

LEAVING VIETNAM:

# The Others We Forgot

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by Charles Peters

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For years doves said the Vietcong would triumph soon after we withdrew our troops from Vietnam. For years hawks cajoled and pressured the South Vietnamese to join the forces of the free world. Yet no one took the responsibility for planning an exit from Vietnam which would take care of the Vietnamese who had committed themselves to us.

The news clippings tell the story. As late as April 22 of this year—less than two weeks before the final evacuation of Saigon—Lawrence Meyer wrote in *The Washington Post*:

“With time running out in Saigon, the Ford Administration has taken the first steps toward planning for the arrival of Vietnamese refugees. . . .

“The first problem facing the Inter-agency Task Force on Vietnam, established by the White House Friday, is that it has no idea how

*Charles Peters is editor-in-chief of The Washington Monthly.*

many refugees may be coming to this country. . . .

“When a reporter mentioned the lack of relocation camp sites and other facilities to a member of the task force yesterday, he replied, ‘That’s an academic point. We don’t have that kind of numbers yet.’ According to this official, ‘sites have been suggested,’ but not selected.”

The planning finally started *three* weeks after this story was filed by UPI from Nha Trang:

“Some Americans, holding shot-guns, automatic rifles and submachine guns, kept long-time Vietnamese friends from taking the places they had been promised on helicopters flying from Nha Trang today on the way to refuge in Saigon.

“Other Americans fired into the air and beat back pleading Vietnamese who tugged at them desperately and then watched helplessly as the last two evacuation helicopters flew off.

Hours later Nha Trang fell to the North Vietnamese and Vietcong.

“United States civilian employes at Nha Trang left behind more than 100 Vietnamese employes and their families in the United States Consulate General’s compound.

“‘I’m so ashamed of the United States Government that I’ll never be able to work for them again,’ a Government employe said. ‘They totally abrogated their responsibility. And the pity is that it was so uncalled for. The people in charge knew eight days ago what was coming, but they refused to do anything about it.’

“All Americans wanting to get out of Nha Trang left on the airlift that began Monday. Only two, one of them a professor at Da Lat University, refused to leave without their Vietnamese families.

“Vietnamese employes who had been promised they would be evacuated, on realizing that the Americans were abandoning them, rushed the

compound. United States Marines closed the gates. When the Vietnamese dashed onto the heliport through unguarded gates, they were met by more armed Americans.”

To repeat, that story had an April 1 dateline. The planning that finally started three weeks later was typical of the whole war in its preference for the educated and the wealthy. Three years ago Suzannah Lessard wrote in this magazine an article titled “Let Those Hillbillies Go Get Shot” which said that America had let its poorer whites and blacks do the dying in Vietnam. As the refugees began to leave Vietnam, Terry Rambo of *The Washington Post* described the kind of people we were taking out first and the kind we were leaving behind:

“There is a Vietnamese saying that ‘Only when the house burns, do you see the faces of the rats.’ This phrase, often cited in Saigon in the last few weeks, is again being repeated by Vietnamese observing the most recent

loads of refugees arriving here from Tansonnhut airport. . . .

"Many of these refugees are employees and families of employees of official American agencies, such as the Defense Attache's Office and the Agency for International Development; these people have legitimate grounds for being evacuated even without accompanying American sponsors.

"Many other Vietnamese, not employed by the U. S. government and often from among the wealthier and more politically powerful families in Saigon, have also come out on these flights. . . .

"The arrival of these former high officials here is galling to many of the Vietnamese refugees who did not enjoy benefits of power. It is particularly hard to accept that these men—who for years called on the people of South Vietnam to sacrifice everything for the 'salvation of the fatherland'—and their families are filling seats on U. S. evacuation flights, while the common soldiers they have abandoned continue to die to preserve their escape route.

"Many lesser official and quasi-governmental figures have. . . been seen in the refugee camp here. A number of wealthy businessmen, dressed in expensive foreign-made clothing, carry small but obviously heavy bags with them at all times. Knowledgeable Vietnamese say these are filled with gold. Young men of military age, but who have never done active service, are also among the new arrivals. Some are more-or-less-legitimate student deferments; others are from wealthy families who paid large bribes to keep their sons out of the army.

