



**INDOCHINA  
IN THE YEAR OF  
THE CAT\* - 1975**



ISBN 978-1-929932-56-6



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***Dedicated to all those who served  
in the noble and valiant effort to turn back  
the forces of aggression and tyranny  
in Vietnam and Southeast Asia,  
all the men and women of our armed forces –  
and the many civilians too  
who played important roles,  
and of course our South Vietnamese allies  
and those of other nations who joined in that effort,  
and – perhaps especially – all their families.  
Thank you, my brothers and sisters.***

***And just one thing more: It didn't have to end that way.***

*Lewis Sorley, October 28, 2014*

*Adapted from an address at the Army Navy Club*

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“As for you, and in particular for your great country, I never believed for a moment that you would have this sentiment of abandoning a people which have chosen liberty. You have refused us your protection and we can do nothing about it...You leave, and my wish is that you and your country will find happiness under this sky. But, mark it well that if I shall die here on the spot and in my country that I love, it is too bad [but] we all are born and must die [one day]. I have only committed this mistake of believing in you [America].”

*Cambodian General Sirik Matak, refusing John Gunther Dean's offer of asylum in the United States, on April 2, 1975.*

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*\* 1975 in the Chinese Zodiac was the “Year of the Rabbit.” But, perhaps due to a mistranslation of the pronunciation of an ideogram, in Vietnam, that zodiac figure is considered to be a Cat, thus 1975 is the “Year of the Cat.”*

## Introduction

North Vietnamese Army forces captured Phuoc Long in early January 1975, in what proved to be the beginning of the end for South Vietnam. For Hanoi, the event was a critical bellwether for U.S. policy on Vietnam. If the United States used its air power to help South Vietnam retake the lost territory, as it had done in the 1972 Easter Offensive, the North Vietnamese would know to factor American air power into their future plans, and might have to scale back their strategic objectives. If the Americans sat on their hands, then the North Vietnamese Army could carry out bold offensive activities without concern for American power.

President Thieu called upon the United States to live up to President Nixon's promise to come to South Vietnam's assistance in the event of a major Communist offensive. But Congressional legislation prevented President Ford from employing American air power in support of the South Vietnamese Army. The failure of the U.S. government to intervene after the fall of Phuoc Long gave the North Vietnamese the green light to go ahead with a massive invasion.

The American Congress would not even authorize emergency funding for the South Vietnamese armed forces, which were critically short on fuel for their vehicles and ammunition for their weapons. A global oil crisis had further reduced fuel stocks by raising the price of oil. Fuel was especially critical because the defense of South Vietnam required great mobility. With a long and open eastern flank, South Vietnam could be attacked at a multitude of locations, so moving reinforcements to the point of attack was imperative. In light of South Vietnam's diminished mobility, South Vietnamese commanders attempted to predict where the next offensive would come, knowing full well that the North Vietnamese were conducting deception operations to conceal their true plans. The South Vietnamese guessed that the main blows would come at Pleiku and Kontum in the central highlands, and positioned troops there accordingly. The main blow actually came at Ban Me Thuot on March 10. The badly outnumbered defenders held out for a few days before the city fell.

The fall of Ban Me Thuot compelled Thieu to abandon his highland bulwarks at Pleiku and Kontum. Civilians fled along with the soldiers, for fear that the Communists would butcher them as they had done at Hue in the Tet Offensive and on Route 1 in the Easter offensive. The civilian traffic clogged the main roads, allowing Communist forces to

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catch up with retreating military columns. Numerous South Vietnamese soldiers and civilians were killed during the retreat from Pleiku towards the coast. The South Vietnamese attempt to build a redoubt at the coastal city of Da Nang was thwarted by the flood of civilians fleeing the Communists, which made it impossible to organize a military defense. At the end of March, the South Vietnamese evacuated as many soldiers as it could from Da Nang by sea.

The Communists then massed their forces for a drive on Saigon. The South Vietnamese offered some stiff resistance, but they were outnumbered by more than three to one. As the North Vietnamese pressed in, the United States began evacuating American personnel and some of the South Vietnamese who had helped the United States. The evacuation's pace was limited to avoid creating a sense of panic and defeat. As a consequence, many of the South Vietnamese who were likely to receive North Vietnamese punishments for their roles in the war were unable to escape before Saigon fell at the end of April.

The North Vietnamese conquerors allowed foreigners into only carefully controlled locations, so that it was impossible to know how many South Vietnamese were killed in the war's immediate aftermath. Hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese were herded into "re-education camps," where they were subjected to harsh living conditions and Communist propaganda. A large fraction of them died before leaving the camps.

American allies in Cambodia and Laos suffered similar fates. Communist assistance to the Khmer Rouge and the slashing of American assistance to the Cambodian government ensured that the Khmer Rouge would take power in Cambodia. The genocidal regime of Pol Pot killed approximately two to three million residents of the country, amounting to one quarter of the population. America's allies in Cambodia and Laos, like those in South Vietnam, seethed with resentment at the U.S. government for breaking promises and abandoning them.

Some Americans greeted the end of the war with relief. Relatively few lamented the squandering of American sacrifices in that country. The media was dominated by individuals who had opposed the war, and they used their platform to downplay the achievements of Vietnam veterans and propagate myths about the problems and failings of veterans. Politicians avoided overseas commitments based on the view that Vietnam showed the inability of the United States to influence events abroad. The perceived lessons of Vietnam have continued to influence American politics and policy to this day.