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THE WHITE HOUSE

PRESS CONFERENCE
OF
HENRY A. KISSINGER
SECRETARY OF STATE

ROOM 450
OLD EXECUTIVE OFFICE BUILDING

5:20 P.M. EDT

MR. NESSEN: The briefing was delayed until the evacuation was completed and the last helicopters are now in the air.

I would like to read a statement by the President. During the past week, the President had ordered the reduction of American personnel in the United States mission in Saigon to levels that could be quickly evacuated during an emergency while enabling that mission to fulfill its duties.

During the day on Monday, Washington time, the airport in Saigon came under persistent rocket, as well as artillery fire, and was effectively closed. The military situation in the area deteriorated rapidly. The President, therefore, ordered the evacuation of all American personnel remaining in South Vietnam. The evacuation has now been completed.

The President commends the personnel of the Armed Forces who accomplished it, as well as Ambassador Graham Martin and the staff of his mission who served so well under difficult conditions.

This action closes a chapter in the American experience. The President asks all Americans to close ranks to avoid recriminations about the past, to look ahead to the many goals we share, and to work together on the great tasks that remain to be accomplished.

Copies of this statement will be available as you leave the briefing.

Now, to give you details of the events of the past few days and to answer your questions, Secretary of State Kissinger.

MORE

SECRETARY KISSINGER: Ladies and gentlemen, when the President spoke before the Congress, he stated, as our objective, the stabilization of the situation in Vietnam.

We made clear at that time, as well as before many Congressional hearings, that our purpose was to bring about the most controlled and the most humane solution that was possible, and that these objectives required the course which the President had set.

Our priorities were as follows: We sought to save the American lives still in Vietnam. We tried to rescue as many South Vietnamese that had worked with the United States for 15 years in reliance on our commitments as we possibly could. And, we sought to bring about as humane an outcome as was achievable under the conditions that existed.

Over the past two weeks, the American personnel in Vietnam have been progressively reduced. Our objective was to reduce at a rate that was significant enough so that we would finally be able to evacuate rapidly, but which would not produce a panic which might prevent anybody from getting out.

Our objective was also to fulfill the human obligation which we felt to the tens of thousands of South Vietnamese who had worked with us for over a decade.

Finally, we sought, through various intermediaries, to bring about as humane a political evolution as we could.

By Sunday evening, the personnel in our mission had been reduced to 950, and there were 8,000 South Vietnamese to be considered in a particularly high-risk category -- between 5,000 and 8,000. We do not know the exact number.

On Monday evening, Washington time, around 5 o'clock, which was Tuesday morning in Saigon, the airport in Tan Son Nhut was rocketed and received artillery fire.

The President called an NSC meeting. He decided that if the shelling stopped by dawn Saigon time, we would attempt to operate with fixed-wing aircraft from Tan Son Nhut airport for one more day to remove the high-risk South Vietnamese, together with all the Defense Attache's Office, which was located near the Tan Son Nhut airport.

He also ordered a substantial reduction of the remaining American personnel in South Vietnam.

I may point out that the American personnel in Saigon was divided into two groups; one with the Defense Attache's Office, which was located near the Tan Son Nhut airport; the second one, which was related to the Embassy and was with the United States mission in downtown Saigon.

The shelling did stop early in the morning on Tuesday, Saigon time, or about 9:00 p.m. last night, Washington time. We then attempted to land C-130s, but found that the population at the airport had got out of control and had flooded the runways. It proved impossible to land any more fixed-wing aircraft.

The President thereupon ordered that the DAO personnel, together with those civilians that had been made ready to be evacuated, be moved to the DAO compound which is near Tan Son Nhut airport and at about 11:00 last night, he ordered the evacuation of all Americans from Tan Son Nhut and from the Embassy, as well.

This operation has been going on all day which, of course, is night in Saigon, and under difficult circumstances, and the total number of those evacuated numbers about 6,500 -- we will have the exact figures for you tomorrow -- ofwhich about 1,000 are Americans.

