

Last Days In Vietnam Documentary Analysis

Posted on October 4, 2019

Rory Kennedy's documentary *Last Days in Vietnam* examines the chaotic final weeks of the [Vietnam War](#) in April 1975, when North Vietnamese forces advanced rapidly toward Saigon and the South Vietnamese government collapsed. The film focuses on the evacuation crisis faced by American diplomats, military personnel, intelligence officers, sailors, Marines, and their South Vietnamese colleagues and families. Its central question is captured by the PBS description: who would be evacuated, and who would be left behind to face imprisonment, retaliation, separation, or death? (Kennedy, 2014; Public Broadcasting Service, 2015)

The original essay correctly identifies the moral dilemma confronting Americans who had been ordered to withdraw. However, by April 1975 ordinary U.S. combat troops had already left under the 1973 Paris Peace Accords. The people remaining included embassy personnel, military advisers and guards, intelligence staff, contractors, journalists, and other civilians. They were not deciding whether to continue the entire war. They were deciding whether to follow restrictive evacuation policy or use limited time and resources to help South Vietnamese allies escape. (Asselin, 2018; Herring, 2014)

The Final Collapse of South Vietnam

The documentary begins as the military situation deteriorates faster than many American officials expected. North Vietnamese forces capture city after city, while South Vietnamese units retreat or disintegrate. Refugees move south, roads become congested, and fear spreads through Saigon. The speed of the collapse makes orderly planning increasingly difficult. (Kennedy, 2014; Public Broadcasting Service, 2015)

President Gerald Ford's administration understood that American citizens needed to leave, but a large evacuation of South Vietnamese allies was politically and logistically sensitive. Congress had rejected additional military aid requested for South Vietnam, and officials feared that announcing evacuation too early would produce panic and signal complete defeat. Ambassador Graham Martin resisted preparation partly because he believed open planning could accelerate collapse and because he remained emotionally and politically committed to South Vietnam. (Asselin, 2018; Herring, 2014; Kennedy, 2014)

This delay is one of the film's most important criticisms. Optimism can become dangerous when leaders treat preparation as disloyalty. An evacuation plan did not require abandoning every hope for a negotiated outcome. It required recognizing that thousands of people had placed their lives at risk through association with the United States. (Kennedy, 2014)

The Moral Dilemma

American personnel had Vietnamese friends, coworkers, spouses, children, employees, and military partners. Official policy initially prioritized U.S. citizens and certain dependents. Many South Vietnamese who had worked closely with Americans feared reeducation camps, imprisonment, or punishment after the communist victory. The people conducting the evacuation therefore faced a conflict between orders and personal responsibility. (Kennedy, 2014; Public Broadcasting Service, 2015)

Some officers and civilians organized unauthorized or loosely authorized efforts. They created lists, arranged transport, used aircraft and ships, and concealed the scale of departures from officials who might stop them. These actions could be viewed as insubordination, but the documentary presents them as morally courageous responses to a policy that had failed to match the human consequences of American involvement. (Kennedy, 2014)

The dilemma is not simply whether soldiers should return to their own families or prevent “genocide,” as the original essay states. The term genocide has a specific legal meaning and is not the most precise description of the expected postwar danger. South Vietnamese associated with the former government faced imprisonment, reeducation, discrimination, economic loss, and in some cases death. Many civilians also feared forced separation and retaliation. The danger was severe without requiring an inaccurate label. (Asselin, 2018; Herring, 2014)

Operation Frequent Wind

As Tan Son Nhut airport came under attack, fixed-wing evacuation became impossible. The United States initiated Operation Frequent Wind on April 29, 1975, using helicopters to carry people from Saigon to U.S. Navy ships offshore. The embassy compound and other pickup points became centers of desperation. Crowds waited outside, while those already approved for evacuation feared that the helicopters would stop before reaching them. (Kennedy, 2014; Public Broadcasting Service, 2015)

Approximately five thousand Americans still needed to leave, along with thousands of Vietnamese. Helicopters flew repeatedly through a narrow window of time. On ships, crews pushed some South Vietnamese helicopters overboard after passengers landed because deck space was needed for additional aircraft. The image communicates both rescue and loss: equipment was discarded so human beings could survive, yet every successful landing implied that many others remained behind. (Kennedy, 2014)

The evacuation ended on April 30. The last U.S. Marines left the embassy rooftop, and North Vietnamese forces entered Saigon later that morning. Some Vietnamese who had been promised or expected evacuation were left inside or outside the compound. The film refuses to turn the operation into an uncomplicated triumph. It was an extraordinary logistical achievement and a final

abandonment at the same time. (Kennedy, 2014; Public Broadcasting Service, 2015)

The USS Kirk

One of the documentary's most compelling episodes concerns the USS *Kirk*. South Vietnamese helicopters arrived carrying military personnel and families. Some pilots hovered while passengers jumped to the deck, then ditched aircraft into the sea. The American crew had not expected to manage such a large improvised air operation but adapted quickly. (Kennedy, 2014)

