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We Aren't Out Of Vietnam

by Stanley Karnow

In contrast to Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who jubilantly accepted the Nobel Prize the other day as recognition of the Nixon administration's contribution to "a lasting peace," chief North Vietnamese diplomat Le Duc Tho displayed considerable realism in rejecting the award on the grounds that "peace has not been really restored" in Vietnam. Bolstered by extravagant amounts of US weaponry, South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu has stubbornly resisted a settlement of the kind envisaged in the Paris agreement, and the Communists, their hopes of making gains by political means frustrated, have gradually resumed military action. As a consequence the conflict that was never ended by the cease-fire accord signed last January now appears to be spreading. Familiar places are again in the news in reports of battles in Binh Dinh and Chau Doc and in the Central Highlands near Pleiku, and, in the estimation of most specialists, these clashes portend widened hostilities. The key uncertainty is when the larger outbreak will come. Some expect a full-scale war to erupt in the approaching dry season; others forecast it for late next year. Only unalloyed optimists still cling to the hope that a compromise can be achieved, perhaps through the sort of international diplomatic maneuvers now being carried out by Kissinger in the Middle East.

An escalation of the fighting in Vietnam would hand President Nixon one more difficult predicament. Defense Secretary Schlesinger has bluntly warned that the US would resume its bombing in the area in the event of Communist "aggression," and his threat was echoed a couple of weeks ago by General John Vogt, commander of the American forces based in Thailand. However Congress has specifically denied Mr. Nixon the funds to commit the US to combat activities "in or over" Indochina, and thus he cannot legally fulfill his pledge or those of his subordinates to defend the Saigon regime by renewed air strikes without violating his promise to comply with the law—a violation that would further weaken his already frayed relationship with the legislature. Congress' vote last week overriding his veto of the war powers bill dramatically illustrates the extent to which his influence in Congress, particularly on the subject of foreign affairs, has declined. The President could, alternately, request fresh authorization from Congress to undertake military action, but present public attitudes toward Vietnam suggest that such an appeal would touch off angry debate and rekindle all those hot passions that have cooled since the US withdrawal. The skepticism aroused by his alert over the Middle East last month shows plainly that Nixon's credibility has dipped to an all-time low, and that distrust of his motives, indeed his judgment, would inevitably impair his capacity to react forcibly in Vietnam.

Kissinger recently noted that "one cannot have a crisis of authority in a society for a period of months without paying a price somewhere along the line," and that "somewhere" might turn out to be Vietnam.

Judging from their current behavior, the North Vietnamese seem to believe that this is an opportune time to take advantage of Mr. Nixon's troubles at home and advance their own aims. Hanoi publicists have been stressing that the US, enfeebled by what they call the Watergate "deluge," can no longer police the world as it did in decades past. Therefore, they imply, the administration's ability to respond to a flare-up in Vietnam is limited. These commentaries coincide with orders to Communist troops to "strike back at the enemy," and they have been matched by evidence of a massive build-up of North Vietnamese and Vietcong strength in the South. According to reliable intelligence sources in Washington, the insurgent force in the South has increased from about 150,000 in January to nearly 200,000 at present, with almost one-quarter deployed in the region around Saigon, where government units are said to be weakest. The North Vietnamese also have heavy artillery, surface-to-air missiles and some 700 tanks in the South, and they have renovated airfields, constructed all-weather roads, erected immense storage facilities, and refurbished the port of Dong Ha in order to move in supplies by sea. Some analysts submit that they might use aircraft for the first time, if they launch a major offensive.

Hanoi's military build-up was designed at the outset to give the Communists parity with the South Vietnamese government, whose force numbers more than a million men armed with first-rate US equipment. One of Thieu's main objectives in delaying the cease-fire draft agreement in October 1972 was to gain the time in which to acquire weapons, and the US obliged him with a crash program of supplies valued at nearly a billion dollars. In addition to four regiments of M-48 tanks, three frigates and thousands of tons of ammunition, Thieu received 300 Chinook and Huey helicopters, 36 C-136 transport aircraft and 200 F-5A fighter airplanes, making his air force the third largest in the world.

Under Article 7 of the Paris agreement, both the Saigon regime and its enemies are permitted to replace materiel on a piece-for-piece basis. The International Commission of Control and Supervision, which comprises Indonesian, Iranian, Hungarian and Polish representatives, is charged with keeping track of these replacements, but in fact the flow of equipment goes unchecked, essentially because ambiguity suits the two sides. As a result the US is now planning to replace Saigon's F-5As with F-5Es, a superior model that might have been designated differently had not the Pentagon considered it expedient, for Vietnam purposes, to put a similar number on the airplane. Despite efforts by congressmen and journalists including myself to determine what other equipment is being sent to Vietnam, neither the Defense nor State Departments has been forthcoming, though such information is supposed to be public. Along with this secrecy there are hints of abuses. South Vietnamese troops reportedly sell their weapons to the Cambodian army and put in claims for new ones, and an official US audit last spring discovered that Saigon had trumped up a request for nine tanks.

