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THE FALL OF SOUTH VIETNAM:
A STUDY OF THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE ARMED FORCES

by

Binh Phuoc Le

A Thesis
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Faculty of The Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the
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THE FALL OF SOUTH VIETNAM:
A STUDY OF THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE ARMED FORCES

Binh Phuoc Le, M.A.

Western Michigan University, 1984

The South Vietnamese armed force was one of the largest and most well-equipped armed forces in the world, yet less than two months after the Communists opened their final offensive the whole South Vietnamese armed forces disintegrated. Consequently, this led to the fall of South Vietnam in 1975. This study attempts to analyze the weaknesses of the South Vietnamese armed forces relating to organization, personnel (officers and recruits), training, armaments, and the utilization of American aid. Overall, this study suggests that because of the weaknesses of the South Vietnamese armed forces, they were unable to defend South Vietnam from falling to the Communists.

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Binh Phuoc Le

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INTRODUCTION

On April 30, 1975, the Communist forces, which included the regular troops of the People's Army of Vietnam (North Vietnam) and the troops of the National Liberation Army (National Liberation Front, South Vietnam), surrounded Sai Gon, the capital city of South Vietnam and forced the President of the Republic of Vietnam to order his troops to lay down their weapons and surrender. The President of the Republic of Vietnam, General Duong Van Minh "Big Minh", then did not have any other choice but surrender. Sai Gon was under heavy military pressure from the Communist forces. More importantly, his troops were disintegrating. The Republic of Vietnam finally collapsed.

The collapse of the Republic of Vietnam was a surprise to many people, including the North Vietnamese military leaders. General Vo Nguyen Giap, Commander-in-Chief of the North Vietnamese armed forces, later revealed that he did not expect that victory could be that easy; he was, in fact, prepared to fight at least for another year (O'Ballance, 1981:211). Why did the collapse of the Republic of Vietnam come so quickly? The collapse of the Republic of Vietnam, according to scholars, experts, and participants of the war, was due to: (1) the reduction of American aid for South Vietnam, (2) the divisiveness in

the South Vietnamese society, and (3) the collective and undisruptive leadership in North Vietnam. These explanations are suprising in that none of the authors emphasized the collapse of the Republic of Vietnam on the South Vietnamese armed forces.

The Purpose of the Study

This study will describe and analyze the weaknesses of the South Vietnamese armed forces, and how these weaknesses contributed to the final collapse of the Republic of Vietnam in 1975. This study will also demonstrate that the armed forces of the Republic of Vietnam aided by the United States should have been able to prevent South Vietnam from falling to the Communists in 1975, if they had been better organized, had better leadership, and had better methods of recruiting and training.

Summary of Related Literature

The collapse of the Republic of Vietnam is still a subject that scholars, experts, and participants of the war are trying to explain. For example, the United States Department of Army is working with a group of former South Vietnamese military officers in trying to write about the collapse of the Republic of Vietnam. It is still a relatively new subject because the collapse of South Vietnam happened so suddenly and unexpectedly, and it just happened

only a short while ago. Furthermore, there are only a very small group of scholars who are interested in this particular subject and their works are rather limited, centering around the following themes.

The Reduction of American Aid for South Vietnam

The Republic of Vietnam fell because the United States reduced its aid for South Vietnam. In his book, The Final Collapse (1983). General Cao Van Vien, the former Chairman of the Joint General Staff of the South Vietnamese armed forces, believed that the South Vietnamese soldiers could not stop the Communist forces because they had shortages of military equipment. The shortages of military equipment resulted because the United States Congress reduced its aid for South Vietnam. This view is widely shared by the majority of the South Vietnamese military officers who were interviewed by Hosmer et al., in The Fall of South Vietnam (1980). More interestingly, this view was also offered by the United States officials, especially among the senior officials of the Ford Administration, including President Ford. In his public statement after the collapse of the Republic of Vietnam, President Ford said:

I am not assessing blame on anyone. The facts are that, in fiscal year 1974, there was a substantial reduction made by the Congress in the amount of military equipment requested for South Vietnam. In fiscal year 1975, the current year, the administration asked for \$1,400 million in military assistance for South Vietnam. Congress

put a ceiling of one billion on it and actually appropriated only \$700 million (Haley, 1982:87).

Because of the reduction in American aid for South Vietnam, there were shortages of military equipment and consequently this had weakened the military strength of the South Vietnamese armed forces. More importantly, the reduction of American aid had a great psychological effect on the South Vietnamese soldiers' morale. They felt that they were "abandoned" by their "big brother"--the United States. Furthermore, they argued that while the United States reduced its aid for South Vietnam, the U.S.S.R., China, and other Communist countries doubled their aid for North Vietnam. Combinations of these factors should have given the Communists the advantage, and ultimately, they were able to defeat the South Vietnamese.

The Divisiveness in the South Vietnamese Society

According to generals Nguyen Duy Hinh and Tran Dinh Tho, the authors of the book, The South Vietnamese Society (1980) the divisiveness in the social structure of South Vietnam was a major factor which had contributed to the final collapse of the Republic of Vietnam in 1975. The authors who advocated this view argued that there were too many political, religious, ethnic, and other groups in South Vietnam, and the problem was that each group tried to protect its own interests by putting their interest above the national interest. In trying to protect their own

interest, one group would not hesitate to fight with another group. Consequently, they were unable to work with each other and ultimately this tore the South Vietnamese society apart. This kind of divisiveness became a major target for the Communists to exploit and finally use it to their advantage.

General Dong Van Khuyen, the author of the book, RVNAF (1980) (Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces), agreed with this explanation but he further believed that the divisiveness in the South Vietnamese society, e.g. Northerners, Southerners, Centralists, Buddhists, Catholics, and etc., led to the divisiveness within the military establishment, especially among the high ranking military officers. In short, the authors cited above believed that the divisiveness in the South Vietnamese society (not only among these factions but also within these factions themselves) was a major factor which contributed to the final collapse of the Republic of Vietnam in 1975.

The Collective and Undisruptive Leadership in North Vietnam

Another explanation of the collapse of South Vietnam was offered by Harrison in The Endless War (1982) and William J. Duiker in the Communist Road to Power in Vietnam (1981). According to them, North Vietnam was victorious because it was led by collective and undisrupted leadership. This view was also shared by Huynh Kim Khanh in Vietnamese Communism 1925-1945

(1981) and Tran Van Don in Our Endless War(1978). The Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) was proclaimed in August 1945, and since then to the time they defeated the South Vietnamese in April 1975, the eleven members of the Politburo of the North Vietnamese Communist Party (Dang Lao Dong) remained intact, except for General Nguyen Chi Thanh, the Commander of North Vietnamese troops in South Vietnam, who was killed in 1968 during the Tet Offensive, and President Ho Chi Minh who died in 1969 due to old age and illness. In contrast, the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) had numerous changes in leadership. The changing of leadership caused disruption in the government's capability to govern the country and to conduct the war effectively. Furthermore, the authors believed that the North Vietnamese leaders were more dedicated, experienced, tough, well-trained, patient, less corrupt, and more importantly, had a common goal: to liberate and unify the country under a socialist government. To them (the authors), these factors helped the North Vietnamese defeat the South Vietnamese easily.

Major Hypothesis

Indeed, the reduction of American aid for South Vietnam contributed significantly to the final collapse of South Vietnam, especially in the psychological aspect of the war. But, the reduction of American aid should not be understood

as the main factor responsible for the collapse of South Vietnam. For example, there were no shortages of military equipment as Gareth Porter (1975) noted, but the South Vietnamese soldiers in many cases ran away and left behind unused military equipment including the "Daisy Cutter" and the CBU-50 bombs--one of the deadliest bombs available in the world. As pointed out earlier, some authors argued that the North Vietnamese received more aid from the Communist countries than the South Vietnamese. The fact was that in 1975 the United States provided South Vietnam with \$700 million in military aid whereas in the same year the Communist countries provided North Vietnam with \$400 million in military aid (Haley, 1982:82). In 1975, the North Vietnamese did receive more aid than the previous years but the amount of aid they received was less than half of what the South Vietnamese received in the same period.

Furthermore, what the authors overlooked was that the North Vietnamese received the weapons they needed, like the 130mm artillery (the longest artillery in the world) or the SAM missile, etc., and were able to utilize them effectively against the South Vietnamese. In contrast, the South Vietnamese received more modern and sophisticated aircraft, tanks, ships, etc., but they did not utilize them to their fullest capability. When the Communists took over the country, they found many of the weapons given

by the United States in storage.

In short, the reduction of American aid could have had a long term effect, but at the time of the Communist takeover, the reduction of American aid was not the principal factor that caused the collapse of the Republic of Vietnam, because there was no severe shortage of military equipment.

The divisiveness of the South Vietnamese society as a major contributing factor to the final collapse of South Vietnam has some validity. However, it was not the single cause for the collapse of South Vietnam. The divisiveness would have led to a gradual collapse eventually. The collapse of South Vietnam, however, happened so suddenly and unexpectedly making this explanation less valid.

In their investigation, it seems, the author cited above failed to take into proper account of North Vietnamese society. North Vietnam was highly unified and single-minded about the execution of the war. During the war the North Vietnamese society, like the South Vietnamese society, had Buddhists, Catholics, and other various kinds of ethnic and political groups, and more interestingly over half of the members of the Politburo of the Lao Dong Party (Communist Party) came from Central and South Vietnam, such as Minister of Defense, General Vo Nguyen Giap, Premier Pham Van Dong, and President Ho Chi Minh, but the North Vietnamese were able to put their society in

order, whereas the South Vietnamese were unable to do so. The main reason that made the North Vietnamese society undivided was that North Vietnam was led by leaders who were not only willing to give up their personal lives for the country, but they were also ready to use force if necessary to preserve unity.

The South Vietnamese society did not have that kind of leadership. This was particularly the case with the South Vietnamese armed forces which ran South Vietnam from 1963 to 1975. For example, after the 1963 coup d'etat against Diem, the military generals divided themselves into groups such as, the "Northern Group", the "Southern Group", the "Young Turks", and etc., to control the armed forces and run the country. The divisions within the armed forces not only weakened the military establishment, but also led to the divisiveness in the South Vietnamese society. For example, during the period from 1963 to 1968 there were more than one hundred political parties registered in South Vietnam. There were many political parties because the people feared being abused by military leaders in power, and did not believe in the legitimate authority of the military government. But the problem, as some authors pointed out earlier, these political parties, including the military government, did not work well with each other. Thus, how could the central government, whether it was a military or civilian government, effectively run the

country? The South Vietnamese armed forces was therefore, not only responsible for the collapse of South Vietnam militarily but also politically.

