

ИСТОРИЯ И КУЛЬТУРА

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FROM PRESIDENT NGUYEN VAN THIEU'S DECISION TO WITHDRAW FROM THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS TO THE FALL OF THE REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM IN 1975

Abstract. In the spring of 1975, the Liberation Army forces in South Vietnam launched a general offensive against the Republic of Vietnam government (RVN) and the Army (ARVN). The strategic area of the Central Highlands was identified as an opening, in which Buon Ma Thuot town was selected as the place of the crucial battle. By skillful diversionary tactics, overwhelming forces were concentrated secretly and organized surprise attacks. The revolutionary armed forces quickly seized control of the town and hit at dangerous spots that shook the arrangement of ARVN in the Central Highlands and throughout South Vietnam. In the situation of weakening forces, lack of weapons and a sharp reduction in the US military aid, the President of the Republic of Vietnam Nguyen Van Thieu decided to withdraw strategically from the Central Highlands and some other important areas. This decision immediately severely affected ARVN, causing a mass escape that could not be prevented, creating extremely favorable conditions for the Liberation Army forces to take advantage of the opportunity to the continuous attack, which lead the Republic of Vietnam regime to collapse quickly.

This paper analyzes the context of the situation, explains the reasons for Nguyen Van Thieu's wrong decision, and addresses the fateful consequences of that decision.

Keywords: Buon Ma Thuot, Nguyen Van Thieu, decision to withdraw from the Central Highlands, the fall of the RVN, Vo Nguyen Giap, Frank Snepp.

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ОТ РЕШЕНИЯ ПРЕЗИДЕНТА НГУЕН ВАН ТХИЕУ ВЫВЕСТИ ВОЙСКА С ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОГО ПЛАТО ДО ПАДЕНИЯ РЕСПУБЛИКИ ВЬЕТНАМ В 1975 ГОДУ

Аннотация. Весной 1975 года силы Армии освобождения Южного Вьетнама начали генеральное наступление против правительства Республики Вьетнам (РВ) и ее армии (АРВ). Местом решающего сражения был выбран город Буонметхуот в стратегическом районе Центрального плато. Умело используя диверсионную тактику, значительные воинские силы тайно сосредоточились в выбранном районе и организовали серию внезапных атак. Революционные вооруженные силы быстро захватили город и нанесли удар по опорным пунктам противника, что отразилось на позициях АРВН в Центральном плато и по всему Южному Вьетнаму. В ситуации ослабления сил, нехватки вооружений и резкого сокращения военной помощи США президент Республики Вьетнам Нгуен Ван Тхиеу принял решение о стратегическом отступлении с Центрального плато и из некоторых других важных районов.

Это решение оказало серьезное воздействие на ARVN, вызвав массовое неотвратимое отступление, что создало чрезвычайно благоприятные условия для наступления Армии освобождения Южного Вьетнама, которое привело к быстрому краху Республики Вьетнам.

В статье анализируется контекст ситуации, объясняются причины неправильного решения Нгуен Ван Тхиеу и рассматриваются роковые последствия этого решения.

Ключевые слова: Буонметхуот, Нгуен Ван Тхиеу, решение о выводе войск, Центральное плато, падение Республики Вьетнам, Во Нгуен Зяп, Франк Снепп.

