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From the Fall of Saigon to Our Fallen Empire

By Tom Engelhardt

April 26, 2015

 "It just started out as a simple goodbye song," James Douglas Morrison told reporter Jerry Hopkins. "Probably just to a girl, but I could see how it could be goodbye to a kind of childhood… I think it's sufficiently complex and universal in its imagery that it could be almost anything you want it to be."

To me, the song always was and always will be about the Vietnam War. If you know it – and you will the instant you hear the first notes and the shivering tambourine – you know it as "The End." And if you know the man who sang that song, it's probably not as James Douglas but simply Jim. What you may not know about the Doors' lead singer is that his father, George Morrison, commanded the U.S. Naval fleet during the August 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident, an event fraught with missteps, distortions, and deceptions that precipitated an escalation of the American War in Vietnam ultimately ending in millions of casualties and almost unimaginable suffering.

Jim Morrison's father is not, however, the reason I think of the Vietnam War when I hear that song. I owe that instead to Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 film *Apocalypse Now*, which begins with "The End" and ends with it, too. When people write about it, they often remark on the naked Oedipal imagery – "Father? Yes son. I want to kill you. Mother? I want to…," howls Morrison. But whoever selected "The End" as the theme music for *Apocalypse Now* must have heard what I heard. It begins like bad poetry, mutates into a furious, profanity-laced tirade, only to glide into a creamy, dream-like ending. A smattering of lyrics along the way seem to capture the nightmare atmosphere of the American War in Vietnam.

"This   is   the   end,   beautiful   friend
This   is   the   end,   my   only   friend,   the   end
Of our elaborate plans, the end…"

Forged in the fading afterglow of World War II, America's plans for a righteous nation to save a backward people were elaborate indeed. To Washington, the Vietnamese seemed to be

"Desperately   in   need   of   some   stranger's   hand
In a desperate land…"

America's moral superiority, its ingenuity, its technological know-how, its military might were unstoppable; with a requisite number of quislings in tow, the fall of those Southeast Asian dominos would be arrested, communism would be stopped, and a Cold War battle won.

"The   West   is   the   best,   the   West   is   the   best
Get here, and we'll do the rest…"

It turned out that the West wasn't the best, that all those Pentagon computers and statistical analyses and bombs and artillery shells and napalm and tanks and airplanes and helicopters and rifles and Swift boats and the generals who, as younger men, had defeated Germany and Japan during World War II, and the boys of the milk-and-honey baby boom toting those rifles and driving those tanks and dropping that napalm couldn't actually do "the rest." It turned out that Americans never won over more than a minority of the Vietnamese and, despite years of some of the most destructive warfare the world had ever seen, could not defeat the majority of them.

"It hurts to set you free,
But you'll never follow me,
The end of laughter and soft lies,
The end of nights we tried to die,
This is the end."

America's grand plans later revealed themselves to be bankrupt. Bombing millions into slums and refugee camps didn't necessarily mean those people would follow you. Soft lies mouthed by the military at 5 p.m. each evening were no substitute for actual victories. Laughter and glad-handing and talk of easy triumph were repeatedly blown apart. By the time it was all over, by the time *the end* had come, the entire American effort had hemorrhaged and bled out in a million hamlets across South Vietnam.

Jim Morrison recorded "The End" in 1966, when the American project in Vietnam still had life in it. Unlike his father, who passed away in 2008, he never saw the end of the Vietnam War, though the writing was already on the wall. He died in France – the country whose war in Vietnam the Americans had bankrolled and then taken over – in 1971.

Today, as *TomDispatch* regular Christian Appy notes, the end of that war – a time of devastating defeat for the United States and relief, if not liberation, for most Vietnamese – has been rebranded to suit American tastes and so offers a hint of what may come when other ends arrive

in our present crash-and-burn conflicts in the Greater Middle East. As in his magisterial new book, _American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity_, – rightly termed "required reading" by the _Huffington Post_ – Appy examines the lasting impact of the Vietnam War on American foreign policy, culture, and national identity and draws attention to the lessons it offers for today and the many tomorrows to come.

