

Right the First Time

By ANTHONY LEWIS

"I renew my protest. I renew my request that our air force mechanics be withdrawn from Indochina. For the good they do, the risk is too great. . . . We are taking steps that lead our men directly into combat. . . ."
—Senator John C. Stennis, March 9, 1964.

LONDON, Jan. 29—For many months now, most Americans have thought that the time of difficult decisions was over for us in Indochina. The level of fighting and casualties was falling, the American military effort winding down, the withdrawal irreversibly under way. So we were told.

Cambodia has pricked that illusion. "You can't close the door" on greater American involvement, Senator Stennis said a few days ago: more Communist success in Cambodia might require expanded American military operations there. It was like coming in again on an old scenario. It was seven-teen years ago, or seven, at Marienbad. Senator Stennis does have the virtue of candor. After the price Lyndon Johnson paid for surreptitious involvement of his country in a war—public resentment that destroyed his author-

ity, as President—one would have expected any Administration to be wary of deception about our role in Indochina. We know now that, like the Bourbons, the Pentagon learns nothing and forgets nothing.

But the emerging facts about Cambodia—and Laos—should awake the American public to something much more important than the official compulsion to deceive: the hard choices are not finished in Indochina; President Nixon's policy has only obscured and delayed them.

Vietnamization has always been a policy with inconsistent objectives, one built on hope more than fact. The aims have been to withdraw from the war and at the same time win it. That hopeful end could only be attained with the cooperation of the other side, and there has never been any realistic ground for expecting them to cooperate.

When officials in Washington were asked six months ago what the President would do if the Communists did not let us withdraw and win at the same time, the answer was an uncertain shrug. Now events suggest the answer, and it is a disturbing one. While pulling ground forces out of Vietnam, Mr. Nixon is intensifying

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the American military effort by other means.

Air operations have been vastly increased in southern Laos, on the missile sites in North Vietnam and all over Cambodia. Now there are reports of American ground activity in Laos, and the suspicion that it is on the way in Cambodia. It is all explained as protecting our withdrawal, but in fact it is the familiar escalation of destruction that has been such a political disaster in the past.

Cambodia is an especially compelling, indeed poignant, appeal to our instinct to help. The people are resisting an external invasion by another race, without any of Vietnam's ambivalence of civil war. The Government seems genuinely to express popular feeling; it does not have that aroma of cynical corruption that hangs over Saigon.

But alas, it is too late to believe that American involvement in another Southeast Asian war can really help our friends or ourselves. That is the illusion we chased in Vietnam. The

results are a bombed and poisoned country, a shattered South Vietnamese society, a divided America.

The lesson of Vietnam, the one we must eventually understand, is that American military intervention in that area—among people remote from our history and institutions—can only be distorting. The balance that will eventually be struck in Indochina will reflect ancient relationships as much as contemporary ideology; no matter how much killing we do, we cannot affect it much.

It follows that we must face the painful decision that Vietnamization attempted to avoid. We must accept the necessity for a political settlement in Vietnam, not fool ourselves that we can impose a military one. We may show military progress here or there, but in the end only a political resolution will end the fighting and get us out.

Getting out should be the overwhelming objective of American policy, for our sake and that of the Indochinese. John Stennis might consider that young men will soon be drafted to fight in Vietnam who were not born when he warned against our involvement there. He was right the first time.