

In Pursuit Of Folly

By Anthony Lewis

To the end, Vietnam retains its mysterious capacity to bring out the worst in American leaders: to distort their vision and paralyze their judgment. It is a phenomenon that historians will have to try to explain.

The American people in overwhelming number, and Congress with them, have learned the lessons of folly. They know now that intervention in South-

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east Asia was a mistake from the beginning. They know that the idea of building a nation on the American model in South Vietnam was a delusion. They know that it did not work and that no amount of arms or dollars or blood could ever make it work.

But the President and the Secretary of State have learned nothing. As their policy crumbles, they go on with their fantasies and their inventions. They tell us that more of what brought disaster will work. They praise the Saigon and Phnom Penh leaders who have turned out to be not only corrupt but inept. Solemnly calling for unity in this country, and no recrimination, they play the politics of blame and division.

"I wish to express my admiration for the Cambodian government leaders," President Ford said as the Lon Nol regime fell, adding an expression of "compassion" for the people of Cambodia.

Admiration! For politicians who fattened on American aid as their people starved. For military officers who made their soldiers pay for the rice sent by the United States—or supplied no food, so that some were reduced to cannibalism. For officials who forced United Nations relief agencies to pay \$100,000 for the privilege of flying in powdered milk for starving Cambodian children. For a government that, even as it fell, was arranging to have a New York bank pay \$1 million to Lon Nol out of a Cambodian account.

Compassion! The word should burn in the mouths of American leaders after what we did to Cambodia. We dragged a peaceful country into a useless, devastating war—for our purposes. The Cambodian Ambassador in Washington, Um Sim, summed it up in poignant words:

"You took advantage of us, of our inexperience. As you are much cleverer than we are, you could induce us into this fighting. . . . If the United States had respected our neutrality, then the fighting, the killing and things might not have happened. . . ."

As to Vietnam, in the teeth of the evidence Mr. Ford goes on saying that more aid would have made the difference—or still could. Secretary of State Kissinger says darkly: "We shall not forget who supplied the arms which North Vietnam used to make a mockery of its signature on the Paris accords."

That piece of bombast was presumably meant to make the gullible think that China and the Soviet Union sent more arms to North Vietnam than we did to the South. But that was never so in the long history of the war, and has not been since the 1973 Paris agreement. C.I.A. figures show that China and the U.S.S.R. cut their military aid in half after the truce. Nor was there any Communist equivalent of the \$1 billion in arms that we rushed to Saigon just before the truce.

"The United States did not carry out its commitment in the supplying of military hardware," President Ford said last week. That echoed his previous claim that we had "promised" to replace all of Saigon's arms losses.

But there was no "promise" or "commitment" of the only kind that can bind this country under our constitutional system: something known to Congress, which it approved or acquiesced in. Secret letters from Richard Nixon to Nguyen Van Thieu cannot commit this country; nor can Presidential words of the kind cited by the White House when the Ford claim was challenged—generalized statements that we "expect" to supply arms in unspecified amounts.

All this is worse than just verbal humbug. After the military collapse the only hope of saving something was negotiation, which first required a new government in Saigon. Instead Mr. Kissinger and Mr. Ford beat their breasts, talked of rebuilding Saigon's "strength" and propped up President Thieu. They did nothing serious to get Americans out until Congress forced action on them. And the weeks wasted in pursuit of illusions have probably foreclosed any chance of getting out significant numbers of Vietnamese.

But the words are also damaging in themselves. The credibility of American leadership can never be restored until some President stops trying to save face, until some Secretary of State tells the truth, until our leaders admit the mistakes of the past and try to learn from them for the future.

The world can see that as well as the American people can. The Sunday Times of London put it: "The massive lies involved in the Asian policy have done as much to damage American society and America's reputation as the failure of the policy itself."