OF LADDERS AND LETTERS

On the anniversary of Saigon's fall, a trove of documents sheds new light on old traumas

THE OWNER OF A CHAIN OF SUPERCENTERS IN MICHIGAN WOULD HARDLY SEEM A MATCH FOR HENRY Kissinger in a debate over the Vietnam War, but at the 1995 Gerald R. Ford Foundation board meeting, the former Secretary of State indeed lost a heated argument on the subject to one Fred Meijer of Grand Rapids. At issue was an 18-step metal ladder, utterly unremarkable except that in April 1975 thousands of desperate South Vietnamese, fleeing capture by the invading North Vietnamese for freedom in the U.S., had clambered up its sturdy steps onto the roof of the U.S. embassy in Saigon and into American helicopters perched there. To Meijer, the gray ladder was an uplifting symbol of hope; to Kissinger, it was a grim reminder of the U.S. failure in South Vietnam that had cost more than 58,000 American lives.

It was Meijer's entrepreneurial son Hank who unwittingly sparked the contention when he went to Ho Chi Minh City (formerly the South Vietnamese capital of Saigon) in October 1994, in search of promising new business ventures that might result from the Clinton Administration's impending normalization of relations with Vietnam. While driving down Le Duan Boulevard one afternoon, Hank Meijer asked his driver to stop at the former U.S. embassy, atop which the tragic last moments of America's involvement in Vietnam had been played out. Abandoned since and allowed to run down into a weed-choked eyesore where only chickens wandered among the shards of broken glass, the padlocked building was slated for the wrecking ball.

ULEVICH—AP

Evacuation from the roof of the U.S. embassy, April 29, 1975

"Then I saw the ladder from the evacuation," Hank Meijer relates. "My first thought was, That's an important piece of history; perhaps I can pay somebody a few hundred bucks to weld it off with a blowtorch, then crate it up and ship it back to Michigan for display at the Ford Museum." He resisted, but when he returned to Grand Rapids and told his father about the ladder, Fred Meijer was captivated, and determined to put those "18 steps to freedom" on permanent display before the American people. He figured his fellow board members at the Ford Foundation would agree—but when he broached the idea of acquiring the ladder at the next meeting he met with surprisingly harsh resistance from Kissinger. "It's just a terrible idea," the nation's only celebrity diplomat kept repeating. "Why would you want to remind visitors about this horrible chapter in American history?"

Somewhat startled, Meijer held his ground. "Henry, if we don't acquire the ladder, it will end up in the bowels of the Smithsonian." To which, an annoyed Kissinger shot back, "That's a good place for it."

Then the ex-President spoke up for his old friend Meijer, likening the "freedom ladder" to the concrete slab from the Berlin Wall that adorns the museum's entrance. "No one knows more than I how humiliating it was," Ford reminded his Secretary of State. "As you recall, I had to sit in the Oval Office and watch our troops get kicked out of Vietnam. But it's part of our history, and we can't forget it." The decision was made to get the ladder. "To some, this staircase will always be seen as an emblem of military defeat," Ford notes. "For me, however, it symbolizes man's undying desire to be free."

For all the high-level brouhaha, the ladder pales in interest next to other new additions from the Vietnam era to the Ford Library and Museum. Last week more than 40,000 pages of newly declassified materials were released to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the end of the war. Most were National Security staff files, and many were written by Kissinger and Brent Scowcroft, who would later become National Security Adviser. Although only tangential to the Ford Administration, one of the provocative documents—found in the files of Graham A. Martin, the last U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam—is a startling 1964 letter from Martin's Johnson-era predecessor, Henry Cabot Lodge, to Secretary of State Dean Rusk. Certain to intrigue cold-war historians, the missive reads:

"This is for you, the President, [Secretary of Defense] Bob McNamara and whoever else you think needs to know. It is definitely not a subject which should get into the cable traffic ... General [Nguyen] Khanh told me on May 25 that when [President Ngo Dinh] Diem was shot he had in his hand a briefcase containing 1 million U.S. currency 'in the highest denominations.' He said that General [Duong Van] Minh took possession of the briefcase and has never yet surrendered it. He added that General Minh at the same time had taken possession of 40 kilograms of gold bars ... I advised General Khanh not to make this public lest it shake public confidence here in all generals. He hopes that General Minh will make his exit quietly."

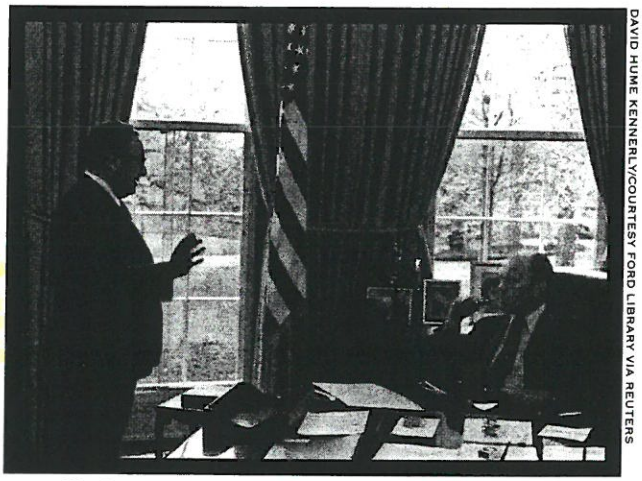
The letter may read cryptically today but one historic image will jog the memory: the bodies of South Vietnamese President Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, chief of the secret police, splayed on the ground in pools of blood in Saigon on Nov. 2, 1963. Until then, Diem's corrupt South Vietnamese regime had been propped up by the U.S. as a bulwark against the communist North. But Diem's "republic" had become an embarrassment to

the Kennedy Administration. American public opinion had turned against the regime after Buddhist monks set themselves on fire to protest Diem's autocratic ways. When a cabal of South Vietnamese military men indicated they were about to stage a coup against Diem, Ambassador Lodge said the U.S. would not stand in their way.

