

Myth And Reality

By Anthony Lewis

BOSTON, Mar. 23—One of the poisons that ate away at Weimar Germany was the myth that a "stab in the back" by politicians at home had beaten the German army in World War I. An effort is now underway to plant a similar myth about Vietnam. Saigon is losing, Secretary of Defense Schlesinger put it, because the U. S. Congress has been "niggardly" in giving aid.

Niggardly! Imagine using such a word after all the United States has done and suffered for Saigon: \$150-billion over a dozen years, 55,000 American lives. The accusation would be funny if it were not so nasty.

A compelling factual answer to the charge is a report just made by Congressman Paul McCloskey, Republican of California. On the basis of official figures and briefings during his recent visit to Vietnam, Mr. McCloskey compared the opposing military forces. These were some of his main points:

1. As of Jan. 1, according to the Pentagon, Saigon had "an approximate

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3-to-1 advantage" over the other side in numbers of soldiers. (More North Vietnamese have entered the fighting since then, but Saigon's forces remain much larger, as always.)

2. In the fiscal years 1973-75, roughly the period since the Paris cease-fire agreement, Saigon has had \$3.98 billion in military aid from the United States, North Vietnam \$1.48 billion from China and the Soviet Union.

3. In the fighting since the cease-fire Saigon has had a "firepower superiority ratio" of 7-to-1. That is, munitions have been fired in that proportion. And that does not count Saigon's air force.

If one looks back before the 1973 agreement, the disproportion between the two sides is even more extreme. Americans fought in Vietnam for eight years, as many as 500,000 at a time, no Chinese or Russian soldier ever did. American planes dropped immense tonnages of bombs and napalm and defoliants; the other side dropped none.

When Saigon cannot hold its own despite such overwhelming advantages over so many years, something fundamental must be wrong. Mr. McCloskey

said the other side, "outgunned" and "outnumbered," was evidently superior in "aggressiveness, will and sense of purpose." Others would put it that the United States has been trying to do an impossible thing in South Vietnam: create a country in our image from people of another culture.

If all the past help has not won for Saigon, how is it possible to believe that three more years of military aid, as the Administration wants, will make the difference? The military solution has been tried endlessly and failed. The choice is either to go on down that road—until children are starving in Danang as they are now in Phom Penh—or else at last to work for a political settlement.

The Administration says the time is not ripe for political talks because Saigon must negotiate "from strength." When Saigon was stronger, it opposed political compromise. In any event, how can it gain strength from more years of a policy that has failed? As military aid proves useless except to prolong the killing, the old logic would call for American bombs and troops again. But Gerald Ford is President now, not Richard Nixon.

The tactic of blaming Congress for Vietnamese realities is running up against the fortitude of such men as Republican Senators Mathias and Hatfield, Democrats Stevenson and Mansfield. But Congress can make only a broad choice: between ending aid, a painful course, and going on with it, which will be more painful. The Executive has the more delicate opportunity: to go to the South Vietnamese, and the Cambodians, and tell them that the time has come to make the best deal possible and end the shooting.

Secretary of State Kissinger deserves sympathy for the breakdown of his mission in the Middle East. But talking about Indochina while there, he sounded like Pontius Pilate. There was nothing more he could do, he said; he would never have negotiated the 1973 agreement if he had known that Congress would not supply military aid as requested.

Mr. Kissinger made the 1973 agreement because he had to. It was politically imperative to get the American troops out of Vietnam, and those were the only terms available. He knew full well that the terms settled nothing except American withdrawal. Nor was there any guarantee of particular U.S. aid for Saigon—unless it was a secret promise to President Thieu.

American policy in Indochina has done damage that can never be undone: death, destruction, loss of American reputation and influence. But Henry Kissinger could still try to save something from the wreckage—some last humanity and honor. Will he? Or will he prefer to let all go down in a bloody finale, and blame Congress for a stab in the back?