

# Vietnam: The Shell Game Goes On, and On

PRESIDENT FORD is making a grave mistake, in our view, by continuing to invent commitments to South Vietnam that never existed in fact and then blaming the Democratic Congress for not having fulfilled them. In doing so he does enormous violence to the truth and to public confidence in the government's word. Worse, he greatly diminishes the chances of working out a bipartisan and constructive approach to the serious foreign policy problems that will confront him in some part as a consequence of the tragedy now unfolding in Indochina. And still worse than that, he is trifling with the deep sensibilities of the survivors of the 55,000 American dead when he suggests that their sacrifice will have been "unwarranted" if what now seems inevitable in Indochina does in fact happen and the long U.S. effort there is seen clearly to have failed.

For a time during yesterday's news conference the President seemed to be moving toward a realistic assessment of the causes for the sudden and disastrous collapse of the Saigon government's forces over the past few weeks. He stressed the "unilateral" nature of President Thieu's decision to evacuate the central highlands and said that this had "created a chaotic situation in Vietnam that appears to have brought about tremendous disorganization." When asked about the reliability of this country as an ally, he avoided an immediate answer and chose instead to point quite properly to the fact that the North Vietnamese "repeatedly and in massive efforts" violated the Paris peace accords. "I still believe that the United States, *in this case*, and in other cases is a reliable ally." Believing this, how could Mr. Ford in any logic, or with any sense of restraint and responsibility, proceed to belabor Congress for failing to provide the wherewithal for South Vietnam's defense?

Well, to be fair about it, the President took pains not to blame Congress himself. Instead, he achieved precisely the same political purpose by inviting his listeners and the American public to make their own judgment based on the "facts." And the facts that he considered to be most relevant turned out to be Congress' reduction in the amount of military aid it was prepared to vote for South Vietnam over the past two years. This, the President said, constituted a default on an American "promise," made "with the signing of the Paris peace accords," to replace South Vietnamese losses of military hardware

on a one-for-one basis. But there was no such "promise." What the President was referring to was a provision which merely "permitted" such replacement.

The true facts of the matter are that, whatever the U.S. government may have told the South Vietnamese, it did not tell the Congress or the American public that it had made any promises of this sort. Still less did it tell the Congress or the public that the availability of American military aid on a continuing, open-ended basis was an integral and essential element in the peace accords. On the contrary, while hailing "peace with honor," President Nixon mentioned only in passing that "we shall continue to aid South Vietnam within the terms of the agreement." And neither he nor Dr. Kissinger made any mention of yet another element which is now being pictured as important—the "potential," as Mr. Ford put it, of the United States to return to the use of bombing and perhaps other military force to deter North Vietnamese violations.

What the administration seems to be arguing is that the possibility of open-ended military aid and the potential re-entry of American forces were in fact crucial to enforcement of the Paris accords as they were drawn and that this was our clear understanding with the South Vietnamese at the time. From this comes the judgment that the Congress made the cease-fire unsustainable and the defense of the South Vietnamese impossible by cutting back aid and passing the 1973 War Powers Act which strictly limited the administration's ability to hold up the threat of more forceful action against the North. And the best that can be said for that judgment is that it could only have some measure of validity if the Nixon administration had told Congress what kind of "peace" it really had negotiated. Instead, Mr. Nixon was congratulating himself for averting a settlement that "would have ended the war for us but continued it for the 50 million people of Indochina."

Mr. Nixon, in short, did not level with the public then; in the hoariest tradition of the American government's Vietnam performance he engaged instead in the familiar shell game with Congress and the public that helped get us into the war. And now, in his efforts to transfer the blame for the misfortunes of Cambodia and South Vietnam to the Congress, President Ford is confounding his own hopes for some measure of bipartisan cooperation in foreign policy by falling into the same old game.