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Drama of Ford's

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Washington

President Ford cradled the white telephone to his left ear and listened to Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger's report.

Ambassador Graham Martin had just recommended, Kissinger said, that "we should go ahead with option four."

Saigon was under attack, and the President's first three options had vanished in the red glare of Communist rockets. It was time for the forced, final evacuation of Americans from the South Vietnamese capital.

Mr. Ford was facing the decision that for days had been creeping closer — whether to order into action the scores of helicopters and thousands of Marines poised on ships in the South China Sea.

He talked for a few more minutes with Kissinger, then concluded: "Go Ahead."

With those two words, Mr. Ford set in motion Operation Frequent Wind, the military's poetic code name for the closing chapter of America's longest war, a tragic conflict that cost the nation 55,000 of its young men and 150 billion of its dollars, a war that alienated many for a generation and changed perhaps forever this country's foreign policy.

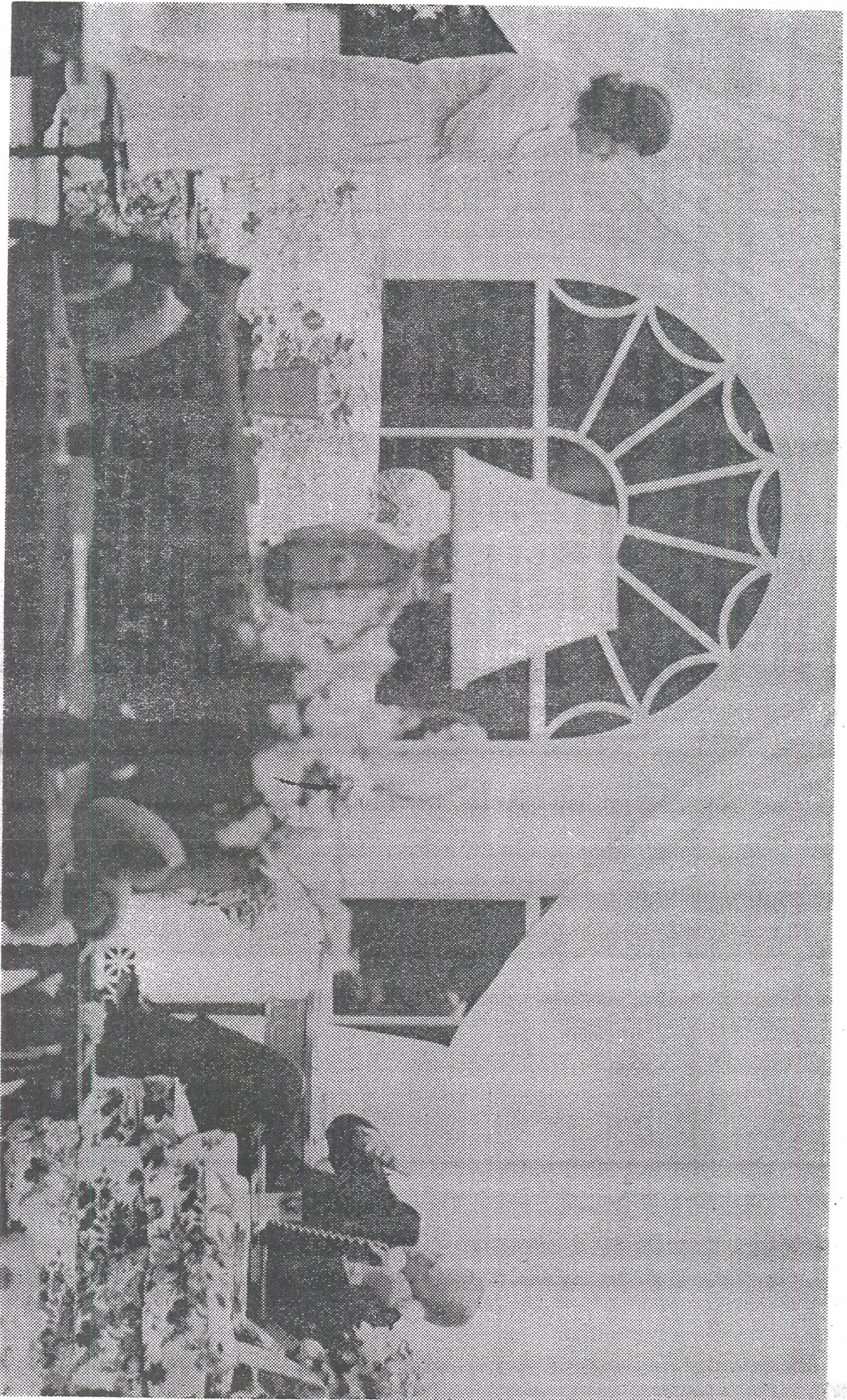
A reconstruction of the hours before and after that late-night telephone conversation between Mr. Ford and Kissinger reveals a chronology laced with tension and laughter, confusion and precision, worry and relief, pessimism and hope.

