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The War in Vietnam Goes on

LE DUC THO and Henry Kissinger have fallen into a pattern of conducting joint checks or, if you will, inquests, on the Vietnam cease-fire agreement about every six months. The first such review, made last June, resulted in a communique but otherwise not much more. The second, made a few days ago in Paris, produced only a few waves for photographers: no pledges, no warnings, no pronouncements of any kind. Presumably Hanoi's and Washington's chief negotiators discussed the various ways in which the January agreement is being shredded, and the ways—which appear now to be quite limited—in which it could be put into effect. When President Nixon last month described the result that had been brought about in Vietnam as “peace at least for a while,” he was on the right track. With the withdrawal of American forces and the return of American prisoners, the direct American interest in the war tapered off sharply. But the original and abiding issue of the war—which Vietnamese shall rule South Vietnam—remains undecided. Neither side is yet ready to relinquish arms on terms which the other will accept. So the war goes on.

In the fighting since January, the most cheering aspect is that the South Vietnamese have at least held their own. To be sure, there are in Washington and perhaps also in Saigon, those who believe that the United States failed in its 10-year mission of creating a South Vietnamese establishment able to care for itself; they expect Saigon's collapse shortly. We would argue to the contrary, however, that Saigon's will and capacity for self-defense could not fairly be tested until the Americans had left the war, and that in the intervening year, Saigon has passed the test. It survived the political shock of the cease-fire agreement and the subsequent American departure. It survived the further shock of last August's congressional ban on further American Indochina warmaking. It has survived a year's continuing war in Cambodia and a year's approaching peace in Laos. It has survived steady North Vietnamese military pressure, plus economic strain and political ferment. South Vietnam is not yet a Jeffersonian democracy

—and never will be. Assuming this vision ever made any sense, the United States essentially lost any residual capacity it had to move Saigon in that direction when it left the Vietnamese to fight for—and be—themselves.

Hanoi's determination to prevail in the South is unabated. To Saigon's refusal to allow appropriate play to its political forces, it has responded with heightened military infiltration. It now reportedly has more troops, facilities and war machines in South Vietnam than it did on the eve of its last major offensive in April 1972. Interestingly, Hanoi has increasingly chosen to build just the kind of conventional military force in the South which is most vulnerable to the conventional force of Saigon. The evidence is that North Vietnam has decided to keep giving its political objectives in the South priority over economic reconstruction at home. East Europeans report with some surprise that Hanoi has not done enough reconstruction planning to use all the aid they are ready to provide.

The United States finally has a truly national policy towards Vietnam, one supported not only by the President but Congress. Military and economic aid is at the heart of it. Threats of military reinvolvement are realized to be without teeth. Everybody wishes there were a true peace; some would like to retaliate harshly against the North; others would like to scuttle the South. But the fundamental situation is one in which Vietnam's struggle is indeed being conducted by the Vietnamese. Already, we would say, enough of an interval has passed since the American troop departure to make the eventual outcome, whatever it is, a *Vietnamese* outcome.

And that is as it should be. That this country continues to supply military aid to Saigon is no more than a measure of the responsibility this country must take for the dependency it created in South Vietnam upon American arms. It does not confer further responsibility upon this country for whatever future course the Vietnamese struggle may take or for whatever the ultimate outcome may be. Still less does it make this country accountable for the harsh fact that the war between the Vietnamese goes on.