



Honorable Exit: How a Few Brave Americans Risked All to Save Our Vietnamese Allies at the End of the War by Thurston Clarke.

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In his new book, American journalist Thurston Clarke tells many stories, some long and some short. Most focus on the actions of mid-level US officials who helped tens of thousands of South Vietnamese evacuate before the communists took over their country. The storytelling is so engaging that it could be the basis of a Netflix series on American involvement during the last four months of the Vietnam War. It would feature an ensemble cast with action set mostly in Saigon and Washington, DC.

As suggested in its verbose subtitle, *Honorable Exit* evokes a morality play pitting “good” characters against “bad.” The biggest names in the latter group are Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, Pres. Gerald Ford, and Ambassador to the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) Graham Martin. Clarke charges Ford and Kissinger with knowing very well that the RVN was doomed to fall, yet not planning seriously for evacuation. Instead, they sought to shift blame from themselves to Congress and others for “losing South Vietnam.”

Graham Martin, though he too botched the evacuation, came from a different background. Reluctant to become the ambassador to South Vietnam after a four-year stint in Italy, Martin accepted the post only after Richard Nixon and Alexander Haig, Kissinger’s deputy at the State Department, pressured him about the honor of service to the presidency. Once in the job, however, he became a firm supporter of Pres. Nguyen Van Thieu. Yet he misread the situation as the communists advanced across central Viet Nam toward Saigon. Even though he sometimes defied orders from Washington and broke RVN and US laws to help with evacuation, his efforts were belated. There were smaller “villains” among the higher-ups in the CIA, but most of the blame for the bungled evacuation, at least in South Vietnam, fell on Martin.

In Clarke’s rendition, the bad Americans in Saigon and Washington were too calculating or stubborn or both and damaged the cause of the tens of thousands of Vietnamese eligible to evacuate. On the other hand, Clarke argues that the good Americans had the foresight to make preparations for an evacuation. Their numbers included primarily US diplomats and military officers, but also journalists, missionaries, even businessmen and contractors. Indeed, “a few” in the subtitle is a misnomer because there were more than a few of these good folks. They comprised Vietnamese-speaking diplomats and military officers like Walter Martindale and Richard Armitage. Some of them, such as Theresa Tull, worked on evacuation weeks before the fall of Saigon. The journalists included CBS Saigon bureau chief Brian Ellis, who help his South Vietnamese counterparts leave the country. Even a few upper-level officers were on the right side. Among them was the defense attaché Homer Smith, whose authority and expertise in moving military supplies and personnel were critical in evacuating a more people than would otherwise have been possible.

The book’s title derives from the Marine Corps officers, who “insisted on an honorable exit” (345): that is, one that would not suggest abandonment of South Vietnamese allies. At the end of his book, Clarke quotes from a letter written to Ellis by the daughter of a former South Vietnam-

ese evacuee, expressing gratitude and calling him “our hero.” This is yet another instance in the book of the notion of Vietnamese gratitude for American largesse. One wishes Clarke had not resorted to such a tiresome and simplistic trope. In fact, the South Vietnamese people per se are mere background players in his story. We await a different book, one concentrating on their experience, not that of “a few brave Americans.”

These criticisms aside, *Honorable Exit* tells a deeper, more complex story than, say, the popular PBS documentary *The Last Days in Vietnam* (2014, dir. Rory Kennedy). In fact, it could itself serve as the basis of a Hollywood drama series about American involvement during the last months of the war. Until there is such a series, I recommend Thurston Clarke’s deftly woven story to both general readers and historians of the Vietnam War.