In a 1969 interview, Jim Morrison said that he was once approached by an attractive young woman "on leave" from UCLA's Neuropsychiatric Institute. She said "The End" was a favorite of the kids in her ward. The woman had puzzled over the lyrics, trying to divine the song's meaning, trying to break it down and piece it together. "I didn't realize people took songs so seriously and it made me wonder whether I ought to consider the consequences," Morrison observed.

Not considering the consequences turns out to be a very American trait, as Appy explains today, and so does refashioning history to make up for it. When _the end_ finally comes in Iraq and Afghanistan, soft lies, willful amnesia, and rampant revisionism are bound to follow fast and furious; where the truth will be found remains to be seen. Sadly enough, a song already almost 50 years old may be as good a place to start as any. ~ _Nick Turse_

How to Turn a Nightmare into a Fairy Tale 40 Years Later, Will the End Games in Iraq and Afghanistan Follow the Vietnam Playbook?

By Christian Appy

If our wars in the Greater Middle East ever end, it's a pretty safe bet that they will end badly – and it won't be the first time. The "fall of Saigon" in 1975 was the quintessential bitter end to a war. Oddly enough, however, we've since found ways to reimagine that denouement which miraculously transformed a failed and brutal war of American aggression into a tragic humanitarian rescue mission. Our most popular Vietnam end-stories bury the long, ghastly history that preceded the "fall," while managing to absolve us of our primary responsibility for creating the disaster. Think of them as silver-lining tributes to good intentions and last-ditch heroism that may come in handy in the years ahead.

The trick, it turned out, was to separate the final act from the rest of the play. To be sure, the ending in Vietnam was not a happy one, at least not for many Americans and their South Vietnamese allies. This week we mark the 40th anniversary of those final days of the war. We will once again surely see the searing images of terrified refugees, desperate evacuations, and final defeat. But even that grim tale offers a lesson to those who will someday memorialize our present round of disastrous wars: toss out the historical background and you can recast any U.S. mission as a flawed but honorable, if not noble, effort by good-guy rescuers to save innocents from the rampaging forces of aggression. In the Vietnamese case, of course, the rescue was so incomplete and the defeat so total that many Americans concluded their country had "abandoned" its cause and "betrayed" its allies. By focusing on the gloomy conclusion, however, you could at least stop dwelling on the far more incriminating tale of the war's origins and expansion, and the ruthless way the U.S. waged it.

Here's another way to feel better about America's role in starting and fighting bad wars: make sure U.S. troops leave the stage for a decent interval before the final debacle. That way, in the last act, they can swoop back in with a new and less objectionable mission. Instead of once again waging brutal counterinsurgencies on behalf of despised governments, American troops can concentrate on a humanitarian effort most war-weary citizens and soldiers would welcome: evacuation and escape.

Phony Endings and Actual Ones

An American president announces an honorable end to our longest war. The last U.S. troops are headed for home. Media executives shut down their war zone bureaus. The faraway country where the war took place, once a synonym for slaughter, disappears from TV screens and public consciousness. Attention shifts to home-front scandals and sensations. So it was in the United States in 1973 and 1974, years when most Americans mistakenly believed that the Vietnam War was over.

In many ways, eerily enough, this could be a story from our own time. After all, a few years ago, we had reason to hope that our seemingly endless wars – this time in distant Iraq and Afghanistan – were finally over or soon would be. In December 2011, in front of U.S. troops at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, President Obama proclaimed an end to the American war in Iraq. "We're leaving behind a sovereign, stable, and self-reliant Iraq," he said proudly. "This is an extraordinary achievement." In a similar fashion, last December the president announced that in Afghanistan "the longest war in American history is coming to a responsible conclusion."

