

[Transcript] The Rest Is History / 324: Fall of Saigon: The Nightmare Begins

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Saigon was an addicted city, and we were the drug.

The corruption of children, the mutilation of young men, the prostitution of women, the humiliation of the old, the division of the family, the division of the country.

It had all been done in our name.

People look back to the French Saigon with a sentimental warmth as if the problem had begun with the Americans.

But the French city, the Saigon of the Piastre, as Lucien Baudard called it, had represented the opium stage of the addiction, with the Americans had begun the heroin phase.

And what I was seeing now was the first symptoms of withdrawal.

That Dominic was James Fenton, who at the time was a young poet. So he's writing this in 1975? Is that right?

No, he's writing this much later, but he was in Saigon. He went to Saigon in 1973.

Yes, because he'd won a poetry prize, hadn't he?

Won a poetry prize. So he's the future professor of poetry at Oxford.

He'd been at Oxford with Christopher Hitchens, and they'd shared a house in their third year.

That's right.

So he goes out to see it, and he's one of, I mean, lots of poets, writers, intellectuals, Bohemians, who are kind of attracted to this incredible spectacle drama tragedy of American involvement in Indochina.

Yeah, exactly right.

So not just Vietnam, but also Cambodia.

And what Fenton is alluding to there with French Saigon and American Saigon, of course, is the great tragedy of the Vietnam War.

So Vietnam had been part of French colonial possessions. They'd been defeated at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu.

They had withdrawn, and the Americans had then come in basically because they were worried of the domino effect.

And perhaps before we just get into this incredible end game, because today's theme is the fall of Saigon.

Americans being removed from the rooftop of the embassy and choppers, all that kind of stuff.

But Dominic, we're not the rest of the geography, but just a quick sketch of what exactly, where North Vietnam is and South Vietnam relative to Cambodia.

Because this is rather important, isn't it?

Okay, Craigie.

Well, hello, everybody.

Yes, so we're in Vietnam in the mid-1970s, but as Tom says, a little bit of context.

So Vietnam, for those people who don't know, is on the eastern side of the Indo-Chinese peninsula, which juts out into the South China Sea and the Gulf of Thailand.

So Vietnam kind of snakes along the eastern side.

So you've got Hanoi in the north, and that was the capital of North Vietnam.

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And then the division about halfway down the country that had been divided in the mid-1950s after the French had left, and there had been effectively two states created. North Vietnam, which is communist South Vietnam, which is sort of in inverted commas democratic, but actually run by a succession of military hunters. And that kind of curls around at the bottom. And it's as though Vietnam kind of cradles Cambodia, doesn't it, Tom? Yeah. So the Vietnamese and the Cambodians, although to sort of ignorant Western outsiders, they're basically the same. Of course, they're not. If you're Vietnamese or Cambodian, there's an awful lot of tension, ethnic and historic tension between the two, which we'll perhaps come to later on. So what had happened is that the war had never really ended in Vietnam. The north and the south were meant to have been unified, but thanks largely to American pressure, they hadn't been in the 1950s. The Americans had poured in loads of aid to the south and then, of course, loads of troops from the mid-1960s onwards. They'd spent \$140 billion. They had sent in half a million men to try and prop up the southern non-communist regime based in Saigon. 58,000 Americans had been killed in this incredibly horrific, I mean, really savage war. We did a podcast, didn't we, with Andrew Preston? Yeah. Tom. In the early days of the rest of history, in which he was talking about the sheer quantity of ornaments of bombs dropped on North Vietnam, being greater, far greater than anything dropped in the Second World War, just absolutely sort of devastated landscapes. And that spilled over to Cambodia at the turn of the 1970s. Maybe we'll come back to that a little bit later in the podcast. The North Vietnamese, first of all, established what they call their sanctuaries in the jungle on the Cambodian side of the border. And Richard Nixon in frustration had finally decided to strike at them first by secretly bombing them, and then by authorizing a full-scale invasion of eastern Cambodia. So that had been immensely controversial and it had an extraordinarily destabilizing effect on Cambodian society. So when Fenton goes, as you say, as a young poet, he's won this prize and he wants to go off to see what's going on at Saigon. I mean, technically, you have, I'm going to use very large inverted commas. You have peace at this point because Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tau, who was the North Vietnamese negotiator, had signed a peace agreement in January 1973 in Paris. And actually, you've probably seen some of the listeners to this podcast would have seen some of the

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sort of anniversary pieces.

So that was 50 years ago in the beginning of this year, so-called peace in Vietnam.

Peace with honor.

Peace with honor, as Nixon called it exactly.

But as we'll discover, the Paris peace accords were nothing of the kind.

And Nixon had basically signed that accord committed still to upholding the independence of South Vietnam

and feeling that he would be able to because he was the president and so he could do what he liked.

But what snarls that up is that his presidency starts to unravel because of the Watergate scandal.

Well, so this is a hugely controversial topic.

So they signed the accord in January 1973, Arthur, an awful lot of sort of back and forth.

