyond the \$700 million appropriated for the year were especially poor. Congressional opposition to additional aid was

bipartisan and included liberals as well as conservatives. Competing demands to fund domestic programs and increasingly strong opposition to the Vietnam War were major obstacles. At a news conference in mid-January 1975, Schlesinger stressed that the \$700 million in military assistance to South Vietnam was inadequate. Denying additional assistance up to the authorized level of \$1 billion would further shrink RVNAF supplies and equipment, and in the secretary's view would represent a "serious moral lapse" and the "semi-abandonment of an ally" that the United States had promised to help. In raising these concerns with President Ford, Secretary of State Kissinger observed that the \$700 million level would reduce the South Vietnamese Army's capabilities to 40 percent of their FY 1974 level and its air force's capabilities by 50 percent. He also warned that reducing aid would result in economic contraction, falling exports and imports, declining industrial and agricultural production, and rising unemployment. Separately, President Ford sought \$600 million in economic assistance for South Vietnam to rebuild infrastructure, restore agriculture to a self-sustaining level, and spur economic expansion.⁶

By fall 1974 South Vietnam's internal problems had become more visible and severe. Economic hardship, along with low morale and disaffection, had grown within ARVN units, undermining combat effectiveness. Shrinking U.S. support was not the sole cause, and an economic crisis in South Vietnam was taking its toll on soldiers and civilians alike. About one-fifth of South Vietnam's civilian work force was unemployed. High inflation in 1973 and 1974 had far outpaced wage increases for soldiers and civil servants. Between March 1972 and February 1974, the purchasing power of a soldier's salary fell by one-third. As a result, one observer noted, a soldier or civil servant "no longer earned enough for the minimum necessities.... He could survive only if he had a second job, stole, or had another wage earner in his household." Many South Vietnamese soldiers took second jobs, making them unavailable for

military duties. The Defense Attaché Office surveyed 6,600 servicemen in summer 1974; over 90 percent confirmed their pay and allowances did not cover the cost of food, clothing, and shelter for their families. The surveyors reached an unpromising conclusion: “Performance and mission accomplishment are seriously affected. Day-to-day survival in the face of worsening economic conditions has caused a deterioration of performance which cannot be allowed to continue, if the South Vietnamese military is to be considered a viable force.”⁷

Cambodia’s situation was even more desperate. In September 1974 the Senate Foreign Relations Committee imposed a \$200 million ceiling on military assistance for FY 1975, a big drop from the \$375 million appropriated for Cambodia in FY 1974. The entire \$200 million had been obligated by mid-January 1975, before the peak of the dry season, which typically saw the heaviest combat. At that time total ammunition, both in Cambodia and in the supply pipeline, would cover only 30 to 45 days of fighting. President Ford on January 10 authorized a drawdown of \$75 million from U.S. defense stocks to fill the void, but that was expected to cover only an additional 50 to 60 days of combat. Congressional opposition also limited nonmilitary assistance. The same Senate bill that limited military aid also provided Cambodia with a mere \$70 million for economic assistance, an amount that Kissinger advised Ford, would be “barely sufficient” to cover the cost of shipping rice under the existing foreign aid program approved by Congress. Moreover, the bill provided no funds for refugee programs, oil, or basic commodities.⁸

South Vietnam Starts to Collapse

The withering U.S. military and economic support for the Saigon government did not go unnoticed in Hanoi, and North Vietnam’s Senior General Vo Nguyen Giap saw an opportunity to make gains against a weakened South Vietnam. Convinced that North Vietnam’s forces were

stronger than its rival's, he successfully pressed his government for an offensive. North Vietnam's Politburo and Central Military Party Committee decided to carry out a three-phase military campaign for the 1974–1975 dry season. The campaign would target Military Regions I and II, seeking to create conditions for the eventual capture of Saigon.

Situated on South Vietnam's border with Cambodia, Phuoc Long province, the initial target, was close to communist supply depots and rest areas at the end of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The capture of the remote province would facilitate the flow of troops and supplies for subsequent phases of the campaign. The offensive began in December 1974 with an assault by two NVA divisions reinforced by two infantry regiments plus tank, artillery, and antiaircraft support. The offensive was, as director of Central Intelligence and former pacification program chief William Colby later observed, a harbinger of how South Vietnam and the United States would react to the brazen resumption of combat that openly violated the letter and spirit of the peace accords.⁹

South Vietnamese president Thieu found himself handcuffed by his “defend everywhere” policy. He could move troops from other areas to the endangered province only at great risk, because ARVN units were thinly spread across the sprawling central highlands and the northern provinces. South Vietnam lacked the time and air assets to quickly reinforce or resupply the beleaguered province, and Thieu knew, given the shrinkage of U.S. military aid, that any aircraft lost in the resupply effort would not be replaced. Moreover, although his static and scattered deployment pattern was an ineffective defense against aggression by the North, keeping troops apart made Thieu feel more secure against the possibility of a military coup. By the end of December 1974 all of Phuoc Long, with the exception of Phuoc Binh, the provincial capital, was in enemy hands. Judging the costs as too high and believing that Phuoc Long had less strategic

importance than places like Tay Ninh, Hue, and Pleiku, Thieu decided not to shore up Phuoc Long. On January 6, 1975, the North Vietnamese army, supported by tanks and heavy artillery fire, captured Phuoc Binh, thereby gaining total control of Phuoc Long. The Vietnamization policy initiated by Defense Secretary Melvin Laird had armed and trained a large South Vietnamese fighting force, but it could not be brought to bear in defending against a focused attack by the North.¹⁰

North Vietnam's offensive did not persuade the Ford administration to ask for a larger supplemental appropriation than the amount (\$300 million) it was already planning to request from congress. In a meeting of the Washington Special Actions Group immediately after the fall of Phuoc Long on January 7, Deputy Secretary of Defense William Clements and JCS Chairman General George Brown both said that amount was the minimum South Vietnam would need to get by. They, like other WSAG members, recognized the unlikelihood of getting Congress to approve for a larger request; yet without a supplemental, the WSAG consensus was that South Vietnam would unravel. On January 10 Clements provided Kissinger with DoD's formal, follow-on recommendation for additional military assistance for Vietnam. The loss of Phuoc Long, however, prompted no change of plans and added no sense of urgency within the Pentagon. Seeking more than \$300 million, Clements believed, "would delay and reduce the probability of getting required resources." He added, "If combat activity becomes more severe than now, it would be necessary to go for an additional or higher level of funding.... There has been no discernible support, however, for a higher authorization level."¹¹

At the WSAG meeting on January 7, Kissinger had asked members what else the United States could do for South Vietnam, beyond requesting a supplemental appropriation for military aid. Both Clements and General Brown suggested deploying naval forces to the Gulf of Tonkin.

However, Morton Abramowitz, deputy assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs, advised Secretary Schlesinger on January 13 that naval deployments and other measures under consideration could encounter serious opposition within the United States, and therefore imperil efforts to get a supplemental appropriation through Congress. He cautioned that one option, deploying the aircraft carrier USS *Midway* to the Gulf from its homeport in Japan, could raise the Japanese government's ire. The ship was already a "sensitive" issue in Tokyo, where, as Abramowitz noted, it had created some controversy when it became the first U.S. carrier based outside the United States in 1973. Other options being studied, such as moving F-4s from Japan to Clark Air Base in the Philippines and deploying B-52s to Thailand, faced similar challenges. The latter move would have to be carefully coordinated with the Thai government, he wrote, and even if it received Thai approval, it was highly likely Congress would object. Schlesinger's senior military assistant, Maj. Gen. John Wickham, read the memo before the secretary did, and noted Abramowitz's concerns about deploying the *Midway* for his boss. Abramowitz's take was consistent with Schlesinger's own views, Wickham wrote, and aligned with the conclusions the Joint Chiefs of Staff had reached in the week since the WSAG meeting. That same day President Ford met with Kissinger and Deputy National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft to discuss the various options. Kissinger, angry at opposition emerging from the Pentagon, blamed the defense secretary, who he thought was trying to distance himself from the Vietnam issue and let the White House take the heat for any unpopular decision on moving forces.¹²

The capture of Phuoc Long was devastating psychologically to South Vietnamese civilians and armed forces, and the blow was amplified when the United States took no action in response. President Ford did not specifically mention South Vietnam during his State of the Union address on January 15, but he did decry congressional restrictions on the president's

authorities in foreign policy generally. However, days later at a press conference the president made clear there were no circumstances under which the nation would again fight in Vietnam—a clear message to both Saigon and Hanoi. Ford understood public and congressional opposition to spending more treasure in Vietnam or undoing the ban on U.S. military operations in Vietnam. He resolved to provide as much support to South Vietnam and Cambodia as U.S. domestic political strictures would allow. Meanwhile, Hanoi had escaped retaliation and sanction while willfully flouting the peace accords. The North Vietnamese Politburo interpreted the Ford administration's actions (or lack thereof) as a signal that the United States would not intervene in the future and decided in early January to issue guidance for the 1975 campaign that made Ban Me Thuot, the capital of Darlac province in Military Region II, the next target.¹³

At the end of January 1975 Ford submitted a supplemental request to Congress that included \$300 million for South Vietnam and \$497 million for Cambodia. Congressional hearings on January 30 and presidential meetings with legislative leaders in early February changed no minds. Ford had low public approval ratings and few Americans seemed to care about the plight of South Vietnam or Cambodia. Eighty-two members of Congress wrote the president, arguing that continuation of aid was not in the national interest, especially when the United States itself was suffering from inflation, recession, and high unemployment.¹⁴

