

## GUEST ESSAY

# I Can't Forget the Lessons of Vietnam. Neither Should You.

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**By Viet Thanh Nguyen**

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I was 4 years old when Saigon fell, so I do not remember any of it. I count myself lucky, since many Vietnamese who survived the end of that war were greatly traumatized by it. The collapse of the American-backed Southern regime began in my Central Highlands hometown, Ban Me Thuot, in March 1975. In less than two months, all of South Vietnam capitulated to the North Vietnamese. Soldiers fled in chaotic retreat among civilians. My mother, brother and I were among them. We left behind my adopted sister. After walking nearly 200 kilometers to escape the advancing North Vietnamese army, the three of us made it to the seaside city of Nha Trang, where we managed to find a boat to take us to Saigon where my father was.

We were lucky; many others weren't. My brother remembers dead Southern paratroopers hanging from trees. In Nha Trang, some people fell to their deaths in the sea, trying to clamber onto boats. In Da Nang, desperate soldiers crammed into the luggage compartments of a plane, while the ones left behind threw grenades and fired at the plane.

Images of bodies falling, of people running desperately, are now with us again, from Afghanistan's capital, Kabul. Comparisons to Vietnam began early in America's misadventure in Afghanistan: It was classic mission creep, a quagmire, another forever war. The pessimism was warranted. Two decades, billions of dollars and tens of thousands of deaths later, Taliban forces are now in Kabul, having secured control of the country with dizzying speed. As much as some American leaders resist it, the analogy presents itself again, with the fall of Saigon and resulting catastrophe foreshadowing the possible fate of tens of thousands of Afghans. It is not something the Biden administration is interested in hearing. "This is not Saigon," Secretary of State Antony Blinken said over the weekend.

True, the Taliban are not the People's Army of Vietnam, and the American evacuation of Saigon, chaotic as it was, was better planned than the American endgame for Kabul. But the Saigon analogy is important because the urgency and the human disaster are similar as is the role that the United States and other nations must play to shape those fates of Afghans. It was therefore disappointing to hear President Biden on Monday defend his Afghanistan policy by focusing on two alternatives — stay and fight or withdraw — while laying the blame primarily at the feet of the Afghan government and army. Blaming Afghans obscures a history of American miscalculation starting with President George W. Bush, and allows Mr. Biden to treat the evacuation of Afghan allies as an afterthought rather than a priority.

For these civilians, the war hasn't ended, and won't end for many years. Their future — and Mr. Biden's role in determining whether it's one of resettlement and new beginnings or one of fear and misery — is what will determine whether America can still claim it will always stand by its allies.

As a scholar of memory and a novelist who has written about the Vietnam War, I have often thought of 1975 and its consequences. I grew up in a Vietnamese refugee community so deeply shaped by the fall of Saigon that the community calls that month Black April, which is commemorated every year. So when I read this account by an anonymous Afghan journalist in recently captured Taliban territory, it resonated completely with all the stories I have heard from Vietnamese refugees: "My whole life has been obliterated in just a few days. I am so scared and I don't know what will happen to me. Will I ever go home? Will I see my parents again? Where will I go? The highway is blocked in both directions. How will I survive?"

Her questions are especially haunting as images of Afghans trying to escape for their lives, crowding Kabul's airport, fill the airwaves. Her questions were probably similar to ones my parents and many other Vietnamese refugees asked of themselves.

Again, we were the lucky ones: My family tried to flee by air but could not make it to Saigon's airport. We tried the U.S. Embassy and could not get past the enormous crowd. Finally, we found a barge at the dock, left Saigon and eventually made it to the United States, where we restarted our lives. We were civilians, but this was a war story.

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People struggled to cross the boundary wall of Hamid Karzai International Airport to flee the country after the Taliban took control of Kabul, Afghanistan. EPA, via Shutterstock

Americans like to imagine war stories featuring their heroic soldiers, sailors and pilots. The reality is that refugee stories are also war stories. Yet despite a growing sense of antiwar sentiment in the country, the United States has found it hard to give up its habits of war, partly because of the military-industrial complex built for war, and partly because even antiwar stories featuring the military still center on the seductive glamour of firepower, hardware, heroism and masculinity. Anthony Swofford, a veteran of Operation Desert Storm, recalls in his memoir, “Jarhead,” how he and his fellow Marines experienced an almost sexual ecstasy in watching the battle scenes from the movie “Apocalypse Now,” even the ones depicting the killing of American soldiers.

