

[Transcript] The Rest Is History / 325: Fall of Saigon: Apocalypse Now

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On the morning of the 29th of April, 1975, Keys Beach, who was a reporter, the Chicago Daily News, he was 61 years old, he had served in the Marines.

He was having breakfast with a group of other journalists when he was told that he had to get on a bus and head urgently and directly for Saigon's main airport.

As they were heading there, however, news came in on the intercom that there were going to be no planes leaving from the airport, and so they turned around and they headed for the U.S. Embassy in Saigon.

And he wrote, Beach wrote an incredible account of what he saw when he got there. Great seething mass of Vietnamese people trying to get over the walls of the U.S. Embassy compound.

Once we moved into that seething mass, Beach wrote, we ceased to be correspondents.

We were only men fighting for their lives, scratching, clawing, pushing ever closer to that wall. We were like animals.

Now I thought, I know what it's like to be a Vietnamese. I am one of them. But if I could get over that wall, I would be an American again.

My Attache case accidentally struck a baby in its mother's arms, and its father beat at me with his fists.

I tried to apologize as he kept on beating me while his wife pleaded with me to take the baby.

Suddenly my arm was free and I edged closer to the wall. There were a pair of Marines on the wall.

They were trying to help us up and kick the Vietnamese down. One of them looked down at me.

Help me, I pleaded. Please help me. That Marine did help me. He reached down with his long muscular arm and pulled me up as if I were a helpless child.

I lay on a tin roof, gasping for breath like a landed fish, then dropped to the ground.

God bless the Marines. I was one myself in the last of the just wars.

So Dominic, this is from the chapter you wrote in your sadly edited book.

So this chapter never made it out, but it's brilliant, brilliant chapter describing the fall of Saigon.

We come to the end game, 29th of April, and the evacuation is famously flagged up for those in the know, isn't it, by the playing of White Christmas?

Yeah, by Armed Forces Radio. I could just see you gearing up somewhere.

What I was gearing up to say was a detail that I'd seen on the Ken Burns documentary about this, that in fact it wasn't the Bing Crosby version,

even though it was meant to be. They couldn't find the record, so they had to put out some other version of it.

Anyway, that's as may be. The signal has been given. It's time for Americans to leave, but not for Vietnamese,

with the consequence that it's very, very dramatically and tragically illustrated by that account that I just read.

Yeah, it's an extraordinary scene. So in the last podcast, Tom, we were talking about how you get from Henry Kissinger and Luduk Tu signing the peace agreement

in January 1973, winning the Nobel Peace Prize, and then getting from there to the end of April 1975,

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the South Vietnamese regime collapsing, this country in which the Americans have invested so much time, money, blood, effort, intellectual and moral capital on the verge of collapse.

And we ended last time by talking about the disjuncture between the White House, which is saying get everything ready, get out.

We need to do this as quickly and efficiently as possible. That's Gerald Ford and Henry Kissinger and Ambassador Graham Martin, who has refused really to make preparations because he says that will spark panic and Saigon and will be a betrayal of the Vietnamese.

We also talked, didn't we, about how there are 6,000 Americans, but there are up to a million Vietnamese who have a reasonable expectation that they're going to be taken out.

So as you said, Armed Forces Radio played the song White Christmas. That's about 11 o'clock on the 29th of April.

North Vietnamese Final Offensive has been under way since dawn. General Zung, who is the North Vietnamese commander, has been given the instruction to strike into the enemy's final layer, which is a very sort of 1970s communist.

And is that the US Embassy or the Presidential Palace?

The Presidential Palace is where they're really heading for. I mean, that's the target.

But the US Embassy obviously is vulnerable. People are already starting to sort of assemble outside the US Embassy.

That warning, so it's White Christmas, the playing of the song, and then the announcer says the words, it is 105 degrees in Saigon and rising.

And that is the cue that all the Americans have been told, get to the Embassy. You must get to the Embassy.

So Dominic, a question at this point. What if they hadn't? What if they'd relied on their diplomatic immunity? Would there have been a kind of Tehran in 1979 situation?

That is an excellent question, Tom. And the truth of the matter is we don't know because they did get out, most of them.

But say, for example, you started the last episode by talking about the future Oxford professor of poetry, James Fenton.

He hangs around and...

Well, he not only did that, he goes to the US Embassy and loots stuff, doesn't he, at some point?

Yes. He's there in the ruins with loads of other people kind of peeking through the bookshelves.

But then he's British. I mean, he's not American.

Yes.

I think that the chances are actually that you would have been taking enormous risk.

No one knows. People at this point don't know that the North Vietnamese are not like the Khmer Rouge.

So there's an expectation you could easily be shot. I mean, the only sensible thing would be...

What if you're cut off? You could be held hostage, Tom. You could end up in a prisoner of war camp. You could be shot out of hand.

Paraded on TV.

Paraded on TV. Exactly.

If you've got any sense at all, you're going to get yourself down to the Embassy.

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So they've got huge Chinook helicopters.

The US 7th Fleet is offshore in the South China Sea. So that's only about a half hour flight away. And isn't there, in the courtyard, there's a tamarin tree that has to be chopped down if the helicopter is going to land in it.

And Martin is still...

Reluctant.

...subjecting to have it chopped down.

That's right, yes.

But it gets chopped down in the end.

Exactly right.

So Martin, right at this point, the Ambassador is still really dragging his feet.

So you talked last time about Henry Kissinger comparing him with General Gordon, the great sort of British imperial martyr of the 19th century, killed by the Mardi's forces in Khartoum.

