

■ Plea for Emergency Aid for Saigon

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Author: Henry Kissinger

Genre: speech; petition

Summary Overview

Between mid-1965 and early 1973, American forces fought a full-fledged war in South Vietnam against regular North Vietnamese soldiers and communist irregular guerillas from the South. When direct combat between American and communist forces ended in March 1973 with the exit of US troops from South Vietnam, the latter country remained on the map for two more years, until April 1975. With the adoption of the Paris Peace Accords in 1973, covering the US withdrawal, vague political agreements were established among the competing forces in South Vietnam, which were supposed to be expanded and worked out in detail later. These agreements gave US president Richard Nixon and his national security advisor Henry Kissinger the ability to say that they had achieved “peace with honor” in Vietnam, and they argued that South Vietnam had a good chance to succeed as a nation in 1973. In reality, the military situation favored the communist forces. With the US public and Congress very wary of more aid to South Vietnam, when communist forces began a new offensive in early 1975, they met with unexpected success and soon threatened to take over all of South Vietnam in one campaign. In the midst of the South Vietnamese collapse, Kissinger lobbied Congress for more aid to the besieged South Vietnamese government. His speech revealed his own beliefs about the viability of the 1973 Paris Peace Accords, which he helped construct, and also provided windows into debates that have raged ever since on both the role of US credibility in leading America into the conflict and also on the actual possibility of South Vietnamese success after 1973.

Defining Moment

Kissinger’s speech before the Senate Committee on Appropriations occurred in the midst of the military collapse of South Vietnam in the spring of 1975. In December 1974, communist forces had begun a hesitant

offensive in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam. Unexpectedly, for both the communists and the Americans who were watching, the forces of South Vietnam rapidly disintegrated and the communists were able to continue a sustained offensive into the heart of South Vietnam. By mid-April, the complete takeover of South Vietnam by communist forces was imminent and all the major cities were either in communist hands or severely threatened.

In the middle of this chaos in South Vietnam, even as US officials prepared evacuation plans for the remaining Americans in the capital city of Saigon, Kissinger urged the US Senate to provide increased funding for the beleaguered South Vietnamese, which US president Gerald Ford had officially requested from Congress. Estimating the South Vietnamese armed forces had abandoned around \$800 million worth of materiel while retreating over the last couple of months, Kissinger recognized that “the amount of military assistance the President has requested is of the same general magnitude as the value of the equipment lost,” but argued that the aid would still work. Detractors, both then and since, have wondered why the United States should provide such extensive aid if previous aid and materiel had been so casually wasted. Kissinger’s claim that the new aid would cover only “minimum requirements” to stabilize the situation in South Vietnam—and it was debated whether that would actually happen—also held the door open to requests for further high levels of aid to come. By 1975, however, the US public and most US leaders had concluded that the United States had spent enough blood and treasure in South Vietnam. Congress denied this request for more military funding.

Author Biography

Henry Kissinger was the US national security advisor, a powerful position in the US bureaucracy that was created in 1947 to fight the Cold War, from 1969 to 1975,

under both Nixon and President Gerald Ford. He was also the US secretary of state from 1973 to 1977. While he served both Nixon and Carter, he is most known for his years under Nixon, during which he helped wind down American involvement in Vietnam. Alongside his

North Vietnamese counterpart in negotiations, Le Duc Tho, Kissinger received the 1973 Nobel Peace Prize for the 1973 Paris Peace Accords, under which US forces left South Vietnam.

HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

The long and agonizing conflict in Indo-china has reached a tragic stage. The events of the past month have been discussed at great length before the Congress and require little additional elaboration. In Viet-Nam President Thiệu ordered a strategic withdrawal from a number of areas he regarded as militarily untenable. However, the withdrawal took place in great haste, without adequate advance planning, and with insufficient coordination. It was further complicated by a massive flow of civilian refugees seeking to escape the advancing North Vietnamese Army. Disorganization engendered confusion; fear led to panic. The results, as we all know, were tragic losses—of territory, of population, of materiel, and of morale.

But to fully understand what has happened, it is necessary to have an appreciation of all that went before. The North Vietnamese offensive, and the South Vietnamese response, did not come about by chance—although chance is always an element in warfare. The origins of these events are complex, and I believe it would be useful to review them briefly.

