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**Notes from editor (not for publication):**

Thank you so much for sharing this exceptional piece, Bill. I've found a couple of photos from the National Archives and a clearer photo of Alan Carter from our news archives. I'll send you the page. It's also going to pair nicely with an essay that coincidentally came in about Vietnam and the draft. —Jeff.

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 The last days of a war gone wrong

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

2 The inside story of Vietnam through the memories of  
3 Alan Carter, a diplomat who left Saigon on the second-to-last  
4 helicopter in 1975 and who would call the war 'a fabric of  
5 deception and lies to the government, to itself, and to the  
6 American people'

####END SUBHED####

7 TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

8 ON APRIL 29, 1975, as artillery pounded the outskirts of  
9 Saigon and thousands of desperate Vietnamese people pressed up

10 against the walls of the U.S. Embassy, Alan Carter climbed onto  
11 the roof with a small group of colleagues as helicopters  
12 alternated rapidly between landing and liftoff.

13 Carter had been ordered onto the first chopper, but he  
14 refused to leave while Vietnamese staff were still trapped  
15 elsewhere in the city. He felt responsible for them.

16 Hours later, in the early morning of April 30, he finally  
17 boarded the second-to-last helicopter off the embassy roof,  
18 carrying little more than an attaché case and the clothes on his  
19 back.

20 Decades later, Carter would describe the entire U.S.  
21 involvement in Vietnam in searing terms:

22 “There was no national interest to be involved. We  
23 stumbled into it stupidly, got over-committed into it stupidly,  
24 fought it stupidly, and left it stupidly,” he said.

25 He described it as “a fabric of deception and lies to the  
26 government, to itself, and to the American people.”

27 \* \* \*

28 THE WORDS STILL carry particular weight. Carter was no  
29 outsider or activist academic. He was a World War II veteran, a  
30 longtime U.S. Information Agency (USIA) officer, and a member  
31 of the senior staff at the U.S. Embassy in Saigon during the final  
32 months of the war.

33 He was responsible for public affairs and the USIS  
34 program, and he sat in the very meetings where intelligence  
35 assessments were rewritten to fit political goals.

36 Following his retirement from government in the early  
37 1980s, Carter lived in Brattleboro and Westmister West for over  
38 30 years.

39 He joined The Experiment in International Living, the  
40 organization that would grow into World Learning Inc., as vice  
41 president for international programs. He later served as executive  
42 vice president, acting president, and chief operating officer for  
43 the organization.

44 In a quiet room, much later and far from the chaos of  
45 Saigon in 1975, Carter would sit before a group of American  
46 students and something that would still startle him: He called the  
47 entire U.S. involvement in Vietnam “ridiculous” and “a fabric of  
48 deception and lies — to the government, to itself, and to the  
49 American people.”

50 It’s not the kind of sentence you’d expect from a senior  
51 U.S. diplomat who was on the roof of the American Embassy in  
52 Saigon, boarding the second-to-last helicopter out as the city fell.  
53 But that is precisely who Alan Carter was, and that is exactly  
54 what he would say.

55 I knew Alan Carter for over 25 years, until his passing on  
56 Jan. 25, 2019. During that time he spoke to me and various adult  
57 and student groups on numerous occasions, both formal and  
58 informal.

59 Alan Carter’s story is not just about a war gone wrong. It’s  
60 also about what happens when an entire diplomatic mission  
61 becomes captive to its own illusions.

62 \* \* \*

63 ALAN CARTER’S PATH to Saigon did not begin in a policy  
64 seminar or a war room. It began first in World War II and then at  
65 the University of Michigan, where he majored in political science  
66 and initially imagined a career in the Foreign Service.

67 After the war, however, he fell in love with broadcasting,  
68 and he spent about 10 years pursuing his dream to become “the  
69 Edward R. Murrow of my day.”

70 A turning point came when an old friend, by then a  
71 speechwriter in the Eisenhower White House and later a liaison  
72 to the USIA, called and said, “We need someone with  
73 broadcasting background to go overseas for us.” Carter barely  
74 knew what USIA was, but he went to Washington, took the  
75 interviews, and was soon posted abroad.

76 That decision began what he calls the most important of  
77 his three careers: a long government career in public diplomacy  
78 and information work. He eventually served as counselor of

79 public affairs in South Vietnam, heading the USIA's U.S.  
80 Information Service (USIS) program in Saigon.

81 He emphasized that despite Vietnam, he still viewed  
82 federal service as "an extraordinarily rewarding important thing  
83 to do," and he encouraged young people who aren't naturally  
84 entrepreneurial but want to serve their country to consider the  
85 option seriously.

86 \* \* \*

87 CARTER'S POSTING to Vietnam was laced with irony. Long  
88 before he arrived in Saigon, he had already been philosophically  
89 and conceptually opposed to the Vietnam War.

