

Neutralize Southeast Asia Now

By DENIS HEALEY

LONDON—The speed and scale of America's withdrawal from Vietnam is impressive by any standard. Politically more important still, as against 14,592 Americans killed in the last year of the Democratic Administration, only 4,180 were killed in 1970.

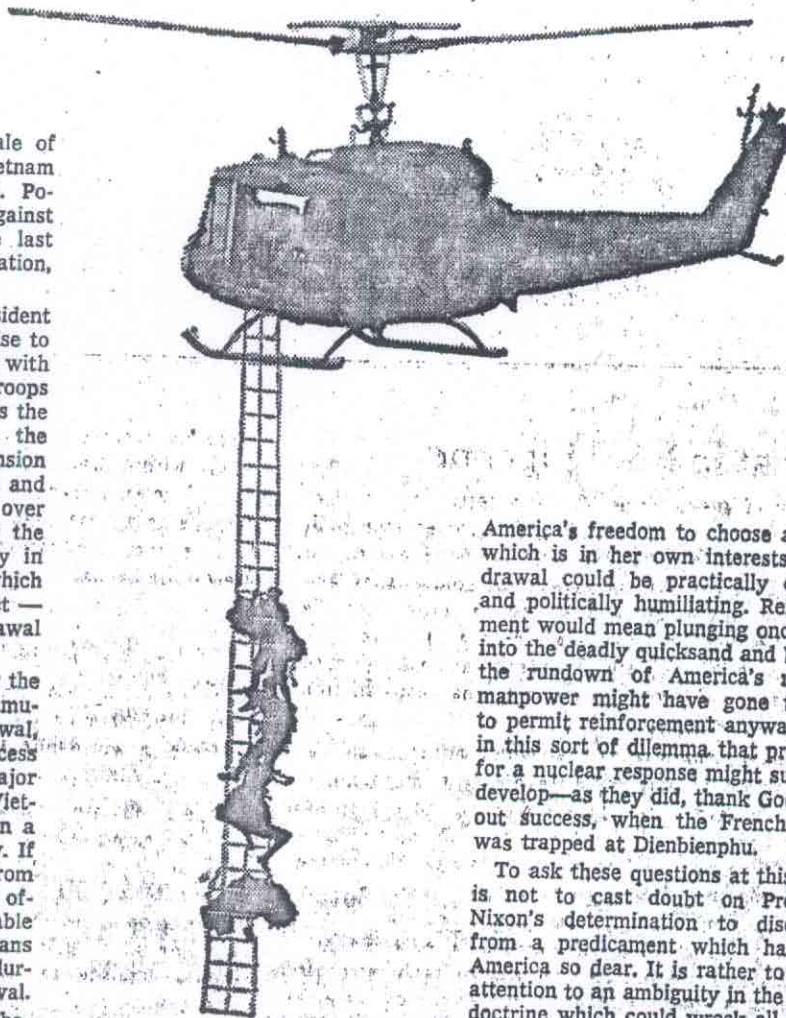
The extent to which the President has already carried out his promise to disengage from Vietnam, together with the fact that American ground troops have not been involved in Laos, is the main reason why criticism in the United States of this latest extension of the war has been so confused and muted compared with the outcry over Cambodia a year ago. Providing the Chinese do not intervene directly in the fighting — an assumption which cannot quite be safely made as yet — there is no reason why the withdrawal should not proceed as planned.

There may be many reasons for the comparative inaction of the Communists during the American withdrawal, but there is no doubt that the success of Vietnamization has been a major one. Of the two million South Vietnamese who carry arms more than a million are in the new model army. If it can prevent the Communists from establishing supply dumps for an offensive next year, it should be able at least to guarantee the Americans immunity from large-scale attack during the final stages of their withdrawal.

It is at this point that the doubts begin to gather. There is still a dangerous ambiguity about America's intentions after the Presidential election. Many observers in Washington believe that after all the rest have gone, the Administration plans to leave substantial bomber forces in Vietnam, together with enough troops to protect their bases—at least 50,000 men in all.

The heart sinks at this prospect. Nearly all America's greatest errors in the conduct of the Vietnam war have sprung from a gross exaggeration of the strategic and political effectiveness of air power. In spite of dropping more bombs than on Germany in World War II, the Air Force has reduced the volume of supplies reaching the Communists by only 20 per cent. But in so doing it has made tens of thousands of recruits for the Vietcong and millions of enemies for the United States. It has never yet had the slightest effect on the political will of the Communist leaders; but it has appalled America's friends throughout the world.

America would also run formidable political risks by leaving 50,000 men



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Should Other Powers Intervene If a New Crisis Arises?

on the ground in Vietnam after the main withdrawal. She would by then have lost control of the situation to the massive South Vietnamese Army. If that army chose to fight in Cambodia, Laos, or North Vietnam, how far would America be committed to support it? How would the American troops react if fighting broke out inside the South Vietnamese Army or if it proved incapable of resisting subversion in the cities?

No one can guarantee that in 1973 fighting will not once again break out in Vietnam on a major scale. The presence of 50,000 Americans will not be a deterrent, since more than ten times as many proved insufficient to win the war. But it could gravely limit

America's freedom to choose a policy which is in her own interests. Withdrawal could be practically difficult and politically humiliating. Reinforcement would mean plunging once more into the deadly quicksand and by then the 'rundown' of America's military manpower might have gone too far to permit reinforcement anyway. It is in this sort of dilemma that pressures for a nuclear response might suddenly develop—as they did, thank God without success, when the French Army was trapped at Dienbienphu.

To ask these questions at this stage is not to cast doubt on President Nixon's determination to disengage from a predicament which has cost America so dear. It is rather to direct attention to an ambiguity in the Nixon doctrine which could wreck all America's plans for relating her defense policy to her resources and to the realities of the 1970's.

The Laos operation has at least reminded the world of the dangers which may face it if the American withdrawal proceeds in a diplomatic vacuum and the military balance changes fundamentally in Indochina without any agreement among any of the parties about the political implications of the change.

Yet a consensus in favor of neutralizing all Southeast Asia is now developing. It includes men as diverse as the new Prime Minister of Malaysia, Abdul Razak, and President Johnson's main expert on Far East affairs, William H. Bundy. Would it be possible for Britain, perhaps together with France — a valuable precedent for Europe — to take the initiative in organizing a more comprehensive conference than so far envisaged, whose objective would be a political settlement in Indochina within the context of the 'neutralization' of Southeast Asia as a whole?

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