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Consequences of the End Game in Vietnam

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As the last outposts crumbled in March and April, the Administration castigated Congress for abandoning Vietnam, labeled certain Americans "isolationists," and predicted the worst consequences from the American failure to stave off the collapse. Other Americans-hopeful politicians, wishful editorialists-angrily, urgently, denied the charges, rejected the epithets, and argued that Vietnam had little to do with the American position in the rest of the world; indeed, release from Vietnam might well benefit the American position elsewhere.

Perhaps now the analysis and the debate can be conducted with more detachment and objectivity. For several reasons, the original fears of "dominoes" might have some truth. The reasons have to do with the process of American policy-making, the reactions of allies and adversaries, and the resulting shape of the international system. All of these factors were sharply illustrated and profoundly affected by the end game in Vietnam. Unfortunately, they are not entirely subject to the control of American commentators or administrations. Like it or not, we cannot limit the damage of Vietnam to suit our hopes and our consciences.

Americans are tired of lessons of Vietnam. This is one war in which the retrospections started virtually before the events had occurred. So it is necessary to ask: What conclusions might be different now from, say, the fall of 1974? or from before the events of March and April 1975-the sudden ultimate collapse? What do we know now that we didn't know then? Or rather, what do we know now that we could only conjecture then?

After all, we already knew that the powers of the executive had been closely hedged about, since the congressional amendment of August 1973 that prohibited reintervention in Southeast Asia. And perhaps we should have been able to predict the ultimate American default after the congressional cuts in Vietnam appropriations in 1974, from the Administration's request of $1.4 billion to $700 million, and the reluctance to restore the cuts in the winter of 1975. And Watergate had run its course. But, in a sense, the evidence was not all in until the final test; we could still speculate on the effects that congressional obstruction and presidential penance would have on the executive license to make war. What happened, of course, confirmed the tendencies of the preceding year. We had the spectacle of a very "constitutional" president (the first since Eisenhower, who had acted, or refused to act, similarly in the analogous Indochina crisis of April 1954), who was content to put the decision on Vietnam and Cambodia up to Congress.

And what we now see about the end game in the spring of 1975 is that the consequences of our demonstrated failure to act-however justified and right it may have been as a decision-are more important than the consequences of the "loss" of Vietnam itself.

II

Most of the lessons drawn by liberal and moderate observers have been to the effect that the loss of Vietnam is tolerable, even welcome; that intervention there had been a mistake; that its loss might leave us better off in our international relations; that at least we could choose, by an act of will and an expression of confidence, to limit the damage to American prestige, influence, and strategic position-even to enhance the value of these assets. For example:

Past errors must not now be compounded by a misreading of their meaning for the future. This country's failure in Indochina is, as President Ford has so succinctly stated, neither the end of the world nor the end of America's role in the world. . . . This country's tragic misadventure in Indochina in no way diminishes the need to keep and make international commitments.1

Henry Kissinger acted like a child with a wounded ego exaggerating his loss. "Look how unreliable we are," he told the world in effect. "Look at the disaster our perfidy has caused."2

. . . the basic fact is that the Vietnam experience is not powerfully relevant to the present problems of the United States.3

The sources of U.S. power are intact, despite Indochina.4

At least there was no need to make the end even worse by proclaiming what could be called a self-domino theory.5

Even the Administration, after a few false starts during March and early April, and after a few more penultimate defeats in Vietnam, finally joined in this interpretation. In his speech to Congress on April 10, even while urgently requesting $722 million in aid for Vietnam, President Ford used the occasion to recite positions of American strength and to pledge renewed support of our commitments. For this, he was applauded by The Washington Post: "President Ford quietly banished the domino theory from presidential policy." Later, on April 23 at Tulane University, the President definitively gave up the game of recriminations against Congress and joined his liberal critics in the exercise of damage-limitation: "[The events in Indo-china] portend neither the end of the world nor of America's leadership in the world." Again, the President was widely applauded. As The New York Times put it: "The end of the misguided military adventure in Indochina should make it easier to return to Lincoln's vision of the American destiny." A few days later, on the night of the final American evacuation from the roof of the embassy in Saigon, the President, in a somewhat Lincolnesque statement of his own, said: "The time has come to look forward to an agenda for the future, to unify, to bind up the nation's wounds and to restore its health and optimistic self-confidence."

