by Clark Clifford

Mr. Clifford, adviser to Presidents Truman, Kennedy and Johnson, was Secretary of Defense in 1968–69. In 1960, he headed the transfer of power from Eisenhower to Kennedy. His article advocating the beginning of withdrawal from Vietnam in *Foreign Affairs* a year ago created a stir; Nixon said then he hoped to better Clifford's timetable. As a contribution to the current national debate, LIFE presents Clifford's first published views on the subject since then.

Set a date in Vietnam. Stick to it. Get out.

On the evening of April 30, I heard President Nixon inform the American people that in order to "avoid a wider war" and "keep the casualties of our brave men in Vietnam at an absolute minimum," he had ordered American troops to invade Cambodia.

My mind went back to a day in April 1961 when I received a telephone call from President Kennedy. He asked me to come to the White House to discuss the Bay of Pigs disaster which had just occurred. He was agitated and deadly serious. I shall never forget his words: "I have made a tragic mistake. Not only were our facts in error, but our policy was wrong because the premises on which it was built were wrong." These words of President Kennedy apply with startling accuracy to President Nixon's decision to invade Cambodia. Unfortunately, it is clear that President Nixon's action is an infinitely greater mistake than President Kennedy's, because more than 400,000 American boys remain involved in Vietnam, and far graver damage has already been done to our nation, both at home and abroad.

Like most Americans, I welcomed President Nixon's promises to end the Vietnam war and bring our boys home. Like most Americans, I applauded the President's action in withdrawing 115,000 of our troops so far, and have noted his intention, with some qualifications, to withdraw 150,000 more in the next 12 months. Like most Americans, my sincere inclination is to support our President in times of crisis. However, I cannot remain silent in the face of his reckless decision to send troops to Cambodia, continuing a course of action which I believe to be dangerous to the welfare of our nation. It is my opinion that President Nixon is taking our nation down a road that is leading us more deeply into Vietnam rather than taking us out.

George Santayana once said: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." In my personal experience with the war in Vietnam, I have learned certain basic and important lessons. It has been my hope that the present administration would study the past and determine not to repeat certain actions previously taken. However, I must express the deepest concern that it is now apparent that President Nixon has not grasped these vital lessons which seem so blazingly clear as we look back at the last five years of our substantial participation in the Vietnam conflict.

I have learned three fundamental lessons from my personal experience with Vietnam and I shall present them in this article. I shall then discuss how these lessons apply to the Cambodian situation. Finally, I will suggest a specific plan for our extrication from Vietnam.

The national security of the United States is not involved in Vietnam, nor does our national interest in the area warrant our continued military presence there.

The basis of our original participation in the conflict in Vietnam was the general acceptance of the so-called "domino theory." If South Vietnam were permitted to fall, then other nations of Southeast Asia, and possibly even in the Asian subcontinent, might topple, one after the other. If this occurred, it was alleged, the national security of the United States would be adversely affected. At one time, I accepted the reasonableness of this theory, but my own personal experience has led me to the conclusion that it is now unsound.

One of the major reasons for the change in my own thinking has been the attitude, evidenced over the last five years, of the nations in Asia that would be most seriously affected if the domino theory were applicable. These nations are infinitely better acquainted with the political, military and diplomatic facts of life in that part of the world, for they have lived with them for hundreds of years. As one looks at the map of the area, it is interesting to fan out from South Vietnam and ascertain the number of troops that these countries have sent to help South Vietnam because, in the final analysis, that is the most accurate test of the degree of their concern.

Burma, Laos and Cambodia, to the west, have sent no troops to South Vietnam. Singapore and Malaysia have sent no troops, while Thailand has sent only token forces.

The Philippines have sent no combat troops. The personnel of the engineering units and hospital corps it did send have been largely withdrawn. Indonesia, India and Pakistan have sent no troops.

These are the closest dominoes, and should be the first to fall.

As far as Laos and Cambodia are concerned, their behavior hardly justifies any sacrifice of American lives or treasure on their behalf. The situation existing in these countries is incredibly sleazy, and should be known and understood by all Americans.

