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# Past And Future

By Anthony Lewis

*No one in these debates has had a monopoly of moral insight.*

—Henry Kissinger, Jan. 24.

LONDON, Feb. 4—Mr. Kissinger is right. It would be hard to find any American who from the beginning took a consistent, principled position on Vietnam. There are not many claimants for the holiness award.

But there was a real issue that for four years divided President Nixon and Mr. Kissinger from those who disagreed with them on Vietnam. It was whether the American role in the world required, or justified, our continuation of the war despite the horror that visited on the people of Indochina and the social division it caused in the United States.

The war is over now: every day one has more reason to say that with hope and confidence. But it is no less important at the beginning of peace to understand where Americans have differed and how they may agree.

Mr. Kissinger stated his view of the American interest in Vietnam

## AT HOME ABROAD

with admirable candor four years ago. However doubtful the basis of our original intervention, he wrote in Foreign Affairs, "What is involved now is confidence in American promises." An unsatisfactory settlement could weaken that confidence around the world, he said, and undermine stability.

From the premise—that "confidence in American promises" was what mattered in Vietnam—it was easy to move on to the policy of maintaining Nguyen Van Thieu in Saigon at all costs. It was then possible to escalate the destruction, to bomb both Vietnams in record amounts and invade Cambodia and Laos if necessary to keep General Thieu in office.

But a great many people who shared Mr. Kissinger's belief in the importance of the American role in world stability did not agree that the policy of the last four years protected that role. Averell Harriman, who is hardly a softy in negotiating with the Communists, did not think it was in the

interest of the United States to tie itself to General Thieu. Alastair Buchan, the leading British strategic analyst, thought the war's "greatest damage" was to "the international authority of the United States."

The deeper doubt was about the Kissinger premise. Given the professed ideals of Americans, their vision of themselves in history, could their country act in terms of power alone, indifferent to the suffering it caused?

The answer is that the doubts themselves limited the ability to operate in power terms. The critics of the war felt increasingly frustrated and useless as the years went on, but they did matter. A B-52 pilot who would not bomb, a Congressman who voted no, a citizen who protested—each made an incremental difference.

Henry Kissinger understood all that as well as anyone: the domestic restraints on policy, the genuine intellectual differences over international implications. That is why it is a little surprising to have him suggest now that he, too, suffered moral anguish. It always seemed implicit in his view that morals were not his business.

In a way the detachment of a Kissinger, the lack of emotional commitment—the freedom from sentimentality, as he might put it—may have special value in this strange new postwar period. Strange indeed: In the long history of irrationality in national conflict there has hardly been anything like the swiftness of this transition from hatred and destruction to association and reconstruction—the more remarkable because the two erstwhile enemies remain undefeated.

The men in Hanoi are not exactly sentimentalists either. They compromised their military aims and moved to settle with the United States last summer, one would guess, because they decided that Richard Nixon was going to be President for four more years. They will receive Mr. Kissinger in that hard-headed spirit.

President Nixon obviously recognizes his own special responsibility to make this extraordinary transition from war to peace with Hanoi work. He took notable care at his news conference last week to protect the prospective new relationship with North Vietnam, from public or Con-

gressional attack. He called it "an investment in peace."

The President did display continuing animosity toward his critics on Vietnam, making the puzzling charge that they had offered "the most vigorous criticism . . . of the peace agreement." I think those who have wanted peace for a long time have welcomed it now. But the President may understandably feel that he has not had enough praise for arranging the kind of terms that he calls "peace with honor."

Whether there is honor in having waited four years for this peace is another way of stating the issue that has divided us all along. The critics ought not to ride that issue now; they should give the President a chance to make his peace work. But of course they will try to see that America does not forget the broader lesson of the Vietnam tragedy, the lesson of power misused.