The entire American political center, anxious to avoid external humiliation and internal division, had embarked on the creation of a new myth: that Vietnam never really mattered; that its loss does not really matter now; that it was a special case, an unnecessary one at that; that it is separable, at least containable; that its loss might even be a blessing and a source of renewed strength-that perhaps America will be even steadier, more reliable, her assurances and guarantees more credible, now that we have shed this "irrational" and "aberrant" situation; that the United States can smoothly transform its military role into some other form of functional leadership-diplomatic, economic, or just spiritual; that all we have to do is to cure our "hubris," recognize our limited, even nonexistent, interest in Southeast Asia, and then, presumably, our adversaries might stop challenging us, our friends would stop doubting our firm will, benevolent intention, and good sense, and our own people would renew their grant of trust in their government. In short, "no dominoes."

No recollections were invoked, no apologies given, for earlier judgments, such as this typical one from The New York Times 12 years ago (November 3, 1963):

. . . the loss of South Vietnam to the Communists could raise doubts around the globe about the value of U.S. commitments to defend nations against Communist pressure. . . . The impact on revolutionary movements throughout the world would be profound. At best, neutralism in the East-West struggle might spread. In much of Asia there might be a feeling that the Communists-under the leadership and inspiration of Peking-represented "the wave of the future."

And there were no retractions by President Ford or Secretary of State Kissinger of their earlier statements predicting implicit, inescapable reactions of allies, adversaries, and the American people. Kissinger, then Assistant to the President, in a background briefing at San Clemente, June 26, 1970, had said: ". . . we certainly have to keep in mind that the Russians will judge us by the general purposefulness of our performance everywhere." And, in a news conference, March 26, 1975, Secretary of State Kissinger had said: "We must understand that peace is indivisible. The United States cannot pursue a policy of selective reliability. We cannot abandon friends in one part of the world without jeopardizing the security of friends everywhere . . . . [Though] we are not saying that every part of the world is strategically as important to the United States as any other part of the world, the problem we face in Indochina today is an elementary question of what kind of people we are. . . . This is a fundamental question of how we are viewed by all other people, and it has nothing to do with the question of whether we should ever have gotten involved there in the first place. . . . There is no question that events in Portugal, Greece, Turkey, and Indochina had an effect on the conduct of the [Middle East] negotiations. On the part of our friends, it raised the question of the durability of our assurances. And since one of our problems was to substitute American assurances for some physical terrain features, this was a factor." And President Ford, in a news conference at San Diego, April 3, 1975, had said: "I believe that in any case where the United States does not live up to its moral or treaty obligations, it can't help but have an adverse impact on other allies we have around the world."

Who is to say that the logic of these earlier statements was false? Perhaps only the conclusions were untenable: that the position in Indochina, deemed necessary for America's global influence and control, could be sustained; or that it was worth what it eventually would cost to maintain-in lives, resources, and destruction.

It may be true that harping on the dominoes, on the probable effects of American unreliability, is a self-fulfilling prophecy. The trouble is that it has a basis in fact, in the independent actions of other parties that are not subject to our control. The corresponding trouble is that the opposite model-that of the liberal critics and now the Administration pragmatists-is not even self-fulfilling. At best it is a self-delusion; indeed, it is designed for domestic consumption, as a salve to our pride, an antidote to "recriminations." At worst, it could be a multiple disaster, both for those allies who believe it and continue to depend on American assurances, and possibly for us, if we are called upon in the future to redeem our newly reaffirmed expressions of support.

The stubborn latter-day hawks (and their mirror images, our domestic radicals) were always closer to the truth of the matter. Certainly they have been more faithful to their original analysis, which was once the shared wisdom of a wider spectrum of American opinion: Vietnam did matter; expressions of American will and intent in one part of the world, or, on the contrary, a default or aborted effort by the United States, do have an effect on other areas, other relationships; they do affect the American position in the world, and consequently the shape of the international system itself. The question was always whether we should accept the challenge or accommodate to the loss, with all its consequences. In any case, the liberal and moderate prognosis of the effects of the end game in Vietnam might be just as shallow as their diagnosis of the significance of Vietnam. The "damage-limiting scenario" is just too good to be true.

