

The Fall of Saigon 1975:

An Eyewitness Report

by [John Pilger](#)

Saigon, April 1975. At dawn I was awake, lying under my mattress on the floor tiles, peering at my bed propped against the French windows. The bed was meant to shield me from flying glass; but if the hotel was attacked with rockets, the bed would surely fall on me. Killed by a falling bed: that somehow made sense in this, the last act of the longest-running black farce: a war that was always unnecessary and often atrocious and had ended the lives of three million people, leaving their once bountiful land petrified. The long-awaited drive, by the legatees of Ho Chi Minh, to reunify Vietnam had begun at last, more than 20 years since the "temporary" division imposed at Geneva. On New Year's Day, 1975, the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) surrounded the provincial capital of Phuoc Binh, 75 miles from Saigon; one week later the town was theirs. Quang Tri, south of the Demilitarised Zone, and Phan Rang followed, then Bat Me Thout, Hue, Danang and Qui Nhon in quick succession and with little bloodshed. Danang, once the world's greatest military base, was taken by a dozen cadres of the Front for the Liberation of Vietnam (the NLF, known as the Vietcong by the Americans) waving white handkerchiefs from the back of a truck. A United Press wirepicture of an American punching a South Vietnamese "ally" squarely in the face as the Vietnamese tried to climb on board the last American flight from Nha Trang to Saigon held a certain symbolism of what had gone before.

By mid-April, the end was in sight as the battle for Xuan Loc unfolded 30 miles to the north-west of Saigon, which itself was already encircled by as many as 15 PAVN divisions armed with artillery and heatseeking missiles. On 20 April, Xuan Loc was captured by the PAVN. Only Saigon was now left. Among the ribbons of refugees heading away from the fighting were embittered troops of the army of the US-backed Saigon regime, whose president and commander-in-chief, General Thieu, had acknowledged their defeat by fleeing to Taiwan with a fortune in gold. On 27 April, General Duong Van ("Big") Minh was elected president by the National Assembly with instructions to find a way to peace. It was "Big" Minh who in 1963 had helped to overthrow the dictator Ngo Dinh Diem and had sought, with his fellow officers, to negotiate a peace settlement with the NLF. When the Americans learned about this they bundled Minh out of office, and the war proceeded.

It was now eight o'clock; I hurried across Lam Som Square to get some urgently needed coffee. Saigon had been under rocket attack for two nights. One rocket had cut a swathe through half an acre of tiny, tightly packed houses in Cholon, the Chinese quarter, and the fire storm that followed had razed the lot. There were people standing motionless, as if in a tableau, looking at the corrugated iron which was all that remained of their homes. There were few reporters; yesterday's rockets were news, the first to fall on Saigon in a decade; today's rockets were not. A French photographer blundered across the smouldering iron, sobbing; he pulled at my arm and led me to a pyre that had been a kitchen.

Beside it was a little girl, about five, who was still living. The skin on her chest was open like a page; her

arms were gutted and her hands were petrified in front of her, one turned out, one turned in. Her face was still recognisable: she had plump cheeks and brown eyes, though her mouth was burnt and her lips had gone completely. A policeman was holding her mother away from her. A boy scout, with a Red Cross armband, clattered across the iron, gasped and covered his face. The French photographer and I knelt beside her and tried to lift her head, but her hair was stuck to the iron by mortar turned to wax by the heat. We waited half an hour, locked in this one dream, mesmerised by a little face, trying to give it water, until a stretcher arrived.

Following the attacks the American Ambassador, Graham Martin, appeared on Saigon television and pledged that the United States would not leave Vietnam. He said, "I, the American Ambassador, am not going to run away in the middle of the night. Any of you can come to my home and see for yourselves that I have not packed my bags. I give you my word." America's last proconsul on the continent of Asia, Martin was a private, strong-willed and irascible man. He was also very sick; his skin was sunken and skeined grey from long months of pneumonia; his speech was ponderous and frequently blurred from the drugs he was taking. He chain-smoked, and conversations with him would be interrupted by extended bouts of coughing.

