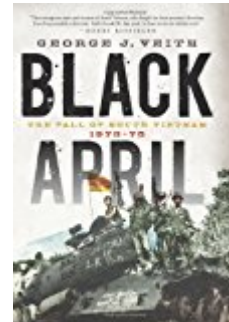


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



George J. Veith. *Black April: The Fall of South Vietnam, 1973-75*. New York: Encounter Books, 2011. 620 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-59403-572-2.



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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey

A triumph for Communist North Vietnam and a tragedy for democratic South Vietnam, intense political and military maneuvering for all involved parties defined the two years between the Paris Peace Accords in 1973 and the fall of Saigon in 1975. Deepening our understanding of this period is George J. Veith's must-read book *Black April*. To explain the collapse of the Republic of Vietnam, Veith provides an assessment of deft North Vietnamese statesmanship, American abandonment, and failed South Vietnamese political and military strategy. What emerges is a holistic account of the diplomatic, and eventual military, campaigns waged between Hanoi and Saigon, all the while Washington, DC, distanced itself from the decades-long conflict.

Comprising an introduction and eighteen chapters, *Black April*, according to Veith, fills a void in the historiography of the collapse of South Vietnam. The author notes that while books published shortly after the capitulation of Saigon in 1975 sought to explain the end of the war, none did so with North Vietnamese sources or classified US documents. While that contention is correct to a degree, such a blanket statement downplays the contribution of American scholarship in illustrating the United States' betrayal of its South Vietnamese allies. For example, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South*

*Vietnam Lost Its War* (2008) by James H. Willbanks makes good use of English-language sources to cover the American perspective. Consequently, what Veith's work does do is complement the American view with the much-neglected Vietnamese angles. In other words, the author covers the North and South Vietnamese as well as the American perspectives while using North and South Vietnamese primary sources. Incidentally, Veith's use of North Vietnamese sources makes this book a valuable contribution to studies of the Vietnam War. For a war that involved two different peoples with dissimilar languages, the history of the war is overwhelmingly void of a balanced perspective. In a field dominated by an American slant, with works typically grounded in American sources, the emerging use of Vietnamese documentation is a much-needed development.

Veith takes readers on a journey through the international political and military battles waged by both North and South Vietnam. The author also addresses the shrinking role played by the United States. In doing so, he offers a balanced work that seamlessly transitions between discussions of North Vietnamese political and military posturing to growing American disinterest and South Vietnam's attempts at self-preservation. Consequently, those interested in diplomatic and/or military

history will thoroughly enjoy Veith's prose.

Diplomatic historians will appreciate the author's discussion of North Vietnam's brilliant publicity campaign to portray South Vietnam as the real culprit in the undermining of the 1973 Paris Peace Accords. Despite North Vietnam's military forays into South Vietnamese territory and massive buildup of conventional ground forces, most of the world accepted Hanoi's contention that it wanted only peace but Saigon made such a reality increasingly distant. Ultimately, the world accepted Hanoi's word as gold and saw Saigon through North Vietnam's lenses. As nations came to see the Republic of Vietnam as a country of warmongers, Saigon's ace in the hole—the assurance of the reintroduction of American air support by Richard Nixon's administration should the armies of North Vietnam reignite the war—disappeared as the Watergate scandal terminated Nixon's tenure in the Oval Office. Consequently, South Vietnam lost the all-important military and financial backing of the United States. With the curtailing of replacement parts and munitions as well as the dwindling of funds authorized by Congress during the Gerald Ford administration, Saigon found itself alone in the fight against a retooled and determined North Vietnamese foe.

Readers more interested in military matters than diplomatic wrangling will appreciate Veith's discussions of the retooled Peoples Army of North Vietnam (PAVN) and the heroics of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam's (ARVN) soldiers. After the Paris Peace Accords, the author argues, Hanoi chose a path of renewed war and thus commenced a massive buildup of mechanized forces for a large-scale invasion of the South. Through diplomatic successes and faith in America's continued abandonment of Saigon, North Vietnamese armies took to the field against a fragile foe. Yet the author notes that the ARVN fought bravely and put up stiff resistance against a numerically superior enemy. In the skirmishes preceding the all-out assault on the South, PAVN troops encountered "three Army divisions [that] had been long regarded as among ARVN's worst units" (p. 72). However, Brigadier General Tran Quang Khoi—an officer highly regarded by the Americans—commanded these ARVN troops. Through Khoi's leadership and intelligent use of combined forces, "tankers and Rangers, using boats to

float their armor across the Vam Co Dong River, struck west and blasted into Cambodia. Soon they turned south, where they encountered enemy logistic areas. With little room to run, the Communists were quickly routed, and many supply depots were discovered" (p. 73).

In his detailed discussion of the last weeks of South Vietnam's existence, Veith addresses the engagements between PAVN and ARVN forces. The author again validates the argument that ARVN enjoyed some topnotch leadership. During the struggle for the central highlands, for example, Veith emphasizes the determination of men like Major General Pham Van Phu in the face of adversity. Although Phu attempted to thwart and counter PAVN advances, the numerically inferior cadres at his disposal could not defend every quarter of the countryside. Having learned from the preinvasion skirmishes, PAVN overwhelmed the ARVN defenders and struck the decisive blow at Ban Me Thout. The loss of the strategically vital city of Ban Me Thout sparked a series of decisions that ultimately spelled the end of the Republic of Vietnam. Acting on the pretext that American assistance would never materialize, South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu made the first independent decision on behalf of his country in over ten years, Veith states. Instead of having his forces remain in position and fight, Thieu ordered the rapid withdrawal of ARVN units from the northern highlands. This poorly planned and executed maneuver led directly to South Vietnam's defeat.

Despite Veith's quip that the Mekong Delta was a backwater during the war—an error easily proven by the actions of the US Mobile Riverine Force during America's direct involvement—the only major issues I have with *Black April* is Veith's sporadic citation style. When including statements from various Vietnamese or American officials, the author uses quotations but neglects to provide footnotes. Yet some quotations are followed by a citation. While the publisher may have decided that this on-and-off again system of citation helps with readability, it does so at the risk of having Vietnam War historians question the depth of Veith's evidence pool. For a work championing the use of never before seen Vietnamese sources, one would expect the book to show off the author's research abilities through a prodigious use of footnotes.

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