

## **Correspondence Between South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu and President Gerald Ford**

On January 27, 1973 the United States, North Vietnam, South Vietnam and the Viet Cong signed the Paris Peace Accords. The accords ended American involvement in Southeast Asia, and paved the way for the eventual conquest of South Vietnam by the communist North. The stated conditions of the Paris Accords were to end the hostilities, withdraw American troops within sixty days, guarantee of South Vietnam's right to self-determination, and facilitate peaceful negotiations between the North and South aimed at reunifying the country.<sup>1</sup> In April of 1975 Saigon fell to the Communist North, in violation of the Paris Peace Accords, terminating the South Vietnamese government.

On August 9, 1974 Richard Nixon resigned as President of the United States following his impeachment in Congress. His Vice President, Gerald Ford, assumed the presidency. Shortly thereafter, on August 20, 1974, Congress significantly cut the levels of aid designated to South Vietnam, all but ensuring that country's loss at the hands of the North Vietnamese.<sup>2</sup> This action goes against a promise by Nixon to aid South Vietnam if the North violated the terms of the Paris Peace Accords.<sup>3</sup> The slashing of military aid, the growing desperation of the situation, and the promise made by Nixon became the basis for a series of correspondences between President Ford, and South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu regarding Vietnam. On April 30, 1975, several days after President Thieu resigned, the last U.S. citizens and military personally evacuated Saigon, ending nearly 25 years of American involvement in Southeast Asia.

On August 21<sup>st</sup>, 1974, one day following Congress' cutbacks of military aid to South Vietnam, President Thieu sent President Ford a letter. President Thieu emphasizes

the amount of effort his people, and America, put into the country the previous twenty-five years, and reiterated, “the Government of the Republic of Vietnam has done its utmost to respect and implement the Paris Agreement.”<sup>4</sup> President Thieu highlights a growing fear of North Vietnamese aggression, which appeared inevitable. He asks President Ford to “show the communist side that there is no hope for them either to break the will of the South Vietnamese People or to undermine the support of the U.S. for the Republic of Vietnam.”<sup>5</sup> President Thieu admits that peace cannot be achieved with the communists without support from the United States, particularly Congress.

On September 19<sup>th</sup>, 1974 President Thieu again wrote a letter to President Ford, detailing him on the escalated armed attacks by communist forces. It does not appear that President Ford sent a reply to President Thieu’s letter dated August 21, 1974. In the September letter, President Thieu shows his negativity regarding the resumption of peaceful talks with the North Vietnamese, which were a condition of the Paris Peace Accords.<sup>6</sup> President Thieu declares, “the Hanoi regime openly declare their active support for movements aimed at overthrowing the legal government of the Republic of Vietnam, while they intensify their infiltrations and military action, thus baring their plans for a forcible conquest of the whole South Vietnam.”<sup>7</sup> President Thieu believes that the Communist stance is based on the (correct) belief that America will not intervene. The situation was worsening, and obviously President Thieu desperately needed American assistance.

In 1972 Congress passed the Case Amendment, which increased Congressional oversight on executive agreements with foreign nations.<sup>8</sup> President Ford could not directly intervene, nor offer aid through an executive agreement without facing extreme

criticism and backlash from Congress. Congress also was not willing to appropriate the funds after spending so much money in Vietnam. Public opinion against sending in troops to save the South Vietnamese government made that option impossible.

On October 26, 1974, President Ford sent President Thieu a response. President Ford's letter, which is notably not urgent and almost lackadaisical, has a very reassuring tone to it. President Ford confirms that his administration's policy remains the same as Nixon's.<sup>9</sup> Ford acknowledges South Vietnam's need for aid, and assures President Thieu of his efforts to provide the needed assistance. President Ford wrote, "I agree with you that it is essential that my government clearly indicate its support for your government and for the full implementation of the Paris Agreements."<sup>10</sup> Beyond simple rhetoric President Ford's response does not sufficiently address or mitigate the real needs of President Thieu's government.

