

Condemned

To

NYTimes MAY 8 1975

Repeat It

By Anthony Lewis

WASHINGTON, May 7—When John Hersey spent a week with President Ford and wrote his remarkable account of it in *The New York Times Magazine*, he found one central puzzle. How could a man so open in manner, so considerate in personal relations, seemingly lack a deeper social compassion and be so insensitive to the currents of change in the world?

The mystery was on display for us all at Mr. Ford's press conference last night. Here was a nice man, a man who could not be imagined making up an enemies list, but one with a sense of history and humanity so limited as to seem one-dimensional.

When he recognized Mary McGrory of *The Washington Star*, the President had a graceful personal word of congratulations for the Pulitzer Prize she had just so deservedly won. But then he gave her question an answer achingly devoid of understanding or sympathy.

It was a question about amnesty. With the end of our enterprise in Vietnam, Miss McGrory asked, with the President's call to avoid recrimination over failed policies, was it not time to wipe the slate clean for the men who had refused to fight that war?

Perhaps deliberately, Mr. Ford missed the real point of the question—the opportunity for healing at this moment by a new, generous gesture of universal amnesty. Instead, he gave a wooden answer about his expired program of limited amnesty—a program so hedged about with Catch 22's that it was ignored by most of the men concerned.

That unfeeling answer was in striking contrast to Mr. Ford's comment on a subject where he has staked out

a policy position: Vietnamese refugees. He spoke with passion, and convincing effect, on the obligation to admit the refugees to this country. But if we feel a duty to the Vietnamese who got out—not all with the noblest motives—how is it possible to be so cold, so hard toward Americans who for various reasons resisted the war? Is there to be amnesty only for the officials whose policy brought disaster to the Vietnamese?

Strangest of all, and most disturbing, was the President's answer when asked what we had to learn from Vietnam.

"The lessons of the past in Vietnam have already been learned," Mr. Ford said—"learned by Presidents . . ."

Would it were so. But of course it is not. For the behavior of the President and his Administration on a crucial matter shows that they have not learned the most obvious lesson: the danger of secrecy in the use of executive power, the danger of lying.

"The U. S. has no bilateral commitment to the Government of the Republic of Vietnam." Secretary of State Kissinger made that statement in writing on March 25, 1974. When Senator Henry Jackson said last month that in fact there were secret commitments, the Administration accused him of a politically motivated smear.

Now we know that there were secret promises. President Nixon wrote President Thieu giving his "absolute assurance" that, if Hanoi violated the Paris peace agreement, "we will respond with full force." Grotesquely, we know that from a Vietnamese source, not our own officials, who continue to keep the Nixon letters secret.

President Ford said the Nixon assurances did not differ from generalized public statements about the possibility of American reactions to truce violations. Mr. Kissinger said they were not "obligations." The White House press secretary, Ron Nessen, dismissed the issue as one of "semantics." He might as well have said "third-rate semantics."

When a foreign statesman gets an "absolute assurance" from an American President in future, should he dismiss it as semantics? Should he treat it as no "obligation" if Henry Kissinger is involved? When Congress is told that there are no secret agreements, should it understand that there may still be some "secret assurances"?

The issue is not semantics but simple truth. Senator Clifford Case, Republican of New Jersey, found the affair of the Nixon-Thieu letters so shaming that he said Mr. Ford simply could not have read them before stating that there were no "secret agreements" with Saigon.

The puzzle of Gerald Ford is not really complicated. He is a personally kind man but one of narrow, largely political experience in life—a limited man. But he should understand Santayana's warning that those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat it. One large reason why so many Americans have stopped believing their Government is that successive Presidents have adopted as their own the lies and the secrets of the past on Vietnam. It is time for the lying to stop.

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