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Without Honor: Defeat in Vietnam and Cambodia, by Arnold R. Isaacs

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Arnold R. Isaacs, *Without Honor: Defeat in Vietnam and Cambodia*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1983. 559 pp. \$19.95.

Review by Paul Siff

Over a decade since the United States withdrew from combat in Vietnam, and nearly that long since the North Vietnamese triumphed in the South, the lessons of American involvement are still being pondered and debated. The Reagan Administration's Central American policy, which defines that area as crucial to United States interests and does not preclude armed intervention, increases the urgency to explain and understand the American defeat in Southeast Asia. In 1980 candidate Ronald Reagan pronounced the U.S. effort "in truth, a noble cause," and later, as president, he claimed that American troops there "were denied permission to win." The implication is clear: in Reagan's mind a military victory was both desirable and possible. Might it not be so in Nicaragua or El Salvador?

Arnold Isaacs' book *Without Honor* should lay to rest wishful fantasies about an American triumph in Vietnam. Isaacs, the Baltimore *Sun's* Indochina war correspondent from 1972 to 1975, has written a fascinating chronicle of American failure, not only in Vietnam but in Laos and Cambodia as well. It is rich in personal experience, compelling in detail, well documented, and judicious in its conclusions. While Isaacs makes clear the follies and dismal misperceptions of U.S. policy-makers, he has little praise for the other principals. "Without honor" can well serve as a collective judgment on all sides in the conflict.

Isaacs begins his account with the 1972 Paris peace talks between North Vietnam and the United States, and the manner in which South Vietnamese President Thieu, kept in the dark and clearly alarmed by the prospect of a cease-fire and American withdrawal, temporarily sabotaged the peace which, in Henry Kissinger's words, was "at hand." This turn of events led Kissinger to renege on his already-concluded agreements with the North Vietnamese, and Isaacs judges him harshly, characterizing Kissinger as a man who "deceived both his enemy and his ally and . . . led the United States

into an act of bad faith that can have few parallels in its diplomatic history." There soon followed both a huge military buildup and transfer of supplies in South Vietnam, destined to evade the provisions of the peace agreements, and the infamous Christmas bombing of Hanoi, the North Vietnamese capital. Finally, a cease-fire agreement was reached. Many Americans, including military leaders, came to believe that the intensive bombing had forced Hanoi into making peace; they therefore concluded that the war could have been won earlier by the same tactics. Isaacs disagrees, pointing out that the peace terms signed in January 1973, envisioning a political settlement of the conflict, were substantially those of the previous October. No significant concessions had been wrested from the communists. Neither side, however, was genuinely committed to observance of the peace agreements. Each, distrusting the other, attempted to strengthen its position just prior to the cease-fire, and the fighting continued thereafter. It was, observed one American officer, "the end of the second Indochina war and the beginning of the third." Meanwhile, the villagers of South Vietnam continued their fatalistic suffering at the hands of government and communists alike. The Viet Cong practiced assassination; the government's soldiers looted, raped, and casually shot civilians in the aftermath of battle. The government of President Thieu, relying on military strength for its survival, persisted in disdaining its citizens; corruption, the regime's "fatal flaw," undermined both civilian and military life.

But while the fighting continued into 1973, one element changed: on March 29 the last Americans departed, bringing to an end the United States's protracted and inglorious direct involvement. Thereafter, American interest in, and commitment to, South Vietnam faded fast, despite President Nixon's secret assurance of continued U.S. support, assurances which Congress and a succeeding administration would find it convenient to ignore. Unfortunately, perhaps the most enduring American legacy in South Vietnam was the fashioning of an army both wasteful of and pathetically dependent upon an unlimited flow of American supplies. No adjustment was made for the possible diminution or cessation of such a flow. Worse, U.S. officials encouraged a belief on Saigon's part that American air power would be available against major enemy attacks, and this belief persisted even after the enactment of a Congressional bombing

ban. All of this, Isaacs suggests, helped commit the South Vietnamese government to a grandiose strategy of defending every square inch of the country, a task clearly impossible without U.S. air support.

And what, in the midst of all this, became of the political settlement called for by the Paris accords? President Thieu, falsely believing in continued American support, spurned it; the communists, alleging American-South Vietnamese sabotage of the agreements, announced a policy of "revolutionary violence" — that is, war — in the South.

After setting the stage for South Vietnam's eventual descent into the nightmare of defeat, Isaacs detours to consider American policy in Laos and Cambodia, two American client nations deeply involved in the Indochina war but hardly mentioned in the Paris accords. Laos, a backward, inherently pacific country, borders North Vietnam on the east; the communists had long used it as a supply and staging area for their war to the south. Since the early 1960s the U.S. had bombed communist targets in Laos, and the bombing increased sharply under Nixon. In the period up to 1969, 454,998 tons of explosives had been dropped; between 1969 and 1973 the tonnage was 1,637,902, an amount equal to the total dropped by the U.S. during the entirety of World War II. The resultant devastation was massive. Equally dreadful was the virtual destruction of the Hmong, tribal hill dwellers whose young men, and later mere boys, were secretly recruited by the U.S. to fight against Laotian communists. The Hmong, stigmatized by this relationship, were finally forced to flee their hills and become miserable, disease-ridden refugees. In the end Laos's fate would be tied to South Vietnam's: in 1975, despite the once-heavy American involvement, the communists in Laos triumphed.

