"Let us put an end to our self inflicted wounds":

Gerald Ford and America’s

Departure from Vietnam

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On August 9, 1974 Richard Milhous Nixon resigned the presidency in the wake of the Watergate Scandal. Vice President Gerald Ford succeeded to this office with the simultaneous assumption of the presidency. With this transition, the United States would support South Vietnam in the context of the recent agreement known as 'An Agreement for the restoration of peace in Vietnam.' Signed on January 27, 1973 for the United States ended American involvement in the Vietnam War. During his address Ford stated "...to our friends and allies in Asia, I pledge continuity in our support for their security, independence, and economic development." Thus from the very inception of the Ford Presidency it was made emphatically clear that his administration would continue to support South Vietnam.

South Vietnam had been the recipient of an inordinate amount of blood and treasure from the United States for the past fifteen years. The result of the war in Vietnam had been to significantly divide domestic public opinion like no other issue since the American Civil War (1861-1865). As a consequence of Nixon’s resignation, Ford became the caretaker of Nixon’s policy in Vietnam. However, less than nine months into Ford’s administration, South Vietnam ceased to exist as a nation having been conquered by the North Vietnamese communists and the Viet Cong. In the wake of North Vietnam’s military victory over the south, Ford called upon the United States to arrange negotiations with the communists.
Introduction

On August 9, 1974 Richard Milhous Nixon resigned the presidency in the wake of the Watergate Scandal. Vice President Gerald Ford succeeded to this office and with the assumption of the presidency, the dilemma of Vietnam. Now President, Ford quickly let it be known via an address to a joint session of Congress on August 12, 1974, that he would support South Vietnam within the context of the recently signed Paris Agreement.1 The cease-fire agreement, known as ‘An Agreement Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam’ was signed on January 27, 1973 formally ended U.S. military operations in Vietnam. During his address Ford stated “…to our friends and allies in Asia, I pledge continuity in our support for their security, independence and economic development.”2 Thus from the very inception of the Ford Presidency it was made emphatically clear that his administration would continue to support South Vietnam.

South Vietnam had been the recipient of an inordinate amount of blood and treasure from the United States for the past fifteen years. The result of the war in Vietnam had been to significantly divide domestic public opinion like no other issue since the American Civil War (1861-1865). As a consequence of Nixon’s resignation, Ford became the caretaker of Nixon’s policy in Vietnam. However, less than nine months into Ford’s administration, South Vietnam ceased to exist as a nation having been conquered by the North Vietnamese communists and the Viet Cong. In the wake of North Vietnam’s military victory over the south, Ford called upon the United States

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to "...put an end to our self inflicted wounds" and end the trauma of the Vietnam experience. What happened in such a short span of time that would have forced Ford to shift from wholehearted support of an American ally to complete disengagement and abandonment? This thesis will examine Ford’s initial policy toward South Vietnam and how it changed by April 1975. Furthermore, since the cost of the war to the United States, in terms of lives lost and resources spent to defend South Vietnam was staggering, why would the United States just give up and walk away from South Vietnam?

In order to effectively examine Ford’s policy, my discussions will be divided into several sections. Chapter I will primarily focus on policies developed by Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger who were the authors of the strategy toward Vietnam that Gerald Ford ultimately inherited. Specifically, I will address Nixon’s plan for turning over the war to the South Vietnamese, the Paris Peace Agreement, and Nixon’s concern relative to South Vietnam in a post treaty environment. Chapter II addresses Ford’s view of the war and his statements of support for an independent South Vietnam as a Congressman. This chapter will also concentrate on Ford’s immediate actions of support for the South Vietnamese upon his assumption of power in August 1974. In addition, the fiscal pressures that Ford faced in his attempts to provide aid to South Vietnam will also be discussed. Chapter III examines the Administration’s handling of Vietnam during the beginning of 1975 as pressure from the communists forced Ford to confront the issue of South Vietnam’s survivability. This chapter deals with congressional skeptics coupled with the administration’s attempts to formulate

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3 Speech to Joint Session of Congress, April 10, 1975, in White House Correspondence Files, SP-2-3-36, Joint Session Foreign Policy 4/10/75, Box 11, Gerald R. Ford Library.
solutions to the supplemental aid requests that were critical to the survival of the Thieu regime. Finally, the last chapter focuses on the very end of our involvement that includes the Weyand Report and Ford's last appeal to Congress for more aid. The paper is designed to be a chronological summary of Ford's actions as president in order to assist South Vietnam and why he failed to live up to his early promises.

The primary source materials for this examination are available at the Gerald R. Ford Library and Archive located on the campus of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Since the twentieth anniversary of the fall of Saigon there has been a concerted effort to release formerly classified documents that dealt with the ending stages of the Vietnam War. These efforts were accelerated in the year 2000 with the twenty-fifth anniversary of the communist victory over South Vietnam. Most of these declassified documents are from the State Department, which at the time of the Ford Administration, was headed by Henry Kissinger. Similarly, Kissinger also served as National Security Advisor to Nixon and was the chief architect of the Paris Peace accords signed in 1973. As a result, the declassification of these documents has afforded the researcher a tremendous opportunity to read beyond the history books and become uniquely acquainted with the personalities and decision makers at that time.

These documents undoubtedly have provided fresh insight as to how this country's foreign policy works and the confidential discussions that are so prevalent in diplomacy. Furthermore, access to these documents provides historians a unique opportunity to completely examine a very important part of the Ford presidency that, until recently, has been classified. Ford and Kissinger argued that if the U.S. simply pulled out of Vietnam American credibility, particularly in the non-communist
community, would be called into question. In the Cold War environment of 1974, a commitment by the United States was viewed by all presidents as unyielding and definite. These documents underscore the importance of our Cold War policy positions and the importance of policy continuity with respect to South Vietnam. Thus during these years an American commitment had to be perceived as absolute and unyielding by not only our enemies, but, more importantly, by our friends and the non-aligned nations of the world.

Many of the relevant policy makers had served in World War II, which subsequently impacted their core beliefs about aggression and appeasement. Likewise, in the rivalry of the Cold War, Vietnam was viewed as a testing ground for American resolve—much like Korea in the 1950s. A typical statement summed up the 1965 rational for Americanizing the war; “The integrity of the U.S. commitment is the principal pillar of peace throughout the world. If that commitment becomes unreliable, the communist world would draw conclusions that would lead to our ruin and almost certainly to a catastrophic war. So long as the South Vietnamese are prepared to fight for themselves, we cannot abandon them without disaster to peace and to our interests throughout the world.”

While this paper is primarily discussing Ford, the McNamara statement could have been written by any of the four Vietnam-era Presidents and their principle advisors. Thus it was hardly surprising that Ford quickly ended any doubt that there would be any dramatic re-alignment of U.S. foreign policy positions.

In the opening weeks of Ford’s presidency, the new administration did not want to invite any misinterpretation or misunderstanding of American resolve. On all levels

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Ford made it perfectly clear that the United States would remain engaged in Vietnam and ensure the continued flow of aid and supplies to ensure survival and stability. An example of this was Ford's initial communications with the South Vietnamese government in which Ford stressed that American policy toward South Vietnam had not changed with Nixon's resignation.

Since Gerald Ford was an appointed, and not a popularly elected president, he has never received the traditional attention that other presidents receive from historians and opinion makers. Ford inherited Nixon's shattered government in the wake of one of the greatest crises America had ever faced. His tenure in office was short-lived, so as a consequence, when most people reflect upon the Ford administration there never really is any program or policy that can be wholly credited to his administration. In contrast, Franklin Roosevelt will be forever associated with the New Deal, John Kennedy with the New Frontier, Lyndon Johnson the Great Society, and Richard Nixon with Watergate. However, Gerald Ford simply does not stimulate the imagination or possess an aura of power that most presidents seem to radiate. This phenomenon, quite frankly, is because Ford is viewed as an accidental president, a caretaker administration that bridged the gap between Nixon's resignation and Jimmy Carter's election in 1976. Yet the myriad of issues that confronted Ford upon assumption of power would have been daunting to even the most recognized and popular president. Ford inherited a fractured government, an economic slowdown, and the thorny issue of Vietnam at a time when there was a significant amount of military pressure being applied by the North Vietnamese against the Thieu regime in the South. Equally, Ford had to contend with a resurgent Congress that continually reflected the anti-war sentiment that had been
brewing in the United States after the high expectations of the 1960s had not come to fruition. John F. Kennedy had ignited a belief that anything was possible. By the early 1970s Vietnam had tempered our enthusiasm. Vietnam, coupled with the Nixon’s resignation in 1974, had seemed to exhaust the United States and its role in international affairs. With the end of the perceived excesses of the Nixon administration a memory, Gerald Ford seemed to provide a framework by which our democracy would move past the unrestrained behavior of the past and into a new light in which integrity was restored to the office of the President.

My contention is that in order to fully understand Vietnam, it is imperative that Ford’s handling of the end stages of that conflict be analyzed in detail. Ford was the consummate Washington insider prior to his selection as Vice President, so when he became President in the wake of the Watergate scandal, he was a mutually agreeable candidate to both political parties. Historian John R. Green noted that: “The reason that Ford was selected instead of Nixon’s first choice, John Connally, was that Ford was something that Connally would never be confirmable.”5 The Democratic leadership, specifically Thomas “Tip” O’Neill made this clear to Nixon during an October 11, 1973, meeting on the subject; “If you want easy sledding, the guy you should have is Jerry Ford. He will get through for you without any problems”.

Unlike the past three presidential administrations before his, Ford would not inherit a war in which the U. S. military was actively engaged in combat. However, in the wake of the American disengagement from Vietnam, the war in South East Asia

raged on. Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon had dramatically expanded the scope of our involvement in Vietnam. Nixon, due in large part to U.S. public opinion in the wake of the Tet Offensive of 1968, had arrived at the realization that the United States could not win a military victory in Vietnam.

I began my presidency with three fundamental premises regarding Vietnam. First I would have to prepare public opinion for the fact that total military victory was no longer possible. Second, I would have to act on what my conscience, my experience, and my analysis told me was true about the need to keep our commitment. To abandon South Vietnam to the communists now would cost us inestimably in our search for a stable, structured, and lasting peace. Third, I would have to end the war as quickly as was honorably possible.\footnote{Richard Nixon, RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon (New York: Touchstone, 1978), 349.}

Ford entered office amid one of the greatest constitutional crises that the United States had faced. The Watergate fiasco had ended, but presidential credibility was at an all time low. Coupled with the background with which Ford came into power was the realization that war still raged in South East Asia. The United States was no longer at war in Vietnam, yet the conflict continued between an aggressive North Vietnam and a South Vietnamese regime that was entirely dependant upon the United States for survival. Ford faced an up hill battle for funding to assist our beleaguered friend since both public and congressional opinion radically turned against further American adventurism in South East Asia in the early 1970s. Ford entered office with the goal of continuing the Nixon polices in South East Asia, yet as we shall see, even the office of the president has its limits.
Chapter I

The Beginning of the Extrication

During Nixon's first term as president (1969-1973) the United States found itself in a unique position trying to extricate itself from the Vietnam War while at the same time trying to win at least a peace that would insure the survival of South Vietnam. Thus, the de-Americanization of the war, soon to be known as Vietnamization, had begun under the Nixon Administration. However, one of the difficulties of Vietnamization was that South Vietnam would be more dependent upon the United States at the end of the war because of the financing and military hardware required by the South Vietnamese to counter Hanoi. Historians Nguyen Hung and Jerrold Schector accurately described Vietnamization in their book, Palace File, as follows: "The net effect of Vietnamization was to increase Saigon's dependence on American supplies rather than minimizing it and making South Vietnam self-sufficient. South Vietnam had no capability to produce its own guns or ammunition." Thus during Nixon's years as president the United States had assisted South Vietnam to be self-sufficient while America disengaged from the war.

The dilemma that was faced by Nixon was the fact that all of the parties (National Liberation Front, North Vietnam and the Thieu Regime) knew that the United States would eventually withdraw in the aftermath of Tet. Moreover, the North Vietnamese were, according to Vietnam expert George C. Herring, "...certain that American public opinion would eventually force Nixon to withdraw from Vietnam" and "the North Vietnamese were prepared to wait him (Nixon) out no matter what.

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additional suffering it might entail. As a result, the fundamental strategic issue faced by Nixon was quite simple: how does the United States negotiate with the enemy from a position of strength while at the same time gradually withdrawing combat forces from South East Asia? Added to this very thorny dilemma was the fact that the South Vietnamese were somewhat reluctant at times to fully support the United States’ position of ending its active combat role in South East Asia.

As noted earlier, Richard Nixon’s primary advisor during this period was Henry Kissinger who held the position of National Security Advisor to President Nixon during his first term as president. At the beginning of Nixon’s second term, Kissinger would be elevated to Secretary of State, a position he would hold until the end of Ford’s term in office. The importance of Dr. Kissinger, in both the Nixon and Ford administrations, cannot be overstated. Many believe he was the influence behind Nixon’s global foreign policy strategy. Like Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, Kissinger would ultimately become the link between the Nixon and Ford administrations. Much like McNamara, Kissinger served the longest and dominated both of the administrations in which he served relative to the decisions the United States undertook with respect to foreign policy and security issues. Kissinger, like McNamara, represented stability of policy because he had been the one who in fact shaped the Vietnam policy that Ford inherited. Similarly, as the primary American negotiator for the United States, Kissinger fully understood the nuances involved that had allowed the agreement to take place, as well as the vigilance required by subsequent administrations to oversee the peace.

Kissinger made it very clear in his memoirs that upon assumption of power in 1969, the Nixon administration had no intention of winning the war. On the contrary, it was not a question of military victory, but a question of withdrawal under the best circumstances, which came to be known as “peace with honor”.

The Nixon Administration entered office determined to end our involvement in Vietnam. But it soon came up against the reality that had also bedeviled its predecessor. For nearly a generation the security and progress of free peoples had depended on confidence in America. We could not simply walk away from an enterprise involving two administrations, five allied countries, and thirty one thousand dead as if we were switching a television channel.10

Similarly, at the time of Kissinger’s appointment as National Security Advisor in late 1968, he had stated in Foreign Affairs that the United States “…could no longer achieve its objectives within a period or with force levels politically acceptable to the American people.”11 Thus at the very outset of Nixon’s term in office there was no secret plan to end the war, just a desire by Nixon to extricate the United States from the war in an honorable fashion so as to not damage the credibility of the United States with its allies.

The negotiations that began in 1969, eventually culminating in the Paris Peace Accords of 1973, were primarily negotiated secretly between Kissinger and the North Vietnamese. The sum and substance of the U.S. negotiating position was predicted upon a mutual cease-fire by all parties, American withdrawal of its military forces from South Vietnam, release and repatriation of prisoners of war, and an end to the North’s overt and covert war against the South Vietnamese government. In contrast, the North Vietnamese demand was the unconditional withdrawal of American forces from

Vietnam and the dismantling of the Thieu regime. Once these two demands had been met the North Vietnamese would discuss the potential release of the American prisoners of war. Kissinger further elaborates on the North Vietnamese demands in the White House Years: "The North Vietnamese stated brutally two fundamental demands: the total withdraw of all American forces and the replacement of what Hanoi called the Thieu-Ky-Huong clique." These were the positions held by the two parties until 1972 when the United States unleashed concentrated bombings of the North in response to the Easter Offensive. Ultimately the heavy military pressure, coupled with Nixon's victory in the 1972 presidential election, coerced the North Vietnamese into accepting terms articulated and put forward by the United States.

The final agreement stipulated the American withdraw, U.S. support of the Thieu regime in the South via financial and military aid, and finally, over the objection and to the ultimate detriment of the South Vietnamese, allowing existing North Vietnamese solders to remain in the south. Marilyn B. Young described in her book, The Vietnam Wars 1945-1990, the reluctance of the South Vietnamese to accept this settlement: "Years later Thieu still fumed: What happened? Mr. Kissinger negotiated over our head with the Communist and try to impose upon us a peace that he has agreed with the Communist." The Paris Peace agreement was a cease-fire in place, which meant that North Vietnamese forces would remain in the south, which caused a great amount of consternation among the South Vietnamese leadership. President Nguyen Van Thieu and the rest of the southern leadership were promised that American military

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13 Kissinger, White House Years, 259.
and financial assistance would guarantee a balance of power after the United States ceased military operations in Indo China.

The 1973 Paris Peace Accords, officially called the “Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam,” formally established the framework by which the United States could honorably extricate itself from the conflict. This policy, primarily shaped by Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, provided for the ending of military hostilities and allowed the signatories to discuss the unification of Vietnam in a peaceful manner. Under the terms of the agreement, North Vietnam would not be allowed to augment its forces in the South, thus the feeling in Washington was that the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) would ultimately retreat back to the North. Nixon expressed this view in his memoirs when he said: “...the provisions of the agreement regulating the replacement of forces and closing the border sanctuaries of Laos and Cambodia would effectively cut them off from their source of supplies and force them to either return to the North or gradually wither away in the South.”

Thus it was assumed that as time went on the North Vietnamese threat would diminish.

The South Vietnamese predicated their maintenance of the balance of power upon the fact that the United States would have to ensure continued assistance at levels that would effectively support South Vietnamese military readiness in addition to deterring the North Vietnamese communists. Moreover, the United States would pay the South Vietnamese to defend themselves while maintaining a comfortable distance from the conflict.

