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China and Vietnam

AT HOME ABROAD

By ANTHONY LEWIS

LONDON, Feb. 20. — President Nixon's visit to China, whatever else it may or may not do, marks the end of an illusory phase in American policy. Instead of applying a double standard to the People's Republic, we now admit to ourselves that it has legitimate national concerns and in any case is there to stay. In short, we have stopped fooling ourselves that we have the power to right the world's wrongs in Asia.

The contrast that cries out is with our policy in Vietnam. For Mr. Nixon and his advisers still evidently believe that the United States can impose its views in that part of Asia—that there we can fight history.

What is Mr. Nixon's Vietnam policy? Fundamentally, it is to maintain Nguyen Van Thieu in office in Saigon. The disclosures of the secret talks between Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho make emphatically clear that the United States would do nothing that really threatened Thieu. That is, the effect of a total American withdrawal was conditioned on [illegible] free [illegible] for the prisoners [illegible] with the Communists holding part would [illegible] Thieu [illegible] a month [illegible] leave his cohorts in [illegible] whose supposed fairness could not be [illegible].

Mr. Nixon and those who back his policy are trying these days to make American support for Thieu a moral issue. It would be dishonorable to abandon our commitments to a small and faithful ally, they say, and Senator Edmund Muskie was virtually treasonous to make the suggestion.

But the American obligation, whatever its limits, is to the people of South Vietnam. It is not to any particular politician, and certainly not one whom we effectively installed.

By now the effect of the American war on the people of Indochina is so familiar that the images have lost their impact. There are the four million pounds of bombs still being dropped daily, the forests destroyed by chemical agents so nearly that we now are worried about disposing of the surplus, the 100,000 casualties and refugees caused by American bombing every month.

Are we justified in doing all that to keep Nguyen Van Thieu in office? That is the real moral question.

Sooner or later, the United States will have to accept that North Vietnam is the strongest power in Indochina. To go on struggling against that reality to maintain an anti-Communist government in Saigon can be done only at an appalling cost to ourselves and to the Vietnamese.

The irony is that that kind of cost made sense at all, historically, only in terms of "containing China." Now that doctrine has been abandoned, Mr. Nixon's formula for perpetual war in Indochina is in fact inconsistent with his doctrine that America can no longer settle the fate of other nations.

The sad thing is that there might just have been a chance for the United States to get out with honor last summer — before the South Vietnamese election that Thieu [illegible] himself. At that time [illegible] indicated that Hanoi [illegible] a simple [illegible] prisoners [illegible] to American [illegible] never [illegible] have [illegible] Thieu as [illegible] But the [illegible] a failure [illegible] the election [illegible] That is clear [illegible]

With Chinese [illegible] Hanoi [illegible] to [illegible] military aid to Saigon. That [illegible] Bar we [illegible] pay [illegible] as part of [illegible] we have caused in Southeast Asia by our alien presence. For the alternative is much worse—to go on fighting indefinitely, to fight history, to forget the prisoners.

After all, Mr. Nixon knows that political commitments do not last longer than the reasons for them. After swearing undying support of Chiang Kai-shek for years, he has just said in his State of the World message: "The ultimate relationship between Taiwan and the mainland is not a matter for the United States to decide."

Some day some President will apply that wisdom to Indochina.