And in fact, Nixon and Kissinger had agreed what was called the Christmas bombing in an attempt to basically bomb the North Vietnamese into signing the deal.

And in all that period, the Americans had been slowly drawing down their troop commitments and kind of switching to a policy of Vietnamization, which meant basically building up the South Vietnamese army,

so getting them to do all the fighting for them.

So they finally pull out in the last troops, I think, in March 1973.

So almost all the sort of ground troops have gone.

There are still thousands of American advisors and CIA people and stuff left behind.

But what do they think is going to happen?

I mean, that's the question, really.

So some people think that Nixon and Kissinger had always been disingenuous, that they knew that South Vietnam was going to fall.

So in 1971, Kissinger had said to Chu Enlai of the Chinese,

what he wanted was a sufficient interval between our withdrawal and what happens afterwards.

So in other words, they thought that it might last 18 months, the Saigon regime, which in fact it did, or thereabouts, and that the Americans wouldn't then get the blame.

Some people who think, basically, they were selling out.

So it was cynical right from the outgo?

Cynical right from the start, because the fighting never ever stopped.

Within days of the so-called ceasefire, there would be massive violations,

the fighting just continued, and they had agreed that Viet Cong troops,

so they're the sort of communist guerrillas who are in South Vietnam,

that they could stay in South Vietnam.

They wouldn't be withdrawn to the North or anything like that.

So basically, the fighting is just carried on as though all that's happened is the Americans have gone home.

So that's one argument that they're basically selling out, the South Vietnam.

The other argument is that Nixon was being truthful when he said to South Vietnam's president, who's called Nguyen Van Tu, Nixon had said to him, had written to him and said, you have my absolute assurance that if Hanoi fails to abide by the terms of this agreement, it is my intention to take severe and swift retaliatory action.

Because Nixon's prestige as president is tied up with that, right?

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Right. Well, it's not just... So there are two different ways to look at it.

One is to say, the Americans said they wanted peace, they should have gone home, end of story. The other way of looking at it, which is what President Chu of South Vietnam would say is, you've spent all this money and all this blood, not just of your own troops, but of our young men and our people, in promising that you would uphold us as an independent nation.

It would be utterly dishonorable for you to now run away and to leave us to face our fate.

And Nixon has said to him on multiple occasions, I will not do that.

And of course, you're right, Tom, that there is a cynical side to this,

which is that Nixon, somebody who is obsessed with his own place in history,

in America's place in the world, that he does not want South Vietnam to fall on his watch.

So there are a lot of historians who say, listen, when they signed that deal in January 1973,

there was nothing peaceful about it because they knew, both sides knew,

that the fighting would go on straight away.

And the American plan was always that they would immediately,

as soon as the North Vietnamese sort of transgressed, they would just start bombing them again.

So actually this was pure smokescreen.

But Nixon falls because of Watergate.

And one of the consequences of Watergate, am I right,

is that Congress introduces kind of increasing measures that are designed to chain the imperial presidency.

Stop presidents from kind of conducting foreign policy in the way that Kennedy and Johnson and Nixon had been doing.

Exactly right. Yeah, exactly right.

So in some ways, this podcast, today's podcast and the next podcast,

that kind of the sequel, not just the Vietnam podcast, but the Watergate podcast,

because those two things are so closely...

And a prequel to the episodes we did on Reagan.

Exactly. Exactly, Tom.

So Nixon falls in August 1974.

By that point, Congress has already moved against him because he's weakened because of Watergate.

And they have passed a thing called the Case Church Amendment.

That prohibits any American military intervention in Vietnam unless Congress explicitly approves it.

And even more controversial, at the end of 1973, the War Powers Resolution,

that limits presidential powers to intervene anywhere at all without notifying Congress.

So Nixon and Kissinger, in their memoirs, both say, we didn't let South Vietnam down.

It was the Democrats, the Democrats in Congress, who wouldn't give us what we wanted.

I mean, the implication of that is that they were secretly always planning to re-escalate the war, once again, which was not what they were saying at the time.

Or I suppose to set it up so that they wouldn't get the blame and they could blame Congress.

Well, there you go. Yeah.

We don't really know. I think what they were doing was a sort of multiple-track thing.

I think deep down, Nixon and Kissinger always thought that they would have to restart the aerial

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war

within months of the so-called peace in January 1973,
because they knew that South Vietnam would struggle.

It's slightly smaller in population in North Vietnam, probably about 24 million to 20 million.

But the South Vietnamese military and the whole of South Vietnam's society
have become so dependent on the American, the massive American presence.

Yes, because the American presence is basically fueling their economy.

And so when all the Americans withdraw, that's not helpful for the economy.

I mean, quite aside from the military angle of it.

Exactly. That's seen that James Fenton describes.

He talks about Saigon as an addicted city, and we were the drug.

And what I was first seeing was the first symptom of withdrawal.

Yeah, cold turkey.

I mean, it's literally an addicted city because one of the consequences of the American military
occupation

has been a massive heroin epidemic.

There are estimates that they're up to half a million women who are involved in prostitution in some
way.

That there's a whole economy, by the way, an incredibly corrupt economy.