Most of the men and matériel of war used to fight against American forces in South Vietnam come down the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos. Is Laos prepared to make any sacrifice to prevent the use of the trail? Certainly not! In fact, the exact opposite is the case. On March 6, 1970, Souvanna Phouma, prime minister of Laos, had a press conference and said:

"I told the ambassador from North Vietnam last year that we will accept the *use of the trail by North Vietnamese troops* with the condition that those troops withdraw from the important regions of Laos."

While American pilots, on a sharply escalated basis, are fighting and dying in support of Laotian forces engaged with Communist troops, the ruler of Laos suggests a deal that would permit the North Vietnamese free use of the trail through Laos to transport troops, guns and ammunition to kill Americans in South Vietnam.

In Cambodia, for years, enemy supplies have come into the port of Sihanoukville and have been transported across Cambodia into South Vietnam, to be used against American forces.

Laos and Cambodia have not been prepared to jeopardize their own interests to prevent North Vietnam from conquering the South. In fact, at least until Sihanouk's recent fall, both countries have been helping the North Vietnamese, and ma-

In the Fishhook area on the Cambodia-South Vietnam frontier, an American infantryman who collapsed from the heat tries to drink from a canteen

neuvering to make their own deals. The United States has become involved in the age-old intrigue and chicanery that are traditional in the area.

I feel strongly that we have met, many times over, any obligation or commitment that we had in that part of the world, and I believe that the developments of the last five years should persuade us that the time has come to disengage in Southeast Asia and bring our men home.

I believe most Americans agree, but from what he says and does, President Nixon continues grossly to exaggerate Vietnam's importance to our national security.

In giving thought and study to this enigma, I have reached the conclusion that President Nixon has a curious obsession about Vietnam and Southeast Asia. Back in 1954, in a speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors in the East Room of the White House, then Vice President Nixon said: "If in order to avoid further Communist expansion in Asia and particularly in Indochina, if in order to avoid it we must take the risk now of putting American boys in . . . I personally would support such a decision." This is particularly startling because Mr. Nixon was recommending that we send American troops into Indochina to help the French who were engaged in war there to retain their colonial territories.

In 1965, President Nixon, then a private citizen, wrote a letter to the New York *Times*. In that letter, he declared that "victory for the Vietcong . . . would mean ultimately the destruction of freedom of speech for all men for all time, not only in Asia but in the United States as well." In his speech of Nov. 3, 1969 he referred to the "great stakes involved in Vietnam," and asserted that they were no less than the maintenance of the peace "in the Middle East, in Berlin, eventually even in the Western Hemisphere."

I want very much for the President of the United States to be wise, mature and to exercise good judgment, but a statement of this kind shakes my confidence to its very core. I cannot remain silent when President Nixon acts as though he believes that a certain political result in a small underdeveloped country of 18 million persons in Southeast Asia is somehow crucial to "the future of peace and freedom in America and in the world."

I have learned these past years that the war in Vietnam is a local war arising out of the particular political conditions existing in Southeast Asia. I consider it a delusion to suggest that the war in Vietnam is part of a worldwide program of Communist aggression.

President Nixon continually argues that we must fight in Vietnam now to avoid "a bigger war or surrender later." But it is clear to me that the only real danger of a "bigger war" would come from the continued escalation of the rapidly widening conflict in Indochina.

We cannot win a military victory in South Vietnam, and we must, therefore, cease trying to do so.

The goal of winning a military victory in South Vietnam has proved to be a will-o'-the-wisp that has led us from one military adventure to another. I have reached the clear conclusion that we are not winning such a victory, nor can we win it in the future.

Certain restraints have been placed upon our military activity by the political realities that exist. We have been unwilling to invade North Vietnam, or to engage in indiscriminate bombing or mining of its harbors. As a result, we have been occupied in the most difficult type of guerrilla war and probably what is the most difficult terrain in which to fight. Our enormous firepower and our airpower are seriously limited and restricted by the fact that most of the fighting takes place in the deepest jungles in Southeast Asia.

