

Nixon Aides Said to Debate Best Way to End War Role

By MAX FRANKEL
Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Feb. 28—There is said to be a subtle but intensive debate in the upper ranks of the Government about whether President Nixon should now commit himself to the definite termination of American involvement in the Indochina war.

It is not, so far as can be determined, one of those flaring controversies about ultimate aims. President Nixon and his advisers are unanimous in wishing to disengage. He is committed to a continuing and irreversible withdrawal of American ground troops until the "bulk" of them are gone.

But there is reported to be a significant difference of opinion whether the United States should move toward disengagement with some ambiguity about its future participation in the war or with firm notice now—to the Saigon Government and American military planners—that the President intends to let the South Vietnamese fend for themselves by a certain and relatively early date.

Nixon Remains Flexible

According to officials, the case for scheduling the end of American participation is being pressed by Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird. He is believed to have the close support of Secretary of State William P. Rogers, who has been heard to say that the problem was something like teaching a child to ride a bike—at some point the instructor must decide simply "to let go."

Judging by his State of the World message and other recent policy declarations, President Nixon has not yet reached that point. Apparently preferring the advice of his national security adviser, Henry A. Kissinger, some of the members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and leading American officials in

Saigon, the President is trying, throughout the period of withdrawal, to retain some flexibility.

Without doubting Mr. Nixon's intention to keep reducing the American involvement, Mr. Laird and others appear to believe that neither the Saigon Government nor American military commanders clearly understand their responsibilities in this ambiguous situation. Moreover, they contend that the availability of American combat support will continue to stimulate reliance upon it.

Mr. Nixon, however, seems to believe that if political or diplomatic considerations ever require it, he can always fix a final withdrawal date—but not now.

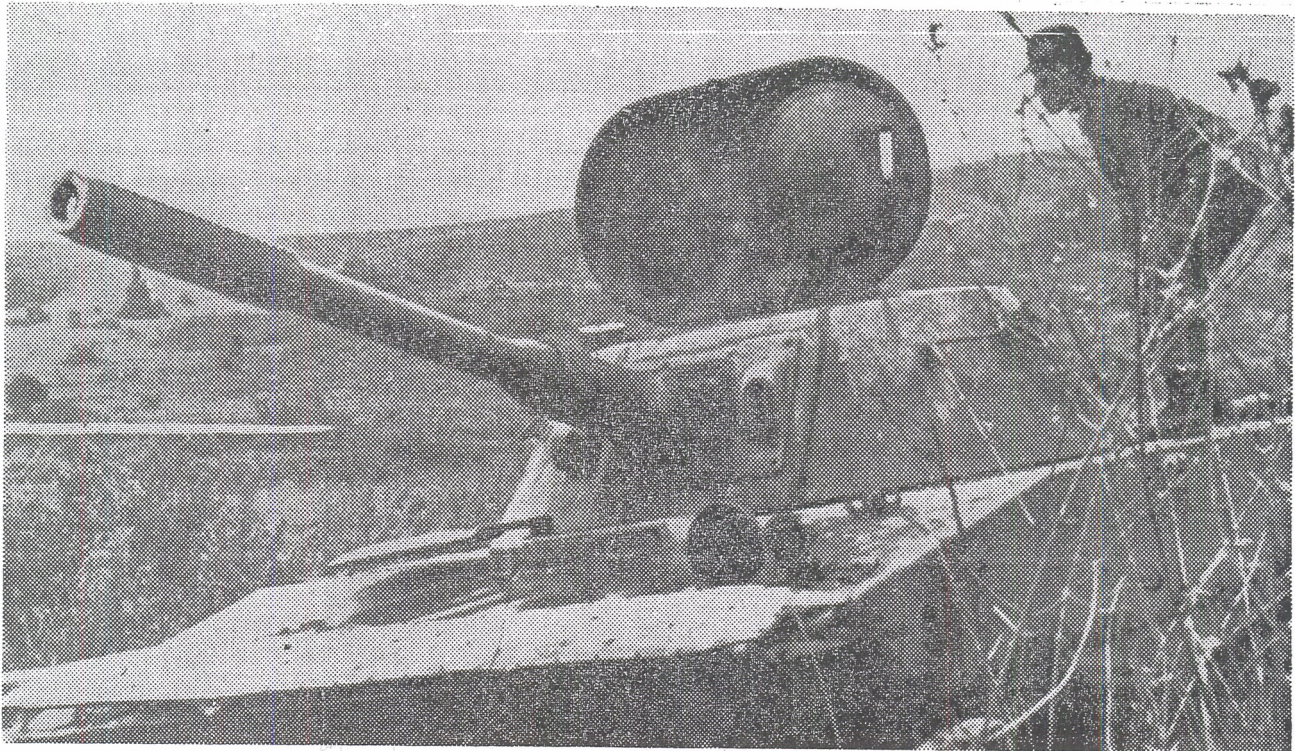
Meanwhile, he has served notice that some American troops will remain in South Vietnam until Hanoi agrees to release all American prisoners. He has promised—if needed—"high levels of American assistance in air operations" to the South Vietnamese not only in their own country but also in Cambodia, Laos and—if they were ever to deem it wise—in North Vietnam. He has threatened increased bombing of North Vietnam if allied forces feel menaced in the south and has offered total withdrawal only as part of an over-all Indochina peace settlement.