There's a whole economy that has grown up to service the needs of this gigantic American military
presence.

And when that is withdrawn, South Vietnam's economy has been completely distorted.

Plus, in the countryside, the sort of rural economy has been destroyed by decades of fighting,
by the bombing, by Agent Orange, the chemical weapons and so on.

So in other words, this is a country that has been dependent on American support,
which has suddenly been withdrawn and it's tottering right from that point onwards.

And so the Viet Cong in the north know this and they presumably are also aware of what's
happening in America.

So Nixon has gone, Gerald Ford, golfer, football player.

Excellent football player, Tom.

Excellent athlete, Gerald Ford.

President, most likely to fall over while on the camera.

The only president who have appeared in a Pink Panther film.

He wasn't playing himself. Somebody else was playing him in the Pink Panther strikes again.

Well, so all these greatly to his credit, but his hands slightly tied in a way that Nixon's hands hadn't
been.

So presumably in North Vietnam, they're aware of this and they start to launch strikes,
not with the aim of conquering South Vietnam immediately, but partly to test South Vietnamese
readiness.

But also what will the Americans do?

Yes.

How far can they push things before the Americans intervene?

Presumably they are assuming the Americans will intervene or have they read the runes correctly in
Washington?

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It's interesting. So in Cambodia, the communists, the Khmer Rouge are their more allied to China. The North Vietnamese are very close to Moscow, to the Brezhnev regime. And they're almost certainly getting intelligence from Moscow. They're just sort of saying, listen, the Americans are kind of gone now. You can start pushing. I think the, as far as we know, the North Vietnamese had their eyes on about 1976 or so. And so from about late December of 1974, the North Vietnamese are a big cheese. He's a guy who could least one. And he's actually from South Vietnam. So how does Ho Chi Minh fit in? He's been dead, Tom, for about six years. Okay, all right. So he died in 1969. I think it was. Sorry, I wasn't up to speed on that. That's all right. So I should explain to listeners that what I have in front of me, because I know almost nothing about this subject, until I read the bootleg Sandbrook chapters from a book that you wrote about American history in this period. What was it? Half a million words. And your publisher required it to be about 100,000. So you have to cut Bath Sway. So there are these two brilliant chapters that you had to reduce to one sentence. That's pretty much it. They're really fantastic. So if there's any publisher out there listening who would like to have them. Tom, what commission am I paying you? My agent will be furious at this. So I read here that on the 6th of January, 1975, the communist flag was hoisted over the first provincial capital to fall for almost three years, which was a place called Fuck Bin. Oh, God, that's the one bit you choose to read out. That's very, that's very restless history, isn't it? Yes, you're absolutely right, Tom. So Fuck Bin falls. And that's clearly not good. No, that's not good at all. If Fuck Bin has fallen. All right, stop, Tom, stop. The gates of North South Vietnam are open. So what happens next? North South Vietnam. Right. So the communists had launched, I'm going to try and steer this podcast back into more reputable territory. So the North Vietnamese had launched a big offensive in the summer of 1974.

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They hadn't really got much American pushback, of course, because Nixon is completely absorbed by Watergate at this point.

So, as you say, in January, 1975, we don't need to go through the names of the towns again, Tom. Yeah.

They take a northern provincial capital and the leadership in Hanoi says, OK, start pushing. But they're thinking about laying the groundwork for a big new offensive in 1976.

And there's no sense at that point that President Tew's regime is on the brink.

So Gerald Ford is in Washington.

He's playing his golf.

He's wearing a badge that says, whip inflation now, which he put on and he encouraged other Americans to buy so that they would publicly display their commitment to getting inflation down.

And it's very easy to fit on, is it?

Because the lapels of his suit are enormously wide.

They are.

He's wearing, he wears tremendous suits, Gerald Ford, actually.

And he wears this sort of very garish kind of tweed suits and things.

He smokes a pipe.

He's great friends with James Callahan.

So there's lots to commend, Gerald Ford.

I commend him to the listeners.

Anyway, he's doing his thing.

President Tew is constantly saying, you know, give me more aid, send support, all this sort of stuff.

And then in the spring of 1975, the North Vietnamese another great push.

And they're sort of pushing down.

So I described North and South Vietnam as like a snake going down the eastern side of the Indo-Chinese.

They're kind of moving southwards.

And by about March, 1975, they're moving into what's called the Central Highlands.

So that's the kind of plateau in the middle of South Vietnam.

And it's at that point that President Tew in Saigon, South Vietnamese capital, makes this catastrophic mistake.

And he says, what we're going to do is we're basically going to lure the communists into a trap.

So we'll withdraw a lot of our troops from the northern bit of our country.

And we'll strengthen down to the south near Saigon and we'll lure them down and then we will strike.

And what he doesn't really take into account is that militarily, there is nothing more difficult than going backwards.

That's the point at which you're most vulnerable.

And it's really, really hard to kind of organize a fighting retreat.

And what basically happens is that by March, late March, 1975, the South Vietnamese army is going backwards.

And it turns very, very quickly into a kind of completely shambolic and a nightmarish route.

