

Weighing the Effects of Two Decisions

Policy decisions two weeks ago by President Ford in the wake of the Vietnam debacle, made in an offhand manner despite grave misgivings high in his own administration, now seem to have worsened what at best was an impossible situation for him.

The President's State of the World address April 10 contained two basic decisions: Asking \$722 million in Vietnam military aid, and blaming the U.S. fiasco in Southeast Asia on Congress rather than Moscow and Peking. That speech and remarkable events since then are viewed by some important Ford supporters as further undermining his shaky presidency.

The blundering last-ditch struggle for huge, new military aid unnecessarily added another chapter to the domestic political saga of Vietnam, delaying a fresh start. More complicated but more important was the President's insistence on detente-as-usual, dismaying Republicans inside and outside his administration.

Everybody inside the administration agrees that niggardly military aid allowed by Congress the past two years hastened the disaster. The disagreement came over the point of no return—when no further aid could possibly help. The overwhelming consensus was that the South Vietnamese army (ARVN) was beyond salvation after its northern divisions collapsed last month.

But Gerald R. Ford was not part of that consensus. "The President is a politician and a former football player," one adviser told us. As a politician, he did not want publicly to concede defeat. As a former football star, he felt no game—even the deadly game of war—was lost until the final gun.

Thus, the President dispatched Gen. Frederick Weyand, the Army's estimable Chief of Staff, to Vietnam as both

fact-finder and seeker of a winning game plan. As a fact-finder, Weyand's assessment of military ruin was deadly realistic. As a game winner, his \$722 million proposal to re-equip four ARVN divisions to stabilize the military situation was wildly optimistic.

Returning to Washington, Weyand ran into skepticism from Pentagon civilians including Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger. Feeling Weyand's plan had only a miniscule chance to work, these skeptics wanted the President to propose a smaller sum for military aid, but high enough to persuade Saigon the U.S. had no plan to cut and run. This would "buy protection" for thousands of Americans trapped in Saigon, and would be quietly sold to Congress as such.

But by the time Mr. Ford got back from Palm Springs, he had bought the Weyand plan in full. Whereas Weyand privately viewed its chances as marginal at best, the President had convinced himself it was a sure game winner. It went into the State of the World address without internal debate (most presidential advisers viewing it useful for psychological effect on Saigon).

But congressmen home for Easter had encountered passionate voter opposition to one more cent for Vietnam. The President reacted to this hostility by cranking up a hard-sell campaign, declaring his faith in what his experts perceived as hopeless—Saigon's military revival. In sum, Mr. Ford committed his prestige to a program which could neither work nor be enacted.

The decision on detente was reached even more informally. Schlesinger, a backstage critic of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's detente policies, was not a principal. White House Chief of Staff Donald Rumsfeld is known to have cautioned Kissinger about exaggerating the fruits of detente.

But during hectic speech-writing before the State of the World address, Rumsfeld proposed, unsuccessfully, one small change about detente. Accordingly, Mr. Ford blamed Congress instead of the Communist superpowers for Vietnam, presumably to save detente.

The result: Sharp private criticism by Republicans, including some old Ford advisers. To no avail. Questioned before the American Society of Newspaper Editors April 16, the President pronounced Moscow and Peking guiltless. Yet, when shown an advance text of Kissinger's remarks to the editors for April 17 castigating the Communist powers for violating detente, the President called it "excellent."

Did Mr. Ford not appreciate the gulf between what he and Kissinger were saying? Some administration officials think not. Moreover, they regard the President's kid-glove treatment as expressing the true Ford-Kissinger position, choosing to write off Kissinger's warning to Moscow and Peking as a tactic, not a strategy. The end result: Growing Republican dissatisfaction with detente.

To some worried officials inside the administration, Vietnam shows detente has not brought world stability. They feel the administration now faces a choice between worldwide re-engagement of U.S. power or tacit accommodation with alarming Soviet power-growth under the umbrella of detente.

But no great internal debate is expected. "The President has his mind made up, and there's no use carping about it," one high official told us. That suggests the same disorganization in foreign policymaking which prevailed this month, deepening the melancholy in official Washington.