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Whose Commitment?

By Tom Wicker

Secretary of State Kissinger has added his voice to those who would have us believe the "domino" theory that the collapse of South Vietnam would endanger American positions throughout the world. But Mr. Kissinger went further.

Not only is Congress, in its reluctance to grant more military aid to South Vietnam, risking the domino effect, he told a news conference. It is also ignoring a "moral commitment" he and President Nixon made in working out the Paris accords of 1973. Therefore, the question is not just that of South Vietnam's survival as an independent, non-Communist country; the question also is "what kind of a people we are."

Mr. Kissinger's implication is clear—that if Congress does not honor the claimed "moral commitment" Americans will be shown to be a perfidious kind of people.

Aside from the egregious insult offered by Mr. Kissinger to the American people, whose financial and blood sacrifices for South Vietnam have been immense, the whole idea of a moral commitment stemming from the 1973 accords has to be questioned. Mr. Kissinger negotiated that agreement in secret; American promises he might have made were not embodied in any document requiring ratification by Congress; and neither he nor Mr. Nixon had the right or the authority to make "moral commitments" about which the American people knew nothing.

Gerald Ford, for example, was House minority leader at the time of the Paris accords. But long after he became President in August, 1974, he was saying privately that he did not know what promises Mr. Kissinger might have made at Paris, or in securing South Vietnamese acquiescence to the accords, or whether any such promises were in writing. However skillful Mr. Kissinger may be at secret negotiations, he cannot elevate that kind of diplomacy into "moral commitments" by the American people.

What, moreover, do Mr. Kissinger and Mr. Ford offer? They apparently suggest that a three-year extension of more military aid would satisfy the great moral commitment, stultify the effects of the domino theory, preserve the American reputation for standing by an ally, and—in Mr. Kissinger's view—give South Vietnam at least a chance to become self-sustaining.

There is no reason to suppose that a three-year extension—even at the incredible level of \$2 billion annually that the Administration has proposed—would do any of those things. It

could not satisfy a moral commitment to sustain South Vietnam if at the end of three years that unhappy country still could not defend itself. If the domino theory means anything now, it would mean as much three years from now. And if the United States is bidden by history to stand by any ally, no matter how dubious, at all costs and in all circumstances, lest no one ever again accept the American word, why would the United States not be as obligated three years in the future as it is claimed to be in 1975? Finally, if anyone really believes that three more years of any kind of aid, at any level, might make South Vietnam self-sustaining, he has not been in this world but in some other for the past fifteen years.

So the three-year limitation, it is a safe bet, would prove to be no such thing. If Congress accepts that proposition now, and if it results in South

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Vietnam struggling along as an independent entity for three more years, it is as certain as anything can be that this Administration, if re-elected, or some other if it is as mesmerized by Indochina as the last four, will be back for still another round of aid—and talking once again of dominoes and moral commitments.

In fact, if the history of this fruitless war is any guide, it suggests that in three years, at any conceivable level of American military aid, South Vietnam will not be better but worse off. What kind of "moral commitment" is it for Gerald Ford and Henry Kissinger to urge Congress to fund a war for what they describe as American objectives, when it is the Vietnamese people who will pay the real price in blood and destruction?

It would be far better to twist Mr. Thieu's arm, as Mr. Kissinger did not hesitate to twist it at the time of the Paris accords in 1973, to enter into real peace negotiations with Hanoi now, while something is left to negotiate. But there is not much chance that Mr. Kissinger and Mr. Ford will do that.

"The only lesson that our politicians seem to have learned from the 1947-1952 China trauma," John Paton Davies recently wrote the editor of The New York Times, "is that a Communist takeover in an East Asian country can be politically disastrous for American politicians." So they ignore, willfully or otherwise, "the far more important China lesson... that the United States cannot make good serious deficiencies of leadership and collective will in a foreign country"—not with troops, not with money.