So they lose a crucial sort of city, which is called Pleiku, which is in the Central Highlands.

So these are names that would have been very familiar to people in America who had seen them

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night after night on the news, their own troops fight.

Suddenly, Pleiku is lost.

It's a bit like the end of the First World War in 1918.

Essentially a kind of stable front and then it's all collapsing.

Yeah.

Once you start going backwards, people always say it's about armies.

Armies collapse very, very slowly and then suddenly.

And this is what happens.

So they lose Pleiku.

They lose a place called Hue on the coast, which is the ancient capital of Vietnam.

And so by the end of March, quite suddenly, almost a quarter of South Vietnam's territory has been lost.

And there are millions.

I mean, there's literally more than a million terrified refugees blocking the roads, of course, which makes it even more difficult for them to organize any kind of military response.

And so the CIA station chief wires Washington and says it's all, you know, this is disaster.

It's all going to go into meltdown unless we have U.S. involvement.

And so that is a massive problem for both Ford and Congress, right?

Right.

So at that point, so Ford has been in, Ford's not been elected.

I mean, this is crucial.

Ford has not been elected, but he wants to run again in 1976.

So he has this sort of terror.

He's got a series of terrible dilemmas, one of which was, was he going to pardon Nixon and he did.

But another one is what does he do about Vietnam?

Because the truth is that by now, most people in America want Vietnam to go away.

The people who want to carry on with the war in Vietnam are basically those people who've been instrumental in the war from the beginning,

who've got a kind of personal stake in wanting to uphold their honor.

They've got it.

It's like kind of sunk cost fallacy.

And I guess they would argue America's honor.

America's honor.

But also they think it's the right thing to do.

They think we had a non-communist country and it's under attack from a communist country.

Even though they know that South Vietnam is repressive, is corrupt, all these things, they still think it's worth defending.

And Nixon has gone, but Kissinger is still around.

He's Secretary of State.

Yeah, Kissinger has huge influence on Ford.

So Henry Kissinger, for those people who don't know Henry Kissinger,

Henry Kissinger is a massive, massive international figure in the 1970s.

He's now the Secretary of State.

He is a former Jewish refugee from Germany who sort of has a deep belief in America and its role in

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the world.

He's committed to the Cold War, committed to the balance of power, American honor, American prestige.

And he knows that South Vietnam is in trouble,

but he doesn't want it to fall apart in such a way that it completely compromises American honor and so on.

Again, reading from your bootleg chapter.

Yeah.

On the 27th of March, he tells Ford,

I say this with a bleeding heart, but maybe you must put Vietnam behind you and not tears a country apart again.

Yeah, so Kissinger, the trouble with Kissinger is he's very contradictory.

So he'll say it at various points, you know, oh, South Vietnam has lost, it's all a terrible disaster.

And then the next day, he'll sort of say, however, it'd be great if we could start bombing the North Vietnam again.

Why won't Congress give us loads of money?

So Ford asks Congress for money and Congress keeps saying no.

So at the beginning of the year, he had asked for \$300 million for aid for South Vietnam, more than \$200 million for Cambodia and Congress said no under no circumstances.

President Tew is writing to him all the time saying, please, will you authorize bombing strikes against the advancing Northern forces?

Please, will you help us?

But he can't, can he?

Without Congress's permission?

Without Congress's permission.

So he can't.

What he does is Ford is sort of dithering a bit.

And at the end of March, he decides that what he's going to do is going to send the last US Army commander in Vietnam,

who's a guy called General Frederick Wyand.

He's going to send him to go and have a look and to see if this is worth any future investment.

And Wyand goes off to Indochina and he gets back on the 5th of April, 1975.

And he basically says, South Vietnam is on the brink of a total military defeat.

And yet he then says, on the other hand, if you could give them \$700 million and you could authorize B-52s to hit the communist positions, then it might be able to survive.

And then, having said all that, there's a bit which is very sort of Henry Kissinger where he says, we have to do it because what's the stake of Vietnam now is America's credibility is an ally.

We must not abandon our goal of a free and independent Vietnam.

So that raises a specter of basically, let's restart the war.

The weird thing is that with him has gone, Ford has this kind of jester, a sort of fool at the White House.

So he's got this guy called David Kennerley.

I'm being a bit harsh on David Kennerley.

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He's actually a very good photographer.

So he was a time magazine photographer who basically Ford keeps on as his own personal photographer in the White House.

And Kennerley is very unusual in the Ford administration because he has a beard and he goes around wearing jeans

and he tells Ford what's actually happening rather than what Ford wants to hear.

So he's like a fool. He's like Lear's fool.

Exactly he is.

And he had been in Vietnam before and he goes off to on this mission with General Wyand.

And he comes back and he gets out all these photographs.

And actually Ford ended up sticking them up on the walls of the White House, the photographs.

And Kennerley says, this is actually what's really going on.

It is utter, utter, utter chaos.

Whatever the generals tell you, he says, quote, they are bullshitting you if they say that Vietnam has got more than three or four weeks left.

There's no question about it.