Diplomatic Considerations

The case for such flexibility and "open options" seems to rest on both diplomatic and military considerations.

It is argued that a definite commitment to disengagement from all combat—in the air as well as on the ground—would destroy whatever slim chance still remains of persuading North Vietnam to negotiate an over-all settlement.

It is argued even more strongly that Saigon's forces are not yet able to handle every



United Press International

USED BY THE FOE IN LAOS: The Soviet-made PT-76 light amphibious tank. Designed as a reconnaissance vehicle with great maneuverability, it can serve as a

missile carrier. Three crewmen operate it. Its weapons are a 76.2-mm gun and a 7.6-mm machinegun. In photo, made months ago in Laos, the turret cover is up.

possible military challenge and that their confidence will develop faster if they can rely on some degree of American help in battle.

It is argued that as long as troop withdrawals continue and American casualty rates decline the American people can be persuaded to support a relatively flexible battlefield posture.

The case for a decision to terminate appears to come from concern about both the risks and costs of a drawn-out involvement. It is argued that the American field commanders, so long as they are charged with some responsibility for the course of battle, will continue to be tempted to move against enemy supply lines and concentrations in ways that may be militarily sound but may also heighten Saigon's reliance on American support.

Military Argument

It is also argued that the Saigon Government will not fully face up to both the military and economic consequences of total American disengagement until it is clearly ordered, with corollary schedules for the withdrawal from ground combat, for the total turnover of air support and equipment transfers and other related activities.

Those favoring a deadline for withdrawal also contend that further delay can no longer bring the kind of military results in Southeast Asia that would offset the drain on defense energies and the deferral

of other military projects needed to match the more worrisome Soviet advances in both strategic and naval power.

Mr. Laird is said to be trying to introduce the word "terminate" into the official vocabulary describing American intentions in Vietnam—with or without a private timetable. He has tried to speak publicly of "accelerated" withdrawals of troops, to fix a date this spring for the end of American participation in ground combat and to suggest that Saigon will be ready to assume air combat

duties much sooner than previously expected.

Americans in Saigon are reported to have complained against such rhetorical pressure, contending that too much has been invested and too much achieved to arouse anxiety and fear among the South Vietnamese at this stage.

The White House has pulled back from some statements by Mr. Laird and Mr. Rogers that American combat duties in Vietnam would be ended next May. But the President has promised "an announcement"

on that subject later this year. He has also promised another target for troop withdrawals in April, by which time the American forces in Vietnam are scheduled to number 284,000.

At least half of these, and probably more, are to be pulled out over the next 12 months, and there has been discussion of maintaining a residual force of 60,000 men or less by the start of the Presidential election campaign in 1972. It is not so much the size as the mission of this constantly dwindling force that is being debated now.