



## Vietnamization Appears Morally Insupportable

WASHINGTON—The moral justification for waging war in Vietnam grows less and less clear, and this city, despite official shrugging of shoulders about the congressional discovery of Saigon's "tiger cages," is gloomier on the war than it has ever been. Even the evil of North Vietnam's treatment of American prisoners has lost a little of its bite. For what would we answer now to some North Vietnamese counterpart of H. Ross Perot, arriving with food parcels and requests for names? We could only answer that we Americans don't keep any prisoners, that we do not even count those we take but turn them over immediately to the South Vietnamese where some of them at least wind up in "tiger cages."

Officially, of course, the White House and the Pentagon are saying in effect "We didn't know about it, but then it's not our responsibility anyhow. It's Saigon's responsibility."

But it won't really wash. Those men chained to iron bars in 5-by-9 concrete pits, doused with lime dust when they beg for water, are prisoners, some of them at least, taken on the battlefield by American soldiers.

And they are housed in jails paid for by American taxpayers—\$2 million annually—supervised by an American official with the absurd title of "public safety director" who tried to deny to two inquisitive congressmen that the "tiger cages" existed.

It is essential in war to think of the enemy as evil and of "our" side as good. But as the American people have gradually discovered what "our" side is, the certainty so necessary to moral superiority has turned into a kind of shame—an aversion to the dream become nightmare.

That is why Vietnamization, which when Mr. Nixon first produced it seemed such a handy and even noble escape route, now appears as a terrible moral reminder, destined to haunt us and taunt us until reason destroys pride.

Take, for example, two items in last week's Vietnamization news. First, we announced an additional \$100 million for the South Vietnamese government as economic aid. But contrary to our usual policies in granting economic aid, this

was a gift outright—no strings.

We did not ask that the Saigon government mobilize its economy for the war, collect income taxes, control prices, wages and credit. We did not even suggest that it would improve Vice President Ky's reputation in this country if his take from the Saigon race track—estimated at between \$10,000 and \$15,000 weekly—were used to improve prison conditions rather than delivered to him personally.

But American officials who protested on the grounds that our taxpayers were being asked to do what the Vietnamese were not got their answer from Saigon's economic minister. He could not raise taxes, he said, because his government could not collect taxes in the countryside. Nothing could have made more of a shambles of the claim that Saigon now controls "over 80 per cent" of the countryside.

Or take another item. We are now committed to build 20,000 houses annually in Saigon—not for civilians but for the military population. This seemed excessive to Sen. Stuart Symington of Missouri, in whose city of St. Louis there were only 17 homes built in all of last year. And it must be counted on at least an irony that while mortgage money is almost impossible at home, American taxpayers should afford a housing boom for South Vietnam.

So while we are confronting the difficult moral proposition of supporting a war we don't want to fight ourselves, another moral proposition is bearing down upon us. It is called Vietnamization, and it more and more appears as a definition of support for that which is morally insupportable.