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Vietnam Aid

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Neither those who favor it nor those who oppose it yet know precisely what post-war aid to Indochina means. The Nixon Administration is hesitating to make any public proposals until it determines whether the terms of the cease-fire are going to become effective, and certainly until after all the American prisoners of war are safely out of North Vietnamese custody. But the forces of public opinion are already at work on Congress, in the form of mail by the truckload, and each elected Representative will soon face some tricky decisions.

First of all, a satchel-full of diverse notions is contained in the term, "aid to Indochina." There is reconstruction aid for North Vietnam. There is economic aid to victims of the war, in both North and South Vietnam. There is support for the Saigon Government of President Thieu, including his armed forces. There is the continued presence of American bombers and armed men in Thailand—not an aid question at all, but intimately related to the political and financial costs of the future United States role in Indochina.

Each of these issues deserves independent consideration, and there will be many who favor one form of aid and oppose another. Some programs will necessarily be bilateral, others should be in consortium or partnership with multilateral agencies. From the start Congress will have to be wary not to be maneuvered into the position of facing one "aid to Vietnam" package, with the necessity of voting it in or out without effective line-by-line controls.

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The arguments on Vietnam aid are as fragmented as the components. Opposition comes from diehards who refuse to give one penny to Communists, from others skeptical of the whole United States foreign aid program. Many legislators see aid to Vietnam as a useful bargaining chip in their debate with the Administration on impoundment of other authorized funds. Others fear that under the guise of economic—or, certainly, military—aid, the Administration might lead the country into new political commitments in Southeast Asia.

The most important clarification so far on aid issues came from President Nixon at his March 2 news conference. Any assistance program, he said, "will be covered by the existing levels for the budget . . . for national security purposes; it will not come out of the domestic side of the budget." This welcome assurance should lay to rest one of the most widespread reservations about post-war Indochina aid.

None of the obligations already undertaken in the cease-fire agreements eliminates the need for the closest scrutiny of exactly what kind of aid is to be authorized, and how it is to reach its end use. The recent account in The Times of the widespread corruption in disbursal of refugee relief funds in South Vietnam, though unfortunately no surprise, demonstrates the challenge to the future administrators of the Vietnam aid program.

Senator Aiken made a sensible statement in the Senate endorsing the principle of Vietnam aid but specifying that "any aid we give to Vietnam should be clearly tied to the rebuilding of specific utilities, factories or municipal services or to specific resettlement of refugees." He added that "the President should welcome a tight Congressional rein on the spending of funds, which might involve quarterly, rather than annual, consultations with Congress."

Considering this doughty Vermont Republican's long record of wisdom in his attitude to Vietnam, his endorsement—and his reservations—on post-war aid deserve the respect of the Executive branch and of his wavering colleagues on Capitol Hill.