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AT THE WHITE HOUSE

WITH HENRY A. KISSINGER  
SECRETARY OF STATE

7:15 P.M. EDT

APRIL 10, 1975

THURSDAY

SECRETARY KISSINGER: I thought that the most useful thing that I could do is to explain what those who were discussing the speech, and above all the President, had in mind, what problems they were considering and what they were trying to achieve with this speech. Then we can answer specific questions on the meaning of the speech.

There obviously are two parts to the speech. There is the tragic problem of Vietnam, and there is the conduct of foreign policy in the face of the difficulties and, indeed, the disasters that have been encountered in Vietnam.

Those of us who are concerned with the conduct of foreign policy and the President feel that we have two problems: One is to manage the existing situation in Vietnam, but secondly, to keep in mind that the purposes of the Nation go forward, that the long-term interests of the country have to be preserved, and that our foreign policy has to be carried out with design and with conviction and with purpose and, therefore, we are trying to say that whatever happens in Vietnam, there is a design in our foreign policy that will become more difficult as a result of what has happened in Vietnam, but that as a united people, we can carry forward and whose essential objectives can be realized, and we will do our utmost to realize. This is the basic thing.

Now, let me turn to Vietnam. You have to remember that in talking about Vietnam at this moment we face many audiences, and what we say can produce its own consequences. We have a domestic audience, we have a Vietnamese audience, and we have an international audience, and each of them have their own requirements and their own consequences.

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It is quite possible -- in fact, it is very likely -- that what we say charts not only a policy but produces immediate consequences. We know, for example, we are aware of the public opinion polls with respect to military assistance to Vietnam, but there is also the fact that if the President tonight announces certain conclusions that reflect these convictions of that majority, that this would produce immediate consequences in South Vietnam that in turn would lead to results that I would seriously question that majority could live with because we are dealing in Vietnam at this very moment also with the lives of 6000 Americans.

Also, there is the problem of the international perception of the United States, how it comports itself in the face of an undoubted disaster.

I am not asking you to agree with our conclusions. I am telling you that these were complex considerations that were as prayerfully considered as any Presidential speech that I have seen in the six years that I have been associated with this level of the government.

Let us take the situation in Vietnam. If the United States were to announce what many Congressmen have recommended, that we would stop all military assistance, there are foreigners here who will be able to judge on their own what the foreign perception of this problem would be, but there is no question what the result in Vietnam would be.

It would lead to an immediate collapse of the situation under the most chaotic conditions imaginable.

What the President is attempting to say in this speech is not rested on legal obligations by themselves; even less does it rest on alleged secret commitments that nobody ever claimed, nobody ever tried to implement as a commitment.

The attempt is raised on the basis that when the United States has been engaged for over a decade with a people, whatever the judgment may be of the original decision, there are literally tens of thousands of these people now whose physical existence, as well as that of their families, is tied up with us and, therefore, as we examined our choices, it became clear that whatever we did, whatever conviction one has about the ultimate outcome of the struggle in Vietnam, unless we were going to do nothing, the conclusions that we could reach were not really all as varied as might appear.

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Whatever our convictions may be about the American obligation towards the Americans in the country and towards the Vietnamese who have been associated with us or towards the possibilities of a political solution, a degree of stabilization of the military situation is an essential prerequisite.

The Administration is as capable of counting up the number of North Vietnamese divisions against a maximum number of South Vietnamese divisions as anybody else, and it is highly probable that the South Vietnamese will also do this counting, but for the immediate problem that we face, a degree of stabilization of the military situation seemed to us an objective that we had no right to reject.

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Now, then, a one-step basic decision had been made. Once it had been decided that we would not do anything, we were in the position that there was no sensible figure short of the figure that had been given to us by the mission sent by General Weyand.

Any one of you or any one of us could invent any other figure and it would have the status of a guess. It was the President's conviction that if he put forward any figure, it would be a figure on behalf of which he could testify before the Congress or his senior advisers could testify before the Congress.

Whether there is enough time to implement this entire program; whether this figure will in fact be enough, can be shown only by events, but if he is to level with the American people, then he had to give the figure for which there was some objective basis.

It is a figure, moreover, which I would like to stress that is important, regardless of what your estimate is of the probable outcome of military operations because it permits a discussion with the government of South Vietnam with respect to some of the contingencies that could arise since no outcome of any battle is ever for a day.

