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Some Maxims on Vietnam

PRESIDENT THIEU has accused the United States of selling out South Vietnam. My inclination is to believe that Mr. Thieu is making internal politics; and why should he not? Mr. Thieu is talking about a country which is his whole concern.

What to say at the moment? Permit me a few Vietnamese maxims:

A CIVIL WAR which has torn a society for 20 years and which has involved the great powers is unlikely to be settled in a single dramatic stroke.

If negotiations give the impression of being a camouflaged surrender, there will be nothing left to negotiate. Support for the side which seems to be losing will collapse. Thus the way negotiations are carried out is almost as important as what is negotiated.

To Saigon, the status of the N.L.F. cannot be a procedural matter. For South Vietnam it has been very nearly the central issue of the war. Washington must bear at least part of the responsibility.

What is involved now is confidence in American promises. However fashionable it is to ridicule the terms "credibility" or "prestige," they are not empty phrases; other nations can gear their actions to ours only if they can count on our steadiness. Unilateral withdrawal, or a settlement which unintentionally amounts to the same thing, could lead to the erosion of restraints and to an even more dangerous international situation.

To split Washington and Saigon has been a constant objective of Hanoi. If the Paris talks turn into an instrument to accomplish this, Hanoi will be tempted to use them for political warfare.

Clearly there is a point beyond which Saigon cannot be given a veto over negotiations. But equally, it is not preposterous for Saigon to insist on a major voice in decisions affecting its own country.

The issue is whether the United States should be a party to an attempt to impose a coalition government. We must be clear that our involvement in such an effort may well destroy the existing political structure in South Vietnam and thus lead to a Communist take-over.

Negotiations seeking to impose a coalition from the outside are likely to change markedly and irreversibly the political process in South Vietnam. Any negotiation on this point by the United States is likely to lead either to an impasse or to the collapse of Saigon.

American objectives should be to bring about a staged withdrawal of external forces, North Vietnamese and American, thereby to create a maximum incentive for the contending forces in South Vietnam to work out a political agreement. The structure and content of such an agreement must be left to the South Vietnamese.

IF THE UNITED STATES brings about a removal of external forces and pressures, and if it gains a reasonable time for political consolidation, it will have done the maximum possible for an ally — short of permanent occupation.

However we got into Vietnam, whatever the judgment of our actions, ending the war honorably is essential for the peace of the world.

These "maxims" are excerpted, verbatim, from "Foreign Affairs," Volume 47, number 2, January 1969: "The Vietnam Negotiations," by Henry A. Kissinger.