

**SURVIVING TET**  
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Aristotle rightly distinguished fright from fear. He argued that we experience fright when confronted with immediate danger. This could be the unexpected appearance of a fierce, wild animal or an enemy on the battlefield. We know today that such experiences are accompanied by the release of adrenaline into the bloodstream and fight-or-flight responses. Fear is aroused by thoughts of something terrible that might happen to us. The imagined event is in the future, not in the present, and generally does not release adrenaline. Fright is a short-lived response to immediate threat. It gives us little time for thinking; indeed, our hormones prompt a quicker response by bypassing cognitive processing. Fear is the opposite. We have time, often considerable time, to mull over our situation and what we might do to minimize or escape the dangers we imagine. Fright passes quickly. Fear can linger, and for some, can be a lifelong affliction.

Saigon aroused more fear than fright. At the outset, however, the principal emotion was annoyance and was associated not only with our arrival in that city but with events that made our trip possible. In the late 1960s, I was an assistant professor of political science at The City College of New York (CCNY). My salary was \$12,000 a year, just above what a token seller on the subway earned and the income where one qualified for food stamps. I had no money for travel. The United States Information Agency (USIA) came to the rescue. They sent me to Jamaica to give a talk at a local university, making it possible for Carol and me to have holiday there. They paid for travel, room and board, and even an honorarium on the days I lectured. They had recently sent both of us to Iceland over the Thanksgiving break, but that is another story. We wanted to go to New Zealand, Carol's home country, and then to Australia to visit her sister and her family. I called my contact at USIA and he promised to see what he could do. A couple of weeks later he called back with good news: his colleagues in both countries would welcome us and arrange talks and USIA would pay my air fare. He wanted to know if Carol and I would be willing to go to South Vietnam as well. They desperately wanted speakers. We opposed the war but thought it would be interesting to check it out first-hand, so accepted his offer.

Another week passed and USIA called back. On the line was the boss of the official who had offered to host my trip. The Agency had checked up on us, he explained, only to discover that I had given teach-ins against the war and Carol did draft counseling. The Agency did not want to send people to Vietnam who would embarrass the government. I reminded him that the primary purpose of USIA was to inform people about American life and politics, and what better way to demonstrate what democracy was about than by sending a critic of the government to speak? He was not convinced and tried, unsuccessfully, to convince me that my talks would not be well-received. We had committed ourselves to going and they could not now withdraw their offer on political grounds. He promised to call me back.

I told my friend Harrison Salisbury at *The New York Times* about what had transpired. He suggested that I record my next conversation with USIA. We went over what I would say and how I might trap the official to whom I spoke into admitting that protecting the Nixon administration and its policies was so important that USIA was willing to violate its charter and vet speakers on the basis of their politics. I reiterated to this official the value of sending an opponent of the war to speak in Vietnam, and one, moreover, who would in every other respect be an ideal representative for the Agency. He told me the trip was off; USIA would not sponsor

me. I told him that I had recorded our entire conversation and that an edited version would be appearing in the new Op Ed section of *The New York Times*. He was stunned, and then speechless when I played the recording back to him. He told me to do nothing precipitous. He would speak to his superiors. To my surprise, a day or two later I received a call from the deputy director of the Agency. They would send me to New Zealand, Australia, Vietnam, and Hong Kong and I in turn would agree not to publish anything about my telephone conversations.

The talks in New Zealand and Australia, at universities and on radio stations, went well. Carol and I had a weeklong idyl in Bali, still untouched at the time my any resort hotels. We then went on to Singapore for a few days, where a friend of mine worked in the New Zealand High Commission. Then the adventure began. We flew Air Vietnam from Singapore to Saigon. It was supposed to be a non-stop flight but we made an unscheduled landing at a dirt strip somewhere in the jungles of Cambodia or Thailand. We were kept aboard the plane but through the window I could make out people loading burlap sacks into the cargo hold. I wondered if it was opium. We then flew to Saigon, and here too there was a puzzling event. Before docking at the passenger terminal we taxied over to the military part of the airfield where the burlap bags were unloaded and put on a truck. The South Vietnamese military (ARVN) was presumably dealing in drugs and using the airline as a means of transport.

