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Nixon Pursuing Path Which Destroyed LBJ



WASHINGTON—There has been from the start something a little less than candid about the President's policy of Vietnamization, but as the days dwindle down toward a collision with Congress, Richard Nixon is being led further and further along the path which destroyed Lyndon Johnson. A policy of Vietnamization will require the President to engage in at least three major defeats: First, he will be increasingly led to portray the government of President Thieu as functioning, stable, possessed of the loyalty of its people and of democratic ideals.

Second, he will be increasingly forced to disguise the fact that the South Vietnamese army cannot leave the barn without U.S. air, artillery and logistic support. Thus we will read more and more about South Vietnamese attacks and air strokes as the President attempts to divert the attention of his countrymen from the fact that it is we who are conducting the war.

Third, and most important, as American troops come home but the war drags on, the President will have to find answers to the inevitable question of why he is continuing a war he does not believe Americans should fight.

This is the basic fallacy in the Vietnamization policy, even should that policy work to the point that the war could continue without any American casualties at all.

The fallacy — as well as the attempt to disguise it — was revealed last week when Henry Kissinger, the President's foreign policy adviser, explained to reporters the administration's fear that getting out of Vietnam altogether would bring about protest from Americans of the right and center who would feel humiliated and angry.

For a President who claims to represent the center, and whose policies have so far won broad approval from the right, this is a clear admission of incompetence. If the Nixon Administration can-

not sell the American right on its war policies without dissembling, we have come to a terrible pass.

One could understand an antiwar administration, coming into office in 1972, worried about the reaction of the American right. But if the government of Mr. Nixon, Spiro Agnew and John Mitchell must bend the truth in order to appease the hardhats, then this administration is indeed a pitifully helpless giant.

What the Kissinger argument about appeasing the rightwing really demonstrates is that Mr. Nixon, like Mr. Johnson before him, is trapped by his own rhetoric. In order to defend Vietnamization as an alternate route to "victory," the President must claim things about Vietnam and the Thieu-Ky government that are not true; indeed, their opposite are true.

As long as he portrays the war as a defense of the freedom of a gallant people, and as upholding the credibility of the United States in Asia, anyone who believes him will be angry if he then abandons the struggle. Kissinger must know that the rightwing does believe the President.

The historic role of a President is to lead, and if Mr. Nixon would tell Americans the truth about Vietnam he could lead right, left and center.

See Robert B. Semple Jr., NYTimes 6 Jul 70