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Secret Non-Commitment

Whether technically a "commitment" or technically "secret," the assurances which former President Nixon gave Saigon as the Paris Vietnam accords were being concluded obviously misled President Thieu into expecting more military support than the Administration could deliver. The shiftiness of the transaction is underscored by the Administration's subsequent reticence on the subject even as Congress was unwittingly voiding those assurances seven months later.

The White House may now be able to claim with technical accuracy that the substance of Mr. Nixon's exchanges with the South Vietnamese leader in January 1973 was reflected in public statements, though in contexts so different as to give vastly different significance to whatever promises were made. The texts of those exchanges are still not public, though a White House statement last week confirmed that Mr. Nixon had promised to "react vigorously to major violations of the Paris agreement." This looks like constituting a unilateral guarantee, made by the former President on his own authority, of United States military action to enforce an international agreement.

In August 1973, Congress imposed a statutory ban on all American combat engagement in Indochina, an action which the White House now says invalidated Mr. Nixon's promises. Perhaps the most telling point of the whole episode is that, opposed though he was to the Congressional ban, Mr. Nixon never saw fit during the debate on this measure to inform Congressional leaders of the assurances he had given and would thereafter be unable to fulfill.

In any case, this kind of obscure maneuvering constitutes no national "moral commitment," when the fact and precise extent of that alleged commitment was so deliberately withheld from Congress and the public.