

The War President

By ANTHONY LEWIS

MIAMI BEACH, Aug. 20—The man who will shortly be renominated for President has done many significant things in his first term of office. But in a way his most remarkable achievement has been in the Vietnam war: He has taken a national mistake and made it an obsession.

Richard Nixon came to the Presidency with widespread goodwill on the Vietnam issue, and high public expectations. Even those who had opposed his election mostly believed he would liquidate a war that was not his responsibility, that his country did not want and that had undone his predecessor in office.

Instead he has intensified the American commitment to an ignoble cause remote from vital national interests. And he has intensified American destruction of the shattered societies of Indochina.

In three and one-half years, his Administration has dropped more explosives on South Vietnam, North Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia than Lyndon Johnson's did in four years. From February 1965 to Jan. 20, 1969, roughly 3,250,000 tons of American bombs fell on Indochina. From then through this past June the figure was about 3,550,000 tons.

There are now more American air bases in Thailand, for the Indochinese bombing runs, and more aircraft carriers and other naval vessels off the Vietnamese coasts. Twice as many giant B-52's are being used as ever before. The Pentagon will need \$1 billion extra in the current fiscal year to cover the cost of additional bombing and mining of North Vietnamese harbors.

All this has happened, and is happening, during Mr. Nixon's successful withdrawal of most American ground forces. There has been a consequent drop in U.S. casualties, but perhaps not so great a reduction over the period as would be expected.

The Nixon Administration has now accounted for more than one-third of the American casualties in the Vietnam war. From the beginning through the year 1968 there were 30,614 killed and 99,786 wounded seriously enough to require hospitalization. From then until the 12th of this month there were 15,233 killed and 53,359 wounded.

Mr. Nixon has said repeatedly that the American war in Indochina would soon be over. As long ago as April 7, 1971, he told the country:

"I can assure you tonight with confidence that American involvement in this war is coming to an end."

Why, then, are Americans still dying in Indochina, still being taken prisoner, still killing and making refugees of

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the people who live there? The answer is nothing complicated: Richard Nixon remains determined to win the war, at whatever cost in Indochinese lives and American reputation.

Winning the war, in Mr. Nixon's terms, means getting the Communist side to accept an American-oriented anti-Communist Government in Saigon. He was advised when he took office that the United States could not end the war unless it compromised on the nature of the Saigon regime. But until this moment he has resisted any real change in the Government of Nguyen Van Thieu.

The obsessive character of Mr. Nixon's position is plain from its imperviousness to changing realities. For example, a central justification for American intervention in Vietnam from the beginning was the need to resist Chinese expansionism. It is utterly clear now that the Chinese do not control Hanoi; Mr. Nixon has made his own great initiative toward Peking, yet still the war goes on.

Similarly, the President constantly reiterates the need to fight Communism in Vietnam. Yet in the rest of the world he has made his peace with the fact of Communist political power. He has accepted Communist dominion in areas much closer to American interests and American history than Indochina.

Nor is the reality of life in South Vietnam allowed to interrupt the President's vision. He talks of saving freedom there, while General Thieu tortures political prisoners, closes the newspapers and arrests anyone who remained in an area after its capture by the Communist forces.

Mr. Nixon's great accomplishment as President has been to bend his country to his own obsession. He has shown that it is possible for a determined President, with shrewd political advice, to carry on indefinitely a war unpopular in the country and in Congress. He has proved that there are no effective political mechanisms in the American system to restrain such a President between elections. For that constitutional innovation alone, history will certainly note him.

To the world, Richard Nixon has proved that the United States' use of her destructive power against the poorest and weakest of countries is not an accident or a passing phenomenon. The historic notion that American wars have a dominant moral element divorced from militarism is now finished. And that again is a considerable achievement in one term as President.