

President Raises the Issue of Blame

'It's Up to the American People' Direct Military Action Shunned

By Michael Getler

Washington Post Staff Writer

President Ford, at his news conference yesterday, appeared to open the door wide for a debate on who is to blame for the potential loss of South Vietnam to the Communists.

Though the President said, "I am not assessing blame on anyone," he pointed out that Congress had reduced the Pentagon's military aid request for Saigon in the past two years and added:

"Those are the facts. I think it's up to the American people to pass judgment on who was at fault and where the blame may rest."

Mr. Ford also pointed an obvious finger at Hanoi for massive violations of the 1973 Paris cease-fire accords which have resulted in a virtually unopposed, steamroller offensive that has al-

ready enveloped three-fourths of the South Vietnamese countryside.

But in constructing his list of culprits for the calamity in South Vietnam, the President yesterday made no mention of the South Vietnamese army, much of which has chosen thus far to flee rather than fight and

News Analysis

which has abandoned a billion dollars or so in American military hardware.

A day earlier, at a Pentagon press conference, Defense Secretary James R. Schlesinger made it clear that an important factor in the astonishingly rapid unraveling of Saigon's well-equipped forces was an overestimate by the United

See POLICY, A8, Col. 1

By George C. Wilson

Washington Post Staff Writer

President Ford yesterday turned away from any direct American military actions to save South Vietnam, but focused instead on humanitarian moves to ease the pain of what he termed a sad and tragic situation.

Administration officials interpreted this emphasis on humanitarian rather than military moves as a clear signal that the commander in chief had decided that the fall of all or most of Vietnam was irreversible.

Mr. Ford sounded no threats about reintroducing American military power to turn the tide. Instead, he promised only to press Congress for the military money already requested for the Saigon government, and raised the possibility of asking for more.

The only possible role of American troops, the Presi-

dent said, would be to help evacuate Americans and some South Vietnamese civilians.

Symbolic of the changed emphasis was Mr. Ford's announcement that the U.S. Air Force's largest plane, the C-5, one designed to extend the reach of American military power, will help evacuate war orphans from Vietnam.

At the Pentagon, where military officials are still stunned by the sudden battlefield reversals 10 years to the month after the first American combat troops waded ashore at Danang's Red Beach, spokesmen said the first C-5 left the Philippines last night for Saigon.

In Congress, key lawmakers indicated that those same battlefield reversals

See AID A17, Col. 1

AID, From A1

had hardened resistance to Mr. Ford's appeal for more military money for the Saigon government.

"We will continue to push for the \$300 million that we had asked for and Congress had authorized for military assistance to South Vietnam, and the possibility exists that we may ask for more," Mr. Ford told his news conference.

Chairman George H. Mahon (D-Tex.) of the House Appropriations Committee, in talking about the failure of the South Vietnamese to put up a fight during the Communists' Easter offensive, said:

"I don't think the United States has let Vietnam down. I'm afraid Vietnam has let the United States down. We're confronted with a bad situation: people who won't fight."

The only way to preserve the independence of South Vietnam would be for Americans to stay in the country "an indefinite number of years to prop them up," Mahon said.

"What assurance is there," Mahon asked, "that if you prop them up three more years it would make any difference in the end?"

Saying that South Vietnam has already received billions in U.S. military aid, he decried how "we spent so much blood and treasure" only to be confronted with "trying to salvage something from a bad situation."

He said that "I never did have any special appeal from anybody" in the administration—before Hanoi launched its Easter offensive—to act quickly on the \$300 million extra the Pentagon had requested on top of the \$700 million appropriated for military aid to South Vietnam.

Instead, the appropriations chairman continued, "Pentagon officials told me that they would rather not expend their fire" to get the extra \$300 million they requested for fiscal 1975 "but would rather concentrate on getting a sizable appropriation in 1976."

Chairman John L. McClellan (D-Ark.) of the Senate Appropriations Committee said he too received no emergency appeals from the Pentagon before the Easter offensive.

The statements by Mahon and McClellan about the absence of any sense of urgency about the extra \$300

millions before the Easter offensive buttress reports that the speed of Vietnam's fall surprised the U.S. government.

McClellan said the Pentagon already has money on hand for Vietnam that it has not yet spent, adding: "I'm not going to vote for any more. It's a lost cause."

However, there "might be some sentiment" on his committee for approving humanitarian assistance, the senator said.

President Ford said yesterday that Congress had reduced his request for \$135 million in humanitarian aid for South Vietnam for fiscal 1975 to \$55 million. "Obviously, we will ask for more," the President said. "The precise amount we have not yet determined."

Agency for International Development figures for economic aid provided to Vietnam in the first two quarters of fiscal 1975 (July 1-Dec. 31, 1974) show that the Ford administration obligated only a small slice to the "humanitarian assistance" category.

