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## Cease-Fire: Another Covert War



By Edward S. Herman

One of President Nixon's most successful tactics in pursuing the Vietnam war has been to reduce its visibility to the American public, thereby freeing himself to continue it as he sees fit. Thus the war was "wound down" in the Nixon first term - during which, by conservative estimate, more than 4,500,000 Indochinese civilians were killed, wounded, or made refugees and about 1,500,000 combatants became casualties. Now, at the beginning of the second term, the war is declared "over," although this is now said to be only the "first step in building the peace."

In the Orwellian world of official double-speak we must convert language into its opposite to approximate the truth. Mr. Nixon says, "The people of South Vietnam have been guaranteed the right to determine their own future without outside interference." In non-Orwellian, read: Having insisted on the preservation of a government of our own choice for two decades by massive interference from the outside, we promise to stick with it to assure the survival of our satellite."

What Presidents Johnson and Nixon have achieved by their historically unprecedented violence in Vietnam is the temporary survival of a corrupt and increasingly brutal police state managing an American-created charnel house. (Impressive and

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terrifying documentation is given by Holmes Brown and Don Luce in "Hostages of War, Saigon's Political Prisoners," just published by the Indochina Mobile Education Project.) This regime is less representative than the unrepresentative Diem

government, and it is still unable to command the loyalties of its own people or to survive without massive aid from the United States, even after many years of "pacification" and devastation by its foreign sponsor. It lives and survives on American money and on the terrorization and repression of its own people. The Nixon triumph is the assurance that this terror and the agony of Vietnam will continue for a while longer.

The Vietnam war itself is far from over, despite the agreement and the cease-fire. A continued deep American involvement and an attempt to shape the course of events there are already apparent in the survival needs of the Thieu government, in commitments of men and resources, in explicit longer-term strategies and objectives and in the character of the newly signed agreement itself, which clearly fails to settle the basic question that has been at issue from the beginning: Who rules in Saigon?

The war could have truly ended by a definitive victory for either side, or by the formation of a controlling government representing some sort of compromise among the main popular groupings in South Vietnam. None of these outcomes was achieved and no political settlement is in sight. The Kissinger-Tho agreement is a trade-off of concessions that allows the basic issue to be bypassed and resolved in the future within a somewhat narrower context than previously, by machinery and processes that are both vague and unpromising in the Vietnamese context.

In important respects the agreement and cease-fire put the level and character of U.S. involvement back to the pre-escalation period of January, 1965. At that time more than 20,000 American "advisers" were in South Vietnam; U.S. military and economic aid was massive; covert intervention had long been under way throughout Indochina, and a firm decision had been made by the U.S. leadership to preserve an anti-Communist regime in South Vietnam. The Johnson

escalation of February, 1965, was brought on by the imminent collapse of the Saigon government, which was unable to sustain itself in a mainly indigenous struggle, even with U.S. aid very much larger than Hanoi's assistance to the National Liberation Front.

The "outside aggression" myth (with the aggressor shifting from time to time among Hanoi, Peking and "international communism") served a public-relations need to justify the U.S. refusal to allow dominant internal revolutionary forces to prevail. Washington chose to oppose a deeply rooted mass movement in the South and to support a government that was, in the words of the late pacification chief John Paul Vann, "a continuation of the French colonial regime....whose popular political base does not now exist." One does not "pacify" a people being saved from aggression. Repelling a genuine outside aggressor would have been easy. Imposing a reactionary minority government by violence on a distant rural population has been cruel and difficult.

The Johnson strategy was to compensate for our client's lack of indigenous political strength by sheer violence - pounding away at South and North alike, until by overwhelming destruction and terror we forced submission. Nixon, while emphasizing similar means toward an identical end, recognized that Johnson's domestic political failure was largely a result of permitting our casualties to get too high, and he adjusted accordingly, withdrawing U.S. combat troops and getting American casualties down. Although he dropped an even larger tonnage of bombs on Indochina and was responsible for even more Vietnamese casualties and refugees than Johnson, Nixon was able to reduce the war's visibility to the American public, while still hanging in there.

The Nixon military strategy had two prongs: First, as with Johnson, was an attempt to weaken the North and the NLF by massive destruction - especially by air power, which saved American lives at the expense of reduced discrimination among Vietnamese targets. Second was the investment of huge resources in the military and police capability of the Thieu regime. It was hoped that continuing the aerial destruction might force submission. But if not, perhaps Saigon could compete more or less on its own with the People's Revolutionary Government.

With the tacit or active support of Washington, South Vietnam has become a heavily armed police state, housing more political prisoners and using torture more extensively and systematically than anywhere else in the world. It is headed by a fanatical anti-Communist who is regarded by the Vietnamese center and left as a quisling, who has made the advocacy or pursuit of compromise a serious crime. Over the past several years Thieu has imprisoned, terrorized or otherwise forcibly suppressed most of the middle-of-the-road parties that stand between himself and the

People's Revolutionary Government, weakening further any possibility of reconciliation and leaving him with an extremely narrow political base. Thieu's government is built neither for independence nor for national concord; it is a unique dependency, spiritually and materially organized to fight on for military and political victory.

Although bombing, Vietnamization, and the overall draft of the Nixon Vietnam-policy - including acceptance of the new peace agreement - are incompatible with a compromise political settlement, they fit well the hypothesis of a still live "win

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*'It will be another war, covert and by proxy, hidden from the American public.'*

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policy," adapting to domestic political necessities (which call for an end of the war) and putting into play the Nixon doctrine of reliance on U.S.-financed local forces aided by covert warfare. On Nov. 3, 1972, it was reported that the number of U.S. advisers in Vietnam would be doubled to 10,000. Subsequent reports indicate that these men will be U.S. military and para-military personnel, dressed in civilian clothes, nominally employed by U.S. corporations and the Agency for International Development.

The prospects are reasonably clear that the "peace" in Indochina under the new agreement will really be a less visible war patterned on the models of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam from 1954 through 1961. It will be another presidential war, covert and by proxy, directed by a few top officials in the executive branch and hidden as far as possible from Congress, the press and the American public. And if it does not succeed in maintaining General Thieu or some reasonable facsimile in power, we can be sure that North Vietnam will be accused of "renewed aggression" and intolerable violations of the January agreement which will provide once again the legal and moral cover for a resumption of U.S. bombing and other forms of overt intervention. The recent terror bombings of Hanoi and Haiphong may be interpreted in this light as a warning to North Vietnam of precisely such a sequence if the future course of events is not compatible with the continued Nixon determination to "win with Thieu" in South Vietnam.

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*Professor of Finance Edward S. Herman is author of Atrocities in Vietnam: Myths and Realities. This article is reprinted with permission from Newsday. It appeared in their Jan. 30 issue.*

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