To describe Graham Martin as a hawk would be to attribute to that bird qualities of ferocity it does not have. For weeks he had told Washington that South Vietnam could survive with an "iron ring" around Saigon supplied by B-52s flying in relays back. But Martin could not ignore completely what he saw; he knew it was his job, and his job alone, to preside over the foreclosure on an empire which had once claimed two-thirds of Indo-China, for which his own son had died, nine years before. In the American embassy, a tree, one of many mighty tamarinds planted by the French a century before, dominated the lawns and garden outside the main foyer. The only other open space big enough for a helicopter to land had the swimming pool in the middle of it, and the helipad on the embassy roof was designed only for the small Huey helicopters. If a helicopter evacuation was called, only the marines' Chinook and Jolly Green Giant helicopters would be able to fly large numbers of people to the Seventh Fleet, 30 miles offshore, within the course of one day. The tree was Graham Martin's last stand. He had told his staff that once the tree fell, America's prestige would fall with it, and he would have none of it.

Tom Polgar was the CIA station chief. Unlike many of his predecessors, he was unusually well informed and he despaired openly of the Ambassador's stubbornness. When Thieu locked himself in the bunker beneath the presidential palace for three and a half days, refusing to resign or even to take any phone calls, it was Polgar, together with the French Ambassador, Jean-Marie Merrillon, who finally persuaded Graham Martin that he should intervene. To Martin, the felling of President Thieu became like the felling of the embassy tree: a matter of pride and "face," for himself and for America. The United States government had solemnly committed itself to Thieu and the southern state it had invented; he often said that his own son had died so that Thieu's "South Vietnam" could remain "free." On April 28 the NLF raised their flag on Newport bridge, three miles from the city centre. The monsoon had arrived early and Saigon now lay beneath leaden cloud; beyond the airport were long, arched bolts of lightning and the thunder came in small salvos as President Minh prepared to address what was left of his "republic." He stood at the end of the great hall in the presidential palace, which was heavy with chandeliers and gold brocade, and he spoke haltingly, as if delivering a hopeless prayer. He talked of "our soldiers fighting hard" and only, it seemed, as an afterthought did he call for a ceasefire and for negotiation. As he finished speaking, a succession of thunderclaps drowned his last words; the war was ending with a fine sense of theatre.

I walked quickly along Tu Do, the city's main street, as the lightning marched into the centre of the city. Half a dozen shops had closed since the day before, their owners having evacuated themselves to the bowling alley and gymnasium at Dodge City, the code-name for the old American command cocoon at Tan Son Nhut airport, where they paid handsomely for a place in the queue. The Indian tailor at No 24 Tu Do, "Austin's Fine Clothes," was morosely counting his dollars and cursing his radio for not picking up the BBC World Service news. I had known the tailor at Austin's for a long time, and our relationship had always been one of whispers and comic furtiveness, involving the handing over of one green note, which would be fingered, snapped, peered at and put up against the light, and the receiving of a carrier bag filled with best British Vietnamese piastres. (Britain's greatest export to South Vietnam was banknotes.) Thunder pulverised the city as the tailor counted his money; he had at least 5,000 dollars in that drawer, today's and yesterday's takings, and his Indian passport protruded from his shirt pocket. "Communists respect passports," he said, patting his without knowing what they respected. He said Saigon would not fall for at least a month, which caused the Vietnamese assistant, whirring at his sewing machine behind the curtain, to laugh.

The thunder had a new sound, dry and metallic. It was gunfire. The city seemed to be exploding with weapons of every kind: small arms, mortars, anti-aircraft batteries. "I think we are being bombed," said the tailor, who flinched from his counting only to turn up the volume on his radio, which was tuned to the Voice of America's Oldies and Goldies hour. For the next half-hour the shop itself seemed to be a target and I ensured that two walls stood between me and the street. The tailor, however, remained at his post and counted his dollars while the Voice of America played "Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White," which was barely audible above the gunfire. It is a profoundly witless song, but I sang along with the tailor, and I shall probably never forget the words. In a far corner, like a wounded bird, an old Vietnamese woman clawed at the wall, weeping and praying. A joss stick and a box of matches lay on the floor in front of her; she could not strike the matches because her whole body was shaking with fear. After several attempts I was able to light it for her, only then realising the depth of my own fear.

The loud noises, including the thunder, stopped, and there was now only a crackle of small arms fire. "Thanks to the gentlemen who have bombed us," said the tailor, "the rate has just risen a thousand piastres." He opened the steel shutters, looked out and said, "OK, run!"

It seemed that all of Saigon was running, in spasms of controlled, silent panic. My own legs were melting, but they went as they never had before, and were given new life by an eruption of shooting outside the Bo Da café. A military policeman, down on both knees, was raking the other side of the street, causing people to flatten or fall; nobody screamed. A bargirl from the Miramar Hotel, wearing platform shoes, collided with the gutter, badly skinning her legs and her cheek. She lay still, holding her purse over the back of her head. On the far corner, opposite the Caravelle Hotel and outside a gallery which specialised in instant, hideous girlie paintings, a policeman sprayed the sky with his M-16 rifle. There was a man lying next to him, with his bicycle buckled around him.