Lastly, the collective and unified leadership in North Vietnam played a very significant role in the defeat of the South Vietnamese government in 1975. If the South Vietnamese were able to provide such leaders as the North Vietnamese, it would have made it more difficult for North Vietnam to defeat South Vietnam. The South Vietnamese people could have chosen such leaders, but when the military took over the country, they did not give the people a chance to select such leaders. There were elections held in South Vietnam but the well-trained, educated, experienced, and dedicated men never had a fair chance to participate in the elections. The military leaders, once they came to power, tried all means available to eliminate the civilian leaders from the political scene, including the use of force when necessary. The problem was that the military never provided any capable leaders to govern the country since the coup against Diem in 1963. The generals who came to power after Diem were, according to Air Marshall Nguyen Cao Ky, "...a bunch of generals who were more dumb than Diem himself" (Charlton and Moncrieft, 1978:216). The military was not only unable to provide South Vietnam with capable leaders, but they were also the group that caused disruptiveness in leadership in South Vietnam especially

during the period from 1963 to 1967. Again, the South Vietnamese armed forces must be responsible for the collapse of South Vietnam politically.

It is, however, not the main concern of this study to examine all the related aspects which the South Vietnamese armed forces contributed to the final collapse of the Republic of Vietnam, but rather to examine only the weaknesses in the South Vietnamese armed forces' organization, personnel, training, armaments , and the utilization of American aid. The author believes that due to the critical weaknesses in these areas there was no way the South Vietnamese armed forces could have prevented South Vietnam from falling to the Communists even though they had more than one million men and no shortages of modern and sophisticated military equipment. The other causes, though have been advanced by many authors, are only contributing factors for the collapse of the Republic of Vietnam.

Methodology

This study has relied on two kinds of sources. The first, is based on library material including books, declassified government documents, and articles in newspapers, magazines, and scholarly journals. The second source is based on the interviews that the author had conducted with several former South Vietnamese military officers and civilians who witnessed the war and who are now living in

the United States. Due to the sensitivity of the topic among the Vietnamese community in the United States, the interviewees' names and ranks will not be revealed in the study.

CHAPTER II

THE BACKGROUND OF THE VIETNAMESE CONFLICT

The purpose of this chapter is to briefly summarize the Vietnamese conflict. Special emphasis will be given to the events bearing on the development of the South Vietnamese armed forces.

Vietnam Before 1954

During World War II, the Japanese took over the control of Vietnam from the French. When the war was over and the Japanese surrendered to the Allies, the Viet Minh (Vietnamese Communists) took advantage of the power vacuum in Vietnam by proclaiming independence for Vietnam and then establishing a provisional government in Ha Noi in August, 1945 under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh. The Viet Minh believed that they regained independence for Vietnam. But, because of their economic interests in this region which were important to their power, the French did not want to lose their control over Vietnam.

Immediately after the Japanese surrendered, the French, with help provided by the British in the South and the Nationalist Chinese in the North, tried to reestablish control over Vietnam. The French, however, were only able to reestablish control over the cities and the coastal areas

in South Vietnam; North Vietnam (except Ha Noi) and South Vietnam's countrysides were in the hands of the Viet Minh.

The Viet Minh agreed to let the French return to North Vietnam in 1946. The French were able to reestablish control over North Vietnam by promising the Viet Minh that if they (the Viet Minh) permitted the French to return peacefully to North Vietnam, they would recognize the Democratic Republic of Vietnam as an independent state within the French Union (March 6th Agreements) (Hammer, 1966:240-267).

The Viet Minh's decision to let the French return to North Vietnam was a critical mistake. This decision not only permitted the French to have total control over Vietnam once again, but when the French firmly reestablished their control they continued to carry out the same colonial policy they had carried out before the war, ignoring the agreement they had signed with the Viet Minh a few months earlier.

At the same time, in the South, the French tried to work with the pro-French nationalists (non-Communist Vietnamese) to create a non-Communist government against the Viet Minh's government (Democratic Republic of Vietnam) (Shaplen, 1966:59). The Viet Minh now realized that the French were not interested in granting independence for Vietnam. Instead, they tried to use the Vietnamese against the Vietnamese for their own benefits. The Viet Minh and their government fled Ha Noi into the jungles and began

their struggle against the French for the independence of Vietnam. This struggle was better known as the First Indo-China War or the Franco-Viet Minh War. The war between the French and the Viet Minh began in 1946 and finally ended in 1954, when the French forces were defeated at Dien Bien Phu, a fortified location near the Laotian-Vietnamese borders in North Vietnam.

The defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu in May, 1954 was undoubtedly a major cause that forced the French to abandon Vietnam. There were, however, many other contributing factors. First, the Viet Minh's forces grew stronger because they began to receive a large quantity of military aid from the Communist countries, particularly from China. Second, the French forces became weaker as a result of the Second World War which had paralyzed the French military and economic power. Third, the British and the Americans refused to send more aid to help the French in Vietnam as they had requested. And lastly, the war in Vietnam became unpopular for the French at home. In the end, the French came to realize that they could not afford to continue the war in Vietnam any longer.

Vietnam: A Nation Divided

The Geneva Conference began in April 1954 (before the fall of Dien Bien Phu) in Geneva Switzerland. Three months later an agreement was reached between the French and the

Viet Minh. Among the major provisions of the agreement were that Vietnam was to be divided into two "states": The State of Vietnam (South Vietnam) under the control of the nationalists (non-Communists) who had control over the southern part of the country; and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (Communists) under the control of the Viet Minh who had control over the northern part of the country. The demarcation line between the two states was to be the Seventeenth Parallel. This agreement also provided that elections were to be held in both regions of the country in 1956 for their unification. This particular provision later turned out to be one of the major factors which the Communists used as an excuse to wage war against the State of Vietnam, because the State of Vietnam refused to hold any elections for the unification of the country as provided (Nguyen, 1976:21). The State of Vietnam argued that it did not sign the agreement; therefore, it did not have to comply with it (Gettleman, 1965:194).

There are several reasons why South Vietnam refused to hold any election in Vietnam at the time. First, at that time, the Communists had better control over the people in North Vietnam; North Vietnam was a Communist country and free elections were not permitted. Second, numerically, North Vietnam outnumbered South Vietnam. North Vietnam had 15 million people whereas South Vietnam had only 13 million people (Fall, 1967:336). Third, after the defeat

of the French at Dien Bien Phu, Ho Chi Minh emerged as an undisputed national hero and his popularity was uncontested. Lastly, for the majority of the Vietnamese people, the Viet Minh were considered to be nationalists, not Communists. These factors could have given the Communists dominance in any election.

The refusal to hold any elections for the unification of the country by the State of Vietnam was a major set-back for the Communists. Their first priority was now to build North Vietnam into a strong socialist state (O'Ballance, 1981:13). The Communists believed that the States of Vietnam would fall because of its internal problems (Kim and Ziring, 1977:268).

The Communists could have won in South Vietnam. Many military experts believed that at that time if the Communists in North Vietnam had used their armed forces to conquer South Vietnam they could have conquered it easily, because at that time the National Army of Vietnam (South Vietnam) could not have stopped the Communist forces. The Communist forces were well-trained, well-organized, and more importantly, their morale was high. In contrast, the States of Vietnam's forces were paralyzed, low in morale, leaderless, and scattered throughout the country without any kind of organization.

The unification of the country might not have been their immediate objective, but the Communists did not let

their opportunity slip away. During the partition about 90,000 to 100,000 South Vietnamese Communists (tap-ket) went to North Vietnam (Fitzgerald , 1972:195). The Communists in North Vietnam wasted no time regrouping and retraining them and sending them back to South Vietnam. They were to work with the Communists who stayed in South Vietnam after the partition to carry out subversive activities against the State of Vietnam Government. There was about 6,000 to 10,000 Communists who stayed behind in South Vietnam after the partition (Fall, 1967:356). In 1960, when the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam was formally organized, these Communists became soldiers of the National Liberation Army; contributing to the final outcome of the war in Communist favor.

The United States and the Geneva Agreement

The Geneva Agreement (1954) was a turning point of the United States' policy in Vietnam. During the Franco-Viet Minh War, the United States not only helped the French but also helped the Vietnamese nationalist through the French by providing them with military and economic aid. When the war was over, the United States sent aid directly to the Vietnamese and began to play an active role in the creation of the Republic of Vietnam.

The United States, like the State of Vietnam, did not sign the Geneva Agreement, even though the United States

was one of the key participants at the conference, because they believed that signing this agreement meant that the "free world" was granting more territory to world Communism, a concession which at that time the United States did not want to make. Anti-Communism was one of the major policies of the United States' foreign policy at that time. Because of this policy, the United States tried all possible means to stop Communism from expanding. South Vietnam became a new frontier for the United States to stop Communism. After the Geneva Agreement was signed, the United States not only sent military and economic aid but also sent military and administrative advisors to South Vietnam to help the South Vietnamese build a republic and a strong armed force, hoping that they would be able to stop the Communists of North Vietnam from invading South Vietnam. The United States believed that North Vietnam was an instrument of the Soviet Union, who represented world Communism; thus, stopping the Communists of North Vietnam from invading South Vietnam meant that the United States would stop the Soviet Union as well.

After six years since the Geneva Agreement was signed, a political settlement for the unification of the country was still out of reach, and the State of Vietnam did not collapse as the Communists had expected. The Communists in North Vietnam believed that the only solution available to the achievement of their goal of national unification

was through the use of force--to conquer the States of Vietnam militarily.

In 1960, the Central Committee of the Lao Dong Party (Communist Party) decided that a branch of the Lao Dong party would be established in South Vietnam to direct the war against South Vietnam. The Central Committee also decided that more North Vietnam troops would be sent to South Vietnam to fight and liberate South Vietnam. It is important to note that the Communists frequently stated that they had no troops in South Vietnam. Prior to this time North Vietnam had sent only a small number of their regular troops to South Vietnam in order to help the South Vietnamese Communists carry out subversive activities against the State of Vietnam (Fall, 1967:176). Also in 1960, the North Vietnamese sponsored and supported South Vietnamese dissident groups to form a military and political organization known as the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam. The main purpose of this organization was to overthrow the United States supported government in South Vietnam. This organization was placed under direct control of the Lao Dong Party's branch in South Vietnam. More specifically, it was under direct control of the Communists in North Vietnam.

While the Communists were concentrating their efforts to conquer South Vietnam, the political situation in South Vietnam began to deteriorate. When the Geneva Agreement

was signed, the political situation in South Vietnam seemed relatively stable, except for some confrontations between the government troops and the troops of the religious sects. However, many social and political disturbances became disquieting. In November 1963, a military coup overthrew President Ngo Dinh Diem and his government. Since then, to the end of 1967, there were several governments installed by the military, but none of these governments lasted more than one year. During this period, the military leaders also constantly fought each other for power and privileges. This infighting not only caused disruption in government leadership but it also caused disunity within the military establishment, especially at the top level of the Command Structure of the South Vietnamese armed forces. For example, it was during this period when the Commander of the First Corps, General Nguyen Chanh Thi who disliked the policy of the generals in Sai Gon, sided with the Buddhist dissidents and refused to take orders from the generals in Sai Gon who wanted him to press hard on the Buddhist demonstrations in the northernmost provinces in South Vietnam. It took Air Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky, who was Prime Minister of South Vietnam at that time, personally to command the troops for several weeks to put down this rebellion. At the end of this troubled period (1963-1967), the South Vietnamese armed forces had most of the senior generals eliminated. The generals who

were in power at the time were young "Young Turks" and they decreed that the military officers with more than 25 years of service must retire from the armed forces, thus eliminating some of the most experienced generals including General Duong Van Minh, the leader of the 1963 coup against Diem.

