

A President's Pain

PRESIDENT GERALD R. FORD

Washington, D.C., April 29, 1975

As Americans and South Vietnamese fled by helicopter from the U.S. Embassy in Saigon, President Gerald R. Ford watched in anguish.

That was probably the hardest day of my presidency for me. I had supported Kennedy when he sent our first combat troops to Vietnam. I supported Johnson even though I differed on some of his military strategy, but I supported the effort to try to win the war. I did the same with Nixon, and with all my support, I'm the president who ends up losing the war.

You have no idea how painful it was. To sit in the Oval Office and watch on TV the American troops, military, civilians being evacuated along with as many South Vietnamese as we could who had supported us. And we had a conflict. The Secretary of Defense, Jim Schlesinger, had wanted us to get out of Saigon a week earlier. And then we had Graham Martin, the ambassador. He wanted to stay until the North Vietnamese shot him. So we were torn, Henry Kissinger and myself, between the two extremes. And I made the decision, and Henry fully agreed, that we would stay as long as possible to get all our military, many of our civilians, and as many as we could of our South Vietnamese allies out. I think we made a very heroic effort and did the best we could under the worst of circumstances. I look upon it as the sadness of a retreat that I'll never forget. ☹