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CIA AND THE GENERALS

*Covert Support
to Military Government
in South Vietnam*

Thomas L. Ahern, Jr.

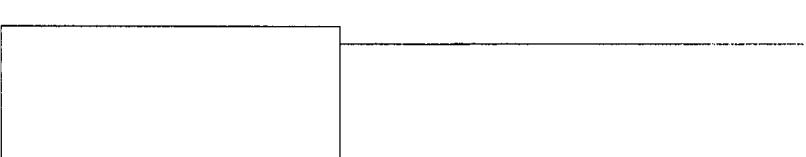


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To the Memory of
Whose Outpost Witnessed
the Fatal Moment

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If this account of Agency involvement in supporting and influencing military government in Saigon succeeds in conveying any of the spirit of the times, the credit goes in large part to the officers, both retired and serving, who consented to be interviewed. Their candor and generosity with their time have contributed most of whatever verisimilitude this narrative may possess. [redacted] long service in Saigon and his gift of total recall have been especially valuable in this regard. The author must also be grateful for the uninhibited style of CIA correspondence during the period of the Agency's experience in Vietnam; this also has facilitated the attempt to re-create some of the atmosphere in which events ran their course.

Every member of the History Staff reviewed a draft of this study in 1994 and contributed to whatever merits it may possess. Special thanks go to former CIA Chief Historians Kay Oliver and J. Kenneth McDonald for their especially rigorous and insightful critiques. Jeffrey Clarke, Chief Historian at the U.S. Army Center of Military History, also read a draft and made welcome suggestions. Any errors remaining uncorrected are the responsibility of the author.

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~~Secret~~*Foreword*

This volume is one of three by author Thomas Ahern on CIA activities in South Vietnam. Ahern's concentration on the actions and operations of CIA officers in the field, not CIA Headquarters, makes these volumes unique. *CIA and the Generals: Covert Support to Military Government in South Vietnam*, traces the tortuous course of events in Saigon following the fall of President Ngo Dinh Diem. Ahern strikingly illustrates Saigon Station efforts to work with and understand the various military governments of South Vietnam which followed Diem, and carefully details CIA attempts to stabilize and urge democratization on the changing military regimes in order to save South Vietnam from Communism.

The massive American commitment to strengthen the South Vietnamese government saw the Station and the field offices not only reporting on rapidly fluctuating conditions, but also attempting to influence or reform the various regimes themselves. Ahern's study outlines CIA programs from the fall of Diem in 1963 to the withdrawal of US combat forces in 1973, and continues through the final South Vietnamese collapse in 1975.

Based on the massive CIA holdings from the period and interviews with key CIA participants, Ahern's work breaks new ground and sets a high standard. *CIA and the Generals* clearly shows, for example, the increasing pressure on CIA field officers "to get with the program" and devote less attention to reporting on government corruption and the integrity of the South Vietnamese political process. Ahern also reveals the sharp splits that often developed between CIA officers in the field and their counterparts in other agencies, especially Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge and White House advisers and US military officials, over policies and operations.

Ahern describes the collapse of the Saigon government and the final days of CIA in-country operations in riveting detail. Though the reader knows the unhappy outcome, the struggle of CIA officers to forestall the ultimate fall of South Vietnam offers poignant reflections on US actions.

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Soon to follow this volume will be Ahern's companion works; *CIA and the House of Ngo: Covert Action and the Government of Ngo Dinh Diem*, and *The CIA and Rural Pacification in South Vietnam*. Read together, these works provide a comprehensive review of a tragic era in American foreign policy and a sharp analytical look at CIA programs and reporting from the field.

Gerald K. Haines
CIA Chief Historian
October 1998

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~~Secret~~**Figure 1 North and South Vietnam, 1968**

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~~Secret~~*Introduction*

The rule of the House of Ngo ended on 1 November 1963, after a group of President Diem's generals, encouraged by the US Government, surrounded the Palace with units they brought into Saigon from Bien Hoa and the Mekong Delta. The military coup d'etat against Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother and adviser Ngo Dinh Nhu terminated an American commitment to their regime that had endured since 1954. After the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in May of that year, the United States invoked the domino theory of Communist expansionism when it sponsored Diem as the leader of an effort to create a nation south of the demilitarized zone at the 17th parallel. Working mainly through his younger brother, Nhu, the CIA Station in Saigon tried for the next nine years to help create national political institutions. With the Special Forces of Diem's army, CIA also pioneered the rural self-defense units that constituted the first expression of US counterinsurgency practice in Vietnam.

These efforts, especially the self-defense units among ethnic and religious minority groups, enjoyed some local successes. But Diem never placed real importance on winning the voluntary allegiance of the peasantry, and his own sporadic efforts with Nhu to mobilize the population against the Communists were clumsy and halfhearted. Instead, Diem had from the beginning relied primarily on the suppression of known and suspected Communists to contain the insurgent threat. This repression decimated—indeed, by 1959, had nearly destroyed—the Communist political organization in the South. But the combination of Diem's essential indifference to the conditions of peasant life and his often indiscriminate campaign against the Communists alienated much of the rural population. When in late 1959 Hanoi added a military dimension to its original strategy of political organization and agitation, the burgeoning insurgency rapidly weakened Diem's hold on the countryside.

The spreading insurgency prompted an intensified US commitment to Diem's survival, and a concomitant expansion of American military and economic aid. By the spring of 1963, when Buddhist-inspired popular unrest signaled the paralysis of the regime's authority, the US military advisory presence stood at some 12,000. Diem's draconian suppression of Buddhists dissent offended American standards of religious freedom.

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Coinciding with a sagging campaign against the insurgency, it persuaded Washington to approve, in late August, Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge's proposal to unseat Diem.¹ []

Having taken over the Joint General Staff Headquarters on 1 November, the rebels arrested and executed Col. Le Quang Tung, the Diem loyalist and longtime Station contact who commanded the Special Forces, and called on Diem and his brother Nhu to surrender. Under cover of darkness, the President and Nhu slipped through the cordon around the Palace, but the next morning coup leader Gen. Duong Van Minh tracked them to their refuge in a Catholic church in the Chinese quarter. Earlier American appeals for safe conduct for Diem and Nhu were ignored when one of Minh's officers loaded them into an armored personnel carrier and there shot them to death. []

Seeing the government's failure solely in terms of Diem's weaknesses as a leader, both the Americans and the generals had concentrated exclusively on the mechanics of the coup, giving no attention to the structure or policy direction of a successor government. Indeed, the generals explicitly disclaimed having any plans for this, twice telling their CIA contacts that they wanted American guidance for the postcoup period. Thus, when Diem fell, the organization, staffing, and policy line of the new government all were still undecided. The Agency had indeed secured the generals' commitment to an intensified campaign against the Communists and their agreement to a more active American role in pursuing it, but no specifics had yet been discussed. []

No such discussions ever took place, and no coherent program was ever devised. Had the effort been made, it would have revealed that Diem and his coterie were only part of the problem. An ill-led army and a sclerotic bureaucracy, both still practicing the authoritarian style of their decayed dynastic and colonial predecessors, presided over a body politic divided along religious, ethnic, and class lines. Tension persisted between a Buddhist majority and the heavily Catholic government, and also between Buddhist and Catholic factions in the military officer corps. Among members of the political and military elites, mutual hostility continued between native Southerners and people from the North. Mutual antipathy also divided ethnic Vietnamese from minorities such as the ethnic Cambodians and the mountain tribes. Finally, a rigid social structure and—especially in the Mekong Delta—a regressive land tenure system

¹Most accounts of the Second Indochina War look at the insurgency from the US-GVN perspective. To understand how the Vietnamese Communists brought the Saigon government to its knees requires some familiarity with the competition between them for the loyalty of the rural population. The best account known to the author of this aspect of the insurgency is Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972). []

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impeded vertical social mobility for the peasantry, leaving the Viet Cong as the main channel for the satisfaction of political goals or personal ambition. []

The military governments that succeeded Diem followed a less repressive course than the late President, but like him failed to gain the political or military initiative against the Communists. By late 1964 South Vietnam was close to collapse. Having received a Congressional carte blanche in the August 1964 Tonkin Gulf Resolution, President Lyndon Johnson responded in March 1965 with the introduction of US ground combat forces into South Vietnam. Hanoi, which until 1964 had limited its infiltration to individual military and political cadres, mostly native Southerners, had already begun sending integral combat units to the South. []

By the summer of 1965, US ground forces in Vietnam numbered 125,000 and were rapidly growing. They prevented Hanoi from exploiting the weakness of the Saigon government and bought time to try to build political stability in South Vietnam. But in 1966, the political if not the military initiative remained in the hands of the North. A growing American casualty list and the uncertain prospects of driving Hanoi out of the war gradually converted the near-unanimous approval of the 1964 Tonkin Gulf Resolution into widespread Congressional and popular opposition to the war. Looking for a way out, the Johnson administration responded with new emphasis on the pacification programs designed to win peasant loyalty and destroy the Viet Cong political organization. It also began looking for informal channels to Hanoi that might allow a negotiated settlement on politically acceptable terms.² []

One debilitating problem, that of revolving-door government in Saigon, ended with the election of Gen. Nguyen Van Thieu as President in September 1967. Then, at the beginning of 1968, the Tet offensive resulted in grievous losses to the Communist political organization as well as to its attacking military forces, but Saigon's pacification efforts also suffered grave setbacks. The shock produced by the Communists' ability to conduct a coordinated, nationwide, surprise offensive, however unsuccessful in military terms, drove antiwar sentiment in the US to new heights. It also drove a President out of office, for it was the major cause of Lyndon Johnson's decision, announced in late March, not to seek a second full term. []

²The Johnson administration's conduct of the war is well described in George C. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War* (Austin, TX: The University of Texas Press, 1994). A good general account of the Vietnam war, emphasizing the evolution of US policy, is Herring's *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam 1950-1975* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Second Edition, 1986). []

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The search for informal channels to the Communists was largely supplanted by the opening of preliminary talks with the North Vietnamese in Paris in May 1968. After another Communist offensive that month, the so-called mini-Tet, South Vietnamese and Allied forces regained the military initiative. Bloody ground combat and intensive air bombardment decimated the Communists' rural organization, and by the end of the year a renewed pacification drive had brought "relatively secure" status to an unprecedented 73% of the South's population.³ []

Ambiguously phrased claims of pacification results did nothing to assuage public opposition to the war in the United States, and Hubert Humphrey's close association as Vice President with Lyndon Johnson's war policy cost him the 1968 election. The new President, Richard M. Nixon, did not produce the "secret plan" for ending the war that he had promised during the campaign. He did, however, accelerate what he called the "Vietnamization" of the war, beefing up South Vietnamese forces; in mid-1969, he announced the first US troop withdrawals. []

For the next three years, Vietnamization and the formal peace negotiations, which got under way in January 1969, produced only stalemate. With Washington's support of Saigon and continuing Chinese-Soviet aid to the North, the combatants struggled to extend their territorial reach in the South, anticipating eventual agreement in Paris. The Communists broke the military deadlock with their Easter offensive of 1972, threatening Saigon's hold on its northern provinces, but were finally beaten off by a combination of South Vietnamese ground forces and American air power. In October, the Communists agreed to cease-fire terms, and on the eve of the US presidential election Nixon aide Henry Kissinger announced that "peace is at hand." The proclaimed breakthrough helped seal the fate of Democrat George McGovern's candidacy, and Nixon won reelection in a landslide. Hanoi then balked, provoking the "Christmas bombing" of North Vietnam that was followed by signature of the accords in January 1973. []

American attention then turned to cease-fire implementation and an effort to make the Saigon government militarily self-sustaining despite the continued presence of North Vietnamese divisions in the South. Whatever its potential, this undertaking came under intensified political attack as the Nixon administration fought for its life in the face of the Watergate scandal. When Nixon resigned on 9 August 1974, to be succeeded by Gerald Ford, the US Mission in Saigon was hearing the first faint indications of a major Communist offensive in 1975. The assault

³The US Mission's pacification figure is given in "Vietnam: A Draft Chronology, 1940-1973" (U), CIA History Staff, September 1974. Hereafter cited as "Vietnam Chronology." []

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came in January, and, despite heroic resistance by some South Vietnamese units, the dénouement began with the catastrophic retreat from the Central Highlands in mid-March 1975. Communist victories in central Vietnam accelerated into a march on Saigon, and on 30 April the Second Indochina War ended for the United States when the last evacuation helicopter roared off the Embassy roof into the predawn darkness. []

The CIA Station that, for its size, played such a disproportionately large role in the political history of South Vietnam, was composed of some two hundred people when the Diem regime was deposed in late 1963. The operational sections included action components charged with rural pacification and intelligence. Other Station elements dealt with both recruited and noncontrolled figures in the GVN and in the non-Communist opposition, using them partly for intelligence and partly in efforts to develop democratic institutions. []

Agency programs, especially the rural pacification projects, expanded in response to the growing US commitment. By the time the Communists launched their Tet offensive in 1968, the CIA presence in South Vietnam had reached about one thousand people, including the six hundred working in the provinces under four regional chiefs. The size of the Station began to diminish in 1969, as CIA and the rest of the US Government gradually withdrew from direct participation in the conflict. The regional outposts were maintained, but from then until the end, intelligence and influence operations at the top of the GVN became the heart of the Station's work. []

This second part of the political history of the CIA in South Vietnam unfolds against the background of a massive but never unconditional US effort to prevent Hanoi from conquering the South. It begins after the fall of Diem in late 1963, when Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, having decided that the appearance of an independent Saigon government was more important to American interests than helping to fill the Vietnamese leadership vacuum, enjoined the Station from accepting the generals' invitation to advise them. When the new regime's instability forced Lodge to modify this injunction, the Station resumed close contact with several of the generals, but only to monitor the series of mutinies and coups that began in January 1964. []

The Station's stable of unofficial contacts acquired particular importance during episodes of tension in which formal communication at the policy level virtually ceased. These links also gradually led to intermittent resumption of the kind of Station engagement in political action that had largely defined its relationship with the Diem regime. Although the Agency had now shifted its main covert action emphasis from party organization to provincial pacification operations, it tried also to help stabilize

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the national political scene, through contacts with the dissident Buddhist leadership as well as with the generals. In addition, beginning in 1966, the Station began using its informal channels as an instrument of communication and persuasion as the Johnson Administration sought Thieu's cooperation in the effort to contact presumptively moderate elements in the National Liberation Front.⁴ []

The eight-year rule of Gen. Nguyen Van Thieu began in September 1967 when he and Nguyen Cao Ky won election on a joint presidential ticket. During the campaign, Agency access to Ky's and Washington's anxiety to preserve at least the appearance of an honest electoral process had combined to turn the Station into a political consultant, trying to enhance the attractiveness of the Thieu-Ky ticket even as it struggled to limit procedural abuses. []

After the election in September, Thieu began a thorough purge of his new Vice President's mostly Northern supporters in the government and the military, and the Station found itself in a scramble to develop new access to the Southerners around Thieu. []

[]

The January 1968 Tet offensive, whose scope and precise timing the Communists managed to conceal from US and South Vietnamese intelligence, plunged the Saigon government and its adherents into a political malaise that threatened their will to continue. This prompted the United States to try once more to help build a popular political base in the South, and the Station became the instrument of this final effort to create a political organization on the US model in South Vietnam. But President Thieu's indifference to the American partiality for genuinely representative government eventually nullified whatever potential this initiative may have had. []

In any case, the growing American perception of Thieu as indispensable to political stability in South Vietnam gradually reduced the pressure on the Vietnamese for progress toward authentic democracy. As early as 1970, the American focus shifted to the need to ensure a Thieu victory in the 1971 elections while avoiding the appearance of an electoral process manipulated in his favor. Again, the Station became deeply involved as it joined in the maneuvers designed to achieve this self-contradictory goal. []

⁴The history of the CIA contribution to the pacification programs of the 1954-75 period is treated in a separate forthcoming History Staff study. []

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The Communists' largest offensive since Tet 1968 began on 30 March 1972, and the Station concluded that South Vietnamese dependence on US combat air as well as advisory support would continue as long as the Soviets and the Chinese supported Hanoi. As the offensive gradually receded, the principal Station service to US policy became that of supporting American pressure on Thieu to accede to the terms being worked out with the North Vietnamese in Paris. [redacted]

[redacted] the Station mobilized its agents and other contacts for both intelligence and influence purposes. [redacted]

President Thieu finally approved the cease-fire terms in January 1973, and CIA intelligence collection on the Saigon government, and efforts to influence it, turned to questions of truce implementation. In one dramatic episode, the Station was instrumental in securing Saigon's adherence to a protocol on the lines of cease-fire demarcation between the forces of North and South. [redacted]

Cease-fire implementation receded into the background in late 1974, when the Station's most reliable source on Communist intentions predicted a major offensive for early 1975. For the next several months, the Station tracked North Vietnamese initiatives and South Vietnamese reaction. In mid-March, the South Vietnamese forces in the Central Highlands collapsed. Da Nang fell shortly thereafter, and the chaotic failure of the evacuation effort there persuaded the Station that no mass evacuation of the government's military and civilian adherents from Saigon could succeed. Accordingly, the Chief of Station and the Ambassador launched an ultimately desperate effort to help broker a political settlement that would preserve a non-Communist South Vietnam long enough to permit orderly evacuation. The fate of this effort, and its dire effects on evacuation planning, constitute the final chapter of CIA's involvement in the politics of the Republic of Vietnam. [redacted]

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Chapter 1

Involuntary Passivity

The generals who overthrew Ngo Dinh Diem lost no time in making it known to CIA that they had meant what they said, as coup planning evolved, about seeking US guidance in the formation of a successor regime. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge moved equally promptly to ensure that no such guidance would be given, and his moratorium on US Mission contacts with the new leadership lasted until January. Even then, he sharply restricted the range of subjects on which the Station could advise the Vietnamese.

The day after the death of the Ngo brothers, Bui Diem, a Dai Viet politician well known to the Station, reaffirmed that the generals would count heavily on American advice in deciding how to ensure the constitutionality of their new regime. On 4 November 1963, Gen. Tran Van "Little Minh," bemoaned the generals' incapacity to meet the challenge of running the country and berated for being unable to say what the US Government wanted.¹

At the same time, "Little Minh" exposed the potential for friction with the Americans when he described "Big Minh's" five-minute tantrum over an Embassy request for the release of labor leader Tran Quoc Buu, who, had enjoyed close ties to both the Embassy and Ngo Dinh Nhu. Minh had exploded in rage at what he interpreted as US distrust of him, and rejected advice from his Prime Minister, Nguyen Ngoc Tho, to let the Americans have what they wanted. Headquarters reacted to the incident by asking the Station to get "Big Minh" to look at the international ramifications of his jailing a respected labor leader.²

¹CIA Critic Message no. 25, 3 November 1963, SAIG 2196, 4 November 1963, Tran Van Minh was often called Little Minh to distinguish him from the physically imposing and professionally more senior Duong Van Minh.
²SAIG 2196, 5 November 1963,

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The Station apparently did not do this. Indeed, having functioned as the primary link to the dissident generals while they prepared the coup against Diem, it found itself abruptly divested of any role in helping them set up a government. Immediately after the coup, Ambassador Lodge had restricted US Mission contact with the generals on the ground that they had to be made to look independent of the United States. This applied as much to discreet CIA contacts as to the normally more visible relationships with other Mission elements. The Station was thus helpless either to respond to appeals like the one from "Little Minh" or to assuage "Big Minh's" fears of US interference with the new regime. The opportunity to help the new government make the most of its chance to succeed thus slipped away.³ []

After a request from Gen. Tran Van Don on 4 November, the Station succeeded in persuading Lodge to let it brief "Big Minh" on the covert programs. The Station wanted to use this opening to influence the Vietnamese on a broader range of political and governmental issues, but Lodge imposed a narrow focus, limiting the briefing to intelligence and security matters. Acting COS David Smith thought this approach wasted an opportunity for constructive US influence on the structure and policies of the new government. "We were the ones they turned to," and Smith believed they needed and deserved help. Instead, enjoined not to become involved, the Station simply watched the generals as they quarreled over responsibility for the bloodshed and looting that accompanied the coup and over promotions and cabinet nominations.⁴ []

The Station had, of course, been reporting from the day after the coup on the volatility of the new political climate. Only Duong Van Minh looked like an impressive leader; CIA in Saigon judged him to be perhaps the only man capable of holding the generals and the civilian politicians together. But he was also a reticent soldier whose "simple and even naive political outlook" might qualify him as a "Vietnamese Naguib. If he is," the Station presciently wondered, "who will be his Nasser?" []

While monitoring the generals' efforts to find the right people for the new government, CIA Headquarters also worried about fallout from its participation in the coup. Gen. Ton That Dinh had already made a

³David Smith, interview by the author, Silver Spring, MD (hereafter cited as Smith interview), 6 October 1992. Recordings, transcripts, and notes for the interviews conducted for this study are on file in the CIA's History Staff office. (Smith served as DCOS from June 1962 to June 1964, and was Acting Chief of Station between John Richardson's departure in early October 1963 and Peer de Silva's arrival in December 1963.) []

⁴SAIG 2191, November 1963, and SAIG 2223, 5 November 1963, []
Smith interview, 6 October 1992; []

'Undated "History of the Vietnamese Generals' Coup of 1/2 November 1963," of which a Vietnam desk officer, [] noted that SAIG 2662 of 25 November 1963 indicated it had been written by Station officers John Riordan, Clifford Strathern; also, [] added, "undoubtedly by Dave Smith, the ACOS." []

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pointed request for the departure of Col. Gilbert Layton, the Station officer whose counterpart had been Col. Le Quang Tung, the Special Forces commander shot after his arrest by the coup committee. DDP Richard Helms asked if Lou Conein, the Station's principal liaison to the coup committee, should perhaps not go on leave while the dust settled, but Acting COS David Smith replied that Conein's rapport with the generals was indispensable and should be fully exploited. Apparently inferring that Helms doubted Conein's discretion, Smith argued that any leaks would probably come from other agencies. He prevailed, and Conein stayed.⁶ []

FE Division Chief William Colby arrived in Saigon on TDY on 5 November. He made a series of calls on the generals, but Lou Conein remained the Station's principal contact with the new regime. Conein's effectiveness rested on friendships with the Vietnamese that in several cases dated back to his service as an OSS officer in Vietnam in 1945. He was less strong on political substance, and this limited his role essentially to that of intermediary. But under the restrictions imposed by Lodge, the personal confidence he enjoyed sufficed to meet the Station's needs for liaison with the generals. Colby described the Embassy atmosphere in a cable that predicted a Lodge effort to arrange the recall of Gen. Paul Harkins, chief of the Military Assistance Command/Vietnam (MACV). The Ambassador's recent expulsion of COS John Richardson was "only the overture to the opera," Colby wrote, adding that Lodge was "running very much a vest-pocket operation" which tolerated only those subordinates who could "operate on a tactical level rather than as co-workers in the strategic vineyard." The US Mission's Country Team would have to "learn to adjust to his style or be replaced."⁷ []

The New Regime: Divided Against Itself []

Two weeks after the coup, Colby's round of calls took him to see Gen. Nguyen Khanh at Da Lat. Although Khanh had been the first to advise CIA of serious planning for a coup, he had soon found himself replaced as go-between with CIA by Tran Van Don. At the end of January, Khanh would depose the ineffectual "Big Minh." Now, however, Colby found him growing a beard that Khanh vowed to keep until he was convinced that the new regime was on the "right path." Colby listened to a downbeat assessment of the problems facing the generals, and later

⁶SAIG 2345, 8 November 1963; [] SAIG 2357, 9 November 1963;
all [] and SAIG 2499, 16 November 1963, []

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reported that Khanh's only question to him had concerned the whereabouts of a former CIA contact named Russ Miller. Colby kept the query in mind, and Miller shortly began a series of TDY visits to Saigon that culminated in a PCS assignment in December 1964.⁸ []

Meanwhile, divested by Ambassador Lodge of any consultative role in shaping the new Saigon government, the Station responded vigorously to General Don's invitation to discuss the more limited field of intelligence, paramilitary, and pacification programs. With Lodge's approval, Acting COS David Smith and his colleagues opened the first of several meetings with the new Vietnamese leadership on 13 November. "Big Minh" attended, with the other two principals on the Military Revolutionary Committee (MRC), Tran Van Don and Le Van Kim, but Minister of Security Ton That Dinh curiously failed to appear; the other generals charged with intelligence and security matters also were absent. The Station described Kim as the "principal interrogator," who had a better grasp of the material than his compatriots. "Big Minh," who seemed to rely for advice on Don and Kim, was clearly startled by the scope of the programs that the Station outlined.⁹ []

Kim was the only MRC member to attend all of the following three sessions. His incisive questions, one of them concerning the net effect of raids on North Vietnam that fed Hanoi's propaganda apparatus while inflicting trivial damage, won the Station's respect. He also astutely noted the shortage of Vietnamese managerial talent and suggested that the Station's admirable organizational proposals might have to be tailored to the strengths and limitations of available personnel. Kim did not know in November that the already-limited pool of potential leaders was about to lose him, along with Tran Van Don and the more easily expendable Ton That Dinh and Mai Huu Xuan. When Nguyen Khanh seized power in late January 1964, he arrested them, and none resumed an active role in the government or army after being released.¹⁰ []

Subsequent sessions drew working-level Vietnamese participants, who relayed the MRC's approval in principle of several Station reorganization proposals, and its suggestion for an expanded National Interrogation Center. But it was clear that the Vietnamese were concerned at least as much with personal rivalries as with flow charts. One Vietnamese counterproposal, for example, called for removing the key Central Intelligence Organization (CIO) from the control of Generals Ton That Dinh and Mai Huu Xuan.¹¹ []

⁸Memorandum of Conversation, William E. Colby and Nguyen Khanh on 14 November 1963, 16 November 1963, [] Russell Miller, interview by the author, Washington, DC (hereafter cited as Miller interview), 7 April 1992, []

⁹SAIG 2555, 19 November 1963, []

¹⁰SAIG 2555, 19 November 1963, []

¹¹SAIG 2650, 23 November 1963, []

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The Vietnamese generals were still struggling with their new governmental responsibilities, and with each other, when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas on 22 November. During Kennedy's time in office, the commitment of US military personnel had grown from 875 to over 16,000, and civilian programs including those of the CIA had grown proportionately. Against this background, new President Lyndon B. Johnson sought in the last weeks of 1963 to penetrate the many uncertainties about the new regime and its ability to reinvigorate the war against the Communists. To this end, he dispatched a factfinding mission in late December, headed by Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara and including DCI John A. McCone.¹² []

Johnson now displayed his penchant for hands-on management by also involving himself directly in selecting a new chief for the Saigon Station. In office for less than two weeks, he found time to write McCone on 2 December about a permanent replacement for Richardson as COS. Either bring in a "top-notch man," he instructed, or "promote the man on the spot." He asserted personal control over the appointment, telling McCone he awaited a nomination from among the Agency's "best and most experienced." McCone's reply testified to David Smith's outstanding performance, but named Peer de Silva the new COS. []

[] de Silva was about to leave Washington for Saigon when he was taken one night to the White House. There he met President Johnson, whose only instructions were not to forget that they were entering an election year.¹³ []

But Johnson was well aware of the conflict played out in the press between Lodge and Richardson and wanted no repetition. On 7 December, he cabled Lodge with categorical instructions about the relationship he expected to obtain between the Ambassador and the new Chief of Station:

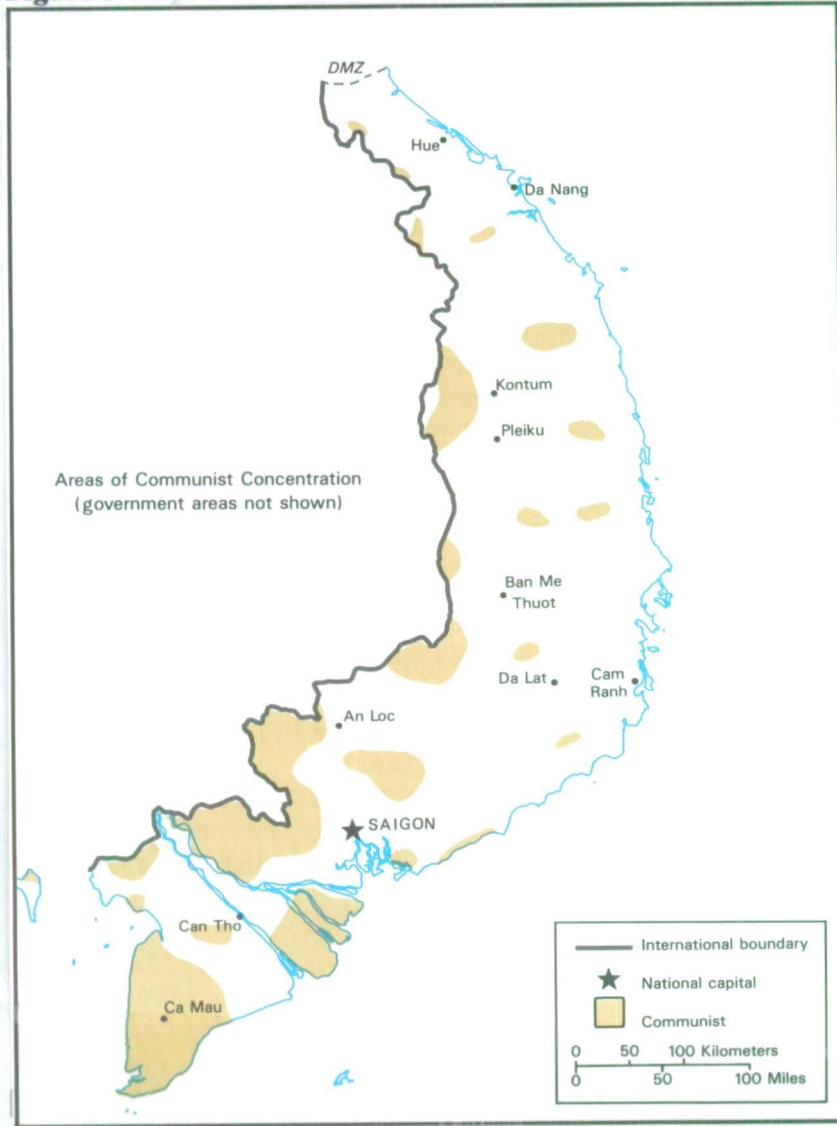
It is of the first importance that there be the most complete understanding and cooperation between you and him . . . I am concerned not only to sustain effective cooperation, but to avoid any mutterings in the press. . . I cannot overemphasize the importance which I personally attach to correcting the situation which has existed in Saigon in the past, and which I saw myself when I was out there.¹⁴ []

¹²"Vietnam Chronology," p. 42. []

¹³Lyndon B. Johnson, Memorandum for Director McCone, 2 December 1963; Blind Memorandum for the President, n.d.; both [] interview by the author, Langley, VA (hereafter cited as [] interview), 18 November 1992. De Silva later recounted the White House incident to [] in Saigon. []

¹⁴J. S. Earman, Inspector General, Memorandum for the Director, "Record on Vietnam", 12 November 1964, History Staff files. []

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~~Secret~~**Figure 2 Area Under Communist Control, 1962**

The Republican Ambassador did not take kindly to being so instructed by his Democratic President, and responded peevishly to McCone's subsequent request that he protect de Silva's cover: "I certainly cannot take responsibility for keeping any man's name out of the press who works for the US Government in Vietnam. . . . It is not clear to me

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what his cover is. In fact the whole arrangement is still somewhat obscure to me. . . ." Indeed, it was naive of McCone to think that de Silva's Agency affiliation could be concealed in Saigon, as the mere fact of his succeeding Richardson would have sufficed to expose him.¹⁵ []

Unlike the youthful Smith, who had launched his CIA career as a 2nd lieutenant with the Lansdale Station in 1955, de Silva was already the veteran chief of three major Stations—[] []—when he arrived in Saigon. Born in 1917, he graduated from the US Military Academy at West Point in 1941, and at the end of World War II was serving as Chief of Security for the Manhattan Project. He joined the Agency as a US Army colonel.¹⁶ []

In December 1963, as de Silva prepared to leave [] Agency and other official US observers in Saigon were trying to gauge the effects of the coup on the war in the countryside. While General Harbins's MACV was lowering its estimate of Viet Cong (VC) strength, CIA analysts in Saigon saw Communist forces actually growing. After arriving with McNamara on 18 December, McCone quickly concluded that tension within the Military Revolutionary Council (MRC), continued disarray and corruption in the government, and what he agreed was growing VC strength added up to a doubtful prognosis for the South Vietnamese. He noted also that the Military Revolutionary Council (MRC) was starting from a much more unfavorable position than had been recognized: "It is abundantly clear that [Vietnamese] statistics received over the past year or more . . . on which we gauged the trend of the war were grossly in error."¹⁷ []

Mutiny Against the Mutineers []

VC gains, if the Southern generals recognized them as such, did nothing to unify the junta or to mobilize the civilian politicians against the growing threat. In mid-December, the MRC sent the still unshaven Nguyen Khanh to Da Nang, the farthest from Saigon of the four Vietnamese Army (ARVN) corps commands. In early January 1964, Duong Van Minh shook

¹⁵*Ibid.* []

¹⁶De Silva official personnel file; [] interview, 18 November 1992. []

¹⁷Blind Memorandum, "Military Situation in Critical Areas of Vietnam," 13 December 1963, []

[] McCone memorandum, "Highlights of Discussions in Saigon 18-20 December 1963," 21 December 1963, [] "Viet Cong" is a Vietnamese term, adopted early in the Diem regime and bearing a pejorative connotation, for Vietnamese Communist. Both Americans, who usually abbreviated it to "VC," and Saigon's officials applied it to any member of either the military or the political arm of the indigenous though Hanoi-directed Communist movement in South Vietnam. The VC were thus distinguished from the integral units of the North Vietnamese Army deployed into South Vietnam after late 1964. []

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up the military hierarchy and took over as commander in chief of the armed forces. Two weeks later, the new commander of the Vietnamese Special Forces claimed to the Station that Gen. Tran Van Don was discussing the neutralization of South Vietnam with a visiting French official. The Station seems to have enjoyed no other access to these events, possibly because Station officer Al Spera, to whom Nguyen Khanh had conveyed the first news of military coup planning, and Lou Conein both were absent.¹⁸ []

Spera was no longer stationed in Vietnam. During his tour of duty, he had earned two GVN decorations, unprecedented among CIA officers there. But his superiors saw him as abrasive and headstrong, and after General Khanh asked McCone to return him to Saigon, when the DCI visited in December, Colby and Assistant DDP Tom Karamessines combined to block the move.¹⁹ []

Lou Conein, having been summoned to see State Department officials Averell Harriman and Roger Hilsman, was in Washington. Conein urged them to help the junta—the Military Revolutionary Council (MRC)—generate some forward momentum by assigning to each of its principal members a known and trusted American adviser working directly under the Ambassador. Conein later heard that Lodge vetoed the idea. In any case, as it turned out, Nguyen Khanh was already preparing to replace General Minh.²⁰ []

Meanwhile, new Chief of Station Peer de Silva was assiduously keeping the generals at arm's length. Shortly after de Silva's arrival in late December, Gen. Nguyen Khanh invited him to visit Da Nang. Telling Smith that the COS could not travel at the whim of every Vietnamese general, de Silva declined. He sent Conein, instead, who got one of the early indications of Khanh's dissatisfaction with "Big Minh." Although similar warnings began to come in from other sources, Lodge thought Station reporting reflected an obsession with coup plotting. If Khanh is unhappy, he instructed the Station, just tell him to take it easy.²¹ []

Despite de Silva's cool response to his invitation, Khanh sent a messenger to the Station again on 27 January asking the COS to see him in Da Nang the next day. De Silva was now willing, but his reply,

¹⁸ [] undated news clipping of Reuters dispatch, [] The abbreviation "ARVN," pronounced "ARven," became the standard American term for the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. []

¹⁹ Thomas H. Karamessines, Memorandum for Mr. Helms, "Mr. Al Spera," 27 March 1964, []

²⁰ Lucien Conein, interview by the author, McLean, VA (hereinafter cited as Conein interview), 16 November 1992. Station officer [] recalled that McCone told Colby to arrange Spera's return to Vietnam, but once back in Washington Colby did not follow through. (See [] interview, 18 November 1992.) []

²¹ Smith interview, 19 October 1992. []

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coordinated with Lodge, regretted that he could see Khanh no earlier than 29 January. Khanh agreed to meet then in Saigon, but Lodge now changed his mind. He prohibited the meeting, for reasons not recorded, and de Silva cancelled it on the pretext of illness.²² []

Khanh then turned to an old friend, Col. Jasper Wilson of MACV, with his claim that the French were maneuvering with Gen. Mai Huu Xuan, who had served them in various internal security organs, for the neutralization of South Vietnam. De Silva reported on this meeting in his own channel, adding information from other sources alleging a French-backed move toward neutralization.²³ []

In Saigon on 29 January, Khanh repeated his allegations to Wilson. He added Generals Tran Van Don and Le Van Kim to his list of alleged neutralist plotters and hinted that he and his allies would use any necessary force to thwart them. According to the Ambassador's account of this meeting—he had Wilson reporting directly to him—Khanh added that he wanted to use Wilson as his exclusive channel to the Embassy: "Khanh's absolute refusal to deal with any American other than Wilson is due to an unfortunate experience 'with a CIA representative named Spera, before the Oct. 31 [sic] coup.'" Lodge's report, transmitted late 29 January, added that he was keeping de Silva and General Harkins informed.²⁴ []

Lodge may in fact have kept Harkins posted, but he said nothing to de Silva until the COS inquired about the matter early that evening. Lodge then acknowledged that Wilson had seen Khanh; he had written a telegram, he said, and the COS would be receiving a copy. De Silva later asked Lodge's deputy, David Nes, about his exclusion from the session with Wilson, but Nes would say only that his instructions had prevented him from informing anyone but General Harkins.²⁵ []

At 0315 hours on 30 January, the Embassy radioed a report from Wilson at the airborne brigade headquarters that Khanh intended to move within the hour "to secure changes in the composition of the MRC . . . Minh has been informed of this and agrees. The only definite statement we have yet is that Premier Tho must go." Twenty minutes later, Nes

[] c. 31 January 1964 (retyped and attached to William E. Colby, Memorandum for Director of Central Intelligence, "Inter-Agency relationships in Saigon," 31 January 1964). []

[] interview, 18 November 1992. Lodge reported to Washington on 29 January that Khanh had insisted on Colonel Wilson as his sole link to the Embassy in this matter. (See *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Volume I, Vietnam, 1964*, [Washington, DC, US Government Printing Office, 1992], p. 39.) []

"FRUS, 1964-1968, I, 1964, pp. 36-37; []

"FRUS, 1964-1968, I, 1964, pp. 37-39; Barman, "Record on Vietnam." It is not known whether Khanh concealed from Wilson his overtures to de Silva, or whether—perhaps reacting to a perceived rebuff from the COS—he actually intended on 29 January to use Wilson as his sole intermediary. []

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summoned de Silva to the Embassy, where the COS learned that Khanh and associates including Gen. Tran Thien Khiem were about to depose General Minh's government. The new junta proceeded to arrest five of their colleagues on grounds of plotting with the French to neutralize South Vietnam. They spared "Big Minh"—indeed, installed him as figure-head Chief of State—but remanded Generals Don, Kim, Dinh, Xuan, and Nguyen Van Vy to house arrest in the resort town of Da Lat.²⁶ []

Lodge's exclusion of de Silva, during this episode, may have reflected a suspicion that the new COS had been sent to restore the autonomy the Ambassador thought the Station had enjoyed before Richardson's dismissal. Smith interpreted Lodge's October request for him to be named COS as confirmation that Lodge thought he had him and the Station well under control. Smith had been content to leave him with this impression, and had deliberately not corrected Lodge's apparent belief that after Richardson's departure the Ambassador saw all Station correspondence.²⁷ []

Restoration of a Limited Mandate []

Whatever the reason for Lodge's quarantine of the Station, it ended when Conein returned just as the coup ended. On 31 January 1964, he saw Khanh, who complained of Conein's absence during the previous five days. No longer disposed, if he ever had been, to make MACV his sole US interlocutor, he now proposed having two US liaison officers, with Conein reporting to Ambassador Lodge and Jasper Wilson to MACV commander General Harkins. Three days later, Khanh sent a car and escort to bring Conein to see him, but Conein disappointed him when he had to advise that he still lacked instructions from Lodge on the liaison question. Nevertheless, Khanh wanted him continuously available on

²⁶ [] FVSA 17118, 7 February 1964, [] Conein interview, 19 February 1992; George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1987), p. 200. Neutralist sentiment may well have been growing at this time, but neither Khanh nor the Station ever produced credible evidence of collusion between France and the generals to neutralize South Vietnam. According to [] perhaps the Station's leading expert on South Vietnamese politics, Khiem was the "mastermind" of the January coup (see [] Memorandum to Chief of Station, "Thich Tri Quang," 26 August 1968, []

²⁷ Smith interview, 19 October 1992. Lodge made his attitude toward Smith more explicit at a meeting with him and de Silva shortly after the new COS's arrival. Someone mentioned Lodge's earlier request for Smith, and the DCOS quickly assured Lodge he had always expected a more senior replacement, to which the Ambassador sneered, "Do you think I give a damn about you?" []

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five minutes' notice and dismissed Conein's protest that all this violated diplomatic protocol: "I don't give a damn."²⁸ [redacted]

As Khanh insisted on seeing Conein, Lodge could not very well object. On 3 February, Khanh outlined his intentions to Conein, saying he would give the "boudoir politicians" a week to propose a civilian prime minister. He said he wanted Conein to be his principal adviser on intelligence and security matters, but Conein let him know that such a role was out of the question. So instead of organizations and programs, they talked about Khanh's plan surreptitiously to record his meetings with the other generals. [redacted]
[redacted]

It soon became clear to the Station that Nguyen Khanh had no more capacity than General Minh to unify the officer corps in a new campaign to mobilize the country against the Viet Cong. As before, the Station continued to cultivate second-level officers, some of whom made no pretense of unconditional loyalty to Khanh. One such was Col. Nguyen Cao Ky, the flamboyantly charismatic new chief of the Vietnamese Air Force. In early February, Ky told Russ Miller, now in Vietnam on TDY, that young officers would have to get the command assignments they wanted, or Khanh's regime could meet the same fate as Minh's.²⁹ [redacted]

Gen. Nguyen Van Thieu, as Khanh's new ARVN Chief of Staff, comported himself more discreetly in a conversation with Dave Smith, insisting that he wanted to use the Dai Viet and other nationalist parties only to help root out the clandestine Viet Cong organization. But other sources began as early as February to claim that Thieu and the Dai Viets were already plotting against Khanh.³⁰ [redacted]

The Station repeated for General Khanh the briefing on Station programs it had recently delivered to officers including Kim and Don, who were now under detention. Khanh endorsed the pacification programs, but temporized on the Station's perennial recommendation for centralized management of Saigon's intelligence collection and analysis. Khanh offered new Deputy Prime Minister Nguyen Ton Hoan, a Dai Viet politician known to the Station since the early 1950s, as liaison on pacification matters. Accepting this, de Silva noted the Station's practice of maintaining contact with non-Communist dissidents as well as with local officials. He assured Khanh of his innocuous purpose in this—he merely

²⁸Lucien Conein, Memorandum for the Record, "Meeting with Major General Nguyen Khanh, Chairman of the Military Council," 31 January 1964; Conein, Memorandum for the Record, "Meeting with General Khanh," 3 February 1964; [redacted]
[redacted]

²⁹Conein MR of 3 February 1964; Conein interview, 7 December 1992. [redacted]

³⁰Conein interview, 7 December 1992; FVS 10,182, 8 February 1964. [redacted]

³¹David Smith, Contact Report, 8 February 1964, and *passim*, [redacted]

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wanted to keep abreast of the various shades of political opinion—and asked for Khanh's forbearance. During a typically informal session with Conein in mid-February, Khanh vilified the French in a way reminiscent of Ngo Dinh Nhu, and threatened to expel French officials as a warning to de Gaulle. He asked if Conein "knew five or six bastards" he would like to have kicked out; Conein temporized by saying he would see if the Station had any candidates. Khanh also asked Conein to train his security detail, and the Station arranged this in March.³² []

Despite his longtime contact with CIA, Khanh remained something of an enigma. A Station assessment of early March 1964 saw intelligence, energy, and organization, but also a moody loner with an overinflated ego. Whatever his flaws, the near-vacuum of South Vietnamese leadership first noted by Agency officers in the early 1950s had not been filled, and there was little to work with. In the Station's opinion, no one else, civilian or military, came close to having Khanh's ability. But he was faced with the traditional "fractionalization" of Vietnamese politics. First the French and then Diem had unified the politicians in opposition to them, but now, as the Station saw it, "the centrifugal forces in Vietnamese politics may become more pronounced than ever." Like Diem and then Duong Van Minh, Khanh would require unqualified US support; without it, he would probably disappear in a neutralist putsch.³³ []

Operating under the Lodge restrictions, the Station could not even try to help Khanh grow into his new responsibilities. Conein supplemented Embassy efforts to ensure the safety of the so-called Da Lat generals, but his meetings with Khanh were devoted mostly to political gossip and such trivialities as office logistics and a Khanh request that Conein develop for him a contingency plan for escape from Saigon. The Station was as well connected as ever, but in its enforced passivity could only listen while the other generals calumniated Khanh and each other.³⁴ []

[] Memorandum for the Record, "Briefing of General Khanh, 11 February 1964," 14 February 1964; Lucien Conein, Memorandum for COS, "Breakfast with General Nguyen Khanh," 17 February 1964; [] Given the Agency's well-known complicity in antiregime activity as far back as late 1960, it is doubtful that Khanh took de Silva's assurances at face value. []

³² William S. Read, Memorandum for COS, "Khanh's Leadership and Cohesiveness of Government," [] 6 March 1964; [] Khanh provoked different reactions in different Agency observers. Conein thought him a manipulator and habitual liar, while Colby saw in him a perceptive, courageous leader with the potential to control the military and run the country. (See Conein interview, 7 December 1992; William Colby, *Lost Victory* [Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1989], p. 119.) []

³³ Conein memorandums of meetings with Khanh, 8 April 1964 and 1 May 1964; []

[] Volume 4, *passim*; Conein interview, 19 February 1992. []

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The Price of Disunity []

In the spring of 1964, as the government position in the countryside continued to deteriorate, Khanh began urging on Ambassador Lodge a massive US military commitment against the North. The purpose would be to divert Hanoi's resources, permitting the South to accelerate the slow and painful process of pacification. CIA Headquarters worried that Khanh's emphasis on retaliation against Hanoi would undermine the province-by-province approach that Washington thought essential to regain the initiative against the Viet Cong on the ground. Lodge, sharing Khanh's anxiety about invasion, thought that Vo Nguyen Giap, the North Vietnamese general who defeated the French at Dien Bien Phu, might now seize the five northern provinces of South Vietnam. Khanh talked in less apocalyptic terms than these when Defense Secretary McNamara visited Saigon again in mid-May, but McNamara nevertheless concluded that the Government of Vietnam (GVN) had lost some 200 villages--12 percent of the total—to the Viet Cong since September 1963.³⁵ []

As spring gave way to summer in 1964, the CIA acknowledged VC gains by devoting increasing resources to the effort in the countryside. It paid pro forma attention to Nguyen Ton Hoan, Saigon's pacification chief, but substantive liaison with the Vietnamese on the rural programs took place mostly at the province-chief level, and the subject intruded relatively little into the management of the Station's most senior contacts. Here, the main question was still governmental stability. Although professionally more capable than Duong Van Minh, Khanh lacked Minh's personal prestige in the officer corps, and the intensified factionalism predicted by the Station quickly surfaced. As the summer monsoon approached, the Station was using its agents and personal contacts among the generals to monitor the internecine quarrels that were to result in the fall of Nguyen Khanh in February 1965. []

At least partly in response to US pressure, Khanh released the "Da Lat generals"—Don, Dinh, Xuan, Kim, and Vy—at the end of May 1964, and over lunch Conein explored their state of mind. Tran Van Don insisted that he supported Khanh, despite his recent incarceration, but no other point of substance emerged, and during the rest of the session Conein heard only the usual backbiting and recrimination. The Station's access to Khanh at this time produced minor ancillary benefits in addition to reporting, as when Russ Miller secured the release of a Vietnamese

"FRUS, 1964-1968, I, 1964, 284-87, 296-97, 323; Chester L. Cooper, Memorandum to the DCI, "Comments on Saigon LimDis Cable 2108," 4 May 1964." []

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Special Forces officer and Station contact who had been languishing in jail since his boss, Colonel Tung, and Diem were assassinated.³⁶

Nevertheless, policy-level communication took place, for the moment, in policy channels. This was as it should be, in protocol terms, but left open the question of whether active Station participation in the American dialog with the Minh and then the Khanh regimes might have helped to unify the generals and enlist popular support for the government. It might have made no difference: Minh's and Khanh's stated desire for Agency advice may have been pro forma. Or it might have had an effect similar to that of the Station's decisive intervention on behalf of Ngo Dinh Diem in 1955, helping only to postpone a fate that the government's weaknesses made inevitable. Be that as it may, David Smith had a point: it was in fact to the CIA that the key generals turned, in late 1963 and early 1964, for advice on the way to govern the country. But Colby had been right when he predicted that Ambassador Lodge would run a one-man show.

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Chapter 2

Preserving a Line of Communication

Henry Cabot Lodge left Saigon in June 1964 to join Barry Goldwater's presidential campaign. He took with him the bipartisan protection on Vietnam policy that John F. Kennedy had constructed by sending a Republican to Vietnam. Now, his support of the hawkish Goldwater threatened Johnson's campaign strategy of disavowing the prospect of a massive or protracted American commitment in Vietnam. The President met this challenge by choosing Maxwell Taylor as his new Ambassador to Saigon. Taylor offered not only a distinguished combat record from World War II but also a reputation as the US military's foremost intellectual. Under Kennedy, he had become Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and a presidential confidant. As Ambassador, both his formidable professional qualifications and his links to the martyred Kennedy would help neutralize Republican attacks on Johnson's allegedly halfhearted response to Communist encroachments in Vietnam.¹

Arriving in Saigon in July, Taylor faced an enormous challenge, that of instilling in a dispirited ally the will to pursue the struggle against the Communists. In pursuit of this objective, he launched a concerted effort to develop personal relationships with important Vietnamese both in and outside government. His purpose was, unfortunately, not well served by an imperious style that soon alienated most of the Vietnamese military leadership; as we shall see, the resulting tension soon generated a reprise of the Station's periodic service as interpreter and intermediary between the Embassy and the ruling generals. Taylor displayed no more enthusiasm for such an Agency role than Lodge had done; it was forced on him by the imperative of continued communication between the United States and the various actual and aspirant power centers in the Vietnamese military.²

¹Kahin, *Intervention*, p. 214.

²Miller interview, 7 April 1992.

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In any case, the problem was not just personalities: substantive issues and the pressures of an American presidential campaign also contributed to the friction with the generals. In May, as noted earlier, Khanh had urged visiting Defense Secretary McNamara to begin air attacks on North Vietnam. Washington was already locked in debate on this issue and wanted Khanh to abstain from any public statement pending a US decision. The matter was all the more sensitive because of the Johnson campaign's eagerness to brand Goldwater as the proponent of an expanded war. But Khanh went public on 19 July, calling for a "march to the North." Two days later, General Ky issued a more explicit call to bomb the North. Taylor protested to Khanh this apparent move to force the US hand, and Khanh retorted that the bombing idea had originated with the Americans. There was conflict also over the future of "Big Minh," to whom Khanh and his allies had awarded the ceremonial post of chief of state. Secretary of State Dean Rusk wanted the generals to exploit his prestige and Buddhist affiliation to rally popular support for the war, but pressure was growing from Catholic elements in ARVN for his removal.³ []

Ambassador Taylor thought this discord reflected nothing more than conflicting American and Vietnamese perceptions of how best to combat the Viet Cong. De Silva, by contrast, thought he saw in the dispute something deeper than disagreement over strategy and bilateral protocol:

The shakiness of Khanh's position, the tremors that are running through the [Saigon] leadership, and the reports of acute war weariness and actions possibly under way to sense out [sic] the French on the subject of negotiations . . . represent not only a maneuver to catalyze USG reactions, but [also] a grave crisis facing Khanh and his leadership, and appear to me to be a crisis possibly involving the will of the present leadership to continue the war.⁴ []

Whether influenced by Saigon's military or simply in response to the continuing decline in South Vietnamese fortunes, the Johnson Administration was disposed to reply in kind when, on 2 August, North Vietnamese PT boats attacked the US destroyer Maddox off the coast of North Vietnam. Two days later, the US Navy reported more attacks, and President Johnson ordered retaliation against Hanoi's gunboats and supporting facilities; Congress backed him on 7 August with near-unanimous passage of the joint Tonkin Gulf resolution.⁵ []

¹Kahin, *Intervention*, pp. 212-216. []

²Barman, "Record on Vietnam." []
³"Vietnam Chronology," pp. 46-47. []

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Although directly responsive to Khanh's and Ky's urge to take the war to the North, US air attacks and the Tonkin Gulf resolution did not relieve the friction among the Saigon generals. They convened in secret on 16 August at the resort town of Vung Tau, where Ky took advantage of Minh's absence to urge his removal as chief of state. A majority agreed, and on the 16th Khanh announced the abolition of Minh's position and his own ascendancy to supreme power.⁶ []

This provoked rioting by both Buddhists and Catholics, and Khanh resigned. He then returned, now as the leader of a triumvirate with "Big" Minh and Tran Thien Khiem, that he said would form a civilian government within 60 days. In the resulting confusion, the Station used its clandestine sources to assess the political balance of power, with []

[] reporting directly on the generals' deliberations and on a continuing spate of coup rumors. A Station agent [] furnished an authoritative perspective on the Northern faction in the military, and another agent at the field-grade level reported on the other main faction, the one influenced by the southern wing of the Dai Viet Party. They reported, among other things, Khanh's effort to eliminate the Dai Viet politicians from government, and a Station contact [] [] now warned of an imminent coup by Dai Viet sympathizers in the military.⁷ []

With the generals progressively more divided, and Khanh's relationship with Taylor increasingly tense, the Station's window on the plans and perceptions of the generals was now clouded by the departure of Lou Conein. As Conein later recalled it, Khanh had summoned him to Dalat for a recitation of his grievances against Taylor, which he wanted conveyed directly to the Ambassador. COS de Silva saw no alternative to honoring this request, and he and Conein later found Taylor leaving the tennis court. The Ambassador had no questions or comments about their account, except at the end, when he frostily inquired whether Conein was sure he understood French, the language of the meeting with Khanh. A day or so later, on 2 September 1964, Taylor told de Silva that Conein's usefulness had come to an end.⁸ []

⁶FVS 10,605, 18 August 1964, [] FVSA 18282, 18 January 1965, [] FVSA 18342, 26 January 1965, []

⁷FVSA 18282; FVS 10,688, n.d., [] FVSA 18342; [] 20 August 1964, [] FVS 10,684, 30 August 1964, []

⁸Conein interview, 19 February 1992; Farman, "Record on Vietnam." []

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The Dai Viets Against Khanh [redacted]

After Conein's unceremonious departure, the COS tried to pick up the slack. On 11 September, Khanh told him that he had a letter from the activist monk, Thich Tri Quang, promising him Buddhist support; Khanh also implicitly confirmed the uncertainty of his own position when he acknowledged Quang's doubtful sincerity. Meanwhile, the Station's sources in the various factions regaled their case officers with accounts of convoluted plotting: Dai Viet officers against Khanh, and Pham Ngoc Thao and General Ky, with Khanh's endorsement, against the Dai Viets. On 13 September, a coalition of southern Catholics and Dai Viets—then Brig. Gen. Nguyen Van Thieu among them—fulfilled the prediction of the Dai Viet source, bringing troop units toward Saigon in a halfhearted coup attempt that Ky and his allies quickly squelched. Khanh seized the opportunity to effect the bloodless purge of senior Dai Viet officers that [redacted]

[redacted] said he had been preparing since the beginning of September.⁹ [redacted] Ky's role in putting down the coup established him as a major player in the game of military politics, and his subsequent erratic talk sparked concern at CIA Headquarters. Ky was reported to be threatening to defect to Hanoi even as he pressed for bombing of the North, and Headquarters asked the Station to "undertake some intensive cultivation of Ky to learn his thinking and to influence it." The Station doubted that Ky was politically ambitious, beyond some muscle flexing as a king-maker, and deprecated his ability: he was "childish and often irresponsible . . . not particularly intelligent or sophisticated." It might become necessary, the Station thought, to put Russ Miller back in touch with him, [redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]

Miller arrived on one of his TDY visits at the end of September 1964 and saw both Ky and Gen. Cao Van Vien, Chief of the Joint General Staff. As the apparently self-appointed spokesmen for the military's "young Turks," Ky affirmed his support of Khanh and urged Miller to

⁹Saigon Embassy Telegram 815, 11 September 1964, [redacted] Memorandum "Plans to Purge the Dai Viet Party Military officers," 2 September 1964, [redacted] extract from Embassy Airgram A-158, 25 July 1974, [redacted] FVS 10,702, 2 September 1964, [redacted]

[redacted] The Dai Viet Party arose early in the 20th century as a nationalist political party hostile to the French colonial power. Conspiratorial in style, its membership was drawn mostly from the small French-educated professional class. [redacted]

"[redacted] SAIG 8920, 22 September 1964; [redacted] A Headquarters observer thought more highly of Ky, describing him at this time as "probably one of the most capable and influential military leaders in South Vietnam." (See blind memorandum, "Air Commodore Nguyen Cao Ky," 28 September 1964, [redacted])

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get Khanh to risk unpopularity by consolidating his power at the expense of the factions. Vien, whom Miller regarded as an apolitical military professional, offered no prescriptions but insisted on the importance of the political dimension: "The battle will not be won militarily until there is an improvement in the generals' political strength and a corresponding reduction in VC political strength."¹¹ □

FE Division Chief William Colby was also in Saigon, and he and Miller visited Khanh in Dalat on 3 October. Khanh complained that his longtime interlocutors Spera and Conein were now both gone, and the timing of Conein's departure—the day before the aborted 13 September coup—suggested some ulterior Agency motive. Colby replied vaguely that Spera's continued presence would have caused "certain complications," and that Conein's high profile meant that his "usefulness had passed." But he added that Khanh's old friend Miller would shortly return to Saigon for a new tour. Khanh immediately proposed to make Miller his informal contact with the US Mission. Colby noted the protocol anomaly of such an Agency relationship with the Prime Minister and suggested that Khanh choose an intermediary through whom to maintain indirect contact.¹² □

With or without Spera and Conein, it seemed that communication between the governments needed improvement. Khanh's distaste for Taylor's authoritarian style had by late September hardened into a distrust of the Ambassador that Colby's deputy at Headquarters described as "very deep and not totally without foundation."¹³ □

Upheaval on the Vietnamese side complicated access to its principal actors. Gen. Tran Thien Khiem, a longtime Miller contact, had played a leading if ambiguous role in the Khanh regime: possibly the instigator of anti-Khanh demonstrations during the summer of 1964, he was at the same time Khanh's Minister of Defense. He then joined the triumvirate that followed Khanh's resignation offer in late August. In early October, Khanh moved against Khiem, sending him to West Germany on a contrived diplomatic mission. In a final session with Russ Miller, Khiem railed about Khanh's indulgence of Buddhist dissidence, and said that only the lack of hard proof of Buddhist neutralism and anti-Americanism prevented him from mounting a coup against Khanh.¹⁴ □

"[redacted] FVS 10,821, 1 October 1964; [redacted]
"Unsigned memorandum of conversation among Gen. Nguyen Khanh and Messrs. William Colby and Russ Miller, 3 October 1964; [redacted]

¹¹FRUS, 1964-1968, I, Vietnam, 1964, p. 805; Robert J. Myers, Memorandum for the Record, "Meeting on Possible Action to Support South Vietnam, 25 September 1964," 3 October 1964; [redacted]

"Office of Current Intelligence, Intelligence Brief, "Tran Thien Khiem, Vietnamese Ambassador-designate to the US," 10 December 1964; FVS 10,854, 8 October 1964; [redacted]

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Despite the tension between Khanh and Taylor, they consulted in October about the composition of the civilian government that Khanh had pledged would replace his military regime. Using the Miller channel, Khanh worked to sabotage "Big Minh's" reputation with Taylor by accusing him of having negotiated with the French for a neutralist solution to the war. But, true to his assurances to Taylor and to Miller that he would step down, he relinquished the prime ministry in October, turning it over to the veteran civilian politician Tran Van Huong; he held on, however, to his command of the armed forces. Meanwhile, Russ Miller was keeping an eye on Nguyen Cao Ky. The unpredictable Air Force commander now looked more sensitive to broad policy issues, worrying aloud to Miller about possible US disengagement from Vietnam after the November 1964 American presidential elections. As Headquarters now saw him, he had outgrown his role as mere spokesman for the "young Turk" general officers, and as their de facto leader was probably the most powerful man in South Vietnam.¹⁵

Taylor Against Khanh

The cordiality of the Station's contact with Khanh represented one fruit of Miller's practice of getting to know anyone who might at some point be useful. He had contrived an introduction to Khanh during his first Vietnam tour, which had ended in 1962. They got along well, as reflected in Khanh's inquiry about him almost two years later, and when Miller returned for a new tour of duty in Saigon in December 1964 he and Mrs. Miller were promptly invited to a holiday reception hosted by the general. Arriving at the party, the Millers found themselves the only foreigners in attendance. As Miller later recalled it, while they were talking to Khanh, Mrs. Miller winced at some infelicity in her husband's French. Khanh noticed, and told her not to worry, as he and Mr. Miller understood each other very well.¹⁶

This empathy, characteristic of Agency relationships with its Vietnamese contacts, probably influenced Khanh's choice of Miller to inform the Americans of the military's next move. At five in the morning on 20 December, he called Miller in to announce the abolition of the High National Council, which the military had set up in August to give the

¹⁵ *FRUS, 1964-1968, I, Vietnam, 1964, passim*; FVS 10,902, 17 October 1964, and blind memorandum, "Air Commodore Nguyen Cao Ky,"

27 October 1964,

¹⁶ Miller interviews, 17 February and 7 April 1992. Also see Saigon Embassy Airgram A-158, 25 July 1974.

