

MAY 19 1972

False Face NYTimes

After the French pulled out of Indochina, it seemed a legitimate concern of the United States that Communism not be allowed to take Vietnam by default. There was ample and convincing ideological momentum to impel Washington to forestall any real or imagined thrust by Peking to assert hegemony over Southeast Asia.

Now, however, in the wake of President Nixon's rapprochement with Communist China and in the light of his start toward Moscow tomorrow, accommodation with the Communist world has not only become a benchmark of Administration policy; it has also removed much of the ideological underpinning from the United States position in Vietnam.

The rationale of Mr. Nixon's withdrawal strategy acknowledges negotiated coexistence as the only path to a viable settlement. It must assume the probability of a coalition arrangement that will eventually include Vietcong representatives. Moreover, Dr. Kissinger's recent secret talks with Soviet party chief Brezhnev—regardless of their efficacy—must have been undertaken on the presumption that the United States accepted coexistence. Ideology, therefore, is plainly no longer a convincing premise for continuing the war.

Coexistence does not mean that Communism must be endorsed or abetted; it merely registers the evident fact that among nations of competing ideologies in a nuclear world, coexistence is the only alternative to suicidal coercion.

However, the President's recent declaration that "we will not be defeated" reinjected the element of ideology. This was underscored by his remarks at the Connally ranch that he could not permit a "Communist take-over" of South Vietnam lest the Presidency "lose respect" in the eyes of the world. "In the final analysis," said Mr. Nixon, "what is really on the line is the position of the United States as the strongest nation in the world."

But that is precisely what is not on the line—or should not be on the line—if accommodation is the policy of the Administration. The logic of that policy should carry over to Vietnam if withdrawal is genuinely the objective along with elections of, by and for the Vietnamese. Asserting American invincibility puts face-saving above the national interest in ending involvement in a destructive, divisive, debilitating war that the Administration seems in most other respects to be desperately anxious to cut short.

Were the United States to maintain, in effect, that it must save face to liquidate its position in this tragic war, it could only dissipate world respect, for it would then have to escalate air and naval attacks even more horrendously. That risk has already been created by the Administration's response to the current North Vietnamese offensive. The mining of the ports and other waterways and the renewed bombing combined with the implied threat of even greater retaliation make Washington dependent on the degree to which Moscow and Peking maintain their restraint and forswear confrontation. This dependence further commits the Administration to coexistence, even granting that saving face could hardly have meant turning the other cheek. Still, the North Vietnamese offensive was not unexpected. Indeed, the Vietnamization program itself assumed the likelihood of such an attack.

It was naturally discouraging to see the South Vietnamese troops respond so poorly to the first stages of the offensive, and admittedly this weakened the American bargaining position. But it would serve no purpose now to re-invoke anti-Communism as another hurdle on the way to the peace table. Ideological rigidity will put a false face on negotiations if and when they resume. The aim should rather be to show up Hanoi's own rigidity on the issues. In the long run, Hanoi may prove to be more intransigent than any Washington hawk. As in all bargaining, the crux of the problem now is to determine—in public or in private—how far both sides can go toward compromising their differences without compromising their integrity.