Saigon was now "falling" before our eyes: the Saigon created and fattened and fed intravenously by the United States, then declared a terminal case; capital of the world's only consumer society that produced nothing; headquarters of the world's fourth greatest army, the ARVN, whose soldiers were now deserting at the rate of a thousand a day; and centre of an empire which, unlike the previous empire of the French who came to loot, expected nothing from its subjects, not rubber nor rice nor treasure (there was no oil), only acceptance of its "strategic interests" and gratitude for its Asian manifestations: Coca-Cola and Napalm.

At one o'clock in the morning, Graham Martin called a meeting of his top embassy officials to announce that he had spoken to Henry Kissinger, who had told him that the Soviet Ambassador to Washington, Anatoly Dobrynin, had promised to pass his (Kissinger's) message to Hanoi requesting a negotiated settlement with President Minh's government. Martin said Kissinger was hopeful that the Russians could arrange this. He said he wanted the evacuation by fixed-wing aircraft to continue for as long as possible, perhaps for 24 hours. It was shortly after four o'clock in the morning when scores of rockets fell on Tan Son Nhut airport, followed by a barrage of heavy artillery. The waiting was over; the battle for Saigon had begun. The sun rose as a ragged red backdrop to the tracer bullets.

A helicopter gunship exploded and fell slowly, its lights still blinking. To the east, in the suburbs, there was mortar fire, which meant that the NLF were in Saigon itself, moving in roughly a straight line towards the embassy. A 6am meeting between Martin and his top officials was, said one of those in attendance, "a disaster." All of them, except Martin, agreed that they should start the evacuation immediately. Martin said no, he would not "run away," and announced to their horror that he would drive to Tan Son Nhut to assess the situation for himself. There was no more than a suspicion among the embassy staff that the last proconsul of the empire might, just might, have plans to burn with Rome. When the meeting ended in confusion, Polgar ordered that the great tamarind tree be chopped down.

The tree-cutters assembled, like Marlboro men run to fat. These were the men who would fell the great tamarind; a remarkable group of CIA officers, former Special Forces men (the Green Berets) and an assortment of former GIs supplied by two California-based companies to protect the embassy. They carried weapons which would delight the collector, including obsolete and adorned machine guns and pistols, and a variety of knives. However, they shared one characteristic; they walked with a swagger that was pure cowboy: legs slightly bowed, right hand hanging loose, fingers turned in and now and then patting the holster. They were issued with axes and a power saw, and secretaries from the embassy brought them beer and sandwiches. They were cutting down the Ambassador's tree without the Ambassador's approval. At the same time, a fleet of cars and trucks pulled into the market outside the Botanical Gardens and Zoo, and quickly discharged their cargo: frozen steaks, pork chops, orange juice, great jars of pickles and maraschino cherries, cartons of canned butter beans and Chunkie peanut butter, Sara Lee cakes, Budweiser beer, Seven-Up, Wrigley's Chewing Gum, Have-A-Tampa plastic-tipped cigars and more, all of it looted from the Saigon commissary, which had been abandoned shortly after an NLF sapper unit strolled in Indian file past its rear doors. To the Saigonese, stealing from their mentors and patrons had become something of a cultural obligation, and there was a carnival air and much giggling as fast-melting T-bones were sold for a few cents. A pick-up truck discharged a dishwashing machine and a water cooler was quickly sold and driven away in a tri-shaw; the dishwasher was of the Blue Swan brand and on its box was the Blue Swan motto: "Only the best is right for our customers." The dishwasher was taken from its box and left on the road. Two hours later it was still there, unsold and stripped of vital parts, a forlorn monument to consumer enterprise in Vietnam.

Saigon was now under a 24-hour curfew, but there were people in the streets, and some of them were soldiers from the 18th ARVN Division which had fought well at Xuan Loc, on Highway One. We had been expecting them and awaiting the first signs of their anger as they watched the Americans preparing to leave them to their fate. That morning, when they first appeared in the centre of the city, they merely eyed foreigners, or robbed them, or fired into the air to relieve their frustration.

