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Through A Looking Glass

By Anthony Lewis

BOSTON, Jan. 29—Anyone aware of what American leaders said on our way into Vietnam must have a sense, these days, of reliving the past. But it is not the pleasurable nostalgia of Proust. For what is familiar is the self-deception, the confusion of objectives.

"We cannot turn our backs on these embattled countries," President Ford has just said. "U.S. unwillingness to provide assistance to allies fighting for their lives would seriously affect our credibility throughout the world. And this credibility is essential to our national security."

Credibility. Nine years ago the late John T. McNaughton, Assistant Secretary of Defense, said in a secret memorandum that our objective in Vietnam was not "to save a friend" but "to avoid humiliation" ourselves. Before his death he well knew how we had damaged ourselves in that false pursuit. Can anyone still believe that hanging on in Indochina has enhanced the world's belief in American strength and our ability to use it wisely?

National security. If we had allowed political events to take their own course in Indochina years ago, would Americans today have less or more faith in their national security leaders? Would we have been able to deal less or more effectively with our central security concerns, in the Middle East and elsewhere?

Secretary of State Kissinger said the other day that "the overwhelming objective" of the United States in the truce agreement of 1973 was not to

For a generation, American policy has been based on the illusion that some outside force—arms, advisers, bombs, men—can remake the politics of Indochina in our image. Always, there has been the belief in "victory." Some examples follow, many of them drawn from a useful little book, "Quotations Vietnam," compiled by William G. Effros.

"The enemy has been defeated at every turn."—Gen. William C. Westmoreland, 1968.

"It looks very good. The other side is near collapse. In my opinion, victory is very near. . . . I'll show you the charts. The charts are very good."—Walt W. Rostow, National Security Adviser to President Johnson, 1967.

"It can be said now that the defeat of the Communist forces in South Vietnam is inevitable. The only question is, how soon?"—Richard Nixon, 1967.

"The tide of battle has turned."—Vice President Hubert Humphrey, 1966.

"The Vietcong are going to collapse within weeks. Not months but weeks."—Walt W. Rostow, 1965.

"The corner definitely has been turned toward victory in Vietnam."—Arthur Sylvester, Assistant Secretary of Defense, 1963.

"Every quantitative measure we have shows we're winning the war."—Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense, 1962.

"The French are going to win. It is a fight that is going to be finished with our help."—Adm. Arthur W. Radford, chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1954.

"There is no question that the Communist menace in French Indochina has been stopped."—Gen. J. Lawton Collins, Army Chief of Staff, 1951.

All along that path of illusion and death, there were points at which American interests—to say nothing of the people of Indochina—would have been served by letting go.

Suppose that in 1945 President Truman had refused to help the French re-enter Vietnam, or that after 1954 we had respected the Geneva agreement's ban on outside intervention. The most likely eventual result would have been a nationalist-Communist government in Vietnam independent of China and the Soviet Union and generally helpful to stability. As late as 1963 North Vietnam was ready to settle for a separate, nonaligned but non-Communist South. But the American Government said no and went on pursuing the mirage of military victory.

Madmen now are planting bombs in order, they say, to change American policy in Indochina. But the way to change an unreasoning policy is by reason—and there is no shortage of that if Congress resists manipulation and fear.

In a television interview the other night an NBC reporter asked President Ford, "How much longer and how deep does our commitment go to the South Vietnamese?" The President said:

"I don't think that there is any long-term commitment. As a matter of fact, the American ambassador there, Graham Martin . . . thinks that if adequate dollars which are translated into arms and economic aid—if that was made available, that within two or three years the South Vietnamese would be over the hump. . . ."

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end our role but only "to disengage American military forces from Indochina and to return our prisoners."

If the objective had been so limited, it could have been achieved years before 1973. But of course, it was not so limited. The aim was officially described as "peace with honor." That meant withdrawal of U.S. forces while maintaining a client government in Saigon. It meant, in short, winning: at last stopping the political process that began in Vietnam in 1945.