

HIS 490: SENIOR SEMINAR: HISTORICAL RESEARCH AND WRITING

A Captive President

Gerald Ford's Presidency and the Fall of Saigon

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Introduction

On April 29, 1975, South Vietnam's fate and America's experience in Vietnam over multiple presidential administrations was sealed. For decades America spent precious resources seeking to achieve peace, while ensuring a noncommunist South Vietnam. As Gerald Ford questioned in a speech to Congress before that fateful day, "Who can forget the enormous sacrifices in blood, dedication and treasure that we made in Vietnam?"¹ This was the price America paid to have a stake in Vietnam's future; involvement was not cheap. America's expectation was not for its involvement to be costless, but "nobody could have imagined then that some three million Americans would serve in Vietnam – or that nearly fifty-eight thousand were to perish in its jungles and rice fields."² It is for this reason, America's great sacrifice of her most precious resource – the blood of young Americans – that "the Vietnam War is behind us but not entirely forgotten."³ Due to this incredible loss, Vietnam has left a scar that calls scholars to understand how and why such loss happened. The Vietnam War, being America's longest war, was rich with complex decisions and factors necessitating a healthy discourse in American culture. Tom Wells, author of *The War Within*, emphasizes this point by saying, "Far into the twenty-first century, Americans may well go on debating the meaning of that war, just as in parts of the Old South, one hundred twenty-five years after Appomattox, they still fight over the flying the Confederate Stars and Bars."⁴ The continuance to understand Vietnam is the ongoing quest to understand a crucial aspect of American history, and to uncover the reasons

¹ Excerpt Related to Vietnam and Cambodia from President Ford's Address to the Joint Session of Congress, April 10, 1975, Box 7, President's Speeches and Statements: Reading Copies, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library. <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/exhibits/vietnam/1252280excerpt.pdf>. Page 16.

² Karnow, Stanley. *Vietnam: A History*. New York: Viking Press, 1983. Page 11.

³ Palmer, Bruce, Jr. *The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1984. Page 209.

⁴ Wells, Tom. *The War Within: America's Battle over Vietnam*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994. Page xii.

why Americans now must bear the burden of such incredulous loss, an important aspect of the American identity.

Understanding the Vietnam War not only offers valuable insight into Americans' historical identity through exploring the motivation and purpose behind America's incredible sacrifice, but Vietnam with its enormity, spanning America's longest tenure of war until that time, laid the bedrock for a discourse between scholars of the many complex factors that contributed toward South Vietnam's collapse. Despite America's sacrifice and investment, one moment on April 29, 1975, symbolizes America's final end to its presence in South Vietnam. This moment can be illustrated by the following vignette: over the course of proceeding months North Vietnamese troops pushed closer towards the South Vietnamese capital. After a series of tactical victories, the North Vietnamese were staged to take Saigon. It was on the morning of April 29 that they were breaching the city, attacking the city's vital targets and seizing ultimate control.⁵ On that day "an obscure American radio operator in the United States Embassy sent this message, "It's been a long and hard fight and we have lost... Saigon, signing off."⁶ This is the radio message that marks the Fall of Saigon, South Vietnam's capital in 1975. Following the North Vietnamese invasion of Saigon, America was evacuated from the top of the American embassy – an iconic image to South Vietnam's fall, the end of U.S. involvement. President Ford's order stating that, "The President has ordered the evacuation of the remaining Americans from Vietnam," was transmitted by the U.S. Department of State and U.S. Department of Defense to Saigon.⁷ To some, this moment marked "a shameful day to be an American,"⁸

⁵ Karnow 669

⁶ Davidson, Phillip B. *Vietnam at War: The History: 1946-1975*. Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1988. Page 793.

⁷ Joint Statement of Department of State and Department of Defense, April 29, 1975, Box 10, White House Press Releases, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library.
<https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0248/whpr19750429-009.pdf>.

⁸ Willbanks, James H. *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost Its War*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004. Page 276.

because some Americans felt ashamed that there was the perception that America abandoned everything it had work for over the past decades, leaving unfulfilled promises to a country and its people in need. But, for others, Saigon's fall could have come as a relief, marking the end of America's unnecessary involvement.

Regardless of one's position, Saigon's fall is a crux to understanding how the Vietnam War came to an end and essential in uncovering the extent America contributed to its end. America was heavily involved throughout the Vietnam War in different incarnations, such as variations in military and economic aid. This involvement was led by government policy from both the executive and legislative branches of government. Looking at the role of the president in particular, which has considerable foreign policy powers delegated under the United States Constitution, each U.S. President and their administration throughout Vietnam's duration had the potential to impact the trajectory of the Vietnam War. Therefore, in an effort to uncover the extent to which the United States contributed to Saigon's fall, it is prudent to direct attention to the president. Gerald Ford, the President of the United States starting in 1974 and extending through the fall of Saigon, reasonably should have had the ability to exercise his constitutional foreign policy powers. By exercising his foreign policy powers, Ford seemingly should have been able to project and implement his foreign policy ambitions that would prevent Saigon's fall, especially after considering that other presidents, such as the policies that Nixon implemented prior to Ford – which will be discussed in this analysis, have had considerable traction implementing policies and doctrines. Although Gerald Ford took presidency after Nixon's resignation, Gerald Ford was not afforded the ability to prevent South Vietnam's collapse to communism, despite the great sacrifice and investment America made over the decades involvement South Vietnam. This is an intriguing phenomenon begging the American public to

question the extent of the role America and its presidents played in Saigon's fall – and South Vietnam's loss to communism. Ultimately, President Ford was constrained by the combination of Richard Nixon's previous policies and congressional action and apathy, which were further amplified by South Vietnam's military failures, which prevented him from implementing more aggressive policies in support of South Vietnam.

Historiography

The Vietnam War, because it was a monumental event in American history, as well as constitutes one of America's longest and bloodiest wars, and ends with America's withdrawal and evacuation, has been an arena of contentious debate. Many scholars have made valuable contributions to understanding the Vietnam War and how it came to an end. One scholar, Todd Gitlin, author of *The War Within*, explains, "The war remains a watershed in American history. On one side of that history, America, whatever its rights and wrongs, stands triumphant, its glorious destiny manifest. On the other, America knows defeat, even shame."⁹ With this passage Gitlin highlights two key points. First, Gitlin explains that Vietnam is a "watershed," which refers to Vietnam's importance to America's international history. Gitlin's incorporation of this phrase is a testament to the importance of the Vietnam War because it marked a shift in long-held foreign policy, America's support for South Vietnam. Not only did divergent policy at this time cause a "watershed" fervor in scholarship, but competing scholarship was spurred on the understanding and interpretation of how the Vietnam War and America's involvement came to an end. Leading into the Gitlin's second point, he provides two of the major sides to the literary debate about Vietnam's outcome. On one side, Gitlin describes South Vietnam's fall as the primary result of forces outside America's control, leaving America untarnished by its withdrawal from Vietnam, and the other as one which American history is ashamed of America's

⁹ Wells xi

actions, finding America as the primary contributor to South Vietnam's collapse. Scholars arguing on either side of this historical debate have contributed greatly to understanding the contributory factors of South Vietnam's fall, but they leave Ford's inability to maneuver as president during South Vietnam's looming collapse wholly unexplained.

The scholar camp that believes America is the leading contributor to South Vietnam's fall discusses the Vietnam War in the context of America's public opinion. Throughout the Vietnam War there was feigned domestic support. Tom Wells, in *A War Within*, concedes, "Domestic opposition to the war was continuing to inhibit the administration."¹⁰ There was poor domestic support throughout the war because, as Henry Kissinger points out in his summary of the lessons learned from Vietnam, pessimistic reports became more abundant, shadowing any positive trends that ever appeared.¹¹ The pessimistic journalism, largely for the first time, would cover the grimness of war, and highlight unfortunate atrocities – such as the Mai Lai massacre. These negative images, along with the continuous extension to the assessment of the Vietnam War's end turned optimistic assessment into public discontent.¹² Further supporting this scholarship trend, another scholar, Karnow states that "the politicians were simply reflecting the opinion of the overwhelming majority of Americans."¹³ Even more, Wells indicates that his book records a "clash unprecedented in American affairs – never before had so many U.S. citizens defied their leaders during wartime."¹⁴ These scholars greatly contributed an essential piece to the Vietnam War's scholarship, because without discussion of public discontent over the war the understanding of the Vietnam War would be greatly skewed and omit a large domestic reaction

¹⁰ Wells 463

¹¹ National Security Council Paper on the Lessons of Vietnam, May 12, 1975.
<https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/exhibits/vietnam/032400091-002.pdf>. Page 3.

¹² "National Security Council" 3

¹³ Karnow 667

¹⁴ Wells 1

to the war. Granted, Vietnam's public opinion scholarship is an important factor, partly because political leaders to some degree are influenced by public opinion – both executive and legislative. Although these scholar's arguments are important and contributory, and they acknowledge that public opinion mattered in bringing about Saigon's fall, domestic opinion will be considered a contributory aspect of larger influencing factors. Rather than considering public opinion as a separate factor leading to Saigon's fall, public opinion will be implicitly and deliberately incorporated into showing how President Nixon's policies and congressional decisions constrained Ford from attempting to prevent Saigon's fall.

