

The Evacuation Dilemma

It is easy for the administration to clobber Congress for deliberating over how much money and power to give the President in order to facilitate the evacuation of Americans and possibly some South Vietnamese from the war zone around Saigon. But, as Rep. Les Aspin (D-Wis.) has said, "Congress is caught in a terrible dilemma."

Much of the reluctance on Capitol Hill to act hastily can be traced to the Tonkin Gulf Resolution of 1964, which former President Lyndon Johnson rammed through Congress with little or no debate in response to a special emergency, but which later was used by Johnson as a blank check for unlimited military intervention in Vietnam.

After being so badly burned by that resolution, Congress has naturally been wary over rushing through new legislation which might in some way lead to the reinvolvement of U.S. armed forces in the embattled area.

As can be seen by the debate in both the Senate and House, it is no simple task to compose a resolution authorizing the limited use of troops without writing it too loosely or too restrictively. How is it possible, for instance, to pin down exactly what the administration needs to do when nobody, including the administration, seems to know what is required exactly?

Some congressmen doubt that a new resolution is needed. Rep. Aspin believes the President already has the authority to evacuate Americans and Vietnamese, or at least, as Aspin points out, the President's actions in

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Cambodia and Vietnam suggest that he thinks he has.

The representative noted that the President (without consulting Congress) did not hesitate to order the evacuation of Americans from Cambodia, using military helicopters with armed Marines guarding the perimeter. Aspin also notes that the President on April 3 ordered a U.S. Navy task force into South Vietnamese territorial waters to help evacuate Vietnamese from Danang.

"What we are left with," says Aspin, "is the conclusion that either the President broke the law (War Powers Act of 1973) when he evacuated Americans from Cambodia and Vietnamese from Danang, or he doesn't need his resolution to evacuate Americans and Vietnamese from Saigon."

If even well-informed citizens are puzzled by all this, they have good reason to be, for the situation is full of contradictions. The White House keeps prodding Congress to hurry, hurry, but Congress keeps asking why, until a few days ago, the President has been so slow in evacuating Americans in Saigon while they could still leave without armed protection.

If Americans are still there when, and if, North Vietnam attacks Saigon, says Sen. Jacob Javits (R-N.Y.), "who is going to say the President should not use troops to rescue them, and it will require a lot of troops." Some in Congress suspect the U.S. ambassador in Saigon, Graham Martin, of wanting to hold the resident Americans as hostages for further support of the discredited South Vietnam government.

The Provisional Revolutionary Government (Vietcong) says there will be "no difficulty, no obstacle" placed in the way of American departures. "If the United States really wants to save their lives," a spokesman says, "it should withdraw them totally and immediately." That makes sense to many on Capitol Hill.

Meanwhile, the Pentagon is talking about establishing a corridor from Saigon to the sea to evacuate an unknown number of Vietnamese. The administration has mentioned 17,000 collaborators; with dependents, Mr. Ford says, that could come to 175,000. Ambassador Martin is said to be thinking in terms of a million.

In any case, the proposed evacuation corridor could involve a major commitment of U.S. forces. Under hostile conditions, Pentagon officials say, at least one Marine division of 20,000 men, plus airpower from Navy carriers, would be required. But that would probably be only the beginning. Is it any wonder that Congress has been having some troubled thoughts about all this?