I think there is a slight sense of Ambassador Martin having a General Gordon complex and wanting to be the martyr.

I don't think he wants to be speared on the steps of the Embassy.

But I think he wants to be the absolute last man out. He's reluctant to go.

He feels this terrible sense of betrayal.

Well, the American Ambassador in Plum Penn had been the last out, hadn't he?

Yes, but he had walked out with a folded American flag.

There'd be much smaller numbers and it'd be much more sort of decorous and efficient.

I mean, to give you an example of the inefficiency.

We are now in sort of, let's say, mid-morning, the 29th of April, the Communist tanks are rolling through the streets.

Meanwhile, in the U.S. Embassy, there's like documents everywhere.

The secretaries are tottering under piles of shredding,

sort of very fawn-haul behavior, if you remember from the Iran-Contra podcast we did.

Am I not right that this is a huge problem for the helicopters

because shredded material can kind of get whipped up and get sucked into the...

It's wafting through the air.

Smoke is literally rising above the Embassy because people are burning documents and that is a problem for the helicopters.

So it's all very chaotic.

They've sent out Embassy employees with lists of key people that they need to get out of the city.

So there's a good example of Ken Moorfield.

He's commandeered buses.

He goes off to buildings in Saigon to pick up people who are waiting.

And he tells the story there's one building called the Brinks Building.

So that's where American senior American officers had stayed during the American kind of military occupation of Saigon.

Moorfield gets there to pick up the people he wants.

And there are hundreds of other people who he describes and he says, they are intelligence agents, they are waiters,

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they are all people who have kind of been complicit as it were with the American presence. And they're just standing there looking at him and he says to them, stand fast, stand fast.

And he can't meet their eyes because he knows there's no...

They're going to be betrayed.

They're going to be betrayed.

And they're just waiting expectantly with their briefcases and whatnot and the suitcases ready to go.

And there's the beach story that you told.

I mean, that is an amazing story.

So Keys Beach, if you read the whole story which he wrote in the Chicago Daily News, they set off for the airport, a load of journalists.

And as you said, they get turned away.

But they're in this bus and there are crowds of Vietnamese beating on the bus the whole time trying to be let aboard.

And Beach describes, he says, you know, there's people from CBS, NBC, all the rest of it, who are normally like mild-mannered, completely kind of Pacific kind of guys who are literally beating back Vietnamese civilians trying to...

Well, also, but all the Marines on the wall were kind of smashing people with the butts of their rifles. They are, exactly.

Yes, beating them in the face.

One of his colleagues, Bob Tomarkin, I think his name is, who also wrote for the Chicago Daily News, he describes people pointing their guns at the Vietnamese and shouting, get down you bastard or I'll blow your head off, all this kind of thing.

So it is a horrendous scene.

It's actually, I would say, far more chaotic, bloodier, more visceral than even what we saw in Kabul in the fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban.

Well, I tell you what it reminds me of, actually, is another British imperial venture, which is the withdrawal from Kabul in 1842, which was kind of similarly supposed to be, the plans had been laid and they all just fell to pieces.

I mean, in the event it's better for the Americans, because they do at least get the Americans out.

Yes.

All the British get slaughtered except for one doctor and flashman.

Yeah, that's right.

The sense in which these episodes kind of echo what had gone before in European imperial history is really interesting, I think.

It is.

As well as the way in which they prefigure what has happened in American history since Vietnam.

It's always because they work as metaphors, don't they, for Western hubris.

Don't you think?

Absolutely.

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And for the sort of arrogance of industrialized modernity
and of sort of Western civility and all these kinds of things in the face of crisis,
that everything collapses.

So Keyes Beach, that bit you quoted, I always think it's such a revealing line.
And I don't think he means this in a pejorative way.

I completely understand what he means, where he says,
we were like animals.

Now I thought, I know what it's like to be Vietnamese.

I'm one of them.

But if I could get over that wall, I would be an American again.

And that sort of sense that the Americans have always thought of themselves as,
I mean, frankly, they've always thought of themselves as superior to the Vietnamese.

And suddenly in the face of the crisis, they've all been dragged back.

But Dominic, I mean, legally, in the context of a city that's being invaded
by people who want to kill everybody that they might think they are superior
because Americans have a legal right to get out.

Well, I mean, isn't that what he means?

Yes, of course, what he means is that if I'm on that side of the wall,
I'm an American and I can get on a helicopter.

If I'm stuck on this side of the wall, I'm just one of them.

And I could end up in front of a firing squad or anything.

I mean, this is obviously what's in the minds of Henry Kissinger
and the people back in Washington who are saying,
all the Americans must be on this side of the wall, inside the embassy compound
and nobody else is to be let in.

And actually what you get a sense of when you go through the story
is that in the White House, in or in Washington,

Kissinger, Ford, all these people are saying,
what's going on over there?

Because they have no sense of the scale of the catastrophe that is unfolding.

And they are also doing it all through an ambassador
who's being forced to do it against his will.

So you talked about his general Gordon complex.

I mean, how do the American, I guess the president, Kissinger, whoever,
how do they get Martin out of the embassy
and get everybody else out of the embassy?

Well, the crazy thing is, Tom, that at 10 o'clock that night,
he is still there.

The helicopter has been taking off all afternoon.

Ambassador Martin is still there.

Washington sends him a demand at 10 o'clock that night saying,
all repeat, all Americans must now be evacuated.

He is still refusing to go.

It's absolutely mind-boggling.

