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“Liberation” of South Vietnam

The following is an excerpt from a book-in-progress, concerning the political activism of Tom Hayden and Jane Fonda, by Roger Canfield.

When 1975 began, Hanoi had finalized plans for its winning offensive against South Vietnam. After years of implementing their theory of “political action” against the enemy abroad, the North Vietnamese were confident that the U.S. Congress would not allow President Gerald Ford to intervene. To test America’s intentions, on January 1, 1975 North Vietnamese regular military forces attacked Phuoc Binh, a provincial capital only a hundred miles from Saigon. There was no U.S. reaction. On January 7th, Phuoc Binh fell. Thereafter, military events moved inexorably toward their natural conclusion — the communist conquest of South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

The conquest of South Vietnam took only four months, concluding years ahead of Hanoi’s original schedule. Hanoi’s well-equipped troops confronted South Vietnamese troops equipped with severely depleted armaments and no hope of further American aid. As North Vietnam’s key strategist and Minister of Defense, General Vo Nguyen Giap, later commented in the book **How We Won the War**, “[Our party] combined military struggle with political struggle and at certain stages ... also with diplomatic struggle, in order to completely defeat the U.S.-Thieu neo-colonialist war of aggression.”

“Smell of Freedom”

While North Vietnam was beginning its final war offensive, Tom Hayden joined Bella Abzug, Joan Baez, Daniel Ellsberg, George McGovern, Pete Seeger, and thousands of others in a National Assembly to Save the Peace in late January 1975. Hayden talked the politics of peace. Baez sang songs of peace. Meanwhile, to win the war, North Vietnam sent some 250,000 additional regular troops to South Vietnam. In all, 418,000 troops moved south.

U.S. Ambassador to Saigon Graham Martin desperately sought aid for South Vietnam. Author Frank Snepp wrote in **Decent Interval** that Martin’s approach to Washington was to emphasize the issue of American conspirators and propagandists for Hanoi: “Tom Hayden, Jane Fonda, Fred Branfman and Don Luce of the ... Indochina Resource Center were the names he mentioned most often.” The FBI and the CIA would not or could not provide Ambassador Martin with the information he needed to prove his case against Hanoi’s American agents of influence — where they got their money. According to Snepp, no one listened to Ambassador Martin, even when he described an identical North Vietnamese propaganda campaign against France.

By March 1975, the communist Khmer Rouge in Cambodia and Hanoi’s troops in South Vietnam were only weeks away from victory. Jane Fonda was in Moscow sniffing out that “smell of freedom”



that had first wafted her way during a Soviet military parade on May Day 1967. While in the USSR, she continued her diatribe against South Vietnam and America. “It’s not in the Soviet Union where civil liberties are most infringed,” she declared, “but in South Vietnam.” She told the Soviet *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, that she “would like to use this opportunity to thank the Soviet people for the assistance they’re rendering to Vietnam.” Tom and Jane had worked for years to ensure that America (the “common enemy”) would render no such assistance to South Vietnam or Cambodia.

“Just a Pittance”

While Jane enjoyed her visit in Moscow, the North Vietnamese regulars were attacking Ban Me Thuot, a city of 90,000, in the heart of South Vietnam. On March 11, 1975 Ban Me Thuot fell. South Vietnamese President Thieu had few choices. By March 14th, he had withdrawn the ARVN (South Vietnam’s army) from the Central Highlands (Pleiky) to re-mass at a more defensible line anchored at the coastal city of Tuy Hoa. President Thieu hoped this strategic retreat would allow the South Vietnamese to dig in and stop the Northern onslaught at this new line. To implement the massing on the Tuy Hoa line, he also had to make a 300-mile phased withdrawal southward from just north of Hue through Da Nang, Chu Lai, and Binh Dinh. The massive retreat from the coastal northern cities and central highlands turned into a disorderly flight and intermingling of demoralized troops and refugees. North Vietnam’s artillery turned on both the fleeing civilians and the ARVN soldiers.

Presidents Ford and Thieu pleaded with Congress for emergency military aid to South Vietnam. Congressmen were either indifferent or antagonistic. Despondent, President Thieu read and reread his secret letters from ex-President Richard Nixon promising military aid, no matter what happened. By the end of March, the South Vietnamese were fighting resolutely, but the ARVN was low on fire power, replacement parts, strategy, and morale. Finally, the whole of the defensive withdrawal from the coastal cities collapsed before the North Vietnamese onslaught. Within five days, on March 25th, both Hue and Chu Lai on the northern coast south of the DMZ fell. On March 30th, Da Nang fell.

President Thieu had planned a new east-west line of defense (Nha Trang to Tay Ninh) 100 miles north of Saigon. That too was to be for nought. Within another five days, on April 2nd, Qui Nhon south of Binh Dinh fell. On April 3rd, Tuy Hoa, Nha Trang, and Cam Ranh fell. Only Saigon and the Delta remained to be conquered.

Clogging the roads, hundreds of thousands of refugees fled, not into the arms of their northern liberators, but into Saigon. *New York Times* reporter Robert Reinhold observed that Hayden and Fonda “watched ... scenes of refugee flight and death with dismay, but not surprise.” Reinhold reported Jane’s assessment: “The suffering and turmoil have been going on for decades — this is just a pittance.”

