

The Fall of Saigon

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The following was delivered to the brotherhood of Calvary Baptist Church in Winchester, VA, on January 13, 2001. Clifford F. Thies is a professor of economics and finance at Shenandoah University.

It's not clear when the Vietnam War began. Some say it was a continuation of the French Indochina War of 1946 to 1954. In any case, by the early 1960s, the war was underway.

During the '60s, United States forces were increased from a few thousand to over 500,000. South Vietnam raised an army of more than a million. Then, in 1973, we signed a peace treaty that was supposed to end the war. But the fighting did not stop. During the next year, fifty thousand men were killed in continued warfare. And, then, in 1975, a new North Vietnamese army infiltrated into the south, and handed the South Vietnamese army its first defeat.

Cut off from support by the U.S. Congress and an American people that had grown tired, it became clear that it was only a matter of time before South Vietnam would be overrun. At that point, the South Vietnamese army collapsed, and the North Vietnamese army proceeded, speedily, to conquer the entire country. Suddenly, the North Vietnamese army entered the capital of South Vietnam, Saigon, since renamed Ho Chi Minh City. The United States began a desperate operation to evacuate Americans and South Vietnamese who had worked closely with us, whose lives would be in danger when the Communists took over. Helicopters flew back and forth between the U.S. Embassy and aircraft carriers stationed offshore, taking as many people as possible to safety in the short time available.

At the time, I was a second Lieutenant in the U.S. Army, stationed at Fort Benning, Georgia. Word was getting back to us, from various sources, concerning the massacres of South Vietnamese who had fought against the Communists during the war. Many of them were our friends. At church, one Sunday, the minister spoke about this. He said he knew that we were frightened for those who had resisted the Communists, and for their families. The Communists, he said, had a list, and were going to round up anyone who might keep them from consolidating their control. We, he said, as soldiers in the United States Army, were scared for them because we knew that we, ourselves, were on such a list, and that we, and our families, would suffer the same fate should the Communists ever take over this country.

President Lincoln said the same thing regarding slavery when he said

In giving freedom to the slave we assure freedom to the free—honorable alike in what we give and what we preserve.

After saying out loud why we were so afraid, that we were afraid not only for the anti-Communists in South Vietnam but also for ourselves, the minister then said something that has stayed with me till this day. He said we should be proud to be on the list that the Communists had, and that we should be proud of those in South Viet Nam who were on the list.

The question I want to raise this morning is, are you on the list? The one list that really counts.

Before I go any further, I should point out that I did not serve in the Vietnam War.

My number in the draft lottery was 365. For males born in the year in which I was born, the draft board assigned numbers based on your birthday. Dates were placed in capsules, and the capsules were placed in a giant hopper. Then, they were drawn out, one at a time. The lottery number for men having their birthday on the first date drawn was 1. They were absolutely certain to be drafted. As I said, my number was 365. There was no chance that I would be drafted. So I signed up for the Army ROTC program at my college as a volunteer. By the time I finished ROTC and got my commission, we had turned the fighting over to our South Vietnamese allies.

Instead of going to Vietnam, I served in Texas and in Germany. And, you can look it up, we didn't lose so much as one battle in either Texas or Germany during the time I was on active duty.

To get back to what I want to say, what is this list, the list that really counts? And, how do you get on it?

Our country remains, to this day, divided by the Vietnam War. For many, the Vietnam War was a period of betrayal. The betrayal of a valiant ally fighting against Communist aggression by our country, when Congress cut off aid. The betrayal of our soldiers by a government that sent them off to war without giving them the go-ahead to win. And, the betrayal of our returning veterans by a people who, for years, disrespected their willingness to serve, whether as draftees or as volunteers.

For others, the Vietnam War was a period of protest and rebellion. A rejection of all the things for which this country stands. Limited government under a Constitution. The family as the bedrock of society. The continuing development of liberty that we call our Judeo-Christian heritage, which you can find implicit in the Old Testament, and which you see most eloquently in the teachings and in the life of Jesus Christ.

While some progress has been made to bind the wounds of the Vietnam War era, our country remains in need of a healing.

