

Mr. Kissinger's War: I

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By Anthony Lewis

WASHINGTON—A letter from Saigon: The writer says he is amazed at the American debate on aid to Vietnam. The argument seems to be all about war, he says—about arms to help President Thieu fight the Communists for years more. Does no one in America think of politics instead of war? Does no one realize that even "rightists" in South Vietnam now want Thieu out of office so a deal can be negotiated with the Communists and the fighting ended?

"Why isn't Kissinger doing anything toward a political solution?" he asks. "Is this his 'decent interval'—a useless massacre?"

There is a short answer to those anguished questions. American policy focuses on war in Vietnam, and feeds it, because Henry Kissinger would rather have war than any visible political alternative. That is why the policy is to sustain President Thieu in his intransigent, increasingly isolated resistance to any political accommodation.

It is a surprising and a serious thing to say: that an American Secretary of State is deliberately holding back a process that might lead to the end of a gruesome war. But the evidence is there. Exploring it throws some light on why Mr. Kissinger, against logic and the odds, is pressing for additional military aid to Saigon.

The peace agreement signed in Paris two years ago called for a new phase of politics in South Vietnam. It promised political rights to all parties, freedom of movement between the military zones, release of political prisoners and the establishment of a national council of reconciliation. The idea of all that was to open up a process—a process of political competition and accommodation instead of war.

But President Thieu prevented that process from starting. He prohibited movement between zones, reclassified political prisoners as common criminals to keep them in jail and effectively banned all parties but his own. He not only refused to carry out the terms of the Paris agreement; he made it a crime to publish them in South Vietnam. And at the moment the ceasefire was to come into effect, he launched aggressive military operations.

In all this General Thieu needed at least tacit American support, and he got it. There was no criticism from Washington of his military offensive, which relied on \$1 billion in new U.S. arms rushed over before the truce, or of his refusal to carry out the Paris agreement's provisions.

Just the other day General Thieu told Peter Kann of The Wall Street Journal that since the signing in Paris the United States had never put any

pressure on him to make political concessions to the Communists—that is, to carry out the peace terms. The reason is plain. Secretary Kissinger, like Mr. Thieu, is uncertain where a political process might lead once it starts. He prefers the devil he knows in Vietnam: war.

But lately, the strategy of military aggressiveness and political intransigence has unraveled. The tide of battle has shifted, and inevitably doubts have grown in South Vietnam about the wisdom of relying on war instead of politics.

Communist military successes have brought angry American talks about a massive offensive by North Vietnam. Given the failure to say anything about Saigon's actions after the truce,

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that outcry is almost comic in its hypocrisy. But it is also factually doubtful. So far, at least, the Communists' campaign seems limited in aim. They say their purpose is pressure to carry out the Paris agreement, and that could be the case.

In South Vietnam, many former Thieu supporters have now turned against him. A Catholic movement leads the criticism. The militantly anti-Communist Cao Dai sect, with two million members, has called for negotiations and reconciliation with the Communists. Even right-wing newspapers criticized Mr. Thieu as an obstacle to peace—until he closed them.

The political setting explains the mystery of Mr. Kissinger's demand for \$300 million more in military aid now. The Pentagon is having difficulty justifying that figure; privately, defense officials say the object is not so much military as "psychological." In short, the aim is to demonstrate the American commitment to Nguyen Van Thieu.

For that purpose, any amount that gets through Congress will serve. Just \$75 million, say, would enable Mr. Thieu to tell doubters that he still has America's support. Any amount would be a symbol of American willingness to go on with the policy of war, not politics—go on, as General Fred C. Weyand, the Army Chief of Staff, had the candor to say, for another five to ten years.

"Do American policy-makers have no concern for the Vietnamese people?" the letter from Saigon asks. In the case of Henry Kissinger, the answer is certainly no. He has no affection for Nguyen Van Thieu either. Why, then, is he so determined to keep Mr. Thieu in power and to block any movement toward political accommodation in Saigon? The answer to that lies beyond Vietnam.

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