It's not going to last.

So Ford has one last go anyway.

He goes to Congress and he asks for money.

He does that really to cover his own back, I think.

So he says, please give me \$700 million for the aid to Vietnam.

And Congress says, no, the public are massively against it.

So polls say that eight out of 10 people think they should just leave the South Vietnamese to their fate as it were.

And so he does.

And then at about this point, South Vietnam is really, really creaking.

And maybe we should end this part of the episode, Tom, with this.

What happens in Danang?

So Danang is on the coast.

It's one of the biggest South Vietnamese cities.

It's coming under communist bombardment from a very late March.

So about the point when General Yen goes off to Vietnam.

And people, as the communists approach the suburbs of Danang, people, tens of thousands of them are basically moving towards the docks.

They're packing into fishing boats and barges and any kind of wooden...

And it's very much not titanic behavior, is it?

It is not women and children first.

It's basically women and children get kicked in the face.

So you've got Paul Vogel, an American reporter.

I saw one of them kick an old woman in the face to get aboard.

So Tom, this is an amazing story.

So we'll just end this half for this.

There's a guy called Ed Daly, who is a founder of an airline that some of our Americanists may have heard of,

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World Airways, which is this tiny kind of private airline, no-frills airline.
And Ed Daly was a great kind of philanthropist.
And he had, for years, allowed his airline to fly military equipment from California and aid and stuff from California to Vietnam.
And he reads in the newspapers about what's going on.
And he says, listen, I'll get two of my planes to go to Danang and to rescue these people who have been kicked in the face
and thrown overboard and all this sort of stuff.
And I'll go to supervise it personally.
And he goes and they land on the sort of tarmac in Danang.
And as they land, a mob of kind of 4,000 people engulf the plane, desperate to board.
And Ed Daly himself is standing at the bottom of this ramp.
And he's literally saying, kind of, women and children first.
And he is knocked over by this huge mob, most of whom are actually soldiers,
South Vietnamese soldiers who are like firing randomly at their own other people in the crowd.
And kicking old women in the face.
In the end, the plane is packed with thousands of people, among whom are just two women and one child.
And the rest of them are South Vietnamese Marines.
And as the plane takes off, the people who haven't got on the plane just start firing at the plane.
I mean, it's absolutely crazy.
And there are people who are dropping off, who've been hanging onto the...
Hanging onto the undercarriage.
The undercarriage, yeah.
Or got into the baggage hold.
So there are at least a couple of people, I think, fell into the sea as the plane kind of takes off.
And Paul Vogel, who is a journalist, who is watching is this.
He says, but the face that remains is that of the old woman lying there on the tarmac,
seeing life itself just off the end of her fingertips and rolling the other way.
Okay, we'll take a break there.
And when we come back, we will move that much faster towards the fall of Saigon.
Hello, welcome back to the Restless History.
We are looking at the fall of Saigon.
And Dominic, when we left, you were describing the chaos of planes taking off
and Marines storming on board and people dropping into the sea and all kinds of things.
And presumably this chaos is not just afflicting the airport at Danang,
but the whole city and countryside beyond.
Yeah, that's right.
So there's...
We ended with that story about Ed Daly in his World Airways or whatever it's called.
And there are many more stories like that.
So there's an American evacuation ship called the Pioneer Contender
where South Vietnamese troops are rescued and they run amok.
They kill about 24, 25 of the other refugees.

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They steal their money.

They rape people.

They take one guy's life savings off and they throw him into the sea.

The American crew actually ended up barricading themselves into their cabins because they're so terrified.

So...

It's all absolute heart of darkness stuff.

And you could see why a young poet would want to go and see all this.

I mean, this is kind of Iliad stuff.

The horrors of war.

And the crazy thing is that the communists march into Danang, I think the next day.

So Easter Sunday, 1975.

And Gerald Ford, do you know what he's doing, Tom?

Playing golf.

He is playing golf.

He's playing golf in Palm Springs.

And newspaper men come up to him and say,

what do you think about what's going on in Danang?

And he just sort of chuckles.

He says, oh!

And he sort of chuckles off.

And he sort of...

Why is he chuckling?

He's just embarrassed.

They've caught him when he's trying to play his golf.

Relax.

Yeah, I think.

I think he's...

But he actually watches the footage of himself that evening, which is juxtaposed with these apocalyptic kind of pictures from Vietnam.

And he says to a friend of his, you know, this is awful.

You know, he knows how bad it looks.

He says, Vietnam's gone.

We just have to kind of get out.

But the tragedy, of course, and this is this will now be very, you know, it'll ring a lot of bells with anybody who was watching the pictures from Afghanistan when Afghanistan felt the Taliban, Kabul felt the Taliban.

Yeah.

You know, you can't get out that easily.

It's really complicated and difficult.

And you feel like you have obligations.

And there are all kinds of tragedies.

So just like there were tragedies at Kabul Airport, just a couple of days later, there's one of the biggest tragedies.

