

Paying the price of America's retreat

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OPINION Guest column

In early 1968 during the Vietnam War, this writer remembers reflecting that the high tide of America's greatness might extend a few thousand meters outside the western wire of the Marine Corps Khe Sanh Combat Base, then under attack, and if we ever retreated from there our nation's decline might become inexorable.

Nothing has happened to alter that impression; it now seems prescient.

The Leathernecks fought tenaciously at Khe Sanh and thwarted the North Vietnamese ambition of winning another Dien Bien Phu, the catastrophic French defeat that marked the beginning of the end of her empire and status as a world power. But we thought America was exceptional—after all, we were fighting for freedom and not imperialism—but perhaps we were mistaken. Not because we were not exceptional, but because now we seem to have ceased believing it. This change has not been imposed upon us. It's been of our own making.

It was critical that we win the Cold War, but was it ever really over? Or was it merely a pause, which we mistook for victory, while our perpetual enemy morphed into a new form? Communism, with its intellectually seductive poison of Marxist ideology, wears many clothes, marches under many flags, transforms and sustains through endless social conflict, perpetual violence and war, either in its insatiable pursuit or in its actual possession of absolute power.

According to the Harvard University Press' "The Black Book of Communism," the Communists have killed at least 100 million people while enslaving over a billion. For their part, the Russian Communists killed at least 20 million and imprisoned 18 million in the Soviet Gulag slave labor camps, while China's Mao Zedong destroyed the lives of at least 65-70 million, more than Hitler and Stalin combined, and his concentration camps imprisoned 50 million.

After the Vietnamese Communists took power in North Vietnam in 1954-56 they summarily executed, tortured

or starved to death 172,000 peasants and small farmers in a so-called "land reform" described by one Communist official who took part as "a genocide" and "a massacre of innocent, honest people." During this same period, they shot an additional 50,000 and imprisoned over 100,000.

In 1954, after the country's partition, a million refugees fled the Communist North to South Vietnam and established a fledgling republic. Soon the North, heavily supported by the Soviet Union, attacked them, first by guerilla insurgency, then later with conventional arms.

We came to their defense. First Eisenhower sent aid, then JFK increased it, but in 1963 Kennedy made the terrible mistake of overthrowing and assassinating our ally, South Vietnam's President Ngo Dinh Diem, whose country we had come to save. Then in 1965 LBJ crossed his and our Rubicon by committing American ground troops. From its inception the war was mismanaged and permitted to drag on until our political will to sustain it evaporated.

In 1969 President Nixon formulated a plan to exit Vietnam "with honor." He initiated a program called Vietnamization, whereby the South Vietnamese, with our continued support, would assume the burden of their own defense.

In 1969-70 this writer participated in this, observing, training and operating with Vietnamese units—elite Rangers and regular army (ARVN) soldiers. The former were very good, the latter not so good. And it was the consensus among most in-country Americans that while the South Vietnamese had some excellent forces; they did not have enough and, if left to themselves, for military and political reasons, would be overwhelmed.

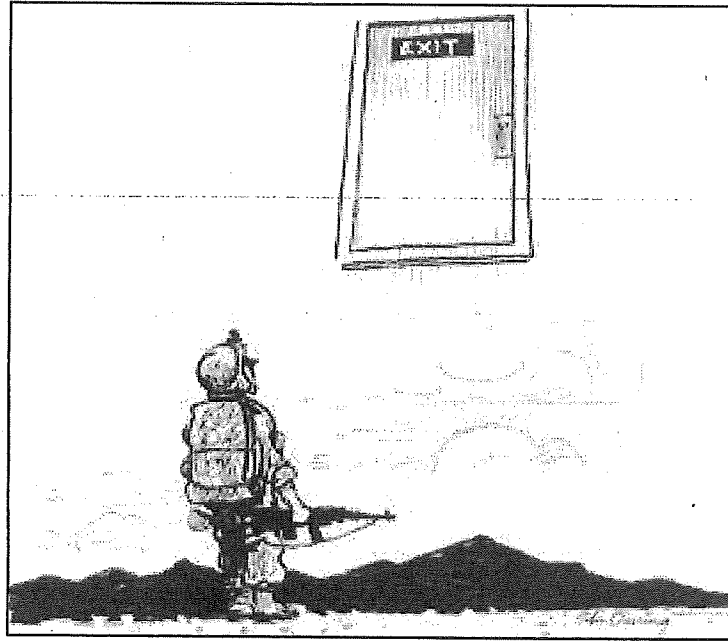
This proved wrong. In 1972, after all our combat troops had exited, the North Vietnamese attacked in what became to be known as the "Easter Offensive" with massive conventional

