

# The End of the Affair—II

By ANTHONY LEWIS

In the Johnson Administration, people used to talk about "the nun gap" as a necessity in getting the United States out of Vietnam. By that they meant that there had to be a reasonable period of time between the American exit and the first Communist attack on a nun—in other words, the collapse of the anti-Communist Government in Saigon.

The Kissinger-Nixon rhetoric is less cynical; officials speak of the need for a "fire-break" of years between final American withdrawal and change in Saigon. But the political motivation is exactly the same: fear of a terrible right-wing reaction in this country if all our suffering in Vietnam turns out too quickly to have been in vain.

Unhappily for the President, as he prepares to tell the country about the next phase of his policy, pressures of another kind are mounting. He must recognize that they are limiting his ability to assure what will follow an American withdrawal.

There is, first, the moral revulsion here at unending death and destruction in Indochina, discussed in a previous column. The patience of the American people, the willingness to play any part at all in the killing, is visibly shrinking.

The other fact of life is that Mr. Nixon's technique for gaining time, Vietnamization, is now seen to have limited possibilities. That is the lesson of the incursion into Laos.

Circumstantial reports after the Laos operation pictured those South Vietnamese units that actually engaged the enemy as demoralized. Even taking the official version as gospel, it is clear that the South Vietnamese were badly hurt despite the immense air support provided by the United States. Unless the President and his advisers have

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shielded themselves from reality altogether, therefore, they know that there is no foreseeable time when the Saigon forces can be expected to carry the whole military burden themselves.

The logical conclusion from all this would be to change our policy. It would be to recognize that the United States cannot determine the future in South Vietnam, given the moral and military limits on what we are prepared to do. It would be to adopt a single overriding objective of American policy: to get out.

That change of policy would be accomplished by the President setting a fixed date for withdrawal of all U.S. forces, air as well as ground. The mere announcement of a date would make the politicians in Saigon begin to adjust to the reality of the power balance in Indochina; it would point toward political settlement and an end to the fighting.

A commitment to total withdrawal should also open the way to negotiation with the enemy on the matters of particular human interest to Americans. The Communist delegations in Paris have indicated that there could be arrangements for withdrawal of American forces without further harassment and death if the commitment were made. And the chances for a negotiated release of the prisoners would also improve.

This entire view of how American policy could change depends on the judgment that this country has no security interest in Indochina worth what it is costing in lives there and national torment at home. The extraordinary public reaction to the Calley verdict suggests that most Americans

have reached that judgment. But has Richard Nixon?

The President has a long history of fundamental belief in America's role as a bulwark against Communism everywhere—and specifically in Indochina. Moreover, because he failed to liquidate our involvement there when he took office two years ago, he now has on his conscience all those lives that make it difficult for any leader to change policy.

For those reasons it is quite possible that Mr. Nixon will resist the logic of the battlefield and of the American conscience. It is possible that he will continue to fudge the timing and nature of our withdrawal, offering Saigon the hope of continued reliance on U.S. air power. It is even possible, given his penchant for sudden displays of "strength," that the President will try to gain more military time by massive new bombing attacks on North Vietnam or some similar aggressive tactic.

In making the choice now, the President and his advisers have to recognize that they will have much to answer for in history. To use weapons of mass destruction in the belief that they will make a legitimate cause prevail is one thing. To use them when this country has no belief in the cause or in its prospect of prevailing—and in doing so to kill and wound and make homeless record numbers of Indochinese civilians—is no better than shooting infants at Mylai.

There is no partisan politics, as some Republicans have charged, in hoping that President Nixon will decide to end all American military involvement in Indochina. It was one of his most fervent supporters who said the other day that he prayed the President would resist those familiar voices from Saigon and listen to his country.