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appearance of civilian participation in government. Khanh justified this on the ground that the Council had tried to prevent the forced retirement of senior officers including Duong Van "Big Minh." Worried about armed forces unity, Ambassador Taylor had also tried to discourage Minh's dismissal, and Khanh's apparent defiance infuriated him. He summoned to his office four of the young officers involved, including Ky and Thieu, and accused them of jeopardizing US support for Vietnam. Khanh refused to make an appearance at the Embassy, so Taylor went to see him at Joint General Staff headquarters. Khanh repeated the rationale he had given Miller for dissolving the Council, and Taylor declared that Khanh no longer enjoyed his confidence. Khanh offered to resign his command, a move which the Ambassador encouraged.¹⁷ []

Khanh did not follow through on this offer, however, and in the ensuing standoff his intentions remained mysterious. Looking for clarification, Taylor authorized Miller to visit Khanh at Vung Tau on 22 December. Khanh recounted his side of the confrontation with Taylor, with whom he was now "at absolute checkmate." In what looked to Miller like a pro forma gesture, Khanh again offered to resign in the interests of an effective war effort. He urged Miller to try to arrange a visit by Defense Secretary McNamara or DCI McCone to verify the gravity of the crisis, and warned that he or the "young Turks" might soon hold a press conference protesting Taylor's interference, even at the risk of provoking anti-American demonstrations.¹⁸ []

The press conference seems not to have taken place, but some of the generals began agitating for Taylor's recall. On 30 December, Miller drove to Khanh's villa. The atmosphere was cordial, but Khanh insisted on conversing at the dining room table, which Miller inferred was bugged. Having had a week to reflect, Khanh was less adamant about Taylor's departure, but reacted hesitantly to Miller's suggestion that he invite the Ambassador to Vung Tau for a reconciliation. The Ambassador, apprised of Miller's proposal, was equally noncommittal. Khanh then suddenly adopted the idea and tried to force the issue by inviting Miller and both Taylor and the Deputy Ambassador, U. Alexis Johnson, to dinner on 3 January 1965. Taylor and Johnson declined, and de Silva explained to Headquarters that "several noses had to have their joints adjusted." The Station's efforts were finally rewarded on 7 January, when

¹⁷FRUS, 1964-1968, I, Vietnam, 1964, pp. 1014-1023; FVSA 18212, 29 December 1964, []

[] Unsigned Memorandum for the Record, "Some Thoughts on Possible Vietnamese Reactions to U.S. Positions taken since 20 December 1964," 5 January 1965, []

¹⁸FVSA 18212, []

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the crisis passed with a compromise in which the generals agreed through Miller to restore civilian government, but without reconstituting the High National Council.¹⁹ []

While the Station labored to preserve US communications with General Khanh, its agents reported on the "young Turks'" growing influence in the government and their disenchantment, also growing, with Khanh. One source reported in early January that the "young Turks" were determined to oust Khanh as armed forces commander, despite the temporary solidarity produced by the Ambassador's criticism of the entire group. One school of Station thought doubted this, believing that US pressure for civilian government, accompanied by threats to reduce military and economic aid, put Khanh in a position that no one would covet. And for the moment, the military and the politicians merely continued arguing about a new cabinet and about the way to treat dissident Buddhists.²⁰ []

Presumably to mollify the Dai Viets, Khanh eventually settled on one of their veteran leaders, Phan Huy Quat, as his new Prime Minister. Most of the cabinet portfolios went to civilians, but Khanh also inserted two of the "young Turks": Nguyen Van Thieu was promoted to major general and became Vice-Prime Minister and Minister of the Armed Forces on 18 January. At the same time, Air Force Commander Nguyen Cao Ky accepted concurrent appointment as Minister of Youth and Sports. He launched his tenure, according to a Station agent [] by mandating a youth organization along Nazi lines; it should have a uniform with black tunic, boots, and armband with a special insignia. Ky thought the West German Embassy might have useful literature on the subject, but someone suggested a briefing by his predecessor before he proceeded. At this session, Ky recognized that the real task was to prepare rural youth to defend their hamlets against the Viet Cong, for which flashy uniforms would not suffice.²¹ []

¹⁹ FVS 11,125, 30 December 1964, and SAIG 0915, 5 January 1965 [] Russ Miller, Memorandum for the Record, "Miller Meeting with General Khanh on 30 Dec 1100-1215 hours at Vung Tau," 31 December 1964, [] Miller interview, 7 April 1992. On 6 January, meeting Khanh at Vung Tau, General Westmoreland offered to serve as intermediary with Ambassador Taylor. Khanh had already mentioned an emissary, presumably Russ Miller, sent by Taylor, and responded to Westmoreland that "he wanted to spare me from getting involved in politics" (see William E. Westmoreland, Memorandum for the Record, "Meeting with General Khanh," 6 January 1965, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Westmoreland Papers, History Backup, #12). []

²⁰ Blind Memorandum, apparently by Station officer Harry Petersen, 4 January 1965, [] MPR, "Possible Vietnamese Reactions"; and *passim*, Volume II, [] Volume II, *passim*, []

²¹ SAIG 1336, 26 January 1965 [] Volume II, *passim*; FVS 11,275, 30 January 1965, and []

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However out of touch he might be with the problems of the civil society, Ky kept a close watch on military politics. On 3 February, he told Russ Miller that Khanh had lost the support of all his colleagues and would have to be removed. His apparently sarcastic prediction of Khanh's survival under US protection provoked Ambassador Taylor to send Miller back to him with the message that "we are in no way propping up General Khanh or backing him in any fashion." Miller's trafficking with the mutually suspicious generals seems not to have damaged his credit with any of them, as he simultaneously continued the liaison with Khanh, a task that included setting up a meeting with the visiting McGeorge Bundy, President Johnson's National Security Adviser, on 5 February 1965.²² []

The End of the Khanh Regime []

Bundy was in Saigon at the beginning of another round of military escalation and political chaos. On 7 February 1965, the Viet Cong attacked the US airbase at Pleiku, in the central highlands, killing eight Americans and inflicting serious material damage. The same day, US planes retaliated with bombing raids on North Vietnam. Two weeks later, after an initially inconclusive military coup, Nguyen Khanh acceded to Maxwell Taylor's desire and resigned. [] Gen. Tran Van "Little Minh" then became acting commander of the armed forces, while Nguyen Van Thieu took over the Armed Forces Council from Khanh. But the ante had been raised on both sides. The VC followed up their Pleiku attack by planting a bomb in a US barracks at Qui Nhon, killing 23 more Americans, and on 2 March the US replaced its earlier ad hoc retaliatory raids against the North with the sustained bombing campaign known as Operation Rolling Thunder.²³ []

This military coup, the second since the fall of Ngo Dinh Diem, began on 19 February, when the same Dai Viet and militantly Catholic officers responsible for the September 1964 attempt against Khanh tried again. Again, the Station served as an Embassy link to both the sponsors of the coup and its target. Russ Miller arrived home for lunch that day to find waiting for him the same army dentist who had provided cover for a meeting between Lou Conein and Tran Van Don during the conspiracy against Ngo Dinh Diem. Captain Long fidgeted about, refusing even a

²² [] Saigon Embassy Telegram 2389, 3 February 1965, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, National Security File, Vietnam, Volume XXVII; SAIG 1576, 5 February 1965. []
"Vietnam Chronology," pp. 52-53. []

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soft drink, until the stroke of one. At that point, he opened up, listing for Miller the military commanders supporting the announcement being made at that moment by Chief of State Pham Khac Suu, that Khanh was being dismissed. Ky and his allies immediately repudiated this move, and the resulting impasse threatened fratricidal violence.²⁴ []

The "young Turks'" objection to the move against Khanh concerned timing and means, not ends, and Ky explained to Miller on 21 February that Brig. Gen. Lam Van Phat and the other mutineers should have given Khanh a chance to make good on his earlier expressed willingness to resign. Now, personal honor had come into play, and Khanh was standing fast. On the 22nd, Ambassador Taylor convened his staff to find a solution to the impasse. General Westmoreland volunteered to "chopper down there" to Vung Tau to see Khanh, but Taylor vetoed this as impossible to conceal from American newsmen. So Miller went instead, and listened to Khanh's side of the story. Back in Saigon, he described Khanh's terms for resignation; the Ambassador then authorized him and Deputy Chief of Station Gordon Jorgensen to convey these to Ky and the other members of the Armed Forces Council.²⁵ []

Late that night, the two drove to Vietnamese Air Force Headquarters, where an aide ushered them into a housekeeping closet. There they waited until about midnight, when Ky joined them. On the way in, Miller had seen enough activity to conclude that the entire Armed Forces Council must be present. He asked why, and Ky explained that Khanh's skill at manipulating his colleagues made it imperative to keep everybody in sight. Ky stayed with the visitors until almost dawn—they never left the utility room—while Jorgensen pressed for a face-saving exit for Khanh. Ky seemed amenable to the suggested terms—whatever his faults, Miller thought, vindictiveness was not among them—and the Americans finally left to report back to the Embassy.²⁶ []

²⁴Embassy Airgram A-158; Miller interviews, 5 November 1991 and 19 February 1992; [] *Pentagon Papers*, Gravel Edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), II, p. 295. [] Once the coup attempt got under way, MACV provided another channel to the rebels, as the senior adviser to the Air Force, Brig. Gen. Robert B. Rowland, accompanied Lam Van Phat, one of the Dai Viet principals, and Communist agent Pham Ngoc Thao, representing Ambassador to Washington Tran Thien Khiem, to Bien Hoa Airbase to confer with Ky (see Blind Memorandum, "Saigon Coup Situation as of 12:00 EST, February 19, 1965," Lyndon B. Johnson Library, National Security File, Vietnam, Volume II[b]). []

²⁵FVS 11,393, 19 February, 1965, and SAIG 2062, 22 February 1965. [] Miller interviews, 19 February 1992 and 7 April 1992. One Station cable said that Miller went to Vung Tau with Col. Jasper Wilson, Khanh's former adviser in I Corps, and Kahin says there was a "CIA officer accompanying Wilson" who reported Khanh's side of the story. In a 1992 interview, Miller said he could not recall traveling with Wilson, and that Wilson certainly did not attend this meeting with Khanh. See SAIG 2062, 22 February 1965. [] Kahin, Intervention, p. 301; Miller interview, 19 February 1992. []

²⁶SAIG 2062; Miller interviews, 19 February and 7 April 1992. []

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But Ky could not deliver, at least not immediately, for Khanh had antagonized too many of his AFC colleagues with divisive maneuvers and an alleged order for an armored attack on key facilities at Tan Son Nhut airport and in Saigon. Despite the standoff, the Station remained optimistic about a bloodless outcome, telling Headquarters that "Khanh may twist and turn a bit more but [we] believe his shoulders are about to be pinned to [the] mat for good." Events justified this optimism when, on 24 February 1965, Khanh relinquished command of the armed forces, accepting exile as a roving ambassador; [redacted] Gen. Tran Van Minh replaced him. Nguyen Van Thieu replaced Khanh in his capacity as chairman of the Armed Forces Council.²⁷ [redacted]

Khanh's departure was the third in little more than a year of a Vietnamese leader whom the US had once held to be irreplaceable, and this change of command did no more than its predecessors had to end the political malaise in Saigon. The civilian Cabinet left behind by Khanh had little authority and no energy. Popular enthusiasm for the war continued to sag, and the police broke up a neutralist group's press conference which the media described as the "first open effort to rally support against the war effort." The latest change at the top also aggravated the perennial management crisis that impaired the Station's working-level intelligence liaison, as the chief of the Central Intelligence Organization chose to go into exile with Khanh.²⁸ [redacted]

Further decay in the government's position in the countryside accompanied political apathy in Saigon. Pacification languished, even in the provinces around Saigon to which both the US Mission and the Vietnamese had given first priority. Nothing in the record suggests that Tran Van Minh provided more effective leadership of the armed forces than his predecessors had. [redacted]

[redacted] Looking for ways to jolt Saigon out of its paralysis, US officials debated whether to try imposing a joint military command on the Vietnamese and then seeding ARVN units with American troops. These ideas gradually gave way to a more direct application of US military power. The Rolling Thunder bombing campaign began on 2 March, as

²⁷SAIG 2062; Reuters dispatch, 25 February 1965. [redacted] An example of the fluidity of political fortunes in South Vietnam is Tran Thien Khiem, at this time still Ambassador to Washington after having been exiled by Nguyen Khanh. Reporting on the new alignment, Tran Van Minh evaluated Khiem as "militarily and politically . . . 'dead.'" Later, under Nguyen Van Thieu, Khiem rose to become Interior Minister, Chief of the Joint General Staff, and eventually Prime Minister. (See [redacted] [redacted])

²⁸Reuters and UPI dispatches, 25 February 1965, and FVS 11,413, 22 February 1965, all [redacted]

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already noted, and the Administration deployed its first integral combat ground forces when it landed US Marines at Da Nang on 8 March to assure the security of the US airbase there.²⁹ []

The Emergence of Thieu and Ky []

The air war against the North and the arrival of US ground forces in the South represented not merely an expanded American commitment but de facto assumption of the burden of fighting the burgeoning insurgency and its sponsors in Hanoi. Meanwhile, the political disorder that inhibited the South Vietnamese war effort once again thrust the Station into the kind of exercise at which it excelled: exploiting its sources on all sides of a complicated problem to get a balanced perspective. []

[] Tran Van Minh and Marine Gen. Le Nguyen Khang, and the Station's stable of witting contacts included eight more generals. Civilian contacts supplemented these military sources. One of these was Prime Minister Phan Huy Quat, long acquainted with Agency officers, []

[] It was a casual contact, however, an Army colonel acquainted with Station officer Stuart Methven, who offered the personal papers Khanh had left behind when he went into exile. []

[] They turned out to contain no important revelations, but one customer for them was Ambassador Taylor, who wanted a complete set.³⁰ []

While the Station sorted out the personalities and prospects of the new regime, the Viet Cong exploited the vulnerability of the Embassy to terrorist attack. On 29 March 1965, a car bomb detonated directly in front of the annex adjoining the Chancery. Flying glass killed a Station secretary and wounded others, including COS de Silva, who was evacuated and replaced by his deputy, Gordon Jorgensen.³¹ []

At 51, Jorgensen was five years older than de Silva. Born in Japan of missionary parents, he had served in the Pacific as an Army intelligence officer, ending the war as a lieutenant colonel. Entering the Agency in 1953, he went to Vientiane in 1960 and as Chief of Station there

²⁹Jeffrey C. Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1988), pp. 85-96; Harry G. Summers, Jr., *Vietnam War Almanac* (Facts on File Publications, 1985), pp. 34-35. []

³⁰SAIG 2342, 4 March 1963, [] FVSA 18515, 18 March 1965, [] FVSA 17236, 16 March 1964, [] *passim*. []

³¹"Vietnam Chronology," p. 54. []

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launched the Laotian paramilitary programs. He was at Headquarters as second in command of CIA paramilitary operations before coming to Saigon in late 1963.³² []

Jorgensen set out to continue de Silva's efforts to build rural pacification programs while helping to shore up the GVN's morale. Meanwhile, Headquarters wanted to debrief Nguyen Khanh on his claimed links to the Vietnamese Communists. During an early April visit in New York, Conein asked him about these connections, wanting to know if they involved Hanoi or the National Liberation Front. Khanh claimed to have good contacts with both, some of them handled by Col. Le Van Nhieu, the former Commissioner of Saigon's Central Intelligence Organization who had accompanied him into exile. Khanh claimed he could reestablish these contacts, but would do so only if Washington had an "overall strategic plan involving contact with Hanoi and penetration of the National Liberation Front." Curiously, there seems to have been no followthrough on this topic; Khanh's old friend Al Spera saw Colonel Nhieu during the summer, but there is no record that he inquired about contacts with Hanoi or the NLF.³³ []

In mid-May, Prime Minister Quat sent fellow Dai Viet and Station contact Bui Diem to tell Jorgensen about a cache of "really black" money left behind by Nguyen Khanh. Quat wanted to surface its existence and donate it to some worthy cause, but hesitated to do so without the availability of other resources he could devote to ad hoc political and organizational expenses. Jorgensen noted for Headquarters that this accorded with the Agency's mandate to help strengthen the Quat government, but nothing appears to have come of it. The Quat administration survived, in any case, only another month, when the generals ended the experiment with civilian government. They replaced the former Armed Forces Council with the Military Directorate, and on 18 June 1965 Nguyen Van Thieu became its chairman and de facto Chief of State, with Air Vice Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky serving as Prime Minister.³⁴ []

[]
"William Colby, Memorandum for the DDP, "Memorandum on Discussions with Lt. General Nguyen Khanh, 1 and 2 April 1965," 6 April 1965, Job 78-597R, Box 1, Folder 10, ARC; [] *passem*. No evidence has been found to support Kahin's claim in *Intervention* that the US Government had information in early 1965 on correspondence between Khanh and Huynh Tan Phat, secretary of the NLF Central Committee, that discussed a negotiated settlement. Kahin seems to have relied mainly on Khanh's statements, and Khanh, as Russ Miller saw him, was quick to sense what an interlocutor wanted to hear (see Kahin, *Intervention*, pp. 295-296, and Miller interview, 6 April 1993). The National Liberation Front for South Vietnam, usually called the National Liberation Front or simply NLF, was created by Hanoi in December 1960 to mobilize both Communist and non-Communist opponents of Ngo Dinh Diem in the armed insurgency launched a year earlier. []

"FVSA 18717, 15 May 1965, [] Gravel, II, pp. 296, 361-362; Embassy Airgram A-158, []

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With their accession to power, the personal and professional styles of Thieu and Ky became of intense interest to US officials. Thieu's reserved personality made him difficult to judge, and a valid assessment of this enigmatic figure was further complicated, for CIA, by a shortage of sources among the Southern-born officers who surrounded him. But everyone found him cautious, perhaps to a fault; some thought him xenophobic and suspicious to the point of paranoia.³⁵ []

Ky represented an entirely different problem. He was readily accessible to the Station and literally surrounded by CIA [] contacts, and the task was to determine what, if anything, lay behind the flashy exterior. As of June 1965, [] Station contacts depicted a first-class pilot and a poor administrator whose genuine charisma had given Air Force morale a dramatic boost when he became its commander in late 1963. He was also a thrill seeker and risk taker, according to [] intimates, renowned for his drinking, gambling, and an endless succession of girlfriends; he also indulged a penchant for insubordination. A second [] had reported, after Ky's brief arrest for complicity in the February 1962 bombing of the Palace, that he would probably support another such venture "for the thrill, not for political reasons."³⁶ []

Ky tackled his new job with characteristically brash energy and shortly produced a 26-point agenda for prosecuting the war. But there were at best no short-term prospects that his program could reverse the regime's sagging fortunes. As the total of American forces in Vietnam climbed past 50,000 men in June 1965, President Johnson authorized the commitment of US ground forces to offensive operations. In the atmosphere of desperation that prevailed in the US Mission in Saigon, COS Jorgensen set out to reduce the Station's role as a channel to the military leadership and to concentrate on trying to help stem VC advances in the countryside. He saw General Ky on 21 June 1965—they had not met since the utility-room conference on 22 February—and briefed him on the rural intelligence and pacification programs. Ky asked if Russ Miller was still around. He was, but had already begun to withdraw from his role as middleman between the Embassy and the Vietnamese military. Jorgensen told Headquarters that, while he anticipated future contact with Ky, he thought the Ambassador would prefer that it be confined to CIA business.³⁷ []

³⁵ [] *passim.* []

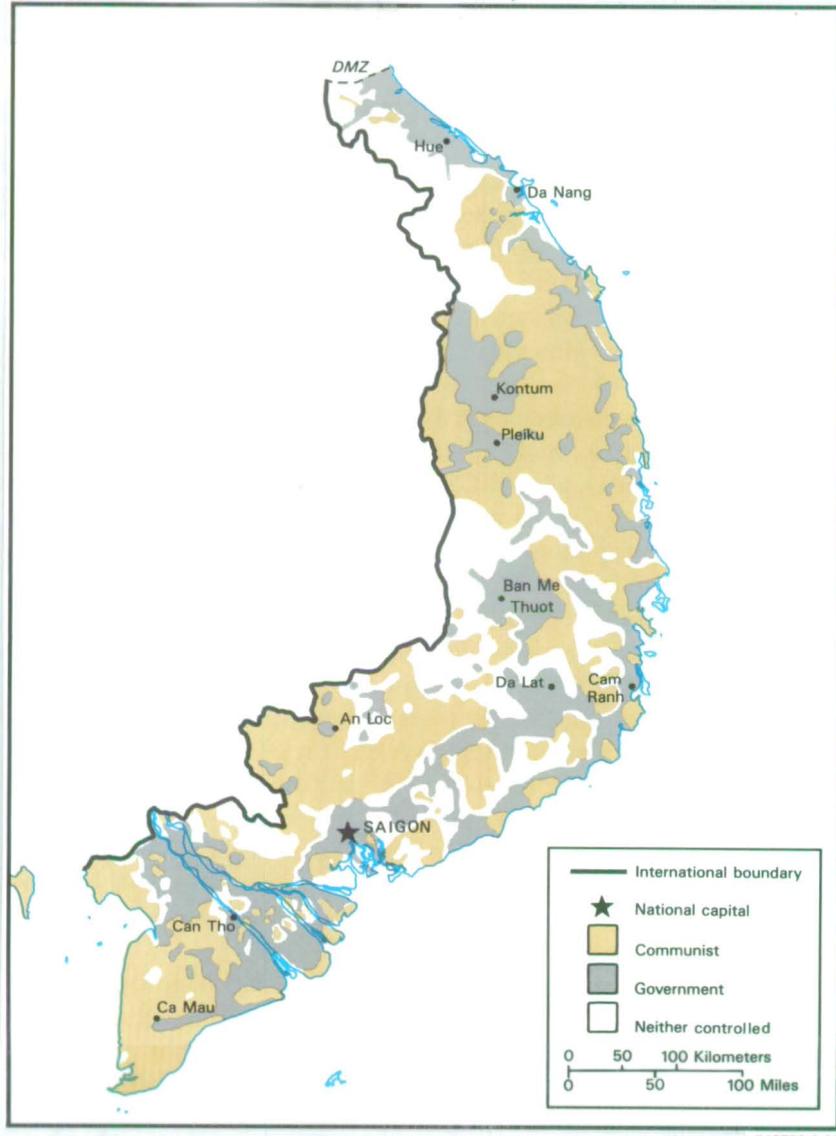
³⁶ Extract from FVS 8321, 28 December 1962; Extract from [] report of 11 March 1962; and *passim.* []

³⁷ SAIG 4747, 22 June 1965; FVSA 18889, 6 July 1965; [] Gravel, II, p. 363; Miller interview, 12 November 1991. []

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Figure 3 Communist and Government Territorial Control in South Vietnam, 1965



Ky endorsed the field programs and accepted an offer to tour the Station's pacification training center at Vung Tau. But like all his predecessors, he parried an offer of CIA help with the organization and staffing of South Vietnamese intelligence. Also like his predecessors, he worried about the Agency's attitude toward potential coup sponsors. Jorgensen

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noted that he had given warning information to Prime Minister Quat during a brief coup scare in May. Ky smiled and said he hoped the Station would do the same for him; Jorgensen assured him it would.³⁸ []

The Station and the An Quang Buddhists []

Quat's civilian government had been popular with the Buddhist leadership, and its demise threatened a return of the Buddhist-led unrest that preceded the fall of Ngo Dinh Diem. This would have compounded an already-desperate military situation, and the Station tried to help prevent it with token material support for the An Quang Buddhists led by the Venerable Tri Quang. Mutually hesitant negotiations produced an agreement in August 1965; the Station would subsidize An Quang training programs, with the understanding that the activity would remain nonpolitical. Quang's suspicion of the new Thieu-Ky regime—he was nearly paranoid about Thieu's alleged Catholic and Diemist sympathies—made his relationship with CIA an uneasy one, and Headquarters worried that he would use Agency money to finance dissident activity. But payments continued at least through December, by which time he had received some 2,000,000 piasters, about \$12,500.³⁹ []

Station officers in touch with other An Quang leaders reinforced this modest initiative, but COS Jorgensen otherwise held the line on Station involvement in policy issues. As it happened, a change of US ambassadors abetted this preference. Maxwell Taylor, burdened by frigid relationships with the Vietnamese and his antipathy toward the use of US ground forces, had not been asked to spend a second year in Saigon; he resigned on 8 July 1965. President Johnson, as eager as Kennedy had been to have a Republican on the front lines, replaced him with Henry Cabot Lodge, who returned in August for his second tour as US Ambassador to South Vietnam.⁴⁰ []

As in late 1963, after the coup against Diem, Lodge assigned the Station no part in the handling of government contacts. His characteristic passivity with respect to Vietnamese internal politics not only eliminated any action role for the Station in this area, but also quickly brought

³⁸FVSA 18889; SAIG 4862, 27 June 1965; unsigned Memorandum for the Record, "Marshall Nguyen Cao Ky Visit to the CAS Vung Tau Training Sites, n.d.; []

³⁹FVSA 19011, 9 August 1965; FVSW 8571, 9 September 1965; []

[] FVSA 19515, 14 December 1965; attachment 3 to FVSA 26054, 26 August 1968; []
[] Policy authority for this came from NSAM 328, 6 April 1965, a document which prescribed a 12-point program the Agency was to carry out in Vietnam, mainly in the field of rural pacification. []

⁴⁰Kahn, *Intervention*, p. 349; Gravel, II, p. 365; "Vietnam Chronology," p. 58. []

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him head to head with the dissident Buddhists. While Lodge argued that wartime stresses made new elections impracticable, the An Quang Buddhists were insisting on the indispensability of elections to legitimize the government. The modest Station subsidy to Tri Quang thus continued in the shadow of the Buddhists' distrust of the generals and disagreement with the Americans.⁴¹ []

During the last months of 1965, as the growing US military commitment slowed Communist military exploitation of Saigon's political weakness, COS Jorgensen accelerated the expansion of the pacification programs that he saw as indispensable to the government's recovery in the countryside. Although the CIA role was nominally limited to advice and support, the Agency adopted the suggestions of various local Vietnamese officials, then furnished the organizational initiative and all the resources, and exercised de facto control of programs carried out at the province level. Like the US military, it had essentially dispensed with the faltering Vietnamese leadership in Saigon and taken charge of its portion of the war. []

⁴¹ [] Memorandum to Chief of Station, "Thich Tri Quang," 26 August 1968, [] interview by the author, Newport Beach, CA, 3 June 1993 (hereafter cited as [] interview). []

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Chapter 3

Looking for a Way Out

The arrival at Da Nang of the US Third Marine Regiment in early March 1965 had introduced the first American combat units to Vietnam and brought the US military presence to 27,000 men. On 6 April, President Johnson authorized the commitment of US forces to offensive ground operations in South Vietnam. In May, the US Army's 173rd Airborne Brigade arrived, and as its combat forces grew, the US started to assume the major burden of combat with Viet Cong and North Vietnamese regulars. By December, US forces numbered 180,000, and by June 1966 some 285,000.¹

Even before the introduction of US forces, burgeoning domestic opposition to the war had forced the Administration to give at least the appearance of openness to a negotiated settlement. Indeed, there was some real hope in the State Department that the US could find exploitable tensions between the NLF and its Northern sponsors, and in the summer of 1965 Assistant Secretary William Bundy asked CIA to explore this possibility. DCI Richard Helms thought the idea impractical and very risky: The Agency could not guarantee the discretion of the third-country contacts through whom it would have to work, and if US sponsorship were revealed, it would suggest to both Hanoi and Saigon that American will was flagging. The Administration was not deterred, but it took another year before the Agency became actively involved.²

¹Harry G. Summers, Jr., *Vietnam War Almanac*, pp. 33-36; "Vietnam Chronology," p. 70.

²Richard Helms, Memorandum for Mr. William P. Bundy, "Possible Contact with the National Liberation Front," 2 July 1965.

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In January 1966, Prime Minister Ky provoked renewed dissidence when he proposed to substitute an appointed committee for the elected constituent assembly that was to write a new constitution and restore civilian government. The Buddhists' militant faction in Hue launched the so-called Struggle Movement, which commanded the sympathy of senior ARVN generals in the northern provinces. Militant Catholics and Diem loyalists contended against anti-Diem and pro-Dai Viet elements in the military, while both these groupings opposed Buddhist-supported neutralism. And there were divisions within these factions. The military had its Buddhist sympathizers, and some Catholics were hostile to the unreconstructed Diemists. CIA in Saigon used its sources, [redacted]

[redacted] to try to elucidate for its customers this multidimensional conflict, while General Westmoreland and Marine General Lewis W. Walt, the latter based in Da Nang, dealt with the contending generals.³ [redacted]

As Prime Minister Ky replaced one unsuccessful I Corps commander after another, and the confrontation hardened, people started preparing to blow up each other's bridges. In mid-May, Vietnamese engineers linked to the Struggle Movement wired with explosives a key bridge and the major munitions depot which it served. General Walt arranged a consultation at the bridge with the ARVN officer commanding the engineers, and while they conferred, Walt's own engineers surreptitiously cut the wires. When the US Marines advanced, the ARVN officer ordered the charges detonated, but it was too late, and the Americans promptly secured the bridge.⁴ [redacted]

With the GVN still temporizing, the US Mission worried about dissident ARVN forces coming to Buddhist aid if violence broke out in Da Nang. Accordingly, Agency officers in Da Nang, headed by a renowned paramilitary swashbuckler called Rip Robertson, began preparing charges with which to blow the bridges these forces would have to use. At this point, on 19 May, Ky and Thieu made their move, and before Struggle Movement sympathizers could prevent it, the Buddhist pagodas and military installations occupied by dissidents all had come under Saigon's control.⁵ [redacted]

³Clarke, *The Final Years*, pp. 127-128; Gravel, II, pp. 367, 369-388. Examples of Station reporting are FVS 12,572, 24 January 1966, and [redacted] and numerous reports [redacted]

⁴Clarke, *The Final Years*, p. 138. [redacted]

⁵Ibid.; Gary Williams, interview by the author, Langley, VA, 17 February 1995. Williams was then stationed in Da Nang and was conscripted to help Robertson prepare the charges [redacted]

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The successful military move did not end the sectarian dissidence. The US Mission continued to fear the disintegration of the South Vietnamese state and, even without such a catastrophic outcome, the effect on US opinion of continued Vietnamese squabbling while American troops bore the burden of combat. In late May the Embassy and MACV sponsored a meeting between Ky and his opponents at the US base at Chu Lai. [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

The Struggle Movement took on an anti-American tinge when demonstrators in Hue burned the USIS library and sacked the Consulate in late May. Ambassador Lodge, alarmed to the verge of panic by the Buddhist threat to a reinvigorated war effort, wrote to President Johnson that the Struggle Movement was "entering its fanatic if not macabre stage," and cited the "plentiful supply of Buddhists—mystics and mental defectives—ready to burn themselves and men ruthless enough to use them." Communist professionals were using the Buddhists, he maintained, and the "evidence was everywhere."⁶ [redacted]

In fact, no persuasive intelligence reporting supported Lodge's vision of a Communist-instigated Struggle Movement. But he was not alone in allowing his distaste for the dissident clergy to prevent him from considering the implications of Buddhist alienation for the GVN's standing with its urban constituency. In his memoirs, Peer de Silva lampooned the Venerable Tri Quang in terms that recalled World War II propaganda depicting the Japanese as buck-toothed rodents. William Colby did likewise, if in less scurrilous terms, when he dismissed his one clerical contact as a mindless obstructionist. [redacted]

The Struggle Movement episode came to an end in June when troops loyal to Ky and Thieu suppressed not only the militants of Tri Quang's faction but also the more moderate Buddhist Institute. In the overheated atmosphere that accompanied this confrontation, no program of aid to the Buddhists could survive, and the Station's subsidy to Tri Quang came to a definitive halt. [redacted]

⁶Clarke, *The Final Years*, pp. 139-143; David Gustin, interview by the author, Langley, VA, 1 July 1992. [redacted] interview, 3 June 1993. [redacted] Peer de Silva, *Sub Rosa: The CIA and the Uses of Intelligence* (Times Books, 1978), p. 168. [redacted] William E. Colby, *Lost Victory* (Contemporary Books, 1989), p. 233. [redacted] Clarke, *The Final Years*, p. 142. [redacted] interview, 3 June 1993. [redacted] Saigon 6176, 6 August 1968. [redacted]

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The Indirect Approach to Leverage

Against this politically fragile background, COS Gordon Jorgensen still had occasional cause to bring Agency influence to bear on the generals, but he indulged his usual preference to use his agent stable as a substitute for direct Station representations at the top of the government. Servicing an Embassy request, for example, he used [redacted]

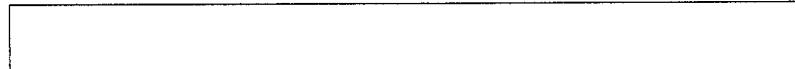
[redacted] to prevent the execution of a condemned VC prisoner which if carried out seemed likely to result in the death of a West German then in VC hands. A little earlier, in late 1965 and early 1966, CIA had also created confidential relationships with two more generals, [redacted]

[redacted] In general, the ascendancy of Northerners in the latest political constellation multiplied the value of the Station's stable of agents and contacts, in which Northerners also predominated. [redacted]

The more senior the agent or contact, the more likely he was to be pursuing his own agenda, and the reporting from such sources sometimes merited a skeptical reception. [redacted] for example, told FE Division Chief Colby a convoluted story about Nguyen Khanh's efforts to keep Thieu off-balance. Khanh had allegedly warned Thieu against Lou Conein, claiming that Conein was trying to get Thieu arrested. Thieu was allegedly grateful to Khanh, but developed a resentment of Conein that threatened his return to Vietnam in late 1965 as a member of Maj. Gen. Edward Lansdale's new team. One nominally recruited general, [redacted] turned out to be useless even in a series of sensitive positions [redacted]

*CA Report UB-15-65, 12 July 1965, [redacted] William Rydell, Memorandum for the Record, "Meeting with Ambassador Tran Thicm Khiem at Sans Souci Restaurant on 14 September 1965," 16 September 1965, [redacted] SAIG 9014, 4 January 1966, [redacted]
 [redacted] *passim*; [redacted]

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[redacted] by contrast, was a prolific and normally reliable source, but even his cooperation had its limits, at least when policy differences came into play. He failed, for example, to warn his case officer, [redacted] of Ky's decision to send Vietnamese Marines to Da Nang to confront dissident Gen. Nguyen Chanh Thi in the spring of 1966. Later reproached for this omission, [redacted] retorted, "If we tell you, you tell us not to do it."¹⁰ [redacted]

Back Into Palace Liaison [redacted]

In mid-1966, with US combat forces carrying the burden of offensive operations against the Communists, government stability was still the dominant political issue. Station disengagement from Palace liaison had now endured a full year, while CIA expanded its programs in the countryside. Ky was planning elections to a constitutional constituent assembly that summer, and the problem of campaign financing drew the Agency back into involvement with the military leadership.¹¹ [redacted]

One of Prime Minister Ky's closest confidants was Gen. Nguyen Ngoc Loan, who as chief of both the National Police and the Military Security Service also conducted liaison with the Station on intelligence and security matters. He importuned the Station for money to replenish police funds he had used to subsidize the campaigns of Ky allies. Ambassador Lodge asked the Station to oblige him, and Headquarters approved a subsidy of 10 million piasters (about \$85,000) which the Station passed to Loan on 25 August.¹² [redacted]

This return to active involvement with the leadership coincided with the departure of Gordon Jorgensen. His replacement, John Hart, had run other large Stations, [redacted]

[redacted] He seems not to have shared

¹⁰FVSW 8614, 18 October 1965, [redacted] Clarke, *The Final Years*, p. 137; [redacted] *passim*. Lansdale was never a CIA employee, and his 1965 mission to assist Lodge with pacification planning did not have Agency sponsorship. With respect to the quality of the Vietnamese military leadership at this juncture, it is worth noting that Cao's immediate predecessor in I Corps, after the removal of General Thi, was the emotionally unstable Gen. Ton That Dinh, so well known to former Station officer Lucien Conein. [redacted]

¹¹[redacted] interview by author, Langley, VA, 27 April 1993. [redacted]

¹²Unsigned draft blind memorandum, n.d., [redacted] Apparently prepared at Headquarters, probably in late 1966. [redacted]

¹³*Ibid.* [redacted]

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Jorgensen's reservations about direct dealings at the top, and in mid-October asked Headquarters to consider giving Loan another 14 million piasters to replace police and MSS funds diverted to the election campaign. According to Loan, Ky needed this support to avoid having to declare to his peers in the Military Directorate that he had used money from the Prime Minister's secret fund for political purposes. Hart noted that Ky was trying at the moment to resolve another cabinet crisis, and thought Lodge would approve CIA support designed to strengthen Ky's position.¹³ □

No reply has been found, and the proposal may have been overtaken by the controversy over Loan himself that came to a head when Headquarters suggested his removal. As for the original 10-million-piaster subsidy, while it may have spared Ky some embarrassment, its influence on the electoral outcome was apparently slight, as the only available reference to its use concerns support to two unsuccessful candidates in Da Nang.¹⁴ □

The discussion over Loan's future—it did not address the means by which he might be unseated—brought into focus once more the perennial problem facing the Agency and the rest of the US Mission as they looked for Vietnamese officials meriting US support. Loan was energetic and highly intelligent, manipulative, and entirely loyal to Ky. But he did not look to the US for guidance, and in personal style sometimes appeared to be playing the clown. COS Hart later recalled having liked him; even if Loan "never agreed with anything I ever said," he was "absolutely honest," and perhaps the only Vietnamese official of Hart's acquaintance who would openly disagree with an American.¹⁵ □

To Russ Miller, who saw them together after he returned to Saigon in early 1967, the fastidious Hart looked repelled by Loan's "scruffy fatigues and open-toed sandals," and put off as well by Loan's chronic unavailability for an appointment. But there were more substantial reasons for reservations about Loan. Among them were his contempt for individual legal rights and for programs aimed at ingratiating the government with the peasantry, an attitude that put him at odds with American convictions on these issues.¹⁶ □

¹³ SAIG 8194, 15 October 1966, and SAIG 8359, 19 October 1966, [] The first of these messages responds to a suggestion about Loan made by Headquarters in a cable that has not been found. □

¹⁴ The election results are mentioned in the memorandum cited in footnote 9. □

¹⁵ PVSA 20865, 5 September 1966, [] John Hart, interview by the author, Washington,

DC (hereafter cited as Hart interview), 19 April 1993. □

¹⁶ Miller interview, 7 April 1992; [] *passim*. □

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US Mission Council—Saigon, Vietnam—October 1967. [l. to r., back row] G. D. Jacobson, Mission Coordinator; Edward Lansdale, Senior Liaison Officer; Donald G. MacDonald, Director, USAID; John A. Calhoun, Political Counselor; John L. Hart, Special Assistant to the Ambassador; Charles Cooper, Economic Counselor; [front row] Robert W. Komer, Deputy to COMUS MACV for RD; Eugene M. Locke, Deputy Ambassador; Ellsworth Bunker, Ambassador; Gen. William C. Westmoreland, Commander MACV; Barry Zorthian, Director, JUSPAO.
Photo courtesy of John Hart.

Whatever his retrospective opinion of Loan, Hart described himself as "not an admirer" when the Ambassador pressed him, in October 1966, to object to the Headquarters call for Loan's removal. Swallowing his reservations, Hart agreed that the police chief was indispensable to Ky at a moment when the US was counting on Ky to produce a constitution and a stable civilian government. Loan soon became important to CIA as well, as events unfolded that led to the Station's two most important political initiatives of 1967.¹⁷ □

In the first of these initiatives, the Station tried to establish clandestine contact with the National Liberation Front for South Vietnam (NLFSVN, usually abbreviated NLF), which although directed from Hanoi was composed mainly of southern Vietnamese. The Station proposed to identify presumed moderate elements in the NLF and to set up a communications channel to any of these who might be interested in a dialog that excluded Hanoi. The second initiative involved a renewed effort to deal with perpetually unstable government in Saigon. Here, the

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May 1967 arrival of Ellsworth Bunker as US Ambassador and the approach of presidential elections in South Vietnam ushered in a new CIA effort to influence Vietnamese politics.¹⁸ []

The Search for a Negotiating Channel []

The effort to contact the NLF arose from two developments which, as 1966 drew to a close, began to reinforce each other. First was John Hart's decision, when he took over the Station in the spring of that year, to reduce its reliance on Saigon's intelligence services for its coverage of the Viet Cong. To acquire unilateral sources in the NLF and the southern wing of Hanoi's Communist party, he set up a Viet Cong Branch, headed by [] which began collating Station holdings and vetting contacts with possible access. By the end of the year, these efforts had produced several leads, the most promising of which involved the chief of the NLF's foreign affairs committee.¹⁹ []

The second development arose from Hanoi's evident will to continue the war despite its heavy losses to American ground and air forces in the South and the devastation of the bombing campaign in the North. As we have seen, Defense Secretary McNamara had already concluded that military victory was impossible, and in early 1966 he was privately urging a political settlement and a coalition government. In August, a reluctant President Johnson made a pro forma concession to such pressure when he named W. Averell Harriman as his "ambassador for peace." Harriman jumped with characteristic energy into this new arena. Uninhibited by the kind of reservations expressed a year earlier by DCI Helms, he began a vigorous search for avenues to potential negotiating partners.²⁰ []

The Saigon Station's involvement began on the day in late 1966 when the Ambassador instructed John Hart to make available a small aircraft to fly into neighboring Cambodia on a mission that Lodge would not describe. The COS could not blindly risk a plane and pilot, and when he insisted on more information, Lodge outlined a White House-directed operation aimed at the defection of NLF Chairman Nguyen Huu Tho. A Vietnamese employee of the US economic aid mission (acting in good faith, it later turned out) had brought his American supervisor the claim

¹⁸SAIG 2025, 25 January 1967, [] Gravel, II, p. 428. []
Hanoi created the NLF in December 1960 to help mobilize non-Communist elements in the military insurgency against Diem launched the year before. []

¹⁹Hart interview, 19 April 1993; [] interview, 27 April 1993; Lewis Lapham, telephone interview by the author, Brunswick, ME, 29 June 1993, []

²⁰Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, pp. 102-120. []

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of a Vietnamese acquaintance that NLF Chairman Nguyen Huu Tho wanted to defect. USOM went to Political Counselor Philip Habib, who took the matter to Lodge, who characteristically did not consult his intelligence adviser, the COS, but communicated directly with Washington. There, the National Security Council staff—this gambit was apparently not turned over to Harriman—seized on the proposal and sent instructions that led to Lodge's demand for an aircraft. At this point, CIA took over the case, and the Station put the self-proclaimed intermediary under surveillance when he next left Saigon, allegedly to see Tho. In fact, he made only an innocuous visit to the Delta city of My Tho, and when confronted by the Station confessed to having fabricated the story.²¹ []

The principal in this affair did, however, have NLF contacts, and the exploration of these led to a daughter of Nguyen Huu Tho who was living in Saigon. By this time, Washington had abandoned the defection approach, and was treating the case as a prospective communications channel to the NLF. In this context the Station tried different approaches to Tho's daughter. She claimed to be estranged from her father and refused to cooperate. Washington's fascination with the idea of a direct NLF connection persisted in the face of this setback; [] remembered Defense Secretary McNamara's interest, during this period, when the Secretary devoted all but a few minutes of a Station briefing to the question of NLF contacts.²² []

In this atmosphere, the Station proposed the first of several avenues—"all long shots," as [] saw them—to the NLF. The target was Tan Buu Kiem, chief of the NLF's Foreign Affairs Committee, whose dossier indicated some ideological flexibility and whose wife was a prisoner of the Saigon government. The Station proposed to get her released and send her to her husband in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, in a good will gesture intended to establish a basis for direct communications. On 25 January 1967, Ambassador Lodge endorsed the effort, which the Station described to Headquarters as aimed at getting Kiem's endorsement of an approach "more intent on resolving the war than in prosecuting it." This formulation implicitly but consciously acknowledged that any resulting negotiations would involve compromises by the US as well as the NLF, and some role in the Saigon government for

²¹ [] interview, 27 April 1993. Already in June 1966, Ambassador Lodge had begun a series of secret meetings with a Polish member of the International Control Commission in Saigon to explore a political settlement (see "Vietnam Chronology," p. 69). []

²² [] interview, 27 April 1993. [] thought the McNamara briefing took place before Bunker's arrival on 1 May, which would place it during the period of President Johnson's exchange of letters with Ho Chi Minh on the subject of private, direct talks between the US and North Vietnam (see "Vietnam Chronology," p. 80). []

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whatever NLF elements might agree to a settlement. But even if no bargaining resulted, the Station hoped for intelligence on the degree of NLF allegiance to Hanoi, and on its autonomous control, if any, of military forces.²³ []

On 28 January, Lodge obtained Prime Minister Ky's agreement in principle to proceed. Why Ky did so, given the evident potential for a US-NLF deal behind Saigon's back, is unclear, but [] recalled that he seemed ready to try to identify and reach some accommodation with anti-Hanoi elements in the NLF. Russ Miller, who had returned at Ambassador Lodge's request for another year in Saigon, negotiated the details with Ky and General Loan. As a result, Kiem's wife, Pham Thi Yen, was released to Station custody on 16 February. After several days in the relative comfort of an Agency facility [] Yen seemed to her case officers "inclined toward constructive solution of [the] Vietnam conflict rather than blind acceptance of [the] party hierarchy's dogmatic requirement to continue." At the same time, she displayed no awareness of any dissension in NLF ranks over Northern dominance. She rejected the Station's effort to get her to carry clandestine radio gear, but agreed to take its message to her husband. Russ Miller escorted her to the Tay Ninh-Cambodian border on 28 February and sent her on her way with Station-supplied Cambodian documentation. It was indeed a long shot, and two months later the Station had received no NLF reaction.²⁴ []

A similar initiative, sometime in late 1967 or early 1968, involved Gen. Duong Van Minh, living in exile in Bangkok. He had a brother known to be a senior North Vietnamese Army officer, and the Station wanted Minh to contact him, hoping this would lead to useful intelligence. Miller carried the request, which Minh rejected on the grounds that he and his brother had made their respective choices, and there would be no further contact between them.²⁵ []

²³ Saigon 2025, 25 January 1967, [] interview,
27 April 1993. []

²⁴ Saigon 2224, 28 January 1967; Saigon 2576, 7 February 1967; []
[] 21 February 1967; Saigon 3379, 28 February 1967; blind memorandum, "CIA Penetration and Defection Program Directed at the Viet Cong and National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam," 4 April 1967; [] Despite his chronic suspicion of Agency autonomy in Vietnam, Lodge welcomed having a reliable intermediary who enjoyed the generals' personal confidence. For his request for Miller, see Douglas S. Blaufarb, Memorandum for the DD/P, "CIA Case Officer Contacts with President Thieu and Vice President Ky," 23 January 1969, [].

²⁵ Miller interview, 7 April 1992. Miller could not remember exactly when he put this to Minh. []

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The Station as Campaign Consultant

With the search for NLF contacts momentarily dormant, the American focus shifted back to the Saigon political arena. The Constitution of the second Republic of South Vietnam took force on 1 April 1967, and a national executive was to be elected in the fall. On 1 May 1967, Ellsworth Bunker arrived in Saigon to replace the departed Henry Cabot Lodge. Already almost 73 years old, Bunker was an energetic, bluntspoken man who had left the family sugar business to begin a series of senior Foreign Service assignments as Ambassador to Buenos Aires in 1951.²⁶

With the US Mission under Bunker's activist leadership, the embryonic election campaign created a new opportunity for the US Government to broker the creation of a simulacrum of representative government in the South. In fact, the Station had tentatively reentered the political field even before Bunker's arrival; in February, it proposed to

to Prime Minister Ky that he launch a united front to mobilize voter support for Ky's expected candidacy. Westmoreland and Bunker both favored Thieu, but Washington decided to maintain strict neutrality between the principal contenders. General Westmoreland inadvertently subverted this stance when in May he assured Nguyen Van Thieu of Thieu's indispensability in ensuring ARVN's continued unity. With that exception, the Americans watched from the sidelines as Generals Ky and Thieu competed for their military colleagues' support.²⁷

In March, an American publisher solicited a book from Prime Minister Ky. Always alert to a chance, however remote or indirect, to get the Vietnamese leadership committed to American policy, the Station urged to "get Ky publicly on record in support of mutually acceptable programs." And Ky should give the proceeds to charity. Whether Ky acceded to these points or even had them presented to him is unknown; the book never appeared. The Station's confidence that Ky's public endorsement of particular programs would bind him to implement them was in any case probably somewhat wishful.²⁸

²⁶Embassy Airgram A-158 Who's Who in America, Volume 35 (1968-1969) (Chicago: Marquis-Who's Who, Inc.).

²⁷SAIG 3415, 1 March 1967, Clarke, *The Final Years*, pp. 261-262. The unquestionably sincere American commitment to democracy for South Vietnam was always tempered by the fear that too much too fast would only weaken the war effort. Shortly before his departure, Ambassador Lodge echoed a MACV assessment when he said that any new Saigon government would have to be dominated by the military. The trick was to strike the balance between "adequate civilian participation" and a "proper role" for the military. (Quoted in Clarke, *The Final Years*, pp. 259-261.)

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Ky's man, General Loan, visited Washington in May and made it plain that he saw no reason not to exploit the government apparatus to get Ky elected to the presidency. CIA Headquarters seemingly paid little attention to this, perhaps because DDP Richard Helms and FE Division Chief Colby were more interested in the approach to the NLF. Helms forcefully urged more initiatives like the one to Tan Buu Kiem of the NLF Foreign Affairs Committee, and Loan tepidly agreed that the Central Intelligence Organization might be the best instrument for this. Meanwhile, in Saigon, the rumor mill impeded American efforts to be perceived as having no preference between Thieu and Ky. The chief of the police Special Branch told a Station agent that the rumored imminent removal of John Hart and Ed Lansdale would serve local politicians as proof of US bias against Ky, if it took place, and of favoritism toward him if it didn't.²⁹ []

Ellsworth Bunker had been in Saigon less than two weeks when on 12 May Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky announced his presidential candidacy. Unlike Lodge, Bunker had no reservations about using CIA's political contacts in Saigon. He promptly enlisted the Station to help fulfill a Washington mandate to ensure fair elections, and to prevent a split in the Vietnamese military while the US preserved its neutrality between Thieu and Ky. As it turned out, Bunker needed all the help he could get, as this objective was threatened from the outset by General Loan, who upon his return from Washington had put into conspicuous action his belief in using government resources to promote Ky's bid. Washington and the US Mission now switched their earlier positions on Loan, as State rejected Bunker's 19 June proposal to force Loan's removal, and suggested using Miller to approach Ky directly to curb campaign excesses. George Carver, the DCI's Special Assistant for Vietnam Affairs (SAVA), thought Loan's activities a symptom of Saigon's political malaise, not a cause, and suspected that Bunker's proposal reflected little more than the influence of John Hart's "personal distaste for and dislike of Loan."³⁰ []

Miller saw Ky on 21 June, probably before the Station learned of Washington's response to the Bunker recommendation. Ky acknowledged the possibly damaging effects of Loan's activism, and said he intended to remove Loan from command of the Military Security Service, and reduce his engagement in the electoral campaign. Ky also proposed to convene all province and district chiefs to enjoin them against any campaign

[] SAIG 6070, 3 May 1967, []

²⁹Gravel, II, 400-402; [] Headquarters 0644, 20 June 1967, and George A Carver, Jr., Memorandum for the Director, "Bunker's 19 Junc Message to Rusk (Saigon 8185)," 20 June 1967, []

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excesses on his behalf. Ky did not know, presumably, that the two aides who had spent five hours with him that day, advocating precisely these measures, were [redacted] Station guidance. Ky said nothing of this session to Miller, who had the satisfaction of hearing his message presented as if it were Ky's own idea. The Station reported that the Ambassador was delighted, and that he proposed to use the Station's "advisory services" as a regular supplement to the direct consultation with Ky being urged on him by State.³¹ [redacted]

Trying To Guarantee a Fair Fight [redacted]

Bunker would have preferred active US support for Ky, but accepted Washington's decision to confine US Mission contacts with him to promoting an honest campaign. He assumed that Ky would win, even if Thieu stayed in the race, a belief rudely confuted on 30 June, when after a two-day marathon meeting of more than 50 senior Vietnamese military leaders, Ky agreed to take the second position on a Thieu-Ky ticket. Headquarters conveyed its dismay that, despite the Station's stable of sources in the military, the junta was able to "spring a surprise." But the decision concluded a contentious session whose outcome no one could have predicted. Miller recalled Ky's subsequent rationale for relinquishing the top spot as a vague and unconvincing appeal to its contribution to the national interest.³² [redacted]

In any case, Ky did not propose, he said, to relinquish real power. On 2 July, he insisted to Miller that Thieu had agreed to serve in a figurehead role, with Ky having "broad authority in the new government as though he were President in fact." The Station seems not to have explored the anomaly of Ky's having given up the top position if he were in fact strong enough to dominate Thieu, and Miller later recalled having recognized the problem only after the election in September. Washington too seems to have taken Ky's claim at face value, as Headquarters' only question about it concerned the context of his remarks.

