

Files Show Martin Waited Too Long

By Jack Anderson
and Les Whitten

President Ford's own files dispute his statements and confirm our charges about Ambassador Graham Martin's handling of the Vietnam evacuation.

After we reported that Martin had badly botched evacuation effort, the President defended him. Martin did a "good job" and directed a "successful evacuation," said Mr. Ford.

This is not what the confidential White House records show. We have had access to some of these documents. We have also interviewed key people who were involved in the evacuation, including some of the refugees themselves.

The President outlined his objectives at a secret strategy session April 9 in the conference room next to the Oval Office. His first concern, he said, was to save "about 6,000 Americans now in South Vietnam."

But he also declared firmly: "A large number of South Vietnamese have worked for the U.S. at great personal peril. Roughly 175,000 to 200,000 will be the first to suffer . . . I think here's a moral responsibility for us to help those people who helped us."

Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger, according to the confidential minutes, stressed that the "removal must be handled so as to avoid panic." He reflected the views of his man in Saigon, the implacable Graham Martin, who kept dragging his heels.

A few senators, privy to the developments in Saigon, became alarmed over the slow pace of the evacuation. In response to their inquiries, the President invited the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to the White House on April 14 for a briefing, which he stressed "must be an executive [secret] session."

"Mr. President," pleaded Sen. Charles H. Percy (R-Ill.), "could you order that every seat be filled on every outgoing plane?"

Mr. Ford said Kissinger had already given Martin orders that "should achieve that."

"We felt the President should be sure through some agent other than Martin that your orders are being urgently carried out," interjected Sen. Jacob K. Javits (R-N.Y.). "Our first priority must be to bring every American out and such Vietnamese . . . as can be brought out."

"The orders that we have given will be carried out," the President promised. Then, referring to the Vietnamese, he pledged: "As far as I can, within the law, I'm going to do all I can to help those people . . ."

But it was too late; Martin had waited too long. He was unable to process all the Vietnamese who clamored to escape. The State Department, for example, wanted to cable Saigon a list of intellectuals who were vulnerable to Communist retaliation and should be rescued.

But Martin, incredibly, refused even to accept the list. He informed the State Department icily that the embassy was making the decisions and had matters in hand.

Meanwhile, on April 21, the Vietnamese who thronged outside the embassy to save their families were greeted with this poignant notice: "PETITIONS FOR RELATIVES. Due to the press of business, we have temporarily suspended acceptance

of petitions for parents, brothers and sisters. DO NOT WAIT IN LINE IF YOU ARE HERE FOR THIS PURPOSE. We hope to be able to accept petitions for parents, brothers and sisters in the near future."

The next day, according to White House minutes, Kissinger reported that it was "not realistic to count on the release of large numbers of South Vietnamese."

There was little more President Ford could do except joke about the crisis. The confidential minutes quote him as telling about one man who "showed up with four wives."

"Which one do you want out?" he was asked. His quick response, said the President, was: "I want the youngest one."

There was nothing funny, however, about the scramble by desperate Vietnamese to get their loved ones on the exit petitions. The petitions provided spaces for the names of relatives. Refugees have sworn to us that U.S. embassy employees sold the spaces like carnival barkers.

This profiteering in human distress was done by the Vietnamese employees, seldom by the American staff members, according to the refugees.

One refugee's story is typical of the several we have heard. He asked us not to use his name, because he is afraid of the conse-

quences. But he alleges that he had to pay \$3,000, two-thirds of it in gold, just to be introduced to someone who could place him and his family on an exit petition. Then it cost him another \$3,000 to be listed.

He was told to wait for a call. It came at 3 a.m. on April 27. He was instructed to have his family at the airport by 5 a.m. Yet the curfew didn't end until 7 a.m. Anyone appearing on the streets earlier could be shot on sight.

He bundled his family aboard a 7 a.m. bus for the airport, where he was told he had missed his flight and would have to return to the end of the line. It took some frantic arguing and appealing for him to get his family aboard a later flight. Since the \$6,000 bribe money had wiped out their entire life's savings, they arrived in the United States penniless.

At a secret White House meeting on April 29, Kissinger reported that of the 175,000 Vietnamese whom the President had hoped to rescue, the paperwork had been completed for 130,000 but that only 45,000 made it.

It is clear from the available documents that the man who is chiefly to blame, as we have reported in previous columns, is Graham Martin.

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