Written by **Kirk Kidwell**

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Indochina Without Americans…

Fall of South Vietnam, Third Indochina War, Khmer Rouge Tyranny

April 1975 was an especially bad month for the inhabitants of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. That month, the dark shadow of Communism fell over the nations of Indochina. On April 1st, Cambodian President Lon Nol abdicated and fled the country. Four days later, on April 5th, the Royal Lao formed a fateful coalition government with the Communist Pathet Lao. Despite the new government, the Communist Lao continued to fight until the capital city of Vientiane fell on August 23rd and the People's Democracy of Laos was proclaimed.

On April 12th, Nguyen Van Thieu resigned as President of the Republic of Vietnam. Five days later, on April 17th, Cambodia fell to the Communist Khmer Rouge. On April 30th, the army of North Vietnam marched triumphantly into Saigon. The Vietnam War was over. And the *New York Times* proclaimed: "Indochina Without Americans; For Most, a Better Life."

Yet the life that followed the fall of Indochina was anything but "better." The killing fields of Cambodia and the boat people of Vietnam stand as brutal testimony to the horror of Communist rule and the irresponsibility (to put it charitably) of the American media and the foreign policy establishment that dominated Washington then as it does now.

In the dozen years since, a multitude of books have been published about the Vietnam War and its aftermath. Recently three books have been published that provide unique insights into the last days of free South Vietnam, the Third Indochina War and life under Khmer Rouge tyranny.

The Palace File

By *Nguyen Tien Hung* and *Jerrold L. Schecter*, Harper & Row, 1986, $22.95, 542 pages, hardbound.

Much has been written about the final years of the Republic of Vietnam. We have heard from former President Richard Nixon and his aide Henry Kissinger, as well as others. But nothing has been written telling the story from the perspective of the South Vietnamese. *The Palace File* fills that void.

Nguyen Tien Hung, currently a professor of economics at Howard University in Washington, served as Special Assistant to President Thieu and also as a Cabinet Minister during the final years of the Thieu government. When Hung was sent to Washington to plead for additional U.S. aid in April 1975, he took with him a file of secret correspondence from Presidents Nixon and Ford to President Thieu. That "palace file" forms the basis for Hung and Schecter's book. (Coauthor Jerrold Schecter covered the Vietnam War as Diplomatic Editor for *Time*magazine.)

*The Palace File*documents that President Nixon repeatedly promised President Thieu that the United States would come to the aid of South Vietnam should the North Vietnamese violate the terms of a peace agreement. Note, for example, the following excerpts from the letters of Richard Nixon during the crucial four-month period from October 1972 to January 1973. During that time period, Thieu was holding out on signing the agreement proposed by the Nixon administration.

October 16, 1972: "In the period following the cessation of hostilities you can be completely assured that we will continue to provide your Government with the fullest support, including continued economic aid and whatever military assistance is consistent with the ceasefire provisions of this agreement."

November 14, 1972: "You have my absolute assurance that if Hanoi fails to abide by the terms of this agreement it is my intention to take swift and severe retaliatory action."

January 5, 1973: "As we enter this new round of talks, I hope that our countries will show a united front …. Should you decide, as I trust you will, to go with us, you have my assurance of continued assistance in the post-settlement period and that we will respond with full force should the settlement be violated by North Vietnam."

President Thieu had a number of valid reasons for believing that the agreement was fatally flawed. First, it made no provision for the removal of North Vietnamese troops from the South. Under the proposed treaty, the Americans would be leaving, but the North Vietnamese would be staying. When Thieu asked Kissinger on October 18, 1972 to explain why the Communists were not required to withdraw, Kissinger merely replied, "Well, as you know, we discussed that with the North Vietnamese and they didn't accept, so we didn't think that we should put it in so as not to poison the atmosphere."

Second, the English draft of the agreement referred to "the three nations of Indochina" — that is, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. While Hanoi maintained that there was only one Vietnam, Thieu asserted that in fact there were two Vietnams created by the Geneva Conference of 1954. Washington sided with Hanoi. When asked to explain this problem, Kissinger insisted that it was only a "typographical error," even though the reference to the three nations of Indochina appeared more than once in the agreement and was both written out and given with the numeral "3."

