

Ex-Envoy Defends Role In Saigon Withdrawal

Washington

Graham Martin, U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam when it fell to the Communists last spring, defended himself yesterday against what he called "uninformed criticism" of his role in the U.S. withdrawal from Saigon.

In his first public comment on charges against him, Graham told a House international relations subcommittee that he had to handle the situation quietly and carefully to avoid "considerable danger to the remaining Americans" in the final days.

Martin, carrying an American flag, left on one of the last helicopters out of Saigon. He has been accused of procrastinating in the removal of U.S. personnel when it became apparent the Communists were going to take over.

That, he said, amounts to "uninformed criticism" of his actions by those unaware of the problems he faced.

"The last ten days," Martin testified, "required a most careful walking of the tightrope of judgment of just how the situation was developing and just how much the traffic would bear without triggering the panic or the resentment of the Vietnamese, either of which would have brought catastrophe."

He said, "We were getting out thousands of people each day," mostly in violation of both Vietnamese and American legal requirements.

Graham said because of the cautious way he handled the situation, he has come under criticism as being "either serenely ignorant or serenely indifferent" to the impending fall of South Vietnam.

But he said "an unfavorable press" could be regarded as "the highest of compliments to the sense of theater that must be an essential part of the baggage of any good diplomat."

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