

# End and Beginning

By Tom Wicker

President Johnson died at about the moment the cease-fire agreement was being initialed in Paris, giving at least a symbolic relation to the two events. And as President Nixon announced the cease-fire, I could not help remembering—as perhaps some other listeners did—what Faulkner had told Dilsey say of the Compson family: "I seed de first en de last."

Mr. Nixon said he had gained a "peace with honor" that Mr. Johnson would have welcomed. Others may believe, with President Thieu of South Vietnam, that the agreement is more nearly for a cease-fire that permits American ground forces and the captives to be extricated from an incompleting Indochinese war. Either way, peace would not have had to be sought nor Americans extricated if the war had not been started.

This is not the moment for recriminations, or even for retracing the history of a conflict that has been so much a part of the lives of all Americans for seven years. The nation well may honor Lyndon Johnson for his domestic aims and achievements, and historians may dispute for years whether President Kennedy left him any choice but to send American bombers over North Vietnam and American troops into South Vietnam.

But those things happened. At one time over half a million American soldiers were in Vietnam; 46,000 died there. The destruction of life and landscape wrought by the contending forces beggars description; and at the pace he set for himself, it took Mr. Nixon four years, as long as our own Civil War, to wind up the American involvement in the fighting. The damage done in American life, the changes wrought in the world, cannot yet be calculated or fully understood.

And in the end, there was neither victory nor defeat but "peace with honor," alternatively "the right kind of peace." Thus did Mr. Nixon, right into the last Presidential statement of the war, maintain the debasement of

---

## IN THE NATION

---

language and the distortion of meaning which were not the least of its casualties—as if "protective reaction" could make a bombing strike other than a bombing strike, or any amount of explanation by Dr. Kissinger make "peace with honor" more than a peace of exhaustion and compromise and necessity.

It now seems apparent, moreover, that the North Vietnamese spring offensive of 1972 was designed to sweep aside the three-year results of Mr. Nixon's Vietnamization program, then to force a negotiated settlement on Hanoi's terms. The first objective was achieved, but Mr. Nixon restored the battlefield stalemate with his own violent measures of airpower. The ensuing negotiations reflected the deadlock, until the election and the final vicious round of bombing at the turn of the year apparently convinced the North Vietnamese that Mr. Nixon was under no restraint, either political or constitutional, in his ability to carry the war to their vitals for as long as he wished.

So, on both sides, it is a peace of violent compulsion, too, in which each adversary pounded his opponent into reluctant acquiescence in a compromise each had hoped to make a victory. If that is how honor is gained, men hold it too dear; but of course the price is always exacted from the dead.

Nevertheless, Mr. Nixon said that what has been achieved "contributes to the prospects of peace in the whole world," and maybe it does. Indochina may be at least briefly peaceful, and if any future fighting there can be confined to the contending forces among the Vietnamese people, Mr. Nixon's goal of a three-power balance in the world may be enhanced. The nation may even be able to turn somewhat more of its attention and resources to its own society, rather than to problems elsewhere.

But this opens up a distasteful line of argument—that, somehow, it was all worthwhile, that something really was achieved, that the world is a better place and its peoples more secure because of Hamburger Hill and Khe Sanh and the Tet offensive and the Christmas bombings and the pulverizing of Quang Tri.

Lyndon Johnson would have welcomed the end of the war, had he lived to see it, and he may have gone into the last night in the belief that he had no choice but to do what he did; but I, for one, doubt that in his heart he ever believed the world would be a better place for it. If he chose, he chose the lesser of evils, as he saw them, not some positive good; if he deluded himself, it was as to the necessity for the choice, not as to the benefits of war and destruction.

So if "the first step toward building the peace" has been taken, it was, as Mr. Nixon said, in "ending the war," not in fighting it. Which will be something to remember if Americans, including their Presidents, really want to "make the peace we have achieved a peace that will last."