III

Before we trace the reactions of allies and the prescriptive lessons for the United States, let us mention some of the things that the outcome in Vietnam does not prove-some of the nonessential issues that have been pursued so persistently, with such consequent distraction from the underlying structural lessons that are to be learned.

One such issue-and perhaps the most salient in the waning hours of the war-was the concern that we should honor our debts to those Vietnamese who had believed in and aided our cause; more recently this has centered on the humanity with which we should treat the refugees in our own country. However compelling these claims might be, this issue has mostly served to obscure the significance of the debacle for our strategic position.

Another non-issue that has been aired (again) is the question of whether we were right-or had a right-to intervene in Vietnam in the first place; whether our intervention was an international outrage or a benevolent national gesture; whether, regardless of the effects and the outcome, our motives were correct. This issue could be settled one way or the other without any decisive effect on the real lessons and enduring consequences of the encounter.

Still another distracting question is "who was responsible for the loss?" Many have taken this to be the essential question-the one to be either settled or avoided if we are to escape the recriminations that followed the "loss" of China in 1949. Various propositions have been advanced, none of them conclusive or comprehensive. One is that defeat was the narrow result of Thieu's tactical incompetence-by some accounts, the result of a single error by a single incompetent commander in the highlands of the Second Corps area, who, by a disorderly withdrawal, began the unraveling of Saigon's entire military position.

Other interpretations fill the rest of the spectrum of possibilities: the general ineffectiveness of the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam), its continuing reliance on American assistance and methods; the unwillingness of the South Vietnamese to fight, or the fact that they had nothing convincing to fight for; and-closer to home-the failure of Congress to provide enough assistance, the inhibiting effects of the military cutoff of August 15, 1973, in denying the plausible threat of American reintervention or retaliation to police the Paris accords.

A closely related issue is whether Thieu's regime ever "deserved" our support, or whether we should have, or could have, used our leverage to exact his compliance with the Paris accords, and whether this would have averted, postponed-or, on the contrary, hastened-the demise of the Thieu government. The implication of this kind of argument-not always intended-is that we might have salvaged something short of abject defeat, and that in future cases we might make greater use of American influence.

Another non-point is that we "did enough" for South Vietnam, or the Saigon government, or Thieu. But, of course, "enough" to satisfy our private criteria might not be "enough" to satisfy the more objective demands of the situation. The argument implies that we were not enough concerned with the results to make the marginal investment to salvage what we had already invested.

The most weighty of the nonessential issues is whether Vietnam was ever a real interest of the United States. The contention that it was not is one of the props of the damage-limiting argument. If Vietnam was never really an interest, then all we need to do is acknowledge our mistake and the future will hold no terrors for us-indeed, it will present enhanced opportunities for an intellectually regenerated foreign policy. But this would achieve only absolution, not immunity, from the effects of the collapse of South Vietnam. The main point in the argument that Vietnam was of little intrinsic interest for the United States is that our intervention was based on the misperception of the "monolithic" nature of communism. What this contention overlooks, however, is that challenges to the situation of a "great" nation have never come in a single size and shape, but they may nevertheless be challenges. One can doubt-as I do-that the essential integrity of the United States would have been much affected by an unopposed triumph of native Vietnamese communism; but such doubts do not conclusively dispose of the real issue: what the United States would do to protect its various interests, and those of its allies, against variegated threats from many quarters-some quite marginal in a strict calculus.

For in the future the probable sources of disorder will be multiple, and not necessarily ideologically aligned or strategically concerted. There will be local revolutionaries; willful nationalists, including, of course, many non-communist states; and opportunistic large powers. The very heterogeneity of communism might make it more troublesome for the United States; local communists will be less likely to be restrained by dictation from Moscow, which might well want to preserve détente and some semblance of world order.

What all these non-issues prove is that, if we ask the wrong questions, we are likely to get the wrong answers. The questions are wrong because they are not operational questions about the future of American performance and, in turn, about the reactions of other nations that, together, constitute the shape of the international system.

IV

There are two points to emphasize about the effects of the end game in Vietnam. They add up to the conclusion that the effects are not containable by our own will or desire, since they have to do with objective aspects of the operation of (1) our own system and (2) the international system.