Third, Thieu was concerned with the reference to the creation of a National Reconciliation Council, which Thieu feared was a coalition government in disguise. Kissinger rejected Thieu's fear, stating, "It is a miserable little council. It has no power. It is only a consultative body." Yet, both Thieu and Kissinger had in their possession the transcript of an interview with North Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong conducted by *Newsweek*correspondent Arnaud de Borchgrave. In the interview, Dong made clear that Hanoi regarded the Council as a "three-sided coalition of transition."

According to Hung and Schecter, what upset Thieu most was the American insistence that "the agreement was the greatest thing that could have been achieved and a collapse of the North Vietnamese position." Kissinger told Thieu, "Le Duc Tho came to me and told me this is the worst concession he has to make, but for the sake of peace he has to give this to me, and he was

crying." Hoang Duc Nha, Thieu's private secretary, remarked, "To make the assertion that the Communists cried set us on our guard. Communists don't cry. Either Kissinger was naïve or he thought we were stupid."

"From the South Vietnamese point of view," Hung and Schecter observe, "the political future of South Vietnam had been predetermined. There was no significant difference between the terms of the draft agreement and what the Communists demanded in the ten-point peace program they had presented to the Nixon administration on May 8, 1969. Hanoi succeeded in having all of its demands satisfied, in some cases with more specificity than originally demanded."

Thieu refused to sign in October 1972, but by January the pressure that Nixon and Kissinger applied became too intense to hold out any longer. To win Thieu's compliance, Nixon used the carrot and stick of promises and threats. If Thieu signed, the American military would be committed to come to South Vietnam's aid should Hanoi violate the treaty. If Thieu did not sign, the United States and North Vietnam would sign without him, the American troops would be withdrawn, and U.S. aid would be terminated. Against his better judgment, Thieu signed.

Hung and Schecter go on to describe how the U.S. government — under the leadership of Presidents Nixon and Ford, Secretary of State Kissinger, and Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger — broke the promises upon which Thieu relied. Their book is a damning account of the actions of American policy makers. In early-April 1975, for example, as the situation in South Vietnam disintegrated, Kissinger confided to White House Press Secretary Ron Nessen: "Why don't those people die fast? The worst thing that could happen would be for them to linger on."

The Palace File leaves no doubt that the powers in Washington decided as early as 1972 to abandon Vietnam to the Communists. The Nixon-Kissinger administration concluded a "peace" agreement with the North Vietnamese over the objections of the Saigon government, promising U.S. assistance. When Thieu's predictions came true, the Ford-Kissinger administration reneged on their promises and abandoned the free peoples of South Vietnam to Communist tyranny.

Brother Enemy

By *Nayan Chanda*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986, 479 pages, $24.95, hardbound.

Nayan Chanda, former Indochina Correspondent for the *Far East Economic Review*, picks up the saga of Indochina where Hung and Schecter left off — the defeat and occupation of Saigon. Like *The Palace File*, *Brother Enemy* is based on extensive research and interviews with hundreds of the top players in Hanoi, Peking, Phnom Penh, Washington, Moscow, etc. But unlike Hung and Schecter's book, Chanda's ends up being more of an apology for the behavior of Communist Vietnam than an objective "History of Indochina Since the Fall of Saigon," as the subtitle suggests.

According to Chanda, the Third Indochina War began with the final withdrawal of American forces from Saigon on April 30, 1975. Within a month, the Communist Vietnamese and the Khmer Rouge began skirmishing over border disputes. In May, the Khmer Rouge occupied several disputed offshore islands, butchering their Vietnamese inhabitants. Within a few days, Vietnamese forces counterattacked and expelled the Khmer Rouge troops.

Over the next several years, Vietnamese forces continued to skirmish with Khmer Rouge troops, and relations between the two Communist neighbors cooled off rapidly. Hanoi's relations with Red China cooled also, as Vietnam began its drive to dominate all of Indochina. Hanoi's drive for domination culminated in the Christmas 1978 invasion of Cambodia. The brutal Khmer Rouge were driven into exile and a pro-Hanoi Communist government installed in Phnom Penh.

Chanda's chronicling of the events of post-1975 Indochina is informative and basically accurate. But he runs into problems when he analyzes the reasons that the Vietnamese Communists acted as they did. In Chanda's view, Hanoi was responding to pressure from Red China, which wanted Vietnam to shift away from Moscow and align with Peking. The leaders of Vietnam were unwilling (or unable) to break with Moscow, so Peking increased its support of Cambodia, Vietnam's traditional enemy. As Cambodia shifted into the Peking camp, Hanoi, fearing a Khmer Rouge invasion, preemptively attacked Cambodia to eliminate a Chinese challenge through Phnom Penh.