Hoping to build support for his supplemental request, Ford invited a bipartisan congressional delegation to make a visit to South Vietnam for a firsthand look. The main part of the delegation arrived on 27 February and departed Vietnam on March 2. Col. William Le Gro, chief intelligence officer in the DAO, provided numerous reports showing Hanoi's violations of the peace agreement, highlighting the especially heavy infiltration of North Vietnamese soldiers since the ceasefire. He believed this level of infiltration indicated a major offensive was in the

offing, but as he later recounted, Le Gro found it hard to establish credibility with the delegation. Most members arrived with a negative opinion of South Vietnamese president Thieu. Embassy personnel who observed the legislators' meeting with Thieu thought they had shown him an appalling level of disrespect, and noted that they tended to discount briefings from U.S. officials. Late in the visit several members of the delegation met with the Joint Military Team, an organization with U.S. and North Vietnamese personnel responsible for coordination about prisoners of war and personnel missing in action. Those members came away frustrated at the North Vietnamese officers' lack of candor, and afterward, resolved to support some increase in military aid to South Vietnam. But their support made no appreciable dent in the rising tide of opposition to aid coursing through both the House and Senate. Shortly after the delegation's return to Washington the Democratic caucuses in the House and Senate united in their opposition to further aid. Thieu and his generals ruefully concluded after the visit that the United States was ready to abandon them.¹⁵

As South Vietnam's prospects eroded, the situation in Cambodia grew dire. By mid-February, Lon Nol's regime was on the verge of collapse and U.S. officials in Washington and Phnom Penh saw virtually no hope for a rebound. The Khmer Rouge embarked on a campaign to close the Mekong River and prevent resupply convoys from bringing food, ammunition, and other supplies to Phnom Penh. Ambassador John Dean questioned the government's ability to survive. On February 26, he cabled Washington that the fighting ability and morale of its Army, the FANK, had so deteriorated there was no certainty that it could continue to contain the enemy forces around Phnom Penh. He doubted that even a favorable congressional vote on supplementary assistance would be enough to turn the situation around. On February 27 the WSAG discussed whether even a reduced amount of supplemental aid for Cambodia could get

congressional approval, but a sense of gloom permeated the conversation. If no further aid was possible, the military situation could not improve, and if the Cambodian government could not at least force a military stalemate on the Khmer Rouge (victory was out of the question), then any hope at a face-saving negotiated settlement would be lost. Participants agreed that the situation was becoming untenable, and mid-meeting the conversation shifted to evacuating U.S. nationals from Phnom Penh. Existing plans called for 25 helicopters to move 600 Americans from the Cambodian capital out of the country. But by late February the National Security Council estimated that the airlift (later code-named Eagle Pull) would need to move more than 750 individuals, including prominent Cambodians aligned with the Lon Nol government. Deputy Secretary Clements, OSD's representative on the WSAG, advised expanding the evacuation plan accordingly—adding helicopters and personnel—so that everyone could be flown out cleanly in one sortie. Clements also suggested that “from a morale standpoint” it would make sense for the United States to give embattled Cambodian forces some armored personnel carriers. Kissinger, chairing the meeting, concurred and ordered that it be done.¹⁶

On March 11 Schlesinger informed President Ford that Phnom Penh's airport was under threat. The facility was essential for getting supplies to the capital and for any evacuations that the deteriorating situation made necessary. The JCS recommended continuing aerial resupply as long as physically possible, but the pilots of U.S. cargo planes were growing reluctant. American C-130s and some DC-8s were still able to deliver ammunition even as conditions worsened in mid-March. The secretary recommended starting Eagle Pull if the airport could not be kept open. Under current conditions he rated the Cambodian regime's survival chances at between 5 and 10 percent, while if Congress were to approve supplemental aid, he would put the regime's near-term odds at “a better than 50-50 chance” to get through the upcoming dry season. In the Oval

Office on March 14 Schlesinger cautioned the president that the resupply situation had reached “the verge of a combat situation,” and was getting perilously close to violating the statutory prohibition on U.S. combat involvement passed by congress in 1973. Although the supply flights continued, the president authorized DoD to proceed with contingency plans for the withdrawal of all Americans from Cambodia.¹⁷

That same day the House Foreign Affairs Committee rejected all alternatives to the president’s January emergency aid proposal and deferred a vote on the supplemental bill itself, a fatal blow for Cambodia. An angry Schlesinger said that Congress “wants to slither away from this.” President Ford acknowledged that “the odds are against us,” but vowed to continue pushing for the supplemental in order to “make a public record that we meant what we said” about not walking away after the Paris Peace Accords. He wanted to put the onus on Congress and force members to “stand up to be counted” because, he said, “The bad results are their responsibility—not ours.” Congress was unmoved. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee narrowly approved a meager \$82.5 million in supplies for Cambodia, but wanted to terminate all military assistance after June 30. Fifty members of the House wrote to the president on March 19 to express opposition to the Cambodian aid proposal and tell him it was time to spend the money instead on the American people.¹⁸

Disaster in the Highlands

Prospects for the administration’s \$300 million supplemental request for Saigon remained dim even as the defense secretary worked with Representative George Mahon and Senator Stennis on a \$1.3 billion aid package for Vietnam for FY 1976. Without these infusions, Schlesinger expected that South Vietnam’s forces would draw down their supplies and retrench, shrinking

the size of previously pacified areas and falling back into areas smaller than what they had previously pacified. Such a pullback, he warned the president, “creates signs that are very bad for the long term.”¹⁹

Retrenchment begat catastrophe. Realizing that the military balance inside South Vietnam had shifted in its favor after the fall of Phouc Long, Hanoi pushed ahead with a 1975 spring offensive in the southern part of the highlands of Military Region II, a large mountainous area with inadequate roads and rugged terrain. Immense distances separated the provincial capitals, giving the NVA room to assemble forces, maneuver, and make it difficult for the ARVN to defend. The NVA stationed five well-supplied main force divisions in the region. Two ARVN divisions, seven ranger regiments, and one armored brigade defended the vast highlands, as Saigon’s units contended with dwindling supplies, limited reserves, and shaky morale. Hanoi’s offensive initially targeted Ban Me Thuot, the capital of Darlac province. If the city fell, the NVA would be in a position to attack northward against Pleiku and Kontum provinces along the Cambodian border, or to drive eastward toward the important coastal cities of Nha Trang, Tuy Hoa, Cam Ranh, and Qui Nhon, which had critical airfields and port facilities. Hanoi’s military perceived that ARVN units in Military Region II were thinly spread, due to a vain attempt to protect more locations in the region. To prepare for the campaign, NVA engineers had improved roads and built new ferry crossings and fords from Pleiku to Ban Me Thuot.²⁰

Before the campaign began, ARVN intelligence had correctly predicted that the NVA’s primary goal would be Ban Me Thuot. However, Lt. Gen. Pham Van Phu, commander of Military Region II, disagreed and kept the ARVN 23rd division at Pleiku. By the time Phu realized the enemy’s real goal was Ban Me Thuot, enemy forces had isolated the city and made it impossible to provide reinforcements. The enemy assault began at 2:00 a.m. on March 10, and

by nightfall the NVA had captured the center of Ban Me Thuot. An ARVN counterattack utterly failed to retake the city. The North Vietnamese were surprised at how quickly the city fell and how the United States did nothing to aid South Vietnam's forces. General Van Tien Dung, the NVA chief of staff and overall commander of the offensive, realized his forces now had the opportunity to advance to the coast, cut South Vietnam in two, and isolate ARVN units in the highlands and Military Region I. Based on their battlefield success, communist leaders now deemed 1975 to be the decisive year. As one North Vietnamese communist party journal concluded, Hanoi saw the reduction of U.S. aid to South Vietnam and Washington's failure to respond to the loss of Phuoc Long "as a sign of U.S. impotence and unwillingness to reenter the Indochina conflict."²¹

In the aftermath of Ban Me Thuot's fall, Schlesinger went on the record about the situation. Appearing on the CBS *Morning Show* on March 13, he characterized the enemy assault as more limited than the 1972 offensive. Schlesinger believed the enemy was isolating certain parts of the central highlands in order to weaken pacified areas. He made no direct mention of the loss of Ban Me Thuot, but saw encouraging signs, contending that the NVA was "not coming in contact with the main strength of ARVN forces." He added that the enemy had been "attacking Hue but they have come up in that case against very formidable ARVN forces and they have not gotten very far." He still expected the major North Vietnamese effort to come in 1976. Neither the secretary nor the television interviewers had an inkling of the catastrophe that would soon unfold.²²

South Vietnam's deteriorating plight led Thieu to change strategy fundamentally, abruptly, and catastrophically. The February-March visit of the U.S. congressional delegation had convinced him Congress would not approve the \$300 million in aid and was unlikely to

agree to a higher amount in the future. He was aware that aid reductions had weakened combat capabilities as well as morale. Ban Me Thuot's fall and the ARVN's inability to reinforce had demonstrated beyond a doubt that his armed forces were overextended. On March 11 Thieu met with General Cao Van Vien, chief of the Joint General Staff and Lt. Gen. Dang Van Quang, the president's assistant for security affairs, and decided to make a fundamental change. Given South Vietnam's current strength and capability, Thieu concluded that "we certainly cannot hold and defend all the territory we want." He chose instead to redeploy ARVN forces to hold and defend population and economic centers most important to South Vietnam's survival, and designated Military Regions III and IV as critical areas to be held at all costs. This meant withdrawing forces from the central highlands to the coastal areas in Military Region II and giving up most of Region I except for an enclave around the port of Da Nang. In Military Region I, the scene of fierce combat, Thieu advised Vien to hold what he could. The president set a final defensive line just north of Tuy Hoa, a coastal city in central Military Region II. Vien had reservations about Thieu's plan, considering it to be too late, but believed Thieu at this point had no other choice.