Our Ambassador has left, and the evacuation can be said to be completed.

In the period since the President spoke to the Congress, we have therefore succeeded in evacuating all of the Americans who were in South Vietnam, losing the two Marines last night to rocket fire, and two pilots today on a helicopter.

We succeeded in evacuating something on the order of 55,000 South Vietnamese, and we hope we have contributed to a political evolution that may spare the South Vietnamese some of the more drastic consequences of a political change, but this remains to be seen. This last point remains to be seen.

As far as the Administration is concerned, I can only underline the point made by the President. We do not believe that this is a time for recrimination. It is a time to heal wounds, to look at our international obligations, and to remember that peace and progress in the world has depended importantly on American commitment and American conviction, and that the peace and progress of our own people is closely tied to that of the rest of the world.

I will be glad to answer questions.

Q Mr. Secretary, you made some reference a few weeks back to those who believe in the domino theory, and while I don't remember exactly your words, the point was it is easy to laugh at it, but there is some justification for subscribing to that theory.

Now that this chapter is over, can you give us your estimate of the security of Thailand and other countries in the area, or the near area?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: I think it is too early to make a final assessment. There is no question that the outcome in Indochina will have consequences not only in Asia, but in many other parts of the world.

To deny these consequences is to miss the possibility of dealing with them. So, I believe there will be consequences. But, I am confident that we can deal with them, and we are determined to manage and to progress along the road toward a permanent peace that we have sought, but there is no question that there will be consequences.

Q Now that it is over, could you tell us, or elaborate in more detail, what we did through various intermediaries to bring about, I think you said, as humane a political solution as possible, and why those efforts seem to have failed?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: I would not agree with the proposition that these efforts have failed because at least some of the efforts, especially those related to evacuation, were carried out through intermediaries. I think it is premature for me to go into all of the details, but we did deal with Hanoi and with the PRG through different intermediaries and we were in a position to put our views and receive responses.

Q May I follow on that by saying, why, then, was it necessary to stage a rescue operation in the final stages?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: In the final stages, it was always foreseen that a helicopter lift for some contingents would be necessary. I believe that the dynamics of the situation in South Vietnam and the impatience of the North Vietnamese to seize power brought about an acceleration of events in the last day and a half.

But you will remember there was a period of about five days when both civilian and U.S. personnel were evacuated without any substantial opposition; in fact, more than five days, about a week.

Q Mr. Secretary, on that point, do you now anticipate that the North Vietnamese intend to move in and forcefully seize Saigon. Do you anticipate there will be a bloody battle of Saigon or is there still a chance for an orderly transition?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: This is very difficult to judge at this moment. I think it is important to point out that the Communist demands have been escalating as the military situation has changed in their favor.

So, a week ago they were asking only for the removal of President Thieu. When he resigned, they immediately asked for the removal of his successor, specifying that General Minh would be acceptable.

When President Huong resigned in favor of General Minh, he was now described as a member of a clique which includes all of the members of his administration. A week ago, the Communist demand was for the removal of American military personnel. This quickly escalated into a removal of all American personnel. Then, a new demand was put forward for the dismantling of the South Vietnamese military apparatus.

When that was agreed to, they added to it the demand for the dismantling of the South Vietnamese administrative apparatus. So, it is clear that what is being aimed at is a substantial political takeover.

Now, whether it is possible to avoid a battle for Saigon, it is too early to judge. I would hope -- and we certainly have attempted to work in that direction -- that such a battle can be avoided and it is basically unnecessary because it seems to us that the South Vietnamese government is prepared to draw the conclusions from the existing situation, and in fact, look forward to correspond to the demands of the Communist side.

Q Mr. Secretary, do you consider the United States now owes any allegiance at all to the Paris pact? Are we now bound in any way by the Paris agreements?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: Well, as far as the United States is concerned, there are not many provisions of the Paris agreement that are still relevant. As far as the North Vietnamese are concerned, they have stated that they wish to carry out the Paris accords, though by what definition is not fully clear to me.

