



IN THE JAWS OF HISTORY

BY
BUI DIEM

FORMER SOUTH VIETNAMESE AMBASSADOR TO THE UNITED STATES

WITH
DAVID CHANOFF

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OF
HISTORY

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This book recounts many conversations held over a long period of time and reconstructed from notes or from memory. In each instance the substance and tone of these conversations is accurate; the dialogue is as precise as the notes and memory permit.

Preface

I have written this book because I feel a duty, a duty not only to the hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese who died on the battlefield in our struggle for independence and freedom in Vietnam but also to the millions of others, soldiers and civilians alike, who suffered the hardships of war for so long and now are suffering the consequences of defeat.

There is a former military cemetery not far from Saigon where many thousands of South Vietnamese were buried. Their graves have now been deliberately desecrated. But an even greater desecration will have taken place if the sacrifices and suffering of the countless thousands who dreamed of a Vietnam neither colonized nor communized are simply swept into the dustbin of history. In honoring my victimized countrymen, I ask the privilege to honor also the thousands of Americans, Australians, Koreans, and other allies who died trying to help us.

This book attempts to tell part of the story of modern Vietnam and its struggle for identity, independence, and freedom. My own upbringing and temperament made it feel unnatural to tell the story in the first person. Yet I realized that my life is part of the common life of all Vietnamese of my generation. To make this story live, I wanted to invite the reader to join us in living through these events and seeing them through our eyes, as if through his or her own.

I also wished to make my own modest contribution to the continuing search for the meanings of the war in Vietnam, about which there are so many misconceptions — both for Vietnam and for America — and to describe the lessons to be learned from this tragic, yet often heroic, period. Accordingly, in the Epilogue I have not hesitated to draw conclusions in the furtherance of what I believe to be truth, reconciliation, and resolve for the future.

I owe a debt of gratitude to Peter Braestrup, editor of *The Wilson Quarterly*, and Philip N. Marcus, former president of the Institute for Educational Affairs, whose encouragement and support were at the origin of this book.

Special thanks are due to my two old friends of the Vietnam era: Ogden Williams, who from the beginning helped me in structuring the book and the initial draft, and George McArthur, whose critiques and abridgments were of great value. I also wish to express my gratitude to my enthusiastic and knowledgeable literary agent, Muriel Nellis, whose valuable professional judgments I greatly relied upon.

My thanks also go to other American friends, in particular to William P. Bundy, who generously put at my disposal his unpublished manuscript on the Vietnam War.

I am particularly grateful to David Chanoff, whose enthusiastic assistance in the research, writing, and editing of the manuscript was invaluable.

Finally, I wish to gratefully acknowledge the Earhart Foundation, the Smith-Richardson Foundation, the Institute for Educational Affairs, the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, and the American Enterprise Institute, without whose support this project could not have been undertaken.

Many have thus shared in writing this book, but responsibility for all the conclusions and judgments expressed in these pages is, of necessity, mine alone.

BUI DIEM

IN THE JAWS OF HISTORY

Bui Diem was the man most called upon to plead South Vietnam's case to its giant American ally. He had regular personal contact with the highest government officials on both sides: Johnson, Nixon, Thieu, Ky, Quat, McNamara, Kissinger, and Westmoreland. Both liberals and conservatives will find new insight in Diem's account of American military and diplomatic intervention. This is the first detailed insider's view of war, tragedy, and missed opportunity in Vietnam.

It is also a gripping personal and political drama by a man whose life is a microcosm of the struggle for democracy in Vietnam. Born to a mandarin family in the northern part of the country, Diem was eager to rid his nation of French domination. Forced to flee when the Communist party took over the North, Diem eventually served in several important South Vietnamese government positions as he continued his fight for democratic rule.

As chief of staff for Prime Minister Phan Huy Quat, he was required to write the communiqué "inviting" U.S. troops into South Vietnam—while they were landing in Danang. As ambassador to the United States, he was accused of trying to influence the 1968 presidential election (a charge fully refuted here). He saw the American liberal press vilify all South Vietnamese politicians as corrupt, ignoring those truly devoted to democracy. And he saw the support of even conservative politicians wither away as America lost interest in the war.

Having struggled valiantly for thirty years to establish democracy in Vietnam, he was determined to tell the story. This book is the product of his determination.