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He sends back a message that reads as follows,
perhaps you can tell me how to make some of these Americans
abandon their half Vietnamese children
or how the president would look if he ordered this.
So basically what they do is at midnight,
the Marines order that everybody now must withdraw
into an inner compound inside the embassy.
So you imagine the embassy is a series of kind of compounds within compounds.
So they've gone through to the inner compound
and at 3 o'clock that morning,
so the helicopter is landing all the time on the roof,
at 3 o'clock that morning,
Washington sends a message to say,
there are going to be 19 more helicopters
and Ambassador Martin must be on one of the helicopters.
The last one, there's their expectation.
But what's happening is the helicopters are landing.
You said the tree had been cut down.
They're landing in the kind of car park of the embassy.
But all the time, because the embassy is under siege
from this mob of people,
the car park is actually no longer safe
for them to land the helicopters.
So they say we can only now use the embassy roof,
which means they have to use smaller helicopters.
So they can't get all the people that they've said
they think they can get out,
even that small number of people.
So there are hundreds of Vietnamese
who have got through some of these sort of walls.
Checks and things.
Checks who are clearly not going to be got out.
I mean, that's the absolutely terrifying thing.
So about 4 o'clock in the morning,
the commander of the Marines is a man called Major Jim Keen.
He gets a message and the message says,
you get Ambassador Martin on the next helicopter now,
and he's actually under orders that if Martin resists,
they basically have to arrest him
and put him on the helicopter at the point of a gun.
Isn't it true that when he's being taken up,
you know, up to the top of the roof,
the Marines guarding the access point,
one of them is reading a book about the fall of Rome.

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Yeah, what an amazing detail that is.
So the Marines are kind of slumped on the floor now.
They're surrounded by all their kits.
They've got their guns, they've got their packs,
and they're going to be the last to go.
And as Martin passes, yes, exactly,
one of the journalists notices that he's
reading a battered paperback that's called the fall of Rome.
About 5 o'clock in the morning,
Martin is put onto a helicopter called the Lady 809,
and he's the last, you know,
official American representative in South Vietnam
and off the helicopter goes,
and it takes him towards the 7th Fleet,
which is out in the South China Sea.
However, he's the last sort of official representative,
but there are still Americans,
because there are still Marines.
And now, the situation is that the Marines,
all the time, there are hundreds of Vietnamese
that are now down there in the car park,
beginning to make their way up through the embassy
towards the roof where the Marines are now stationed.
And it's basically a race against time for the helicopters
to get the Marines before the Vietnamese get there.
It's like a kind of zombie film, isn't it?
It is, actually.
You know, it's people stuck on the top of a shopping center
surrounded by zombies waiting to be taken off.
It is, and that's a terrible thing to say,
because it sort of plays into that sort of sense
that the Vietnamese are a threat,
because that's certainly how they're seen at this point,
that it's such chaos,
and all sort of civility has been cast to the winds.
But of course, the Vietnamese are people who've worked
with the Americans for years, decades,
who have got all their stuff, who are terrified,
and will have been promised.
They've been promised that helicopters are coming.
And Major Keen, he knows that there are about 100 Marines left.
There are just enough spaces on the helicopters for them,
but for nobody else.
So at about 5.30, he tells his men, everybody up now,

we bar the doors, and they actually jam things like
air conditioning units in the doorways
to block the Vietnamese from getting onto the roof.
And that really is, you know, you said like a zombie film.
That is the kind of atmosphere.
But by now, the Vietnamese have kind of twigged
what's happening, right?
Yes, so some of them are going mad.
And so you say that they're busy urinating gleefully
in the swimming pool.
Well, I don't know if gleefully is the right word.
I mean, to some extent, some of them have yielded
to a kind of macabre carnival, you say.
Do I say that?
You say, from the roof, Major Keen's men could see them
stripping the restaurant of its fittings,
carrying off frozen steaks and slabs of ribs,
cartons of cigarettes, playing bumper cars
with abandoned embassy vehicles,
urinating gleefully in the swimming pool,
cavorting in one last macabre carnival.
Pricky.
Macabre carnival is a quote, though.
So somebody else must have said that.
Yes, this is all description from the time.
Yeah, Major Keen.
So he's one of these people who later gave loads
and loads of interviews about it.
So the helicopters keep coming by about 7.
7.30.
There's just one group left, 11 Marines.
And then, as you'll remember from the Ken Burns documentary
that you were saying last time you'd watched, Tom,
there's then a delay before the final helicopter comes.
So picture the scene.
Dawn is breaking or has broken over Saigon.
A lot of the city is on fire, smoke over the city.
There are North Vietnamese troops advancing through the city
towards the presidential palace.
There's the mob below in the embassy.
There are mobs on the streets.
These 11 guys, US Marines, are on the top of the embassy
and they are waiting.
They are exhausted.

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There are various points where people are starting to smash through the windows of the doors onto the embassy roof and they're having to kind of beat them back or spray them with mace.

And they've lost their walkie-talkies, haven't they?

Yes.

So they have no way of communicating.

So they don't know if the helicopters are coming for them.

And then they're waiting and waiting and waiting.

And of course, they think if no helicopter comes, we'll either be lynched by the people in the embassy or we'll be captured by the communists, paraded on TV or shot or who knows.

No good option.

And they're waiting and waiting.

And then basically at 7.53, I think it is, they see one last kind of black dot against the sky, one last helicopter coming back for them.

They get aboard the helicopter and the last thing they do as the helicopter takes off.