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15 Nixon, RN, 692.
16 Kissinger, Diplomacy, 695.
As a result of Vietnamization, Nixon, much to the approval of American public opinion, slowly ended America’s active military involvement in Vietnam by incrementally withdrawing our combat and support troops. By the time of North Vietnam’s 1972 Easter Offensive, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) bore the primary burden of the ground combat. At the time of the Easter Offensive most of the American forces in South Vietnam consisted of support and advisory personnel.17

During the Easter Offensive the United States primarily used air power to stop the North Vietnamese, instead of reintroducing American ground forces to turn back the North Vietnamese. Ultimately, the South Vietnamese turned the tide of battle with the overwhelming assistance of American bombers and in due course held their ground against the North Vietnamese assault. While the level of violence had dramatically increased in 1972, the fact remained that the North Vietnamese had not achieved victory and Theiu remained in power after one of the gravest military predicaments since the Tet Offensive of 1968.18 More importantly, to the American public, U.S. casualties during this phase of the war were measured in single digits.

The Easter Offensive and the South Vietnamese response to it proved that the South with the support of American air power could effectively block an overt, large-scale invasion by the North Vietnamese communists. South Vietnamese General Ngo Quang Trung, who was the Corps Commander for Military Region IV commented that: “The American response during the enemy offensive was timely, forceful, and decisive. This staunch resolve of the U.S. to stand behind its ally stunned the enemy.

Additionally, it brought about a strong feeling of self-assurance among the armed

17 Herring, America’s Longest War, 246.
18 Herring, America’s Longest War, 249.
forces and population of South Vietnam." The performance of the South Vietnamese underscored the fact that in order to survive the South would need continued American financial and military support and, if required, the realistic threat of U.S. military intervention if the North attempted a significant treaty violation or conventional invasion of the South. The American response to the 1972 Easter Offensive was effectively seen as the model by which the United States could effectively support the South in dealing with any significant treaty violations.

The peace settlement significantly boosted Nixon’s popularity with the American public. According to a February 1973 Gallup poll, 68% of the American public approved of the way Nixon was handling his job as president, while a resounding 77% approved the way Nixon handled the situation in Vietnam. Moreover according to the same public opinion index, 8 out of 10 Americans registered that they were satisfied with the agreement, while 58% of those polled felt that Nixon had in fact achieved his goal of “peace with honor.” Overall, the agreement and Nixon’s handling of the last stages of the war struck a positive tone with a majority of Americans. On the other hand, there were some interesting findings from the survey questions that were being asked. According to one survey question, “If North Vietnam does try to take over South Vietnam again, do you think the U.S. should bomb North Vietnam or not?” 71% of respondents answered “no” while only 17% favored the United States resuming military action against the North. Similarly, when the question was re-phrased to ask if the United States should commit ground forces to aid in the defense of South Vietnam, 79% said no, the U.S. should not commit ground forces.

while 13% favored introducing ground forces in the event North Vietnam struck at the South.\textsuperscript{21}

Based upon the polling data collected at the conclusion of the American segment of the war, it was clear that the American people were weary of war. The expectations of the New Frontier and Great Society gave way to the frustration of Vietnam and the civil unrest that ensued in the late 1960s and early 70s. This ominous sign was an obvious signal to those in positions of elected power in the United States that the American public no longer wanted to be burdened with Vietnam. Moreover, it appeared that Congress was hesitant in flexing American military muscle to insure that the North Vietnamese complied with the Peace Accords. Thus, the heavy bombing of the North by U.S. aircraft, the likes of which occurred during the 1972 Easter Offensive, appeared to be off the list of options that would be employed to cope with North Vietnamese treaty violations. By the time of the 1973 Peace Treaty, many Americans felt that the costs of the war had simply been too high. Historian John Green summarized the state of public perception in America when he stated that: “...Vietnam and Watergate had left an indelible scar on American society. Its institutions had been altered, its economy compromised, and its citizenry made cynical about its destiny.”\textsuperscript{22}

The agreement established the ground rules to which the United States would adhere in support of South Vietnam. First and foremost was the fact that Nixon had pledged the United States to fully sustain South Vietnam in the event the North flagrantly violated the Paris Peace Accords. During negotiations in the fall of 1972, Nixon wrote to Thieu and stated, “…you (President Thieu) have my absolute assurance

\textsuperscript{21}Gallup Poll Index, February 1973.
\textsuperscript{22}John R. Green, The Presidency of Gerald R. Ford (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1995), 21.
that if Hanoi fails to abide by the terms of this agreement, it is my intention to take
swift and severe retaliatory action."23 Yet just two years later South Vietnam ceased to
exist under the weight of a communist military offensive.

Clearly, Nixon was driven by a need to ensure that agreement would not merely
provide a "decent interval" between the American withdrawal and a potential South
Vietnamese collapse. Nixon was indeed concerned about South Vietnam in a post-
treaty environment and to that end summed up his position in his book, *No More
Vietnams*, written 18 years later: "We [the United States] would continue to send
enough military aid to maintain the balance of power, and we would respond swiftly to
North Vietnamese attempts to subvert the terms of the agreement."24 Nixon further
elaborated that the United States would come to the aid of South Vietnam in the event
of an aggressive North Vietnamese military offensive or significant treaty violation:

"South Vietnam would handle minor violations of the cease fire, and the United Stats
would retaliate against the major ones."25 Thus, Nixon committed his administration to
insuring the preservation of South Vietnam by assisting the South Vietnamese with
military support to thwart any significant communist military strike.

In the final analysis relative to the 1973 Paris Peace Treaty, Nixon believed that
while the agreement was not perfect he had little time left with both the American
public and a wary and reluctant Congress. An example of Congressional impatience
with the war is the fact that on January 2, 1973 the House Democratic caucus, in a non-
binding resolution, had voted 154 to 75 to terminate all funds supporting American

24 Nixon, *No More Vietnams*, 266.
military operations in Vietnam. Thus, Congress was trying to force the United States out of the war, and Nixon was obliging. By signing the agreement and redeploying the balance of our forces out of South Vietnam, Nixon strongly felt that with continued American aid to the South and sustained military reconnaissance of the North, the United States could ensure a balance of power in the region that would keep South Vietnam intact. Throughout the initial months after the treaty was signed in 1973, Nixon made good on his promise to insure the continued flow of aid and supplies to the South Vietnamese “at a high level without overtly violating the terms of the Paris accords.”

At the time of the cease-fire, both sides were near exhaustion. In the short run, this aided Thieu greatly. Logistics were traditionally the weakest part of the Party’s [Communist] war effort, and Front [National Liberation Front – Viet Cong] and PAVN [People’s Army of Vietnam–North Vietnamese Army] units were at the end of a long supply line that had run dry and would take months to be restored. Thus, for the time being Thieu’s army had the advantage so long as the United States continued to supply military aid to the South Vietnamese. Similarly, the North Vietnamese, now that the United States had officially ended its combat operations in South East Asia, would be free of the devastating affects of American bombings in its quest to re-supply its forces in South Vietnam.

The ink was hardly dry before fighting erupted between the North and South Vietnamese. It this juncture both sides were attempting to consolidate their territorial holdings in South Vietnam. At the time the Paris Agreement was signed, there were an

27 Herring, America’s Longest War, 259.
estimated 145,000 North Vietnamese soldiers in South Vietnam. Herring commented, "None of the Vietnamese combatants had abandon his goals, and each was willing to observe the agreements only to the extent that it suited his interests." The war would continue despite all of the provisions put in place by the Paris Agreement. The difference this time was that the South would have to go it alone. Marilyn Young adds the follow point: "The 'cease-fire war' claimed 26,500 ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam – South Vietnamese] dead in 1973 and almost 30,000 in 1974. Pentagon statistics listed 39,000 and 61,000 PRG/DRV (Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army) dead for the same time period. Fifteen thousand civilians died, 70,000 were wounded, over 800,000 became refuges." Despite the peace treaty, the war continued unabated during this time regardless of America's direct involvement.

To understand Nixon's concern about Vietnam is to recognize that Vietnam was part of a much broader framework by which the United States would continue its support for anti-communist regimes within the confines of the Cold War politics. Nixon knew that anti-war sentiment was alive and well in the United States. Yet he needed to keep the United States engaged in a foreign policy that perpetuated U.S. strength and credibility among both allies and potential adversaries. Recognizing that Vietnam was merely another piece on the Cold War chess board, Nixon commented that "Vietnam was important not for itself but because it demonstrated in terms of support for our friends and allies and in terms of showing our will to our enemies."

30 Herring, America's Longest War, 258.
32 Memorandum of Conversations, folder "February 15, 1973, Nixon Defense Secretary Elliot Richardson", Box 1, National Security Advisor, Memoranda of Conversations, Gerald R. Ford Library.
Richard Nixon had gone to great pains to assure South Vietnam that the United States would not abandon its ally after the peace agreement was signed. With the looming presence of Watergate eroding Nixon’s power, it appeared that the survival of South Vietnam was inexorably tied to Richard Nixon because it was Nixon who had been the guarantor of the Thieu regime.

Gerald Ford assumed the office of the presidency amid the clouds of Watergate and the perceived excesses of the Nixon Administration. A political insider in Washington, Ford was not a nationally recognized figure when he was confirmed as Vice President. A University of Michigan and Yale Law School graduate, Ford had been first elected to Congress from Michigan’s fifth Congressional district in 1948.33

From the beginning of his legislative career, Ford was an avowed internationalist who felt that in the post-Second World War environment the United States must exhibit strong global leadership. Having served as a naval officer during the Second World War, Ford was fully aware of American military potential and the influence that could be exerted to shape international events that would conform to U.S. national interests. Known as a consensus builder while moving up the Congressional ladder, Ford took an active role in supporting a strong internationalist U.S. policy during the 1950s and 60s. Vietnam was of great interest to Ford during his time in the legislature. He wholeheartedly supported the growing U.S. escalation under the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Moreover, as the war dragged on Ford often felt that the United States was not exercising enough military might against the North Vietnamese Communists. Considered a “hawk” by his colleagues in government, Ford freely admitted in his memoirs “from the beginning of our involvement in (Indochina), I had always thought we were doing the right thing.”34 By the “right thing” Ford felt

34 Ford, A Time to Heal, 248.
Chapter II

Verbal Support and Fiscal Restraint

Gerald Ford assumed the office of the presidency amid the clouds of Watergate and the perceived excesses of the Nixon Administration. A political insider in Washington, Ford was not a nationally recognized figure when he was confirmed as Vice President. A University of Michigan and Yale Law School graduate, Ford had been first elected to Congress from Michigan’s fifth Congressional district in 1948.33 From the beginning of his legislative career, Ford was an avowed internationalist who felt that in the post-Second World War environment the United States must exhibit strong global leadership. Having served as a naval officer during the Second World War, Ford was fully aware of American military potential and the influence that could be exerted to shape international events that would conform to American interests. Known as a consensus builder while moving up the Congressional ladder, Ford took an active role in supporting a strong internationalist U.S. policy during the 1950s and 60s. Vietnam was of great interest to Ford during his time in the legislature. He wholeheartedly supported the growing U.S. escalation under the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Moreover, as the war dragged on Ford often felt that the United States was not exercising enough military might against the North Vietnamese Communists. Considered a “hawk” by his colleges in government, Ford freely admitted in his memoirs “from the beginning of our involvement in (Indochina), I had always thought we were doing the right thing.”34 By the “right thing” Ford felt

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34 Ford, A Time to Heal, 248.
that the United States had to support anti-communist regimes and wage war as a policy against communist aggression.

During the gradual U.S. build up of military forces in Vietnam in the 1960s, our growing acceleration in Vietnam became a topic that continually attracted Ford’s interest. To Ford, like many other of his contemporaries in the early stages of our involvement, Vietnam policy was a natural response to communist aggression. Ford’s overall foreign policy position clearly espoused U.S. containment policy. Subsequently, this made Ford an ardent supporter of America’s role in the Vietnam War. This view was firmly established when Ford gave a speech in Congress on August 8, 1967 in which he told his colleagues that he “supported the President [Lyndon Johnson] and our country from the outset and to this hour” but took issue with the “slow squeeze” incrementalist approach that had been Johnson’s policy. Ford felt that this type of gradualist approach did nothing more than prevent the United States from soundly defeating the North Vietnamese. Ford’s rationale was that the United States was “pulling its best punches in Vietnam” and he urged the president to fully utilize an “awesome arsenal of conventional arms to compel a swift and sure peace.”

However, Lyndon Johnson knew that use of the entire American arsenal against North Vietnam was unthinkable coupled with the fact that he did not want to sacrifice his Great Society programs to the Vietnam War. “Johnson had few illusions about what escalation of the war would mean at home. He knew that wars had side tracked Populism, Progressivism, and the New and Fair Deals.”

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As the war dragged on and grew increasingly unpopular in the wake of the Tet Offensive of 1968, Ford remained a staunch supporter of our effort there. Ford’s support of U.S. policy continued into the 1970s when Richard Nixon was president and included Nixon’s expansion of the war into Cambodia. In a speech on June 5, 1970 to the National War College, Ford said of Nixon’s expansionist policy:

I think that we have properly employed our power in attacking the communist sanctuaries in Cambodia. This is the kind of use of power that the communists understand and respect. No longer will they think that President Nixon is engaging in meaningless rhetoric when he talks of an appropriate response to the other side’s failure to cooperate with us in our search for an end to the Vietnam War.37

Two years later during the 1972 Easter Offensive Ford felt that Nixon was for all intents and purposes correct in committing vast amounts of American air power to blunt the North Vietnamese thrust into the South: “The president is standing up against the enemy’s blatant aggression. He is destroying the enemy’s war making capability, rapidly and effectively. …[O]ur initiatives toward an honorable settlement have drawn only an obstinate, negative response from the enemy.” Similarly, in the same speech Ford labeled those who called for a unilateral pull out of Vietnam defeatists: “In the frantic search for expedient solutions, they (the defeatists) openly support resolutions which would tie the President’s hands as he with-draws from Vietnam.”38 Hence, Ford believed that the United States should support South Vietnam in such a manner as to insure its survival, calling those who did not support the efforts of Nixon “defeatists”.

Yet once in power and faced with the same type of situation Ford failed to obtain congressional support to assist South Vietnam in the wake of the communist offensive.

Upon Ford’s assumption of office as president it was immediately clear that his fundamental concern was to ensure a continuity of policy toward South Vietnam. This view is expressed in Ford’s autobiography, appropriately titled A Time to Heal, and supplemented by the recently de-classified State Department documents that attest to Ford’s legitimate concern about South Vietnam.

Knowing that he had to take action fast once Nixon left Washington, Ford immediately calmed the nation smarting over the Watergate wounds and, in his first address to the nation on August 9, 1974, quickly dispelled any fears that U.S. foreign policy would undergo any dramatic changes. “To the peoples and governments of all friendly nations, and I hope that could encompass the whole world, I pledge an uninterrupted and sincere desire for peace. America will remain strong and united but its strength will remain dedicated to the safety and sanity of the entire family of man, as well as our own precious freedom.” Thus, from his initial moments as president Ford gave no indication that there would be a change of policy.

Within 48 hours of taking office Ford sent a secret cable via State Department channels to the South Vietnamese President, Thieu. The once secret message, formally declassified on December 15, 1999, outlined Ford’s approach toward his predecessor’s policy toward Vietnam. The first paragraph states:

I do not think I really need to inform you that American foreign policy has always been marked by its essential continuity and its essential bipartisan nature. This is even truer today and the existing commitments this nation has made in the last (administration) are still valid and will be

fully honored in my administration. These reassurances are particularly relevant to the Republic of Vietnam.\textsuperscript{41}

In addition to Ford’s written communication to President Thieu, the U.S. embassy in Saigon sent the American Charge’ D’Affaires to convey “general assurances on continuity of U.S. generally and U.S. support for RVN specifically.”

Subsequent to their meeting on August 9, 1974, the South Vietnamese Ministry of Information publicly announced: “Mr. Lehmann (Charge’ D’Affaires) specifically assured the Prime Minister that the United States would continue to its policy of close Friendship with and support for the Republic of Vietnam including continued economic and military assistance to Vietnam.”\textsuperscript{42}

Ford’s initial actions upon assuming the presidency made it immediately clear to the South Vietnamese that the United States would remain engaged in Vietnam and that the passing of Nixon would not undermine the current policy of support. In the same cable Ford also addressed the worrisome issue that Congress was not going to allow foreign policy to be dictated out of the White House, as had been the case during the Nixon Administration. Similarly, Ford addresses the recent Congressional cutting of foreign aid to South Vietnam by reassuring Thieu that the United States would essentially still fund the war at an appropriate level to ensure the survival of the south in the wake of repeated North Vietnamese low level military probes. He said: “I know that you must be concerned by the initial steps taken by the Congress on the current fiscal year appropriations for both economic and military assistance to the Republic of

\textsuperscript{41} Cable from Ford to Thieu dated 9 August 1974, Gerald R. Ford papers, National Security Advisor, Kissinger-Scowcroft West Wing Office Files 1969-1977, Vietnamese War “Camp David Files (1)” Box 34

\textsuperscript{42} Gerald R. Ford Papers, National Security Advisor, Kissinger Scowcroft West Wing Office files, 1969-1977, Vietnamese War “Camp David Files (1), Box 34
Vietnam. Our legislative process is a complicated one and it is not yet completed.

