



Hanoi's Aid Claim

Andrew Tully

LAST TIME I looked, the Ford administration was still "studying" a report brought back from North Vietnam by members of an American relief work team that Hanoi was willing to compromise on its claim for U.S. reconstruction aid.

The Communists' gall is of a piece with that of the youth convicted of murdering his parents. The judge asked him if he had anything to say before sentence was pronounced, whereupon the youth pleaded for mercy on the grounds he was an orphan.

On the sidewalks of New York, they call this "chutzpah," and it has always been a hallmark of Communist negotiators.

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WASHINGTON and Hanoi have been exchanging messages over the question of normalizing relations since the war ended. North Vietnam insists that the United States honor a promise made in the 1973 Paris cease-fire agreement to provide aid, but the Ford administration claims that flagrant and admitted Communist cease-fire violations nullified the American commitment.

Hanoi bases its case on a letter from President Nixon dated Feb. 1, 1973, which promised \$3.25 billion in postwar aid. But the letter was accompanied by a note from Henry Kissinger, then Mr. Nixon's national security adviser and chief negotiator, that the pledge was conditional upon congressional approval.

Mr. Nixon was shrewd enough. He wanted to make the gesture, and, indeed, he intended to do everything in his power to fulfill his promise — if the Communists lived up to the cease-fire terms. But experience had taught him the peril that accrues from putting trust in a Communist's word of honor. So he insisted, over Kissinger's objections, that Kissinger spell out the need for an OK from Capitol Hill.

Everybody knows what happened. Hanoi repeatedly violated the cease-fire terms, using those violations to speedily overcome all resistance by the South.

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BUT THIS IS a country full of well-meaning amateurs in the field of foreign policy. In that class is the group representing various national religious and peace organizations, led by James Armstrong, Methodist bishop of the Dakotas.

While in Vietnam, the group met with a "senior Hanoi spokesman," one Hoang Tung of the North Vietnamese Communist party's newspaper, Nhan Dan. Members of the group quoted him as telling them that aid is "not a question of money, but of a symbolic gesture toward normalization of relations." To the American visitors, that meant the amount of aid was negotiable.

Horesefeathers. The amount of aid is not negotiable because North Vietnam long ago forfeited the right to any aid at all.