Killing Fields

On April 16th, Phan Rang, a coastal city fifty miles south of Thieu’s second (Nha Trang-Tay Ninh) defense line, fell. On April 17th, the Cambodian capital fell; led by Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge



entered Phnom Penh and declared “Year Zero.” On the day they entered the Cambodian capital, the Khmer Rouge force-marched the entire population, including hospital patients, out of the city. The “bloodbath” began with a vengeance. Over a period of three years, as many as 3,000,000 Cambodians died in the “Killing Fields.” This was the bloodbath that Tom Hayden had said could be prevented only by a cut-off of U.S. aid to Indochina.

When the conquering communists entered Phnom Penh on April 18th, Tom Hayden was interviewing their Khmer Rouge representatives. The April 18th issue of the **New York Times** cited Hayden’s interpretation of the events: “Indochina has not fallen — it has risen. What has fallen is the whole cold war establishment.” According to Hayden, the communists would not take over the governments of Indochina, but would instead establish coalition governments. “The policy of the other side is reconciliation,” Hayden confidently asserted as the tanks rolled south and innocent civilians fled from the murderous artillery of Hayden’s forces of reconciliation. “Communism is one of the options that improve people’s lives,” Hayden proclaimed.

In another article proclaiming “Peace,” Hayden wrote in the May 8, 1975 **Rolling Stone**: “It is a high irony that the new government of Cambodia came to power on a day exactly 200 years after Paul Revere’s ride, but now the shots heard around the world are coming from Indochina.”

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On April 30, 1975, the Soviet tanks of the North Vietnamese 203rd Armored Brigade surrounded the Presidential Palace in Saigon. South Vietnam had “risen.” The North Vietnamese Politburo immediately established control of the Military Management Committee, the ruling body of South Vietnam. The NLF or Viet Cong played virtually no role. It would take just over a year for Vietnam to be unified officially in July 1976. There would be no coalition, no elections, no reconciliations.

“How Happy They Must Be”

While thousands of South Vietnamese sought to retain their freedom by desperately fighting to board departing planes, helicopters, and ships, the North Vietnamese and the Left in America were rejoicing. The commander of the conquering North Vietnamese Army, Colonel General Tran Van Tra exclaimed: “There are few moments in life when one is so happy one wants to cry. I suddenly felt [as it] my soul were translucent and light.” According to radical professor Howard Zinn, “everyone stood up and cheered” when a message was read to the audience of a protest meeting at Brandeis University on April 30, 1975. The message was that “the Saigon Government has surrendered. The war is over.”

Like Colonel General Tran Van Tra, Tom Hayden was close to tears “thinking of the faces of the people in Vietnam over the last ten years, thinking how happy they must be.” He pointed out that, for the “first time in over one hundred years ... their country hasn’t been occupied ... by either French or American troops. Now they’re able to try and put their house in order.” Jane Fonda was also jubilant about the fall of Saigon. She compared North Vietnam’s occupation of Saigon to the American Revolution: “a revolution for independence playing itself out in Vietnam.” She said, “To say Saigon has ‘fallen’ is to say that the 13 colonies ‘fell’ two centuries ago.”



This “joyful welcome to peace” was cause for special celebration. Miraculously organized in only ten days, 50,000 people gathered for the celebration held at Sheep Meadow in New York City’s Central Park on May 9, 1975. The celebrants heard speeches by David Dellinger, Bella Abzug, and Elizabeth Holtman. They listened to the music of Joan Baez, Harry Belafonte, and Phil Ochs.

Forced Repatriation?

The citizens of “liberated” Saigon (soon to be renamed Ho Chi Minh City) did not share in the joy felt among America’s leftist community. According to French journalist Brigitte Friang, when the North Vietnamese tanks entered Saigon at noon on April 30th, “They advanced into a dead city, welcomed only by 125 foreign journalists. The rush of the press ... not the rush of the population.” Friang said she knew “the population is not pro-communist ... but I did not expect such a strong rejection.”

On May 2nd, the Joint Chiefs of Staff ordered the termination of all American “refugee operations.” America’s role in Vietnam was over. For America, Vietnam meant the 2,500,000 who had served there, the 58,000 dead, the 300,000 wounded, the 21,000 permanently disabled, and the 2500 MIAs. So many young American men and women had paid with their blood and youth for the freedom of Indochina, while their leaders showed little wisdom, and even less political courage. The defeated people of Indochina would pay even more.

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With the fall of Saigon, Tom Hayden, Jane Fonda, and their friends took up George McGovern’s call to refuse aid for the fleeing refugees. On May 5, 1975, Tom Hayden spoke at Freeborn Hall of the University of California at Davis before an audience of 350. In reference to the refugees, Hayden said, “Why are they so frightened? Because they are remnants of a privileged class that we Created.” He proposed merely temporary asylum and advocated immediate action to return the refugees to their country.

Hayden regarded the Americans’ “outpouring of emotion for Vietnamese orphans and refugees” as “misdirected.” Following Hayden’s recommendation, the Center for Constitutional Rights (founded by Hayden’s Chicago attorneys William Kunstler, Arthur Kinoy, and Morton Stavis) filed suit to return orphans brought to America before the fall of Saigon and to place them in the custody of the new communist government.

On August 22, 1975, Laos fell. The third country of Indochina succumbed to communism. Nobody noticed. In mid-September of 1975, speaking before the greater Los Angeles Press Club, Hayden advocated United Nations membership for both North and conquered South Vietnam. In return for this little favor, two votes in the UN, and over \$3 billion in reparations, Hayden said, the Vietnamese would be more cooperative about American MIAs. Hayden reiterated his call for repatriation of the refugees, insisting that most refugees wanted to return!