And this was the basis at which the particular figure was achieved.

Let me make two other points. The first is, it seemed imperative to the President, and to all of us, that this debate not be infinitely protracted -- one, because the situation in Vietnam does not permit it; and secondly, because the requirements of American national security do not permit it, either.

We believed that it was extremely important that we state our case, that we put it before the Congress and that we then get a clear decision as to the Congressional and public will. So, that we can then turn one way or the other to the essential agenda which, in any case, remains and which, in any case, must be carried out and which, in any event, will be carried out.

I want to say on behalf of the President that it is not the intention of the Administration to look for scapegoats, that once the decision is made, it will not be used to start a national debate on who lost or who was responsible, but precisely because we do not wish to do this and precisely because we owe it to the rest of the world to continue our international responsibilities as a united people.

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Precisely for this reason, must we now be honest and state what we think is needed to have a chance to stabilize the situation, to save the lives that can be saved, to permit an orderly negotiation and to conduct ourselves in this tragic moment with dignity and purpose.

Now, this is what we attempted to do in this speech and I would point out again that we have no intention, whatever happens, of letting Vietnam paralyze the basic obligation of the United States which in the entire postwar period, has preserved the global peace and has attempted to lead other countries towards common objectives.

This, we will continue, but how we conduct ourselves in this tragedy will play an important role in it. This is the purpose of the speech. This is what was uppermost on our mind.

There were many possibilities. I can give you, for example, one possibility that was very seriously considered. The figure of \$300 million that was put forward as necessary under conditions in January would have been an absurdity to put forward under current conditions and would have had almost the same effect in Saigon as to put forward nothing at all. But we did consider the proposition of putting forward the figure of \$300 million and warning the Congress that if that helped we would come in with another figure in a few weeks.

The President's judgment was that the country should not have an endless debate every four weeks on the same basic set of facts and on the same fundamental issues and he, therefore, decided to take the route of asking for the amount which he considered the minimum amount that could achieve the objective that he had described, but we are prepared to discuss with the Congress other methods and we are not approaching the Congress with an attitude of finding scapegoats. We are approaching the Congress with an attitude that we absolutely must find national unity now in the face of the other problems that are ahead of us.

Now, this is what was the thinking behind the speech. I will be glad now to answer questions.

Q Mr. Secretary, when you speak of negotiations to South Vietnam, you are in fact talking about surrender, aren't you?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: I am not talking about surrender. I am talking about what the negotiations will produce depends very importantly on the military situation that exists and the terms that can be achieved in negotiations will depend importantly on our own actions. But obviously, the terms are not brilliant.

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Q Mr. Secretary, when you come to the Congress with a \$722 million aid request when they, in turn, had rejected, in effect, the \$300 million, aren't you actually putting the monkey on the Congress' back despite all of your disclaimers about not looking for scapegoats or not engaging in the recriminations?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: Peter, whether they reject \$300 million or \$722 million does not change that basic principle. Whether we are going to put the money on anybody's back depends on what we will do after the decision has been taken. We strongly urge this as being in the national interest under the current conditions that we face.

I believe that when the Congress addressed the question of the \$300 million, it faced totally different circumstances, it did not have to confront the question of the possible evacuation of maybe tens of thousands of people, and it was then dealing with what seemed like a totally different set of facts.

Q How do you want the law revised to take care of those Vietnamese that have become associated with us and are endangered if worst comes to worst?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: There are two legal issues. One has to do with the extraction of Americans and the other has to do with the extraction of Vietnamese.

Under a literal reading of that Indochina amendment, some lawyers argue that we do not have the right to use American military forces in any hostile action for any purposes in Indochina or in any situation where hostile action may result.

Other lawyers hold the point of view that the President has the residual constitutional right to protect American lives and that overrides a literal reading of existing legislation.

We would like the Congress to clarify this constitutional point, and frankly, we have no question that the Congress will support the constitutional point that the President does have the residual powers to use American forces to evacuate Americans. We consider this a relatively simple point.

The second question is that under the Indochina resolution, there is no doubt that we do not have the right to use American military forces under conditions in which they could become involved in hostilities for purposes of evacuating South Vietnamese or third country nationals which could also arise.