³¹ [redacted] CIA Document Library; Saigon 8452, 25 June 1967, and
Saigon 8486, 26 June 1967, [redacted]

³² George A. Carver, Jr., Memorandum for the Director, "Bunker's 26 June Message to Rusk,"
26 June 1967, with attachments [redacted] Gravel II, p. 402 [redacted]
[redacted] Miller interview, 6 April 1993 [redacted]

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The Station replied that Miller had simply listened, that Ky had not solicited his endorsement or even opinion of the proposed arrangement with Thieu.³³ []

The Thieu-Ky ticket faced a competing civilian slate. Fearing the instability of an inevitably weak civilian government, the United States wanted the military to win. But it also wanted Thieu and Ky to abstain from irregularities that would discredit the election. Ambassador Bunker accepted and sent to Washington as his own an 11 July recommendation drafted by the visiting George Carver for an effort, not to support the military ticket, but to keep its activities acceptable to the US. Carver then returned to Washington, where he lobbied the DCI to support the proposal. As it happened, Ky had offered at the 21 June session with Miller to put him in touch with a campaign official named Nguyen Xuan Phong, the Oxford-educated Minister of Social Welfare. Probably in the context of the Carver-Bunker proposal, Miller took up the Ky offer, meeting Phong on 14 July and launching the Station effort to influence the campaign.³⁴ []

Bunker and the Station thought they would enjoy more leverage if the Station funded a front organization of religious sects and political groups favoring Thieu and Ky and supported those of its contacts running for the National Assembly. But Washington was smarting under the exposure of CIA funding to the US National Student Association and other domestic organizations and refused even to consider it. Secretary of State Rusk cabled Bunker in Agency channels, urging him to establish a closer relationship with Thieu even while pursuing the CIA advisory effort with Ky, and to ensure that Thieu and Ky arrived at a clear mutual understanding of their respective roles during and after the election.³⁵ []

Miller succeeded in getting Phong to press the funding question with Ky, who released 5,000,000 piasters in mid-July to support the religious-political front. Ky had instructed Phong both to keep Miller fully informed of campaign planning and to give full consideration to American

[] Document Library; Miller interview, 6 April 1993; George A. Carver, Memorandum for the Record, "Background to the Acquisition of Prime Minister Ky's Comments on the Thieu-Ky Slate, and the Alleged Agreement that Thieu will be a Figurehead and Ky the Real Power if the Slate Wins []" 4 July 1967; []

"George A. Carver, Jr., Memorandum for the Director, "13 July White House Vietnam Committee Meeting," 13 July 1967, [] undated, unsigned memorandum for the Ambassador, presumably written by Russ Miller in mid-July 1967, []"

"George A. Carver, Jr., Memorandum for Mr. Benjamin Read, "Transmittal of Bunker Message," 14 July 1967; []"

[] The NSA flap induced an atmosphere at State which questioned the viability of any clandestine relationship, and the Department sent a series of anxious queries about the security of the Miller-Phong connection [] *passim*). []

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suggestions. Phong began to do both, and his 20 July account of Thieu's having "swallowed a bitter pill" in accepting a circumscribed presidential role lent credibility to the claim of Ky's ascendancy. Miller noted that Phong seemed to think he could run a subtle campaign, keeping government employees from any egregious abuses while encouraging them to advertise Saigon's accomplishments. But the Station apparently feared that an election completely honest could be an election lost: it accepted without comment Phong's stated intention to exploit General Loan's police apparatus "in critical areas which require more effort to swing the vote to Thieu and Ky."³⁶ □

State wanted reassurance that the Vietnamese were giving the US Mission a voice in shaping the style and substance of the Thieu-Ky campaign. The Station replied on 23 July that Miller had already listed potential platform topics for Phong, who had in turn promised to turn over documentation on recent government accomplishments, prepared by the various ministries, to be used in preparing campaign themes. Miller's frequent sessions with Phong required a variety of meeting places to avoid creating a detectable pattern, and by late July they were alternating among six safehouses and apartments in Saigon. Meanwhile, Hart complained to Headquarters that the Station's rigorous effort to maintain the appearance of US detachment from election preparations was being undermined by Gen. Ed Lansdale's overt embrace of the new front organization, the All-Vietnam Bloc. Lansdale defended this, according to Hart, on the basis that its leaders consulted him as a friend, not as a foreign official.³⁷ □

On 26 July, Miller gave Phong a list of platform suggestions approved by Bunker, and the next day Ky said they agreed with his own thinking, especially those dealing with civil service pay, corruption, and increased emphasis on the rural population. Ky did not, apparently, vet the ideas with Thieu, whose participation in the campaign he at one point derided as "completely silly." Meanwhile, the campaign was faltering, at least partly for lack of money, and Ky threatened that, lacking US funding support, he would be forced to rely on General Loan to extract "loan-type levies on various citizens with resultant, unfavorable repercussions." Phong wanted to avoid this kind of coercive fundraising, and the need to make deals with unsavory people, but Miller stood on his

³⁶Saigon 9395, 18 July 1967, [redacted] Miller report of 20 July meeting with Phong, dated 21 July 1967, [redacted]

³⁷[redacted] Saigon 9612, 23 July 1967; Saigon 9743, 26 July 1967; and Saigon 9821, 27 July 1967; [redacted] Whether Hart got Bunker to intervene with Lansdale is not known. Lansdale's rationale for his involvement with the All-Vietnam Bloc is characteristic of his self-image as an avuncular, disinterested, quasi-autonomous mentor to well-intentioned but politically unsophisticated leaders in underdeveloped countries. □

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instructions. The Station rationalized that an impecunious Thieu-Ky campaign might look more like an honest campaign, but also anticipated the same effects from an unresolved money crunch that Phong did. A few days later, Phong mentioned the distribution of 8,000,000 piasters in the Mekong Delta. Ky had not revealed the source of the money, and Phong could only surmise that it came from General Loan.³⁸ []

Having denied material support to the military slate, the US Mission had only moral suasion to apply when it heard of campaign irregularities. On 11 August, Bunker relayed to Ky the complaints of opposition civilian candidates that the government was obstructing their campaigns. On the same day, Miller lectured Phong about the apparently deliberate diversion of an airplane carrying opposition candidates to a campaign event: "Ky himself should help us, CIA, convey a good impression of him by behaving in a proper manner." Phong insisted that Ky had a clear conscience with respect to treatment of the opposition. Ky was more receptive to advice about his platform style, and the Station took credit for having taught him to avoid being provoked by opposition taunts at campaign appearances.³⁹ []

At this point, in mid-August, officials of Tran Van Huong's civilian slate appealed to Ambassador Bunker for campaign funds. Bunker saw in this a way out of the constraints that limited his influence on the Thieu/Ky campaign, and asked Washington for authority to fund *both* campaigns. The answer was a categorical no, and the normally activist CIA Station was relieved. COS Hart cabled that he doubted the Huong group's security noting apologetically that he had already voiced his misgivings to Bunker: "It is unusual to find us acting more conservative than the policymakers, but then Vietnam is an unusual place." Casting about for other ways to improve the campaign's public image, Bunker came up with a proposal to get Ky to resign as Prime Minister for the last two weeks before the 3 September voting. The idea was to offset charges that Ky was using the government apparatus to rig the election. Russ Miller found himself appointed to broach this with him and was probably not surprised when Ky summarily turned it down.⁴⁰ []

³⁸Miller report of 26 July meeting with Phong, dated 27 July 1967; undated Miller report of 27 July meeting with Phong; Saigon 9906, 29 July 1967; Saigon 0098, 3 August 1967; []

[] Also, Miller report of 11 August meeting with Phong, 12 August 1967, []
[] With respect to "loan-type levies," it is not clear whether the pun was intentional or inadvertent []

³⁹Miller report of 11 August meeting with Phong, 12 August 1967; undated report of 28 August 1967 Miller meeting with Phong []

⁴⁰Saigon 0685, 16 August 1967; Headquarters 898, 19 August 1967; Saigon 0754, 17 August 1967; Saigon 0932, 22 August 1967; []

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The Huong campaign faded in the last days before 3 September, and the Thieu-Ky ticket won with 35% of the vote, a smaller share than expected. The Station thought the result might be due in part to workers who had pocketed campaign money and then sat back hoping for the best. The Station expressed satisfaction that the Phong contact had permitted the injection of Station ideas into the campaign, provided some leverage on the military slate to "play fair," and produced excellent intelligence coverage on Thieu and Ky.⁴¹ []

The Ascendancy of Nguyen Van Thieu []

The Phong connection provided early evidence of Thieu's attitude toward playing second fiddle from the concertmaster's chair. Thieu and Ky were scheduled to appear on the US television program *Meet the Press* just after the election, but Phong reported that a junior aide to Thieu called to tell Ky the new President would appear alone. An article in a Saigon newspaper suggested the intention behind this when it quoted a Thieu assistant as saying that Ky would henceforth do what Thieu told him to do. The Embassy worried that all this might provoke Ky to resign, while the Station feared only that he would stay, behaving in "divisive and destructive fashion."⁴² []

Miller tried to contact Ky, presumably to urge restraint, but Hart was already concentrating on using his agents to get the election results validated—Catholics and others were alleging election fraud—and on establishing a regular, direct contact with Thieu. Miller thought the Station's rush to abandon Ky shortsighted and risky—who knew when he might be back on top?—but within ten days of the election he had obtained an appointment with the President. At this session, Thieu agreed to Bunker's desire for an informal "special link" between them. The link was Miller, who later recalled that an early agenda item was Thieu's procrastination on a matter involving the exchange rate for the scrip used by US troops in place of currency. Displaying some annoyance

⁴¹ Clarke, *The Final Years*, p. 264 [] undated blind memorandum, "Russ Miller on 28 August 1967," and Memorandum, "Evaluation and Summary of the Phong Operation," 4 September 1967, []

⁴² Blind memorandum, 12 September 1967, apparently the record of a Miller meeting with Phong, [] Saigon 1887, 11 September 1967, and Saigon 1924, 12 September 1967, []

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with the topic, Thieu abruptly switched languages—Miller couldn't recall whether they had started in French or in English—but agreed to fulfill his earlier commitment.⁴³ □

With the Thieu-Ky victory not yet certified, US officials turned their attention to the Lower House elections scheduled for December. Ambassador Bunker used CIA communications to ask State for authority to recruit National Assembly candidates at \$1,500 each, and the Acting Secretary of State approved, authorizing Bunker to go as high as \$3,000 each. Always ready to make a new beginning, FE Division Chief Colby urged the Station to get Ky's All-Vietnam Bloc, and other groups if possible, focused on substantive issues as "a starter toward the kind of programmatic political development" that he thought the future would require.⁴⁴ □

In the week before the validation vote on 2 October, the Station mobilized its political contacts, making fifty separate approaches aimed at preventing an embarrassing repudiation of the election results. One opponent of Thieu and Ky, in an access of "naivete or crudeness," acknowledged that he and his allies were concerned less with rectifying electoral fraud than with "the possibility of extracting a certain profit through political blackmail." Whatever the effect of the Station's pressure tactics, the members of the Provisional Legislative Assembly were left in no doubt about the US preference for a validated result. The Constituent Assembly approved the result, 58 to 43, and Thieu and Ky were sworn into office on 31 October 1967.⁴⁵ □

An Ambiguous NLF Overture □

Six weeks earlier, in a move apparently unconnected to the February release of Pham Thi Yen as a probe of the NLF, the NLF had used the hardline anti-Communist General Loan of the police to establish direct communication with the US Mission in Saigon. On 18 August, Loan told the Station that he had arrested a VC cadre who was carrying a letter for Ambassador Bunker from Tran Bach Dang, a member of the Presidium

⁴³Saigon 1924; Miller interview, 6 April 1993. Bunker could presumably have used one of his Foreign Service subordinates as intermediary, but they seemed not to resent his using the Station instead. Miller recalled that when he left a few months later, Political Counsclor Archibald Calhoun, working on very short notice, hosted a farewell party for him (see Miller interview, 6 April 1993).

⁴⁴Saigon 2436, 23 September 1967; □

⁴⁵Saigon 2902, 5 October 1967; □ } "Vietnam Chronology,"
p. 92 □

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of the NLF Central Committee. The note suggested a prisoner exchange, with the NLF to free unnamed POWs after Saigon released several imprisoned NLF officials.⁴⁶ []

Previously suspicious of an American end run, Loan now favored accepting Dang's proposal to use as intermediary an imprisoned minor NLF official named Truong Binh Tong. Bunker persuaded President-elect Thieu to help explore this prospect of liberating US POWs, and Loan released Tong to John Hart's custody on 9 September. The Station immediately dispatched him to Cu Chi District, west of Saigon, and on into VC territory in Cambodia. Twelve days later, on 22 September, he returned with word that Tran Bach Dang was ready to begin negotiations. Hoping to dispense with the need for a courier, the Station now equipped Tong with clandestine radio equipment before sending him back. US ground units were engaged with the Communists in the area of Tong's infiltration point, and Hart arranged with MACV commander General Westmoreland for a 24-hour suspension of offensive operations in order to improve Tong's chances of surviving when he left on 29 September.⁴⁷ []

The Station waited almost four weeks without further contact. The NLF did not activate the radio link, but Tong returned to Saigon on 25 October with a message reaffirming interest in a prisoner exchange and perhaps "continuing to other, larger matters." Pursuing this tantalizing theme, the NLF letter stated a general position slightly softer than its public line, but explicitly excluded Thieu and Ky as acceptable interlocutors about future political arrangements in South Vietnam.⁴⁸ []

Vice President Hubert Humphrey visited Saigon just after Tong's return, and the Station gave him a one-hour briefing. Like McNamara earlier in the year, Humphrey devoted a few minutes to the pacification programs, but gave his main attention to the prospects of the NLF link, reading both Tran Bach Dang's latest message and the debriefing report from Tong. Four days later, on 4 November, Ambassador Bunker reviewed the operation with President Thieu. On the 5th, Miller visited the Palace to discuss mechanics. Thieu designated General Loan as his action officer, but explicitly reserved the political aspect to himself.⁴⁹ []

The days that followed saw Embassy and Station in tortuous exchanges with Thieu and Loan, and with Washington, over the language of a reply to the Front. The Mission hoped to advance the prospects of a

"[] interview, 27 April 1993; blind memorandum, "Synopsis of the [] Case," 26 August 1971 [] (hereafter referred to as "Synopsis"). []"

⁴⁶ "Synopsis; [] undated memorandum to C/VNO, [] c. 16 November 1971, [] (hereafter cited as [] memorandum). []"

⁴⁷ [] memorandum. []

⁴⁸ Undated abstract of the [] case (hereafter cited as [] abstract); Saigon 4057, 1 November 1967; []

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prisoner exchange and begin exploring the political potential of the new channel while simultaneously assuaging the Saigon generals' apprehensions. Thieu worried mostly about the damage to his government's legitimacy that would follow revelation of a prisoner release negotiated directly between the NLF and the Americans. But he saw no alternative to US management of the link, if he was to avoid the even more damaging political fallout from disclosure of any direct Saigon dealings with the Front.⁵⁰ □

Loan worried more about accommodating the enemy too much, and about the purity of US motives, and Miller had an uncomfortable session with him and Interior Minister Vien as they interrogated him about US purposes. Loan thought the NLF should release two American officers before Saigon freed any more Viet Cong. Ambassador Bunker, wanting to soften Thieu's "distrust and cynicism," adopted Loan's position. On 16 November, Thieu confirmed to Miller his approval of a channel aimed at prisoner exchange, but repeated his earlier anxiety about having any of his own people directly involved. The Embassy responded to this a few days later by telling Thieu that, if he worried about the NLF exploiting the fact of negotiations, President Johnson worried that our breaking off contact might give Hanoi a propaganda windfall. Thieu should understand that the Administration could not give the North any basis to claim US Government indifference to the fate of American prisoners. At this point, two American noncommissioned officers were released, but they had not been named in the Tran Bach Dang channel, whose role in this, if any, remained unknown.⁵¹ □

In the last week of November, with the authenticity of the Dang channel still at issue, General Loan provoked a crisis that threatened to end the affair amid mutual embarrassment and recrimination. Miller confronted him with evidence of Saigon leaks about the operation, and at the same time expressed US concern about rumors that Loan was resigning as national police chief. Loan confirmed having submitted his resignation, adding that Ky had rejected it. But Loan anticipated trouble with Thieu's new civilian government, saying that its apparent indifference to pro-Communists among its appointees would inevitably collide with his aggressive approach to countersubversion.⁵² □

On the even more contentious question of the Dang channel, Miller wanted to know why the government, after ten months of cooperation on approaches to the NLF, now appeared to be sabotaging the venture. US objectives had not changed, he noted, from the original goals of prisoner

⁵⁰ □ abstract. □

⁵¹ *Ibid.*; Miller interview, 7 April 1992. □

⁵² Saigon 017 (*sic!*; a series of cables on the □ case bears three-digit numbers), 2 December 1967, □

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exchange and communication on "any broader political matters the NLF might wish to discuss." Loan insisted that he still favored the program, but acknowledged some disagreement on tactics. At the policy level, he noted, there was President Thieu's fear that the Americans were acquiring too much leverage on Saigon in pressing for release of VC prisoners. And there might indeed have been leaks, Loan added, but as a result of poor security in the Interior Ministry and not as a matter of deliberate sabotage.⁵³ []

The depth of the disagreement over tactics became evident when Miller and Loan met again the next day. Miller, speaking for the Ambassador, wanted the release of all the prisoners requested by Tran Bach Dang, while Loan insisted that the NLF would regard such a concession as a sign of weakness on the anti-Communist side. He thought only two should go back, Tong and the bearer of Dang's original letter, pending the release of prisoners in NLF hands. Miller insisted that such an insignificant gesture would provoke Dang into closing the channel. Loan then took refuge in a jurisdictional argument, asserting that Thieu's delegation of authority to him did not apply to the question at hand, which involved not just operational planning but strategic national policy. He would not, he said, decide whom to release, and Miller asked if he could at least quote him to the Interior Minister as having no objection to the US proposal. After a painful silence, Loan agreed.⁵⁴ []

Miller tried to restore a collegial atmosphere, emphasizing the need for a joint approach to the venture, and wondered aloud whether Loan would really prefer to see bilateral US-NLF contacts that excluded the South. Loan pessimistically but presciently replied that it would surely come to that, if not now then later. When this happened, he said, Saigon's forces would face the combined NLF, VC, and North Vietnamese Army alone.⁵⁵ []

[] Interior Minister Linh Quang Vien was even less accommodating when Miller saw him on the 29th. Repeating all of Loan's arguments, he refused to take the American proposal to Thieu. It would only encourage a Communist hard line, he insisted, and the release of so many prisoners would also seriously damage police morale.⁵⁶ []

On 1 December, seeing President Thieu on Ambassador Bunker's instructions, Miller got an even stonier reception to the US proposal to release up to ten VC. Thieu accused the Americans of naivete and Loan of playing anti-Thieu politics by opposing the release in order to make

⁵³ *Ibid.* []

⁵⁴ Saigon 019, 2 December 1967. []

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* []

⁵⁶ Saigon 020, 2 December 1967. []

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the President look like an American puppet if he granted it. Professing anxiety that this could undermine his support in both the military and the population at large, Thieu said that, against the background of his internal political problems, prisoner exchange was a "drop of water in the ocean."⁵⁷ [redacted]

Bunker saw Thieu in early December and used alleged leaks by Loan to pressure Thieu into one concession, namely, the release from prison of Tran Bach Dang's wife, Mai Thi Vang. Along with the courier who had carried Dang's original message in August, she was delivered into US custody on 15 December. Miller was at this point walking the minefield of Vietnamese sensitivities, trying to negotiate the text of a message to Dang that would avoid even the implication of any juridical parity between the NLF and the Saigon government. With this achieved, the Station dispatched the courier and Truong Binh Tong into VC territory west of Saigon in late December. Dang's wife was still recuperating from harsh treatment as a prisoner—she had at first looked disoriented, and only after several days of care began to emerge "from sullen pessimism to cooperative optimism." At this point, apparently receptive to the idea of direct US-NLF contact, she was flown to the US Army base at Cu Chi. There she boarded a truck in a convoy to Tay Ninh City and was dropped off en route on 5 January 1968.⁵⁸ [redacted]

Ky saw Miller and Loan on 15 January and reaffirmed his interest in the Dang channel for its intelligence potential and as access to possible dissidents in the NLF. Tong returned to Saigon three days later, predicting the release of two American and two Vietnamese officers. Later in the month, the Communists released two US and 14 ARVN prisoners, and Dang claimed, in a subsequent message, that he was responsible. But his failure to identify them before the fact, and his refusal to activate the radio link, called into question his good faith.⁵⁹ [redacted]

Nevertheless, Washington did not let even the Communists' massive Tet offensive of 30 January, apparently aimed at breaking Saigon's will to resist, interfere with further exploration of the Dang channel. With the enemy still pressing the attack in much of the country, Miller went to see Thieu on 3 February. Urging some Saigon concession, Miller pointed out that the Communists had released over 70 American and Vietnamese prisoners, while Saigon had made just one abortive move to release 40 sick

⁵⁷Saigon 021, 2 December 1967, [redacted]

⁵⁸Saigon 095, 6 December 1967; Saigon 140, 8 December 1967; Saigon 256, 13 December 1967; Saigon 309, 15 December 1967; Saigon 325, 15 December 1967; Saigon 360, 20 December 1967; Saigon 6175, 23 December 1967; Saigon 6462, 29 December 1967; Saigon 855, 5 January 1968; [redacted]

⁵⁹Saigon 064, 16 January 1968, and Saigon 7707, 30 January 1968, [redacted]

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and wounded Communist POWs. At Bunker's bidding, Miller stressed "highest level Washington's continuing interest in getting an active prisoner exchange going."⁶⁰ []

This interest led to further pressure on the Saigon government. Apparently seeing Ky as the nearest thing to a Vietnamese ally on the subject, the Station sent Miller to him on 8 February. Miller relayed the expressed opinion of the intermediary, Tong, that Tet reflected a "prelude to [the Communists'] desire to go to the bargaining table," and urged the release of four more prisoners. Ky promised to try to persuade Thieu, and to do what he could to keep General Loan in line. It now turned out that two of the four VC had died, apparently by Communist fire, during the Tet offensive, but Bunker persisted, reporting to Washington principals including Rusk, McNamara, and Walt Rostow about Miller's success in preserving Ky's support. After last-ditch resistance from Loan and Interior Minister Vien, Tong and three more of Saigon's NLF prisoners crossed into Communist territory on 22 February 1968. Tong never returned to the Station, and for all practical purposes the operation was defunct.⁶¹ []

It had not, in any case, served to advance Washington's original purpose of informal political discussions—if not outright negotiations—with the NLF. With a nervous and skeptical Saigon government looking over the American shoulder, and with briefly encouraging prospects of arranging POW releases, the political aspect was deferred until CIA could have direct contact with Tran Bach Dang. The Communists may well have used the channel simply to monitor the intensity of American interest in negotiations. In any case, as someone at Headquarters noted later, "Whatever interest either party had in this ratline diplomacy was overtaken by the opening of the Paris talks."⁶² []

⁶⁰Saigon 447, 4 February 1968; []

[] Abstract; Saigon Embassy Telegram 673, 16 February 1968, [] (sent in CIA channels); Synopsis, pp. 5-6. []

⁶¹[] C/VNO/SVN, Memorandum to Chief, Vietnam Operations, []

[] n.d. (apparently written sometime in 1971), []

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Chapter 4

The Tet Offensive and Political Vietnamization

The urgency attached to the informal channel to the NLF did not distract the Station from its more routine collection and assessment responsibilities. In December 1967, agent reporting had begun to predict a major Communist offensive in the New Year. The first of these indications coincided with a debate between the Station and Headquarters over the performance and prospects of Nguyen Van Thieu after his first three months as President of South Vietnam. A Headquarters appraisal of 14 December said that Thieu had shown few signs of launching "promising new programs for the country." It noted complaints about his "dilettante approach," and alluded to evidence of GVN indecision and military resentment of his civilian cabinet. The legislature was not legislating, and the anticorruption campaign he had promised was at a standstill.¹

The Station agreed that the government was preoccupied with its own organization and staffing, but thought this inevitable, given the absence of a party organization that might have accelerated the post-electoral transition. The Station acknowledged other problems, including the enmity between Thieu and Ky, but saw personal and institutional rivalries as only one feature of a political climate of "soul searching . . . on the American role in this country and . . . real differences of opinion on how to prosecute and resolve the war." The Station proposed to help generate reforms and GVN momentum.

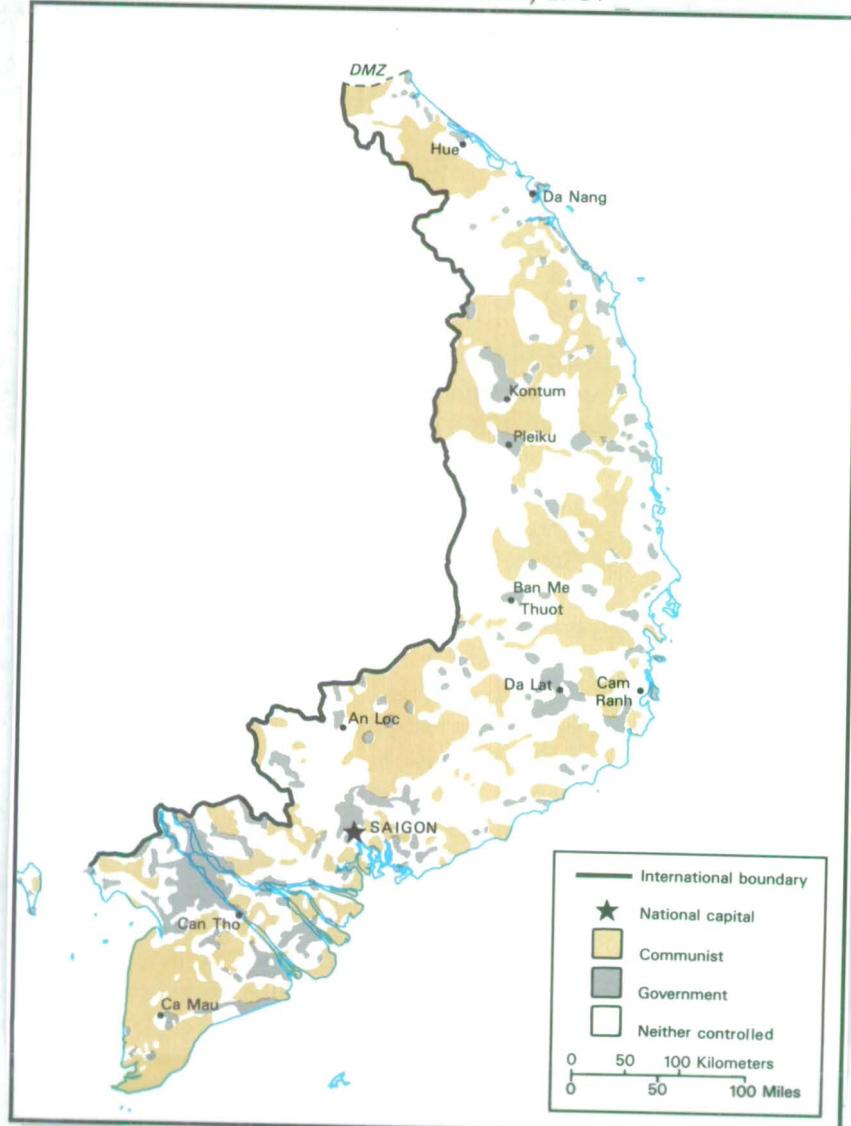
Headquarters responded with an extraordinary cable, generated by an impatient 16 January 1968 phone call to DCI Richard Helms from Walt Rostow, the President's National Security Adviser. Rostow had

 Saigon 6129, 22 December 1967,

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Figure 5 Communist and Government Territorial Control in South Vietnam, 1967



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*Entrance to US Embassy
in Saigon, 31 January
1968.*



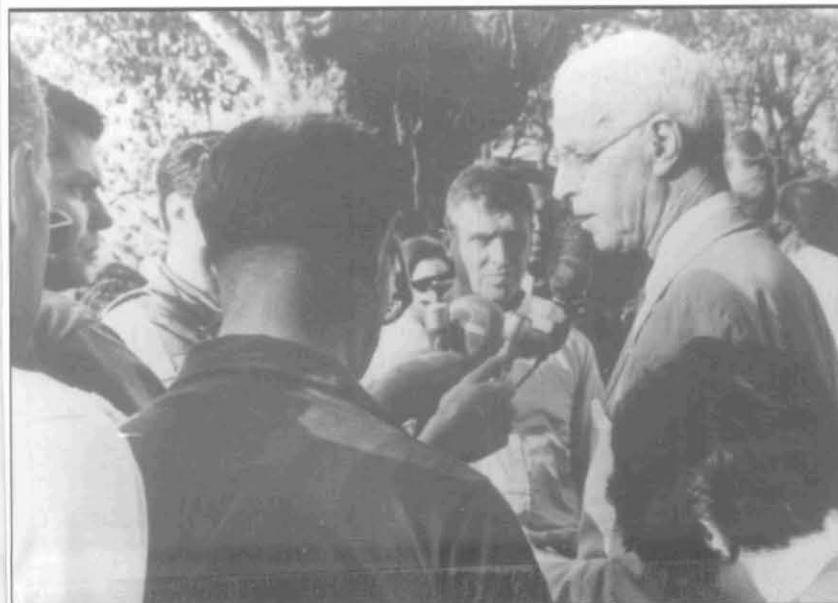
Hodges Parker, Chief of Station support staff, viewing VC bodies, 31 January 1968.

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Destruction in Saigon after VC attack, 31 January 1968.



Press interview by Ambassador Bunker, 31 January 1968.

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repudiated what he saw as Bunker's tolerance of the barriers to political mobilization in South Vietnam, and Headquarters told Saigon that he was demanding "early results, not [at the] next election some years hence." Accordingly, Headquarters wanted the Station to assess the possibility of the "forced draft creation of political groupings with wide appeal" if the GVN were suddenly—and admittedly improbably—to find itself, after a negotiated settlement, competing for votes with the VC/NLF. No Station reply to this has been found. It appears that, whatever its reaction to the idea, subsequent Embassy and Station efforts to generate political mobilization reacted more to the Communists' Tet offensive than to guidance from Washington.³

The Tet Offensive

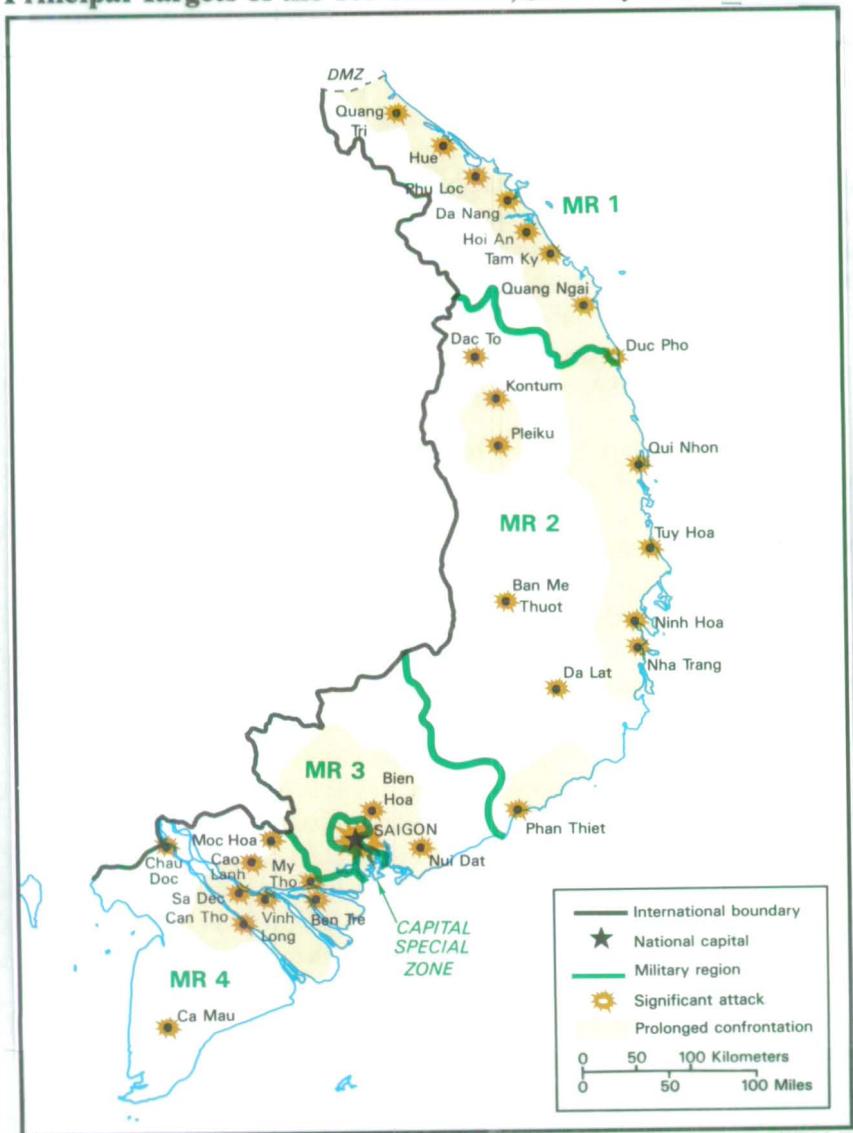
COS John Hart had just been evacuated from Vietnam for treatment of a detached retina when, on 31 January 1968, Viet Cong and North Vietnamese units launched a coordinated, nationwide assault on GVN and US installations. In Saigon, Communist troops briefly occupied part of the US Embassy before those not killed were driven off. Although the offensive failed to generate a mass uprising against the GVN, if that was its purpose, the pacification programs suffered major disruption, and the Communists held the former Imperial Citadel at Hue until 24 February. With US troop strength in Vietnam at 495,000, General Westmoreland suggested the need for even more US forces.⁴

The Tet offensive generated more excitement for some Station personnel than for others. The attack on the Embassy in predawn darkness found only the Station Duty Officer and the communications night shift present. The Chief of Station's secretary lived only a few hundred yards away from the Embassy, and she called new COS Lewis Lapham, Hart's former deputy, to describe the firing. Lapham then called the duty officer, who reported that he was lying flat on the floor to stay as far as possible below window level. Station communications had already told him of a Headquarters demand for information about the offensive and he wanted to know how to reply. Lapham told him simply to report what he was hearing and seeing; for the moment, nothing else could be done. Station

Wilfred Koplowitz, telephone interview by the author, New York, NY, 20 July 1993.
"The September political action initiative is described below. For the sequence of events at Tet, see
"Vietnam Chronology," pp. 99-100.

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Figure 10
Principal Targets of the Tet Offensive, January 1968



security urged Lapham to stay home, which he did until a heavily armed escort arrived at about 0900 hours to take him to the Embassy, now cleared of Viet Cong.⁵ □

⁵Lapham interview, 29 June 1993. A lanky Iowan with a background in covert action, Lapham had come to Saigon in 1967 as the Deputy COS in charge of the Station's pacification programs. □

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Russ Miller remembered calling his various contacts that day to see if he could help. General Loan wanted weapons and ammunition for the police, and Miller and another volunteer—a "GS-15 from TSD [Technical Services Division]"—loaded a 2 1/2-ton truck at the Station arsenal near Tan Son Nhut near the airport and drove it to National Police Headquarters on Le Van Duyet Street. Next day, they did the same for the Military Security Service. General Loan fought at the side of his police until the assault was repelled; it was at this point that Loan summarily executed, in the presence of a wire service photographer, a VC captured after killing the entire family of one of Loan's senior officers.⁶ □

Meanwhile, some of the Station's provincial offices were still taking fire. The Agency compound at Quang Tri, the northernmost province capital, had come under heavy attack, and [] heading the CIA office there, later received the Intelligence Star for valor in organizing and leading its defense.⁷ □

The Communists' ability to hide the scale and timing of such a gigantic coordinated operation produced an intelligence embarrassment of major proportions. Beginning in December 1967, the Station had indeed obtained predictions of a seasonal offensive on a much larger scale than those of earlier years. According to a report from Long An Province, the VC were promising their cadres that offensive operations would end after the Tet holidays, and that the formation of a coalition government, to be dominated by the NLF, would follow. An assessment by the Agency's Nha Trang Base completed on 20 January said that "the most ambitious goal of the campaign in II Corps calls for the liberation of Kontum and/or Pleiku provinces . . . in a decisive phase of the war." By this time, MACV and NSA were receiving similar fragmentary indications of preparations for a major offensive. And a Station report disseminated just two days before the assault described the establishment of six VC "subregions" in and around Saigon, directly subordinate to the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN); in retrospect, these could be seen as part of the planning for attacks on the capital.⁸ □

All this sufficed to make the Station apprehensive and restive, as Lew Lapham later recalled, and General Westmoreland was sufficiently concerned to order US battalions into the Saigon area and to put all forces on maximum alert. But no reporting specified the objectives or

⁶Miller interview, 7 April 1992. □

⁷Hart interview, 19 April 1993; Lapham interview, 29 June 1993. □

[] An assessment done in 1975 after the fall of South Vietnam took the report on Saigon-area subregions as an indicator of VC military intentions for the capital area, which before the Tet offensive had never been subjected to a ground attack. □

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timing of the anticipated action. Then, on 29 January, an ARVN report intercepted by US intelligence specified Tet as the launch date. But it was too late, even if the report seemed authoritative, for it to affect the state of US or ARVN preparedness. In any case, the US Mission—especially MACV—and official Washington both had been reluctant to credit Hanoi with the capacity to launch a nationwide offensive; this mindset, reinforced in Saigon by the holiday atmosphere of Tet, prevented an adequate reaction to the available fragmentary intelligence. Thus, despite Westmorland's precautionary redeployments, Hanoi achieved almost complete tactical surprise.⁹ □

Considering the scale of the assault and the extent of the surprise, the Station's various pacification teams performed acceptably well, and a mood of euphoria began to emerge as the offensive was gradually repelled. At the same time, Lapham recalled, the intelligence failure, even though mitigated by some valid reporting, could not help but introduce a countervailing note of despondence.¹⁰ □

Opinion among CIA officers varied, after GVN and US forces defeated the offensive, on what it implied about the relative political strength of the GVN and the Communists. Some thought the Communists' ability to mobilize in secret such massive forces implied an ominous GVN failure to compete successfully for the allegiance of the South Vietnamese peasants among whom the VC prepared the assault. Others, noting the fearful losses inflicted on both the Communist military forces and their political organization, saw Tet 1968 as an unqualified victory for the government. John Hart, presiding over the Station until just days before the assault, was one of the latter: the Communists had presented a serious threat, but "we stamped on it." Lapham doubted that anyone had won. In his more balanced view, GVN inability to prevent the offensive had allowed massive damage to its authority and to its pacification

⁹Lapham interview, 29 June 1993; Harold P. Ford, CIA History Staff Study, "1967-1968: CIA, The Order of Battle Controversy, and the Tet Offensive," October 1993, 25-41. A Saigon operations officer, Patrick McHugh, later recalled a pre-Tet argument with a Station analyst who shared the MACV J-2 opinion that the Communists were simply incapable of such a broad, coordinated offensive. McHugh said he had maintained that abundant reporting of an enemy buildup required the recognition that Hanoi might, at least, intend exactly that. (See Patrick McHugh, interview by the author, Langley, VA, 14 July 1994.) The Tet offensive rendered largely moot the debate that raged through 1967 between Agency and military intelligence analysts over the numbers and relevance to VC capabilities of part-time guerrillas and other support personnel. That debate was in any case driven more by politics than serious professional disagreement. The US military feared the political consequences of acknowledging that, after more than two years of massive US ground combat operations, the enemy's numerical strength had grown (see Harold P. Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers: Three Episodes, 1962-1968*, CIA History Staff, 1998). □

¹⁰Lapham interview, 29 June 1993. □

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efforts, while the Communists, who he thought must have aimed at destroying Saigon's will to resist, were beaten off with enormous losses.¹¹ []

"Operation Shock" []

If observers in Vietnam were at worst ambivalent about the significance of Tet, news of the offensive left many of the Vietnam-watchers at CIA Headquarters close to despair. On 2 February, DDP Bill Colby sent Director Helms a jeremiad apparently composed by the so-called brethren, an informal group of CIA analysts, operations managers, and SAVA staffers chaired by George Carver. Called Operation Shock and written only two days after the offensive began, its title reflected not only its intended impact on Nguyen Van Thieu but also the effect of Tet on the authors themselves. Tom Donohue, then on George Carver's staff, thought the impact of Tet particularly traumatic on those, like himself, who had interpreted a late-1967 Viet Cong recruiting drought as a sign of declining VC capabilities. The very scale of the Tet offensive confounded this view and called into question the belief that the GVN might finally have turned the corner.¹² []

The paper summarized all the conventional complaints about the GVN, asserting that the Vietnamese generals had "developed a complacent assurance that American support is immutable." This complacency had led to cronyism, a halfhearted war effort, a sclerotic leadership cadre, and "only a casual attention to mobilizing popular support and engaging the population actively in the war." These "attitudes and habits" simply had to be changed, and the authors departed from more conventional formulas when they urged a "frontal attack" on this GVN lassitude.¹³ []

The attack would include insistence on a greater US role in setting GVN performance standards and in GVN decisionmaking during an "emergency effort" of unstated duration. An ultimatum to General Thieu would repudiate the "gradualism" of the GVN's approach to the war effort and would require him to combine the Interior and Defense Ministries under Maj. Gen. Nguyen Duc Thang, the well-regarded chief of Saigon's pacification forces. The Ministry of Revolutionary Development, housing the American-supported pacification teams and all other relevant GVN assets, would also be subordinated to Thang.¹⁴ []

¹¹Hart interview, 19 April 1993; Lapham interview, 29 June 1993. []

¹²Richard Helms, Memorandum, "An Immediate Program for Vietnam," 2 February 1968. []

[] Thomas A. Donohue, telephone interview by the author, Arlington, VA, 9 September 1996. []

¹³ Helms, Memorandum, "An Immediate Program for Vietnam." []

¹⁴Ibid. []

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"Operation Shock" prescribed a powerful role for Vice President Ky, who as Thieu's proposed Chief of Staff and Director of Operations would supervise a purge of all military and civilian officials guilty of corruption or other abuses. Ky would have a second mandate, that of organizing a national political front, uniting all non-Communist elements in a "massive rallying of the entire population . . . to develop the country and free it of Viet Cong terror." President Thieu was to be given 100 days in which to comply with American demands and make satisfactory progress. The US would furnish any required additional material support, "outside normal channels if necessary."¹⁵ □

No one can seriously have thought that President Thieu would consent to put his nemesis Nguyen Cao Ky in charge of both a mass corruption purge and a national political front. In any case, the "brethren" seemed to harbor little hope that their prescription would work even if it were rigorously applied. Of its prospects to succeed they ventured to say only that "we might, of course, find that sufficient momentum has been achieved to warrant continued U.S. support." Apparently doubting that this would occur, they proceeded to outline the options available to the US if it failed.¹⁶ □

First would be a demand for Thieu's resignation in favor of anyone who had distinguished himself during the 100-day grace period. Second, the US could suspend the bombing of North Vietnam and initiate talks with Hanoi, either as a prelude to withdrawal or to energize the GVN. Third, it could begin to treat the National Liberation Front as a legitimate negotiating partner, conducting a "dialogue" with it on the possibility of forming a coalition government.¹⁷ □

The authors concluded without stating a policy preference, and DCI Helms sent their effort, without comment, to four of the Vietnam policy principals. No response from them has been recorded, but Administration "doves" like Undersecretary of State Nicholas deB. Katzenbach and Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Nitze presumably found its tone congenial, while hardliners Walt Rostow, at the White House, and JCS Chairman Gen. Earle Wheeler did not. Nevertheless, while lacking the formal authority of a national estimate, the "Operation Shock" proposal put the Agency on record as inferring from the Tet offensive that radical changes in the US approach to Vietnam were now required.¹⁸ □

¹⁵Ibid. □

¹⁶Ibid. □

¹⁷Ibid. □

¹⁸Ibid. □

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On 27 March, the substance of this view got directly to the President. Johnson demanded the same briefing that George Carver had given the so-called wise men—Dean Acheson, Clark Clifford, and Supreme Court Justice Abe Fortas among them—and which was followed by their unwelcome recommendation that he “throw in the towel.” George Allen, afraid that Carver’s characteristic optimism might reassert itself, implored him not to slight the negative side of the argument. And in fact Carver gave the balanced presentation Allen was hoping for. Four days later, the President declared a partial halt to the bombing of North Vietnam, called for negotiations with Hanoi, and announced his withdrawal as a candidate for reelection. Vice President Hubert Humphrey, present at the briefing, later wrote to Carver thanking him for his “brutally frank and forthright analysis. The President’s speech of March 31 indicated that your briefings had a profound effect on the course of U.S. policy on Vietnam.”¹⁹ []

Pursuing Nonpartisan Political Mobilization []

In Saigon, ferocious resistance by GVN and allied forces had tempered the initial shock of the Tet offensive, and US officials there did not see in it the apocalyptic implications that George Carver’s people found inescapable. Ambassador Bunker nevertheless sensed impaired morale on the GVN side even as the offensive was being beaten off. He appealed to President Thieu to try to “inspire his nation in this hour of crisis” with a major address supplementing his “rather brief and defensive statement” of 31 January.²⁰ []

The Station, using an agent []

[] offered propaganda themes aimed at both South Vietnamese and third-country audiences. The agent asserted that VC attacks on such symbolic targets as General Staff Headquarters and the Presidential Palace had administered a severe psychological shock to the South Vietnamese body politic, and the Station tried to help him create for Thieu “an eloquent and impressive statement to fill the psychological vacuum.” But the US Information Service had primacy in such matters, and in any case Thieu fired the agent in March for criticizing the government’s post-Tet handling of the media. The Station []

¹⁹Allen, “The Indo-China Wars, 1950-1975,” p. 334-335; Harold P. Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers: Three Episodes, 1962-1968* (CIA History Staff 1998), p. 182; “Vietnam Chronology,” p. 102. []

²⁰Saigon 7786, 1 February 1968, []

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[redacted] but had to start again from scratch to play even a supporting role in shaping the government's propaganda response to Tet.²¹ [redacted]

Like Bunker, Lapham thought the Tet offensive required a new campaign to reassert the Saigon government's claim to popular loyalty. His senior covert action officer, Wilfred Koplowitz, thought that the South's ferocious defense and growing evidence of massive Communist losses had generated a surge of confidence and pride. In his view, the Station should try to consolidate this momentum with a nonpartisan political movement capable of unifying the fragmented Vietnamese political scene.²² [redacted]

As always, the candidates for leadership were few, and the Station settled on ex-General and now Senator Tran Van Don, generally respected if not highly intelligent or charismatic. Koplowitz recalled working with Ky loyalist and longtime Station contact Dang Duc Khoi to help Don set up the so-called National Salvation Front. Despite his connection with Ky, Khoi looked genuinely persuaded of the need to reduce partisanship, and the Station hoped that the front would cooperate with pro-Thieu forces. The Station provided modest financial help, and Don announced the creation of the NSF on 18 February.²³ [redacted]

President Thieu apparently distrusted the NSF's claims to nonpartisanship, for just over a month later he responded with his own proposed instrument of political mobilization, a party he called the Free Democratic Force. This move aggravated the perennial factionalism of Vietnamese politics at a moment when political unity was becoming an even more

²¹ Saigon 8068, 6 February 1968, and *passim*. [redacted] *passim*. The agent, [redacted] was only one of several Station agents of influence whose political ideology had always been suspect as the result of their early affiliation with the Viet Minh and of subsequent allegations of Communist sympathies. The sincerity of his views on the effects of Tet is therefore uncertain. [redacted] Exotic background had one feature often found in the Station's civilian agents of influence, namely, a degree of Westernization that allowed them to serve as a kind of cultural comprador, interpreting their countrymen to the Agency. But this very cosmopolitanism rendered them suspect to their generally xenophobic compatriots, even while it made them useful to the GVN, and thus limited their access to the government's inner councils. [redacted] Westernizing experience began [redacted] where he arrived with no facility in English, but where—presumably by his own later account—within five months he became managing editor of the school paper. [redacted] At that point, the FBI had already heard that he had been a "gun runner for the Communist Party in Indochina and was sympathetic to Ho Chi Minh . . . [He had said] that all Americans talk about Communism but no one has ever told him what is wrong with it." [redacted] *passim.*) [redacted]

²² Lapham interview, 29 June 1993; Koplowitz interview, 20 July 1993. [redacted]

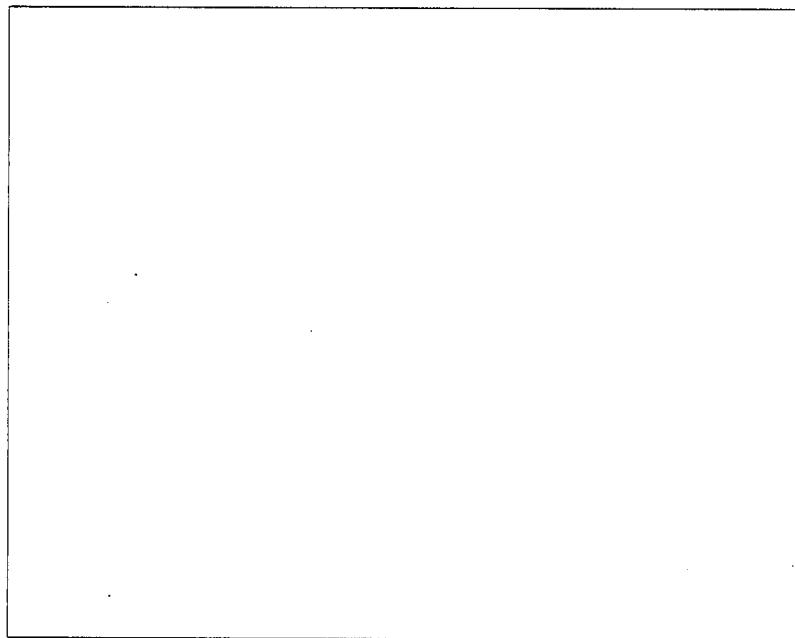
²³ *Ibid.*; Eleazer A. Williams, unpublished Individual Research Paper, "The Election Process in Vietnam: The Road to a Functioning Polity," National War College, Washington, DC, March 1971 (hereafter referred to as Williams, "Election Process"), 65. [redacted]

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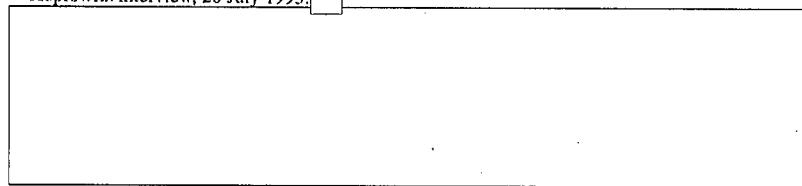
urgent imperative, for President Johnson's partial bombing suspension and proposal to negotiate with Hanoi had served notice that US support to the GVN no longer aimed at defeating the Communists.²⁴ [redacted]

As it worked out, neither the NSF nor Thieu's FDF prospered. Koplowitz later thought it naive to have expected otherwise, but at the time he and the other Mission proponents of political mobilization still hoped to find a formula that would ameliorate Vietnamese factionalism. While these efforts continued, the approach of peace negotiations and the gradual eclipse of the Station's best political sources, mostly Ky associates, emphasized the need for improved intelligence coverage of the Thieu regime.²⁵ [redacted]



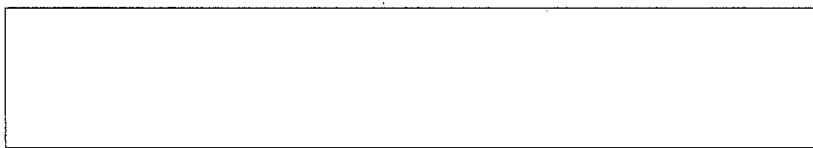
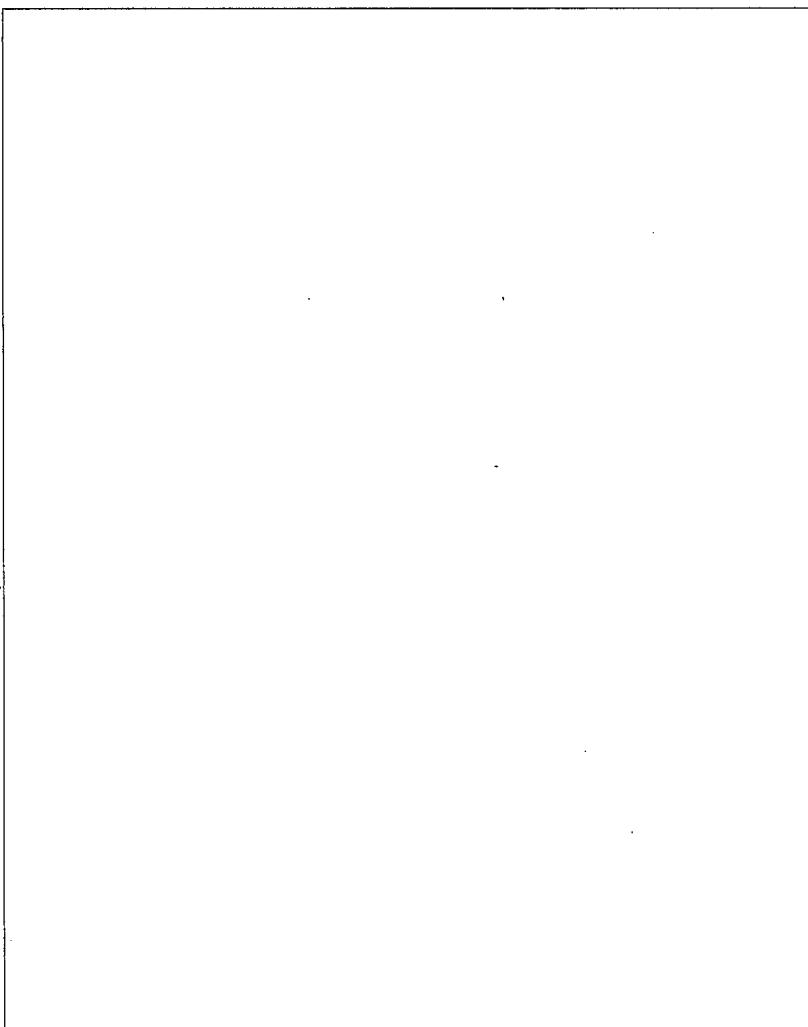
²⁴Williams, "Election Process," pp. 68-70. [redacted]

²⁵Koplowitz interview, 20 July 1993. [redacted]

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Photograph of Nguyen
Cao Ky inscribed to
Ralph Katrosh, c. 1969.

Photo courtesy of
Ralph Katrosh.

Building the Stable

[redacted] and when Russ Miller's third tour in Vietnam ended in the spring of 1968 Ambassador Bunker wanted a replacement. Leaving his post as Deputy COS in [redacted] Ralph Katrosh arrived in Saigon to face the challenge of earning the confidence of the mutually antipathetic leaders of the South Vietnamese Government. He began by trying to persuade them that nothing either one said to him was shared with the other. To emphasize this compartmentation, he avoided going directly from Thieu's office to Ky's, or vice versa, always returning to the Embassy between sessions even when he was scheduled to visit both. Whether this ploy worked, or was even noticed, both Thieu and Ky soon began to talk to Katrosh as if they trusted him not to betray their comments about each other. The contact with Ky even developed a

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social side, and the Vice President's aide would call Katrosh, usually on short notice. [redacted]

Katrosh was still working to persuade the feuding Vietnamese principals of his discretion when CIA became the instrument of the latest US gambit to promote political cohesion in the South. The disproportionate influence of Ky's people in the National Salvation Front had ended that group's attraction for the US Mission, and Thieu's Free Democratic Front had an equally partisan cast. The point, for the Americans, was to overcome partisanship, and Bunker began to push a broader front he called the National Alliance for Social Revolution or *Lien Minh*, an abbreviation of its Vietnamese title. This required joint Thieu-Ky sponsorship, and Bunker sent Ralph Katrosh to get them to appear together at the inaugural event.³² [redacted]

Katrosh started with Thieu, telling him that President Nixon wanted to see him and Ky work together. The President's face "puckered up like a prune" at the thought of appearing with Ky. After 20 minutes of denigrating his Vice President, Thieu asserted that, even if he agreed, Ky would never do so. Katrosh acknowledged this hurdle and asked permission to approach Ky. Thieu finally permitted this, and Katrosh then repeated the exercise with Ky, who reciprocated Thieu's abuse, telling Katrosh for Washington's benefit how Thieu was ruining the country. But like Thieu, he gave in, and the two appeared together on 4 July 1968 to inaugurate the *Lien Minh*, which incorporated, at least nominally, the Thieu and Ky organizations and included Tran Quoc Buu's labor union and 25 other minor groups.³³ [redacted]

Bunker tried to involve Thieu personally in *Lien Minh* organizational activity, sending Katrosh with incremental payments of a CIA cash subsidy. But Thieu resisted direct participation, and in August the Ambassador felt constrained to remind him of the high priority the US attached to a functioning national political organization. Thieu responded with the claim that Vietnamese contributions to the program were already twice the American, moving Bunker to ask the 303 Committee, the Washington interagency group charged with covert action policy, to

³² Blaufarb memorandum, "CIA Case Officer Contacts with President Thieu and Vice President Ky;" Ralph Katrosh, interview by the author, Arlington, VA (hereafter cited as Katrosh interview), 28 May 1992. [redacted]

³³ Saigon 3940, 7 February 1969. [redacted] Katrosh interview, 19 May 1993; Ralph Katrosh, interview by the author, Bethesda, MD (hereafter cited as Katrosh interview), 26 June 1993. [redacted]

"Katrosh interviews, 19 May and 26 June 1993" [redacted] Williams, "Election Process," 72-73. [redacted]

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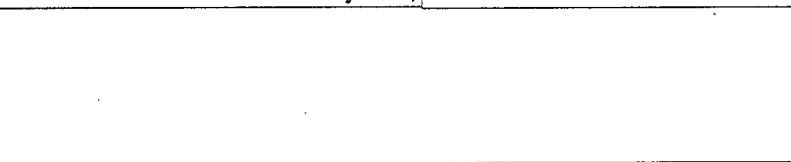
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approve \$400,000 for the last four months of 1968, Thieu could perhaps do more, Bunker said, but serious training and other activity had already begun.³⁴ [redacted]

Perhaps it had, but Thieu's support of *Lien Minh* appeared to Katrosh to reflect deference to American wishes more than it did personal conviction. Thieu would subject him to obscure lectures on the problems of developing Western-style institutions in Vietnam, conveying a lack of enthusiasm that Katrosh took to be the message intended for Bunker.³⁵ [redacted]

During his first weeks in Saigon, Katrosh had taken over the contact with Ky's former campaign manager, Nguyen Xuan Phong, who described the progress of Thieu's maneuvering to reduce Ky's influence. Katrosh also began calling on Gen. Tran Thien Khiem, brought back from Washington by President Thieu. Now Interior Minister, Khiem responded with reporting, [redacted] on his relationship with Thieu. At the same time, the Station maintained other policy-level access through unilateral contacts—[redacted]—and its liaison with Saigon's intelligence and security services. General Loan, severely wounded leading the police against a new wave of Communist attacks in early May, was replaced as Director General by a Thieu man, Col. Tran Van Hai.³⁶ [redacted]

The Station knew Hai very well, [redacted]



[redacted] And it seems that Hai did, in fact, mandate full cooperation with US advisers to the police.³⁷ [redacted]



³⁴Katrosch interview, 19 May 1993; Saigon 85322, 1 September 1968. [redacted]

³⁵Katrosch interview, 28 May 1992. [redacted]

³⁶Ralph Katrosch, Memorandum for the Record, "Conversation with Minister for Chieu Hoi Nguyen Xuan Phong," 21 May 1968, and *passim*. [redacted]

[redacted] Saigon 4016, 14 June 1968. [redacted]

³⁷FVSA 26799, 13 December 1968. [redacted]

FVSA 27825, 25 April 1969. [redacted]
Colonel, later Brigadier General, Hai's cooperation took place mainly in the context of the pacification programs. There is no record that he assumed Loan's role as occasional spokesman for the Saigon government. [redacted]

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[redacted]
[redacted]

In the middle of 1968, [redacted] the Station needed all the new access it could find. Thieu was now finishing the removal of Ky's associates, [redacted] from positions of political influence. The resulting loss of access compounded the problems created by the personal ambitions and sometimes doubtful loyalties of certain of the Station's remaining sources.

