

# The National Agony of Vietnam

## Washington

Richard Nixon's approach to foreign policy was underscored by his handling of the most important issue facing him when he assumed the presidency — the Vietnam war.

In 1969, the President ordered Henry Kissinger to undertake a major study of the options open to the United States. The conclusion was that the U.S. should build up Saigon's military force and at the same time begin to withdraw American forces from Southeast Asia.

More than 500,000 Americans were stationed in Vietnam when Mr. Nixon took office by the time the Vietnam agreement was signed, the American force had dwindled to less than 25,000.

Mr. Nixon coupled the decision to begin withdrawing from Vietnam with what became known as "the Nixon doctrine." Under this policy, the United States was to provide its allies with necessary arms and political support, but would not — except in extraordinary circumstances — use its own forces to fight other countries' battles.

But the effort to secure a Vietnam settlement took longer than the President and Kissinger expected. Secret talks between Kissinger and Le Duc Tho, Hanoi's chief negotiator, in Paris, seemed to be making progress in the summer of 1971. But they broke down, and did not resume seriously until after a major North Vietnamese drive into South Vietnam in the spring of 1972.

That offensive turned out in retrospect to have been a turning point in the war. It prompted Mr. Nixon to make several major decisions.

In May, 1972, on the eve of his visit to Moscow, he ordered the mining of Haiphong harbor, risking cancellation of his trip by the Russians. But Leonid Brezhnev, who had invested his reputation in better relations with the United States, did not postpone the visit. Nor did China seek to sever her new ties with the U.S.

These developments were believed to have influenced Hanoi's decision in the fall of 1972 to make its most conciliatory negotiating offer to Kissinger, the one that ultimately led to the settlement.

Mr. Nixon took maximum credit for the negotiations and Kissinger's statement only a week before the election that "peace is at hand" contributed to Mr. Nixon's landslide victory. Actually, the negotiations were to drag on into 1973.

This final phase was interrupted by a vast bombing effort against Hanoi and Haiphong — the first time the major cities were struck by B-52's.