I mean, it says so much about the American commitment to Vietnam.

The last thing they do before leaving is they throw their tear gas grenades over the sides trying to tear the looters and then they lift off into the sky and they're gone.

It's amazing, isn't it?

Because actually helicopters beating through early morning haze is absolutely the image that kind of dominates the folktales of Vietnam because of Apocalypse Now and because of this.

Yeah.

And they blur.

So the helicopters in Apocalypse Now are, you know, right of the Valkyries destroying.

And here they're scuttling and withdrawing.

Yes.

The chopper had been a sort of the emblematic military technology of the Vietnam War.

And so it's almost like a sort of script writer.

Yeah.

So the beating of the fan kind of blurring into the sound of helicopters moving.

I mean, it's kind of, if I shut my eyes and think of Vietnam, that's basically the sound that I hear.

Yeah.

That and the music of the doors from Apocalypse Now.

This is the end.

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Those things all being one sort of almost psychedelic kind of trance-like.

Yeah.

And the fact that they go up on helicopters.

But actually, of course, the story doesn't quite end there,
at least not for those guys because they're brought back to the ships.

And actually, when you read about, they get off the choppers.

And a lot of them are in tears.

Bob Tomarken, who we mentioned in the journalist,
he's sitting on a bunk next to a guy called Stuart Harrington,
who was a US intelligence officer.

And Stuart Harrington says, they lied to us at the very end.

They promised.

They promised.

I've never received an order in my life to do something I was ashamed of.

If I'd known how it was going to end, I'd have refused the order.

And a Lieutenant Colonel, a Lieutenant Colonel,

I suppose he'd have called himself, butts in.

And he says to Tomarken, do you know what you saw?

Do you really know what you saw?

And the reporter says, I saw the evacuation of the US Embassy in the last hours.

And this guy says, no, you saw deceit.

You saw how he let this country down to the very end.

So they're absolutely, the people who've been involved with this,
they are absolutely wracked by guilt at what has happened.

Meanwhile, the North Vietnamese crashed through the gates into the presidential palace.

I know you were very, you were very entertained, Tom,

when we were texting each other about this,

that the last leader of South Vietnam was called Big Min.

It's a good name.

It is a good name.

You know, Big Min.

So I'll tell you something about Big Min.

Is that something from Damon Runyon?

It is.

It is.

He's a very Damon Runyon-like character,
because Big Min, he'd had a couple of goes
at being the kind of strongman of South Vietnam.

And he'd ended up kind of, you know, the music stopped and he was in the chair.

He only had one tooth, because all the rest of them had been pulled out
by the Japanese in the Second World War.

Oh, God.

But when he smiled, apparently, he would smile in a way to exhibit his single tooth
to sort of remind you of his courage.

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Yeah.

Yeah.

So Big Min is waiting for the North Vietnamese.

The Americans have just gone.

The North Vietnamese arrived.

And he says, I'm here to surrender power to you.

And they say, well, you have no power.

You know, there's nothing to surrender.

There's no question of you transferring power.

Then somebody shoots those guns outside and Big Min and his ministers all kind of quail.

And the North Vietnamese say, oh, don't worry, you have nothing to fear.

This is a moment of joy for our country, all this kind of thing.

And Big Min and his guys relax.

And the captain or whatever says to Big Min, how's your orchid collection?

Big Min was a big orchid collector.

Was he?

Oh.

And Big Min says, oh, you know, how do you know that?

No wonder you won the war.

You know everything.

And actually, interestingly, the orchid collection.

So that Big Min actually just devotes himself to orchid collecting after this.

So he's fine.

He doesn't get it.

He's not shot.

He's not put in the camp.

No.

Does he get a reeducation center?

No, I don't think he's reeducated, interestingly.

He's based under house arrest in a villa where he looks at orchids and smiles to himself in the mirror and looks at his tooth.

Well, meanwhile, his predecessor, President Tew, he's

Sorry?

He's watching the Eaton War game.

Yes.

Or whatever.

Yes.

Both of them could have come to worse fates.

Exactly.

You started the first episode on this with James Fenton, didn't you, Tom?

And James Fenton, actually, the poet, he actually goes back to the US embassy a few hours later to see what's going on.

And it's absolute and utter chaos.

And he actually does loot books from the embassy library.

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Well, he's with a French businessman, isn't he?

A French businessman just kind of goes berserk, so kind of grabbing everything that he can and Fenton joins in.

And you're in this book that I hope someone will get out there.

Fenton's gone there beside him.

A French businessman similarly swept up in the craze for booty, picked up a dusty color portrait of a smiling man in a dark suit surrounded by his family.

To Ambassador and Mrs. Graham Martin with appreciation for their service to the nation read the inscription from Richard Nixon.

Yeah.

Well.

On that note, Saigon has fallen.

And Dominic, when we come back, perhaps we could talk about the long-term ramifications.

Sure.

See you after the break.

I've been hard.

Harder than I said.

Are you out of your mind?

I'll be a murderer.

You know what I mean.

That Dominic Sembrick was, of course, Marlon Brando in Apocalypse Now, one of a number of films that was made in the wake of the Vietnam War and the fall of Saigon.

And you think of that and the Dear Hunter and...

I don't think of that.

I suppose the Dear Hunter and Apocalypse Now are the two kind of landmark films that were made in the way of the Vietnam War.

And kind of ways for America to process and try and come to terms with the trauma of what had happened.

But before we come to the impact of all this on America, perhaps we should look at what happened to Vietnam, to the South Vietnamese.

