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What chance is 'reasonable' in Vietnam?

With presidential adviser Henry A. Kissinger coming home from a "fact-finding" trip to Saigon and Paris, the Nixon administration is in the midst of yet another reappraisal of American Vietnam policy. The Pentagon papers indicate that such reevaluations are episodic. As in the past, the public can only be dimly aware of what options are being seriously debated. The President's choice involves as much what he decides to tell the American people as what he decides to do.

We believe that only an unambiguous public gesture can now end the divisions in our country. The Senate for the first time has gone on record in favor of a complete withdrawal within nine months. The publication of the Pentagon papers has intensified the debate about governmental credibility. And, in the midst of this, the Vietcong on July 1 put forward another in a long line of peace proposals.

This new seven-point proposal, like its predecessors, is a construct of Marxist rhetoric and Talmudic precision. The Vietnamese Communists use words very carefully to state their position in a way that raises hopes without giving anything away. They present a familiar list of moral imperatives that the United States "must" do in order to bring peace to Vietnam: ending "Vietnamization," dismantling all bases, withdrawing "all troops, military personnel, weapons, war materials," bringing about a coalition government.

But in the following paragraph, which enunciates their conditions for action, as distinguished from the moral imperatives, they simply state: "If the U.S. sets a terminal date for the withdrawal from South Vietnam in 1971 of the totality of U.S. forces [and Allied forces], the parties will at the same time agree on" 1) safe withdrawal and 2) the release of American POWs, beginning and ending with the withdrawal of U.S. forces.

The message seems to be this: if we set a 1971 terminal date, there will be a cease-fire against American forces, a concurrent release of prisoners, and ostensibly no prohibitions on future American military and economic assistance to the Saigon regime. This interpretation is supported by North Vietnam's Le Duc Tho in his press interview of July 6.

We cannot be certain that this is really Hanoi's meaning. In the past, when we asked them what such and such a phrase meant, they only would say that we should look at the totality of their proposal. Thus we can only learn what they mean by putting forward a concrete proposal of our own which includes a terminal date for our presence and simultaneous release of prisoners.

Of course, if release of our POWs alone were our basic goal, the President would have every reason to accept the Hanoi position. But the real issue is, as it has always been, how important a non-Communist Vietnam is to American security. In this regard, everything that the President has *said* indicates that his Vietnam policy is not much different from that of each of his post-World War II predecessors. His stated goal is, as their goal was, a non-Communist South Vietnam. For President Truman, that meant beginning a program of military assistance to enable the French to fight the Vietminh. For President Eisenhower, it meant massive aid totaling 80 percent of the French effort in 1954 and, after the Geneva Conference, the introduction of an American military mission. For President Kennedy, it meant sending 15,000 American advisers to Vietnam and meddling in South Vietnamese domestic politics. For President Johnson, it meant Americanization of the war. For President Nixon, it is Vietnamization with phased withdrawal of American troops, along with invasions of Laos and Cambodia. The American policy in Vietnam is now described by President Nixon as assuring a "reasonable chance" for survival of the Saigon government. The difficulty is not with the phrase but with what meaning it is given. In fact, "reasonable chance" reasonably defined could provide a basis for uniting the American people.

So far, however, "reasonable chance" seems to add up to an ambiguous holding action: it has meant withdrawing most of the American forces in order to cut American casualties and costs, thereby, the President hopes, maintaining domestic support for the war. It has meant withdrawing slowly enough with hawkish enough rhetoric to reduce the chances of what the President has called "a nightmare of recrimination"—the right-wing reaction.

It seems to portend keeping two American residual forces in the battle as long as necessary: one on the ground in Vietnam providing assistance to the South Vietnamese and defending itself, and the other in Thailand and offshore on carriers conducting bombing raids throughout Indochina. It surely will mean continuing large-scale military and economic assistance to the South Vietnamese government.

While these actions can be interpreted in various ways, they are consistent with the notion that the President is doing everything that our domestic politics will permit to support the current Saigon government for the indefinite future.

Many would argue that we have long since given the Saigon government a "reasonable chance." We have fought their war for them for six years, killing many of the best enemy troops. At least for the past three years, we have given top priority to the equipping and training of South Vietnamese forces. The Saigon government has an army larger than its opponents, and it can draw ample recruits from the population under its control. These facts do not mean that the Saigon government would survive a complete American withdrawal. The simple truth is that we do not understand much more about South Vietnam today than we did in 1946, and we just do not know whether the Saigon government can survive or not.

President Nixon is really asking for continued American support for the war—for what everyone, including the President himself, seems to concede is only a marginal improvement of an uncertain chance that the current Saigon government will indeed be able to survive.

What the President hopes to gain is surely more than overbalanced by what he risks in continuing the war.

First, whatever Hanoi's current terms are, they are almost certain to increase as the size of our force diminishes. When 50,000 or fewer American troops are left in South Vietnam, Hanoi might demand that the United States also cease aid to Saigon and perhaps even change that government in return for the release of the prisoners.

A second risk is that if Hanoi does step up military pressure against this shrunken American force, the President might feel that he had no alternative than to respond by what he has called "decisive escalation" against North Vietnam. Most observers would say that the President simply cannot afford the domestic political repercussions of escalation now. But most of them were saying that before Laos and Cambodia. Indeed, most U.S. escalations of the war were preceded by predictions that they would not occur.

Beyond these two risks lies a third: namely, the risk of breaking the fragile link of trust between the President and the people. Presidents always want to keep open their options and retain their flexibility. But when the issue is Vietnam today, the President's desire for ambiguity must give way to the public's right to clarity.

President Nixon seems prepared to run these risks for two reasons. He still believes what most Southeast Asian specialists, including those within the government, have long since ceased to believe: that prospects for a "generation of peace" depend on the outcome in Vietnam.

The President also fears the growth of radicalism at home. Such a domestic reaction is indeed something to worry about. The political left has started calling for war crimes trials. Their goal seems to be to establish wide-ranging individual, if not national, guilt. The Calley trial sparked the political right. Their goal will be to find out who is to blame for America's not winning this war. This emerging "scapegoatism" is frightening. President Nixon is on the mark here.

It is now the President's obligation to unite the country by stating an unambiguous policy. The new NLF proposal opens the way for doing so by apparently allowing the President to define "reasonable chance" as an American withdrawal with the Saigon government free to receive American military and economic aid. If President Nixon were to define "reasonable chance" in these terms, few here would quarrel with that decision, and it would almost certainly open the way at last to an end to our military involvement in Indochina.

It may well be the only way to give ourselves—these United States—a reasonable chance.

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