

TAKE THE MONEY AND RUN

On 27 April 1975, the Chief of Staff of the Army of the Republic of Viet Nam, General Cao Van Vien, issued a stirring order to his forces resisting the North Vietnamese advance on Saigon exhorting them to “fight to the death.” The next day the General and his wife boarded a plane and fled South Vietnam for a new life in America, after reportedly first prudently depositing one million dollars in a bank in Guam. As reprehensible as General Vien’s actions on 28 April may seem, he was merely emulating the actions of his former Commander-in-Chief, President Nguyen Van Thieu, who had resigned as President the day Xuan Loc fell and left Saigon in similar fashion four days before General Vien. In turn, Thieu had acted in a manner that became increasingly familiar in the latter half of the 20th century: a leader appeals to the loyalty, patriotism, or devotion of his followers and implores them to make the ultimate sacrifice for the cause, while carefully planning an escape which usually includes a “nest egg,” often ill-gotten, that will provide for a comfortable “retirement.” This installment of “And the Data Shows” examines the issues surrounding Nguyen Van Thieu, and will briefly compare his deeds with those of other controversial figures who reputedly also took the money and ran.

The case of Nguyen Van Thieu ultimately boils down to “he said, they said” and “who you gonna believe?” According to some of those who witnessed his departure from Vietnam on 24 April, 1975, the ex-president of the Republic of Vietnam, looking haggard and perhaps intoxicated, boarded an American provided C-118 transport airplane with some trusted aides, 15 tons of luggage and 3½ tons of gold bullion. The gold alone was worth \$18,726,400.00 on that date. An alternate version of this story has Thieu lugging only two suitcases full of gold, worth approximately \$353,000. These claims did not surprise those who had long heard stories of corruption that emanated out of Vietnam during the regime of President Thieu. The President was believed to be deeply involved in the corrupt machinations of his closest political henchmen or “bag men” as they were often termed. Two of his close associates can serve as examples.

General Dang Van Quang became Thieu’s Advisor on National Security and Intelligence in 1969 and reportedly used his position to shield drug smugglers at great profit to himself and Thieu. He may even have been involved with the CIA in the smuggling of heroin into Vietnam. As an internal CIA report in 1972 acknowledged, known drug smuggling officials were tolerated throughout Southeast Asia as their good will “considerably facilitates the military activities of Agency supported irregulars.” Quang was also involved in manipulation of rice pricing and the selling of military offices. Notoriously, the slightly tipsy wife of Colonel Nguyen Van Minh stood up at her husband’s investment ceremony as commander of the 21st ARVN Division, Quang’s old unit, and announced that the promotion had better be worth it as

Minh had paid Quang 2 million piasters (about \$7300) for it. Multiply that figure by the number of colonels in the ARVN and quite a lucrative profit could be had by those with the power to promote.

Thieu’s Prime Minister, General Tran Thien Kiem, had a habit of appointing numerous relatives to important posts. While Minister of the Interior he appointed his opium-addicted brother, Tran Thien Koi, chief of the Fraud Repression Division of customs, a position specifically designed to deal with drug smuggling businessmen! Chief Koi’s main task seems to have been protecting the Tran family smuggling operations. One of a myriad of minor customs officials overseeing a cargo warehouse in Saigon has testified he paid Chief Koi around \$22,000 annually in kick-backs to ignore illicit drug dealing. Again, given the number of such warehouses in Saigon, a nifty profit in such dealings could be had. A cousin of Tran Thien Kiem was appointed Director of the Port of Saigon, where prospects were infinitely greater, while Kiem was Prime Minister. In the last days before President Thieu’s fall, members of National Assembly, disgruntled with Thieu’s handling of the war, began to come forward with these and many other stories of corruption within the President’s administration. They also accused Thieu of intentionally appointing incompetent high level military commanders as they were more likely to be inclined to ignore lucrative but illegal activities in their

commands (indeed, they would more probably join in them) and were less likely of being capable of pulling off a coup against Thieu. At about this same time, a Vietnamese priest Father Tran Tuu Tranh, leader of the “Anti-corruption Movement,” publically charged Thieu with master-minding a massive drug ring in Viet Nam, accepting a \$7 million bribe from the Nixon Administration to sign the 1973 Paris Peace Accords, and having fabulous bank accounts in Switzerland where he hid all of this money.