Since January 1973, Hanoi has violated—continuously, systematically, and energetically—the most fundamental provisions of the Paris agreement. It steadily increased the numbers of its troops in the South. It improved and expanded its logistics system in the South. It increased the armaments and ammunition of its forces in the South.

And as you know, it blocked all efforts to account for personnel missing in action. These are facts, and they are indisputable. All of these actions were of course in total violation of the agreement. Parallel to these efforts, Hanoi attempted—with considerable success—to immobilize the various mechanisms established by the agreement to monitor and curtail violations of the cease-fire. Thus, it assiduously prepared the way for further military actions.

South Viet-Nam's record of adherence to the agreement has not been perfect. It is, however, qualitatively and quantitatively far better than Hanoi's. South Viet-Nam did not build up its armed forces. It undertook no major offensive actions—although it traded thrusts and probes with the Communists. It cooperated fully in establishing and supporting the cease-fire control mechanisms provided for in the agreement. And it sought, as did the United States, full implementation of those provisions of the agreement calling for an accounting of soldiers missing in action.

But perhaps more relevant to an understanding of recent events are the following factors.

While North Viet-Nam had available several reserve divisions which it could commit to battle at times and places of its choosing, the South had no strategic reserves. Its forces were stretched thin, defending lines of communication and population centers throughout the country.

While North Viet-Nam, by early this year, had accumulated in South Viet-Nam enough ammunition for two years of intensive combat. South Vietnamese commanders had to ration ammunition as their stocks declined and were not replenished.

While North Viet-Nam had enough fuel in the South to operate its tanks and armored vehicles for at least 18 months. South Viet-Nam faced stringent shortages.

In sum, while Hanoi was strengthening its army in the South, the combat effectiveness of South Viet-Nam's army gradually grew weaker. While Hanoi built up its reserve divisions and accumulated ammunition, fuel, and other military supplies, U.S. aid levels to Viet-Nam were cut—first by half in 1973 and then by another third in 1974. This coincided with a worldwide inflation and a fourfold increase in fuel prices. As a result almost all of our military aid had to be devoted to ammunition and

fuel. Very little was available for spare parts, and none for new equipment.

These imbalances became painfully evident when the offensive broke full force, and they contributed to the tragedy which unfolded. Moreover, the steady diminution in the resources available to the Army of South Viet-Nam unquestionably affected the morale of its officers and men. South Vietnamese units in the northern and central provinces knew full well that they faced an enemy superior both in numbers and in firepower.

They knew that reinforcements and resupply would not be forthcoming. When the fighting began they also knew, as they had begun to suspect, that the United States would not respond. I would suggest that all of these factors added significantly to the sense of helplessness, despair, and, eventually, panic which we witnessed in late March and early April.

I would add that it is both inaccurate and unfair to hold South Viet-Nam responsible for blocking progress toward a political solution to the conflict. Saigon's proposals in its conversations with PRG [Provisional Revolutionary Government] representatives in Paris were in general constructive and conciliatory. There was no progress toward a compromise political settlement because Hanoi intended that there should not be. Instead, North Viet-Nam's strategy was to lay the groundwork for an eventual military offensive, one which would either bring outright victory or at least allow Hanoi to dictate the terms of a political solution.

Neither the United States nor South Viet-Nam entered into the Paris agreement with the expectation that Hanoi would abide by it in every respect. We did believe, however, that the agreement was sufficiently equitable to both sides that its major provisions could be accepted and acted upon by Hanoi and that the contest could be shifted thereby from a military to a political track. However, our two governments also recognized that, since the agreement manifestly was not self-enforcing, Hanoi's adherence depended heavily on maintaining a military parity in South Viet-Nam. So long as North Viet-Nam confronted a strong South Vietnamese army and so long as the possibility existed of U.S. intervention to offset the strategic advantages of the North, Hanoi could be expected to forgo major military action. Both of those essential conditions were dissipated over the past

two years. Hanoi attained a clear military superiority, and it became increasingly convinced that U.S. intervention could be ruled out. It therefore returned to a military course, with the results we have seen.

The present situation in Viet-Nam is ominous. North Viet-Nam's combat forces far outnumber those of the South, and they are better armed. Perhaps more important, they enjoy a psychological momentum which can be as decisive as armaments in battle. South Viet-Nam must reorganize and reequip its forces, and it must restore the morale of its army and its people. These tasks will be difficult, and they can be performed only by the South Vietnamese. However, a successful defense will also require resources—arms, fuel, ammunition, and medical supplies—and these can come only from the United States.

