

Opiate of the Rulers

By Russell Baker

Henry Kissinger telephones in the night. He is exhausted from shuffling Chinese, Cypriotes, Arabs, Senators, Pakistanis, reporters, and now he has an overpowering urge to unwind on a little Vietnam.

"Don't touch it, Henry. You know what it does to you."

Just a little bit can't hurt him, can it? he asks. He has been off it now for more than two years, has kicked the habit. Now, surely, he is entitled to just a little bit of Vietnam.

"Not one drop, Henry. One drop leads to two and two leads to 550,000 soldiers, and before you know it you're seeing light at the end of the tunnel."

He says he already sees light at the end of the tunnel. It is a bad sign.

"How much have you had, Henry?"

Nothing, nothing at all, he insists.

"Stay right where you are, and whatever you do don't touch that elephant grass. I'll round up some other members of Vietnamics Anonymous and we'll come over and watch 'Casablanca' with you until the urge passes over."

When we arrive the State Department is in a mess. The détente is lying on the floor with a bad crack in it and there is a small fire in the trash can. It appears as if somebody has been burning an embassy. Henry himself is tilting badly toward Turkey.

"You've been on the Vietnam again, Henry. You promised you wouldn't touch it, but you did."

What are you nagging him for? he asks. So he did slip a little. So what? It was just a little. He can handle it.

"How much, Henry?"

Just a few hundred million dollars worth, he says. He would like to see the day when Henry Kissinger couldn't handle a trifling few hundred million dollars worth of Vietnam.

We maneuver him to the television set, get him seated and turn on "Casablanca." "Here's looking at you, kid," Bogart is saying to Bergman.

"A great line," somebody says.

Henry says it is a good line, but not in a class with his own line, "Peace is at hand."

"That is also a great line, Henry."

Henry rises. He wants the opportunity to deliver it again, he says, heading for the Central Highlands by way of the ancient imperial city of Hue.

"Play it, Sam," Bogart is saying as we stop Henry short of the Tonkin Gulf.

Henry says he can play it. He will send in some reconnaissance planes in the opening bars, then add an arpeggio of advisers and stuff General Thieu's piano with a surprise packet containing another \$500 million.

"You know what I want to hear,"

Bogart is saying. "Play it."

Henry begins to sing the old favorites, "We Have Turned the Corner" and "Bring Back That Coonskin To Me."

We congratulate him on his memory, and Henry says he loves the old diplomatic tunes best of all. He cannot understand why people prefer seeing "Casablanca" over and over to seeing reruns of Vietnam.

He is drowned out by a rousing performance of "La Marseillaise" led by Paul Henreid. Henry says it reminds him of the Paris peace talks. One of the best things about Vietnam was the Paris peace talks.

"Paris peace talks were all right for you," somebody says, "but what I liked were the captured enemy documents they used to compose at the American Embassy at Saigon to prove whatever the Administration wanted to believe."

We have all turned away from the television now and are drifting toward the Mekong delta. Somebody else says he always liked the way the body count showed that the entire population of Indochina had been killed, compelling the Americans to send more

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troops to stymie new offensives expected right after the monsoons.

I remark that my favorite scene is the one in which Maxwell Taylor, or Clark Clifford, or Robert McNamara makes a flying inspection tour and reports that we will be out of the woods by Christmas of 1984.

Henry says "Casablanca" would be improved if Conrad Veidt had a scene in which he has Bogart's saloon bombed and then explains that he had to destroy Bogart in order to save him.

We all agree. Heartily. Henry looks at us in that cunning way of his and, then, deciding that times are ripe for a change of policy, unlocks his desk drawer, takes out some elephant grass and offers it around.

We all nibble on it. "A few days of surgical bombing in Hanoi could bring the Communists to the negotiating table," somebody muses.

"Surgical bombing?" somebody else asks. "Why not bomb 'em back to the Stone Age?"

Henry says we shouldn't go so fast. It shows a lack of diplomatic know-how. He throws a few hundred million dollars toward the famous Iron Triangle, where it promptly vanishes. We all empty our wallets and throw more. It is like old times.

On the television set Bogart is holding a gun on Conrad Veidt. He looks as if he would rather turn it on us, but there is nothing he can do about it. Like us, he is imprisoned in an old script.