Thieu’s defenders, and there are some, have come forward to counter these damaging claims. The story about Thieu fleeing with 15 tons and luggage and 3½ tons of gold is easy to debunk. If true, they point out, passengers and cargo on that flight would have totaled nearly 19 tons. The lift capacity of the C-118 is only 12 tons. The plane could not even have gotten off the ground! And why would Thieu, if he was such a massive embezzler of national wealth, have contented himself with just \$353,000 worth of gold in a couple of suitcases as the variant story claims? Of course, Thieu could have had the gold flown out of Vietnam on previous, secret flights. Or as one commentator points out, why transport heavy gold at all? In the chaotic days before the fall of Saigon it would have been easily possible to convert the gold to paper currency, much lighter and easier to transport. Of course, Thieu’s detractors contend that whether in script or bullion, ill-gotten money is ill-gotten money, while his supporters point out there has never been any proof Thieu left Vietnam with any wealth at all.

Then there is the 1990 testimony of one Colonel Bui Tin, the officer of the North Vietnamese Army who accepted the surrender of Thieu’s successor, President Duong Van Minh, in Saigon on 30 April 1975. Acting on orders from Hanoi, Colonel Bui went to the Treasury immediately after the surrender. Upon arrival, Bui testified, he was able to ascertain that the Republic of Vietnam’s gold holdings, all 17 tons of it, were present and intact. Thieu’s critics point out that Colonel Bui gave this testimony *after* he had defected from Communist Vietnam and he had added that the leaders of the Communist party of Viet Nam had frittered away the gold for “party and personal” purposes. Bui apparently was disgruntled with his former bosses and his prospects in the “new” Vietnam. If his testimony putting the communist leaders of the Vietnam in a bad light happened to reflect favorably on the capitalist puppet Thieu, well so be it. One might also question whether Bui, or almost anyone else, would know what 17 tons of gold looks like if they saw it.

As for the charges of corruption, Thieu’s admirers point out that his critics are applying Western standards not applicable to an Asian civilization. This was Vietnam, a non-Western society, where what the West condemned as corruption was an ancient and accepted way of life. Thieu was no better or worse than anyone else, they argue. In fact, some claim is made that Thieu knew of but disapproved the CIA’s involvement in drug smuggling, but as the obvious junior partner in the American/RVN team, he knew better than to make waves. Besides, Thieu’s defenders argued, where is the incontrovertible proof that he was involved in any shady dealings or had taken any wealth at all?

So, where does the truth about Nguyen Van Thieu lie? One of the most interesting pieces of data is a so far non-existent piece of data. Unlike almost all of the other “take the money and run” leaders recently (see Table 2), I have yet to come across an estimate in dollars and cents of just how much Thieu is accused of embezzling from his nation. There is, however, circumstantial evidence one must consider. This is a guy who on 21 April 1975, in his speech announcing his resignation as president, blasted the United States for not living up to its commitments to continue supporting South Vietnam. “You Americans with your 500,000 soldiers in Viet Nam! You were not defeated, you ran away!”...“I resign, but I do not desert.” Four days later, Thieu left Vietnam as communist troops closed in on Saigon. Of course, this was also the man who earlier had proclaimed, “Hue will not fall!” and that he would “...fight to the last bullet, the last grain of rice.” How good are his protestations that he did not steal any wealth from his nation?

That reputed wealth he took with him? As noted, I have found no estimate as to its amount but after a brief stay in Taiwan following his leaving Vietnam, Thieu settled in England, where his wife was with their son, who was attending prestigious Eton. At first they lived in a *mansion* in Surrey, but not wanting to attract undue attention, sold it (note this implies they owned it) and *purchased* a flat southwest of London in “expensive and lovely Wimbledon.” Unlike many other political refugees, Thieu did not give interviews nor did he write his memoirs or make speaking engagements for income. Like a judge in an old movie might observe, Thieu “lived without any visible means of support.”

After Colonel Bui’s testimony in 1990, Thieu became a bit bolder. He and his wife moved to the United States, living first in Newton, a suburb of Boston, before *buying* a large home in “tony” Foxborough (a Patriots fan?) and he began granting interviews. It was revealed that in 1980 he had secretly been involved in the founding of The National People’s Revolutionary Organization (NPRO), which advocated the return of Vietnamese refugees to their homeland “with guns to overthrow communism.” It is quite clear that Nguyen Van Thieu was not a refugee barely surviving in a camp or living under a bridge somewhere. His son attended one of the finest schools in England, and he owned and lived in a mansion, a flat, and a large house, all located in quite expensive neighborhoods. He did not work nor pursue the usual money making activities of most political refugees. Perhaps the NPRO was some sort of support organization for former South Vietnamese officials like the legendary Nazi ODESSA organization? Thieu obviously had access to enough wealth to account for a comfortable life style. To date, no one has yet produced evidence of how much it was, where it came from or how he came by it.

