

VIETNAM EVACUATION
MINUTES

[TS-42-5520]

NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL MEETING

April 28, 1975

Roosevelt Room

7:23 - 8:08 p. m.

Participants:

President Ford
Vice President Rockefeller
Secretary of State Kissinger
Secretary of Defense Schlesinger
Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, General George S. Brown
Director of Central Intelligence William Colby
Deputy Secretary of State Robert Ingersoll
Deputy Secretary of Defense William Clements
Lt. General Brent Scowcroft, Deputy Assistant
to the President for National Security Affairs
W. R. Smyser, Senior Staff Member, National Security Council

NSS, DOS,
OSD, DIA, JCS
reviews
completed.

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President: Brent Scowcroft this afternoon brought me the report that two Marines had been lost, so I felt we should convene the National Security Council to discuss the situation in Saigon.

Who can bring us up-to-date?

Colby: I think I can.

What has happened is that the Viet Cong have rejected Minh's cease-fire offer. They have now added a third demand, which is to dismantle the South Vietnamese armed forces. Bien Hoa is in the process of falling. The Viet Cong have cut off the road to the Delta and are advancing on Vung Tau.

It is a very dangerous situation. The North Vietnamese are bringing artillery within range of Tan Son Nhut airport. At 4:00 a.m. they had a salvo of rockets against Tan Son Nhut. This is what killed the Marines. This salvo was followed by 130 millimeter artillery fire. Some of this artillery fire hit the American side, not the Vietnamese side like last night.

Three aircraft have been shot down. All are Vietnamese. They include a C-119, an A-1, and an A-37 helicopter. The latter was shot down by an SA-7 missile. The presence of these missiles increases the risk factor greatly.

President: Has the rocket and the other fire now stopped?

Colby: No. It's continuing.

Schlesinger: The latest information is that there is still artillery fire against the airport. A flight of C-130's is going in to take out the DAO (Defense Attache Office). They hope to be able to land, but they can be waved off by a controller on the ground if it is unwise. North Vietnamese ground forces are one kilometer from Tan Son Nhut and advancing.

Colby: Those forces are of platoon strength, perhaps one or two platoons.

President: We should not predicate our judgments on two platoons. How many people is that?

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Schlesinger: About 100.

President: When did you get a report that the firing was last going on?

Schlesinger: About 30 minutes ago.

President: What is the status of the runway?

Schlesinger: Landable.

President: Do you have air controllers?

Schlesinger: There are some on the ground.

President: Are there any C-130's on the ground?

Schlesinger: Only one, which had been hit. We are loading weapons and bombs on aircraft in Thailand. Our aircraft are in the air for potential cover, but they are over the water.

President: What kinds of bombs are these? Are they the "smart" bombs?

Brown: They are regular iron bombs. The aircraft do not carry "smart" bombs unless they have special equipment.

President: How many DAO people do you have at the airport?

Schlesinger: About 400, including contractors.

President: If the C-130's can land, they should. How many are there?

Brown: The plan is for 70 sorties, with each of 35 aircraft coming in twice.

President: Who will decide whether they come in?

Brown: The controller on the ground at Tan Son Nhut.

President: If these attacks continue, would he bring the aircraft in?

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Brown: If it is artillery fire, he would wave them off. If it is rocket fire, he would bring them in.

He had a message yesterday that one artillery unit was to fire on two targets. They have now hit those two targets, an apron and a gymnasium used for processing.

President: For the processing of Vietnamese?

Brown: Yes.

Kissinger: Was that artillery or rocket fire?

Schlesinger: It is not certain.

Brown: What worries me more than the artillery fire is the report of an aircraft being shot down by an SA-7. Choppers or aircraft are defenseless against the SA-7. The only way to deflect the missiles is to use flares, but I am not sure whether the aircraft we are using are equipped for that. Of course, we have to do our mission, but if the risk becomes too great, we may need to turn off the lift.

President: If the risk is too great, the man on the ground has to judge. We cannot. That means we have to move to get the DAO people out as well as the Embassy. That is one possibility.