Large quantities of equipment and supplies, totaling perhaps \$800 million, were lost in South Viet-Nam's precipitous retreat from the northern and central areas. Much of this should not have been lost, and we regret that it happened. But South Viet-Nam is now faced with a different strategic and tactical situation and different military requirements. Although the amount of military assistance the President has requested is of the same general magnitude as the value of the equipment lost, we are not attempting simply to replace those losses. The President's request, based on General Weyand's [Gen. Frederick C. Weyand, Chief of Staff, United States Army] assessment, represents our best judgment as to what is needed now, in this new situation, to defend what is left of South Viet-Nam. Weapons, ammunition, and supplies to reequip four divisions, to form a number of ranger groups into divisional units, and to upgrade some territorial forces into infantry regiments will require some \$326 million. The balance of our request is for ammunition, fuel, spare parts, and medical supplies to sustain up to 60 days of intensive combat and to pay for the cost of transporting those items. These are minimum requirements, and they are needed urgently.

The human tragedy of Viet-Nam has never been more acute than it now is. Hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese have sought to flee Communist control and are homeless refugees. They have our compassion, and they must also have our help. Despite commendable efforts by the South Vietnamese Government, the

burden of caring for these innocent victims is beyond its capacity. The United States has already done much to assist these people, but many remain without adequate food, shelter, or medical care. The President has asked that additional efforts and additional resources be devoted to this humanitarian effort. I ask that the Congress respond generously and quickly.

The objectives of the United States in this immensely difficult situation remain as they were when the Paris agreement was signed—to end the military conflict and establish conditions which will allow a fair political solution to be achieved. We believe that despite the tragic experience to date, the Paris agreement remains a valid framework within which to proceed toward such a solution. However, today, as in 1973, battlefield conditions will affect political perceptions and the outcome of negotiations. We therefore believe that in order for a political settlement to be reached which preserves any degree of self-determination for the people of South Viet-Nam, the present military situation must be stabilized. It is for these reasons that the President has asked Congress to appropriate urgently additional funds for military assistance for Viet-Nam.

I am acutely aware of the emotions aroused in this country by our long and difficult involvement in Viet-Nam. I understand what the cost has been for this nation and why frustration and anger continue to dominate our national debate. Many will argue that we have done more than enough for the Government and the people of South Viet-Nam. I do not agree with that proposition, however, nor do I believe that to review endlessly the wisdom of our original involvement serves a useful purpose now.

For despite the agony of this nation's experience in Indochina and the substantial reappraisal which has taken place concerning our proper role there, few would deny that we are still involved or that what we do—or fail to do—will still weigh heavily in the outcome. We cannot by our actions alone insure the survival of South Viet-Nam. But we can, alone, by our inaction assure its demise. The United States has no legal obligation to the Government and the people of South Viet-Nam of which

the Congress is not aware. But we do have a deep moral obligation—rooted in the history of our involvement and sustained by the continuing efforts of our friends. We cannot easily set it aside. In addition to the obvious consequences for the people of Viet-Nam, our failure to act in accordance with that obligation would inevitably influence other nations' perceptions of our constancy and our determination.

American credibility would not collapse, and American honor would not be destroyed. But both would be weakened, to the detriment of this nation and of the peaceful world order we have sought to build.

Mr. Chairman, as our Ambassador in Phnom Penh was about to be evacuated last week he received a letter from a longtime friend of the United States who has been publicly marked for execution. Let me share that letter with you:

“Dear Excellency and Friend, I thank you very sincerely for your letter and for your offer to transport me towards freedom. I cannot, alas, leave in such a cowardly fashion. As for you, and in particular for your great country, I never believed for a moment that you would have this sentiment of abandoning a people which has chosen liberty. You have refused us your protection, and we can do nothing about it.

You leave, and my wish is that you and your country will find happiness under this sky. But, mark it well, that if I shall die here on the spot and in my country that I love, it is too bad, because we all are born and must die one day.”

Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, I suspect that neither Ambassador [John Gunther] Dean nor I will ever be able to forget that letter or the brave man who wrote it. Let us now, as Americans, act together to assure that we receive no more letters of this kind.

