



In the Room — The Final Days of Vietnam

April 27, 2015 By [David Hume Kennerly](#)

Kennerly Blog

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In early 1971 United Press International assigned me to their Saigon bureau to replace photographer Kent Potter who was rotating out. On Feb. 10, 1971, Potter and three other photographers perished when their chopper was shot down over Laos during the Lam Son 719 operation. Larry Burrows of Life, Henri Huet of the AP, and Keisaburo Shimamoto of Newsweek were among those who died. I don't know any of those great photographers, but Burrows was a personal hero, and his photos inspired my desire to cover the war. A few weeks later, and shortly after I turned 24, I was on a plane bound for Saigon.

I spent over two years photographing combat in Indochina, and In 1972, I was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for my previous year's work in Vietnam, Cambodia, and India where I photographed refugees escaping across the border from East Pakistan.

Vietnam became part of my DNA, and everything that has happened to me since has been informed by that experience. I was 24, and my first year as a combat photographer was so intense, and there were so many close calls, I really never figured to see 25. When I celebrated that birthday in Saigon, I felt that every one after was a bonus. So far that windfall has added up to an extra 43 years! I have tried to use them well.

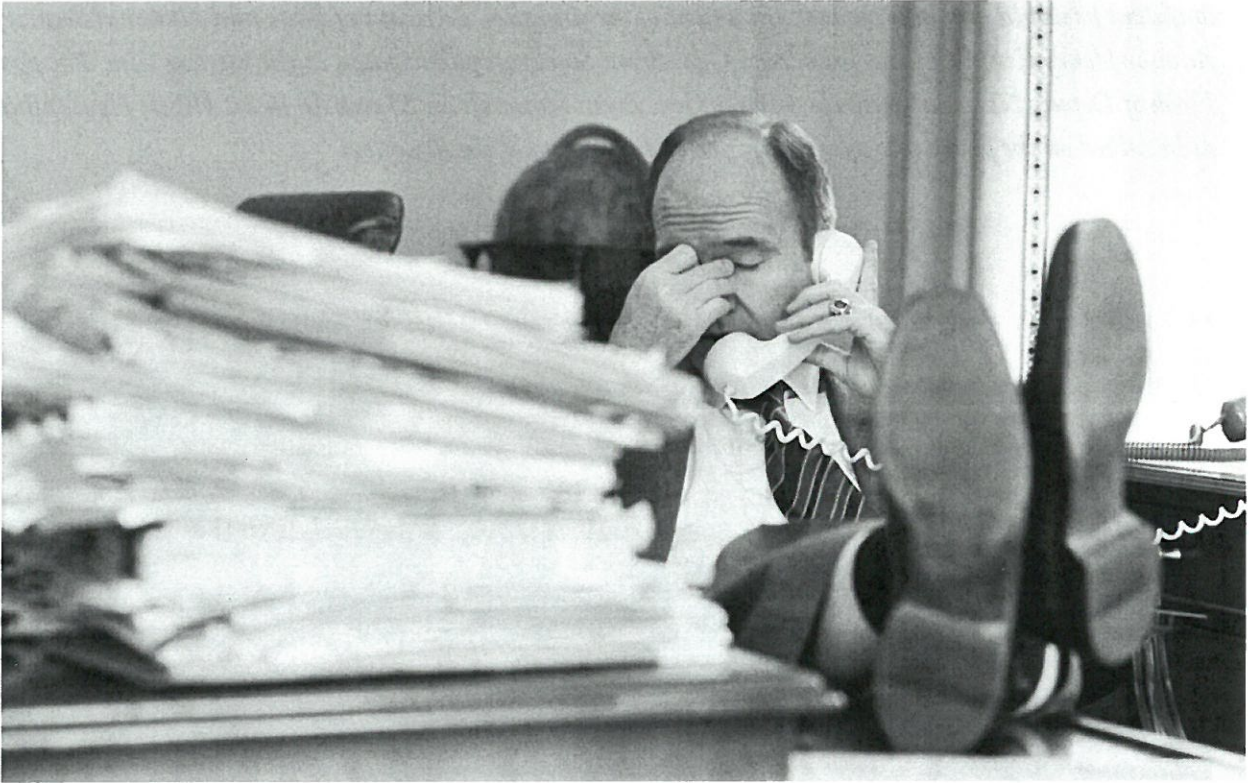
I returned to the states in mid-1973 to go to work for TIME Magazine. One of my early assignments was the Watergate melee, and I was also assigned to photograph House Minority Leader Gerald R. Ford after Vice President Agnew resigned in the fall of that year. A portrait that I took of Ford ran on the cover of TIME when President Nixon announced that he would replace Agnew as the new vice president. TIME then assigned me to cover Ford full-time. When President Nixon resigned, and Ford replaced him, he asked me to be his chief photographer. With that job came total access, not just to the President and his family, but to everything that was going on behind the scenes. It was quite an honor, wildly exciting, and one of the most professionally and personally rewarding times of my life.