Although it may take a little time I do want to reassure you of my confidence that in the end our support will be adequate on both counts."43 Thus, on all levels Ford quickly moved to calm any fears on the part of the South Vietnamese. Ford unequivocally stated to both domestic and foreign parties, that there would be no significant shift in U.S. policy toward Vietnam. The fact that, within a day of taking office, Ford is already soothing worried allies is very important because it sends a signal to Thieu that South Vietnam is and will remain an important ally to the United States in the new administration. Moreover, Gerald Ford’s statements were by design optimistic. It appears that Ford’s initial correspondence to Thieu achieved the goal of reassuring the South Vietnamese that the United States would continue maintaining the status quo. Moreover, a State Department official in Vietnam, at the time of Ford’s initial correspondence to Thieu, telegrammed officials in Washington and reported that the assurances coming out of the new Ford administration proved to be a success in calming South Vietnamese fears. The once secret cable indicates that Ford’s statements provided the “necessary steadying ingredient to the moods and attitudes here.”44

Ford’s early messages were optimistic by design because Ford felt that he could win over Congress in an effort to insure that continued aid flowed to South Vietnam. Ford’s insight about Congress was based upon the fact that he had primarily been a legislator. Similarly, he felt that he knew the mood of Congress and would, by gauging congressional inclination, would insure aid programs continued to the South

44 Dept of State telegram, Embassy Saigon to Secretary of State, August 13, 1974, Folder: Vietnamese War-Camp David File (1) Box 34, Kissinger-Scowcroft West Wing files, Gerald R. Ford Library.
Vietnamese. Likewise, while every president has a certain grace period or "Honeymoon" upon assuming power, Ford felt that after the trauma of Watergate it seemed possible that he would be able to usher in a new era of cooperation and trust between the White House and Congress. *Time* magazine reported the following in support of this mode of thinking:

The resignation brought at least the unity of hope for a fresh beginning, and with Ford, the hope for a new style of presidential leadership. After the long, obsessional preoccupation with Watergate and its claustrophobic underground works, most Americans felt last week as if they were emerging for the first time in a long while into the upper air.  

Nixon’s resignation ushered in a new opportunity to Ford. The American public had wanted an end to the divisions of Watergate and the perceived excesses of the Nixon years. *Newsweek* magazine compared and contrasted Ford’s administrative style with that of Nixon in a positive way: “[Ford’s] young presidency was open where Nixon’s was insular, straight where Nixon’s was devious, plain where Nixon’s was imperial, and above all cheery where Nixon’s had gone sullen under its long siege.”  

Thus with the appearance of Congressional support behind him, according to the media pundits Ford could reasonably expect support from the legislative branch in funding the aid requirements for South Vietnam. So long as Ford continued in the role as a solidifier and consensus builder (much along the same lines that he had used during his thirteen terms in Congress) Ford felt that he would be able to bridge the gap that had formerly existed between Congress and Nixon.

In addition to Ford’s assurances to South Vietnamese President Thieu, Ford also convened a meeting of his National Security Council staff on August 10, 1974. The

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purpose of the meeting was two-fold. One element was Ford’s intention to use the NSC for the formulation of national security policy in order to fully explore and develop foreign policy issues and options. The other key element of the meeting was the fact that it was Ford’s “intention to continue to pursue the basic foreign policy and national security goals which have been articulated over the past five years.” Thus, Ford was supporting his public and private pronouncements with bureaucratic actions in an effort to insure that his administration continued to pursue the same policies as his predecessor.

Another interesting facet that emerged from Ford’s August 10th NSC meeting was that Henry Kissinger, Nixon’s Secretary of State, would continue to serve in this same position and continue to be Ford’s primary foreign policy advisor. Kissinger represented continuity and the balance of power politics that had been the basic position of the Nixon Administration. As a consequence, Ford’s reliance on Kissinger was a clear signal to the bureaucracy that Ford would carry on Nixon’s policies and that there would be no dramatic changes. Nixon elaborated on the need for Kissinger to remain as Ford’s Secretary of State in the remaining hours of his presidency:

You know that you [Kissinger] must stay here and carry on the things for Jerry [Ford] the things that you and I have begun. The whole world will need reassurance that my leaving won’t change our policies. You can give them that reassurance and Jerry will need your help. Just as there is no question but that I must go, there really is no question but that you must stay.48

47 NSC Meeting Dated 8-10-74, President’s talking points, Gerald R. Ford Papers, National Security Advisor, NSC Meeting File 1974-1977, Meeting File August 10, 1974, Box 1, Gerald R. Ford Library.
48 Nixon, RN, 1074.
Both Nixon and Ford viewed Kissinger as a settling influence because of the achievements of the past and the fact that Kissinger would insure a continuity of policy between the incoming and outgoing administration.

While Ford was busy ensuring that South Vietnam, and the rest of the world, clearly understood his intentions he also took the opportunity on August 12, 1974, to speak to a joint session of Congress. In his speech, Ford articulated his stance relative to continuity of United States foreign policy as follows:

Let there be no doubt or any misunderstandings anywhere, and I emphasize anywhere; there are no opportunities to exploit, should anyone desire, there will be no change of course, no relaxation of vigilance, no abandonment of the helm of our ship of state as the watch changes. We will stand by our commitments and we will live up to our responsibilities, in our formal alliances, in our friendships, and in our improving relations with potential adversaries. On this, Americans are united and strong. Under my term of leadership I hope we will become more united. I am certain America will remain strong. To our allies and friends in Asia, I pledge continuity in our support for their security, independence, and economic development. In Indo China, we are determined to see the observance of the Paris Agreement on Vietnam and the Cease-fire and Negotiated settlement in Laos. We hope to see an early compromise settlement in Cambodia.49

Ford’s speech to Congress clearly enunciates the policy that was also stated in the secret communications to Thieu upon Ford’s assumption of power. What was clear to all concerned is that Ford will maintain the Nixon policy of a free and independent South Vietnam.

A week after Ford gave his August 12th speech; Secretary of State Henry Kissinger forwarded a secret cable via General Brent Scowcroft to North Vietnamese Special Advisor Le Duc Tho in Paris. Since Kissinger had primarily negotiated the Paris Agreement with Le Duc Tho, Kissinger was all too familiar with how Mr. Tho

felt about U.S. intentions in Asia. The once secret document, formally declassified in January 1997, quotes the aforementioned section from President Ford's speech and, then in closing, Kissinger personally elaborates on U.S. intentions in Asia to Le Duc Tho:

President Ford, as you must be aware, has been a firm supporter of President Nixon's policy in Indo China for five and one half years. In the spirit of mutual respect and candor, which has always characterized our exchanges, Mr. Special Advisor, I must convey to you that President Ford is a man with a keen sense of American Honor. He also shares the view, as we all do on the American side, that the DRV (Democratic Republic of Vietnam) has a positive path open to it—of peaceful settlement, reconstruction, constructive ties with the United States and the western world, and a truly independent role in world affairs. The President is ready to engage with you on this path. It is up to you. 50

Kissinger, as the primary voice for United States foreign policy, undoubtedly provided the North Vietnamese with both an oppressive position as well as potential benefits for remaining peaceful and compliant. His carrot and stick approach offers “reconstruction and constructive ties with the United States” which would assist in healing the wounds of war as well as setting forth a policy that would regain a sense of normalcy in post war South East Asia. However, what many American policy-makers at the time failed to understand was the fact that the communist leaders of North Vietnam did not fight for nearly thirty years for compromise. Kissinger elaborates on the fact that Ford supported Nixon’s policies going back to 1969, which by suggestion, implied that Ford supported Vietnamization, and continuing aid to South Vietnam—just like Nixon. I feel that this is significant given that Ford was the Republican minority leader in the late 1960s and early 70s. Having come from the same political party as Nixon, as well

as being labeled a “hawk,” Ford would continue his predecessor’s policies because he was tied to them based upon his legislative rhetoric and voting record in the House of Representatives. To change course now would invite a collective doubt about his judgment as well as question upon American credibility.

Thus Ford, based upon his past leadership position, would continue the Nixon policies because as Minority Leader of the House of Representatives Ford had been an early supporter of our diplomatic and military efforts which culminated in continuing his support for the current policy that was established by Nixon. To waiver at this juncture would put Ford in an embarrassing position that would amount to a reversal of his core beliefs towards Vietnam and South East Asia.

The North Vietnamese response to Ford fell along the same lines as their feelings toward Nixon. Just days after Kissinger’s initial cable to Le Duc Tho, the North Vietnamese, through Tho, responded to Ford’s statements by telling Kissinger the following:

Since Mr. Gerald Ford replaced Mr. Nixon as president of the U.S., we have carefully followed and read his statement. Although his predecessor has failed, Mr. Ford still continues to implement the Nixon Doctrine without Nixon, to Vietnamese the war, and to use the fascist and dictatorial Nguyen Van Thieu group as an instrument for the pursuance of the war and the sabotage of the Paris agreement with the view of imposing U.S. Neo-colonialism on South Viet Nam. Mr. Nixon met with failure in this enterprise and had to leave the White House. Should Mr. Ford continue doing so, he would certainly and inevitably fail too. You yourself in the capacity of U.S. Secretary of State declared that the U.S. Policy in South Vietnam was unchanged.51

For all practical purposes, Ford succeeded in insuring both sides of the conflict in Vietnam that the United States would remain steadfast and firm in its support for the

South Vietnamese. While Ford’s pronouncements of support for South Vietnam enhanced Thieu’s confidence, it was nothing but a warning of the continuing American involvement to Le Duc Tho and the rest of the North Vietnamese leadership. It is clear by Tho’s tone that the North still viewed the United States and Thieu regime with distain. Likewise, Tho seemed to think that Ford would continue to carry on the war by supporting Thieu and using Nixon’s policy to achieve, what the North Vietnamese considered, an imperialist war on the people of Vietnam. Moreover, the Tho cable to Kissinger implied that the North Vietnamese communists would continue to up the ante and continue to place military pressure on the South with the goal of ultimately discrediting Nixon’s policies, which were now Ford’s, by overthrowing the Thieu regime.

Ford’s initial round of assurances continued well into his first month of presidency. For instance, in a September 12, 1974 Bipartisan Congressional Leadership meeting with Kissinger and other Congressional leaders, Ford told members of this meeting that there were a number of trouble spots in the world, which included Vietnam. His position was to “assure that what we are trying to do in Vietnam is not destroyed through a lack of funding or that our hands are not tied in using those funds.” Ford clearly recognized that “there is a prospect of increased military activity in Vietnam” and that if the United States were to “bug out of Vietnam, it could affect our whole foreign policy and the reliance that countries can place on us.” Without a doubt, it was viewed by Ford and his advisors that, while the United States had effectively honored its commitment to Vietnam during our active military involvement

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52 September 12, 1974 Ford, Bipartisan Congressional Leadership, Box 5, National Security Advisor, Memoranda of Conversation, Gerald R. Ford Library
and in the post 1973 Peace Accord environment, the United States had no other choice than to continue to send vast amounts of aid to South Vietnam. Henry Kissinger, during a September 13, 1974 meeting with both Ford and the U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam, Graham Martin, felt that “it is inconceivable we spend $1 Billion in Israel and not the same in Vietnam where so many Americans have died.” Kissinger continued with the fact that “Vietnam is enormously important in the international perception of the United States.” 53 On all counts Ford agreed. Thus Ford would carry out his predecessor’s intentions and plans to insure that South Vietnam could resist the North.

In the months following Gerald Ford’s assumption of power, Ford was acutely aware of the fundamental importance of American aid to South Vietnam. From the very beginning of his political career, Gerald Ford had been a fierce anti-communist. However, now that the North Vietnamese were accelerating military pressure on South Vietnam, Ford knew that the single most imperative ingredient to the survival of South Vietnam was military aid from the United States. Ford was painfully aware of the public’s aversion to any more foreign military entanglements. Similarly, like all Americans who lived during the Vietnam War, Ford had witnessed the striking domestic changes that had occurred during the war. Ford elaborates upon this in his memoirs when writing about his first few months in office in late 1974:

The war dragged on and on, and the damage it caused this country both domestically and internationally was truly staggering. Our greatest loss, of course, was the 57,000 American dead and the more than 100,000 who suffered serious injuries. Next came the loss of U.S. prestige around the world. The conflict created deep divisions among the American people and discredited our military. Lastly, LBJ’s decisions to provide both guns (the war cost us $150 billion) and butter without a

53 Memorandum of Conversations: Box 5, National Security Advisor, Gerald R. Ford Library
tax increase had resulted in a terrible disruption of our economy. It would take America a long time to recover from these wounds. Ford understood that America as a nation had been damaged because of the war. However, given the fact that the United States had sacrificed so much, Ford was intent upon sustaining South Vietnam so long as it was legally, financially, and politically viable.

In support of the administration’s objective to support South Vietnam, Henry Kissinger disseminated a memo to the president on the subject of the current $700 Million dollar aid package circulating through Congress in September 1974. The memo principally outlined the implications of the reduced aid to South Vietnam. Simply stated, the aid was basically not enough to maintain South Vietnamese readiness. Additionally, considering the current rate of inflation and the transportation costs for vast amounts of military aid to South Vietnam, the reduced sum of $700 million would drastically compromise the effectiveness of the South Vietnamese forces. The austerity measures that would have to be implemented by the ARVN because of the decrease in aid would result in less firepower availability and, as a consequence, would constrain the South Vietnamese to observe strict fire discipline relative to artillery and air support operations. Likewise, the lack of funding would ground armor and aircraft due to fuel and spare parts shortages. In addition to weapons degradation, the proposed cuts would also cut into the availability of medical supplies if the fighting remained at its current level. Thus, Kissinger’s memo on the subject of aid

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54 Ford, A Time to Heal, 250.
to South Vietnam was unambiguous; without an appropriation of $1 billion to the South Vietnamese the United States would place South Vietnam in peril resulting in increased vulnerability to North Vietnamese advances.  

While the current funding for South Vietnam was becoming an issue only one month into Ford’s term as president, South Vietnamese President Thieu sent Ford a letter on September 16th in which he notified the president that “the Communist generalized offensive continues unabated” and that “significant cuts in previously promised aid could potentially tempt the North Vietnamese to intensify efforts in the South.”

All of the parties were conscious that the North Vietnamese had rebuilt their military in the wake of the failed 1972 Easter offensive and had fortified enclaves in the South. In a memo to Kissinger on September 4th American intelligence had estimated that the North had repaired several airfields and fortified these forward airfields with anti-aircraft weapons to deter South Vietnamese attacks. Clearly, the state of affairs in South Vietnam appeared to be deteriorating and Ford would have to ascertain a way to effectively handle the situation. Despite the dismal reports from South Vietnam, the Ford administration did not believe that all was lost. Ambassador Graham Martin, who could be described as an optimist, told Ford during a September 13, 1974 conversation: “If I thought it was hopeless I would tell you. We can make it. But if North Vietnam

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57 Letter, Nguyen Van Thieu to Gerald R. Ford, September 19, 1974, Folder “Vietnam-President Nguyen Van Thieu” Box 5, National Security Advisor, Presidential Correspondence with Foreign Leaders, Gerald R. Ford Library.
sees the loosening of support it will change their perceptions." Martin’s position was that an American aid package of at least $1 billion dollars would significantly aid the South Vietnamese security while an additional $600 million in economic aid would provide its citizens with a more optimistic view of their government.

From the beginning of Ford’s administration, it is evident that he placed a special emphasis on Vietnam. It is clearly documented that, with his initial contacts with Thieu and South Vietnamese Ambassador Bac, President Ford would not treat South Vietnamese aid as a normal process but, instead, personally took a vigorous interest in aid formulation for the South. Ford subscribed to Ambassador Martin’s feelings that “the only way we can lose now in Vietnam is to throw it away here in Washington.”

During Ford’s second week in office, he convened a group from the various Departments of Defense, State, the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Council, and key administration personnel. This gathering came to be known as the Legislative Interdepartmental Group. The task of this group was to evaluate the amount of aid that South Vietnam was receiving from the United States. Based upon the outcome of the August 19th meeting, the group advised that for the time being the Ford Administration should oppose the reduction of military and economic aid currently under consideration in Congress.

60 Memo, Graham Martin to Brent Scowcroft, August 12, 1974, Folder “Vietnam (1),” Box 18, National Security Advisor, Presidential Country Files for East Asia and the Pacific, Gerald R. Ford Library.
By September 1974, as Ford watched the Congressional deliberations for aid to
South Vietnam, he began to work more closely with legislative leaders in an effort to
augment his support for increased aid to the South. During a September 12, 1974,
meeting between the president and an assortment of key members of Congress, Ford
and Kissinger stressed that sufficient aid would insure the survival of South Vietnam.
Ford stated, "We must assure that what we are trying to do in Vietnam is not destroyed
through lack of funding." Similarly, Ford continued that reduced aid would
demoralize the South Vietnamese military during a period of time in which there was
the "prospect of increased military activity" by the North Vietnamese. Kissinger
supplemented Ford's argument by arguing: "To the extent we cut back, we encourage
military action" and "if we bug out of Vietnam, it would affect our whole foreign
policy and the reliance countries place on us." Kissinger felt that, at a minimum,
$600 million be allocated for economic aid in an effort to bolster Nguyen Van Thieu's
regime. In his memoirs Ford elaborates the policy position expressed in his
September 12th meeting:

> From the time I became President, I urged Congress to supply additional
> aid to prevent the collapse of both nations (South Vietnam and
> Cambodia). 'With adequate aid United States military assistance, they
can hold their own,' I said. 'We cannot turn our backs on those
> embattled countries.' If we do not stand up to aggression, I told the
> Congressional leadership, we would lose our credibility around the
> world. Their reaction was mixed. Mansfield and O'Neill, consisted
> with their long-held attitude, wanted no part of it. Speaker Albert,
> however, tried to be helpful. 'You're right,' he told me privately,
> addition, 'I'm not sure I can get the House to go along.'