[redacted]

Almost every political action agent had his own agenda, whether he acknowledged it or not, and this complicated the problem of assessing loyalty. The limits of [redacted] responsiveness to Station guidance emerged in an Embassy assessment of his performance [redacted] he was a "confining influence" on Thieu, "likely to undermine any effort to broaden political support for the government." But whether this obstructionism implied Communist-directed sabotage of Saigon's political mobilization efforts, or merely personal interests or limitations, remained obscure. In any case, Thieu knew of and condoned [redacted] connection with the Station, using it for a time to supplement his channel to the Embassy via Russ Miller and then Ralph Katrosh.⁴¹ [redacted]

[redacted]
FVSA 25995 12 September 1968.

⁴¹Saigon Embassy Exdis 20049, 21 February 1968; Saigon 0539, 12 August 1967; FVSA 29228, 14 October 1969; and *passim*, [redacted] A marginal note on the Embassy message, presumably by a CIA Headquarters officer, says, "meaning that our political agent won't follow instructions?" [redacted]

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~~Secret~~Preserving Communication With the Client

Neither [redacted] nor any other of its contacts gave the Station early warning of Thieu's declaration of a coup alert on 8 September 1968, but there may have been nothing to predict, as police chief Tran Van Hai evaluated it, two days later, as an example of Thieu's chronic paranoia. Fantasy or not, the incident had repercussions that quickly involved the Station. Upon hearing of the alert, acting Ambassador Samuel Berger had called General Ky, interrupting an official birthday party at midnight to, as Berger put it . . . "check out coup reports." Ky thought he was being accused of plotting against Thieu and hung up on Berger. At a 12 September press conference, he alleged that foreign schemers were trying to topple the government. In private with Thieu, he was more explicit about his unhappiness with Berger. At this point, as it had been doing at intervals since 1955, the Station undertook to save Vietnamese face and restore communications at the government-to-government level. Berger sent Katrosh to Ky with roses and an apology couched in terms of Washington's extreme sensitivity to signs of political instability in Saigon. Ky, quick to anger but not one to hold a grudge, accepted the gesture.⁴²

US pressure on Thieu to join the projected peace talks in Paris may have encouraged the paranoia that led him to declare still another coup alert on 8 October. Lt. Gen. Dang Van Quang, Thieu's military assistant, told Katrosh that he doubted the existence of any serious coup planning, and deplored the isolation that induced Thieu's perpetual anxiety. Doing precisely the opposite of what the President feared, the Station now used its stable of military contacts to pass the word to Ky followers that the US adamantly opposed any move against Thieu. Perhaps Thieu got wind of this; in any case, he called in Katrosh to review with him the entire episode, giving every appearance of openness to the US viewpoint.⁴³

On 31 October, President Johnson announced a total bombing halt in North Vietnam. He had just sent President Thieu an ultimatum, telling him that negotiations with Hanoi would proceed, with or without a Saigon representation. Thieu repudiated both negotiations and the bombing suspension in a speech on 2 November. The resulting tension

[redacted] Saigon 7952, 17 September 1968,
[redacted] Katrosh interview, 28 May 1992,
"Saigon 9219, 19 October 1968" FVSA 10872, 10 October
1968 [redacted] passim; Saigon 0702, 23 November 1968,
[redacted] extract from attachment to FVSA 27,013, 21 January 1969,
[redacted]

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US Mission Council—Saigon, Vietnam—November 1968. [l. to r., back row] Lloyd Jonnes, Economic Counselor; Lewis J. Lapham, Special Assistant to the Ambassador; Martin F. Herz, Political Counselor; Edward J. Nickel, Director JUSPAO; George S. Newman, Special Assistant for Press; Rodger C. Abraham, Administrative Counselor; George D. Jacobson, Mission Coordinator; [front row] William E. Colby, Deputy to COMUS MACV for CORDS; Samuel D. Berger, Deputy Ambassador; Ellsworth Bunker, Ambassador; Gen. Creighton W. Abrams, Commander, USMACV; Donald G. MacDonald, Director, USAID.

Photo courtesy of Lewis Lapham.

was not ameliorated by Richard M. Nixon's election to the presidency on 5 November, and the icy relationship between Washington and the GVN led to a one-month hiatus in the Station's liaison with Thieu.⁴⁴ □

The Station met this development by sending Ralph Katrosh more frequently to see General Quang. In mid-November, despite the continuing standoff with Thieu, the two had a cordial session during which they agreed that a Vietnamese National Intelligence Coordinating Committee, whose establishment had been a longtime Station goal, might have prevented the intelligence failure that led to the October coup scare. And Quang subsequently got Thieu to authorize such a body, though whether it ever served the desired purpose is unknown.⁴⁵ □

Resuming the Thieu contact on 19 November, Katrosh assured him of Bunker's continuing support; Thieu, in turn, reaffirmed his commitment to *Lien Minh*. The Station still had 4,000,000 piasters (\$25,000) for the *Lien Minh* subsidy, which Katrosh delivered to a Palace functionary. Richard Nixon's new administration would have to approve any additional funding, and Bunker urged a briefing at the White House in order

⁴⁴Extract from Embassy Airgram A-158, 25 July 1974, [redacted], Saigon 0702. □

⁴⁵Saigon 0702; attachment to FVSA 27,013, 21 January 1969, and *passim*, [redacted].

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to ensure continued support. Meanwhile, he said, he needed an additional stopgap authorization of \$100,000, pending a 303 Committee decision on the larger program then before it.⁴⁶ []

Bunker's optimistic progress report was couched in general terms: "Governing bodies are meeting, . . . cadres are beginning to develop projects, 'people's committees' have been elected in all Saigon precincts," and "We discern steady if slow movement forward." He acknowledged problems of internal dissension, weak leadership, and lack of participation by religious groups, and Washington's message approving the \$100,000 asked for more detailed reporting on the results of US support.⁴⁷ []

Peace Negotiations and a New Station Charter []

Nixon retained Bunker as his Ambassador to Saigon, but Lew Lapham's tour as COS came to an end when Theodore Shackley replaced him in November. One of the postwar generation of operations managers, Ted Shackley brought good Polish—he had been raised in a Polish-American house—and fluent German when he joined the Agency at the entry level in 1951. He served five years in Germany, participating in the Berlin tunnel operation, before taking over [] []

[] in 1962. Coming to Saigon from two and a half years as COS in Vientiane, he brought a mandate from DCI Richard Helms to emphasize intelligence collection and preparations for the long-term political struggle that Washington expected to follow a peace agreement. At the same time, he was gradually to pare down the Station's role in rural pacification.⁴⁸ []

Shackley at once proposed to enter the Palace liaison, but Deputy COS Bill Edwards urged him to reconsider, pointing out that Katrosh's status as authoritative spokesman for the Station and the Ambassador would be undermined by adding the COS as a participant. Shackley acceded, but did not encourage Bunker's use of Katrosh as an Embassy stalking horse. In any case, Thieu now began to delegate even more of

⁴⁶Saigon 0702 []

⁴⁷*Ibid.* Whether Bunker supplied the requested information is not known. []

⁴⁸Shackley [] Joseph Lazarsky, interview by the author, Middleburg, VA (hereafter cited as Lazarsky interview), 14 June 1993; Theodore Shackley, interview by the author, Sumner, MD (hereafter cited as Shackley interview), 26 June 1993. []

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his dealings with CIA to General Quang and press secretary Hoang Duc Nha. Nevertheless, Katrosh continued the Thieu liaison, though with reduced frequency, until he left in September 1969.⁴⁹ []

As momentum grew, in November 1968, for the launching of peace talks, the Station's relationship with Thieu led to a perspective slightly more sympathetic than the Embassy's on his refusal to endorse the bombing suspension and join negotiations. The Station thought him under real pressure to prove his anti-Communist credentials to his hardline Northerners, and that his temperament made it impossible for him to bend to US demands for immediate agreement. It was partly a question of face, but also of his aversion to decisions that did not merely ratify events: "The idea of taking this bombing halt/negotiations bull by the horns on a kind of sudden death basis is not Thieu's favorite sport." The Station advocated more patience, and in the weeks that followed worked with Bunker gradually to bring Thieu into line.⁵⁰ []

Multilateral Distrust []

In January 1969, probably just to get Ky out of Saigon, Thieu sent him to Paris, not as chief of the Saigon delegation, but as an ex officio observer. Ky's old friend Russ Miller [] at Headquarters' behest [] made periodic visits to exploit their long-time acquaintanceship. They first met on 7 February, and Ky still displayed the greater flexibility toward dealing with the North and the NLF that had distinguished him from Thieu—and most of Ky's fellow-Northerners—while the Saigon Station and Ambassador Bunker were pursuing contacts in the NLF. Ky said he expected an agreement by the end of the year, and that he intended to urge Thieu to accept concessions on NLF participation that the North would find hard to reject, but which the South could survive. Ky's perspective always attracted high-level interest, and

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⁴⁹ Katrosh interview, 28 May 1992. Throughout Katrosh's tour, as he recalled it, the Station channel to the Palace was readily accepted by all witling Embassy officers except Deputy Ambassador Samuel Berger, who appeared to resent the Station's prominent role. Katrosh recalled both Lapham and Shackley as having an excellent command of the complexities of internal GVN politics; Lapham's style was one of intellectual detachment, whereas Shackley tended toward advocacy of Thieu. []

⁵⁰ Saigon 0377, 15 November 1968, [] extract from attachment to IVUSA 27,013, 21 January 1969. The Station also had to deal with minor crises such as Ky's unwelcome proposal to attend the Nixon inaugural in a gesture reciprocating Vice President Humphrey's presence at the Thieu-Ky inauguration. Katrosh was deputized to tell him that the "unique American character" of the event limited foreign participation to chiefs of diplomatic mission. (See []

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Miller drove to the Embassy after each of these evening sessions to brief US delegation leader Cyrus Vance, who would sleep in his office while waiting, and Philip Habib, who would drive in from home.⁵¹ []

In Saigon, despite a productive and apparently cordial relationship with Ralph Katrosh, Thieu's mistrust of the US focused increasingly on the CIA, which he saw as an ubiquitous power either beyond Washington's control or being used by the US Government to thwart Saigon's desires. He told one visitor that "between the infiltrating Communists and the American CIA, the government is stuck." Furthermore, the Station was provoking Buddhist agitation and encouraging neutralist groups. Presumably referring to the Station's program of NLF contacts, Thieu alleged unilateral Agency contacts with the Communists: "A VC could sleep in the US Embassy and I would not know it." In mid-November 1968, Thieu made a vague allegation to Ambassador Bunker about CIA involvement with the Buddhists, and this gave the Station a pretext to reassure Thieu of the Agency's unconditional commitment to him. He professed to be mollified, but Bill Nelson, Colby's successor as Chief FE, was worried enough to send the DCI a memorandum in February 1969 warning that, in a crisis involving either the US Government or his domestic rivals, Thieu might well publicly denounce the Agency or undertake some other unfortunate action against it.⁵² []

Even Ky, relatively open to his American interlocutors, treated them with some reserve. His views as transmitted by [] for example, varied from those he expressed to Ralph Katrosh. [] explained this by saying that Ky sometimes treated a Katrosh meeting with some misgivings, assuming as he did that his answers to Katrosh's questions would soon reach US policymakers. This did not necessarily mean that Ky was always more candid with his coterie of Northern-born generals, but the Station drew the obvious inference that he was at least tailoring his remarks for different audiences.⁵³ []

As we have seen, President Thieu's gradual exclusion from his entourage of the generals around Nguyen Cao Ky had by mid-1968 already severely reduced the political access of the Station's agents and contacts in ARVN. At the same time, Thieu's suspicion of US purposes created an adversarial climate that increased the need for clandestine coverage of his intentions. [] in early 1969 []

[] the Station tried to make responsive sources out of such unlikely material as Gen. Do Cao Tri, who

⁵¹ [] Miller interview, 7 April 1992 []

⁵² William E. Nelson, Chief, Far East Division, Memorandum for the DCI, "President Thieu's Com-

⁵³ "Comments on CIA," 5 February 1969, []

⁵³ Saigon 8216, 7 May 1969, []

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had the merit of being a Southerner and a capable commander, but who was reported to be "volatile, exuberant, and bombastic," massively corrupt, and like Thieu suspicious of US motives in Vietnam. At the same time, the Station launched an elaborate scenario designed to achieve informal yet secure contact with Gen. Duong Van "Big" Minh, thought to have residual political ambition as well as Buddhist sympathies and connections. The Tri collaboration produced some intelligence, before his death in a helicopter crash in early 1971, but the Minh gambit seems to have failed.⁵⁴ []

Nguyen Van Thieu and Political Mobilization []

The eclipse of the Station's military sources enhanced the importance, especially for influence purposes, of the few civilian contacts around Thieu who showed any disposition to exceed their official charter with their Station contacts. One of these was [] still not exonerated of Communist connections, whom the Station enlisted in January 1969 to urge its *Lien Minh* program on Thieu. At the Station's behest, he did a memorandum for Thieu "reflecting" the Station's view that the organization would grow only if the President directed Saigon's governmental machinery to provide discreet but effective support. Thieu's reaction is not known, but he was in any case not the only one with doubts about the organization's prospects. Headquarters had already asked for more evidence of results, and State used CIA communications to tell Bunker on 11 February that the 303 Committee would postpone its decision on additional funding support until Bunker had learned more about Thieu's attitude and intentions. The problem, from Washington's perspective, involved not only doubts about *Lien Minh*'s "impact" in Vietnam but also concern about public reaction in the US to any revelation of the Agency's support for it.⁵⁵ []

Another problem was the vagueness of Thieu's intentions regarding the composition and program of a political front. So far as Bunker could determine, in mid-February, Thieu might actually encourage two such organizations, associating himself with both. In early March, after Thieu asserted an intention to enlarge the existing front, the *Lien Minh*, Bunker and Shackley again confronted a money crunch: Bunker still did not have a firm proposal from Thieu and could not get funds without one.

⁵⁴ [] *passim*; FVSX 00211, 18 February 1969, []
"FVSA 26971, 13 January 1969, [] [] []

[] Fading enthusiasm in Washington for *Lien Minh* may be attributable at least in part to Walt Rostow's departure when the Nixon administration took office on 20 January 1969. []

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Like everyone else on his Country Team, Bunker was convinced of the need for Thieu to broaden his political constituency in order to compete with the NLF in what everyone expected to be a long-term division of the two Vietnams. Reluctant to let the front expire when it was "about to reach take-off stage," he instructed Shackley to ask Headquarters to get authority to make the April 1969 subsidy payment. Shackley's request sounds pro forma: the front was making "limited but sustained progress" and needed to be "kept alive" until Washington decided its future. But this apparently sufficed, as Katrosh delivered [redacted] on 19 April.⁵⁶ [redacted]

An earlier Thieu discourse to Bunker, late in March, on Vietnamese political dynamics might have been taken word-for-word from one of Ngo Dinh Nhu's disquisitions to the Station in 1954. Like Nhu, the President saw the old line non-Communist politicians as representing almost no one but themselves, and useless if brought into the government. What he needed were cadres "who will work and not just talk" and a program to inspire the masses with a "political revolution." Like Nhu, Thieu acknowledged the absence of a structure to rival that of the Communists, adding that nothing could be done without public recognition that the struggle was about to shift to the political arena. People were now ready, he thought, and he intended to exploit this by deploying an Information Ministry cadre in every hamlet and village, adding other leadership cadre—for women, youth, and self-defense units—at the village level to a total of perhaps 50,000 people. All such cadres would have as one responsibility "keeping an eye on the Communists."⁵⁷ [redacted]

It is not known whether President Thieu actually tried to implement this scheme. But on 25 May 1969, whether as a serious move to compete with the Communists or as a pro forma response to continued US pressure, he created a second political umbrella organization, the National Social Democratic Front. The NSDF apparently enjoyed a broader base than the *Lien Minh*, and the US Mission promptly shifted its material support to the new grouping. But the results were equally disappointing, partly because so many politicians refused to work with the controversial Huong; these included Tran Van Don, whose National Salvation Front declined to join the NSDF. Shackley feared that the unpopular Huong survived as a Palace functionary because of a Thieu perception

⁵⁶Saigon 4338, 15 February 1968, and Saigon 5580 11 March 1968, [redacted]
[redacted]
Shackley interview, 26 June 1993; Saigon 7436, 19 April 1969, [redacted]

⁵⁷Saigon 6215, 24 March 1969, [redacted] Thieu's analysis and proposed solution are nearly identical to those of Ngo Dinh Diem in the mid-1950s. The role of the Information Ministry in Diem's "Denunciation of Communists" campaign appears to have served as Thieu's model in 1969 (see *CIA and the House of Ngo*). [redacted]

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that CIA liked him. In the event, the NSDF failed even to merge its constituent parts, which at best represented only a small fraction of the country's political interests. The Station subsidy continued until June 1969 at an average rate of about [redacted] and at an unknown level through the rest of the year.⁵⁸ [redacted]

During the experiment with the NSDF, there was sporadic talk among US officials about integrating urban political mobilization with the nation-building side of rural pacification. The regular lunch meetings of the US Mission Council turned periodically to this topic, and Vietnamese, including Lt. Col. Nguyen Be, chief of the Station's pacification training, urged the extension of NSDF organizing to the countryside. But President Thieu made it clear that, for him, pacification was part of the military struggle, not a political task, and the Mission never tried to force the issue. It probably could not have succeeded—Thieu was no more open to argument than Ngo Dinh Diem had been, and trained, motivated manpower had always been lacking. Nevertheless, Thieu's attitude indicated that, like Diem before him, he saw the struggle with the Communists exclusively in terms of isolating and destroying a malevolent alien presence. Like Diem, he would offer no leadership in presenting a competing ideology or program.⁵⁹ [redacted]

⁵⁸Williams, "Election Process," 74-79; Shackley interview, 13 July 1993 [redacted]
[redacted] *passim*; untitled draft Station memorandum, 8 May 1969, [redacted] The Mission Council included the Ambassador, his deputy, and the heads of the autonomous US agencies represented in Vietnam. The most important of these were MACV, the US Agency for International Development, the US Information Service, and the CIA. [redacted]

⁵⁹Shackley interview, 26 June 1993. The interpretation of Thieu's position is the author's. [redacted]

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Chapter 5

Distractions and Frustrations

In June 1969, Ted Shackley had been running the Station for just six months when the murder of a suspected double agent by a US Special Forces unit—the so-called Green Beret incident—threatened to associate the CIA with crimes against civilians. The 1968 murder of villagers by American troops at My Lai had just come to light, and CIA, already under attack for some of its activity against the Viet Cong organization, risked being added to the list of alleged war criminals.

The incident began with a request from a US Special Forces intelligence unit at Nha Trang for assistance in disposing of an agent it believed to be controlled by the Communists. Unwilling to turn the man over to GVN security elements—they would discover that he had been used for unilateral Special Forces operations into Cambodia—the Army wanted CIA assistance in killing him. The Special Forces made their first approach directly to the Station in mid-June, but saw only two Shackley outer-office aides, who they later claimed gave a noncommittal response.¹

Still looking for help, two Special Forces officers visited acting chief in Nha Trang, on 17 and 18 June 1969. sent a cable to his boss, Base Chief Dean Almy, attending a conference in Saigon, that arrived on the morning of 19 June. Upon reading it, Almy headed for the COS's office, where Shackley's secretary, intercepted him and refused to interrupt a meeting then in progress. So Almy left the cable with her, making a point of its urgency. But failed to give it to Shackley, who left the next day for a weekend in Hong Kong.²

¹Dean Almy, telephone interview by the author, Bath, ME, 12 December 1994. The dates cited are taken from David Corn, *Blond Ghost: Ted Shackley and the CIA's Crusades* (Simon and Schuster, 1994), pp. 195-201.

²Almy said that, away from Nha Trang, he lacked the authority to release a cable and thus needed Shackley's intervention to get a reply to

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Back in Nha Trang on 20 June, Almy received yet another visit from the Special Forces. At this session, he told them that, whatever the popular fantasy on the subject, the CIA simply did not kill its agents, and he could not help them with theirs. But, according to their later testimony, the Special Forces officers had already been told by [] that "Shack won't mind, he killed hundreds of guys in Laos." Such an off-hand remark could not have constituted Agency approval, especially for something not in the Agency's power to grant, and even if taken as authoritative was now effectively countermanded by Almy's refusal. But the Special Forces officers now decided to act. Without advising Almy, they took the agent out to sea in a small boat that night, shot him to death, and dumped the body overboard.³ []

Back from Hong Kong, Shackley finally saw the original [] query and cabled Nha Trang that eliminating the agent was out of the question. He ordered Nha Trang to get Special Forces' assurance that the agent was safe, and when this was not forthcoming took the matter to Ambassador Bunker and General Abrams. A sergeant who participated in the murder soon volunteered a confession, and the case became public in August. Counsel for the accused launched an early example of the "CIA defense," demanding voluminous but unspecified Agency correspondence and testimony from various Agency officials. As Richard Helms later recalled it, the Nixon White House appeared to support Army efforts, under Secretary Stanley Resor, to establish Agency complicity. These failed, as the Station had done no more than unintentionally, if clumsily, fail promptly to make its position clear. The cases against the defendants were eventually dismissed, and the episode left a residue of public suspicion of the Agency at a time of growing opposition to the Vietnam war and to the Agency's role in it.⁴ []

Other Problems []

Meanwhile, almost two years after Nguyen Van Thieu's election to the presidency, Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker and the Station had not yet abandoned their joint effort to talk him into a serious political mobilization

³The quotation is from Almy interview, 12 December 1994. [] Almy remembered being called to Saigon with [] when the alleged statement about Shackley became known. The COS demanded to know if it was true, and [] his face "the color of parchment," denied it. The flip allusion to Laos, if [] made it, []

[] of the Hmong tribe's irregular warfare against the North Vietnamese. [] Also see Corn, *Blond Ghast*, pp. 195-198. []

⁴Corn, *Blond Ghast*, pp. 198-201. [] Richard Helms, telephone interview by the author, Washington, DC, 15 December 1994. []

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campaign. The Americans had indeed won Vietnamese acquiescence to a vastly intensified pacification program, and the military and police resources devoted to this were making serious inroads on the Communist organization in the countryside. But the final American push for political organizing at the national level met the same fate as all its predecessors, and it died in 1970. Thereafter, the Station's political program was confined to participation in Bunker's perennial effort, notably in the presidential election of 1971, to support and energize Thieu while pushing for cosmetic refinements in GVN institutions.

But in mid-1969, the political struggle still looked worth an effort. Unfortunately for American purposes, the obstacles to getting President Thieu's acceptance of the US political prescription were compounded by two irritants that threatened Embassy and Station rapport with their senior government contacts. The first was Thieu's hostility to Lower House Deputy Tran Ngoc Chau. Chau had once been the darling of the Station officers who devised the Agency's pacification programs after the fall of Ngo Dinh Diem. As chief of the Delta province of Kien Hoa, Chau originated one such program, the so-called Census-Grievance apparatus, which elicited intelligence on local Communists while giving villagers a theoretically privileged channel for complaints about GVN performance.⁵

Chau also allowed the Station to use Kien Hoa as a testing ground for the Counter-Terror Teams, later called Provincial Reconnaissance Units, that tried to make life as insecure for Communist officials as it was for Saigon's representatives in the countryside. When the Station needed a new Vietnamese commander for its training center at Vung Tau in late 1965, it persuaded the government to let Chau leave Kien Hoa to take the job. The assignment failed—Chau brought in weak assistants, and his egocentrism alienated his Vietnamese superiors—and he left the Army after less than a year at Vung Tau to go into politics.⁶

Elected to the National Assembly's Lower House, Chau called for an accommodation with non-Communist elements in the NLF. In early 1969, he asked for CIA support of his constituency-building. The Station begged off, seeing Chau's program as too extreme and his faction as a potential competitor to the *Lien Minh*, but Chau seems to have traded on his CIA contacts anyway to give the impression of Agency backing. When in June 1969 Thieu had had enough of this gadfly, he took Chau's insinuations of an Agency connection seriously enough to check with the Station before proceeding against him. Concerned to allay Thieu's perennial suspicions, Shackley assured the chief of the police Special Branch that he had no

⁵ *passim*. The author set up the Station pacification programs in the northern tier of Delta provinces in 1964 and early 1965 and worked with Chau during this period.

⁶ *Ibid.*

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interest in Chau and no objection to legal action against him. It was the State Department, worried about US press reaction to a prosecution, that urged Bunker to intercede with Thieu on Chau's behalf.⁷ []

The charge was unauthorized contact with the North, in the person of Chau's brother, Tran Ngoc Hien. Chau had first told the Station of a Communist connection in late 1964, when he said "some high ranking people from Hanoi" had contacted him; Chau wanted a meeting with Ambassador Maxwell Taylor to "explain 'requirements for victory,'" but this seems not to have taken place. About a year later, Chau again mentioned Communist contacts, but still did not identify them. Donohue and Jorgensen agonized over this development, for Chau refused to include the Saigon government in any exploitation of this opening. On this occasion, Jorgensen decided that unilateral exploration of such an anonymous channel posed an unacceptable risk to Chau's viability in the cadre programs. Accordingly, he let the matter drop.⁸ []

In 1967, Chau finally identified Hien as his Communist visitor after the Station confronted him with information from other sources. Eager at that time to forge unofficial channels to the Communists, the Station wanted to meet Hien directly, but Chau refused to arrange it. []

[] Thieu then launched his tortuous effort to prosecute Chau, beginning with a legally dubious device to lift his parliamentary immunity and ending with conviction by a military court and a 20-year sentence in early 1970.⁹ []

Despite the Station's disavowal of Chau, his protection by a senior US adviser, John Paul Vann, and subsequent US appeals for clemency probably confirmed Thieu in his suspicion of Chau as a CIA agent. But Chau constituted, at this point, the lesser of the two current irritants in Station relations with the Vietnamese leadership. The more troublesome, because it embarrassed President Thieu, involved an agent of Hanoi in Doc Lap Palace. By early 1969, a joint operation of the Station and police Special Branch had identified Huynh Van Trong, an intelligence

⁷FVSA 27261, 18 February 1969; undated, untitled draft memorandum; FVSW 10340, 20 February 1968; Saigon 0547, 27 June 1969; State Department INR Intelligence Note 430, 4 June 1969; Saigon 1146, 11 July 1969; [] Shackley interview, 26 June 1993. []

⁸SAIG 7749, 6 November 1965; [] Donohue interview, 23 January 1995. []

⁹ Saigon 8101, 20 December 1969, and *passim*; [] Chau made his 1964 revelation to the author, who remembers the claim of Communist contacts but not the request for a meeting with Taylor. Shackley later claimed that when he disavowed Chau to the Palace he was unaware of the 1967 effort to get Chau to introduce Hien to the Station (see Shackley interview, 26 June 1993). But in December 1969, the Station cabled a review of the case that mentions this; it is not known how long before this the Hien episode had come to light (see Saigon 8101). []

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aide to Thieu, as a probable Communist agent. A [redacted] supported the reporting agent's bona fides, and when Trong's handler was captured, his confession confirmed the police reporting. In July, the Station began pressing Thieu's military assistant, General Quang, to have Trong arrested. Thieu, eager to avoid embarrassment, had wanted the matter handled quietly, but acceded to American urging, and Trong was picked up on 24 July 1969.¹⁰ [redacted]

The arrest generated intense press criticism of Palace security, and Thieu reacted with angry defensiveness, blaming his police chief and the Station for forcing his hand. The Station urged National Police chief Colonel Hai and General Quang to explain to Thieu that President Nixon's impending visit made it unavoidable: the Secret Service had to be informed, and it would never permit Nixon to enter the Palace with Trong still at liberty.¹¹ [redacted]

Meanwhile, as it tried to mollify Thieu, the Station acquired new insights into the Communist use of influence agents from the interrogation of Trong's case officer. Disappointed at Trong's limited access to Thieu, the agent's superiors had begun feeding him analyses on such things as the peace talks and the economic and financial situation in South Vietnam. These were all calculatedly pessimistic, and Trong was to offer them when Thieu looked depressed. According to Trong's handler, Hanoi hoped that they would help discourage Thieu to the point that he saw no alternative to negotiations with the NLF.¹² [redacted]

The Station's Palace liaison survived both the Trong affair and Thieu's suspicion of Agency collusion with Tran Ngoc Chau. The atmosphere permitted Ralph Katrosh to make one more plea for a more professional Vietnamese intelligence effort before he left Saigon in September 1969. In the latest of a series of CIA representations dating back to 1954, Katrosh praised Nguyen Khac Binh, the able and cooperative new chief of the Central Intelligence Organization, and urged Thieu to provide the high-quality people needed to help Binh raise professional standards. Thieu said he would do what he could, but apparently did nothing. He had earlier given Katrosh the impression that he cared as little for the CIO, a US-sponsored creation of the early 1960s, as he did for American-style political organization.¹³ [redacted]

¹⁰FVSA 27,060, 28 January 1969; Saigon 1736, 25 July 1969; Saigon 2885, 18 August 1969; Saigon Embtel 15273, 29 July 1969; [redacted]

¹¹Saigon 1736; Saigon 2885; Saigon Airgram A-194, 7 July 1973; [redacted]

¹²Saigon 1736. Whether the prescribed diet of bad news improved Trong's access to Thieu is not recorded. [redacted]

¹³FVSA 28701, 3 September 1969, [redacted] Katrosh interview, 19 May 1993. [redacted]

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Col. Nguyen Khac Binh, chief of the Central Intelligence Organization,

at National Interrogation Center Headquarters, c. 1970.

Photo courtesy of Joseph Lazarsky.

But despite the frequent necessity for Katrosh to raise uncongenial subjects, President Thieu seemed genuinely to value their relationship, making the rare gesture, upon Katrosh's departure, of awarding him the Fifth Class National Order Medal. Katrosh later recalled having adopted a practice of delivering his messages in the most direct possible way—"Here is what [Washington and Bunker] want and this is why they want it"—and thought Thieu had found this helpful.¹⁴ □



¹⁴ Katrosh interview, 19 May 1993. Katrosh recalled that the medal carried with it the right of burial at the expense of the GVN. □

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The Final Push for Political Mobilization []

On 3 November 1969, President Nixon delivered a vigorous speech reaffirming US support for the anti-Communist cause in Vietnam. Three weeks later, the DCI's principal Vietnam adviser, George Carver, talked with Thieu in Saigon, and gained the impression that the President "honestly believes the US is going to stand firm behind him . . . and the Communists are going to run out of steam." Perhaps this belief justified in Thieu's mind his continuing indifference to the political mobilization that Bunker and the Station had so long urged upon him. The Station saw no substantive accomplishment or organizational momentum in the NSDF and was ready to see Thieu abandon it.¹⁶ []

Whatever the fate of the NSDF, there remained the need to find a successful political mobilization technique, but the Station cautioned against optimism about enlisting Thieu's cooperation. His contempt for the Westernized politicians in Saigon and, in Carver's phrase, the "alien institutional toys they call political parties," meant that political mobilization would remain at best his fourth priority. Vietnamization of the military effort, pacification, and the economy all would take precedence. Furthermore, Thieu continued to insist that the South Vietnamese were "not interested in [political] doctrine," but simply "wanted to lead better and more prosperous lives without being afraid." In these circumstances, the Station doubted it could find any formula capable of winning Thieu's unreserved support.¹⁷ []

The State Department drew the obvious conclusion and told Bunker in Agency channels that the lack of results had made Washington skeptical about the merits of continued support of the NSDF. Shackley had already told Headquarters of his intention to review with Ambassador Bunker the entire issue of covert political support of the GVN. At their meeting on 4 December, the COS identified several other potential recipients of US support if the NSDF failed, including the durable labor

[]
"Saigon 7268, 30 November 1969, []

"Saigon 6423, 9 November 1969, and Saigon 7163, 27 November 1969, []

[] As had been true since the mid-1950s, CIA thinking about mass political organization in Vietnam focused here almost exclusively on organizational mechanics, with little attention to political issues or principles. []

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leader Tran Quoc Buu and the perennially dissident An Quang Buddhists. Bunker endorsed these ideas, and the Station reported that he would raise with President Thieu "appropriate portions" of its memorandum on the subject.¹⁸ []

Shackley's report provoked a tense cable from CFE William Nelson accusing the Station of getting out ahead of Headquarters and the NSC on support for South Vietnamese political mobilization. Shackley's rejoinder reminded Headquarters that he had given advance notice of the intended review, with no reaction from Washington. Regarding the substance of the complaint, the COS assured Nelson that both he and Bunker understood the need, before doing anything else, to get Thieu's reaction to Washington's expressed disappointment with a languishing NSDF. Nelson's reaction is not known, but Washington deliberated for three months before the NSC approved \$225,000 in mid-March 1970 for continued funding of Thieu's political mobilization efforts.¹⁹ []

Bunker and the Station continued trying to get President Thieu to take these efforts seriously, but Shackley did not serve as Bunker's intermediary as Katrosh had, and the Station increasingly emphasized indirect approaches to Thieu. In doing so, it encountered not only the customary Vietnamese resistance to American political principles, but also growing suspicion of US purposes. This was true even of people the Station was trying to exploit as agents of influence. General Khiem, for example, had been a cooperative Station contact as concurrent Interior Minister and Deputy Prime Minister for Pacification, and the Station thought him a distinct improvement, as Prime Minister, over his predecessor. But as urban discontent led by students and Army veterans festered in the spring of 1970, he told Thieu he agreed that the United States was supporting the disturbances in order to bring down the Saigon regime, arrange a coalition government, and end the war.²⁰ []

At the end of April, President Nixon ordered US troops into Cambodia in search of enemy logistic and command installations. In early May, he launched the first major bombing raids on the North since

¹⁸Saigon 7163; Director 57975, 2 December 1969, and Saigon 7517, 5 December 1969. []

[] Saigon 7517 refers to the Station's memorandum to Bunker, sent to Headquarters as FVSA 29783, which has not been found. []

¹⁹[] Saigon 7675, 10 December 1969. []
[] This correspondence, particularly the Washington end, appears to overlook Thieu's well-known reservations about what had always been an American initiative. Washington and the US Mission in Saigon presumably discussed the matter further before March 1970, but the correspondence has not been found. []

²⁰Undated [] II, *passim*; Saigon 12077, 9 April 1970. [] also said that Khiem had a reputation for "deviousness and cunning and seems to have been motivated throughout his career primarily by opportunism." []

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October 1968. The Cambodian incursion, especially, provoked massive protests in the United States, and National Guard soldiers killed six students at Kent State University and Jackson State College. Intensified US operations might have been expected to bolster South Vietnamese morale, even if they alienated domestic American opinion. Any such effect was transient, for President Nixon followed the June withdrawal of US troops from Cambodia with a resumption of the American force reduction in South Vietnam.²¹ []

In this atmosphere, Shackley tried to awaken Thieu to the danger of a disaffected South Vietnamese public. On 6 May, the Station drafted a program calculated to "defuse some of the more troublesome irritants" between governors and governed. In Bunker's absence, acting Ambassador Berger told Shackley he concurred, but judged the program too provocative to broach directly with President Thieu. Prime Minister Khiem seemed a potentially more receptive audience, but even here, Berger thought it better to package the message as an intelligence appraisal, to be delivered by the COS, rather than to go himself with an overt political demarche. Khiem received Shackley the same day, 6 May, and after listening to the CIA proposal agreed to develop the terms of a "political position on the current constitutional crisis;" he would submit this to Thieu if it appeared likely to win substantial public support.²² []

For Shackley, the outcome demonstrated Khiem's unwillingness to "move boldly in raising any issues with Thieu." For, although Khiem seemed clearly to share the Mission's view of the crisis, he would "take political soundings with Thieu but no more. In short, where we were looking for decisiveness and rapidity of action we have every reason to believe we will get nothing more than oriental time-consuming dissembling." The Station saw no evidence that the Communists had fomented the unrest, which despite its fragmentation threatened Saigon's authority. "Only Thieu can save Thieu," Shackley wrote, and only Ambassador Bunker and President Nixon could reach him with sufficient force to stand a chance of getting him to regain lost credibility through essential reforms. The COS wanted a letter from Nixon to Thieu, followed by an urgent appeal from Bunker that Thieu move decisively to deal with corruption, police misconduct, and his own government's defiance of Supreme Court rulings.²³ []

²¹Herring, *America's Longest War*, pp. 233-239; "Vietnam Chronology," pp. 121-122. []

²²Saigon 13459, 9 May 1970. []

²³Ibid.; Saigon 13460, 9 May 1970, and Saigon 13541, 11 May 1970. []

[] This correspondence does not acknowledge that reform might have posed a threat to Thieu from the generals whose corruption he would have had to challenge. []

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The standoff between the regime and its non-Communist urban constituency now resembled that of the last months of the Diem regime. Trying to work out a reconciliation formula, the Station created a 27-page prescription for Headquarters' benefit that implicitly recognized Thieu's dilemma—he had to quell popular disturbances while trying to persuade the politically alienated of his reformist purposes—but did not specify how he was simultaneously to put down these disorders and soften the public perception of police brutality. It concentrated instead on the protocol of proposed government contacts with dissident An Quang Buddhists and on the content of suggested public addresses by Prime Minister Khiem. The Station also proposed major new programs of political mobilization, land reform, and economic improvements. Here, as with the problem of police action against public disorder, the means of implementation got little attention; the problem of attracting capable and dedicated people to staff such new programs, for example, drew only the facile observation that there were "many good men lying fallow."²⁴ □

Declining Interest in Political Modernization □

This omission may have reflected a degree of indifference to what Station management saw as just one more well-intentioned initiative by George Carver to impose Western forms on South Vietnamese politics. Although the very dimensions of the Station's May 1970 prescription and the effort to get Thieu's attention to its main provisions imply some sense of urgency, Lazarsky later remembered the affair as a routine matter given a dutiful Station response. As the DCOS later recalled his own reaction, he had equated Thieu's position with that of Indonesia's General Suharto: each had control of his armed forces, and that was the only power base either one required.²⁵ □

The Station's attitude toward the dissident Buddhists reflected a similar ambivalence. Management had little interest in them—Lazarsky, using a term he said he borrowed from Burma's General Ne Win, called them the "Asian unemployed"—but the Station did resume the effort, suspended after the 1966 rebellion in Central Vietnam, to involve them

²⁴Saigon 13541. With respect to "good men lying fallow," throughout the Agency's involvement in Vietnam, its management in Saigon at least implicitly assumed that enough competent and motivated people were available to staff essential programs, if only the GVN devoted enough energy to recruiting them! □

²⁵Lazarsky interview, 14 June 1993. Ted Shackley, interviewed in 1993, did not recall the episode. □

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in the political process. In 1970, the Station's longtime channel to the Buddhists, [redacted] urged several prominent monks to run for the Senate. Among them was Vu Van Mau, once Ngo Dinh Diem's foreign minister.²⁶

Aiming to reduce the monks' dependence on dissident veterans and students, [redacted] backed up his encouragement with modest financial support. Most of them won, and for a time after the 30 August elections urban rioting stopped while they tried to work within the system. At the tactical level, this effort produced better results than the Mission's larger program of support to political mobilization by the Thieu government: the NSDF, despite renewed US funding in March, did not even sponsor a senatorial ticket, and the candidates of three of its constituent parties all lost.²⁷ [redacted]

American interest in mass political mobilization largely subsided after the 1970 senatorial elections, as the US Mission in Saigon turned its attention to the Presidential contest scheduled for October 1971. As of late 1970, Vice President Ky seemed unlikely to run, and US officials already worried about the effect on Thieu's political legitimacy if he ran unopposed. Ambassador Bunker proposed to forestall this outcome by persuading ex-Chief of State and Buddhist ally Duong Van "Big Minh" to seek the office.²⁸

Bunker anticipated some difficulty with the moody former general,

It was not that the US wanted Minh to unseat Thieu. Minh's devotion to the war effort looked doubtful, and a question of unauthorized contacts with the North through a brother in Hanoi had not been resolved.

²⁶ Lazarsky interview, 14 June 1993.

²⁷ [redacted] interview, 3 June 1993; Williams, "The Election Process," pp. 88, 101. Six of ten other

candidates, supported by the Station at an average of \$2,000 each, also won (see [redacted] and Saigon 18214, 1 September 1970). [redacted] Station had always found the Buddhists' goals obscure at best, and their political detachment unattractive. Lazarsky described the leadership in terms borrowed from Madame Nhu's notorious allusions to "Buddhist barbecues," conveying the same bemused contempt expressed by former COSS William Colby and Peer de Silva. Vu Van Mau served for about 18 hours as the last DIA Mission to Saigon.

de Silva. VII Van Mau served, for abc
"Saigon 33018 12 November 1970.

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Minh's ability was equally suspect: [redacted]

[redacted] a

Vietnamese colleague and Station agent who once described him, affectionately, as having "the body of an elephant and the brain of a mouse." But he would have been a credible candidate, likely with An Quang Buddhist support, to have won 20 percent to 30 percent of the vote.³⁰ [redacted]

Despite Minh's reluctance, a Thieu victory was not to be taken for granted, and in January 1971 Ambassador Bunker wanted action to ensure it. The Station also wanted a solid foot in the opposition camp against the possibility, however remote, of a Thieu defeat. And it wanted ten more "responsive" people in the Lower House, where its ten existing agents were already able to stimulate or block legislation. For these tasks, and to support pro-Thieu Lower House candidates, the Station wanted (and presumably got; the record is incomplete) \$252,000. As elections approached, the Station redefined, in effect, its longtime goal of Vietnamese political mobilization; this now meant simply generating votes for Nguyen Van Thieu. Shackley approached General Quang in one phase of a Station effort to get Thieu to press the Catholics to unite behind him and to court the Chinese minority and the tribal highlanders. Thieu apparently took some of Quang's advice, as the COS asserted in April that moves taken by Thieu after such colloquies with Quang demonstrated the efficacy of this channel.³¹ [redacted]

Varying Perceptions of Vietnamization [redacted]

As the Paris negotiations dragged on, US ground forces continued their withdrawal in pursuit of the Nixon administration's policy of Vietnamization. In February 1971, Saigon and the US tested ARVN's self-sufficiency on the ground with a major incursion, supported by American airpower, into South Laos. ARVN casualties were heavy and the results disappointing. In the aftermath of the operation, called Lamson 719, DDP Thomas Karamessines assigned the Station the delicate task of reporting on resulting ARVN morale problems without unnecessarily jarring ambassadorial or MACV sensitivities. Shackley replied that Bunker

³⁰Shackley interview, 26 June 1993; Saigon 22018; Groth interview, 29 July 1992; [redacted]

17 February 1968 [redacted]

³¹FYST 29542, 10 November 1970, and Saigon 24763, 18 January 1971, [redacted]

FVSA 35093, 11 April 1971 [redacted]

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Jospeh Lazarsky and Lt. Gen. Dang Van Quang, President Thieu's Special Assistant for Military and Security Affairs, Leesburg, VA, 1971.

Photo courtesy of
Joseph Lazarsky.

and Abrams both expected the unvarnished truth from him, and that he would "stoically absorb any irritation" on their part that his reporting might provoke.³² □

In fact, as Station management saw it, ARVN had "come out smelling like a half-decent rose," despite the casualties and limited gains. When DCOS Joe Lazarsky left Vietnam some weeks later, he shared what he later recalled as General Abrams's optimism about Saigon's prospects of survival. In MR 3, by contrast, ROIC Don Gregg thought that the nearly complete withdrawal of US forces had left a vacuum, in mid-1971, which ARVN had yet to fill. In some places, the Communists were busy filling that vacuum, which Gregg thought reflected President Thieu's reluctance, in an election year, to take the casualties that a more aggressive stance would incur. Even pacification assets like PRU and the Police Special Branch had "sagged badly" in June, and ARVN in MR was essentially passive, its morale "a question mark."³³ □

As was chronically the case in the CIA establishment in Vietnam, the intuitive judgments of working-level Station officers tended to the most pessimistic. Vietnamese linguist [redacted] had come to know a pair of ARVN paratroopers in 1970, and they looked him up

³²Clarke, *The Final Years*, pp. 472-474; Director 124179, 26 March 1971, and Saigon 28188, 27 March 1971, [redacted].

³³Lazarsky interview 14 June 1993; Memorandum, "MR 3 Monthly Report for June 1971," 7 July 1971, prepared by Donald P. Gregg, who provided a sanitized and declassified copy. □

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whenever their battalion was in the Saigon area. Their unit was committed to Lamson 719, and several months after the ARVN withdrawal one of the two appeared at [] door. His gung-ho paratrooper spirit had vanished; so had his buddy and most of the unit when they were overrun in Laos. [] gathered that the morale of the other survivors had been similarly shattered, and he later remembered thinking that "if this is what a member of an elite unit looked and felt like, the rest of ARVN must be in a hell of a fix."³⁴ []

The 1971 Presidential Election []

Subjective questions like military morale were in any case not to be definitively answered. With presidential elections scheduled for 3 October, GVN and US attention gravitated to the political sphere. As Station officers like Gregg and [] worried about ARVN resolve, Thieu and Ky began trying to use the Agency to advance their respective candidacies. In early July, Thieu's press secretary, Hoang Duc Nha, sought Shackley's endorsement of a South Vietnamese election information office in Washington. Failing in this—the COS referred him to the State Department—Nha asked Shackley to arrange Washington briefings for him on US antiwar groups and on government monitoring of terrorist organizations like the Weathermen. Bunker declined to get involved, while Headquarters opposed the information office idea and rejected the briefing request.³⁵ []

On 24 July, Thieu announced his candidacy, and "Big Minh" fulfilled Ambassador Bunker's hopes when he followed suit two days later. Vice President Ky declared on 4 August, but the Supreme Court rejected his filing the next day, citing his failure to meet the terms of the election law, which Thieu had formulated with Ky in mind. Minh then began threatening to withdraw. This would have reintroduced the prospect of an unopposed election, and on 19 August Ambassador Bunker visited Minh to persuade him to stay in the race. []

[] The next day, Minh did in fact withdraw. The ploy went badly in one other []

³⁴ [] note to the author, 10 November 1994. []

³⁵ Saigon 33503, 9 July 1971, and []

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respect: the press got hold of the Bunker approach, presumably from someone in Minh's entourage, and one story included the probably fictitious claim that the offer specified a campaign fund of \$3 million.³⁶ []

The Supreme Court reversed itself on 20 August, reinstating Ky, but he withdrew on 23 August, leaving Thieu as the sole candidate. This did not mean that Ky was resigned to a Thieu victory, as he now tried to use the Agency to generate US pressure for electoral reforms. He began by smuggling aide Dang Duc Khoi to Phnom Penh, whence Khoi flew to Washington in early September and appealed to an old Agency contact to put him in touch with National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger. DCI Helms informed Kissinger of this overture, summarizing Ky's appeal to force Thieu to conduct fair elections. But the American commitment to a Thieu victory overshadowed concerns about electoral fair play. Khoi did see Deputy Assistant Secretary William Sullivan, but Ky got no satisfaction.³⁷ []

While Helms in Washington was conveying Ky's message to Kissinger, COS Shackley and Prime Minister Khiem were trying to influence each other's principals in Saigon. On 7 September, Shackley urged that Thieu be induced to allow opposition, at least to the extent of specifying the mechanics of casting a negative vote. Khiem conveyed this to Thieu, and two days later noted in the same context that the President had not yet specified how many votes would constitute a victory in this singleton election. He thought Bunker should pin Thieu down on this matter, and more basically should try to avoid the embarrassment of a one-man election by persuading Minh and Ky to reactivate their candidacies. Shackley met the Prime Minister several more times before the election, once when Bunker could not get in to see Thieu, and Khiem again urged ambassadorial pressure. As the COS later recalled it, Bunker did keep trying to prevent an unopposed election, but in vain.³⁸ []

President Thieu won 91.5 percent of the votes cast on 3 October; nearly 90 percent of registered voters cast ballots. Five days later, the Viet Cong released an American prisoner, Sgt. John Sexton, in Cambodia.

[] *The New York Times*,
24 July, 1 August, 20 August 1971 [] also recalled the Bunker offer, but Shackley said in 1993 that he believed his own research, after the press allegations, determined that there had been none. (See [] interview, 3 June 1993, and Shackley interview, 26 June 1993.) []
"Victuaum Chronology," p.131; *The New York Times*, 21 August 1971 (U); William E. Nelson, Memorandum for Director of Central Intelligence, "Comments of Dang Duc Khoi on Current Views of Vice President Ky," 7 September 1971 [] *The New York Times*, 4 September 1971. []
"Saigon 36887, 7 September 1971; Saigon 37001, 9 September 1971; Saigon 37059, 10 September 1971; and *passim*, [] Theodore Shackley, interview by the author, Sumner, MD, 23 July 1993. []

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This had been preceded in August by a letter, apparently authorized by Tran Bach Dang, the Communist principal in the dormant NLF operation, which proposed new prisoner exchanges. But no channel for a reply had yet been set up when Sexton emerged from the jungle, and the two developments might have been unrelated. Sexton brought messages containing instructions for contact with his captors, and on 27 October the Communists used the Embassy telephone number sent to them with a North Vietnamese lieutenant released in reciprocity for Sexton. The caller claimed to represent Tran Bach Dang and offered to release captured Foreign Service Officer Douglas Ramsey for two high-ranking Communists. Informed of the proposal, President Thieu agreed to further communication in this channel, but postponed any commitment on prisoner exchanges until after his inauguration. No formula acceptable to Thieu, the United States, and the Communists ever emerged, and the dialog produced no further exchanges.³⁹

The War Is Not Over, and We Have Not Won

With President Thieu installed for another four-year term, Ambassador Bunker moved to reduce the Station's involvement at the top. In January 1972, with Deputy Ambassador Berger and MACV commander General Weyand both seeing Prime Minister Khiem, Bunker asked Shackley to withdraw. The COS later recalled this as a logical decision at a time when the Paris talks and Vietnamization were high on the agenda, and an informal CIA interlocutor with Khiem risked undercutting the designated contacts. But Khiem occasionally asked to see him anyway, and one such meeting took place on 17 January.⁴⁰

The main order of business was Communist intentions for the Tet holiday, but Khiem also made the first recorded reference to Thieu's proposed Democracy Party, describing it in terms that made it sound like a replica of Ngo Dinh Nhu's Can Lao (Labor) Party. Entirely unlike the American notion of mass-based political parties, it would be a semisecret cadre organization based on the Army and the bureaucracy, providing Thieu with an unofficial instrument for controlling the governmental

³⁹"Vietnam Chronology," p. 13 [] Summary, 19-23; [] interview, 24 August 1992.

⁴⁰Blind memorandum, "Tenth Conversation Between Prime Minister Khiem and CAS Station Chief," 20 January 1972 [] Saigon 43430, 19 January 1972, []
[] Shackley interview, 26 June 1993.

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apparatus. In this context, Khiem remarked that anyone working with Thieu did so strictly on the President's terms, imposing no conditions and without expecting any security of tenure.⁴¹ []

But all this came as an aside. The immediate question concerned the timing and scale of new Communist military initiatives. Khiem and Shackley agreed that the North probably intended a major assault; Khiem expected Hanoi to try to destroy rural pacification and overrun ARVN strong points in order to embarrass President Nixon during his visit to Beijing, planned for February. Shackley conveyed this to Headquarters, saying that the series of high points foreseen in Station projections as recently as December now looked like plans for a general offensive.⁴² []

This foreboding climate prevailed when Thomas Polgar arrived to replace Ted Shackley in late January 1972. Born and raised in Hungary, Polgar like his predecessor had a native command of an East European language and fluent German as well. Five years older than Shackley, he had been with the Agency since its creation in 1947. Polgar had wide experience in Europe [] He was seeing East Asia for the first time.⁴³ []

Polgar remembered that, when he learned of the Saigon appointment, he pointed out to DCI Helms, an old friend as well as colleague, that he had no background in Asian operations. No matter, Helms responded, Polgar would have four permanent items on his Saigon agenda, none of them operational. First was his relationship with the Embassy. After that, in no particular order, came MACV, the media, and Congressional visitors. Polgar left Washington with this mandate and with the prognosis offered by Defense Secretary Melvin Laird during a ceremonial call at the Pentagon: the US role in Vietnam was like that in divided Germany and Korea, and Americans would be there for 40 years.⁴⁴ []

Despite omens of a major Communist offensive, Shackley departed Vietnam optimistic about its prospects: military operations into Laos and Cambodia in 1971 had bought time, rice production was up, and the

⁴¹Memorandum, "Tenth Conversation." William Colby wrote that once, returning from a rural inspection trip with Thieu, "the President remarked that Diem had run the country quite well" (see Colby, *Lost Victory*, p. 294) []. He had also told Colby, in September 1970, that he could easily create a political party, but that when Diem had done so, it proved to be "only a facade," and a basis for "corruption and improper influence" (see Saigon 18593, 8 September 1970, [])

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⁴²Memorandum, "Tenth Conversation;" Saigon 43598, 22 January 1972, []

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⁴³Polgar official personnel file. []

⁴⁴Thomas Polgar, interview by the author, Maitland, FL, 29-30 July 1993. []

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Ted Shackley, Gen. Creighton Abrams, and Thomas Polgar, January 1972.
Photo courtesy of Thomas Polgar.

economy was booming. The curve was rising, in his view, despite ubiquitous official corruption, which in his view was a real problem, but one greatly exaggerated by rumor. Polgar largely accepted this evaluation as he took command of the Saigon Station; to him as to most if not all his predecessors, the situation seemed so well defined as to obviate the need for close analysis. Within days of his arrival, he was assuring National Police Commissioner Binh that "the war in Vietnam would eventually be won, not by military action, but by the acquisition of intelligence followed by police action."⁴⁵ □

The DCI's mandate to the new COS said nothing about Station dealings with the Saigon government, and Ambassador Bunker, as we have seen, had curtailed the CIA role after the presidential elections.