Bui Diem held many high government offices in South Vietnam: member of the delegation to the 1954 Geneva conference, chief of staff (1965), secretary of state for foreign affairs (1966), ambassador to the United States (1967–72), ambassador at large and special envoy to the Paris peace talks (1973–75). He is now president of the executive board of the National Congress of Vietnamese in America, and makes his home in Washington, D.C.

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CONTENTS

	<i>Preface</i>	<i>ix</i>
1	The Jaws of History	<i>1</i>
2	Early Years	<i>11</i>
3	Secret Societies	<i>16</i>
4	The Dai Viet	<i>23</i>
5	The August Revolution	<i>29</i>
6	British, Chinese, and French	<i>37</i>
7	The Terror	<i>45</i>
8	In Hiding	<i>51</i>
9	The Bao Dai Solution	<i>62</i>
10	Alpine Interlude	<i>71</i>
11	The French Dig In	<i>77</i>
12	The Emperor's Choice	<i>82</i>
13	Diem and the Opposition	<i>90</i>
14	The Coup	<i>99</i>
15	Beyond the Coup	<i>106</i>
16	The Government of General Khanh	<i>116</i>
17	The Americans Intervene	<i>124</i>
18	Dr. Quat and the Generals	<i>144</i>
19	Toward a Constitution	<i>153</i>
20	Second Step	<i>165</i>
21	Ambassador to Washington	<i>175</i>
22	A Democratic Constitution	<i>184</i>
23	Behind the Scenes	<i>193</i>
24	The 1967 Elections	<i>201</i>
25	A Change in Mood	<i>209</i>

26	Tet Mau Than	216
27	The Talks Begin	226
28	The Anna Chennault Affair	235
29	New President, New Policy	247
30	Buying Time	259
31	Losing Time	270
32	The One-Man Election	284
33	Two Showdowns	297
34	The Paris Agreement	309
35	Last Things	321
	<i>Epilogue</i>	334
	<i>Index</i>	347

Chapter 1

The Jaws of History

A THIN, PERSISTENT VOICE penetrated the static on the line: “Diem, this is Bob Shaplen, Bob Shaplen. I’m calling from Hong Kong.” The voice kept repeating the name, but the deep sleep I had been in a moment before and the drugs I was taking for a vicious flu wouldn’t let my head clear enough for recognition to take hold.

“Bob Shaplen, Diem. I’ve just gotten back from Saigon. Your friends need you, Diem. They have to know what’s happening. Nobody has any idea what’s going on. Thieu and Graham Martin are incommunicado. Nobody can get through to them. You’re the only one. You’ve got to go to Saigon to tell them the truth. You’ve got to go immediately!”

By now my attention was riveted on this demanding voice, the first direct message I had received in weeks about conditions in Saigon. By the time Shaplen hung up I was wide awake and convinced he was right. I had to get back. The *New Yorker’s* veteran Far Eastern correspondent was knowledgeable and perceptive, not the sort for dramatics. He was also an old friend. He would not have called like that unless he felt compelled. I could still hear the urgency in his voice.

It was two in the morning in Washington, and though I lay back down in bed, there was no getting to sleep again. I had in fact been thinking hard about returning to Saigon for the last week. But then this knockout virus had hit. And South Vietnam’s military disintegration in this spring of 1975 had been so unexpected, and so sudden, that it was hard to say how much time might be left. I certainly had no illusions about what would happen if I was caught by the other side.

Three weeks earlier President Nguyen Van Thieu had sent me to the American capital, the city where I had lived as South Vietnam’s ambas-

sador from 1967 to 1972 and where I had visited regularly from 1973 on as ambassador at large. My mission this time was to do what I could to unstop the \$700 million in emergency aid that was bottled up in the U.S. Congress, aid that would give shells to South Vietnam's nearly silent guns and fuel to her grounded aircraft, as the nation's armed forces battled to hold back the flood tide of twenty North Vietnamese divisions that were engulfing the country at the rate of a province a day.