Document Analysis

Throughout the document, Kissinger largely blames two sources for the imminent defeat of South Vietnam—the North Vietnamese and American unwillingness to extend any more aid to the crumbling nation. In Kissinger's view, the 1973 Paris Peace Accords had put in place a viable path forward toward a political solution between North and South Vietnam, although most people at the time were unsure what that eventual settlement would look like. After all, the North Vietnamese and the communists in South Vietnam had long vowed to unite the country, by any means necessary, under a communist government. Therefore, most historians tend to see the aspects of the 1973 agreement that related to the political future of South Vietnam as only temporary, although Kissinger and Nixon at the time, and their supporters since, have insisted that the 1973 Accords provided a legitimate chance for South Vietnam to succeed. Therefore, he largely blamed the North Vietnamese for escalating the conflict again after 1973, stating, "It is both inaccurate and unfair to hold South Viet-Nam responsible for blocking progress toward a political solution to the conflict." He argued that North Vietnam never took the political aspects of the Paris settlement seriously and were always planning on a military takeover of the South.

Relatedly, Kissinger argues, the lack of American willingness to give South Vietnam more aid in fact encouraged North Vietnamese intransigence and spurred their military offensives, including the final one in early 1975. He argues, "So long as the possibility existed of U.S. intervention to offset the strategic advantages of the North, Hanoi could be expected to forgo major military action." Basically, for Kissinger, when it became clear that the United States would no longer support South Vietnam with new funding or more weapons, it seemed to open the door to a communist victory. In fact, dismissing the charges of others that the South Vietnamese armed forces were unwilling to fight, Kissinger finds the root cause of their retreat and disintegration in the American lack of aid. In a kind of linked effect, he argues that the lack of American aid has led to a lack of good war materiel for the South Vietnamese army, which then produced low morale because the soldiers felt unsupported and undersupplied. This low morale is said to have caused them to flee when "they faced an enemy superior both in numbers and in firepower." Thus, the aid that Kissinger is requesting would, in his assessment, allow an "end to the military

conflict and [would] establish conditions which will allow a fair political solution to be achieved." In essence, renewed American aid would bolster the morale and fighting ability of the South Vietnamese forces, halt the communist advance, and shift the entire future of Vietnam back again away from the military realm to the political realm, as it had been, he believed, in early 1973.

Essential Themes

One key theme, as Kissinger, Nixon, and a few historians supportive of this view have argued, is that if the United States had shown a deeper willingness to continue the flow of military and financial aid to South Vietnam, the nation would have survived. Others, however, have countered that if an army of over half a million well-equipped and well-trained American soldiers could not win the war in the South, then additional aid between 1973 and 1975 would not have done the trick. The latter group also tends to think, contra Kissinger, that the 1973 Paris Peace Accords were largely a cover for Nixon to get the United States out of Vietnam and that there was never a very good chance, either in 1973 or earlier, that South Vietnam would remain a viable nation. (The reasons given are varied.) There is an additional debate, of course, about whether or not the war would have been won if military operations had been consistently expanded to North Vietnam and if the cost to both the Vietnamese and the United States would have been justified; but the debate about South Vietnam's chances for success after the US exit is a separate issue about which there is a general consensus—with a few dissenting opinions.

Another major theme relates to the justification for US involvement in Vietnam, going back to President John F. Kennedy, if not earlier. Near the end of the document, Kissinger argues that "American credibility...and American honor...would be weakened, to the detriment of this nation and of the peaceful world order we have sought to build." The latter part of the phrase is especially important in revealing Kissinger's thinking. Many historians agree that the primary reason the United States entered into a war in South Vietnam was that successive American presidents had promised support to that nation, and that if support was not then forthcoming, people around the world, both allies and enemies, would not take America's word at face value. Many American leaders feared that this would then encourage communist advances around the globe, in an expansive application of the domino theory, which

usually formally applied only to Southeast Asia in warning of the fall to communism of Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and other countries in the region if South Vietnam should fall. Both at the time and since then, Americans have debated whether US global credibility would actually have suffered if the United States had not fought in Vietnam, and some suggest that engaging in fighting actually had the opposite effect—namely, diminishing American credibility because the United States seemed to have made an unwise choice to fight there. Kissinger's words in April 1975 show that, almost a decade after President Lyndon Johnson escalated the American involvement in Vietnam to a full-blown war,

and more than two years after the last American troops left, one of America's top leaders still believed that US credibility was on the line in South Vietnam.

—Kevin Grimm, PhD

Bibliography and Additional Reading

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