

H-Diplo REVIEW ESSAY 558

25 April 2024

Ralph White, *Getting out of Saigon: How a 27-Year-Old American Banker Saved 113 Vietnamese Civilians*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2023. ISBN: 97819821955175 (hardcover, \$28.99).

<https://hdiplo.org/to/E558>

Editor: Diane Labrosse | Commissioning Editor: Daniel R. Hart | Production Editor: Christopher Ball

Review by Nathaniel L. Moir, Harvard University

It may be rare for H-Diplo readers to have a personal connection to the books they read. For younger readers especially, history does not always have a clear demarcation line as to when it begins and, to be sure, such blurry boundaries may include subjectivity. For this reviewer, *Getting out of Saigon*, by Ralph White, who worked for Chase Manhattan Bank in Vietnam in the spring of 1975, hits close to home. While I am intellectually allergic to using the first person in a review, let alone for war-torn Vietnam, my military service in Afghanistan and two post-deployment years trying to help a former Afghan translator gain a Special Immigrant Visa (SIV)—long before America’s withdrawal in 2021—undeniably shaped my perspective on White’s memoir. Certainly, this is a book about Vietnam. In my reading, nonetheless, it is as much a critique of US efforts in Afghanistan and its approach to the obligations the United States owes to others in return for their efforts to assist the United States while it is militarily committed overseas.

White’s memoir focuses on his experiences but also tacitly indicts US policy-planning in Vietnam, particularly the disastrous withdrawal during which the United States abandoned thousands of Vietnamese who supported America during the war. Based on White’s previous experience working for the American Express Bank in Pleiku in 1971, which was his first job out of college, and his later work for Chase Manhattan’s branch in Bangkok in 1974 and 1975, Chase executives selected White to lead the evacuation of 53 Vietnamese employees to the United States. White organizes the book into fifteen chronological chapters that chart his planning of the evacuation, beginning on 6 April 1975 and ending with the successful evacuation of 113 Vietnamese on 26 April 1975. The additional 60 Vietnamese individuals were the family members of the original 53 Chase employees, whom White, who was driven by idealistically humanitarian-supplied energy, worked to include in his evacuation plans.

Getting Out of Saigon is a well-constructed memoir. White makes extensive use of Chase Manhattan’s historical archives. Critically, in addition to extensive personal notes, he also gained access to a detailed after-action report he submitted to Chase on his and the Vietnamese evacuees’ arrival in the United States. White also relies on multiple interviews he personally conducted with several of the refugees whose evacuation he had helped. Long after the events recounted, he was also able to meet with and interview other American and Vietnamese Chase employees who were evacuated as South Vietnam fell. His narrative is a story of trial and error in creating and finding a viable evacuation plan against a ticking clock as North Vietnamese troops closed in on Saigon. Appropriately, White’s narrative is gritty, even raunchy at times. These elements add integrity to an evacuation story that was far more complicated than it should have been due to unnecessary bureaucratic obstacles created by the United States Department of State as chaos in the spring of 1975 enveloped South Vietnam.

White's efforts to develop multiple plans for evacuating Chase's employees structures the overall framework for the book. As his narrative indicates, White was provided with the mission, but not with a specific plan he was to follow. Rather, his day-by-day chronicle shows how he invariably explored one possible evacuation option, only to have it close, and then how he was forced to explore and develop multiple other plans. In thinking through a range of options, he investigated a water route out of Saigon on a barge from the Alaska Barge Wharf. In a riskier plan and with a small plane pilot license, he looked into commandeering and piloting a DC-3 to fly the evacuees out. Eventually, White developed and navigated his way through a personal network of officials at the at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, the Evacuation Control Center, and did so with the assistance of key individuals at the US Embassy. Foremost, among many, was Ken Moorfield—a Foreign Service officer—whom White thanked in his acknowledgements for “administering consular regulations ‘flexibly’” (283). To be sure, there were numerous other individuals on whom White relied as he coordinated options. At the latest possible time, he eventually found a successful route: a US Airforce Lockheed C-141 Starlifter. On Saturday, April 26, 1975, White and over 100 Vietnamese Chase Employees, including their dependents, flew out of Saigon as the city fell. The book's twists and turns provide an almost movie-ready intensity as North Vietnamese troops edged closer to Saigon and as White's options for evacuating the refugees began to narrow. With a great deal of luck and work, White's group flew to the Philippines, then Guam, and, eventually, to the United States. At that point, White's narrative concludes. He briefly notes that this marked the beginning of new chapters for the Vietnamese he assisted, as they joined a large diaspora in the United States in 1975 and 1976.

