

FORD ASSERTS U.S. HAS FAILED SAIGON

APR 17 1975

Says Commitments on Aid Were Not Met, Creating a 'Tragic Situation'

NYTimes

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, April 16—

President Ford said today that the failure of the United States to meet its commitments to Saigon had created "this present tragic situation" in South Vietnam.

Responding to questions at the annual convention of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, the President compared the United States behavior toward its South Vietnamese ally unfavorably with what he characterized as the fidelity of Moscow and Peking to Hanoi.

He said that this country had promised Saigon when the Paris peace accords were signed in January, 1973, that it would supply replacement war matériel to South Vietnam. He said he assumed that the Soviet Union and China had made similar commitments to North Vietnam.

"It appears that they have maintained that commitment," the President said. "Unfortunately the United States did not carry out its commitment in the supplying of military

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Ford Blames U.S. Aid Failure For Saigon's 'Tragic Situation'

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hardware and economic aid to South Vietnam."

"I wish we had," he continued. "I think if we had, this present tragic situation in South Vietnam would not have occurred."

Then, referring to a question about the estimated \$1.5-billion in aid to Hanoi from Moscow and Peking, the President added: "I don't think we can blame the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China in this case. If we had done with our allies what we promised, I think this whole tragedy could have been eliminated."

While not mentioning Congress, the President used some of the strongest language he has employed yet to condemn what he said was the American failure to keep its commitments to South Vietnam.

"For just a relatively small additional commitment in economic and military aid, relatively small compared to the \$150-billion that we spent, that at the last minute of the last quarter we don't make that special effort and now we are faced with this human tragedy. It just makes me sick every day I hear about it, read about it and see it."

'More Commitment'

Mr. Ford said that even now he was "absolutely convinced" that if Congress made available soon the \$722-million he had requested for military aid to Saigon, "the South Vietnamese could stabilize the military situation in South Vietnam today."

A White House aide, asked later to identify the specific commitments the President was talking about, said that the United States had made no legal commitment to provide arms to South Vietnam. He also said that the Paris peace accords set a ceiling of a one-for-one replacement of arms in Indochina but did not bind the United States to provide the arms.

But the White House aid insisted that the United States had entered into a "moral commitment" to replace all South Vietnamese arms and ammunition. He said that this commitment was made in public statements by former President Nixon and members of his administration and affirmed in

private communications from Mr. Nixon to President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam. The private communications said the same as the public statements, the aide said.

The aide cited three public documents that he described as the basis for the moral commitment. One was a United State-South Vietnamese communique issued at San Clemente, Calif., on April 3, 1973, in which Mr. Nixon "affirmed that the United States, for its part, expected to continue, in accordance with its Constitutional processes, to supply the Republic of Vietnam with the material for its defense consistent with the agreement on ending the war,"—that is, the Paris accord.

The communiqué and the two other documents cited—a transcript of a news conference of March 15, 1973, and President Nixon's report on foreign policy issued on May 3, 1973—refer chiefly to a generalized United States response to a violation of the Paris accord, and they contain no reference to a specific level of military aid. The United States has accused Hanoi of violating the accords.

In the question-and-answer session today, Mr. Ford said that he had personally reviewed the correspondence between President Nixon and President Thieu "and I can assure you that there was nothing in any of those communications that was different from what was stated as our public policy."

Not to Be Made Public

Mr. Ford also indicated that he would not make the Nixon-Thieu letters public, saying that "it is not the usual custom for correspondence between heads of states, as I understand it, to be released."

Senator Henry M. Jackson, Democrat of Washington, charged last week that the United States had made secret agreements with South Vietnam.

Answering questions from a panel of five editors at the convention, the President said that the United States would continue to supply military and economic aid to countries around the world.

But he said that such aid was not intended for the "containment of Communism." It was, he said, for "a furtherance of the policy of the United States aimed at our security and the maintenance of peace on a global basis."