What happens to all the, for instance, to all the people who have not managed to escape from the US Embassy?

What happens to them?

Do they get rounded up?

Do they get shot?

Do they get re-educated?

Do they get away?

What happens?

No one has ever introduced a discussion of the fate of South Vietnam with a reading like that.

I think it's fair to say.

Pretty good.

Pretty accurate.

But okay, they don't get shot.

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So this is an interesting thing.

It's not Khmer Rouge.

No.

So I think that's what makes that valuable that you actually did mention Cambodia in episode one.

Because the expectation, I think, at this point is quite apocalyptic.

That they will all be killed or that there will be some gigantic purge or whatever.

Blood bath.

There isn't really a blood bath.

I mean, I'm not saying there's nothing.

There undoubtedly are acts of sort of violence and terror.

It's actually quite hard to tell because, of course, the people who won that war are still running Vietnam to this day, or at least their ideological descendants.

So it's slightly difficult to get a sense of this, but as far as we know, somewhere in the region of 300,000 people were probably sent to re-education camps.

You do sometimes see figures that are much higher, so a million people.

And some of them are there for quite a long time, aren't they?

Yes.

I mean, they're kind of there for decades.

Yeah.

So some of those re-education camps are probably there for about 20 years.

But these, again, these are not quite like the Khmer Rouge's camps.

So the Khmer Rouge's camps, you go in and there's a really, a very good chance you're not coming out again.

In these camps, there's a chance that you might go and you'll just have to listen to days and days or weeks and weeks of very boring lectures about communism.

And then eventually you'll be let out.

A bit like going to a British university.

Oh, very good.

Very good, Tom.

Very good.

Yes.

Just like going to a British university.

Boom.

However, there was also a chance you could be beaten, you could be tortured.

There are estimates that thousands of people may have, possibly even tens of thousands of people may have died in the camps.

On the other hand, what you don't know is whether they died because they were beaten or they died of malnourishment.

Yeah.

And actually there are an awful lot of people who die in Vietnam of malnourishment at this point because Vietnam has basically descended into an abyss, into a kind of economic and societal abyss.

And America presumably is refusing to recognise the new government so they've been cut out

of the international trading system and...

Exactly.

Exactly.

So if you think about...

Quite like Afghanistan.

Again, the analogy is there.

Yeah.

The Vietnamese economy is in utter tatters.

They are dealing with literally millions of refugees, perhaps 10 million refugees.

There are perhaps a million people who've been widowed because of the war.

There are perhaps a million orphans.

There are hundreds of thousands of people who have been injured because of the war.

Millions of people with no jobs.

Much of the countryside has been ravaged by chemical weapons or by bombing or by mines.

All of that stuff.

The Americans who had promised to pay billions of dollars in reconstruction aid as part of the Paris Peace Accords say, well, basically because you violated the Paris Peace Accords in conquering the rest of the country, you are now liable for South Vietnam's debts to us.

Okay.

That's punchy.

And because you're not going to pay, obviously, we're going to impose a trade embargo on you.

Okay.

So it's miserable.

It's miserable.

Oh, yes.

It's absolutely dire.

The interesting thing though is that the Vietnamese regime is nothing like as repressive as the Cambodian regime.

And actually, the Vietnamese regime is fighting the Cambodian regime.

Well, because the very witty comment that Cambodia becomes Vietnam's Vietnam.

Right.

Yeah.

Because the Vietnamese are there for 10 years.

They kind of get sucked into a kind of get bogged down in there.

They do.

They do indeed.

Now, there are a lot of Vietnamese who of course have left and continue to leave.

So in 1975.

So these are the boat people?

Yeah.

So in 1975, there's about 100,000, 125,000 who've gone to America one way or another.

So actually China then attacks Vietnam because of Vietnam intervening Cambodia.

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Yeah.

I know.

I mean, poor Vietnamese.

I mean, it's just one horror after another, isn't it?

Yeah.

People who you and I remember, I mean, I remember as a child watching John Craven's news round.

Yeah.

And that was always about the Vietnamese boat people.

800,000 people got onto little boats or crammed onto really overcrowded bigger boats and tried to get to, I mean, often they were heading for kind of Indonesia or Malaysia or somewhere or Thailand.

But probably about 200,000 of them died, drowned in attempts to escape Vietnam.

I mean, absolutely astronomical, terrifying figures.

And actually the fact that it's in Southeast Asia means that it's a little bit more distant from the kind of particularly European kind of consciousness because if that had happened closer to...

Well, in the channel, for instance.

I mean, imagine, whereas now it's largely forgotten.

Most of our British listeners were probably forgotten about all about this.

When the boat people reach safety and they're heading for Thailand, aren't they?

Is that right?

Yeah.

When they get there, are they staying in Thailand or are they going on to America?

Well, the dream is to go to America.

Does the American government, does their sense of responsibility and guilt lead them to giving visas more readily to South Vietnamese?

Yes.

So about 300,000 Vietnamese moved to America in the late 70s and early 80s.

I mean, it's a very, very large movement of people.

But I think what's interesting is Gerald Ford, I mean, Ford went to Congress to get aid for the Vietnamese refugees in 1975 and Congress initially said, no, would you believe? And Ford went back again, was really cross about it, and went back again and did manage to get the aid through, but it's actually really remarkable how America is a country that has generally been very welcoming to waves of refugees.

I mean, I know we can sort of find things to criticize, but by Western standards generally, the United States has been very hospitable.

