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Of Blood and Slogans

Slogans can have a fateful significance.

Taking office in 1969 on a pledge "to end the war and win the peace," President Nixon made a fateful decision concerning the true content of that vague but beguiling campaign slogan. "Winning the peace," he decided, meant that an anti-Communist Government had to be consolidated in power in South Vietnam. Otherwise the "peace" would be lost because additional military effort by the Communists would soon bring them the victory they have long sought.

Since the United States and its South Vietnamese allies had not conclusively defeated the Communists on the field of battle, there was no immediate visible way to "win the peace" in Mr. Nixon's special sense of that term. As a result, "ending the war" had to be indefinitely postponed and the subtly but significantly different objective of "winding down the war" had to be substituted. Even this phase had to be defined in a special sense. The war itself was not wound down; on the contrary, it was extended to Cambodia and Laos and American bombing greatly increased. What was "wound down" was the scale of American involvement in the ground fighting.

When these special Nixonian interpretations have been decoded, that 1968 promise "to end the war and win the peace" translates into ordinary English as a promise "to continue the war until the enemy concedes defeat and accepts American peace terms."

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Would the American people have accepted Mr. Nixon's leadership four years ago if they had understood the true import of his slogan? The question is unanswerable. What can be said is that the Communist forces in Viet-

nam are not prepared to accept Mr. Nixon's special definitions. The bloody fighting of the last ten days demonstrates that the war was not ended.

South Vietnam's Army has been able to achieve at least a temporary stalemate but on terms that have ominous implications for long-term American involvement. Only massive American bombing, including heavy raids in North Vietnam itself, enabled the South Vietnam forces to halt the Communist advance. And it is the precarious position of South Vietnam's embattled forces that has led to the weekend's American escalation of the air war near Haiphong and Hanoi.

If American air support on a large scale is the essential prerequisite for staving off a South Vietnam defeat, the United States may be fighting an air war in Southeast Asia for several more years—on and on into the indefinite future in an elusive effort to "win" an ever-receding "peace."

America's involvement in the Vietnam war cannot be satisfactorily ended until this country obtains the release of its prisoners of war. Every new air raid means more pilots shot down and captured. The number of American prisoners steadily grows. Thus, every raid not only brings death and devastation to Vietnam but postpones the end of the war.

The war is being fought to determine the political future of South Vietnam. Since the United States cannot win the war by means acceptable to the American people, it has to achieve peace by a political compromise with its Communist adversary. A negotiated settlement is the only alternative to more bombing, more bloodshed, more prisoners. Deceptive slogans can no longer obscure that harsh choice.