

'Option 4': A Blessing in Disguise

The wrenching horror of the last Americans being helicoptered out of Saigon in the dead of a stormy night threatened by enemy fire resulted from American miscalculation of Communist strategy, but that miscalculation saved thousands of Vietnamese lives.

It bought time, however dangerously, for evacuation of South Vietnamese who had worked as allies of the U.S. for 15 years or more and to whom this country owed a debt of honor.

Thus, the miscalculation of Communist strategy in the battle for Saigon at highest levels here and in Saigon turned out as something of a blessing in disguise. 28 APR

As late as last Monday, the American ambassador in Saigon, Graham Martin, felt the odds were above 50-50 that with final liquidation of former President Nguyen Van Thieu's regime, and his replacement by Gen. Duong Van Minh, Hanoi would stop the unequal military struggle for Saigon and negotiate what amounted to terms of South Vietnamese surrender.

Indeed, secret messages from Martin, a brave and stubborn diplomat who lost a son in the Vietnam war, made this forecast to President Ford: The lull late last week in the battle for Saigon and its suburbs signalled Hanoi's willingness to strike a deal with incoming President Minh allowing the Americans "two to three weeks" to complete the evacuation.

That forecast was buttressed—but just how much is still unknown—by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's strenuous and highly secret diplomatic approaches to the Soviet Union through Ambassador Anatoliy Dobrynin here. President Ford and Kissinger were seeking Soviet aid in their effort to do exactly what Martin was trying to do in Saigon: Persuade Hanoi to accept negotiated settlement at the ultimate moment of American catastrophe.

What happened next in the ghastly scenario of this country's worst foreign disaster is now history. Not only did Hanoi and its Communist allies in South Vietnam reject the negotiations route, but the Soviet Union failed in any major way to change the course of events, either



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because of inability to influence Hanoi or because it did not choose to intervene.

Indeed, that result was probably predictable. For days Hanoi had repeatedly raised the ante for negotiating a cease-fire: Get rid of the "Thieu clique"; dismantle the military establishment; dismantle the administrative establishment; throw out all American "advisers"; ad infinitum.*

In the Pentagon, military commanders showed growing strain over the delays imposed by Martin and Kissinger. Their two highest options for removing the stranded and endangered Americans were to fly them out by commercial aircraft or by special military flight. But those options, plus option 3—special military aircraft plus a sealift—went down the drain when Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airfield came under heavy rocket fire.

That left only option 4—the perilous but successful helicopter escape

* SEE KISSINGER PRESS

from downtown Saigon. To the military brass, option 4 was to be avoided at all costs as carrying unnecessary dangers. In Congress, so infuriated was the Democratic majority by the delay in evacuating Americans that unprecedented restraints were shackled on the President in the bill—still not sent to the Oval Office—financing the evacuation and providing humanitarian aid for Vietnamese refugees.

But Kissinger, fully backed by the President, controlled the timetable. Both he and Martin were deeply motivated by an obligation that angry congressmen and senators did not want to think about. That was the American obligation to tens of thousands of Vietnamese who followed Washington's lead and were marked for Communist revenge.

Thus, Martin's cabled messages to Washington predicting Communist agreement on a negotiated cease-fire, together with Kissinger's secret dip-

lomatic approaches to the Russians, became a blessing in disguise, buying time, dangerously but fruitfully.

If the Americans had been rushed out in mid-April as demanded by frenzied members of Congress and anxious Pentagon officials, it is certain that only a small portion of the 55,000 South Vietnamese would ever have followed. That would have deepened the tragedy, presenting a morbid image of the free world's superpower leaving to Communist revenge its own best friends and allies among the South Vietnamese.

There was another example of this emotional commitment in 1961 when John Kennedy refused to forsake Cuban refugees who landed in Cuba during the Bay of Pigs disaster. He literally bought their freedom from Fidel Castro, the retrieval of some slight national honor from the wreckage.