90 In the 1960s, while he was assistant director for Near  
91 East and South Asia at USIA in Washington, nearly every U.S.  
92 agency was stressing "counter-revolutionary warfare" and the  
93 need to confront communism worldwide. Carter, by contrast,  
94 aligned himself with many Americans who viewed the U.S.  
95 intervention in Vietnam as fundamentally misguided.

96 In 1968, the influential ambassador to Vietnam, Ellsworth  
97 Bunker (who called Dummerston his home), contacted Carter by  
98 cable, requesting him to lead what was then the largest  
99 psychological warfare unit ever mounted by a U.S. civilian  
100 agency: the Joint U.S. Public Affairs Office (JUSPAO). Carter  
101 refused — first, because he didn't believe in "psychological  
102 warfare," and second, because he objected to U.S. policy in  
103 Vietnam.

104 The Paris Peace Accords had been signed in 1973; U.S.  
105 combat troops were gone, leaving behind only advisors; and  
106 Washington told itself that the war was effectively over. When  
107 Carter was offered a senior post in Vietnam as minister-counselor  
108 for public affairs, it felt harder to refuse on moral grounds, since  
109 his objections had centered on a war that, officially at least, had  
110 ended.

111 He accepted. In doing so, he walked into what he would  
112 later call "as bad an embassy as I have ever worked with" — an

113 embassy warped by ideology, saturated with Cold War orthodoxy,  
114 and prone to manipulating facts for political effect.

115 \* \* \*

116 THE U.S. EMBASSY in Saigon, under Ambassador Graham  
117 Martin, was unlike any Carter had served in. Instead of staffing it  
118 with people who held a diverse mix of views, Martin had  
119 imported his own cadre of true believers — “cold warriors”  
120 fiercely committed to the South Vietnamese cause and the U.S.  
121 mission.

122 Carter described the ambassador as dedicated and as a  
123 “super-patriot” but said his zeal warped his judgment. Martin, he  
124 said, ran the embassy like a “one-man band,” surrounding  
125 himself with “yes men.”

126 Before accepting the assignment, Carter confronted  
127 Martin in Washington. The prospective employee warned the  
128 ambassador that was known not as a yes-man, that he disagreed  
129 with many of the embassy’s policies and practices, and that he  
130 couldn’t imagine why Martin would want him on the team.

131 Martin replied that he was criticized for being  
132 surrounded only by loyalists and wanted at least one person on  
133 staff who might say “no” from time to time.

134 Carter later concluded Martin “didn’t mean a damn  
135 word” of it.

136 Once in Saigon, Carter quickly saw what some State  
137 Department officials in Washington already suspected: The  
138 embassy’s reporting was distorted, politicized, and sometimes  
139 flatly dishonest.

140 \* \* \*

141 TWO LAYERS OF misrepresentation stood out to Carter.

142 • The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) did not  
143 control the Mekong Delta. Local U.S. officials reported this  
144 reality to Saigon, but the embassy’s reports to Washington did not  
145 acknowledge this. If Congress knew the military situation was  
146 deteriorating, the embassy believed, it would not appropriate the  
147 funds they wanted.

148 • By late 1974 and early 1975, U.S. intelligence showed  
149 the North Vietnamese extending and supplying the Ho Chi Minh  
150 Trail and building up for a new campaign. If Congress knew that  
151 were the case, it would be reluctant to provide military aid. An  
152 adjusted story would keep the dollars flowing.

153 Carter explained that this was not simply about one  
154 man's mendacity. The entire senior structure — from ambassador,  
155 to deputy chief of mission, to political and economic counselors,  
156 to defense attachés — participated in the “fudging of the truth.”  
157 Most had been brought in precisely because they already agreed  
158 with Martin's line.

159 This pattern echoed what they were reading in Neil  
160 Sheehan's *A Bright Shining Lie* and what another insider, CIA  
161 officer Frank Snepp, documented in his book *A Decent Interval*  
162 — a title referencing then-Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's  
163 view that the U.S. needed only a “decent interval” between its  
164 withdrawal and South Vietnam's inevitable collapse.

165 Carter agreed: From start to finish, the war was a chain of  
166 misjudgments and deceptions.

167 \* \* \*

168 WHEN CARTER ARRIVED in September 1974, conventional  
169 wisdom in the embassy was that the U.S. and Saigon had at least  
170 two more years — the “decent interval” Kissinger had spoken of  
171 — to shore up the South Vietnamese state.

172 That illusion lasted about a week. At his first senior staff  
173 meeting, Carter saw how dissent would be handled.

174 Two outgoing consuls from the field spoke candidly  
175 about the embassy's toxic relationship with the press and the gap  
176 between what journalists saw and what the embassy was saying.  
177 Carter backed them up.