If only. Instead, warfare, strife, and suffering of every kind continue in both countries, while spreading across ever more of the Greater Middle East. American troops are still dying in Afghanistan and in Iraq the U.S. military is back, once again bombing and advising, this time against the Islamic State (or Daesh), an extremist spin-off from its predecessor al-Qaeda in Iraq, an organization that only came to life well after (and in reaction to) the U.S. invasion and occupation of that country. It now seems likely that the nightmare of war in Iraq and Afghanistan, which began decades ago, will simply drag on with no end in sight.

The Vietnam War, long as it was, did finally come to a decisive conclusion. When Vietnam screamed back into the headlines in early 1975, 14 North Vietnamese divisions were racing toward Saigon, virtually unopposed. Tens of thousands of South Vietnamese troops (shades of the Iraqi army in 2014) were stripping off their military uniforms, abandoning their American equipment, and fleeing. With the massive U.S. military presence gone, what had once been a brutal stalemate was now a rout, stunning evidence that "nation-building" by the U.S. military in South Vietnam had utterly failed (as it would in the twenty-first century in Iraq and Afghanistan).

On April 30, 1975, a Communist tank crashed through the gates of Independence Palace in the southern capital of Saigon, a dramatic and triumphant conclusion to a 30-year-long Vietnamese struggle to achieve national independence and reunification. The blood-soaked American effort to construct a permanent non-Communist nation called South Vietnam ended in humiliating defeat.

It's hard now to imagine such a climactic conclusion in Iraq and Afghanistan. Unlike Vietnam, where the Communists successfully tapped a deep vein of nationalist and revolutionary fervor throughout the country, in neither Iraq nor Afghanistan has any faction, party, or government had such success or the kind of appeal that might lead it to gain full and uncontested control of the country. Yet in Iraq, there have at least been a series of mass evacuations and displacements reminiscent of the final days in Vietnam. In fact, the region, including Syria, is now engulfed in a refugee crisis of staggering proportions with millions seeking sanctuary across national boundaries and millions more homeless and displaced internally.

Last August, U.S. forces returned to Iraq (as in Vietnam four decades earlier) on the basis of a "humanitarian" mission. Some 40,000 Iraqis of the Yazidi sect, threatened with slaughter, had been stranded on Mount Sinjar in northern Iraq surrounded by Islamic State militants. While most of the Yazidi were, in fact, successfully evacuated by Kurdish fighters via ground trails, small groups were flown out on helicopters by the Iraqi military with U.S. help. When one of those choppers went down wounding many of its passengers but killing only the pilot, General Majid Ahmed Saadi, *New York Times* reporter Alissa Rubin, injured in the crash, praised his heroism. Before his death, he had told her that the evacuation missions were "the most important thing he had done in his life, the most significant thing he had done in his 35 years of flying."

In this way, a tortured history inconceivable without the American invasion of 2003 and almost a decade of excesses, including the torture and abuse at Abu Ghraib, as well as counterinsurgency warfare, finally produced a heroic tale of American humanitarian intervention to rescue victims of murderous extremists. The model for that kind of story had been well established in 1975.

Stripping the Fall of Saigon of Historical Context

Defeat in Vietnam might have been the occasion for a full-scale reckoning on the entire horrific war, but we preferred stories that sought to salvage some faith in American virtue amid the wreckage. For the most riveting recent example, we need look no further than Rory Kennedy's 2014 Academy Award-nominated documentary *Last Days in Vietnam*. The film focuses on a handful of Americans and a few Vietnamese who, in defiance of orders, helped expedite and expand a belated and inadequate evacuation of South Vietnamese who had hitched their lives to the American cause.

The film's cast of humanitarian heroes felt obligated to carry out their *ad hoc* rescue missions because the U.S. ambassador in Saigon, Graham Martin, refused to believe that defeat was inevitable. Whenever aides begged him to initiate an evacuation, he responded with comments like, "It's not so bleak. I won't have this negative talk." Only when North Vietnamese tanks reached the outskirts of Saigon did he order the grandiloquently titled Operation Frequent Wind – the helicopter evacuation of the city – to begin.