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In this case, if the Congress went along with us, we would have to be given explicit authority for perhaps a limited period of time, and clearly defined purposes to do this.

So, we need two kinds of Congressional action. The first one we can probably do without, but given the situation and the sensitivities, we would prefer to happen. The second one is, if there is to be an evacuation, we must get --

Q Mr. Secretary, you referred several times to negotiations.

SECRETARY KISSINGER: Yes.

Q As far as we know, there are no negotiations going on.

SECRETARY KISSINGER: No.

Q The PRG says they will not negotiate as long as Thieu is in power. Do you expect him to remain in power?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: I don't think it is for me to speculate what the political evolution in South Vietnam may be. I believe that under the conditions that now obtain, some sort of negotiation is probable and that the terms of this negotiation can be importantly affected by the military situation.

Q What sort of negotiations?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: I would rather not go into that at this point.

Q Mr. Secretary, are you conditioning that on getting the \$722 million when you say some sort of negotiation is probable?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: We have seen in Cambodia what happens when one side achieves total predominance and the other side is deprived of the most elementary physical means, and it appeared, of course, in Cambodia that even the departure of Lon Nol did not produce a negotiation.

Based on my own experience with the North Vietnamese, any negotiation with them will reflect the existing balance of forces to a considerable extent and, therefore, it is difficult to predict what the negotiation will be in the abstract.

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Q Mr. Secretary, if I understand you correctly, and I realize there are some problems of subtlety, and perhaps deliberate ambiguity here. If I understand it correctly, you are not really saying give us the \$722 million and we are promising it will save South Vietnam.

What you are saying is it will give us stability and a chance to get out in a somewhat orderly fashion. Is that a correct understanding?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: I am saying the judgment of General Weyand seems to be that the \$722 million could stabilize the situation perhaps on a permanent basis. I am saying that even if this is not correct -- and, after all, not every military judgment in the Vietnam war has invariably been exactly on the mark, but not every diplomatic judgment, either, not every journalistic judgment (Laughter) -- but even if this is not achievable, I would say the other purposes that America has would still be best served by the granting of this sum, and in that sense you have correctly summarized my views.

Q Mr. Secretary, the last sentence on page 2 of the President's speech deals, I believe, with a very basic premise. What evidence is there to support the statement that there was universal consensus in the United States in 1973 that the United States would continue to provide adequate materials to support South Vietnam,-- an impliedly open-ended basis.

Q I can add to that the Democratic platform in 1972 specifically called for the end to all military aid, and that certainly is a part of the national debate.

SECRETARY KISSINGER: Yes, it is also true that they only got 38 percent of the votes.

I think this is subject to research. The general impression that many of the critics of the war in Vietnam left was that their major objection was to the endless involvement of American combat forces in the region which sooner or later would have to stand on its own feet, and the impression that was widespread was that if the United States could withdraw from the war and reclaim its prisoners, that it would be prepared to assume the same responsibilities or at least with respect to material help toward Indochina that it did toward South Korea, for example, in similar circumstances.

We have never claimed a legal obligation. We have always stated that we thought it was a moral obligation. I have stated at press conferences, and I repeat it now, that we told the South Vietnamese that we believed that the Congress and the American people, in gratitude for being relieved of the nightmare of the prisoners and the loss of life, would be generous in its assistance.

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We do not claim this is a legal obligation, and we do not claim there were secret commitments, nor have we ever claimed it, nor have we ever invoked it to oppose any particular legislation.

Q Mr. Secretary, do you suppose 6000 Americans are in danger of losing their lives in Vietnam? Could they not get out on Pan American in nine days by the time this bill is considered?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: We are going to make an effort to reduce the number of Americans in Vietnam. We have to consider that if the United States precipitously pulls out of Saigon, it will also produce the very consequences, with respect to all its other concerns, that it is attempting to avoid. But, we are reducing the numbers of Americans to the minimum that is considered necessary to perform the functions that remain.

Q Are they in grave peril, as the President says?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: Whether they are in grave peril or not depends on possible evolutions that can be foreseen. If there is a collapse produced by despair and a sense of abandonment, you have one situation.

