

U.S. Involvement in Vietnam

Cloudy U.S. Viet

Washington

Ever since the American intervention in Vietnam ended in "peace with honor" more than two years ago, there has been a nagging doubt that it could have ended so neatly, in a signed agreement, a few communique and three or four protocols.

The "hawks," those who were left in January, 1973, knew that the war for control of South Vietnam would continue. Many opponents of the war harbored darker suspicions that Henry Kissinger negotiated secret commitments of future American support to Saigon that could start the whole process all over again.

Those doubts and suspicions are now at a fever pitch, fed by the sober news from the war zone and nourished by declarations from the highest levels of the Ford administration.

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Kissinger himself started it more than a week ago when he exhorted Americans to show "the kind of people we are" in the growing crisis by "living up to a moral commitment" to keep Nguyen Van Thieu supplied with tanks, plans and guns.



Henry Kissinger and Hanoi's Le Duc Tho held secret meetings in Paris during the peace negotiations.

Yesterday, President Ford raised the emotional level of the debate to its highest pitch yet with his declaration that the whole American sacrifice in the war — the 55,000 dead, the many more unded — would be wasted if the "solemn commitments" to South Vietnam are not fulfilled.

The President has not asked to spell out precisely

what those commitments were, or how they were conveyed, but his words on the subject at his San Diego news conference were direct and unequivocal.

The public record on the question of U.S. commitment to Saigon is ambiguous. Only Wednesday, for instance, Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger was unable to say unequivocally that

'Commitment'

there was no unpublicised American commitment to send troops and planes back to Vietnam.

Kissinger, the main negotiator of the agreement with both Thieu and the North Vietnamese, declined yesterday to speak about the commitment issue. Instead, he called attention to his public account of the agreement Jan. 24, 1973, and it is there that the public record of the commitment begins.

Asked how Thieu was brought to accept the agreement, Kissinger made no direct mention of American aid. He said that the Communists, under provisions of the agreement they violated almost from the start, would be prevented from reinforcing or supplying their troops in a large scale. Then he added:

"President Thieu, after examining the totality of the agreement, came to the conclusion that it achieved the essential objectives of South Vietnam, of permitting his people to bring about self-determination and of not posing a security risk that he could not handle with the

forces that we have equipped and trained."

Asked about secret protocols or understandings, Kissinger replied: "The only protocols that exist are the protocols that have been made public . . . There are no secret understandings."

There matters rested for more than a year. But in March, 1974, in a letter addressed to questions put to him by Senator Edward M. Kennedy (Dem-Mass.), Kissinger made the first admission that a more open-ended aid commitment to Saigon had been made.

"The U.S. has no bilateral written commitment to the government of the Republic of Vietnam," Kissinger wrote. "However, as a signator of the Paris agreement . . . the United States committed itself to strengthening the conditions which made the cease-fire possible . . ."

With these commitments in mind, we continue to provide to the Republic of Vietnam the means necessary for its self-defense and for its economic viability."

That disclosure was a factor in the increasingly tough

Congressional attitude to Vietnam aid in 1974.

A movement began to dissociate Congress from any commitment Kissinger may have made, on the ground that no treaty was ever approved by Congress.

Then last week, Kissinger redefined the commitment anew. During the peace negotiations, he told a news conference, Thieu was assured as follows:

"If the South Vietnamese cooperated in permitting us to withdraw our forces and, therefore, to reclaim our prisoners, that in our judgment Congress would then vote the aid that would be necessary to sustain Vietnam economically and militarily."

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