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Vietnam: A Lesson From History

By O. Edmund Clubb

The Presidential adviser, Henry A. Kissinger, flies to Paris, to Saigon, to Paris, and always back to Washington, saying, "peace, peace," when there is no peace. The war in Indochina goes on, for there can finally be only one victor and one vanquished force in that struggle, and neither yet concedes defeat.

To judge the potential for the future, reference to historical example can be instructive. In November, 1944, Maj. Gen. Patrick J. Hurley, intervening to effect a peaceful compromise between the Nationalists and Communists in China, worked out together with the Communist leaders at Yenan a draft agreement that provided pro forma for unification of all Chinese military forces for the war against Japan, and also for recognition of a legal status for the Chinese Communist party and for creation of a coalition government. Hurley thought the plan good, and confidently submitted it to the Nationalists at Chungking, only to be rebuffed. Chiang Kai-shek would consent to no coalition govern-

ment, to no infringement of his autocratic power.

In January 1946 the successor to Hurley, General George C. Marshall, was instrumental in bringing the warring Chinese Nationalists and Communists together in a cease-fire arrangement, to be implemented by a tripartite (Nationalist, Communist, American) executive headquarters set up in Peking. It was provided that "All hostilities will cease immediately." However, hostilities resumed in full fury six months later, and in the end the Communists won.

The agreement reached in October 1972, between Mr. Kissinger and Hanoi's Le Duc Tho proposed in general a resolution of the military aspect of the Vietnam imbroglio. On its face, it gave the Nguyen Van Thieu regime in Saigon, with its million-man army and mountains of American ordnance, the long-prescribed "reasonable chance of survival." But in essence, by recognizing the National Liberation Front's political existence and its right to share in determination of South Vietnam's future through participation in "free and democratic elections," and by stipulating a cease-fire in place op-

erative with respect to North Vietnam as well as N.L.F. forces, it projected fundamental changes in the political structure of South Vietnam.

President Thieu has made it abundantly clear all along that he has no interest in a "compromise" settlement that would give adversaries equal opportunity of political (or military) contest. Mr. Thieu knows well how to exploit the tactical vulnerability of the nation that poses a savior of peoples "menaced by Communism." He quite naturally turned thumbs down on the agreement, and now demands in effect that the United States remain engaged until there might be achieved a political settlement that would consolidate, not eliminate, his dictatorship. That, he would say, using President Nixon's term, would be a settlement that was "right."

Washington confronts a compound dilemma. Whose war? Thieu says that it is ours, for did we not choose to combat "Communist aggression" in the first instance? Whose the future peace? Thieu says that it must be his, for is not South Vietnam, by American definition, a sovereign state? Washington is not to be permitted to "impose" a settlement.

It remains to be seen whether the Nixon Administration will enter upon a compromise agreement with Hanoi in defiance of the Saigon autocrat's veto. On the other hand, it can be anticipated that Hanoi and the N.L.F. will not make the surrender demanded by Thieu. They don't have to. For continuation of the war progressively weakens further the political and economic fabric of South Vietnam, and by that much nurtures revolution; whereas if the military action stops, and the revolutionaries are accorded a legitimate political role, both principle and practice of dictatorship will have been undermined, in South Vietnam and in Cambodia and Laos. In war or in peace, the revolutionaries stand to win in Indochina.

The big question at this critical juncture is whether the United States will in fact permit the Indochinese peoples to determine their own political destiny, even a revolutionary destiny, or whether it will continue fighting anti-insurrectionary wars in service of the petty dictatorships it has cultivated in Saigon, Phnompenh and Vientiane.

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