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The Issue of 1972

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President Nixon has taken American ground combat troops out of the war and therefore American casualties are down, but American war prisoners are nowhere near freedom. "Vietnamization" has never looked more dubious, the Thieu regime has never seemed a less attractive ally, and neither lethal bombing nor mining of its harbors has ended North Vietnam's ability to carry on and perhaps intensify the war.

Even Congress continues to pick at Mr. Nixon's Vietnam policy, despite his success in fending off end-the-war legislation. In approving the biggest defense bill (\$74.6 billion) since World War II, for instance, the House nevertheless cut \$450 million from the \$2.8-billion Mr. Nixon had requested for increased military operations. These cuts included trimming from 252 to 180 the number of helicopters to be sent to South Vietnam—just one day after seventy of those they already have were destroyed or damaged at Bienhoa, in the worst aircraft loss of the war.

Those with long memories will recall that it was the South Vietnamese Army's inability to protect air bases that first brought American air power directly into the war; in February, 1965, infiltrators blew up a number of American aircraft at Pleiku, and President Johnson sent the bombers north in retaliation. More than seven years later, the South Vietnamese still can't protect their aircraft, which is one eloquent comment on the "success" of Vietnamization.

Another is the continuing display of North Vietnamese and Vietcong military enterprise in South Vietnam—despite the incredible weight of American bombing in North and South, and despite the mining of Hanoi's ports. American officers now are claiming that the North Vietnamese threat to Hue has been ended, but in the last week Saigon lost an important base camp in the Central Highlands and suffered setbacks at Tienphuoc 35 miles south of the important city of Danang.

Together with vigorous North Vietnamese and Vietcong activity in the Mekong Delta, all this suggests that neither Vietnamization nor Mr. Nixon's air power and mines have tipped the balance of fighting in favor of Saigon; indeed, without American planes and pilots, the Communist spring offensive might well have been a knockout punch.

Politically, the new Vietcong peace proposal—"for a provisional government of national concert that shall be dominated by neither side"—may be pronounced by American analysts to

IN THE NATION

be the same old stuff clad in new rhetoric. On paper, however, it appears fair enough and is so stated that it may prove hard for Mr. Nixon to ignore.

This is particularly so since the proposal appears to demand something less than what Mr. Nixon calls "the overthrow of the Saigon Government." It would specifically permit participation by members of that Government, excluding only President Thieu himself—and the evidence is mounting that this exclusion is a splendid idea.

Having already wrested from the Senate the right to govern by decree in the fields of security, defense, economy and finance, having intimidated and virtually silenced the opposition press by Draconian publication rules, having—since the spring offensive began—thrown into prison literally thousands of Vietnamese on nothing more than suspicion, Thieu has now abolished popular democratic election of officials in his country's 10,775 hamlets.

These moves make it clear that as Americans have been withdrawn from Vietnam, while Mr. Nixon's commitment to the Thieu regime has been continued and perhaps solidified, Thieu himself has seized the opportunity to concentrate all power in his own hands. So much for all the talk by the Nixon Administration and its predecessors about democracy and self-determination in South Vietnam.

To its credit, the Nixon Administration has protested against attacks by Thieu's controlled radio and television network (financed by American money) on George McGovern as a "mad dog" and "mentally ill." The question is whether the nation that finances South Vietnam and guarantees its existence with the most destructive air assault in history, has the power left even to stop this presumptuous behavior.

Sad to say, none of this seems to be costing Mr. Nixon any votes at home. The American people do not seem to realize that their air power is carrying out one of the most terrible mass exterminations in history, not only in the North but in the South Vietnam that it is supposed to be defending and over which the squalid Thieu has been given such dictatorial sway.

That is the message George McGovern ought to be carrying day by day and state by state to the American people. That is the theme that brought him the Democratic Presidential nomination, and if it is not the true issue of 1972, then there is no issue.