Existing literature also finds America at fault for other reasons. One reason is that America created a system of South Vietnamese dependence on America, leaving them abandoned and unprepared after a peace resolution was created. John C. Donnel, the author of *South Vietnam in 1975: The Year of Communist Victory*, explains, "The central issue was the great dependence of the GVN on its American patron... [a] dependence on massive foreign assistance [that] was illustrated in the depression of civilian and military morale after the signing of the 1973 Peace Accords," a treaty to remove American troops from involvement in Vietnam while providing continual support to South Vietnam through economic and military aid.¹⁵ In his article, Donnel describes how the United States' policies created a dependence, which in the end contributed to South Vietnam's debilitating collapse when America withdrew. Similarly, James Willbanks's book *Abandoning Vietnam* explains how the policy of Vietnamization left South Vietnam wholly unprepared to confront an aggressive North Vietnam. Even though Vietnamization is a policy of transferring combat duties and responsibilities back from American

¹⁵ Donnell, John C. "South Vietnam in 1975: The Year of Communist Victory." *Asian Survey* 16, no. 1 (1976): 1-13. Accessed April 16, 2015. *Self-Destruction: The Disintegration and Decay of the United States Army During the Vietnam Era*. Page 10-11.

troops to the South Vietnamese forces, under the premise of poisoning South Vietnam for sustainable peace.¹⁶

Slightly different scholarship focuses on America's self-interest. Demonstrating this theme of scholarship, Gareth Porter, the author of *A Peace Denied*, explains one of his major findings, "American geopolitical interests were invariably held to be absolute ones which took priority over any consideration of the interests and aspirations of the Vietnamese people themselves."¹⁷ This contribution is important to the literary debate because it makes the stark claim that America only acted for itself, and that the Peace Accords or any other political or military action was for itself, not for the benefit of South Vietnam. Porter's scholarship views the United States as one single actor, whereas this analysis will demonstrate that there are multiple American factors influencing foreign policy to the point of constraining Gerald Ford, who diverges from the self-interested Nixon policies or congressional actions. Another similar voice in this scholarly debate, General Bruce Palmer, claims, "We left South Vietnam with the legacy of a fatally flawed strategy that gave the strategic and offensive initiative to Hanoi."¹⁸ Palmer goes further, "Although we Americans can rationalize our actions in light of the military situation in Vietnam and domestic situation at home, our South Vietnamese friends can never forget the tragic nightmare."¹⁹ What Palmer is explaining is that not only did America leave South Vietnam poised for failure. When South Vietnam looked for help, America turned a self-interested, blind-eye, choosing noninvolvement over the continued support Ford called for. These scholarly arguments differ from this scholarship because the analysis will not view America as homogeneous with one universal policy. Rather, I argue that Nixon's policies that

¹⁶ Willbanks 285

¹⁷ Porter, Gareth. *A Peace Denied: The United States, Vietnam, and the Paris Agreement*. Don Mills, Ontario: Fitzhenry & Whiteside Limited, 1975. Page 277.

¹⁸ Palmer 151

¹⁹ Palmer 151

were established prior to Ford's presidency and congressional actions during Ford's presidency were self-interested. These factors constrained Ford from pursuing policies that sought to continue America's support of South Vietnam. After South Vietnamese military failures, self-interested factors won over Ford's policies, abandoning an allied South Vietnam, but not for lack of Gerald Ford's want to support a friendly Saigon.

Differing scholarship shows that even though South Vietnam was reliant on America, South Vietnam itself is to blame for its own collapse. George Herring argues this stance with this passage: "The fall of South Vietnam... was symptomatic of the malaise which had afflicted the nation since its birth," including "Political fragmentation, the lack of able far-sighted leaders, and tried and corrupt elite which could not adjust."²⁰ Herring goes on to affirm, "The United States could not effect the needed changes in South Vietnamese society without jeopardizing the order it sought, and there was no long-range hope of stability without revolutionary change."²¹ This shows that Herring firmly believes, and argues throughout his book, that factors within South Vietnam itself were the root cause of their downfall, no matter the United States' stance. Another advocate of this argument for Saigon's fall is Laurence Grinter: "But the collapse in the Spring of 1975 indicates that Saigon never was able to forge a viable political community with the people."²² Although Grinter makes the claim that the South Vietnamese were never able to be a viable state because of their politics, he adds, "By guaranteeing the Saigon governments that we would do so much for them, we guaranteed that they would do very little themselves."²³

Essentially Grinter justifies that although the United States contributed, even ensured, the system

²⁰ Herring, George C. *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*. Second ed. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979. Page 268.

²¹ Herring 268

²² Grinter, Laurence E. "How They Lost: Doctrines, Strategies and Outcomes of the Vietnam War." *Asian Survey* 15, no. 12 (1975): 1114-132. Accessed April 16, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2643587>. Page 1132.

²³ Grinter 1132

which would lead to destruction, South Vietnam was primarily responsible because it did not have the necessary political structure anyway. Grinter's argument differs from the this scholarly analysis because my contribution to existing scholarship shows that American factors were a primary factor in Saigon's fall despite Ford's ambition and America's capability to prevent South Vietnam's demise.

On the other extreme of the literary debate, some author's argue that North Vietnam is primarily responsible for Saigon's fall. Phillip Davidson's literary contribution seeks to explain "how the United States won every battle in and over Vietnam and yet lost the war," while focusing his research around a central North Vietnamese general Vo Nguyen Giap.²⁴ The reason he focuses on Giap while seeking to prove how America lost despite its military triumph throughout the war is because, "the collapse of the RVN would not have occurred without the dynamic NVA action;" this included the fact that the NVA "fielded an overwhelming force, not only in numbers, material, and firepower, but in the intangibles of leadership, training, and morale."²⁵ Contributing to this argument, Palmer adds, "The real 'blame,' of course, must be laid squarely on the Hanoi regime and the North Vietnamese people, who demonstrated to the world that they had the will to prevail."²⁶ This scholarship deserves merit, because the North Vietnamese did display feats of military precision and expertise in the final year of the Vietnam War. What these arguments do not consider is America's constrained ability to prevent the North Vietnamese from conquering and overpowering of South Vietnam. I will seek to differ from existing scholarship about of the end of the Vietnam War and Saigon's fall. This study's scholarly contribution will show that, to a great extent, American factors such as Richard Nixon's precedence and congressional actions, given the reality of South Vietnam's military

²⁴ Davidson ix.

²⁵ Davidson 791

²⁶ Palmer 133

failure, influenced the fall of Saigon, despite Ford's inclinations to prevent South Vietnam's fall and the abandonment of a friend.

Gerald Ford's Policy Ambitions

Ford always saw the United States as necessary and essential in South Vietnam's success, yet at the same time he advocated for a process to a peaceful end to United States' involvement in Vietnam throughout his presidency, from which he diverged from in order to save South Vietnam. Even prior to Ford's ascension to President, he believed that the North Vietnamese Communists were responsible for failed peace. Considering, before the U.S. became majorly involved in the Vietnam conflict, Ford points out distaste for communist control of Vietnamese territory and shows his affinity toward United States support of South Vietnam. Congressman Ford, in 1953 on a trip to Vietnam, points out, "In reality the Reds have driven the families from their homes. The local governments with our help have provided homes, a means of livelihood, medical... anti-communists with 21 villages have lived up to the concept that the 'free world' does help the needy."²⁷ In this early congressional case, Ford does not explicitly say that the United States has, or will have, the responsibility to provide support and aid to South Vietnam. Although he does not explicitly say that the United States should have the responsibility to support South Vietnam, Ford seems to have a tone which acknowledges the benefits of a democratically supported South Vietnam, rather than a communist Vietnam. Additionally, later in his congressional years and while Nixon's administration was seeking peace negotiations, Ford wrote in *Your Washington Review*, "let's look at the record," and proceeds to state seven steps the United States and South Vietnam have taken in seeking a peaceful outcome to the

²⁷ Gerald R. Ford, Congressman Gerald Ford's Newsletter with Comments Written about the Indo-China Stop on his Trip to the Far East, September 3, 1953, Congressional Papers at the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library. <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/exhibits/vietnam/005400673-001.pdf>. Page 2.

war.²⁸ In this Ford concludes, “Let’s put the responsibility for war or for peace where it belongs - --- on the communist aggressors of North Vietnam.”²⁹ By blaming communist North Vietnam as the aggressor, and placing blame – and potential outcome – solely on them, Ford inherently supported South Vietnam. This is the case because by claiming that the responsibility relies on the North, Ford was claiming that the determining factor would not be the United States, and therefore, the United States would maintain its support. Although Ford seems to inherently support South Vietnam from communist North Vietnam, Ford never explicitly described his Vietnam War policy, but it was during these early years where Ford showed his distrust for communism and an inclination for United States’ support of an anti-communist South Vietnam. At the same time, as Ford was forming his own Vietnam War policy, before thoughts of presidency arose, President Nixon sent Ford a message in 1972 stating, “It was most encouraging to learn of your forceful expression of support for peace proposals I presented to the Nation.”³⁰ Contrasting from Ford’s seemingly inherent support against a communist North Vietnam, Ford showed going into his presidency that he agreed with Nixon on the substantive policy of a path to peace in Vietnam. It is at this stage where Ford laid the foundation for latter years in his presidency. Ford both seemed to support South Vietnam against a communist aggressor, while at the same time approving Nixon’s policy towards limiting America’s role in South Vietnam in pursuit of a peace process. In these early years, the roots of Ford’s eventual divergence from Nixon’s peace process and American withdrawal – reinforced by congress – and towards a policy of continued aid and support for South Vietnam can be seen.

²⁸ Congressman Ford's Newsletter with Comments on "Who is Blocking Peace in Vietnam?", July 23, 1969, Box D2, Ford Congressional Papers: Press Secretary and Speech File, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library. <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/exhibits/vietnam/005400708-001.pdf>. Page 2.

²⁹ “Congressman Ford's Newsletter” 2

³⁰ Letter from President Richard Nixon Thanking Ford for his Support for Peace Proposals, May 11, 1972, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library. <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/exhibits/vietnam/NixonLetter-19720511.pdf>.