The first point is that the American performance in Vietnam has revealed how our own polity, society, and economy work as a policy-making system-particularly the constraints that Congress and public opinion put on the actions of the executive. Thus, we should ask ourselves how our behavior is likely to manifest itself in future situations, even those that are different in certain respects from Vietnam. After all, it is the future, contingent reactions of a nation that constitute its "policy." In turn, it is the internal policy process of the nation that defines the limits of American assurances and commitments-including the new assurances our leaders are putting about in the wake of Vietnam. In this respect, the trouble with the new myth of damage-limitation is precisely that it ignores the implications of this policy process. There is not a sufficient realization that policy is the product of systems, not individual wills, and that these systems are complex and have many restraining, as well as motivating, elements. The best intentions, the most earnest attempts at credibility, the highest honor, and the most profound humanity of leaders may be severely impaired, and sometimes completely obstructed, by the operation of the entire political, social, and economic system.

Only those who do not understand the complexity of the total American foreign-policy process will be reassured by the promises of our executive branch. What is at stake is not, after all, the willingness, or good faith, of the President and his advisers. What hobbled U.S. policy in Southeast Asia was not the reluctance of the executive branch to implement its commitments. It was more than willing. What frustrated the American effort at home was the eventual resistance of Congress, and behind Congress, the public, to prolonging sacrifices and risks of lives and resources in situations that were not immediately compelling or clear. Thus, it is not Vietnam directly that will inhibit American responses in the future. It is the structural similarity of future challenges, as perceived by the American people and their representatives, that will be likely to evoke the same responses or obstructions, hence the same ultimately effective constraints on American power. There is no reason to think that, after Vietnam, these factors will cease to operate. The reliability of the American response is the first casualty of Vietnam, and particularly of the end game there.

The second point is that the performance of the American system in Vietnam will have a tangible and profound effect on the actions of other countries, allies and adversaries, and will consequently change the shape of the international system. Other nations cannot simply speculate about the future performance of the United States; they must do something about it. Both those nations that have depended on us and those that have feared our response will, respectively, hedge against our default or probe our further reactions. Each nation will do this in its own way, according to its peculiar strategic situation. This is why the "dominoes" are neither perfect as an analogy nor obvious as a fact; but it is also why they are nonetheless real.

The most neutral and general statement one can make is that not only the integrity of alliances, but the whole shape of the international system is built on every country's expectation of the behavior of each important member. For the international system, in the last analysis, is not a simple thing, but a construct of two elements: (1) what countries can

do to one another; and (2) what they intend to do to one another. And both of these elements are inevitably affected by the operation of America's internal system. We cannot undo these principles, since we did not establish them in the first place; they are definitive properties of the system in which we exist as a nation.

Specifically, U.S. leadership in the world-during the long regime of the bipolar system, and the brief reign of the balance of power-has rested on our capacity and resolve, perceived by others, to do something for our friends if they, or their systems or values, are threatened (or, in a balance of power, to do something even for adversaries for the sake of the stability of the system). There is no reason to believe that our adversaries are going to help us by limiting their efforts now to a more benign competition. The experience of Vietnam has chastened the United States-and perhaps properly so-about the efficacy of force; but the shape and character of the international system still depend on the ability and propensity to use or threaten force, in the last resort, to defend friends, strategic assets, and political values.

Both the bipolar system and more recent balance-of-power politics have depended on the high probability of intervention by a superpower, in this case the United States. In the bipolar system, such intervention would be used to support allies against threats by a major adversary; in the balance of power, to preserve the equilibrium that is the condition for the continuing independence of states. Thus, the collapse of South Vietnam not only has undone the premises of the Nixon Doctrine; it has also provided an early clue to the instability of the balance of power. The dilution of American guarantees makes it both more necessary and more feasible for allies, as the case may be, to seek the protection of the adversary, to accommodate the adversary, to strike a posture of neutrality, to attempt more equidistance between the great powers, or even to pursue self-reliance, perhaps to the point of acquiring a national nuclear force. The type of international system that might emerge from these tendencies will not be the neat structure of manageable pluralism envisaged five or six years ago by Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon. It will be an extreme pluralism of general nonalignment, approximating the quasi-anarchy of a nuclear "unit veto" system.