I walked back to the Caravelle Hotel where I was to meet Sandy Gall of Independent Television News (ITN); he and I were the "evacuation wardens" for the TCN Press, which meant Third Country Nationals,

which meant everyone who was not American or Vietnamese. For some days Gall and I had concerned ourselves with the supremely eccentric task of trying to organise those representatives of the British, Canadian, Italian, German, Spanish, Argentinian, Brazilian, Dutch and Japanese press who wanted to be evacuated. The American embassy had distributed a 15-page booklet called SAFE, short for "Standard Instruction and Advice to Civilians in an Emergency." The booklet included a map of Saigon pinpointing "assembly areas where a helicopter will pick you up." There was an insert page which read: Note evacuational signal. Do not disclose to other personnel. When the evacuation is ordered, the code will be read out on American Forces Radio. The code is: THE TEMPERATURE IN SAIGON IS 112 DEGREES AND RISING. THIS WILL BE FOLLOWED BY THE PLAYING OF I'M DREAMING OF A WHITE CHRISTMAS."

The Japanese journalists were concerned that they would not recognise the tune and wondered if somebody could sing it to them. At the Caravelle, Gall and I had nominated floor wardens who, at the first hint of yuletide snow in Saigon, were to ensure that reporters who were infirm, deaf, asleep, confined to a lavatory or to a liaison, would not be left behind. There was more than a modicum of self-interest in this arrangement; I had, and have, an affliction which has delivered me late for virtually every serious event in my life.

Two C-130 Hercules aircraft from Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines were over Tan Son Nhut. They were ordered not to land. Scouts sent to the perimeter of the airport reported that two platoons of PAVN infantry had reinforced the sappers in the cemetery a mile away; a South Vietnamese pilot had landed his F-5 fighter on the runway and abandoned it with its engine running; and a jeep-load of ARVN were now ramming one of their own C-130s as it tried to take off. "There are some three thousand panicking civilians on the runway," said General Homer Smith on the VHF. "The situation appears to be out of control."

Graham Martin, alone in his office, watched the tree fall and heard his CIA Station Chief cry, 'Timberrrr!' When Kissinger phoned shortly afterwards, in compliance with President Ford's wish that the American Ambassador should take the final decision on the evacuation, he listened patiently to an exhausted and ailing Graham Martin. At 10.43 a.m. the order was given to "go with Option Four" (the helicopter evacuation; the other options had involved evacuation by sea and by air). But Martin remained steadfast in the belief that there was "still time" to negotiate an "honourable settlement."

The Caravelle emptied without the knowledge of the Unofficial Joint TCN Warden. Nobody told me. Bing Crosby did not croon on my radio. When I emerged, the rooms looked like the Marie Celeste, with clothes, papers, toothbrushes left. I ran to my room, gathered my typewriter, radio and notes and jammed them into one small bag; the rest I left. Two room attendants arrived and viewed my frantic packing, bemused and slightly in awe. One asked, "Are you checking out, sir?" I said that I was, in a manner of speaking. "But your laundry won't be back till this evening, sir." I tried not to look at him. "Please ... you keep it ... and anything else you see." I pushed a bundle of piastres into their hands, knowing that I was buying their deference in the face of my graceless exit. After nine years, what a way to leave. But that I wanted to leave was beyond question; I had had my fill of the war.

Outside, Lam Son Square was empty, except for a few ARVN soldiers slouched in doorways and in the gutter. One of them walked briskly up Tu Do, shouting at me; he was drunk. He unholstered his revolver, rested it on an unsteady arm, took aim and fired. The bullet went over my head as I ran. A crowd was pressing at the gate of the American embassy; some were merely the curious who had come to watch the Americans' aerial Dunkirk, but there were many who gripped the bars and pleaded with the marine guard

to let them in and waved wax-sealed documents and letters from American officials. An old man had a letter from a sergeant who a long time ago had run the bar at the Air Force officers' club in Pleiku. The old man used to wash dishes there, and his note from the sergeant, dated 5 June, 1967, read, "Mr Nha, the bearer of this letter, faithfully served the cause of freedom in the Republic of Vietnam." Mr Nha also produced a toy Texas ranger's star which one of the pilots at Pleiku had given to him. He waved the letter and the toy Texas ranger's star at the marine guard who was shouting at the crowd, "Now please don't panic... please!" For as long as they could remember, these people, who worked for the Americans, had been told to fear the communists; now they were being told, with the communists in their backyards, that they should not panic.

