

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SATURDAY, APRIL 12, 1975

The Whys Behind Ford Speech

By LESLIE H. GELB

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, April 11—President Ford stepped before Congress last night and asked for \$722-million in emergency military aid for the Saigon Government and Congress

News responded with opposition, by all accounts, he expected just about that. Why, then, did he do it? The

answer goes to the mind of the President. He decided to stand with his five predecessors and do what he could to prevent a Communist take-over of South Vietnam.

Behind the President's decision was a test of strength among Presidential advisers showing, once again, that Secretary of State Kissinger has more influence with Mr. Ford than Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger.

The result—the speech—was aimed at Saigon, the world, the Congress, and the American people. It was a laboriously honed mixture of high principles and politics that failed in Washington last night, but which the White House hopes will play well around the world today and score in Peoria next year.

To Saigon, he was saying in effect: Don't turn against the thousands of Americans there; I'm doing what I can back here.

To other nations, he was proclaiming: The United States keeps its commitments—or tries to.

To the Congress, he was exhorting: The real choice is between what I am asking you to do and catastrophe, but I won't explicitly blame you if things go wrong.

To the American people, his message was: I've tried to do what's right, and you have to judge who is to blame when Saigon and Phnom Penh fall.

Reasons and motives can only be listed, not measured. To piece together why President Ford said what he did, one must look to what he said, to how Administration officials later amplified on his address, to what can be gleaned from private White House deliberations, and to the foreign policy and political context.

The President said that \$722-million in extra aid "might enable the South Vietnamese to stem the onrushing aggression, to stabilize the military situation, permit the chance of a negotiated political settlement between the North and South Vietnamese, and, if the very worst were to happen, at least allow the orderly evacuation of Americans and endangered South Vietnamese to places of safety."

Administration officials later repeated the same list, but focused on the "worst" case—evacuation. The real danger, it was explained, is that the Americans remaining in the Saigon area might have to battle South Vietnamese allies as well as Vietnamese Communists to get out of the country.

The clear implication was that the United States would

not be able to evacuate Americans and others without many lives being lost if the South Vietnamese thought they were being abandoned.

There is little evidence that Administration officials are seriously counting on the additional aid restoring the military balance or leading to negotiations, and not much thought that the aid could actually be delivered to Saigon in time to avert defeat.

Senior Administration officials have known that Congress would not be responsive to the new Indochina aid request. This was clear in Capitol Hill reaction to the original request for extra emergency military aid to Saigon of \$300-million and Phnom Penh of \$222-million almost two months ago.

Adding another \$422-million to these earlier requests based on the fact-finding report of the Army Chief of Staff, Gen. Frederick C. Weyand, was not going to help. The new request for \$250-million in humanitarian relief aid, the officials estimated, had a good chance, but this would not favorably affect reaction to the military package.

The only possible way of turning Congress around on the military aid, the White House seems to have reasoned, was to link the aid to the safety of Americans.

But whether the Administration actually believed it had no other choice but to do this depends on what options it thought it had. All of this was thrashed out at a National Security Council meeting on Wednesday morning. Interviews with Administration officials provide the following and only partial account of this meeting.

The participants apparently did not discuss the possibility of withdrawing support from President Nguyen Van Thieu. It could not be learned whether this was discussed elsewhere. Hanoi has said that it would be prepared to discuss a cease-fire with a Saigon Government not including Mr. Thieu.

The alternative of immediately evacuating all Americans and some South Vietnamese was discussed. It was rejected on the ground that it would produce panic and the instant collapse of the Saigon Government. The American Ambassador in Saigon, Graham A. Martin, cabled his vigorous opposition to this alternative.

Then the discussion focused on the "two narrower options" referred to by Mr. Ford in his speech. Some officials related, but it could not be confirmed, that Mr. Schlesinger argued for simply repeating the original request for \$300-million for Saigon and, in the meantime, speeding up the evacuation process that had been going on in a leisurely way. He was described by several officials as maintaining, in effect, that Washington should not spend chips fighting Congress to prevent the Saigon collapse.

Mr. Kissinger argued that if the United States was to do anything at all, it had to do enough. It is a waste of money

and lives, he is reported to have said, to do a little and pretend it is a lot.

President Ford, everyone interviewed insisted, made his own choice for the \$722-million package. It was also the position advocated by Mr. Kissinger.

The package held a great symbolic importance for them. The Administration had been restating for weeks that Saigon's fall without continued American aid would seriously and adversely affect Washington's relations with other nations. "These nations," the President said last night, "must not think for a minute that the United States is pulling out on them or intends to abandon them to aggression."

Some working-level Administration officials felt that the Administration had created its own international problem with this "domino theory" rhetoric. But whatever the cause, the situation had to be righted, and as the President stated, Vietnam put "in perspective."