forces, supported by tanks and artillery. It was the largest military operation of its kind since the Communist Chinese intervention in the Korean War. But, aided by our air, logistical and advisory support, the South Vietnamese shocked everyone and defeated the North Vietnamese.

Things seemed to have achieved a certain stasis, and hope arose that South Vietnam might survive. Then Watergate struck and Nixon fell. In 1973, as opposition to the war increased, Congress, led by Sen. Ted Kennedy and his political allies, including Joe Biden, who were determined to ensure our failure, ended all American military activity in Vietnam.

This prevented Nixon, mortally wounded by scandal, and his successor, President Gerald Ford, from supporting South Vietnam, guaranteeing not only South Vietnam's ultimate defeat but our own. Sensing victory, in 1975 North Vietnam attacked again and the South, demoralized and deserted by us, collapsed.

The world has never forgotten the image of that lone American helicopter lifting off our Saigon embassy in a pathetically desperate, shameful fly-



way, a perpetual symbol of American humiliation.

The Communists rounded up 56,000 who worked for us, shot them, and imprisoned 980,000 in "re-education camps" where many perished. From 1975 to 1995, two million people escaped Communist Vietnam as refugees; 800,000 fled as "boat people." With great courage, 250,000 South Vietnamese soldiers and 58,000 Americans had given their lives fighting Communist tyranny in South Vietnam.

Following our exit from Southeast Asia, in 1975-1979 the Communist Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge took power in Cambodia and murdered 2 million people in the infamous "Killing Fields."

Dr. Martin Malia, historian at the University of California, Berkeley, summed it up: "The Communist record offers the most colossal case of political carnage in history."

Since the Second World War, a fatal flaw has gradually emerged like a cancer vitiating our increasingly bureaucratic military elites. Our top leadership, with some exceptions, has proven unworthy of those they lead. Our troops have been inspirationally

selfless, brave and effective, but their generals disappointingly self-seeking, disingenuous, mediocre and sometimes astonishingly incompetent. This insidious disease began to germinate after Korea, spread in Vietnam, then flourished to fatal proportions in Afghanistan.

We had consoled ourselves that we had learned "the lessons of Vietnam" and that there would never be another Saigon helicopter scene of ignominious retreat. Recently our president promised us just that and proclaimed, "There's going to be no circumstance when you're going to see people being lifted off the roof of an embassy of the United States from Afghanistan."

He broke that promise. It was not forced on him; it was his choice. And, as all the world knows, we surrendered to our mortal enemy, the Taliban, and fled in the shame of abject defeat. The sad spectacle of desperate people clinging and falling from our aircraft was worse than that solitary Saigon helicopter.

To compound our utterly confused subjugation, we armed our enemies, abandoned our people, and betrayed those who fought for us. Their fate is not a happy one. It was a disgrace of our own making and, like Saigon in 1975, a permanent stain on our national honor.

That our military leadership should father such a debacle or not resign in protest at its conception is too appalling to comprehend. That there has been no uniform outcry of condemnation and demand for accountability is even worse. No great people, no great nation would tolerate this. The country this writer was born in certainly would not. No country that aspires to world leadership behaves this way, and the world knows it.

Such a catastrophe has a cost. It can't be bought at a cut rate and hidden away as yesterday's news or purchased with a change of subject. It will not be pocketed so cheaply. The full price will have to be paid.

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