We were met at the gate by a low-ranking American official named Jeanne. She insisted she would hasten our passage through immigration. The reverse turned out to be the case. For whatever reason, we were the last foreigners to be allowed into the country. Her driver picked us up, stowed our backpacks, and we made ourselves comfortable in the back seat. We drove silently, and Carol and I directed out attention to the local scenery as we made our way into the city. Jeanne finally turned to us and in an angry voice exclaimed: "It's people like you who are making us lose this war!" An argument ensued but it quickly became evident that Jeanne was not willing to listen to another point of view or any of the reasons why such a large anti-war movement had developed in the US. At last we arrived at our hotel and went with her to the registration desk. She spoke Vietnamese to the desk clerk and handed us keys to two rooms. I told her we only needed one. She insisted that because we were not married, we would have separate rooms. "We need to be respectful of local customs," she insisted. We waited for her to leave, explained to the hotel desk clerk in French, that one room would suffice. He was happy to accommodate us.

We wondered if Jeanne was representative of the officials we would meet. Fortunately, she was not. The public affairs and the cultural officers – the first and second in command – at the USIS post – USIA overseas was known as USIS -- in Saigon turned out to be against the war. Both explained that they were delighted to sponsor us in part for this reason. We could say what they could not, and they hoped we would say it often and to large audiences. We found widespread disenchantment with the war among US officials and also in the armed forces. The general consensus was that we were fighting to uphold a corrupt regime and exploitative elite, and bound to lose in the longer-term. Of course, we encountered people – more in the military than in civilian agencies – who backed the war, but few of them expected victory.

Physical danger seemed relatively remote in Saigon, although we did hear stories of Americans being killed. Lots of precautions were in place. A friend in the embassy took us to an excellent French restaurant in the downtown area. We approached an utterly nondescript and somewhat rundown commercial building and our host went up and rapped on the metal door. A slat was pulled back, the person inside could see that we were Caucasian, and the door opened. The guard with an automatic weapon welcomed us as he stepped aside. So this was what a

speakeasy was like, I thought. However, it was not some crowded, smoky bar but a large dining room, very French in its furniture, décor, menu, and language of service. We had a very good meal and were impressed by the size of the wine list. It was surreal to go from war-time Saigon to somewhere in provincial France, only to then remerge in the city again.

Each excursion outside of Saigon was risky and involved fright, not just fear. We flew south to the Mekong Delta on Air America, an airline owned and run by the Central Intelligence Agency. En route south to Cần Thơ, our plane was riddled by ground fire and machine gun bullets passed through the wing and the fuselage on either side of our seats. Even though this happened very quickly, I could see the bullet holes marching toward me and breathed a sigh of relief when they missed us. Flying north to Danang was uneventful, but our stay there at “The Alamo” was another story.

The Marines had named the old colonial hotel by the Danang landing strip the Alamo because of its vague resemblance – quite a stretch in my view -- to the eponymous Texan fort. The more appropriate comparison was siege. The Viet Cong fired rockets at us on a regular basis from their well-entrenched position in the hills to the east. One landed close enough to make the spartan but heavy wooden furniture in our room bounce. Sitting on the desk was a spent artillery shell casing recast as a Buddha and etched with acid to give it the patina of age. It was an attractive copy of an old Cambodian statue. I bought it at a shop in Saigon and schlepped it around the country as the concept of swords into Buddhas was so appealing. The shock wave from the shell knocked off the desk. It fell on its side onto the floor, pushing in one of the spiky protuberances on the Buddha’s head. He, of course, retained his pacific expression.

Breakfast the next morning provided comic relief. The Marines shared the air base with the South Vietnamese air force and coming out of their shared mess I encountered a South Vietnamese captain in a uniform with a Road Runner patch on his shirt. A sensible talisman, I thought, to protect him from Wily Coyote. He was whistling one of Papageno’s arias from the Magic Flute. That stopped me in my tracks. I asked him in French if he was a Mozart opera lover. “Alors,” he replied, “you are familiar with our culture.” It took me a minute to respond to his humor. I laughed, so did he, and I joined him in the mess for another cup of coffee. He explained that he was studying voice in Paris but compelled to return home and here he was flying combat missions. I know the opera well and Papageno is something of a coward, shrinking from the challenge of the life-threatening tests that his bold companion Tamino willingly accepts. Presumably, my new friend also recognized the irony.