The Communists, on the other hand, took advantage of the political instability in South Vietnam and attacked the government's troops in the countryside, eventually taking over complete control. By the end of 1965, the Communists had control over two-thirds of the country. The collapse of the State of Vietnam seemed imminent.

Fearing that South Vietnam might fall to the Communists, the United States brought in its troops and began fighting against the Communists for the South Vietnamese armed forces. The conflict reached its peak in 1968, when the Communists waged a massive offensive all over South Vietnam during the Vietnamese New Year celebration. This was better known as the Tet Offensive. During the Tet Offensive the Communists took over control of many cities and heavy fighting took place in the Capital City. The Communists also attacked the United States Embassy in Sai Gon. Only with help from the United States troops, South Vietnam was able to defeat the Communists and regain control of all the cities which were taken by the Communists. At the end of this event, there were more than half a million American

Table 1
U.S. Forces--1964-1972 (in thousands)

1964	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969	1970	1971	1971
24	184	385	486	536	475	335	158	24

Source: Southeast Asia Statistical Summary, Office of the Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), February 14, 1973, Table 3, p. 245.

soldiers in South Vietnam.

The United States did defeat the Communists in the Tet Offensive. However, a total military victory over the Communists remained illusive. The United States might have won military, but politically lost. The United States not only failed to politically consolidate their military victory, but also faced a war that became increasingly unpopular with their own people at home. The majority of the Americans no longer wanted to support the war in Vietnam. Furthermore, it was a difficult time for the United States government with many social and economic uncertainties and problems. The United States now, like the French in 1954, could not afford to continue the war against the Communists who never gave up fighting. The United States was finally forced to call for a conference to end their involvement in Vietnam.

The Paris Peace Agreement (1973) and Aftermath

The negotiations began in Paris in 1968. Five years later in January 1973, an agreement for ending the war was reached at last among the United States, North Vietnam, South Vietnam, and the National Liberation Front. The two major provisions of the agreement: 1) the complete withdrawal of all American troops from South Vietnam; and 2) the future of South Vietnam will be decided by elections in which all political parties, including the National Liberation Front,

will be free to participate. The Government of the Republic of Vietnam did not want to sign the agreement because the agreement did not call for the withdrawal of the North Vietnamese troops in South Vietnam, and they also did not want to recognize the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam as a legitimate political party. The government of the Republic of Vietnam at the end did sign the agreement because the United States put pressure on them. According to Air Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky, President Thieu received \$7 million for signing the agreement (1976:113).

The Paris Agreement of 1973, like the Geneva Agreement of 1954, did not bring peace to Vietnam; but it was rather a face saving excuse for the United States to get out of the conflict quietly and without embarrassment. The fact was that none of the parties of the agreement wanted to live up to their pledges. For example, according to the agreement, the United States had to withdraw its troops including military advisors and remove its military bases from South Vietnam. The United States did withdraw its troops from South Vietnam but left behind more than 15,000 "civilian" advisors to advise the South Vietnamese armed forces. These "civilian" advisors were regular soldiers before the agreement was signed. The United States removed its military bases from Vietnam; but the United States moved them to Thailand and continued to use these bases to support the South Vietnamese troops in the battlefields

(Amter, 1982:295-297). At the same time, the United States provided more military equipment for South Vietnam. After the agreement went into effect in 1973, the South Vietnamese armed forces became one of the largest and most well equipped armed forces in the world.

The Communists, on the other hand, concentrated their efforts to rebuild the supply-line from North Vietnam to South Vietnam through Laos and Cambodia--the so called Ho Chi Minh Trail. This preparation was later revealed by General Van Tien Dung, the Chief-of-Staff of the North Vietnamese armed forces and the Commander of the North Vietnamese final offensive in 1975.

The strategic route east of the Truong Son Range (what was known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail) was the result of more than 30,000 troops and shock youths. The length of this route, added to that of the other old and new strategic routes used during various campaigns built during the last war, is more than 20,000 kms. The 8-meter wide route of more than 1,000 kms, which we could see now, is our pride. With 5,000 kms of pipeline laid through deep river and streams and on the mountains are more than 1,000 meters high, were capable of providing enough fuel or various battlefronts. More than 10,000 transportation vehicles were put on the road...
(Van, 1976:15)

The Communists had used this route to transport more troops and new military equipment to South Vietnam after the agreement was signed. While the Communists were preparing for their final offensive, the South Vietnamese armed forces was ordered by President Nguyen Van Thieu to pacify and retake the countryside from the Communists.

After the agreement went into effect, the Republic of Vietnam as a matter of policy, attempted to control as much of the countryside as possible (Duiker, 1981:304). Needless to say, everyone had ignored the agreement they had signed, and it seemed clear that everyone was prepared for war, not peace.

Less than two years after the Paris Agreement was signed, the war in Vietnam finally came to an abrupt end. Communist forces overran the South Vietnamese forces in the Spring of 1975. The Communist forces opened their final offensive on March 10th. By April 30th, they captured the Capital city of South Vietnam unopposed by the South Vietnamese forces. The South Vietnamese armed forces could not undertake the job of protecting the city. By that time, there were no South Vietnamese armed forces. They had already disintegrated to the point where they were not able to defend themselves and the country. South Vietnam collapsed, and the Communists became the ultimate victors in Vietnam.

CHAPTER III

ORGANIZATION OF THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE ARMED FORCES

This chapter will examine: (1) the organization and weaknesses of the South Vietnamese armed forces, (2) the 1963 Coup d'Etat and its impact and, (3) the failure of Vietnamization.

Organization

In the late 1940's, the French developed a new strategy (the Navarre's Plan), hoping to defeat the Viet Minh. The French, however, were unable to defeat them. The French now realized that they could not defeat the Viet Minh alone. They tried to rally the non-Communist Vietnamese for their support, hoping that they, together, would be able to defeat the Viet Minh.

First of all, the French helped organize a non-Communist and pro-French government (the Bao Dai Government) to elicit popular support for war against the Viet Minh. The French, however, did not grant full independence for Vietnam. Vietnam remained an associated state within the French Union, and the French still had control over many economic and political aspects in Vietnam.

Second, more significantly, in organizing a government for Vietnam, the French agreed to let the Vietnamese govern-

ment have its own armed forces and helped the Vietnamese organize, train, equip, and finance their new armed forces. The French, however, feared that if an armed force was to be established it would eventually be a major threat to their control over Vietnam, because the Vietnamese might use this armed force to fight against them to regain their independence. And the French also feared that the Vietnamese armed forces might join the Viet Minh and fight against them. As a result, once it was organized, the French put it under their control.

The way the French established and controlled the Vietnamese armed forces made the Vietnamese armed forces look like a branch or a component of the French armed forces. There were French officers at all levels in the Vietnamese armed forces. They held all important posts in the Vietnamese armed forces, particularly, in the Command Structure (Schroch, 1966:842). At the lower levels, there were Vietnamese military officers. However, many of them had French citizenship. The soldiers in the new Vietnamese armed forces were not totally Vietnamese, either.

Prior to the establishment of the Vietnamese armed forces, the French had recruited a large number of Vietnamese to serve in the Colonial Army. In recruiting the Colonial Army, the French recruited those who supported their colonial policy, and the Vietnamese regarded these soldiers as "mercenaries". When the Vietnamese armed forces

were established, the French transferred these soldiers to the Vietnamese armed forces. And, of course, the French taught the Vietnamese soldiers with their military doctrines, organized them to their military patterns, and equipped them with their weapons (most were obsolete). On the whole, the Vietnamese armed forces did not create a good image among the Vietnamese people.

The Vietnamese army was organized into small units, the largest unit was a battalion. The purpose of organizing them into small units was that they could be moved from one place to another with less difficulty, thus making it more suitable to the type of warfare (guerrilla warfare) that the Viet Minh forces were carrying out at that time (Tran, 1978:43). When the Vietnamese armed forces were organized, however, the French seldom used them to fight against the Viet Minh forces. Instead, the French used them to guard highways, bridges, or military installations. The Vietnamese soldiers never had any combat experience, a critical handicap when the Vietnamese themselves took over the fighting against the Communists.

Command Structure

During the period from 1949 to 1954, Vietnam (including North Vietnam) was divided into four military regions. Each military region had two or three sub-regions. Each sub-region had several sectors; each sector had several

sub-sectors. Military headquarters were established in these regions to operate the military and administrative affairs. The commander of region was responsible for both civil and military affairs in the region. The military regions' commanders reported directly to the Chairman of the Joint General Staff. The Chairman of the Joint General Staff reported to the Minister of National Defense and the President. Theoretically, this was how the channels of the command structure of the Vietnamese armed forces operated. However, during this period, the President (Emperor Bao Dai) did not have any real power, and the command structure of the Vietnamese armed forces was in the hands of the French. As a result, all the civil and military affairs of the Vietnamese were still decided by the French. When the Franco-Viet Minh war was over (1954) the Vietnamese armed forces, about 250,000 men in strength, found themselves scattered throughout the country without leaders or any centralized organization.

Reorganization

According to the Geneva Agreements which ended the Franco-Viet Minh War, the French forces were to withdraw from Vietnam. The troops of the Vietnamese Army were also to withdraw from North Vietnam, even though the State of Vietnam (South Vietnam) did not sign the agreement. In return, the Viet Minh were to pull out their forces from

South Vietnam. All parties had 300 days to complete their withdrawal. (After the State of Vietnam completely withdrew its troops from North Vietnam, the State of Vietnam changed its name to the Republic of Vietnam, and the Vietnamese armed forces also changes its name to the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam.)

While the French forces were pulling our from Vietnam, the United States sent administrative and military advisors to help the South Vietnamese to build a strong anti-Communist government and a strong armed force. The United States, like the State of Vietnam, did not sign the agreement. Furthermore, with firm backing from the United States, Diem, Prime Minister of South Vietnam, refused to hold any elections concerning the unification of the country provided by the Geneva Agreements.

In helping the South Vietnamese reorganize their armed forces, the United States faced many difficulties. The French forces were about to leave Vietnam after the war was over, but the French High Command, still directing the war against the Viet Minh; continued its tight control of the Vietnamese nationalist military forces (Lansdale, 1972:150). The French, in fact, were unwilling to relinquish their control over the Vietnamese armed forces. As a Swiss journalist put it:

The French are like a man giving up his mistress. He knows the affair is over, but he hates it when he sees his mistress ride by in a big car of a rich man (U.S.) she has just met (Lansdale, 1972:150).

The United States did not wish to antagonize the French,

but their friendship turned sour over the issue of who should reorganize, train, equip, and ultimately control the South Vietnamese armed forces (Shaplen, 1966:115-122). However, when Diem successfully requested the French to pull out their troops and transfer the control of the Vietnamese armed forces to the South Vietnamese government, the United States began to play an active role in reorganizing, training, equipping, and financing the South Vietnamese armed forces.