The old man attempted to slide through the opening in the gate and was pushed to the ground by the marine who was telling them not to panic. He got up, tried again and was tackled by a second marine who propelled him outside with the butt of his rifle and hurled the Texas ranger's badge over the heads of the crowd.

Inside the embassy compound the marines and the cowboys were standing around the stump of the great tamarind tree. "OK, you tell me what we're gonna do about this immovable bastard?" said one of the cowboys into his walkie-talkie. "Take it easy, Jed," came an audible reply, "just you and the boys level it down by at least another foot, so there's plenty of room for the rotors. And Jed, get all those shavings swept up, or sure as hell they're gonna be sucked into the engines." So the marines and the cowboys went on swinging their axes at the stump, but with such mounting frustration and incompetence that their chopping became an entertainment for those both inside and outside the gate, and for the grinning French guards on the high wall of the French embassy next door.

There is in the Vietnamese language, which is given much to poetry and irony, a saying that "only when the house burns, do you see the faces of the rats." Here was Dr Phan Quang Dan, former deputy prime minister and minister responsible for social welfare and refugee resettlement, a man seen by Washington and by Ambassador Martin as the embodiment of the true nationalist spirit of South Vietnam. An obsessive anti-communist who was constantly making speeches exhorting his countrymen to stand and fight, Dr Phan Quang Dan was accompanied by his plump wife sweltering under a fur coat and by a platoon of bagmen whose bags never left their grip. The "beautiful people" of Saigon were also there, including those young men of military age whose wealthy parents had paid large bribes to keep them out of the Army. Although they were listed as soldiers on some unit's roster, they never reported for duty and their commanding officers more than likely pocketed their wages. They were called "ghost soldiers" and they continued to lead the good life in Saigon: in the cafés, on their Hondas, beside the pool at the Cercle Sportif, while the sons of the poor fought and died at Quang Tri, An Loc, and all the other places.

"Look, it is me ... let me in, please ... thank you very much ... hello, it is me!" The shrill voice at the back of the crowd outside the gate belonged to Lieutenant-General Dang Van Quang, regarded by his countrymen and by many Americans as one of the biggest and richest profiteers in South Vietnam. The marine guard had a list of people he could let in, and General Quang was on it. With great care, the guard helped General Quang, who was very fat, over the 15-foot bars and then retrieved his three Samsonite bags. The General was so relieved to be inside that he walked away, leaving his 20-year-old son to struggle hopelessly in the crowd. There were two packets of dollars sagging from the General's jacket breast packet. When they were pointed out to him, he stuffed them back in, and laughed. To the Americans, General Quang was known as "Giggles" and "General Fats." Among the Americans in the embassy compound there was a festive spirit. They squatted on the lawn around the swimming-pool with

champagne in ice buckets looted from the embassy restaurant, and they whooped it up; one man in a western hat sprayed bubbly on another and there was joyous singing by two aircraft mechanics, Frank and Elmer. Over and over they sang, to the tune of "The Camp Town Races":

We're goin' home in freedom birds,

Doo dah, doo dah;

We ain't goin' home in plastic bags,

Oh doo dah day.

"This is where I've come after ten years," said Warren Parker almost in tears. "See that man over there? He's a National Police official ...nothing better than a torturer." Warren Parker had been, until that morning, United States Consul in My Tho, in the Delta, where I had met him a week earlier. He was a quiet, almost bashful man who had spent 10 years in Vietnam trying to "advise" the Vietnamese and puzzling why so many of them did not seem to want his advice. He and I pushed our way into the restaurant beside the swimming-pool, past a man saying, "No Veetnamese in here, no Veetnamese," where we looted a chilled bottle of Taylor New York wine, pink and sweet. The glasses had already gone, so we drank from the bottle. "I'll tell you something," he said in his soft Georgia accent, "if there ever was a moment of truth for me it's today. All these years I've been down there, doing a job of work for my country and for this country, and today all I can see is that we've succeeded in separating all the good people from the scum, and we got the scum."

At 3.15 p.m. Graham Martin strode out of the embassy lift, through the foyer and into the compound. The big helicopters, the Jolly Green Giants, had yet to arrive and the stump of the tamarind was not noticeably shorter, in spite of the marines' and cowboys' furious chopping and sawing. Martin's Cadillac was waiting for him and, with embassy staff looking on in shock, the Cadillac drove towards the gate, which was now under siege. The marine at the gate could not believe his eyes. The Cadillac stopped, the marine threw his arms into the air and the Cadillac reversed. The Ambassador got out and stormed past the stump and the cowboys. "I am going to walk once more to my residence," he exclaimed. "I shall walk freely in this city. I shall leave Vietnam when the President tells me to leave." He left the embassy by a side entrance, forced his own way through the crowd and walked the four blocks to his house. An hour and a half later he returned with his poodle, Nitnoy, and his Vietnamese manservant.