Later that morning, Carol and I relaxed at the swimming pool inside the low-walled compound. An officer took too much time positioning himself on the high diving board and presented an inviting target to a sniper. There was little left of his head as the rest of him fell off the board, seemingly in slow motion into the pool. It was closed for the rest of the day. Our host, the public affairs officer, insisting on taking us on an outing, perhaps thinking it would take our mind off the incident. We drove in an armed convey to China Beach, which the Marines used for R & R. It was a long, pristine, sandy beach guarded by entrenched machine gun positions to protect bathers. We had an interesting, but hardly relaxing, afternoon.

A couple of days later we drove north in a Vietnamese army (ARVN) convoy to Huế. Our car was located in the middle of a dozen trucks that proceeded single file along a two-lane road. Two of them were packed with furniture and other belongings of officers. Another truck brought up their girl-friends. A good part of the drive could be described as something of a game between the Viet Cong and ARVN. The Viet Cong had artillery in the mountains that zeroed in as best they could on our road. They periodically fired at us, hoping to score a hit at those parts

of the road that were visible from their position. The drivers knew the danger zones and would reduce their chance of getting hit by breaking up the convoy into component parts and then slowed down or them speeded up when out of sight because of intervening hills. They would emerge into view out of synch with Viet Cong calculations of their time of arrival. Fortunately, the VC gunners had the day off, and when no shells came our way everyone soon relaxed.

We arrived in Hué in the aftermath of the Tet offensive and the US counter-offensive against the occupying Viet Cong forces. Much of the city was destroyed and many of the buildings left standing showed the scars of shrapnel and bullets. The streets had been cleared of debris and were relatively passable. Casualties had been high on both sides. During the brief occupation of the city the Viet Cong eliminated officials and collaborators. In the aftermath of the city's later liberation, the ARVN went on its own killing spree.

We were met by the assistant of the local American cultural affairs officer who drove us to his compound. It was on the outskirts of the city, in a neighborhood of large, private residences. It stood out for its openness. Like all the residences it was set back some distance from the street but not surrounded by stone or cement walls topped with barbed wire and protected by pill boxes and machine gun nests. It had no fence or hedges, just a lawn and a path and driveway leading from the street to the house. There was no sign of damage from the fighting.

Our host offered us tea and we sat on his veranda and became acquainted. Michael – not his real name – was tall, lanky, and somewhere in his fifties. He was soft-spoken, and had a voice that hinted at Mid-Western roots. He had seen our resumés and asked some inquisitive questions about our research and also what brought us to Vietnam. I told him about my encounter with the US Information Agency (USIA) which he thought it hilarious.

I had a slew of reciprocal questions for Michael. How did he end up in Hué? How did he survive Tet? And why was his house open and unprotected, unlike any other American compound I had seen in the country? He laughed and said he had a tale to match my own. He explained that he was a homosexual and, while discreet, made no secret about it. Washington found this embarrassing and so posted him to Vietnam – hardly a sought after posting. Saigon found him an embarrassment and sent him to the boonies. Hué was the most distant city to have a cultural affairs officer.

I suggested that it was also the most dangerous. “They did not know that at the time,” he assured me. It was just an out-of-the-way place that would make me invisible to all but the most intrepid visitors -- like the two of you.”

“Were you here during Tet?” I asked.

“It was quite something” he replied. “The Viet Cong took over the city in a matter of hours and immediately began eliminating the opposition. They had a very liberal view of who their enemies were, killing all officials, South Vietnamese soldiers, others identified as collaborators, and any Americans they could get their hands on.”

“How did you survive?”

“I was very lucky.”

“Surely, it was more than luck. Your compound as entirely open and unprotected. The VC must have known where you were and could have captured you with impunity.”

“Maybe I was safe for this reason. Like all Americans with official residences, I receive a hefty monthly allowance for security. Most of my colleagues wall in their compounds and hire guards to protect them. I was never convinced that this did any good. If the VC wanted to get you, they would pick off your guards and scale your walls. From what I've heard, hired guards

are likely to run off at the first inkling of a firefight. Like mercenaries everywhere they are in it for the money and it doesn't pay to get killed.”

“So what protected you?”

“I use the funds I receive for security to run a soup kitchen. Twice daily I provide hot meals to anybody in need. Sometimes there is a long line of hungry people, including children, and I feed up to two hundred people a day. You can see for yourself tonight.”