The point, then, about the American performance in the end game of Vietnam is not simply that the United States failed to re-enter the contest, but that in similar-or even dissimilar-instances in the future it would be subject to the same kinds of constraints. It does not matter that the United States may still remain selectively "interested" in different parts of the globe or that it will undoubtedly retain the raw capacity for a potent response. It certainly does not matter that allies may become the objects of renewed pledges by American leaders. They would be foolish to depend, to the same extent as before, on American guarantees if these were not redundant with alternative defensive or diplomatic arrangements they had already made. Specifically, even less than before, can they now (as in the case of Israel) exchange tangible strategic assets for American guarantees of future contingent support, even in the form of an explicit bilateral mutual-security pact, let alone the secret, and perhaps illegal, personal promises of a transient Secretary of State. In short, they must hedge-now more widely than ever-against the possible failure of an American response.

Thus, the real lesson-which can be ignored but not escaped-is that both the American role and the shape of the international system as we have known it for the past 25 or 30 years have been irrevocably altered by Vietnam, its outcome, and most of all by the revelation of

the American response in the final critical days of the war. For this judgment, it does not matter that we could not do anything effective, or that our support might not have done any lasting good. These facts only aggravate the judgment. Thus, the dependence of allies on our commitments, and the efficacy of these commitments in stabilizing the international order, constitute the second casualty of the end game of Vietnam.

When the matter is put in this way-in terms of structure, cause, and effect-the real issue is clearly not "isolationism." This facile abstraction not only misrepresents and oversimplifies the American attitude, but it locates the discussion on the wrong ground. We are talking not about a vague, undifferentiated, subjective psychological phenomenon, or a matter of comparative philosophies of an ideal international order. The matter is more tangible and more objective: it lies in the specific operations of the American policy-making system, including its constraining elements; and it lies in the specific responses -the actual reactions, the necessary hedges-of allies, and also the probable strategies of adversaries.

V

In fact, the effects of the end game are rippling out from Vietnam and Cambodia. We have seen the resuscitation of factional warfare in Laos, subverting the accords of 1973. There are the feverish accommodations of Thailand to the concerns not only of China-an old story that dates from the Nixon Doctrine and the American approach to Peking-but also now of Hanoi. The Thai Foreign Minister has referred to the United States as a country that "does not have any morals at this point"-deriding the assurances of Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger. The Prime Minister of Thailand has ordered the 27,000 U.S. airmen withdrawn by March 17, 1976, and the five U.S.-used bases returned to Thai control.

The government of the Philippines is having second thoughts about the two major U.S. bases on its territory-Clark Air Base and the naval installation at Subic Bay; and President Marcos has challenged the Mutual Security Treaty with the United States. This shift, like Thailand's, began at the time of the Paris accords. By now, both the bases and the treaty have become net liabilities in the eyes of the Philippine government.

President Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore was wishfully misinterpreted by American editorialists, when he said, "I am not going to talk about dominoes." What he meant might have been precisely the opposite: for he also said that "what is happening [in South Vietnam and Cambodia] is having a profound effect on the minds of others in Southeast Asia, particularly Cambodia's immediate neighbors, the Thais." Lee sees the United States as "no longer [able to] intervene in Southeast Asia," and foresees a regional power contest "mainly between the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union."6

Taiwan professes to trust the American security guarantee-perhaps because in any case it does not need it for its defense. But it wonders which of Taiwan's interests President Ford might sacrifice in his trip to Peking later this year-since it is abundantly clear that the United States cannot get something for nothing from Peking.

South Korea worries about a North Korean move in 1975 for forcible reunification of the peninsula, and ruminates about acquiring a national nuclear capability. The recent extended visit (April 18-26) of North Korean Premier Kim Il Sung to Peking may be obscure in its specific intent, but it cannot be an accident. At least, judging from reports of

the visit in the Chinese press, Peking seems to be sending the United States a harsher message, and a sterner interpretation of the events in Southeast Asia, than most American analysts will admit: that South Korea is a domino-though perhaps not the next; and that we might have been exaggerating China's "need" for American collusion in a stable balance of power in Northeast Asia. Japan, generally unnerved, sent its Foreign Minister to Washington in mid-April 1975 to seek a conspicuous pledge of support for the Security Treaty.