62 Memorandum of Conversation, Folder “September 12, 1974 – Ford, Bipartisan Congressional
Leadership,” Box 5, National Security Advisor, Memoranda of Conversations, Gerald R. Ford Library.
63 Memorandum of Conversation, Folder “September 12, 1974 – Ford, Bipartisan Congressional
Leadership,” Box 5, National Security Advisor, Memoranda of Conversations, Gerald R. Ford Library.
64 Memorandum of Conversation, Folder “September 12, 1974 – Ford, Bipartisan Congressional
Leadership,” Box 5, National Security Advisor, Memoranda of Conversations, Gerald R. Ford Library.
65 Ford, A Time to Heal, 250.
Despite Ford’s best efforts to convince the Congressional leadership that aid to Vietnam was vital to her survival, it was clear that there was a ground swell of anti-Vietnam sentiment growing not only in Congress but, also, in the country as a whole. A private memo from Kissinger to the president where he refers to “a very broad anti-Vietnam sentiment in Congress,” supports the reality that by 1974 the Vietnam consensus in Congress was gone.  

An important element during this period is the fact that the American economy in the mid-1970s exhibited a significant rise in inflation that consequently cast a shadow across all governmental spending. It was at this juncture that Senator John Stennis, a Democrat from Mississippi and chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, expressed his view to Ford during a September 12th meeting at the White House. Stennis felt that the government needed a “tightening up” of expenditures and he expressed to Ford that the Vietnam aid debate was more “acrimonious” than ever. Senator Stennis counseled Ford that his best hope to receive aid for Vietnam through the Congress was to “try and hold the line and come back after the elections.”  

Clearly, if a self-described hawk and ardent supporter of the Vietnam War like Senator John Stennis became weary of funding the conflict, then it appears that the entire Vietnam consensus was unraveling. It would have been political suicide for Ford, and the Republican Party, to push for more aid to South Vietnam prior to the November 1974 Congressional elections.

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66 Memo, Henry Kissinger to Gerald Ford, September 12, 1974, Folder “Foreign Assistance – Military Assistance Service fund (MASF), (1),” Box 6, National Security Advisor, Presidential Subject File, Gerald R. Ford Library.

Ford, being a savvy politician, realized that in the wake of the Watergate scandal, Nixon’s departure, and a lack-luster economy more aid to Vietnam would further damage the already vulnerable positions that Republicans held in Congress. Yet Ford felt that he could not desert South Vietnam and reverse the policies of the past three presidential administrations. What was becoming clear to Ford was that once the midterm elections were over, there would be ample time for his administration to guide Congress in order to formulate a supplemental aid package for South Vietnam.

Kissinger advised Ford of this very phenomenon when he stated: “In the current pre-election climate, it is the unanimous position of the leadership that any effort to restore funds on the Senate floor would be unsuccessful.”\(^{68}\) Thus, Ford and Kissinger would wait until the 1974 Congressional election cycle was over before approaching the Congress for a supplemental aid bill for South Vietnam. In his book, *Years of Renewal*, Kissinger describes the administration strategy of trusting Stennis for adequate aid to South Vietnam after the mid-term elections. The Senator had indicated to Ford that he would “consider favorably” a supplemental budget request of $300 million in the new Congress if the currently allotted $700 million “is given rigid supervision and proves to be inadequate six months from now.”\(^{69}\) Since Senator Stennis was the Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Ford and Kissinger felt that there was time to work out an acceptable amount of funding once the elections had passed.

\(^{68}\) Memorandum of Conversation, Henry Kissinger to Gerald Ford, September, 1974, Folder “Foreign Assistance – Military Assistance Service Fund (MASF), (1),” Box 6, National Security Advisor, Presidential Subject File, Gerald R. Ford Library.

On October 9, 1974, President Ford signed the Defense Appropriations Act and commented that the bill’s “inadequate” provisions of $700 million in military aid to the South Vietnamese was a “major drawback,” and indicated that he would in all likelihood have to approach Congress early in 1975 in order to seek supplemental assistance for the south. The military aid to the South coincided with the signing of $449 million in economic aid just two months later on December 30, 1974. In a statement during the signing of the economic aid package Ford remarked:

In South Vietnam we have consistently sought to assure the right of the Vietnamese people to determine their own futures free from enemy interference. It would be tragic indeed if we endangered, or even lost, the progress we have achieved by failing to provide the relatively modest but crucial aid, which is so badly needed there. Our objective is to help South Vietnam to develop a viable, self-sufficient economy and the climate of security, which will make that development possible. To this end, the economic aid requested ($600 million) represented the amount needed to support crucial capital development and agricultural productivity efforts. The lower amount finally approved makes less likely the achievement of our objectives and will significantly prolong the period needed for essential development.

These two appropriations bills gave Ford an insight of how Congress could thwart his efforts because of their appropriation powers. Although Ford clearly objected to the amount that Congress appropriated for South Vietnam, at this juncture he had little choice but to sign the measures and work on further supplemental aid down the road.

Ford felt that the abridged funding “gravely impaired the ability of our ally to forestall further aggression from the North.” Consequently the course of action that Congress seemed to be embarking upon, in terms of reduced funding, was viewed by

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70 “Statement on signing the Department of Defense Appropriations Act, October 9, 1974.” In Ford Public Papers, 1974, p.244.
72 Ford, A Time to Heal, 137.
the Ford Administration as hurting the prospects for a lasting peace in South Vietnam due to the south’s military vulnerability. In 1980 interview, former South Vietnamese Ambassador Bui Diem commented on this phenomenon when discussing the reduction of American aid to South Vietnam:

The ‘tightening of the screw’ period began right (after the Paris Agreements). Persistent anti war feelings (in the United States), illusions of peace generated by the peace agreement, (American) antipathy against the one man regime in Saigon—all of these factors resulted in the fact that the South Vietnamese received during calendar year 1973 barely what they needed for survival. And this was but the beginning of the trend, because the real difficulties came only in 1974 when an unfortunate confluence of reverses came along:

1. Of a requested $1.6 billion in military aid, the U.S. Congress appropriated only $700 million (in spite of the fact that an earlier bill had already authorized $1 billion).
2. An unexpected action by the DoD, charging off $300 million worth of equipment against FY 1975 (while normally it should have been charged against FY 1974), thus further reducing the volume of military aid to $400 million.
3. Economic aid being almost totally consumed by soaring costs of fuel and commodities in the world market.
4. An urgent request for additional aid which was ignored by a U.S. Congress too much absorbed by Watergate, and, most importantly of all,
5. The resignation of Mr. Nixon, who was considered rightly or wrongly as the solid supporter of Mr. Thieu and the anti-Communist cause. 73

While the South Vietnamese were concerned about the reduction of aid from the United States, coupled with the increasing military activity of the North Vietnamese communists, Kissinger was clearly alarmed at the swift tempo of North Vietnamese activities in the South. He expressed his concerns to President Ford in a November 23, 1974 memo, which discussed the fact that there was a “major and sudden increase in

the infiltration of men and equipment into the south."\textsuperscript{74} Ford was aware of the fact that
the pressure was building in Southeast Asia for another communist offensive, and in
keeping with his pledges of support for Thieu was seeking further aid to assist the
South Vietnam.

Similarly in his statement Ford was clear that he would be going back to
Congress for additional aid once the new congressional session commenced in January.
While Ford communicated his discontentment with the lower amount of aid, he was
careful in attempting to foster an accommodating relationship with the Congress. Ford
would later characterize his efforts here in the following and pithy way: "motto toward
the Congress was communication, conciliation, compromise, and cooperation."\textsuperscript{75} Thus
a significant portion of his actions was predicated upon the circumstances of how he
arrived in office coupled with his lack of a formal mandate from the electorate.
Besides, the public outcry over his pardon of Richard Nixon, foreign policy challenges
ranging from the Soviet Union to the Middle East, and the sagging economy all
competed for funds and attention. Meanwhile Ambassador Martin was pleading with
Kissinger and Ford for significantly more aid to South Vietnam.\textsuperscript{76}

Based upon the shifting dynamics relative to governmental spending and the
fact that the United States was no longer engaged in Southeast Asia, there was the
prevailing mood that Vietnam was no longer a significant issue as it had been for much
of the last ten years. Given the atmosphere in the United States, the Democratic gains in

\textsuperscript{74} Memo, Henry Kissinger to Gerald Ford, November 23, 1974, Folder "Vietnam (3)," Box 18, National
Security Advisor, Presidential Country Files for East Asia and the Pacific, Gerald R. Ford Library.
\textsuperscript{75} Ford, A Time to Heal, 134.
\textsuperscript{76} Memo, George S. Springsteen to Brent Scowcroft, September 12, 1974, Folder Vietnam (2), Box 18,
National Security Advisor, Presidential Country Files for East Asia and the Pacific, Gerald R. Ford
Library.
the 1974 Congressional elections, and the economic realities of the time, Ford realized
that attempting to gain supplemental appropriations for South Vietnam would be
arduous at best. As 1974 came to a close, pressure would intensify in the coming year
as the North Vietnamese began to gear up for their long anticipated offensive. While
there had never truly been a complete cessation of hostilities after the January 1973
agreement, the North now felt that, with Nixon out of the way and an apparent
unwillingness of the Congress to support the South Vietnamese war effort, the time was
ripe for renewed action in the South.

Although it appeared that the South Vietnamese were holding their own as 1974
closed a misguided perception masked the underlying realities of the military balance in
1975*, sums up the position of the South Vietnamese military situation at this juncture:

“The Americans had taught, trained, and organized the South Vietnamese to fight a war
‘American style’-with high tech devices, air mobility, and profuse expenditures of
ammunition and other material. ...By 1974 the RVNAF (South Vietnamese Air Force)
had to fight a rich man’s war on a pauper’s budget.”77 Thus, at the end of 1974 South
Vietnam faced increased pressure on the military front followed by significantly
reduced funding. Added to the financial woes affecting South Vietnam, there was the
perception that that the South Vietnamese had lost the battlefield initiative. Coupled
with these troubles facing South Vietnam, the Ford Administration was set back by the
1974 Congressional races that resulted in the election of many anti-war Democrats to
Congress. Taken in its totality it became clear that it was not a matter of *if* but *when* the
South would disintegrate. George C. Herring, in his book, *America’s Longest War*;

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The United States in Vietnam 1950 – 1975, summed up the situation confronted by the Ford Administration:

The American abandonment of South Vietnam was manifest by the end of 1974. Nixon was forced to resign in August, removing from power the individual who had promised Thieu continued support. Throughout the year, Kissinger had pleaded with an increasingly defiant Congress to expand American military aid to $1.5 Billion, insisting that the United States had a moral obligation to South Vietnam and warning that failure to uphold it would have a ‘corrosive effect on our interests beyond Indochina’. The argument that that had been accepted for nearly a quarter of a century now fell flat. Inflation in the United States evoked insistent demands for reducing expenditures, and many members of Congress agreed with Senator William Proxmire that there was less need for continued military aid to South Vietnam than for ‘any other single item’ in the budget. Critics pointed out that the Thieu government was in no immediate peril and warned that much of the money would line the pockets of Saigon’s corrupt bureaucrats. A continuation of massive military aid would encourage Thieu to prolong the war, while a reduction might impress upon him the need to seek a political settlement. It was time to terminate America’s ‘endless support for an endless war,’ Senator Edward Kennedy insisted.78

Consequently, with issues such as a reluctant Congress, a stagnant economy, and a brewing anti-war sentiment, the unpopular topic of Vietnam had been relegated to the back pages of most newspapers. At this juncture, nobody wanted to resurrect the memories of America’s painful experience in Vietnam.

As 1974 ended the military pressures that were accumulating in Southeast Asia made it unmistakably clear that 1975 would be a watershed year that would culminate in the final decision on the fate of South Vietnam. Ford may have wanted to support South Vietnam; however, by 1975, his authority to influence the Congress for the passage of supplemental aid for the South Vietnamese was marginal at best. For example, historian John R. Green commented: “correspondence [between Ford and Thieu] shows beyond much doubt that until the end of 1974 Ford believed—or he

78 Herring, America’s Longest War, 263.
wanted Thieu to believe—that the United States would step in to save the South Vietnamese. Yet Ford knew full well that Congress would never allow that.” 79 What is unmistakably clear is that the United States no longer felt that Vietnam was a priority in American life. This was reflected in funding that had dramatically slipped as a budgetary item. A nation’s budget reflects its priorities. In the case of South Vietnam, the United States reduced aid because America had turned its back on Indochina and was moving on. There was little Gerald Ford or Henry Kissinger could do to reverse this phenomenon.

91 Green, The Presidency of Gerald R. Ford, 134.
Chapter III

The Beginning of the End

1975 began with the North Vietnamese seizure of the city of Phouc Binh. This event, coupled with the conquest of Phouc Long province, represented a turning point in the post Paris Peace Agreement phase of the war. While the fall of Phouc Binh was of little strategic significance, in terms of South Vietnamese self-confidence it was quite considerable. The fall of Phouc Long province was the first time an entire province had fallen to the North Vietnamese. Correspondingly the lack luster performance of the South Vietnamese military during the defense of both the fallen city and province left much to be desired. The combination of the military defeat within the south and the diminution of U.S. aid contributed to a deep sense of gloom in Saigon.

Stanley Karnow, in his groundbreaking book, Vietnam: A History, describes the fall of Phouc Binh as follows:

Stunned by the loss of Phouc Binh, members of the Saigon regime were doubly shocked by the almost inaudible American reaction to the defeat. Le Duan, encouraged, now urged a more aggressive schedule: bolder actions “to create conditions for a general uprising in 1976” with a bid for complete victory sooner “if opportunities present themselves.” So the strategy was to be improvised, with each new step determined by the results of the last one. A crucial question was whether the United States might intervene, but the grizzled Communist leaders, the dream of a lifetime within their grasp, refused to be pessimistic. Pham Van Dong, then nearly seventy, had been struggling for a half century. Addressing his comrades at one meeting in Hanoi, he conceded that American bombers might return. But only U.S. combat troops would make a difference, and, he quipped: “they won’t come back even if we offered them candy.”

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80 Newsweek (20 January 1975): 40
It was in this rapidly deteriorating atmosphere with the North Vietnamese full of fight and confidence that an anxious Nguyen Van Thieu wrote to President Ford on January 24, 1975 recounting the “most massive and blatant violation of the Paris Agreement.” Thieu concluded that the existing state of affairs developing in the South was “grave” and represented “a most serious threat to the survival of South Vietnam as a free and independent country.” Likewise, Thieu appealed to President Ford for further aid in order to stem the growing communist tide. In support of his request, Thieu called into question American trustworthiness as well as the moral obligation that the United States had made to the South. Moreover, he also pointed out that while the North was receiving massive amounts of aid and supplies from communist block countries, the South Vietnamese were hindered by an austerity program because of the recent cuts in aid from the United States. He even argued that South Vietnamese soldiers “had to count every single shell they fired” while the North was not constrained by such limitations. A significant factor, which was repeatedly analyzed by Washington, was the fact that on just about every level of the military the South Vietnamese had the advantage in arms, men, and equipment. A review of the comparative military strengths between North and South Vietnam in early 1975 illustrates that, at least on paper, it appeared that the South Vietnamese had an adequate amount of military equipment to insure at least a stiff resistance to any significant communist military offensive:

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### South Vietnam

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Army: ARVN Regulars:</th>
<th>180,600</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regional Forces:</td>
<td>289,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popular Forces:</td>
<td>193,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
<td>662,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanks:</td>
<td>350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APCs</td>
<td>880</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Air Force: Personnel:</strong></td>
<td>63,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aircraft:</strong></td>
<td>1,673</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Navy:</strong> Personnel:</td>
<td>40,258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Craft:</strong></td>
<td>1,507</td>
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</table>

### North Vietnam

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Army: NVN &amp; VC Regulars:</th>
<th>225,000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guerrillas:</td>
<td>40,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative:</td>
<td>110,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
<td>375,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanks &amp; APCs:</td>
<td>600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Air Force: Aircraft:</td>
<td>342</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Air Defense (Regts):</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navy: Personnel:</td>
<td>3,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craft:</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The impression of such a comparison is that the South Vietnamese appeared to be quite a formidable opponent. Writer and historian David Halberstam commented that "if there was an overestimation of the South Vietnamese, there was a comparable underestimation of the capacity, resilience, determination, and toughness of the other side." Therefore, the fact remained that the South Vietnamese capabilities were overemphasized, which ultimately would add to the administration’s credibility problems when the North Vietnamese offensive began in earnest in 1975 and the ARVN collapsed under the weight of the communist offensive. In lieu of the fact that the United States no longer had large amounts of military advisors to assist the South Vietnamese, coupled with U.S. diminishing aid, Saigon seemed to be merely a paper tiger standing in the path of a concerted, well trained and lavishly supplied North Vietnamese Army. Jeffrey Record of the Brookings Institution commented on this...
point and argued that, “The central fact was that the ineffectiveness of the (South) Vietnamese Army was not something that could have been dealt with simply through finding a more effective training program. Much more basic were the problems of corruption, incompetence, low moral, poor leadership, and lack of security.”86 Thus for all of the strengths noted on paper, the fact remains that without direct American support, Nguyen Van Thieu’s military was a house of cards waiting to collapse.

