

WXPost *The U.S.-Vietnam Relationship*

NOV 24 1975

AMERICAN POLICY TOWARD Vietnam has come full circle. From regarding that Asian land as a place where our very national destiny would be shaped, Washington has withdrawn to the view that we must first of all care for the welfare of the few American citizens who happen still to be there. This is a prudent policy; one wishes it had been adopted, say, a decade earlier. It also is showing some signs of success.

For months after the Communist triumph in April, the Vietnamese insisted they would not deal with the United States in any way until Washington acknowledged its aid commitment in the Paris accords of January, 1973. That commitment, however, was hedged on the "(anticipation) that this agreement will usher in an era of reconciliation." One government that signed it, Mr. Thieu's, no longer exists. Washington has, correctly, pronounced the agreement "dead"—dead as a basis for policy and dead in terms of public support for it. By releasing nine Americans (mostly missionaries) out of the 50-odd who stayed on after April, and by accepting 1,600 Vietnamese refugees back from Guam, Vietnam demonstrates in deed if not word that it thinks the Paris accords are dead, too.

The Ford administration, which had taken a rigid bargaining position, at once relaxed a bit and authorized some token private relief shipments by the American Friends Service Committee. Secretary of State Kissinger explained that there was "no obstacle to the principle of normalization" and that the United States was ready to reciprocate Vietnam's "gestures." Vietnam at once made its own response, inviting the House Select Com-

mittee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia to meet its representatives in Paris. This committee, set up last September under the chairmanship of Rep. G. V. Montgomery (D-Miss.), has a membership spanning the familiar spectrum of American opinion on Vietnam. It seems to have successfully conveyed to the Vietnamese, however, that on the particular issue of the 820 Americans officially listed as missing in action in Indochina, it speaks with a single voice. Mr. Montgomery is going to Paris with Mr. Kissinger's blessing—an all too rare example of congressional-executive collaboration on an important foreign policy matter.

Whatever their previous views, most Americans, we surmise, have lost their zest for engaging any of the issues still posed by Vietnam. Neither revenge nor guilt nor strategic purpose stirs more than small eddies. This makes it impossible for the Vietnamese to play on American divisions and passions, as they once did, for ends of their own. It makes it feasible, however, for a careful policy of normalization to be worked out with adequate public support. We think Vietnam would be foolish to expect a nickel's worth of American aid. But the Vietnamese still have political reasons of their own—offsetting the pressures they feel from China and Russia—to cultivate a relationship with the United States. In brief, they need us more than we need them. This is the reason one can hope the Vietnamese are coming to realize that they cannot treat the few Americans left in their country as hostages, and that all Americans share an interest in receiving what satisfaction is possible with respect to the MIAs.