By and large, the polls show that people were very, very ambivalent about admitting the Vietnamese. So there are huge sort of little panics about the Vietnamese bringing disease in 1975.

In Niceville.

Yes.

A place called Niceville in Florida, where people turn out not to be very nice.

Yeah. Niceville, Florida, exactly.

So there's more than a thousand refugees at Eglin Air Force Base and eight out of 10 local

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people said they didn't want them there.

Lots of people said they won't cut their hair, they won't let them buy drinks, they won't do all this sort of thing.

I think a lot of that is as a projection.

There's a feeling of humiliation, of they're sick of the issue of Vietnam, and actually what's really interesting is they blame...

So seeing Vietnamese people, seeing Vietnamese people, it just reminds them of everything they want to forget. Do you think that's it?

I think there's that, and I think there's a lot of Americans who blame at the time, maybe not now, but at the time, they're instinctive to blame the South Vietnamese themselves for... For having lost, for having run away.

For having sucked us in, our boys into this fight, and then our boys lost, it was all terribly corrupt over there, and then the South Vietnamese themselves lost and ran away.

We tried to help them, but they didn't want to be helped, all this sort of thing.

And it's, yeah, there's a sort of, there is an ugly side to it.

Okay, so that opens up the much broader question of how America kind of synthesizes what has happened. Is it about burying the memory? Is it about going into a kind of cultural national therapy? And of course, there's a very, very broad range of responses to it.

So if people in the government, Kissinger and so on, are traumatized by this, so equally on the anti-war section, the humiliation of Saigon is seen as a great celebration.

People have festivals and things, don't they?

It's absolutely mind boggling to me, actually, this. So at Central Park, New York, on the 11th of May, 1975, plays host to a rally of some 50,000 people, many of whom are anti-war activists who have gathered to celebrate the North Vietnamese victory. And they are the sort of, you know, sort of anti-war folk singers and stuff who are singing their old ballads.

There are two Democratic Congresswomen, local Democratic Congresswomen, Bella Ubsurg and Elizabeth Holtzman, Pete Seeger, Paul Simon, people like that.

All the lads.

It's a really weird thing. There are lots of people there who are just celebrating. They are delighted that the South Vietnam has been defeated.

Well, because they would say it's not America that's been defeated, but it's the warmongering militarists who have seized control of America.

They would indeed. They absolutely would. And maybe some people listening to this podcast will say that now. I wouldn't want to be making that argument to somebody who's about to spend 20 years in a reeducation camp who might say, listen, we believed in you and my entire family have been incarcerated and their lives have been polite by, I mean, I think it's not a moment you could absolutely oppose the war. You could oppose the war with every fiber of your being and still regard the fall of Saigon and South Vietnam as a tragic moment rather than one for celebration, I would have said.

Right. But I mean, the assumption about Vietnam, it seems to me, has been that it's for Americans, it's a bit like what the First World War is for the British, that it's a doomed war, a foolish war shouldn't have been fought, basically both sides are as bad as the other.

Is that an accurate reflection of the historical reality, do you think? And the reason that I ask is to go back to those echoes of General Gordon. General Gordon was a man who was

committed

to destroying the slave trade. He felt that in taking a stand against the Mardi, he was on the right side of history, if you want to put it like that.

With Vietnam, there are two very ideologically committed groups of people in America who both feel that they're on the right side of history, those who are opposing the war, those who are supporting the war. When the war finishes, where did those assumptions go? So people on the left and people on the right, or does it just, I mean, because this is very much the impression I get from Poclips now and Dear Hunter, is that ultimately the idea that on either side, there was a right side of history completely goes up in smoke, goes up in napalm, you might say. But the whole thing was just a moral catastrophe. Yeah, the Viet Cong, the South Vietnamese, the Marines, everybody was morally compromised. There was no right side of history there.

Well, that's a really complicated question. So let's start with the people at the top.

So Henry Kissinger is the most obvious one because he's been the person who's been presiding over the war for the last six years or so. Kissinger writes a paper, a Gerald Ford's request on the lessons of Vietnam. He says we were always on the right side of history. He says our intervention in Vietnam saved Indonesia from falling to communism and the whole of Asia would have gone and we preserved some sort of US presence in Asia. I believe our efforts militarily, diplomatically and politically were not in vain. We paid a high price but we gained 10 years in time. We changed what then appeared to be an overwhelming momentum.

But he would say that, right?

Well, he would say that and I don't think most historians would now agree with him. I think most historians would say that's nonsense, that actually Indonesia was not going to go communist as a result of a domino theory, that actually the domino theory was nonsense, that there was no communist monolith because as proved by the facts, as we said, these countries all started fighting each other, Cambodia, Vietnam, China.

We had Andrew Preston, a great historian at Cambridge University, who's written a lot about Vietnam on our podcast and he said, you know, it was the wrong war to fight, wrong time, the wrong place. There is no kind of right side of history argument for it really.

I mean, remember the communists are still running Vietnam to this day in 2023.

But they're very kind of capitalist communists.

Right, they changed tack. Their policies were a disaster. They changed tack completely in the middle of the 1980s rather like the Chinese to embrace capitalism. In fact, what they now have, a lot of people says the worst of capitalism and the worst of communism, but also very high rates of economic growth.

And a very successful COVID policy.

Really? What do they do?

Well, none of them got COVID.

Right. Okay. But I also thriving tourist industry, interestingly.

Yeah.