Cambodia's fate, according to Isaacs, was worse. Until the 1970s, under its ruler Prince Norodom Sihanouk, it managed to remain neutral, its population contented if not prosperous. However the price of neutrality was the accomodation of Vietnamese communist sanctuaries. These became the target of Richard Nixon's secret bombing policy beginning in March 1969, and his April 1970 land "incursion" which, in Isaacs' opinion, undermined Cambodia's fragile neutrality. Although he holds Sihanouk responsible for his own decline and fall in 1970, Isaacs faults the U.S. for encouraging

the succeeding pro-American government of Lon Nol to widen its military efforts against the Vietnamese communists. The results were disastrous; the Cambodian army, as corrupt and inefficient as the South Vietnamese, proved ineffective. The growing war thoroughly disrupted Cambodian civil life and choked the capital, Phnom Penh, with refugees. The Khmer Rouge communist insurgency, once small, grew, and a combination of revolutionary fanaticism and traditional hatred of the Vietnamese placed it beyond Hanoi's control after the Paris accords were signed. The U.S. responded with bombing of unbelievable intensity. In six months of 1973 more American bombs fell on Cambodia than had fallen on Japan during all of the Pacific war. The bombing campaign appeared devoid of rational objective; foreign diplomats in Phnom Penh and not a few Americans thought the U.S. had gone mad. "More and more," comments Isaacs, "the bombing seemed to take on a quality of rage," And since it was now directed at heavily populated areas, Cambodian society was further rent. Despite the bombing, however, the military situation continued to deteriorate; the communists by 1975 held four-fifths of Cambodia. Hundreds of millions of dollars in American military aid were squandered by ineptitude before Cambodia, merely a "sideshow" in the Indochina war, would slide on its own into the madness of Khmer Rouge despotism, "a victim of blind forces it had not created or controlled or even understood."

The fall of Cambodia, in Isaac's retelling, has an air of eerie unreality to it, and this is even more the case with his description of the fall of South Vietnam, which occupies the last two-fifths of his book. By the summer of 1974 the North Vietnamese, in clear violation of the cease-fire, began engaging in offensive operations; the South Vietnamese army, in the face of shrinking U.S. aid, could only counter defensively. By this time the South Vietnamese economy was a shambles, the civilian population thoroughly demoralized. Yet Kissinger, Defense Secretary James Schlesinger, and other Washington officials continued to exude untiring optimism. Undoubtedly they were in part influenced by Ambassador Graham Martin's misleadingly cheery reports, and so may have been the South Vietnamese leadership to whom the Ambassador gave repeated and unjustified assurances of continuing U.S. aid. On August 6 the Congress cut military aid to South Vietnam; three days later Richard

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Nixon, who had promised to stand behind President Thieu, resigned. Within a year, Thieu himself, and all he represented, would be swept away.

Thieu's end began with public protests against official corruption *in the midst of national distress*. The protests, which grew despite — or perhaps because of — government concessions, inspired the communists to abandon any remaining thought of negotiations in favor of all-out military victory. By year's end the Saigon army, losing men and material at what Isaacs calls "a fearful rate," began to crumble. The following March the communist offensive commenced in earnest; the Army of the Republic of South Vietnam began its apocalyptic retreat to and abandonment of Saigon. Morale, civilian and military, evaporated as city after city fell; it is Isaacs' important observation that, in this extremity, "the Saigon regime could find no reserve of will largely because it had no relation to its own people." Predictably, realism still eluded American officials; the U.S. *charge d'affaires* in Saigon insisted that the communists lacked the capability to attack the capital and urged American businessmen there to expand their enterprises and encourage further investment. In early April General Frederick Weyand, sent by President Ford on a fact-finding mission, advocated \$727 million in military aid to Saigon, as if weaponry could counter moral bankruptcy. There is a significant lesson here, Isaacs tells us: senior U.S. military officials could not admit that "South Vietnam's collapse had moral and not just material causes." To do so would acknowledge that there was no American remedy for Vietnam's defeat, that America's "can do" spirit was unavailing.

Isaacs' gripping account of Saigon's final days can scarcely be summarized; it must be read to be appreciated. Its lessons are those which pertain to the outer limits of human behavior under incredible stress, danger, and disorder, rather than to international politics. But the author concludes with a judgment that, while not new, is worth re-emphasizing: "what the United States really lacked in Vietnam was not persistence but understanding. . . . From start to finish American leaders remained catastrophically ignorant of Vietnamese history, culture, values, motives, and abilities." It is a lesson to remember the next time a voice from Washington, oozing sincerity and confidence, calls the nation to another foreign adventure.