In reorganizing the South Vietnamese armed forces, the South Vietnamese military leadership committed two major errors. At that time, their major emphasis was to organize their armed forces into a conventional armed force. For example, the South Vietnamese troops were organized into large units, such as divisions, corps, etc. According to General Cao Van Vien, the Chairman of the Joint General Staff of the South Vietnamese armed forces, the South Vietnamese were organized into a conventional armed forces because they feared a North Vietnamese invasion of the South as North Korea had invaded South Korea a few years before (Cao, 1980).

The impact of this type of reorganization was, however, detrimental. First, the war in Vietnam was not a conventional war; the North Vietnamese did not invade South Vietnam as in Korea. The Communist forces in the Vietnamese conflict used guerilla warfare. Evidence shows that

conventional armed forces often prove to be ineffective in this type of war (Thompson, 1968:166).

Second, in order to have an adequate conventional armed force, there must be well-trained officers. The South Vietnamese armed forces at that time did not have enough well-trained officers. To solve this problem, the South Vietnamese armed forces had to promote inexperienced officers to command troops, or to assign junior officers to command the posts of senior officers. As General James Lawton Collins, the American senior advisor to Vietnam, put it:

In general, the actual grade structure of Vietnamese armed forces' units was far below the authorized level. This condition was most apparent in senior command and staff positions and especially in the infantry battalions and armoured cavalry squadrons (1975:97).

Lastly, because of its limited resources, South Vietnam had to depend on the United States for financial requirements and equipment. And throughout the years, the United States lavishly provided them all kinds of military aid and this had created a critical impact on the South Vietnamese soldiers. According to a high ranking South Vietnamese military officer:

I will tell you what happened. At a certain point neither the troops nor the officers are willing any longer to walk to battle, hacking their way through jungles if necessary. So they stay in their helicopters and get shot down or cut off from American rescue, or drive along the road, where they get shelled or ambushed, and cut to pieces.

Every officer knows this, but our army has

become flabby and lazy over the years, we owe some of that to the kind of luxury aid you gave us (Brown, 1976:325).

But most importantly, because they used to depend on the United States for everything, when the United States reduced its aid, the whole armed forces could not operate.

The second major error was that, as mentioned above, when the South Vietnamese armed forces were reorganized into a conventional armed force, the South Vietnamese military leadership did not pay much attention to the development of the semi-militia forces, such as the Civil Guard (Regional Forces) or the Self-Defense Corps (Popular Forces). Evidence shows that, in a guerrilla warfare, these forces played a very significant role in combating against the guerrillas (Thompson, 1966:234). These forces were organized right in their own villages or districts. As a result, they know the people and the locations in their own areas better than the regular soldiers, thus helping them fight the guerrillas more effectively. More importantly, they were to fight to defend their families and their villages, and they proved to be highly motivated soldiers.

But as of 1964, ten years after the South Vietnamese armed forces had been reorganized, the Popular and the Regional Forces, as one author put it:

...were little more than armed bands of young men; others were private armies and gangs "federalized" into the service of the government of Vietnam (Collins, 1975:42).

They were regarded as second class soldiers and were equipped with obsolete weapons. According to General William C. Westmoreland, as of 1968, the Territorial Forces were "lightly armed", principally with the semi-automatic M1 carbine; they had neither automatic weapons nor mortars (Westmoreland and Sharp, 1968: 210). Officers who commanded these semi-militia forces were officers who were relieved from the regular forces for ill-conduct or ineffectiveness. Additionally, their salaries were minimal, and they often did not have any formal training

In a study by W. Scott Thompson and Donaldson D. Frizzell, it was concluded that:

The Regional Forces and the Popular Forces took the brunt of the war, more than any other South Vietnamese armed force, and they were the prime targets of Communist forces attacks until 1972. The RF and PF share of combat deaths was higher than their share of the RVNAF force (1977:258).

They further stated:

Adding the cost to the assessment of effectiveness suggests that the RF/PF, dollar for dollar, were the most effective large force in the killing of VC/NVN troops in South Vietnam. The figures indicate that the RF/PF accounted for 30 percent of the VC/NVN combat deaths of the RVNAF program budget costs. More startling, the territorial forces accounted for 12-30 percent of all VC/NVN combat deaths, depending on the year, but for only 2-4 percent of the total program budget costs of the war (1977:269).

Additionally, many of the officers whom I talked to said that these forces not only were suitable to the type of warfare that they had fought, but also did not require a great deal of financial support as the regular forces.

Furthermore, they strongly believed that they could have defended South Vietnam if these forces were well-organized, well-led, well-equipped, and more importantly, had been developed much earlier.

The November 1, 1963 Coup d'Etat and Its Impact

Successfully helped by the United States, the South Vietnamese armed forces were strong enough to help Diem stay in power. The South Vietnamese armed forces helped Diem's government extend its control to the rural areas. They destroyed a great number of Viet Cong (Communists) who stayed behind in South Vietnam after the partition in 1954. According to William J. Duiker:

For the first time. ARVN military units attacked Communist base areas in the Plain Reeds, on the Ca Mau Peninsula, and in Zone D, one of the Party's major base areas, north of Sai Gon, causing severe losses to the revolutionary infrastructure...Party membership in South Vietnam, which had stood at about 5,000 in mid-1957, had fallen to one-third that level by the end of the year. Party historians concede the difficulties during that period, admitting that GVN efforts reduced the prestige as well as the real strength of the revolutionary movement and "significantly weakened its ability to carry on the struggle." It was, in the words of one historian in Ha Noi, "the darkest period" for the revolution in the South (1981:184).

Experts estimated that the South Vietnamese armed forces had become one of the best in Asia (Lacouture, 1966:118). In short, the South Vietnamese armed forces had contributed a great deal to the survival of South Vietnam in its darkest days.

By the early 1960's, however, the political situation in South Vietnam began to deteriorate. Diem became very unpopular. The South Vietnamese people resented this dictatorial power, particularly his uncompromising policy toward the Buddhists. There were massive demonstrations by the Buddhists throughout the country and they demanded that he and his government be replaced.

In response to these events, Diem arrested many Buddhist leaders and charged that they were Communists. When the situation got worse, he used the armed forces to put down Buddhist demonstrations. But, the armed forces sometimes refused to stop the demonstrations because most of the men in the armed forces were Buddhists. Diem's policy toward the Buddhists not only displeased the population who were mostly Buddhists (80 percent of the population were Buddhists), but it also displeased the armed forces. By 1963, the situation seemed out of control, and on November 1, a group of senior generals (mostly Buddhists) who were eliminated or assigned to unimportant posts in the armed forces by Diem, organized and staged a coup d'etat. The coup d'etat, however, had brought South Vietnam more political chaos, almost causing South Vietnam's fall to the Communists. Fortunately, the United States troops were sent to South Vietnam and helped prevent this from happening. But this coup d'etat had two major negative impacts on the South Vietnamese armed forces: it had weakened the

armed forces capability because of the "lack of leadership" within the armed forces; and the introduction of American combat troops who took the responsibility of fighting away from the South Vietnamese armed forces, turning the South Vietnamese armed forces into a security force.

Following Diem's overthrow, the South Vietnamese armed forces appeared to be falling apart. The South Vietnamese armed forces had severely suffered from the "lack of leadership." After the coup, the generals began to fight with each other for power and personal gains. They forgot their duties--to command the troops and to defend the country. Coups followed and each time there was a coup, the soldiers did not know what generals or group of generals to obey or to be loyal to. During this period, each year, more than 100,000 soldiers deserted from the armed forces (Harrison, 1982:243). Also some of the officers and their troops sided with the dissidents, refusing to obey the orders from the generals in Sai Gon. The South Vietnamese armed forces were in total chaos!

The coups and the events which followed the first coup had another critical impact on the South Vietnamese armed forces. Because of internal fighting, South Vietnam was on the verge of collapse. To remedy this situation, the United States brought in its combat troops. From this time on the United States troops did the fighting for the South Vietnamese armed forces. The South Vietnam-

ese armed forces were increasingly used as a security force--to maintain order in the cities and to pacify the countryside. Since then, the South Vietnamese soldiers seldom engaged in major battles against the Communists and gained no combat experience; which they needed, especially when the United States troops would leave Vietnam.

The introduction of United States combat troops also had another negative impact on the South Vietnamese soldiers. During the period (1965-1970), when the United States troops were actively involved in the fighting against the Communists, there was a common belief among the South Vietnamese soldiers that the United States would fight until they defeated the Communists, because the South Vietnamese thought that the Vietnamese conflict was not a conflict between the Vietnamese, but rather, a conflict between the East and the West (Hosmer et al., 1978:14). Therefore, it was the United States' responsibility to defeat the Communists, not theirs. "Why fight? the Americans will fight for us." This attitude had weakened the armed forces' morale tremendously. As it later turned out, the South Vietnamese soldiers were shocked when the United States withdrew from Vietnam. In short, the period from 1963 to 1968 was one of the most disastrous periods in the South Vietnamese armed forces' history.

The Command Structure (1963-1975)

During this time, South Vietnam was divided into four military corps. Each corp had several provinces; in each province, there were several districts. All the provinces and districts were headed by military officers. The corps commanders, the provincial and district chiefs were responsible for both civil and military affairs in the territory under their command. Corp commanders received directives from the Chairman of the Joint General Staff (JGS); and the Chairman of the JGS received directives from the President. Theoretically, this was how the channels of command of the South Vietnamese armed forces operated.

Throughout the years, President Nguyen Van Thieu's excessive power in the execution of the war was heavily criticized by military authorities, especially by the Joint General Staff. They often complained that the President handled the military matters without consulting with the Joint General Staff. In fact, the President (both Diem and Thieu) often gave orders directly to the corps commanders and provincial and district chiefs, bypassing the Joint General Staff (Hosmer et al., 1978:102). As a high ranking officer later revealed, every time he wanted to ask General Cao Van Vien, the Chairman of the Joint General Staff, something, General Vien told him:

Go to Corps commanders and get direct instructions from President Thieu. Our mission is not to mount big operations, so the Province chiefs and the Corps

Commanders have the responsibility for the security of their area. That is all (Hosmer et al., 1978: 103).

In short, there was no unified command between the president (political) and the top levels of the South Vietnamese armed forces.

Vietnamization

By the end of 1968, there was more than half a million American soldiers in South Vietnam, but a military victory for the United States, as pointed out earlier, seemed illusive and the problems began to mount against the United States government. The United States government, on the one hand, was facing the consequences for the cost of financing the war; which severely weakened the United States economy. On the other hand, as the death toll of American soldiers rose; the war in Vietnam became unpopular with the American people at home. The majority of the American people no longer supported the war. For example, there were many anti-war demonstrations throughout the United States, particularly on the campuses of major American colleges and universities. Facing these difficulties, the United States government was forced to find ways to end its involvement in Vietnam. But as the world's most powerful nation, disengagement from Vietnam was not an easy task for the United States government to do; because, on the one hand, it would damage the United States credibility if the

United States backed out from Vietnam. On the other hand, the United States government could not afford to continue the war not only because it could not win militarily, but it also no longer had the support of the American people. The United States was in a dilemma.