On March 3, 1975, six months into the Ford Presidency, South Vietnam began to unravel when the North Vietnamese Army attacked the Central Highlands city of Ban Me Thuot. After a few days of heavy fighting that saw thousands of casualties, particularly among the civilian population, that key city fell to the North Vietnamese. This was the beginning of the end for South Vietnam.

My previous life as a combat shooter was running head-on into my latest career as a presidential photographer. I documented the events of the next few weeks as any professional news photographer would, but with a major exception. I was deep inside the White House as the president's photographer, and was given an unparalleled opportunity to see a war implode from within the halls of power. This special access also led to a secret trip back to Vietnam on a special mission for the President of the United States, and then back to the White House for the finale of the Vietnam drama.

April 28 and 29th of 1975 were personal days of hell as the last act of the Vietnam tragedy unfolded. I didn't sleep, and was consumed with making sure that I photographed every minute that I could of these tense final days. I was uniquely qualified to record this series of events, but I was also emotionally drained by the circumstances. During the war itself I played through my pain to document the story, and I did the same during those final days. I always knew that just a handful of people with tremendous power made the decisions that shaped our lives. They were the ones who started and ended wars. As someone who had always been an outsider it was startling to see that process in action. Just a few short years earlier, I was consumed with a drive to document events from the other end – and to be out on the front lines where the action was. Or so I thought. Not much later, I found myself in the center of action of another kind – watching and recording the agony of decisions about life, death and the future of nations being made one at a time by a president until there were no more decisions to make. And then, the Vietnam War was over.

This is my account and photos of the final days of Vietnam. Direct quotes from the participants are from declassified minutes of National Security Council meetings, Memorandums of Conversations, Cabinet meetings, White House press conferences, President Ford's book, "A Time to Heal," Donald Rumsfeld's book "Known and Unknown," and my autobiography, "Shooter."



WASHINGTON — MAR 16: Deputy National Security Advisor Gen. Brent Scowcroft in his White House office reacts to the news that the South Vietnamese town of Ban Me Thuot has fallen to the North Vietnamese, March 16, 1975, Washington D.C. Ban Me Thuot was a decisive battle of the Vietnam War and led to the complete destruction of South Vietnam's II Corps Tactical Zone and exposed the incredible weaknesses in the South Vietnamese Army. This was the beginning of the end of South Vietnam. The defeat at Ban Me Thuot and the disastrous evacuation from the Central Highlands came about as a result of two major mistakes. In the days leading up to the assault, the S. Vietnamese high command ignored intelligence which showed the presence of several North Vietnamese combat divisions around the district, and then President Nguyen Van Thieu's strategy to withdraw from the Central Highlands was poorly planned and implemented, resulting in a civilian catastrophe.

The North Vietnamese were now in Hue, and moving on Da Nang. It looked as if all of the northern provinces of S. Vietnam would fall to the advancing Communist forces. On March 25th President Ford met in the oval office with U.S. Army Chief of Staff General Frederick Weyand and U.S. Ambassador to S. Vietnam Graham Martin. The president discussed dispatching the general on a fact-finding mission to Saigon to see if anything could be done to stem the advancing North Vietnamese tide. Gen. Weyand had heroically served several tours in Vietnam and knew the intricacies of the conflict. The president felt confident he would give him the best assessment of the situation. Secretary of State and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, and his deputy Gen. Brent Scowcroft participated in the meeting also. The photo I took of Deputy National Security Advisor Gen. Brent Scowcroft on March 16 in his White House office as he talked on the phone to a colleague reflected the gravity of the situation.



WASHINGTON — MAR 25: (9:22-10:25 a.m.) President Gerald R. Ford talks to U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam Graham Martin, Army Chief of Staff Gen. Frederick Weyand, and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in the Oval Office the White House. March 25, 1975. President Ford dispatched Gen. Weyand on a mission to Vietnam to see if anything could be done to help the South Vietnamese government stem the tide of the advancing North Vietnamese Communists. Ambassador Martin, who was in the states for a medical problem, would return to Saigon with Weyand.