As mentioned above, Nguyen Van Thieu is one of a number of political leaders in the latter part of the 20th century who exhorted his countrymen to give their all while feathering their own nests and planning their getaway at the last minute while those countrymen continued fighting and dying for his cause. Table 1 introduces these other notorious characters and outlines the precarious situations they were in right before they fled.

TABLE 1: Leaders Who Took the Money and Ran...or at least tried to.

LEADER AND NATION	REIGN	FORCES AVAILABLE	OPPOSITION
Fulgencio Batista CUBA	1952-1959*	c.100,000 troops and secret police	Sundry rebel groups, including Castro's: c.50,000 guerillas
Nguyen Van Thieu SOUTH VIETNAM	1967-1975	c.200,000 troops	North Vietnam: c.500,000 troops
Idi Amin UGANDA	1971 - 1979	c.18,000 troops, including 400 Libyans sent by Gaddafi	20,000 Tanzanian troops and several Ugandan exile groups
Ferdinand Marcos PHILIPPINES	1965-1986	115,000 troops	60,000+ protesters before his palace, over a million in Quezon City/Manila
Nicolae Ceausescu ROMANIA	1965-1989	180,000 troops	100,000 protestors each in Timorosa and Bucharest
Mobutu Sese Seko ZAIRE	1965-1997	48,000 troops	20,000 Ugandan and Tanzanian troops plus Congolese rebels

**Also served as President of Cuba from 1940 until 1944.*

It is interesting to note that in the above instances, the leader in power often had a manpower advantage over his opposition. Only Thieu in Vietnam and Amin in Uganda faced likely against the odds situations—Amin barely so. Yet, in each case, the leader in question threw in the towel and fled. Of course, if they had remained to fight it out, they may not have survived to enjoy the wealth each had allegedly spirited away in advance. In fact, one of them did not survive. Much of Nicolae Ceausescu's army defected to the protestors on 22 December 1989, an event that took the Romanian dictator completely by surprise and led to his decision to flee with his wife and a few close aides. Unfortunately for him, it was too late. He and his wife were captured and executed on Christmas Day, 1989. All of the others did make good their escapes and Table 2 shows their estimated ill-gotten gains.

TABLE 2: Estimated Wealth Embezzled by Embattled Leaders Who Took the Money and Ran

LEADER AND NATION	DATE FLED	ESTIMATED WEALTH EMBEZZLED	IN INFLATION-ADJUSTED 2011 DOLLARS
Fulgencio Batista CUBA	1 January, 1959	\$300 million	~\$2.28 billion
Nguyen Van Thieu SOUTH VIETNAM	24 April, 1975	? (see in article above)	
Idi Amin UGANDA	11 April, 1979	\$1.2 billion	~\$3.89 billion
Ferdinand Marcos PHILIPPINES	25 February, 1986	\$10 billion	~\$20.05 billion
Mobutu Sese Seko ZAIRE	17 May, 1997	\$5.6 billion	~\$8.13 billion
Nicolae Ceausescu ROMANIA	22 December, 1989	? (see discussion below)	

If nothing else, the data in Table 2 implies that crime sometimes might pay, and fleeing dictators apparently have been affected by inflation. All of the men above except Ceausescu managed to do quite nicely in their retirements, though they may not have been the most popular individuals on the planet. In fact, most had angry countrymen demanding action to recover the wealth they had spirited out of their countries. However, these leaders had astute advisors, really shadowy figures who are mostly unknown even today, to carefully launder funds and deposit them in places and ways difficult to trace and almost impossible to recover. Swiss banks were a favorite choice as until last year Swiss authorities could take no action at all unless the accused's nation charged

him with a crime under that nation's laws. Many of these men sometimes still had friends in high places, and such charges might not be lodged for some time, if at all. Even if charges were filed, there was a 15-year statute of limitations. A good team of lawyers could prolong action until the accusers gave up due to the expense, the 15 years ran out, or the accused comfortably died of old age. In the future, it might not be so easy for displaced dictators. Now their assets can be frozen if there is any suspicion of embezzlement or illegal action pending investigations by the affected country and/or several international agencies. This is precisely what happened to the Swiss bank accounts of Tunisia's Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak while I was researching and writing this article. It remains to be seen whether either of these two deposed leaders really did siphon off wealth and what will happen if they did.

