

Our Man on the Spot in Saigon: Elusive in a Question of Reason



GRAHAM MARTIN
... "ultimate defender"

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SAIGON—He is a tall man with a leathery face and unsettling eyes, sitting amid the eagles and flagstaves in the well-fortified U.S. embassy.

Below and around him are doubt, confusion and panic in a city bracing for the worst. Four floors above him is the rooftop helicopter pad, where one day soon the last U.S. military flight will lift out the final load of evacuating Americans and thus close the book on U.S. efforts in Indochina.

Ambassador Graham Martin is a highly controversial figure in an almost impossible job. Some people, including a number in his own embassy, believe him to be mad as a March hare and just about as elusive. Others see him as determined and wily in a way that is essential to the survival of the Americans and Vietnamese whose lives are in his hands.

Martin, 62, a native North Carolinian, has a reputation as the ultimate defender of the faith, a man utterly committed to the American effort here. Appointed to the post two years ago as successor to Ellsworth Bunker, Martin has frequently been at odds with the press and the U.S. Congress. Last year, in a confidential memorandum that was quoted widely, Martin

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advised the State Department that it would be "the height of folly" to permit Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) "the tactical advantage of an honest and detailed answer" to his questions on U.S. policy in Vietnam.

As U.S. policy here draws ever closer to total failure, some observers believe that Martin's reasoned judgment and timely action have been impaired.

There are signs of this, such as his continuing insistence that the lopping off of unproductive northern provinces creates the basis for economic development of the remaining parts of South Vietnam. Within the past few days, Martin has been pushing new U.S. long-term investment programs.

Behind his bland expression and chain-smoked Winstons, however, a set of complicated calculations is taking place. Martin believes that President Thieu will not step aside of his own ac-

cord, that no substantial chance exists for a meaningful diplomatic settlement and that the Communist forces are quite capable of deciding to go all the way against Saigon.

Once an American evacuation order becomes evident, the dangers could mount rapidly. Intelligence reports say the South Vietnamese air force is prepared to attack U.S. craft at Tansonghut Air Base to prevent American departure, at least until and unless the Vietnamese commanders themselves are given a way out.

Any clear signal of an American evacuation that is seen as a final abandonment is likely to be very dangerous. Martin believes that Saigon is already on the edge of panic, induced—so he believes—in large degree by panic and irresolution in Washington. Without announcement or explanation, the number of Americans here has been reduced from about 6,000 to less than 4,000 within the past week or so, in an

attempt to make the final evacuation more manageable.

At the same time, hardly anything has yet been done about the evacuation of Vietnamese employees of the U.S. government and related enterprises, whose lives could be endangered by a Communist takeover. President Ford's statement Thursday night of a "profound moral obligation" to these and other loyal Vietnamese is so far more a statement of principle than an order for action.

Martin insists that he is fully mindful of this immense human problem, that the Vietnamese associated with Americans will leave Saigon before he does. There is no indication how he will accomplish this feat.

The contradiction between what is being said and what is being done leaves room for misunderstanding and mistrust. Hardly anybody knows what Martin is thinking.