By that time, Army Captain Stuart Herrington and others like him had already led secret "black ops" missions to help South Vietnamese army officers and their families get aboard outgoing aircraft and ships. Prior to the official evacuation, the U.S. government explicitly forbade the evacuation of South Vietnamese military personnel who were under orders to remain in the country and continue fighting. But, as Herrington puts it in the film, "sometimes there's an issue

not of legal and illegal, but right and wrong." Although the war itself failed to provide U.S. troops with a compelling moral cause, *Last Days in Vietnam* produces one. The film's heroic rescuers are willing to risk their careers for the just cause of evacuating their allies.

The drama and danger are amped up by the film's insistence that all Vietnamese linked to the Americans were in mortal peril. Several of the witnesses invoke the specter of a Communist "bloodbath," a staple of pro-war propaganda since the 1960s. (President Richard Nixon, for instance, once warned that the Communists would massacre civilians "by the millions" if the U.S. pulled out.) Herrington refers to the South Vietnamese officers he helped evacuate as "dead men walking." Another of the American rescuers, Paul Jacobs, used his Navy ship without authorization to escort dozens of South Vietnamese vessels, crammed with some 30,000 people, to the Philippines. Had he ordered the ships back to Vietnam, he claims in the film, the Communists "woulda killed 'em all."

The Communist victors were certainly not merciful. They imprisoned hundreds of thousands of people in "re-education camps" and subjected them to brutal treatment. The predicted bloodbath, however, was a figment of the American imagination. No program of systematic execution of significant numbers of people who had collaborated with the Americans ever happened.

Following another script that first emerged in U.S. wartime propaganda, the film implies that South Vietnam was vehemently anti-communist. To illustrate, we are shown a map in which North Vietnamese red ink floods ever downward over an all-white South – as if the war were a Communist invasion instead of a countrywide struggle that began in the South in opposition to an American-backed government.

Had the South been uniformly and fervently anti-Communist, the war might well have had a different outcome, but the Saigon regime was vulnerable primarily because many southern Vietnamese fought tooth and nail to defeat it and many others were unwilling to put their lives on the line to defend it. In truth, significant parts of the South had been "red" since the 1940s. The U.S. blocked reunification elections in 1956 exactly because it feared that southerners might vote in Communist leader Ho Chi Minh as president. Put another way, the U.S. betrayed the people of Vietnam and their right to self-determination not by pulling out of the country, but by going in.

Last Days in Vietnam may be the best silver-lining story of the fall of Saigon ever told, but it is by no means the first. Well before the end of April 1975, when crowds of terrified Vietnamese surrounded the U.S. embassy in Saigon begging for admission or trying to scale its fences, the media was on the lookout for feel-good stories that might take some of the sting out of the unremitting tableaus of fear and failure.

They thought they found just the thing in Operation Babylift. A month before ordering the final evacuation of Vietnam, Ambassador Martin approved an airlift of thousands of South Vietnamese orphans to the United States where they were to be adopted by Americans. Although he stubbornly refused to accept that the end was near, he hoped the sight of all those children embraced by their new American parents might move Congress to allocate additional funds to support the crumbling South Vietnamese government.

Commenting on Operation Babylift, pro-war political scientist Lucien Pye said, "We want to know we're still good, we're still decent." It did not go as planned. The first plane full of children and aid workers crashed and 138 of its passengers died. And while thousands of children did eventually make it to the U.S., a significant portion of them were not orphans. In war-ravaged South Vietnam some parents placed their children in orphanages for protection, fully intending to reclaim them in safer times. Critics claimed the operation was tantamount to kidnapping.

Nor did Operation Babylift move Congress to send additional aid, which was hardly surprising since virtually no one in the United States wanted to continue to fight the war. Indeed, the most prevalent emotion was stunned resignation. But there did remain a pervasive need to salvage some sense of national virtue as the house of cards collapsed and the story of those "babies," no matter how tarnished, nonetheless proved helpful in the process.

