

The Self-Domino

By Anthony Lewis

"I have believed ever since I came to Washington that it is overwhelmingly in our national interest to put the debate on Indochina behind us." So said the man whose policy has kept the issue of Indochina before us for six more years.

Henry Kissinger's press conference last week must have troubled his supporters. It was the performance of a man so wounded by failure that in the course of blaming others he would exaggerate the damage to his country. It was a self-destructive performance.

Governments, like rational individuals, ordinarily try to minimize, not maximize, their losses. They do not go around crying: "Look at the terrible defeat we have caused! Look how unreliable we are!" But that is the way that Mr. Kissinger has reacted to the crumbling of South Vietnam's military position.

While in the Middle East, he broadcast his view that events in Indochina showed how allies could not count

ABROAD AT HOME

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on the United States. Was that meant to encourage the Israelis to exchange territory for political assurances?

Then, at the press conference after his return, Mr. Kissinger spoke of America "destroying" South Vietnam by withholding aid. That, he said, would have a "cataclysmic" or "very dangerous impact on the United States' position in the world."

The facts belie such talk. The United States has not caused Saigon's soldiers to cut and run. Nguyen Van Thieu, not we, appointed the corrupt officers who ran the Saigon army's command structure. President Thieu took the disastrous decision to withdraw without warning, pell-mell, from much of the country. His soldiers, not ours, are deserting and shooting their way out to refugee planes.

What is happening in Vietnam today is the collapse of a myth—the myth of an independent, flourishing, nationalist South Vietnam with the will to fight for itself. It is a case not of America "destroying a country" but of reality destroying an illusion.

Ten years ago Lyndon Johnson took the disastrous decision to make Vietnam a test of American strength. That was a bad enough idea then. To go on with it now, after all that has happened—to invite the world to judge us by Indochina—looks like lunacy.

There was a chance, six years ago, to "put the debate on Indochina behind us." It was to make the settlement then that we eventually did in 1973: the withdrawal of our forces in exchange for American prisoners.

But President Nixon and Mr. Kissinger insisted on more. They wanted to assure the survival of the Thieu government in Saigon—for a "decent interval" that apparently, in their minds, ran at least until Jan. 20, 1977. To achieve that objective they widened the war into Cambodia, lost thousands more Americans and hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese lives and bombed all of Indochina.

That policy failed. All the death and destruction could not make a myth real. Is it possible for anyone to believe that any imaginable amount of American aid, over three years or whatever, will now create a viable anti-Communist country in the southern part of Vietnam?

At this point there is one great American responsibility in South Vietnam. That is to help feed and care for the millions—on both sides of the political line—whose homes and families and lives have been wrecked by this terrible war. That is the cataclysm we should be worrying about. That is the real test of our dignity and decency as a country.

Instead of focusing on the desperate need for food and medicine, Americans still argue about military questions that are being overtaken by events. We have the spectral scene of one more American general visiting Saigon. And Henry Kissinger tells us that the answer is more military aid: voted annually, if he has his preference, with "no terminal date."

"The cumulative effect of nearly a decade of domestic upheaval is beginning to take its toll," on American foreign policy, Mr. Kissinger told the reporters in a grave voice. He referred to Vietnam and Watergate. But in this country people have the right to change things they do not like and they meant to change Vietnam and Watergate. It is not possible to conduct a foreign policy independent of such public views, and it should not be.

What came through at that press conference was Mr. Kissinger's impatience with democracy. He plainly would have been happier as chancellor to an absolute monarch, though even they do not always stick inflexibly to failed policies. King Pyrrhus would have been ideal.