

OBSERVER

By Russell Baker

WASHINGTON, — Henry, very important at the State Department, was weeping when I arrived for our interview. I withdrew discreetly, embarrassed by those powerful tears, but he pursued me. "Ask me why I am weeping," he commanded. I did.

"I am weeping because our allies will no longer have confidence in us," he said. "Vietnam proves that the United States is not a reliable ally because it will not do enough to help its friends."

"But, Henry, surely it proves just the opposite."

"Don't talk like an imbecile."

"We gave them \$150 billion, Henry. Was that an act of bad faith?"

"Not entirely," he said.

"We sent them an American army of more than 500,000 men and lost 56,555 of our men in combat for them."

"I'm not saying we didn't."

"We kept our Army fighting out there for them twice as long as we fought in World War II."

"Of course we did," Henry sobbed.

"And to support that Army we ran budget deficits that started us on the road to one of the worst inflations in our history, but we were willing to do it because they were our allies and we wanted to stay reliable."

"That much was very decent of us," he agreed.

"We built and trained an army of their own for them and gave them guns, tanks, planes, cannon, trucks, helmets, rifles, bullets, khaki uniforms, metal helmets and PX commissaries."

"Tell me something I don't know," said Henry.

"At home we let the country stew in bitterness, division and animosity as bad as anything we've had since the Civil War, and we let it happen because we were determined to honor our commitment."

"I'm not complaining about that."

"We had to throw out a President in order to keep faith with our Asian ally, but we did it."

"Lyndon Johnson," said Henry, "made a great sacrifice for the commitment."

"And then we elected Nixon to bring us together and give our Asian ally peace with honor, and we spent four years waiting for him to do it."

"It wasn't too much for an ally to expect of America," said Henry.

"To keep faith with our ally, we forced many young Americans to break from their families and live in exile, and even pursued them with policemen to punish them for not upholding America's reputation for reliability as an ally."

"That was then."

"We let other young Americans sit caged for years in North Vietnamese prisons, sometimes being tortured, and all to show that we would not break in our resolution to keep our commitment."

"Those were brave young men."

"We blockaded Haiphong harbor and bombed Hanoi, which cost us considerable losses in our Strategic Air Command bomber force. We moved peasants from their villages into armed camps to prevent their subversion by enemy forces. We defoliated large parts of the country, even though it brought us into bad repute among a lot of our other allies abroad, and we did it because we were resolute about honoring our commitment."

"Well?"

"We made war on a neutral country in violation of the Constitution, and we knew it was not a completely good thing to do, but we sat still for it because we were the kind of people who mean it when we say we will honor our commitments."

"I know all about Cambodia," said Henry, "but it has nothing to do with the present case."

"Be reasonable, Henry. You can't just shrug off the \$150 billion, the longest war in American history, the 500,000 man American Army, the 56,000 dead and all that bombing, defoliating, and blockading. As good allies, we were willing to turn out a President, violate our own laws and see our prisoners tortured, our families broken, our economy weakened, our world reputation damaged and our country deeply divided, rather than refuse to honor our commitment. Doesn't all that count for something, Henry?"

"Sure," sobbed Henry, "but what have we done for them lately?"