Literature review

In recent years there have appeared a number of works on this subject by authors and co-authors in Vietnam. The book series “History of the anti-US Resistance War for National Salvation, 1954-1975” (9 volumes) was compiled by the Vietnam Military History Institute (the Ministry of Defense) and released in 2013 by the National Political Publishing House. Beside the books used for quoting in the paper, there are some research works, memoirs and scientific papers mentioned the event, such as: “The Review of the Resistance against the US – Victory and Lessons” compiled by the Steering Committee of the War Review (belongs to the Politburo), released by the National Political Publishing House in 1995. “Operation Department, General Staff: Statistics of enemy forces in South Vietnam (1954–1975)”. Documents kept at the Operation Department, General Staff; “High Command of the Central Highlands Front (B3): The Central Highlands Armed Forces in the anti – US resistance war for national salvation”, published by the People's Army Publishing House, Hanoi, 1980; High-ranking Military Academy, Ministry of Defense “Central Highlands Campaign 1975”. The work was printed by High-ranking Military Academy, Hanoi, 1981; General Hoang Van Thai has a book “Decisive years”. People's Army Publishing House, Hanoi, 2001; Senior Lieutenant General, Professor Hoang Minh Thao has a book “The Central Highlands Campaign Great Victory”. People's Army Publishing House, Hanoi, 1977. Major General Dau Dinh Toan wrote the paper “Strategic diversion – The unique art of the Vietnam People's War in the Central Highlands campaign in 1975” and Senior Lieutenant General, PhD, Associate Professor Vo Tien Trung has an paper “The issue of "cunning, world and time" in the Central Highlands campaign – The contents need to be further studied”. These two scientific papers were published in Proceedings of Scientific Conference “Great Victory of Spring 1975 –Strength of the will to unite the Fatherland and the desire for peace”. Ho Chi Minh City Publishing House, Ho Chi Minh City, 2015.

Overseas, in Russia, there is a book on “The Fall of Nguyen Van Thieu’s Regime in South Vietnam (1965–1975)” by Prof. Dr. Vladimir Mazyrin, Social Science Publishing House, Moscow, 1978. In the United States, there are many books and articles by the US’s officials, generals, historians and Vietnamese writing about the event. These include: Dr. Henri Kissinger has a book “The years at the White House”, Fayard Publishing House, Paris, 1979. Central Library of the Vietnam People’s Army translated in 1982; Nguyen Tien Hung and Jerrold L. Scheter have a book “From the White House to the Independence Palace”, Youth Publishing House, Ho Chi Minh City, 1990; Gabriel Kolko has a book “Anatomy of a war”. People's Army Publishing House, Hanoi, 2003; Issac R. Arnold has a book “The last days of America – Thieu in Saigon”. Department of Culture and Information of the Dong Thap province translated and published, 1985; J. Pimlott has a book “Vietnam –Decisive battles. Center for Science, Technology and Environment Information, Ministry of Defense translated and printed, Hanoi, 1997.

However, so far no works or papers have focused on researching, analyzing specifically the reasons and consequences of the Thieu’s decision. Most authors agreed that Nguyen Van Thieu’s

decision to withdraw the Central Highlands had taken place due to the overwhelming power of the Liberation Army. However, it was quite unexpected as for the time of decision, the hasty nature and the magnitude of the withdrawal when ARVN was still relatively strong.

Most of these people who blamed and condemned Nguyen Van Thieu's decision believed that Thieu could not do anything else, because he was abandoned by the US and the morale of the soldiers was too low. However, no one analyzed the consequences of the decision which upset the arrangement of battlefield, causing tactical Region I to be isolated from tactical Region III, resulting soon in the loss of Hue and Da Nang.

This article focuses on analyzing the aforementioned fatal mistake of Nguyen Van Thieu which had accidentally created the best conditions for the Liberation Army to win the decisive victory.

Summary of the situation after the Paris Agreement

After the Paris Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Viet Nam had been signed on January 27, 1973, the situation in South Vietnam became quite complicated and unpredictable, because each side had its own calculations. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South.

Vietnam (PRG) considered the Paris Agreement to be the legal basis forcing the United States and its allies, along with the means of war, to withdraw from South Vietnam within 60 days, while the key units of the North remained in South Vietnam at that time. Thus, a very good force correlation for the Liberation Army was created, because at that moment it only had to confront the Republic of Vietnam's government and ARVN which were bewildered, weakened by the loss of the main support of the US, with its military and economic aids. The 21st Plenum of the Central Committee of the Vietnam Labour Party held from June 19 to July 6, 1973 expected the situation of South Vietnam may take place under two possibilities: firstly, the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) was forced to gradually implementing the Paris Agreement, peace was truly restored; secondly, the Agreement would be violated, sabotaged, and military conflicts could increased, the intensity and scale of the war were greater [Vietnam Communist Party 2004: 231].