We would certainly support this if it has any meaning.

Q May I ask one follow-up? Do you now favor American aid in rebuilding North Vietnam?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: North Vietnam?

Q North Vietnam.

SECRETARY KISSINGER: No, I do not favor American aid for rebuilding North Vietnam.

Q South Vietnam?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: With respect to South Vietnam, we will have to see what kind of government emerges and indeed whether there is going to be a South Vietnam. We would certainly look at particular specific humanitarian requests that can be carried out by humanitarian agencies, but we do believe that the primary responsibility should fall on those who supply the weapons for this political change.

Q Mr. Secretary, I would like to ask a question about the length of time that it took to complete this evacuation. First, the question of whether days went by after the end became obvious before ordering the evacuation; second, if after ordering it there was a one-hour delay in helicopter landings, apparently caused by military confusion; third, whether the evacuation was prolonged by picking up thousands of Vietnamese instead of concentrating on Americans, and fourth, whether this was delayed even further by Ambassador Martin's desire to be the last man to leave the sinking ship.

In other words, I tried to put the specifics in order to ask you, did it take too long to get out of there to write this last chapter?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: We got out, with all of the personnel that were there, without panic and without the substantial casualties that could have occurred if civil order had totally broken down. We also managed to save 56,000 people whose lives were in the most severe jeopardy.

We had to make a judgment every day how many people we thought we could safely remove without triggering a panic, and at the same time still be able to carry out our principal function and the remaining functions.

I think these objectives were achieved, and they were carried out successfully. Therefore, I do not believe that there was an undue delay because an evacuation has been going on for two weeks.

The difference between the last stage and the previous period was that the last stage was done by helicopter, and the previous stage had been done by fixed wing.

I think the ability to conduct a final evacuation by helicopter without casualties during the operation, at least casualties caused by hostile action, is closely related to the policies that were pursued in the preceding two weeks.

As far as Ambassador Martin, he was in a very difficult position. He felt a moral obligation to the people with whom he had been associated, and he attempted to save as many of those as possible. That is not the worst fault a man can have.

Q Mr. Secretary, there have been numerous reports of American appeals to the Soviets, to the Chinese. Can you say today in the evacuation effort were either the Soviets or the Chinese helpful or unhelpful in this diplomatic effort?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: I think that we received some help from the Soviet Union in the evacuation effort. The degree of it we will have to assess when we study the exchanges.

Q Mr. Secretary, what caused the breakdown of the intent which was spoken of earlier on the Hill to try to achieve a measure of self-determination for the people of South Vietnam, and what is your total assessment now of the effectiveness or the noneffectiveness of the whole Paris accord operation, which you said at the outset was intended to achieve peace with honor for the United States?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: Until Sunday night we thought there was some considerable hope that the North Vietnamese would not seek a solution by purely military means, and when the transfer of power to General Minh took place, a person who had been designated by the other side as a counterpart worth talking to, they would be prepared to talk with, we thought a negotiated solution in the next few days was highly probable.

Sometime Sunday night the North Vietnamese obviously changed signals. Why that is, we do not yet know, nor do I exclude that now that the American presence is totally removed and very little military structure is left in South Vietnam, that there may not be a sort of a negotiation, but what produced this sudden shift to a military option or what would seem to us to be a sudden shift to a military option, I have not had sufficient opportunity to analyze.

As to the effectiveness of the Paris accords, I think it is important to remember the mood in this country at the time that the Paris accords were being negotiated. I think it is worth remembering that the principal criticism that was then made was that the terms we insisted on were too tough, not that the terms were too generous.

We wanted what was considered peace with honor; was that the United States would not end a war by overthrowing a government with which it had been associated. That still seems an objective that was correct.

There were several other assumptions that were made at that time that were later falsified by events that were beyond the control of, that indeed were unforseeable by anybody who negotiated these agreements, including the disintegration of or the weakening of Executive authority in the United States for reasons unconnected with foreign policy considerations.