Anyway, so I think the arguments for and against the Vietnam War, both left and right, they both become kind of rolled into this general sense of American victimhood, actually. So that you mentioned the deer hunter and indeed apocalypse. Now, the deer hunter is the best

example of that of the first wave of Vietnam films that's coming home and go tell the Spartans and the deer hunter. They'll come out that same time, 1970, 1978 or so. The deer hunter is the most successful, great triumph at the Oscars. You know, anyone who's seen it remembers Christopher Walken and Robert De Niro, the Russian roulette and all that sort of stuff. And that film presents Americans as being innocents who have been sort of lured into this terrible inferno inhabited by these barbaric and cruel and savage people. So all the Vietnamese are shown in the film as just unbelievably corrupt. And I mean, lots of people said at the time, they said it's a very racist film. Yeah. The Americans are all basically decent people who have been corrupted.

Well, you've seen them for an hour, haven't you? Kind of hanging out in their steel town. Right. Exactly. And Pennsylvania or wherever it is, going to weddings and drinking beer and being great pals and having this, they're all their ethnic Ruthenians, aren't they? And so they're kind of Ukrainians in the deer hunter. So they go to Vietnam and they descend into the heart of Darn. It says not dissimilar to the sort of trajectory of General Kurtz or of the horror, the horror. Yeah, of Martin Sheen's character as Marlon Brando would put it. Yes, I wondered if we'd get Marlon Brando again. I should never have mentioned apocalypse now. And I think that sense is actually the one that becomes the more powerful, even than the arguments about whether or not it was right or wrong to go into. So the argument is basically we are still a decent and innocent people who through a series of terrible blunders were dragged into this kind of maelstrom. And we've been terribly scarred as a result of it. Certainly the late seventies, I would say that was the presiding, the overwhelming feeling. But also, of course, there was a massive feeling of humiliation through no fault of his own. Jimmy Carter becomes associated with that in the late seventies. Yes. And so you could argue, couldn't you, that a lot of American attitudes to foreign policy since the seventies has there's been a kind of conflicted response to what lessons you should learn. And it seems to me that they're summed up by ironically, the figure of Tom Cruise. So Tom Cruise, all action hero. But one of the roles for which he was most lauded as an actor was playing Ron Kovic, who was a Marine who went to Vietnam, came back, I think he lost both his legs, didn't he?

Yeah, he ends up in a wheelchair, ends up in a wheelchair and becomes a very prominent peace campaigner. And Tom Cruise stars in the film of his life, Born on the Fourth of July. And that articulates the idea, I suppose it's that ultimately, it's an isolationist idea that America has no business going in poking its noses into the business of other countries. But also that if you do that, awful things will happen. Yeah. So it's good for America. It's good for the world would be the attitude. Yeah. But Tom Cruise has also starred in Top Gun and Top Gun two and Top Gun two is all about going and blasting up whatever it is he blasts in Top Gun two. Yeah. That America has a duty to get out there and kick Komi butt. And this idea that a war will enable America to redeem its honor to get over Vietnam. That's also been a kind of enduring narrative. So it's there in Rambo famously. So Rambo is all about that. But it was also there in the arguments for the first Gulf War, for the Second Gulf War, even in Afghanistan. But all of those wars have basically seemed to me kind of confirmed the lesson of Vietnam, that the age for imperial adventures abroad perhaps is over as it perhaps it always was that even the technology and firepower of the world's greatest superpower is ultimately unable to resist the same kind of forces that

led to the doom of General Gordon or the British sinkable.

Well, that's what I was about to say. You mentioned General Gordon, what the Americans do with Vietnam, I would say is exactly what the British do with their own defeats in the 19th century. So General Gordon is the kind of he stands in in a weird way for the kind of Captain Willard in Apocalypse Now or the Christopher Walken, Robert De Niro kind of characters and the deer hunter. So General Gordon, the British imagination is the Christian hero, the saint or the martyr, who has gone off to this terrible place to do his best, and has fallen victim to the exotic, foreign, savage passions of this far off land, you know, that sort of heart of darkness idea that you were talking about. So that becomes very pronounced in America, but that's something that's old. That's something the British thought is what they thought after the retreat from Kabul.

And so Apocalypse Now is based literally on Heart of Darkness. I mean, it's based on Conrad story of Belgian imperialism in the Congo.

Exactly. What happens to America with Vietnam, actually, I would say a really good way to understand it is to say, it's actually really very similar to the British attitudes to empire in the second half of the 19th century, which is there are people who regard as you touch it and you are tainted, you know, that this is the dark heart of darkness that you can you can tell a story about British involvement with the rest of the world in the second half of the 19th century, that is a saga of defeats and humiliations. Or you can tell it as one that is a saga of heroic stands against the odds, you know, rocks, drifts, all of that sort of stuff. I think it's not that the age of imperialism is over or but

I think that dynamic or that conversation, are we victims? Are we liberators? Are we innocence abroad? You know, should we stay out of all foreign entanglements? I mean, all of the things that people are saying in the 1970s, 80s, 90s and onwards in America, they're not saying anything that people weren't saying 100 years earlier in Britain.

Yeah. And again, thinking of kind of fictional treatments of it, the idea that to go abroad into some kind of imperial heart of darkness is damaging and that that damage can then be re-imported back into the imperial metropolis. So if you think of taxi driver, the Robert De Niro character is a damaged veteran. And you think of all the Sherlock Holmes stories where sinister figures from abroad come back and are poisoning jewels or have brought people with blowpipes or whatever. It's yes. It's the same kind of idea, isn't it?

Oh, it is. Absolutely. Well, I mean, Dr. Watson is an injured veteran. Yeah. Rambay's got his limp from Afghanistan. But in both cases, it's absolutely about the imperial power.