⁴⁵Shackley interview, 26 June 1993; Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993; Philip Potter, Memorandum for the Record, "Meeting with National Police Commissioner Nguyen Khac Binh," n.d., but with reference in the text to the date of the meeting as 2 February 1972. □

□ The economic picture also included the high inflation that had forced Thieu, the previous October, to devalue the piaster and raise interest rates (see "Vietnam Chronology," p. 132). With regard to corruption, Shackley said that he had vigorously investigated his Palace contact, General Quang, notorious for alleged corruption, but had been unable to confirm any specific instance of it (see Shackley interview, 26 June 1993). □

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Nevertheless, Polgar soon found himself heavily involved. Tran Thien Khiem, Prime Minister since August 1969, had told Shackley that he would not resume his informal CIA relationship with the new COS. But he soon reversed himself, and Polgar reported on 22 March that he and Khiem had agreed to continue the dialog. Indeed, Khiem took the occasion of this inaugural meeting to ensure that Polgar understood the President's style: Thieu had a most suspicious nature, he said, adding that he thought Bunker had more influence over Thieu than anyone else, and predicting that this would not transfer to the Ambassador's successor.⁴⁶ []

Polgar inherited from Shackley warm relations with both Ambassador Bunker and MACV commander Gen. Creighton Abrams; the general had taken the trouble to attend Shackley's leavetaking at Tan Son Nhut. But the prevailing cordiality did not imply the absence of tension or disagreement. Abrams particularly disliked overt contacts between the Station and senior ARVN commanders and any reporting even implicitly critical of MACV's advisory and training performance with ARVN. But he and Polgar established a personal as well as professional relationship, based on mutual friends and a shared taste for classical music.⁴⁷ []

The media and Congressional visitors did not intrude much during Polgar's first weeks, when the US Mission worried mainly about a Communist offensive during the January Tet holidays or during President Nixon's visit to China during the last week of February. But these events passed with no major initiative from Hanoi; meanwhile, US troop strength on the ground in Vietnam dipped below 100,000. Then, on 30 March, North Vietnamese Army units, including armor and heavy artillery, entered the demilitarized zone to launch what became known as the Easter offensive. As Polgar recalled it, MACV J-2 had predicted the time and place of the DMZ assault in "one of the most prescient cables I have ever seen." The Station's agent sources, who in late 1971 had already warned of Communist strategic intentions, were less precise at the tactical level; they had correctly foreseen attacks in the Central Highlands, but apparently had lacked access to preparations above the DMZ.⁴⁸ []

On 6 April, Tom Polgar sounded for the first time the note that henceforth dominated his perspective on South Vietnam's future, namely, its indefinite dependence on US support: "the illusion that [the] war is over and we have won is shattered." He expected ARVN to hold out, despite heavy losses, but "American support in the air and in military

⁴⁶"Saigon 43430; Saigon 46343, 22 March 1972, [] Blind Memorandum, "Meeting Between New Vietnam Station Chief and Prime Minister Tran Thien Khiem," 23 March 1972, [] In fact, Bunker stayed another year and a half []

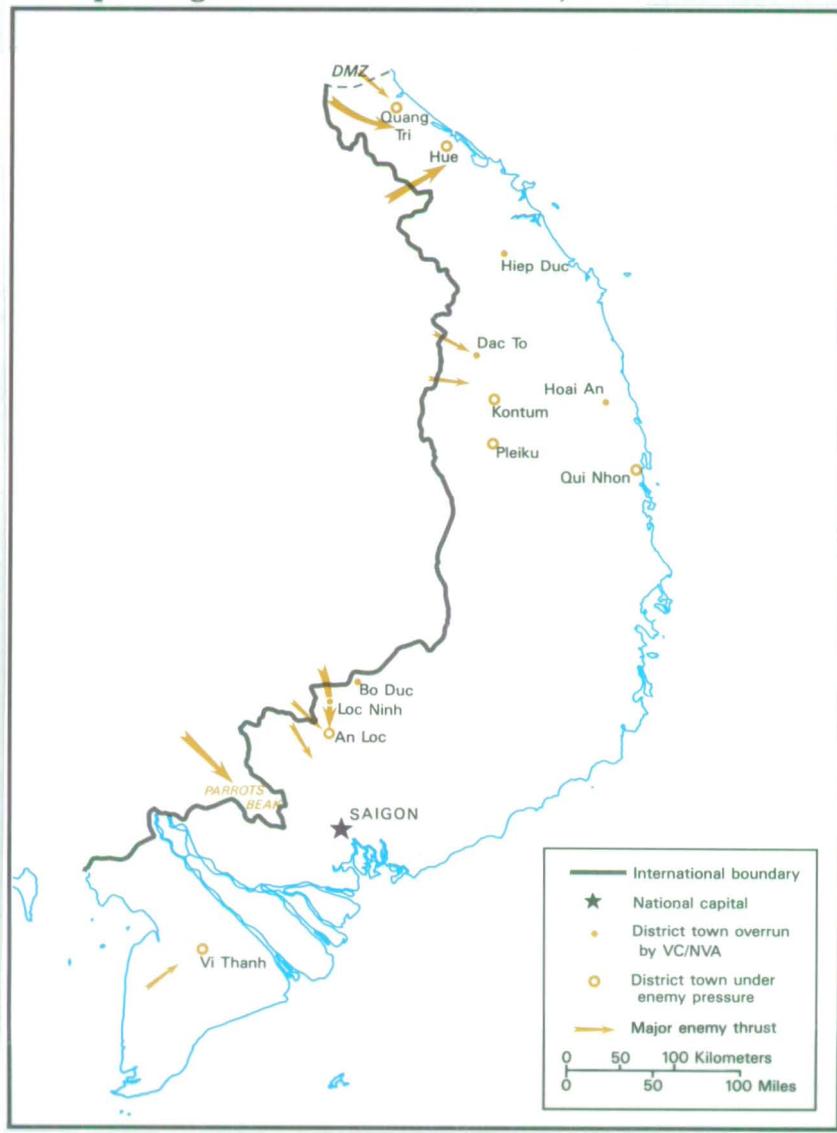
⁴⁷"Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993, []

⁴⁸"Vietnam Chronology," p. 135 [] Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993, []

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Figure 16
Principal Targets of the Easter Offensive, 1972



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and civilian advisory capacities remain [sic] essential for survival of a non-Communist Vietnam as long as Soviets and China continue support to North Vietnam."⁴⁹ []

With the Easter offensive still gaining momentum, an apocalyptic cable from his Bien Hoa base forced Polgar's attention to corruption in the government. The message described the corrosive effects of the VC shadow supply system, in which Saigon's officials accommodated, for a price, Communist needs for local stocks of food, medicine, and other supplies. The ARVN commander of Military Region (MR) 3 seemed to take it for granted that Communist combat units infiltrating his area would be locally supplied, and the base chief saw an urgent need for a rigorous resource control system. Without it, he thought, there would be sustained main unit fighting in MR 3 inside of one year. Polgar said he intended to take up the matter with the Mission Council, but years later did not recall what action, if any, the Council recommended or undertook.⁵⁰ []

Whatever the overall effect of corruption or of the absence of resource controls, new evidence of institutional malaise in the intelligence and security organs had surfaced two weeks earlier in a late March meeting with Col. Nguyen Khac Binh, chief of the CIO and concurrently National Police commander. He deplored both the malign influence of the French-trained old guard and President Thieu's refusal to detail from ARVN the high-quality, middle-grade officers he needed to improve police effectiveness, including that of Special Branch, the Station's intelligence liaison. The Station responded with the lame hope that attrition would take care of the old guard. And to a discouraged intimation that Binh wanted to resign it could only suggest that regular rotation of police commanders would probably be a good thing.⁵¹ []

⁴⁹Saigon 46947, 6 April 1972, [] A Defense Department task force dispatched after the offensive to evaluate its effects came up with a more comprehensive critique: "Continued social injustice, open political chicanery, and economic dependence on the United States would ultimately give the people little to fight for against an opponent whose determination appeared unshaken." (see Clarke, *The Final Years*, p. 489.) []

⁵⁰Saigon 46947; [] Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993. In retrospect, Polgar saw official corruption as having had little effect on the fate of the GVN; he thought of it as something endemic in Third World countries, including members of the Communist Bloc. The term "Military Region" was adopted in July 1970 to replace the word "Corps" to designate the basic areas of ARVN territorial responsibility. What had been called the Capital Military District became MR 5. []

⁵¹I'VSA 38598, 5 April 1972, []

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Conflicting Assessments of the Easter Offensive []

As with the 1968 Tet offensive, the reactions of US observers to the 1972 Easter offensive sharply diverged. Regular units of the North Vietnamese Army were besieging An Loc, north of Saigon, when COS Polgar reported himself "perplexed by [the] overoptimistic position taken by Ambassador Bunker," who seemed to have adopted General Abrams's position that "this is the final offensive—the enemy has nothing left." After a bow to their collective experience and expertise, Polgar said that intelligence didn't support them, that the Communists could repeat the current offensive, assuming only continued Soviet support and the use of Laotian and Cambodian territory. Polgar said he was even prepared to accept that Saigon's forces might be doing better than had a half million US troops a few years before, but insisted that the Vietnamese depended utterly on American combat air support.⁵² []

Whatever Abrams thought about Communist capabilities, he also had his reservations about ARVN leadership. On 22 April, he complained to Polgar about the lethargy of ARVN's reporting system, and the resulting tendency of the generals around Thieu to second-guess the field commanders on the basis of outdated information. Abrams clearly believed that "President Thieu's contribution to some recent tactical decisions did not represent [the] epitome of wisdom." In an unusual move, the general asked if the Station could "insinuate" to the Palace that Thieu ought to rely more on briefings by his field commanders. Despite the implied tribute to the Station's influence, Polgar noted that only Abrams himself and the Ambassador were situated to have any impact on this.⁵³ []

Polgar continued to call the military situation as he saw it, and in early May showed Bunker an assessment that included a devastating critique of ARVN commanders. Many owed their positions to their demonstrated loyalty to Thieu, and many of these were incompetent. The leadership had failed catastrophically to prepare for the attacks in MR 2, which included the Central Highlands, despite intelligence that predicted to the day when the attack there would come.⁵⁴ []

Bunker forbade the dissemination of this report, even though Abrams had just said essentially the same things to Thieu. Headquarters worried that Station candor might create friction with the Ambassador or MACV, but Polgar wrote back that Bunker genuinely appreciated it. His reassuring words did not mention Abrams, and Polgar shortly afterward

⁵²Saigon 47371, 14 April 1972, [] Saigon 47772, 22 April 1972, []

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⁵³Saigon 47772, []

⁵⁴Saigon 48369, 4 May 1972, []

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complained that MACV's realism seemed to be confined to the back channel. Abrams and General Weyand understood the problem, but "published MACV material [is] consistently overoptimistic and seldom if ever critical of ARVN."⁵⁵ [redacted]

[redacted] some insights into the functioning of the ARVN command under the latest Communist onslaught. MR 2 commander Gen. Ngo Dzu simply panicked and fled from Corps headquarters at Pleiku to coastal Nha Trang, leaving the de facto leadership of ARVN forces in the interior to MR 2 senior adviser John Paul Vann. ARVN leadership in MR 1 also cracked. [redacted]

[redacted] refused to return to Pleiku. [redacted] Thieu was considering replacing him with a known incompetent named Phan Trong Chinh. Acting on an ostensibly spontaneous impulse, Bunker sent Thieu a list of candidates on which Chinh's name did not appear. Thieu picked one that did, that of Gen. Nguyen Van Toan. Toan had recently been relieved as 2nd Division commander on charges of corruption and was at the moment defending himself against charges of illicit relations with prepubescent girls. But he had something the situation required, namely, a reputation as a genuine combat leader.⁵⁶ [redacted]

[redacted] illuminated Thieu's own functioning under pressure, and [redacted] gained the impression that military reverses had loosened his connection with reality. One of them remembered a surrealistic performance during the crisis in which Thieu agonized with [redacted] over the minutest details of his appearance at the celebration of a national holiday.⁵⁷ [redacted]

Nevertheless, by late June, Polgar saw some basis for renewed optimism. US intelligence suggested that airstrikes on rear area North Vietnamese units had blunted Hanoi's fighting instruments. ARVN had rallied from its April funk, and Saigon's control had not diminished except for the areas physically occupied by invading forces. This confirmed, for Polgar, that the population had come to be "content to live with the Thieu regime." Polgar believed, as Thieu did, and Diem before him, that "whoever controls the machinery of government can be sure of having adequate even if passive acceptance by [the] population." This argument ignored the ineluctable pressure on the rural population to take sides, but

⁵⁵Saigon 48392, 5 May 1972, [redacted] Also, Saigon 48449, 6 May 1972 [redacted] Also, Saigon 48245, 2 May 1972; Saigon 49362, 24 May 1972; [redacted]

[redacted] The criticisms of ARVN leadership and MACV's official optimism in the seventh year of Thieu's rule constitute a nearly exact reprise of themes being played at the same point in Ngo Dinh Diem's career, in 1961. One of the most interesting features of the Thieu regime is its imitation, conscious or otherwise, of Diem's. [redacted]

⁵⁶[redacted] interview, 24 August 1992; [redacted] note to the author, 10 November 1994. [redacted]
⁵⁷[redacted] interview, 24 August 1992. [redacted]

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CIA, earlier the most vigorous proponent of a "one-war" strategy, now joined the rest of the US Government in either abdicating the ideological struggle or assuming that Saigon had won it.⁵⁸ []

Polgar expanded on this point of view when Gen. Alexander Haig visited Saigon in late June: if the North Vietnamese were defeated, "there should be no problem with pacification. . . . It is not [a] question of [a] 'fight for hearts and minds' but simply one of who controls city hall." The COS dismissed Haig's question about the prospect of a general uprising: there had been no uprisings or any other significant action by the indigenous Communist organization, even where the North Vietnamese Army had made "authentic gains," and ARVN was now fighting well.⁵⁹ []

By mid-July, Thieu aide General Quang was reassuring Polgar that the South Vietnamese presence had not suffered serious damage in the populated areas of the Mekong Delta, although it would take hard work farther south, in An Xuyen and Chuong Thien Provinces, to "restore or establish" government control. In August, with the immediate threat largely surmounted, the hardy-unity-through-crisis theme surfaced again in a Station meeting with Judge Tran Si Tan, a Thieu confidant and intermittent channel to the Agency. According to Tan, Thieu still believed that, with continued US support, South Vietnam could resist political and military pressure from the North. To be sure, Thieu would have to rely on relatively mediocre military and political leaders, but he hoped that fear of a Communist takeover would galvanize the disparate South Vietnamese military and political elements into an effective resistance force.⁶⁰ []

Looking for a New Political Action Strategy []

A September 1972 exchange between Bill Colby—now the Agency's Executive Director/Comptroller—and COS Polgar revealed continuing disagreement inside CIA about US political goals in South Vietnam. Colby wrote to the COS urging him to develop a new political action strategy for South Vietnam. Colby would leave specific action proposals to the Station, but he thought it essential that they be aimed at strengthening GVN institutions for protracted competition with the

⁵⁸Saigon 51007, 28 June 1972, []

⁵⁹Saigon 51131, 1 July 1972, []

⁶⁰Saigon 51886, 18 July 1972, [] Richard Helms, DDP, Memorandum to Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs Henry A. Kissinger, "President Thieu's Reactions to His Discussions With Dr. Kissinger," 28 August 1972, []

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Communists after a cease-fire. Going "far beyond improving President Thieu's image, or even supporting him," the effort should emphasize the "development of political mechanisms and structures which hopefully will outlive him."⁶¹ □

Confident as always of CIA's ability to bend foreign leaders to its will, Colby called on Polgar to exploit the Station's "unique relationships" with South Vietnamese leaders, taking the initiative in an area "so difficult for other agencies to enter." What obstructed the participation of other US officials he did not say, but CIA would in any case not have to commit substantial new funds or personnel. It should suffice, Colby thought, to apply "good counsel and imagination," so long as these qualities served the pursuit of an overall strategy.⁶² □

Polgar's reply repudiated Colby's main thesis. Pointing out that the investment of billions of American dollars and a gigantic civilian effort had not resulted in US-style political institutions taking root in Vietnam, the COS doubted that CIA could succeed where others had failed. In language recalling Edward Lansdale's advocacy of Ngo Dinh Diem, Polgar called instead for "constant, generous, and sincere moral and material support to . . . President Thieu, no matter what internal policies he pursues, as long as [these] do not damage fundamental U.S. interests."⁶³ □

Having adopted Lansdale's formula for an essentially unconditional commitment to a Saigon ruler, Polgar rejected Lansdale's faith in the transforming power of American ideals. Arguing that democracy was too antipathetic to the Vietnamese tradition to constitute a real alternative, the COS thought the US should abandon what he called the "social reformist/missionary" approach. A more *laissez-aller* approach would result in a regime "more autocratic—not more democratic," but if this trend was accompanied by better security, the populace would welcome it. For Polgar, intermittent US efforts to liberalize the South Vietnamese political system constituted a somewhat arbitrary end in themselves, essentially unrelated to the survival of the GVN.⁶⁴ □

Colby had always been more of the Lansdale view. A military emergency might justify authoritarian measures, but the government must always concern itself with its integrity and competence in the eyes of the governed if it was to mobilize them in their own defense. But the static quality of Colby's latest proposal, with its call for unspecified "structures" and "mechanisms," perpetuated the CIA proclivity to ignore political substance in the pursuit of political forms. Although Polgar surely

⁶¹FVSW-14175, 1 September 1972, copy in History Staff files. □

⁶²*Ibid.* □

⁶³FVSA 39312, 19 September 1972, copy in History Staff files. □

⁶⁴*Ibid.* □

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erred in his belief in physical security as the single determinant of political loyalty, his resistance to the proposal is easy to understand, for it contained no more substance than did earlier Agency political action initiatives.

Without any common ground on ends, let alone on means, the exchange came to an end. Its only result was to illustrate, eighteen years after the original American commitment to South Vietnam, the continued absence in CIA—as in the rest of the US Government—of any shared concept of US operational goals there. The question remained: what was the implication for the United States if both Colby and Polgar were right, if political modernization was essential to the GVN's long-term survival, and if this modernization was impossible?

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Chapter 6

Squeezing Thieu []

Whatever the theoretical merits of unconditional support to President Thieu, the Station found itself by late summer 1972 in something of an adversarial relationship with the GVN. For almost a year, from August 1972 to June 1973, it had as the main item on its agenda to help the administration get Saigon's adherence to the terms of a cease-fire agreement as these emerged from the Paris negotiations with North Vietnam. Part of this effort involved the exploitation of []

[] various agents to keep Washington apprised of the Vietnamese bottom line. But the Station also brought its liaison contacts to bear in the gradually escalating effort to wear down President Thieu's resistance to terms that permitted the continued presence of Hanoi's troops in South Vietnam. []

On 17 August 1972, National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger arrived in Saigon on the first of several visits, sometimes delegated to Alexander Haig, aimed at winning President Thieu's adherence to the US position being developed in the Paris negotiations. Here Kissinger renewed an acquaintance with Tom Polgar that dated to 1958, []

[] Their common origin in Central Europe and similar experiences in the US Army facilitated communication, and in Saigon Polgar thought their "instinctive understanding of each other" had survived the intervening 14 years. []

The relationship allowed Polgar to escape occasional tense moments, as on the evening after Kissinger's meeting with Thieu, when the COS was summoned to the Ambassador's residence. A pajama-clad

¹Henry A. Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1979), pp. 1319-26 []
Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993. Polgar said that Kissinger made an overture for his services on the NSC, sometime in 1969, but that DCI Helms had quashed it on the basis that a team including Kissinger and Polgar would be "too smart for the State Department." Helms gave Polgar to understand that he thought it not to the Agency's advantage for the DCI to be seen in apparent collusion with Kissinger against State. []

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National Security Adviser complained of Thieu's intransigence and instructed Polgar to put the Station's contacts to work to soften his resistance. Polgar objected that the nature of the relationships made this impossible, and Kissinger said Polgar should take it as an order. Turning to Bunker in mock despair, he asked what to do in the face of such insubordination. Bunker, as Polgar recalled it, said he stood with the COS. Despite this frustration, Kissinger recognized that the Station's sources, especially the penetration of the VC in [] gave it unique access to information on what he was telling the Communists in Paris. Accordingly, he gave Polgar "full White House clearance" and brought him up to date on the status of the talks: "This way," he said, "you will know what to keep out of your reporting." The arrangement served Kissinger's purposes even as it created a problem for Polgar, who was now forbidden to share with Headquarters some of the information on the Paris talks he acquired not only from Kissinger but also from clandestine CIA sources.² []

Upon Kissinger's departure the next day, Thieu retreated into almost total inaccessibility. On 15 September, Prime Minister Khiem told Polgar that, perhaps as a result of his talks with Kissinger, Thieu now feared that Hanoi was in a position to make a peace offer that President Nixon, in an election year, could not refuse. Moving to solidify his control in the countryside, Thieu had therefore just abolished the election of hamlet officials and reestablished the Diemist system of their appointment by province and district chiefs. Polgar protested to Khiem that this could have waited two months (presumably until after the US presidential election), and Khiem claimed to have advised Thieu to this effect. But Thieu, increasingly given to Diem-like pronouncements, had replied that "in the current situation great firmness must be shown." Reporting to Ambassador Bunker, Polgar discovered from him that Kissinger had, in fact, "scared the daylight out of Thieu" when he told him that if Hanoi offered a cease-fire and release of American POWs, the US would have to accept, whatever the military situation.³ []

As Kissinger and Le Duc Tho neared agreement in Paris—they came to terms early on 12 October—a retired ARVN general with a junior position in the Thieu cabinet reported the terms of the President's hard-line position; it demanded, among other things, enforcement of a peace

²Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993. Numerous subsequent cables testify to Polgar's tortuous effort, while respecting Kissinger's constraints, to keep Headquarters at least generally informed. []

³Saigon 53332, 18 August 1972, [] Blind Memorandum, "15 September Meeting Between the CIA Station Chief in Vietnam and Prime Minister Tran Thien Khiem," 19 September 1972, [] Saigon 54604, 16 September 1972, []

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agreement by the US, the USSR, and China. Despite such reporting, the National Security Adviser was back in Saigon on 18 October, expecting to get Thieu's agreement to the terms worked out with Le Duc Tho.⁴ []

Kissinger had seven meetings with the Vietnamese during this visit, six of them attended by Thieu. []

[] In one of them, Kissinger insisted to Thieu that, "you have to trust me," and Thieu responded, "I see no reason to trust you."⁵ []

At their second meeting, on the evening of the 19th, Thieu demanded a Vietnamese-language version of the Paris draft, which Kissinger acknowledged he could not supply. But Thieu now got from the jointly run agent in [] a summary of the draft, circulated to the district level, that emanated from the Hanoi delegation in Paris. Translated by the Station and shown to Kissinger, it provoked a frown and the comment, "This has the unpleasant smell of truth." Polgar told Headquarters that the report constituted a major scoop. But as Kissinger anticipated, it only added to his headaches with Thieu, who already opposed several other provisions, and now fiercely objected to wording used to describe the administrative structure that a cease-fire would bring into existence.⁶ []

Thieu abruptly postponed the next meeting scheduled for 21 October, and when Bunker called the Palace to protest, Nha hung up on him. Thieu then treated Bunker to a paranoid-sounding, hysterical phone call. But negotiations resumed at 0800 hours on 22 October. There were two meetings that day, both of them limited to the principals. At the first, though still refusing to speak English, Thieu presented a calm, dignified front, but at the second, he reverted to his emotional state of the evening before, weeping with rage as he rejected the entire Paris formula. Kissinger insisted

⁴ Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp. 1355, 1366-1367; [] Untitled memorandum, DDP Helms to Secretary of State William Rogers, 19 October 1972; []

⁵ Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp. 1366-1385; [] interview, 24 August 1992; Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993; []

⁶ Saigon 56126, 22 October 1972; [] interview, 5 November 1993; Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993. A curious aspect of the Paris negotiations is Hanoi's assiduous attention to keeping its lower echelons informed, while Kissinger worked no less assiduously to compartment the proceedings even from other high-level national security officials. []

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that a deal was imperative and inevitable. At one point, he claimed that President Nixon was risking a confrontation with the Congress by omitting any consultation over the several billion dollars in airstrikes and military supplies already invested in preparing South Vietnam to survive a cease-fire agreement. But Thieu's resistance did not waver, and Kissinger faced the prospect of being forced into a unilateral deal with Hanoi.⁷ [redacted]

Kissinger took Bunker with him to say goodbye to Thieu on 23 October.

[redacted]	Kissinger [redacted]
predicted disaster if Thieu did not sign, but repeated none of his earlier argumentation. [redacted]	
[redacted]	

[redacted] Kissinger was not, however, mollified. Thieu had deeply antagonized him, and he told Polgar he'd never come back.⁸ [redacted]

Before leaving Saigon on 23 October, Kissinger ordered Polgar to report all reliable information on Thieu's reactions both to the negotiations and to Kissinger personally. Three days later, having received an account of Thieu's bitter criticism of Kissinger, the COS worried that Headquarters might hesitate to pass it along, and sought to disarm any such reluctance by saying that Kissinger knew exactly what to expect: Thieu had already voiced his distrust directly.⁹ [redacted]

The report of Thieu's reaction to Kissinger reinforced earlier impressions of his almost childlike faith in President Nixon—a "frank and honest man who . . . will never betray the [Saigon government] and the Vietnamese people." But Thieu said he feared Governor Averell Harriman, whom he saw as ambitious for the Nobel Peace Prize, and Kissinger, a "prideful man" who appeared to confuse American interests with his own ambitions and prejudices. The best course for the regime was to help ensure Nixon's reelection, and Thieu had just given orders both to the government and to the legislature forbidding criticism of the United States. Whatever his reservations about Kissinger, Thieu now softened

⁷Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp. 1382-1385 [redacted] interviews, 24 August 1992 and 5 November 1993. [redacted]

⁸Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp. 1390-1391 [redacted] interview, 5 November 1993; Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993. [redacted] illustrative of the mutually alien mental processes involved in these negotiations, was Thieu's remark, [redacted]

[redacted] about verifying the departure of North Vietnamese troops from Laos. Easy, said Thieu, you only had to count teeth; everyone knows that the Lao have fewer than the Vietnamese. [redacted]

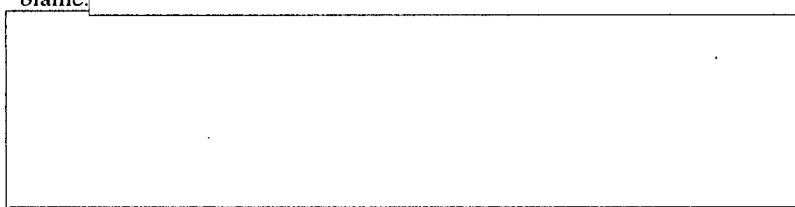
⁹Saigon 56272, 26 October 1972. [redacted] Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993. [redacted]

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the line he had drawn only a week before: Lower House chairman Nguyen Ba Can told [] that the President now objected only to the draft provision allowing North Vietnamese forces to remain in the South, and to the formula for a coalition commission charged with subsequent political arrangements.¹⁰ []

Polgar was now getting more on Thieu's antipathy for Kissinger than it seemed prudent to transmit to Washington. Policy differences alone might well have provoked hostility, but [] thought Kissinger's consistently peremptory manner at least partly to blame. []



"Peace Is at Hand" []

On 25 October, the Station's [] [] provided details of the agreement about to be announced. The Communists were exulting, for example, that North Vietnamese troops could stay in the South, and that the United States had pledged \$7 billion in war reparations. The next day, Hanoi announced conclusion of an accord, and Kissinger, describing his own acceptance of the agreement as partial, declared nevertheless that "peace is at hand."¹² []

However near at hand, agreement continued to elude the negotiators in Paris. During the next two weeks, the Station kept Headquarters apprised of the GVN position on disputed points. It also continued to relay reports from the []

[] Tom Polgar began to wonder why this reporting was receiving such highly restricted dissemination; it seemed to him that US officials with an urgent need to know were being denied information already known to the Communist negotiators. []

On 3 November, FE Division Chief Bill Nelson explained this apparent anomaly partly in terms of Henry Kissinger's penchant for secrecy: "He has been even more sensitive than in Saigon on restricting

¹⁰Saigon 56272. []

[] interview by the author, Langley, VA, 3 March 1992; [] interview, 24 August 1992. []

¹²Saigon 56400, 28 October 1972, [] "Vietnam Chronology," p. 140 []

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info to him only." The result was that "no one at the analytical levels of the Washington Intelligence Community has been privy to the details of these negotiations nor, to a large extent, have their superiors. This has been a tightly controlled operation with no explanation from the [US] side until 26 October press conference which was a very careful disclosure operation."¹³ []

Nelson identified two other reasons for the rigid compartmentation: with elections imminent, the Democrats would "be delighted to have any scrap of material they could which would embarrass the current Administration." Further, the press was "desperately searching" for news of the negotiations, and "experience over the past two years has shown that, on a topic . . . as hot as this one, information is bound to leak out if given . . . widespread dissemination in the Intelligence Community."¹⁴ []

Nelson assured Polgar that his reporting was "getting to the only place in town where it counts," i.e., to the White House, "and its recipients are most grateful." Headquarters would relax its dissemination controls as soon as possible. Meanwhile, in a situation that for a "professional intelligence organization . . . is not easy to live with . . . we will all simply have to make the best of it."¹⁵ []

Despite the ambiguity of Kissinger's declaration of peace at hand, it helped ensure President Nixon's landslide victory over George McGovern on 7 November. It did not, however, reflect the resolution of Thieu's objections to the impending deal. Although GVN reservations about the terms of the cease-fire had narrowed, Thieu remained intransigent about the remaining points, especially the North Vietnamese military presence. Bunker pressed the COS into service to monitor Thieu's state of mind and try to bring him around. Shortly after a brief trip to the United States, Polgar saw Khiem in late November, and at Bunker's request used the occasion to describe the atmosphere in Washington. He found Khiem entirely comfortable with the cease-fire terms, and optimistic about the government's future, assuming as he did continued US support. But Thieu, he said, was another matter. The President was driven by "emotionally tinged attitudes brought about partly by his resentment of Dr. Kissinger."¹⁶ []

Repeating what the Station had often heard about Thieu, Khiem described his abhorrence of quick decisions. Khiem deplored Kissinger's imposition of a deadline and especially his practice of discussing controversial points with Thieu in the presence of other Vietnamese, especially

¹³ [] The word "disclosure," added by hand, replaced the word "political." []

¹⁴ *Ibid.* []

¹⁵ *Ibid.* []

¹⁶ Saigon 57536, 27 November 1972, []

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[from center left] Rodney Landreth, General Quang, and Thomas Polgar,
at Quang's office for farewell to Landreth, late 1972 or early 1973.
Photo courtesy of Thomas Polgar.

the hardline Vice President Huong, leaving Thieu no maneuvering room. Khiem regretted that Bunker had not been allowed to brief Thieu as events progressed, as this kind of incremental pressure might gradually have brought the President to think of the US solution as his own.¹⁷ □

The standoff with Thieu dragged on into early December. Bunker tried to intimidate him by showing him ostensible top secret memorandums from Nixon to Kissinger, one of which agonized over possible Congressional suspension of Vietnam aid if the deadlock over North Vietnamese troop withdrawal persisted. The Ambassador reinforced this gambit by sending Polgar to Press Secretary Hoang Duc Nha with the message that Nixon's demand for Saigon's signature of the peace agreement, just presented to a South Vietnamese delegation in Washington, should be taken in dead earnest. Intelligence on Thieu's reaction to these pressures suggested an intention to circumvent the terms of the US agreement with Hanoi, taking the "center of [the] stage away from Kissinger," and Polgar feared that dissemination of such reporting would result in "bruised egos in [the] White House."¹⁸ □

Grasping at a tactic first proposed by Ngo Dinh Nhu just before the fall of the Diem regime, Thieu began to consider resigning, hoping thereby to deflect US pressure which he thought aimed at him personally.

¹⁷Ibid. □

¹⁸Saigon 57732 and Saigon 57734, 1 December 1972, [redacted] Saigon
57813, 4 December 1972, [redacted]

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Thomas Polgar, [second from left], General Quang, and USOM Public Safety Division director Mr. McGrath at National Police Christmas Party, 1972.

Photo courtesy of Thomas Polgar.

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According to agent [redacted] reporting, a new government composed of trusted hardliners would make no concessions, and Thieu would shortly return in response to ostensibly "spontaneous demands" from ARVN and the general population. Perceptible progress in Paris on 7 and 8 December and Thieu's reported recognition that "failure to sign would mean 'sudden death' for South Vietnam" pushed this momentarily into the background. Nevertheless, as of the 10th, Thieu reportedly intended only to "accept" the agreement, as to sign it would brand him a puppet of the United States.¹⁹ [redacted]

[redacted] the Station's variegated agent stable made the United States a witness to Thieu's struggle with his fatal dilemma. [redacted]
[redacted]

[redacted] But the most authoritative reporter at this juncture was perhaps retired Gen. Pham Van Dong, then Minister of Veterans' Affairs, who attended a 12 December meeting at which Thieu compared signing the agreement to taking poison—it would ratify a continued North Vietnamese Army presence in the South—while abstention would produce slow suffocation from the termination of US aid. The President asserted that the agreement guaranteed an ultimate Communist takeover, and although he would not turn on the Americans, he would not sign. Meanwhile, Polgar's privileged position with Kissinger enabled him to inform Headquarters that the Communists, too, were presenting problems: chief negotiator Le Duc Tho was claiming that Hanoi disagreed with certain of his proposed concessions, and he would require consultations in Hanoi.²⁰ [redacted]

Thieu's nephew Hoang Duc Nha argued with the Station's Palace liaison, Rodney Landreth, Saigon's case for greater US pressure on Hanoi, rather than on Saigon, for the concessions needed for an agreement. Nha acknowledged Saigon's vulnerability to an aid cutoff, but refused to accept that "the US could have made so many sacrifices over the years only to abandon the very principles [it] came to fight for in the first place; the GI's weren't exactly here on R and R." Nha argued, presumably on Thieu's behalf, that withdrawal of US support would "lower US prestige among the free world and Communists alike," and the US could not afford to risk "its honor and adherence to commitments and principles. . ."²¹ [redacted]

¹⁹Saigon 57838, 5 December 1972; Saigon 58039, 9 December 1972; Saigon 58046, 9 December 1972; Saigon 58147, 13 December 1972; [redacted]

²⁰[redacted] Also see Saigon 58149, 13 December, 1972; Saigon 58148, 13 December 1972; Saigon 58202, 14 December 1972; [redacted]

²¹Saigon 58202. Landreth had replaced Ralph Katrosh in late 1969. [redacted]

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On 13 December, the day of Landreth's colloquy with Nha, Vice President Huong's son told [redacted] that Thieu was still evaluating the consequences of a refusal to sign. Echoing Nha's argument, he said Thieu doubted the United States would risk delivering South Vietnam to the Communists by terminating material support. But the Vice President admitted that Thieu was gambling on an American perception that he, Thieu, was indispensable to the survival of the South.²² [redacted]

Kissinger's assistant Gen. Alexander Haig came to Saigon to turn up the heat and saw Thieu on 19 December. Polgar's report said that the atmosphere was more cordial than during Kissinger's October visit—the entire session took place in English—but Thieu insisted on giving Haig a sealed response to the letter that President Nixon had sent with Haig. Ambassador Bunker doubted that it would give Nixon much satisfaction, and Haig now pointed out to Thieu that an agreement was now an American political necessity: wording was of secondary importance, especially as no one had any illusions about Communist good faith. Bunker thought Thieu understood the argument, but lacked the psychological flexibility to make the change of tactics that Haig was demanding.²³ [redacted]

On 21 December, Prime Minister Khiem assured Polgar that he understood the effect of US public and Congressional opinion on Nixon's options, and Saigon's need to ensure continued material support by signing the peace agreement. But he reinforced Bunker's assessment of Thieu, reminding Polgar of their meeting in November at which he had predicted the failure of the pressure tactics that Haig had just applied. Thieu still resented what he took to be an ultimatum, but according to Khiem had now come a long way toward the American position. The sole remaining stumblingblock, a serious one, to be sure, was the "juridical presence of North Vietnamese troops in South Vietnam." Khiem feared that Thieu overestimated President Nixon's power to impose a hardline position on the Congress. And he again attributed part of Thieu's remaining intransigence to deep resentment of Kissinger, whom Tran Van Don had just reported to have made a contemptuous remark about Saigon's peace equities in a meeting with the French. Khiem promised to keep working on Thieu and urged that Ambassador Bunker do the same, but the contest of wills between Thieu and Kissinger continued.²⁴ [redacted]

²²Saigon 58201, 13 December 1972, [redacted]

²³Saigon 58434, 20 December 1972, [redacted]

²⁴Saigon 58453, 21 December 1972, [redacted]

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The Paris Agreement and San Clemente []

On 12 January 1973, after the suspension of the "Christmas bombing" of the North provoked by Le Duc Tho's mid-December equivocations, one of the Station's VC penetrations predicted that the United States and Hanoi would sign a cease-fire agreement on the 20th. Barred by Kissinger's rules from saying more, the Station told Headquarters to rush the report to it, as it would understand the significance of the reported date. Also, there were signs that the Saigon government had at least an inkling of the impending agreement, and Bunker, worried about Kissinger's sensitivities, importuned Polgar to alert Headquarters. The COS obliged, hoping to "prevent unnecessary suspicion and aggravation" in the White House resulting from leaks that might appear to have originated on the US side.²⁵ []

On 16 January, Haig delivered another ultimatum from Nixon, which threatened to denounce Thieu as an obstacle to peace if he refused to sign. Thieu continued to hang tough, telling Haig only that he would have a reply the following day.

[] About 15 minutes after Haig's departure, Thieu came in and read Nixon's letter to his hastily assembled NSC. The ensuing discussion dealt exclusively with implementation measures; references to Thieu's "carom shot" tactics made it clear [] that his apparent intransigence was designed to squeeze whatever he could out of the Americans before he finally signed.²⁶ []

Other sources, [] also told the Station that day that Thieu had bowed to the inevitable and would now sign; Haig was relieved and grateful for these indications that he need not worry about the tactics to be employed with Thieu on the 17th. Thieu did indeed give Haig a letter for Nixon asking for more changes, but the issue was now decided. It remained only for Thieu to communicate his decision to his government and the Army. On 20 January, he convened the National Security Council. A weeping Vice President Huong recounted [] this gloomy assembly and his offer of himself as scapegoat. Huong said he had compared South Vietnam to a carriage standing on a collapsing bridge, in danger no matter which way it moved

²⁵Saigon 59064, 12 January 1973, []

²⁶Kissinger, *White House Years*, 1469-70 []

[] interview, 5 November 1993, []

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and had spoken up in favor of signing as the lesser of two evils. Having let the fiercely anti-Communist Huong take the lead, Thieu could now more safely defy his right wing, and he proceeded to endorse Huong's recognition of the inevitable.²⁷ []

On 23 January, alluding to US pressure to sign, he told a cabinet meeting that the Paris agreement reflected a consensus among the US, China, and the USSR; South Vietnamese acquiescence had been unavoidable. But he credited his own intransigence of October 1972 for preventing an even more unfavorable outcome; the resulting Christmas bombing, he said, would hinder Communist military operations in the South for at least three months.²⁸ []

Thieu did not know how much he himself had contributed to the pressure applied by the White House; Haig told Bunker after the signing that [] had been indispensable in getting Thieu's agreement. []

Fighting in South Vietnam continued at virtually pre-cease-fire levels after signature of the Paris agreement, and in mid-February Polgar complained to Headquarters in the privacy channel that the "significance of ongoing fighting is underplayed by MACV." As the Station saw it, the VC and the North Vietnamese had expected to benefit from the cease-fire to consolidate their control in such places as Quang Ngai and the Delta. But at least in the Delta, they seemed to have moved too soon, and ARVN was now hunting down exposed small units. This explained, for Polgar, Hanoi's current pressure on Kissinger to end the combat. Two weeks later, noting ARVN recapture of most of the Communists' January

²⁷Saigon 59211, 17 January 1973; Saigon 59260, 18 January 1973; Saigon 59370, 22 January 1973; and *passim*; []

²⁸Saigon 59407, 23 January 1973. []

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Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker and Henry Kissinger, San Clemente, CA, April 1973.
Photo by Thomas Polgar.



President Nguyen Van Thieu in Saigon victory parade celebrating the end of the North Vietnamese "Easter offensive" and the signing of the cease-fire agreement, 19 June 1973.
Photo by Thomas Polgar.

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*Presidents Thieu
and Nixon,
San Clemente, CA.
April 1973.*

Photo by Thomas Polgar.

"land grab," the Station interpreted Hanoi's stalling on prisoner release as an effort to recover by diplomatic means the initiative their armed forces had lost.³⁰

President Nixon had promised to receive President Thieu when a cease-fire came into effect, and he made good on this when he invited Thieu for an early April visit to the Western White House at San Clemente. Ambassador Bunker included the COS in the accompanying Embassy party, and on 31 March Polgar had arrived early at the airport when he encountered Hungarian General Szuecs.³¹

³⁰Saigon 60261, 13 February 1973, and Saigon 60823, 28 February 1993.

³¹Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993.

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The occasion for Szuecs's presence was the arrival of Gen. Tran Van Tra, commander of the military forces of the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG). As they waited for Tra's plane to land, Szuecs pointed to two Communist officers leading a Communist honor guard from the Paris-mandated Joint Military Commission and asked, "Do you know those characters?" Polgar did not, and Szuecs introduced him to the young North Vietnamese captain, in English, as "the most important man in the American Embassy, next to Ambassador Bunker." The officer responded with a polite, "Would he like to review the troops?" and Polgar accepted the invitation.³² []

Shortly after their arrival at San Clemente, Bunker complained to the COS that he had not been invited to the only dinner that Nixon would host for Thieu. He thought Thieu would find this incomprehensible. Polgar apparently agreed, for he took the matter to Kissinger, who was "outraged" to discover that the tenth and last place had been appropriated by H. R. Haldeman, Nixon's Chief of Staff. Haldeman summarily rejected Kissinger's request that he withdraw, whereupon the Secretary of State went directly to the President, who decided the matter in Bunker's favor.³³ []

The office politics of the occasion did not end with this episode. Kissinger was hospitable to Polgar and once invited him to breakfast, but the Haldeman-run kitchen failed to deliver anything to Kissinger's room. They repaired to the staff mess, where Kissinger's assistant, Gen. Brent Scowcroft, joined them. Nothing of great moment was discussed, but that afternoon Ambassador-designate Graham Martin knocked on Polgar's door. He had heard about the breakfast, and in what Polgar came to see as his customary "conspirative and manipulative" way, looked concerned that the COS might undercut him with Kissinger. But Polgar assured him that as COS he worked for the Ambassador, and despite this strained first meeting they got along well in Saigon, after Martin's midsummer arrival; it was not until after the fall of the South that Martin grew hostile. As to substantive matters, Polgar listened while Nixon promised Thieu a billion dollars in military aid and another billion for the economy; the COS thought this episode helped explain Thieu's abiding faith in Nixon's loyalty to the Saigon regime.³⁴ []

³²*Ibid.* Polgar did not indicate that he thought this description, despite its disregard for well-established protocol, represented anything but Szuecs's sober estimate of his status in the US Mission. The PRG replaced the National Liberation Front after the signing of the truce accord in Paris in January 1973. []

³³Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993. []

³⁴*Ibid.* []

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[foreground] Lt. Gen. Tran Van Tra, commander of Provincial Revolutionary Government forces, Tan Son Nhut Airport, March 1973.

Photo courtesy of Thomas Polgar.

Back in Saigon, the chance meeting with General Szuecs at the airport was followed by the visit of a Hungarian Army doctor who knew of the Station-operated clinic and wanted a malaria drug for his people on the Commission. Then a Hungarian First Secretary came to call, apparently announcing an intelligence affiliation when he introduced himself as a Polgar "colleague." They chatted later over a drink, and "one thing led to another," but Polgar's Hungarian contacts had not yet assumed the urgency that they acquired in April 1975. Nevertheless, Communist representation on the Commission did give the Station access to new recruitment targets, and it later made what Polgar called a "sensational" [redacted] recruitment in the Mekong Delta.³⁵ [redacted]

More Pressure on Thieu [redacted]

The establishment of cease-fire machinery in the South did not mean that all parties now agreed on implementation measures. Kissinger and Le Duc Tho had begun renegotiating some of the January provisions,

³⁵Ibid. Although it appears that the Hungarians were cultivating Polgar, no evidence has been found that this reflected, at least before April 1974, any specific operational objective. [redacted]

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Thomas Polgar reviewing honor guard assembled for General Tra, with unidentified Communist officer, Tan Son Nhut Airport, March 1973.

Photo courtesy of Thomas Polgar.

and Thieu objected to the proposed wording of a protocol on lines of demarcation between Saigon- and Communist-controlled territory. A four-power communique was scheduled for release on 7 June, and Acting Ambassador Charles Sheldon Whitehouse—Bunker had now departed after six years of grueling service—was trying to get a Palace appointment to secure Thieu's concurrence. With Thieu playing hard to get, Polgar saw General Quang that day to repeat the familiar argument that continuing US support of South Vietnam far exceeded in importance any "semantic triumphs at [the] conference table." Neither Quang nor Thieu knew that Nixon was to meet that day with Congressional leaders, and that he urgently needed Thieu's agreement; Polgar conveyed this point to Quang. In so doing, he may have sparked the summons to Whitehouse that Thieu issued later that afternoon.³⁶ □

But Whitehouse failed to move the President. In the view of the COS, Thieu's obstinacy stemmed from three perceptions. At the tactical level, Polgar saw him as distrustful of both US and North Vietnamese motives for renegotiating the implementation terms, and as convinced that GVN territorial gains since January made further concessions

³⁶Saigon 64959, 7 June 1973, [redacted]

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unnecessary. Underlying these considerations, as Polgar saw the matter, were Thieu's personal hostility to Kissinger and his resentment at Hanoi's being allowed to "call the tune while South Vietnam is reduced to . . . client status."³⁷ [redacted]

The standoff continued. On 10 June, Whitehouse instructed Polgar to rehearse once more with Quang the US line on the damage to the Saigon cause if Congress even briefly suspended logistic support in retaliation for GVN intransigence. A Station officer found Quang at Mass at the Saigon cathedral and intruded long enough to set up the meeting. Quang accepted Polgar's argument, as he had three days earlier, but Thieu continued to insist on the "minor changes" that he thought essential to avoid the "legalization of the division of South Vietnam." Nevertheless, Polgar thought Thieu would come around: "My gut feeling is that one more Nixon letter will do the trick."³⁸ [redacted]

But Thieu's advisers, Quang included, unanimously and vigorously supported his insistence on including in the communique a provision of the January agreement concerning general elections. MPPRY confirmed Quang in this, and the Station's flash report led Nixon to overrule Ambassador William Sullivan in Paris, instructing him to reopen this point with Tho. The Nixon message to Thieu announcing this concession arrived at 0600 hours 13 June, and Polgar saw Quang an hour later to give advance word. Quang anticipated a debate in Thieu's National Security Council, with himself and Joint General Staff chief Cao Van Vien urging signature over the objections of hawkish civilians like Hoang Duc Nha. Polgar said that the end of the road had been reached, and urged Quang to get Presidential concurrence by noon. Quang and Vien prevailed, and a rupture with the United States was avoided when all parties signed the four-power protocol that day in Paris. Polgar told Headquarters he thought the Station had been instrumental in getting agreement with the Vietnamese, and DCI Colby responded with an "emphatic well done" for action exemplifying "the interaction of intelligence collection and political action at their respective finest."³⁹ [redacted]

³⁷Saigon 64998, 8 June 1973, [redacted]

³⁸Saigon 3283, 10 June 1973, [redacted]

³⁹Saigon 3289, 13 June 1973, and Saigon 3287, 13 June 1973, [redacted]

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~~Secret~~Trying To Draw the Bottom Line

In the summer of 1973, COS Polgar saw Thieu's forces as having gained at the expense of the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong in the six months since the Paris agreements: the Communists had introduced some armor and artillery, but Saigon was "forging ahead and consolidating its control over most of the populated areas of South Vietnam." Generally speaking, "the VC didn't amount to anything." In making this assessment, Polgar apparently assigned no particular significance to the intelligence furnished months earlier by the [redacted] penetration on the Communist decision to shift their emphasis from military to political struggle. Years later, he defined pacification as complete when the government controlled all its province and district capitals; from his point of view, the government had never enjoyed full "territorial integrity," and persisting VC control of some hamlets did not offer evidence of a failed pacification effort, at least during the "pre-storm calm" that prevailed from April 1973 to November 1974. And the "sweet cancer" of corruption was universal in Southeast Asia; the essential point as Polgar saw it was that Nguyen Cao Ky and then Nguyen Van Thieu had succeeded where their predecessors failed by establishing security and by offering the fundamentally apolitical peasant the prospect of improved living standards.⁴⁰

Polgar's DCOS, Conrad LaGueux, was less confident that the massive American investment in the rural economy had produced greater loyalty to the regime: in his retrospective opinion, "the VC had extensive popular support." One of Polgar's officers in the Indications and Assessment Branch (IAB) remembered the working level as less sanguine even than LaGueux. Robert Vandaveer had run the Station's office in Hue for two years before he came to Saigon in mid-1973 to join IAB. Explaining the reason for this assignment, Polgar told Vandaveer that the "social democratic" bias of the branch, staffed by DI officers, needed to be balanced by a DO presence; Vandaveer took this to mean that Polgar wanted to see more commitment to the government cause and less agonizing about its weaknesses. The COS did not prohibit reporting bad news, but he did impose strict standards of verification, and a requirement that such reporting be "put into perspective." In practice, this meant that reports of government corruption, individual instances of which were hard to confirm, were seldom disseminated. And when a village

⁴⁰Saigon 64998, 8 June 1973, [redacted] Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993.

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headquarters, for example, was lost to a Communist landgrabbing operation after the Paris agreement, the report had to specify the much greater number of villages remaining under Saigon's control.⁴¹ []

The requirement for "perspective" did not apply to good news, and Vandaveer thought that when retired Major General Timmes made his periodic tours to debrief his ARVN contacts on the Station's behalf, Polgar accepted his usually upbeat reporting at face value. As Vandaveer saw it, the divergent views of management and the working level reflected a Mission-wide phenomenon, with the Mission Council clinging to an optimistic, "get with the program" mentality that echoed the style of the now-departed US combat forces. Station analysts, on the other hand, looked at the reporting of Hanoi's infiltration of men and supplies in a "mood of foreboding," and many street case officers were entirely cynical about the integrity of the South Vietnamese political process.⁴² []

Political Cosmetics []

Whatever the political views of the peasantry in 1973, the US commitment to Nguyen Van Thieu's continued stewardship of South Vietnam had already brought an end to the chronic struggle to Westernize the national political process in South Vietnam. As late as 1971, as we have seen, COS Ted Shackley was anticipating at least the possibility of a genuine political struggle following the conclusion of a cease-fire. But in June 1973, as partial senatorial elections approached, the Agency and the State Department were concerned more with Saigon's image in the United States than with the vitality of its democratic institutions. Headquarters enjoined the Station to make contacts in both the opposition and government parties to give the elections "as much an appearance of a genuine multi-party exercise as possible." Polgar promised to try, but noted that there was little he could do about it: Vietnamese resentment of US pressure to sign the Paris communique, reinforcing a "generally diminished faith that the United States will live up to its commitments," meant that US "leverage is now the smallest in many a year."⁴³ []

⁴¹ Conrad LaGueux, interview by the author, Arlington, VA, 23 November 1992; Robert Vandaveer, interview by the author, Munich, Germany, 3 September 1993. As far back as mid-1971, well before Polgar's arrival, management was restraining the working-level proclivity to report corruption. As the 1971 presidential election approached, Vandaveer got instructions in Hue to "keep the fecal filter clean." []

⁴² Vandaveer interview, 3 September 1993. Vandaveer said his own doubts about the GVN's long-term prospects were doubtless influenced by his service in Hue, where persistent student opposition to Thieu and support of the dissident An Quang Buddhists led him to see an "objective absurdity" in the idea of a Catholic regime taking root in a Buddhist country. []

⁴³ Saigon 65366, 17 June 1973. [] Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993. []

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On 18 June, the Station documented the leverage gap by recounting its efforts with [redacted] contacts like labor leader Tran Quoc Buu, retired Generals Huynh Van Cao and Pham Van Dong, and Lower House Chairman Nguyen Ba Can to generate an opposition slate. Station pressure could not offset the prospect of almost certain defeat, and Buu, for example, flatly refused to run at the head of a Social Democratic Alliance ticket. He would name somebody else to do this, he said, if the government extended the filing deadline, but Buu would not himself ask for the extension. Whatever generated this anticipation of failure, whether it was recognized lack of voter appeal or anticipated election-rigging by the military, the outcome ensured the absence of an opposition slate.⁴⁴ [redacted]

In the weeks between Ellsworth Bunker's departure and Graham Martin's July arrival, Polgar had to deal with reports of a rift between President Thieu and Prime Minister Khiem. Concerned about the destabilizing potential of such a development, Acting Ambassador Whitehouse encouraged Polgar to take the bull by the horns and simply ask Khiem about it. The Prime Minister readily acknowledged some recent tension, which he attributed partly to his withdrawal as head of the senatorial slate of Thieu's Democracy Party and partly to his opposition to hawkish advisers like Hoang Duc Nha—"aggressive, arrogant, and persuasive"—and another civilian Thieu aide named Nguyen Van Ngan. Khiem, whose pretensions as a man of fearless, principled action Polgar had learned to distrust, said that he and Gen. Cao Van Vien found themselves opposing Nha and Ngan's push for a "fully centralized, absolutist" regime on the Ngo Dinh Diem model. Khiem said he did not think South Vietnam ready for representative democracy, but he wanted at least the appearance of one, even if that meant that the regime occasionally yielded to the opposition.⁴⁵ [redacted]

In July 1973, at the midpoint of what COS Polgar retrospectively called the prestorm calm, Graham Martin arrived as US Ambassador to Saigon. He had already served as Ambassador in Thailand and Italy; when they arrived in Saigon, he and Mrs. Martin had already lost a son in combat in Vietnam. Although vastly different in style from Bunker, whom Polgar described as considerate, hospitable, and in every way a gentleman, Martin seems not to have greatly changed the Mission's approach to matters of substance. Polgar survived the initial period, during which Martin drove his new Deputy Chief of Mission into requesting a transfer, and "within months," by his own account, was "clearly the Ambassador's closest confidante" [sic]. Their relationship prospered despite Polgar's active cultivation of American journalists, which Martin disliked, but for some reason tolerated. Polgar recalled that his role

⁴⁴Saigon 65400, 18 June 1973, [redacted]

⁴⁵Saigon 65783, 27 June 1973, [redacted]

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expanded to helping Martin select a new deputy and later to reviewing with him the evaluations of senior Embassy officers.

The new Ambassador used the Station as an information and influence channel to the generals much as Bunker had done. As DCOS LaGueux saw it, one reason for this was the secretive Martin's confidence in Station discretion. Another was the access to Thieu enjoyed by certain Station contacts, especially Khiem and Quang, and also occasionally Nguyen Khac Binh, National Police and CIO chief; all three were sometimes willing to push American policy positions with Thieu. Protocol accounted for two other factors: the new DCOM, Wolfgang Lehmann, did not hold the personal rank of ambassador that his predecessor Ambassador Whitehouse had enjoyed, and this limited his acceptability to President Thieu as an official interlocutor. And the Station maintained the informal contact with Khiem at least partly, as Polgar recalled it, because Foreign Minister Tran Van Lam would have objected to a regular Embassy liaison with the Prime Minister that bypassed his Ministry.⁴⁷ □

Responding to ambassadorial and Washington requirements, the Station now used these contacts, as it had those in the legislature, for purposes that included the cosmetic. Conrad LaGueux, who conducted the liaison with Binh, recalled that a recurring theme was the alleged political prisoners whose treatment had provoked public controversy in the United States. Persuaded that they were the common criminals the Vietnamese claimed them to be—LaGueux could not see what Thieu had to gain by jailing anyone in what then passed for a non-Communist opposition—he persuaded Binh to release information on them and to ensure that they got unexceptionable treatment. As the Watergate scandal eroded the Nixon administration's ability to support Thieu, the issue escalated in September 1973, and both Martin, dealing with Thieu, and Polgar, addressing Khiem, pushed for the release of a non-Communist woman dissident [redacted] named Ngo Ba Thanh.⁴⁸ □

*Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993;

⁴⁷ LaGueux interview, 23 November 1992; Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993. Martin's attitude toward State may also have contributed to this relationship. A protege of Averell Harriman, he had entered the Foreign Service at a senior level, and as Polgar saw him hated only the Communists more than he hated the Department. □

⁴⁸ LaGueux interview, 23 November 1992; Saigon 69580, 11 September 1973, [redacted]; interview by the author, Langley, VA, 10 November 1994. □

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As usual, the argument centered on the deleterious effects on the prospects for aid legislation if the Vietnamese did not comply. Polgar buttonholed the often-antagonistic Hoang Duc Nha on the Ngo Ba Thanh case and reminded him that the police aid appropriation was at stake. "With the possible exception of our respective wives," Polgar told him, "no woman is worth that much money." And it appeared that some genuine political dissidence was involved, after all, as the government promised on 18 September that three labor unionists, not charged with common crimes, would be back with their families before the week was out. Polgar suggested that Headquarters assure labor leader George McAny and Congresswoman Bella Abzug that the matter was now in hand.⁴⁹

Thus, as summer gave way to fall in 1973, the Americans had prevailed over a stubborn client when they persuaded Thieu to sign the cease-fire agreement and the June implementation protocol. The United States had, at the same time, implicitly committed itself to permanent support of the Thieu regime and its style of governing. Having abandoned political reform, the United States now concentrated its attention on the fluctuating military fortunes of North and South as they contended for territorial control in the countryside.

⁴⁹Saigon 69650, 12 September 1973, and Saigon 69843, 18 September.

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Chapter 7

Trying To Preserve the Status Quo

In the next year and a half, from fall 1973 to late winter 1974, the Station watched as Hanoi played cat and mouse with its adversaries in Saigon. During this period, the Station's government liaison took on added importance as Ambassador Graham Martin failed to reestablish the rapport with President Thieu that Ellsworth Bunker had enjoyed. In late 1974, Station intelligence reporting began to predict another Communist offensive. This broke out at the end of the year, and the first provincial capital fell on 6 January 1975. By late February, further defeats threatened the survival of the Saigon government.

Senate hearings on Henry Kissinger's nomination as Secretary of State took place in September 1973. Kissinger told the Senate that "the Vietnam war is behind us," and in so doing provoked COS Tom Polgar into vigorous dissent. Fighting continued, he told Headquarters; the Communists had not complied with the terms of the January agreement, and the war was definitely not over. In mid-October, Headquarters took much the same view, revising a National Intelligence Estimate to predict a sharp expansion of Communist and South Vietnamese military activity in the next few weeks. To Polgar, such a prediction invalidated the assumptions on which Station staffing was based; some components would have to be reinforced in order to cover a heightened level of combat. Headquarters acknowledged a persisting difference of opinion in the Intelligence Community regarding Communist intentions, but postponed further discussion until Polgar should be in Headquarters on a scheduled visit.¹

Amid this uncertainty, another round of negotiations on cease-fire implementation took place in Paris in late December. Ambassador Graham Martin attended, and upon his return to Saigon on 22 December

¹Saigon 69584, 11 September 1973, Also see
 Saigon 71674, 7 November 1973; and

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enlisted Polgar in a Kissinger-mandated effort to reap some propaganda benefit from the session. Kissinger wanted Thieu to declare a unilateral cease-fire and to propose consolidating it by demarcation of the ground held by each side; an exchange of civilian prisoners was also to be proposed. As the Secretary of State envisioned it, the Communists' anticipated violation of the cease-fire and their rejection of demarcation would earn the Saigon government a substantial propaganda windfall. Polgar told Martin that Kissinger would not get his way. The ploy depended on the cooperation of the Iranian official whose chairmanship of the ICCS ended on 31 December, and Thieu would never move that fast. Polgar also doubted that Thieu shared the American confidence in the way the Communists would react. But the COS did his best, supplementing Martin's jawboning of Thieu with two sessions with General Quang.² □

At the second of these, a dinner meeting on 27 December, Quang said that Thieu was amenable to a prisoner exchange, but no more. Polgar had anticipated this, and proceeded to rehearse, "line by line," the terms of the Iranian initiative inspired by Kissinger. Quang, for his part, reiterated Thieu's objections—one of them was the claimed impossibility of acting within the 31 December deadline to explain cease-fire procedures to field commanders.