Initially, Ford's similarity and support of Nixon's peace policies carried over into his presidency. Upon receiving his presidency, Ford delivered an address to other governments: "although the country was switching presidents, its foreign policy remained the same."³¹ Ford wanted to uphold Nixon's trend because, as Ford says, "It was my ambition to put the peacestone back in the foundation of America."³² Like Nixon, Ford did not want to contribute or cause United States' or South Vietnam's failure, nor did Ford want to lose political credibility. After a long and tenuous involvement in Vietnam, Ford followed Nixon's lead in pursuing peace – and eventually United States' entire disengagement from Vietnam, while supporting South Vietnam in order to prevent their collapse. Ford explains to Thieu, "The existing commitments this nation has made in the past are still valid and will be fully honored in my administration... [and, furthermore,] I do want to reassure you of my confidence that in the end our support will be adequate on both counts, [economic and military]."³³ Similarly, Ford told Henry Kissinger, the Secretary of State and National Security Advisor, to explicitly reassure South Vietnam's president, Thieu, of the United States' dedication to providing aid: "please give President Thieu my personal assurance that this administration will do everything possible to provide adequate military and economic assistance."³⁴ From this, it is evident that Ford sought continuity in foreign policy, as well as sought to uphold America's promises to other countries. This contradiction between Ford's goals of supporting South Vietnam while providing continuity with

³¹ Ford, Gerald R. *A Time to Heal: The Autobiography of Gerald R. Ford*. First ed. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1979. Page 33.

³² Ford 125

³³ Message to President Nguyen Van Thieu from Gerald Ford on the Day He Became President, August 9, 1974, Box 38 of the NSA, Kissinger-Scowcroft West Wing Office Files, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library. <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/exhibits/vietnam/033200013-001.pdf>. Page 1&2.

³⁴ Briefing Paper for President's Meeting with Ambassador Graham Martin, September 13, 1974, Box 18 of the NSA, Presidential Country Files: East Asia and the Pacific, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library. <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/exhibits/vietnam/032400070-002.pdf>. Page 2.

Nixon's continual peace process is what will come to Ford's divergence from Nixon and congress's will leading up to the fall of Saigon.

Due to his adherence to continuity and commitments, Ford saw United States' economic and military aid as necessary and a military commitment as quite possible. Ford believed this because, as he said, "We cannot turn our backs on these embattled countries."³⁵ Turning America's back to Ford would consist of defaulting on America's promise to the Paris Peace Accords signed in 1973. In these accords the United States committed to two promises: the United States would sustain the terms of the accord, and that the United States would provide necessary economic and military assistance to South Vietnam in support against an aggressive, communist North Vietnam.³⁶ Pursuing this promise, Ford was adamant about securing aid for South Vietnam's success all the way up until the Fall of Saigon. Clearly demonstrating this, Ford noted in a meeting, "We must assure that what we are trying to do in Vietnam is not destroyed through lack of funding or our hands are not tied in using those funds."³⁷ Additionally, Kissinger forcefully claimed, "we had to publically fight for aid so long as a government structure remained in Saigon."³⁸ Ford's sentiment of driving for aid to help a friendly South Vietnam, all the way up until the end, can be thought to be synonymous with Kissinger's passion and forcefulness. Ford assures that Kissinger "has my fullest confidence," and they had a daily meeting where they discuss these topics.³⁹ Differing from Nixon, Ford not only wanted to ensure continued aid and to provide support to South Vietnam, but he wanted to do so at the cost of

³⁵ Ford 250

³⁶ Warner, Geoffrey. "Leaving Vietnam: Nixon, Kissinger and Ford, 1969-1975. Part one: January 1969-January 1972." *International Affairs* 87, no. 6 (November 2011): 1485-1506. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost(accessed April 16, 2015). Page 18.

³⁷ President Ford's Meeting with Bipartisan Congressional Leadership on Foreign Aid, September 12, 1974, National Security Adviser's Memoranda of Conversation Collection, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library. <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0314/1552782.pdf>. Page 1.

³⁸ Notes from a Cabinet Meeting, April 29, 1975, Box 4, Conner Files, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library. <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/exhibits/vietnam/000800055-001.pdf>. Page 2.

³⁹ "Message to President" 2

infringing on the continual peace process that was already in motion, which called for continual United States disengagement from South Vietnam. Ford was willing to, and advocated that the United States remain engaged in South Vietnam at least minimally to provide economic and military aid, rather than perpetuating a “peace policy” that sought disengagement regardless of South Vietnam’s outcome – a possible loss of an friendly ally to a communist aggressor.

Ford’s policy, unlike Nixon’s and prevailing congressional pressure, was to avidly support a friendly South Vietnam, and to do so with the utmost of his ability and power. Displaying Ford’s emotion and demonstrating his motivation for this resolving Vietnam’s turmoil, he admits that “a vast human tragedy has befallen our friends in Vietnam and Cambodia.”⁴⁰ The tragedy is the looming threat of communist North Vietnam encroaching on South Vietnam’s heart, threatening South Vietnam’s existence. While South Vietnam and Cambodia are beset in this tragedy, Ford was compelled to advocate for aid and support to countries he envisioned as United States’ friend and ally. Because the South Vietnamese were friends, Ford went as far as to pose this rhetorical statement in one of his speeches: either “we wash our hands of the whole matter – if we can” or “ask Congress for authority to enforce the Paris accords with our troops and our tanks and our aircraft and our artillery and to carry the war to the enemy.”⁴¹ This rhetorical statement, placed in the context of a speech primarily asking Congress to provide aid to South Vietnam, is striking because it essentially dismisses the notion that the United States can simply leave. Ford goes on to say, “We cannot in the meantime abandon our friends while our adversaries support and encourage theirs. We cannot dismantle our defense, our diplomacy or our intelligence capability while others increase and strengthen

⁴⁰ “Excerpt Related to Vietnam” 15

⁴¹ “Excerpt Related to Vietnam” 31

theirs.”⁴² Therefore, in order to prevent the communist North Vietnam from conquering South Vietnam, North Vietnam representing an aggressive political and ideological adversary during the Cold War to the United States, the United States must support their endangered and embattled ally. Ford did not see the option of “washing our hands of the whole matter” and let South Vietnam fall, but vehemently saw the other option -- of preventing their fall -- as a necessary policy. The only other absolute option Ford possessed was a request for Congress to approve military authorization to provide South Vietnam with military assistance, the response the Paris Peace Accords prescribed in an offensive attack on South Vietnam. Taken as a whole, Ford saw South Vietnam’s survival as crucial: “the national interests of the United States and the cause of world stability require that we continue to give both military and humanitarian assistance to South Vietnamese.”⁴³ In the height of the Cold War, Ford could not afford United States’ loss of an allied power to the spreading tide of communism. Therefore, Ford’s Vietnamese policy called for a literal adherence to the Paris Peace Accords, which the United States provided economic and military assistance in order to bolster South Vietnam to prevent its demise. Despite Ford’s aspirations and policy ambitions to save South Vietnam from collapse, he was not able to prevent the Fall of Saigon. Richard Nixon’s peace process policies, as he envisioned, created momentum for and expectation of the United States’ continual disengagement from South Vietnam, which Congress would eventually use to leverage its policy goals of continued disengagement and continual reduction in aid to South Vietnam. Differing from these policies, when faced with the reality of South Vietnam’s looming collapse, Ford sought Peace Accord’s proper implementation as he saw them, which meant South Vietnam’s continued aid and support in the face of an aggressor. Although Ford had these diverging policy

⁴² “Excerpt Related to Vietnam” 54

⁴³ “Excerpt Related to Vietnam” 39

ambitions, in the end he would be constrained from implementing policies that sought to save South Vietnam from collapse.

Nixon's Constraining Policies

Richard Nixon's presidency faced a Vietnam War that had been the longest ongoing war in America's history. Vietnam had swallowed considerable amounts of America's treasures, including both financial aid and America's young blood. Because of Vietnam's burden on America, Nixon sought policies to disengage America from its involvement in South Vietnam, while still achieving peace and a stable South Vietnamese ally. Nixon sought to accomplish this through the implementation of the Nixon Doctrine, Vietnamization, and the 1973 Paris Peace Accords. These policies were, in theory, created for the United States to leave South Vietnam, while leaving South Vietnam self-reliant, but Nixon's policies created such momentum of disengagement that Ford was constrained throughout his presidency. From constraint, Ford became unable to implement his own policies that would have reengaged with South Vietnam through financial and military aid in order to prevent South Vietnam's collapse.

The broadest of Nixon's policy concepts, and which would constrain Ford, is the Nixon Doctrine. The Nixon Doctrine was devised in order to begin to limit U.S. involvement in Vietnam. The Nixon Doctrine is the idea that there would be "a new role for the United States, preserving our world interests less by direct involvement and more by supporting the efforts of others."⁴⁴ Therefore, Nixon sought to decrease the United States' physical presence and direct military intervention in South Vietnam, and shift over to a more supportive role. Nixon pursued this policy direction, to disengage – largely at all cost – while ensuring South Vietnam's continued success, as a complex dynamic. To some extent, Nixon felt it was his duty to bring

⁴⁴ Letter from President Richard Nixon Regarding Foreign Aid Legislation, July 27, 1972, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library. <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/exhibits/vietnam/NixonLetter-19720727.pdf>. Page 2.