But were pecuniary incentives involved? There are numerous ways to analyze this curious letter. It could be that General Khanh—Saigon's military strongman—made up this story to lay the blame for the Diem coup on his archrival, General Minh ("Big Minh" as he was popularly known). Another possibility is that Diem had been paid off by the CIA, and was making a getaway when he was apprehended and killed.

Ambassador Martin's Saigon embassy files, from 1970 to 1975, mostly backchanneling missives to and from Kissinger, offer plenty to think about as well. The most sensitive cables pertain to the diplomatic intrigue that resulted in the Paris cease-fire agreement Kissinger and North Vietnamese negotiator Le Duc Tho signed on Jan. 27, 1973. One folder, in fact, contains extensive new documentation on the role French intermediary Jean Sainteny played in keeping Kissinger and Le Duc Tho at the bargaining table.

But the drama in which the Ford ladder becomes a critical prop emerges from documents on the last months of Saigon, as communist North Vietnam began seizing provinces from the crumbling regime of Nguyen Van Thieu. Late in March 1975, President Ford sent Army Chief of Staff General Frederick C. Weyand to Saigon to assess the situation and bring back a full report with recommendations. The most compelling product of the Weyand mission comes from Kenneth M. Quinn, a National Security Council adviser on East Asia who, on April 5, 1975, wrote Kissinger a private, top-secret, 10-page memorandum so bleak it still stands as the grimmest and most accurate assessment by the Ford Administration of America's final weeks in South Vietnam. The South Vietnamese forces "may be totally defeated in as little as three weeks," Quinn noted. "President Thieu is discredited and almost completely ineffective. He can no longer provide the leadership necessary to rally the country. The morale of the army and civilian population is critically low and bordering on national despair. Fear of the communists is widespread, and people from all walks of life are now searching for a way to flee the country. Panic is seemingly just below the surface, and an imminent attack on Saigon could lose it [for us]."



DAVID HUME KENNERLY/COURTESY FORD LIBRARY VIA REUTERS

Kissinger and Ford the day before the fall of Saigon

Just five days after the Quinn report, Ford went hat in hand before a joint session of Congress to request $722 million in emergency military aid plus $250 million for economic and humanitarian assistance for the people of South Vietnam. "The options before us are few, and the time is short," the President pleaded. "We cannot ... abandon our friends." The Senate Armed Services Committee disagreed, and on April 17 rejected the appeal, causing the genial Ford to pound his fist and exclaim, "Those bastards." Meanwhile, Kissinger, in an April 24 State Department meeting, was reduced to denouncing those "treacherous bastards in France" who seemed hell-bent on celebrating America's misadventure in Southeast Asia. What the Ford Library's new documents show, however, is that neither the President nor Kissinger ever really thought Congress would appropriate more money; the nearly billion-dollar request was largely a ruse to buy more time to plan for the imminent evacuation of Saigon and to pin Congress with the historical blame for losing Vietnam.

Another debate was shaping up behind closed doors. On the same day the Senate committee rejected Ford's proposal, Kissinger cabled Ambassador Martin. "We have just completed an interagency review of the State of Play in South Vietnam. You should know that at the emergency White House meeting today there was almost no support for the evacuation of Vietnamese or for the use of American force to help protect any evacuation. The sentiment of our military, DOD and CIA colleagues was to get out fast and now." But the newly declassified record also shows that the Commander in Chief insisted that the U.S. had a moral and humanitarian obligation to airlift out as many South Vietnamese as possible and bring them to America. At Ford's behest, Kissinger cabled Martin on April 24. "We are amazed at the small number of Vietnamese being evacuated, considering the substantial amount of aircraft available. I know you feel, as we do, a heavy moral obligation to evacuate as many deserving Vietnamese as possible, and I urge you to redouble your efforts in that regard. The President expects these instructions to be carried out fully and within the time schedule he has set out. For his part, he plans to call the NSC together this afternoon to lay down the law."

The results make for some of the most compelling reading in the Ford Library: more than 100 transcribed pages of authorized National Security Agency intercepts of helicopter radio messages sent during the frantic evacuation of the U.S. embassy in Saigon on April 29, 1975. Operation Frequent Wind, as the rescue mission was dubbed, takes on a dramatic new immediacy in the words of the pilots dodging mortar fire and gas bombs to save U.S. embassy staff members before attempting to rescue any South Vietnamese. "Reports are that there are 200 Americans left to evacuate," an intercept reads. "Gunners Six to GSF Commander. Bring personnel up through the building. Do not let them [the South Vietnamese] follow too closely. Use Mace if necessary, but do not fire on them." Despite fire fights around the building, Ambassador Martin, the other remaining Americans and the luckiest South Vietnamese nationals climbed the ladder and made it out safely to the U.S.

"I still grieve over those we were unable to rescue," Ford reflected last week from his library in Ann Arbor. "I still mourn for 2,500 American soldiers who to this day remain unaccounted for. Yet along with the pain there is pride. In the face of overwhelming pressure to shut our doors, we were able to resettle a first wave of more than 130,000 Vietnamese refugees. To have done anything less would in my opinion have only added moral shame to military humiliation." Today almost a million people born in Vietnam live in the U.S., making Vietnamese Americans the nation's fifth-largest immigrant group. Odds are they could help other visitors to the Ford Museum decide the debate over Fred and Hank Meijer's 18-step ladder. ■