

The Last Tango

By Anthony Lewis

PARIS—The second Indochina war is ending as it began, in obscurity and contradiction. It is like a Pirandello play, confounding appearance and reality. But as in Pirandello, there is a profound theme to be found amid the confusion.

The incongruities are glaring. The very text of the "agreement on ending the war and restoring peace in Vietnam" is a diplomatic curiosity, a document that calls on the parties to settle the fundamental questions now. It is an agreement to begin negotiating an agreement.

Le Duc Tho hailed the result as "a very great victory." Yet North Vietnam had abandoned, in the settlement, its long insistence on a negotiated end to the Government of Nguyen Van Thieu in Saigon.

Militarily, the end was at least as unsatisfactory for the United States. After all those years of punishing war, it was having to concede the presence of 145,000 North Vietnamese troops in the South—which is approximately 145,000 more than when the American intervention began.

President Nixon said the agreement offered not just a cease-fire but a chance for lasting peace, "peace with honor." But the man for whom he fought, General Thieu, treated the accord with unconcealed contempt. A Thieu spokesman indicated that, in explicit contradiction of the agreed terms, Saigon would not agree to early elections, would not open the political process to anti-Thieu forces and would not allow movement between the two zones in the South—even to let refugees go home.

And so it is easy for anyone, critic or supporter of the war, to criticize the Paris agreement. But to do so because of its ironies and confusions is to miss the point that they were inevitable in any negotiated settlement that achieved the one fundamental aim shared by the principal opposing parties.

That aim was to get the United States out of the Vietnam war, and the Paris agreement has achieved it. No matter how many imperfections appear, the nearly five years of talks in Paris will have been amply justified in their result if that accomplishment sticks.

Withdrawal has been essential to American society for many years, for reasons of the spirit that do not need to be argued any longer. They were manifest in the relief of both hawks and doves at the news from Paris.

Even if the worst happens and re-

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pression and guerrilla warfare flicker on in South Vietnam, the level of violence will be reduced by the end of the American role. The ordinary people of Vietnam will endure less destruction.

A last and certainly not least significant reason for welcoming the U.S. withdrawal is that it will free American diplomacy from its obsession with a peripheral interest. Prof. Ernest R. May of Harvard was surely right when he wrote for *The Washington Star-News* that future Americans will look back on this adventure with the same amazement that Frenchmen regard the intervention by Napoleon III in Mexico in the 1860's. There is more than enough of vital interest to the United States in her relations with her allies and her great-power competitors to occupy President Nixon and Henry Kissinger for the next four years.

At this fragile end of so much destruction that accomplished so little for anyone, it is worth recalling the far-sighted warning of one of the earliest and most committed critics of American intervention in Vietnam.

He spoke of American "illusions about the use of force" leading to "increasingly extensive escalation . . . increasingly censured by numerous peoples." He said friends of America had until now thought of her as she thought of herself, "championing the concept that we must allow people to determine their own destiny in their own way."

"If it is unthinkable that the American war apparatus will be annihilated on the spot," he said, "there is on the other hand no chance that the peoples of Asia will subject themselves to the law of the foreigner who comes from the other shores of the Pacific, whatever his intentions, however powerful his weapons. . . ."

"In view of the power, wealth and influence at present attained by the United States, the act of renouncing . . . a distant expedition once it appears unprofitable and unjustifiable . . . will not, in the final analysis, involve anything that could injure its pride, interfere with its ideals and jeopardize its interests. On the contrary . . . what an audience would the United States recapture from one end of the world to another, and what an opportunity would peace find on the scene and everywhere else."

That was not a carping partisan talking, or a moralizing amateur. It was Charles de Gaulle, speaking in Phnom Penh on Sept. 1, 1966.