

HENRY KISSINGER: The Evacuation of Vietnam

On April 30, 1975, the South Vietnamese government collapsed and surrendered to North Vietnam. The long war had finally ended. Cambodia had already fallen thirteen days earlier, and Laos was soon to follow. In the days before Saigon's collapse, the United States conducted a massive evacuation project to bring out most of the Americans who were still there, as well as thousands of South Vietnamese who felt they would be endangered by the Communist takeover. On April 29 Secretary of State Kissinger held a news conference explaining the evacuation and answering reporters' questions on the future of American foreign policy. Portions of the news conference are reprinted here.

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Secretary Kissinger. Ladies and gentlemen, when the President spoke before the Congress, he stated as our objective the stabilization of the situation in Vietnam.

We made clear at that time, as well as before many Congressional hearings, that our purpose was to bring about the most controlled and the most humane solution that was possible and that these objectives required the course which the President had set.

Our priorities were as follows: We sought to save the American lives still in Vietnam; we tried to rescue as many South Vietnamese that had worked with the United States for 15 years, in reliance on our commitments, as we possibly could; and, we sought to bring about as humane an outcome as was achievable under the conditions that existed.

Over the past 2 weeks, the American personnel in Vietnam have been progressively reduced. Our objective was to reduce at a rate that was significant enough so that we would finally be able to evacuate rapidly, but which would not produce a panic which might prevent

anybody from getting out.

Our objective was also to fulfill the human obligation which we felt to the tens of thousands of South Vietnamese who had worked with us for over a decade.

Finally, we sought through various intermediaries to bring about as humane a political evolution as we could.

By Sunday evening, the personnel of our mission had been reduced to 950, and there were 8,000 South Vietnamese to be considered in a particularly high-risk category—between five and eight thousand. We do not know the exact number.

On Monday evening Washington time around 5 o'clock, which was Tuesday morning in Saigon, the airport in Tan Son Nhut was rocketed and received artillery fire.

The President called an NSC meeting. He decided that if the shelling stopped by dawn Saigon time, we would attempt to operate with fixed-wing aircraft from Tan Son Nhut airport for one more day to remove the high-risk South Vietnamese, together with all the Defense Attaché's Office [DAO], which was located

near the Tan Son Nhut airport. He also ordered a substantial reduction of the remaining American personnel in South Vietnam.

I may point out that the American personnel in Saigon was divided into two groups; one with the Defense Attaché's Office, which was located near the Tan Son Nhut airport; the second one, which was related to the Embassy and was with the United States mission in downtown Saigon.

The shelling did stop early in the morning on Tuesday, Saigon time, or about 9 p.m. last night, Washington time. We then attempted to land C-130s, but found that the population at the airport had got out of control and had flooded the runways. It proved impossible to land any more fixed-wing aircraft.

The President thereupon ordered that the DAO personnel, together with those civilians that had been made ready to be evacuated, be moved to the DAO compound which is near Tan Son Nhut airport. And at about 11 o'clock last night, he ordered the evacuation of all Americans from Tan Son Nhut and from the Embassy as well.

This operation has been going on all day which, of course, is night in Saigon, under difficult circumstances. And the total number of those evacuated numbers about 6,500—we will have the exact figures for you tomorrow—of which about a thousand are Americans.

Our Ambassador has left, and the evacuation can be said to be completed.

In the period since the President spoke to the Congress, we have therefore succeeded in evacuating all of the Americans who were in South Vietnam, losing the two Marines last night to rocket fire and two pilots today on a helicopter.

We succeeded in evacuating something on the order of 55,000 South Viet-

Wide World



Vietnamese refugees are hauled aboard ship near the South Vietnamese city of Hue in March 1975, shortly before Saigon fell to the Communists.

namese, and we hope that we have contributed to a political evolution that may spare the South Vietnamese some of the more drastic consequences of a political change. But this remains to be seen; this last point remains to be seen.

As far as the Administration is concerned, I can only underline the point made by the President. We do not believe that this is a time for recrimination. It is a time to heal wounds, to look at our international obligations, and to remember that peace and progress in the world has depended importantly on American commitment and American convictions and that the peace and progress of our own people is closely tied to that of the rest of the world.

I will be glad to answer your questions. . . .

Q. Mr. Secretary, do you consider the United States now owes any allegiance at all to the Paris pact? Are we now bound in any way by the Paris agreements?

Secretary Kissinger. Well, as far as the

United States is concerned, there aren't many provisions of the Paris agreement that are still relevant. As far as the North Vietnamese are concerned, they have stated that they wish to carry out the Paris accords, though by what definition is not fully clear to me. We would certainly support this if it has any meaning.

Q. May I ask one followup? Do you now favor American aid in rebuilding North Vietnam?

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Secretary Kissinger. No, I do not favor American aid for rebuilding North Vietnam.

