

NY Times

China and Vietnam

FEB 21 1972

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AT HOME ABROAD

LONDON, Feb. 20. — President Nixon's visit to China, whatever else it may or may not do, marks the end of an historic phase in American policy. Instead of applying a death-trial to the People's Republic, we now apply to ourselves the same legitimate personal concerns—and in any case is there to stay. In short, we have stopped fooling ourselves that we have the power to fight the war.

The contrast that cries out is with our policy in Vietnam. For Mr. Nixon and his advisers still evidently believe that the United States can impose its views in that part of Asia—that there we can fight history.

What is Mr. Nixon's Vietnam policy? Fundamentally, it is to maintain Nguyen Van Thieu in office in Saigon. The disclosure of the secret talks between Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Thuan make emphatically clear that the United States would do nothing if they really threatened Thieu. That was the matter of a total American withdrawal was condemned on its face. First, it is why the proposal to withdraw completely the Communists and the United States would not have left a month ago. The United States would not have left a month ago. The United States would not have left a month ago.

Mr. Nixon and those who back his policy are trying these days to raise American support for Thieu a moral issue. It would be dishonorable to abandon our commitment to a small and failed ally, they say, and Senator Edmund Muskie was virtually treasonous to make the suggestion.

But the American obligation, whatever its limits, is to the people of South Vietnam. It is not to any particular politician, and certainly not one whom we effectively maintain.

By now the effect of the American war on the people of Indochina is so familiar that the images have lost their impact. There are the four million pounds of bombs still being dropped daily, the forests destroyed by chemical agents so heavily that we now are worried about disposing of the surplus, the 100,000 casualties and refugees caused by American bombing every month.

Are we justified in doing all that to keep Nguyen Van Thieu in office? That is the real moral question.

Sooner or later, the United States will have to accept that North Vietnam is the strongest power in Indochina. To go on struggling against that reality to maintain an anti-Communist

government in Saigon can be done only at an appalling cost to ourselves and to the Vietnamese.

The irony is that that kind of cost made sense at all, historically, only in terms of "containing China." Now that notion has been abandoned, Mr. Nixon's formula for perpetual war in Indochina is in fact inconsistent with his own doctrine that America can no longer decide the fate of other nations.

The sad thing is that there might just have been a chance for the United States to get out with honor last summer—before the South Vietnamese election that Thieu chose for himself.

At that time, it was indicated that Hanoi would accept a simple formula: the United States would withdraw its troops and its military aid, and the United States would never again have any troops in Indochina. The United States would never again have any troops in Indochina.

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After all, Mr. Nixon knows that political commitments do not last longer than the reasons for them. After swearing undying support of Chiang Kai-shek for years, he has just said in his State of the World message: "The ultimate relationship between Taiwan and the mainland is not a matter for the United States to decide."

Some day some President will apply that wisdom to Indochina.