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Option 4—Night's Vigil at White House

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WASHINGTON, April 29 —

The United States exit from South Vietnam, like so much that preceded it, was dictated by events in Saigon that out-paced hopes in Washington.

President Ford ordered the evacuation of the last remnants of the American presence—the United States Embassy in Saigon and the defense attaché's compound at nearby Tan Son Nhut airport—after Ambassador Graham A. Martin reluctantly recommended, at 10:41 o'clock last night, "We should go with Option 4."

Option 4 was the plan for the immediate evacuation by helicopter of all remaining American citizens and as many South Vietnamese as possible.

Mr. Ford assented to the recommendation, ordered the withdrawal of the last Americans and received a briefing on how the evacuation would be conducted.

Officials in the White House said today that there had been no emotion and no dramatics as President Ford yielded to the reality of imminent danger to the remaining Americans in Saigon.

"I think everyone understood the import" of the order to evacuate without having to state it, Ron Nessen, the White House press secretary, said late today.

The Closing Chapter

Based on accounts by Ford Administration officials, here is how the President decided on the action that he said "closes a chapter in the American experience."

It was early yesterday evening. The President's economic and energy advisers sat around him in the Cabinet Room of the White House, discussing continued high unemployment and Mr. Ford's concern about whether Congress might soon enact a comprehensive energy program. An aide handed Mr. Ford a note.

The note described the situation in Saigon. A short time earlier, Communist rocket and artillery fire had struck Tan Son Nhut airport, killing two United States marines and destroying one of the large C-130 military transports that had been used to fly Americans and "high-risk" South Vietnamese to haven.

The new President of South Vietnam, Duong Van Minh, had called publicly for the removal of the last of the Americans as one of the conditions for a possible negotiated settlement with the Communists ringing the capital.

Top Advisers Summoned

Mr. Ford whispered to the messenger that the National Security Council should be assembled at 7 P.M.

At 7:23, Mr. Ford walked from the Cabinet Room to the Roosevelt Room to join his senior security advisers: Secretary of State Kissinger, Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger, William E. Colby, director of Central Intelligence,

and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. George S. Brown.

Mr. Kissinger said today that the upshot of the 45-minute meeting was a decision by the President to wait until dawn, fast approaching in Saigon, in hopes the Communist shelling of the Saigon airport would end and the gradual evacuation by fixed-wing aircraft could resume. If so, Mr. Ford ordered, the 900 or so remaining Americans should be reduced to a substantially smaller number.

Mr. Ford went from the National Security Council meeting to the family quarters of the White House. At 8:30 P.M., Mr. Kissinger joined him there. Evidently they learned about that time that the shelling of Tan Son Nhut had ended.

The President and his wife, Betty, sat down to a quiet dinner, expecting the C-130 flights to resume.

Planes Unable to Land

Shortly before 10 P.M., two of the large American planes circled Tan Son Nhut, preparing to land. But the runways, Mr. Kissinger said tonight, were crowded with South Vietnamese seeking to be evacuated and the situation was "out of control."

At the airport, Maj. Gen. Homer Smith, the defense attaché, concluded that the planes could not land. He telephoned Adm. Noel A.M. Gayler, the Pacific commander, in Honolulu, and Admiral Gayler relayed the information to Secretary Schlesinger at the Pentagon.

At nearly the same time, Mr. Kissinger was conferring by telephone with Ambassador Martin. From the embassy in downtown Saigon, the Ambassador recommended that Option 4, the last of four evacuation options—the removal of Americans by helicopter—be put in effect.

Mr. Kissinger, in the Situation Room in the basement of the West Wing of the White House, telephoned the President to convey Ambassador Martin's recommendation. Just before 11 P.M., Mr. Ford ordered the last exit.

About 25 minutes later, Mr. Ford walked from his residence to the Situation Room. Mr. Kissinger showed the President, on a large map of Saigon, the two escape hatches still open—the defense attaché's ringed compound at the airport and the two open spots at the embassy grounds—a parking lot and the flat roof of the building.

'Somber and Determined'

Mr. Ford was "somber and determined," according to the Secretary of State. He listened to the description of the evacuation plans. At midnight, the President walked back toward his residence.

Phil Jones, a White House correspondent for CBS, spotted Mr. Ford and commented to him that he was working rather late.

"With good cause," Mr. Ford replied tersely.

The President went back to the residence. He got ready for bed, at 12:43 A.M., two minutes before the first of 81 helicopters lifted off from the Hancock, about 100 miles from Saigon, Mr. Kissinger telephoned the President to advise that the evacuation would soon get under way.

Exactly 30 minutes later, Mr. Kissinger telephoned Mr. Ford once more. The evacuation was on.

The President went to bed. At 5:27 A.M., he arose as usual and picked up the phone to ask the White House switchboard if there were any messages for him.

There were none.

Mr. Ford read the morning newspapers, breakfasted and, amid periodic briefings from Mr. Kissinger on the slow pace of the evacuation, went through what might otherwise have passed for a normal day.

He met, as planned, with

King Hussein of Jordan. He conferred with leaders of two dozen civic and service organizations — among them Lions and Kiwanis officials and a representative of the Needlework Guild of America—and encouraged the group to help in relocating the South Vietnamese fleeing their homeland. He formally accepted the diplomatic credentials of new envoys from Peru, Haiti, Chile and Colombia.

In between those more routine meetings, Mr. Ford briefed his Cabinet and then the leaders of Congress on the reasons for the evacuation and its progress.

Representative George H. Mahon, Democrat of Texas, said after the Congressional briefing, "We're rapidly evacuating everyone."

Others from Capitol Hill said they had been assured all was going "smoothly."

Problems in Evacuation

Throughout the day, however, there were reports of problems. The first helicopters to head for Saigon unaccountably received orders to turn back and as a result were an hour behind schedule. Rain hampered the evacuation. Exhausted pilots had to rest. Americans trying to reach the withdrawal rendezvous points had difficulty getting past anxious South Vietnamese.

The planned announcement of the end of the evacuation slipped past noon, then past 1 P.M. and was put off for 30-minute and 60-minute periods.

"We all went through a somewhat anxious 24 hours," Mr. Kissinger said, "because until the last helicopter left we never knew when an attack on the compounds might start or when missiles might be used against the helicopters."

Shortly after 5 P.M. — 18 hours after President Ford ordered Saigon abandoned by Americans—the White House announced that Ambassador Martin had boarded the last helicopter and had flown out to sea.

The United States was out of Vietnam.