

Editorials / Columnists

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The Vietnam Drama: Still Looking for an Ending

By Philip A. McCombs

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SAIGON—What is the American interest in South Vietnam in 1975, nearly two years after the signing of the Paris cease-fire agreement? What is the American policy here, and what should it be?

While the debate on these questions no longer dominates American political life, it remains, here at least, as bitter and sometimes as hysterical as ever. A senior American diplomat at a recent dinner described a reporter for a major American newspaper here as a "traitor." A liberal Democratic congressman, visiting Saigon recently, gazed glumly from a coffee shop at the heavy downtown traffic and said: "Yeah, I listened to all [U.S. Ambassador Graham] Martin's arguments. What a bunch of crap."

All sides seem convinced that the way this drama finally plays itself out will deeply affect our self-image as well as the world's view of us as a people and a nation.

Our policy on how to close the drama here appears to be: Get out of Vietnam by ending massive military and economic aid as quickly as possible without letting the Communists take over. Or, if they do eventually take over, without letting it appear that this was due to a lack of U.S. will.

As part of this goal the State Department, through the U.S. embassy here, appears during the last year to have been waging two fights, one a propaganda battle against the U.S. Congress and the other a secret struggle to keep President Nguyen Van Thieu in line with U.S. objectives. Both battles are going on essentially out of view, although the first has surfaced frequently in the form of the American embassy's strained relations with the press.

Martin exploded publicly a year ago over a lengthy news article document-

ing the hypothesis that massive U.S. assistance to Saigon set the pace of the war. Now that U.S. military aid has been halved to \$700 million and the pace of the war has dramatically shifted, with Saigon on the defensive, inside the South, it seems possible that Martin's anger was stimulated more by the article's impact on Congress than by any errors it might have contained.

This conclusion seems all the more likely given the bitter mood of many American diplomats here. One quickly learns that not only journalists but a surprisingly large number of American congressmen seem to be on the "traitor" list.

During the past month of spectacular Communist battlefield successes, this bitterness has been accompanied by fear. "Jesus, this is the worst it's ever been," said an American diplomat recently. "We may not even be able to get out of here."

"A Sense of Obligation"

MARTIN IS AN experienced, resourceful and tough diplomat who has formed a clear idea of what he hopes to accomplish here and who believes that, regardless of the atmosphere on Capitol Hill today, most Americans and members of Congress ultimately will share his point of view.

With adequate U.S. economic aid, Martin told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in testimony last July, "We can confidently anticipate that in a very few years we will be able to regard our Vietnam involvement as closed. If the secretary's [Kissinger's] recommendations are heeded, our involvement will be closed in the way that the great majority of Americans quite obviously want it closed—leaving the Republic of Vietnam economically viable, militarily capable of defending itself with its own manpower against both ex-

ternal aggression and externally supported internal subversion, and free to choose its own leaders and its own government as its citizens themselves may freely determine."

Kissinger, in a letter last June 1 to the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, wrote, "I have a very personal sense of obligation to do everything I can to make good on our moral commitment to assist [South Vietnam] in its survival as an independent state." This survival, wrote the secretary, "is indispensable to the creation of an enduring structure of peace in Southeast Asia."

Kissinger also wrote—and this a year and a half after the cease-fire agreement—that America's longer-range objective "is not just a reduction in the level of hostilities but more importantly the creation in Southeast Asia of an environment conducive to enduring peace and reconstruction."

Confrontation With Hanoi

THESE GOALS have tended to keep the United States in a position of stark confrontation with Hanoi two years after the cease-fire agreement.

In the U.S. embassy's view, Hanoi is principally to blame for this. According to intelligence reports, Hanoi has not given up its goal of total victory in the South by political, military and economic means. Its troops are now attacking widely in key areas of the country in what intelligence sources say might be termed a limited offensive. Politically, the Communists, encouraged for a time by the rise of a vocal political opposition to Thieu in Saigon, have announced that they will no longer negotiate with Thieu but only with a more reasonable successor.