But it was now April 14. There was nothing left for me to do in Washington. At the crucial moment, with South Vietnam's existence in the balance, seven years of friendships and contacts with American presidents, cabinet secretaries, senators, and congressmen had proven insufficient to free up an extra penny of life-giving aid for my country. With the end approaching fast, it was time to return. My ninety-year-old mother was still in Saigon, living with my sister. I would get them out if it was humanly possible. But besides that, fate had given me a role in thirty years of Vietnamese political life, both in opposition to South Vietnam's governments and as their representative to the outside world. Although Saigon was doomed, my place was there. Who knew, maybe I could still help somehow, as Bob Shaplen had said. And if not, it would still be better than sitting in Washington watching the news describe the end, the marooned ambassador of a dying ally.

The next day I kept my luncheon appointment at the Empress with Ted Shackley, CIA chief for East Asia. Shackley had just gotten back from a special mission to South Vietnam for President Ford. He would have the latest information, and before I left I wanted to hear his assessment of the situation. Shackley's prognosis was grim. Saigon was already dangerous and would quickly become more so. Thieu was a lost soul, "numbed." The South Vietnamese president hadn't even been able to keep his mind on the discussion Shackley and Army Chief of Staff Frederick Weyand had had with him. A man overwhelmed by the immensity of the debacle.

By the following morning I was ready to leave for Saigon, with a short layover in Hong Kong to talk with Shaplen. At Washington's National Airport I said an emotional goodbye to my wife and three children: Luu, twenty-four; Giao, twenty; and Han, at eight too young to understand but old enough to sense the difference in this leavetaking. My wife was worried but as supportive as always. Though she had a sharp appreciation of the dangers, she also knew that if I didn't go I would regret it the rest of my life.

The Pan Am jumbo jet made its way west while I slept fitfully, exhausted in mind and body and only vaguely aware of the stops in San Francisco and Honolulu. Twenty hours later I stepped out of the plane

at Hong Kong's Kai Tak Airport and went immediately to Shaplen's apartment. When I arrived it was afternoon. Till late that night I sat with him as he talked about the chaos in Saigon. "Nobody there knows anything about what's really happening, especially about American intentions. It's an absolutely critical situation. But they still have a lot of illusions about help from the United States, and about a compromise solution."

There were a million rumors, he said, and a general belief that the United States could not simply stand back and watch an ally of twenty years be destroyed by its Soviet-supplied Communist enemy. Somehow the Americans would even now save the situation. Fleets of B-52s were being sent to rip apart the fully exposed North Vietnamese divisions. U.S. marines were readying themselves to land in the Mekong Delta, to secure South Vietnam's rice basket as a new state. Kissinger was negotiating a further division of the country with the North Vietnamese, ceding the central provinces and promising massive economic assistance in return for a cease-fire. These were only a few of the stories making the rounds, stories that were affecting not just the morale of the population but of the government itself, which had become blind and paralyzed and beset by fancy. "They need the truth of it," said Shaplen. "That's why you had to come back."

"The truth of it," I told him, "is that as far as the United States is concerned, this war is over."

"Then that," he said, giving me an intense look, "is what you have to go and tell them."

The next day, April 17, I was on the Air France flight to Saigon. Landing at Tan Son Nhut at four in the afternoon, I was surprised by the relative calm. After Shaplen's description, I had half-expected to find myself in the middle of a madhouse. Then I noticed the crowd milling around the Air America restricted area, awaiting what was clearly a high-volume airlift outbound. On the ride into town, the traffic on the other side of the two-lane thoroughfare was piled up — lines of cars headed toward the airport.

In Saigon, the only outward indication that people were aware of the wave sweeping toward the city was the unusually nervous bustle of street crowds. Each face in the sea of movement seemed set and preoccupied. The ordinary air of diffuse energy and noise was gone, replaced by the determined expressions of people who had a lot to do in a hurry. That day, two hundred miles to the north, Phan Rang, President Thieu's native province, fell to the invaders.

At my apartment on Nguyen Hue Street my mother and sister were happy and relieved that I had come. They were growing anxious about the developing crisis and were at a loss about what to do. The only other

member of our immediate family was my brother, a professor in Hanoi, who had remained in North Vietnam with my father when my mother and sister had fled south in 1951. Obviously, no help could be expected from that quarter.