The United States, however, came up with two solutions: (1) to bombard North Vietnam and force the Communists to the negotiation table to end the conflict, and (2) to provide the South Vietnamese armed forces with massive military equipment so that they could fight the Communists themselves when the United States troops left Vietnam. This particular plan was better known as "Vietnamization".

The Communists finally agreed to come to the conference table in Paris at the end of 1968. While all parties were negotiating in Paris, the United States gradually withdrew its troops and sent more military equipment for the South Vietnamese armed forces. At the same time in South Vietnam, the Government of the Republic of Vietnam issued a General Mobilization Ordinance (1968) in which all male citizens from the age of 18 to 43 years of age were to be drafted into military service. Even though the government did not implement this ordinance forcefully, because there were many people who were able to avoid being drafted into the armed forces one way or another (Hosmer et al., 1978:118-119), it helped the South Vietnamese armed forces increase their manpower from 634,000 in 1967 to 820,000 at the end of

Table 2

The Growth and Development of the South Vietnamese Armed Forces^a

	Army	Air Force	Navy	Marine Corps	Regional Forces	Popular Forces	Grand Total
1954-55.....	170,000	3,500	2,200	1,500	54,000 ^b	48,000 ^b	279,000
1959-60.....	136,000 ^b	4,600	4,300	2,000	49,000 ^c	48,000	243,000
1964.....	220,000	11,000	12,000	7,000	96,000	168,000	514,000
1967.....	303,000	16,000	16,000	8,000	151,000	149,000 ^c	643,000
1968.....	380,000	19,000	19,000	9,000	220,000	173,000	820,000
1969.....	416,000	36,000	30,000	11,000	190,000	214,000	897,000
1970.....	416,000	46,000	40,000	13,000	207,000	246,000	968,000
1971-72.....	410,000 ^c	50,000	42,000	14,000	284,000	248,000	1,048,000
1973-74.....	460,000	50,000	45,000	17,000	285,000	250,000	1,107,000
1974-75.....	450,000	60,000	40,000	15,000	285,000	250,000	1,090,000

^aAll figures are approximate only.

^bCivil Guard (later Regional Forces and Self-Defense Corps later Popular Forces).

^cDecline due to increased desertions and recruiting shortfalls.

Sources: Adapted from James Lawton Collins, Jr. The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army. Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1975. and from The Military Balance. London: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1976.

1968--an increase of 200,000 soldiers in one year. And by the end of 1972, the South Vietnamese armed forces became one of the largest armed forces in the world. It had more than one million men.

The United States not only financed this large armed force but also equipped them with large amounts of the most modern and sophisticated weapons. For example, by 1970 almost all of the soldiers in the South Vietnamese armed forces were armed with the M-16 automatic rifle. Furthermore, when the United States troops withdrew from South Vietnam following the 1973 Paris Agreement, they left behind most of their military equipment. Whether or not the United States had used Vietnamization as a "scape goat", was not the central issue, but it must be recognized that Vietnamization had made the South Vietnamese armed forces one of the largest and most modern and sophisticated armed forces in the world.

Although Vietnamization had made the South Vietnamese armed forces one of the largest and most modern and sophisticated in the world, it met some resentment from the South Vietnamese leaders. Many South Vietnamese, including President Thieu, refused to accept the term "Vietnamization". They argued that the Vietnamese had been fighting against the Communists long before the United States troops were in South Vietnam. In fact, the Vietnamese military officials used to call "Vietnamization" the "United States Dollar and

Vietnam Blood Sharing Plan" (Hosmer et al., 1978:37).

Furthermore, the South Vietnamese military leadership later argued that the United States had provided them with too many different kinds of weapons, and the weapons were so modern and sophisticated, they could not absorb and operate them. Ironically, the South Vietnamese military leadership often claimed that the Communists received more modern weapons than they; now that they had modern weapons they did not want them!

Instead of blaming the United States for providing them with many kinds of modern military equipment or using the South Vietnamese armed forces as a "scape goat", the South Vietnamese military leadership should have devoted their energy and time to teach their soldiers how to utilize these weapons to their advantages. Furthermore, they should have realized that defending South Vietnam was not the United States responsibility, but theirs, and that only they could do it. However, they failed to do so.

The failure of Vietnamization, however, was not because the United States provided South Vietnam with many kinds of modern weapons, but rather because the United States provided them with such a large quantity of weapons; which helped the South Vietnamese military leaders, whose aim it was to enlarge their armed forces. The South Vietnamese forces became so large that it reached the point where the commanders did not know how many soldiers they

had in their own units. The consequences of having a large conventional armed force, as pointed out earlier, were that they were unable to control and maintain it because of their limited resources; and furthermore, fighting against guerrilla warfare, conventional armed forces often proved to be ineffective.

CHAPTER IV

PERSONNEL AND ARMAMENTS

In fighting a war, whether or not it is a conventional or guerrilla war, and to win it, depends almost entirely on the will and the ability of the men (officers and recruits) who made up that armed force. This chapter will qualitatively and quantitatively analyze the characteristics of the South Vietnamese soldiers (officers and recruits); including their training and armaments.

Officers

Social and Educational Background

The social and educational backgrounds of the South Vietnamese military officers can be best summarized in the words of a former United States senior military advisor in Vietnam, General Richard M. Lee:

It appeared to me that the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) officers as a group came from the middle and upper-educated classes of Vietnamese society, comprised primarily of a few of the old aristocracy, the officers group created by the French military during the Indo-China War, and the raising commercial/business classes from the major cities, particularly Sai Gon (Collins, 1975).

In addition, there was a significant number of senior officers who were Catholic and came from North and Central

Vietnam. For example, General Nguyen Van Thieu, who later became South Vietnam's President, was Catholic and came from Central Vietnam. Air Marshall Nguyen Cao Ky, who later became South Vietnam's Prime Minister, came from North Vietnam, and many others. The South Vietnamese soldiers, in contrast, came dominantly from the peasant and Buddhist families of South Vietnam. Many of them were poor and uneducated. Thus, there was a big gap between the social class origins of the officers and the soldiers, and they tended to represent different values and priorities. The officers, therefore, found it often difficult to appreciate their soldiers and to command them and more importantly to motivate them to commit themselves totally in the conflict.

The Officers and the French Legacy

Since 1949 when the South Vietnamese armed forces were organized to 1975 when the whole armed force disintegrated, the South Vietnamese military officers experienced numerous destructive changes under different political regimes. These changes had greatly damaged the armed forces capability to defend South Vietnam.

From 1949 to 1955, when the Vietnamese armed forces were under the control of the French, the French staffed their officers at all levels in the armed forces. As a result, as Edmund Gullion, the American Chargé d'Affairs in Vietnam during that time, states:

It remained difficult to inculcate nationalist ardor in a native army whose officers and non-coms were primarily white Frenchmen (Shaplen, 1967:81-82).

Also according to Robert Shaplen, the Vietnamese armed forces had 2,600 Vietnamese officers, and only a handful above the rank of major, and some 7,000 French officers (1967:81). However, near the end of the Franco-Viet Minh War, the French did put some effort into training Vietnamese officers. For example, by the end of 1953 the French built two military academies for training Vietnamese officers. The French also selected some Vietnamese and sent them to France for military training. However, the number was insignificant (Dong, 1980:189). As a result, in 1954 when the French finally pulled out from Vietnam they left behind an armed force of more than 250,000 men and a dozen Vietnamese military officers above the rank of major who had no combat or administrative experience.

The Officers and the Americans

As mentioned earlier, in organizing the South Vietnamese armed forces, the South Vietnamese military leadership organized their armed forces into a conventional armed force. Many officers were needed for such organization, but there were only a limited number of officers available in the South Vietnamese armed forces. In order to have an adequate conventional armed force, according to General Do Young Chang (Dr. Chang was a general in the South Korean Armed

Force and had visited South Vietnam on many occasions, and was one of the people the author interviewed), there must be sufficient numbers of well-trained officers. As pointed out earlier, the South Vietnamese armed forces at that time did not have enough well-trained officers. To solve this problem, the South Vietnamese armed forces promoted inexperienced officers to command the troops and run the military administrative machinery of a conventional armed force. For example, a lieutenant was assigned to command a company or a deputy commander a battalion. A General James L. Collins put it, "...the actual grade structure of the Vietnamese armed forces was far below the authorized level" (1975:97).

The United States tried to help the Vietnamese train as many officers as possible to fill the gap. The United States helped build more military schools for officers. The United States also provided schools with American instructors and sent many South Vietnamese officers to the United States and other countries for training. But still officer shortages became a critical problem, most importantly these officers were wrongly trained and its impact was critical. As Robert Shaplen indicated:

...by sending the most able Vietnamese junior and senior officers to be trained at bases and camps in the United States and in Okinawa, MAAG was creating a Vietnamese officer corps that was not educated to handle a guerrilla war situation. As the war later unfolded, most of these officers demonstrated their incapability to confront a fluid guerrilla type of action, and they insisted on

meeting the Viet Cong challenge with a conventional response that brought about defeat after defeat (1967:139).

In addition, while the Americans were in Vietnam, the South Vietnamese military leadership let the United States take the responsibility of conducting the war. They let the United States fight against the Communists. As General Cao Van Vien, the Chairman of the Joint General Staff of the South Vietnamese armed forces, told General Tran Van Don, the last Minister of Defense of South Vietnam:

We Vietnamese have no military doctrine because the command of all operations in Vietnam is in the hands, is the responsibility, of the American side. We cannot have a Vietnamese military doctrine. We can get it only on the day when we will be in charge, when we will be responsible for the operations in South Vietnam (Hosmer et al., 1978:102).

Furthermore, according to one high ranking South Vietnamese military officer:

When I was division commander and corp commander, every year I got a heavy book and it was the military plan. And when I read the plan, on one side is Vietnamese and on the other is English. And I see that it is translated from the English and it is not the plan of General Vien (The Chairman of the Joint General Staff). So I think this is no good because General Vien did not do anything--he let General Westmoreland's staff write the plan and they sent a copy of the plan to General Vien and J3 translated into Vietnamese and signed (Hosmer et al., 1978:72).

In other words, the South Vietnamese military officers let the United States do all the planning and the conducting of the war. As a result, when the United States left Vietnam in 1973, South Vietnam had an armed force of more than one

million men and many thousand officers, but only a small number of these officers were well-trained and had meaningful combat and administrative skills.

The Officers and Their Leadership

Following the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, the French no longer had control over the South Vietnamese armed forces. The Vietnamese armed forces were now under the control of the South Vietnamese government. More specifically, they were under the control of Diem, the new Prime Minister of South Vietnam. Diem became the Prime Minister of South Vietnam when the French left Vietnam. Before this time, Diem had many time refused the position of Prime Minister offered to him by the French and Emperor Bao Dai, because one of his major demands was never met--he wanted to have complete control of the armed forces (Fishel, 1965: 195-204). When the French left, he accepted the Prime Ministership and wasted no time in consolidating complete control over the armed forces.

