

Ford's Defense of U.S. Policy in Indochina

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WASHINGTON, April 3 —

President Ford positioned himself today, contrary to conventional political wisdom; as a defender of two decades of American policy in Indochina. We were right, said the President in his San Diego news conference; the fact that Indochina is shambles does not invalidate what we tried to do.

News
Analysis

With the possible exception of former Gov. Ronald Reagan of California, who has been threatening Mr. Ford from the Right, there may not be another politician in America who would have said what the President said—even though many of them, like Mr. Ford, have invested much of their careers in preventing Communist takeovers such as those that now loom.

The President said he thought the "romino theory" had "a great deal of credibility"; that he intended to push for \$300-million in additional military aid to the tottering Saigon regime, and possibly for more; that he continued to believe in "the will of the South Vietnamese people."

Like his predecessors in the White House he refused to give up on the situation in Southeast Asia—except that, operating under Congressionally imposed restraint, he said he had no intention of reintroducing American combatants. He regretted those restraints, the President said, because they denied to him the ability even implicitly to threaten intervention as a deterrent.

Mr. Ford's position was surprising, not only in view of the situation in Indochina—he himself talked at a private meeting earlier today of "a disaster of incredible proportions"—and not only in view of the conclusion of most politicians that

there is no longer any electoral value in defending past American policies in the war there.

It was most surprising in view of the emerging consensus within the White House that the time had come for Mr. Ford to stop blaming the Democrats for the debacle in Southeast Asia and to prepare the country for the probability of Communist governments in Saigon and in Phnom Penh.

Like his predecessors, Mr. Ford apparently feels himself a prisoner of his personal history and that of the nation in Indochina, unable to believe that so many lives and so much money could have been spent in a wrong-headed cause by

men he considered wise and well-motivated.

The President's problem is complicated, furthermore, by factors that not obtained in the past—fear that any expression of Vhavet or inconstancy might itself hasten the fall of the Saigon Government and that a rapid fall of that Government might make impossible the already herculean task of coping with the flood of refugees.

Relations With Congress

At first, Mr. Ford, while defending American policy, refrained from criticizing Congress. Indeed, he said that he was "not assessing the blame on anyone" for the events in

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South Vietnam, and commented that he considered it important for him to work with Congress.

But then the President's instinctive convictions seemed to burst to the surface, and he said that if the United States "had carried out the solemn commitments that were made in Paris," the American lives lost in Vietnam "would not have been in vain."

"But when I see us not carrying through," he added, in an obvious reference to Congressional unwillingness to send more weapons to Indochina, "then it raises a quite different question."

"If we [give] the South Vietnamese an opportunity to fight for their freedom . . . then

there was not a sacrifice that was inappropriate or unwise," he said.

Perhaps Mr. Ford will decide that he spoke too hastily, that he should say nothing to excite recriminations in the nation. But for the moment, at least, he has none too subtly suggested that if Congress refuses to put more arms in the hands of the South Vietnamese, Congress will bear the blame for invalidating the sacrifices of American fighting men.

Outlook Unclear

Some politicians fear that a steady stream of such suggestions could lead to a spasm of recrimination like that which followed Mao Tse-tung's

takeover in China, when the right wing of Mr. Ford's party accused the Democrats of having "lost" China. Whether that will develop or not is far from clear, but the conclusion of many politicians is that the country is unlikely to side with a leader who attempts to whip up such passions.

Gov. George C. Wallace of Alabama, for example, said the other day that "more aid in the amount we're talking about wouldn't have stopped what's happening," and urged the United States to concentrate on humanitarian measures. Senator Henry M. Jackson of Washington opposes further military aid.

And Representative Morris

K. Udall of Arizona, a third Democratic Presidential hopeful, commented after Mr. Ford's news conference:

"his assertion ignores the reality of a South Vietnamese Army on the run, its spirit broken, its leadership in shambles. Further, the President still refuses to do the constructive thing by admitting plainly and openly that our intervention in Vietnam was a mistake."

If Mr. Ford does not modify the thrust of what he said this afternoon, then, it appears likely that he will have drawn a principal issue for the 1976 campaign, with uncertain consequences for his own intended candidacy.