On March 14, Thieu ordered the MR II commander to withdraw regular forces and rangers from Pleiku and Kontum provinces in the central highlands to the coast. The hastily made decision would require a massive troop withdrawal under fire, a difficult maneuver that involved considerable risk and required careful prior planning. Thieu had made his decision secretly to avoid leaks to the communists or the public and presented it as a *fait accompli* to his generals to forestall any coup plotting. The secrecy was too effective, though, and left no time for the ARVN to prepare. The RVNAF's Joint General Staff in Saigon and regional commanders in the field were completely in the dark. On March 16, the redeployment began, leaving no time to devise or disseminate plans. Regional and Popular Force units protecting the provinces and

districts were not even informed of the decision to withdraw. Without prior planning, everything had to be improvised.²³

Even the Ford administration was blindsided by Thieu's change in strategy. Stunned by the sudden withdrawal from the highlands, Clements later exclaimed, "He [Thieu] did not tell us anything." In a meeting with Maj. Gen. Homer Smith, the defense attaché, on the afternoon of March 14, General Vien had failed to inform him of the plan to abandon the highlands. DAO and CIA officials working in Pleiku learned of the redeployment on March 15. When the embassy found out, it ordered all Americans to leave the central highlands and was able to evacuate 450 American and Vietnamese employees working for U.S. agencies.²⁴

The abrupt exodus from Kontum and Pleiku on March 16 triggered panic. Large numbers of civilians, many of whom were soldiers' dependents, joined the flight. As this unwieldy column staggered down Route 7B, halting while necessary repairs were made to the damaged road, it came under communist attack and unit integrity dissolved. Only about 20,000 of 60,000 regular troops, 700 of 7,000 Rangers, and perhaps 100,000 of 400,000 civilians reached the coast. Few of the soldiers who made it remained fit for combat. The situation in Military Region I was equally grim. At the beginning of March, the region contained five ARVN divisions—including the Airborne and Marine Divisions, South Vietnam's major reserve units—one armored brigade, and five Ranger groups. Communist strength was equivalent to seven divisions, with several more readily available above the Demilitarized Zone. Between March 8 and 10, the North Vietnamese attacked in several areas of Military Region I. Thieu ordered the Airborne Division to redeploy to the Saigon area. The marines shifted southward from Quang Tri to replace the airborne division. Hordes of civilians followed. On March 19, the government decided to bring the Marines to Saigon.²⁵

Surprisingly, no DoD officials were present when Kissinger met with the NSC staff and Ambassador Martin on March 24 to review the unfolding calamity in Vietnam. Kissinger, who had returned to Washington on March 23 after traveling in Europe and the Middle East, was stunned and demanded to know “how did all this happen.” He glumly reminded everyone at the meeting that the United States could do little—that U.S. law precluded American military action. The only avenue available was military assistance, and all agreed that the \$300 million supplemental the president had requested in January fell short of what South Vietnam actually needed. President Ford decided to send General Frederick Weyand, the Army chief of staff, to South Vietnam on a fact-finding trip. An officer of integrity and insight, Weyand had commanded a division in Vietnam and later served as the MACV commander, the highest-ranking U.S. officer in Vietnam. Kissinger aimed to use Weyand’s visit to justify a larger aid request to Congress. “If we get creamed,” he mused, “we’re going to get Adviser Scowcroft creamed asking for the right amount.” He directed Deputy National Security Adviser Scowcroft to “tell Weyand what we want him to report,” that the general should err on the side of more aid rather than less. The next day Ford reinforced the message, telling Weyand in an Oval Office meeting, “We want your recommendation for the things which can be tough and shocking to the North.”²⁶

On March 25, before Weyand reached Vietnam, a special national intelligence estimate concluded that Thieu’s government would probably soon be reduced to controlling little more than Saigon, the surrounding populated area, and the Mekong Delta: “It would thus face further communist pressure from a position substantially weaker than our previous estimates, with the result likely to be defeat by early 1976.” North Vietnam saw no reason to wait. Sensing victory,

the Politburo had sped up the timetable, and committed to a complete victory before the start of the rainy season.²⁷

Weyand had a nearly impossible assignment. He needed to find a way to stave off what looked like an inevitable defeat. Arriving in Vietnam on March 27, he assured Thieu of Ford's continued support and spent six days traveling on inspection trips. On the day Weyand landed, the NVA began its attack on Da Nang. In Washington on March 27, President Ford met with a deeply pessimistic Kissinger, the architect of the now-shattered peace accords, who lamented that South Vietnam had "lost virtually everything and North Vietnam has suffered very little." Kissinger urged Ford to consider ending U.S. support: "Maybe you must put Vietnam behind you and not tear the country apart again."²⁸

The following day, U.S. ships began to take on refugees in Da Nang's harbor. Around 90,000 displaced persons headed south on U.S. and South Vietnamese boats. ARVN efforts to reinforce the enclave around the coastal city of Da Nang quickly unraveled. Two million people crowded into the area; public order broke down and desertions multiplied. Police left their posts and the roads to the airport were jammed. Facing an imminent communist attack, local commanders tried to organize an escape on March 29. Only about 10,000 South Vietnamese marines and other troops reached navy ships and civilian craft. At the airport a desperate scene played out in front of television cameras as soldiers scrambled onto one of the last flights out and those who didn't make it aboard tried to block the runway. Da Nang fell without a fight on March 30.²⁹

While Weyand was still in Vietnam, the WSAG met on April 2 in an atmosphere of pervasive gloom. Much of the discussion was premised on the certainty of imminent defeat. At best, Schlesinger said Thieu's government might last 60 to 90 days, but added, "It could fall

within three weeks” before cautioning that he “wouldn’t count on any more than 45 days.” The secretary reported that the defense attaché in Saigon, General Smith, had estimated that the country could fall in a few days. Schlesinger, Kissinger, and DCI Colby agreed that South Vietnamese units had all but given up the fight, leaving virtually no military obstacles to the NVA units swiftly advancing toward Saigon. When Colby said that “remnants” of ARVN’s 2nd Division might be able to establish a defensive line to protect Saigon, the defense secretary responded, “That whole effort is hopeless!” Anticipating defeat, the participants offered their postmortem analyses of South Vietnam’s fall even before it happened, but no one attempted to link Saigon’s military collapse with the way the Vietnamization program had unfolded. The “pell-mell” evacuation of Pleiku and Kontum provinces, and the evacuation of Hue, Colby said, created a shock effect. Schlesinger agreed: “It was the shock effect of the swift withdrawal that led to the collapse of that house of cards ... I don’t think, however, the situation would have been this bad had they stood their ground.” The secretary thought the situation completely hopeless, and that the South Vietnamese military could not prevent the NVA from capturing Saigon. He had no ideas on how to stave off defeat. After talking by phone with Weyand in Vietnam, Schlesinger observed that even the general was “much more pessimistic than when he first got out there.”³⁰

The WSAG agreed upon an immediate evacuation of U.S. dependents in South Vietnam along with Americans who had escaped from the advancing NVA. Kissinger feared that proceeding too abruptly with an evacuation could accelerate the disintegration of the Thieu government. The United States, he insisted, also had a duty to bring out the South Vietnamese “who believed in us.” The size of that group was hard to divine. Philip Habib, assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, thought that such a description easily fit 93,000

Vietnamese; an NSC staff member said it could be a million. Kissinger directed the U.S. Embassy in Saigon to arrange for the departure of all dependents of American officials and to encourage “non-official” (non-U.S. government) Americans to leave as well.³¹

Upon General Weyand’s return Schlesinger urged him to not “lead the president astray” about Saigon’s prospects. Weyand replied that he was not wearing rose-colored glasses and said he would speak only about the consistency of U.S. support and the importance of ARVN morale. On April 5 Weyand met Ford during the president’s vacation near Palm Springs, California. The probability of survival for a truncated South Vietnam based in the southern provinces, Weyand asserted, “is marginal at best,” and he characterized South Vietnam as being “on the brink of a total military defeat.” The current level of U.S. support “guarantees GVN [Government of the Republic of Vietnam] defeat.” In his estimation, South Vietnam needed an additional \$722 million, a politically unrealistic amount of money, just to establish “a minimal defense posture to meet the Soviet and PRC [People’s Republic of China] supported invasion.” Like the WSAG, Weyand recommended that the United States plan for a mass evacuation of American citizens and “tens of thousands of South Vietnamese and Third Country Nationals to whom we have incurred an obligation and owe protection.” To prevent a repetition of the chaotic Da Nang evacuation, he recommended a minimum U.S. task force consisting of a reinforced division and tactical air to suppress North Vietnamese artillery and antiaircraft fire. He believed the bulk of the recommended ammunition and equipment could reach South Vietnam “within 45 days of availability of funds.” These steps he thought were necessary to sustain the credibility of the United States as an ally, but would not necessarily be enough to prevent the total conquest of South Vietnam.³²

Officials within the administration clashed over Weyand's proposals. Some saw no point in asking Congress for more aid. John Marsh, counselor to the president, reported there was no congressional interest in approving additional assistance. Critics complained that the ARVN had abandoned supplies and weapons as its units fled south. Other advisers questioned whether South Vietnam could even survive long enough to receive fresh aid, should Congress approve it. David Kennerly, Ford's official photographer, had accompanied Weyand to Vietnam and warned the president: the generals are "bullshitting you if they say that Vietnam has got more than three or four weeks left. There's no question about it. It's just not gonna last." Unswayed by those urging him not to seek funds for Vietnam, Ford decided to ask Congress for economic aid, \$722 million for the military, and authority from Congress to evacuate. Fully aware that the legislative branch would likely reject his request, Ford wanted to pin the onus for Saigon's defeat on those opposing aid, averring, "If the Congress wants to vote this way, then the efforts of five Presidents, 55,000 dead ... are in vain."³³

Ford sought the views of his top advisers and several of their deputies at an NSC meeting on April 9. Attendees agreed that South Vietnam was on the cusp of a complete military defeat and that any new military aid Washington furnished—if Congress approved it—would buy time for the Thieu government but would not save it. They agreed that President Ford had to make a strong public case for the aid, if only because failing to do so might precipitate a rapid collapse in South Vietnam and prevent the United States from evacuating U.S. government personnel, their dependents, and other American citizens as well as South Vietnamese and friendly foreign nationals identified by the Embassy in Saigon. The question became whether to ask for the full \$722 million that Weyand had recommended, which the president favored coming into the meeting, or to stick with the \$300 million figure he had announced in late January (with the

promise of yet another interim request later on). After much discussion but before making a final decision, Ford invited comments on “general issues.” Schlesinger seized the floor and delivered a lengthy monologue that irked the president. He began by urging all to recognize that South Vietnam was “gone,” and recommended that Ford make the smaller aid request to Congress. But the defense secretary then expanded his writ. He said the important thing for the president was “to establish leadership and to give a call to the people” in a “fighting speech” akin to former British prime minister Winston Churchill’s “blood, sweat, and tears” address during World War II. “I am concerned for the country and for you,” the secretary lectured. He pushed Ford to send a broader signal that the United States remained in a strong position internationally regardless of events in South Vietnam. The president should push European allies to “do more in their own defense,” he advised, and to warn Moscow that “We want to preserve détente but it cannot be a one-way street.”³⁴