In the wake of the North Vietnamese seizure of Phouc Long Province, Ambassador Martin in Saigon surmised that the North’s victory was a “turning point in the history of the Paris Agreement.” In his communications with Henry Kissinger, Martin continued:

In the cynical belief that no one outside South Vietnam really cares, North Vietnam in open defiance of the Agreement is determined to use whatever military force is required to gain its objective of conquering SVN. The US reaction to the North Vietnamese conquest of Phuoc Long province is thus of critical importance for the success or failure of our policy in Indochina.87

In another communication to Kissinger, Ambassador Martin further stated that the North Vietnamese strategy was to conquer South Vietnam through accelerated military operations against the ARVN. Martin commented: “We have ample intelligence and documentary proof that the communists have opted for an escalated level of violence in 1975 aimed at winning a significant victory through military means.”88

The initial weeks of 1975 proved to be a watershed relative to Ford’s Vietnam policy. The discouraging events now occurring in South Vietnam made it obvious to

Ford that he would have to take swift and decisive action in order to successfully cope with the brewing crisis. The only way to stabilize the state of affairs was for more U.S. aid to the South. However, this request would have to run the gauntlet of a very reluctant Congress. Similarly, the North Vietnamese, now emboldened by their recent triumph, would only gain momentum in their military operations, while the South Vietnamese, reeling from their recent set back, would have to contend with the fact that the United States had no troops or advisors to assist them as had been the case in 1972.

In response to the deteriorating situation in Vietnam, on January 11, 1975, the United States addressed several of the other signatories of the Paris Agreement in an effort to gain their support in order to attempt to get the North Vietnamese back to the negotiating table. However, given the fact that it now appeared to the communists that the United States would not come back into Vietnam, the North Vietnamese were not going to entertain the idea of going back to the negotiating table at a time when it was clear that they now held the initiative. 89

With the deteriorating situations in the south and the lack of progress on the diplomatic front, the Ford administration began to review its military options during early 1975. While the United States was prohibited from taking military action because of the restrictions imposed by Congress, both Ford and Kissinger began to play on “Hanoi’s near paranoid suspiciousness” in an effort to deter the North Vietnamese from further military incursions into the South. 90 In a back channel message from Brent Scowcroft to Graham Martin on January 7, 1975, Scowcroft alluded to discussions that had brought about the potential option of deploying B-52 Bombers to Thailand as well.

89 Back channel Message, Graham Martin to Henry Kissinger, January 1975, folder “Vietnamese War – Camp David File (1)” Box 34, Kissinger-Scowcroft Wet Wing Office Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.
90 Henry Kissinger, Years of Renewal (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 486.
as a deployment of a Carrier Battle Group to the Gulf of Tonkin in an effort to show support for the ailing South Vietnamese. In a move to show that the United States was in fact a credible ally to the South Vietnamese, Ford approved of this strategy. According to Kissinger’s account, President Ford agreed to a scenario that would have the USS Enterprise and its associated battle group elements steam through the Gulf of Tonkin while on its way to its regularity-scheduled deployment to the Indian Ocean. However the controversy that ensued over this decision erupted in the media and ultimately resulted in Ford rescinding his order as well as abandoning the plan to move bombers into Thailand. Historian John Green commented, “the prospect of renewing the bombing of the North was absurd. Congress would never stand for it, Ford was personally against it, it was legally indefensible (Ford himself had helped shepherd through the 1973 bill outlawing any further U.S. commitment), and the president risked an outpouring of protest that could easily eclipse the reaction to Nixon’s decision to invade Cambodia.” Thus the concept of overt military action was never really an option at this particular juncture.

In his memoirs, Henry Kissinger states that in order for the forward deployment of air and naval forces to Indochina, Ford would ultimately have to “say a thousand ways what he would not do” with those redeployed U.S. military forces to Congress. Kissinger’s reflection of this time highlights his concern that the administration would have to spend more time explaining to a skeptical legislature and press that the United

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91 Back channel message, Brent Scowcroft to Graham Martin, January 7, 1975, Folder “Vietnam (6)”, Box 11, National Security Advisor, NSC East Asian and Pacific Affairs Staff Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.
92 Kissinger, Years of Renewal, 486 - 487.
93 Newsweek (20 January 1975): 38
94 Green, The Presidency of Gerald R. Ford, 137.
95 Kissinger, Years of Renewal, 487.
States was not militarily re-engaging in Vietnam. Clearly Ford would not tempt Congress by violating the congressionally imposed ban on American military activities in South East Asia. As a consequence Ford was unable to move military forces in the area to play upon Hanoi’s fears of direct U.S. intervention. Obviously, Hanoi was watching American developments with interest. Now that Ford’s trump card was effectively blunted by Congress, it is safe to say that the North Vietnamese were encouraged by the lack of American intervention. Despite the recent aid setbacks, Ford did approve unarmed U.S. reconnaissance flights over Vietnam and Cambodia. Ford was an astute enough politician to understand that lobbying Congress for more aid was one thing, while introducing American military forces back into Vietnam was an altogether different proposition. The last thing Ford, Congress, and the American public wanted to see was dead and maimed Americans on the evening news. Aid for South Vietnam did not involve risking American lives—just money.

The Ford Administration’s commitment to South Vietnam left little doubt that Ford would in fact press Congress for a supplemental aid package in light of the recent aggressive moves by the North Vietnamese. A list of talking points for Henry Kissinger, dated the day before the fall of Phuoc Binh, unequivocally stated that, “if a supplemental is needed, you may be sure the President will strongly support it.” Claiming that the $700 million military aid appropriation for fiscal year 1975 would “undoubtedly be inadequate,” the Kissinger talking points memo primarily advocated

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the timely submittal and the anticipated passage of the aid request by Congress.98

Clearly the administration’s position was not the question of "if" Ford would seek aid, but instead how much. Similarly in notes from a January 7th meeting with Ambassador Martin, both Ford and Kissinger had stressed the vital importance of support for the prospective supplemental aid package for South Vietnam and that Kissinger was optimistic about its chances for passage because Congress would not want the burden of the loss of South Vietnam due to inadequate funding by the United States.99 Thus Ford was still pursuing a policy of aid and support for South Vietnam despite the early defeats of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) in Phuoc Long province. Consequently, while the recent defeats by the South Vietnamese on the battlefield did not inspire much confidence in most observers, Ford was still living up to his pledge to support South Vietnam.

Both Ford and Kissinger felt that Congress would not allow South Vietnam to collapse under the increasing pressure of the North Vietnamese communists. In addition, both men felt that with the election year posturing over, Congress would guarantee the survival of the South by appropriating the necessary aid. Graham Martin had felt that the Ford Administration should ask Congress for an additional $700 million in military aid in order to insure that at least $500 million would ultimately be appropriated.100 In due course President Ford requested only $300 million in military

99 Backchannel Massage, Brent Scowcroft to Graham Martin, January 7, 1975, Folder "Vietnam (6)" Box 11, National Security Advisor, NSC East Asian and Pacific Affairs Staff Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.
aid for the South. A January 14th memo to the President from an advisor explained the administration’s rationale:

A $300 million increase has the advantage of being within the $1000 million already authorized... This amount would maintain ground ammunition stocks above the stockade objective at year’s end even allowing for a 30% increase in consumption during the dry season. Should the North Vietnamese attack with the same intensity as during the 1972 offensive, no more funds would be required to defeat the attack, but some additional funding would be needed to bring ground ammunition stocks back up to the stockade objective afterward. If no massive offensive develops, no funds beyond $1000 million will be needed.101

As Scowcroft indicated to Graham Martin via the back channel to Saigon, Ford believed that the $300 million was an adequate figure that the Congress could approve quickly, if not the ideal sum.102 Similarly, during a January 27th meeting at the White House with Senators Strom Thurmond and William Scott, Gerald Ford unequivocally stated that “if we don’t vote the money South Vietnam is lost.”103 Moreover, the administration’s position was that if the United States would continue to supply the required aid to Thieu, the South Vietnamese Army would grow stronger which in turn would afford the South Vietnamese the opportunity to effectively block the major North Vietnamese military moves currently underway in the South.

Likewise, it was also felt that if the United States stood squarely behind the South Vietnamese, then Hanoi would potentially re-think its strategy and stop the infiltration into the South. It was clear that during the January 27th discussions,

102 Back channel Message, Brent Scowcroft to Graham Martin, January 16, 1975, Folder “Vietnam (6)” Box 11, National Security Advisor, NSC East Asian and Pacific Affairs Staff Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.
Thurmond, who was considered a “hawk” on Vietnam, agreed with the administration’s assessment and, in rather simplistic terms, stated, “I think South Vietnam can be saved if we get the ammo.”104 The NSC staff echoed this sentiment as well. For example, a January 30th National Security Council memo to Henry Kissinger took the position that South Vietnam can be saved with adequate funding. Similarly, it was the administration’s opinion that the communists possessed no “ridged upper limit on what it [the communists] hopes to achieve this year” and would “take advantage of every possible military or political opportunity that (it) can get.”105

Thus by all accounts it is quite clear that the Ford Administration could minimize the risk of the South Vietnamese collapsing by providing more military aid. In Kissinger’s memoirs, he echoes the same sentiment relative to the proposed $300 million supplemental to the South Vietnamese by arguing that “without (the supplemental), everybody agreed South Vietnam was doomed.”106 However, the underlying fact remains that during January 1975 both Ford and Kissinger truly believed that all was not lost in South Vietnam. Similarly, Graham Martin, noted for being an optimist and always giving the South Vietnam the benefit of the doubt, reported to the administration that South Vietnam’s economy and its political structure was stable and that the supplemental aid would be highly constructive and would contribute to further stability in the south.107 Ford made an effort to devise an aid

106 Kissinger, Years of Renewal, 489.
107 Back Channel Message, Graham Martin to Brent Scowcroft, January 6, 1975, Folder “Vietnam (6),” Box 11, National Security Advisor, NSC East Asian and Pacific Affairs Staff Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.
package that would stabilize the military situation in South Vietnam. While this ran contrary to Congressional sentiment and public opinion at the time, Ford felt that he owed the South Vietnamese the tools by which to defend themselves and prosper. This course of action is supplemented by Ford’s February 24th letter to Nguyen Van Thieu in which he tells the South Vietnamese President, “We have frequently stated that the United States would provide South Vietnam with the means to defend itself, and I intend to do everything I can to achieve this objective.”108 Based upon the discussions within the administration and coupled with Ford and Kissinger’s core beliefs there is no reason to distrust the sincerity of Ford’s statement to Thieu in February 1975.

What was very apparent in the early months of 1975 was that there was a significant amount of opposition in the legislature against further aid to Vietnam. Many felt that any expansion of aid to the South would somehow entangle the United States into another large-scale commitment in Indo China. Thus, there was much skepticism regarding the administration’s course on Vietnam and potential aid programs that would supplemental the strength of the South Vietnamese Armed forces. As a consequence, Ford increasingly realized that it would be Congress and not the North Vietnamese that would impede progress in Southeast Asia. It was at this juncture (January 1975) that Ford really began to stress bipartisan support for a supplemental aid package for South Vietnam in an effort to provide some type of hope for the South Vietnamese.

During a January 28, 1975 meeting with Congressional leaders, Kissinger the Chairman of the Joints Chiefs of Staff, General George Brown, and Secretary of Defense James

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Schlesinger, Ford repeatedly offered arguments for supplemental aid to South Vietnam. The administration’s primary position remained that although South Vietnam was distressed under the weight of the current North Vietnamese military moves, with enough aid the south could remain viable. However, Congressman Al Ullman, a Democrat from Oregon, felt that South Vietnam was essentially no longer worth saving: “We are putting money in a place that is doomed” by South Vietnamese “ineptitude and …lack of will to carry on.”

By this time many Americans were echoing this very same sentiment that the South Vietnamese were “fractious, corrupt, and poorly led.” Thus, while the administration wanted to assist the South Vietnamese, an anti-war undercurrent was eroding any chance that Congress would commit to a significant aid package for South Vietnam.

Similarly, on the same day, January 28, Ford met with selected Congressional leaders. Ford’s argument to the legislators that the United States had a moral commitment to the South Vietnamese and that the United States should support them in their hour of need feel on deaf ears. Mike Mansfield, the Senate Majority leader from Montana, replied to Ford “our friends are in this country, not in South East Asia or the Middle East.” Thus Mansfield was implying that Ford should stop focusing on Vietnam and begin working with the Congress on a plan to alleviate the domestic ills that were plaguing the United States at that time. Similarly Democratic House Speaker Carl Albert suggested that the world would view the U.S. in a more positive light and that there might be “a better feeling toward the United States now that Vietnam is

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110 Clifford, Counselor to the President, 614.
over.”\footnote{Memorandum of Conversation, Folder “January 28, 1975 –Ford, Kissinger, Rockefeller, Bipartisan Congressional Leadership,” Box 8, National Security Advisor, Memoranda of Conversations, Gerald R. Ford Library.} Finally Kissinger and Ford used the issue of “a sacrifice of 55,000 men and blood treasure” argument only to be met with Congressman Tip O’Neill’s response that the American public may welcome a separation from South Vietnam “I think the American people feel that this country has deteriorated over the past 10 years because of Vietnam.”\footnote{Memorandum of Conversation, Folder “January 28, 1975 –Ford, Kissinger, Rockefeller, Bipartisan Congressional Leadership,” Box 8, National Security Advisor, Memoranda of Conversations, Gerald R. Ford Library.} Thus, while Ford was viewing the unfolding South Vietnamese collapse as a test of American credibility, Congress was closely scrutinizing the financial aspects of continually supporting Nguyen Van Thieu’s widely perceived corrupt regime, Congress was questioning the feasibility of more aid to a country that had devoured over $146 billion dollars in aid over the previous decade.\footnote{Richard Reeves, President Nixon: Alone in the White House (New York: Touchstone, 2001), 564.} With the strong domestic pressures against further assistance it appears that the Congressional leaders were trying to impress upon Ford that priorities had changed in the wake of the American withdrawal from the war.

Based upon the positions of the senior leadership within the legislative branch, it was becoming excruciatingly apparent to Ford that Congress would not simply rubber stamp his aid proposals earmarked for South Vietnam. Furthermore, it would take considerable more effort to move any type of supplemental aid package forward in the current environment in Congress. Ultimately, it was Carl Albert who, during the January 28th meeting, stated “it will be almost impossible to get this through the Ford Administration’s $1.4 billion request for military assistance the morale of
memorandum of conversation, folder “january 28, 1975 – ford, kissinger, rockefeller, bipartisan congressional leadership,” box 8, national security advisor, memoranda of conversations, gerald r. ford library


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troops here began to drop.”¹¹⁷ Clearly, the handwriting was on the wall and Thieu understood more than anyone that without a significant influx of military aid Saigon could not hold back the North Vietnamese.

Later, in February 1975, Ford continued his quest for more aid to the South by actively lobbying Congress. During a February 3 bipartisan meeting with Congressional leaders, Ford indicated that he was willing to work with Congress to find common ground relative to the supplemental aid request. During this meeting Ford endorsed an idea to send a Congressional delegation to South Vietnam for a first hand assessment of the situation in Southeast Asia.¹¹⁸ However, once again Ford found little support for his suggestions. On February 6, 1975 eighty two self described “Members of Congress for Peace through Law” wrote to Ford signifying their opposition to send further aid to South Vietnam. The members simply stated: “We can see no humanitarian or national interest that justifies the cost of this assistance to our country.”

The Congressmen felt that the United States needed to move onto other “pressing domestic and international problems.” Moreover, they believed that it was time for the United States to finally “extricate itself from the situation in South East Asia once and for all.”¹¹⁹

In an effort to gain support for Thieu’s ailing regime and better understand what was occurring in South Vietnam, a bipartisan Congressional delegation was selected to travel in February 1975 to South East Asia for a first hand assessment of the battlefield

situation. The members of the delegation were Senator Dewey F. Bartlett (R-Oklahoma), Congressman Paul McCloskey (R-California), Congressman William V. Campbell (D-Florida), Donald N. Fraser (D-Minnesota), Bella Abzug (D-New York), Millicent Fenwick (R-New Jersey), John P. Murtha (D-Pennsylvania) and John J. Flynt (D-Georgia). In conjunction with this visit, Ford reassured President Thieu in a February 26 communication that the United States would “continue to press for the full implementation” of the Paris Agreement.²²⁰

Although Ford had expressed optimism that ultimately the “good judgment of the Congress” would prevail relative to funding for South Vietnam, for all intents and purposes there appeared to be no sense of urgency on the part of the law makers to move forward with any type of aid plan for South Vietnam.²²¹ However, Ford realized that the deteriorating situation in Vietnam required immediate action because of the increasing pressure placed on the South Vietnamese armed forces. Ford also knew that he would be unable to wait for prolonged Congressional deliberations on the supplemental aid package. In an effort to resurrect the supplemental aid issue, Ford suggested, in a February 9th interview with the Chicago Tribune, the possibility of a terminal aid grant for the South Vietnamese.²²² If appropriated, Ford would agree not to request any more funding for the South. As a consequence of having compromised on the original $700 million appropriation, Ford sought a new way to assist the South Vietnamese in their time of crisis as well as placate a skeptical Congress. This was quite a dramatic step because it would allow the South Vietnamese to receive the needed funds to fend off the recent attacks while at the same time providing a skeptical

²²⁰ Hung and Schector, The Palace File, 251-252.
²²² Chicago Tribune (9 February 1975).
Congress with assurances that our role in South Vietnamese affairs was coming to a close.