The strategy of Vietnamization was a failure. The US wanted to end its military involvement, the RVN was left to decide for itself, Saigon troops having been massively supplied with weapons, equipment and means of war just before the signing of the Paris Agreement [Ministry of Defense 2013: 12].

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On the one hand, the RVN government and ARVN opposed the content of the Agreement, condemned the US for its fleeing and abandoning allies, and declared their standpoint: no peace, no negotiation, no union with communists and no giving up of land to communists; on the other hand, they massively and fiercely implemented a special campaign before and immediately after the Agreement, occupying many disputed areas and lands controlled by the Liberation Army in order to create a posture and to compare beneficial forces on the battlefield [Ministry of Defense 2013: 13].

Regarding the Strategic Fighting Plan of Liberating South Vietnam

Facing the ongoing war situation in the South after the Paris Agreement had been signed, the DRV, on the one hand, fought through the quadripartite Central Military Union Committee and demanded the opponents to seriously implement the Agreement, on the other hand, outlined a strategic

fighting plan to end the war by combining political and military action [Ministry of Defense 2013: 194].

This plan had some notable points:

first, this plan was drafted in mid-1973, under the direct guidance of Le Duan, the First Secretary of the Central Committee. It was time and again discussed and commented in the Central Committee and the Politburo and was adopted on January 8, 1975. It was a strategic plan intended for two years, 1975–1976. However, the Politburo also expected: “If the opportunity comes at the beginning or at the end of 1975, immediately liberate South Vietnam in 1975” [General Vo Nguyen Giap 2004: 170];

secondly, this plan always took into account an important factor in assessing whether the Americans would return to South Vietnam. How and to what extent would the US government react, if the Liberation Army launched a large-scale military attack? After President Nixon had been forced to resign because of the Watergate scandal (August 9, 1974), this plan was speeded up and had more grounds for determination to implement. The plan was further confirmed after the victory of Operation Road 14–Phuoc Long (January 6, 1975), liberating Phuoc Long provincial town, which was only about 100 km from Saigon, but the US and ARVN did not react strongly enough to recapture. At the time Frank Snepp, the analyst at the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) branch at the US Embassy in Saigon, commented: “Psychologically, losing Phuoc Binh (town) of Phuoc Long is a painful blow to the Thieu government [...] But the most painful is that the US has never been as indifferent as it is now. For Thieu and also to North Vietnam, the battle of Phuoc Long is the main exploration of US policy” [Snepp 2000: 97];

thirdly, the plan was carefully drawn up for forces, weapons and equipment, such as food, gasoline, road construction, transportation, and medicine. The plan paid special attention for the direction and the target of the attack, the crucial battle to open the campaign, on the art of diversion, on the secret and surprise factors, on the concentration of forces, on the tactics to fight and the battle to conquer Buon Ma Thuot town [Van Tien Dung 1976: 57];

fourthly, the plan did not fully expect the direction of the attack after the Central Highlands campaign, because it had not anticipated the great impact of Buon Ma Thuot battle. There was no specific plan of ARVN withdrawing from the Central Highlands.

In the early morning of March 10, 1975, big units of the Liberation Army secretly mobilized from many directions to approach, unexpectedly opened fire to hit targets on the periphery and inside Buon Ma Thuot town, capital of Dak Lak province, the largest town of the Central Highlands. By noon of March 11, important targets in Buon Ma Thuot town were basically occupied by the Liberation Army. The RVN government and ARVN directly ordered the main force of the 23rd infantry Division, coordinated with the air force and artillery to organize a counterattack to retake the town time and again, but with no success.

On March 13, facing such an emergency situation, President Nguyen Van Thieu urgently convened a meeting of the National Security Council, decided to withdraw from some positions and areas of no importance for protecting vital goals [Snepp 2000: 130]. On March 14, Nguyen Van Thieu went to Cam Ranh with Prime Minister Tran Thien Khiem; Chief of the General Staff of ARVN General Cao Van Vien; Lieutenant General, Advisor of President Dang Van Quang, convened Major General Pham Van Phu, Commander of the 2nd Corps, Military Region II and held a meeting to assess the situation. Having realized that it was no longer possible to retake Buon Ma Thuot, the disposition forces were scattered, weapons, equipments, maneuverability were not assured, and the towns of Kon Tum and Plei Cu were at risk of being attacked, the strategic roads to the Central Highlands were

threatened and controlled by the Liberation Army, Nguyen Van Thieu came to an important and extremely wrong and disastrous decision, the result of which was a quick and complete collapse of the regime of the RVN.