In warfare, a nation has three major goals. The first is to kill as many of the enemy as possible on the field of battle. The second is to destroy the enemy's war-making potential, and the third is to seize and hold enemy territory. In the present conflict, a substantial number of the enemy have been killed but the troops from the North continue to come down in an uninterrupted flow. The enemy is well armed, well equipped and well trained, and is expert in guerrilla warfare. And Hanoi has made clear beyond any reasonable

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'Cambodia will lengthen the war'

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doubt its willingness and ability to accept substantial casualties for as long as necessary.

As to the second goal, we have been unsuccessful because we are wholly unable to destroy the enemy's war-making potential. The factories turning out guns, rockets, mortars and the matériel of war are not located in North Vietnam, but in Red China and the Soviet Union. We cannot destroy the factories in those countries. We attempted instead to impede the flow of weapons into South Vietnam by a bombing campaign in the North. In my opinion, the results did not warrant the enormous cost to us.

We have been no more successful in pursuing the third goal of seizing and holding territory. The enemy does not operate along a battle line; his objective is not to hold territory. When we attack, the enemy yields, but he returns when we move out.

In the pursuit of these goals, we have lost the lives of close to 45,000 Americans, had more than 275,000 wounded, spent over $125 billion, lost close to 7,000 planes, and we have dropped more tonnage of bombs in this conflict than we did in World War II and the Korean War combined.

Our problem in Vietnam is due not only to our inability to attain the military goals, despite our great effort, but to the fact that the struggle is basically a political one. The enemy continues to symbolize the forces of nationalism. The regime which we support is a narrowly based military dictatorship.

President Nixon has repeatedly asserted that the only alternative to his Vietnamization program is the "defeat and humiliation" of the United States. He has announced his determination not to accept this "first defeat" in our nation's history. The President's view constitutes, in my opinion, a complete misreading of the nature of the conflict in South Vietnam, of our role and purpose there and of the American national interest. The alternatives in Vietnam are not military victory on the one hand, or defeat and humiliation on the other. We did not intervene to conquer North Vietnam, but solely to extend a shield for South Vietnam. We did not intervene to impose any particular government on South Vietnam. The interests of the South Vietnamese people will be served and our objectives will be achieved by a realistic political settlement. A program for orderly disengagement will create the conditions in which productive negotiations become possible. Such a program is the only way to peace, and peace in Southeast Asia is the only victory that we should seek.

One of the deepest concerns I have about our present policy in Vietnam is that President Nixon, while he proclaims his dedication to a political settlement, by his actions still seeks to gain the military victory that cannot be won.

We cannot continue to fight the war in Vietnam without doing serious and irreparable injury to our own country.

The effect of the war on the young people in the United States is a virulent one. They feel especially affected by the war because they are the ones who have to fight it. Many of them do not believe in it and they are at a loss to understand why they must fight and die in a remote corner of Southeast Asia when they know their country is in no peril whatsoever. One of the poisonous effects of the conflict is the disunity and bitterness, and in some instances violence, it has brought about in our country.

The war has confused many Americans and has caused a continuing loss of confidence because the institutions of our government have not dealt with the pressing problem of national priorities. Every domestic problem we have, including poverty, inadequate housing, crime, educational deficiencies, hunger and pollution is affected adversely by our participation in the Vietnam war, and I do not believe these problems will be brought under control until we have disengaged from that conflict.

The war is a major contributor to the inflation that is hurting every citizen in our nation. We are also in the midst of a serious setback as far as business is concerned. The effect of the war on our economy is dramatic. Almost immediately after our foolhardy entry into Cambodia, the Dow-Jones industrial average declined over 19 points.

What troubles me is that President Nixon continues to give priority to policy in Indochina and to ignore its consequences at home. His actions are dividing the nation when we need desperately to be united and to devote our energies to our critical domestic problems.

