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Thieu and the delusion we can play God in Vietnam

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LONDON — There is wonderful irony in the belief, now being expressed on all sides, that the United States can have peace in Vietnam if only it acts despite the objections of Nguyen Van Thieu. For American independence of Saigon has always been a prerequisite of any negotiated settlement.

Four years ago, after their intense experience in the negotiations, Averell Harriman and Cyrus Vance saw that Thieu was a major obstacle to peace. From the Defense Department, Clark Clifford and Paul Warnke urged a military and political course not tied to Thieu's preservation.

Advice ignored

But the Nixon Administration ignored that advice. Year after year it tied the "honor" of the United States more closely to the survival of Thieu, allowing him to use his dependence as a device to obtain ever more American aid and destruction on his behalf. Most crucially, Washington let the chance for peaceful political change in Saigon go in 1971 when Thieu arranged his unopposed reelection as president.

According to reports, Henry Kissinger is pained now to find Saigon's objections threatening the terms he has so arduously worked out with Le Duc Tho. Another irony. Is it conceivable that Kissinger, of

Anthony Lewis

all people, underestimated the stubbornness of Nguyen Van Thieu?

Price of success

If the U.S. was serious about the negotiations, confrontation with Thieu was always certain to be a price of success. That was so for one exceptionally simple reason: He did not want a compromise settlement. He wanted victory.

Thieu made no secret of his aims. He said the problem of South Vietnam would not really be solved unless the Communists gave up or were all killed or captured. He killed or imprisoned thousands of suspected Communists and non-Communist critics of his regime. Newsweek estimates that there are now 145,000 political prisoners in South Vietnam, the equivalent in population terms of 1.7 million in the U.S. Thieu is not a man of what Americans would call the moderate center.

The present impasse in agreement on the draft terms negotiated by the U.S. and North Vietnam is said to turn on Thieu's insistence that the text recognize the government's legal sovereignty over all of South Vietnam. That is just another way of saying that he wants to settle for nothing less than victory.

Fundamental issue

Sovereignty has of course been the fundamental issue in the war all along.

Saigon claimed that it was the legitimate government of an independent country, defending itself against invasion. The other side, noting that the Geneva agreement of 1954 explicitly treated all of Vietnam as one country, argued that it was the true representative of indigenous Vietnamese forces.

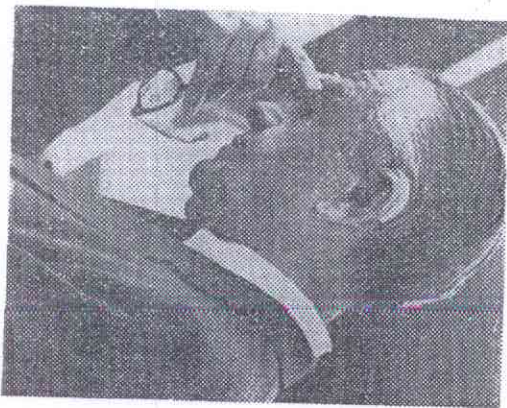
No peace could ever be negotiated in Vietnam unless it carefully obscured that fundamental issue and allowed each side to claim some satisfaction. Henry Kissinger, understanding that as well as anyone, has sought all along to avoid the lawyer's trap of seeking a delusive certainty.

Kissinger's central purpose in these long negotiations has been to extract the U.S. from the responsibility that it was our tragic mistake to assume a decade ago—the responsibility of allotting political power in South Vietnam. With every day of delay over the peace terms now, the achievement of that purpose is at risk.

Intention mocked

Every day that there is no peace, American bombs continue to fall, mocking our declared intention to let the contending parties work out the political future of South Vietnam. During the most recent session of the Kissinger-Tho talks, U.S. planes dropped an average of nearly four tons of explosives every minute, night and day.

There is a further danger: That Thieu



Averell Harriman
Recognized the obstacle

will extract from the American government, as the price of a grudging agreement to peace, some further political commitment to protect his government. With that we should be on the road to repeating the precise mistake that led the U.S. into the moral and political disaster of its role in Vietnam.

With every bomb and every moment of delay in peace at Thieu's behest, we continue the delusion that we can play God in Vietnam.

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