If they can land, they should carry out the operation as before. But when they find that it is getting too hazardous the last two C-130's have to take the DAO out.

I think we have to continue operations if the people on the ground say that conditions are alright, but if it is a question of two remaining aircraft they should be filled by the DAO personnel and not by Vietnamese.

Kissinger: I have talked to Graham Martin. I think the DAO should come out anyway. I also think the Embassy should be thinned down. If we have to go to suppressive fire, then we must remove the Americans. Otherwise, it is too risky.

Schlesinger: There is no authority now for suppressive fire, only for the chopper lift.

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President: If we do not fire until they do, we are bound to lose some choppers to the SA-7's.

Schlesinger: It is a hard weapon to counter.

Brown: We cannot do much about them.

President: Will there be air cover above?

Brown: Whenever you say. Also, tankers.

President: Should we not have that cover even for the C-130's?

Brown: We can do that, as Jim Schlesinger says. The aircraft and the tankers are ready.

President: How much time will be lost before the aircraft come in?

Schlesinger: There are two issues. First, once we get to the point where we have to have air cover, we should pull out anyway.

Kissinger: I think if they see air cover, it helps.

President: If we have air cover but do not use it, they would still have enough radar to pick up our presence.

Brown: The artillery people do not. Nor do the SA-7 people.

I think we should not commit the air cover until we are ready to use it. The risk is such that they should only be used for a job, rather than to be picked up on radar.

Schlesinger: They may only be doing this shooting to bloody us. If they see fighters, they may hit us hard.

Kissinger: It may, of course, have the opposite effect. Even if some of their local units do not see our aircraft on radar, the high command in Hanoi will know it very quickly. I do not think that they will intensify their attacks.

Schlesinger: They may have pre-positioned orders to attack us.

Brown: I think they have pulled out the stops. The platoons that we have spoken of are being followed by more. They came in through that same area during the Tet offensive. They are ready for the battle of Tan Son Nhut.

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President: If we decide on air cover, we have to go for the evacuation of Saigon and not just Tan Son Nhut. How soon will we know if the C-130's can land?

Brown: Within an hour. We have an open line to Graham Martin.

Kissinger: I think we have three decisions:

-- First, how long to continue to operate, and whether the C-130's should just pull out Americans or Vietnamese as well. In either event, today is clearly the last day for fixed-wing operations.

-- Second, whether you want to have air cover flown over Tan Son Nhut or wherever the evacuees can be picked up.

-- Third, when we order suppressive fire. In this connection, I agree with Jim that it should only be used when pulling out Americans.

My concern is between balancing the risk to pull out all the stops if they have not yet decided to do so. I think if they see American air cover it would have a good effect.

Schlesinger: I think we can go in over the area with less equipment.

Clements: If you decided that this is the last day for civilian evacuation, we can proceed on that basis.

President: I think so. This is the last day for the evacuation of the Vietnamese.

Kissinger: Then the DAO will go out with them.

Brown: Regarding whether our air cover will be seen: We are putting in a Navy CAP above the air cover and Gayler has told them to jam the radar of the SA-2's.

President: Can the SA-7 not be jammed?

Brown: No. It is heat-seeking.

Scowcroft: We have just received a report that the airport is still taking fire. The two North Vietnamese platoons are still in the cemetery near Tan Son Nhut. The C-119 was shot down over the airport, and the other aircraft elsewhere. We also understand the C-130's are still on the way but are not landing.

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Schlesinger: The North Vietnamese have 4,000 sappers in Saigon. They will hit the Embassy if we attack by fire.

Kissinger: I think that, if we fire, we have to pull out the entire Embassy. Maybe we should consider leaving in a nucleus of volunteers, but I would pull everybody out. The North Vietnamese have the intention of humiliating us and it seems unwise to leave people there.

President: I agree. All should leave.

We now have made two decisions:

-- First, today is the last day of Vietnamese evacuation.