“Do you help out?” Carol asked.

“At lunchtime, whenever I am free, and sometimes in the evening. I help serve out on the lawn and talk to the people who come to eat. I’ve recruited some of them to help and pay them a decent salary. I’ve also arranged medical care for a few needy people.”

“You must be a popular man in these parts?” I suggested.

“I think so, and it might explain why the VC left me in peace. This war is above all a political struggle. The VC is winning because it has successfully framed the conflict as one of national liberation and convinced people that its victory will also bring about a better life for them. I’m doing this in my own small way and the VC would probably lose support by killing me and putting an end to my charity.”

“That makes sense.”

“Until the US counter-offensive, I had no problem buying supplies and my staff came to work without interference. More evidence, I think, that someone in the National Liberation Front made a decision to leave me alone.”

“What happened during the counter-offensive?”

“All hell broke loose. The VC dug in, the US shelled and bombed them, and destroyed much of the city in the process. They routed the VC after twenty-six days, killing thousands of civilians in the process. The generals proclaimed a victory but it was a pyrrhic one. They killed lots of VC but completely alienated the community. It was a political victory for the Viet Cong.”

“My soup kitchen is up and running again. The Marines give me food from their larder, and I’m hoping to buy everything I need locally again as I don’t want to depend on the military.”

“So the Marines haven’t killed you either?”

Michael grimaced. “They almost did. One of their shells exploded nearby and Marines in full battle gear approached my compound. I had to march out with a white flag.”

“You have protection on both sides,” I suggested.

“Seemingly so, and you will meet them tomorrow evening.”

“I don’t understand.”

Michael chuckled. “You’ll see.”

That evening the three of us had drinks on the veranda and a lovely dinner prepared by Michael’s chef. Earlier, Michael spent some thirty minutes on the food line talking to people and reported back to us some of what he had heard. Nobody ever expressed political sentiments. They kept those thoughts to themselves, but he got a sense that people were frightened and fearful of new fighting.

Michael was a well-educated man, having done a degree in Chinese history and literature at Yale. This created another bond between us, as I had done graduate work at Yale. He took the foreign service exam after graduation and joined the State Department, later transferring to the newly created USIA. He had prior postings in Hong Kong and Taiwan. He would use the opportunity to do a master’s degree. His specialty was classical Chinese literature, especially the Hundred Schools of the Tang Period. Neither Carol nor I knew anything about the subject, so we quizzed him instead about his life in Hué and his understanding of how his colleagues viewed the

war. Most were disillusioned, he thought. Having much local experience in the region, they could not take the domino theory seriously. They regarded the conflict as a largely internal one for which Washington bore considerable responsibility because of its insistence in Geneva in 1954 that the country be temporarily divided in two, and then later encouraging Southern leaders not to hold elections for fear that Ho Chi Minh would emerge the victor. He believed that the US was undermining democracy, not supporting it. Military intervention under President Johnson had only made matters worse. The US could win every firefight but would still lose the war because the regime it supported in the South was now regarded as a corrupt, puppet government.

“Does anybody support the war?” Carol asked.

“Oh yes, some people do, and some of them are quite thoughtful. They fear communism and see it as a worldwide conspiracy. Many also believe that the US will lose face and support throughout the region if it walks away from a commitment it has fought to uphold for so long. But hardly anybody I know supports the militarization of what is, at its core, a political problem. You most often hear these arguments from the military, but there are many officers, even generals – you’ll meet one tomorrow night – who question these arguments. They are mostly Marines.

“Why is that?” I asked.

“They are the force mostly closely integrated with the ARVN. They have an accurate sense of what it is worth and how it is likely to melt away if left on its own. They also have their ears closer to the ground than the army and recognize that most villagers value their survival and wellbeing more than anything else. They have no real commitment to either side and will appear to support whoever is the dominant in their vicinity. The minority who are committed almost all support the Viet Cong.”

Carol and I were given a tour around the city by Michael’s assistant. Evidence of the fighting was everywhere. The nearby countryside was pockmarked with shell and bomb craters. It had just rained heavily so they were filled with water and very visible. The countryside was nevertheless lush and the local inhabitants went about their business on foot or on the ubiquitous motor bikes and bicycles. It was a far-cry from countryside we had flown over that had been cleared with agent orange and looked like a lunar surface.

