

The Politics of Vietnam

By JAMES RESTON

SARASOTA, Fla., Jan. 27—President Nixon's account of his secret efforts to negotiate a peace in Indochina has clearly helped him in the Florida Presidential primary election campaign, and embarrassed the leading Democratic candidates for the Presidency.

His peace terms are extremely complicated, but what stands out in the shorthand of stump campaigning is that he offered to withdraw all his troops if he got all U.S. prisoners of war released—and that this was rejected by Hanoi and the National Liberation Front.

Accordingly, Senators Muskie, Humphrey, McGovern and Mayor Lindsay, when they point to the critical conditions which are basic to the President's peace terms, find themselves caught in a tangle of complex and ambiguous qualifications, and even in danger of seeming to be sympathetic to the enemy.

Ironically, it is not the press here but the families of the American prisoners of war who have cut to the heart of this issue and made clear that Mr. Nixon is demanding, not only the release of the P.O.W.'s, but the neutralization of all of Indochina, the end of all infiltration by foreign troops (are the South Vietnamese Communists "foreign" in South Vietnam?), a cease-fire and an election process which is virtually certain to restore the Thieu Government to power in Saigon.

For example, Mrs. Gerald A. Gartley of Dunedin, Fla., whose Navy lieutenant son, Mark Gartley, was shot down over North Vietnam in August of 1968, observed here that while Mr. Nixon was obviously trying to free the P.O.W.'s, the safety of the Thieu Government and Mr. Nixon's own Presidential future were also apparently important considerations and may even have "come first."

This, of course, cannot be anything

A Cautionary Word to Read the Small Type Along With the Big

more than Mrs. Gartley's personal speculation (nobody but the President knows which of his conditions come first). But several things are fairly clear:

1. Both sides in the war have now put forward specific terms of peace unacceptable to the other side.

2. Hanoi and the N.L.F. are asking the President not only to get out of Indochina but to take all his equipment with him, including the equipment now in the hands of the South Vietnamese, and stop future military aid to Saigon. Dr. Kissinger has fairly characterized this as a demand that Washington abandon Saigon and in effect overthrow the Thieu Government.

3. At the same time, Mr. Nixon is demanding that the enemy give up the positions it has gained by years of fighting in South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, and accept a cease-fire just at the time when the enemy is mounting an offensive and U.S. ground troops are withdrawing.

It is clear that Washington is not going to abandon Saigon under what amounts to a demand for Saigon's surrender, and that Hanoi and the N.L.F. are not going to order a cease-fire and abandon military positions they have won in the last ten years at the cost of millions of lives.

So the stalemate continues. Mr. Nixon has clearly made concessions for peace—which deserve a better hearing than Hanoi and the N.L.F. have given them—and has finally clarified the major political and military issues in dispute. But his publication of

these terms, while they relieve him of the charge that he was not even considering a final withdrawal of all U.S. troops, introduce other conditions known to him to be unacceptable to the enemy.

In fact, by impressing public opinion in this country by his persistent effort to negotiate a secret agreement, he has undoubtedly gained support for stepping up the bombing against the enemy's forthcoming military offensive.

Thus the outlook is not for less fighting but for a more savage battle during the coming dry season, and while Mr. Nixon has undoubtedly gained politically in the short run, he has now committed himself to a course of action and a set of unacceptable peace terms that have revived the Vietnam issue in the Presidential election campaign, which still has over nine months to go. For his peace formula is a little like the old insurance policies: "The big type giveth but the small type taketh away."

During the long and sharp debate which lies ahead, the President, if he sticks to his present peace terms and war aims, will be asking the American people to continue fighting, not only for the release of the American prisoners of war—which nobody opposes—but also for the maintenance of his ally in Saigon, for the neutralization of all of Indochina, and for democracy in a country where the word has little meaning.

Here in Florida, his complicated peace terms will be a good political issue at least until the primary voting on March 14, but thereafter, when his military and political terms are finally analyzed and widely understood, they may well be seen not as a means to peace, but as a cause for continuing the war. And by November, that might not be a very popular argument for re-election.