Although he acknowledges Vietnam's desire to dominate all of Indochina, Chanda downplays Hanoi's imperialistic bent. His arguments are similar to those of liberal Sovietologists who maintain that the Soviet Union has no expansionist aims, but is merely responding to threats to its own security. In fact, however, Hanoi's goal is to be, in effect, the vice regent of Indochina in Moscow's global Communist empire.

Chanda's tendency to defend Vietnam can be seen most clearly in his treatment of Communist atrocities in both Cambodia and Vietnam. The index to *Brother Enemy*lists ten citations under the heading "Khmer Rouge, massacres and brutality of"; ten citations under "purges of opponents of"; and eight citations under "radical policies of." The reader will search in vain, however, for any citations for the massacres, brutality, purges and radical policies of the Communist Vietnamese.

The brutality and genocide of the Vietnamese Communists are documented in Nguyen Van Canh's book *Vietnam Under Communism, 1975-1982*. From reading Chanda's book, one might mistakenly conclude that the Vietnamese rode into Cambodia like knights in shining armor to liberate the oppressed Cambodian people. Even the tragedy of the boat people merits only six citations, of which five are merely passing references. Incredibly, life in the repressive New Economic Zones is referred to as "farm life."

Brother Enemy does have one redeeming feature, however. Over the past decade Chanda has been able to interview an impressive list of leaders and policy makers from around the world. His book is filled with intriguing anecdotes and vignettes that provide unique insights into the machinations of global power politics and regional squabbles. Thus, while Chanda's book has many drawbacks, it serves as a valuable reference on the people and events of the last decade.

Cambodian Witness

By *Someth May*, Random House, 1986, $17.95, 287 pages, hardbound.

Of course, the Khmer Rouge were brutal, as were the Communist Vietnamese. Someth May's autobiography makes that point dramatically. May, born in Phnom Penh in 1957, spent the majority of his childhood years in the comparatively peaceful reign of Prince Norodom Sihanouk.

The first third of the book is devoted to May's pre-Khmer Rouge life. Those pages read as an autobiography of a typical American boy might read. May tells of his family life, the important role of religion (Buddhism) to his home, the trials and joys of his school life, the wedding of his older sister and the tragic, accidental death of his brother.

But his life took a dramatic turn when the Khmer Rouge invaded Phnom Penh and expelled the entire population from the city. May's family numbered 14 when he left the fallen city. Only four survived the savage rule of the Khmer Rouge. First, his father was taken away and brutally tortured to death at a "Re-education Centre." His father's only crime was in having been a doctor prior to the Khmer Rouge regime. May's brothers and sisters died one by one, some by execution, most by starvation and disease. (May's mother was out of the country when Phnom Penh fell.)

Life under the Khmer Rouge was a never-ending struggle to survive. May was ordered to spend weeks and months building dams on elevated ground where water would have to flow uphill in order to fill a reservoir. Later, another work detail might be ordered to dismantle the very dam May and others had labored to build. At other times, May would be assigned to plant rice in fields where it could not grow.

Starvation was a fact of life for the New People in Cambodia. (The Old People were the privileged few who had joined the Khmer Rouge prior to 1975; the New People were everybody else.) While the Old People had more than enough to eat, extra sets of clothes, watches, radios, and comfortable homes, the New People were placed on a starvation diet of rice, water, and occasional soup. The New People lived in hovels they had to construct and were permitted only one set of clothes, more often than not mere rags.

Each day began at five in the morning with a meager breakfast, followed by a half-hour meeting in which the same message to work harder was given day in and day out. Until noon, the New People would labor in the fields or work at building earthen dams. After a short lunch break, they labored till sunset. All this time, the Old People lounged about, supervising their "slave" laborers. The evenings were spent either in more meetings or back at work under the light of bonfires. Most days did not end until nearly midnight. As May notes: "The whole society was working at maximum — and brutally enforced — inefficiency."

Cambodian Witness is, to this reviewer's knowledge, the first autobiographical treatment of life under Khmer Rouge tyranny. It is a well-written and gripping account of man's inhumanity to man. But it is also a testimony of man's inherent will to survive and overcome the tyranny and brutality of Communism.