What is very clear is that Ford was serious about the terminal aid concept and as such requested aid submittals for South Vietnam for the next three years. Graham Martin immediately submitted an aid estimate in the range of $6 to 6.5 billion in military and economic aid that would fold into the administration’s position concerning supplemental assistance. Similarly, the CIA undertook their study relative to the aid request by Ambassador Martin and its repercussions on the North Vietnamese communists. However, like Ford’s other aid proposal, it soon became very clear that Congress would not support a large-scale, three-year terminal grant of aid to South Vietnam.

On March 4th Ford received Senator Frank Church and Congressman James B. Pearson, who had initially shown some interest in a terminal aid grant. But as the March 4th conversation unfolded, it soon appeared that Congress was thinking more along the lines of $2.5 billion in aid over three years, not $6 billion. Without a doubt the willingness of Congress to accept Ford’s Vietnam policy was lukewarm at best. Just several days later in a meeting with the Congressional delegation that had recently visited South Vietnam, both Ford and Kissinger advised the delegation members that in

order for the three-year program to be a success, Congress would have to provide an adequate amount of aid, consistent with administration requests.125

Ford’s position, relative to the terminal aid grant, was that the proposed funding would provide the needed resources to the South Vietnamese during their time of crisis while persuading Congress that there would be an end to U.S. funding of the Saigon regime. Although the Ford Administration had not declared that the Graham Martin figure of $6 billion was the administration’s stated goal, Ford was clearly not prepared to accept the proposed figure by Senators Church and Pearson of less than half of what Ambassador Martin, the administration’s point man in Vietnam, had deemed essential for South Vietnam’s survival.

What became increasingly clear in the first several months of 1975 is that Ford, long a staunch supporter of South Vietnam, felt that, regardless of the anti-Vietnam sentiment in Congress, he could not unilaterally capitulate on the cause that he had supported for a large part of his political career and to reverse the policy of the five previous administrations. Ford had gone to great lengths in an effort to insure Congress that America’s commitment to Saigon would not be an open ended drain on the U.S. treasury. However, in light of a very reluctant Congress to continue the funding of a war that was for all practical purpose over as far as the United States was concerned, the President’s proposal was not enough to sway even his staunch conservative supporters in Congress. Thus, it appears that at this stage in the game the only hope Ford had of securing the aid required for the South rested on the Congressional delegation traveling to South Vietnam for a first hand assessment.

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125 Minutes of the Meeting of Gerald R. Ford with the Congressional Delegation that visited South East Asia, March 17, 1974, Folder “Indochina Chronological File, March 13-21, 1975” Box 13, National Security Advisor, NSC East Asian and Pacific Affairs Staff Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.
Ford was not excessively optimistic that the Congressional delegation would side with the administration to increase aid for South Vietnam. Although the delegation members seemed to display an open mindedness, a memo prepared by the administration to Ambassador Martin indicated that the delegation was hostile to the South. The advice that was given to Martin was to convince the delegation that South Vietnam was not the aggressor that the South Vietnamese government was not corrupt, and that Thieu was not an oppressive leader.\(^{126}\)

President Thieu echoed administration concerns during the delegation’s visit to South Vietnam from February 27 to March 3. Working to push Ford’s funding agenda, Thieu told the members of the Congressional delegation that at issue in South Vietnam was American credibility. If South Vietnam collapsed under the weight of the current North Vietnamese offensive, free governments around the globe would call into question the promises and commitments of the United States. Similarly, Thieu pressed the case for additional funding. “If the 300 million (supplemental) is not voted, I can’t tell you we will be over run tomorrow, or next week, or next month. ... We will get weaker and weaker. ... An army that cannot move, shoot, or repair its equipment (for lack of fuel ammunition, and spare parts), what can it do?”\(^{127}\)

As the administration might have suspected, the members of the delegation were not won over by the pleas from Nguyen Van Thieu. While several of the representatives William Chappell, John J. Flynt, and John P. Murtha voiced support for further aid, the balance of the group voiced strong reservations because of the


perception that the Thieu regime was not committed to democratic ideals. From the South Vietnamese point of view, the delegation was more concerned with uncovering South Vietnamese corruption rather than focusing on the North Vietnamese offensive currently besieging the south.\(^{128}\)

In the final analysis the delegation could not provide Ford with the support it desperately needed if it had any hope of persuading Congress of increasing aid to South Vietnam. Similarly, those members of the delegation who supported Ford knew that it would be a long shot in winning further aid because of the anti-Vietnam attitude that was growing throughout the country. Congressman Flynt succinctly described the position of South Vietnam supporters: “All of us have the difficult job of convincing Congress and the people that we cannot drop the ball. …I wish we could report that we have solutions. I have no panacea to suggest.”\(^{129}\) Ford thus faced several issues that were diametrically opposed to each other. The first was that Congress would not automatically consent to Ford’s funding proposals. The second was the fact that Vietnam was a not a fashionable topic with the American public. The result was that Congress was simply responding to the will of the people. Third, Ford also was being assailed by Ambassador Martin, South Vietnam’s strongest proponent, who was pushing the administration for a substantial public relations campaign in favor of increased funding for South Vietnam.\(^{130}\)

\(^{128}\) Hung and Schector, The Palace File, 252-262.


\(^{130}\) Back Channel Message Graham Martin to Henry Kissinger, January 1975, Folder “Vietnamese War – Camp David File (1),” Box 34 Kissinger-Scowcroft West Wing Office Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.
To many observers, including Ambassador Martin, Ford had not been aggressive in publicly lobbying for South Vietnam. Yet the historical record clearly indicates that he was energetic in his support for the South. However, Ford knew from first hand experience that Congress was taking an increasingly hostile stance towards the funding issue relative to South Vietnam. Congress in turn was taking its cues from the institution from which it derived power—the people. Walter Isaacson, a biographer of Kissinger commented:

Congress nor the public was willing to support further fighting in Vietnam. Admittedly, the cynicism about presidential authority caused by Watergate infected the Vietnam debate; likewise, the passions produced by Vietnam probably heightened the anti Nixon fervor of the Watergate investigation. In any case, even with Gerald Ford in the White House and Watergate over, Congress was not about to authorize an infusion of new aid to prolong the quest for honor in Vietnam.131

Thus, in an increasingly war weary environment, the American public was not very tolerant of any more Vietnam adventures. Ford realized at this juncture it was not politically feasible to be publicly aggressive concerning South Vietnam without congressional consensus. In an effort to sway legislators, Ford would have to publicly lobby Congress in order to achieve some sort of supplemental support for the south.

Although Ford wanted his policy to be successful in terms of support for the South Vietnamese, he was not going to gamble his office on this one single issue. Yet, Ford faced a daunting struggle with members of his own political party as events in South Vietnam unfolded. To many in Congress, it seemed as if the United States was throwing good money after bad in its attempts to prop up the ailing South Vietnamese regime. With the latest military encounter unfolding in the south, by March 1975 the administration, Congress, and the South Vietnamese had reached the proverbial fork in

131 Isaacson, Kissinger, 643.
the road—the time for compromise was over. The administration harbored no illusions about the predicament of the South Vietnamese under the guns of the communists. As Congress continued to show no indication that it would endorse the President’s supplemental aid program for the Saigon government, the military balance in Vietnam began to dramatically swing in Hanoi’s favor.

On March 10, the North Vietnamese moved against Ban Me Thout, a provisional capital 150 miles northeast of Saigon, and easily routed the city’s defenders. With the city’s fall, it became abundantly clear the North Vietnamese incursion into the South was no longer a probing action but rather a determined effort to conquer South Vietnam. Herring noted: “Both the fall of Phouc Long in January and the conquest of Ban Me Thout in March...confirmed what many North Vietnamese strategists had long suspected, that having pulled out of South Vietnam the Americans would not jump back in.” Based upon this assumption, it became obvious to all that the end of South Vietnam was only a matter of time. Historians James Olsen and Randy Roberts noted book, Where the Dominos Fell: America and Vietnam 1945 to 1990:

South Vietnam was imploding. For years the United States had trained ARVN to fight a conventional war with the support of enormous firepower, a strategy that although incapable of achieving a military victory, had at least staved off defeat. But Vietnamization had taken American troops out of the strategic picture, and opposition to the war in the United States gradually eliminated the firepower. Only the B-52s had stopped the Easter Tide offensive in 1972. The South Vietnamese did not have that support in 1975. They did not even have much American money anymore. But between 1970 and 1975, when the ARVN lost its American support, the war expanded all across Indo-china, increasing the field of battle and stretching the ARVN’s resources to the breaking

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132 Herring, America’s Longest War, 264.
point. Those strategic factors, combined with a crumbling economy and an isolated political regime, guaranteed defeat. 133

Since the French had battled the Vietnamese communists, beginning at the end of World War II, the United States had generously supported an independent South Vietnam in terms of money and military assistance. After the French left South East Asia the United States filled the role as protector of South Vietnam, thus guaranteeing the survival of a regime that was favorable to the interests of the United States. However, the Paris Peace Accords signified the formal end to the American military involvement in South East Asia. With the departure of American military might, a large vacuum occurred in Vietnam. The United States had provided billions of dollars worth of military equipment to South Vietnam in an effort to insure that at least in terms of the military balance the south would at least be able to put up a respectable fight if invaded. Similarly, as American funding began to dwindle, the level of vulnerability and weakness began to rise within the south, ultimately undermining the Thieu regime. Ford, while wanting to support the South Vietnamese with the only politically feasible aid he could provide, which was, only money and military hardware, found that a skeptical Congress was now challenging his aid program. Trapped by the legacy of a war that had gone bad, there was little he could do but watch the tragedy unfold.

Chapter IV

The Final Retreat

As the United States Congress continued to show no sign that it would approve any type of significant supplemental aid for South Vietnam, the military situation began to dramatically tilt in North Vietnam’s favor. Hanoi, by this time realizing that the United States would not stymie efforts by initiating military action, employed a significant amount of new divisions in an effort to complement their military forces currently employed in the South. The North Vietnamese goal was to strike a quick blow at the South by quickly moving against cities in the Central Highlands, notably Pleiku and Kontum, in an effort to cut South Vietnam in half.¹³⁴

Thieu compounded the problems facing South Vietnam by ordering his military forces to pull out of the Central Highlands in an effort to consolidate his interior lines of communication around Saigon. Thieu’s plan would allow him to strengthen his remaining forces around South Vietnam’s primary population centers in the hopes of providing enough “territory to survive and prosper as a nation.”¹³⁵ Moreover, it appeared that Thieu’s last hope was to draw his forces closer to Saigon in order to defend a much smaller, yet vital, amount of territory in an effort to insure the survival of his regime. In discussing the South Vietnamese withdraw from the Central Highlands, historian Tiziano Terzani commented: “Thieu had planned to set up something like a Maginot Line just north of Saigon to defend a region that would have been more or less the old French Cochin China, comprising the capital and the Mekong delta.”¹³⁶ However, the television viewers in the United States were increasingly shown the grim realities of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam at war, as U.S. casualties were rising at a new level of concern.

¹³⁴ Herring, America’s Longest War, 262.
¹³⁵ Hung and Schecter, The Palace File, 264.

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delta." 136 However, the television scenes of a retreating South Vietnamese Army in the face of superior North Vietnamese forces dealt a significant blow to the already sagging morale of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam as well as adding a new level of skepticism into the Vietnam supplemental aid package debate. Thieu’s move to essentially give the top half of South Vietnam to the communists reversed his long-standing policy of not giving up territory to the communists. 137 Compounding the retreat was that the military operation was poorly executed, “with little planning and no coordination.” 138 In the wake of the vast communist drive into South Vietnam, as the ARVN pulled out of these northern cities, confidence in Nguyen Van Thieu’s regime collapsed. 139 One of the residual issues that compounded the problem was the fact that the escape routes in the south were clogged with as many as half a million refugees intermixing with Saigon troops making their way to areas still under control of the South Vietnamese Government. 140 All of these scenes, actively reported by the world’s press, showed the general chaos and despair that generally accompanies the disintegration of a government.

While the situation in the South dramatically deteriorated, the Ford administration recognized the latest North Vietnamese military moves for what they were—a full scale invasion of South Vietnam. American intelligence summaries during this time reported that “current Communist propaganda and soldier...

137 Hung and Schector, The Palace File, 266.
indoctrination indicate a major North Vietnamese offensive has begun." This position was further advanced via the Department of State in a memorandum to Henry Kissinger on the latest communist military moves: "When taken together, these signs indicate that the North Vietnamese spring offensive could be extremely intense and is probably designed to achieve a fundamental change in the balance of power in the South. Many intelligence sources indicate that this fighting is a prelude to a new round of negotiations designed to achieve an implementation of the Paris Accords on North Vietnamese terms."

On March 22, 1975, Ford sent a letter to Thieu in which he made it clear that the administration would make "every effort" to fund Saigon's military needs during this time of grave crisis. While Ford's purpose was to bolster Thieu's morale, his general promise of support was at best excessively optimistic and at worst deceitful. Similarly, with all of the military advances by the North Vietnamese and the corresponding defeats suffered by the south, it was very apparent that the United States would not be charging in to save the day. Military Historian Wilbur H. Morrison commented about the South Vietnamese reluctance to recognize that the end was indeed near:

"Thieu should have had no illusion about America's hands-off attitude towards the war. Despite North Vietnam's escalation of the war in the past two years the United States had taken no military action. Certainly the negative aspects of the last congressional visit to South Vietnam should have convinced Thieu that the United States Congress would not

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143 Letter, Gerald Ford to Nguyen Van Thieu, March 22, 1975, Folder "Vietnam – President Nguyen Van Thieu", Box 5, National Security Advisor, Presidential Correspondence with Foreign Leaders, Gerald R. Ford Library.
authorize a return to military intervention. It had repeatedly shown that it was in no mood to intervene. 144

During a March 18th meeting with the president and members of the Republican Congressional leadership, Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger articulated the defense community’s view that prior to Thieu’s strategic withdraw from the Central Highlands the North Vietnamese would merely “chip away this year and not mount a major offensive.”145 However, based upon the aggressive military movements by the communists, the American CIA station chief in Saigon felt that the “general offensive” was indeed underway and that if the trends continue “within the next few months, the very existence of an independent, non communist South Vietnam would be at stake.”146 At this juncture Ford and his advisors were still solidly behind the South Vietnamese and there was never any discussion of abandoning Thieu and his country to the North Vietnamese communists.147 It was in the wake of the fall of the Central Highlands that Ford convened March 20th and 27th meetings of the Washington Special Actions Group, which was a crisis management team comprised of various second tier members of the various agencies of intelligence, defense and state. The purpose of the meeting was to formulate ideas by which Ford could approach Congress in an effort to obtain Congressional funding for aid to South Vietnam. Some of the ideas that came out of the March 27th meeting included the three year terminal grant proposal as well as a very

public campaign to enlist the aid of the American people to come to the aid of their beleaguered ally.148

However, much as Ford still had confidence that South Vietnam could hold out, the realities of a hostile Congress indicated that any supplemental aid would be an impossibility. On March 12, 1975, House Democrats voted 189 to 49 expressing the democratic caucus opposition to further aid for South Vietnam. This was echoed in the Senate chambers just a day later when Senate Democrats voted 34 to 6 to oppose supplemental military aid.149 As a consequence of the action of the Congressional Democrats, the reality of the situation dictated that the eventual loss of South Vietnam would be determined not only by the aggressiveness of the North Vietnamese and the inability of the South to repel an invasion but also in the halls of Congress ten thousand miles away from that country.

By April 1975 the major media outlets in the United States began to report that a general collapse was now underway in South Vietnam. U.S. News and World Report told readers in its April 14, 1975 issue that the “U.S. is writing off South Vietnam and Cambodia—no matter what’s being said officially.”150 However it was still acknowledged that the catalyst for any type of hope relative to the survival of South Vietnam depended upon an infusion of U.S. aid. U.S. News continued: “Objective analysis here feels that, even under the best of circumstance, the most the South Vietnam can possible manage now on their own is a holding action. U.S. aid, in large

149 Congressional Quarterly Weekly Reports (15 March 1975): 552.
quantities, is considered vital to survival as an independent nation.\textsuperscript{151} Time lamented that there was no support among the American public to continue with a steady stream of aid for South Vietnam:

Although Americans were saddened by the collapse in Indochina, U.S. Congressman touring their districts during the Easter Recess encountered practically no support for President’s Ford plea of further military aid. Democrat Don Bonker of Washington State: “People are drained. They want to bury the memory of Indochina. They regard it as a tragic chapter in American life, but they want no further part of it.” Said Republican Garner Shriver of Kansas: “The feeling is that we have made a considerable contribution to Cambodia and South Viet Nam and that we’ve done enough.” Added Democrat Joseph Gaydoes, whose district encompasses the formerly pro-war steel towns of Western Pennsylvania: “In retrospect, most people realize that regardless of how much we might have spent in lives or dollars, we couldn’t have changed the outcome.”\textsuperscript{152}

At this juncture it appears that the only support Thieu had was Ford, who without Congressional aid, could do little more that send reassuring notes that help would be on the way. The thought of direct American intervention in South Vietnam was simply out of the question. Similarly, Ford had finally recognized by this time that “the country was fed up with the war.”\textsuperscript{153} Although with the pending collapse of South Vietnam, Ford still believed that Southeast Asia was relevant and that the United States would continue to safeguard its interests in that region of the world: “There is a great deal of credibility to the domino theory. I hope it doesn’t happen to other countries in South East Asia-Thailand, the Philippines-don’t misread the will of the American people in the leadership of this country, to believe that we’re going to abandon our position in Southeast Asia. We are not.”\textsuperscript{154} Similarly, at this particular juncture in the Cold War,

\textsuperscript{152} Time (14 April 1975): 22.
\textsuperscript{153} Oliver Todd, Cruel April: The Fall of Saigon (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990), 101.
it was still inconceivable to Ford and his national security team that the United States
would walk away from Vietnam. Henry Kissinger recalled in September 1998:

We did believe...that with adequate economic and military assistance,
South Vietnam had a chance to preserve its independence. We did not
consider it conceivable that the Congress would within two years at first
drastically reduce and finally cut off aid to the country for whose
freedom over 50,000 Americans had given their lives.\textsuperscript{155}

Ford was still hoping that at some point Congress would intervene with some type of
aid in an effort to stabilize the situation. Yet at this juncture American policy makers
began to envision the end of South Vietnam and a revised strategic alignment in
Southeast Asia.