The Cambodian invasion ignores these three lessons. The President ordered up to 20,000 American troops into Cambodia, and has now promised to have them out by July 1. I know already, in my own mind, that the operation will achieve little. The enemy will fade into the jungles of Cambodia, which are just as impassable and impenetrable as those in Vietnam. Any military gains will be temporary and inconsequential.

This is not an idle prognostication upon my part but is an opinion derived from past experience. Time and again in South Vietnam, the recommendation was made that a sweep be conducted through the Ashau Valley on the grounds that a vital blow could be struck against enemy forces. Time and again, thousands of American troops would sweep through the valley and find practically no enemy soldiers. The same will happen in Cambodia.

Also, there is a curious psychology I cannot understand that attaches importance to capturing territory even though it is held for a temporary period. A perfect illustration is Hamburger Hill. We drove the enemy off Hamburger Hill at great loss of life to our troops, and then later on withdrew. As soon as we pulled out, the enemy reoccupied Hamburger Hill and we went back and repeated the process. I do not know who holds the hill today. I am sure it doesn't matter.

After the adventure is concluded and our troops have been pulled back to South Vietnam, I predict the enemy will quickly reoccupy the areas that we have cleared. Even if the decision were made to remain in Cambodia, then I predict the enemy will develop new bases and staging areas just outside the perimeter of the area we occupy in Cambodia. In either event, the military effect is negligible and not worth the effort.

President Nixon, in his address to the nation of April 30, informed the American people that the invasion of Cambodia is indispensable to the withdrawal of our troops from South Vietnam, that it will serve the purpose of ending the war in Vietnam, that it will keep our casualties at a minimum, and that it will win a just peace.

These contentions violate every lesson that we have learned in the last five years in Vietnam. The bitter experience of those years demonstrates clearly to me that our incursion into Cambodia will delay the withdrawal of our troops from South Vietnam because it spreads the war and intensifies it. This decision will not end the war, but will lengthen it because of the reactions of the enemy to this new development. It will not keep our casualties down but will increase them, not only because of the men killed in Cambodia but because of the increased level of combat which I predict will be the other side's response in Vietnam. It will not achieve peace but will postpone it or destroy entirely the chances of obtaining it. Even though we pull out, the damage has been done, and the bankruptcy of our present Vietnamization program has been exposed.

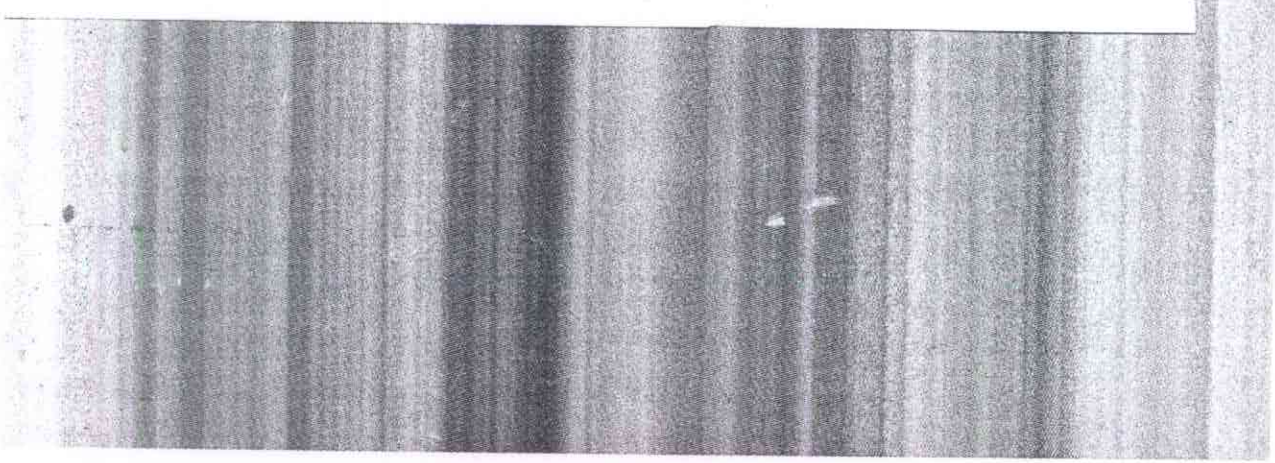
The thrust of President Nixon's position in his speech of April 30 was that if we escalated our efforts into Cambodia, it would aid our program of Vietnamization.

