

Peace With Honor: II

By Anthony Lewis

BOSTON, June 5—Whatever their views on Vietnam, most Americans would agree that the way we got into that war was a disaster. We were taken in by deception—by leaders who falsely assured us that we were only responding to a Vietnamese request, that our troops had a limited role, that victory was around the corner and so on.

We have paid a terrible price for that deception, in politics and economics and belief in our ideals. Surely we ought to know that. Yet we are in danger of allowing ourselves to be deceived about the end of our war in Vietnam as we are about the beginning.

The first detailed account of the steps leading to the Vietnam truce agreement is given by Tad Szulc in the current Foreign Policy magazine. When one reflects on the story, what is striking is those familiar official attitudes: deceit, secrecy, contempt for public opinion.

President Nixon has repeatedly told us, for example, that he forced North Vietnam to accept the agreement by bombing Hanoi over Christmas, 1972. But Hanoi had long ago agreed to the terms; it urgently wanted to sign in

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October what we finally signed the following January. The recalcitrant party was South Vietnam, and the Szulc piece shows that the bombing was designed to demonstrate our willingness to use the most brutal measures in her support.

Why does the President persist in so transparent a misrepresentation of the Christmas bombing? Because the bombing had another purpose as well: To impress right-wing opinion in this country with our "toughness"—to foster the illusion that we smashed our way out of Vietnam with a kind of victory, called "honor."

In this fantasy, American firmness successfully answered aggression. We ended our role in Vietnam with a strong Government in Saigon able to maintain its own security, and with peace secured.

The reality is different. When we began our full-scale military action in Vietnam, in 1966, there were about 3,000 North Vietnamese troops in the south; in the truce we implicitly accepted the presence of 130,000 to 140,000. So much for "victory." The Saigon Government would not last a day without us. The U.S. role has not ended: The President wants to spend more than half of all American foreign aid for the world next year, economic and military, in Indochina. And of course there is no peace for the Vietnamese.

The officially maintained illusion of toughness, victory and honor is a piece of Caucasian face-saving. It fits perfectly with Henry Kissinger's fear of a right-wing reaction in America if our withdrawal from Vietnam were seen as a defeat. It fits with Mr. Nixon's stated view of Americans as "children"—who cannot be told the truth.

When the Szulc article appeared, the State Department handled it with the same attitude of contempt for public intelligence. Asked about its mention of secret commitments to Hanoi, an official spokesman said there were none. Later he was shown a secret State Department document saying that the U.S. had "assured" Hanoi we would remove all American civilian employes of the Saigon army within a year, as we have not done. The spokesman then said that he had not been "asked about American civilians, but only about secret commitments." The word "assurance," he explained, did not mean "commitment."

Congress has to a great extent been an accomplice in the policy of disingenuousness about the end of the war. Senator Fulbright could give a wonderful world-weary speech about the United States in Vietnam, but he did almost nothing; he and his Foreign Relations colleagues have seldom even asked Mr. Kissinger hard questions. Nor has the press been exactly a tiger in getting at the truth of what we did and what we promised before the truce agreement.

In short, we are getting more of what took us into Vietnam: the surreptitious manipulation of power, the

selling of illusions, the avoidance of hard truth. Do we really want to pay the corrupting price for all that again? Or are we ready to face realities now—ready to believe that, with all its inconveniences, democracy suits us better than government by secrecy and deceit?

There are reasons to think that Americans would prefer the truth, however unpleasant. People are showing increasing disquiet with the official fantasies. The Chicago Tribune, which along with The Washington Post published the text of the Szulc article in substantial part, wrote recently that it had supported Mr. Nixon in Vietnam but was concerned now about the

word "honor." After the "fearful price" paid from 1969 to 1973, it said, "the killing goes on . . . and we can wonder, as the French must have wondered after Dien Bien Phu, how high the price for that honor, and how legitimate it was."

It is not healthy for any people to fool themselves about what they have done—not Frenchmen, not Germans, not Americans. Our society will continue to suffer from the effects of Vietnam until we tell ourselves the truth: that we made a mistake, that our intervention was destructive, that there can be no peace and no honor until we abandon the illusion of a civilizing mission in Vietnam.

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 PART I

In Anthony Lewis' column on the Op-Ed page yesterday a date was incorrect because of a typographical error. His sentence should have read, "When we began our full-scale military action in Vietnam, in 1965 . . ."