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So yet another humanitarian gesture.
This was called Operation Baby Lift.
And this was a big transport plane from...
They'd been chartered to take Vietnamese orphans to the United States.
And they basically strap three kids into each adult seat.
So 243 children in all.
And they take off and the plane basically a door blows out and 135 people are killed.
And even at the time, a lot of journalists say this is the most terrible metaphor.
Like the daily flights.
These are the most dreadful metaphors for American intervention in Vietnam.
Intentions, technology.
But it ends up with legs scattered over paddy fields.
Exactly right.
Exactly right.
So there are a lot of journalists there.
I mean, some of the American...
There's a sort of Library of America two volume edition of War Reporting from Vietnam.
And if anybody's never read about the Vietnam War and is interested in the writing about it,
the war reporting is better than any history book.
Because the really, really brilliant writers would be sent by their papers.
They'd have unfettered access.
Because the American military was so useless, a sort of censorship.
So they would see everything.
And you get these stories.
I mean, there's a guy who was an ex-marine called Philip Caputo,
who later wrote a brilliant book about Vietnam.
And he talks about the flow of people.
What's he called it?
A stream of flesh and blood and bone of exhausted frightened faces of crushed hope and loss.
Along the roads, flooding south all the time.
This is the end of the road, his report ends.
The end of a war.
And the nearness of an end is all there is to mitigate the incalculable suffering of the Vietnamese
who are making their last march down the street without joy.
Yeah, brilliant stuff.
But also, I can't remember where I read it, but it must have been in your book.
The same with photography.
There are photographs that are so hideous that they can never be shown.
Am I right that there's a photograph of a head being taken out of a boiling pot of water or
something?
Yeah, there's loads of things like that.
And hideous things like that.
And the sense of an inferno, which then becomes incredibly enhanced by what is going on in
Cambodia

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across the border, which is even by the scale of the Vietnam War, is a kind of, you know, you're into a fresh circle of hell there.

Yeah, so this incredible thing that South Vietnam is collapsing.

This Cold War effort into which the Americans had pumped so many billions of dollars and so many thousands of lives.

And in the middle of all this, Cambodia is also collapsing.

So Cambodia was a real tragedy because Cambodia had been basically a sort of peaceful kingdom under Prince Chinook.

Is that right?

Yeah, Prince Sihanouk.

Yeah.

And basically being ripped apart first by both sides using it as a kind of battleground because, I mean, obviously, I know lots of people aren't looking at map.

But if you look at a map, as I said at the beginning, Vietnam kind of slightly cradles Cambodia, curls around it.

It's like a snake squeezing a baby.

Exactly.

And first the North Vietnamese had established their bases in Cambodia.

Then the Americans had bombed them and then invaded them.

Law and order, society, the kind of ecological system, the kind of the harvest, all those things, the rice harvest,

had completely broken down in Cambodia.

And that opened the way for an initially very small guerrilla group called the Khmer Rouge.

So these, they're often, they're largely illiterate young men, boys from the rural villages, commanded by kind of fanatical university educated communists.

But university educated communists who hate the university educated and particularly people with glasses.

I wouldn't have fared well.

You have no time for the Khmer Rouge, do you Tom?

I'm not a fan.

No.

So while all this has been going on, the Khmer Rouge have been advancing on Prom Pem, the capital of Cambodia.

Now, Americans obviously don't have anything like the same investment in Cambodia, but they do have an embassy.

So this is kind of like a dry run for what's going to follow in Saigon.

Except in this case, the Americans do manage to pretty much get out.

They say they've got the last flight, they've got, they get out 82 Americans and 152 Cambodians.

They're the ambassador who's a guy called John Gunter Dean.

He's the last to go and he's folded up the American flag and it's relatively decorous.

But even then, they're the most awful tragedies.

So John Gunter Dean, the ambassador, he got a letter just before he left from a guy called Prince Sirik Matak,

who had actually been a prime minister of Cambodia.

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And he had said to this guy, come with us, the Khmer Rouge will kill you.
And Sirik Matak wrote this letter, which actually does bear rereading because he says,
I thank you very sincerely if you're offered to transport me towards freedom.
I cannot alas leave in such a cowardly fashion.
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 has chosen liberty.
You've 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 the sky.
But mark it well that if I shall die here on this spot and in my country that I love, it's no matter, because we're all born and we all must die.
I have only committed this mistake of believing in you.
Imagine what a letter that is to receive.
And then the Khmer Rouge arrive and they shoot Sirik Matak in the stomach and he lies there for three days and dies.
Yeah, exactly.
So Henry Kissinger tells that story in his memoirs.
I mean, Henry Kissinger clearly blames Congress for that.
But I mean, Henry Kissinger himself is not entirely blameless.
I think it's very fair to say.
And we might do another episode on the Khmer Rouge, but just very briefly,
the sense of madness and cruelty generating this kind of hell is absolutely manifest in the first days of the Khmer Rouge takeover of Pnom Penh.
That all the people who live in the city are forced to go out into the countryside.
So the US ambassador, John Gunter Dean, he had predicted that.
He had said the infrastructure will be everybody involved in the infrastructure of this country and everybody involved with all the Buddhist monks, all the civil servants, all of these people.
He'd said they will be killed because we know what the Khmer Rouge have done to the villages they've occupied.
And the amazing thing is that most of the press corps at the time said,
They'll be all right.
Because they can't comprehend it.
Right.
This is Cold War Alarmism.
So the most famous example of that is actually one of the guys who's often seen as one of the great heroes of Western reporting of what happened in Cambodia,
who is the New York Times's correspondent Sidney Scharberg.
So he's the hero, one of the heroes of the film, The Killing Fields.
At the time, Sidney Scharberg is filing reports from Pnom Penh to say,
Yeah, the US government is saying the Khmer Rouge will be terrible.
They won't be.
I mean, he publishes one of the most infamous pieces in the New York Times's history with the headline,
So China without Americans, for most, a better life.
Saying the Khmer Rouge will be fine.