How unfortunate it is that President Nixon did not heed the congressional testimony of Secretary of State William P. Rogers when he testified on April 23, just one week before the President spoke. Secretary Rogers said:

"We have no incentive to escalate. Our whole incentive is to de-escalate. We recognize that if we escalate and get involved in Cambodia with our ground troops, that our whole program [Vietnamization] is defeated."

I anticipate that in the period of the next few weeks glowing reports will flow back from Vietnam regarding the outstanding success of the drive into Cambodia. Figures will be proudly presented showing the number of tons of rice captured, bunkers and staging areas destroyed, substantial numbers of weapons and quantities of ammunition found. A determined effort will be made to portray the entire adventure as a success, even though no major engagements will have taken place and the number of enemy casualties will be woefully small. This has happened time and time again, and our hopes have been raised only to be dashed by new enemy offensives. The capture of supplies and equipment, in the past, has been met by an increase in the supply of such equipment by the Soviet Union and China, with resulting increased flow down the pipeline from North Vietnam.

A further worry I have is that this ill-advised move into Cambodia could create a whole new set of problems. The open violation of Cambo-



dian neutrality on the part of our troops could well constitute an open invitation to the North Vietnamese to expand their efforts further over Indochina on the pretext of defending independence. Our march into Cambodia now jeopardizes the ancient capitals of Phnom Penh and Vientiane. I do not have the prescience to visualize what may take place in this regard, but I know that we have greatly expanded the danger of the conflict spreading throughout Cambodia and Laos, and even further.

Although I consider the attack on Cambodia to be fraught with the most serious military consequences, I attach even greater danger to the diplomatic results that will flow from it.

Many of our friends around the world are shocked at this imprudent expansion of the conflict. They had hoped that they would see a contraction of the area of conflict and instead they learn, with deep apprehension, that it is being widened. The Cambodian adventure ignored the request of Foreign Minister Malik of Indonesia that no action be taken to extend arms support to Cambodia pending a regional conference to find ways of preserving that country's neutrality.

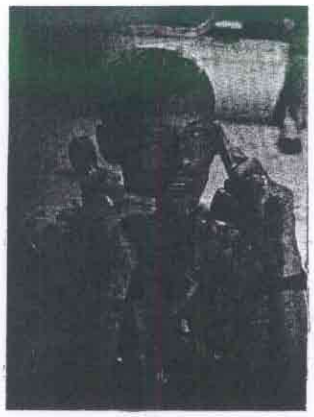
The decision appears to have been made so precipitately that the proper consideration was not given to the effect of the action on Communist China. The action was taken right after the recent conference of Communist representatives from China, Cambodia, Laos and North Vietnam. This conference ended with an agreement of mutual support and cooperation in combating American and other enemy forces in Indochina.

The predictable Soviet reaction was also apparently discounted. Premier Kosygin, on May 4, called a special news conference to warn of the worsening in Soviet-American relations. Mr. Kosygin stated that the Cambodian move raised serious doubts about President Nixon's sincerity in seeking an "era of negotiation." Mr. Kosygin went so far as to suggest that President Nixon's statements could not be trusted. This does not mean that either China or Russia will intervene directly, but it does mean that they will give North Vietnam all the aid it needs to neutralize our action.