The lecture did not please the president, who already had a contentious relationship with his inherited defense secretary. Clements, also attending for DoD, agreed with the thrust of Schlesinger’s comments but offered a more tactful assessment. He said the president should use his funding request to acknowledge before Congress how profoundly Vietnam had divided Americans for 12 years and to urge Americans to “look ahead and not get into acrimonious debates over the past.” Because the United States could do very little and all options were bad, he advised Ford not to make promises he could not keep and offered the president words of consolation: “It takes a strong leader to be able to cut your losses.” Before the president closed discussion, General Brown, chairman of the Joint Chiefs, offered his view that the full \$722 million amount “would be wasted” on South Vietnam. A lesser request of \$300 million might do something to sustain the Thieu government and would show Vietnam’s neighbors that the United

States was not abandoning Asia. But the larger sum would “have an impact on the equipment of our own units. We would have to send material that our own forces should use.”³⁵

After hearing the discussion, Ford made his decision. He was aware that the full \$722 million Weyand had recommended would not save South Vietnam, and he was clear-eyed about the request’s dim prospects in Congress. But he closed the meeting determined to ask for the full amount “because we can justify it. At least the record will be clear.” Turning to Schlesinger, Ford pointedly affirmed that he would make “a strong speech in my own way, not perhaps in Churchill’s.” “I gather, Jim, that you have reservations,” the president concluded. “But this is the decision.”³⁶

President Ford made his request in an address to a joint session of Congress on April 10. Calling the \$300 million figure he had requested in January “obviously inadequate” in light of recent North Vietnamese military successes, and citing General Weyand’s recent recommendation, he asked for \$722 million in military assistance and \$250 million in economic and humanitarian aid. Congressional action had to be “swift and adequate,” the president warned, in order to avert “far deeper disaster.” Trying to set the current crisis in broader perspective, the president asked, “Who can forget the enormous sacrifices of blood, dedication, and treasure that we made in Vietnam?” He argued the \$722 million in military supplies could help stabilize the military situation and offer an opportunity for a political solution, and stated that the United States had a “profound moral obligation” to the South Vietnamese who supported and worked with the United States. He then addressed the domestic fissures the war had caused: “Let us deny our adversaries the satisfaction of using Vietnam to pit Americans against Americans. At this moment, the United States must present to the world a united front.” Seeking to put the onus on Congress, the president insisted, “We cannot in the meantime abandon our friends while our

adversaries support and encourage theirs.” The president’s rhetoric, while impassioned, persuaded few. Not one member applauded his request for \$722 million, and two members of the House walked out of the chamber while he spoke. Ford’s appeal foundered not just because antiwar feeling in the country ran so high. Many thought too much blood and treasure had been spent in vain. Others believed the request came too late to be practical and the amount was insufficient to ensure South Vietnam’s survival.³⁷

Evacuation

On the day Ford addressed Congress, Kissinger directed Ambassador Dean in Cambodia, “Evacuate without delay ... all Americans for whom we are responsible, including as many Khmer as possible under the circumstances.” Operation Eagle Pull, executed on April 12, deployed 33 helicopters in one lift from the USS *Hancock*. Twelve helicopters carried 346 marines into Phnom Penh to protect the withdrawal. The operation evacuated a total of 276 American, Cambodian, and third-country nationals, but a number of anticommunist leaders chose to stay. One of them, former prime minister Sirik Matak, wrote Dean a farewell letter: “I cannot, alas, leave in such a cowardly fashion ... I have only committed the mistake of believing in you, the Americans.” The Khmer Rouge took Phnom Penh on April 17 and, in victory, executed prominent members of the losing side, Sirik Matak among them. Declaring the establishment of Democratic Kampuchea, they then drove Phnom Penh’s two million inhabitants into the ravaged countryside. Under the leadership of Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge came to power and engaged in genocide as it attempted to create a communist agrarian utopia.³⁸

The day of his address to Congress, April 10, Ford also ordered Ambassador Martin in Saigon to reduce the American community in South Vietnam to 1,250 over the next 10 days.

Schlesinger wanted to remove all nonessential U.S. personnel as fast as possible. When the WSAG met on 17 April, Schlesinger reported that C-141s were flying nearly empty from Tan Son Nhut airport outside Saigon. Ford, who was ready to believe the worst about the defense secretary, later wrote in his memoir that Schlesinger “had ordered the flight of empty or near-empty planes in and out of Saigon—just to establish for the record, I suspected, that it would not be his fault if we failed to remove all our people.” Ford was mistaken, however. The same day as the WSAG meeting, Schlesinger telephoned Deputy National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft to push back on the idea that the Pentagon was to blame. Scowcroft agreed that the DoD was not the problem, telling the secretary the “DoD’s track record in pressing for accelerated evacuations is very clear.” Responsibility for the flights of partially filled aircraft rested mainly with Martin. The ambassador remained doggedly optimistic about South Vietnam’s survival, and moved with deliberate slowness to avoid alarming the South Vietnamese. After the WSAG meeting, Kissinger sent a second cable to Martin on the matter: “The sentiment of our military, DoD and CIA colleagues was to get out fast and now.” Kissinger instructed that by April 22 the American presence must be cut to 1,090, a number of personnel that helicopters could take out in one lift.³⁹

The war was quickly reaching its end. Nguyen Van Thieu resigned the presidency of South Vietnam on April 21 as NVA divisions approached the outskirts of Saigon. Speaking to the graduating class at Tulane University on April 23, less than two weeks after he appealed to Congress for assistance and while fighting still continued in Vietnam, President Ford stated that the war “is finished as far as America is concerned.” He urged the graduates to look forward, to help heal a divided nation, and to “regain the sense of pride that existed before Vietnam.”⁴⁰

North Vietnam’s army soon reached the area around Saigon. On the evening of April 28 (early in the morning of April 29, Saigon time) Tan Son Nhut Air Base came under rocket and

artillery fire; two U.S. marines guarding the evacuees were killed. Hearing the news at an NSC meeting, President Ford decided that April 29 would be the last day to evacuate everyone. Martin wanted to keep a skeletal staff, but Ford insisted that all Americans leave. On April 29, 81 helicopters brought out 7,806 U.S. citizens and foreign nationals. At 7:53 p.m. Washington time, the last Marines were lifted off the embassy roof. U.S. Navy ships in the South China Sea picked up many South Vietnamese who had fled by boat. On April 30 South Vietnam's newly installed President Duong Van Minh agreed to an unconditional surrender. In Laos, soon afterward, communists took control of the government, completing their victory in Indochina. By May 3, the North Vietnamese Army controlled the entirety of South Vietnam, less than two months after the attack on Ban Me Thuot. South Vietnam's forces, including an army of one million and \$5 billion in weapons and equipment, had been completely defeated. Since 1964 the foundation of U.S. policy in Southeast Asia had been the preservation of a sovereign and independent South Vietnam. That nation no longer existed.⁴¹

The *Mayaguez* Episode

Less than two weeks after the fall of Saigon and the forced evacuations from South Vietnam and Cambodia, the United States found itself embroiled in a new crisis in Southeast Asia. On May 12, 1975, at 5:12 a.m., Washington time, the National Military Command Center (NMCC) received a report that a Cambodian boarding party had captured the SS *Mayaguez*, an American-registered commercial ship, near the island of Poulo Wei (60 miles off the Cambodian coast) as it sailed from Hong Kong to Thailand. The National Security Council decided on a strong response. The president relied on Kissinger, Schlesinger, and Scowcroft to decide policy and strategy until the crisis ended. A carrier task group built around the USS *Coral Sea*, destroyers

USS *Harold E. Holt* and USS *Henry B. Wilson*, and support ship *Vega* were directed to proceed to the vicinity of the Cambodian port of Kompong Som.⁴²

The recent defeat in Vietnam and Cambodia and the still-fresh memory of North Korea's seizure of the USS *Pueblo* shaped the U.S. response. In January 1968 North Korean gunboats had captured the *Pueblo*, forcing it into Wonsan harbor in North Korea before a rescue operation could be mounted. The crew had spent eleven months in harsh captivity before being released, and no one in the Ford administration wanted a reprise. Fearing that the Khmer Rouge and their leader Pol Pot might use the *Mayaguez*'s crew as hostages or for propaganda purposes, Ford felt he had to act quickly. During the brief episode, the president's consultation with Congress was minimal. The administration believed it had the authority to take military action, contending that the War Powers Act applied to Vietnam, not to situations like the capture of the *Mayaguez*. Ford and his inner circle of advisers—Kissinger, Schlesinger, and Scowcroft—set three objectives: recover the ship and crew, avoid the possibility of hostage negotiations, and conduct a military operation to demonstrate U.S. credibility. The last was especially important; the United States had been forced out of Vietnam just 14 days earlier.⁴³

At 2:25 a.m. on May 13, U.S. aircraft spotted the *Mayaguez* dead in the water off Koh Tang Island, 34 miles southwest of Kompong Som. The JCS ordered constant tactical air and gunship coverage and granted authority to fire in the vicinity of, but not at, small boats approaching the *Mayaguez*.⁴⁴ At an NSC meeting at 10:22 a.m. on May 13 a lack of hard information complicated the discussion. Vice President Nelson Rockefeller and Schlesinger argued about the actual location of the *Mayaguez*. Scowcroft gave the president a number of different reports, exasperating Ford: "We have to be more factual or at least more precise in pointing out our degree of knowledge.... How certain are we of the facts with which we are

dealing?” Ford asked the group. He was also upset by delays. “We must have the information immediately. There must be the quickest possible communication to me.”⁴⁵

Schlesinger outlined two options for recovering the ship and crew. The first of these had helicopters from Thailand hovering over the *Mayaguez* while marines rappelled to the deck; this could happen as early as May. The alternative was to wait 12 hours until the destroyer *Holt* could reach the area and send a boarding party. To gain control of Koh Tang and prevent Americans from being moved to the mainland, Schlesinger advocated using marines from Okinawa and Thailand. He cited a defector’s report that only 60 Cambodian troops were on Koh Tang. The secretary recommended retaking the ship, then moving against the island. After the NSC meeting ended, the JCS directed Admiral Noel Gayler, commander in chief, Pacific (CINCPAC), and Lt. Gen. John J. Burns, commander of the Seventh Air Force, to isolate Koh Tang by intercepting all ships and to report all activities within 10 minutes. Washington would decide whether to sink any boats.⁴⁶