Yeah. It's about the British. It's about the Americans. It's very much not about, you know, the Afghans or the Vietnamese. Agreed. I mean, they're kind of peripheral characters whose role is to embody the heart of darkness. Yeah, absolutely. Right. So this is the criticism that people made of the deer hunter at the time. Apocalypse Now, which is probably the single best known Vietnam war film, do any Vietnamese characters even speak? No, they just kind of, you know, they're there to be napalm to the sound of Wagner. I mean, the protagonist and the antagonist are both American, Martin Sheen and Marlon Brando. Although it calls Marlon Brando character is also British, because he's modeled on Colonel Kurtz.

Is Colonel Kurtz British? Maybe he's not. Willard is certainly British. Willard is Marlowe, isn't he? Yeah. So it's a story about American Vietnam that is filtered through the story about the Belgian Congo, written by a British, Polish novelist. I mean, just an extraordinary

sort of series of filters. But none of those filters, none of those filters are actually Vietnamese or Congolese. No, exactly right. So we've got loads of American listeners I know to the rest of history, many of whom will have read a lot of the books about by Tim O'Brien or Philip Computer or whoever about Vietnam, about the Americans of Vietnam, they've seen loads of the films. But actually, when you think of it, how many of those things is that even a named Vietnamese character? I mean, that's the weird thing that I mean, it's actually even been missing from the two podcasts that we've done, Tom, to a large extent. We've had some Vietnamese characters, but most of our characters have been American. We had big, what's his name? Big Min. We had President Tu with his older Tony and son. But no, it's a really, really interesting... Right. So we haven't quoted from any Vietnamese who were outside the compound of the US embassy trying to get in. No, no, we haven't. And Ken Burns does that to an extent in his film, doesn't he? He has a few Vietnamese interviewees. Well, he has Viet Cong, he has South Vietnamese. Yeah, he does. He does. He absolutely does. And I think there's much more actually in Vietnam, historiography more generally, I think in the last 10 years or so, there's been a much bigger move to incorporate.

To de-center.

To de-center. Well, I mean, but the funny thing is, Vietnam is the center.

Well, to de-center the American.

Right. To de-center the American experience. So where I think it works with America, and I think the ultimate effect is actually, I think to me, as a non-American, one of the interesting things about American politics since, let's say, the 1970s is that it's become, I would argue, more overtly nationalistic and less internationalistic, if you know what I mean. So for Eitan Ha, Truman, Kennedy, whoever, or Nixon, in fact, they saw America as the leader of a Cold War alliance. And America's place in the world was enormously important to them. And I think what has obviously become more and more pronounced in the last 20, 30 years is exemplified by Donald Trump and his America First stuff. It's the sort of shining city on a hill that is not necessarily open to the rest of the world.

Well, and Trump didn't go to Vietnam.

No, he didn't go to Vietnam.

He had a bony spur in his foot or something.

He did. And do you want to know what Trump said about Vietnam?

I remember what he said about McCain, that he preferred his heroes, not to have been taken prisoner.

He said he had his own personal Vietnam. He said, we had our own Vietnam. It's called the dating game. Did you know this? He said dating was perilous because the risk of sexually transmitted diseases. I've been so lucky. It's my own personal Vietnam. I feel like a great and very brave soldier.

And the interesting thing about that, of course, is that it did Trump no harm whatsoever.

No, it didn't. I think because the Vietnam War, for a lot of people, is ancient in history now. One person we did do a podcast about very recently, Ronald Reagan, he gave a speech in 1980 that's probably largely forgotten now, but he argued that Vietnam was the right war, a noble cause. And that did him no harm at all. I think a lot of Americans wanted to hear. Don't forget, a lot of Americans always supported the war. There they might have had sort of mixed feelings about it and not been terribly happy about it. Pulsars

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often used to say, there's only one thing that Americans hate more than the Vietnam War and that's the anti-war movement. So I think Americans always had conflicted feelings about Vietnam. And actually, one of the things that Reagan offered was an opportunity to put Vietnam behind them. And there were things like the, I mean, people often said about things like the invasion of Grenada. I mean, it's such a sideshow by comparison, but that it made Americans feel good about themselves. They could actually get something done without being embroiled in this agonizing conflict.

Well, thank you, Dominic. And thank you, everyone, for listening, a gripping, terrifying, sobering story. Ronald, you're told, may I say a tour de force?

Oh, I tell you that's very nice. Do you not think it's so like, I mean, the Kabul thing last year? Yeah, I do. I mean, it's impossible to resist the echoes that are very clear.

And if there's a lesson, the truth is, when you go in, it is really, really, really hard to get out. And I don't mean just stop intervening. I mean, it is physically hard to withdraw from the, I mean, how do you do it when you've got all these people who are lying on you? But the other lesson you might draw is actually in the long run, it's quite easy to get out because you have no choice. Yeah, I suppose so. The danger is you draw a lesson, which is basically just we sit on our hands in our isolationists. We never do anything at all.

And the trouble is, people have always sought since the end of the Vietnam War, they've looked for a formula that will say, oh, this intervention is fine, you know, Bosnia, Kosovo or something, but this intervention is not fine. And there actually, there never is a neat formula. The lesson of history is that there are no lessons.

We've said that so many times. Yeah. On that profound, profound note, we will bid you a very fond farewell. Yes, farewell from Tom, from me and from his awful, awful Marlon Brando. Goodbye. Bye.

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