

## Saigon's Denouement...

The political and military unfolding of Saigon's fate is moving with a dynamic of its own that is unlikely to be much affected by any decisions in Washington. What does hang in the balance on Capitol Hill, however, is authorization for the Ford Administration to mount a military operation, if necessary, to evacuate American and Vietnamese personnel. Congress has a responsibility to make available all needed resources without, in the process, granting an inadvertent blank check that could lead this country into renewed combat engagement.

Dramatic testimony to the speed-up of the evacuation process came in the White House disclosure that, by today, the number of American citizens in besieged Saigon should have dropped to 1,500. The Administration seems to consider this number the minimum necessary to carry out the responsibilities of the United States mission, a judgment that needs continuing review, day by day, if not hour by hour.

With so little of the country left in Saigon's control, it is hard to see what official operations the United States is still conducting that require this relatively large complement, shrunk though it may be from the 5,000 on station a week ago.

Evacuation of Vietnamese citizens closely associated with American operations over the years, and therefore fearful of reprisals from a victorious enemy, is a clear moral obligation of this country, but one presenting far more complex problems of law and logistics.

A large-scale transfer of population is impossible to contemplate under crash conditions that might only provoke chaos. Voluntary emigration should be a high-priority issue for negotiation with the North Vietnamese and their southern allies, the Provisional Revolutionary Government; the 1954 Geneva Agreements on Indochina provide the pattern for such an orderly evacuation; in the two months following signature of those accords, over 350,000 Vietnamese from the north were relocated in the Saigon area.

## ...and Washington's Role

Legislation to authorize military protection for any evacuation must include tight safeguards: a clear time limit on terminating deployment of American forces, some definition of the specific geographic areas into which those forces could be legally introduced and, finally, continuing oversight authority in the Congress to assure that no military operation develops a life and purpose beyond the immediate evacuation effort.

Bills now pending also include appropriation of \$200-million for humanitarian economic aid to South Vietnam. Desirable as such aid is, it would be best if the major part of it were channeled through international agencies, rather than donated to a Saigon regime that might not even exist by the time the supplies were dispatched.

Factional maneuvering among Saigon's non-Communist political forces and former President Thieu's lingering presence in the capital seem to be holding up reconstitution of a government capable of opening negotiations for a cease-fire. With North Vietnamese troops continuing to menace the capital, no one can pretend that anyone in Saigon has a totally free hand.

For its part, however, the Vietcong cannot long maintain its initial claim that President Thieu's resignation changes nothing. His withdrawal is precisely what the Vietnamese Communists have been demanding for months past. To minimize the problems of legitimizing their presence in Saigon and calming a restive population, P.R.G. authorities should waste no time in seizing the opportunity now presented to them for an orderly settlement, consistent with the 1973 Paris agreements.