

## Buying Time for What?

The White House has wasted no time in shattering the illusion created by President Nixon in his television interview earlier this week when he indicated that the fate of American prisoners of war is the "one circumstance" standing in the way of total withdrawal from Indochina.

A White House spokesman now concedes that the Administration is also still insisting that "the South Vietnamese have a right to determine their own future." While the words themselves are unexceptionable, their use in this context amounts to an admission that the real reason for keeping a residual force in South Vietnam and for the renewed bombing of North Vietnam is to "buy time" for the Saigon regime of President Thieu—which is what American military spokesmen in Saigon have been saying all along.

This raises the question: how much time, at what price and to what end?

Despite reiterated claims of growing success in the President's Vietnamization program, recent evidence suggests that time is running against American-supported forces in Cambodia, Laos and South Vietnam and may be rapidly running out as American troop withdrawals continue.

The Cambodian front, which the President sought to stabilize with a massive American-South Vietnamese invasion two years ago, is a shambles. A series of defeats has shattered Cambodian morale and has left in doubt the very survival of the regime headed by Premier Lon Nol.

In Laos, scene of a disastrous South Vietnamese intervention last year, American-supported Government and Thai forces are falling back on two critical fronts. In the North, the Communists have again overrun the Plaine des Jarres and are pounding the key military base at Long Thien. In the South, the North Vietnamese control the strategic Boloven Plateau, and are threatening Pakse, the nation's second largest city.

Most ominous of all is a Communist buildup in South Vietnam's Central Highlands which United States military sources say has reached "historic" proportions, threatening that a major offensive will be launched there early this year.

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There is no question that these developments gravely threaten Mr. Nixon's Vietnamization plan and the shrinking American forces who remain hostages to that fast-fading illusion of military victory. But there is no reason to believe that the renewed bombing can prevent, or even long deter an all-out assault from the North.

Years of sustained bombing throughout most of North Vietnam did not solve President Johnson's problems when he had up to a half-million troops fighting in the South. Intensive bombing did not stave off disaster for the Cambodians along Route 6 or for the Laotians and Thais in the Plaine des Jarres. It is extremely doubtful that last week's five-day revival of the air war against the North will seriously upset Hanoi's schedule, especially since those raids were apparently less successful than President Nixon extravagantly claimed.

The agonizing question then is, what new risks may the President hazard in his desperate attempt to salvage a bankrupt policy? How many more Americans and Vietnamese must die, how many more prisoners must rot for how long in Hanoi, how much more of Vietnam must be devastated—and to what end? Does the President really believe he can save the regime in Saigon by air power alone?

Or, as Republican Representative Paul McCloskey of California has charged, is the President merely trying to buy time until the American elections are held next November?

Mr. Nixon only encouraged such sinister speculation when he suggested Sunday night that "when we come down to the end, as far as our own involvement in Vietnam is concerned, the question of whether or not they [the Communists] will return our prisoners in exchange for a total American withdrawal is one they will have a chance to answer." If the President is prepared to make such a proposal later, why not now?