The *Kirk* later helped escort South Vietnamese naval vessels and refugees toward safety. Colonel Kiem Do and other South Vietnamese participants describe the emotional lowering of their national flag. These scenes broaden the documentary beyond the embassy and show South Vietnamese agency. They were not merely passive victims waiting for American rescue. Officers, pilots, sailors, parents, and civilians made dangerous decisions to save families and preserve lives during state collapse. (Kennedy, 2014)

Vietnam as a Cold War Conflict

The original essay situates the war within the Cold War, when the United States and Soviet Union competed globally and China also supported communist movements. This framework is necessary but incomplete. Vietnam's struggle involved anti-colonial nationalism, civil conflict, ideological revolution, regional politics, and superpower intervention. Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh fought French colonial rule before the conflict developed into war between North and South Vietnam with extensive foreign involvement. (Asselin, 2018; Herring, 2014)

The Soviet Union and China supplied the North with weapons, training, and political support, though their relations with one another and with Hanoi were not always harmonious. The United States supported the South Vietnamese government with money, equipment, advisers, and eventually large combat forces. The conflict became a Cold War battleground, but Vietnamese actors pursued their own political goals rather than serving merely as puppets of Moscow, Beijing, or Washington. (Asselin, 2018)

French Colonialism and the Earlier War

The original essay argues that the conflict began with France attempting to retain Indochina and should initially have been a war between France and its colonies. French colonial rule created economic exploitation, political repression, and nationalist resistance. After Japan occupied Indochina during the Second World War, Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh declared independence in 1945. France attempted to reestablish control, leading to the First Indochina War. (Asselin, 2018; Herring, 2014)

The French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 led to the Geneva Accords and a temporary division near the seventeenth parallel. National elections intended to reunify the country did not occur. The United States increasingly supported the anti-communist South, believing that communist victory could alter the regional balance. What began as anti-colonial struggle became intertwined with Vietnamese civil conflict and U.S. containment policy. (Asselin, 2018; Herring, 2014)

Outside involvement was not politically inevitable. American leaders made choices based on the domino theory, credibility, domestic politics, and assumptions about communism. Understanding those choices helps explain why the peace movement regarded the war as unjustified or unnecessary. (Herring, 2014)

Ho Chi Minh and the North Vietnamese State

The original essay describes Ho Chi Minh as a guerrilla leader against France who later headed a well-supplied army. He was a revolutionary nationalist and communist whose political movement sought independence and reunification under its leadership. The North Vietnamese state combined popular anti-colonial legitimacy with one-party authoritarian rule, land reform, political repression, and sustained military mobilization. (Asselin, 2018)

Calling Ho Chi Minh's regime "anti-communist," as one sentence in the original implies, is an error. It was communist. The conflict should not be simplified into a pure war of liberation in which every northern policy was automatically just. Nor should nationalism be ignored because of communist ideology. Both elements shaped the movement. (Asselin, 2018)

Bảo Đại and South Vietnamese Political Legitimacy

Bảo Đại, the last emperor of the Nguyễn dynasty, served under French and Japanese-dominated political arrangements and later became chief of the State of Vietnam. The original essay portrays him as a weak figure who spent substantial time abroad and lacked commitment. His limited authority and association with colonial structures did weaken legitimacy. (Asselin, 2018)

However, Bảo Đại was no longer the principal South Vietnamese leader during the main period of U.S. escalation or the 1975 collapse. Ngô Đình Diệm replaced him after a 1955 referendum and established the Republic of Vietnam. Subsequent governments experienced coups, instability, and authoritarian practices before Nguyễn Văn Thiệu became the dominant president. A documentary analysis of 1975 should focus more on Thiệu, Ambassador Martin, President Ford, and the military collapse than on Bảo Đại. (Asselin, 2018; Herring, 2014)

The Peace Movement

The Vietnam War contributed to a powerful antiwar movement during the 1960s and early 1970s. Protesters challenged the draft, civilian casualties, official deception, racial and economic inequality, and the strategic logic of intervention. Veterans also participated in antiwar activism, demonstrating that criticism of the war did not require contempt for those who served. (Herring, 2014)

The documentary's evacuation story reaffirms one lesson of the peace movement: wars create obligations that continue after political support disappears. Ending an intervention does not erase responsibility toward local allies, refugees, or people placed in danger. Peace policy should include preparation for the human consequences of withdrawal. (Kennedy, 2014)

American Perspective and Documentary Bias

The original essay's most important criticism is that the film relies heavily on American accounts. The documentary includes significant South Vietnamese testimony, including military officers and refugees, but its narrative structure centers Americans confronting a moral decision. This focus creates emotional clarity and gives viewers access to people who defied or stretched policy. It also limits the range of Vietnamese perspectives. (Kennedy, 2014)

