



Drawn Swords in a Distant Land: South Vietnam's Shattered Dreams

by George J. Veith.

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Drawn Swords in a Distant Land is a much needed comprehensive history of the South Vietnamese state from 1955 to 1975. Its author, historian and US Army Colonel George Veith, addresses relevant political, military, social, and, critically, economic aspects of that history. A central figure in that story is the only legitimate democratically elected president of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN): Nguyen Van Thieu. Readers should be aware that the book is not a purely conventional military history, concentrating on orders of battle or tactics.

Studies of the Vietnam War tend to espouse the myth of the unwinnable war, portraying US involvement as fundamentally flawed and South Vietnam as hopelessly corrupt and ineffective, or to argue for never implemented perfect solutions. Proponents of each share an overarching preoccupation with the United States. Even conflict simulations, games, and movies stress American activities. By contrast, studies of the South Vietnamese state itself or its armed forces in particular are scarce. Author Veith takes a different approach in *Drawn Swords*, putting South Vietnam, the Republic of Vietnam, front and center. In this regard, it is a major departure from his earlier work, *Black April*.¹

The book traces the trials, successes, and failures of South Vietnam during the first republic under President Ngô Đình Diệm (hereafter “Diem,” 1955–63), the interregnum under military leaders (1963–67), and the second republic under Thieu (1967–75), with special attention to the vital, if chaotic, political life of the country. Far from being simply American puppets, Vietnamese political and military leaders were products of their own constituencies, traditions, and religions. President Diem and all his successors consistently represented internal groups and trends rather than Washington’s mandates. This fact alone made South Vietnam a potentially viable state.

Veith eschews the orthodox view that South Vietnam was an artificial creation of Paris or Washington. He also elucidates relations between the country’s two main religious groups: Buddhists and Roman Catholics. Both were powerful religious and political entities that could reasonably claim to represent the country. But, as Veith astutely shows, from a purely religious standpoint neither was a majority creed or any other sort of monolithic bloc.

From Diem onward, the South Vietnamese strove to shape a lasting individual identity for South Vietnam. But the viability of a successful South Vietnam depended on having a sustainable economy. The country survived two apocalyptic economic collapses, one during the first North Vietnamese offensive (1965), the other after the Tet offensive (1968). That survival required strong economic reforms by the RVN government but also US money and blood. Another disaster befell the country with the Easter Offensive (1972), but that time American money did not materialize in the required amount. While militarily the the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) acquitted itself reasonably well and defeated the invaders, 1972 sounded the death knell of the economy. It also aggravated the underlying problem of Vietnamization: replacing the US Army and Marines with local resources

1. Subtitle: *The Fall of South Vietnam, 1973–75* (NY: Encounter Books, 2012).

put an unbearable strain on the local economy. This should have been a useful lesson: that no country with a war being waged on its soil could be expected to support itself. (Discussions of the recent Afghan debacle ignore this elementary fact.)

After the 1973 accords and Pres. Richard Nixon's fall, the end was inevitable. As Veith points out, post-1973 South Vietnam was starved of US troops and, critically, funds. The final collapse reflected a lack of means rather than resolve, as the desperate, but successful, defense of Xuan Loc attests. Veith assesses the rumors of a last ditch attempt by Paris and Beijing to replace Washington as guarantors of an independent South Vietnam. While the whole scheme is difficult to substantiate, the two powers were prepared to send troops to protect Saigon and stop the North Vietnamese' final advance. Only the intervention of acting president Duong Van Minh quashed the scheme.

Readers are left with one key question. Why was the United States unable to accept that leaving a residual force was the only real guarantee of Saigon's survival? After all, this had been the case in South Korea. Every criticism levelled at Saigon applied to Seoul as well.

Veith's judgment of Thieu is favorable and balanced, without crossing the line into the hagiography others² have shown toward their Vietnamese heroes.

Bui Diem, however, agreed that while Thieu "projected a serious mature image, in distinct contrast to Ky's unpredictable cockiness," he was "secretive and suspicious and calculating.... What Bunker and Westmoreland saw as maturity, I felt as hesitancy and indecisiveness.... Thieu was a hard worker ... but he was not a man of ideas or vision.... By nature he was too careful too aware of the angles, too convoluted in his thinking and indirect in his methods." (242-43)

The final impression here is of a man disturbed by the travails of his country and doing his best to solve them.

The villains of Veith's story are Gen. Duong Van Minh and France. The former is depicted as an ambitious, lazy, and garrulous figure more interested in personal gains than in the survival of his country. His alleged reaction to the last gamble by Paris and Beijing to prevent Hanoi from taking over the country appears as just another fit of pique. The reader is left with the impression that General Minh's brother was not the only Communist in the family.

Veith casts later French governments as fecklessly scheming to secure some sort of special relationship with the area without committing to specific countries. They are also portrayed as trying to increase their own influence at the expense of Washington's. Finally, Veith describes the controversial role of Henry Cabot Lodge and his backing of the 1963 coup plotters. He maintains that it was a critical moment in South Vietnam's history, not so much for the fall of Diem per se but for launching an era of internal squabbling and active military involvement in politics during three years of instability. South Vietnamese leadership's paranoid fear of a coup and internal US meddling made for an inauspicious recipe for stability.

Drawn Swords in a Distant Land makes a welcome contribution to our understanding of the Vietnam War. By concentrating on Saigon rather than Washington or Hanoi, it avoids the tired ideological debates over the conflict. South Vietnam appears here as eager and able to fight for its own survival. As George Veith shows, it faced two towering issues: defeating an implacable enemy and creating a modern state. If it failed in the end, it was not for lack of trying. Today's policymakers and strategists will learn that its ultimate failure provides a salutary lesson in the complexities of war and nation building then and now.

2. E.g., Lewis Sorley, in *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (NY: Harcourt, 1999), or Mark Moyar, in *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2006).