The fall of the Central Highlands had taken everyone, including the North
Vietnamese, by surprise. As a consequence, its loss did not inspire an already reluctant
Congress to assist Ford by contemplating more aid. While the administration’s position
remained solidly behind the South, the mere fact that territory was being surrendered
did not bode well for those who supported South Vietnam. It was in this climate that
Ford would send Army Chief of Staff General Frederick Weyand to South Vietnam to
personally assess the situation and provide options on how to best deal with the
deteriorating situation.

The Weyand Report was to be the administration’s assessment of the situation
in late March /early April 1975. Similarly, this would be Ford’s last attempt to try to
convince a reluctant Congress to move forward with a supplemental aid package.

General Weyand had been the last Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV)
commander after General Abrams moved on to the army’s top position as Chief of Staff

\textsuperscript{155} Robert McNamara, \textit{Argument Without End, In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy} (New
York: Public Affairs, 1999), 367.
in the summer of 1972. Weyand, a decorated Korean and Vietnam War combat soldier, made his assessment and returned to the United States on April 4th to brief the president. Weyand’s assessment of the situation in South Vietnam was grim. His written report was candid and honest:

The current military situation is critical, and the probability of the survival of South Vietnam as a truncated nation in the southern provinces is marginal at best. The GVN (Government of South Vietnam) is on the brink of a total militia defeat. However, the South is planning to continue to defend with their available resources, and, if allowed respite, will rebuild their capabilities to the extent that United States support in material will permit.156

Weyand continued with his assessment that the United States was the key ingredient in an effort to stabilize the situation. Weyand continued:

The present level of U.S. support guarantees GVN defeat. Of the $700 million provided for FY 1975, the remaining $150 million can be used for a short time to maintain a major supply operation; however, if there is to be any real chance of success, an additional $722 million is urgently needed to bring the South Vietnamese to a minimal defense posture to meet the Soviet and PRC supported invasion. Additional U.S. aid is within both the spirit and intent of the Paris Agreement, which remains the practical framework for a peaceful settlement in Vietnam.157

The Weyand Report is clearly framed in the context of the Cold War with the United States and South Vietnam in a struggle against North Vietnam, the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China. The report’s key ingredient is that as a consequence of South Vietnam’s potential collapse, the foreign policy of the United States would be called into question: “United State credibility as an ally is at stake in Vietnam. To sustain that credibility we must make a maximum effort to support the South

156 Memorandum from General Frederick Weyand to President Gerald Ford, April 4, 1975, Folder Vietnam (13), Box 19, National Security Advisor, Presidential Country Files for East Asia and the Pacific, Gerald R. Ford Library.

157 Memorandum from General Frederick Weyand to President Gerald Ford, April 4, 1975, Folder Vietnam (13), Box 19, National Security Advisor, Presidential Country Files for East Asia and the Pacific, Gerald R. Ford Library.
Vietnamese now." Both Weyand and the President knew it was imperative to secure
this type of supplemental aid package if the south was going to have any hope of
surviving. Ford now faced a point at which there would be no turning back. He would
either have to aggressively push Congress for the aid or abandon South Vietnam.

By April 1975 Ford's ultimate aim regarding American support for the South
Vietnamese was considerably more modest than it had been just several months earlier.
Not particularly optimistic about Saigon's future by this time, Ford hoped that the
immediate infusion of aid outlined in General Weyand's report would stabilize the
deteriorating military situation in South Vietnam. A strong show of American support
for her beleaguered ally would forestall chaos in Vietnam and allow the United States
to at least safely evacuate American citizens and selected South Vietnamese supporters.
Thus, the aid that General Weyand was requesting would simply allow for a temporary
stabilization; it offered no long-term solution to problems facing the South Vietnamese
government. Ford's assistant, Robert Hartmann, described Ford's decision to request
the amount of money outlined in the Weyand report and his feeling about this sum as
being "high stakes poker in an effort to buy a little time to ransom the remaining
Americans and as many blacklisted South Vietnamese as we could get out." 159

Underlying Ford's prospective request was the legitimacy, as he saw it, of the $722
million dollar figure. Although he understood that increasing the price tag of the aid
package by more than $400 million would diminish the probability on Congress
passing it, Ford seemed to believe that it was the only logical choice in the face of the

158 Memorandum from General Frederick Weyand to President Gerald Ford, April 4, 1975, Folder
Vietnam (13), Box 19, National Security Advisor, Presidential Country Files for East Asia and the
Pacific, Gerald R. Ford Library.
159 Robert T. Hartmann, Palace Politics: An Inside Account of the Ford Years (New York: McGraw-Hill
North Vietnamese invasion. Weyand’s assessment had made it very clear that the
previous aid supplemental requests would not be sufficient to cope with the magnitude
of the North Vietnam effort. Similarly, American aid to South Vietnam would have to
be reasonable in order to assist the Ford administration in achieving its foreign policy
goals in South East Asia. Weyand’s $722 million request reflected the seasoned
military judgment of the South Vietnamese military position and their need for basic
military necessities.

Ford’s view of the Weyand report is best expressed in his memoirs, A Time to
Heal, in which he describes his meeting with General Weyand to discuss the report:

We met on the afternoon of April 5. The military situation, he said, was
very critical, but the South Vietnamese were continuing to fight with all
of the resources available to them. If their efforts were to have any
chance of success, they needed an additional $722 million worth of
supplies, primarily ammunition. That money wouldn’t enable them to
recapture the ground they had lost, but it would be enough to let them
establish a strong defense perimeter around Saigon. If they managed to
stabilize the military situation, there was still hope for a political
solution to the war. If that aid was not forthcoming, there was no hope
at all.160

In addition to the military effect of the additional aid, from a political
perspective $722 million would provide evidence that the South Vietnamese could
count upon the United States during this difficult period of time. Not only would this
assist the South Vietnamese, but would also send a signal to other allies of the United
States. Another element to the supplemental aid proposal was that the aid would
provide an excuse that the United States had done everything possible, short of re-
introducing American combat forces into Vietnam, to help the South Vietnamese.

Hence the passage of this type of aid package was obviously vital to the South Vietnamese but would also bolster American credibility around the globe.\textsuperscript{161}

By this time the administration had gravitated into damage control mode as it began to seriously contemplate a complete withdraw from Vietnam and the evacuation of "Americans and others to whom we had an obligation."\textsuperscript{162} Similarly the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Defense Attaché Office in Saigon also began considering evacuation plans.\textsuperscript{163} At the administration's request, Ambassador Graham Martin cabled Brent Scowcroft that the United States was obligated to evacuate a minimum of 175,000 Vietnamese who had ties to the South Vietnamese government, and American interests that would endanger them should the North Vietnamese triumph.\textsuperscript{164} At the time, talk of a full-scale evacuation remained secret due to the potential risks involved for those Americans who remained in South Vietnam.\textsuperscript{165}

While the situation in early April 1975 did indeed look bleak for the survival of South Vietnam, Ford continued to agree that the U.S. had an obligation to render as much assistance as possible to South Vietnam. Since a re-introduction of U.S. troops and aircraft was clearly not an option, Ford felt that he could fulfill this obligation by taking steps to procure supplemental aid for the Saigon regime. His stance was that the

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[161] Minutes of a State Department Meeting on Indochina, March 24, 1975, folder "Vietnamese War-Camp David File (2), " Box 24, Kissinger Scowcroft West Wng Office Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.
\item[162] Meeting Minutes, Folder "NSC Meeting 4/9/75, "Box 1, National Security Advisor, National Security Council Meetings File, Gerald R. Ford Library.
\item[163] Memo, Kenneth M. Quinn to Henry Kissinger, April 5, 1975, Folder "Indochina Chronological File, April 1-10, 1975, " Box 13, National Security Advisor, NSC East Asian and Pacific Affairs Staff Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.
\item[164] Back channel message, Graham Martin to Brent Scowcroft, April 7, 1975, Folder "Vietnam (9)", Box 11, National Security Advisor, NSC East Asian and Pacific Affairs Staff Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.
\item[165] Memorandum of Conversation, Folder "April 9, 1975- Ford, Joint Congressional Leadership," Box 10, National Security Advisor, Gerald R. Ford Library.
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United States owed the South Vietnamese one last infusion of aid to deal with the current military situation.

Addressing Congress on April 10, 1975, President Ford wasted little time in focusing his attention on the crisis in Vietnam. He started his appeal by reviewing the history of America's involvement in Vietnam and reminding the members of Congress of the "enormous sacrifices of blood, dedication, and treasure" that the United States had made in Vietnam. Ford continued that the United States could not simply abandon South Vietnam leaving it to the communists. He summed up his position by asking Congress to stabilize the military situation and thus create the "best opportunity for a political solution" by approving General Weyand's suggested $722 million emergency aid package. In addition to the $722 million request for military supplies, Ford asserted that "fundamental decency" compelled the United States to provide $250 million in economic and humanitarian aid for South Vietnam.\(^{166}\) He concluded his address with a call for Congress to "clarify immediately its restrictions on the use of U.S. military forces in Southeast Asia for the limited purposes of protecting American lives by ensuring their evacuation, if this should be necessary" and to undertake a "prompt revision of the law to cover" those Vietnamese to whom the United States owed protection.\(^{167}\) Ford requested that Congress act on his requests by April 19, 1975. Clearly Ford had drawn the line and acted in concert with his beliefs in appealing to Congress for emergency aid to support South Vietnam in its time of crisis. In his speech Ford claimed that American involvement in the world had "sustained and


advanced the security, well being, and freedom of millions of human beings beside ourselves” and had “helped prevent a third world war.” He presented his emergency aid request in the context of an obligation of the United States to “stand by our friends” and “honor our commitments.”

Having a significant amount of faith in Weyand and his military judgment, Ford provided Congress with the solution to save South Vietnam or, at the very least, to provide the South Vietnamese with an opportunity to stabilize the situation in the hopes of concluding a political settlement with the North. Furthermore the administration passed the moral obligation of the whole Vietnamese affair on to Congress by “burdening the Congress with unpopular decisions.” The Congress would either have to act on the advice of the administration or let the south collapse. However, based upon the fact that a March 1975 Gallup poll concluded that 78 percent of the American public opposed further U.S. aid to South Vietnam, Ford had a very difficult sell not only Congress but to the American people as well.

One week before his address to Congress Ford had begun to politically distance his administration from a South Vietnamese collapse by noting the following in an April 3 press conference:

I am not assessing blame on anyone. The facts are that in fiscal year 1974, there was a substantial reduction made by Congress in the amount of military equipment requested for South Vietnam. In fiscal year 1975, the current fiscal year, the Administration asked for $1,400 million in military assistance for South Vietnam. Congress put a ceiling of $1

billion on it and actually appropriated only $700 million. Those are the facts. I think it is up to the American people to pass judgment on who was at fault or where the blame may rest. 172

Ford would sum up his position in his memoirs when he described his frame of mind concerning Vietnam as follows:

The situation in South Vietnam and Cambodia has reached a critical phase requiring immediate and positive decisions by this government. The options before us are few, and the time very short. Members of Congress, my fellow Americans, this moment of tragedy for Indochina is a time of trial for us. It is time for national resolve. It has been said that the United States is overextended, that we have too many commitments too far from home, that we must examine what our truly vital interests are and shape our strategy to conform to them. I find no fault with this as a theory, but...we cannot in the meantime, abandon our friends while our adversaries support and encourage theirs. We cannot dismantle our defenses, our diplomacy or our intelligence capability while others increase and strengthen theirs. Let us put an end to self inflicted wounds. Let us remember that our national unity is a most priceless asset. Let us deny our adversaries the satisfaction of using Vietnam to pit Americans against Americans. At this moment the United States must present to the world a united front. 173

Upon the completion of Ford’s speech, it was immediately evident that Ford’s appeal to Congress fell on unreceptive ears. Newsweek described the president’s speech as “one of the smallest and most sullen joint sessions in recent memory.” 174 Time noted the “chilly silence” that greeted Ford’s appeal for more aid. 175 In an extraordinary move that signaled the nation’s disgust over Vietnam and our role in that conflict, two members of Congress, Toby Moffett of Connecticut and George Miller of California, walked out of the Congressional chambers during Ford’s speech. 176 Even more disconcerting for Ford, telegrams to the White House in the wake of the April 10

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176 Ford, A Time to Heal, 254.
speech ran four to one, against further aid, in conjunction with Senator Henry Jackson’s
declaration that Ford’s aid proposal was “dead.”

Congresswoman Millicent Fenwick
summed up what many Americans were thinking; “We’ve sent, so to speak, battleship
after battleship and bomber after bomber, and 500,000 or more men and billions and
billions of dollars. If billions and billions didn’t do at the time with 500,000 of our men
over there, how can $722 million save the day?”

Given the opposition in Congress for further American aid, there was some
speculation that Ford was simply going through the motions in order to distance himself
from the future “Who Lost Indochina?” debates. Ford, having been a junior member
of Congress in the early 1950s, remembered the damage inflicted upon the Truman
administration by the Republican right wing over China and Korea. Understandably,
Ford did not want to see a resurrection of that type of debate during his watch as

president.

On April 11, the day after Ford delivered his speech to Congress expressing his
support for South Vietnam, the administration made one last attempt to deal directly
with the North Vietnamese. In a diplomatic note invoking the Paris Agreement of
1973, the Ford administration called upon Hanoi to “cease immediately its military
offensive” and warned that if the North ignored this directive it would “be held
responsible for the consequences.”

The North Vietnamese did not reply. Seeing that

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177 Newsweek (April 21, 1975): 22.
178 Vietnam: A Television History; The End of the Tunnel (1973-1975), Written and Produced by
Elizabeth Deane, Executive Producer Richard Ellison, 1 Hour, WGBH Educational Foundation, 1983,
videocassette.
180 Diplomatic Note, United States to Democratic Republic of Vietnam, Folder “Vietnam (9),” Box 11,
National Security Advisor, NSC East Asian and Pacific Affairs Staff Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.
they were close to a great military victory, there was no reason to send a response to Ford.

The outlook for assistance to South Vietnam became non-existent when members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee visited the President on April 14th. In this highly unusual meeting requested by the senators, the Foreign Relations Committee did not discuss saving the south, but primarily focused on an American evacuation from Vietnam. Henry Kissinger informed the committee members that orders had been sent to the American embassy in Saigon instructing it to reduce the number of Americans in South Vietnam to approximately 1200. For some committee members, such as Clifford Case (R-NJ), the pace of the personnel reductions was too slow. The Senator advised “urgent action to reduce American personnel to the point where they could be lifted out in one lift,” and Senator Stuart Symington (D-MO) expressed his constituents’ concern that the Ford administration was “holding Americans hostage for more aid.” Equally disturbing to Ford was the fact that there seemed little support among the committee members to evacuate Vietnamese citizens. Senator Frank Church (D-ID) scoffed at the possibility of evacuating large numbers of South Vietnamese along with the Americans. Senator Joe Biden (D-DE) supported his colleague from Idaho when he remarked, “I will vote for any amount for getting the Americans out. I don’t want it mixed with getting the Vietnamese out.” Ford recorded his feelings about this meeting in his memoirs: “The Senators, I knew, were well meaning, yet they were incredibly short-sighted. We couldn’t just cut and run.

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We had to consider the people of Vietnam and what might happen to them, especially those who had supported us.”  