Farther afield, in the Middle East, it may be true that a handful of Gulf sheikhdoms still respect American power. Still, the decisive case is the nation that is faced with the actual choice of trading territorial and strategic assets for American guarantees. This exemplary case, of course, is Israel. Arguments will rage about the effect of the crumbling of Vietnam and Cambodia during March 1975 on the concurrent decision of the Israeli cabinet to reject Kissinger's terms and assurances. But it cannot have failed to have an effect.

Again, it is not the fall of U.S. positions in Southeast Asia that directly affects the decisions and dispositions of nations halfway around the globe; it is the evidence of American attitudes and the demonstration of the operation of the American policy-making system. What is at stake is not the intention of the executive branch to meet its commitments, let alone one man's fervent promises. Rather, it is the calculable ability of the executive branch to back up the personal commitments of leaders, either by mobilizing reluctant American sentiment or circumventing it through deception or the presentation of a fait accompli. And in this precise respect, the analogy of the assurances of Nixon and Kissinger to Thieu could scarcely be more apposite to Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy in the Middle East.

Even in Europe, the American default in Vietnam has had its indirect effect. No doubt European leaders would prefer to dissociate Vietnam from their own circumstances. They do not relish having to make a precipitate and drastic reassessment of the American connection-whatever its strains and cracks-since any alternative is measurably worse. Nor is it expedient for European leaders to air their private doubts too loudly, or for American leaders to reaffirm any but the most sanguine sentiments of European statesmen. And it is true that the United States is actually in the process of providing three additional divisions oriented to the defense of NATO, as well as improving its readiness to deploy troops to Europe. Moreover, for the first time in eight years, Senator Mansfield, wary of the implications of a steep force reduction at this moment, does not plan to introduce his perennial amendment or resolution to cut forces in Europe. But even Senator Mansfield's temporary reticence may not long hold back the growing American constituency, influenced by the experience of Vietnam, for large-scale troop withdrawals from Europe regardless of strategic consequences. And this possible future deletion of American conventional strength from Europe raises to the surface various proposals to substitute nuclear strategies (the selective use of America's strategic nuclear arsenal, or the development of new tactical nuclear doctrines and weapons, such as "mini-nukes"). All of these create new fears of the decoupling of America's ultimate responses from the fate of Europe; it is no wonder that there are new stirrings of interest in European nuclear alternatives.

VI

There is yet another lesson that our allies will have to draw from Vietnam, and from our manner of leaving it: that the United States will not defend allies as they might prefer to be defended. It is still possible that we might intervene in some conflicts-particularly where we perceive that the Soviet Union is the real adversary or even the major possible beneficiary. But the United States will fight in its own traditional way.

There is such a thing as "the American way of war." It arises out of the conditions of our society and our economy. It is capital-intensive, attaching a high value to the trade-off of American dollars against American lives; it does not directly engage many of the "threats" that might be experienced; and it is annihilatingly destructive in the cases where it is applied. One conclusion is that it is simply beyond-or, more properly, beneath-the capabilities and the nature of our system to fight an "un-American" kind of war, such as Vietnam. We, and others, ought to realize that our system cannot be retooled to do this, except at costs that it is not styled to bear.

There is a further corollary to this. The entire American mode of defense is not that of a steadily committed global imperial power, continuously maintaining its magnetic field of force over the whole strategic universe. Geography, and the circumstances of the founding and building of this nation, have-for better or worse-endowed us with a "fortress" mentality. We give battle if necessary and when provoked. We are likely to use "leverage" on our ally, to secure certain reforms that will make our temporary alliance with him more palatable to our sensibilities. We will pursue the battle to an unconditional -sometimes unnecessary-outcome; or we will abandon the field when it suits our purposes-when we think we have done "enough." (President Thieu's parting complaint, though querulous and ungrateful, was, in this particular sense, quite accurate. After all, the United States extricated itself by bargaining for its prisoners, fabricating an overhead deal with its ally's mortal adversary, signing a cosmetic and imperfect agreement on behalf of the local contestants, and forcing the deal down its ally's throat.) The advent of nuclear weapons has, if anything, given us all the more license to behave this way. In sum, our defensive efforts in the world are likely to be last-ditch, self-serving, overwhelming, destructive-and above all intermittent. Potential allies ought to be more wary about inviting the United States to participate in their troubles.

