

The Imperfect Circle

By ANTHONY LEWIS

LONDON, June 4—The success of the Moscow summit is a particular triumph for Henry Kissinger's world view. He has argued that great powers can balance their mutual interests on a planetary scale, transcending local or ideological differences. In Moscow, as in Peking, President Nixon boldly followed that approach.

The question that remains is how the global vision can solve the little local difficulty of Vietnam. Mr. Kissinger would doubtless accept that it is not begrudging the triumph of Moscow for those concerned about Vietnam to ask.

In the Kissinger view, American policy—Presidential policy—should be a circle in which all elements fit together. Bangladesh, the Middle East: Everything must be related to the effort to create a structure of great power accommodation. In those terms Vietnam is an annoyance. It is "one small country," as Mr. Kissinger recently called North Vietnam in evident frustration, that will not fit the pattern. It is a bump on an otherwise perfect circle.

American policy is to squeeze that bump, to make it conform. The evident fear is that to compromise our political objectives in South Vietnam in any meaningful way would weaken our power and credibility everywhere: would threaten the entire circle.

That is the theory underlying the tremendous increase in American firepower applied to Vietnam in the last two months: The intensified bombing of the North, the new shelling from subs offshore, the approval of new strategic targets, the mining of harbors. And the prospect is for more escalation: more B-52's, more ships, a new air base in Thailand.

One who has just been in North Vietnam would never underestimate the destructive force of those bombs and shells. American bombing has clearly wounded the transportation system and made life more difficult. It has also destroyed many civilian facilities—schools and homes and hospitals—and taken many lives.

The utilitarian question is whether the destruction will work politically: Will it make the North Vietnamese negotiate on American terms in Paris, as Mr. Kissinger has long hoped?

When I tried to explore that question in Hanoi, several persons referred to the testament of Ho Chi Minh, written a few months before his death in 1969. It includes a two-line verse:

*Our mountains will always be,
our rivers will always be,*

AT HOME ABROAD

*our people will always be;
The American invaders defeated,
we will rebuild our land ten
times more beautiful.*

The implication is that the North Vietnamese will accept total destruction of the works of man in their country if that is the price of the war. It is a difficult thought to believe in its fanaticism, but there it is.

If in fact the present level of American air and naval activity does not make them come to terms, what follows? In Hanoi, many foreigners thought the logic of American policy was to go on up the path of escalation, hoping that each step would at last bring political results. Some thought the next logical step would be the destruction of Hanoi.

There is no real sign now of any internal check to such a policy. Protest in America is at a low level. People are weary, without hope. Congress is ineffectual. Few seem to care how many Vietnamese are killed in order to make the circle perfect.

But history will care. If American bombers turn Hanoi into rubble, as they can, Americans will be the victims as well; their children will have to live with it. And that suggests that the whole Kissinger vision may be wrong: Vietnam is not a bump on an otherwise perfect circle. It is the issue on which the United States will be judged, by the world and by itself.

To apply some force to preserve an indigenous independence in South Vietnam would be one thing. To use staggering destructive power for the sake of preserving Nguyen Van Thieu in office is another. As André Fontaine said recently in *Le Monde*, it is an obsession, the self-destructing pursuit of a white whale.

In all this Henry Kissinger has a particular responsibility. Not only because of his position—the power remains the President's—but because of his life and ideas.

He saw for himself the terrible results of an ideology of force. He taught hundreds of students the necessity for analysis, for detachment, in weighing values and making political choices. To forget all that now, to provide the intellectual rationale for the obsessive pursuit of an abstraction, would indeed be *la trahison des professeurs*. Henry Kissinger must know better.