That decision was: withdrawing forces from Kon Tum and Plei Cu, to defend strategic areas in the Central coast plain, to protect Da Nang, Nha Trang, Cam Ranh. The final purpose was to recapture Buon Ma Thuot. In the area of Military Region I, it was expected to withdraw from Quang Tri to protect Hue; bringing the Division of paratroopers from Da Nang to defend Saigon. This was the policy of redeploying forces towards “light above (the north), heavy below (the south).”

Thieu’s decision was partly based on the US attitude and aid. General John Murray, Head of the Office of Defense Attache (DAO) at the US Embassy in Saigon, in June 1974, telegraphed to the US Department of Defense: “If the aid amount drops below one billion dollars, for example, only 700 million, then South Vietnam is only able to protect a part of the territory, if further reduction, it means erasing the name of the RVN...The only solution for the RVN government is to stick to Saigon and the plains” [Snepp 2000: 81–82]. On August 16, 1974, before returning to the US, at the last meeting with the commanders of the RVN General Staff, Murray and the US officers offered to give up some land and implement consolidation tactics to save reserves [Snepp 2000: 85]. The withdrawal from the Central Highlands was prepared urgently, secretly to surprise. Most of the forces would have withdrawn along 7B route from Plei Cu to Tuy Hoa town, Phu Yen province. That was an old road that had not been used for a long time. It was urgently repaired and bridged to serve the ever largest scale withdrawal.

Why did Nguyen Van Thieu decide to withdraw from the Central Highlands?

Through research, there are several main reasons as follows:

firstly, due to the complete surprise of the strategic and perfect diversionary tactic of the Liberation Army. ARVN and the US intelligence were deceived by the Liberation Army’s “diversion strategy”. The attack on Buon Ma Thuot town was prepared almost in secret in terms of mobilizing forces, vehicles, weapons, motor roads, etc. ARVN attracted most forces to defend Kon Tum and Plei Cu, so they could not keep up. Frank Snepp admitted: “There was an important point but I didn't get it out: I didn't expect where was the first target of the communists. Although I pay attention to unusual military movements in the West and the North of Buon Ma Thuot, I think not to rush to a pessimistic conclusion. It should be said that there would be an attack on the town, I predicted that the communists only intended to surround it and cut off all roads in the area. It was a big mistake because of my ignorance” [Snepp 2000: 123].

The “Summary of Weekly Intelligence from 9 to 15 March” of the Intelligence Section, the RVN General Staff, submitted to Cao Van Vien, read: “The communist large-scale offensive campaign in early 1975 has begun. [...] In the highlands, the enemy continued to occupy the Dak Lak. With the reinforcement of F.316 (F: division), F.320 is tending to deploy operations to Cam Ranh, Khanh Hoa to prevent our troops from besieging. Meanwhile, F.968 and the remaining F.10 forces may increase their activity on the Southwest Plei Cu and North Kon Tum fronts to disrupt our efforts” [Tran Mai Hanh 2017: 25];

secondly, due to the incorrect assessment of the immense ability: the overwhelming forces of the Liberation Army concentrated in the Central Highlands in general and around Buon Ma Thuot town in particular, so when the attack had broken out, Buon Ma Thuot was captured quickly. At that time, ARVN and the RVN realized that the whole area of the Central Highlands was in danger. The number of units of the Liberation Army present in the strategic land outnumbered ARVN. The Liberation Army

had mobilized four divisions (except F.968 to conduct diversionary duties to restrain ARVN troops in Kon Tum and Plei Cu) to attack Buon Ma Thuot. Meanwhile, the total number of ARVN troops stationed in Buon Ma Thuot, including the main force, the local army and the police, was but nearly 8.000 soldiers [Ministry of Defense 2013: 249– 250, 266];