Many of the soldiers who came back from that war eventually succumbed to a mental disorder described as "post-traumatic stress syndrome." Yes, there have always been soldiers who were so disturbed by the horror of war as to suffer temporary or permanent emotional injury. We used to say they suffered "shell shock."

As a boy I remember meeting a great uncle who suffered shell shock during World War I. He was indeed a shell of a man.

When I had the occasion, as a man, to confront a criminal attacking a woman with a baby on the New York City subway late one night, I wondered why I was brave and my great uncle was a coward. I knew it wasn't me who was brave. I knew I did not deserve any special recognition. I knew my impulse to come to the defense of this woman and her baby was due to my upbringing, to my parents and teachers, and to my military training. God had chosen me to be brave, and He had chosen my great uncle to be an object for our compassion.

By the way, after I had come to the rescue of the woman and her baby, a gang of black youth came to my rescue. At the next stop of the train, they whisked the criminal off the subway car and up a ramp, and what happened after that I don't know.

The difference between the soldiers suffering post-traumatic stress syndrome after the Vietnam War, and the soldiers suffering shell shock in other wars wasn't simply the extraordinary number who succumbed to the disorder following the Vietnam War. It was the commitment of our army to a war without a purpose.

In the words of General William Tecumseh Sherman, "War is Hell."

As my father, who served as an enlisted man during the Korean War, said to me when I received my commission,

They told me the reason we had to fight in Korea was so our sons would not have to fight in such a far-away place.

The day I received my commission was a difficult day for my dad. He was proud of me, and frightened for me.

War is such a terrible thing, that it can only be justified when all other options have failed, and when there is no alternative, not even the alternative of waiting.

Let me contrast the Vietnam War with the war in which I participated. Our country's greatest war. The Cold War. A war that lasted forty years. From the time Harry Truman was President, to the time George Bush, the elder, was President. Through nine presidents and two entire generations, through prosperity and through recession, we and our European allies manned the ramparts. We stared across the Iron Curtain at an army the members of which we never considered our enemy.

The great symbol of the Cold War was, of course, the Berlin Wall.

At the Berlin Wall, President Kennedy, explaining why we would never betray Europe, said "Ich bin ein Berliner." "I am a Berliner." We Americans, although an ocean away, saw our self-interest, our destiny, inseparable from the fate of the people at the point of confrontation with Communism.

But President Kennedy did not use the word "we." He did not say "We are Berliners." He used the word "I," "I am a Berliner." He personalized it.

Same thing with President Reagan. When he gave a speech at the Berlin Wall, he said, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall." Again, President Reagan personalized it. He did not address the Communist regime, or even refer to Mikhail

Gorbachev as Mr. Secretary-General. He spoke to the person, "Mr. Gorbachev."

Same thing with the story of the Exodus. It is not simply the story of how Moses delivered the children of Israel from bondage. It is also the story, the personal story, of Pharaoh.

In my loosely translated version of the Bible, Moses went unto Pharaoh and said, "Mr. Pharaoh, let my people go."

The reason the Cold War was our greatest war is because none of our guys got killed, and we didn't have to kill any of their guys. We simply waited, resolute, for the eventual collapse of the Communist system, as any system incompatible with human nature must eventually collapse.

Abraham Lincoln did not want to end slavery through a civil war. All he wanted was to prevent the spread of slavery to new territories, the same way we wanted to prevent the spread of Communism to new countries, so that eventually the parasitic system would collapse.

My dear brothers, the victory is won. The victory was won 2,000 years ago, when Jesus rose from the dead. The whole world will soon be brought into dominion. This is just so obvious, today, with the fall of Communism, and the new opportunity we have to spread the gospel message.

Jesus said we should pray for our enemies. What a concept! Instead of fighting, pray for peace and reconciliation.

Early this year, the post office raised the price of a first class stamp to 34 cents. For those of us who have piles of 33-cent stamps, the post office has a large supply of 1-cent stamps available. They call them "make-up stamps."

According to the United States Postal Service, it costs one cent to "make up."

According to God, it doesn't cost anything to "make up."

Indeed, when you make up, you are enriched. Speaking as an economist, the opportunities for human cooperation through free trade increase "geometrically."