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Cambodia will be fine.

They'll soon be back on their feet.

They're a rich agricultural country.

They will be revived quite quickly.

All this is mad alarmism.

Then, about a month or so later, he's been the only reporter who's been brave enough.

The only American reporter who's brave or foolhardy enough to stay in Cambodia.

So all the rest have fled.

And then he files another report.

And he says, I was in the French embassy with all the other Westerners.

And eventually we were bussed to safety in Thailand.

And this is what I saw.

And he's the man who breaks the story.

And he says, unbelievably, the whole of this city has been emptied.

So that's three or four million people.

Yeah, have been forced to march into the countryside in this sort of,

they're like ghosts in a stunned silence guarded by Khmer Rouge guerrillas.

They've been forced out into the countryside and they are going to be made to become peasants.

I mean, this is the story.

And they've got no food.

They've got no water.

And as you said, Tom, the classic thing, people with glasses, people with Western education, people who speak foreign languages, people who are well-travelled, they are going to be killed and thrown into mass graves

because they are tainted by capitalism and imperialism and so on.

So that's a story that we might come back and do a separate episode on, unbelievably grueling subject.

But this is going on and under normal circumstances, this would be the absolute focus of world attention.

But actually, it seems to have been pretty much a sideshow.

Because meanwhile, the end game is being played out in South Vietnam.

Yes.

So South Vietnam, the Southern defences are kind of collapsing all the time.

There's a sense of the North can't believe it.

You see, they had thought this offensive would take two years, maybe longer.

And suddenly, the South's sort of great trap plan has completely fallen apart.

And they're just going on and the opposition is kind of melting away before them.

Now, the rainy season is coming probably in May or so.

So they need to get this done and dusted within the next kind of few weeks.

So the order comes from Hanoi, right, go for it.

And I quote, unremitting vigor in the attack all the way to Saigon.

So on they go, they take a crucial town, which is basically guarding the main road to Saigon, which is called Swin Locke.

And it's at that point that President Tew, who has been in situ all through the Nixon presidency,

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he's been the face of South Vietnam, he's constantly been badgering the Americans for help. He's been to Washington, he's done all these kinds of things. He resigns on, I think, the 21st of April. And he gives another extraordinary speech. So he gives this televised speech in which he says, I dug it out this morning, the text. He says, the United States is not respected as promises. It is inhumane. It is not trustworthy. It is irresponsible. The United States did not keep its word. Isn't Americans' word reliable these days? You Americans with your 500,000 soldiers in Vietnam, you were not defeated. You ran away. And then he says, he blames Kissinger personally. I never thought that such a secretary of state would produce a treaty that would bring us to our death. Doesn't he famously say that it's so easy to be an enemy of the United States but so difficult to be a friend? Yeah. So, I mean, the thing is, President Tew was... And then he ends up in Surrey. Well, I'll say why he was in Surrey in a second. He was corrupt. He was autocratic. He was all these things. But he relied completely on US support and he genuinely believed in the US commitment. And as a Brit, I suppose, American listeners would say it's easy for you to say. But he wasn't entirely wrong when he said the United States has made a commitment and then had walked away from it. I mean, American listeners will reasonably say, you know, we couldn't just keep pouring troops in forever. But Tew feels genuinely upset. Now, as you say, he ended up in Surrey. Do you know why he ended up in Surrey, Tom? Is it because he likes golf courses and stopbroker houses? I don't know. It's because he wants to visit his son who was eaten. Of course. Of course. Was he able to continue to afford to pay the school fees? I think he was. Yeah, I think he was. Because he squirreled out lots of loot. Well, he left.

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Yes, he left with something like...

I read he left with something like 18 tons of luggage.

Okay.

With including gold ingots.

It was said to be gold bars.

Yeah, it was genuinely said to be gold bars.

So there is a slight sense of that.

So it's just a couple of days after that that Gerald Ford, he basically is thinking, okay, this is now.

So this is now over.

So he goes to Tulane University in New Orleans, I think it is.

And he gives a speech where he says the war is finished as far as America is concerned.

And the students all go absolutely wild.

They're delighted because they think this is the final...

This is the commitment that we're not going to intervene.

We're not doing anything.

Henry Kissinger is actually furious about this.