The White House received two letters from President Thieu on January 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup>. The close timing of the letters caused confusion amongst President Ford's advisors, and President Ford waited nearly a month to provide a response. The two letters from January outline the attacks made by North Vietnamese forces and the beginnings of a desperate situation. President Thieu also points out that the communist forces were re-supplied by other communist countries, while the South Vietnamese are not receiving such help.<sup>11</sup> President Thieu pleaded to Ford:

I understand that some sections of the American public opinion have been induced into believing that too much aid to the Republic of Viet-Nam would only prolong the war and encourage us not to seek a political solution. The record clearly shows the opposite. Reduction of military assistance to Viet-Nam by the U.S. Congress has only encouraged the Communists... Taking advantage of the scarcity of our supplies and hoping that adequate aid for us will not be forthcoming, they are once again undertaking to destroy our government structure by force of arms with a view of imposing a solution of their own.

By the time of President Ford's response on February 24, 1974 North Vietnamese forces were on a heavy offensive into South Vietnam. President Ford confirmed in a press conference in January that the United States would not re-enter the war, and administration officials publicly said that America reneged on its promise to retaliate against the North Vietnamese for violating the Paris Agreement.<sup>12</sup>

President Ford's letter dated in February promises more rhetoric from the United States against North Vietnam. President Ford commends President Thieu's efforts to continue negotiations with the communists, and emphasizes that the North Vietnamese are the aggressors.<sup>13</sup> This letter promises no additional help beyond President Ford's reassuring words. It is clear from the delayed timing, and lack of action that the South Vietnamese cause is not worth the potential political damage to President Ford.

On March 22, 1975, President Ford sent President Thieu another letter. This letter followed massive losses by the South Vietnamese at the hands of the communists, resulting in a massive and chaotic retreat by South Vietnamese forces and civilians.<sup>14</sup> In the letter President Ford mentions his disturbances at the aggression from Hanoi, and expresses his confidence in Thieu's ability to hold his country together. President Ford assures President Thieu that he will make every effort to supply South Vietnam with adequate military assistance.<sup>15</sup>

Three days later President Thieu sent his response. In very desperate terms President Thieu declares, "the military situation in South Viet-Nam is very grave and is growing worse by the hour...Saigon itself is threatened."<sup>16</sup> Furthermore Thieu points out:

That [South Vietnam] signed [the Paris Agreement], not because we credulously believed in the enemy's goodwill, but because we were certain of the common resolution of our two governments to make the Agreement work...firm pledges

were then given to us that the United States will retaliate swiftly and vigorously to any violation of the Agreement by the enemy and will provide the Republic of Viet-Nam with adequate military and economic assistance...those pledges have now become the most crucial ones to our survival.<sup>17</sup>

After this desperate plea, President Thieu highlights two steps that would help stop the North Vietnamese. Thieu requests a B-52 bombing raid and military aid, both of which never came. At the end of the letter President Thieu appeals to President Ford's, and America's, conscience regarding the credibility of American foreign policy, as well as the ability of the South Vietnamese people to remain free.<sup>18</sup>

The March 25 letter from President Thieu reflects the growing desperation in South Vietnam. The country was a month away from being completely overtaken, and President Thieu obviously recognized the growing urgency. He unfortunately did not realize that President Ford could not respond in a way that would save South Vietnam. Congress would not allow him to commit more troops, nor increase military aid.<sup>19</sup> President Ford was effectively powerless to help the South Vietnamese.

The last correspondence between President Ford and President Thieu was a letter from the former to the latter on March 25, 1975, a response to the latter's message that same day. President Ford said, "I am convinced that in the end the South Vietnamese people, under your leadership, will be successful in their fight to preserve their independence and free institutions."<sup>20</sup> Whether President Ford believed this or not is unclear. Ford talks about making "urgent" efforts to get Congress to approve aid for South Vietnam, which later failed.<sup>21</sup> It appears that President Ford is prepared to take every step he possibly can to remain committed to South Vietnam, but it is Congress that eventually declined to help President Thieu.

On April 12, 1975, President Thieu resigned. Saigon would fall on April 30<sup>th</sup>, a few hours after the last Marines left the embassy.<sup>22</sup> The correspondence between President Ford and President Thieu depict an accurate timeline of the growing desperation in South Vietnam. President Thieu became increasingly desperate for American aid, which would never sufficiently come. President Ford tried to reassure the South Vietnamese leader by expressing his confidence as the situation deteriorated. In the end, there was not much President Ford could actually do. He needed Congressional approval, and that was impossible to get considering the domestic policy implications involvement in Vietnam had. American involvement in Vietnam just ended, and our elected leaders were not about to re-enter.