America's involvement to a peaceful end. As Nixon thought, "I ... [am] conscious that the responsibility for doing so, [ending the war], is above all mine, and I intend to carry out this obligation in a responsible way."⁴⁵ As Herring notes, Nixon also went on to say, "I am going to stop that war. Fast... [and] the war must be ended honorably."⁴⁶ In addition to this intrinsic drive to bring about American peace, Nixon received immense pressure from public opinion. Geoffrey Warner points out that Nixon's "impression is one of an almost desperate effort to disengage, mainly on account of opposition in Congress and among the public at large."⁴⁷ Warner also claims that no "American official, military or civil, was 'under any illusion that the battle in South Vietnam can be brought to a military conclusion within six months, a year or even several years' and 'unless some change can be made in the relative contributions of U.S. and South Vietnamese forces, we were faced with" a continued, extremely high loss of American life in Vietnam."⁴⁸ Nixon was faced with pursuing a doctrine of United States disengagement under the undesirable reality of continued unbearable American loss. In order to do this, Nixon juggled the dynamic of withdrawal combined with continued support and assistance, engaging in large military operations and force despite rhetoric of disengagement.⁴⁹ To do this was to fulfill Nixon's doctrinal motivation, which was "to be sure the South Vietnamese fight well ... because they're going to be battling in there for years to come."⁵⁰ Recognizing American military campaigns could not last forever with their consequences; Nixon had hoped to stabilize South Vietnam. But once his doctrine was put into motion, it created an ideal of disengagement that

⁴⁵ "Letter from President Richard Nixon Regarding Foreign Aid Legislation" 1

⁴⁶ Herring 223

⁴⁷ Warner. "Leaving Vietnam: Nixon, Kissinger and Ford, 1969-1975. Part one: January 1969-January 1972." 1506

⁴⁸ Warner. "Leaving Vietnam: Nixon, Kissinger and Ford, 1969-1975. Part one: January 1969-January 1972." 1489

⁴⁹ Warner. "Leaving Vietnam: Nixon, Kissinger and Ford, 1969-1975. Part one: January 1969-January 1972." 1491-1493

⁵⁰ Warner. "Leaving Vietnam: Nixon, Kissinger and Ford, 1969-1975. Part one: January 1969-January 1972." 1501

acted as the roots of Nixon's constraint on Ford's presidency at a time where Ford sought the reengagement of America's aid in order to save Vietnam.

Coming from the Nixon Doctrine was the Vietnamization policy, a much more focused and specific policy which, combined with the culmination of the 1973 Paris Peace Accords, would be the bedrock of Nixon's constraint of Ford's presidency. Vietnamization was the progressive withdrawal of troops while gradually transferring responsibility for the conflict to the native Vietnamese. Nixon explains, "The United States is going to encourage and has a right to expect the problem will be increasingly handled by, and the responsibility for it taken by, the Asian nations themselves."⁵¹ What this calls for is the South Vietnamese troops to take over combat responsibility. What Nixon claimed at the onset was, "Ten months to a year from now ARVN, [the Army of the Republic of Vietnam,] will be ready to take on more of the responsibility for its own defense."⁵² The more the South Vietnamese forces took responsibility the more the United States could withdraw its forces. During that same time, the ten months to a year which Nixon claimed ARVN – the South Vietnamese force – would take over more responsibility, Nixon claimed that there would be a "withdrawal of 150,000 Americans over the next year."⁵³ Vietnamization hinged on the idea that the South Vietnamese forces would be able to improve military performance and stability as the United States withdrew its forces. By using this logic, Richard Nixon was able to say, "We have made steady progress during the past three years in reducing US involvement in Vietnam in the absence of a settlement."⁵⁴ This Vietnamization concept of withdrawal paired with a transfer of duties and responsibilities to the

⁵¹ Warner. "Leaving Vietnam: Nixon, Kissinger and Ford, 1969-1975. Part one: January 1969-January 1972." 1493

⁵² Memo from President Richard Nixon with Thoughts on Vietnam and Cambodia to Include in Ford's Speech at the Republican Conference, May 6, 1970, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library.
<https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/exhibits/vietnam/NixonMemo-19700506.pdf>. Page 2.

⁵³ "Memo from President" 2

⁵⁴ "Letter from President Richard Nixon Regarding Foreign Aid Legislation" 1

South Vietnamese forces became such a crux of the Nixon Doctrine, it “became the principle plank in Nixon’s policy for draining the poison of Vietnam from the American body politic.”⁵⁵ What this means is that the public body increased its approval of the president as the number of American troops coming home increased. Once Vietnamization increased, and more troops withdrew as conflict ownership transferred to the Vietnamese, it became harder to find a peaceful compromise, because “Nixon continued to undermine the threat potential of American power.”⁵⁶ Peace through Vietnamization seemed illusive because the North Vietnamese did not want to approach the negotiating table, unless leveraged by American power. That is why Nixon, despite his ambitions to press for disengagement, displayed rhetoric and periodic actions of military involvement and escalation.⁵⁷ Nixon was seeking to find a dynamic balance between projecting American power in order to bring the actors to the negotiating table, while at the same time pressing his disengagement policy of troop withdrawal.

The fact of the matter was that there was no guarantee that the South Vietnamese would be adequately trained on the Vietnamization timetable, or that the North Vietnamese would enter into an honest peace agreement which would ensure South Vietnam’s security and stability. It was in this problem where the seed of constraint was sewn for Ford’s presidency. This policy of Vietnamization constrained Ford because the policy of Vietnamization was alluring, given the possibility for America to free itself from the long burdensome war with which it had been entangled. For this reason, the more Nixon withdrew forces and disengaged, the more public support and positive feedback Nixon received. Herring summarizes this sentiment by saying that Nixon, in spelling out his Vietnamization policy, “offered the alluring prospect that it would not only reduce American casualties but might also terminate American involvement in an honorable

⁵⁵ Warner. "Leaving Vietnam: Nixon, Kissinger and Ford, 1969-1975. Part one: January 1969-January 1972." 1490

⁵⁶ Warner. "Leaving Vietnam: Nixon, Kissinger and Ford, 1969-1975. Part one: January 1969-January 1972." 1493

⁵⁷ Warner. "Leaving Vietnam: Nixon, Kissinger and Ford, 1969-1975. Part one: January 1969-January 1972." 1491

fashion regardless of what North Vietnam did.”⁵⁸ To add, the public seemed to be jubilant in response to announcements of withdrawals. As Warner quotes Halderman Diaries following massive troop withdrawals – cutting the number of forces by half in 1971, “Doves and Hawks both [were] jumping in to acclaim the move for a cease-fire... General public reaction seems to be excellent.”⁵⁹ Considering that the public and general sentiment was supportive of Nixon’s Vietnamization and withdrawal plans, Nixon further created an expectation for America and Americans that America was on the precipice of ending its involvement in South Vietnam. As this possibility became more and more of a reality, the less inclined America and its people would be to become involved in South Vietnam again, creating the main point of constraint on Ford to act on policy ambition that reengaged to an extent with South Vietnam.

As Vietnamization was taking place, Nixon sought final peace negotiations, which would further constrain Ford’s eventual presidency. Kissinger adamantly stated, “The Nixon Administration solely affirms its readiness to withdraw U.S. forces from South Vietnam as part of an honorable settlement, which includes mutual troop withdrawal.”⁶⁰ Nixon did not want to lose the war, but he did want to pursue a policy of disengagement while simultaneously consolidating a lasting peace to the lengthy conflict. After using the tactic of limited projection of power through military action or rhetoric, when withdrawing and transferring responsibility through Vietnamization, Nixon “negotiated a settlement that made it possible for us to remove our combat forces and bring home our prisoners of war.”⁶¹ Not only did Nixon secure a peace settlement pursuant of withdrawal and obtain friendly prisoners of war, Nixon made the

⁵⁸ Herring 229

⁵⁹ Warner. "Leaving Vietnam: Nixon, Kissinger and Ford, 1969-1975. Part one: January 1969-January 1972." 1499

⁶⁰ Communications with Hanoi Prior to January 20, January 31, 1969, Box 38 of the NSA, Kissinger-Scowcroft West Wing Office Files, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library.
<https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/exhibits/vietnam/033200018-001.pdf>. Page 3.

⁶¹ Ford 249

agreement that the U.S. would “continue to provide adequate military and economic assistance to South Vietnam,” as well as coming to South Vietnam’s aid if they were the victim of military aggression.⁶² What the administration believed was that the peace agreement “would launch the contending Vietnamese on the path to eventual reconciliation.”⁶³ Until that final reconciliation, South Vietnam would have to come to on its own accord after America’s disengagement, the South Vietnamese would be backed and supplied by the United States. Nixon’s promise to back South Vietnam was not concrete though. In fact, Herring explains that “Nixon had secretly promised” aid and military backing upon North Vietnamese aggression.⁶⁴ By only promising to South Vietnam that the Paris Peace Accords were predicated on aid and assistance with military support in the case of an attack by North Vietnam, Nixon was able to exercise the implementation of the Vietnamization concept of full withdrawal and disengagement. The problem with this starts with the fact that “Vietnamization was a unilateral American policy designed to serve the national interests of the United States, and the United States only.”⁶⁵ Whether South Vietnam would be prepared to be self-reliant after withdrawal and disengagement was beside the point. On top of a policy that disregarded effectiveness or final outcomes for South Vietnamese, Wells describes through one of his stories in *A War Within* that the withdrawals incited more support and ferocity for constituencies against the war.⁶⁶ By implementing the peace accords on the premise that the United States would back South Vietnam, Nixon created the expectation that America would be able to exit the Vietnam War, honorably, with the hope that a self-reliant South Vietnam would not fall to a communist North

⁶² Ford 249

⁶³ Memoranda of Conversation between President Ford, Henry Kissinger and Ambassador Graham Martin, September 13, 1974, Box 5, National Security Adviser's Memoranda of Conversation Collection, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library. <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/exhibits/vietnam/1552785.pdf>. Page 6.

