

Truce but No Truce . . .

The Vietnam tragedy pursues its course. Casualty rolls, American and Vietnamese, cannot yet be closed after all. Political machinery for cease-fire supervision, so intricately elaborated in advance, seems clogged with feuds over credentials, landing permits and protocol. The governments say cease-fire but the fighting goes on.

No one expected the Vietnam war to end tidily. As long as the cease-fire documents did not draw a specific map of on-the-ground control—and the circumstances would not permit such a delineation—last-minute grabs for position across South Vietnam were fully expected. But the intensity of small-unit fighting these last two days stretches the anticipated untidiness to the limit.

Just five years ago the Vietnamese Communists launched their epic Tet offensive. Already Tet has assumed the stature of turning point in the Second Indochina War, as the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu was in the first. The parallels between these two prolonged battles are far from exact; indeed, Tet marked as much a collapse of North Vietnam's expectations as it did those of the United States. In Tet of 1968, both sides could have seen that their military pretensions were unrealistic, that neither side could win a military victory. It took five years less two days for that realization to be embodied in truce. But the futility of military action seems still to be eluding those on the battlefield.

The coming days are a moment of acute danger for the United States Government, both for the policy-makers of the executive branch and for the Congress. In a dozen actions and small decisions, the future relationship between the United States and South Vietnam is now being defined. How responsible is Washington to be for enforcing the truce if the international machinery cannot function? Can Saigon expect American support in maintaining or regaining positions threatened by assault after the cease-fire?

Has the United States removed itself from the Vietnam power struggle, or not? It was ominous Sunday to hear the American negotiator, William H. Sullivan, stress that this country is under "no inhibitions" if the truce breaks down or fails to catch. He cited the American air units in Thailand and the Seventh Fleet off the Vietnam coast as implicit warning to North Vietnam.

It is imperative that the future American role and responsibility in South Vietnam be defined clearly and deliberately by the nation's top political leadership. Otherwise a series of individual de facto decisions, some at a low level, could create a new relationship that may not be fully intended. The State Department spokesman has admitted that "everything is new—solutions to problems, if any, will have to be worked out on the ground." To avoid getting caught up in commitments creeping steadily upwards—it has happened before in Vietnam—the President might take Congress and the public into his confidence for a change, and state what this country's future role in Vietnam is to be.

. . . Meanwhile in Laos

As the fighting spasmodically subsides in South Vietnam and the last United States troops prepare to withdraw from that still unresolved conflict, continuing American air activity over Laos is a painful reminder that the United States still hasn't wholly extricated itself from the wider Indochina war.

To be sure, Henry A. Kissinger has offered assurances that an early cease-fire in Laos can be expected and this presumably would call a halt to the last vestige of American military activity in the area. The Laotian bombing is nevertheless at odds with the spirit of the Vietnam agreement signed last Saturday in Paris and with the principle of total United States disengagement in Southeast Asia which most Americans would like to think that agreement signifies.

The bombing offers a modest demonstration of the power which Administration officials have indicated they intend to maintain in the area even after withdrawal from Vietnam. The continued use of this power in the closely related Laotian conflict after the signing of the Vietnam settlement suggests a persisting reluctance of the Administration even now to allow its old Indochina allies to fight their own battles in accordance with the prudent precepts of the Nixon Doctrine.

This doctrinal ambiguity raises serious questions about what the Administration might do if any of these governments should appear to be endangered as a result of a breakdown in the Vietnam agreement, a not improbable eventuality. The retention of major United States strike forces in Southeast Asia and their continuing deployment over Laos add force to the argument of Senators Church and Case for action to require Congressional approval before any American forces can be recommitted in Vietnam, Laos or Cambodia once the last prisoner of war has been freed.