

# The Evacuation Issue

## Congress Suspects Saigon Aid Bid Is Meant Only to Get Americans Out

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WASHINGTON, April 17—There is a growing suspicion among members of Congress that the Administration's words about a moral obligation to supply military aid to Saigon are really a charade; that the real object underlying the rhetoric is to gain time to rescue Americans still in Saigon. Neither the White House nor Congress can openly admit that what they are discussing is not how best to aid Saigon but how best to insure the safe withdrawal of some 5,000 Americans.

Knowledgeable officials do not believe that additional aid is going to influence the course of the battle now shaping in South Vietnam, but the hope that Congress will not reject the aid request out of concern for the Americans.

Those hopes received a serious setback today when the conservative Senate Armed Services Committee, by a one-vote margin, voted against authorizing additional aid. There still remained the possibility that Congress might vote some of the \$300-million in aid that had been previously authorized but still requires appropriation.

As Defense Secretary James R. Schlesinger acknowledged in a moment of candor before the Senate Armed Services Committee this week, the purpose of the aid request is as much psychological and political as it is military.

In essence, the Administration is fighting for time, not so much to rescue South Vietnam as to rescue the Americans as well as wives of Americans and their children.

By holding out the offer of aid, which probably will never arrive in time to have any impact, the White House hopes to provide a signal of support that will hold the Saigon Gov-

ernment together long enough to permit the evacuation.

The alternative of asking for no additional aid, by Administration calculations, would have meant the collapse of the Saigon Government and the very conditions of chaos, panic and probably anti-American rampages that would have jeopardized a safe withdrawal.

The charade began last week when President Ford asked Congress to provide \$722-million in military aid. At the time the President said the aid would "stabilize the military situation, permit the chance of a negotiated settlement, and, if the very worst were to happen, at least allow the orderly evacuation of Americans and endangered South Vietnamese to places of safety."

The rationale began to become evident even before Mr. Ford had delivered his speech. In a background session, "Administration officials" (that was the way the White House insisted the voice of authority had to be identified) linked the aid request to the safe evacuation of Americans.

The White House could not emphasize that linkage, lest such talk set off the collapse and panic it was trying to avoid. Instead, it has stressed the positive objectives without making clear how the aid would reach Saigon in time to stabilize the situation or why North Vietnam, with victory in its grasp, would be willing to negotiate anything but the surrender of the Government of President Nguyen Van Thieu.

Yesterday, for example, Mr. Ford declared he was convinced that, with the additional aid, "the South Vietnamese could stabilize the situation in South Vietnam today."

That may have been a welcome appraisal intended for ears in Saigon. But not even the President's top advisers—Secretary of State Kissinger and Defense Secretary Schlesinger—have been so confident. The most they have been willing to promise is that the additional aid will give Saigon an uphill chance to survive 90 days.

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The Administration found itself in a political box. The more it emphasized the goal of stabilizing the military situation, the more skeptical was the reaction in Congress.

### Opposition Moderating

It was only when officials, in private sessions, began emphasizing the condition of the Americans that Congressional attitudes began to shift. There has been a moderation in the initial outburst of opposition. Some of the older liberals have been cautioning their more outspoken, younger colleagues to hold their tongues while the political game is played.

The Administration also finds that the evacuation issue can cut both ways. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee, for example, has been holding back on humanitarian aid as it pressed for more rapid reduction of the American contingent so that only a relatively small, manageable number would need to be rescued in the end.

To many in congress, The Administration—and in particular, Graham A. Martin, the United States ambassador in Saigon—have been holding the resident Americans as hostages for a continuing commitment to the Saigon government.

There are also complaints that Congress is being forced to pay a ransom to Saigon to assure the evacuation. But there is a growing feeling in Congress that perhaps this is the symbolic price that must be paid to get the Americans out.