The End of an Era: American Media Coverage of the Surrender of Saigon

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On April 30, 1975, when military forces from the Democratic Republic of Vietnam entered the Presidential Palace and accepted the formal surrender or the South Vietnamese government, the Republic of Vietnam ceased to exist. The events of that day had a number of different meanings for a variety of people. On that day, one country disappeared forever and another country was changed forever. That day witnessed both the conclusion of a long and brutal war and a massive and complex evacuation of thousands of people from South Vietnam.

An analysis of the U. S. news reports that portrayed what happened on that day in Vietnam finds that reporters and editors chose to accentuate the sense of urgency and frenzy felt by those who were evacuating, but not the equally dramatic story of a superpower who had just lost their first war. This essay examines over thirty of the major media news sources from the United States that were published on the last day of April 1975 and the first two weeks of May. None of these sources said that the United States had lost the Vietnam War, even though there was substantial empirical data that said otherwise. People may have said that the United States had lost the Vietnam War to each other around their dinner tables or water coolers, but they would not find it said in any of the mainstream media sources. Many other expressions and euphemisms were used, but the phrase, “lost the war” was not. Some of the news reports considered the deeper meaning of the communist takeover of the South Vietnamese capitol and the effect it would have on American foreign policy around the world, but none of them portrayed the Vietnam War as one in which the United States lost.

After recapping the events of April 30, 1975 this essay will scrutinize major media accounts from the United States that were published on April 30 and throughout the first two weeks of May 1975. The sources of information that the authors of these stories chose to use, the words they elected to use, and the words they chose to leave out as well as the pictures that these reporters and editors utilized will be examined. Determining why the media made the choices it did and to what extent those choices enabled or encouraged the American government to engage in future foreign policy excursions is beyond the scope of this work.

Nine newspaper articles from the New York Times, The Washington Post, The San Francisco Chronicle and The Los Angeles Times were carefully read, as well as twenty-two articles from the periodicals Time, Newsweek, and U.S News and World Report. The NBC Nightly News television broadcast on April 30, 1975 that millions of Americans watched was also utilized. For the majority of Americans, these and similar sources constituted the primary source of information on what transpired in Vietnam on the last day of the war. From these
accounts millions of Americans formed their thoughts and opinions on what happened that day in Saigon.

There were two especially significant developments that occurred on the final day of the Vietnam War. First was the military defeat of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam by the North Vietnamese Army and second was the evacuation of the remaining American personnel and those Vietnamese who worked closely with the Americans. On March 10, 1975, the North Vietnamese Army attacked and defeated the South Vietnamese military positions at Ban Me Thout nearly 200 miles north of Saigon. This defeat left the rest of the troops in the Central Highlands Area in jeopardy and three days later the South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu ordered all of these troops to evacuate to the south. In doing so he surrendered twenty-three of the country’s forty-one provinces and caused a mass exodus of civilians fleeing ahead of the Communists. Nearly seventy-five percent of the troops defending Ban Me Thout were killed on that retreat, and of the more than 400,000 civilians who were trying to escape, only a few thousand made it. The retreat turned into a chaotic rout as the North Vietnamese forces rolled down the coast, capturing town after town and base after base. The morale of the South Vietnam troops plummeted and many soldiers abandoned the battlefield to care for their families. The speed of the collapse was breathtaking, and by April 20, sixteen North Vietnamese divisions encircled Saigon, poised to either level the city or accept its surrender. \(^1\)

At the beginning of April there were more than 7,500 Americans in Saigon and 164,000 Vietnamese on the U. S. government’s “endangered” list. Over the course of the previous month the majority of these people boarded U.S. ships bound for one of the two principal staging areas for evacuees, Guam or Wake Island. The remaining 24,000 persons gathered at Tan Son Nhat airfield north of Saigon and were in the process of being airlifted out by U.S. Air Force C-130 and C-141 cargo planes. Once the airfield was threatened by North Vietnamese gunfire, President Ford authorized operation Frequent Wind. Frequent Wind called for the deployment of 1,000 Marines into Vietnam to protect the landing zones. U.S. jets from nearby aircraft carriers were to provide air protection for the eighty-one large Chinook helicopters that would be used to ferry people from the U.S. embassy to Navy ships waiting off shore. This last element of the American evacuation is what most of the news outlets of the day focused their reporting on.