If you have a relatively, even temporarily, stabilized military situation and a government that appreciates that fact, you have another situation. If you have a negotiation, you have yet another situation. So, the exact status of both the Americans and the endangered Vietnamese cannot be stated in the abstract, it depends on a whole set of circumstances.

Q Mr. Secretary, you have said several times tonight that what is important now is that we make this decision on the \$722 million, and then what is important is what we do after that decision is made.

SECRETARY KISSINGER: That is correct.

Q From all indications, Congress has shown no inclination to pass \$300 million, and you perhaps agree that it is not reasonable to expect them to pass the \$722 million either, so my question is twofold. Number one, do you agree with that assessment; and number two, what will we do if they reject this additional aid request?

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Q Question?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: The question is, that since Congress in effect, rejected \$300 million, it is almost certain to reject the larger figure. Do I agree with this assessment and what shall we do if this assessment turns out to be correct? Is that a fair statement of your question?

The \$300 million were put forward as a supplemental appropriation under conditions that were totally different from the circumstances that we face today, both within Vietnam and in terms of our international consequences.

We did not ask the Congressional leadership yesterday about any particular figures because we did not think it was fair to them nor did the President think it was fair to him to get into a debate about a figure in which he felt he had to make the preliminary decision of what was necessary.

I had the impression, however, from the leadership that they were approaching this issue in a prayerful and serious manner and not in a contentious manner. And if the Congress looks at this not in terms of an old debate, but in terms of something of a transition to a new period of cooperation, then I would not make a pre-judgment of what they will vote and I believe that something can be worked out with them.

Now, if it turns out that they will not vote it, I have stated that the Administration will do its absolute utmost to prevent an orgy of recrimination and will attempt to focus the American people on the duties and obligations we now have which have not ended.

We have been the central power in preserving the peace and many of the initiatives of the postwar period have been due to our leadership. That is what we must maintain under now more difficult circumstances, but we can attempt to do it with a united people.

Q Mr. Secretary, is the President planning a conference in the Pacific with the leaders of our --

SECRETARY KISSINGER: No, all of these leaders that I mentioned will be coming to Washington.

Q The NATO?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: No, we are now talking about the Asian leaders. All of those have been scheduled to come to Washington.

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Q In the near future?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: Over the next three months, beginning in the near future.

On the NATO meeting, no precise date has been set and the surest way to keep a precise date from being set would be for me to try to try to interfere with the prerogatives of the permanent representatives of the NATO Council, but I think it is a reasonable assumption that it will take place -- if you speculate on that on your own -- sometime between the end of May and the end of June, and more in the earlier part than in the later part of the period. But it really has not been set.

Q The President refers to \$722 million as being for very specific purposes. Can you tell us what those specific purposes are?

Secondly, can you tell us how many Vietnamese are contemplated in the description of those whose lives may be dependent upon us?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: On the first question, there is a very precise list which we looked over in San Clemente -- in Palm Springs, and which will have to be -- (Laughter)

Q Will you stand on that statement, please?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: Will you put that on the record, Murray?

-- which we looked over in Palm Springs and which I do not have with me, but I am sure the Defense Department witnesses before various committees can testify to that.

With respect to the second question, we have tried to make as careful an analysis as we could. If you make a list of all of those whose lives could be endangered, you come up with horrendous figures because in Vietnam, the whole family is involved, it is never a question of just saving an individual. There is always the question of his entire family.

The figure of those that are endangered that we could put together amounts to something like 1.5 million. The figure of those that are endangered, we have some obligation to, but this is beyond our capabilities. The figure that we think we have a special obligation to is between 150,000 and 200,000, but that is a massive logistic effort whose feasibility depends entirely on the conditions in which it will have to be executed and therefore, an important concern of ours is to provide conditions in which we can at least think about it.

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Q How many Americans might be required to evacuate 150,000 to 200,000 South Vietnamese?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: You will have to get this from the Defense Department, but it is not an insignificant figure.

On the other hand, it is not a very extended operation, either.

Q When you get these Vietnamese out, don't you have to negotiate either with the South Vietnamese regime or the Communists?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: Or both.

Q What circumstances do you envisage? The South Vietnamese, so far, have indicated they would not allow this to happen.

SECRETARY KISSINGER: We are not talking under conditions now. We are not saying this will happen. We are saying we have an obligation to consider the worst contingency and we are trying to create circumstances where we can talk with a South Vietnamese government about the worst contingencies.