The president told Gen. Weyand, "Fred, you are going with the ambassador. This is one of the most significant missions you ever had. You are not going over there to lose, but to be tough and see what we can do." The president continued, "We want your recommendation for the things which can be tough and shocking to the North. I regret I don't have the authority to do some of the things President Nixon could do." (These quotes are taken from recently declassified notes of that meeting). Secretary Kissinger asked, "What is the real situation and why? What can be done?" Weyand replied, "We will bring back a general appraisal and give them a shot in the arm."



WASHINGTON — MAR 25: (9:22-10:25 a.m.) President Gerald R. Ford walks to the door with (L-R) Deputy National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft, U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam Graham Martin, Army Chief of Staff Gen. Frederick Weyand, and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in the Oval Office the White House. March 25, 1975. President Ford dispatched Gen. Weyand on a mission to Vietnam to see if anything could be done to halt the advancing North Vietnamese Communists. Amb. Martin would fly with him.

After they left I took this photo of the president alone in the office, clearly frustrated. We talked about the trip, and I told him that, because of my extensive experience in Vietnam, I would like to go with Weyand. The president agreed, and said that he would depend on me to deliver to him my usual impartial and candid point of view when I got back.



WASHINGTON — MAR 25: (10:30 a.m.) President Gerald R. Ford after meeting with Deputy National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft, U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam Graham Martin, Army Chief of Staff Gen. Frederick Weyand, Ford, and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in the Oval Office the White House. March 25, 1975. President Ford dispatched Gen. Weyand and Amb. Martin on a mission to Vietnam to see if anything could be done to stop the advancing North Vietnamese Communists.

My office was on the ground floor of the White House, and I dropped in to tell my staff that I was leaving early on a trip the next day. I hung a sign on my door that said, "Gone to Vietnam. Back in two weeks." My staff thought I was joking until I didn't turn up the next day, or for almost two weeks. Later that evening I went to say goodbye to the Fords and asked the president for a loan. These were the pre ATM days. "The banks are closed, and I'll be gone before they open," I said. President Ford pulled all the bills that he had in his wallet. "Here's forty seven dollars," he said. "Don't spend it all at once!", Then he turned serious, put his arm around my shoulder, and said, "be careful."



SAIGON — MAR 27: U.S. Army Chief of Staff Gen. Frederick Weyand talks to U.S. Ambassador Graham Martin shortly before landing in Saigon aboard a U.S. Air Force C-5A. Weyand was on a special mission for President Gerald R. Ford to give recommendations on how to save S. Vietnam from the advancing North Vietnamese Army. Saigon, Vietnam, March 27, 1975.

General Weyand's plane, an Air Force C-141, made two refueling stops in Anchorage and Tokyo before reaching Saigon 24 hours later. I got to know Ken Quinn on board the plane, a young National Security Council staffer who specialized in Southeast Asia. I also spent time on the trip, and there was plenty of it, talking to George Carver and Ted Shackley, two senior CIA officials. They were men who worked in the deep shadows, and were major players in the Vietnam saga. Once in Vietnam, Ken Quinn and I were assigned to be roommates at Ambassador Martin's residence in Saigon. At that time, there was no official evacuation of Vietnamese underway. However, Ken and his buddies knew that the end was in sight. I discovered that Ken and some fellow NSC staffers were running an effective, vast and very unofficial underground network that was spiriting thousands of Vietnamese allies out of the country and to safety. At the same time, the American news organizations were frantic about the safety of their Vietnamese employees and dependents. I arranged an off the record meeting with the ambassador and Art Lord who

represented the media that resulted in an unofficial process to start getting some of those individuals out of the country. The ambassador thought some of these news organizations were hypocritical because while they were asking for help to get their own people to safety, they were reporting that there would be no reprisals against the southern Vietnamese if the northerners took over. The downside wasn't an exaggeration, and many southerners who were still trapped after the fall of Saigon were subject to severe reprisals.

I was not part of Gen. Weyand's official briefings, but at the same time I had a very personal directive from the president to give him my own first hand view of the situation.. I decided to head up north. Da Nang was out of the question as it was effectively in North Vietnamese control, so I made my way to Nha Trang, a small city 300 miles south of Da Nang that was already overrun with refugees. When I arrived, I found Montcrieff Spear, the U.S. Consul General in Nha Trang, preparing to leave. His wife was actually packing when I arrived. However, before he could go, he needed to find his colleague and fellow consul general Al Francis who had escaped from Da Nang.