Based on interviews with White House, Pentagon, State Department and other administration officials, and an examination of the movements of the major characters, this 24-hour chronology emerges:

Decision to Pull Out

Monday's dusk came early to Washington. Low gray clouds had thickened during the afternoon and now they sent sheets of spring rain slanting against the windows of the White House Oval Office. There, in the room Mrs. Ford redecorated in yellow and gold so it would be more cheerful, Kissinger had a somber report.

Tuesday's dawn had come early in Saigon with the red glow of the fires and explosions caused by hundreds of Communist rockets. Tan Son Nhut airport, the vital landing site for the waves of fixed-wing evacuation craft.



Betty Ford listened in the family quarters of the White House as the President talked with a senior aide about the crisis late Monday

AP Wirephotos



President Ford and members of the National Security Council met late Monday. From left: CIA director William Colby, deputy secretary of state Robert Ingersoll, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, Mr. Ford, Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger, deputy secretary of defense William Clements, Vice President Nelson Rockefeller, and joint staffs chief General George Brown.

was the principal target.

Mr. Ford, with assurances he would be kept informed, decided to go ahead with the next item on his schedule: a Cabinet Room meeting with 14 economic and energy advisers to discuss those two troublesome problems.

A half hour into the meeting General Brent Scowcroft slipped quietly to the President's side, handing him a digest of the latest reports from Saigon. Two Marines had been killed when rockets slammed into the Defense Attache's office near the air base, part of an attack that closed down the runways.

While discussions of oil tariffs and imports continued to flow back and forth across the long table, Mr. Ford scanned the document. Then he wrote Scowcroft a note: "We'd better have an NSC meeting at 7."

Scowcroft, who is Kissinger's right-hand man at the White House,

left the room to arrange for the extraordinary session of the National Security Council, the government's highest level crisis panel.

Two miles away, on the opposite banks of the Potomac, General George Brown was in the office of Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger. They, too, had just received news of the rocket attack on Tan Son Nhut. Brown, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said it looked like a long night. He suggested they break for dinner.

Schlesinger agreed. He telephoned his home, about a 10-minute drive away in Arlington, Va., to tell his wife he would be home early.

Five minutes later the call came from the White House: the President had called an NSC meeting.

"I guess it's not dinner after all," Brown said.

From the Pentagon, State Depart-

ment and the CIA, the limousines and staff cars splashed through dense rush hour traffic, converging on the White House. Several arrived late, and the NSC meeting did not begin until 7:23 p.m.

Mr. Ford sat at the end of the table, beneath a portrait of a stern-faced Theodore Roosevelt. On his right were Kissinger, Assistant Secretary of State Robert S. Ingersoll and CIA Director William Colby. On his left were Schlesinger, Assistant Secretary of Defense William Clements and Brown.

For more than a week, in previous administration meetings, Schlesinger, Clements and Brown had strenuously urged that the evacuation of Americans from Saigon be speeded up and carried out before the hazardous last minute.