The NSC reconvened at 10:40 p.m. and had to make an immediate operational decision. A fishing boat with Caucasians possibly on deck was spotted moving from Koh Tang toward the mainland; reports indicated the prisoners might be aboard (in fact, it turned out they were). Schlesinger recommended sinking any speedboats approaching the fishing vessel but using only riot control agents on the boat itself—to avoid killing any *Mayaguez* crewmen who might be aboard.⁴⁷ At 10:55, U.S. aircraft fired across the fishing boat’s bow and then dropped riot control agents. The boat continued its course, reaching the Cambodian port of Kompong Som, but the local ground commander refused to let the ship land.⁴⁸

Believing that the captive crew members had been split between the *Mayaguez* and Koh Tang—a wrong guess—President Ford chose to launch coordinated attacks on the island and

ship while bombing Cambodian naval vessels.⁴⁹ At 12:45 a.m. on May 14, 20 minutes after the NSC meeting ended, General Jones directed Admiral Gayler and General Burns to prepare to retake the *Mayaguez*, occupy Koh Tang, conduct B-52 strikes against Kompong Som and the adjacent Ream Airfield, and sink all the Cambodian small craft in the target areas. Preparations were to be completed in time for execution in the early morning of May 15 Cambodian time, which would be late afternoon on May 14 in Washington.

When the NSC reconvened at 4:00 p.m. on 14 May, rescue forces were ready. The *Coral Sea* with 51 aircraft aboard was within range; the *Holt* stood 12 miles from Koh Tang; and the *Wilson* would be on station in two hours. General Jones recommended landing on the *Mayaguez* and the island at first light (the night of 14 May, Washington time) and foresaw a high probability of success. Jones suggested that aircraft from the *Coral Sea* go after mobile targets first, leaving other targets for later. Thirty minutes before the meeting adjourned, at 5:10 p.m., the JCS directed Admiral Gayler to start cyclical strike operations from the *Coral Sea* against the Kompong Som complex. The first aircraft would arrive over the target area at 8:45 p.m., the same time that Marines from the *Holt* were to board the *Mayaguez*.⁵⁰

At 6:30 in the cabinet room, President Ford briefed congressional leaders from both parties about his decision. Kissinger, Schlesinger and Scowcroft attended. Senator Mike Mansfield voiced “concern that we are once again invading by air the Asian mainland.” Senator Robert Byrd said the leaders should have been given a chance to urge caution prior to the decision. Ford firmly replied that he was exercising his power as commander in chief within the law.⁵¹

From U Tapao, eight Air Force helicopters had already begun transporting Marines to assault Koh Tang. When they reached the island around 7:00 p.m., resistance proved fierce;

Cambodian strength had been grossly underestimated. Three helicopters crashed and two were disabled. By 7:46, 131 marines were on the island. At 8:45, the *Holt* came alongside the *Mayaguez* off Koh Tang, quickly taking control but finding no one aboard.⁵²

Air strikes against Kompong Som were timed to coincide with the boarding of the *Mayaguez*. The first wave from the *Coral Sea* had been ordered to make aircraft and military watercraft its principal targets, avoiding merchant ships until their Cambodian identity could be clearly established. At 7:45, while carrier aircraft were still enroute, the National Military Command Center received a press release by the Cambodian government that it intended to release the ship and crew. At 8:25, Air Force Brig. Gen. Charles E. Word, deputy director for operations at the NMCC, was sending operational reports to the White House Situation Room when the senior duty officer there interrupted him: “Do not execute the Navy tac air [strikes] against Kompong Som.... This is from the president.” General Brown spoke with White House personnel and at 8:44 p.m. passed along the order to stop all launches from the *Coral Sea*. At 8:48 p.m., Scowcroft told General Word that the first strike would proceed as planned; bomb damage assessment should be provided before another wave was launched. Four minutes after that, Scowcroft called to say that the *Coral Sea* operations should proceed as planned without pausing. Admiral Gayler in Hawaii had been reviewing the restrictions with General Burns in U Tapao; Burns concluded that the strike might not yield much bomb damage assessment. In fact, aircraft in the first wave expended no ordnance.⁵³

At 10:05 p.m., the *Coral Sea*'s second wave struck Ream airfield. A few minutes later, U.S. aircraft spotted a small boat with white flags approaching Koh Tang Island. At 11:14, the *Holt* reported securing the entire crew of the *Mayaguez*. Almost simultaneously, *Coral Sea* started launching its third wave. At 11:30, Admiral Gayler queried General Brown about whether

the third wave should continue. After conferring with Brown, Secretary Schlesinger decided that it should proceed.

With the ship and crew recovered, Schlesinger and Brown decided to focus efforts on extracting the embattled marines from Koh Tang. Accordingly, at 11:44 p.m., Brown ordered that the third wave continue as planned but all subsequent strikes be devoted to close air support for the marines. Simultaneously, Schlesinger informed Ford and Kissinger that the third wave was continuing against mainland targets but could be diverted to Koh Tang, as the fourth wave would be. Kissinger wanted pressure against the mainland to continue until the marines had been evacuated. Divert sorties to help the marines, Ford instructed, but maintain a perception of continuing pressure.⁵⁴

Just after midnight on May 15, Schlesinger and Brown discussed the fourth wave. Schlesinger wanted it to hit mainland targets, but Brown argued that strikes turned off (as he had ordered at 8:44) should not be turned on again. The chairman further maintained that U.S. objectives had been achieved by recovering the ship and crew, that no worthy targets remained in the Kompong Som area, that sorties were needed to help the marines on Koh Tang island, and that the *Coral Sea* needed to position itself to serve as a helicopter platform during the marines' extraction. Admirals Holloway and Gayler agreed with Brown. Accepting their advice, Schlesinger called the president at 12:35 a.m. on May 15 and explained why the fourth wave would not fly. Twenty minutes later, General Brown directed that all offensive operations cease and forces withdraw as soon as possible. Helicopters already enroute from U Tapao delivered 100 more marines to Koh Tang at 1:21 a.m. The difficult pullout was considered complete at 9:15 a.m. For the entire rescue operation, U.S. casualties numbered 18 killed and 50 wounded.⁵⁵

Schlesinger's call had reached the president minutes after he had made a late-night statement in the White House briefing room, informing the nation on radio and television about the successful recovery of the ship and its crew. He had accomplished the mission he set for his administration. At 1:00 a.m., Kissinger telephoned congratulations to Schlesinger: "Beautifully done. Best cooperation in NSC I've seen." During the brief NSC meeting that afternoon, the president praised the DoD. Talking to Schlesinger, he said, "Jim, I would like to congratulate you and your whole department for a job well done." Ford also asked Schlesinger for "a full factual report giving a summary and chronology of what happened ... and indications of what we did when." Ford requested similar submissions from State, Central Intelligence, and the NSC Staff.⁵⁶

Despite his praise, the president was actually dissatisfied with Schlesinger's performance. At a meeting the following day, Ford, Kissinger, and Scowcroft reviewed the operation. Ford complained that his orders were ignored or changed and wanted to see all the orders issued to CINCPAC to compare them with orders issued in the NSC. "What happens in the Situation Room is being bypassed in the NMCC," he accused. Kissinger suggested that Schlesinger changed the orders when he heard about congressional reaction and asserted that the whole operation was conducted not as a military operation but in order to demagogue before the Congress. Kissinger offered no evidence.⁵⁷

On May 20, Schlesinger gave President Ford a detailed chronology compiled by the Joint Staff as well as a compilation of verbal and written instructions. Entitled "Some Observations on the Decision Process," the report defended the secretary's performance, demonstrated that he did not ignore or change White House orders, and offered veiled criticism of Ford and Kissinger. Schlesinger pointed out that the first wave from the *Coral Sea* did not expend ordnance because

of restrictions imposed by the White House. The fourth wave was canceled for plausible reasons which Schlesinger had explained to the president. Schlesinger then went on the offensive, criticizing policy making in Washington. He characterized control from Washington as “a tenuous thing at best.” “Washington deliberations tended to concentrate unduly on specific and alternative *actions*,” rather than on defining larger goals and policy objectives for commanders to attain. Schlesinger contended NSC meetings were too formal, procedural, and intermittent to cope with rapidly changing circumstances. The secretary recommended far more frequent and informal exchanges of information to narrow any gaps between the president and White House advisers on the one hand and DoD on the other. Schlesinger urged that presidential orders be written and verified, thus avoiding inconsistencies and looseness of interpretation. He assigned “very great importance” to avoiding sending orders from multiple White House sources to different offices in DoD, which made confusion inevitable. Instead, “There should be one funnel into one pre-designated place.” His views, sensible but not artfully expressed, failed to gain sympathy at the White House. No matter how sound Schlesinger’s performance may appear in retrospect, his standing with the president suffered.⁵⁸

Despite the evidence that Schlesinger provided, Ford contended in his memoir that there had been “high-level bumbling by the Defense Department”:

The first strike never took place, although we were told that it had been “completed”.... The fourth strike—and I had specifically ordered four—was never carried out. I hadn’t told anyone to cancel that attack.... I was anxious to find out who had contravened my authority. The explanations I received from the Pentagon were not satisfactory at all, and direct answers kept eluding me. Perhaps I should have pursued my inquiry, but since we had achieved our objective, I let the matter drop.⁵⁹

Schlesinger had rebutted Ford's accusations, but the president was unconvinced. Given the personality clash between Ford and Schlesinger, the president seemed predisposed to believe the worst. Schlesinger's reputation at the White House fell to a low point as a result.