ROMANIA



As also indicated in Table 2, there remains the fascinating case of Nicolae Ceausescu. This was a leader who had cleared several square blocks of central Bucharest, requiring the demolition of 30,000 homes and apartments, 19 historic churches and 6 synagogues, so he could have built for himself the second largest building in the world: a one million plus sq.ft. presidential palace. He already owned 15 other villas scattered about Romania, as well as several yachts, a fine art collection, and a garage full of automobiles (although his official 1967 Buick Electra was his favorite "limo"). All of this on an official salary of \$3,000 a year! After his execution, authorities discovered several family-owned warehouses chock full of luxuries like beef, oranges, and coffee; this in a nation where food was so scarce, much of the population bordered on malnutrition.

Yet, to date, no formal inquiries have been made into Ceausescu's wealth and, as in the case of Thieu, no estimated figures as to just how much Nicolae had stashed away have been published. The main reason for this apparent lack of interest in possibly recovering Ceausescu's wealth? It seems the people who overthrew and replaced him were in many cases the same people who had worked with and for him when he ruled. As officials who were aware of and probably participated in Romania's chronic corruption, they apparently simply divided up the "goods" among themselves and are not interested in seeing any of it "recovered" by anyone else. In fact, today most Romanians assume that anyone who has prospered since Ceausescu's fall probably was a member of the hated *Securitate* (secret police) and either knows the ropes or has damaging information with which to blackmail those in high places. As one Romanian critic of the country's corruption noted, corruption is the Romanian national pastime. Rampant corruption nearly derailed Romania's efforts to join the European Union in

1997, and may yet delay its Schengen Accession (admission to the Schengen Agreement which provides the real nuts and bolts to a "borderless" Europe). Perhaps the only victory so far for democratic capitalism in Romania are plans to convert Ceausescu's giant former palace into a shopping mall, although winning contracts for the work to do so will probably require a fortune in bribes.

What happened to the other erstwhile national strongmen and the minions they left behind?

CUBA



Within weeks of occupying Havana, Castro's rebels had executed nearly 700 former Batista loyalists, officers, secret policemen, informers, etc. It is alleged that hundreds more were killed elsewhere in the country. By 1962, several thousand Cubans had been executed and 200,000 whose lives and/or property were threatened had fled to the United States. Batista, meanwhile, first settled in Madeira, and then moved to Estoril, an upscale seaside resort suburb of Lisbon, Portugal. He wrote several books and served as chairman of a Spanish insurance company that specialized in investment on the Spanish Riviera while managing his own real estate investments in Daytona Beach, Florida. He died at age 73 on 6 August 1973—two days before a team of assassins sent by Castro were to make an attempt on his life.

VIET NAM



Immediately after the fall of Saigon, after limited immediate settling of old scores, North Vietnamese forces and agents began rounding up any former South Vietnamese military officers, rank and file soldiers who were reportedly "unreliable," local, provincial and national government officials, unfriendly journalists, educators, etc. and interned them in so-called "Re-education Camps." In all, at least 300,000 South Vietnamese were interned. The curriculum at these camps must have been quite rigorous as some 65,000 internees perished within two years. Ultimately, the number of South Vietnamese subjected to "re-education" is believed to be more than one million. Nguyen Van Thieu's postwar life has been described above. He died in Boston at age 78 on 29 September 2001 as result of a stroke.

UGANDA



Amin's departure set off first an orgy of reprisals by Acholi tribesmen, whose tribe had been persecuted by Amin's government for years. Over 1000 of Amin's soldiers and agents were killed, along with about 300 of the 400 Libyans sent by Muammar Gaddafi to bolster Amin's defenses. Then civil war erupted among several of the Ugandan exile groups that had temporarily set aside their differences to oust Amin. The civil war quickly became entangled in the tribal violence that erupted between Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda, Tanzania, Zaire, and Uganda. Within six years, over 300,000 Ugandans were dead, although how many died solely because they had been supporters or auxiliaries of Amin is impossible to say. Amin himself fled first to the welcoming arms of Gaddafi in Libya, but was asked to leave within a year after a serious clash between his bodyguards and Libyan police. Professing to be a devout Muslim, Amin moved to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, as part of a deal brokered with the Saudi government, in which he promised never to try to return to Uganda or again dabble in politics. In return, Amin was allowed to live in the top two floors of a luxury hotel and received a sizeable pension from the Saudi government. He lived in Jeddah until his death from kidney failure on 16 August 2003 at age 78. It is assumed his Saudi pension enabled him to pass his "estate" on to his heirs—officially 7 wives and 40 children—intact.

