

'At Hand' + 365

A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

We are coming up on the anniversary of the Paris cease-fire agreements, a birthday worth celebrating because this leukemic child of international diplomacy may not be with us a year hence. Gen. Thieu, democracy's standard-bearer in Southeast Asia, announced on Jan. 4 that, "As far as the armed services are concerned I can tell you the war has re-started." In other words, he has denounced the central proposition of the Paris accords, which is that both sides would foresake a military resolution of their struggle in favor of a political one.

Less than a week later the world had learned that Thieu's people had begun large-scale bombing of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese positions. As always these acts were described as defensive, as necessary to forestall an offensive by the other side. To date the other side has not attempted an offensive, but it takes no great analytical brain to figure out that some day it will, if Saigon feels it can break the cease-fire agreements merely by imputing the intention to do so to its opponents.

In reply many will say that Thieu is entitled to respond to many cease-fire violations on the part of his enemies throughout the whole year. That can't be convincingly denied. However, it would be a mistake to think that Saigon, after showing saintly patience for a year, has been forced to step up the level of the

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fighting. Both sides have broken the terms of the agreement. We are more aware of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese violations because it has been difficult for our newsmen to report on Saigon's infractions.

Nevertheless, violations by Thieu's armies have been reported starting a year ago with a Wall Street Journal dispatch about an attack against An Hoa; a Baltimore Sun description of air strikes on Tay Ninh; a Dallas Morning News story about an artillery barrage against Cua Viet, and so on and so forth through all of 1973 adding up to scores of incidents. If Americans think it's only the Communists who are breaking rules, it is either because they are blanking out what they don't want to know or because Saigon and Washington are at great pains to depict the other side as villains.

None of this would matter except to the dead, wounded and homeless if South Vietnam was moving toward a political resolution of the differences which divide the country—if the fighting were dying out as the decision-making was being transferred to the mechanisms envisaged in the Paris agreements.

That is not happening. Saigon has refused to have anything to do with the setting-up of the National Council of Reconciliation and Concord that was, according to the deal signed with such empty solemnity, to oversee elections in South Vietnam. By April of last year Thieu was already saying North Vietnamese troops would have to be withdrawn from the South before there could be elections, thereby attaching a new condition not included in the Paris agreements. By the year's end the hope of elections in which all factions could take part vanished with Thieu's December statement that "I assert that there will be no general election, and I am sure peace is not coming . . ."

The Paris agreements understood that there are three major political elements in Vietnam—Thieu and his people, the Reds, and everybody else, the plague-on-both-your-houses people who get lumped under the designation of neutralists. They are being wiped out. In the course of the year an election was held for the Vietnamese Senate, the only governmental body left that is not under the General's control. Although the opposition found it couldn't get a slate on the ballot, 92 per cent of the electorate still turned out to ratify the foregone conclusion because, The New York Times reported, people "come to the polls to get their election cards stamped; an unstamped election card can mean trouble with the police." So much for the neutrals not yet in Thieu's jails.

From a selfish point of view, neither Vietnam's non-democracy nor the shredding of the Paris agreements should cause us greater anguish than the state of self-government in Chile or China, except that in Saigon it was the means for our exit. Now with the piece-by-piece abrogation of the Paris Agreements, we are setting ourselves up for a reprise of what happened after the 1954 Geneva accords, when one of Thieu's predecessor American stooges renounced the commitment to have general elections then.

Twenty years ago when the Vietnamese communists were blocked out of the political process they went to war; they will go to war for the same reasons now. Then Thieu will get his much-predicted offensive and we, with our Indo-Chinese obsessional neurosis, will get it with them.