Seeking Resolution

The Vietnam War had profoundly divided the American people, prompting many to desert from the military services, flee the country to avoid conscription, or dodge the draft. Ford wanted to mend the rifts over Vietnam and end the domestic fight over the war, so he began looking for a path toward reconciliation. Upon taking office in August 1974, he asked Schlesinger and Attorney General William B. Saxbe for a report on the status of the approximately 50,000 people convicted, charged, or sought by the government for dodging the draft or deserting. The Defense and Justice Departments identified two groups of draft evaders: 8,700 who had been convicted of an offense and 6,610 who were either indicted or under investigation. Deserters were the ones most concerning to the defense secretary. At that time, deserters charged but not convicted numbered about 12,800. Speaking to the Veterans of Foreign Wars convention on August 19, 1974, Ford rejected blanket amnesty but offered offenders a chance to “*work their way back*” through “*earned re-entry*.” Schlesinger shared the president's reservation about total amnesty. He stressed that the services, for reasons of good discipline in the ranks, viewed desertion as a serious offense, something that an act of reconciliation should in no way condone. In the secretary's view, a presidential proclamation had to establish culpability. Every deserter should have to sign a statement acknowledging the act of desertion was a violation of his oath of service. Only then would that person be allowed to reaffirm allegiance to the United States.⁶⁰

On September 16, the president signed a proclamation aimed at “the reconciliation of all our people.” Evaders and deserters not yet convicted could dispose of their cases if they swore allegiance to the United States and performed 24 months of alternate service. For persons convicted by civilian or military courts, a clemency board would review each case. Each deserter seeking relief would receive an undesirable discharge which, upon completion of alternate service, would be upgraded to a clemency discharge. Those who took advantage would be denied veterans’ benefits.⁶¹

The period to apply for clemency ended on March 31, 1975. By then, about half the number of eligible deserters (the total was revised downward to 10,115 in the intervening months) had been processed into the program. In early May the Presidential Clemency Board urged Ford to pardon everyone it had recommended for clemency, including those not convicted by court-martial but separated administratively with undesirable discharges. The board also proposed that, in lieu of pardons, those receiving clemency discharges would be deemed to have separated under honorable conditions, albeit without veterans’ benefits.

More than 5,500 returning deserters received undesirable discharges, with the prospect of being granted clemency discharges when they completed alternate service. The Department of Defense strongly opposed granting pardons to deserters. The presidential pardon power, in DoD’s judgment, bore no relation to administrative discharges from military service. Unlike administrative discharges, pardons were traditionally associated with either criminal convictions or the prospect of them. Inevitably, many people would fail to distinguish administrative pardons from punitive discharges. Instead, for cases in which the board had recommended clemency, the president should direct the appropriate service secretary to issue a clemency discharge upon the completion of conditions prescribed. Nonetheless, Ford elected to grant pardons in meritorious

cases, stating that unique circumstances required an unusual exercise of clemency. When the board went out of existence on September 15, 1975, it had received 21,500 applications and requests for clemency. Of those, 15,500 were recommended for presidential consideration: 6 percent for denial, 43 percent for clemency conditioned upon the fulfillment of alternate service averaging six months, and 51 percent for pardons.⁶²

As of February 1976, more than half the deserters had elected to participate in the clemency program. Some 600 jailed deserters also were released under the program. About 13,750 draft evaders were referred to Selective Service offices. Of those, 5,700 never reported, 3,250 were dropped from the program without having completed alternate service, 4,450 were in or awaiting such jobs, and only 350 had completed their alternate requirements. Overall, Ford's clemency program proved a good deal better at attracting deserters than draft evaders, many of whom were still living abroad, prompting the next administration to craft a more sweeping policy for conciliation.⁶³

Pointing Fingers

The conflict's abrupt, ignominious end spawned fresh arguments over Vietnam. Why had the American military effort in Vietnam ended in calamity? To what extent were U.S. programs, policies, and strategies responsible? To some the collapse of South Vietnam and Cambodia demonstrated the bankruptcy of U.S. strategy and policy, and the massive U.S. investment had wasted lives and treasure in vain. The military services under the direction of the Department of Defense had provided advice and support and spent billions of dollars to equip and train South Vietnam's armed forces since the end of French colonial rule in 1954. Yet, those forces quickly collapsed in 1975. Others defended the performance of U.S. and South Vietnamese forces,

attributing defeat primarily to the refusal of Congress to provide adequate assistance after the peace accords were signed. The reduction of U.S. support after 1973 and a peace agreement that allowed North Vietnam to keep forces in the South obviously affected the outcome. Yet it was far from certain whether additional military advice or hardware would have transformed South Vietnam's military into an effective force that over the long run and could have matched the determination and prowess of North Vietnam's army. At the time of the Paris Peace Accords, South Vietnam's armed forces had fundamental leadership and organizational flaws that no amount of American assistance could have remedied. General Weyand's April 1975 assessment for the president had offered no assurances regarding South Vietnam's long-term survival, even if the United States provided emergency aid.

The swift, unexpected defeat confounded senior U.S. officials at the time. Schlesinger privately faulted U.S. intelligence and a reporting system for not hoisting "strong warning flags long before the final debacle occurred." He aired this criticism in public also. At a press conference on April 2, Schlesinger decried the deficiencies in U.S. intelligence, which he believed had overvalued the strength, resiliency, and steadfastness of South Vietnam's armed forces. Intelligence analysts, he claimed, had not taken into account the impact of Hanoi's expanded road network and base structure in the western part of South Vietnam when assessing the balance of forces. Moreover, intelligence reports had failed to appreciate the impact of diminishing ammunition allowances and consumption on troop morale. Reduced U.S. funding shrank South Vietnam's logistical base and force structure, undermining morale, organizational cohesion, and resiliency. Notably, the defense offered no criticism of the role that U.S. policy or strategy may have had in the defeat. Could any U.S. policy have ensured South Vietnam's continued existence as an independent nation? Or were South Vietnam's internal problems so

intractable that they were beyond the capability of an outside government to effect fundamental change?⁶⁴

For his part, DAO intelligence chief Le Gro rejected the charge of poor intelligence reporting. He maintained that intelligence reports sent to Washington made no attempt to filter out negative information from the field. If anyone was misled, he contended, it was not because of distorted or incomplete reporting. In his view, Washington was simply not listening. “I have the impression that policy makers at the highest level in Washington didn’t want to hear, didn’t want to believe what we were telling them,” Le Gro observed after the war. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (Intelligence) Vice Adm. E. F. Rectanus affirmed Le Gro’s position when he reviewed the assessments DAO prepared between March 1973 and October 1974. General John Murray, then serving as attaché, believed the South Vietnamese would not be able to resist a countrywide offensive. A minor setback, he feared, might cascade into a major calamity. From late 1973 on, his reports had frequently emphasized ARVN’s loss of morale stemming from equipment shortages and heavy personnel losses. Murray’s final appraisal, covering March to June 1974, emphasized the cumulative toll of the reductions. “If the present trend continues, the enemy could construe this as an opportune time for an all-out...Unless we match the enemy’s aid, the current equilibrium will vanish soon—if indeed it has not already.” The DAO reports rebutted Schlesinger’s criticism. They did not minimize or ignore the lethal threat that North Vietnam’s buildup posed to South Vietnam’s existence or the importance of U.S. assistance.⁶⁵

In mid-June 1975, after reviewing the DAO reports, Albert C. Hall, assistant secretary of defense for intelligence, agreed with Rectanus. He reminded Deputy Secretary Clements that Murray had stressed that U.S. support was critical and warned that a sudden collapse of the RVNAF was possible, but suggested that Murray’s responsibility to support the RVNAF had

inhibited his objectivity in assessing South Vietnamese forces' readiness. He "did not provide a clear exposition of fundamental weaknesses in the RVNAF will to fight or combat capability which resulted in such a rapid and complete disintegration of the RVNAF." As attaché, Murray had two conflicting roles: to advocate for RVNAF and to serve as their objective critic. His closeness to the RVNAF made it difficult to fully grasp the nature of its fundamental shortcomings.⁶⁶

After the war, General Cao Van Vien, chief of the Joint General Staff, reflected on South Vietnam's defeat. Most of Vien's analysis followed a well-worn path, citing the flawed peace accords, the severe cuts in aid, and the poorly executed and hasty decision to abandon the highlands. But Vien also identified a deeper reason: what he called the political and economic bankruptcy of South Vietnam itself. Endemic corruption contributed to the government's failure to lead and unify the nation. He likened South Vietnam in 1975 to a rotten piece of fruit ready to fall, suggesting that continued American aid would have been insufficient to ensure South Vietnam's existence over the long term. Senior U.S. officials who had long served in Vietnam disagreed vehemently, almost exclusively blaming the defeat on the decline of political support in Washington and the reduction of material assistance that decline produced. Former U.S. ambassador to Vietnam, Ellsworth F. Bunker, DCI Colby, and others contended that the United States had not been defeated when it signed the peace treaty. The nation had achieved its objective, but let victory slip away after the agreements were signed.⁶⁷

The notion of a lost victory frittered away by an indifferent Congress proved to be an insufficient explanation. When U.S. forces left South Vietnam in 1973, Saigon's government and military had to contend with internal weaknesses as well as the threat from North Vietnam. Even if Congress had provided all the funds the administration sought in 1975, it would have been

inadequate to hold off North Vietnam, especially when it had such momentum in pursuit of its long-term goal of unifying North and South. Nor could American funds compensate for inadequate leadership, poor organization, systemic corruption, and the questionable performance of South Vietnam's armed forces and government. South Vietnam would have required U.S. economic and military assistance over an indefinite long-term period just to keep North Vietnam's military forces at bay. Given Hanoi's unshakeable will to win and the Saigon regime's inability to garner broad popular support and foster a sense of nationhood, it is unlikely that continued U.S. aid could have preserved the Republic of Vietnam.