[Redacted]

Polgar now went to work on a yearend assessment, which he sent in the operational channel to FE Division, of South Vietnam's position with respect to the North. Phrased more optimistically than Quang's bleak description of US-Vietnamese relations, it saw 1973 as a relatively good year for Saigon—"certainly better than 1972"—and as having seen an erosion of VC influence, Communist discomfort as the result of continuing ARVN pressure, and economic difficulties in North Vietnam. The COS saw no possibility that Saigon could regain the military initiative, but he thought Hanoi genuinely interested in stabilizing the cease-fire agreement, and more concerned to preserve Communist assets in South Vietnam than to try now to overthrow Thieu or to "achieve political control in Saigon by other means." The Saigon government, for its part, was constrained by Nixon's "debility in Washington," economic problems,

²Saigon 73468, 28 December 1973. [Redacted]

¹Ibid. □

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and a manpower shortage; it too "might welcome a respite from the very heavy burden of continuing fighting." The bottom line for Polgar was that "decisive changes in the military and geographic control are going to be minimal from here on . . . a coexistence must develop, peaceful or otherwise."⁴ []

There certainly were no decisive changes in the first months of 1974, and Thieu took the opportunity to amend the Constitution in January and reorganize his cabinet in February. Of these events, the second more directly affected Station interests, as []

[] in the cabinet were fired. [] Nguyen Van Ngai, had been Minister for Rural Development, but found himself demoted to a functionary's role in Thieu's Democracy Party. He might still retain some useful access, the Station thought, but it saw dimmer prospects for Pham Van Dong, the retired general [] who had been serving as Veterans Affairs Minister.⁵ []

The consequences of Dong's fall from political grace were aggravated when the tenants of a house he owned in Saigon were arrested in mid-February on charges of running an illegal gambling operation. Dong's reaction, like that of other Station contacts who had found themselves in distress, was to advertise his CIA affiliation as a buffer against prosecution. "His faith in our loyalty is touching," the Station reported, "but there is nothing explicit or implicit in the relationship which should lead him to expect such support." He was in fact arrested in April on corruption charges and jailed until July.⁶ []

The loss was mitigated by Thieu's selection of retired general and Senator Tran Van Don as Vice Prime Minister for Inspection of Community Development and Security. [] Don had been a sporadic contact since before the coup that toppled Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963. He welcomed Agency contact in his new role, and gave early advice that Ambassador Martin's relationship with Thieu was not prospering as well as Bunker's had. The Station's liaison with General Quang was very good, he thought, but perhaps "not broad gauged enough."⁷ []

Meanwhile, Khiem and the Station's access to him had survived the reshuffle. In late February Polgar saw him with an agenda that ranged from opposition to a Finance Ministry surtax on police gasoline (Polgar prevailed) to argumentation on Martin's behalf that Saigon

⁴Saigon 73361, 24 December 1973 [] and Saigon 73710, 9 January 1973,

⁵Saigon 73875, 14 January 1974, []

⁶Saigon Base 75083, 19 February 1974, [] Saigon Base 75005,
15 February 1974, and *passim*, [] []

⁷Saigon Base 75083; [] []

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should stay at an impending Geneva Laws of War Conference even if a PRG delegation were seated. Khiem asked about prospects for US aid, and the COS felt comfortable enough with this policy question to reply that the Vietnamese should expect no major new package. Khiem volunteered that President Thieu was serious about fighting corruption, but indicated no consideration of any punishment more severe than removal of the worst offenders, beginning with the Director General of Customs and a dozen or so province chiefs.⁸ □

An odd episode in early 1974 suggests that something of a siege mentality had overcome Ambassador Martin, and to some degree COS Polgar as well. In a cable of 28 February, Polgar told DCI Colby that Martin wanted CIA to know of a continuing exchange between the Ambassador and Senator J. William Fulbright (D-AK) on press coverage of Vietnam. In Martin's view, a "massive deception campaign" in the United States was seeking to undermine American support to Saigon, and it threatened "the objectives for which we fought in Vietnam and the achievement of which is now truly within reach." Martin did not specify who he thought was directing the campaign, naming only *The New York Times* as a "witting vehicle in this carefully coordinated effort." □
□
□

In the context of this incident, Polgar predicted that anti-Saigon propaganda would shortly reach new highs in the United States, taking advantage of the administration's preoccupation with the Watergate scandal. The Agency might be directly affected because of its well-known support of the National Police, which had become "a principal bulwark of the government and more than a match for the VC infrastructure."¹⁰ □

The First Hungarian Approach □

In late March 1974, Martin enlisted Polgar's support in another effort to exploit for public relations purposes a Communist proposal on cease-fire implementation. As usual, Thieu was disposed simply to reject the offer; it looked to him designed simply to obstruct talks already under way. Also as usual, US officials saw in it some propaganda potential.

*Saigon 75214, 22 February 1974, □

⁹Saigon 75451, 28 February 1974, □

¹⁰Saigon 75451, □

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Martin deputized Polgar to see Khiem and Quang to urge on them a quick acceptance of the Communist proposal, which included prisoner exchange and reduction of forces, contingent on Hanoi's paying its ICCS bills and permitting full deployment of the inspection teams mandated by the Paris agreement of January 1973.¹¹ []

The absence of further reporting suggests that this ploy had no more effect on Thieu than such public relations maneuvers usually did. In any case, the Station role in cease-fire implementation took a new direction less than two weeks later when Col. Karoly Gombos, []

[] approached Polgar with a message he said had been authorized by the Soviets. As Gombos told it, the USSR had already reduced its deliveries of war materiel to North Vietnam, and would be willing to negotiate further mutual reductions with the United States. Moscow had no wish to dump Thieu, as Hanoi was perpetually demanding, and would rather see a real cease-fire along de facto lines of control. Headquarters [] encouraged Polgar to elicit specific proposals. Meetings continued, but the specifics did not emerge, and the issue faded, for the time being.¹² []

Watching the Paranoia of Isolation []

If Ambassador Martin suspected a media cabal aimed at sinking South Vietnam, President Thieu feared a US Government conspiracy to do the same thing. On 5 June, Polgar went to the Palace, where he and General Quang discussed the meeting of their respective chiefs scheduled for the next day, just before Martin's departure for consultations in Washington. Quang began by requesting a Martin assurance to Thieu that no official American support was going to such dissident groups as the Hoa Hao sect or the Catholic Priests' Anti-Corruption Movement. Quang described something that Polgar already knew about, namely, the paranoid suspicions harbored by Thieu's nephew and current Information Minister, the US-educated Hoang Duc Nha, and "insisted that any lingering doubts which Thieu may have must be dispelled." Martin need not criticize Nha; it would suffice to point out the absurdity of combining massive US support to the government with simultaneous aid to "piddling dissident groups."¹³ []

¹¹Saigon 76396, 25 March 1974, []

¹²Saigon 76783, 6 April 1974 and *passim*, [] Shackley interview, 16 August 1993. []

¹³Saigon 78881, 6 June 1974, []

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Quang went on to deplore the economic situation and the lack of South Vietnamese leadership in this area, and he accused the US Embassy of aggravating the problem by no longer maintaining a single point of reference on economic matters; the result was, in effect, no US advice at all, as each Vietnamese minister quoted his own American "guru" against all the others. Polgar asked about political prisoners, and Quang promised that Tran Ngoc Chau, the pacification expert and former National Assembly Deputy jailed since 1970, would be released before Martin's imminent appearance on Capitol Hill.¹⁴ []

The conversation turned, as usual, to cease-fire implementation talks, and Polgar, as usual, helped carry the Ambassador's water. He pointed out the opportunity to exploit recent Southern military gains by making at least apparent concessions that would improve Martin's reception by the Congress, where Saigon's intentions tended to be suspect. Quang responded that a strategy meeting that very morning should give shape to Thieu's decision in principle to take such an initiative.¹⁵ []

One reason for Quang's importance as a conduit to Thieu became clearer after President Nixon's 9 August 1974 resignation, when Ambassador Phuong lunched with EA Division Chief Shackley. Phuong worried that Thieu's Vietnamese advisers lacked the fortitude to speak their minds with the President. He saw only two of them as willing to state unpleasant facts; one of these was General Quang. In any case, Phuong believed, Thieu could get a balanced assessment of his problems only from Americans, and he had just implored Ambassador Martin, already in Washington, to see more of him. Martin had made a note of this, but no commitment. Another factor in Quang's prominence was Thieu's growing isolation from other Station contacts who had once enjoyed more or less regular access. One example was Lower House Chairman Nguyen Ba Can. []

Martin had asked Polgar to send him a threat estimate, and the COS replied, on the day of Nixon's resignation, in terms that foreshadowed the impending Communist drive to final victory. Despite intensified military action, he said, Hanoi showed no unambiguous signs of intending to tear up the Paris agreement and launch an offensive on the scale of 1968 or 1972. To this Polgar added a prescient qualification which he must have intended to strengthen Martin's hand on Capitol

¹⁴Saigon 78881. The file contains no further reporting on this. []

¹⁵*Ibid.* []

[] FVSA 42651, 7 September
1974. []

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Hill: "Recent intelligence suggests that the 'decisive blow' which they have been contemplating may come sooner than later, perhaps in the dry season of 1975."¹⁷ [redacted]

The Quang channel brought the COS back into the policy arena after a 16 September lunch during which Polgar briefed the general on the US political and economic situation and its implications for Vietnam aid. Quang relayed this to Thieu, who reacted by inviting the COS to his office the next day. Thieu probed for information on Kissinger, forcing Polgar to deny "categorically . . . any and all rumors which Thieu might have received about alleged weakening of Kissinger's position."¹⁸ [redacted]

As always during this period, the subject of military aid arose. Polgar explained the implications of the approaching midterm elections in the United States. Concerned about Saigon's "public relations problem" in the United States, he urged Thieu to abstain from agitating in Washington for additional aid. Reflecting more understanding of his benefactor than he was often credited with, Thieu expressed more anxiety about the continuing reliability of American military aid than about the precise amount.¹⁹ [redacted]

Thieu said the aid issue would top the agenda in his forthcoming discussions with Deputy Defense Secretary William Clements, and the session with Polgar turned to American dealings with the local non-Communist opposition. The COS alluded to rumors of US support, noting—not for the first time—what he called the absurdity of encouraging opposition to a recipient of massive US support. Thieu disclaimed having given any credence to the allegations of support, but said he had proof of official US contacts. Polgar acknowledged both Embassy and Station contacts with groups such as the An Quang Buddhists and dissident Catholic priests, asserting that these served only legitimate information purposes. Thieu professed to agree, but complained that some dissidents used their American contacts as proof of US support for their "respective machinations." Polgar cited a case in which information on contacts with military dissidents by an American had been turned over to General Binh's CIO, and Thieu repeated that he gave no credence to the rumors.²⁰ [redacted]

That same day, 17 September, Vice Prime Minister Tran Van Don emphasized the government's unease over continuing US association with Saigon dissidents. He pointedly noted Thieu's awareness of [redacted] legislative and Buddhist contacts, but the Station gave him no [redacted]

¹⁷Saigon 80861, 9 August 1974, [redacted]

¹⁸Saigon 81953, 17 September 1974, [redacted]

¹⁹Ibid. [redacted]

²⁰Ibid. [redacted]

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satisfaction, merely repeating the line that Polgar had just given Thieu. Visiting Washington in early October, Don raised the question again with Ted Shackley, claiming that Buddhist opposition to Thieu was growing. Shackley asserted that [redacted] was doing no more than keeping a finger on the pulse and assured Don of steadfast US support for Thieu. Shackley also, he told the Station, made it clear that CIA would choose its own contacts.²¹ [redacted]

If Thieu followed Polgar's advice to restrain his Washington lobbyists, he compensated with an orchestrated effort to convince Deputy Secretary William Clements of a critical need to restore cuts in military aid appropriations. [redacted]

[redacted] Emphasis on post-cease-fire Communist landgrabbing and on weapons lost by territorial forces reflected Thieu's intention to portray aid cuts as having inflicted "crippling reductions in the application of firepower." [redacted]

Intimations of a New Communist Offensive [redacted]

After the January 1973 cease-fire agreement, the traditional role of the Vietnam Station as a US channel of influence and information to the Saigon generals increasingly involved it in issues like corruption, South Vietnam's image in the United States, and the prospects of continued US military aid. Official corruption had long counted as one of Saigon's more intractable problems. Among Station contacts, the most controversial in this respect was Lt. Gen. Dang Van Quang, the portly aide to Thieu whom some Americans were inclined to take lightly because of his high-pitched giggle in moments of tension. Sometime in 1974, hoping to resolve the issue of Quang's alleged corruption, the COS designated

[redacted] to do an all-source review of Quang's financial probity. [redacted] could find no smoking gun, and

²¹ Saigon 81954, 17 September 1974. [redacted]

²² William E. Colby, Memorandum to Henry A. Kissinger, "Planned GVN Tactics to Convince Deputy Secretary of Defense Clements that the Military Situation in South Vietnam is 'Desperate,'" 18 September 1974. [redacted]

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did a report whose thrust was, if not vindication, at worst "not proven."

[redacted]

Quang's pecuniary honesty, or lack thereof, and the Station's liaison role in public relations and military aid matters were in any case peripheral to the Agency's main interest. The gut issue, for the Station, now centered on the fact that the cease-fire agreement had left the Communists with the military—if not, in Polgar's view, the political—initiative in the South, and the dominant intelligence question was how and when they would exercise it. The first part of a definitive answer, after Polgar's tentative prediction of early August, came on 8 November 1974 when the [redacted] reported to the Station and the Special Branch on the Resolution for 1975, just issued by the Hanoi Communist Party's Central Office for South Vietnam.²⁴ [redacted]

According to a preliminary report by the Bien Hoa base, "the key point of Resolution 75 is that the Party is determined to launch an all-out offensive which may well be more intense than the 1972 offensive. The VC have weakened the [Saigon government] to a marked degree, using less than one-third of [their] available strength against [Saigon], while the latter had to use all of its strength." The offensive was to be nationwide and was to strike not only the military but also the political and economic fronts. Orders had already been given, the source said, to collect rice, salt, and other foodstuffs "in preparation for a long offensive." In a move that recalls Bien Hoa's earlier concern about resource control, Party headquarters ordered local VC to "buy two-thirds of the civilian production and let the farmers take the rest to the strategic hamlets [*sic*]."²⁵ [redacted]

As it happened, Washington had just asked the Station to comment on a draft Intelligence Community consensus judgment that "Hanoi probably will not choose to mount a new 1972-style offensive in the current dry season (i.e., between now and June 1975)." Polgar had apparently drawn back from his August warning of a possible dry season offensive, for he cautiously replied on 11 November that Washington's prognosis "had been and still remains Station position as of today." But he went on to cite the [redacted] report, not yet disseminated, and compared it with the reporting from the same source that had correctly predicted the timing

²⁴ [redacted] 24 August 1992. If Quang made any money from [redacted] impropriety, he apparently failed to get it out of Saigon; at one point, having finally been accepted into the US, he was working as a baggage handler at the Los Angeles airport. (See Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993.) [redacted]

²⁵ Bien Hoa 28354, 9 November 1974. [redacted]

²⁵ *Ibid.* [redacted]

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of what turned into the Easter offensive of 1972. An Embassy report had just described a VC threat, allegedly conveyed to an intermediary sent to them by Buddhist leader Tri Quang, to launch a new offensive if Thieu remained in power more than another three or four months. The Station saw a possibility that this and the [redacted] report represented the beginning of a "carefully staged psychological pressure campaign (using sources perhaps reporting in good faith) . . . to erode President Thieu's control." But the track record of the [redacted] source required that his information be taken seriously, and Polgar later remembered having urged both Ambassador Martin and police and CIO chief General Binh to give it close attention.²⁶ [redacted]

No single report sufficed to establish Communist intentions, and on 15 November Polgar reminded Headquarters of another report, issued about the same time as his August warning of a possible offensive, that Hanoi really wanted a new round of negotiations. Then, after another briefing by a province-level superior, the [redacted] specified that the campaign in 1975 was to set the stage for "some sort of 'grand finale' in 1976." He outlined Hanoi's plans for division-level deployments, saying that concentrations around Saigon would be designed to lure an ARVN division from the Mekong Delta, where the VC could then more easily collect rice from the current harvest. Preparations were to be complete by the end of December. Headquarters continued to doubt that Hanoi was planning a major offensive, but Polgar now adopted the more pessimistic view and complained that Washington's argument arbitrarily relied on a repetition of the deployments made by Hanoi before the Easter offensive of 1972.²⁷ [redacted]

As signs of plans for a major Communist military initiative accumulated, the South Vietnamese economy remained a major anxiety for both Saigon and the US Mission. On 19 November, Thieu made the curious choice of the Station to communicate to the Americans his concern about problems of "coordination and leadership" in the economic sector. The desperate state of the economy may have had something to do with this departure from protocol: the increase in oil prices resulting from the Arab export embargo had combined with reduced US economic aid to create severe shortages. In any case, General Binh, clearly uncomfortable with the subject, told DCOS Conrad LaGueux that the President had heard of Mission objections to his proposed cabinet reorganization, and

²⁶Saigon 83590, 11 November 1974, [redacted] Polgar interview,
29-30 July 1993. [redacted]

²⁷Saigon 83747, 15 November 1974, [redacted]
[redacted] Saigon 84264, 2 December 1973, quoted in FVSA 43707, 9 April
1975, [redacted]

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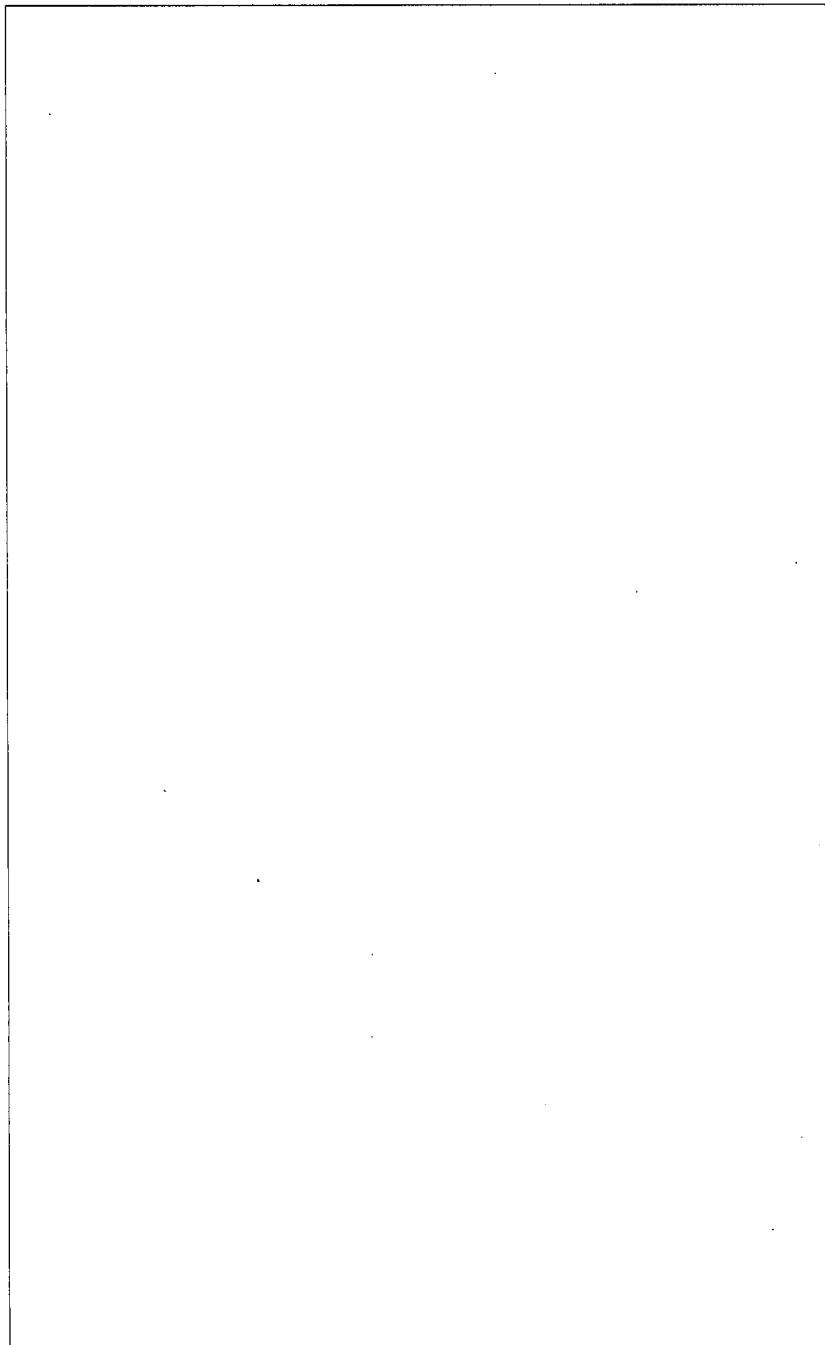
wanted to clarify these "thru 'intimate friends.'" After a check with the Embassy, DCOS LaGueux was able to assure him that the thing would be taken into regular channels.²⁸ [redacted]

²⁸Saigon 83852, 12 November 1993. [redacted]

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The Fall of a Provincial Capital

Indeed, as 1974 came to a close, Khiem and his colleagues had more serious challenges Just before Christmas, Khiem told COS Polgar that the new year would be more difficult than the old, in economic as well as military terms. He thought the Communists "certainly smart enough to recognize that the [government] cannot defend equally in all forty-four provinces." Saigon, for its part, would not fall into the trap of distributing its forces equally throughout the country. It must hold Pleiku, Khiem said, but would not be justified in sacrificing a division to hold Kontum. Then, just one week into the New Year, the Communists captured Phuoc Long Province, on the Cambodian border north of Saigon.³⁵

On 6 January, the day Phuoc Long fell, the State Department asked Ambassador Martin for a military assessment. In response, Martin sent a Station-drafted paper that emphasized Hanoi's ability to expand the Southern territory under its control without committing strategic reserves. It might do so by filling the four divisions just created in the South to "avoid alarming the Washington Intelligence Community, which remains mesmerized with the thought that a major offensive could take place only with the movement of integral units from North Vietnam a la 1972." But if the military situation was grim, Saigon faced it "with its own political house in order." Thieu's position was firm, and "indeed the recent upsurge in Communist activity has served to quiet some of Thieu's critics, causing them to put the national interest above parochial political concerns." Despite this one, perhaps illusory, bright spot, a continuing high volume of Soviet and Chinese aid to the North led Polgar to a somber bottom line.

³⁵Saigon 84760, 20 December 1974.
July 1993 Vietnam War Almanac, p. 59.

Polgar interview, 29-30

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Quoting Thieu, he said, "It looks as though South Vietnam has been deceived by the US and the United States has been deceived by the Soviet Union."³⁶ [redacted]

The US ability to counter aid deliveries to Hanoi with aid deliveries to Saigon was already limited by public and Congressional opposition, and Kissinger called Martin to Washington in late January to help lobby for a supplemental appropriation of \$700 million. While there, Martin stayed in close touch with Polgar, using him as an intermediary with the Vietnamese on a range of issues far broader than the Station's intelligence and covert action mandate. The COS found himself addressing problems ranging from the arrest of allegedly pro-Communist journalists to the handling of a Saigon request for help setting up an American-Vietnamese association in the United States to counter anti-South Vietnam propaganda. Acting on behalf of Charge d'Affaires Wolfgang Lehmann, Polgar also had to straighten out the confusion over reports of Western military advice to Thieu to give up his four northern provinces to the Communists. On this point, Khiem acknowledged that he was familiar with the idea, being promoted by former Australian Brigadier and counterinsurgency adviser Ted Serong, but that contrary to Serong's claims he had rejected it as militarily unsound and politically unacceptable.³⁷ [redacted]

President Thieu, in any case, was optimistic about getting the supplemental appropriation, which he thought would guarantee ARVN enough fuel and ammunition to cope with the Communist moves predicted in the COSVN resolution for 1975. [redacted]

[redacted] he needed the additional aid, but without it would simply make the necessary tactical adaptations. In any case, he could not "conceive that the Americans would abandon him altogether." Apparently speaking for himself in a cable devoted to this topic, Polgar said, "There is no reason to believe that Hanoi would be willing to make an acceptable compromise with a South Vietnam weakened" by US inaction on the aid question.³⁸ [redacted]

³⁶Saigon 85162, 6 January 1975. [redacted] CIA and other American observers had over the years often invoked, usually as a hope, the politically energizing effect of military reverses that the Station here announced as a fact. [redacted]

³⁷Saigon 85873, 29 January 1975; Saigon 86082, 4 February 1975; Saigon 86055, 4 February 1975;

[redacted] Martin was not deterred in his use of the CIA channel by a 15 January incident in which the visiting Senator Sam Nunn (D-TN) had dismissed him from a postlunch discussion at Polgar's house. Of that incident, Polgar reported, "I have never seen [Martin] so worked up." (See Saigon 85488, 16 January 1975. [redacted])

³⁸Saigon 3819, 5 February 1975, [redacted]

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Later in February, the US Mission was preparing a commentary for Kissinger on the Administration's proposed three-year aid package for South Vietnam. Martin asked the COS to estimate the effect on Hanoi of different hypothetical levels of US aid to South Vietnam. Polgar's 26 February response appealed to the authority of Kissinger's intellectual paradigm:

Metternich said that politics is the art of the possible. This dictum is true of military affairs as well as politics and is as relevant to Communist nations as to non-Communist ones. A substantial infusion of U.S. aid to South Vietnam over the next three years would go a long way toward modifying Hanoi's view of what is possible and what is not, both militarily and politically, and would accelerate policy trends in North Vietnam that could ultimately strengthen the force of the Paris accords.³⁹ [redacted]

In any case, as Polgar saw it, Hanoi's supply of munitions in the South, perhaps greater than at the launching of the Easter offensive, was not matched by its ammunition reserves in the North nor by evidence of massive Chinese or Soviet deliveries of armor and artillery. The COS concluded that "the Vietnamese Communists are not going to risk that which they have in an 'all or nothing' gamble of another general offensive." For one thing, they had never taken such a high risk; even in the Easter offensive, Hanoi had kept reserve divisions in the North. For another, "were they to lose, their loss would be final in terms of the existing Communist equities in the South with the strong possibility of repercussions also in the North."⁴⁰ [redacted]

Indeed, the COS believed that increased aid to Saigon now might actually end the war. Here, Polgar reflected, perhaps unconsciously, the optimism of all the US officials who had over the years forecast a limit to Hanoi's capacity to absorb punishment. He suggested that "a clear-cut major U.S. commitment to South Vietnam" would strengthen the "enough is enough" elements in Hanoi. These in turn would be encouraged by what the COS saw as the Soviets' disposition to reduce material aid and to accept a divided Vietnam as they accepted a divided Germany and a divided Korea.⁴¹ [redacted]

This optimistic estimate—its general thrust widely shared among informed US officials—did not, of course, rebut the intelligence reporting on COSVN's Resolution for 1975. According to the [redacted] agent, this document explicitly deferred a final confrontation until 1976.

³⁹Saigon 86693, 26 February 1975. [redacted]

⁴⁰Ibid. [redacted]

⁴¹Ibid. [redacted]

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In this respect, the Communists and the COS seemed to share the judgment that, despite reduced US military aid and the absence of American combat air support, the ARVN's capacity to repel a general offensive had not diminished since 1972. But the Communists still aimed at victory within a specified period of time, while the entirely defensive stance of the GVN sought only to defy Hanoi's timetable.

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Chapter 8

The Fatal Moment

Whatever the validity of the assumptions about ARVN's staying power, events at the local level were creating some unease in the minds of Agency officers manning the Station's outposts. Tom Polgar's 26 February 1975 prognostication of a limited Communist offensive was followed on 10 March by the North Vietnamese capture of Ban Me Thuot, capital of the highland Province of Darlac. Pleiku was also threatened, and the chief of the Station's detachment there, Don Nicol, was issuing daily reports on "what fell during the night." On 12 March, North Vietnamese antiaircraft artillery shot down an Air Vietnam DC-4 on the outskirts of Pleiku.¹

Nicol had at this point received no Station reaction to his reporting about the deteriorating ARVN position around Pleiku, no inquiry or instructions about possible evacuation, and so he asked for consultation in Nha Trang with the MR-2 base chief, Robert Chin. On 13 March, his flight to Nha Trang scheduled for the next day, Nicol convened a meeting of all US officials in Pleiku. Everyone saw an immediate danger of North Vietnamese attack, and they worked out an evacuation protocol, with air transportation for Vietnamese employees guaranteed only to those who risked reprisal at the hands of the Communists.²

Col. Le Khac Ly, the ARVN MR-2 Chief of Staff interrupted the meeting with a phone call to Nicol in which he noted ARVN's deteriorating position and recommended that the Americans pull out. Having delivered this advice, Ly mentioned that MR-2

¹Donald J. Nicol, interview by the author, McLean, VA (hereafter cited as Nicol interview), 26 February 1993.

²Nicol interview, 26 February 1993; Fred Stephens, interview by the author, Langley, VA (hereafter cited as Stephens interview), 10 August 1994. Not all the local employees would accept evacuation even if offered. Nicol recalled that the ethnic minority Nung guards at his compound explicitly declined to consider any departure arrangements, whether by air or on the ground. And two of those who were evacuated, a Vietnamese couple, stayed in Nha Trang when it fell on 1 April; Nicol left for Saigon wondering about their loyalty.

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commander Gen. Pham Van Phu would attend a meeting with President Thieu the next day at Cam Ranh Bay. He noted that Phu's official itinerary called for him to be in Qui Nhon, and assured Nicol he would clarify the matter when Phu returned to Pleiku.³ []

Nicol told Nha Trang Base of the plans for this surreptitious gathering. On 14 March, as he was preparing to leave Pleiku, he got word from the Base that the outpost in Qui Nhon had been queried. Although its people had not actually seen Phu, their contacts asserted that he had indeed arrived at the divisional headquarters there.⁴ []

Late the same day, after Nicol's departure, Stephens visited MR-2 Headquarters in hopes of getting a report on the Cam Ranh meeting. He found Ly, [] had no time to recount the day's events before Phu himself came in. Stephens thought he looked shaken, but did not connect it to the Cam Ranh meeting; in Stephens's view, a continuing string of ARVN reverses had given Phu every reason to look shaken.⁵ []

Stephens left emptyhanded, but returned the following morning, noticing as he passed the airfield that the fighter aircraft normally parked there were gone. He found the headquarters a shambles, evidently in the middle of packing up, and it took him half an hour to locate Colonel Ly. [] took him aside and, with an urgent request that Stephens conceal the provenance of the information, announced that Thieu had just ordered Phu to withdraw from Pleiku and Kontum. In so doing, he had explicitly enjoined his commanders to withhold the decision from the Americans. On leaving Colonel Ly, Stephens briefed the US Mission's senior provincial representative, Earl Thieme, who then called on General Phu. Phu acknowledged the impending relocation of his headquarters, but not the withdrawal from Pleiku and Kontum. He did, however, repeat Ly's earlier suggestion that the Americans leave Pleiku.⁶ []

Stephens accompanied his intelligence report with a recommendation that all Americans be promptly evacuated. Polgar was skeptical of the report, but Chin had already lost two Americans killed in recent

³Nicol interview, 26 February 1993; Stephens interview, 10 August 1994. Nicol described Ly's motivation as a liking for Americans and a craving for Coca-Cola. []

[]
⁴Stephens interview, 10 August 1994. []

⁵Ibid. [] Stephens recalled that Ly said Thieu's rationale for concealing the decision included a desire that Americans be captured in the Highlands; he hoped that such a provocation would draw the United States back into active combat. None of the subsequent cables from Nha Trang and Saigon on the Pleiku evacuation refers to this, and the intelligence report that conveyed Thieu's decision has not been found. Stephens thought he might well have omitted the point from the dissemination as being too sensational, but it is missing also from the accompanying operational cable, []

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action in MR-2, and he and the Consul General at Nha Trang, Moncrieff Spear, persuaded Polgar as the Embassy duty officer to authorize the immediate departure of all Americans from Kontum and Pleiku. Chin requisitioned Air America transport planes, and the first of these arrived at Pleiku not long after noon. Stephens and most of his people took this plane, along with the other Americans, but his communicator and the National Security Agency man at Pleiku insisted on waiting for the promised second aircraft, explicitly assigned for their use. Everyone got out that afternoon, and the group arrived in Nha Trang with their weapons, the unit's cryptographic devices, and the clothes they wore. That day, or the next, the Station got its own look at the catastrophe when DCOS LaGueux went up in a Station aircraft to photograph the chaos on the road leading southeast from Pleiku to Phu Bon.⁷ []

While Stephens and his people were boarding the airplane at Pleiku, COS Polgar was reporting on his efforts to confirm Vietnamese intentions with respect to the Highlands. Liaison contact General Quang []

[] General Khang had just denied any knowledge of a decision to withdraw, "although General Quang conceded that evacuation of Kontum was likely." Khang said he had seen Joint General Staff chief General Vien that morning, and Vien had said nothing of the matter. Acting Chief of Mission Lehmann had seen President Thieu at 0900 hours that morning—presumably before the arrival of Stephens's report of the Cam Ranh meeting—and Thieu had also been mute on the subject. []

In the same cable that reported Quang's and Khang's disclaimers, Polgar speculated that Thieu might have intended no more than to approve in principle Phu's plans to concentrate his forces to retake Ban Me Thuot by evacuating Pleiku and Kontum. In this interpretation, Phu had misunderstood and had prematurely put the plan into effect. As for

⁷Nicol interview, 26 February 1993; Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993. Nicol recalled having felt some relief when the Embassy duty officer, who had to approve the evacuation flight for the Pleiku outpost, turned out to be the COS. Nicol thought that someone else, who might have felt obliged to consult the Ambassador, would have encountered Martin's fear that evacuation of Americans would spark Vietnamese panic. Stephens remembered that Provincial Representative Thieme got a helicopter back to Pleiku on 16 March to rescue his collection of *Playboy* magazines. His arrival coincided with that of a transport sent from Saigon to pick up the ARVN radio intercept detachment that had worked with the Station and NSA. Thieme diverted it to pick up civilian acquaintances of his, and the intercept people were left behind to try making their way out overland or to be captured by the North Vietnamese. (See Stephens interview, 10 August 1994.) []

*Saigon 87355, 15 March 1975, []

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the absence of notification to the US Mission, Polgar later thought it improbable that so many of the Mission's contacts could have skillfully feigned ignorance; in his view, they had in fact not known what Phu had set in motion. But on 17 March, Joint General Staff chief Cao Van Vien responded to the Defense Attaché's probing by acknowledging that withdrawal was already under way. The attaché, Maj. Gen. Homer Smith, asked why Vien had said nothing about it when they met just after the 14 March Cam Ranh Bay conference. Vien said he'd had no choice—Thieu had issued a direct order not to reveal the decision.⁹ □

The Pleiku withdrawal diverted the Station's attention from developments farther south. On 14 March, while Thieu was closeted with his generals at Cam Ranh Bay, Polgar had been evaluating the fall of Ban Me Thuot and growing enemy pressure on Tay Ninh. The current crisis was the worst since 1965, he told Headquarters, now exceeding even the 1972 Easter offensive. Quang had reported Thieu to be unprecedently "worried and even depressed," and General Binh described the ARVN effort to retake Ban Me Thuot as perhaps "the decisive battle in terms of the future of [South Vietnam] as we know it." In Binh's view, the loss of the Central Highlands would be psychologically devastating; he doubted that Thieu and his government could digest it.¹⁰ □

⁹Saigon 87355; Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993; Saigon 88853, 14 April 1975, [redacted]

[redacted] Saigon 87372, 16 March 1975, [redacted] Wm
[sic] R [sic] Johnson, Memorandum to Chief, East Asia Division, "Major General Homer Smith's Report on the Last Days of Vietnam," 23 September 1975, att. Smith report, [redacted]

[redacted] Ted Shackley said he made direct inquiries when he came to Saigon later in the month, asking Generals Quang and Vien, both present at the Nha Trang meeting, as well as General Binh, Hoang Duc Nha, and Thieu himself, what had happened. The consensus, as Shackley recalled it, was that Thieu had announced a policy decision to give up the Central Highlands and had directed MR-2 commander General Phu to begin the planning. Shackley said he later reviewed the subject in the United States with Khac and Nha, and they reaffirmed Phu's blunder. (See Shackley interview, 19 August 1993.) Nothing in the official record other than Polgar's conjecture of 15 March supports this interpretation. Robert Chin's account of the fall of MR-2 categorically states that Thieu "ordered Phu to abandon Pleiku and Kontum." One 50-page undated and unsigned review of the GVN's collapse, apparently prepared at Headquarters, says nothing at all about this episode. Another such memorandum says that Phu returned from the 14 March session with Thieu with orders to abandon Pleiku and Kontum "between 15-17 March," i.e., immediately. (See Robert Chin Memorandum "Chronology," 16 April 1975, [redacted]) The untitled Headquarters reviews are in [redacted] All of this leaves unresolved Polgar's and apparently also Shackley's reluctance to accept that the Vietnamese had withheld a decision to launch an immediate evacuation. In both Nicol's and Stephens's recollection, the initial report from Pleiku had explicitly referred to Thieu's order to conceal his decision from the Americans. The report itself has not been found. □

¹⁰Saigon 87308, 14 March 1975, [redacted]

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~~Secret~~Fixing the Blame for an Accelerating Disaster

The accelerating ARVN collapse did not result from a North Vietnamese general offensive, but rather invited it, as Polgar was later at pains to point out. With both MR-1 and MR-2 in enemy hands, the COS wanted Headquarters to understand that it was Thieu's "precipitous decisions and poor execution by his commanders, . . . poor leadership, poor morale, indiscipline, and selfishness . . . that let the nation down and introduced a process of deterioration that led to results far in excess of what North Vietnamese military pressure would have been capable of during this time frame."¹¹

Prime Minister Khiem was equally concerned to find a scapegoat.

 complaining about "the bastardly attitude of the U.S. Congress . . . the more they go on with their current game the more eager and aggressive the Communists will get and the more force they will apply."

Hanoi is pleased as they can be. Why the hell would they even consider negotiations for now? As a minimum, they would sharply increase their demands. We are like the farmers, and they have just raised the interest rates on our mortgage. In the meanwhile our houses are falling down around us, our plow is broken, and we still have to find the means to prevent foreclosure on our mortgage.

 noting how things had changed since 1972, when the North Vietnamese had been hit by everything from B-52s to naval gunfire. Now the North was stronger and the South weaker. "We have moved out of the Kissinger period and into the period of the American Congress, and there is nothing we can do about it."¹²

On 19 March, Headquarters told Polgar about an interagency meeting at which "both military and State representatives were most appreciative of Station reporting . . . almost their only source of South Vietnamese plans and actions in the last six days." Ambassador Martin was again in the United States, this time for dental surgery, and the Department was about to instruct Lehmann to go see Thieu. Polgar's reply described the

¹¹Saigon 88853, 14 April 1975.

¹²Saigon 3835, 17 March 1975.

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Embassy as a "rudderless ship" in Martin's absence. Lehmann was not a leader, and "senior officers of the Embassy have failed to recognize the new situation and its implications." As the COS saw it, the political officers, "reflecting the atmosphere in Washington," were still preoccupied with the non-Communist opposition to the Saigon government. But it wouldn't matter even if they did change their focus: Thieu didn't like to deal at the charge d'affaires level, and the Embassy would get little of value from contacts less highly placed.¹³

That same day, 20 March, Headquarters begged for information on Thieu's "grand design," even while it worked to "crank up an Asian CA program on the refugee situation, the fact that people are voting with their feet. . ." Could the Station get to Thieu, or at least to Khiem or Quang? The Station's reply noted Lehmann's meeting that day with Thieu regarding the new enclave strategy and said it had produced little not already reported in Agency channels. Polgar went on to say that

We wish you luck with the Asian CA program, but frankly this is not going to make any difference. The North Vietnamese tanks cannot be stopped with sympathy but only by anti-tank weapons and aircraft . . . The failure of the United States to live up to the one-for-one provisions of the Paris agreement or to hinder North Vietnam from undertaking all-out military effort will inevitably terminate the existence of an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam and no amount of words will change that.

Headquarters acknowledged the point, but cited orders from higher authority to fix responsibility on the Communists and to generate support for the refugees fleeing the Communist advance.¹⁴

The specter of accelerating catastrophe had at this point produced some curious reactions also in Saigon. Polgar, for example, had been quick to see the implications of the Central Highlands disaster. But on 21 March, with ARVN still fleeing toward the coast from Pleiku and Kontum, the COS saw a modest Embassy proposal to curtail travel to Vietnam by Mission family members as "ridiculous," tantamount to an official vote of no confidence in the Saigon government's survival. At the same time, aside from its sensible concern about dependents' travel, the Embassy's dominant reaction to collapse in the north was to try doing business as usual. Polgar complained of time wasted at Embassy staff

[] Saigon 87522, 20 March 1975; []
[] Also see Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993; []
[] Saigon 87567, 21 March 1975; []
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meetings in discussion of improvements to the Mission's Combined Recreation Association facilities and related social events. In Washington, irritation with Thieu for concealing his enclave strategy and with the Mission for its poor coverage of the past week was mitigated only by general satisfaction with Agency reporting: the Station was the "only Mission component which has come out of events of past week with reputation either intact or enhanced."¹⁵ []

An Attempt To Restore Saigon's Morale []

Polgar's reporting demonstrated his understanding of sagging Vietnamese morale. His perception of passivity in the Embassy led him to take the lead in an effort to reverse this potentially fatal trend. He launched a vigorous effort to get his Saigon counterparts to identify and undertake the "organizational, psychological, and political efforts" required to salvage "what seems to us [a] rapidly deteriorating situation." On 19 March, he had hosted a working dinner for senior intelligence officials including Generals Quang and Binh. The next day, DCOS LaGueux went to Binh and [] to Quang with additional briefing material that Quang wanted to include in a presentation to President Thieu. On the 21st, Polgar saw both Hoang Duc Nha—"quite changed, humble and obviously most concerned about the fate of the nation"—and Prime Minister Khiem, whom he found in a "state of mild shock." Khiem insisted he had had no idea that the Highlands were to be abandoned forthwith and reacted incredulously to Polgar's statement that Thieu had given the Americans no advance notice. The Prime Minister criticized General Staff chief Cao Van Vien, but did not look as if he intended to be any more forceful on the political front than Vien was on the military. The COS discussed with him "at some length the concept of a national unity government," but "came away with the clear feeling that the Prime Minister was not going to move with the flair and decisiveness which [the] situation would seem to demand."¹⁶ []

On 22 March, Polgar saw Khiem again, this time accompanied by the Station's photo interpreter, and briefed him on ARVN losses during the flight from Pleiku to Phu Bon. That afternoon, he repeated the briefing

¹⁵Saigon 87612, 21 March 1975, and []

[] Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993. Lehmann, as Polgar saw him, lacked the confidence even to adapt the Embassy staff meeting to changed circumstances, with the result that several meetings were dominated by the proposed construction of a Regency Hyatt hotel in Saigon. The Administrative Counselor's problems with overtime pay for local employees also figured prominently, and the Embassy's two-hour lunch break continued. []

¹⁶Saigon 87654, 23 March 1975, []

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for General Quang, who wanted to borrow the material for use next day with Thieu. The Defense Attaché G-2, Col. William Legro, and his colleagues were engaged in similar efforts, Polgar said, but "while we are doing our best to get the top levels of the government to focus on these various problems, the Station cannot of course fill the vacuum created by the absence of the Ambassador during this critical situation." The COS described all this activity to Headquarters on Sunday, 23 March, preceding his report with a despairing cable in which he noted North Vietnamese successes, South Vietnamese blunders, and the "lack of any effective American reaction." Hanoi had now committed five divisions from its strategic reserve, and the COS said he wanted the Secretaries of State and Defense advised that he saw South Vietnam "going down the drain."¹⁷ □

Later on the 23rd, Headquarters chose to treat the situation as manageable, asking for information on ARVN losses and on Thieu's military planning so that Washington could decide "what type of equipment should be put into the pipeline now." Headquarters had accepted that Da Nang would probably fall, that even Tay Ninh might have to be abandoned, but needed to know "where Thieu ultimately plans to make a stand." Replying the next day, Polgar could say of Thieu's intentions only that he wanted to protect what is "essential for the survival of an independent South Vietnam." Polgar went on to say that "the way events are moving, this is likely to be smaller than anyone would have considered possible even two weeks ago." A coastal enclave at Da Nang might still be possible, and another, farther south, from Qui Nhon to Phan Thiet, but such developments would represent not "changes in Thieu's strategic planning but simply reflections of desperate moves made in the hope of conserving ARVN fighting resources for a later decisive battle."¹⁸ □

Washington's relative optimism, at this point, emerged also in an exchange with Polgar over evacuation policy. Although their respective positions would shortly be reversed, Headquarters told the COS on 25 March that "every agency we talk to" worried about the political signals implicit in a conspicuous evacuation of American dependents and their household effects. Polgar replied in a biting cable, pointing out that Saigon was teeming with unneeded American refugees from the northern provinces, and "such political signals as we may raise [with their evacuation] are inconsequential compared to [the] extremely negative signals being transmitted by the Congress of the United States and current military developments in South Vietnam." Headquarters hastily backed down.

¹⁷Saigon 87654; Saigon 876653, 23 March 1975. □

¹⁸□ and Saigon 87697, 24 March 1975. □

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Although it did not explicitly give Polgar the requested blanket authority, it approved his list of proposed evacuees and affirmed his authority under the regulations to move people out.¹⁹ [redacted]

At the strategic level, Polgar still saw a leadership vacuum on both the US and South Vietnamese sides, and he appealed for a visit from former MACV commander Gen. Fred C. Weyand to resume the kind of "informed and detailed discussion" that Weyand and General Abrams had once routinely conducted with President Thieu. Such a move may already have been in train, as Headquarters replied the next day, 25 March, by announcing that Weyand would head a mission to Saigon whose Agency members included Ted Shackley and George Carver. Weyand was even then at the White House to get his instructions. Headquarters illuminated the Washington atmosphere for Polgar by adding that its intelligence customers were now mainly concerned to know whether South Vietnam retained the will to resist.²⁰ [redacted]

Polgar replied on the 26th that it did, in a general way, but that the trauma of the reverses in Central Vietnam left open the question of effective resistance at any given point of attack. "The South Vietnam we have known over the years is no more." The COS saw the prospect of a rump state, if Hanoi permitted it, but "the end will come sooner rather than later unless political and/or military pressure should dissuade Hanoi from pressing its current advantage." That same day, all remaining Americans were evacuated from Tay Ninh by helicopter.²¹ [redacted]

Other Station reporting cast some doubt on the survival of even a general will to resist. [redacted] depicted JGS Chairman Cao Van Vien as "personally affected by the defeatist spirit pervading large segments of the South Vietnamese people and military." [redacted]

[redacted] without B-52 strikes the game was over, but that it would be over anyway: "If we don't redeploy our forces we are dead, and if we do redeploy we are still dead."²² [redacted]

In the desperate mood instilled by Communist military advances, Thieu advisers Quang and Binh [redacted] discussing repressive action against the "radical opposition," which included "that bitch Ngo Ba Thanh" and dissident Catholic priests. The Station noted that this was

¹⁹ [redacted]

²⁰ Saigon 87697; [redacted]

²¹ Saigon 87820, 26 March 1975, and [redacted]

²² Saigon 3839, 25 March 1975, [redacted]

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taking place just as Prime Minister Khiem was sounding out the "responsible" opposition to bring them into a cabinet of national union."²³ []

As this depiction of the Vietnamese mood was going to Henry Kissinger, the Weyand mission was in the air headed for Saigon. The group was to identify and evaluate the Saigon government's military and political strategy, and determine the aid requirement for a strategy judged to be viable. If Saigon's planning was inadequate, the mission was to talk the generals into the necessary changes. In Saigon on 28 March, Shackley reported to DCI Colby that such planning needed to accept that Vietnamese claims about holding Da Nang were hollow, that for all practical purposes it was already lost.²⁴ []

The Fall of Da Nang []

Shackley was probably reacting to a description of accelerating chaos in Da Nang sent on 27 March by the Station's MR-1 Base Chief, [] Airport security had already broken down, and only a third of the manifested passengers were among those who jammed onto the first of the US evacuation aircraft scheduled for that day. The second flight loaded all its intended passengers, but only by waiting at the end of the runway while they were trucked from the terminal.²⁵ []

The COS replied the same day that he had already read [] report to General Quang, who promised an immediate briefing of President Thieu. Polgar said he had warned Quang in the strongest terms that without the restoration of some semblance of order, US efforts to extricate the maximum number of people from Da Nang would be halted. Quang said he would take the necessary action, acknowledging that Station information on the evolving catastrophe in the north was more detailed and timely than the reports reaching Thieu through his own channels.²⁶ []

Polgar saw no point in further exposure of Station personnel in Da Nang, and instructed [] to evacuate his staff "at the earliest opportunity. I am not willing to risk our personnel to obtain continued reporting . . . when it appears that neither U.S. nor Vietnamese authorities are capable of putting that intelligence to any practical use."²⁷ []

²³Saigon 3843, 26 March 1975, []

²⁴Saigon 87899, 28 March 1975, []

²⁵[] and FVSA 43738, 22 April 1975, []

²⁶Saigon 87846, 27 March 1975, []

²⁷Ibid. []

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At 1640 hours, Quang got back to Polgar, saying that President Thieu wanted Consul General Albert Francis to tell MR-1 commander General Truong that a continuing US airlift depended on Truong's ability to restore order at the airfield and to control the roads serving it. An hour later, Quang advised that he had reached Truong himself, but recommended having Francis make his representations anyway. It was all in vain, as military discipline had now simply dissolved. A state of even wilder chaos the next day, 28 March, prompted the Consul General to cancel the airlift entirely.²⁸ []

Evacuation by sea, using vessels of the US Military Sealift Command, now remained the only possibility, [] and a Consulate officer set out to move the 3,000 Vietnamese to whom the Mission felt a specific obligation. Early on 28 March, working under cover of darkness to avoid the attention of unsponsored refugees, they tried to load a barge at the river dock in front of the Consulate. But the ruse did not succeed, and as many as 1,000 unauthorized refugees forced their way on board. Some fell into the water, in the general crush, and were drowned. The overloaded barge finally had to be towed out with many of its intended passengers still on shore.²⁹ []

[] and his colleagues tried again the next night, but not all the promised barges appeared. In the confusion and panic, those that did were towed away only partly loaded, again leaving many US-sponsored refugees behind. Fortunately for the few remaining Americans, Grealy had made arrangements with the captain of an Australian-owned tugboat, the *Osceola*, to pick up the CIA and Consulate staffers still in Da Nang. With nothing more to be done for the masses of refugees trying to flee, the Americans boarded on the morning of the 29th, taking as many Vietnamese refugees as they could, and moved out into Da Nang harbor.³⁰ []

Once on the water, danger came less from the Communist forces approaching by land than from armed ARVN deserters. At one point, a sampan carrying Vietnamese Marine deserters approached the *Osceola*. Ignoring continuous warning fire from the tug, they pulled up to the *Osceola*'s stern. Hank Boothe, one of [] men, confronted them there and tongue-lashed a Marine pointing a pistol at him until, apparently confused and frightened, the man opened the action to show an

²⁸Saigon 87851, 27 March 1975, [] FVSA 43738 []

²⁹FVSA 43738; Wm [sic] R [sic] Johnson, Memorandum to Chief, East Asia Division, "Major General Homer Smith's Report on the Last Days of Vietnam," 23 September 1975, att. Smith report, []

³⁰Ibid., Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993. []

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unloaded weapon. The leader, brandishing both an M16 automatic rifle and an M-79 grenade launcher, then meekly obeyed Boothe's order to join the fishing boats already clustered behind the *Osceola*.³¹ []

From the relative safety of the tug, the Americans watched more soldiers and refugees putting out into the harbor on barges, or in sampans or fishing boats. Most of these vessels could not venture into open water without foundering, and the ships of the 7th Fleet, required to remain offshore in international waters, could not come close enough to pick up refugees. By early afternoon, thousands of refugees were afloat in the harbor, caught between the approaching North Vietnamese and the rough waters of the South China Sea. [] saw the impending disaster, and suggested that the *Osceola*'s skipper invoke maritime emergency practice by sending a distress call over [] voice link to the Station in Saigon. By midafternoon, the Station had relayed it to the communications facility in [] which in turn broadcast it on the appropriate frequencies to ships at sea.³² []

The response was almost immediate, as several freighters were then passing Da Nang. But the rescue effort revealed another threat to the refugees' survival: some of the barges had left the shore at least a day earlier, and the tugboats and freighters helping with the rescue did not carry enough drinking water to supply the parched Vietnamese. Trying to ameliorate this, [] asked for an Air America airdrop, which the Station promptly furnished. The aircraft arrived at dusk, but the various containers hastily collected for the effort all broke; one of them hit the *Osceola*'s antennas, interrupting communications until [] communicator could improvise a repair. [] was trying to arrange a parachute drop for 30 March when a heavy rain postponed the problem long enough for the rescue operation to be completed.³³ []

The four CIA men and their Consulate colleagues spent the night of 29 March on the *Osceola*. At 1030 hours on the 30th, they were still on the tug, and the Station was hoping to see them evacuated before the end of the day. But transfer to a seagoing vessel turned out to be fully as risky as cruising a Da Nang harbor full of armed Vietnamese deserters. The *Osceola* approached the freighter Pioneer Commander, only to discover Marine deserters, perhaps 500 of them, already on board, busy robbing

³¹ Saigon 88676, 10 April 1975. [] This cable is an account of the episode volunteered to the Station by Robert M. Lanigan, the USOM officer for Quang Nam Province, who was also on the *Osceola*. He had been eager to ensure that Boothe's heroism was recognized. []

³² Saigon 87954, 29 March 1975. [] Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993. []

³³ FVSA 43738; Saigon 87971, 30 March 1975. [] Saigon 88676, 10 April 1975. [] Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993. []

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the refugees alighting from a barge, and knifing or shooting those who resisted. [] and his party crossed the now-empty barge without incident and boarded without resistance from the Marines. They proceeded to help the captain organize watch teams guarding the bridge and the engine room, the only parts of the ship which marauding deserters had not yet penetrated. During the course of the night, the watch successfully fended off Marines intent on occupying the bridge, but the rapine continued.³⁴ []

Thanks in large measure to [] ingenuity and enterprise, the Da Nang rescue operation evacuated an estimated 50,000 refugees from the doomed city. Many of the three to four thousand Vietnamese comprising the Consulate and Base local staff and their families were unfortunately not among them. [] subsequent report does not address the question whether the Base might have moved its local employees at its own discretion. It acknowledges the "failure to remove a very large number of Vietnamese Consulate and Base employees" and attributes this to the Embassy's failure to provide the airlift it had encouraged Consul General Francis to expect. This leaves open the question why so few of CIA's local staff had been moved out in the twelve days after the fall of Pleiku and Kontum and before civil order collapsed in Da Nang. Also, as we have seen, an airlift did in fact begin on 27 March and ended on Francis's initiative, not the Embassy's, when General Truong failed to restore order at the airport.³⁵ []

The Trauma of Impending Defeat []

ARVN's collapse at Da Nang contributed to the psychological toll that accelerating disaster was already taking in Saigon. Shackley remembered trying to brief Ambassador Martin, on the Weyand mission's airplane, about the Communist advance on Da Nang. But Martin could not or would not absorb the dimensions of the catastrophe, and General Weyand finally signaled Shackley to give it up. Three days later, on 30 March, Da Nang fell. Shortly afterward, Polgar took Vince Daly, a Base officer recently evacuated, in to see Martin. The Ambassador refused to accept Daly's account of the disaster, saying he would fly to Da Nang

³⁴FVSA 43738. []

³⁵FVSA 43738. It has not been determined whether the Base was required to tie the evacuation of its local employees to that of the Consulate's, and if not, what rationale it used to delay moving them. []

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himself to establish the facts. Only strenuous argument persuaded him that he could not land at an airfield controlled by the North Vietnamese Army.³⁶ []

Probably reflecting the desperate need for some good news, the Station's intelligence product now occasionally depicted events in more optimistic terms than they merited. One [] remembered serious attention in the Station to idle Vietnamese talk about retaking Da Nang. Another [] recalled [] General Quang [] joked about an incident in Lam Dong Province. It seemed that a couple of VC sappers had been spotted outside a district capital, and the panicked local defenders fled toward the province capital. Finding it abandoned, they reversed course and headed back through their district town, encountering no resistance, as they dashed toward Da Lat. Quang [] saw the dark humor in this, but the Station published a report saying that the Regional Forces had "launched a counterattack on Di Linh and [driven] the Communists from the city."³⁷ []

The Vietnamese were no less affected. The disarray was such that on 30 March, "not one senior officer or official was on duty at [the] Palace" when the Station called repeatedly to try to coordinate the evacuation of Da Nang. Even the President was not entirely in control of himself. When Shackley and Polgar saw him on 2 April, he seemed "choked up with emotion"; indeed, as Polgar later recalled it, he at one point broke into tears. Shackley perceived that "shock waves have gone through ARVN and South Vietnamese population at large as a result of recent military developments in MR 1 and 2." Morale had reached an all-time low, and a "feeling of abandonment by [the] United States is growing among all strata of . . . society." President Thieu was invisible to the body politic, and Prime Minister Khiem busied himself with fruitless efforts to reorganize the government. The South Vietnamese were unanimous on just one thing, the need for B-52 bombers to hit the approaching Communists.³⁸ []

The potential of the Communist advance to engender panic in Saigon emerges in [] retired Gen. Pham Van Dong [] [] Alarmed by the fall of Da Nang, Dong

³⁶Shackley interview, 19 August 1993; Vandaveer interview, 3 September 1993. Daly recounted the Martin incident to Vandaveer some time later. []

[]
³⁷Saigon 88019, 31 March 1975, [] Saigon 88167, 2 April 1993, [] Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993. The Shackley-Polgar briefing of Thieu represented an unusual concession by Martin, who usually insisted on being present at any meeting with the Chief of State. He made no such concession to Weyand, even though the general, a Vietnamese speaker, was an old Thieu associate (see Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993). []

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[redacted] At this session, he asserted that the US Secretary of Defense had just predicted that the Communists would soon attack and capture Saigon. Dong begged [redacted] to get his family evacuated. He himself would stay, for the moment, but expected Saigon to fall within two weeks. [redacted]

[redacted]
On the substantive level, Shackley reported on 31 March that the Weyand mission had found it necessary to remind the Vietnamese at all levels that their priorities were to stabilize the military situation and to provide evidence that the government could still protect its population. At this point, with its resources in the Mekong Delta still devoted to the now-irrelevant pacification program, the government had only the "vaguest formulation" of a strategic plan and of the force structure needed to implement it. At the CIA briefing on 2 April, Thieu seemed unaware of the movements of North Vietnamese divisions that Polgar described for him. He appeared, however, to comprehend his military position and was alert to its political implications and its threat to general morale. Nevertheless, he seemed to Shackley to overestimate the time available to deal with his problems.⁴⁰ [redacted]

Shackley's cables of 31 March and 2 April posed the question of Communist intentions. He saw two possibilities: first, Hanoi's exploitation of its military advantage to press for an immediate victory on the battlefield, and second, a political settlement with a coalition government that would disguise Saigon's "de facto capitulation." Neither of these messages predicted Hanoi's choice, but Shackley later recalled the Weyand mission as marking the parting of the interpretative ways between Washington and the US Mission in Saigon. General Weyand and his team had arrived believing that Hanoi would press for military victory, and nothing they learned in Vietnam persuaded them otherwise. Thus, although Ambassador Martin and COS Polgar continued to find credibility in signs of Communist interest in a coalition fig leaf, the final Weyand report predicted that without accelerated logistic support to ARVN and the commitment of US combat air support, Saigon would fall to a military assault.⁴¹ [redacted]

And in fact the North Vietnamese juggernaut continued to roll into the coastal strip of Central Vietnam. On 1 April, only two days after the fall of Da Nang, North Vietnamese forces approached Nha Trang, just

⁴⁰Saigon 88019; Saigon 88167. [redacted]

⁴¹*Ibid.*; Shackley interview, 19 August 1993; Saigon 88257, 4 April 1975, [redacted]

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north of the former US base at Cam Ranh Bay. Nha Trang was now the headquarters of ARVN's Military Region 2 and the site of a US Consulate General and CIA Base. At 1030 hours, having heard from the Khanh Hoa Province Chief that the city was "out of control," the Consul General authorized immediate helicopter evacuation to the airfield. The CIA Base closed down its communications at 1117 hours, and the last of its staff, with Base Chief Robert Chin, took off for Saigon at about noon.⁴² []

The Consul General had planned to evacuate local employees by sea that day; it appears that Chin's Vietnamese were to have been included. But the departure of the US staffers aborted these preparations. Chin's subsequent report to Polgar implied that no obligation to these employees had gone unfulfilled, although, "as it turned out, only 50 percent of our locals showed up in Saigon. Perhaps the rest couldn't make it. On the other hand, some might have stayed behind; others who had been paid off might be on their own somewhere."⁴³ []

On the same day, 1 April, the DCI gave Polgar the explicit blanket authority to move people and household effects that EA Division had denied him a week earlier. On the 2nd, Headquarters completed its *volte-face* on the evacuation question, telling Polgar that State would shortly require the evacuation of families of US officials, and would ask for the number of Vietnamese to be evacuated if the Vietnamese were defeated. The latter category could reach a million, Headquarters estimated, if all were included who might be subject to North Vietnamese retribution.⁴⁴ []

Polgar replied cautiously to Washington's call for evacuation preparations, saying that they could "in and of themselves set in motion forces which will bring about [the Saigon government's] prompt demise." George Carver, in a separate and less temperate cable, called the proposed moves "lunatic." Yes, evacuation was a serious question, but "such blundering steps would precipitate the very crisis they are supposedly designed to cope with and, in the process, cause the GVN to topple." Saying that Shackley as well as Polgar shared this view, Carver went on to insist there be no "visible signs of an impending American exodus until we decide to take out everyone left." When that moment came, it would probably take an augmented US airborne division and tactical air

⁴²Saigon 88078, 1 April 1975, []

⁴³Robert Chin, Memorandum for Chief of Station, Vietnam, "Evacuation of Nha Trang Base," 17 April 1975, []



The CIA Base at Nha Trang, 1968...

