

Evacuation

The greatest danger now facing the United States in Vietnam would be the necessity of a military operation to evacuate the thousands of Americans who have inexplicably been allowed to remain in Saigon.

The callous irresponsibility which delayed evacuation until long after the risks involved became overwhelmingly apparent no longer seems to be obstructing the out-movement. American residents are in fact departing Saigon, perhaps as many as five hundred a day. What remains uncertain is whether there will be time enough remaining to complete the operation. As Secretary of State Kissinger told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee yesterday, "We have to move at a pace at which the cooperation of the people and Government of Saigon is maintained."

That is the tragic essence of the problem. The gravest threat to this discreet evacuation comes not from any of the North Vietnamese divisions menacing the capital. It comes from America's own ally, the increasingly edgy Government of President Thieu and the shattered remnants of its forces whose resentment might not be controllable as the Americans who led them in war seek their own safe haven.

At some future time it will be possible to consider all the factors now operating. The air of vagueness about how many Americans remain—and why—may be neither bureaucratic carelessness serving no meaningful purpose nor cynical calculation designed to coerce funds out of a hostile Congress.

The position of the American Ambassador, Graham Martin, is particularly sensitive, both in Saigon and in Washington. His long-standing displays of fervent loyalty to President Thieu have made his presence an important symbol of last-ditch security for the Saigon Government. At the same time his vehement opposition to any evacuation—in full awareness of the psychological impact it could have—has had to be circumvented organizationally in order to get any exodus under way.

In retrospect there will be occasion to judge how such a perilous situation has been allowed to develop, why the danger was not sensed and acted upon long ago. For the moment all that is important is to continue evacuating as swiftly as the local circumstances permit, and to resist any premature temptations to send in military forces that could provoke grave new tensions—with no certainty of achieving their purpose.