"Although the young men would be listed as soldiers on some unit's roster, they would never report for duty, and their commanding officers would pocket their salaries. Such "ghost soldiers"—who represented a significant reduction in the fighting capability of many of Saigon's units, continued to lead the good life in the

capital while others fought and died in Quangtri and Kontum and Camau.

"Watching the 'beautiful people' arrive, many Vietnamese and Americans with long personal involvement in the war openly express bitterness and anger.

"Two weeks ago on Phuquoc Island, a soldier disfigured by battle scars approached an American. The soldier had been wounded while serving together with the U. S. Marines in a combined-action platoon in Quangnam Province. He showed a carefully preserved certificate attesting that he had completed a special training course run by the Marine and asked if the Americans would remember him and help him escape from the Communists.

"The answer is to be seen here at Clark, and so far, at least, it appears to be an overwhelming No. There are ghost soldiers in abundance, but combatants like the militiaman from Phuquoc are conspicuous only by their absence."

A later *Washington Post* report, on May 7, described what happened to the majority of the less privileged who tried to get out: "The captain of a ship that brought 5,030 Vietnam refugees to Guam tonight said thousands of persons were left behind in boats in the waters off Saigon 'howling and crying, 'Come back!'. . . ."

"Arthur Boucher, captain of the cargo ship American Challenger that docked here today, described the scene off Vungtau in South Vietnamese waters as he picked up refugees there 10 days ago.

"There were people afloat in boats. They were scrambling to get on the ship," he said. "At Phucuoc [island] there were 30,000 to 50,000."

"At the beach resort of Longhai, he said, he saw 4,000 to 6,000 would-be refugees wailing and pleading from the shore. 'But we had to go,' he said. 'Our orders were to take only 2,500 people from that area and we already had our quota.'

“Boucher said one of his companions, the Pioneer Contender, became so overloaded with nearly 16,000 people, that at least 600 jumped overboard to escape the crush.

“I counted at least 200 people in the water swimming for the shore at one time,” he said.

“‘It was very sad,’ Boucher said. ‘Families were being broken up. Some were on the ship and their families were in small boats and were left behind. . . .’

“Although some earlier evacuees from Vietnam have been wealthy, the poverty of those landing today was obvious. Most were barefoot, poorly dressed and carried few possessions. . . .”

Some liberals think that only the corrupt rich had reason to fear the Vietcong. But it wasn't the Saigon jet-set that got killed by the Communists at Hue in 1968. That massacre cut across class lines. And while the Communists weren't quite as careless with the lives of Vietnamese villagers as we were, they still managed to kill thousands who had sided with us.

This fear of being murdered, of the blood-bath that mercifully has not happened in post-war Vietnam, was not the only reason for wanting to escape. Take Tran Van Ngu, a fisherman the *Times* wrote about in a May 11 story from Guam:

“He was barefoot, wore typical black pajamas, and carried a blue umbrella for shade. He had saved little else from his boat when he set her adrift as he and 11 family members leaped aboard an American freighter off Vang Tau.

“‘I do not know where I am going,’ he said, ‘but I cannot live with the Communists. All I want is an ordinary life with my family.’”

As we point out elsewhere in this issue (“American Communes: Voluntary Maoism”) there is much that is attractive about communism, particularly as it is practiced by the Chinese, the Cubans, and some of the com-

munes here in the United States— attractive, that is, if you don't have to practice it, if you can choose the freedom we so long urged the South Vietnamese to embrace. One might choose to agree with Asian communist leaders who think the traditional family is counter-revolutionary, or one might love his family and think the leaders are wrong, which seems to be the view of Tran Van Ngu.

