

A Voice From Virginia

By Anthony Lewis

BOSTON, April 9—I had a telephone call the other day from a man with the deep soft voice of tidewater Virginia.

"We lost our only son in Vietnam in 1968," he said.

There was a pause after the pain of that beginning. Then he said he was deeply worried at the attempts to assign blame in America for what had happened in South Vietnam—to blame Congress for the collapse of the Saigon Army.

"The memory of those who gave their lives in Vietnam deserves better than that," he said. "We are not responsible for the collapse. It would be terrible if we added recrimination over that to everything else in this country. We must stop it.

"I was a cold warrior. But when my son died, I tried to find out why. I went back to the university; I didn't work for two years. I learned that we never belonged in Vietnam. And I learned years ago that the ARVN [the Saigon Army] would never fight. I learned that by talking to Americans who had been in combat in Vietnam.

"Don't mention my name," he said. "I've had enough self-pity. I don't want pity from anyone else. I just wish I could do something—tell people—to stop the recrimination."

The conclusions reached by the gentleman from Virginia as he searched for his own answers to tragedy would not all be accepted by all Americans, of course. But I think it would be hard for any political leader to talk with him and then go on playing the politics of recrimination over Vietnam.

Years ago Alastair Buchan, the distinguished British scholar of international security affairs, warned that the United States would be severely tested when the day of reckoning in Viet-

nam finally came—when indigenous strength told, that is, and the Communist side prevailed. As that happens, now, we can see that the event will indeed measure our political maturity. National character is tested most profoundly in reaction to adversity.

In our system the President bears a heavy responsibility for leading the country through times of frustration and remorse. President Ford's leadership, in the weeks since South Vietnam began unraveling, has had a curiously ambivalent quality.

Mr. Ford's words have been on the whole unhelpful. While saying he would not blame Congress for the debacle, he has slyly invited the public to do so.

One of the oddest things was a statement by Mr. Ford at his press conference of April 3. "We promised with the signing of the Paris peace accords," he said, "that we would make military hardware available to the South Vietnamese Government on a replacement, one-for-one basis. Unfortunately we did not carry out that promise."

But there was no such promise in any published document or statement at the time of the peace accords in 1973. Secretary of State Rogers was asked at a Senate hearing on Feb. 21, 1973, "Have we given any commitment to the South Vietnamese regarding future levels of assistance?" He answered: "No." And on March 25, 1974, Henry Kissinger wrote to Senator Edward Kennedy that "the U.S. has no bilateral commitment" to Saigon.

Thus Mr. Ford's remark had to be either a mistake or a reference to some secret "promise." In either case, it invited another round of bitterness over Executive deception and secrecy in regard to Vietnam. That has quickly begun, with Senator Jackson's charge of secret undertakings and the lame White House response that there were some "private assurances" to President Thieu—but that the gist became public. Was there a "promise"? What exactly did it say?

But the President's actions have been in contrast to his misconceived words. The important thing is what he has not done. He has not sent American bombers back over Indochina or taken any other step to reinvolve this country directly in the war.

In that respect Gerald Ford makes a difference—a great and salutary difference. If the team of Nixon and Kissinger was still making U.S. policy, judging by the record of 1969-74, would have been some aggressive American military action by now, whatever the law says. (An act of Aug. 15, 1973, prohibits any U.S. military action in or over Indochina. When Congress later passed the vaguer War Powers Act, Secretary of State Kissinger asked lawyers whether it could be read as overriding the strict 1973 ban—and allowing some quick action if necessary in Indochina.)

For President Ford to accept the failure of policies he long supported as a Congressman cannot be easy, especially when he is surrounded by men who helped make those policies. It cannot be easy for Americans generally to recover from the illusions most of us had about Vietnam. But if the gentleman from Virginia finds it in him to forswear recrimination, it should be possible for the rest of us.