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The President's Press Conference: Vietnam . . .

For all the public anguish centering on My Lai, and the current concern with tax cuts, and the recent uproar over the Vice President and the press, the President's press conference Monday night was dominated (five questions out of 26) by one question: How, and how soon, do we get out of the war in Vietnam? It was asked any number of ways: ". . . do you see any signs of the war cooling off . . . are there any circumstances that might lead you to want to reverse the process of troop withdrawals . . . how do you rate the chances of a negotiated settlement . . . will our Vietnam involvement be reduced to the point where it will command no more public attention than, say, Korea . . . what significance could (increased infiltration) have in terms of your own plans for troop reduction . . . ?"

But it all came down to the same thing—*when will it end?* And while the President couldn't say, presumably because he doesn't know, what he did say amounted to far and away the most confident and optimistic prospectus he has yet given us on the war. That is the most, or perhaps the best, you can say about it. The very least you can say about it is that the President has learned a great deal about the tricky business of talking publicly about Vietnam. For he somehow managed, at one and the same time, to speak to domestic disquiet by projecting a progressive and seemingly irreversible process of American disengagement from the fighting while insisting, for Hanoi's benefit, that far from weakening our bargaining position, this will strengthen it; disengagement, in other words says nothing about our resolve to see it through.

The key to it all is Vietnamization and the reasoning behind it requires examination step-by-step. "If that situation continues," the President said, referring to reductions in American casualties and enemy infiltration, "I believe that we can see that the Vietnam war will come to a conclusion regardless of what happens at the bargaining table. It will come to a conclusion as a result of the plan that we have instituted for replacing American troops with Vietnamese forces."

So far, fine, but what if the South Vietnamese

can't go it alone, or the enemy steps up infiltration and intensifies its efforts in the field? "The present prognosis that I think I can make," the President said, "is that any action that the enemy takes, either against us or the South Vietnamese, can be contained within (our troop withdrawal) program."

And so the President promised an announcement of further troop withdrawals "within the next two or three weeks" unless something untoward and unforeseeable develops to upset current plans.

Those are brave words, and welcome, even without the timetables and deadlines that everybody wants and the administration cannot reasonably be expected to provide. One is therefore hesitant to look for flaws. Yet it is impossible to ignore a certain contradiction between the bright promise of Vietnamization and what the President had to say about the outlook for a negotiated settlement to end the fighting once and for all. "Not good", was Mr. Nixon's verdict. But he went on to argue that progressive Vietnamization will whet Hanoi's appetite for a negotiated settlement with us sooner, while we are still in it, rather than later, "because once we are out and the South Vietnamese are there, they (the enemy) will have a much harder individual to negotiate with . . ."

Maybe. But if this is in fact the enemy's reading, it is not immediately clear why Hanoi would not make a rather large effort, by increased infiltration and a stepped-up offensive, to spoil the Vietnamization program and spin out our involvement in hopes of collapsing completely public support for the war in this country. "The fact that (enemy infiltration) was down is one of the reasons that we have been able to go forward with our troop withdrawal programs," the President himself conceded Monday night. What happens if it goes up?

We shall see, in Paris and in the field. The test of progress, in the last analysis, will not be in the pace of American troop withdrawals, or even in the enemy infiltration rate. The final test of Vietnamization will be the weekly figures on American battle casualties.

... And The Press ...

It used to be that the press would periodically (and with great tediousness) accuse any administration at hand of "news management." Now the thing has been made to work the other way around. Thus it was that we didn't have the President explaining his non-intention of managing the news, at his press conference on Monday night, but rather we had him explaining how he felt about the Vice President's charge that the newsmen are managing the news on which subject the President delivered some split-level remarks.

"I... will have no complaints," he said, "just so long as the news media allows—as it does tonight—an opportunity for me to be heard, directly by the people, and then the television commentators to follow me. I'll take my chances." Since this is precisely what the networks have customarily done and precisely what the Vice President objected to ("instant analysis"), Mr. Nixon appeared to be staking out less contentious ground than Mr. Agnew. At the same, however, he did manage to characterize the Vice President's two assaults on the media as "dignified" and "courageous."

For our part, we do not readily see what was

courageous about Mr. Agnew's going to Montgomery, Alabama to unburden himself of complaints about The Washington Post and The New York Times, newspapers that have gained note in the state largely as a result of Governor Wallace's ceaseless attacks upon them. And as for dignity, we would recall to Mr. Nixon only Mr. Agnew's vicious attack on Averell Harriman. If that was dignity, we look forward with fascination to Mr. Agnew's first indecorous remarks.

Still, Mr. Nixon's synopsis of Mr. Agnew's remarks was a considerable improvement on the remarks themselves, a kind of interpretive rearrangement which detached the President from his Vice President's shriller charges. As reconstructed by President Nixon, Mr. Agnew's complaint came down to the suggestion that news reporting not be mixed up with opinion-pushing. We're for that, and we tend to view the substantive differences between the President's and the Vice President's declarations as being somewhat more important than the adjectives Mr. Nixon chose by way of defending Mr. Agnew's original forays.