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Americans In Vietnam

SALON.—There are more Americans in South Vietnam now than there were a year ago, but the number working for the U.S. government has dropped dramatically. There are 6,892 Americans here, according to a U.S. official, and 2,697 of these work for the American government. This category includes 1,205 working as civilians for the embassy and its large defense attaché's office, 142 U.S. military personnel, 1,488 American contractors doing work for U.S. agencies and 42 club and company managers and the like, working for U.S. officials. The embassy spokesman said, "There were 6,065 Americans in South Vietnam, and 2,191 of them worked for the U.S. government."

Thus, during the year, the number of persons working for the U.S. government has been reduced by 214, according to the official statistics. Most of these reductions (1,886) have been contractors whose contracts were discontinued as a result of congressional cut-

backs in military aid to South Vietnam, the spokesman said. The other large reduction was of civilians working for the embassy and its defense attaché.

This year there are 3,265 non-government Americans here, a decrease of 231, 1,015 last year, the spokesman said. Most of this increase has been due to an influx of businessmen connected with exploration for oil off the shores of Vietnam and with other businesses, the spokesman said. He also cited increases in the number of tourists in the country, missionaries, doctors and tourists in the country. There are 254 dependents of U.S. civilian and military officials here, the spokesman said, and these are counted as non-government Americans. The 125 American military personnel here include 42 in the embassy, 10 in the defense attaché's office, and 19 involved with the search for missing Americans in Indochina. The 1,205 civilian U.S. officials are categorized: 799 in the Defense Department, 375 in the Agency for International Development, 129 in the State Department,

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In its public statement, the U.S. embassy appears to be backing "Thieu" to the hilt. Thus the embassy consistently has attacked the communists as the enemy of the South Vietnamese people. It also is examining closely every expenditure to make sure that money is going for the most necessary items. And talks of communist troops and their movements are being carefully watched and reported to Congress. Since purchasing comparable military talent and equipment costs more in the American economy than in Communist China, the embassy says, the analysts should encourage Congress to appropriate more money for South Vietnam.

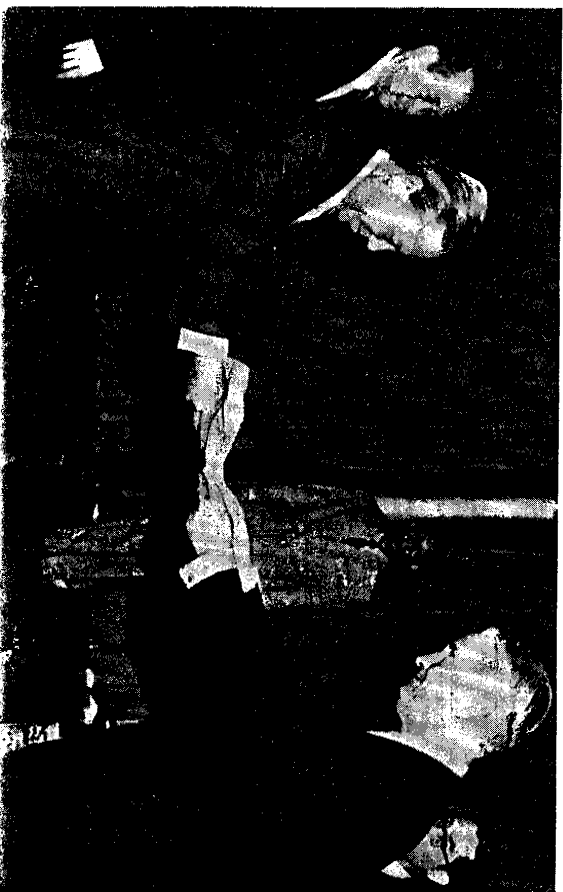
The Battle With Thieu

FROM THIS overall situation of confrontation and continuing war, one gets the sense that the cease-fire agreement has been forgotten and replaced by a win-lose situation, with no other possibility for resolving the conflict. The South Vietnamese have lost a year, and indeed, supporting other possibilities.

While the U.S. embassy is doing its best to support South Vietnam's fight against the Communists and was willing to talk publicly about this, it was not willing to support Thieu in his battle to keep President Thieu in line with American objectives.

In fact, Martin briefed frequently during the past year at any suggestion in the press of tensions between the embassy and the Saigon government. He said that the embassy and its officials have suggested that President Thieu may be too intransigently anti-Communist to suit American policymakers.