In consolidating the control over the armed forces, Diem eliminated the pro-French officers in the armed forces. For example, he dismissed General Nguyen Van Hinh, the Chief of Staff of the Vietnamese armed forces, who was a Vietnamese but had French citizenship. One possible reason for this elimination is that Diem did not like the French. As Kim and Ziring put it: "As a fervant nationalist Diem could

not be accused of pro-French proclivities" (1977:268). And because of his staunch anti-French feeling, he did not like those who worked or cooperated with the French. Diem, in fact, not only wanted to keep himself a "pure Vietnamese" but he also wanted to keep his armed force "pure Vietnamese".

While he was eliminating the pro-French officers, he also tried to eliminate the pro-Bao Dai (Emperor Bao Dai) military officers in the armed forces. Prior to the transfer of the actual control of the armed forces to the Vietnamese government, the Vietnamese armed forces were "officially" under the control of Emperor Bao Dai, and he had a number of military officers loyal to him. These officers wanted Bao Dai to be the leader of South Vietnam. Diem realized that these officers could be a danger to his power, and he eliminated them from the armed forces (LaCouture, 1966:117).

To replace these officers, Diem selected men who he thought would be loyal to him and his regime. Under his regime, military officers had to meet three major requirements: they had to be Catholic (Diem's religion), Northerners (mostly refugees from North Vietnam and who were staunch anti-Communists), and Centralists (the people who came from the same region he was from). These were also the requirements used to decide who would be promoted to higher ranks (Tran, 1978:50). These personnel policies of Diem's were greatly resented by the South Vietnamese armed forces made

up of mostly Southerners and Buddhists, and they directly and indirectly contributed to the 1963 coup. For one thing, the coup participants were all Southerners and Buddhists, who were also pro-French officers (trained and served in the French armed forces).

Also under Diem's regime, he and his brother Nhu organized a political party known as the Can Lao Nhan Vi Dang (The Personal Labour Revolution Party). The main purpose of this party was to develop a counter-Communist ideology. Its central theme was, furthermore, to glorify Diem's character and philosophy. The people who worked for the government, especially officers in the armed forces, were also forced to be loyal to Diem and his philosophy. The officers in the armed forces who did not join or become a member of this party were eliminated or assigned to unimportant posts in the armed forces. The four major generals who led the coup against Diem in 1963 fell into this later category. When Diem was overthrown, the coup leaders eliminated most of the officers who were selected by Diem in the armed forces and selected their own officers to replace them. Thus, more officers were eliminated. This not only made the shortage of officers severe, but also made the armed forces lose some of the ablest officers.

The overthrow of Diem did not bring any constructive changes in the armed forces. Instead, it brought more problems for the country and the armed forces. There were

seven coups (and many attempted and unsuccessful coups) which happened within this time period (1963-1967). Each time there was a coup, there were more changes in the personnel of the armed forces. Each time a general came to power, he selected his own officers to the key positions in the armed forces. As Air Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky, who came to power after a military coup in 1965, later admitted: "I picked them (officers) on the basis of true friendship" (1976:90).

General Ky was not only the one who selected his friends to key posts in the armed forces, but many other generals who came to power did the same. For example, when General Nguyen Van Thieu became President of South Vietnam in 1967, one of his first major tasks was eliminating the officers selected by General Ky and selecting his own officers to take their places. President Thieu, like President Diem and other South Vietnamese political leaders before him, did not select the best officers for the important posts in the armed forces, but he selected those officers who supported him, regardless of their ability. For example, he appointed General Dang Van Quang, the most corrupt and hated general in the South Vietnamese armed forces, to be his Special Assistant for Military and Security Affairs (Hosmer et al., 1978:70). According to General Tran Van Don, the Minister of Defense:

The figures were unusually grim. Of sixty generals and two hundred full colonels, fewer than

one-third were "clean" (1978:236).

At the end of 1967, only two of forty Vietnamese officers of the general rank under Diem remained in the armed forces. Additionally, officers with more than 25 years of service were forced to retire from the armed forces. Many more officers were lost in this way. More importantly, many of the most able officers such as "Big" Minh, Don, Dinh, Vy, Kim and Khanh were lost from the South Vietnamese armed forces.

At the top levels, personal friendship and political support were some of the major requirements for the selection and promotion of officers. At the lower levels, money was the most important requirement for officers to be assigned or promoted to the desirable posts in the armed forces. This practice became so open and wide-spread, particularly when General Thieu was the president of South Vietnam from 1967-1975, that according to Douglas Welsh:

High positions in the government went to the highest bidder and corruption was rife in both government and armed forces, no matter what the long term damage might be (1981:188).

During this period, the war's casualties ran high and officers did not want to be sent to the fronts. In order to stay away from the front or to be transferred to non-combat units, an officer had to bribe his superiors with money. This practice became a major problem for the armed forces, and it became beyond the control of the government and the leaders of the armed forces. The officers who were sent to the front were the ones who did not have money or

connections. It was also the armed forces' policy to send the ineffective officers or officers of ill conduct to the front as a punishment.

Throughout the years, the South Vietnamese military officers were used as political tools by their leaders to gain and protect their power and privileges. In addition, the South Vietnamese armed forces did not send their best officers to command troops on the front, but rather they sent the poor, ill disciplined and ineffective officers.

Recruits

Social and Educational Background

South Vietnam was one of the poorest nations in the world. For example, its Gross National Product (G.N.P.) in 1974 was \$4.2 billion (\$220 per capita) (Dupuy, 1974:331). These numbers however, do not represent the whole story. The fact was that about 7 to 10 percent of the population controlled 70 to 80 percent of the nation's wealth. There was a big gap between the very rich and the very poor. The term "middle class" was not often used to classify the South Vietnamese social classes.

The majority of the South Vietnamese soldiers came from very poor families. The soldiers from the lower classes in other nations, especially from poor nations, saw the armed forces as a place for career advancement. This was not the case for the soldiers in the South Vietnamese armed forces.

They did not believe that the armed forces was a place for career advancement. This point is brought up by Guenter Lewy:

There was not upward mobility because secondary education that was essential for entry and advancement in the civil service and the army officer corps was available only to the sons of the prosperous. Peasant boys who were sent to primary school but then could not go on to secondary school understandably developed discontent and resentment. Frustrated in their own ambitions, many joined the Viet Cong, who promised advancement and rewarded outstanding performances. By contrast, complained by the American advisors, in the Vietnamese government, which seeks victory in a revolutionary war for the allegiance of the people, the privileged elite reigned supreme (1978:95).

Further more, they believed that the armed forces were a political tool to be used by their leaders and by foreign powers for their own benefit. Consequently, most of the young men from different classes never wanted to be in the armed forces. They were there because they did not have any other alternatives. They were forcefully drafted when they reached the age of 18.

The South Vietnamese soldiers seldom received an education above the elementary level. This was because most of the higher educational institutions, including the secondary institutions, were established in the urban areas or the provincial capitals and most were privately owned. In the rural areas, where most of the Vietnamese lived, the only education available was the elementary level. Most of the recruits came from the rural areas.

The South Vietnamese Soldiers and Foreign Influence

When the French were forced to leave Vietnam in 1955-1956, the Vietnamese armed forces numbered between 300,000 and 400,000 men in strength. It was a large armed force. However, its role in the conflict (The Franco-Viet Minh War) was insignificant, because the French Forces did most of the fighting against the Viet Minh forces. The French organized and controlled the Vietnamese armed forces, but did not use the Vietnamese troops for combat. The French, instead, used the Vietnamese soldiers to guard highways, bridges, or military installations. There was only a small number of Vietnamese soldiers (mostly the paratroopers) who were used to fight against the Viet Minh forces, especially in the period near the end of the conflict. This happened probably because the French began to run out of manpower.

Why did not the French use the Vietnamese soldiers for combat is not clear; but probably because the French did not trust them. They also did not pay attention to the training of the Vietnamese soldiers. Thus, for almost six years since the Vietnamese armed forces were established in 1949, the Vietnamese soldiers did not have much combat experience and were not properly trained. More importantly, because they were on the losing side, their morale was extremely low.

After the French finally pulled their troops out from Vietnam, the United States began to expand its involvement

in the Vietnamese conflict. The United States' involvement in Vietnam, particularly the introduction of United States' combat troops, had three profound negative impacts on the South Vietnamese soldiers. First of all, the South Vietnamese soldiers believed that the Vietnamese conflict was not a conflict between the Vietnamese (North and South) but an international conflict between the East and West (Hosmer et al., 1978:260). Because of this belief, the South Vietnamese soldiers thought the United States' troops would stay and fight against the Communists until they won. They believed the defeating of the Communists was the United States' responsibility, not theirs.

Secondly, when the United States' combat troops were in Vietnam, the South Vietnamese military leadership let the United States dictate the fighting against the Communists. And while the United States' troops were fighting against the Communists, the South Vietnamese military leadership used their forces to pacify the countryside. In other words, they used their forces as a security force. The South Vietnamese military leaders should have let the United States know that it was their war and they must let the South Vietnamese soldiers to take a greater role in the fighting against the Communists. The South Vietnamese military leadership, however, was too passive. They let the United States do what it pleased. The problem of not using South Vietnamese soldiers to perform combat duty was that it

denied the South Vietnamese soldiers the combat experience they needed.

Lastly, when the United States helped the South Vietnamese to train their soldiers, they trained them (the South Vietnamese soldiers) to fight a conventional war. As mentioned earlier, the war in Vietnam was not a conventional war. The Communists used guerilla warfare (strategies and tactics) in this conflict. As a result, all the training was not applicable for the war they were fighting. They also trained them like American soldiers; to depend a great deal on fire and air power. It became a major problem when the United States reduced their support for them; the South Vietnamese armed forces could not fight effectively.

The Soldiers and the Conflict

The rank and file of the South Vietnamese armed forces was made up of men from South Vietnam. Most of them came from the lower class families, and many of them were Buddhists. In contrast, officers and political leaders came from the upper class families, and were mostly from Central and North Vietnam. For example, General Nguyen Van Thieu and President Ngo Dinh Diem were Catholic and came from Central Vietnam, and Vice Air Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky was a Northerner. Another example, in 1975, in Military Region I (Corps I), two of the three infantry division commanders were Northerners, and five out of the six provincial chiefs and mayors were

Northerners (Nguyen and Tran 1980:78). The soldiers felt they were different from their leaders. They were not able to identify themselves with their leaders.

In addition, the soldiers, for the most part, did not know much about the Communists. They did not have strong feelings of anti-Communism, as their officers and their leaders did. The problem with this attitude was that the soldiers were not as committed to the cause of the conflict as they should have been. Consequently, they did not want to participate in the fighting, a fight they did not understand.

This lack of commitment of the anti-Communist cause on the part of the South Vietnamese soldiers became a major problem when the war escalated because the soldiers began to desert from the armed forces. Some avoided being in the infantry units by giving their salaries to their officers or simply staying home, or they paid their officers for a transfer into a non-combat unit. Desertion and corruption became a widespread problem.

