

War Without End, Amen

By Anthony Lewis

ABROAD AT HOME

Since the United States first intervened in Vietnam, we have had two broad alternatives of policy. One is to try to impose our desired pattern on the area by force of arms. The other is to withdraw, leaving the Vietnam problem to the Vietnamese and doing only what we can to encourage accommodation.

Our leaders long ago chose the first course. In doing so they naturally told us that war would be only a temporary necessity: soon there would be a free government in Saigon with the political legitimacy and effectiveness to govern in peace. In pursuit of that illusion we bombed Vietnam and poisoned vegetation and lost 50,000 American lives.

Then, a year ago, we signed an agreement for "peace." Perhaps only the naive thought that act signaled a decision to choose the second alternative at last and leave Vietnam alone. But how many saw it as nothing more than a device to carry on intervention and war by other means? How many would have predicted that five years hence, or ten, or twenty, the United States would still be trying, by arms and ammunition, to impose a solution on Vietnam?

That vision of perpetual proxy war is not just a grim fantasy. It would be the necessary result of the policy disclosed by Secretary of State Kissinger the other day in a remarkably candid letter to Senator Edward Kennedy.

The Paris agreement and our "long and deep involvement in Vietnam," Mr. Kissinger said, both leave the United States with "commitments" to South Vietnam — though there is nothing written down. He spoke of providing the Saigon Government "the means necessary for its self-defense and for its economic viability." For how long?

"We have . . . committed ourselves very substantially, both politically and morally. While the South Vietnamese Government and people are demonstrating increasing self-reliance, we believe it is important that we continue our support as long as it is needed."

That saving phrase about Saigon's "increasing self-reliance" — what a wonderful echo of all those forgotten promises of light at the end of the tunnel! And just as cynical.

The United States last year supplied the resources for more than 80 per cent of South Vietnam's Government budget. We pay for the oil, we give food and we supply the arms.

For the current fiscal year, which ends June 30, the Nixon Administration has requested \$2.24 billion in visible appropriations to aid the Saigon Government, and it projects \$2.4-billion for the next fiscal year. Actual

spending is almost certainly a good deal higher than published, with additional money coming from the secret C.I.A. budget. Senator Kennedy estimates that aid this year totals \$3-billion.

It is only this enormous American subvention that enables President Thieu to maintain his garrison state in South Vietnam—to keep one million men under arms, and a huge police force, and jails filled with political prisoners. It is American policy and American money that allow General Thieu to spurn the terms of the peace agreement calling for political accommodation and to carry on a policy of aggressive military action and indiscriminate shelling of areas under the other side's control.

General Thieu is our surrogate in a proxy war. We pretend that he emerged from a democratic process, but the fact is that we helped him to power in the first place and support him now as he pursues American goals for South Vietnam.

Nguyen Van Thieu is a shrewd man, and he understands that he can remain in office only so long as the United States continues to pay for his million-man bodyguard. He understands, therefore, that he can never afford a political compromise or state of peace. He must maintain the atmosphere, and the reality, of war.

Among those who have studied the origins of our intervention in Vietnam, there is disagreement about whether the leaders who took us in believed their own hopeful words about early viability in Saigon. They had plenty of intelligence showing that no Saigon Government could be expected to survive without continuing massive armed support. Did our leaders go on escalating nevertheless, because they knew nothing else to do?

It is a nice argument about the distant past. But Henry Kissinger well knew the truth about Saigon's prospects when we bombed Hanoi over Christmas, 1972, in order to change some commas in the peace agreement. He well knew that there could never be any way to keep General Thieu in power except perpetual war, waged by the United States through surrogates. And he knows it now when he writes about the prospect of "stable peace."

That is why, despite his other accomplishments, some of us believe that Mr. Kissinger will go down in history on his Vietnam policy as a cynical betrayer of American ideals. But those judgments will come, if ever, a long time from now. The task at the moment is for Congress to end the American intervention in Vietnam.