Here, as everywhere else, I had to sing for my supper, but Michael made it an easy and enjoyable experience. He arranged an informal seminar at his house as the American library had been destroyed during the fighting. I met with some half-dozen people, most of them young, and made my talk about American politics briefer than usual to leave more time to interact with these participants. I gave my talk in English but the conversation that followed was a mix of French and English. My interlocutors were intelligent and well-informed and we had a good discussion about American foreign policy, the strength and effects of the anti-war movement, and the role of journalism in the war. They wanted to know how the war and their country was reported in American media. I explained how coverage had gone from largely supportive of government policy at the outset but was now largely opposed, albeit in a restrained manner. Tet was a turning point. It convinced many journalists that the war was unwinnable, and they passed their views on to the public,

I asked what kind of outcome they wanted. Nobody volunteered an answer, but when I pushed them, one of them replied that there were no good outcomes. A Viet Cong victory would do away with the few freedoms they had left and not be good for the professional class – to which they all belonged. A continued American presence meant a high level of violence and an arbitrarily repressive regime. Others nodded their heads in agreement. Were they taking a risk

attending my seminar? Only a marginal one, someone replied. It would not put them on any hit list, especially as our host was a man respected by everyone.

In the early evening, Carol and I helped Michael set up for his dinner party. He had a chef who would do the food preparation and someone who came by to serve whenever he entertained. The menu was what today we would be called fusion. It was Vietnamese with French touches. In addition to us, Michael was expecting three guests: a Marine general in command of I Corps, responsible for the northern tier of the country; Mr. Trang, a prominent, local businessman; and an elderly Theravada Buddhist priest who lived in a nearby monastery. Michael explained that they met regularly to discuss the mutual love of Chinese literature.

“The general too?” I asked.

“Oh, yes. He is a fluent Chinese speaker and has a good reading command of classical Chinese. So do the other two. But don't worry. They know you are my guests and we will not talk literature tonight.”

“There can't be many generals like him in the Corps?”

“Probably not, but don't write off the Marines. Their officers, especially senior ones, are well-educated and often more independently minded than their army or air force counterparts.”

The guests arrived at almost the same time. Introductions were made and we were invited to take seats on the veranda. It was a large and comfortable room with a hardwood floor, bamboo furniture, and screened in on three sides. We were offered glasses of rice wine, the traditional ice-breaker in Vietnamese gatherings. The general came across as intelligent, genial, thoughtful, and more interested in drawing out others than in expressing his own views. The Vietnamese businessman, who had arrived in a chauffeur-driven limo, was wearing what looked like a very expensive silk suit. He was about forty, agile, fit, and something of an enigma as he said very little. I would have dismissed him as your average successful businessman who liked to flaunt his success had not Michael told me about his interest in and knowledge of classical Chinese literature. His name seemed fitting, as Trang in Vietnamese means “decoration.”

The Buddhist priest was a bonze from central casting. He was old and thin, even gaunt, but well preserved and of indeterminate age. He was clean shaven except for some hairs that extended several inches from his chin. He wore a bright orange robe and it moved with him in pleasing, flowing manner. It was big and he was so small that it all but enveloped him. For a man who led a contemplative life he was quite loquacious, although not in English. To accommodate him we spent most of the evening speaking in French. Occasionally, Michael would say something in Vietnamese to the businessman, and we had the odd aside in English with the general.

Dinner conversation touched on multiple topics. Carol and I asked the priest questions about his life, his community, and how he had developed an interest in Chinese literature. He had gone to university in Saigon before entering the priesthood and had studied philosophy and literature. Our businessman was also a university graduate. He had wanted to pursue postgraduate studies in Chinese history and literature, but was “persuaded” by his father to enter the family business. The general's experience was not that different. He attended the University of Michigan, funded by the naval reserve program (NROTC) where he did a double major in political science and Chinese history. He went directly into the Marines after graduating and signed up for another four years because they promised to send him to graduate school. He did a PhD in Chinese language and literature at Stanford and then tours of duty in South Korea, South Vietnam, and Quantico, Virginia, before being sent to the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island. He did a stint at Marine headquarters and was now back in Vietnam.