It was estimated that one million men were in the South Vietnamese armed forces, but according to General Tran Van Don, the last Minister of Defense, there were only 100,000 men who did the actual fighting (Hosmer et al., 1978:277). Furthermore, since the soldiers' salaries were low, the young people avoided the armed forces, looking for other jobs where they could find better pay, thus depriving the

armed forces of talented recruits.

Armaments

Training

The South Vietnamese soldiers, for the most part, were inadequately trained. Their improper training resulted from: (1) the demands for more soldiers at the front, (2) the training they received was not suitable for the type of war they were fighting, and (3) the lack of qualified instructors at the training centers. These weaknesses, as we shall see, were critical handicaps of the South Vietnamese soldiers; and had significantly contributed to the final collapse of South Vietnam in 1975.

As a matter of fact, while the war was going on, more soldiers were killed and wounded at the fronts. Consequently, there was always a great demand for more soldiers. Facing this problem, the South Vietnamese military leadership cut short the training time for their recruits. In short, they were more eager to send the recruits out to the battlefields than to train them properly.

The recruits were not only poorly trained but they were also wrongly trained. The war in Vietnam (as stated earlier) was a guerrilla war; but the South Vietnamese soldiers were trained to fight a conventional war. For example, they were trained to fight in large battlefields where a large number of soldiers (e.g. divisions, battalions, etc.,) fought toge-

ther. But, as it was often the case, the Communists fought against the South Vietnamese soldiers with small units (e.g. squads, platoons, etc.), and proved to be effective. During the war, they successfully wore down and frustrated the South Vietnamese forces morally, physically, and materially. The South Vietnamese military leaders, however, failed to revise their training methods. Consequently, their soldiers proved to be ineffective when they confronted the Communists in the battlefields.

In addition to the methods and the length of training, there was a severe shortage of qualified instructors to train the soldiers. This situation can best be described in the words of former United States' senior advisor to Vietnam, General James Lawton Collins, Jr.:

The most significant obstacle to effective training was poor leadership at the training center level. The most highly qualified officers should have been placed in training positions; but too often these posts were filled by officers who were relieved of combat commands. Their superiors often reasoned that such officers should do less damage in these positions of seemingly little responsibility than as combat officers, and, in the short run, their logic was probably sound. But poor leadership at the top quickly affected lower echelons, starting a cycle of poor training and poor combat effectiveness (1975:124).

The problem was further compounded when the troop's commanders did not want to lose their best officers, and as a result they did not want to send their best officers to the training centers to train the soldiers. Furthermore, there were only a few experienced and dedicated officers

and they did not want to become instructors because they believed that to be an instructor meant a longer time to be promoted (Dong, 1973:226). General Dong V. Khuyen also said that there were too many old instructors in the training centers and these instructors used the same methods to train the soldiers as they did twenty years ago (1978:228).

Armaments

The South Vietnamese soldiers were ill-equipped compared to the Communists, especially in the early years of the war. As General William C. Westmoreland pointed out:

Regular troops were equipped with standard U.S. World War II weapons such as the M1 rifle, the the Brown-automatic rifle, and the Browning light machine gun. Territorial Forces were lightly armed, principally with the semi-automatic M1 carbine, they had neither automatic weapons nor mortar (Westmoreland and Sharp, 1968:210).

However, after the Tet Offensive (1968), and the initiation of Vietnamization, the South Vietnamese soldiers began to be equipped with more modern and sophisticated weapons. After the United States' troops withdrew from South Vietnam at the end of 1973, the United States provided South Vietnam with thousands of aircraft, tanks, ships, and various kinds of military equipment.

These weapons made the South Vietnamese armed forces one of the largest and most sophisticated armed forces in the world. The South Vietnamese armed forces, however, were unable to utilize these weapons to their fullest cap-

Table 3
South Vietnam Armed Forces' Armaments
(Before Vietnamization)

Principal Equipment	
<hr/>	
<u>Weapons</u>	
200	light and medium tanks
500	armoured cars and personnel carriers
1,200	pieces of artillery
<u>Ships</u>	
14	escort and patrol vessels
3	coastal minesweepers
20	motor gunboats
215	landing ships
550	motorized junks
<u>Aircraft</u>	
240	combat aircraft (F-5As, A-37Bs, A-1Es, etc.)
250	helicopters (CH-34s, Bell Iroquois, etc.)
70	transports (C-47s, C-119s, etc.)

Sources: Adapted from Robert C. Sellers, Ed. Armed Forces of the Third World. New York: Praeger, 1971. and from James Lawton Collins, Jr. The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Armed Forces. Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1975.

Table 4
South Vietnam Armed Forces' Armaments
(After Vietnamization)

Principal Equipment	
<hr/>	
<u>Weapons</u>	
800	light and medium tanks (M-41, M-47, M-48, etc.)
700	armoured cars and personnel carriers
1,500	pieces of artillery (105mm, 155mm, 175mm, etc.)
<u>Ships</u>	
7	frigates
520	escort and patrol vessels
22	gunboats
300	landing ships (LST, LSM, LSST, LSU, etc.)
24	minesweepers
700	motorized junks
<u>Aircraft</u>	
500	combat aircraft (F-5As, A-37Bs, A-1Es, AC-119)
700	helicopters (CH-47, UH-1, Bell Iroquois, etc.)
300	transports (C-123, C-130, C-119, etc.)
200	trainer and support aircraft

Source: Adapted from T. N. Dupuy, et al. The Almanac of World Military Power. London: R. R. Bowker, 1974.

ability. In other words, they failed to turn the balance of force to their favor. A group of former high ranking military officers (South Vietnamese) who were interviewed by Hosmer and others, said that they could not utilize the weapons given by the United States because, on the one hand, they did not have enough well trained soldiers to operate them; and on the other hand, many of the weapons, such as M-48 tanks, F-5E aircraft, ships, etc., consumed a large quantity of fuel, a commodity they could not afford, particularly following the oil crisis in 1973 which made fuel too expensive to purchase (1978).

These arguments had some validity, however, they were not as dramatic as these officers had indicated. The failure for not utilizing the weapons given by the United States was not because of the reasons pointed out by these officers; but rather because the weapons such as, M-48 tanks, F-5E aircraft, 175 mm guns (howitzers), etc., were best used for offensive purposes and the South Vietnamese armed forces, on the contrary, was a defensive armed force. During the war, the South Vietnamese forces were divided into units (divisions, regiments, battalions, etc.) and assigned to certain defense posts throughout South Vietnam. And when the soldiers were assigned to some certain posts, they often stayed "dug-in" there for a very long period of time. The weaknesses of this strategy were that, on the one hand, they became the target for the Communists' attack. On the

other hand, once they were assigned to defend a location; they seldom went out and searched for the enemy. Thus, the weapons such as, M-48 tanks, F-5A aircraft, 175 mm guns, etc., like the soldiers, were forced to stay idle. If the soldiers were inactive, how could these weapons be utilized? Furthermore, how could they be effective if they were used only when the soldiers were being attacked? Thus, because of the defensive nature of the South Vietnamese armed forces, they failed to utilize the weapons given by the United States to their fullest capability; and turn the balance of force to their favor.

CHAPTER V

UTILIZATION OF AMERICAN AID

From the time of the Vietnamese armed forces were organized in 1949 to the time they were defeated by the Communists in 1975, the United States had spent over \$6.5 billion (includes grants and credits) on the Vietnamese armed forces (Nguyen, 1976:124). This amount, however, did not include the cost of such materials as weapons, vehicles, aircraft, naval craft, and ammunition. For example, there was an estimate of over \$5 billion worth of military equipment given to the South Vietnamese armed forces by the United States after the 1973 Paris Agreement (Brown, 1976:307). With this massive amount of aid, the United States contributed roughly 90 percent of the total military budget of the South Vietnamese armed forces during the entire war (Thompson and Frizzell, 1977).

Needless to say, American aid was very important to the survival of the South Vietnamese armed forces and its nation, but it was a major subject of criticism by the South Vietnamese military authorities. The South Vietnamese military leadership believed that the forms in which American aid was given caused unproductive results. As a matter of fact, over 80% of (\$5 billion out of 6.5 billion) the amount of American aid given to the South Vietnamese armed forces was in grants,

loans, and credits. The South Vietnamese military leadership said that they had to use most of this aid to buy American military equipment right in the United States. According to them, these forms of aid were unproductive. They said that they could have bought the same military equipment at cheaper prices elsewhere and that they could have saved themselves a large amount of money. In addition, they said that because the United States wanted the South Vietnamese armed forces to be like their own, they had to buy large quantities of costly modern and sophisticated weapons. They wasted a large amount of their financial resources.

Another criticism by the South Vietnamese military authorities was that the United States had put too many restrictions on how to use the military aid. They said that before the United States sent military aid to the South Vietnamese armed forces, the United States had already designed some programs and wanted the Vietnamese military authorities to carry them out (Tran, 1978:159-161). The Vietnamese military officers believed that many of these programs were designed to please the United States' Congress to provide more aid than help the Vietnamese armed forces. According to them, many of the American "designed" programs were not important to the armed forces, but they had to be carried out because, if they did not, they might not receive more military aid. Furthermore, the Vietnamese realized that these programs were not important, so they did not want to implement them whole-

heartly. Both the doner and the recipient country suffered heavy financial loses.

Indeed, many of these criticisms had some validity. The United State's restrains on the use of aid might have had some negative effects on the South Vietnamese armed forces fighting capability. However, many of these restrains would not have created so many severe problems for the South Vietnamese armed forces fighting capabilities if their own leadership were better able to lead their men. As mentioned above, the United States had spent over \$6.5 billion worth of military aid on the South Vietnamese armed forces. The South Vietnamese armed forces, with this massive aid, however, did not use it to their best advantage. Instead, they utilized it very poorly. Throughout the years, there were, as will be explained later, numerous cases where military aid was misused by the South Vietnamese military officials. The misuse of American military aid severely damaged the South Vietnamese armed forces credibility and capability.

After receiving aid, the South Vietnamese military authority gave it to their military officers to carry out programs that, for the most part, did not really exist. What was often the case was that military officers simply "made up" some "programs" and requested that the military authority provide them necessary funds to carry them out (Nguyen, 1976:122). Once the military authority allocated the funds for these non-existant programs, they simply used

the funds to enrich themselves. As Douglas Welch pointed out:

Government officials spent much of their time and aid money on personal pleasure and very little of either on government duties or programs (1981:188).

Their leadership knew that many of their officers were corrupt, but they could not remove them. It was they who put them there. More importantly they themselves were also corrupt. This practice had, on the one hand, severely drained the armed forces resources. On the other hand, this practice also deprived them of the necessary resources that could have been utilized to improve the soldiers' professional skills which would have helped the soldiers fight more effectively.

