

Washington merry-go-round

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with Les Whitten

WASHINGTON — President Ford has been trying delicately to extricate his foot from his mouth ever since the Saigon surrender.

The sudden collapse of South Vietnam caught him with some bygone rhetoric stuck in his throat. He has been obliged to make some quick revisions, to wit:

—The President had persistently sounded the warning that the United States would lose credibility with its other allies if more military aid weren't rushed to Saigon. The new line, according to our White House sources, is that U.S. credibility is still high and that our allies can depend upon U.S. commitments.

—The President had preached that a Communist victory in Vietnam would cause its Asian neighbors to fall like dominoes. Now he is spreading the word that he doesn't believe the domino theory after all.

—Ford had implied that Congress was to blame for South Vietnam's military reverses for refusing to vote more aid. This line was eagerly adopted by Saigon leaders looking for a scapegoat for their own mishandling of the war. Now the President is trying to correct the impression that the United States was responsible for the fall of South Vietnam.

—Ford had called for an emergency appropriation of \$700 million in military aid to save Saigon. At the same time, the Joint Chiefs of Staff urged that billions worth of military equipment should be hauled out of South Vietnam before it fell into Communist hands. It would have made the President look silly, however, to removed weapons while he was pushing for more military aid.

Therefore, U.S. Ambassador Graham Martin blocked U.S. forces from salvaging an enormous arsenal, which the Communists have now inherited. The irony is that the Communists now possess far more U.S. equipment than they ever received from their own Russian and Chinese allies. This contradicts still another Ford implication that Hanoi got more military assistance than did Saigon.

RED FACES: Duane Freer, a Federal Aviation Administration bigwig, presented a flight safety award the other day to DuBois, Pa., flight station. Then, ceremoniously, he led an FAA delegation to a waiting government plane, took the controls and taxied the plane into a ravine.

An investigation of the accident has

Grandly, the FAA bigshots boarded their official DC3 and, as the crowd waved goodbye, the plane wobbled down the runway like a drunken duck and plunged into a ravine.

The crowd rushed to the ruined plane and began to crowbar out the distinguished visitors. Some were seriously injured, including Freer.

The National Transportation Safety Board is now investigating the accident. Their confidential, preliminary findings have left FAA headquarters gasping with incredulity.

The board has found that Freer, although rated to fly light aircraft, had no rating to fly a DC3. This is a violation both of FAA regulations and the law.

It also appears that he was only partially belted into his seat. Worse, some of the FAA regulators, who require all commercial passengers to fasten seat belts, didn't obey their own rules. This apparently caused many of the injuries.

Finally, the confidential findings indicated that the FAA hotshots were to blame for the crash.

Footnote: A board spokesman declined to comment except to say no final report is expected until summer. James E. Dow, the acting FAA administrator, promised "an evenhanded approach" to the case. He told us the FAA would treat "infractions by FAA employees in the same manner as we treat infractions by others."

COLSON'S MANUSCRIPT: Charles Colson, the former White House tough guy who turned to Christianity, has completed 100,000 words of his book about Watergate.

He wrote much of the first draft by hand in prison. But now that he has been released, he dictates long passages to his wife, Patty.

Those who have seen his closely guarded manuscript say its message is that "a spiritual revival could well grow from Watergate."

Colson would tell us only that the book is about "what happens to a man when he accepts Christ in his life." His conversion, he says, helped him through the bleak prison months.

Colson hasn't yet selected a title for his book, although he has filled five pages of yellow pad paper with ideas for a name.

He refused to say how much his publisher, Chosen Books, is paying him for the manuscript. We have learned, however, that he turned down higher offers from larger publishers, because he preferred to deal with a small, religious-oriented firm.

Footnote: On two occasions, Colson has interrupted his writing to testify in secret before the Rockefeller Commission, which is investigating the Central Intelligence Agency. Sources close to the commission say he reiterated views he had raised 18 months ago that the CIA was deeply implicated in domestic dirty tricks.

now determined that the distinguished safety official was flying the plane illegally and that his fellow regulators had neglected to buckle their seat belts.

At an earlier airport luncheon, Freer extravagantly praised the DuBois station for guiding a pilot safely through an overcast on a near empty tank.

The luncheon crowd, speeches about air safety still echoing in their ears, gathered to see the important visitors off.