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To Get Out, And Stay Out, Of the War

AS ONE READS with care and sympathy the transcript of Henry Kissinger's press conference last week, one is struck again by the tangle into which the United States government has gotten itself by its apparent determination to give up its cake and eat it too.

The administration has renounced its efforts to win the war by battle or to drive the North Vietnamese out of the South. It proposes to withdraw its remaining forces in exchange for a cease-fire in place and release of our prisoners, but without any vestige of a political settlement between the two Vietnams. The scattering and juxtaposition of hostile armed forces throughout Vietnam, the continuing determination of both sides to win by whatever means are necessary, makes it almost certain that, whatever oaths are sworn and machinery established, a cease-fire cannot last for long. Its function is not to end the war but to facilitate United States' withdrawal.

No doubt aware of these facts, Dr. Kissinger, judging by his explanation to the press, seeks to exorcise them by two devices. Firstly, he asks from Hanoi some verbal recognition of Saigon's sovereignty over the south, in his words, "that the parties of a peace settlement should live in peace with one another." But the point is that this is not a "peace settlement" between the two, or rather three, Vietnamese governments. It is an agreement for a cease-fire, United States withdrawal, and release of prisoners, leaving the two Vietnamese sides unreconciled politically, confronting each other under arms, and each dedicated to the destruction of the other.

IN THE SECOND place, Dr. Kissinger seeks to give to an International Supervisory Group the powers, members and means to monitor the cease-fire effectively throughout the South. Even if he were successful, this would be of little use. The supervisors will be observers, not policemen with powers of enforcement. Even if they detect violations and identify the guilty party, all they can do is report to some nebulous higher authority, which will file their reports away in pigeonholes.

The problem is not with the facts, which are clear and unpalatable, but with the administration's state of mind, which refuses to accept their implications. If Americans are under the illusion that the cease-fire really means the end of the war, that if the

Communists violate it they must be punished, and that if no one else will do the punishing we must, we will soon find ourselves back in the war and up to our necks once again.

That this is a real danger is suggested by our apparent intention to continue to scatter quantities of Americans, foreign service officers, military attaches, aid personnel and private contractors, throughout South Vietnam.

The only way to get out and stay out of Vietnam is to get out both physically and psychologically. If the Vietnamese start fighting again after we withdraw, as is all too likely, that should no longer be our business. We have already done far more than honor and duty require.

IF THE AGREEMENT permits continued shipment of some arms and "defense support," these can be received by Vietnamese who have ample training in how to use them. If the accord establishes a supervisory corps, we should not try to take over or second-guess their job, impossible as it is likely to be. If we wish to participate in relief and reconstruction, we should do so jointly with others through an international agency, preferably the United Nations which has been doing an outstanding job in Bangladesh.

It is understandable that President Thieu and his colleagues should be displaying the withdrawal symptoms of the addict who wants just one more drink or one more trip. They would be delighted if the whole Paris negotiation failed. It is hard to imagine, however, that President Nixon and Dr. Kissinger will permit their admirable effort to extricate the United States from Vietnam to be aborted, either by the reluctance of Thieu to be left alone with his fellow Vietnamese or by an illusion that the United States can as it departs freeze a dynamic situation into immobility.

Should we fail to seize the opportunity to withdraw that is within our grasp, we risk all sorts of hazards far more serious than those with which Dr. Kissinger has been struggling in Paris—a prolonged term of captivity for our prisoners, a bitter dispute between the president and Congress as soon as the latter convenes, a marked cooling of the climate of detente with the Soviet Union and Chinese, more military expenditures for Vietnam pressing against the President's budget ceiling and making necessary the new taxes he seeks to avoid.

All this seems so illogical and unreasonable, so like turning the clock back to the 1960s, that one cannot but believe that, despite all obstacles, the agreement will soon be concluded. Yet we should never stop reminding ourselves that just as important as getting out is staying out.