Barry?

Q Excuse me. Just a technical point, maybe. It is not clear to me.

Is there a remaining aid request for Cambodia? What is it or are you just abandoning any hope now?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: It is very probable, as the President has indicated, that the fate of Cambodia will be decided in the next few days and that therefore we are not, tonight, in a position to make a plausible request to the Congress.

But if that should turn out to be wrong, we will then do it but we do not want in Vietnam a similar situation to arise in which there is an endless debate while there is a constant deterioration of a situation over which we lose progressively any capacity to exert influence.

Q Dr. Kissinger, is the use of American air power considered in any way in your proposals?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: The President has pointed out that this contingency, that the introduction of American combat forces was a theoretical possibility which is, one, proscribed by law, and secondly, will not be requested by the President except for the limited purpose of refugee evacuation.

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Q Mr. Secretary, what about troops on the ground?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: It depends, really, entirely on the situation under which this takes place and the degree of cooperation and indeed, whether it is feasible at all.

Q Did you get a range of figures?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: We had a very rough guess, but we have not made a detailed study of this.

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Q Mr. Secretary, to take that point a little further, do you contemplate the need to put in enough American troops to draw a protective ring around Saigon if that becomes necessary to evacuate?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: Right. I hope you ladies and gentlemen realize we are now talking about the absolutely worst contingency which has, if you analyze it, many nightmarish aspects to it and, therefore, depends to a very important degree on the degree of cooperation that is achieved by the South Vietnamese government, the kind of negotiation that might be going on at this moment, the kind of cooperation that could be achieved from the North Vietnamese.

Therefore, it is very difficult -- and also the degree to which it is possible -- to assemble ahead of time those whose lives might be most endangered. All of these are factors on which I think it would be dangerous to speculate, but they are being considered.

Yes, sir.

Q Mr. Secretary, some of us were told today that the tone of the President's speech this evening would be optimistic, yet you presented anything but that. Can you cite something optimistic in the outlook for U.S. foreign policy?

In the President's speech we were also told that the President was sounding a conciliatory note in this -- Carl Albert, Speaker of the House. I was wondering if you would cite what is conciliatory in the President's speech?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: I think the President considered it his duty to present the situation as he saw it, and I do not think the President should be asked to be optimistic or pessimistic.

The President should be asked to explain the situation as he sees it to the best of his ability.

Secondly, what is conciliatory in the speech is his repeated expression that this is not an attempt to begin a period of recrimination, that at his repeated insistence that the duties before America remain constant, whatever setbacks we may suffer in Vietnam, and that he will work with the Congress and with the public to try to achieve a united approach to this.

This is his attitude. He did point out those things that have to be remedied in order to get the forward momentum, but the spirit of this speech and the spirit of the man is conciliatory, it is not vindictive. It is not bitter, and it is not accusatory.

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It is also serious because it is a serious situation which we cannot escape by pretending that it is not serious or by pretending that it does not affect international affairs. We can master them, but we cannot explain them away.

Mr. Osborne?

Q Mr. Secretary, two clarifying questions. Would it be intended to bring the endangered Vietnamese to the United States, number one. Number two, there is a reference on page 3 to diplomatic notes being sent to members of the Paris Conference. That is a reference to the January notes?

SECRETARY KISSINGER: No. We have sent a new set of notes tonight. The destination of these individuals has not yet been decided, but we will be approaching other countries and we, without any question, will have to take a substantial number of them.

Q Sir, as I understand the reading of this, you will not only have to get the money, but you will have to get -- isn't it two laws on the books now that you will have to have taken off the books? You will have to go back and say we want to nullify these two laws in case the Church-Case law and continuing resolutions --

SECRETARY KISSINGER: No. We are asking for the money, and we are asking with respect to the law, for a clarification of one point, which I believe will present no difficulty whatsoever; namely, the President's legal authority to use American forces to extract American citizens.

We could probably do that on a unilateral interpretation. We simply would like to get this clarified. I am confident from consultations that this is no problem.

The second is not to take the Church-Case off the books, but rather to get an exception for a limited period of time for a specific purpose for a one-time operation.

THE PRESS: Thank you, Mr. Secretary.

END (AT 8:00 P.M. EDT)