

WR POW
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The Right 'Signals' in Vietnam

In suspending mine-clearing operations off North Vietnam and in halting talks with Hanoi about reconstruction, Mr. Nixon has sent just the right "signals" to indicate his concern over Communist violations of the Vietnam cease-fire. These are gestures of diplomacy, not of war: a wielding of the carrot rather than the stick. Unlike bombing, they do not raise either constitutional or political issues at home. Very few Americans, we surmise, will find it unreasonable that Mr. Nixon has taken these steps. Moreover, they are gestures of American disengagement. In our view, the mine-clearing and reconstruction offers made sense as part of the whole cease-fire package, but if there is not to be a cease-fire, then the logic of mine-clearing and reconstruction fades. Hanoi does not lack for friends who can help out at both tasks.

We see yet another positive aspect to the President's new gestures. Some administration members declare that the January agreement must be "fully carried out" and that the United States will not abide the other side's selective fulfillment of it. But the new gestures seem to suggest that this is not the President's policy: now that the troops and prisoners are out, he intends to carry out the obligations undertaken in the agreement only to the extent he deems appropriate. Exhibit A is his suspension of the mine-clearing and aid discussions. Exhibit B—quite different, of course, in its threatening implications—is his resumption of reconnaissance flights over North Vietnam. One can deplore that the complete agreement is not being smoothly consummated but it appears to us wiser to recognize, as the President now implicitly has, that the agreement is not "of a piece."

It is not, after all, that full implementation is necessary in order for Mr. Nixon to deliver on his stated war aim of assuring South Vietnam a reasonable chance to make it on its own. By past American sacrifice, by continuing American aid, by readying Saigon to fight its own battles, by using his new leverage in Moscow and Peking—by all these elements, the President has fully satisfied the requirements of his own policy. To insist on "full" implementation, when it is plain that both Vietnamese sides mean to cheat just about every chance they get, is merely to provide a rationale for open-ended American participation in a struggle among the Vietnamese.

Mr. Kissinger is reportedly dismayed that North Vietnam has not switched more quickly and cleanly from

the military to the political track. No doubt Mr. Nixon is similarly dismayed. One can have sympathy, especially in view of the prediction of many war critics that Hanoi and the Vietcong would make a quick switch to politics. Fortunately, however, the American mission can fairly be judged to have been accomplished, despite what has happened since January. And surely a responsible President will not elevate personal disappointment to the level of a national imperative. Those who urge the President to continue regarding Vietnam as an essential arena in which to demonstrate American will, when there is no legitimate American interest to be served by such a demonstration, are, in a word, irresponsible.

We would note that it is not that clear exactly what has happened in Vietnam since January. The administration concedes that not all violations are on the Communist side; a "preponderance" are, it says, whatever that means. Hanoi has continued sending men and supplies down the Ho Chi Minh Trail—for a purpose (a military offensive or political action) which events have not revealed—but at the same time Hanoi has, according to the Pentagon, withdrawn portions of one or more divisions from South Vietnam. In any event, it is inconceivable to us that the vaunted results of the Nixon Vietnamization program have evaporated in just three months. For the administration to imply that, by its jitters, is careless and wrong.

American warplanes are now bombing in Cambodia within a few miles of Phnom Penh. Presumably, by continuing to move in, the insurgents can "walk" American bombs downtown. The U.S. embassy in Cambodia concedes, by the way, there is no documented evidence that North Vietnamese and Vietcong troops are fighting there. That the insurgents can withstand aerial pounding does not seem to be seriously in doubt. But whether the American-supported government of Lon Nol could survive the American bombing of its capital is in doubt. Our sense of events is that Prince Sihanouk will be back in Phnom Penh before too long. Some may be apprehensive at this prospect but we share the editorial judgment of the Star-News that, so great is Communist control in Cambodia anyway, "It is not clear that a complete Communist takeover in Cambodia would place South Vietnam in much greater jeopardy than it is in today." And Mr. Nixon has, we repeat, put South Vietnam in an excellent position to fend for itself.