

***Black April: The Fall of South Vietnam, 1973-75***

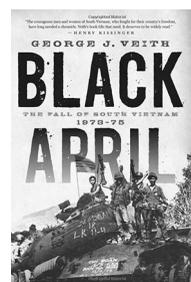
By George J. Veith

Reviewed by Dr. William J. Gregor, Professor of Social Sciences at the School of Advanced Military Studies, US Army Command and General Staff College

*Black April: The Fall of South Vietnam, 1973-75* is the first of two volumes in which the author, George J. Veith, intends to provide a comprehensive analysis of the last two years of the war in Vietnam. This first book covers the military aspects of South Vietnam's defeat and addresses five critical questions: (1) when did the North Vietnamese decide to renew the war; (2) how did they disguise their decision and construct a surprise assault on Ban Me Thuot; (3) why did President Nguyen Van Thieu withdraw his regular military forces from the Central Highlands; (4) what triggered South Vietnam's fall militarily in 55 days; and (5) was the South Vietnamese military inept? The second volume will discuss the political and diplomatic efforts to implement the Paris Peace Accords and the social and economic events that had a profound impact on the war. Given the length and detail of this military account it was probably necessary to divide the work into two volumes. Unfortunately, limiting this volume's scope to military decisions, actions, and events prevents the author from presenting a totally convincing explanation of South Vietnam's collapse. Readers might supplement their understanding of this excellent volume by reading Dr. Henry Kissinger's *Ending the War in Vietnam* while awaiting volume two.

Although many books explaining the fall of South Vietnam have been published, most of them date to the 1980s and none of their authors could take advantage of recently declassified documents, both American and North Vietnamese, that detail high-level decisionmaking. George Veith has exploited the newly available archive materials along with translations of North and South Vietnamese published general and unit histories, and interviews with the senior military participants. For example, his bibliography lists memoirs published in Vietnamese after 2000, and an account of the fall of the Saigon government through South Vietnamese documents published in 2010. Mr. Veith acknowledges in the introduction the problems that arise with the use of Communist official histories and the skepticism needed when trying to use journals published by Republic of Vietnam military associations. However, when the author deals with high-level military decisions and orders to subordinate commands, the text is usually drawn directly from archival documents and messages. Regrettably, the reader might not notice this because quotations taken from documents sometimes appear between quotation marks, other times in block quotes.

Despite the author's claim, *Black April* is more a detailed, narrative account of military actions, events, and decisions than a clinical analysis of those decisions or an explanation of the events. This fact does not diminish the value of the book because it allows readers to interpret the facts themselves and mitigates what some might consider this book's anticommunist bias. However, it does mean that some evidence a reader might expect in a military history is not present in the book. For example, despite the fact that 72 percent of the book deals with the 55 days of the



New York: Encounter Books, 2012

587 pages

\$29.95

Great Spring Offensive, there is no detailed assessment of the overall availability of supplies, repair parts, operational ready rates of aircraft, or air and sea lift capabilities. The impact on operations of those factors are discussed in the accounts of various battles and actions, but absent that aggregate data, the assessments about the impact of those factors on military capability are qualitative and relatively subjective. Nevertheless, the author's judgments are reasonable given his account.

Following Mr. Veith's historical account may initially be difficult for anyone not familiar with the Vietnam War or Vietnam's geography. The author succeeds in presenting the military situation and military decisions from the perspectives of both the North and South Vietnamese, and, where applicable, the American perspective. He does this by discussing operations in each corps or front area and by weaving back and forth in time and in ever-shorter time periods. Thus, for example, the text might discuss North Vietnamese operations in II Corps from 12 to 15 March, then visit politburo decisions in Hanoi during that period, and then turn to South Vietnamese tactical actions in II Corps in the same period. Paying close attention to the shifting time periods is an absolute must. Some readers may also find keeping track of Vietnamese place-names daunting. Fourteen maps aid the reader, but even though they are very well designed, the reader might still wish to use the Internet to supplement the maps. Fortunately, the author's clear style and skillful weaving of the full account will ultimately result in the reader being able to assemble a clear picture of the campaign and the military commanders. Veterans and students of the Vietnam War will find the detail rewarding.

Many of those who will read this book never experienced either the Vietnam War or the acrimonious antiwar political debate. The passage of time has undoubtedly faded the memories of the military veterans and antiwar activists. Removed from the heated arguments of the time and armed with currently available documentary evidence, many of the assessments made in the 1970s appear foolish or naïve. For example, congressional Democrats called for formation of a coalition government containing communists as a precondition for peace. However, in the event a coalition government formed, North Vietnam's politburo planned to use it to infiltrate and overthrow the government of South Vietnam. The American left argued that the Saigon government suppressed the will of the people and absent the dictatorial Thieu regime, the South Vietnamese would quickly reconcile with the North. However, nowhere were the advancing Communist forces greeted as liberators and in the few instances when the Communist forces called for local populations to rise up, they refused. Democrat members of Congress opposing assistance to South Vietnam appear to have been dupes of the North Vietnamese regime because they argued that cutting off aid to South Vietnam would bring President Thieu and the North Vietnamese to the bargaining table. They were not aware that in April 1973, Le Duan and General Vo Nguyen Giap had formed a secret committee to plan the conquest of South Vietnam within a two-year period. Every congressional denial of aid reinforced the North's determination to conquer South Vietnam by force and by October 1973, the return to military struggle was finalized and the small political-struggle faction silenced. After that

decision, the North Vietnamese government adjusted its public posture to reinforce the empty arguments in the US Congress.

*Black April* makes clear that the military forces of South Vietnam were neither inept nor cowardly and that during the Great Spring Offensive they often got the better of their North Vietnamese opponents tactically. Unfortunately, the effect of two years of active North Vietnamese preparations and of declining military aid to South Vietnam could not be reversed. The Paris Peace Treaty in January 1973 had created military planning constraints that a South Vietnamese government could not ignore if it hoped to obtain much needed American assistance. Adhering to those constraints led President Thieu to deploy his forces in positions where they could not be easily extracted or supported. Thus, when North Vietnamese tanks and artillery attacked and seized Ban Me Thuot in March 1975, the South Vietnamese government had neither the forces required to regain the city, nor the reserves nor transportation needed to cover a withdrawal. The South Vietnamese army might have fared better by stoutly defending its forward positions, but to what avail? The United States Congress had abandoned the US commitment to South Vietnam. Absent US assistance, the government of South Vietnam could not prevail. This detailed military account of the final days of South Vietnam provides a valuable correction to previous accounts. Given the numerous myths that have been perpetuated within the military about the Vietnam War, *Black April* is a must read for serving soldiers and Marines.