Many South Vietnamese soldiers and units fought bravely and well up to the end, but nonetheless South Vietnam's armed forces failed utterly in 1975. The dissolution of the ARVN called into question the effectiveness of the long-term U.S. advisory effort to improve South Vietnam's forces that began in November 1955 with the establishment of the Military Assistance Advisory Group, Vietnam, and culminated with the Vietnamization program of 1969–1973.⁶⁸

The conduct of the South Vietnamese armed forces during Operation Lam Son 719 in 1971 and the Easter offensive of 1972 revealed longstanding, fundamental flaws. The Nixon administration had mistakenly believed in 1971 that the Vietnamization program had made the ARVN capable enough to mount Lam Son 719, the South Vietnamese operation to invade Laos and cut the Ho Chi Minh trail. But early in the campaign ARVN units retreated in haste from Laos under unexpectedly heavy enemy counterattacks. As the operation unfolded, the administration tried to scale back public expectations, hoping to dispel the impression that the ARVN had panicked and fled in battle. South Vietnam's conduct of Lam Son raised questions about what Vietnamization actually had accomplished up to that point and the competence of the Thieu government to wage war on its own. During the 1972 Easter Offensive, South Vietnam's

forces, to their credit, withstood an all-out enemy offensive, but they were totally dependent on U.S. airpower to break up the enemy's attacks. Without air support, South Vietnam would have most likely been defeated. After the war ended, the official U.S. Army history of the Vietnamization program concluded that the ARVN was no more mobile in 1973 than it was in 1965 and remained unprepared to fight against a mobile foe striking simultaneously on several fronts. The ARVN was more suited to fight a static defensive war. It was a flawed organization established largely by a Vietnamization policy that was less a strategy for victory than a policy for U.S. withdrawal. Even by early 1973 it was by no means certain that South Vietnam's forces on their own could survive in the long run.⁶⁹

After the war, the architect of Vietnamization, Defense Secretary Melvin Laird, stood up for the program. For Laird it was not a cover for U.S. troop withdrawal but a plan that would have worked if the United States had kept the promises it made to South Vietnam under the peace accords. Laird attributed the collapse of South Vietnam in 1975 to a weak White House lobbying effort that had failed to persuade Congress to provide military and economic aid. He believed the failure of President Ford and Congress to honor their word had doomed South Vietnam.⁷⁰

In hindsight it is clear that Vietnamization had been devised as a way to extract U.S. forces, replace them with larger and greatly improved local forces, and thus temper the growing domestic political opposition to the war. U.S. troops did leave Vietnam and South Vietnam's forces did expand and did acquire better weapons. The problem was that the operational effectiveness of South Vietnam's military did not improve sufficiently, and Vietnamization did not remedy the poor leadership that weakened the force. South Vietnam's military remained

dependent on long-term U.S. support at a time when Congress and a growing percentage of the American public wanted a complete end to U.S. involvement in the war, no longer finding a compelling U.S. national interest at stake in Vietnam. The conflict was not an existential struggle for the United States. Moreover, Vietnamization only started in earnest in 1969, rather late in the war. Clearly the program would have had a greater chance to build a viable military force if it had begun earlier. The departure of American troops and increased training only made South Vietnam *more* dependent on U.S. technology and firepower; since Vietnamization largely recast the RVNAF as a mirror image of U.S. forces, it made South Vietnam's military heavily reliant on outside technology and assistance. Vietnamization prepared the South Vietnamese to wage a U.S.-style of war that it could ill afford. Vietnamization focused on physical aspects: training and the buildup of manpower, weapons and equipment. It was beyond the power or influence of U.S. advisers to ensure the production of sufficient numbers of competent leaders for the quickly growing armed forces. Poor leadership remained an endemic weakness. As the former head of the U.S. pacification support effort Robert W. Komer expressed it in 1972, no matter "how well trained, equipped, and organized the GVN and RVNAF became, poor leaders all too often became its Achilles Heel."⁷¹

Other analysts suggested that the U.S. military should have been directly involved in weeding out incompetent South Vietnamese military leaders as they had done with South Korea's army during the Korean War. During the Korean War, General Matthew B. Ridgeway commanded the South Korean Army. With the backing of South Korea's president, Syngman Rhee, Ridgeway and his subordinates freely fired incompetent Korean commanders, replacing them with the best officers they could find. The United States in effect could veto South Korea's selection of military leaders. South Vietnamese officials too often selected commanders on the

basis of political ties and personal loyalty, allowing a cadre of corrupt, incapable leaders to remain in high posts. Performance in combat was not the path to advancement in the RVNAF.⁷²

The American experience demonstrated the limits of what U.S. military power could accomplish in a foreign nation. Vietnamization wrongly assumed U.S. forces could transform the South Vietnam's military, offering few positive lessons for policymakers in the future. After the fall of Saigon, "No more Vietnams" became the nation's watchwords.⁷³

Endnotes

1. Memo, Kissinger for Ford, 23 Nov 1974, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:577–578; Schlesinger, “Remarks before the Godfrey Sperling News Group,” Federal City Club, 21 May 1974, folder VN aid, box 306, OSD/HO.
2. NIE 53/14.3-2-74, 23 Dec 1974, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:580–581; Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 232.
3. Memo, Sullivan for Schlesinger, 6 Jan 1975, subj: Prospects for South Vietnam—1975 and Beyond (stamped “SecDef Has Seen”), folder Viet 302-399 1975, box 84, Acc 330-78-0058, OSD Records, WNRC.
4. Ltr, Stennis to Ford, 12 Sep 1974; memo, von Marbod for Miller, 2 Jan 1975, folder Viet 091.3 (Jan-Mar) 1975, box 84, Acc 330-78-0058.
5. Schlesinger, “Remarks before the Godfrey Sperling News Group,” Federal City Club, 21 May 1974, folder VN aid, box 306, OSD/HO.
6. Schlesinger, Pentagon News Conference, 14 Jan 1975, *Schlesinger Public Statements 1975*, 1:4–16 (quote, 8); memo, Kissinger for Ford, 9 Sep 1974, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:556–561.
7. Isaacs, *Without Honor*, 300–301 (quote, 300); Herrington, *Peace with Honor*, 86–87 (quote). For more on South Vietnam’s army during this period, see Robert K. Brigham, *ARVN, Life and Death in the South Vietnamese Army* (Manhattan: University Press of Kansas, 2006), and Andrew Wiest, *Vietnam’s Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN* (New York: NYU Press, 2008).
8. Memo, Kissinger for Ford, 9 Sep 1974; memo, Ash for Ford, 14 Jan 1975, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:604–605; memo, Kissinger for Ford, 9 Sep 1974, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:559.
9. *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People’s Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 361; Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 222; George J. Veith, *Black April, The Fall of South Vietnam 1973–1975* (New York: Encounter Books, 2012), 100–110; William Colby with James McCargar, *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America’s Sixteen Year Involvement in Vietnam* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1989), 349.
10. Veith, *Black April*, 106–110; Willbanks, *Abandoning South Vietnam*, 225–226; Le Gro, *From Ceasefire to Capitulation*, 132–137; R-2208-OSD (Hist), *The Fall of South Vietnam: Statements by Vietnamese Military and Civilian Leaders* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1978), 79–81; msg, Martin to Dept. of State, 8 Jan 1975, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:596–598.
11. WSAG, meeting minutes, 7 Jan 1975, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:582–593; memcon, 8 Jan 1975, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:598–99; memo, Clements for Kissinger, 10 Jan 1975, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:600–601 (quotes).

12. Memo, Abramowitz for Schlesinger, 13 Jan 1975, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:602–603; memcon Ford, Kissinger, Scowcroft, 13 Jan 1975, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:600–602 (quote, 601).
13. “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress Reporting on the State of the Union,” 15 Jan 1975, *Ford Public Papers*, 45; “The President’s News Conference of 21 Jan 1975,” *Ford Public Papers 1975*, 64. Historian James Willbanks contends that the loss of Phuoc Long “demonstrated the impotence of both South Vietnam and the United States and signaled the beginning of a series of events that would ultimately result in the fall of South Vietnam.” See Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 226–227 (quote); Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 768–769
14. Memo, Ash for Ford, 14 Jan 1975, cited in note 8; Ford, “Special Message to the Congress Requesting Supplemental Assistance for the Republic of Vietnam and Cambodia,” 28 Jan 1975, *Ford Public Papers 1975*, 119–123; Veith, *Black April*, 111–114; Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 229–230.
15. Sney, *Decent Interval*, 162–169; Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 230–232; Le Gro, *From Cease-Fire to Capitulation*, 144–145; Herrington, *Peace With Honor?*, 115.
16. Memo, Stearman for Kissinger, 19 Feb 1975, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:637–638; telegram 3479, Embassy in Cambodia to State Dept., 25 Feb 1975, *ibid.*, 10:644–646; WSAG, meeting minutes, 27 Feb 1975, *ibid.*, 10:651–657.
17. Memcon, Ford, Schlesinger, Scowcroft, 11 Mar 1975, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:673–675; “Schlesinger interview with newsmen,” 11 Mar 1975, *Schlesinger Public Statements 1975*, 4: 1377–1379; Telegram 4556, Embassy in Cambodia to DOS, 13 Mar 1975, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:677–668.
18. Memcon Ford, Schlesinger, Scowcroft, 14 Mar 1975, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:679–680; P. Edward Haley, *Congress and the Fall of South Vietnam and Cambodia* (Rutherford, NJ: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1983), 79–80.
19. Memcon, Ford, Schlesinger, Scowcroft, 11 Mar 1975, cited in note 17; Haley, *Congress and the Fall of South Vietnam and Cambodia*, 80–81.
20. Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 767–770; *Victory in Vietnam*, 361–365; Veith, *Black April*, 124–125.
21. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 233–234, 238–239; Veith, *Black April*, 135–139; Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 772–773; memo, Scowcroft for Ford (quote), nd, attached to memo, Stearman for Scowcroft, 17 Mar 1975, box 19, Presidential Country Files, East Asia and the Pacific, Ford Library.
22. Secretary of Defense Interview on CBS TV, *The Morning Show*, 13 Mar 1975, *Schlesinger Public Statements 1975*, 4:1380–1382.
23. General Cao Van Vien, *The Final Collapse* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1983), 76–81 (quote, 77); Willbanks, *Abandoning South Vietnam*, 235–237.
24. Sney, *Decent Interval*, 192–193; Willbanks, *Abandoning South Vietnam*, 239–241; SNIE 53/14.3-75, 27 Mar 1975, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:702–704; NSC, meeting minutes, 28 Mar 1975, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:707–710 (quote, 707).

