

Stephen S. Rosenfeld

## Would Nixon Cut off Saigon?

THE PREMISE of a decade's American involvement in Vietnam has been that we could in some acceptable way succeed or settle, and that is precisely the premise being called increasingly into question by the sequence of events in the last two months.

Earlier, those who accepted this premise could blame its nonfulfillment on Soviet/Chinese help for the enemy, on South Vietnam's lack of preparedness, or on the spectacle of a prospective cave-in ostensibly represented by the candidacy of George McGovern.

But now it's plain, or plainer, that Soviet and Chinese aid is not so crucial to Hanoi's effort as its own will. No reasonable man can deny that Saigon has been given adequate time and means for its self-preparedness. Events since Nov. 7 show it was wrong if not disingenuous to claim that McGovern ever gave Hanoi cause not to accept the Nixon terms.

FROM THE SLIM available evidence—consisting of the President's acts, Kissinger's words, and the reports and comments of journalists—it appears, however, that the President still believes he can in some acceptable way succeed or settle.

This is the tacit basis of the statements by Kissinger and Ziegler, and by journalists respecting one or the other, to the effect that Kissinger's negotiating credibility with Hanoi has not been undermined, despite the appearance of undermining conveyed first by Mr. Nixon's rejection (apparently at Mr. Thieu's urging) of the Oct. 26 draft Kissinger brought back from Hanoi's Le Duc Tho—an appearance later enhanced by administration denials that its or Kissinger's credibility had been impaired. (Hence, the "help Henry" movement among his sympathizers who believe that a settlement can still be reached if only Kissinger's standing in Hanoi, perhaps also in the White House, can be preserved.)

The succeed-or-settle premise has been granted by all those accepting one or more of the various rationales which successive Presidents have offered for the different kinds of American involvement in the war. Just for this reason I found it interesting this week that one such supporter, Newsweek columnist Stewart Alsop—who is, as they say, well informed—should show signs of doubt.

IN A COLUMN reprinted on this page Wednesday, he asked: What next, if the Communists refuse to negotiate?

He answered that Mr. Nixon had a "perfectly sensible" answer—to halt the bombing and, with American aid, to let

*"... it may not be possible to succeed or settle on terms presently deemed acceptable."*

Saigon undertake its own exclusive defense. This would not guarantee Saigon's survival or the American POWs' return, he said, but it would preserve American honor.

This is, it seems to me, a perceptive honest position. It recognizes the chance that American honor, as Alsop and the President see it, may stand in the way of getting back the prisoners and, even then, may not guarantee an independent non-Communist South Vietnam. That is, it may not be possible to succeed or settle on terms presently deemed acceptable.

Where Alsop ends, however, others might choose to begin. What next, if a bombing halt does not win us back our prisoners? Would we then cut off our aid to Saigon (a move which, more surely than any other, would retrieve the prisoners but also would deny Thieu the kind of "reasonable chance" Mr. Nixon long has promised him)?

Even to pose the question is, of course, to force a rethinking of the conventional definition of what the war is "about." The conventional definition is that it is "about" which of the contending Vietnamese will finally hold power in the South. But what I would call the real definition of what the war has been "about" for the United States is the maintenance of American "honor," "prestige" or "credibility"—conceived not merely jingoistically but seriously, as bulwarks of America's world position and of its interior dignity and balance as well.

IS THE CUTTING OFF or phasing out of aid to Saigon compatible with maintenance of the American world position and with a bolstering of the country's self-respect? Many would find the question beyond further argument. The more relevant question perhaps is: What might lead Mr. Nixon to think so?

Here are some possible answers, which try to take into account the demonstrated failure of other approaches to Mr. Nixon in the past: Continued heavy losses of supposedly invulnerable B-52s. Legislation cutting off war funds. Nationalistic conduct by President Thieu that Mr. Nixon might regard, as offensive to the United States. Intimations by, say, Israel and Germany that they worry that continued involvement may undermine the American commitment to them. Soviet or Chinese decisions to suspend trade and other business for the duration. Kissinger's resignation.