-- Second, if we fire, our people will go.

Are we ready to go to a helicopter lift?

Brown: Yes, if you or Ambassador Martin say so, we can have them there within an hour.

Kissinger: I understand your orders are that the Vietnamese should go today, and that the DAO and most of the Embassy should go with the rest of the fixed-wing aircraft.

President: I think they should be phased in.

Kissinger: A reduced staff should be left at the Embassy. If there is suppressive fire, we go to the plan to evacuate all Americans. If we have to go out, priority will go to the Americans.

Schlesinger: We should get Embassy people out today also.

Kissinger: Yes.

We should not let it out that this is the last day of civilian evacuation.

Vice President: Does the press know of the two Marines being killed?

Schlesinger: Yes. We will see how the four Chairmen react.

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Brown: The Secretary said that Americans should have priority if we have to terminate the lift, but we will not know this. We will not know in advance which is the last aircraft.

Schlesinger: We should give them subtle priority.

President: We have to leave it to General Smith to phase them into the evacuation.

Kissinger: If the Americans get on the first aircraft, the situation will be out of control. We have to space them out. The people who should stay to the end are the team to handle the evacuation of the Vietnamese. The others should go.

President: We have to mix them. We do not want too many at the end.

Brown: I do not want to see Americans standing there waiting for the last plane.

Schlesinger: There is one question, Henry, that we need to think about. When it is known at the end of the day that this was the last day, will it not provoke panic against our Embassy?

Kissinger: I believe that, as the new Government comes in, our obligations are terminated.

Even without shelling, we might have a transformation of the Minh Government from a pro-American to a neutralist to an anti-American Government. This could have happened this week.

To answer the question, it could produce panic. It could also make the Government turn on us. With 150 people, this would be more manageable.

President: They are one hour away. Even later today, if the situation deteriorates more rapidly than we think, we can go.

Brown: We are 25 minutes away from a ship to the Embassy. We can go on your orders or Graham Martin's.

Schlesinger: There is a chance of a night attack.

Kissinger: I think the Embassy is safer from a disciplined attack than the DAO.

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I think during the day tomorrow you will probably need to decide whether you want to take out the Embassy tomorrow night. You minimize the panic if you do not take the Embassy to Tan Son Nhut. So you may need the Embassy compound for evacuation.

I think we should take everybody we can out today, and then decide on the Embassy tomorrow.

President: What if the C-130 cannot land; then we cannot get people out by fixed-wing aircraft.

Kissinger: You can then go to an emergency airlift at the DAO and the Embassy, and you have no choice but to evacuate everybody. Then you might also have to go to suppressive fire.

Schlesinger: I think we should still try to get the C-130's in.

Brown: We are more ready to get people out at Tan Son Nhut than at the Embassy, since at the latter we need to blow up trees and to clear the parking lot.

President: We first need to see what happens at Tan Son Nhut. Then we have to use the DAO and Embassy lift.

Kissinger: If they keep up their attacks, it is because they have decided to bottle us up. We should then get everybody out.

President: Who executes?

Kissinger: I suggest we draft a message here, clear it with Jim and George, and show it to you. We will then send it to Graham Martin. Jim can send the same message to Gayler through his channels.

Then everybody should know what we are doing.

Clements: If we cannot get the C-130's in, we will need to make a critical decision at midnight or 1:00 a. m.

President: That decision would be whether to get out.

Schlesinger: Should we soften up the artillery first?

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Brown: I would ignore the artillery for the chopper flight if the artillery is on the air field. But if it is on the DAO or on the Embassy, we cannot go in. In the first case, we would hope that they cannot shift too rapidly. In the second case, we may need to suppress.

Kissinger: But you would have air cover any way to protect the lift.

President: Where is the air cover now?

Brown: I recommend that it come in when we go to a helicopter lift.

President: We can await that until we see whether the C-130's can get in. If they cannot, then we go to Option 3. The decision will be forced by whether the C-130's can or cannot operate.

Is that agreed? (All nod.)

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