As soon as we had embraced and I had assured them that I would take care of things, I put in a call to Thieu at the presidential palace. His chief of staff, Colonel Vo Van Cam, came on the line and said he would let the president know immediately that I was in Saigon and then get back to me quickly. A few minutes later Cam was on the phone again, telling me that "the president is very busy and very agitated by the loss of Phan Rang." Thieu had asked me to see the prime minister right away.

That message said everything necessary about how black the situation truly was. Thieu himself had sent me as his emissary to the United States. Now I was back, straight from the only possible source of South Vietnam's salvation. Whatever the news, hopeful or desperate, he needed to know it right away. Instead I was to see the prime minister, Nguyen Ba Can, a man Thieu regarded with barely concealed scorn. Always before, under far less critical circumstances, I had had immediate personal access. I thought of CIA chief Shackley's assessment — Thieu was "overwhelmed," "numbed" — and of Shaplen's report that Thieu (and U.S. Ambassador Graham Martin, too) was "incommunicado." "Who," I said to myself, "is running things?" How fast events had raced since mid-March and the marathon session I had had with the president before taking off for Washington — a brief three weeks before.

* * * * *

March 11 had been the beginning of the end, though nobody saw it at the time. On that day Banmethuot, a lightly defended provincial capital in the central highlands, was overrun by a surprise attack of three North Vietnamese divisions. In the Saigon government there was no panic. Banmethuot was a serious setback, but hardly a fatal one. We had recaptured larger cities in the past — Hue after the Tet offensive in 1968, Quang Tri after the 1972 spring offensive — and now crack South Vietnamese special forces were being mobilized for an attempt to take back Banmethuot.

At that time I had just returned from a fence-mending visit to New Delhi, one of the many stops that made up my itinerary as South Vietnam's ambassador at large, a diplomatic troubleshooter attempting to shore up my country's image, improve bilateral relations, and seek financial aid in Southeast Asia, Japan, India, France, and anywhere else a need or an opportunity presented itself.

This activity I combined with regular visits to Washington — my brief-

case bulging with documents on military and economic necessities — lobbyist and public relations man for a cause that was growing less and less popular with each passing day. Now, on March 15, Thieu had asked me to come in, to prepare me for yet another mission to the United States, a more pressing one this time, with the North Vietnamese offensive in full bloom and the fallen Banmethuot a potential key to the strategic central highlands.

Typically, my meetings with Thieu were far-ranging affairs that would include blunt discussions of world politics as well as analyses of every important dimension of South Vietnam's domestic life. I had been drafted into the Thieu-Ky government back in 1965, directly from my job as cabinet-level chief of staff to Dr. Phan Huy Quat, the last civilian prime minister. As a convinced opponent of military rule, I had had few positive feelings about the generals who were then replacing Quat's administration with their own. But when Quat himself urged me to accept their invitation, I swallowed my reservations. South Vietnam needed every advantage it could muster in its dealings with the United States, its huge protector. As the Quat government's liaison with the Americans, for better or worse I had developed an excellent rapport with Ambassador Maxwell Taylor and Alexis Johnson, the top-ranking State Department official who served as Taylor's deputy. Besides that, I knew how important it was to the generals that they retain some highly visible civilian presence in their government.

When the Quat administration fell, I had been anxious to get back to private life and my job as editor and publisher of the *Saigon Post*. But the fact that the generals were so determined to keep me on suggested I would have the leverage to make my views heard in the new government. And if not, I could always quit. So I took the job, secure in my independence and willing to see if I could continue to serve in a way that would be compatible with my integrity and productive for the country.

The upshot was that my relationship with Thieu and Ky was blunt indeed. Thieu especially was not noted for his tolerance of criticism, and it was something of a wonder to both me and others that he could put up for so long with my regular harping on themes that were anything but dear to his heart. Foremost among these was the need for a government of national unity. As far as I was concerned, Thieu's cabinet was made up almost entirely of passive incompetents, many of them corrupt and none of them willing to do more than acquiesce to the president's wishes. Only a government of strong individuals who represented the country's various non-Communist political factions, including the opposition, could rally national support against North Vietnam and the Vietcong and begin to resolve the host of urgent social concerns.

It wasn't that Thieu was blind to the shortcomings of his administra-

tion. In our private talks that would follow the typically sterile and unproductive cabinet meetings his frustrations would break out. "Look at them," he would snarl in frustration. "These people are utterly worthless!"