Spear and I took an Air America chopper up to Cam Ranh Bay to search for Al Francis who had managed to flee from Da Nang on a ship that had been hijacked by fleeing South Vietnamese troops. We saw a large vessel crammed with thousands of troops, and at least one of them, in frustration at the situation I guess, fired at our American-flagged chopper. They missed, but caused the pilot to make one helluva U-turn. That story also made AP, and was seen by my parents who didn't know I was back in Vietnam (it was, after all, a secret mission). They called the White House, and were surprised that they were put right through to the president himself (the operators there knew me well!). He had just been briefed on the incident, and told them I was just fine, but still overly adventurous.

Al Francis had made it onto a tugboat from the big ship, and that's where we spotted him. He waved as we flew over, and we landed in Cam Ranh Bay to pick him up before he and his Spear headed back to Saigon. Nha Trang was abandoned that day, and I made a detour over to Phnom Penh.

I was in Vietnam on a presidential pass, so I could have waved my White House orders at the CIA transport guys for a ride to Phnom Penh, and they would have had to do what I wanted. I thought the polite approach was better, however. I found a few pilots in the Air America hanger, and I asked, "Would any of you guys be willing to give me a lift over to Phnom Penh? I know it's kind of dangerous..." They all jumped up, and said in unison, "I'll take you!" Nothing like a little machismo moment among the CIA's secret pilot's society! My old friend and colleague, Vietnamese-Lao-Thai-Khmer speaking colleague Matt Franjola was in Phnom Penh working for the Associated Press at the time, so I sent him a message and told him that I was getting a lift over there by a ballsy and intrepid pilot, and asked whether he could pick me up. (I had the good sense not to mention that chauffeur was a CIA-employed aviator, flying an Agency-owned aircraft). Pochentong Airport was essentially closed and under constant fire. It was so bad there that the pilot told me as we approached in his Short Take-off and Landing (STOL) airplane that he was going to taxi by the terminal, and that he would slow down, but not stop. In other words, I would have

to jump out as he cruised by the sandbagged terminal. And that's what I did. There was nobody to be seen—except Matt, who was sitting there in his jeep, nonchalant as always, as rockets exploded nearby. We hightailed it out of there, and he took me first for drinks at the old Le Phnom Hotel, our favorite haunt, where I had the special of the day, Martinis and mortars. I also met up with photographer Al Rockoff and some other compatriots from my time working there. Matt caught me up on what was happening, then took me to an overcrowded where I witnessed hundreds of suffering people wounded in the fighting. I photographed a woman being comforted by her husband. She had been hit by shrapnel, and died while I was there. I made a portrait of a Cambodian refugee girl who was among thousands of people crammed into an unfinished hotel on the banks of the Mekong River. I saw that she wore a dog tag, and its reflection is what caught my eye. Her photo has remained a symbol for me of all the suffering that kids the world over experience because of senseless wars. I have been haunted by her ever face ever since, and even traveled back to Phnom Penh several years ago to try and find her, but with no luck.

Later that afternoon Matt dropped me at the U.S. Embassy where I received a Top Secret briefing on the grave situation in Cambodia by Ambassador John Gunther Dean and his staff. I vividly recall being in the tactical operations center looking at a map showing large red arrows representing the advancing Khmer Rouge coming from all directions toward the capital of Phnom Penh. We were surrounded. The embassy staff was already preparing a helicopter exodus for U.S. citizens and some allies if the situation deteriorated further. Dean painted a horrible and compelling picture about what might happen to Americans and their Cambodian counterparts who chose to remain. When Matt collected me after the briefing I told him way off the record that there was going to be an evacuation soon, and urged him not to play hero and stay, but get his ass out. He had never heard me sound so serious, and that got his attention. A few days later the U.S. commenced Operation Eagle Pull, and evacuated all the Americans and high risk Cambodians who wanted to leave Phnom Penh. Matt had considered staying, but with my voice ringing in his ears, decided to take the last helicopter out, and went from the frying pan into the fire, ending up in Saigon where he stayed after it fell to the Communists. After reporting that story, he safely got out of there also.

I returned to Saigon in time to attend a meeting at which General Weyand and his crew met with the beleaguered South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu in his office at Saigon's Presidential Palace. It wasn't a pleasant meeting and the Americans didn't have much to offer him. As I took a photo of Thieu at his desk, a traditional Vietnamese painting behind him, I wondered how much longer he would be in that chair. Only eighteen days more as it turned out

Later that night I reconnected with Ken Quinn. He and his collaborators were real heroes, saving countless lives of high risk Vietnamese who had worked with the Americans and might well have been executed had Quinn and his team been unable to facilitate their evacuation. Ken and his contacts around the country were incredibly pessimistic about the outcome for Vietnam. His comments and observations,

combined with my first hand look at a country coming unspooled, was going to lead to a tough report for the president.