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Thieu and Diem...

The chances for total withdrawal of American combat forces from Vietnam in the foreseeable future and for a negotiated settlement that would insure a speedy return of American prisoners of war have been set back by pronouncements in Saigon and Washington this week.

In Saigon, a confident President Thieu made clear his intention to go through with his one-man election charade Oct. 3. He vowed to make no concessions to the other side, virtually ruling out meaningful peace talks in Paris before there is a military showdown. The South Vietnamese leader indicated that he expects to be supported by at least 50,000 American troops through 1973 and by American air power "for many more years."

Commenting on the Vietnam situation in Washington, President Nixon said nothing to discourage Mr. Thieu's overweening expectations. The President rejected Congressional suggestions that American aid to Saigon be cut off because of the election farce, although President Thieu's increasingly dictatorial posture is clearly contrary to Mr. Nixon's own earlier stated goal of assuring the South Vietnamese people the right to determine their own future. President Nixon said the American involvement would continue until "South Vietnam [is] able to defend itself against a Communist takeover."

That is a prescription for unending involvement. The Nixon decision to continue supporting President Thieu politically and militarily amounts to a rejection of the promising peace proposals put forward by the National Liberation Front last July. In effect, the President has reaffirmed the tragic commitment of his predecessors to defend with American lives an anti-Communist regime lacking the political and military strength to defend itself.

As justification for his refusal to use the leverage of American aid to try to alter President Thieu's arbitrary policies, Mr. Nixon said: "I would remind all concerned that the way we got into Vietnam was through overthrowing Diem and the complicity in the murder of Diem. . . ." The analogy is a poor one; what is being suggested now is not forceable overthrow but free popular choice. In one respect, however, ominous parallels do exist between events today in South Vietnam and those that preceded Ngo Dinh Diem's death.

Then as now, Washington failed to employ the legitimate leverage of generous aid to insist on political reforms in Saigon that could rally all non-Communist forces around the Government. Has Mr. Nixon forgotten that by the time Diem was overthrown by a group of Vietnamese officers, the political and military situation throughout South Vietnam had become a shambles largely as a result of his harsh and arbitrary rule?

Currently, signs of similar deterioration emerge in the revival of overt political opposition by the powerful Au Quang Buddhists, the rise in terrorist incidents in Saigon and elsewhere throughout the country, and the strong resistance of Communist forces in the Mekong Delta.

The mistake United States officials made in 1963, both before and after Diem, was in believing that the road to peace in Vietnam lay in a Saigon leadership that would press for military victory, spurning any opportunity for political compromise. President Nixon appears committed to pursuing the same disastrous policy today.

...and Mansfield Amendment

The new indications of prolonged American involvement in Vietnam make especially disappointing the Senate's decisive rejection of a chance to restore the Mansfield amendment to its version of the Selective Service Act. The amendment calling for withdrawal of all American forces from Indochina within nine months is not dead, however. It received strong affirmative support when the Senate first voted on the draft act last July. It should receive even stronger backing when Mr. Mansfield reintroduces it as an amendment to the military procurement bill, as he has indicated he will do.

Given the present clear mood of the Senate, we believe the Selective Service Act and the significant reforms in conscription procedures and policies it does contain should now be adopted. There is no justification for the filibuster that some Senators are threatening, especially since the President has pledged his support for separate legislation on the pay reforms that were also omitted from the House-approved version of the draft bill and from the conference report.