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Not Victory But at Least Pity

By James Reston

The most significant fact that came out of President Ford's press conference on the tragedy of Southeast Asia is that the Saigon Government decided to abandon two-thirds of the country to the North Vietnamese troops without even informing the United States of this decision in advance.

President Ford rather skimmed over the point. The decision was made, he said, by Saigon "unilaterally," which is a fancy word for concealment or even deception. With just a few days' notice from General Thieu that he was going to cut and run from areas America spent thousands of lives and hundreds of billions to defend, Mr.

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Ford would have been able to get the planes and ships in position to save not only the children but the province officials, the teachers, the religious leaders and all the others who have fought with us for over a decade and whose lives and families are now in danger.

After all, President Thieu was not in a panic situation. The North Vietnamese, in violation of the Kissinger-Le Duc Tho Paris agreements, sent over 150,000 men from the regular Hanoi divisions into South Vietnam, but not suddenly. Messrs. Ford and Thieu knew they were coming down and a crisis was developing, but it never occurred to officials in Washington that Thieu would give orders, even before his men were under serious attack, to abandon most of the country and leave hundreds of thousands of refugees to scramble for their lives.

In fairness, Mr. Thieu had his problems. When the North Vietnamese began sending organized units into the South, he sent a delegation from Saigon to Washington to appraise how much support he could expect from the Congress. The leaders of the delegation, according to the State Department, asked to present their case to Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield and Senate Republican

leader Hugh Scott, but they were not received, and apparently returned to Saigon and told President Thieu that he could not count on support from the Congress.

There were other accidents and blunders. President Ford was preoccupied with the economy, Henry Kissinger was preoccupied with the Arab-Israeli struggle and was shuttling from one Middle Eastern capital to another for most of this critical month while Southeast Asia was collapsing.

The result was that when President Ford finally had to face the press in San Diego, he was trapped. He couldn't really tell the truth about how he had been deceived by President Thieu without making Thieu's problem even worse than it really is. He tried to

concentrate on the disaster of the children and the refugees in Vietnam and Cambodia, but the reporters didn't help him.

The first question put to him was whether he was ready to accept a Communist take-over in South Vietnam and Cambodia. And the questions didn't get any easier. How and why did he miscalculate the will of the South Vietnamese to fight? Was he still insisting on giving hundreds of millions in military aid to Saigon, which had just abandoned almost a billion dollars' worth of U.S. arms to the Communists? Did he still believe in the "domino theory"—one lost, all falling; one abandoned, all doubtful of America's support?

President Ford did as well as he could, but he was in an awkward position. He was trying to handle an international crisis while on vacation and between golf games at Palm Springs. He was appearing as a conservative, accidental Republican President with a deficit approaching \$100-billion, in San Diego, a hawkish Reaganish, budget-balancing town. It would be hard to imagine a more difficult diplomatic, political or geographical problem.

The truth is that the United States Government, in addition to its own mistakes, was deceived by both the North Vietnamese, who broke the Paris agreements, and by the South Vietnamese, who broke the Paris agreements, and then gave up most of their country without advance notice. It was almost as if they wanted to blame Washington for the human disaster they knew their sudden retreat would produce.

In this situation, President Ford was patient with the press, concerned about the Vietnamese orphans, and so generous to President Thieu that he was almost unfair to his own country. For he left the impression that somehow the United States was responsible for the carnage in Southeast Asia, that we hadn't kept our promises, and, with a whiff of politics, that maybe things would have been different had the Democrat Congress voted more funds.

Still President Ford was probably right to concentrate on saving the kids and getting funds to ease the human disaster. The Congress would vote almost any amount of money to do this, and American families would take in the Vietnam and Cambodian orphans, fathered by the G.I.'s of a dreadful war. But the Thieu Government didn't even give Mr. Ford a chance to be fair at the end. It just ordered the retreat, called in the television cameras, and blamed America for the human wreckage of its own failures.