The obstacles blocking White's efforts to evacuate his Vietnamese colleagues and family members were entirely American made. US Ambassador to Vietnam, Graham Martin, is depicted as a political martinet who was unable to accept the reality that the United States has lost the war in Vietnam. In contrast, numerous Chase employees and other US military personnel—who bent or often ignored the ridiculous rules that blocked White's effort to evacuate—are deservedly described as critical individuals who enabled White's mission. This memoir is a troubling reminder of how irresolutely the United States has ended its wars since World War II. Too many conflicts in the latter half of the twentieth century and so far in the twenty-first century indicate a chronic political and decisionmaking problem at the highest levels of American leadership.¹ That the United States abandoned many Afghans in 2021, let alone Vietnamese in 1975, despite often decades of those allies' efforts to help the United States, is a black mark on American history.

White's book, in this constructive way, testifies to a critical need for the United States to do better and fulfill its obligations to partners. It is difficult to believe that future allies are unaware of how Vietnamese, Afghans, Kurds, and others have been treated, not only by the United States, but also by the United Kingdom and Canada.² However, a silver lining for better future planning centers around withering after-action reports (AARs),³ such as those published by the US State Department and studies completed by prominent scholars, such as David Kilcullen and Greg Mills.⁴ More discussion of such after-action analysis on White's part would

¹ On the United States' efforts to resolve its conflicts, see Col. Matthew Moten, United States Army (Editor), *Between War and Peace: How America Ends Its Wars* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2012) and Donald Stoker, *Why America Loses Wars: Limited War and US Strategy from the Korean War to the Present* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

² On the United Kingdom's failures, see Holly Bancroft, May Bulman, Fahim Abed, and Monica C. Camacho, “Murdered, Tortured or Hiding from the Taliban: The Special Forces Abandoned by Britain,” *The Independent*, 1 November 2023, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/afghan-special-forces-triples-abandoned-britain-b2435597.html>. On Canada's failures, see Murray Brewster, “Canada Now has its Own History of the Afghan War—Good Luck Finding a Copy,” *CBC*, 10 November 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/afghanistan-canada-canadian-forces-history-1.7023872>

³ “After Action Review on Afghanistan—January 2020—August 2021,” US Department of State, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/State-AAR-AFG.pdf>

⁴ David Kilcullen and Greg Mills, *The Ledger: Accounting for Failure in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst & Co. Publishers, 2021).

have added a great deal to the book, even though White tacitly makes his case on this matter and weaves a critique—although obliquely—through each chapter.

White's worthwhile book exemplifies an application of history in that it discusses the past while raising questions about the recent past and present. Debates over providing Ukraine continued aid are a case in point, as are lessons from Afghanistan. This book, with its a quick-paced narrative about White's efforts to assist Vietnamese seeking refuge from abandonment by the United States as it flew away from its obligations to the South Vietnamese, touches those of us who sought to help Afghans who helped us for well over a decade before we were forced to abandon them. Short-sighted and morally depraved policies—let alone the creation of an intelligence gap in central Asia that is outrageous—seep through White's writing. While his story focuses on his work as a young man seeking to extract over 100 Vietnamese Chase Manhattan employees against great odds as North Vietnamese tanks approached Saigon, the book provides a lot to consider today.