The experience and the outcome of Vietnam have even further skewed the choices that the United States is likely to pursue in waging war. One of the effects of Vietnam was to cast a shadow on the feasibility of limited conventional war. During the decade of the 1960s, limited war (in a spectrum from conventional to subconventional or counterinsurgency) was thought to be the solution to the dilemma of holocaust-or-paralysis that was ushered in by what Henry Kissinger has called "nuclear plenty." Logically, limited war should be even more appropriate to the succeeding age of "essential equivalence" that we now have. But this logical recourse has been clouded by the experience of Vietnam, considered as a token of an era of advancing diffusion of power. (Diffusion of power takes the form of countervailing reactions by adversaries, uneconomical effects of the application of force, the disintegration of alliances and regional groupings, and the inhibitions placed on governments by the ungovernability of their constituents.)

Whatever the specific or general causes, the American government, by the end of the first Nixon term, had been driven to the conclusion that intervention, if attempted, must be decisive, and escalation purposeful. Indeed, if the culminating North Vietnamese offensive

of 1975 had been indefinitely postponed, and if we had been compelled to draw our lessons of Vietnam from the earlier phase-the one that included the blocking of the spring 1972 communist offensive, the mining of Haiphong, and the Christmas bombing of Hanoi that ended in the Paris accords of January 1973-we would have concluded that the decisive application of force, and the further threat of retaliation or escalation, were the lessons of Vietnam. Now, we can conclude only that the choice, for the United States, has been narrowed to decisiveness or default. But neither mode is nicely calculated to mesh with the defensive preferences of our allies.

VII

The more seriously we construe the lessons of the end game of Vietnam, the more we implicitly vindicate the policy-makers of the early and mid-1960s, who responded to the challenge in Vietnam, and the Administration of Nixon and Kissinger, which sought to avoid obvious defeat. Those groups of policy-makers believed that Vietnam was a challenge of more than local or regional import, and one that we could not safely decline, for more than domestic political reasons -for reasons that had to do with the nature of the international system and the continuity of American influence. To expect, now, that they might have viewed the challenge differently, that they might have taken the large risks of default, is, to say the least, anachronistic. However these fateful decisions turned out, they were not trivial or cynical-not some psychological aberration or bureaucratic mindlessness. The very expressions, now, of affirmation of the continuing validity of our other security commitments, by Congressmen and others who had criticized and aborted the Vietnam War, are back-handed tributes to the seriousness of the effects which, in prospect, impelled those decision-makers to intervene.

Ironically, if our international position is now compromised and if the collapse in Vietnam hastens the evolution of the international system out from under our control, the policy-makers of the Kennedy-Johnson era and the Nixon-Kissinger administration are vindicated-in a way despite themselves. One does not have to accept the validity of the decisions to intervene and escalate in Vietnam. But, to the extent that one rejects these decisions (as I do), one must be willing to accept the train of consequences that will follow from America's default.

Two divergent prescriptions can thus be drawn from the American experience. One would be actively to shore up the American position in the world; deliberately to neutralize the adverse consequences-even, perhaps, to invite some demonstrative confrontation; to rebuild U.S. alliances; to restore our credibility; to make stronger declaratory statements of our resolve. This prescription would imply a conspicuously larger defense budget; it would move American policy away from the incipient balance-of-power policy of Kissinger; and it would move the international system back toward bipolarity.

Another, and opposite, prescription would be to "roll with the punch," to accommodate oneself to a situation of increasing confusion; to recognize that the damage cannot be limited to Saigon and Phnom Penh, that we can no longer influence events or control the reactions of our allies to the same degree that we did prior to the final collapse of South Vietnam. Nor are we likely even to concert our own political system, to forge a sufficient consensus to respond to marginal challenges that structurally approximate Vietnam. This would be a prescription of disengagement; and the process would not end until we had found a new, obviously defensible security frontier. We would have to reconcile ourselves

to a diminished weight in the international system-to let allies make their accommodations, to do some hedging of our own against their defection, and perhaps even to let our adversaries have their season of mischief in the world.

My preference is for this second policy-the substantial political-military disengagement. In fact, it is not so much a preference as a suspicion that the United States, though it might resist, will eventually be forced to embrace this policy. Such a policy would be responsive to the unfolding of the international system in the wake of Vietnam: the diffusion of power to the point where power becomes unmanageable in itself, and unusable in influencing the constructive behavior of other states. Such a policy would also be responsive to a domestic situation in which an American government will scarcely have the legitimacy to induce its diverse constituencies to support actions, which are not in their obvious and immediate interest, for the sake of remote international order.