There was another way in which American aid was improperly used by the South Vietnamese military authority; American aid was used to pay salaries for the dead and non-existent soldiers, "the ghost soldiers". What happened in this case was that the commanding officers of the units on the fronts often did not report the dead or deserted soldiers from their units to their superior officers. In doing so, the units' commanders not only received the salaries of the dead and deserted soldiers, but they also received other benefits for these soldiers as well. There was an estimate of over 100,000 "ghost soldiers" or "phantom soldiers" in the South Vietnamese armed forces (Lewy, 1978:209). This practice, on the one hand, had further deprived more finan-

cial resources for the armed forces. On the other hand, it had severely weakened the armed forces fighting capability. As it often happened, casualty and desertion rates were usually higher in the combat units. But because the commanding officers in these units did not report their dead and deserted soldiers, the military authority did not send additional soldiers to make up for these soldiers. Thus, this practice had created a severe shortage of manpower in the combat units at the fronts. And because of the shortages of manpower, the commanding officers in the combat units either did not want to fight against the enemy when they were being attacked, or they simply ran away from the enemy. They also did not take any initiative to fight the enemy, and this had given the enemy the freedom to act according to his will. In short, this form of misuse of American aid had tremendously damaged the armed forces financial resources and more importantly, their fighting capability.

Another major form in which American military aid to the South Vietnamese armed forces had been badly used was when military supplies were given to them, high ranking officers illegally sold a good portion of them to the public through the black-market. According to Douglas Welch:

Black-market activities were at their peak during Thieu's government, with military supplies and other much needed commodities being sold by government officials for high profit (1981:188).

Further elaborating it, Air Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky stated:

In Qui Nhon (a city in Central Vietnam) market you could buy anything from army rations and clothing to washing machines and grenades. Weapons changed hands at \$25 to \$30 a piece and if you wanted to buy a tank or a helicopter it could be arranged (1976:108).

The high ranking officers' illicit activities were not limited to military supplies. They also reached into the pockets of their soldiers. For example, by mid-1974, 92 percent of the soldiers surveyed by the United States Defense Attache's Office said that their pay and allowances were not adequate to provide food, clothing, and shelter for their families (Porter, 1975:272). Another American study discovered that the South Vietnamese soldiers received only about one-third the salary required to support an average family (Lewy, 1978: 208). The consequences were severe as one South Vietnamese military officer pointed out:

Under our system, the generals amassed riches for their families, but the soldiers got nothing, and they saw no moral sanction in their leadership. In the end they took their revenge (Lewy, 1978:217).

The high ranking officers not only illegally sold many of these military goods, but they also used another portion of their military supplies to build houses, cottages, and recreational facilities for their families. This practice was very common with the high ranking officers. As one South Vietnamese civilian told me, his neighbor, who was a colonel commanding a logistical support center, converted three military vehicles (mostly jeeps) to civilian vehicles; one for himself to use on the weekend, one for his wife,

and one for taking his children to school. The drivers of these vehicles were soldiers under his command, not civilians. There was an estimate of about 350 high ranking officers between the rank of colonel to four star generals in the South Vietnamese armed forces. And many of these high ranking officers had three vehicles; thus, there were more than one thousand vehicles being used; but not for military purposes. Furthermore, the high ranking officers not only sold and used a good portion of American military aid, they in some cases, illegally sold weapons to the militant political parties, gangsters, etc., and even worse than that, they sold weapons to the Communists (Nguyen, 1976:113). For example, in 1975, the Washington Post reported that military aid amounting to more than \$200 million had been lost or squandered by the Thieu government, a large amount of it being stolen by officials of the Sai Gon government and sold to the enemy. Among the losses were 143 vessels, including patrol boats and landing crafts, that disappeared from the South Vietnamese Navy. Another example, in 1974 General Nguyen Vinh Nghi, the Commander of the South Vietnamese forces in the Mekong Delta, had pilfered 8,000 radios and 24,000 small arms from American equipment, selling most of them to the Communists (Nguyen, 1976:113-114).

Finally, as mentioned earlier, most of the Vietnamese, including the political and military leadership, believed that Vietnam was a vital interest of the United States and

the United States would support them until they defeated the Communists. In other words, they thought that American aid was unlimited and the United States would never end their support. Because of this belief, they did not make a major effort to make their armed forces into a self-supporting armed force. As it turned out later, when the United States cut off its military aid to them, the whole armed forces were paralyzed. The fact is that the South Vietnamese armed forces were not paralyzed because of severe shortages of weapons as many people had claimed, but they were paralyzed because they felt that the United States had abandoned them.

Following the United States withdrawal, the South Vietnamese leaders finally realized that they had to make a "self-supporting" armed forces on their own. According to this plan, the government decided to abandon Military Region I and II, except for some major cities in the coastal area and defend the Military Regions III and IV (Cao, 1983: 187-190). This plan was not necessarily to make the armed force a self-reliant armed force but rather to fight with the resources at hand, hoping that it would eventually create a military stalemate and result in a peaceful settlement. This plan, needless to say, was too late. It began only after the Communists started to attack them. But more importantly, this plan revealed that the high ranking South Vietnamese military officers lacked the necessary military

knowledge and skills. To abandon over half of the territory and to regroup over half a million soldiers and their equipment was an enormous task even if it happened under peaceful conditions. In order to be successful, the plan needed various kinds of coordination from the various branches of the armed forces. This plan was not well-coordinated and therefore it was poorly executed. For example, soldiers, for the most part, abandoned their units and weapons to run away from the chaos to safety on foot. As one high ranking South Vietnamese military officer put it:

...it was the greatest disaster in the history of the South Vietnamese Armed Forces... It must be ranked as one of the worst planned and the worst executed withdrawal operations in the annals of military history (Hosmer et al., 1980:194).

This plan, as it turned out brought on a disastrous defeat for the South Vietnamese armed forces. With American aid, South Vietnam was never able to create its own self-supporting, combat-ready armed forces against the North Vietnamese Communists.

CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, this chapter will first summarize the weaknesses of the South Vietnamese armed forces, and second point out how these weaknesses contributed to the fall of South Vietnam in 1975.

The Weaknesses of the South Vietnamese Armed Forces

Organization: The South Vietnamese armed forces were organized into a conventional armed force and this type of organization created many critical weaknesses.

a. The war in Vietnam was not a conventional war. The Communist forces in the Vietnamese conflict used guerrilla warfare. Thus, the organization of the South Vietnamese armed forces was not suitable for the type of warfare in Vietnam.

b. The South Vietnamese armed forces concentrated heavily on the development of conventional forces; they did not pay much attention to the development of semi-militia forces, such as the Regional and the Popular Forces. This was a critical error because in a guerrilla warfare these semi-militia forces proved to be highly effective in combating against the guerrillas. The South Vietnamese semi-militia forces which existed were poorly organized, trained and equipped.

c. A conventional armed force requires many support elements. It particularly demands a great deal of manpower and resources. South Vietnam with its limited resources could not support an armed force of more than one million men.

d. To have an adequate conventional armed force, there must be no shortage of well-trained officers. In South Vietnam, there was a severe shortage of well-trained officers. The political infighting within the armed forces, the changing of national leadership, and the lack of training facilities were in part responsible for creating such shortages of officers.

Officers: The South Vietnamese armed forces not only had problems with the shortage of well-trained and dedicated officers, but it also had problems with the officers.

a. The South Vietnamese military officers came mostly from the middle and upper-educated families. In contrast, most of the South Vietnamese soldiers came from poor, uneducated and peasant families. Their values were different. Their perceptions of the war were also different. The officers were not able to motivate their men effectively to fight for them.

b. Many of the officers, especially at the top level were promoted because of political considerations and money rather than because of service performance.

c. Many of the officers were unwilling to be at

the front and they preferred the non-combat units. In order to be in the rear, they paid money to their superiors. Those officers who did not have money or connections usually found themselves at the front.

d. There were many factions among the high ranking officers in the South Vietnamese armed forces. They fought each other for power and personal gains. This infighting had severely damaged the armed forces' unity and capability.

e. Many of the officers were corrupt. They used all possible means to enrich themselves even if at the expense of their men and the survival of their own nation.

f. Because of their involvement in politics, many of the ablest senior professional officers, such as Hinh, Minh, Don, Kim, Dinh, Vy, and Khanh, were eliminated from the armed forces.

Soldiers: Many forces affected the South Vietnamese soldier.

a. Given the length of the war, many of them did not want to fight anymore. They preferred civilian life over the military life.

b. Many of the soldiers did not know much about the Communists, and they did not have a strong feeling of anti-Communism as their officers did. Furthermore, many of them came from the peasant families and they felt that their lives would not be any different whether South

Vietnam was under the control of the Communists or under the Sai Gon government.

c. As the war escalated, more soldiers were needed at the fronts, but due to the shortage of training facilities and qualified instructors the soldiers were not properly trained.

d. The South Vietnamese soldiers' salaries were low. Their benefits were minimal. This was caused by officers being corrupt; they often took away their soldiers' pay and benefits.

Utilization of American Aid: America's involvement and aid had many impacts on the South Vietnamese armed forces.

a. The United States did not have a clear cut policy for their involvement in Vietnam. The Vietnamese soldiers believed that the Americans, like the French before them, were colonialists. Because of this belief, many of them did not really want to cooperate with them.

b. When the war escalated, the South Vietnamese military leadership let the Americans do the fighting against the Communists and kept their soldiers away from combat. Additionally, the South Vietnamese thought that the U.S. troops would fight for them regardless of their involvement.

c. The Vietnamization was not successful. The United States provided the Vietnamese military with modern and sophisticated weapons, but the South Vietnamese soldiers

did not utilize them to their fullest capability or to their advantage.

d. The United States gave the South Vietnamese armed forces more than \$6.5 billion of military aid and several more billions worth of military hardwares but most of the American aid found its way into high ranking officers' pockets rather than to the armed forces and their soldiers.

The South Vietnamese Armed Forces and the Fall of South Vietnam

South Vietnam depended totally on the United States for its survival. When the United States completely withdrew its troops in 1973 and tried to end its involvement in Vietnam, the survival of South Vietnam was in the hands of the South Vietnamese armed forces. Within two years after the South Vietnamese armed forces took full responsibility for defending South Vietnam, however, South Vietnam fell to the Communists.

When South Vietnam fell, the whole South Vietnamese armed forces disintegrated in the face of the final offensive by the Communists. The South Vietnamese armed forces had more than one million men and equipped with modern and sophisticated weapons, but ran away in chaos before the Communists attacked them. As pointed out, throughout the final offensive, there were no major battles between the South and the North Vietnamese armed forces.

How could have this happened?

This study has shown that the South Vietnamese armed forces, qualitatively, was very impressive. However, the South Vietnamese armed forces was merely a giant body with a soul. In any conflict, it must be pointed out, victory or defeat depends on the quality of the armed forces, not quantity. The South Vietnamese armed forces were somewhat like the Chinese nationalist armed forces in 1949. They had a very large quantity of manpower and resources (compared to their enemy) but had no quality in their armed forces. This was the main reason for the disintegration of the South Vietnamese armed forces in 1975.

In conclusion, the South Vietnamese armed forces were never prepared to fight the Vietnamese Communists. They were too weak to stand against a well-organized, well-led, and highly motivated armed forces of the North Vietnamese. With all the American aid they received, they failed to defend South Vietnam.

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