

Power and Innocence

By Anthony Lewis

LONDON, Feb. 25—As the foreign ministers assembled in Paris for the international conference on Vietnam, Tran Va Lam of Saigon made a comment that for once could win general agreement. The unstated purpose of the meeting, he said, was "to de-Americanize the peace."

Those words reflect the curious nature of this conference. For its fundamental decision has already been made by the United States, and that is to leave Vietnam to the Vietnamese. The particular form has been accepted after tortuous negotiations by the warring Vietnamese parties, and the function of this meeting is to endorse it.

A rich strain of irony runs through the whole affair. An agreement that Vietnam should be free of external, Western interference was supposedly reached at Geneva in 1954. But the United States refused to accept the agreement, joined in sabotaging it and then entered and repeatedly escalated the resulting military conflict.

In the truce terms last month the United States at last formally accepted the Geneva agreement. Yet President Nixon and his supporters have treated those terms as if they justified the war and proved its critics wrong.

The President, who could rightly take satisfaction from the fact of the settlement, has made the broader claim that it represents "peace with honor." Addressing the South Carolina Legislature, he said American forces had been sent to Vietnam "for the most selfless purpose that any nation has ever fought a war," to prevent the imposition of a Communist government on South Vietnam by force.

Those of us who believed for years that the American war in Indochina was a terrible misuse of power do not now seek an argument about the peace. However ragged the truce, it is better than what went before. Those like myself who doubted that Mr. Nixon would ever end direct American military involvement should gladly admit now that we were probably wrong—and hope that the remaining uncertainty soon ends.

But it is another matter to be told that the course of American policy over the last dozen years has represented nobility or honor. That would only perpetuate a corrupting myth.

It is the myth of innocence. The Vietnam War showed how strong a hold it still has on the American imagination. The notion that we are a uniquely idealistic people survived all the years of bombing, all the Mylai revelations, all the lies and illusions. It allowed us to brutalize and destroy on an enormous scale in Indochina

AT HOME ABROAD

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while leaving many of us convinced that we were kind and helpful.

The phenomenon was perceptively explored last fall, in Saturday Review: The Society, by Francine du Plessix Gray. The myth of America as Eden, she said, helped us to avoid feeling a responsibility for our grossest actions in Vietnam. The war indeed made most Americans increasingly resentful of criticism: "Don't speak to us of our sins," they said.

It is entirely natural for any country to try to escape the truth about its wars. But to perpetuate illusion is dangerous, and especially so in this case. The United States is the most powerful nation on earth; for our own safety and the world's we have to learn that, like others, we are a flawed people who can use our power reck-

The American Christmas bombing is a notable example. Apologists for the Nixon policy say it was right because it "worked"—the North Vietnamese agreed to terms.

Exactly what happened in the peace talks is not clear to outsiders. But even assuming that Hanoi gave ground because of the bombing, what is the actual difference between the October draft and the final agreement? Some verbal implications of South Vietnamese sovereignty, larger foreign truce teams, details—distinctions that hardly anyone today would consider worth a day of war, much less that bombing.

But the factual issue is of course not decisive. The real point of difference between the American Government's apologists and its critics is a moral one.

The Government's concern last fall, as it had been for years of the war, was primarily with its own face. The crucial need was for terms that could be sold politically; anything that worked in that sense was good, whatever further misery it meant to the Indochinese. But some Americans, millions of us, rejected the idea of a policy without moral content, without concern for the means used. And while it is right that the divisions in American society should be healed, that lesson—the lesson of power and false innocence—cannot be forgotten.

DEC 72
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