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his original strategy. "Then made additional political concessions. He bowed the legislature to rewrite the military party law to make it easy for any number of parties to field candidates in this year's elections. He then agreed to a new constitution that would allow only if such a change was made. This was the case of the South Vietnamese to the Communist Party. Thus when the political opposition to Thieu was at its height last October and November, U.S. officials and augmented corps of senior CIA agents were opening fresh contacts with the opposition. They were specifically contacted by the United States and the Communists. They were in many cases, in fact, reopening them in many cases, in fact, amounted to a major policy move because it appeared to open a new option of dropping Thieu in favor of one of his opponents.

Contesting the Opposition

IT IS PROBABLY true, in the view of some political observers, that the United States might not have some other, more pliable leader to interpose between the Communist Party and the South Vietnamese to the Communist Party. Thus when the political opposition to Thieu was at its height last October and November, U.S. officials and augmented corps of senior CIA agents were opening fresh contacts with the opposition. They were specifically contacted by the United States and the Communists. They were in many cases, in fact, reopening them in many cases, in fact, amounted to a major policy move because it appeared to open a new option of dropping Thieu in favor of one of his opponents.

The situation could, however, after the embassy became convinced that the opposition could put forward no powerful leaders who could command a truly massive following among the six-page states. The embassy issued support for Thieu, stating that it supported any of the dissenting political groups and attacking the Communists in page after page of strong rhetoric. The Oct. 21 statement was followed by the Oct. 21 statement of support from President Ford on the election of N.

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"Will me again... what did Kissinger get his power price for?"

PHOTO BY THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

social consensus that would not be reached until the end of the year. Kissinger's political talks, going again in Paris under the terms of the ceasefire agreement.

Flexibility is something that may be expected from Kissinger, but with the major Communist powers that form Secretary Kissinger's global policy. But then, according to reliable reports, would have nothing to do with the dispute except to signal from Martin that the U.S. was not ready to accept the results for Thieu's government. Chinese supply of arms to Hanoi during the year, even arguments that the U.S. was not ready to accept the results for Thieu's government. Kissinger's political talks, going again in Paris under the terms of the ceasefire agreement.

An Apocalyptic View

WHETHER THIEU really has anything to fear from Martin and Kissinger is an open question. However, Thieu, whose military and political position has eroded broadly in the past year, is said to be in a state of deep pessimism and ready to cut Thieu's throat politically at a signal from Henry Kissinger that this would be in the U.S. interest.

For one thing, the Communists, seeking victory, may simply press on all the harder. For another, Thieu himself is said by some who know and watch him carefully to be somewhat apologetic about the situation. He is said to feel deeply and bitterly that his former American allies now are underrating him. In his speeches during the past year, Thieu has spoken passionately of fighting to the last drop of blood for the South. He has also claimed that there can be no coalition government with the Communists.

Political Concessions

POLITICALLY, the congressional aid cutbacks forced Thieu to make a series of concessions to his opponents inside South Vietnam and make public statements that he was open to negotiations. He is also open to the possibility of a coalition government with the Communists.

At that time, the insiders say, Thieu and his intimates developed the strategy that they are still following today: determination not to make any significant concessions to the Communists, but to combine with limited concessions to the Communists, combined with limited concessions to internal political opponents, especially prior to this year's Vietnam elections.

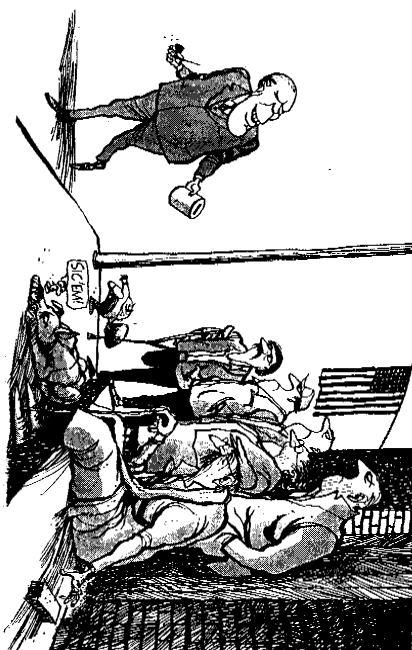
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Fighting in the Palace

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"Anyone come to give again to Vietnam...?"

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