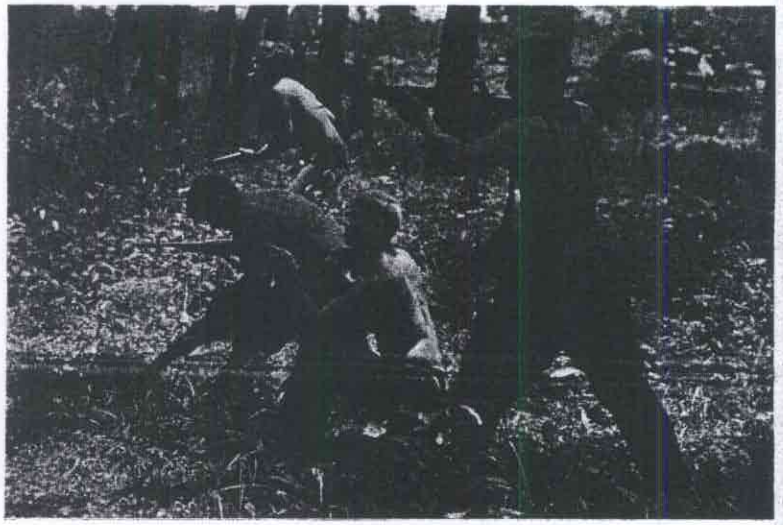
Another unfortunate result of our action is to imperil the success of the strategic arms talks now being held in Vienna. Mr. Kosygin stated that our actions put the Soviet Union on guard and decrease their confidence, without which it is difficult to conduct negotiations.

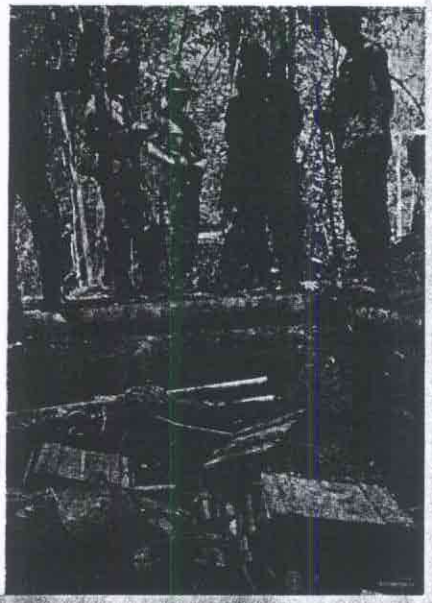
Domestically, the re-escalation of the war has gravely increased the disaffection of young Americans, and the disruption of our society.

The active invasion dramatizes another facet of President Nixon's statements on the war which has caused me the deepest concern. In his speech of April 30, President Nixon again warned the North Vietnamese that, if they accelerated the fighting, he would take stern action in response. He has done this on at least four or five occasions and, in each instance, the enemy has responded by some type of military action. I suggest that this is the road to utter chaos. While announcing the withdrawal of a limited number of troops on the one hand, the President keeps threatening the enemy by assuring him that we are perfectly willing to raise the level of combat. This is not the path to peace. It is the path that will lead to more and more fighting and more and more dying.



Defense Secretary Melvin Laird last week announced that "several thousand" American troops had already been pulled out of Cambodia, and repeated President Nixon's pledge that all Americans would leave by the end of June. Until then American troops will continue to provide what the President calls "the protection of Cambodian neutrality." In the Parrot's Beak area, Captain Dennis Muchlstedt (left) juggles a pair of phones in effort to contact field units of his division, the Ninth Infantry, while troops of the Ninth (below) exchange fire with the enemy. Soldiers from the 11th Armored Cavalry inspect a Vietcong weapons cache (bottom), shortly before destroying it.





It is time now to end our participation in the war. We must begin the rapid, orderly, complete and scheduled withdrawal of United States forces from Indochina.

President Nixon has described his program of Vietnamization as a plan for peace. I believe, however, that it can never bring peace in Southeast Asia, and that it is, in fact, a formula for perpetual war.