⁶⁴ Herring 259

⁶⁵ Davidson 601

⁶⁶ Wells 577

and refrain from further military involvement. To the American public this represented an incredible allure, and with such expectation the threshold to become reengaged in Vietnam after withdrawal was elevated, constrained Ford from propagating a policy that seemed to reengage despite North Vietnam's aggression during his presidency. Together, the Nixon Doctrine, Vietnamization, and the 1973 Peace Accords sought United States' disengagement while transferring conflict responsibility to the South Vietnamese, in conjunction with promising the South Vietnamese military and economic aid and assistance in order to prevent their fall to communism. Nixon's policies created an expectation that the United States had washed its hands of the conflict, while succeeding in denying communism – Nixon's sought after "peace with honor." For Ford, when paired with Congress's power to limit and refuse the President's ability to act leading up the Fall of Saigon, Nixon's idealistic policies severely constrained Ford from acting on his ambitions to save Saigon.

Congress's Constitutional Powers

In addition to Richard Nixon's constraining policies, Congress constrained Ford's Vietnam policy implementation. To point out the importance of Congress's constraint on Ford's policy ambitions leading up to Saigon's fall, even senior White House officials recognized the potential for enemy exploitation. More specifically, they acknowledged that the North Vietnamese could see Congress as a venue to exploit America's action in preventing the fall of Saigon. A National Security Council memorandum expresses, "the communists would probably seek to pressure us, through the Congress."⁶⁷ This memorandum's comment shows that Ford's administration saw congressional ability and power to deny Ford's policy ambitions as exploitable by the enemy and used to bring about Saigon's fall. Combatting and retorting this

⁶⁷ The Next Steps on Vietnam, March 31, 1975, Box 19 of the NSA, Presidential Country Files: East Asia and the Pacific, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library.
<https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/exhibits/vietnam/032400079-001.pdf>. Page 3.

perception, South Vietnam's president, Nguyen Van Thieu, states, "I strongly hope that future actions by the U.S. Congress will further convince the Communist side of our common determination and steadfastness of purpose."⁶⁸ This goes to show that not only did Ford's administration acknowledge that Congress could be exploitable by the enemy through pressure or public sentiment, but South Vietnam, demonstrated through President Thieu's statements, also perceived Congress as having the clout to impact America's foreign policy and deny the president from reengaging or escalating commitments in South Vietnam. These beliefs were not baseless. Congress's powers were within the realm to greatly influence America's policy by exercising its power over legislation and America's budget. These congressional powers, in addition to Nixon's constraining policies, placed an increasing constrained reality on Ford's ambitions leading up to Saigon's fall. Kissinger described just prior to Saigon's fall, "The congressional situation is fast getting out of hand."⁶⁹ Kissinger expressed this because, as Ford called for American support and funding for South Vietnam, Congress disallowed Ford's policy ambitions.

Congress's power to constrain Ford's ability to offer support to South Vietnam, in part, comes from its constitutional power to legislate. One key law that Congress passed which constrained Ford during his presidency and limited his ability to pursue his ambitions to save South Vietnam was the War Powers Act. Created under Nixon, the War Powers Act "required the President to inform Congress within forty-eight hours of the deployment of American military forces abroad and obliged him to withdraw them in sixty days in the absence of explicit

⁶⁸ President Nguyen Van Thieu's Message to President Ford, August 21, 1974, Box 5 of the NSA, Presidential Correspondence with Foreign Leaders Collection, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library. <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/exhibits/vietnam/035100003-001.pdf>. Page 2.

⁶⁹ Message for Ambassador Graham Martin Concerning Interagency Review of State of Play in South Vietnam, April 18, 1975, Box 3 of the NSA, Backchannel Messages Files, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library. <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/exhibits/vietnam/033000018-001.pdf>. Page 1.

congressional endorsement.”⁷⁰ These mandated powers, legislated to itself by Congress, constrained Nixon’s ability to act militarily, as his “ability to threaten was severely curtailed by a rebellious Congress.”⁷¹ This congressional power founded under the War Power Act, Willbanks says, “made providing assistance decidedly more difficult.”⁷² Although indoctrinated under Nixon to limit his policy in Vietnam and begin the trend of disengagement, this power, was not just short lived, but rather, carried on through Ford’s administration. With this piece of legislation, congressional authority was bolstered over presidents’ foreign policy and operations in Vietnam. Embedded in this piece of legislation lies the underlying power of Congress to constrain both Nixon at first, but Ford’s Presidential ambitions later, to provide support to a South Vietnamese ally. Even from the beginning of the War Powers Act’s inception, Palmer claims that Saigon’s chance of survival was slim because of the “multiple roadblocks put up by the U.S. Congress in such forms as the Congressional War Powers Act of November 1973.”⁷³ Because of these restricting additions to the War Powers Act and the ‘multiple roadblocks,’ Congress founded its ability to limit presidential action that it deemed unfavorable.

Within the War Powers Act’s edicts, Ford could not respond at any level of necessary reengagement with South Vietnam in order to halt and mitigate North Vietnamese assaults on South Vietnam, assaults which would eventually lead to Saigon’s fall in April 1975. In fact, the War Powers Act prevented Ford from implementing a policy he felt was pursuant of the 1973 Peace Accords Nixon agreed to. The Peace Accords called for the United States’ assistance in the face of an aggressive North Vietnam, but with congressional apathy towards the Vietnam War, it flexed its muscles, disallowing Ford from going forward with a policy he felt was within

⁷⁰ Herring 260-261

⁷¹ Herring 259

⁷² Willbanks 196

⁷³ Palmer 141

the realm of his predecessor's promises. Supporting this claim, Ford's executive secretary reflects back on Saigon's fall in a memorandum published May 1975 by stating, "We were in that year, [1973], deprived by the Congress of the ability to enforce the Paris Agreement."⁷⁴ It was with Congress's refusal to allow Ford to adhere to the Peace Agreement and implement his policy ambitions to support a friendly South Vietnam from an aggressive enemy that Ford realized that an apathetic Congress, one averse to the Vietnam War, would not allow him to pursue his policy ambitions to save South Vietnam from collapse. Ford states in a speech written for Congress just prior to Saigon's collapse, "We deprived ourselves by law of the ability to enforce the agreement – thus giving North Vietnam assurance that it could violate that agreement with impunity."⁷⁵ What this means is that Congress removed Ford's ability as president to maneuver and to respond to North Vietnam's march toward South Vietnam when it was necessary, thus preventing its fall. In consternation Congress and its ability, through the War Powers Act, Ford admits, "Obviously, the 'consultation' called for by the act was impossible. Although we went to incredible lengths to reach them, [Congressmen], and explain the situation, we did not succeed."⁷⁶ Therefore, Congress used the War Powers Act and its ability to legislate in order to constrain the President from implementing his policy ambition; policies by Ford's measure were in defense of the Peace Accords in order to save South Vietnam. Although the War Powers Act was one fundamental power and ability Congress used to constrain Ford's presidency, Congress also wielded the country's financial and budgetary power as a tool to constrain Ford.

⁷⁴ State Department Paper on the Lessons of Vietnam, May 9, 1975, Box 20 of the NSA, Presidential Country Files: East Asia and the Pacific, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library.
<https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/exhibits/vietnam/032400090-001.pdf>. Page 3.

⁷⁵ "Excerpt Related to Vietnam" 21

⁷⁶ Ford 252

Another tactic Congress employed to constrain Ford's policy was to refuse economic aid packages for South Vietnam, through its constitutional power of the purse. Through its power over the budget, in approving or denying all of America's financial assets, Congress greatly impacted Ford's maneuverability as president. One bipartisan leader demonstrates how financial aid, its approval or disapproval, was no minor issue for Congress, "There is a philosophical antipathy toward aid."⁷⁷ Congressional antipathy created a major roadblock for Ford and his policy ambitions, a policy of providing help for South Vietnam and to prevent its fall to communism. To illustrate this, Ford explains in his memoir, "For fiscal year 1975, I requested a total of \$1.4 billion in military aid for South Vietnam and Cambodia. Congress authorized \$1 billion to \$700 million... I urged Congress to supply additional aid to prevent the collapse of both nations," but Speaker Albert retorted, "I'm not sure I can get the House to go along."⁷⁸ Congress refused to support South Vietnam and supply an economic aid package for the purpose of preventing its fall. This was detrimental to South Vietnam's longevity, because starting under the Peace Accords South Vietnam anticipated monetary support throughout its fight, and military support if necessary. Without economic aid, Ford was unable to prevent South Vietnam's or Saigon's collapse. South Vietnam was deprived of what had become their lifeline since Nixon's policy of disengagement, while promising supporting aid. Martin, South Vietnam's ambassador declared the detriment of Congress's actions of denying aid by saying, "Now Congress says it wants a political settlement, but it is pursuing an aid strategy more likely to produce Saigon's military defeat."⁷⁹ It is because of this capacity for Congress to refuse the President's calls for increased economic support for South Vietnam, severely constrained Ford's ability to implement his policy ambition to support Saigon in the face of a communist aggressor. Without money

⁷⁷ "President Ford's Meeting" 6

⁷⁸ Ford 250

⁷⁹ "Memoranda of Conversation" 7

available to allocate to South Vietnam, Ford was left without the financial resources to accomplish his goals, leaving Ford at the mercy of Congress's decision whether to support his policy recommendations or not.