Along with the reduction of American ground troops in Vietnam came a reduction in the foreign press corps devoted to covering the war. By 1975, the daily media coverage of the Vietnam War that had been the norm in the late

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1960’s was reduced to sporadic stories. The story of a civil war in Asia was not nearly as interesting to American readers without American soldiers fighting and dying in it. News gathering organizations like the Associated Press and United Press International reduced their staffs to two or three people each and these reporters were often pulled off the Vietnam beat to cover developments in Cambodia and Laos. As it became clear that the North Vietnamese were making a major push to end the war, correspondents from all over the world flooded in to Saigon to write the story. Many of these newcomers did not have the ability or the established contacts to ascertain what was happening in a country disrupted by war for over two decades and whose military and government structures were collapsing. Instead, many of them turned to the information officer from their respective embassies for information. These governments then were in a unique position to be able to influence the direction and tone of press reports.

The main theme of the U.S media accounts of April 30, 1975 was the urgency and panic felt by the South Vietnamese. These people were desperate to leave Vietnam fearing execution if they remained in the country. George Esper of the New York Times wrote that at the end of the evacuation, "[I]arge groups of Vietnamese clawed their way up the ten foot wall of the embassy compound in desperate attempts to escape approaching Communist troops." John Chancellor, in his Nightly News Broadcast, spoke of “soldiers using the butts of their rifles to break the handholds of desperate Vietnamese as they tried to cling to the last helicopter leaving.” Newsweek wrote of the “thousands of frantic Vietnamese that were mobbing the embassy gates pleading to be put on one of the evacuation flights.” The Los Angeles Times in reporting the closing of Tan Son Nhut airfield wrote that, “the South Vietnamese crowded onto the runways in terror, forcing the United States to cut short the operations with fixed-wing aircraft and to begin using helicopters to take the remaining evacuees to the ships offshore.”

John Finney of the New York Times wrote that the lives of the South Vietnamese who

worked for the United States “would be in danger” with a Communist takeover.\(^7\) *Newsweek* also reported that these people "would be prime targets for execution following the Communist takeover."\(^8\) *Newsweek* referred to Saigon as “A City at the Edge of Doom.”\(^9\) Rumors had been spreading for weeks on what actions the North Vietnamese might take once they assumed control of the country. The consensus of the speculation was that the Communists would treat those Vietnamese who collaborated with the Americans harshly at best. Magazines and newspapers almost universally chose to accentuate this sensationalistic aspect of the story instead of the equally dramatic story of a world superpower losing its first war.

Although many words were used to describe the final scenes of the evacuation, pictures were even more effective in portraying a sense of the human drama and desperation that occurred that day. The iconic images of helicopters lifting off of the rooftop of the U.S. Embassy containing the remaining Americans and South Vietnamese were not only used in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* stories, but were carried in newspapers around the world. Even people who did not take the time to read those articles could glance at the paper and get the sense of panic and urgency that was conveyed in those images.

Along with pictures, many of the articles chose to use a quotation from the statement released by President Ford’s press secretary: “I ask all Americans to close ranks, to avoid recrimination about the past, [and] to look ahead.”\(^10\) When it appeared that the collapse of South Vietnam was imminent, President Ford made it clear that America would no longer commit troops to provide military assistance to the South Vietnamese government in a speech given at Tulane University on April 23, 1975:

> Today, America can regain the sense of pride that existed before Vietnam. But it cannot be achieved by refighting a war that is finished as far as America is concerned. As I see it, the time has come to look forward to an agenda for the future, to unify, to bind up the Nation's wounds, and to restore its health and its optimistic self-confidence.\(^11\)

President Ford, who certainly did not want his legacy to be the first American President to lose a war, is careful not to say who won or lost the war, but instead

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11 Ibid.
he advised Americans to move on from the war. Instead of vowing never to repeat such a costly foreign policy adventure, this quote from the President’s office seemed to diminish the importance of winners and losers and instead urged Americans to look forward. This tone of looking forward and not labeling the outcome of the war as a win or a loss dominated many of the accounts in the United States.

Some of the stories that were examined gave the impression that many Americans resigned themselves to the defeat of South Vietnam in 1973 when the United States pulled out its ground forces from the country and the prisoners of war had come home. Time wrote “Most Americans had made their emotional peace with Vietnam more than two years ago,” and then printed the quote from President Ford, supplied to them from the White house press secretary. Other outlets, such as the Indianapolis Star were not resigned to the “loss of Vietnam” and printed a bitter editorial that asked who is to blame for the fall of Saigon since it happened under the watch of a Republican President and a Democratic Congress. Ronald Reagan drew cheers in a speech he gave at Georgia Tech University by blaming the “collapse in Vietnam” on “the most irresponsible Congress in our history.”