The United States pressured the South Vietnamese to accept the Paris Agreement to end American involvement, with the assurance of continued aid. Nixon's departure because of political scandal negatively impacted the strength and feasibility of this assurance. Many South Vietnamese foresaw their inevitable destruction if the Americans withdrew.<sup>23</sup> The correspondences between the two country's leaders gives an insight into the decline of the South Vietnamese country, and the inability of President Ford to fulfill promises made by his predecessor. The letters reflect the culmination of an American foreign policy nightmare that lasted nearly three decades, and took the lives of nearly 50,000 young Americans. In the end, America's reputation was significantly damaged by its inability to protect its South Vietnamese ally.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Treaties and Other International Agreements, vol. 24 (1973) and Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War, Stanley I. Kutler, ed. (1996), pp. 657-678.

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- <sup>2</sup> [http://www.ichiban1.org/html/history/1975\\_present\\_postwar/nvn\\_invasion\\_1975.htm](http://www.ichiban1.org/html/history/1975_present_postwar/nvn_invasion_1975.htm)
- <sup>3</sup> <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history.do?action=Article&id=1618>
- <sup>4</sup> Correspondence, President Thieu to President Ford, 8/21/1974, folder "Foreign Correspondence", Gerald R. Ford Library.
- <sup>5</sup> Correspondence, President Thieu to President Ford, 8/21/1974, folder "Foreign Correspondence", Gerald R. Ford Library.
- <sup>6</sup> Correspondence, President Thieu to President Ford, 9/19/1974, folder "Foreign Correspondence", Gerald R. Ford Library.
- <sup>7</sup> Correspondence, President Thieu to President Ford, 9/19/1974, folder "Foreign Correspondence", Gerald R. Ford Library.
- <sup>8</sup> Jeffrey Cohen and David Nice, *The Presidency* (McGraw Hill, Boston; 2003), 440.
- <sup>9</sup> Correspondence, President Ford to President Thieu, 9/26/1974, folder "Foreign Correspondence", Gerald R. Ford Library
- <sup>10</sup> Correspondence, President Ford to President Thieu, 9/26/1974, folder "Foreign Correspondence", Gerald R. Ford Library
- <sup>11</sup> Correspondence, President Thieu to President Ford, 1/24/1975, folder "Foreign Correspondence", Gerald R. Ford Library.
- <sup>12</sup> [http://www.ichiban1.org/html/history/1975\\_present\\_postwar/nvn\\_invasion\\_1975.htm](http://www.ichiban1.org/html/history/1975_present_postwar/nvn_invasion_1975.htm)
- <sup>13</sup> Correspondence, President Ford to President Thieu, 2/26/1975, folder "Foreign Correspondence", Gerald R. Ford Library
- <sup>14</sup> [http://www.ichiban1.org/html/history/1975\\_present\\_postwar/nvn\\_invasion\\_1975.htm](http://www.ichiban1.org/html/history/1975_present_postwar/nvn_invasion_1975.htm)
- <sup>15</sup> Correspondence, President Ford to President Thieu, 3/22/1975, folder "Foreign Correspondence", Gerald R. Ford Library
- <sup>16</sup> Correspondence, President Thieu to President Ford, 3/25/1975, folder "Foreign Correspondence", Gerald R. Ford Library.
- <sup>17</sup> Correspondence, President Thieu to President Ford, 3/25/1975, folder "Foreign Correspondence", Gerald R. Ford Library.
- <sup>18</sup> Correspondence, President Thieu to President Ford, 3/25/1975, folder "Foreign Correspondence", Gerald R. Ford Library.
- <sup>19</sup> "An Irony of History," *Newsweek* (April 28, 1975), 16.
- <sup>20</sup> Correspondence, President Ford to President Thieu, 3/25/1975, folder "Foreign Correspondence", Gerald R. Ford Library
- <sup>21</sup> "An Irony of History," *Newsweek* (April 28, 1975), 16.
- <sup>22</sup> [http://www.ichiban1.org/html/history/1975\\_present\\_postwar/nvn\\_invasion\\_1975.htm](http://www.ichiban1.org/html/history/1975_present_postwar/nvn_invasion_1975.htm)
- <sup>23</sup> "The Man Kissinger Hated; Nha, Thieu's aide, saw the Paris accords doom his country," *The Washington Post* (November 4, 1979), C3.