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Why are we in Viet Nam? Well, ... er ...

OTTAWA
Events in Washington and Saigon are making a shambles of the rationale behind Canada's decision to join the international truce force in Viet Nam.

There were two principal reasons for deciding, in the first place, to go along with the Americans' offhand assumption that Canada would say "ready-aye-ready" whenever the U.S. was ready to end the overt war in Viet Nam.

The first was a cautious hope that Canada's presence on the International Commission of Control and Supervision would contribute to a genuine settlement in Viet Nam.

The second was that Canada's willingness to help in the delicate business of getting the Americans off the hook in Viet Nam would pay off in the long run for this country.

Reports this past week that the con-

flict in Viet Nam, apart from bombing, is now as severe as it was before the peace agreement show how futile the Canadian effort has been in terms of helping the Vietnamese people.

Awareness of this is sharper in the U.S. today than in Canada. Fred Branfman, co-director of the Indo-China Resource Centre in Washington, calls it "the illusion of withdrawal" in an article in the May issue of Harper's magazine.

"The Paris agreement represents an adjustment of our military posture in Viet Nam, not an abandonment of it," states Branfman.

"So it appears that the administration is preparing for a period of covert war to assure a pro-American South Vietnamese government."

Branfman then goes on to document the extent of continued massive U.S. involvement in military and security

activities of the South Vietnamese government. He claims that the U.S. is "progressing back" to the covert warfare practised in Viet Nam during the late '50s and early '60s.

Nothing in Branfman's article will come as any surprise to officials in Ottawa. Even as the first Canadian soldiers were flying to Viet Nam, these officials were aware in detail of preparations for the truce that were being made by all sides. But the irony of the situation lay in the fact that Ottawa's commitment to observe the peace in Viet Nam gave it a clear picture of U.S. activities there since the truce, but prevented it from commenting on these activities or informing Canadians about them.

The decision to go into Viet Nam as an open-minded observer of the truce has effectively prevented us from making public judgment on U.S. con-

duct there. In the eyes of the world, Canada runs the risk of appearing not only to condone Washington's "progressing back" process but to be collaborating in it.

The second reason for Canada's current involvement in Viet Nam springs from national self-interest.

It has always been felt in Ottawa that helping the Americans to withdraw from Viet Nam would be good for Canadian-American relations in the long run.

Whenever it was suggested to officials here that the bargain might have been harder, they reacted with pious dismay. No, they insisted, one didn't bargain that way: So many Canadian soldiers for so many concessions on the automobile agreement. But at some point, the Americans would remember who had helped them out of a tight spot.

It is now time to ask: Which Americans?

Officials here admit that U.S. media have done little to make ordinary Americans aware of Canada's role in Viet Nam.

But a few months ago, it was argued in Ottawa that Canada's decision was certainly appreciated by people in high places in Washington. On one occasion, private correspondence was shown to me to illustrate this.

That was before the Watergate floodgates really opened.

Now it appears that all we have done is to build up an intangible stock of goodwill with an administration in Washington that is rapidly becoming synonymous with political corruption.

As events develop in Washington and Saigon, it is becoming more and more difficult to show that Canada's decision to help the truce has helped anyone at all.