thirdly, Buon Ma Thuot had an extremely important strategic position on the Central Highlands, but ARVN did not have enough forces to guard. So, the town was suddenly attacked and captured, which had so serious consequences that the attack was compared to an “acupuncture point”, causing the entire arrangement of ARVN in the Central Highlands and in the whole South Vietnam territory shaken. Nguyen Van Thieu was forced to withdraw from the Central Highlands with a vague hope that he would find a way to reoccupy Buon Ma Thuot, from which to reoccupy Kon Tum and Plei Cu;

fourthly, due to a sharp decline in the US aid, the RVN government was increasingly losing confidence in the US ally. Nguyen Van Thieu said that the US did not react strongly when losing Phuoc Long province and Buon Ma Thuot, so there was no hope of any assistance. Due to the lack of aid, although ARVN still had a large number, however, their weapons, firepower, equipment and maneuverability were limited, so they could not protect the important areas and targets, not to mention the need to retake lost positions.

The “Daily Telegraph” of UK published an article entitled “The American Surrender Attitude in the Republic of Vietnam”, which stated: “In 1974, RVN received 1.4 billion in military support but this number was cut to 700 million by Congress in 1975. At 1974 prices, the figure was equivalent to 400 million, and the actual reduction was therefore 1 billion” [Ministry of Internal Affairs 2010: 209].

That is why Nguyen Van Thieu said: “RVN needs more than 1.5 billion USD a year to maintain its territory. If it was cut down to 700 million USD, which means half of aid, ARVN can only hold half of the territory” [Ministry of Internal Affairs 2010: 250]. The economic aid, especially military aid, was cut down, having reduced ARVN combat capability by 60 % [Ministry of Internal Affairs 2010: 250]. Referring to the withdrawal from the Central Highlands, Nguyen Van Thieu admitted: Under such circumstances, the military could do nothing but have changed strategies, redeployed forces to keep the lands fertile, resource rich. If some mountains had to be removed for communists to retain the fertile, mineral-rich areas including the continental shelf and the newly drilled offshore oil field, then it is also acceptable [Tran Mai Hanh 2017: 29]. This is a map of the Central Highlands Campaign, which contributes to clearly the happening of the campaign and Nguyen Van Thieu’s decision (fig.1).

The consequences of the decision to withdraw from the Central Highlands

One thing to confirm is that the decision to withdraw from the Central Highlands was not a temporary one. This decision was carefully considered basing on the actual situation of the battlefield and the comparison of the forces on both sides and was directly affected by the loss of Buon Ma Thuot.

Describing the meeting in Cam Ranh on March 14, 1975, Frank Snepp wrote: “He (i.e., Thieu) rolled his eyes around the meeting table to see if anyone responded. Not available. Everyone was very flattering, agreed with him. At the historic turning point of the war, he put his hand in his pocket, rubbed his throat and in a sigh he declared his decision. He said: “Must abandon Plei Cu and Kon Tum. The strategic withdrawal began in those two provinces.” The room was quiet. Thieu continued: “Such a retreat was quite reasonable and necessary; it will release the forces to save Buon Ma Thuot. The key to everything lies in Buon Ma Thuot.” Surprised and scared, Thieu's collaborators did not object. There was no discussion. Finally, Thieu also ordered people to keep it secret, not to tell anyone about this secret plan, especially not to tell Americans; they had a chance to help us, they didn’t do it, they betrayed us” [Snepp 2000: 131–132].

