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Who Lost Vietnam?

By Anthony Lewis

BOSTON, Feb. 2 — In arguing for continued American involvement in Vietnam, Henry Kissinger for years has stressed the need to avoid political trauma in this country. If the Saigon Government fell after what we had spent in lives and money, he warned, there could be a terrible right-wing reaction in the United States.

Mr. Kissinger has sounded that theme gravely in private since he came to Washington. It has also surfaced occasionally in public. A Nixon speech of Nov. 3, 1969, that he helped to draft warned that "precipitous withdrawal" from Vietnam could lead to "remorse and recrimination" among Americans. The concern seemed natural enough in one who had known the horror of German recrimination at the loss of a war.

Now, however, a curious thing is happening. The warning of a possible right-wing reaction is becoming a threat to create one.

That was the unmistakable message as the Administration last week started its campaign for more aid to Indochina. The words were carefully orchestrated to imply the threat: If a Democratic Congress refuses to increase aid and Saigon falls, the Democrats will be blamed for "losing Vietnam." First President Ford formally requested \$522 million more in arms for South Vietnam and Cambodia. He told Congressional leaders, according to his press secretary: "If the money is not put up, and if in six months there is a disaster, it would be a very traumatic experience for the American people."

Then Nelson Rockefeller took up the theme. He used his first big political speech as Vice President, to a Republican dinner in New Jersey, to warn that "the fate of South Vietnam is at stake." He said the United States had

a commitment to Saigon "a moral obligation negotiated by the Secretary of State, which the Congress authorized." There has in fact been no such Congressional action.

Mr. Rockefeller told reporters that Congress would be responsible if it did not vote the additional aid and the Saigon regime collapsed. Then he said:

"If we don't, if the Communists take over and one million people are killed—they are going to be liquidated—I think we ought to know where the responsibility lies."

The crude tone of Mr. Rockefeller's statement evokes memories of one of the ugliest and most damaging episodes in our recent political history. That was the effort to blame individual Americans for "losing China" to the Communists.

It began with a series of articles by Joseph Alsop, in the Saturday Evening Post in 1950. They were called "Why We Lost China," and they argued that U. S. Foreign Service officers biased against Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist regime and toward the Communists had helped undermine the Nationalists.

The charge of wrong policy was converted by Joe McCarthy and others into one of "treason." Before long the State Department had been purged of those who knew anything about China. For two decades American policy toward China was paralyzed by political fear and ignorance, with tragic consequences for us and for Asia.

Henry Kissinger knows as well as anyone the price the United States paid for that shameful adventure in political scapegoating. The greatest single achievement of his six years in office has been the opening to China. He knows that the movement of events in China leading to the People's Republic was beyond the effective control of Americans, and that we only hurt ourselves by pretending otherwise for twenty years.

It would be grotesque irony, therefore, if Mr. Kissinger let his old talk of right-wing recrimination over Vietnam be perverted into a campaign to threaten Congress. That he had an influential role in the first shots of the aid campaign last week is difficult to doubt; the ideas bore his stamp.

In truth, there is no present sign of extremist political danger over Vietnam. Of course Americans will care about what happens there, and they should. But an overwhelming majority now rejects the notion of a permanent United States responsibility for the politics of Saigon. We cannot "lose" Vietnam any more than China, and most Americans know that.

In any event, given Mr. Kissinger's view of history, his role should be to minimize rather than exacerbate domestic divisions over the issue. That there should be even the beginning of scare tactics is a sign of how far the irrational obsession with Vietnam has gone.

The scare tactics, if they continue, will put a particular responsibility on one Democrat. Senator Henry M. Jackson of Washington has such a reputation as an advocate of American military strength that he is invulnerable to charges of softness on Vietnam. He has already indicated deepening doubts about endless aid to Saigon, and he is in a crucial position to help his party resist the pressures of fear.