

One Year After the Paris Accord

By Frances FitzGerald

CAMBRIDGE, Mass.—A year ago yesterday the United States signed the Paris Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam. Since then the number of combat deaths in Vietnam has reached far above 50,000, or to about the level it reached in 1966, an "average" year in the war. Only the circumstances of these deaths has changed.

Whereas a year ago Vietnamese were dying in military operations, they are dying today in cease-fire violations. According to Richard M. Nixon they are dying not to win the war but to win the peace in South Vietnam. From these facts many might draw the conclusion that the peace agreement accomplished nothing, that it changed nothing in the history of the Vietnam war. They would be wrong.

Last Christmas was the first in twelve years that the United States was not bombing Indochina or maintaining American ground troops in Vietnam. Furthermore, the other events in Vietnam this last year did not duplicate those of the year before. They were repetitions of events much further back in history.

Take any recent news reports—President Nguyen Van Thieu declares he will not hold a national election as the peace accord specifies, tracts given to South Vietnamese peasants revert to former landlords, military-intelligence analysts fear foe will cut country in half. You will not find a similar report since 1956 or 1964. It is just that there is a certain symmetry to the war, a symmetry that extends beyond the period of American troop engagement to the beginning of the American intervention in Vietnam.

The United States has been actively engaged in a war against Communism in Indochina since 1950. As the history books for American children unborn at the time now show, the policy has been perfectly consistent; only the means have changed. In 1950-54 the Eisenhower Administration paid up to 80 per cent of the French colonial war. After the French defeat, the Administration created and financed a regime in South Vietnam that would contravene the Geneva Accords by refusing to hold national elections and by building an army to compete with that in the North.

When the southern guerrillas came near to defeating this regime on their own, the United States introduced counterinsurgency teams and helicopter squadrons; in 1964, just after Congressional passage of the Tonkin Gulf resolution, the United States began to bomb North Vietnam and a few months later to send regular American forces in to the South. Four years later, in the wake of the Tet offensive, Lyndon B. Johnson ended the troop build-up; he did not, however, change the policy of pursuing the war in Vietnam.

For Mr. Johnson, and later Mr. Nixon, the means became known as Vietnamization—the slow withdrawal of American troops combined with a further build-up of the Saigon Government's Army and the increased use of American firepower. The period of American withdrawal ended with the peace agreement; it took four and a half years to accomplish, or slightly longer than the build-up, and in the first three years of the Nixon Administration it cost the lives of 20,000 Americans and some half a million Vietnamese.

Since then the Nixon Administration has been carrying on the war in the traditional way, by proxy. Last year it spent \$3 billion in support of a military regime that resists any form of political settlement as specified in the peace accords.

The history books for children recount most of this story, but they do not answer the question of why the United States pursued this policy for so long. As the intelligence documents in the Pentagon Papers show, neither Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy nor Mr. Johnson could have had any confidence of winning the war with the measures they were using.

In 1961, for example, Robert S. McNamara, then Secretary of Defense,

questioned the value of sending a token American force to Vietnam, warning, "We would be almost certain to get increasingly mired down in an inconclusive struggle." A few months later the Kennedy Administration sent just such a token force and publicly predicted success for it, suggesting that no further measures would be necessary.

In his analysis of the Pentagon Papers, in an essay called "The Quagmire Myth and the Stalemate Machine," Daniel Ellsberg addresses the question of why three Administrations concealed their most realistic estimates and continued to step up the war on that basis. His answer, to put it briefly, is that even though all three Presidents strongly suspected that the war could not be won, they also strongly suspected they could not politically survive the "loss" of Saigon or a land war in Asia during their Administrations. Their solution, therefore, was to maintain the stalemate as cheaply as possible while hoping for a miracle. And if the miracle did not occur, they could pass the problem on to their successors. Mr. Johnson's misfortune was that he occupied the White House at a time when the guerrilla war had reached such a peak that he could not maintain the Government in Saigon without committing American troops. Mr. Nixon, by contrast, came to the Presidency after the crisis had passed.

The Ellsberg theory is, I think, sound. But today we have no need of theory in order to predict the future course of the war under a Nixon Presidency. Mr. Nixon has already made that course perfectly clear by his actions in Indochina over the last six years. Elected at the height of the peace movement and over Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey whose Administration had been discredited by the war, Mr. Nixon had the option of disavowing the Johnson war policy and making peace in Vietnam. He did not do so. Instead, he chose to maintain the stalemate at a price far higher than any other President had paid.

tion may well require the renewal of American bombing in the South. What he has done is to bring the United States full circle to the same moment of decision in which the Tonkin Gulf resolution was passed in 1964.

One difference is that now the war is a decade older, and three countries have been partly destroyed. The other difference is that because the American public will not permit the reintroduction of American ground troops, Mr. Nixon and his advisers know precisely what the final outcome will be. They support the war in perfect cynicism. After the visit to Peking they have no ideological pretext, much less a justification for that support. Over the last six years about a million Indochinese have died for the prestige of two men. A lot more will die if the American public continues to pay the war no more attention than it did in 1964.

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Militarily the cost included the invasion of Cambodia and the beginning of a destructive, long-term war in that country, the invasion of Laos, the secret bombing of North Vietnam and Cambodia, the mining of North Vietnamese harbors and inland waterways and the terror bombing of Hanoi in Christmas, 1972. But these actions were only the most spectacular of his military measures. Equally important was the sustained bombing of three countries, the destruction of two or three national economies, the uprooting of several million Indochinese and the building of an army that, statistically speaking, drafts all able-bodied South Vietnamese men for the duration of the war.

These measures, taken before the cease-fire, have had an important impact on the military situation in Vietnam, but they have not meant victory for the United States. In the Paris agreement the United States had to accept what it refused to acknowledge in the Geneva Accords of 1954: the principle of unity and territorial integrity of all of Vietnam and the presence of North Vietnamese troops in the South.

Mr. Nixon's measures have not insured a stable situation—a permanent stalemate, as it were—because the Saigon Government, while larger than before, remains what it always was: a parasite that lives on what one Frenchman called *la densité de la pourriture* (the density of corruption). President Thieu's control over South Vietnamese (even in the absence of the Northern troops) rests on his ability to maintain American aid at a level at which he can keep the majority of the population in the army, the jails, the cities and the refugee camps. While American military and Central Intelligence Agency analysts predict a North Vietnamese offensive and propose more military aid for Saigon, President Thieu is actively trying to realize that prediction and that aid by calling for an invasion of North Vietnamese and Provisional Revolutionary Government base areas in the South.

What Mr. Nixon has done is to create a stalemate that may last until the end of his term and whose preserva-