The film provides little sustained attention to ordinary North Vietnamese soldiers and civilians, antiwar South Vietnamese voices, people who remained in Saigon, or those who interpreted communist victory as liberation and reunification. It also compresses the political failures of the South Vietnamese government and the long history of Vietnamese suffering under bombing and war. A viewer could leave with the impression that the central tragedy was America's inability to rescue enough allies rather than the broader destruction experienced across Vietnam. (Asselin, 2018; Kennedy, 2014)

Documentaries always select. Kennedy chose to tell the final evacuation as a moral thriller, not to produce a complete history of thirty years of war. The film should therefore be used with other Vietnamese, American, and international sources. Its partial perspective does not make it useless. It defines what the film can and cannot explain. (Kennedy, 2014)

Veterans and Moral Injury

The original essay values the documentary for recognizing American veterans. Many Vietnam veterans returned to a divided society and struggled with physical injury, trauma, grief, and public misunderstanding. The evacuation personnel also carried memories of promises they could not fulfill and people left behind. Moral injury can arise when someone participates in, witnesses, or fails to prevent events that violate deeply held values. (Herring, 2014; Kennedy, 2014)

The film gives veterans and officials an opportunity to explain choices that may not fit simple categories of victory and defeat. Some risked careers to evacuate Vietnamese friends. Others followed orders and later questioned whether more could have been done. Listening to these accounts does not require endorsing the war. It helps understand how policy decisions become personal burdens. (Kennedy, 2014)

Archival Footage and Narrative Technique

Last Days in Vietnam uses archival news footage, photographs, maps, audio, interviews, and dramatic editing. The advancing map creates urgency, while helicopter footage provides visible evidence of improvised rescue. Contemporary interviews allow participants to reflect, but memory recorded decades later may simplify or reinterpret events. (Kennedy, 2014)

The film's pacing resembles a thriller because the audience knows Saigon will fall and watches time disappear. This narrative technique is effective, though it can make structural history appear as background to individual heroism. Emotional music and close testimony encourage identification with rescuers and evacuees. (Kennedy, 2014)

Was the War Merely a Showcase for Military Technology?

The original essay suggests Vietnam became an opportunity for great powers to display inventions and revolutionize aerial warfare. Technology was important: helicopters, bombers, chemical defoliants, surveillance, air mobility, and advanced weapons shaped the conflict. Yet calling the war primarily a showcase risks trivializing its political aims and human cost. (Herring, 2014)

Military technology did not guarantee political success. The United States possessed enormous firepower but could not create a stable and legitimate South Vietnamese state or compel the desired political outcome at an acceptable cost. The war demonstrates the limits of technological superiority when strategy, legitimacy, geography, and public support are unresolved. (Asselin, 2018; Herring, 2014)

The Meaning of the Fall of Saigon

For many Americans, the fall symbolized defeat and the end of a long national trauma. For communist leaders and supporters, it represented victory, reunification, and the defeat of foreign intervention. For many South Vietnamese, it meant loss of country, imprisonment, property seizure, dangerous escape, and refugee life. The same event therefore contains incompatible memories. (Asselin, 2018; Herring, 2014)

The renaming of Saigon as Ho Chi Minh City did not erase the former name from memory, especially among refugees and the diaspora. Vietnamese American communities developed across the United States and elsewhere, carrying stories of escape, adjustment, loss, and achievement. The documentary's "last days" were also the first days of new refugee lives. (Kennedy, 2014)

Conclusion

Last Days in Vietnam is a powerful documentary about the evacuation crisis in April 1975. It shows North Vietnamese forces closing on Saigon, South Vietnamese resistance collapsing, official planning delayed, and American personnel deciding whom they could save. Operation Frequent Wind and the work of the USS *Kirk* reveal extraordinary improvisation and courage within a broader political failure. (Kennedy, 2014; Public Broadcasting Service, 2015)

The original analysis is right to connect the film with colonial history, the Cold War, the peace movement, and veteran experience. Several corrections are necessary: U.S. combat troops had already withdrawn, Ho Chi Minh led a communist rather than anti-communist regime, Bảo Đại was not the central ruler in 1975, and expected postwar repression should not automatically be labeled genocide. (Asselin, 2018; Herring, 2014)

The film offers a partial understanding because it centers American moral choices even while including South Vietnamese voices. Its limitation should lead viewers toward additional Vietnamese perspectives rather than toward dismissal. The documentary's enduring lesson is that withdrawal from war creates a final test of responsibility. Decisions delayed in offices become life-or-death choices for people at airports, embassies, ships, and crowded gates. (Kennedy, 2014)

References

Kennedy, R. (Director). (2014). *Last Days in Vietnam* [Film]. Moxie Firecracker Films.

Public Broadcasting Service. (2015). *Last Days in Vietnam*. American Experience.

Asselin, P. (2018). *Vietnam's American war: A history*. Cambridge University Press.

Herring, G. C. (2014). *America's longest war* (5th ed.). McGraw-Hill.