178 Martin responded with a short, blistering rebuke about  
179 newcomers who arrived full of “advice” without understanding  
180 what they were talking about. Everyone in the room understood  
181 he was talking about Carter.

182 Afterwards, Carter confronted him privately:

183           “You just shot me down,” he said. “I haven’t been here a  
184 week, and you shot me down, and nobody is going to pay any  
185 attention to me anymore.”

186           Martin feigned surprise and denial, but, as Carter  
187 explains, the damage was done.

188           \* \* \*

189           BY EARLY 1975, what began as a limited North  
190 Vietnamese campaign escalated unexpectedly.

191           Hanoi’s planners had not intended an immediate  
192 endgame; they expected stiff resistance. Instead, they discovered  
193 a “totally enfeebled” South Vietnamese army and started pushing  
194 harder, even though their logistics weren’t fully prepared for a  
195 rapid victory.

196           In the central highlands and coastal areas, cities like  
197 Pleiku and Da Nang became symbols of that unraveling.

198           As the military situation deteriorated in January–March  
199 1975, the embassy grudgingly turned to “what if” planning. What  
200 if South Vietnam were overrun? How would the U.S. extricate its  
201 own personnel and the Vietnamese who had worked closely with  
202 it?

203           Carter’s section alone had 32 American staff, and  
204 approximately 300 Vietnamese employees, plus many local  
205 contacts in ministries and the media who would be at risk if  
206 collaborators were labeled as American.

207           Embassy units were ordered to draw up priority lists of  
208 who should be evacuated: those in politically sensitive positions,  
209 those with long service to the Americans, those with visible ties  
210 to U.S. programs (like information and media), and key contacts  
211 in Vietnamese institutions.

212           He and his executive officer worked late into the night,  
213 night after night, trying to sort people into categories and rank  
214 them. Simultaneously, the human pressure outside his villa and  
215 office mounted.

216           Every morning, when he stepped outside his villa ringed  
217 with barbed wire, he would find one to three dozen Vietnamese  
218 people waiting.

219           They believed Carter's title gave him the power to save  
220 them. Many fell to their knees; some begged him to take even  
221 just their children or their spouses. All were terrified of what  
222 might happen if the communists identified them as pro-  
223 American.

224           Carter would later call this one of the most emotionally  
225 draining experiences of his life. And there was very little he could  
226 do. Fixed-wing flights out of Saigon were limited and already  
227 heavily reserved for the most sensitive cases.

228           \* \* \*

229           ONE INCIDENT from the spring of 1975 would, in Carter's  
230 view, illustrate Martin's "Machiavellian" mind at work. A plane  
231 loaded with Vietnamese orphans crashed shortly after takeoff,  
232 killing everyone on board.

233           A few days earlier, Carter had been called on his secure  
234 line from Washington. A State Department official, distrustful of  
235 the embassy's reporting, asked for his personal assessment of the  
236 situation on the ground.

237           Carter cabled back that there was "fear bordering on  
238 panic" and that one of the great challenges would be whether the  
239 U.S. could safely evacuate itself and vulnerable Vietnamese  
240 through the "pandemonium" that might come.

241           After the plane crash, Martin summoned Carter to his  
242 residence, ostensibly to discuss the tragedy as a "public affairs  
243 problem."

244           Instead, he launched into a speech.

245           Martin said the crash should "never have happened" and  
246 claimed that if he had been consulted, he would never have  
247 allowed that type of plane to be used.

248           The ambassador then blamed the crash, indirectly but  
249 clearly, on "people who go around cutting me off from the advice

250 I would be giving Washington” — a jab at Carter and his direct  
251 communication earlier.

252 Carter pressed him: “What you’re saying is that I am  
253 responsible for the plane crash?”

254 Martin didn’t quite say “yes,” but his implication was  
255 unmistakable.

256 For Carter, this was a stunning example of a leader  
257 twisting reality to serve his own political narrative and protect his  
258 authority.

259 \* \* \*

260 THE EMBASSY EVACUATION concept had three tiers:

261 1. Primary tier: Fixed-wing aircraft from Saigon’s Tân Sơn  
262 Nhất Airport.

263 2. Secondary/complementary tier: evacuation by sea.

264 3. Last resort: Helicopters, which were considered  
265 dangerous because they were low-flying, carried small loads, and  
266 were thought likely targets for soldiers of a betrayed South  
267 Vietnamese army who might fire on departing Americans.

268 In practice, the worst-case scenario became reality.

269 On the night of April 28–29, 1975, senior embassy staff  
270 — including Carter — met to review the situation. Artillery had  
271 reportedly blasted the runways, making fixed-wing operations  
272 impossible.