Before dinner, I had asked Michael if it was permissible to ask questions about the war and local politics and had received his assurances. I was waiting for the appropriate moment to steer the conversation in this direction but Michael did it for me. We had finished dinner and returned to the veranda, which had cooled off nicely as it was positioned to benefit from the off-shore evening breeze. Our conversation paused as some heavy vehicles, presumably military trucks, passed by the compound.

When the noise subsided, Michael said: "Ned and Carol would like to know how you think all of this will end?"

To my surprise the businessman was the first to speak. "I have little doubt about the outcome. The political pressure on President Nixon to withdraw is enormous but the political right and the generals are telling him to stay the course. As Nixon is a Republican, he has to appease the right more than a Democrat would. I'm guessing that he will withdraw most American forces but step up the bombing."

"I agree," the general said. Nixon is under pressure from opposite directions and a drawdown of troops will take the sting out of the anti-war movement and increased bombing and support for the ARVN will pacify most of the hawks."

"That will leave all of us in the provinces pretty exposed," Michael said.

"I-Corps is already stretched," the general said. "We play a little game with the VC. We occupy a village or two and they withdraw before we arrive. Don't ask where they get their intelligence from. We leave after we think the area is pacified and they immediately move back in. I don't dare bomb the villages because we will kill mostly civilians. The army doesn't want to recognize that their airstrikes, even when successful, are the VC's best recruiting weapon."

"Do you get into frequent firefights with the Viet Cong?" I asked.

"Very rarely these days. The fighting was fierce when we retook the city, and also in the countryside. Within six months it petered out because the VC gave up its military formations and went back to organizing itself as a guerilla force. Small units would occupy villages or conduct ambushes, and most of them against the ARVN."

"Why did you get a bye?"

"I'm not entirely sure. You'd think that killing Americans would build support for a pullout as the antiwar movement benefits from high casualty rates. But we Marines are hard to kill. We're better equipped and better trained than the army for counter-guerrilla warfare. We're vulnerable, of course, but we're going to take out a lot of them for every one of our loses. The Marines are all volunteers, unlike the army, which relies heavily on the draft. So you get more political benefits from killing soldiers, and it costs you less."

"Do you get the same kind of intelligence about them that they do about you?"

"I can't answer that question, of course. But our intelligence is getting better and occasionally we make good use of it. In the last year, however, things have been rather quiet. The VC is directing most of its military effort against the ARVN and more or less leaving us alone."

"Aren't you integrated to some degree with the ARVN?"

"Yes, very much more so than the army. We use these combined units to occupy villages and carry out patrols. The VC on the whole stays clear of them and attacks purely ARVN units. They do so with relative impunity and inflict serious losses. It pays off because it's become increasingly difficult for ARVN to attract recruits or keep officers."

The priest nodded his head. "It's a very effective strategy. Ultimately, the US will have few forces left on the ground. Our friends the Marines may be among the last to go, but go they



will. This will leave only the ARVN and it won't hold back the National Liberation Front for long.”

“Even if the US continues with its air strikes?” I asked.

“Their tactical air is impressive, but the VC is relatively immune so long as it does not mass its forces.”

“But don't you need to do that,” I asked, “if you want to take over the South and occupy its cities?”

The priest responded: “If you launch a Tet-like offensive where small, dispersed, and hidden forces suddenly come together all over the country, you overwhelm the American air force and artillery with possible targets. If most VC concentrations are in or near cities, they will be more hesitant to bomb and shell.”

“It didn't seem that way during Tet,” I suggested.

“Yes and no,” the general said. “We bombed and shelled to soften them up before we launched counter-offensives. Without any offensive ground capability we would be less likely to do this as it would cause immense collateral damage for little military advantage.”

“And don't forget the North Vietnamese Army,” the businessman said. “They too know the likely cost of showing themselves in large units. But they have developed effective ways of moving large numbers of men and equipment through the jungles and mountains where they are all but invisible. I can imagine that many of their units would be in place and come to the support of the Viet Cong. They might even invade directly from the north.”

“So you all think the outcome foreordained?” I asked.

“We do,” said the businessman. It's only a matter of time. More pressure on the ARVN, an American withdrawal, and then a quick takeover with the help of the North Vietnamese army.”

“And you agree?” I looked at the general.

“I do. The ARVN will not put up a real fight against either the VC or an invading Northern army. I wouldn't be surprised if Saigon fell so quickly that not all the Americans could get out.”

“What would happen then?”