Can you imagine the increased speed of progress, when Russian and Chinese scientists turn their attention away from nuclear bombs and military rockets, and toward consumer-oriented goods and services, including computers and electronics, medicine and pharmaceutical drugs, and the search for new sources of energy?

Can you imagine how our lives will be enriched by Russian and Chinese literature and fine art, performance and sport?

With the spirit of forgiveness, can you imagine how our community life, right here in Winchester, would change?

With the spirit of forgiveness, can you imagine how our family life would change, how your family life and my family life would change?

This is the healing that the world needs, that our country needs, that each of us needs.

A partial healing took place for our country when the POWs returned from

North Vietnam. Among these POWs was John McCain, then Navy Lieutenant Commander McCain, and today United States Senator McCain.

John McCain illustrates, in his book, *Faith of My Fathers*, what it is like to be on the list. After his capture, he was tortured into confessing to war crimes and betraying his country. It was, as he describes it, his “moment of dishonor.”

For four days, he was kept in solitary confinement, with a rope pulling his arms tight behind his back, dislocating his shoulders and keeping him in constant pain. Then every two or three hours, guards entered his room and beat him. They beat him about his shoulders, chest and stomach, taking care not to kill him. Occasionally, when he fell to the floor, they kicked him, breaking several of his ribs, two of his teeth, refracturing his right arm. They left him on the floor in his blood and his waste.

On the third day, to avoid confessing to war crimes and betraying his country, he made two feeble attempts to commit suicide.

Then, on the fourth day, he gave in. He confessed to being a war criminal. He betrayed his country.

After that, they returned him to his cell where he was left alone for the next two weeks.

He says in his book,

They were the worst two weeks of my life. I couldn't rationalize away my confession. I was ashamed. I felt faithless, and couldn't control my despair. I shook, as if my disgrace was a fever. . . . All my pride was lost, and I doubted I would ever stand up to any man again. Nothing could save me. No one would ever look upon me again with anything but pity or contempt.

“Nothing could save me,” he said. But he was wrong. For he was already saved.

John McCain and many other POWs were tortured into confession. Others, who were tortured even more severely, held out. Many of those who held out, held out to the point where God could no longer stand their pain and allowed them, mercifully, to die.

Why did some of the POWs confess under torture and others resist torture even to the point of death? That, only God knows.

After John McCain recovered sufficiently from his beatings, the Communists said he had to make a propaganda film for them. He refused. The Communists said they would torture him again until he, again, gave in. McCain said he knew they could do that, but that he hoped that when he again recovered he would be able again to resist.

John McCain was on the one list that matters. God's list. We call it “The Book of Life.” Once your name is written in the Book of Life, it doesn't matter that we were once a sinner. Once your name is written in the Book of Life, your soul is forever bound for glory, and nothing, no power on earth, and no power under the earth can take that away from you.

Are you a sinner? Your past sins have no power over you once you put your

name onto God's list.

Have you made the decision to turn your life over to God, but have retrogressed in a moment of dishonor? Don't you let the devil tell you that your sin gives him power over you.

Has somebody disappointed you with his or her retrogression? Don't you let the devil tell you there cannot be a healing. The spirit of forgiveness is miraculous. Love does conquer all.

The same thing that happened to John McCain happened to Joan of Arc, or "Jeanne d'Arc" as her countrymen pronounce her name.

She was tortured into confession. She said that, while she was in captivity, an angel came to her to tell her she would be delivered. They beat her until she recanted.

Then, the night before she was to be burned at the stake, the bishop in charge of her inquisition allowed a Franciscan priest to hear her confession. This priest accompanied Joan to her execution. While she was being tied to the post atop the woodpile, and as the fire was lit and the flames engulfed her, he held a cross high, in front of her eyes.

Many eyewitnesses in the crowd testified that she died praising God's name.

The angel was right. She was delivered.

Don't you ever doubt your salvation. And don't you ever doubt the salvation of anyone who is on the list.

Praise be to God! And praise be to Jesus Christ who in his atoning sacrifice took away our sins, and absolved us completely in God's eyes. Ω