Furthermore, Congress limited economic and military aid because of public sentiment. As an example of this, Herring concludes, "America's disinclination for further involvement was obvious; on the day Ban Me Thout fell, Congress rejected President Gerald Ford's request for an additional \$300 million in military aid... the legislators' vote seems to have reflected the wishes of the American people."⁸⁰ A National Security Council memorandum affirms this same thought with this statement: "Any decision... rests on the judgement on congressional and popular mood."⁸¹ According to both of these passages, Congress relies on public sentiment; a sentiment that had no interest in America's involvement in the Vietnam anymore. As a matter of fact, Palmer finds that "the United States was inhibited from attacking North Vietnam or supporting South Vietnam, not only by proscriptions in the cease-fire agreement but also by the virtual disappearance of domestic support."⁸² Essentially, after leaving Vietnam with the 1973 Paris Agreement, and becoming disengaged from the Vietnam War, the American public did not want to become entangled in Vietnam once again. In fact, Wells explains, in reference to public dissent under the Nixon administration's offensives, that "Members of Congress, the targets of much of the spring dissent clearly noticed it."⁸³ This carried through Ford's presidency, constraining his ability to prevent Saigon's fall. Specifically, "The Ford administration's ability was effectively hamstrung by congressional actions and domestic opposition."⁸⁴ Therefore, the combination of Congress's War Powers Act, its refusal to provide economic and military aid

⁸⁰ Herring 265

⁸¹ "The Next Steps" 16

⁸² Palmer 130

⁸³ Wells 523

⁸⁴ Palmer 147

through its constitutional power over America's purse, and Congress's willingness to listen to a public who was disinterested in American reemergence in Vietnam, constrained Ford's policy ambitions to prevent South Vietnam's collapse through economic and military aid.

Lastly, Congress cut economic and military aid to South Vietnam because of congressional weariness of South Vietnam's military performance and strategy, even though Congress's power over America's purse was increasing the perception. Describing this phenomenon, a memorandum for Ford written by Brent Scowcroft reads, "The GVN as a result of U.S. aid cutbacks is in the position of having to defend itself with far fewer resources than ever before."⁸⁵ Not only did congressional cuts leave South Vietnam with a reduced combat effectiveness due to material limitations, "Recent congressional cuts in U.S. assistance to South Vietnam [also] undermine[s] South Vietnamese confidence in continued U.S. support."⁸⁶ When the South Vietnamese questioned whether or not they had American support they performed less effectively, in addition to their lowered material ability to fight. It is because of this lowered effectiveness, brought about in part by congressional cuts predicated on public mood, which when Congress was asked to fund South Vietnam once again, the belief among congressman was that "many Congressmen will believe that it will represent an effort to pin the monkey on their backs once again after the poor performance of the ARVN has taken it off."⁸⁷ Effectively, Congress felt that it had funded failed military operations and strategies to no avail for years, and now that Congress had washed their hands from the matter for some time after the Peace Agreements, Congress views all attempts to accrue congressional funding as a ploy to get Congress to support another round of failures. These beliefs, that Congress was about to fund

⁸⁵ Assessment of the Current Military Situation in South Vietnam, March 17, 1975, Box 19 of the NSA, Presidential Country Files: East Asia and the Pacific, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library.
<https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/exhibits/vietnam/032400077-001.pdf>. Page 2.

⁸⁶ "Briefing Paper for President's" 1

⁸⁷ "The Next Steps" 3

Vietnamese engagement yet again to no avail, was the belief that led Congress to exercise its power to constrain the president. Despite “warnings from the Pentagon and the White House, Congress eventually rejected all supplemental aid requests and slashed the final appropriation for 1975.”⁸⁸ Leading up to Saigon’s fall, Congress was warned that their actions could potentially have negative effects on South Vietnam’s viability, yet Congress proceeded with its policy of disenfranchising South Vietnam of its promised aid, perpetuating the continued failures in South Vietnam. The sad “reality was that Congress would not permit Ford or Kissinger to do anything to forestall a North Vietnamese victory.”⁸⁹ Although Ford sought economic and military aid to support South Vietnam in order to prevent Saigon’s fall, Congress, viewing this as supporting historically failing military strategies, remained steadfast on noninvolvement and constrained Ford’s presidency from acting on its policy ambitions.

Congress’s view that America’s continued and increased involvement through aid to South Vietnam would be bad policy is contrary to the views of multiple administration officials at the time. Kissinger, as one example, explains that the minimalist funds Congress would allow – if any – “are totally inadequate... [And, that] \$600 million is the minimum to stabilize the situation.”⁹⁰ It must be noticed that Kissinger did not believe that no amount of aid would prevent North Vietnam’s victory over South Vietnam. Rather, Kissinger, with the help of other White House staff, determined the minimal aid package necessary in order to stop North Vietnam’s march towards Saigon. Ambassador Martin describes this in a passage written for the *Washington Post* the September before Saigon’s fall, “We are not arguing for indefinite and very high levels of aid... In such an approach, aid would be offered at levels which allowed Saigon a fair prospect of holding its own. It would be offered with the expectation of being continued for

⁸⁸ Willbanks 216

⁸⁹ Willbanks 232

⁹⁰ “President Ford's Meeting” 3

some time, not yanked back next year or the year after that. This is what Congress has failed to do.”⁹¹ Again, Ambassador Martin points out that Ford, and his administration, were not requesting unreasonable aid packages from Congress that would be ineffective or wasteful. Instead, these aid packages that Ford requested were analytical, calculated in order to match what South Vietnam’s necessity was, given the high probability that Congress would approve the cheapest, most necessary aid package. Because Congress did not listen to the recommendations of these policy makers and approve Ford’s policy ambitions to support Saigon with economic and military aid, William Stearman, a National Security Council advisor, prophesied correctly. He projected a military assessment of South Vietnam published August before Saigon’s fall, if “the US was no longer willing to come to Saigon’s defense because of domestic political constraints, they, [the North Vietnamese], might be tempted to undertake heavier military actions and take greater risks to make major gains in South Vietnam.”⁹² Stearman recognized that Congress was not approving Ford’s proposed aid to South Vietnam largely because of their own and public antipathy towards the Vietnam War and reengagement in it, and saw Saigon’s future collapse due to North Vietnam’s initiative advantage. In the end, Ford’s policy ambitions to provide South Vietnam with economic and military aid packages were seen by policy makers as feasible to prevent North Vietnam’s initiative and stop Saigon’s immediate and impending collapse. Congress’s failure to approve Ford’s policy initiatives in support of South Vietnam constrained Ford from saving Saigon from its looming fall.

⁹¹“Memoranda of Conversation” 7

⁹² Current Military Situation in Vietnam, August 9, 1974, Box 18 of the NSA, Presidential Country Files: East Asia and the Pacific, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library.
<https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/exhibits/vietnam/032400069-001.pdf>. Page 10.

South Vietnam's Military Failure

With Congress's ability and Nixon's policies, South Vietnam's military failure amplified the constraint placed upon Ford's policy by strengthening and reinforcing the public and Congress's reluctance to become involved in Vietnam, leading to Ford's reluctant decision to evacuate Saigon. Understanding how South Vietnam's failures contribute to the constraint Ford faced begins with the 1973 Paris Peace Accord. In response to the Peace Agreements of 1973, an unknown North Vietnamese author of military history says the agreement was "a great victory for our people and a major defeat for the American imperialists and their lackeys... [because on] the battlefields of South Vietnam the entire U.S. army of aggression and all satellite troops were forced to withdraw, whereas units of the People's army of Vietnam were allowed to maintain their forces and positions in all strategic areas."⁹³ Essentially, as a contingency of the peace agreement, the North Vietnamese were allowed to keep positions in South Vietnam, a military strategic asset from which the North could rebuild in the absence of American forces. By allowing this, America allowed North Vietnam to prime itself for an assault on South Vietnam years later. By leaving South Vietnam vulnerable, and setting the stage for North Vietnamese attack later, the Peace Accords created the setting which allowed Ford's constraint to be amplified by South Vietnam's military failure.

The Paris Peace Accords also set the stage which led to South Vietnam's failure, by the United States method of military training and investment. Porter explains that South Vietnam "had been able to survive until the Paris Agreement under the umbrella of American power, on which AVRN troops had come to depend."⁹⁴ The problem is that the South Vietnamese had

⁹³ Warner, Geoffrey. "Leaving Vietnam: Nixon, Kissinger and Ford, 1969-1975, Part two: January 1972-January 1973." *International Affairs* 90, no. 1 (January 2014): 185-198. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 16, 2015). Page 197-198.

⁹⁴ Porter 272

become over-reliant on American military assistance despite Nixon's Vietnamization policy – which claimed that the United States would transfer responsibility as South Vietnamese were trained – and initial continuous military aid up until congressional cuts. When the United States began withdrawals, South Vietnam was wholly unprepared to defend itself against a North Vietnamese threat. It seemed as if America “paid insufficient attention to our number one military job, which was to develop South Vietnamese armed forces that could successfully pacify and defend their own country.”⁹⁵ The United States did not ensure that South Vietnam was ready to have the extent of the responsibility thrust upon them without America's guaranteed and continual support and aid. That is why South Vietnam's ability to pacify and defend itself in the long run was exploited upon America's exit following the Peace Accords, especially after Congress started to disengage from Vietnam further with decreased budgetary allotments for South Vietnam. This phenomenon of South Vietnam's military inability created by an over-reliance on American support, and a South Vietnamese army left not successfully trained before withdrawal, was seen by Congress and America's public as a detriment of America's investment. Therefore, the Peace Accords staged South Vietnam for military failure, which would amplify congressional defiance and more adamantly constrain Ford's policy of increased support for South Vietnam.