Although there were many different accounts of the last day of the Vietnam War, not a single one of them examined in this essay said that America lost the war. None of the media accounts examined used those words, although there were quite a variety of words and phrases used to describe the final result of the war. Time magazine referred to it as "a war that is finished - as far as America is concerned." The Washington Post portrayed it as the “end of American involvement,” and in the opinion of the New York Times it was the “end of a century of western influence.” President Ford, through his press secretary Ron Nesson, said that the evacuation of American personnel from Saigon “closes a chapter in the American experience” and the Christian Science Monitor contended that it “heralded a new era for the United States in Southeast Asia.”

Perhaps these reporters did not want to antagonize their readers or perhaps they honestly did not view it that way, but today most historians believe that America lost the Vietnam War. While the criteria that people might use to determine

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15 Esper, Communists Take Over, 1.
victory or defeat will differ, it can be said that America, for all the effort and material it expended, could not maintain a stable and independent non-communist country called South Vietnam.

Several media accounts of the events of April 30 used the opportunity to provide an overview of the amount of time and money that the United States spent on the war. These articles emphasize the length of time that America was involved in the war, the number of lives lost, and the amount of money spent trying to keep South Vietnam from falling under communist rule. Haynes Johnson of The Washington Post wrote, “The final act of American involvement that had lasted for a generation, took the lives of 56,737 military personal cost more than 160 billion and affected nearly every aspect of American life occurred in the early morning hours of Wednesday.” The New York Times reported that the evacuation “brought an end to American involvement in Vietnam that cost more than 50,000 lives and $150-billion.” The Christian Science Monitor described the evacuation as “ending a generation of involvement in Indo-China.” These articles gave readers a sense of both the tremendous effort that the government of the United States made and the tremendous loss that the American people suffered. Articles that place emphasis on the difficult struggle that America made tend to diminish the result of those efforts, giving readers the impression that the most important aspect of the war was not whether America won or lost but that they tried. These articles also re-enforced the idea that the war was a worthless quagmire that never should have been fought in the first place.

The end of the war brought ramifications not only for the United States and Vietnam, but also for other countries around the world. Several reports chose to highlight the effect that the end of the Vietnam War would have on other American allies. Seemingly, such articles would have been the natural opportunity for reporters to address how the United States losing its first war would have affected relations with other countries, but this point was never addressed in these articles. An account in The Christian Science Monitor, contained a country by country breakdown on how the governments of those countries would react to Vietnam’s fate. They speculated on how America’s “withdrawal of support” in Vietnam would affect other commitments made in Asia and suggested that the governments in those countries needed to reassess the nature and their degree of dependence upon the United States. Specifically, they

17 Johnson, Saigon Surrenders, 1.
addressed Korea, the other Asian country where 50,000 American troops were still stationed.\textsuperscript{20}

We have seen that the communist takeover of Saigon was an event that drew a large number of media coverage and that news outlets were prodigious in the number of articles they produced. Although there were countless ways to portray the fall of Saigon and the end of the Vietnam War, the fact that one of the worlds’ greatest military powers had lost their first war was not the image used by any of the work’s examined here

The last day of the Vietnam War was a culminating event for everyone who had ever been involved in the war. For the thousands of Americans who were there and the hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese who were in Saigon that day, their differing experiences were used to make personal conclusions as to what happened that day. A much larger segment of people in the United States, though, relied on the reports that were printed in their newspapers or broadcast on their television stations to draw their conclusions and form their opinions about the event. In the mainstream U. S. press, these reports portrayed a sense of the panic and urgency felt by those who were being evacuated, and a sense of doom for those who were not. They often took the time to recap the involvement of America in the war, lamenting the amount of money spent and lives lost. Despite the acknowledgement that the United States had spent many dollars and that many people had been killed, none of them reported that the United States had lost the war. The decisions made by the media regarding coverage of the end of the war in Vietnam had a tremendous effect on the American people, whose government had invested so much in the war. The words and pictures reporters used, as well as the ones they chose not to use, had a tremendous and lasting influence on how the citizens of the United States viewed the end of the war and how they would remember that ending.

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\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
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