White implicates the United States, but in a commendable way, when he points to inane policies that blocked his efforts. His critique, in short, is pragmatic and non-idealistic. He neither peddles a self-righteous wag of the finger at the United States or accuses it of imperial-oriented disasters abroad. Nor does he embrace a jingoistic-oriented revisionism that may be associated with letting leaders, such as Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and President Richard Nixon, off the hook for a realpolitik approach to China and ending the war in Vietnam.⁵ The recent comprehensive strategic partnership with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam versus the increasingly elevated "strategic competition," or contentious "Cold War 2.0," should leave Vietnam War scholars and all of us interested in foreign policy with more questions than answers about the utility of force.⁶ Losing the war and winning the peace in Vietnam has taken decades. Wondering if war in Southeast Asia mattered at all is more of a vibrant question in my mind now than it might have been in the 1960s, let alone the 1970s.

As a detailed chronicle of an evacuation effort, the majority of *Getting out of Saigon* focuses on White's efforts in the two weeks leading to the evacuation of Chase Manhattan's employees on Saturday, 26 April 1975. White is self-deprecating and credits Chase Manhattan's leadership for directing and funding his efforts. Many Chase employees and other individuals supported his efforts and cleared bureaucratic obstacles to support White's plans. He credits Chase Manhattan, writing "I know of no other commercial enterprise that has ever done anything like what Chase did for its vulnerable Vietnamese employees and their families during the fall of Saigon" (278). IBM's (International Business Machines Corporation) employees, in contrast, "were abandoned by their management. On 30 April 1975, as the North Vietnamese Army marched into Saigon, they were all still standing in front of the IBM building with their packed suitcases. God knows what happened to them" (276). In providing his detailed account of Chase Manhattan's efforts, White recounts an evacuation effort that was unique and, to be sure, more rapid and less fraught than the often great challenges that faced the majority of Vietnamese who were fleeing South Vietnam.⁷

White's account, while revealing, has shortcomings. Based on his experience in working against an American bureaucracy that obstructed his efforts to evacuate Chase employees, a discussion of White's views on American policy would have been a useful addition to the book. Since White does, however, provide a ground-level view of administrative dysfunction and willing blindness, the book can equally be commended for remaining focused on White's experience and not extrapolating too much in a strategic sense. Certainly,

⁵ An even-handed treatment is Thomas Schwartz, *Henry Kissinger and American Power: A Political Biography* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2020).

⁶ George S. Takach, *Cold War 2.0: Artificial Intelligence in the New Battle between China, Russia, and America* (New York: Pegasus, 2024).

⁷ For a representative work on the tragic circumstances facing most Vietnamese refugees, see Sucheng Chan (Editor), *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation: Stories of War, Revolution, Flight and New Beginnings* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006).

he does not pull punches and recounts in detail his efforts and those of his colleagues who assisted him in evacuating 113 Vietnamese Chase employees. *Getting out of Saigon* is honest, authentic, and written in a personal, non-academic tone that is refreshing even though its topic is distressing and frustrating. For scholars who are interested in a more holistic perspective on the Vietnam War, the book provides a counterpoint to combat-focuses autobiographies, such as MACV-SOG member Franklin Miller's *Reflections of a Warrior* or David Donovan's *Once a Warrior King*.⁸ White's experiences in Vietnam, told through this fast-paced narrative, add a unique perspective to war and history that provides insight into the present and, regrettably, most likely the future.

Nathaniel L. Moir is a Research Associate with the Applied History Project at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, an affiliate with the Contemporary History Research Group at Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia, and an Editor with the *Journal of Applied History*. He is the author of *Number One Realist—Bernard Fall and Vietnamese Revolutionary Warfare* (Hurst, 2022), and is currently working on a book that is provisionally titled *Corresponding Conflicts: A Comparative History of the Korean and First Indochina Wars*.

⁸ Franklin Miller with Elwood C. Kureth, *Reflections of a Warrior* (Novato: Presidio Press, 1991); David Donovan, *Once a Warrior King: Memories of an Officer in Vietnam* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985).