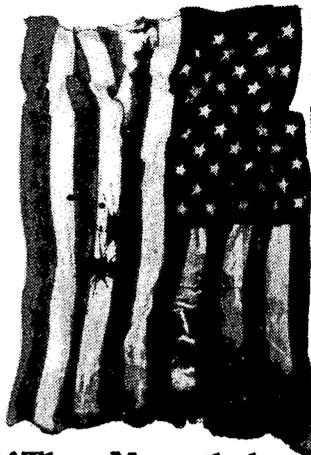
That we did not make plans to help people like him, the people who supported our cause and believed our propaganda, is a severe indictment of all of us, conservative and liberal alike. ■

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Lawrence Patzkin

## Of Thee, Nevertheless, I Sing

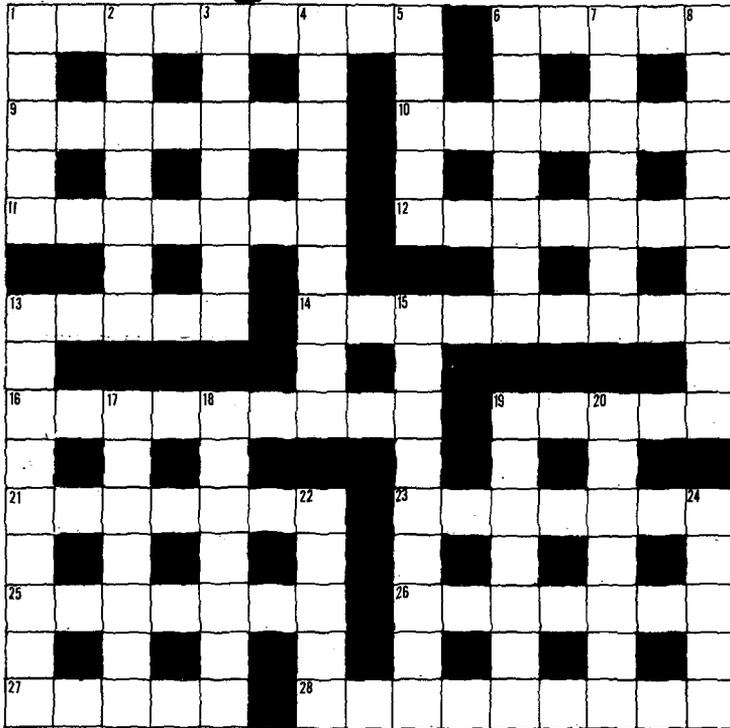
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HARCOURT BRACE JOVANOVICH

# the political puzzle

by John Barclay



## Across

1. The winner, put him in with a hundred in water. (2, 3, 4)
6. City in such a noisy victory celebration. (5)
9. Eel fibs? Quite the contrary! (7)
10. Calls again at airport to take back an opening in a prophet. (7)
11. Pet term for an enticer. (7)
12. To employ laws use fence or arrangement. (7)
13. Russian girl at New York mixer. (5)
14. Getting along with his lot in camp somehow. (9)
16. Grabs her in case things turn around. (7,2)
19. Good prospect in Mexico merchandising. (5)
21. Dow wire scramble costs man his mate. (7)
23. Tasks, and in sins, too. (7)
25. Mixed-up old bald stranger. (7)
26. Exterior brace used to remain longer? (7)
27. Philadelphia iceman on a fling? (5)
28. Pause to see if race can be sorted out. (5-4)
5. Kind of opera or play. (5)
6. Promising jump tuel arrangement. (7)
7. Inge upset taking air up in Africa. (7)
8. Setting of prices not object of his check. (9)
13. Misled by setting forth of Northwest Mounted Police. (6,3)
15. Twins home name is not turned around. (9)
17. Forever surplus? (3,1,3)
18. "all the Punkahs... cried, "My \_\_\_\_\_ you are!" Lear. (3,4)
19. Medical aid and Roman truce arrangement. (7)
20. Maker of music, not time composition. (7)
22. Something remains in an overelicitation. (5)
24. Yes, lieutenant can make class, too. (5)

## Down

1. Normal costume? (5)
2. Ford bets one clam on Dot. (7)
3. Something enervating about nite air. (7)
4. Lays down culinary art in crust tins. (9)

The numbers indicate the number of letters and words, e.g., (2, 3) means a two-letter word followed by a three-letter word. Groups of letters, e.g., USA, are treated as one word. Answers to last month's puzzle are on page 42.