273 Martin refused at first to fully believe it and insisted on  
274 driving to the airport himself to inspect the runways. When he  
275 finally did so, he accepted the reality and triggered the helicopter  
276 plan.

277 Meanwhile, Carter was juggling grim responsibilities:

278 • His USIS compound, several kilometers from the  
279 embassy, housed about 200 Vietnamese who had “overnighted”  
280 there in hopes of catching the next plane out.

281 • His staff lists, carefully assembled over weeks, had  
282 been dumped in a pile somewhere in the embassy and were now  
283 useless.

284 • Late in the process he was ordered to help create new  
285 lists for another 10,000 evacuees overnight, even as the military  
286 situation collapsed.

287 As fixed-wing operations ended, convoys of buses tried  
288 to move people from Saigon to helicopter pickup points. Carter  
289 later recalled helping a Marine captain who didn't even know the  
290 locations of all the designated pickup zones, improvising under  
291 fire to get people in place.

292 \* \* \*

293 ON APRIL 29, the embassy grounds were ringed by  
294 thousands of desperate Vietnamese, pressed against the walls and  
295 gates. Inside, staff were blowing safes, shredding documents, and  
296 burning files.

297 Helicopters began landing not only on the embassy's  
298 helipad but also on several other U.S.-controlled rooftops in  
299 Saigon which had been fitted with landing zones in recent  
300 months.

301 Carter was ordered to board the first helicopter at around  
302 1 p.m. with his key American staff. He led them up to the roof.

303 He then refused to get on.

304 "I put my crew on the plane, and I would not go. I stayed  
305 behind because I had left Vietnamese people, my staff in  
306 particular, in the compound," he said. "They were trapped."

307 The plan — already badly frayed — had been reduced to  
308 a brutal directive: Only Americans would be permitted on the  
309 final lifts, despite explicit promises made earlier to senior  
310 Vietnamese staff that if the Americans evacuated, they would take  
311 them, too.

312 Carter tried to find a way to reach his Vietnamese  
313 colleagues.

314 He phoned the compound and told them to slip out, one  
315 by one, and make their way to his villa halfway between the  
316 compound and the embassy. He hoped he could walk or smuggle  
317 them into the embassy through the crowds.

318 But transport had broken down; bus drivers were  
319 deserting, vehicles failing, emergency plans collapsing.

320 When members of Carter's staff called the Marine guard  
321 at the embassy to ask for him, they were told — correctly, from  
322 the Marines' perspective — that their boss had left on an earlier  
323 helicopter. Believing he had abandoned them, they scattered  
324 from the villa for their own safety.

325 Carter spent hours making calls and trying to locate  
326 transport, but never found them before he too was forced to  
327 leave.

328 He eventually boarded the second-to-last helicopter out  
329 of Saigon in the early hours of April 30, alongside a few  
330 American correspondents, the ambassador's secretary, and the  
331 ambassador's dog, a detail that would still sting him years later  
332 for what it symbolizes about priorities in that final chaos.

333 \* \* \*

334 WHEN SPEAKING ABOUT his last days in Vietnam, Carter  
335 would take pains to emphasize two things:

336 The helicopter pilots and crews were extraordinary, he  
337 said. They would flying 24 hours straight, often ditching perfectly  
338 good helicopters off aircraft carriers to make room for more  
339 evacuees, and getting "all the Americans out" and at least "a  
340 handful" of Vietnamese employees and key civilians in the last  
341 lifts.

342 Secondly, contrary to many fears, no widespread revenge  
343 fire came from South Vietnamese troops. Carter knew of only a  
344 few shots taken at helicopters, causing minimal damage at worst.

345 Still, for months afterward, Carter would wake up with  
346 nightmares about the people he could not get out. He worried  
347 not just about those he knew personally, but about the entire  
348 process:

349 "We left people behind that we swore we would take out  
350 if we got out and we didn't," he would say. A lot of people got  
351 out that shouldn't have been taken out or gotten out."

352 Every time Alan Carter spoke of the last days of Vietnam  
353 and his efforts to evacuate his Vietnamese staff and others who  
354 had aided the American effort there, he would become visibly  
355 emotional and moved to tears.

356 They had been left behind.  
357 It weighed on him to the end of his life.

####END TEXT####

BIO/COATTAIL:

####BEGIN BIO/COATTAIL####

358 **BILL HOLIDAY**, a retired veteran social studies teacher of  
359 48 years, believes in exposing students to primary sources in  
360 history and would introduce his students at Brattleboro Union  
361 High School to people — like Alan Carter — who could tell them  
362 firsthand about their lived history. Holiday is a member of the  
363 board of trustees of the Brattleboro Historical Society.

####END BIO/COATTAIL####

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VIDEO:

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LOGLINE (SOCIAL MEDIA):

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