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The Domino Theory

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By James Reston

WASHINGTON, March 18—In trying to drum up support for giving more military aid to Cambodia, President Ford revived at Notre Dame University the other day the old "domino theory": If Cambodia falls to the Communists, it may knock over Thailand, and then maybe the Philippines, and so on until the last domino, the United States, is standing alone in a windy world.

The President at Notre Dame also fell back on another popular argument of the cold war era: namely, that opposition to his foreign economic aid program was evidence of opposition to all foreign aid programs and an alarming revival of American "isolationism."

These are the vivid simplistic analogies of the Hitler thirties and the Stalin forties, but in the mid-seventies, it's like saying that if Notre Dame loses one game, all other games are lost. There is something to what the President says, but the domino theory—one down, all down—is almost as obsolete as the game of dominoes itself.

You have to go back to the history of the "domino theory" to understand the dangers of applying it to Cambodia. It comes out of the tragic experience of Munich appeasement before the Second World War. If you tolerate Hitler's *Anschluss* in Austria, you get Hitler's demands on Czechoslovakia, and if you put Neville Chamberlain's umbrella over that, you get Hitler's demands on Poland, the Second World War, the collapse of the old empires and of the old order, and the emergence of Soviet Russia as a dominant force in the world.

It's a valid argument if you think any country is as important to the vital interests of the United States as any other country; that Southeast Asia is as important as Europe or Japan; that the fall of Lon Nol and Cambodia are as important now as the fall of Czechoslovakia and Eduard Benes and Jan Masaryk were in the days before the last World War. This seemed to be what President Ford was suggesting at South Bend—maybe good politics but bad history.

President Eisenhower, stealing the phrase from Joe Alsop, was the first President to talk about the "domino theory" in 1954. My colleague, Bill Safire, recalls in "The New Language of Politics" that Ike said in arguing for economic aid to Saigon: "You have a row of dominoes set up. You knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last is that it will go over very quickly. . . ."

But Ike didn't go into Vietnam. He fiddled with the notion of dominoes, but he refused to rescue the French at Dien Bien Phu, despite the recommendations of his Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, his Vice President, Richard Nixon, and his head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Radford. He said he thought it was a bum idea to get the United States involved in a war on the Asian continent 10,000 miles from home. And he listened to the "domino theory" on Cuba too, and stayed out of there as well.

It's not surprising that Jerry Ford, confronted by hard questions on the Notre Dame campus, goes back to the old political answers he used to make as opposition leader in the House of Representatives; but as President in 1975, these old political clichés sound a little odd and out of date.

The doubt in the allied world about American action now is not about Washington's courage but about its judgment. The major allies in Europe, Japan and Israel are not condemning the United States for pulling out of Southeast Asia but for persisting in a war that divided and weakened America.

There is obviously an element of selfishness in this, but the allies in Europe are not saying that if Washington won't fight to the end for the capital of Cambodia or South Vietnam, it won't fight for London, Paris or Jerusalem. On the contrary, they are afraid that Washington will get trapped again in Southeast Asia, and lose sight of the major strategic problems in the United States itself, and in Europe and Japan.

"While we pursue a world in which there is unity and diversity," President Ford said at Notre Dame, "we must continue to support security against aggression and subversion. To do otherwise, would invite greater violence. We are counseled to withdraw from the world and go it alone. I have heard that song before. I am here to say I am not going to dance to it."

But very few people are asking him in America today to dance to the tune of isolationism, or to abandon his allies or the nation's commitments. They are merely asking him to choose between what is primary and what is secondary, not to confuse Saigon or Lon Nol or Southeast Asia with the really critical strategic areas of Europe, the Middle East and Japan.

This is precisely what he did not do at Notre Dame. He argued for Cambodia and Saigon, for foreign aid for everybody, and suggested that all might be lost if his recommendations were not adopted. And the funny thing about this is that he doesn't really believe, or at least doesn't say in his private conversations, that the dominoes will fall or the "new isolationists" will take over if Congress doesn't go along.

The trouble is that he is stuck with the old rhetoric. He wants to understand the universities and have them understand him, but when they ask him questions, he goes back to the old answers of the cold war: "dominoes" and isolation.