Specifically, the AID figures show that \$8.3 million of the \$148 million in the reconstruction account went for such humanitarian assistance as refugee relief and health care. In contrast, \$97.4 million went for aiding agriculture and \$20.7 million for industrial development.

Mr. Ford at another point in his press conference said "I still believe" our Vietnam policy "was right if the United States had carried it out as we promised to do at the time of the Paris peace accord, where we promised . . . we would make military hardware available to the South Vietnamese government on a replacement, one-for-one basis."

Although Pentagon officials have said some of the war equipment South Vietnam forces lost before the Easter offensive was not replaced, the language of the 1973 peace treaty does not commit the United States to replacement. Instead, the replacement is allowed.

Specifically, Article 7 of the treaty states: "The two South Vietnamese parties shall be permitted to make periodic replacement of armaments, munitions and war material which have been destroyed, damaged, worn out or used up after the cease-fire, on the basis of piece-for-piece, of the same characteristics and properties . . ."

POLICY, From A1

States regarding their fighting capabilities.

Asked if U.S. intelligence estimates of Hanoi's intentions had been bad, Schlesinger told reporters that the estimate of Hanoi's intentions probably stands up quite well.

"The problem with the intelligence was . . . the estimate of the capabilities of South Vietnam," he said. "It is obvious in retrospect that the strength, resiliency and steadfastness of those forces were more highly valued than they should have been, so that the mis-estimates, I think, apply largely to Saigon's capabilities rather than to Hanoi's intentions."

In his nationally televised press conference yesterday, the President took note, but only briefly and not in a critical tone, of South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu's unilateral decision on March 17 to withdraw his forces from forward positions in the Central Highlands and the northernmost provinces.

That decision, taken hastily and secretly, will wind up, in the view of many top administration officials and defense experts, costing South Vietnam its independence.

Mr. Ford acknowledged that the decision created "a chaotic situation . . . disorganization . . . and several situations that developed that I think got beyond the control of the Vietnamese people."

But the President made no mention of the behavior of the South Vietnamese armed forces, trained and equipped for 14 years at a cost of tens of billions of American dollars.

Mr. Ford said: "I don't believe that we miscalculated the will of the South Vietnamese to carry on the fight."

Mr. Ford's estimate is at great variance with the privately expressed opinions of many senior U.S. military men who cannot condone the manner in which some of Saigon's supposedly best military units scattered, left their weapons and uniforms, and joined the fleeing civilian refugees.

For many officers now

working in the Pentagon who spent years fighting in Vietnam, the spectacle provided a bitter reminder that leadership at all levels of command in Saigon's military—from the rifle squad to the general's tent—had never been improved sufficiently.

Though Mr. Ford obviously had to—and did—express hope that Saigon's remaining forces could rally and defend what is left of their country, the realities of the military situation now strongly favor North Vietnam.

With that kind of no-win situation staring the President in the face, his press conference might have provided Mr. Ford with an opportunity not to point the finger of blame but rather to begin healing some of the

Instead, Mr. Ford's answers to repeated questions on Indochina continued to land heavily on the Congress for reducing military aid and shutting off the President's ability to resume U.S. bombing.

Mr. Ford said he still believed that American policy

in Indochina had been correct if the United States had been able to carry out the one-for-one replacement of military hardware to Saigon which was permitted by the 1973 accords and which the United States promised to provide.

"Are you blaming Congress for this," the President was asked?

Mr. Ford said he wasn't going to assess blame but pointed to reductions in both fiscal 1974 and 1975 by the Congress and said that it will be "historians in the future who will write who

was to blame in this tragic situation.

"But the American people should know the facts and the facts are as I have indicated. I think it's a great tragedy that we're seeing in Vietnam today. I think it could have been avoided, but I am not going to point a finger," he said, adding, "The American people will make that judgment."

At another point, the President was asked if in the light of current events the 55,000 American lives lost in Vietnam had been wasted.

number of experienced officials believe was the best.

By last fall, the administration knew it would need more money for Southeast Asia after the congressional cuts, but it intentionally chose to wait until after the November elections and the new year to make its request.

It lumped Cambodia and Vietnam together, and when Cambodia seemed faced with imminent collapse, it focused all of its efforts on that country and helped alienate Congress even further by claiming it was res-

"I don't think they were wasted providing the U.S. had carried out the solemn commitments that were made in Paris," he said. If we had carried out these commitments, he said, the tragic sacrifices of those killed or wounded would not have been in vain. "But when I see us not carrying through, then it raises a quite different question."

Ironically, the administration's efforts to get more aid for both South Vietnam and Cambodia have not been handled in a way that a

possible for any imminent collapse.

Then Vietnam exploded with devastating speed and the administration had little good will left to exploit on Capitol Hill to try and help the South Vietnamese.

Aside from one other earlier televised Presidential statement on Indochina—dealing with Cambodia—the case for getting aid to Southeast Asia was left to a new White House press secretary, State Department officials below the level of Secretary Henry A. Kissinger, and the Pentagon.