This war can only be ended by a political settlement. Nothing that the Administration is now doing holds any promise of bringing one about. And our present program for indefinite military presence in Vietnam makes such political settlement impossible. So long as our withdrawals are conditioned on the ability of the South Vietnamese to assume the combat burden, Hanoi cannot be expected to believe that we are genuinely interested in, or would even accept, the kind of political compromise that a peaceful settlement

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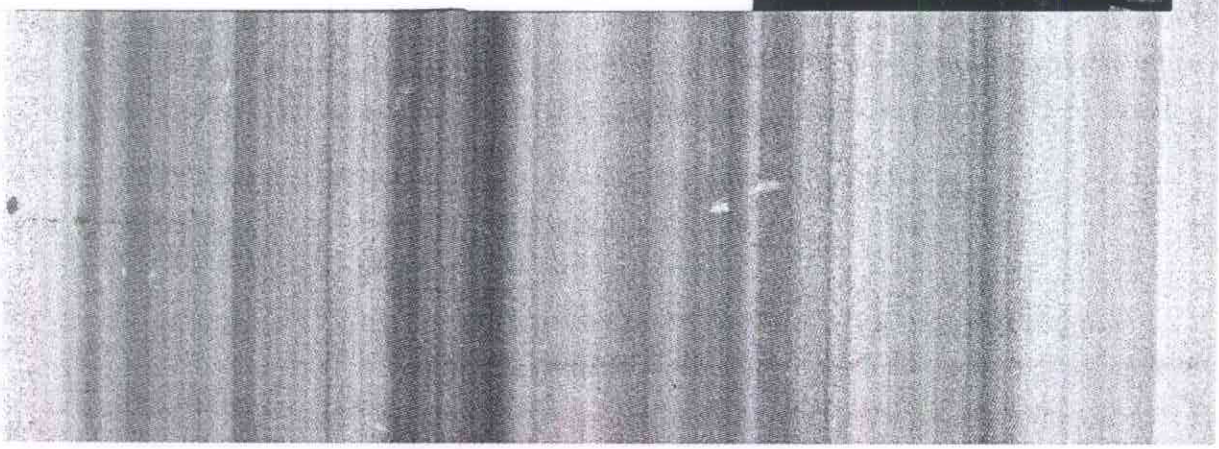

Three points to 'Vietnamize the peace'

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would require. The present Saigon government, on the other hand, will never make the necessary accommodations so long as it is secure in the belief that American forces will remain in sufficient numbers to keep it in power.

It seems clear that the Administration believes it has proposed in Paris a genuine basis for compromise. In my opinion, however, these proposals are not realistic, nor will they lead to any progress.

Accordingly, what we need is a program that will Vietnamize the peace rather than prolong the war. In July 1969, in an article in the magazine *Foreign Affairs*, I recommended the definite, scheduled withdrawal of our ground combat forces from Vietnam by the end of 1970. I now propose to go further, and set a final date for our complete disengagement. Such final date might even be advanced if certain agreements are reached. The following is my specific three-point plan:

1. Announce publicly that all U.S. forces are to be removed from any combat role anywhere in Southeast Asia no later than Dec. 31, 1970, and that all U.S. military personnel will be out of Indochina by the end of 1971, at the latest, provided only that arrangements have been made for the release of all U.S. prisoners of war.

2. Move promptly to end B-52 attacks, all search-and-destroy missions, and all other offensive operations, except as necessary to protect the security of U.S. forces, as disengagement proceeds.

Clark Clifford visited Vietnam as L.B.J.'s Secretary of Defense in July 1968. With him in Danang is General Creighton Abrams, commander of U.S. forces.

3. Inform Hanoi and Saigon that *we are prepared to negotiate an even more rapid withdrawal* if the safety of our forces is assured by a cease-fire or other arrangements in South Vietnam, and if there is an understanding regarding the cessation of military pressures in Laos and Cambodia.

President Nixon has maintained that, were he to announce a withdrawal schedule, Hanoi would lose all incentive to negotiate a settlement. It is abundantly clear, however, that Hanoi feels no incentive to negotiate at the present time. The President has also asserted that North Vietnam would then simply wait until our troops have been reduced in number and launch attacks. But this potential exists whether a withdrawal program is announced in advance, or simply in instalments. A third objection has been that the South Vietnamese forces may not be ready to assume the full combat burden and that a military conquest and bloodbath may ensue. But our objective should be to establish the conditions that will lead, not to the continued necessity for combat capability, but rather to a political compromise that will bring peace and stability to that troubled land.

