

WASH/22 - NYX - APRIL 30, 1975.

TO: TIME SPECIAL SECTION

FM: NEIL MACNEIL, WASHINGTON (DS)

FALL OF SAIGON -- TAKE II: SENATORS' VIEW
AND
EVACUATION -- TAKE I: BRIEFING THE LEADERSHIP

THE CALLS WENT OUT FROM THE WHITE HOUSE IN MID-MORNING, AND AT 11:30 TUESDAY THE LEADERS OF CONGRESS WERE ASSEMBLED AROUND THE CABINET TABLE AT THE WHITE HOUSE. THE PRESIDENT ENTERED THE ROOM, HIS FACE DEEPLY ANXIOUS, HIS MANNER TENSE. HE SHOOK HANDS WITH SPEAKER ALBERT, WITH MIKE MANSFIELD, WHOSE SEATS WERE ON EITHER SIDE OF HIM.

FORD NODDED TO THE OTHERS, SPOKE THEIR NAMES: "HI, TIP. HI, BOB, HOW ARE YOU?"

HE WAS UNSMILING, AND WITH HIM CAME THE SECRETARIES OF STATE AND DEFENSE. AND IT WAS AN ALL-DEADLY-BUSINESS SESSION, UNRELIEVED BY SMALL TALK, WITHOUT A TRACE OF HUMOR. THE PRESIDENT BRIEFED THE LEADERS OVER-ALL. KISSINGER BRIEFED THEM ON THE DIPLOMATIC SEGMENTS, SCHLESINGER ON THE MILITARY.

"WE'D FIXED MONDAY FOR ALL OF THEM TO BE OUT OF THERE," SAID PRESIDENT FORD.

IT DIDN'T WORK OUT THAT WAY. COMMUNIST ARTILLERY AND ROCKET ATTACKS KNOCKED OUT THE SAIGON AIRPORT.

"WE WERE GOING TO SEND IN C-130S," FORD SAID. "THE ROCKETS PREVENTED THE C-130S FROM COMING IN."

THEN WHEN THE ROCKET ATTACKS CEASED, FORD SAID, THE PLANES COULDN'T OPERATE OUT OF SAIGON BECAUSE OF THE VIETNAMESE TRYING TO BOARD THEM. SO FORD ORDERED THE HELICOPTERS IN, AT 10:30 MONDAY NIGHT, WASHINGTON TIME. HE HAD BY THEN CONCLUDED A SESSION AT THE WHITE HOUSE WITH THE NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL.

PRESIDENT FORD WAS INTENSE THROUGHOUT THE MEETING WITH THE LEADERS, AND DURING THE HOUR-LONG SESSION WITH THE BIPARTISAN CONGRESSIONAL LEADERS, HE WAS RECEIVING MESSAGES FROM THE FAR EAST. EVERYTHING WAS GOING WELL.

AT ONE POINT, FORD TURNED TO THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE. "I WANT THOSE HELICOPTERS TO KEEP MOVING, JIM, UNTIL EVERY AMERICAN IS OUT OF THERE."

"EVERYTHING IS GOING ON SCHEDULE, MR. PRESIDENT," SAID SCHLESINGER. "I'M PROUD OF THE AMERICAN FORCES AND THE EVACUATION JOB WE'RE DOING."

AT THE CONCLUSION OF THE SESSION WITH THE LEADERS, FORD HAD WORD THAT ONLY 89 AMERICANS WERE STILL IN SAIGON, WAITING TO BE RESCUED. ALMOST COMPLETE, BUT NOT COMPLETE.

HE TOLD THE LEADERS THAT TWO MARINES HAD BEEN KILLED. HE TOLD THEM THERE WAS ONE INSTANCE OF AMERICANS RETURNING FIRE. AND HE TOLD THEM THAT THEY HAD TRIED TO RETRIEVE FROM VIETNAM (SAIGON) WHAT THEY COULD IN HIGH-COST PLANES AND TECHNICAL EQUIPMENT IN THESE LAST DAYS. "WE'VE SALVAGED ABOUT \$400 TO \$500 MILLIONS WORTH," SAID FORD.

NOT MUCH FROM THE BILLIONS SENT THERE.

FORD TOLD THEM HE HAD SUMMONED THE NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL INTO SESSION AT 7:30 MONDAY NIGHT, THERE GAVE THE ORDER TO GET ALL AMERICANS EVACUATED FROM VIETNAM. HE RECEIVED WORD OF GENERAL MINH'S ORDERING ALL AMERICANS OUT AT 1:30 TUESDAY MORNING.

FORD TOLD THE LEADERS THAT HE'D DRAWN FUNDS -- "BORROWED" THEM -- FROM PUBLIC LAW 614 AUTHORITIES TO PAY FOR THE OPERATION, NEEDED THOSE FUNDS REPLENISHED. TIP O'NEILL TOLD HIM THAT THE VIETNAM-EVACUATION-WELFARE BILL NOW BEFORE THE HOUSE IS "MOOT." DOC MORGAN, CHAIRMAN OF THE SPONSORING HOUSE COMMITTEE, SAID HE DIDN'T WANT TO PROCEED WITH THAT BILL, WANTED TO START ANEW.

THE LEADERS WERE TOLD THAT, WEATHER PERMITTING, ALL AMERICANS WOULD BE EVACUATED BY 2 O'CLOCK TUESDAY -- THAT DAY. KISSINGER WOULD HOLD A NEWS CONFERENCE AS SOON AS THE LAST ONE WAS OUT, NOT BEFORE. WE'RE TOLD THE LAST COPTER LEFT AT 3:45P.M. WASHINGTON TIME.

KISSINGER WAS ASKED: HOW MANY VIETNAMESE DID WE GET OUT?