It's a weird thing with Kissinger because at the same time that he's saying,

South Vietnam, I can't do his accent.

That was Arnold Schwarzenegger's accent.

At the same time that he's saying South Vietnam is finished, it can't be resuscitated.

He's very cross when Ford says, well, we have to give up now.

So, okay, the US isn't going to intervene.

South Vietnam is clearly doomed.

However, what's hanging in the air is what on earth are you going to do about Saigon?

So how many Americans are in Saigon?

Maybe 6,000.

And how many South Vietnamese have the Americans promised to kind of take care of?

So it is a Kabul situation, isn't it?

It is absolutely Kabul, but on a far grander scale.

So don't forget the Americans have been much more committed in South Vietnam than they were in Afghanistan in the last two decades.

There have been vast numbers of Americans, enormous quantities of American money, and their commitments are enormous.

So 6,000 American citizens, there are probably about 200,000 people who have been employed by American agencies or are married to Americans or are the partners or girlfriends of Americans or the children of Americans, Tom.

And who therefore would be absolutely on the hit list of the Viet Cong?

Well, that's what the Americans think.

So everybody thinks these people could well all be killed when the war ends.

We absolutely have to get them out.

But if you include the families of those people, right?

So imagine you're a translator, you drive a Jeep, you run a bar that American soldiers drank in, you run a boarding house, you were a hotel porter, you worked at the embassy as a cleaner.

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I mean, the list goes on and on.
But each of those people has a family.
So actually, when the Americans draw up the list, they say,
we're actually talking about a million people.
And you cannot, I mean, with all the helicopters in the world,
you're not going to be able to bring out a million people.
Now, the thing, the problem they have is the ambassador,
who is a man called Graham Martin, who's from North Carolina.
He's a liberal guy.
He's been involved in the New Deal.
He's a sort of career ambassador.
He has completely an utterly gone native.
And to use the sort of expression at the time,
people refer to him as our man from Saigon rather than our man in Saigon.
And he is basically saying, you know, we can't just scuttle and leave all these people.
You know, it would be an absolute betrayal.
We have to stay and somehow get them all out.
Or, you know, what are we going to do?
And so there's this sense of every hour the communist armies were approaching,
the kind of tanks are rumbling down the rutted roads.
And all these people are getting increasingly agitated.
But how on earth are you going to get them all out?
And does Martin's determination, I mean, his sense of obligation
to say the million people who will be, you know, in the crosshairs,
does that result in a kind of sense of paralysis?
Yeah, of course, because Henry Kissinger is saying,
right, make preparations now, shred your documents, get everything ready,
sod the Vietnamese, you know, we'll get you in America first.
In America first.
Well, that's all we can do.
And Martin just sort of says, no, that won't do at all.
We can't run away.
We can't leave these people and does nothing.
And so people are going mad.
They're kind of tearing their hair out because all the time
they can almost kind of hear the rumbling of the guns on the horizon.
And the ambassador is saying, no, we can't do anything precipitous.
We can't rush out.
Yeah, because you quote him, the one thing that was set off violence
would be a sudden order for American evacuation.
It would be universally interpreted as the most callous betrayal,
leaving the Vietnamese to their fate while we send in the Marines
to make sure we get all of ours out.
So basically the North Vietnamese Army is heading towards Saigon

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and Ambassador Martin is refusing to do anything.
Pretty much.

I mean, that sounds like I'm being very mean to him,
but that's pretty, that's certainly the view from Washington.
Washington's view is, why is he not doing anything right?

It's a terrible, terrible situation.

We're approaching the end of April and we're getting to the point
where actually Saigon has not days left, but hours left
and there are still the 6,000 Americans,
plus a million people who think that they are going to.

And the situation I was intrigued to read reminded Kissinger
of very much a friend of the show who we've did two episodes on,
General Gordon, who ended up in Khartoum,
killed by the forces of the Mardi.

And I mean, the echoes of British imperial adventures here
are very, very strong and perhaps we could come to maybe
in the second episode.

So this is what, by the 28th of April,
that Ford and Kissinger are starting, well, they didn't,
Kissinger has hair, Ford doesn't have much hair.

If Ford had hair, he'd be tearing it out.

They're going absolutely mad and, well, Ford says to Kissinger,
as tragic as it is Henry, we've got to leave these people there
because they know that all these people,
lots of people have now gone to the airport.

So there are thousands and thousands of people
on the tarmac at the airport waiting for American planes
that they think this kind of magic wand is going to be waived.

And Kissinger and Ford are saying to each other,
we have to tell Martin now, no more Vietnamese, Americans only.

And Kissinger says, Ford says,
get the order underway and it sickens me.

And Kissinger says it's the best that could be done.

So this is 28th of April, so the end is only hours away
and yet some of the most sort of melodramatic events
and the most sort of tragic drama is yet to come.

Okay, so for those iconic moments,
the choppers heading down to pick up the very last Marines,
people surging over the walls of the American Embassy,
great drama, tune in for our next episode,
second part of this series.

And we will see you then, bye-bye.

Bye-bye.

You