“Oh, they would be allowed to depart in peace but it would be great propaganda victory for the communists and a humiliation for the US.”

“And the longer-term consequences?”

“Not what Washington fears.” The general said. There are no dominos to fall. Vietnam will be reunited and Hanoi will solidify its influence in Laos and Cambodia. But further expansion? hardly likely. There's no love between the Vietnamese and the Chinese but they are dependent on them as long as they are fighting us. The Chinese like it this way and tensions between the countries are likely to increase the more independent the Vietnamese become. The new fault line in Southeast Asia will be the Vietnamese-Chinese border and nationalism will be at the heart of the conflict.”

Neither the businessman nor priest offered any dissent. The priest expressed concern for the Chinese community within Vietnam. “These are hardworking people who contribute to the economy. Deteriorating relations with China, which is likely, will create domestic tensions and could lead to the kind of violence we see elsewhere in the region against local Chinese immigrant communities.”

“Is there nothing that can be done politically to prevent the violent outcome you all foresee?” Carol asked.

“Very unlikely,” said the businessman. “The US and its puppet regime will never agree to free elections, which is the only political way to resolve the problem.”

“I concur,” said the general. “Nixon can’t hand over the South to the Viet Cong, which would quickly lead to unification. He would arouse fierce opposition in the Pentagon and in his own party. The Democrats would probably also join the feeding frenzy. Elections would provide the cover he needs as the National Liberation Front would certainly win. So long as Nixon and Kissinger refuse to recognize the struggle in Vietnam is a local one with largely local implications, not a communist challenge to American credibility, they will never give in.”

“That’s the problem,” Michael agreed. “They are prisoners of their ideology and as a result acting against the real interests of their country.”

“The end will still come,” the businessman insisted. “We all agree on the scenario.”

“What a tragedy!” the general exclaimed. “We know what will happen but have to let events take their course. If only the administration could agree to some face-saving agreement – I’m certain that Hanoi would push the VC to agree to it and postpone their takeover of the South for a couple of years. But it won’t happen, at least as long as Nixon and Kissinger run American foreign policy.”

“So the fighting will go on and more people will die,” said the priest.

“A lot more,” said the businessman.

“Too bad,” Carol said, “that the warring parties won’t delegate authority to the three of you.”

The priest agreed. “We would have it straightened out in no time.”

“It’s time to go,” said the businessman. Everyone rose and thanked Michael for a pleasant evening and delicious dinner. The businessman offered to drive the priest back to his compound. The general also had a driver who had returned to pick him up. We said our farewells by the door and Michael’s local guests went on their way.

We started to cleanup but Michael stopped us, saying his staff would deal with the mess in the morning. “Come join me for a nightcap,” he insisted.

We had all been abstemious so I readily agreed. Michael came back from the kitchen with a bottle of Napoleon cognac and three glasses. We went back out to the veranda, where the breeze had picked up. We sat down and Carol reached out for one of the glasses as cognac was her favorite tittle.

“Just whom do you think those three men are?” Michael asked.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Michael looked me in the eye. “The general is exactly whom he claims to be. I think he’s an excellent officer as the level of violence has gone down considerably since he assumed command.”

“Would the Pentagon be impressed by that metric?” I asked.

“Perhaps not, but let’s come back to this question.”

“The businessman is the regional political representative of the National Liberation Front.”

“You’re kidding?” Carol said.

“No,” Michael replied. He has a direct line to the Viet Cong.”

“How do you know that?” I asked. “It’s no big secret. He never acknowledges his position but he is the go-to person for journalists, and even government officials who want to know what the Viet Cong think about something.”

“The general must know this then.” Carol said.

“Yes, it’s one of the reasons the three men meet regularly.”

“And what about the priest?” I asked.

“He’s a spokesman for Hanoi. The regime has been very careful to treat Buddhists well and many have become prominent in the nationalist movement. I suppose they are not all that opposed to communism as they live an ordered life and take the equivalent of vows of poverty.”

“And this is well known too?” I asked.

“Not at all. I would guess he has confided his position to only a few people.”

“And you are obviously one of them.”

“Yes, I am.”

“Why are you telling us?” I asked.

“I don’t think it can do any harm, even if his secret became public. You are really interested in the conflict and free of the usual American prejudices. You are also leaving tomorrow for Saigon, and then, if I remember correctly, for Hong Kong. You’re not a local player but someone who might talk some political sense into people back home.”