So, the premises of the Paris accords, in terms of aid, of the possibility of aid, and in terms of other factors, tended to disintegrate. I see no purpose now in reviewing that particular history. Within the context of the time, it seemed the right thing to do.

Q Mr. Secretary, a follow-up question on that. What is the current relationship of the United States to the South Vietnamese political grouping, whatever you would call it?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: We will have to see what grouping emerges out of whatever negotiations should now take place between the two South Vietnamese sides. After we have seen what grouping emerges and what degree of independence it has then we can make a decision about what our political relationship to it is. We have not made a decision on that.

Q Would you say diplomatic relations are in abeyance with the government in South Vietnam?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: I think that is a fair statement.

Q Mr. Secretary, looking back on the war now, would you say that the war was in vain, and what do you feel it accomplished?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: I think it will be a long time before Americans will be able to talk or write about the war with some dispassion. It is clear that the war did not achieve the objectives of those who started the original involvement, nor the objectives of those who sought to end that involvement, which they found on terms which seemed to them compatible with the sacrifices that had been made.

What lessons we should draw from it, I think we should reserve for another occasion. But I don't think that we can solve the problem of having entered the conflict too lightly by leaving it too lightly, either.

Q Mr. Secretary, looking toward the future, has America been so stunned by the experience of Vietnam that it will never again come to the military or economic aid of an ally? I am talking specifically in the case of Israel.

SECRETARY KISSINGER: As I pointed out in a speech a few weeks ago, one lesson we must learn from this experience is that we must be very careful in the commitments we make, but that we should scrupulously honor those commitments that we make.

I believe that the experience in the war, can make us more mature in the commitments we undertake and more determined to maintain those we have. I would therefore think that with relation to other countries, including Israel, that no lessons should be drawn by the enemies of our friends from the experiences in Vietnam.

Q Mr. Secretary, in view of the developments in the last week or so, would you agree that there was never any hope of stabilizing the South Vietnamese military situation after the withdrawal from the northern region?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: When the President met with General Weyand in Palm Springs, the judgment was that there was a slim hope, but some hope. Somewhat less than 50-50, but still some hope.

The situation deteriorated with every passing day. Those of you whom I briefed at that time will remember that I said that whatever -- and I said it in public testimony on innumerable occasions -- that whatever objective we may set ourselves and whatever assessment we make about the outcome, the Administration had no choice except to pursue the course that we did, which was designed to save the Americans still in Vietnam and the maximum number of Vietnamese lives, should the worst come to pass.

Q Mr. Secretary, could you tell us, are you now reassessing the amount of humanitarian aid which Congress should give to the South Vietnamese and also, can you tell us the President's reaction and mood during the past 24 hours?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: With respect to humanitarian aid for South Vietnam, we spoke to the Congressional leadership this morning and we urged them to pass the humanitarian part of the aid request that we have submitted to the Congress.

The President pointed out that he would make a later decision as to what part of that humanitarian aid could be used in South Vietnam after the political evolution in South Vietnam becomes clearer.

The President's mood was somber and determined, and we all went through a somewhat anxious 24 hours, because until the last helicopter had left, we could not really know whether an attack on any of these compounds might start and whether missiles might be used against our evacuation.

Q Mr. Secretary, could I ask you to clarify something that seems rather important at this point? You said here, and in the past, that a weakening of the American Executive authority was a factor in this whole outcome. Now, there have been reports that former President Nixon, with your advice, had decided in April of 1973 to resume the bombing of North Vietnam, but that Watergate intruded and he could not carry through on that. Is that an historic fact or not?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: To the best of my knowledge, President Nixon had never actually decided on any particular action. The Washington Special Action Group at that period was considering a number of reactions that could be taken to the beginning flagrant violations of the agreements. This was done on an interdepartmental basis, including the Department of State, my office, the Department of Defense, and had reached certain options.

