

Promises, Promises!

By James Reston

WASHINGTON, May 13—The United States isn't very good at handling defeat, probably because it hasn't had much practice. It has been excessively self-critical about the collapse of Vietnam and Cambodia, and now our officials seem obliged to go around reassuring everybody that Uncle Sam is a stout and dependable fellow after all.

Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore came here the other day, after turning back shiploads of Vietnamese refugees who sought safe haven in his country, and lectured us on how to be a reliable ally and regain the confidence of Asia. Nevertheless, President Ford gave him a big splashy dinner at the White House, where the Prime Minister turned his toast into a stump speech, and then went on "Face the Nation" and implied that the United States had not only been unreliable but maybe even dishonorable in Southeast Asia.

Some of this sort of thing was probably unavoidable, but confusing the American record in Southeast Asia with the American record in the world over the past thirty years is a little silly, and if the world is in doubt about how the United States will react to any serious challenge to its vital interests, the postwar record is fairly clear.

Washington reacted to the Soviet threat to Berlin with the airlift; to the Soviet Sputnik challenge in outer space by going to the moon; to the disaster of the Cuban Bay of Pigs with the blockade of Khrushchev's Cuban missiles in the second Cuban crisis; to the Communist threat to Greece and Turkey with the Truman Doctrine; to the economic wreckage of Europe after the last World War with the Marshall Plan; to the Soviet pressure on Japan with a security pact and the most generous and imaginative economic and political settlement ever offered by a victorious nation to a defeated nation.

The revisionist historians are having a field day now, but in the postwar era, the United States has been at its best when confronted by serious trouble and at its worst when it was sweet-talked into dreams of a phony perpetual peace.

Moscow misjudged Dean Acheson's Pacific "defense perimeter" speech, which left Korea out of the protected area, but found an American Army in Korea soon after the North Koreans attacked the South, at the Soviet Union's urging.

The Russian threat to dispatch airborne divisions to the Middle East produced an immediate American world-

wide alert and a compromise ceasefire—not a very good one—but the Moscow threat or bluff or whatever it was, got the usual stern American response.

In short, whenever the United States has seemed to be wavering and the Soviet Union has probed and tested America's will and its strengths, the United States reaction has been clear and swift.

In fact, if there is a danger in the present mood of disappointment and failure in Southeast Asia, it is not that the United States will fail to react in the future but that, if pushed on the assumption of American weakness, that it will overreact, as President Kennedy did in Vietnam after his humiliating blunders at the Bay of Pigs.

The threat to the United States in the last decade was not primarily a

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military or strategic threat, unbalancing the power of the world, as the Pentagon insisted, but a philosophical and economic threat, dividing the American people and unbalancing their trust in one another and the dependability of their institutions at home.

To allow these divisions to go on, after the loss of 56,000 lives and over \$150 billion in aid would really have raised serious and justifiable doubts about the judgment and reliability of the United States as the principal defender of Western civilization.

The allies of this hemisphere, in Europe, and in Japan and the rest of Asia will know they are in serious trouble and will know they are insecure when America is diverted from its primary interests by secondary considerations, and weakened by unemployment, inflation and mistrust.

Meanwhile, verbal assurances by President Ford and Secretary Kissinger that America is a faithful ally are not likely to do much good, and in any event, will not impress either our allies or our adversaries. If they have not learned how America reacts to adversity after Berlin, the Middle East, Cuba, and the Marshall Plan, they probably won't be impressed by Mr. Ford's apologies or Mr. Kissinger's promises.

The truth is that a united America, out of Southeast Asia, is stronger and more reliable than a divided America fighting for dubious goals around Saigon. And if the allies don't see that after the record of the last thirty years, no amount of rhetoric out of this city is likely to convince them.