

confusing tragic conflict. Along the way, he formed close associations with Americans John Paul Vann (who claimed Chau knew more about defeating a communist insurgency than anyone in Vietnam) and Daniel Ellsberg (who wrote the foreword for *Vietnam Labyrinth*), among others. He was a military academy classmate of Nguyen Van Thieu, who in 1970 as president of South Vietnam had Chau unconstitutionally imprisoned and held in solitary confinement for almost four years for “advocating democratization of the South and political negotiation with the North.”

Chau’s memoir provides insight into the inner workings of the Viet Minh, the South Vietnamese government, and the French, then American, presence in South Vietnam. He gives powerful testimony to the trauma of thirty years of war on a small nation caught in the destructive vise between internal struggles and great power conflict. Chau’s most significant contribution, however, derives from his close work with American military and civilian personnel in South Vietnam. He witnessed their faulty perceptions, lack of understanding, and cultural arrogance that in his assessment undermined South Vietnam’s chances for independence. The preponderance of the American presence, the cultural illiteracy of American advisors and officials, the misplaced American backing of reactionary Vietnamese in high government positions, and the overuse of massive firepower while neglecting basic pacification principles fed South Vietnamese dependence upon the United States, undercut government legitimacy at all levels, and alienated the population.

While these conclusions are neither novel nor new, the context in which Chau presents them is original and insightful. His memoir, like Nguyen Công Luan’s *Nationalist in the Vietnam Wars: Memoirs of a Victim Turned Soldier* (Indiana 2012), is invaluable to moving beyond an American-centric history of the Vietnam War. Defense professionals should read history, and they should read *Vietnam Labyrinth* to understand the “other” in American wars, be they ally or enemy.

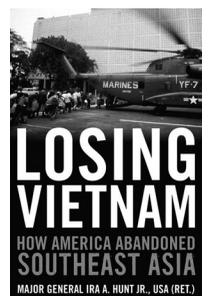
Losing Vietnam: How America Abandoned Southeast Asia

By Ira A. Hunt, Jr.

Reviewed by Dr. David Fitzgerald, School of History, University College Cork, Ireland

Over forty years after the signing of the Paris peace accords, the “post-war war” in Vietnam continues to be relatively neglected, at least by the standards of the literature of that exhaustively documented conflict. With *Losing Vietnam: How America Abandoned Southeast Asia*, Ira Hunt adds to the literature by offering an analysis of the collapse of South Vietnam and the Khmer Republic and strives to correct misperceptions about the denouement of the war; instead, he accidentally offers a window into the mindset that contributed to America’s defeat in Indochina.

Part of the Association of the US Army’s “Battles and Campaigns” series, the book uneasily straddles the line between analysis and memoir. Hunt (who also served as Chief of Staff in the 9th Infantry Division in Vietnam from 1968 to 1969) certainly had a unique vantage point on this period of the war. As Deputy Commander of the United States Support



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Activities Group (USSAG) in Thailand during this period, Hunt met frequently with senior military leaders of South Vietnam and Cambodia and had access to all Southeast Asia operational reports. He uses that perspective to produce an account of the efforts of various US military advisors and diplomats to keep American financial aid flowing into Indochina. The title of the book is something of a misnomer, as only half the book covers the final years of the Republic of South Vietnam, while the rest focuses on the war in Cambodia, with some brief codas on the *Mayaguez* incident, the insurgency in Thailand, and the war in Laos.

Throughout, Hunt argues the lack of US funding for the South Vietnamese and Cambodian war efforts doomed both governments to defeat. Hunt produces table after table highlighting the curtailment of ammunition expenditure and the drop in flying hours that meant the South Vietnamese and Cambodians were unable to hold off the final communist onslaughts in the spring of 1975. He argues ammunition shortages and rampant inflation created deep-seated morale problems in South Vietnamese and Cambodian forces. Somewhat tendentiously, he claims, despite all of this, “in early March 1975 South Vietnam was holding its own,” making a similar claim with respect to the Cambodians. Hunt is more willing to blame the institutional culture of the Cambodian Army than he is to seriously question the decisionmaking of the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) leadership.

Hunt’s argument is thoroughly informed by his Thailand-based perspective. In many ways, this book is a distillation of various reports that crossed Hunt’s desk in Nakhon Phanom airbase. While he produces statistics for things as diverse as ammunition expenditures, precipitation in Indochina, enemy-initiated incidents, and a “won-lost” ledger for major engagements in South Vietnam in 1973 and 1974, there is something missing here. These data capture much about the war. The tables and figures enrich our understanding but not as much as the author might want us to believe. By focusing so much on the data flowing into United States Support Activities Group headquarters, Hunt completely ignores South Vietnamese or Cambodian perspectives, despite the fact that they, not the Americans, were the war’s chief protagonists at this time.

For instance, the author does good work in showing the impact of reduced US funding on ammunition supply and expenditure in South Vietnam, but we learn nothing about the origins of President Thieu’s “four no’s” decision, which committed RVNAF to a static defense of its territory and was a major factor in the South Vietnamese defeat (something even Hunt, who is eager to highlight American culpability for the fall of Saigon, admits). Nowhere in the book is there a detailed analysis of the culture of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam leadership or of the Government of Vietnam corruption. Reading Hunt’s account of the final collapse of South Vietnam, this reviewer was reminded of Arnold Isaacs’ point that “to acknowledge that South Vietnam’s collapse had moral and not just material causes was painful [because it] . . . meant there was no American remedy for Vietnam’s defeat.”

While part of this reliance on statistics and focus on material can be ascribed to where Hunt sat during the events he describes, much of this is a symptom of his general view of the uses of data and statistical analysis, which are always privileged over more qualitative assessments of South Vietnamese performance. The narrowness of the perspective

Hunt adopts means that those interested in the last years of the wars in Vietnam and Cambodia would be advised to turn elsewhere for more comprehensive analysis. For a complete picture, scholars would do better to read James Wilbanks' *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost Its War* (University Press of Kansas 2004) or even Arnold Isaacs' classic journalistic account of the fall of South Vietnam and Cambodia, *Without Honor: Defeat in Vietnam and Cambodia* (Johns Hopkins University Press 1998). Hunt's book is still useful on two levels—as a semi-autobiographical account of the Vietnam War's final years and as an example of the quantitative-driven worldview that permeated American leadership throughout the Vietnam era. The author's attempts to quantify South Vietnamese and Cambodian battlefield performance through win-loss and combat initiation ratios are efforts of which Robert McNamara would have been proud.

In Gregory Daddis's excellent work on the use of metrics in the American war in Vietnam, he pointed out the extent to which a data-centric approach informed US thinking on the war and concluded that “in short, there is more to winning than counting.” Surely the same applies to losing.