

Bungling of the Saigon Evacuation

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WXP (longer) filed Comment.

Jack Anderson

PRESIDENT FORD'S own files dispute his statements and confirm our charges about Ambassador Graham Martin's handling of the Vietnam evacuation.

After we reported that Martin had badly botched the evacuation effort, the President defended him. Martin did a "good job" and directed a "successful evacuation," said Mr. Ford.

This is not what the confidential White House records show. We have had access to some of these documents.

The President outlined his objectives at a secret strategy session April 9. His first concern, he said, was to save "about 6000 Americans now in South Vietnam."

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BUT HE ALSO declared firmly: "A large number of South Vietnamese have worked for the U.S. at great personal peril. Roughly 175,000 to 200,000 will be the first to suffer . . . I think there's a moral responsibility for us to help those people who helped us."

Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, according to the confidential minutes, stressed that the "removal must be handled so as to avoid panic." He reflected the views of his man in Saigon, the implacable Graham Martin, who kept dragging his heels.

A few senators became alarmed over the slow pace of the evacuation. In response to their inquiries, the President invited the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to the White House on April 14 for a briefing.

"Mr. President," pleaded Senator

Charles Percy (Rep-Ill.), "could you order that every seat be filled on every outgoing plane?"

Mr. Ford said that Kissinger had already given Martin orders which "should achieve that."

"We felt the President should be sure through some agent other than Martin that your orders are being urgently carried out," interjected Senator Jacob Javits, (Rep-N.Y.). "Our first priority must be to bring every American out and such Vietnamese . . . as can be brought out."

"The orders that we have given will be carried out," the President promised. Then, referring to the Vietnamese, he pledged: "As far as I can, within the law, I'm going to do all I can to help those people . . ."

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BUT IT WAS too late; Martin had waited too long. He was unable to process all the Vietnamese who clamored to escape. The State Department, for example, wanted to cable Saigon a list of intellectuals who were vulnerable to Communist retaliation and should be rescued.

But Martin, incredibly, refused even to accept the list. He informed the State Department icily that the embassy was making the decisions and had matters in hand.

Later, according to White House minutes, Kissinger reported that it was "not realistic to count on the release of large numbers of South Vietnamese."

(Written with Les Whitten)