Photo courtesy of Dean Almy.



Refugees near Nha Trang flee southward.

support to secure the evacuation of the remaining Americans and the "many Vietnamese (with their families) whom in good conscience we simply could not leave behind to be slaughtered."⁴⁵ □

The DCI's curt reply to Polgar said he had discussed the matter with Assistant Secretary of State Philip Habib, and the "decision had been made to evacuate dependents and thin out remaining principals." Dealing with Polgar's expressed concern for the effect of American departures on

"Saigon 88212, 3 April 1975, [redacted] Saigon 3850, 3 April 1975, copy retained in History Staff files; Shackley interview, 19 August 1993. Whether his stance had been inaccurately conveyed by Curver, or whether he was simply bowing to Headquarters insistence, Shackley later said he had supported this Headquarters position while still in Saigon. He said he adopted an end-of-the-line tone with Polgar, urging him to make evacuation plans. □

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Vietnamese morale, Colby paraphrased his own message of the previous week, suggesting that they be explained to the Vietnamese in terms of the staffing surplus created by the fall of Military Regions 1 and 2.⁴⁶ []

The question of staybehind operations, designed to provide information from within South Vietnam even after a Communist victory, did not involve the same sensitivities. Ted Shackley later said he remembered that during his visit he urged Tom Polgar to push the recruitment of such sources, and Polgar assigned Station officer William Johnson to supervise the effort. Johnson and his colleagues gave it a game try, as Shackley recalled it, but none of the agents they deployed ever established communication. It was in any case too late; a managerial mindset which rejected the prospect of the United States being forced out of Vietnam had found timely staybehind preparations no more congenial a task than arranging to evacuate the Station's Vietnamese employees.⁴⁷ []

On 2 April, Thieu described for Shackley and Polgar various Vietnamese efforts, all of them apparently stalled by the politicians' mutual jealousies, to create a government with a base broad enough to interest the Communists in a negotiated cease-fire. The next day, Polgar told Headquarters that Gen. Nguyen Cao Ky and Senate President Tran Van Lam had combined to try assembling such a government. While Thieu might suppress this move, it was also possible that the Senate's unanimous call for new leadership would contribute to Thieu's departure. Implying a difference with Martin on this subject, Polgar judged Thieu insufficiently flexible to deal with the disparate elements of any government of national union; in any case, as long as he stayed, the Communists could be expected to pursue a military victory. DCI Colby reacted apprehensively, enjoining Polgar not to participate in any move to oust Thieu.⁴⁸ []

On the morning of 8 April, a defecting South Vietnamese pilot bombed Doc Lap Palace; the results included severe damage to General Quang's office. []
[]
[]

⁴⁶ []
⁴⁷ Shackley claimed that, contrary to the impression of some contemporary witnesses, he had not thought staybehind prospects too poor to merit a serious effort. The impression derived, he thought, from his rejection of the Station's proposal to try using [] for this purpose. (See Shackley interview, 19 August 1993.) []

⁴⁸ Saigon 88167; Saigon 88229, 3 April 1975, [] Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993. []
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As the Communists pursued their advantage, Vietnamese reactions, and those of some in the US Mission as well, evoked the sight of deer impaled on the beams of approaching headlights.

An Answer From Tay Ninh

On 8 April, the agent in Tay Ninh reported that the North Vietnamese had decided to go for broke—even if the Thieu government fell, or received augmented US aid, there would be no negotiations, no coalition government, and “Communist forces will strike at Saigon at an appropriate time.” Meanwhile, Polgar saw the US Mission as still resembling a rudderless ship, despite Graham Martin’s return. On 9 April, the COS bemoaned the need to waste time arguing the validity of the bad news pouring in from his intelligence sources, and noted that, with household effects and official cargo piling up on the docks, two American ships had just sailed empty because the “Embassy could not organize itself to issue loading instructions.” The Ambassador was still trying to move Washington into increased military and economic aid, and in other

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respects seeking to maintain a business-as-usual attitude in the face of a clearly worsening situation.⁵¹ []

In the same message, the COS evaluated current Communist attacks on provincial capitals near Saigon as supporting the previous day's report by [] and Polgar said he therefore anticipated a Communist move to occupy Saigon by June. He noted that for two weeks there had been no functioning cabinet, and that Martin had not seen Thieu in almost a week. The Ambassador now agreed, he said, that Thieu had outstayed his usefulness, but would not urge him to leave in the absence of a "viable alternative." Polgar concluded that without "decisive American moves . . . major and useless bloodshed can be avoided only if Thieu steps down and aside and a credible government of 'national union' offers to implement the Paris formula . . . on polite surrender terms." The United States would also have to press for a cease-fire "with the same energy that was used when Israel was advancing in Egypt [in 1973]." Otherwise, the "Vietnamese will be defeated in short order and . . . very few of the South Vietnamese will be able to escape."⁵² []

The only immediate reply to this was an order from DCI Colby to get CIA dependents out of Vietnam; if other resources were lacking, he said, he would charter the necessary aircraft. But Polgar remained unconvinced that such urgency was required. [] remembered a dinner at this time for a departing Station officer at which he and []

[] Chip Schofield asked Polgar what circumstances would require evacuating the Mission. The COS posited the loss of Bien Hoa and interdiction of the highway from Saigon to the port at Vung Tau, but emphasized the improbability of such an outcome. He said he feared that any kind of general evacuation announcement would panic the Mission, and in any case he anticipated a coalition government, eventually leading to a slightly disguised surrender, that would obviate the need for an emergency evacuation.⁵³ []

This view stood in apparent contradiction to Polgar's 9 April forecast of a decisive North Vietnamese offensive. Perhaps, as [] later thought possible, Polgar had designed the more optimistic prediction

⁵¹Thomas Polgar, Memorandum, "Washington Post Article Concerning Destruction of Classified Files in Vietnam," n.d., probably early June 1976, copy provided by Mr. Polgar []

[] Then DCOS LaGueux remembered Martin as an insatiable reader who disliked oral briefings. LaGueux thought that one reason for the "business as usual" atmosphere was simply Martin's failure to catch up with his reading after arriving with the Weyand mission; he didn't see the impending catastrophe. (See LaGueux interview, 23 November 1992.) []

⁵²Saigon 88570. []

⁵³[] [] interview, 24 August 1992. []

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at least partly to prevent working-level panic. If so, he shortly began to assign real importance to an effort to negotiate a settlement that would allow an orderly withdrawal, and perhaps even the survival of a small US Mission. One reason for this development may have been pessimism about the likelihood of successful evacuation under military pressure. DCOS LaGueux had observed from the air the retreat from the Central Highlands and later Da Nang and was horrified by the chaos. Polgar agreed with his judgment that the orderly evacuation from Saigon of all Americans and all compromised Vietnamese was unlikely to succeed, in anything like similar circumstances, and commissioned him to do a worst case evacuation scenario for Washington.⁵⁴ □

Conflicting Prognoses and Prescriptions □

Polgar's own perceptions continued to lead him to push for a negotiated surrender. In a despairing message of 10 April, he predicted that the US would fail to generate enough pressure on Hanoi to deter it from its military course. Thieu had "lost his credibility with friend and foe alike," and Prime Minister Khiem was having no luck assembling a government from which Hanoi might accept a deferred surrender. □

□ Nguyen Ba Can would have no better luck than Khiem, should he be named prime minister. "The war is lost," Polgar said, acknowledging that as recently as February he had seen a "fair prospect for a relatively favorable outcome," one that would allow US disengagement "undertaken with dignity and honor and the conviction that we are leaving South Vietnam in better shape than we found it when we took it upon ourselves to interfere with the fate of this small country." But the events of March, "which of course germinated in Hanoi and Washington a lot earlier, have changed all that."⁵⁵ □

Polgar saw just four things to be done: accelerate American evacuation, "but short of a level of intensity which would trigger a panic"; launch an intense effort to get the Soviets or French to broker a ceasefire; instigate the replacement of Thieu by a government of national unity; and arrange the "orderly evacuation of those South Vietnamese who cannot reasonably be expected to survive under the new regime. . ." Success with this formula, Polgar implied, would fulfill minimum US

⁵⁴ □ interview, 14 September 1993; LaGueux interview, 23 November 1992. □
⁵⁵ Saigon 88663, 10 April 1975, □

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obligations while allowing Hanoi to fulfill its "hope" to remove Thieu and the US presence "without the spectacle of North Vietnamese tanks rumbling through Saigon."⁵⁶ []

EA Division Chief Shackley responded with a synopsis of the Weyand mission's reception in Washington. He noted Congressional reservations about additional aid to a Vietnam having at best "minimal or marginal prospects for surviving as [a] truncated nation state." President Gerald Ford had explicitly addressed the evacuation of Americans and vulnerable South Vietnamese, and Shackley wanted to be sure that Polgar understood Washington's urgent concern about evacuating CIA and NSA dependents. The COS assured Shackley on 11 April that everything was under control; that dependents and surplus employees were on their way out, and "nothing further needs to be done from your end."⁵⁷ []

The pessimistic evacuation scenario drafted by LaGueux reached Headquarters on 12 April. For Polgar's 11 April assurances to Shackley, it substituted the judgment that "the orderly evacuation of all Americans and their dependents (including Vietnamese) will not be possible" without US military intervention, which would itself generate "political and psychological problems of great magnitude." The Station estimated that the United States now had "a clearly stated moral responsibility for the evacuation of a quarter of a million people," not counting thousands of military officers and professional men and their families who would doubtless prefer to escape living under the Communists. "There is no reason to believe that the North Vietnamese would tolerate such a massive exodus."⁵⁸ []

In any case, an ARVN collapse on any of the approaches to Saigon "could produce additional military disintegration as well as instability and social unrest in the capital that would make phased or orderly large-scale evacuation impractical within two or three days. . ." Polgar anticipated general panic as the result of any effort at large-scale evacuation of Vietnamese—over a million and a half might have some claim to it—and said he had indications that "there are those in the Army who would hold the U.S. civilian population hostage to their own safety and to insure [sic] their own evacuation."⁵⁹ []

⁵⁶*Ibid.* The cable does not specify what led Polgar to believe that Hanoi preferred to avoid investing Saigon by force. [] and Saigon 88719, 11 April 1975, []

⁵⁷Saigon 88762, 12 April 1975, []

⁵⁸*Ibid.* Polgar may have had in mind a warning by former police chief Loan on 4 April that ARVN troops and Vietnamese marines at Tan Son Nhut would unquestionably block any aircraft evacuating only US nationals. US military intervention would make matters worse, according to Loan, as these forces would only have "more angry Vietnamese to contend with." The Station reported that Loan seemed "quite sympathetic" to this prospect. See Saigon 88283, 4 April 1975, []

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Even landing a division of Marines would create more problems than it solved, and the only solution was to proceed with the removal of as many Americans and dependents as was inconspicuously possible while taking "strong measures . . . to facilitate negotiations." Years later, Ted Shackley recalled the message as a "good think piece," although clearly designed to spur Washington into more energetic pursuit of a negotiated cease-fire. In this, it did not succeed, even though the chaos at Da Nang confirmed the high risk of an effort to evacuate Saigon. Consensus opinion in Washington, as Shackley understood and shared it, saw the evidence of the battlefield, and reporting such as that from the authoritative [redacted] agent, as presaging a military decision. From this perspective, evacuation was the only option, however risky, just as in Polgar's view the only reasonable course lay in pursuing a cease-fire. The result was that, as of 12 April, Headquarters and the Station were pursuing incompatible strategies for the liquidation of the CIA commitment in Vietnam.⁶⁰ [redacted]

⁶⁰Shackley interview, 19 August 1993. Polgar's confidence in a negotiated settlement permitting a coalition government permeated Station correspondence at this time. The author of a cable on stay-behind operations, perhaps Bill Johnson, assumed that at very worst an interim non-Communist government, "possibly with some PRG representation," would obviate the need for an emergency evacuation. See Saigon 88883, 14 April 1975, [redacted]

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Chapter 9

Surrender Politics and Evacuation Logistics

Xuan Loc, the nearest provincial capital east of Saigon, had become the scene of a critical battle on 8 April. With the outcome there still undetermined, psychological disorientation in Saigon seemed to feed on itself. Khiem resigned in favor of Nguyen Ba Can, and the new Prime Minister invited [redacted] to become his personal adviser for press affairs. On 11 April, the fierce struggle for Xuan Loc still raging, they seriously discussed ways and means to improve Saigon's image abroad. JGS Headquarters was equally divorced from reality: [redacted] heard Gen. [redacted] instructing his airborne commander to avoid partisan political activity and to emphasize jump training to reduce the proportion of men in his units who were not airborne qualified.¹ [redacted]

As of 14 April 1975, the government remained paralyzed, and the main policy issue facing Station management was that of evacuation. On this, COS Polgar found himself in general agreement with Ambassador Martin's approach, and still in some conflict with Washington. Martin had just successfully appealed a State Department order to reduce the Mission to 1,250 people by 19 April, and told Polgar that he now had full authority to determine the size of the establishment he wanted to maintain. Martin proposed to reduce the number of contractors, but remained "very reluctant and I [Polgar] must admit for good reason" to authorize planning the movement of any South Vietnamese other than American dependents. But Polgar did not want the Vietnamese ignored, either, and worried that the Defense Attaché Office, in charge of evacuation planning, was drifting into a position "leaving out of consideration the requirement to move any Vietnamese at all." This possibility reinforced

¹Saigon 88719; Saigon 88734, 11 April 1975.

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Polgar's other concerns: "The more I think about this problem the more convinced I become that we must move in [the] direction of [a] political solution and there is no time to lose."² □

One factor in Polgar's thinking was the anticipated failure of the supplementary military aid package then before the Congress. "Nobody here really believes that Congress will grant President Ford's request," and the COS had just advised Generals Quang and Binh and the new Information Minister to concentrate their internal propaganda on the level of supplies actually arriving, rather than on the prospect of an increased authorization when the vote came on 19 April. But Hanoi could reinforce faster than ARVN could either rebuild itself or destroy NVA units. The main imperative, for Polgar, remained the ouster of President Thieu and the installation of a government that might negotiate a cease-fire. Martin was still resisting the idea of pressuring Thieu to resign, but "I think I have just about brought the Ambassador around to the acceptance of the cruel facts of life."³ □

Headquarters returned to the evacuation theme, and Polgar responded to this renewed pressure by advancing the departure of a number of Vietnamese wives of Station officers. The COS also advised that he had completed plans to reduce Station staffing to about 270, where he expected it to stay: Kissinger had just authorized Martin to maintain Embassy staffing at 1,500, and the Ambassador was not contemplating significant additional cuts in Station manpower.⁴ □

However close he was to accepting Hanoi's imminent triumph, Martin had not yet decided to encourage Thieu's departure. On 15 April Polgar sent him a memorandum from the Station's reports chief that supported both his own apocalyptic view of the consequences of Thieu's remaining in office and his conviction that a national unity government must be formed and that the US must announce its interest in negotiations. "If we do not take this action immediately, we face disaster within a week or so."⁵ □

Disaster on a small scale struck immediately. North Vietnamese forces captured Station contract officer □ when they took Phan Rang, the new MR-2 headquarters. □ had been ordered to return to Bien Hoa, but confident that no regional headquarters would be overrun, decided to stay there with his counterpart, General Nghi. Both wound up in the hands of the Communists. Worse, □ □ claimed on 16 April that it no longer mattered what Saigon did. He

²Saigon 88852, 14 April 1975, □

³Saigon 88909, 15 April 1975, 15 April 1975, □

⁴*Ibid.* □

⁵Saigon 88938, 15 April 1975, □

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reported a Communist intention to "fight on until total victory, regardless of whether the Nguyen Van Thieu government falls or the U.S. decides to give aid to Vietnam. There will be no negotiations and no tripartite government." The report went on to assert that the North would rather sacrifice troops in a final drive than "waste time trying to achieve victory through a coalition government . . . The Communists now plan to celebrate 19 May (Ho Chi Minh's birthday) in Saigon."⁶

Polgar's Campaign for a Negotiated Surrender

Despite the accumulating evidence of Hanoi's intention to destroy the Republic of South Vietnam with military force, Polgar refused to abandon hope for a negotiated cease-fire. On 17 April, he reacted passionately to a reported administration statement that the United States was engaged in no diplomatic process aimed at a cease-fire and political settlement. If this were true, he wrote, "The paralysis of the American executive in face of the continuing North Vietnamese military drive and in face of the imminent danger of extinction of South Vietnam seems to me astonishing." The COS sought to enlist DCI Colby in his crusade for a diplomatic strategy: "It seems to us that as the nation's chief intelligence officer he has the justification and perhaps the obligation to present to the administration [and to] Congress the predictable consequences of the current policies." Polgar ended his appeal by insisting that "the failure of the United States to take the diplomatic steps which might, we repeat only might, prevent or at least delay the ultimate catastrophe would pin on us a responsibility for blood which the rains of future years cannot wash away."⁷

On the 18th, the COS reacted with almost equal emotion to a "shocking" report that Assistant Secretary of State Philip Habib had told US news organizations, worried about their Vietnamese employees, that the US Government had no plans to evacuate its own local employees. This announcement, if true and circulated in Saigon, would "as a matter of absolute certainty" spark panic in South Vietnam. The Ambassador had just authorized the surreptitious evacuation of some 350 of the press people, and General Quang, reacting to a Polgar query, intimated that the government would not oppose it. Ending this message in a more matter-of-fact

⁶Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993; Shackley interview, 19 August 1993 Polgar memorandum, "Washington Post Article . . ." In the context of Snepp's later accusation that Polgar had ignored this information, the former COS noted that the report was indeed disseminated and received the highest possible Headquarters evaluation.
⁷Saigon 89078, 17 April 1975.

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tone, the COS said "the Station continues to proceed on the assumption that there will be evacuation of key indigenous persons and their families."⁸ []

Polgar thus believed that, depending on circumstances, the United States would provoke panic if it evacuated its Vietnamese collaborators, and if it did not. In any case, the Embassy had now set up "assembly line procedures" with the Interior Ministry, and any relative or dependent of an American could leave within a matter of hours. In this way, the American community was declining, Polgar reported, by several hundred each day; the system was "running very smoothly without any trace of panic."⁹ []

Polgar saw no reason at this time to treat the evacuation of the Station's Vietnamese with the same urgency that he had brought to moving the press people. One reason was his relatively optimistic forecast of Hanoi's intentions and of the prospects for installing a unity government. On 18 April, he wrote that "our perception of the timing of possible sustained NVA assaults on Saigon may be a few weeks beyond the date that some elements in Washington are currently contemplating." Acknowledging that "one could push Mission evacuation at an even faster pace, it is our best judgment that we have as a minimum several weeks before things may start getting tight around here." Meanwhile, although not at liberty to provide details, Polgar wanted Headquarters to know that "Ambassador Martin and French Ambassador Merillon are about to take important initiatives vis a vis [sic] President Thieu"; it appeared that he would be pressed to resign.¹⁰ []

On the same day, 18 April, a Hungarian colonel named Janos G. Toth came to see the COS. As Chief of Staff of the Hungarian ICCS representation []

[] Toth had regular dealings with the North Vietnamese delegation at Tan Son Nhu airport. At his meeting with Polgar, he alluded to their social encounter of a week earlier, at which the Hungarians present argued that on the basis of "socialist logic" the North Vietnamese must prefer strangulation tactics to a full-scale assault on Saigon. In the days following, Toth said, remarks to him and other Hungarians by their Hanoi colleagues had led to several conclusions.¹¹ []

The first of these saw the North Vietnamese as determined to force a military decision in the absence of negotiations begun promptly and on Hanoi's terms. Second, the North was in fact ready to resume negotiations provided that Nguyen Van Thieu gave up the Presidency. A successor

⁸Saigon 89096, 18 April 1975, []

⁹Saigon 89140, 18 April 1975, []

¹⁰Ibid. []

¹¹Saigon 89170, 19 April 1975, []

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government would have to be willing to "stop the war in concrete terms," and the US Embassy would have to restrict itself to "normal, traditional" diplomatic activity. The Hungarians thought only a few days remained to set up such talks, but that the North was genuinely not interested in humiliating the United States. Toth thought it silly, on the other hand, to talk about US military aid to Saigon; "The North Vietnamese will certainly not wait until the new materiel arrives and the South Vietnamese divisions are reformed."¹² □

Toth specified that by humiliation he meant something like the ignominious helicopter evacuation of the US Mission in Phnom Penh, which had just taken place. In his opinion, the North saw a large-scale reprise of that event in Saigon as provoking US action against the best interests of all concerned, and wanted to avoid it. Polgar asked about the Hungarian interest in all of this, and Toth asserted there was none, that Hungary just wanted to see the end of unnecessary bloodshed. Also, "As a country which has lost many wars, it [has] a certain sympathy for the losing side." The South had now lost, and the only question was whether the political consequences took effect "under civilized circumstances," like those facilitated by the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II in 1918, or only after destruction of the capital city, as in Berlin in 1945.¹³ □

Although they still differed, apparently, on the question of Thieu's continued tenure, Martin and Polgar shared an intense commitment to the pursuit of negotiations. The Ambassador seized on Polgar's talk with Colonel Toth, telling Kissinger, still on 19 April, that Toth reflected "Hanoi's desiderata much more accurately than the 'intentions' you've been getting recently from Hanoi's exhortations to its cadre." Having thus dismissed the reporting from □ and elsewhere, Martin said that, unless instructed to the contrary by the next day, he would instruct Polgar to explore the matter further. The Ambassador went on to summarize a discussion with visiting US military commanders of helicopter lift capabilities. He had determined that a "one-cycle lift" could remove 1,600 people, in addition to the Marine security force; two cycles would allow 3,200. In any case, although he accepted a worst case estimate of ten days until the end, Martin expected another three weeks in which to continue the evacuation.¹⁴ □

Martin showed Polgar his cable, with its startlingly bitter complaint: "As it now stands, it seems everyone has completed the CYA operation in Washington. The Intelligence Community has drawn the absolutely worst

¹²*Ibid.* □

¹³*Ibid.* Toth ended the meeting by suggesting that in view of Saigon's uncertain future, it might be useful to set up a radio link between his delegation and the US Embassy. □

¹⁴Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993 □ David Butler, *The Fall of Saigon* (London: Sphere Books, 1986), pp. 304-305 □

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case, which is unrealistic but which protects them. . . . You have given me a directive which it is almost impossible for me to fulfill without destroying the fragile fabric which still exists. . . . The only one whose ass is not covered is me. . . . There is no way I can come out of this without criticism, no matter how unjustified it may be." Next morning, Martin showed Polgar Kissinger's reply: "My ass is not covered. I can assure you that I will be hanging several yards higher than you when this is all over." But the Secretary of State went on to tell Martin that "we have this morning made an approach to the Soviet Union."¹⁵ []

Polgar adopted Martin's point of view in a cable that day to Headquarters in which he accused Kissinger of a "'CYA' play on a grand scale. Kissinger directs the Ambassador to do something which would produce effects which Kissinger in other traffic says he does not want." Furthermore, "The [National Security Council] cover themselves by assembling ships and planes for which there are no passengers and which could be filled only at the risk of pulling the rug from under the [Saigon government] while it is proclaimed that we want to 'stabilize' the situation." As for the reported southward movement of surface-to-air missiles, the COS thought this designed not to interdict Tan Son Nhut airport, already vulnerable to smaller weaponry, but to protect NVA command posts then being set up within range of South Vietnamese combat aircraft. Nevertheless, both the COS and the Ambassador had by now greatly scaled down their projections for Embassy and Station staffing. Kissinger had approved only a "one-cycle" plan for helicopter lift, and Polgar was now reducing to a "hard core of some ninety people and zero dependents other than working wives."¹⁶ []

More Attention to Evacuation []

Meanwhile, both Kissinger and some at the working level in Saigon found themselves reluctant to trust the fate of Vietnamese dependents to the workings of the system still being developed with the Vietnamese. Kissinger cabled Polgar on 19 April asking for help with the relatives of two National Security Council staffers. The COS complied, sending Chip Schofield, proficient in both Vietnamese and Cantonese, to neighboring Cholon to find the Sino-Vietnamese in-laws of NSC official Ken Quinn. Schofield was at that point getting anxious about his wife's Vietnamese family, and, having received no assurances from the Station,

¹⁵Butler, *The Fall of Saigon*, pp. 305-306. Polgar said that the Butler quotations accord with his own memory of the cable. []

¹⁶Saigon 89202, 19 April 1975. [] Butler, *The Fall of Saigon*, p. 306. []

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he asked Polgar to send them on the C-130 transport dedicated to the Kissinger party. Having sharply inquired as to their number, Polgar consented. [redacted] had the same sense of being on his own, but found a different solution when he took his relatives to the informal Defense Attaché center for evacuation on one of the supply aircraft returning to Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines.¹⁷ [redacted]

Late in the evening of 19 April, Polgar summarized the North Vietnamese troop movements that threatened Saigon: Hanoi could readily reinforce, while ARVN reserves were nonexistent or already committed. But Thieu was heartened, a Vietnamese military contact had told the Station, by a report that the US Congress was about to approve \$350 million in military aid. As a result, the President was preparing a defiant speech sure to irritate the domestic opposition and provoke the North Vietnamese into intensified military pressure. But if Thieu was defiant, Ambassador Martin had finally come to see his departure as indispensable. Just what he would do, and when, Polgar did not know, but the COS understood that Martin and Kissinger had just exchanged several messages on the subject. And the Ambassador had just made an urgent request to see President Thieu.¹⁸ [redacted]

Acting on his assurance to Kissinger, Martin had also instructed Polgar to contact Colonel Toth. At this point, the COS was simply to ask Toth to clarify his allusion to a Communist demand for an American statement regarding the future of an American Embassy in Saigon. But Polgar noted to Shackley that the PRG spokesman at that day's Tan Son Nhut press briefing had restated a willingness to begin negotiations, which tended to confirm that Toth had indeed talked to them and accurately conveyed to Polgar what they said. There was one hitch, a new PRG precondition that Ambassador Martin be recalled for allegedly having functioned as a military adviser. In the context of these developments, and in particular that of Thieu's proposed departure, Polgar assured Shackley that neither he nor anyone else in the Station was "engaged in political action to bring about a change of government in Saigon. All of our senior officers understand fully the need to avoid any semblance of a repetition of the events of 1963, and none of them aspires to be Lou [Concinc's] successor."¹⁹ [redacted]

¹⁷Saigon 89202; Schofield interview, 3 September 1992; [redacted] interview, 24 August 1992. Neither Martin nor Polgar opposed the informal DAO airlift or any of the other de facto evacuation schemes that emerged after the fall of the Highlands. Their objection seems rather to have involved any US policy declaration that in their view would implicitly abandon the Saigon government. [redacted]

¹⁸Saigon 89215, 19 April 1975. [redacted]

¹⁹Saigon 89215. The message to which Polgar was presumably responding has not been found. [redacted]

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Washington's alarm about evacuation preparations did not ensure, and may even have hindered, the dispatch of precise instructions to Saigon. Shackley advised Polgar that a meeting of the interagency Washington Special Action Group on 19 April had discussed President Ford's order to reduce the American presence in Vietnam. The deadline was unequivocally 22 April, but the ceiling was either 1,700 or 1,400 people; the numbers had been used "interchangeably." Washington still intended a single airlift operation for Americans—it would now accommodate 1,700 people—but Shackley noted that a 13-hour operation would permit the evacuation of 7,100 Vietnamese in addition to the Americans. Meanwhile, the Embassy could call for additional military air transport and at least one mission by a Boeing 747. In this context, Shackley advised that the WSAG meeting had seen no impediment, other than the need to avoid triggering panic, to selective evacuation of Vietnamese on the Station's list of 3,000 key indigenous personnel, the KIP list. He wanted to know which of these Polgar was "planning to get out on commercial flights now," and who might be moved "black," that is, without documentation, via military aircraft to Clark Field or other destinations.²⁰ []

As Shackley later recalled it, Polgar responded to this by moving a number of KIP dependents. But, again in Shackley's recollection, the rate of evacuation suffered from Kissinger's decision to let Graham Martin set the pace while the Ambassador, and Polgar as well, were giving negotiations and their place in them more attention than they were to evacuation logistics. There was also Polgar's demand for an aircraft dedicated to Station use for KIP evacuation, but this would have required ambassadorial clearance, something that Shackley saw the COS as reluctant to press Martin to give him. As it happened, Kissinger was just about to reinforce Polgar's and Martin's hopes for negotiations: Polgar later recalled that on the 20th or 21st of April, Kissinger cabled the Ambassador saying that Soviet Communist Party First Secretary Leonid Brezhnev had relayed word from Hanoi that it sought a political goal, and did not seek to humiliate the United States.²¹ []

Meanwhile, the evacuation procedures that Polgar had reported as working smoothly now needed some refinement, and the Station directed [] to get Prime Minister Nguyen Ba Can to approve an agreement, negotiated by the Embassy with the Interior Ministry, to simplify granting exit visas. The problem was to find him; 19 April was a Saturday, and the Prime Minister's office was closed, with not even a duty officer to consult about Can's whereabouts. [] persisted, and finally found the Prime Minister on Sunday. Can's first action

²⁰ []
²¹ Shackley interview, 19 August 1993; Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993. []

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the next day was to endorse the agreement with the Interior Ministry. [redacted] subsequently heard that the rate of visa issuance had risen tenfold, but confusion still prevailed: even [redacted] Pham Van Dong believed as late as 24 April that a ban on exit permits still obtained.²² [redacted]

Preparing the Liquidation of the Regime [redacted]

[redacted] Prime Minister Can thrust upon the Station the burden of preserving continuity in the South Vietnamese government. Can [redacted] wanted to stay long enough to transfer his office to his appointed successor, but feared this would provoke his assassination by extremist elements of the internal opposition. [redacted] branch chief told him it was "absolutely necessary" that Can remain in office, but as Gen. Duong Van Minh emerged as Thieu's likely replacement, Can's fears grew that handing his office over to a Minh nominee would get him arrested and executed by the anti-Communist hardliners.

The Station labored that weekend not only to keep the Prime Minister in office but also to help persuade President Thieu to leave it. On Saturday, Ambassador Martin had recognized the inevitability of Thieu's departure and deputized the Station's retired Major General Timmes to prepare the ground. Timmes managed to see Thieu late that evening, and on Sunday morning, while [redacted] was looking for Nguyen Ba Can, Martin was closeted with Thieu. The Ambassador insisted to the President that he was not soliciting his resignation. But Martin noted that there was very little time to avoid an attack on Saigon; if Thieu did not step down, his generals would probably ask him to do so. Thieu listened carefully and

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dispassionately, and as they parted thanked Martin for his frankness, saying, "I will of course do what is best for my country." Martin replied, "I know that you shall."²⁴ []

Headquarters was now looking for refuge for the 3,000 Vietnamese on the KIP list. With State Department concurrence, Shackley cabled Bangkok proposing the Thai military facility at Nam Phong. Those with proper documentation were leaving on US military flights to Clark Field, he said, and others were to be sent to Phu Quoc Island in the Gulf of Thailand for subsequent pickup by ship, but this left a group that would have to be exfiltrated black. Shackley instructed Bangkok to get Thai agreement and report back for the opening of business in Washington the next day, Monday, 21 April. []

Now displaying a greater sense of urgency, Polgar had already told Bangkok that the Clark Field route was "heavily cluttered," and that in any case it lacked the "reliability and security that we must have." To the KIP's who were Shackley's concern Polgar added "Vietnamese wives, children, fiancees, and in-laws of Agency staff and contract personnel." Documentation of these people was going as fast as possible, but "time may run out on us."²⁵ []

On Sunday afternoon, 20 April, Shackley described to Polgar that morning's WSAG meeting. The Attorney General had not yet finished the immigration paperwork needed to grant parole status to Vietnamese refugees, but the clear intent of the meeting, Shackley said, was to move them anyway to transit points such as Thailand, the Philippines, and Guam. The meeting had also reaffirmed CIA's authority to move KIP-list Vietnamese whose departure now would not contribute to panic. Shackley said that Phu Quoc was already beginning to look less desirable as a pickup point, and told Polgar to anticipate Thailand as an intermediate destination. Shackley summarized the discussion of a final helicopter evacuation, saying that planning now called for a 13-hour operation, allowing some Vietnamese to be included. Finally, he expressed the hope that the Station could discreetly check on plans at the Palace to destroy its files, and could ensure that arrangements were made to destroy anything whose capture by Hanoi would embarrass the United States.²⁶ []

On Monday morning, 21 April, Polgar contacted Colonel Toth with a request for clarification of whatever demand for a public US declaration they might make. He also asked Toth to try to determine when and where negotiations might begin. Toth wanted to know if Polgar spoke

²⁴ LaGueux interview, 23 November 1992 [] Butler, *The Fall of Saigon*, pp. 308-309,

[] and Saigon 89239, 20 April 1975, []

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with the Ambassador's authority, and being reassured on that point said he would immediately report to his own Ambassador. Late that afternoon, Toth said that Polgar's questions had been passed to the PRG representation, and he would immediately relay any reply. Martin's meeting with Thieu had apparently had the desired effect, as [redacted] informed the Station of Thieu's decision to resign. With ambassadorial approval, Polgar took the opportunity to give the Hungarians advance notice of this, pointing out that it would represent compliance with the Communists' first prerequisite for negotiations.²⁷ [redacted]

Just hours after Polgar's advisory to the Hungarians, Nguyen Van Thieu resigned, blaming Henry Kissinger for having "led the South Vietnamese people to death." Thieu's Vice President, the feeble septuagenarian Tran Van Huong, replaced him. As a lifelong anti-Communist, he stood no more chance than Thieu that Hanoi would deal with him, and the question of a national unity government, one that could negotiate a surrender, remained open. However momentous the occasion, it did not preempt CIA's attention that day, as the logistics of evacuation commanded management's attention both at Headquarters and in Saigon.²⁸ [redacted]

Polgar began with a complaint that Headquarters' "bookkeeping errors"—he was being asked to account for people who had never been in Vietnam—and its insistence on using the privacy channel for this correspondence, distracted him from more important activity. But the message had come through "loud and clear that we should draw down and we are so doing"; a head count of dependents and their travel schedule would leave the Station by the end of the day. He defended the retention of locally employed wives of Station personnel: an essential employee was an essential employee, and being also a wife seemed irrelevant. Nevertheless, Polgar understood that "the policy is to reduce the essential personnel and we are following this conscientiously." At the same time, he continued to feel that "the sense of panic is greater in Washington than here, which is not to say that we are not seized with a sense of urgency."²⁹ [redacted]

"Saigon 89265, 21 April 1975, and Saigon 89315, 21 April 1975. [redacted]

[redacted] As South Vietnam disintegrated before their eyes, the American principals took encouragement wherever they could find it. The second of the two Polgar cables cited "as one of few optimistic signs coming our way these days" a Polish invitation to a cocktail party for the arriving Minister of the Polish Delegation to the ICCS. Two days earlier, Martin had closed his "CYA" complaint to Kissinger with what he called a "morale booster" [redacted]

[redacted] "Up to eighty percent of the Sixth Company has conjunctivitis, and it could spread through the entire battalion. Suggest a medic be sent down for immediate treatment." (See Butler, *The Fall of Saigon*, p. 306. [redacted])

²⁷Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (Penguin Books, 1983), pp. 668-669; Butler, *The Fall of Saigon*, p. 317. [redacted]

²⁸ Saigon 89266, 21 April 1975. [redacted]

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The COS saw administrative inefficiencies in the Defense Attaché Office and the limitations of available aircraft—the C-141 could carry only some 70 passengers—as aggravated by the ever-expanding concept of family relationship. The “Station is gaining dependents daily as new marriages are contracted or old ones surfaced or fiancees are acquired formally or otherwise.” But the Station quota of Kissinger’s 1,100-person Embassy staffing limit would be reached the next day. Fortunately, the Saigon public seemed not to expect anything much from Congress in the way of military aid—Thieu had just acknowledged this prospect by resigning—and Polgar anticipated no increased hazard to US personnel from a negative vote.³⁰ []

The COS remained adamant on the requirement for a separate destination for KIP principals and their families. “Clark Field will be so crowded that it would be best to forget about it.” He disliked the Nam Phong idea and urged Headquarters to try to get Takhli, another base in Thailand, or Grande Island in Subic Bay. Ambassador Martin had agreed to assign the Station an entire ship, which could handle the entire contingent, but this seemed to Polgar academic without agreement on a destination. Concluding with a change of subject, the COS sourly dismissed Headquarters’ request of the day before for information on sensitive American correspondence held at the Palace: he knew nothing about it and had no leverage to apply. He did not even know what to look for, and he speculated that, given the US failure to support South Vietnam even within the terms of the Paris agreement, “Thieu and his cohorts will not go out of their way to avoid embarrassment to [the US] and may even decide to publish what they interpret were U.S. commitments made in 1972 and 1973.”³¹ []

Shackley apologized for his inability to take evacuation correspondence out of the restricted channel, saying that WSAG deliberations and decisions were allowed only limited distribution. He sympathized with the need for working wives, but expressed some frustration with the absence of hard numbers for dependents as a group; he hoped the promised accounting from Saigon would lay that issue to rest. Five hours later, Shackley cabled his summary of that day’s WSAG meeting. He anticipated that Washington would require a reduction below the 1,100 ceiling by Saigon’s close of business on 22 April, and described some tentative changes in the format of the helicopter lift. The meeting had discussed prospects for “some negotiated basis on which selected Vietnamese could be withdrawn,” and in this regard Shackley wanted Polgar to know that

³⁰Saigon 89312, 21 April 1975, []
³¹*Ibid.* []

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Kissinger had been briefed beforehand on the COS's latest talk with Colonel Toth. But whatever these prospects might turn out to be, "It remains clear that trend line in decision-making process is for evacuation of more people sooner rather than later."³²

Disagreement Over Withdrawal Tactics

Polgar objected strenuously to Washington's focus on the evacuation process, and made more explicit than ever before his conviction that only a negotiated surrender could avert catastrophe. "The picture which you present is certainly not flattering to the American policy makers . . . WSAG appears to be preoccupied with the mechanics of evacuation, which could safely be left to the professionals on the ground, and is not concentrating sufficiently on the policies and political ramifications inherent in the problem." Overlooking the possibility that his and Martin's absorption with a negotiated solution might account in part for Washington's involvement in evacuation mechanics, Polgar went on to say that evacuation goals were being met. But this was only by "exporting a very large number of Vietnamese to Clark Field, whose subsequent resettlement is going to create major problems." The COS made it clear that his Vietnamese were not among those being exported: "I have held the line on Station indigenous employees exiting through that process."³³

Polgar saw Thieu's resignation of the previous evening as creating "a real possibility for negotiated settlement provided [that Saigon] moves with the requisite speed in conveying clear signs to the other side." Repeating his antipathy to an emergency evacuation, Polgar said he thought Washington's emphasis on it increased the likelihood of its being required: "Frankly, even Dr. Kissinger's approach to the Soviets was evacuation oriented and not very practical . . ." The upshot was that "the only elements of the U.S. Government currently trying to promote a negotiated political solution are Ambassador Martin and myself."³⁴

Polgar was certainly right about the object of Kissinger's appeal to the Soviets; he may at that point already have seen the Secretary of State's message to Martin saying the Soviets had just replied, and it appeared that "we will be permitted to continue our evacuation, including the evacuation of Vietnamese, unimpeded." But Kissinger also

³² Saigon 89373, 22 April 1975, Polgar acknowledged that he had not been able to hold the line with respect to Vietnamese dependents: ". . . a number of our staff and contract employees did utilize DAO processing facilities."

³³ Saigon 89373,

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encouraged Martin's hopes for a negotiated formula, and not merely for North Vietnamese restraint on the battlefield: "I take the response to indicate that the PRG is prepared to undertake negotiations in the tripartite [Saigon, PRG, Hanoi] formulation."³⁵ []

It appears that Kissinger had told Martin more about this than he shared with CIA Headquarters. Shackley, who was then working closely with Assistant Secretary Habib, later recalled that evacuation was indeed the only thing on the WSAG agenda, and his reply to Polgar specified that the committee had been excluded from the policy arena. Shackley wanted to rebut the Station's argument that it lacked a destination for Vietnamese evacuees; accordingly, his message urged Polgar to make more liberal use of the Defense Attaché evacuation flights.³⁶ []

Intelligence now indicated that Tan Son Nhut might come under artillery fire, and Shackley advised Saigon that Washington was anticipating a substantial helicopter lift from the Embassy, using both the parking lot and the Chancery roof. With respect to Vietnamese evacuees, the Administration had just won Congressional approval to parole 50,000 into the United States, and in so doing solved the question of a final destination for refugees in the Defense Attaché channel. This was not the only possible evacuation route, and State was about to ask Martin's views on the use of ships already at Saigon and two more headed in that direction. Polgar still had "confidence that something may be worked out along political lines," and Shackley's reassurance about a destination did not entirely dissolve his reluctance to "dump people into Clark Field." He was starting, he said, to use the Defense Attaché channel for indigenous employees, but with respect to potential KIP evacuees wanted to wait for the opening of a Thai facility from which "if things do not turn out too badly here we can bring most of them back to Vietnam."³⁷ []

Aside from the improbability of any such accommodation by Hanoi, the immediate prospect was for things to get worse. The government was already crumbling, and American facilities outside Saigon were concerned solely to avoid being overrun. On the Vietnamese side, for example, General Quang was [] discussing a proposed cabinet session at which the members of the government would reassure the country on television that the government was still functioning. Quang observed that this had been abandoned when a head count revealed how many ministers

^aButler, *The Fall of Saigon*, p. 324. []

^bShackley interview, 19 August 1993; []

[] and Saigon 89410, 23 April 1975, []

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had already fled. [redacted]

The US Mission had its own problems, one of them reported by Polgar's MR-3 chief, [redacted] from Bien Hoa on 23 April. According to [redacted] the Consul General there, alarmed by the dire prognosis given him by the corrupt and unreliable province chief, Luu Yem, had begged Yem for a guarantee of protection. [redacted] feared that the opportunistic and unprincipled Yem would use this to extort favors, endangering the American staff, and saw no alternative but to close down the Consulate. Already dissatisfied with the Consul General's performance, Martin promptly took [redacted] advice. In the few days that remained for Americans in Vietnam, Base officers commuted to Bien Hoa from Saigon.³⁹ [redacted]

Clearing the Way for the Succession [redacted]

Meanwhile, in the prevailing political vacuum, Martin and Polgar worried about a report from French Ambassador Jean-Marie Merillon that Duong Van Minh feared violent action by northern-born generals to block his accession to the presidency. The COS dispatched General Timmes to confront his old friend Nguyen Cao Ky with the allegation. Ky and two associates who arrived after Timmes argued persuasively that they had no such thing in mind. The Station duly relayed this to Minh, who then complained that he felt powerless as long as President Huong and his predecessor Thieu remained influential.⁴⁰ [redacted]

The Station's longtime relationships with senior Vietnamese put it in the middle of the elaborate procedural maneuvers intended to clear the way for "Big Minh." Deputy Prime Minister Tran Van Don reported to both the Station and to Martin about the developing Vietnamese consensus in favor of "Big Minh," and it was to the Station that Prime Minister Nguyen Ba Can reported his intention, the evening of 22 April, to offer his resignation the following day. At Martin's behest, the Station persuaded him to make the offer in principle and to keep it secret until a new cabinet could be proposed; Martin hoped by this ploy to avoid a "dangerous additional loss of negotiating momentum."⁴¹ [redacted]

³⁸Schofield interview, 3 September 1992; [redacted]

³⁹[redacted] and Saigon 89409, 23 April 1975, [redacted]

⁴⁰Saigon 89429, 23 April 1975, [redacted]

⁴¹Saigon 89432, 23 April 1975, [redacted]

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Polgar went on to urge on Shackley "the absolute need to resist any idea of sending in a Marine battalion" to protect the evacuation. It would be useless, at best, but would also provoke the North Vietnamese, who had been quiet for the last 48 hours. The COS closed with an angry outburst at the White House and Kissinger: they were being "most unhelpful, unimaginative, and completely devoid of any constructive suggestion." Kissinger had done nothing but make a "ridiculous request" to the Soviets for a two-week cease-fire; otherwise, "all the action is here and with [the] French Government in Paris and Hanoi."⁴² □

Headquarters replied in a more even tone, judging it "safe to say that only Ambassador Martin, the COS, and to a lesser extent Dr. Kissinger, believed anything of value would come from current Vietnamese maneuvering. While this minority of three may be proven by history to be correct, [the] DCI [is] not willing to gamble lives of CIA KIPs on this possibility. In view of this he has directed that you proceed without further delay to move selected KIPs out of Vietnam." Shackley reminded Polgar that he already had the needed authority, and resources in the form of commercial air and the military flights then going to Guam. He urged greater efforts to put KIPs in the military pipeline, adding that he needed "without fail answers to questions which we have repeatedly put to you" on the numbers of KIPs slated for evacuation to the various possible destinations.⁴³ □

Shackley acknowledged the crushing pressures on the COS, but insisted that he comply with Headquarters demands on the KIP issue: "These are trying times and [the] Station's total effort is superb. We do have some differences in perspective on movement of CIA KIPs, and this must be resolved as outlined [above]. Other than that we are all in tune. Good luck."⁴⁴ □

On the same day, Shackley exhorted Bangkok to get immediate approval from reluctant Thai officials to fly KIP-list personnel to Nam Phong. That list had grown by two-thirds since Polgar's last message on the subject, and on 24 April numbered some 5,000 people. The COS said he was still keeping needed local employees and productive agents, and was not yet ready to move ARVN and police officers. But "we do plan to evacuate the greater part of the 5,000 group in [the] near future."⁴⁵ □

Tom Polgar now found himself at odds both with Headquarters, over the prospects for a negotiated surrender, and with Martin, over the means of installing a Minh government in Saigon. As we have seen,

⁴² *Ibid.* □

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⁴⁴ *Ibid.* □

⁴⁵ □

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Saigon 89486, 24 April

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Headquarters—and Washington policymakers in general, with the possible exception of Kissinger—anticipated a North Vietnamese military drive to end the war. Meanwhile, Polgar and Martin saw real if conditional Hanoi interest in a coalition government that would postpone the outcome and perhaps even allow a continued US presence in Saigon. Now, with Thieu out of office—though still in Saigon—the practical problem was to find an interlocutor acceptable to the North.⁴⁶ □

With North Vietnamese forces closing the noose around Saigon, the Ambassador and the COS disagreed on how best to do this. On 24 April, Polgar reported that Minh refused to serve as Prime Minister under President Huong. Meanwhile, the Communists had declared the Huong regime unacceptable as a negotiating partner, which rendered that question moot. Minh now called Timmes to advise that he would see Huong at 1100 hours in an effort to get him to step down. Reporting this to Headquarters, Polgar said he thought the ARVN generals to be unanimous that Minh represented the only hope for a negotiated settlement, and that they would remove Huong, "decisively and quickly," if he refused to resign. Minh was also sending two associates to Paris, presumably to contact the Hanoi delegation there, and the Station advanced him a thousand dollars for their expenses.⁴⁷ □

In the context of these developments, Polgar reported differences with Martin over the time remaining to get negotiations started, over the need to respect constitutional forms while doing this, and over the desirability of "symbolic concessions in [the] absence of any sign from the other side. (I was strongly in favor of such concessions.)" The COS also found himself on the other side of the argument from Kissinger, whose message that morning had reproached "us"—presumably Martin and Polgar—about the complications with the Soviets provoked by Thieu's "precipitous" resignation. Kissinger wanted the Mission to prop up the Huong government while concentrating on the evacuation of deserving Vietnamese; Polgar reacted to this by saying that there was "nothing that could prop up the Huong government short of B-52s over Hanoi."⁴⁸ □

As Polgar saw it, there was no time for anxiety about constitutional process, and US rigidity was by default transferring the initiative to the French, who "will reap great credit if they can put this thing together." Developments in Saigon were taking place without any participation by Martin; "the Station, however, is in contact with all the key players and we are keeping the Ambassador informed."⁴⁹ □

⁴⁶Saigon 89479, 24 April 1975, □

⁴⁷Ibid. □

⁴⁸Ibid. □

⁴⁹Ibid. □

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On Thursday evening, 24 April, Huong was still President, and no one had worked out a formula to transfer power to "Big Minh." Huong had called in Martin to say that his effort to make Nguyen Ngoc Huy the new Prime Minister had attracted no support, and he wanted advice on the way to get Minh to take over. The Ambassador demurred, saying he had insufficient information, and Huong went on to complain that the continued presence of Thieu and Khiem created such difficulties that he was about to ask them, especially Thieu, to leave. Lending support to Polgar's view of the growing French role, Huong added that he intended to see Ambassador Merillon later that evening. The Station, meanwhile, reported that it would shortly be seeing "Big Minh" and Deputy Prime Minister Tran Van Don for updated reporting. Polgar also chose this moment to attempt a direct sounding of Communist interest in a negotiated settlement.⁵⁰

⁵⁰Saigon 89504, 24 April 1975, Nguyen Ngoc Huy had been an intermittent Station contact for years and had served as the Station's link to the civilian participants in the mutiny against Ngo Dinh Diem in November 1960 (see *CIA and the House of Ngo*, Chapter 10)

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Chapter 10

A Military Decision

In the 24 April 1975 message that described the standoff between Tran Van Huong and Duong Van Minh, COS Polgar reported having suggested to [] an acquaintance from their days in [] that he explore Communist reaction to a possible Minh government. [] with sources around Minh "as good as ours," debriefed his Saigon contacts and then called Colonel Giang, who represented the Communists' Provisional Revolutionary Government on the four-power commission at Tan Son Nhut.¹ []

Professing interest in what he said was new information, Giang hoped to comment on it in the next hour. At Polgar's request, [] had mentioned that a Communist radiobroadcast at noon that day called for Martin's departure and the removal of US Navy ships in Vietnamese waters, but said nothing about evacuating the Embassy. Could it be concluded that "the PRG had no problem with the continuing presence of an American Embassy in Saigon provided that it refrained from 'military intervention'?" Giang answered that it could.² []

Polgar rushed this information to the Ambassador. The COS saw it, he told Headquarters, as suggesting that the PRG anticipated a continuing US presence in Saigon, and therefore at least the facade of an independent South Vietnam, and that "there will be no North Vietnamese occupation or attack on Saigon." Linking Hanoi's military moves to Saigon's political maneuvering, Polgar saw the future as still "ominous and obviously full of problems." The South Vietnamese seemed unable to "move with any speed regardless of the nature of the emergency," and "the threat to Saigon in terms of enemy capabilities . . . continues to increase. Intentions are of course far more difficult to judge and that is where the political events may have a very significant impact. . . . For this reason I

¹Saigon 89504, 24 April 1975. []

²Ibid. []

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consider the political theater at the moment as taking priority over the military one." Well aware of Washington's preoccupations, Polgar ended by assuring Headquarters that the Station had that day moved an unspecified large number of KIPs.³ []

The perceptual differences between the COS and Headquarters came into sharp relief in Shackley's comment on these developments. Giang's comments were "intriguing, but far from definitive or what one could call hard intelligence." Polgar's inferences from them might be on the mark, but nevertheless constituted a "thin reed on which to base policy judgments" on evacuation criteria. The COS should therefore continue to reduce "all categories of personnel while focusing collection on [the] political theater which does indeed have near term priority . . ." With respect to Polgar's hopes for a Minh government as interlocutor with the Communists, Shackley said he wanted only to note that Minh was always exasperatingly slow to move. The prospect of "parlaying him into anything but disaster," he thought, was minimal.⁴ []

Polgar disagreed. His optimistic cable of the 24th had just left when a new PRG statement that evening "clearly reaffirm[ed] the Communists' interest in a political rather than a totally military solution." That the Communists now explicitly demanded withdrawal of US intelligence personnel and a prohibition on efforts at political influence seemed to Polgar clearly, if implicitly, to allow for a continuing US presence and for the delivery of humanitarian aid. Accordingly, the COS reported, he had once again enlisted [] to make soundings at Tan Son Nhut. Giang responded to [] phone call by saying that it was too early to comment, but he invited [] to stay after the regular Saturday press conference, two days hence, for further discussion. [] asked if the scheduling of that session was firm, and Giang replied, "Of course, why not?" To Polgar, this represented a "pretty good indication . . . that no attack on Tan Son Nhut is imminent . . ." The COS noted, in this context, that the military lull following Thieu's resignation had continued unbroken, and that the Polish Ambassador was hosting a party on Friday evening which the North Vietnamese and PRG representatives were expected to attend.⁵ []

Polgar also took issue with Shackley's pessimism about Minh, reporting on Friday, 25 April, that he, General Timmes, and two of his case officers had been working to "smooth the way toward a political solution." At the suggestion of ex-Prime Minister Khiem, the COS had met that morning with a principal adviser to President Huong, pointing