On a number of occasions, President Nixon, in arguing that it would be improper for us to leave Vietnam now, has used the so-called "bloodbath" argument. He has suggested that the massacre of many South Vietnamese, including a million and a half Catholics who fled from the North, would occur when our forces withdrew.

I find this position difficult to understand. In the first place, the figure of one million and a half Catholics who fled to the South, referred to by President Nixon in his speech of Nov. 3, 1969, is incorrect. A study of this subject, published in 1956, by the South Vietnam Department of Education and the National Commission for UNESCO, discloses that the number is not 1.5 million but 754,710. This is significant because the President overlooked the fact that there are still living in *North* Vietnam today approximately 800,000 Catholics. There are also Catholics among the leadership of the National Liberation Front in South Vietnam.

The President bases his claim of "bloodbath" on his charge that when the Communists took over North Vietnam in 1954, they slaughtered thousands upon thousands of North Vietnamese. In fact, the records of the International Control Commission disclose that, in the two years following the armistice of 1954, only 19 complaints were filed covering political reprisals in all of North Vietnam. Later, in 1955 and 1956, a peasant revolt was harshly repressed, and the best estimate are that 10,000 to 15,000 may have died.

It is my firm belief that, when it becomes apparent that the Americans are in fact leaving, all parties seeking power in South Vietnam will have a strong incentive to negotiate a compromise settlement. All will recognize that compromise is their one assurance of a share in political power. The contending factions must now be aware that, in the absence of compromise, they can look forward only to continued conflict and disruption. The need for peace must now be apparent to all but the very few whose power and profit depend on war. We should not forget that, in South Vietnam's election of 1967, and under circumstances that could hardly be described as favorable, a candidate advocating accommodation for the purpose of peace secured 17% of the votes counted, while the winning military ticket fell far short of a majority.

The North Vietnamese negotiators have indicated their willingness to talk seriously if the United States declares the total and unconditional withdrawal of its troops from South Vietnam. Their suggestion of a six-month period for such withdrawal need not be accepted, but their acceptance of the principle should not be ignored.

The obvious advantage of the three-point plan proposed herein is that it will specifically and unequivocally have all U.S. forces out of Indochina by the end of 1971 at the latest. It also frees the President from military pressure to slow or stop the withdrawal process. The plan takes account of the plight of the Americans now held captive and gives them and their families the hope of early release. No such hope can exist while the war continues and even intensifies. It offers also an immediate reduction in the level of violence throughout Vietnam. The ending of B-52 raids and search-and-destroy missions, so long as the other side does not act to jeopardize the security of our troops, will lower casualties and create a climate far more hospitable to the process of political settlement. This approach could serve to get negotiations started again, and as they progress, this diminution in hostilities can develop into a complete cease-fire.

The time has come for us to grasp the initiative in making the necessary and vital decisions. President Nixon's policy of making our withdrawal dependent on his three criteria is a grievous error. These criteria are: 1) the level of enemy activity; 2) progress at the peace talks in Paris, and 3) the speed with which the South Vietnamese take over the fighting. Even a cursory study discloses that items one and two are controlled by Hanoi, while item three is controlled by Saigon.

We should no longer allow our own perception of our own interests to be distorted or deflected by our apprehensions as to what may occur politically in Saigon. American national interests require American disengagement from South Vietnam. I am convinced that, as presently enunciated, the Nixon program will not bring this about.

We should, instead, decide now to get out of Vietnam on a scheduled and orderly basis no later than the end of 1971. We should, at the same time, make known our readiness to negotiate a much earlier withdrawal and we should move now to scale down the level of violence. Only in this way can we achieve the peace that all Americans want, and that American military might can never win.

The present policy must be changed. The only effective method to accomplish this is sustained pressure from the public. The enormous upswing in antiwar sentiment, following the Cambodian transgression, must be maintained and strengthened and continuously brought to the attention of our country's leaders.

The solution is within our hands—if we *will* but use it. ■