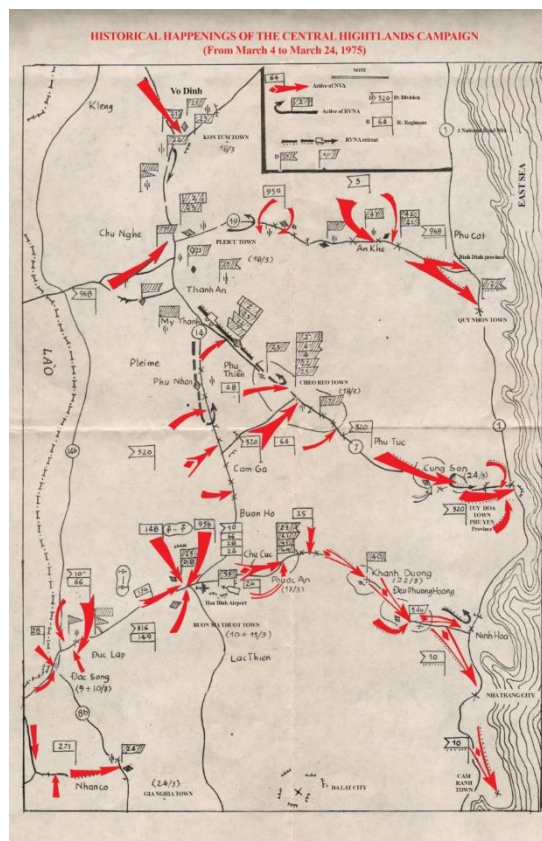


Fig. 1. The Central Highlands Campaign.

Source: [Ministry of Defence 1991: 108]

This consequence was reflected in the following major points:

first, despite clear knowing the strategic position of the Central Highlands, Nguyen Van Thieu and the RVN officials, generals could not fully estimate the profound and serious impact of the withdrawal from the Central Highlands for a strategic layout throughout South Vietnam. That decision completely reversed the battle between ARVN and the Liberation Army, putting ARVN at an extremely disadvantageous position and providing meaningful strategic opportunities for the Liberation Army in the final battle.

Commenting on Nguyen Van Thieu's decision, General Van Tien Dung said: "The battle of Buon Ma Thuot was too strong and dangerous, followed by the battle to destroy the 23rd Division reinforcement troops in the East of Buon Ma Thuot so quick and compact, that it made the enemy panic and confuse. The disorder raised not only at the divisional and military zone level but also at the headquarters of the RVN government. The enemy's tactical and campaign mistakes engendered strategic mistakes; in panic the RVN government ordered to flee from the Central Highlands, having sent troops to the plain to keep forces and land. But the strategic mistake meant the inevitable failure in the war, sooner or later" [Van Tien Dung 1976: 125].

George Herring, an American historian and the author of the book "America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975" commented: "This collapse came suddenly [...] The Liberation Army attacked Buon Ma Thuot on March 10 and captured the provincial capital just in two days. To control the Central Highlands before the end of the dry season, they quickly moved their troops to the North to attack Plei Cu and Kon Tum. Thieu was horrified at this time, so he ordered the withdrawal of troops from the Central Highlands, but did not outline the plan to withdraw troops and

the Liberation Army cut all important roads. The withdrawal finally turned into a flee. [...] The disastrous withdrawal of the Central Highlands caused Thieu to lose six provinces and at least two infantry divisions as well as to lose the trust of both the army and the people, paving the way for even bigger disasters in the coastal provinces of South Vietnam” [Herring 1998: 341].

Speaking at the meeting of the US National Security Council on March 18, 1975, chaired by President Gerald Ford, CIA Director William Colby assessed: “President Thieu tried to withdraw his troops out of the Central Highlands in time, but the transfer failed. He was so concerned about the disclosure of information to the communists that he did not tell anyone, even his commanders were surprised” [Oriental Research Institute 2019:18]. Henry Kissinger, the US Secretary of State, emphasized: “He (i.e., Thieu) decided to do this because there was not enough support from the United States. [...] He made a mistake by ordering the withdrawal of troops from the Central Highlands but he did not have a better choice” [Oriental Research Institute 2019: 19];

secondly, the decision showed a clear weakening of ARVN and the RVN government, signaled the darkest days of the RVN regime. Nguyen Van Thieu only advocated the withdrawal of the main units, while all the local forces, the guards and the families of soldiers, civilians and units of administrative structures in Kon Tum and Plei Cu were not reported to withdraw. The reason was that these subjects were forced to stay and to fight the Liberation Army to protect themselves, and to create conditions to support the retreat. However, that policy could not be implemented, because in reality ARVN officers and soldiers were ordered to withdraw, even though the orders were absolutely confidential, but they could not abandon their relatives. It was impossible not to inform their relatives about the reason for the withdrawal, so the confidentiality of the withdrawal could not be guaranteed. Moreover, the forces had to stay also due to the “unjust” order, the discrimination of the commanders, and, certainly, they would also seek to evacuate freely.

