

'Commitment' Without Clout

President Nixon paid scant attention to the war in Vietnam in his State of the Union messages, perhaps because he genuinely believes he can make that interminable conflict a nonissue in the Presidential campaign. That is a most unlikely prospect if the President clings to the policy which he briefly reiterated in his written message.

The essence of that policy is to continue pursuing the old objective of securing an independent, friendly South Vietnam while reducing American military clout through the progressive withdrawal of United States ground forces, relying on indigenous forces in Vietnam and neighboring Cambodia and Laos to maintain the balance of power with the help of American air forces.

The Nixon policy is faulty in two fundamentals. The avowed "commitment" to the people of South Vietnam to give them "the chance to choose their own future" has lost any semblance of credibility after the farcical one-man Presidential election of last fall.

Beyond that, the means the President has chosen to pursue this elusive end are more clearly inadequate to the task. While Mr. Nixon spoke to Congress, allied positions were crumbling in Cambodia and Laos and the President's Ambassador in Saigon was warning of expected new enemy offensives in South Vietnam itself. In Indochina, the President is ignoring the sound doctrine he himself enunciated to Congress: "We make today only those commitments we are able and prepared to meet."

Mr. Nixon reaffirmed his "hope that we can end this tragic conflict through negotiation." That is the only way the Indochina war can be ended with some degree of honor for the United States and with safety for the residual forces and the prisoners of war still in Vietnam. If the war is to be eliminated as a national issue, the course for Mr. Nixon is to advance fresh proposals in Paris realistically geared to this country's true interests and capabilities in that tortured region.