These were the times to press the issue. "I've told you, Mr. President. You have got to change this government." But as the discussion warmed up, inevitably the response would come. "I'm considering it. I'll give it some thought." In the end, the dilatory, indecisive nature of the man always prevailed. To whatever extent he actually understood the vital need for change, that understanding would be lapped in a sea of temporizing, suspicious cerebration that precluded action.

Still, by March 15 Thieu had been in deep political trouble for months. And now, with the accelerating North Vietnamese offensive applying its own iron logic, the time had come for a showdown. I knew how critical our aid requirements were (though neither I nor anyone else suspected how quickly the enemy avalanche would descend), and I intended to use this moment for whatever leverage it could provide. So it was that when the president summoned me on the fifteenth, I sent back the clearest signal possible. I would of course meet with him, but I wanted to bring two others with me: my good friends Tran Van Do, former foreign minister, and the labor leader Tran Quoc Buu, both active politicians who were outside the government. With these men along, there could be no question about which issues I intended to address.

When Thieu's chief of staff called to say that the president would be pleased to see the three of us together, I knew I was in a position to push hard. In particular, I would hammer on the link between American public opinion and congressional responsiveness to our requests.

Thieu knew from years of briefings by myself and others that in the United States he was widely regarded as an oppressive militarist and dictator. It was, in fact, one of my greatest frustrations that I had been unable to impress on him the corrosive effect this perception had on our relations with the Americans. Typically, he would answer my dissertations on the ultimate importance of American public opinion by insisting that many of the U.S. criticisms were "exaggerated" and "unjustified." My response was always the same: "As long as you still need their help, you have to take their views into account. The moment you can say you don't need them — that moment you can tell them to go to hell."

Now, of course, Thieu's need for the Americans could not have been more graphic. The loss of Banmethuot was the most pointed kind of stimulus. With Do and Buu reinforcing me, I spent a good part of our five-hour meeting insisting on the necessity for immediately forming a government of national unity. Even at this hour such a change might

affect the response I would receive at the White House and on Capitol Hill. At the very least, it would rally the spirit of the nation to resist. So tense were our discussions that word leaked out (as it was later reported by the CIA's Frank Snepp) that I had demanded Thieu's resignation. I did not; but everything short of it that I could do, I did.

Even then Thieu remained unreceptive. He went so far as to agree in principle to restructure the government. He even asked us to provide him with "practical formulas" for doing it. But underneath I knew he was still temporizing, promising as he had so many times before, with no intention of taking action. Even in his extremity he proved to be a man blindly wedded to power, incapable of accommodating himself to either the needs of his own people or those of his sole support, the ally by which he would live or die.

On March 22 I arrived in a Washington just beginning to come alive with the beauty of the spring. But the incipient bloom of azalea, dogwood, and cherry did nothing to lighten the mounting anxiety in my heart. Stopping over in Paris, I had learned of the disastrous retreat from the highlands. Instead of attempting to stabilize the military situation in the center after the loss of Banmethuot, Thieu had elected to pull back to the coast. With the main roads interdicted, the retreating South Vietnamese troops had been forced to use an old logging trail. There, in the heart of the highland forests, the fleeing columns had been cut in half and annihilated. Now North Vietnamese army units were attacking the coastal highway, isolating the major cities of Hue and Danang. What had been a limited local defeat was rapidly developing into a stunning military catastrophe.

The tragedy unfolding on South Vietnam's coast turned the \$700 million in emergency funds — the object of my trip — from an urgent necessity into a matter of life or death. The continued existence of my country was now to play out its final act in the halls of Congress. In my years of experience with trying to move Congresses, I had developed a fairly standard series of steps that included preliminary meetings at the White House, the National Security Council, the State Department, and the Pentagon. After these I would get together privately with journalists on the Vietnam and congressional beats. By the time I completed my rounds, I could count on having a good feel for where senators and representatives stood on a particular issue. By then I would be well prepared to meet with the congressmen themselves, with friends to rally support, and with critics to urge reconsideration.

The day after I arrived in Washington, Hue, the old imperial capital, was cut off. Hundreds of thousands of refugees pushed southward down the coastal highway to Danang, fleeing the North Vietnamese spearhead.