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No End of a Lesson: I

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"It is obvious that a war that has been raging for ten years is drawing to a conclusion. . . . Peace is at hand."

Henry Kissinger, Oct. 26, 1972.

By Anthony Lewis

BOSTON, April 23—We should have had no illusion that it would end well, when it finally did end. But we did not have to expect the nightmare that now confronts us: Americans fleeing Saigon, leaving behind most of those whom we enlisted in our war against Communism. It is a final horror in the series of horrors that has marked the American intervention in Indochina.

If we are to learn the lessons of our disastrous involvement over all these years, we ought at least to understand the ending. And doing so will in fact afford insight into what went wrong in general. For a crucial element at the end was the same one that caused disaster all along: deception by American officials—deception of others and ourselves.

The last long phase of deceit began with Henry Kissinger's declaration of peace just before the 1972 election. When the published peace terms were not signed over the next two months, Mr. Kissinger and President Nixon blamed North Vietnamese intransigence. There was the same explanation for the Christmas bombing of Hanoi. But we know now that that was all a charade.

The obstacle to agreement at the end of 1972 was not Hanoi but Saigon. President Thieu, in his resignation speech, has just confirmed what many had surmised: that he at first refused to sign the agreed terms, objecting to the lack of any provision for removal of North Vietnamese forces from the South. To overcome his resistance, the United States rushed \$1 billion in fresh arms to Thieu—and bombed Hanoi as a demonstration of our will.

What happened at the end of 1972 was more than just an isolated episode of deception and brutality. It foreshadowed the nature of the "peace" that followed.

It was "peace with honor," Mr. Nixon said when the Paris agreements were signed in January, 1973. Such a peace would necessarily mean the substitution of political for military struggle in South Vietnam. And the accords did contain numerous provisions to start a political process, notably the creation of a National Council of Reconciliation.

But Mr. Kissinger and Mr. Nixon did not really favor political compromise in South Vietnam. Their policy was "Vietnamization"—making the Thieu regime strong enough militarily to survive without compromise. They

saw the Paris agreements as essentially providing a military pause in Vietnam and meeting the domestic demand to bring home the American soldiers and prisoners of war.

Accordingly, after the 1973 agreements were signed, American officials encouraged Mr. Thieu to believe that he could disregard the political provisions. If the Communists returned to the offensive on the battlefield, as they inevitably would in the absence of a political process, he could defeat them with American arms.

In the words of Richard Holbrooke of the magazine *Foreign Policy*, who spent years in Vietnam, that policy was "a fantastic gamble." In 1965 and 1968 and 1972 only the most massive American power—troops and bombers—had denied the insurgents victory. How could anyone conceivably expect

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the South Vietnamese to win without that kind of intervention?

The answer is that Mr. Thieu was led to believe that the United States would send its bombers back, if necessary. He says now that he had a "solid pledge" from Mr. Nixon to "actively and strongly intervene" against any renewed North Vietnamese "aggression." President Ford confirms that there were Nixon-Thieu letters but refuses to publish them, saying that they did not go beyond public expressions of support for Saigon.

What did Mr. Nixon and Mr. Kissinger really intend in whatever they conveyed to Mr. Thieu? Perhaps their words were ambivalent, implying more to him than they knew could be delivered. After all, it was hardly likely that Congress would have supported a pledge of re-intervention if it had been informed of such a thing following the Paris agreements.

But if our leaders really meant what they signaled to Mr. Thieu—if they really meant to use the B-52's again—then that policy came to a dead end on Aug. 15, 1973, when Congress prohibited all American military activity in or over Indochina. After that it was rank cynicism to go on with the policy of resisting political accommodation in Vietnam and banking on military victory. By doing so, we saved face for a little while, and assured a bloodier, more shameful version of the same ending.

Deceit does not pay; it may have worked in some other century or some other country, but in the United States at the end of the twentieth century it cannot. That is the lesson, the familiar lesson, of what has happened since Henry Kissinger declared that peace was at hand.