

WXFosf

'Dear President Thieu' MAY 4 1973

RELEASE OF THE text of two letters that President Nixon wrote President Thieu removes what few doubts remained about the nature of Mr. Nixon's promises to meet with force any North Vietnamese violations of the Paris Accords. On Nov. 14, 1972, he pledged "swift and severe retaliatory action" and on Jan. 5, 1973, he promised to "respond with full force." Against these words one must set Henry Kissinger's statement on Jan. 25, 1973, the day the accords were signed: "There are no secret understandings." Would we react with force to North Vietnamese violations, he was asked. He replied, "I don't want to speculate on hypothetical situations that we don't expect to arise." With the Nixon letters now published, presumably the Ford administration will stop pretending that nothing was offered secretly that was not explained publicly at the time. That argument is over.

But what about Mr. Nixon? Reflect on the nature of the policy that he inherited and that he himself pursued, one of conducting a limited war whose success depended on convincing the enemy that the United States would hang in indefinitely and on convincing an increasingly restive American public that the United States would get out. Concealment and dissimulation were not arbitrary, a mere bureaucratic convenience; they were fundamental to the nature of the policy. At virtually any point in the war, to have informed the public of the costs and risks that officials privately felt lay ahead would have invited the public's refusal to go along, which in turn would have invited a level of dissent that Hanoi could only take as evidence that the United States would not hang in. In brief, the policy could not succeed if the people were to be told the full truth about it. Its fundamental flaw, in fact, may well have been its incompatibility with the workings of a free and open society.

So it was from the beginning in Vietnam, throughout the war, and at the end, President Thieu was deeply alarmed—and, as events showed, not without reason—that the Paris Accords let North Vietnam keep

troops in the South. But President Nixon was determined to end American involvement in the war to recover American POWs. And for the latter purpose, if not the former, he required an agreement only between the United States and Hanoi but not between Hanoi and Saigon. To gain Mr. Thieu's support for the necessary accords, Mr. Nixon thus found it necessary to promise "full force." Had he not done that promise South Vietnam might have balked at the withdrawal of the remaining American troops denounced Washington and refused to sign the accords with Hanoi. Had he made the promise public North Vietnam might have refused to accept the ceasefire terms with the South. This almost certainly would have torpedoed the agreement on the POWs and all of the various two-sided agreements between the various parties—Hanoi, Saigon and Washington—were interlocked and conditioned on each other. Congress and the American public, of course, would have gone up the wall. Mr. Nixon was the prisoner of his own policy.

This certainly does not mean that the principle of lying to one's public is tolerable or acceptable in commitments to acts of war are acceptable. The appropriate "lesson" is not so much that statesmen should be warned as it is that they should not conceive and conduct a policy whose success depends on lying. In Vietnam it was clear that the necessary foundation of a policy of limited war—a clear impression, conveyed in the society, that the United States would stick it out—collapsed. As little by little the public's sense of the reality of Vietnam grew, its taste for prosecuting a war there shrunk. Unless President Nixon was prepared to change his policy and to declare that the United States would no longer have anything to do with trying to shape the outcome in Vietnam—in which case he might have been able to recover the POWs but might also have had some difficulty extracting the American troops as well as civilians still in South Vietnam—he had caught in the trap from which he tried to escape with his secret assurances to President Thieu.