Then President Nixon, as it turned out, never made a final decision between these options. To what extent it was influenced by Watergate is a psychological assessment that one can only speculate about.

Q Mr. Secretary, there is a new Asia developing after the Indochina situation. What will the priorities of the United States be in recognizing its existing commitments and in making new ones?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: We will have to assess the impact of Indochina on our allies and on other countries in that area and on their perceptions of the United States, and we will have to assess also what role the United States can responsibly play over an indefinite period of time, because surely another lesson we should draw from the Indochina experience is that foreign policy must be sustained over decades if it is to be effective, and if it cannot be, then it has to be tailored to what is sustainable.

The President has already reaffirmed our alliance with Japan, our defense treaty with Korea, and we, of course, also have treaty obligations and important bases in the Philippines. We will soon be in consultation with many other countries in that area, including Indonesia and Singapore and Australia and New Zealand, and we hope to crystalize an Asian policy that is suited to present circumstances with close consultation with our friends.

Q Mr. Secretary, are you confident that all the Americans that wanted to come out are out of Saigon, and do you have any idea of the number of Americans who remained behind?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: I have no idea of the number of Americans that remained behind. I am confident that every American who wanted to come out is out, but how many chose to stay behind we won't know until tomorrow sometime. The last contingent that left was the Ambassador and some of his immediate staff, and we won't know really until we get the report from them.

Q Mr. Secretary, is President Thieu welcome to seek asylum in this country, and is there any possibility that the United States would recognize an exile government of South Vietnam?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: If President Thieu should seek asylum in the United States, he would be, of course, received. The United States will not recognize an exile government of South Vietnam.

Q Mr. Secretary, could you tell us what went wrong, what were the flaws in American foreign policy toward Indochina all these years? Why was it that so many Administrations repeatedly underestimated the power of the North Vietnamese and overestimated the capability on the part of the South Vietnamese?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: As I said earlier, I think this is not the occasion, when the last American has barely left Saigon, to make an assessment of a decade and a half of American foreign policy because it could equally well be argued that if five Administrations that were staffed, after all, by serious people, dedicated to the welfare of their country, came to certain conclusions, that maybe there was something in their assessment, even if for a variety of reasons the effort did not succeed.

As I have already pointed out, special factors have operated in recent years. But, I would think that what we need now in this country, for some weeks at least, and hopefully for some months, is to heal the wounds and to put Vietnam behind us and to concentrate on the problems of the future. That certainly will be the Administration's attitude. There will be time enough for historic assessments.

Q Mr. Secretary, you have repeatedly spoken of the potential consequences of what has happened in Southeast Asia. I would like to ask if you feel that your personal prestige and, therefore, your personal ability to negotiate between other countries has been damaged by what has happened?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: If I should ever come to the conclusion that I could not fulfill what the President has asked of me, then I would draw the consequences from this. Obviously, this has been a very painful experience, and it would be idle to deny this has been a painful experience for many who have been concerned with this problem for a decade and a half.

I think the problems in Vietnam went deeper than any one negotiation, and that an analysis of the accords at the time will require an assessment of the public pressures, of what was sustainable, but I don't think, again, that we should go into this at this particular moment, nor am I probably the best judge of my prestige at any particular point.

Q Mr. Secretary, what was it in particular that led you to believe until Sunday night that Hanoi might be willing to go for a nonmilitary solution? Did you have some specific information from them to indicate that, because certainly the battlefield situation suggested otherwise?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: Maybe to you, but the battlefield situation suggested that there was a standdown of significant military activity and the public pronouncements were substantially in the direction that a negotiation would start with General Minh. There were also other reasons which led us to believe that the possibility of a negotiation remained open.

Q Mr. Secretary, you have blamed the Soviets and the Red Chinese for breaking faith with the letter and the spirit of the Paris peace accords. The Soviet Union has apparently, through its broadcasts, encouraged a Communist takeover in Portugal. The Chinese have signed a joint communique with North Korea encouraging North Korea to unify South Korea by force.