25. *Victory in Vietnam*, 370–372, 377; Vien, *The Final Collapse*, 82–95; Snepp, *Decent Interval*, 193–194.
26. Memcon, 24 Mar 1975, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:687–689; memcon, 25 Mar 1975, Gale U.S. Declassified Documents Online; Isaacs, *Without Honor*, 405–406.
27. SNIE 53/14.3-75, 27 Mar 1975, cited in note 24; *Victory in Vietnam*, 388.
28. Msg, Embassy in Vietnam to State Dept., 27 Mar 1975, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:699–701, 701n2; Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 259.
29. *The Fall of South Vietnam*, 87, 102–111.
30. WSAG, meeting minutes, 2 Apr 1975, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:731–739.
31. WSAG, meeting minutes, 2 Apr 1975, cited in note 30; telegram 74933, DOS to Embassy in Saigon, 2 Apr 1975, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:739–740. The directive to Ambassador Dean in Phnom Penh is summarized in *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:760n2.
32. MG Wickham Notebooks, entry for 4 Apr 1975, box TS-5, Schlesinger Papers; Report to the President of the United States, attached to memo, Weyand for Ford, 4 Apr 1975, <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/exhibits/vietnam/032400081-001.pdf>; Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 259–260. In his memoir Ford recalls Weyand telling him during the April 5 meeting that the South Vietnamese needed the \$722 in military aid if they were to have “any chance.” The money “wouldn’t enable them to recapture the ground they had lost, but it would be enough to let them establish a strong defense perimeter around Saigon” and thereby maintain some hope of a political solution with North Vietnam. See Ford, *A Time to Heal*, 253.
33. Kennerly quoted in Ford, *A Time to Heal*, 253; Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 260; memcon, Ford, Kissinger, and Scowcroft, 8 Apr 1975, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:760–762.
34. NSC, meeting minutes, 9 Apr 1975, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:762–779 (quotes, 777–778).
35. *Ibid.*, 778.
36. Ford, *A Time to Heal*, 252–253; NSC, meeting minutes, 9 Apr 1975, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:762–779.
37. “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress Reporting on United States Foreign Policy,” 10 Apr, 1975, *Ford Public Papers 1975*, 459–465; Isaacs, *Without Honor*, 407–408.
38. Telegram 81634, DOS to Embassy in Cambodia, 10 Apr 1975, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:784; telegram 6111, Embassy in Cambodia to DOS, 10 Apr 1975, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:785; memcon, Ford et al., 11 Apr 1975, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:803–804; ed. note, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:947–48; Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, 518–519.
39. Ford, *A Time to Heal*, 253; MG Wickham Notebooks, entry for 17 Apr 1975, box TS-5, Schlesinger Papers; WSAG, meeting minutes, 2 Apr 1975, cited in note 30; msg 686, Martin to Scowcroft, 7 Apr 1975, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:752–758; msg 705, Martin to Kissinger, 15 Apr 1975, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:823–827; msg WH50717, Kissinger to Martin, 18 Apr 1975, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:839; msg WH50727, Kissinger to Martin, 19 Apr 1975, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:848. According to *Operation Frequent Wind*, helicopters would shuttle between carrier decks and the Defense Attache Office compound near Tan Son Nhut airport. WSAG, meeting minutes, 19 Apr 1975, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:850.

40. Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, 533, 537; “Address at Tulane University Convocation,” 23 Apr 1975, *Ford Public Papers 1975*, 568–569; memo of record, NSC meeting, 24 Apr 1975, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:898–901.
41. Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, 537, 541–545; “Statement Following Evacuation of United States Personnel from the Republic of Vietnam,” 29 Apr 1975, *Ford Public Papers 1975*, 605; WSAG, meeting minutes, 28 Apr 1975, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:916; NSC, meeting minutes, 28 Apr 1975, *ibid.*, 10:922–928, 947; Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 277.
42. NSC, meeting minutes, 12 May 1975, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:977–985; John F. Guilmartin Jr, *A Very Short War: The Mayaguez and the Battle of Koh Tang* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 1995), 27; Nalty, *Air War over South Vietnam*, 427; Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, 552. Unless otherwise noted, this section is based upon the “After Action Report: US Military Operations, SS *Mayaguez*/Koh Tang Island, 12–15 May 1975,” folder Cambodia 385.3 Jan-May 1975, box 61, Acc 330-78-0059, OSD Records, WNRC.
43. Nalty, *Air War over South Vietnam*, 428; Guilmartin, *A Very Short War*, 2–3, 36–38.
44. Ralph Wetterhahn, *The Last Battle* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2001), 54–60.
45. NSC, meeting minutes, 13 May 1975, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:991–1000 (quote, 993).
46. *Ibid.*; telcon Ford and Scowcroft, 13 May 1975 8:10 p.m.; telcon Ford and Scowcroft, 13 May 1975, 9:50 p.m.: both in *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:1002–1003.
47. NSC, meeting minutes, 13–14 May 1975, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:1004–1019.
48. Wetterhahn, *The Last Battle*, 104–109.
49. *Ibid.*, 100.
50. NSC, meeting minutes, 14 May 1975, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:1021–1036. The quote from General Jones is on 1025; the exchange is on 1031.
51. Memcon, 14 May 1975, 6:30 p.m., National Security Adviser’s Memoranda of Conversation Collection, Ford Library, <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0314/1553074.pdf>.
52. Wetterhahn, *The Last Battle*, 222. Tactical aircraft based in Thailand provided the Marines with air support.
53. The next three paragraphs are based on “Report by the OJCS on Strikes against Mainland Targets during Operations to Recover SS *Mayaguez* and Crew,” 19 May 1975, attached to memo, Schlesinger for Ford, 27 May 1975, folder Cambodia 385.3 1975, box 3, Acc 330-78-0059.
54. MG Wickham Notebooks, 14–May 1975, box TS-5, Schlesinger Papers.
55. Wetterhahn, *The Last Battle*, 222.

56. MG Wickham Notebooks, entry for 15 May 1975, box TS-5, Schlesinger Papers; *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:1039n4; NSC, meeting minutes, 15 May 1975, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 10:1039–1043 (quote, 1041); Guilmartin, *A Very Short War*, 99, 147.
57. NSC, meeting minutes, 15 May 1975, cited in note 56; memcon, 16 May 1975, 9:25–10:38 a.m., National Security Adviser’s Memoranda of Conversation, , Ford Library, <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0314/1553080.pdf>.
58. “Some Observations on the Decision Process in the *Mayaguez* Incident,” 20 May 1975, attached to memo, Schlesinger for Ford, 27 May 1975, cited in note 53.
59. Ford, *A Time to Heal*, 284.
60. *Ford Public Papers 1974*, 22–25; MG Wickham Notebooks, entry for 29 Aug 1974, box TS-5, Schlesinger Papers.
61. *Ford Public Papers 1974*, 136–140; memo, Schlesinger for Service Secretaries, 17 Sep 1975, folder 327 (Sep-) 1974, box 33, Acc 330-78-0011, OSD Records, WNRC. On September 8, Ford granted a full, absolute pardon to former president Richard Nixon.
62. Memo, Brehm for Clements, 12 Mar 1975; memo, Hoffmann for Counsel for Buchen, 5 May 1975; Folder 327 (Jan-May) 1975, box 34, Acc 330-78-0058; memo, Hoffmann to Buchen, 3 Jun 1975; memo, Buchen for Chairman, Presidential Clemency Board, 12 Jun 1975; White House Fact Sheet, “Presidential Clemency Board Transition,” 15 Sep 1975, folder 327 (Jun-Dec) 1975, box 34, Acc 330-78-0058.
63. Ltr, ASD(M&RA) Taylor to Comptroller General Staats, 13 Oct 1976; comptroller, draft report, The Clemency Program, 50, attached to ltr, Director GAO to Associate Counsel to President Lazarus, 17 May 1976, folder 327 (Jan-Dec) 1976, box 36, Acc 330-79-0049, OSD Records, WNRC.
64. Memo, West for DDR&E, 10 Dec 1975, and memo, West for Schlesinger, 22 Jul 1975, both in folder Viet 300-399 1975, box 84, Acc 330-78-0058; MG Wickham Notebooks, entry for 24 Mar 1975, box TS-5, Schlesinger Papers; News Conference with SecDef Schlesinger, 2 Apr 1975, *Schlesinger Public Statements 1975*, 5:1515–1520.
65. Isaacs, *Without Honor*, 308n; Memo, Vice Adm. Rectanus for Hall, nd, folder Viet 385 1975, box 85, Acc 330-78-0058; Isaacs, *Without Honor*, 308n.
66. Memo, ASD(I) for DepSecDef , 13 Jun 1975, folder Viet 385 1975, box 85, Acc 330-78-0058.
67. Vien, *The Final Collapse*, 154–155; Lewis Sorley, *A Better War, The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America’s Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt, 1999), 382; Colby, *Lost Victory*. Prior to his tenure as DCI, Colby held the rank of ambassador and served as the DEPCORDS, the senior official in charge of the U.S. support of South Vietnam’s pacification program from 1968 to 1972. See Richard A. Hunt, *Pacification, The American Struggle for Vietnam’s Hearts and Minds* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), for a discussion of Colby’s role in the pacification program.

68. See Graham Cosmas, *MACV The Joint Command in the Years of Escalation, 1962–1967* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2006) for information on the establishment of MAAGV.

69. Gregory A. Daddis, *Withdrawal, Reassessing America's Final Years in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 73. See Hunt, *Laird and the Foundation of the Post-Vietnam Military, 197–198, 248–249* for information about the RVNAF's performance during the two campaigns. Steven Randolph's *Powerful and Brutal Weapons* is an absorbing account of the massive amounts of firepower the United States applied against North Vietnam during the 1972 offensive.

70. Dale Van Atta, *With Honor: Melvin Laird in War, Peace, and Politics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 477–478, 481–482, 518–519, 524.

71. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 277–288; Robert W. Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: Institutional Constraints on U.S.-GVN Performance in Vietnam* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1972), 124 (quote).

72. This comparison is explored in Thomas C. Thayer, *War Without Fronts: The American Experience in Vietnam* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985), 59–68.

73. See Daddis, *Withdrawal*, 73, 200, 202, 205, *passim*, for a balanced reassessment of the final years of the war.