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In U.S., Many Things Will Not Be the Same

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 23—America is moving out of Vietnam after the longest and most divisive conflict since the War Between the States. But Vietnam is not moving out of America, for the impact of the war there is likely to influence American life for many years to come. Though it is probably too early to distinguish between the temporary and the enduring consequences, one thing is fairly clear: There has been a sharp decline in respect for authority in the United States as a result of the war—a decline in respect not only for the civil authority of government but also for the moral authority of the schools, the universities, the press, the church and even the family.

News Analysis

There was no cease-fire on this front. Vietnam did not start the challenge to authority, but it weakened respect for the executives who got the nation involved in the war in the first place, for the Congress that let it go on for more than a decade and for the democratic process of debate, which failed to influence the course of battle for years and which finally declined into physical combat and sporadic anarchy.

Even after a cease-fire, there will still be considerable contention in the country over whether the challenges to authority are good or bad.

Many Americans have maintained that it was precisely the dissent and the defiance that forced social reform at home and a settlement abroad.

Others have argued that the war produced a whole new revolutionary climate in America, which encouraged the Communists to prolong the conflict and disrupted the nation's unity and the previously accepted attitudes, standards and restraints in American public and private conduct. But few Americans challenge the proposition that for good or bad, something has happened to American life—something not yet understood or agreed upon, something that is different, important and probably enduring.

Even at the moment of the Vietnam compromise, for example, there was a rash of teacher strikes in several of the great cities of the nation; one-time members of the Central Intelligence Agency, some of them former White House consultants, were confessing in court that they had been involved in

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a conspiracy to spy on the Democratic party and its leaders during the 1972 Presidential election campaign, and there was a controversy at Madison Square Garden over the playing of the national anthem before major sports events.

The direct costs of the war to the United States are easier to estimate than the indirect. Vietnam cost 46,000 American lives and, at a minimum $110-billion. That does not take into account long-range obligations to veterans, which may add up to $50-billion more, nor does it include the costs of the fighting in Laos and Cambodia and the continuing military establishment in Thailand.

Nor does it take into account the cost to the peoples of Indochina in dead, wounded, maimed and homeless, and in the destruction of their lands, which are almost beyond accurate calculation.

Significant Imponderables

The imponderables — the changes in attitudes and assumptions, for example, and the decline in truthfulness and self-confidence—promised to be even more significant for the future than the financial strain.

Among other things, Vietnam changed the nation's way of looking at itself and the world, reduced its willingness to get involved in distant continental land wars for ambiguous reasons, and envenomed the relations between the political parties and between the President and Congress.

The American people seem less confident about many things they took for granted. They are not so sure, for example, that the United States always prevails in foreign conflicts, that big guys always lick little guys, that money and machines are decisive in war, and that small states would rather surrender than risk American military might.

Even the two World Wars of this century did not have quite the same effect on American society. They divided Western civilization, destroyed its old empires, broke its domination over world politics, and changed the lives of Britain and Germany, but they did not challenge quite so many assumptions of American life as the long struggle in Vietnam.

In 1937 Munich became a symbol of appeasement and the dangers of nonintervention, dangers that, in turn, encouraged more overseas commitments by the United States than by any other nation. In the nineteen-seventies, on the other hand, Vietnam became a symbol of the dangers of intervention and led to American withdrawal and even to fears of American isolation.

The tone of President John F. Kennedy's inaugural address in 1961 at the beginning of the deep involvement in Vietnam, and the tone of President Nixon's second inaugural during the last phase of the cease-fire negotiations illustrate the change in the American mood and commitment.

Prudent Pledge by Nixon

"Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill," Mr. Kennedy said in his oft-quoted promise, "that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty. This much we pledge—and more."

After the disappointments and disillusions of the ensuing 12 years, President Nixon was more prudent and modest in pledging what the American people would do.

"We shall do our share in defending peace and freedom in the world," he said. "But we shall expect others to do their share. The time has passed when America will make every other nation's conflict our own, or make every other nation's future our responsibility, or presume to tell other nations how to manage their own affairs."

Moreover, the disillusionments of Vietnam not only led to a more modest estimate of what the United States could or should do to help maintain freedom and order in the world, but they also seemed to encourage a downward reappraisal of what government could do to maintain the health and welfare of the poor at home.

Yesterday, when former President Lyndon B. Johnson died, with the Vietnam peace agreement near completion in Paris, the heroic themes of his Administration — his Great Society, his war on poverty, his bills on civil rights and voting rights—were very much in the news. But by this time the emphasis if not the direction of American policy at home was undergoing a marked change.