Putting the Fall of Saigon Back in Context

For most Vietnamese – in the South as well as the North – the end was not a time of fear and flight, but joy and relief. Finally, the much-reviled, American-backed government in Saigon had been overthrown and the country reunited. After three decades of turmoil and war, peace had come at last. The South was not united in accepting the Communist victory as an unambiguous "liberation," but there did remain broad and bitter revulsion over the wreckage the Americans had brought to their land.

Indeed, throughout the South and particularly in the countryside, most people viewed the Americans not as saviors but as destroyers. And with good reason. The U.S. military dropped four million tons of bombs on South Vietnam, the very land it claimed to be saving, making it by far the most bombed country in history. Much of that bombing was indiscriminate. Though policymakers blathered on about the necessity of "winning the hearts and minds" of the Vietnamese, the ruthlessness of their war-making drove many southerners into the arms of the Viet Cong, the local revolutionaries. It wasn't Communist hordes from the North that such Vietnamese feared, but the Americans and their South Vietnamese military allies.

The many refugees who fled Vietnam at war's end and after, ultimately a million or more of them, not only lost a war, they lost their home, and their traumatic experiences are not to be minimized. Yet we should also remember the suffering of the far greater number of South Vietnamese who were driven off their land by U.S. wartime policies. Because many southern peasants supported the Communist-led insurgency with food, shelter, intelligence, and recruits, the U.S. military decided that it had to deprive the Viet Cong of its rural base. What followed was a long series of forced relocations designed to remove peasants en masse from their lands and relocate them to places where they could more easily be controlled and indoctrinated.

The most conservative estimate of internal refugees created by such policies (with anodyne names like the "strategic hamlet program" or "Operation Cedar Falls") is 5 million, but the real figure may have been 10 million or more in a country of less than 20 million. Keep in mind that, in these years, the U.S. military listed "refugees generated" – that is, Vietnamese purposely forced off their lands – as a metric of "progress," a sign of declining support for the enemy.

Our vivid collective memories are of Vietnamese refugees fleeing their homeland at war's end. Gone is any broad awareness of how the U.S. burned down, plowed under, or bombed into oblivion thousands of Vietnamese villages, and herded survivors into refugee camps. The destroyed villages were then declared "free fire zones" where Americans claimed the right to kill anything that moved.

In 1967, Jim Soular was a flight chief on a gigantic Chinook helicopter. One of his main missions was the forced relocation of Vietnamese peasants. Here's the sort of memory that you won't find in *Miss Saigon*, *Last Days in Vietnam*, or much of anything else that purports to let us know about the war that ended in 1975. This is not the sort of thing you're likely to see much of this week in any 40th anniversary media musings.

"On one mission where we were depopulating a village we packed about sixty people into my Chinook. They'd never been near this kind of machine and were really scared but they had people forcing them in with M-16s. Even at that time I felt within myself that the forced dislocation of these people was a real tragedy. I never flew refugees back in. It was always out. Quite often they would find their own way back into those free-fire zones. We didn't understand that their ancestors were buried there, that it was very important to their culture and religion to be with their ancestors. They had no say in what was happening. I could see the terror in their faces. They were defecating and urinating and completely freaked out. It was horrible. Everything I'd been raised to believe in was contrary to what I saw in Vietnam. We might have learned so much from them instead of learning nothing and doing so much damage."

What Will We Forget If Baghdad "Falls"?

The time may come, if it hasn't already, when many of us will forget, Vietnam-style, that our leaders sent us to war in Iraq falsely claiming that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction he intended to use against us; that he had a "sinister nexus" with the al-Qaeda terrorists who attacked on 9/11; that the war would essentially pay for itself; that it would be over in "weeks rather than months"; that the Iraqis would greet us as liberators; or that we would build an Iraqi democracy that would be a model for the entire region. And will we also forget that in the process nearly 4,500 Americans were killed along with perhaps 500,000 Iraqis, that millions of Iraqis were displaced from their homes into internal exile or forced from the country itself, and that by almost every measure civil society has failed to return to pre-war levels of stability and security?

The picture is no less grim in Afghanistan. What silver linings can possibly emerge from our endless wars? If history is any guide, I'm sure we'll think of something.