“I assume the general also knows?”

“Indeed. We meet on a regular basis, as I told you, to talk about Chinese literature. After an hour or so I disappear and leave the three men on the veranda. I like to take evening walks.

“Is that safe?”

“For me it is. They talk among themselves and presumably exchange intelligence that each wants the other to know about.”

“How remarkable!” Carol exclaimed.

“Sometimes I suspect,” Michael said, “they make arrangements among themselves. Perhaps it’s not accidental that the rate of violence and casualties on all sides is lower here than elsewhere in the country.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time something like this happened,” I said. “Toward the end of the War, a few German commanders in northern Italy made arrangements with the resistance to avoid further bloodshed. The deals were brokered by priests – and that may be the case here. Both sides went through the motions of hunting each other down but it was more a charade than a reality.”

“Interesting,” Michael said. “Our general reads everything he can get his hands on about World War II.”

### **POSTSCRIPT**

In 2008 I was a professor at Dartmouth College. Carol and I occasionally went on cruises sponsored by the alumni association where one of us would give three lectures and socialize with the Dartmouth grads. The highpoint was a week in the Antarctic. A year or two later I was offered the opportunity, solo on this occasion, to lecture on a month-long, private jet, tour of Asia with the pretentious title: “The Lands of the Great Buddha.” The first destination was Lhasa, Tibet, the final one, Osaka, Japan, and in between we touched down in various locales in China, Outer Mongolia, India, Nepal, Cambodia, and Vietnam.

I made one of my lectures on the war in Indochina and was very keen to see how Vietnam had changed in the almost forty years since I had been there. Our first destination was Danang and even on the approach to the airport the difference was notable. When we landed during the war we did a steep angle descent, literally falling out of the sky and hitting the runway with a resounding bang. It was not good for the plane, and a little unnerving for the passengers, but it presented a far more difficult target to the enemy. This time we came in on a long glide

path and made a smooth touchdown. But I could still tell it was Danang because waterlogged shell craters on either side of the runway were still visible.

We taxied over to a relatively new terminal, disembarked, and entered the customs hall. To our surprise we were greeted by a bevy of school children who presented us with flower leis and performed a dance for us. They were extraordinary. No more than five and six years of age, they executed an elaborate five minute dance routine with surprising skill and coordination. Their teacher must have put them through hours of practice to achieve this level of proficiency. The faces revealed joy and the little girl who gave me the lei also gave me a big hug. Other than the few immigration officials and one policeman, also enjoying the show, there were no other uniforms in sight and nobody carried a weapon.

Danang had been rebuilt, people looked healthy and well-fed, motorbikes were still ubiquitous, and capitalism was on the march. Shops of all kinds advertised their wares, many of them selling imported goods, and most of them from China. We spent a couple of hours in the city, including an hour in a museum featuring local archeological finds and art from different eras of Vietnamese history. There were many Buddhas and they ran the gamut from crass to delicate.

To my surprise and delight our hotel was in China Beach. There were no check points or machine gun nests on the road there and we arrived to find a strip of modern looking hotels along the strand. We checked into one of the newest, and the trip's doctor and I decided to go exploring. We walked along the sandy beach, met some local kids, and joined a pick-up football game. A quick reconnaissance of other hotels and cafes revealed that most of the clientele was Vietnamese. There were lots of families, mostly middle class, and day trippers from Danang and surrounding areas. The vibes were excellent, the locals willing to chat with foreigners, and more hotels under construction. The goal, the hotel's bartender told us, was to become a kind of Miami Beach and attract foreigners as well as locals.

The following morning, we made a day trip to Hué, where the memory of the past and the scenes of the present were just as surreal. I gave a lecture on the bus ride up and told the story that I have written here. We visited the Thien Mu pagoda, the old imperial city, and the tomb of the Emperor. I had no time to search for Michael's house but wondered what had become of him, the general, the businessman, and the priest. Were any of them still alive? What did they think of today's Vietnam? What would Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon and their hawkish advisors think? For better or worse, Vietnam was a bulwark against China, had not encouraged uprisings elsewhere in Southeast Asia, was increasingly capitalist, and beginning to open up a bit politically. In retrospect, the war seemed even more senseless.