

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE James Schlesinger persists in warning Hanoi that, if it conducts an all-out offensive in South Vietnam, the President may seek and get from Congress authority to resume bombing. He should stop. His warnings are misplaced on three counts. They could tempt North Vietnam to test them—this is the principal lesson of the history of the threatening “signals” which Washington has been sending Hanoi since the early 1960s. They could tempt South Vietnam to lean on them—to get in militarily over its head in the expectation of being rescued by the United States. And they reflect an alarming misconception of what we have taken to be the heart of the Nixon policy toward Vietnam and the requirements of American policy now.

The heart of the Nixon policy has been, we thought, to bring South Vietnam to the point where its future depended on its own exertions. The United States was not to abandon Saigon: hence American participation in combat until a year ago and the supply role sustained since then. But neither was the United States to remain indefinitely responsible for fighting Saigon's battles. That is to say, the President's policy granted the possibility that, after being launched on its own, Saigon might go under. But having won Saigon a reasonable chance to endure, Washington would not regard it as an intolerable disaster for American interests if Saigon flubbed that chance.

This is precisely the point Mr. Schlesinger seems to miss. His threats of a return to American combat indicate a belief that the eventual outcome in Vietnam is so vital to the United States as to be worth resuming the war, that the outcome is still an American responsibility and that the outcome is within American power to shape. In 1974 we would have thought that all these ghosts had been laid to rest. They constitute nothing less than a rationale for another decade's participation in a war which Americans have every good political and strategic reason to put permanently behind them.

Moreover, we cannot believe that Congress, if approached for its permission to start up the bombing, would go along. Mr. Schlesinger suggests that since the public supported the Nixon response to the Communist offensive in 1972, it would support a similarly stiff response to a similarly blatant Communist invasion now. He's dreaming. To fight the last round in a long match, as

Mr. Nixon did in 1972, is very different from climbing back in the ring for a new match. Nor does the President now have anything like the public standing which he enjoyed in 1972. Mr. Schlesinger ought to go talk with Melvin Laird.

To be sure, the situation in Vietnam is wretched. The year-old “Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace” has become all but a dead letter among the Vietnamese. That agreement did permit the American combat withdrawal and did remove Vietnam as a major complication in relations between Washington, Moscow and Peking—no small achievements, for all that they were painfully overdue. But beyond that, the agreement simply established the general framework in which the war among the Vietnamese would go on.

Fighting is regular and widespread, and casualties are very high; the Saigon-Vietcong Joint Military Commission created at Paris is evidently about to disband. Hanoi has built up a strong conventional military force within the considerable areas it holds in South Vietnam. This probably precludes, by the way, the necessity for the North to launch another blatant cross-border invasion of the sort which notably broadened public support for Mr. Nixon's defense against it in 1972. Political talks between the South Vietnamese factions are stalemated. Indicatively, no civilian prisoners have been exchanged for six months. The Vietcong claim 200,000 of their civilians remain captives of the enemy; Saigon says 67,000 of its civilians are captives. The other day, President Nguyen Van Thieu called off the planned general elections in South Vietnam and ordered his troops and aircraft to press the attack in Communist-held areas.

With the United States in the war, it took about 10 years to produce a balance adequate to permit the drawing of a “peace” agreement. The contending Vietnamese are now composing a new balance, and it is a fair one, with each side equally supported and equipped, and with each having roughly equal populations, resources and military capabilities. Most important, it is a balance which does not commit the United States to anything more than logistical support for the South. That is the way it ought to be left. A lingering war is a sad legacy for our own long hard war effort. But it is rightly and honorably their war, not ours, and it is irresponsible in the extreme to suggest otherwise.