

# War and Peace

By ANTHONY LEWIS

LONDON, Feb. 14—Through the Johnson and Nixon Administrations, American policy in Indochina has focused almost entirely on military force. American troops are slowly withdrawing now, but the war goes on by other means: Vietnamization, expanded bombings, close air support by American planes over wider fronts. The official talk is still of punishing the enemy; it is the familiar talk of victory.

Those who criticize the reliance on military power argue that the alternative to ever more war is a political settlement. But what does that really mean? What political objective can we reasonably seek and hope to attain?

It is best to discuss such matters in practical terms. Ideological opposition to Communism, for example, does not determine policy in the real world. Any illusion that it does vanished with American indifference to the Soviet crushing of freedom in Hungary and Czechoslovakia—areas much closer historically to the United States than Indochina. We oppose Communism when, and to the extent that, the possible gains are seen to outweigh the risks.

Moralizing is equally out of place—especially in Indochina. For every village chief cruelly murdered by a Communist guerrilla, Americans pushing a button to drop napalm or modern anti-personnel devices have probably killed 100 innocent Vietnamese, Cambodians and Laotians. Even if there was only one Mylai, the balance of guilt lies with the wielders of abstract technological war.

A realistic analysis of the political possibilities should start with the assumption that, some day, Americans will have to stop fighting on the peninsula: not some but all, not just ground troops but Air Force. Or so one must hope. It is not easy to believe that any President would base his Indochina policy on perpetual American fighting.

That assumption, if it is correct, sharply limits the political terms available to us. For even after two years of Vietnamization, and with an extraordinary part of South Vietnam's population under arms, its forces are heavily dependent on American protection.

Thus Henry Brandon of The Sunday Times of London, in a Washington report reflecting White House thinking and doubtless that of Henry Kissinger specifically, takes an optimistic view of the Laos operation. But Brandon notes that American artillery, bombers and helicopter gunships protect the South Vietnamese in Laos, and he writes:

"The American military are confident that they can effectively keep the enemy at bay from the air and that, if it came to an encirclement, their helicopter flotilla could extricate the South Vietnamese."

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## AT HOME ABROAD

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There is no pretending that the Saigon Government is anything like self-sufficient. Accordingly, the political aim of current American military strategy is evidently to buy time. The hope is to push the North Vietnamese back at the perimeter and damage their supply lines enough so that South Vietnam will hold together, as we withdraw, at least through its election this fall and America's next year.

The trouble with that approach is that it is too narrowly opportunistic. For the sake of the Thieu-Ky Government in Saigon, it damages the hope of stability in Cambodia and Laos. However difficult the situation was in those countries, it becomes worse as we push out at the perimeter. The strategy buys time in Saigon at the cost of intensified killing in Cambodia and Laos; it offers no hope, ever, of political stability in the ravaged Indochinese peninsula.

In the longer view, the view beyond 1972 politics, political stability is our realistic objective in Indochina. We cannot determine the ideology—not even in Latin America, much less in Southeast Asia. We can rightfully hope only for Indochinese states at peace with one another and their neighbors and independent of Communist China.

Once we see that, we may accept what we have talked about but never become reconciled to—a new government in Saigon, one with some degree of Communist participation. That is hard lines for the United States after all that has happened, but it is not inconsistent with the idea of a stable, independent Indochina. Even under the strains of a terrible war, Hanoi has kept her distance from Peking.

Looking back, we can see how much better off the Indochinese and all of us would have been if the French had let Ho Chi Minh establish an independent Vietnam in 1945, or if the United States had let the 1954 Geneva agreement on a unified Vietnam be carried out at the price, as President Eisenhower assumed, of Ho winning the election that was never in fact held.

Dr. Kissinger is said to believe that military pressure can force the North Vietnamese into negotiating on our terms. But that is fantasy, not policy. They know that they will be there long after we are gone. Some day American policy will have to adjust itself to that reality. The way to do so is to commit ourselves to total withdrawal by a fixed time, leaving the Indochinese to work out their own balance—one too long and too bloodily delayed.