KISSINGER: APPROXIMATELY 50,000.

HE WAS ASKED HOW THEY WOULD BE DISTRIBUTED, WHERE WOULD THEY GO, HOW MANY WOULD COME TO THE U.S.

"WE'RE ASKING DIFFERENT NATIONS TO TAKE THEM," KISSINGER SAID.

BUT HE MADE IT PLAIN THAT HE AND HIS PEOPLE WERE HAVING LITTLE SUCCESS WITH THIS TALK. HE ESTIMATED THAT THE U.S. COULD PERSUADE OTHER COUNTRIES TO TAKE PERHAPS 10,000 OF THE VIETNAMESE, THE REST WOULD BE SETTLED IN THE U.S.

THE LEADERS WERE TOLD THAT PLANES WERE BEING FLOWN OUT OF VIETNAM IN THE PAST 24 HOURS BY SOUTH VIETNAMESE PILOTS, THAT SOME HAD FLOWN PLANES TO THAILAND, THAT OTHERS HAD FLOWN THEM OUT TO SEA, THEN DITCHED THEM CLOSE TO U.S. NAVAL SHIPS -- ESCAPING THEMSELVES, ALSO PREVENTING THE PLANES FROM FALLING TO THE COMMUNISTS.

THEY WERE TOLD THAT THE U.S. EMBASSY HAD BEEN STRIPPED OF EVERYTHING EARLY TUESDAY MORNING.

KISSINGER WAS ASKED TO PROJECT THE COURSE NOW IN SOUTH VIETNAM -- WHAT HE EXPECTED TO HAPPEN -- AND HE LAID OUT FOR THE LEADERS HIS ASSESSMENT OF THE RADICALLY-NEW SITUATION THERE.

HE TOLD THEM THAT HE AND HIS PEOPLE "ANTICIPATED" THAT A NEW "TRIPARTITE" GOVERNMENT WOULD BE FORMED MADE UP OF SOUTH VIETNAMESE, VIETCONG AND NORTH VIETNAMESE. HE SAID HE EXPECTED THAT THE COMMUNISTS WOULD PROVIDE SUCH A COALITION TRIPARTITE GOVERNMENT IN SUCH A WAY THAT NO ONE ELEMENT WOULD BE ABLE TO GET A STRONG FOOTHOLD ON CONTROL OF THE NEW SOUTH VIETNAMESE GOVERNMENT.

FURTHER, HE SAID, HE EXPECTED THAT WITHIN A YEAR, THE NEW CROWD WOULD PROBABLY CONDUCT A "PEBISCITE" OF NORTH AND SOUTH VIETNAM, MAKING SURE HOW THE VOTES FELL, AND THEREBY WARRANT THEIR UNIFYING THE TWO VIETNAMS INTO ONE REGIME.

IT WAS THIS, HE BELIEVED, AT WHICH THE HANOI CHAPS WERE TARGETED. THAT WAS WHAT LAY BEHIND HIS JUDGMENT THAT THEY WOULD NOT ALLOW A STRONG GOVERNMENT TO TAKE HOLD IN SOUTH VIETNAM.

A SIGNIFICANT, MAYBE EVEN STUNNING, THING DID NOT HAPPEN AT THIS SESSION WITH THE LEADERS OF CONGRESS AND THE TOP ADMINISTRATION CHIEFS: NO ONE MENTIONED ANYTHING ABOUT A COMMUNIST BLOODBATH.

"THE WORD WASN'T EVEN MENTIONED," SAID ONE OF THE CONGRESSIONAL LEADERS.

AFTER ALL THE HORROR TALK OF THE PAST, THAT SEEMED CURIOUS INDEED.

THERE WERE NO SOCIAL AMENITIES AT THIS SESSION: A CUP OF COFFEE WAS PLACED IN FRONT OF EACH ONE THERE. THAT WAS ALL.

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YOU ALREADY KNOW THE ATTITUDE OF CONGRESS ON THIS FINAL CATASTROPHE FOR SOUTH VIETNAM, WHICH NOW WILL DISAPPEAR AS AN INDEPENDENT ENTITY OF ITS OWN. IT WAS GRIM, MUTED, SOMEWHAT TENSE UNDERLAY -- BUT PROFOUND RELIEF.

"AS FAR AS THE WAR IS CONCERNED," SAID HOUSE MAJORITY LEADER TIP O'NEILL, "IT'S WRAPPED UP. AM I GLAD THAT WE'RE OUT OF THERE."

SAID MIKE MANSFIELD: "IT'S THE END OF AN ERA, THE END OF THE POST WORLD WAR II ERA. WE HAVE TO BIND UP THE WOUNDS, AS FORD SAID, AND START ANEW. WE HAVE TO RECOGNIZE THAT WE ARE LIMITED IN OUR RESOURCES; WE CAN'T POLICE THE GLOBE. THAT DOESN'T MEAN A RETREAT INTO ISOLATIONISM. WITH THIS SHRUNKEN GLOBE, IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO BE ISOLATIONIST, EVEN IF YOU WANTED TO BE. IT HAD TO HAPPEN. IT HAD TO COME TO A CONCLUSION SUCH AS THIS. I HOPE WE'VE LEARNED FROM WHAT WE'VE GONE THROUGH AND THAT WE NEVER GET INVOLVED IN ANY CIVIL WARS AGAIN. THE PRESIDENT SET THE PROPER TONE: PUT IT BEHIND US. BIND UP THE WOUNDS."

SAID JACK JAVITS: "I'M GLAD WE'RE OUT, WHATEVER THE GRIEF. WE'RE OUT AND IT'S A GOOD THING."

JC--2:19PM