Q. How about South Vietnam?

Secretary Kissinger. With respect to South Vietnam, we will have to see what kind of government emerges and, indeed, whether there is going to be a South Vietnam. We would certainly look at particular specific humanitarian requests that can be carried out by humanitarian agencies, but we do believe that the primary responsibility should fall on those who supplied the weapons for this political change. . . .

Q. Mr. Secretary, what caused the breakdown of the intent which was spoken of earlier on the Hill to try to achieve a measure of self-determination for the people of South Vietnam, and what is your total assessment now of the effectiveness or the noneffectiveness of the whole Paris accord operation, which you said at the outset was intended to achieve peace with honor for the United States?

Secretary Kissinger. Until Sunday night, we thought there was some considerable hope that the North Vietnamese would not seek a solution by purely military means. And when the transfer of power to General Minh took place, a person who had been designated by the other

side as a counterpart worth talking to—they would be prepared to talk with—we thought that a negotiated solution in the next few days was highly probable.

Sometime Sunday night, the North Vietnamese obviously changed signal. Why that is, we do not yet know, nor do I exclude that now that the American presence is totally removed and very little military structure is left in South Vietnam, that there may not be a sort of negotiation. But what produced this sudden shift to a military option or what would seem to us to be a sudden shift to a military option, I have not had a sufficient opportunity to analyze.

Now, as to the effectiveness of the Paris accords, I think it is important to remember the mood in this country at the time that the Paris accords were being negotiated. I think it is worth remembering that the principal criticism that was then made was that the terms we insisted on were too tough, not that the terms were too generous.

We wanted what was considered peace with honor—was that the United States would not end a war by overthrowing a government with which it had been associated. That still seems like an objective that was correct.

Now, there were several other assumptions that were made at that time that were later falsified by events that were beyond the control of, and that were indeed unforeseeable by anybody who negotiated these agreements, including the disintegration of, or the weakening of, executive authority in the United States for reasons unconnected with foreign policy considerations.

So, the premises of the Paris accords in terms of aid, of the possibility of aid, and in terms of other factors, tended to disintegrate. I see no purpose now in reviewing that particular history. Within the

context of the time, it seemed the right thing to do.

Q. Mr. Secretary, a followup question on that. What is the current relationship of the United States to the South Vietnamese political grouping, or whatever you would call it?

Secretary Kissinger. We will have to see what grouping emerges out of whatever negotiations should now take place between the two South Vietnamese sides. After we have seen what grouping emerges and what degree of independence it has, then we can make a decision about what our political relationship to it is. We have not made a decision on that.

Q. Would you say diplomatic relations are in abeyance with the government in South Vietnam?

Secretary Kissinger. I think that is a fair statement.

Q. Mr. Secretary, looking back on the war now, would you say that the war was in vain and, what do you feel it accomplished?

Secretary Kissinger. I think it will be a long time before Americans will be able to talk or write about the war with some passion. It is clear that the war did not achieve the objectives of those who wanted the original involvement, nor the objectives of those who sought to end that involvement, which they found on terms which seemed to them compatible with the sacrifices that had been made.

What lessons we should draw from it, I think we should reserve for another occasion. But I don't think that we can solve the problem of having entered the conflict too lightly by leaving it too lightly, either.

Q. Mr. Secretary, looking toward the future, has America been so stunned by the experience of Vietnam that it will never again come to the military or economic aid of an ally? I am talking specifi-

cally in the case of Israel.

Secretary Kissinger. As I pointed out in a speech a few weeks ago, one lesson we must learn from this experience is that we must be very careful in the commitments we make, but that we should scrupulously honor those commitments we do make.

I believe that the experience in the war, that the war has had, can make us more mature in the commitments we undertake and more determined to maintain those we have. I would therefore think that with relation to other countries, including Israel, that no lessons should be drawn by the enemies of our friends from the experiences in Vietnam. . . .

Q. Mr. Secretary, there is a new Asia developing after the Indochina situation. What will the priorities of the United States be in recognizing its existing commitments and in making new ones?

Secretary Kissinger. We will have to assess the impact of Indochina on our allies and on other countries in that area and on their perceptions of the United States. And we will have to assess, also, what role the United States can responsibly play over an indefinite period of time, because surely another lesson we should draw from the Indochina experience is that a foreign policy must be sustained over decades if it is to be effective and, if it cannot be, then it has to be tailored to what is sustainable.

The President has already reaffirmed our alliance with Japan, our defense treaty with Korea, and we, of course, also have treaty obligations and important bases in the Philippines. We will soon be in consultation with many other countries in that area, including Indonesia and Singapore and Australia and New Zealand, and we hope to crystallize an Asian policy that is suited to present circumstances with close consultation with our friends.