Kissinger had generally backed his man in Saigon, Ambassador Martin, and contended that a speedy with-

drawal would damage Vietnamese morale still further.

But the rockets raining on Tan Son Nhut forced new decisions.

Details of the 45-minute NSC meeting are cloaked in secrecy, but it is clear that the President chose a course that stopped short of full and final evacuation.

Mr. Ford decided an attempt would be made to complete another day's evacuation of Americans and South Vietnamese with the huge aircraft that for days had ferried refugees from Tan Son Nhut to Guam and the Philippines.

When the meeting ended, orders went out to Clark Air Base in the Philippines to send two C-130s to Saigon to attempt a landing.

At 8:18 p.m., Mr. Ford walked beneath a covered portico to the First Family's living quarters. Twelve minutes later Kissinger joined him in the West Hall, and four minutes after that Scowcroft arrived.

David Kennerly, the President's photographer, captured the scene: Mr. Ford, an untouched martini on the table before him, holding a type-written document, listening to Kissinger. His brow furrowed, his lips were pursed.

This meeting lasted nine minutes. The advisers returned to their White House offices. Mr. Ford sat alone for a while, then went to the family dining room. There he and Mrs. Ford dined on oyster cocktail, corned beef and cabbage, carrots, beet salad and black cherry Jello.

Schlesinger and Brown were having dinner, too — hamburgers at their Pentagon desks. Then both went

to the National Military Command Center — the elaborate operation center on the second floor of the Pentagon, a beehive of communications equipment, maps, plus leather chairs and a lavish oval table out of Dr. Strangelove.

Over loudspeakers in the command center, Schlesinger, Brown and a group of generals and admirals could hear radio communications flashing through the stratosphere from Washington to Honolulu, the Philippines and Saigon and back.

Shortly before 10 o'clock, the men in the command center heard the pilots of the two C-130s circling over Tan Son Nhut requesting clearance to land. The rocketing had subsided an hour earlier, and General Homer Smith, head of the defense attache office in Saigon, radioed word for them to descend to 16,000 feet and prepare for a landing in 16 minutes.

But at 10:10 p.m. — midmorning Saigon time — Smith's voice was heard again, this time directed to Admiral Noel Gayler, commander in chief of the Pacific Fleet in Honolulu.

The situation at Tan Son Nhut was getting out of control, Smith told Gayler. There was a near riot. Crowds had flooded onto the runways. A vietnamese-operated C-130 had been abandoned by its crew with its engine still running. Another C-130 on the ground was blocked by a civilian jeep, which pulled in front of it to prevent its takeoff.

The same conversation was heard at the White House, and it prompted a telephone call from Kissinger to the President. Kennerly again photographed the after-dinner scene: Mr. Ford sitting in a floral print arm chair, his head cocked to the left with the white telephone pressed to his ear; Mrs. Ford standing a dozen feet away, arms folded over a quilted housecoat, concern cloaking her face.

General Smith told Schlesinger and Brown that in his judgment the hope of landing the C-130s was gone — the evacuation would have to be carried out by helicopter.

Schlesinger and Brown, both advocates of a complete withdrawal, agreed. Schlesinger called Kissinger while Smith called Ambassador Martin at the embassy in downtown Saigon. Smith suggested the ambassador call Kissinger direct. The ambassador did, recommending "we should go ahead with option four." He was referring to a section of the contingency plan headed: "(IV) Helicopter Extraction."

The first three options involved use of fixed wing aircraft and hinged on Tan Son Nhut's runways being open. But the people the first three options were intended to save — the thousands of South Vietnamese long associated with the American cause — had thronged onto the runways and prevented planes from landing. Their panic ended hopes for their rescue.

From the situation room in the White House basement, Kissinger again called the President and told him of the ambassador's recommendation. That brought Mr. Ford's decision to "go ahead." The orders went out: Implement Operation Frequent Wind.