PHILIPPINES



Many Filipinos were justly proud of their nearly bloodless "People Power" revolt which overthrew Ferdinand Marcos. Fewer than a dozen reprisal killings were reported in the days following Marcos' departure. Yet, today many of those same Filipinos feel something is missing, namely the \$10 billion or so he is believed to have fled with. It seems that many of those who survived Marcos' fall remained loyal to him and his family. To date, Philippine courts have ordered only a couple of thousand dollars of restitution, thanks to the efforts of Marcos family friends in high places and a crack team of lawyers. In fact, several "notorious" figures of the Marcos era have fared very well since his fall. Fidel Ramos, architect of the hated Martial Law of the 1970s and 1980s, was President of the Philippines from 1992 to 1998, and is fondly remembered as a "senior statesman" by some. Marcos' right-hand-man and Defense Minister, Juan Ponce Enrile, is Senate President.

Even more surprisingly, Marcos' only son, Ferdinand "Bong Bong" is himself a senator, and his father's widow, Imelda of shoe fame, is a member of the House of Representatives! Ferdinand himself, however, died in Hawaii at the age of 72 on 28 September 1989 as a result of complications from heart, lung and kidney problems.

ZAIRE



Mobutu's successor, Laurent Desire-Kabila, immediately changed the country's name back to the Republic of the Congo and almost as quickly plunged it into civil, tribal and national war, which killed between 4 and 5 million people from 1998 to 2003. Comprising elements of civil war between groups that had ousted Mobutu Sese Seko, the notorious Tutsi-Hutu tribal conflict and a war against the combined forces Rwanda and Uganda, this Second Congo War ranks as the fourth deadliest conflict of the 20th century (after WWII, WWI and the Russian Revolution) and might also be called "The War Nobody Ever Heard Of." As in the case of Uganda, how many of these deaths can be attributed to retribution for supporting Mobutu cannot be determined. Of all the leaders discussed in this article, Mobutu Sese Seko had the least opportunity to enjoy any of the wealth he is charged with taking from his country. After fleeing Zaire to Togo, he went on to Morocco seeking treatment for prostate cancer, which was unsuccessful. He died on 7 September 1997, at age 66, not quite four months after leaving Kinshasa.

CONCLUSIONS

So why anyone would fight and possibly die for characters like Ceausescu, Idi Amin or any of the others? In some cases, these types of rulers began their rule genuinely popular, being seen as harbingers of better times. Their followers often found it difficult to abandon the dream of a better life that accompanied their hero's accession to power. These leaders were often rulers of impoverished nations and could offer both urban and rural poor three square meals a day, a roof over their heads, and decent clothes, in return for military or secret police service. Such service could promote a person to dazzling heights, offering a way out of an otherwise unpleasant life. Some like Amin played on traditional rivalries among groups within their nation to promote loyalty within a chosen group; or like Mobutu Sese Seko, Amin or, sometimes, Marcos, were seen as standing up to the hated old colonial powers. If all else failed, a shrewd ruler like Batista or Ceausescu could use their growing wealth to buy loyalty, although this is not a fail proof strategy as Ceausescu learned.

There are of course other leaders who have taken the money and run. The Shah in Iran, "Baby Doc" Duvalier in Haiti,

and others have fled, but not exactly with their forces gallantly battling the “enemy at the gates.” Others, like the Empress Dowager Tzu-hsi of China during the Boxer Rebellion, certainly exhorted her minions to continue fighting a lost cause, but when she fled Beijing, it was in a famer’s donkey cart disguised as a peasant with no money. Interestingly, she managed to return to power after the Western powers crushed the rebellion, as a reformer against antiquated Chinese ways and beliefs.

The world today certainly features many leaders who face situations that may evolve into crises similar to those faced by Thieu, Amin, and the others mentioned in this article. As already alluded to, the entire Arab world appears to be ripe for just such situations, and there will surely be heads of state in the Middle East and elsewhere who will exhort their followers to fight to the death against an enemy at the palace doors, while they themselves plan to take the money and run. In the end, considering what has happened in places like the Congo or Cuba, one wonders about the ultimate outcomes of such escapades. In Hillary Mantel’s recent novel *Wolf Hall*, Cardinal Wolsey’s Gentleman Usher, George Cavendish, bemoans his master’s fall from grace in 1529 and angrily questions the poor commoners of London cheering Wolsey’s downfall: “But what do they get by change?” Cavendish persists. “One dog sated with meat is replaced by a hungrier dog who bites nearer the bone. Out goes one man fat with honor, and in comes a hungry and a leaner man.” One thing is clear: *kleptocracy* is an equal opportunity temptation that attracts leaders of any nationality, creed, or race. As you watch events unfold around our politically tumultuous world, you might be wary of situations where fat-cat rulers are opposed by those with lean and hungry looks.

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