

WHEN HENRY KISSINGER gave the official briefing on the occasion of the announcement of the Vietnam peace accords on Jan. 25, 1973, he was asked quite specifically whether there were any secret protocols or understandings, and he replied categorically: "There are no secret understandings." He was also asked directly whether the United States "will ever again send troops into Vietnam if the peace treaty is violated," and he answered that he didn't "want to speculate on hypothetical situations that I don't expect to arise." He was also asked specifically "what is now the extent and the nature of the American commitment to South Vietnam?" and his answer was:

"The United States, as the President said [a day earlier in his announcement of the accords], will continue economic aid to South Vietnam. It will continue that military aid which is permitted by the agreement. The United States is prepared to gear that military aid to the actions of other countries and not to treat it as an end in itself and the United States expects all countries to live up to the provisions of the agreements."

That, as far as we can make out by reading back over the record of that momentous day, is the gist of what Dr. Kissinger had to say on the critical issues of continued military aid and the likelihood of the re-introduction of American forces in the war. In his announcement a day earlier, President Nixon had even less to say on both counts. He proclaimed that "the people of South Vietnam have been guaranteed the right to determine their own future without outside interference." He did note that "we shall continue to aid South Vietnam within the terms of the agreement"—which permitted one-for-one replacement of arms destroyed, damaged or worn out—and "we shall support efforts for the people of South Vietnam to settle their problems peacefully among themselves." And he hailed the Paris agreement in these words:

"The important thing was not to talk about peace but to get peace and to get the right kind of peace. This we have done. Now that we have achieved an honorable agreement, let us be proud that America did not settle for a peace that would have betrayed our allies, that would have abandoned our prisoners of war or that would have ended the war for us but would have continued the war for the 50 million people of Indochina."

Well, American prisoners of war were returned and

American troops were removed. And that is about all you can now say for Mr. Nixon's "peace" or for the "guarantee" that was given the South Vietnamese that they could "determine their own future without outside interference." Or that was all you could say until yesterday, when the White House finally got around to acknowledging what this guarantee consisted of. What it apparently consisted of was a "secret agreement," if you prefer Sen. Jackson's phrase, or a collection of "private exchanges" between Mr. Nixon and President Thieu, if you prefer Ron Nessen's formulation, under which the Nixon administration took upon itself the right to assure the Saigon government that this country would go on indefinitely supporting South Vietnam with military as well as economic aid and would react "vigorously" to any North Vietnamese violation of the cease-fire. Mr. Nessen gave assurances that "in substance, the private exchanges do not differ from what was stated publicly."

Not having reviewed every word of the public record in the intervening years, we cannot be sure on this point. But if Mr. Nessen is talking about what was said publicly at the time, and with direct reference to the peace accords, he is of course quite wrong. As you can see for yourself from the citations already noted, nothing was said about a "vigorous" American reaction to cease-fire violations—by which the Nixon administration, we would surmise, was referring to a return to bombing—and every possible effort was made to project the impression of an airtight cease-fire, which would require only minor replacement of worn out armaments, rather than any sustained and heavy military aid. In no way that we can recall was Congress given any reason to suspect what now appears to have been the truth: that Saigon's signature on the cease-fire was obtained only by open-ended promises of military aid and a continuing "potential," as President Ford put it the other day, for reapplication of American force as a deterrent against violations of the cease-fire by Hanoi.

Secretary Kissinger would now have us believe that all this was somehow implicit, in the context of public discussion at the time. "These agreements were negotiated on the assumption that . . . the United States would continue economic and military aid to South Vietnam—and also that there would be some possibility of enforcing the agreements," he said the other day. And he added: "This is the basic problem with the policy in Vietnam." Inadvertently, we suspect, the Secretary is



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*Le Duc Tho and Henry Kissinger at Paris peace talks.*

dead right. The basic problem with our policy in Vietnam from the very beginning was not that the Congress or the public refused to accept the right assumptions, which is what we suppose Secretary Kissinger was suggesting, but that the Executive Branch in five administrations acted on its own assumptions and saw no need to confide them to Congress or the public until after the fact.

First economic aid was promised, then military aid was pledged, when economic aid did not suffice; then came the advisers to help the South Vietnamese handle their new weapons; then the advisers, with permission to shoot if shot at, were sent out on combat missions in order to train the South Vietnamese; then came the combat troops and the bombing and the surprise "incursion" of Cambodia and the plunge into Laos, and finally these private promises to President Thieu of a return to military aid and American intervention if the cease-fire were violated.

At each and every important step along the way, the pledge or the commitment or the involvement was made secretly or without advance consultation, on the assumption that, once it was made, Congress would have to honor it. That was "the basic problem with the policy in Vietnam," or one of them. And President Ford could do himself, and the future conduct of this country's foreign policy, no greater service in his address to Congress tonight than to show some awareness that international undertakings cannot effectively be handled in this manner in a free society.