The status of the American civilian technicians assigned to Vietnam is equally cloudy. Members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee staff were told in April that the number of US private contract employees would be reduced to fewer than 2000 by

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the end of this year and to approximately 500 "very soon thereafter." Official figures show that the number still exceeds 3500, more than half of them working for Lear Siegler on aircraft maintenance.

Any estimate of the Saigon government's strength must also take into account the US presence in Thailand and Guam, and on aircraft carriers off the South Vietnamese coast. In Thailand, where the US deploys 700 B-52s and fighter bombers on seven airfields, plans to cut down the force of 38,500 American troops were suspended early last month as signs of possible hostilities in Vietnam multiplied.

Despite a cease-fire agreement on Laos, there are few indications that the US intends to pull completely out of that land. On the contrary the administration appears to be transferring its Laotian establishment across the Mekong River to northeastern Thailand, as it did when it was constrained after 1962 to respect Laotian neutrality. Since then the sector of Thailand adjacent to Laos has become the site of a wide variety of logistical installations operated by both the Pentagon and the Central Intelligence Agency. The US presence in Cambodia also continues in the form of a military mission that is legally barred from doing more than delivering equipment but, according to a recent General Accounting Office study, flaunts the law by advising the Cambodian army. The President is currently seeking \$200 million in aid for Cambodia in addition to more than a billion dollars to keep the Saigon government army operative.

The Communists could have probably tolerated the combination of the Saigon regime's harder muscle and continuing US support, since they were matching it with their own military build-up. But what apparently led them to edge toward their present level of violence — and may spark a bigger explosion — was their incapacity to make any political headway in the face of Thieu's intransigence. They signed the Paris agreement in the expectation that it would improve their political chances inside the South in three important respects. In the first place, the cease-fire brought the withdrawal of US forces from Vietnam, and that was Hanoi's initial priority. Secondly, they calculated that it would give them the opportunity to consolidate their position in the territories they held, and thus enhance the Vietcong's stature as a government parallel to the Saigon regime. And finally, they anticipated that the Council of National Reconciliation and Concord to be established through negotiations with Thieu would eventually open the way to the creation of coalition rule in Saigon. For these reasons they welcomed the Paris accord, urging their supporters to observe it, follow it faithfully, and exhorting them, as one of their directives at the time said, to "eradicate hatred and heal the wounds of war . . . by placing national interests above all." In short the Communists perceived the truce as an opportunity to lower their military profile and concentrate on political action to reach their long-range goal: control of Saigon and reunification of Vietnam.

But the reasons that made the Paris agreement acceptable to the Communists made it anathema to Thieu. Unwilling to accede to the notion that the Vietcong represented a rival government, he systematically harassed its representatives as well as those of Hanoi, refusing them diplomatic privileges, locking them into guarded compounds and even inspiring attacks against them by "spontaneous" mobs. He repressed press and

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Alarmed by thefts of weapons from U. S. bases, the Army is asking for a 7-million-dollar program to track down thieves. Congressional testimony shows that 3,800 weapons were lost between Jan. 1, 1968, and Dec. 31, 1972, in "major thefts"—a term used when at least 10 small arms or two crew-served pieces of ordnance are stolen in a single operation.

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While favoring early reopening of the Suez Canal as part of a Mideast settlement, the United States is warning Moscow that if the Soviets try to take advantage of easier access to the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf with a naval build-up in those waters, America is prepared to match them.

political freedom in Saigon more than ever, and although his prisons are estimated to hold at least 40,000 political captives, he admitted to only about 5000, thus resisting a provision of the Paris agreement that calls for an exchange of civilian prisoners who, if freed, would reinforce the opposition to his government. Consistent with his view of himself as the sole ruler of South Vietnam, Thieu has rebuffed Communist demands that a constituent assembly be elected to write a new constitution and has insisted instead that elections be held under his own auspices. As Dr. Gareth Porter has pointed out, the US was prepared to exert pressure on Thieu to sign the Paris agreement, but it has done little since to persuade him to honor its terms. The result, which is taking shape at the moment, will be a return by the Communists to arms. Kissinger, now en route to Peking, will doubtless ask the Chinese to persuade Hanoi to abandon a military approach and go back to political struggle. The secretary of State probably plans to make the same request of the Russians, and he may figure that both they and the Chinese can curb the North Vietnamese by cutting back on supplies to Hanoi, as they did prior to the settlement last year. But the international situation has altered somewhat since, and Kissinger's expectations of big power cooperation may prove illusory. The North Vietnamese have been observing the Middle East crisis closely, and they can argue persuasively with the Kremlin that they deserve at least as much support as the Soviet Union gave to the Arabs. In addition they can certainly explain that, with the Nixon administration in disarray, their chances of escalating the war in relative safety are greatly improved. Moreover, with the dispute between Moscow and Peking continuing unabated, Hanoi can play the Russians and Chinese against each other, in their own favor.

But even without either Soviet or Chinese backing, the North Vietnamese are believed to have the means to sustain an offensive for six months, and unless new elements intervene to give them political potential in the South, the battlefield appears to be their only option. Mr. Nixon may be tempted to view a renewal of the war as a distraction from the woes of Watergate. But there is another side to that: a recrudescence of fighting in Vietnam will show his much-vaunted "peace with honor" to have been another exercise in public relations.