It became apparent that Ford did not have the support to carry out his policy of support for South Vietnam. The legislative branch would not allow more aid to flow into Vietnam and was insistent that the United States begins to contemplate an exit strategy in order to safely evacuate the remaining Americans from South Vietnam. The proverbial nail on the coffin came when Senator Jacob Javits (R-NY) informed Ford: “I will give you large sums for evacuation, but not one nickel for military aid for Thieu.” With the lawmakers now focused on ending the American presence in Vietnam, the administration’s request for $722 million did not have a chance of succeeding. Ford, reflecting later about the pivotal April 14th meeting with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, remarked: “the message was clear: get out, fast.” Congress was not going to support any more South East Asian military adventures. Michigan Congressman Donald Riegal articulated this position in a letter to Ford on April 9th in which Representative Riegal said the following:

With the recent climactic events in Vietnam and Cambodia, an overwhelming majority of the American people, after a decade of division and rancor, have broken loose from what was left of the old self-deceptions and myths about Southeast Asia. They have come together in a solid national consensus on America’s future role in Southeast Asia. Thus the 94th Congress, which has just returned from a week of face-to-face contact with its constituents, is speaking that new consensus with one voice: “No more U.S. military expenditures in Southeast Asia.” “Humanitarian aid yes! Military aid, no!” Now that the American people and their elected Congress have decided to close

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182 Ford, A Time to Heal, 255.
the book on U.S. military involvement in Southeast Asia, nothing Jerry Ford can say or do will change that. The iron fact is that no additional money will be appropriated for military assistance in South East Asia—-that is a final, irreversible judgment.\footnote{Letter, Donald W. Riegal to Gerald R. Ford, April 9, 1975, Folder, "White House Correspondence File—SP-2-3-36", Joint Session Foreign Policy 4/10/75, Box 11, Gerald R. Ford Library}

Congressman Riegle had summarized the new position that the United States would now embark upon; it did not include support for our beleaguered Southeast Asian allies. Ultimately Ford would receive $300 million in aid for South Vietnam, which was earmarked strictly for humanitarian assistance.\footnote{Olsen and Roberts, Where the Dominos Fell, 261.}

For all practical purposes, the decision had now been made by the United States that South Vietnam was no longer worth the sacrifice. As a consequence, the end of South Vietnam was now just a matter of time. The North Vietnamese did not change Ford’s policy, but instead Congress decided that the United States had done all it could to assist South Vietnam. For the President and his Secretary of State, the meeting was a final demonstration of the lawmakers’ unwavering opposition to their efforts. The following day, Kissinger remarked to the president “there is no longer any chance for Vietnam in the Congress” to which the president replied, “...we won’t get the money.”\footnote{Memoranda of Conversations Folder “April 15, 1975 – Ford, Kissinger,” Box 10 National Security Advisor, Memoranda of Conversations, Gerald R. Ford Library}

General Weyand was asked by Representative Jamie Whitten of Mississippi during testimony before Congress concerning the $722 million dollar aid request: “Is there any basis for your request except to maintain an appearance perhaps in the press and the news media when we know the end is inevitable?”

replied "Well sir, let me say this: that sometimes the style with which we do things, or the appearance, as you say, are equally as important as substance."188

In an April 16th cabinet meeting Ford announced to those present that "Congress has shown no cooperation in a meaningful way" but vowed that he would still stand by South Vietnam by insisting upon his original request of $722 million rather than endorse the limited, and much more attainable amount $220 million that was under consideration by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.189

Ford's meeting with the members of Congress also highlighted the great degree of difficulty of successfully evacuating Americans and Vietnamese from South Vietnam. Ford realized that if the United States left South Vietnam too noticeably, thereby giving the appearance of abandoning South Vietnam, the U.S. could risk both resentment and violence against the remaining Americans. Similarly, Ford also realized that if he moved too slowly in reducing its presence in Vietnam there was the potential of having a large number of Americans trapped in Vietnam in the event of a North Vietnamese victory.190 The administration fully understood that if the South Vietnamese sensed a complete withdraw of American support, they could very well turn on the remaining Americans in South Vietnam. Given the committee's pressure to speed up the withdraw of Americans; it was clear that Ford would suffer an immense amount of criticism if the south collapsed and American citizens fell into communist hands. Uncertain as to what could happen if news of the evacuation leaked to the South

189 Notes of the Cabinet Meeting, April 16, 1975, Folder “Cabinet Meeting, April 16, 1975,” Box 4, James E. Connor Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.
190 Talking Points for Meeting with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, April 14, 1975, Folder “Presidential Meetings with Senate Members, April – May 1975,” Box 7, Max L. Friedersdorf Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.
Vietnamese, Ford repeatedly cautioned advisors and Congressmen to remain silent on
the evacuation issue while the administration wrestled with the various options it could
use to move American civilians out of Vietnam.\textsuperscript{191} Options that were being considered
varied between the view of Defense Secretary James Schlesinger, who favored a pace
of evacuation consistent with Senate Foreign Relations Committee requests,\textsuperscript{192} and
those of Ambassador Graham Martin, who stated that his greatest concern was the
panic caused by the existing low level withdraws currently in progress.\textsuperscript{193}

When Congress decided that the United States had done enough for South
Vietnam, the Ford Administration’s policy changed from a position of active military
support to an orderly and speedy withdraw from Vietnam. At this juncture there was
no longer any hope of saving South Vietnam. Ford, the Congress, the military, and the
nation as a whole realized that and independent South Vietnam would soon cease to
exist. Thus, the consensus now revolved around speeding up the departure of
Americans from Saigon. Henry Kissinger cabled Ambassador Martin, still in Saigon
on April 16, 1975, to tell him that, because of Congressional pressure relative to the
speedy departure of Americans from South Vietnam, “the U.S. political situation will
not permit withdraws at the rate you propose.”\textsuperscript{194} The following day, Kissinger
informed Martin that the administration felt that the situation in South Vietnam was

\textsuperscript{191} Notes of the Cabinet Meeting, April 16, 1975, folder “Cabinet Meeting, April 16, 1975,” Box 4,
James E. Connor Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.
\textsuperscript{192} Jerrold Schecter, “The Final Days: the Political Struggle to End the Vietnam War”, In Gerald R.
Ford and the Politics of Post Watergate America, edited by Bernard J. Firestone and Alexej Ugrinsky,
vol. 2. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993), 547.
\textsuperscript{193} Back channel Message, Graham Martin to Henry Kissinger, April 15, 1975, Folder “Vietnam-
Evacuation (South Vietnam),” Box 12, National Security Advisor, NSC East Asian and Pacific Affairs
Staff Files, Gerald R. Ford Library. (Also see Also Karnow, Vietnam: A History, Page 667).
\textsuperscript{194} Back channel Message, Henry Kissinger to Graham Martin, April 16, 1975, Folder “Vietnam-
Evacuation (South Vietnam),” Box 12 National Security Advisor, NSC East Asian and Pacific Affairs
Staff Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.
“rapidly and irretrievably reaching the worst case” and that the “pressure for immediate evacuation of U.S. personnel has now become irresistible.” Martin was directed by Kissinger to hasten the U.S. withdraw by reducing the number of Americans remaining in South Vietnam from more than four thousand to less than two thousand by April 22, 1975. Kissinger later amended these instructions to include a target of 1100 as the maximum number of persons that could be evacuated in one airlift. Kissinger’s own words conveyed the strain he and the president were under:

I gave you this instruction reluctantly and with no little concern over the risks that this action may entail. It is clear to me that unless we take this action now, other agencies will lose no time in leaking that you and I are dragging our feet. Congress will then almost certainly promptly direct an evacuation (through a resolution) of all... repeat... all Americans... I can assure you that once we reach this level, I shall not press you again for future reductions except on the day, God forbid, if and when you are instructed completely to close down the mission.

What is very clear to this researcher was that the Ford Administration was preparing for a communist victory in South Vietnam. The time for direct military intervention, diplomatic overtures, and negotiations were over. The fact that the North would triumph became clear not only to senior administration officials but to the world, at large, as television images of chaos and destruction were transmitted from South Vietnam. Ford, would now preside over the American withdraw and the South Vietnamese collapse.

Despite the administration's intentions to speed up withdraw of Americans from South Vietnam; the president was not ready to close the American embassy in Saigon. As his April 17 conversation with Defense and National Security officials suggests, Ford remained determined to evacuate as many South Vietnamese as possible. Plans for their safe flight were still in the planning stages, and the president could not yet approve the final departure if he had any hopes of rescuing the South Vietnamese as well as Americans.198 Similarly, on April 17th Kissinger cabled Ambassador Martin in Saigon: "You should know that at the WSAG (Washington Special Actions Group) meeting today there was almost no support for the evacuations of the Vietnamese or for the use of American force to help protect any evacuation."199

In addition to the internal preparations within the United States Government for the departure from South Vietnam, on April 19th the Ford administration sent the Soviet Union an "oral note" requesting, as Kissinger told a National Security Council meeting, "their assistance to permit a safe evacuation and the beginning of political discussions" and "to help create the conditions where this would be possible."200 Specifically the United States government was asking the Soviet Union "to use its good offices to achieve a temporary halt to the fighting."201 The Soviet reply arrived several days later and claimed that they had contacted the North Vietnamese, who in turn indicated that they had "no intention to put any obstacles in the course of military actions to delay the

198 Memorandum of Conversation, folder "April 17, 1975 – Ford, Kissinger, Schlesinger, Rumsfeld, Marsh," Box 11, National Security Advisor, Memoranda of conversations, Gerald R. Ford Library
199 Back Channel Message, Henry Kissinger to Graham Martin, April 17, 1975, Folder "Vietnam – Evacuation (South Vietnam)," Box 12, National Security Advisor, NSC East Asian and Pacific Affairs Staff Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.
evacuation of American citizens from South Vietnam” and that indeed “favorable conditions” had been “established for such an evacuation.202 Although the note was silent on the issue of the high risk to South Vietnamese, Kissinger interpreted the note favorably asserting that the North Vietnamese were “tacitly saying ‘Get them out.”’ The president’s reaction to the note was that “the lull which we have is a result of this.”203

The President could have used the “lull” to which he referred to remove the remaining Americans from Saigon and close the embassy. During an April 24th meeting with National Security Council, Ford referred to the pressure he was getting from the Congress to completely pull out of South Vietnam. He stated: “Congress has been on us with this, to get it off their back.” He nevertheless stated, “I think it is very important to stay there as long as we can contribute to evacuate (Americans and South Vietnamese) in a way that will not promote panic.” He added, “I understand the risk. It is mine and I am doing it.” The president then discussed the final evacuation plans he had approved and declared that by April 25th the American presence in Saigon would number approximately 1090 individuals who would “stay until the order is issued to take them all out.204

An April 26 status report on the evacuation indicated that the president had so far been successful on two fronts. Since the beginning of April, the United States had evacuated approximately 4,100 Americans and over 25,000 South Vietnamese. Ford’s

204 Memorandum of Conversation, Folder” April 24, 1975 – National Security Council Meeting,” Box 11, National Security Advisor, Memoranda of Conversations, Gerald R. Ford Library.
target of limiting American exposure in Saigon to approximately 1,100 Americans had been reached, and on April 22, President Ford's "parole authority," which permitted the resettlement of foreign refugees in the United States, went into effect. The authority provided that up to fifty thousand at-risk Vietnamese and their dependants could move to the United States. 205

Although the evacuation was proceeding according to plan, on April 26 trouble loomed for the United States. The departure of President Thieu did not appear to persuade Hanoi to abandon its military campaign of conquest in favor of a political solution. In fact the communists indicated that Thieu's departure meant nothing and in turn demanded the formation of a government in the South that would expel all Americans. 206 By April 26th Hanoi and the Viet Cong were openly criticizing the American removal of South Vietnamese citizens. Further, intelligence sources reported that while Hanoi had essentially permitted the Americans to evacuate, the communists were now preparing to actively move on Saigon and Tan Son Nhut airport. 207 An NSC meeting memorandum outlining the most recent events occurring around Saigon reported:

On April 28, 1975 long-range communist rocket fire directed against Tan Son Nhut airport, on the outskirts of Saigon, claimed the lives of two U.S. Marines stationed at the adjacent Defense Attaché Office. After learning of the tragic incident, the president convened a meeting of the National Security Council to discuss the latest events. Since communist fire was directed against Tan Son Nhut and other vital areas outside of Saigon, the consensus was that this in fact was the opening

206 "DCI Briefing," April 22, 1975, Folder "Washington Special Actions Group Meeting, April 22, 1975 (Evacuation)," Box 26, National Security Advisor, NSC East Asian ands Pacific Affairs Staff Files, Gerald R.-Ford Library.
stage of the final communist drive to Saigon. At this juncture Ford ordered that April 28 would be the last day to evacuate Vietnamese citizens, so long as transport planes could safely land at Tan Son Nhut, and that the number of Americans remaining in Saigon would be reduced to such a number that if Tan Son Nhut was rendered unusable, the remaining Americans could be evacuated by helicopter.\textsuperscript{208}

On April 29th as the situation on the ground in Vietnam became more chaotic, the President ordered Operation Frequent Wind to commence. The operation involved seventy helicopters and 865 U.S. Marines who entered South Vietnam from the U.S. Navy armada operating just off the coast of South Vietnam.\textsuperscript{209} The final evacuation would last this last day and involve the safe, and final, evacuation of all remaining Americans, 1,400 total, and approximately 5,500 Vietnamese.\textsuperscript{210}

Because of Ford’s resolve to support an ally to the best of his abilities, the United States had evacuated close to fifty thousand South Vietnamese who were at risk under a communist regime in South Vietnam. Vietnam represented an American reversal of significant proportions. The South Vietnamese government surrendered on April 30, 1975 while communist tanks rolled through Saigon. It was clear to all: the South Vietnamese and the United States had lost the war.

Prior to the total collapse of South Vietnam, Ford had summed up the mood of the United States on April 23\textsuperscript{rd} during a speech to the students at Tulane University when he remarked:

\textbf{Today, America can regain the sense of pride that existed before Vietnam. But it cannot be achieved by re-fighting a war that is finished}


\textsuperscript{209} Text of the President’s Message to the Speaker of the House and the President Pro-tempre of the Senate, April 30, 1975, Folder “War Power Resolution: Vietnamese War,” Box 65, Phillip W. Buchen Files, Gerald R. Ford Library. (Also see \textit{Newsweek} (May 12, 1975): 28).

\textsuperscript{210} Meeting Minutes, Folder “Washington Special Actions Group Meeting, April 29, 1975 (Evacuation),” Box 26, National Security Advisor, NSC East Asia and Pacific Affairs Staff Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.
as far as America is concerned. As I see it, the time has come to look forward to an agenda for the future, to unify, to bind up the Nation’s wounds, and to restore its health and its optimistic self confidence.\footnote{Address at Tulane University Convocation, April 23, 1975, in Ford, Public Papers, 1975, p. 569.}

Ford’s speech signaled once and for all the end of U.S. involvement in South Vietnam. During Ford’s flight on Air Force One after delivering the Tulane Speech, Ford was asked by a reporter if the United States was marking an end to its support for South Vietnam. In response Ford replied: “Yes,” and continued: “After all, its been a pretty long era. I had mixed emotions. It’s not the way I wish it had ended, but you have to be realistic. We can’t always achieve perfection in this world.”\footnote{Isaacson, Kissinger, 644 – 645.}
Conclusion

In the space of approximately nine short months the United States liquidated its investment in South Vietnam. The fact of the matter is that the American public lost faith in the Vietnam crusade. As a consequence of the American public’s disillusion with Vietnam, Congress blocked Ford from pursuing more aid resulting in the collapse of South Vietnam. Ford had every intention to support South Vietnam, much the same way Richard Nixon was prepared to serve a second term as president. However, neither of these intentions became reality. The outcome might have been different if Watergate never occurred and Nixon not resigned; but the inherent weakness of the South Vietnamese government, coupled with the aggressive nature of the communists’ cause, all but sealed the fate of South Vietnam once the United States finally left Vietnam in 1973. Ford could not re-introduce American military forces in 1975 simply because there was no support from both Congress and the American public. Steven Ambrose, a noted Nixon biographer and historian, explained that politicians realized that the war could never be won on grand terms, like World War II, after the Tet Offensive of 1968. Ambrose commented:

Whatever the merits of the charge that the politicians lost a war that the military was winning, the charge puts the spotlight directly on the two leading politicians in the nation, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon. As the heads of their respective parties, they were more sensitive than anyone else to all the tugs and pulls of American politics. And their conclusion, reached simultaneously...was that America could not win.213

In the post-Watergate, post-Vietnam world that Ford found himself in, the power of the presidency had been dramatically curtailed by an aggressive Congress re-

asserting itself in foreign affairs coupled with a demoralized military whose status in American society had suffered greatly during our active participation in the Vietnam War. Prior to Vietnam, the general consensus among American policy makers was that if the United States did not face the communist threat in South East Asia, then America would be discredited, thus allowing the Soviet Union and China to gain the initiative in world affairs. Credibility was one of the primary reasons why the United States went to war in Vietnam. Yet ultimately our intentions, money, armaments, and solders could not stop the dedication of a people who would literally spend close to thirty years fighting to achieve independence. Senator Mike Mansfield summed up the mood of the American public when he expressed his weariness with Vietnam in February 1975 when he announced he was “sick and tired of pictures of Indochinese men, women, and children being slaughtered by American guns with American ammunition.”\footnote{Olsen and Roberts, Where the Domino Fell, 261.}

The American people had endured much pain and suffering during the war in Vietnam. The end result was that after nine years of war, public opinion turned against America’s crusade in Vietnam. Ford may have seemed weak and befuddled by the events overtaking him, but privately he did work to assist South Vietnam as best he could. When Congress finally decided that enough was enough, Ford followed the lead established by Congress and pronounced an end to our participation in Vietnam. Although Gerald Ford’s presidency is indelibly linked with the images of America’s defeat in Vietnam, the war had been lost long before Ford had set foot in the oval office. Given the circumstances, Ford managed as well as could be expected. He indicated to lawmakers in very frank terms his concern for Vietnam early in his presidency, and then prepared a sensible aid package that he believed Congress would
accept. As South Vietnam crumbled, Ford realized that his options became more and more limited in the wake of a Congress that was growing much more assertive. To Ford’s credit, he pursued a policy of aid and assistance until the last possible moment for the South Vietnamese. Ultimately, a skeptical Congress and a war-weary American public restrained him. It was at this juncture that Ford conceded that there was nothing that could be done. Ford’s Tulane speech marked the end of the Vietnam experience for the United States and the beginning of healing for America. In an effort to move America beyond the debacle in South East Asia, Ford commented in May 1975: “The lessons of the past in Vietnam have already been learned---learned by presidents, learned by the Congress, learned by the American people---and we should have our focus on the future.”

During this particular interview Ford did not describe what the “lessons” were but the message was simple: no more Vietnams.

Ford officially designated May 1, 1975 as “the last day of the Vietnam era.” It was now official; the Vietnam War and America’s long tragedy was over.

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