Ibid. []

*Saigon 89528, 25 April 1975. []

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out the probable limits of Communist patience and urging a solution which both preserved Huong's dignity and accommodated Minh's refusal to accept appointment from him. Polgar proposed a convocation of military, political, and religious institutions at which Huong would call for the nomination of someone to accept plenary powers and begin negotiations; Minh's would be the name proposed. The adviser, former Interior Minister Le Cong Chat, promised to convey Polgar's idea to Huong at once.⁶ []

Complementing Station efforts to get negotiations started, General Minh was still trying to send a small delegation to Hanoi, and the Communists, in a break with precedent, were allowing a special liaison flight to Hanoi the next day in order to accommodate this. All these political efforts, viewed against the background of the continuing lull in military activity, suggested to Polgar that "significant and dramatic developments should be expected within the next 48 hours." And he was not alone, he said: Kissinger had "vitally important information bearing on the evolution of the situation here." Despite these expectations, evacuation was proceeding, and the COS reported having moved surplus Vietnamese personnel and a number of KIPs and their families. He was also reducing Station personnel to a "hard core," if only because "it is certain that under the changed circumstances [of a new government] the size of the Station will have to be commensurate with the reduced importance of Vietnam in terms of the United States policy interest."⁷ []

At this point, Polgar got some qualified support from DCI Colby, who said he and he alone had information, which he did not specify, relevant to the developments predicted by the COS. But the focus was still on evacuation, and Colby wanted the Station's closest attention to any military action around Saigon, the scale of which would determine whether to persist with the Minh negotiations or launch an emergency airlift. The Director closed with "congratulations on the additional Distinguished Intelligence Medal which I hereby award you."⁸ []

Unwilling to wait another day for the next contact with PRG Colonel Giang, Polgar gave [] some Foreign Broadcast Information Service material on recent Communist statements, along

Ibid.; Saigon 89531, 25 April 1975, [] Of his suggestion for the mechanics of Minh's accession, Polgar added: "Readers of history will recognize that a similar scenario was implemented by Bismarck in the proclamation of the German Empire in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles in 1871."⁹ []

'Saigon 89528. Polgar could not recall, 18 years later, just what information he was attributing to Kissinger, but believed that it must have concerned "Kissinger's expectation that with Brezhnev's help he would pull the rabbit from the hat--i.e., prevent the North Vietnamese from entering Saigon." (See Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993.) [] []

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with an analysis of their apparent import. [] obtained an appointment for that Friday afternoon, 25 April, and drove to Tan Son Nhut. Presenting the conclusions as his own, he asked for comments. Giang said that [] was correct to infer that progress toward a political solution would avert an assault on Saigon, that "Big Minh" would be acceptable as head of government, and that the PRG did not object to the continued presence of an American Embassy. The PRG was most interested in political developments in Saigon, according to Giang, who asked [] to keep him informed. [] left with the impression that the Communists had set no deadline for the creation of a new Saigon government.⁹ []

While [] was on his way to Tan Son Nhut, Hungarian Colonel Toth came to see the COS at home. With regard to procedure, he said, the COS should know that all his messages had been promptly relayed "to the other side as well as to Budapest" and, Toth presumed, "also to other places." Regarding his own role, Toth disclaimed any status as an official spokesman for the DRV/PRG, but said he could convey "substantive guidance originating with the other side." Like Giang, he specified General Minh as an acceptable candidate to lead the Saigon government, and went on to identify several other Saigon politicians whom the Communists would like to see in a new cabinet. The PRG, Toth said, remained particularly interested in a US declaration of noninvolvement in domestic Vietnamese affairs, including an end to military aid, and was amenable to a cease-fire in the context of political progress in Saigon.¹⁰ []

Toth relayed two questions to Polgar, both having to do with the presence and intentions of US military forces in the South China Sea. Polgar gave assurances that they were deployed solely to assist an emergency evacuation, and turned the conversation to the problem of law and order in Saigon. Worried about violence by armed elements hostile to a negotiated settlement, he asked Toth to counsel the Vietnamese Communists against moves that might spark "foolhardy individual acts. We don't want any F-5 pilots bombing the Palace to protest the sellout of the nationalist cause, nor do we want a collapse of law and order in Saigon. Chaos in this large city would not do either side any good." Polgar said

⁹Saigon 895544, 25 April 1975, [] With respect to [] bona fides with Giang, it seems likely that the stated concern for the survival of a US Embassy, if nothing else, would have suggested to Giang that [] approach had official sponsorship. []

¹⁰Saigon 89553, 25 April 1975, [] Different intermediaries used different labels for the Communist political authority, here the PRG, elsewhere the Hanoi leadership. There is no evidence that the control of Communist policy was anything but unitary, and Communist references to the PRG were presumably intended to help preserve the fiction that it and its dominant People's Revolutionary [Communist] Party were autonomous, Southern-based institutions. []

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he could not predict just when a new government might take office, but assured Toth that the Huong government would shortly indicate clearly that "national reconciliation is the order of the day."¹¹ []

This brought Polgar to the American situation in Saigon. He told Toth that the US stood ready to work out "an appropriate formula . . . in private and not on the front pages of the newspapers." He had Martin's approval, he said to propose discussions "on an official but informal basis with the representatives of the other side." Toth left to deliver Polgar's message, while the COS returned to the Embassy to brief the Ambassador.¹² []

Nguyen Van Thieu's Farewell []

Ambassador Martin had taken to heart President Huong's complaint about the difficulty of governing with his predecessor still in Saigon, and told Thieu he thought it best for him to leave. Thieu accepted the inevitable, and Martin charged Polgar with the arrangements for a departure conducted "with utmost secrecy." As it happened, the aircraft that President Johnson had put at Ambassador Bunker's disposal for visits to his wife, the US Ambassador to Kathmandu, had not been withdrawn after Bunker's departure. Inquiring about it, Polgar learned that it could be made ready in a matter of hours, and that its range would take it to Taipei. Thieu designated Khiem to handle the arrangements for the Vietnamese side, and preparations began to evacuate a group of fourteen.¹³ []

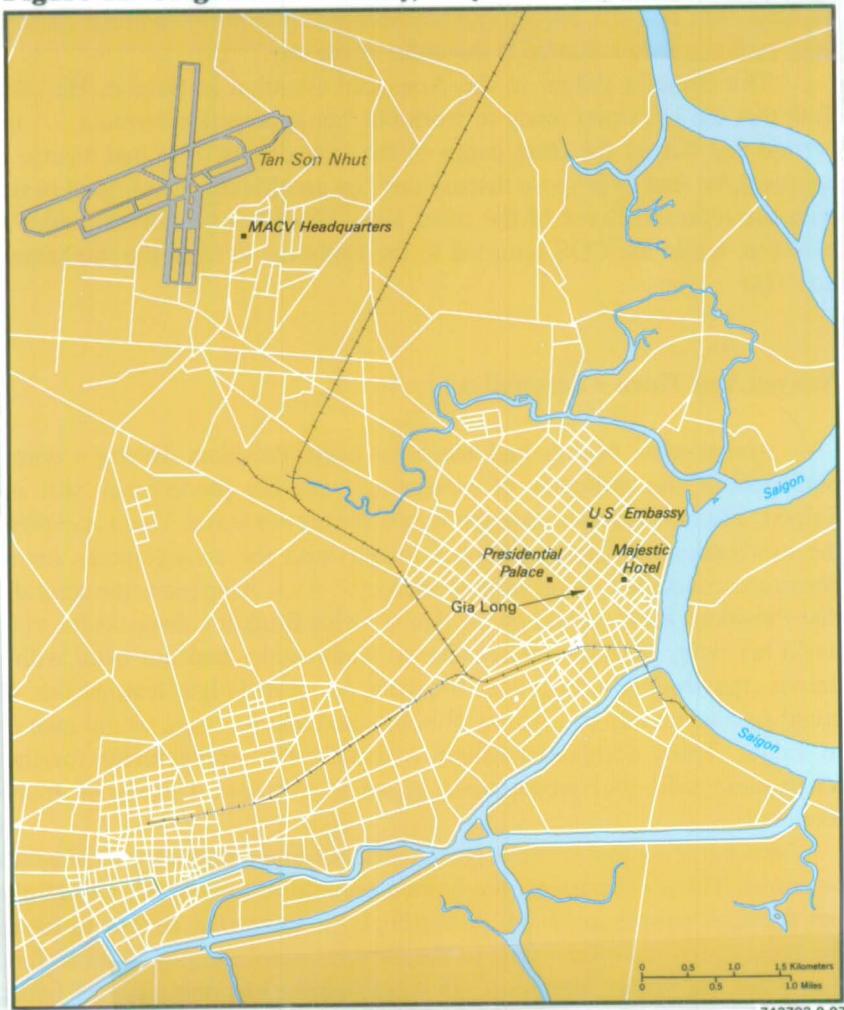
Recognizing that some disgruntled subordinate might try to prevent or punish Thieu's departure, the Station undertook to conceal it from all but the CIA people involved. Accordingly, it instructed Khiem to have the passengers make their way to the General Staff compound, near Tan Son Nhut, on Friday afternoon, 25 April. Limited to one piece of hand luggage each, they assembled at Khiem's residence there—Thieu waited until after dark before walking from his own house in the compound—even as Polgar and [] were exploring the latest bid for negotiations. After finishing with [] Polgar joined General Timmes at Khiem's

¹¹ Saigon 89553. []

¹² *Ibid.* One of the differences between Headquarters and the Station, at this time, concerned Toth's bona fides. Polgar said he "thought Toth was acting in good faith in carrying messages to me from what he considered authoritative Vietnamese communist circles." Shackley thought it more likely that the Hungarian initiative represented part of a concerted Communist effort to deceive the US about North Vietnamese intentions, and thus to deter it from using its combat forces to prevent the fall of Saigon. (See Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993, and Shackley interview, 19 August 1993.) []

¹³ Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993. []

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house, where they used the grand piano as a desk on which to fill out parole documents for a group that in the end numbered twelve.¹⁴ □

Polgar saw the General Staff compound gate and the police checkpoint at Tan Son Nhut airport as the danger points. He therefore set out to avert any inquiry or inspection by using Ambassador Martin's official vehicle, supplemented by three black Station sedans with diplomatic

¹⁴Saigon 89563, 25 April 1975, [redacted] Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993. □

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license plates, to create the impression of a high-level US convoy. The ploy worked, and the guards waved the convoy through to the parking area reserved for Air America. Ambassador Martin was there to bid farewell to the ex-President, and Polgar also boarded the old C-118 to brief the pilot on the formalities to expect in Taipei. With the aircraft disappearing into the evening sky, Polgar radioed the Station to flash [] its estimated arrival time. To Headquarters, he wrote, "Wish to advise you that by direction of highest authority Station has successfully evacuated former President Nguyen Van Thieu, former Prime Minister Tran Thien Khiem and ten others, with wheels up at 2120 hours local, 25 April." Returning to Saigon, the Ambassador and COS sought to present a business-as-usual air by dropping in at the party at the Polish Mission.¹⁵ []

Thieu's departure may have facilitated the subsequent transfer of power from Tran Van Huong to General Minh, but the next day brought only intensified anxiety over other aspects of the Saigon and US positions with respect to Hanoi. For one thing, the North Vietnamese chose 26 April to renew both psychological and military pressure, with strident media attacks and stepped-up military activity around Saigon that forced the closing of Bien Hoa Air Base. In addition, the evacuation problem remained unsolved. The Thais had already expressed their reluctance to harbor large number of Vietnamese refugees, and now Manila reported that Ambassador William H. Sullivan had just promised President Marcos to allow no politically sensitive Vietnamese, that is, KIPs, into the Philippines. And the [] echoed Polgar's own fears when he blamed Saigon's paralysis for a perceived decline in the prospects for negotiations.¹⁶ []

But the Station persisted in its uphill struggle to get a Saigon government capable of avoiding military occupation by negotiating a political surrender. The Station discussed with General Minh the candidates for office Colonel Toth had listed for the COS. These included the woman activist, Ngo Ba Thanh, whom Generals Quang and Binh had exactly a month earlier contemplated arresting; Minh said she would get a senior position. But he would have no Catholic priests in key positions, especially the "irresponsible liar" Father Chan Tinh proposed by the Communists.¹⁷ []

While Polgar struggled to help prevent a Communist assault of Saigon, his reservations about full-scale evacuation preparations encouraged something of a business-as-usual spirit at the working level. As one

¹⁵Saigon 89563; Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993. []

[] and []
¹⁶Saigon 89606, 26 April 1975 []

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of the surplus officers from Central Vietnam, Fred Stephens went to the personnel office to arrange transportation. He was startled to find people haggling over their itineraries; most wanted to go through Europe, and one married couple was trying to talk a harried personnel officer into arranging separate itineraries for them after the first stop. Stephens wound up with a seat on what he understood was the last Pan American flight out of Saigon, a few days before the end. At that point, there was so little sense of urgency in Saigon that only some 30 people boarded the plane.¹⁸ □

At this point, some of the remaining support staff had indeed been pushed to the limit. The Station physician, Charles Saunders, complained to Polgar on 25 April that he had seen several people in a state of total physical exhaustion. This could not go on, he said; everyone should get Saturday afternoon off, and all of Sunday. Polgar was unsympathetic, telling Headquarters that most people were working 14 hours a day, 7 days a week because "we have to do what must be done." Anyone who couldn't cut the mustard would be shipped out. Later, Polgar said, he would identify "those who can take the pressure and perform at peak capacity over extended periods and those who cannot."¹⁹ □

Meanwhile, as the Station dickered with General Minh over the composition of a new government, a leaked Station report and a Kissinger rebuke to Polgar cast doubt on the future of CIA efforts to broker a transfer of power in Saigon. The leak had appeared in the 24 April *New York Times*, and quoted verbatim from Polgar's account, sent to Headquarters only, of Toth's 19 April initiative regarding negotiations. Having now on 26 April seen the story in Saigon, Polgar attributed it to "someone close to Kissinger if not . . . Kissinger himself," and said he feared it could damage his dialog with the Hungarians. The COS made it clear that a "pretty sharply worded" message from Kissinger accounted for this suspicion; the Secretary of State had just reminded him that he, Kissinger, conducted negotiations for the United States, and that these would take place in Paris. Shackley also sent a reminder at this time; he later recalled it as a blunt message telling the COS that, whatever might be transpiring in other channels, the Station's job was to evacuate agents and dependents, destroy files, and dispose of confidential funds.²⁰ □

¹⁸Stephens interview, 10 August 1994. □

¹⁹Saigon 89700, 28 April 1975. □

²⁰Saigon 89605, 26 April 1975. □ Blind memorandum for the record, "A Recapitulation of Eyes Only Traffic between CIA and COS Vietnam relating to the Planning and Action Phases of the Evacuation of the Vietnam Station and the U.S. Mission in Vietnam," n.d., □ Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993; Shackley interview, 19 August 1993. Polgar said, "I did not think that was among Kissinger's better moments." □

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Perhaps Kissinger feared that parallel efforts might derail what he saw as the bright prospects of his own work with the Soviets, for along with his admonition to Polgar came an upbeat message to Martin. "My thinking . . . is that following the formation of a Minh government there will be negotiations [leading to] agreement on a tripartite government." Kissinger then discussed the future of the Embassy in terms reflecting his assumption that it would be up to the United States to decide whether to keep it open.²¹ □

The Evaporation of the Government in Saigon □

Nguyen Ba Can, still nominally the Prime Minister of South Vietnam, had so far honored his promise to stay, but the prospect of Minh as new head of government or chief of state provoked more jitters, and on that same Saturday, 26 April, he appealed □ for evacuation. No one cared anymore about his longevity in office, and Martin approved; the Station evacuated him the next day. The much-maligned General Quang displayed substantially more grit, telling the Station on the 27th that, although pleased to have his wife safely out of the country, he would not leave while on active duty. He had submitted a request for reassignment after Thieu's resignation and was waiting for General Vien's reply.²² □

For five days after Thieu's resignation, Ambassador Martin had insisted that new President Tran Van Huong remain in office at least until replaced by a process that respected constitutional forms. With Can preparing to leave, and the Saigon government more than ever paralyzed, the Ambassador reluctantly gave up his resistance. At 2200 hours on 26 April, Polgar reported that he expected Huong to convey the presidency to Minh the next day, following a procedure similar to the one the COS had recommended a few days earlier.²³ □

Events of Sunday, 27 April, fulfilled Polgar's prediction. Minh was voted full powers, and the Station expected that the swearing-in ceremony would draw "political and religious groups who have never before been seen in Saigon['s] Presidential Palace." The question remained, the Station said, whether the change had come in time to divert the Communists from pursuing the military decision of which they were now fully capable. The near collapse of the government forces in the Saigon area,

²¹ Butler, *The Fall of Saigon*, p. 384. □

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²³ Saigon 89625, 26 April 1975 □

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compounded both by the efforts of the hardline General Ky to sabotage the new Minh regime and by renewed factionalism in the National Assembly, could only reinforce such doubts. Prospects for successful evacuation also dimmed with the news that the Communists had cut the road from Saigon to the port at Vung Tau, and that the Thai Government had just refused permission to use the Nam Phong camp as a refugee camp. Martin, at least, was undaunted, cabling Kissinger about midnight that, while rockets might continue to fall and roads to be interdicted, it was the "unanimous opinion of the senior personnel here that there will be no direct or serious attack on Saigon."²⁴ []

Whether or not there were grounds for such optimism, renewed military pressure around the capital created a demand for information on what remained under government control. The Bien Hoa sector was especially critical, and at one point, probably on the 28th, the COS resorted to sending out his own reconnaissance patrol: Analyst Frank Snepp and one or two others drove northward a prudent distance, trying to find the ARVN perimeter.²⁵ []

Meanwhile, Ambassador Martin and Adm. Noel Gayler, Commander in Chief of Pacific forces, found themselves increasingly at odds with regard to the pace of evacuation preparations at the Embassy. This conflict between the military's concern to be ready for the end and Martin's fear of creating panic came to be symbolized by the fate of a giant flame tree in the Embassy parking lot. Chip Schofield came to work the morning of 28 April, and noticed an ax lying next to the tree and a few chunks out of the bark. Upon inquiring, he learned that the 7th Fleet had ordered the tree cut down, but Martin had noticed the first blows and overruled it. Someone, probably in the Defense Attaché Office, resumed chopping, and Martin once again vetoed it.²⁶ []

²⁴Saigon 89680, 27 April 1975, and Saigon 89697, 27 April 1975. []

[] Butler, *The Fall of Saigon*, p. 392. [] Polgar never forgave Martin for the Ambassador's performance during this fateful week: "In my view the paralysis of the Huong Government, between 21 and 28 April, aided and abetted by Ambassador Martin, was a major contributor to the conditions which triggered the events on April 29, our last day in Saigon." (See Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993.) []

²⁵Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993. []

²⁶Ibid.; Schofield interview, 3 September 1992. []

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One item of good news arrived in the form of a flash cable from Bangkok: the Thai Government had relented, and the United States could use Nam Phong. The question now was how much longer the United States could use Tan Son Nhut airport: the North Vietnamese had just bombed it with captured aircraft, and Admiral Gayler worried about an intelligence report predicting that the airfield would soon come under artillery fire. But evacuation flights continued on the 28th, and one C-130 transport carried out Nguyen Ba Can's family, as well as National Police and CIO chief Nguyen Khac Binh and other police officers.²⁸

Flights from Tan Son Nhut were continuing when, just after 1700 hours on Monday, 28 April, Duong Van Minh became the last President of the Republic of South Vietnam. To the Station, he looked amenable to further evacuation of Vietnamese as well as Americans; the principal question now was that of negotiations with the Communists. The Station reported that it knew nothing of Minh's specific intentions, but noted his stated preference for talks in the context of the Paris agreement. Polgar surmised in a cable to Headquarters that contacts would begin in Paris, moving eventually to some mutually acceptable site in South Vietnam. He followed with an exhaustive survey of candidates for ministerial posts, and offered the wan hope that despite sniping from Ky supporters Minh would display new "determination and toughness" by sticking to the list he had discussed earlier in the month with General Timmes.²⁹

Beginning the Last Day

Polgar and his staff went home about 2100 hours, that Monday evening; the COS later thought that none of them realized the night of 28 April would be their last in Saigon. There was not to be much sleep that night: Polgar awoke about 0400 hours to the thump of incoming artillery, and his duty officer reported by phone that Marines on the Embassy roof could see flames and explosions at Tan Son Nhut. The COS gave instructions to begin the preparation of emergency fund envelopes for Station employees—a thousand dollars plus a few small bills in Thai and Hong Kong currencies—and hurried to the Embassy, whence he could see for himself the explosions at the airport; these had reportedly already heavily damaged the runways and several Air America helicopters.³⁰

[redacted] Saigon 89703, 28 April
1975. [redacted] 24 August 1992; Polgar interview,
29-30 July 1993.

²⁸Saigon 89719.

³⁰Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993.

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Waiting for Polgar, when he got to his cable traffic, was a Shackley message dealing with the 28 April WSAG meeting. It acknowledged Polgar's report of Minh's inauguration, but otherwise pointedly ignored the event and the Station's speculation about cabinet organization and negotiating procedure. Dealing exclusively with the evacuation issue, Shackley acknowledged Martin's relatively optimistic estimate of two to three weeks while Minh negotiated with the Communists. He also pointed out Hanoi's clear capability to take the airport under fire whenever it chose. Uncertain about Communist intentions, Washington had authorized Gen. Homer Smith, the Defense Attache, to decide when to suspend C-130 flights under artillery or rocket fire. Regarding the Station's Vietnamese, Shackley advised that the WSAG endorsed CIA use of Nam Phong and Taipei as it wished; he was at the moment trying to obtain C-130 transports for the Station's use.³¹ []

Martin was ill—the subsequent diagnosis was bronchial pneumonia—but Polgar thought his presence at the Embassy essential and called to insist that he come in. The Ambassador did so, about 0600 hours, but until his medication took effect he lacked the strength even to make himself heard on the telephone. Polgar had to relay his instructions to the Defense Attache people at the airport and his reporting to Admiral Gayler and the Secretary of State. In these early morning hours, Polgar's reports staff was busy keeping Headquarters informed of the destruction at Tan Son Nhut. No one, however, had yet proposed the so-called Phase Four evacuation procedure that prescribed an emergency helicopter lift to replace the C-130 shuttle.³² []

About 0800 hours, Martin received a formal request from President Minh for the departure within 24 hours of all Defense Attache personnel. The Ambassador promised to comply and asked Minh to ensure their orderly and safe departure. Polgar took Minh's request as confirmation that the Embassy would continue to function. But whether the airport would continue to function was now in dispute between General Smith at Tan Son Nhut and Ambassador Martin at the Embassy. Martin refused to accept Smith's judgment that the runways were now unusable, and insisted, against staff advice, on driving to the airport for a personal inspection. What he saw there convinced him that a helicopter lift was in fact now indispensable, and about an hour later, or around 1100 hours, Admiral Gayler at CINCPAC in Honolulu ordered Martin's recommendation put into effect.³³ []

[] []

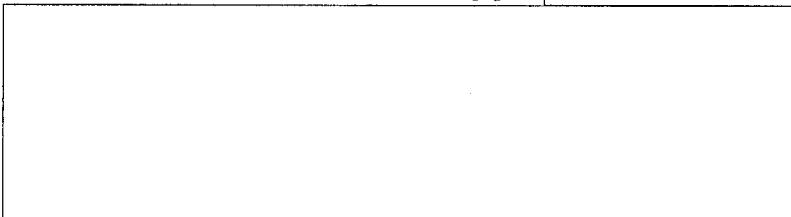
³¹Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993. []

³²Ibid.; Butler, *The Fall of Saigon*, p. 420. []

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On returning to the Embassy at about 1030 hours, Martin allowed the controversial tree in the parking lot to be cut down. With respect to staffing, he now instructed Polgar to "draw up plans for a 50-person CIA Station, including sufficient communications personnel to service an approximately 200-strong American Embassy." This, in Polgar's words, "effectively sidelined the COS and several of his senior assistants and diverted their attention from the immediate priorities of the evacuation," which in any case he understood was proceeding according to plan. The result of these deliberations was a staffing plan [redacted]



At about 1130 hours, Martin told Polgar that Washington, where the military's view of the Tan Son Nhut situation now evidently prevailed, had just put the Phase Four helicopter lift into effect, and "we are all going." There was no general announcement of this, as Polgar recalled it; during the next hour the Embassy's senior officers heard separately from Martin or his deputy that the signal had changed. The timing of this decision struck Polgar as unfortunate—"we lost precious daylight hours"—but he had not at any time in the course of the morning considered entering the debate himself with an appeal to Headquarters: it would have been "unthinkable" for him to "inject" himself into this policy matter. In any case, he later saw an important distinction in the fact that the launching of Phase Four did not in itself mean total evacuation of the Mission; this decision did not come until the late afternoon.³⁵ [redacted]

The End of the Political Gambit [redacted]

Although Martin was still resisting the inevitable, asking President Ford to let him stay with a skeleton staff, Polgar now recognized that the end was near. Colonel Toth paid a call in midmorning; he said he had concluded that "our efforts have failed and that the North Vietnamese will press for [a] military solution." Toth insisted that this came

³⁴Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993; [redacted]

³⁵Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993. This has an air of rationalization, as the COS had overcome any inhibitions about entering the policy arena when he urged Washington to emphasize a political settlement and when he complained about Kissinger's handling of negotiations through the Soviets. [redacted]

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as a surprise—just two days ago, he said, PRG General Thuan at Tan Son Nhut said he was awaiting clearance to enter into direct discussion with the Americans. Polgar saw that it no longer mattered; as of 1100 hours, he said, the thrust of Communist media pronouncements and current intelligence left “little doubt that this is it”; closing the Embassy and Station was now a matter of time, perhaps only hours.³⁶ □

An hour later, Polgar explicitly acknowledged that Station sources like the [redacted] VC penetration had been right. He reported that “all files and sensitive equipment [are] being destroyed . . . We have started [to] lift surplus personnel from Embassy rooftop to warships off coast.” The Minh government was “moving with excruciating slowness,” Bien Hoa had fallen, and there was no sign of any effective resistance now north of Saigon. Neither ARVN nor the Air Force was disposed to put up a “Stalingrad-type defense. The end is at hand.” Polgar now recommended, in the “absence of any political developments, to move all Americans out of Saigon. We tried to avert this kind of exit to the bitter end but we lost.” As crowds of nervous Vietnamese gathered outside the Embassy, Polgar left the office to check the security of the compound. He spotted General Quang, in his customary blue suit, pressed against the gate, and managed to get it opened far enough for the former Presidential aide to squeeze himself inside to safety.³⁷ □

Whatever the causes—management preoccupation with negotiations, confidence in the prospect of a more orderly withdrawal, the suddenness of the Saigon government’s collapse, inertia, or some combination of these—the Station and the Mission found themselves on 29 April ill-prepared for the denouement. DCOS LaGueux discovered to his dismay that millions of dollars in currency still reposed in the Station’s vault, and he had to arrange an emergency helicopter run to get it out to the USS Blue Ridge, offshore in the South China Sea. Starting in the late afternoon, each of four officers carried an eighty-pound duffel bag of currency and financial records to his assigned helicopter. Not all

³⁶Saigon 89746, 29 April 1975, and Saigon 89751, 29 April 1975. [redacted]

[redacted] If Toth had advance warning of the bombardment of Tan Son Nhut, he had concealed it by leaving his delegation in its quarters there on the night of 28-29 April. Only the following morning did he ask Polgar for help; the COS delegated Bill Johnson, former Saigon Base Chief, now responsible for staybehind activity, to form a convoy and escort the Hungarians to the relative safety of the Majestic Hotel in downtown Saigon. (See Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993.) □

³⁷Saigon 89750, 29 April 1975. [redacted] Saigon 89751; Polgar interview, 29-30 1993. □

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such oversights could be remedied; LaGueux also learned that the staff in charge of the Station's Vietnamese translators had simply "walked away" from them, and now there was nothing to be done for them.³⁸ □

It was chaotic everywhere in the Mission, as Chip Schofield learned when as a Vietnamese speaker he volunteered to help man the Embassy switchboard. The economic aid office had assembled all its Vietnamese employees and their families at its separate compound to await the promised evacuation convoy, and the American staffers then proceeded to the Chancery. But no convoy appeared, and no American returned to the compound. Schofield, at the telephone, began getting anguished appeals for instructions from the frightened Vietnamese still waiting there. He had none to give, except at the end, when it was clear that the people there would be left behind. A woman asked what to do with the AID greenbacks in her custody; he told her to keep them.³⁹ □

By early afternoon of 29 April, the last Agency outpost in the countryside had gone out of existence. Jim Delaney, the Base Chief at Can Tho in the Mekong Delta, had wanted to begin moving his local employees by 26 April. But Consul General Francis McNamara grounded the four Air America helicopters assigned to Can Tho, arguing that to evacuate Delaney's locals would spark panic. Delaney's heated argument, including references to personal and professional contacts the CG had already sent out, only provoked McNamara into threatening to have him relieved. Delaney appealed to Saigon, which the next day overruled the CG and authorized the Base Chief to proceed. A chastened McNamara apologized to Delaney and offered to give the Agency KIPs priority over his own.⁴⁰ □

But two days later, when the Ambassador's evacuation coordinator, George Jacobson, ordered Can Tho to evacuate, many of the Base's locals were still awaiting transportation to safety. Jacobson's instructions, received at 1030 hours on the 29th, recalled Can Tho's four Air America helicopters to Saigon to make up some of the losses suffered earlier that morning when the North Vietnamese shelled Tan Son Nhut. The US Navy had declined to commit any helicopter lift to Can Tho, and this left the American and local employees of the Consulate to make their way by boat down the Mekong River to the South China Sea. At noon,

³⁸LaGueux interview, 23 November 1992; [] Memorandum to the Director of Central Intelligence, "Funds Abandoned at Saigon Station," 11 July 1975, []. The title of the memorandum implies that not all the Station's funds were saved, but the amount lost is not known. □

³⁹Schofield interview, 3 September 1992. □

⁴⁰James Delaney, Memorandum for the Chief of Station, Vietnam, "The Final Evacuation of Can Tho Base Personnel in MR-4, 2 May 1975; Delaney, Memorandum for the Record, "Evacuation of Can Tho Base Personnel," 27 May 1975; []

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Delaney discovered that McNamara and his party had just left on the Consulate's Navy landing craft. Then, at 1320 hours, two Air America helicopters suddenly appeared; their pilots had not received Jacobson's order. Delaney radioed McNamara, suggesting a rendezvous with the aircraft, but McNamara replied that he preferred to continue by boat.⁴¹ □

Delaney loaded the aircraft with his Americans and a few of his Filipino and Vietnamese employees, and they flew out to the USS *Barbour County* in the South China Sea. But most of the local staff could not be accommodated, and some one hundred employees and family members were left behind.⁴² □

Like his colleagues in the other military regions, Delaney had been left to his own devices in the matter of evacuation preparations and decisions. Polgar later said he did not recall issuing any specific instructions to his offices in the four Military Regions: "The Base Chiefs were all experienced, senior officers. I could rely on them to do the right thing."⁴³ □

The Duc Hotel □

While Delaney and his group were flying out to the *Barbour County*, accelerating chaos in Saigon nullified many evacuation preparations. Of particular concern was the Duc Hotel, several blocks from the Embassy, which housed many Station employees. After the air attack on Tan Son Nhut on the 28th, the Station had sent contract employee Joe Hartmann to the Duc to set up communications and transportation procedures. The communications worked, but transportation fell victim to the loss of Air America helicopters during the airport bombardment at dawn on the 29th. As the morning wore on, Hartmann's repeated requests to the Embassy's Evacuation Control Center brought no helicopters to the Duc. By 1430 hours, he was reporting a nearly continuous clatter of small arms fire from ARVN soldiers in the neighborhood. The buses ordered to evacuate the Filipino and Vietnamese employees had not appeared, and Robert Cantwell, Polgar's Chief of Support, decided to wait for them no longer. Accordingly, he instructed Hartmann to move the 33 Americans out by helicopter.⁴⁴ □

⁴¹*Ibid.* □

⁴²*Ibid.* □

⁴³Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993 □

⁴⁴Thomas Polgar, Memorandum for Chief, East Asia Division, "Evacuation of Station—Planning and Events," 31 May 1975. □

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But Cantwell could not supply the airlift, and Hartmann had to improvise. He climbed to the hotel roof, where he ignited smoke grenades in hopes of attracting the attention of Air America pilots flying in the vicinity. The second grenade drew a helicopter to the rooftop landing zone. It would take two trips to move all the Americans, the pilot said, and he was too low on fuel to make two round trips to the Embassy before heading out to sea for refueling by the Navy. So half the group flew to the Embassy and the remainder, preoccupied during their wait with keeping the local employees from joining them on the roof, flew directly to a Navy vessel in the South China Sea.⁴⁵ []

Because of their exposed position at Tan Son Nhut, the Defense Attaché personnel there got first priority when the 7th Fleet, standing offshore, launched the helicopter lift at just after 1500 hours. While the C-53 helicopters shuttled between the airfield and the fleet, the limited Embassy airlift made only slow progress moving the hundreds of Americans and Vietnamese inside the compound. Meanwhile, the thousands of frightened Vietnamese outside the perimeter threatened to flood through the gates and fences. To leave the compound was now impossible, and the only thing the Station and Mission could do was to post officers at the gates to identify Vietnamese contacts who managed to get close enough to be lifted bodily over the wall.⁴⁶ []

Polgar and some of his people were there, looking for familiar faces. One of them spotted an ARVN colonel, a contact in the psychological warfare unit, and told him to form human wedges of the people he wanted to get inside. Those whom he managed to get to the wall were allowed to throw one bag over before being hoisted to safety. In the confusion, US Marine guards unaware of this arrangement threw some of the baggage back over the wall. Their evident purpose was to protect against explosives, but the result was to deprive some evacuees of irreplaceable identity papers.⁴⁷ []

The acting chief of the Station's Air Branch, O. B. Harnage, constituted Polgar's only resource to rescue both his own Vietnamese contacts and other KIPs stranded at various US facilities scattered across Saigon. Harnage requisitioned an Air America helicopter and survived an afternoon of wild confusion tracking down refugees and plucking them from rooftops and parking lots. Polgar worried particularly about the apartment house at 22 Gia Long Street, the site of DCOS LaGueux's

⁴⁵*Ibid.* []

⁴⁶Butler, *Fall of Saigon*, pp. 445, 477-479, [] Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993, []

⁴⁷Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993. Some probably lost substantial material assets, as well. []

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apartment, where notables including Tran Van Don and General Binh's principal aide had been instructed to assemble. As of 1630 hours, Polgar feared he would not be able to get them out.⁴⁸ []

The COS now asserted that "The die is cast. We are leaving. That means everybody, including Ambassador Martin. . . . At this point all Station personnel in Embassy or en route to ships by chopper." Some of the Marine helicopters serving the lift from Tan Son Nhut were taking fire, apparently from disgruntled ARVN personnel, and the Embassy was now a "beleaguered fortress" with an uncontrollable crowd of Vietnamese blocking all entrances. The "end has come too fast and there is no pretty ending to this."⁴⁹ []

Harnage finally reached the group at 22 Gia Long, but there were more potential evacuees there than he could handle. The Station could not get a helicopter into the Agency logistics compound, and the Vietnamese there were left behind. Reporting at 1820 hours, Polgar was nevertheless encouraged by the smooth functioning of the lift from the Embassy. He took time to tell Headquarters that Ted Shackley's former driver had become one of the heroes of the day. Ut had left the Embassy, going over the wall and forcing his way through the mob to the Lee Hotel, another assembly point, where he correctly identified the Station's KIPs and escorted them to a safer location, from which they were eventually extracted.⁵⁰ []

One much larger group of evacuees also enjoyed good luck. A large radio propaganda operation aimed at North Vietnam employed four Agency case officers and nearly a thousand Vietnamese. Well before Communist fire closed the Saigon airport, the Station flew them all to Phu Quoc Island, in the Gulf of Thailand. Communications with them then failed, and some anxious hours followed before Headquarters arranged with CINCPAC to direct an American freighter to rescue the entire group.⁵¹ []

Late afternoon saw a continuous shuttle of C-46 helicopters at the Embassy, while the larger C-53s worked to rescue a large American contingent at the Defense Attache compound at Tan Son Nhut. By this time, North Vietnamese artillery located east of Saigon was launching shells over the city to strike the airport. On their own authority, []

[] destroyed their equipment. Having no other duties, they then joined a group of Station employees in Polgar's outer office on the top floor. A Marine emerged from the elevator, saying he needed 17 people

⁴⁸Saigon 89755, 29 April 1975, [] Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993. []

⁴⁹Saigon 89755. []

⁵⁰Unnumbered Saigon cable, [] []

⁵¹Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993. []

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for the next shuttle from the parking lot. [] and Schofield looked at each other, wondering if they ought to seek instructions. There seemed to be no point in it, and they and fifteen others followed the Marine downstairs.³² []

The End of the Enterprise []

Weakened by illness, Ambassador Martin struggled to extend the helicopter lift, urging Kissinger, CINCPAC, and the White House to keep the C-53s coming. Confusion and the infiltration of new refugees had required a continuously revised estimate of the numbers remaining, and Washington finally lost patience and declared finis: early in the evening, between 1900 and 2000 hours, a presidential message instructed Martin that the evacuation would cease at 0345 hours the next morning. Apprised of the deadline, Polgar cabled that ". . . this will be final message from Saigon Station. It will take us about twenty minutes to destroy equipment. Accordingly, approximately 0320 hours we must terminate classified transmission."³³ []

"It has been a long and hard fight and we have lost," Polgar wrote. Reflecting his conviction that the fault lay in Washington, he continued:

The severity of the defeat and circumstances of it however would seem to call for a reassessment of the policies of niggardly half measures which have characterized much of our participation here despite the commitment of manpower and resources which were certainly generous. Those who fail to learn from history are forced to repeat it. Let us hope that we will not have another Saigon experience and that we have learned our lesson . . . Saigon signing off.³⁴ []

But there remained several hours before communications equipment would have to be destroyed, and Polgar came back on the air at 2100 hours. He reported that the Station would be down to eight people after the next helicopter departed. The commander of the 7th Fleet was urging the Ambassador to end the evacuation within the next two hours, but the COS judged this impossible: the lift was going well, but

³¹ []
"Unnumbered Saigon cable, [] []"

³⁴ *Ibid.* []

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"despite best efforts Marines there has been steady infiltration into Embassy compound all day. At times as many were coming in as going out [by helicopter]."⁵⁵ □

At exactly 2300 hours, Polgar responded by flash precedence to another exhortation from Headquarters to get all Americans out of Saigon. He thought the injunction unnecessary, he said, noting that while only a few officials remained, there were still a good many US nationals with Vietnamese relatives. Thirty more sorties by the big C-53 helicopters had been promised, and "with a little luck we should be able to clear up compound. I doubt Ambassador will want to leave on any but last chopper, or perhaps on last one but for Marines." There was, at the moment, no sign of major enemy activity, but there was also no question that could "open up just as they did last night."⁵⁶ □

DCI Colby had just sent his own last message to Saigon, praising the Station's display, over the years and in the last few weeks, of

courage, integrity, dedication, and high competence. . . . Thousands of Vietnamese owe their lives and future hopes to your efforts, your government has profited immensely from the accuracy and breadth of your reporting, and your country will one day learn with admiration of the way you represented its best instincts and ideals. Good luck and many thanks.

Polgar responded with his own thanks, regretting that only he, DCOS LaGueux, and four communicators remained to "receive and cherish" the message. "I cannot match your eloquence but my conscience tells me that it was not for lack of our effort or understanding of the situation that we failed."⁵⁷ □

The Vietnam Station's final word, at 0120 hours on 30 April, described the evacuation as having slowed to a glacial pace. Darkness was impeding the use of the poorly lit Embassy parking lot, and most of the large helicopters were servicing the Defense Attaché compound at Tan Son Nhut, where other Americans waited for evacuation. Polgar wrote that Saigon was relatively quiet, but that experience suggested a resumption of enemy fire after 0400 hours; he hoped he would still be there at that time to file a last report.⁵⁸ □

⁵⁵Unnumbered Saigon cable, □

⁵⁶Unnumbered Saigon cable, □

⁵⁷Unnumbered Saigon cable, □

unnumbered Saigon cable, □

⁵⁸Unnumbered Saigon cable, □

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But this was not to be. At just about 0400 hours, a Marine major marched up to Ambassador Martin and announced that if he did not immediately board the waiting helicopter, the major would carry him to it. Martin finally accepted the inevitable; Polgar, LaGueux, and evacuation coordinator Jacobson were among those who boarded the aircraft with him. They flew east to the USS *Blue Ridge*, where they joined earlier evacuees for the voyage to Subic Bay.⁵⁹

⁵⁹Polgar interview, 29-30 July 1993.

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Polgar proceeded from Subic Bay [] There he begged for Headquarters' permission to visit Station employees and people on the KIP list among the Vietnamese refugees at Guam. Headquarters worried about possible press attention, but Polgar felt a "strong moral obligation" to demonstrate Agency interest and concern. As for publicity, he proposed to keep a low profile. In any case, he argued, possible later charges that the Agency had abandoned its own Vietnamese presented a greater risk than media attention to his proposed visit to those who had made it out. Headquarters bowed to this appeal, and the COS prepared to depart for Guam.¹ []

[] Polgar drafted a review of the Station's performance since mid-March which implicitly defended his reluctance to emphasize evacuation preparations. He noted that he had correctly predicted imminent defeat, after ARVN abandoned the Central Highlands, seeing it now as "probably hastened by the American-sponsored mass evacuation which took away any remaining will to fight." He defended his efforts to promote the negotiated surrender that would have obviated an emergency evacuation, saying that Communist overtures had "suggested a glimmer of hope" which, absent a better alternative, had to be pursued. Even after military pressure on Saigon resumed on 26 April, he said, Communist demands "permitted the inference" that Hanoi expected a continuing US presence in Saigon. But the South Vietnamese had dithered after Thieu's resignation, and by the time of General Minh's accession on 28 April, "it was probably too late" even had Minh avoided the fatal mistake of a vigorously anti-Communist inaugural speech. Establishing that he had not been alone in holding out hope for negotiations, Polgar went on to note the interdiction of the port of Vung Tau on the 27th as a violation of an "apparent understanding" between the Soviets and "high-level" Washington, i.e., Henry Kissinger.² []

[] [] and [] []

[] The "glimmer of hope" formulation considerably understates the degree of confidence in a negotiated settlement which Polgar had earlier conveyed to the members of his Station and to Headquarters. []

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Ambassador Graham
Martin on board USS Blue
Ridge, 1 or 2 May, 1975.

Photo by Thomas Polgar.



South Vietnamese Navy vessel in distress, South China Sea, May 1975.
Photo by Thomas Polgar.

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The USS Blue Ridge.

Photo courtesy of Thomas Polgar.



*Refugees arriving at Guam,
May 1975.*

Photo by Thomas Polgar.

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*Refugees arriving at Guam,
May 1975.*

Photo by Thomas Polgar.

Polgar criticized Washington's policy guidance to the Embassy, during the last week, as "frequently contradictory and at times unrealistic" when viewed against developments in Vietnam. If he had been viewed as "moving too far and too fast on various fronts," he wrote, "the North Vietnamese were moving a great deal faster." And he had coordinated every one of his moves with Ambassador Martin. But all of this had come to naught, and on 29 April, with Tan Son Nhut under fire, "The American Embassy was not in an evacuation posture." Polgar implicitly acknowledged that the Station had not been far ahead of the Embassy in this respect. He and LaGueux had spent an hour that morning responding to Martin's requirement for a "hard core" Station of 50 people; that time "should have been spent in moving indigenous personnel into [the] Embassy compound." Thus, "while the total number of Vietnamese evacuated looks impressive, the percentage of KIP's and others of direct interest to [the] US Government will turn out to be disappointingly small."³ □

³*Ibid.* Polgar does not mention here the conviction he and LaGueux drew from the Da Nang experience that an orderly mass evacuation from Saigon would be impossible. This must have been, nevertheless, the single most compelling inhibitor of timely and energetic evacuation planning. No figures have been found for the numbers of KIP's evacuated or the proportion of the total these represented. □

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Apparently still persuaded that an earlier and more active approach to evacuation would have backfired, the COS nevertheless courageously included himself when he said that "the delay by Embassy and Station to move with greater decisiveness toward total evacuation between 0400 and 1100 hours of 29 April was [a] major error of judgment." Nevertheless, if he and the Station could have done better, and if Martin, finally awakened to the crisis, deserved credit for his devotion to moving the greatest possible number of Vietnamese, Polgar put final blame on the Ambassador for the Mission's unpreparedness: Martin "simply could not bring himself to override organizational boundaries and to use available personnel as a team. . . . His failure to delegate authority and his continuing concern to win points in debate over policy with Washington deprived the Mission of the leadership without which a hierarchic organization cannot function." Polgar concluded in painfully ambivalent fashion: "While we regret and feel guilty about those we could not take with us," there was reason for pride and satisfaction in the numbers successfully evacuated. "We believe that within the perimeters [sic] of the physical means available to us, we did the best we could."⁴ □

DCI Colby had the last, conflicted word in a cable that reflected his anguish over the outcome in a place to which he had dedicated so much time and energy, and to which he had developed an intense personal commitment. Sent to Polgar on Guam, it assured the COS of the DCI's "total confidence that you were acting in every way in full step with policy. Your reporting was the basis on which we here were able to press certain actions which I believe had some beneficial effect in terms of people evacuated." Colby continued in an elegiac tone, his stilted language revealing the strain of the effort to praise the Station's performance during the final catastrophe. Except for the lament for allies left behind, he might have been proposing an epitaph not just for the work of the final weeks but for all of the Agency's endeavors in Vietnam since 1954:

It is all too easy to think about the "might-have-beens" which would have made the solution ideal. In fact, however, I think you should rest in very good conscience at having done a superlative job and accomplished much more than many of us might have feared. It is important now not to nit and pick over the details of that performance but to focus on the fact that in the large it was successful and achieved a high percentage of what anyone might have hoped. I know this is no solace to those of us who think in

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terms of individual people left behind but I think it is an important attitude to take with respect to the dignity of our country and our Agency.⁵

The Inhibitions of the Anti-Communist Mind

This story of the role of the Vietnam Station in the American struggle to make military government successful in South Vietnam omits the military and economic, and even some of the political developments that would be included in any comprehensive account of the enterprise. But an account from the CIA perspective is not as constricting as might at first glance appear. To begin with, the Station's intelligence mission made CIA management in Saigon an informed observer of all significant developments in South Vietnam. Perhaps more important, the Station was intimately involved in the continuous effort to stabilize and liberalize the succession of military or military-dominated regimes that arose in late 1963. And finally, the Station led the effort, never completely successful, to develop an integrated rural pacification program.⁶

The record of the CIA experience in Vietnam thus provides the material for some judgments about the outcome there and about the quality of the Agency's participation. There is ample room for different interpretations, but for the author one inference is inescapable. This is that, entirely aside from the quality of the Agency's, or indeed America's, effort to save South Vietnam, the perennial weakness of the Saigon government and the implacable will of its Viet Cong and North Vietnamese adversaries are what determined the outcome. The withdrawal of US ground forces, beginning in 1969, and later of combat air support, certainly affected the

The air war against the North was, to be sure, quite another matter, and President Johnson's personal attention to the selection of bombing targets became legendary. But with respect to the South, the only serious Washington effort to shape American thinking even about strategy, let alone tactics, came from Walt Rostow at the White House. As National Security Adviser, Rostow had been a vocal proponent of air bombardment of the North for more than a year before the Administration adopted that course. But his cerebrations about insurgency as a byproduct of the economic modernization process overlooked the anticolonial origins and therefore the essentially political nature of the Vietnam war.

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timing of the GVN's collapse, but a massive American military presence could not permanently substitute for the psychological mobilization of the South that always eluded Saigon's leadership.⁷ □

But despite the pessimism of some Agency analysts, it was hardly self-evident, immediately after the fall of Ngo Dinh Diem, that the generals would not succeed where Diem had failed. The Station and the rest of the US Government hoped that, however politically untutored, the generals would share the widespread American conviction that their principal order of business was to inspire active loyalty in the GVN's urban and especially its rural constituencies. □

The CIA's initial reaction to the challenge in Vietnam had reflected not just the spirit of the times but more specifically the activist spirit inherited from the OSS and encouraged during Dwight Eisenhower's presidency. The Agency's support of Ngo Dinh Diem, beginning in 1954, reflected the confidence of an organization which took credit for the recent defeat of the HMB agrarian revolt in the Philippines. The Plans Directorate was then basking also in the glow of successful coups d'etat in Iran and Guatemala. This self-assurance survived the 1961 Bay of Pigs embarrassment, and, when the moment came in late 1963 to begin again in South Vietnam, the Station entertained no doubts about its ability to meet the challenge. To Agency officers in the field, the US military seemed too uncomprehending and the State Department too passive. In the eyes of the operations people, this left CIA once again to pick up the slack. □

What looked like an early opportunity to take the lead role faded with Ambassador Lodge's resistance to American participation in GVN planning for the post-Diem period. But the Station would have been confronted with a very tall order, even had it acquired the role the Vietnamese generals implicitly requested for it in late 1963. There is little reason to believe that CIA could have succeeded where the rest of the US Government ultimately failed in the effort to make leaders out of the politically myopic and mostly self-interested ARVN officer corps. In the event, the Station turned its energies toward more ad hoc programs of urban

⁷That this judgment represents something more than the wisdom of hindsight is suggested by contemporary predictions that even massive US military involvement would fail to prevent a GVN defeat. An especially poignant example is the Omega war games conducted in early 1963 with participants who included Gen. Maxwell Taylor, then military adviser to President Kennedy; DCI John McCone; and Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Curtis LeMay. Even after assumptions were modified to meet Air Force objections and the exercise run a second time, the GVN and the United States went down to decisive defeat. See Roger Warner, *Back Fire* (Simon and Schuster, 1995) pp. 96-97. □

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organization and rural pacification. These initiatives took advantage of the Station's many longtime contacts throughout South Vietnamese society, and reflected the characteristically improvisational CIA style. □

The activities that evolved after late 1963 displayed both the strengths and the weaknesses of the Clandestine Service that created and ran them. They reflected, to begin with, the continued recognition that, despite or even because of military escalation, the GVN had to earn the active commitment of its people in order to survive. In practice, the selection of means to reach this goal relied more on intuitive, extemporized experimentation than it did on any rigorous analysis of the insurgency. This approach saved the programs from bureaucratic rigidity, but it also kept them from systematically addressing the country's structural problems, especially the gulf between city and country and the GVN's politically crippling colonial style. □

Indeed, the single weakest aspect of covert political organizing in Vietnam was precisely the one in which the Agency took the most pride. William Colby's perennial celebration of CIA political action expertise is echoed in much other operational correspondence by recurring references to the Agency's unique capabilities in this field. But in fact, the Station's contribution to political mobilization in Vietnam hardly ever transcended the logistical. In practice, CIA furnished money, materiel, and advice on organizational technique while leaving program content to its sundry Vietnamese collaborators. □

The tortured history of political organization in Phong Dinh Province exemplifies this approach, which indeed had its merits when the Station's Vietnamese contacts produced workable ideas of their own. But even at its best, it perpetuated the almost schizoid Agency (and US Government) approach to the political aspect of the conflict. The GVN had to be invigorated and reformed, and the peasantry must be won over to the government side. CIA did indeed recognize the need to develop peasant leadership, at least at the local level. But it never questioned the contradictory imperative that this be done without disturbing the social and economic structure bequeathed by the French colonial regime. □

No one argued that this structure was free of inequities, but it seemed to Agency and other US officials to be positively idyllic, compared with the evil of the Communist system that challenged it. Americans took for granted that not only they but all South Vietnamese saw the decisive moral superiority of the Saigon government. One result of this perception was that CIA saw no need to look much beyond anti-Communism and promises of economic benefits in the design of its political programs. Indeed, when it came to the organization of a political front like *Lien Minh*, the question of a substantive agenda hardly arose. □

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True, a program like *Lien Minh* had the limited, essentially cosmetic, purpose of creating a facade of national unity behind President Thieu. But it remains that the Agency's covert action managers seldom recognized in practice that their political programs assumed a citizenry basically disposed both to accept the GVN's legitimacy and to help it defeat the Viet Cong. That some, both urban dwellers and peasants, met this expectation did not make it a valid universal principle. Like the other US participants in the drama, CIA was caught up in the paradox that only a basic transformation in the distribution of power could save a government whose interests and identity lay in preserving the status quo.

The Actor as Observer

Responsibility to help achieve a policy goal inevitably exerts pressure on intellectual objectivity when the actor has to evaluate the prospects and then the results of his own efforts. A perfectly banal observation, but one that takes on real poignancy when an intelligence agency, whose basic charter calls for disinterested advice to policymakers, becomes an interested party by virtue of its commitment to action programs.

It is clear that CIA analysts, whether working in Saigon or in Washington, consistently viewed GVN prospects, and the merits of all US programs aimed at improving those prospects, more skeptically than did the operations managers. As had been the case during the Diem period, Chiefs of Station in Saigon after 1963 sometimes thought they had found a formula that promised eventual victory. Peer de Silva was the most fervidly optimistic of them, but several of his successors also developed a personal commitment to the CIA role in assuring the GVN's survival. This was the case with Theodore Shackley and Thomas Polgar—perhaps John Hart as well—who put their faith not in a pacification scheme, as de Silva did, but in the person of Nguyen Van Thieu.

The biases of these managers shaped their own interpretations of events and certainly had the potential to distort the intelligence process. In fact, they seem not to have affected to any significant degree either the thrust of Agency analysis or the content of intelligence reporting from Saigon. No Chief of Station ever censored the product of his Intelligence Directorate analytical unit, and the officers staffing the unit seem not to have been intimidated by their successive chiefs' personal convictions. On the intelligence collection side, many of the working-level case officers reporting on the South Vietnamese political climate dealt with sources who were far less sanguine than Station management about the GVN's

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progress and prospects. Pessimistic accounts from these contacts might have to meet rigorous dissemination standards, but well-sourced, factual reporting did not fail to be distributed.

Perhaps the single most contentious issue, especially in the later years, was that of corruption in the GVN. Shackley and Polgar, both of whom questioned its very relevance, did not encourage reporting on it. But their reluctance reflected not only their judgment of its importance but also the scarcity of specific, verifiable allegations. Solid information would be disseminated whether it supported managerial proclivities or not. Only in the area of rural pacification did Station reporting—even then mostly operational, not intelligence reporting—sometimes uncritically echo managerial preference. Under de Silva, the Station's possession of a potentially successful pacification formula became an article of faith. Later, under Shackley, the Station tacitly ceded the evaluation of rural loyalties to the pacification managers at MACV, first Robert Komer, then William Colby. Toward the end, under Polgar, the villagers' preference for the GVN was simply taken for granted. Political allegiance in the countryside had then ceased to exist as an intelligence question.⁸

A Tough Nut To Crack

That the Station's professional objectivity largely survived the pressures of a simultaneous action role allowed it to provide competent intelligence coverage of its Southern ally through the duration of the conflict. This objectivity did not suffice to ensure equally competent reporting on the Communist adversary. It is of course never easy to penetrate an adversary whose organization enjoys high morale and discipline. This generic difficulty was compounded in South Vietnam by the inaccessibility of Communist cadres to direct American manipulation and by the irredeemable inefficiency of the GVN's intelligence agencies. The most prolific source of policy-level information at any time during the war was himself a mere district cadre the creation of better access eluded CIA to the end.

It seems likely that the informal approaches to the NLF that began in 1967 actually contributed to the near-invulnerability, from an intelligence perspective, of the Communist leadership in the South. It is

*Shackley's passivity regarding rural political loyalties may have reflected his knowledge that the first priority of the Nixon administration was to find a way to liquidate the US commitment in Vietnam; the objective had become to escape military defeat. As US interest in "nation-building" faded, so did that of the GVN. Within a year of Shackley's arrival, repression of the Viet Cong rural apparatus had become the dominant if not the exclusive focus of the pacification effort.

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difficult to imagine how these overtures could have been received as anything but an acknowledgment, however reluctant, that the United States was looking for a way to disengage. Seen this way at COSVN headquarters and in Hanoi, attempts at informal communication could only have helped to bolster the Communists' conviction that their strength of will exceeded that of the Americans. This expectation was essentially realized a year later, when President Johnson proposed official talks and abandoned the quest for a second full term. [redacted]

At the very least, the modest results of strenuous efforts to obtain controlled sources on Vietnamese Communist policy and plans suggest the limitations of agent operations in such circumstances. In Vietnam, physical inaccessibility and cultural remoteness only compounded the already-formidable obstacles posed by Communist discipline, political sophistication, and the élan that seems to have arisen from an unshakeable expectation that the GVN and US resolve would weaken. [redacted]

Flawed as they were, CIA's action programs, including the ones described in this volume, represented the most nearly coherent, comprehensive approach to the insurgency taken by any American agency in Vietnam. That these efforts took place in an ultimately losing cause does not detract from their instructive value. Indeed, if it is true that failure is a better teacher than success, the Agency's activities in Vietnam deserve all the more attention precisely because they were not rewarded with victory. [redacted]

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Note on Sources

Although the author served in Vietnam for two years beginning in the spring of 1963, his own experience has contributed in only the most fragmentary way to the preparation of this volume. Indeed, he has been chastened, while writing this and two companion studies, to discover how little he then understood of the environment in which he and his colleagues were trying to help shore up a tottering South Vietnamese Government. Even for the period of his own service, therefore, the author has relied primarily on the operational files of the Directorate of Operations and on interviews with CIA veterans of the period.

The author's two forthcoming companion pieces complete the Agency history of the CIA contribution to US efforts to create a viable nation-state in South Vietnam:

CIA and the House of Ngo: Covert Action in South Vietnam, 1954-1963 (CIA History Staff).

The CIA, the Viet Cong, and the Peasantry: Rural Pacification in South Vietnam (CIA History Staff).

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