

Correspondence

"Beyond Vietnam"

To the Editors: I agree with James Finn's first point in "Beyond Vietnam" (Excursus, *Worldview*, May), that blame for the failure in Vietnam should not be placed on those who opposed the war nor on Congress for its recent refusal to give military aid to the Saigon government. Failure was inevitable because the U.S. was trying to do what could not be done: it was attempting to create a viable government in South Vietnam, using generals of our own government's choosing. And their fight was a hard one, for it was a fight against Vietnamese nationalism as much as it was against communism.

Probably I do not disagree very much with what James Finn means when he speaks of intervention, but in the context of his Excursus his arguments give a false impression. I was not present at the Convocation for Peace Finn mentions, and I do not take responsibility for any of the rhetoric that came out of it. Yet it would be desirable to ask what these people and other Americans actually have in mind when they say "no more intervention in Indochina." I would say they are not excluding the kinds of defensible interventions Finn mentions. I myself would not oppose any of those on principle. If by intervention we mean actions overseas that effect some purpose for which there is general national support, it is obvious that such interventions should not be ruled out. That would be isolationism. What should be ruled out under foreseeable conditions (I am not given to proclaiming absolute laws or ones that prescribe their exact application for all possible future circumstances) is any intervention involving military force or the use of the CIA in order to prevent somebody's revolution or to preserve institutions of which we approve in other countries. I feel even more strongly against such interventions when they are unilateral, as our intervention was in Indochina and as it was in Chile. The attempt to impose by

force on another nation or culture a one-sided American ideology is the kind of intervention I believe we should renounce. The pursuit of American aims of "freedom" and "stability" without an attendant concern for the transforming social justice that is needed in half the world has been the great error of American foreign policy in the Third World for decades.

Readers may find fault with some of my words, and some possible exceptions may suggest themselves. But I do hope what I am saying points to a form of intervention that is recognizable and that is different from those forms suggested by James Finn. He says that even his examples of defensible interventions might lead to military intervention. I do not see that as a necessary step, and I surely do not see that the intervention need be a unilateral one. If it were possible to stop the torture of people by a militarily protected airlift in Uganda, for example, there might be justification for carrying it out. But if there were not some multilateral African cooperation, the whole project might do more harm than good. Yet even in a cooperative effort where military intervention might at some point appear justified, the burden of proof is on those advocating military force, for military efforts, once begun, tend to gather momentum and go out of control; inevitably, such efforts are carried out under auspices that are not sufficiently critical of the use of that force. We are likely then to end up with more victims than there were in the original situation we sought to correct.

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To the Editors: I find myself in deep disagreement with "Beyond Vietnam." First of all, I believe the issue of responsibility is misleadingly posed. The Excursus suggests that the military collapse of Saigon was a debacle, although an unavoidable one. I disagree. In light of Saigon's refusal to carry out the political bargain embodied in the Paris Agreements, the resumption of warfare was inevitable. In this context the open issue was the duration and intensity of the post-American military phase. The collapse of Saigon came shortly after "the decent inter-

val" of two years, and its rapidity should be an occasion of relief, not regret. Hence, if Congressional reluctance to underwrite Saigon's insistence on prolonging a military option helped to hasten the final outcome, this fact is an occasion for justifiable pride, and what is called "responsibility" in the Excursus should be claimed rather than disavowed.

I agree that Congressional reluctance to aid Saigon probably contributed only marginally to the victory of the other side. But my point is that our commitment on any plane and at any level to General Thieu and his regime added to the suffering of the Vietnamese people since January, 1973. The main policy-makers in Washington knew (or should have known) from the outset that Thieu never intended to implement the treaty provisions that, after months of negotiations, finally created an agreed political process for translating a military stalemate into nonviolent competition. Thieu's words as well as deeds demonstrated his opposition to this Paris approach. He denounced the agreement without pretense, refused from the outset to carry out its critical provisions (political prisoners, permitting political action by opposition groups, formation of the tripartite National Council of Reconciliation and Concord), and immediately launched a military offensive in the weeks after January, 1973, that temporarily succeeded in capturing some 400 PRG-held hamlets.

Washington understood and supported Thieu in his stand. Indeed, American advisors in South Vietnam were euphoric. This support for Thieu's post-Paris actions, following upon the Christmas bombing of the Hanoi area and rush of U.S. military equipment to Saigon just weeks before and after the Paris signing, the failure to apply any pressure on Saigon to carry out the political provisions, and Nixon's recently revealed secret pledge to react vigorously to any North Vietnamese offensive were all part of the acquiescence by Nixon and Kissinger—despite their public claims to the contrary—in Thieu's determination to press ahead with the war. Such a repudiation of the Paris Agreement carried with it the clear realization that the war would be

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