This latter prescription is not tantamount to leaving the United States defenseless. It is simply a recognition that an alternative way to avoid the domino effect is to put some space between them, to get the first ones to stand up by themselves, and to make the final domino-ourselves-invulnerable to a host of pressures, and correspondingly resistant to the temptation to intervene.

There is a third kind of prescription proposed by many-one that lies in the center. It would have the United States remain engaged, but more "selectively." It would seek an active foreign policy for the United States, but with fewer risks and lower costs. It would reaffirm commitments to worthy allies, but attempt to avoid or minimize the consequences of possible contingencies. The proponents of this sort of policy orientation, mostly the "liberal realists," criticize the engagement in Vietnam primarily on the grounds of its disproportionality to interests that were, at best, marginal. Their diagnosis of the failure in Vietnam rests on the observation of its uniqueness-the special, and especially intractable, circumstances.

Yet this prescription is, upon analysis, less a policy than a hope that nothing will happen to disturb the new composure, the new moderate elite consensus that seems to be forming. The trouble is that it will not be up to the United States to "select" the next threat, the next challenge, the next contingency. The United States will not be able to cut and trim its commitments artfully to fit the cloth of its capabilities-Walter Lippmann's classic admonition. Our adversaries will not respect our basis of convenient selectivity. And our allies will be wary of accepting the meticulous guarantees of a nation that cannot find the will or the purpose to extend them, or honor them, more generally.

In castigating what they consider the myopia of those who stubbornly chose to stand in Vietnam, the proponents of selectivity forget the fact that wars must be taken as they come, with their intractable features, their uncertainties, and sometimes their long odds against convenient victory. Or wars have to be avoided, in rather wide moves of policy direction, long before they happen. And that surely means a shedding-a devolution, if you will, but not some neat tailoring-of commitments. In the end, the prescription of selectivity of commitments is part of the larger syndrome of myths of the liberal and pragmatic center-a syndrome that includes the myth that the damage of Vietnam can be limited, and the prior myth that Vietnam was a "mistake" and unessential to our experience as a nation.

The myths of a nation are functional. They are the half-truths, and half-lies-the explanations we know are false and yet choose to believe-that gloss over divisions and bind a society together. It is almost compelling, therefore, to refrain from challenging them.

But perhaps we should not rest so easily with the new myths of Vietnam. For they are also intended, specifically, to salvage from the debacle of our ambitions and intentions in Vietnam the capacity and the will for further intervention. Of course, there is the hope that the prospective new American global leadership will be benign-humanitarian, economic, diplomatic-anything but "military." Indeed, the apologists for amnesia about Vietnam and renewal of the American global engagement would have it that the principal fault of our prior policy was its "militarization."

Along with this call for a rebirth of American leadership in the world comes, not unnaturally, a call for a renaissance of presidential leadership at home. Saving only the ritual purification of the removal of Richard Nixon, many are already claiming that the pendulum has swung too far toward congressional government, that we face obstruction or incoherence if the tendency goes too long unchecked.

So perhaps this time we must choose between two kinds of "lethality." There are the healing qualities of these myths about Vietnam, particularly their intention to avoid recriminations and divisiveness and enable this country to unite and get on with its business. This is the Lethe of forgetfulness and renewal. But there is also the danger that, by obscuring the causes and consequences of the encounter in Vietnam-by evading sufficiently deep and wide conclusions and the fundamental changes in foreign policy objectives that might follow from them-this country might invite the lethality of another encounter, perhaps in a place, and in circumstances, that do not look like the last one. In short, we might have to choose between some recriminations and the risk of "another Vietnam."

Footnotes

1 "After Vietnam," The New York Times, May 4, 1975.

2 Anthony Lewis, "Hubris, National and Personal," The New Republic, May 3, 1975.

3 Joseph Kraft, "Letting Go of the Vietnam Issue," The Washington Post, May 6, 1975.

4 Henry Brandon, The New York Times, April 13, 1975.

5 Stanley Hoffmann, "The Sulking Giant," The New Republic, May 3, 1975.

6 Address to the New Zealand National Press Club, April 7, 1975, The Washington Post, April 13, 1975.