Furthermore, America's large investment in resources and training for South Vietnam, a focal point of Nixon's Vietnamization policy, ended up leaving South Vietnam's forces ineffective. An example of this great investment was Operation ENHANCE PLUS, which was undertaken just after the peace agreement was signed. This operation “dumped vast amounts of equipment on RVNAF,” a segment of South Vietnam's forces.⁹⁶ This operation is a token

⁹⁵ Palmer 179

⁹⁶ Davidson 735

example of America's strategy of military aid after withdrawing forces, which delivered huge amounts of equipment to South Vietnam. Contrary to what one might think, deliverance of equipment does not necessarily produce results. Qualifying that claim, Davidson explains that "the RVNAF could neither use nor maintain" the equipment given to South Vietnamese forces by the Americans.⁹⁷ With this, America found itself supplying military and economic aid to South Vietnam, as Nixon and Ford promised as a contingent of the peace agreement, only to find out that the large amounts of equipment were not effectively used by the South Vietnamese.

Additionally, America did not effectively train the South Vietnamese during implementation of the Vietnamization policy, creating an ineffective fighting force that would find an eventual defeat. It was not that America did not train the South Vietnamese at all. Rather, the training America did provide South Vietnam was in "American-Style" war, "using air mobility, tactical air support, and lavish expenditure of ammunition and other material... [which were] either in short supply or unavailable" after America withdrew following the peace agreement.⁹⁸ For one thing, this was problematic because America withdrew in part because Congress and public sentiment pressured Nixon to find an "honorable peace." This means that America would be training the South Vietnamese in the same tactics, without the same resources and capabilities as America used. This reality became problematic when Congress began to limit and cut aid to South Vietnam. As Davisson explains, America expected Vietnam to have already "adapted their armed forces to the revised conditions brought on by the Paris Agreement," which anticipated effective implementation of Vietnamization and with limited American support.⁹⁹ It was after congressional cuts to aid, throughout 1974 and 1975, when South Vietnam saw the beginning of its failure, and the tightening constraint on Ford's intended policies, because,

⁹⁷ Davidson 735

⁹⁸ Willbanks 201

⁹⁹ Davidson 747

“Without the continued large infusion of American funds and equipment, the armed forces could not fight the way the Americans had trained them.”¹⁰⁰ The reality that South Vietnam could not assume responsibility of the war due to ineffective military aid and training portrayed the perception to Congress and the public that South Vietnam could not be helped and was too costly, amplifying the constraint on Ford’s to pursue his policy ambitions...

Along with how America’s investment translated into Ford’s constraint, the dynamic of a spiral of South Vietnam’s military forces until collapse, while at the same time witnessing the strengthening of the North Vietnamese forces, both contributed toward Ford’s constraint. First, North Vietnam’s authoritative party “Hoc Tap,” “interpreted the cutbacks in U.S. aid to South Vietnam as a sign of U.S. impotence and unwillingness to reenter the Indochina conflict and indicated that this had figured centrally in Hanoi’s decision to escalate the fighting in 1975.”¹⁰¹ Therefore, North Vietnam took a calculated, strategic risk in interpreting America’s cuts to Saigon’s aid, a risk that paid off. The simple fact of the matter was that South Vietnam could not survive without American military aid as long the North Vietnamese war-making machine remained unimpaired and supported by countries like the Soviet Union and China.¹⁰² With support, the North Vietnamese expanded its forces. North Vietnam started in 1973 with many fewer forces than South Vietnam. North Vietnam had only 148,000 combat troops and 71,000 in support, compared to South Vietnam’s 200,000 regulars, 450,000 support personnel, 100,000 naval troops, and about 525,000 were in the Regional and Popular Forces.¹⁰³ In September 1974, Kissinger stated in response to Speaker Aiken’s comment that Congress was cutting aid because of the apparent military capability in South Vietnam with equipment and troop numbers, “North

¹⁰⁰ Herring 263

¹⁰¹ “Assessment of the Current” 3

¹⁰² “Assessment of the Current” 3

¹⁰³ Davidson 736

Vietnamese forces have tripled since the Agreement.”¹⁰⁴ What North Vietnamese forces would eventually amass to, Davidson correctly calls an “overpowering NVA force.”¹⁰⁵ A memorandum on General Weyand’s military assessment in Vietnam for General Scowcroft early April 1975 describes the “ratio of combat forces is about 3:1 against the South Vietnamese,” with the North demonstrating their use of conventional forces in a “highly professional manner,” and further describing the North Vietnamese forces as “disciplined in their operations” and excellence in command and control.¹⁰⁶ This general build-up and development of North Vietnam’s forces was a product of the Peace Accords and Vietnamization. America relied on the premise that South Vietnam would be self-reliant and properly trained upon America’s disengagement from Vietnam, and the Peace Accords allowed the North to remain largely unmolested, allowing the North Vietnamese to develop. It was this strengthening, in combination with South Vietnam’s apparent decreasing strength and ability that would amplify the constraint on Ford’s policy of continued and increased support of South Vietnam in order to prevent Saigon’s collapse.

South Vietnam was becoming increasingly vulnerable in the midst of an ever more formidable North Vietnam, which in a cyclic pattern, amplified the constraint suppressing Ford’s policy ambitions. The major components to South Vietnamese vulnerability were aid cuts and an undermined morale: “there was no question that severe cuts in U.S. military assistance, as well as American unwillingness to intervene militarily... had undermined the morale of the South Vietnamese people.”¹⁰⁷ Kissinger added that there is “the certainty that the tactical and psychological situation immediately requires military aid in excess of \$300 million.”¹⁰⁸ It was

¹⁰⁴ “President Ford’s Meeting” 3

¹⁰⁵ Davidson 787

¹⁰⁶ A Second Opinion on General Weyand's Visit to South Vietnam, April 5, 1975.
<https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/exhibits/vietnam/032400082-001.pdf>. Page 2.

¹⁰⁷ Palmer 146

¹⁰⁸ “The Next Steps” 16

clear that the South Vietnamese forces, due to congressional aid cuts, were suffering militarily from it. Here the cyclic pattern can be seen where congressional cuts beget more congressional cuts. This is the case because the premise behind disengagement with Vietnam was that public pressure and congressional sentiment saw Vietnam as too lengthy and costly; but with Vietnamization and the Peace Accords setting the stage for failure, South Vietnam was not poised to perform well in the face of a much stronger, aggressive threat. Yet, by this point, America believed it had washed its hands of “the poison” it saw in Vietnam and was not willing to front the aid in combat an advancing enemy in South Vietnam. Put simply, the more America disengaged from Vietnam, despite Congress rationalizing that disengagement during North Vietnam’s rebuilding was prudent because South Vietnam did not appear under attack, the more vulnerable South Vietnam became; and, the more South Vietnam became vulnerable the more Congress saw disengagement, and the dismissal of reengagement , as more prudent.

Looking at further increasing vulnerabilities of South Vietnam, not only were the forces under supplied and running low on key materials, such as ammunition and fuel, deteriorating combat effectiveness and the cuts struck a blow at troop morale, degrading troops’ combat effectiveness further.¹⁰⁹ On April 21, 1975, Thieu said, “The government’s combat potential had fallen by 60%, severely weakening military and civilian morale.”¹¹⁰ Ford in his memoir also recalls, “If their efforts [the South Vietnamese] were to have any chance of success, they needed an additional \$722 million worth of supplies, primarily ammunition... [and if] aid was not forthcoming, there was no hope at all.”¹¹¹ It was this vulnerability created from congressional cuts that led to material shortages and demoralization within South Vietnamese forces that propelled South Vietnam into a defeat. In fact, as South Vietnam began to spiral towards

¹⁰⁹ Willbanks 220 and Davidson 748

¹¹⁰ Donnell 4

¹¹¹ Ford 253

Saigon's fall, and the North Vietnamese loomed ever closer, Congress became increasingly more averse to the essential aid Ford called for. It was no constellation that cuts in aid contributed toward decreased viability for South Vietnam. Rather, it was this increased vulnerability, with the only alternative being large aid packages called for by Ford that caused Congress and the public to foreseeably default back to the sentiment that began disengagement under Nixon. To add another reason to oppose Ford's policy, General Weyand made the assessment that South Vietnam had a defeatist philosophy, whereas North Vietnam had a winner's outlook.¹¹² From this, Ford's policy became more constrained from a more vehement congressional opposition and public sentiment that wanted to continue the path of disengagement laid forth under Nixon, rather than beginning a path of increasing involvement in the attempt to save South Vietnam.

Considering South Vietnam's position of weakness, North Vietnam engaged in coordinated attacks and routing South Vietnamese forces. With reports of North Vietnamese increase in strength, assessments such as the "Current Military situation in Vietnam," a memorandum for Kissinger from William Stearman on April, 9, 1974 came in projecting that because "the South Vietnamese are now in a more vulnerable position," "the communists are clearly preparing to return to large-scale warfare at some point in the near future."¹¹³ This was predicated on the fact that "the military balance [was] shifting in the communists' favor."¹¹⁴ Assuming its position of strength, North Vietnam engaged in the looming large-scale assault American analysts were predicting. As Brent Scowcroft, CIA Station Chief in South Vietnam, said on March 17, 1975, "GVN [Government of the Republic of Vietnam] is facing 'general offensive' as traditionally defined to include coordinated, countrywide attacks by divisional-

¹¹² "A Second Opinion" 2

¹¹³ "Current Military Situation" 1

¹¹⁴ "Current Military Situation" 10

sized units aimed at bringing about a decisive change in the military and political situation.”¹¹⁵

The change that the North Vietnamese were seeking was a domination of South Vietnam and reunification of Vietnam under communist rule. In order to defend against this assault Thieu first tried to hold everywhere, but then decided on abandonment, ordering a withdrawal to more defensible positions.¹¹⁶ When Thieu withdrew, further signaling to America South Vietnam’s projection for failure, antipathy for involvement in Vietnam was amplified. How this constrained Ford was that the more South Vietnam demonstrated military failure, despite all the investment America had made in their country over the past years, the less likely Congress was to agree to increased economic support.