"A person can be expected to act responsibly only if he has responsibility," President Nixon said at his second inaugural. "So let us encourage individuals at home and nations abroad to do more for themselves. Let us measure what we will do for others by what they will do for themselves."

In short, after Vietnam the emphasis is not on what government can do but on what it cannot and should not do; not on welfare but on work; not on a compassionate society but on a competitive society in which the comfortable majority will pay less in taxes and everyone will rely more on himself and less on the Federal Government.

Perhaps these are merely changes in style and rhetoric, due more to Mr. Nixon's philosophy than to the experiences of Vietnam; but particularly in the field of foreign affairs America after Vietnam is likely to regard the world as a much more complicated and diverse place than it did in the fifties and sixties.

For most of the last decade this country has been preoccupied with Vietnam on the assumption that the 2 per cent of Asia's population that live there were critical to the worldwide struggle between the irreconcilable forces of darkness and light. This and many other illusions have been modified if not rejected.

It was widely believed, for example, that Communism was a monolithic force working on a vast and centrally controlled strategy to change the balance of power in the world and threaten the vital security and commercial interests of the United States.

Reshaping Foreign Policy

The Communist threat to Greece and Turkey, in the late forties, the invasion of South Korea by North Korea, the blare of Communist pronouncements and the expansion of Soviet and Chinese influence all encouraged the belief—which persisted even after the Chinese-Soviet split—that the United States was confronted by a vast conspiracy that could be turned back only by its power and countermeasures.

Furthermore it was widely believed in the fifties and sixties that the system of collective-security alliances that had helped preserve and reconstruct the advanced industrial nations of Western Europe could be adapted to primitive societies lacking in industrial and political tradition. Part of this popular belief was that if American commitments were not met in one place—say, Vietnam—they could be regarded as worthless in other critical areas—say, Europe—and that if Vietnam fell other nations would fall—"like dominoes," as the popular saying of the day went.

Even before the cease-fire agreement drew near, President Nixon had begun to question those assumptions and shape foreign policy to the changing situation. The split

between Moscow and Peking and the need in both China and the Soviet Union for surplus grain and modern technology gave him the opportunity to renew diplomatic contact with Peking, and, despite Vietnam, to negotiate new agreements with Moscow on trade and arms control.

The likelihood is that the trend toward limited cooperation between the major powers will be even more marked with the final withdrawal of the United States from Vietnam.

Thus the United States, the Soviet Union and China all seem to have learned some of the lessons of the Vietnam war, limited their use of power and avoided a direct military confrontation.

A major question here is whether the Russians will again be tempted to assist in another "war of national liberation" in the belief that Vietnam was so painful for the United States that no President of the Vietnam generation would be tempted to intervene.

The experts in Washington are divided on the question, but a majority seem to believe that for the foreseeable future Peking and Moscow will decide that they have more to gain by cooperating with the United States than in risking another confrontation.

Role of Public Opinion

It is less clear that the lessons of the war have been learned in Washington. President Nixon has clearly reduced overseas commitments and tempered the cold-war rhetoric, but the habit of centralizing foreign-policy decisions in the White House, where so many of the Vietnam blunders were made, is persisting, as is the heavy influence of the military on foreign policy.

Charles W. Yost, one of the naton's most experienced diplomats, observes in his book "The Conduct and Misconduct of Foreign Affairs" that in the first three years of the Vietnam war American public opinion did not exercise either a stimulating or an inhibiting effect on United States leaders, but that Mr. Kennedy, Mr. Johnson and, at first, Mr. Nixon were so afraid of what public opinion *might* do if they "lost" the war that they misjudged both the problem in Vietnam and attitudes at home.

"There are many depressing examples of international conflicts," he writes, "in which leaders have first aroused their own people against a neighbor and then discovered to their chagrin that even when they judged the time had come to move toward peace, they were prisoners of the popular passions they had stimulated."

President Nixon's argument that the United States had to keep following his policy or look like "a pitiful, helpless giant" is only one of many illustrations to be found in Vietnam policy; but the chances are that this sort of thing will not be heard again for some time.

Meanwhile, Mr. Nixon does have to deal with the consequences of the war at home: with a kind of spiritual malaise, with the continuing opposition to his theme that the end of the war will not release additional funds for social reconstruction at home; with the resentment of policies reached in secret and not explained to Congress or the people; with the dangers of returning soldiers facing unemployment and exhortations to be self-reliant; and with an American conscience troubled over the bloodshed and sorrow.

The guess here is that it will take some time to restore the self-confidence of the pre-Vietnam years, but it may be that the destruction of many popular misconceptions in Vietnam will produce a more mature, if sadder, nation.