There is neither power nor glory in the stories of civilians killed or maimed or forced to flee or orphaned by war. It is in civilian experiences, similar to what many Afghans are now going through, that we truly find war stories. We keep hearing that Americans are suffering from war fatigue — but how many stories do we read or hear or see about American soldiers at war compared to stories of refugees created by wars led by the United States? Civilian war stories disturb our mind-set of conducting perpetual warfare as an unquestioned American privilege.

Americans also like to think that wars end when they are declared to end. But the aftereffects of war continue for years. In Vietnam, the victorious Vietnamese imprisoned untold numbers of South Vietnamese soldiers, politicians, priests, sex workers and other people in re-education camps, where many died of illness, starvation and overwork. Others were executed. Prison sentences ran from months to more than a decade.

Many of those prisoners probably felt like the Afghan journalist describing her bewilderment at being turned into a refugee and at the mercy of the Taliban: “I remember screaming and crying, women and children around me were running in every direction. It felt like we were all stuck in a boat and there was a big storm around us.” She is speaking metaphorically, but in the decades after the fall of Saigon, nearly a million Vietnamese fled by sea. Tens of thousands perished during the desperate attempts. The truly lucky ones made it to refugee camps and then to host countries. The less lucky ones lingered in those refugee camps for years and even decades. They are part of the human toll that continued to grow for years after the official end of the war. This is what the Afghan people face, with the certainty that as the Taliban seize Kabul, there will be potentially terrible recriminations for those who allied with the Americans.

One hoped that as we saw the increasingly desperate pleas of Afghans over the weekend that the comparison to the fall of Saigon would provoke greater urgency on the part of the Biden administration to do its duty and help its Afghan allies escape the country.

Yet, the danger of the Saigon analogy is that it could also simply allow Americans to view the tragedy in Afghanistan as many viewed the end of the Southern Vietnamese regime — as a spectacle, a singular moment in history.

In reality, the fall of Saigon ushered in many more years of fear and desperation for the defeated. With Afghanistan, Mr. Biden committed to evacuating an unspecified number of vulnerable Afghans to safety. And perhaps in response to anti-immigrant sentiment in the country, the United States is also trying to find homes for many Afghan refugees in other countries. This is not enough. “The people of Afghanistan do not deserve this,” the novelist Khaled Hosseini said on Twitter. “The United States has a moral obligation. Admit as many Afghan refugees as possible.”

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History is happening again, and again as tragedy and farce. The wars in Vietnam and Afghanistan happened as a result of American hubris, and in both cases Americans mostly focused on the political costs of war for them. But in each case, the Vietnamese (and Laotians, Cambodians and Hmong), and now the Afghans, have paid the much greater toll in human suffering. In April 1975, the United States recognized its moral responsibility and evacuated about 130,000 Vietnamese people, and then accepted hundreds of thousands more from Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia in subsequent decades. This is what must happen now, and anything short of such a vision of responsibility and hospitality will compound the American failure in Afghanistan.

Joe Biden, a senator in 1975, surely remembers that the majority of Americans did not want to accept Southeast Asian refugees. Nevertheless, Congress did the right thing, and the subsequent flourishing of Southeast Asian American communities throughout the United States has shown the wisdom of that moral decision. While the politics of these two moments in America's flawed wars differ, the morality does not. Tens of thousands of Afghans believed in the American promise of ushering in freedom, democracy and an open, tolerant society. And now, they're stuck. For Afghans, the war hasn't ended simply because we, the United States, declared it to be over.



An American official punching a man in an effort to knock him from the doorway of an airplane overloaded with refugees hoping to flee Nha Trang, Vietnam, on April 1, 1975. Bettmann, via Reuters

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A U.S. service member pointing his gun toward an Afghan man as thousands of people poured into the airport in Kabul in an effort to flee Afghanistan as it fell to the Taliban. Wakil Kohsar/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

The nightmare doesn't end for Afghans after the last American leaves. Our obligation to help Afghans in mortal danger extends beyond the present moment and well into the years ahead. The United States now must take the lead in evacuating and welcoming tens of thousands of its Afghan allies. Otherwise the words of another young Afghan woman contemplating the future of her country will be painfully true: "We don't count because we were born in Afghanistan ... No one cares about us. We'll die slowly in history."

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