A reasonable question for Congress to pose to pose was why America should support a South Vietnam if they had not taken advantage of the training and investment provided during Vietnamization? Even though this thinking may have been flawed because of the flaws from the beginning, the sentiment is hard to refute when situations like this happen: during the withdraw - more of a military rout - South Vietnamese forces abandoned \$2 billion worth of serviceable government military equipment.”¹¹⁷ Willbanks even states that this was the battle loss that created the “death blow to President Ford’s supplemental aid request.”¹¹⁸ Congress clearly saw South Vietnam after this instance as incapable, and not responsible enough, to receive American funding without massive American support or military assistance. These options were not feasible given the antipathy towards involvement in Vietnam. Left with an adverse Congress, and increasing sentiment in the wake of lost trust in South Vietnam due to military failures, Ford faced increasing pressure to further disengage from Vietnam – even completely. This placed

¹¹⁵ “Assessment of the Current” 2

¹¹⁶ Davidson 777 & 792

¹¹⁷ Donnell 3

¹¹⁸ Willbanks 267

heavy constraint on his policy to provide increased support of South Vietnam in order to prevent its collapse. On top of amplifying Congress's antipathy and adamancy to constrain his policy ambitions, Ford was constrained by other officials; after seeing substantial South Vietnamese failure members of the military, Department of Defense, and CIA wanted to get out of South Vietnam, and they wanted to do it "fast and now," before it was too late to evacuate remaining personnel.¹¹⁹ Together, it was America's vast investment in South Vietnam's forces, an investment that South Vietnam could not turn into a real tactical and sustained military advantage, combined with the needless and hasty abandonment of American resourced equipment, which amplified the constraint on Ford's ambitions to provide continued help to South Vietnam. Others, such as Congress, the public, and, after large-scale South Vietnamese losses and withdrawal, some government officials were ready to let go of South Vietnam and accepting Saigon's fall. It was the perception of South Vietnam's military inability and defeat which amplified the constraint Ford faced .

Conclusion

Faced with collapse in the spring of 1975, South Vietnam hoped that America would live up to the promises made during Nixon's presidency, those promises which were reassured to Thieu by Ford. The promises included assistance in South Vietnam's defense from a hostile North Vietnam and continued aid to South Vietnam to ensure its survival against communism.¹²⁰ In the dire military situation pressed upon Saigon on those final days in April, with a strong and skilled North Vietnamese Army fast approaching, South Vietnam could only hope for the United States to reignite its involvement and resuming its iconic bombing. Although Nixon had premised withdrawal on support of South Vietnam with necessary aid, and military assistance if

¹¹⁹ "Message for Ambassador "1

¹²⁰ "President Nguyen Van Thieu's Message"

needed, Ford was not able to pursue the policy he called for from America and Congress. Ford was constrained from implementing his policy ambitions to support South Vietnam through economic and military aid in order to prevent its collapse to a communist North Vietnam. Due to this, America did not resume its bombing. America neither defended South Vietnam militarily, nor did America supply crucial economic aid that may have prevented or delayed South Vietnam's fall. It cannot be proven, but if Ford had been able to pursue a policy which had supported South Vietnam, the outcome may have been much different. Palmer suggests just this by stating, "With a declared and demonstrated U.S. willingness to support South Vietnam, including military actions and the provision of necessary U.S. military and economic aid, South Vietnam would have an excellent chance for survival."¹²¹ That is also why Karnow explains that the Vietnam War's "origins were complex, its lessons disputed, [and] its legacy still to be assessed by future generations."¹²² The Vietnam War carries such an important American military, cultural, and social history, because of its length and pervasiveness throughout society, as well as the many political and social aspects of life it impacted, it is an important event to understand. By understanding the Vietnam War more fully, and how Saigon fell, we may be able to better understanding the how a combination of nuanced factors played a role in Vietnam, bringing about an American allies defeat to communism, and in a broader sense how various factors can impact outcomes in culminating and untold ways despite oppositional forces.

Although the fact is that a nuance of many factors muddies the clarity of Vietnam's outcome, by exploring the reasons and factors why the Vietnam War came to such a tumultuous and iconic end during Ford's administration there can be a better understanding of why the Vietnam War ended under his presidency. This is important because there is seemingly "a

¹²¹ Palmer 186

¹²² Karnow 11

frequent temptation,” Kissinger states, “of many commentators... to draw conclusions regarding the tenacity of the American people and the ultimate failure of our will to win.”¹²³ This idea may even be able to be extrapolated to find a tendency to blame Nixon or Ford for South Vietnam’s defeat, just as others have claimed Nixon’s policies have contributed greatly towards Saigon’s fall. If this claim was as simple as that and entirely true the literary debate would be short and one dimensional, only assessing and analyzing the actions and factors of America’s people, or Nixon’s policy and how it caused South Vietnam’s loss. Simplicity of this nature is naïve. The reality is that a multitude of reasons exist as to why Saigon fell. This analysis has chosen one focus on President Ford, unlike much of the existing scholarship. Multiple presidents’ legacies have been marked by the Vietnam War’s. Ford’s presidency is particularly interesting, not only because he was the President when Saigon fell, but because he expressed policies that were contrary to Congress and much of the public sentiment. Even though the President has considerable power over foreign policy and foreign affairs, even having the role as Commander in Chief, Ford seemed not able to pursue his goals, goals that may have produced an alternative outcome other than Saigon’s fall in April 1975. Therefore, it is interesting to discover and understand what factors caused the Vietnam War to end, and how Ford, or any president for that matter, was unable to implement policy ambitions at a critical time.

By focusing on Ford’s presidency this analysis finds that Ford was held captive by other factors influencing American foreign policy. These factors included prior policies Nixon implemented during his presidency combined with congressional power and ability, and further amplified by South Vietnam’s military failures. From the outset, President Ford sought to prevent South Vietnam’s fall by expressing an obligation to uphold commitments made under Nixon’s precedence: “We negotiated under the most difficult circumstances a settlement which

¹²³ “National Security Council” 2

made it possible for us to remove our military forces and bring home with pride our American prisoners. This settlement... if its terms had been adhered to, would have permitted our South Vietnamese ally, with our material and moral support.”¹²⁴ Where Ford differed, and created a policy shift that differed to the extent that other factors worked to constrain Ford’s ambition, was that Ford did not see support and aid to South Vietnam as a temporary tool to disengage from the Vietnam War’s grasp. Rather, Ford sought to increase support for South Vietnam in a critical time. South Vietnam was about to fall to communist North Vietnam, an unacceptable loss for Ford. Furthermore, Ford wanted to remind America, and Congress, of its commitments it had made to allied nations in need of help, calling out, “Let us refresh our memories for a moment.”¹²⁵ Ford went against policies went against policies and a Congress that sought to disengage from a tenuous conflict at the cost of an ally, to a communist enemy aggressor – the primal threat to America at that time during the Cold War. Had Ford been able to pursue his policies and prevent Saigon’s fall at that time, the impacts are untold, but America may have prolonged or even prevented the loss of a friendly nation.

Along with understanding the geopolitical implications of Ford’s constraint, Congress utilized its power over legislation and national fiscal responsibility to constrain Ford’s actions. Congress’s actions were predicated on Nixon’s precedence, a precedence of America’s disengagement from Vietnam. This disengagement, although accounted for in the Paris Peace Agreement of 1973, created a failed policy of Vietnamization which called for a “policy of building a viable South Vietnam... [although the] real policy [goal] was to cut American losses and get out of Vietnam.”¹²⁶ Once constrained by the allure Nixon’s policies created for disengagement for America, combined with congressional power to prevent further engagement

¹²⁴ “Excerpt Related to Vietnam” 17

¹²⁵ “Excerpt Related to Vietnam” 17

¹²⁶ Palmer 142

in a conflict it was apathetic toward, South Vietnamese military failure amplified hostility towards any increase involvement in South Vietnam. All combined, these factors ensured Ford's immobility to pursue his policy ambitions to help America's South Vietnamese ally. It is only after Ford could not maneuver and gather traction to help America's South Vietnamese friends, and confronted by an immediate North Vietnamese sweep through South Vietnam, to Saigon, did Ford issue the Saigon's evacuation. Ford issued the order in order to save the lives of the remaining Americans at the embassy. Nonetheless, this moment marked America's end to its involvement in the Vietnam War. Despite Ford's policy ambitions, shortly after issuing the order to evacuate after Saigon's fall, Ford expressed to the American people, "This action closes a chapter in the American experience. I ask all Americans to close ranks, to avoid recrimination about the past, to look ahead to many goals we share and work together on great tasks that remain to be accomplished."¹²⁷ With this, Ford asked America to have a positive outlook on America's evacuation, despite his failed attempt to pursue a policy calling for an economic and military aid package that may have saved South Vietnam from collapse to communism. It is valuable to understanding how other factors, or a culmination of other factors, influenced America's foreign policy, even though the President's policy ambitions differed, because it can provide insight into analyzing other political decisions, as well as to provide a better understanding to an important event in American history. Although his presidency is marked by the fall of Saigon, Ford sought to prevent Saigon's fall. Yet, he was a president captive to, and constrained by, Nixon's previous policies, congressional power, and South Vietnamese military failure.

¹²⁷ Statement by President Ford, April 29, 1975, Box 10, White House Press Releases, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library. <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0248/whpr19750429-011.pdf>. Page 1.

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