My question is, why, in view of these violations in both the letter and in the spirit of detente, does the United States continue to believe in detente; secondly, are we ever going to take some obvious action showing American displeasure at the behavior of the two Communist superpowers?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: First, I think it is important to keep in mind that our relationship with both the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China is based on ideological hostility, but practical reasons for cooperation in certain limited spheres.

With respect to the Soviet Union, they and we possess the capability to destroy mankind. The question of how to prevent a general nuclear war is a problem that some Administration must solve before consequences that would be irremedial. Therefore, there is always a common interest and indeed a common obligation to attempt to deal with this particular problem.

With respect to the various points you made, it is important for us to recognize that we cannot, in this situation, ask of the Soviet Union that it does our job for us. On the one hand, as I pointed out previously, of course, the Soviet Union and the People's Republic must be responsible for the consequences of those actions that lead to an upset of the situation in Indochina or maybe in the Middle East; that is, the introduction of massive armaments that will in all probability be used offensively is an event that we cannot ignore.

On the other hand, I think it would be a grave mistake to blame the Soviet Union for what happened in Portugal. It may have taken advantage of the situation in Portugal, but the fact that the Communist Party in Portugal has emerged despite the fact that it, in recent elections, had only 12 percent of the votes cannot be ascribed to Soviet machinations primarily, but due to causes that are much more complicated and also due to evolutions in Europe that have roots quite different from Soviet pressures.

So, we must not make the mistake of ascribing every reverse we have to our Communist opponents because that makes them appear ten feet tall. On the other hand, we must not make the mistake of lulling ourself with a period of detente, into believing that all competition has disappeared.

Between these two extremes, we must navigate, seek to reduce tensions on the basis of reciprocity and seek to promote a stabler world. When either of the Communist countries have attempted actively to bring foreign policy pressures, the United States has resisted strenuously, and again, we have called their attention to the fact that the fostering of international conflict will certainly lead to a breakdown of detente. But the individual examples which you gave cannot be ascribed to Communist actions primarily.

Q In ordering the evacuation, to what extent were you responding exclusively to the military situation and to what extent were you responding either to a request by Big Minh for all Americans to get out or to your own feeling that a total evacuation might facilitate a political settlement?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: When the President ordered total evacuation, it was done on the basis that Tan Son Nhut airport had already been closed and that therefore the American personnel in Saigon -- and there were 45 in the province -- might soon become hostage to the approaching Communist forces.

The order to evacuate was made before any request had been received from General Minh and the principle, indeed the only, reason was to guarantee the safety of the remaining Americans.

Q Mr. Secretary, there was a report last night that the Communists were backing away from the airport, the rockets seemed to be moving back. Was that a direct result of negotiations and were they prepared to let us move refugees out or Americans out on fixed-wing aircraft?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: I don't know that particular report, but the shelling stopped about 9:00 p.m. last night. We could not operate fixed-wing aircraft because the control at the airport broke down and it was at this point that the President decided that with Communist forces approaching on all sides, and with the airport being closed, that we had to go to helicopter evacuation.

Q Mr. Secretary, there is a report in New York that last week you sent a further request for the good offices of the Council Ministers of The Nine, the European Communities.

SECRETARY KISSINGER: We did not approach The Nine last week.

Q Mr. Secretary, do you see any possibility of a negotiated settlement and also, with respect to that, what can and should the South Vietnamese government do now?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: I have already pointed out that the Communist demands have been escalating literally with every passing day, that as soon as one demand is met, an additional demand is put forward. So, we should have no allusions about what the Communist side is aiming for.

The South Vietnamese, as far as I can tell, have met every demand that has so far been put forward on the radio. There have not been any direct negotiations with which I am familiar.

What is attainable in the transfer of power that would preserve a vestige of other forces than the Communist forces, that remains to be seen.

THE PRESS: Thank you, Mr. Secretary.

END (AT 6:08 P.M. EDT)