

# China and Vietnam

By ANTHONY LEWIS

LONDON, Feb. 20 — President Nixon's visit to China, whatever else it may or may not do, marks the end of an illusory phase in American policy. Instead of applying a devil theory to the People's Republic, we now admit to ourselves that it has legitimate national concerns—and in any case is there to stay. In short, we have stopped fooling ourselves that we have the power to fight history in that part of Asia.

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 disclosures of the secret talks between Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho make emphatically clear that the United States would do nothing that really threatened Thieu. That is why the offer of a total American withdrawal was conditioned on a ceasefire. That is why the proposal for fresh elections with the Communists taking part would have Thieu resign just a month before and leave his cohorts in charge—an idea whose supposed fairness would not fool a child.

Mr. Nixon and those who back his policy are trying these days to make American support for Thieu a moral issue. It would be dishonorable to abandon our commitment to a small and faithful 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 installed.

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 deadly 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

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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 settle 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 rigged for himself.

At that time Le Duc Tho indicated that Hanoi might agree to a simple exchange: release of American prisoners in return for a total end to American military activity. The official American view is that Hanoi would never really have agreed, would always have insisted on the removal of Thieu as part of the price. But Le Duc Tho clearly had the election in mind, knowing that it would be affected by a declared U.S. intention to withdraw.

If those who make American policy had been willing last summer to offer total withdrawal in exchange for the prisoners, their moral position would be stronger now. They would not have to pretend to having made the offer, and they could fairly criticize the other side if they had said no. If—but we shall never know, because the offer was not made.

The critics warned last summer that a failure to break with Thieu before his election might make our extrication from Indochina even more difficult. That is clear now.

With Thieu's grip that much stronger, Hanoi is insisting that we help to loosen it by stopping military aid to Saigon. That is a painful price indeed. But we may now have to pay it, as part of undoing the distortions we have caused in Southeast Asia by our alien presence. For the alternative is much worse: to go on killing indefinitely, to fight history, to forget the prisoners.

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.