In fact, Nguyen Van Thieu did not fully account for the consequences. Thus, it was a disorganized escape, out of control. Depression, desertion and panic spread at the airport and on the roads, especially on 7B route, where hundred thousand soldiers and people crowded together, inching toward the coastal plain.

Pham Huan, a journalist, the chairman of the Vietnam War Reporters Association, the author of the book “The Central Highlands Retreat in 1975” assessed: “The Cam Ranh decision of March 14, 1975 ordered the retreat from the Central Highlands and the withdrawal of troops from tactical Region I, which led to the rapid collapse of ARVN. Within two weeks, 500.000 troops, half the country fell into communist hands... The decision to withdraw from the Central Highlands in 1975 was a wrong strategic decision, disintegrating ARVN, and causing the greatest losses during the Vietnam War” [Pham Huan 1993: 294-295].

Mr. Tran Van An, the former Press Director of the Ministry of Information, the General Secretary of the Defense Committee of the RVN House of Representatives, said: “The Cam Ranh Conference on March 14 and the Central Highlands retreat on March 17, 1975 were not the beginning of the collapse of the Second RVN. These two events were really the last extinction point of the years-long agony of Nguyen Van Thieu – Tran Thien Khiem militaristic regime” [Pham Huan 1993: 309];

thirdly, the retreat created a real opportunity for the Liberation Army. A current point of view on ARVN retreating and evolving the battlefield is that the Politburo and the Central Committee believed that in reality ARVN was much weaker than before the Buon Ma Thuot battle. A number of marines’ units, special forces continued to withdraw from Quang Tri and moved to Da Nang. Therefore, it was possible to launch an early attack to liberate Hue city and two provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien. General Vo Nguyen Giap wrote: The development of the battlefield preceded all

judgments and expectations... A great opportunity had appeared [Vo Nguyen Giap 2004: 210] for the Liberation Army to gather forces launching the next major campaigns to liberate Hue, Da Nang cities, the provinces of South Central, and finally liberating Saigon, to end the war in a short time;

fourthly, the fact that ARVN's units retreated to the Central coastal plain and implemented strategic clusters, accidentally created favorable conditions for the Liberation Army divided strategically the South Vietnam battlefield layout, isolated Military Region I, tactical Region I with Military Region III, tactical Region III. The disastrous consequences of the withdrawal following this direction were soon proved.

On March 17, 1975, General Vo Nguyen Giap telegraphed to General Van Tien Dung: "The enemy is carrying out a strategic cluster, that is earlier than we expected. In the face of our progressive development, ARVN strategic clustering process will continue. Direction is concentrated in Saigon, Cam Ranh, may be Da Nang ... [Vo Nguyen Giap 2004: 212]

Military Region I of RVN was isolated. As a result, the fall of Hue city and Da Nang in a short time, despite the large numbers of troops and armaments, showed an irreversible failure. Many units were only worried about retreating, losing the will to continue fighting to protect key areas. The panic fleeing from the area spread like a blaze caught by strong winds, could not be prevented, led to sudden complete disintegration and collapse of the RVN military and government.

Conclusion

At the end of this article, the question has been raised: could the decision (considered to be a strategic mistake) to withdraw from the Central Highlands be avoided? It is possible to say that this decision could not be avoided. Only it could have been launched sooner or later, because all the factors and the situation at that time were against ARVN and the RVN and detrimental to them, when the main support of the United States was no longer available. The US government had abandoned the RVN. The Vietnam War was over for the Americans.

The history of the Vietnam War has passed for nearly half a century but its effects and lessons are still there, still illuminating the present and will help us understand and behave better in the future.

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