As the first Chinook helicopter made its precarious landing, its rotors slashed into a tree, and the snapping branches sounded like gunfire. "Down! Down!" screamed a corporal, high on Methedrine, to the line of people crouched against the wall, waiting their turn to be evacuated, until an officer came and calmed him. The helicopter's capacity was 50, but it lifted off with 70. The pilot's skill was breathtaking as he climbed vertically to 200 feet, with bullets pinging against the rotors and shredded embassy documents playing in the downdraft. However, not all the embassy's documents were shredded and some were left in the compound in open plastic bags. One of these I have. It is dated May 25, 1969 and reads, "Top Secret ... memo from John Paul Vann, counter insurgency ...900 houses in Chau Doe province were destroyed by American air strikes without evidence of a single enemy being killed. The destruction of this hamlet by friendly American firepower is an event that will always be remembered and never forgiven by the surviving population..."

From the billowing incinerator on the embassy roof rained money. I found it difficult to believe my eyes. The unreal and the real had merged. From the heavens came 20, 50 and 100 dollar bills. Most were charred; some were not. The Vietnamese waiting around the pool could not believe their eyes; former ministers and generals and torturers scrambled for their severance pay from the sky. An embassy official

said that more than five million dollars were being burned. "Every safe in the embassy has been emptied and locked again," said an official, "so as to fool the gooks when we've gone."

At least a thousand people were still inside the embassy, waiting to be evacuated, although most of the celebrities, like "Giggles" Quang, had seen themselves on to the first helicopters; the rest waited passively, as if stunned. Inside the embassy itself there was champagne foaming on to polished desks, as several of the embassy staff tried systematically to wreck their own offices: smashing water coolers, pouring bottles of Scotch into the carpets, sweeping pictures from the wall. In a third-floor office a picture of the late President Johnson was delivered into a wastepaper basket, while a framed quotation from Lawrence of Arabia was left on the wall. The quotation read: "Better to let them do it imperfectly, than to do it perfectly yourself, for it is their country, their war, and your time is short."

It was approaching midnight. The embassy compound was lit by the headlights of embassy cars, and the jolly Green Giants were now taking up to 90 people each. Martin Garrett, the head of security, gathered all the remaining Americans together. The waiting Vietnamese sensed what was happening and a marine colonel appeared to reassure them that Ambassador Martin had given his word he would be the last to leave. It was a lie, of course. It was 2.30 a.m. on April 30 when Kissinger phoned Martin and told him to end the evacuation at 3.45 a.m. After half an hour Martin emerged with an attaché case, a suit bag and the Stars and Stripes folded in a carrier bag. He went in silence to the sixth floor where a helicopter was waiting. "Lady Ace 09 is in the air with Code Two." "Code Two" was the code for an American Ambassador. The clipped announcement over the tied circuit meant that the American invasion of Indo-China had ended. As his helicopter banked over Highway One, the Ambassador could see the headlights of trucks of the People's Army of Vietnam, waiting.

The last marines reached the roof and fired tear-gas canisters into the stairwell. They could hear the smashing of glass and desperate attempts by their former allies to break open the empty safes. The marines were exhausted and beginning to panic; the last helicopter had yet to arrive and it was well past dawn. Three hours later, as the sun beat down on an expectant city, tanks flying NLF colours entered the centre of Saigon. Their jubilant crews showed no menace, nor did they fire a single shot. They were courteous and bemused; and one of them jumped down, spread a map on his tank and asked amazed bystanders, "Please direct us to the presidential palace. We don't know Saigon, we haven't been here for some time." The tanks clattered into Lam Som Square, along Tu Do, up past the cathedral and, after pausing so that the revolutionary flag on their turrets could catch the breeze, they smashed through the ornate gates of the presidential palace where "Big" Minh and his cabinet were waiting to surrender. In the streets outside, boots and uniforms lay in neat piles where ARVN soldiers had stepped out of them and merged with the crowds. There was no "bloodbath," as those who knew little about the Vietnamese had predicted. With the invader expelled, this extraordinary country was again one nation, as the Geneva conference had said it had a right all those wasted years ago. The longest war of the 20th century was over.

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